



Paper
Swans
Poetry & Flash Fiction

ISSUE 4

FOREWORD

Welcome to the fourth issue of Paper Swans, an iPamphlet showcasing emerging poets and writers of flash fiction. We are always excited by the diversity and strength of the submissions we receive for our iPamphlet and this issue has some international writers too.

We are now in the process of becoming a small press and we have a call for submissions for two printed anthologies next year: 'The Darker Side of Love' (poetry) and 'Schooldays' (poetry and flash fiction). These anthologies will include writers new and established and will be an example of the very best poetry and flash fiction. For further information, see our <http://paperswans.co.uk>

Issue 2 Contributors:

Catherine Connolly

Catherine Connolly resides in the North West of England amidst an ever increasing number of books and competing story ideas. She is a member of The Poised Pen writing group and contributor of flash fiction and poetry to their third anthology 'Half Baked'. She has previously published stories at 1000 Words and with Sirens Call. Her story 'Dealbreaker' is due for publication in the forthcoming charitable anthology 'In Creeps The Night'. Website: www.fallintofiction.blogspot.co.uk

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A. B. Cooper

Anna is a recent convert to poetry writing, enjoying the challenge of crafting form, structure, narrative and language in such a condensed form. She also enjoys writing short stories for both adults and children and is about to embark on writing her first full-length novel. She can be seen sharing her work on YouTube, here at 1:26: <http://m.youtube.com/watch?v=LBEGIfnYU9w> and here at 1:28: <http://m.youtube.com/watch?v=PjvWOWBhOM4>

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Ellie Danak

Ellie Danak is a poet and occasional cartoonist, with a background in researching modern Swedish crime novels, skiing off hills head first and stuffing her face with tiramisu. She lives in Edinburgh and divides her time between her keyboard and/or notebook and Peanut (her toddler-son powered by dried mango). She blogs at <http://poetryandpandemonium.com>

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Ariel Dawn

Ariel Dawn lives in Victoria, British Columbia. Recent writing appears in Scraps flash fiction anthology, Black & Blue, The Bohemyth, and Ambit. She is working on her first novel.

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Liz Hedgecock

Liz Hedgecock divides her time between work, childrearing, running and writing. She writes short stories, is attempting a longer one, blogs about all of it at <http://lzhedgecock.wordpress.com>

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Michael Jackson

Mike Jackson - 63 years old, a retired primary school headteacher. Lives in Cheshire, Warrington with his wife. In the five years since he retired he has developed a passion for writing flash fiction and Twitter fiction. More of which can be found on his blog and Twitter page. The picture on his blog and Twitter page is of his 'Studio' (his wife calls it a shed!) and this is where he dreams and writes.

Blog: <http://mjshorts.wordpress.com>

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Jade Kennedy

Jade Kennedy is a writer of poetry, prose, flash fiction and a collector of borrowed expressions. She lives in East Yorkshire, UK. Her poetry has been included in various zines and she is now looking to find more homes for her flash fiction and prose. She writes a blog - 'Borrowed Expressions' at www.jadekennedywriter.blogspot.co.uk

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Judith Kingston

Judith Kingston writes novels, poetry, song lyrics, monologues, screen plays, lesson plans, amusing status updates and shopping lists. She illustrates her stories and her life and does a mean Dora the Explorer. Website: <http://judithkingston.wordpress.com/>

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Mark Newman

Mark Newman is a Library Supervisor from Leicestershire and, after many years of procrastination, is finally doing something about his dreams of being a writer. He has been longlisted this year for the Bristol Prize and highly commended in the New Writer Prose & Poetry Awards, as well as winning several competitions, including two from Paper Swans. Website: <http://marknewman1973.wordpress.com>

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Clodagh O'Brien

Clodagh O'Brien has been published in many interesting places. A Dublin resident, she prefers to write in bed and realises there are too many books to read before she dies. She is Assistant Editor of short fiction at the online literary journal, The Bohemyth. You can read her blog at www.clodaghobrien.com

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Andrew Patch

Andrew's flash fiction and short stories have featured in Firewords Quarterly, 1000 Words, 101 Fiction, With Painted Words and various anthologies.

