



In the Belly of the Whale

and other flashes of historical fiction

In the Belly of the Whale

In the Belly of the Whale - Ellipsis Zine #11

© 2022 Steve Campbell

Design by Steve Campbell

Cover image by Silas Baisch via unsplash.com/@silasbaisch

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be copied or reproduced, stored in retrieval systems or transmitted in any form or by any means - electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording or otherwise without the prior permission of the publishers. All the stories included within this publication have been reproduced with the knowledge and prior consent of the authors concerned, and no responsibility is accepted by the publisher for infringement of copyright or otherwise arising from the contents of this publication. Whilst every attempt has been made to ensure accuracy in compiling this publication, the publisher cannot accept responsibility for any inaccuracies, omissions or otherwise since compilation.

- 09 **In the Belly of the Whale** (4.54 billion years ago)
by Junyi Chew
- 10 **One Morning in Warboys** (1593)
by Rachel Canwell
- 12 **The Trial** (1699)
by Jeff Taylor
- 15 **In a Stew** (1700s)
by Fiona MKay
- 16 **Cave, Clovelly** (1783)
by Lucy Peters
- 17 **Sous la Terreur** (1794)
by Kate Deimling
- 20 **Napoleon Bonaparte Visiting the Plague Stricken of Jaffa** (1799)
by Ruth Brandt
- 21 **The Pioneering Marine Biologist** (1800s)
by Kik Lodge
- 22 **The Harvest of War** (1816)
by Jenny Woodhouse
- 24 **The Big House** (1830)
by Georgia Hilton
- 25 **Silver-Pockets Pete** (1850)
by Christine Collinson

- 27 **La Peste** (1855)
by Michelle Walshe
- 29 **Going Down the Line** (1862)
by Clare Martin
- 31 **Rebel Doctor** (1916)
by Emma McEvoy
- 33 **The Lotus Lounge** (1921)
by Kathrtn Kulpa
- 35 **Idle** (1922)
by Diane Simmons
- 36 **Why?** (1938)
by Christine Reeves
- 40 **The Last Drop** (1939)
by Denise Bayes
- 42 **Keep Calm and Carry On** (1939)
by Laura Besley
- 45 **Goint East** (1940)
by Slawka G. Scarso
- 47 **A Real Solid Guy, Was Pawpaw** (1942)
by Mallika Narayanan
- 49 **Ba (Three)** (1970)
by Bayveen O'Connell

- 50 **Reconfiguring Malcha Mahal (1978)**
by Mandira Pattnaik
- 51 **The Travelers (1982)**
by Amy Strong
- 52 **The Moment You Realise that Echo and the Bunnymen
are Better than ABC (1982)**
by Donna L. Greenwood
- 54 **Greenham Common (1983)**
by E. E. Rhodes
- 55 **That Night, the Silence Changed (1984)**
by Brecht De Poortere
- 57 **Game Boy (1989)**
by Anne Daly
- 59 **As We Mean to Go On (1995)**
by Joyce Meggett

In the Belly of the Whale

(4.54 billion years ago)

Junyi Chew

Here in the deep, everything pulsates with song. Before names and the brutal slicing up of minutes and seconds, song carries you in its folds.

The cadence slants and a colossal wheel begins to turn. There are a thousand shades of dark and you are losing them one by one.

Hunger beats on the door; the crowd brays, *we had a pact*. The knowledge that you are the gift burns like ice.

For a long time your conversation will be with the stars and the rocks. Your Elders will offer tutelage like they hold out biscuits to a favourite grandchild. And when you are ripe and bursting, you will give birth again and again and again.

Many things shall come to pass. You will bloom in the stories spun into spiders' webs and the fractals of mosques, the blackbird's melodies, the swell of orchestras.

There will be times when your children delight in you, when you break bread in olive groves and your laughter holds the fullness of one another in your hearts. Your young will bury their faces in your skirts and swear they love you to the moon and back.

There will be times when your children strike you and look away in anger and shame, their blows escalating in force and blindness, swung in the belief that if they glanced back at your writhing body, they would instantly be turned to stone.

Your progeny will pronounce you dead and eat you alive.

There will be times when you wish for any one of the roads not taken in a relentlessly branching map.

We promise nothing except that you will be floored by your own magnificence. And even in that moment the withering will have begun.

In light and dark, remember the song. The song is what you carry.

A mother's heart can create *everything*.

One Morning in Warboys

(1593)

Rachel Canwell

Even though Alice is not there, even though she has been shut out from the room, she knows it is true. The girl is writhing on the floor again.

From where she hunkers in the kitchen, crouched by the hearth, trying to coax the fire to life, Alice can hear the thuds.

She can feel in her aching bones the rhythmic knocking as the girl's limbs twist and shake, banging one after the other against the dusty boards in the room above.

Yesterday five times, the day previous three; today the convulsions have been constant. Starting in the blackest part of the night, continuing through to the lightening of dawn.

Alice hasn't moved. She has sat here cramped and cold, bearing witness to it all.

This is not her child, yet Alice feels every spasm, every beat as if it were coming from somewhere deep inside of her soul. Every cry the girl utters, strikes Alice square in her breast.

It makes that part she won't speak of pull against her thigh. The part that has grown with age, sagging and low. Nestled in her groin. The part she has tried more than once to cut away

The thing they call a witches teat.

Above the knocking is subsiding, falling from an insistent drumming to a hollow, steady beat. Alice looks up at the rafters and notices the dried herbs hanging there have begun to sway; the vibrations from above dislodging seeds and leaves. The kitchen is filled with the scent of something pungent, something intense and strange. She can taste it in her throat.

Alice lifts her hands, gnarled and papery, and watches this organic dust fall on her palms; a fragrant, grey-green snow. It coats her skin and she begins to shudder.

Alice leans forward, towards the kindling, barely caught in the

fireplace, cupping the dust in her hands. She lowers herself, wincing, and blows steadily, sending the fragments into the flames.

The fire flares and leaps, sends up great streaks of gold, amber, crimson, that dance and cavort, licking hungrily at the chimney stone. Alice cries out and falls back. Her bones crack, her wrists jar but her eyes stay fixed on the sudden, impossible flames.

There she sees it. A shadow, silent and terrible, that lifts from the embers, the thickest purple, hovering above the fire. Alice watches as it shifts, sorts itself into shape after darkening shape.

First hound, then hare, imp, then snake. Settling finally into a bird.

Huge with open hungry beak and great talons reaching down into the flickering flames. Hovering there, steady and commanding. Alice watches, horrified and spell bound; sees the raptor turn towards her, holding her with one gleaming eye.

Above all remains quiet

Without warning it moves, bursts out from the fire. Alice shrieks as it rushes upwards, over her head, and circles the room; rattles the copper pans, knocks against the windows and upsets the milk. Horror and confusion reign.

With a cry that belongs to a place far away, the creature soars to the ceiling, and Alice watches in horror as it changes form yet again. Like smoke, like an inky hissing whisper, it spreads, then pours itself beyond the beams, through ancient cracks; disappearing, inch by haunting inch, into the room above.

Alice scuttles, low and bent, across the stone flags, slipping on spilt milk and sodden straw. Throwing open the narrow kitchen door, she thrusts herself forward, out in to the yard, gulping in frantic gasps, snatching at the cool morning air.

But she does not linger.

By the time Alice hears the scream and the commencement of that twisted, unnatural knocking her hand is on the gate.

Alice puts one foot on the road, chasing a head start on what she knows is coming her way.

The Trial

(1699)

Jeff Taylor

"Will they kill Mamma?"

"We must go to support her," her father said softly, avoiding the dreadful question. He gently swept the child's unruly locks behind an ear, and caressed her cheek. Her innocence and confusion about this world that contained many things that were evil, and few things that were good, tormented him.

Their lives had been simple, just enough for a family on the small lot that provided their sustenance. A few chickens, one goat which provided their meagre source of milk, and corn stalks that produced food, or not, according to the vagaries of the climate. The land owners came weekly to demand their share, and sometimes more, when the mood took them.

The girl felt the torment that came from her father's soul and through his touch. "But Mamma has done nowt wrong!" she exclaimed, consumed with terror of things she had heard in the village. She looked, but could find no consolation in her father's eyes. Eyes that had wept for three days since the men-at-arms had stormed their hut and taken her mother away.

"There is a terrible mistake they have made," the father said. "They are saying that she is skilled in ancient augury and of bad character. But the charge is contrived. She should not have told others about the voices that are plaguing her."

