



ECLIPSE 180

WAR AND  
PEACE

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# ECLIPSE 180

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*With the first issue of Eclipse 180, we begin with a theme of war and peace. These poems exemplify the world as metaphor with a bit of humanity.*

*Marking a new beginning, we hope you enjoy it and share in the future of the journal.*



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Nor is there anyone to whom lovers are not  
sacred at midnight....

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Who Counts the Bodies?

*for ALL those who have died in conflicts*

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equal one body?

Rich body bags,

cost tags,

add to the tally?

Bodies that fall

seconds before the declaration?

or minutes after the truce?

Who counts

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in splattered brains?

Who counts

the piece of the parent gone

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Who counts

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if it's the enemy's?

Who counts

how many are missing in action?

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Who counts

the spirits

when bodies become armor?

when eyes become empty bowls?

when faces become photos?

AVIVA

## **JUST LIKE HIS FATHER**

It's the last night before John joins the troops. His mother is sitting at the dinner table, chain smoking, following the smoke rings. They will tell her what tomorrow will bring. Her pupils are pins of darkness. Her tight lips are ashes, her fingers are knives aimed at her heart. She is silent. She ran out of words. Her silence is driving him crazy.

John is pacing the floor as if he was already marching in formation. He stared at his mother poisoning herself with her cigarettes, and his hands moved constantly as if he were playing a march.

"I must go mom. Everybody else is making it there. They will shape me into a hero. The money is crazy. The girls will die to dance with me. Did you see the uniform?

When I wear it I am Superman. And the battlefield is across the sea. I will explore the earth. Aren't you proud? I will be somebody. Your friends will be yellow when they hear of my hot conquests. The girls will write me hoping to marry the catch I have become. I will help the good guys. Come on, mom, enough of that sad lantern, show me the sun, so that I have a happy tune on my way".

"Dearest John. Your father lays across the waters. He sang me the same chant. You never met his smile. Your papa was a hot dude. He loved and sang and danced and laughed like a school of dolphins. But once he left, I never heard his voice, nor bathed

in the love of his eyes. You want to go, and I won't throw myself in front of you. I will not dry my eyes crying, or tear my hair apart. I am too weak to intrude. I feel alone already. If you stay for me it will be The Second Coming. If you leave, I won't be here on your return."

"Mother, I beg you to live and be a bird of prey. If you hate what I do, be the hawk that I know you are, and bring peace to this dirt ball. Bring peace so soldiers will be obsolete and archaic. Join other mothers of men in arms, and make wars a foreign concept. I remember as a child you came to school the day I broke into the gym. You thanked the head Master for his call; locked me after school for five weeks to make me realize I was burning my bridges. You need the dragon fire to do it again. While I am breaking into somebody else's playground, fight against the slavery of the mind. Educate me and my friends by showing us how we act against the flow of life".

"Son, no wonder I love every part of your being. You are wiser than any book. Your heart is large and red. Your hair is curly and dark. You are the image of your father. Your words soothe my heart and stimulate my blood. I will fight for peace while you practice shooting."

SHEILA FALLON

## THE COUPLE IN FRONT

*In high summer in Normandy when the poppies and the field flowers shimmer mirage-like in the heat haze, a stranger to this land will lie back on the ground, relax in the sun and find themselves entering that strange, heat-blurred place somewhere between sleeping and waking, hear the past whispered by the buzz of insects, feel the murmur of hidden heartbeats in the ground beneath them and in the crowd of wild flowers bobbing red and white towards the distant, hazy horizon, see through half-closed eyelids, those multitudes of war-dead, Europe's countless slain from centuries of battle.*

*In Normandy, it is not darkness nor moonlight nor ancient castles overgrown with ivy that tell of ghosts. It is the blinding sun of late summer, the still calm of the flat, arable land, the sizzle of insects and the nodding heads of flowers in the fields that remind the stranger coming to these parts.*

*Normandy is full of ghosts.*

Jack and I were en route that summer, just a couple of back-packers enjoying the long student break, taking a train here, a bus there. Wandering. It was my fault we went to Pattonville. I'd spotted the name in the guide-book and years before, seen George C. Scott playing Patton in a movie, a bio-pic of an American general from World War II with a face sculpted from granite and a heart made of something harder. A whole town named after some kick-ass general made me curious and we were practically passing the place: a ghost town, well, that's what it said in the guide book.

We boarded a single decker bus, crammed and airless, full of locals making their way to the villages lining the ribboning road to Pattonville and beyond. Lulled by the motion of the bus, we drifted in and out of sleep with a sea of fields and grassland eddying around us. Then all at once we were startled

awake by the shout of the driver with the sign for Pattonville looming ahead and we were there, stepping down from the bus with the scorching heat rushing to meet us. Just us and a small French family, mother, father and daughter, old-fashioned as people are in these country places, mouse-quiet as they softly walked away, hand in hand.

