Novel Studio

New Writers Anthology

Class of 2017
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Lost Revolutionary</td>
<td>Lucy Smith</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Truthteller’s Tale</td>
<td>Pauline Walker</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synthetic City</td>
<td>Johnathan Kopkin</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Of Guns and Potions</td>
<td>Charli Wijesinghe</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three Little Words</td>
<td>Evleen Mann</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Companion</td>
<td>Rosamund Davies</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Now the Spirit Speaketh</td>
<td>Eoghan Hughes</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Drawn Tide</td>
<td>Lucy Underhill</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Exhumation Proofs</td>
<td>Luke Richardson</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ceilings of Broken Glass</td>
<td>Arun Das</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The English Devil</td>
<td>D. Hart Smith</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Dream Circle</td>
<td>Máire Malone</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reincarnating Andy</td>
<td>Nick Connell</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Away with the Faeries</td>
<td>Lesley Ricardo Jones</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1919. The fighting has ended, but for Song Shaoqing and the Chinese Labour Corps the war is far from over. In the disintegrating landscape of Flanders, Song makes a choice that will change his life. As his ideals are tested in the aftermath of war, events in the Beijing he left behind look set to catch up with him. [Image: © IWM (Q 9848)]

“So, Johnny, what next?”

Lieutenant Watts’s breath was hot in Song’s ear, his arm tight around his neck, and the bell jangled as they clattered out of the restaurant and back onto the cobbles of the square. Song felt strange. There was something loose about him, about his knees and elbows; they felt jangly like the bell.

“I feel good,” he said. Night had fallen while they were in the restaurant and he squinted up at the new moon, knowing it should remind him of something but forgetting what.

“I know you do, Johnny,” said Watts, hugging him close. “You’re going to feel even better soon.”

Song shook his head in a large arc. It felt at once true and yet inexplicable. The town stank, of the millions of men who had slept in it, shat in it, puked in it, bled in it, of fuel burning in grates that was neither firewood nor coal, and of people who drank liquids fit only for the dead.

“Come on, Johnny,” said Watts. “We’re going to make a man of you tonight.”
The blue lantern glinted outside the hotel. Watts paid a couple of francs to a woman at the door and they went inside. There was a bare corridor with a crucifix on the wall leading to a steep staircase, and to the right a parlour which the woman ushered them into. The parlour was papered with a heavy striped wallpaper and hung with a brass framed mirror and a portrait of a man surrounded by hunting dogs. Watts motioned for Song to sit on a small settee. It sank so far under him he felt vulnerable, as if he might not be able to rise in an emergency. The woman brought champagne in coloured glasses. It tasted marginally better than the wine but it still made him sneeze. As he wiped his nose on his sleeve, two more women came into the room. These women were younger and were dressed in negligées cut low over their bosoms and ending just below the lines of their buttocks. His eyes ranged over their bare skin; so much of it, it made him blink. He thought for a moment of Lanfen. The day before he left Beijing, she’d pulled up her sleeve to show him the white skin of her wrist, the small cut she’d made, from which she’d penned their pledge, ‘dare to die,’ in blood on the even whiter cotton of his handkerchief. If only she had pushed the sleeve a little further, up to the cup in her elbow, a cup he’d wanted so long to kiss.

One of the women approached Watts and they began to move together in the middle of the room, a dance, kissing and fondling each other. Embarrassed watching another man touch a woman, Song turned away. As he did, the other woman slid in next to him on the settee and began stroking his face.

“ Aren’t you sweet?” she said, and then, taking hold of the glass in his hand, “may I?” Song nodded and she took a sip of champagne, returning him the glass.

“Do you like her?” said Watts, glancing away from the woman in his arms. “Why don’t you let her show you upstairs?”
The woman took him by the hand. He let her lead him into a bedroom, no wallpaper this time just plaster and a crucifix, and a large brass bed. He felt a red wine belch rising up from his stomach, and he dashed to throw open the window and douse himself in cold air.

“I think I’m going to be sick,” he said. He thought he’d said it in Chinese but she seemed to understand and reached under the bed to pull out a chamber pot. As he knelt over it he caught the scent of her urine, sweet like the wine, and his gut emptied into it.

“Jesus,” she said. She waited for him to finish spitting and then passed him a towel. “There’s a basin over there if you want,” she said, pointing at a small table in the corner. Song stood and poured water into the basin, splashed his face and rinsed his mouth, and wiped himself with the towel.

“Sorry,” he said.

She said nothing but held something out to him. “You’ll have to use this,” she said. He looked at it, a small rubber bag. “You put it on your johnny, your thing.” He stared at it. “To protect yourself. And me.”

She expected him to know what to do. He felt panic, the feeling he might be about to humiliate himself beyond any of his wildest fears. Then she said, “Jesus, I’ll do it then. But you can take off your own boots if you don’t mind.”
Mixed-race couple Claudette and Alec’s idyllic life is shattered when the far-right New Britain Party wins the 2022 General Election and immigrants are classified as non-citizens. Newly-pregnant Claudette is interned in the government’s flagship Community Housing Project, while Alec infiltrates the government and attempts to bring down the oppressive regime from within.

Thursday 5th May 2022

I’d been up since 4am, at my desk, polishing the final chapter of my autobiography. Leaders like me don’t need eight hours sleep a night. If we won today the country could be confident knowing that I would not be sleeping on the job. Four hours a night with two power naps during the day and a hard jog on the treadmill is more than enough to keep me mentally alert and ready to face the challenges ahead.

I won’t be a reactionary leader. My policies have all been fully considered and sharpened through endless debate with my inner circle: Douglas Hetherbridge, my Campaign Manager, and Nigel Graves, Deputy Leader of the New Britain Party. The minute I’m in Number Ten I’ll put my plans into action with the full cooperation of the police and the military, plans to make this country great again.

Taking a sip of my espresso, I picked up the report from the Institute and Practice of UK Economics. They’ve been providing me with various statistics since Article 50 was triggered back in 2017: net migration has increased to 500,000; the NHS is paying out compensation in the hundreds of thousands due to the negligence of doctors from India; the
UK is suffering a brain drain with entrepreneurs leaving Tech Cities across the country for Dublin; and with a record rise in unemployment to 3.6 million the Institute predicts that the UK is on the brink of economic disaster, the likes of which the country may never recover from. In less alarmist terms – can there be less alarmist terms? – if the Tories get in again and continue to bury their head in the sand and lie to the public, we will end up as a third world country. I will not let that happen.

