

**AFTERSCHOOL
SESSIONS 1**

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Designed and arranged by Malachi McIntosh with ideas stolen from Philippa Fong and Colleen Hubbard.

‘Afterschool Sessions’ is a London-based literary event series organised by the three recent graduates of the UEA Prose Fiction MA named above. The series showcases new and innovative writing from emerging authors.

This chapbook has been compiled for the inaugural Afterschool Sessions reading at SLAM King's Cross held on 20 July 2016. It features short stories and extracts of novels-in-progress from the first event's readers in the order of their appearance.

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'How do I know what I think until I see what I say?'

Crush

Philippa Found

A complete short story, first published in the London Journal of Fiction.

*M*ake_up_pro says it's all about gloss. A translucent shimmer on the lips to give a milky wet sheen. Katie copies the look from Instagram: smearing her lips in plumping gloss until they are mirror glazed, then swipes a flick of iridescent liquid liner, just above, on her skin, to highlight the sharp V of her Cupid's bow. She smacks her lips together. They feel sticky. She tucks the gloss into the gap at her waistband, between her school skirt and her skin so she can touch it up later. All she's eaten in the last twenty-four hours is an apple and she's pretty sure it's already had a positive effect on her waist. She rolls her school skirt up an extra fold at the waistband to lift the hem an inch higher up her thigh, ignoring her mum when she says this makes her look like a duck from behind. Her Mum knows nothing about fashion, or life. Then she goes to the bathroom, slides her fingers between her legs and uses the moisture as perfume. She traces Xs on her wrists and her neck, drawing glossy kisses with her fingertips on her skin. She read on *cosmosextipz* that men find that scent irresistible.

Without other pupils or noise pounding the corridors, the school seems fake: just a stage set. Mr Vickers said she didn't need to arrive until five to six so she gets there at quarter to so she can hang out in his office, and prays, as she rushes down the hallway, that when she gets there he's alone.

At his door, she takes a breath and knocks.

‘Come in.’

His voice is perfection – hot stars glistening on swimming pools, sunlight; it melts her. She pushes open the door and registers instantly that he *is* alone. In the first second of walking in, she takes a mental snapshot of him sitting at his computer with textbooks stacked up jaggedly either side of him, his eyes screen-lit from leaning too close to the monitor. His dark, pudding-basin hair is dishevelled with threads of grey glittering the temples; his skin looks rugged and dry, like he needs some moisturiser and a wife. She likes it though, how undone he is. It’s sort of heart-breakingly intimate.

The yellow strip lighting highlights his scars. Circular dents all over his cheeks that makes her think of cigarette butts being ground into skin – she wonders if he smokes – teenage acne, presumably. The imperfection of it slays her. It makes the twenty-one-year gap between them seem not so big. Not big enough to have recovered from the scars.

She wishes she could photograph him exactly as he is now and capture the moment when she walked into his office and he didn’t even look up; like it was so normal her being there, and he was so comfortable with her around, that it seemed as if she’d just walked into a room in a house that they’d shared for twenty years.

When he looks up he coughs, and coughs again in an attempt to style it out. She smiles, congratulating herself on her outfit, then pretends to study the room as she stands pushing her boobs out, tilting her face to catch the best light.

The office is cramped, rammed full of bookshelves and cardboard boxes with World War Two posters on the walls. It smells of old books and sweaty fingerprints. She runs the tip of her finger along the spines of the books on the shelf, like she saw someone do in a film once, and dust floats like stars across the room, strip-lit electric. There are also two low, square, cushioned chairs pressed up against one wall; old and ugly but perfect for having sex on, probably. She wonders if Mr Vickers has thought of that too. When she sits on one, he slices a semi-circle in the

air with his swivel chair to face her and their knees touch. They both look down at their knees and he slides back an inch, then looks up. His lips are chapped, a grid of white on pink. She wants to bite them.

‘So, what would you like me to do for you tonight?’ She leans towards him fingering her lips. She prepared the line earlier. She likes the innuendo.

The corners of his mouth turn up a fraction before he corrects himself, ‘Mainly it’ll just be shuttling parents to and from the department, being on hand to point them in the direction of their next appointment.’

Catching him, even just for a second, not being a teacher makes him being a teacher seem like just a role that she can crack. She can practically see the cracks, like the creases in his tarmac-grey suit.

‘Sure. I can do that,’ she draws out each word, to make him want to taste them.

‘Right, we better get going,’ he says.

She watches him gather his things from his desk and when he’s ready, she stands, but doesn’t leave. If she fixes where she is, he’ll have to brush past her. He comes towards her but just before he reaches her he pauses. He’s so close that she can smell him. It’s the smell of nothing but skin. Not like the boys in her year who drench themselves in Lynx deodorant; this is a subtle scent. Warmth. Trapped in body hair. Oils.

His serpentine eyes climb upwards, meet hers. ‘Ladies first,’ he says and she inhales, letting invisible parts of him enter her.

He extends his arm, gesturing her through the door and the palm of his hand fits like an echo into the space just outside the curve of her back. She wonders what he’ll taste like.

Shuttling parents around is hurried so Katie can spend most of her time waiting at the front of the history classroom, either perched on the edge of the front desk or leaning against the white board, memorising him. She strains to hear what he’s saying to the parents sitting in front of him;

watches the kaleidoscope of his expressions transform from furrowed brow to dimpled cheeks and creased eyes.

The classroom has been rearranged so the teachers are sitting behind pupils' desks in the centre of the room and in front of each teacher there are two chairs: one for the mum, one for the dad. Whenever Katie's mum comes to Parents' Evening she must sit next to an empty chair. After so many years the teachers must predict that her dad won't show. She wonders if the teachers feel sorry for her mum always coming alone. What if they feel sorry for her, knowing her dad doesn't give enough of a fuck to show up? She looks out of the window into purple sky, no, having an absent Dad gives her an edge. One that's dark and sharp but glitters when the right light touches it, like cut glass. It says she has depth. Closes the gap.

'Alright?' Katie looks round and Darren's in front of her. He cocks his chin up.

'Oh hey,' she says, slipping off the edge of the desk.

'So you helping out?' he says.

'Evidently.'

Darren edges closer, looming into her personal space. She'd step back, but the desk's in the way.

'So what you doing later?' Darren says pushing her on her shoulder.

She looks at his hand on her shoulder then back at him. 'Going home?'

'Lame.'

He starts soft-punching her on the top of her arm and she's about to slam his hand away, but as her eyes skim the room she catches Mr Vickers watching her and Darren. Their gazes lock.

She dips her head, looks up at Darren, 'Why, what are you suggesting?' she smiles, then flicks her eyes to Mr Vickers.

It works. The way light can pass through glass without making a sound, she can feel Mr Vickers zoning in – cutting through the parents in front of him, across the classroom – onto her and Darren. Katie leans

closer to Darren, so he can touch her some more. She flicks her hair as she's talking, wraps a strand round her finger, looping it, like a lasso, and she can practically hear Mr Vickers' brain stumbling as he tries to reengage with the parents in front of him because he's completely attuned to her. Laughing is most effective.

'So,' Darren says, 'do you fancy going to the pub later?'

She has to stop, he's alright but she does not fancy him. Then over Darren's shoulder, she sees Mr Vickers looking. 'Sure,' she says and smiles.

When Darren has gone, and Mr Vickers has a break in his schedule, Katie struts toward him.

'Can I get you a coffee or tea?' She rests her fingers on the edge of his desk and leans over slightly.

'A tea would be great. Milk, two sugars.'

Her lips form a pout as she says, 'Sure.' She really wants to put her tongue in his mouth.

A trail of milky tea spatters behind her as Katie hurries along the corridor. Her fingers redden through the thin skin of the plastic cup. She pauses; takes a sip to taste what he'll taste. It burns.

When she walks back into the room his eyes are doing that thing they do when he stares into space sometimes: they've gone flat and blank, as if something's switched off behind them and he's slipped away leaving just a shell. She steps in front of them and like a doll tipped upright they reanimate, lighting up, and she sees life rush into them.

She sets the cup down in front of him, right on his papers. Then slides her hand into her skirt pocket, takes out the Nice biscuit that she swiped from the cafeteria and places it on his open notebook. Grains of sugar skitter across the page. Katie wipes the ones stuck to her palm against her school skirt, then leans in to whisper, 'Don't tell Mrs Mayer,'

she flicks her eye to Mrs Mayer, sitting at the next table down, ‘but there was only one left and I stole it for you.’