The guide-book had been wrong. Pattonville was not so much a ghost town, more a ghost-village, a huddle of empty houses with suggestions of a bar, a baker's shop, reminders of the lives once lived here, the everyday routines, the colour and laughter and music that had spilled out onto the streets on summer evenings and vanished like a dream. Now Pattonville was empty, its houses shells, roofs gone, walls tumbled, doorways opening onto vacant rooms carpeted with weeds. Deserted buildings shimmered in the heat-haze and amongst the ruins for fleeting seconds, we saw wisps of people, translucent forms clad in khaki crouching behind the wreck of a wall or running across a street as if making for shelter, only to evaporate to nothing a moment later, the husks of houses but nothing else, no tourist shop, no guide, no cafe to welcome us and no-one else around apart from the flickering images of soldiers, mirages raised by the heat of the unforgiving Normandy sun.

I wondered where the others were: the small French family who'd descended from the bus ahead of us. I thought we'd be bound to bump into them as we explored the scant streets and ruined roofless houses but we didn't. I thought I'd seen them entering one of the caves of houses, a remnant of a building with a grassy carpet ahead for them to walk along. I must have turned my head and in that second, they seemed to have melted away. Into the sun-bleached stones or the shadows, into the air itself. After half an hour in Pattonville and a thorough investigation of its streets and buildings, we felt that we were quite alone.

We decided to walk away from the village to where the fields began, to wait for the bus on its return or flag down a passing truck, anything with wheels to take us away. We lay on the grass next to the road, listening for the distant rumble of a vehicle, hearing nothing but the steady buzz and fizz of

flies and small bees, watching them looping the loop through the spiky grass and wild-flowers around us like tiny planes. Happy in their environment, unconcerned by our presence. It seemed to me that apart from the motion of the insects, we might as well have been in a still life painting, in a small corner of a gold-green canvas made up of grasslands and wheat-fields stretching as far as the eye could see, without a trace of movement or life within it, with the sky cerulean-blue above entirely clear and not even the faintest smudge of a cloud to mar it.

We lay on the ground relaxing, relieved to be away from the village and for a few minutes all was still. Then from under the ground we lay upon, we heard it. Something resonating out of the belly of the earth. Something like a murmur that swelled to a drone and grew louder. A distillation of sighs that became a whining, groaning pandemonium around us; voices, human voices and a blare of words:

*Normandy is a graveyard the voices said and we are the dead, soldiers-no-more, all ranks equal, all uniforms the same. Death won the battle, Death won the war and we are exiled here, forgotten and unmourned.*

We listened to the babble of complaints: cries and moans, lamenting lives dashed to pieces, love and hope bled away into the ground. Not knowing where the complaints came from, not knowing which wars they'd fought in, just hearing the sense of pain, of loss and separation the voices spoke of and understanding it. We stood up quickly, relaxed no more and suddenly I started to speak, remembering some lines I'd memorised at school but never thought I'd ever repeat aloud:

*What candles may be held to speed them all?*

*Not in the hands of boys but in their eyes*

*Shall shine the holy glimmer of good-byes.*

*The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;*

*Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds...'*

Lines from Wilfred Owen's Anthem for Doomed Youth: he'd died here himself, I knew, just weeks before the First World War had finally ended, the war they'd said would be the end of all of them. Like thousands of others, buried here without a monument or a headstone to remember them by. I recited his lines and as I spoke, the noise receded, sinking into the ground like a whisper, calm and appeased, becoming silent. The busy everyday hum of insects returned and everything started to seem real again, normal, natural, understandable. Seconds later, we saw the dazzle of white paint-work and chrome, a car, coming towards us over the glimmering road. Not just a car but an open-topped white Chevy, a fifties

classic in pristine condition, made for cruising highways and pulling up at grand hotels and Oscar-award evenings. It stopped abruptly in front of us and the driver, a slight, blond man in his twenties, spoke. They were both English, he said, he and his girl-friend, and they could give us a lift to the next village.

'Amazing' Jack said 'I've never been offered a lift in a Chevy before.'

The driver seemed pleased, talking about the car like any proud owner for a minute or so as we put our back-packs into the boot. The girl in the passenger seat kept her head turned away from us and said nothing. She was slim with glossy brown hair falling to her shoulders and from the back, I guessed good-looking.

Happy to be leaving, quietly relieved, we stepped into the Chevy and were away, with the breeze on our faces and the rush of gold-green fields hurrying past. This was travelling, this was what it was all about. We were cruising through Normandy in a luxury limo and all that was missing was champagne.

Lucky we arrived when we did.' The driver said, cutting through our comfortable silence, sharp as a knife. 'Before the ghosts got you.'

His words were as heavy as a ball of lead swinging towards us, shattering our quiet comfort.

'Ghosts?' I tried to laugh 'I think it was all under control by the time you arrived.' I was trying to sound casual. I tried to smile. Jack looked towards me, an expression of doubt and worry on his face, his eyes telling me what I was starting to realise. We'd entered some kind of strange territory here and even the weather seemed to be changing, no longer the dry, harsh Normandy heat we knew but something more northern, like a misty chill was descending around the car, an autumnal coldness. Still, it was good to be away from Pattonville and its strange mirages, I thought. And we were travelling in a luxury vehicle. It could be worse. We could be still sitting there by the side of the road, feeling the sun hot on our faces,

hearing the buzz of insects, waiting and waiting and waiting for another car, a truck or bus to arrive. Not knowing if one would ever come.