I finished my espresso and thought about the new kind of politics I represented. For the last few months I’d been rolling out “operation hearts and minds” by inviting many of the country’s chief executives from FTSE100 companies to lunch, at The Manila Rooms in Mayfair. We’d discussed the impact of globalisation, immigration and blockages to wealth creation and how those obstacles could be overcome when the NBP got into government. I saw the doubt on their faces. How could a party like mine possibly do what they wanted? I delivered my pitch and allowed them time to think as we ate triangles of toast with caviar and drank Bollinger. Once the plates were cleared away and the table swept for crumbs, I found it useful to incentivise them with photographs of their private lives which I keep on my phone.

I’m always happy to act as waiter at moments like this and fill up their water glass as they swipe left, left, right, linger, left, left, left. I assure them that the pictures are for my own private amusement. They are part of a collection that will never see the light of day.

Against the backdrop of the other diners’ gentle murmurings and my guest’s quiet contemplation, I enjoyed rare steak with white peppercorn sauce, green beans and sautéed potatoes; blood oozed from the meat and intermingled with the sauce. By the time cognac was served they’d tell me, very passionately, that they supported both me and the party and they promised to donate money the minute they returned to their offices. I’d toss my napkin over their leftovers and leave them with a smile to settle the bill.
Politics should always have a lighter side.
A disenchanted Las Vegas poker player finds himself trapped in an alternate version of the nine to five nightmare he thought he’d avoided. After a missed opportunity during a visit to his hometown leaves him full of regret, Anthony struggles to resume his routine, turning instead to the Strip’s higher risk offerings in a bid to cope with his feelings of alienation.

I've been folding hand after hand for hours now. Standard. I'm getting tired, but there is too much potential profit here for me to leave. That potential chiefly resides on the table in front of a man who has enthusiastically introduced himself as Dave to each and every person within earshot. The jumbled mass of uneven multicolored stacks and loose chips, from one or another of the countless pots he's sloppily dragged toward himself, are there for the taking. Dave is probably in his early forties, easily six or seven drinks in, and having an absolute blast. Despite his admirable efforts to the contrary, he simply cannot stop winning.

At the moment, Dave's engaged in light-hearted conversation with a guy named Jason who’s sitting in the seat between us. I've seen Jason around on a number of occasions and know him to be a solid player. As the game unfolds, he and I will occasionally discuss a particularly interesting hand or event at the table. For the most part, however, Jason is busy talking to Dave, with whom he's seemingly developed quite a rapport. I suspect there is an ulterior motive to his friendly demeanor, but Dave genuinely seems to be enjoying the plaudits and sense of camaraderie. So that's nice.
On the button, I take a look at my cards. The king of hearts and king of diamonds are a welcome change from the mismatched and disconnected starting hands I’ve been seeing all night. The action folds around to Dave who makes his standard $20 raise. Jason calls the bet. I pause for a moment before sliding $80 worth of chips forward. The guy in the small-blind calls and the big-blind folds. It's back to Dave and he slides three stacks of varying height toward the center of the table. Jason quickly throws his cards away.

“How much?” I ask the dealer.

He counts the stacks and replies, “$215 total.”

Masking my delight, I take stock of how much I’ve got left. A little more than $650. I doubt that Dave fully appreciates the fact that I've hardly played a hand over the last few hours. If he happens to have aces it's just one of those things.

I shuffle my chips, repeatedly, trying my best to appear as if I'm struggling with a difficult decision. After thirty or so seconds I announce, “All-in.” Stack by stack, chip by chip, I put everything at risk. The small-blind picks up his cards, looks at them longingly, taps them on the table a few times, and folds. Dave squirms in his seat as the dealer looks to him expectantly. My eyes, locked firmly on nothing in particular in the center of the table, give nothing away. A few minutes go by and some of the other players begin to grumble and stare. Dave's inaction is of no concern to me. I want him to take all the time he needs to convince himself to stay in the hand. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Dave look me up and down one last time as, with defiance thick in his voice, he makes the call.

I lean forward in anticipation of the hand's conclusion and the others at the table follow suit. The dealer authoritatively palms the table twice then puts things into motion. The ace of hearts is immediately visible in the window and unease gnaws at me. If Dave has an ace in his hand, I'm close to dead. The 6 of clubs and 7 of spades complete the flop. No real
reaction from my adversary, it’s tough to say whether the ace hit him. The turn and river are
the 3 of spades and 9 of diamonds, respectively. Likely meaningless.

I look over at Dave, “You have an ace?”

He nods hesitantly.

Standard. “You got it,” I manage to say with only a tinge of disgust.

He turns over the ace and jack of clubs as a smile stretches across his face.

I take a last look at my deposed kings and throw them face down into the muck.

“Nice hand, man.”

Jason looks over at me with a sympathetic expression. I shake my head slightly as,
with a wide sweeping motion, the dealer pushes the roughly $1600 pot to Dave.

Poker is a microcosm of life. It's possible to seize every opportunity and end up with
nothing to show for it. Hard work might pay off, but there are no guarantees. The only way to
fully take hold of your destiny is to walk away from the table. Problem is, that's not really a
solution; not a good one at least. Still, playing optimally yields the best chance of success so
there are times when you simply have to take a break lest your emotions sabotage you.

Suddenly finding nothing but the felt of the table in front of you is often one of those times. A
foul stew of injustice, anger, desperation, and bravado bubbles up inside and complements a
certain distinct feeling of sickness in the gut. These feelings are perfectly normal but also
incredibly dangerous.

“Lock it, I'll be right back.” I stand and motion at my seat. The dealer nods and slides
a marker over to where my chips sat just a few minutes ago.

As I exit the poker room I hear Jason exclaim to Dave, “Wow. You're my hero, man!”

