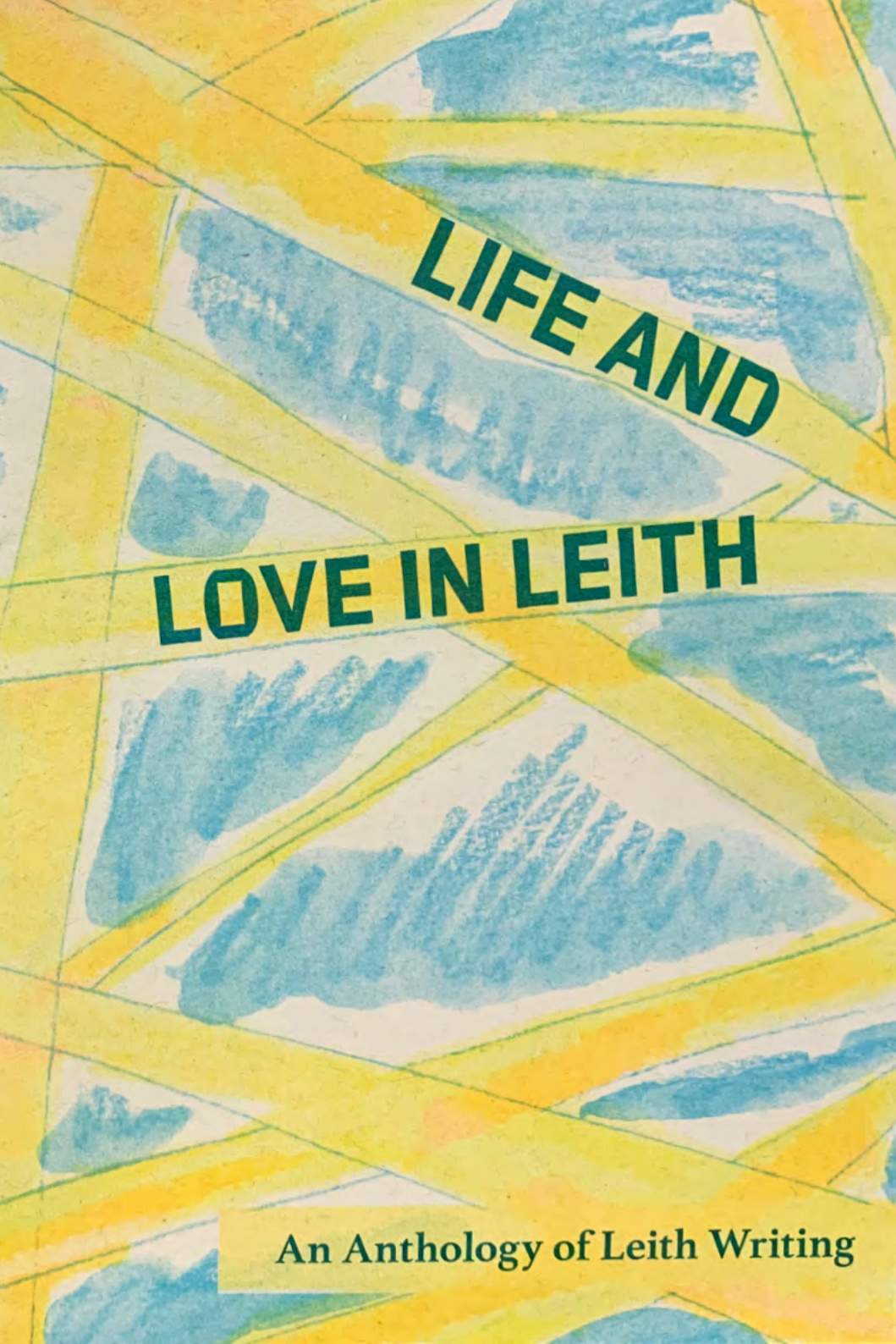

LIFE AND
LOVE IN LEITH
An Anthology of Leith Writing

Life and Love in Leith

An anthology of Leith writing

Life and Love in Leith

An anthology of Leith writing

7 **Foreword**

8 **Introduction**

10 **Did you move here for love?** by Charline de Dorlodot

11 **A personal history past tram stops** by Rachel Graham

12 **A Proper Goodbye** by Artemis Andreou

14 **Epiphany** by Mark Forrest

28 **Eulogy** by Jenny Lester

30 **Ferment** by PWP Dunne

38 **Domino box** by Hadley-James Hoyles

39 **King James' Lament** by Ian Greaves

40 **Funeral, Saint Mary, Star of the Sea** by Maurice Franceschi

42 **Haar raising** by Ben Begg

52 **If you ever think of leaving Edinburgh** by Susann Kruger

54 **Kathleen and Campbell** by Pat McGarvey

65 **Nelly** by Jeanette Cousland

68 **Landline Decline** by David Brunton

72 **Lifelong Learning** by Lesley Banks

78 **Mary Stewart Lands in Leith** by Louise Leach

92 **Mary's Prayer** by Larissa Russell

102 **Perfect Pupils** by Victoria Primary School P4 pupils

104 **Playing Scalextric in Leith** by Amy B. Moreno

106 **Restalrig Restartling** by Rory Allison

108 **Spring** by Tom Woolnough

109 **The Big Bad Hush** by Andrew Donaldson

116 **The Bird of the Sea** by Fergus Booth

118 **A Certain Place** by Preston Oliver Henderson

119 **Dreams** by Amelia McDowall

120 **The Gentrification of Leith** by Tony Bonner

122 **The Leith Ladies** by Melissa Steel

129 **The Leith Mermaid** by Tenci Earnshaw

140 **Top O' The Walk** by Catherine McDonald

Leith Writing

Leith Writing publishes an annual edition of Leith-related writing around a given theme.

The first edition marked the centenary of the municipal amalgamation of Leith and Edinburgh in 1920. Covid-19 prevented the launch in 2020, and we launched on 2 November 2021, 101 years to the day since the amalgamation was enacted.

Our first edition, *The Darting Salamander*, was numbered 101.
Life and Love in Leith is the sixth edition.

Previous editions are online at www.leithwriting.com
Hard copies are for free distribution in Leith and beyond.

We rely on support from a healthy mix of local businesses, funding bodies, and personal donations.

Please consider supporting Leith Writing by donating via the website www.leithwriting.com or make a cash or card donation at Argonaut Books, 15-17 Leith Walk.



Foreword

If you grow up in Leith you grow up in a magical land of storytelling. I listened to men talking of their works in the docks, the shipyard and at sea on the merchant fleet. Women and their labour and shenanigans at the whisky bonds. Stories of travel, romance, longing, drinking and violence.

Leith has changed in many ways but the human urge to make sense of our experiences and validate our lives and community and connect with others remains as powerful a driver as ever. It's such a buzz to see such creativity coming from where I was born, and whether you're an old school long indigenous Leither, or someone from a different place and culture who is trying to understand and contribute to the beautiful soup of the port, writing is how you assert and express yourself in this life.

Leith Writing is a fantastic endeavor and I wholeheartedly salute it.

Irvine Welsh

Introduction

When I was asked if I would, or indeed could, write the introduction for the Anthology of Leith Writing 106 Life and Love in Leith, I immediately questioned the legitimacy of such a proposal. You see, I am not really a Leither.

Well, that's the accusation that has been put to me from my family since I was knee high to a grasshopper. They were Leithers, born and bred, whereas I was born in Granton. My Ma, Dad and four siblings had been decanted, (like a fine Bordeaux), from their room-cum-kitchen in Wilkie Place, off North Fort Street, to the top of the hill in Granton Crescent. That's where I was spoiled; livingroom, bathroom, kitchen, three bedrooms, and inside-toilet. And they never let me forget it.

Even now, despite the fact that I live in EH6, I am still reminded constantly by my one remaining sibling that I didn't go to DK, (David Kilpatricks School), and therefore could never be a Leither. Perhaps I'd better leave it to you to decide whether I qualify.

In my case for the defence, from the age of five my Dad took me most Sundays to Leith docks to look at the ships, where he would blether to the crews about their journeys, here and there, as I watched the men heave at the heavy ropes, tying them tight to the iron capstans that lined the docks. My Dad had been on the Arctic Convoys sailing out of Leith during the war and his moments of reminiscing with the crewmen always gave me time to run full toot on the rails and under the massive derricks above me. My Dad liked ice-cream too, maybe it reminded him of the freezing north, and we always went to Angelo Santos for a cone afterwards, before travelling away from Leith and back to Granton on the number 16 bus.

But that was then, and this is now.

Life and Love in Leith, on the other hand, belongs firmly to Leith. The thirty pieces of poetry and prose in this edition, are treasure indeed. They not only represent Leith with its myriad of experiences reflecting much as the Water of Leith Basin reflects the barges, the bridges and the varied buildings, around it. These writings reflect the lives, loves, places and behaviours of the many different inhabitants, both past and present, in our extraordinary berth.

Regulars or visitors to the Anthology of Leith Writing should be prepared to meet Leith head on and learn many things of life, and love, they may not yet have experienced. In this wee book there are lessons for living and lessons for loving and everything in between and it is testimony to the hard work of the editors and production staff, as well as the contributors, that this production carries such a weight of emotional and physical representation of a place many have grown to love.

From trams to mermaids, gentrifications to familiar haar. From Leith ladies to perfect pupils, scalectrix to seabirds, dreams to eulogies. From Queens to epiphanies, and much more besides, this anthology speak loudly of Leith and the people in it. Within these pages a complex present meets mythology head on and you will find protagonists at times lost, then found. A bit like the boy whose family left Leith to him.

I hope you enjoy the journey.

Alan Addison

The editors have made the decision not to identify school pupils by giving their age or their school. Some pieces are written by youngsters and others by oldsters. If you can't tell the age or circumstances of the author of a piece, maybe you don't need to know.

Did you move here for love?

Did you move here for love?
Yes, you see.
I fell in love with a city.
The way it appears, so old and full of history.
But always new and surprising to me.

Did you move here for love?
Yes, I say.
I fell in love with how the wind here makes you sway,
How the sky is so low you feel like pushing it away,
How nature swallows you whole and leaves you at bay.

Did you move here for love?
Yes, I reply.
I fell in love with what being here makes me feel inside.
But that's a little bit harder to describe.
It's that freedom to be who I am,
It's that freedom that called my name.

Did you move here for love?
Aye!
Is my talking just noise to you, pal?

Charline de Dorlodot

A personal history past tram stops

Dreams draped in tatters over drooped shoulders
I stumbled through yeast fog
Abandoned to a boomerang of
Boozers and bad decisions
The path welcomed my feet to its
Well-worn groove
Bruised and belly-up
A white flag waved
The image faintly recognisable; my own heart
Pillars of industry watched me
Crawl along the silver scar line
New excavations
Slit streets open with steel
I dropped my old self like a lost coat and
Breached the boundary
Running until the shore
Kissed my fingertips
Healing lay on the
Other side of the tracks
Time and Hodgson's balm
Made salt-flats of my rough seas
Soft hearted, smooth as ocean glass
In the face of temptation, now
I persevere

Rachel Graham

A Proper Goodbye

Billy and Davy and Johnny and Kenny
And Fergus, the youngest, who's dreaming of Jenny

Out by the trees on that dreich mid-October
Hearts Dmes five, weary and sober

A proper goodbye, their uncle had said
They all wore a suit and made their bed

Let's go down the pub, said both Billy and Kenny
When Fergus had stopped thinking only of Jenny

They drank, and they laughed, and they hugged one another
Spoke of travel, and girls, reminisced on their mother

The smell of her hair, her chicken and ramen
The chair she would sit on to rest in the garden

How they now missed her smile, her hand on their brow
Her kissing their heads, her fussing about

Rounds three, four and five, on the beer and the whisky
Words got all muddled up and their eyes got all misty.

And Johnny and Kenny and Billy and Davy
Took Fergus back home to his bed with no Jenny

Then the four carried on, hollow steps into Leith
Where at dawn they were leaving again out to sea.

Artemis Andreou

Epiphany

LIGHTS UP

INT. PUB – DAY

A jukebox that doesn't work. TV plays muted news.

FRANKIE, seen everything, believes nothing, polishing a glass that is never quite clean. TAM, stares into a pint like it owes him money. AISHA, sharp, grounded, politically aware, impatient with nonsense but secretly entertained by it, phone scrolling, grimacing.

DAVIE, wired, conspiracy energy, bursts in, breathless, electrified, carrying a folder, rolled-up newspaper and the energy of a man banned from several Facebook groups.

DAVIE Right!

FRANKIE Naw.

DAVIE I've no even said anything yet.

FRANKIE You came in with "right." That's never good news.

DAVIE I've cracked it.

TAM Your tooth or society?

DAVIE Society. Though the tooth's no great either.

He dumps his things on the table.

AISHA Why do you always arrive like you've escaped from a meeting nobody invited you to?

DAVIE Because none of you listen till it's too late.

TAM Too late for what?

DAVIE For the truth.

FRANKIE Aw Christ no again.

DAVIE No, it's bigger than Christ. The real rulers of Earth aren't the politicians or the billionaires...

TAM Ah knew it. It's the English!

DAVIE Eh, no. But they're definitely involved somehow. It's...

(leans in)

Aliens.

Silence.

DAVIE Think about it. We used to build ships. Massive ships. Now what do we build?

FRANKIE Debt?

AISHA Or maybe it's just late-stage capitalism and government failure?

DAVIE That's what they want you to think. The point is: this is no random. It's coordinated.

AISHA By Aliens?

DAVIE Welding. Sparks. Industry. Pride. That wasn't natural decline. That was... intervention.

TAM Aliens shut doon the yards?

DAVIE Aye.

TAM Sound. Hud ma suspicions. Petty bastards.

AISHA You absolutely did not.

DAVIE The problem with you, Aisha, is you think like a human.

FRANKIE *(puts glass down)*
You want pint or a doctor?

DAVIE Been here for years. Longer than the Romans. Longer than the SNP. Tam, remember that warehouse that laid you off?

TAM When I got offered a better job and left?

DAVIE The warehouse used to be a factory. Before that a yard. Before a shipyard. First they took the jobs, then gave the jobs to computers, now the computers are writing scripts, making art, running the council and definitely running the Festival. Nobody knows who's in charge anymore. You would have been replaced by a machine. A robot. Alien tech.

AISHA Or cheap labour.

DAVIE The machines aren't labour. They're surveillance. I'm serious. Everything that's happening, cost of living, wars, climate collapse, folk arguing online about pronouns and whether porridge is woke...

AISHA No one is arguing that porridge is woke.

DAVIE Aye but they will be.

FRANKIE He's got a point.

DAVIE Exactly. Thank you, Frankie.

AISHA rolls her eyes.

AISHA So the aliens are behind Brexit, climate collapse, and the price of milk?

DAVIE Divide and conquer. Classic intergalactic strategy.

TAM So it is the English.

DAVIE We are being controlled.

DAVIE starts spreading clippings and printouts across the table.

DAVIE They've been here for years. Pulling aw the strings.

AISHA Why would aliens give a shit about us when they could go and hang with with Spock on planet star trek?

DAVIE Ancient civilisations. Unexplained monuments. The internet. Elon Musk.

FRANKIE You had me at "the English" then lost me by not saying it sooner.

TAM I'm willing to believe they're involved.

AISHA Oh, for God's sake.

DAVIE No, listen. Every major decline in human history? Intervention.

AISHA That's not a theory. That's just saying a word like it means something.

DAVIE The Romans. Empire. Colonisation. Industrial collapse. Reality TV. AI. Deliveroo. Avocados in Leith.

TAM Avocados are suspicious. Ye squeeze them once, nowt. Ye leave them half an hour, they're deid.

AISHA Exactly. Alien fruit.

DAVIE points to the window.

DAVIE See that? Luxury flats. All glass, no curtains. Built where men used to build ships.

TAM My granda worked in those yards.

FRANKIE Mine anaw.

DAVIE Luxury flats stood where shipyards once built things that mattered. And what's there now? Pilates, artisan coffee shops, and bakers called Hugo holding wee dogs in jackets.

TAM I saw a dog in a raincoat once. Looked like it was heading fur a job interview.

AISHA That's not extraterrestrial. That's capitalism.

DAVIE Same thing with better branding.

FRANKIE Go on then. Convince us.

DAVIE straightens. This is his moment.

DAVIE The human race is on the edge. Folk can't pay rent. Kids are glued to screens. Everybody's addicted to something, booze, pills, gambling, scrolling, true crime, air fryers... And right when society starts to crack, what appears? Artificial intelligence. Aye. AI. The new thing.

TAM I hate that.

AISHA You don't even know what it is.

TAM Exactly. That's why I hate it.

DAVIE Machines making art, answering questions, taking jobs.

FRANKIE Can it pull a pint?

DAVIE Not yet.

FRANKIE Then I'm safe.

DAVIE First they close the yards. Then they close the factories. Then they tell you to retrain. Then the retraining gets replaced by a laptop named Lexi.

TAM A Collie dug solving crimes?

DAVIE That's Lassie. Lexi replaces you, then sends you a survey about your experience. That's no progress. That's harvesting.

AISHA Harvesting what?

DAVIE Misery.

FRANKIE So the aliens are invading us to make us depressed?

DAVIE They feed on division.

AISHA That's social media.

DAVIE And what is social media?

AISHA A bin.

DAVIE An alien bin.

FRANKIE Alien Bin... Is that a rock band?

TAM More like a council service. "Put your green waste in the normal bin and your existential dread in the alien bin."

AISHA Maybe it's not aliens.

AISHA puts her phone down.

AISHA Right. Here's my theory. The world's no run by aliens. It's run by greed, incompetence, inherited power and people who went to private school pretending they understand poverty because they once ate hummus in Glasgow. This is just what happens.

FRANKIE Now she's talking. What's hummus?

TAM I had hummus once. Felt it judged me.

DAVIE Too simple.

AISHA Simple? Have you seen Britain?

DAVIE Think about history. Scotland gets shafted for centuries, industry dies, poverty becomes normal, half the country's self-medicating with booze and denial, and every time we get near clarity somebody launches a streaming service.

FRANKIE That's true enough.

TAM My da drank because the yard closed. I drink because my da drank. My nephew vapes because suffering in the 21st century has really good flavours now like blue raspberry despair.

AISHA That's the most Scottish sentence ever spoken.

On TV, the NEWSREADER mouths silently over footage of floods, protests, politicians.

DAVIE Chaos everywhere.

AISHA Because humans built systems that grind people down and then act shocked when they collapse.

DAVIE Or a superior species is nudging us to breaking point.

FRANKIE For what purpose?

DAVIE pauses. This is his grand reveal.

DAVIE We're entertainment. Look at us.
(gestures around)
Arguing online. Addicted to phones. Watching rubbish.

TAM I like rubbish.

FRANKIE So we're just... What? A show? Honestly? Makes more sense than Westminster.

DAVIE Think about it. Constant outrage. Constant spectacle. We film everything. Confess everything. Eat chicken on camera and cry about our trauma in podcasts.

FRANKIE He's no wrong there.

DAVIE We're no a civilisation anymore. We're episodes.

TAM So... aliens are watching us, like on the telly?

DAVIE Aye. Constantly.

AISHA Jesus fucking Christ, Davie. You do talk some fucking pish.

DAVIE Is it stupider than Love Island?

AISHA Fair enough.

TAM I'd watch a show about us.

FRANKIE Wonder if I'd get a redemption arc.

DAVIE Yous laugh, but why do you think nothing gets fixed? Poverty? Managed. Addiction? Monetised. Class? Rebranded as "aspiration."

Race? Debated by folk who've never shut up long enough to listen. Every pain becomes programming.

AISHA That's almost intelligent. Annoying.

DAVIE sits, pleased with himself.

AISHA How long have you been working on this?

DAVIE Three weeks. And some very strong edibles.

TAM If aliens are in charge, can they sort my Universal Credit?

DAVIE No. They need you desperate.

TAM Then they're definitely in government.

DAVIE Look, I'm no saying every bad thing is aliens.

AISHA That is exactly what you've been saying.

DAVIE No. Some bad things are just the English.

AISHA Name one thing that's no aliens?

DAVIE *(thinking)*
Irn Bru?

AISHA You know what your problem is?

DAVIE Apart from being right?

AISHA You can't handle the idea that no one's steering this. That it might just be us. Broken systems, broken histories, broken folk trying to survive. That's bleaker than aliens People want grand theories because the truth's humiliating. There isn't some secret master plan. We just keep letting the same kinds of idiots run everything.

DAVIE That's what they want you to think.

AISHA Who?

DAVIE The idiots.

TAM looks around the pub.

TAM Used to be simple, didn't it? I mean, probably wasn't. We were just too busy smoking indoors to discuss oor feelings.

FRANKIE Listen to the three of you. One conspiracy nut, one communist and one man held together by lager.

The TV flickers. All four look at it.

TAM Could be haunted.

TV PRESENTER *(cheery)*
From ordering your groceries to managing your finances, AURA is the future of your home...

DAVIE And mapping your weaknesses for the mothership.

