

three

A collection of flash fiction



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Ellipsis Zine: THREE

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- *Steve*

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Catnapped

by Frances Gapper

Before I had time to miss Mewmew, or even register her absence, Louise and Joel @JoelandLou, aka my next-door neighbours, started boasting about her on Facebook. Apparently she now lived with them, renamed Fluff, our beautiful new rescue cat. Endless pix of darling Fluffums: eating roast chicken, asleep, playing the piano (photoshopped). Cue gushing comments, kisses, hearts etc. My own friends had dutifully 'liked' my occasional cat pic, theirs blizzardd emoticons.

At first I raged, i.e. felt annoyed, in silence. Then I tried to guilt-trip Louise (Joel's a cypher on FB, her sleeping partner, or maybe they don't, miaow) with fictional accounts of my cat-bereftness. Out with a torch every night calling Mewmew's name, etc. Louise ignored me. She has 4,381 friends (plays online games) and no doubt she long ago unfollowed my updates.

We were all invited to join Fluff's Page. At this point I created Malcolm, a separate cat persona. And a good thing I did, because Fluff blocked me! So did Louise. Malcolm however could still see both pages.

I set up a ladder by the garden fence and peered over. Fluff was behind their glass patio doors. I waved to get her attention and our eyes met for a long moment, before she turned and strolled away.

...

Office Space

by Emma Kernahan

Sarah had never considered herself a tall woman, but when she got to 7ft 3 she knew she'd have to tell HR. Karen in accounts always made a point of saying hello these days, which was a bad sign. Karen had an eye for affliction. Even the most mildly inconvenienced were described as an inspiration, so if she'd noticed, so had everyone else.

Sarah wasn't sure when it had started, only that one day she was petite, the next she was catching the eye of a certain kind of man in the canteen and within a week she was so tall, all the eyes were averted. She'd blamed the chairs for a while, and nobody had said anything. That had been fine between 6ft and 6ft 6 but when even the men's trousers didn't fit any more, they stopped inviting her to meetings.

In an open plan office, she was becoming a distraction. Executive Assistants were supposed to be discreet, not enormous. And then there was her constant creaking. Farting would have been better - the guys in IT did that all the time. It was embarrassing for them; her body. Every time Mark's phone rang she would let out an explosive crack, grow half an inch more and like Wagner even less.

Since all the mirrors were now at breast height, Sarah took out her compact and put her lipstick on at her desk. She made a short oh for risk assessment, an ah for annual leave and an eeeeh for no really, that's fine.

Climbing to her feet and striding across the office, she glimpsed Karen leaning in to the new girl in admin. 'I don't mean to be rude' Sarah heard as she ducked through the door towards HR, 'but that woman is an inspiration.'

...

Night Music

by Emily Devane

She makes a tent of her bed, tucking blankets beneath the empty mattress of the upper bunk where her sister used to sleep. The blankets don't do much to muffle the noise. She presses her ear to the pillow and, with a torch, explores the patterns that run across it in patchwork fields of green and blue and yellow. She runs a finger along the cotton, from stripy green to flowery blue, criss-cross yellow to leafy sprigs, imagines the dry brush of the grass at her fingertips until the scratchy sensation absorbs her completely. She can almost hear the crash of the sea over the din of the voices from downstairs. She dips an exploratory big toe into the water and pulls away at the cold. She conjures the peppery perfume of the cornflowers that fringe the path beside the sand dunes, their blue in competition with the sky. Beside her, the dog she's asked for nuzzles her hand; she bends and it licks the salty streaks from her face. She hears symphonies in her head, songs that never seem to end because each time the music stills, the voices return, and now they're louder: the high-pitched screech of her sister; her father, his replies punctuated with little coughs; her mother filling the gaps with sobs. She doesn't know the instruments' names but she makes them play as bold as they're able: low rumbling drum rolls, sad shimmering quivers on strings, and that reedy, painful sound that seems just right for the song she wants to sing. When the front door judders, she summons up a clash of cymbals and booming, earth-splintering blasts from the brass section, so that tomorrow, when they ask her what she heard, she'll say *just the sounds in my head* and they'll believe her.

...

Work Stuff

by Jason Jackson

It doesn't really matter who we are. You just need to know there are three of us in this office, but now they only need two.

She works hard most days, and so does he. And so do I, if truth be told. You'd probably think what we do is dull. But we're pretty good at it.

At ten, they call all three of us into their office.

"Sit down," they say. "Coffee?" they say.

And then they tell us how they're going to decide.

Later, lunch in the canteen, and she says, "Rock, paper, scissors would be easier"

"Or we could just have a fight," he says.

I say, "We should all refuse."

But just after one-thirty, I knock on their door.

"We knew it'd be you first," they say.

"She steals things," I say. "Nothing big. She took a printer cartridge, once. An old laptop last month."

"And him?" they say, not looking up from the notebook they're writing in.

"Porn sites."

"We can check that, you know?"

"I know. It's the truth. Nothing bad. Just the odd lunchtime. For a laugh. But, still..."

"And you?" they say. "What will they tell us about you?"

"I don't care," I say, and I walk out. I turn the corner in the corridor, and I see her walking towards me. She doesn't smile.

At half-past three, he pushes his chair back, says, "Fuck it," and walks out of the office. It takes five minutes, and then he's back. None of us speak for the rest of the afternoon. I leave first, and I don't say a word.

At home, Clare says, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," I say, "Just work-stuff."

"But I thought you liked this one?"

"I do," I say, not looking at her. "I really, really do."

The Geometry of Triangles

by Adam Lock

With care, the end of her tongue peeping out between her lips, Kim draws a triangle. You bought her the pink geometry set: pencil, ruler, compass, protractor, eraser, sharpener. On the ruler is her name written in purple.

‘Isosceles,’ I say and she laughs at the word.

The triangle is the three of us. You’re the upright. I lie across the bottom, next to you, and together we make a right angle. Kim slides from you, up high, down to me.

‘This is the hypotenuse,’ I tell her, pointing to the longest side.

She laughs again and says, ‘hippopotamus.’

‘If you like,’ I say, because it’s not important and there’s plenty of time to learn the names of such things.

She rubs out the upright because she says it’s not straight, and you disappear. The longest side, Kim, reaching from you down to me, hangs in the air with no right-angled leg to support her. I see her falling, the angles dissipating, the triangle becoming a straight line, me at one end, Kim at the other.

Kim sleeps in her own bed now. Until morning that is, when she climbs into your side of the bed and we lie together like a collapsed triangle, the shadow of one hundred and eighty degrees in her cold toes, tangled hair, and sleep-sugared warmth.

With the side of her hand, Kim wipes away the small shavings of eraser. She extends her neck, her face close to the paper. She has your persistence. Having lined up her pink ruler, she draws a line next to the one she rubbed out, but it’s not the same. It’s not the same.

...

Three Reasons They Call Me Dyke

by Bonnie Scott

1. My name's Diane. I go by 'Di', so it's inevitable that some geniuses would make the mental leap to 'Di The Dyke'.
2. I'm in High School. 'Nuff said, right?
3. I'm a girl who's into other girls. A dyke. But that doesn't give anyone else the right to call me that.

The reason I choose to go by 'Di' is that if anyone crosses me, they ought to know I'm coming for them, and they're going to die.

As my pass sails over the heads of the competition's Defenders and my team's Shooter plucks it from the air, my breath catches. Time seems to slow down—as cliché as that is—when our Shooter tosses it into the hoop from almost the edge of the circle.

A stunning victory, with seconds left to go in the final game of the season. The final game of our High School career.