10
Modern day, magical London. Hector, the illegitimate son of a philandering politician, is a rare breed of Other, a soul thief who can access the appearance and memories of the dead. Meeting Anna, another of his kind, feels like fate. The only problem? She's determined to kill his father.

It is crisp, this autumn air. Hector feels the cold down to his bones. His nose runs and his cheeks are red; his fingers, un-gloved and clutching at a bouquet of wilting roses, feel like icicles.

His route is a scenic one. Across the park, the walking trail curves around on itself like a snake. He passes trees aflame with reds and golds, and slows to better appreciate the sight. Autumn, to him, is a reminder of the peculiar beauty that comes right before death. It is a vivid decay that has taken him years – decades, even – to appreciate.

He is a little stiff as he makes his way uphill. His leg is healed, but it still carries the echo of broken bones. He keeps going, slowly, winding around the duck pond, wandering past the line of poplars, and then exiting out onto the side road.

The cemetery’s West Gate, the one that is so decrepit it borders on romantic, is there across the street. It is his favourite entrance. It is his favourite graveyard, too, despite its small size and subsequent lack of choice.

The gate itself is made of rusted iron spokes and rotting wood, either bent or warped out of shape. There is an archway flanked by crumbling stone statues, of angels holding greening brass instruments: a harp, a trumpet, a flute. On a quiet day, in a quieter hour, he can strain his ears to catch their faint melody floating through the air.
This gate, unlike the main one in the South, hints at the possibility of something more. Something Other.

It is here then, that he first sees her.

It happens like this: she is walking out, and he is coming in, and had she not been directly in his path, he never would have spared her a glance.

But she is, and he does.

The first thing he notices is the soul that she has borrowed. She wears it loosely, like an oversized cloak, and he catches glimpses of her – the real her – beneath the old lady’s skin. A flash of blonde hair instead of silver; a smooth forehead in the place of wrinkles. There is the shadow of a straight back despite the old lady’s hunch, and the gait of somebody much younger.

Time slows. He is stuck, his legs frozen in place. His fingers slacken, just slightly, and the roses slip out of his hand and roll onto the road.

One beat; two. His heart quickens. Three beats. His ears heat with rushing blood. Four. Was it real? Five. Because she was – six – he’s sure that she was. Seven. Just like him?

And then, eight beats later, he is moving. He spins around, quickly now that he is no longer in shock. But it is too late.

She is – not gone, not yet, but she is too far away. He watches her close the door of a sleek blue Mercedes, and then she is driving, shrinking into the distance. Time drips through his fingers. In only a handful of seconds, she turns the corner. A couple more, and she is gone.
1978: Three medical students are on a mission to Kerala: Ajay wants to retrace his roots, Molly to deepen her vocation to become a nun and Piers to analyse the local culture. As charismatic junior doctor Shiv cures their prejudices and heals their ignorance, he unwittingly plays havoc with their hearts.

Molly smoothed down the blue airmail paper and began her first letter home.

Dear Mammy and Padraig and Maurice and Luke and Oisin and Eugene and Dominic, I’ll be sorry to miss out on Christmas with ye for the first time ever, hopefully the last! Think of me in the heat, eating rice and lentils, while you huddle round the turf fire with the goose roasting and the potatoes turning crisp as caramel.

I’ll bring back a bottle of sunshine for you to dry the clothes with, Mammy, and a snake or two as a souvenir for you lads. Do you want them dead or alive?

Oh no, now Mammy would worry about her bringing snakes back into Ireland and undoing all St Patrick’s good work. Better add something spiritual to prove she still held the faith.

Thanks be to God, there is a chapel in the convent attached to this mission hospital. The Mother superior is an Obstetrics and Gynaecology specialist and a relation of Ajay’s.

Don’t worry yourself about me being in India with ‘two fellas’ as you put it, Mammy. They’re my best friends. Ajay’s a Catholic Indian for God’s sake, and he has a steady girlfriend. As for Piers, he’s a convert and they’re better Catholics than any of us! Besides,
we’re all going to be doctors, so you have to trust us.

It was a constant battle to calm her mother’s nerves. Molly experienced a pang every time she remembered the holiday she brought home a book she’d borrowed from Piers, his first edition of *The Naked Ape* by Desmond Morris. Mammy found it in the inglenook and opened it at random. A few seconds of reading was all it took.

‘This book is not about apes at all, at all,’ she cried and flung it on the fire.

‘You’ll be glad to know I did manage to sprinkle some of the Holy Water from Knock inside the plane, as you suggested and I’m still wearing your St Christopher medal, so your prayers have kept me safe thus far.

*It’s seven o’clock. I can just see you all now kneeling down for the rosary in front of the Sacred Heart.*

_Say a decade for me, your loving daughter and sister, Molly Margaret Patricia._

When Mammy had promised to say the Angelus every day to protect her from the heathens in India, Molly had objected to the word ‘heathens’ and cheered her mother up with the news that there were more Catholics in Kerala than in Eire.

‘Kerry-la, is it? Sure and all,’ Mammy sighed. ‘Some auld Kerryman must have sailed across the sea and named it after our own blessed county.’

The poor creature had never even been to Dublin. But as soon as Molly qualified and earned her first pay cheque, she would fly Mammy to Rome to see the Pope.

She was licking the edges of the letter and folding them down carefully, when a complex sensation of fear and sadness rose up in her chest, making her eyes film with tears. Blinking hard, she gazed around the bedroom, which she was to share for the next three months with Priya, and Ruby, the resident junior doctors. Their beds were topped with a single sheet; there was no rug on the dark wooden floor; on the white-washed wall opposite was a simple wooden crucifix and a holy water font hung by the doorway. It was just like home!
Glancing through the open window, from which poured warm, welcoming blossom-scented air, she saw the bright green tops of the swaying palm trees. As usual, Mammy was wrong. Kerala actually meant ‘The Land of Coconuts’.
When Polish refugee Marta, a lady’s companion in 1950s Britain, discovers the teenage diary of her employer, she unearths a secret. Revelations about Lady Pelham’s early life force Marta to face her own past and, in turn, to confront her future.

