

The background of the cover is a photograph of a dirt road winding through a dry, open landscape. The road is reddish-brown and curves from the bottom right towards the center. The surrounding terrain is covered in sparse, dry vegetation and scattered rocks. The sky is a clear, bright blue with a few wispy white clouds.

# SOUTH AFRICAN SHORT STORIES

FOREWORD BY HENRIETTA ROSE-INNES

EDITED BY MICHELLE NÖTHLING

THE 15 WINNING STORIES  
FROM THE SA WRITERS' COLLEGE  
SHORT STORY COMPETITIONS

2008-2012

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# FOREWORD

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Every year, when the time for judging the South African Writers' College Short Story Competition rolls around, I relish the opportunity to read this sample of what new authors are dreaming up and writing down. The stories are often lively, touching, ambitious – always surprising.

Each year, a handful of gems appear: stories that do something genuinely new with the well-worn form of the short story. The most successful of these have tight structure, take the reader on a satisfying journey and use language in adventurous ways, whether they are fantastical tales, dark works of satire, gritty portraits or thoughtful meditations. All of the above are represented in this collection of the best of the last five years' entries.

The scope is wide, and includes wild flights of invention. The creepy Kickpush from Widaad Pangarker's *Writer's Block* and the blood-chilling Tokoloshe in the story by that name by Hannah Green are some of the most memorable figures in the anthology. Both stories are fresh takes on classic

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horror. A gentler, childlike magic illuminates *Pieces of Peony-Painted Teacups* by Shelley Blignaut.

In a more realist mode, several pieces do what short stories, with their capacity for fine detail and sharp focus, have always done well: isolate moments of crisis or revelation in ordinary people's lives, and invest them with drama and tenderness. And so we have the young wife contemplating her marriage in *A New Life*, a finely judged story by Grant Griffiths; a woman lyrically haunted by the sadness of an earlier generation in the *The Yellow Coat* by Katja Abbott; and the pull of romantic delusion in the suspenseful *Tune in Again Next Week* by Carla Lever.

There are several moving explorations of mortality and aging, such as the heartbreaking *The Colours of Choice* by Ann Kern and *Martin Mandel's Parabola* by Ashley Symes, a story full of melancholy wisdom. Also tackling death, in a less sombre but no less profound manner, are the exuberant, irresistible *Waitin' for Fuzzy* by Ross Ian Fleming and the powerful dystopian piece *Final Disposition* by Jessica Liebenberg. These writers do not shy away from big themes.

As one might expect from a South African anthology, many of the stories show a preoccupation with the inequalities and violence of our society. *Watching Sunsets We Never See*, the second story by Shelley Blignaut in the collection, starkly exposes the ironies of life for the poorest, while the subtle, evocative *Go* by Aname van Zyl offers the perspective of a child witness to domestic violence. Others deal with these issues with a

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darkly comic touch, surely also a feature of South African psyche. *Board and Lodging* by William Oosthuizen approaches homelessness and exploitation with bittersweet absurdity; *Line of Sight* by Arthur Bacchus is a vivid portrait of paranoia, while *A Gambling Man* by Bettina Calder pokes delicious fun at our expectations of violence.

It's an exciting range of voices, most as yet unfamiliar to the reading public. I don't doubt that will change, and that the writers collected here have many more stories to tell us: tragic, comic – always surprising.

Henrietta Rose-Innes, 25 May 2012

# PREFACE

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In 2007 we launched the first national SA Writers' College writing competition in South Africa. From the start, we aimed the competition at unpublished, emerging writers who would benefit from the affirmation that they were on the right track. To our amazement, we received a couple of hundred entries, and five years later, the numbers are still rising.

What we've noticed is that we're growing a community of writers – entrants who re-enter each year and who are developing their skills. Each year the writing standard edges up – a noticeable progression in writing confidence, style and general cognisance of writing basics.

## THE JUDGES

The success of our annual competition hinges on the generosity and expertise of our judges. Each year they dedicate their time to read and rate the top stories, and we are truly grateful to them.

## Preface

Ginny Swart spearheads the competition, helping to rank all the stories and offering solid critiques to entrants. Our judges include Henrietta Rose-Innes, Alex Smith, Karen Jeynes, Liesl Jobson, Lisa Lazarus, Karin Schimke, Helen Brain, Michelle Matthews and Charlotte Randall.

A huge thank you to them for making the competition – and thus this anthology – possible.

Another word of thanks must go to our skilful editor, Michelle Nöthling, who also did the beautiful typesetting.

### WHAT'S NEXT?

For now, we are delighted to present this anthology of the winning stories from the past five years – a culmination of many hours of work by our entrants, and the team at SA Writers' College.

We look forward to the next five years' of competitions, and the second anthology out in 2017. Our hope is that these stories inspire more South Africans to write and enter. Enjoy the read.

Nichola Meyer  
(Principal of SA Writers' College)

Acknowledgement and appreciation goes to Don Pinnock for supplying the photograph adorning the cover page.

# MARTIN MANDEL'S PARABOLA

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Ashley Symes

**T**his morning, Martin Mandel is out of sorts.

At eight minutes past five on a Wednesday in January, in the seventy-first summer of his life, he is cycling staunchly on a stationary bicycle in the upstairs section of his gym. Before him are tall windows active with reflections, overlooking the parking lot where lights are still burning. The sun as it rises will uncover green sports fields ahead and to the left a sweep of blue Cape mountains.

So far all is as it should be. Martin has found himself here Mondays to Fridays, a little after 5 a.m. for the past five years. He exercises out of natural vigour and self-respect and admiration for the human body – and, more precisely, out of prudent regard for the good health and balance of Dr Mandel, paediatrician retired, and family man. He and his friend Denis Friedgood (anaesthetist retired), long agreed to meet at this hour in this spot for twenty minutes of cardiovascular exercise, preparatory to thirty gingerly

minutes of weight training, ten minutes on the elliptical steppers, and some conscientious stretching to finish.

A clutch of anxiety seizes Martin as his glance falls on the video monitor streaming CNN live to his bicycle, soundlessly; today Martin has neglected to remember his headset. The screen flashes pictures of Gaza, wounded children, withdrawing tanks, livid lumps of white phosphorus amid rubble. Debra, her husband and his grandchildren will still be asleep in Tel Aviv. Yet none of this is good or just, Martin reminds himself, however expedient. The monitor has moved swiftly ahead of him to recount fresh agonies in the global economic downturn. After which it is some relief to glimpse America's new president confident before serried ranks of citizens in their National Mall, allowing themselves to hope.

Confronted with the world's turbulence, Martin rebounds upon what unsettles him closer to home. Waiting outside is his new Mercedes, a gift to himself in December but one which has proved capricious. Friday before last at noon, in an underground parking garage, he was stranded like a whale on a beach in his luxury vehicle, let down by failed auto electrics which jammed the central locking mechanism and the electric windows, and with no accessible signal for his mobile phone. Eventually a strolling security guard set in motion the necessities for his rescue. But Martin has been deeply disconcerted and still approaches his Mercedes askance, as if it had bitten him. Having always delighted in technological ingenuity and tackled

gadgets with gusto, in this experience he was defenceless. He acquired a membrane of frailty, instant and dismaying but – he suspects – permanent.

There is the matter too of a scarcely perceptible tremor in his left hand which he has mentioned to no one, not even to Edith his wife. Although he did admit to himself on Sunday that he trembled five of the seven days in the preceding week.

His attention swerves to the statistics being diligently tracked by his bicycle to the side of the mouthing CNN anchorman. Seven and a half minutes gone, and his heart is beating at one hundred and thirty beats per minute. Denis Friedgood is not cycling alongside him, but he would typically start three or so minutes after Martin who has always been the earlier bird. Martin realises that he and Denis, cycling side by side these five years, have made an odd couple. His own appearance is benignly eccentric: unruly grey hair that harks back to Albert Einstein, pouches squirrelling in the sag of his cheeks, a paunchy trunk and chunky limbs. This solid fleshly self has kept its pattern for forty years and never intimidated his young patients. Contrast this with Denis who is compact and dapper, silver stubble covering his neat head, and with bright blue eyes that have always assessed the world with intelligence and irony – even as he looked over his surgical mask counting down the fearful into sleep.

As ten minutes notch up on his bicycle, anger at Denis's absence this morning washes over Martin with physical heat. He glances at his watch and having seen the time shakes his wrist irritably as if the hours and minutes

were to blame for Denis's non-arrival. Then, being a mild and equitable man, he pulls himself up to inspect this reaction, this irregular eruption on the smooth surface of his habitual emotions. Immediately he intuits a connection between this anger and his helplessness in his Mercedes, but he cannot put his finger on the essential part of it.

A movement and a dull metallic thump to his right alert Martin to the presence of a fellow rider setting up the next-door bicycle. It is a smallish, fortyish woman who regularly appears at this hour and with whom there is invariably an exchange of greetings.

"Hallo," says Martin.

"Good morning," the woman replies and smiles.

She gets smartly down to business on her bicycle, outstripping him almost at once it seems, on revolutions per minute. Martin returns to his inner conundrum.

He sees that he has tried to fill his life with the youthful and the energetic, with flourishing and stalwart things. He lists the ways. Even as a doctor his efforts have always been on the side of the positive, to nurture the growing young, to preserve the healthy ones, to heal the sick and vanquish their diseases. As an individual, he has been ensconced in his community: not religious, no, but with inner attentiveness on the High Holy Days and with joy in the communal festivals; knowing the Law and the obligations even where failing them; honouring his parents and remembering those of

their families who died in Eastern Europe before he was seven years old. In this troubled African country where he was born, he did not take the path of activism but tried to discern just and unjust, to act accordingly, and to be of service. He chose his wife for her laughter, her sound character and her common sense. They raised three excellent children, all now with families of their own: one daughter living in Israel, his second daughter a counsellor and volunteer in the cause of prisoner rehabilitation, and his remarkable son a cardiologist and keen competitive cyclist.

Of course it is true that he has sat by the side of dying children and their families: he is well acquainted with grief. He knows the intricate concatenation of the phases described as shock, disbelief, denial, bargaining, yearning, anger, depression, resignation, acceptance, awakening. Then, he is acquainted too with the ineluctable shape of life, at least from a rational perspective. Each life is bounded by a line from birth to death, whether long or short, and by a physical body, whether sturdy or weak. Martin has known since the geometry of his school days that a point moving in relation to just such a set line and fixed body traces a parabola. He is perfectly familiar with the idea of human experience as an arc. Yet this morning he is struck – as if by a stone – by the sequence of ascent and descent in that trajectory.

At the same moment his eye is caught by the time indicator on his monitor, which is tracing his progress from zero minutes to twenty in an accreting curve of green electronic segments. These segments are now tailing downward past the halfway mark; '14:48,' says the display.

How obvious that the common human life comprises another linked chain, a litany of energy, vigour, passion, knowledge, confidence, assertion, achievement – and at some point a series of fallings away from all of these. Entropy, it occurs to Martin, an ugly word. And when did Martin crest his peak of wellbeing, at what moment did his descent begin? At thirty-five, at forty-five, ten days ago? Has it only so recently happened, or has it rather taken him so long to apprehend?

It is certain that exactly two months have passed since Denis was there beside him, running a commentary on this and that, leaning to squint at Martin's monitor and pace himself. Martin knows, he knows that Denis will never come again. He swats now at his face and arms with his sweat towel, swigs from his water bottle, wishing urgently to dispel the compression in his chest and throat.

In September was found, beneath the shelter of Denis's skull, a neoplasm – another ugly word: a malignant inoperable growth. It would be quick, Denis was informed and he relayed this to everyone he cared to tell at all. On the second-last Friday in November, as they betook their dishevelled selves from the gym into the early morning air, Denis said to Martin: "I won't be joining you on Monday". That was three weeks before Hanukkah, Martin's seventieth birthday, and the delivery of the Mercedes whose selection they had much discussed. Denis attended the Mandels' celebrations. Now he remains exclusively at home with

his wife and youngest daughter, receiving a few visitors, fading but impatient and ironic still.

Here, more pressing than the throbbing of his temples, more vivid than the sudden ringing in his ears, bursts upon Martin an imaginary but dizzying sensory profusion. The sea, the mountains, the desert, morning birds and a lion's roar; the eyes of his father and the hands of his mother, the expressions of those around his table at the Seder, the faces of patients from years ago; the astringent smell of hospitals and the redolence of baking bread; the tastes of coffee, of sesame, of vanilla and lime; the wedding photograph on his wife's dressing table and the crunching of glass under his heel; David crying and crying through the night as a baby, massed voices intoning. May there be peace and life on all of us.

'Maximum time of 20 minutes has expired,' reads red text scrolling from right to left across the top of his bicycle's monitor. Martin presses Stop. 'Cool down,' instructs his bicycle, and he slows the turning of his legs without stopping. Martin generally would cool down a little at this point while Denis caught up on his own twenty minutes before they went downstairs to the free weights area. Now Martin considers his next move. He feels raw and ill at ease.

He pictures the large, sunny kitchen at home, the newspaper lying on the breakfast counter, Edith preparing fruit on a board placed before the blender which she will use to whip up a smoothie for his breakfast. His legs keep slowing down. He hits Stop a second time and all his statistics disappear

from the monitor; CNN carries on regardless. He rotates the pedals once and stretches out his calf muscles on the right; he circles again and stretches those on the left. He makes a decision. His wife will be taken aback at his early return; will perhaps leap to concern about him or further misbehaviour of the car. But for today, as an exception, he will forgo the weights and the elliptical trainer.

Just for today, Martin Mandel believes he has done enough.

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# Ashley Symes

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Ashley Symes studied Languages and Literature at the University of Cape Town and Public Policy at the London School of Economics. Her working life has included magazine editing, programme co-ordination in NGOs, management consulting and higher education policy research and consulting.

For all kinds of reasons, Ashley had not yet achieved her lifelong dream of writing fiction. Now in her forties, she is in the process of restructuring her life and creating an environment for realising this goal.

*Martin Mandel's Parabola* was the winner of the 2009 South African Writers' College Short Story Competition.

# TOKOLOSHE

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## Hannah Green

**I** never meant to hurt Amy; let's make that clear from the start. I did what I thought was best for my child. Isn't that what we all try to do? And if it doesn't work out the way we planned, well, can we be the ones to blame?

Four months ago, Amy and I left the harsh, fast-paced city of Johannesburg for the promises and potential that Durban held. It was hard to leave our home, but there were too many memories and too few jobs for me to stay. Within a week of being retrenched, my disillusioned wife kicked us out. Amy's mother would fight to keep the house, but she wanted little to do with her eleven-year-old daughter. That's when I made the decision to move on.

With Amy in mind, I phoned my uncle Koos, reminded him of various favours owed and organised a new job and a place to stay before we arrived in Durban. The garden cottage I was promised turned out to be a hastily

renovated domestic workers quarter from the pre-Apartheid era. The two bedrooms, bathroom and open-plan kitchen-living area were so dark and cramped that a fresh coat of paint and a couple of rugs couldn't hide the harsh concrete beneath. I was disappointed, but I couldn't afford better so we tried to make it work.

I'm not sure when the trouble began. In hindsight, the warning signs were there from the start. A vicious, rusted knife had been hammered through the top of the front door. The beds were raised off the ground by old paint tins. Strange bundles of dried plants and animal hair were lashed to the burglar bars. I recognized them for what they were, Zulu charms to ward off evil spirits, but I had no place in my life for superstition.

The first month passed us by in a whirl of hard work and new worries. Amy's moods fluctuated between childhood excitement and sadness, but this was to be expected after her abrupt uprooting. She was at that tender age where she could see the facts for what they were yet she still struggled to understand them.

Amy and I slowly made the house our own. Over the weeks I took the beds off their paint tins, pried the knife from the door and repainted Amy's room. We soon settled into our new lives and, despite the chaotic upheaval that we had been through, Amy and I still found happiness in one another's company.

I did not realize that as we drifted along the tide of life, darkness swirled beneath us.

Strange things happened in that house, little things that seemed trivial at first, but gained sinister undertones in their continuity. I could never find anything where I'd left it: cigarette lighters, the TV remote, pens, my cell phone. Fruit and vegetables bruised and seldom tasted fresh, food spoiled and rotted overnight. My sleep was interrupted by disconcerting noises: the squeal of a door hinge, the creak of a window, stifled thuds and bumps.

I kept hearing footsteps in and around the house and worried about Amy, but when I'd get up to check on her she would be fast asleep. These things concerned me in an offhand way but when I heard Amy talking to herself late at night, I began to get nervous.

I would sneak to her bedroom door and listen to her muffled voice, sometimes sounding serious, sometimes she giggled. In the mornings Amy would seem her normal self and my fears would fade until night came again. I wondered if I had made the right choice in moving Amy to Durban, perhaps it was too much too soon.

A week's leave in December made me realize how odd things were, how being in that house all day made me feel uncomfortable, almost unclean. I began to dread those sleepless hours in the dark with their creaks and rattles, scrapes and thumps. I feared robbers and vandals, but could find no signs of foul play.

That Saturday I tried to talk to Amy. As I sat at the kitchen table I watched her out the corner of my eye. She seemed okay, but the dark rings under her eyes made me ask: “Everything okay, love?”

“Yes. Why?” Her big, blue eyes made my heart twinge with guilt. I didn’t know how to tell her that I’d been spying on her, that I’d seen her talking to herself in the dark of night.

“Well ... You look a little tired. You sleeping okay?”