"What will happen?"

"They will take her to the river for her trial, but she will be shown innocent!" He wrapped his arms around his daughter of ten years. They had slept fitfully for three nights since. For the first time since she was an infant, he had allowed her to curl up with him. They'd lain there, cocooned together, fearful of what the future would bring.

Hearts heavy with apprehension, they arose early on the morning of

dread, and attempted to eat an egg each to sustain them. The child threw hers up within a few minutes, and he tried to settle her stomach with some powdered ginger root. As they made their way to the river through the village, he prayed that some of them would show solidarity, and walk with them. Normally the street would be bustling with friendly greetings, but the quiet and emptiness of the place was self evident. They were on their own in this, as everyone had already left for the biggest show in town.

Spectators had flocked to an event so awful yet so entertaining. There were prayers, there were oaths. The bell-man clanged a deathly toll, full of his self-importance, and overdoing it according to some in the crowd.

There was scaffolding of wood on the bank. An old crone, arrived whom they called 'The Angel of Death'. She wore a black cloak and hood, and had no duty it seemed other than to be an observer. One day, when this one died, the elders would bestow her position onto the next in line. It was a much sought after honour.

Solemn men began to beat their shields with sticks as the accused, dressed in a gown of coarse material was brought out. The packed mob swayed and bayed at the woman's horror and despair, and drank greedily of it. She saw her husband and daughter, clad in their best tunics, and locked pleading eyes on them. But they dared not intervene, and could only pray for her to be vindicated.

A group dressed like monks, started speaking in a tongue that was unfamiliar to most present. A choir of priests began singing psalms.

There was urgency amongst the onlookers as they became impatient for the big event. A swell of noise as chanting began in the crowd, slowly to start, then gathering sound to soar like a heavenly chorus.

The woman seemed to now have become passive, and uttered not a word or a whimper. In fact her demeanour had changed to one of defiance. As if there had been some silent signal, the chanting and drumming stopped, and four hooded men appeared from the crowd. Slow, steady handclapping and the thumping of staves on the earth started up as they advanced. Each seized a limb of her, then stepped

across the boards of the platform, and in one motion threw her into the river. She made no resistance, protest or sound. The spectator noise died, and the masses became silent, watching and waiting. She disappeared from sight beneath the surface immediately without any sign of struggle to survive. The quiet lingered for several minutes, then a murmur of whispering started, growing in volume until a babble of noise filled the air. She had not surfaced, and the spirits had thus decided.

The faces of many of them now spoke a kind of mirth, as if the spectacle they had beheld had afforded them pleasure and satisfaction with the outcome.

Some people had brought kindling and firewood, and a man produced a firebrand which he threw on the pile so that the wood became engulfed in flames. The sun bled in the sky as a new, strange, cold wind blew.

The man clutched his distraught daughter. "Your mother has sunk, therefore it is proven she was addicted to evil spirits, and was a witch unbeknown."

Then, as he looked into her eyes, he realised with a start, how many of her mother's traits and characters his child had inherited. The worry of it tore at his heart. The crowd had now noticed the husband and the child lingering at the edge of the throng and a murmur started up.

The thrum built in intensity, and the masses started to slowly move in their direction.

"Come, child," he said. "We must quickly flee this place."

In a Stew

(1700s)

Fiona McKay

Me and Bobby are playing the rhyming game, clapping our hands together as we chant, Mother busy at the table, rolling out the pastry for what she is making, a big pie for our journey, though where we are to go, I have no mind, for she don't tell us when we ask her. I think of nothing but the rich smell of the gravy, steaming in a huge pot, the size of a giant's foot, filled with dark meat and liquor tumbling slowly, the meat falling off the bones in long, soft strands. The cooking smell has a bloody depth, it makes the back of my neck prickle, like an animal. Bobby has his nose up in the air, wolf-like.

I don't know where Mother got meat, and so much of it. Meat is for Christmas, and some rare days in the year, a scrap in our stew. But the journey will be a long one, she tells us, and we need to provide. Maybe we be going back to the place she came from, the farm where she grew up raising corn and slaughtering hogs. The blood sausage her mother was known for. My belly groans thinking of the food there'd be.

Mother lets me cut the letters for the top of the pie. I'm proud to show her I know them, though she don't, so well. I make B for Bobby, though he can't read it, but mother stops me, tells me to do S instead. S for Smith, to mark that pie as ours, she says, for when she takes it to the baker to be cooked in his big oven.

I make the letter and with what remains, some tiny leaves to go around the edge. Mother packs while I'm doing this. We don't have much.

Isn't Father coming with us, I ask, watching her bruised arms at work.
In a way, lass, she says, in a way.

Cave, Clovelly

(1783)

Lucy Peters

Cold walls, weeping under her lantern. The girls wait, hair loosened, shivering mermaids listening to the anguish of the sea. And a thunder of men rolls in, the tubman purpled, doubled over, batsmen shouting like her brothers after the hurlian match, and the winner of the ball's her new husband, a stranger in his drenched greatcoat, lugging something across his shoulders, a pig in a cloak? His eyes brighter than yesternight, their wedding eve. Then the moon tacks out from the clouds and she sees the blood, trickling to his boots, and around his neck the exciseman's limp young hand.

Sous la Terreur

(1794)

Kate Deimling

Anticipating this moment has been the sole focus of my anguished mind for so long that when it comes I am taken totally by surprise. Is this boy with the floppy canvas hat, this gentle child, really leading me to my execution?

He takes my arm and we tread on the matted straw past the other women, who have become all but invisible to me, like shadow puppets behind a screen. The boy leads me through a corridor, matching his steps to mine as if I'm recovering from an illness. My shoes click on the stone — no longer the brisk rhythm of striding to welcome my guests, arms outstretched, but slow, ponderous tapping, like a pocket watch someone has forgotten to wind. I stop and touch the stone wall, whose trails of water remind me of the wine cellar in my father's castle in Touraine where I played hide-and-seek as a child, overcoming my fear of dark places, determined to find the best hiding spot and impress my older cousins.

The boy takes my hand and my arm stretches to its full length as he begins to move through the doorway. There are two uneven steps and I climb them carefully. A laugh catches in my throat. I wouldn't want to get hurt now, would I? The boy turns back to look from under the brim of his hat, his gaze almost shy.

There is more light than I have seen for weeks, and people are moving about everywhere. Like a child at the theater for the first time, I find it hard to understand what is happening. Barking sounds from a group of men startle me, and I realize it is laughter. People are milling about as if it's a marketplace. The sun hits me full on — no shade anywhere — and I close my eyes and imagine it's a salve soaking into my skin. I look down. I am still wearing the day dress I had on when I was arrested. The hem of the salmon-colored worsted wool hangs dirty and ragged, but the ring of white organza roses around my neckline blooms as fresh as when I

first put it on. Not that anyone has noticed me. I am not something to be noticed anymore.

On a wooden stage stands the scaffold. I look away — down, to the side, anywhere but there. At a chemistry demonstration once, I was told not to look at the flame. Only with great effort could I force myself to look elsewhere. Does this kind of attraction animate moths' eyes, that they are irresistibly drawn to destructive light?

The boy leads me around the edge of the square, behind the scaffold. Men with red caps and guns or swords stand there, chatting. There is a hubbub, and I see men moving around on the platform the way they do when controlling a recalcitrant horse. They step aside and there is a scraping sound as the blade is raised, then a thud. If heard in a workshop, where wood is sliced or sheets of tin are stamped, it would be a pleasing sound.

The men step onto the scaffold again, and there is Etienne. His wig is gone, and seeing how his hair recedes at the temples I remember waking up to him bending over me in his dressing gown, telling me to go back to sleep and kissing my eyelids. He is diminished, and with his sharp nose he looks almost birdlike. His cheeks are pale; he must have been shaved this morning. Not a trace of the darkness that used to tinge them at the end of the day, accenting the angle of his jaw.

My stomach lurches, fear ripples through my arms and legs. I hold myself still, overtaken by a somber, serious feeling, much like my wedding day, when I was aware I had to live up to all that was expected of me as we knelt before the priest and I prepared to pledge myself before God to my husband. Is God present at this moment? Is there any prayer that will prevent what is about to happen?

Etienne has been strapped down. I can no longer see his face and I wonder if he is thinking of me. I wonder if I should call out to him, but it seems too horrible. Look away, look away! I look down, at the cobblestones. I imagine them as eternal gray rocks that have been here since the earth began, remnants of boulders that bulge over the surface of the globe, rough cliffs that jut over a remote sea, where no human foot has ever

trod.