It was a grey afternoon in May 1950 and the house sat square in its grounds, as it had done now for over a hundred and fifty years. At this moment in its history, the mansion’s many windows were mostly shuttered and blind. Only those on the ground floor remained open to the day, but as yet unlit from within, they were dim and unrevealing in the pale, weak light. The placid brick exterior, like a gigantic dolls house, yielded no hint of the occupants and activities inside its walls.

Hearst Park, as the estate was known, was named for Annabel Hearst, wife of George Sudbury, the first Lord Pelham, for whom the house had been built in 1790. The estate had accommodated five generations of Pelhams, hosted their parties, sheltered their indiscretions and kept their secrets. It had withstood fire, bankruptcy and war.

On this particular afternoon, solid, impassive and self contained as ever, Hearst Park was awaiting the arrival of a stranger. At the end of the drive, footsteps on the gravel signalled her approach.

The stranger in question was Marta Sadowska, 25 years old, Polish in origin, resident in Britain since 1939, and not expecting much as she walked through the gate. It was May 1950, a new decade, a new job, but not, to Marta, a new beginning.
In fact, her arrival signified an ending, an admission that the die was cast. To be a lady’s companion once in your life might be considered a temporary episode. To take up a second position was to accept it as a permanent occupation. She put her suitcase down on the gravel and looked around her. There was a smallish house on the left of the drive. That must be the gatehouse, to which she’d been asked to report. Marta sighed. She hesitated a moment, as if considering flight, but then stepped resolutely forward. This was her life now. This was it.

As she approached the door, a sweet scent hit her, making her notice the wisteria, which had not, until then, succeeded in breaking through the glum veil of resentment, in which she was wrapped. She’d drawn it around herself early that morning when she started her journey and it had cocooned her all the way, keeping her numb and anaesthetised against the trials of cross country travel: the long waits on railway platforms, the noise and crush and sandwich smells of other travellers, the bus journey to the village, the weight of her suitcase as she lugged it the mile walk that brought her to the driveway of Hearst Park. She’d let nothing through.

But now she saw the wisteria, its pale purple blooms swarming over the entire building in fragrant, drooping clusters. She had to admit it was spectacular… but she would not let it lift her spirits. She drew the veil around her again, reached for the bell pull and gave it a tug.

The maid led her through a small, black and white tiled hallway and into a medium sized room, richly furnished in upholstery and curtains of silk brocade. The lighting was not bright and this, together with the fire glowing in the grate and the dark wood panelling, gave the room a somnolent, heavy-lidded atmosphere that might, depending on the observer, be experienced as cozy or oppressive. In Marta, unused to overheated rooms, the warmth
induced a sense of torpor as it seeped into her limbs. However, she managed a polite smile, as a pink-cheeked man in his early forties got up from his seat to greet her. He held out his hand.

‘Hello, Miss Sadowska.’ He pronounced her name correctly, sounding the ‘w’ as a ‘v’, even though she had not said it for him first. Was that a point in his favour, Marta wondered, or did it mean he was a pedantic old bore?
County Donegal, 1966. When Father Daniel McNeill is called to administer the Last Rites to a dying man, he is dragged into a world of secrecy, paganism and folklore. Why does the town not want to hold the funeral? Who is the woman who has appeared in the house beyond the mountain? And can Father McNeill’s faith save him from the superstition he encounters?

May the Lord bless me and keep me, but wasn’t it a bleak scene awaiting me through that door, Father. I do not know how long I have left myself, but I shall not forget it for all the days I am yet to live. I pray I never have to see the like again. For in that small, gloomy room, lying perfectly still on the table in front of a half-lit fire was the body of what looked to be an elderly man, as pale as the taibhse. Holed up in the far corner closest to the fire, huddled on small wooden stools, sat two young boys, staring intently into its flames, as if in a trance, quite undisturbed by their surroundings, or of the man on the table. Sullen and half-frozen, they were filthy, covered head-to-toe in black muck from the bog, as if they had been rolling around like pigs in dirt. In the dim light of the fire it was hard to make out any expression on their faces, but I recall the older of the two was playing with a torch aimlessly, flicking it on and then off again, his eyes unmoved by the direction of the light. Usually children of their age are boisterous, full of life, but their sunken, dead eyes revealed to me two disturbed souls. It was the most macabre, chilling scene I could have imagined. I fell backwards and the Sergeant moved to steady me.

Sensing my unease at the boys’ presence, the Sergeant spoke gently. “Best to ignore them, Father,” he said. “They’ve learned a hard lesson tonight alright and I’ve no doubt their
Da will belt some sense into them tomorrow. At least they had the decency to bring this with them,” he said, handing me a hipflask, bidding me to drink.

I’m not much of a drinker, Father, but I needed that whiskey like nothing else.

“McAlonan?” I stammered, pointing towards the table.

“That’s him. Best be quick, he doesn’t have long.”

I gripped steadily onto Sergeant Carville’s arms as I took a few weak steps towards the splayed frame of McAlonan and removed the oil and water from my pocket. He was still breathing, just, his chest making only the slightest of movements to disturb the air. From the long, deep and crimson slits traversing his wrists, it was clear he had lost a lot of blood. His lips were drained of colour and, on closer looking, his face contorted, as if he had endured a great shock. He had suffered, that much was clear. The shadow of death hung all about him and there seemed to be, though I could not explain it, a feeling of malaise hanging about him, as though there were a sickness of the soul, as well as the body. A cold bead of sweat ran from my temple to my cheek and my palms were sticky and my mouth dry as I whispered those most everlasting of words, “Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.” I stooped lower to administer the oil, “I absolve you of your sins, in the name of the Father, the Son and of the Holy Ghost.” He was cold to the touch.

But here is the curious thing, Father, and now I think back, it was what shocked me the most that evening. The absolution is an intimate moment, and administering the oil I examined his face in some detail, not only for signs of life, but to see if his soul would yield up any secrets from that evening. As I scanned the lines and cracks that ran all about his unshaven face, I noticed a peculiar marking, just above his left cheek and running onto his forehead. It had the blotchy texture and pinkish red colour of a birthmark and it stood out so remarkably, and in such contrast, to the paleness of the rest of his face. Yet the pattern, the pattern resembled that of a handprint. There was no other way to describe it. There were four
clear finger marks and a thumbprint, while the palm sat directly below. It was almost as if he had suffered a blow or a slap from an open hand that had etched itself permanently on his face.
Hastings, 1946. Newly reunited in a grieving town, twins Grace and Harvey's relationship is fractured by secrets. Grace witnesses a mysterious man emerge from the night sea, while Harvey's entanglement with an aging occultist threatens to reveal aspects of his past. Together the twins must find a future in a world where conventional beliefs have been shattered.

