Read our longlist here (in alphabetical order of title)

20/20 WRITING COMPETITION

The 20 longlisted entries are:

A Father's Son by Terry Lowell
A Negative Image by Alison Deering
All for Her by Kaitlyn Young
Dull Gary by Robin Tones
East by Elodie A Roy
EveryBodies by Dawn Hemming
He Doesn't Have a Grave by Kate Venables
Killing Two Birds with One Stone by Amanda Barton
Not a Child by Jane Mooney
ShutEye by Jayne West
Sixteen by Lauren Foster
Squirrel and the Squid by Estelle Hargreaves
Strawberry Picking by Elizabeth Barratt-Golding
The Black Soap by Ella Ononugbo
The Cancelling by Gemma Wilson
The Funeral Procession by Pauline Braisher
The Inside-Out World by Tim Taylor
The Stumpery Project by Jo Regan
The Valley by Sue Wright
Travelling Spectrums by Neil Clarkson

Also Highly Commended:
Dark Secrets Dangerous Lies by Sheila Frampton
Have I Forgiven You by David John Ward
In Pursuit of Justic by Virginia Crow
Mill Town Meltdown by Lloyd Rivett
Mr Spoon by Irish Hable
The Society of Time Travelling Artists Against Evil by Daniel Joseph Day
Vertigo by Laura Christine Price

A Father's Son by Terry Lowell

How do you tell your boy he's not your son?

Do you do it with one brutal sweep of the sword, to cut through a Gordian knot of half-truths; or carefully, laying a trail of breadcrumbs for him to follow as he grows older?

Perhaps we should have told him when he was small. Explained the concept of biological parents and how they are not necessarily the parents who raise a child, who love a child. But that would have opened a Pandora's box and a slew of questions to release all the ills of the Earth.

How do you explain rape to a child? How do you tell them of the horrors inflicted on their mother by a vicious, hate-fuelled monster?

No. I am your father. One simple lie does the job.

Until it doesn't.

I watch him sleep, face jaundiced like a sixty-a-day smoker. Without the transplant my boy will die. The thought crushes my heart.

I am his father. He is my son. From the first moment I felt Amy's stomach move under my hand. From the moment I held him, bloodied and screaming in my arms. From his first word, his first step, his first day at school. He is my son, but I am not his father. Not in the one single way that matters.

Not compatible.

He opens his eyes. Blinks. Smiles.

'Hi Dad. Are we good to go yet?'

My mouth is dry. I lick my lips. Take a breath.

'Son…'

A Negative Image by Alison Deering

It felt familiar, the houses backing onto the railway track, red-brick; smoke coming from the chimneys even in the heat and stillness of August. Washing-lines sprawled out over neat-edged lawns – rows of clean laundry, rows of flowers in neat, angular beds.

Jack had no plan as he got off the train. How long since he had seen Lily? Four years now, and communication down to a Christmas card. Was it birthdays too? He'd forgotten. For the second time this summer he had a vision of himself as a stalker; firstly, the way he'd followed the young woman to the library. And now what was he doing? Was he about to spy on his ex-wife, try to catch a glimpse of the daughter he had abandoned years ago? He pulled his cap down over his forehead, as if this would act as some form of disguise, if any of his onetime in-laws should see him and become alarmed. Sunglasses too, he pulled from his rucksack, tried to walk differently.

"Don't slouch!"

Fiona's words came back to him. He straightened his shoulders, took longer confident strides. The voices were different, the shorter vowels, the greetings "how do" and "ta-ra" as families and friends met and dispersed on the platform, heading for the town centre.

He'd had a letter from her four years ago. Lily had sent him the birth details: a daughter born; her weight; her name. Martha. Then the change of address, so she hadn't hidden from him.
Had she wanted him to stay in touch? Was forgiveness or regret sealed in the envelope?
As he walked along the once familiar track from the station, Jack paused by the fence. There was a little girl, about four years old, standing on tiptoe, peering through the gaps in the wire.

'The last time I saw my daughter', thought Jack, 'was the ultrasound photograph Lily had propped against the Belgian chocolate cake she'd bought at a patisserie on her way home from the hospital. That same afternoon, I left her.'

He had kept that photograph, the black-and-white image of a baby, their baby, just 20 weeks old, unborn, just an ultrasound image, but enough to see the outline, to know it was a girl and to see her beating heart. Then he'd lost her, never seen his child, and there was an ache, a loss that he had never really acknowledged.

Could it be her? Was she wondering where her Daddy had gone, if she'd ever known she had a Daddy? He would buy her new shoes, pink ones with flashing lights and unicorns, ask Fiona to tie her hair into a ponytail with pink ribbons, make her his, make her his little girl.

But it wasn't her, of course. She turned to look at him - a freckled face, a snub nose, auburn hair, so unlike his own fair hair or Lily's pale skin and dark hair. Her mother called her over, "Lucy!" and she ran to her with an outstretched hand.

All for Her by Kaitlyn Young

Chapter 1

I had always known that if I ever had a child, their life would look nothing like mine.

My mother died when I was barely five years old. I have no memories of her – not her smile, not her face, not even the way she smelled. I only have the stories other people told me.

My father tried to survive the grief the only way he knew how. He drowned it in alcohol. It didn't even take a full year after my mother's death before I was standing at another funeral, burying the only parent I had left.

After that, my childhood became a blur of temporary homes and unfamiliar places. Foster families. Short-lived adoptions. Boarding schools that never felt like home. I learned early that nothing was permanent.

Eventually I was old enough to be out in the world on my own.

It was ironic, really, that I had ended up here.

A piercing shriek echoed through the quiet maternity ward.

It took me a moment to realise it was mine.

Giving birth in handcuffs wasn't how I imagined motherhood would begin – but then again, neither was killing my husband.

