

# PENNING

SMEDDUM



AUGUST 2018

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Welcome to our next edition of PENnings. We are delighted to publish poems and prose connecting in various ways, to the theme of Smeddum. This is such a great Scottish word which, as is often the case, has no satisfactory one-word English language equivalent. A strength of spirit, a strong and fearless approach to life. So many of our contributors have exactly this quality. Writers in PENnings magazine include PEN members, refugees, asylum seekers and people with English as a second language. It's inevitable that, amongst such a group of writers, the need for Smeddum is paramount.

From the subtle, humorous suggestion of survival of *What Your Headstone Doesn't Tell*, to the bleak but overtly black humour of *At this Point in Time*, examples of smeddum abound. Another elegy appears in *Annie* where a vivid depiction of place results in the poet's philosophical: 'No one's life has more value than anyone else's'.

The intrigue of *To Move On* and its suggestion of a woman's complicated life is mirrored in *We Done Riz* which abounds with energy and anger.

Sometimes it's the choice of language that impressed us such as in *Millstone Grit* with its strength of imagery, or the fun of *Goliath* and its short sharp play with words.

Overall, there's a great mix of content and approach and we've selected a wide range of material in this edition.

In each PENnings edition, we invite a guest editor to assist us in our selection and we also focus on a featured writer of international standard.

Heather McDaid not only agreed to be our current guest editor, but also has now joined the Writers-in-exile committee. We are very pleased to welcome her.





# FOREWORD

We selected Quim Monzó as our featured writer. He is a respected Catalan writer and we publish here a sample of his work. This issue, with its theme of Smeddum seems an appropriate edition to focus on Catalonian writers where we are reminded currently that freedom of expression sometimes require a strength of spirit to continue.

Our next PENnings will be on the theme of Letters. This can be interpreted in any form or fashion. Prose, poetry, drama or novel extract, all are welcome.

As we are hoping to grow our numbers in the Writers-in-exile committee, we have two guest editors for the next edition of PENnings. Hopefully, they might agree to join us on a permanent basis. They will be Nadine Aisha Jassat and Jemma Neville and the deadline for submissions is September 30th 2018.

Liz Niven,  
Convener Writers-in-Exile Committee

## **This issue's guest editor is Heather McDaid**

Heather McDaid is an award-winning freelance writer and publishing person, co-founder of indie publisher 404 Ink and Books Editor at The Skinny. She won the London Book Fair's Trailblazer Award, was named in The Drum's 50 Under 30 for women in marketing and digital and the Young Women's Movement 30 Under 30, and jointly won The Saltire Society's Emerging Publisher of the Year 2017. She was formerly Co-Chair of the Society of Young Publishers Scotland and co-ran Scotland's virtual book festival #ScotLitFest. She writes about books and music.



# QUIM MONZÓ

## FEATURED WRITER

Quim Monzó has always alternated between writing narrative fiction and articles. He is a frequent contributor to the newspaper *La Vanguardia*. He published his first collection of short stories, *Whew! He Said*, in 1978; his later collections include *The Why of It All* (1993), *Guadalajara* (1996) and *Three Christmases* (2003). In 2004 he put together his shorter narrative fiction in *Eighty-six Stories*. *Benzine* (1983), a novel about the emptiness and nonsense of postmodern art, was published in 1983; and, in 1989 *The Enormity of the Tragedy*, which plays with the cliché of the character whose days are numbered.

His collections of journalism include *Zzzzzzzzz...* (1987), *All is a Lie* (2000) and *The Subject of the Subject* (2003), the reading of which offers an inimitable look at the past two decades.

Monzó has translated Capote, J.D. Salinger, Bradbury, Hardy, Hemingway, Barth, Miller, and other writers in the English language. He has received, among many others, the National Prize of Literature, the Prudenci Bertrana Prize for Novel, and, on more than one occasion, the Crítica Serra d'Or Award. All of his work can be found through Quaderns Crema and has been translated into more than twenty languages. His most recent book to be translated into English is *Gasoline*, translated by Mary Ann Newman and published by Open Letter Books. He was the winner of the 50th Prize of Honor for Catalan Letters. The prize, started by Òmnium Cultural in 1969, is a recognition to the trajectory of a person who “for his literary or scientific work, written in the Catalan language, and for the importance and exemplary of his intellectual work, has contributed in a remarkable and continuous way to the cultural life of the Països Catalans”.



## TRANSLATOR

# LISA M. DILLMAN

Lisa Dillman was raised in California and studied Spanish at the University of California, San Diego, before completing an MA in Spanish literature at Emory and a second MA in literary translation from Middlesex University in London. She is co-editor (with Peter Bush) of the book *Spain: A Literary Traveler's Companion* and has translated many novels and scholarly works, including *Zigzag* (by José Carlos Somoza), *The Scroll of Seduction* (by Gioconda Belli), *Pot Pourri: Whistlings of a Vagabond* (by Eugenio Cambaceres), *Op Oloop* (by Juan Filloy), *The Mule*, (by Juan Eslava Galán - the original novel was turned into a motion picture), *Critical Dictionary of Mexican Literature* (by Christopher Domínguez Michael), *The Frost on His Shoulders* (by Lorenzo Mediano), and *Me, Who Dove into the Heart of the World* (by Sabina Berman). She also co-translated *The Polish Boxer*, by Eduardo Halfon, with a team of four (Ollie Brock, Daniel Hahn, Thomas Bunstead, and Anne McLean) and Halfon's novel *Monastery* with Daniel Hahn. Most recently, she has translated several works by Andrés Barba (*After the Rain; August, October; Death of a Horse; and Such Small Hands*) as well as Yuri Herrera's *Signs Preceding the End of the World*, *The Transmigration of Bodies*, and *Kingdom Cons*. In 2016 she won the Best Translated Book Award for *Signs Preceding the End of the World*.