There is a thud. The men carry a basket down the steps. It contains the eyes that loved me, the lips that kissed me.

The boy squeezes my hand. I forgot he was here. I look into his eyes. My wig was taken soon after my arrest, and I pulled my hair back into a long braid to try to keep it clean. My eyes, my face, feel dry and cracked. I am brittle as a skeleton. Yet he looks at me with affection. Behind him some soldiers are squatting and playing dice on the stones.

"If you walk a few steps this way, past those trees is the avenue. No one will notice."

The trees are very close. Their leaves lift in a light breeze. It should not be difficult at all. Yet I feel rooted to the ground.

He gives me a little push in that direction. I fixate on a spot, a single leaf, as dancers do to keep from falling over. I will walk to that leaf. From that leaf, forward the same distance again. The laws of geometry have not been changed. With a straight line to guide me I shall soon be far away.

Napoleon Bonaparte Visiting the Plague Stricken of Jaffa

(1799)

Ruth Brandt

Absolute bollocks. That's what Jacques Petit thinks of this little big-man in tight white jodhpurs and with a red feather in his hat, who is reaching out an ungloved hand towards a feverish fellow as though his dazzling gold braid endows him immunity. When here Jacques is, kneeling on the ground, as ordered, in bleeding Palestine, as ordered, without even a sodding cloth to wrap around his gent and two veg. Come to reassure his conquering troops now smitten with plague, this man has, except those wanting the reassurance, those trembling behind lace hankies and holding sprigs of spring foliage to their noses, are back in Paris, firmly indoors.

Not even a rag to conceal his nadgers, has Jacques. Fellow-me-lad over there has been given a sheet of some sort. What's-his-name, face to the ground snivelling, has a sack over his buttocks. And Jacques? He is to endure the pestilence stark-bollock naked.

Such a farce this whole thing. Hauled from his barracks so the tiny-weeny boss man can be lauded in *Le Figaro* for providing succour to his stricken troops. Go down well with the nobility, this exploit will. He and his plume will be praised for demonstrating there is nothing to fear. No thing at all. Remarkable bravery.

Dear Lord, when will this midget cease his vainglorious parading and allow Jacques to slink back to his straw pallet with his bulging neck and shits and, please God, nothing more. He can't take any more.

What has the world come to? Total bollocks.

The Pioneering Marine Biologist

(1800s)

Kik Lodge

Jeanette Villepreux-Power embroiders tiny calcite shells onto the Queen's dress and watches them sail along the lace hem.

The Queen does not see this. She sees masked balls, court envy.

"*Ça me va à merveille!*" the Queen says, and she twists her torso towards the mirror.

"What an exceptional embroiderer you are, Madame!"

Jeannette Villepreux-Power is an embroiderer, yes, and she is also a scientist! She has seen how the paper nautilus or female argonaut does not borrow other shells like Aristotle thought, no! she secretes her own and uses it to carry eggs, to float with other females, to race through the ocean on an air bubble at giddy speeds. An architect of her own life!

Jeanette Villepreux-Power wants to say to the Queen who is looking out the window at the King as he strolls in the gardens below with two feathered ladies hooked under both arms, "do you know that the male argonaut carries his detachable sperm-delivery arm in a sack under his left eye and that he doesn't make shells at all?"

Instead, she says, "*vous êtes belle, Madame,*" because that's what Queens like to hear generally speaking, and the latter tiptoes in front of the mirror and makes a movement akin to the *paper nautilus* rising to the surface to gulp in as much air as she can.

The Harvest of War

(1816)

Jenny Woodhouse

Midsummer day. A dull red sun, veiled in something not cloud, nor mist, nor smoke. We live in eternal twilight, hoping, praying, that the sky will clear and summer will come. But this is the year without a summer. Our second year of famine.

I stand with the other women, looking across the fields, hoping to see signs of growth, knowing there are none. We're all hungry, though I'm given a little more than most.

This isn't like the smoke of last midsummer, cloying, stinking. They forced us to burn the soldiers' bodies. Some say this new darkness was caused by a fiery mountain on the other side of the world. Others that God is punishing us for war and killing. I cannot believe that. The war was not of our wanting or our making.

Last year's battle destroyed our fields. It seeded our ploughland with bullets. Our pasture was deep in ruts and mud and the cows milked poorly. There was little left to harvest after Bonaparte's Frenchmen fled and the triumphant English and Prussians stormed after them.

Sightseers came, trampling any remaining grain we might have gleaned, searching for whatever jetsam the tide of war had left behind. The gentlemen wanted souvenirs: insignia, musket balls, weapons. The less well-off took anything that they could sell. They looted purses, spectacles, gold chains, silk handkerchiefs. They even pulled the teeth from the corpses to sell to dentists.

We were hungry that winter. But we did what we had to do. We ploughed and sowed and hoped for a good harvest. Spring came. A few shoots pushed up in the cornfields, flourished briefly then yellowed, drooped, and died. Little grew in that everlasting winter.

My child was born in March. Out of wedlock but nobody blamed me.

They gave me food when I could not work, tended me when my pains began. There had been so many soldiers, drunk with victory, rampaging through the village. So many soldiers, but the other women thanked God. There was only one baby, and that not theirs.

The Big House

(1830)

Georgia Hilton

She knows this room more intimately than he does. He sleeps and dresses here, is served his breakfast from silver dishes, sometimes reads his correspondence. But Mabel knows this room in all hours and seasons. She is the one who slips into the dark cocoon of his slumber to sweep the ashes from the grate and light the new fire. This she accomplishes swiftly, almost in silence, though she need not worry as he sleeps long and heavy, unencumbered yet by any responsibility.

Later in the morning she will come in and draw back the heavy drapes, serve his breakfast. She keeps her eyes downcast, but in any case, he doesn't see her. The household spaniels are of more significance than she is. 'I think I am like a lampshade or a footstool' she says to Cook, 'only noticed when missing'.

Mabel has gone missing once. She was younger then, thirteen perhaps, and homesick. She slipped down the backstairs, out through the kitchen while the house was sleeping. Stumbling, skirts wet with dew through Grange Park to Northington Crossroads and straight on home to the village, a journey by foot of almost two hours. Her mother screamed and scolded when she saw her, fearful she would lose her position. So that was the end of Mabel's ramblings.

This morning the young master will be hunting, in his scarlet coat and top hat, and tall black boots polished to a mirror-like sheen. She doesn't know that what she feels is envy, but Mabel wishes she too could fly like a winged sprite across the fields. The ease of his stride to his waiting mount, leather crop in hand, as if the very earth would move at his command.

Silver-Pockets Pete

(1850)

Christine Collinson

Pete's so used to the stench that he smells nothing. Not tanners' muck, butchers' muck, people's muck. In his world, down in the night-time sewers, every sense is alert but his deadened nostrils. For a practiced Tosher, the finds await the taking. At moonrise he scours for the gleam of metal, or flashes of colour amongst sludge-brown fifth. The treasures of rich folk cast aside.

The other Toshers call him Silver-Pockets; Pete's luck had held since he was a young man first tipped into the grime. This night, desperation sits on his shoulders. Pete's youngest child, Betsy, was weak with sickness. He'd left Georgia frantic, trying to settle Betsy beside her with only watery soup in their bellies again. As he faced the bedroom door, Georgia had grabbed his arm. "Please, Pete, find us something tonight."

If only it were that simple. He knows the likely places after all the years, delves his arm elbow-deep in stinking water, hoping to feel a solid shape between his fingertips. Coins wedge in familiar places, like seeds stuck between teeth. All the best Toshers know where to find them, it was just a matter of being the first. Sometimes, Pete's loyal gang-mate divvied up the finds. "You take the next; the one after's mine, no funny ideas." And he'd fix Pete with hollow eyes, death-black in the lantern light.

When he most needs a find, it's even harder. The rats are having a better night. In his sieve Pete sees fish bones, globules of fat, lumps of ash. Everything the well-dressed folk above don't want; discarded, spat out, washed away. Move on, try another spot. The lantern-light flickers against the tunnel, casting ghostly patterns. Dead Toshers of years past. "Got ya!" A plain hatpin which might yield some coin. Not much, but something. He recalls Georgia's colourless face pleading for reassurance, Betsy's cries into the pillow. The city's rubbish was their bounty, but she was not proud. When it came to the nippers, Georgia was above nothing. As was he.