I sat upright on the delivery bed they had directed me to, my entire body trembling as another wave of pain tore through my stomach. My long blonde hair clung to my damp face and neck, tangled from hours of labour. The thin hospital gown stuck to my skin, soaked with sweat.

My wrists were cuffed to the sides of the bed, my hands straining against the silver metal as contraction after contraction ripped through me. The metal was cold – a cruel reminder that I wasn't like the other mothers giving birth in this ward.

An elderly nurse wiped the sweat from my brow and took my hand, trying to comfort me. I had no husband. No parents. No friends. No one except strangers.

"Come on! One more big push!" the midwife encouraged. "You're doing so well."

The scream that tore from my throat felt raw and desperate, like it was being ripped from my throat. The nearby nurse winced in sympathy. And then, a shrill cry filled the room, and everything stopped.

"It's a girl!" the midwife cried.

My daughter.

And I had already killed her father.

Before I could speak – before I could even properly look at her without being in disbelief – a woman pushed into the room and took my baby from the nurse.

She was short, with dark hair pulled into a tight bun at the back of her head. A black blazer hung neatly over her shoulders, accentuating her thin waist. She wore the kind of clothing that made her look official even in a hospital room full of chaos. A thin lanyard of identification hung from her neck, swinging against her chest as she moved.

Her movements were precise, practiced, like someone who had done this thousands of times before. But when she looked down at my daughter, something in her expression softened.

Dull Gary by Robin Tones

Dull would have been the description given to Gary by the young women of the Firm who discussed all their male co-workers over lunch. Not that he wasn't clean, presentable or even mildly handsome, in their opinion, it was just he lacked a spark, any fizz.

Nadine, from accounts, had called him Mr Bean, without the humour.

Gary lived with his mum, a fact that played really poorly with his peer group, who bizarrely, in his eyes, preferred to live in squalid, overpopulated, pokey flats like rats in a sewer, rather than with their middle-class parents who had comfortable houses in the suburbs. Gary had seen how they lived when he was asked to accompany Jerry, from purchasing, back home after he had overindulged at a lunchtime pub session, which Gary had not been invited to.

'Gary,' his boss had said. 'You appear to be the only sober member of the team. Please take Jerry back to his home, make sure he gets into bed. Don't worry, I have ordered an Uber.'

Gary had worked at the firm for ten years, straight from university, after attending a milk round event, and much to his surprise, been offered a graduate trainee position. Climbing the greasy pole had been a game of snakes and ladders, without any ladders. Unlike other Junior complaints officers, he had been given his own cubicle, which was normally associated with progression. However, in his case, it was because his manager had found his dullness irritating.

'If I have to hear him droning on for another second, I'll jack this rotten job in,' Deborah, a well-liked member of the complaint handling team, had moaned to the manager.

So, a self-contained, sound-insulated work station was dedicated to Gary, keeping him away from the outside world, and more importantly for him, keeping the outside world out. The cubicle was a perfect cube, six, by six, by six feet. The honeycomb board was insulated on both sides with air filled foam, which absorbed sound. It was light blue, snuggled into the far corner of the office, and very nearly invisible to passing strangers. It left him the perfect environment for what he did best, resolving customer complaints.

At home, Doreen, his mum, was a popular woman within the community. She was a librarian, head of the local chapter of the Women's Institute, the WI, and warden at the nearby C of E church, St. Andrew's, she was busy. Her husband had left her when Gary was young; it was said that it had taken a while for Doreen to notice his absence, but never said to her face.
Gary had always been well cared for. Doreen gave him clean clothes, a calm home environment, masses of books and not a scintilla of emotional support.

His early life revolved around the library, knitting with old ladies and an excessive amount of time spent at church. He was never abused, never spanked, rarely shouted at and largely ignored.

East by Elodie A Roy

The year I turned forty my friend Pauline reluctantly agreed to introduce me to Johann. “Are you sure you would like to meet him?” Pauline asked, slightly mystified by my insistence. It was a late afternoon in Brighton, sometime in February. We were sitting in her office at the back of the gallery, drinking tepid tea as the night was drawing in, slowly flooding the room. Pauline liked the enveloping obscurity – her computer screen softly glowing, beaming like a lighthouse in the darkening office. She did her real work at night – editing exhibition catalogues, drafting her articles for art journals, working until very late if she had a deadline to meet. But she wasn’t working right now.

There was a sad, almost apologetic perplexity in her voice as she sat, speaking about Johann. She said he was a difficult character. That he had a lot of issues. I had heard these stories before. Johann Kaufmann was a highly regarded painter. The critics hailed him as ‘one of the most distinctive representatives of post-Soviet art.’ He’d come from former Eastern Germany. Johann was also a dreamer, a drifter, an alcoholic – about once a month he drunk himself into a formidable stupor. During this period, it wasn’t unusual for him to destroy his paintings, to disappear for three, four days in a row, sometimes more. He would ring up his friends in the early hours of the morning, his voice slow, sunken – sweetly repentant.

As Pauline was speaking, conjuring up scenes from the German painter’s life, I realised that I didn’t care about his eccentricities. It was all the same to me – what he did, what he didn’t do. My ex-husband had done it all before, with more definitive results – living the artist’s erratic life with a diligence so perfect that he was now interned in a psychiatric ward, permanently damaged. Sam’s fall had been spectacular. Johann’s private history sounded too much like a repetition, a muffled echo of events that had already been lived and suffered through. At first I didn’t want to hear about Johann’s personal life. But I wanted very much to meet the person who’d painted the only painting I had loved in years, the only painting that mattered. I was obsessed with Johann’s painting then: it was a sunflower.