The spectators' roars, cheers, and groans filter through my battle-lust-clouded ears, and time almost fast-forwards. My teammates jump-hug-cheer around the court.

I feel like a can of shaken up lemonade just before the cork is released. This is it! We won!

“...dyke bitch...”

The words cut through the fizz and all sound mutes, although my teammates don't notice a thing. No one does. Except me.

My eyes lock on to her. Wendy Benson.

A smile twists my lips, and I'm in front of her in a moment. Her lash extensions go wide, and her friends scuttle away.

I bring my sweaty face up close to Wendy's and crush her lips with mine. She staggers away and scrubs at her lips, further smearing her gloss. Strawberry. My favourite.

“Enjoy High School,” I hiss as I return to my team.

...

Jumping the Wall

by Victoria Bird

That last, heavy, bluebottle summer, you were stretching like drum skins. The girls in empty training bras and rolled-up skirts; boys' mouths loose with new swear words and too much spit.

You smuggled contraband in paper bags. Candies that caught in your molars. Chalky chocolate mice. Sherbet sucked from fizzing, sugared shells to bite your tongue.

Your playground separated you from the younger kids, with their hopscotch-jellied knees. There was a brick wall – three feet – between the playground and the walkway, the ground higher on your side.

After they'd banned milk caps, football cards and slap bracelets, a boy breached the wall – ran up and cleared it, knees tucked high. Then, a tide of kids, rushing the wall and sinking into the abyss.

The first time, you landed on top, impact clapping through the balls of your feet and screaming up your shins. Thereafter, you rehearsed the same racing line, refusing the jump like a stubborn cob.

Even by then, the roll-and-gasp of waking dreams had taught you the ancient lore that guards against falling. Your body's talisman – its batten against your dripping, tangled thoughts.

You gave up. Lay pride-stung and bone-sore on hot bricks, flinching at the scuff of a hundred hooves inches from your nose.

The bully, with a tell in her cuticles ripped to red ribbons.

The meaty kid whose parents were divorcing, hauling himself around like a raging bear.

The class heartthrob who saw nothing but a wall when he looked at you. The feeling was mutual.

They called it off after a few days – long enough to loosen your mind from your body and set it bobbing like a skiff sulking against a slate sky.

Some days, you say it took twenty years to wash ashore. Other days, it seems you are still waiting.

Shall We Talk Of Legacies?

by Andrew Leach

Down you go, now. Snug and dirt covered. We stand over you and ponder. What was, what might have been, the ordinary blues. Will you soar like never before? Like you never did, before. A rose dropped onto the soil. A change of clothes.

Endings as new beginnings were never part of your vocabulary. Instead they were tidbits to be savoured, rolled around your tongue like gobstoppers. For hours. For years. Pulling the weight of history behind you on Marley's borrowed chain that you kept duster rubbed so that it shone like cut glass.

All around, a weeping. A black gloved, white knuckled contraction. Stoic shoulders look inwards. An appropriate absence of dramatic art. The address temperate and without embarrassment. The vol-au-vents pregnant and good value.

Had you wanted me to say something? I thought we'd agreed not. Take it with you. And I'll hold a facsimile folded away inside my jacket, a Swiss Army knife made of paper and truth. A blade for protection. Another for betrayal. And one still to whittle your story into a suitable end. Three possible outcomes, their merits blind as the sea. Tools to be used. As and when.

...

Because of Percy

by Traci Mullins

Amanda was down to her last three bottles—enough for one last drunk. She envisioned a contraption that would drip the numbing liquid directly into her veins—slow and steady until she didn’t care about anything at all. That was always the goal: to reach a state of imperviousness where nothing could touch her. As a child she’d used daydreaming, but this was much more effective.

The dog had gotten to her, though. The night before, Percy had peed on the rug and Amanda had lost it—not enough anesthetic on board, apparently. She’d spanked the sweet elderly dachshund until his shrill squeals died to whimpers. She couldn’t get his look of pleading perplexity out of her mind. I can’t go on like this, she thought, lifting her favorite wine glass to her lips.

The next morning she awakened with the familiar hatchet of regret wedged firmly in her skull. Glancing at Percy, she looked up the number for Alcoholics Anonymous and picked up the hundred-pound phone. The dog jumped into her lap and looked up at her with his usual adoration, as if she’d never laid her cruel hands on him.

“I’m done, sweet boy,” she said. Percy’s liquid brown eyes brimmed with tenderness, as if to say, “You can do it, I just know you can.” Amanda punched the numbers onto the screen and lifted the phone to her ear. Percy wagged his tail, three times for good measure.

...

Each Minute

by Sophie Kearing

The mouth of the tunnel, with its gentle dimness, only hints at mystery. But the further in I venture, the more swathed in darkness I become, and the more humbled by the tunnel's convoluted walls and protective climate. I come to a narrowing through which I cannot pass. On the other side of this formidable barrier is a place well worth guarding: a primordial garden yielding the most precious of fruit. The mere thought of such proliferation and bounty fills my heart to the brim, and I abandon the narrowing, sated. I retreat through the pillowy blackness, through the fertile humidity, pulling my finger out gently.

Now I can see the tunnel's opening again, in a hand mirror over which I dutifully squat. My therapist recommended this exercise so that I can get to know my own body—so that I can accept it as a thing of functional beauty and divine femininity. But now that I've risen and put the mirror back in its drawer, my communion with the peaceful trove inside of me dissipates. Each minute I spend away from the mirror and its benevolent honesty, each banal task I complete, every trivial word I say, puts a bigger wedge between me and that sacred cove of promise and possibility.

...

Three Strikes

by K.B.Carle

Strike One

Nobody cheers for the catcher squatting over dirt like a victim of constipation, chewing tobacco like his mama taught him the moment he turned 12. Some of his fondest memories are of the two of them looking like bullfrogs, bat made of wood striking tennis balls that bounce off the brick walls of their apartment building. His nightmares are filled with her, lying in bed, cancer ripping holes in her throat but all she wants is one last chance to chew.

He returns the ball to the true star of the game, crowd never noticing that the pitcher's curve balls are flying straight.

Strike Two

The batter swears he can smell Arnica cream in the breeze that sends the umpire into a coughing fit. He'll show his wife that he is more than his anger, that he didn't mean what he said last night and that she shouldn't run to the neighbors in tears when she's the one who starts it all. If only she didn't ask so many questions. He is more than his words, his strength, and he is happy that she's lost in a crowd waiting for his next move. At least she can't distract him from...

Strike Three

The pitcher knows his shoulder will fail soon, can feel the bones shift with every catch and throw of the ball. He can see the coach's eyes trembling in their sockets, the question to pull him from the game trapped behind the fingers drumming against his lips. The catcher, signaling for him to throw fastballs instead of curved, wouldn't understand the high of being on the mound in the middle of it all, waiting for your opponent to send up another sacrifice.

It's enough to take away the pain, at least for one more inning.

...

An Excellent Telephone Manner and Passion for Customer Service

by Chloe Tomlinson

I wake up in the morning at 06.30, I reach for my phone, I go on Snapchat, I tap on Kylie Jenner's latest snap, tap tap tap, see her pouting from various angles and looking coyly at the camera, a different song for each snap, check my emails and see three about town planning updates, doubt my life choices, drag myself into the shower muttering 'poo shower hair breakfast make up clothes', get two buses to a job that's alright for a job but still basically shit, sit there for 8 hours dreading the phone ringing, looking at memes and planning my next meal and writing lists of what I will buy when I get paid. When the phone rings and someone wants to complain I read out the sentence on the post it note in front of me: I appreciate that you are frustrated but unfortunately that's where we are... This is what I repeat again and again on the phone all day, and when someone says something like, 'fucking disgraceful!' I breathe a sigh of relief and hang up.