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Bart Van Goethem

Bart Van Goethem, 42, Brussels, Belgium, is a father, a copywriter, a drummer and the author of the self-published and sold out 'Life's too short for long stories', a collection of micro-fiction (2012). Over 40 one sentence stories and 5 flash fiction stories have been published in print and online.

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ARIEL DAWN

WHEN I FALL

A stranger bends down: cologne and black wool. I use his shoulders for flight, I pull at his heart like a memory. He's the one who phones at midnight to breathe. He's the reason I cry for no reason. There is this moment. The light changes. He could take me away and I'd remind him of the forest in the dark oil painting, the knotted silver rings, the blueberry smoke behind the cemetery.

JADE KENNEDY

OLD NORSE

She taught me languages by calling into the air in German, Swedish, Norwegian, rolling her northern dialect off her tongue effortlessly. She told me once that her eyes were from her Viking heritage, a lush green with hints of copper and silver, rimmed with a band of rich hazel. I believed every word she said.

Her mother was Russian, a willowy woman with smooth pale hands. She spoke with a lisp and absently stroked the side of her face when she was nervous, and had a laugh that sounded like a prayer, hollow and darkly warm. Her father was Swedish. He told me he had been born with brine in his veins, told me stories of ice across lakes as far as the eye could see, and the time death missed his hand when he was a foolish light-eyed lad of thirteen. He sailed for a living and his arms were solid and heavy. His hair was cropped short, a dancing play of light between red and wet sand, eyelashes so fair they could be dusted with ice crystals, as if he had walked out of a fairytale wood and never looked back.

I couldn't see where she went that day, when we walked along the beach in March. She was throwing Old Norse at the sea and it roared back at her. The look on her face was one of intense listening. I laughed. She blushed and said that the waves were asking if I would go looking for her. I felt the words slip from my tongue and lay heavy, unanswered, 'Why, where are you going?'

If only I had not fallen asleep on the sand. I awoke, my head full of pain and sand crystals on my face. She had gone. Maybe walked out to sea to try and catch a wandering star. She never really belonged to this world, living like a fae with beliefs in magic and things unseen. The last words from this child of other lands was

'Would I go looking for her?'

I willed the strength to search. I was trying to find a whisper, a myth, my friend. I

searched for her footprints but only my own marked this sparse landscape. The beach sighed with me as I listened for the things on the wind that she told me once were there; words and curses, prayers and songs, thrown away as carelessly as they had been created, and that still lived in the layers of the air. I heard a Celtic song sung to a child, an argument between lovers and the heated devotion, all on one gust of wind that blew hair across my eyes.

‘Not just fair, but a beauty. Standing closer than you think. Where the sky and sea meet in a bright light. On a land without sin.’

It was spoken in a rush. I turned, tried to hold onto it, but then it was gone over the grasses, joyous in its escape.

ANDREW PATCH

THE SERPENT

The barb bit deep releasing crimson. ‘Fool!’ Abigail sucked at her palm. If Frank were here now he’d mock her clumsiness.

Abigail returned to unfurling the rusted barbed wire, discovered within the gloom of Frank’s shed, along the garden wall. A spiky corroded serpent that resisted her as Frank had towards the end. Their love eroded by time and pressure, like the nearby cliff top adorned with police tape, fluttering in the sea breeze. Marking Frank’s final defiance at the doctor’s prognosis.

Rubbing tears away, Abigail renewed twisting the wire around the latch of the gate. Just ... keep ... busy.

The shrill clamor of the phone interrupted her progress, the caller denied by the answer machine already overburdened with sympathy. A final twist, Abigail rubbed together her bronzed numb fingers, looking out across the grey sea. She wasn’t the one who left that morning in silence, never returning.

She just wished the waves would stop calling out to her.

