

Issue Five

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In Praise of Zeitgeist

Patricia Walsh

Surely you remember, that
scar of experience Dangling
around your neck, a forever
shame The spirit of the times
calling forever home Slipping
through main streets in full
view Please be seated for
another round of coffee
Passers-by don't know what
hit them.

Jigs and reels around the
fountain Never enough to
vandalise what is yours Picked on
outside the gates, being hit to
prophecy Asking for misfortune
in a gutter of snide Cutting
losses while those powers still
are Fleeting insults repeated on
the sly.

Tying bicycles to railings is your
own risk, A bar on creation masks
indolence Some philistine's law
rocks the opportune cradle
Intelligence just another crime to
sink ships Open mouths catching
flies always on target Slipping
curses below par for a bloodied
adventure.

Eschewing television, the rot of
our times Bonding totally

disproved, shamefully disciplined
Meal tickets cautiously exhibited
for good reason A prime
associate, temporary though it
me be Starving through laziness,
a perfect catchcry Rifling scandal
sheets for proof of same.

Planning the psyche's holiday,
never before time Sleeping in
calculations, a congratulatory
exercise Not eating enough to
cover the stain Loved for
representation, heavily cracked,
No one knowing where you're
destined, forever Drinking spirits
nicely, besides tracking doom.

Pushing and Pulling Envelopes
Patricia Walsh

Kissed like an eel, studying
shape of form Sneaking out
of lectures to surprise you
Cutting losses to eventually
inspire you. Too caseless to
answer, a disaster on
arrival.

Strung-up bicycles hung out
to dry Gallery of potential
theft, out there, seething
Nothing much to say
besides bald platitudes
Thread less and
dangerous on any road.

The brightened code, laughing at
resistance The sacred wooden
panel braves the situation
Laughing at circumstance,
examinations permitting A genetic
stone pedigree yours for the
taking.

Repetition of 'boring day', in
the personal block Never
stopped the rifling of private
items The hiding of make-up
soon discovered Purposeful
failure a deft exercise.

Bleeding from neglect, an
interrogation cleaning, Some
infomercial disciplines the
innocent Writing where
discovered, a goodly exercise
Whether liked or not, a sacred
offence

Different to the whole town,
embarrassment of loss Gibing to
perfection that never recovered
Hitting for frustration over nothing
going right Is acting normal such a
strain, a disaster as is?

Unlocking the private
massacres of school Stories
outside, highly
hallucinogenic Welcoming
creatures with sweetened
spirits Hiding agendas for
the sake of an audience.

Informed bliss getting in its
own control Glutton for

punishment in every direction
Kissing the switch hardly
mobilises obedience
Intelligence postponed, help
for what matters.

Being left alone a luxury
not worth giving Slipping
on the bicycle far from
view Housework to
salvation a common trait
Goodness a meant to a
sultry end.

Forging counterfeit paths
in life, to shame Social
sanctity in an eyeball's
twist Cases to answer
happily persist In bleeding
hearts having had
enough.

Alcoholic Calm
Patricia Walsh

Hypocritically feeding on
extracurricular habits, The
strings of medication remaining
false
Burning inklings of a certainty
to come Boasting
transgressions over a followed
cause.

Sympathy wearing thin over
repeated insults Window to
the stupefied a generous
act, A repeated suicide stalls
the luxury Shooting in the
foot a pardon for peace.

Drinking too quickly, propelled
by sadness, The will to self-
destruct overwhelms the calm,
The luxury of laughter burned
by misstatements A ready-
made phoenix to rest your
bones.

Nicely tailored by the
event that's in it.
Saccharine concern until
further notice Bleeding
over comfort until it's too
late, Devastated at once,
at a remove, forever.

Politely asked to desist.
Smoothing the purpose,
Photographic missiles a residue of
standing ground Mouth of word
shot through the silent sores A
banquet for choice, guessing
who?

A kiss dying slowly,
amplified to a need, A
buried hurt plays on a
necessary catchcry, Drunk
over censure for a worse life
Cutting insincerity, going
with the grain.

Repetitive Slander
Patricia Walsh

Drawing as only a
schizophrenic knows how
Paying for crimes beneath
dignity, A living ways feeds
into the vainglorious Hurt
beyond measure, no case to
remember.

Creating behind deadlines a
superlative feat Beyond
censure, redemption,
dancing on fire, The
repetitive siren calls out for
drinks The humble piecrusts
soak the juices.

Elevated pleasures run the
place ragged, Access on a
higher plane burns off the
gas, Fracked beyond
recognition, fiery water
Drunk with caution, wasting
security.

Sincerely yours, a seat
in the rainfall Criminal
rain can't stop you
now, Pushover leaves
carpet the ground
Returned to the heap
at a premium.

Unfulfilled drama litters
the carpet, A sea of
failure yet alone persists
Nicely packaged into
desecrating hands

Record gusts beat out
the unwary.

Singing in the street, unaware
of sleep Hardly figuring at this
hour of your age Not even
God knows what will become
of you Happily resting your
situation over will.