Mr Vickers raises his eyebrows, looks at Mrs Mayer, at the biscuit, then up at her. ‘*You* are going to get me into trouble,’ he says.

She smiles; the word trouble pulses in her head, like a promise.

At nine Darren’s not in Reception like he said he’d be. Katie circles and across the open space she sees Mr Vickers sitting alone in the Assembly Hall doing some marking. Adrenalin slams through her.

She does her best walk down the Assembly Hall steps, towards him. The hall is mainly oak and has a warm glow. The stage lights burn yellow in the night.

‘I’m waiting for Darren,’ she announces when she reaches Mr Vickers’ table.

He looks up with just his eyes and she sees future Sunday mornings, his favourite lines spilling from his lips as he reads to her in bed, his eyes skimming the surface of his page and her skin; nights spent learning how he sleeps. ‘I’m doing some marking,’ he says. ‘Do you want to sit?’

Being with him is the key change in pop songs. It is sparklers and sugar highs, and finally getting the lead role in a film about a girl and a guy.

‘We’re going for drinks at the Byng,’ she says. She focuses on the hashtag grooves in his bottom lip. Her heartbeat spikes. ‘Wanna come?’

He opens his mouth, then stops; closes his eyes, and squeezes them. When he opens them again he looks straight at her, and sighs.

It’s all happening too fast, and too slow, like watching a glass of milk topple off a table. It’s terrible. A terrible sigh. Full of regret, want, sympathy, but worst of all: resignation. Standing there she shrinks, becoming as small as her reflection on the gloss of his eyes and for a second she sees herself the other way round, from his point of view: fifteen and delicate, with the potential to become anything she decides to

be as long as she isn't cracked or damaged. It's an awful sight because it's wrong.

'Are you coming?' Katie spins round, and there's Darren waiting at the top of the steps.

She doesn't want to go, she wants to stay and do something that will move them past this look. She stares at Mr Vickers then Darren, then Mr Vickers. *I'm your teacher* – his eyes are saying – *Nothing can happen* – and she feels crushed, like a balled up tissue. She turns and quickly walks up the stairs towards Darren.

They're cutting across the courtyard towards the school gates to leave when Katie grabs Darren's arm, 'Let's go to the lake.'

There's something inside her resisting leaving. A restlessness, but to stay; an unwillingness to accept the night is over and move on.

'The lake?' Darren frowns.

'Come on!' She tugs his arm, turns and runs. Her body slices through the slits between the concrete buildings, out towards the school woods with Darren's footsteps slamming hard behind her.

At the lake, she finds the Evian bottle full of vodka that the year elevens store in the hole in the trunk of the oak tree. It's full: topped up every Monday. She holds it up like a prize; downs some, then chucks Darren the bottle. Everything becomes warm and blurry as they sit on the ground drinking.

'So when are you going to give it up?' Darren says leaning in. His breath is hot and vodka-laced. He smells of Lynx. 'You're nearly sixteen now, it's practically illegal to still be a virgin.'

She looks at his watch to avoid his eyes. 'Fuck, Darren!' she laughs, 'We'll miss the last bus if we don't leave now.'

Night has transformed the school making it meaningless. It's black, except for the punctuated glow of lights that stud the buildings. Their plastic casings mostly cracked and fogged. And it's empty, like a graveyard. Their footsteps sound hollow against the silence.

As they turn a corner and pass the outside of Mr Vickers' office, Katie's stomach wrenches. She pushes Darren up against the brick wall of the building.

'What are you doing?' he says but when she doesn't move, a smile creeps across his face. His eyes flash, electric.

She's weightless as he spins her round, slams her back against the wall, rams the hot oblong of his erection against her, and crushes her body beneath his weight. Losing hope of what you want feels liberating. It frees you to be reckless, Katie thinks. And there's a power in that. It makes you not you. And not being you means you can be anyone.

She reaches down, unzips Darren, and bunches her knickers to one side. She doesn't wince as he thrusts in, breaking her inside, as her back – through her school shirt – is grated against the rough surface of the brick wall. She's vodka numb. Her legs hitched round him feel disconnected to her, strange; mannequin legs. She watches Darren's bowed head as he looks down with such intense concentration it's as if he's been asked to memorise a spot on the white shoulder of her shirt. The smell of Lynx cuts her lungs, chokes her, and she's angry, like she's having to prove a point to Mr Vickers that he should have been strong enough to discover himself: that she's fine to be broken, she's so fine about it that she can even break herself.

Darren's breaths become jagged and Katie feels him jolt, pull out and a warm pool spurt jerkily onto her thigh. It shudders thickly on her skin. She scrapes down the wall; lands hard.

As Darren looks down to zip up, Katie mops her thigh with her palm. It feels sticky, like lip gloss; but it burns. Then she wipes her palm against the brick wall behind her and leaves a barely visible, personal trace drying, like spilt milk, in the cracks in the outside wall of Mr Vickers' office.

Philippa Found graduated from the University of East Anglia Creative Writing (Prose Fiction) Masters with a Distinction in 2015 and is currently completing her first collection of short stories about girls in the Instagram generation. Her stories have been prize listed in the Galley Beggar Press Short Story Prize 2015/16 (longlist), the Words & Women Prose Competition 2015/2016 (shortlist), the Short Fiction visual literary journal Prize 2016 (shortlist), the Bath Short Story Award 2016 (current longlist), and have appeared in the *London Journal of Fiction* and published by Galley Beggar Press. Previously Philippa was a curator and the director of a London contemporary art gallery. She lives and works in London.

W: philippa-found.com

E: philippafound@icloud.com

Domestication

Colleen Hubbard

An excerpt from a novel.

Synopsis: At the start of the novel, Winston, a slacker in his 40s, discovers that his estranged wife has taken up a competitive cat show hobby with her new boyfriend. To win her back, Winston hatches an unusual plan: he adopts Frank, a moggy from an animal shelter, and intends to compete against his ex and her new paramour on the cat show circuit.

It was a four-hour drive to Star Cats with a broken AC the whole way. I wasn't eligible for one of the regular rental car companies, because of my lack of income or credit. I had to go the rent-a-wreck route with a company that rents to alcoholics and illegal immigrants for a higher fee. That's how I got an eleven-year-old Ford Tempo with no air conditioner and dicey brakes. At \$39 plus gas for the rental, I figured it was worth it. Plus we could chill out in the motel; maybe there'd even be a pool?

I kept Frank in his box for the trip, which normally I'd feel bad about, but Frank liked the box. We stopped in northern New Jersey for gas and to pick up the list of things I was required to bring for the show. At the gas station I gathered some personal supplies, too: a six-pack, jerky, salt-and-vinegar chips.

As I pulled into the motel lot, I saw an older lady unpacking her Subaru. She said hello the moment I opened my door and rushed over to shake my hand.

“Star Cats?” she confirmed. “Pleasure to meet cha. I’m Dee.”

Her eyes were that always-wet type, below an atom bomb of hair spray. She was in her 60's, I'd guess, and she owned a couple Persians. As it turned out, my room was right next door to Dee's.

“Hey, you know if there's hot breakfast included in the show rate?” she asked as she pulled a bag out of the front passenger seat of the Subaru and dropped it on the walkway between our rooms.

I said I didn't believe it was.

“Shame,” she said, cooling her face with an entry slip for the show that she had folded into a fan. “This hay fever is really getting to me. My allergies are terrible this time of year. Don't suppose you were at Mardi Klaws? Or the Quarter Final last year? Chaddy—that's my eldest, Captain Chadwicke Barleycorn—Chaddy took 14th Best. Anyhow, the motel at the Quarters only had a ratty old box of Corn Flakes. I skipped it, went to the Bob Evans instead.”

I nodded. She seemed to want more from me.

“A shame,” I added. “A damn shame when you think of what breakfast can be.”

“That's the truth,” she said. “Eggs, bacon, pancakes. Give me something that'll keep me going. The shows sell out all these motels, anyhow. They're making bank from us.”

She clicked a button and the Subaru's hatchback swung open, hitting us with a wave of cool air and the smell of hay. In the back of the car were three little gray rabbits crouching in a hutch.

“I know, it's a little strange.” she smiled. “But I've always been a real animal lover. Ever since my husband passed—bless him—I devote my time to animals. He had allergies. I've got eight animals now. Twelve if you count the fish. Oh and the goats, but those are charity relief for a family in Africa. The rabbits are friendly with the Persians. They play together.”