JUDITH KINGSTON

YOU MEANT US TO FLY

You meant us to fly
that's why
my feet are so tired
of trudging from here to there
in circles and round again
dragging your good news behind me,
slipping it in unnoticed
with oil lamps and trinkets.

I ask you:
"Feel there, just there,
are those nubs of wings?"

I sigh, disappointed, and on I walk -
my glorious wings, twenty cubits wide,
catch in the doorframe.

If I did have wings
(I dream sometimes)
what would I do?
Would I be like you?
Shelter frail chicks as they grow
and soar in glee towards the sun
where unlike Icarus
I'd land unharmed,
run into your arms,
and revel in your pure
unending
passionate love for me
for ever more?

Then I wake and I walk on
and leave a trail of pearly feathers
burning in my wake.

LIZ HEDGE COCK

THE MAKER

I am an artist.

I began as a sculptor in stone, working in the classical tradition. Under my hands deities, nymphs and fauns were shaped.

But the city had enough sculptures. The gods slumbered in my workshed, their nakedness muffled in cloth. I couldn't afford to buy a humble soapstone, much less eat.

The main problem, though, was that I wanted my creations to live, to move. My statues were spellbound, frozen.

Strangely, satisfying my base need for food led me to my life's work. Night had fallen long ago, and I was in a back alley, picking through the rotting fruit and vegetables beneath even the servants' contempt. I bit into an apple and recoiled at the taste of decay and a wriggle against my lips. I spat, ran to the babbling spring at the alley's end, and gladly drank. As the water washed the foulness from me, I saw my sculptures as the conduits for healing streams.

My first fountain was simple: a group of water nymphs outside the bath-house, themselves bathing and pouring water. On its unveiling, the crowd gasped as sparkling water splashed and played, making rainbows in the sunshine.

My next commission was a fountain for the park. I spent many days and evenings there, observing. Children jumped up and down and couples squeezed hands as the water jets embodied the swoops and dives of my wheeling flight of swallows.

Perhaps I should have stopped there. However, the Mayor made me a very generous offer. I toyed with several ideas – I tried to resist – but my art called me.

The fountain came to life and water soared upwards, joyful and free. I gasped at my own creation.

The Mayor wept. 'It's true, isn't it?'

I had denied nothing, but I nodded. Leo had saved himself with his confession. While the hand was his, the intent was all mine. My chains clanked as I was led from the cemetery garden.

The Mayor has already administered my main punishment by breaking up my masterpiece. What follows is a release.

Soon I will be free as the water, ascending, a soul in flight.

CLODAGH O'BRIEN

NEAR-NIGHT

Near-night is a lollipop, rosy as a happy tongue. The wind claws; in scratches that chatter my bones. I write my name across the sky with an invisible pen and wish I had an aeroplane instead.

A Cheshire Cat moon glows against the darkness, settling in for the many hours winter allows. It nestles between two mountains, their tops smothered in ice cream, a hint of pistachio mixed with vanilla. Street lamps ignite, their droopy heads stuck in a mourn. Lone leaves scatter the ground; cracked and sodden. They lift in a swoon as if praying for an end that just won't come.

The bench is damp, its slats oozing out this afternoon's rain. A plaque is screwed into the back. Dull with gunk and fingerprints it reads: 'For Mildred'. That's all, just her name and a 'For'. I run my fingers over the grooves and wonder why it stops there, and how that could ever be enough.

From here I see my bedroom. Full of my sisters' shadows, all arms and mouths screaming for something they only want because the other one does. As they stamp, my chandelier lampshade will chime, in poor triangle dings that call for peace. My mum will pace the kitchen, steam churning from a pot, lid half-on and half-off. The smell of burning will go unnoticed as she loses herself on the phone, to anyone who'll listen.

The chair where my dad sat will creak. His glasses, thick and round with a masking tape crack that got stuck to his eyebrows, will be on the side table covered in cup rings. The newspaper will be there, still rolled up, the pages unblemished and crisp.