# THIRTY LINES

*Quim Monzó*

The writer begins typing cautiously. He has to write a short story. Lately everyone's talking about the virtues of short fiction, but he, if he were honest, would confess that he detests stories in general, and short ones in particular. Still, not wanting to miss a trick, he's been forced to join the ranks of prevaricators who feign enthusiasm for brevity. That's why he's terrified at how lightly his fingers skip across the keys, one word followed by another, then another appearing after that, and another, and together they form an entire line of text, which is soon followed by another—and another!—and he hasn't even managed to find a focus yet, because he's accustomed to going the distance: sometimes it takes him a hundred pages to sense what he's writing about, other times he hasn't gotten to that point after two hundred. It's never even occurred to him to fret about length. The longer the better: blessed be each new line, because, one after the other, they demonstrate not only the magnitude but also the magnanimity of his work, which is why—although, in all honesty, one, two, even fifty lines add nothing to any story he's narrating—never in his life would he expurgate. In order to write this story, however, he almost needs to grab a ruler and begin measuring.





It's absurd. It's like asking a marathoner to run the hundred-meter with dignity. In a short story, each new line is not one more line, but one less, and in this particular case, one less from thirty, because that's the limit: "From one to thirty lines," the velvety voice that phoned from the Sunday supplement and asked for the story had said. Reluctantly, the writer lifts his fingers from the keys and counts the lines thus far written: twenty-three. Only seven left until he's at the limit. But, after transcribing this concern—and this one—he's got even less. Six. Jesus, Mary and Joseph! He's incapable of having a single thought without transcribing it, so every idea eats up another line, which leads, at line twenty-six, to his realization, just four lines from the end, that perhaps he is unable to find a focus for his story because—he's suspected this for some time now—he's got nothing to say, and although normally he manages to dissimulate by churning out page after page, this damn short story is blowing his cover, which is why he sighs, on reaching line twenty-nine, and, with a not-wholly justified feeling of failure, types the period at the end of thirty.

Translation of "Trenta Línies." From *Mil Cretins*. © 2007 by Joaquim Monzó. © 2007 by Quaderns Crema, S.A.U. By arrangement with the publisher. Translation © 2010 by Lisa Dillman. All rights reserved.

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# FICTION

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Cinzia DuBois is a freelance editor, writer and literary agent in Edinburgh. She has been reviewing books on Youtube for the past eight years, and is well known for producing *'The Unemployed Philosopher'*; a series of entertaining, bitesize lectures focussing on breaking down complex literary theories, analyses and philosophical concepts. She's a passionate advocate for the power of reading, and strives that her writing informs readers on how literature can not only transform but save lives.

## CINZIA DUBOIS

## SAMINA CHAUDRY

Samina Chaudry has lived in Manchester, London, Pakistan and then came to Glasgow in 1998 and has been here since. She has been attending creative writing classes from the University of Glasgow and enjoys reading fiction and putting words down whether they're self-loathing first drafts. She has been published by Scottish PEN and thi wurd and her work can be found in *Tales From A Cancelled Country*. Samina Chaudry is also one of the ten writers of the project called Ten Writers Telling Lies, a collaboration of music, poetry and fiction and most recently performed at the Aye Write Festival at Mitchell Library.

Andrew Murray Scott is presently completing a novel, *Saltire Blues*, from which this piece is extracted. He has published four novels previously, ten non-fiction books and numerous stories, poems, features and reviews. He lives in Dundee.

## ANDREW MURRAY SCOTT







# AT THIS POINT IN TIME, ENID IS DYING

*Cinzia DuBois*

It gives me no pleasure to inform you that, at the point you've entered this story, Enid's plan has backfired, so now she finds herself dying. Had you come earlier you'd probably have had a more agreeable time with her; but for whatever fault of yours it was, your tardiness has robbed you of this experience. The very least you can do from here on is to be courteous, and forgive her faults unequivocally; as I know you would have done had you arrived on time.

Dying, Enid admitted to all those around her, was terribly dull. She was bored by the paralysing thoughts her mind plagued her with; not only did they prevent her from getting on with the little life she had left, they were simply uninteresting. She found them repetitive and derivative. Her body constantly reminded her of all the probable ways she could die. Every agonising step she took reminded her of the possibility that her weak thigh muscles might crumple beneath her pathologically skinny body, right there in front of everyone. Perhaps, she thought, she'd die during a lecture. One day she'll descend the lecture theatre stairs to take a seat on the front row and then, having not recovered from the descent, her heart would just stop. Her body would slink under the desk beside some poor, anorakish student on the front row who, rather than scream, rolls their eyes at the inconvenience of what they perceive as a hung-over fresher. They then resume their incredibly expensive, debt-crippling learning, tutting and glaring at the body self-righteously throughout the hour until it's time to rush to her next seminar, which is when she finds herself blocked by a well-dressed corpse. The university then take extra-measures, naturally, to enroll the now traumatised student into their counselling and welfare services, ensuring that another case of PTSD isn't reported in their university statistics. The Independent's University Student Satisfaction league table really impacts application rates.

To drag her mind from the monotony of the plausible, Enid had to hypothesise more ridiculous scenarios just to spice up her fear-flooded consciousness. Her favourite was to imagine herself dying somewhere obnoxious like in the middle of a zebra crossing, or at a supermarket self-checkout counter. Please remove this item from the bagging area.



She even oftentimes found herself scrutinising the airtight, concealed toilet cubicles at her university campus, and sympathetically reflected on how inconvenient it would be for her to die in one whilst on the toilet; both for those waiting for a cubicle and for those needing to fetch her body out.

Unfortunately the stages of dying were less bemusing. It soon became apparent to Enid that terror is quite an exhausting experience. Every night she fell asleep reluctantly, despite being so desperately tired, for fear she would never wake up again.