Somewhere out of view in the front of the car, one of the Persians growled.

“Anyhow, they hate to be left alone when the Persians go to shows. Rabbits have shows too, you know. These are show-quality Netherland Dwarfs. But the cat thing, now that's just consuming, isn't it? I mean, the grooming, the training, the dues, the fees, the clubs. My club has events every other week. What's your club?”

I told her I was part of a darts team. She laughed as if it were a joke, and then stopped.

“But if you don't participate in the social stuff, how are you going to win? Anyways, I think the rabbits get jealous. I think animals understand quite a bit. Don't you agree?”

By that time, I'd been standing on the sidewalk for some ten minutes holding Frank's carrier while this lady yapped. It must have been a hundred degrees and muggy as the inside of a gym sock. Frank was trying to pace as much as a cat could pace inside a cardboard box, and it meant he slid from one side to the other as I struggled to keep the carrier steady. Dee peered into the air holes cut into the carrier.

“He's, uh...”

“A cat.”

“Not a pedigree?”

“Just a regular cat.”

“Isn't it kinda sweet that a plain old domestic shorthair gets to be exhibited alongside Persians and Siamese? Makes you almost feel a little nationalistic.”

It's true Frank wasn't a champion yet, but I wouldn't call him just a plain cat, either. His qualities made him exceptional, not his lineage. Plus he had his entry papers to the show, just not a crown or scepter or anything along those lines, whatever cats get when they win.

“Are you raw yet?” Neighbor lady was waving an aluminum container under my nose. She snapped off the plastic lid to show me the pinkish-gray meat inside. “Pheasant. Better for their digestive systems.”

Her raw food and her grooming kit and her pedigree papers got me thinking. Were all the owners like this? How was Frank going to win if

they were? And if Frank didn't win, how were we going to get to the Supreme show, and how was I going to impress my Ex? By that time, Dee's hair had started to deflate and even her paper fan appeared to sweat. She sat on the lip of the Subaru hatchback and sighed.

“I think it might just be time for the Persians' bath,” she said. “Mind if I leave the rabbits on the sidewalk for a bit, give 'em some air? Air conditioning dries out their lungs.”

I hauled Frank inside and set the AC to high. I couldn't let Dee shake me. If I was confident in one thing, it was that Frank was an extraordinary cat. He didn't freak out or hiss or bite. He wasn't shy or weird. His hunting instincts were impeccable, not that the show organizers thought to examine anything useful about these cats. I'd even combed him once, and it had made his coat smooth and shiny. I'd probably do it again some time. Any decent judge would be able to see his superior qualities.

After twenty minutes, maybe an hour, I woke with a chill. The sweat on my face and chest had gone cold. I had left the TV on mute with the local news on; a blonde was talking to a man in front of a car dealership. So many helium balloons were strapped to the cars and light poles that I was surprised the whole place didn't float off, the AV cords snapping, chunks of pavement crumbling, the on-air talent and the car dealer looking over the jagged edge of Jimmy Joe's Discount Wheels as South Main Street got smaller and smaller below them.

Then I noticed it was too quiet. I took a look around and saw Frank's box was empty.

I had left the door cracked open owing to the room's cigarette smell, which Frank hated, and the fact that I wasn't paying extra to keep the room cool. And, to be honest, I resented the rate being \$10 higher than what the motel manager promised over the phone, so \$20 of chilled air pouring out into the parking lot suited me just fine. Outside the room, I found him. Between my neighbor's door and mine was the hutch, and next to the hutch there was a gray rabbit, its eyes dull, its head held stiff

by Frank's front paws while the cat's back paws pulled and twisted the rabbit's body.

“Motherfucker,” I said and wished for a moment that I hadn't quit smoking.

Frank looked up at me as if to say “Yep.” Then he let the bloody carcass drop.

The two surviving rabbits were cowering in the hutch and Frank started giving them the eye. I had to make a decision, and fast. I picked up the rabbit carcass and went back to my room, Frank trailing me. I walked to the bathroom and started filling the sink. Blood began to cake around the rabbit's neck; its eyes, which looked pretty dead when I picked it up, looked very dead on closer inspection. The motel room layouts were mirrored, and through the cheap walls I could hear the bath running in the neighbor lady's room as she gave the Persians a pep talk.

“How're my sweetie bears? How's my champion?”

“You know, Frank, I really thought you were one of the good ones,” I whispered.

Frank sat in the doorway between the bedroom and the bathroom, watching me. He didn't seem to be taking the situation seriously at all. I dropped the rabbit carcass in the sink and held it under the water for a minute. When I pulled it out again, most of the blood was gone. I mussed the fur and pushed the rabbit down into the water again. Blood: gone. Good, great. Now we're on to something. In a drawer by the sink, I found a blow-dryer. With the power switched on high, the rabbit's ears went wild, flopping this way and that in the blast of air. The wet fur grew dry and soft. Despite the heat of the blow-dryer, I thought I could feel the body going cold.

Then the tap next door shut off.

My mind worked fast in crises, and I began to calculate. I had a homicidal cat, \$526 minus the \$3,000 I owed my best friend Ford, a rented beater, and an Ex I needed to win back by making said homicidal cat a champion. On the plus side of the equation, I had a full tank of gas,

and Frank, even considering this mess, was generally a straight shooter, as far as cats go. He just happened to be a hunter, and you can't blame him too much for his natural instincts.

But then there was the blow-dried rabbit quickly going stiff in my hands.

“Get in there,” I said to Frank, pointing to his travel carrier. He didn't fight. I closed the carrier and tossed in a couple of the treats just in case he was taking it too hard that I was mad at him. Outside the room I quietly opened the hutch and dropped in the dead rabbit, trying to sit him up in a natural pose. It wasn't until I had both my hands in the carrier that I realized that I'd never seen a rabbit just r兔biting, and I didn't know how they sat. The dead rabbit's friends huddled in the corner of the hutch, not doing me any favors by exhibiting a casual pose that I could copy.

I did the best I could propping the dead rabbit against the side of the cage. He didn't look too bad in the end, about as natural as a dead rabbit could be. Maybe I'd be good at taxidermy. Are there jobs for taxidermists? Is that a growth industry? Then I crept back into my room and unmuted the TV. *Wheel of Fortune* was on. A contestant guessed wrong; the audience sighed. Should have gone for a vowel. I heard a knock.

“Hey, Dee!” I let myself breathe. It was a knock on the neighbor's door. “The manager told me you were in room seven. How was Chaddy on the drive out from Pittsburgh? Did he get motion-sickness again? Hot as Hades out here, huh? Too bad about the show photographer, didja hear? Cristos apparently had a conflict.”

I cracked open a beer and sank back into the bed. The Ex once told me that motel comforters were about the filthiest things you could find. She always peeled them off first thing when we took a road trip. But since she left, the comforter at home hasn't been washed, so this didn't seem much worse. The neighbor lady and her friend kept yammering.

The word “non-pedigree” floated up.

“That right?” came the friend's answer.

I notched up the TV volume so that I could tune them out. My eyes started to close. My head buzzed a little from the beer and the heat. Frank was quiet in his carrier, probably taking one of his naps. Catnaps. That's one of those things that lives up to its reputation. He could curl into a ball and be out in a—

“Heathcliff? Heathcliff, honey?” The creak of the hutch's metal gate. “*Heathcliff?*”

“I think he might be dead.” The other voice had really started to piss me off. She seemed like the type of person who might say “This ice cream is *cold*” or “April sure is *rainy*.”

There was a hard knock at the door, and no mistaking it—it was my door this time.



Colleen Hubbard is an American resident of London. She has a Master's degree in Creative Writing (Prose) with a Distinction from the University of East Anglia and was a Poe-Faulkner fellow in writing at the University of Virginia. Her current project is *Domestication*, an excerpt from which won the Head of School Prize for Best Dissertation at UEA.

E: colleen@colleenhubbard.com

Champion

Paul Howarth

A complete short story.

We found him on the highway, walking the central tram-lines like a lakeside bike-trail. Eight lanes of Saturday traffic and he's there in his football shirt and cargo pants, hands in his pockets, scuffing his way between the rails, part-hidden by the tall grass on the reservations either side, his lucky scarf flapping in the breeze.

'Would you look at this idiot. Bloke's gonna get himself killed.'