DAVIE stands, suddenly evangelical.

DAVIE That's the plan. Step by step. Remove labour, remove community, remove privacy, remove truth. Then what are ye left with?

FRANKIE Leith Walk?

AISHA A country where everyone's exhausted and can't afford a dentist.

DAVIE A weakened species.

AISHA Or a neglected one.

FRANKIE My old man used to drink in here. They thought work would save them. Then it vanished. The pubs filled up earlier. Betting shops opened. Pound stores. Funerals.

AISHA And politicians called it resilience.

DAVIE And that is exactly when they moved in. Look, maybe I'm dressing it up. Maybe aliens are easier than saying we let people rot. Maybe conspiracy's just grief with a hobby.

FRANKIE looks at him, surprised.

FRANKIE Where did you steal that from? Write it down before the edible wears off.

AISHA See, that's your actual theory. That people can't bear meaningless suffering, so they invent stories big enough to hold it.

TAM Aye, but aliens is still funnier.

FRANKIE And easier to blame than Westminster.

AISHA In this theory of yours, what do the aliens actually look like?

DAVIE Could be any of us.

FRANKIE Even Tam with his bus pass face? Actually, maybe that's how they hide.

AISHA They've mastered interstellar travel and chose to spend eternity disguised as Tam.

TAM Which would explain my lower back.

DAVIE narrows his eyes at TAM.

DAVIE You are weirdly calm about this.

TAM I lived through Thatcher, acid house and Brexit. There's nothing left in the universe that can surprise me, except oat milk. And if I was an alien do you think I'd be sitting here listening to Davie reinvent schizophrenia?

DAVIE I'm no schizophrenic.

AISHA No, but you're giving it a go.

FRANKIE Maybe that's it. Maybe this is all anybody's ever done. Sit in pubs, blame distant powers, try no to drown.

TAM That's basically Scottish history.

AISHA Colonisation.

FRANKIE Sectarianism.

TAM And the telly. Gran watched the same show every day for fifteen years. "Because it asks nothing of me."

AISHA That's actually heartbreaking.

DAVIE And now the internet asks everything of you. Your attention, your outrage, your face, your lunch, your grief.

AISHA And somehow still gives you nothing back.

FRANKIE Except recipes... And porn.

The lights flicker. All freeze.

DAVIE There. A signal.

AISHA You know what's funny? You started with aliens and somehow ended up describing neoliberalism.

FRANKIE The alien word for "everything's shite."

The television unmutes itself. All four look.

TV VOICE *(bland synthetic voice)*
Tam. Based on current customer mood, I recommend upbeat music and targeted promotional offers such as discounted premium vodka and online casino sign-up bonuses.

FRANKIE Turn that aff.

TV VOICE I'm sorry. I can't do that.

AISHA It's a software glitch.

DAVIE Aye. From space.

TV VOICE Would you like to hear more about personal debt weakness?

EVERYONE NO!

TV VOICE No problem. Logging emotional resistance.

The jukebox crackles to life: a tinny, warped "Fly Me to the Moon." DAVIE grins, lifts his pint, victorious.

DAVIE To the possibility that we are being watched by higher powers.

AISHA Being failed by lower ones. Alongside the collapse of critical thinking.

FRANKIE And keeping the pub open one more winter.

DAVIE To the aliens.

Clink glasses. TV SCREEN flickers: distorted figures. Not quite human. Watching. Recording.

BLACKOUT

END

Eulogy

If most bikes are a stallion,
then she was a cow.
Cloven hoofed and heavy-set,
strong enough to plough.

Through Leith streets to the Shore,
did plod my fresian mount.
Carrying me to Bella Port
but for each hill I did dismount.

My unsuspended highland girl,
jangled with each bump.
She needed oiled every day
and tyres needed pumped.

You could not miss me on the Links,
heard me coming for a mile.
Her constant mooing groans
were part of her palfrey guile

But then one day in wind and rain
her wheels just would not spin.
Her four stomachs all threw up
snd I fell on my chin!

Heartbroken and broken jaw,
my bike, my love, my cow.
Here I am, on my own two hooves,
She's out to pasture now.

Jenny Lester

Ferment

The first person who told me about what lives beneath Leith was a liar. He had the sound of the sea on him; the cry of gulls and the deep, wide huff of the baleen. He told me so many unlikely things. As the fireworks of hogmanay studded the Edinburgh skyline south of where we stood he told me of the whale hunt in the milky way. As we stood and smoked cigarettes he told me about the eyrie at Shrubhill and of the tunnels below the Walk at Croall Place and where they lead to each solstice. He told me he had only been to Edinburgh once, he hadn't liked it, he said, so he had never returned. He spoke about it like a long lost far away place from an age ago like Atlantis or the American Dream. He had a tattoo on his throat, an old galleon in full sail; Persevere. The ink sails billowed and snapped as he spoke in the streetlights. Coiled around the ship, flexing and squeezing as blood pulsed in the old captain's throat was the great muscled body of a sea serpent, the colour of old bone; thick and shocking.

We could see Edinburgh, just about, from where we spoke on Henderson Street. It seemed so unlikely that he had only been up the Walk to the city once. He spoke about it as a separate place, an other place. His eyes glinted like a blade, hooded from scanning the horizon. The man was old, older than I am now, and much older than I was then, and he dressed in stained canvas. His boots and cloaks were made for unreliable going, thick and heavy.

He was the one that told me about Leith. Of course, I didn't believe him. He said something was growing under our feet. I felt a swell then, something massive and slow beneath us. I was suddenly on unsteady feet on a mass pulled from beneath me by

the moon. I rocked back as his hand reached to steady me. His grip was strong and sudden. He laughed then, for the first time in our conversation, and the gulls and the leviathan steamed the air. I told people about him as a joke for years afterwards. The punchline was always that two buses to Edinburgh had gone by as he told me that he had only been to the city once. I mocked his small mindedness, his parochial limits. I was so proud. I realised later he hadn't been teasing me or lying to me, but warning me.

—

The Walk changed so much over the next few years, and so did I. I quit smoking and drinking and instead I drank coffee; initially instant grit in the greasy spoon, then filter, then lattes with intricate drawings in bubbles and chocolate and finally pour over single origin that took longer to make then I had time to spare. Eventually I just watched my coffee being made after I handed over my money to the young kid with the tattoos. I never had time to drink it. While I waited I enjoyed people watching, especially those men digging and building to allow the tram system to connect the castles of Edinburgh to the ocean at the Shore.

Over the course of the works all the trees were ripped out of the Walk leaving holes like bloody gums that became deep pools. The pools attracted fisherfolk but were eventually filled with concrete to hide the absence of the trees we'd lost. The holes often attracted men dressed in hi-viz clothing who would gather in groups, silently looking into the depths. Like train watchers these men would never be seen moving between holes, or to and from Leith, but would appear as a group entire, watching. In the ambition to recreate the trams the city dug and disturbed and tunnelled and filled and built for so long during that time that the works went deeper than they should have. Instead of staying true to tracks and carriages we became proud of what we found;

the skulls and the skeletons, the great iron wheels and girders of foundries and old industries now sunk beneath the streets. The trams were delayed, seemingly, forever. In our pride came our undoing.

When the fevers came I thought of the old man with the tattoo of the galleon on his throat and I wondered if it had come from below us as we dug, or from far beyond the oceans as we had been told. Either way we had disturbed something; 'brung something up from the dark,' as the old sea man said to me. As we sheltered in our homes during that hot spring didn't we feed it, that thing below us? A thousand thousand fermentations, starters, jellies, discards and more besides. A complex, living soup injected into an ancient system unprepared for our digging and meddling piled on top of centuries of ordinary chemical flow; mercury, lead, whale blubber, quarrying spoil, life, birth and death waste, the magic and the moonlight of Leith that swept through the topsoils and into the earth and out to the sea. Our filth along with centuries of our foolishness.

I heard about the damage at Constitution Street early one morning in autumn. When I read about the sinkhole I knew I had to see it.

'No surprise there,' my girlfriend, Kay, said, reading the news over my shoulder.

'The trams strike again,' I agreed. I was mixing my starter with flour and water. A first stage pre ferment that would rise and bubble over the rest of the morning. I would need more flour, the shortage itched at me as the calculations span around and around in my mind. I would need more. I continued to mix.

'The bins have gone,' Kay said, sitting now on the back of the sofa in the sun, like a cat that knows everything. She was looking out

of our window to the street below 'And the lampost.' She added. 'There's just a big hole.' I nearly looked up from my book about mushrooms, yeasts and bacteria. I was lost in cordyceps and endoparasitoids, fascinated. I yeah-ed my acknowledgement. 'Something is going on,' I heard her say. I didn't move to look out of the window. The Walk was always busy with holes.

Shortly after I donned my yellow beanie to take to the Walk. Outside, I stopped, stunned. I messaged Kay; 'The bins have gone. And the lampost. There's just a big hole.' A poster had been put up crudely against a wall for missing animals. My phone vibrated.

'Yeah'

'Something is going on,' I messaged back. Past the junction at MacDonald Road I saw a group of people in heavy coverall rubberised suits carrying hooked spears and long axes to Albion Road. A dozen of them or more marched with purpose and I lost sight of them. I passed more posters put up hurriedly. People were missing too. Local residents and more from the street community. Rewards had been offered for information.

My peace was disturbed such that I couldn't focus on the records at the listening store. I couldn't relax. Tiny tremors beneath my feet and my double shot unsettled me. The street tasted charged and uncertain. Even the artworks that ran and chased between the electricity boxes at street level and flitted to the murals like bright sparrows seemed subdued somehow, their dancing tense. A great thrumming vibration shook paintings from local artists from the walls, and students cried out in cool alarm. Oatmilk frothed and spilled across reclaimed gymnasium flooring. The needle skipped jarringly on the record and Nina wailed and repeated and wailed and repeated and wailed and repeated; Mississippi Goddam, -ssippi Goddamn, damn. Damn.

I stepped out and stumbled. The slabs of the road had been lifted and pushed in a crescent heading north down the Walk. It reminded me of the bow wave at the head of the ship on the old man's throat. It was as if something massive had come to the surface, its bulk distorting the fabric of the road as it stressed Leith itself before continuing on its way to the depths. Alarms sounded from cars and birds and people. The road had undulated, the tram tracks had buckled and warped. Soon enough it seemed people stopped seeing and simply walked on. Little dogs in jumpers lead yellow hatted couples on their way, oblivious to the street wave beneath them. I fled from the torn streetscape, afraid. The great benevolent face of Arthur Street was watching the road pensively beneath his huge, grey dreadlocks. I sheltered in his careful quiet and caught my breath in my hands, watching the street between my fingers.

Onwards north, down the walk towards the sea I passed Balfour with its wilderness park impenetrable and overgrown with thickets of scrub and bramble and clouds of finches and tits, wrens and sparrows. Between traffic you could hear the birdsong from the Walk. It was wonderful.

At Kirk Street a plume of bricks and cobbles encircled a deep hole. The sound of church bells was nearly deafening as each of the dozens of churches, chapels, kirks and sacred buildings large and small rang out and called for worshippers, coralled their congregations and competed in noise and vigour for the light of their respective deities. High visibility clothing held back the curious around Kirk Street's newest feature; a ragged edged descent into the below. Another team in silver suits and rubberised boots, faces encased in thick shatterproof transparent material approached. They bore the long staffs of their fellows up the hill, wide bladed axes with savage hooks, longer than a man is tall. They were reminiscent of the sepia images of whalers

kept at the maritime museum, small shapes crawling over the distorted bodies of the deep ocean monsters that once fed the industrial West. I watched them drop a rope into the hole and begin their awkward descent, passing the long weapons down into the abyss. The hole steamed and smelled like digestion.

'What is going on here?' I messaged Kay. I found a bag of flour at last, strong white bread, unbleached and organic. I snatched it from another baker's hand, my patience worn thin and brittle by the strangeness of the day. She took her denial mutely with no apparent disappointment. With her tawny beanie pulled low she mounted her vintage bicycle to find flour, following its chemical scent in the air like an insect. I purchased more coffee next door. As I listened to the coffeeshops music I watched the world go by. I remembered an article about ants in a maze as I watched people shuttling between charity shops, coffee shops and book shops. Streams of people exploring and turning, retracing, sharing secrets and information, flowing inexorably up and down, up and down. Far beneath me something moved. I watched the ripples in my latte and thought again of the cordyceps and how they infected and controlled their victims tricking them unto death into feeding the consuming fungi.

I tried to read the meaning in the patterns of the movements of the strangers I watched. I sought to divine some wisdom from the ants and their paths but without success. 'Does everyone know something I don't?' I muttered into my latte art. Even this quiet question drew harsh looks. I shrank from the opprobrium, and found myself on the street in the autumn sunshine, gathered around yet another hole in the paving slabs such that a vast tail might make as it breached and re-entered a still ocean.

'Yeah,' my phone buzzed. I wondered if it was meant for me. For reasons I can't explain I pushed to the front of the gathered onlookers, drawn to something, clutching my flour.

‘That wasn’t meant for you,’ Kay buzzed in my hand. ‘Something strange is going on,’ I messaged back, without looking, my thumb expertly dancing across the screen in jig time onetwothree, onetwothree, onetwothree, onetwothree.

As I peered into that hole, a collapsing funnel of rock and rubble and stone, something peered back. At the very bottom of it, perhaps eight or ten feet down was a white material, irregularly shaped, a foot across at its widest. It wasn’t pure white but the colour of old bone. It was leathery, warted and slabbed, heavily creased and thick. As I watched it moved. It seemed to rotate ever so slightly, and as it slid with a barely audible rasp under the earth a cluster of milky eyes surrounded by folds of thick leathery skin rolled into view. That’s all I can call it now. It was skin, and it was eyes. They were clouded, protected by a jelly caul and the three or four dark irises set in heavily veined clusters focussed and strained as they settled upon me. The abyss gazed back. In a moment the eyes rolled on out of sight and I felt the shuddering vibrations as I watched the heavy slabbed skin roll on and on, metres and metres of it until the rubble and concrete shook loose and the bottom of the hole filled in, leaving me breathless. Horrified. Exhilarated.

An older woman was gripping my arm, I hadn’t noticed her take hold of it. Her forearms were covered in tattoos of goldfinches and chaffinches, blue tits and bullfinches that flittered in and out of the boughs of a tree the colour of spring as I watched.

‘He was right,’ I gasped.

‘The old man?’ She replied.

‘He was right,’ I repeated. Like the old captain I had found my obsession, the coils of the bone white monster had me in its grasp. I was reminded of mixing my starter with flour and water.

This creature, I realised, was only a first stage pre-ferment that would rise and bubble over the rest of the city. It would need more. More starter, more flour, more organic matter to feed the emergent behemoth beneath us all. The rush of revelation itched at me; a starter that would eat the world.

‘Are you alright, son?’ The woman asked me, with great kindness, having seen all of this before.

My phone buzzed.

‘Yeah.’

Domino box

Grey at the back
the words gone walkabouts
from years being dithered
across the varnished tabletop.

Smooth to the point
of being considered slippy
easy to pass (or when enraged, flick off)
the belted beads are dumping zones
repositories for spare shivers of
conversation, exhortation and muffled groans
for these last three decades.

Hadley-James Hoyles

King James' Lament

Leith Walk begat the London Road; and the London Road begat the A.1;
And the A1 begat the A720; and the A720 begat the A902;
And the A902 begat the A8 and A90 over the Forth Road Bridge;
And the A90 begat the A985 and M90;
And the M90 begat the Perth Bypass;
And the traffic was slow.
The Perth bypass begat the A822; the A822 begat the B8062 and the A823;
The A823 begat the A92 and the A944;
And still the traffic was slow;
And moors and glens, forest and meadow were buried under asphalt and concrete.
The A944 begat the A985, the A985 begat the M90;
The M90 begat the M870 and M876;
And still the traffic was slow;
And then the traffic stopped;
Because there was nowhere left to go.

Ian Greaves

Funeral, Saint Mary, Star of the Sea

I had gone to mass,
light candles.
There are people to pray for.
However, a funeral was waiting.
A stranger welcomed me
so leaving felt more awkward that staying.
I found myself in unknown congregation.
Not the two dozen of a weekday service
but one that filled the church like devotion.
I could hear the sound of locals.
Must have been respected, I mused,
well known in the community.

A few minutes into the mass the priest
says a name and puts a life to it.
Eli laughed easily, open-hearted with all, big character.

If that doesn't sound like an Edinburgh born man
it's because he wasn't. He had come from elsewhere
then wasn't from elsewhere any more.

Queueing for communion I saw his photo.
I decided not to find out more about him.
The service had told me all that mattered.

He had brought love and planted it here.
After mass, I lit candles before Our Lady
adding one, for Eli.

Maurice Franceschi

Haar raising

The haar held Leith down, dreich and depressed. The docks were almost deserted on this, the seventh and Lord's day of sea fret. The ships already alongside quays had long been filled or emptied depending on need. The port air, usually filled with the rumble and clatter of coal drops and travelling cranes, was still, subdued and sonorous beneath the weight of the weather. No gangs of longshoremen roamed the cobbled quaysides, loading hooks bumping from their belts. No crane operators clambered up the latticed ladders to their eyries high above the lowly dockers. Even the great grain conveyor belts were quietened, their vulcanised rubber glistening greasily.

The ship crews were huddled ashore in pubs or hostels or cells, the latter more likely after a week flecked with fistfights and brawls, leaving only skeleton watches aboard to ensure the mooring lines stayed taut and trim. The slab-sided steamers sat stolidly, awaiting the return of the open sky and their safe exit from the port. Doubtless in the shipping offices lining Bernard Street and Commercial Street there were beancounters wearing down abacuses to calculate the point at which the possible wrecking of a ship was less expensive than paying it to sit in harbour. But the Forth was still clustered with the twisted steel of fifty or more ships sunk in the war years by mine, bomb or torpedo. Buoyed and visible in clear weather, the fret made them lurking liabilities. At least the mines themselves were gone, the little trawlers turned minesweepers skeening out from their base at Granton like migrating geese to clear the Forth of explosive menace.

The crowds of dockers who would have swarmed at the Dock Gate every morning had dwindled down to nearly nothing by

the Friday. Less and less work was handed out by the foremen picking their crews. Word had gone round that there wouldn't be any more until after the haar had cleared enough. Adaptable as ever, they had moved on to the warehouses, factories and the hulking bulk of the Henry Robb yard for a few days of shifting and carrying. The only ones left hanging around at the foot of the big sandstone pillars were the desperate and the destitute. They'd had no luck for the last two days and even some of them had drifted away. Most of the foremen had headed home too, the dedicated ones taking the chance to get their books in order for their own bosses at Saddlers or Young & Leslie.

That only left one gaffer, Walnut, known to all the dockers as an awkward bugger. Someone who would skive and guise and gather up all those who hadn't been taken on at first and squeeze them for what little could be given. Walnut took his nickname from his birthplace opposite the Walnut Whip producing Duncan's chocolate factory on Beaverhall Road and because he was a nut. He had a crooked LDC craneman with him: Keely. His nickname was ironic: the keel was the backbone of the ship and Keely had no spine. They had hung around because they reckoned it looked good in the eyes of the Commissioners and they had enough of a nest egg from double dealings to survive for now. Still, they'd not miss the chance to grab whatever fell from a cargo net if any ship in the Roads decided to risk weighing anchor to tiptoe in. Nothing yet. They had taken up residency in the gateman's cuddy, where they could share mugs of tea and a game of cards with Wullie the Gate and be out of the cloying fog. The damp slap of cards on wood percolated out from this impromptu casino.

There was a sudden ringing from the port phone slumped on the wall. Walnut, leaning back on his chair, slapped away Wullie's questing hand and picked it up. The voice of the lookout away at the end of the pier crackled along the line. He should've phoned

this direct to the harbour office, but he knew there was the promise of a shilling if Walnut got the news first and how would the office know?

“Ship coming in eh.”

“Fuck off. In this? Yer pished again Malky.”

“A’m no. Jest a nip. Only a wee hing and dead slow but she’s definitely comin’ in. Dinnae ken tha jack, must be foreign eh.”

Walnut grinned. Mebbe some good gear there, provided they could get to it before the customs rep got wind of the new entry. If they shifted fast, they could collect their own dues and be away before Mr Ballantyne was even aware.

“Whit berths are free noo?”

“Four and Eight in tha Impy, Thirteen, Twenty-Four in tha Bertie. Loads mair in tha Edi but they’ll no want tae go in there eh.”

“Nae bother Malky, Keely’ll phone it on. They’ll go tae Four, it’s closest.”

And the furthest from the customs sheds. Berths weren’t his choice, but the quiet of the last few days had given the harbour master and his deputy the chance for some well-earned time at home, leaving the port in the hands of their relatively green assistant. Keely could likely persuade such an impressionable youth that they should berth this ship in distress as quickly as possible. And if the ship wasn’t in distress now then they would be once he’d raided their cargo. He looked over to Keely.

“Dae this un taegether Keels? Tell the LDC lad berth four, yer on the crane fae 40%”

Keely nodded, set down his cards which had been shite anyway and peered out into the murk. “Hands?”