“Yup ...” The silence that followed felt weighted with the thick Durban heat. “What’s a ticklish, Daddy?”

“A what?”

“A ticklish.”

“A ticklish? Something can be ticklish, love, but there isn’t anything called a ‘ticklish’.”

“But there is. Phineas told me.”

“Phineas the gardener?”

“Yip.”

“He told you there’s a ‘ticklish’? I think he’s just telling you stories.”

“No, he was being true, Daddy. He said there’s a ticklish in our house.”

“In our house?” A terrifying suspicion began to grow in my mind; I felt it swell like a Highveld thunder storm, crackling and booming with fear. “Was Phineas in our house, Amy? Was he tickling you?”

“No, Daddy.”

“Because you know no one’s meant to touch you, right?”

“Yes, Daddy.”

“And if that guy ...” Horrid thoughts stampeded through my mind, they bounced off one another and spiralled into depravity.

“No one’s been touching me. They teach us that at school.”

“Okay, honey.” I wanted to believe.

“But he said there is a ticklish. In our house. He said that that was the reason bad stuff keeps happening.”

“What bad stuff?”

“You know ... those things.”

“What things?”

“Things like why you can’t sleep so well. Why we can’t ever find anything, why food goes bad so quick.”

“Oh.” I was taken aback. I hadn’t realized that Amy was so perceptive, but I knew then what Phineas had been getting at. “I think Phineas is talking about a Tokoloshe. Like ticklish but with o’s instead of i’s.”

“Okay, but he thinks that’s what our problem is.”

“And why does he think that?”

“He told me about the knives in the door, and how we should’ve left them there.”

“Honey, Phineas is just having you on, trying to scare you.”

“No he’s not!”

“Yes, he is, love.”

“Really?”

“Of course. There’s no Tokoloshe causing problems. There are no problems to be caused. We’re just adjusting to a new home and we’re both stressed. Nothing to worry about.”

“Oh.”

That was where our conversation ended.

I tried to keep myself busy that day, pottering around the house, cleaning and making repairs. My conversation with Amy kept playing through my mind and it disturbed me in a way I couldn’t understand. We both needed to get out the house so I took her out for lunch and we rented some DVDs. Neither of us paid much attention to the movies, I think we were both submerged in our own thoughts. Amy was fast asleep by eight so I scooped my girl into my arms and carried her to bed, closing an open window and tucking her in tight beneath the covers.

## Tokoloshe

With the house quiet and knowing that sleep was far away, I was forced to consider my conversation with Amy. As I settled myself at the kitchen table with a bottle of brandy and a box of cigarettes, vague memories of South African culture crept into my mind. I remembered the story of the Tokoloshe. It was a devious creature summoned by witches, like a familiar. It could do what it was told or be left to cause chaos on its own. Its description varied, but the most feared aspect of the Tokoloshe, especially for women, was that it could sneak into their rooms at night and impregnate young girls. I had no doubt in my mind that these things were not real. Every culture has their demons; this was just another myth, a fable for children.

The longer I sat drinking and thinking that night, the more tired I became. I folded my arms on the table and soon drifted off into that precarious space between waking and sleep, that no-man's-land where your thoughts run free with the lucid quality of dreams.

A creak of a door hinge raised my head with a start. I scanned the room and saw nothing. I took a deep breath and told myself to relax. My eyes were closing again when I heard a deep-throated chuckle. The sound was close, inside the house. It crept across my skin like hundreds of spider legs. I opened my eyes. I saw movement in the passage, a shadow fluttered across the floor, but nothing was there. I raised my head, inch by inch, and saw a shape materialize in the gloom.

The Tokoloshe. Less than a metre tall, its arms and legs looked emaciated compared to its bulging belly. Its skin was mottled brown and

leathery, pulled taught over its body. It swayed as it grinned from a malevolent face. My eyes were drawn towards its waist, and it was then that my mind was jolted from its solid foundation, because there, between its legs stood a large, swollen penis. It was huge, a grown man's penis, not in proportion with the rest of its body, and even in that dim light the tip sparkled with spent seed.

In that instant my heart knew the horrific truth. I wanted to scream, to squirm and swat it away like the vile thing that it was. My body wouldn't move, it only let loose a flood of piss down my leg. I felt soiled by shame as I sat in terror looking at the Tokoloshe that I did not, could not, believe in.

As it staggered towards me, my nose was battered by the smell of animalistic corruption. I wanted to puke, to clench my rigid fists against my eyes and scream until it all went away. I was transfixed by its eyes, its jagged teeth peeking out from taught lips that stretched in a mocking smile. It reached out a mummified hand and showed me a smooth, grey pebble. In one swift motion it gobbled the pebble and vanished. I heard that chuckle again, a phlegmy, rasping sound that came from an empty space in my kitchen.

I don't know how long I sat there.

I tried to breathe as my heart battered my lungs with its furious beating. I crept into Amy's room and found her sound asleep as I had left her. But the window was open again. I tiptoed across her room on jellied legs and closed it.

Somehow I made it back to my own bed. I crawled under the covers like a frightened child and gripped a pillow over my head. I closed my eyes, clenched my teeth, and listened to the low keening sound that came from my body as my soul withered to a bitter husk.

The next morning Amy seemed fine; she ate breakfast then trotted down the road to a friend's house. It took an hour for me to work up the courage to go into her room. I ripped the sheets off the bed and emptied her laundry basket; I shoved the laundry into the washing machine, threw in as much detergent as I could, and made it to the bathroom just in time to vomit.

You see, if I'd had any doubts about what I thought had happened, the evidence was there. On her sheets. On her nightie. On her panties.

That night I once again packed our bags. We have to keep moving on. How would I explain? If I took her to a doctor or stayed in that house there would be too many questions, they would take my girl away from me. You see, that night took place three months ago and her belly has begun to swell with child.

So now we keep moving. Every day we're on the move so no one will see her. And every minute of every day I ask myself the same sickening question: What will she give birth to?

# Hannah Green

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After allowing life to get in the way of my dreams, I forced myself to decide if I wanted writing to be my hobby or my career.

I enrolled in the SAWC's Short Story Writing Course and haven't looked back since. After six years of studying English Literature, getting my

BA from Wits and my Hons BA from Unisa, I knew too much about the theory and not enough about the practical aspects, the sweat and tears, of writing my own stories. When I made the decision to become a Writer (not just a writer) a new door opened. The result? This winning story for the SAWC 2011 competition!

With a passion for the macabre mixed with fervour for the lesser told stories of South Africa, you can be sure that I'll be writing more of the same ...

*Tokoloshe* was the winner of the 2011 South African Writers' College Short Story Competition.

GO

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## Aname van Zyl

**C**ranes sweat in the windowsill, heat heavy on their backs. An old grease floats from the folds of their paper wings and trickles down their split beaks. It clings to the curtains, the walls, the child's nose and cheeks.

Elaine is struggling with the first of the shutters for her origami house. *Princess Aiko's Final Move* is open at the two-page illustration of the neatly-shuttered garden cottage. Dust rests in the ditch between the pages.

The book's contained watercolour angles pull at her; fold her to their shape. For weeks she has worked to reconstruct this constraint in paper, but today the smaller folds hurt her fingers.

Between folds she takes stock of the bones of her paper home, spread on the low table like dealt cards.

An insect whine from the back of the house makes Elaine twitch and she fumbles a middle fold so that the white square springs from her hands.

The clicks and thuds that follow, the ringing of the hinges, sear a line across her vision and the shutter lands unseen. As Jonah's boots thud into the room and the floating grease takes on the stench of unwashed leather, Elaine pulls her stomach to the floor and lowers her head.

On the carpet, her breath a tired wind pushing dust through the loops, she listens for the man's chair. She waits for it to scrape against the kitchen tile before turning her body and raising her front, steadily, imagining herself in the Princess's day kimono, practising her bows, the deep, controlled folds of the body. A second louder scrape, and his dark shape grows behind the large brown sofa that separates her territory from theirs.

In a bow of diminished depth and respect, Elaine hugs her chest to the sofa. She lets the urge to sob grow stale, her cheek resting on the seat. The density of fabric and grime gives the man's steps towards the microwave an underwater boom, and when he slams its door until it sticks and the machine lets out a final heartbroken ping, she barely feels it.

Before Jonah's thuds disappear back down the tight passage Elaine hears his fingers move from his pocket, and the dice begin to roll.

The bony click of the stone dice – won in some luckier time – as he rolls them over each other, fails to echo in the thick air. Instead, it reverberates in the coils and fibres of the soft brown wall and becomes to Elaine a polyrhythm with her pulse, quickening to the discordant gong of her mother's name, the jawbone creak of the bedroom door, and the brush of lighter feet pulled up the passage.

Elaine does not lift herself to see her mother's dress move behind the sofa, but digs her head into the padding and irons the slack upholstery with her palm, stopping to tuck the excess fabric between the seats. Her fingers brush against something papery in the lost space, and the feel of it stirs a longing for the dog ears in the back of her book. Beyond the border, an empty biscuit tin rolls off the counter.

Elaine closes her eyes and pulls the tab. With her eyes shut, she sees the sofa pull itself in and out from under her, collapse into a tiny brown box ... her body left to dip and sway, the rolling biscuit tin come to settle against her knees.

"Caroline, don't you tell me you didn't know." Jonah has a plate, a teapot, a vase, something in his hands, because the clicking has stopped. Elaine waits for the crash, and when it comes she straightens herself and places the pressed crane on the table in one dizzy movement.

"How could you not know, Caroline?"

Through the eye between her thumb and forefinger, Elaine inspects the bird. How long were you trapped there? The wounds list themselves as she traces the body with a finger: Collapsed folds spread like leaf-veins across its sides; beak bowed deeply into throat; one wing crumpled into a warped square, the other bent upwards, its end the dog-ear tab; legs shrunken. She pulls at its throat so that its breast lunges and caves, and swallows hard as she levels the hills of its wings.

The dust between the two pages of Princess Aiko's garden cottage has not moved. Elaine turns to the book's dog-eared addendum and the chain of haikus that introduce it. Their syllables are cool round pebbles for her to pack a short wall around her thoughts.

All day our princess  
plays the last white pebble on  
her mind's board of go  
Aiko paints orchids  
on royal silks with needle  
and bright coloured thread  
she remembers moves  
her uncle made while she shapes  
a favoured bonsai  
tea cools in her bowl  
as she watches her realm fold  
over the old man's  
but her lead most spreads  
when she pleats fine paper cranes  
who nod in her hands

Go

A stream of instructions follows, dammed by the short wall. The cool stones echo the resumed war-dance of the dice.

Elaine lifts the wrinkled paper square. The first instruction comes to her like the opening of a nursery rhyme.

Fold down the middle and unfold.

In the kitchen her mother begins and abandons a phrase, and is shoved against the counter. Loose drawers shake against her back.

Fold in half the opposite way.

“How long, how long, was it in there? Weeks? Come on, Caroline. Don’t play with me.”

Change sides. Fold in half. Crease well, and open. Repeat fold in the other direction.

“What was it anyway? Did you even cook it?” Jonah’s voice cracks on the last syllable of every question. After every crack the dice click on the counter.

Follow the creases to collect the top three corners in the bottom corner. The paper is worn tissue thin with pressure and grease, and the veins are feint.

“Do you have any idea what I do while you lie around in this hole? Huh, Caroline? You know what I’m out doing while you’re here being useless?”

Fold the triangular flaps to the centre. Unfold. Make and unmake. Fold the top corner to the centre.

“I work, Caroline, I go out there, and I risk my skin—” his voice breaks on skin, and he repeats the word as if the first instance were only practise.

Crease well and unfold.

“—skin! I work these men, big men, Caroline, with good cards, so I can come back a winner ... but you know what I get? Dirt, an empty fridge, a sleeping sack, and a plate of mould in a microwave that won't even open. Open. OP-EN-YOU-WORTH-LESS-PIECE-OF—”

Open the uppermost flap of the model, bringing it upwards and pressing the sides inwards. Flatten and crease well. Turn model over and repeat.

The metal box crashes to the floor. Small orphaned parts whirl into the recesses of the kitchen. Elaine turns her head to see a plastic screw, split down the middle, roll past the foot of the sofa.

When she returns to the crane, her hands have betrayed her. Uppermost flaps are not uppermost, veins cross and disappear.

Bring top flaps to the centre. Repeat on the reverse.

For a moment the paper model feels unmade; stillborn. She puts it to her face to peer through the web of creases.

“Oh now you care, Caroline! Now I broke it and it’s important!”

Two long, skinny triangles will have formed at the end of the sheet. Fold them up. Crease very well, and unfold.

Elaine knows the shape of the legs and neck. Before she started the house she made so many gentle cranes from thick wax-paper, kept but unsuitable for baking, one side glossy with fat; the other dull. Her fingers remember their grease, and she wipes them on her sleeve.

Pinch the new creases so that they rise on the other side of the sheet.

“And, Caroline, another thing,” he sieves words through his teeth like bitter leaves, “that smell, the rank air in here, have you noticed it?”

Pry open slightly, before pressing flat. Turn over.

“Come on now,” the click is the chatter of teeth, “tell me what that smell is.”

He thuds to the opposite wall, where wide curtains like those on Elaine’s side conceal an identical window. She hears the wooden rings knock on the rod, followed by an animal sniff.

“This smell, Caroline,” he’s close to whispering now, “this stink ...” He kicks a chair. It scrapes along a row of tiles before toppling.

Press the existing crease out, fold over and pry open slightly before pressing flat.

“Why won’t you tell me? Is it you?” Elaine can hear her mother sob, and knock over the cutlery stand as she retreats into the corner.

“What about this? Is it in this ugly thing?” He’s got his hand on the sofa, his nails in the fabric. The other hand clicks.

All that remains is to fold down the wings. Elaine keeps the injured crane in her palm, only two moves from whole.

Jonah thuds around the sofa, crushing one half of the split screw. “Oh, look who’s here, Caroline! Obviously! So it’s her? What is she, eleven, and she can’t clean herself?” He hammers up to her. She watches the dice in his hand. They are shiny with sweat. “Where is it, girl? What stinks?”

Jonah turns to Elaine’s window, where the first cranes, the wax-paper ancestors, bake on the sill. With his free hand, he tugs at the curtain’s edge so that something snaps, and the fabric droops like a crippled wing. Light and heat rush in.

“What ... what is this?” He turns to Elaine with three sweating cranes in his palm, wrinkled like spoiled fruit. Still upright, he brings the hand so close to her that she squints, and squeezes. The birds’ veins burst in his fist and grease runs between his fingers.

“Was this you? Did you stink up the whole place with your paper crap? Come on, you deaf mute, why did you do this?” The cranes stick to his palm. He struggles to shake them. With every shake of his open hand the dice dance in the other.

Jonah crouches in front of her. “What is it you’re keeping from me?”

Elaine covers the crane with her other palm. Her fingers spasm and it takes strength not to ball them up. With a concealed finger she bends the first wing, slowly, not too deeply; the subtle royal bow. The man in front of her is unsteady on his haunches. The compulsive roll and click cripples the hand he holds in front of him, renders it a masterless claw.

“Listen, if you don’t open your hand this second ...” His threats are drowned by the thunder of the dice; washed over by the slow air forced out beneath the final fold.

Elaine opens her hands to reveal the crane whole, a stone guardian against the approaching fist, the escalating clicks. She shuts her eyes and sees herself place the bird on Aiko’s sill, in the pruned shade of a bonsai.

The clicks stop. When Elaine opens her eyes, she sees sunlight burst through the stains of her mother’s dress, then Jonah’s crippled fist slam into the low table behind her. She watches – everything slow in a trick fold of space – the broken man heaving the table upwards and over, so that her shallow bowl of day-old Rooibos shatters against the wall. Walls and stepping stones float in the shifting grease before settling in the carpet dust.

“Go.” Caroline’s voice clicks in her throat, unused to air.

The new light shoves the drooping curtain aside, fills the creases of Caroline’s dress. Elaine watches Caroline take Jonah’s hand and release it so that it flops, an empty claw, to his side. “Jonah, leave.”

Anamé van Zyl

The stench of unwashed leather thunders down the narrow passage. Caroline's fingers unfold and the stone dice drop and roll away, mute, under the sofa. The hinges whine, and the crane nods its head in the breeze.

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# Anamé van Zyl

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I knew I wanted to be a writer when I became a reader. Like most writers, I began writing early, producing such wonders as the cookie-shaped illustrated novelette *Cookie Island*, and an unintentionally post-modern retelling of *A Christmas Carol*.

With the support of family, friends and teachers I recommitted myself to writing in 2011, beginning with the SAWC Short Story Competition. My goal was to finish a short story (my first) and submit it. I was astounded when my story was placed and received invaluable critique and encouragement. In the year that followed I managed to complete a child's handful of stories between essays and exams and won a flash fiction competition.

I am currently a student at UCT and hope to focus my studies on creative writing in the near future.

*Go* was the winner of the 2012 South African Writers' College Short Story Competition.

# LINE OF SIGHT

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## Arthur Bacchus

**I**sn't it funny how, when you're looking through a telescopic sight, the tiny circular world on the other end seems so intimate, yet the subjects in it are unaware of your existence?

Look at this bear of a man, for instance, his undersized police uniform stretching tight over his belly. He shades his eyes with one hand as he brings his face right up to the frosted glass window set into my front door. That's definitely going to leave a smudge.

