University of Strathclyde

Creative Writing Studies

PhD Thesis

‘It’s No Real Pleasure in Life’: The Grotesque in Southern Gothic and Beyond

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Contents

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Abstract

This PhD thesis is comprised of a collection of linked short stories 'whose characterisation and themes situation it in a modern gothic tradition that spans the anglosphere, particularly American Southern Gothic literature, and an accompanying critical reflection on the writing process and associated works.

The short story cycle focuses on the blighted town of Shawkirk, a fictional area in the West of Scotland marked by woods, moorland and decay. A discovery in an abandoned church sets a ripple of unease throughout the townsfolk, and impacts their lives to varying degrees, from the mildest of rumours to the explosion of animalistic savagery. Above the escalating Gothic drama, the church sits waiting in a harsh natural landscape, a totem of the ugly past that claws into the present.

The critical reflection examines the composition of the short story cycle, and the implications of taking inspiration from the Southern and other Gothic traditions – adaptation of cultural and historical context, the personal relationship to the Scottish conception of Gothic, and examinations of similar literary exchanges and evolutions in writing and folk tradition.

STORY CYCLE

I sall gae intil a hare,

Wi’ sorrow and sych and meikle care;

And I sall gae in the Devillis name,

Ay quhill I com hom againe.

- **Isobel Gowdie**

Discontent is a luxury of the well-to-do. If you’ve got to live here, you might as well like it.

– ***Wake in Fright***

Blue Label

Kirk-Alloway was drawing nigh,

Whare ghaists and houlets nightly cry

It's not so warm now, but his clothes are still carrying the damage, drooping with sweat. He unbuttons his shirt, feels the cold, buttons it, feels the heat. *One hand on the wheel.* His sinuses are throbbing, vibrating the course of his skull. *Because fuck you.* Davey plays with the radio, hears a song he's supposed to recognise as the summer's big hit. He nods to a chorus he doesn't know. *SAVINGS,* the radio tells him when it's finished singing. *WE KNOW HOW YOU LIKE IT. ARTISAN CAN BE CHEAP AT YOUR LOCAL-*

He catches the fag before it burns his fingers. He flicks it out the driver's window, turns it into another red light in the dark. *One hand on the wheel.*

He takes a moment to relish anonymity. Stealth. He remembers Karen's tales of unsolved mysteries and stops relishing. Stories of disappeared loved ones and bodies piled in barns. She loved how uneasy they made him. She loved seeing the hairs of his arm rise. *A farmer sees footprints in the snow,* she'd begin, and he'd have to kiss her to shut her up.

He stinks of chlorine. It burrows into him all day, rubs off in his house. His bedsheets might as well be made of solid bleach at this point. Not that he's going to have bedsheets much longer.

A song he used to love is selling couches. He pulls in at the pub early, parks on yellow lines beside bearded men suckling on e-cigarettes. The only one without a smoke recoils.

"Swimming pool," Davey says.

“As long as it’s the chlorine and not the shit, mate.”

He does clean shit. Pushes it out of the grooves in the tiles, slops it into waste buckets with the piss and the hair and half-eaten hot dogs oozing mustard. Toddler crap, and more adult crap than he ever expected.

He leaves the car unlocked, insurance fantasies smoothing his headaches. He feels the vapour from the e-cig settle on his ears.

No beggars here. He likes it. He’s not seeing his own future for a moment.

He needs Kestrel to be there first. He can’t buy his own drinks, and Kestrel seems to have heard. Kestrel with his shiny new teeth and Fossil wallet. Kestrel bringing up the old days at the distillery, what happened next, who’s gone where, who’s died. Kestrel who takes his kids to the same swimming pool and acts surprised to see an old friend. Kestrel with an agenda.

“You a lifeguard now aye?” Kestrel could see the mops, the nets; pretended otherwise.

“I’m only diving in for the drowning shits,” Davey said. “I’m the jani.”

“Mind whit the dinosaurs used tae say on The Flintstones: ‘It’s a living!’” Smiling, fixing his daughter’s armbands. Pupils in the corners of his eyes. “If you’re intae it, might have something extracurricular on the go. One-off, but decent money.”

Kestrel, outsourcing. Long chain of people who don’t know each other if they’re asked in the wrong way. Davey had done one before, kept watch while Kestrel knocked off an off-licence. Back in the distillery days. Back when Kestrel had grey teeth and no kids.

“I’ll think about it.”

“Tell ye whit Davey, write your number, put it through ma locker.” Kestrel tilted his wrist to show the digits on the rubber key-band. “Meet ye fir a pint and some Black Label.”

“I’m skint.”

“Business expense on ma part, pal.”

He put his number in the locker, as the PA screeched for RED BANDS TO LEAVE THE POOL NOW PLEASE. *It’s a living.*

And like he said he would be, Kestrel’s there in the pub, swollen knuckles strangling a whisky tumbler.

“Feels like a job interview, dunnit,” he says.

The place still smells of smoke, years on. The stale carpet rasps against soles. He looks for Karen, like she’s going to rise again. No women, just generational variants on the same drunk man.

“Never been here,” says Davey, stuck for an opening.

“It’s fair new tae me, only found it couple weeks back. What are you drinking?”

“You promised Black Label.”

Kestrel grins. Davey doesn’t like the way the mouth peels back over the teeth. “There’s our Davey. Was worried for a minute.”

A bartender brings them over. Davey notes it. They seem to know who Kestrel is.

“Ah, now Karen,” says Kestrel. “She said I only like whisky cause it’s like meat. She aways said that. Said it was alcoholic Bovril. Never knew what she was on about.”

It's the harshness of it, Karen had told Davey one night, tasting it on his breath. *Like you've just torn intae something.*

"Me neither," says Davey.

"I wis awfay sorry tae hear about her, mate."

"Aye. Me too."

Kestrel waits until the second and third tumblers have emptied. Neither of them goes near the bar. Expense account, Kestrel jokes. Then he leans forward.

"Mate, there's better work out there than jani work."

"One would fucking hope."

"I wis asked tae find some cunt fir a particular job and yer name came up. I'm a good fuckin reference."

Davey swirls an empty glass until Kestrel gets the gist. The bartender brings the bottle to the table and leaves it there.

"Naebody's brought my name up in years," says Davey.

"Aye, well." Kestrel picks at the table. "There's no many of us left."

"No." Three cancers, four heart-attacks, one car crash. "There's not."

"Well, anyway, it's nothing as dramatic as the shit we used tae do."

Fucking say it then.

“It’s a listed building. We’ve owned it fir three years-”

“We?”

“Aye, fair enough, I’m no that well aff that I’m buying up property. So, it’s been sitting empty, getting nice and rotten fir you.”

“Time fir it tae catch fire.”

“Exactly. And you being outside the chain of command so to speak. Not much ae a trail.”

“Unless they have an eye on ye, and start asking why yer meeting folk fae the auld plant.”

“It’s no illegal to have friends.”

Friends. “Why no get a wee bam or a pyro or something.”

“They’re deniable, but they aways get caught. Leave fucking evidence everywhere, usually leave a jobbie fir the polis to scan through the records.”

“You did that once.”

Kestrel laughs. “Aye, the newsagents. Christ, seventeen years auld. Wisnae exactly a mastermind. Just the excitement. You’ll no be getting like that.”

“Where is it?” Looking down, feeling where he’ll grip the can of petrol.

“Out in Shawkirk, out of sight. Past aw the big hooses and garden gnomes. Jist an overgrown chapel, eh.”

Davey knows Shawkirk from Karen's housing magazines. Fancy houses being eaten by greenery. She pointed at them from her hospital bed. *Pipe dream,* she said. Now they were kicking him out flats a tenth of the size.

"I dunno. It's dodgy – Shawkirk's awfay far out."

"Bus and train straight there," says Kestrel, too quickly. "The owner'll leave ye something to get ye started. You'll jist be an anonymous cunt wi some matches in his pocket."

ANONYMOUS CUNT, 58, BURNS TO DEATH. "I'm no sold Kes."

"I get it. It's been ages, yir used to things being as they are. Think about it – but promise tae actually think about it." Kestrel takes a pad from his coat, scratches down a number. He spins it to Davey on the table. "Don't say ye can dae without that in yer life."

It's a private number, for the two of them. Davey sees Blue Label running between poolside tiles.

"I'll call in the morning. Either way."

Kestrel, leaning across the table. "Davey, take the damn lifeboat. Ye don't have tae wait fir the council tae shut doon yer pool afore ye look for mair work. Don't repeat whit happened at the plant. The cunts in charge'll leave ye behind again."

"And your guy's better?"

BLACK BANDS LEAVE THE POOL NOW PLEASE.

*

Davey lies awake, sweating.

It's 1am when they text him saying he's not needed at the pool tomorrow. They forgot about him again. 'We're covered. Just the contract hours this week.' *Because fuck you.* He doesn't put up a fight. He smooths his thumbs over his cheekbones, presses down hard. Imagines the sinuses flushed clean. The bedroom air is sterile. He gets up and wades through the cold.

He's dreamed of Karen's book again. The unsolved mysteries, the urban legends. UFOs and men in rabbit costumes and murdered babysitters. Karen relishing the look on his face. Always that story about the barn – the dead, and no suspect.

A farmer sees footprints in the snow. They lead towards his house.

Beer can by the couch – thick, heavy, sweating. Must've had it in the freezer - left a cold puddle on the carpet, which he prods with a bare foot. Ice rattles inside. He sets it on the kitchen counter to defrost.

He breathes into his hand and tastes whisky. *Like you've torn into something.*

Kestrel's biggest problem was what to get his kids for Christmas. When the plant closed, he swanned out with bottles and bottles of Blue Label, the last use of his discount. He'd thrown a party, a send-off. Davey had gone home early, off with Karen. Kestrel gets out running, Davey gets out with his clothes and his cock. Always the same.

Always the same. Kestrel was right about the council. Davey started out cleaning the pool, the library and the council offices. The library was shut down, the council hired a private company for their office. The pool was dying slower. Fred Flintstone takes a shit, and the dinosaur swallows. *It's a living.*

Davey hits the computer, listens to it groan like an old greyhound. When the desktop's been on screen for twenty minutes, it's fully loaded. He signs into his online casino and wastes a tenner.

"That's half a fucking bottle of red label," he says, when the number winks out of life.

Cracks the beer, swallows it rancid and bubbling. Kestrel's his last friend left. Kestrel and the bottle of tile cleaner. He'd get a dog if he could afford one.

Karen swims up from a lonely church graveyard and the beer reacts.

Door, skid. Cubicle, flip the lid, retch. Keeping his knees grinding off the floor and

fuck

acid burning stink of fucking whisky

thighs –pain pain

and orange

coming out orange and still coming

groaning now, and the retching gets fainter. Wipes his eyes with free hand. Spits into the bowl. When it's over, he presses his hands to his throat, runs the gullet. No lumps. He's not coughing. Karen makes him check. She says not to go the same way as her.

And he wakes there at seven. And the phone isn't far away.

“Know what,” says Kestrel. “Indians aren’t aw that great. Know what they used tae do tae cunts they caught – not even soldiers, mind? Cut their cocks off, pour coal down their necks, scalp them. So much fir peace loving savages eh?”

“I want the job.”

“Aye, well, I assumed ye werenae callin about my Ken Burns, but I thought I’d fill ye in anyways.”

He takes the orders that follow. The petrol’s already there, waiting for him.

He’s the only sentient on the early morning bus. A man is harder to trace than a car. He is sandwiched between a fat student, passed out drunk, and Karen, who grins in the reflection. *But then,* she says to him, *the pool brings in customers. Maybe there’s money to keep you on.*

It’s too late for that. The bus radio screeches SAVINGS and it starts playing Erasure. The student groans in his sleep and starts muttering the words, lids straining to hold flicking, bulging eyeballs. He stinks of sweat. Of chlorine. Davey looks at the boy beside him, and the camera by the driver’s seat.

An old man hits the stop button by a diner in Pollokshaws. A three-pronged tree branch scrapes against the windows. Damp wood on plastic. Karen cringes at the squeal. The driver turns up Erasure until Andy Bell’s caged voice is shrieking in agony. Davey digs his fingers into the flesh underneath the student’s knee, out of sight, raking up. Bursting through the jeans.

The boy lurches forward, strikes his head on the seat in front. His eyes stay shut.

“Better hope this isn’t your fucking stop,” Davey says.

“She’s not for me,” says the student. Buckfast stains his mouth black.

Pollokshaws peels away from the bus. The tree branch screams don’t leave along the length of the vehicle. Davey checks his thumb. Jean denim is trapped under the nail. *Like you’ve just torn into something.*

“She’s not for me either mate,” Davey says.

The shops begin to disappear, identical houses in their place. Past a garage, he recognises the empty space where a spa once stood. It had been in the news, revealed as a brothel. Nothing but weeds and cavernous puddles now. *Torn into.* The houses get bigger; the trees thicker.

Shawkirk looks like Karen’s magazines at first. Commuter houses to lead a smug TV host around, to hold garden parties amid the topiary. That’s what he tells himself. Just the pictures in the magazines. Not the book of urban legends. The illustrations of strange men lurking on leafy roads.

“Do you ever forget your name,” he asks the student, “cause it’s been so long since anycunt said it?”

The student is out again. The seat in front is etching a red pattern into his face.

Davey thinks about Kestrel’s money, and the heat of a spreading fire. Money to further his existence. Money to fuel the engine. Another job, and another job after that. Kestrel goes on living. Davey’s life has been over for years.

“A farmer sees footprints in the snow,” he tells the boy. “They lead toward his hoose. But when he gets there, there’s nae visitors.”

Shawkirk main street, shops shuttered or boarded. Rotting bookies' with a to-let sign. Old ladies in cafes already, clustering at the window seats. Nothing for the housing magazines now.

"Nae visitors. Just his family, wondering where he's been. They've seen the footprints anaw."

The song fades out to the voice of a DJ promising EIGHTIES MUSIC ALL THE TIME. A fox struggles home in the daylight, scuttling out from the walls of a Kwik-Fit and down through a cracked and sunken car park.

"Noises take them out tae the barn, one by one. And the whole family is found stacked there, the week after, by neighbours. Neighbours who haven't seen them in a while. Took them ages to figure out something was wrong, cause some cunt had obviously been using the hoose. Killed them aw, made his dinner, read the paper and fucked aff. Into thin air."

The morning sun glints from the window of a shop. The student curls his head down lower. Davey picks his teeth, thinks of Kestrel lounging in a dark wood study. *The cunts in charge'll leave ye behind again.*

The houses start to thin out; the foliage only gets thicker. Shawkirk is coming to an end. Kestrel told him to stop at the roundabout. Davey squeezes the stop button until it shrieks. Leaves the student groaning in his seat. The driver doesn't speak, even when Davey tries 'cheers mate'. Steps out into the cold, watches the bus circle round and disappear up another winding street.

The houses at this point remind him of Burns' Cottage. Short, but stretched lengthwise with black winged roofs. *Like farmhouses.* Yellow grass stretching every way except back. Evergreen trees lined up, guarding Shawkirk's exit.

He nearly phones Kestrel, screaming he can't find the church. The dull black of an iron railing through the trees dissuades him. He tracks up along the main road for a while, searching for a way through. He finds none, doubles back, swearing. He looks suspicious. He doesn't dare look back at the windows. He pictures old men with one hand on the blinds and one on the phone. He leaves the road and heads through the overgrowth. The mud is deeper than he expects, and he makes his way through, balancing on the clumps of dying grass. He ducks under the trees, and is gone from the world.

The church gapes at him, windowless. Davey spits. His chest feels tighter than it should. What remains of the Black Label threatens to return. He can't manage the chain-like fence. He wanders around the warnings and Keep Outs until he finds the hole that all fences acquire in the end. The wires snag on his jacket and slough the sleeves apart. Bleeding, he walks on, and through the iron gate.

He pulls his collar up, tries to roll fabric back into his sleeves. He remembers his gloves before he touches anything. They are scarred and old, an attendance gift from the bottling plant. For his service.

Kestrel told him to check the shed for the lighter fluid. It's a black, wet husk of a shelter, lacking a door or a window. Even open to the elements, the light doesn't make it inside. Davey finds nothing but leaves and the light space where a canister stood for a night against the rain. *Cunts in charge.*

"Cunts," he says. Slaps palms against temples.

Kestrel doesn't sound bothered when he phones. "Well he said he'd leave it."

“It’s not fucking there! Someone’s went and knocked it!”

Kestrel’s teeth clicking. “Huh. Probably just kids. Or it’s in the main building. Search for it, if it’s no there we’ll try again another day.”

“This isn’t my fucking job, Kestrel. I need the money.”

“Calm down mate.” Kestrel sounding like old Kestrel, the Kestrel with the knives. “Calm right down, and get back tae us after ye’ve actually looked.”

Cunts in charge. Davey nearly throws his phone against the wall. He can’t afford another one, so he kicks at the empty space where the canister stood. He closes his eyes and sees Karen talk about pipe dreams, about lives that aren’t over. He walks back out into the morning.

The church keeps on staring. Davey stares back, dwarfed. The whole building has begun to stain. Weeds spread out from gutters and wind through open windows, and the main doors hang open, crooked and mocking. For the first time in years, he cannot smell chlorine. Just countryside, fertilizer and rot. He breathes in deep. The church has been dead for years and still stands. Davey still stands.

“Fuck you Kestrel,” he says, and walks forwards anyway.

He hears something clatter, deep in the church. A wobbling echo. *A farmer sees footprints in the snow.* He walks forward and grips the gaping doors. The damp handles seep freezing water through his gloves, and he pushes them away, sees the grey open space beyond.

He thinks of the pool and he thinks of the money. He thinks of men in charge, pouring Blue Label in crystal glasses.

He knows he is never going back.

When We Reach the Sea

Alex had been killing cats in the church cellar for a month, but he was on clean-up duty this morning. What the rats wouldn't eat was dropped into a bucket of bleach and stirred. He'd never been any good at chemistry, but he figured cleaning the bones couldn't hurt.

He wore a torch on a head strap, as if he was a miner or diver. He had found it in the back of his dad's tool cupboard, and was pleased by how pale the light threw up his skin in the subterranean dark. It was bright enough to shine away the hairs, expose his hands in their crude mottle of white and pink underneath the surgical gloves.

He knew no one was chasing him in the same way he knew the local newspaper reports on missing cats had become national news. He knew the police were tracking everyone even if he knew they hadn't the budget to drive their cars.

He sat in a hole in the brickwork, where enthusiastic trespassers had ripped out the wiring years ago. He could trace his fingers where the copper had been stripped. He'd known there was nothing left after that, nothing that ordinary people could want. There was no light back here, save his head mounted torch. Every so often he would swing his head from side to side, illuminating corners and trying to catch the rats by surprise. They would chitter at him in annoyance, but they no longer ran. Often he found them caught in circumstances he found baffling, once freezing two rats in the process of swapping an empty packet of crisps, like men posing with an oversized cheque.

When he had first discovered this place, the rats had kept him away – unexpected, alarmed chittering from the shadows and flashes of movement forcing him back up the stairs. He had headed back armed with crude bladed traps, intending slaughter, and found a rat in the process of casually washing itself under a leak in the walls. The abstract of a rat – the idea of a hulking matted

parasite – met with this wet-eyed animal with the permanent gawping expression. He had left them to their own lives. They kept the bugs away anyway.

They in turn had adjusted to him, at first fleeing in terror, particularly when he was venting on one of his catches. With the exception of the Big One, they ignored him now. She was a broad blue creature, with back legs like a kangaroo and a ridge of fur that started under her ears and traced the curve of her spine. She would steal anything that dropped from the table, and he had given up trying to retrieve them from her. There was no dignity in chasing her around the cellar.

He turned the bones in the bucket, the wooden spoon briefly surfacing clods of gristle. Everything left a mess. Even with the rats working as his personal janitors, things left a mess. He was in need of a mask, he thought. Something surgical, like they did in Beijing to prevent themselves spreading sickness. That might keep the stink and the dust away. If he was going to take all this maintenance seriously he needed professional equipment. He could ask Grandpa how he managed his allotment.

He forced himself up, ankle still shaky from an old Scout camp break. He stuck his head out into the cellar proper and sniffed air that was more mildew than stewing flesh. The Big One squeaked and thumped away into the corner as his chair scraped the floor.

He hung there awhile, all his weight on his good leg, though they'd told him there was no such thing. That everything healed. He'd proven them wrong with Simon though, at Kate's party. Simon drank too much, mixed cockiness with an eagerness to please, had claimed he could take a punch. In one punch Alex turned a blue eye permanently white. Doctors had taken that seriously, but they still ignored the ankle. Alex traced the outline of his skull, the rubber gloves coating a trail of

grime. He needed to convince his parents to pay for hydrotherapy again. Anything to keep the throbbing heat travelling upwards again.

"Fuck me," he said, into the stagnant cellar, and lit a Marlboro Ice Blast.

The rats knew well enough to keep clear. The smell of menthol usually preceded thrown bricks and inarticulate shouting. He angled the headlight and saw them part almost equally into the room's damp corners. Sometimes Alex was convinced he could feel a breeze down here.

He couldn't stop these hangovers, the space between a kill. Every time they were worse, and lengthier, thickening with visions of policemen, lawyers and journalists. Any BBC bulletin that didn't involve politics kicked him into sweats. Even his nightmares featured pointed fingers. None of it seemed to matter in the action though. None of that came through when he squeezed the prey and his eyes so tight that the world flashed monochrome. Sometimes he terrified himself with scenarios where he'd be forced to explain what he was doing, how opening things had always soothed him. How he'd started with his parents' watches as a kid, how he'd moved onto insects, and how they had all stopped being enough. The imaginary faces sneered.

Alex smashed the rest of the cigarette into the wall and flicked the remains in the bleach. He could tidy now. Later mess was a problem for a later Alex.

Then came footsteps on concrete.

Alex reached up and clicked the button by his temple, extinguishing the headlight. Eyes closed, eyes open; the same black. The rats had gone quiet too, and he could only just make out the sound of their cautious padding.

The intrusion sounded heavy, methodical. The steady weight of a Victorian diver hitting the seabed. Each step was unmistakeable. Loud enough that secure darkness seemed full of cracks.

Alex straightened up, drew in. Just one intruder, he told himself. Too slow, too uniform for any others. Couldn't be anyone official, could it? He had been prepared for kids, or other teenagers. Would-be urban explorers, hunting folk-stories and bragging rights. This was one person.

The figure above clattered against a pew. Perhaps frustration, perhaps clumsiness. Alex stared at the ceiling in case it said which.

Any electronics, had there ever been electronics, would have been the first looted. If kids hadn't smashed the glass, someone would have that by now too. Alex chewed the inside of his cheek. A junkie, maybe, too desperate to realise the copper wire was all gone.

There had been the lighter fluid, of course. He'd picked it up in the church shed a few days back. A full container, appeared out of thin air. Alex had been using it in the same fashion as the bleach, though the rats hated the smell of it, having huddled in the far corner until he'd stopped. It was capped somewhere at his feet. Stupid not to have questioned it.

As quietly as he could, Alex stretched out his bad leg and prodded the bucket with the toe of his boot. The metal rocking on the floor was unexpectedly loud and Alex kicked the bucket properly, sending the blood and the bones and the bleach slopping away into the church's recesses. He froze, but, sensing no shift in the intruder's movements, moved for the hole in the wall.

Stepping over the crumbling brick into the proper cellar was something of an issue, and he had to shimmy forwards on his knees at one point, grimacing at his own lack of grace. He brushed at

his knees and found that very little of the dust came off his waterproofs. What little had floated up and vanished in the gloom that sat at the end of his nose.

The shambler above continued its rampage. Pews screamed as their legs were shifted from their place. Alex could picture the naked white squares revealed in the stained concrete. He traced his path along the cellar wall, sliding his waterproof against the brick so the rats heard his progress and could keep out from under his boots. Whoever this is, he wanted to tell them, they could be the end of everything.

The rare sense of a breeze whisked the line of his jaw. Miniscule cracks, squeezing their way through the building. Blood vessels in a giant. Alex made himself as flat against the wall as he could, and moaned.

The shambler stopped. Its feet scuffed overhead – near the stripped pulpit, Alex thought, standing by the blank table that had been an altar.

"Hello?" said the shambler. A man's voice, deep and tired, but not enough of either to hide uncertainty.

It had been luck, Alex knew, that this intruder had been so loud. Anyone more cautious could have been in the cellar before he or the rats could have reacted. In all his panicking, he had never once thought to set up a warning system. Even something as crude as a bell tied to a string, like a low budget Vietcong trap, could have been useful, now he was trapped in his own tunnel.

"Think and listen," Alex said to himself. The shambler hadn't moved anymore. This was overthinking things. He could lay it out logically – lone intruder, lighter fluid. The Glasgow

method – fire in a listed building. Just one man required. Would be doing Alex a favour if the fire was capable of gutting the cellar.

"Oi," said the shambler, sounding like he'd found the door behind the altar. "Clear out of here. Private property."

Oh aye, that'll get them running.

"Hello?"

The shambler was unsure again. Trying to work out what he had heard, what he hadn't. That was good, Alex supposed. The shambler could always retreat to buy more lighter fluid. Incriminating perhaps, but better than scouring abandoned countryside cellars surely. Surely, anything could be down there.

"It's not -" the shambler was talking to someone now, his tone flat and obvious as any older man could be in a phone conversation. "Like I said before, it's not here Kes! – Yes I've fucking looked, I'm still looking! – I know, it's just – yes, yeah I know. Okay. – One last check and then we'll see?"

Whatever answer came, the call ended there. Loose gravel from the path outside skittered down the cellar steps. The shambler was directly above.

Alex shifted in position, easing his back and trying to ease his bad ankle when he could. He was confident that he could dodge the shambler in the dark, particularly once the rats were startled, but he drew himself out nonetheless. Hitting the shambler at the right moment could work even better.

Rubber squealed. Alex had no time to react before the crack at the base of the cellar stairs was echoing around the room. The rats scattered again, rushing to spill through the hole in the wall, joining the bleached cat bones.

Alex pushed his thumb against his throat and swallowed, the gulping saliva momentarily silencing breath and blood. He stepped from the wall, headlight activated.

The shambler lay where he'd fallen. In the sudden light the deep hoarse voice was hosted in a haggard bald head, and it was leaking. The blood reflected a dark brown under Alex's torch, and appeared as thick and gristled as the bleach. Alex did not stop to check what floated there in the spreading pool, but stretched around until he could jump to the step above the twitching man.

Jittering eyes followed him eventually, as if there was some delay between impulse and action. Alex sat on the step and stared back.

"How did you manage this," Alex asked.

The shambler didn't reply. His entire face seemed hewn out of what Alex's mother called worry lines. Combined with his baldness and the gelatinous skull fracture, the man was beginning to resemble a melting candle.

Alex glanced up at the top of the stairs, where the morning light was illuminating wet leaves blasted into the wall. The shambler said something. It came out a gurgle, and another dark fluid trailed from his mouth. This was, Alex thought, not at all dissimilar from the cats. The similarity was comforting.

"You got a phone?"

The shambler twitched, wild eyes gesturing towards his worn jeans.

“Can you not move?”

The shambler, staring him down. Tears of pain or frustration.

Alex regarded the stairs again. “Did you fall on purpose?”

The shambler jerked his head towards his jeans with such ferocity that Alex rose to catch the streaming head on its return fall. His bad ankle roared with the sudden lunge.

“Alright, alright,” he said. His right-hand glove had instantly gone from translucent to a solid red. He laid the shambler’s head still. “Jesus.” With his clean hand, Alex reached into the jeans and drew out an outdated mobile. Idly he wondered if this thing could even operate the most basic games, before the gurgling had him dialling the first of three nines.

Then Alex thought about it.

“Did you slip,” he said, “or did you jump?”

The shambler gagged and spat blood. Alex stepped back, checked his boots under his headlight. His ankle throbbed.

“I think you’ve fucked something up there,” Alex said. His palms itched, the gloves sealing them in their own sweat.

This was the end of the church for him, he realised. This idiot had destroyed it as entirely as if he’d found the lighter fluid and set about his work. Questions, evidence, and likely exterminators. A swarm of intrusions. Alex took a step forward, and then decided against it. It wouldn’t do to hit the shambler now. He wasn’t sure what kind of evidence that could leave. Best not to touch it at all. An ambulance could haul the man out fairly quick, though with too many questions. Police

hammering on front doors once they found the bucket, as clean as he'd managed things. The more time Alex had, the clearer things would be.

Alex realised he was shaking. "You've ruined everything."

The shambler flopped forwards. One eye no longer matched the other, and looked to roll up into the head. "Nine," said the shambler, and while the voice wasn't so deep anymore, it was as tired as ever.

Alex used the bannister to take the weight from his ankle. "Yeah, mate, nine nine nine. Just coming." The shambler was an obscure heap at the base of the stairs. "I'm calling them right now. Ambulance and everything."

It would have been hard to slip here, Alex thought. Leaves soaked where they'd blown in but the steps were dry, the grit and dust barely disturbed. He bet the cunt had done it on purpose. People never made any sense.

Alex drew up and hurled the phone down against the steps. The sound whipped through the body of the church. Spilling plastic number keys, the phone bounced and slapped the high wall above its owner, and dropped to crack open in the pooling blood.

"No," said the shambler, almost clearly.

"Reckon that looks alright."

It did look alright. Alex stood, flushed and trembling. His hangover was dissipating, and he felt the other thing descend with a shiver. Policemen backed away, kicked-in doors repaired themselves as lawyers and reporters retreated.

“I, I – I,” the shambler was saying, head rocking back and forth on a shattered cheekbone.

“Aye,” said Alex, “I said the sparrow with my bow and arrow. Now you stay there.”

He turned off his headlight and breathed in the mildew and the rot for the last time. There would be no more rare breezes on his face as he went about his work. Nothing else thrown into the corners for the rats. They’d all be dead soon, no doubt. Poison, steel traps, gas. The Big One was in the doorway now, rocking back on the coiled muscle of her haunches. Her wet black eyes darted from man to man as she sniffed the air.

He had the morning at least, he thought as he lit another menthol. The fear could come later for a later Alex. For now, he’d sit and watch a lost cause spasm, and wait for the rest of the rats to grow bold.

Bobby Driscoll Blues

"Was it Protestant?" Barry Hackett chews on a strain of yellow grass and spits it mangled onto cobblestone.

"It was fancy and old," says Jane. "So yeah, I guess." Climbing the fence has left white scrapes along the arms of her jacket. She knows her mum will make her clean it for hours when she gets back.

The two of them take a moment to stand in front of the ruin. Jane sees herself, a silhouette, against the dilapidated church and the moors beyond. She likes the image.

Barry goes first, lifting his leg so that his knee is in line with his waist before trampling the first row of tangled weeds. Encouraged, he crashes forward. Jane follows his path, walking among the flattened scenery as it begins to slink back upwards. When they reach the groundskeeper's toolshed, she looks back to see that Barry's path has vanished. The grass is kinked and muddied, but stands unbroken.

The place has been abandoned long enough that the countryside has curled around the pitchfork and pulled it down to earth. Jane narrowly misses the mud-coloured prongs, and hears her mother's usual warnings about tetanus. She leans against the shed, itself mud-coloured and half-enveloped, and checks nothing has snagged her socks.

"Watch your feet," says Barry.

"I'm watching them."

He wanders through the thicket, slashing the foliage with an imaginary machete. There's no pretending Barry Hackett is good-looking, with his squat red face and his Dumbo ears, but Jane

still feels a rush of adrenaline at the realisation they are alone. They were the only ones brave enough to approach the church after all. She extinguishes a certain line of thought and looks away.

The shed door has long since joined the pitchfork. Jane feels the wood soften under her weight. One hinge remains of the door frame, rusted outwards and forever pointing away from its home. Pointing at the church like an accuser.

"Know what the worst feeling is," Barry says, "when it's dry but you go through some grass and come out wet. Fucking horrible."

Jane thinks a pitchfork shoveling up through the foot would be worse, but she's already peering into the shed, hands on either side of the doorway gripping crumbled plaster.

"Anything in there?" Barry jumps on the other end of the door, and Jane feels herself rise slightly on one soggy plank.

"I'd check if you weren't trying to launch me."

He moves forward and she comes back to earth. It's barely a couple of inches, but her teeth rattle all the same. She stabs her phone's torch function into life before she finds herself snapping at him. The light seems to be swallowed by the blackening walls. A couple of iron shelf-spikes manage a feeble glint back at her, the rust crawling to their heads. The weather has blasted the room clear, piling the grass and leaves neatly in opposite corners.

"I was hoping there'd be a chainsaw or something."

Jane, with a vision of herself accompanying a limbless Barry to Accident and Emergency, regards the absence of power tools as a blessing.

“Think they’ll do anything with this place?” she asks.

“Nah, it’s too far out to bother int it.”

Jane isn’t entirely sure of that. According to the sort of television her mum watches, churches are forever being converted into something weird. Stylish bars and oddly shaped flats. If she stands on her toes and squints, she can see Shawkirk’s houses peering through the trees. The church has walled itself off with nature – when they came down the path she had seen the cracked white stumps where the sign used to be. *Unmarked grave.* She imagines living here, a bedroom at the highest point, looking over the same trees and town and pretending she owns everything. It doesn’t make sense for such a building to be forgotten already; doesn’t seem right that the countryside is eager and powerful enough to erase entire properties.

*

Donna crosses her legs, presses her back against the armchair in the practised way that bulges the cushions out at the side, like fat butterfly wings. “One of my kids,” she says, “goes in for urban exploring. He watches these videos exploring abandoned places. I had to come pick him up from an empty warehouse once.”

Jane doesn’t give her the satisfaction of mirroring her movements. “In the city?”

“In the city.”

Jane is mapping the lines underneath the woman’s tights, trying to work out the years like she’s examining an oak tree. “This was up the moors,” she says eventually.

“Why up there?”

“It’s where you go.”

“I am from Scotland, Jane. It’s where you go with a carry-out, yes?”

Jane hates that. Donna has an uncanny ability to say the simplest of words in a manner that sounds completely wrong. It was worse when the chummy swear words came out.

“Aye,” says Jane. “Cider n that.”

*

“Probably gonna have to break a window to get in,” says Barry, forging ahead to the chapel steps.

“You really think we’re the first ones here?”

“Pfft. Course. Shawkirk is full of pussies.” He kicks the great wooden doors for emphasis, and nearly keels forward when they fly open. He doesn’t turn back to look at her, but Jane sees his ears redden. “They must’ve left it unlocked when it closed,” he says.

“Must’ve,” Jane says, and wades over from the shed.

The bareness of Protestant churches has always unnerved her. Even though the doors have kept the wind and rain from repeating the scorched earth pattern of the shed, the great windows cast light on a particularly Spartan hall. The blunt, functional pews – the first things to take shape in the gloom – are nothing like the carved and decorated rows back in St Gabriel’s. She has never taken religion seriously, but she knows it all the same. This church reminds her of the aunt who looks a little too much like her mother – the face is there, rendered unrecognisable by different expressions.

Jane has heard her little sister talk about the church with horrified relish. Among primary kids, the church is said to be the lair of a ghost that pretends to be a blind man until it gets close. When Jane was in primary the lair was a bridge over the local burn – she can't choose between pride at the longevity of a story she helped spread or annoyance at the changes that have been made. She whistles, and the echo doesn't travel far. No blind ghost. No-Eyes McGurk must have moved house again.

"Fuck's Jesus gone?" says Barry, pointing at the empty spaces between windows.

"On holiday," she says. She's glad he's distracted – she takes the first step inward and waits for him to catch up. "Aren't you coming, Finbarr?"

"Shut up. This was my idea."

The cold does its best to mask the smell, but the relief does not last long. Jane fumbles for her mints and near-hisses with relief when she finds them. She's heard something about the cost of upkeep here, but she didn't think that it included amenities as basic as the pipes. The stagnant pools of water lining the walls begin to make themselves known - chips of black paint flake from the additional stacked chairs, floating all over the room. She crouches down, fishes one of them out, turns it over in her palm. The chip sloughs apart almost instantly, sliding out of her grasp in divergent traces of water. She flicks the droplets away and tips out another mint. She holds the packet out, and almost drops it when Barry attempts to seize it.

"Fucking hell, stinks in here," he says. He crunches the mint into dust.

"The damp, I think." *Or asbestos.*

"Worst fucking damp I've ever smelled. Like a curry shite or something."

“Barry,” Jane says, “I hear a lot about your shites and I really don’t want to.”

There are streaks of dried mud in the centre aisle, the dusty pink carpet coiling away from its intrusion. Jane scuffs it with the tip of her shoe - the only trace of others that the building hasn’t tried to cover up. She guesses people were looking for copper wiring, or anything else that could be sold quickly at the dump over in Eaglesham. Her dad is always joking about going out to do the same. *As long as other kids from school have kept away.* She can still hang onto the excitement of uncharted territory. Trying to salvage her mood, she moves up the aisle and swings into the pulpit.

“Do you accept Jesus as your saviour?” she says, doing her best Southern Baptist. When the echo sounds she doesn’t recognise herself.

“What?”

She sets her elbows on the stand, cranes her neck over the edge to look down on him. “I’m being American and that.”

“Ah right,” he says, and she knows he still doesn’t get it.