'Not afraid of ghosts then - that's interesting.' The driver replied, his words frosty, his tone suddenly icy.

'They're probably just like people.' Jack said keeping his voice breezy. 'Some good, some bad. But how did you know there was something back there?'

It was a good question, I thought. The driver seemed irritated, coldly angry, as if provoked by Jack's cheeriness. I wondered.

'Just like people, I see.' He said in a low tone, stretching the words out, emphasising each one.

The girl beside him sighed, the only sound she'd made since we'd met, I realised.

I tried a little small talk, ordinary conversation that steered clear of ghosts and voices and unreal things.

'Do you live round here?' I asked.

'We live on the road.' The driver said in the same tone he'd used before. As if he was tired. 'On the road.'

He would not be drawn further, would say nothing more. I wondered how he knew about the ghosts. Perhaps everyone who'd visited Pattonville had seen those glimmers of once-real people in the ruined streets. Perhaps it was well-known round here. I wondered if he somehow knew about the voices we'd heard. Or maybe he just meant to rattle us.

The girl in the passenger seat remained as motionless and silent as a dummy in a shop-window, a mannequin. I still hadn't seen her face, screened by that curtain of glossy brown hair falling to her shoulders and I was curious. I leant forward towards them, as far as I could reach, my face right behind their shoulders. I moved forward a little more and suddenly felt my face smashed up against something, a barrier as invisible as the air around us but hard as glass. I reeled with shock and pain and disbelief. Something was separating me from the couple in front, my aching nose told me that with certainty whilst my other senses told me it couldn't be. It just couldn't be.

I had just severely banged my nose on what seemed to be some kind of transparent screen separating us, me and Jack, from the couple in front, the blond guy driving and his girlfriend with the glossy curtain of hair. Though I knew there was nothing there, no glass screen, no barrier. That's what my logical mind told me. Though the pain in my nose was telling me different. I wondered if I'd broken it, it hurt so much. I carried on looking forward despite the pain, not easy when the distance between the back seat of the car and the front seat was one a decent-sized picnic-table could have been fitted in. I'd practically had to crawl to make the distance and was hovering behind them, stretching my neck as far as I could to see what I could see of the pair in front.

But no matter how much I twisted and turned my head and neck to look in the minutes that followed, all I could see of him was a little blond hair, the jut of a cheekbone. Of her, I could see nothing but that shiny brown hair falling like a sheet of water to her shoulders, so glossy it looked synthetic, like the hair of a doll. I tried again, they didn't seem to notice my presence behind them I realised but I didn't want to hang around there too long. Just in case. I peered through the strands of the girl's hair

straining to see her features, I looked further, straining my gaze and found myself staring into a well of never-ending midnight where her face should have been.

I felt my mouth open all by itself, ready to scream and scream. I listened for the sound, a scream that should have been loud enough to wake the dead, echoing for miles across the still sun-flecked fields of Normandy to warn the living. But I heard nothing. My scream was still-born, it died on the air as soon as it reached it. And there was something like a small swarm of insects crawling across my scalp, through each hair on my head. Fear. Total fear like I'd never felt it before. I heard the sounds of thunder and realised it was the sound of my own heart pounding. I turned towards Jack and saw his eyes wide with fright reflecting mine.

He'd been crouching down to tie up a boot-lace, a ploy, I knew it, simply a way of getting low enough to see into the driver's mirror and the wings, to search for some sign of the couple in front. He shook his head, he'd seen nothing in the mirror. No facial features, no reflections. Blue sky, gold-green fields but nothing else. We both knew it now. We had not escaped the ghosts. We were travelling with two of them. And now Jack and I were both silently screaming. The air fused with light and the sound of the breeze and the car's engine seemed suddenly hushed, fading away to nothing as a high pitched whistling sound took over. We seemed to be flying, rushing upwards away from the earth and I thought that I would die from sheer panic. Then suddenly, the whistling ceased, wheels started touching tarmac again and everything was approximately normal. We were on the road again, just as if we were in any car, travelling.

At the next village, the driver stopped just as he'd said he would, got out of the car to retrieve our back-packs from the boot and handed them over. We thanked him for the lift. He said nothing and the girl in the passenger seat, true to form, didn't move. We walked away, stepping down a short street towards a bar several yards away. I walked towards it doggedly, refusing to look around to watch the limo leave as though I might be turned to stone. Jack turned back to look and watched for a few minutes waiting for the Chevy to pull away.

They'd parked up behind the end of a house, a blind brick wall as big as a barn that hid the car from view, that's how it had looked, he said. He hadn't seen the car drive past, it seemed to be holed up there for some reason, Jack thought. Anyone would have done in the same situation, seeing the same. He ran back down the street and turned to look, onto the main road, looking behind the building to see the car parked up there like it should have been. But he saw nothing, he told me when he'd walked back: the car had disappeared and when I heard what he had to say, somehow, I wasn't surprised.

We walked on and saw a bar on the left of the street, a place with metal chairs and tables outside, leather seats inside and the usual paraphernalia, adverts for La Meuse and Stella Artois punctuating the walls. There was no-one else in the place apart from the owner, no customers. It was mid-afternoon and this particular village was quiet as if everyone was asleep. The owner was a big man, wearing a stained white apron over a rough checked shirt and old-style jeans and seemed friendly enough but a little wary. Of us, it seemed. We ordered beers and croque monsieurs, sat down at a table outside on the street and talked through what we'd experienced on our journey. What we'd seen. What we'd felt. What we'd thought.