And then, somewhere further up, sluices open. Rushing water is upon Pete before he can prepare, the thundering force topples him. His sieve is washed from his hands, the lantern goes out. Darkness. He fights to stand against it, but rising water, and coldness, engulf him.

The space fills quickly. Pete's head slams against the roof-curve. His final sense, of foul water drenching his face, filling his nostrils. Has no choice but to breathe the stench of filth again, after so long. The single hatpin in his pocket, the only sliver of wealth carried with him. Just one more man to join the Toshers' graveyard, one more soul to flicker across the dark tunnel walls.

La Peste

(1855)

Michelle Walshe

The sickness walked into my village in the shape of a white man.

I watched his arrival from high in the ancient baobab tree. Something kept me there. Told me not to move. The stillness of the animals. The silence of the birds. A feeling of a worm crawling in my belly.

A heavy rotting scent rolled through the air. I smelt it before I saw him.

He was the size of four villagers standing together. His body strained against his clothes; his flesh wobbled when he walked. His white clothing blinded me. It shone as brightly as the sun. I looked away, focussed on the soft green leaves on the branches around me until the glare subsided.

A high but plain headdress made of metal sat low on his head with a single white feather pointing backwards as if trying to escape. His jowly chin crawled over the strap that cut across his jaw. Shiny golden buttons on his jacket caught the sun, sending out flashes of light so bright it hurt my eyes.

I watched as the villagers ran towards him, dropping their weapons, chanting, beating their painted chests, grabbing tokens of welcome from the ground, or from inside their huts, a stick, a necklace, a decorated rock.

They gathered in front of the white man, sat cross-legged in a semi-circle at his feet. He was not truly white. His skin was mottled pink. Streaks like angry welts crisscrossed his pallid cheeks. A flushing redness crept up his neck pooling in places, round rosy patches coagulating like little puddles of blood. His ears burned pure purple like the feathers of the birds that nested in the trees.

A monkey screeched in the distance, a solitary sound. A shiver crawled up the back of my neck like an insect.

The white man roared words the villagers did not understand. But the birds understood. A flock rose from the trees, the branches around

me shook, rustled, then fell silent. A sudden whoosh the only sound of their evacuation.

Spittle formed at the white man's mouth. Flecks flew into the row of upturned faces before him. They wiped it away with their hands and used those hands to touch the feet of the white man, to hug each other, to clap, backslap, rejoice. They built a fire, danced into the night, whooping, hollering, waving their hands in the air.

I slept in the tree.

When I woke the white man was gone.

The birds returned. Different birds. Black birds. I watched them circle the row of bodies curled like commas on the sun-bleached earth as if they were unsure of their prey.

I squinted into the limpid light of the breaking dawn, the edge of the sky barely tinted orange by the rising sun. Maybe the villagers were still sleeping. But their bodies held that stillness, the stillness of supplication.

One bird broke the circle. Dived swiftly. Cut a perfect v through the air. Beak open. Claws raised.

Then I knew.

Going Down the Line

(1862)

Clare Martin

The ward orderly threw the lumpy brown paper package into Robert's lap and gave a chirpy little whistle.

'There you go Father, goodies from home. They'll make you feel better.'

Robert sighed. It would be socks or a muffler - again. He closed his eyes to shut out the disinfectant-laced cheeriness of the delivery round. He just wanted to be left in peace but the package, rough under his thin, shaking hands, begged to be opened. Tugging at the string knots he unfolded the paper to reveal, ah yes, thick woollen socks in marbled grey yarn, wrapped around a small, hand-bound book.

A wash of wintery sunlight fell from the window high above, lighting the cover with the words, 'To Father from your loving daughter, Beth' in spidery letters. Inside were pages of sweet, childish drawings and stories of love and bravery. Underneath, buried at its heart, a note from his dear Margaret. She was waiting for him. Proud of her hero husband and his work, succouring the troops fighting the good fight.

Good?

Who or what was good in this hellhole of pain and blood?

Robert let his head fall back onto his sweat-stained pillow. The bubbling in his chest grew until he could hold it no longer. He leaned forward, racked with coughing. Greeny-yellow spittle dribbled down his chin. No red streaks today.

The nurses would say that was good.

Not him.

Not here.

Not today. His last in the blessed isolation of this dirty, desperate camp hospital.

Robert leaned back on the pillow again.

Sally.

Yes, Sally had been good; her body a beacon of warm delight in a dark, dismal, hopeless place.

For three, sweet months she'd shared his bed when he returned each night, weary from mouthing empty platitudes of comfort to the frightened, the restless and the dying. Or they'd take a tumble in the shadowy light of the campfire, secrecy sweetening the horizontal refreshment he preached against by day. Her passion had warmed his soul, her clever fingers and mouth bringing his drained body to peaks of pleasure and moments of perfect, shining peace.

Then the small open sore bloomed at the side of his mouth. He knew what it meant, seen it many times amongst the men. The almost inevitable result of going down the line with the women.

Women like Sally.

From that day on he wrapped his face in the despised home-made mufflers, thankful for the excuse of the bitter winter wind.

He turned his face away from Sally and her comforts. Too little, too late.

The syphilitic seed she'd planted grew and blossomed in his chest.

The seed he would take home to his loving family.

Rebel Doctor

(1916)

Emma McEvoy

The only source of light in the cell comes from the moon: it enters through the barred window and casts a silvery glow over the women, giving them a ghostly pallor. They are all monochrome versions of who they were only days ago when they were brimming with bluster and bravado, full of dreams and possibilities for themselves and each other and their country. Kathleen looks upon their sleeping forms, wishing she, too, could momentarily escape this hell. She wishes it had never come to this, wishes it had never needed to come to this, but really, she has no regrets.

Closing her eyes, she offers up a prayer to the god she shares with her friends, her comrades, but a religion she does not. She thinks of her father, a rector and a unionist, who will undoubtedly be ashamed of her actions. She has tried to keep her involvement with the Citizens' Army from her family but no doubt they will have learned by now that she's being held in jail as a political prisoner. Daughter, doctor, the one who has made them proud on so many occasions for her educational achievements, her appointments and her pioneering positions in the field of medicine.

She's had a lifetime of pushing herself forward; of not lying down; not taking no for an answer when doors were closed on her because of her sex. A lifetime of asking for improved conditions for the poor and better access to medical care. Here, she asks for food to stop their excruciating hunger; for access to exercise; for blankets which are not crawling with lice. Earlier, when she complained about the appalling sanitary conditions, she was told: "It's good enough for you. Lice and fleas and typhoid should content you."

But she is not content, nor does she have a desire to reform herself or change her beliefs: she's had enough. Anger has simmered inside her for as long as she can remember; anger at how the marginalised are

treated by those with power; an anger which intensified and began to boil when she met other like-minded souls and was converted to the national cause as a means of achieving freedom, equality and suffrage. For all.

When the soldiers arrested her, they thought she was with the insurgents in a medical capacity. But she told them, "I'm a Red Cross doctor; and a belligerent." A wry smile curls her lips at the memory.

Outside the cell, there are footsteps. She tenses, and listens to see if they will pass by their door and is flooded with relief when they fade down the passage. They are not all bad, her jailers. She has come to know them over the course of her stay here in Kilmainham. Last night, one of the old sergeants came with oranges, which he had concealed in his pockets, to share with them. Never has she tasted anything so wonderful, so juicy and zesty and utterly delicious. She kept some of the rind in her pocket, takes it out now, runs her fingers over the bumpy skin, lifts it to her nose, welcoming how the scent cuts through the odour of must and decay. It reminds her of the kindness of some. The humanity: for that is what she is fighting for.

As Kathleen Lynn feels overcome by exhaustion, feels her strength fade, she lays down in the moonbeams next to her friends and comrades, hoping her dreams will provide her with a brief respite. She reminds herself of who she is: Chief Medical Officer of the Irish Citizen's Army. Captain in the Easter Rising. Red Cross doctor. Belligerent. She has no regrets.

The Lotus Lounge

(1921)

Kathryn Kulpa

The Lotus Lounge, where languid ladies linger long past the hour when respectable schoolgirls are asleep in their respectable beds. Asleep in their respectable beds, wrapped in white sheets, under white canopies. But under white canopies, do schoolgirls dream of languid Lotus hours, smoking perfumed cigarettes, drinking absinthe, lounging on crimson velvet couches, crossed legs revealing a tease of garter? What do they know of the Lotus Lounge, these girls who sit tight and upright ("Don't slouch, ladies! Perfect posture brings perfect health!") in starched shirtwaists at the new consolidated high school? What do they know of the Lotus ladies, ladies whispered about but never seen, save in one daring moment when a bold girl ignores the warnings of her less bold friend and stands tippy-toe at the window where a curtain was left undrawn and finds herself unexpectedly close, close enough to touch a lady smoking a short, fat cigarette (or was it a cigar? *Could* a woman smoke a cigar?) in a black lace peignoir, in a red leather chair. Languidly, that lady's green eyes meet hers. Her look is sedulous. Incredulous. Going-to-bedulous. O sweet sleepy-eyed lady of the Lotus! What secrets do you know?