She can see the hole in the wood where a thin microphone has been ripped out. Whoever the culprit was, they had found the Bible next to it worthless. She chucks it underhand, expecting Barry to catch it, only to watch him headbutt it mid-air, spinning it straight down into one of the puddles.

“It’s another fucking beautiful play from the young Hackett boy!” He rounds on it and boots it upwards over the first pew, where it flaps open on the carpet.

Jane regards her congregation of one, and chews another mint.

The smell is somehow worse near the altar, despite lacking nearby windows or obvious pipework. Barry is stalking through the pews, hoping to ambush the injured bible. The pulpit in front of her begins to look very much like her school desk, complete with the indents of push-pins and the frayed cast-offs from chewed pencils. She could order Barry to get up next to her and kiss him, but she knows he'd boast about for weeks, particularly to Khaled. Khaled was supposed to be here too, but backed out faking illness.

"This is rubbish," she says.

Barry's hunter instinct evaporates. "How?" he says.

"It's all empty. Just not what I was expecting, I guess."

"You wanted a treasure chest or something?"

"Maybe."

Barry takes this information on. "You want to break a window?"

"With what?"

Barry walks over and scoops up the victimised book, waves it at her.

"You can't throw it that hard, Finbarr," she says.

It works as well as she expected. Barry hurls the book against a grime-streaked window, and the thump sounds uncannily like a fireplace bursting into life. The Bible flops back to earth, spine dented. The window stands as before, with a slightly reduced coat of filth. Barry's arm remains outstretched for a good five seconds before withering back to his side.

“Well done, Finbarr.”

“Stop calling me that!”

Jane swears she can see the blood pumping into his ears. “It’s your name, isn’t it?”

“Fuck off,” he says, and starts off down the aisle at a pace just short of a jog. Jane is about to give in and call after him when he abruptly stops. “Eh, Jane.”

“What is it?” She drops down from the pulpit.

“There’s a big fuck-off rat over here.”

*

Jane’s looking at the bookshelves along the office wall. Cheery shit. Disney-approved copies of *The Jungle Book* and *Peter Pan,* with all the licensed artwork. They match with the toys piled in the blue plastic tray in the corner. This place is meant for people much younger than her. Kids with wolves for parents.

“What are you looking at?” asks Donna.

Anything but you. “Around.”

“How have things been at home? Your grandfather…”

Jane supresses laughter. This has been a constant thread throughout. *I am out of topics so tell me about your family – anything about your dying grandfather, or your closeted cousin? Please let me know your parents are terrible in some definable way.*

“He’s not getting better.”

“No, I know.” Donna has her palms raised, like she’s making peace with a confrontational chimpanzee.

Jane leans forward, indicates the blue tray of toys. “Is that a Transformer?”

“It transforms, from what I can tell.”

“Let me see the Transformer.”

*

She sees it before she reaches him. A black ball of matted fur the size of a football, sitting and blocking the door where they came in. As she draws level with Barry, the rat cocks its head to examine her. The greasier sections of its fur have hardened into a ridge along the spine. Confident in its assessment of boy and girl, it rises up on its haunches like a bear.

“Go,” says Barry, shaking a limp foot in its direction. “Bugger off.”

Even unmarked graves attract rats, Jane supposes. The animal looks disturbingly well-fed. It drops back to all fours and crawls forward, nose shuffling.

“Don’t have any food mate,” says Barry. He sounds calm but Jane sees him edge out of her peripheral.

The rat notices, and the crawling becomes a lope. Jane sees its hindquarters rise and fall behind an open row of teeth. It makes no sound, its claws merely pricking the carpet. It’s only by the point she can see the blank eyes and hears Barry manage another ‘fuck!’ that she remembers exactly where she is standing. She watches her shoe collide with the animal’s incisors, and then registers the impact from ankle to spine. It is like kicking a medicine ball. The rat shrieks as it

lands on its side, then swings back up to glare. Barely conscious of anything but the prospect of another attack, Jane staggers back on two feet.

She hears Barry laugh, shout something. The rat starts running again, but before she can move it's under the pews, darting away and up past the altar, where she loses sight of it. Barry is gripping her shoulders now, cheering. Jane feels almost drunk, and leans against the pew.

"Where'd that come from?"

She laughs. She doesn't know why she's out of breath. "No idea. Just happened."

"It was fucking amazing."

He looks like he's going to move in closer when she pushes herself up and down the aisle. "Come on," she says.

"Where?"

"I wanna see where it goes."

"Fucking hell. Great white hunter, eh?" He follows anyway. She knows he will. "Great white-ish hunter. Great Black Irish hunter? Something like that."

"I got it."

"Is Great brown hunter a thing? What are you again?"

"Fuck off."

She hops up beside the pulpit, tries to see over the altar before she makes her way around. Elated feeling or not, she's aware the rat may have cornered itself somewhere. She clambers up

onto the bare surface, feeling its coolness against her knees. She glances down the other side of her perch and decides she is safe.

"There's a side-bit there," Barry says. She thinks he's been staring.

"Right." She steps back down, brushing her jeans. The adrenaline is wearing off. If Barry were to claim he'd been the one to kick the rat, she thinks she'd believe him.

She follows a short set of stairs down to the side-entrance. *The minister's entrance.* Barry hovers behind her, his breath irritatingly warm. The smell is stronger here, and Jane finds herself out of mints. When she thinks about it, her throat contracts.

*

"What are you thinking about?" Donna asks. This is the inevitable follow-up to the failure of the family question.

Rats. "Peter Pan."

"Why- oh the books, of course. Were you a fan?"

"I saw the video. We had a VHS player until very late."

"Retro." Donna smiles like they have something in common.

"I looked up the guy that played Peter Pan once," Jane says. "He was in a whole lot of Disney stuff."

Donna switches her expression – confidante morphs back into child psychologist. "Ah, I see. I know the story."

“No one came looking for him.”

*

The room that waits them is as skeletal as the rest of the building. Stripes of dust and rat shit litter a room stripped of everything but the wallpaper, and most of the wallpaper looks to be leaving of its own accord. The light from the windows does not quite reach the cellar stairs, but Jane can just make out the midges circling there.

“Well I’m still not seeing any treasure,” Barry says. “Just smelling more curry fart.”

“Quiet. He’s gone down there.”

“Think we should? Fucker was like capybara-size and there could be like a nest and shit.”

“Let me look.”

Barry doesn’t say anything as she flicks her phone’s torch back on and crosses the room. She’s seeing the damp leaves again, in their neat little piles. *Me and Barry explored that old church. Oh aye, what you find? Boredom.*

She readies in case she startles the rat into action, takes the first step down and shines a spotlight to the bottom.

The man’s hat was the only part of him that was intact. She knows he is dead even before she sees the rat nestled behind his bottom teeth, weighing the slack jaw down into the neck. His skin is a mottled yellow where it still clings from the bone, in shreds. The rats have eaten his eyes. *There’s no blood,* she thinks. *Fake.* And then, realising, *there’s no blood because the rats have taken it all.*

She hears Barry, halfway through a swear word before he chokes it down. He says something else, something about the smell.

"Oh," she says, and she's looking at the torn trousers that are too big for the legs, too big because all the muscles are gone, and the ankles are loose and teeth have scraped at every exposed bone, and she's looking at the dead man with the live rat in his head, and she falls back onto her arse and stares back at the blank shining eyes glinting in the crater, and at the little pink hands holding onto the teeth the way a baby grasps its parent's finger.

"Jane," Barry is saying, "J. Come on, stop looking." He keeps talking, and talking, and it all sounds like crying.

When she can speak again, her voice breaks with each word. "It's not a treasure chest."

She turns the torch off, and the dead man winks back out of the world.

Gloom

has them now, away from the cigarettes and the boots,

away from the dead, coiled and foaming, tails flicking.

There will be no poison, out in the world.

Gloom takes them far

from the men, and leather clogged with sediment,

takes every rat that can still run.

Gloom holds them together, this wet and shivering shoal

Of fur and generations.

Start again.

Gloom drags them out to start again.

There is a hole in the moor.

The gloom reveals it to them, as they press together like black feathers coming together in a great wing.

An explorer snout breaks from the shoal, and finds dry earth, cool to the pad,

Without smoke or sediment.

She noses forward.

Dragging her bulk along whispering roots, calling back to the others.

And the pit shifts.

The knot unwinds, and a plague of yellow spools outwards.

So late in the year and so late in her life,

The ball of adders snaps and warps and furrows forward in the earth.

The gloom pulls back at her call, dragging the rats back to the wet,

Away from her and the flickering diamond eyes of nest,

Before the two pins sling forth in the first hissing jaws.

Gloom retreats with those who can start again.

It leaves and reveals the twitching and the poisoned – rodent and serpent

Entwined. Gloom moves on, bound by matted tails and muddied claws.

There will be no snakes, out in the world.

Clock Town

Robin noticed the tape on her way to work. Just five feet away from her shop, someone had taped a large square into the pavement, and drawn rough chalk shapes within. It threw her off. When she started walking again, she couldn't remember what she'd been thinking about.

"You see that tape down the road?" she asked Simon, when she got in.

Simon, hunched over a paper beside the bread rolls, did not look up. "Yup, the world's a fascinating place."

"I know it'll just be pipework or something, but still," she said.

"I hope," said Simon, cocking his head until his good eye could see her, "I get this excited about shit when I'm old as you."

She had turned ignoring his foul mouth into a talent. "Och, you're prematurely cynical. It's not impressive."

"Not trying to impress," he said. He tapped his pen on the paper. "Mr McNally's complaining about the paper round again."

Robin hung up her coat in the backroom and fetched her *Elle Décor* before she came back and gave any thought to the statement. "Who does his round?"

"The wee ginger guy. You know, the one who puts cans in his bike's back wheel, pretends it's a motorbike."

"Ah. Well, what's the problem?"

“McNally says ginge spits on his paper, ginge says it’s rain or a wet porch or some shit.”

“I’ll have to have a word,” she said.

“I told him that this is Scotland,” said Simon, “and that Scotland occasionally experiences rainfall.”

“He’ll be complaining about you then.”

“Yeah, well, he’s got MS and I don’t, so who’s the real winner here.”

“Oh, go on and get out,” she said, tapped his back with her magazine. “You’ve surely got class by now.”

“Free period,” he said, but he stood up and went anyway.

Robin went through the first sixty pages without interruption. Half of the appeal for her was seeing if she recognised any of the houses, and making up stories for the ones she didn’t. She would sit and invent television shows based on the house – this one was a sit-com, this one a flagship drama. Sometimes, feeling especially creative, she scribbled blue pen on one of the photos: ‘main set’, ‘stage entrance’. As far as she could see it, anything she had written down was as good as anything on the BBC nowadays. Inventing her own was healthier than writing to Ofcom to complain. In snatched moments, she would eye the chocolate stand, then force the magazine in front of her face.

The shop was busiest when other people weren’t. It was eleven o’clock before she realised she should have opened the alcohol shelves an hour ago. In the process of pulling up the grey curtain and revealing the gaudy cans and bottles, a chocolate bar ended up in her hand. She ate it back behind the counter, distinctly ashamed of herself.

With half an hour before schoolkids on lunchbreak started flooding in, she took a sandwich and headed out. She didn't bother to put a sign up anymore. There was nowhere to go, so 'back in five minutes' no longer meant much. She ripped up the packaging with enough speed to flick chicken stuffing onto the curb. Cars trickled past between her and the wall of the park, framing distant trees in their tinted windows. Two magpies flew in loops all the way to the Sainsbury's. She stood eating, letting the cold sun strip away the lethargy that came with indoor working.

Two vans were parked down by the tape, though the tape itself was gone now. A vague chalk outline was visible under the debris of the freshly churned pavement. They'd kept within the lines, as far as she could see. Two men stood listening to a dark-haired woman in a pencil skirt, draining coffee from sagging paper cups while she tapped at a laminate sketch.

"What's going on?" Robin asked. She was horrified to find out she'd spoken before she finished chewing. She gulped the rest of her food and words before they looked at her.

The woman flipped her hand up in a timid kind of wave, and came half the distance over. Robin was suddenly aware of herself in her cardigan strewn with cat hair, looking up at this younger, prettier type dressed like clothes still mattered. Robin knew she hadn't ever looked like that.

"Hi, they didn't let you on about the project?"

"Depends who they are," she said.

The businesswoman checked her sketch. "Officially, 'Shawkirk Business District'."

Robin snorted. "Yeah, that's what they call themselves."

"You're not part of that? I thought pretty much everything on this street was."

“It’s a glorified neighbourhood watch. With delusions of grandeur.” She wasn’t sure how this would be taken, but she managed to get a smile in response.

“They did come across that way. I assume they pooled their money for those big electronic maps down there?”

“It’s why I left.” Robin crossed the remainder of the distance. “What did they pool the money for now, a talking speed camera?”

The woman held the drawing out to her side, mockingly drawing her free hand across it like a showgirl. “A clock. Congratulations, you’re a clock town now.”

“Must have eaten away their souls that they didn’t have a clock tower.”

The woman studied her own drawing. “I’d love to work on a clock tower. This is just a pillar with a clock in it. Mick and Jim over there, they’re the builders. I’m the termineur.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s just a joke. I work with clocks. Watches, grandfathers, etcetera.” She tilted her head forward, as if to say something conspiratorial. “No towers though. They get big companies in for that, or old masters. But when you need a phallic little ornament for your town, I suppose that’s my job.”

“I don’t think you could call us a town.”

“That’s okay,” she said. “I don’t think you could call me all that professional.”

A couple of cars passed, and Robin struggled to find something to fill the void. The clockworker seemed entirely comfortable with this silence, and didn't even look back at the men clearing out the shattered concrete.

"I eh, own the shop just there. You should come by and get rolls and sausage at lunch time." Robin realised she was still holding a half-eaten sandwich, and swiftly moved it behind her back. Cars passing would see this *termineur* first, if they ever saw the dumpy little shopkeeper at all. A fat little vole, hiding its food away. "I'm Robin," she was saying. "Business district exile."

"Sarah," said the *termineur*. "I'll come by if we're on track."

The schoolchildren came by at exactly half twelve, shouting and laughing in their blazers. Robin had long since turned the constant stream of chocolate, Irn-Bru cans and double rolls-and-sausage into a mental state of automation. She spoke her standard lines, reciting prices, barely heard over the jokes barked between shelves by pubescent voices. At regular intervals, she would flick her eyes over to check for shoplifting in the circular mirror by the counter. Sarah was the woman's name.

She told one of the stragglers that she had run out of sausages, directed him to the pies that lay blasted of all moisture in their heated cabinet. It was a lie. She had three out and ready by the backroom grill for Sarah and the two workers.

The schoolchildren tapered off, and she was left with the infrequent bank employee or hairdresser looking for their energy drinks. One old man came by and went through his usual shopping routine before 'remembering' that he also wanted his six pack of Tennents. Robin humoured him every time, pretended it wasn't the only reason he'd left the house. Sarah still hadn't

appeared. The old man took Robin's finger drumming as some sort of impetus to hurry up, and left looking hurt.

As she was about to rewrap the sausages in tinfoil, the door chime sounded and Sarah strode through to the counter. Smooth as clockwork, Robin thought.

"Didn't know if I'd offended you," she said.

"Yeah, I'm sorry," said Sarah. "The material they're using, this composite stuff, it's hard to cut. I have to make sure they make enough space for the clock."

"Man plans, God laughs?"

"You'd think, wouldn't you. Any chance there's three rolls leftover?"

"I'll just put them on."

Sarah stood to the side of the counter, almost tall enough to sit on the edge. "You're a lifesaver, Robin."

With a mix of elation and loneliness, Robin realised it had been a long time since she had heard anyone say her name. She restrained herself from asking Sarah to say it again. She hoped she didn't appear too eager in rushing to put those sausages on the grill. She hoped she didn't look like herself.

They passed another silence, one that Sarah again endured with good cheer. Eventually she bent her knees and explored the boxed cookies and bizarre trivialities that Robin never had to restock – packaged spatulas and ladles that had hung on their spikes for years. Robin took this sudden movement for discomfort, and searched for something.

"Composite, like eh, decking and stuff."

“Not far off,” said Sarah, twirling a packaged spatula in her hands. “Jim and Mick, they’ve worked with it before.”

“They’re not your employees?”

Sarah laughed. Her hair shook out of place, and settled back, seamless. “Not as far as I’m aware. I’m just here to make sure the clock fits.”

“They seemed competent enough.”

“Oh, the pillar’s going to look horrendous, but the clock will be beautiful.”

“It’s lovely you can have such pride in your work.”

There was something in her voice. Robin cringed before she finished speaking. Sarah, otherwise examining the circular mirror, appeared to frown – a microscopic twitch that transformed her back into a stranger. Robin slid the sausages off the grill and into the rolls, pressing them in with plastic tongs. When she handed them over in a little brown bag she felt hot grease slide down the back of her hand. Sarah took no notice.

“I hope you’re serving these all week,” Sarah said as she left.

“The shop doesn’t move,” Robin said, gripping the counter with both hands.

*

The door chime sounded when the school lunch break was safely over, and Robin jerked her head up, halfway through forming a sentence. Sarah was not there. Simon took a can of juice from the fridge and dumped his bag on the counter, hard.

“You almost looked happy to see me there,” he said.

“I’m always happy to see you.”

He cocked his head in his usual fashion. She suspected it helped his sight – the one blue eye was perfectly functional. The filmy white eye in the centre of the birthmark she understood to be temperamental at best. She had been horrified when he’d come into work like that, explaining that someone had punched him directly on the birthmark, ‘to see what colour it would go’. When she’d asked if he’d taken it to the police, he had laughed and explained that it had been a bet he had initiated. Squandered his sight through drunken machismo.

“You seem to have a lot of free periods,” she said, watching the door again.

“Always fucking happy to see me,” he said, and she thought he was talking to himself.

He had not commented on her dress. The night before, her magazines abandoned, Robin had raked her wardrobes for something she could conceivably wear to work. She had settled on a blue summery dress. Certainly out of season, but the cold wasn’t a problem. She had tested it in front of the mirror, and smiled too broadly when the friendly old men complimented her that morning.

She didn’t hear the door chime, didn’t even know Sarah was right in front of her until she spoke.

“Daydreaming?”

“Excuse me?” Simon said, venom rising.

Averting disaster, Robin straightened up. “Hi! I didn’t see you when I took my break. Three rolls?”

Sarah held up three fingers and nodded. “Yeah, I was doing last minute touches. We’re putting the clock in today.”

“That – that was fast.”

“The pillar’s not all that big. I assume Jim and Mick’ll still be in for their rolls tomorrow. But my part’s done.”

Robin gestured for Simon to fetch the food from the back, realising the disaster that would unfold if Sarah tried to talk to him. Not that she felt she was entirely averting disaster. “It’s just, I thought you’d be longer.”

“Me too,” she said. “It’s been pretty painless, barring the odd intervention from your friends in ‘the business district’.”

“They are terrible.”

Robin had anticipated the next silence, and bore it with ease when it came. She thought about what Simon saw of the two of them, this beautiful woman and Robin. Maybe Robin with a kind of beauty from being in Sarah’s presence, a contact high. He could look at them and think that they were two people who understood one another.

“That’s a beautiful dress.”

“Thank you! You know, if you can’t dress up every so oft-”

“Rolls,” said Simon, thrusting the bag over the counter.

Sarah held the bag in some sort of salute. “Thanks again,” she said.

They passed one of their moments.

“Well hang on,” Robin said. “Can I see the clock before it goes in?”

She rounded the counter before Sarah was halfway through a shrug.

Sarah led her out to one of the vans. The clock pillar stood at head height, a jutting black spike, with a dip at the centre – presumably where the clock was to go. It was an angry looking creation, like one of Shawkirk’s ribs had punctured up through the earth, broken and malevolent. Mick and Jim were on either side, contemplating the shape, examining the wound. They took their rolls with grunts that verged on grateful.

Sarah opened the van doors and hopped up into the dark. She flicked on her phone torch, and indicated for Robin to follow. Robin put her hands on the doors and made as if she couldn’t quite lift her legs. Sarah smiled, set the phone down, and took Robin’s hand, lifting her up into the vehicle. Her hand felt like that of a musician, a harpist maybe; soft but drawn somehow, as if skill was something that could be sensed in the fingers.

“Oh it’s beautiful,” said Robin, spying the ivory clock face leaning against the van’s interior. The hands hung loose, both slouching towards six.

Sarah shook her head. “Ah, the face is just a topping. Check the real thing.

Sarah dropped her hand and continued eating as she shone the torch on a deep black cylinder that was sat upon its packaging. It looked very much to Robin like a bomb, or at least, what she imagined the modern day insurgent would place on a train. She followed Sarah, wary, and crouched down to look into the face of the mechanism.

Robin saw depth. Every space of the cylinder was occupied by golden gears, each visible behind the spokes of its brethren. The clockwork in its complexity seemed more biological than anything else, and when Sarah leaned over for a moment and clicked it into life, the gears did not click together so much as breathe into one another, the entire device beating gently. The ticking was low, from the bell of the gears where Robin could see little detail except gold.

Her knees aching, she reached out to touch the box.

"Don't touch it though," Sarah said, stepping forward. Robin could smell her perfume, felt it spread throughout the van. "You think building one of these is hard, you should see how long it takes to prepare one."

Robin got to her feet, unsteady. The two of them were closer than she had expected, and when she tried to speak all she could think of was the proximity of their faces.

"You have a talent," she said.

Sarah smiled, and jumped out of the van. Robin thought she saw that little frown again, a brief twitch before the black hair swept it out of sight. Robin clambered down onto the cracked curb, blinking her way out of the van's darkness. Sarah closed the doors, definitely.

"It really looks fantastic," Robin said, hearing her voice croak.

Sarah waved her off. "I told you I was good Robin."

Robin.

"See you tomorrow," she said, already walking away, in case her eyes started to water.

"No you won't!" Sarah said, her call almost musical.

Robin remembered the truth, in the lowest part of her chest. The breeze caught her as she entered the shop, and disturbed a thin film of sweat on the nape of her neck.

"Who the fuck was that?" said Simon.

"My friend," Robin said. "Her name is Sarah."

"You don't have any friends," he said.

*

Robin saw it completed the next day, as she stood out on her break. Sarah was not there, true to her word. Mick and Jim wiped the dust and shavings from the pillar, polishing their obelisk with silent efficiency. They left before the school bell rang for lunch. With the last wipe of the cloth, gold lettering was revealed in the body of the pillar: SHAWKIRK BUSINESS DISTRICT.

Robin did not eat as she waited there. The ivory-shaded clock face threw off some of the pillar's ugliness, but not by much. If it had been transparent, she thought people would appreciate it. They would be able to see the precision of the work, the effort and care that had been covered up. That morning she had fetched a screwdriver and worked off the back of her watch. She had climbed back into bed with it, watching it roll its gears; a tiny, beating animal.

When she saw the first school blazer flicker through the trees, she headed back inside, and prepared to serve them as she always had. They joked over her head and she mumbled prices at them. She was sure she saw a Yorkie slipped into a pocket in the mirror's reflection, but she didn't say anything.

When Simon came in that afternoon, she let him handle the counter. Under the pretence of going to fetch another box of crisps, she went into the backroom and sat opposite a stack of *Elle Décor*. Most of them had begun to curl at the corners.

"Isn't that clock lovely," she said.

"It looks like a giant cock," Simon said, and resumed doodling on his notepad.

Late in the evening, Robin drew the shutters, ducked back under and locked herself in the store. She dropped the keys down by the counter and ran her hand along the places Sarah might have been. With some effort she managed to push herself up onto the surface, high enough that her legs swung helplessly. She held her watch to her ear and listened with closed eyes.

"Robin," she said out loud. It sounded empty.

She pushed off from the counter, feeling the impact jar her ankles. She saw herself in the curved mirror – a hunched creature in an ill-fitting dress. In the back room she pushed apart piles of magazines and stock boxes until she found the rusted toolbox she was looking for, nestled under a table. She tore it open and took the hammer, placed it on the store counter.

Hours passed under the full mirror. She didn't think her house phone would be disturbed once in all that time. When the day was well and truly dead, she unlocked the door and scuttled out from under the shutters, hammer in hand.

No cars framed the sights in their windows. Above, a bulbous cloud was pressing down on the earth. Robin approached the clock, and raised the hammer in line with its pretty ivory face.

"Please come back," she said, and swung. The glare of the lampposts made the shards of glass fly in streaks of orange and silver.

Grendel

When his father died, Ray's mother had gone around and replaced every blank cross with a proper Catholic crucifix. His father had been a borderline atheistic Protestant, though Ray's mother always claimed he just couldn't stand the blood. Couldn't stand a writhing Jesus in the corner of his eye.

Ray kept the blank crosses when he moved out, nailed them to the walls in every hovel he ever occupied. Shawkirk was no different. He was older, balder, but he took the nails and drove them through the same holes he always had. Empty crosses in every room.

Ray pissed in jars he lined along the walls of his house. When all sixty were full, he'd begin the process of sprinkling the oldest jar around the back garden, and move on from there. The garden was mostly ferns now, he'd seen to that. He wasn't going to waste himself on anything more recent than ferns. Allosaurs had trampled ferns in pursuit of dryosaurus. Even grass wasn't that old. Grass was younger than people realised, Ray knew. Grass would die, but Ray was betting on ferns.

Shawkirk was expensive, even in the small houses in the outskirts. Ray had money. Wages and a little inheritance. He didn't have expenses, outwith his garden supplies, and he could get them cheap from work. There were the jars as well, but he'd filched most of those from his mother. He'd listen to neighbours scream at their kids, one another about the money they were all wasting. He would smile every time. They could all have had his money - if they hadn't been scared of their loneliness.

They all baffled him. His space was his own. He stood in his living room, pissing into the latest ceramic and laughed when he heard the kids next door badger their parents into buying a trampoline. Saps who'd bought into advertising. They'd lived their whole lives in anticipation of

squirting out kids, and now the kids dictated everything. He was an affable neighbour, he thought. When the football came over the fence and rolled over his ferns he would throw it back. They thanked him like he was doing them a favour. Like they were beggars.

He had splurged on a television. He was not immune to society. They told him he needed a television, the channels and the recorder. He did as he was told. He sat on the floor most of the time. His armchair was for sleeping. He chewed on fiddleheads he'd harvest from immature bracken. He watched game shows religiously, watched the scum trip up on general knowledge. 'Wrong!' he'd tell them, before they answered. He had become quite accurate in predicting stupidity.

The bosses at the garden centre learned they couldn't reach him by text. When they called, he'd fill them in on how the contestants were doing. 'A moron,' he'd say. 'Thinks he's on *Takeshi's Castle* or something, can't answer anything.' 'Brilliant,' they'd say, 'can you work Saturday?'

Ray would look up at a blank cross and pretend to think. He would always say yes, but he liked to make them wait.

Ray's father had been a marine biologist. That had been how he had introduced himself at parties, though he mainly concerned himself with lochs. Ray had once commented that lochs were not marine, and received a smack to the ear. The smacks came more frequently when it became clear Ray had no academic talent to speak of – and they came near constantly after the expulsion for grabbing that girl.

It hadn't bothered Ray so much. His father was useless a long while before his death. Starting a family had pulled the man inland, to rot in a suburban garage surrounded by leeches in specimen jars. The remnants of the marine days had hung overhead – literally, in the case of the

skull of the long-finned pilot whale that was suspended from the garage rafters. A swinging bleached nightmare. Ray had stood among the specimen jars, in front of its open jaws and he had only grown bigger. He was sure his mother had thrown it out now.

"This is a leech," Ray said to himself one night, pressing a drinks glass to his arm. He pulled it loose and watched the red suction mark fade. "They draw blood."

He bought bones from those who would sell. The butchers gave them for free, if you told them you had a dog. There were other means. A boy named Alex would come from time to time and hand him a small collection for a tenner. 'Cat,' he would say, 'rat, mouse, pigeon' and jab his finger against each one.

Ray snapped each bone individually, boiled them in water. When they were softened he ground them with a mortar and pestle and buried them kneeling in the dirt. The ferns grew quicker that way. It was one of the few things his dad had taught him, showing him the bursts of life along river banks where fisherman had dropped the offal.

He had formed a sort of prayer over the years. It only sounded like words. Life cycles, growth from death – that sort of thing. It wasn't particularly consistent.

The police came on Monday. It had been a while since Alex's last visit, and so Ray did not think about the bones straight away. That thought came as he opened the door, and registered the Police Scotland logo on the stab-vest.

"Hello," he said, and nothing else.

“We’re canvassing the neighbourhood,” the officer told him. Ray did not like the way she craned her neck, like she was trying to see the rest of the house behind him. “Did you hear or see anything unusual last Tuesday, particularly in the early morning?”

She did not sound like she expected a useful answer.

“What’s this about?” he asked, fingers twisting on the door handle.

“Perhaps you’ve read the papers regarding-”

“Newspapers are good for nothing but mulch,” he said. “Eh, for the garden.”

“Right. Well, sir, there was a death out by the church on the moors. Filling in the blanks, the victim was in this general area-”

Ray straightened, dropped his hand from the door. “Probably down from that nutjob house out there.”

“We don’t believe so, sir.”

“Murder?”

“We’re not at liberty to discuss that.” She produced a grainy photo. “He would be older than he is here, in his late fifties.”

“Doesn’t look like much.”

“Well,” she said, and Ray did not understand the relief in her expression, “thank you for your time sir. If you remember anything out of the ordinary, please do not hesitate to call.”

“What’s ordinary,” he said, and shut the door.

He watched her join up with a colleague coming from another house, saw her gesture back towards the door. ‘Some kind of disabled’, he heard, muffled by glass and a laugh. The kids next door were laughing too, when he stepped out the back garden. Probably nothing to do with him. That’s what he would tell himself later. In the present however, he kept low to the ground and filled in every gap and crack in the wall between the two gardens.

He researched the death, as best as he could. He wasn’t one for computers, and the local newspaper hadn’t made much of an effort. Dead man, not local. That could mean a lot. Ray wondered what would possess a man to creep into an abandoned church. He looked up at his blank crosses and was glad to see that no-one looked back.

He woke to scratching from the garden. He slid from his armchair and tilted the blinds from the back window. The security light coloured the ferns in splendorous health, contrasting greater against the shadows. Midges and flies reflected for a fraction of a second. For the first time in his life, Ray wished there was someone else with him. For the first time in a while, he ascended the stairs and slept in the cavernous peace of his bedroom.

He tried discussing the dead body with his colleagues at the garden centre, as they cleaned the fish tanks. None of them had heard of it. They didn’t like to make eye contact with him. They scraped the algae in silence.

“I’ve got a whole garden of ferns,” he told his mother, when he called that night. He kept his eyes on the walls, where the nothing hung from the crosses as they did in her house. He tried not to see her, see her continually wizening past the point of parody.

“So you keep telling me.”

"It's looking better."

"You've told us that one anaw."

"Sorry," he said. "I think I'm having a tough time of things."

"Tough times all over," she said. "Are you visiting fir ma birthday?"

"Eh, yeah. Did you hear about the dead guy in the church? No one's sure how he got there."

"That's how you change yer topic? What church? What on earth ur you on aboot this time?"

Ray checked his garden through the blinds. "Just a church near me. Really near me actually. The police were asking round."

She started her coughing, and Ray was beginning to fear he'd startled her into a fit until she came back on, throat sounding drier: "It'll be those Muslims. Ruining a church, an a white man, no doubt."

"The church was abandoned, Mum."

"There you go. That's that lot for you – desecrating a sacred place. Probably used the crucifixes fir God-only-knows."

"It's a Protestant church."

"Oh." The cough again. "Yer dad was a Protestant."

"Yeah."

"Yer dad wis a piece of shit."

"Yeah."

"Never wanted tae marry him but we hid tae in those days, being pregnant wae you. Father Francis wouldnae talk tae me anymair – pregnant by an Orangeman he says tae my mum and Christ, my faither went…"

"Bye Mum," said Ray.

"You be careful," she said.

He went into the garden before dark. There were no children on trampolines today. Their absence was unsettling. He thought he might have to reassess his opinion of the little termites. He got to his knees, bracken leaves springing back up to cover him to the chest. He muttered his burial prayer, and started over when he got to the end.

It took him a while to notice because he had moved the rock himself. Rolled it in front of a hole in the wall when the children were laughing at him. It had been partially hidden by the ferns, but it had been forced back among them now. The dirt was furrowed where it had been pushed out from the hole. Worms were visibly exploring the changed terrain.

Ray slept in his bedroom again. He was waking up sore now, cramped from sleeping in an unfamiliar bed.

Alex came the next day. Ray had been pulling at a fiddlehead in the kitchen when the greens and whites muddling through the frosted glass of the back door had darkened into the vague shape of humanity. The knock came a moment later. Ray had been lucky this time, he thought. All he had been able to seize as a defensive tool had been his spoon. If something really was easing through holes in his wall, stalking through his garden, they would not knock.

Alex sniffed. “You smell bad,” he said. “Worse than usual.”

“If there’s a smell you tracked it in with you.”

“People smell bad when they’re sick. The body’s too busy fighting infection to see to the day-to-day things.” He dropped a bag of bones on the kitchen table. “Less this month,” he said.

“Some of these are old,” Ray said, peering in. He always washed the bones he sourced from Alex. He hadn’t at first, and been repulsed to find a slug making its way along the hollow of a leg.

“I’ve not been feeling it recently,” said the boy.

“Well if there’s less, I pay less.”

“No you don’t,” said Alex. He prodded the frying pan hanging over the sink. “You still pissing in pots and pans?”

“I don’t do that.”

Alex didn’t say anything. He waited for the money. Talking had taken all of the energy out, it seemed. Ray tried to fob the boy off with a fiver. The note remained motionless in an immense open hand until Ray was forced to relent and add another fiver. He took up his fiddlehead again and worried his teeth in.

“Did you hear about this church thing?” Ray said.

“What church thing?”

“The police have been all over.”

"Still?"

"Well, yeah. They found a dead guy."

"People must find dead people all the time."

"But it's unsettling," Ray said. "Right? I mean, I live alone here."

Alex laughed. It both began and ended too quickly. "I'd be careful then. There's a dead body and you live in the creepy house nearby."

"What do you mean?"

"Remember that lassie got murdered someplace and they thought the landlord did it? He was funny looking. Didn't do it though." Alex prodded a finger into the bridge of Ray's nose. "That is you, my friend."

Ray saw the smile drop back into nothing, and Alex lumbered out of the house as blank-faced as he had entered. Ray locked the door.

Ray said his burial prayer. He left the bones where Alex had dropped them and went to watch another game show. He hadn't thought of his house being creepy. Himself, perhaps. An awful lot of people laughed when he passed by. Had children, jumping on their trampoline, laughed at the house they glimpsed over the garden wall? Had they talked – had their parents – talked of a dark house among the ferns in the way he thought of the church?

The more he thought about it, the more Ray was convinced they had.

The scratching, the pushed boulder. Intruder, or animal used to using the passage. Or – whispered dares. Stories, urban legends. The cockiest of all of them squeezing into his garden and defiling his work.

That seemed likely too.

It was night again, when he stopped thinking. He'd missed work. They called and told him his absence had been noted. There was a first time for everything, he supposed. He left them on speaker to pick at a weed growing through the living room skirting board. When they hung up he headed out to the garden.

Ray moved low through the bracken, digging his fingers into the earth. He slammed the rock back in front of the hole, heard the impact rattle as his and his neighbours' security light flickered and startled. He tipped a specimen jar over the obstacle as gradually as if he was pouring a pint. Some of the cold stuff sprinkled bare toes. Let intruders crawl through that.

He lay among his ferns, overturning clumps of black dirt to see the flecks of bone meal he'd spread all over his garden. He regarded his house through the fronds of a young plant and hated the sight of it. The thing that had been expected of him, his suburban house and his tasteful blank crosses. If he planted bone meal under the carpet perhaps the crosses would grow their own screeching Jesuses.

A strange man, in a strange overgrown house. The officer would have noted as much. Perhaps an annotation in the margin: 'didn't kill anyone, but guilty of something'. Maybe they could find something, smack him around the ear.

He wondered how many people would wake, start at the sound of him wrenching open the garage at this time. He hoped scared children huddled by their windows and peered between blinds. The strange man was about strange business.

He'd taken the Beetle off his mother's hands when she became too sick to drive. Spattered with dirt from his efforts potting plants in the garage, backseats clogged with the residue of neglect. It had been bone white once, his cramped little shell. It wasn't much of any colour now. Just an aberration like himself.

Ray got into his car. There was nothing to be scared of. He could stare at the whole of Shawkirk and only grow bigger. The place was a preserved skull, treasured by fading idiots. Bones were for burial. He fondled the crucifix hanging from the rear view mirror and mumbled his burial prayer all at once.

He caught his eye in the mirror, short of breath.

"I'm the scariest thing in this whole town," Ray said, and the engine growled with him.

Leatherback

They were called Leatherback that week. They were still The Glass Keys online, but that was because Dan had forgotten the account password. Marina had lobbied for a return to the old name, but Stuart and Rana had already drawn up the new logo by that point and refused to back down. Word had already got out, they claimed. They were Leatherback now.