Jack said: 'I thought we weren't going to get out of there alive, Soph.'

I nodded towards him. 'Next Chevy that comes along, I'll look twice at.' I said, happy to be sitting at a conventional café table outside a run of the mill bar with the Normandy sun seeping into my skin, warming my beer.

Neither of us had taken much notice of the bar's proprietor. He had served us politely but hesitantly, a little warily. Now he came over, reeking of sweat and garlic and cooking oil, wiping his hands on a greasy apron to shake ours. He admitted he'd been worried by us at first, but that now, after seeing our evident enjoyment of the food and drinks, he'd started to think differently. We looked at him, questioningly. He'd seen the car, he said, the Chevy, on many occasions, travelling down the road. Over the years he'd seen quite a few people being dropped off at the end of the village as we had

been. They were couples mainly, sometimes single people, backpackers for the most part, people like us. They'd walked down the street towards his bar and some of them had stopped just like we had and ordered drinks, a coffee or a glass of wine. But when they'd left and he'd come to clear the tables, he found their drinks were always untouched. Over the years, he said, there had been articles

in the newspaper about strange and unexplained deaths on that stretch of road, young people with back-packs found on the roadside, without a mark upon them. Maybe the same people as the ones who'd visited his bar and walked away without touching their drinks, he thought. Many people thought that way, he said. But still the Chevy travelled the road.

'Normandy is full of ghosts.' He said.

We thanked him for talking to us so frankly and asked him if he knew how we could get to Caen. He organised a lift for us with one of the local farmers who made a regular delivery of vegetables to a shop in the city. Twenty minutes later, we were climbing into the back of an old grey van, reassured by the pungent earthy smells of farm produce, the casual chat of the driver. And then at Caen, we found a cheap hotel and fell asleep early, exhausted.

Next day, at the railway station, we passed a news-stand and saw the local newspaper: Normandie Ce Soir. Large across the front page was an aerial photograph showing the burnt-out shell of a white open-topped Chevy. The newspaper report explained that the car had been carrying an English couple, a photographer and his model girl-friend. Both had been flung out of the vehicle by an explosion thought to have come from the car's own engine. The girl's face had been completely blown away by the blast. Their passports had been thrown clear of the car and were stamped with the name of the port of entry into France clearly marked. And the year. 1962, decades before.

The reporter on the case had evidently done his homework. He'd been in touch with port officials who confirmed that the couple had indeed entered France in 1962. Then amongst the newspaper's own archives he'd discovered that on a particular day in high summer in 1962, much of the front page of Normandie Ce Soir was given over to a photograph of a white open-topped Chevy caught in an explosion, probably caused by the car's own engine on exactly that same stretch of road in rural Normandy.

The driver, was an English photographer and his passenger, a model, his girlfriend, both killed by the blast and thrown from the car with the girl's face completely blown away, we read, though their passports were still intact. The names were the same. They had died twice.

## **CARTOON MOON**

### **EVERYDAY TRUTH**

As the sky detached itself from the half-light of evening, the bus lurched out of its stagnant position and crept into the unfurling traffic ahead. The windows filled with the fierce assault of October rain, instantly creating pixelated images of all in its line of sight. Bright ambers and reds merged together; creating a consonance of autumn which had been peaking with its usual force. Outside was an onslaught. A field of dancing umbrellas, ducking and weaving almost in unison yet giving the air of a swarm of infuriated wasps. Each one a threat. Leaves which had given so much of themselves to the rampant beauty of the village now lay sediment. The carpet they created now provided a rich tapestry of colour that blanketed the paths; deep autumnal colours overlapping one another giving a sense of sadness to the concrete as if playing out one final dying wish to inspire.

Inside, the safe protective warmth of the bus may have given the illusion of comfort but the reality was far from it. Second hand music rattled around the space as it spilled from over-eager headphones, adding a disconcerting buzz to an already close environment. The air was moist from the rain that evaporated from the shoulders of coats, hanging transparently in the yellow light. What could not be seen, however, could be sensed. It provided a thin film over your eyes, almost as if you had just awoken but couldn't shake the haze. It gave the place a fuzzy feeling. Commuters felt an unease as their minds were dulled by the combination of audio and visual restraints. Newspapers were ruffled and folded, pages turned, statuses updated. The melodrama of the commute was enough to generate proclamations of frustration and boredom; spreading the negativity that encapsulated the bus far beyond its geographical location.

The vessel had nothing else of note aside from two lovers. The ease with which they carried themselves gave away the connection between them. Sitting opposite each other, conversations started and ended with single utterances. Facial expression replaced the need for vocalization. As the journey wore on, laughter was replaced by intolerant shrugs between bus-stops. It was as if the full nature of human relationships was taking place, cyclically, between these two individuals. He watched as she looked away; almost at once his gaze followed hers, being channelled to share her experiences. Then she spoke, long and full. Her palm was open and upturned, giving the impression that was questioning him.