Her heart seemed to validate her fears by inciting spontaneous attacks of rapid palpitations, reminiscent of what Enid had presupposed heart attack symptoms to be. Presumably for its own amusement, her heart chose to only engage in this unruly behaviour at night, usually at the very moment she felt she was finally drifting asleep. Of course, they were always anti-climatic. After the emergency services' third visit to her dorms when, of course, she magically lived once again, Enid stopped phoning for help. The friendly, Brummie ambulance driver told her it was nothing more than an anxiety attack induced by hypoglycemia, and encouraged her to eat a digestive biscuit, or piece of chocolate, to vanish her ailments away. At 4:30 am, after four hours of insistence, he left defeated, accepting her nibble of the corner of a mini, chocolate weetabix as sufficient enough. — Poor bab, he thought as he watched the icy scab on his windscreen begin to thaw. She won't be alive much longer. Well, Enid intended to finish reading *The Man Without Qualities* before 'went', which was why she hadn't started it yet. She intended to start it after graduating, when there was officially nothing left for her in the world to do. She was doing a literature degree after all.

No one who saw Enid needed to speak to her; everyone who saw Enid knew she was dying. For the same reason you shouldn't get attached to goldfish and guinea pigs, students conscientiously chose not to form memories of Enid. Even Lizzie, the waxy-tanned, shimmer faced brunette who smelt of fresh leather, and always sat by Enid lecture to copy from her notes called Enid Edith. The early day excuse of 'forgetting her glasses' slowly revealed itself in time as Enid became more familiar with Lizzie's vanity and illogical need to re-apply her makeup throughout lectures.

— Is it me, or were the Brontës just a bit naff?

Enid withdrew from the hug and fingered the side of her hair now mesed by a lipglossy stickiness. An inconspicuous tilt of her frame allowed for the perfect opportunity to wipe her fingers against the three year old poster for a David Lodge guest seminar. In all honesty, Enid didn't understand the question, and there was little chance of her formulating an articulate response when her thoughts were drowned out by a loud corridor filled with I-haven't-done-the-reading people. From what Enid could decipher from Lizzie's critical analysis, which consisted entirely of the abysmal quality of sound and mumbling actors in a TV production, was that Lizzie was contextualizing the quality of Emily Brontë's Wuthering Heights within her review of a low-quality BBC production of Jamaica Inn . Because she was dying, Enid had to be selective about when she exerted her little remaining energy. After a brief internal monologue, Enid concluded this was far too wretched a case for rebuttal, humorous engagement, or even sarcastic comment, so she reserved her energy for a more challenging target. Enid wondered why not more of her fellows had been fatally affected by academia in the same way she had. Case studies like Lizzie served as powerful analytical resource data. From studying their manners and attitudes, she postulated that the answer lay somewhere in between regular, unrestricted alcohol consumption and capitulation to sophomoric culture. Somehow, however, amidst their careless indifference, blase engagement and shameless, nay, at times proud ignorance, they all seemed to do well. None of them were dying like Enid.

Of course, Enid took full responsibility for her health. None of this would have happened had she not crafted such a beautifully intricate, yet deadly plan. Her psyche had woven this immaculate tapestry of emotional abuse, accumulated over a quarter of a century, and was adorned with gilded threads of self-hatred, viscous lambastement and malignant criticism. In her desperate attempt to free herself from her tormentous weavework, Enid had thrown herself mercilessly to the corporeal vision of Camelot and screamed for salvation. Except the reaction she received was not that she expected; for the first time in her life she stopped being invisible, but nobody saw her. They saw instead what was happening to her. They saw her plans unravelling, the risks she kept taking, and morbidly admired her efforts.



This wasn't how it was supposed to unfold. She kept telling people her plans and nobody stopped her, nobody said the measley words she needed to hear: you're just fine the way you are . Now her hair was falling out. It was incredibly stupid of her, she confessed, but her obtuse reasoning did not surprise her anymore. She'd grown accustomed to it.

She never expected dying to be so inconvenient, but in ways it challenged her logistically, something which she enjoyed. Following the humiliating incident in January, where her trousers, along with her knickers, plummeted to her ankles in the middle of the Humanities building entrance hall, she became dexterous with a needle, and adapted all her knickers, skirts, trousers and tights to hug more securely to her skeletal frame. Her second major challenge was to devise a contraption in her bed which provided her with the ability to sleep without cutting off her own circulation (a nighttime affair which had become excruciating and was incredibly easy to fall prey to. Her mere hand resting upon her wrist during her sleep was enough to shock her body into prolonged, agonising bout of pins and needles). She modelled her resolution on a rack device, by tying her limbs to the four corners of her bed, using the silkiest of ribbons so as to not restrict circulation further, and then propped her legs upon a stack of five books (hardbacks, of course), which she found helped reduce the acidic cramps in her calves.

Enid may have been foolish, and may also be dying, but at least she was industrious. She prided herself on her stuff upper-lip, and her impervious dedication to her studies. Whilst the shame and humiliation of her miscarried scheme consumed her, she remained resilient and, if anything, became more persistent. She assured herself that whilst her scheme had failed in its original initiative, resulting in an inevitable premature death, it wasn't a waste of time if a new goal could be assigned to the project. Going back was not an option. Undoing what had been done never entered her mind. She was too proud.

The problem arose however when Enid's ambition became skewed, and as she found no replaceable purpose for her original plan, she decided it was worth extremitising her situation in order to achieve the original goal.

It was unclear whether or not her eyes began to bulge from her sockets, or that her skin began retracting into her skull, but the effect was the same. Her features protruded like those on a shrunken head; her smile, still so large was much less white, and one's imagination could be forgiven in believing her teeth were now so large that they could engulf her own jaw. The hair on her head sprouted and vanished in a pattern similar to a garden lawn which is unevenly affected by weighty plant

pots and suffocating, inflatable paddling pools. There were days when she began to stop walking entirely, not out of choice, but because she simply couldn't, and there were incidents when her eyesight just decided to fail her entirely for a couple of hours, without any warning or reason (an incivility which disappointed her from her otherwise well-mannered body).