Tap, tap. Tap, tap. My magpie is back. Its claws hooked over the back of the bench. In the strange near-night its feathers glow, in ivory and deep sea glimmers that make me feel colourless. It rubs its beak on the wood, back and forth just like my dad used to do when he sharpened the turkey carving knife. It was a ritual that made my mum tut and smile at the same time.

In my bedroom the shadows run, my sisters being called for dinner. They will fight over where to sit, even though they end up in the same places every time. Mum

will serve us first, a gentle pat on each of our heads as the plate goes down. Then she will sit at the top and barely eat; her food the victim of jittery prongs.

Slow and strong, the phone vibrates in my pocket. “Yeah, I’m on my way... No, I won’t dawdle.”

I say goodbye to the magpie and pull my coat tight, the wind whispering in my marrow. Back home, I will sit, wolf down the food and try not to look at the empty space. I will pretend that he’s there in his masking tape glasses, rustling the newspaper, adding just one more cup ring.

MARK NEWMAN

ACROSS THE WAVES

She wrote letters home to her mother, but something was missing. They both sensed it, across the waves, a lost connection. She hit upon an idea. She took a pair of scissors and cut a square from her favourite coat, the one she had had for so long. Her mother received this; was unsure what to do. When the second piece arrived she understood.

Inside the next letter from her mother there was a pebble from her rockery. She loved her mother's tiny rockery, had always adored the way the pebbles framed the forest of bonsai trees that thrived in all weathers under her mother's care.

The letters crossed oceans; a pebble going one way, a square of cloth the other. The daughter arranged the pebbles on the mantelpiece. Across the waves her mother brought down her old dressmaker's mannequin from the loft. On it the coat was being remade; her daughter reassembled before her.

CATHERINE CONNOLLY

APPEARANCES AND DISAPPEARANCES

They are there one day, where once was just gravel and dirt, reaching skyward, thick and tall. Before nightfall they are the talk of the town. You go to see them, of course, amongst the curious in the crowds, to press a finger to the cold stone and wonder at the meaning of the symbols inscribed upon them. They are far up on each of them, too high to touch, surface too smooth to climb. You screw your eyes up against the light, hand above an eye, to try to see them clearly. An alien? A sea horse, perhaps? They blur as the sands shift in the breeze, clouding your vision momentarily. You hear someone say they see a winged dragon and smile briefly. Perhaps you are this year's community in joke - the season's take on the crop circle - captured on camera for posterity. You scan the mobile phones and cameras cautiously. They are pointed, one and all, front and centre, at the standing stones.

You circle the two pillars, walk between them, take a snap or two to tweet before abandoning the site to dusk and dirt, as numbers dwindle. You think you will return for a closer look sometime, presupposing they are still there in the morning.

By nightfall next day they have multiplied magically, three freestanding, where once were two, fresh symbol imprinted on the tip, up on high. You struggle to see amongst additional sightseers, the sea of shufflers grumbling forwards, as they submit to queuing to take their turn. The stones stand regimented, ruler straight in line. Impossible to see how deeply they reach down, though you scrabble at the base of one amongst the grains. They bury themselves under your nails. You frown at the kick back, as you feel - or think you feel - a short, sharp shock to your fingertips where they touch the granite. You pull them back, raising them to your lips to cool the smart. There is heat where you suck them, though you see no red, raised marks or burn. You tell yourself it is your imagination which has been sparked by the mystery of the standing stones and what they may represent. You tell yourself aloud, then repeat it.

There are five at dead of night when you approach again, alone, as others sleep. You nod, once, twice, to each of them in turn, smile slightly as you take in the now familiar symbols and those new to you, completing the quintet. You inhale as you walk between the pillars, breathe out onto each in turn, inscribed images fully illuminated in your eyes now you see. You know where they will take you, with them, on their journey and where it ends. That those who travel to see the standing stones tomorrow will see merely gravel and dirt, where once were pillars and a girl. You wonder how long it will be before they realise their silent stone visitors have taken a willing souvenir with them.

JUDITH KINGSTON

ARE YOU STILL THERE, ENGLAND?