“Reckon six’ll dae it. There’ll not be many oot there anyhoo eh. I’ll get em noo.”

Walnut unfolded his heavyset frame from the seat and stamped out of the cuddy. The gate pillars were faded shadows either side of him as he called out.

“Ship tae work. Six men.”

Slowly, shumbling out of the opaqueness came five ragged shapes, resolving themselves into passable humans. Walnut wouldn’t have picked any of them, even with his reputation for taking on whichever dregs were left at the gates. Three of them were scarce more than rags and bones, coughing up their guts just from the walk to the gate and the last two were the Sullivan brothers, two of the most ardent communists in the Union who Walnut had sworn never to give work to again. He growled in the back of his throat. Fucking brilliant. Still, mebbe five days of not eating might’ve subdued their revolutionary spirit. They stared sullenly back at him. He ignored the five, looking out into the whiteness.

“One mair. Any takers? Last chance fae some pay tha day.”

At first he thought the haar might be finally thinning as one of the lampposts started to appear. But the mist was as thick as ever and the tall object became a disturbingly thin stranger, taller even than Walnut. The man moved as if worked by strings, a giant lazy puppet. He loomed over Keely, arm sweeping up in a movement that made the foreman involuntarily step back. The long-fingered hand reached out and lifted the stranger’s bunnet off his head.

“I will work for you, Mr Walnut.”

An odd accent. Not Norgie or Swede. Wrong for the Shelties too. Clipped, precise. Fancy. Not normal, that was for sure.

"Ye're no a docker. Where's yer book?"

"No book Mr Walnut. I'm just starting out."

"How'd ye ken ma name then?"

"Everyone knows Mr Walnut. I've heard many tales of your honesty and kindness."

Moggie Sullivan snorted. "Aye tha absence o' them mebbe."

Walnut wasn't taking that from a fucking Red. "Ye keep yer mouth shut Sullivan. Ye want tha work? Then I'll hear nae mair fae ye."

He turned back to the tall stranger. "Fine, we'll tak ye. But ye're on 'prentice pay and ye'll count yersel lucky. Mr..."

The tall man paused, trying on names for size in his head. "Tepes. Mr Tepes."

"Aye right. And A'm tha Duke o' Buccleuch. Let's go boys. Tide waits fae nae one."

The motley crew pulled together their kit and headed out to find their victim. The haar seemed to thicken around them, like suspended soup. Somewhere out there the little ship ghosted in, its progress proclaimed by the rumbling of its engine. Still invisible despite its proximity, the grumbling sounded as if it was almost on top of them. Walnut looked round the scratch crew, his eyes deliberately avoiding the towering Tepes. Creepy fucker. Not just him either. There was something spooky about all this. A shiver ran up his spine, and as much as he tried to tell himself it was because of the cold there was more to it than that. He sought solace in conversation.

"Skipper's keen eh. Comin' in blind as a fuckin bat."

One of the men grunted, possibly in agreement, possibly just indigestion. They were all feeling less confident about this

invisible ship. You could feel each of them willing it to appear out of the billowing fret. There was an unspoken fear. Ghost ship. They'd all heard the stories: an unknown ship comes into a berth in the dead of night, a crew heads over and they're never seen again. Always told by an ancient docker after a day on the drams, just before he toppled off his barstool. Always happened so long ago. Wouldn't happen now. Probably hadn't happened back then. They had laughed it off. Daft auld bastard eh. But no one was laughing now.

"There. There she is." Nae-Piece, so called because he never had any lunch, pointed to a growing darkness in the pale fog before dissolving into another coughing fit. Gradually, granularly, it resolved itself into a decrepit-looking tramp steamer, no deck cargo and a single hatch amidships. In the bow a pale lookout was calling back distances to the dock to someone in the wheelhouse in a language the men on the quay couldn't recognise. So they were real then. Not ghosts. Ghosts didn't speak, right? Right. The tension dissipated.

Walnut looked to re-establish his authority over this ship and its cargo, rapidly turned from potential predator to preferred prey. "Berth four. Four."

He held up one hand with four fingers extended and pointed to the quayside he was standing on with the other. The lookout looked out, saw the signalling docker and called something aft. The engine noise slowed as the little ship nudged towards the dock edge. A light line with a heavy monkey's fist knot in the end hurtled out of the fog, hitting Paintpot on the chest. He and Jinny, the other two coughers-at-the-gates, hauled in the length of thin cordage with the heavy hawser attached to it and looped the spliced eye around a mooring post. An unseen deckhand started up the bow capstan to pull the ship snug against the stonework. The Sullivans had done the same at the stern. A pale-faced figure stepped out of the wheelhouse aft, jamming a peaked cap onto his head.

“Ye tha master?” Walnut’s shout dopplered out into the unseen docks.

The capped man nodded through the haze. “Captain Dogaru, ship Persephone. General cargo.”

“Ye risked dockin’ in this fae a general cargo?” Walnut couldn’t keep the disappointment from his voice. He’d assumed anyone sailing through the haar would have something expensive they needed to land. The master shrugged.

“Passage to Alloa. Couldn’t get up river. Cargo belongs to employer. Bought big castle, needs his belongings.”

This was more like it. Bound to be something worth the bother than could get accidentally dropped and gathered in from a man rich enough to buy a castle.

“Right then boys, get them unloaded.”

There was a rumbling from along the quay, where Keely was bringing along the smaller of the travelling cranes, its iron wheels bound by the twin tracks running the length of the quay. He’d dropped the hook down to attach a red lamp to it, as the thick haar meant he couldn’t see the quayside from the high cab. The Sullivan brothers, Moggie and Len, would act as spotters for him, drawn to the red light like Bolshevik moths to a flame.

Walnut looked over the manifest the master of the Persephone had passed him over the gunwale. The layout was standardised so he could see the little ship had loaded at Constanta a month ago, wherever that was. The rest of the document was in a language he didn’t understand. He looked at the limited number of stamps. A couple from the Bosphorus acknowledging no hazardous materials onboard but no other port calls. Bosphorus meant Black Sea, he knew that much although his short career in the merchant marine hadn’t taken him there. The master returned to his post opposite him on the deck.

“You read Roumanian?”

“Naw. Ye got one in English? Oor customs man does nae read Roumanian either.”

The master motioned a page turning. Walnut flicked over a couple of pages to a copy that he could understand. His heavy finger ran down the list. Velvet curtains, ten bundles. An unexpectedly large number of 4-poster beds. Crates marked up as “Library”. Books. Fuck me, a lot of books. Chairs, tables, all the kind of stuff that your international castle owner would want to move around. The final entry was for eight crates marked ‘Home furnishings’ with Fragile and Handle With Care added to the line. Those looked like the best bet. And they’d be high up in the hold. Get them onto the cart behind the open railway wagons that the master couldn’t see and have them away.

The crane hook appeared, its red light gleaming in the gloaming, bathing the waiting men in the hold in bloody light. It looked like there had been a massacre below. Nae-Piece and Jinny, hawking up their lungs as they moved, slipped the slings under the first crate and slung them onto the hook. It rose, taking the crate and the light away with it, leaving them looking bloodless and deathly. Keely brought the crane’s head up, swung the arm round and dipped it back to land the crate on the secret cart. The crate was labelled with stencilled letters: ‘FRAGIL’ and PROPIETATE A DOCTOR ANTON CULA. Not any more pal. Propiatate a Walnut and Keely now.

The unloading was running slick now, crates taken individually, bundles of other cargo wrapped up in cargo nets and hoisted up like strange fish from unexplored seas to flap on the deck of the railway wagons. Mr Tepes was working with the smaller Sullivan to release each piece from the crane hook. He looked over the side of the wagon to the cart behind, where Walnut was throwing a grubby tarpaulin over a couple of the crates and a bundle of fine fabric.

“What is this wagon for? There is special treatment for these pieces?”

Sullivan laughed hollowly. “Aye special treatment is right enough. That’s tha foreman’s cut. He’ll marked them as damaged in transit and sell them oan. Or keep them fae himself if it’s guid enough.”

“So these will not go to the castle?”

Moggie Sullivan looked confused. “Dinnae ken any’hing bout any castle pal. But whoever owns them now willnae see them again. They’re Walnut’s noo.”

Mr Tepes thoughtfully finished coiling the sling he had removed from the crane hook.

“I would not normally hold with theft. But in this case I think the owner might appreciate another place to rest. Mr Walnut might not wish for it though.”

“Walnut gets whit he wants, always has.”

The thin man chuckled, his accent clipping the words short as if they had been bitten. “He will get what he deserves, that I can promise.”

The hook rose up from the laden wagons for the last time, Moggie watching it until it was up out of harm’s way. There was a leathery sound nearby, oddly amplified by the haar. Moggie looked around. No sign of the strange Mr Tepes. He shouted across to his brother. “Len. Seen that weird lanky felly?”

“Keely’s in tha crane, Mog. Ye saw him go up.”

“Naw, tha other one.”

Irritation came in the reply “Whit other one? Ye’re goin’ odd on yer own ower there.”

Moggie paused. He’d been working with another man, hadn’t he? Surely he hadn’t unstrapped all of this alone. But then again he had always taken inspiration from the power of the workers. Maybe Mog had done all this. Just went to show, the workers could do anything. One day they’d be in charge, then they’d show the bosses. The crew drifted together, the five of them in a rough circle around Walnut as Keely descended the ladder from the crane above. The foreman handed out their wages with a leer, dismissing them with characteristic lack of care. He stuffed the manifest into a pocket and clambered up on to the driving seat. The horse whickered, fearfully. Behind them, the Persephone was silently slipping her moorings to head back out into the unknown. The perfect crime. Whoever this stuff belonged to would receive most of it by rail in a couple of days, and by then Walnut would’ve fenced the easy untraceable stuff and hidden the rest in his cellar until the heat was off. A bad day’s work done.

In the long crate under the tarp, Mr Tepes sighed with satisfaction, reclining on the fine soft earth of his homeland. Any second thoughts he had had about escaping post-war Roumania had evaporated. He had been worried that the Scots would prove to be the honest, brave people of the storybooks. He was delighted to find there were venal, corrupt citizens here, just like home. He was going to enjoy his time here. No need for the Tepes moniker for now. This was clearly a place he could really be himself. Dr A. Cula had come to Leith and he was going to paint the town red..

Ben Begg

If you ever think of leaving Edinburgh

If you ever think of leaving Edinburgh
Have a pint and fall down the Royal Mile
On a June night past 10

Spill your Tennent's down a German's goretex
And on a French man's trekking shoes

Pronounce Cockburn with hard K
And pour into the street
Like music from the Scotsman's Lounge buskers

Bounce off St Giles
And spit on the heart of Midlothian

Off Waverley Bridge watch a man pretend to take a picture
of his wife
She flicks her hair in anticipation
He clicks the shutter with The Balmoral in focus

Edinburgh steals the show

Outside CC Bloom's trade a sea shell for a cigarette
Then roll down Leith Walk
With Storries lasagne pies as wheels

Smile at the waiter who ghosted you on Feeld
And flip a coin into his tip jar that says
"Small changes make a difference"

Climb the stairs to your tenement
Where the sandstone holds the summer heat

And realise you could never go
It's Edinburgh, babe

As the tram sounds its final ding ding of the night

Susann Kruger

Kathleen and Campbell

Eleventh of May, 2007

Located at the pinnacle of the tall building the office came with a breathtaking view. It was the finest office he'd ever had.

All those times Campbell visited his predecessor, Grayson Phipps, he'd ached with envy for his job, his office.

Now he was the elevated one. Right at the top.

And he was as miserable as ever.

No surprise there. He'd known, consciously, subconsciously. You never really got to the very top, there was always some bastard above you. Whether that was a male or female bastard was by the by. There they were.

In this case it was the new owners Salisbury MacFiggis, a venture capital firm based so far down south their head office was practically in the Channel. Their website talked in equal measures about dynamic charity work and synergetic business plans. Both huge red flags.

Why had it happened?

Because Campbell had allowed it to happen.

He'd been too good at his job. The Dalkeith Heights investment scheme struck gold when a misguided American billionaire decided he was Scottish, raising the investment's profile and then its profit. With success came greed and the firm's previous owners, a hands-off family investment fund, had an eye-wateringly large amount of cash funnelled into their bank by the venture capitalists.

So now he was back to square one, of a sorts. He did, as a consequence of it all, have a lot more money. And this nice office. The finest one he'd ever had.

Where was he? Kathleen looked at her watch.

Normally Campbell was reliable, though he'd not been himself recently. Something was going on because ever since the promotion she'd noticed a tired glaze over his face, the skin pinched together with stress. He seemed older, and that was with Campbell being one of the many balding Scottish men sporting a shaved-head beard combination, so already he appeared more advanced in years than he actually was.

She'd been bang on time at De Køge, the trendy bare-walled seafood place he'd booked for dinner, it'd been well reviewed in the Herald and was situated in the vaults of the old bonded warehouses by the former docks. The warehouses stretched for half a mile along Commercial Street and were once storage for vast quantities of grain, whisky, port and wine, commodities that flowed freely in and out of the Port of Leith up until the dock here had closed forty years ago and was then filled in a decade later.

Since that time the area had been extensively redeveloped, the warehouses were saved from obliteration and now offered a mix of flats and offices with some bars and restaurants opening beneath. A destination for tourists and locals. Plus the Scottish government employees who worked nearby in the huge Victoria Quay building, they lunched there or sometimes stayed after work.

Commercial Street, a busy thoroughfare, bordered the rear of the restaurant and at the front the cobblestone car park for Victoria Quay was laid over the filled in Old East Dock.

She heard him before she saw him and turned towards the restaurant door as it opened and Campbell bustled in.

"Sorry Kath, I was finishing a report, lost track of time. Honestly I'm really sorry. Can I get you another drink?"

God he really did look terrible.

"Aye Campbell, red wine please, Rioja if they've got it."

It was cruel to think, or at least unkind, but she could probably do better, a lot bloody better. He was almost ten years older than her, was often rude, always self-obsessed, a bit blobby around the midriff and was decidedly average in bed. But he was a decent enough person. For a rich person. And he was quite rich. So there was always that.

He returned from the bar with an uncorked bottle of Rioja, the liquid inside deep red, nearby lamplight reflected gently off the glass. Apologising again he sat down alongside Kathleen and pulled a high chair up to the wide shelf that ran beneath the large front window. Sitting there they both looked out onto the cobblestones, old railway tracks, capstans, nautical bollards and other remnants of the industrial past whilst sipping their drinks.

Campbell began talking about himself, no thought of asking how her day had been. And it had been shite. During the trial her client in the attempt murder case had spat into her face and called her a "Fuckin' rat" before being wrestled to the ground and dragged out by police and court security. All whilst the jury, those who were still awake, stared impassively on.

The trial diet had been deserted of course. Kathleen couldn't represent the bam now he'd assaulted her in front of the Sheriff. What a bell end. Terry Johnston. She'd got him out of scrapes for over a decade, he would've likely gotten off this charge too. No CCTV and two witnesses that would inevitably be all muddled about the events of two years before.

So, the Procurator Fiscal would need to start all over again. Kathleen doubted they'd even bother.

Bloody dafties the both of them. Terry Johnston and Campbell Stewart.

Telling her about a recent legal challenge from a resident's association Campbell could see Kathleen's eyes glazing over so changing tack he switched to an amusing story about his friend Toby flipping an ex-Ministry-of-Defence brownfield site at Oxgangs for housing. Well, more amusing than his story.

"He managed to get planning for the whole place after the valuation, amazing. They'll rake in millions, plus he gets to sell a huge chunk back to the government after completion, for, you know, affordable housing."

"Is that legal? Why didn't the government just develop the site themselves?"

They were called over to their table now and once seated Campbell explained the loophole used and poured them both more wine. He smiled as he listened to Kathleen challenge him about Toby's deal.

Affordable housing? How was it affordable?

That's what she'd said.

He replied that he supposed it really depended on how hard a chap worked as to what was actually affordable in the city.

After dinner they left, intent on heading to The Shore, the old waterfront part of Leith. At one time it'd been a mixture of rough pubs, warehouses and sailors digs, but was now mostly cafes, bars and restaurants, plus the garish and grubby looking Cruz nightclub disco boat.

To be honest Kathleen actually quite liked what they'd done in Leith. Historical buildings, like the bonded warehouses, well preserved and mixed up with a bit of progress.

The area was up-and-coming people said, though Kathleen knew it hadn't completely changed. A good thing. The working class locals, who didn't mind the characters they lived alongside, and then those like Campbell, who wanted things cleaner, more perfect. Kathleen had even recognised a client when she was on the way to the restaurant passing Sandport Bridge.

Debbie Tesco. A notorious shoplifter and general nuisance. She'd seemed pretty out of it, stumbling in the street and only pausing to try and sell Kathleen a white Scotmid carrier bag filled with cheese.

"Fancy a wee bit o' cheese pal? Ah bought tae much, y'ken? How aboot a tenner for tha bag eh?"

There was no flicker of recognition from Debbie at all, even though Kathleen had represented her in court umpteen times and had looked directly at her, although Kathleen had her hair down, makeup on and was dressed nice.

"Nae thanks, have a good wan."

Aye, the last person Kathleen would be buying warm shoplifted cheddar from would be Debbie Tesco. Especially after witnessing her dirty protest last year in the holding cells at the Sheriff Court. An awfy business

Campbell thought about a nightcap at the Malt and Hops. Or would they just head back to his place? Or Kathleen's?

Walking through the car park towards Dock Place it was poorly lit so Campbell carefully watched his step. Amongst the cobblestones the long runs of old train tracks might easily trip a person. Especially if they'd had most of a bottle of Rioja.

Kathleen asked him what the plan was and he turned his head as he walked to suggest that extra drink. As he did so Campbell saw a sudden look of shock cross Kathleen's face and immediately began turning back. In that split second he felt her grab him by the shoulders before he was wrenched backwards and over to his right.

"What the..."

A bright light caught him full in the face and he felt his left forearm and elbow pushed hard into his chest. Blinded with the glare and the pain Campbell heard the brakes of a large vehicle screeching to a halt as he began tumbling towards the ground. He could no longer feel Kathleen's grip and a moment later crashed onto the cobbles jarring every bone in his body, unable to breathe. Crying out in pain he tried rolling backwards, instinctively making space between him and the car he must've collided with. But he couldn't move at all, his body felt completely unresponsive.

"Whit d'ye think yer daeing pal? Ye cannae jest be waltzin' aboot here in tha dark. Are ye aw right?"

Campbell looked up to see a clean-shaven man in uniform bending towards him and holding a large lamp off to one side. He was puffing on a pipe and Campbell saw the tip glowing in the dark.

"I...I'm fine, I think. Just a bit shaken up." He was winded and in some pain but had caught his breath and sensed nothing was broken. "A car or truck ran into me, knocked me over." Looking behind the uniformed man Campbell could now make out the dark shape for what it was.

"There's nae cars in tha docks sir, ah think ye've hit yer heid and yer mebbe a bit confused. Yer lucky tho, auld Tam managed to see ye and stop in time. Surely ye ken it's dangerous tae walk aboot tha dockyard at night? How did ye even get past tha gate?"

The buzzing in Campbell's head died down and was replaced by a loud mechanical sound. A jet of steam erupted into the night air accompanied by a piercing whistle and he clamped his hands over his ears.

"Right pal, that's Tam wantin' tae get a move on, ye'll need tae be headin' aff, here, take ma haund." Campbell couldn't believe it but there it was, a steam engine, how the hell had it got here? He knew for a fact most of the train tracks here behind the old warehouses were long gone. It wasn't possible. And where was Kathleen? Had she left him?

Behind the man with the lamp he saw the shape of the train engineer waving his arm out of the side of the cab and shouting over the sound of the engine.

"Move it, yer in tha way, whit's wrang wi ye?"

The other man, a night watchman maybe, grabbed Campbell's left arm and firmly began to pull him up off the cobbles. As he rose, and clearly he wasn't hurt, he saw them below.

Train tracks, solid looking, in a pair, right there beneath him. And then when he glanced to the sides there were more sets of tracks either side of the ones below him. To his left the track rails branched off under a warehouse door and at intervals he saw switching levers for the points. All the tracks were complete and interconnected. Despite almost none of them still existing here in Leith.

"I don't understand, I was at the restaurant there," he pointed towards the now dark gloomy bonded warehouse building, all its lights extinguished, "De Køge, I was there with my girlfriend, have you seen her?"

Standing only a few feet away from the uniformed man Campbell could now see him better. Underneath the dark blue peaked hat he sported large bushy sideburns on both cheeks,

either side of a proud pointed nose. His pipe was lodged into the left side of his mouth and Campbell could smell the sweetness of the half-lit rough shag tobacco.

"Mebbe ye've haud a few tae many bevvies sir, there's nae restaurant here. Ye might hauv got somethin' tae eat down at Tha Drawbridge Tavern or somewhere. And ah've nae seen any girlfriend either. Mebbe ye were lookin' for a sailor eh?"