A simple sunflower. Not one of those trembling, almost incandescent van Gogh affairs. Something else entirely. Johann’s sunflower – so small and frail, so immensely soulful. I lost myself in its soft, glittering darkness. Every time I looked at the sunflower I fell into a sort of reverie. Sleepiness overcame me. It was the heavy, content sleepiness of childhood, the sleepiness of first loves and very old age – a drowsiness so deep it resembled eternity.

EveryBodies by Dawn Hemming

One

He could still see her pale pine eyes, as she fell away from him. She hadn't jumped, she had simply stepped backwards off the edge of the building. Her warm hand slipped away from his clammy palm. His grip was not enough to hold onto her.

Operative William Haych found himself lying flat, his upper torso hanging half over the edge, his arm still stretched out. He was grabbing at nothing. He blamed it on his age slowing him down, making him sweat. Her calm eyes were wide open, staring at him as she plummeted. She did not scream, nor even open her mouth. There was a placid look on her face that met Haych's panicked stare. The distance between them stretched.

He closed his tired eyes and tried very hard not to imagine the sound of her head cracking on the concrete below him, but the distance wasn't far enough, and he didn't have to imagine.

The lines on his head momentarily formed deeper creased, the folded skin knitting his grey eyebrows. He breathed out a long sigh.

When he opened his eyes again, he could see her body far below him on the roof of the next building as a red smear. He didn't even know her name, only knew that he had tried and failed to stop her. The Remothery vehicles were a distant flash or red and blue. Before long he would be able to hear the sirens wailing, but not yet.

Operative Haych picked himself up and dusted down his grey suit and overcoat.
The roof of the building where she had landed was a long way below. He carefully stepped back from the edge, to let his senses regain their balance. Around him on the roof were cooling towers, water tanks and air vents.

Haych looked away from the scene below, to the city around him. Plexity stretched out, steel towers and spires to the horizon in all directions. Millions of lights, each with their one little dramas beneath them.

Haych looked up at the sky; the sun only showing as a dull glow in the west. He watched one of the Remothery vehicles land. Instead of joining the clearing up process, he waited. The sky bruised; the light scorching the clouds as the sun set. A bright light circled down in front of him, red and blue lights flashing. The body below was lit in a primary colour palette. Haych shaded his eyes from the brightness. He moved to the elevator that clung to the side of the building. From inside the descending glass box, he watched Plexity come alive in the darkness.

By the time he had reached the roof where the girl had landed, it was awash with lights and busy with people in bio suits. An area had been cordoned off around where the body lay. Haych couldn't stop himself from looking as he passed it.

He Doesn't Have a Grave by Kate Venables

It is the first spring of the coronavirus pandemic and the gulls along the river are in their black-capped breeding plumage. There's a woodpecker drumming in the scrubby copse by the sewage farm and a rabbit hops across the cycle track.

I am running along a path through woodland by a stream which flows into the Thames. Under my trainers the ground is peaty with last year's leaves and maybe it is this, maybe the flickering sunlight through the trees, maybe it is the warmth in my thighs as my muscles tire, but I am back in the garden at 21 The Crescent in Middlesbrough, running, running, running like a puppy in an overflow of joy at the world and at my body in it. I run past the rockery my father built, past the blocky corner where the tortoise is hiding and which I must not disturb, up towards the house and under the pear tree, the apple tree, and the drifts of fallen blossom along the edge of the lawn. My father is digging in the flower bed near the house. He wears a checked shirt, sleeves rolled up, and I can smell his familiar scent of warm skin, clean cotton and tobacco as I run on the spot and look at him. Then it's on past the strip of mouse-smelling privet next to the house, past my mother's face in the kitchen window, on to the path and past the narrow, dusty bed along the outhouse wall where my sister and I plant marigold seeds, on down the long path and past the rows of vegetables, the loganberries and the tangly, prickly gooseberries which turn pink when they are cooked, down to the dustbins, the coal bunkers, the oily, metallic-smelling, saw-dusty garage and the rockery again. I am starting to feel dizzy but the running pulls me along. 'What's she doing?' my father calls to my mother, now standing on the back step. She shrugs and goes inside again. He smiles and turns back to his digging. I am content and I run and run until I drop on to my back and look up through the pear tree to the sky.

There is all the time in the world.

After lockdown ended, I went to Middlesbrough again. A counsellor had suggested that I visit my father's grave as an indirect way of exorcising the grief about a failed marriage. 'He doesn't have a grave,' I said, 'he was cremated.' But she persisted. While there, I knocked on the door at 21 The Crescent, now a care home, and spoke to an old lady in an attic room. 'This was my playroom,' I told her, and she was pleased.

Killing Two Birds with One Stone by Amanda Barton

‘Ten – nine – eight – seven – six – five – four – three…’

Just before ‘two’, Marjorie started to wonder if she’d remembered to turn the iron off.

As the deep rumble became almost deafening, and everything inside the shuttle pod began to shake, she squeezed her eyes shut and saw herself opening the front door earlier that day, smoothing out any lingering creases in her favourite green dress, hoping her trembling fingers hadn’t made too much of a mess of her lipstick. She’d asked Helen, who was standing next to her on the freshly scrubbed doorstep, if she looked all right for the cameras.

Helen had glared at her, though her eyes were wet and mascara zigzagged down her cheeks. ‘Is that really all you’re bothered about, Mum? Whether you look all right? What about me, and your grandkids? Don’t you care about us?’

‘Love, I know you don’t want me to go. But it’s just something I’ve got…’ Before Marjorie could finish, Helen had turned away, her shoulders shaking. She’d done that all morning, one minute hugging Marjorie, telling her she loved her, and the next turning her back on her in floods of unforgiving tears. Marjorie had felt a searing pain that was a hundred times worse than the physical ones she’d got used to suffering every minute of every day. Maybe even worse than the sudden pain she felt now, like somebody wearing hobnail boots had just kicked her hard in the back, as the ship hurtled into space.