...

Two Brothers and a Sister

by Erin Schmiel

There are three kids in my family, my two younger brothers and me. I have often obsessed too much about the fact that I'm the oldest, and the only girl; believing this order matters a great deal. I am brash, loud, and spoiled. The first, the "practice" kid; given no curfew, few rules, and causing no trouble. The next, Stephen, broke all the rules, talked back to mom, and made me furious with how cool he was: played sports (well) in high school, went to parties and had girlfriend(s). I played in the band, never stayed out late, or to a single party. I stayed home, read widely, quietly fuming: the good girl. The last of us, Philip, we visited in the hospital when he was born. I was six and Stephen was three, we're all three years apart. Philip was an adorable little puppy of a baby. I loved him, and he could do no wrong.

I realize new things about our birth order, now. Stephen is the peacemaker, the listener, the voice of reason, thoughtful and a good communicator on his feet. I need much more time to be civil. Philip is still that laid-back, up-for-anything youngest kid just keeping up with us, but to a fault. I wonder if he asserts what he really wants in his own house, his marriage, and his job? I don't have to worry about him, but I do, and so does Stephen. We feel a fierce need to protect, and speak up for him now. Now, after I spent a childhood of asking him to get things for me from the next room.

The three us don't spend enough time together scattered across three different states, but our number makes us strong.

...

Authorsoft™

by James Burr

“If you’re a writer then this,” the spotty youth said, his polyester suit gleaming under the harsh lights of the shop, “is the business.”

“Windows 10, user-friendly interface, warranty.” He ran his finger under each word of the miniature text, concentrating intensely. “Spellcheck. Grammar check.....”

“Thank you but...”

“And it can simulate the styles of over 1000 famous English language authors,” he said, concentrating on his spiel. “Just type in a sentence, choose the author you want it to sound like”, he stuck his tongue between clenched teeth like a child as he slowly tapped away at the keyboard, “and.....bang! Job’s done!”

He sat back from the screen, inviting the Writer to admire his masterpiece. He stared at the single sentence.

My sole possession is an eldritch XR2 squatting cyclopean-like in the stygian shadows.

The Writer dreaded to think of what he had originally typed into the computer.

“H.P. Lovecraft, innit.”

The Writer was stunned. How could a computer ever have any contribution to the Arts, the expression of human experience? The corruption of Nature now complete, it seemed Man had feverishly endeavoured to rape Art. He looked at the sentence that the Assistant had himself created, and of the ultimate non-expression it represented. Words mechanically rearranged in a codified symmetry, phrases patterned in a beautiful but empty order.

Later, as the Writer trudged from the shop, the wet wind chilling him to the core, he viewed the world through despairing and abandoned eyes. He slowly made his way home and remembered how he had looked on the alluring but faithless abomination in the machine and how the sculpting of experience into Art was now reduced to nothing more than a superficial glamour on the page.

And he had cursed himself even as he had handed over his cash.

Muddy Waters

by Clarrie Rose

A three-headed animal of any kind seems strange, but a three-headed fish seems all the stranger.

The first one washed up on a cool spring evening just off the coast of Southern England. Not much fuss was made, just a two-inch column in the Plimpton Gazette. The hunger came after, when the poor of the community salvaged the remains and roasted them over campfires. The news spread fast. Word of the soft texture and delicate flavour travelled around the village and soon the fishmongers were sending boys out on boats to catch as many as possible.

Within a week, they had their first casualty. An old homeless man was found lifeless in the sand. But no one cared. And so, the feast continued, the hunger almost insatiable.

It wasn't until Mrs Wrigley started feeling queer that people began to take note. She'd have lapses of memory, big chunks of darkness and lost time. Then the bleeding began. First the nose, then the ears and finally the eyes. Her Doctor gave her some tablets to thicken her blood. It was the third time that week he'd seen that kind of ailment, he thought it quite unusual.

It began to spread. There was talk in the village of a great plague and a small faction of the local church began to preach about the coming apocalypse.

Hundreds of bodies piled up. Doctors were baffled, until a young medic made a discovery.

He'd cut in to his subject and caught a glimpse of something odd. He dug a little deeper and that's when he saw it, a living breathing organism. A three-headed fish nestled in the stomach, attached to the organs and very much alive.

They burned down the town.

But the three-headed fish still swim in those waters, forever awaiting the hunger.

...

She Built Three Houses and Still It Wasn't Enough

by Gaynor Jones

Her adult house was made of bricks and so she thought she would be safe. She had a job, an education, a life. But still,

Her husband told her 'If you really loved me, you would do it.'

Her manager told her, 'Get the kettle on, love, the meeting starts in five.'

Her doctor asked her, 'Are you sure you still want birth control, at your age?'

Her teens were built on sticks. Tentatively balanced, trying not to break.

Her magazines told her, 'Of course you can drink beer, but still get your tits out.'

Her best friend told her, 'Don't be such a fridge, just let him do it.'

Her idols told her, 'Girl Power!' (but they didn't really go any further than that.)

Her childhood was built on straw, meagre and vulnerable. She supposes they just didn't know any better.

Her teachers told her, 'He's only doing it because he likes you.'

Her Nana told her, 'Cross your legs, dear, it's uncouth.'

Her own Mother told her, 'Stop playing in the mud, you're getting your dress dirty.'

And so the wolf? The wolf – he got in. Every time.

...

Jericho Falls

by Michele Finn Johnson

They all die the same way in our town. We've come to expect the dying in Jericho Falls, so when it happens—Mrs. Ramirez, the high school chemistry teacher, Bea from Bea's Sweet Shop, or even beloved Father Salazar—we don't cry so much as nod. We all know things about the factory and its big, black smoke belches. Some say that we should do what the people in that old mining town in central Pennsylvania did—abandon ship. Those folks didn't have a choice, probably, what with the ground giving way underneath their houses and streets. That town swallowed its people while they slept. Our town is a little sneakier than that. It coats you—a fine layer of poison dust, thinner than a communion wafer, lighter than the Holy Ghost himself and just as much a mystery. The EPA people say it's fine, it's safe, but notice they don't live here. Notice they don't stay late enough to witness that smokestack turn from cloud-white to crud, or come early enough to watch us hose off our cars in the morning, dark flakes running into the gutters. When we burn that factory down, we will leave a pile of rubble and cinders stacked so high, even Google Earth will notice. If you zoom in close enough, you might be able to see the dots of our heads—witness us scrambling up, over, out.

...

The Three Types of Home in England with Some Examples

by David Cramer Smith

Type 1 – Orthodox

Terraced w/ gnomes in front garden

Humble, if unprepossessing. Salt of the Earth. Contented.

Terraced w/out gnomes in front garden

Work-shy. Abusive drunk.

Bad hair.

Semi-detached, mock-Tudor/1960's

Authoritarian tendencies. Repressed and bitter. Strong work ethic. Rotarian.

Aspires to be a detached house (see below).

Semi-detached, millennial/post-millennial housing development

Trendy, even slightly Hipster. Wears Ray Bans and retro Nike trainers. Works in a 'creative industry' but has few original ideas worth pursuing. Good hair.

Aspires to be an architecturally designed house (see below).

Detached

Bright, witty, but dead on the inside. Will give money to charity, but cannot shake the feeling that 'something is missing'.

Flat, 1 bedroom

Confused, slow-witted, but occasionally reaches transcendent levels of ontological insight.

Flat, ≥2 bedrooms

Popular, funny, brusque. Has an unadventurous dress-sense. Functional alcoholic. Will one day be a detached house.