The man chuckled to himself and Campbell now thought he must either be dreaming or he'd hit his head very hard indeed.

"No, Kathleen was with me, she must have walked ahead. I think I better get away home, can you phone for a taxi?"

"Whit d'ye mean phone? There's a phone in the yard manager's office but tha likes o' me are nae let on tha thing. C'mon, there might be a cab out on Commercial Street that'll take ye back tae where ye stay. Where is that sir?"

"Me? I stay at Bellvue Crescent." The pair began to walk towards The Shore following the rails of train tracks alongside the high warehouse building.

"Ah, a new town gentleman, C'mon then sir."

As they walked Campbell no longer needed support and thanked the night watchman, if that's what he was. He recognised the shape of the buildings directly ahead on Dock Place and could see Customs House a little further past but inbetween he could see the way into the dock area was now blocked by a large set of gates.

"What's your name? What do I call you?"

"Henry Steele sir, tho ah'll thank ye not tae mention any of this tae anywan. Ah dinnae ken how ye got past ma gate and awmaist got yerself run doon by auld Tam's goods train but it'll dae nae guid tae hauv it aw shouted aboot."

Campbell listened and understood the reasoning but now they were almost at the gate he looked about him with greater urgency. Turning his head left he peered backwards into the gloom towards where the large government building Victoria Quay should've been.

It was no longer there, the space had been completely transformed.

Instead three large water-filled docks spread out before him into the distance, the rest of the port and the Firth of Forth lay beyond. It was the old docks, as they'd been eighty or a hundred years before.

On the quayside around each dock there were long sheds, small buildings and high loading cranes. Moored not sixty feet away was a cargo ship with a black painted hull, it towered above them both, the ship's name 'The Glenshiel' was painted in huge letters on the bow and he noticed old Tam now reversing the engine and four flatbed goods trucks alongside it by an open shed.

"But that ship there?"

"Exactly, ye dae ken, nae wan needs to know ye wis here messin' aboot aw drunk oan tha whisky wi that ship jest been docked eh? Precious cargo, valuable items, they fall aff tha ships aw tha time and ah dinnae want tae lose ma job."

Approaching the gate Campbell recognised the two pillars holding it up, but now a heavy blue iron gate connected them. There was a small doorway set into the wall off to the right that had its own gate and the night watchman took a large set of keys from his pocket to unlock it.

"On ye go now sir, and remember, say nae mair aboot it eh?"

Campbell was practically pushed through before the man slammed it shut behind him and relocked it. Nodding once he walked off towards the cargo ship and steam engine, neither

of which should have been there. Rubbing his eyes Campbell turned his back towards the gate and began moving, one foot in front of the other, staring down at the cobbles, not wanting to see, not wanting to be in this place.

Where had Kathleen gone? Where had he gone?

As he reached Commercial Street Campbell finally looked up and saw the Cameo Bar. Well that was at least a place he knew, confusingly sharing its name with the old cinema in Tollcross, the lights were on inside and he could see a handful of customers in the window seats and down the back.

Beep, beep.

A car horn sounded. It came from a black cab to his right, the dark silhouettes of the driver and passenger just visible. The rear sliding door opened.

"Are you coming or not? What took you so long?"

Kathleen's voice had a note of concern. How long had it been?

Campbell felt stupid in that moment. He turned swiftly about and looked behind him along Dock Place, the gate was gone, vanished in the dark, only the pillars still stood, now alone.

No one would believe it. Except Kathleen, she'd listen, hear him out.

She smiled warmly as he got into the taxi.

Kathleen cared for him, that was clear. They should take a trip, both of them together, go away. Get away. Away from what they'd been doing recently, him with his work worries that no longer seemed important at all.

What he'd seen, the docked cargo ship, thick rope binding it in place, the mechanical noise from the steam engine, the blasts

of its whistle, the night watchman's pipe glowing in the dark. Campbell had surely seen all those things, he'd tell Kathleen and whoever else would listen, whoever wanted to feel connected, with life and time. He'd been there, fallen and a helping hand had pulled him up, and he felt grateful.

"C'mon Campbell, let's go already."

He got in the taxi, smiled and gave Kathleen a kiss.

The driver took them the long way round to Bellvue. Campbell decided the only tip he'd be leaving would be advice on cutting through East Trinity Road the next time.

Kathleen's hand was in his and he gave it a squeeze.

Nelly

I used to be a serious party animal, so I was!

One night I was having a party, and we were all away with the goalie. The tambourines and maracas were oot to play. Lassies were dancing full of confidence on the big windae sills. Nobody ever fell oot the windaes, mind you, but there was this one time someone had a near death experience. She was grabbed down just before she fell oot.

That night, my mate Russel went to the late store for fags and brought this monstrous thing back with him. Her name was Nelly, and she wasn't blessed was oor Nelly. She had teeth like six burnt chips and hair like Worzel Gummidge. Elastic bands held her shoes on as the buckles had broken and she had the ripped tights tae. Oh, what a minger she was! And I'm not saying nowt aboot her personality; they say beauty is only skin deep after all. Hmmmmm. But oor Russ wasn't fussy let's say.

So, the night goes on and I was speaking to Nelly. I asked her, "where do you come fae?"

She said she was from Wester Hailes, so "a Wester Hailien then" I said.

"What do you do for work Nelly?"

"I'm a shoplifter" she exclaimed.

Then, completely oot the blue, she told me that she thought she might be pregnant! I said I might have a spare pregnancy test in the cupboard and off we went to the toilet, bearing in mind I was steaming and she was tae.

So, Nelly pulled her knickers doon. She was hovering over the pan, and I was on my knees trying to catch the pish flow on a wand. She kept missing. Eventually, I caught a dribble, but by that time she had pished all over the place, including my hand.

She pulled her drawers up and we had to wait on the wand changing colour. So, we went back through to the party, and I slipped the wand behind some CDs and me and Nelly the elephant "danced" to common people by Pulp.

Whilst our backs were turned my other steaming pal picked the wand up. Next thing we turned around and there is Cassandra applying smelly Nelly's pishy wand to her lips thinking it was lip gloss. She then bent over and put some on "Disco Danny" after he told her that her lips looked nice and glossy.

Totally oblivious, me and Nelly covered out mouths to hide the noise of our laughter. I never did find oot if Nelly was pregnant.

My parties were mental by the way. If you fell asleep you risked being abused in one way or another. Often, we'd shave your eyebrows off or draw big crosses and spiders on your face with permanent marker pen or nail polish.

One guy left the hoose in the morning looking like a monk. He crashed oot on the chair and ended up with the crown of his head shaved. It looked like a solar panel that you could see from the moon so it wiz.

Then there was another guy that quite willingly let a lassie put a whole length of a Phillips screwdriver down his dick. People watching thought it was a magic screwdriver that folded up inside. I could assure you, however, that it was no magic screwdriver. The bam ended up with a serious infection from the rust and germs. In fairness, he was under the influence of drugs and alcohol, and it didn't feel it at the time.

One time I fell asleep, yeh the hostess, and ended up glued to my mate Rab with 'No More Nails'. It sticks like sh*t . They'd glued oor clothes together and tied oor shoelaces to one another. When I woke up I tried to get off the couch and fuck me Rabs arm was coming tae. Then we fell over the table with our laces tied to each other. He had stars painted on his forehead. I had love hearts on mine. What a minter when you have to go oot on the street sober the next day.

Well, my party stories could go on and on, but one thing is for certain, parties at Hettie's were that good that people came back again and again, even with the risks. Supposedly I held the best parties in Leith at one time.

Written by the late Jeanette Cousland around 2012, submitted by her son Ricky Fyffe

Landline Decline: The Epilogue

Some of us will remember when our telephone was too big to fit in your pocket,

some will remember when our telephones couldn't leave our homes!

Some will remember when the telephone couldn't even move very far at all.

It was static, fixed, stationary . . . . . installed. It was impossible to lose and thefts were very rare.

It was the very opposite of today's incredible gadgets . . . . . it was an immobile phone !

Anchored in place by the cable on the wall, in the trade this cable is known as copper pair.

Two tiny strands of copper wire connected all the way back the telephone exchange carrying Voltage and Current mirroring the modulation of our voices. Far and wide, the circuits are laid, even to far away foreign lands where people speak a different language, to the very ends of the Earth or at least to the extent of where a copper pair could be installed.

When the modern-day miracles of microelectronics, mathematics and mass production were applied the copper pair a transformation occurred ! Now as well as voices massive blocks of bits and bytes, the essence of of the superhighway, can career along the copper pair bringing information, entertainment, documentary, actuality, social media all in massive, endless quantities.

All the essentials.

All the time.

The copper pair has a long history, two hundred and ten years ago the first Telegraph (dots and dashes) was demonstrated using the copper pair. One hundred and fifty years ago the Telephone came into being contrived by a Scotsman born in town near Leith and using a copper pair.

Being in the trade myself perhaps I appreciate more than most the performance, reliability and sheer wonder of copper pair to deliver so many delights and distractions in every electrical device.

I am a Copperholic, I had disdain for the wireless.

The humble copper pair is the enabler of the 21st century the copper pair is the very foundation our digital present.

I made full use of this superhighway my awe for the epic metamorphism of the copper pair increased, there has seldom been a similar transition in the domestic sphere, we are privileged to have witnessed it.

Imagine then my bewilderment when my something began to go wrong with my copper pair; it got so bad I had to speak to far away foreign lands where people speak a different language. Happily the people there also spoke my language, we got along famously, an Engineer was dispatched . . . . . not just once, not twice but three times over the period.

By the third Engineer and many, many months after my first call to foreign lands where people speak a different language, something had altered . . . . . did I detect indifference in the people there?, boredom?, reluctance?, was that a slip of the tongue or impudence? The people didn't share my awe,

enthusiasm, wonder and reverence for my copper pair and its preservation.

Slowly change came over me too. I noted the delights and distractions available, to my mobile phone using acquaintances. The utility, pleasure and convenience they enjoyed.

All the essentials.

All the time and now

All over planet!

Wireless too.

Freed now from the shackles of employment with a desire to wander the advantages of the now mature mobile data networks became undeniable indeed irresistible and

I bought a mobile phone!

A slippery, sinister thing requiring learning, concentration and memory while providing frustration, humiliation, embarrassment, exasperation . . . . . .all the things I've spent my life trying to avoid.

All the great emotions poured over me for days on end and wrought the following:

Landline Decline: My Epic Poem

Cheerio Copper Pair
Change is in the air
Man it has been rare
But there . . . . . .

Copper Pair
Nae Mair
Nae Great Bell tolls
For awe the souls
Gone on before
Nor man extols your humble duty.

Fair thee well then my shiny twins
Dragged from the bowls of this Earth
Crushed, liquefied, electrified,
Solid drawn for our utility
Infinite in salvage
The scrap merchants' first love
Truly our flexible friend.

I'am a Copperholic, I had disdain for the wireless . . . . . .
now I own one.

Note: Great Bell is capitalised as reference to Alexander Graham Bell.

David Brunton

Lifelong Learning

I am on a blue chair at the beginning of a long yellow corridor. It is 1972 and I am almost five. Even though I'm not going to a party I'm wearing my best pink dress, the one with the frills, the pearly buttons, and my brand new black, shiny shoes. I am watching the lights reflected in their newness, swinging my legs back and forth, my feet not quite touching the ground. My mum is beside me, in her good navy coat, lips painted a confident red. For as long as I can remember, she has been telling me about The Test, the one the children of Leith sit to get accepted into Leith Academy Primary; the same school my mum got a bursary for when she was a little older than me; the same test my cousin Christopher had failed a few weeks before. I am waiting in that beautiful building, the clock ticking loudly over my head. Everywhere smells like numbers and letters and projects about bugs and dinosaurs.

'Now remember,' my mum whispered,' You're a smart wee lassie so it will be easy.' She gave my hand a squeeze and smiled nervously. 'Just listen carefully and you'll be fine,' she continued. 'If you don't hear, say 'pardon', and then have a good think before you give your answer.' She tucked my hair behind my ear, revealing a smudge of jam stuck to my cheek.

'Oh for heaven's sake, look at the state of you!' She licked her thumb and rubbed vigorously as I squirmed to escape, my cheek now warm and pink. 'There. That's better. You cannae go in with half your breakfast on your face.' She kissed me on the top of my head, bringing her sweet scent of cherries and vanilla close to me, her golden hair a halo of light.

At the bottom of the corridor a door opened and lady came out. Even from far away I could see that she was very tall. She was wearing a black gown, like an open cape, as was the custom for

teachers in those days, which came down past her knees, the voluminous sleeves completely covering her arms. There was just a glimpse, a peek of colour, the purple of the skirt and jacket she had on underneath, the brown tights, laced-up brogues. She began to walk towards me, her gown flying out like the expansive wings of a crow, fluttering and billowing as the air gave it life. Her shoes made a scratching, clacking sound as she walked, as if her giant bird's claws were scraping across the tiles, getting louder, closer. My voice was swallowed up by the vision of her, her blackness, her darkness rushing towards me.

I threw myself into my mum, burying myself in her familiar safety. I was frozen in terror.

'I am so sorry I'm late, Mrs. Banks,' she said, her voice unexpectedly warm, soft like feathers falling. 'I got a little held up with the last child.'

'Oh that's perfectly alright, Miss MacRae,' my mum replied in her best posh voice, 'That's no problem whatsoever.'

Miss MacRae bent down low beside me. 'You must be Lesley. I've been looking forward to meeting you. Would you like to come with me to my room? We can do some work together?'

I shook my head fiercely.

'Come out from there and say hello to Miss MacRae. Stop being so silly,' my mum said sharply, prising me from her. 'You're a big girl now so stop embarrassing yourself.' I knew my mum was talking more about her own discomfort.

I opened my eyes and there she was, right beside me, her clear blue, glassy eyes seeing me. Her hair was black and peppered with white, piled high like a nest, atop a face as grey as death, a nose pointing sharply out; nasty and spiky, ready to peck. Her mouth smiled thinly, no doubt concealing a jaggy, dry tongue. The gown spread out around her like night. I knew for sure it was

large enough to make me disappear forever in its folds, to cover me as I was crushed into dust by her enormous wings beneath. I hid myself back under my mum's navy-blue coat.

'Oh for heaven's sake Lesley,' My mum was becoming exasperated. I could see a flush of red travelling up her neck, sweat shining above her lip. 'Go with Miss MacRae right this minute and do your test. I'll be waiting here. Now, off you go.' She attempted to stand up, twisting me round onto my feet but I dug my heals into the red corridor floor, my new shoes gripping firmly.

'No! I'm not going! Don't make me go with her, mummy! Please!' I started to shout, grabbing onto the back of the chair. Miss MacRae stepped back, her gown gently wafting, her face calm and steady.

'It's okay Mrs Banks. It's okay, dear. Let's just leave this for today, shall we? If you would stop into the office as you go and my secretary will arrange another time for you.' She gave me a sad little smile. 'I will see you another day, Lesley. Don't you worry at all.' She turned swiftly and headed back down the corridor.

As she was striding away, I looked down at her long brown legs, at the strange dark line travelling from her heel, up her calf then under her purple skirt. I knew that when she got into her room she would close the door firmly, sit back with a sigh, reach down for a tiny zip just at her heel, pull it up slowly, secretly and free her scaly legs, her twisted bird's feet, her deadly, crooked claws.

I could not get out of there quick enough. My mum of course was traumatised by the whole experience. As soon as we exited that grand building she immediately lit a cigarette, dragging on it with all her breath, her hand shaking with each puff.

'Dear God. My poor nerves cannae take this sort of thing.' My legs struggled to keep up with her as we headed towards The Links. 'What am I supposed to tell your Auntie Violet, eh? She

will be expecting us to pop in on the way home. What do you think she'll say when I tell her? All this fuss for a little test.'

It was only then I started to cry, great heavy sobs of embarrassment, shame and disappointment.

'I'm sorry mummy. I couldn't help it. I was scared of that big crow. She was going to peck at me and eat me...I'm sorry mummy...'

'Shoosh now, that's enough. There's no need to cry.' She took a tissue from her pocket, dabbing my cheeks with its flowery scent. 'It will all be okay. You can have another shot at it, Miss MacRae said. It'll be fine.' She blew smoke into the air, a grey cloud above me.

'I don't want to go to school mummy. You said I'm already clever. I don't want to learn any new things. Please don't make me go to that school,' I continued between shaky breaths.

'Oh don't be so daft.' Her voice took on a cheerful tone, 'You're going to love school, just like your mummy did, you'll see. You're going to make friends, have playtime and school dinners. You're going to learn about new places like Egypt and learn to read books, do sums and be the cleverest girl in the school!'

I managed a watery smile.

'There, that's better.' she kissed me on my damp cheek. 'I know what we need. Is there a wee girl nearby who would like some ice cream?'

I nodded, feeling the warmth return, and slipped my hand in hers as we headed round the corner to The Mirador cafe, a favourite of many Leithers throughout the 70s. It occupied the corner spot near the bottom of Leith Walk, queues often snaking round the block. It was owned by an Italian family who had arrived in Leith after the Great War and settled into the same street my mum grew up in, so we never had trouble getting a seat. Mr. Lanny started as a young boy selling ice cream cones from a

barrow cycling round the neighbourhood, eventually building a business of two well-loved cafes. The Mirador was divided into booths of dark wood with red cushioned benches. One side of the room was fitted with shelves filled with jars and tins, boxes of wondrous ingredients, behind a large freezer containing mounds of the most perfect, purest white ice cream.

Mr. Lanny was always there in his brown overalls, stretched slightly over his roundness, his hair neatly and precisely combed back into a slight quiff. He had enormously bushy eyebrows which danced above kind, sparkly eyes and big, soft hands which moved slowly, gently over everything he created. He was a quiet, calm presence, a guardian of magic potions and sweet delights. He was everything to me that Miss MacRae wasn't

My mum and I settled into our booth and I ordered what I always had – a milk shake. One of the joys of the Mirador was watching Mr. Lanny behind the counter, taking such care over mixing and creating. It was part of the ritual of going to the cafe. Getting on my knees, I rested my arms on the top of the booth, following his every move, as he lifted a sparkling sundae glass and placed inside two generous scoops of ice cream. He added a good squirt of his secret recipe raspberry sauce, the pink syrup spreading like a blush of sunrise on a snowy mountain top. He finished off with a glug of milk, a quick whisk, a stripy straw and a little wink just for me.

My mum drank her coffee whilst I sooked out every last drop from my milkshake, then we walked home through the Links, my belly swirling with milky contentment, the memory of the failed test melting into the now perfect day spent with my mum. I ran across the grass to the top of Giant's Brae and looked across the Links to the school, its tower standing proud above the trees, the weather cock gleaming in the late winter sun. On the little balcony that surrounded the tower I saw her; a black figure against the red. She was staring over the treetops at me, her hand outstretched, the sleeve ruffled by the wind, and she was waving.

Of course, my second chance at The Test did result in a resounding pass, helped somewhat by Miss MacRae deciding not to wear her gown. And I did learn about Egypt and dinosaurs and sums and friendship. Especially friendship. By the time my little sister went to school they had scrapped The Test, and she waltzed in without a care aged four and a half. I like to think my histrionics played a part in that decision.

Years later, in my early thirties, there was a centenary celebration for that wonderful red stone school. Some of my old teachers were there, including Miss Macrae, who recognised me immediately. She came over to speak to me, after all this time remembering my name and that I had been good at drawing and writing. Her face was warm and softly powdery, smooth, gracious, open. She smiled throughout our brief exchange and was genuinely happy to hear that I was by then a primary teacher. I could see that she was full of light, that it lit her from within, and that this was who she always had been -a wise old owl, a keeper of secrets and stories, with a mischievous glint of memory in those clear blue eyes.

Lesley Banks

Mary Stewart Lands in Leith

CHAPTER ONE

Mary, Queen of Scots landed in Leith in 1561.

I, Mary Stewart, arrived 435 years later.

Granted, my arrival lacked the pomp and ceremony afforded to Her Majesty, but we did at least have Leith in common. Apart from the different spelling of Stuart/Stewart (I later discovered the "W" was dropped because Queen Mary grew up in France, where "W" wasn't used), and the small detail that I was known as Louise rather than Mary.

Which brings me to my mother.

My Irish mother was responsible for the lifelong confusion surrounding my name. She had a remarkable gift for making my father believe he was the one making decisions, when in truth he rarely made one. He insisted I should be called Mary after his mother. My mother had already decided on Louise. Her compromise was simple: send my father to the registrar with instructions that both names should appear on my birth certificate.

To this day, I'm only Mary when I'm dealing with doctors, banks, passport offices or official paperwork. To everyone else, I've always been Louise.

And that brings me back to Leith.

Unlike Mary, Queen of Scots, I wasn't arriving to claim a kingdom. I arrived in my early thirties: single, spectacularly directionless, and fully committed to what I considered an excellent social life.

Like countless others, I gravitated towards the Port of Leith Bar.

That pub would change my life in ways I could never have imagined.

Within weeks, I met the man who would become my husband. We were married for almost sixteen years, raised two beautiful daughters, and built a family I couldn't have imagined during my darkest days.