To distract herself from the feeling that her teeth were being shaken out of her head - good job she’d thought to use extra Sterigrip before they set off - she forced herself to remember the conversation she’d had with the softly-spoken man in the suit from the agency as they left the house. ‘Are you sure you won’t take the wheelchair, Mrs. Turner?’ he’d asked, but Marjorie had shaken her head, drawn back her shoulders, ignoring the agonising jolt that shot down her spine, and said, ‘No thank you, I’d like to walk.’ And the suited man had gently taken Marjorie’s arm, picked up her pink travel bag and steered her slowly and carefully through the crowd of TV cameras, newspaper people and well-wishers, all jostling to get to her:

‘Marjorie, how are you feeling, Marjorie?’

‘Any last words for us, Marjorie? The whole world’s watching.’

‘What does it feel like to be the oldest woman to travel into space?’

Marjorie had started to say how lucky she felt that she’d been chosen, and a bit relieved it would all soon be over, but then she’d spotted a few angry-looking faces at the back of the crowd, shouting and waving placards with words on them like ‘No dignity in space’ and ‘Humans aren’t space junk.’ She’d leaned a bit more heavily on the suited man’s arm, then, and they’d picked up the pace to get to the car, with him waving away the journalists.

Not a Child by Jane Mooney

I DON'T need a carer I tell you. I can wash myself and feed myself and there's nothing wrong with eating chocolate and chips for dinner every day. Milk is food isn't it? I drink lots of milk. They say I forget to take my tablets. I'm not sure they make a difference anyway.

Now… where did I put the hippopotamus. Well, what's it doing in the dish washer? Let's get it on and I'll make you a brew. Oh no! You don't want that mug! That's got my special water in it.

As I was saying, they've told me I need help. They sent a very snooty woman round. She obviously thought she was better than me, telling me she was going to look after me and make sure I eat properly. She doesn't know who I used to be. People listened to me, they paid attention. I was important. I was running multi-million pound contracts and what does she do? Wipe people's bottoms for a living!

That man was in my house again, you know? Going through my things. I know, because when I got up this morning all the drawers were pulled out, just like that other time. And I couldn't find the photos of my mother. I love to look at pictures of her. She was such a lovely person. He comes in when I'm asleep and takes things. They don't believe me. You believe me? Don't you?

Do you like that picture? You can have it! I'm not sure who it's of anyway. Your grandpa? Well I don't know why I've got a picture of your grandpa, you may as well take it, it's no use to me.
I won't have a carer. She'll be taking all my precious things, I know what they're like. That's what happened when my Jack was in a home. I promised I wouldn't put him in a home, but I had to. I couldn't… couldn't cope at home with him. And trying to work as well. It was too much. But they stole his things. His clothes. His bedding. Even his watch went missing and it was the one his parents gave him for his twenty-first. I'm not sure he realised, but I knew.

How's your coffee? Oh… did I use the wrong jar again? You should have said something! It must be my eyesight. Gravy granules do look a bit like coffee, don't they? Here, have mine. Oh – actually no, that's not coffee. Yes, it is vodka. I don't see why I shouldn't have a little tipple now and then, do you? I'm not a child!

ShutEye by Jayne West

At the beginning, the linen pile was higher, whiter, less patched. Today, I'm taking the prettiest sheet - a double, hand-embroidered with blue gentians, and obvious love. Only the steadiest hand could have finessed these tiny knots, perhaps a soon-to-be bride sewing for her bottom drawer.

Nobody knows why it remained there, virgin white cloth tied with a blue ribbon, in yellowing tissue. A wedding that never happened. Was the groom struck down in battle, leaving our gentle seamstress a bereft spinster? Or perhaps she succumbed to consumption, buried in bridal threads?

Today, only the best will do for Helen's winding sheet. Helen means light. Today that light is extinguished. The world has darkened.

We work silently, softly. I found a tiny sliver of hyacinth scented soap. When she bathed her kids, it was always her no-nonsense scrub. If she woke up right now, she'd tell us to stop faffing.

She doesn't.

We wash and dry her hair, taming the wild strands into Helen order. I pick out the remaining dirt hidden under her nails and remove the gold wedding band, which one day will be Hannah's. As I hold her cold hand in mine, I recall our days at the Yorkshire house, when this hand rolled the lightest of scones.

One of Miriam's tears falls onto Helen's cheek. Momentarily, the drop rests as if Helen herself is weeping, before the sparkle of water dissipates into fine rivulets, finding its course along Helen's laughter lines.

We fold the embroidered edge under her chin. A necklace of silk flowers, framing her face in beauty for Stu's last look.

We always include the children in death. Whether animal or human, they need to understand, accept the one-way journey that can't be changed.

Hannah and Holly grasp each other, displaying a strength beyond their years. The strength passed directly from mother to daughters. But when no one is looking, later, each will crumble into a tear-stained pillow.

Stu positions the sleeping baby over the mother she will never know, her tiny downy cheek resting fleetingly on Helen's lips. A first and final kiss.

We leave and for the last time Stu has his Helen to himself.

When he exits, I'm waiting in the shadows of the long corridor. He knows I'm here. He knows she won't be alone.

I close the library door and pull the hidden spool of cotton from my pocket, the needle ready threaded. We always start at the feet to stitch this final seam. Without a coffin to hide any imperfections, the stitches must be strong and tight.

I unfold the sheet neckline, raising the excess cloth, providing the flap to cover her head, smoothing her hair one last time, telling her how much she is loved, how much we will miss her.

I keep on telling her

As I position the embroidered flowers

As I stitch the last confining stitch

As I clip the final thread

As I open the door to announce

She is ready.