Bedsit

In need of a hot meal and a warm bath. Will one day be a semi-detached house or a houseboat (see below); it could go either way.

Type 2 – Unorthodox

Architecturally designed

Eccentric, if aloof. Lacks empathy but throws fantastic dinner parties. Envidable sense of style.

Houseboat

Free-spirited. Well-read. Kind.

Bad teeth.

Caravan, type 1

The cocoon stage of an architecturally designed house. Mysterious, since they're in a form of hibernation while they transmogrify into something 'better'.

Caravan, type 2

Traveller. Unfairly reviled by the wider community, particularly semi-detached houses. Bottom of the social hierarchy; will struggle to improve their status. Problematic tendency to encourage consanguineous teenage marriage.

Thatched cottage

Caring, gentle. Watches too much reality TV.

Excellent lover.

Lighthouse

High sex-drive without the skill to match. Always buys the best birthday presents.

Type 3 – Elite

Penthouse

Amoral, sociopathic. Charismatic, but sometimes stares at you in a way that makes your blood run cold.

Country mansion

Warm, quick to laugh, excellent cook.

Uses the n-word in private.

Castle

Life of the party. Top of the social heirarchy and happy to be there, but understands the heirarchy is bullshit. Has the potential to change the world for good or for evil. Will sometimes do both over the course of their life.

...

Sisters of the Marsh

by Tim Goldstone

Rousted by his father from a deep skullcap sleep in the trembling yolk-yellow glow of a flaming smoking reedmace, wind groaning through gaps in the roughly fitted logs, now at twelve years considered a man, he was sent out into the dawn of the coldest winter since his mother had perished giving birth to thrice split daughters while starving marsh-wolves stalked the tribe.

He was to search the marsh for his three missing sisters.

He knew no infants so new to walking could ever have survived the night just gone – remembered the three of them learning to walk, the guard-dogs either side of them so little hands could grip the neck-hackles for support: a traditional cure amongst the estuary dwellers for those reluctant to cease crawling.

He found the triplets naked on all fours around a savaged sheep, their long hair matted with its still-steaming entrails, their mouths bloody, their eyes rolling up into their heads until only the whites were showing, nostrils flared, breath visible and billowing – tinted with dull-red light from the unsteady line of the stillborn day's frozen horizon. He watches, wanting to vomit, feeling his mouth fill with saliva – then, as an awoken freezing river-mist creeps through the reed beds, he abandons them.

He will say he found them dead. He will say he buried them.

A cataract is forming over the black swamp-pools so that as an icy sleet begins to fall the stagnant waters hiss. The little girls' heads turn towards the sound as their pupils fill the whole of their eyes, their bodies flood with warmth, and the growth of their new pelts accelerates.

They had caught their brother's scent from a long way away. But they will not hunt one of their own.

...

Rescue

by Rupert Dastur

We have a rescue dog called Max. He's black and tan, with short legs and a tail that goes left and right like it's a lever that pumps the blood around his tiny heart. He was abandoned in a dustbin as a pup and was found shivering and yapping and wanting food and water. We picked him up from the rescue centre and on the drive home Dad wouldn't stop smiling. He's a little fighter he is, said Dad.

Max likes chasing after tennis balls, sleeping on the sofa, and chewing the far-left leg of the dining table. What he likes most though, is the moment Dad comes home from a long day of work, looking troubled and tired. Max will scurry to the door, his whole body shaking in excitement. Dad lifts him up and laughs as if not a thing in the world could make him happier. He kisses Max's muzzle and says I love you, I love you, you little fighter.

Although my tongue and lips can make shapes, I never say the things I want to say. I never tell Dad that I wish he would look at me, that he would pick me up and say I love you, I love you, you little fighter.

Today I am to be left alone in the house. I wait until Dad is gone and then I lock Max in the downstairs loo. He yaps and yaps like he knows. I then wheel myself out of the front door, roll all the way down the street to the back of the local primary school where the large bins keep watch. I haul my broken body up and into that sheltering darkness.

Listen, and you'll hear me.

I'm here, howling and howling, wishing my Dad would rescue me.

...

Water, USA

by Elizabeth Burton

Puerto Rico

A woman slips from her bed long before dawn. She travels to the river, scoops up her family's morning water in the two-gallon container she bought for her lawn mower's gasoline. She no longer struggles to get it home, her arms strong from months of use. She starts a fire in the wood stove her husband found, she didn't ask where. She's learned how to gather the wood, use scraps of paper to make the flames flick higher, higher, until she could be lost in the vision. But there is no time for getting lost.

Martin County, Kentucky

A new advisory went out today: For the hours you'll have access to water, you'll need to boil it to take the contaminants out. A woman writes down the hours on a Post-it; they're different than they were yesterday or the day before. Her life is arranged around water: filling up the tub during the allotted times, trying not to notice the liquid's stink before it is boiled, setting pans out to cool. Her children have learned not to complain of thirst.

Flint, Michigan

A woman sits in the pediatrician's office, remembering the bright, happy child her daughter used to be before lead poisoning took who she was away. Tabitha's eyes, once wide with wonder at the bug, the puppy, the world, were dull as the doctor dangled his stethoscope in front of her. I bought bottled water as soon as we found out, the mother wants to say, knowing from the doctor's expression it was too late.

...

All Bodies Celestial or Otherwise Turn Through Space

by Helen McClory

We on the walkway stand between our rooms one night when there are three sounds in the air: insects, frogs, and a cockerel habitually crowing. The few people who have clapped their way across the wet boards of the patio cannot hear us, and we can no longer hear them. We watch an inflatable ball chase an inflatable doughnut around the overflowing pool. We stand very close watching this happen. Our elbows are touching. Below them, the fingers on our other hands are touching. A man comes up, very white cigarette in hand, asking what we are watching. I tell him, and he joins us to watch too, before he leaves. Several months pass this way, in the dark, on the walkway, looking down at the objects moving. Eventually, there in the dark, we forget each other's features. Your fingers no longer reach mine. The ball, motion stretched to infinity, never wins the chase. The insects, the frogs and the cockerel never cease their noises.

...

Carnaval

by John Paul Davies

The undead kissed in backroom bars.

Blake and Sara exited the Sambadrome at four a.m. – too late and too early for taxis in the old quarter of Rio. The crowd dwindled, disappearing through the alleyways between boarded-up shops bearing graffitied slogans of long lost causes.

Earlier, semi-clad drinkers had formed human corridors of thrumming flesh. Skewered beef burnt the air. Locals and gringos – Blake and Sara among them – danced, awaiting the reappearance of the Carnaval idol, King Momo.

Now, only those from the Samba competition remained. The dancers in ghoulish make-up maintained their morbid costumes, celebrating their performance. Expertly choreographed, the undead had waltzed in the Sambadrome before dying again, their foam headstones sprouting in exact rows at their heads.

Higher than Sugarloaf Mountain, ‘The Redeemer’ stood against bruised sky, wide arms equally weighted between good and evil.

“I just want to get back to the apartment, Blake!” Sara complained, removing her high-heels.

An off-duty taxi turned into a side-street, weaving between the undead dancers.

“Taxi!” Blake called after the departing vehicle, which did not slow down.

The drums started again.

The samba rhythms of an earlier century pulsed. The soundtrack of the sugar plant slaves first dragged into Rio’s unturned fields.

The dancers surrounded them. Hands the colour of cemetery stones gripped their wrists. Too many to resist, Blake and Sara were carried into streets behind streets, the drums becoming louder, their beat intensifying.

