

*a sample of*  
**Various Authors**  
The Fiction Desk Anthology Series  
Volume One

Edited by Rob Redman

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# Introduction

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Rob Redman

Back in the late nineties, just around the end of the big boom in alternative British music, I worked for a while as a DJ. I'd moved to a new city and hadn't found much going on there in terms of good music, so one evening I wandered into a club and somehow talked them into letting me run their Monday nights for them. For the next year or so, I played records from bands like St Etienne, My Bloody Valentine, and half the back catalogue of the 4AD label.

The club wasn't up to much: the beer was stale (but cheap), and they rarely replaced the bulbs in the lights, so there were times when the dance floor was lit for the entire evening by one meandering purple spotlight and an occasional burst of strobe. Both the turntables were broken and one of the CD decks skipped, so I'd put a long instrumental by Mogwai in the skipping one and

use it to fill the silence while I quickly changed songs on the other deck. The crowd got used to hearing fifteen seconds of grinding guitars between each song, and occasionally losing half a Pixies chorus to a skipping disc. If there were complaints, a simple press of a button—under the decks, more or less where you'll find the panic button in a shop—would make the complainer, the dance floor, and most of the club disappear in a cloud of raspberry-scented smoke.

On some nights the club was packed, while on others it was so empty that I'd put on a compilation CD and sit down for a drink with the regulars. It lasted for around a year, before collapsing during a particularly quiet summer. It had never been a huge commercial success (one night we managed a door take of minus fifty pee), but it had a loyal following, got people listening to new music, and sold quite a few records. A few bands formed among the regulars, and some of those went on to record albums of their own.

Then, a couple of years ago, I started a book blog where I do my best to talk about new fiction. It's been a bit irregular, with some quiet months and some busy ones, but it's sold a few books, introduced a few readers to new authors, and given me the opportunity to meet some interesting people.

I like to think that the club night and the blogging both came from the same place: a desire to seek out new and interesting things, the worthwhile but perhaps overlooked, and to share them with as many people as possible.

One advantage that the music had over the blogging is that it was more direct: it was a case of 'listen to this' rather than 'let me tell you about this,' sharing experiences rather than simply reporting them. Much as I enjoyed rambling to people about why they should like *The Magnetic Fields*, I found that it was better just to put on the CD.

It's my preference for that directness that has led The Fiction Desk from blogging about fiction to publishing it: instead of boring you with why you should read Charles Lambert, or telling you to seek out Lynsey May's stories, or how funny the new one from Jon Wallace is, I'm just going to show them to you.

So go and grab yourself a bottle of out-of-date beer, find somewhere comfortable to sit (not too close to the toilets, if I were you), and get ready to hear some things worth hearing.

Oh, and please bear with any odd noises you might hear: it's not the music, just the CD player warming up.

*Lynsey May's stories have appeared in The Stinging Fly, as well as other print and online projects. She's also published a chapbook with Forest Publications, called It Starts So Sweetly.*

## Two Buses Away

---

Lynsey May

It takes two buses to get to Ger's parents' house, and the second is always full of dickheads. His headphones are acting up too: there's a jittery buzz in the left ear that comes and goes at random and every time it flies in and over the music, his annoyance grinds a little deeper. It's his first day off in six days and he'd been planning to spend it in bed.

He's sitting with his knees shoved up against the seat in front, and has to twist and arch his back to get the MP3 player out of his pocket. Grunting, he flicks the switch off.

'You silly wee ho, you don't ken the first thing about me and Justine, you need to—'

He flicks it back on again. A spin of the wheel and he lands on some hardcore house. Ger looks blankly out the window for a beat or two before putting the player back in his pocket. The bass

might complement the buzzing, even if it isn't likely to help his hangover.

The bus slowly suckers along the road, stopping, starting and lurching like a mechanised slug. He's got the seat to himself, but it's little comfort. He hates this fucking bus.

One of the girls from the gaggle on his left sprays a great swathe of cheap perfume. It's like the kind the girls in his high school used to wear, the kind that makes you think of sweeties and that's now making him think of Joanna Parker. He's not seen her around in years, but he'll not soon be forgetting the wee fleshy pyramids of her brand new tits.

She was the first girl in their year to grow any; for weeks the new tits had poked softly at the material of her school shirt and mesmerised all the boys. Everyone had been gutted the day she'd come in with a bra. Ger'd have liked the chance to see her in the buff some time, but by fifth year—when his face finally sorted itself out—she'd already been with two of his mates and was working on a third.

Ger picks at a stain he's just noticed on his knee. His best jeans and everything. Fucksake, that's a lecture just waiting to happen.

A proper old geezer is sitting a couple of seats ahead. Looking at the scrawny state of the bloke, Ger wonders what possessed him to haul his carcass up to the top deck. The top deck is for young folks: the youngest playing driver at the front; troublemakers strung across, and out, at the back; then there's the not-to-be-messed-with-but-decent-enough guys in the middle. The old guy is about a third of the way from the front. The collar of his jacket is so worn it looks wet in patches, and he stares out the window as though the view is worth looking at.

Ger thinks he can smell something bad wafting off him, a smell that piggybacks on the tantalizing spray of Joanna Parker and turns his stomach. He hopes he'll manage to eat whatever

his mum has made for dinner. He hasn't had to leave the table to boak in a couple of years now, but the last time he did, he and his dad didn't talk for a good week or two.

Ger's been tensed for the first glimpse of the street for the last five minutes, but he doesn't move to slap the button until he's close to missing the stop. Before he stands, a bunch of wee rades from the back swarm past his seat, pinning him there and forcing him to wait. He ricochets down the stairs behind them. His steps and heart bounce to the beat in his buzzing ears and it feels good when his trainers hit the gravel and a light layer of drizzle coats his face.

One of the kids is shouting something, but Ger can't hear shit so he shucks his coat, sticks his hands in his pockets, and swerves around them. It's only when Ger's in the alley beside the park that his biceps unclench. Shithole, he mutters to himself. His folks are going to have to bite the bullet and sell up one of these days, before the house prices slide even lower.

There's no key in his pocket and the back door is locked. He yanks the earphones out and thumps on the patterned glass. The fresh silence makes his head vibrate. He waits for a handful of seconds, then steps round to look in the kitchen window with a phlegmy sigh, but the light's off. Back at the door, he leans one hand on the frame and makes a noise somewhere between a growl and a groan. The light comes on.