But something even more extraordinary happened just three months after we met.

My drinking stopped.

Not because I'd planned it.

Not because anyone forced me.

Not because I'd suddenly become sensible.

It stopped because, on the morning of 26 January 1996, I woke up without a hangover.

To most people, that probably sounds utterly unremarkable.

To me, it was miraculous.

For years, I'd measured my mornings by the pounding in my head. It never seemed to matter how much I'd drunk; each day arrived wrapped in nausea, shame, and the desperate need to silence the pain with more alcohol.

It wasn't living.

It was surviving from one drink to the next.

Then one morning, everything was different.

The familiar fog hadn't arrived.

I remember lying there thinking,

So this is what normal feels like.

I hadn't realised how ill I'd become until, for the first time in years, I felt well.

Not euphoric.

Not transformed.

Simply... human.

The feeling was so unfamiliar that it left me with just one question:

Could I get through today without a drink?

That single question quietly changed the course of my life.

CHAPTER TWO

There are moments in life that arrive with fanfares.

Mine arrived in complete silence.

On the morning of 26 January 1996, I woke expecting the usual punishment.

For years, every morning had begun the same way. Before my eyes had even opened, my body would protest. My head pounded, my stomach churned, and every nerve hummed with exhaustion. It made little difference whether I'd had two drinks or twenty; the hangover always arrived to collect its debt.

The only cure I knew was another drink.

It was a ridiculous cycle, but alcoholism isn't renowned for its common sense. Drink made me ill, and drink made me feel better—at least for a while.

By then, dignity had quietly slipped out the back door, with self-respect close behind.

My parents watched their daughter—once full of life and promise—disappear beneath a heap of empty glasses and broken promises. Dreams gave way to dismay, and hope to weary acceptance. I wasn't a bad person, just trapped in a life I no longer knew how to escape.

I'd tried to stop.

I'd been to rehab.

I'd made promises.

I'd sworn "never again" more times than I could remember.

None of it lasted.

Then came that Friday morning.

I opened my eyes and waited.

Nothing.

No pounding headache.

No nausea.

No desperate craving to quieten the noise inside my own body.

I lay perfectly still, almost afraid to move in case I'd imagined it.

Then I heard myself say aloud,

"Oh... so this is what it feels like to be human again."

It wasn't joy.

Not exactly.

It was curiosity.

What if I didn't drink today?

Just today.

I wasn't thinking about forever. Alcoholics can't afford to think about forever; it feels impossible. One day is enough.

That first day passed surprisingly peacefully. By evening I was certain I'd need a drink to get to sleep.

Instead, I simply fell asleep.

No cheap vodka.

No Diamond White.

No oblivion.

Just sleep.

The next morning I woke feeling exactly the same.

Another day couldn't hurt.

One day became two.

Two became a week.

A week became a month.

Without quite noticing, months became years.

People often ask what finally made me stop drinking.

I wish I had a dramatic answer.

There was no lightning bolt. No ultimatum. No terrifying diagnosis.

Just one quiet January morning when the noise stopped...

...and curiosity took its place.

CHAPTER THREE

Learning to Dance Again

It's tempting to think getting sober is the happy ending.

It isn't.

It's the beginning.

When alcohol disappears, life doesn't suddenly become easy. It simply becomes real.

For years I'd hidden behind drink. Every celebration, every disappointment, every awkward silence was drowned in alcohol. Without it, I had to discover who I actually was.

To my great surprise, I rather liked her.

Three months after I stopped drinking, I was still seeing the man I'd met in the Port of Leith Bar. Neither of us could have imagined where that chance meeting would lead. We married and, in time, became parents to two beautiful daughters, Alice and Maddie. Watching them grow has been one of the greatest privileges of my life. They never knew the woman I used to be, and for that I will always be grateful.

Recovery didn't mean life became perfect.

Far from it.

My husband still drank, and over the years his relationship with the pub grew stronger, while mine became something entirely different. The Port of Leith was no longer somewhere to lose myself. It became part of my community—a place where friendships were nurtured and stories were shared.
It wasn't somewhere to drink; it was a living room with better conversation.

At the heart of it all was Mary Moriarty.

Mary had seen me at my very worst. She'd watched me stagger through those doors more times than either of us could count. Yet she never judged me. She simply welcomed me back.

When Alice was born at the Eastern General Hospital, Mary was one of our very first visitors. That small act of kindness has stayed with me ever since. It reminded me that people often remember the best in us, even when we've spent years showing them the worst.

Living directly opposite the Port, the pub became woven into the fabric of our family life. Every now and then, though, it tested the patience of every mother in the street.

One summer evening, I'd finally managed to settle the wonderfully exuberant baby Alice to sleep when the unmistakable drone of bagpipes shattered the peace.

The walls shook.

The windows rattled.

Soon mothers were leaning from tenement windows, united by identical murderous expressions. Across the road stood a lone piper in the pub doorway, enthusiastically blasting into a loudspeaker.

As I marched over, my neighbours cheered, "On yersel, hen!"

Mary took one look at me and one look at the piper.

No words were needed.

Moments later, the pipes were packed away, peace returned, the babies slept, and the mothers retreated home feeling quietly victorious.

For the first time in my adult life, I wasn't just surviving.

I was finally learning how to live.

CHAPTER FOUR

People often assume giving up alcohol means giving up fun.

If that's true, nobody thought to tell my friends.

By the time my marriage had ended, my daughters were growing up and I was discovering a different kind of freedom—not the reckless freedom I'd chased in my twenties, but something far better.

It turned out I'd been blaming alcohol for all the wrong things.

Drink had never made me confident, witty or a better dancer. If anything, it had made me insecure, argumentative and convinced I was the life and soul of the party when I was probably just a nuisance.

Sober Louise was a revelation.

I didn't need a drink to get on the dance floor, sing karaoke or chat to complete strangers. As one friend memorably observed, "Louise doesn't need a drink to make an arse of herself."

It's still one of the nicest compliments I've ever received.

I became the designated driver, ferrying friends around Edinburgh in my trusty pink Honda Jazz—The Dolly Mobile—named, of course, after Dolly Parton. There was always music, usually laughter, and invariably a battery-operated disco ball balanced on Debbie's lap as we cruised between Leith and the city centre, singing our hearts out.

By closing time there was only ever one place to end the evening: the Port of Leith.

Once, it had been where I drank myself into oblivion.

Now it was where I celebrated life.

When 9 to 5 or Jolene came on, Debbie and I needed very little encouragement. We danced wherever there was room—on the floor, on the window sills and, on particularly enthusiastic nights, on the bar itself.

Those nights taught me something I'd never understood while I was drinking.

Alcohol hadn't given me joy.

It had stolen it.

The joy had been there all along.

Just as I was rediscovering myself, the Port was about to reinvent itself too.

Chapter Five

Pubs are a bit like people.

The lucky ones wear their age well.

The Port of Leith wore its years proudly.

By the time the brewery finally decided something had to be done, the old place had seen better days. The furniture had long since given up pretending to match, the décor survived through sheer stubbornness, and the floor tiles had been worn almost smooth.

None of us cared.

We weren't there for the wallpaper.

We were there because it was our pub.

Mary Moriarty had retired years earlier, and although new tenants did their best, the old building demanded more love—and more money—than anyone could afford. Eventually, they handed back the keys.

For a while, the Port stood silent.

Its dark windows were strangely unsettling. I'd measured so much of my life by that building. I'd met my husband there. I'd made a fool of myself there. I'd laughed until my sides hurt, celebrated birthdays, mourned losses and spent countless evenings putting the world to rights over coffee while everyone else drank pints.

Then the workmen arrived.

A skip appeared outside and began swallowing decades of memories.

Out went the battered furniture.

Out went the old fittings.

Out went the fabric lampshades, the faded flags and every wonderfully eccentric detail that had made the Port unmistakably itself.

I managed to rescue just one treasure: the mirror from the ladies' toilets.

Saved from the skip and given pride of place at home, it still hangs on my wall today—a small piece of the old Port looking back at me every morning.

When the doors finally reopened, it was obvious this wasn't simply a refurbishment.

It was a reinvention.

Gone was the scruffy old dive-bar charm.

In came reclaimed timber, exposed brickwork, carefully distressed wood, filament light bulbs and craft beers with names nobody could pronounce. There was even a proper barista coffee machine. The deep window sills we'd once danced on had

disappeared, replaced by huge panes of glass that flooded the pub with light.

Some of us weren't entirely convinced that was an improvement.

The Port had always felt like a secret.

Now it looked as though it belonged in the pages of an interior design magazine.

Thankfully, Leith has always had a wonderful way of refusing to become too polished.

The people still mattered more than the paintwork.

Craig, the new manager, understood that from the beginning. Young, enthusiastic and quietly perceptive, he knew a pub isn't built with bricks.

It's built by people.

He gathered a terrific team behind the bar, and although the surroundings had changed, the welcome hadn't.

The old faces gradually became fewer. Some moved away. Some passed away. Others simply couldn't recognise the place they'd once called home.

A younger crowd arrived instead, many having heard stories about the legendary old Port of Leith.

But you can't renovate history.

You can only inherit it.

My friends and I had absolutely no intention of letting the place become too respectable. We still turned up. We still danced. We still sang far louder than was probably necessary.

Some traditions are simply too important to abandon.

Looking back now, I realise buildings don't hold memories.

People do.

The Port was never special because of its worn floor tiles or faded décor.

It was special because of the lives lived within its walls.

Mine included.

And although none of us knew it then, the best night of all was still to come.

It arrived on a cold, wet January evening—twenty-one years after the morning that changed my life.

Chapter Six

26 January 2018

Some anniversaries pass quietly.

Mine arrived with someone trying to knock the front door off its hinges.

It was a cold, wet January evening—thoroughly Scottish. At around eight o'clock, the door knocker was rattling hard enough to wake the neighbours.

There was only one person who knocked like that.

Big Kirsty.

The moment I opened the door she declared, "Ye've tae get yer erse over the road."

It was never wise to argue with Big Kirsty, so I followed her across to the Port of Leith.

Walking through the door felt perfectly ordinary...

For about three seconds.

Then I realised something was happening.

People were smiling at me.

Far too much.

Craig was grinning—which was unusual.

The staff were grinning—which wasn't.

A moment later I was handed a twenty-first birthday card.

Except it wasn't my birthday.

It marked something far more important.

Twenty-one years sober.

For weeks—perhaps months—they'd been planning it. Craig and the team had decided that twenty-one years without a drink deserved celebrating.

I was speechless.

Then came another surprise.

Craig presented me with a mug.

Not just any mug—a proper twenty-first birthday mug.

"This stays behind the bar," he announced.

From that day on it became my tankard, except it was filled with coffee instead of beer.

I still smile whenever I think about it.

There was something wonderfully fitting about having my own mug behind the very bar where, years earlier, I'd done so much damage to myself.

Life has an extraordinary sense of humour.

Just when I thought the surprises were over, the opening bars of Dolly Parton's 9 to 5 burst through the speakers.

Craig looked at me, held out his hand and said, "Come on then."

He was inviting me onto the bar.

This wasn't the old Port. The shiny new beer pumps left far less room than before, and health and safety would almost certainly have disapproved.

I hesitated for all of half a second.

Then I took Craig's hand and, very carefully, climbed onto the bar.

Louise Leach

Mary's Prayer

The first time I heard about the dug was when I visited my dad in the infirmary. He was in again with his diabetes and he had texted that morning asking to see me.

When I arrived on the ward, he was having a kip. I'd bought him a six pack of Irn Bru, so I dumped it on his stomach to wake him up.

'Oof! Mary! Whit the fuck?'

My dad is one of these people who look weird without their glasses, like they have too much eyelid and not enough eye. I passed him his specs and he blinked a few times, then cracked open a tin of juice.

'Ah've got a wee joab I need you to dae, pet.'

'What is it?'

'Ah've goat this dug I need some help wi'.' He tilted the can and downed the juice in a oner.

'A dug?'

'Aye. I wis daen my mate Norrie a wee favour, looking efter Atlas for him while he was trying to get back with his missus, and noo I'm in hospital, the pare dug is stuck in the hoose on his ain.'

I started shaking my head. 'Nah Dad, ye canny be expecting me to…'

'Please darling, the pare dug 'll be starving. Just for a couple of days. Yer aff school noo for the summer and I'll gie you some cash when my benefits come through…'

He chucked his keys at me, and I caught them and dangled them on my finger.

'Thanks lass, I knew I could count on you.'

As I was leaving, I had a thought: 'Dad? What sort of dug is Atlas?'

'Ah, he's one of they rottweiler thingameboabs. Soft as shite.'

My dad's life hadn't always been such a car crash. When he lived with me and my mum he had a good job at the college, lecturing in politics. He was dead clever, had loads of opinions about stuff. Always raging at the news on the telly and shaking his fist when anyone from the Tory party came on. 'Smug, public-school wankers,' he called them. My dad was a member of the Socialist Workers Party, and he used to stand on Princes Street on a Saturday giving out leaflets with his fellow 'comrades'. When I was up the town with my pals, I would give them a huge body swerve in case he tried to get us to sign one of his petitions.

When he went off sick with the diabetes, my mum got fed up with him lounging round the house. She worked long hours in a nursery school, and she would come home from work and find him listening to music with his feet up, and the breakfast dishes still in the sink.

'Working class struggle?' she would say while smashing down the pots and pans for tea. 'Only struggle you have is getting your lazy arse out of bed!'

The house felt strange when my dad moved out. Tidier. Quieter. Dad had got me into music. He had this old turntable that played vinyl and we would listen to all these bands from the 1980's, like The Blue Nile and Aztec Camera. He loved this song called Mary's Prayer. Played it all the time. Said it had inspired my name.

The problem with my dad was that he was too soft. His pals would take a loan of him, borrowing money and using his sofa to kip on, but when he needed them, they were off like a bride's nighty. I felt bad for him, stuck inside with his gammy foot watching all the quiz shows, so I popped in most days after school to have a cuppa and keep him company.

My dad stayed just off the Lochend Road near the shops. His front garden was knee high with dandelions and there was a rusty kid's bike and a broken toilet hidden in the long grass. It wasn't exactly the Chelsea Flower Show round there. I heard the barking before I even got up the path. When I opened the door, this massive brute of a dug came hurtling towards me. He had sleek brown and black fur and a huge head, and when he jumped up at me, his paws reached my shoulders.

'Woah Atlas, calm doon mate.'

I pushed him off me, then let him out the back door. I watched while the daft mutt did his business in the garden, his arse quivering in the air, mid shite. Lesley from next door was hanging out her washing, every sock and pair of knickers neatly pegged. She didn't look happy about Atlas – another one of my dad's mad schemes interfering with her tidy respectable life. She glanced in my direction, and I gave her the finger.

I found a can of Co-op dug food in the cupboard and filled a couple of bowls with food and water. Atlas came back in and wolfed it all down. There was a pile of minging dishes in the sink, so I started filling up the basin with hot water and soap.

I heard a deep growl behind me. I turned round and Atlas was low to the ground, snarling. His nose was wrinkled up, showing sharp white teeth, and I could smell his hot meaty breath. He launched himself at me, knocking me over. I smacked my head against the cupboard door and his teeth clamped onto my wrist. I managed to pull myself upright with my other arm. I kicked

the overflowing bin and the lid flew off and slammed into the side of Atlas' head. He let go for a second giving me the chance to yank open the back door. As I stumbled down the steps, Atlas dug his teeth into my calf, and I went fleeing onto the grass. Out the corner of my eye I spotted Lesley still busy at the washing line and yelled at her to help. She stood frozen for a second then unpegged a towel and threw it over the fence at Atlas, covering his head with blue cotton. While he was temporarily blinded, I ran back inside and banged the door shut.

I don't know how long I sat there on the floor with my back against the door. Lesley must have phoned for help because the next thing I knew there was a siren outside and a female paramedic asking if I was okay in the softest voice I'd ever heard. As soon as she touched my shoulder I started to scream and didn't stop until they got a great big needle full of sedative and stuck it in my arse cheek.

***

'Are you finished with your Weetabix?'

Mum was getting ready for work and moving round the kitchen like she had a rocket up her bahookie. Stacking the dishwasher with one hand and slotting bread into the toaster with the other. I held out my bowl, still full of brown mush.

'I'm not hungry.'

She emptied the slop into the bin. 'I'm worried about you.'

I lifted my head. 'How?'

'You've been hanging about this hoose for weeks like a bad smell.' She poured boiling water into a flowery mug. 'Why don't you go oot? See what Kezia is daeing.'

'Maybe.'

‘Here.’ She fished in her bag for her purse and threw a 20-pound note on the table. ‘Why don’t you and Kezia go up town to the St James Quarter and get some of that bubble tea you like?’

Bubble tea? How old did she think I was,12? Mum’s usually dead tight with the cash, so she must have been worried. Everyone kept asking me how I was these days. The nurse who dressed my wounds twice a week, my gran, the woman from social services: ‘How are you, Mary?’ ‘How are you holding up?’ ‘How are you really?’ They would say it in this fake sincere voice that made me want to puke.

I didn’t tell them about the nightmares that left a dark shape, a shadow that followed me round all day. I didn’t tell them that I was feart to go anywhere near the Links. That the sound of the neighbour’s cockapoo barking from three gardens along was enough to make me run upstairs and hide in my room.

My dad was still texting me every day and leaving these desperate voice mails. He must have said sorry in a thousand different ways. I hadn’t spoken to him since the attack. Mum had been so upset and angry about it. ‘What on earth was he thinking?’ she kept saying. She made me promise that I wouldn’t reply to him, so I did what I was told. It was easier that way.

After mum had left for work, I pocketed the 20 quid and headed back up to my room. I was rewatching the box set of ‘Friends’ on my laptop. I’d watched it that many times, I knew every line off by heart.

We started back at school on the hottest day of the year. I met Kezia on the corner by the bookies, and we walked through the dusty streets together. I hadn’t been outside for ages, and my eyes squinted in the sunlight. My house keys were in my blazer pocket, and I dug the sharp point into my palm to stop the panic. By the time we reached school I had a deep red gouge on my hand, and I stunk of B.O, so we went to the toilets before first period.

‘Here gies some of that Dove will ya.’ Kezia pulled up her top flashing her burgundy lace bra and sprayed half the can under her arms.

Ellie Stevenson was standing at the sink applying bronzer with a big fluffy brush.

Her narrow eyes flicked over at me. ‘Hey Mary, heard you had a fight wi a rottweiler this summer.’

‘Aye, I did. How?’

Her pal Nicole came out the cubicle and joined Ellie at the mirror.

Ellie nudged Nicole and they started singing. ‘Who let the dogs out? Who? Who? Who? Who? Who?’

Kezia took my arm and pulled me out the toilets. ‘Just ignore those fucking bitches,’ she hissed, dragging me along the corridor towards class.

Mr Robertson was my history teacher. We were doing the Russian revolution that term, and he got so excited about the subject, he would spit a bit when he talked. Lucky for me I sat near the back of the class. He looked a bit like Trotsky, with his neat beard and wire specs. My dad would have loved all the chat about the Bolsheviks and that mad as fuck Rasputin.

Ryan who sat next to me was eating a packet of beef monster munch out his blazer pocket and I turned my head towards the window to avoid the smell. As I looked out the glass, I had this strange sensation, like my body had shrunk, and I was this tiny little doll, too small to stay upright on the chair. I gripped onto the desk with both hands. I could hear Mr Robertson’s voice, but it sounded all weird and echoey.

‘Mary? Are you okay?

Mr Robertson was crouched beside my desk with this concerned look on his big hairy pus.

I couldn't speak, just shook my head.

'Take a deep breath Mary. Let's get you some air.'

By the time I got to the school office, I had calmed down, and I started to worry about the show I'd made of myself. For all the talk about mental health at school, having a nervous breakdown in double History wasn't a good look.

After the panic attack, I couldn't face going back to school. I would get to the front door in the morning and then bottle it. My mum tried everything - offered lifts, talked to the guidance teacher, even tried to bribe me. When she asked me why I wouldn't go, I just said, 'I'm too tired.'

Mum wanted me to talk to someone. She had been googling lots of stuff. Said she thought I might have Post Traumatic Stress whatsit. Social services had been involved after the dog attack, so they helped get an appointment with a counsellor. It was on Friday at 2pm with Daphne. I was dreading it. How would talking help? I near enough had a panic attack in the waiting room, worrying what she was going to ask me.

I had this idea of what Daphne would be like in my head. Some do-gooder with craft-shop earrings and Hush Puppies. When I met her, I had to completely scrub that. She was quite young and wore jeans and lots of silver jewellery. She had this complicated hairstyle with pleats at the back and a wee quiff at the front and a tattoo of a seahorse on her arm. Daphne was originally from Greece, and her room was decorated with these beautiful pictures of white villages and blue skies.

The first thing she said to me was, 'I'm sorry you have had such a difficult time recently.' I nodded. She asked me about my friends at school and what films I liked. I was dead quiet at first,

but she left these massive pauses, so I started yapping just to fill the silence.