Enid had the strongest will out of anyone she knew. Her mind was no match for her biology, though it did try. Her body had retaliated vehemently; it kept pushing her to the edge and even that had given up trying to break her resilience. But she refuted it, every, single time. Now her mind no longer craved, her stomach no longer growled and gnawed at the lining of her stomach. Her mind had won, and now Enid was dying; the weakest state of life.

Do you think I am an automaton? — a machine without feelings? and can bear to have my morsel of bread snatched from my lips, and my drop of living water dashed from my cup?

Enid wedged her highlighter between the pages, walked to her bathroom and stood before her mirror. She once had a plan to cease being invisible, to be saved by another from her own thoughts; but nobody had come to her rescue. She had made herself weak, prime for salvation. She had morphed herself into the quintessential damsel in distress, and shrewdly skirted this subconscious desire for patriarchal heroism under the false perception that she was being mentally strong. Mental strength takes skill to amass, but when misapplied proves fatal.

I care for myself. The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself.

Nobody is coming to save Enid.

Enid is going to have to save herself.





# TO MOVE ON

*Samina Chaudry*

Riz came out of the kitchen holding an oven tray. He put two chicken legs on her plate. It was pink in the middle when she cut through it. He looked up from his plate as he forked a mouthful of the chicken into his mouth.

"Spent the afternoon cooking", he said.

She nodded. "I'm not too fussed about food these days."

Riz put the bone of a leg piece next to his plate on the table and said:

"I was just thinking maybe we could take a short trip to Lake District?"

"I'm not sure".

"The break will do you good."

She shrugged. "I don't know really."

He reached over the table and touched her hand with his.

"You better hurry up", he said. "I've made something really nice for the dessert."

"What is it?"

"Going to have to finish your main first."

She looked at her plate. She'd tasted the chicken but that was about all she could manage. Somewhere in the future the wish to become a vegetarian. Maybe that could be a reasonable enough excuse for not eating the meat.

Riz had dropped some gravy onto the front of his shirt. It left a yellow stain as he tried rubbing at it with his finger. She put her fork down and nodded towards the kale on her plate. She told him how she once made kale soup but it didn't turn out to be so good a soup.

Riz grinned at her and was looking across the room. He got up to pick his cigarettes from the side of the sofa. He lit a cigarette, took a couple of drags and stubbed the rest into a plate.

"Ready for the sweet dish?" he asked glancing at her plate.

She smiled, lifted a bottle of water and poured some into a glass. From the kitchen she could hear Riz humming. The oven door opened and closed and a nice smell drifted in. She stood up and stepped towards the living room window. There was a light drizzle outside. Lately, the weather was strange, it was almost the end of April and still it was cold and damp. Riz said it would be milder out there in Cumbria. They would go out for walks, explore the countryside, but she couldn't see herself enjoying the break.

She sat down and switched the TV on. A football match was being played and some noise the crowd made when one of the players scored. She pressed the volume down. Riz walked over holding a small wooden tray. He handed her a plate. The custard although a bit lumpy had a nice taste. She took a spoonful of the apple pie.

Riz went back to the kitchen and came out with a glass and a bottle of wine.

"Seems to be a great match", he said, looking towards the TV.

"Never used to watch much TV until recently", she said.

He sat down next to her taking a swallow of his drink.

"Has Sahil been in touch?" he asked.

She nodded.

"The children?"

"Seem to be happy with him."

"Let them stay with him. After all they did choose to be with their father."

She didn't say anything.

"I wouldn't say to you to go back being with him again."

She put her empty plate on the coffee table next to the bottle of wine.

"I don't know, all these years I've been there for him, but now I'm doing this for myself, for my own sanity."

Her hand went down into her handbag, a slight panic, trying to remember if she had her keys and her phone with her. She found herself doing this quite a bit when outside.

Riz had poured himself another glass of wine and was staring at the glass then at the TV screen. A moment later he said:

Some controlling freak that man of yours was. He was always looking for an excuse to put me down. If I was working in the office he'd send me over to the site, and when I went there he'd be complaining that work wasn't getting done because I wasn't buying the material on time, and then he installed CCTV cameras on all the sites. She looked at him. "He did catch you going through the drawers in his office."

Riz smiled.

"I'm not going to defend myself on that. Sometimes you need to be in a team and what better way than to get some of the boys on your side. Should have seen their faces when I told them what they were getting paid compared to some of the other boys."

"So it was you then looking for wage slips in Sahil's office? I always thought it was never true that you did such a thing."

Riz was silent.

She stared at the carpet then looked up at him. The thought of waking up and going home. But what was it then? The truth of it being that there wasn't any kind of familiarity that existed between them. She'd seen Riz a couple of times at Sahil's office but that was about it. When he phoned up asking her over, she could have said anything and not come, and that would have been it and probably no more of the phone calls from him.

"You sure you don't want a cup of tea?" Riz asked.

"I'm okay."

He turned to face her. She could smell the wine off his breath. She looked towards the TV. The picture on the screen had changed. A pack of lions were sitting around the half-eaten carcass of a giraffe, while another giraffe, probably the dead giraffe's companion stood nearby watching. She was wanting to reach over across Riz to pick up the remote when she found herself staring at a ring on Riz's index finger. The structure of the ring as well as the dark red stone in the centre seemed similar to the ring that Sahil couldn't find. He was told to wear it at work by one of the spiritual healers he went to, but the day he lost it, he couldn't remember if he took it with him to his office or misplaced it somewhere in the house. She gestured at the ring. "Nice", she said.

"It's for good luck", he said touching the stone on it.

"Do you believe in fortune-telling and all the other stuff?"