I remember stone cottages
on windy roads hemmed with hedges,
dogs barking in the yard at dawn
a village shop, red phone box outside.
We ran without fear, without thought,
down the road, flip flops flying,
summer clothes, always grubby,
cricket in the garden and afternoon tea.

There was a stillness that settled.
You were but the scene, painted
as backdrop for childhood adventures,
no one moving or laughing but us.
Shopkeepers waved paper hands,
painted smiles from the hikers,
they knew their role and their place,
any words tightly scripted to brighten our day.

Twenty years on I have jumped in the picture:
the cars set in motion, the volume turned up.
Outside the shop is a shattered red phone box,
the winding lanes hide speeding cars round blind bends.
The chatter is ceaseless, voices cry for attention,
each one the centre of their own universe.
I can't hear the birds now, the rush of the river,
no one wants to play games or run after geese.

Oh England,
Is it you or my youth that has fled
in the whirl and confusion of life games
insurance and taxes, politics, violence
and final demands?

Then I step out of the front door
the dewy lawn, tall purple flowers,
a child by the hand and one on my arm
and I see them gaze in joyful wonder
at bees and planes and diggers and cats.
Bills are just paper, traffic a game,
Their eyes reflect your beauty,
England,
I look at their faces and find you again.

MICHAEL JACKSON

MARY, MARY

The sign in the flower tent had her name on it. There it was as clear as day,

Ms M.Mary

Gold Award Hollyhocks

Best In Show'

and underneath it one of the judges had scribbled, 'Just like a row of pretty maids.' She should have felt elated but she didn't, on the contrary, she felt extremely nervous. She looked around to see if there was any way out of this nightmare but, just as she was making a dash for the exit, a voice stopped her in her tracks.

'Mary! Mary Mary. Congratulations. I didn't realize what a talented horticulturist you were.'

Mary looked behind her. To her horror she saw Jane Dobson, Chairwoman of the Women's Institute, local snob and village busybody, bearing down on her.

'I was just talking to some of the ladies on the committee,' said Jane 'I was saying, we must get young Mary Mary to come to our next meeting and tell us the secrets of her hollyhocks.'

Mary felt quite faint. This was her worst nightmare. How on earth could she talk about something she knew absolutely nothing about? They weren't her hollyhocks. She had so wanted to enter this year's village flower show but everything she attempted to grow just withered and died. She realized now was a crazy idea it had been to go to the local B&Q and buy some beautiful looking hollyhocks to enter. She never dreamt they would win.

'You're a dark horse,' prattled on Jane Dobson, 'I thought you didn't like gardening. Why only the other day I'm sure I overheard you telling the Vicar you couldn't grow anything. Whenever I've been past your garden it just seems to be full of shells and those bell-shaped ornaments but I've never seen any flowers. You are a contrary one Mary.'

'Well, yes, but no, you see' stammered Mary.

‘That’s it!’ interrupted Jane Dobson, ‘That’s what we shall call your talk, ‘Mary Mary Quite Contrary, How Does Your Garden Grow?’ splendid, we look forward to hearing what you’ve got to say. Will a week on Wednesday be OK?’

JADE KENNEDY

BLACKBIRD

It started softly, almost like a golden humming within a dream that then became a small part of the dawn chorus, singing strongly his song of welcome. As the days brightened and the nights receded more and more towards the horizon, he started visiting my window sill and just before the last star of night had faded away he would sing just for me, joyously, but with a sharp tone, a strange notation that he had come to tell me something.

His beak was smoothed, polished to a vibrant yellow, his feathers were a like a velvet black cloak he wore with pride and he knew me and I knew him. As he woke me earlier each morning, during the week when the sun walked the longest through the sky, a mid-summer message from a spirited blackbird - I nicknamed him Solstice and he wove a dance between the green robed branches just for the joy of being.

The songs grew more desperate, his visits longer each morning, a swift imploring look in his eyes, a wishing to talk to me, tell me his real name, his story, something for my heart alone. In my lack of sleep blackbirds flew from every shadow, walked across my fingers and across my thoughts - his song wasn't finished so my eyes didn't close.