'Alright,' he says, straightening up at the minute. The old man opens the door and Ger looks down out of habit, expecting to see Suzie ready to wind in and tangle his step, but the cat is nowhere to be seen.

'Son.' Patrick shuffles back to let Ger in with the same nod that's welcomed him home since his first day at school. Ger slides by, holding his breath as though it'll also hold in the smoky smell

*You can learn a lot from fiction. For example, this debut story from Londoner Harvey Marcus is a handy cut-out-and-keep guide to...well, to falling in love with an air hostess.*

## How to Fall in Love with an Air Hostess

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Harvey Marcus

Begin by getting on the fifth carriage from the front of the 10:36 from London Paddington to Cardiff Central on the 10<sup>th</sup> October, 2008. Bundle your coat onto the overhead shelf, and take your seat. Listen to music, waiting twenty minutes for the train to pull out. Gaze absently at the empty platform for some time before you notice the pretty girl in an air hostess uniform sitting diagonally across from you. Sit up straight, and try not to stare. Think of something to say.

In the event that you cannot think of the perfect thing to say to a beautiful stranger on a train, try to visualise some common ground between you. Put yourself in her size six black pumps with silver buckles. Get under her slightly too-small blouse and skirt with thigh bulge. Walk the cabin. Close overhead compartments. Glance at seatbelts. Tear open steaming packets of food. Ensure

your seat backs and tray tables are in an upright and locked position.

Do not smell the food. You can't be hungry yet, or can you? What time is it meant to be? From where we were, or where we're going to?

That's your first question: 'What time zone are you in now?' Not a bad opening gambit, and much better than the 'Where've you just flown in to?' that the ticket inspector has just tried. He gets a polite, non-committal response: he's quite fat and old.

Don't ask yet, though. An opening gambit does not a conversation make. Squeeze back under the orange blush skin, wriggle the ends of your fingers till your nails slip under her perfectly manicured half-moon cuticles. She flew in to Gatwick, she says to the ticket inspector. And now she's going to Cardiff. 'Quite a commute,' you might say, 'do you enjoy travelling generally, or just on planes?'

No no no, that's shit, what are you talking about? Planes or trains, it's all the same basic aisles, same seats filled with bored passengers, Styrofoam food and untouchable scenery. She doesn't care about that, she's had a long flight, all she wants to do is get home. She definitely does not want to talk about travel, literal or philosophical. There has to be something of interest to her you can talk about, but you only have the vaguest outline of what an air hostess actually does. They unpack the food, then...

Before you even have time to pull the Hammer for Use in Event of Emergency and hurl it at his pudgy grey head, this ticket inspector has stolen your line. 'Quite a commute,' he says, even in the tone you would have used - a little ironic, a little teasing, getting in on the joke. 'Like travelling, don't you love?' Love! Has he no shame, you think, doesn't he know how ridiculous he looks, a man of his years chatting up a girl like this, with you sitting here, young and available. Fat old bastard, leave some for the rest of us!

(Story continues in the complete book.)

*Ben Lyle is a graduate of the creative writing MA at the University of East Anglia, but is also one of our contributors with a background in film: he's worked with the UK Film Council and Working Title, and is now co-head of development at Gorgeous Films.*

## Crannock House

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Ben Lyle

*Which of these definitions is correct?*

*Beriberi:*

- a) *A Mexican sauce*
- b) *An ailment of the nervous system, caused by malnutrition*
- c) *A Sri Lankan siren*
- d) *A Malay word for 'friends'*

I can't look at those word games in the newspaper without thinking about Mervyn. If you guess right, you can pretend you knew the answer all along. They have them in all the papers now, but back in the mid-eighties only *The Times* had it, on the back page next to the crossword.

On the first day of term one year, I was sitting alone in the school dining room and reacquainting myself with colourless porridge and kid-cut toast, spread thinly with St Ivel Gold and

thick honey. Short and fat-faced, I must have been thirteen but I was already an old hand at the school, one of about fifty boarders. A large steel teapot stood on the table, looking like the head of the Tin Man. Pouring a cup, I turned to the window and gazed out over the gravel, past the sloping football pitch towards the meadow. Grey, green, greener and then again grey: the low dark grey of the troubled Scottish sky.

A strange man marched across the gravel in front of the window, his face determined and serious. His hair was spread out across his shoulders and down his back. His beard reached from his nose to the top of his chest and stretched from ear to ear unchecked. Amid the inky bushes of his face lay two ale-dark eyes and a swollen red nose. He looked like an escapee from *The Muppets*.

‘It’s the yeti!’ shrieked Jenny, a mole-speckled girl my age.

‘Hey! Don’t be rude.’ Fran, the history teacher and part-time cook, sat down. ‘That’s Mervyn, the new maths teacher,’ she said in her Canadian accent, sounding American but not.

‘He’s dressed like a teacher,’ I said. ‘I hope it means he can count.’ He wore proper trousers and a Marks and Spencer-style jumper over a shirt and tie, barely visible through the thatch. This was not typical wear for the staff at my school. That morning Fran, for example, wore clogs, flared orange trousers and a fringed poncho.

In the educational world, Crannock House School was known as ‘progressive’. There were no compulsory lessons: learning was considered a contract between teachers and pupils. The idea was that children knew what was best for them. My parents thought I’d do well in an environment of joy and discovery, rather than set texts, exams and school uniforms. That’s what my dad wrote in his articles for *The Guardian* anyway.

It wasn’t a rich school. Most of the kids got benefit help and many had been chucked out of other schools. Crannock

House became the last resort. Located on a small estate in the Scottish countryside, the school worked at utopia with a bunch of misfits. I was the exception: my parents had the money to send me elsewhere but they were ideologically committed. I imagined them boasting at dinner parties about their only child's idyllic schooling, whilst I was four hundred miles away from London, saving them money on babysitters and learning nothing.

The whole school would meet once a week, ostensibly to run the place. One of the older kids chaired the meeting. Even the ageing headmaster, his sporran resting in the lap of his kilt as he leant forward with hand raised, had to wait his turn to speak. My dad described it as a revolutionary way to engage children, but in reality the meeting dealt with tedious admin: who left the cowshed door open, can people remember to put their dishes away after tea, will Billy undertake to stop calling Ka a chipmunk?