Blake moved his head, searching in vain for his girlfriend. Sara’s cries came from somewhere behind him, fading as a foul-smelling sack was placed over his head.

The undead occupied the town wholly.

The giving up of meat for forty days of Lent began tomorrow. But tonight, in Carnaval, old Rio would feast at its King’s feet.

‘The Redeemer’ averted its eyes.

Because all the cats are black

by Alicia Bakewell

You get home and Rose has replaced the cat again. So careless with pets. Front door left wide open, still she calls it bad luck. Because all the cats are black, she says. Other things missing, not replaced: your potted jade plant; a coffee mug, your favourite; a library book you hadn't finished reading, returned too soon with her pile. No bookmark in it, she shrugs. An argument about bookmarks and folded corners will become an argument about other things, about everything.

New cat hisses when you reach to stroke it, like the first and third used to. You like this cat. Six, it must be. Two was too needy. Five undersized and sickly. Four you don't remember at all. Turns out Six likes sardines in tomato sauce. You share a tin and it's like the old days – single life, easy dinner in front of the TV, cat curled warm in your lap.

Six won't sleep on the bed with you. Neither will Rose.

You knew it was doomed with Rose the day Three disappeared. Same old tears, half-contrition. Resigned, you played at searching the woods together, silent. Her thoughts of foxes and other painful endings seeped into your own like dirty water. When she gave up and wandered back to the house, you continued alone. You knew Three wasn't coming home, but something dragged you deeper into the woods, kept you out there until long after dark.

...

Just Like a Coward

by Christine Collinson

As surely as the rising sun, Father and I head off to the mill; he's teaching me everything he knows. Mid-morning, I dash home to collect apples and cheese for us and the wind loosens the flour dust from my tunic.

My mother's peeling potatoes in the kitchen. When she brushes her hair away from her face, I glimpse a fresh purple bruise staining her cheekbone. She hands me the cloth-wrapped food. "Always do as your father tells you, John."

We have another rat in the mill; they love it here, the blighters. As we're loading a sack, it scarpers up a chute. "Father, it's gone up there!"

He doesn't pause. "It'll be hiding somewhere, just like a coward," he says, raising his voice above the clanking machinery.

Later, the rat reappears and father tries to whack it with a broom handle; misses, curses, misses. "Damnable creature!" he spits, ruddy colour rising in his face. "I'll get it tomorrow." But there will always be another.

As we walk home, I'm anticipating hot pie. We don't talk as he's dog-tired. Father devours supper and after, goes upstairs to wash. Mother and I talk as I finish my meal; she gently laughs at the story of the hiding rat.

We fall silent from heavy treads on the stairs. Father reappears, suddenly, in the kitchen doorway. In the candle light I see his brow's set with tension. He slowly holds up, by its scrawny tail, a semi-disembowelled rat. Worse, it is trembling from the fury emanating from his body. "I found *this* by my pillow."

My eyes flick to my mother. "The cat must have left it there, Richard," she replies, her face as unyielding as stone.

Then I smile, but it's concealed behind my flour-speckled hand.

...

Jill's Reflection

by Francine Witte

"Everything's a gamble," Jill says to her reflection. Jill's reflection has been around long enough to know that this will not end well.

That it means another quaky romance or a bungee jump off Miller's Bridge. Either way, Jill's reflection has heard it all before and is tired of Jill's inevitable tales of woe. Jill's reflection likes it when Jill buys a bright new lipstick or the day after a haircut. That's when Jill spends lots of smile time and doesn't have much to say.

But it seems that Jill is in love again, this time Rodolpho, who already has a wife. I'll be seeing you now, but for all the wrong reasons, Jill's reflection wants to say. And I'll have to tell you how sexy you are. It turns out, Rodolpho will tell her she is sexy, whisper it in his nightsparkle voice. Whisper it as he slides Jill out of her hesitant clothes.

And in the end, he is the only reflection Jill will believe. And when that gets broken, there's no telling how many years of bad luck it will bring.

...

Enigma

by Callum McLaughlin

I saw the girl with golden hair for the first and last time today. To think she hid amongst us all this time. Ag-something-or-other, I think they called it; a new term fresh from doctors' lips. I can't be sure though; fact swallowed up by the storm of scandal that soon whipped up the locals.

Her life always sounded like a sorry tale to me. A mother taken in the throes of labour. A father quick to remarry; quicker still to drop down dead. A step-mother left to drag her up through the muck of spittle and rage, rivalled only by the blight of stares and whispers.

Some believed her myth incarnate, but rumours of twitching curtains and flashes of sun-kissed locks at the uppermost window forever plagued the street. There are even those who claim to have seen the long-ago days in which she wandered freely. They ladle out stories of horses spooked by wild turns in the market, and rampion plucked from her mother's grave, thrust down the bodice of her gown to wither against her heart.

Some say the step-mother was nought but a wicked old witch; others that she loved the girl in her own way. Both sides call her measures 'mercy'. Wherever your faith lies, it matters not, for Death has dealt his hand again. None remain to claim the woman-child as their own but the men who breached this street with talk of mania and fallen women.

She howled when they brought her out; thrashing that famed hair against the eyes of her so-called liberators. As I chase away the flame of my candle and lay my head down in search of sleep, I must swallow the stone of second-hand bitterness. The cruel hand of man strikes harder than the harshest of night terrors; her twisted taste of freedom little consolation for the handsome prince surely longed for through all those years.

...

The Trouble with Three

by Adam Sear

It's the magic number. Goldilocks and the bears. Macbeth's witches. Yeah, I know what you're thinking, but you're wrong.

Sorry to tell you this because it sucks, but one of the bears died. It was baby bear's twin. Why do you think mama and papa were so damn protective? Getting his porridge to just the right temperature; making sure junior had a special comfy chair; all sleeping in the same bedroom.

As for Macbeth... There's three witches on the night-shift, sure. But they had a boss witch. (That's not, like, an excellent sandwich by the way.) We'll come to her, the boss, in a bit.

Four. That's the number. All the best bands are quartets, and I'll brain you with a mic stand if you try to argue. Or cast a hex on you. Or pour boiling-hot, milky oats over your head. Sorry if that sounds vindictive, but it's tough out here in the woods.

Baby's twin got lost out here. The truth is, he was lured away by a little blonde kid. What a bitch, you might say, but she was just trying to get in with a gang. You're safer here that way.

So, the witches feasted on missing bear cub, and made Goldie an honorary crone. Time passed, and she worked her way up. She couldn't help going back to the scene of the crime, vexing those poor, bereaved bears once again. That little break-in helped her get the top job: Boss Witch.

As for the Scottish Thane, Goldie had a ball with him. Spun him a right line about invincibility, immortality... But, you know: Out brief candle, let it be, four is the number, so much for three.

You don't know that rhyme? Ah, you will. Watch your back is all I'm saying.

...

Renée's Sequence

by Marie Gethins

You know Jeff and Renée? Out for the anniversary (two years, I know hard to believe). They're sharing the Futomaki Platter at Dashi. (Yeah, yeah, to die for.) Chomping on a Spicy Tuna Roll, Jeff says something about ancestry and history and knowing where you come from. Renée says, 'Let's get our genes done'. A week later, they're swabbing each other cheeks, sending off the blue envelopes. Wait. For. It. They're related! Same grandfather, like 20 generations back. Jeff says he's feeling claustrophobic, that he remembers from high school Biology it was VERBOTEN. Renée tells him if he thinks that, he must have failed Biology. She wakes me up at 3am, crying into the phone, 'he's abandoned me' blah, blah, blah. For real. How could she not see this coming? You remember what happened with her and Bob, then with Danny. I told her, 'just stop'. Renée said, 'I thought maybe third time lucky'. Seriously.