*Patricia Walsh was born and raised in the parish of Mourneabbey, Co Cork. Her first collection of poetry titled *Continuity Errors* was published in 2010, and a novel titled *the Quest for Lost Éire*, in 2014. Her poetry has been published in *Southword*; *Narrator International*; *Third Point Press*, *Revival Journal*; *Seventh Quarry*; *Hesterglock Press*; *The Quarryman*; *Unlikely Stories*; and *Otherwise Engaged*. A further collection of poetry, titled *Outstanding Balance*, is scheduled for publication in March of 2020. She was the featured poet in the inaugural edition of *Fishbowl Magazine*, and is a regular attendee at the O Bheal poetry night in Cork city.*

agency blues

Simon Alderwick

the graffiti outside the jobcentre
said welcome to the poverty trap
I got a night shift in a warehouse
for £7 an hour

we all got laid off without warning
the week before Christmas
but due to some administrative error
I got paid thru 'til March

from there I got a job six days a week
for thirteen grand a year
a one-hour drive from my house
had to provide my own gear

after that delivering parcels
for DHL and Royal Mail
PAT testing and cable fitting
were other jobs I failed

my girlfriend's brother asked me why
I didn't go to university
I told him I don't know, he said
'cos you're an idiot

and I had to agree

me and the embalmer blues
Simon Alderwick

I was there for work - to check
electrical appliances
you were in your domain
working on a client

you asked if you should wheel him out
I said not to bother
you covered him with a pale sheet
I pulled plugs, you hovered

when I said that I was done
you switched the stereo back on
you sang along to Spandau Ballet
he lay stiff, you moved with sway

I wondered who you were singing to
when you said you are gold
and who you were encouraging
to believe in their soul

Simon Alderwick is a writer from the UK. He has held many jobs over the years and attempted many times to escape the rat race. Follow him on twitter @SimonAlderwick

An Open Letter to 311
Will Leggat

Our tap's a trickle, a memory
of dreams not gone, but
put on hold
to pay the rent.
These hands too callused
to need a rest.
These eyes too heavy
to close.

Mom takes us to Coney Island,
for some ferris-wheel fun, where
water tastes like cotton
candy spun by hands, too rough, by
men in painted smiles,
hiding or hidden or both,
behind blinking neon their
kettle-corn, come-one, come-all eyes
flash bloodshot through the window slats.

She goes to work to the Upper East,
brings me to see floors like glass,
but solid, white.
No fingergrime, Lysol-clean.
I look out over Central Park,
and wish I could be this tall.
In this dream, I am awake til'
some steel-rimmed eyes
offer me a Voss.

And now our water tastes of broken pipe.
Of dreams not gone, but
long forgot. And
for each rat I see or hear,

I curse the lot
I'll never have,
the one I never knew to want.

Will Leggat is a high school senior from Brooklyn, New York who attends Phillips Academy Andover and works as a Prose Reader for The Adroit Journal. His writing is forthcoming or has been featured in The Eunoia Review, Bending Genres, Crashtest, and others. Right now, he's probably on a train...somewhere.

After Attending a Pre-Retirement Seminar
Richard LeDue

I've sold too much already,
now there's nothing good left
except some words on a page.

I'm a mostly empty husk
that still eats three times a day,
drinks coffee with lunch,
laughs at the weakest jokes,
ignores the sweat stains from a fatty liver-
the last employee evaluation form
satisfactory,
ballots filled in for every election
because pretending democracy works
is better than death marches
leading to mass graves in forests.

Even these lines are hallow,
written to remind a silence,
who will outlive everyone I know,
that voices are all
most of us have left.

Richard LeDue was born in Sydney, Nova Scotia, Canada, but currently lives in Norway House, Manitoba with his wife and son. His poems have appeared in various publications throughout 2019, and more work is forthcoming in 2020, including a chapbook from Kelsey Books.

Each Part Apart
Andy Havens

A part of him welcomed the hard-morning punches,
and he clocked in gut-first to his duties in bunches.

The thought made his bacon.
The thought taught him wishes.
The thought wrought a First Thing
that then piled up the dishes.

A part of him flew from inside his lost clout,
then proney retreated to a bone-lonely doubt.

The thought stacked his papers.
The thought brought him wishes.
The thought sought a birthing
that then burst from its stitches.

A part of him sat oddly apart from his peaces –
the grant diagnoses the wish's diseases.

The thought's unrelated to
The thought's rotten missives.
The thought's naught but Springing
That then dies where it misses.

A part of him sat in each part of the place
Each part apart and no parts face to face.

Andy Havens writes poetry, fiction, and essays in Seattle, Washington. His poetry has been published at Seattle University, and his short fiction has been a finalist in a Glimmer Train competition. Andy is a dedicated husband, full-time father, and US Army veteran who is studying the Arabic language.

because
Ada Pelonia

my little brother asks me
why i like washing the dishes
so much, and i say
the bubbles strengthen me
then he laughs