On the first day of term the meeting was always a short one. It was only September but someone had wheeled out the Calor gas heater. Its warmth disappeared into the rafters of the purpose-built octagonal hut while the smell hung about our heads. At the end the headmaster introduced Mervyn and said how lucky we were to have a Cambridge man. Mervyn gave a quick nod and saluted with his biro. It was only when we filed out that I realised he'd been doing the *Times* crossword all along.

'Can you teach me how to do those,' I said, pointing at the paper as we walked away from the Octagon.

'I'm here to teach you maths,' he replied without breaking stride. He stretched out the vowels when he spoke, like my cousins from Bristol, that I hardly ever saw.

'Go on, give us one clue at least.' I followed his nervy movements. He looked down without stopping.

'I don't encourage fraternization,' he said.

'Is that the clue?' I hurried to keep up with him. 'It sounds like gobbledegook.'

'It is not gobbledegook.' He laughed and looked directly at me for the first time. 'Nor is it a clue.' His face sharpened for an instant, like a stoat or a weasel in *The Wind in the Willows*. 'Good word though,' he continued. His eyes blinked as if helping him clear his head. 'Now leave me alone.'

The first lesson we had with him was a shock. He expected us to be quiet, for one thing. Before then, every class had been a free-for-all, a debate about what might or might not be worth learning about any particular subject. In Mervyn's class we sat quietly whilst he explained Pythagoras' theorem.

'You already know what the length is,' Billy said. He pointed at the blackboard 'It says it's Z. Look.'

'Z's an unknown.' Mervyn scratched at the board. 'X, Y and Z—they're all unknowns.'

'But if they're all unknown, how do you find them out?' Billy persisted. He was thirteen too but we didn't speak much. He wiped his snub nose, adding to the silver spindles on his sweat-shirted forearm.

'It's not real,' I said. 'It's a theorem. The measurements don't matter.' I glanced up at Mervyn.

'That's right,' he said, stepping nimbly to the side. 'Here are the set questions for next week.' He gestured with a chalk-scarred hand.

'You mean we have to answer all those?' I asked as I folded away my exercise book. I was quite pleased: I'd learnt more in one lesson than in the previous two years at the school.

'Brilliant.' He smiled. 'You're obviously the brains of the class.'

'I have to work in my own time?' I said.

'That's why it's called homework,' he replied, and ushered us to the door.

*Stories often seem to arrive at our office in thematic batches. One day will bring lots of difficult divorce stories, another will involve a series of alien invasions. On the day I read 'Rex', I'd already seen three or four stories about man's best friend. This one stood out, though I can't think why...*

## Rex

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Jon Wallace

Rex opened the front door, carefully poking his head into the house. When he was certain it was clear he crept inside, tip-toeing his way to the kitchen, being sure not to wake Sylvia. She slept all the time now, which was fine by him. Her waking hours were not a good time to be around. She was still depressed about Ernie.

A month ago Ernie had been hit by a car out on the street and killed. Sylvia mourned that dog as if it were a relative, which Rex understood. But the other night she'd implied Rex had been complicit in the mutt's death. This struck a nerve in Rex, and there had been an argument. Hadn't he been the one to find the dog? Hadn't he been the one who brought the stinking carcass back into the house, cradling him in his arms as if the wretched pup were some fallen general? Didn't he get any credit for that at all?

Of course, he knew where she was coming from. He had never liked the dog, and it had never liked him. He had resented

paying more for the Sir Lunchalot gourmet dog food than his own dinners. He had resented the dog's attitude: Ernie only ever regarded him as a rival, certainly never as a master. Finally, he had resented the hound's persistent invasions of the bedroom, where it had always done its very best to prevent cordial marital relations.

He was stood in the kitchen, thinking over these things, when he heard something odd. It was the sound of Sylvia coming in through the front door.

What is she doing up? he asked himself. She had passed the last three weeks without leaving the bed, let alone the house.

He went over to the kitchen door and listened. There was something strange going on: Sylvia was talking to someone. There was something in her speech that wasn't right. There was too much joy in it. He thought the voice a little unhinged.

Oh God, he thought. Is she talking to herself now?

There was a scratching noise, as if Sylvia was slipping about on spiked trainers, and she was laughing—*laughing*—at something. Crossing himself, he made up his mind to go into the hallway and greet her.

He tossed open the door with a flourish, raising a smile he in no way felt, and took in the sight now greeting him.

Sylvia stood looking at him with wild, wet, and joyful eyes. She was, in spite of being drenched, considerably more attractive than she had been for the last month or so.

But she was not alone.

Snuffling around her feet on all fours, panting and emitting small growling noises, was a man in a dog costume.

There was a silence as Rex examined this man.

He was wearing some kind of home-made fancy dress costume. His face was fully exposed, apart from a rubber snout on a string that he wore over his nose. On his head he had a novelty

headband, sprouting black felt ears. On his torso he sported a loosely fitting body suit, torn in several places and flecked with Dalmatian spots. On his hands and feet were the remains of black socks. Finally, sticking obscenely out above his rump, was a black wire tail. The only vaguely authentic thing about him was his brand-new, black, metal-studded collar. Sylvia was clutching the leash tight in her fist.

The dog-man had been scampering about until Rex entered, but now noticed Rex. His eyes widened and he became very still, apparently unsure of himself.

Rex said nothing. The dog-man didn't say anything either, but his expression suggested he hadn't foreseen Rex's presence.

'Well,' said Sylvia finally, 'What do you think?'

Rex remained mute. He couldn't stop staring at the man in the costume.

'Rex?' said Sylvia. 'Don't you like him?'

Words still eluded Rex, but he didn't want to create a situation. He had to say something.

'Who's this?' he said, a slight crack in his voice.

'It's our new dog. He's called William,' said Sylvia. 'Isn't he beautiful? He's a Dalmatian.'

'Really, a Dalmatian, eh? Well, I never,' said Rex.

He edged over to the coat stand and wrapped his fingers around the handle of an umbrella, drawing it out slowly, clutching it like a broadsword ready for action. William regarded every movement anxiously.