Sixteen by Lauren Foster

As soon as I was sixteen I said 'Righto, I'm off', and the first week of January I moved 60 miles down the M1. Not easy for my folks to come and get me – I don't think they wanted to anyway. So began a year of booze, spliffs, parties and shagging. The 3 Nuns, AKA the 6 Tits, became my living room. Back then, no one asked for ID and you could be well pissed on a fiver.

My new home was a tiny, freezing extension above the kitchen of a ginger-brick mid terrace near the railway station, for the grand sum of £16.50 per week. A house full of students, dossers and me, working – illegally, as I should've still been in school and Nanna was still claiming child support.

£5 for leccy, £3.50 for a sack of spuds, from the corner shop, to go with the tray of little white eggs given to each worker every Friday. The rest of my wages: beer money. I never had a full week in the 4 months I worked at Freshpak, being a master of excuses, carefully honed from 4 years of skiving off PE and er, school in general. Period pains. An unhygienic cold. A sprained wrist. You get the drift. They must've been desperate for staff because they didn't actually sack me, I had to hand in my notice. The bulk of the workforce was nepotism central, all being mates or relatives of the supervisor, and all women bar one brother. They all hated me, wouldn't talk to me, and thought I was a snob because I wanted to retake GCSEs.

Everyone I knew seemed to have done a stint at Freshpak, shelling eggs – frequently ankle deep in cold, pongy water, while Radio 1 played Black Velvet and Nothing Compares to U on repeat. Rob told me Nothing Compares to U is about quitting smoking and I can believe it, it took me 25 years to stop. I only started on bloody roll ups when I'd run out of hash.

After that, before I went mad, I managed another 4 months at a factory which made brushes – as a machinist, a warehouse operative, an assistant supervisor, and, because they thought I was quite bright, they took me on as their office junior. I am not an office worker. I think the fact I killed the guillotine proves that. Their switchboard made my head feel like a tangle of wires. The photocopier vomited paper all over the floor. I'd put on silly accents whenever I got bored. I'd tell jokes to Marlene, who was trying to train me up, and give her the punchlines when she answered the phone. I totally failed to notice the franking machine tallying up every time I put a letter through, again and again, as I tried to get the post-mark to line up properly on the envelope, which ended up as a big messy smudge anyway. I handed my notice in there too.

Squirrel and Squid by Estelle Hargreaves

Breakfast was served late at Mrs Adelaide Oval's Boarding House for Theatrical People on Nelson Street. It was around the time other, non-theatrical, establishments were starting to think about lunch.

'Well, yer not morning people, are yer?' Mrs Oval would say, sailing around the room, patting the smaller performers affectionately on the head as she went. "My little night beasts."

She made a grand entrance every morning in the dining room, overseeing her domain in front of a densely ornamented dresser. She was a creature of habit. Her clothing was always black and white (today's outfit was a polka dotted bodice above a striped skirt) with her impossible hair fixed into place. It protruded alarmingly from the back of her head; the tangled strands were violently teased before being tightly encased in a bun in the nape of her neck. The hair rat she used for bulk made the back of her hair perfectly, peculiarly square. Mrs Oval had never seen her hair from this angle and was therefore entirely unaware of its geometry. But she wasn't the kind of woman you would draw attention to something like that, not unless you were looking to be presented with an unfurling list of your own deficiencies.

Mrs Oval had aspirations and kept a keen eye on the rankings of the other Liverpool boarding houses. She was confident that her place was a step up from Mrs March's down the road, where five residents were recently up on assault charges for the wilful destruction of an opera hat. But she had to admit that she was still a step below Mrs Thornton's, who let it be known that she bought her apples from a man very high up in the fruit exchange, a man who had once sent a basket of fruit to Queen Victoria herself. In the city it was widely recognised that the best you could hope for would be Mrs Seed's Georgian villa on Castle Street, where the lady of the house gave the impression that no rank lower than a duchess would be admitted, and only then after taking references.

But Mrs Oval's meals were more plentiful than those at Mrs Henk's, who was the ideal landlady for those fond of porridge oats and turnip tops. There was no porridge at Mrs Oval's. Not because she was scornful of cheaper ingredients. Indeed, a slightly thickened gruel had been a mainstay of her breakfasts until The Porridge Incident, as she always referred to it afterwards. You could hear the capital letters quite clearly in her tone of voice. No-one could induce her to reveal the horrors of what had happened on that dark morning, and no-one but the taciturn Mr Damps had been there long enough to know the details.

Strawberry Picking by Elizabeth Barratt-Golding

It is a bright, sunny day with a sky the colour of cornflowers. In the haze of the midday sun meandering home from school for sandwiches at lunch time – you could do that if you lived nearby back then – dawdling with arms outstretched, fingertips touching the corrugated leaves of the hedge.

The surprise to see both of them; mom and dad home early. And the excitement as they share the conspiracy of going fruit picking with you, just you. The phone call from the Formica kitchen, the dial tone and the 'no they won't be back this afternoon, been sick out of nowhere, no sorry', click.

But you mustn't tell all your little friends back there, sitting sweating on plastic seats, casting careless glances out of the window across the hot tarmac. This is a strawberry subterfuge, a pick your own adventure.

Were clothes even changed? The audacity, perhaps, of bundling into the car in a checked summer dress with a Peter Pan collar, getting dust and dirt on spotless frilly white socks. Holding their hands and swinging between the twin stars of your universe. Skipping across a car park and out into the sea of rustling emerald and spiky yellow straw.

This is fuel; this sweet sticky memory of sustenance. The recollection of an endless field, of absconding with relaxed smiling parents. Just us and the chance to chase through the rubied fields, early pink raspberries and the discovery of a gooseberry patch; all lost time in the streaming sunshine on a Friday afternoon when you should have been in Ms Halloran's stuffy classroom.