The crosshairs waver across his unshaven cheeks, then up to his right eye, then down to his chin. It's because of my breathing that the crosshairs can't fix on any one point for long. I try to slow it down just like John taught me back on the smallholding when we had just purchased the rifle. It's not as easy as back then. My lungs have aged forty years, after all.

I can see his mouth move. His frosty breath leaves ghostly evaporating patterns on the window. I will really have to polish that come Saturday. He

must be saying something to his partner again. I cannot understand the language, never bothered to learn even the basics. That's why I never watch the news on SABC 1, not even the weather. I like to catch that young man on e-TV, the one with the smart suits and the overseas accent. I like it when young men dress smartly, not with their pants hanging down at the knees like you see at the shopping centre these days. He's extremely presentable, the weatherman, just like my dear John used to be. But he got it wrong for today. The partly cloudy and fine never happened this morning, only cloudy. I forgive him. It's late March, after all. The weather is unpredictable.

The policeman leaves the tiny world now. He moves further along the stoep. I assume he's going to spy on the ornaments in my living room now.

I don't think he's a real policeman; it's been on the news for weeks. A young couple got stuck with their car on the N2 late one evening and two officers of the law stopped to help. It turns out they were fake policemen. How could they do those things to the young lady? What a cruel race.

A high-pitched beep from a two-way radio startles me. It sounds like it's coming from a bit further than the stoep. That must be his partner's radio, the one at the front gate. A tinny female voice rattles off a message in what could be English. I hear a muffled reply. Heavy footfalls echo on the stoep, and then a blur passes in front of the circle. The front gate creaks open. A car door slams shut, then another.

The grey morning is suddenly bathed in blue light which arcs into the lens of the scope. An engine sputters into life and then I can see the blue

lights in the circle as the police van screeches away. I don't believe that the van belongs to them. The fake policemen on the N2 had a van. They get it somewhere.

The flashing blue ambience fades away and the grey seeps back into the small world.

I lower the heavy rifle down onto my lap. My arms are stiff with cramp. The clock on the passage wall reads a quarter after nine. Gosh, has it been twenty minutes since the knock on the door? I missed my nine o'clock medication. Dr Erasmus said I can take it as soon as I remember. It helps for the arthritis. First however, I think a cup of Rooibos tea would be nice.

I lean the rifle against the wall. My hands instinctively find the edges of the big shiny wheels as I lower them to the side of my chair. I tighten my grip to start the inertia which will bring me closer to the kitchen at the end of the passage. I'm ready to move, but maybe the gap isn't wide enough. The boy landed awkwardly when I shot him this morning. His body is twisted in such a way that there is no space in the narrow passage for me to move past him. I'll have to get out of the chair and move him just a little bit more to the side.

When I heard the noise this morning I first thought it was Tomkins, Diane's Persian, preying on the small birds which sometimes frequent the backyard for the blueberries. Diane has a good heart, but she can be very naïve sometimes. I think, if anyone, she'll fall for the false policeman routine one of these days.

It was the stink that triggered alarm bells in my head. A feral stink not unlike you can smell when you visit the city centre to go to the bank. I don't like to go anymore. The city stinks like an animal cage lately. Like the cages in Stellenbosch that I visited with my grandson a month ago.

Then I heard the cough. I had practiced the movements many times before, but I must admit I did hesitate for a few seconds. Icy cold spikes grabbed at my heart before I reacted. I spun around and made for the closet in the main bedroom. My rubber wheels squeaked as they do on the polished floor. When I got there it was easy. Rifle out, box of cartridges out. Insert five rounds into the magazine and click it back into its slot. Safety off. I rotated the chair to face the open door and nestled the wooden stock firmly against my right shoulder. Waiting.

The smell grew stronger. I judged that the intruder must be in the kitchen by now. The distance from the closet to the passage is about four metres. I know how to adjust the telescopic sight that sits proud on top of the weapon, but I didn't bother then. You don't really need the scope at four metres.

A shapeless shadow fell obliquely onto the passage wall. The steel trigger was warm to my touch and I worried about my clammy finger slipping off it at the crucial moment.

Then I didn't have to worry anymore. He was right there in front of me. A coloured boy. Layers of dirty clothing made it difficult to tell his age, but he couldn't have been more than fifteen. His yellowed eyes widened

slightly in surprise to find me there. The knife in his left hand was from the kitchen, one of a set of three steak knives, a birthday gift from my sister Catherine. He took a small step towards me.

I whispered, “Please God, give me strength” then I squeezed the trigger. The recoil snapped my shoulder back and the shot sounded like a thunderclap in the confined space.

He was thrown back as if some mad puppeteer had pulled his strings too hard.

The boy lifted off the ground and his body hit the passage wall, and then spun away to land somewhere near the kitchen entrance. I didn’t see his body hit the floor but I heard the muffled thump. A loud persistent zing filled my ears, but through it I still managed to hear the fine china rattle in the glass cabinet as the impact shook the wooden floorboards.

The diagonal rip high in the passage wall where the .303 round settled after passing through the child’s body looked strangely comforting.

The room smelled of burned matches then. The wispy membranes of smoke in the air lingered a moment then dissipated slowly. I sat motionless in my chair for what felt like hours. I heard no sound from the passage until the urgent buzzing of the mobile phone started. I had left it perched on the front dresser. It was probably Sergio from the fish shop. I had asked him to let me know as soon as he got fresh hake. I have never seen Sergio wear a suit, but his fish is always first class.

I eased out into the passage. The intruder's body was on its stomach. Dark blood oozed out in a rivulet and ended in a small pool on the floor. It's going to be a nightmare to get it out of the wood. Oh, it will have to wait until Saturday.

I wanted to get to the phone before it stopped ringing, but there was no space for the chair to move between the boy and the wall. Sergio will have to call again. That's a pity, I hate being an inconvenience. From my position at the bedroom door I could see the boy's upturned eyes. It seemed to mock me with its vacant stare. What are your plans now, Grandma?

Nothing.

Until the front gate squeaked and the fake policemen arrived, I did nothing.

Then the bear had knocked on the door so hard I thought the stained glass was going to crack. But luckily it didn't. That's when I started watching the world through the scope on the rifle.

I can hear Tomkins in the yard now, playing his fatal game with the birds. I think he was also just waiting for them to leave. Cats can sniff out dishonesty. And they dislike it as much as I do.

That cup of Rooibos sounds good now. I'm sure I can move the boy to the side of the passage. The cramps in my arms are mostly gone. I slide off the chair and shuffle over to the body. The blood on the floor hasn't dried completely and my hands stick to it as I grip his shoulder. One hard push

does the job and the boy flops over and rests against the wall like a rolled up carpet. Easy.

The wheels pick up some of the blood as they travel through the gap, but it is wide enough. Good job, Elaine. They leave two parallel lines all the way to the kitchen. The kettle boils almost immediately after I flip the switch. I always fill it with enough water for one person. Energy saving tip number seven.

The morning can't start without the Rooibos. It prepares me for the day. I think about the hard work ahead as I take the first few sips.

Then I hear the gate again. Maybe it's Diane with my mail. Sometimes the postman is early.

But there is that hard bang on the door. It can only be the bear. Can't he see the bell?

"Mrs Visser, are you in there?" Bang, bang, bang. I hear him twisting at the doorknob. The audacity!

I hurry out of the kitchen and into the passage. He can probably see me moving through the frosted glass. A sharp right turn brings me to the rifle leaning against the bedroom door. That gap that I made is just perfect. I spin to face the front door. The distance down the passage to the front door is about six metres. Maybe I will need the scope this time.

I slide the steel rod above the trigger back and an empty shell jumps out and lands gently on the carpet in the bedroom. I look at it for a brief

moment. Sunlight filters through the curtains. It hits the shell and creates tiny rainbow colours on the brass surface. The weather guy was right after all. I slide the rod back to insert a fresh shell.

“Ma’am, if you’re in there, open up, please!”

The voice is rough, like gravel being crushed underneath a bakkie’s tyres.

I bring the scope up to my right eye. The hard metal scrapes at my bifocals. It will probably leave a scratch.

“Ma’am, are you inside the house?”

He eases into focus in the circular vignette. Unaware. It’s peculiar, when you look through the scope, how that is.

How unaware they are.

How you can see them. So close.

But they can’t see you.

He bangs his shoulder against the door and I can hear the wood crack.

Now that really is the last straw!

The crosshairs settle on his big fat fake policeman head and I pull the trigger.

# Arthur Bacchus

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After aimlessly performing clerical duties as a civil servant, I abruptly resigned after seventeen years and spent the next three writing and directing short films as part of an Advanced Diploma course in Film and Television production.

Then, a tiny ad promoting the SAWC Short Story Competition appeared in my community rag.

It proved to be a call to adventure which rekindled a love affair with creative writing. Penning this story reminded me just how much more intimate the journey is with creative writing. Ownership of the final product seems that much more complete and I am keen to embark on regular jaunts along this route.

Hopefully, in the not too distant future, a No. 1 bestseller or the Academy Award for best original screenplay will have my name on it! Watch this space ...

*Line of Sight* was the winner of the 2010 South African Writers' College Short Story Competition.

## TUNE IN AGAIN NEXT WEEK

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Carla Lever

**M**y record is ninety-two items, in the correct order, with no hesitation. Of course some people who have an aptitude for these things can stretch into the hundreds easily, no sweat. My record is ninety-two items.

I try to use association, build myself a little story. For instance, if I had to memorise: toddler, lasagne, baseball cap, Heimlich manoeuvre, Greece; I'd imagine Babe Ruth carbo-loading before the World Series and choking on a rogue olive pit. It's pretty easy; it's just about building relationships between seemingly unassociated words. It's like life, really – you have to build a story from the pieces or else it's all just ... things.

I'm pretty competitive with it, in my way. Nothing world class, but give me a mid-size memory meet and I've got a pretty good shot. Gambling's out, though – the casino blackballed me without my ever stepping foot

inside. I guess I wouldn't take myself on at cards either, though I've yet to try applied skills like that.

Aside from the memory thing, I'm quite unexceptional. I live in an average Chicago suburb. I take multivitamins and my annual leave in a timeshare. I don't take milk in my coffee. Job-wise, I'm an accountant.

I know.

I also have a pretty nice little situation for myself with the local radio station, a weekend call-in slot on the 90.2 FM breakfast show; 'Store-All Stan'. You might have heard of it? Well, no matter. Viewers call in with words and then try to catch me out when I recite them all at the end of the show. No one's done it yet. You build a bit of a reputation that way. Good for queue jumping and extra pastrami at the deli counter. My mother likes it. She gets to boast about birthing the elephant man of the Midwest; not, I think, a label that improves either of our dating odds.

Yes, I'm single. Not a surprise, really; I'm more Woody Allen than Woody Harrelson. You'd probably never give me a second glance if we were to pass each other in the street; women don't tend to. Looking at it objectively, I'm not surprised. One thing on my side, though: I'd never forget your birthday.

I like it when people call in with their words. They always pick something meaningful to them, something they'll get a kick out of hearing on the air. Sometimes the link is obvious – Dan the optician from Minnesota picked 'rifle telescope', Wandita the hairdresser from Queens, 'double-mint

gum'. Often, though, you get callers – I like to call them the romantics – reaching out. The link takes over without any help from me; you get a city of lonely hearts, calling in over their solo servings of Pop-Tarts and cornflakes, summoned by the pull of early morning radio. I mean, radio's a pretty romantic thing. Well, I think so.

So you're going to think I'm crazy – one of those highly excitable types. My mother always said that people with exceptional skills always come with exceptional neuroses. Made her marry an artist. A bad one. She divorced him last year because she was bored as hell.

Look, it's this girl. No, not a real girl. A voice-girl – a call-in. She's been calling the show every week. Always seems to get put on; I think she's become one of those regulars they let through screening. Adds a family feel, our production manager says.

Anyway, she calls in. I first noticed her because her words were really random; I couldn't crack her personal pattern. Like, that first week it was 'crystals' and, just when you think she's a hippy health nut, the next week it'd be 'pepperoni'. They didn't seem to fit her location – Pleasant Springs, Wisconsin – or her voice. She has a nice voice, not that shrill kind of insistence you get in some callers. It's lower, still really feminine, though.

So at first I thought it was coincidence. The things that happened after, I mean. I guess ninety-nine per cent of normal people with regular brain functioning patterns would think it was coincidence. Look, despite

what my mother says, I have normal brain functioning patterns. I totally do. I just remember things really well. And I remembered Sandy from Pleasant Springs. It's not easy to kick the words out your head when the jingle plays us out, you know. So when I went to Walgreens to grab some detergent that first Saturday and came face-to-face with a checkout girl whose nametag read Krystal, I just had to kind of smile, you know? Like Sandy sent me a wave from Pleasant Springs. Anyway, I totally forgot about it. Until she called back the next week.

Her word was 'tornado'. As in giant natural disaster. As in Midwest Fall special. An epic kind of word. Okay fine, I recall it, along with other people's 'trucker cap' and 'Budweiser' and 'skillet'. And then I go home. So that night I head to this party with a few folk from back in the day and then Bob says, "Hey, remember Twister? Wanna play Twister with me, just for a laugh?" And the accountant in me goes 'there's no way I'm getting limber over a multi-coloured plastic mat,' but all of a sudden I'm thinking connection; I'm thinking Twister's another name for tornado and something tells me, yeah, sure, let's try it. And then I'm bent double right hand red and left leg yellow face against Lee-Anne's smooth right leg green and wondering just how awesome my life had become.

What it had become was a Thing. I waited for Sandy's word, each word she gave was some kind of puzzle, a clue, a hint of things that – by magic, fate, careful orchestration? – ended up in my life. Sometimes it needed a bit of interpretation, I mean like the jump between tornado and Twister, it's not obvious immediately, you know? But, like I say, sometimes

you've just got to find the link between stuff that happens to you for something to happen that's worth remembering.

My thing, the thing that's indisputable, is that it is happening. No doubt about that. Is it just my own mind, clocking the connection, jumping the queue at Walgreens and pushing my seven-dollar selection bang in front of Krystal's laminated name badge? Maybe. But maybe doesn't make for good stories. Maybe doesn't get the girl. Maybe sits at home with reruns of Friends and Youtube videos of cute cats, because he's allergic. Maybe sucks.

I'm not maybe anymore. I'm definitely.

I guess I know what you're thinking. It's not like I'm one of those people who think the voices in the radio are talking to them. It's totally not like that. I mean, you've got to realise that nothing like this happens in my life. I don't go looking for drama. This just found me. I don't know how or why it works, but it does. Sandy from Pleasant Springs and me, Stan from nowhere special, we've got something. It's the best part of my week. And I can't wait to see how it'll play out after our closing jingle.

You know, some of them have been pretty amazing. Like the time Sandy said 'horseshoe' and the next Tuesday I walked to the lake – I wouldn't normally go to the lake, but you can't expect things to happen if you don't put yourself in the way of happenings – and this kid, he had one of those big helium Disney balloons with Eeyore on it. It was red and, as I looked, he let it go. It floated up and, just as it was about to disappear behind the boathouse, it twisted and I saw the big white letters spell out, 'I heart U'

right there, red and white against the blue sky. Now if that's not a sign, I don't know what is.

After 'horseshoe' was 'subway'. I remember the exact order, like some kind of extended radio play set. I mean, we'd gone weeks with this, but I was right there in the game. The real clincher, though, came with 'garland'. I mean, who'd pick garland? It's not even a regular word that people use. That's how I knew it had to mean something really special. So walking through town one evening (something I never did before Sandy came along), I went past an old movie theatre. It must have been a classic movie festival because 'Meet Me in St Louis' was on. When I made the connection, it was like that final piece of the puzzle just slotted in; my ninety-second item in the correct order just completed the story. I had no hesitation.

So that's how I wound up here, at a table for two in a grimy St Louis Subway chain restaurant, the remains of my one way ticket in one hand and a double order of pepperoni subs on its way. Outside, the steel of the Gateway Arch stretches above like our very own lucky charm. And something's bothering me, nagging like a missing piece, but it's not worry about if she'll come. It's not that. It's 8:59 and I know in three minutes, Sandy from Pleasant Springs, Sandy who ripped a tornado-sized hole through my regular life, she'll walk in that door and slip in beside me in this faded plastic booth.

## Tune in Again Next Week

At about the same time as the familiar jingle cuts in on the Subway's crackly 90.2 FM-tuned radio, I realise what it was that I'd forgotten. But it's time. And I realise that it's now, right now that my life's about to change.

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# Carla Lever

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A Master's in English gave me many things, but confidence in creative writing wasn't one of them. After graduation, I began lecturing literature and journalism at Varsity College (something I still do in my spare time). I realised I could learn a lot from my students.

They weren't afraid of my pumped-up inner critic at all. If they could do it, why couldn't I? Looking to challenge the adage that 'those who can't do teach', I started.

I think that sometimes we look to stories to give us the kind of narrative satisfaction that life so often doesn't. But I also think that sometimes a story, like a life, is allowed to be a little more open-ended.

Together with many of my students, I'm looking forward to growing as a writer.

*Tune in Again Next Week* was the runner-up of the 2012 South African Writers' College Short Story Competition.

# WATCHING SUNSETS WE NEVER SEE

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## Shelley Blignaut

“Tell me again how it looks,” he says.

I seldom get impatient with him, but today I am. Today I am tired, cold and miserable. Mr Z3 zapped me again and pretty Miss Toyota Tazz ignored me.