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I'll have to ask my head', he said, sliding down in his chair as if to shield himself from his own answer. It was an untypical response to a typical request. It was said in such a way that it seemed like the most intuitive of phrases ever coined, while simultaneously being as frivolous and as disconcerting as an off-colour joke. He had been making a habit of such utterances for as long as she could remember. Words tumbled out of his off-centred mouth with an assured ease of thought and delivery that befell the listener with wonder at the thought processes that could possibly contribute to as idiosyncratic a manner of speaking as his. It gave weight and credence to the persona he had crafted and nurtured throughout his teenage years and into early adulthood.

Bourne from accident yet carrying the weight of scars too heavy to let go of. The way he thought about the world was a culmination of circumstance, misinformation and possibly the most formative, fear. Fear of rejection and the recurrence of the inevitable dejection that comes of it. Fear of being seen as a cookie-cutter 'lad'.

Bourne from accident yet carrying the weight of scars too heavy to let go of. The way he thought about the world was a culmination of circumstance, misinformation and possibly the most formative, fear. Fear of rejection and the recurrence of the inevitable dejection that comes of it. Fear of being seen as a cookie-cutter 'lad'. The type that was emotionally and, in the most private recesses of their imagination, sexually, indebted to anything that upgraded their interactions from passing to meaningful. Most of all though, he was laden with the irrational yet perfectly alluring fear of truth. Like any others that fear truth, his fear was such that to succumb to the abhorrent world of fiction that categorized so many of the words he heard, that he could not think of a more important trait than to seek out a different form of communication. One which satisfied him yet allowed him to bask in a secret egotistical warmth. Something gnawed at him though. He wasn't like others. He saw through bullshit. He was different.

Like everyone else.

\*

'Yeah, it was some ability alright', she thought. An ability to see through the banality of social convention, to scrape away the layers of truth, counter truth and projected anti-wisdom that pervades modern interactions. An innate compulsion to unearth a hidden yet simple logic, reaching far beyond the generic Instagram filter of discourse. It was this ability that had so endeared him to her. It had fed her mind with remarkable arguments against the accepted reasoning she had come to regard as fact. Facets of herself that she could but offer helplessly, carelessly drifted out of her as she listened. She swam in his words. It wasn't so much an ebb or flow

that lifted her. Conversely, his phrases were clunky at times. Their juxtaposition made her dizzy. They were also instrumental in pushing them, as lovers, apart.

As the words landed in her ears, she grimaced. The sort of grimace that told him everything yet nothing. It was a look that had reciprocated his words all too often recently. They both knew it yet neither knew the cause. As her reply formed on her tongue it hit her. It would be more accurate to say that it blossomed inside her, as in reality, it had been growing and developing in her psyche for some time. It was only now, sitting opposed to him on a late night bus, watching with half dead eyes as the lights of a thousand and countless living rooms lit up by the glare of widescreen televisions, giving the façade of contentment, drifted past them, that she could fully formulate the reason for her disquiet. It stirred a sense of loss immediately for she now had no choice but to face up to the stark reality that the deterioration of their relationship had evolved into a full stop. Ultimately, she thought, everyone is a fraud. Not one single person can look at themselves without feeling the sharp pang of guilt. She allowed her mind to follow this idea to its conclusion. For as long as she cared to consider, she had looked up to him as some bastion of honesty. Her opinions were, unknown to her, formed from his. She has subconsciously allowed herself to be surrogate to his truth. His opinions. His fears. But what were they? On another day, she had watched in awe as he shared opinions on honesty. Honesty, he said, was too wretched a concept to be beneficial. The people that declare themselves as honest, he had continued, were simply using it to mask the barbed message they delivered. Once she had disentangled herself from her confusion at such a statement, she had not only come to believe this, but she had a deep admiration for the notion, repeating it herself on a number of occasions.

It was only now that she had thought to ask herself, amidst his twisted English and quirky charm, what reason

*he* had for being so honest? What was *he* delivering? More pertinently, what mask was *he* wearing? His record collection might have left a more transient listener stumped. His clothes might seem deeply independent yet gloriously populist. His political affiliations might scream revolution, peacefully of course. What was now impossibly easy to see however, was that the person he had so carefully constructed was nothing more than a shadow. A nuanced yet formulaic version of everybody else. His truth, she conceded, was hers.

Her truth was anyone's.

As the bus stopped to relieve itself of a sterile looking lady with unkempt hair and too many concerns on her mind, it jolted her into consciousness.

'You know, you don't always have to speak like that', she said.

## CARTOON MOON

### AN UNSOLICITED MEMORY

As the door slid open, the spill of noise from the drunkening crown inside poured out. It filled the cold November air. Readjusting his sight to the shadows of the late evening garden, he moved away from the yellow glare and into the featureless and bitter onslaught of winter. His breath curled and drifted away in tantalising wisps; the cold air catching in his lungs and eliciting a deep and uncomfortable cough.

He ignored the gentle coaxing of the sea as it slid effortlessly along the shoreline in favour of the tantalising allure of his phone. Primary colours dazzled as they flashed before him, lighting his face with an unnatural glow. He scanned various media disinterestedly before settling on music. Placing the earbuds into his ears he lit a cigarette. A plume of smoke rose into the night sky as the opening aggressive chords of The Clash began echoing in his ears.