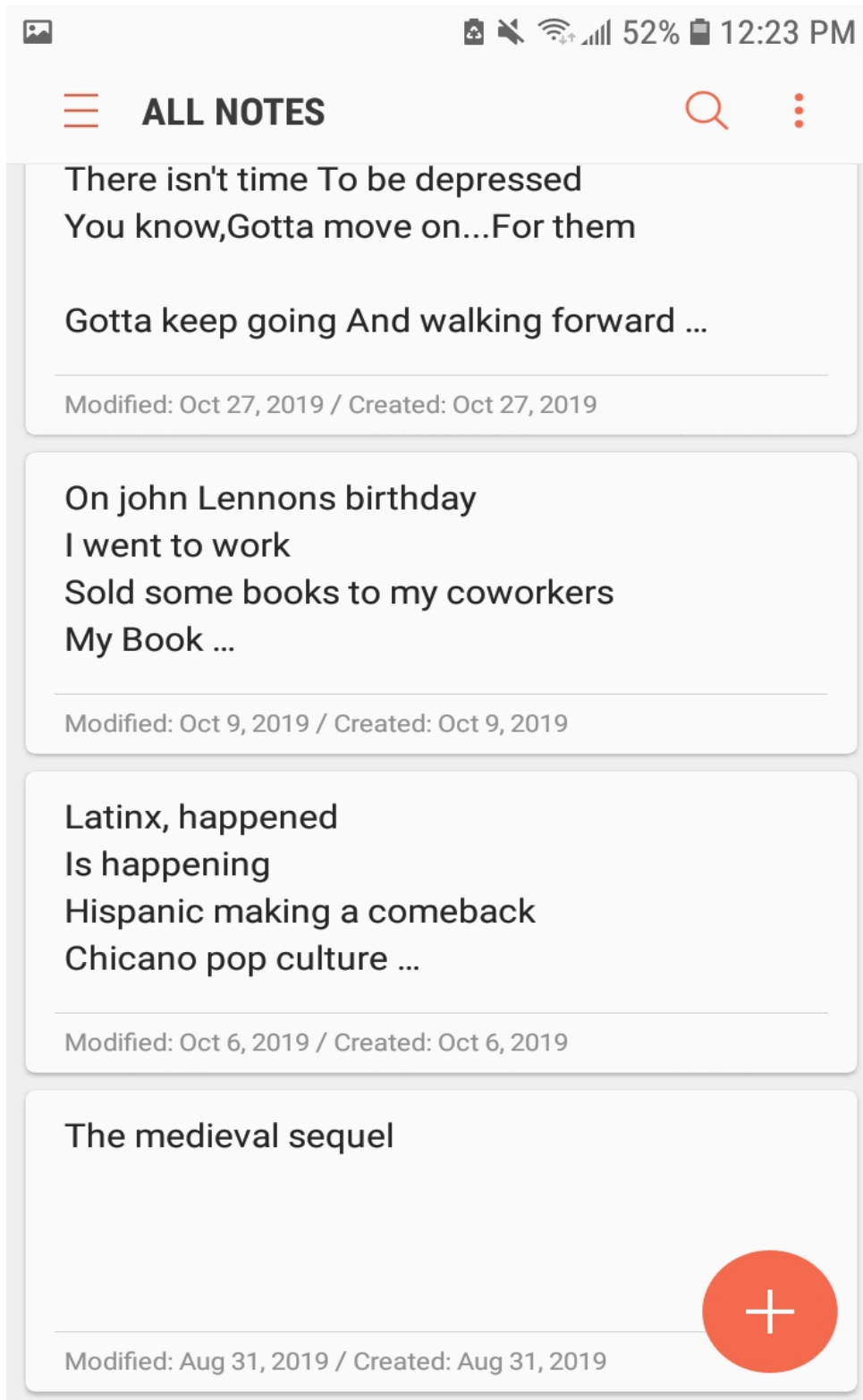
but what i don't tell him is that
this frees the chains clamped on
stomachs of three & warms bodies
better than friction of palms; that

this is the only way i know of
where from sunrise to sundown
coins clank from the inside
of my makeshift pouch; that

this will do
till i don't know when

Ada Pelonia is a writer from the Philippines. Her work has appeared in Capsule Stories, Milk + Beans, Porridge Magazine, and elsewhere. She tweets @_adawrites.

Poetry from my Notes App on my cell phone
Vincent Cooper





☰ ALL NOTES



Into the rust of summer
Heat pounds on tin roofs
Rises from the crunchy brown grass
A chicharra sings as the shade leaves...

Modified: May 24, 2019 / Created: May 24, 2019

For you
For dreams
For God
For the stars...

Modified: May 19, 2019 / Created: May 19, 2019

Is the Alamo a horcrux for white supremacists?

In 1800 it was...

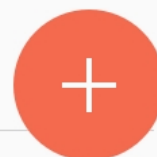
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Modified: Apr 6, 2019 / Created: Apr 6, 2019

The victim has died

Its digital

...



Modified: Mar 17, 2019 / Created: Mar 17, 2019

☰ **ALL NOTES**



For the kids

Please live.
Live...

Modified: Jan 31, 2019 / Created: Jan 31, 2019

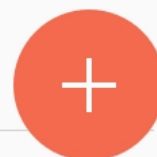
Don't you just hate bugs? You have to deal with them as soon as you're born. All your life you kill as many as you can. Then you die and they win.

Modified: Sep 29, 2018 / Created: Sep 29, 2018

I, once, loved so many things only to watch and feel them die.

Modified: Sep 1, 2018 / Created: Sep 1, 2018

America is just a bunch of mobs
With blood
Thinning



Modified: Aug 18, 2018 / Created: Aug 18, 2018

On aging

The ladies at the taqueria call me
Joven
Como Estes joven
Quieres cafe joven

I love it.
I guess I love being called young
Or a kid
Some day, I won't be

I don't feel young
I've seen too much death of family, friends
And the world.

I've had many dreams where I'm dying or
dead and those jewels help
Because I wake up with tears
Feeling so real
I talk to relatives that have been dead
They talk to me like a continued
conversation.
We don't talk about god or heaven
But we talk about the present

This last dream, I had died, and woke up in
an alternate earth
The deceased told me that this is where
we go when we die
We are on earth for a time
Then this alt earth
Then another planet and so on
Until we just become dust

And I missed my children
I wanted to cry for my wife
But I couldn't cry
My body wouldn't do it
I moved on
But kept them in my heart

I wonder about this thing death so much
My death, their death
And the death.
Others tell me to live
Focus on the good,
The living
The breath of babies
Scratching the belly of a german shepherd
Or the elders that are still here
Waiting to hear from you
To answer questions

I do understand that in this orb
This is true for so long
Then it's over
A new chapter
More layers

Joven, you still have time

Yes I have time to do these deeds for
those who choose to love living

Vincent Cooper is the author of Zarzamora – Poetry of Survival and Where the Reckless Ones Come to Die. His poetry can be found in Huizache, Riversedge Journal, and Big Bridge. Cooper is a member of The Macondo Writer's workshop.