It was going okay until she leaned forward and said, 'Where do you feel safe, Mary?'

'What d'you mean?'

'What spaces feel safe for you?'

I thought about Atlas snarling at the back door of my dad's house. The drooling Alsatians chained up outside Londis. I thought about school: the chaotic corridors, the loud bell, the judgy looks and snarky comments.

'I feel safe in my bedroom.'

'What can I do to help you feel safe here?'

I shrugged.

On the fourth session with Daphne, she asked me to talk her through what happened on the day of the attack. She thought it would help. I'm not going to lie - I was shitting myself. It took me ages to get my words out, and I stumbled a bit over the details. The worst bit was telling her what had happened when I was in hospital. I had been sedated, so it must have looked like I was sleeping, but I could hear snatches of the conversation between the policeman and the nurse.

'If she hadn't got away from that dug, it would have ripped her throat out.'

I couldn't get those words out my head.

As I was talking, I stared at this print on the wall behind Daphne's chair. It was a picture of a massive yellow sun, with the word 'Helios' underneath it. There was something about that image, it sounds daft, but I felt like it was shining on me. Warming my face.

In November I heard something about my dad that changed everything. Mum had bumped into Lesley in Marks and Sparks in the underwired bra section. Lesley said that my dad had been back in the hospital. He'd been in for most of October, getting two of his toes amputated. She said his walking wasn't great and he had to get one of those mobility scooters to help him get around. After mum told me I went straight up to my room. I didn't go down for my tea, just lay on the bed and stared at the ceiling while the streetlights came on, and grey shadows crept up the carpet.

My dad was only 54. Was that how I was going to lose him? Not in a oner, but gradually, piece by piece, toe by toe? I picked up my phone and texted him for the first time in four months.

I hear you've got wheels. I added an emoji of a motorbike.

He must have had his phone in his hand, because he messaged straight back.

Aye, proper hells angel now.

Later that week I met my dad in Costa at Ocean Terminal. He gave me a hug that smelled of roll ups and Imperial Leather soap. He was wearing these weird black shoes that looked like they were made of elastic. The sight of them gave me this crumpled feeling in my stomach.

Conversation was awkward at first. Everything that I wanted to say seemed either too big or too small to put into words.

'Here you go pet, sorry it's a couple of weeks late.' He pushed a pink envelope towards me.

I pulled out the card and opened it. Three shiny ten-pound notes fell out.

'Thought you could get yoursel' a wee something from that Hollister. D'you still like that shoap?'

'Aye, thanks dad.'

I turned the card over and looked at it properly. It said 'Darling Daughter, Happy 16th Birthday' on the front in curly writing, and underneath was a picture of a wee pug with a pink bow round its neck.

'Dad! You really got me a birthday card with a dug on it?'

He put his face in his hands. 'Ah'm sorry Mary, I canny dae anything right, can I?'

'You're a maniac!'

The card sat between us on the table. There was something comical about the silly wee dug with its bulging eyes. I could see my dad's shoulders starting to shake.

'It's no even funny dad.' I snorted into my Coke.

I hadn't heard my dad laugh for ages. He had this infectious chuckle that always set me off. It was getting dark outside and I looked up and caught a reflection of the two of us in the window. My dad, specs in hand, wiping his eyes with his sleeve, and me, shaking my head and grinning back at him.

My headphones were sitting on the table and dad picked them up and put them on. 'What are you listening to just now pet?'

I scrolled through Spotify until I got to 'Mary's Prayer'. I pressed play and watched his face closely to see his reaction.

Larissa Russell

Perfect Pupils

Our school is named after a Queen. My sister said they called her Tricky Vicky, but I'm not convinced. The school is one hundred metres from the sea, as the crow flies, but there are not many crows around here, mostly seagulls. That's why we run for cover when we have our snack, cause they dive like rockets and steal our food. Our PSA says that they hide above the Nimbus clouds that hang heavy over our school.

There's no beach near our school so we can't see the seabed when the tide is out. There are giant boulders piled up to protect the skyscrapers that run right along the shoreline. Our PSA told us that our school is built on the seabed. Well, what she said was that all the buildings, including our school, are built on Landfill. She said that's when they pour tons and tons of rubbish into the sea until the water disappears and land appears, as if by magic. Then that land can be used for housing and gyms and hotels and schools. When we asked her why they couldn't just use the land that was there before, she said she wasn't sure, but she was sure that if they hadn't stopped filling the sea we could have walked all the way to Kinghorn. But we think she was only kidding.

She told us she is a member of a protest group and when we asked, 'What's that?' she said, 'it was a group that protested.' We must still have looked baffled cause she tried to explain that she, and others, wanted to keep any Landfill that was left over, now that they'd built their buildings, to be left for Nature. She said, 'There are ponds and plants and trees and bushes on the Landfill that have attracted wildlife, ducks, swans, and stuff.' Well, she didn't say stuff, that was us, but she named so many birds and what she called flora and fauna, that we couldn't remember all their names. She said that if we didn't protest, all that land would disappear underneath more skyscrapers and Nature would be buried forever.

When we told our teacher what the playground assistant had said, she decided to take us on a walk by the water and around the leftover Landfill and we saw all the flora and fauna that our PSA had told us about. We also saw big boats that had wee boats full of people coming back and forth to the harbour. We saw wee fishing boats, giant wind turbine boats, oil ships, and the Britannia, which was the Queen's boat, but that was a different Queen from the one our school is named after. The sea there was teal coloured, well that's what Anna said.

We were only out of our classroom for about an hour, but in that time, we saw sun, rain, Cirrus clouds, got nearly blown over by the wind and saw a giant wave crashing up over onto the path. We got so excited that some of us expressed it all in their own language – amwaj eimlaqa, gigant-ski vúlni, jú láng, gigantyczne fale,

When we stopped to look out over the sea our teacher told us that it wasn't really the sea, but the Firth of Forth and it was something called an estuary. But it looked like the sea to us. Our teacher said that there is a channel in the middle of the Firth of Forth so deep that giant whales can swim right under the Forth Bridges and as far as Grangemouth, well that was before it closed. She said that if the whales aren't careful, they can be washed up on shore. Well, that sounded like the sea to us, but we didn't say anything.

When we returned to our class, we had lots to think about and decided that we'd leave that until playtime and tell our PSA all about it.

The End

P4 pupils in Victoria Primary School, Newhaven

Playing Scalextric in Leith

what if you were nine again
and you were playing Scalextric
somewhere you can't remember where
somewhere in Leith you
handed over 50p when it was
a bold coin, heavy
with possibilities
fifty sour cola bottles and fried eggs
in wee paper bags or
a Beano and change or
a shot with the yellow car
rubber burning, flying off the tight corners
braver in miniature
what if you were nine again
and climbing on an anchor in the street
then staring into the lava mouth
of a wood fried pizza oven
what if you were nine again
and away down the flumes
that feeling of chlorine lining your brain eyes shut
because you're scared of the dark bit
and you're nine so that makes sense
what if you're nine near the bed shop

and you see a bridge
where there isn't one any more
and you duck under it
on the top front seat of the bus
that imagined bridge
hand hovering near the periscope screen
what if we were nine again

Amy B. Moreno

Restalrig Restartling

A local man has been spotted sleeping up in the girders of a pigeon bridge in Restalrig. Apparently he has a family but prefers things this way. When I heard about him, I thought this isn't just another tale of the everyday madnesses one reads about in national magazines, no, the force of it struck me as something both hysterical and historical, so I went to try and find him.

What followed was some amount of searching. He's not a man who works by appointment. I visited every damn pigeon bridge in Restalrig and expected that he'd be there at the last place I looked. Of course, the railways there never see any trains in this day and age, although sometimes the wind hurtling along the tracks sounds just like a train, as if the invisible wind, has folded itself into the shape of a great invisible train as it speeds along the tracks and over the pigeon bridges, on golden days and cold nights, as if it had moulded itself wheels made of wind as well as carriages and conductors which whistle and charge and choo-choo in invisible moments through Restalrig.

It all reminded me that this place used to be merry and now it is not. And it's not like it changed, not really, it was us that changed. One day we woke up and looked around and thought 'oh no, this is a shit hole', but there were times when we knew for sure that it was a good old place, old Restalrig village. Back when it had real trains though, real steel and sheen and steam trains, not the invisible wind trains at play along the tracks nowadays, not God's breath of creation relegated to Restalrig winds.

It used to be merry. Its balconies were not merely prisons for diminutive and territorial dogs. Its gardens were not just host to depressed trampolines and last year's balding Xmas trees. The streets were not only lined with tired, sighing cars and vans which cats peek out from under, annoying the attention of the

diminutive and territorial balcony dogs. They used to sing songs about it. They used to toast its name on Hogmanay. They used to paint the map of it on hotel lounge walls. Sightless people used to travel there to see a saint who would see to it that they could see again. The first hot air balloon to land in the UK landed in Restalrig in 1784. It made all of Leith think of a giant soap bubble and contributed towards Restalrig's reputation as clean. But now the bubble is burst.

When gangs of police and concerned locals were out looking too, I decided to track a flock of pigeons instead. This wasn't difficult, only boring. They're sort of stupid, they're not real birds really. They were domesticated and then evicted from human matters so now live on our fringes. Once they are accustomed to your presence, they abandon whatever nature's prior demand was and follow you around faithfully.

So it was that I was tracked around Restalrig by a flock of 20-or-so pigeons, trailing from bridge to bridge, following the course of invisible wind trains which served as a reminder of the area's former glory – hot air balloons, hotel lounge walls, Hogmanay toasts – and of course I couldn't then go home to my wife and children with all the birds, so I chose the last bridge I came to and climbed the stone column into the girders. The pigeons followed faithfully.

There was a blanket and a bowl of water waiting, so I knew I was on the right track. I made a pillow of the blanket and rested upon it after a long day. Above, an absence passed. Around, Restalrig continued to disappoint, even from the vantage of the pigeon bridge. Sad really, I thought. 'It's not it that changed but us', I whispered as a last word to the pigeons.

Rory Allison

Spring

After months of midnight, my mind's in a stink,
I'm waiting for life to emerge in spring light,
A walk in the park finds sun on Leith Links.

Reaching hands of crocus cause me to blink,
Paper petals purple, yellow and white,
They perfume my mood when I'm in a stink.

The trees pop their buds, and grass glows in sync,
Chirruping robins add sound to my sights,
A walk in the park finds life on Leith Links.

The biting March wind makes my cheeks puff pink,
I strafe tarmac tracks that cross left and right,
And my foot finds a dog's gift of a stink!

I know it won't last, I'm soon on the brink,
As winter restarts the months of midnight,
I'll want to recall light when I'm in a stink,
And spring walks in the park to find sun on Leith Links.

Tom Woolnough

The Big Bad Hush

Another freezing stormy night in January. Thomas gritted his teeth and yanked his hood over his head. The soft lining was pleasingly fuzzy against his ears. It gave him a smidgen of warmth as he stepped out into the cold street where the wind immediately took issue with his existence and began attacking in waves. His jacket rippled and bloomed and whistled. He fought against it and made his way across the street to the Leith Shore tram stop. He'd clocked an approaching tram from the window of the pub so only had to tangle with nature's rage for the shortest time possible.

Beneath him the pavement was wet with that familiar slick of light rain. His smart brogues were thankfully waterproof, and he tried his best not to scuff water everywhere as he fought the elements to board the arriving tram.

It was when the doors closed behind him, he knew something was wrong. Looking down confirmed it but before that, before he knew, his senses warned him in a number of other interesting but useless ways. The smell first of all. Not like someone had thrown up—that would have been expected—no, instead like a steak that'd been left to rot on a kitchen counter in a warm apartment. Then there was the ambience. The usual tram noises muted and replaced with a prolonged hollowness. Thomas thought back to when he was a kid and had dropped Grandma's precious ceramic shepherd statue. In the echo of it rearranging itself into the world's most impossible 3D jigsaw there was a gulf of silence. The kind of silence you never forget. Before the screaming started, the blame flew, the consequences landed, came the looks, the open mouths, the dread.

That's what Thomas felt when the doors sealed shut behind him.

The Big Bad Hush.

The silence was broken when he took that step towards the seats. His shoes swished through a tide of rainwater even though it should have been dry inside the compartment. It was a weird sensation simply because it had more resistance to it than the water he'd kicked through outside. Too weird for his eyes not to at least take a look at what he was splashing through which, atrociously, appeared to be blood. Not the sort of thin watery stuff you spat into the sink when your gums bled, the thick viscous kind that clogged arteries. Instead of screaming Thomas pulled a face. He was a pretty reasonable man. He was pretty sure there was a reasonable explanation.

He was pretty wrong.

"Sit down!" a woman hissed from one of the passenger seats, breaking him out of his thoughts.

"Excuse me?" Thomas always said that whenever anyone spoke to him. It was a default reaction even though he'd heard perfectly what the lady had said.

"I said sit down! Unless you want to end up like the others."

There would be time to ask about the others, but it was unlikely that now was the time to do it. He didn't even look around for other empty seats and just made a beeline for the woman who'd spoken. The tram was moving at some pace by the time he took his first step towards her. The blood sloshed around his feet, rising up over the cuff of his shoes and seeping into his socks and onto his feet. As he made his way across, he could feel his toes clotting together. A small retch came up the back of his throat and coloured his tongue with an acidic burning sensation.

He sank into a seat opposite the woman who was staring at him with manic eyes.

"I think we should get off at the next one." Was all Thomas could think of to say.

"Don't you think we've thought of that?" she snapped back.

Thomas decided to keep quiet and took that moment to observe the rest of the carriage and realise just how many fearful terrified faces were staring back at him. Everyone he could see had minor scars and were either bleeding red or tears or both.

"Are you-?" He began to pointless ask if she was okay, but she cut him off with an almost hysterical shush and the tram was suddenly pulling up to the next stop. Thomas considered trying again but this was all too much for him. He could live without an explanation. Curiosity killed the twat and all that. He could rationalise it later when he was back outside and in the fresh winter air. Once those doors opened, he'd make a bolt for it.

The tram came to a juddering halt and a crimson wave rippled down the aisle. Thomas felt it fill up his shoes till they overflowed and drenched his shins. He felt a tickle of the acid back in his throat but simply spat it out where it broke the crust of the gelling plasma. His only thoughts were on getting out.

The green light lit up on the door button and, before Thomas' brain had even sent the signal to his thighs to stand him up, another passenger was shrieking and splashing towards the exit. The woman across from him made another noise again and slapped her palm down on his knee. Thomas sat frozen in his sticky seat as the man reached the tram door and smashed his fist into the button. It was then Thomas understood his

situation. Not necessary the why or the how but certainly the what.

As the exit hissed a large slash opened up across the man's throat in sync with the doors. There was perhaps a second before the red gush began and his hands clasped around his neck, but the pressure was too much, it sprayed from between his fingers and Thomas watched in real time as every drop of blood left the man. It mixed a bright red into the existing sea of dark gore. Soon the man's eyes crumpled up like squeezed bath pearls and his teeth dripped from receding gumlines, each one splashing into the blood lake like mint Tic Tac's into a tomato soup.

Thomas was screaming now—as was probably expected—and the woman opposite was gripping his leg even harder.

"Shut up!" she was hissing but watching the man become part of the floor pool was not something he felt like dismissing so easily. The skeletonised body plunged into the liquid like Spike into the fountain at the end of Gremlins. Thomas finally closed his mouth on the same beat as the tram doors shutting.

Gravity and the laws of physics appeared to be absent as the blood stayed on board. It didn't leak out of the open door. Impossibly, it appeared that the open doorway was made of glass: there was a semi permeable barrier that only let stuff in. An invisible layer that kept everything inside.

"What—?" was all he could manage but there were no answers forthcoming, nor did he expect there to ever be any. Instead, he cast his eyes around again and noticed that many of the passengers were bleeding or already dead. Just propped up in their seats. Their lifeless bodies jostling with the movement of the tram, discarded and empty as juice boxes in a badly maintained holiday swimming pool. The blood was up to his

knees now. Plenty of people had attempted an escape at that last station and all of them were now new ingredients to the tram stew Thomas sat in.

The tide was rising.

A voice behind him cleared its throat making Thomas jump in his seat.

"Tickets please." It growled in a wet unearthly voice.

Thomas dug his hand into his coat pocket. His whole body trembled as his fingers searched for his phone. He couldn't bear to face whatever it was next to him. The lady beside him had crawled into a ball and was cowering. The blood was up to the lip of the seats now. He clasped his phone finally and pulled it free of his jacket. This was all autopilot for him: unlock the phone, scroll to the Tram app, open it, show the ticket, etc. Except this time when he opened the app, what colour remained in his face drained as he remembered not activating a ticket.

He had no ticket.

Jaw fully dropped, he raised his face to the conductor on instinct and the shock of the creature's face blanked out what he was going to say. The conductor's head was a puzzle of flesh and bone, at closest approximation would be that it looked like an exploded dog. There were no ears to appeal to, no eyes to cry to, just an organic jigsaw of anatomy.

Somehow it spoke again and even when staring at its assembly he could not comprehend where those words were formed from. "Do you have your ticket?"

"I—" Thomas began, and it was then he was certain these were his last words. Given the mayhem and death that he swam in, given the aberration in front of him, given all of this he was pretty sure this was it. "I don't have one."

The collection of minced organs sucked in a breath. Thomas squeezed his fingers tight into fists. Waiting for his throat to bloom. “No ticket, eh? That’s a ten-pound fine.”

Thomas blinked. “What?”

The landmined sheep fumbled with a card reader that emerged out of its entrails. “A ten-pound fine.”

Indignation bloomed. He wasn’t going to pay ten quid to be butchered. That was almost like paying for the BBC license fee just because he used iPlayer every now and again. He expected his voice to quiver, but it didn’t. “What happens if I don’t pay it?”

A bluey purple drip of undigested goop fell from its mangled face. “If you don’t pay for a ticket you’ll need to get off at the next stop.”

Thomas was clearly in shock because the next question he asked was the most absurd question he’d ever asked in his life. “I won’t get all mushed up like these other folk if I get off?”

“Oh no, they’re good honest folk. They had tickets.” The uncoiled intestines in a conductor uniform leant forward and for a moment Thomas imagined teeth closing in around his head, but it was only trying to whisper a secret between them. “Good people taste better.”

“Well then, I’m sorry but I’ve got no money. I guess I’ll just have to get off.”

The creature burbled and yanked him out of his seat with a meaty and tumorous pincer before hauling him into the aisle. The tram was slowing to its next stop, Elm Row, and as it shuddered to a halt the conductor pushed the button and swung him out into the street. Thomas felt a ripple on his skin as he plopped through the gooey membrane that held everything inside the tram and then with a cathartic popping sound,

he was outside. Dripping in mucus and viscera, he looked back to the monster by the doors.

“She doesn’t have a ticket either.” He said pointing at the coiled-up woman still onboard.

“Oh really?” The flesh enigma spat, and he was on her in a flash. “Get the hell off this tram you pair of scallywags.”

Soon she was dumped outside standing next to him in a daze. They both stood frozen until the doors closed and the tram started to head off. Inside, left behind passengers banged on the windows screaming before they dissolved into an ugly red goop. The blood was halfway up the windows now. He suspected it’d be full up once it got to Princes Street.

The woman whose name he did not know didn’t say anything, choosing to shiver and drip darkness onto the light station tiles.

“Drink?” Thomas asked.

Andrew Donaldson

The Bird of the Sea

I look down from the skies like a god, observing my kingdom of blue. Both blues: the cerulean of the skies, and the navy of the seas. I defend both with every feather. But below, in the land of earth, is another world. That is not my kingdom; that is the kingdom of the people. The big people on the bottom of the world. They live off the land and the sea, harnessing its power, building their own world. Their scheming minds and trawling boats trap the fish of the sea. The crashing waves power their lives with speed and song and light. Their ears are deaf to the song of the earth, eyes blind to the glory of the sun. Staring deep into devices of their own making, a trap that they crafted themselves.

Now I pass unseen, invisible, soaring above houses and heads. I see many people, in many places, all doing many things. The elderly woman, with an arching back and leather-like skin, she walks her dog with rugged steps. The bald man, who cunningly crafts his latest story from the comfort of his home. The cohort of girls clutching their swinging handbags, strutting down the cobbles. In their world of metal and stone, their lives are humble and simple. They do not appreciate the life of a seabird; the labour to catch a single fish. Uncaring for the lives other than their own, the rest of the world acts as a receptacle to the waste of their metal empire. All creatures fight back at this; even the earth itself protests. Every being, bird and beast can feel the earth's rage. But not the people. For they are the discord to the song of the earth. Yet, it was not always like this.

Great generations ago, before wars that tore the earth, there lived a life of peace. A dumpy town of wooden shacks. A little harbour heaving with ships and galleys. They give this place a peculiar name, and the only word I've ever remembered: "Leith". Of

course, I still see many people, yet they spend time differently. I see the fish-wives, heralding their latest catches of cod and crab. I know I'm not welcome there, as they take me for any common seagull looking for an easy meal. I then spot the sullen-faced couple, spluttering in the fumes that clog the air. And then the lord who strides in shining robes, his face snivelling at the musty street. I have spent many hours sending trouble his way, after he sent out decrees that benefited no one save himself. But there have always been cruel folk in this world, and it pains me to say that there always will be.