'I must be drunk' he thought as a simple grin emerged on his lips. He exhaled heavily in a half laugh that made public this embarrassing realisation. He was not in a terrible state by any means. Far from it. Speech was yet to slur and thoughts were clear, if a little giddy. He had been here before though and knew what it meant. Choosing to play The Clash was the tell-tale sign that he had regressed to a person he no longer identified with. That person would make foolish decisions to impress the people he no longer needed, or desired, to impress. 'It was fine though', he reasoned. He would just take it easy for an hour. An air of humorous resignation took hold of him as he allowed that thought to dissolve and he shook it free from his dizzying head. 'Maybe I should make my excuses and head home early' he thought. Unsettling feelings bubbled within him though as he knew damn well that there was no chance of that happening. 'Just enjoy it' he concluded. 'Nights like this don't happen very often'.

Settling into his seat, he watched as the lights from the hotel car park sprayed across the sea, painting trails that lead to nowhere but seemed to act as beacons, guiding him away from himself.

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Inside, acquaintances were being re-made over heated exchanges while shamefully brief dalliances were catching fire over cold drinks; a way to stave off the bitterness of the onrushing winter I suppose.

The hotel hadn't seen many nights like this in recent times. Too many one-way tickets had been bought to pretend that this was anything but an anomaly. Tonight seemed different though. A Venn Diagram of social calendars had resulted in this perfect storm. For in this moment, years fell away gracefully, debts were paid and mortgages had yet to be applied for. Young hearts were quite literally running free from the brutal reality that had made elderly the young long before they were ready.

Outside, he had been too enraptured by music to hear the door slide open again. In fact, it was only when his thoughtless mind was interrupted by the muffled murmur of a voice, a female voice, that he awoke. She caught him by surprise and sheepishly, he asked her to repeat herself as he casually tossed the earphones into his pocket, trying to reclaim an element of sophistication.

'Well fancy meeting you out here' she teased with a glint in her eye that bore witness to the irony of her words. Their eyes had already caught repeatedly before then and they both knew it. At first, he had studiously ignored the visual embrace. Passing it off as an accident on both their behalves. The second time however, had been undeniable. The downward tilt of her head, allowing her chin to graze against her shoulder, had been as obvious and glorious as he had remembered. It had resurrected memories of black poetry and solitary lustful trysts. Now, shifting uncomfortably in his seat, he almost missed the opportunity to bask in the knowledge that, ten years ago, he would have given anything to spend a moment in her space, alone.

Her tone of voice sent him searching for context. In all the years that she had occupied his thoughts she had never really given him a second glance, let alone speak to him in the playful, perhaps even flirtatious manner that she adopted now.

For six years of secondary school she had mesmerised him. Six years! He couldn't even begin to re-

mind himself. It had been six years of torture, illicit shadowing and missed opportunities. Choreographing his routines so that their paths would silently cross; he would pass her, with an uncomfortably stiff gait, howling inside, while she politely smiled at her shoes. Mentally preparing for every conceivable conversation yet converting none.

In truth though, it wasn't as though she had ever given him reason to hope. Nothing in her actions had given him cause to suspect she harboured reciprocal feelings. Rather and largely more unsurprising was that she had not swatted him aside either, privately or publicly sending him into a freefall from which he could never face down. In actuality and ultimately more hurtfully, was his acceptance that he simply hadn't existed for her.

That hadn't stopped him from manufacturing hope against his better judgement. It just doesn't work that way. Maybe she had smiled in a pleasant way that he had read too much into, offering politeness which had been misconstrued as favour. Perhaps he had vicariously taken some comfort in being party to an event that had made her laugh.

That laugh.

Just thinking about it made the intervening years slip away much too easily to be anything other than a dishonesty.

It was a laugh that seemed guttural yet engaging. He could have recognized it from the other side of the large congested assembly hall where the students spent their free time. It simultaneously made him feel nauseous and elated. In fact, he had long suspected, on moments of reflection, when a song or a picture sent him spiralling back into his teenage education, that it was her laugh that he had tied his emotions to. He could still hear it now if he wanted, so engrained as it was in that certain part of his being that is reserved for pre-adulthood desires. No matter how life had changed, there would always be a section of memory especially reserved for those years. He suspected this was the case with everyone else too, but dared not to ask. He was pretty sure that, even now, were he to somehow encourage her to lose herself in laughter, it would not only sound the same, but it would elicit the

Sitting opposite the person that had filled so many of his teenage thoughts was a surreal experience. The years had changed him. They had granted him a basic level of confidence that he had considered unfathomable a decade previously. It allowed him to relax into conversation. Helping him to bring an assuredness of poise that lent an air of adulthood to their discourse. Time had also been kind to her. She had grown into herself magnificently. Unrecognizable to the mental image he had fallen back on-to during periods of nostalgia yet her mannerisms and movements provided a singularity to her being that was undeniable. Her hair, cut fashionably of course, framed a face he was finding it difficult to look away from.

I could say the same myself. Light?’ was the only thing he could bring himself to say. He rummaged in his coat pocket for a lighter with much more anxiety than he would have liked.