'Where did you get him?' asked Rex. It was a good question, but he hadn't meant to ask it. The most important issue at hand was that Sylvia appeared to believe the man in the costume to actually be a dog. This, coupled with the fact she had been leading a man on a leash around the neighbourhood, caused Rex some thought. It didn't seem to concern Sylvia.

*Alex grew up in Australia but now lives in London. Like several contributors to this volume, her background is in film production, where she's worked for a variety of organisations including the BBC and the UK Film Council. 'The Puzzle' is her first published story.*

## The Puzzle

---

Alex Cameron

The old man sits in his chair, one shin crossed over the other; a leg slips out from beneath the towel of his dressing gown, revealing mottled, hairless skin, so taut it shines. To see his head lolling to one side on his chest, it would appear he is asleep but on closer inspection, beneath loose stalks of grey hair heavy with grease, his eyes are wide open, glaring. Eyelids, pink and translucent, blink over murky green eyes—the colour of the Solent, toward which he stares. Rain begins to fall, big fat splotches, like bird droppings on his forehead: they have forgotten him again.

'Yoo hoo! Mr Valentine, Yoo hoo! You have a visitor,' calls the nurse.

Her voice, thin from guilt, quavers down the hill as he imagines her running. Her uniform, at first white against the green grass, begins to melt into her generous flesh, soaking with rain. Big Bertha.

'Oh, Mr Valentine, how silly of me. Sun'll be out in a sec, I bet. Still, better for a little fresh air for those squeaky lungs of yours.'

## The Puzzle

She straightens him up in the wheelchair, smothering his face with her chest, and slaps his feet back into place on the platforms.

The old man's bad arm falls out of the pocket of his gown and swings against the wheel of the chair. She picks it up and places it in his lap, while she jabbars about her colleagues and pushes him up the hill toward the sanatorium.

He's heard it all before.

On and on she goes, as if someone has permanently injected the wings of a mosquito into his head. To be able to open his mouth and scream at her to shut up is a luxury he does not have.

'...and that's when I arrived this morning to find you had a visitor. Yes, a visitor. Interesting man, he is. Dressed all in black. I said to myself, Bertha, what's his business coming here and wanting to see our Mr Valentine? Well, he was all mysterious, he was, Mr Valentine, wouldn't tell me a thing—wouldn't even open his mouth. Well, I warned him, of course, told him you wouldn't be able to speak to him, said you wouldn't understand him but it didn't matter a thing. Strange man indeed who wants to have a one-way conversation. Well, now, I think you can understand me, of course, Mr Valentine, but I wouldn't want you to become distressed like what happened that other time, and that's when I remembered Warren had put you out for the morning. Ah, now here we are. And what did I tell you, there he is, come out as I said he would—the sun.'

But there is no visitor, just a parcel wrapped in brown paper.

Mr Valentine's wheelchair is placed in the foyer, where the package rests on the reception desk. Shelley, the receptionist, sits on the other side of the bench. He cannot see her as the bench is chest height, but he imagines she is sipping from her mug that says, *Real women don't have hot flashes, they have power surges.*

'Where's that chap gone then, Shelley?' says Bertha.

(Story continues in the complete book.)

*Matthew Licht is one of our American contributors, although he lives in Italy these days. He has an energetic, rolling style, which I think works particularly well in this story. For more of Matthew's stories, seek out his collection The Moose Show, published by Salt.*

## Dave Tough's Luck

---

Matthew Licht

Up on the screen was a kid with long curly hair and a weird squint, like a bug flew into his eye. He was playing drums, I mean *really* playing them, on a stage in front of an ocean of people, half a million, the biggest concert there ever was. He was in one of the hottest hippie bands, out of his mind on LSD, and he played so hard and hot, the sound reached off the psychedelic split screen, touched me with a burning stick and set me on fire.

So I had to learn to play the drums. I thought drums must be easier than instruments where notes come out.

More than twenty years later, sometimes I feel I haven't really got it yet. Sometimes I think I'm not even holding the sticks right.

First crummy kit cost me fifty dollars. Bought it from a hunchbacked former big band guy who finally threw in the sponge. His name was Munger, rhymes with 'from hunger', and he lived way the hell out in Queens. He led me down to his basement that stank of sweat and dust, and pulled a gray sheet off his drums. The

blue glitter-flake shells and rusty rims looked like he'd personally chewed them with his big yellow square teeth. He got all hung up on the hi-hat cymbals, like he was throwing them in special, like he was doing me a huge favour giving me something that was supposed to be included in the deal anyway. He said they were a pair matched by Dave Tough.

At least old Munger from Hunger gave me the urge to hear what a drummer with a name as cool as Dave Tough sounded like.

I've still got those hi-hat cymbals. They sound perfect together, dark and sharp.

Got my initial chops courtesy of marching band practice. The maestro started me out on bass drum, so I learned to use my shoulders and elbows. Then he moved me up to the snare where it's all about wrists, fingers. I went to a giganto high school in Newark, so there were always plenty of games, parades, ROTC marches, block dances. Got tapped for a spot on the riser with a prog outfit called Zero. They were older guys who used weird time signatures, so I had to learn to count like a bastard. I also learned I wasn't the kid who took LSD and beat his soul out for half a million people at Woodstock. He went on to play prog crapola and fusion garbage. His life topped out at Woodstock, unless he wins the lottery twice or something. Maybe I should be glad I haven't topped out yet. There's still a chance it could happen.

Started giving lessons for a living when I hit thirty. Not many other gigs pay fifteen dollars an hour. I learned the hard way I can't handle office jobs, the whole steady life deal. Maybe playing drums does that to you. Or maybe it's the other way around. You're that way, so you play the drums.

Most people think monkeys can play the drums. Chimps got rhythm. Chain 'em down, hand 'em the sticks, they'll figure it out soon enough.

The Shrovers were a family that lived in a big house in Montclair. They stood out mainly because there were so many of them and because they had a lot of dough. They would come into Newark for symphony concerts, or the opera. They were a big family, seriously big on music. They'd all get dressed up in velvet, tartan and bowties. They could've crossed the river to New York for major-league performances, but they were civic minded. Maybe even patriotic, partisan, or provincial. The Newark Symphony was close to home so that's where they went.

Mr and Mrs Shrover occasionally got their pictures in the local papers. They made massive donations towards local culture, especially musical culture, which meant strictly classical. One time they got their picture in the paper, it was because Mrs gave live birth to triplets.