Marina drove them out to Shawkirk in her dad's van, banking on an early start. Instead, she spent several hours driving through every narrow street near Glasgow University, trying to track down each individual member. It had been Rana's idea, and even she was late, scribbling notes in their bed until she had to be rolled out ('sorry Marina, I got distracted'). Stuart climbed aboard shirtless, demanding to be driven to the nearest clothes store at once, which came close to happening until Marina found out that Dan was at his girlfriend's in 'fucking Bishopbriggs'.

Two hours off-schedule, they reached Shawkirk, Marina stopping for petrol when houses started getting scarce - she had seen *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre,* she told the others.

"Christ," said Dan, eyeing the pedestrians. "It's still the Seventies here. Oh, hang on – what's the difference between an apple and an Orange?"

"Don't know," said Rana.

"I've never heard of a dirty apple bastard!"

Rana. She was from there. She didn't speak to her family anymore, a combination of the lesbian thing and the no-longer-a-Muslim thing. Marina had been confused at her recommending Shawkirk for her grand idea. Marina had been talked into a lot lately.

"I think my uncle ran his brothel up here," Marina said.

“Yeah,” said Rana. She was leaning over her seat, trying to help Dan force a t-shirt over Stuart’s head. “No, wait, it was at the Glasgow facing side. Almost in Newlands.”

“How do you know?”

“Was a big story. Nothing ever happens here.”

It was true about Marina’s uncle. He fled to Spain after a tabloid exposé, and was eventually dragged back. The family got some decent holidays out of it. She tried not to mention it at the uni’s feminist society social. Life was just like that, sometimes.

Rana’s brilliant location turned out to be an abandoned NHS Mental Health Unit on the moors. Up nice and high, where the trees gradually thinned out. Presumably out of sight for the suburban folk, Marina figured, and out of mind. Padded cells dotted in sinister locations, because councils and concern groups were terrified of having schizophrenics anywhere near them.

“Look gang, an abandoned mental hospital,” said Rana. “Let’s split up and search for clues.”

“Ruh-roh,” Marina said, and swallowed a couple of Valium.

“Christ, did we end up at Carstairs?” Stuart was asking. He was more hungover than Marina had first realised.

“Brilliant isn’t it?” Rana said. “There’s your album cover, inspiration, music video…” It was like her to get ahead of herself.

“It’s going to be alarmed,” Marina said. “It’s boarded up.”

She wasn't sure where things stood with Rana. Well off as Marina was, she was still paying for the flat herself, and a chance look inside Rana's bag had revealed a stack of CVs that hadn't diminished in the slightest. Marina didn't know how to broach the subject with someone who had nowhere else to go.

Someone had drawn a jizzing cock on the NHS sign. The building itself looked like it had been converted from a country house at some point – the sort of place that ended up with a worn sandstone exterior and exposed piping interior after dozens of renovations. A garage converted into a larger kitchen. Linoleum floors rolled out over everything, except from the single room with a couch, a plant and a plaque thanking the original owner for his kind donation to the public, pretending the sale hadn't occurred in the aftermath of the Depression. Plywood was jammed in front of every window and door. Someone had drawn cocks on those too.

Marina killed the engine and jumped out. Rana was in the middle of justifying her experiment to the boys. They were not exactly convinced. Rana was the main songwriter. She reminded them frequently. Coffee shop laptops, notepads full of scribbles. In the cellar venue of a bar Marina had watched her face drop when a previously apathetic crowd cheered the opening chords of Dan's own 'Cocaine Did a Number on My Teeth'.

"It's tradition," Rana was saying. "William Friedkin hired Tangerine Dream when he saw them play in an abandoned church."

"There's an abandoned church back there. We should go there if we're being all traditional."

"Yeah, but they found a body there a couple weeks ago," said Rana, "so…"

“The idea of a dead body,” said Dan, slamming the van’s back doors, “is way cooler than a mental hospital.”

“Nah, nah,” said Rana, “the mental institution throws up all kinds of warped imagery. It’s traditional.”

“I’m pretty sure folk were dying before mental hospitals were a thing.”

“Too generic,” said Rana. “Who cares about an anonymous dead guy? Nah. Plus, here I can get some good shots with the light coming in. You’re the guy who wants a music video.”

“A good music video. Girls with big tits and that. Not this asylum shit, it’s too gimmicky.”

“Everyone shut up,” said Stuart. His shirt was off again. His goosebumps were bigger than his nipples.

Marina had a go at one of the plywood boards, Valium-sluggish. One boot on the wall, the ham actor approach. Her fingers came away scraped, flakes of paper-thin wood trapped under the nails. The greyed-out alarm above the windows made no sound.

“You could call your family,” Rana said, jogging over. “I’m sure one of them knows how to break and enter.”

“This was your idea.”

Rana had a way of flinching when a joke didn’t land. It had been cute at first.

‘How’d you hear about this place anyway?’

Rana tapped a knuckle to the NHS logo. ‘My friend Catherine was here a long time ago.’

‘The nutjob?’

‘Hmm. Hence the coming here. You alright?’

‘I’m fine,’ said Marina, feeling the Valium drooping her eyelids. ‘Tired.’

It turned out the plywood was their best bet – one of the back doors was not boarded, but secured by a heavy lock and chain. Marina felt more at ease – the building being so secure meant they weren’t going to be ambushed by any crazed squatters, though ghosts were very much still in play.

Feeling suddenly enthused even under the Valium, she talked Dan into helping her have another go at the plywood. Stuart received the order too, but he was occupied retching by the wheels. Rana circled behind, camera out and stealing ‘exterior shots’. She had one of those editing apps now. A true Renaissance woman, to listen to her.

“Don’t fucking film me doing illegal stuff,” Dan told her.

It would not be the first time Dan had been photographed or filmed doing something illegal, but Marina found herself agreeing. She tried to wrench her section of the plywood around the nail securing it, feeling her neck burning under the gaze of that damn camera. And that got her thinking about CCTV. She hadn’t clocked any on the way in, but that didn’t mean it wasn’t there.

“Fuck’s sake,” she said, leaving out the ‘Rana’ part. She ripped her hands free and kicked at the board. The impact sent her back on one foot at first, but Dan had already caught on and they both sprang at it on her recovery, splintering the bastard open in a matter of seconds. There was something for Rana’s stupid video.

The way was cracked in, chunks of wood skidding across the floors. Marina closed her eyes as the sawdust circled them. No alarm. She kissed Rana and helped her up and through the windowsill.

"Don't say I never do anything for you."

They were in the carcass of a reception room. Much of the furniture had long since been stripped away, saving the calcified receptionist desk, evidently bolted to the floor. Dan kicked at a dusty laminated poster of a male model advocating a suicide hotline and claimed he knew the guy.

The walls, Marina noted, were intact. She wished she knew how to scavenge the copper wire. It could be worth a return trip with tools, provided they weren't arrested this time.

"I think we'll need more light," said Rana. She was already in the hallway. "Can't shoot in here like this."

"A little graininess never hurt anyone's reputation," Marina said. "You're the one who showed me *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* after all."

"Still have to be able to see something."

It was not as bad for the eyes as it was for Rana's camera.

A staircase rose in one direction. There was a landing every couple of steps, and great white bars growing up to the top floor, penning the stairs in by the wall. The message was clear there – no one was jumping in this place.

Ahead, a heavy steel door hung open, a multitude of security locks protruding from its spine – the hospital had been neatly segmented. Marina gave it an experimental shove. The thing wouldn't shift. Mere stubbornness had turned to implacability after years of abandonment. That sounded like something for Rana's notebook.

"Whatever we do," Rana said, "let's not have that shut behind us."

"I think it'd be electronic." Marina tried pressing in one of the dorsal locks and came away with nothing but dirt on her hands. "See?"

Dan had led Stuart into the hall, like escorting a toddler. Stuart had found his t-shirt again and was intent on whistling 'Sumer is icumen in' to prove his recovery. Rana ordered them back out. She wanted the instruments in, even if they weren't going to play them. She could edit around everything later, she said, but she needed the shots first.

"Are you okay?" Marina asked. "Being back here?"

She laughed. "I didn't grow up in this building."

"You know what I mean."

She tucked her hair over her ear. "Yeah," she said. "This place is great. I think I have a title."

"What is it?"

"Well it's not a title-title."

"Right," Marina said. "As long as it's working for you."

The “I love you” came as a surprise. Not that Marina hadn’t heard it before, not that she hadn’t said it herself. Still, the two of them alone in the gloom, all she could think was ‘why?’ Why, when they were back in Shawkirk. Rana’s apparent source of inspiration. She who had come into Marina’s life, Marina’s band, Marina’s flat. She had nowhere else to go and yet she was in Shawkirk again.

“I love you too.”

Rana handed over her notes and went through the steel door, flashing the camera’s torch in her wake. The red blink of the record setting marked her out like boat lights. That footage, Marina figured, was going to end up looking a lot more unsettling than intended. There was the occasional unblocked window down the corridor – small ones guarded by steel bars, the same ones you’d see in every doctor’s surgery. The cells did not have windows, except a token square built into the doors. Perhaps cell was not the right word. Whoever had come here had come here for help.

Marina wandered into the first cell and checked Rana’s notes. They were mostly illegible. A couple lines of poetry every page or so. Rough sketches with excess lines, scattering across the page. This, she thought, is what the leech has been doing instead of looking for work. She fingered the Valium in her jacket pocket. Nothing else calmed her these days. There weren’t many left though. Moderation.

She breathed in.

She thought too much, her parents said. Her uncle had as well, so perhaps it wasn’t great advice. He probably cracked that one for the women in his ‘spa’ too.

Another couple of pages. And then - Marina. Amidst a black whirlwind of hasty annotations and lyrics, was the rough outline of her Facebook photo. The photo itself was of both of them, but she'd taken herself out in the drawing. Just Marina. The reliable one.

"Jesus," she said to the empty room. Valium could dull a lot, but not everything.

She gave the padded wall a shot. Maybe she was in here for this, all that rage and paranoia boiled over. Doctors tutting, parents sobbing in the reception. The notebook to the floor, Marina threw herself against the dust strewn mattress pack.

It fucking hurt.

So did the floor, when she bounced off the wall and to the ground. Her left shoulder had cracked into the wall, so it was only fitting the right one was as bruised when she landed on it. She tried fixing her hair from the floor.

"The hell you doing?" Dan asked. He had his guitar strap slung over his neck.

"Sumer is icumen in," Stuart was singing. He needed the doorframe to stay upright.

"Padded," Marina said, the air coming back to her. "Supposed to be a padded wall."

Dan plucked a couple of strings. "The operative part of that phrase is the fucking 'wall' part, non?"

Rana was calling, excited. Marina pulled herself off the floor, groaning. No one offered a hand..

They'd left the chairs, in the room Rana had found. The windows were barred here too, so afternoon light caught the luminous grey of the settled dust. She was standing in the middle of the

circle, arms spread like a preacher where the light was centred. Annoyingly beautiful. Rana, former teenage runaway, grinning happily back in Shawkirk. Spotlighted where she belonged.

"Good innit," she said.

"Go fucking Leatherback," said Dan. He strummed the opening chords of 'Cocaine Did a Number on My Teeth'. "We need proper set up?"

"The electricity's all shut off," Rana said. "But we play dry, we make sure it matches up when we fix everything up."

"Super cool," said Dan, and Marina thought about stabbing him.

"Stuart," Rana said, "where's your drumkit?"

Stuart tilted his huge head up from the snare drum he was cradling. "All of them?"

"Yes, all of them," Marina said, not quite expecting her voice to come out at the volume it did. "You fucking idiot!"

He shuffled off.

"You okay Marina?" The light had shifted from Rana's head to her shoulders, obscuring her face. She held the bass Dan had fetched for her in one hand.

"Yeah. Everything's great." Neither of them replied. "I'm just gonna help Stu with the other drums."

She caught up with Stuart in the corridor as Rana and Dan's idle strumming turned into a song she didn't recognise. When the hell had they written that one? It was heavy on Rana's bass,

and even at this distance Marina could feel the lingering vibration of her four strings more than any of Dan's frantic madness.

"Stuart," she said, "sorry I yelled."

"S'okay Maz."

"What do you think," she said, and he stopped to listen, "of me being in one of these cells for the video?"

He came to stand next to her. "Pretty cool yeah. Need a straitjacket."

"That is a problem. Could probably get a makeshift one. Have a look inside."

He did.

She slammed the cell door shut behind him. "Should have been on fucking time today Stu."

She doubted he heard it. She could barely hear him when he revolved and slurred a 'oh haha, very funny'. She hit the steel with alternating bruised shoulders until some deep mechanism clicked. He heard that one.

"Marina?" he said. He shouted the next few ones, but Rana and Dan, playing on in their group therapy room would be oblivious.

"Should be on time," she said, fingering the Valium packet. "Should have worn a fucking shirt."

"Marina! It's not funny anymore! Marina open the fucking door!"

Marina slid down onto her ass. Each slam against the door vibrated through her ribs. She took another Valium, lit up a fag and listened to the music.

"Rana," she said to herself, "can't say Shawkirk's growing on me."

Weasel

lives among skins, the furs pressed into the cloying walls of the den.

Kit of rabbit, hare, mouse and vole. The hairs are shed and never replaced, sticking between her pads, her black nails.

She waits in her tunnel of skin –

the birds are out tonight.

Barn owls, with their dead eyes, swinging down to clack beaks against the merlins, the sparrowhawks and the kestrels.

Weasel feels ribs against her skin, the tunnel of her shape straining against fur. The birds will fight one another down to the yellow grass, and stalk around the mud in search of their pride.

They hunt rats, but not

weasel.

She has seen the rats flee across the moors, driven by men in masks and boiler suits. She has seen the rats spasm and twist

she does this to confuse her quarry,

but their eyes are blank and swivelling, no longer aware, no longer cautious.

The birds can squabble over the steaming intestines.

Merlin, haunching wings over head, backs away from shining white owl hacking pellets over a half-flayed rat.

Weasel whines in lair of skin and bracken. Her tongue flinches away from the aching tooth that forces her on ever slower prey.

She waits.

Rats come again, and again. Pronged teeth pry at the entrance to her den, scratching away at the roots before the steam of decay reaches their snouts. Those that linger see her, coiling over the shell of a rabbit carcass.

She is old, and there is no easy for old. The rats can pass, to be skinned by the kestrels and owls. She will stay in a nest that stinks of lapine flesh, chewing at the tufts of meat that cling to the hair.

Weasel knows man and she knows prey.

Weasel knows when the world is wrong.

Ten Leopards

Aiden Docherty came back into Shawkirk shivering on the seventeenth of October, the wool collar of his coat gnawing at a bruised collarbone. He had been in Glasgow the last two days, spreading the Word. He had been armed with seventy-six A4 sheets of paper – 1 Corinthians 1:18, typed all over:

FOR THE MESSAGE OF THE CROSS IS FOOLISHNESS TO THOSE WHO ARE PERISHING, BUT TO US WHO ARE BEING SAVED IT IS THE POWER OF GOD.

He had been leaving them in public toilets, where he thought they'd be needed. At one point, a few weeks back, he had tried handing verses directly to people and found little success. He had looked up and down the street and found himself sandwiched with various other denominations and Mormons and Muslims besides. The threat of louder competition drove him off the street and onto other ideas. He'd resorted to toilets after the multilevel car park attendants had stopped him slotting the paper behind windshield wipers. McDonalds and train station toilets had taken the bulk of the verses. They would find the people in need there.

But it was time for Shawkirk again. Brian, his friend from university, had put him up for the last two days in his Glasgow flat until scepticism set in. A playful jibe at the verses the first night had become outright mockery on the second, with several remarks about 'picking and choosing'. In any case, Aiden was out of paper.

The effort of the past few days drove him into as swift a solitude as he could manage, heading straight for his parents' house from the station. Retirement saw them on frequent holidays, and he was relieved to find the hall dark and cool. They were in Devon, they'd said that at one point. He slept for two hours against the stairs and then hit the printer.

It was already dark when he got back to Shawkirk's main street, twenty-odd verses stuffed in his coat pockets. The sun had long since substituted for the fluorescent yellow Lidl logo. He peeled his collar away from the skin. Shawkirk was limited for verse targets, especially by the evening. The Lodger was the most obvious destination, but he could already see the faces of everyone he had hated in school waiting there, huddled round their pints. He was something to gossip about now. Brian wasn't the only one to have laughed at his mission.

No, a pub toilet wouldn't do anyway. Drunks were too hyper, too cruel. If they didn't piss on the verses, they'd use them as toilet paper. He bought coffee from the petrol station and walked back to the kebab-stained bench at the train station. He perched on the end, careful to avoid the grease. He had time to think, interrupted solely by his own slurping and the muffled sound of the wind flapping the lid of a polystyrene takeaway box.

Shawkirk was full of the perishing. In Glasgow there was enough foot traffic that he had to reach out to someone, statistically. And you had to want to be reached out to, really. A three person'd God could batter His way to a man's soul, but it was considerably more illegal for a mortal to try the same approach.

"Your problem," Brian had said, "is that this thing of yours justifies anything you want it to. You pick and choose anything you want to believe."

"I believe in the Bible."

"Parts of it, from what I can see. You don't even go to church. Far as I can tell the only consistent tenet of your religion is that you are at the fucking head of it."

The station speaker announced the cancellation of the next train. Aiden tried to work out if that was meaningful. At times he would have to reckon his faith against a knee-jerk declaration of coincidence, like he was rolling dice. The stack of papers crinkled between shirt and coat as he hunched over to finish the coffee. The station speaker repeated the cancellation in a louder voice and he flinched enough that the cup rolled from his hands and down over the platform edge. He could see himself in the hooded black bulb of the station security camera. Aiden slid from the side of the bench and stuffed a verse through the window grate of the station building. The message came through crumpled, but began to unfurl once fully behind bars.

"CCTV cameras are operational in this station twenty-four hours a day," said the speaker, slow and emphatic.

He crossed into the main street again, before whoever was watching could blare another snide comment. He was forced to stop, wheezing, by the wall of the bank, when the paper stack began to slide out from under his coat. The blood in his ears groaned, and he was thankful not to hear approaching engines as he shovelled the Word into his clothes like stage padding. He pulled the coat belt tighter this time. Everything he wore was sliding from him these days. It was a comforting thought, and it chased off the embarrassment. If he was justifying his own behaviour, as Brian had claimed, would he really go threadbare and hungry?

He decided it was best to go uninterrupted. Shoving his hands in his pockets to keep track of the papers, he hurried past the Lodger, snatching laughs and shouts from behind the swinging of doors. Incredibly, there were people sitting outside, faces cast lined and crimson red by the heat lamps. He kept his eye to the ground and the cigarette butts until he was in the clear. Would any

of them read the verse in the station by morning? Odds were good; odds it would mean anything to them were slim. If he got through to one person it would all be worth it.

In the dark space between two buzzing lampposts, Aiden looked both ways down the street and, satisfied, hopped over a stone dyke wall and down into the park. His landing was off, his heel glancing on the wet roots, flipping him onto his back into the mulch of cast-off autumn leaves. The wall, he thought, blinking. He touched the crown of his head and laughed. He might have fallen on his arse, but he had avoided dashing out his own brains at least. When the mud started to seep through to his legs he staggered up and lurched into the blackened park.

It had been years since his last visit to the park, and memory would not have helped in the dark. He came out of the line of the trees onto a featureless plane – mud, grass and concrete path blended into the same nothingness. A mass of flashing lights forced its way across the emptiness, and Aiden waited until it had passed and he could safely surmise it as a man and a dog running with fluorescent lights and jackets. One of the more tame things to encounter in a park at night. He walked on, shuffling his papers to force blood in his arms. Brian could never say he wasn't dedicated, not if he heard of this. Seeing dedication in action could make anyone see sense.

Light and time had an odd relationship, Aiden thought. His eyes were not adjusting to the dark as much as he had hoped, and the seconds passing were arbitrary. Several times he restarted his count, lengthening and shortening seconds in frustrated confusion, until he emerged before the lunar security light fixed glowing to the wall of the public toilets, and his imagined clock hands fell into place. Even blind and disorientated, he had arrived where he was supposed to be.

From his little island of light, he could see reflections in inactive headlights a distance away. He figured he was near the car park, and resolved to avoid it. Whatever business people had in

parked cars in the middle of the night was best not interrupted. He nudged the door of the toilets with his shoe. The door had been shoddily bolted to the Edwardian lean-to that passed for a toilet, and it shuddered on the hinges.

"Anyone in there?"

Reassured, he stepped in and bolted the door behind him. The lightbulb gave a few false starts before it revealed a cracked brown toilet and sink, overlooked by a narrow window of frosted glass. Aiden put a finger to the grimy windowsill and it came away wet. That was not unexpected. He had prepared for situations like this in Glasgow, and it would work here. He wouldn't be helping anyone if he yielded before something so simple.

He leant against the rugged bricks as he fished for the string from an interior pocket, holding out the paper stack with his other hand. He took the string in his teeth, selected one of the verses and stuffed the rest into his belt, and worked the strand through a hole in the paper he worried with the nail of his right thumb. Once the paper hung on a short loop he bit the string into a manageable length and knotted the ends. Climbing up onto the toilet, he kept one hand on his stomach guarding the papers while he looped the string over the window handle. As the paper settled, the colours warped in the frosted glass, exaggerating the swing of the tether. He had never liked frosted glass. It always looked as if something was moving behind it.

He made to step down and see how it looked, and heard the mud of his shoe squeak against the toilet seat. The back of his head cracked against the floor, colours pulsing a torrent behind his eyes and time went out of play.

Groggy, he sat up and pulled his foot from the toilet. The heel was dripping.

“Brian,” he said, and didn’t know why.

The Corinthians verse swung from side to side against the window, unsettled by his fall. Even squinting he could not read the text. His fingers blurred at the edges as he counted them. He pulled himself up and hobbled out of the light. Car headlights glinted in his peripheral. He couldn’t tell if they had crept closer.

It was after he clambered up the boundary wall and onto the street, stone carving at the soft pockets of flesh under his knees, that he could form a coherent thought. He walked, hand on stomach. He would look dazed, he figured, and if he stopped to breathe he’d attract attention even on this deserted street. The verses were undamaged, again. As close to proof as you could get in matters of faith. The Word endured. Aiden watched rings of light ripple out from each blurred lamppost. It was the contrast with the park, he told himself. Everything was colour. Each car went howling past spiralling reds and yellows, and the neon logo of the petrol station filled a blank sky.

He was standing below it now, he realised. He touched the back of his head. Wet, sore but what came off on his fingers was too dark to be blood. He closed his eyes, basking in the heat from the glare. A sliding door rattled open.

“Aiden! Aiden!”

A dim, raggedy shape was emerging from the side of a black van at the pumps. Other shapes were standing around in the shape of people. He had thought the place empty.

“Yeah?” He could feel his pulse in his eye sockets.

“It’s Rana. From school?”

“Oh, hi, haha,” he said. Slowly, he added features to a blank face, the blurring fading to form Rana. “How – how are you?”

“Ah not bad, not bad. We were up the moor. Band stuff. I’m in a band now. Well, not in the band really, but I’m kind of the manager. And we all got in a big fight of course. Cause we’re a band.”

“Oh, aye. That’s good.”

“I’m the Yoko.”

“Could be worse.”

“God I’ve not seen anyone from school in ages. Are you still at uni?”

“I dropped out.”

Rana inclined her head in sympathy and blurred again. “Sorry.”

“No, it’s fine. Just wasn’t what I was expecting.”

“Could say that about a lot of things.”

“Are you back in Shawkirk then?”

Rana was quiet enough that Aiden blinked several times to reassure himself that time wasn’t lapsing again. “No,” she said. “Don’t think I’ll ever be back.”

“Sorry.”

“Well again – things don’t turn out as you’re expecting.”

“There’s reason in everything.”

She was staring him down, maybe. It was hard to fight the urge to shut his eyes.

“We didn’t even get to the lesbian part. It was all about the hijab.”

“I heard something like that,” Aiden said. “But you’re with friends now.”

“You can look at it that way.”

“It’s better than nothing. There’s still something there.”

“Hm.” The face pulled back into obscurity. “I’ve to go wrangle my friends now. Take care Aiden.”

He mumbled the same and did not move. The van snarled its way out of the petrol station, windows tinted against the Aidens of the world. He spun to watch it go up the road to Glasgow, and kept spinning until he faced the car behind him, the one that had waited there with the growling engine and the amber reading light that vomited three silhouettes leaning forward in their seats. Rana’s van was four red lights vanishing over the hill.

Aiden approached the car. He was swaying, he thought. The blurred colours could be anything in the shape of an idea of a car – this hunched, yellow-eyed thing with its shaking riders. An automatic window whirred open.

Aiden unbuttoned his coat and let the papers spill out, into the wind and street.

Thylacine (Völlig Losgelöst)

Strangers clapped one another on the back, squeezed hands and talked about what a great man Francis McCarthy had been. Often they didn't say anything else – they'd see one another, wade through others like them, embrace and say 'aw he wis an affay nice man'. One man went further and delivered a speech on the 'perspective' the bereavement had given him, as Simon's parents nodded in agreement. The heels of new shoes pressed tight squares all over the living room carpet. In one print, a 'cool original' Dorito lay squashed flat. Simon noticed it when he was musing on how much of an arsehole Grandpa Francis had been.

"Someone's making a fucking mess," he said. Not that Grandpa Francis could do much about that anymore.

Nobody said anything in return. Simon left the room, and ground the crisps with his heel on the way.

Jane was standing underneath the grandfather clock, tapping her fingers against the dark wood. Simon had tried to talk to her after the service, but she had gone off in a different car. Of all his relatives, she stood out as the tolerable one. She had never once asked about his eye, though he assumed she had heard the embarrassing story

"God knows how that thing stays on time," Simon said. "I never saw him use it."

"He always said I wasn't to touch it," his cousin replied.

"Yeah, well, he was a sensitive old bastard."

Jane took her hand away from the clock, smile dying. "There's been too much death, lately."

“I dunno about you,” said Simon, “but I’m not too bothered by this one.” When she turned to look at him, he managed: “But who knows how we’ll feel a week down the line.”

“Yeah,” she said. “What’s that you’ve got?”

“Whisky and coke,” he said. “No one’s paying attention.”

“Good. Let’s get me one.”

“Is Robert Ford coming too?” Simon pointed down at the ginger cat that had followed him from the room and begun to coil around Jane’s legs.

Jane stooped to pick the animal up. It placed its paws on her shoulder and swung its head round to glare at Simon like a hairy teratoma. “Robert Ford goes where he wants now,” Jane said.

“God knows he has fuck all else,” Simon said. Some years ago a young Robert Ford had slashed his forehead open when he had stuck his head through the cat flap. Grandpa Francis had found the whole ordeal hilarious. For years he had sent birthday cards with claw marks beneath his signature. Simon had to threaten to bring one of his dogs round to bring an end to that. It was funny to think about now, that a scratched forehead had been a major obstacle in his life. That he had been anxious about his height, his birthmark, his voice. Here Simon was years down the line, missing an eye and any winning personality traits he might have had.

They took to the kitchen and he fetched her a whisky. An expensive one, from Francis’ collection. It wasn’t worth anything now, and Simon couldn’t stop smiling when he diluted it with coke, swirling all that money with sugar and syrup. Multiple strangers eased by them, stooped figures with necks too scrawny for their collars.

“Tastes bad,” Jane said.

“Course it does. We’re in mourning.”

“They’ll yell at us if they see us drinking.”

“Nah. Told you they’re not paying attention.”

“My parents don’t know I drink.”

Simon downed his glass. “They probably do. Just easier to ignore it.”

“Parents do do that,” Jane said. She preoccupied herself with leveraging Robert Ford onto the dining room table. The cat did not want to leave her. She was forced to put the drink down first, and lift the limp bundle off with both hands. Robert Ford dropped to the linoleum and coiled around the table leg, offended.

“You’ve made an enemy there,” he said.

“He’s just grumpy. Kinda like you really.”

Jane was the only person he knew who might have used ‘grumpy’. Even his mother used the term ‘selfish prick’ when she could. He shrugged. “More like his owner. Temperamental bellend.”

“Are we still talking about you?”

They peeled out of the kitchen when an aunt threatened to ‘say hello properly when she got back from the loo’. Under the grandfather clock, Simon stumbled to find a seat on the stairs. Jane caught his arm, but he had already jarred his back against the edge.

“Drunk already?”

He tapped his white eye. “I have no fucking depth perception.”

“Right,” she said. “Sorry.”

He expected her to leave after that, but she crouched down beside him, knees up to her chest. Both of them had orange cat hairs dotting their mourning clothes, though Robert Ford did not seem to have followed them out the kitchen.

“They’ve all got funny stories about him,” she said. “I wish I could remember more.”

“All be exaggerated anyway,” he said. “Most of them. People have shit memories.”

“You said you remembered when I was born.”

“I do,” he said, indignant.

“You’d have been, what, one and a half?”

“So?”

“That’s not a shit memory.”

Simon grinned. “Ah, but I’m not people.”

She liked that one. “I know how that feels.”

“Figure we’ll get anything?” he asked. “In the will, I mean.”

“I don’t,” she said. “Have you looked outside?”

Simon had. Thigh-high grass and veiny, purplish ivy were waging a war over the old house. In what had been the original patch of front lawn, Simon had spied grass growing through a rusted

lawnmower. The back garden, from what he could see of it, was so dense with vegetation that he would not have been surprised if Grandpa Francis had been ambushed and killed by a tiger while seeing to his birdbath. It was hard to reconcile the state of the outdoors with the varnished oak bannisters and dusted artwork of the house itself.

"He clearly didn't have the money for any fixing up," she said.

"Maybe. But inside's alright." A half-forgotten boast waded its way back to him. "Wasn't he always on about coin collections and that?"

Jane tilted her head. "What you thinking?"

A woman was staring at his eye from across the room. Simon squeezed it shut and felt it leak. "I'm thinking his keys are probably still in the utility."

The woman touched his arm as he tried to get past. "Excuse me," she said, "but is your eye okay? It looks-"

"Dead," he told her. "I thought it could take a punch, and it couldn't." He left her to digest that. She could find out the detailed version from someone equally invasive.

Jane kept watch while he took the ring of bronze keys from underneath the calendar. He regretted doing it himself, clambering over disused washing baskets and the brooms that were snapped in two, all points facing up – but he had wanted to avoid opening himself to any sort of vision joke. When his ankle went over sideways on a loose pencil and his cheek met the cabinet, he had the bitter realisation that Jane wouldn't have made any sort of joke. He slipped the keys into his pocket and re-joined the throng in the hall.

"Did I hear you fall in there?"

"No. Anyone ask you what you were doing?"

"Some old guy told me I looked nice."

"Yeah, welcome to Shawkirk."

Simon went up the stairs first, readying an excuse about looking for a toilet in case anyone appeared on the landing ahead. He passed successive framed photographs of ludicrously named cats, the picture quality declining the higher he climbed. The last one was a faded monochrome of a tabby prowling along a tree branch. Something about the perspective was off, and despite the cat's considerable heft, the branch seemed impossibly long and wide, like a scarred and crooked motorway. Simon closed his bad eye and looked again. The picture righted itself.

"Fucking thing," he said.

It took a couple of tries and too much noise to find the right key for Francis' bedroom. Jane made a face from the bottom of the stairs. Simon gave her the finger and found success with a cold black key that looked more suited for an iron gate. He stepped in and held the door until Jane jogged up and in beside him. Robert Ford darted in at her heels, his tail only just flicking out of the way of the closing door. Jane picked him up and circled in place, patting the animal's back like she was trying to burp it.

The room did not feel lived in, though it could only have been vacated a couple of days. The bed had been made, the curtains pulled back to throw light on thin films of dust across its dry mausoleum interior. If he hadn't known otherwise, Simon would have placed it as an unused guest room.

"God," Jane said, "look at all these photos."

“As long as it’s not more cats.”

It wasn’t. The photos that were propped on the dressing table, the ashen mantelpiece and hanging over the bed’s headrest, depicted places further afield than Francis’ home and garden. The centrepiece of the wall was four men in uniform. Francis loomed on the far left, his own camera swinging from the black strap around his neck. His sunglasses were tilted so that one eye glinted free above the silver lenses. He had been handsome at one point.

“I’ve seen this one before,” Jane said. “It’s in Berlin. They were all there ‘hunting Reds’, if you believe Grandpa.”

“He was in Berlin?”

“Yeah, Cold War. Still had time for photos, mind.”

“I didn’t know that,” he said. Another of the photos appeared to show a gloomy checkpoint, though Simon’s immediate assumption was a tollbooth.

“You should have talked to him,” she said. “I did.”

“Yeah,” Simon said, “but the thing is - he was a total cunt.”

“Simon!”

“Fuck’s sake, keep your voice down.”

They made to check the cupboards first, but found the doors stiff and disused. Any sort of display area had been used for photo frames. Simon told Jane that he figured coins were collected in a form of photo album, and the thought of that sank his stomach. The amount of framed photographs suggested a lot of albums.

Simon paused by a forest scene on the mantelpiece. Behind a thick coat of leaves was the glimpse of a long, hanging jaw. “Look at this,” he said.

Jane heard his excitement, and hurried over to be disappointed. “What am I looking at?”

Simon pointed at the striped tail retreating into the foliage. “Tell me that’s not a Tasmanian tiger. A fucking thylacine.”

Jane leaned in. “Simon,” she said. “That’s a cat.”

“The fuck it is, see here,” he said. He took the photo down from its perch, and pointed at the same moment he realised the camera had captured Robert Ford mid-yawn in among sun-dappled weeds. He put the photo down. “Your fault,” he said. “You got me thinking about all that spy stuff.”

“I hope you’ve not imagined all these expensive coins too,” she said.

At the back of his mind, Simon did have the humiliating thought that it might not have been this grandfather who had boasted about antique coin collections. He decided against a confession when his cousin zeroed in on the locked drawers of the dressing table. She took the keys from him and tried a quick succession on the drawers, still balancing Robert Ford on her shoulder. Simon rubbed at his corneas. The dust was making his good and bad eye leak an impressive amount of water. He had seen them flared red in the reflection of the Berlin photo frame. The lock clicked.

“Bit like one of those escape rooms,” said Jane, and looked inside.

“Better be those coins.”

Jane was staring. Simon felt his palms tingle, envisioning piles of money in thick clips.

"What is it?" he asked her.

Jane reached into the drawer, and removed a single thin photograph. She rounded her mouth over her teeth, suffocating a giggle, and wordlessly passed Simon the weathered image.

A man dressed as Hitler had a Margaret Thatcher on all fours atop a moulting old couch, gripping her arse as he was frozen mid-thrust and mid-grunt. The exertion had knotted the faces into Peter Howson grotesques. Simon laughed. Mercifully, neither of the people in the photo appeared to be Francis.

"Cold War wank bank," he said. "Probably worth something, but I'll be fucked if I'm going around asking."

He dropped it back in the drawer. Jane elected not to open the other two, wary of stumbling onto any creative images of Ronald Reagan. "I'm definitely feeling the whole, eh, privacy thing," she said.

Simon examined the bedside table. Empty glasses case and a camera's lens cap. "You don't have any privacy when you're dead. You're too dead to care."

"Maybe." She bobbed Robert Ford up and down. "I mean, it's funny, but I really didn't need to know that about Grandpa."

"Why not?" There was nothing but dust and dead skin under the bed. "Humanises him a little, doesn't it? Cause most of the time he was nothing but a grumpy prick."

“We’re at a funeral,” she said. She went back to the dresser and closed the drawer with a jarring show of force. Robert Ford flinched on her shoulder.

“We’re at a funeral,” Simon said, in a high-pitched voice. And then, although he regretted it as it came out in the same voice: “There’s been too much death lately.”

“You’re a hard person to like, Simon,” said Jane.

He had turned around with the intent to apologise. Jane hugged the fat cat close to a black dress, her eyes hooded by lowered brows. The edges of the image distorted with the water in his eyes, darkness growing along his peripheral. Her sombre brown face lost its definition. He closed his bad eye, and opened it again.

“Yeah,” he said. “That’s what folk say when you tell the fucking truth.”

Jane’s smile was thin. “No,” she said. “They don’t.” She ran her fingers through the cat’s fur. “I loved my grandpa.”

Simon doubled down. “Despite him being a total prick you mean.”

“Nah,” she said, “I think that’s you.” She took the cat with her when she left.

He sat on a dead man’s bed and drew his eyes closed with his fingers. At one point, he knew, being a prick had gotten people to laugh. Then they stopped finding it so funny.

Simon dragged the keys off the dressing table and let them clatter against one another. Once he was sure she was gone he stepped out and locked Francis’ room once more. Something glittered by his feet. A five pence coin. Simon nodded, grim.

At the base of the stairs he looked on a diminished gathering. The inquisitive woman from before stood at the centre of a circle, all of them gnawing their way through rolls and square sausages. No one had looked his way.

Gently, he eased open the front of the grandfather clock, and dropped the ring of keys inside. The clock pendulum juddered against the wood with the impact. When he reached out to steady it, it dropped into his grasp. Neck and ears growing hot, he tried lifting the pendulum back into the clock, shaking it in search of a hook to catch it back into the whole mechanism. Someone was laughing, and it was apparently hilarious.

"Fucking thing," he said, and just left the broken instrument leaning against the side. He closed the clock up once more, and whipped around. The mourners continued their eating.

He saw no sign of Jane on his way through to the kitchen. He had half an apology ready, though it wasn't any good.