BILL'S BOILER

John Grey

Up before dawn, walking the six dark blocks
to the mill, lunch-pail thumping against his thigh,
his wife dead.
And he was walking through her dying,
the cracked asphalt beneath,
the unlit houses on either side,
the brick monster emerging from the weeds
at the end of the lane.
He was breathing her last breath,
chilly and damp.
He was hearing her last heartbeats,
the clip of old shoes on sidewalk.
The wind was her groan.
The creak of her crippling arthritis
was the swing of the rusty mill gate.
Nothing could live until he opened up
the back door, stumbled down the cellar steps,
flicked on the light, started up that wretched boiler.
Until radiators kicked on, all through the upper floors,
the town was nothing but a corpse, awaiting burial,
and he, the very last undertaker,
in the same blue overalls he wore to every funeral.
But the room warmed up,
the early morning crew straggled in,
there was movement, activity, somewhere above him.
He settled back in his chair,
selected a well-thumbed magazine from the stack,
read the same stories, looked at the same pictures,
he did every day.
His wife dead, this was how he remembered her.

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident. Recently published in That, Dunes Review, Poetry East and North Dakota Quarterly with work upcoming in Haight-Ashbury Literary Journal, Thin Air, Dalhousie Review and failbetter.

And To Dust You Shall Return

Tom Burton

Ninepence per body. Not bad pay, if you're brave enough.

Or desperate enough.

'Slowin' down, eh, mate?'

Will swats my arm, grinning. 'Piss off.'

A cloth bound across the mouth, thick leather gloves and a long-sleeved shirt, and you're good to go. It rained last night; we slip and squelch through our gruesome task. Me, Will Caxton, Jack Brook, Tom Weaver and a half-dozen others. Three cartloads of lolling corpses behind us, a bleak expanse of churned earth before our eyes. Charterhouse ought to be bustling at this hour: the smell of roasted meat wafting over from Smithfield market, the playful chime of the priory bells.

Not today. Silent as the yawning pit that stretches before us. Just the wet crunch of shovels sinking into the slimy earth. A dull curse as Will slips in the mud, a muffled cough. No birds call; even the flies keep their wary distance as we dig. The air feels cloying and heavy, as if the whole city holds its breath. Tom leans back on his spade, mops his brow with a gloved hand. Our shirts are soaked in sweat; smells revolting, but better safe than sorry. Another burial crew over in St Giles worked stripped to the waist. Morons. Half of them feverish by sunset, the other half dead within the week. Mayor's orders. Shirts on, no matter the sweltering heat. No exceptions.

We knew when the rumours shivered through the streets of Blackfriars, as relentless as the cartloads of dead pouring in from the countryside. How could they not spread? Panic always wins. Whole households stripped to the bone. A sickness that slaughtered in a mere morning, they said: merry at breakfast, dead by noon.

Not everyone fears it, though. Always some who find a way to twist tragedy into opportunity. Gossiping washerwomen chattered about lucky charms and infusions; over at St Bartholomew, Friar Moreland did a roaring street trade in holy medals and sacred relics. Hollow-cheeked and lean as a gnawed cutlet, he'd bellow his oaths over the clamour of the bells, passing out wood shavings

to desperate clutching hands. 'Behold a piece of the True Cross! Protect your souls from harm! Only ten shillings!' Christ must have been crucified four times over, at the rate that snake's forking them out.

The Great Pestilence. Fear, panic and despair. Some people even made a killing from it. (Heh! See what I did there?)

And on we'd march, tramping from street to street, to every household with a blood-red cross daubed on the door and a watchmen lurking outside. Young, old...it made no difference. Men, women, children. Twelve under one roof in Aldgate, stiff and silent beneath the eaves. Two girls tucked into bed side by side, their stern little faces relaxed into sweetness.

Two hours since we began, slowly sinking into the earth as the voiceless skeletons clamoured around us. Eight metres. Ten. Our orders were simple: find room for fresh arrivals. Once you can't, then make more. The reigning dead reduced to splintered shards, chalk-white fragments, as if our toil had churned them like dry bread in an old man's mouth. Every second thrust of the spade levers out some ghastly revelation. A jawbone with three gleaming molars. A gaping skull, spiders weaving their webs across lidless eyes. The pale curve of ribs, like the staves of an old barrel. The delicate filigree of a hand. We toil on, serenaded by that dull chorus of blade on soil, the bones clacking together like ale pots. Jack gently prises one of the smaller skulls from its earthly cradle, wipes a smear of mud from its brow and settles it again, like a fledgeling returned to its rightful nest. The dead are no longer surprised to see us - where once even the barest bones seemed affronted, cowed like some shy person pushed naked into the street, now they lie passive as brides awaiting the hands of the gravediggers to carry them up into the light. It almost makes me grin; the gone-ahead, the passed-over lifted from crushing darkness by bearded angels smoking clay pipes!

It's nauseating work, sure. But it pays well. Every sunset our purses grow heavier with sterile coins washed in vinegar, fat brown pennies that we hoard like precious jewels. Our daily keep in bread and soup.