I sigh.

“I am blind not deaf, you know,” he says and guilt rises like bile in my throat. “It will make you feel better. It will take your mind off the cold.” I am reminded that he too can feel the cold. Sometimes I think that his lack of sight blinds him from the rest of the harsh realities of life. I lean on my hands and feel the icy bridge railing sting my elbows though my thin jersey. The tall buildings loom down at us like grey tombstones blotting out the sun.

The grey clouds form a low ceiling and the air is rank with pollution. The cars are not moving underneath the bridge and it makes me think that we should be down there.

It would be a good time to be down there. People are always tired on their way home, more likely to give you something to get you away. But utamkhula wants to be up here, watching the sunset that he cannot see.

The cars snake along the long length of the grey road and wind their way up the hill to their big garages by the sea.

I try to look for the people.

It is always easier when I see people. But all I can see is old Sara with her thick lips and arm tucked underneath her shirt, hoping that some stupid driver would feel pity for the one-armed lady. She gets it worse than we do, if the drivers don't feel pity for the blind old man they are definitely not going to feel it for the tik addict weaving in and out of the traffic with a badly disguised fake deformity.

"It's beautiful," I start and I watch how his face relaxes. "The sun is low in the sky and it has streaked it so that it looks like those jam cakes that Mama makes, a layer of berry jam, a layer of strawberries and a layer of yellow sponge." He laughs. "The buildings look like shards of glass, sticking out the ground. They shine silver—" his brow wrinkles.

## Watching Sunsets We Never See

“What does silver look like?” he asks. He knows the answer, he has asked me a hundred times and each time I have to think up a new way of explaining.

I think for a moment.

“Like when you are sucking condensed milk off a teaspoon and the spoon scrapes against your teeth,” I explain and he nods knowingly.

“Tell me about the people,” he asks.

I look down at toothless Sara. She has found someone’s cigarette butt and is sucking it with her big lips trying to keep it in her mouth without the grip of her teeth.

I close my eyes again.

“There is a white lady in a fancy red coat across the street,” I say.

He hits me on the arm.

“You shouldn’t be spying on young ladies,” he says, but he is smiling. “What colour is her hair?”

“It is golden.” He begins to open his mouth. I know what he is going to ask. “Golden is like walking out from the shade into a patch of sunlight, feeling the warmth of the sun on your face and getting goose bumps on the top of your head.” He seems satisfied enough with that so I continue. “She is laughing so that her skin, which is as smooth as umakulu’s special pearls, is all crinkled.”

“Thank you,” he says. And he feels his way to my shoulder before giving it a squeeze.

He was right, I do feel better.

I wake up to Mama standing over me holding some coffee and oily bread. I take it from her and dunk the bread into the warm milky coffee until it is soggy and I can slop it into my mouth. She looks at me and smiles, that same guilt-soaked smile as I sometimes give utamkulu, only difference is he can't see mine.

“I learn enough from the city, Mama,” I say in response to her thoughts.

“But you should be at school with your brothers and sisters,” she says and I can see that her eyes are welling up now.

“Yes, and utamkhulu should never have been born blind.” I don't look at her as I say it and I get up quickly and pick my way through mattresses and sleeping children.

He is waiting for me at the doorway, looking as smart as ever in his collared shirt and fedora.

“Is it dark out?” he asks.

“Yes, 'mkhulu, but the sun is coming,” I say.

## Watching Sunsets We Never See

I shoo some of the younger boys off the seats on the train and guide him to sit down. They mouth curse words at me.

“Lucky we found some seats,” he says.

“Some of the younger boys gave them up for us,” I say loud enough so that they can hear me. They raise their middle finger at me.

When the train starts moving he asks, “What does it look like outside?”

It is grey and overcast again.

“Like the smudge of wet paint on paper. All the colours are mixed together.”

“Colour,” he says. “What a wonder it would be to see!”

I nod. The train stops and the doors open, more people squeeze in. Brown faces. Grey sky.

Town is busy today. No sign of Miss Toyota Tazz; she must have gone to work early. A Merc flashes me. He thinks I am the paperboy again. No matter, I will play the stupid street-child. I lead utamkhulu to the window and hold out my hand.

“Where’s my paper, boy?” he says.

I gesture to utamkhulu.

He opens his mouth, but then his cellphone starts ringing. It is one of those fast whitey songs. He waves me away as he picks it up. I gently tug utamkhulu to the next car.

“Did we get anything?” he asks.

“He had a look, but he didn’t have any change,” I say and look behind to the Merc’s number plate. It reads MOVE OVER.

Behind Move-over-Merc, an old woman in a dark blue Mazda 323 smiles at me. One-armed Sara calls it the Ag-siestog smile. I don’t know what it means, but I like to get those Ag-siestog smiles. I apply my winning ‘I’m poor and you’re not,’ face and move my hand a little higher on utamkhulu’s arm so that she is sure to see his helplessness.

She doesn’t even roll her window down. Instead she points to last month’s copy of *The Big Issue* on her dash board and gives a thumbs-up.

Damn *Big Issue* guys.

The traffic light turns green.

“Green,” I say. Utamkhulu steps back toward the curb.

As the robot turns red a young guy pulls up with a large exhaust and tinted windows. He opens his window just a little as we approach.

“Don’t even try and spray my windscreen with crap,” he says to me.

“No, I was just—” I start.

## Watching Sunsets We Never See

“I don’t want my freaking windscreen washed! What’s up with you guys and you bring this blind old man along to make me feel bad?”

I want to swear at him. I so want to say all those bad words that I have been storing up. The ones Sara uses when she is drunk and angry with her boyfriend. But utamkhulu squeezes my arm. I slump down on the curb and breathe in the petrol and burned tyre smell. I put my head on my knees. I notice there is something moving on the ground, it takes me a moment to realise that it is the shadow of the car in front of me.

“Green, ’mkhulu, green!” I shout, jumping up from the curb. The hooters go off. And I stop breathing. He steps back unharmed, save for his fedora which is blown off from the rush of the cars.

“I am so sorry ’mkhulu.” I throw my arms around him and feel his body trembling.

“Were they angry? I didn’t mean to—” the words stumble out of him.

“They weren’t angry, ’mkhulu, no one was angry.” I can see he is still a little shaken.

“Let me get your hat,” I say.

The robot turns red. Sara waves at me from the other side of the road. She smiles her toothless grin. She has chosen to have an amputated left arm today I see.

It was black. Definitely black.

I looked up just in time before it hit. I am sure it saw me, it must have. I am sure they would have slammed on brakes; I think I even heard the skidding. But those fancy cars, they go fast to keep up with their drivers. It didn't hurt, not like the time the Mini Cooper drove over my foot or the Hyundai's side mirror wacked me on the arm. (It left a bruise for days.) But it felt like someone had hit me in the stomach, a good and proper one that takes all the air out of you. It went black then and I thought of utamkhulu lost on a page of darkness trying to feel the grooves that the words have made on it to find his way.

It is his face that I see when I open my eyes again, his tears dropping on my face, his hands rubbing red blood between his fingers.

"Is this blood?" He is shouting, holding up his red gloved hand. "Is this my son's blood? Can someone tell me what is happening?"

"Mkhulu," I manage to get out. He drops his head to the sound of my voice. "I lied," I whisper.

He can't speak, the tears are coming fast now and his chest is heaving. "The world is not as I have described it. It is grey. It is ..." pain, I can feel it now, that must be a good sign, "... dreary and full of grumpy people, full of people who ignore us and swear at us. There are no sponge-cake sunsets or pretty ladies in fancy red coats with golden hair. But 'mkhulu ..." sirens, the ambulance is here, it needs to wait. I need to tell him this. "Mkhulu, I can see it now and you will see it too. Not with these eyes." I lift my hand, it is

## Watching Sunsets We Never See

littered with pieces of gravel and scraped skin, and I touch the space where his eyes should have been.

“Every colour imaginable, ’mkhulu! I wish I could show it to you, I wish we could see it together. It is like ...”

“I know,” he says and he finds my lips with his fingers. “I have seen it.” Each of his words is laboured and spurted out between sobs. “Every time you described something to me, umzukulwana, I saw it. Your words painted the world better than I could have seen it.”

My eyelids are getting heavy now and I so want to see the lights again ... maybe if I just close them for a little while .... until the medicine men come ...

“And now my sight is gone,” is the last thing I hear him say.

# Shelley Blignaut

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For my twenty-sixth birthday, my husband enrolled me in the Short Story Writing Course at SAWC to reignite my passion for writing. Since I was little I have loved writing stories; my parents were always amazed by my overactive imagination. Although I would have loved to study literature and Greek mythology, I chose the 'safe' route and went for a business degree, and ended up working as a footwear and accessories buyer for one of the ladies fashion retailers.

Subsequent to completing the Short Story Course, I enrolled for the Novel Writing Course as well and have just completed my first fantasy novel which is in the editing stage at the moment. I plan to start working on the sequel as my next project. So move over JK Rowling and Stephanie Meyer!

*Watching Sunsets We Never See* was the runner-up of the 2011 South African Writers' College Short Story Competition.

# FINAL DISPOSITION

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Jessica Liebenberg

Jacob lay still, staring up at the white ceiling. He hadn't moved for a while, and had begun to wonder if this was by choice, or if it was because he was unable to do so. The doors to the room whirred open and The Man entered.

“Mr Bennet. Have you made a decision?”

Jacob eyed The Man suspiciously. He was a strange apparition; his meagre amount of hair was combed all to the left side, with pink scalp shimmering through. He wore tight jeans over which his sturdy belly hung like an overinflated balloon, giving the impression that at any moment the buttons on his shirt could shoot off, pinging in the direction of Jacob. The overall effect made The Man look much like a potato roped into a clean white sack.

The Man had pulled out a clipboard, and growing impatient, he shot off another question.

“Mr Bennet, have you decided where you are going?”

Jacob scrunched his eyebrows together like a worm curling into itself before it extended and propelled forward.

“To Heaven ...?” Jacob suggested cautiously.

“I’m not sure we discussed that option,” The Man replied while taking the pen from his clipboard and sucking on the end of it. He looked absentmindedly over Jacob and out of the window on the opposite side of the room.

“Is that the one in the Free State? Because you know, you can claim only a limited amount on your policy for transportation costs.”

“So Heaven is too far?”

“I could check for you.” The Man took the pen from his mouth and wiped it clean on Jacob’s bed sheets before scribbling a note on the page in front of him.

“Perhaps I should run you through your options again,” he continued.

“There’s the local cemetery. But that’s pretty full right now. You get to be buried near your family and right in the thriving heart of the city for the next two years, until they take in new stock. So it’s guaranteed that there will be a fair amount of noise and traffic. But I’m sure your eternal rest would be more comfortable in something like ... Shady Psalms. But for that you would need to upgrade to a ‘Believers’ package, and the Dutch Oven

## Final Disposition

Reformed Reformist Family Church of the Wholly Spiritual Apocalypses is only taking a few new members this year to keep from repeating the mass overload they had near the end of 2012. The old Church of Scientology is also in the 'Believers' package, but they require a minimum of ten substantial donations before one is allowed to be sent to one of the volcanoes they own. To be allowed into their pyramids requires your being awarded a lifelong achievement award, and only 4 000 people to date have been awarded such a high accolade."

Jacob stared dully at The Man.

"What about alternate facilities, you ask?"

Jacob was quite sure he had not asked, but he had no option other than to let The Man continue.

"Well," The Man followed on with barely a breath in-between, "you can go with the more traditional cultural forms: burning, underwater interment, cannibalism, and using your body for medicinal purposes. The problem with the latter is, firstly, Healers – as they call themselves – like to start on the process whilst you are still alive. Which can be a great inconvenience when at home, but it would be fairly well suited for someone such as yourself who has not much else to occupy these dull final days whilst in this fine care facility. Yet there is the additional problem that acceptance into the programme is not guaranteed: Healers and Cannibal groups in general prefer the unusual, and I see from your medical records here that you possess neither an extra pair of chromosomes nor toes – which may lead

Sangomas and the like to dismiss you as wholly un-magical and ill-suited to their purposes. Now, this may be just a personal preference, but there is also the problem that you have all those little medicinal-men-to-be mucking up stock standard procedures such as harvesting testosterone, because unexceptional bodies such as your own are often used in training these little tykes. Unless of course you can prove some history of mysterious happenings: possession by evil spirits, seeing ghosts, that sort of thing. But at this point you would need confirmation by some form of priest and/or prophet that these things have indeed happened to you. Ultimately it is not always the most comfortable of processes, but it is nonetheless a common choice among the more avid followers of these traditions.”

“Would they allow me to do it if I was not registered from birth?” Jacob asked.

“In some cases they do make exceptions, so if you would like to keep your options open I would suggest applying as soon as possible.” The Man almost looked like he would pause here for a while, but then rattled on.

“There is the option of cloning too, but there are a number of lengthy forms to be completed. In general, they prefer to take only the last surviving member of a familial line. This is of course unless however it can be shown that the other members have no ability to reproduce and genes in the form of sperm and/or egg and/or saliva donation have not been stockpiled for insemination at a later stage. Please note that in this case too, there is no guarantee of the transference of consciousness. There is, however, the

## Final Disposition

advantage of government subsidies for many of the cloning projects which makes it cheaper in many instances than something like, cremation, which involves heavy penalties for Pollution.”

Jacob abruptly sat up. “Which is the cheapest option then?”

“There is not really a ‘cheapest option’, Mr Bennet – body disposal is quite an expensive business, which is why Post-Mortem Plans have become a compulsory aspect of insurance policies. So in terms of monetary costs it is quite difficult to analyse; the markets change with the weather, sometimes literally. However, if you mean the cost on the planet, there is indeed the Biodegradable option that many people choose. You know, things like Peter’s Pumpkin Patch and Steven’s Squashes have become household names. At the very least they allow your family directly to benefit from your decomposition for many years to come by literally reaping the fruit of your decay.”

“Jacob’s juicy gem squashes,” Jacob mumbled to himself.

This was a mistake because it overexcited The Man so much he seemed to gargle his own tongue a while before he could get any coherent words out.

“Are you thinking of that option, sir? Because I have some figures that may interest you. I have lists of what nutrients and fertilisers are to be consumed before death and notes on how to maximise your body mass and which conditions are best for ...”

While The Man spluttered out his continuous suggestions, Jacob began to fiddle with the white linen bed sheets.

“Can you give me some more time to think about it?” Jacob eventually squeezed in through the mass of words. The Man paused a second, looking very concerned.

“I don’t want to keep on coming back here, Mr Bennet. Putting off this decision would result in your taking the default position, or worse, forcing the trauma of this decision onto one of your family members.” The Man seemed to shiver at the mention of these options, and Jacob realised that his discomfort was not insincere.

Jacob was returned to his youth by The Man’s reaction to these suggestions, to when his grandfather died quite suddenly in an accident at home – a bucket of baby-turtle-brown paint had inexplicably fallen on to him and knocked him off a ladder. They had always suspected that Jacob’s gnarly-fingered and self-pronounced Alzheimer’s-ridden grandmother had more to do with it than she claimed, but it was impossible to prove at which point her baby-turtle-brown fingerprints had appeared on the bucket. Jacob’s mother, however, had to decide on what to do with the body, and she had chosen not to decide at all. So his grandfather was sent down the route of default: every salvageable part of his body stored for re-use, and the rest disposed of in what was considered the most economical way possible at the time – he could not remember exactly what this was. His aunt, younger

## Final Disposition

than his mother by two years, had never spoken to his mother again. When he was older he went to his aunt's house to try and reconnect with his cousins, but any attempt at making peace was stunted by his aunt, who spent much of the time glaring at him, grinding her off-white porcelain teeth. As he was leaving she handed him a piece of paper which he dared not look at until he had rounded the corner a block away from her house. Under the shade of an imitation Tuscan villa he read the letter. It was a long typed list of hospital store rooms, with a handwritten note at the top. The exact wording he had never been able to recall, but it read something like: 'You have your grandfather's eyes, and so does somebody else.' Jacob threw away the note, and never returned.

He looked down at his own fingers now, lying folded over the edges of the bed sheet. His grandmother had moved to Germany almost immediately after his grandfather's death, but he recalled her hands in great detail. Watching those hands he had realised then that he too would become old, and imagined the creases and wrinkles springing up as suddenly and frightfully as when you left your hands in the bath for too long. Now he looked down at his own fingers with a shock of recognition. The veins popped over his knuckles and tapered down his fingers over a mesh of wrinkled skin, just as they had on her. The weight he had lost during his illness reflected even here, and his once fully-fleshed fingers seemed to have crinkled without his knowledge. How rude of them to do this without his permission! He was not even old.

He realised that The Man was simply staring at him, swinging back and forth on the spot as if he were an overbalanced pendulum. Each rock seemed to be bringing his puffed-up belly closer to Jacob's bed.

"Sorry, could you repeat the question?" Jacob asked, not really knowing if a question had been posed.

"Well, I was just saying that all of us at Finality only want the best for you after your death, and that's why it is vital that you not postpone this decision. You of all people should be aware that time is running out. I can give you some more time to think about it, but I assure you that the decision will not become any easier. This is as simple as it gets, Mr Bennet, and that is why I am here to guide you through all of its complexities."

Not taking his eyes off the overwrought buttons which moved closer with every swing, Jacob was barely aware that The Man had begun speaking again.