He opened the back door and clambered down, past the smokers, into the hanging menace of Francis' garden. Robert Ford passed through his legs and vanished through a parting in the grass, ginger hide briefly striped with the shadow of each blade. Simon followed after him, only to stop when he felt dew cling to his formal trousers.

"Oi," said one of the smokers. "You'll get your shoes dirty."

"I didn't pay for them," Simon said, staring up at the twisted branch of a bulbous, impossible tree.

Orcs

"Thing about this is," said Darren, dragging his fingers along the radio channels, "cause of the internet and everything, we're like the first generation that'll never escape our parents' music."

"What you mean?" said Anwar. He was slumped in the backseat, flicking crumbs from his t-shirt.

Darren settled the radio on an 80s music station. "Cause like – everything's there. It's digital."

"I'm sure they had like, old music channels in the eighties."

"Well yeah, but records only last so long. If the guy in the eighties lost The Beatles' shit or something, he has to go buy it again."

"Do they not pay for music these days?"

"I dunno, I dunno how radio stations work."

"Greg, they not pay for music these days?" said Anwar, leaning forward into the front, tapping Greg's shoulder.

Greg shrugged. Offering an opinion tended to get him made fun of, and he couldn't say he knew much about music. He kept on looking out the passenger seat window. Darren had circled them round the park twice now, and looked to be starting another lap. At each red traffic light, Darren would put them on a new radio station, Anwar would tell him to buy an aux cable, and Greg would say nothing. Darren would sometimes turn and sing to the other two, badly mimicking whatever song he'd found this time. Whenever he did, Greg would have to look away. The right

side of Darren's face was still healing, and healing poorly. Between the cheekbone and the jaw ran a pink, puckered wound that still showed the scrapes of teeth marks. Darren's beard, patchy even before someone bit out part of his face, hit a bald patch at this point. Occasionally Greg would catch a glimpse of it in the mirror, this fleshy cavern margined by wiry hairs, and it would be a while before he could think of anything else.

"Let's go to a Waitrose," Anwar said. "Get some fancy brownies."

"Waitrose is for quality folk," said Darren. "They don't let Pakis in."

"Fuck you."

"And it's too expensive to let fat cunts like Greg in there, eh?"

"I'm not fat," said Greg.

"Is it a gland disorder then?" Anwar said, sitting up properly.

Anwar himself had put on a lot of weight, but Greg decided not to say anything. Depending on mood, Anwar could be a loyal ally or a savage tormentor. Unlike Darren, who had left tents behind and straight up built a house in the latter camp.

"Or a brain tumour," said Darren.

"What?"

"A brain tumour. My cousin had one and it messed with the water part of his brain, like what's waste and what's not."

"The hippogriff," said Anwar.

“Yeah, it fucked with his hippogriff and he kept all the water in his body and got fat.”

“I’m not fat,” said Greg.

“Hang on, there’s the cunt there.” said Darren, slowing at first, then pulling into the car park entrance. He drew to a stop in front of a blank-looking boy who sidled up to the passenger window. “You’re late.”

Greg obediently held the window button down, watched as the glazed figure became more human, vague qualities suddenly overrun with clogged pores, acne and hairs clinging to one another with teenage grease.

“Sorry.” The kid was thrusting a twenty into the car, first at Greg, then past him. A sour smell eased its way in through the open window.

“Waste of petrol,” said Darren, snatching the twenty and passing over the weed.

“I didn’t tell you to drive in circles.”

“Why did we drive in circles?” asked Greg.

Darren leaned over Greg and sent the window shooting back up, just as the kid’s fingers slipped past. As they drove away, Greg saw the kid stuff the weed in his pockets and give the departing car the finger.

“I feel advertised to,” said Anwar, rubbing his stomach. “Let’s go back to yours, I wanna smoke.”

This was hardly unusual – Anwar always wanted to smoke. While he’d sell like Darren if he felt like it, he was generally far too interested in smoking to be a reliable contact for anyone.

He was the only person Greg knew who used a bong, like in films. The thing was disgusting – a bright plastic orange, encrusted with greys and greens after a lifetime spent avoiding a wash. One time Darren had made Greg chug the stagnant water from Anwar's bong, while the two of them chanted.

Darren hit the steering wheel to the beat of the song. "Fine by me. Greg? Ah, who're we kidding?" He reached over and slapped the fatty part of Greg's shoulder, hard. "Is there ever a time when Gregsy's had too much?"

"Yet to happen," said Anwar.

"The day he's had enough is the day of the rapture, I think. Anwar, the rapture's this Christian thing where-"

"I know what it is."

"Catholic school did you good."

They went the long way back to Darren's, all the way around the outskirts of Shawkirk so they could go to the McDonald's drive-through and Darren could make stupid comments to a girl who worked there. Greg sat with the food between his legs, the drinks between his feet. Something uncomfortably hot was pressing up against one thigh, but he didn't dare move it in case Darren accused him of stealing before they could work out who had ordered what. It cooled down by the time they reached the house, but a sticky, lukewarm patch of moisture had already impressed itself on Greg's trackies. He tried to air it between the driveway and the front door.

Darren's house always seemed to be in a vague state of construction and upheaval. The family certainly had more than enough money – Darren was constantly spending money far beyond

his net worth as the world's most unpleasant dealer – but the house itself was little more than empty rooms, sawdust, and plastic sheets over couches. The front room was a little more luxurious – a glass coffee table, a black plastic television on a cabinet. Greg sat on the bare floor, dividing up the food. He heard Anwar's bong start to bubble and belch.

"Wanna watch *Planet Earth,"* Anwar said, when the smoke cleared.

"Let's watch something not crap," said Darren, palms pressed together. "My house, int it."

"What you wanna watch Greg?"

Greg didn't say anything. Even when not high, he was happy to watch anything that took him out of the real world for five minutes. He suspected the same was true of Anwar and Darren – all three had wasted one weekend on vodka and weed and a marathon of the children's cartoon *Horrid Henry.* Greg had been disappointed that the theme tune had changed since he was a kid.

He had hoped Darren would see to rolling a joint, and instead found himself peering down the rancid chimney of Anwar's prized possession. Greg tried not to think about the amount of slabber he was smoking by this point. They alternated smoking and eating chicken nuggets, and watched an entire episode of *Walking with Dinosaurs* before they realised it wasn't *Planet Earth.* Then Darren changed it to a movie, and Greg couldn't follow. People yelling and firing guns. Darren wasn't even watching it – preoccupied with his phone buzzing on and off. When he finally put it to his ear, Greg stole some nuggets out from under him and felt like a criminal mastermind.

"What?" Darren was saying. "Nah, I said. Nah, I can't drive, we've been smoking-"

"Who's on the phone," asked Greg. He licked his forefinger and thumb, worked at the trouser stain again.

Darren ignored him, though Greg saw the cheeks suck in with irritation – the wound flexing. "-yeah. Like an hour. Why don't you come down here? Get your shit, and we'll have some passing around still, I think." Here he pressed the phone to his chest and smacked Anwar till he looked up.

"What?"

"Refill that fucking thing, you know where everything is." Phone back up to the ear: "Nothing, Anwar's here. …Nah his case hasn't come up yet. Look, just come over, everyone's looking at me just now. Yeah. Bye."

"Who's that?" Greg asked.

Anwar came back in with more weed and tobacco, cleared a space amid the sawdust-covered table, and began doing his work. The bong hit the glass like a gavel.

"Mhairi Hackett's coming over," Darren said.

"Lewis' wee sister?"

"She's not that wee."

Anwar, looking up from his work on the table: "She's got a good arse on her that one."

Greg looked from Anwar to Darren. "How old is she?"

"I dunno," said Darren, "like sixteen, I guess, you want a fucking birth certificate?"

Greg ate the rest of the nuggets in silence, then lumbered into the kitchen in search of crisps. On Darren's orders, he came back with a bottle of vodka as well. The other two wouldn't stop talking about Mhairi Hackett, about her arse in a skirt.

"Don't eat them aw, you fat bastard," said Darren.

"Okay," said Greg, and wondered why he'd said anything. He got a couch seat this time, worked his way into the plastic while Darren paced and drank straight from the bottle. People were shooting at each other in the movie again – big American black guys with big American teeth. Greg had never seen a black guy in real life, except Mike Gallagher, but Darren said that didn't count cause Mike's dad was white.

The shooting was fine. Greg just didn't find it all that interesting. It was much worse when fucking scenes came on. Anwar and Darren would always wind him up about those, ask him if he was getting a boner, if he was going to try fuck the screen. Then they'd talk about the real sex they'd had, and Greg's mind would go back to the one time he'd tried to kiss a girl and she'd called him a fat retard.

"You alright there Greg?" Anwar asked.

"Hnh?"

"You spaced out. Well, moreso." He laughed and sucked at his bong.

"Stop smoking that," Darren said. "We're waiting for… Actually fuck it, I'll roll one."

"Why?"

"Cause she sees that bong and she'll think she's getting salmonella, you grubby cunt."

“Salmonella?”

“Or Weil’s disease,” said Greg. He was proud of that one. His dad was always talking about the dangers of Weil’s disease in bars and warehouses.

Anwar spat on the bong’s water pipe and wiped the saliva through the grime.

“Definitely roll a joint Greg,” said Darren.

By the time Mhairi Hackett showed, Greg had forgotten what was going on. He was staring at the television with narrowed eyes, slowly coming to realise that someone had sat on the remote and interrupted the movie some time ago. Anwar was telling him something about his court case, why it was taking so long. Greg didn’t know if he was expected to understand, and he didn’t. Darren brought Mhairi into the room like he was walking a racehorse to the stands. It took Greg a while to acknowledge what was going on. She was wearing her school blazer.

“Awright,” said Anwar.

“Hey,” she said, indicating the table. “Special occasion?”

“Just Wednesday,” he said.

“It’s Thursday,” said Darren.

“Well, dick. You want some?”

Mhairi Hackett was not impressed by the bong, and even Greg could see that. He laughed until Darren told him to shut up. Greg tried leaning back, ended up tottering right off the couch and falling against the radiator, propping his head up to grant him a full view of the room and his own expanded belly. He chewed the crisp salt from his fingers.

“Just take the money, Darren,” Mhairi was saying.

“Nah, but, just hang out for a bit,” said Darren. “Just kick back a bit. See, we got vodka – and we don’t charge for weed that’s already fucking primed like this one.” He was thrusting the joint at her.

Greg didn’t hear what she said, but when his eyes came back down from the ceiling she was sitting on his spot on the couch, drawing in smoke. Darren was watching her intently. Greg found his crisps again and kept eating.

He didn’t think he’d met Mhairi before. He remembered seeing her briefly, understanding who she was, at least in relation to Lewis, but he’d never been invited to any of the Hackett house parties. ‘Hackett house party’ was a phrase that had dogged Greg as long as he could remember, even after school was over. Darren was invited to them sometimes – he’d come out of one Hogmanay party sorely beaten up, muttering that Lewis was ‘a total cunt’. Greg suspected Darren was only ever tolerated by real people due to his never-ending weed supply. He’d worked a similar scheme in primary, always bringing in his own football so the others would let him play. Greg had never had to scheme his way into football. As Mike Gallagher had once said, the team was always in need of a fat guy to block to the goals.

“You live in Shawkirk, Mhairi?” Greg managed.

Anwar was laughing at him, high-pitched bordering on a shriek.

She drank vodka from a used teacup, the clear liquid turned a pale brown, and oddly bubbly. “Mmhm,” she said. “I go to your school.”

“Not our school anymore,” said Darren, putting his arm around her in a particularly awkward attempt at camaraderie. “We’re grown-ups now.”

Mhairi Hackett shifted away from him. Anwar kept giggling.

Whatever was going on, Greg didn’t like it. Darren’s tendency to come back from parties after a sound thrashing were beginning to make sense. All the muttered curses about frigid whores and cunts who couldn’t take a joke were beginning to pool into something Greg didn’t quite understand. He swallowed, grimaced at the taste of smoke-tainted saliva.

Greg had the vague idea that he should keep everyone talking. “Is eh… her there? Still there?”

Darren looked up, wound curled up with his false smile. “Fucking what?”

“Mrs… McDonagh.”

Everyone was staring at him. Darren’s hand was paused, hovering over Mhairi’s knee. Though she was keeping up a good attempt at composure, when she looked over at Greg her eyes had taken on a distinctly glazed expression.

“Yeah I think she’s still there,” Mhairi said.

Greg couldn’t tell what was happening to her exactly. A voice in the back of his head said he was stoned and paranoid. Then the other voice – Darren’s voice – piped up as it always did, telling Greg that he was too fat, too stupid and too retarded to ever understand the situation. Greg could see fingers brush at the hem of a school skirt, see a blank expression turn to fear.

Greg stood up, and decided to be fat and stupid. He howled, drew himself out, groaned sounds he wasn't sure he could make, feeling like a troll in some fantasy movie. Before the three on the couch had time to react, he was hurtling towards them, baying, suddenly aware of his own size.

"He's so fucked," Anwar was saying, still giggling, still staring.

Darren was getting up. "Greg you c-"

Greg seized Mhairi Hackett by the wrist, heard her shriek, dragged her from the couch and felt the jar in his arms when she bashed against the coffee table. Darren was shouting something now, and maybe she was too, but Greg was only really listening to his own snarls, ones that flecked spit down his front and congealed with sawdust on the bare floor. He threw her round in front of him, forced her into the hallway. Her bones were light as anything under his thumb, but she'd stopped trying to pull away.

The front door made a cracking noise as he pulled it open, and the sound of it immediately brought a halt to his uproar. He let go of her arm. "Hurry up and go," he said, feeling his voice scratch at a raw throat.

He didn't know what he saw in her expression before she hurried down the steps. He hoped it was the right one. He closed the door, turned around, and the end of the extension cord caught him in the eye and sent him back against the frame. When he took his hand away from his face Darren was winding the cord up for another hit, lashed this one across Greg's stomach and ripped away a streak of t-shirt. Greg pushed past into the front room, saw Anwar standing by the coffee table before the cord whipped across the back of both thighs and dropped him to the ground, knees screaming with the impact.

“Fucking-”Darren was managing a word between each strike. “Cunt-” Whip crack. Scream. “of a-” Skin torn open. Sobbing. “Downy-” This one right across the back, from shoulder to hip. “Bastard!” A final one, cutting across Greg’s rear.

Greg stayed where he was, waiting for the next.

Anwar’s voice. “Here, give us a shot.”

Darren. “There’s another one over there, get your own.”

Greg watched his own hands trail through the sawdust, hauled his knees up to meet his chest after every slight pull forwards. Another cord came down between his shoulder blades, Anwar laughing politely. Darren’s followed, harder. Greg grit his teeth and kept pulling himself along the floor, listening to them mockingly cheer him on. When he reached the cabinet, he heard them leisurely coming after him. They whipped at his fingers when he tried to anchor himself on the furniture, whipped at his ears whenever they were visible, making his vision go white and everything sound like they were underwater. Greg curled at the foot of the cabinet and let them keep at it.

Anwar dropped his first, though with the speed that Darren kept up, Greg didn’t notice until he heard the bong’s familiar gurgle from somewhere far off. A new scar lashed across his side and Greg smelled the smoke in the air. The next few blows were fainter, and the cord suddenly, inexplicably, dropped to the ground by his head. There was blood coiling from the tip.

Greg sat up. Darren and Anwar were back on the couch, alternating pulls of the bong. Darren’s phone was buzzing again. Anwar gestured towards him, and Greg took it like water in

the desert. He held the smoke down until he brushed against one of his fresh cuts and sent it billowing out in one great cloud.

They were all out of breath.

"I wanna watch *Planet Earth*," said Anwar.

The Ethics of Pike Fishing

Nikos was having tea with the woman from the heritage committee when his son told him Kestrel was in the driveway. The heritage woman straightened against the back of her armchair.

"Hopefully not the family you're thinking of," Nikos said.

"You could have another career as a mindreader."

Who, Nikos thought, would ever need to read minds. This one in particular would throw up her eyebrows and blow out her nostrils at the slightest hint of interruption. Detail like that was probably how psychics wrung money out of their marks, now that he thought of it.

"I'm sorry to cut our date short," he said, "but this has to do with one of my development projects."

She told him that she would see him Tuesday, and he showed her to the door praying that Kestrel had not blocked the driveway with one of his absurd ramshackle cars. It was not as bad as all that, but he saw her shoot a glance at the broad man picking his teeth behind the tinted windows of an old Skoda. This, Nikos knew, would be quite the topic of conversation at the next ladies' lunch.

Then of course, Kestrel made it all worse. The window squealing as it rolled down against the flaking rubber in the door. "Ho ho, sending the side-piece on her way."

Nikos got in between them. "Very peculiar sense of humour, he has. Kestrel, this is Mrs Ruth. From the heritage committee? Mrs Ruth, this is, uh, Kestrel."

"Nice to meet you hen." Grinning, knowing exactly the effect caused.

Mrs Ruth said little else, and refused Nikos' assistance in getting into her car. Even the automatic gates managed to slam angrily behind her. Kestrel loped over to his boss and waved at the departing Mini.

"I am familiar with your penchant for class-based revolution Kestrel," he said, "but that was important. Could you have managed restraint for five bloody minutes?"

"I feel like heritage tends to mean 'the good auld days when we could send weans up chimneys'."

"More or less," said Nikos. "But they occasionally do good work. Artwork, restorations. Preservation of historical buildings."

"No exactly the hospice, is it?" The only project on which Kestrel ever had something positive to say was donor money that went into the hospice. He scorned anything else. "Good use of money. Funds something other than lunch dates with posh fanny."

One of the worst things about Kestrel, Nikos found, was his tendency to joke about your sex life. You could never respond in a way that would not, somehow, confirm his image of you as a grotesque pervert. Anger would prompt a smirk; polite laughter encouraged more jokes. It rankled, as Nikos, despite everything, still loved his wife. He was pleased not to have to deal with the whims of a 20-something mistress like so many of his peers, though he had never quite managed to tell anyone of his accomplishment.

"Now eh," said Kestrel, "speaking of historical buildings-"

"We'll take the boat out," said Nikos. "Come on."

It was not the best time to fish, but Nikos preferred having something to occupy his attention when talking to Kestrel. That and going straight to the boathouse kept Kestrel's boots off the new carpet. Unlike with his neighbours and lunch dates, Nikos did not have to feign politeness or diplomacy. He could sit and watch the loch ripple, unburdened by eye contact and crippling awareness of social faux-pas. That was another terrifying fact of Kestrel's existence – that his presence was somehow comforting.

Kestrel. Kestrel had been essential in the early days, back when he'd needed an old Glaswegian ally to establish himself. The Kestrels were ancient, all of them born loan sharks and petty thugs, never bold enough to form their own organisation, but they were established. The sight of one taking up with the Greek businessman had enticed the rest. All of them sick of sectarianism, seeing the police crackdown on gangs on its way, seeking legitimacy.

The loch shore was deserted. The cold putting them off – Nikos would often go without another human until spring and summer. The boathouse frigid in its white panelling – he had assumed, in what he knew now to be Original Sin, that the boat could have been kept in the garage. But it wasn't the way it was done here, so he'd had to throw together this sub-Bayou freak of a shed on his own property. "It looks good for us," his wife had told him, and never used it.

He went and hooked the equipment over his shoulder, and sat in the boat while Kestrel pushed it out. Perks of the job. Nikos delegated the rowing too. His arms felt heavy these days, and he knew he'd be tired before they got off the stones. He was craving lunch. The sun was just visible behind bulbous clouds in the high noon position, and the salivating began unbidden. It was becoming more frequent, he knew. The need to bloat. He was inflicting his wealth on his belt.

There was, at least, nothing to eat out here. Nothing but pike to be thrown back. Nothing for Alice to get on his case about. She was watching his waist closer than he was.

"I hope you're not planning throwing them back," said Kestrel, fiddling with his rod.

"That's the aim of the sport."

"That's just counting coup."

"I don't know what that means, Francis."

"Injuns did it," said Kestrel. "In peace time. But in war times, you have to start scalping."

That was Kestrel. Somehow more of a father than Nikos would ever be. All brutality and John Ford romanticism.

"We're at war?"

Kestrel looked at him. "With the pike."

"Ah."

They hooked sardines under floats ('waste of sardines' – Kestrel) and cast them out on the line. It would be a while before anything moved down below. Pike are slow and methodical, until they finally decide to strike. Nasty creatures, supposedly used in castle moats to deter anyone brave enough to swim it, though Nikos wasn't sure he believed that.

"So they wouldn't let us out to the church," said Kestrel, when they were a few yards out. He was keeping his voice low, like any good fisherman.

"Okay. Any updates?"

"Still standing, in theory. I let them know it could be structurally unsafe. Official-like."

Nikos simulated the lines, gave the bait some movement. "What's the rest of it?"

"That lot were asking around again. You-know-who was saying it looks like we can't or won't look after folk."

"He wasn't 'our folk', that was the whole bloody point Francis. I asked you to find a deniable little junkie, not your old pal."

"Aye, well."

"How hard is it to make a fire," said Nikos. The church had been a perfect location. Huddled amid pine trees, a rare naturally enclosed space on the moors. A few big gates, a couple years work on the space, he could have had a veritable gated compound. Architects competing with apartment designs, cars rubbernecking the sight of diggers, cranes, men in hardhats.

And all of it had gone wrong from the start.

The council out in Shawkirk had been insufferably petty, and took money without any indication of gratitude. Boundary charges, Kestrel had joked. Sketches and plans went through their 92nd iteration. Opinions of non-existent neighbours had been sought, the health and safety crows descended. The abandoned church was a problem they said. It could take years they said.

And so Nikos had acted as he always had in Glasgow. A man, some lighter fluid, some matches. Shawkirk had other plans, Kestrel's goon had bumbled down an old set of steps and into his grave, and the church had been swarmed by police and local interest. Some god was laughing at him. It kept bringing his father to mind, the sound of him grunting as he loaded the family car,

then the little gasp like a muffled orgasm, then clothes rustling against the driveway. Heart attack. Struck down from on high.

"Are they saying anything else?" he asked. "Beyond your friend?"

"Just the usual. You're getting old and that."

"They're all older than me."

"Yeah, they're not ones for facts in those parts."

They sat for some time, watching the floats in silence. The natural oils from the sardines leaked to the surface and dispersed slowly, black tracing across a mirror. In the breeze and the chill of the water, Nikos realised the hunger had gone. The dark line of trees on the shore soothed like an eye-mask.

"Nice out here," said Kestrel.

"This place can surprise you sometimes."

"You've done the house all nice, I saw."

Nikos opened his eyes. "What're you getting at?"

"You kept the whole exterior, like. Nice big house."

Not a subtle man, Kestrel.

"You're saying I should have just bit the bullet and developed the church."

"Bit fancy and shit, but that's the jist. Same as you did here, gut the insides, re-do it all but keep the structure. Add bits need adding."

Nikos closed his eyes. “If we switched places, you could have tried that.”

Nikos was always trying to get his son Jack out here, to no success. It had taken fifteen years to realise he had nothing in common with his son, but he kept prodding. Alice had recommended following the boy’s interests, and so Nikos had tried sitting with Jack at 3am and enduring MMA, not understanding any of it. When two women entered the ring his son had explained that one of them was an old champion, back from the days where the competition had few women. She was doomed, his son told him, because her early days had inspired more and more women to join – and the higher that number went, the more the odds were stacked against her. Nikos watched the old champion get her skull caved in by a blonde upstart and knew how she felt.

The rod spasmed up his wrist and brought him forward.

“That it?” said Kestrel.

“Shut up.”

He drew the rod up, feeling the resistance. The gap between his arm and his shoulder felt ever more distant, but he tried reeling nonetheless. Kestrel’s gleaming head in his peripheral, but Nikos kept reeling. He could make out the shape of the creature along the line of the water, disturbing the clear blue with shaking froth. Like the loch was rabid.

“Give it some fucking heft,” said Kestrel.

“Enough.”

The pike drew it out, some red in the froth. Nikos' arms jarred again, distant. Funny that he could work his hands as well as always, but his arms refused to comply. He worked the reel harder, to find there was nothing left. He reeled in the strands.

"Bastard," said Kestrel.

Nikos set the rod across his thighs and unwound the shredded line. "Something like that."

"I brought some of the recon," said Kestrel. All pretend pity, using one hand to offer his phone while he kept his line steady. Nikos snatched it away.

He flicked through the photos. The police tape came first, blue and white ribbons blown onto the perimeter trees, frozen flapping like scraps of rent flesh. More tape had been freshly applied, staying firm so far across the garden gate.

"That's definitely my church," Nikos said. It looked worse every time.

He couldn't see much in it now. Not with the money sunk into it. The cheap plaster was peeling off by the great wooden doors, mocking him. Fire couldn't touch it, but time might, it told him. Just a couple more loans, they'd suggest, some more patience, more of your time and money. More rumours. More rivals popping out of the dirt.

Nikos saw himself clutching the points of the iron railing, let the flakes of black paint be drawn away by his moist palms. He looked up from the pictures to see Kestrel fighting his line.

The evergreens bore down around the shell of the church and told him he should have stuck to running nightclubs. Nikos' father slumped forwards in his driveway, the holiday suitcase he'd been carrying sliding from his grip. He looked into the line of the trees. It was easier than seeing

the sagging face of the church. Seeing his investments absorbed one by one into this blunt mass of glass and concrete.

"Ah, ya bastard," Kestrel said. The line was taut, and Nikos had to draw into the prow of the boat as the rod swung the pike in. The boat tipped with his weight, but both Kestrel and pike were too occupied to notice.

The fish slammed into the wood fighting, tail spasming against the centre bench. The water flecked off onto their clothes, but Nikos could only stare as the thing flipped over to face him, red-eyed and crocodilian. It worked its way under the rung of the bench and twisted there in place, jaws slapping into its own gums.

"Well done," said Nikos. "Throw it back."

The red eye was obliterated with Kestrel's first hit. His fist came away bloodied.

"Jesus Christ!"

Kestrel brought his fist down once again, slammed into the cavity he had created. He took the monster by its tail and slapped the head against the bench. Something thin and grey trailed across the wood. Kestrel drew the corpse back into the hull and made sure the fish was dead.

"You need to throw them back," Nikos said, to the air more than Kestrel. "Sporting. Need to throw the sport fish back."

"Never been too into sport, mate," said Kestrel. "Not in that respect. You can count coup on all the fish you want, but I'm fucking eating what I kill."

"There's guidelines."

“Is that right?”

He was bringing them to shore before Nikos had anything else to say. Nikos watched his broken line disappear underneath an oar’s ripple. The hull screeched on the shore stones.

“You got tin-foil?”

“What?”

Kestrel was already tearing open his fishing kit. “Ah, ya beauty.” Wrenching tinfoil, screaming against the zips of the kit.

“Didn’t even know that was in there.”

“Oh aye.” Kestrel dragged the dead pike out onto the stones, slapped its mushed head for emphasis. “Most good kits have them.”

Nikos stepped out onto uneven ground, cold water splashing up to his ankles and dribbling into his socks. He grabbed at the side of the boat and felt his hip jar, savagely. The water would dry off at some point, but the sediment was imprinted at every joint of his clothing.

Kestrel was stacking stones in distinct piles, at a safe distance from the lapping of the water. “Taught the girls this one,” he was saying, “but they were all too clumsy with the blade, like. Cut right through the intestines, got shite all over the meat.”

He brought the knife just under the gills and sloughed the pike’s head onto the shoreline. Implausibly, the jaws kept snapping at some invisible grievance. Kestrel swung the blade around and traced it gentle down the belly, then drew the body open with callused fingers.

“I thought you grew up in the city,” Nikos said.

“Aye, but I was a Scout.”

“I can’t quite imagine that.”

Kestrel scooped the intestines and offal into his free hand and cast them into the lake. “I joined cause they let us play with axes and that.”

“Ah, of course.” Nikos looked away, seeing the wind manipulate the flaps that had previously made up a living creature. “They’re not good eating.”

“They’re not poisonous,” Kestrel said. He was wrapping the carcass in the tinfoil, laying it across the stones. Nikos realised the purpose of the orange leaves and twigs gathered between the makeshift stone pillars. “I’d write off Shawkirk,” Kestrel said. “I don’t think it’s worth it.”

“We’ve gone this far. It was your friend.”

“Whispers, money, time,” said Kestrel.

“Yes,” said Nikos. “That’s about the sum of it.”

He spat into the stones. One last look at the loch treeline, half-expecting the church to be lurking there somehow. His shoes were coated in grey, aggressive stains that brushed against the cuffs of his trousers. He tried stomping the coating away on his way back to the house. Behind him, Kestrel clicked at a lighter, and in time the stench of burnt flesh would make it over to the sitting room in the big house, where Nikos would entertain his next guest.

Tod

is moving where he has to. Rat in his jaws, squeezing the blood out both ends.

Rakes the offal out from between the legs, tosses it steaming to the ditch behind Shawkirk Tennis Court.

Tod is

Tearing lungs from ribs, gulping them down in one. Hiding from drunk men who come heavy footed on the bridge over the burn, screaming to one another

About things they won't remember.

Tod is

Choking, briefly.

Eyes swivelling, stinging.

The poison has driven the rats out to him,

Back to the cultivated hedges where

Tod is

Suspicious

Choking

The rats have fled from the husks of buildings, dogged by poison

Straight to him,

In this lane,

Where he will choke them down

Tod is

Dying, for the moment.

He will retch the rat

Into wet earth, and rise,

Revived, and gulping the scent of petrichor.

Or not.

Tod is

Lying in the lane by the tennis court

Poison swallowed by a rat swallowed by a fox.

High Roller

It was too large to be a rabbit. He'd seen the ears flick up, the eyes reflect his headlights, and as he swerved and hit the fence had time to register his confusion amidst all the panic. His chest crunched against the wheel, and the air bag had the gall to send him back in the other direction. The fucking seatbelt, the times he'd meant to see to it. He wasn't held in place so much as attached to a bungee rope.

His head cracked the reading light as the car continued through the fence and over the rise. The fence screamed underneath him, crushed between the earth and the undercarriage. He thought of the word fontanel, wondered why, and slumped forward until he could think again.

The windshield had held. He lay with his ear to the steering wheel. There were flecks of blood, increasingly revealed as his air bag pillow sank back under the weight of his head. He probed at his mouth with staved fingers, and hissed when they brushed a bloodied front tooth. This movement began to well blood in his nose, and when he leaned back to prevent it leaking, felt it was a good sign he was more irritated than injured.

The bridge of his nose pinched, he stared through the cracked reading light and fumbled for the phone in his pocket. He was cheered at the sight of the battery near full charge. Bill prided himself on seeing the upside.

"I've had a crash," he told the recovery service, feeling the words ache in his ribs. "Moors outside Shawkirk. Went off a ledge I think. Bloody rabbit ran out in front of me."

"Are you injured in any way?" They probably all asked that.

“Mostly my pride. Look, god knows where exactly I am. Off the main road at least. Haven’t looked around.”

“Shall I send an ambulance along with our crew?”

“Fuck it, I’m on BUPA,” he said, then thought about it. “Actually, best err on the side of caution. Insurance probably demands it eh?”

“That’s a good idea.”

He hung up, not sure if the woman on the other end had been mocking him at that last moment. He remembered having customer-facing jobs like it as a kid. They had a way of making you sarcastic.

The headlights had the black landscape thrown into grey – a brief patch in front of him where the grass and mud was visible, in contrast to the featureless blanket that waited further out. The driver’s door was blocked, and Bill had to crawl over and out of the passenger side.

“Fuck this for a country drive.” He knew he should call the wife, but put it out of mind as soon as he saw his breath float out into the open air. He stretched the way he’d been taught at the gym – safe, relaxed movement. The thing in his sternum cracked, as it always did.

The damage to the car could have been worse, he felt. The brilliant blue coat he’d fought the wife for was scratched up a fair deal, traces of it visible on the headlights. A pain, but nothing fatal. He didn’t know enough about car mechanics to know if the fence had wrought anything worse on the undercarriage. He leaned into flick the radio on. The reception was distorted, and it took Bill a couple of tries before he resigned himself to being stuck with the classical music channel.

He put his hands in his armpits, paced as much as he dared on the disturbed grass. He'd been driving this way home for years, telling the wife he needed a dose of the country after working late. It was true, in a sense. He'd drive with the windows down, aerating for nearly half an hour. Just to get Kirsty's perfume out initially, but he'd come to enjoy it. The way the trees loomed overhead until they died off at the highest point, near the old NHS unit, and you could see night for miles in every direction – Glasgow's distant glow the only anchor in a featureless void. Though he'd admit, there were never enough stars for his liking.

"Guess what happened to me," he said, when Kirsty picked up the phone.

"What's that noise?"

"Some Shostakovich waltz or something, but-"

"Who?"

"Never mind, guess what happened to me."

"Is it a funny story?"

"No! It's an interesting story."

"Yeah, you'd never laugh at yourself. Out with it then."

"Shot right off the road, straight into the moors. I'm waiting for the pick-up right now."

He heard her sit up straight. "Oh my god. Are you alright."

"Of course," he said. He liked how he sounded saying it. "Took a couple good whacks, but I'm up and about. Looking rugged."

“I’m sure,” she said. The concern had already dissipated. That was the thing about young people, Bill thought. They cycled through all their emotions too quickly. In an ideal world, he could have had the wife’s personality transplanted to Kirsty’s body.

“Technology’s no there yet.”

“What?”

“Nothing,” he said. “Hoping to get some good scars out of this, but I’m just phoning to say I’m alright.”

“As long as they’re sexy scars and not like… deformed I suppose.”

His front tooth throbbed. He didn’t dare touch it. “I’ll let you know.”

“Listen,” she said, “I think that-”

He recognised the tone, and threw her off, claiming the recovery van was in sight. She told him to text when he was home, and he was alone again.

That ‘listen’ was a red flag. They always started to end it that way, when the excitement started to wane and they reassessed the ‘married boss’ part of the relationship. Then there’d be the glances at the photos on his desk, the refusal of eye contact. He could delay it a while longer, but he’d draw the card eventually.

He was glad he’d left out the rabbit, if he was getting dumped. Getting into a scrape was a good story, but spinning out to avoid Flopsy made him sound like a wimp. Especially the fact that his panic had been more due to the size of the damn thing than the impending collision. He was

old enough to remember the story about US President Jimmy Carter's brush with something similar. There was a reason the Americans only elected that guy once.

"Suppose I should get back up there," he said, feeling her absence. He could wave at the recovery van when it deigned to show itself.

He walked into the red glow at the back of the car and figured his way up the embankment. Moisture clung to suit trousers, mud rising up to touch the edges of his socks. Annoying, but nothing fatal, he reminded himself. Without warning his heel gave way, and his knees smacked into the grass. He'd put his hands out to catch himself, and when he reached the top of the embankment and pulled himself to the remnant of the fence he left wet strains on the wood. It had all taken the breath out of him. Kirsty had warned him about that once, saying it took too long for his breathing to stabilise after they fucked.

At the top, he realised he'd forgotten to turn off the radio. The trip back down seemed too much for now, so he resigned himself to the faint sound of travel adverts.

There was no sign of the rabbit, though he was unsure what he would have done had it still been there. Made sure it was as large as it had appeared, he supposed. Yell at it. It could all be worse. He could have come off the road at the reservoir had the damn rabbit decided to hop a mile up the road. He never wanted to be the guy who didn't know how good he had it.

There was snow on the tip of his shoe, another coat atop the mud. It hadn't snowed in months. It must have lain frozen since April. He could believe it – he was already planning to order an overcoat when he got home.

YOUR RECOVERY TEAM IS **15 MINUTES** AWAY! his phone told him. Bugger. It would be warmer in the car, but he could see his returned weight being the point at which the balance tipped and the vehicle went careening across the moors, propelled by gravity and his middle-aged gut. He knew he should take the time to call the wife, but the thought of her panic as he tried to relay the story put him off. He could act as stoic as he liked, but she, pessimist to the end, was still going to think him near death.

The faint adverts switched to a fainter song. Bill recognised a French horn, and thought of primary school music lessons.

Headlights scanned the road from Shawkirk, and Bill smiled. They had to give you a longer time estimate, he figured, so you wouldn't yell at them for running late. He'd let the recovery team know how grateful he was for their speed in getting to him. He prided himself on his skill with those kind of people.

"Ah, damn," he said, when the vehicle behind the headlights began to take shape.

The Volkswagen was not in a hurry. It was a 97 Beetle, the new design that Bill had always hated. It was still recognisable as the Herbie car, just without any of the charm. He'd often proposed buying a proper one, one from the sixties, and restoring it in the garage. The wife had said no, of course.

The stranger's car, up close, was filthy – the story of countless country shortcuts splattered from hood to boot. It slowed at the sight of him, its leisurely movement reduced to a hunched crawl. Bill stepped forward, hands casually in trouser pockets. He wondered how he looked – a ragged, dirty stranger in the dark.

The window inched down. The man inside tilted his head towards Bill, revealing a drawn, bony face. The stranger said nothing, flicking his eyes between Bill and the red hazard light peeking above the ridge and illuminating the wreckage of the fence. Bill couldn't read any of this. The man disappeared for a moment, as if checking the glove compartment. Bill stepped back, hearing various deliveries of 'wallet, now'. But the window cranked open an inch more, and the stranger appeared again, close to the glass, vacant stare.

"Nice car."