Hastings, February 1946

Grace could tell a storm was coming by the way the waves rushed the shadowed beach. Not smooth and soothing, a luxurious hush and rasp drawing back into the body, but choppy and dancing, with white-frosted black waves that chucked and dropped and splashed with a wonderful command.

This was Grace’s sea. She had spent hundreds of hours perched among the rock pools while she documented and categorised the details of its strange creatures, or bargaining in the blackened fishing huts for whatever had come in with the catch. The stranger the better for the scholars who visited from London to buy her drawings and photographs.

Grace checked her watch. Drummond was late; he was always late. Countless times he had rushed up with that dreadful mournful look on his face, apologising and excusing himself earnestly. She knew she should be glad of him, and she was fond of him, as she was fond of the worn but soft Fairisle jumper that she wore around the house. Drummond certainly had many good qualities – he was very attentive, and had such a distinguished army record. And, as her mother would have said, he did well to put up with her. But still, wasn’t it ungentlemanly to leave her waiting in the gloom with only a streetlamp for company?
As she looked out to the crackles of lightning being unleashed into the darkness on the horizon, her eyes caught on a pale shape rising from the drawn tide as it readied to surge the brown and grey pebbles. She wiped the wind-whipped tears from her eyes and looked again. It looked like a man! A tall, lean and muscular man, walking from the waves with his skin bare to the elements! He was the first naked man Grace had seen, aside from those she could recall from her school anatomy books, and the maps of tendons and veins had not prepared her for the flesh. She stared.

The dry pebbles creaked beneath him as he climbed the beach, and it was as if Grace could feel it: the rough stones pushing strange nerves in his feet; sand grinding between his toes. He walked calmly, seeming not to feel the cold, to the wooden steps leading up to the promenade. In the lamplight, his skin was both gleaming and shadowed, and Grace saw long, salt-knotted hair falling down his back. The breeze blew a dry, briny bloom to her tongue.

At the top of the steps, the man stopped. He looked up and down the deserted road that ran along the promenade. The wind tossed sea-spray around the scene and drew his hair up and away from his neck. He turned towards Grace, standing silent in the pooling light beneath the street lamp, and returned her gaze.

With a rush, Grace felt the immodesty of her stare and she turned to the sea, blushing. From the corner of her eye she saw the stranger begin to walk away, and when she looked back, he was crossing the street, his bare feet unflinching on the cobbles. He entered the darkness of the gardens at St Leonards Warrior Square and was gone.

A moment for a breath, to grip the white metal bar that marked the start of the beach and wonder: Who was that? From where had he come? The last brought a thrill to her shoulders. She re-tied her scarf and pulled her coat around her, and, no longer of a mind to wait for Drummond to make his slow way, walked quickly towards the town centre. Her heels marked her steps, clicking sharply against the rhythmic crash and rustle of the tide.
1868. Once one of the most promising young artists and poets in Britain, Gabriel Rossetti, now in his 40s, faces the prospect of sliding into obscurity while his contemporaries thrive. Unable to create anything new, his last chance at success may be recovering and publishing a book of his poetry buried with his dead wife a decade before. Yet this risks unearthing aspects of a past he’d hoped he had suppressed forever.

It was raining that night when Gabriel arrived back at the studio. He had to leap the puddles and the grimy streams that ran down the street. Hunt’s latest was another enormous canvas, bisected diagonally. One half was still blank, the other a series of amorphous green shapes in various shades. On every wall, he had pinned torn pages from a sketchbook covered in dozens of drawings of sheep. Despite the surreality of all this, for once Hunt seemed pleased with the day’s work. They both lay on their backs on the studio floor, staring up at the ceiling.

Hunt screwed his forehead into a frown and began to speak. ‘I dreamt that I had something for the Academy. To submit, for the exhibition. And it was the best thing I’d ever painted, no question. So, along I go, canvas under my arm and am in Burlington House, when suddenly, I realise, I’m desperate to shit.’

‘Really?’ Gabriel asked. ‘What did you do?’

‘I went into a lavatory of course. Except, it wasn’t like a lavatory, it was enormous, as big as a ballroom. And everywhere in every direction, were toilets, row upon row of them. And, on each one was some grey haired man or other, all of them were there, Reynolds, Gainsborough, Watts, all with their unexpressables around their ankles, shitting. Just shitting
on endlessly. And there was me, some canvas or other in my grip, and nowhere to take my seat.’

He stopped and sighed. Gabriel stared at the ceiling. Above them a fly batted its way between the lamp fittings.

‘Worst part was, when I awoke I really needed to go. So it’s lucky I didn’t happen on an empty receptacle or I might have shat the bed.’

Gabriel laughed.

‘The Academy is then, in your imaginative world, nothing more than a turd factory? Hardly a complimentary vision.’

‘Or,’ Hunt turned to his own canvas, ‘am I just frustrated I can’t add my own steaming contribution to the heap?’

‘Do you remember what the painting was at least?’

‘Lost to me I fear. It was an absolute stunner though, I remember that. Better than anything I’ll ever actually do.’

Gabriel had lost track of what time it was. Late. It was always late when he arrived at Hunt’s.

‘I dreamt I was in a carriage,’ he began. ‘It was normal at first, but then went so fast I was pressed into my seat. I tried to shout to the man, but it just went faster and faster.’

Hunt had sat up. ‘When’s the last time you were in a carriage?’

‘A while ago I suppose.’

Hunt seemed to roll it over in his mind for a moment, then cracked his fingers. ‘Mine was better.’

Gabriel said nothing.

‘You’re not painting,’ Hunt said. It wasn’t a question. ‘The Academy deadline is in two weeks.’
Gabriel closed his eyes. ‘I’ll miss it.’ He could hear the fly, which had made it to the corner of the room. ‘I’ve been writing poetry.’