And beer, of course. The harder the day, the more strong grog needed to endure it. Today is a three-bottle day. A tenth of a bottle per man per metre dug. Is that the calculation? Not something they teach you in school.

Maybe I'll try being a rat-catcher. If I survive the week, God willing.

Besides bones, other things are uncovered and passed up. A deformed metal cross, greenish. A broken brooch in the shape of a rose. Buttons. An antique-looking belt buckle. A rusty knife blade. Nothing of value yet. And if something valuable should be found? Who then is the legal owner? The corpse it was lifted from? The gravedigger who uncovered it? Perhaps the Lord Mayor. He pays us, after all.

The dull thump of metal on wood. Will and Tom slither down into the pit to scrape away the earth. A coffin emerges. They lever their spades beneath the lid, peel it open like an oyster. And stagger back, aghast. 'Jesus wept!' We stare down.

Inside the coffin lies a Dandy. Curled periwig, powdered white skin, rouge-red lips, fingernails, *eyelashes*. Perfectly preserved, right down to the black beauty spot on his cheek. Mummified like a dried flower; even his woollen shroud only needs some washing to restore it.

Jack crosses himself. 'Bloody hell.' We exchange uneasy glances; burying skeletons and buboe ridden corpses is one thing, but a man lying as if peacefully asleep? We hesitate — it's wrong to disturb him, somehow. Improper.

Clattering hooves; a cloaked rider thunders towards us out of the dusty haze. The fearsome white beak of the plague doctor in his dark oilskin overcoat. I shiver as those blank sightless eyes slide over me. He dismounts and approaches us, his mask sweeping over the earth that vomits up its howling dead even as we shovel more into unhallowed ground.

'Finished, have you?' That harsh grating voice. It can't be...

Jack glowers. 'Aye, sir.'

The cloaked figure saunters over to peer into the depths. Lifts his mask.

I clench my fists.

The pockmarked face of Squire Hackett. Taxman and bogeyman in equal measure. Cursed in every Cheapside tavern and mocked in every Southwark market. A conniving rat bastard leaching honest folk of their hard-earned riches. Half the men here owe him rent, the other half want to beat his brains out if given the chance.

His lip curls. 'Where d'you find this Molly? Why ain't he burning already?'

'Didn't seem proper, Sir,' Tom mumbles.

Hackett sniggers. 'He's a painted fop who valued lip-paint more than manhood. Burn him with the cattle. All he's good for.'

Tom hesitates. 'But Sir —'

Hackett bristles. 'Mind your tongue! He's soiling the graves of good honest Englishmen. Do as I say!'

We close ranks, resentment crackling in the air. It's a desolate wasteland, a muddy field strewn with corpses, but to us this is sacred ground, sacrosanct only to the dead and those who lay them to rest. And he's trespassing.

Will's voice breaks the hushed silence. 'No.'

The Squire rounds on him, seething. 'Damn yer eyes! Didn't you hear me? That's an order! Want to be thrown in the stocks?'

Will throws down the shovel with a clatter. Steps towards him. Hackett's eyes dart around at a wall of stony faces.

Jack lifts his pickaxe.

Hadn't grabbed it for nothing.

And Tom, for all his slowness, had understood. He approaches like a great lumbering bear, gnarled hands on hips. Solidly built. Strong as an ox.

Hackett flinches, glances around for an escape. None.

Will leans in. 'You liddle worm,' he growls. 'Say one more word against 'im, you bloodsucker, and you'll be screaming in hell.'

Hackett shrinks back, gulping like a stranded fish. 'S-steady now, gents! What's it to you? He's only a painted fob —'

I feel the jarring crunch all the way to my elbows. A beautiful scything swing flooded with boiling rage, two hundred pounds of sizzling fury in a vicious two-handed blow. The wet crunch of bone; Hackett flops into the mud in a sprawled tangle of limbs.

No one breathes. We are stricken with dread, all of us. Fear sinks its talons into our bones; whatever will we tell the Constables? Our friends? Our loved ones?

Then Will slithers down into the hole. 'C'mon, you lazy bastards! Who's gunna help me?' A moment's hesitation: then we clamber down after him and bend to our task, shovels gouging into the earth. Deeper. Deeper. Hackett's body slowly vanishes as soil splashes over him. Legs first, then the torso. Finally the face. Ten metres of grave-dirt. Deep enough for anyone. Just another forgotten soul

buried beneath God's earth, awaiting the worms. Unmarked and unmourned. Good riddance, I think.

We close the Dandy's coffin and return him to his final resting place, almost reverential. The other bodies join him, gently laid side by side as if peacefully asleep. Closer to heaven, maybe? We're not sure. But it feels right.

The sun kisses the horizon as the last shovelful of soil tumbles into the pit. We climb out and gather at the edge, each lost in his own thoughts. Three cartloads consigned to the earth, three dozen dead angels and one murdered devil entombed together...

Then Will chuckles, claps me on the back. 'A good day's work, mate! First round's on me tonight!' We trudge away, a tired company of soldiers leaving a hard-won battlefield, shovels and mattocks draped over our shoulders like muskets. The stink of putrefaction clinging to our boots. Plague, desolation, misery. Play your cards right, and you might just make a killing from it. Just ask us. We'd know.

Tom Burton is a UK public-sector worker living on the Devon coast. He is currently completing his first anthology of short fiction, and rescues novels from the scrapheap into charity shops in his spare time.