"It looked better on the road," Bill said, and threw up one hand like he was presenting the damn thing for show.

The man in the car didn't laugh. "Bad crash?"

"It wasn't fatal at any rate."

"No," said the man, as if this revelation was significant. "There was a bad one out here I remember. A mangle. You sure you're not a little mangled?"

"You see any van coming my way by any chance?"

The man shrugged. "It's cold," he said, drawing the word out.

"Is it?" Bill said, and feeling absurd with the lie. Even covered in muck and his own dried blood he wouldn't let anyone think him at a disadvantage. The man's open mockery had managed to rile up some forgotten adrenaline.

The man smiled. "Hear they found a dead body in the church back there last week. What you think all that was about?"

“Just a homeless guy,” said Bill, shoving his hands back under his arms.

“Aye, probably looking for someplace warm.” The lines on the man’s face seemed fixed. The smile came and went, but the creases stayed firm. “Something scary for the kids I suppose. What set you off the road?”

“Something ran out in front of me,” Bill said. He hadn’t wanted to admit as much, but to allow a pause in this conversation seemed oddly dangerous.

“There’s no deer around Shawkirk.”

“I didn’t say it was a deer.”

“What was it then, a fucking tiger?” The smile expanded to show teeth, but it never quite made it to a laugh.

“I dunno,” said Bill. “It just ran out. Didn’t stop to take its details.”

“Fox? You get scared off by a fox? That’s all I can think of.” The man moved in his seat, looked down. For a moment, Bill imagined him bringing up a hand clutching a knife. “Nothing else living out here. Even the foxes only come out here to stretch the legs. Nothing to eat in the moors that you can’t find in a good suburban bin, eh?”

“Couldn’t tell you.”

“Ah well.” The reading light above the man’s head came on, and he reached up and turned it back off. Bill could hear him moving, but the face stayed where it was. “That’s your fancy car done for eh?”

“It’s affordable. Besides,” Bill said, “I’m not far from home.”

“Not far, but too far to walk, eh?” The man grunted suddenly, and it bordered on laughter.

“Lucky it wasn’t worse.”

“Aye, you’d have been fucked in that case. Coulda dunked…” The man grunted again, shifted. “Coulda dunked you in the reservoir.”

“You’re no half wrong there.”

“Good bit of luck. High roller. Could – take you to the casinos, you fucking…”

Bill tried drawing himself up. “I beg your pardon.”

“You fucking whore,” said the man, and sighed. The window wound down further, and he reached out and wiped his semen on the door. Staring Bill down, the man worked his mouth and spat just shy of Bill’s feet.

“Fucking degenerate!”

“I hope you freeze out here ya twat,” said the man, and he drove off laughing.

Bill couldn’t reach for his phone until his hands stopped shaking. He paced along the ridge, avoiding the sight of his car or the space the stranger had been. He was thankful the saliva had quickly dissipated against the road’s surface.

“Nothing fatal,” Bill told himself. “Nothing fatal. Nothing fatal.” The adrenaline had rotted into shivering.

His phone was tumbling back down the bank before he’d even registered it in his hands, and he was following it before he could think, cursing the whole way. His foot caught in the

inevitable divot, he slammed against his own car and heard it groan and threaten to break loose. Bill waited, frozen against the petrol tank, and slowly drew himself away from the car. It held. The classical music channel let out the long whine of held string.

He slumped into the grass and retrieved his phone from a clump of strangled weeds. He turned it over in his hands, and the light from the screen caught the hare watching him. The sight of it stabbed at his chest.

As still as he could be with the shivering, Bill shone the light back into the moor. The highland hare had stayed in position, standing up attentively. Seeing the size of it, Bill didn't know how he could have thought it a rabbit. Unblinking, it stood nose twitching, shaking droplets of mud from silver white fur. At a twitch in Bill's arm, the phone's light caught the amber of the hare's iris. The hare turned and ran.

"How the hell did you get so far from home," Bill said. Already shaking, he found he could laugh. "Darling," he said when he phoned his wife, making sure she could hear him over the radio, "I've got a funny story."

Kelpie

It had been summer when she saw the boy drown. October now, and she hadn't heard a word. The papers, local and national, would come with no information and leave with less.

Mia was beginning to think no one had drowned at all. She had nearly grown sure of it, felt the cavern in her chest begin to close with excruciating leisureliness, until the death at the church. Police cars, an ambulance, a headline. A homeless man had died where he could be found. The cases were entirely different. Hell, she thought, the boy had never had a case.

Still, it brought him back – in dreams, in the brief flashes of water she could make out through the trees at the base of the garden. She would stand at the kitchen sink waiting for the hint of a silent ripple.

Once the kids were on the bus and Paul set out for work, she crossed round the back of their house and fetched Barshai from his stable. Barshai was a Clydesdale – built for work, muscles in eternal war with his skin, bulging out at the first sign of weakness. He only liked her. His previous owners had advertised him as an 'angry, but lovable presence'. She saddled him and rode him out of the gates and toward the reservoir.

The water was still. She rode out here as often as she could now. Before, she'd ridden Barshai all over the moors, and even into the town once or twice. The Clydesdale did not seem to mind that she had shrunk his world to the half-mile between house and water. She guided him around the perimeter, loose stones rolling out into the water from under his hooves, the resultant capillary waves fleeing out across the surface.

At the opposite end of the reservoir was a hut of corrugated iron. It had been roughly hewn into the yellowed grass, and had remained long enough that it was often mistaken for a disused storage shed. Up close, the hand painted sign became evident, and Mia could read the care with which someone had marked 'SHAWKIRK TROUT FISHING SOCIETY'. Mia did not know how many members the society could boast of, nor even if their activities were legal. But they had been here longer than she had, and might as well have been part of the landscape.

One of the old men was outside the hut now, seated on an upturned bucket, the fishing rod trapped between his boots.

"Morning," she said, drawing Barshai to a halt.

He looked up at her with mild surprise, as if he could have missed the approach of a two-metre amalgamation of woman and horse. "Oh, if it isnae Lady Godiva again."

"One of these days," she said, "I will ride in naked, and you'll have no jokes left."

He tapped a spare bait hook against his teeth. "I suppose that's true."

"Just yourself today."

"So far," he said. "It's too cauld for the likes ae the rest. Fair-weather fans, aw ae them."

Mia did not think less of them. She doubted she would be willing to sit for hours in the morning cold at their age. One day, she thought they would find one of them frozen to his upturned bait-bucket like a cadaverous Oor Wullie.

"Do you ever worry you'll run out of trout?" she said, just to say something.

“Throw most of them back,” he said. “Not that we catch too many when there’s a lot of noise.”

She knew he was referring to her, and didn’t need to see his pupils roll to the points of his eyes to get the point. She feigned stupidity. “There must be a lot of kids splashing around in summer.” Splashing all the way down.

The old man snorted. “Naebdy swims here. If a guy jumped in there his baws would shoot so far up his body they’d come out his heid. If ye’ll excuse the language.”

It would be a good phrase to have on hand if the kids asked her to go swimming. The thought froze with the image of the twins in the strange boy’s place – arms reaching out for the land and the trees half a mile away, the blackness beneath them.

“Good to know,” she said, guiding Barshai’s nose until the horse turned in place. “Nice seeing you.”

She heard him mocking her to himself as she left. “Dae people swim here?”

I think someone did, she thought.

*

She caught the twins off the school bus in the Merc, ferried them out from the town back to the house. She would have driven them to school and back, but Paul insisted they socialise whenever possible. The school bus was a vital part of primary, he told her.

Ruth tilted her car seat forward the whole journey, gripping the seat in front of her, telling Mia about the rabbits in the fields, and the hares that someone’s dad saw the day before last.

“There aren’t any hares,” Mia said. “They all live in the Highlands.”

“No,” said Ruth. She had been an early adopter of the mortal, fallible parents epiphany. “Liz’s dad saw them, and they live near us.”

“He probably saw a big rabbit Ruth.”

“He saw a big hare.” Ruth shook the passenger seat in front of her. Mia slapped her daughter’s hands away before the noise got to her.

“Can we go look for them?” Joe asked. He had been gazing out at the reservoir, daylight running deceptively golden across the furrowed water. Mia glanced up at him in the rear-view mirror. He was a quiet kid, and his speech often came without warning.

“Ask your dad when he’s home,” Mia said. “I’ve got dinner.”

“We could go without you,” said Ruth.

“No,” said Mia, nearly missing the turn off for the driveway. “You never leave the garden without Mummy or Daddy. There’s cars and adders and god-knows-what.”

“God-knows-what,” said Ruthie. “Liz’ parents let her-”

“I don’t care,” Mia said, grateful for the sound of driveway gravel crunching under the tyres.

Ruth was in the house as quick as she could get out of the car. Mia had to fetch the backpack from the seat herself. Joe stood by the bonnet, one hand on the straps of his own bag, facing off toward the trees and the water they hid.

“Did you see anything in the water Joe?” Mia asked, then covered herself with a clarification: “Any fish or birds?”

Joe shook his head. “You said there were lots of animals. Lots at the new house.”

“Animals don’t come when they’re called,” she said. “But you’ve got Barshai.”

“I don’t like Barshai,” he said, and followed after Ruth. “I liked the old house.”

Mia had to admit that she had liked the old house too.

*

Paul was in bed when she came in from feeding Barshai, a book propped on his growing stomach. His reading glasses had already marked the tender skin by the bridge of his nose – twin little welts on either side. He was happy, as he put it, to become corpulent in his big new country house. Somewhere to retire to. He’d been waiting to retire his whole life.

Mia was sure that stories were half the reason for buying the house. The estate agent had been full of them, eager to point out the landmarks and the rumours that went with them. Here’s where a homeowner felt so self-sufficient he tried to make his own alcohol, blew up half the moor. Here’s where a priest was attacked in the 1950s, here’s where Tam O’Shanter’s witches got lost. And now Paul had his own – here’s the old church with a mysterious death. She knew he hadn’t heard about the hares from Ruth yet, because his boots had been unmuddied at the base of the stairs. Gossip and retirement – biding his time until the trout fishers would let him join the club.

“You alright?”

“What?” she said.

“You were away with the fairies there. Just,” he pulled a face, “glaikit.”

“Just thinking,” she said. She chose her next words carefully, under the guise of getting herself into bed. “I thought I saw something today, and it’s been bothering me.”

I thought I saw something months ago, when we first came here. I thought I froze and watched a boy bloat with filthy water until it sank him.

Paul let the book fall forward, open at the page on his stomach. “What’s up? One of the old guys pulling his pud?”

“Just, it looked like there was someone struggling in the water.” Months ago.

“If anyone’s jumping in this time of year they mean to be there.”

“I don’t know if there was anyone there.”

“Think you saw a ghostie?”

She gripped the covers. “Shut up Paul.”

“Awright, awright. It’s put you out of sorts, I get it.”

The boy couldn’t see her, she had thought. Not really. Maybe a silhouette, the shape of a woman bursting from the back of a horse, among stretching trees. Then under again, and never back up.

“It just freaked me out,” she said, and held her voice so it wouldn’t crack.

Paul dropped his book to the carpet and tapped out the lamp. “You know those old guys would have seen something, right?”

“Yeah,” she said. She hadn’t seen any of them that day. “Then what did I see?”

Paul rolled to face her, the sheets whispering with him. “I do get it Mia,” he said. “Once I was driving to a site – I’m not sure what job it was, anyway – and I pass this bus shelter-”

“When was this?”

“I don’t know, I’m just saying. Anyway, out the side of my eye, in this bus shelter, I see this young… bam I guess, this young bam smack an old lady so hard she twists around.” The corner of his mouth curled up with the relish of the horror story. Mia rolled to face the ceiling.

“Jeez,” she said.

“So you know, I pull over, and I dunno if I’m panicking or raging, but I’m out the car, staring down this shelter, working out if I can stop this guy - and I realise the only people in it are a bunch of teenage girls.”

“Maybe the guy ran.”

“There was no old woman either. It never happened Mia. I went and got myself a coffee after that, guess I looked like a right nutter to those girls. Sometimes the brain just has an error message.” He lay a hand across her stomach, and it grew heavier.

Slivers of light through the curtains illuminated the brush strokes on the ceiling above her. Just an error message. She had not seen the boy in her peripheral. She hadn’t that kind of luxury. She had sat atop the horse and watched the boy flail and sink without a sound, her hand frozen in the process of reaching for her mobile. And she’d gone home, and she’d made the dinner, and the moment never left.

“Was that true?” she asked.

Paul was asleep.

*

Saturday. The twins stared out at the rain until they boiled over. The living room and the hall filled with Monopoly hotels, trodden crayons and scraps of paper. Paul was overwhelmed, unused to the full force of attention outside of evenings. His morning walk with Ruth and Joe, looking for the phantom hares, had turned into a shouting match. Mia hadn’t mentioned it. At the sight of three slick red faces coming up the driveway she put the kettle on. Her time to shout would come when the twins got bored, which they did.

Ruth was telling her about the worms that would come to the surface after the rain. Mia remembered telling her that one. Presumably Ruth had improved it. Joe was shredding paper into strips, the purpose of which Mia could not be bothered to discover.

When the rain stopped, she and Paul forced them out into the garden, Mia’s turn first. Paul made the rare excuse of going to feed Barshai, while she wandered down to the fence before the treeline, boots sunk in the long grass she had warned the twins off. The reservoir was disturbed, still feeling the aftershock of the rain and wind. The water was billowing up and down, the way Mia had shown the twins they could manipulate the bedsheets into a game. Up, now down – here’s the storm, so you have to shake it, and calm-

She closed her eyes, saw a boy in water just before Joe began to scream. Mia turned to see the twins frozen in tableau, Ruth standing over Joe with the arm outstretched, Joe’s shrieking strangled into a silent grimace.

Her boots skidded at first, the slick grass screaming against the rubber. Hands tattooed with the dirt that had caught her, Mia loped over the uneven terrain. Something jarred in her back, but she had seen blood. She dropped to her knees.

"A adder bit him," said Ruth, with a child's grasp at a solemn expression.

"It bit me!" Joe was writhing in the grass, one knee to his chest, both hands clasped over his shin.

"It's okay, it's okay." Christ. "Show mummy, show us what it is, Joe." And then, when he shook his head enough to mix the tears with the snot: "Joe!"

Mia ripped her son's hands away from the shin, and saw another boy sink. Twin puncture marks rested on either side of the bone, pulsing two thin streams of blood into the white socks. They looked at her, malevolent and calm. She pressed her hand to the wounds and heard herself shout for her husband, the twins flinching at the note in the words.

"It was a adder," said Ruth again. "I saw it."

"I know, I know." Blood was pooling around her fingers, and she gripped harder, until Joe's leg was the same white as her knuckles. "But we know that now Ruthie, okay? It's not helpful to keep saying it. Run in and see if Daddy's coming, please?"

Ruth managed a few steps towards the house before Mia saw it, and dropped her hand from the wounds.

"Ruth," she said, "turn around."

"It was a snake. We saw it."

“Turn the fuck around,” said Mia, and did it herself, lurching over and twisting the girl by the shoulders to face her. Ruth struggled to look anywhere but straight ahead.

Two lengthy pins protruded from the toe of Ruth’s wellington boot. Several centimetres apart, they were thin enough to almost escape notice. Without the wet sheen as they passed through the grass, Mia knew she would have missed it. The very tips of the twin prongs were dotted with a black mixture of mud and blood.

“What,” said Mia, “is wrong with you?”

“I saw a snake.”

Paul came out of the house before she hit her. Mia heard her name and looked around to see both of her children crying in the mud below her. The grass squeaked under her boots again as she stepped away, her hand still frozen at the point of contact.

He took Ruth with Joe to the hospital. To see the fruits of her labours, he said. So she could see her brother be checked for tetanus. It would put the scare in her, he said. He didn’t mention anything else, but the twins both clung to him until they got in the car. Mia hadn’t said a word the whole time. Just watched the car roll gravel and washed her hands in the kitchen sink.

She caught the water through the trees again. The fading daylight reflected on the surface was giving the illusion of movement. That was what she told herself. Mia took her keys from the hook by the door and turned from the kitchen window.

Ruth had left the twins’ room a mess again. That wasn’t fair, Mia told herself. There were two kids living there and neither of them were particularly clean. She contemplated the LEGO scattered at her feet, but in the end she only made up the twin beds, smoothing down the blankets

as she did. The coloured drawings, fixed to the wall with blu-tac, put her in mind of the forced cheer of a children's hospital.

There was no wind as she locked up the house. She dropped the keys through the letterbox. Paul had his own.

It was not the usual time, but Barshai did not look surprised. She shook flecks of oats from his hair as she saddled him, and clambered up. One stroke of the hair told her it needed another brush and grooming. She should have taken the time, she told herself.

They took the steady walk to the reservoir. The cold rose up her bare arms as the horse drew her down towards the darkening water, but she found it comforting. She took in the smell of wet earth as Barshai overturned each clump of dying leaves, brushing them on ahead to be trampled again at a leisurely pace.

The hooves sounded on the stones. Barshai had stopped by the water. A circular wave spread out from the centre, as if something light had dropped through the heart of the reservoir.

Somewhere further off, an animal darted through wet grass. Mia sunk into the cold and watched her breath huff out in time with her steed's. She decided not to look back at the house.

"Go," she said, knees digging into the heaving ribcage.

Barshai trotted two steps forward, and let out a deep spurt of irritation as the shallows pooled up his ankles. The white cuffs above his hooves whipped about, momentarily fluid with the water, before sinking back heavily to hug his ankles.

"Go," she said, urging him on again.

Barshai raised his head and looked out across his reservoir, where an unmoving figure hunched by the fishing hut. Mia shook the reins.

"Barshai, go," she said, the words beginning to scrape her throat. "Now, come on."

The horse did not move. The ripples that had announced his steps died some distance away. Mia dropped the reins, crying now, slapping her palms against the animal's quarters, her legs aching and increasingly useless with each attempt to spur.

"In we go," Mia said, and looked up, around, over at the black shape by the hut. Anywhere but the back of the horse's head, where she would see the failure to obey instead of merely feeling it. She did not dare dismount and go into the cold alone.

Barshai dipped his head to drink, ignoring the feeble blows to his side. He straightened up when he felt her flop forward, arms hanging limply around his neck. His mane was far too thick to feel the tears and mucus clinging to the matted clumps of his fur. Every so often, she would have a revival, kicking and slapping, flinging the reins up and down. Eventually there was nothing left in her, and she sat back up in the saddle and did not move. The beat of the horse's heart drowned out the pulse of the woman's legs pressed against it.

They stood there, the horse content, until they came to find her.

Terriers

He'd laid his inhalers out on the dinner table with the throat spray and Ibuprofen. When Sophie came in, he was tweaking his display so any observer could read Pulmicort or Bricanyl or Boots Cold and Flu should they desire. She carried the milk in past him and saw to the fridge.

"They gave me inhalers," her husband said.

"I saw."

"Feel like a six year old."

"I would too."

"They said my asthma 'got woken up by a viral infection'."

"Told you as much."

"If it's not one thing," he said, "it's some other thing."

She thought the same about the house. Above him, the frame of the Velux window was visibly flaking. She suspected his asthma had been awakened by dust and paint chips more than anything. The two of them were constantly coated in a layer of the farmhouse's flaking skin. "Just do as they told you, Callum."

"I didn't say I wouldn't," he said. Making sure she was still there, he added: "I think we have rats. Or maybe just the one. Saw something dart out from under the fence this morning."

Sophie had been in the process of taking her tea mug from the dishwasher. She placed it by the sink. "They flock to abandoned buildings," she said.

“What do you mean?”

She went into the living room and played The Danube Waves on the CD player. Callum shouted something in response, and she turned up the volume. When the music dipped, she thought she heard him suck at one of the inhalers.

The track skipped in different places each time. It was on the player, she guessed. Their friends didn’t have CDs anymore. Some of them had even forsaken their ipods for playlists on phone apps she didn’t understand. Callum’s friend Mark had offered to explain the process to her once, his fingers brushing her knee, tracing a little red wine across her tights.

She skipped back to the start of the track, savouring the swell that Al Jolson had warped into the opening warble of ‘The Anniversary Song’. If Callum was still huffing at his medication, she couldn’t hear it anymore. She let the song play out, and crushed the stop button once it did. She had heard the start of the next track far too many times. The CD halted with a squeal.

“Have you been upstairs yet?” Callum said. Calling out through the house started his coughing.

“Not yet.”

“Best not to leave it too long.”

Sophie felt it could wait.

“How was work,” she said, into the silence that came after.

The throat spray squirted down in the kitchen. It sounded like Callum coughed much of it back up. “Fine. Yours?”

“Fantastique,” she said, chewing an old scar on her pinkie.

*

Her father had taken her out one morning, into the cold with a jacket and a flask of Bovril. He had made her wake up Scraggles, her fox terrier, from his space in the utility room. When she came back out, dog in tow, her father had his own dogs waiting. All of them were bigger than Scraggles – she had once caught the big one, Koba, trying to snap at Scraggles through the garden fence. She scratched her dog’s ear when he tried to slink around her legs.

“You ready?” her father asked.

“Of course she’s not.” Her mother stood in the doorway. Koba shied away, wary of the broom that was propped between the doormat and the wall. Behind her, the window was sleek and new. “How could she be?”

“It’s just a little blood,” her father said. “Is whathisface ready?”

“His name is Scraggles,” Sophie told him.

“Good for him,” her father said, and he smiled as Koba bared greying teeth.

It was early enough that colour was still to drain back in over the farm. When she squinted, she could make out a congealed yellow sun buried under mounds of cloud. Twice she fell trying to see it again. Her father tightened his expression when he saw the state of her trousers, but he said nothing. He was a firm believer of starting the day off right, and she didn’t tell him when she felt freezing mud run down the inside of her wellies.

He told her off when she tried carrying Scraggles out to the field. “Don’t let him get coddled.” She couldn’t look at him when he said that. She had turned her pet into a lapdog when no one was looking.

Her Aunt Agnes and Uncle Charlie were waiting for them by the barn, having reached the comic strip section of their Daily Record. “Did someone sleep in?” her aunt said. “We’ve been through the sport section five times.” When Sophie tore the barn down in 2005, she found a scrunched and bleached horoscopes section under a loose plank.

Her dad bade the dogs sit, while he opened the barn door a sliver and went inside. He did the same thing on Christmas mornings in the living room, sneaking inside to switch the lights on before assuring Sophie that Santa had visited. The door creaked open again, and out tipped a collection of pitchforks and mattocks. They were not exactly new, but they were not yet close to becoming the rusted monstrosities that Sophie would leave propped against an old couch at the dump on the moors.

“Pick one,” her dad said.

“Does it matter which?” she said. She held Scraggles’ collar, pulling him away before he licked the muddied end of a pitchfork.

“Long as it’s pointy.”

“They’re all pointy.”

“Guess it doesn’t matter then,” her dad said, and they all laughed at her.

Reddening, she took up a mattock and shrank back as her dad came back out of the barn. He had to push Koba back with his leg, the dog desperate to get around him and into the hay behind.

“Maybe I should have got one of they video cameras for Christmas,” her uncle said. “Make ourselves a wee home video, see how Sophie and her dug get on.”

“You have too much fun in all this,” her aunt said.

Her father ignored this exchange. He swung a pickaxe over his shoulder, and patted Sophie’s shoulder.

“You ready?” He didn’t seem to realise how embarrassed he’d made her. She nodded and watched the mud rise over the tips of her wellies.

He crouched down by her. “Is Scruffy ready?”

“Scraggles,” she said.

He laughed and went to open the barn doors, leaving his scent behind him. She had been young enough to assume her father’s unique odour was aftershave. Later, when the whites of his eyes reddened and his skin greyed and crumpled like an old sock, she realised it had always been vodka. In the park as a teenager, she would recognise the scent gulping the contents of a boyfriend’s plastic bottle.

“Cardinal rule-” her father said, gripping the door handles.

“Cardinal?” said her uncle. “You’ve been going to the wrong churches, mate.”

“Cardinal rule,” he said again. Koba had begun scratching beside him, claws scraping red paint off in ribbons. “Don’t get anything in your eyes and mouth. Especially you, Agnes.”

“Oh, naff off.”

Sophie pulled her hood up, comforted by the sight of the fur lining creeping into her peripheral. She reached down to brush Scraggles’ ears, and found him gone.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” her father said, wrenching the doors open, “the away team!”

In the gloom squatted countless grey bales of hay, and far more unorganised hills stretching behind them, like the hide of a dead elephant. Koba was the first in the room, flanked by two of the other dogs. Scraggles, momentarily forgetting his fear, rushed after them, the sound of his sniffing magnified into excited, rasping gulps. Sophie was ushered inside, the adults hushed with a church-like reverence. The hall, as she thought of it, stank – somehow humid even in the cold, with the lingering hint of something sweet begun to rot. She raised one mitten to her mouth and suffocated her gag before anyone heard. Her father closed the doors behind them, and she leaned against them until Aunt Agnes sparked a hanging lamp and brought the misshapen bales back into focus.

Charlie pushed ahead, sank his pitchfork into the first available mound and swung the tool back up, tearing the growth apart. Sophie, still standing by the entrance, closed her eyes as stray lumps of hay blew past her and slammed against the doors.

The rats came. At first Sophie thought she recognised the scream of a loose hinge, but then the first black shape burst from the hole her uncle had made, and the sound went with it. Scraggles,

occupied with the scent of a rotten plank, jumped when she did. The second and third rats broke from the hay too, and the dogs took after them. Frantic barking drowned out the squeals.

She lost track of the first rat until it appeared before her, hay clotted in its fur, scrambling on the rotten wood. She looked for her dad, halfway through a pleading call, when Koba found it first. The dark terrier caught the intruder by the back legs and tossed it in the air until his teeth found the neck. Sophie watched Koba shake the rat dead, and didn't have the time to look away before he began to swallow the corpse raw. The leathery tail wiggled as it disappeared.

"Is that it?" her dad said, and she hoped it was until she saw him swing his pickaxe into another hay pile. More rats erupted out into the open, and Charlie brought yet more with another swing. Sophie heard her dad laugh as Agnes was nearly bowled over by a panicked rat and its pursuing terrier. Scraggles was in one of the piles, digging excitedly, all paws sunk out of the sight. She was relieved by the lack of blood on his face. Koba, killing another rat nearby, had managed to turn his face and front paws a dark, wet red.

Her father clapped her on the back. His sterile smell blocked the stink of the barn. "You managed to scare any up yet Soph?"

She shook her head.

"Come on," he said, "have a go." His hand pressed harder against her back. "See that bit there? Just whack the top off. The dogs'll do the rest."

She shook her head.

"Nothing to be scared of," he said, smiling.

"I don't want to."

“Just do it,” he said, and he wasn’t smiling anymore.

She had to edge past Koba to get to the pile her father insisted on. Clumps of fur dotted the way, and the black terrier eyed her warily, standing between her and his catch. One of the other dogs cut in behind and ran off out of the light, the stolen rat pinched in its teeth. Koba pursued barking, and Sophie stepped over the dots of blood splattered on the earth and hay strewn floor. She held the mattock level with her stomach, and resisted its pull to the ground.

“Don’t hit too hard,” her father said. He was leaning against a post, and took the lantern from the wall to dangle in front of his face. Every crease deepened into a valley as the flame turned his eyes opaque. “And step back when you’re done. Little bastards can jump.”

“Och, go easy on her,” Agnes said.

Sophie breathed in and thudded the mattock head into the hay. She had expected it to sink with ease, she found the tool that heavy. Instead, her arms jarred like she had hit the trunk of a tree. Her father caught the edge of the handle before she let go in shock.

“Lift,” he said.

She pushed the mattock until she had leverage, and sloughed off a thin layer of hay. She stepped back before her father did.

Scraggles hit the pile before the rats had time to flee. Sophie saw a paw clamp down on a squealing head, and heard her dog let out a wet growl. Red spittle turned thicker when the killing started. The lamp creaked as it swung back and forth in her father’s hand.

“Hey!” she shouted. “Scraggles!”

The fox terrier looked up, but only after it was done. Scraggles raised his head, his shoulders risen higher, expression impenetrable. Sophie stared at the dog she had cuddled watching *Blue Peter,* as he licked the blood from his little white beard.

"I guess he was ready after all," her father said.

She remembered them shouting after her. She had got some way across the field before they noticed, and when the shouting came, she broke into a run. The mattock threatened to topple her every step. She threw it away, down the path to the kirk. Her father never found it, but he kept on at her to ask the minister, years down the line. Sometimes, when he thought about it too often and she was small enough, he would threaten to belt her for every day the tool was lost, though he never quite managed it.

Sophie huddled in the tree line, protected from the winds whipping in from the moor. She dug her feet into the earth and let the dead pine needles stick to her muddied wellies. The kirk congregation filed out of their worship. Standing rooted in her post, she could discern individual parishioners, but not their features. Tall flecks of pale skin in coloured coats.

Uncle Charlie found her, after enough time that the tears had been and gone. If he could tell she'd been crying, he didn't say. He wordlessly led her back across the fields to the main house, where her father stood in the kitchen doorway, gripping the frame hard enough that it threatened to chip. Koba and Scraggles were sleeping in the grass before him, curled so that either one of them could rest his head on the other's back.

"It's just a little blood," she was told.

*

At seven o'clock, Callum told her he had put the kettle on.

"No tea," she said. "Don't want to deal with burns."

He shrugged. "You'll need to deal with it. I'm sick."

"Come upstairs with me and you'll see what sick looks like."

She settled for a glass of milk and a ham sandwich. On her way up the stairs she stopped to flick another paint chip from the plate. It didn't look like it had come from the Velux. She supposed everything else in the house was crumbling now. At the top, she had to balance the milk on the plate while she struggled with the key in the black door. She had had her spills here before.

"Callum thinks he saw a rat this morning," she said when she pushed her way in. She set the milk and sandwich on the bedside table, before scanning the room to make sure everything was as she'd left it.

Her father snorted. "Get him out to the barn with the dogs then."

"We tore down the barn, dad. You were there."

Another snort. It launched a thin brook of drool down his chin. She tried not to look at that face when she could. It folded in on itself in a manner that still unnerved her. "That boy's no good."

"That boy is nearly forty. Christ, I'm nearly forty."

"Neither of you have any clue. Not a single clue. I heard pigs the other day. What business have you with pigs?"

"We don't own that land, Dad," she said. "You sold it. To the man with the pigs."

She heard her husband wheeze through another inhaler dose down in the living room. She decided to have some music when she got back downstairs. Some friends over, if they were free. Wine and playlists.

“Bullshit. We’d have to take out the barn.”

“We did. It’s just the main house now,” she said. A smile broke out. “Well, for you it’s just this room.”

“Bring Koba in.” He’d found his walking stick, and tapped it against the browning mattress. “We’ll see to these rats.”

“If Callum’s better tomorrow I’ll send him up to change your clothes.” She whistled the Waves of the Danube as she closed the door.

Her father reached out with his stick and tapped the peeling wallpaper. He could still summon a little energy every so often. “Bits of me are coming off, Soph,” he said.

“Oh, Dad,” Sophie said, locking him in, “if it’s not one thing, it’s some other thing.”

Moscow Train Dog

"Help children's cancer," Catherine said, rattling coins under the dripping awning of the Lidl. "Money for children's cancer!"

She had read somewhere that the modern shopper was unwittingly trained to view beggars and charity workers as objects. It had been a study of some kind, working out what parts of the brain lit up. She didn't believe it. An object wouldn't have her reflexively hunching her shoulders and dipping her head down as each passer-by did. A good line of them in dark coats, the same awkward methods of avoidance, looking like a procession of nervous storks.

"Children's cancer?"

Catherine switched her tablet to the other hand and flexed stiff fingers. The Lidl shoppers quickened their pace, sensing a pause in which to rush in through the automatic doors. Those leaving the shop were even faster, and she would often catch only a glimpse of a face in her peripheral before she was seeing the backs of their heads bobbing off down Shawkirk's main road.

Card machines were her enemy, she'd decided. Card machines and contactless pay. No one had any spare change, and no one wanted to give out their card details. There was the rare stranger who was willing, and then she'd find out the tablet wasn't working. She shook the donation box that hung on a strap around her neck, this big plastic hourglass rattling a few dirty ten pence coins. A wishing well, it was called, and it sounded deep and dark and empty.

"Help raise money for children's cancer!"

Her voice grated on her. It was like being back at school, she thought, cheering on whatever sports event and hoping volume was a viable substitute for enthusiasm. The neon green sign of the

kebab takeaway across the street seemed almost malicious in the way it caught her eye. When a sudden change of wind slung a deluge of rainwater into her face and the hood of her jacket, she scuttled backwards and through the automatic doors in a smooth motion. Fuck it, the intention was supposed to be what counted in the end. She texted as much to Mike, whose idea this had all been and was currently assigned with a prime spot in Buchanan Street. This was not the future she'd pictured for them together when they had resolved to become upstanding citizens.

"They said you weren't allowed in," said a shopworker. He was older than her but still had acne.

"I'm not collecting in here," Catherine said. Creasing her face into a false smile rerouted each stream of rainwater. "Just needed some heat is all."

"Are you buying something then?"

"It's not illegal to walk around without buying anything."

"Just make it quick."

Catherine could see her face in the reflection of the aisle fridges. The wind had chipped it red and the shine of the rain only made it worse. Impulsively, she swivelled to the worker. "Do you like working here?"

"Do you like what you do?"

"I just meant does it pay good, can you live on it. That sort of thing."

He frowned, still holding onto one of the Halloween-ready pumpkins he was supposed to be organising. "It's better than Asda," he said.

She found the cheapest chocolate available and stood in the longest checkout queue so she had an excuse to lurk in the warmth for a few minutes longer. She looked at her phone, conscious she had adopted the same pose as the shoppers when they were ignoring her. Bent neck, raised shoulders. 'Think of the CV' Mike had texted. That was all he thought about lately. Nothing could stop his grand plan, and they could have a flat in a year he said. With the right kind of padded CV, with the right kind of job. Once he'd got drunk and cried and said he was scared they'd never leave Shawkirk. Catherine had held him and said nothing.

Her friend Rana had left Shawkirk. Cut ties properly, done a runner. There were family issues in that case though, fights until Rana couldn't stand it anymore. Catherine's mother had done nothing to justify that sort of response, and without Catherine she'd be alone in the world. Maybe Rana was lucky to be so much less fortunate.

When she left the shop there was a clothed table set up where she had been standing, the prime spot under the awning. Catherine stepped out in the rain to get a better look. A soldier carefully set the table, laying out several displays of plastic and paper Remembrance Day poppies. From the moment he straightened up she disliked him.

"Excuse me," she said.

"Yes ma'am." His voice was PR ready, his accent long since smoothed over.

"I was here first." She indicated the wishing well around her neck. "Children's cancer."

"I'm sorry ma'am, but this display has been pre-arranged for several weeks now. It's for a good cause too."

"Some kind of mix-up, I'm supposed to be here."

“If there’s a mix-up ma’am it must be on your end. We were stationed in front of the United Reformed Church yesterday and we’ll be back there tomorrow.”

“It’s not my fault.”

“I wasn’t accusing you, ma’am, these things are always bureaucratic errors.”

Catherine nodded and smiled and texted Mike to find out from the charity people what the fuck was going on because a squaddie was in her spot. She shuffled under the corner of the awning, stooping so as not to get dripped on. The soldier had long since stopped looking at her, holding his arms behind his back and staring straight ahead.

“Money for children’s cancer!” she said, “Help folk less fortunate than yourself!” She had to keep moving to let people in through the doors. The charity logo sticker was beginning to peel from the wishing well, her fingernails coming away with more and more wet paper every time she readjusted.

The soldier, whom she was trying not to notice, did not have any sort of slogan. In fact he barely moved at all, save for the breeze catching the folds in his uniform. Camouflage in Shawkirk, Catherine thought. Maybe they could nuke the place. He should open with that.

It was a trickle at first. One old man, shaken from his intended path at the sight of a military hat, stopped to buy five poppies. A muttered ‘good for you son’. The soldier came to life, smiling, and froze again when the man was gone. A woman came out of the shop, pivoting to inspect the stall and buy some of her own. ‘My dad was in the war’. The soldier said something in response that had the woman laughing. By the time a line formed before the poppy salesman Catherine was no longer calling out or waving the wishing well. Mike had replied with the equivalent of a shrug

– ‘they say it might be a fuck up with the council?’ She loved him, but he was hardly Nero Wolfe when it came to solving a case.

She waited for a lull.

“Look,” she said, “this was definitely arranged for us today.” She tapped the sticker with the charity logo and hoped it was still legible.

“I’m sorry ma’am, but I’m in the same position as you. Perhaps you can call your boss and find out if he knows what’s happening.”

“Why don’t you call your boss?”

“I’m not allowed to use my phone right now ma’am. If you’ll excuse me there’s someone waiting behind you.”

Catherine leaned out of the way to let another bobbing shopper approach the table. She tried thinking of the correct approach. ‘Here mate, I’m a Protestant too’? ‘I’ll buy a poppy for some table space’? She should have gone to Glasgow and let Mike take the Shawkirk spot. Mike could be diplomatic.

“Look I need this,” she said, once the shopper was gone. “My boyfriend and I, we need to fluff up our CVs. I can’t claim I did charity work if you chase me off from here.”