Riz glanced at her. Depends, there's a lot of fake people going around proclaiming to have knowledge about the future.

"Sahil believed a lot in these things but myself I don't know what to make of it all."

He was mental. Riz shook his head. Once brought a yogi kind of person into the office who spent half the day saying prayers and rolling the rosary.



Shirin looked at the ring again. It seemed to be loose on Riz's finger but surely it was crazy her thinking like this and what if it did actually belong to Riz. The problem being she was over thinking again and yet she was trying not to. She pressed the back of her eyelids with her finger. She was tired and it was the early mornings, not being able to go back to sleep again, just lying there and thinking, waking up to check the time on her phone, still a couple of hours before the morning broke through. She looked towards the window. It was getting dark and the rain also coming down. What if no bus appeared? It would be no point waiting but she could keep on walking and maybe find a taxi towards the main road.

"Should be heading home", she said.

Riz looked towards the clock on the mantelpiece.

"Stay the night. I can drop you off in the morning."

"I need to be at work early tomorrow."

"What time?"

"I'm covering up for another receptionist, said she'll text me."

Riz took a swig of his drink. He got up and walked towards the window. He closed the blind and switched the lamp on. She blinked, her eyes adjusting to the dim light. Riz put his drink down and came up behind her, putting his arms around her shoulders. She noticed his nails rough and dirty at the rims. She got up and told him that it wasn't possible for her to go on the trip to Lake District. He didn't say anything and put his hands in his trouser pockets, then took them out and poured himself more drink. She lifted her jacket and was walking towards the doorway.

It was cold and wet when she stepped out of Riz's house.

"You sure you don't want a lift home?" he asked.

She shook her head.



# SMEDDUM

*Andrew Murray Scott*

*Extract from Saltire Blues, novel in progress*

Robert was browsing through old photographs on his laptop when he came across the four pictures of him and Sarah Grewar taken at Karen Wallace's 21st Birthday party. They'd gone out about four or five times; the cinema twice (he could not remember what films they'd seen), the pub a couple of times and the millennium party. In the photos, she was wearing a black sleeveless dress, her skin paled by the flash's over-exposure. She hadn't liked being photographed and her face was somehow expressionless, unsmiling, her most prominent feature apart from curly auburn hair was her long straight nose. She was doing a Post-Graduate teaching diploma. He remembered kissing her and getting the impression that she could take it or leave it. They hadn't gone to bed and that was unusual, normally it was sex after a second date. He'd have been 20 then and remembered that she was two years older than he was and that was a little unusual too. In the end, they'd just drifted apart. He didn't think she had met someone else, they just stopped seeing each other. He had chatted with her dad a few times while waiting for her and during a family Sunday lunch in the plant-encumbered conservatory which she'd invited him to. Robert felt very sorry then, remembering what had happened. It was so irretrievable, so lost in The Past.

The next day was a Saturday, a bright, restless day; a soaring high wind unsettled him and he ended up walking into town anyway. He had a hankering for intellectual



discussion, felt jittery and on edge and so he decided, as promised, to visit Willie Grewar. It was a good 30 minutes' walk, up Albert Street, out along the Arbroath Road to the Craigie Roundabout. Walking was good. Gave you a purpose or at least, a direction of travel and a destination. Mr Grewar's was on the spur of the Crescent, at the junction with Balunie Drive, one of a long row of council semi-detached houses facing a playpark near a row of shops. The patch of grass at Number 42 was overgrown and littered with items; Pampers, cigarette packets and, oddly, a single pram wheel. He read, on the small plastic rectangle on the red door: W. Grewar.

Robert rang the bell but suspected it wasn't working, so he rapped the knocker. He heard faint sounds and Grewar appeared behind the slowly opening door. His face relaxed into a smile when he saw it was Robert. He was wearing an old grey sweater and an over-boiled white shirt with frayed collar, and black carpet slippers.

'Robert, is that you? Come on in.'

He led him down the sombre hallway that smelled musty, into a cluttered living room, in which, he noted, there was no TV and not much in the way of comfort. Books and newspapers were everywhere. Robert felt a wave of pity. No woman's touch. Of course not. Mr Grewar had been a mechanical engineer, a skilled man and they had lived in a sunny comfortable detached house in the West End with a large garden. Now he was reduced to the narrow untidy confines of this widower's abode. His sweater had no elbows and a spectacular gash in the side. Two old-fashioned armchairs and a slumpy sofa draped with a tartan blanket, were piled with polythene-covered library books. On the wall, a large framed Highland landscape all gloomy mist and tumbling bright waterfalls. It was lived-in, that was the best you could say for it. No money wasted on fripperies. No money. Maybe it was true what



he'd heard; that Mr Grewar had spent all his money on legal fees trying to prove negligence. Years of court battles had bankrupted him and he had, in the end, lost.

'Sit you down, Robert, I'll get the kettle on.'

Robert sat in one of the deep armchairs and looked out of the window at the gable wall opposite. At his feet was a small pile of plates containing the small remnants of humble meals and used cutlery.

Mr Grewar came back in a few minutes later and sat down heavily opposite him in the other armchair. Robert saw for the first time, the evidence of his contorted fingers. Arthritis. 'Ah, I have just remembered that I promised you a wee doch-an-dorus. Well, we'll have tea first. It's maybe a bit early for the whusky.' He pronounced the word with relish in a mock-Highland accent. 'Anyway, thanks for coming round. As you see, I don't live the high life, but I'm not complaining.'

'Mr Grewar...' Robert began.

'Oh call me Willie, please.'

'Right. Look, I'm just so sorry.'

'Yes. Thank you. It seems so long ago now, although it's only been five years, nearly.'

'Five years?' Robert repeated faintly. It hadn't occurred to him how long ago it had happened. He remembered Sarah and her mother ten years ago. He remembered his shock at seeing it in the papers – someone his age being killed - but he hadn't gone to the funerals. In a way he felt the strangeness of sitting there with him, strange that he'd been remembered - even stranger that he himself had remembered. And yet, Sarah Grewar hadn't even been a serious girlfriend, just one of several casual attachments in his student days.