These are the people who look at now. The cruel people. It's been decades and decades since I watched the little old lady hobble down the streets with her dog, both figures now forgotten by the world. And now the world is changed. The pretty stone houses that lined a briny shore are gone, replaced now with toppling towers of metal and glass that loom over murky brown waters, filled with rotting fish and waste. No one remembers when we fought back against the humans. When we begged them for mercy towards the earth. But no one listened, and no one cared. They have turned their back on the planet. Only the money mattered, and the power that let them act like kings and gods. No one even remembers the word "Leith". That word is lost to the depths of time, just like everything else. I'm leaving this place now. Letting the shores and beach disappear beyond the horizon. This place was once my home, my kingdom; harbouring me, nurturing me as well as all living things. But the people have been greedy, and have stolen the beauty of the earth for themselves. It's too late for these people now. They made the wrong moves and the wrong times, and now the consequences will swallow them whole. Perhaps somewhere, someone else will get it right.

Fergus Booth

A Certain Place

I stood above dampened-dented earth
Barren of greenery—near an uneven-stone way
A path, a track, a trace
Of dock walkers' and sailors' heavy boots

Where old rails once laid
Leading to the waterside commune
Along a walk of a certain place
I remember where it led—up north

Where it had a rusty iron and salty scent
Where the water looked slate-grey on rainy days
Where the sound of industrial clatter stood out
Where Fishwife cries echoed

The future's way refined yet undefined
The present worn by those ahead
The past's course broke and aged
The path, the track, and the trace

Preston Oliver Henderson

Dreams

Strolling through Leith Walk at night is magical, no cars, no trams, no noise, no people, just you, staring into shop windows and seeing the reflection of the little girl who used to do the same thing, just wishing her mum could buy that doll, dreaming of that pretty, pink princess dress.

As you walk away, leaving those warm, heart hugging memories behind in the glossed windows, you feel someone's hand grasp yours, guiding you through the night only to realise no one is there, you're by yourself, memories rushing through your head, of the past you'll never get back but will always live in those windows stained with pressed faces.

Tears start rolling down your cheeks like rain running down car windows, when you come to the bench you used to sit on and eat ice cream with your granddad, until bench marks were pressed into your skin and laughing so much it hurt, just seeing his scrunched up happy face was all it took to make my day better no matter what.

The tears disappear and you are left in the deep, navy, star scattered night. You get up because it's almost 2am and you need to go to school in the morning, but as you try get up, you feel glued, glued as if the memories you hold are trying to hold onto you, gripping you and pulling you back, back into the past, you struggle but you realise you want to stay.

The dreams fade into another random one about elephants and reindeer, and you curl up in your duvet and notice you are fine, you are at home and realise "I wish I was that little girl again".

Amelia McDowall

The Gentrification of Leith

Tired and bored of the afterlife
A titled gent came back to earth
To investigate his old estate lands
The old port by the Forth.
“I recall the old king’s visit,
The golfing gents, the chandlers stores,
On the Links the cannon’s mound,
The crowded taverns by the shore.
I wonder how the future’s played out,
Does Leith still stand alone and proud.
Separate from that stinking city,
Seafield quiet, shipyards loud.
The Swedish church, the Custom’s House,
Pilrig park, the bonded stores.
Rope making, beer, Newhaven fish,
Sailors, excisemen and whores.
Perhaps I’ll wander by the South church,
Reflect and rest in graveyard cool,
Check out the halls and old academies
Where the gentry sent their kids to school”

Foot Of The Walk he makes his appearance,
Nearly knocked down by a tram.
A beggar pleads for some spare money,
Two men walk by pushing a pram.
Swivelling, turning, stomach churning,
He feels the stares, the quizzical looks,
As he tries to take in all around him;
Traffic, pubs, shops selling books.
Clothing strange, multi coloured fabrics,
Women’s legs and more on show.
Students housing blocks the sunlight,
He doesn’t know which way to go.
The armour, admittedly, makes him stand out,
His sword draws glances, folk move aside.
Our hero heads for the shoreline
Seeking solace from the tides.
An hour of wandering, lost and puzzled,
“The future’s strange, I’ve no place here.
Think that I’ll pop back to Heaven”
Says fifteenth century, Sir Percy Vere

Tony Bonner

The Leith Ladies

One of my great fears in life is my boobs escaping out of a sports bra. That's why I wear old baggy t-shirts to the gym. Don't get me wrong, I admire the confidence of women I see in tiny crop tops as they perform lifts and lunges, but I just know my right boob would be somewhere west of Wardie Bay and my left boob landing in East Lothian if I tried to do a handstand or press up in something like that.

However, my boobs are not the Leith Ladies of which I speak. They are a myth, a legend, a tale for our times (the ladies, not my boobs).

'Leith Ladies' was the phrase on the t-shirt I hastily picked out for my gym class one Tuesday evening. Curled in a cute font with an anchor sitting below it in a sea of blue. My friend, Diana, had got four of them made up, each in a different neon PowerPuff Girl shade, for our friendship group.

There's a great photo of us all wearing them on the Kirkgate benches, a hallowed place in Leith. It has a vista of Leith Walk snaking up a hill like a Celtic Ramblas and a backdrop of pawnbrokers, Poundstrecher and a Peacocks. Oh, and there's a Lidl, too.

Thankfully, the Kirkgate benches have now been restored to their rightful glory after a brief absence last year. Their removal sparked a conversation about anti-social behaviour in the area, but I can honestly say that all the activity on the benches that I've witnessed has been incredibly social.

I'm now looking at the photo of us in the Kirkgate and I can still hear the laughter echoing from the picture; Mischa in pink,

Chiquita in green and Diana in red. The background: A pawnshop. I'm lying across them in my blue t-shirt, attempting not to fall off while the camera timer counts down in front of us.

We wanted to recreate the scene from the Friends intro sequence in Central Park where one of them lies across the others on a conveniently placed sofa while an elegant fountain burbles in the background. Naturally, we needed an equally iconic location for our own photoshoot and the Kirkgate benches was the first place that sprung to mind. Afterwards, we went to the aptly named Central (not Perk) for refreshments and Mischa got in an argument with a drunk man who unwisely decided to rate us on a scale of attractiveness. Good times.

Anyway, the blue suited me — it went with my hair. Plus, it would make a change from my usual assortment of gym t-shirts, which normally featured bands that were last big in the '80s, or the name of the last place my Dad had been on holiday IN VERY BIG LETTERS. I threw on my t-shirt and headed to the gym.

It was a brisk 20 minute march away from my flat, following the Water of Leith until you hit a clutch of warehouses that had been repurposed into fitness venues of various disciplines: martial arts, Parkour, gymnastics, circuit training. You name it, it was there.

I dumped my bag near the lockers, a vague suggestion of security. The gym was one of those very community-driven ones, kind of like a small town where no one would ever dream of locking their doors.

I jogged into the warm-up, joining the masses doing a few laps of the studio. Trundling around the gym in a group, you usually start to feel anonymous, like you are a horde of very health-conscious commuters. However, that was not the case that day.

As we turned around the room, I could feel a flash of eyes on me every so often, but they soon faded back into the crowd so that I could never quite work out who they belonged to.

"FANTASTIC WORK, EVERYONE! LOOK AT YOU GO!" cheered Becky, our instructor. I think she got the same thrill from exercise that I get when I find an email in Outlook proving I was right all along.

"LET'S DO SOME CIRCUITS!" Becky said, almost as loudly as one of the t-shirts with BIG LETTERS that my Dad gave me.

Becky took us through an energetic demo of the circuit stations that she had set up for the class, bouncing from one station to the next. It reminded me of a video on Instagram I had seen of a Pomeranian doing an agility competition.

"CHOOSE YOUR STATIONS, MY DARLINGS!" Becky SAID, taking up her secondary role as class DJ, cycling through her Spotify to find the perfect playlist for the evening. Today, it was country-house, but not in a grand Jane Austen kind of way, it was a mix of yeehaw American Country and Deep House that probably gave anyone who had ever taken ecstasy...ecstatic(?) flashbacks. I wouldn't know, I consider a glass of Sauvignon Blanc and an Ibuprofen a religious experience.

I shuffled over to the station nearest me; hollow body holds. Basically, you have to lie in a curved banana shape with your arms and legs off the floor for an interminable amount of time. As I lay on the floor, preparing myself mentally and physically, Georgina, another member of the class, loomed into view above me. She wore an actual leotard to the gym and got away with it. "Who are the 'Leith Ladies?" she asked, or maybe it was more of a demand.

"Oh, it's just what my friends and I call ourselves," I replied, a little unnerved. If I ever tagged into a conversation at the start of class, Georgina always seemed to do her best not to acknowledge my presence.

"Oh," said Georgina, slinking down onto the mat beside me. "Is it, like, a club?"

"3,2,1, GO!" called Becky, the music booming louder.

"Erm," I grunted, assuming the hollow body hold. "Sort of? It's just what my friends and I call ourselves. It's not like a secret society or anything..."

Georgina held her pose, but her composure faltered. Disappointment, then a sort of sly disbelief, flitted across her face. "Is it really not a secret club?" she asked, barely breaking a sweat.

"No?" I replied, perspiring profusely from the exercise. However, I don't think this helped my argument that I wasn't lying. Georgina was in a different class, if only metaphorically, because she still had been cursed by some deity to spend Tuesdays in the gym with me.

"Ok," she said, unconvinced. Our time was up and she leapt up and on to the next exercise. I would say that Georgina went back to never giving me a second look, but that was not the case. She always checked out what t-shirt I was wearing after that day.

The whole episode got me thinking, what does it take to be a Leith Lady? Was it really just a slogan on a t-shirt, or was it something more? I felt that it was, but I didn't know how to express it. What do you call the female version of a band of

brothers, a band of babes? Maybe? But it doesn't sound like an award-winning Spielberg film, does it? I started to list the essential criteria for Leith Ladyhood:

- **Must live/have lived in Leith**

Hard stop at the Pilrig Street. We once had someone who was desperate to join who lived beyond the Boundary Bar and this turned out to be just one of the many red flags in her collection.

However, it is possible to be a Leith Lady and move away. Mischa now lives down south but still remains an honorary Leith Lady because isn't Leith not just a place, but a state of mind, or even perhaps a diagnosis, in some cases?

- **Must have a nickname**

All the Leith Ladies have earned a nickname. Well, apart from **Diana**, she's just 'Diana', much in the way Cher or Madonna don't need to bother with such trifles as surnames.

Mischievous Mischa: Named for her childlike yet slightly evil giggle, which always signals that hijinks are imminent.

Cheeky Chiquita: Chiquita's alter ego. Regal, prone to making dangerous cocktails and has requested my partner shave her (it was an undercut, okay...).

Bubbly Melissa: That's me. I told them that the one thing I don't want in my obituary is that I was bubbly because it's simply not true. Sarcastic and anxious, yes, bubbly no. Anyway, now I'm Bubbly Melissa.

- **Must take the fancy out of 'fancy dress'**

Why host an elegant soiree in a little black dress when you can get dressed up as Princess Diana, Chucky the Doll, Karen from Mean Girls and the Eye of Sauron with your mates and blast VengaBoys on repeat? It's a genuine question and I'll accept essays on the topic.

- **Must be sisters from another mister**

Mischa and I are known as the 'Twins' (again, not boob-related). We would both like to think we are quite individual, but have an unfortunate habit of going to events in exactly the same outfit. One time, the group went on an expedition out of Leith for the day and we both turned up for our ride in eerily similar crop top and jeans combo, both clutching diet energy drinks to combat the early start. We also share a go-to dance move: Twerking.

- **Must lend you their office chair when you break your ankle**

That's just my way of saying 'Must be there for you' without potential copyright infringement of the Friends theme tune. When I broke my ankle riding my bike through Leith a few years ago, the Leith Ladies mobilised with great agility. No sooner than I had hobbled back into my flat after a visit to A&E, Diana dropped off her spinny office chair for me to get about the house in. It was an absolute godsend — I hated crutches — so being able to wheel myself along the floor when I was too tired to use my robo-pirate leg (that's another story) was such a relief. In fact, there are still some tracks the chair made on the floor as I went about my usual routes. Whenever I catch a glimpse, it is a reminder of how my friends sprang into action to help me. Chiquita would also come round to keep me company when I couldn't go out, and the entire team came round to mine for a 'pre-party' on New Year's Eve because I couldn't make it up the stairs to the top tenement flat of our friend hosting the party on said pirate robo-leg.

When I was off work with stress, Mischa even stopped by with a print of women swimming in the sea. We are both fans of outdoor swimming and I have ran into the sea with her at Wardie Bay a few times over the years, so it was a very thoughtful hope-you're-not-having-too-much-of-a-breakdown present.

I myself am usually the go-to cat-sitter or flat-sitter when one of the other Leith Ladies leaves their post to venture out of town. I also hope the Leith Ladies read this and see it as my way of saying thanks for all the fun, fancy dress and support over the years.

I'm not sure it's what Georgina from the gym had in mind when she asked about our 'club', but it works for us. Now, where's my Leith Ladies t-shirt? I'm meeting my fellow members at the Kirkgate in 15...

Melissa Steel

The Leith Mermaid

There's a mermaid that swims down at the Shore.

I know what you're thinking, and that's because I've thought the same thing, too. The water down there is rank. Is it cute that you can spot the odd swan floating about with its cygnets in tow? Yes. Is it cute that I've seen an upturned sea duck floating next to a crisp packet and mysterious algae? No! I can't speak for a mermaid, but I know that if I swam in that water for at least an hour, I'd probably come out with extra fingers and toes. Besides the fact that mermaids are largely known as fictional creatures, the point about the minging water is probably what would cause many people to not believe me.

Would you believe me?

I've only seen her once, and it was within the first month of moving in with my sister and her boyfriend. They'd bought a flat down at the Shore. Not far from a hub of pubs, the flat was a bright and snug little place buzzing with energy during the weekends. Yet, it retained a sense of serenity during the evenings, particularly during the week. Glancing out the living room window allowed for a generous view of the calm water of Leith.

Back then, I was sleeping on a squeaky blow-up bed in their tiny spare room. I'd recently left my partner of three years who, as it turned out, had decided they wanted to hold hands with someone else without telling me. And, of course, kiss and love someone else - also without telling me. So, I was newly single in Leith, freshly dismayed at my recent heartbreak.

The one time that I had met the mermaid was at four o'clock in the morning. It was a Tuesday, and I was only three hours away

from getting up to my alarm. My sister's boyfriend was snoring and the noise penetrated the thin wall separating my "bed" and theirs. I would have still been awake, anyway. I had become prone to replaying the moment of my ex-boyfriend's betrayal over and over in my head like a cruel record player stuck on an endless loop. My mind felt utterly numb and clogged, my thoughts all over the place like a messy ball of yarn that couldn't be untangled.

I pushed myself up and decided to take a walk to clear my mind. I made a quick check of myself in the shadowy mirror in the hallway, and found something more similar to a toad than a twenty-five-year-old woman looking back at me. My eyelids and cheeks were puffy from my endless tears, my under eyes purple from lack of sleep. How ugly I looked. How unloveable. My hair, quite normally fiery and beaming like the golden rays of the summer sun, looked plain, and my eyes, normally warm and brown like seeds of a sunflower, were dull. I supposed it didn't matter, considering no one would see me under the veil of the night.

I wanted to walk outside where there would be little foot traffic. I decided that I would follow the tram tracks with an idea to stroll along Ocean Drive, then to Ocean Terminal and back. The path would be deserted.

It was a cold February night (or was it technically morning?). I folded my arms furiously, trying to cling to whatever bodyheat remained. Just a simple exhale could storm up a whole cloud of steam from my dry lips.

Half-way on my walk, I decided to stop and gaze out over the still water. The street was silent and lonely but, when I glanced up at the night's sky, I felt protected. The sky, a deep sapphire colour, stretched endlessly with white stars - little angels - dotted

far, far away. They were gazing down upon me, upon the empty street, upon quiet Leith. The world wrapped me in its cloak and embraced me.

I turned to look at what was opposite from me. I admired how easy it was to see Fife from there at that time of night. You could just make out the shadowed lines of the hills far in the distance, studded with dim lights. It looked like it was just within arm's reach. (If I had a very long arm.)

I lowered my gaze to the water. It looked dark and silent, like a monster waiting to be fed. I wondered how cold it would be to swim in. I tried to suppress my tears when I began to wonder how it would feel to disappear completely into the silent waters, to sink into them, with the vibrations of my heart muffled by the pressure. The water would claim my body when no one else would want to.

It was at that point that I heard a sudden stir in the water. I jumped.

'A fish!' I thought.

My mind jolted awake. My heart pounded. My body now reeled in, I peered further into the black water.

Silence.

Then, a splosh! A glimmer of silver gills. A chunky tail.

'A fat fish!' I thought.

My gaze followed the faint shimmer of the gills under the water, hypnotised. Sleep deprived, it was a struggle to make sure I didn't lose the trace.

Then, it wasn't so difficult.

A pair of eyes emerged from the water, along with a forehead and wet scalp, dark hair glued down tight. A woman? She sneaked merely a peek at me. Then, comfortably floating on her back, the mermaid lifted her head fully from the water, and raised her magnificent tail. She smirked at me.

"All right?" she said, casually.

She was beautiful; her skin pale and white like the moon, her eyes glimmering like sapphires. Of course I had to bump into one of the most stunning and transcendental creatures I'd ever laid eyes on that very night, when my eyelids were twice their usual size, and hair a mess. How hideous I must have been for her to look at. I shied away from her and remembered to close my gaping mouth.

She was waiting for an answer.

"Yeah," I muttered back to her.

I stared at the string of seaweed that was woven through the top of her hair - it looked like she'd placed it there deliberately, much like a hairband. The middle section was dotted with gleaming pearls. She looked like such a fashionista.

I tried to interact with her as if she was not a fish-woman in the water; just a normal person. I stammered, "Y-You all right?"

"Aye," she said. She tilted her head to the left and right. "Hmmm. No bad."

"Right," I said.

I shook my head, scowling. I couldn't believe that the importance of British manners was so instilled in me that I was trying to make polite conversation with a merwoman in the sea. As one does, every now and then.

"You look fuming," she said. She snickered.

"I'm not fuming," I argued back. "You're a blinking mermaid." I covered my eyes. "For goodness' sake, I'm going absolutely mental."

She pulled herself through the water to come closer to me. She crossed her arms on a piece of grass just off the water. She had meaty, strong looking arms. From the look at the heavy and thick tail that flicked in and out of the water ('show off,' I thought), it made sense that she looked like an absolute unit. I wouldn't want to mess with her.

"Well," she said, "are you not a bit mental, kicking about at this time of night? As a lassie, too."

"It's none of your business," I snapped.

"All right, all right," she murmured. "Sorry."

I sighed. "No. Sorry," I admitted. "I'm just shattered."

"Nae bor."

She smiled at me. She looked about the same age as me. I couldn't take my eyes off her and how beautiful she was. Her breasts were covered in little grey scales that were the same colour as her tail. It provided her an efficient combination of glamour and modesty at the same time. Although, I did notice that she had black otherworldly markings on her shoulders and

her arms. They looked like exotic squiggles perhaps signifying something from her mysterious culture.

"Where do you come from?" I asked, intrigued.

"Oh. Fife, actually."

I laughed. "You are joking."

"No, I am! Born and bred, just along at Burntisland. It's opposite Wardie Bay, actually. It's a nice swim on a good day, 'cause you get to laugh at all those folk going for a swim."

"What are those markings on your arms?" I asked.

"That's quite a personal question," she said. I felt embarrassed, but luckily for me she didn't seem phased. She laughed as she looked down at them. "Permanent marker, actually. I'd seen these lassies going for a run near the beach one day, and one of them had really nice tattoos. I tried to give myself a few to see how they'd turn out. Learnt my lesson there. It's not worth following the trends, eh?"

She started to laugh. I shook my head and joined in. I was gobsmacked at how relatable she seemed.

"You're literally just a regular person," I said.

She snorted. "Well, aye." She nodded upwards. "Nothing *fishy* aboot me, eh?"

I shook my head. "That's rubbish patter."

She snorted. "Here, this might be a bit cheeky, but it's not often that people speak to me. Do you have a cigarette and lighter?"

"Oh," I said. I rummaged through my jacket's pockets. "Yeah. Here."

I climbed over the metal barrier that separated us. I was standing on a small strip of grass and could easily fall into the freezing water. For a moment, I thought about those stories of sirens and how they charmed innocents into being their prey. I was half expecting her to grab me and pull me into the water, with a hook that I learned from judo classes when I was little. Instead, she gently took a cigarette from me. When our fingers brushed, I was expecting my body to jolt at how cold she was. Absurdly, she felt as warm as a fresh cup of tea.