“I’m sorry ma’am. If you’re looking for a sense of structure, we are actively engaged in finding recruits who may not otherwise think themselves suited for the army-”

“Oh fuck off,” said Catherine, having exhausted diplomacy.

Something twitched in the soldier's face. It might have been amusement. "Again," he said, "my apologies ma'am." He drew out the last word with a display of regimented white teeth.

Catherine leaped in front of the table, rain rustling from her jacket. "Money for children's cancer!" She found the voice deep in her stomach. "Help the less fortunate!"

"Ma'am-"

"Help children's cancer!" Catherine shook the wishing well at an alarmed old woman who half-raised a handbag in defence.

"You're embarrassing yourself," said the soldier.

"And you're not, dressed like that?"

"You're not going to get anywhere yelling like that."

"You don't know that."

"For one," he said. "Your phrasing needs work."

"The hell is wrong with my phrasing?"

"You sound like you're raising money to give children cancer," said the soldier.

"I'll raise money to give you cancer."

"How grown up."

Catherine waved her arms like a preacher, dangling the wishing well and clutching the defunct tablet like it was the word of God. Her knuckles were blooming red with the wind and the rain and she yelled until something cracked in her throat and then the tears were coming and she ran down

a side street with the soldier's silence following her. Behind her, she knew the procession of shoppers would pause to stare, and then resume without a word.

Sitting on a garden wall, she called Mike, grit and sediment leaking into her jeans.

"How's it going?" he asked.

"Bad," she said, hoarse. "I fucked it again Mike."

Silence for a while, then: "The soldier thing? It's not worth it Catherine. It's a bit of a setback but you don't need to take them so hard. We have other things going for us. Remember our flat."

She saw him drunk and sobbing, saying it was too late to make something of himself. She felt him leaning into her, so much taller, her knees threatening to buckle.

"I should chuck something at him," she said.

"You can't chuck anything at an army guy, you'll get the jail. I'll get the jail just hearing you chuck something at an army guy. That's terrorism."

Catherine laughed. Looking down the street she could see the yellow crest of the Lidl rising behind a garden hedge. She could drop everything now, she thought. Drop the tablet and the wishing well into that puddle in the road, leaving them floating next to the discarded crisp packets. Do a Rana, or explain to Mike that he'd only ever been right when he was drunk, that flats were expensive and they'd be renting until they died or at least until he was sick of her and found someone better, that maybe joining the army actually sounded like a life even if it cost them their autonomy.

Instead, she said: “Do you know in Moscow there are stray dogs that learned how to ride the trains to wherever they’re heading. Taught themselves. Why do dogs have so much going on in their lives?” She had read it, and wasn’t sure if she believed it.

“There’s trains in Moscow? I went and it was a couple houses and a cow.”

“Moscow Russia.”

“Ah. You alright?”

“I don’t think I’m cut out for civic decency Mike. But yeah, I’m feeling better.”

They said they loved each other, and that they would meet tonight. Catherine thought of ways to turn the whole day into a joke, something that Mike could smile and forget about. Something that didn’t affect the grand plan.

Catherine made her way through the procession of shoppers. The soldier cocked his head, expressionless.

“How much for a poppy?” she asked.

“For you? A fiver.”

She looked at her waterlogged shoes. “I’m sorry I yelled at you. Come on. Let me buy one.”

The soldier sighed. “A quid.”

She handed it over, and selected one of the paper poppies. She felt the edges curl under the impact of the water dripping from the awning. Catherine removed the pin, delicately, and placed it back on the table, held up the crimson flower wilting with rainwater and shoved it directly into

her mouth, chewing with her lips peeled back and letting the solider see it pulped. His hand came up to the table as if to grab her and then froze. Catherine kept chewing. The edges of the paper scratched her gums and the soldier returned the hand behind his back. She swallowed the poppy and bowed.

"Mature," said the soldier. "I hope it was worth a quid."

"It would have been worth a fiver," said Catherine.

The Dancing Plague

He would never ask her not to go, but he made his opposition clear enough. Hanging around in doorways, maudlin expression fixed on her luggage. When they were close, his thumbs would brush the thick white scarring on the first knuckle of both her pinkies, cloying and obvious.

"I don't know what goes on with you all up there," he said once, laughing, though she'd told him years ago and he hadn't laughed then.

"You can run out and get some drink for us," Louise said. "The list is on the cabinet."

"They don't have shops?"

"They don't have people." She snapped the locks on her case. "And they have those minimum unit prices, so it's cheaper to buy here."

That had been it for discussion. She clipped his petulance whenever it reared, and she'd been away up to Shawkirk without receiving a single one of his wheedling text messages.

She took the long route, the one that wound her through Shawkirk's side streets. She made the necessary detour to the old house, intending on sending a picture over to her parents' new place in Spain. The fresh concrete driveway and sprawling extensions were a surprise, and the sight of the new owner raking leaves into the street sent her away with no picture and no story for Mum and Dad. She nearly got herself lost on the way back to the main street. She had forgotten how Shawkirk tilted in on itself, overlapped in strange ways so that a downhill journey required several trips uphill. As a kid she was told that the cause of it was the old quarries from the Romantic era, and the erratic attempts to build over them. Her grandpa intended this to be a mildly interesting

anecdote, but at the time it had flooded her imagination with tunnels, sudden collapses and things scuttling under the crooked hills. It was a relief to find the main street again.

Sophie still lived in her parents' old house, out on the moors near the windfarm and the old kirk. Still lived with her dad, according to Megan. Got married and moved the husband right in with her, though she had been very clear in her emails that there would be no men present on the night. They would all be safe out there if childhood fears came true and the collapsing quarry sent Shawkirk into the dirt. A little haven on the edge of the pit.

Louise was glad to recognise Sophie's house at least. Through the walls of thick evergreen pines, the ramshackle attic window gleamed yellow. Sophie's old bedroom, and if the flicker of movement was any indication, her current one too. A newly fenced perimeter did not distract from the way the house threatened to sink back into the moors – in several places the formerly white house had begun to match the colour of the scrubland it sat on, and many of the windows were marred with deep brown water stains.

"Needs a budget and a TV crew," said Louise, to nobody but the wine in the backseat.

The wood-panelled gate drew back automatically, shedding its tasteful disguise and drawing the eyes to greased wheels and a metal track. An expensive addition, Louise thought, considering the paint was visibly peeling from the house itself. As soon as her tires rolled gravel, a cacophony of barking started up, and she was forced to halt the car halfway over the threshold as half a dozen wire black terriers circled her, claws scattering up dust.

Sophie was in the doorway, stout as a farmhand, gesturing like a politician. Louise had to roll the window down, and strain to hear over the excitement. One of the dogs kept jumping at the driver's seat door, a glassy-eyed thing that looked like a living pad of steel wool.

“What?”

“Pump your horn at them, pump the-”

The sudden blast sent the dogs running through Sophie’s legs and into the house, all noise ceased. Louise parked and hauled the booze out from the backseat. Sophie caught her on the turn around, wrapping her in a hug that felt tight enough to shuck the meat from her bones.

“Welcome home.”

“Oof, it’s not been home for a while.”

“And yet you keep coming back.”

The mass of terriers had reappeared in the door, eyeing the car that had scattered them and jumbled together in strength. Their eyes and ears were all lost somewhere in the heaving bristle, the panting and occasional whine the only clues to their species.

“Your dad surrounding himself with dogs as ever, eh?”

“No,” said Sophie. “These ones are mine.”

Louise tried reaching out to clap a terrier as they entered the hall, but it shrank from her hand. She decided not to take offence. She was the one looming over it after all.

“I saw you in the bedroom window on the drive up. Remember we used to kid on it was a lighthouse?”

“That’s not my room anymore,” said Sophie. “Got the master bedroom now.”

“Oh. Why were you up there then?”

“I wasn’t up there. Wouldn’t work as much of a room for me and Callum. Too small.”

Louise chanced a look, gauged Sophie’s fixed smile. “Guess I didn’t see anything then.”

“Guess so.”

Megan was already in the kitchen. They followed a hollow musical note to find her tracing one finger over the rim of a wine glass. She did not go for the hug, instead smiling as if she had seen Louise five minutes ago, revealing crow’s feet that had not been there before.

Louise was not sure whether to be relieved or disappointed, and was contemplating trying her hand at an overly performative reunion when Sophie snatched up the bag of wine bottles and clunked them on the table.

“Straight for the booze,” said Megan.

“You’re the one with a glass already.”

“Just making do with what we could find.”

Sophie herded the dogs to the flap in the back door, sending each through with a tap of the boot to the backside. Two of them set to snapping at one another before she crouched and, whistling the Danube Waves, pressed both writhing through the plastic flap and locked it behind them. The click of the lock seemed to trigger a hollow knock from somewhere on the floors above. Louise figured the place could collapse easily enough on its own, divorced from any of Shawkirk’s impending quarry disasters. Sitting amidst all the hanging iron pans, unwashed tea mugs and uneven table was a balance act of its own. Shout Jenga, she assumed, and grab any random item, and odds were good that the house would crush them in seconds.

Sophie, apparently oblivious to chain reaction theory, kept on whistling.

“That,” said Megan, pointing, “has been a point of contention. Sophie’s gone all classical in her music tastes.”

“Scuse me for not living off the music that played back in school,” said Sophie.

“It’s like that down south,” said Louise. “Constant nostalgia playlists, like they stopped making new music or something.”

“Well I liked school,” said Megan. “And I don’t know who Sophie’s kidding with this orchestra shite. Bloody hell, you bought this, Louise? Sophie, look at the booze Miss Media bought.”

“I already saw. They have tastes down there. Moulded her into high society.”

Louise laughed, and it was answered with another knock from above. “Call Callum on down, Soph,” she said. “He’s going nuts up there.”

Sophie poured the wine and handed her the glass. The scars on her left pinkie were visible through the transparent stem. “Cal’s away out. He’s not welcome at girls’ night.”

Louise looked upwards.

“Ah, I’m not sure he’s real,” said Megan. “I never see him.”

Louise ran her thumb over her scars. “It’s not quite a husband, but an imaginary man has his uses.”

“Oh aye?”

“Yeah. Mine’s a nebbish sort, always worried. Passes for a conscience.”

Megan grinned. “Hear that Sophie? Not everything’s perfect down south.”

“South of the border or south of the waist?” asked Sophie.

“Fuck off,” said Louise. The wine was sweet, and dangerous because of it.

The terriers had returned to the door, claws scraping at the seal of the flap. Sophie drained her glass, and Megan and Louise followed suit. School memories and the refills followed.

“Imaginary boyfriend.” Megan whittled another tune from her wine glass. “Might be worth a shot.”

The knocks came rapidly, and louder than before. Fists were slammed to flooring, and a ragged groan echoed between blows. The plastic flap rattled as the terriers threw themselves against the frame.

“Fucking hell,” said Sophie. Her wine glass rang from the force with which it met the kitchen counter, but she was already gone from the room.

Louise sat, and sipped her wine. Megan looked to her. Rabbit eyes, startled amber circling the pupil.

“I saw protesters in the city,” Louise said. “We’re all going to die apparently.”

“You said that about here too, once.”

“The quarries?”

“Yeah. The ground will cave in. Nicer than the sky falling down I suppose.”

“Something’s gotta give. Quarries, icebergs, sea levels.”

“Your imagination still runs riot Lou. No wonder they have you writing clickbait.”

“Imagination’s all it takes. Like in the middle ages, a lady would start dancing, and before you know it the whole town was joining in. All dancing themselves to death. Their brains told them they had to join in. Duped themselves.”

“Sounds familiar.”

Knocks gave way to shouts. The two of them rolled their eyes to the kitchen ceiling. Far above, Sophie could be heard hissing. Louise could picture her slashing the air as she spoke, hands swinging in the stereotypical karate fashion. Sophie had been doing that since they were six.

A deeper voice carried down, and wavered. Then a howl, a guttural scream of frustration and grief. The sort of noise that should never have been uttered in public and almost always was. Louise scooped her hair back over her neck, giving herself the excuse to smooth over the risen goosebumps.

“He’s got Alzheimer’s,” Megan said. “Or dementia. One or the other.”

“She keeps him all the way up there?”

“Keeps him out of trouble I reckon.”

Louise remembered a looming man, permanently smoking, flicking a zippo lighter with hands that were mostly scar tissue. She could not see him in Sophie’s old room, stooped under the slanting roof – at least, not without conflating the image to Gulliver in Lilliput.

“Remember he found that dead owl? We were primary seven I think.”

“Fuck,” said Megan. “Yeah, and nailed it on the barn door?”

They had stood as a trio and watched in silence. The taloned feet dangled free and knocked against the door in the wind. Sophie had conflicting explanations on each successive school day.

“For luck. Or warding off evil, think that was one reason.”

“Daft. Might well have kept evil away but it gave him a massive bloody rat problem.” Megan’s glass enveloped her face; her eyes, nose and mouth warping until they were hidden by the slick coaster that clung to the base. It slid, wobbled and clattered off the table and into her lap. The wine bubbled with an involuntary giggle.

“Smooth,” said Louise.

“I thought so too.” She placed the glass down more carefully than it had been raised up, and wiped the condensation from the coaster. Her gaze was safely on the table when she asked if it was always an imaginary boyfriend.

“It depends,” said Louise.

“I could go for the city,” Megan said. ‘Not even Glasgow. A big one, a big fuck off city I can get lost in.”

“We could always switch places.”

Megan kept staring at the coasters. “Sure.”

Sophie arrived on cue, the mud shaking from her Doc Martens with each irritated stamp. Louise rose halfway from her chair.

“Did you hear-”

“It’s fine,” Sophie said. “If it’s not one thing it’s some other thing.”

Whatever the issue had been, it prompted more refills, more jokes about Callum and imaginary boyfriends, and grim jokes about collapsing industries. The terriers howled and Sophie ignored them and poured more wine. She had sold off a good amount of her parents’ land, she claimed. Louise listened, but no agonised response came from upstairs.

“Hey,” said Louise.

They held their glasses.

“Just how nostalgic are we feeling?”

“Fuck nostalgia,” Sophie began, and then stopped as Louise flashed the scarred knuckles of her pinkie fingers.

“This nostalgic?”

“No way,” said Megan. “Nope.”

“It’s part of us being home,” said Louise. “It’s what we do together.”

“That’s what you tell your imaginary boyfriend.”

Louise touched the tip of her shoe to Megan’s calf and found it tense. “I can go first.”

Sophie reached out and turned Louise’s hands in hers, until the thin hooks of white scars caught the light. “We’re too old for this,” she said.

“We said we’d never be too old,” said Louise.

Megan took her hands next, her fingers much lighter on the skin. Scarred pinkies curled around scarred pinkies. Louise avoided her gaze.

"It was just stupid kid stuff," Megan said.

"Stupid home stuff," said Louise.

"She's right," said Sophie. "We promised."

Louise could still remember the first conversation, in the dark of a sleepover. She had suggested the palms, like they did in movies, but Megan said they only cut there in movies because it was easier to hide the blood packs. Besides, Sophie said, cuts on the palms would take forever to heal. The pinkies were a safe place, she told them, and Megan and Louise knew from her voice that she had long since made up her mind.

"It's unhygienic," said Megan. "None of us – we can't drive to a hospital in this state."

"It's a paramedic issue at worst," said Sophie.

"Do you really want paramedics poking around your fucking murder attic?"

"That's enough," said Louise, and drew her hands back. Megan was pulled through the empty wine glasses and sent them circling on gaudy tablecloth. Panicked rabbit eyes, backed by the blackened moors framed in a corrupted door window. Louise pressed the keys into Megan's right hand and drew the ragged edge to her pinkie.

"We're not doing it," Megan said. "It's been fucking decades, we…"

Sophie propped her chair against the counter and sat atop both like a preacher on his pulpit.

Louise leaned in and kissed Megan deep, as they had in the dark when Sophie was asleep. They heard her now, gasping or hissing, but then the keys were digging into Louise's finger on the knot of the first knuckle, grinding bone and she hissed into Megan's mouth, saw the gold eyes flash open and tasted the bitterness of home and Shawkirk and blood and collapsing quarries.

Megan drew back. The key wobbled, blood running down the groove. Then her head tilted forward, and she was kissing back, furiously and someone hissed "Welcome home."

Drey

Found this pen after fall from the bed. If you can't find it best check that space again. Read this first, don't tell Sophie she doesn't want us writing

Sophie has gone out. Something heavy is on the roof. I told her yesterday and she said it was just a bird, that's what it's like to live in the at tic.

> Like I'd forgotten. This isn't a bird unless birds have four legsthese days. Maybe they do, haven't seen a real one in years. There was a bird on the cover of that book Joan got us back 1988? 89? There was a bird on that and it's faded now, just scratches on the paper. Used to know all kinds of birds. Read this back to yourself. Don't get angry if we get confused – we'll get there.

I can hear them again, those claws on the tiles. Need to tell Sophie again.

Sophie's bastard husband didn't believe me either. I couldn't remember his name before all this and I won't try. No man should let a woman run his life like that. Took one look at the roof and said Sophie told him it was sparrows. Took my cup, left a new one. Scratching when he left. Tried screaming and no one came

Sparrows today! I remember what they sound like. It must have rained and they'll be

after the worms. They used to follow me when I was turning over the soil. Oppor tune istic little tootired.

Claws all afternoon. Yelled for Sophie or the boy but no one's coming. Hit the ceiling with the slipper and heard it run to the other end of the roof. Knows I'm here. I hope it's not a rat. They can chew through anything and this house is damp as it is. Need some terriers up here – barking will scare it off. Do we still have dogs

here?

Forgot Sophie's name today, spilled my soup everywhere when I couldn't think of it. She didn't look at me. Still covered in winter broth, bits of barley in my pajammas. At least you'll know it's no pish when you wake up- SCRATCHING!

It must be under the tiles now, got right under the lead. I could hear it crawling closer, and slow like it has less room than before. Must have found its way in after the wind last week-
last month? Zoey doesn't take care of the bloody house, tell her she needs a roofer. Sophie.

Can't remember if it came today. Sophie left a cal en dar so I could tick each day. She was being nice I remember when she was six we had a rat problem

I think it’s in the wall but I can’t

h

Can’t m ak e muchsens of this Reading

and writing get harder and harder if Jo could see me now

Claws found the damp. I think it burst something. Joan said I made a hole in the wall but it must have been the rat she’ll see when it – Sophie said that not Joan

sqwirrel. It’s a sqwireltook me four ever to tell what I was looking at big eyes and twitching nose coming threw the hole in the damp. I dont think it minds me

it has been so long since I saw an animal. I forgot I missed them I had dogs and life was tough but fur in your hands fireplaces and animal snoring I hope sophie never comes back up these stairs

I think this house was mine

Topiary

Margaret had kept herself busy, as they'd told her at the funeral. Visited friends, hosted them, sat in restaurants. The days were successfully broken into chunks of an itinerary, like she was the world's oldest Girl Guide at camp.

No one tried to advise her on Eric's hedge animals, however. Every trip brought her out from under the leaves, and every trip saw the animals warp and bristle – the hare's ears merging; stray branches erupting from the swan's neck. The arch Eric had grown over the driveway threatened to hold her car in place. She did not pretend that she was capable of seeing to this with Eric's dedication, and did not come close to picturing herself at the top of his ancient ladders flashing the shears. So when the cat lost all definition and the swan's swelling head threatened to topple into the base, she hired a gardener. He came on the Tuesday and whittled the topiary back into life, somewhat less artistically than Eric, but close enough. When it was time to send him away, she made sure her jewellery was all present and secure. You ran a risk, having workers round your house.

Her friends and neighbours were quick with the compliments. That meant they had been talking about it – whispering that the overgrowth was proof that life without a husband was corroding her. She wondered how often they followed "It's good you're keeping yourself busy, hen," with a glance to the collapsing swan. Still, she was satisfied.

Eric was right about the hedges. The neighbours were too in love with their gates. Gates you couldn't see through; gates with locks instead of latches. They only got bigger over the years, some even dotted with cameras and security lights. She agreed with Eric – they'd only have a

small gate. If they were sealing themselves in their burrows like the rest of the neighbours, they'd grow walls that were pleasant to look at. Here they were pleasant again.

Her itinerary loosened. With the garden repaired, she hosted more and visited less. Restaurants were an unnecessary expense now that she could sit on the patio and look down on a place cultivated just for her. Occasionally she wondered where all this pride surged from.

"I don't know why you don't get a big display for yourself," she said to her friend Grace over tea. "Strong as any gate, and a bit better looking than your Tam's cameras I'd say."

"They fair spruce the street up, but I don't know. Those cameras give us peace of mind."

"Oh, what peace of mind. If someone robs you, you'll have a photo of him, aye, but he'll still have all your jewellery. No to mention the number those cameras'll do on your electric bill."

"You're probably right Margaret," said Grace.

When the young man started to appear in the street, Margaret knew of it instantly. They all did. Eyes and cameras traced the black coat and tight shoulders from entrance to exit. He was nobody's son, this man with the damp hair. Nobody's friend. But he was there frequently now, ambling in and out the other end of the street nearly every day, some days early or late enough that the lampposts had time to catch the curved shine of his hair. He didn't speak to anyone, not even if they said hello first, said Tam and Grace. Just looked at you and went on. He walked too slowly, all the neighbours said. From the patio, Margaret could sometimes see the tip of a head walk from the cat to the hare, and always took it as a cue to go inside. Certain people carried an unpleasant atmosphere with them, and Margaret knew to avoid them.

"Maybe some of the men could approach him," she said to Grace one day.

“Good luck to them,” said Grace. “He acts like you’re no even there.”

“I mean to give him a scare.”

“Council says get on the phone the second he does something.”

“God above,” said Margaret. “You’ve to let them rob you first these days. And Eric always said, if you hit them back, there’s no self-defence in this country. You’d be on trial before him.”

“You’re probably right Margaret.”

One day, heading out for the supermarket, Margaret found the stranger standing directly in front of the hedges, blank face fixed on the topiary swan. She halted the car halfway out the drive. She would have to get out and close the little gate behind her. Step out of the car and stand right next to the man, who by now had noticed and turned to gaze through the window. Margaret found him painful to look at, the brief empathetic pain a person feels on seeing another so gaunt. The car window squealed as she opened it the slightest it could.

“Can I help you?”

“Mum would drive us up to these big houses when she was in one of her moods,” he said. His voice was slow, and tuneless. “Had to be quiet. Wasn’t allowed to see her in the rear-view mirror. If she caught me she’d stare back.”

Margaret drove straight to the shops. The gate could hang open if it meant standing on the same street as the man. She sat in the Morrisons café, the weekly shop forgotten, and called Grace.

“Is he still there?”

“Who?”

“The boy, the man – the nutter outside my house. Is he still hanging about?”

“Are you alright?”

“He was waiting around outside the drive, trying to talk to me. I think the boy’s on drugs, you should see the look he gave us. I’m staying out till he’s gone Grace, I’m telling you.”

“Hang on, we’ll have a look.” Neither Grace nor Tam could move very well these days. Margaret pressed the phone to her ear hard as they wheezed their way to their windows. Eric could have dealt with this. Nothing scared Eric.

“Is he there?”

“Hang on.” Grace was breathing heavily. “No, no I don’t see him.”

“I had to leave my gate open Grace, he was right there talking nonsense-”

“Tam got us one of these automatic gates, maybe we could-”

“Grace, he could be in the garden!”

Grace did not say anything. Margaret thought she’d hung up, but she could still hear Tam shuffling in the background. The truth of what she’d said must have dawned on Grace. She must have realised she was watching drug-fuelled robbery from across the street-

“Oh!” said Grace.

“What, what, is he there!”

“There he goes. He’s away up past George’s. Had to twist right round the curtain there, you should have seen me.”

Margaret's ear began to ache. She lessened her grip on the phone and felt the blood rush back. "Thank you," she said, though she was not sure Grace heard.

"Tam's asking - did he really talk to you Margaret?"

Margaret slept with the garden lights on. People could complain if it kept them awake. Better that than hearing branches snap, gravel crunch and not being able to get up and check straight away, which she did throughout the night. Casting up from the ground, the lights slashed the daytime colours back into the topiary animals at strange angles. They were hunched black creatures, highlighted in sickly green. The hare's head was mottled with thick shadow all night.

The stranger was there next afternoon. Across the street this time, far enough that Margaret could see that pale drawn face from the living room window. She thought she saw his mouth moving as he looked from one animal to the other. She took the car again, drove to her sister's without an invitation. She accelerated as she passed the stranger, sinking in place as if to use her seatbelt as a blindfold.

She could call the police now, she was sure. A pattern had been established. They couldn't say he was a pedestrian now – couldn't say he was minding his own business, not now he was watching people. Who knew where things could escalate from there.

"He's watching your hedges?" said the officer on the phone.

"Staring at them! He was staring at them yesterday too."

"Have you asked him to stop?"

"No. I'm not going near the boy, you should see the look of him."

“Miss,” said the officer, “looking at hedges isn’t a crime. If he was damaging the hedges-
”

“He’s not just looking at them!”

“Miss, if you could give me a more thorough description of what’s bothering you then I can see about helping.”

And that was it. Wouldn’t even send a cursory patrol car around the street. They were always on the news saying police numbers were being cut back, but was it any surprise if they were going to be so useless? She said as much to Grace later.

“Aye, you’re probably right Margaret,” Grace said.

The next day, at the first glimpse of the wet hair passing between the animals, Margaret left the house, got in her car and edged her way out of the driveway. She cracked the window and made sure the doors were locked.

“You,” she said.

The stranger had been craning his neck to see the cat. When he turned to her, he blinked three times in quick succession. Eric used to do that. Granulated eyelids he’d said.

“Hello,” said the stranger. He would not quite meet her eye, tilting his head slightly to the side of her.

“People live in this street,” she said. She had built the confrontation in her head all morning, but she couldn’t find the lines. “People.”

Hands in coat pockets, the stranger instead moved his elbows when he talked, as if he was flapping tattered wings at her. “Mum used to drive us up here.”

“So you’ve said. But you don’t live here.”

“No,” said the stranger, as if it was a struggle to think about it. “She wanted to see the animals.” He nodded at the hedge. “Swan. Cat. Rabbit.”

“It’s a hare,” Margaret said, “and they belong to me and my husband.”

“We needed to be quiet when we saw them. Because people were sleeping, she said. Drove around and around.”

Margaret resisted the impulse to close the window and silence him right there. “They don’t belong to you, or your mother. Don’t you have somewhere to be?”

“They closed where I’m supposed to be.”

Margaret wasn’t sure what to make of that. “I think you should find somewhere else to be then.”

“Okay,” he said, and didn’t move.

“Now,” she said. “I mean you should go somewhere else now.”

The stranger nodded, slow as ever, and began walking back up the street. Margaret kept her eyes on the hunched shoulders until they swept around the corner. She waited to make sure he didn’t try to slink his way around to the other end of the street, waited long enough that Grace called over from her garden to ask what she was doing.

He was going to come back, of course. What had he meant about ‘them’ closing the place where he was supposed to be? The newspapers would have said if anyone dangerous was in the area. She could have missed an issue. He could have been kept in any dark hole over the years. The asylum at Carstairs, for instance. Anyone could tell there was something wrong with him, stalking down the street with his shoulders bunched like the folded wings of a stork. One look at that blank, sunken face told you everything.

And he was coming back. Was she to move him on every day, like a club bouncer for her own property? At any point he could choose not to listen to her, and even with the car doors locked and the windows wound shut, he was still a grown man facing a retiree. A retiree who lived alone.

The neighbours ignored him now. Even Grace and Tam sounded more and more like the condescending officer on the phone. It wasn’t their property the man was peeping at, was it?

She took the shears and Eric’s stepladder from the garage early one morning. She didn’t have the shoes for this, standing in the muddied grass trying to steady the ladder into position. She should have kept a pair of Eric’s boots for a situation like this, not that she could have imagined it when he’d passed. This was ludicrous. Everything since Eric died had been ludicrous. She would have to apologize to him later, but she was sure he’d understand. Anything to keep that man away.

“This,” she said to herself as she clambered up the ladder and felt it sink deeper into the grass, “this is keeping myself busy.”

She spread the shears and reached them up to rest on the hare’s head, the blades on either side of the ears. Her height was a burden, but if she stretched she could just manage the angle. The hare’s leaves crinkled under the weight of the shears. The ladder swaying, Margaret forced the handles together and dug the blades into the topiary.

They barely sunk in, the sudden resistance wrenching the handles back apart in her hands, the hare's ears barely dented. There was enough time to think of putting more force into it before she realised she was toppling, one muddied foot sliding from the plastic steps. Her face slammed into the hedge, manicured branches snapping and stabbing at her cheek. She hit the grass on her knees, water immediately soaking through her dress and running down her legs. The shears, blades first, planted themselves next to her.

She had barely made an impact on the hedge, even being flung into it. A light dent was all the evidence of her attack, while it had torn at her face and left its evidence clear. It was as she was pulling one of the fragments out from the papery skin around her left eye that she began crying. Her clothes weren't going to get any better, so she told herself that was why she stayed there for some time, wishing for Eric. Cat, hare and swan towered.

When she edged the car out of the driveway later, cuts cleaned and freshly clothed, she opened the window a little further.

"Does anyone know you come here?" she asked the stranger.

The stranger thought about it, and pointed, smiling, at the topiary animals. "Mum loved these."

"Yes," said Margaret. "So did my husband."

The Great Hare War

It was a big bastard of a merlin, but it had been lucky. Red doubted it had actually killed the hare, he'd never heard of anything like that. Merlins went for other birds mostly; the little ones growing fat from garden feeders and unwisely heading out into the countryside slow and tired.

This hare was fully grown, mottled with the white of an encroaching winter coat that would never be complete. And its summer half – charcoal. Red's family only came this way every so often, but he'd known the moors to be dotted with rabbits and brown hares. The merlin was working the strange carcass hard, the eye-plucked head torn into further abstraction.

He'd been watching rapt, neglecting to tilt back the Tennants, only managing at the clear liquid settled in the grooves by the tab. Any attempt to fetch his sketch-pad would have disturbed the scene. He knew the merlin would be gone at the first creak of his lawn chair.

The van pulled in on the other side of the stone wall. The men – one suited, one cloaked in high vis chic – took some time navigating the cracked and overgrown route to the caravans, heels skimming tire tracks filling with rancid mud water. Their staggering sent the merlin screeching upwards, where it circled radiating its ill-temper. Red leaned back on his chair and rapped his knuckles on the side of his mother's caravan. She was always best at talking to these kind of people, confusing them, sending them home. Even when they came on less polite, when Landrovers arrived in the dark and tried to give the camp a tan with full headlights, Red had seen her turn them around.

The suited man stopped by Red's chair, his soul swinging on the end of a lanyard. He indicated the hare. "Did you kill that?"

"Oh yeah," said Red. "I like the birds to have a fair go before I cook it myself."

"Smart-mouth and a fucking pikey," said the high-vis man. "Christ alive."

"That's enough Ryan." The suit. "I hope you're of age for those beers, young man." He said young man the way the other had said pikey.

"Uh-huh." Red went off words at the sound of his mother's door opening, eyes tracking back to the carcass as she went through the 'can I help you gentlemen' routine and the men clambered up the steel steps. Still wary, the merlin came back down and perched on the wall, regarding its meal at a short distance.

"You go on and eat," said Red, "I'm not gonna bother you." The bird wasn't listening, and stayed where it was.

The men came out five minutes later. The high-vis one was red in the face, and left the gate swinging open when he went for the van. The movement and noise sent the merlin screeching into the sky again, and Red saw the suited man flinch at the sound before he disappeared behind tinted windows. Tire-thrown mud spattered the van's council logo as it reversed.

"That's an angry bird," Mam said. She'd come down the steps to see them off.

"Can you blame him?" said Red. "He hit a goldmine and we keep scaring him off it."

"He killed that?"

"Nah, found it. A hare could kick the shit out of a merlin."

“Never heard of a merlin. Get that out of the book?”

She meant the nature guide he’d pulled out a library sale years back, when he was still at school. Fifty pence for an illustrated and mapped guide to nature, produced by an oil company. It was showing its age even then. Red had thoughts of writing his own – from the early notes of a six year old scrawling ‘I saw this today’ to his recent, orderly ‘I have observed this species off-course on occasion’. Mam was the only one to know about it, where it had been hidden away from mocking uncles and cousins.

He shrugged. “What’d they want?” More to change the subject than anything.

“Accusing us of coursing,” she said.

“What?”

“That’s what I said. Asked them if they saw any lurchers round here.”

“Just staffies. They actually think we’re coursing?”

“Probably not. They said there’s a species of hare around that shouldn’t be.”

“Like that bastard over there,” said Red. “That yin’s from up north.”

“Hm. Well I said what kind of courser would import their own hares, there’s hares and rabbits all over these fecking moors. Never mind in all this October muck.”

“What’d they say?”

“They said – the big one said, ‘who knows why you folk do anything’.”

“Nice man.”

"Least he was straightforward. He wasn't the one with the briefcase and forms."

Red nodded, turned to catch her before she disappeared back inside. "Going down the pub with Shane soon."

"Grand," she said, and then, "Don't give anyone an excuse."

My face is usually their excuse, he thought. He said, "Sure."

It didn't take long to roust Shane from his caravan, but it took much longer to pull Shane away from the online gambling. He was fighting with the customer service, and Red glimpsed some of the text chat over his shoulder. Red doubted Customer Rep Alec had started it, but they were both calling one another cunt by the time he read it.

"I'd just leave it," Red said.

Shane resumed typing, crashing over cracks, puddles and hare in demented obliviousness. Only the gate seemed to provide any trouble, and Red had to guide his friend towards the side that opened, presuming he was preventing an endless loop of Shane thudding against an inert fence.

"Supposed to give me better odds, I've been a member since forever. It says in the ads, sign up early, they give you better. Well that's not effing better, is it Alec? They're holding all my effing winnings till I get a verified account, but I am verified. The effing definition of verified."

"Just say fucking," said Red. "You've already typed it."

"Look." Shane thrust out a screen where numbers flashed green and red. Most of them were red.

"It's a swindle. Gamble with real money."

“It is real money!”

“Physical money. Bookies.”

“All the bookies are effing shut, Red, specially the places we go.”

“Cause of eejits like you I’d guess. But unless you can get booze through an app we’d best be moving.”

*

Red had been in The Lodger before, though he had not seen it this busy. The bar had a thick margin of Shawkirk’s locals trying their best to press crotch to the counter while craning their necks back to view the boxing. Red chewed the inside of his cheek. The Saturday crowd were better dressed than the weekday regulars he had seen before. Men and women sitting with wine in metal buckets, fingering shallow bowls of olives. The suited man was probably in among them, Red thought. Tie loosened, but the case of files merely tucked under a cushioned seat.

“What’re you wanting?” Shane asked.

“Anything we don’t need to get a mortgage for.”

Shane left him for the bar, and Red cleared away from the door, finding the only clear space near the toilets. He shuffled to the edge of that clearing, hoping he wasn’t looming into strangers’ conversations in his bid to avoid the waft of the urinals. Once, when they were all down by the border, a fat man had offered Red money to follow him to an empty cubicle in the park. He had run off holding his nature guide, hid behind the caravan and sworn off public toilets for two years. He eyed the men’s room sign, just in case anything else came hurtling out of his childhood fears.

Someone clapped him on the shoulder on the way past – Red inhaled a humid cloud of wine. “Got money on someone pal?”

“Ah well,” he said, and thought about it. “I think - there’s no real science to punching folk in the head.” He looked to gauge the response, and realised the stranger hadn’t really been talking to him, had just barked something casual on his squeeze through to the toilet.

“You talking to yourself?” Shane asked.

“Fuck have you been,” Red said. The first sip of beer turned into a gulp.

“Welcome,” said Shane. “Sláinte and such. Had to bob and weave through all these buggers here, thinking of boxing myself.”

“I’ve seen you box. I didn’t bet on you.”

“You’re the picture of the best mate, aren’t you? I mean real boxing, not doing the whole Bartley Gorman to chat up the birds, eh.”

Red watched the man on screen take a blow to the side of his brow, and winced. Shawkirk loved it – laughing as the boxer momentarily staggered to one knee with a sagging expression that reminded Red of the hare under talons and beak. “Nah, I’d stick to gambling, Shane.”

A man near the bar had watched the same fall. He swung away from the screen and Red saw wild panic turn to something else. A pint that was more foam than liquid hit the first shoulder it could find, jumped out and died on the available space. Pink and getting pinker, the man hurdled towards them, reeking humiliation.

“Cunt,” the man said, and Red and Shane found themselves in a circle, “you in the habit of spilling shit?”

“Wasn’t anywhere near you mate,” said Shane.

My face is their excuse. “He’s right,” said Red. “You hit that guy.” The shoulder didn’t turn from the bar. Shave my head, cover my face, thought Red. It doesn’t matter. My race is their excuse.

“You being smart?” The man was intent on rolling through the list of beer-sodden clichés. He rocked his pint back and forth. It soaked up froth on one side and spread it on the other.

“Not at all mate,” said Shane.

“Yeah,” said Red, and sucked the air in around his teeth. “You just calm on down there.”

It was impressive, Red thought, to see a man reach lobster red in the middle of October. He pushed off from the bar looking like a merlin had pulled the skin from the muscle and stood at Red’s chest height. Red tilted his head all the way down to look, knowing it made everything worse. But somehow it was Shane, taking a sleeve to wipe his mouth that had the man’s attention.