Mr Grewar passed over his mug, then he said: 'Oops, seems I've forgotten to take the teabag out. Here let me...' and he fished it out with the spoon and dropped it onto the metal tray on the floor where it lay in a milky brown splodge.

Robert sipped the tea. Too milky and not totally hot either. He forced himself to take a mouthful. He could taste sugar around the rim of the cup as if it hadn't been washed properly. Yet again he wondered why he'd come. Pity? A sense of homage to the father of a long-ago girlfriend?

'So - ' Willie Grewar said, 'you're politically active? That's good. It's good to believe in something, Robert, to have views and opinions.'

'I seem to remember you were a bit of a socialist.'

Mr Grewar considered. 'Perhaps I still am, deep down. I'm not entirely disillusioned with parliamentary politics. Your lot aren't bad. I might even vote for them, in the Euro Elections coming up.'

Robert blinked. 'I work for them - the politicians - Sonia, Kevin and Chris. I mean, that's my full-time job.'

'Bright shiny new faces. They're clever, I grant you that.'

'Yes, well, I think so.'

Grewar sipped his tea and smiled. 'No, I wasn't being unduly sarcastic. They always seem so -- positive, so relentlessly... remorselessly... upbeat. As if things are certain to change for the better with them in charge. They exude absolute certainty.'

'Well, they will. We're... they're improving... things are getting better. Everyone knows...'

Mr Grewar sat back in his seat and blew his nose mightily into a tissue from the Mansize carton on the arm of the sofa. 'Oh, Robert,' he snuffled, 'they are good. They give a great... impression that they are just on the verge you know, the verge of great change... one more push... vote for them again... and the change will happen. But you know, in your heart, I suspect, Robert, that you do know - that you would admit privately - that it's not changing. They've not changed anything, well, anything that really counts. Oh, they give the impression that things will change and of course time moves on and things change anyway but nothing will, nothing that really matters to people, not really.'

Robert was stung at this cynicism. He felt himself bristle with loyalty. 'I can't agree with you,' he said stiffly. 'The government is pushing forward lots of legislation...'

Mr Grewar laughed triumphantly. 'Oh, pardon me, if I seem like an old cynic, but that's a good one. I can just see them now, oor ain wee legislators, gloating at their white papers or whatever it is nowadays. But surely, Robert, you've noticed that legislation is no longer meaningful in any real sense.'

'Not meaningful...?' Robert frowned. 'I'm not sure I...'

'Well, it's long since ceased to be anything other than electoral positioning, you know.' He sniffled and wiped his nose on the tissue. 'Ah - summed up in that lovely concise new phrase - virtue signalling. Which is another way of saying electioneering, Robert. Governments saying to their supporters; we're such nice people and we care about the things you care about and although we can't do anything about it, we'll be bringing out a brand new white paper in a jiffy! And it's all carefully planned, you see, Robert, to have no adverse effects on key supporters' groups. They don't expect it to have any real, actual benefits.'

When Robert didn't answer, he continued: 'You're a smart lad, Robert, you must know this? The poor will still be getting poorer, the rich getting richer and one in four children born into what's called poverty.' He shook his head and gestured with the crumpled tissue. 'It's been one in four, Robert, since the 1960s, to my certain knowledge. Of course, the definition of poverty has changed a bit...' He smiled sadly. 'Being poor isn't as poor as it used to be. Now, being poor is probably kids not having a 42-inch LED TV screen or a working DVD player in their own bedroom and all the latest shoot-em-ups. That's what they call these computer games? See, I keep up.'

Robert laughed dutifully.

'Well, I'm exaggerating of course, Robert, the official description of poverty is a family with less than 60% of the average income, which is a lot more than I'm on by

the way, but you get my point. What's changing is our perception of the situation. Your Sonia and Co. have successfully created the impression of movement, of change, things getting better - but it's largely an illusion, a trick of the light if you will. Eventually people will realise that your lot are simply better communicators. Some people vote for them as a kind of protest you know and yet they're seven years down the line in Government! How is that even possible?'

'Well, I see what you're saying,' Robert said, 'but... I'm not sure...'

They sat still for a minute thinking that over, the sadness never leaves. A car passed and in the distance an ice-cream van hurdy-gurdied its banal melody around the Douglas estate. Robert leaned back in his armchair which creaked loudly. 'I saw some photos,' he began, 'that were taken of Sarah and me at a party about ten years ago... seems so long ago.'

Mr Grewar sniffed and blew his nose into a tissue. 'Hayfever - get it every year... yes, well, it was a long time ago.' He continued in a more gentle tone; 'I was sorry that you'd broken up. You had a lot more... smeddum than some of the others.' He squinted over at Robert. 'D'ye know what "smeddum" is?'

Robert nodded. 'Of course. Good word. Even though it sounds like something to do with the sinuses.'

'Ha! That's a good one, Robert. For a man with COPD.'

'We did a Hugh MacDiarmid poem at school called that.'

'Ah, Wee Shuggie,' Grewar smiled fondly. 'That's what they used to call him. Or maybe they didn't. But wasn't it Lewis Grassie Gibbon?'

'I'll have to look that up. I think you're right though.'

'I think so. Matter of fact, I've got that particular essay here - somewhere. By the way, I know the place is a mess. It hasn't escaped my notice. Has been ever since the butler left.' He added with a grin, 'ran off with the footman. Sign of the times, eh?'





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# POETRY

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Anita John is Writer in Residence for RSPB Scotland Loch Leven 2017-18, a member of Playwrights' Studio, Scotland, a poet and creative writing tutor. Her book, *Child's Eye*, was published by Biscuit Publishing in 2013 and is available from Amazon.