Secrets passed round like autograph books, whispered in the buffed and shining high school halls by these girls whose fathers rode the range or dug for gold. These girls born to a civilized age of microbes and motorcars. Will they be somebody's wife, or *Somebody's Stenog*, or something else, something only half imagined? Do they dream a loose life, a louche life of unbound freedom, dancing through nights, sleeping through days, not to be chivied by the school's morning bell, not to be cramped in classrooms where the clock's hands crawl, slow and slower. O ladies of the Lotus, sultry sirens of sensation, save us from Domestic Science!

And the ladies, lowering their violet eyelids, hands playing carelessly

with the thinning hair of fat bankers, imagine ending everything in a whipcrack blaze of gunpowder, then sigh for the dream of a life in middy blouses and woolen skirts, a cloistered classroom life where the hardest thing to escape in the world is boredom.

Idle

(1922)

Diane Simmons

Winnie tuts when she sees her husband sprawled out in his chair, his head in a book again. 'It's a warm evening,' she says. 'Are there not things need doing down allotment?'

'I'm happy enough reading.'

She picks up his cup and saucer from the hearth. 'I don't know how you can just sit there. I were taught not to be idle.'

Hubert stares at her for a moment before he speaks. 'Reading's not being idle, Winnie. You know how busy I am at that factory – I need some peace of an evening.'

Mad, she marches into the scullery, wipes down things that don't need wiping down. Why is he so content with doing nowt? Her weaving shed's a right tiring place to be and her head thumps some days with the noise of it all, but you wouldn't catch her sitting down at seven-thirty in the evening. It's not how she was brought up. And Hubert doesn't come from a lazy family either.

When Hubert leaves the room, she picks up his library book and looks at the title: *My Man Jeeves*. She flicks through it – it's just a load of daft stories, nowt useful. She had been fond of books about plants and animals when she was younger, but her mother discouraged reading, said she should be spending time improving her cooking or darning – preparing herself to be a good wife. But her Hubert doesn't seem to care about Winnie being a good wife or about her efforts with the house.

When he comes back in, she waves his book at him. 'I don't understand, Hubert,' she says. 'Newspapers and pamphlets fair enough. And the bible if you'd go near it. But this book's just made-up stories, not things that really happened – butlers and cocktail parties – it's nowt like our life.'

He lights a Woodbine and takes a drag. 'That's the point, Winnie. That's the point.'

Why?

(1938)

Christine Reeves

The Star of David is important to our family so I didn't understand why my parents were worried when someone painted it on the wall outside.

I can still see the horror on Mutti's face when she saw it, quickly shutting our front door, leaning against it crossing her arms against her chest.

'What's wrong?' I asked.

She stared through me for a while before she smiled and said:

'Nothing for you to worry about Ruth.' She brought one hand to her forehead, 'I'm just feeling faint. Let's have hot chocolate and Linzer biscuits.'

Mutti was always baking and her Linzer biscuits, with their soft jam centres, was a family favourite. As we sat in the kitchen, our fingers covered in icing sugar, I forgot to ask about the door.

That was in March 1938.

Not long afterwards our school director came into my class and said all Jewish children had to leave. Nine of us stood and had to file out. I felt embarrassed and couldn't understand why we were being excluded. After that my parents would not allow me to leave our apartment.

'It is not safe Liebling,' Vati said.

Then Mutti stopped baking, saying we could no longer afford such luxuries. I found out Vati had lost his job.

Sometimes I heard people in the street calling 'Juden raus' and 'Heil, Heil' and would peer through the curtains to see angry crowds outside.

'Why Vati?' I asked.

He would shake his head and say, 'They don't like us, I don't know why.'

One day there were raised voices in the corridor outside our apartment followed by banging on our front door. Vati told me to stay in my room. I lay on the bed hugging Liese my doll, a pillow over my

head. Only after the front door slammed and there was silence did I go out to find Mutti sitting on the floor sobbing into her apron. Vati had gone. I never said goodbye.

Soon after that a couple came and looked at our apartment. They liked it and we had to move out within fourteen days.

'Why?' I asked Mutti, her eyes red-rimmed and puffy.

'I don't know,' she replied.

We moved into an apartment occupied by five other families. Mutti moaned because we had to leave all our furniture and pictures, even though there would have been no space for them in our corner of a shared room. I would often find her sitting at the table rocking back and forth. When I asked her to make Linzer biscuits she would stroke my cheek and shake her head.

We would have starved if it had not been for Frau Wegner, who was there with her daughter and three grandchildren. She seemed to know everything about everyone and Mutti would once have called her nosey, but it was Frau Wegner who told us to look after one another, to work together. I went out a few times but the men in the streets frightened me. Not so Frau Wegner, every day she went out returning with food and medicines for those who needed it.

As summer passed Mutti barely ate and she started coughing, she had always cared about her appearance, now her clothes were stained and hung loose and she never brushed her hair. It was autumn when she told me Frau Wegner was going to take me to see some people who could make things better.

'How?' I asked.

Mutti ignored my question, telling me I had to be a good girl and remember my manners as she fussed with my plaits.

Later that day as I stood in front of a large desk a woman questioned me about my family and schooling. I was polite and well behaved. The woman studied some papers then stamped one and called out 'Medical'.

Back in the apartment, I told Mutti about having my photo taken and Frau Wegner said my application had been approved and we now had

to wait.

'Wait for what?' I asked.

Frau Wegner looked at Mutti who answered, 'For a sponsor.'

'Why do I need a sponsor?'

Mutti looked away as she said, 'A sponsor will give you a home, away from here, somewhere you'll be safe.'

'I'm safe with you. Home is with you,' I said. Then asked, 'Will you be coming?'

Mutti shook her head.

'Why aren't you coming?' I shouted.

'Sponsors only take children,' Frau Wegner answered.

Mutti put her arms around me, squeezing me tight and said, 'Sorry Liebling, I'm so sorry.'

Weeks passed. There was fighting in the streets. Two more families moved into the apartment and Mutti's cough got worse.

In December Frau Wegner came in with some papers saying I had a sponsor and would be leaving the following week.

I watched Mutti sort through our possessions, consulting a list provided by the authorities of what I was allowed to take and packing them into a small suitcase.

On the day of my departure Mutti insisted she would take me to the station; only one adult was allowed to accompany a sponsored child. Before we left Frau Wegner held me close whispering,

'Be brave Ruth.'

Mutti hung a label attached with string around my neck saying, 'This is your ticket, look after it.'

The label was printed with a number.

Wien Westbahnhof was chaotic with officials and soldiers yelling loudly trying to control the crush of people. Like me, all the children wore a label round their necks. Adults were not allowed onto the platform so we had to say goodbye at the gates.

'Be brave mein Liebling,' Mutti said as she tucked a handkerchief into my pocket, then she was gone.

As the train pulled out of the station I stared into the darkness and remembered Liese was in my case. As I took her out I saw one of Mutti's aprons together with a hand-written recipe for her Linzer biscuits.

It was then I cried.

The Last Drop

(1939)

Denise Bayes

Silver tiddlers squirm within the jam jar. Tommy rests the glass base on the doorstep.

Dark fenland peat drops in clumps as he stamps his feet. He tiptoes past Ma, washing up in the kitchen, silent steps down the corridor towards the wooden door.

Pressing down on the handle, chatter from inside the bar grows louder. Tommy looks up at his father releasing the tap, pushing a glass of golden beer across the counter.

"Cheers, mate."

The small boy stands on tiptoes to watch the customers. A group of pilots from the nearby air base lean on the wood, drinking, chatting.

"Hello, wee Tommy." A glass raised in his direction.

He listens as they weave tales of their homes, far away from the flatness of these lands. Tommy stares at the pilot with dark hair. Sees him gaze ahead in silence, lost in thought.

"Well, better be off. Busy night ahead."

The men drain their glasses and push their way through the black felt of the curtained door. Good luck messages ring through the air from the locals drinking, glasses lifted towards the uniformed squad.