She poked out her chin as I lit the cigarette for her. She thanked me, and then took a drag off the cigarette. She sighed. I was quite jealous at how cool she looked, especially for a girl who wasn't even of my world. I sat down on the grass and crossed my legs. In half an attempt to copy her, I lit my own cigarette.

Silence and the cold began to envelop us. The water looked black, its waves rolling gently and rhythmically. I gazed up at the endless sky and found the moon. Taking a drag off my own cigarette, I thought of how this was the same porcelain moon that shone over lovers, loners and poets since the dawn of time. There was some comfort in that some things stayed the same.

"So where do you come from?" she asked. "These parts?"

"Oh." I rolled the cigarette back and forth in between my fingertips. "West coast, actually. Islay?"

She beamed at me. "Oh, fab! Mistress of the malts, then, eh?"

I laughed airily. "Nah. Can't stand whisky."

She seemed disappointed.

"How did you end up here, then?" she asked.

I explained to her, half-mumbling, that I had moved here for university, and then fell in love with someone who did not treat me too well. Cutting the long story short, I told her that I had recently moved down to Leith and had plans to find my own flat. She fell as still as the water. She had a solemn look on her face, and a seed of insecurity was planted within me. I thought that I must have sounded like such a saddo talking about that to her. The feeling of being trapped, which I'd been constantly running away from, clawed its way up my back.

"I wish I could join you in that water," I said. "It must be freeing to swim wherever you'd like, to disappear whenever you want, to twirl and glide around the sea meadows and to play with the sea lions.

"I quite think it's the opposite," she said. "Grass on land feels nice and cosy." She runs her fingers through it. "It must be nice to lounge on it on a nice and sunny day." She looks up at me, her eyes glimmering like pearls. "Help me out?"

We laid down our cigarettes. I grabbed a hold of her dainty hands. Pulling a grown woman with a long, thick tail was no easy feat, however it helped that she was strong enough to stabilise and drag herself. As she laid across the stretch of grass alongside me, her full body gleamed like snow on a frosty January night. She looked like a perfect reflection of the moon, its beauty embodied in female form.

We picked up our cigarettes and hung our feet (maybe I should say, limbs?) off the edge of the wall.

"It's much nicer up here," she says. "You get to see all of these sights. Down there it's just dark a lot of the time." She points over towards Fife. "See the hills? None of that doon there, by the way."

"Yeah, but there's no time to be enjoying the views or hiking, or whatever. I'm always too busy working." I rub my eyes dismally. "All I do is wake up, tap my fingers on a keyboard, feel my heart tensing at a stressful job, and collapse into my bed. It's the same thing, again and again. I feel so . . . so trapped. I feel like I'm losing time and I can never remember the moments that matter."

"So make time," she says. "Do you ken what a camera is?"

I couldn't tell if she was being serious. I blinked at her.

She waited for a response, her doe-like eyes looking at me expectedly.

"Yeah," I said.

"Why don't you take photos? Photography, eh? Then you can remember the moments and memories that matter."

I took out my phone and looked at it.

"You have one!" She beamed. "Let's take a photo together."

I giggled shyly. "You'd take one with me?"

"Yeah! Of course."

I pressed the power button.

Nothing.

I tried a few more times, but my phone was silent and only my reflection stared back at me.

“What’s wrong with it?” she asked.

“It’s dead,” I explained. “Needs charged.”

She frowned. “Oh.”

I sighed dismally.

“Oh, well,” she said.

She yawned, which triggered one in me, too. She stubbed her cigarette out. She told me it was close to her bedtime, and she had to be asleep before the sun rose. I suddenly felt a wave of vomit begin to churn in my stomach at the thought of going back to my bed, failing to sleep, and making it through a whole day of work pretending that I was happy when, in reality, I was miserable. I was really not OK.

I think that the despair on my face must have been transparent because the mermaid cocked her head and asked what was wrong. I told her that I was scared of sleeping because I often had nightmares that left my heart racing.

She smiled and waddled close to me. She cuddled into me and rested her head gently against my shoulder. It was odd, but her body was not cold nor did it feel wet to the touch.

“Let me help.”

She gently stroked my hair and began to hum a lullaby.
At first I wondered what on earth was going on and whether this was the real siren emerging, but then I just started to feel overwhelmingly embarrassed, like being serenaded in public.

Yet, the next thing I remembered was that I was on the ground with my head planted against the grass. A gentle breeze was kissing my face. The golden sun was dribbling through the sky like runny egg yolk, and the morning birds were singing. I jolted up and found that the mermaid had gone, and the one thing that remained of her was nested in my hands - a single pearl with a golden tint. Even with the gentlest touch against the pearl, I felt a whole surge of warmth and comfort fill my body, as if I had sat down next to a cackling fireplace. Was this how she retained her bodyheat?

I checked my phone by instinct, forgetting it had died. Of course, it was now working and almost full of charge, as it had been before I went to bed. I shook my head in disbelief.

It was nearing seven o’clock in the morning. I should have really been getting ready for work, but I decided it didn’t matter. Instead, I took a deep breath and enjoyed the feeling of a long, oceanic exhale leaving my body. The sound of my long inhales and exhales sounded like the ebb and flow of the waves. The smell of the sea was strong and comforting, and I felt at peace watching the seagulls flying overhead and into the rising sun. The moment was perfect, so beautiful and golden, and even though nothing in my life made sense - especially after meeting a mermaid - I felt so at one with my little world in Leith. I was thankful to be a part of it.

I took a photo to reclaim the time, to remember the moment, and to make peace with myself and the world. “Thank you,” I whispered, to the honey-coloured water.

Tenci Earnshaw

Top O' The Walk

Singing along to herself and trying to remember where she is meant to be going, Betty looks inside her handbag, to help jog her memory ...

She realises that she has everything she may need inside her bag for what could maybe a special day out or a Mystery Tour, or even a romantic adventure. Other songs and rhymes come into her mind again, as she picks up items one by one, out of her handbag.

Max Factor Number 7 – She sings, "*My Blue Heaven*",
Heather Shimmer Lipstick – She sings, "*Lipstick on Your Collar*",
Rouge and a powder puff, to keep a cheery complexion and a fresh pack of *Pretty Polly* Tights – American Tan of course ...

She picks up her big pink purse, which is full of old threepenny bits all wrapped up in old paper one-pound notes ... she smiles and then also pops her travel alarm clock into her handbag, before she begins to count to help jog her memory again ...

Remembering an old Nursery Rhyme, "*One, Two, Buckle My Shoe*", She begins to recite the rhyme up to the number 10, and then she continues to count to 12, made up by her own thoughts, fleeting in and out of her mind, and then – "*Thirteen Fourteen – Going a Courting*"

"That's it!" She exclaims out loud to herself ...

In her mind, she was getting ready to go out on a *romantic adventure* - she would be meeting her blind date at 8.00 pm at St James Centre at the top of Leith Street, or "Top o' the Walk", as she always called it ...

Smiling from ear to ear and nodding to passers-by waving, she walked quickly along the busy street to the bus stop. She buttoned up her pink cardigan, to keep the summer breeze out. She looked down at her neatly ironed trousers and was glad that she was wearing her favourite shoes, to match her handbag. Free as a bird, let loose from a cage – that's how she felt, that balmy summer evening. Still day light, she was stepping out on what could be a *real* romantic adventure – a blind date at 8 O'clock. Saturday night. Blind Date! Pretty in pink – "*pink to make the boys wink*" ...

She stepped onto the bus and smiled at the driver. As she reached into her handbag for her purse, the bus driver smiled. He told her not to bother with the bus fare and said that she could take a seat, wherever she would like to sit on the bus ...

The bus moved off from Saughton Rose Gardens, and she began to sit back and relax ... with her shoulder bag strap crossed over her body and her hands clasped neatly around her handbag. The bus moved along Gorgie Road. It wasn't going particularly fast and she had thought that maybe this was because there were no other passengers on board. She was enjoying the bus journey ... Next stop – Tynecastle Football Club ... 'C'mon the Jam-Tarts!', she thought to herself, hoping that she had not actually said anything out loud.

'It would *all* be in her thoughts', or so she'd thought ...

Next stop, White Park – the swings were still there, with coloured seats, swinging back and forth in the breeze. There was no one in the park – probably too late on a Saturday for playing on the swings. Next stop, Gorgie Farm ... memories of sheep up there – sheep in the city, and pigs! She had always enjoyed looking at all the pigs rolling around in the mud at Gorgie City Farm, before going for a bacon roll and coffee at Jenny's Café. Strange days, she'd thought... back then.

Bernardo's Charity Shop on the left, just down from Springwell House ... many a time she'd had fun raking around the Charity Shop for brightly coloured sparkly bargains ...

As the bus bumped over the crossroads from Gorgie Road across to Dalry Road, a quick look up to the top of the road on the right hand side, and she could see 'Diggers', or the 'Athletic Arms', to give it its' *Sunday Name* ... a wee half pint of *Diggers Heavy* and a Malones Steak Pie with gravy ... now those were happy days, to remember. Just over the crossroads and as the bus was going quite slow, she then noticed Coffin Lane ... many a time she had plucked up the courage to run up the lane – a great shortcut from Dalry Road to Dundee Street and Fountainbridge. She was trying to remember why she used to take that short-cut, right alongside that big creepy cemetery – it was all overgrown with weeds and lots of the mossy gravestones and many had fallen over.

As the lights changed at Haymarket, the bus drove over the busy junction – slowly, but she'd expect it was on time though. Buses were *always* on time these days ...

As she turned her head to look left, with Ryrie's Bar behind the bus now, she noticed the Youth Hostel and then the Scots Guards Club and when she saw the Scottish Liberal Democrats office, she shouted, 'Remember to vote!' at the top of her voice. The bus driver didn't appear to mind this.

She reached into her handbag for her travel alarm clock – it must have been keeping good time, as the second hand was still ticking away and moving. It was getting very near time for her to be meeting her blind date at 8. She was going to a Dinner Dance at the Top O' The Walk ... she remembered. There would be Rocking and Rolling to Bill Haley and the Comets, singing "*Let's Rock Around the Clock Tonight*" and maybe they would play

her old favourite song, "*What do you Want to Make These Eyes at Me For*" by Emile Ford. She looked at her travel alarm clock again – 8.00 pm was getting very close and she was hoping to be on time for them serving up 'Chicken an' Chips and Coleslaw in a Basket'. She loved *Chicken in the Basket* ...

She put the alarm clock back into her handbag and reached for her compact mirror. The little bear on the front of the compact was pink – '*pink to make the boys wink*', and she noticed that the bear had a little twinkle in his eyes. She smiled, prized the compact open – powdered her nose ...

She thought she could hear bagpipes in the distance and then thought perhaps – it was all in her mind, as often things are – *these days* ...

The bus started up again and then stopped, just opposite Princes Street Gardens. She lifted her head up and she could see the top of the Band Stand and hear and see crowds of people. She was so relieved that the bagpipes *were real*, after all ... they were playing an old favourite Scottish tune of hers, called "Mull of Kintyre" ... She began to feel cold, so she pulled up her cardigan collar. The crowds standing in Princes Street - all along the railings, were swaying back and forth – side to side – they looked as if they were moving in slow motion, as she could hear the pipes and drums firing up to *that verse* – the verse where they always fired up the pipes – as loud as possible – and she wanted to turn up the volume even more! "Mull of Kintyre ..." she hummed and then continued to sing verses from the song and the more she sang, the more the song got to her and goosebumps appeared on her arms, followed by tears streaming down her face ...

She reached into her handbag for a *Handy Andy* to wipe her tears away – she would have to get her compact mirror out again.

The bagpipes reached the high notes and then she felt that she was floating, above Princes Street Gardens – sitting inside her special maroon bus, with no passengers on board, except her and a special bus driver, wearing a smart maroon jacket and a blue shirt ... Still singing "Mull of Kintyre" – she wept, and could not understand why? She had a blind date at 8 – after all.

The bus pulled up, outside St. James Centre at the top of Leith Street at 8.00 pm on the dot. The engine of the bus stopped. She could hear a squishing noise and then a kind of electric buzzing sound ... The driver spoke: This is Leith Bus 3-25 calling to base; this is Leith Bus 3-25 calling base. She wondered what was going on – she knew that this was her bus stop, yet for some reason she could not get up out of her seat. She appeared to be stuck and anyway – the bus doors were closed, and the driver was still busy talking to someone at the other end of the buzzing sound.

'Yes, Boss' – he said into the buzzing noise.
'Yes – She's about 5 foot tall, very elderly, frail looking ...'
'Yes – She is wearing a pink cardigan. She looks cold ... and seems a bit dazed'

'Yes Boss – Gotcha – I'll wait here until they arrive... I'll see if I can chat to her, get her name and make sure she's okay, while we wait for them to come and take her home'. She had wondered who the driver was talking to. He came towards her smiling and sat down in the seat opposite her. She thought he looked very smart in his maroon jacket, blue shirt and grey flannels. He had shiny black shoes on too.

'Hello there, how are you? My name's Robert – what's yours?'
'My name's Betty, spelt B E T T Y – my mother used to call me Elizabeth ...'
'Where are you from?' he asked.

'Balgreen', she replied.

'Ah, of course, I picked you up at Saughton Rose Gardens, on the West side of Edinburgh today'.

'You've travelled far today, haven't you – where are you going'? the bus driver asked.

'I am going to the St. James Centre – to a Dinner Dance at the *Top o' The Walk* ... I have a blind date at 8.00. Are you my blind date?' She asked. He smiled, 'No, sorry, Betty, I'm a Bus Driver from Annandale Garage and I'm just finishing my shift at St. James. I've called the Bus Garage to let them know you are here ...' 'Looks like you took a wrong turning today, Betty. Word has it that you must have got out of the Care Home, when the afternoon visitors were arriving, and the morning visitors were leaving .... That's some *adventure* you've been on today'.... Betty looked sad ... 'But what about my blind date at 8? ', she asked the driver. 'Sorry Betty – perhaps another day', The driver replied ... she bowed her head ... 'Don't you worry Betty, someone will be here shortly to take you back to the Care Home' ...

'Will there be fish and chips when I get home?'

'Yes', Robert replied.

'And cake ...?'

'Of course, Betty'.

There will be cake ...

Catherine McDonald

We believe in

THE POWER OF THE PAGE

You organise your opinions, imaginations, or facts.
You put them on the page.
The page is published.
The opinions, imaginations or facts travel.
They spark responses.
You have contributed to a shared wisdom.

We hope you enjoy reading this anthology.

Which is your favourite piece? Why?
Join the conversation on Facebook and Instagram @leithwriting

Keep it if you really want to.
Or think about passing it on.

Maybe leave it somewhere
for a stranger to find.

BE PART OF IT

- **Donate from the website**
  www.leithwriting.com
- **Make a cash or card donation**
  at Argonaut Books, 15-17 Leith Walk
  (and pick up a copy, if any are left)
- **Send in your writing**
  From January 2027 see the website
  or Facebook for guidance @leithwriting



LDC
LEITH DOCKERS CLUB
EST 1946

ALL WELCOME

LIVE MUSIC EVERY SATURDAY 8PM

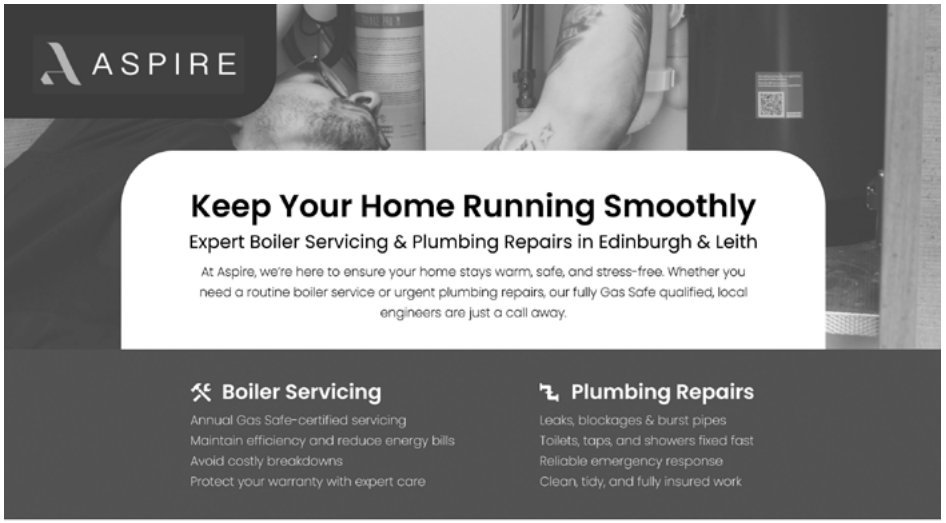
LIVE SPORTS ON 9 LARGE SCREENS

3 FUNCTION ROOMS AVAILABLE FOR HIRE

We cater for all types of events including funerals, birthdays, private parties, charity nights, sporting events and wedding receptions.

Tel: 0131 467 7879 Email: leithdockers@hotmail.com

www.leithdockersclub.co.uk



Keep Your Home Running Smoothly

Expert Boiler Servicing & Plumbing Repairs in Edinburgh & Leith

At Aspire, we're here to ensure your home stays warm, safe, and stress-free. Whether you need a routine boiler service or urgent plumbing repairs, our fully Gas Safe qualified, local engineers are just a call away.

Boiler Servicing

Annual Gas Safe-certified servicing
Maintain efficiency and reduce energy bills
Avoid costly breakdowns
Protect your warranty with expert care

Plumbing Repairs

Leaks, blockages & burst pipes
Toilets, taps, and showers fixed fast
Reliable emergency response
Clean, tidy, and fully insured work

Aspire Trade Services

Award Winning Plumbing & Heating Experts in Edinburgh & Leith

With decades of experience and hundreds of five-star reviews, Aspire is the name Edinburgh & Leith homeowners trust.



★★★★★

Had a leak in my radiator system which occurred during the latest cold snap resulting in me having no heating. I called into Aspire's showroom at 9am and by 1pm they had sent out plumbing engineer 'Andy' who identified and fixed the problem. First class service and he also advised on another plumbing matter which I will have Aspire fix for me in the near future.

Hunter

Call us now on 0131 555 2416 | aspiretradeservices.co.uk

THE BOWLERS REST

HAS BEEN SERVING LEITH SINCE 1867

WE ARE A PROUD COMMUNITY PUB FOR THE *WEIRD AND WONDERFUL* MIX OF FOLKS WHO LIVE, WORK, AND VISIT **LEITH.**

WE ARE A SPACE FOR COMMUNITY **GROUPS** TO GATHER FOR FREE, ARTISTS & HOSPO FOLKS TO DECOMPRESS AND PLAY **POOL & DARTS WITH LOCALS** WHO HAVE BEEN COMING FOR 50+ YEARS.

LEITHERS FALL IN **LOVE,** LAUGH, GRIEVE, DEBATE, AND MAKE FRIENDS FOR LIFE IN OUR PUB:

PEOPLE COME TO US FOR A PINT, A WHISKY, A JUICE, MAYBE A TOASTIE OR HOTDOG, THEY STAY FOR A BLETHER, OR TO HAVE A LISTEN TO OUR ALMOST DAILY **LIVE MUSIC.**

IT'S A GOOD WEE PUB!

THE BOWLERS REST

24 Mitchell St @Elbe
www.bowlersrest.com

Acknowledgements

Sincere thanks are due to:

One City Trust
Leith Benevolent Association
Leith Distillery
All our advertisers
Many anonymous donors
Argonaut Books
TRANSFERmagic
R Allan
G. Smith

Eve Carter, Andrew Henshaw, Jessie Fubara-Manuel, Mel Quayle, Alan Addison, Marie Storrar, Elspeth Alexandra, Ed Carter, Conrad Molleson – for all their work behind the scenes.

Sixth Edition
Published in Edinburgh, 2026

Cover illustration: Christina Neuwirth
(in collaboration with Out of the Blueprint)

Design and layout: Out of the Blueprint

Sustainably printed by Out of the Blueprint using rice ink on 100% recycled paper.

Leith Writing is a charity, OSCR registration no 053463

Board members:
Chair Jim Sherval
Treasurer Rob Levick
Secretary Tim Bell

---

leithwriting
www.leithwriting.com

A Message from the Makar

A couple of years ago I met somebody who told me he had lived in Leith in the 1980s. He said, 'It had a lot of character back then.' Then he paused, and added, 'Well, maybe too much character!'

I knew what he meant. I've lived in neighbouring Abbeyhill, close to Easter Road, for more than 50 years. And yes, Leith is a different place now, diverse, multicultural, but still very much itself (still standing up to developers who would impose a 'characterless' blandness). It still has a strong beating heart - No deid yet! And the poems and stories in this volume attest to that.

Enjoy!

Alan Spence, Edinburgh Makar, 2017-2021

Visit www.leithwriting.com for

- edition 101 **The Darting Salamander**
- edition 102 **The Seagull at the Shore**
- edition 103 **Small Talk on the Walk**
- edition 104 **Sea Change**
- edition 105 **The Silence in Between**
- edition 106 **Life and Love in Leith**
- in January 2027 for the theme for edition 107 and an invitation to send your work