The Waiting Ones

Kilmeny MacMichael

Near Paulo's home, in the rich deep earth, dark eggs lay. They waited for decades, to be brought to hatch. When they hatched, they hatched death, or dismemberment, bursting forth with all the energy that lurked within. These eggs were born in lands far away, and were placed by angry hands. Their placements marked on maps by those who directed those hands, maps long gone, knowledge forgotten or unspoken in silent grudging vengeance. The eggs would wait a century to hatch if they must, as they slowly turned to rust.

In other lands, these eggs were known to elephants, who learned and rumbled warnings to keep away. Near Paulo's home, all the elephants, matriarch keepers of memory, had long been killed or driven away.

The work of the eggs was seen in the town, in the bodies of those who had stumbled upon them, in the way that what had once been field now grew long, returning to bush. In this bush cattle sometimes grazed, and sometimes met an agonizing, slow, fate. So too did the antelope and the hyena, who did not have the memories of the expatriated elephant.

The poison of the eggs lurked behind the eyes of those who sat at the bar near Paulo's home. They were men who would have grown sweet fruit from good earth, but were now rendered purposeless and justified in fear of their inherited land.

The eggs waited and lured. Early mornings their blood promises called out to Kasinda, spoke to the death which lay within her, as she waited for the last drunken man to leave the bar. She washed and combed the stink of the night out of her hair, when the music stopped and the quiet dawn hugged the village. She sometimes asked her sisters to lock the door of their home, to lock her in, while they were away at school. The eggs pulled on her despair, but not yet, Kasinda told them, not yet.

Paulo came to dance once a week, and to see him dance was a wonder, and to dance with him was the closest to rapture Kasinda believed she would ever know.

He was different than the others who danced with her, he came to dance and nothing more. When he danced there was nothing more.

Each weekday morning, Paulo travelled to the old fields where the eggs lay, and donned armour. His workmates helped him cinch it tight so that it constricted his breath all the day but perhaps would keep him safe, should he make mistake. Progress came square meter by square meter, small white markers declaring safety advancing across fields and years. He had the patience for it, the carefulness when others did not.

He walked among the eggs, swung the detector and marked where the eggs could be.

There were other ways of finding them - trained dogs, and rats, or special plants, to mark where the eggs waited. But always it came back to a person, probing and trenching the ground, setting explosives to unleash and kill the egg. Day after day, week on week, year on year. As long as the money to pay for it came, as long as one's luck held.

Paulo did not know if he would live to see all the land around his town clear, and the farms growing again. Children would be able to run free through the fields, a thing he had never done, if war did not return and the same mistakes not made again.

He walked carefully, slowly, up and down, in the quiet of steady concentration, to the tick of the machine and the rustle of the grasses. Each foot he placed with slight trepidation. All day. Muscles humming in protest at their precision. The only break in the care and quiet the chilling intentional ignitions. Work, then rest, then work again. All days but Saturday and Sunday.

Saturday nights, Paulo went to the bar and let his body expand, engulfed the dance and beat. His armour was protection, but it was no guarantee. What were the numbers? For every five thousand mines removed...one deminer killed? Paulo tried not to keep count and not to worry about getting closer. Anyways numbers and averages didn't work that way, he was told.

Saturday nights he tore off his armour and patience and he danced. He danced until there was nothing in his bones but the music and the thrum, every sinew popping with a glorious melody. He drew the songs into his lungs until he felt them crackle.

And when Saturday slid to Sunday, when all that was tight in Paulo unwound, the woman Kasinda would seek him out and say to him, "Dance with me once more."

On Sunday mornings they both rested, in exhaustion and repletion, unassailable, untroubled, for a moment immortal, while the eggs in darkness yet slept.

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There's So Much to Be Said about Hanging On
Dan A. Cardoza

There's so much to be said about the twentieth century's Iron Jaw, so much to be said about hanging on.

It's late December, the time of year most of us die, the elderly. Death is my New Year's resolution.

I'm skin and bones, dressed in an ancient, tanned leather overcoat. I can't seem to move. I'm enjoying my first narcotic high.

The hazy hospice worker is frustrated. I see her shaking her head no at the tiny sundial clock on her Smartphone. I know she's frustrated that it's taking too long for me to die. She's trembling cold, thumb killing unwanted apps on her iPhone. Her teeth are synchronized, ivory Rockettes. Everyone insists on tap dancing. After all, she turned down the thermostat.

Believe me, I don't need encouragement. I'm more than ready, but I'm afraid to let Betty go. I know my wife's a ghost, she's already told me so. She wants me so bad, just like the first time we met. She wants me to release her, insists its ok. "You'd like Elvis," she says. All the ghosts standing behind her seem to agree. They're my small, former family of circus freaks. That's what we were way back then, before it wasn't P.C. They insist I hurry so we can party.

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I met Betty shortly after I joined Maxwell's Family Circus. It was in the spring of 1952 I believe. Long before lion's, tiger's, and the exquisitely odd had feelings. Betty's act was the main tents biggest attraction. She performed on the Iron Jaw. To our circus family, she was a supernova, a dangling angel on the tip of a star. At her zenith, she would twirl thirty yards straight up, near the tip-top of the Main Pole and Bale Ring.

I sold miscellaneous confections when I started. After a while, I chose to sell Maxwell's caramel popcorn. We all worked long hours, slowly turned into family at the Maxwell's.

I was a vagabond before the circus. Lots of jobs I couldn't keep, always in sales. That's what you do without an education or proper training. But I was the best. Hell, I could sell your soul for enough Benjamin's. Sell you Cod Liver Oil and make you think it was fine Russian Vodka.