There were three of us in the car. The usual three. Me and my brother, David, our cousin Grant in the back. Grant leaned forward, his head between the seats, to see who David meant, his baseball cap nudging my left arm as I drove.

'Here, that looks like...isn't that your old man?'

I peered through the dusty windscreen. The figure coming closer, a hundred, fifty, twenty metres away. He had Dad's white hair and the same team colours but then half of Melbourne would be wearing red and blue today. He didn't walk like Dad. Head stooped, shoulders hunched, his right arm static as if carried in a sling. I slowed as we drew alongside and all our heads turned. He didn't look up when we passed. Eyes fixed on the tram-lines, kicking the stones, muttering darkly as he went.

'Shit,' I said. 'Oh shit, Davey, it is.'

I pulled in at the roadside. Grant stayed in the car. Me and David dodged the traffic and ignored the angry horns. Up the raised kerb and onto the grass verge, then down to the empty tram tracks, checking the lines either side, as Dad waddled towards us, oblivious to our shouting,

to us standing right there—only when I reached out and cupped his good arm did he look up bewildered and say,

‘Where have you two been?’

‘Three at the servo,’ I told him. ‘Same as every game.’

His eyes flicked between us. ‘The race was at noon, boys. It’s always at noon.’

‘What race?’ David said. ‘What d’you mean?’

Dad flapped a hand. ‘Ah, never mind, I’ll give the bastard this one. But that hill’s too steep for our Jason—he’ll never beat my time.’

The traffic buffeted past us. I said, ‘Dad? You alright?’

‘Champion.’

‘You pissed-up already?’

He shook his head determinedly. ‘I never drink before a race.’

There were tram lights in the distance, the white shimmer of the cab and the outline of the driver behind the glass. Cameras in the front fed straight to the cops.

‘Here,’ I said, steering Dad to the verge, ‘let’s get back to the car. Grant’s inside waiting. We’ll talk about it there.’

‘Jason’s boy?’ Dad said, laughing. ‘His old man come along to gloat?’

Dad’s brother Jason had been dead fifteen years. They’d grown up together on a farm outside Goulburn, and as teenagers had run a regular foot-race around the nearby hills. Dad had told the story at Uncle Jason’s funeral, claimed he’d never been beaten; we’d all laughed at him boasting, and shaken our heads.

We waited for the lights and a gap in the traffic and by the time we were in the car Dad didn’t seem to know where we’d been. Like we’d just picked him up as arranged. Grant got straight into him, asking about the tram lines, and in the mirror I saw Dad scowling like Grant was putting him on.

‘Leave it, eh?’ David told him. Grant shrugged and did just that, and we drove to the footy like it was any other day. At the game Dad

barracked as hard as he always did, while me and David watched him side-on. When he went for a piss we went with him, and we only let him drink one beer per half. By the siren David had convinced himself there was nothing too much wrong: ‘A moment of madness, we all get them,’ he said. But we drove Dad home directly, warmed him a pie in the microwave, and left him in front of the TV. Told him we’d pick up his car from the servo in the morning, though the car was still there on the drive. He must have walked all that way: freeway, bridge, tramlines. A wonder that no one stopped him, he wasn’t arrested, worse.

Afterwards, once it had all been confirmed, you ask yourself if you should have somehow known. Watch for the signs, the posters tell you, but you only see those posters in hospital waiting rooms. Maybe he’d slowed down a bit. Maybe his arm had started to hang. He forgot things, but then he was seventy—for his age Dad was a well man. Right into sixties he was still running marathons, now he struggles to cross his little room. His body is shutting down. There have been falls and bruises and broken bones; he can’t wash himself, cut his toenails, needs help to take a piss. Might take years, the doctors have said, and what a fucking way to go. I sit with him in that place and you can smell it all around. Death stinks. It’s in every nursing home.

But we talk about the football, we read the papers, watch the games. We still keep his membership; he wears his lucky scarf. David won’t do it, won’t come and watch on TV—I’ve seen him and Grant in the crowd a few times. I don’t point them out, don’t know if Dad’s noticed. He drifts in and out, asleep with his eyes open, and then sometimes he’ll cheer a goal like he’s the one that scored. He never complains. I don’t know how he stands it but he does. Told me the other day one of the young nurses was getting friendly. ‘But don’t tell your mother,’ he said. I laughed and replied, ‘I don’t think Mum’ll mind,’ and he winked at me and smiled. Mum died seven years ago—I don’t know if he remembers or not. I’m not telling him. Not unless he asks. He doesn’t have much to

smile about, but that's the funny thing: he's champion, he says. No matter what happens, he's always champion, my Dad.



Paul Howarth is a British-Australian author. His work has been shortlisted for the Bridport Short Story Prize, the Wasafiri New Writing Prize, and won the Stonnington Short Story Prize (Australia). He holds an MA in Creative Writing from UEA (with distinction), where he was also awarded a Malcolm Bradbury Scholarship. Paul is currently writing a novel entitled *The Warrant*, an historical thriller set on the Australian frontier, in which the lives of two brothers and their settler family are devastated by one man's campaign of racial violence and another's insatiable desire for land.

E: paulhowarth1@yahoo.co.uk

T: @paulhowarth_

Invalid Litter Department

Malachi McIntosh

An excerpt from a novel.

Synopsis: This half-chapter comes from a novel, FAME, about a washed-up former pop singer, Mona Starr, who dies, comes back to life, then goes on world tour. It recounts the end of her early career.

She made mistakes, but not on purpose. They had five European stops left on the *Pyromaniac* tour – Paris, Frankfurt, Berlin, Manchester, London – and they hadn't sold out; they had barely even sold. The last single had done okay but Danny was on the phone six weeks after the album dropped downgrading venues, trying to find supporting slots from other singers who were coming up and had – he didn't need to say it – more fans than it seemed that Mona had now. He decided to flip the order of appearances – start East in Japan where they loved her and then come through Asia and Europe and end in America, sending packages of champagne and chocolates and theatre tickets and jewellery and sneakers to DJs everywhere as they went and calling in favours at newspapers to get good reviews to create, hopefully, a kind of avalanche effect of a slow but serious start that could end in something devastating. No matter what Danny said, the fact was that the switch to starting in Asia was a switch to starting in places where she could credibly headline and moving through to places where, it was obvious, now, even though he wouldn't admit it, he was struggling to justify why she should go there at all.

He was stressed, had thrown even more of his own money behind her and it wasn't turning out. There would be some profit – there already was – but it wouldn't be *real* profit, superstar profit, profit to make what they were doing worthwhile – and so, Mona Starr – nobody knows what's going to happen next.

He was on the phone all the time. He rode out with them to Singapore but locked himself in his hotel room. When he came out to the venue he was on his cellphone; when he took her out to dinner – he'd pop up and say, 'Hold on, Mona. I got to get this,' lift his phone high like he just caught it from the air and go.

Her dancers were getting panicky, some poached, others just twitchy, irritable, on the phone all the time too and trying to work out what would come next because it was clear the Mona Starr slots weren't all going to get filled. The dancers she loved – Lizbeth, Archie, Talia, Blaise – were being over-positive with her in a way that started to get annoying. It was a sinking ship and they knew it was sinking and it was like they were telling the captain of the Titanic, after it hit the iceberg, cracked in half, the band was already dead and people were already drowning, how amazing he was.

Mona was twenty-one and spending more and more days dead drunk. Whatever city they were in she tracked down parties, asking their tech guys or other singers or even bouncers outside bars about where the best places to be were at. She gatecrashed VIP lounges in VIP clubs and spent money to convince people that she was welcome. It worked. She'd buy rounds of champagne and pay for oysters and give rolls of bills as tips. She'd then tell jokes and agree with everything her hosts said and say yes to everything anybody ever asked. When actors she didn't recognize from Asian movies came and stood next to her and said, in English that was both perfect and really hard to understand, something mildly interesting, she'd touch their arms, touch their faces and play with her hair. When, inevitably, some took that as an invitation, she'd let them, let them press themselves against her thigh, her dresses then only ever

just clearing the bottom of her butt, their vodka or whiskey breath whispering in her ear the things they were used to saying to their groupies in a spinning top of club colors, bass murmuring in their stomachs and across their skin. They'd want her at the edge of the dancefloor, in the back of their limos, in the elevators on the way to just-booked hotel rooms and she would be too laced to really see what they looked like and not need to say yes or no. Then she'd wake up wherever, and if there was something to drink, she'd drink it, wriggle back into the tube she'd been wearing the night before and take a taxi to practice and Lizbeth or Archie or Talia or Blaise would say her moves were all perfect.