For more information and examples of her work visit [www.anitajohn.co.uk](http://www.anitajohn.co.uk)



## ANITA JOHN



## GISELLE ALCANTARA MICKEL

London-born Giselle has lived in Manila, Philippines and makes her home in Edinburgh. A poet and writer, she also works in financial crime prevention for a bank.

Julian Colton has had five collections of poetry published: *Something for the Weekend* (SBC 2001), *Two Che Guevaras* (SBC, 2007) *Everyman Street* (Smokestack 2009) *Cold Light of Morning* (Cultured Llama 2015) and *Selkirk's Marvellous Monuments, A Poetic Odyssey* (Selkirk CARS, 2017). He lives in Selkirk and has edited The Eildon Tree magazine for 16 years.



## JULIAN COLTON



A photograph of a dog, possibly a collie, sniffing the ground in a field of lush green ferns. A yellow caution tape is stretched across the foreground. The title 'WHAT YOUR HEADSTONE DOESN'T TELL' is overlaid in large white letters.

# WHAT YOUR HEADSTONE DOESN'T TELL

We rarely talked on the Kitleyknowe Road  
though we walked our dogs. When we did stop  
we talked of this and that, of dogs mostly.  
You despaired of your collie. His crime?

Stealing socks from the laundry box.  
"I've not got a matching pair," you sighed.  
"Wear odd socks, Andrew," I replied,  
"for who's to know?"

After that you'd hitch up your trouser legs,  
show me your ankles: the one striped black  
and grey; the other red and blue.  
Yet how our small talk was silenced

when socks became the least of your problems.  
Your hello now shaped with colourful hands,  
a movement of mouth, a shining of eyes,  
until the one day you confided in song:

"When I sing, the words come trickling like water."  
"Then sing, Andrew, sing," I urged.  
And oh, how you sang.

*Anita John*



# THE IRIDESCENCE OF NEW WONDERS

The moment I decided to transition,  
it was monumental: a nightingale sang  
through my chest.

Technicoloured jeepneys beep-beeped, vendors  
shrilled rice cakes, mangoes and coconuts.

The following day, Mama uprooted the red  
gumamela in the sun-soaked garden  
to join the rest of the flowering plants.

The deed reminded me of how I made  
magic as a child. By crushing the flower's velvet petals and  
its coarse leaves, the sticky juices flowed and transformed  
into soap. The papaya tree lent its stalks for me  
to produce  
bubbles.

In my new country, the cold  
fills the spherical shells of my body. I use  
it as tonic; I am rarely wounded by its clasp.  
I find similar friends who revel in spinning  
through the air in trapezes.

One shares: the smell of candles newly extinguished  
bring back prayers, brownouts, hide and seek,  
furtive episodes in the middle of the night.

The current panorama  
tastes of routine and greyness, yet the stories  
we both exchange are enclosed in  
orbs tinged with the orient of a pearl  
before they disperse.

I say, this is what I used to  
do with a gumamela.

*Giselle Alcantara Mickel*



# ANNIE (1919-2014)

*(In Memory of Annie Harrower, née McDonald)*

Last time we saw you, small face pressed to glass  
Strangely, not a wedding or a funeral  
You waved solitary from the downstairs window  
Frail bandaged legs, smiling Kirk stoicism  
Knowing this would be the last time we ever saw you.

Though we didn't share blood, clan or nationhood  
There was simple kinship sadness  
You the first post-war child born Nineteen-Nineteen  
Last of the generation, male and female  
Possessed of the century knowledge we all die alone  
Take with us our belief systems, masonries  
All our prized images and careworn memories:

How you survived another wider world war  
On rationed meat and milk tokens, coop dividends  
Worked the Empire canteens in Australia and Canada  
Came home, married, bowled through Fifties austerity  
Childless, stuck rigidly to codes and moral certainties  
Now faded or turned face prone like lost photographs  
Mislaid hand-me-downs and sold off artefacts.

Somehow I feel there may be a stanza missing  
Containing frustrated love, desire, curtailed ambition  
The people who came cold calling, often sent packing –  
Romancers, chancers, life's snake oil salesmen  
Guess you could smell shoddy from the genuine article.

Fife Railway and Stornoway fishing boat families  
Sea mist and coal driven census recollections  
In service relations, Glasgow registry marriages  
Disappear into the distance, become antiquity.  
No one's life has more value than anyone else's.

*Julian Colton*







Mother-of-pearl hand brush and mirrors minus the looking glass  
Positioned on the mantelpiece above electric fire

A shrine to the dearly departed  
Left in place by a respectful daughter

Faced the old cabinets, bedstead and lace  
A cold shade-filled room I lodged in

When the pre-booked fishermen came like apostles  
And I vacated the outside caravan.

The blind since birth mother who died in there  
Too frail to braille her way around the farm

Feel from gate to stone to lambing bower  
Each rise and fall of distaff ground

Down to the twisting bends in the river  
Past the cow stall and oak present in Burns' time



A dark, moody photograph of a hallway. On the left, a tall mirror reflects a potted plant and a framed picture. A light switch is visible on the wall. To the right, a dark kitchen unit with a digital clock showing '18:32' is partially visible.

# BLIND GHOST

Bestowing a sense of enduring hope  
To the disappearing, God-fearing generations.

Why have mirrors at all if you are blind?  
Even a farm woman needs feminine tokens

A pre-requisite like girly playfulness –  
Tugged the sheets, tickled my feet

Explored the ghost contours of my face while I slept  
Wondered if I was handsome or plain?

Listened secretly as I recited my poems  
Through the long winter Dumfriesshire nights

Heard the stresses in my human voice  
Weighed the content of its character

Like a wind thrown crow caw and a distant fox bark.