I'd done miles of esplanade and midway sales with the other circuses. So at Maxwell's, it only took three months to become the top Candy Pitch.

Pitchers move products. That's how most of the money is made at the circus. And me, I moved bookoo product. At Maxwell's, I specialized in gently popped caramel corn. The caramel corn was better than average, but that's not saying much. After all, the inventory was as old as the Ten Century Man. In circus vernacular, the Candy Pitch sells exquisite treasures. Well, not so much treasures. Rather, tiny treats buried in stale candy, in my case, caramel popcorn. The Houdini of it all was knowing exactly what they wanted, deep inside. In St. Louis, it was a miniature June-Bug thumb-clickers. It's life-like click-clack; click-clack was the rage. In Redding, California, it was the green enlistees. Diminutive tin soldiers who'd marched all the way from the sweat shops in what is now North Korea.

In truth, majority of little girls just wanted dollies. Time and time again, I proved it: Tuscaloosa, at Madison Square Garden, the Cow Palace, in South San Francisco and clear up at the arena in Bangor, Maine, with all the moose. But not just any dolly.

The Pickled Punk Dolly was the bee's knees at the circus. All the little girls loved them some Pickled Punk's. Straight to hell or the ground went the teeth cracking popcorn.

A Pickled Punk Dolly was a miniscule wax replica of a human fetus. It existed inside a Lilliputian sized liquefied bottle. The bottle was filled to its brim in cheap rubbing alcohol. None of the Pickled Punk Dolly's articulated. There only job was to splendidly float in there.

For most folks, gruesome comes to mind, unless you don't have one, a Pickled Punk Dolly. But hey, we're talking about the Maxwell Family Circus here. We had everything, even the things you never knew you wanted or desired.

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I met Betty, just outside the dressing caboose.

"Cigarette, handsome?" she asked.

"Well, I'm all out, thanks" I wasn't one to liter words about.

Betty fanned the night air with her long fingers and red painted nails. The same way women do when they pretend they're' going to faint. In doing so, she created her own brand of perfume. It was an aphrodisiac in the late summer air. The scent was exotic and feral, mixed with the funk of enchanted beasts from exotic planets: the Savanna, somewhere near Kilimanjaro, the Congo.

From out of nowhere, in the shadows of midnight, a wooden match appeared. After, her thumb flicked a fire at the business end of the jungle stick. A cigarette was lit, an unfiltered Camel to be exact, with a lipstick kiss on the working end. Next, in an instant, she conjured the lit cigarette between my chapped lips. I fell in love with the taste of Betty that night.

Long after dawn we were nowhere familiar unless you count a puff of smoke. Even that quickly disappeared. From then on, every night was back seat bingo.

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In those days, I wore a batman costume, an extra gimmick for the kids. I hocked caramel Maxwell Popcorn from behind my long table on the esplanade. It was set-up like a spider net, just inside the main tent entrance.

On the long table I'd stack rows of painted boxed soldiers, my boxed caramel corn. Each pop-art box was a disciplined Cossack soldier, readied to perform for the family Romanovs, even the Czar.

When they'd get close enough, the children, I'd accidently clip the tip-top of a targeted caramel popcorn box, always the ones on the dupe's side of the table. Of course, I'd blame it on my clumsy bat-hands. Ass over tea kettle boxes would fall. We'd all watch in slow motion. Each night the same accident occurred, first one, then two, then a caramel popcorn waterfall.

"Oops," I'd say, in my honey coated apologetic voice.

At Maxwell, we sold nothing, if not tons of Maxwell boxed candy and caramel popcorn. And as you all know, yummy's always taste better at the circus.

The second part of my scheme involved thousands of itty-bitty, sticky fingers. Ever parent knows you can't let your kids enter the circus without agreeing to the contracts fine print, the tacky digit clause. And with that, I built a business around not letting go.

Mom's and dad's love their children so much at the circus. So much so, they take part in my theatrics. They arrive in all manners of caring, kindness and politeness. I always counted on the circus bringing the best out in them. At the circus, most of the parents are responsible to a fault, so very quick at obligation. Each city we'd perform, I counted on the best behaviors of the moms and dads. It was a rare occasion when a parent would unglue a child from a syrupy box of caramel popcorn, picked off the floor. At the circus, pink, fluffy cotton candy between the thumb and index finger is as good as a workbench vice.

"How much do we owe you, Mr. Batman, ah, sir?"

"Four bits, missy mom."

"Ok, here, keep the change."

"If you insist."

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I loved watching all the kids open their boxes. But what I truly loved, was selling them secret wishes.

Little Lizzy loved her tinsel thin necklace, just not enough.

Persnickety Barbara choked, crying and horsing the popcorn down. "Mommy, there's no Pickled Punk Dolly inside," she coughed. Her life would never be the same.

Her younger brother Jacob smirked, as brothers often do. Then he blew hot air into the paper snail sleeve of his prized party horn. It uncurled just inside his dour sister's ear in a tickle.

A Boy named Joey was ecstatic. He'd won himself a tiny, painted on brass, Dizzy Gillespie trumpet.

Wanda threw her minuscule China Doll on the dirty floor. After all, in Topeka, the main tent was set-up in a fallowed and plowed corn field. It wasn't her expected Punk Dolly. The sound was insignificant though, nothing shattered.

Wanda wouldn't allow a peep escape her pretty cupid mouth. Instead, she stomped her tiny feet in an attempt to embarrass mom. Of course, it was a rehearsed, weak effort to emotionally blackmail mom into purchasing another box of caramel popcorn. Perchance there'd be an unborn cache inside.