*

She drank too much but everybody always did, did other stuff, or was detoxing. She didn't have the stomach or the head for anything harder but would smoke weed in the evenings to chill out, tried opium once with a thirty-year old J-Pop star and woke up on the floor of his hotel room next to his bodyguard with the J-Pop star – she couldn't pronounce his real name – naked on the bed. All of them were naked and she couldn't find her dress so left in taxi wearing a hotel robe. She was in Yangon when the night before she'd been in Bangkok, and only realized that when the taxi driver asked her if she had ever been to Burma before. She looked at his eyes in the rearview mirror, stared at him through the passed-out bodyguard's sunglasses, and answered, honestly, 'No' – and Danny had her flown out for the next show in Delhi.

She'd met people since she left Florida at seventeen for what ended up being pretty much five years on the road who had gone to college: all older guys and girls who she smoked with, drank with, or talked to in between things like sound checks or after shows. She asked them about college, studying, wondered if one day she could go, and most admitted that it wasn't much but living wild and going to parties. Mona was just doing that now, she told Danny in the ride from the airport. That was it. She was just being young.

*

She arrived late for practice at the London show, staggered into her dressing room, took off the dress she had on the night before for some premiere of some English movie, its lining ripped out. She'd woken up in the living room of someone named Vanessa Kensington, still drunk. Vanessa made her a coffee, called her 'love' and split a muffin with her and Mona came in by limousine. Danny wasn't happy, tried to grab her as she walked by but she whipped away from him, went straight into the bathroom of her dressing room and upchucked a thin gluey paste for five minutes, paused, panting, then dry heaved for a good five minutes more. After flushing and brushing her teeth, she pulled her hair back into a scrunchie, washed her face, changed into a t-shirt and jogging pants after dropping her underwear in the trash and went back out.

'Does anybody have any gum?' she asked.

They practiced, Danny basically trying to kill her with his eyes, staying for the whole rehearsal, snapping his cellphone open and closed whenever it rang, his arms crossing and uncrossing.

'We need to talk,' he said in a break and she ignored him, swept past him again and asked Blaise if he had any NoDoze, Danny in hearing distance. Blaise left, came back, palmed some pills to her and she took them without looking, dry – and perked up.

'Alright motherfuckers!' she said, clapped her hands, and made them into devil horns. People clapped and laughed too except for Danny, and Solomon.

He was a sound tech, from New Jersey but living in England, supporting them, for cheap, for the whole tour. Where all the other men in her entourage were either growing paunches or sculpted from iron he was skinny, strengthless, pale, exactly the same height as Mona but often dressed in tighter clothes, mainly band t-shirts of people she'd never heard of – Botch, Rye Coalition, Drive Like Jehu – and skintight jeans with a carabiner of keys permanently latched onto the back. He wore

huge black glasses and had unnaturally black hair, and, on one forearm down to his hand, had a gauntlet of tattoos of the characters from *The Lion King*.

Whenever anyone was laughing, he sneered. Whenever something bad happened – someone fell over or something – he smirked. He skulked. Flirted with some of the girls but always went quiet whenever Mona got near him and now, after ‘Alright motherfuckers!’ he was looking at her like something floating in a toilet, with crossed arms, just like Danny.

*

The tour ended in Virginia. For all her efforts to ignore the fact that the wheels had come off completely – that no one wanted to see her anymore – for all her attempts to do everything to fill up all space and all time with a kind of white noise – for all she did things that, as she did them, she knew, looking back now, she wasn’t doing because they were exciting or fun – for all of that, despite all of that – she was a good singer and a good dancer and she knew she *was* better than half the people she ended up opening for in America. Since forever she’d been singing, dancing, writing songs, and she had to grind for it – no one scooped her up at sixteen with a million-dollar contract and a rapper to be her boyfriend; no award show got in contact to say she could just show up and mouth along to a backing track – no award show ever called her to do anything. So she was good at this stage – really good – never lipsynced, never fell out of step, had the lung capacity of a blue whale, and had so much passion, wanted it so bad – but it didn’t matter. Danny still called her into his office at their last venue to tell her it was over. She still fell on her knees pleading to him. She still left in tears.

The only person she saw outside was Solomon, winding cables, sneering, and she told him to *fuck off*.

‘Excuse me?’

‘Do you think—’ she said, the words coming loud and strained between breaths, tears, snot, like a toddler’s. ‘That I need you judging me?’ Her eyes were so full she couldn’t see anything. She should’ve wiped her face. ‘No matter what I’m doing you—’ she breathed, ‘you look at me like I’m a piece of shit. And I’m not!’

She was twenty-one. Solomon, then, was twenty-eight. There were hundreds of things he could have done that would have made what was meant to happen happen – he’d go off and do his thing in life and she’d go off and do hers – but instead he hugged her.

*

The rest was history. They went for a drink together and he soothed her, told her the fame machine was a waste of time because you couldn’t control it and it was never about you. Many have tried, none have succeeded, he’d said. Plus, it’s all so flat and passionless. The expression of emotion in her songs was, no offense, all artifice and empty – the kind of things people *think* they’re feeling when what they’re really feeling is infinitely more complex. She should try other things. She had a good voice for folk, maybe, even country. He didn’t know but there were probably far more interesting things she could do. Mona listened and watched him and nodded her head. He was better-looking than she’d paid attention to, said things that chimed with the churning in her stomach.

She followed him, that night, to a party with his local friends. They were fascinated by her – a pop singer! – passed a bong around and listened to Siouxsie and the Banshees, Morrissey, Joy Division, Bauhaus, Solomon introducing each band with a biography, all of it new to her. The party went until dawn and Solomon drove her back to her hotel room.

‘Where do you live?’ he asked, engine running.

‘Here,’ she said.

‘I mean. Where are you headed back to after this?’

‘Nowhere.’

He tapped his thumbnail against his bottom lip – *The Lion King* cast undulating on his forearm. ‘Want to ride out with me to New York?’

*

They stopped in a motel on the way up and the inevitable happened. Solomon insisted on getting a room with two beds but, after showering, climbed straight into bed with her. He wanted to be kind and she wanted the opposite and by the time he realized they were both half-asleep. It was better in the morning. At breakfast she stared at him and he stared at her and she wanted, already, to tell him that she loved him although there was no reason for it. Eight days later in New York, at another party with people who all looked like Solomon, who were also fascinated by the fact that she was herself, she did.

She bought a brownstone. Dipped into her bank account and scooped out almost all that was there so he could live in Brooklyn like he’d dreamed and she could have the base he said that she needed.

Solomon started doing studio work for bands she thought were unlistenable, lurking with guys with similar-sized tattoos, similarly tight clothes, and taking her along to shows where the people she met were also fascinated by her. ‘You’re like a doll,’ a girl once said. ‘I can’t believe you’re, like, actually, unironically into the Backstreet Boys’. She cut her hair and had it chemically attacked and coloured so it looked like Betty Page’s, just like every third girl’s. She wore plastic glasses she didn’t need, got three hibiscus blooms tattooed on her ribcage. She started getting into the more melodic end of the aggressive music they listened to every weekend and on the stereo at home; but still she’d stand at the back of concerts he did the sound for, watching crowds move in the way that her crowds never moved, hear them scream lyrics that had no meaning to her, like:

‘Feeding frenzy is contagious!’

or ‘Can I pick your modest waste!’

or ‘Raise the fucking flag / the flag of mutiny!’

All ecstatic, all raised fists.

Then, one night, after seeing a band called Converge, which drove the entire venue into a frenzy, people kicking each other and smiling, Solomon at the back, on sound, and yelling, he dropped on one knee, sweat-soaked on their stoop, his t-shirt ripped, with a black eye, and she said yes before he was even done saying it.

But it was only another mistake...

Malachi McIntosh was born in Birmingham, England but raised in the United States. He worked as a lecturer in English at the University of Cambridge for four years but stepped down from his post in June 2016 to focus on fiction-writing full time. So far, his work has been published in *Broadcast*, *The Caribbean Review of Books*, *Flash: The International Short-Short Story Magazine*, *Fugue*, *The Guardian*, *The Journal of Romance Studies*, *Under the Radar*, *Research in African Literatures*, and *Wasafiri*. He is the author of an academic monograph, *Emigration and Caribbean Literature* and the editor of a collection of essays, *Beyond Calypso: Re-Reading Samuel Selvon*. At UEA he received a David Higham Award and a Distinction.