What is a gooseberry? A new fruit unknown before today. Then biting into the pale green globes and scrunching a face at the sourness; exclaiming 'ergh!' so loudly that people in the distance turn and laugh. Your responsible adults laugh too and call you a 'gooseberry fool' while you grin widely with a berry-stained chin.

In your mind this glorious golden afternoon lasted for days, but it eventually ended with the sun still high and the barest tendrils of cloud. Plodding back to the car weary and laden with punnets of treasure – no gooseberries! – to be savoured with cream at the weekend. These gems are paraded before, and even shared begrudgingly with, older siblings contained on that day all day at college.

It is the recollection of that stolen afternoon, many years later in the cool hospital room, that you talk about with one parent as a distraction from the other. It glistens like jewels in those fields; impossible like the momentary summer breeze in this overly air-conditioned space, the feeling of gentle warmth on this dismal January day.

In the silence you close your eyes and sink into the gift of recollection, thankful to summon these gossamer memory-threads from the cobwebs in the hedgerows. To breathe in the comforting scents of that perfect place for as long as you can, until, at last, they return from surgery with new, livid, strawberry-red marks.

The Black Soap by Ella Ononugbo

Small slices scattered themselves around my body haphazardly, slowly blinking themselves open. There are too many to count from my previous frenzy. Subconsciously or unconsciously? The difference only registers to a small nook in my mind. A matter of negligible substance. The result stays the same, however: my thick, metallic red fills the air around me; the syrupy tears weep from my wounds; rolls of moist brown skin are stuffed uncomfortably between my nails and fingertips. I turn my fingers to myself, as if pointing to condemn in a multitude of 10, and my eyes glaze over the objects of the crime. I want to think I am being dramatic, especially if it was dead before I acted.

“I only expedited an inevitable shed.”

Quite simply exonerated on a biological technicality. Or so I try to convince myself. It is not so simple.

An uncanny, oddly functioning system when you think about it. Exposed to the elements, the guardian of my being is a thin, elastic organ pumped up with water, fats and melanin. A sacrificial lamb of the body, some may say. Cells to protect other cells. What a morbid existence it must be for our skin. At least with reptiles there is a full or partial, translucent cast of the entire body. There’s an element of acknowledgement. With us, skin typically unpeels in torn layers, inconspicuously utilising friction from our day-to-day movements. And then, as the Bible says: made from dust. Raised to life. Made to dust again.

Histamines rush towards the blinking, bruising cuts. Still sore and aching, the surrounding skin cries out for more desperately. I like to think it’s from a lack of sobriety. My bloody fingers twitch. It’s almost like a scene from a slasher movie. But the blood, the pain and the damage is all me. All self inflicted. And of course, all uncontrollable.

So, the horrid ritual restarts.

Sweet release. I need to cry, but I can’t discern why. Was it pain? Disgust? Relief? Disappointment. Time was meant to heal- that’s what all the doctors said. Instead, everywhere feels numb. I’m drained of everything. This undignified routine occurs on the daily, and there is no cure. It will be with me my whole life like a bad rash- and the irony isn’t lost on me.

Dark ink-like blotches are layers of hardening flesh, a defence mechanism that proves unhelpful. Traumatised from the constant attacks, my person is decorated with countless. On the creases of my limbs; on the fat flesh of my thumb; on my neck, forehead and torso. It’s destroying, and my self-esteem suffered consequently.

I tried prescribed medication, traditional Nigerian remedies and spontaneous Amazon recommendations. Nothing has seemed to work as well as the black soap – I was little when we trialled it. The black soap was awful and it stung every time. I never tried it again, but it gave me hope, and for that, I guess I can be thankful.

The Cancelling by Gemma Wilson

Dustin headed down to the corridors below the stage. It was too late to worry that their leading man hadn't memorised all his lines. Until a couple of months ago, Dustin had been holding out hope that the stark reality of this production would dawn on somebody other than himself. How had nobody else stood up to say that a modern rendering of the musical Oklahoma! set in the farms of Calderdale was not going to be a seat filler for the summer show?

'Happy Valley meets Shania Twain,' the director had said with genuine enthusiasm in his freezing home cinema (garage with a projector) after an all cast and crew screening of the 1955 film, complete with jerky and popcorn snacks to 'get us in the spirit'. Typical Graham. Poor old fool.

Dustin had already decided that Graham didn't need to know about the ushers throwing assigned seating to the wind for opening night. They had seated everyone from the front, so the stalls were packed. The circle, with its faulty seats and spider infestation, was barely occupied. As usual, their fearless leader was anticipating a sold-out show, with a queue for return tickets. This was characteristically over-optimistic of him. The Northern Players were a community theatre company with only a Delphi Charitable Trust grant and Graham's inheritance from an arts-loving aunt to keep the two of them employed full time.
Dustin ascended the stairs at stage left and slipped into the wings.

'Has the Stage critic arrived yet?' a hushed voice demanded, just behind his left ear.

'Jesus.'

He spun around. It was her. Their leading lady and source of Graham's high hopes for the year. Emma Burnston, star of small stages and small screens for 10+ years, fresh from her untimely demise on Coronation Street.

'I think so,' Dustin said, teeth clenched. 'We sent out the invites so they should be in.'

'What? You haven't checked?' she said, enunciating every syllable as if this hissy fit was a part of her vocal warm-up.

Close up, in the stage make-up she'd insisted on doing herself because their barista/make-up artist didn't have 'the level of experience' she was used to, Emma was a drag queen- Halloween mask hybrid. Her orange foundation was already rubbing off on the nude microphone at the side of her cheek, making it look like she had some kind of tropical insect trying to crawl into her mouth.