"But of course this sort of thing takes time. I have a few more clients to see today, but I will be back in an hour after lunch. I hope you will have come to a decision. I will leave these notes here for you to look through in the meantime."

The Man slipped a streamlined pamphlet on the otherwise empty bedside table, snapped his pen into place on the clipboard and strode out.

## Final Disposition

Jacob felt himself relax at not having the miniature firing squad of buttons faced at him. He shifted his weight on the bed and wondered if there had been a time when one could die and be left to decompose in peace.

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# Jessica Liebenberg

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Jessica Liebenberg is currently in her first year of Masters in Creative Writing at Wits University. She has a particular interest in speculative fiction and spends her time writing, playing music and annoying the dog.

*Final Disposition* was the third place winner of the 2011 South African Writers' College Short Story Competition.

# WAITIN' FOR FUZZY

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Ross Ian Fleming

**I** wake up this mornin' and the sun shines in the window and Fuzzy starts barkin' in my ear so I bark back and we race round in circles for about five minutes playin' tag – then I wander through to the kitchen and a bowl has miraculously appeared with – holy guacamole – Delishus Dogg Chunks and I drool a bit and guzzle it all down quickly burp and growl just to show Fuzzy who is boss and then go outside and do a quick business next to the pot plant; the Tubby One comes downstairs and starts whinin' so I hide behind the couch for ten minutes until it's safe to come out and then the Scrawny One comes along with a poop scoop and I breathe again – oh yes and then Fuzzy comes along unsuspectin' so I pounce on him and we fall and tumble rock 'n roll then break 'n breathe – the Scrawny One goes past talkin' to himself all the time like a madman sometimes I think I am the only normal one in this family here he comes again mumblin' under his breath talkin' to imaginary friends the cat from next door just came into view – time to drop 'n chase damn

she's up the mulberry tree – she can move fast when she wants to – hey Fuzzy's on my team again and we're both howlin' at the treed feline hey it's the Scrawny One shoutin' he sure has a mean temper – better take cover behind the couch again – ah here's the Little One – happy day the Great White Hope of 15 Paradise Place she's always got a smile for me lickies lickies don't let the adults see – darlin' did I ever tell you that you give the best kisses in Upper Harfield – ah a biscuit for the little boy – walkies come on walkies it's all I want from you just a little stroll I wag my tail and make a cringe-plea-bargain yyyeeesss we're off and I grab the leash in my mouth and in seconds we're out the door glorious freedom sniff sniff ah yes Kilroy was here and Fuzzy last week stop for a wizz sniffle a little more hey that car just hooted at us hi guys it's Furball here where're you from?

Trot trot trot walk run scramble hey this is wild the Little One is headin' for the park and it's only 6 a.m. man this is good good good – hey Marvin Ed Pete – hi guys wadda gas man lets run up and down and maybe chase some tail – how come I'm not functionin' know what I mean – must have been that trip to the vet last spring knicker knacker noooo – all gone so you been there done that got the collar huh? Chase the kids sniff for the rest – the Little One chattin' to Ms Ervid the librarian what you doin' here on your own don't you know you could get into trouble adjust my glasses scratch my ass bomb on the kids – so I bark at her circlin' round and tellin' Ed and Marvin to join in – cowards conformists hustlers they fade and wander off past the jungle gym – your dog has a mean streak Caitlin says Ms

## Waitin' for Fuzzy

Ervid so I give an extra loud one and try anoint her ankle but the Little One intervenes and bang we're on our way home – sniff sniff this is fun hey check out Ms Ervid's Volksie wet her wheel quickly – hey more cars hi guys this is Furball remember me?

Sssssmokin'!! The Scrawny One is sleepin' on the couch again – if the Tubby One finds out it's gonna be tickets think I'll watch this one out – stretch out and snooze in the sun patch next to the window – dreamland here I come birds cats friends Fuzzy ...

Snore deep slumber approachin' sherbet it's 7:11 a.m. and we're none of us ready for this day. Think I'll park off and wait for the rush crash bang slosh everybuddy eatin' shoutin' chasin' and the Scrawny One finally off the couch – the Tubby One says how come I gotta do everythin' in this house these dishes still not washed and you sleepin' on the couch – I bark to show my solidarity with the early risers and wink at the Little One snubbin' the Scrawny One – the politics in this kennel is powerful man.

Yeah it's 8:23 a.m. and everyone's gone just me 'n Fuzzy alone in the house – we settle down to watch the sun move across the sky lyin' next to the window it's a fine day – god in his heaven Fuzzy 'n me down here sunbathin' – we can hear the cars roarin' down Rosemall Avenue gee those guys got no respect – noise pollution deluxe carbon fumes foul'in' up the atmosphere where will it all end – we're cosy here but every twenty minutes or so one of us'll go bark at the Smellies take a peek for burglars don't come in here my friend cos we got Teeth and we don't take no you know what –

snoozin' nicely when I see Fuzzy's got a lamb bone from somewhere – get outta here pal where d'you get That from? – mice 'n rats 'n vagrants from KFC across the road coulda got hold of that – I'm talkin' rabies guy – not to mention HIV and hepatitis B who knows where that bone has been – put it down Now I say – that's the problem with the younger generation no respect for authority I got eighteen months on Fuzzy – that's about ten in dog years – my arithmetic not too good on account of all I know is Drop It Furball I'm countin' 1-2-3 bang you're dead gotcha etc etc – anyways so Fuzzy's gnawin' this bone and all and I'm actually Quite disgusted at this sound so I try wrestle it from him and we're rollin' everywhere and the water bowl goes flyin' – we stop and stare stupidly at the mess and look at one another then break up laughin' – life is a gas here folks.

And there's some guy barkin' for all he's worth its probably seen one of the bergies – yeah they say a poodle has more smell receptors than an iguana on acid – not that I'd know of course Never Havin' Been There Ahem – and some of those gentlemen haven't taken a bath in years sad really hey the whole neighbourhood's joinin' in wow this is a subculture it's a movement c'mon Fuzzy let's give it a blast Did U Vote and all – sound of police siren or maybe it's an ambulance – guess the bergie got his – oh joy exultant justice sublime – what's that sound of an accident – Fuzzy climbs the stairs to get a look see – screech bang crash – now they shoutin' at one another and Fuzzy's all excited and yappin' like tomorrow's been cancelled man the fun never ends.

## Waitin' for Fuzzy

Well it's 6 p.m. and Nobody's home maybe it's the Rapture – the Tubby One's always goin' on about Armageddon – yes Fuzzy I have some sad news for you we are officially Left Behind as in the late night horror movie about Revelations etc etc – Fuzzy mopin' at the news and I must admit I'm feelin' a little sorry for us down here – I say a little prayer for the Little One and I'm just scoutin' for adjectives to describe her ponytail when hey in they walk – moanin' mumblin' about the power cut – robots out laptops down system not workin' – hey guys it's me Furball boy am I glad to see you d'you know what happened today yip yip yip – get outta here Fuzzy where did you learn that Raddy is a doll for cryin' out loud she's a girl you can't wrestle her get off off off the Tubby One is throwin' a fit Not in front of the children not on the carpet not in my house guys this is a sad day for red-blooded males everywhere hoo boy what a sicko.

Ahem yes well a really terrible thin' happened today – I'm still reelin' from the implications – let me elaborate – the whole family goes walkin' see – I'm talkin' dudes stridin' out serious cool with trainers leashes peaks t-shirts and Fuzzy takes the lead strainin' to get to the park and I'm hangin' back not wantin' to be Too uncool when blow me down but Fuzzy slips his leash – it's been loose for ages but the Scrawny One got no sense of responsibility – and hightails it into the traffic and man he's dodgin' wheels brakes squealin' people watchin' and there's a sick thud and Fuzzy goes flyin' – my heart lurches and I'm tryin' to get there but the Tubby One is runnin' harder wobblin' everywhere and the Scrawny One is hangin' frosty keepin'

the family on the pavement and Fuzzy is yelpin' I can hear the pain I'm goin' mad and then No – there's a sudden ominous silence and the Tubby One is screamin' at the Scrawny One about takin' ownership and I don't know where to hide and Fuzzy is dead – know what I'm sayin' Not Here No More his little body limp and blood comin' out his nose I feel suddenly emptied and can't breathe nor think the Tubby One cryin' hysterically the Little One terribly silent – watchin' – and Fuzzy cradled in her arms sayin' goodbye I think I'm gonna cry but I don't know how – oh lord lord lord lord ...

The vet just left and we're all kinda dumbstruck it's gonna be either Moonie Hill Pet Cemetery or the back yard – is this what'll happen to me one day pushin' up the Scrawny One's daisies – I don't know what to say I'm like devastated this is kinda no comment country – who's gonna bury that lamb bone who's gonna help me see off the burglars who's gonna keep me company I feel Very empty and lonely and ever so slightly vacant ...

The Little One took me in her arms last night and we had the Most Meaningful Conversation of Our Lives – she told me what Fuzzy meant to her and I sympathised and gave her lickies and told her what I felt about the situation and there was Empathy and Love and Sharin' and Carin'. Pastor Jack came round later and we all sat around lookin' miserable and apparently the Scrawny One is in Big Trouble for bein' a Typical Callous Male and other names I shall not mention and there was some elaborate apology but as I sit here waitin' I know that Fuzzy was irreplaceable and that's a big word in dog language – they'll be comin' home later today at some point but who really

## Waitin' for Fuzzy

cares life isn't worth a bowl of nuggets without my old friend – I think I will just lie here and wait for him to re-appear ...

You know I keep expectin' the little guy to jump me when I drop off steal my Delishus Dogg Chunks when I'm not lookin' bark at those goldarn burglars – holy guacamole – I'm sure he's just playin' hide 'n seek is that you, er ... Fuzzy ...?

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# Ross Ian Fleming

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Ross devotes his days to testing Telecoms software, satisfying his wife's need for fast food and educating his three kids (and dog). At night, however, he dreams of Poetry. He has written three small volumes of poems, all available and downloadable on <http://lemmingpoetry.blogspot.com/>.

Although occasionally inhabiting an imaginary land beyond description, in reality he lives in Cape Town, South Africa, the next best thing in the chain of being.

*Waitin' for Fuzzy* was the winner of the 2008 South African Writers' College Short Story Competition.

## BOARD AND LODGING

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### William Oosthuizen

**I**t is dark outside when K, research assistant, finishes his work for the day. As he picks up his leather holdall – a Xmas gift to himself – he observes with bitterness that he is the last to leave the building.

He complains loudly, his voice flat amongst the book-lined walls. “Never anyone to help out when you’re behind. The bastards just rush off home.”

He quickly makes his way towards the exit doors. A minute later he is approaching his car, a vintage two-seater convertible, bought second-hand with the small inheritance left by his mother a year earlier. As always he stops a few paces short to admire her clean lines and to think kindly of his mother. She was a real woman, the only one who really cared.

K tilts his head back, sniffs the night air. Not a star in sight, but rain would only come later. No need to put up the canvas top for the drive home.

For a few seconds he is unsure if anything at all had happened; it had been too quick to take in. Now, slowly, frame by frame, he relives the horror: his right foot pushing down on the accelerator, the car rounding the bend, picking up speed into the straight, the dark form looming solid and unyielding in the headlights of the car, the moment of impact, the windscreen shattering.

Everything is quiet when he steps out of the car. He moves to the other side, stares down at the prostrate form of his victim: a vagrant in a coat. Dark streaks of blood trickle down his forehead, disappearing into his beard.

K reaches out and touches the side of his neck. The slow realisation dawns: he has killed a man.

His eyes scan the deserted street. Not a sound, not a movement. If he drives off now, leaves the man lying in the street, nobody would be any the wiser. And why shouldn't he? There was nothing anyone could do for the man. And it wasn't his fault. The man had stepped into the road; he must have been drunk, throwing himself in front of a moving vehicle like that, not keeping a lookout. That's what got the man killed.

K steps back to the car. Something crunches underfoot: shards of glass from the shattered windscreen are strewn on the road surface. With deft fingers, he collects every piece he can find. This changes everything; he cannot simply leave the man here, not with evidence all over the place.

## Board and Lodging

Getting the vagrant into the car proves to be an arduous task: he has to drag him by the arms and lift and roll him into the passenger seat. He secures the man's body with a seatbelt, places his leather holdall on his lap and folds his limp hands over the bag. For good measure he drops the strap of the holdall around the man's neck.

"There, that should do it."

He gets into the driver's seat, glances at his passenger. To the casual observer, his passenger was a drunk, sleeping it off. K speaks softly, his eyes on the road, "Too bad, old boy. Not your day, I'm afraid."

The trees in the forest are spaced apart at irregular intervals with narrow dirt roads criss-crossing the soft forest floor. He drives slowly. When he reaches the heart of the forest, he stops.

Arms outstretched, he explores the area on foot by the light of the car's headlamps.

He settles on a spot between two tall pine trees, thirty paces distant, and starts to dig with his makeshift tool. Soon he is drenched with sweat; his hands, unaccustomed to manual labour, shed skin in protest.

Half an hour later, K drops the tool and slowly, wearily, makes his way back to the car.

It takes several seconds for his brain to register the impossible: the dead man is no longer slumped in the passenger seat.

This is not happening, he tells himself. He walks around the car, his eyes searching the darkness beyond, and the impossibility of the situation becomes evident. It is dark, and the forest is vast. He will never find the vagrant. He sits down on the soft earth and cups his head in his damaged hands. Then he starts to laugh; if the dead man had left the car under his own steam, he wasn't dead. So there was nothing to worry about; the man was injured, and he will find his way to a doctor; someone is bound to help him.

The screech of an owl jerks him from his reverie, and he stumbles to his feet and falls into the driver's seat, still laughing.

It is only when he pulls up in front of his townhouse that it dawns on him: the vagrant took off with his holdall, and with it his house keys, his wallet, his passport.

Why is this happening to him?

In the days that follow he has his car fixed at an out-of-the-way panel shop. He reads every newspaper he can lay his hands on, watches the news on television, but there is no report on the incident. He starts to relax, puts the whole thing behind him.

## Board and Lodging

One afternoon, as he walks through the door, the man is there, in his town house, sitting on his coach, watching television. His heart skips several beats as he takes in the scene: it is the vagrant, wearing the same overcoat, his beard long and filthy.

The vagrant speaks first, his voice low and pleasant.

“Welcome home.”

K slowly recovers from the shock.

“You’re alive.”

The vagrant nods.

K takes a step back.

“What is it you want?”

The vagrant shrugs indifferently.

“Board and lodging.”

“But ...”

The vagrant digs in his pocket and extracts a small plastic jar.

“Pieces of glass from your car, buried in my face when you knocked me down.”

K stares at the evidence of his crime. He swallows hard.

“My bag?”

“It’s in a safe place.”

“How did ...?”

“I’ll tell you over supper.”

A slow realisation dawns: the man is here to stay.

The vagrant eats with gusto. When his plate is empty, he burps.

“Wine?”

K opens a bottle of wine and fills a glass.

Much later the vagrant tells him what he is waiting to hear.

“It was the doctor who put two and two together, when I told him how I woke up in a car, with someone digging a hole in the forest. He said it was simple: you ran me down, thought I was dead, and then decided to get rid of me.”

K knows he is trapped. The man now controls him.

“When will you be leaving?”

The vagrant shrugs.

“I have nowhere to go. Winter is coming.”

The vagrant moves into the spare bedroom.

## Board and Lodging

K tries to ignore the unwanted presence in his house, stoically accepting his fate.

But soon a pattern develops: the vagrant starts to do small chores around the house, sweeping, washing dishes, vacuuming carpets. And he looks respectable: he has cleaned himself up, trimmed his hair, shaved off his beard, wears fresh clothes from K's cupboard.

A month later K cannot believe how things have changed. The vagrant has become a regular part of his life, a respectable housekeeper.

K forces himself not to think too much of the arrangement. It is an acceptance bred from having no choice: the vagrant is now part of his life.

Things could have been worse, he tells himself: the man could've been dead.

On a day, as he walks through the door, the vagrant is sitting at the kitchen table, a chess set in front of him, an open book at his elbow, engrossed in the recreation of a game.

K stops to watch and then speaks without thinking.

“Perhaps we can play a game tonight.”

The vagrant grins.

“Anytime.”

Soon another pattern is established: at night they face each other over a chessboard. K looks forward to the evenings with his boarder, and in time he admits to himself that the man is the closest thing he has ever had to a friend.

On Sundays they drive into the countryside in his vintage car, the wind on their faces and the sun on their backs.

On one sunny day, he takes a picture of his friend leaning against the side of the car, smiling.

On a Friday in early spring K leaves the office at midday. A persistent cold has gone to his head and he feels feverish, in need of bed rest and darkness.

When he gets to his door, he finds it standing slightly ajar. He pushes the door open, calling his friend's name. His voice echoes, a hollow sound: the place is empty.

A cursory check confirms that the man is gone, and so are the television set, DVD player, sound system, laptop computer, digital camera, Persian carpets. All is missing.

In the second bedroom he discovers two things on the bed: his leather holdall and the small jar with the shards of glass.

## Board and Lodging

A fair swap, he thinks. He should feel relief for this unexpected deliverance, he tells himself. But he feels only loss.

He whispers, “You fool, why now?”

K lies down on his bed, nauseous and dizzy. He gets up when cramps seize his belly. On his knees, gripping the toilet bowl, he retches repeatedly, spraying the white porcelain with bright red blood.