‘That’s an amusement though, Gabby, you understand that. A pastime.’

Judging from the location of Hunt’s voice he had laid back on the floor next to him.

‘Your destiny is in the paint, same as mine. You know it as well as I do.’

Hunt wouldn’t be finished in time either surely. And Millais, that was another question entirely.

‘Deverell is submitting.’

This time Gabriel sat up.

‘Deverell! Have you seen his latest?’

‘I have.’

‘It’s…good.’

‘I know.’

‘Genuinely well done.’

‘I know.’

‘And that’s what he’s submitting?’

‘One supposes.’

Gabriel looked at Hunt, still reclined, and to the mess of the canvas. In the rough greens he could just about make out the impression of a hillside.

‘Who is the model?’

‘This new thing. His discovery.’ Hunt’s eyes were closed, his voice gentle. Gabriel wondered if he was about to fall asleep.

‘What discovery?’

Hunt seemed to search for a word.
‘Siddal. Miss Siddal. He found her in a milliner’s on Leicester Square. Behind the counter.’

‘Have you seen her?’

‘In life? Yes, she’s remarkable.’

‘Really?’

‘Oh yes.’

Gabriel dropped himself back down and looked at the ceiling again.

‘That rat Deverell. I might have known there was something. He’s nowhere near as good as that.’

They were silent. Hunt’s breathing became gentle and regular, and after a moment a small snore escaped. Gabriel surrendered and allowed his eyes to close.
Ceilings of Broken Glass
by Arun Das
Contact: m.arundas@gmail.com

A divorcee putting his past to bed. An IT worker escaping a sham marriage. A Bollywood pin-up girl desperate for a big break. A makeup artist searching for love in Bombay’s LGBT scene. Can four determined individuals break through glass ceilings without getting hurt?

I've never been able to cry. Haven’t done it once in my adult life. Not even now, after everything that’s happened. I'm doubled over the sink, one hand gripping the granite for support, the other held under the tap. Rivulets of blood snake into the drain. Bits of glass are embedded in my hand.

What is a world without tears? It's a world of laughter. Laugh when you're happy. Laugh when you're sad. Laugh when everything is a bit mad. I sense a laugh coming. First a murmur, then a rumble and eventually an explosion. It comes in waves, each one carrying with it a needle of pain. Soon, the pain overtakes the laughter and sends me crashing to the floor.

I lie there for a time, knees curled into my chest, knowing I can’t stay forever. I use my good arm to grab onto the counter and lift myself to my feet. The pool of blood on the floor wets my naked toes. The counter is a minefield of splinters and shattered glass, but the bottle of Glenmorangie is in one piece, standing like a palm tree in a desert of chaos. I seek refuge in its familiar warmth with a swallow straight from the bottle. Papa would turn in his grave if he could see the way I’m treating a single malt. I have to remind myself that he has no grave. It’s been five years since I scattered his ashes into the river Ganga. Now he's just another effluent, dissolved in the vastness of the Indian Ocean. Maybe that is where we will unite again. Sooner, than I ever thought we would.
I stumble into the living room, leaving crimson footprints on the oak wood floor. I lean on the leg of the upturned coffee table to steady myself. Shattered remains of ceramic pepper the carpet, forming a kaleidoscope of bits, bobs and broken things. It is all that remains from a lifetime of travel souvenirs. The bookshelf is on its side, its shelves vacant, its contents scattered across the carpet. I've never opened any of those books before and never will. I use them as stepping stones, like a child who's pretending the floor is lava. I’ve done it once before, when I was eight. Got a slap on my cheek for doing so and a long lecture for touching books with my feet. In Maa's eyes, books were equal to God, and my dirty feet were a direct affront to them. I wonder what the gods will make of what I'm doing now, anointing the books with footprints of blood.
Better the devil you know? When her friend Anna is found dead in unexplained circumstances, Kate Wallace is drawn back into the sun and shadow of southern Italy – a world she thought she had left behind. But as she uncovers more about Anna, Kate begins to question just how well she knew her friend, and just how well she knows herself.

It was lunchtime when Anna fell. People were in their apartments. Children were home from school, their heavy rucksacks abandoned on sofas, chairs, beds or floors. Anna’s cry was high and loud. Everyone heard and recognised it, or so they said afterwards.

As her body hit the polished surface, the blood snaked along the patterned marble tiles in the lobby. I’m not sure you are ever able to remove blood. It seems to me that there is always a shadow of something; a stain that is visible to certain eyes.

I imagine their necks craned to see the sight below, mouths agape, loud voices shocked into whispers. Then, as swiftly as people had appeared, they returned to the safety of their homes and there was only the sound of a stilted silence in the atrium. Inside the living rooms of each apartment people turned up the volume on the animated adventures of Lupin l’incorrigibile, the cartoon, which they always showed on Mediaset channel 5 at the same time of every weekday, since the time when the parents had been children themselves. When the police arrived I know from experience that no one would want to be around.

When I think of Anna I remember how she liked to describe herself as Anna M. Mysterious and dangerous like a femme fatale in one of those black and white films her papa,
Uvierro loved to watch. When she was 17, instead of dressing in jeans and tight t-shirts like her fellow students, she had her own style. She would browse through her mother’s old copies of *Vogue* and *Elle* magazines. The huge slabs of coffee table books on Dior, Chanel, Yves St Laurent, and Balenciaga were her inspiration. She wore jackets cinched in at the waist, which skimmed the hipbones. Tight pencil skirts with seamed stockings and black high heeled shoes in leather or suede with matching accessories; red lipstick, strings of pearls and hats with veils to complete the look. It pleased her father, her dear papa. He would sit in his high backed leather armchair and look at her. She would stand in front of him as he ran a critical eye over her latest combination. Or so I remember her telling me.