'I'll get on it,' Dustin said, copying her enunciation and accidentally-on-purpose spitting on her slightly. 'T-minus one minute to curtain up everyone.'

He edged around the huddle of whispering cowgirls in dungarees and wellies and peaked into the audience. Kieran and Helen still had an empty seat between them. Between his lanky frame and her short stature, it was like the Russian stacking doll which usually connected the two of them had become sentient and gone walkabouts. Both their faces were lit up by their phone screens, presumably sending more unread WhatsApps to the group chat.

The Funeral Procession by Pauline Braisher

I glance at the road ahead and then, out of the corner of my eye, at my husband sitting beside me. He's driving and we're towing the caravan. He was in one of his rare good moods when he got up this morning but as is always the case, that didn't last long. We're running late and now we're stuck behind a funeral cortege with no chance of overtaking. It's his fault for refusing to stop and check the map when it became clear that the shortcut he was so confident about was anything but. He won't use a Satnav, does not hold with all this new-fangled technology, possibly does not like the female voice telling him what to do. And coming from Yorkshire he is stubborn to the point of idiocy. Of course, he'll change the narrative, convince himself it's my fault. If there's one game my husband excels at, it's the blame game.

We've only been behind them for a few minutes but already he's working his way up to a massive tantrum. I've learned the early warning signs – deep sighs, fingers tapping the wheel, muttering. He likes to be in control, thinks he's still in the Army ordering the recruits about, but there's nothing he can do about this situation. Normally he'd be hooting the horn, driving up the backside of the car in front of us, intimidation tactics. But even my husband will not do this to a funeral cortege. I can tell his blood pressure's on the rise: he's been told to be careful, to cut down on the drinking and smoking, but he dislikes experts of any sort, including doctors, especially if they are female or from the Indian sub-continent. His complexion by now is bright red, beads of sweat glistening on his forehead, but that could be down to the fact that it's a hot day. He refuses to use the air conditioning – he says it costs money – and he insists on wearing a jacket and tie at all times, so unsurprisingly he's over-heating. I, too, am uncomfortable, the long-sleeved high necked dress he decreed I should wear today hiding a multitude of sins. I gaze down at my lap, murmuring agreeing sounds from time to time: it's best not to make eye contact.

The Inside-Out World by

Vaya had never seen so many people at once. Everybody was coming out of their habs and into the courtyard. There was a big mess as they all tried to get on the pathway that was only four people wide. She saw Denbon waving at her and started running towards him.

“Ow!” Her arm almost jerked out of her shoulder. She had forgot that Pap’s big hand was wrapped around her small one.

“Stay with us, Vaya. We don’t want to lose you in the crowd.”

“Where are we going?” Pap and Muv had said something before, but it was all elephant words that didn’t fit in her head.

Pap looked down at her with that smile he used when Vaya had made a mistake. She didn’t like the smile, but she did like the hug that usually came with it. But this time there was no hug.

“It’s called an Assembly. It’s very exciting. There hasn’t been one since I was smaller than you are now.”

“Ass … sem … bee. What is it? And why does everybody in Blue Court have to go?”

It was Muv that answered. “Because Pap has to tell everybody some important news that we all need to hear. And it’s not just Blue Court: Red Court, Green Court, all the others in Africa Sector are coming too. And in all the other Sectors people are going to their Hubs as well. Everybody is coming together. That’s why it’s called an Assembly. Because we all assemble.”

“Ass … sem … bull. Everybody? Even the upside-down people?”

“That’s right. Everybody on the whole ship. A hundred thousand people – that’s more people than we’ve got flowers in our garden.”

“Even with the weeds,” said Pap, laughing.

Vaya didn’t quite believe it, even though Muv had her true voice on. So she leaned back, holding on to Pap with both hands, and looked straight up. Among the greens and blues she found the white splodge that Muv and Pap called Asia Sector Hub and Vaya called Upside-Down Town. “Zoom, zoom,” she said, and the white patch grew bigger and bigger, till it almost filled her visor screen. Now she could see the squares and oblongs that she knew were buildings, the circles and ovals that were Courts, the spiderweb lines of roads and pathways linking them all together. But they needed to be bigger still.

“Zoom, zoom,” she said again. Now she could see a pathway close up. It was wobbling – Vaya couldn’t keep her head quite still – but she could make out blobs that looked like the tops of people. And they were moving.

“Oh!” Pap let her go, and for a moment she was falling backwards. Then she could feel those big hands behind her shoulders, stopping her fall and lifting her up, till she was sitting on his arm, big and thick like a tree branch, like an elephant trunk.

The Stumpery Project by Jo Regan

Beauty is that in the presence of which we feel more alive.
John O'Donohue.

Whenever I invite people to see my stumpery, their reactions say it all. My twenty-three-year-old stepson, Josh, screws up his face, then flashes his 'get away with anything' grin. He calls my stumpery "midge-city," and only ventures into that part of the garden under sufferance. When I showed my creation to his girlfriend, Ellie, she stared at the decaying logs and droopy ferns, nostrils flaring, sculpted eyebrows raised above her trainee-teacher glasses. She turned to me, lips pressed together, head tilted as if consoling a lost child. Part of me relished her polite pity. The unkempt space is a world away from a twenty-something's idea of beauty, but it is my sweet spot.

Step out of the back door of the house, turn right along an old flagged stone path, through an area of once-golden gravel, and you'll reach the stumpery. Lying in the shadow of the north-facing gable-end, this corner of the garden receives only a few hours of sun per day, even at the height of summer. It is bounded on one side by a moss and lichen-peppered drystone wall, six or seven courses high. On the east-facing side, every May, a thicket of firethorn beckons with creamy blossoms. By September, the thorny hedge becomes a refuge for garden birds, darting in and out, gorging on a flare of juicy red and yellow berries.