T: @malachimcintosh

The Switch

Sarah Moore

An excerpt from a novel.

Synopsis: The Switch, a 'lit lite' novel, tells the story of a wartime secret that begins on a beach and is discovered two generations later.

Prologue

London, August 1940

She walked like a blind woman down pavements littered with sandbags and had to be nudged from behind when she reached the front of the ticket queue. It was only when she stepped into the heaving train, thick with the smell of smoke and grease and the din of a dozen different voices, that the assault on her senses brought her back to herself.

A group of soldiers were sprawled over the corridor, khaki legs outstretched. One was shaking dice in a metal beaker, his hand cupped over the end, another drinking from a bottle wrapped in brown paper. The orange tips of their cigarettes floated at calf height, threatening to burn a hole in her stockings. In her haste to get past she felt the toe of her shoe make contact with a limb or boot and she mumbled an apology without looking down.

'Don't be sorry!' The man with the bottle made a playful grab at her skirt. 'What's your hurry? Come and sit with us! Go on Joe, move up! Make a space for the little lady!' Their laughter drifted after her as she struggled up the passageway.

Since most of her money was gone she'd only purchased a third class ticket, but managed somehow to find a carriage with a vacant seat by the door. She sank down with relief next to a curly-haired Wren. Two airmen were positioned either side of the window playing cards, and an elderly grim-faced husband and wife were sitting on the bench opposite, a suitcase at their feet that looked to be made out of thick cardboard and was fraying at the edges. The airman adjacent to the Wren kept catching the Wren's eye. A minute or two later he poked the Wren's arm and gestured through the glass at an advertisement for Woodbine cigarettes that was fastened on the station railings. He took some Woodbines out of his top pocket, angling the packet in the exact same way as the image in the picture, and the Wren laughed out loud.

The sudden shrillness of it shattered her composure and she leapt to her feet, making the other passengers turn and stare. She had to go back. But even as she thought it the carriage lurched forwards and she staggered, clutching at the luggage rack to keep her balance. At that moment a woman in a navy coat appeared in the doorway. 'I say,' the woman said, pointing at the empty cushion. 'Are you using that seat?'

She watched the blue and white enamel of the Woodbine advertisement disappear behind the edge of the window-frame. Outside the station, above the ragged line of tenement buildings and dirty backyards, the sky was becoming a luminous mauve as the earth tipped away from the sun. The train began to gather speed. Nodding, she sat down again slowly.

'Oh!' The woman looked a little put out. 'Well, in that case would you mind budging up for me? I don't fancy standing and there's no room to sit down anywhere else.' Without waiting for a reply the woman wedged herself onto the bench, settled her shopping bag on her lap and took out some knitting.

She closed her eyes. Under her eyelashes she could feel tears beginning to swell. The airmen had begun to play cards. She could hear the gentle slap and shuffle of a hand being dealt. After a pause the one

who fancied the Wren asked, ‘What should I do? Twist or stick?’ And the Wren said, ‘I don’t know!’ and giggled. From her other side came the steady clack of needles and a repetitive digging in her ribs from the churning of the woman’s elbow.

In time a shout, like the passing of a baton, came looping through the train. ‘Black out! Black out!’ She looked up as a light attendant put her head round the door and one of the airmen reached above the window and pulled down the blind. The carriage was instantly drenched in darkness. A second later somebody switched on the overhead bulb; faint and blue it made ghosts out of all of them. The indigo of the airmen’s uniforms became lost against the wood of the carriage, their faces floating in the dimness, pale and insubstantial; the elderly couple became grey, stony shapes under the ebony ropes of the luggage rack, and even the Wren and the knitting woman seemed no more real or solid than twilight shadows.

The airman next to the Wren tried to continue his game. He ignited a match, holding the tip close to the deck, but the knitting woman leaned across and said, ‘You’d better not keep doing that or I’ll get the light attendant!’

‘Alright, keep your hair on.’ The airman struck another match, but this time lit a cigarette and made a big show of blowing out the flame afterwards.

A short while later the train stopped. There was the sound of voices and doors slamming further down the corridor, then footsteps on concrete fading into nothing. Nobody moved or spoke and soon the train jolted forwards again. Cigarette smoke swirled about their heads like trailing muslin, the light bulb giving it a violet hue.

She gazed around. The carriage seemed ethereal and otherworldly. Nobody will escape untouched, she thought. It’s bound to change all of us. The sense of powerlessness seemed to empty her out, but it was also strangely numbing; she’d done what she could and now she had no alternative but to live with the consequences.

When the train reached Norwich it was past nine o'clock. She walked quickly towards the silhouette of the Cathedral tower, following the trace of moonshine on the river. The night was overcast but from time to time the clouds shifted to unveil puddles of stars; fat diamonds that seemed within touching distance and barely visible pinpricks of light. She crossed the medieval span of Bishop Bridge and continued past the Great Hospital until she reached the end of her road and finally her own front door. As the key turned she could hear Howard talking to Elsie, his speech wafting from the drawing room, low and indistinct.

She went straight upstairs and into the bedroom. She opened the top drawer of her bedside table, lifted out an Ivorine jewelry chest and positioned it on the counterpane. Then she reached into her handbag and extracted a plain gold wedding band. She held the ring for a moment or two between her thumb and forefinger before placing it carefully inside the box on top of a torn piece of newspaper. She shut the box back in the drawer and sat down on the bed. The room was quiet apart from the trickle of conversation below and the dying drone of a receding motorcar. Eventually she unbuttoned her coat, taking her time over each of the fastenings, laid it over the back of a chair, and made her way down the stairs.

...

Chapter Three

Norfolk, May 1939

Sylvie was watching her daughter dribble a golden E across the top of her porridge in thick syrup, knowing it would never get eaten. It was far too warm for food like that. Sunshine was bouncing white and clean from the Damask cloth and striking the tunnels of dust motes floating by the French windows that had been flung wide to catch the laundry-fresh air sweeping in from the North Sea.

It was their third day at Headlands; the brick and flint house with yew trees stationed on both sides of the gateposts and the rusting weathervane on the roof, where Sylvie had lived with her parents until she married Howard. She had brought the children back for her aunt's funeral, but Howard had stayed in Norwich. Sylvie didn't mind about that. Like shutting a door on a dirty, disordered room, for a few days at least she could pretend the problem wasn't there.

Next to Esther, Lewis had pushed back his chair, swinging his legs with a sullen expression that soured the still-soft lines of his ten-year old face. His looks were Sylvie's, for the most part at least: the heart-shaped face, the sandstorm of freckles across the bridge of his nose and the stretched-out limbs that seemed to grow visible inches night after night. But whereas Sylvie's eyes were Serpentine grey, his own were a darker, unsettling blue.

Sylvie was sitting in the exact same place she used to sit as a child, her father at one end of the table, her mother at the other, facing the bay window with its three pairs of blood-red curtains and the lawn beyond. Dishes of marmalade and butter dotted the table, along with a toast-rack and a cut-glass bowl of grapefruit. A plate smeared with egg and the silver filigree of herringbones rested by her father's elbow, for as long as Sylvie could remember he had eaten the same breakfast every Saturday, his appetite undaunted by either funerals or warm weather. Now, dressed in shirt, tie, and a sleeveless pullover he was using a small ivory knife to open the mail. As he slit the last of the envelopes, something small and dense fell onto a willow-pattern saucer and the high-pitched chime of it ricocheted through the dining room and made them all jump.

Her father picked up a small brass key, turned it over with a puzzled expression and put it down beside his plate. Then he unfolded a letter typed onto creamy vellum. 'It's from Ginger's solicitor,' he said scanning the page. 'He says it's been sent to me because he doesn't have Sylvie's address.'

'My address?' Sylvie said.

Her father didn't reply. He moved the paper closer to his face and carried on reading for while. Finally he lowered it again. 'Well Sylvie,' he said, his voice tight with surprise. 'I'm told your aunt owned a beach hut. It seems she's left it to you in her will.'

There was a moment of silence. Her father swallowed a mouthful of tea, still holding the letter in his other hand as if there was something unfinished about it.

'A beach hut?' Sylvie repeated. 'Ginger's left me a beach hut?' She wasn't sure she'd understood him correctly. 'What do you mean? Where is it?'