Brave pale smile on weary Mrs's face. Her black hair's cut mom-short. Paunchy Mr standing proud but freaked in the background. Three squished-looking kids sprawled across her lap. One of the three, Andy—*my* Andy—has one eye slightly open. He's the only one looking around, although he was the last one out. He came out a shade too late, poor little guy. But he was already squinting at the world. Just like the kid who took acid and set his drums on fire. Set me on fire, and I'm still burning, though nowhere near as bright.

The Shrovers were, as I said, a majorly musical family. They crowded around in the living room listening to Daddy Shrover's state-of-the-art hi-fi component system. They went to concerts as a gang. They all played. Daddy Shrover on oboe, Mama Shrover on piano and sometimes harp. The sexy Shrover sisters comprised a peewee string section. The older Shrover brothers played horns, like their pop. So naturally that's the direction the first two triplets took. Michael started tootling a silver flute practically before he could walk, and Matthew got his hand stuck in a French horn.

Andy was last. He hadn't got enough oxygen at some crucial point of the birth process. No oxygen equals no wind instrument. Andy was a retard, so Ma and Pa Shrover figured him for percussion. They must've seen the flyer I put up at Symphony Hall, trolling for timpanists with an itch to get hip.

The first time I saw Andy, he had a kooky smile stretched over his entire face. He stumble-ran over and jumped on me as I was being led, open-mouthed and staring, through the mansion's living room. Didn't know ceilings could reach that high, outside of basketball gyms. He held on like a drooling koala bear as Daddy Shrover explained, in the tone people use on retards, that I was going to be his teacher.

'Thee-thur.' Andy gurgled, and wiped his nose on the shirt I'd ironed half an hour previous.

We went out to the garage, a perfect place for orangutans to slam on garbage cans. I'd brought a rubber pad and a few pairs of sticks. I think Ma and Pa Shrover expected me to lug over a whole kit, a playground of drums and cymbals for slow little Andy.

Cello and viola fought a duel up in some bedroom or music room or home recording studio while I tried to get Andy to hold the sticks correctly. In other words, my way. But he had his own way of holding sticks. After half an hour, I let him have his way. What the hell. We started banging. The original plan was to teach Andy to count, if nothing else.

Andy already knew how to count. Maybe he couldn't say the words for numbers right, but he knew. He got a charge when I counted sixteenth notes: one-ee-andy, two-ee-andy, three-nee-andy. He thought sixteenth notes were all about him. Maybe they were. Maybe they are. Even with that weirdo grip of his, he had no problem with sixteenth notes, or thirty-second notes, or sixty-fourth notes.

Took me years before I could burn sixty-fourth notes convincingly.

(Story continues in the complete book.)

*American playwright and musician Jason Atkinson is making his fiction debut with this story. Like several of our contributors, he's lived abroad; and like several of our contributors, he's told stories in other media. On this evidence, I'd say that both are good training for writing fiction.*

## Assassination Scene

---

Jason Atkinson

'In the district we'll be seeing lower temperatures tonight. Highs in the 50s and rain in the afternoon.'

The radio emitted some variation of this every morning. His response to it was always the same: he hit the snooze button one time and then, upon the sounding of the second alarm, rose and began preparations. Clothes were already set out. Coffee programmed. Lunch packed. Before he became fully conscious, he was often already in the car. The engine hummed as he passed through the upper middle class suburbs.

Panera bread. Wal Mart. Costco. Arby's. Giant supermarket. He drove past them all before merging onto the highway. Many years ago he might have thought something negative about the ubiquity of all these franchises, but recently he had made his peace with them. They were here now, lording their wares over the good people of Vienna, Virginia. But they would pass, just as he would pass. Just as everything would pass.

It was better to enjoy their bounty, and try to extract something positive from the experience.

He took the Suitland Parkway into the District. Someone had once told him that the Suitland was on the National Register of Historic Places and he had to admit that, when fall came, it looked really beautiful. He always got a real good look at the beauty of the parkway because it was always full of traffic. The commuters move into the city. The commuters exit the city.

Despite years of doing this drive, he felt a surge of pride when the Washington Monument came into view. He felt powerful. Part of the power structure. Part of something big. Unprecedented. Important. Human beings were needed to make this government run, and he was happy to offer himself.

He caught sight of Capitol Hill. He was almost at the office.

He thought, 'I am in a car, and I am surrounded by other cars, and we are all driving towards a place where people wear suits. This is occurring on a parkway that is called The Suitland Parkway. The parkway is historical.'

He often felt this sounded like a fairy tale before the good stuff started. Government work was not a fairy tale. Government work was dull and confusing and filled with long corridors that went nowhere and offered no exit.

When he was younger, he'd wanted to get deeper inside. A beltway insider. Deep, deep inside. The centre. The centre of the centre. To the place where the man in the chair sat and said something and watched as his wishes were carried out.

He had not located this place. He had long abandoned his search for this place.

He settled. One has to settle. It would be a good retirement, he would receive a good pension, and then he would take what he could get from this life. It would involve sometimes being very quiet and very still and just listening to his heart beat and

trying to get a sense of the blood being pushed through his body.

And then he, like all great nations, would pass away.

He parked and went into his office. He worked at the Federal Energy Commission. It was a good job. A government job means that you are set for life and, if you're not the greatest worker or the sharpest tack, or if you suddenly fade out, they won't just put you out on the street. They'll find a little corner for you in the complex mechanism and there you will sit until retirement.

He had his corner. He worked on issues that dealt with the United States power grid. It was a large and complex system. Vast and sprawling and impossibly powerful. It had been just an old boy's club for a long time, but when they screwed up in the NYC blackout, the government was finally able to get in there and regulate. And that is exactly what Daniel did. He regulated. It involved him writing down stuff on paper and examining things and correcting things and typing things into his BlackBerry. Sometimes something happened; most of the time it was just red tape and confusion.

As long as he checked and responded to his BlackBerry and did what the higher-ups asked (which involved late hours sometimes), he would be okay. They would let him retire and they wouldn't move him out of this office and into an even more godforsaken place. If he followed the rules, he would be safe here. Some days he wished that death would come and some days, especially when his kids were younger, he was grateful to have the peace of mind that a government job gave to a man.