I first came across the idea of a stumpery in a book about gardening in shady areas. Biddulph Grange in Staffordshire houses the UK's oldest recorded stumpery, built in 1856 to showcase plants collected from around the world. Victorian gardeners regarded tree stumps arranged on the ground with exposed roots as 'picturesque,' meaning 'somewhere between the sublime and the beautiful.' Stumperies provided ideal habitats for specimens gathered during the European fern-collecting frenzy that took hold at around the same time.

Stumpery gardens fell out of favour at around the turn of the 20th century and were later dismissed as Victorian horticultural oddities. All my reading about stumperies led to an obsession: I started examining every log I found washed up on the beach or came across in the woods, favouring those with gnarled roots, torn-off limbs, deep scars – imperfect enough to be awarded a place in the little-used corner of our garden.

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By fifty-five, most women I know are counting down to retirement and anticipating grandchildren. Some try to turn back time – dosing up on vitamins and collagen supplements, braving Botox, and popping HRT pills. My sister-in-law, a couple of years older, keeps regular dates with her beautician. Seeing her, I sometimes think, 'I really should get my act together.' Then I remember the one time I had my nails painted for a wedding; within minutes of leaving the salon, I'd smudged the polish, not waiting for it to dry before heading back into the garden.

The Valley by Sue Wright

In spring the woodland at the foot of the valley is a mass of bluebells and white-pink, star-shaped wood anemones, the air scented with the pungent aroma of wild garlic. In summer the skies above the fields overlooking the woodland are alive with the almost electronic song of skylarks. Today, in winter, glutenous mud sticks to the soles of our boots, weighs down our feet as we make our way through a field of brassicas, their bitter scent filling our nostrils. To one side, a ribbon of water, reflecting the steel sky, collects in a small ditch running parallel with the path. To the other side, desiccated ash leaves tumble in the wind, race us down towards the wood until a change in the wind's direction and a sudden gust sends them bowling away at right angles to our path.

In a ravine, sheltered from the wind, the song of a robin and a handful of bluetits our only company. We pause to rinse our boots in the stream that chatters over stones and rocks, the mud clouding the water. Climbing out of the valley, our breath shortening, strands of holly and brambles catch our clothes. We contour around the hillside where a blackbird grubs for insects in a pile of rotting horse manure. As we approach, it scuttles into a nearby hedge, its rattling alarm call piercing the air.

In the lane a man carries a shotgun, the stock over his shoulder, the barrel held to his chest. A grubby shooting dog trots at his side, tail flickering, ears pricked and alert. Behind them a cock pheasant slips through a gap in the hawthorn hedge, his rich caramel and chestnut tail quivering.

Descending once more, we hear the rush of water from an old millpond as it cascades over a stepped weir of gritstone, falling into a channel that once powered grindstones for the scythes and sickles that were forged here.

To reach our picnic spot we cross a footbridge over a goit, a water channel that once powered a wheel. The nearby millpond is now a fishing pond but there are no anglers here today only a handful of mallards paddling over the water. The air is scented with woodsmoke from a nearby dwelling. A robin sings from high, perhaps waiting for crumbs from our picnic. After lunch we climb once more, follow an old, rutted farm track, weave our way between potholes of murky water. We pause to watch a kestrel hovering low over the fields before it rises and disappears over the trees. The mewl of a buzzard alerts us to its presence before it too drops down into the woods and is lost from view. We reach another lane, sunken in the earth. Once, coal was brought up the lane from seams in the valley below. Now, in the post-industrial quiet, we hear the thud of feet and panting breath of a solitary runner who passes us and disappears into the valley below.

Travelling Spectrums by Neil Clarkson

Chapter 2

‘Red guy’ I said to Jack, without any context. I repeated it again, ‘Red guy’. Jack looked up at me with a slight twitch of his sparsely thatched eyebrows.

‘Who?’ he replied.

I swivelled and pointed to the middle distance. There stood a smallish man, decked in vivid red clothing from head to toe, starting from the top with a battered red baseball cap then a long flowing tunic that looked like it belonged in the Middle Ages. He stood with a red cane too, topped by a polished gold knob handle. His hair had been dyed red – badly. He wore roughly applied blusher and on his hands could be seen peeling nail varnish. Jack was impressed with the get up of Red Guy. He was very attracted to the idea of gold – its weight, its solidity, its flaunt. I think he secretly wished that we lived in an exuberant blingy house instead of a sober, austere one where the good taste on display was just too much for him.

‘Is that a, …….what do you call it……., er, nickname?’ enquired Jack but I was too distracted to hear the question.

Chapter 3

It was a rare all blue sky day and the breeze cut though our coats like the sharp edge of a label not yet removed from a new shirt. It always did, whatever the season. Me and my son Jack were up on the moors close to our house, the sky scowling as we walked past black grey rock emerging from the thick unproductive grass. We felt like anything was possible when we were outside in the pain-free air. He seemed hemmed in by the confines of a house – a place where only part of his real self could give expression to itself.

We were having a break from our normal urban weekend excursions. A blow out in the country in the wake you up air and the total smells of nature rotting and revolving.

As we took a breather at the foot of the next hill that we were preparing to scale, we looked up to see a crimson figure striding purposefully towards us, head bowed down towards his feet. As he came rapidly closer, we saw that these feet were covered in red beetle crusher shoes. His trousers were red from hip to ankle, his long red jacket had the air of a circus MC. His Wurzel Gummidge hair was streaked with different hues of red. On his hair stood a red baseball cap with an elongated peak, tilted slightly towards the left.

He stopped, well inside the dread zone that we call personal space, paused as if for dramatic effect, said to me: “God is not random. He couldn’t forgive his beloved son. His son’s sin was too immense and we are all resigned to pay for that, from that day forward.”