A finger with swollen joints was levelled. “You. What fucking age are you?” He swung the remnants of his pint, beer sprinkling the floor until it was empty. No one was watching the boxing now. The pint glass was swung. Red assumed the man meant to crack it on an edge, form a weapon on the fly. It did not reach anywhere near a surface, and the man staggered into the force of his swing.

A barmaid slung between them, and the crowd came back into focus. The combative triangle was shattered. “What age are you?” she said to the man.

"What – fuck – fucking pikeys."

"Yeah?" She took the glass from him. "Yeah I remember my first pint too. Get out."

That brought the manager, and Red was able to shrink back into the locals for the first time in his life. The boxing fan started on the price of a pint, screamed about his wasted 3.60. The barmaid, unflappable, counted it out of the till coin by coin and slammed it into his palm by way of a fuck you handshake. Red didn't see the man's reaction. He watched her turn back to the clientele and continue serving, ignoring the spluttered rage of a man who'd been stiffed five pence. And then the drunk was gone, to the weak protests of a couple of locals, who tried their best to put some feeling in their pleas to bring the man back.

He felt a tug at his shirt. "Come on," Shane said. "We've had our warning too."

"Hang on,' said Red. "Two seconds."

He slid his way through two bloating lawyers and caught her eye. "Miss," he said, just to make sure.

She gave him the same regard as the drunk. "What is it?"

"Sorry, I eh…" Red checked the whisky-soaked stubble to his left and right. "Thank you. I liked your line about the guy's first pint." He got two sweaty pounds across the bar. "Sorry about the noise." She tucked in the frays of her shirt and swept the money into her pockets. Red got a smile, and he carried it outside with him.

"Waste a effing money that," said Shane at the door. "Posh fanny in general, waste of it."

"Probably. She kept us from a fight."

“A fight you were all intent on starting, Red. Going on knocking boxing and then going doing that.”

“You’re a critical bastard, Shane. Who was your money on?”

“You only had one pint in you, so you. Unless they all joined in.”

“I was already drinking at home.”

“That effing balances the odds, dunnit.”

They took the main road back out of Shawkirk, the lampposts getting further way from one another until they became distance markers in the countryside divorced from all civility and housing. The trees grew – blocking out the blank space that so unnerved suburbanites. Cars flashed hazards as they rolled in and out of the town. Red noticed the most arrogant ones were heading to Shawkirk. The cars heading outwards disappeared after the initial blaze of light, vanquished by black countryside. By the time they took the path off the path they were relying on moonlight and the sound of gravel.

“So that’s the modern life,” said Shane.

“What do you mean?”

“Just a shower of bastards looking for an excuse.”

“Hang on,” said Red. “That was just one guy.” Not believing it. Thinking of Mam’s words.

“One guy, who cares. Only one guy for now. See how they all reacted? Everyone hates people. I bet if there was a button that’d kill everyone you didn’t know, you’d press it. Just to see what’d happen, sure, but also just cause people.”

“What about a button that went the other way? Press it and only kill people you know personally?”

“Well that’s effing psychotic, int it.”

Red’s boot plunged into another pothole. Mud sought out the space between ankle and shoe. “Fucking hell.” He shook himself loose and stamped the mud into what was left of the road. He kept his mind on the Tennents nesting in the caravan fridge. “I’ll admit – I’ll admit this - I’m sick of boxing fucking hares, Shane. It’s not even March.”

“You’ve gone and lost me there, I’ll just hope it’s not a jab at me, son.”

“Cross my heart and all that, Shane. Did you not see that big hare out by the caravans?”

“Nah.”

“It wasn’t supposed to be there. Not the right species. Council was gonna dob us in for coursing.”

“If it’s out of sorts, I can tell you, they effing put it there.”

“Maybe. Seems stranger than that. There’s already enough hares without bringing something else in.’

“Who knows what goes through the mind of posh fanny?”

“You’ve got a point,” said Red. The first stone cut across his shoulder blade before he could take the thought any further. “Christ!”

“What are you-” Shane caught one in the temple and the blood was instantaneous.

The drunk. Red was already round, fists raised, when a foot swung into his crotch and sent the world reeling into white. Then he was back, meeting a fist, meeting a fencepost, meeting mud.

"Red, the fucking bastards!" Shane had a few on him, forcing him off the path into the grass.

Swaying, Red was up, blackened shards of fencepost sticking from his palms. The figure that had struck him waited, bobbing, until he was standing. It hit him again – nose, teeth. Red hit out blind, left hand, and caught incisor on the knuckle. Someone was laughing. Red dropped back, expecting the next hit. The switch was out of his jeans in that time, and he hoped the aggressors had caught light on the blade, but the figure stayed on him, and swung no matter how much Red waved the knife like a crucifix.

"Stay the fuck away from her," his attacker said. Red intercepted the next blow with his right eye. He hit the gravel and rolled into earth.

The pause gave him leave to look at the darkened figure. Something like his shadow – tall and lithe. The shapes on the other side had evidently stopped kicking at Shane too, because they hailed soundlessly into his peripheral, nothing more than haircuts on stick figures.

"Stay away from who?" Red asked, but they were heading off back to Shawkirk.

Shane pulled himself back onto the gravel and extended a hand. Red was fished back onto solid ground, feeling the air hit his muddied back.

"You gambled wrong," said Shane. "Warned you it was a waste of money."

"Fuck off. It was either them or someone else."

“Uh huh.” Shane didn’t need to voice his intention to walk ahead. He went and did it.

Red walked on. The merlin alighted on a stone boundary wall, hunched against the cold. Its shape was rendered obscure by the moonlight, but talons scraped rock with a familiar reassurance. Red stopped and stared for a while, wondering what the bird could see in the rustling grass.

Antipode

The police tape refuses to come unstuck. Wound around the tip of one shoe, it seamlessly transfers to the other when Jane tries scraping it off with her sole. Another attempt brings the tape back to the original shoe, muddier but unharmed. Jane is forced to the side of the trampled grass path, fighting her feet while boys and girls in masks jostle past her. She thumbs the bandages up over her nose so she can get a breath in, crouches and tears the tape away with her hands. The tape shines with the reflection of the party and promptly coils around her forearm, one loose end flapping and smug.

Jane pulls all her bandages into place and decides to leave it. She could be the Invisible Man post-entanglement with a police cordon.

Light, and music and drink have not transformed the church as they might have. The overgrowth on the main path has been beaten back down into the cobble by successions of police, rubberneckers and partygoers, but the façade is cracked. The rusted pitchfork is still tied to the earth by thick grass – prongs still curved and smirking at the sky. The door-less tool shed still gawps from the side-lines, its interior blacker than the trees enclosing them all.

"You. You, the Mummy." Someone seizes her arm and swings her to face the old church. The building's greying, pained expression was vomiting noise and colour. Silhouettes swung bottles in the doorway. The girl clamping Jane's shoulder leans in. "Need your help."

"What with?"

"Holy shit you're a girl. Never mind, just hide me for a second."

"Hide you?"

“Just look like you’re talking to me!”

It is Mhairi Hackett, Jane realises. Older girl, probably one of the organisers, and with a reputation for cruelty. Jane’s sunglasses, however, render her tinted and warm. Jane reckons the sunglasses were a useful addition.

“Hi Mhairi. I’m the Invisible Man, not the Mummy.” Mhairi herself seems to be in more of a dress than a costume, though with the occasional highlight that suggests feathers. It looks cold.

Mhairi, still swaying, not listening, pulls her to the side. “Just stay still – oh shit, Jane!” The smile is blurry but well meant. “Both you and Barry back at the scene, eh? You like what I’ve done with the place? Halloween! All the po-lice busy in town with the trick or treaters. Us, up here, in something real?”

“Brilliant, looks great,” says Jane. She’s having trouble balancing the taller girl. “Who am I hiding you from?”

“Fucking older – older year, not even in school anymore.” Mhairi speaks directly into Jane’s ear. “Creepy drug dealing bastards.”

“Isn’t this your party? Get them to leave.”

“Nah, people wanna – people wanna buy drugs, so.”

Jane settles for gripping the other girl by the sides, mimicking a slow dance. That way, she reckons, she can send her flying if Mhairi goes in for a hug.

“I don’t see anyone, Mhairi.”

Mhairi leans out. “Huh? Ah, yeah, yeah. Musta gone. Good hiding, Jenny.”

“Jane.”

The hands slap her shoulders again. “Hey, did they ever find out what happened here? I asked Barry, but you know, it’s Barry. He holds court with those stories.”

“No,” says Jane, eyeing the windows the light of the party cannot reach. “They just cordoned it off.”

“Huh,” says Mhairi. She patted Jane’s arm. “Pretty good for Halloween, eh? Spooky as shit. I’m going to get drunk enough to start believing in ghosts.”

Jane doesn’t know how drunk that would be, as Mhairi smells drunk enough.

“Oh yeah,” says Mhairi, tapping Jane’s arm a little too hard. “Don’t be going into the basement cause we had to put down some rat poison – don’t tell anyone.” She remembers who she is talking to. “Not the worst thing you’ve seen down there though, right?” She laughs, and Jane knows she’s to join in.

Watching Mhairi bounce through the double doors, Jane recognises the feather patterns on the older girl’s dress were supposed to resemble the plumage of a bird of paradise. A new one as far as Halloween outfits went. Jane touches a hand to the police tape and regards the church. It is more of a church in death than it was in life – for a month it has been the only thing people will talk about, the only place people want to go. Planted firmly between Shawkirk and the surrounding moors, finally the focal point its creators had wished it to be.

An evil sundial on an old stone map, Jane thinks.

The interior is full of drunk boys lounging in pews, girls in witch hats dancing on what passes for the altar. The heat of excitement and electricity are sudden – the stone walls had blocked

out more than she had expected. A boy in an elephant mask leaps in front of her, screams ‘boo’ and promptly vomits into his own trunk while Darth Vader rushes to his aid. Lewis Hackett, the eldest Hackett and too old for the party, was standing on the thin partition of the pulpit, waving a feathered musketeer hat and attempting to master the guitar. More guests pushed by Jane carrying speakers, and she smiled. It would be blasphemous if the church wasn’t Protestant.

She sees Barry, Lauren, Lee and the rest in the front pew, and waves. Barry, in the midst of recollecting Jane’s last visit to this pit, beckons her over. They’ve found some old cigarette lighters and are bouncing them off the floor until they explode. Jane says nothing until they share their intentions to build a campfire (‘by the window, to be safe, eh’) and decides she will never catch up to their level of drunkenness. She segues away from them and steps through the altar throng of dancers. She does not understand how Barry is nonchalant about their location. She has to see the staircase at the back, even if he will not.

She slips through the archway, out of sight, and faces the blank room with the cellar staircase waiting at the back, black maw gawping at her return. Jane approaches, sees the first step down. She half-expects to see the collapsed skull again, even at this height, that the man’s corpse might have somehow stayed past the investigation, past the special officers comforting her for a week. That they might have left him here for her, rats and all.

“Who the fuck are you?”

She cuts her scream short. A rabid dog bears down on her, red eyes lolling. The spittle is solid on the gums and the snout is wrinkled in a permanent rubber snarl.

“Am I not allowed back here?” Jane pushes the boy lightly in the chest. Not too aggressive, she hopes.

“Jane?” The dog laughs. “Holy fuck, I thought you were a boy. Are you supposed to be a Mummy?”

She squints, can’t make out her cousin’s mismatched eyes behind the dog’s glassy ones. “I’m the Invisible Man, Simon.”

“Pfft.” Simon backs off, sways towards the staircase with his rubber head nodding up and down. “I wouldn’t have got it.”

“Well what the hell are you supposed to be?”

The dog’s flapping jaws turn to her. “I dunno, just creepy I guess. Good innit?”

“It’s creepy, yeah.” Jane pushes a bandage over the bridge of her nose and breathes deeply.

“Thought you’d had enough of death,” he says. “Didn’t you say all that? All depressed and shit, and here she is back at the body pit!”

“Go back to the party, Simon. Maybe someone can hold your hair back while you puke.”

“You hoping the guy’s still here? Forget to make off with a femur the first time?”

“Leave me alone, Simon.”

“Yeah, leave her alone.” Another boy has stepped into the dim grey, unmasked. At first Jane thinks he has taken the time to rent a suit for the occasion – as he gets closer she sees that even the neat bolo tie is part of a cheap supermarket costume, a flat packed t-shirt and trouser combo titled something like ‘El Mariachi’, or ‘street preacher’. There was, doubtlessly, a hat included, but the boy did not have it with him.

“It’s alright, she’s my cousin.”

The mariachi likes this answer, but he does not quite laugh. He has, Jane notes, that late-teenage impression of girlishness still hanging onto a man’s frame. He gestures at Simon.

“He loves it when someone’s smaller than him, doesn’t he?”

“No I don’t.” The petulance is unexpected. Jane senses an inexplicable subservience and does not know where to look.

“He’s family,” she says.

The blond boy strides over, reaches out and tears the tape from the arm of her coat. It looks to cling to him before he crushes it up into his hand, the tail end vanishing between his fingers. He tosses it overhand into the stairwell and smirks.

“Maybe that was part of my costume,” Jane says.

“Looked like the police cordon,” Simon says. “You get here by crashing through a bush?”

“You’re the one who found the body,” says the other one.

Jane has to crane her neck to address him. There is a pang of vague guilt as she notes, feet from where she saw a rat-infested corpse, that this older boy is extremely handsome. “Me and Barry, yeah.”

“Barry Hackett is a cunt,” he says. Without malice, as if he’s read it somewhere.

“All Hacketts are,” says Simon. The hatred in his voice only makes the previous one stranger.

“He’s my friend.”

The blond considers this. “He’s told about six different stories by this point. Fighting through rats in the dark, I heard that one.”

“Well,” Jane glances back at the door, attempts to identify the music pulsing beyond, “he made that part up.”

“Fucking duh,” says her dog-headed cousin.

“Jane,” she says, ignoring Simon.

“Alex,” the other boy says, and grips her outstretched hand with no expression. “Show us around your local then?”

“Ah come on,” says Simon, “everything’s gonna be fucking cleared up.” But he hovers by them, craning his neck. He has poor vision at the best of times, and Jane wonders how he can see much of anything in that slobbering dog mask.

“Hurry the fuck up,” says Alex, who, Jane realises, is already halfway down the stairs. His voice reverberates in the narrow space.

Jane walks to the rim, peers down. No body but Alex, himself peering down at the space a man used to occupy at the very bottom. Jane pulls her bandages back into place and finds she likes the effect, though she has to slide the sunglasses down to make her way down the stairs sans a broken neck. The effect of Alex activating his phone torch hits her twice – naturally, and then bouncing up through the lowered glasses. She puts a hand to the wall to steady herself and is disgusted to find it moist.

“This is where it was right?” says Alex. “Or, him?”

“That’s right,” says Jane. Looking over his shoulder, she sees the base of the stairs blasted by the torch, scorched of any evidence that might have remained. No cracked skull, and no rats. Mhairi said they were all dead. And the police would have dealt with anything else, surely. “There were rats down here.”

“Hm? Yeah. Probably got all fat from your pal.”

“Alright you’ve seen it,” says Simon. “You coming back?”

“Mhairi said they’re all dead. They put poison down.”

Alex nonchalantly passes over the empty space and into the basement. His voice becomes even louder, and Jane hurries to catch up. “Rats are smart. She probably only got a few. Once they died, the rest would have cleared out.”

“You think?”

“They only live for three years, they have to be practical.” She thinks he looks back at her, but the light has her confused. She adjusts her sunglasses and activates her own torch, trying not to remember how it lit up a skull. Nothing in the dark this time but broad shoulders in a mariachi outfit.

“Simon’s shat his pants up there.” Like the Hackett statement, it doesn’t invite argument.

“He’s being protective.”

“Or jealous.”

“What do you mean?”

“Never mind.”

“You’re too old for me.”

Alex laughs, and scours the basement. “That’s not what I was getting at.”

Jane does not understand the Mariachi’s interest past the staircase. Male bravado, most likely. He wanders forth into the cellar, which, as far as she can tell, is laden with stagnant water and mould. She recognises the smell here. She is glad for the bandages.

“I um, I like that you came right here,” Alex says.

“What do you mean?”

“You came to the party and went straight for the place you found the body. That’s quite cool.”

Jane has never been accused of being cool. Even in drunken benevolence Mhairi Hackett had not dared go that far. “Is it?”

“Practical.”

“Like a rat.”

“Maybe not like that.”

She knows he is skirting around an issue, but Jane is not uncomfortable. She has been uncomfortable with boys before, men even – stares and comments that she cannot forget. This is

different. It's like the bravado performances boys do in groups, where they spread their arms and make their voices deeper and louder. He's looking right at her and thinking of himself.

"You could say brave."

"What did it look like?" he says. "Him, the body."

"Gross."

"Oh come on."

Jane closes her eyes. "There was a rat in him. He – he was decomposed."

"Eaten, more like."

"Maybe."

"It was new, wasn't it?"

"New?"

Whatever he'd been searching for, Alex has not found it. He is only addressing her, with unblinking attention. "New!" he is almost shouting, the pulse of the upstairs music interrupted. "Like something finally happened here."

"Just a part of life," says Jane.

This is wrong, according to whatever point he is making. A smile had been coming on, but now it drops, and his voice is once again flat: "Course," he says, "you only saw the aftermath."

Alex clicks off his torch and stands on the edge of her light. His hair is sticking to the side of his head, following the groove of his temple. "I saw him die."

Jane absorbs this. “What,” she asks, “were you doing down here?”

“Does it matter? The exciting part was when that old cunt fell.”

There is a boy in a stupid cheap costume spouting the imitation of threatening now. A boy up to his ankles in pools of water smelling worse than a corpse. Jane smiles. She doesn’t expect to, but it’s there.

“You want to tell me. Cause that will be new.”

He gets it. His voice climbs in pitch and he lets it out in a whisper. “I’d been down here for ages.”

She doesn’t say anything. This stupid kid – older than her and somehow a kid. Her silence just spurs him to fill the gap.

“I kill things down here.”

The panic comes, like she was expecting, but it’s just panic. It fades, and fear does not arrive in its stead. “Things?”

“All the cats that go missing?” His voice has become ragged now. “They come down here.”

Jane is surprised at herself again, because what comes out next is, “Were dogs too tough?”

Alex drops his arms by his side. He had begun to raise them like an American preacher, and they hang boneless, searching for pockets to attempt a casual front.

Her laughter makes him flinch, smirk blasted into confusion. She is amazed to see a jaw actually drop. It recovers quickly enough, and when she passes the torch over him it clenches in

what looks to her like the mere idea of anger. Shadows cast hollows over a face that is little more than a forgery and Jane laughs again.

"How," she says, and she knows what she is doing, she has watched a rat crawl from a dead man's skull, "how do you see yourself?"

The Shawkirk Cat Killer draws himself up, paces forward. "The wrong person to talk shit to."

She can't stop it at this point. His shoulders drop with another stab of her laughter. His clammy skin is like latex under the glare, and eventually even his clenched jaw sets into neutrality. This boy, Jane thinks, experiences everything in a matter of seconds.

"Did you turn off the torch for effect?" she asks, and 'effect' becomes long and shakily high.

Alex doesn't say anything. She sees dark stains on the white 'shirt' of his outfit.

Jane wipes a hand across her face, clears space in the bandages. "Jesus Christ man." She walks back into the staircase, waits to hear him run for her, but he never does. She pushes past Simon, who teeters on the edge of the second last step. "Jesus Christ."

"Jane, Jane. Are you alright? Slow down a fucking bit."

Simon is following her, his rubber mask dangling from one hand, and she stops to wait for him, this beautiful wounded animal that she has still found time for, after everything. His hair is standing on edge, frayed by the confines of the dog head. There is concern there, in his face. It looks so odd without a sneer.

Alex rounds onto the steps and climbs without pause. Simon blocks the space between them, holds out an open hand at either end.

"Now hold the fuck on-"

Alex's palm slams into his face, and Simon's head cracks against the stone wall, falls forward into fingers that hold him by the brow, eye socket, open mouth and repeat the action, with a louder, and wetter impact, then pull him from the wall and casually drop him down. Simon tumbling down the stairs, and Jane thinks, in her shock, how like a doll he looks – and then he is gone out of the light and Alex keeps coming.

The sound of bone on concrete dogs her as she runs. Through the open door into the church, where drunk girls sing their best attempt at The Supremes and fight for the prime spot in the creaking pulpit, where the boys' fire has gotten out of hand and they slap at it with sodden strips of carpet as it attempts to scale one of the neglected pews. Where is Mhairi? Jane can't stop to search – the unconscious desire to check over her shoulder reveals Alex walking through swaying bodies as if he belongs there, all bland pleasantries and fixed eyes. She sees Simon fall again, limp.

Most of these people, she realises, are in his class. She can hear some of them call to him even now, can hear him call back, though she knows his eyes have not once flicked away from her. They will not believe her. Something feral tells her she is glad to have enraged such a pathetic creature.

"Hey, it's the Mummy!" Mhairi Hackett has her spinning between the pews in a spasmodic parody of a waltz. "Where you been? You seen Barry's fire? It's getting fucking mental…" The older girl begins to jump up and down, racketing the impact up Jane's arms.

“Scuse me.” Jane extracts herself with a feigned stagger. Mhairi shouts after her, but when she looks back to try to guess the meaning Mhairi is being politely twirled by Alex, and Jane hurries on, locked into this fake drunken walk until she makes the threshold, straightens up, and begins to run as she hears boots slap and echo against the bare church stone. Jane closes her eyes and flies through the smokers, clipping their shoulders, inciting their swears as she hits blessed cold air and breathes, and goes on.

She thinks about where she’s going as she reaches it. Just enough time, to hope, and pre-emptively regret. Three steps bounce her over the knots and divots and her shoe scrapes against what she hopes to find. Albino Rorschach blots burst under her eyelids. She turns, sees him coming on. And she watches his boots catch, feels him come down heavy. He makes no noise – she is seeing red-rimmed eyes and then she is looking at where the hair swirls on the back of his skull as he hits the ground.

Blood runs down the prongs and rolls wet flakes of rust with it, hits the grass heavy. Alex swings his head back and forth, leans into the mud, and finally lets out a low grunt. His fingers grasp but miss the iron erupting from his back, where they punched through as easily as they ripped through his costume. Jane presses herself against the toolshed, telling herself it was an accident. Anyone would have forgotten the pitchfork. Alex runs his fingers along the handle. She cannot see his expression, but the swaying head pauses with the rooting grunts. He understands.

The head swings up now, pale and blond and drowned. He finds her immediately, and even if he cannot truly see her eyes amidst all the shadows he stares through them regardless. His jaw hangs open, teeth and chin stained red, and he is smiling, a full force expression that has squeezed

his eyes into blue dots. Jane drags herself along the shed wall, feeling it scrape off against her jacket.

Alex rears onto his knees, shredding the grass from the nested pitchfork. The handle swings up, juts out in front of him as if sprouting. He pushes up – once, twice, and Jane is somehow finding the energy to run – and he flops down, his legs skidding out from under him, his bloodied teeth clenched in agony.

Jane breathes. Alex breathes, splutters, tries again.

He finds her again.

"When," he says, and his voice is no longer so flat and deep, "when was your last tetanus booster?"

The laugh rips out of her, and her shame is not enough to stop it. Alex wheezes, perhaps joining in. That kills her laughter for good, and she finds she can move. The smoke seeping from the door has become a torrent, and as her head cools the background static warps into shouting. She yanks the bandages from her face, breathes in something hot, and alarmingly sweet. Alex is no longer facing her. His ragged breathing wobbles the pitchfork that has melded with his skeleton.

"Oh God," Jane says, and she tramples through the muddied grass and onto the crude path. Headlines are in her head. Angry faces, uniforms, iron bars. "Oh Jesus." And then, unable to stop it: "Help!"

People are running from the church, but not to her. She grabs at sleeves and swinging elbows, but gets nothing. She watches them run past Alex, still wriggling in the mud, his blood easily masked by the black grass whipping over him in a bitter October wind. The church glowing

orange, yellow, red – flickering like it will suddenly expel the fire and incinerate the fleeing intruders.

"Ambulance," she says, to no one. She could phone one herself, she knows.

And she's back in the doors of the ruin, and it groans and belches smoke, but she pushes on, where the older boys are fighting their own fire and telling everyone to run, and Jane stands near them and shouts back that they need an ambulance out front, and the church sends more smoke her way. Eyes and throat clogged, she shouts again and no one listens. She cannot tell the boys from the darker coils of smoke, and the flashes of fire cast no light.

She's back out, where Mhairi Hackett dabs at Simon's bloodied head in the dark by the gate, where a featureless shroud of drunk and frightened idiots have gathered to watch Alex spasm. Some arms reach out, and grasp the flailing limbs. Alex rises among them, face bloodless, gaze fixed on the church. He pushes them aside, and they dart under the long handle that sprouts from his midsection. Silhouetted there, it is merely another appendage, a natural fact of his existence. She hears Simon call over to him, voice wavering in pain. Jane sits on the step, the concrete cooling her aching legs, adjusting the bandages about her face as the fire audibly splinters the pews behind her.

CRITICAL REFLECTION

Introduction

In one of his rare interviews, the American author Cormac McCarthy remarked that 'the novel depends for its life on the novels that have been written' – originally in reference to his self-described 'Faulknerian' novel *The Orchard Keeper* (Woodward, 1992). Various works have covered McCarthy's influences since, notably Michael Lynn Crews' analysis of McCarthy's notes and papers *Books Are Made Out of Books*, taking its title from that same interview (2017). In creating a collection of short stories and an accompanying critical work I resolved to be equally open in dissecting the creative writing process. Transplanting a specific style of writing, the tradition of American Southern Gothic literature, to another culture would bring natural changes to the narrative and I shall demonstrate how this shaped the collection as work progressed. I will also reflect on relevant attempts from artists worldwide who have adopted the costume of Southern Gothic, in particular Australian writer and musician Nick Cave. From old masters of rural strife to would-be appropriators and admirers, I intend to place my short story collection on a strong critical base that explores both tradition and evolution. As Woodward somewhat hastily notes in the above interview, McCarthy's novel 'is no pastiche' (1992). McCarthy's extensively noted inspirations served to help him find his own place in the literary canon, with an awareness of what has come before. Similarly, this collection is not intended solely as an experiment in mimicking a genre, but as a work that can stand on the shelf by the traditions that inspired it.

At this stage, it is necessary to define some of the terms that will be relevant in this chapter. The Southern Gothic is a loose literary tradition that, as the name implies, roughly[1] comprises works by writers from, and in the setting of, the Southern states of the USA. While many of the

[1] In any case, as a literary grouping, it is clear that the genre commonly known as Southern Gothic has a broader scope that the name implies.

classics of the genre, such as the works of O'Connor, McCarthy and Gay are firmly rooted in Georgia or Tennessee, several other works have strayed further afield: towards Ohio or West Virginia, respectively in the cases of Donald Ray Pollock and Davis Grubb. Flannery O'Connor has been particularly important to me as a common reference point of the genre. O'Connor was the author of numerous short stories, two novels and various essays that all in some fashion contend with a heightened and gruesome depiction of the Southern experience, often with the goal of moving her grotesque characters to a state of grace. Entrenched alongside the name of the genre, her work has come to influence later artists working in the same tradition, with Giraldi remarking that in the stories of the author William Gay, O'Connor is 'an elderly aunt who lives in [Gay's] house and will not die' (p331, 2009). While items on the Southern Gothic bookshelf can vary remarkably between the slowly revealed horror of Faulkner's 'A Rose for Emily' and the rabid action of Harry Crews' *A Feast of Snakes,* there are recurring elements and motifs linking such diverse works. Chiefly, as with many other forms of Gothic fiction, there is the sense of decay, forgotten people and the residual influence of regressive politics[2]. In the American South, this often concerns the legacy of the slave trade (particularly the heat and brutal conditions of plantation house slavery – the houses themselves an imitation of past European style), as expressed in Rickey Laurentiis' poem 'Conditions for a Southern Gothic':

> I was a head alone, moaning in a wet black field.
>
> I was like any of those deserter slaves
>
> whose graves are just the pikes raised for their heads, reshackled, blue

[2] For example, the decayed manifesto discovered in a suicide's grave in *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner,* or the eternal decline of Castle *Gormenghast*

and plain as fear.

All night I whistled at a sky that mocked me (Laurentiis, 2013)

Technology and society can advance, but in Gothic fiction there is always a crumbling plantation house, rusted industrial equipment or even the clanking movement of a car from the 1950s. The past lurks behind every action and opinion, growing fat on an anaemic society.

The grotesque will be a similarly persistent term in my account of the gothic – though it is not limited to the immediate image of grotesque bodies first identified by Mikhail Bakhtin. In fact though my stories contains many characters that could be characterised as grotesque, few manifest this in their physical appearance. Traditionally, the physical is a major aspect of the grotesque; in Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* 'exaggeration, hyperbolism, excessiveness' are the 'fundamental attributes' of the grotesque (p303, Bakhtin, 1984). As such it is inherently satirical, tied to traditional notions of festivals and carnivals wherein a society is flipped on its head in an intentional, cathartic disruption of social hierarchy and order. Grotesque bodies are a familiar sight in caricature, but the behaviours and thoughts of characters can be as susceptible to exaggeration and excess as Rabelais' Pantagruel. In *Grotesque,* Edwards and Grauland fittingly place Flannery O'Connor's work in the chapter 'Attraction/Repulsion', a 'disturbing' category due the 'incompatible emotions' in contrasting 'abjection and possibility, limitations and becomings, compassion and rejection' (p78, Edwards and Graulund, 2013). Though Edwards and Grauland also notably conflate Southern Gothic and the grotesque as one and the same – 'the Southern American grotesque (or Southern gothic)', they draw a distinction between the aspects of 'queerness[3] and [physical] grotesquerie' (p110) of Carson McCullers, another Southern Gothic

[3] Making reference to both the strangeness of McCullers' characters and their place in the history of LGBT fiction

mainstay, and that of O'Connor's '[distortion of] everyday life to reveal darkness and brutality' (p80). O'Connor was no stranger to the more typical associations of the grotesque. Injured and fragmented bodies make plenty of appearances, notably in 'Good Country People' although even there the resentful one-legged protagonist is ultimately not predator but prey for a subtler, moral misfit with a less remarkable appearance. Flannery O'Connor characterised the Grotesque as the remora to Southern Gothic's shark in her essay 'Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Gothic Fiction', noting that misfits, criminals and lunatics in fiction should, in order to be classified as grotesque, adhere to 'an inner coherence, if not always a coherence to their social framework' – personalities that lean 'toward mystery and the unexpected' (O'Connor, 2014, p40). O'Connor's character The Misfit of 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find' is a grotesque – outwardly an ordinary, albeit oddly-dressed middle-aged man who punctuates his killings of innocents with long speeches on the theological anguish that plagues him wherever he goes. Even among the grotesques of fiction, he is a unique figure but other examples often depict grotesques shucking their existing social framework for an older one – the titular grotesque of Faulkner's 'A Rose for Emily' refuses to accept the reality of the antebellum South, clinging to the collapsed remnants of her pre-Civil War lifestyle. The grotesque of Southern Gothic can manifest in something as simple in as violation of social norms and order – often in unpleasant or unnerving fashion, as in William Gay's 'I Hate to See That Evening Sun Go Down'. But this can be portrayed sympathetically, as with McCullers' rejection of heteronormativity – and to an extent it is this tradition, the grotesque as a rejection of contemporary society, that I follow throughout the stories. Later in this discussion I will also detail how Southern Gothic was modified by engagement with traditions of the anglosphere – the connections between the border ballads of Scotland and the murder ballads of Appalachia, and a shared oral culture. Major recurring influences in the creation of the collection

and this reflection include the aforementioned ballads, O'Connor and her followers in Southern Gothic, modern Scottish literature and the music of Nick Cave – all of which will be referred to in the coming analysis.

Southern Gothic

Lenard and Balint, writing in the journal *Ethnicities,* explain the twin 'problematic forms of cultural engagement – cultural offence and cultural misrepresentation' (p331, 2020). This was a point to consider in writing the collection – whether my transference of the appeal of the Southern Gothic to a new context and the changes accompanying the cultural translation constituted an unearned poaching of a literary tradition that lay outside my own experience. However, particularly as I researched the murder ballad traditions shared across the Anglosphere, detailed later on, I began to see the commonalities between the works as a literary exchange with a deep history. The world of crime fiction also offered an interesting case study for my own approach.

A rough parallel to my collection's relationship with Southern Gothic is that of the crime writer David Peace. Peace, who made his name with 'The Red Riding Quartet', a series detailing the systematic failure and corruption of the Yorkshire police force, comprising the novels *1974*, *1977, 1980* and *1983.* Peace acknowledges the influence of James Ellroy's earlier 'LA Quartet' on his work – the LA Quartet (*The Black Dahlia, The Big Nowhere, LA Confidential* and *White Jazz*) providing a similar exploration of a rabidly corrupt policing system through the eyes of various savage and compromised narrators. The critics David Bishop and Diana Powell contend that both writers are 'writing secret histories of a period and a locality, ones which suggest other hidden stories taking place alongside well-documented ones' (p186, Bishop and Powell, 2018). Peace 'transplants' Ellroy's noir to 'the Northern England he grew up in' and in doing so moulds certain aspects to fit the new geography – Peace's Yorkshire is a place of 'religion and magic', 'a haunted forbidden locale' of 'forests, lakes [and] moors' and populated by characters with nicknames such as the Badger and the Owl (p187-189). For Peace, folklore and history occupy the space where Ellroy's characters are star struck by celebrities and landmarks, forever seeking to imitate the

language of cinema in their own lives – from evidence collector Upshaw who views cadavers in 'close-ups' in *The Big Nowhere* (p4, Ellroy, 2011) to the giddy tabloid obsessions of *LA Confidential.* Peace's Yorkshire is quieter and older, even the name of the quartet suggesting the menace of wolves on the path to grandmother's house. The essence of crime, corruption and 'secret histories' remains, but the cultural context invariably sends both works in a different direction.

Murder Ballads and Gothic

This example of such a translation within crime fiction recalled an earlier cultural translation between genres of crime narrative - the (generally) Scottish borders ballad tradition, as collected in the Child Ballads, and the Appalachian American murder ballad. 'Popular printing' in the eighteenth century linked orality and literature with the English speaking culture (p258, Bushaway, 2002). Nick Groom notes the spread of the British ballad, in 'both oral and published forms' spreading to North America[4], and in particular Appalachia; while in mainland Britain[5] it was gradually replaced 'in the nineteenth century by music hall', even as various collectors like Child attempted to 'rescue and record' the tradition (p82, Groom, 2013). For example, the Scottish Child Ballad 68, commonly referred to as 'Young Hunting' spread to the American South as the popular murder ballad 'Henry Lee'. One variant was recorded by blues singer Dick Justice in 1929, and covered with much the same lyrics by Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds in 1996[6]. These are often 'ballads of no morality' – reports of the rending of the human body and soul without much in the way of traditional 'redemption or transcendence' (p85). Like many oral narratives, the ballad tradition is adaptable, relying on familiar motifs over concrete plot and character. As with Richard Bauman's study of storyteller Ed Bell (Bauman, 1987) details and incidents can be added or subtracted depending on the speaker or (most importantly in terms of this reflection) location and audience.

These Gothic oral traditions have an existing relationship with short stories. Magdalene Redekop, for example, identifies the oral ballad tradition in the works of Canadian writer Alice

[4] A notable influence on Canadian Robert Service's Gold Rush poems, such as 'The Shooting of Dan McGrew'
[5] Still extant in the Scottish isles in various forms – 'And in every hamlet a poet', Grant, Kevin 2014
[6] 'Lie there, lie there, little Henry Lee/ 'Til the flesh drops from your bones/ For the girl you have in that merry green land/ Can wait forever for you to come home' (p247, Cave, 2013)

Munro, often alongside a Bakhtinian grotesque realism in the allure and repulsion of the old country:

> No story speaks more explicitly and more profoundly about the importance of the singing old women than "Hold Me Fast, Don't Let Me Pass" in Friend of My Youth. The story stages the Scottish nostalgic grotesque as a tourist destination. In an astonishingly bold gesture, Munro reinstates the figure of the ballad transmitter eliminated by the ballad collectors. (Redekop, 1998)

Again we can see the cultural exchange still operating on old imperial lines of migration, most explicitly in Munro's case when a character who, like Munro, is Canadian of Scots descent, traces history back to Scotland and finds not the Walter Scott romanticism but encounters instead a pre-Child bleakness and genesis of the murder ballad. Donna Tartt, reminiscing on a childhood she explicitly refers to as 'Southern Gothic', turns to Robert Louis Stevenson's 'The Sick Child' to express her memory (Tartt, 1992). The tradition has changed when brought to a new land – bringing it back to Scotland will inevitably result in yet another change.