On the morning of the longest day, rising like a blue translucence shell into the darkness, I went out to the garden, the dew collecting on my feet like gold dust. He was in the tree above me drowned in green shadows and it was then when I reached out to him that I fell asleep, enveloped by the grass in its mid-summer growth. I felt my arms stretching, moving out of place, my bones softening, losing their shape, my back burned and pulsed, the first tips of feathers broke my skin, a downy black veil washed over me like rain - and I knew the morning songs and all the songs I must now sing. It was then that Solstice and I could speak.

ARIEL DAWN

WHO STARES THROUGH THE DARK

Fog hides the city lights, so the tower burns alone.

Voices float around the rails; they leap through windows like forbidden cats.

The dream of a boy who stares through the dark, who crosses the room to lie on my bed of feathers and down. Here we'll live forever, skip the day and blame our absence on life-altering books and hauntings.

This morning his father appeared. He wore a Dali tie, The Persistence of Memory. We rode the elevator like rebel children riding it nowhere. He held out a velvet box, and in the slit where a ring is placed, a charm for a bracelet I lost.

A.B.COOPER

THE FACE I'D WRITE MYSELF

Bleeding blackberry lips; sad sweet stain
Redolent of endings and fleeting ripeness,
Parted, exhaling hot winds on sighs from molten core.

Mother of pearl incisors,
Sharp, patiently articulating soft, iridescent words with
Salty oyster tongue -
Alchemical language transforming base, invading irritation,
Purified in cleansing crucible.

Weeping willow boughs for hair:
Rooted in earth,
Tossed in air,
Dipped in water.

Skin carved,
Weathered,
Patterned
In topographical beauty
With scars of conflicts raged in time's onward march.

Brows of river weed, shifting, riding currents,
Arching in languid serenity.

Eyes of darkly polished wet slate,
Ammonite-whorled sentinels bearing timeless witness.

This is the face I'd write myself.

JADE KENNEDY

EDEN

She was courting an isolation never known to her before. The walls were humming with a silence that could be felt and seen, she knew she was undeniably alone. Not even a creature or a wisp of something unknown lingered on the air to watch her.

She felt the urge to write and wrote such words of depth and understanding, of the people she watched and reached out to with the bones in her fingers stretching and clicking in her many attempts. They would not hear her or see her grasping hand, she was concealed behind a glass so thick she could trace the bubbles of its impurities with a changing heart

As she wrote into the days and nights, needing less and less light to read her words, blocking out the light, shielding away from the windows like a flower closing its face to the dusk. Her finger tips grew soft and pooled out like melted wax, they stuck to everything she touched. She stroked the cool walls with a deep yearning to walk them. Skin untouched by the sun, started to pale to a translucent sheen with its visible marbling of blue tinted veins.

Her pupils lost their definition and eyelids as thin as white rose petals claimed their place over her iris.

When they find her shed skin, lost behind a carved chair, with its paper thin markings of a woman consumed by herself. With all she left behind, the pages on pages of fiction, prose, poetry and the unknowable love she created on paper,

could they ever know what she went through ...

BART VAN GOETHEM

I AM INVINCIBLE

‘Test. Test.’

The man spoke into the microphone through his gas mask. The green LED lights lit up. The orange and the red didn’t.

‘Sound level is okay. Can we start?’

‘Sure,’ I said.

‘How are you feeling?’

‘Fine,’ I answered.

It was the 37th day of the nuclear winter and there I stood: legs spread, arms crossed, wearing nothing but my army green shorts and my black Nikes. Somehow the radiation had made me incredibly healthy. It had also made me into an anomaly. A freak. But I didn’t care.

Out of the deadly clouds a snow flake fluttered down on my naked shoulder.

‘Oh, look,’ I said. ‘Nice. I was wondering if we’d get a white Christmas.’

I looked at the man in his protective suit. If anything could kill me, anything at all, it was the piercing stare of his beady eyes.

‘Sorry. What’s the next question?’

CLODAGH O'BRIEN

CRACK(ER)

“He’s a cracker!”