‘No thanks, I don’t smoke.’ A smile creeping across her imperfectly curved mouth.

Her reply unsettled him. What was she doing outside? Why brave the mid-Winter weather, the cold air raising visible bumps on her skin, if not to speak to him. He quickly began to revisit the events of that evening so far. Yes, they had shared a fleeting look, but what else? Nothing discernible that could account for this.

‘Just out for the company then?’ he returned the smile; his, considerably less confident than hers. The fact that he had not felt this weak, this unable to appropriately navigate a social situation since school was not lost on ‘Just out for the company then?’ he returned the smile; his, considerably less confident than hers. The fact that he had not felt this weak, this unable to appropriately navigate a social situation since school was not lost on him. He grimaced at the dark humour at play. Obviously the only conclusion could be that while it felt as though the years had fallen away that evening, so too had any achievements and improvements he had made to his character.

It hurt.

'Yeah, I suppose I am actually. How are things?'

'Things are good actually, you?' As he spoke he offered what seemed like a sympathetic shrug in her direction for no other reason but to apologise for the banality of his conversation.

'Jesus', he thought, 'ten years on and all you can muster up is *'things are good'*? No wonder you never stood a chance'.

Being critical of himself was something he had always battled against yet was unable to emerge from. On occasions he had used it to his advantage. A little self-depreciation always went down well when delivered at just the right time. God knows, he had enough to depreciate. In reality though, he was always chasing something else. Always fearful of being caught out. Always wary of being left behind. It was that fear, perhaps, that made him a liability when drinking.

'I'm.... I'm glad to see you are keeping well'. Had he been sober he might have picked up on the frailty in her voice. Instead, he had to wait until he saw her eyes rain to realize the real reason she had been so friendly. Christ, he felt so stupid. Of course. How could he have thought that time had softened her feelings for him into anything other than curiosity. Curiosity and guilt. Throwing his cigarette into an ashtray, he savoured the hiss as the puddle of rainwater chased the ember down.

'Well, it's really nice to see you again.... And thanks'. He bit his lower lip, ashamed at how pitiful the situation he now found himself in. The Clash a very distant memory. All feelings of anticipation had dissipated onto the horizon. The lights now taunting him. Instructing him home.

'You know...', he began, unsure of how he was ever going to speak another word, let alone finish his sentence. He chose not to watch as she turned and slid the door open to be enveloped into the warmth and revelry inside. He knew now what he would have seen on her face. Pity.

That is all he had ever seen really, well, ever since that night. Faces has looked different since then. Indifference had been replaced with something equally as frightening.

That night. The beginning and end. Starting as any other Friday night would have. The Clash loudly

echoing in his ears as he made his way to meet friends. Only that time, something struck him. A stark realization that his time was that night. He needed to move. He had no choice but to tell her. It had been too long, what? Over five years? Come on. What was needed now was a grand gesture. How better to tell her other than to shout it? Youthful petulance maybe. Drunken hope, likely. The climb hadn't been difficult, exhilarated by lust and alcohol. It had been a dizzying experience standing up there. The rooftop of the house. The streetlights has evaporated and all that was real was the warm balm of the summer sky.

He didn't remember the fall. Friends, once they were finally able to speak about it, had said that he had slipped. That was inconsequential now.

Putting his earbuds back into his ears, he looked homewards. He hadn't anticipated making the journey alone. What choice did he have now? All journeys were solitary really. He let his hands fall to his sides. Gripping the wheels of his chair, freezing now having absorbed the chill of the night air, he pushed himself away from the noise of his past.

ROB RYLAN

## **ROAD TO BEIJING**

Civil unrest will most likely lead to war  
Battle lines are being drawn  
There is trouble on our shores

Smoke, a bomb, people gather around  
Who leads, who follows, I hear not a sound

Police in blue, why do they carry shields  
When we are those who are in danger  
Do you feel my anger  
What, if any good will this yield

A cry for freedom  
A cry for peace  
A call for a prisoner's release

JULIET JULENNE

**BULGARIA**

The graffiti marked the new beginning  
The rubble in the streets  
A telling symbol of political decay

A girl crosses the street  
A new way on the other side  
An outstretched hand  
calling for democracy

I see vestiges of propaganda and political dissidents  
And still Stalin's presence is felt in Bulgaria

Remnants of her home country, personal during her youth  
shaped the rest of her life  
Hope marked by the fall of the Communist Wall  
November 2015

Political ennui ensued  
A weariness and hopelessness filled the face of a nation  
And still Stalin's presence is felt in Bulgaria

DARREN SCANLON

## **SHELL SHOCK**

And the whistle blows to sound the charge  
Over the top they bustle and barge  
Covered from head to toe in mud  
Soon to be tainted with flesh and blood

Up the ladder with slippery rungs  
A scream of rage from terror filled lungs  
Adrenalin coursing through every vein  
Knowing they may not come back again

Dashing through mud sucking boots from feet  
Tangled in barbed wire; a blast of heat  
As a shell explodes just off to the right  
Leaving in its wake a dreadful sight

Bullets whining and whizzing by  
Calling the names of those who must die  
Screams of help from men in distress  
Their lives torn apart in the horrible mess