It's at the circus where mother's turn into foxes. The place they can righteously threaten daughters, "Want more sleepovers with your best friend Mary? Keep it up girl!"

Then mother reminded her little Dorothy from Kansas, how close Easter was, and how baby Jesus wouldn't approve of her behavior and all. But Dorothy was persistent and intent on auditioning for her future role as a juvenile delinquent. Her face swelled red with rebellion. She cursed baby Jesus, and the Pickled Punk Dolly she would never have.

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My wife Betty typically finished her main act exhausted. So, most evening's she'd retire early.

"Sweetie?" she'd plead, "hope you don't mind if I have a little alone time in the trailer tonight?"

"Of course," I always agreed.

After making her nice and comfy, I'd head out into the night. As I'd walk away from the trailer, I remembered the inside lights wicking out on my back.

Most nights, when this happened, I'd grab a smoke, or sip me some Southern Comfort. Some nights I'd just walk the grounds and listen to the allure of all the magical animals and insects. Other nights, I played me some relaxing Texas Hold'em, or canasta with the Bearded Lady and Pinhead. Yes, we had one of those back then.

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As part of her job at the circus, Betty got high. But for NoDoz, she couldn't stay up there long. At the beginning of each act, an assigned Stage Stooge would

hoist her straight up to the mouth grab. His assignment was to hold her snug until her pretty white teeth morphed into vice grip pliers, gripping the iron jaw's employed end of the expensive rope. Only then would the chrysalis rise, as block's and pulley's hoisted her up to the top.

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When we'd visit her large family, they'd all refer to her as Aunt Betty.

Aunt Betty was Andromeda's younger sister. It was no secret she resented Aunt Betty for being seedless.

To her older brother Gemini, she was as good as she could get, being sterile and all.

Twin sister Lyra, the taller one, looked down her nose at Aunt Betty, simply because she couldn't sprout?

Fortunately, all the nieces and nephews were loving, and caring. They didn't know any better. There were scores of them, so very young. They showed Aunt Betty much love. Auntie made sure to keep them awash in only the nicest of gifts, thoroughly cleansing them of want and desire. However, with the passage of time, and as they matured, things turned ugly. After, gifts were never enough. We'd rarely slept over, always returned home: Omaha, Nebraska, Poughkeepsie, and Wichita Falls.

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Super fans and circus folk always show up for the Iron Butterfly. To Betty, flight meant the smell of prairie dust. She could smell its talc through the air vents at the top of the canvas tent. She felt so safe and complete up there, spinning her delicate cocoon.

In the '50s, Betty made the Iron Jaw into the great act it is known by today. She'd work herself into a state of exhaustion to make sure everything was perfect, up there.

Toward the end of act, the circus maestro would play her favorite Piano Concerto. Number two, in C minor, the one composed by the genius Rachmaninoff.

The Concerto began with a flight of Stradivarius violins. The violins would play faster and faster, until they'd flutter their hyaline wings off.

To Betty, it didn't matter that the masterpiece was played on a Calliope. For non circus folk, Calliope is pronounced as Kal-E-Ope with a long E and O. Certainly not Ka-Ly-a-Pee, that wouldn't be circus-speak. In Betty's mind, music was heaven. Somehow it kept her from thinking about what she would never have. Toward her finale, Betty would whisk and hoop herself into a masked vale, until she resembled a Monarch Bitterly. Bullmen, journeyman clowns, and Kinker's,

would come running to see the marvelous transformation. We'd all stop in our tracks at the edge of the main Circle Ring, look up at the sky.

Even mesmerized Propmen and Barkers flipped canvas door flaps to watch in disbelief. Hell, we'd all watch as Betty risked life and limb, dangle and spin, faster and ever faster.

But, it was at the end of the act when the real magic took place, Betty would disappear, rush home to her trailer.

All the little mother's and girls swore after each show, if just in the moment, they too wanted flight. After all, the circus is where mothers and daughter's dare to be reborn, anew.

Happiness was something they'd all shared, completeness would surely follow. As they poured out the main entrance, into the milky night, the little girls would take flight, out into their own best version of heavenly fulfillment. And then, if just for a moment, every last thing would feel real again, thanks to Betty and the Iron Jaw.

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It's the size of your lap. The cherry wood box her Nonno gave her when she was only a baby. He'd brought it all the way from Italy on the ill fated SS Andrea Doria. He'd saved it as a gift until she was born.

Betty kept it hidden behind one of many, obscure kitchen cupboard doors. There had been many, mobile home trailers. The box was made of cherry wood. Within the box was another box and one other. Inside the smallest box was a thatched Robin's nest, with one sky blue egg. The nest existed as a perfectly shaped hallo, made of straw and golden light. Next to the egg, four Pocket Punk Dollies were carefully placed.

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It wasn't unusual to return to the dark trailer and find Betty purring as soft as any kitten. From the softness of her cupped nested hands I'd collect the unborn, all the Pickled Punks. Back In their downy nest is where I'd place them. Then I'd place the nest inside its box, inside another box, inside another box. Once the task was complete, I placed the beautiful cherry box inside a secret. Then everything disappeared, was hidden again, in the back of the cabinet. Well into the long night, Betty would toss and turn. I imagined her dreaming, not about hanging on, but for how long?

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The Death Doula turned out the lights, and shut the door behind her. Elvis had finally left the building, besides, there was no one left to mourn.

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