He showed his big heavy plastic ID to guards at the door. He passed through the metal detectors. He greeted people he knew and turned on his BlackBerry at exactly the time he was expected to have it on.

(Story continues in the complete book.)

*Back in 2009, Patrick Whittaker won the British Fantasy Society's short story competition with 'Dead Astronauts', about a man who keeps finding dead astronauts in his garden. It's a nicely handled slice of the absurd, as is this new story.*

## Celia and Harold

---

Patrick Whittaker

It was St Valentine's Day and I'd been on the train for five hours. My senses were numb, my throat was parched, and the reports I'd been immersed in since leaving London threatened to induce a coma.

As the train rolled into Midwick, I closed my laptop and put on my raincoat.

It was a dull little town, built on the sides of a valley and cut in two by the railway and a river. Terraced houses ribboned the streets. Next to the station, an abandoned linen mill sat like a carcass with its bones picked bare.

The guard wasn't happy about stopping in Midwick. 'We usually roll right on through,' he declared. 'Never any reason to stop.'

'I have to get to Nether Willows,' I told him. Normally that would have involved a change at Gilton Minor but the station there was closed for repairs. Going via Midwick added hours to my journey but I had no choice.

No one else got off and the train rolled on just as soon as it could.

Grey drizzle, so fine as to be barely more than mist, greeted me.

I checked my watch against the station clock. The timepieces agreed I had two hours and seven minutes until my next connection. Time enough for a leisurely lunch.

In lieu of a buffet, the station boasted a windowless waiting room with a coffee machine and a wooden bench. I decided to find a pub.

The first thing I noticed was the barfly perched on his stool. He was hunched over the bar, beer in one hand, chin resting on the other. All the gloom in that dingy room seemed to emanate from him.

The landlord stood on the other side of the bar, drying a pint glass. He was a stout fellow with a ruddy face and mutton-chop sideburns. There was no one else in the pub, but that suited me just fine. I was after a drink, not company. So why I sat on the stool next to the barfly, I'll never know.

As the landlord poured me a pint of Pudfrugger, my body language made it plain I wasn't one of life's listeners. Some men keep their sorrows to themselves, but the barfly didn't look the sort. And I wasn't about to give him reason to think he could unburden his soul on me.

After handing me my change, the landlord retreated to his back room, leaving me alone with old misery guts. I looked around at all the empty tables and unoccupied chairs. Over by the window was the least gloomy spot. Through the rain-drizzled glass, I would have a fine view of the tenements and alleyways of Midwick.

But the barfly made his move before I could make mine. 'You've not seen her,' he said. 'Pray you never do.'

*Charles Lambert has published two novels, Little Monsters and Any Human Face, and a collection of short stories, The Scent of Cinnamon. Something that always stands out for me in his work is the way he breathes life into his characters.*

## All I Want

---

Charles Lambert

He's strolling out of Teddy's classroom when I first spot him, carrying a briefcase and a folded newspaper. Most students are in shirtsleeves, light summer dresses, but this man's wearing a sharply tailored dark suit, white shirt, a slim red tie. His hair's short, but long enough to shine blue-black as the light catches it—dead-straight parting, a hint of that cologne Italian barbers use, with the retro label on the bottle. He studies me for a moment, then nods, as though I've passed some test. 'Good morning,' he says, his Italian accent strong but clear. Before I can answer he's out of the door.

'Who was that?' I pretend to swoon.

'My new private,' Teddy says, leaning against his classroom door, jerking a Winston from the packet. 'He's a journalist. Freelance.' He pauses. 'Guess what he's got in his briefcase.'

'A scoop?'

A longer pause. 'A gun.'

'He says.'

Teddy grins. 'He showed me.'

We walk down the stairs and out into Piazzale Loreto. Our students keep telling us that Mussolini and his mistress were hung here by their heels. Yes, we say, we know. They don't seem proud of it, or indignant, though some of them were alive when it happened. It's history by now.

'It's got a silencer. And it's loaded.'

'Is that allowed?'

'He showed me a licence,' says Teddy.

Most of the tables outside the bar are taken but there's one in the sun that nobody wants. We sit and order beers.

'Is that all he showed you?' I say, not wanting to sound waspish. 'It doesn't sound as though you're using the Method.'

'He's too interesting for that,' says Teddy, shielding his eyes with his hand. 'He's got to protect himself. It's big business. He can't exactly say what he does. It's pretty dangerous stuff.'

'He tells you this in English?'

Teddy looks sheepish. 'Not all of it, no. We piece it together. His French is good.'

I light the last cigarette from his packet. 'You're sure he isn't trying to impress you? As in pick you up?'

Teddy crushes the packet, drops it into his empty glass. 'Calm down, Simon, he isn't gay. He's married, actually. He's got two kids.'

I close my eyes for a moment, feeling the start of a headache. But I won't be shaken off.

'How old is he?'

'Twenty-seven.' Teddy doesn't say it but I know we both think the same thing. Four years older than we are. Four years between us and a real life—a wife, two kids. A licensed gun in the briefcase.

'What's his name?'

'Luigi.'

'Luigi what?'

Teddy squints for a moment, as if considering whether to tell me.

'Baietto.'

Three days later I'm given a new class. A mother and two children. I realise who they are when I see the family together in the corridor. She's my height, slightly taller than her husband, dark as he is, with hair pinned up loosely, tendrilling down her neck, and suntanned arms and shoulders. The children, both boys, are oddly blond, like Finns. One of them looks seven or eight, the other maybe three years younger. Baietto shakes my hand, then introduces me. His wife's Anna; the boys are Davide and Luca. He knows my name. I smile and nod, sweating in the close air of the school. 'Look after them for me, Simon,' he says, smiling. His canines are longer than the other teeth, set higher in the gums.

In the classroom, Anna sits in the middle, with Davide on one side and Luca, the younger boy, on the other. I stand behind my desk as I've been told, the timer set for fifty minutes, the Method open in front of me. I've never taught children before. Anna's wearing a simple white dress, her knees just visible as she smoothes the fabric round her, brown and slightly gleaming. When she smiles, a keen smile filled with trust, her lips part and I have to look away; she seems so open, so available. She sits between her sons and waits for me to teach them.

They are the most beautiful family I have ever seen. I'm awestruck as I point at the table and say table, point at the chair and say chair. Table, they say, and chair. If I knew what else to do, I'd close the Method and teach them what they need, whatever that might be.