'It's here in Wells. On the beach right here.' Her father gathered up the key and handed it to Sylvie. 'Suffice to say,' he added, drily, 'your aunt has not lost her capacity to astound me, even from beyond the grave.'

Esther, who had abandoned any pretence of eating, was staring at her grandfather as if he might next produce a rabbit from a hat.

'What is it Mummy?'

'It's a secret,' Sylvie said. 'For later on today. A secret from Ginger.' She was pleased to see Esther's eyes widen as she digested this astonishing piece of news but the effect was spoiled when Lewis nudged her hard with his elbow.

'Don't be silly,' he said. 'Ginger's dead. It can't be a secret from her.'

'Well it is,' Sylvie said, frowning at him. 'When people die they can leave you special things. And this is something Ginger has left for me.' She gazed down at the cool weight of the key. The possibility of something new, something more than the dusty claustrophobia of her own home glinted back from the palm of her hand...

Sarah Moore lives in Norfolk with her husband and teenage children. After graduating from Cambridge she practised as a barrister in London for many years but now combines writing with judicial work. She received a Distinction for her MA and is now in the final stages of completing her first novel, *The Switch*, set in the Second World War and present-day, and inspired by the iconic beach huts at Wells, Norfolk. In September she will start a creative-critical PhD at UEA and write her second novel, *London Traffic*, the first chapter of which is published in the UEA Anthology 2015.

E: sarah.moore99@btinternet.com

Dinner

Peter Bloxham

An excerpt from a novel.

I.

On a Sunday evening in late spring, a 27-year-old mixed-race vegetarian called Winston Fox pushed his broken bicycle along the pavement towards his girlfriend's flat. The sun was setting, a soft purple twilight gently creeping in beneath the gold-orange sky. The street was lined with small trees covered in pink blossom and Winston paused to take a photo with his phone and looked at it, holding his bike upright with his free hand and thinking about chapter four from *Thoughtful Living for Wellness* which was called *Smell the Roses*. As he was putting the photo on Instagram his phone vibrated in his hand with a message from his girlfriend that said 'where are you' and he pictured somebody in a short film walking on this same street with the sunset and the trees and the fading warmth and then he stood for a moment, looking down the road and chewing his bottom lip before he put his phone away and walked on, picking up the the pace slightly.

His girlfriend's flat was in a large red-brick building that used to be a hospital or a mental asylum or a prison or something but was now a block of flats. Winston locked up his bike on the railings near the front door and pressed the button on the stainless steel panel next to the name Elspeth Storey.

Her voice came through almost instantly, muffled and crackling but discernibly pissed off. 'You're forty-five minutes late,' she said and the door buzzed and clicked inside its frame. Winston pushed it open,

overstepping the scattered envelopes and flyers on the doormat and mounting the stairs two at a time. Into the stairway from the other flats filtered the aroma of cooking onions, of marijuana smoke, the sound a television.

In months past, Elspeth would open the front door and wait in the hallway for him to climb the stairs. Sometimes she would lean over the bannister and call down to him as he ascended towards her. Sometimes she'd climb the next flight of stairs and crouch behind the curve of the wall to jump out on him as he reached her door. Today she'd left the door ajar and gone back to the kitchen. Winston quietly entered and closed the door behind himself. Her cat carefully stepped into the hallway and froze, glowering at him. He held its gaze as he forced off his trainers and dropped his backpack. 'Hi Jorge,' he said, approaching and holding his hand out for the cat to smell in the way he always did, hoping that it would one day appreciate the honest gesture. The cat sniffed Winston's hand and bolted away in the direction of the bedroom.

Elspeth was in the kitchen starting blankly into a frying pan, nudging something around with a wooden spoon. 'Hi,' Winston said, watching her and understanding that he was in trouble, probably for being late but also perhaps for something else, perhaps a variety of things and actually more generally for things that were harder to pin down but easier to express via anger at his latest mistake: arriving for dinner forty-five minutes late.

'Hi Win,' she said in a deliberately unconvincing not-angry way which seemed to Winston to be very worrying. He thought to approach and kiss her on the shoulder and apologise in the way that a handsome actor in one of his favourite romances might do but instead found himself rooted to the spot, hovering in an unnatural way on the precipice of the kitchen and searching for some halfway useful words.

'What're you making?'

'Tofu. Like I told you.'

A pause.

‘Look... Sorry I took longer to get here than I thought. I think my front wheel is buckled, I had to wheel my bike here.’

‘S’fine. I started dinner without you in the end.’

‘Okay, well. I should’ve messaged you. Sorry.’

‘It’s fine.’

And so he watched as she added soy sauce and minced ginger and garlic and mirin to the tofu and drained the runner beans and served herself a plate with some quinoa and walked past him through the door and into the front room, the brief contact of her body and the smell of her shampoo causing a little throb somewhere in a place behind his ribs that was physical and, he briefly considered to himself, not physical.

‘Serve yourself,’ she said as she slipped away down the hall.

He thought about catching her arm and gently taking the plate from her. ‘Hey,’ he thought about saying, in the way someone in one of the old romances might say, the ones in black and white where the guy always seems to know what he’s doing. He’d be Gregory Peck or Clark Gable but not white and with a different accent. ‘Now what’s going on, El?’ he’d demand, lighting a cigarette.

‘How’d we get like this, dammit?’

Then he’d slam his fist against something.

‘Dammit, El! How’d we get like this?’

She’d stare into his eyes and her bottom lip would tremble and she’d say ‘Oh Win, you sad, beautiful man. Don’t you know that I love you? God, how I love you, you fool!’ and she’d turn away to the window but he’d spin her around by the shoulders and kiss her hard on the mouth (by this point he’d have put the dinner plate down). Then maybe they’d have sex for the first time in six weeks, off-camera.

From the front room the sound of the television, faux-dramatic news programme music. He’d recently downloaded an app for his phone called FeelingsTracker. You were supposed to record your feelings and the possible reason for your feelings as many times a day as you could. The app would then give you stats on your feelings and advise ways that

you might improve your feelings. Recording your feelings was also supposed to help you feel better generally. Winston considered opening the app and entering ‘Apprehensive. Reason: In trouble with Elspeth’ but instead he removed a plate from the cupboard and gingerly scooped up quinoa, runner beans and tofu. He opened the fridge and found the jar of vegan mayonnaise and unscrewed it and used a clean spoon to scoop some from the bottom of the jar. Elspeth re-entered the room and opened the cupboard to take the pepper and rolled her eyes when she saw his plate.

‘I don't understand why you have to put mayonnaise on absolutely everything,’ she said and left the room again. Winston stared down at his plate for a few seconds and then with another clean teaspoon he carefully scooped the gelatinous white blob from the rim of his plate and tapped the spoon on the rim of the jar until most of it dropped it back inside. He replaced the lid and put it back in the fridge and washed the spoons and put them on the rack to dry.



Peter Bloxham is a thirty-year-old writer and hayfever sufferer. He’s recently completed an MA in Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia and a set of three interconnected novellas. He is currently working on his debut novel with the working title of *Martin Amis*. He lives in London. His twitter handle is @ohgodohgod.

Goodbye Armadillo

Sharlene Teo

A complete short story, which previously appeared in the UEA Creative Writing Anthology 2013

The Internet is down forever. We tried troubleshooting but it's an irresolvable issue, and everyone is afflicted. You can't fully be angry at something when it is happening to everyone. Loose-leaf impersonal anger just feels shitty and unsatisfying. It's like hitting a brick wall with baby mittens.

Without the Internet my brother and I sit bored at home, gawking at desktop wallpaper. It is just the two of us in a four-bedroom flat. We can barely afford to keep the other two rooms empty, but we can't bear to dress them in strangers. Our parents succumbed to cardiac arrest in quick succession seven years ago. Our youngest brother decided that the only way to cope was to move to the other side of the world. He was always a quitter, always a snail. I miss him ridiculously. Up until last week he was only contactable by email.

My older brother and I have no friends besides each other. We aren't disagreeable. We didn't mean to discard everybody else; it just happened. We filled our evenings with the Internet and now we don't quite know what to do with all this ticking time. The array of alternatives makes us tense and uncomfortable. We jump at the hiss of a kettle. We agree that it is too humid to stay outside. We are too grown-up and uncoordinated for ball games, too young and illogical for Sudoku. The television flickers on. I switch it off. I lack the hope and patience for prime-time television serials. I feel like I can't relate to all these fish-ball

sellers' daughters with their marmoset eyes, their hearts of gold.