The dark-haired airman stays by the bar. Tommy stares at him. Watches as the last drop of amber fluid disappears down the pilot's throat, eyes closed.

"Goodbye," the man salutes. Tommy thinks he sounds like he is about to cry.

Tommy's throat tightens. He has heard them through the bedroom wall, Mum pleading for Dad not to join up, telling him that she needs him here in the pub, needs him here with Tommy. Dad's sighs telling her that he has to do his bit.

Is this what doing your bit looks like? Tommy wonders, seeing the

pilot's blank gaze. He feels Dad's hand grasp his shoulder.

The bar falls quiet. Drinkers turn towards the door, watch the airman leave in silence.

"Come and show me what you caught today, son."

Dad leads Tommy through the corridor out to the yard. Daylight is fading across the flat fenland landscape, as they crouch on the back step, watching the torpid fish circuit the cloudy jar.

"That pilot, Dad. He looked..."

Tommy stops, feels his stomach twist.

"Sometimes the men have a feeling it might be a tricky night." Dad sighs. "Not everyone comes back safe."

Dad shakes the glass jar.

"Shall we let these chaps free now?"

Side by side, Tommy and Dad release the shiny bodies back into the river.

A ripple of waves shakes the water as plane engines roar overhead.

Keep Calm and Carry On

(1939)

Laura Besley

Mary looks at the girl – sitting in her parlour, on her sofa, next to her son – and hates her. Hates her scarlet-painted unsmiling lips, hates her hand with matching painted nails resting on her son's knee, hates her downcast eyes, and hates her swollen stomach.

'If it's a girl,' Henry says, sunshine splitting his face, 'we're going to call her Sylvie after Alice's mum. And if it's a boy, we're going to call him Henry,' he says. 'After Dad.'

Mary's husband spent one week with his son before he returned to the trenches. A month later a piece of shrapnel flew into his stomach and killed him. So it's only ever been the two of them. Mary and her boy. She worries the name is cursed, wonders if she should say something, but holds her tongue.

After a dinner of steak pie with vegetables from the allotment, Mary washes and Henry dries, a habit long-formed. Out of the window, she watches swallows sweep and swoop, preparing for the long journey ahead.

'Please try to like her, Mum,' Henry says. He dries a cup and places it with the rest of the best crockery on a tray to be returned to the sideboard by his mother.

Watching the birds, Mary forgets about his call-up papers, his uniform, the one supposed to evoke fear in its enemies, but in her eyes makes him look young, no more than a boy playing dress up.

'Promise me, Mum. She doesn't have anyone else and there's the baby to think about.'

Mary nods, looks out of the window again, but the birds have gone.

A little before noon, when Alice is feeding Sylvie, Mary puts the water on to boil. She tips a level spoonful of loose tea into the pot, then cuts them each a thin slice of bread. She sets the table, gives herself the plate with

the chip in the exact centre of the purple flower.

The kettle whistles and Mary turns off the gas. She pours the water, stirs and stirs, as if that will make the tea strong enough to taste.

From her cot in the bedroom she shares with her mother, Sylvie sings to herself in words only Mary and Alice understand. A few moments after Sylvie goes quiet, Alice saunters into the kitchen, sits down at the table and lights a cigarette. 'She's asleep. Shall we eat?'

There is a knock at the door.

Mary looks at Alice, then at the stairway leading down to the front door on the cobbled high street.

'I'll go,' Alice says.

Mary tiptoes to the bedroom door to check Sylvie hasn't been woken up. She is lying on her back, arms and legs splayed, mouth open, as if someone switched her off mid-song.

When Mary returns to the kitchen, Alice is leaning against the doorjamb, clutching a piece of paper. Her scarlet lips are moving, but no sound comes out.

Mary stumbles to a chair, slumps onto it.

'He's... he's...' Alice says.

'Don't,' Mary says. 'Don't you dare say it.'

Alice scrunches up the paper and throws it at the bin. It misses, nestles itself next to the icebox. Mary leaps from her seat to retrieve it, then kneels on the cold kitchen floor, ironing out the creases in the paper with her hand against her lap. Her last connection to him.

The front door slams, the subsequent silence pierced only by the slicing seconds from the wall-mounted clock.

Mary gulps and grasps for breath. She thought she knew grief after it forced its way into her life, like a cuckoo pushing out all her other feelings. Except her love for Henry. Oh, Henry. She keens, leans forward. Yes, Mary thought she knew grief. But the grief for her husband has thawed over the years, has been gently folded into the creases of her skin and become part of her. Unlike this new grief which is sharp and pointy and arctic, each stab life-threatening.

She sits up. The curse. Maybe the name is cursed after all. Or maybe it's her. Is this why she has lost both the men in her life? It's nothing more than she deserves after what she thought the day she met Alice. Hoped the girl would lose interest in Henry, or lose the baby. Either. Both.

'Mummy,' Sylvie says. 'Mummy.' Louder this time.

Mary pushes herself up from the kitchen floor. In her bedroom she opens the top drawer of her bedside cabinet and lays the telegram inside alongside another; like father, like son.

'Nan-nan?'

Mary knows Sylvie's cries will topple into tears in a moment or two. She pushes open the door to the bedroom.

Sylvie stands in the cot, her eyes and blonde curls peeking over the top rail. Mary marvels at how much she resembles Henry.

'Hungry, Nan-nan,' Sylvie says.

'Let's get you something to eat then.' Mary lifts her out of the cot and kisses her brow. The weight of her body sits heavy on her hip, the responsibility heavier, but she will gladly bear it. Together, they will carry on.

Going East

(1940)

Slawka G. Scarso

Sweat has a different smell when you're tired, when you're scared. Sweat mixes with the smell of cows, or what once was transported in these wagons, before they decided to use them for men, and women, and children. Sweat mixes with the smell of urine and faeces from those who missed the holes in the floor, curled up for privacy, mothers covering their teenage daughters, men not bothering at all.

I'm among the lucky ones, who found a place by the wall. Every now and then, I look at the landscape through a slit in the wooden planks that is wide enough to confirm that we're going East, and let in the cold, let in the air.

I breathe in, I gasp, but hang in there.

When we arrive at a village in the Urals, a village of which we'll never know the name of, the train stops. Soldiers and mechanics rest. I, we, cannot rest when standing for days, weeks, crouching in turn but only for the briefest time until our legs cramp up.

I hear a shy knock on the planks from the outside, I look through the slit and see a girl, – fifteen? Sixteen, maybe? – She passes me a cup filled with tea. She knows. She's seen all the trains that have come before us, crowded with people; seen them returning, stacked with minerals. She hands me a flower too, and I wonder if it's for the dead, already. I know there's one on the other end of the wagon: I heard the moment everyone went silent.

I pass the tea to mother, but she insists I drink it instead, to keep warm, and as we discuss, someone takes the tea from us, the little cup disappearing among the hands and the shoulders, and the coats that cannot keep away the cold.

When we start up again, two weeks pass, then three, four. Counting days has become a meaningless waste of time. When we next stop, it is for good. The doors are opened and we stumble over each other on stiff

legs. As I touch the cold, icy ground of Siberia, a ground I will have to learn to dig with my hands and a stone, I look at the guard ushering us forward, thinking he must be eighteen, just like me, and I ask:

‘How are we to survive here?’

He looks at me, lost for words, and I think that yes, he must be my age.

And then I hear the officer looming behind me:

‘You’re not meant to.’

A Real Solid Guy, Was Pawpaw

(1942)

Mallika Narayanan

Maw's eyes were closed and spit leaked from her open mouth like our dog, Bessie's did. I turned to the train window, stuck out my pointy finger, and scrawled Ben in the dust.

We passed fields with horses and black and white cows like the puzzle pieces I used to fix in Pawpaw's place. Pawpaw had horses too. Three of them, Bert and Cole, and Gus. When I became real big, right after my fifth birthday, Pawpaw let me feed Cole.

Pawpaw made me and Maw smile because my Paw was far far away shooting mean people dead for our uncle Sam, so we'd be safe at home. Maw used to be real proud until two men with stars on their uniform knocked on the door. They took off their hats when they saw Maw.

Maw never spoke of Paw again.

The bus sped away and the horses became tiny dots.

It was a neat trick because horses are real big. Pawpaw would lift me so I could touch Bert's head with mine. Bert would whinny but I never got scared. Pawpaw said one day I'll be a real solid guy like Paw.

"What's solid?"