The boys' feet don't even touch the floor.

(Story continues in the complete book.)

*Danny Rhodes is the author of two novels, Asboville and Soldier Boy. Both books received critical acclaim, and I'm delighted to be able to include one of his stories here.*

## A Covering of Leaves

---

Danny Rhodes

Each morning brought a fresh covering of leaves. Webster had the job of clearing them, first from the platform, then from the entrance lobby, and given time, from the station's guttering and drains. In between these tasks, he was meant to oversee the car park. He did not have to clear the leaves from the line, nor did he have to explain to irate passengers why leaves could cause a train to be delayed, but he did the second job anyhow.

'It's mainly to do with the points,' he'd say. 'They get clogged up with fallen leaves. There's nothing we can do about it except clear them when they begin to cause obstruction, for safety reasons of course.'

Things had changed in the past few days. There had been a crash at the city station. The crash had killed forty-seven people. It might have killed a whole lot more, but it had only maimed and injured the rest, some two hundred all told.

Webster could see the front page of a tabloid in the kiosk across from him. It showed a station clock, its bent hands and charred face crudely displaying the time the engine had exploded into a ball of flame, twenty-three minutes past eight, right slap bang in the middle of commuter hour. In the background of the picture, the paint had been stripped from the walls by the blast. The blistered paint that remained was clinging to the walls precariously, like so many autumn leaves.

For Webster it meant a quiet week. He found himself with too much time on his hands. He liked to keep busy, to stop his mind from wandering. When it wandered it tended to wander back to the time before his own world had fallen apart.

The day after the crash he had come to work as normal, only to wind up twiddling his thumbs as a small and silent trickle of passengers entered the station. He found himself searching the faces of these people, looking for signs. One man arrived with his briefcase in his hand and his long cashmere coat draped over his forearm as always. He flashed his travel card as always. On his face was a white piece of cotton wool, held in place by a surgical plaster. He might have cut himself shaving or he might have survived a train crash by the skin of his teeth. In his mind, Webster played back the moment where a tiny shard of metal from the train cut into the man's cheek. The briefcase looked scarred and scratched too, like it had been battered and bruised over many years, or flung across a platform full of broken glass. It was funny how it all worked, how one man could escape with a cut cheek and another man lose a leg or an arm. It was funny how some lived and some died. But then Webster knew all about that. He knew more about that than most.

There were others: a woman who might have been limping, a man who could have been holding his arm in a peculiar position. These were the hard core, defiantly stepping up into their working

lives the very next day, stoically treating the event as nothing more than a minor disruption, just more leaves on the line. Others came in the days that followed. And when the station announcement was made that the train would be delayed due to leaves on the line, nobody flinched. They simply stood on the platform and waited, as always.

But for Webster, things were changing.

It started when he noticed the cars. Two were nestled together under an ancient oak in the middle of the car park: a brand new black BMW and a silver Honda Civic. A third was by the iron fencing that separated the platform from the car park. It was a metallic blue Range Rover and it had a faded sticker in the back window that read 'Burgreen Horse Trials 2004'. The final car was a small red Nissan, parked way off on its own in the bottom corner. It was parked in the sort of space that would only be used by the last person to arrive on any given morning, or by somebody who wanted to be out of the way of everybody else. It was the Nissan that Webster felt drawn to the most. When he arrived at the Nissan on the morning after the crash, when he saw the golden leaves on the bonnet, the day old ticket in the window, the stubbed out cigarette in the open ashtray, it dawned on him that he might be staring at the possessions of a dead person.

On the second day, Webster spent several minutes examining the cars. He built pictures of lives. It was the sort of game a man played when his job required no thought at all and when thinking brought up moments best left alone. His mind leaned mostly towards the Nissan cowering sadly in the corner. More leaves had fallen, turning the paintwork a shade darker, creating some kind of curious camouflage.

The Range Rover wasn't there when Webster arrived on the third day, and the BMW was collected by a pickup at lunch while

(Story continues in the complete book.)

*Ben Cheetham's story is one of the longer pieces in this volume, but you get the sense that it could easily have been longer still: Finn could spend hundreds of pages wandering through a sort of Dickensian episodic series of characters and conflicts. Perhaps it's just as well Ben kept it short, though, or we'd never have managed to fit it in here.*

## Sometimes the Only Way Out is In

---

Ben Cheetham

The wind shrieked like a monster against Finn's bedroom window. That was one of the worst things about living in a high-rise. The noise of wind was always there. It lessened to a whisper sometimes, but it always returned to batter at the grimy, weather-stained panes. Sometimes, lying in bed at night, Finn heard angry voices in it. 'It's your fault,' they shouted. 'It's your fault he left.' If he felt really brave, which wasn't very often, Finn shouted back, 'Go away, wind, and leave me alone.' Most of the time, he pulled the covers over his head and sought reassurance from Zack, the boy who lived in his mouth. *Take no notice of the wind*, Zack would say. *The wind is a big fat liar.*

The best thing about living in a high-rise was the view. Finn could sit staring at the view for hours of an evening. From his bedroom window, which looked towards the setting sun, he could

see other high-rises poking up like rows of dirty, uneven teeth. He could see rigid lines of maisonette blocks and terraced houses, and sinuous lines of detached houses with big gardens. He could see traffic-clogged roads, crisscrossing in every direction. Further out, he could see more high-rises, more houses, more roads. And further out still, he could see yet more of the same, stretching away, on and on, seemingly to infinity.

Finn knew the city didn't go on forever, though. He knew that somewhere out there was a place where all around you, all you could see were fields, trees and hills. And he knew that that place was called Wales. His mum and dad had taken him there once, four years earlier. They'd spent a week camped in a field between a rock-capped hill and the sea. Pretty much all he remembered of that week now was that the sun had shone and the sky had been blue every day, and he'd eaten ice cream on the beach and paddled in the sea, and his parents hadn't argued, not once. But even those memories—the most cherished he possessed—were fading, getting dimmer and dimmer. He might've started to wonder if the holiday was just a happy dream, if it hadn't been for the photo.