He drifts in and out of consciousness as his fever intensifies. He awakes at dawn, dimly registering that he should eat something. But there is no time to waste. He will eat later, after he has found his friend.

The street people listen and shake their heads as they stare at the snapshot of his friend: nobody has seen him. He hasn't been back for months.

By mid-afternoon, K concedes defeat.

On the drive home another spell of dizziness threatens to overcome him. The fever has returned, taken control of his head; his body shivers violently as chills rampage through his veins.

He stops his car at the top of the mountain pass. Everything is suddenly very clear. There is a way he can make his friend come to him. He laughs with joy, amazed at how swiftly this perfect understanding dawned.

Finding a gap in the barriers lining the sheer drop between the road and the ocean below proves to be easy, and as he steers his car over the edge, into a free fall that seems to last forever, he reaches upwards, embracing the sky.

The early springtime heat favours the people in the city square. Amongst them is the vagrant. He is in a relaxed mood, with the sun on his face and money in his pocket.

When a passing pedestrian discards a newspaper, he gets up from his bench and recovers it. He slowly turns the pages. When he sees the photograph of the crumpled sports car, he pauses to read the eyewitness account of his former host's last moments.

“Now why did he go and do that for? Just when I gave him back his freedom.”

He turns to his companion and pokes his finger at the picture.

“I lived with this guy for a while. The sorriest bastard I ever came across, not a single friend and no family.”

His companion grunts. “Nobody will miss him, then.”

The vagrant narrows his eyes. Perhaps he could try to make it to the funeral. It wouldn't look right if nobody turns up, he thinks. That would surely be the saddest send-off the poor bastard could have.

# William Oosthuizen

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Lawyer by day, wordsmith by night. Since moving to Cape Town a few years ago, I started doing some of the things I had been putting off for far too long, and this included writing fiction.

I have always been an avid reader but the transition did not come easily: I soon discovered that enjoying good writing does not automatically qualify one to produce a compelling story. A number of books on the subject aided my progress, as did my wife's unflinching support (and critical eye).

Being runner-up in the SAWC Short Story Competition gave me a big thrill, and the many hours of toil will hopefully continue to pay dividends – the manuscript for my first novel is presently sitting at a publisher waiting for the green light.

*Board and Lodging* was the runner-up of the 2010 South African Writers' College Short Story Competition.

# A GAMBLING MAN

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Bettina Calder

**T**he ground was hard. A lot harder than I thought it would be after the rain. And it was quiet. But for the unrelenting roar of the highway below, I could have been in the middle of the Bushveld. I could see my house from where I stood, here in the middle of nowhere.

My spade zinged and vibrated up my arms as I hit a rock embedded in the rich red soil. I loved the smell of wet soil. I needed to make the hole just a little bit deeper. And wider. Six foot or so should do it.

I could hear Fiona's critical whine in my head, "No point in doing half a job. Idiot. You never do anything right!" Painful memories echoed around the quietness of my head dragging my headache back between my temples. "Go-away," begged the grey loeries watching me dig. "Go-away!"

The day was getting hotter as midday approached. In the still air my perspiration was pooling into a cloying miasma with my cologne. Expensive

cologne. I stopped to take my shirt off and the loeries complained loudly. Damn! I thought that I had been more careful. A jagged smear of blood contrasted accusingly red with the pale grey logo of my tracksuit. I hated blood. I hated the sticky sweet smell of it. At least it was dry.

“Go-away” accused the grey loeries flopping about eating the ripe yellow syringa berries above me. “Go-away.” For a moment I rested, watching the careless loeries drop berries that trickled with the dry soil into the deep red hole. Six foot under and here on top of the hill it was peaceful. No worries.

I shaded my eyes and imagined I could see vultures, graceful dark shadows spiralling towards the sun. I shook my head and continued digging. “You love her more than you love me,” Fiona’s shrill voice interrupted my thoughts again. So much for peace and quiet. Damn woman.

We used to come up here often before they built the highway. Before I married Fiona ... seven long years ago.

I took a deep breath and pulled the soft blanketed lump closer to the hole. Fiona spent a fortune on these mohair blankets. Another fight another day. That’s what it was like with Fiona and me. My mother was right, I should’ve left her when the going was good. The hole was ready; not quite six feet under but close enough. “No point in doing half a job,” admonished Fiona in the silence. Automatically I scooped out a few more handfuls of soil to appease her. The soil was cool down here and its silence was almost comforting. Strangely I could no longer hear the ocean of traffic. It was the

## A Gambling Man

absence of sound that I rarely heard. I patted my pocket and was comforted. The 9-mil. Weighed my pocket down, but these days one couldn't be too careful.

I dragged her closer. The tracksuit snagged on a thorn bush. Dammit! For a moment I had to cradle her body while I disentangled it. The 'haak-en-steek' clawed me and ripped a curved brown thorn deep into my wrist. The fabric pulled free and I tripped, tipping her into her grave.

"Dammit!" I wanted to do it gently, she deserved that at the least. I knew she was dead, but I still loved her. She was my best girl. My favourite. I didn't want to look, but I had to. Her slender brown legs were sticking partly out of the blanket. I grabbed the spade and began shovelling. It is hard to bury what you love.

"Go-AWAY!" shouted the loeries.

I worked quickly now. Sorry that I had seen her again and at the same time absurdly thinking that she might get cold in the cool dark ground. I was sure that I could smell death now. Her death smell. Almost sweet. I didn't dare look down as I filled the hole. I hesitated, again imagining that she had moved ... I waited, reasoned, remembering the living warmth of her body. Then I shoved more earth into the hole, thinking that perhaps I should have wrapped her in something more than a blanket. Maybe plastic. I tipped the contents of Fiona's jewellery box near her head. The diamond tennis bracelet that I hadn't bought her glinted for the last time at the sun.

It was beginning to get dark. But it was almost over now. My back ached and my shoulders were sore. I was grateful for Fiona's gardening gloves. Pastel pink paisley and rubber. A fly settled excitedly on my hand oozing contentment as it found the dried blood. I swatted at it and missed. I know I should have wrapped her in plastic. I forced my mind away from the reality of maggots and worms and decomposition. I took the safety off my 9-mil and felt better. These days it just wasn't safe up here anymore after dark. The loeries had finally given up and gone away themselves. It was time to go home.

The fly stubbornly returned to my hand and watched me as I dragged a few rocks into place and camouflaged the grave. I most definitely didn't want anything to find her grave or dig her up. I bowed my head and said goodbye.

I was late back. Ironically late for our last bloody anniversary dinner. I could almost hear Fiona whining to her guests, "Typical, he is always late. He never cares about anything I want." But manners are manners and we have guests. Her friends. Her family. Her guests ... her lover. Tonight Fiona's pretentious guests will finally have something interesting to say.

The fly, or one of his friends, hitched a ride home in the Merc and got out with me at the side entrance.

I should have known better. Sexy, young secretary marries recently-divorced much older boss. The oldest cliché in the book of old clichés and old fools and I fell for it. Stupid me. They say that dogs are a good judge

## A Gambling Man

of character. I should have heeded Beth's warning. The old bitch never did like Fiona.

I put Beth's bloody collar and the Merc's keys on top of her empty jewellery box and the bank repossession notices and bankruptcy papers inside. Then I let myself out the side door with my bag. I could have, would have, still forgiven her everything. Even the affair. But she knew! Fiona knew Beth, my old dog always slept in the driveway stretched out in the sun. Careless bitch! Her damn tennis pro was more important than being a few seconds late to check for Beth. It would have been a damn lot easier to give the vet the go-ahead for her than for Beth. Put me out of my misery.

I phoned my bookie from the car. All my money on 'Roll of the Dice' in the sixth.

I spun my wheels shooting gravel at the arriving guests as I accelerated out the driveway. Good luck to them all. Fiona and her bloodsucking lawyers are in for a treasure hunt. She was lucky I am a gambling man. Heads she would have joined Beth.

# Bettina Calder

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I love writing and my husband is a brave man, considering that my favourite genre is murder and mayhem and I have a book on poisons on my bedside table.

I've always been a writer, as far back as I can remember, long before I became a wife and mother. The problem is that I never had any idea or strategy of how to do what I love doing as a career. After matriculating in the dark ages of 1982, I somehow ended up as a medical technologist.

Over the years I have continued to write, but haven't really had much self-confidence as a writer. SAWC gave me a much-needed boost. It has taken me an inexcusably long time to actually send in an entry to the annual SAWC Short Story Competition, but I'm really glad I did!

*A Gambling Man* was the third place winner of the 2012 South African Writers' College Short Story Competition.

# THE COLOURS OF CHOICE

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Ann Kern

“I'm sorry, Mrs Henderson, you can't leave till Doctor's seen you.”

The nurse moved off and Alison settled back against the crisp linen pillowcase with a sigh. There was no choice really, she hated making a fuss. She wondered which 'Doctor' it would be. She never thought of them as 'her' doctors, they were temporary, just as she was temporary. Old Dr Katz hadn't been part of her life for months now, not since the pain had taken up residence and he sent her along to the oncologist to be prodded and poked and scanned and biopsied.

Hospital life went on around her, while Alison worried if medical aid would cover everything this time. She used to deal with all that, but lately the pills and the pain and the eternal weariness made her forgetful, made it hard to concentrate, and she had asked Delia to take over. Delia was their youngest, the only one with a head for figures. No one knew where that

came from; Alison was artistic while Paul was the practical type, not all that good with numbers. She should ask Delia how much was left of her oncology allowance, even if she got fobbed off with generalities again.

In the days before the pain came, she knew those things without having to ask anyone, just as she would know if they could afford another call to Tricia in New York because she so wanted to hear her voice, or to Michael in Perth. He had wanted them to move there a few years back, but she couldn't imagine living in Australia, she found the accent so unattractive. Paul had asked Michael to take a look at the job market for him, but it was less promising than they were led to believe and the idea was quietly dropped.

Perhaps that had been a mistake, one of several over the years. The medical insurance was better in Australia, wasn't it? If she asked Michael, it would only upset him – he got upset easily, especially about them not following him out there. And he hated talking about her illness. Only Tricia did that. Tricia understood.

She knew she could look it up on the internet, but the bright screen tired her eyes and the discomfort of sitting upright at the desk in that hard chair – she couldn't do it for more than ten minutes at a stretch now, and their internet connection was aching slow. Should have upgraded, of course, but no one else had complained. She used to read foreign blogs and news sites, liked the sense of no question being unanswerable, loved having the world at her fingertips. Paul wasn't fond of technology, so after Delia

moved out the old desktop had become her personal luxury and she didn't feel right asking him to spend money on a laptop and a good ADSL line just for her.

When she found the lump, she had bypassed Dr Katz and gone straight to her gynae. The first shiver of fear had come when she mentioned there was something not right with her breast and the secretary moved her appointment from ten days in the future to the following morning. After the surgery, while she was trying for calm and thinking positive thoughts, she had used the medical sites to read about post-cancer care: what to eat, how to change your lifestyle, boost your immune system. As far as money would allow, she had taken charge of her recovery, setting her immune system on the promised road to invulnerability.

When the pain came to live with her, she was stunned, almost offended. She had done everything right, surely she had beaten it? But late at night the gnawing in her stomach that kept her from sleep told its own tale. She might have beaten it once, but victory had left her complacent, unprepared for its older, uglier sister.

Or brother. This pain was masculine: harsh, uncompromising, lacking in empathy. It did its job, which was to tell her she was broken inside, and refused to live comfortably beside her, unlike the discomfort after the mastectomy. That had been female pain, it understood there were times when she needed to breathe, to rest. This one said no, she could rest when it was done with her. Even after the drip and the new pills, even now she

could feel him lying coiled, waiting for her to get home where there was no white-clad magician to drive him back.

The rattle of trolley wheels announced lunch. She looked at the cottage pie, sloppy mince with soft potato sitting in a pool of thin sauce, and her stomach heaved once, again. She felt the pain laughing, waiting for this slop to slide down, give it an excuse to surface. Carefully she pushed back the tray and swung her legs over the side of the bed. Her slippers were on the far side of the locker, but the soles were slippery and going barefoot on the ward's smooth floor seemed safer. She seldom felt steady on her feet these days.

Their bathroom was occupied so she started down the passage, only to be stopped by one of the nurses. "Where are you going, Mrs Henderson?" She had a bright, condescending voice, and Alison felt like a schoolgirl again, out of class during lesson time and spotted by one of the prefects.

"I need the bathroom, ours is busy. I think I'm going to be sick."

"You should have rung for a pan." She radiated disapproval, her tone made it clear Alison should have known better. "Anyhow, you can't use that one, it's for wheelchair patients. You have to go to the end, turn left; it's on your right."

She pointed, impatient to be off. Clearly she felt a patient able to get out of bed wasn't sick enough to fuss over.

## The Colours of Choice

The corridor stretched endlessly and Alison almost went back to wait her turn in the ward, but the nurse would see and wonder at that, she might even come back and ask. There seemed no option. One step at a time, she told herself, setting off. The carpet was flat and smooth beneath her feet, the white walls bright under eternal lights.

Her route would take her past the nurses' station, and she wondered if they enjoyed this artificial world with its constant temperature and no real day and night. Though they could still look outside when they went on the wards, of course. She had been in Intensive Care after her op, and that was like living on a ship, in one of the inner cabins. She had never liked that idea, in fact going on a cruise had never appealed to her at all, though Paul would have loved it.

The alarm buzzed when she was almost level with the station, startling her. The nice blonde sister and the nurse who had told her she couldn't leave yet, stood near an open locker, consulting clipboards and a computer screen. Responding instantly to the sound, the sister came round the counter and sped off down the passage, while the nurse made a quick call on the house phone before following her in the direction Alison had just come from. Emergency.

She stopped to lean against the counter and look back, curious to see which ward they entered, her eye passing over the open locker. It had a combination lock and the shelves held medicines, they must have been

getting ready for afternoon rounds. More containers stood on the counter, apparently waiting to be packed away. Newly delivered, she guessed.

The name leapt out at her as though someone had zoomed in on it the way one did on the computer when the text was too tiny for eyes that grew weaker by the month. After the pain came, while she could still sit at the desk, she had spent ages on the medical sites. At first she researched treatments and prognosis, but increasingly she was drawn to pain control with its variety of drug cocktails to keep the claws at bay. That had been when she and the oncologist still discussed things on an almost equal footing, before she began meekly accepting his decisions as law.

She couldn't remember when she had relinquished control. The answer lay somewhere in the haze of endless, fearful aching, in the crumbling straws of hope, in a future swallowed up by the word 'terminal'. These days her concentration was less and her memory poor, she mainly identified her own drugs by their colour. But she remembered this name and the string of warnings and provisos that had accompanied it.

She became aware of the silence, a tangible thing that stood beside her, all but tapping her on the shoulder. Faint, distant hum of air con, sounds of voices, muted, distant. No footsteps, no one near. No eyes on her, on the nurses' station. Just her and the bottles of pills and the little cold-box which she guessed held ampoules. There had been so many needles in the past months; when the pain was unbearable she asked for the needle, she who had been terrified of injections. It happened more and more often now. She

was staring at the pills. There were eleven bottles; she seemed to have counted them.

And then she was walking on down the corridor and there were ten.

She found the bathroom, went into a stall and sat on the toilet seat. A tap dripped in one of the basins. Her heart was racing. The bottle fitted her hand as though it belonged there, the label clear. She opened it – this took some effort as the circle of plastic around the edge of the lid was hard to pull and her nails were brittle since the chemo. She would have used her teeth but they ached all the time and she was afraid they would break. Then it was open and she was tipping pills carefully into her hand. Twenty. Yellow and green; 50 milligrams, it said on the bottle. That made a thousand milligrams, more than enough for ... More than enough.

She sat a while staring at nothingness until the nausea subsided, then got up, flushing in case someone was outside. The little bottle fitted perfectly in her pocket, but she tucked it into her panty instead, just to be on the safe side.

The tall nurse from Atlantis was at the station this time. The medicine locker was closed, the pills no longer on the counter. She reached the ward, nodded to the woman nearest the door and returned to bed. The cottage pie had settled and seemed less watery. She tried a few mouthfuls and the pain hissed a warning against red meat and grease. She ignored it. She would eat the mince if she wanted, and if she suffered, so be it. Everything had its price.

And now when she could no longer pay the price, she could make it stop. A handful of the orange pills and six, maybe seven of the yellow and greens; that was all it would take. In her own time, when cottage pie belonged in the past, when she no longer ached to hear Tricia's voice – Tricia who couldn't afford to come home. Her dark adversary would not be the one to decide the day or the hour, because in orange, green and yellow she held the power to drive him back. Forever. Then there would be no more pain, only rest and the answers that lay beyond Google's scope, like where and how. And why.

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# Ann Kern

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I've been writing for most of my life. School taught me you didn't have to rely solely on books, you could create your own stories, and once I discovered that I didn't stop. In my teens my parents bought me a portable typewriter and I would type away for hours. Looking back, I'm quite jealous at how easily the ideas flowed.

Getting married, having two daughters and moving around stopped me from weaving stories for pleasure. I only started again after getting involved with online writing communities and learned there is always time for something if you really want to do it.

I love playing with words and finding more effective ways of combining them. One day I'd love to write a novel. Or two. Just waiting for the right idea to creep up on me.

*The Colours of Choice* was the third place winner of the 2010 South African Writers' College Short Story Competition.