...

Motel

by Laurie Stone

The motel was in the undergrowth between two weedy towns. A neon sign was visible from the road. We used it as a safe house, but the man on the run did not know the room was bugged. I fumbled with his belt. He said, “Do you mean this, or are you handling me?” I brushed hair off my cheek and said, “I’m not sure.” I liked not living in a house, not having friends, not eating regular meals, not caring for anyone. The man on the run performed sex with his eyes closed, like a boy who was angry at his toys for being important to him. I didn’t know how I performed sex. Afterward I wondered what kind of sex we would have if he were not on the run. If we were living a normal life, would we look at each other? I was mad for the length of him and the lacey scars on his skin. I was plain mad. To have the thing you want is to see what else there is, and I could feel my happiness rooted with the men in the van, hunched over their screens. They could hear the headboard slam against the wall. They could see the man and me naked. We huffed like cars that take a long time to turn over. I didn’t mind. I was doing my job.

...

Four Minus One

by Ben Reynolds

I get pulled out of maths, and as the howls of derision fade, each knock of the Headmaster's walking stick on the floor of the deserted corridor pounds against my ribcage, so that when I see them in his office, smiling desperate smiles, I almost don't register the shock of them holding hands. I sit down as the Headmaster slips out of the room, and the air solidifies as

the

door

clicks

shut.

Their bodies fold awkwardly on chairs meant for primary kids. Dad leans forward, elbows on knees, breathing heavy. Mum also leans forward, but takes my hands in hers, rubbing her thumbs over my palms. I can feel her soul shaking. She takes a deep breath, but the words are trapped, so she swallows

and tries again

and this time there are words and she picks her way through each and every one of them, so careful, so caring, of me and the language; each word more deliberate than the last, each more devastating, and they gather and drift in the air

like dust in a sunbeam

and just like that

Logan is ripped away.

My body implodes, squashing my breath.

The edges of the room vignette like an old film.

But she can't be right, she can't be right, because where are the sirens and the trauma

and I still owe him five pounds and where is the panic and the screaming and he is two levels away from completing Uncharted 4, his hoodie is on my floor, his half-eaten yoghurt is in the fridge, his copy of Fight Club is on the sofa, his trainers are on the landing, his laptop is charging on the dinner table, he scrawled a message on my blackboard:

Got you past that Dark Souls boss x

We are Three.

...

Three Part Harmony

by Ed Teja

She leaves rehearsal, carrying her cello and a new idea. The cello is awkward to carry at times, but lighter than the idea.

The cello is her voice; the idea is about love, for recently she has fallen in love, and she has fallen in love. Suddenly, separately, she has fallen in love with two people who seem to love her.

In her tiny apartment, she puts the cello on a stand and carries the idea and those facts about her life into the kitchen where she puts on a kettle. Life, love has handed her a problem that shouldn't be one. If loving one person is good, how can loving two be a problem?

Her music means working with a violinist and viola player. The three of them perfect their understanding of the music and practice the detailed motions required to make the composer's three-part harmonies soar.

A trio is intimate, yet provides rich harmonic treats. Three notes define a chord, letting the listener know it's nature: minor, major, augmented, diminished. Two notes, the most a duet can offer, is not enough. A duet can be beautiful if the composition is brilliant, but brilliancy is elusive.

She plays music in a trio. She plays out her love in two duets. It seems to be expected and unlike music, words mask the reality. Calling it monogamy only hides the fact that it is a duet. Playing out her love in a duet would mean never hearing the beauty, the richness a third voice could offer the music of her life.

She picks up her phone. "I want you to meet someone," she says. "I think we have the players for an exciting arrangement."

It's a gamble she needs to take. For the music.

...

It.....Goes.....On

by Jayne Morley

I wore it on my middle finger. As he had crouched down by my side I had not thought that it was a proposal, I did not have the confidence for that. So the ring was on my third finger and I liked it like that. Neither one thing nor another, like me. Middle child, neither brilliant nor nothing, just, in between.

His look was one of disappointment but I was used to that. My siblings and my ex, the father of my child, gave me that look. We are disappointed with you but we will not tell you why. But why did he not say, smiling, no, no, it's to go on your ring finger? It's to show my love, my engagement with you. His own discomfort showed that he too did not have the confidence. Or conviction.

Champagne? Yes please. Are we celebrating? The cut glass crystal reflected the shadows in my eyes. Glasses I bought from a vide grênier in France. How many lips had drunk from the fine edges. And then kissed, mixing saliva and champagne between mouths.

There were two glasses left. The third had been broken a long time ago. Shattered into fragments and then swept away. Wrapped in newspaper so as not to cut the bin man. Lest he bleed. Lucky for him.

He always talked around me, not through me. Talked of things so simple I didn't comprehend. I waited for the moment when he would inject sweet, reckless words into my veins.

I lay on the carpet and held the glass up to the window. The stem, spiralled and fragile, seemed incapable of holding the tall flute. The simmering bubbles threatened to make fissures in the delicate quartz. I placed my other hand behind it and saw the ring radiant with regret..

...

A Miracle

by Christopher M Drew

For months, all I could think about was the number three, because I was convinced, ever since we stepped out of the doctor's office, that three was the perfect number. It was a feeling. A feeling inside.

And you know what? I was right.

Three is everywhere. Like primary colours. You can mix red, blue, and yellow together and paint the whole rainbow.

Then there's Pi. You've only got to look at Pi to realise the number is special. Irrational, but infinite. A chaos of random digits stretching to infinity without order or repetition.

We wouldn't exist without three. We wouldn't be here. Dimensions of space, states of matter, properties of subatomic particles, number of quarks in a proton. Down and down to the fundamental building blocks of life. Up and up to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

The Borromean rings have such devastating beauty I cried, right there in the library in front of the computer screen. Three interlocking rings, but if one is removed, they all collapse.

Trisomy 21, the doctor said. *A third replication of the twenty-first chromosome.*

Our daughter sits at her desk. The night light spins a galaxy over the walls and ceiling as she works.

She turns, smiles, holds up a piece of paper as stars drift across the wet paint.

A picture of us, the three of us, holding hands. And, stretching over us, encircling us, filling the sky with colour, a rainbow.

Three is a beautiful number. No, it's more than that.

Three is a miracle.

...

Is the Magic Number

by Sophia Rainbow Haddad

Superstition is the illusive back bone of my mother's logic.

My childhood room was a sparkly mess, but a Taurus thrives on beautiful things. No wonder I can't throw anything away.

Astrologically, my boyfriend's Sun is in the same place as my Moon, an age old sign that we are certain to be married. However, it is well worth noting (in front of him, the first time he visited my house) that my brother and I were married in a past life and that my mum and dad were siblings in their past life together. It's common for souls to find each other again.

The largest planet in our solar system is made of gas and represents Expansion. So Mum is not surprised that our family is divided by whole continents, knowing that Jupiter is in my house of Travel. A tarot reader once told me there would be a death of a man in Algeria and that I would be very upset. Her avoidance of the word 'dad' has haunted me everyday ever since.

A feather fell from the ceiling mid-meal, "the angels are listening to us," Mum told my university friends. Light a candle for your dead Aunty. The child who craves salt knows suffering. Luckily, I suffer from ulcers and must rub salt on them (the homeopathic remedy for this is Nat mur).

My mother is magical.

A magical person at a loss in reality. Someone who believes their name is Aileen because they are an Alien. A human-fearing human who comes alive with other moonlight creatures. Who turns her face to dreams, symbols of the past and the future, and other escape routes.