The same ballad tradition travelled to Australia and has led to comparable, though not identical, transformations. Nick Cave, for example, is no stranger to this type of adaptation. *The Proposition*, a film whose script was written by Cave, takes the American Western to the outback, with the translations that might be expected (Native Americans become Aboriginals, Manifest Destiny is replaced with the expansion of the British Empire). The film also contains a notable scene where the Irish convict characters sing 'Peggy Gordon' – another ballad crossing the seas and ready to develop in a new country. His body of work also includes the self-consciously Faulknerian novel *And the Ass Saw the Angel*, set in the same recognisably heightened and depraved Southern Gothic

surroundings as much of his earlier lyrics. The hallmarks of various Southern Gothic[7] writers recur frequently across these songs and chapters – the mute protagonist by way of Carson McCullers, the malevolent strangers and religious desperation of O'Connor, the explosive violence of Crews and Gay, all against the backdrop of an American South interpreted through folk tradition and oral narratives. Isabella van Elferen discusses the Gothic effect in the music itself: '[Song of Joy] is accompanied by slender organ chords overlaid with the dry sounds of a bar piano that almost sounds like it is played in a cold church or ruin through the heavy reverb… This song, with its ridiculously ironic title, is Gothicized-over-the-top, a musical language in excess of its own limits…' (p179, van Elferen, 2013). In many ways, Cave's work in the Gothic tradition could be seen as a frieze of the different aspects and traditions of the genre – creating a repulsively expansive coverage of excess, salvation and savagery. It is a critic's view of Gothic that became an inspiration for the town of Shawkirk – a creation that is self-conscious in its relation to existing work, as blatant a tribute as Cave's. Appropriately, Cave's work has been mentioned in reference to later works of American Gothic – with Karen Brissette remarking that the 'glorious destruction' in the works of Donald Ray Pollock are something of 'a literary companion to Nick Cave's song "O'Malley's Bar"' (Brisette, 2016). The cultural exchange across the formerly imperial anglosphere is still active, consistently influencing and being influenced by writers from abroad.

Cave's work, in a departure from many traditional ballads, has a strong interior focus on character and psychology – bringing the Gothic literature influence to the fore. The grotesque protagonists are generally focalisers of the narrative – warping the narrative from their delusional perspective. In this respect his work mirrors the idea of the folk criminal hero – songs

[7] The song 'Up Jumped the Devil' is curiously reminiscent of the relationship between Wringham and the devil Gil-Martin

commemorating gallows confessions such as ‘Down in the Willow Garden’, or the exaggerated exploits of bushranger Ned Kelly (though Cave’s protagonists are often too gleefully vile to mesh with the traditional anti-hero):

> Many of the perversely appealing characters on the *Murder Ballads* album are presented from the inside, the psyches of serial killers chillingly and amusingly intimate… in which the killer narrates his own mad rampage. (p26, Boer, 2013)

This reflects O’Connor’s idea of the ‘grotesque character’, as opposed to the grotesque body of earlier Gothic – unusual and even repulsive world views and behaviours rigidly adhered to in the face of all social and lawful tenets to the contrary. Unlike O’Connor, whether Cave allows his protagonists a moment of grace in their comparatively more gleeful self-destructions varies from song to song. This is perhaps attributable to Cave’s interest in spirituality veering closer to a literary interest in a form of Gnosticism as opposed to O’Connor’s sincere Catholic faith (p224, Baker, 2013). Generally speaking, when Cave is most overtly aping Southern Gothic, the end results closely reflect the O’Connor-without-a-God nihilism of William Gay, ‘heading west into the open country, tracking into open-wide territories he could infect like a malignant spore’ (p88, 92, Gay, 2003). Bryant suggests that Gay, like O’Connor, fulfils a tradition in ‘restoring the plain fact of evil to a faithless world’ (p306, Bryant, 2013), sans her redemptive faith – and this is largely Cave’s outlook in his murder ballads. ‘Violence is autopsied’ but not traced to origin (p303).

The Scottish Gothic and the Short Story Cycle

While it is important to reflect on the collection from an international perspective, it would be remiss not to examine Shawkirk in the context of Scottish literary traditions, itself an important source of the ballad traditions of Appalachia, Australia and Canada as discussed above, to compare and differentiate it. Alan Bissett, in his introduction to *Damage Land: New Scottish Gothic Fiction* offers his interpretation of the national tradition:

> The Scottish psyche has been formed from being cast as underdog in the dialectic of power, from our being subsumed both in our own culture and in that of a stronger nation's. There is a place there where the two halves do not meet. Damage. …Scottish writers have returned time and again to themes of disunity and schizophrenia. (p1-2, Bissett, 2001)

This is most obvious in works such as Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, or the earlier *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* by James Hogg (the latter, appropriately, concerned with the fragmented nature of Scottish religion). More recent fiction on the subject include the fragmentation of gender roles in Banks' *The Wasp Factory*, and the corrupt detective Bruce Robertson of Irvine Welsh's *Filth* who embodies rabid power and bigotry in the day, and moonlights in drag as the abused wife who has left him[8]. Murray Pittock identifies similar trends of the Scottish Gothic in Hogg's work:

> Just as those dimensions of Scottish culture incompatible with Britishness were aestheticized as picturesque in the generation after they had been defeated or dismissed as

[8] A rather apt expression of this repression comes when Bruce, in denial of his own issues, insults a group of men from Liverpool: 'All I was saying that when something bad happens in Liverpool, youse cunts go fucking do-lally… Why can't you sit in the house and mourn quietly, why do you have to turn everything into a tasteless audition for *Brookside,* to show who can be the most fucked up by tragedy? …you bastards are glad that there's no jobs n that, cause it gives you something to act so fucking tragic and hard-done-by!' (p177-178, Welsh, 2013).

> barbaric, so their survival in terms of threat rather than regret is a feature of Scottish Gothic, the violation of the expected in British space by remaining traces of the lost national other. (p215, Pittock, 2008)

These are perhaps more literal examples of the halved psyche than feature in this collection, but the overall idea of the Scottish struggle between the superstition and shame of Calvinism (or as Ascherson terms it, 'the Presbyterian tradition of binary right-or-wrong' that forever stifles debate [p85, Ascherson, 2002]) and the everchanging face of the population still remains prominent in the Shawkirk stories.

One of the more famous examples of Scottish Gothic, given its international reach, is Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting* – an episodic novel that could be redescribed as a short story cycle, as it is narrated in short sections focalised through a rotating cast. These are features of short-story cycles such as Jennifer Egan's *A Visit From the Goon Squad* or Elizabeth Strout's *Olive Kitteridge*, in that there are definite through lines of character or plot, but we are given a multi-perspective view of a place or its community. Lousia Shen dissects the world of *Trainspotting* as seen by its (expansive) cast of characters:

> *Trainspotting* anatomises the emergence of an uncontested zeitgeist of liberalisation, where capital previously locked down in the physical bases of material production (factories, docks, mines) is released in the form of increasingly mobile investment capital. (p191, Shen, 2019)

This is recognisably the Shawkirk we encounter in the collection, as I will cover later in 'Religion and Decay'. Later novels in Welsh's oeuvre explore the encroaching gentrification, and it comes to the fore in the film sequel to *Trainspotting.* But Shawkirk, by virtue of its more rural

placement, is not primed for such a development – Nikos' ambitions amount to a kind of countryside retreat for himself and family, secluded from the town and out of sight. As always, the Gothic is defined by its location, and while they share religious turmoil and post-industrial ruin, Shawkirk is a long way from Welsh's Edinburgh. Neal Ascherson references this side of Scottish history in an assessment that approaches a definition for Bissett's phrase 'Damage Land':

> The wholesale uprooting of Scottish society within a few years and its forcible replanting in physically transformed landscapes, in new industrial cities or in other hemispheres altogether[9], has left a persistent trauma. (Ascherson, 2002)

This sense of trauma pervades the Gothic, as it must in a genre occupied with the past. Returning to Bissett's *Damage Land,* in which each writer was given the freedom to interpret Scottish Gothic as they saw fit, trauma recurs across the stories – from an English couple turned increasingly feral by a visit to the Highlands, Neo-Nazis skulk in bookshops, a violent man is increasingly terrified by unseen vermin and the AIDS crisis is explored in a rural landscape of slaughtered animals and 'meat'. This latter story, by Laura Hird, is a good example of the Gothic reckoning with the past allowing the exploration of contemporary issues by contrast – instead of empty factories and docks, the pastoral violence and toxic masculinity is a regressive reaction to the queer and to a disease it is yet to fully understand. This pressure cooker environment is reflected in 'Moscow Train Dog', where Catherine's job troubles in a stalled economy result in a rabid confrontation with the predatory recruitment tactics of the Armed Forces – one of the few stable employers of people trapped in her situation. As with the earlier Ascherson quote on Presbyterian

[9] Again, linking back to the transient nature of the ballad tradition in the 19th century

Scotland, the simplistic attitude and falsely benevolent solutions that Catherine encounters in her daily struggle ensure that explosive reactions may follow the most minor of Gothic conflicts.

Shawkirk: Religion and Decay

The moral grotesque quickly rears its head in the collection, particularly as it pertains to the characters' sense of religion. As a setting Shawkirk has sometimes proved difficult in writing. In my master's thesis I used the same name for a town, though the collection of stories focused on a place of youthful disaffection that shares little with the more isolated, horror-tinged Shawkirk of this collection. This new Shawkirk required a cautious approach – I wanted to associate it with the dramatic and almost expressionist places that haunt Gothic fiction and its various sub-genres without stretching the writing beyond plausibility as a real town and landscape. Writing in the *Guardian,* Michael Newton makes a controversial point connecting the resurgence of British folk horror to the migratory unease of urbanisation and post-industrialisation:

> [The locals'] rootedness in place becomes uncanny. Once, almost everyone was so rooted. But now – in the discontinuous world of modernity, where relationships are casual and work comes and goes – such belonging feels strange and even sinister. (Newton, 2017)

In both its incarnations Shawkirk has been consistent in the absence, or outright denial, of community, its inhabitants generally united only by their own personal isolation. This is at odds with Newton's interpretation of folk horror, and in particular *The Wicker Man* (1973), the most prominent example in Newton's summary of the genre. In *The Wicker Man* the locals are united in a reactionary and desperate faith. For Shawkirk, taking equally from Southern Gothic and real Scottish towns, such unity in a common cause would clash with the suspicious, Darwinist attitude of the characters and I remain unconvinced that community is uncanny even to the most metropolitan of us. But the idea of a rootedness took hold and I began to try writing Shawkirk as

a place that is almost responsible for the behaviour of its inhabitants and their inability to ever truly leave it – this, combined with my research into Shawkirk-esque towns in Scotland and the quarries that once occupied many of them (Drury, 2018), produced the imaginative protagonist of 'The Dancing Plague', who is dogged by intrusive thoughts of abandoned tunnels spidering under the main street. The town itself had become vampiric, inspired in part by the location-based horror fiction in Lovecraft's 'The Colour Out of Space' (2002) and Thomas Ligotti's 'The Shadow at the Bottom of the World' (2015). These are both more literal examples of rural characters confronting a landscape that has become alien and hostile - in the latter story facing the realisation 'that the nightmarish reality attempting to break through is none other than… the root of their own collective identity' (p97, Cardin, 2003). Shawkirk is unlikely to literally prey on its inhabitants in these stories, but I tried to introduce a restrained horror element to give the town a unique sense of character without leaving behind its Southern Gothic intentions – most notably the church, the heart of the menacing side of Shawkirk and an area as bloodthirsty as Ligotti's blackened fields and Hardy's sacrificial wicker man.

This poisonous old church fortuitously aligned with the name of the town, and solidified my decision to reuse 'Shawkirk'. It is a name previously chosen for its plausibility of continuity with real locations in the southside of Glasgow, implying a sort of continuity leading out of the city – Pollokshields, Pollokshaws, Shawlands etc (p104, McNee, 2017). This did not suit my purposes for the town's more rural positioning in this collection, but the emphasis on 'kirk' did – implying an area that was once named as a reflection of staunch Protestant roots perhaps, and the 'shaw' merging this idea with long cleared woods, and perhaps the very trees that Marina notices thin out as the altitude climbs on the moor in 'Leatherback'. This central location, small enough to be manageable but revealed by a 'line of woods [gaping] like an open mouth' (p127, O'Connor)

proved invaluable to the collection – as sprawling and disconnected as the stories could threaten to be, I was always able to return to this church, through the plot or through its significance to various characters, providing the book with a spine of sorts. In my initial thoughts on the collection, I had thought to divide the stories up into separate arcs – written down as 'The Church', 'The Car' and 'The Cook', each comprising around three stories. 'The Car' became the singular, almost archetypical Southern Gothic story 'Orcs', and 'The Cook' revolved around an eventually unused character's relationship to the travelling community (this community did end up appearing in 'The Great Hare War'). The arc sketched to involve arson at a church eventually incorporated a fair amount of the ideas I wanted to cover throughout, such as the secularisation of Scotland's 'central belt' and the lack of lasting industrial and economic replacements, and so came to dominate the finished collection. Little could be more appropriate for O'Connor's 'Christ-haunted' Gothic than a skeletal kirk (p44, O'Connor). O'Connor's phrase refers to the spectre of faith that invariably guides the behaviour and possible redemption of those neglecting its tenets. In this collection, as with other aspects of Southern Gothic, it takes on a different meaning.

Shawkirk is Christ-haunted, but in a different manner than O'Connor's South. I had given this some thought in outlining the initial project, but it was only in writing the fiction that I came to understand how deeply this town would feel the residual scars[10] of Scottish religious politics. I underscored this as quickly as possible in the story 'Bobby Driscoll Blues', where the Catholic schoolchildren Jane and Barry explore the church:

[10] As previously mentioned, a great deal of Southern Gothic deals with the residual scars of the slave trade, from antebellum to reconstruction to Jim Crow and to reparations. This did not strike me as an implausible subject to cover in moving to Scottish climes, but perhaps better suited to a less rural collection, where city streets still bear the names of slave-owning tobacco merchants.

> The bareness of Protestant churches has always unnerved her. Even though the doors have kept the wind and rain from repeating the scorched earth pattern of the shed, the great windows cast light on a particularly Spartan hall. The blunt, functional pews – the first things to take shape in the gloom – are nothing like the carved and decorated rows back in St Gabriel's. She has never taken religion seriously, but it has always been routine. This church reminds her of the aunt who looks a little too much like her mother – the face is there, and rendered unrecognisable by different expressions.

Any church can be abandoned and perhaps say something about faith or the organisation of faith in the area. But to specify denominations, particularly in the west coast of Scotland, broaches a different topic. Graham Walker, writing on the sectarian conflict in Scotland, attributes to Scottish society a greatly delayed or wilfully blind attitude towards religious hatred – with 'little in the way of clarity as to what is being debated'. Any measures to pre-empt sectarian abuse are aimed largely at football fans, in a way that obfuscates 'the Irish dimension to the question', that is, deeply rooted political and religious prejudice relating to Irish immigration, reactionary xenophobia and the Troubles (p376, Walker, 2012). Walker cites the example of sociologists like Steve Bruce, who have a tendency to simplify the problem, where the modern 'widespread nature of intermarriage between Catholics and Protestants' (p375) and a decline in religious belief in general has relegated sectarian prejudice and violence to nothing more than a mask for tribalism in sports. Shawkirk's abandoned Protestant church, waiting for intruders out on the moors is somehow both unspoken and loud – a monument that only the young dare notice, until the sudden eruption of violence within forces the community to pay attention. From there its very existence,

and the unexplained nature of the death that occurred within, work as an intrusive thought on the denizens of the town.

The history of religious conflict, particularly in relation to Scottish Calvinism, dogs Shawkirk. Given its proximity to Glasgow, it is likely that many of the characters are familiar with the monument to John Knox (a prominent leader of the Reformation in Scotland) that dominates the skyline of the Necropolis. Scotland's post-industrial belt, which naturally includes Shawkirk, is dotted with the lasting tradition of militant Protestant and unionist (opposed to Irish and Scottish independence, representing themselves as upholding the union of the United Kingdom) Orange Marches and lodges that commemorate the Battle of the Boyne (appropriated as a Protestant victory). The contradictions in the Calvinist conception of work and pre-destination is frequently explored in Scottish literature, especially when it comes to the Gothic, which I will cover in a later section of this reflection. At the same time, Shawkirk is no different to many Scottish towns in that, alongside the early effects of de-industrialisation in the central belt, it would have experienced a rapid wave of secularisation in the 1960s, relegating the church and lodges to a tribal sense of identity rather than a force of order and community cohesion. Callum Brown notes the social changes, including women rejecting 'piety' as a socially-enforced tenet of femininity and the decline of Sunday schools:

> A hundred and ninety years after Sunday schools first opened, the salvation industry was shutting its doors to an entire generation of youngsters who no longer subscribed to religious discourses of moral identity. Secularisation was now well under way. (p180, Brown, 2009)

As tensions always arise in times of hardship, Shawkirk's economic decay is marked by increasing division. Shawkirk is marked by the 'gradual erosion' of other 'historical pillars' that

are often seen to represent similar areas in Scotland – historian Tom Devine, addressing the decline of Labour Party support in Scotland, covers these issues succinctly:

> Labour had originally been born out of the trade union movement; the collapse of union membership, with the loss of the old mining and manufacturing industries in the 1980s, was bound to have a negative impact. Over half of the Scottish workforce was unionised in 1980, yet by 2010 that figure had fallen to a third. The new service-, oil- and finance-based economy, outside the public sector, was markedly less unionised than before. (p30, Devine, 2016)

Shawkirk has little to offer the modern economy – it is even built atop a disused quarry as we discover in 'The Dancing Plague', waiting for historic work that is extremely unlikely to return. (In this respect, Shawkirk and the post-industrial belt of Scotland more resemble the American Rust Belt than the agricultural South. Rust Belt Gothic is not a common term, but writers like Donald Ray Pollock and Scott Benson would count geographically, even if they are often conflated with Southern Gothic). So too has the institution of the kirk been abandoned, if not be forgotten – the collapse of religion and industry are almost simultaneous. Irvine Welsh remarked on the industrial aspect in 1993:

> A lot of the Glasgow writers are concerned with work and the alienation from work and now you've got a generation who've grown up with the dole queue and YTS schemes - there is no work. The rave kids coming up now - they know that work's a pile of shit. Because of the industry in Glasgow there's a kind of machismo about work - that dignity of labour thing. (Elizabeth Young, 1993)

As there is little future, Shawkirk is forced to interact, consciously or not, with the past it tries to ignore – the protagonist of ‘The Dancing Plague’ fervently believes that Shawkirk will eventually collapse into the quarry tunnels as a sort of reckoning. Despite a study in which 48% of Scots polled were in favour of scrapping denominational schools, Dr Michael Rosie remarked that ‘Scotland [is] not yet at the stage as a nation where it could have a "grown-up debate" about religion-based schools’ (p8, Small, 2011), and that sectarianism was likely to flare up rather than disappear in the case of such an event. There can be no progress without a proper acknowledgement of the past.

Ray, the ritualistic loner of ‘Grendel’, already plagued by visions of decay and suffering, and adopting his hated father’s Protestant crosses over his mother’s Catholic crucifixes because he ‘[can’t]stand a writhing Jesus in the corner of his eye’, faces a rapid worsening of his already alarming isolation upon hearing about the violence at the church. His inner religious conflict unwittingly primes him for a kind of radicalisation, forcing a dark self-reflection that morphs the shame of existence as a social misfit to pride in becoming an active misanthropic predator, revelling in being ‘a strange man, in a strange overgrown house’. Even before this development is sparked by the news of the church however, Ray has tacitly accepted its influence – his pseudo-religion revolving around powdered bone delivered to his fern garden is kept running by Alex’s generous supply of animal bones, which have of course been sourced from the church’s bloodied cellar. When Ray next appears, he is the malevolent stranger of ‘High Roller’, an opportunistic sexual predator serving as the final obstacle in that story’s protagonist’s warped moral lesson.

The religious themes come to a climax at the end of the collection. In ‘Antipode’, Alex, the previous donor of blood to the church’s ominous cellar, chases after the protagonist Jane, who disrupted the primal sanctity with her discovery of the body in ‘Bobby Driscoll Blues’ at the

beginning of the story cycle. Alex finally externalises the predatory and almost vengeful nature of this decayed monument to past religious glories. Like *Nosferatu*'s Count Orlok draining Lucy of blood so single-mindedly that he forgets the rising sun, Alex's tantrum distracts from the far more mundane danger – the drunken party-goers and their matches, which suddenly flares from the background detail of the story to consume and destroy the church (Murnau, 1922). The church 'groans and belches smoke', but at the end of the collection, Jane chooses to look away as Alex, injured and 'bloodless' stares at the destruction of his temple: '[She] sits on the step, the concrete cooling her aching legs, adjusting the bandages about her face as the fire audibly splinters the pews behind her'. It is unlikely that Shawkirk will improve greatly, but the cleansing of the church represents a break with the sectarian hatred of the past. Ray and the villain protagonists of 'Orcs' are still on the loose, and Alex is humiliated but alive. However, they are individuals, and what has been destroyed was capable of causing wider harm than any of them. It is an optimistic inclusion to what is largely a blackly comic and borderline misanthropic collection, and there is an element of catharsis in Jane finally being able to relax amidst the crowd.

Where religion and ethnicity stalk Shawkirk, the general theme of decay carries further than the town and its desolate moors to the local economy. Genre outsiders that they may be, both Davey and Kestrel (of 'Blue Label') appear as autopsies of past life – both of them set apart by the closure of stable work at a bottling plant many years before (implied in dialogue and the general setting to be something similar to the devastating job loss brought on by the closure of the Johnnie Walker plant in Kilmarnock). Davey finds himself in increasingly unstable positions, to the point of financial ruin, until he is desperate enough to take a job from Kestrel, who has leveraged past criminal connections into work for a corrupt real estate mogul. Kestrel's new employment thrives on continued decay – listed buildings either neglected or actively sabotaged in order to make room

for new property developments, and the church is a natural target. But even Kestrel is ill-suited to the new world, his 'John Ford romanticism'[11] and propensity for violence proving to unnerve his corpulent employer Nikos who exists solely for the gain of status (ironically, via a heritage committee) and money. Davey's life and death register as an inconvenience for Nikos, remembered as 'Kestrel's goon', another setback on a project that is refusing to move as swiftly as he expected. The financial costs can be weathered, and Nikos can only attribute the church's immobility as 'some god laughing' – unwilling to believe any earthly power could stop his bloated rampage of institutional corruption and progress. On a pessimistic note, the church's defeat in the final story will mean a victory of a sort for Nikos, this time benefitting from, rather than inconvenienced by, events he does not understand. Nikos and his excess provide an important reminder that as uncanny as Shawkirk appears[12], its denizens do not exist in a vacuum and in fact reflect the impact of wider social problems, the same purpose served by the church.

Within the confines of Shawkirk, decay is continuous, unstoppable and curiously paralysed – the town and its inhabitants are in perpetual freefall, and there is no apparent end in sight.

[11] In reference to director John Ford, of Westerns such as *The Searchers,* often depicting a glorified image of masculinity against the backdrop of American ideas of 'Manifest Destiny'

[12] The horror writer Ramsey Campbell remarks that the breaking of taboos 'can be deeply reactionary… as medieval Norman church carvings often depicted obscene caricatures of sex in order to turn the faithful against their own sexuality' (p65, 2020). With the focus on church and corruption, I am lessening the likelihood of reading the grotesque characters as sneering or elitist, which could be an easy trap in this genre. I did not want the collection to become a simple interpretation of the Newton quote, suggesting that Shawkirk is a reactionary metropolitan horror story about more rural communities.

‘No Pleasure but Meanness’: Nature and Morality

Leaving the human institutions behind, Shawkirk and its moors form a harsh, vast landscape – an unwelcoming Darwinian painting of the natural world that isolates each individual, a setting expected to prey on its inhabitants. It is a world that brings suffering, especially to characters who stubbornly stay their course – they are demeaned, as opposed to the animals, by the conflation of their supposed greater intelligence and the reality of the struggle to survive. I am hardly subtle in broaching the bestial nature of its characters, though in many cases the feral required reeling in to give a touch of depth to their tunnel vision. Here there is an element of the physical grotesque that I otherwise avoided, the idea of human flesh taking on aspects of the animal. In invoking this animalistic imagery, I intended to give Shawkirk a kind of humorous taxonomy, as if each individual occupies their own space in the food chain of a collapsing eco-system. Brad Prager identifies a particular use of this technique in the works of director Werner Herzog:

> Herzog connects crabs metonymically with tyrants, and here as elsewhere he defines humans in relation to our animal counterparts: the despot is at once a crab and a man, barely recognisable as human. … one of the first images we encounter in the film is a pig wallowing in the mud… mercenary humanity is forced to face itself in the animals… (p33, Prager, 2007)

This comes to the fore at various points throughout the collection: struggling jobseeker Catherine obliquely refers to herself as a stray dog and reacts viciously to intrusion on her ‘territory’; cat-killer Alex obtains curious satisfaction from the overwhelming power of rat colonies; Louise thinks of her ex-girlfriend Megan as having ‘rabbit eyes’ and Sophie is constantly positioned amidst a pack of terriers. Often the titles of the stories too reflect this, acting as a commentary on the characters within, such as ‘Thylacine’ being a story about a boy on the brink

of personal crisis – a parallel to the tiger's extinction and rumoured survival. Of course, the literal animals of the collection are more innocent and instinctive when they are depicted, but their human analogues convey that consciousness has been mistaken for separation from the natural world – they are animals, and part of everything around them.

The world presented in the collection can often be Darwinian, but I chose to invoke some form of morality, arbitrary though it may appear throughout the stories. The universe of the collection evokes a form of moral order – authorial punishments inflicted on crimes of pride and hubris, while the characters chafe under their own, perhaps more conventional understandings of morality in contemporary society. As mentioned, 'High Roller' presents itself as a sort of karmic punishment for the protagonist – the entitled businessman Bill is upended in his expensive car and stranded in the moors by the intervention of an enormous and uncanny hare. What follows is a series of humiliations that serve to highlight his consumerism, sexism, and casually manipulative behaviour – Ray's arrival and power dynamic serving as a cracked and exaggerated reflection of Bill's uneven relationships with his female employees. The hare, 'unblinking' and 'shaking droplets of mud from silver white fur', is the instrument of a moral judgement that does not seem to be in line with the religion conveyed by the nearby kirk, or anything particularly Calvinist. Marianne Taylor recounts the alleged confession of accused Scottish witch Isobel Gowdie, in 1662:

> I sall gae intil a hare,
>
> Wi' sorrow and sych and meikle care;
>
> And I sall gae in the Devillis name,
>
> Ay quhill I com hom againe. (p32, Taylor, 2018)

This invocation of magic and malevolence is a typical expression of the role the hare plays in folkloric tradition – simultaneously a figure of 'pagan reverence' and 'Christian revulsion' (p31). This is the punishment that awaits Bill once he leaves the reality of his car and enters the gothic and almost prehistoric moor, his flaws bringing a brutal condemnation akin to the punitive transformations of myth and fairytale, such as Arachne, the arrogant weaver transfigured into a spider. The hare sparks Bill's journey and appears to signal the end, where Bill confronts his own failings by contacting the wife he has ignored for the duration of the story. The hare continues its accusatory role in 'Topiary', in the form of a hedge sculpture, a totemic head that is 'mottled with thick shadow all night' and dominates the space between Margaret and the stranger, forever linking the two characters no matter how much the commonality frightens Margaret, threatening the personal security she finds in snobbery. When she attempts to destroy this link, attacking the topiary hare with garden shears, she falls from her ladder injured and humiliated as Bill was before her – the hare is 'barely dented'. It is this failure in the face of the totem that brings her to a moment of connection with the previously unnerving stranger, the hare once again serving as a Draconian arbiter. In 'The Great Hare War', the hare we see is dead, pinned to a fencepost by a scavenging merlin, an 'eye-plucked head torn into further abstraction'. Red, the protagonist and amateur naturalist, identifies the corpse as that of an elusive mountain hare (*Lepus timidus*) halfway developing its winter coat, which he notes as total anomaly in the moors surrounding Shawkirk[13], which should be home to the more common and larger brown hare (*Lepus europaeus*). The two hare variants are apparently competing for space, and the killing of the mountain hare reflects the violent discrimination Red encounters as a member of the travelling community – both are attacked by the 'locals' and both are designated a problem for the council to solve. Predictably the council

[13] Though mountain hares have been known to stray from the Highlands, 'in extreme weather, when too much snow obliterates its food sources' (p51, Crumley, 2018)

assumes the problems are linked, suspecting that Red and his community have brought the hares with them for the illegal sport of coursing with dogs (Red remarking that his family's Staffordshire bull terriers are remarkably unsuited for such a task). Later in the story, Red and his friend watch a boxing match in the town of Shawkirk before their confrontation with the locals – both a reference to the 'boxing' behaviour of March hares and a blunt foreshadowing for the conflict of class and ethnicity that explodes into a fight on the moors. The presence of the mountain hares on the moor defies all explanation for the characters, and the implausible not impossible nature of its occurrence adds to the heightened sense of gothic reality that envelops Shawkirk. For Red, unlike Margaret and Bill, the hare is a sympathetic presence (albeit not sentimentalised), bordering on a figure of identification. More than once is a hare referred to as 'mottled' or somehow obscured throughout the collection; unlike the vampiric kirk, it symbolises an older and more ambiguous side to the land around Shawkirk – a brutal natural world, but one that ultimately appears to guide its visitors with a harsh sense of truth.

In contrast with the human characters' experience of nature and morality, the wildlife of Shawkirk experiences a far more straightforward life. The animal poems ('Gloom', 'Tod' and 'Weasel') were a late development in the writing process. Having detailed multiple animalistic human characters in the vein of Herzog's dictator crabs detailed above, I decided to establish a contrast with the literal nature of Shawkirk – a control group, almost, with which to contrast the behaviour of the residents. I had to distinguish the xenofiction (writing from a non-human perspective) by its own unique style – something to indicate to the reader that we were now seeing Shawkirk in a completely different light. I had already used the punchier action-driven prose on the noir-inflected 'Blue Label', and attempting something similar with animals might have implied I was connecting Davey from that story intimately with the local wildlife, which I wished to avoid.

I experimented with a second-person narrator, enjoying the sense of helpless participation it might induce in the reader, as if they were a sporting camera strapped to the animal's hide. Ultimately I felt what was essentially pronoun changing wasn't a stark enough difference, and I reshaped 'Tod' into a rough poem. The lyric poetry takes a step back from narrative into related actions and images, mimicking the absence of genuine self-consciousness in the animals' view of the world – instinct-oriented and without a concrete narrative. In its finished form, there is still a measure of uncertainty: 'Tod is' repeats throughout to introduce the next scene of the poem, an effect I liked but can also see as a mark of a writer unused to poetry grasping at structure for assistance. The subsequent poems differ again, using the full space of the page – partly as I grew more confident and willing to experiment, and partly because I did not want the reader to feel as if they were reading variants on the same poem. The hare has no poem of its own, as spotlighting it in any detail might disrupt the air of ambiguity it carries for the human characters – it is more meaningful as a symbol of the land than as a literal animal.

Process

Gothic fiction tends to be a tone piece, not heavily relying on the intricacies of plot. However, the stories required some form of rudimentary plot or through-line in order to establish that the work was intended as a cycle over a looser collection – as I have covered above, the church ended up providing such a structure. This meant that some stories ended up as vital and had to go through several rewrites before I was satisfied with them; whereas stories less dependent on the arcing plot that I was displeased with could easily be scrapped and replaced with new work. Of particular frustration was the story 'When We Reach the Sea', at the start of the collection, which depicts the inciting incident of the plot in the death of Davey from Alex's perspective. Originally darker and more violent (and titled 'Liopleurodon' after an extinct reptile, in a similar fashion to the likely extinct marsupial of 'Thylacine'), it edged towards the horror side of gothic in a Grand Guignol fashion I found ridiculous. After several rewrites I found what I was looking for[14] in a quieter, more offbeat story that kick-starts the plot without sacrificing mood for shock. This had a knock-on effect throughout the stories, as I eased the violence to match the new tone, but also on the character of Alex, who becomes more unpredictable in the climax of the collection due to his more ambiguous level of menace established.

'The Ethics of Pike Fishing' went through a similar process. A sequel of sorts to Davey's noir story in 'Blue Label' it was originally as James Ellroy influenced as its predecessor. My intention had been to draw an almost comic contrast with these Glasgow crime figures with Shawkirk, as if they had come from a more focused, plot-driven thriller. Much of that remains in

[14] The ending scene of Werner Herzog's *Aguirre, the Wrath of God (1972),* in which Aguirre rants to a horde of screeching small monkeys as his raft aimlessly drifts out to sea, allowed me to revisit Alex as a more inept, blackly comic figure, rather than the death masked horror villain I was so unimpressed with. 'When We Reach the Sea' as a title is paraphrased from Aguirre's speech in reference.

'Blue Label', but the grotesque waddling gang boss Nikos changed over drafts until 'Pike Fishing' was the story of a man so removed from the suffering he causes that he is squeamish at the prospect of killing and preparing fish, a far more effective character and one with a point. If 'Blue Label' was about a born unfortunate, its sequel needed something different, and 'Pike Fishing' contrasted the petty and feral of Shawkirk and the blunt desperation of 'Blue Label' with almost perpetual hand-wringing.

Another issue encountered with the prodigious output of stories is the blurring of character and incident. Characterisation required constant attention throughout the cycle, and the high turnover rate risked blurring every individual character into the same obsessed character with obtuse and obsessive motives. This was covered in meetings with supervisors, where I became concerned the stories were beginning to work to a formula rather than help to build a diverse range of stories. Combined with a tendency to neglect necessary exposition, this left a lot of stories reading as far too similar to one another, not to mention bare bones. One solution to this was zero-in on technical issues – loosening the prose to fit the character, and undertaking various experiments (such as the animal poetry) that, while unlikely to be included in a published collection, helped me fix what had become the gradual stiffness of my prose. Close reading of authors outwith the specific circle of my influences[15] helped me assess the diversity issue, while serving as a reminder of what had drawn me to Southern Gothic in the first place.

Shawkirk itself remained coherent throughout however, the setting being the most important aspect of the cycle. Having looked at Iain Crichton Smith's story cycle *The Village*

[15] Including *Nothing Gold Can Stay* by Ron Rash, Miranda July's *No One Belongs Here More Than You* and the works of William S Burroughs. Burroughs' story 'The Finger', collected in *Interzone,* is perhaps an obvious influence on 'The Dancing Plague'.

(1976) I was wary of the letting Shawkirk become as being geographically inconsistent as Smith's titular village – Shawkirk needed to be a physical place as much as it was draining, leeching influence on the inhabitants. Keeping prodigious notes, as well as various locations behind visited and revisited within the cycle kept Shawkirk consistent throughout. With the town as a solid base of locations, I was able to move between the various stories without having to worry too much about their overall links with one another, and overlapping characters – I was able to keep track by connecting each story with a physical space in Shawkirk (excepting of course, the two stories that take place elsewhere). The animal poetry is dotted between stories at selected intervals with the intention that, like brief flashbacks in a film, the reader is still aware of the knock-on effect of the church storyline impacting the surrounding areas, ensuring that the return to the church in the climax is not a jarring reintroduction to a forgotten plot. In some cases, this idea led to branching sub-plots – the church factors heavily into 'Terriers', which then branches off into 'The Dancing Plague' and 'Drey', during which the main plot is not mentioned at all, but thanks to the meandering structure, can inevitably be traced back to the source. It is my intention with the presentation as it stands that the collection takes place in a rough chronological order – this required some reconfiguring of 'Bobby Driscoll Blues' to place more emphasis on the character of Jane rather than the reveal at the end of the story, as the reader would already be anticipating such a revelation having read the previous entry. This was a better solution, I felt, than to begin the collection with 'Bobby Driscoll Blues' and create an *in media res* effect, which could be distracting for a reader, especially if the rest of the collection proceeded more-or-less traditionally.

Conclusion

Art does not exist in a vacuum. This short-story cycle not only reflects the cultural and political climate in which it was conceived, but also its relationship with existing art, from the Southern Gothic to the traditional Gothic, from oral narratives to modern music. The intertextuality and awareness of the medium displayed throughout this reflection has demonstrated the exchange of ideas and storytelling across the Anglosphere, and particularly in the relationship between Scottish literature and that of the American South.

At the same time, this collection is not imitation – that 'the novel depends' on the books written before it, as McCarthy says, does not mean that each expression of art is crudely pasted together from other sources. In inspiration and creation, something new is created, and this collection intends to interrogate issues that impact the Scottish and global community from a modern perspective – the use of long-lasting literary traditions provides a useful lens for examining such a society, given its deep and identifiable commonalities with other countries, particularly in the English-speaking world.

It is relevant to note that at the time of writing, several points mentioned in this reflection became more relevant than ever, with a revitalisation of the debate surrounding Glasgow's (and the wider UK's) history regarding the slave trade, including the statues and street names dedicated to slavers and tobacco lords I briefly mentioned as an example of residual horror in a footnote above. Religious schism was once again brought to the fore as far-right activists and Orange Lodge members sought to 'protect' these monuments from the Black Lives Matter movement and its associated allies. Several days of Loyalist violence erupted in George Square in mid-June of 2020, a sobering reminder that relics like the husk church of this collection continue to have a rippling

impact on Scottish society. The past, as it does in the American South, as it does in abused former colonies of every empire, comes to reckon with a present that tries to smooth it over. As always, the horror of Gothic is the voice of the unquiet dead.

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