"You see the ol' White Oak tree there, by the well? It stood before my Pawpaw was here and it'll still stand when you're old and grey."

"Will I have hairs growing out of my ears too, like you?"

He had thrown his head back and laughed.

Then, one day, Pawpaw clutched his chest and fell. Maw came running. They took Pawpaw away in a big fancy car. Maw cried until snot came out of her nose. When I tried to wipe it, she hugged me. "Oh Benjamin, your Pawpaw has gone to be with your Paw and Jesus."

That night I heard Mrs. Jenkins tell Maw it was cruel of Jesus to take Pawpaw. I didn't know why she said that. I'd heard Jesus was a real good

guy and he was kind.

Maw got angry and said Pawpaw's heart was bad and the doctor didn't do nothin'. But the Vicar said that Pawpaw always had a good heart. They put Pawpaw in a wood box and sent him to a dark place anyway.

Two men came to the farm later. "It's a good deal, Mrs. A. I'd take it if I were you," the first said.

Maw told them to leave and cussed some bad words I'm not supposed to know.

The second man aimed the shotgun tucked under the crook of his arm at Maw's face and said, "A solid deal."

Maw was real quiet that night.

"We're going to live with your Aunty Alice. You remember her?"

"They have a Border Collie, Jack!"

Maw smiled big before she cried.

I was sad to say goodbye to the horses and Bessie too because Maw said we couldn't take Bessie with us. But I didn't cry because I wanted to be a solid guy for Pawpaw.

Ba (Three)

(1970)

Bayveen O'Connell

In the West, when a woman is pregnant, they say she is expecting; but none of us expected this: my daughter born perfect but trapped in cold sleep, my son without eyes and a heart with the lifespan of a butterfly, my niece without a cap for her tiny skull.

In Buddhism, things are done in threes: three bows, three incense sticks lit, three circles around the temple. It was my wife, Linh, who convinced me we should try again. So, here we are at the Jade Emperor Pagoda, waiting in line to offer up our prayers, our hopes for a healthy child, one that will emerge intact and awake from the half-globe of Linh's belly, as we watch women passing us, twisting red string bracelets around their wrists: right for a boy, left for a girl.

Though I'm afraid the imbalance is bigger than all of this, something the statue of the Golden Goddess and her twelve midwives can't fix; it will take more than three rubs of the midwives' stomachs, of the bell, of the baby at their feet, of Linh's tummy. It will take years to drain the poison from our rice fields, from our livestock, from our bodies. On the radio I've heard the returned soldiers and spray pilots across the Pacific have fathered babies without spines. There's a tiny tang of bitter melon on the tip of my tongue as I include them all in my invocations. Third time lucky or three strikes you're out, isn't that what they say?

Reconfiguring Malcha Mahal

(1978)

Mandira Pattnaik

Resonance is what she desires, marking a solitary protest at New Delhi Railway Station, making it her home for eight long years. When the wind lashes her face after a departing train, makes her zardozi sari border flutter, her two children anxious, retinue of thirteen dogs and seven servants alert, she shoos them to silence. Belongings in boxes piled in the corner of the first-class waiting-room crammed with royal portraits, bone-china and silverware, insignia of her Oudh descendancy rattle, wait; prepare Wilayat Begum for what was to come.

Resurgent is what she felt when her defiance was recognized, offered the hunting lodge of the Tughlaqs, Malcha Mahal, by the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi herself, after she had shunned a modern apartment because she claimed her rightful inheritance in Oudh had been mischievously usurped. It was the shadow of erstwhile royalty, she lived on the ruins to embrace the semblance of aristocracy she craved. Without doors, water or electricity, instead, the abundance of skies and liberties of the wildernesses, which in their unbridled character were, in fact, proclaiming her resoluteness.

Resignation is what came, when having unleashed dogs on curious intruders, keeping her children without education or amenities, and maintaining no contact with the outside world, except to register new complaints through elaborate handwritten letters, she decided on a violent death. She crushed the diamond that crowned her ring and consumed it as sleeping potion.

Remnant is what there is at Malcha Mahal now, of muffled history, of whispers of doubtful lineage, of the siblings who died in penury and humiliation, of Persian carpets still hanging on crumbling walls, of resplendent ruins and family photographs, of royal seals and fine artefacts, of how nothing is clear in the diffused light of Delhi, of three lifetimes of weaving a tale worthier than the truth.

The Travelers

(1982)

Amy Strong

Daddy took the car today, it's pale blue and rusty over the tires, its hood is faded. I like it because when the air conditioner works, I get to slide the silvery knob to the right to turn it on and it makes a phreeewwww noise when it kicks on like it's tired. Momma's always tired. We took the city bus today since Daddy has the car, we paid in silver dimes, and there's no A/C on this bus, so we crack the window, but that just lets more Louisiana air seep in, hot and stinky like garbage juice that pools under a dumpster, wet and sticky like the back of Momma's shirt, the whole bus smells like hot mayonnaise and pee. The whole bus smells like the man sitting next to us with a crumpled, greasy brown paper bag between his knees. Momma says greasy like it has a "z" in it, like it's extra greasy, easy-greasy-cheesy-sleazy. The bus stops in front of Charity and a lady moves slowly, slowly from the bus stop, and the bus driver says, Take your time, ma'am, we ain't in no hurry, and the lady has the tiniest baby I ever seen in one arm, and holds her belly with the other arm, and she's wearing two hospital gowns, one put on forwards and one on backwards so she won't show her bits and pieces, and Momma is in a hurry, I made her late this morning, she said, but she gets up to take the baby while the lady gingerly raises herself up the stairs. Momma gets the lady settled in a seat next to the old lady reading the bible and humming something different from the rap that stutters all staticky out of a man's silvery boom box: *She had to get a pimp, She couldn't make it on her own.* Momma, what's a pimp, I say as she adjusts her elastic waistband and sits back down next to me, her purple polyester slacks scratching across my knee and thigh. We pass the hospital and cross ourselves, father, son, holy spirit, we pass the cathedral and cross ourselves, father, son, holy spirit, we pass the cemetery and cross ourselves, there but for the grace of god.

The Moment You Realise that Echo and the Bunnymen are Better than ABC

(1982)

Donna L. Greenwood

You are learning that you can tap your foot to 'The Look of Love' at school whilst taping 'The Back of Love' in your bedroom late at night. You are learning that your friends and your teachers think that Margaret Thatcher is a strong leader, and we need a strong leader, especially now. You are learning to keep your voice small because your tatty jumper and market-stall shoes already mark you out as different.

You are reading the only newspaper in the house which is the one your dad gets for the bingo. You are reading with an apocalyptic dread about the war with a country far away. You write a letter to the newspaper asking them why they show ladies' breasts amongst the stories of war. Don't they know what the boys at school say about those ladies? You get a reply from a man who tells you to wait till you're a grown up before you have opinions.

You are learning that the kids at school think poverty is a crime and that beggars should be put in prison. You are learning that when boys say they will love you if you do, what they mean is that they will hate you if you don't.

You are reading the same headlines disguised in different words – 'WE'LL SMASH 'EM', 'THE QUEEN BLASTS ARGIES', 'STICK IT UP YOUR JUNTA'. You are invited to sponsor Sidewinder missiles. You are offered free 'Sink the Argies' computer games. You are seeing girls just a little older than you in their underwear underneath the banner, 'THE SUN SAYS KNICKERS TO ARGENTINA'. You are learning how to smile through your horror. You are learning to keep your mouth shut because there's something of the devil in the eyes of your friends.

You read a headline in the newspaper your dad buys for the last time on Tuesday May 4th 1982. It reads, 'GOTCHA'. You read that 368 young

soldiers were killed in the sinking their cruiser and you fold the newspaper and choose never to look at it again.

You will learn, in time, that just because your opinion is unpopular, it doesn't mean it's wrong and that Echo and the Bunnymen were considerably more talented than ABC.

Greenham Common

(1983)

E. E. Rhodes

He's in my face, even with the fence between us. Snarling. Angry. His knuckles white on the stock of the gun he grapples across his chest. The helmet strap biting into the jumping muscle under his chin. Get back, he barks. Go on, get! His voice desiccated with Midwest vowels, barn broke hoarse, like his pa. The farm, down on its uppers. The farm he ran from, hating the herd, hating the endless fields of green. Hating the man he knew he'd be. Wanting and wanting something unnameable, something that was a shape called Not This, something in a recruitment flyer with a shape called More. Sees them, on the other side of the fence, think he's been fooled by that cropping swathe of propaganda. Sees them distrust the camo-sprottled green of his cubbed wolf's clothing. Sees in their faces he's still just one of his pa's sheep.