The woman who taught me about handing my worries over to the Devine. But for whom I worry placed all her faith in the intangible, and has nothing to show for it other than one daughter and three sons who orbit her like the Sun.

...

Red Peppers and Mild Cheese

by Mariah Feria

Opening the fridge, I search for the cheese. Instead, I find an impostor: mild cheddar.

“Where’s the cheese?” I ask mum. She’s chopping peppers.

“It’s there.”

“Not this mild shit, we normally have at least a three. Is this it?”

“Yes, just mild. Lee likes it.”

Lee. Mum’s new boyfriend.

The house has changed since he’s intruded: our childhood photos replaced by two strangers; a lock on the spare bedroom that is now ‘Lee’s study’; so many fucking plants.

But the kitchen cupboards are the most contaminated. Tinned potatoes, mild curry sauce, practically no fruit, and smooth peanut butter.

“But you don’t like mild. Did you not get mature for us too?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“You’re not here anymore and Lee can’t handle mature. What’s the point?”

Ah, the ‘you’re not here anymore’ line; despite the fact I come home every holiday during university. She’s never forgiven me for going travelling during the divorce.

“What do you mean he can’t handle it? It’s cheese.”

“It makes him sweat.”

I burst out laughing and close the fridge.

“It’s not funny.” Mum puts down the knife she’s using and finally faces me.

“Is he allergic?”

“No, just makes him sweat. Like how we’d sweat eating a hot curry.”

“But it’s not a curry. It’s mature cheese.” I laugh again.

“It’s not funny,” she repeats, and I can see she truly believes that.

“Oh come on, it’s a little bit funny. He can’t handle cheese.”

I get up and pinch one of the sliced peppers.

“I wouldn’t laugh if you couldn’t handle cheese,” she says.

I leave the kitchen, sensing the conversation has taken a sour tone.

Lee enters and I hear him say “Oh peppers. I’ve never tried a pepper before. Aren’t they hot?”

...

Finale

by Julie Zuckerman

The children clucked, conspiring against her.

“The Jewish Home is a beautiful place, Ma. Nice gardens. Activities. Dance three times a week,” said her oldest, filling out forms.

They’d found Estelle puzzling over the implications of the words “breakfast” “lunch” and “dinner” on her pill box.

Sam’s passing, a few years earlier, had jolted something in her brain.

Estelle refused to speak when they settled her into her new room. She noted her sons’ grim expressions and her daughter’s quivering lips when they kissed her goodbye.

“One of us will be here every day,” they promised.

Sometimes a teenager or a younger child appeared with her favorite black and white cookies. They kissed her cheek. Called her “Grandma.” She’d smile though she didn’t understand.

The residents of 2A could chat amiably amongst themselves. It was 3A that terrified Estelle in moments of lucidity, the knowledge she’d be moved upstairs when her disease worsened.

The dance instructor spotted Estelle’s talent and often chose her as his demonstration partner. The cha-cha, the jitterbug and the jive.

“We have a champion dancer here, folks.”

She didn’t remember telling him, but it was true: on the ship to America, 60 years ago, she’d won contests for the Lindy Hop and the foxtrot. She couldn’t summon the names of her three children but she could recall the light twinkling in Sam’s eyes. The smell of his coat wrapped around her and promises he’d whispered about their future, the cells of her oldest already multiplying inside her though they didn’t know it at the time.

Now the instructor led her through the swing, a flair in her step.

“Muscle memory,” said a familiar voice from the sidelines. She closed her eyes and was with Sam. Hands held high, taking a final curtsy.

...

dad says fists speak louder than words

by FJ Morris

fuck em up he said, and they wont touch u. theyll leave you well alone. them were his rules. fists speak louder than words. he went everywhere wiv fists of action like bombs ready to go off. he wudnt let me hold his hand when i fell over, when i needed someone to hold on to, when our house flooded and i went after my dog messi who went out the window and into the river runnin down our street. i had to swim. i had to save myself.

so i thought he only had fists for me too.

but when i took a corner too fast on my bike and basically had to be scraped off the road, he sat by me for hours. he waited to hear me speak, and said nothin when only munted noises came out. id lost all my words. they all went. and i wanted to explode for real because all i felt were pieces of me like shrapnel and so i hit the bed harder than anything or anyone ive ever hit before because i wanted to see something break that wasnt me.

and my dad said nothin.

he opened up my sweaty hand wiv his, and crushed it. he clamped down on me as if thats where he had always been, and the holdin of it hurt. it hurt more than if he had laid me out wiv a million fists to my already mashed-up-mug, and so all i cud do... like a trigger, all i cud do, was pull away.

...

Brexit, Flags and Sausage Rolls

by Jeanna Skinner

I love this green and (mostly) pleasant land of rolling hills, lakes and dales. I even love the rain, because without it, there wouldn't be any hills, lakes and dales. But what I love best, is the coast. I eye the shingle beach sky with suspicion. One thing rain does not make is perfect picnicking.

“A storm approaches, one I'm not sure we'll weather - not without becoming a washed out, washed-up pastiche of a Constable painting. Our once glorious colours faded to grey; like a day-old gammon, sweaty and reeking in a rare June heatwave.”

I'd written that last night, drunk with the power of my oh-so profound Twittering.

“If you don't like it, LEAVE!” the bullet-fast reply whistled into my notifications.

“But I do like it. I love it,” I tried to protest.

He didn't listen. The buzz quickly drew a crowd. Some came to my defence; others spat vinegar.

A shimmering mirage on the horizon could be France. Sighing, I pick my spot and lay out the spread, but the food attracts wasps; a sugar-crazed swarm, hell-bent on ruining my picnic. I flap them away, arms windmilling with panic.

As I scoop up shop-bought sausage rolls and limp ham sandwiches, a gust catches the red, white and blue of my new Union flag picnic blanket. (A fiver in the Marks and Sparks' mid-season sale; it's *my* country too).

I lunge but I'm too slow, and it parachutes out of reach of my grasping fingers. Then the squall calms and the blanket crumples, collapsing inwards on itself. But it's drifted too far. With agonising torpor, it wafts towards the Beachy Head cliff.

Even the wasps appear to watch in silence, as the flag slips finally—irrevocably—over the edge and out of sight.

...

Father, Son and Holy Ghost

by Alison Woodhouse

His hat's pulled down and his rucksack's heavy. His boots, worn at heel and covered in mud, kick up what's left of the gravel as he walks between the gravestones.

The double doors creak at his touch, inviting him in.

He passes his hand over space where a corkboard used to be, with its sketches of angels, heart shaped wings and square bodied sheep; then walks down stone steps into the belly of the church.

Scrappers have been here before him, broken the lock on the door, taken what they could after it was decommissioned.

Not even the pews remain.

There used to be white linen across the altar, silver candlesticks at either end. An embroidered sash of red and gold on the pulpit. Beautiful flowers in damp, green oasis. He remembers the earthy, heady scent. Now there's dust, dust everywhere.

He'd loved all the hushing and shushing, taking the Collection plate around, thanking people nicely. Their smiles had warmed the top of his head. He'd loved the floor length white dress he wore as a chorister, the purple trim around his neck.

He'd loved hearing his own high, clear voice as it rang out across the church.

He'd loved his father priest who blessed him and said suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me.

His father priest warned him the world wouldn't be kind to a boy soprano who made wild accusations. Told him to pack his bags, get out of the village and stay away.

He'd left home: his high clear voice breaking.

His father priest is buried in an unmarked spot in the corner of the flinty graveyard. Here in the house of God, a dove cries softly.