As she fell, was it as I imagine it? She flew through the air like a witch on her broomstick, travelling down in a straight line. Just before her body smashed onto the tiles below was there a cry of triumph? Did she declare that, whatever else, her death like her life would be something that would be remembered? As I walk alongside the group of friends and family who have come to bury her I already know that, like the voice on the phone said, I cannot go back to London. I have to find out how she died.
When Pearl Conors, a beauty from Cork, joins Fergus Doherty’s Dream Circle, his career is put at risk. How will the Circle survive the turbulent waves of the couple’s passion? Dreams have the power to transform lives but can they transcend Fergus and Pearl’s forbidden love?

Some dreams are private, like letters from the soul,
while others serve as passports into wider worlds.

Fergus Doherty rehearsed these words as he set out for the opening night of his first Dream Circle meeting. He thought of Sandra and what she might say if she were still alive. As he jangled the keys to the side door, he reckoned she would have chalked a message on their kitchen blackboard saying something along the lines of ‘Fracture a limb, darling,’ which was her style.

He let himself into the Assembly Hall of St Jude’s Primary School - desolate except for the presence of a giant statue that stood on a wooden base at the top of the hall.

The first person to arrive was a neat woman in a twinset. ‘Maggie Fitzgerald,’ she said. ‘I’ve signed up for your course.’ She fiddled with her necklace.

‘Welcome, Maggie,’ Fergus said. ‘Please follow me.’ He pushed open the door of classroom 3A. Maggie slipped in behind him. They scanned the room. Fergus saw her shock as she took in the tiny chairs and tables.
‘Oh God, Maggie. What a fiasco! I neglected to mention to the caretaker our need for
adult chairs when I booked the goddam room. What must you think of me?’

‘Well, Mr… em…Fergus, it’s an unexpected beginning.’ She grinned. There was
nothing for it but to resign himself to his mistake and make sure to sort it out before the
following week’s meeting. Maggie helped him to arrange the chairs into a close knit circle.

Another member arrived.

‘Are the seven dwarfs joining us?’ a stocky man in a pinstripe suit asked through a
sarcastic grin. ‘My name is Eamon Doyle.’

‘Welcome Eamon.’ Fergus held out his hand in greeting. He was met with a limp
response. So this was the man who had written one word in answer to why he had signed up,
‘Curiosity.’

Next to arrive was a dark haired woman in a red dress. ‘Pearl Conors,’ she said,
holding out slender fingers. He enjoyed her Cork accent with its husky tone and noticed
masses of freckles on the back of her hand.

The response on her form to the question “Why do you wish to join a Dream Circle?”
had impressed him. It said, “Dreams are mysterious. I want to know how they can transform
my life.”

‘Delighted, Pearl ‘Take a seat.’ He tightened his ponytail and smiled.

When the six signed-up members were seated, three men and three women, Fergus
stood and looked at each of them in turn. He felt like the fairy tale giant as he watched them
shift around in an effort to settle into comfortable positions.

‘Welcome everyone.’ He traced the tail of his one lizard earring around the top of his
earlobe.

‘Before next week’s session; please invest in a brand new Dream Journal. For the
adventurous among you buy a sketch pad as well. But for goodness sake if you present me
with glorious sunsets I also want electric storms. If you give me Blake’s Lamb then I also want his Tyger fire.

‘Permission to be playful,’ Pearl’s eyes were full of merriment. When Fergus met her gaze he felt the stirring of a longing that reminded him of Sandra. Even when they had been apart he would imagine himself kissing the delicate skin of her throat, the inside of her wrists, her thighs. Enough. This was no time to revive old memories.

That night Fergus would dream he was sitting beside a dark haired woman at the arched entrance to a red and yellow vardo with massive wooden wheels. The entrance was decorated with gold painted lion heads and gargoyles. As he managed the reins of a piebald horse with its silky mane, a light breeze fluttered under the loose sleeves of his shirt and he inhaled the smoky aroma drifting out from the wood burning stove. They journeyed beyond the streets of his childhood lulled by the trot, trot, of feathering hooves. The road ahead was long. When he woke he knew that Pearl was destined to transform his life.
Join Andy in the afterworld, as he embarks on a journey through the reincarnated lives of animals (from bacteria to various humans) in his search for Nirvana. In the process he must confront the memories of his own life and decide: has he been a good man, and does it matter?

When the moment of death comes it is something of an anti-climax.

His consciousness is released from his body, and it seems to him that he hears a pop.

He feels no pain any more. In fact, he feels nothing whatsoever. His mind is alert and alive, but he is no longer in the body of Andy. He tries to focus.

But what is he focussing on?

Where is he?

His death is very different to what he’d expected.

He had imagined rising as a transcendent being, slowly elevating from his dead, emaciated corpse.

Dressed in robes with a spiritual glow emanating from his smiling, peaceful face. Hovering in the hospital room, hands positioned in his favourite ‘Asana’ posture, with his legs crossed as far as they could go and hands clasped as if in prayer, which he’d always thought made him look like he really knew his stuff.

But he cannot see his body. He cannot see the vessel that has carried him dutifully for 57 years. He remembers being in his body, his heart beating timidly, and his blood moving thickly around his circulatory system more out of habit than the determined and purposeful
urging that had been the norm for most of his previous days. He had been aware of pain; the usual – disease, treatment, old age – but it was a background hum that he had become accustomed to during his illness. Until that jolt along his left side, as if he had been whipped.

And then, virtually mid thought, the pop disentangled him from his dead body. It hadn’t built to a wonderful and terrible crescendo; it just happened. Now his pain was no more.

So where is he? Andy thinks that he should look around, but he doesn’t have any eyes. He has none of the old senses. His mind is conscious and he is processing thought – if he is to understand anything about where, what, who he is, his mind will have to do it.

He tries to cast his consciousness out, to extend his understanding around himself. There is nothing. Nothing that he can alight on or comprehend. No sense of space, no sense of time. Nothing.

This must be limbo, thinks Andy.

Where is the waiting room, where he can take a numbered ticket and wait for his next life? He wants to go into a small grey office, see an afterworld weary civil servant, sitting behind a standard government issue desk, with a huge, wobbly stack of crumpled papers in an ‘in’ tray, and an empty ‘out’ tray next to it. He wants an interview with this person, an interview that would be tedious for him if it weren’t for the circumstances. He can even imagine the dialogue:

_Civil servant: You are Mr Cummings of 38 Kitchener Road, East Finchley?_

Andy: Yes, that’s me.