# PIECES OF PEONY-PAINTED TEACUPS

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Shelley Blignaut

I can still remember the day we met. Pregnant clouds hung low, their swollen bellies darkened the sky. I remember looking up and smelling the muggy air, waiting for the rain. February brought thunderstorms, the crazy kind that left even Dawson, the Great Dane of number nine, whimpering outside the kitchen door. It had been a long January, the Meyer's had moved out just after Christmas and they had taken Molly with them. It was understandable since she was their daughter, but she was also my best friend. And so it was this day, with the threatening rain and the heavy air, with number four standing empty and me on the pavement mourning the loss of my friend, that February brought something else. It brought Grace.

You would probably say that she had potential to grow into a beauty, and since I would never see her grow, let us just say she did. But when she

stepped out the car that day you would have to search hard for the potential. Her hair was mousy and her skin fair. Her eyes were small and brown and they were separated by a little nose that crinkled when she spoke. She was a wisp of a girl and I was afraid that the sound of the thunder might topple her over.

At first Grace didn't see me, or perhaps she was ignoring me, but that night after the rain came, I slipped through the gate separating number four and number five, sloshed up their driveway and went to sit next to her on the top step of their veranda.

"Shouldn't you be in bed?" She asked without looking up.

"Shouldn't you?" I replied.

She smiled guiltily.

"I'm Grace," she held a little hand out. It was clammy and warm when I held it.

"I'm Emily," I said.

I saw a tiny speck of gold flash in her brown eyes.

"I've always wanted a sister called Emily."

"Very well then, we shall be sisters." I shook her little clammy hand and we were inseparable.

Autumn leaves rusted on the boughs of trees until they fell to streak the lawns with colours of saffron and beetroot. The mugginess was replaced

## Pieces of Peony-Painted Teacups

with chilly winds that whipped through windbreakers and chilled you from the inside. Grace and I would spend hours at the river at the bottom of her house squashing the muddy banks with our Wellingtons. It was on one of these autumn days by the river that we found a raven upturned on the banks. It was dead. Grace looked up at me with brown eyes filled with loss, “We will have to bury it, Em.”

I had no particular love for Ravens, especially dead ones. Days had eaten at this one’s feathers. Its blackness had no lustre and its eyes had been picked out to reveal gaping wells of nothingness. But Grace’s nose crinkled when she asked again and I would do anything to make her happy. So we took its still, stiff body and laid it in a shallow grave dug by a polystyrene cup that we found. Grace said a few words and then we sang the first line of ‘Abide with me’, because she said that was what they sang at funerals.

After we had hummed the rest of the hymn, she turned to me and asked, “Em, if you die, will you promise to come back for me and take me to where you are?”

“I’ll never leave you Gracie, we’ll be together forever.”

I know now that fate was laughing. I believed then that she needed me more than I needed her and so I told her what she needed to hear. How I have wondered through days of loss: would it have been any different if I had asked her to promise the same? Would she have left me? How these unanswered questions prolong the loneliness as they gnaw through justifications and create gaping holes of what ifs?

Grace's mom came then, stalking down the hill, calling for her to come eat dinner. I don't think Grace's parents liked me much, they thought that Grace spent far too much time with me and would rather her play with her school friends. They largely ignored me, so I did the same to them.

"You better go, Gracie," I said

"Will you stay and pat down the grave?"

"Of course."

"Make sure that it is packed nice and tight and maybe pick some daisies from the garden to lay on top; that's what they put on Sarah's grave. Momma wanted roses, but Sarah's always liked yellow daisies."

"Who's Sarah, Gracie?"

She looked away from the daisies and stared right at me. Her brown eyes glazing over with a film of tears.

"I've got to go Em, remember the daisies."

And with that she ran up the hill to the house where she would eat dinner with the parents that wouldn't talk to me.

Sarah's name didn't come up for a long time. There were times when Grace would fade into a world of her own and stare blankly through me. I thought that she was probably thinking about her and I would feel a touch of jealousy for someone I didn't know existed. There was only one other time when I heard Sarah's name mentioned and that was the day I lost

## Pieces of Peony-Painted Teacups

Grace. It was one of those rare warm winter's days, Grace and I were drinking tea in the garden. We sat underneath a bougainvillea awning and the sun spilt purple patterns on our tablecloth as it poured through the leaves. We drank the tea out of Grace's favourite peony-painted teacups. Of course there was no tea, but there is a blurry line between make-believe and real in a child's mind and so we sipped and slurped and talked of the fairies we were still to catch and the princes we were yet to meet.

And we were happy. Grace was happy.

But how a moment can change a lifetime.

Grace's mother came home. She looked thinner and dark rings had smudged grey-black under her eyes. Her forehead was permanently pinched into two crinkles that not even a smile could iron out. She marched straight up to us.

"Grace, what are you doing?"

"I'm drinking tea, Momma. Emily's here."

Grace gestured to me and smiled. Her mother did not bother to look in my direction, but I could see her shoulders tense.

"There is no tea in those tea cups, Grace." She said slowly, impatience seeping through her pores.

"Of course there is Momma, and there is sugar—" she stretched across the table and pinched a block of air between her thumb and forefinger and dropped it in her teacup.

“—and milk,” Grace reached over to the empty milk jug.

“Enough already, Gracie!” Her mother screamed, the last drops of patience now evaporated. “There is no sugar or milk or tea!”

And with that she swept her hand across the table, the teacups smashed to the ground. Shards of peonies landed at my feet.

“And there is no Emily! This is all made-up, Grace. You have to understand that we live in the real world, a world where imaginary sisters do not exist. Emily does not exist. You had a sister Grace, but Sarah is dead, you cannot replace her with some figment of your imagination. Do you understand?”

She was kneeling now, holding Grace by the shoulders and shaking her so that wisps of her mousy hair stuck to the blobs of tears that spilt from her eyes. Grace’s mom kept mumbling, “She’s dead Gracie, she’s dead.”

I waited for Grace’s defence. I waited for her to tell her mom that she was wrong, that we were sisters, that there is no definitive line between real and make-believe, that that was some bizarre concept made up by adults to lay down boundaries in children’s minds.

But no rebuttal came.

I watched as Grace chose reality. I had seen it many times, the slow unfolding realisation of where the adults’ line is, and I knew that she would be slipping away. It hurt so much with Grace; with the others it was a slower process; I knew it was coming and I would have time to prepare. They would

forget me on the lopsided tire swing and go play with their other friends, or maybe not call for me for a day or two, but a nasty remark from a classmate or a fight with their parents would always bring them back. Until the day they did not call at all. But with Grace it all happened so suddenly that I didn't get a chance to say goodbye. Her mom drew her in and hugged her tightly, Grace's big brown eyes looked up at me from her mother's shoulders and I knew she was gone. She couldn't see me. I called her name, softly at first, then screaming it, but still she would not look. Instead she nuzzled her head into her mother's neck and then let her carry her to the house.

I was left holding the pieces of my peony-painted teacup, staring up as Grace got carried away. How fickle the human brain is, that it would believe in the intangible one day and choose sinew and blood the next.

I visited her for a short while after that; I would climb the trellis to her bedroom window and watch as the cheesecloth moon reflected a fluorescent glow on her pale cheeks. I would whisper to her, call for her and hope childishly that she would awake and forget this silly idea of 'reality'. I did hear her call my name once. I turned, ready to forgive all and welcome her back, but it was only in the subconscious land of dreaming that she still saw me, and perhaps that is where I belong.

# Shelley Blignaut

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For my twenty-sixth birthday, my husband enrolled me in the Short Story Writing Course at SAWC to reignite my passion for writing. Since I was little I have loved writing stories; my parents were always amazed by my overactive imagination. Although I would have loved to study literature and Greek mythology, I chose the 'safe' route and went for a business degree, and ended up working as a footwear and accessories buyer for one of the ladies fashion retailers.

Subsequent to completing the Short Story Course, I enrolled for the Novel Writing Course as well and have just completed my first fantasy novel which is in the editing stage at the moment. I plan to start working on the sequel as my next project. So move over JK Rowling and Stephanie Meyer!

*Pieces of Peony-Painted Teacups* was the runner-up of the 2009 South African Writers' College Short Story Competition.

## A NEW LIFE

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### Grant Griffiths

**I**t was firstly to Aunty Maurida, a formidable midwife, counsellor and advice-giver, that the women from the Wynberg Pentecostal Church turned when in trouble of any kind. Her insights were mostly spot-on. Ma sent Jolene to her.

Aunty Maurida stared incredulously at the slim, plain girl in her early twenties seated in her tiny sitting room.

“You think having another baby is going to make your husband happy again?”

Trust Ma, she had said too much as usual. But Jolene had made up her mind. She did not doubt the joy their first baby had brought Cliffie. She remembered it well.

“Ma said you’d help to work out when I can fall pregnant ... you know, the days when I’m most likely to. That’s why I’m here.”

“Of course, no problem, I can help you.” Aunty Maurida smiled generously, then leaned forward with a finger pointing at her breasts, her sing-song voice continuing, “But listen, this aunty has seen a few things in her time, né, especially when it comes to men. If you want to talk, I’m here. Don’t leave things too late, like all these other girls with their babies round their legs, their men God knows where.” She stared at Jolene with a sudden intensity. Her voice was softer when she next spoke. “My dear, if you have marriage problems, another baby is not going to help.”

Jolene bristled protectively, but she spoke quietly. “I don’t have marriage problems, Aunty Maurida, please.”

Later, the big woman sent her off down the street with a hug and a playful pat on her tummy. “As soon as you think it’s happened, phone me, okay, I’m waiting.”

Jolene had always been plain and homely, less attractive and outgoing than some of the louder women in the neighbourhood. But she had learned from her ma how to turn this into a good thing, working hard to keep the little semi-detached house clean, their child neat and fed, and her husband proud.

Tomorrow Cliffie would be going away for three weeks on the trawler up the West Coast. The boxes of food and worn canvas bag of clothes stood on the kitchen table, ready for him. Now, with little Dillon asleep after his supper, she checked once more the dates that Aunty Maurida had worked out for her, brushed her teeth, tied back her straight black hair, then sat

waiting with a magazine by the window. He wouldn't be late tonight because of the early morning start. Shortly after nine, the gate swung suddenly open and a hunched figure walked slowly up to the front door.

"Not in bed yet?" he said, pausing in the open doorway.

She went to him and put her arms around him, tight, pressing her head to his chest. Then she looked earnestly into his clouded eyes.

"Tomorrow you're gone, baby, I'm going to miss you." Her tenderness touched him, and he softened, following her willingly into the bedroom without a word.

The next morning she rose at four to prepare his breakfast: steaming oats with sugar and milk, bread and jam, and a mug of coffee. There was little conversation after the night before. He ate quickly, asking once whether she had remembered to pack his CD player. At the door he pecked her on the cheek, a quick goodbye, then he was gone.

Nearly three weeks later, the day before Cliffie's ship was due back in Cape Town harbour, Jolene stood inside the cubicle of the public toilets on the east side of Wynberg station, her hand over her mouth. "Thank you God, thank you, thank you God, oh thank you," she mumbled breathlessly. Again she held up the test kit, just purchased. Sure enough, two fat lines appeared side by side in the little window. She grabbed the instructions from off the tiles at her feet and read them again. Yes, if two fat lines appeared in the

little window side by side, then ... then she was pregnant! Ag, there was a small chance that she was not, but ...

She quickly wrapped the test kit in some toilet paper, placing it inside her jacket pocket, before exiting into the shoppers and loiterers mingling outside the cheap shops that led up to the station. None of the payphones in the rank of vandalized telephones worked and she had to hurry round the corner to the shabby internet café.

Aunty Maurida answered immediately, her loud, friendly voice welcoming after three weeks of anxious waiting. “I’m just making tea, I’ve got some lekka koeksisters left over from church on Sunday. Did you get some? No? Then what are you waiting for, my dear?”

Jolene paused on the steps of the internet café. Raised as she was above the street level, she could look over the heads of the people walking past, the familiar beggars and wannabe skollies, over the broken-down garden of the dirty house on the other side of the street, beyond the hemmed-in confines of the squat, squalid flats to the sprawling range of mountains beyond, majestic and solid, grand and certain, pure and pristine. Sjoe, but it is beautiful, she thought, with a sudden recognition that life is good and wonderful and full of promise.

As she hesitated for those few moments, her thoughts switched unaccountably to the Chinese R5 shop just on the other side of the train line, through the subway, where recently she’d gone to look for some plastic

kitchen containers, but instead had spotted the dirt cheap Babygros and blankets piled at the back.

She could go later, no rush, she was anyway closer to Aunty Maurida's place. But the irresistible lure of those mountains, the bulge of the test kit in her pocket beneath her fingers, the rush of joy in her heart ... just three minutes, that's all it would take!

The quality was poor, she could see that. Holding it up to the light you could easily see how transparent it was. It would wear through in a couple of washes.

"My goodness!" a voice intruded loudly into her thoughts. "Jolene ... is that you?" A hand clutched her arm and then Mollie Arendse's painted face thrust itself into view. "My jinne, to think our husbands work on the same boat and we never see each other, except bumping into each other like this!" She spotted the Babygro in Jolene's hands and drew in her breath sharply, her red mouth round like a small porthole, her painted eyebrows floating high like two curved sails.

"NO ... a baby? You? Don't tell me! When?"

Jolene was acutely aware of people nearby turning to stare in their direction. "I'm not really sure," she said, and immediately regretted it. "I must go, I have an appointment ... It's so nice seeing you again."

But Mollie's long fingers seized her arm tightly, and she leaned forward confidingly. "And Cliffie, what does he think about it? Happy to be a daddy again, hey, the busy boy?"

Jolene dropped the Babygro back into its rack and said, a little too defensively, "The boat's only back tomorrow, you know that." Then she smiled, preparing to leave. But the abrupt change in Mollie's expression stopped her short. The woman's eyes were suddenly vague, her brows knitted in puzzlement. As she stared in growing wonder at Jolene, eyes widening, she slowly raised her fingers to her mouth to stifle a low moan.

Jolene stared fearfully at her. "What's wrong?"

Mollie spoke softly through her fingers. "But the boat mos came back early, yesterday morning already, like it sometimes does. Everybody went home, I picked up Johnny myself from the harbour ..."

Aunty Maurida put the plate of koeksisters on the small, low table between them, but she could tell that the young woman would not be eating any. She nibbled one herself for a while, then put it down carefully, took Jolene by the hand and led her through to a tiny room off the sitting room. Originally the room must have been the dining room, but now it was white and clean with posters and charts on the wall, a bed by the window and two chairs beside a small metal cabinet, the kind you see next to hospital beds. Aunty Maurida picked up something from a little jar and put it in the palm of Jolene's hand. It was a grain of rice.

"What's this?"

Aunty Maurida smiled beautifully. “That’s your baby, my dear. Just that size, that’s all. But look here, see this.” She pointed at a chart on the wall above the cabinet. When she spoke, her voice was reverent and full of wonder. “The embryo’s just a flat disc, like a small piece of paper, but right now it’s folded over to make a tube, like this.” She held up her right hand, fingers curved, and blew through them. “And the little brain, heart and the whole nervous system is being slowly lowered into the tube, just like this.” She inserted the index finger of her left hand into the curved tube of the right. Her eyes sparkled. “Now don’t anyone tell me there is no God!”

Then she touched her curved hand lightly in different spots as she spoke. “Little dots on the tube show where the eyes, nose and mouth will be, and over here, tiny bumps which will be the arms and legs. Already the heart is beating. Everything is in place, my dear, a new life growing inside you. It’s a miracle!”

They sat down in the two chairs. “Jolene,” she said gently, “you must talk to me, my dear, it isn’t good to keep things in like this, especially with the baby.”

Jolene sighed, suddenly grateful for the kindness offered her. For too long she had been too scared to acknowledge the problem, but now she could no longer carry it alone.

“It’s Cliffie,” she said weakly. “Something’s wrong with him.”

With great difficulty she tried to put into words the things she had come to silently dread. His growing anger, the accusations of control, the

drinking and the late nights, the lack of lovemaking. She poured it out as best she could in painful stops and starts. The older woman rose and put her warm, heavy arms around her.

“My dear, men are complex creatures and they don’t even understand themselves. Your man is needing to grow up, but he doesn’t know how. He is just a big boy thinking that you, like his mother before, is blocking his way.” She held her curved hand to an eye, winking through the hollow. “God will help us to put things into place, exactly where they should go.”

The little semi-detached cottage on Gosport Road was not especially tidy the next morning. Breakfast plates stood in the sink, a used pot waited on the stove top. Some of Dillon’s toys lay on the rug in the sitting room where he had left them when Ma fetched him earlier.

Jolene put two koeksisters on a plate in the middle of the kitchen table and covered them with a doilie to keep the flies off. Beside it, Cliffie’s favourite mug waited with coffee, sugar and milk powder already mixed, just needing hot water.

In the bedroom Jolene put the test kit, together with the instruction paper, on top of Cliffie’s pillow and, underneath, a large Cadbury’s Top Deck. Then she locked the front door, dropped the keys in the letterbox, and pulled the suitcase behind her through the gate.

# Grant Griffiths

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Aged forty-five, I have been teaching English and Drama for the last five years at a private school in Wynberg, Cape Town. Prior to that, I worked in the corporate world, as an art curator, photographic librarian and bookshop manager.

Married at thirty-three, I am blessed with a beautiful wife, two young daughters and an energetic two-year-old son who has succeeded in keeping me from any further writing attempts.