I lie on the food-stained sofa and imagine the Internet as a dead animal. Flopped out in front of me, an ancient armadillo- corpulent, perverse and wrinkled. I picture its grayish-pink, dirty neck rings and sad, beady eyes. I've always thought "sad" was a lazy way to describe eyes, but this armadillo would have such sad eyes. Just a huge, leathery armadillo excavated from the earth and strung up like a birthday banner. Where would they put it? Probably in the National Heritage Museum, where it would set off all the smoke alarms, and scare passing children.

I'm trying to read a book. After I lost my job a few months back, I decided to try hard-copy concentration, a habit so casually and inexorably neglected over the last few years. Now that the Internet is gone I will have to work even harder to finish reading a whole novel. I've picked a book called *Tangled Thoughts of Leaving*; medium-thickness, yellowed, with an extremely ugly forest of purple vines on the cover. Willfully hideous, those dark messy vines- crude and almost pubic. That cover is what caught my attention when I found it in a second hand bookstore. It is by an author I have never heard of, some Danish guy with an unpronounceable name.

The story is about a mild-mannered, middle-aged man whose wife runs away to the jungle, leaving a note citing "irreconcilable differences". He tracks her down in a cannibal estate, blunders through mosquito-ridden canopy, and almost starves to death before discovering and getting into a fight with the chief cannibal. Through the revival of his long-forgotten judo skills, the husband manages to overpower the chief. The chief, cowering, asks the husband to spare his life, and he obliges. Just as the hero turns away, the chief sticks a hunting knife in his back. "Too bad! It's a dog eat dog world," the chief says. The husband lies doomed and sputtering blood on the floor. "Just tell me my wife is okay," he pleads. "Tell me she's having hot showers and proper meals," The chief sniggers disdainfully and turns away. The chapter ends.

I'm only at the halfway mark and cannot imagine things progressing

much further. I dislike the wife and didn't think much of the husband. I don't believe or buy into any of it and I am wondering if I am one of only about ten people to have ever tried to read this lousy novel. I try describing what has happened so far to my brother. He thinks it is all about mid-life crises. He says it is so clichéd, done to death and fake-o, the whole mid-life crisis thing, never mind the mangled marriage. I tell him you'll never really know until you get there, will you, and he shrugs.

My brother is 35, and I am 27. Depending on what direction his health goes, maybe he's already middle aged. When we were younger, when he was younger, he was incredibly handsome. He looked not even a bean-root related to our younger brother or I. He had strong, sharp features framed by commanding eyebrows, the kind of fresh-milk face to mould onto a coin or affix to a keychain. Even I had to admit his handsomeness, in my awkward phase when it felt tongue-bitingly icky to do so. I don't know what happened to him once he hit 30- a churning-through, smudging-out process. He sort of puffed up, filled out; his features got a little erased. Now he has an indistinct, bleary face, which elicits no questions. Back then he was something special.

At school, at tuition class, on a crowded train, all these random girls would put love notes in his backpack when he wasn't looking. Folded and re-folded squares of paper tenderly frayed. He never admitted to reading them, but he would announce he had received some rubbish as he came through the door, and throw the notes in the bin on the way to his room. As a child I used to take the letters up from the waste bin and pretend I was a handsome boy, reading a declaration from Amanda or Min Li, any fawning one. For a moment, scanning my eyes over pastel-colored ballpoint scrawling, I could almost believe I was eighteen, and a dashing boy, and that I couldn't care less. I kept all the love letters in one of the cardboard boxes under my bed.

I was skim-reading *Tangled Thoughts of Leaving* two days ago when a scrap of paper fell out of the last few pages. I picked it up and unfolded it.

“Dear you,” read the note- smudged-blue Red Leaf pen scrawl,

handwriting half- familiar. “I don't know if you've seen me, but I'm the girl at the bus stop at 7:15. I'm the one who is always looking over your shoulder at what you are listening to on your mp3 player. I'm that girl. My name is Tracy. I have short hair and a polka-dotted uniform. And I love you, yes, I love you sweetness.”

“I found one of your notes,” I told my brother when he returned from work. He works in a sub-letting office with four other people, and now that the Internet has died everything takes a long time more. They sit around piles of yellowing fax paper, frowning and miscalculating.

“Throw it away,” he replied, and went to heat some soup up on the stove. That's another thing- all the microwaves stopped working a few months ago. Every microwave on earth played a polyphonic goodbye and shut down forever with one shrill, final beep. I'm ready! Exclaimed the microwave. I'm ready to stop waiting all the time, I'm going to go now.

“Don't you want to know what it said?” I protested. I never let my brother know that I usually read all those notes. He probably knew anyway, but didn't care. When I thought about it, my older brother was such an impervious person. He didn't even cry at our parents' funerals. The last time I saw him display alarm or much noticeable emotion was when he fell down and broke a leg over twenty years ago, and even then, he had only squawked and looked mildly irritated. Unlike my younger brother with his penchant for sappy music and slow-stewing sulks, my older brother is habitually blithe, clement-tempered, that droopy ex-handsome face betraying not even the slightest trace of disappointment. His main interest and hobby up until recently was an online multiplayer game called WARTal. So much for WARTal. His entire arsenal, award badges and P2P chat logs gone up in smoke.

“Aren't you a little curious?” I asked, still holding the note.

“Not really.”

“What if it's new?”

“Nah. No idea how it turned up, but definitely not new. Bin it.”

And that was that. I thought of Tracy, this frozen sixteen-year old in

a butterfly and blue-tack room, uttering her prayers and tucking that scrap of paper under her pillow. Sleeping On It. I pictured a nondescript, plaintive face, daydreaming in moonlight. And that note had found its way, years later- to me, to us. I felt sorry for her. And I also felt spurned.

My brother settled on the sofa with his bowl of lemongrass soup. He stirred the soup, and murmured about the news.

“What else do you think will go next? Magnets? Television?”

“I don't know.”

“When will you find a new job? I can't support you forever.”

“I know.”

“You know, you shouldn't-”

“Shouldn't what?” I asked. There was brittleness in my voice. I pushed it out through my teeth, like a tiny fish bone. I sounded old.

“Never mind. I forgot what I was going to say.”

The spoon clinked against the side of his bowl.

I frowned and scrunched the note in my palm, and then I went outside for a cigarette. I thought of all the cigarettes I had ever smoked or wanted to smoke lined up in a row. Some just tiny little stumps and others straight-backed and flawless, paper tar soldiers snaking all the way down the road.

In the air I heard chanting. It sounded like they were holding a memorial service in the nearby community centre. They were always holding memorial services in that green, broad linoleum-floored venue but the chanting today sounded louder and even more mournful than usual.

Five white cars floated past. Propped up in their back seats I thought I saw wreathes and framed photos of a tired and rusty armadillo. If I squinted I could even picture it in better detail: that scaly, honk-nosed, dustbowl face. Such fine features, for an armadillo. I missed the Internet. My heart gave a little.

Scientists had said that magnets were losing their attractive force. They were groping around for a solution- working around the clock,

organizing emergency conferences. It was quietly terrible and extremely important, because magnets were in so many things. Without a magnet, what would hold a fridge together? It would just be a lidless cupboard of food.

The sky was brownish-pink and smelled of incense. My body slackened, ready for sleep. There would be a few more soft, small hours to go before bed. Maybe I would finish that book, or maybe not. I unfolded and read the note for perhaps the twelfth time since discovery, careful not to get ash on it. I inhaled my cigarette and thought about what I used to do before I got fired. I used to take the 7:20 bus to the park near my workplace. I used to sit in the park, the one with the empty Speaker's Corner and the reflexology path in the shape of a snail. I would take my breakfast there, black coffee and half a soggy bun, and look at the birds. And I used to think aren't you always going to be here. You and me in the morning, little birds.



Sharlene Teo (b. 1987) is a Singaporean writer based in the UK. She is the winner of the inaugural Deborah Rogers Writer's Award for *Ponti*, her first novel. Her writing has appeared in publications such as *Esquire* and *Magma Poetry* and been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. She is the recipient of the 2012 Booker Prize Foundation Scholarship and 2013 David T.K Wong Creative Writing Fellowship at the University of East Anglia, as well as the 2014 Sozopol Fiction Fellowship.

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See you soon.