_Civil servant: You do of course realise that you are dead?_

Andy: Yes, I remember the pop.
Civil servant: Oh good, you’re not a weeper. Some people don’t take it so well, but you seem to know what you’re doing. Now then, have you filled out your D9 certificate with authorisation from your relevant deity?

Andy: What’s a D9 certificate?

Civil servant: Oh dear. Ok, well you’ll have to go back outside and join the queue for the forms window where you can pick up a D9...

But no, no such laughs. Just limbo. He has no way of measuring time but it feels to him like he has been here for ages. Andy goes through mental gymnastics, trying to throw out his consciousness and comprehend something, anything, other than himself.

After a long while his thoughts begin to meander, and he finds himself replaying scenes from his favourite films. He watches Sonny Corleone being ambushed in his black 1950s Ford, climbing out of the car to stand and fight his fate until succumbing in a hail of bullets. He watches Sonny die in his mind, over and over again.
All Willow wanted was to be normal. But when she discovers a feisty faerie, in her Nan’s old pickling jar she is propelled on a quest that will take her from their dingy flat in Swansea to the mysterious Super-Natural History Museum in London. The fate of the world lies in Willow’s young hands. Will she find a way to save it? And what is normal anyway?

Willow’s heart was beating so hard she could feel it in her feet and her face glowed as red as her hair. She stared at her shoes and picked at the fraying laces, wishing she could just disappear. Another voice joined the conversation going on above her. Glancing sideways she recognised the librarian’s nice leather shoes with a small heel.

‘I don’t really see what the problem is, Officer. Queenie isn’t doing any harm. We all love to hear her sing, it brightens the world up no end.’

Willow felt the librarian’s hand brush past her as she dropped some money in the hat. She watched the silver coins fall from the woman’s fingers and heard the police officer tut.

‘Look, I’m not a monster,’ he said. ‘I’m just trying to do my job, right.’

‘Well it’s a rotten job if it involves bullying old ladies and little girls. Shame on you.’

Willow watched the nice leather shoes walk briskly away. The policeman started rocking on his feet again and she went back to closely examining her own shoes and pretending she wasn’t in the middle of the street with everyone staring at her. She ran her fingers along the cracks in the pavement and focussed on the patterns, trying so hard not to listen to the conversation going on above her, but snippets slipped through nonetheless.
‘Miss La Rue, Queenie. Please… just go home, and don’t even think about busking here again, okay? We have a new sergeant at the station. He’s up from London and he is not a patient man. He will arrest you …and none of us want that now do we?’

Willow looked up at her Nan who caught her eye and winked. Willow groaned quietly under her breath and snuck a glance at PC James as he took off his helmet and rubbed at the red mark around his forehead. She looked away quickly and felt his shadow shift across her as he turned and dropped some money into the hat.

‘That’s the last, Queenie. okay… you have to stop this.’

He walked away, leaving a heavy silence behind him.

Queenie spoke first. Willow could tell she was pretending to be okay.

‘Scoop that lot up then will you please, Willow. You can have the coppers, stick them in your savings jar. It’s been ages since you had anything in there, other than dreams and wishes.’

Willow muttered a thank you and picked out the pennies and twopences from the silver coins before carefully handing the hat up to her Nan. A shiny penny that must have bounced out of the hat onto the floor caught her eye

‘How did that get there?’

Queenie, smiled, ‘Ooh you found a nice new shiny one. That’s lucky, that is. You know the old saying; See a penny pick it up and all day you’ll have good luck!’

‘Yeah right,’ muttered Willow under her breath as she slid it into her pocket with the others.

***

Willow waited patiently on the stuffy landing for her Nan to catch her up and open the door to their flat. Inside, Queenie’s foldaway bed was still out in the living room so Willow
followed her Nan into the kitchen and got her book on the lifecycle of ladybirds out of her bag to read. The chiller cabinets in the shop below them hummed persistently through the floor though neither of them really noticed it any more.

‘Salad and hard-boiled eggs okay for you?’

Gross, thought Willow, but she nodded enthusiastically from behind her book and gave Queenie a thumbs up.

Every now and then Willow peered over the top of the page and watched Queenie staring intensely at the eggs boiling in the pan. What is she thinking about, Willow wondered, and why does she keep taking the same letter out of her apron pocket, reading it and putting it back? It’s odd, she thought, she normally just stuffs brown envelope letters straight in the recycling bin.

As soon as they had finished eating, Queenie stood up to clear the table.

‘I’ve got some mending to do. I was thinking I might tidy up some of those old stage costumes, see if anyone wants to buy them, so why don’t you head off to bed and I’ll see you in the morning.’ Willow felt her gently kiss the top of her head. ‘Don’t stay up too late reading, okay?’

***

Once she had changed into her pyjamas, Willow sat on the edge of her bed to count the coins Queenie had given her. It wasn’t much, she thought, but it was a start. She hoped that by the time she got to her birthday in August she might have enough to buy a pair of hair straighteners.

‘No way am I going to start big school with this frizz bomb on my head. That would be a total disaster.’

The shiny new penny caught the light from the bulb overhead as she ran her finger across it. A bird started singing on a rooftop somewhere nearby and she went to the open
window. It was starting to get dark but she leant out into the warm evening to see if she could see it. The green rubbish bins and folded up cardboard boxes in the courtyard under her window didn’t make for much of a garden but from somewhere Willow recognised the same sweet smell of the flowers from the posh houses on Cwm Donkin Avenue. She stood breathing it in for a few moments whilst the bird sang its end of day song. A memory tickled inside her, trying to get her attention. She sighed, dropped the coins into her empty glass jar on the windowsill, screwed the lid on and climbed into bed. When she eventually fell asleep she dreamt she had long straight brown hair that swished across her shoulders like a horse’s tail as she walked.

***

‘Holy Hedgerows, I thought that long human child was NEVER going to fall asleep!’

Pinkie had been disguised as a shiny penny for days and she felt her wings snap painfully back into place as she shook off her travelling form. It took her a moment to realise that she was now faced with a new problem. A very big problem. Every faerie’s nightmare, in fact. She was trapped in a glass jar!