*Julian Colton*



Mary McCabe's books include: fiction *Everwinding Times* and *Two Closes and a Referendum*, non-fiction *Streets Schemes* and *Stages* and fiction *Stirring the Dust* (Paperback of the Week in the Herald). A children's book and several radio plays have appeared in German translation. Dozens of her poems and stories in Scots, English and Gaelic have been anthologised. *Comin Back Ower the Border* was a Scottish Arts Council Poem of the Month and *Merch o the Baby Boomers* was short-listed in the Yarrow Ettrick and Selkirk Literary Festival Ballad Competition. Mary is also a lifelong political activist.

## MARY MCCABE

## SAMANTHA A.P. OCEAN

Samantha A. P. Ocean is a German immigrant who has lived in Scotland for the past 10 years. Prior to that she lived and worked in Germany (most of my life), The Netherlands and the USA. Samantha wrote her first poem when she still lived in Germany (the only poem she wrote in her mother-tongue in 2004) and continued to sporadically write poetry to cope with mental health problems. However, this year Samantha enrolled in an Arts & Humanities course and started writing more frequently and about current affairs as much as about life.

# GOLIATH



Faced with a finch  
Peacock  
Won't flinch  
Flaunts frail wings  
Breeze-battered  
Rain splattered  
Savage glare.

Butterfly flutters by  
Earth shudders.

*Mary McCabe*





# FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Whenever words are written or spoken,  
Invoking the right to Freedom of Speech,  
Effecting others, leaving them broken,  
Carping their remarks were in definite breach,  
Depriving them of the same liberty -  
I shall be frank in my retort,  
As I am reminded of history,  
When Nazis put guns to everyone's thought  
And pulled the trigger if you disagreed.

For blind acceptance is what you demand!

There is no freedom as it is decreed,  
Since sheer ignorance is at your command.  
So your distorted views will never succeed,  
I decide to speak out and make a stand!

*Samantha A.P. Ocean*

# TABATHA STIRLING

Tabatha Stirling is a writer, poet and indie publisher living in Edinburgh, Scotland with her family and a depressed Beagle, called The Beagle. Her publishing credits include Spelk fiction, Literary Orphans, Mslexia, Feminine Collective and she recently won the Scottish Book Trust 50-word short story competition and was awarded 2nd place in the NopeBook Halloween contest.

An extract of her addiction memoir is to be published in the *Wild & Precious Life Anthology* edited by Lily Dunn. Tabatha is a member of both The Society of Authors and The Scottish Federation of Writers.

Her debut novel, *Bitter Leaves*, an exploration of maid abuse in Singapore is to be published by Unbound in 2019.

Tabby is absolutely ready for a zombie apocalypse.

A. C. Clarke is a poet and Scottish PEN member living in Glasgow who has won a number of prizes over the years and been widely published in anthologies and magazines. Her fifth full collection, *A Troubling Woman* (Oversteps Books), centred on the Medieval visionary, Margery Kempe, came out in 2017. It is a companion book to *Fr Meslier's Confession*, which is centred on the atheist priest, Jean Meslier. She was one of four joint winners in the Cinnamon Press 2017 poetry pamphlet competition with *War Baby*, which was published in January 2018.

# A. C. CLARKE





# WE DONE RIZ

when we fell in love it was death at night  
and a beating for breakfast.

the taste of sin was on everyone's lips  
and a harvest of souls by the Bible Belt  
made nightly contributions to rural hospitals

I may have mowed your lawn  
along the sweet-sweat lines of the Mississippi  
but in New York I might have been a lawyer

could have fandangled some of the greybacks  
on Wall Street  
taken them for ride colder  
than the Hudson on an icicle day  
in February

I may have chopped your kindling  
in the warm, honeyed shadow of the acacia tree  
but in Connecticut, I could have been a poet

salted words, cursing and spitting,  
through the hipster joints and green leaf cafes  
guilted blondes sweeping my eye line  
with fine hair and freckles

I may have been caught kissing you  
in the dusk of the day with the static currents  
of God's anointed pounding in our ears

their wide-eyed children meandering  
through our fates harbouring tiny glimmers  
of thrill

and we may have fled, battered and you,  
bleeding a ripe, white-red  
from between your legs

your hair shorn, defiant and madly beautiful.

those white shrouds of hate too liquored up to  
pursue a coon and his whore much past the state line

we never forgot in those long, faulty evenings  
when your vision blurred and you bit your lip  
until it burst like cherry-coke on a marble floor

and we clung and sung and watched others  
walking hand in hand celebrating  
acceptance

our fists of triumph  
blazing black and everything.

*Tabatha Stirling*

# GALA EN VOYAGE

*after Paul Éluard 'Une Personnalité'*

She heads out of Russia  
all the long route to Helsinki to Sweden to England  
to Southampton to Dieppe to Paris  
burning the miles between her and her destiny  
though u-boats hunt in schools  
and the air hums with fokkers

At the Galeries Lafayette  
she squanders Blanc de Coty on her pulsepoints  
reports in her despatches to the front  
undying love and perfume

She gives him everything  
her whole impassioned body  
the library of her mind

she gives him nothing  
not one codex  
from the secret archive of her self

They live on their dreams  
in a world waking from nightmare  
to plunge again into nightmare

Her daughter falls out of the nest  
between her thighs  
like a tile falling off a roof

In that moment  
she plans abandonment

In that moment  
her spirit sets sail.

*A.C. Clarke*





# MILLSTONE GRIT

The name speaks dourness like a minister  
black-clad and buttoned-up, on the lookout  
to pray down random joy.

Light falls into its hollows - glints,  
is gone. There are few stones darker.

Up here the weather drives like a whip  
huddles sheep under overhangs  
doubles up grass, twists stunted trees.

Walkers struggle against the onslaught,  
boots slipping on stone greasy with rain.

The rocks stand foursquare, hard as the climate.  
The long ridges of their faces  
frown disapproval.  
They are not going to lift a finger.

*A.C. Clarke*



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