Finn assumed his mum had taken the photo, since she wasn't in it. It was of him and his dad sat on deckchairs outside a tent, the steep hillside of heather and rock in the background. Both of them were smiling. He'd spent hour after hour studying it, fixing the smallest details of the scene in his mind. It was the only photo he had left of his dad. His mum had destroyed the rest. He'd salvaged it from the bin and kept it hidden ever since, in a secret place in his bedroom. He usually only took it out late at night, after his mum was in bed. But he knew he was safe to take it out whenever he felt like at the moment. Even though he was late getting up for school, there was no chance his mum would come into his bedroom and find him looking at it, not the state she was in.

*You'd better get your clothes on and eat some breakfast,* said Zack.

'Aw, why do you always have to be so sensible?' whined Finn.

*One of us has to be.*

Finn slid the photo back into its hiding place, dressed and made his way to the kitchen. There was nothing much to eat—a few slices of stale bread, but no butter; some scraps of cereal, but no milk. Finn ate the cereal dry with his fingers in front of the telly.

*Turn that thing off and brush your teeth,* said Zack.

'Awww,' Finn whined again, but he did as Zack said. School rucksack slung over his shoulder, he stood outside his mum's bedroom, listening. There was absolute silence. Very gently, he opened the door. The room was unlit except for a sliver of sunlight that pierced the curtains, and had a heavy, stale atmosphere. A motionless figure was dimly visible on the bed. Finn's mum appeared to be sleeping, but as he padded closer he saw that her eyes were open—open yet unfocused and staring off into some other place.

'Mum,' whispered Finn. No response. 'Mum,' he repeated, louder. Still no response, not even a flicker of an eyelid. He released a sigh that no ten-year old boy should have inside them. She'd been like this for a week now. It had come on suddenly, like last time. Unlike last time, Finn hadn't told anyone else what was happening. He'd tried his best to look after her himself, spoon-feeding her canned chicken soup—he'd heard that was good for you when you were sick—brushing her hair, washing her face with a flannel, even changing her sheets and nightie one time when she wet them.

*She's not getting any better,* said Zack. *You should tell somebody.*

Finn shook his head fervently. 'They'll put her back in that hospital and make me go live with those people again.'

Those were memories Finn wanted to forget, but which wouldn't go away, no matter how hard he tried to banish them.

Even now, two years later, all he had to do was close his eyes and those memories spooled through his brain like a movie on endless repeat. Memories of his parents arguing for weeks on end, day and night; of his dad slamming out of the flat, shouting that he was never coming back; of his mum sobbing loud enough to make his ears ring; and of her screaming at him, 'My face is fucked up, my skin is fucked up, my figure is fucked up, and it's your fault. It's your fault he's gone.' And finally, memories of her silence and blankness. She'd scared Finn so much that he ran crying next door to Mrs Kelly. Mrs Kelly had phoned a doctor, who contacted Social Services, who placed Finn with a foster family, with whom he lived for half a year until his mum was better. It was the worst time of his life. Every day for the first month he'd expected his dad to turn up and take him home. But he never did. He'd kept asking where his dad was, but nobody seemed to know. It was as if he'd vanished right off the planet.

It was only later on, when he was living back with his mum, that the realisation of where his dad was came to him. He'd been laid in bed, poring over the photo, when a memory of something his dad had said during their holiday suddenly popped into his head. He'd said, 'If I could choose one place to live the rest of my life, this would be it.'

'Can I live here with you, Daddy?' Finn had asked him.

'Of course you can,' he'd replied.

When she got out of hospital, Finn's mum had made him a promise. 'I promise I'll never get sick like that again,' she'd said. And she'd kept that promise, until a week ago. And now, for some reason beyond Finn's understanding, it was happening all over again. Only this time things were going to be different, he was going to make certain of that. He'd made a promise, too, after leaving his foster home, and that promise was that he would never go back into care, not ever, no way, no how, no matter what.

*The anxiety of impending fatherhood is a common subject for short stories, but it's one of those personal events that can be difficult to translate well into fiction. Fortunately, Adrian Stumpp has provided us with an example of how it can be done.*

## Nativity

---

Adrian Stumpp

Ever since we bought a house in the suburbs, I haven't been able to sleep. I have nightmares I can't remember. I wake in dread and a sweated fever with my heart knocking like a sick engine, and drink several glasses of water straight from the tap before my hands stop shaking. I feel like nothing belongs to me and all the time I catch myself wondering how the hell I got here, who is this woman in bed next to me, and I know the house is part of it.

The house makes no sense to me. It is too big and I don't know how to use it. The house is a decade-old rambler with a dishwasher and a stainless steel refrigerator with dispensers in the door for filtered water and ice, crushed or cubed, whichever your pleasure. I'm thirty-five years old and never until now has my life required a preference for crushed or cubed ice. Not that it matters, because I still drink water from the faucet, the harder the better. Soft water gives me a skin rash, I've discovered. Something else I never worried about before living in this house.

My wife is having a baby. She gets mad when I tell people this. She thinks I should say 'we' are having a baby, but in truth, she will do it from here out. My only essential responsibility has already been performed, with much gusto, and after browsing the important baby books she's given me, I can tell you with extreme confidence my job was the best part of the process.

For a long time I told her we couldn't have a baby. They're too expensive. I was going to school and only kept a part-time job, and then I was unemployed and uninsured throughout my post-graduate studies. There were obscene student loans and it took a while to find a teaching job and a while longer to find a position as permanent faculty. Our apartment had lead paint on the walls and asbestos in the ceiling and it was too small and located in a bad neighbourhood.

After all these excuses were gone I couldn't think of any more, and like the street-barker of a Las Vegas massage parlour, Amy tempted me with endings happier than those found in a latex reservoir, and now she's nine months pregnant. The baby could come any day, Amy threatens me; it will in fact be here no later than Friday, December twenty-seventh, when her doctor will induce labour if the baby hasn't already.

The doctor seems convinced the baby will be born on Christmas, just to spite him. He is a portly man in his early fifties who rides a Harley-Davidson. The baby is his arch nemesis. It took three separate ultrasound appointments before the baby would cooperate enough for the doctor to discern a gender. The baby has rendered all of the doctor's sage predictions inept. It has changed genders once and shuffled its conception date by one and then two weeks, before dropping into Amy's pelvis a week early. The doctor grits his teeth and laughs and pretends not to harbour any irrational animosity towards our baby, but I know he is the only person whose ambivalence exceeds my own. Now he

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