“Like Christmas.”

“Like fireworks.”

“Like Ryvita.”

“Like...” Mel flips through the words in her head, but none get picked up by her tongue. Fucking words, she thinks. Screwed up, piece of shite scrawls and loops that just don’t like her.

Across the table Kylie picks at her fingernails. They painted them for each other, sky blue and dirty pink the bottles said. It was her suggestion to paint each nail an alternating colour, an idea she’d seen somewhere, but wasn’t sure where. She sees so much in a day that it’s hard to keep track of where stuff comes from.

Like swims around Mel’s head, her brain starting to hurt with all the thinking. She gets excited when it appears, raps the table with a dirty pink finger. “Like pipe.”

Kylie doesn’t bother looking up. “That’s crack, not cracker.”

Mel remembers why she hates ‘er’ more than any of the ends of words, more even than ‘ing’. “It still counts. He can show me his pipe anytime.”

They both explode into giggles, although Kylie’s is more of a bark; a smoker’s cough even though she’s never smoked. It’s her dad who does; two packets a day, every day. Kylie doesn’t want him to die, but she knows they’re killing him. “I’d be happy to let him explore my crack.”

“He can come and pull my cracker anytime.”

“I’d light his pipe, nice and slow.”

“He can spread me like Philadelphia.”

“I’ll make him explode like New Year’s Eve.”

“He can fill me up, and keep on going.”

“Jesus Mel that’s grim.”

“You’ve said worse.”

“Fill me up and keep on going? I don’t think so. What are you a Ford Fiesta?”

“Screw you. I’m a Ferrari.”

“Ferrari’s are ugly.”

“But they’re the best aren’t they? Fast and furious.”

Kylie goes back to her fingernails and peels off a hood of dirty pink. “You think he’d go with one of us?”

“The cracker?”

“Yeah.”

They both look out the window, to the football pitch where he’s far away but close enough.

Mel looks away first. “He’s prob’ly gay anyway.”

“Like all the best ones.”

“Xactly.”

The bell rings and chairs screech. They walk into the hall.

“You know what we should try tonight?” Kylie holds her hand up to the ceiling.

“What?”

“Stripes. Three colours this time and none of this shite dirty pink.”

“Alright, but you know I’m no good at lines.”

ARIEL DAWN

MY SKIN

My skin breaks out, there are spots and lines; the world bleeds through. I lie down, still as a canvas, under my lover with his gun of ink. Imagine grey flowers, smoke and clouds and winged embers stung to sleep in a nest of ash, while he fashions my brand new skin. He learned inside. He carves out roses, tribal, flags for places where I was never born yet wanted to live. Released before learning how to shade, outlines are hard, fading out like a bruise or a scar.

ELLIE DANAK

AND IF YOU MUST SQUEEZE MY HEART

then squeeze it hard,
unpin the safety net of veins, drain
the sludge and drink its blood-light.

Rock its swallow's nest in your hand,
roll the rust-specked eggs, scoop out
tufts of hair, softened shells, loose bones

that spill like matches on the floor.
This muscle is nothing but a pain-
scorched sac. You play it like a bagpipe,

drop it at my feet,
on the bus, from a bridge
on the train tracks, in a side street
where kids kick the dirt out of it.

MARK NEWMAN

MY FENCE IS ELECTRIC

She had not had good experiences with love, so she bought the wire and wound it around her heart as a barrier. It was true that it caused her considerable pain, but it was a constant pain; a hurt she was in control of.

When he met her he paid no attention to it, clambering over the wire and straight into her heart.

'Did you not see the fence I put up?' she said.

'Of course,' he said. 'I thought you had put a wall up against the outside world for us to live inside.'

She stared at him for a while, wondering if he was really so sure of himself, or just foolish; or both.

'I have one too,' he said. 'A fence. My fence is electric.'

It was the right thing to say. She let herself into his heart and, as she did so, she felt the tingle pulsing through her skin.

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And if you must squeeze my heart

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My Skin

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When I Fall

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