The Centre for Examining Memories, Visions, and Insomnia during Full Moon

by Annie Q. Syed

Sometimes I dream with my eyes open. While reading, I can absorb myself into Time. It happens through words. All words have mass. Dictionary defines mass as a noun that is “a body of coherent matter, usually of indefinite shape and often of considerable size” and “a collection of incoherent particles, parts, or objects regarded as forming one body”.

When I am done reading others’ words, I arrange my own. I have a two drawer white letter writing table that is built into the room and against the opposite wall is my writing desk from the 1950’s which I bought at a flea market. The smaller table has a candle and many notebooks. Sage or bergamot scents keep me alert.

In another corner there is a microscope where I examine visions that are not ready to be put into words. Next to the large window is a telescope through which I look at the cosmic dust outside. Usually the best words are out there and sound like Dizzy Gillespie. I sometimes use a hammer against words when the moon comes after me and I can’t fall asleep. Then the full moon transfigures itself into a white flame, burning, and I become the candle.

Weight can change from planet to moon but mass remains the same; so it goes with words. Words on planet Earth mean the same as on Mars and will mean the same on the Moon.

But the weight of words on the Moon will be 1/6 of what they weigh on Earth. That’s great news for ‘racism’, ‘death’, and ‘ignorance’. Words on the moon will be written in turquoise ink outlined by golden embroidery. There I will measure the spontaneous combustion inside memories from a world that no longer exists.

...

Them Flowers in the Dark

by Sharon Telfer

Dear Mrs Speirs

I wanted to write you before but had no paper. I think about you a lot. I think about the summer all them flowers with long names. You said what they were. I forget the names but they were dead pretty blue & red & yellow all mixed up like but dead clever so it looked right. I think about them then when its dark the flowers.

Sorry if this is wrong. I dont know when I wrote a letter last it were at school most like. I get lessons about writing here. I work hard. I want to do better.

I hope Sammy is OK & plays with that ball I got him. I nicked it from that other place me & Dobbo were working. I didnt buy it I feel bad about that. You all thinking I got it special.

I think of Emmy with that ball Sammy barking like a right loon the sun behind her like she were a leaf – all light like. When its dark I see her like shes right there by the door. In that dress the yellow one like her hair. Its gone lights out may be but I see her plain as day right there.

I have to say where she is. They go on & on it does my head in. Why wont I tell them where she is. It ud help me. It ud help you. I cant tell no one. You know I cant but that doctor dont shut up posh bitch. You know we have to keep her safe you know shes safe now. Theres no one like her all soft & the world so hard but shes safe now. Thats what I wanted to say really. That & the flowers.

Yours truly

Darren

...

The Second Twin

by Louise Mangos

You are my phosphorescence. Something that hangs on to its energy for a moment before it radiates. You were the stronger force in Ma's womb, taking more than your share of nutrients. Building your strength before offering me the scraps. Something to do with my twisted umbilical cord, they said.

We floated in our separate universes, repelling each other in an opposing flow of amniotic fluid. You crowned first, born eight minutes before me. Pa held you in his arms, while I had to settle for the midwife.

It wasn't Pa who gave me his attention in those first moments. Instead, she did the test. She rolled her thumb over my skin, put the cold disc of a stethoscope to my chest, ran her finger nail along the sole of my foot, flexed my limbs, and made me cry in order to fill my feathery lungs. A weak score.

You all silently blamed me for Ma's passing.

Now you stand a head above me in a crowd. Pa always sees you first. He must have called your name two thousand times more than mine. Angela, Angel, Angie.

It took a few years to identify the emotion, having been together since the race to divide our cells. Competing with you for Pa's attention exhausts me, but I don't know anything different. They say three's a crowd, and my jealousy flares like the sulphur on a match head at any given moment. Phosphorescence.

The same flare that lights you like a torch, starting with your hair.

I am surprised at the pain, and realise my plight. In the sharing of traits, when you were given your beauty, I was given your suffering.

...

The Soul of a Warrior

by Mandy Huggins

The teacher told them all to hold hands, but with their arms full of insect nets and jars it was almost impossible. As they neared the river, Keiko gasped when she saw the glimmer of a thousand fireflies reflected in the water.

‘When they become adults, they stop eating,’ said her teacher, ‘and drink only the sweet evening dew. The light of a firefly is the incarnation of a warrior’s soul; a fighter who died in battle!’

Keiko’s heart thumped like a rabbit’s foot inside her ribcage. Her father had been a fighter. At his funeral she’d heard everyone say how bravely he’d fought, and how sad that he’d lost his battle.

She crept away from her classmates and walked a little way along the riverbank, calling softly for her father. A single firefly alighted on Keiko’s finger, and she lifted it up to her face.

‘I’ll take care of you! I’ll read you all the samurai stories!’

She transferred the insect to her jar and slipped it inside her rucksack, returning to the others without saying a word.

When she arrived home, she ran inside to show her mother, her words tumbling over themselves as she explained about the warriors’ souls.

Her mother smiled, but Keiko could see it was her new smile: the sad one.

‘The firefly’s life is brief, so we must be kind and set him free. Your father’s soul is in every firefly, and in every raindrop and every grain of rice.’

And after that evening, Keiko could hear her father’s voice in the chirp of every grasshopper, and see his face in every flower. Yet still, each summer, she caught a single firefly and kept it just for one night, and she read the samurai stories out loud before they both fell asleep.

...

Three Hour Drive

by Anne Summerfield

No warning

Hi there,

You won't believe this but we ran away to Florida! We thought why not a Disney park! The whole marriage thing's so corny. We thought why not make it even cornier? We didn't think you'd mind!

Here's a link to a video somebody made. We've put more photographs on Facebook.

XX

You look. Cinderella's castle. Him in Beast-turned-human suit. Her in princess dress. Digital confetti falls over them as if they are trapped in a snow globe. They look happy. They look strange. They didn't think you'd mind.

So much has changed

It seems these days birth announcements are not printed on quality bond or posted on notecards with cuddly teddy bears and teated bottles round the edge, pastel colour-coded, tender. Instead you receive an email with 'first photograph!' attached. Weight still seems compulsory, more so than gender or a name. In the picture, a generic newborn is bundled in a tiny white babygro, eyes closed like a kitten. You stare to see if you can perceive resemblances. You try out your new reading glasses and stare some more.

This is how you welcome your grandchild to the world.

Snow fall

He dropped the email bomb two weeks after you'd gone to visit. You'd driven three hours under the shadow of clouds weighted indigo by snow. The hospital was imposing as a castle but smelled like a plane. The doctors were keeping him in. There would be new tests each day, more results coming through.

He'd seemed perky. Paler but the same. The girl in the Cinderella dress and the baby in white were both older than you'd imagined, but they were quiet as their

photographs, following you with their stares.

'I'll write,' he said.

He wrote.

He said.

The snow fell.

...

**Ellipsis Zine: Three, a collection of flash fiction.
300 words or fewer from the best contemporary
flash fiction writers.**

Read three over a cup of coffee. Read four on your daily commute. Read one that will make you think twice.

•••

That last, heavy, bluebottle summer, you were stretching like drum skins. The girls in empty training bras and rolled-up skirts; boys' mouths loose with new swear words and too much spit.

from 'Jumping the Wall' by Victoria Bird

My mother's peeling potatoes in the kitchen. When she brushes her hair away from her face, I glimpse a fresh purple bruise staining her cheekbone.

from 'Just Like a Coward' by Christine Collinson

We wouldn't exist without three. We wouldn't be here. Dimensions of space, states of matter, properties of subatomic particles, number of quarks in a proton.

from 'A Miracle' by Christopher M Drew