That Night, the Silence Changed

(1984)

Brecht De Poortere

That night, like every night, we switched on the six o'clock news on BBC, not because we were interested in what was going on in the world, but because we wanted to chase the unbearable silence that hung over our household.

We rarely got through supper without Mom and Dad getting into a fight. By the time we ate dessert, the air was filled with tension, thick as the custard on our bread and butter pudding.

Mom and Dad took their seats on opposite sides of the living room. Dad in his comfy chair, ashtray placed precariously on the arm rest—an act of defiance, because he knew Mom hated that. Smoke rose from his cigarette and blended with the unvoiced accusations hanging in the air.

Mom sat cross-legged on her chair, her lips tight and wrinkled, as if stitched to prevent the insults on the tip of her tongue from taking flight. We, the kids, bunched up on the sofa in between, keeping our parents physically apart, like a human Berlin wall.

Then came the eagerly awaited newsreader voice.

“Dawn, and as the sun breaks through the piercing chill of night on the plain outside Korem...”

At first, we thought there had been a mistake, that we had tuned into the wrong television channel. It was like watching a Star Wars episode. Colourless silhouettes in dirty robes drifted across a barren, washed-out landscape, like the Sand People in the desert world of Tatooine—ghostlike figures, indistinguishable from the land they roamed.

But this was no mistake. It was no Hollywood film.

“...a biblical famine... This place... the closest thing to hell on earth...”

Our eyes were glued to the television set. Dad's cigarette hung between his fingers, the ash getting longer as he forgot to tap. Mom's lips slightly parted—her arsenal of snide remarks, which had been waiting to be fired, had dissolved into thin air.

Emaciated children stared at the camera, too weak to chase away the flies crawling over their bodies. Bloated bellies, eyes turned away in deep, hollow sockets, streaks of tears running through the dust on their faces. A crying baby clung to its mother's empty, shrivelled breast.

The box of Quality Street remained untouched on our coffee table. Although we were allowed a chocolate after dinner, none of us that night argued over the Purple One, or the Green Triangle.

"Thousands of wasted people are coming here for help. Many find only death."

A young woman wailed as a blanket was lain over a tiny, skeletal figure. People stood in a circle, chanting songs of despair, while more shrouded bodies were brought into their midst. By the shapes under the sheets, we guessed most were children.

My little brother slid off the sofa and climbed onto Mom's lap. I tried to put on a brave face, but shuffled closer to my older sister who, although she hated me, did not object.

"Death is all around. A child or an adult dies every 20 minutes. Korem, an insignificant town, has become a place of grief."

The coverage of the Ethiopian famine ended and the newsreader moved on to the European Cup football matches of the night. Liverpool played Benfica. The fans sang "You'll never walk alone".

Dad switched off the television and the silence returned to our living room. But this was a different silence—as if it had changed colour, or taken on a different shape.

The world had come into our house. The images lingered. The alien-like heads, the knobbly knees, loose skin around the bone, like parched leather. The winds of Korem whistled in our hearts.

This was no longer our silence.

This was the silence of the world.

Game Boy

(1989)

Anne Daly

Hold it in your hands. Feel the cool blockiness of it. Rest one thumb on the cross-shaped pad while the other hovers between two purple buttons on the other side. Flick the switch at the top and watch the word Nintendo® float down. A dark green pixelated bird that settles its wings with that familiar sound. You are ready to play...

You always brought your Gameboy with you, on trips home from the States. Long summer weeks when I finally had my best friend back again. Your Dad was doing well there, building slate rooves for people who had more money than our eighties town could ever dream of. I always secretly hoped you'd forget it, that I would find it under the trestle bed and have it all to myself for a few days before posting it back. I was getting really good at fitting the different shaped blocks together. The colourless forms of Tetris that flipped and cartwheeled between my hands as I moulded them into lines without any gaps.

You were the plank, not tall but thin and the same width from heel to head. I was the squat, stocky square. The one that didn't change shape, no matter what button you pressed. And we would fit together perfectly, playing in the long grass in the field behind my house. You lying down, me sitting up, talking over all the things we would do in a future that curved away from us, as indifferent and intangible as glass.

You laughed at the computer my mother brought home from school because it had become obsolete. It was an enormous plastic shell with a tiny screen that showed only green and black. It ate floppy discs, grinding their bones and spitting them out and a massive joystick lolled unhappily out of its mouth. We could only get Space Invaders to work on it. A neon phallus shooting balls at rows and rows of alien moths with wriggling lips, twitching mesmerically from side to side.

And I would smuggle that Gameboy into my bed. Spend hours with Mario, chasing coins or breaking out of The Simpsons summer camp. I

always went back to the tetronimoes though, guiding their fall, manipulating their limbs and placing them into something solid and beautiful and mine.

A few years later, I had my own console. We played it non-stop, speeding through the leafy palm trees and swirling clay tunnels of the Green Hill Zone. You were always Sonic, I was Tails, chasing after your shadow as you sped across the screen. You spoke of High School and dances and I could see it all. Your life was a Sweet Valley High of sunshine, beautiful girls and handsome jocks leaning on lockers, asking them out on a date. You had lost your accent. You glitched into Americanisms until I longed to take out the cartridge and blow the dust away.

Then a long gap, and on that final visit, you were a man. Just a few hours, a brief stopover between flights. You told me you still gamed, had saved up to buy a Playstation that you would bring with you to college. I strained to see the boyish face in your solid jaw and the slight swagger of your shoulders.

Just before you left, you handed it to me, wrapped loosely as a gift. The familiar lines, six ridges where the speaker etched itself into the corner. The comforting silkiness of its tiny screen. The Gameboy was finally mine. And suddenly you were back, smiling at me with that cheeky grin. I was twelve again and I hugged you so tight. The last time I saw you, you waved as you walked through the departure gates, adjusting your backpack, as if loading up to start a new game.

The shapes drop faster and faster, piling on top of each other. It gets so much harder to place them. The wall builds up, irregular and uncontrolled and the music reaches a crescendo as you struggle to find any space. For the last few seconds, you relax as you realise it's all over. The shapes continue to fall off- screen, until it's time to begin again.

As We Mean to Go On

(1995)

Joyce Meggett

Good afternoon and welcome to the thirty-second century before Christ. My name is Craig and I am a Blue Badge tour guide. I've lived in Orkney all my life.

Imagine, if you will, what it must have been like, living here in Skara Brae. The village — for it *was* a village, made up of sixty souls — had family homes, a community centre and, about two hour's walk away, a church of sorts. The Ring of Brodgar.

It was two hours' walk then, too — someone always asks -- but you will be travelling there in comfort when your coach returns to pick you up at half three.

The villagers didn't have a coach, of course, or even any sort of wagon — cattle were for farming and horses as unknown as the internal combustion engine — but they did enjoy a comfortable existence. How do we know this? For one thing, a system of drains leads from inside the houses to an outside channel. Our friends had indoor toilets.

For another, they had leisure for creating art.

When you dropped in for a visit, the first thing to catch your eye would be a stone dresser where they displayed their treasures. In the house over there, you'd see a whalebone hairpin and a necklace and bracelet made of seal ivory. They liked getting themselves up. Over here you'd find a curiously carved ball of the same sandstone used for buildings and furniture, and a ball of a different design carved out of chalk.

And then it was over.

In the space of an afternoon they went away.

Why? What was it that made them desert their homes and history? There was no tsunami, no eclipse. There is no sign of an invasion or a fire.

Where had they gone?

All we know is they were surely struck by terror, as they fled in almost unimaginable haste. The girl who lived in that house — the one to my right — dropped her necklace and never stopped to rescue a single one of her white beads as they flew in all directions. Never mind how dear they were to her. Never mind how long it took her man to make each one.

The bead I keep here in my pocket is a replica of course.

I'm sometimes asked what the people of Skara Brae would have looked like. Much like anyone you might see out and about in Kirkwall or Stromness today, there's every reason to suppose. I often look at the groups I guide and think some of you could be the many, many times great grandchildren of the people who once were here.

You'll forgive me for not accompanying you as you explore the site. My knee is playing me up as it will do. Sometimes it locks and I can't walk far at all, which is a pity.

I'm not as young as I once was.

But you mustn't worry about me. I've seen the place a time or two before. I've lived in Orkney all my life.



Visit ellipsiszone.com to read more flash fiction
or purchase other publications.