*A New Life* was my first recognised short story, though I have other unfinished projects awaiting some spare time.

*A New Life* was the third place winner of the 2009 South African Writers' College Short Story Competition.

# WRITER'S BLOCK

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Widaad Pangarker

'He knew what would happen next.'

H

Sam stared at the screen. That was where the well ran dry. It had been his final sentence for months now. Still, he sat in the dark and bored

holes into it every night, hoping it would magically grow, because he certainly wasn't contributing to its progress. Sam sighed, shut down the laptop, which suddenly seemed to flicker strangely, as if it fought being put away. Reluctantly, he got into bed.

Scratch, scratch, scratch.

There it was again. The scratching, rustling sound in the darkness, just outside the window. And it definitely wasn't a branch this time. Dan had cut that back last week. Sam stared at the ceiling. He thought if he lay really still under the blanket and pretended to not hear, it would go away. But the scratching grew louder and even more persistent. He pulled back the covers

and tiptoed to the window, swallowing to push his fear back down his throat. The wooden floor sounding like it needed oiling didn't do much to quell his nerves. His hands were pale and shaking as he reached to pull the curtain aside. Sam wanted to scream at what he saw, but his voice had somehow left him. He staggered back, in shock and disbelief. He should have closed the curtains, gone back to bed, called someone, but he couldn't draw his eyes away from the sight in front of him. It was big, dark and what seemed like a man, but was somehow incomplete. Shapeless limbs and missing structure, as if God had taken a smoke break in the middle of the job. He had never seen anything like it, except of course in his dreams, one dream in particular. He shut his eyes and opened them again to stop himself dreaming. But of course it wasn't a dream. It was Kickpush come to life.

“Took your own damn time.”

Kickpush's voice sounded like a thousand pins shuffling in a plastic bag, much like his face. Kickpush was sticking to the window like a warmed lizard, a crouching and bent gargoyle determined to get in. As much as Sam wanted not to think about it, he knew this thing, very well. He put it down to being consumed by writing Kickpush's story, when it began to overflow into his reality: the voices he started hearing, ghosts he started seeing. It was only a matter of time before it had come to this. Before Kickpush manifested himself in Sam's life. He shouldn't have told anyone about the voices. That's how he landed up here, trapped in stark white walls.

“Let me the hell in,” Kickpush barked.

"I can't, the window is sealed."

"You can. You can write it. In your fat head if you must. Let me inside, shit face."

"Why should I?"

Sam pictured the grotesque man inside the room, and he vanished from the window. Sam breathed deeply, relieved. It was short-lived as he heard Kickpush's noisy breathing behind him. He turned around, moving away from the half-man.

"This isn't possible? You're not real," Sam gasped, scared. Kickpush seemed to smile. He tapped his bulbous fingers against the stark walls.

"No? You made me. You should know just how real I am."

"But you're just a ... you're made up," Sam protested.

"Not very well, by the looks of it," Kickpush spat out.

"You're not real, like me."

"Like these walls you're trapped in? This life? I've been the truest thing you've known since you put down the first words of my story, but you run from me, pathetic creature."

"What do you want?" Sam demanded.

"For you to finish it."

"I can't."

“Then I’ll never go away.”

Kickpush was dark, shadow-like with no facial features, but Sam felt like he was being watched like a hawk. He was more shadow than man. A shapeless menacing mess that seemed without substance, yet Sam had never felt a stronger presence in his entire life. Kickpush was exactly how Sam had pictured him. And that was the trouble. Sam could never picture him completely. He was one of those who ran away from him, hid his true self from Sam. One of those Sam got bored with and shoved him, incomplete, in the bottom of his manuscripts, maybe to get back to one rainy day when he’d run out of ideas and deadlines.

“Sit down.” It was an order.

Sam stood, defiant. He had created Kickpush, after all. He wasn’t going to be pushed around. Kickpush moved towards him and raised his voice, repeating himself. Sam sat down.

“Now complete me.”

“I can’t.”

“You created me, you have to.”

Sam could hear Kickpush shifting impatiently, and knew he wasn’t going to be budging anytime soon. Kickpush had been anchored inside Sam long before he put him down on paper. He went to his desk and sat down with eyes closed, fingers on the keyboard. He knew that nothing mattered more than writing Kickpush’s story. He knew the latent potential of

## Writer's Block

Kickpush better than Kickpush himself did, even though he hadn't explored it. When he began writing Kickpush's story, he felt caught up in something much darker and more powerful than he could control. His friends and lovers left him at that time, claiming Sam was too volatile to be with. It was only when he found himself pulling his dead dog from the pool filter, when he decided to shelve Kickpush. That was two months ago. He woke up one day in someone else's life, just a vehicle.

"You're not doing anything!"

"I can't just write on demand. Besides ... I don't know what happens to you."

"Of course you do. You created me. It happens to you too."

"No. You created me. This ... this place that I'm in, this person I am now, have been for the past few months."

Kickpush threw his faceless head back and laughed. Sam stared at him. Of course it was absurd. Then again the whole thing was. Perhaps they were right. Perhaps he was crazy. Sane people don't have fictional characters crossing over to real life, ill formed and not completely human characters at that. He stared at the blank screen facing him, knowing he had to put down something before Kickpush got impatient. He knew in that dark place he let no one see, that he really wanted to write. That nothing was more important than writing Kickpush. That he couldn't rest until he did. He could kill him of course. But it would never work; this he knew. Death was for someone else – weak and tortured souls, not Kickpush, who'd be more likely to inflict

the pain visited on these souls, than be the victim of such crimes. Kickpush was indestructible. Sam had never met an indestructible character before, they're not relatable, he'd learnt, not human enough. You don't write them. People want someone who can suffer as much as they would, if given the same challenging circumstances.

"I don't even have a proper name, half-wit," Kickpush said, stealing into Sam's thoughts.

"That's your name. I can change it, if you like, but then you'd be something else entirely."

"I don't want to be something, I want to be someone. Give me a face, and arms and legs and—"

"What makes you think I can do that?" Sam cut in.

"You did this, didn't you?"

Kickpush was right. He did this. Sam created this magnificent, grotesque being. And he'd achieved what no other writer, or scientist ever could. He gave it life. A very severe and overwhelming thought crept into him and sunk its teeth deep. He had done what only God could do, if there was such a thing. Sam frantically tapped at his keyboard, never resting till the final word. He knew the story. Words were flowing through him, coursing the journey he should have finished months ago. But it felt good that he was finishing it now. He sighed with satisfaction when the words

came to an end. He knew Kickpush wasn't finished. He would never be finished. But Sam had more than played his part in it.

Sam felt iron fists closing in on him from behind. He knew what was going to happen next. He had finished Kickpush's story. The half-man was now a stronger, darker and beautifully menacing Kickpush. He carried Sam to the open window, like a three-year-old being picked up by his father. Sam's mind was calmer than he'd anticipated. Perhaps knowing what was going to happen made it easier to accept. He felt the cool air ruffle his hair and flap against his blue pajamas. He smiled, relieved that he'd finally fleshed out the elusive Kickpush. He'd finally been true to the character. This was the only way it could be. He could finally let go, feeling the air caressing him as he slipped off the fifth-storey windowsill.

The white coats rushed out of the asylum to find Sam glued to the pavement, another sad soul who couldn't get through the day. They looked up to fifth-floor window, but it was still sealed shut. No one noticed a tall shadow moving across the pavement to do some other business.

# Widaad Pangarker

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I am currently living in Dubai with my soul mate and two bits of fur. I teach English to Russian spies during the day and at night I change into a sentimental fool watching reruns of 80's TV series.

I have had a play, *Hook, Line & Sinker*, produced at the Artscape Theatre in Cape Town and a short story, *The Day of the Whales*, published in

*Something Wicked* magazine.

My greatest supporters have been my husband, my high school English teacher, the late Fiona Coyne, Ginnie Swart, and my mother who, to this day, remembers the very first story I wrote.

*Writer's Block* was the runner-up of the 2008 South African Writers' College Short Story Competition.

# THE YELLOW COAT

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Katja Abbott

**T**he gentle light of dusk softened the hardness of the Karoo veld as it flowed into the endless curve of the horizon. Jo was drained by the trip to town and the long drive on the animal that was the road to the farm. Every time its mood was different.

“I know you’re alive. I see your breath on cold mornings, I feel your dark holes, your sly slitherings and the stones you throw at me,” she whispered to it.

She had dropped her husband, Jack, and her children at the bus station. They were spending a week with her parents. She was distracted, distant. The bus drove off. Relieved, the mechanical smile slid from her face into the gutter. The person they called ‘Mom’ stepped out and stood opposite her on the pavement.

“I’m going on holiday too. Without them I don’t need to exist. The question is, is there anybody left?”

She watched herself turn and melt into the crowds. Jo frantically glanced around to see if anyone had noticed this strange interaction. Apparently not.

Her mouth was dry. She walked down the road, her thoughts arriving like punches, “Post-office. Bank. Sand paper. Chicken wire ... Anybody left ... who’s left, what’s left?”

“Hey Jo, you’re looking pale, you okay?”

“Huh? Ja, I’m fine.” She felt the curious eyes and raised eyebrows of the post office queue follow her out into the street. She quickly finished her shopping and headed back. The stillness of the farm pulling her back.

As she drove home the caged wolf of her grief paced within her. His ancient, haunted eyes angry, desperate. This beast was no stranger. She’d kept him muzzled, chained in a dark place since the first time she’d felt his hungry breath and sharp teeth sinking into her soft flesh many years ago.

“How are you?” people would ask.

“I’m well, everything’s fine.”

“Liar,” growled the wolf.

“Shh, they don’t want to know,” she hissed back at him.

## The Yellow Coat

But now the wolf was restless. He strained at his chains; deep growls escaped his muzzled jaw. He roamed free and wild in her dreams. She'd wake drenched in sweat, panting like an animal. Then lie awake for hours. Muffling her sobs in her pillow. Can't wake the family. They can't see me like this. Out of control. They won't understand ... I don't understand. She had no idea where it came from, this sadness that lived in her. Grief that rose like floodwater in the cavity of her chest, threatening to drown her.

She'd grown up on the farm with her brother, Scott, and sister, Rita. When she came home on weekends from boarding school, she'd spend hours walking the veld. The stillness and emptiness of the land meeting the emptiness within her.

Jo's favourite place on the farm was the kloof where the river sometimes tumbled, sometimes trickled through. Rita and Scott always headed straight for the rock pools but Jo would scramble up to the cave in the cliff. Their splashes and laughter would shoot past her like arrows to pierce the endless blue silence of the Karoo sky. Jo found stone arrowheads in the cave.

“Who made you?” she'd ask them.

She had many questions. And the arrowheads gave her the answers in whispers on the wind, and in the frog songs that sang her to sleep at night.

The bakkie's arrival at the farm gate nudged Jo back into the present. There was a nervous edge in the dogs' welcome barks. Her skin grew cold, but she pushed the feeling away. As Jo turned to close the gate she noticed a single grey cloud hanging motionless in the otherwise flawless darkening sky.

She walked towards the empty house. Its deserted cave coldness both beckoned and repulsed her. She could not remember when last she had been here alone. Nothing to do now. No need to cook dinner. No bedtime stories to read. She suddenly longed to hear the kids' bath-time laughter and squabbles. To smell the rich cherry tobacco of Jack's pipe wafting in from the stoep.

She absentmindedly fed the dogs, suddenly aware that Jup, her black cat, wasn't there. He was always around for his supper. She stuck her head out the back door, "Jupiter!" Nothing. She went upstairs, calling. Faint scratching noises came from the attic. She wrenched open the swollen door. Jup poked his head out.

"How did you get in here, boy?"

"No one's been up here for months," she thought, feeling the goosebumps rise on her skin.

She took a deep breath and stepped into the attic. The air smelled faintly of lavender. Instantly the image of her grandmother's gentle face and sad grey eyes hovered in front of her. The vision felt clinging and slightly

## The Yellow Coat

heavy, like the unwelcome landing of a moth. She could not smell lavender without thinking of her. You always smelled of lavender, Gran.

And then it came as she knew it would one day. The grief crushed her lungs and grabbed at her throat. But this time there was no reason to hold back and she let the pressure break the wolf-beast's chains. Primal howls and gasping sobs clawed their way up from her belly and out of her body. Wave after wave crashed through her until she lay exhausted in the dust of the attic floor. The dogs stopped barking. And then – for the first time in twenty years – she felt the warm Karoo stillness settling into her bones. Tears of relief and realisation came softly.

“So, Gran,” she said to the attic, “the wolf, it is you. You can tell me. Tell me about the sorrow that lived in you and now lives in me.” She gathered Jupiter in her arms, closed the attic door and went downstairs to bed.

Her grandmother had lived with them on the farm. On hot summer afternoons she'd sit on the shady side of the stoep under the vines sewing colourful patchwork quilts adorned with dragons, majestic cranes and tall snowy mountains. She drew Jo into her fantasy world with stories of the magical animals she created.

When Jo was older she would say, “Gran, what are you doing here on this dusty farm in Africa? Your heart is on the other side of the world.”

Her Gran would just laugh and change the subject. But Jo would often catch her gazing sightlessly out over the veld and watch as the grey clouds of sadness moved into her eyes.

Her grandmother died when Jo was twenty. She came home from university for the funeral. She was buried in the old graveyard on the farm next to her husband. Jo insisted that her body be wrapped in her favourite quilt, the one with the green dragon and the unicorn dancing in a rain of cherry blossom.

“May you ride your fire-breathing dragons out of your sorrow into the snowy mountains,” she whispered as she threw a handful of gazanias into the grave. Then she walked away and up into the kloof, attributing the heaviness pressing on her heart to grief.

But now, twenty years later, that feeling still lived in her body.

Jo woke with the rising sun. Her sleep had been deep and dreamless. Feeling a surge of energy she hadn't felt in years, she called the dogs and headed straight out in the bakkie to check for holes in the sheep fence. Suddenly the road curved sharply to the left. The bakkie slid on the loose gravel. Jo rode the skid and only just managed to keep control of the car. A flash of something yellow on the barbed wire fence caught her eye as she

## The Yellow Coat

skidded round the bend. She looked through the rear-view mirror. It looked like a coat. Too shaken to stop, Jo drove on slowly.

“I’ll have a look on the way back,” she thought. But when she came back an hour later the yellow coat was gone.

Jo was troubled by the disappearance of the coat. Suddenly the Karoo was too empty and she felt very alone. She got out of the bakkie to open the gate into the yard and then stopped suddenly. The yellow coat was hanging in the willow tree. She called the dogs to her and went towards it. The silk fabric was old and soft. Delicate patterns embroidered in red and black thread swirled across it. Jo brought it up to her face. The coat smelled of lavender. Jo’s whole body relaxed.

“Okay, Gran, so you’ve come to talk. Well, I’m listening.” Jo put the coat on. Her hands found the pockets – and in one of them, Gran’s voice. She took out the old black notebook and went to sit on the stoep in the sun.

9 April 1925

Today is the saddest day of my life. I have just left Shanghai station and am travelling away from everything I hold dear, everything I love. I arrived here in China eighteen months ago with my father. He was sent here from England for business and, as I was eighteen and under his guardianship, I came too. Everything about China intrigued and delighted me. The lush beauty, the overwhelming kindness and curiosity of the people.

After we had been here for two months, a business associate of my father came for dinner. His name was Lao-lung and he spoke fluent English. He was warm and friendly. Unlike most English men I had met, he spoke to me as if I were his equal. He asked me to teach English to his children. So I went twice a week and after the lessons he would invite me to drink tea with him. Often we would talk for hours. After a while I realised the woman who served us tea was his wife. She spoke no English, but was always welcoming and seemed happy that her husband enjoyed my company.

One day after the English classes we went for a walk in the cherry orchard. It was spring and blossom covered the trees. A light breeze blew and clouds of pink swirled around us. We became lovers in the cherry blossom. The way he loved me came as a surprise. He was warm, sensitive, spontaneous, playful. A few months later I fell pregnant. He was delighted. He said he would take care of us. When I couldn't hide my condition any longer I told my father. He was enraged.

He accused me of trying to ruin his reputation and ordered me to remain hidden for the remainder of my pregnancy. Lao-lung sent letters and poems with the lady who cleaned the house. Sometimes he managed to sneak into the house at night and would lie with me stroking my growing belly. Our son was born a month ago on 9 March 1925. We called him K'i-lan. It means unicorn. My father insisted I have nothing more to do with him.

## The Yellow Coat

K'i-lan has gone to live with Lao-lung's family. At least he will grow up surrounded by warmth and love. My father has sent me back to England. From there I will take a boat to South Africa to start a new life. But I don't want to live. I feel nothing. I cannot even cry.

Jo's tears fell silently, making dark patches on the faded old quilt that covered the wooden bench.

That evening at sunset she walked out into the veld and up to the old graveyard just below the koppie. She wrapped the small black book in the yellow coat and placed the bundle on her grandmother's grave. She struck a match and watched as the flames transformed it into smoke that dissolved into the cool night air. The last ember flickered and died.

"Now we are free," she whispered.

As Jo turned to walk back her eyes were drawn to something moving in the distance. She could just make out the shape of a large animal loping towards the sunset. Had she not been in the Karoo, she would have sworn it was a wolf.

# Katja Abbott

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Katja Abbott is a barefoot beach-walking writer, artist and qigong-teaching poet. She lives in Cape Town with her dreams, whims and imaginary cat.

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