Distant machine-gun fire from a bunker  
Shells and grenades exploding like thunder  
Looking for shelter, to weather the storm  
Hoping and praying he won't come to harm

There it is, his eyes open wide  
A shell crater, a place to hide  
Diving down into the shattered remains  
Of fathers, brothers and sons with no names

His bile is rising along with his fear  
He senses his breaking point is near  
Alone in a world of death and destruction  
Ducking down low and beseeching redemption

A boom to the left and the ground heaves and shakes  
That final shell is the shock that breaks  
The scream that wells up from deep down inside  
Is far too hysterical, too terrified to hide

Breaking right through the walls within  
Carried aloft on cacophonous din  
Eyes squeezed shut to block out the sight  
As he enters a world of eternal night

And the whistle blows to signal retreat  
Men bathed in death are now on their feet  
Running and slipping through the lives of their friends  
Knowing any moment could be their sad end

From the crater he gazes with vacant stare  
No longer afraid for he's no longer there  
He leans into his mother's embrace  
And gazes up into her smiling face

Curling up into a foetal ball  
He doesn't register the Sergeants call  
As he's lifted and carried to be safe from harm  
Saved by his friends; his brothers in arms. □

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DARREN SCANLON

## **CRIMSON TEARS**

There's a world of hate outside my door,  
And it matters not if you're rich or poor.  
The brave and the weak are equally at risk,  
From the enemy within and his evil task.

The horror no longer hides behind my TV screen,  
I no longer need a remote to hear the awful screams.  
The invited guests have turned on their hosts,  
An insidious cancer with a horrifying cost.

And now the blood runs cold upon our streets.  
Crimson tears beneath defiant feet.  
A hero lies defiled 'neath a warming springtime sun  
His loss beyond expression, a country now struck dumb.

Rest easy, Fallen Hero,  
Your work, for now, is done  
You did us proud and in our hearts,  
Your memory will live on.

The candle of your spirit will forever light the way  
For those you leave behind, to light their darker days.  
And when the loss is greatest and comfort can't be found  
Wrap them warm within your love, let them know you're still around.

Rest easy Fallen Heroes  
For Britain will never forget.

DARREN SCANLON

## **DEFENDER**

The sword cuts the air  
Like a wisp of breath  
A silent sigh from too nearby  
The deadly dealer of death.

A thousand turns of the sword-smiths hand  
Each hammer-blow, pure skill  
Passed on down, with smile and frown  
A beauty made to kill.

The ancient warrior whirls around  
Dispensing one more threat  
His agile gait, and deadly trait  
All challenges have been met

He walks the field with noble strides  
Through names of men, untold  
Who fought to gain and died in vain  
And history will behold.

He defended his realm with endless zeal  
He stood his ground and won  
He protects his kin, he will never give in  
Until the bloody war is won.

DARREN SCANLON

## THE FUTILITY OF WAR

Death, The Dealer,  
The final deck of life.  
No hidden agendas,  
Just a cold slate to wipe.

With hand and sword,  
With rock and stone.  
With shaft sailing, deadly,  
Through grey skies, alone.

The smarter the weapon,  
The reaper delights.  
A fulsome harvest,  
Of terror and cries.

Split the atom,  
And split the odds.  
Split the proceeds,  
But not the cost.

And thus to tally,  
The tariff of all,  
The carnage of the brave,  
Young men, watch them fall.

The dealer doesn't care,  
Be they friend or foe.  
To fall is to die,  
To die cold and slow.

The spear of destiny,  
Fate beckons us all.  
Watch as they flock,  
The heartbroken mothers,  
Bereft, hear them cry.  
Like lambs to the call.

The colours fly high,  
On the wind, watch them dance.  
Few will go home,  
Save the cruel whim of chance.

And beseech with empty eyes,  
They can't understand, why?

No love can protect them,  
No arms keep them warm.  
No power over the tyrants,  
Who promise them harm.

Like the pull of the tide,  
O'er seas vast and wide.  
There's nowhere to run,  
There's nowhere to hide.

The cards are now dealt,  
In futile designs.  
And only deaths dealer,  
Can decipher the signs.

DARREN SCANLON

## **UNITED WE STAND**

To run with the devil  
To cry like a beast  
To contaminate the west  
With a plague from the east

To hold life so low  
To just dust it away  
Like a fly in the face  
No matter what they may say

A poison so potent  
An insidious decay  
Like cancer, it spreads  
Further each day

Eating away  
At the life we once knew  
Losing our culture  
Our nation, our view

Till the sorry, sad day  
When we kiss it goodbye  
When the dust in our eyes  
Dries the tears we have cried

This vision I've had  
So many times  
Yet my resolve is bolstered  
A strength of mind

I cannot allow  
All that I am  
To be eroded  
By the ills of that land

To the death! I will fight  
To protect what is right  
To defend our great nation  
Through the days and the nights

Our forefathers fought  
Paid the ultimate price  
To protect all the goodness  
So dear and so nice

We cannot allow  
All the hardship and pain  
They suffered, endured  
To be simply in vain

Oh England, Scotland  
Ireland & Wales  
Across misty moorland  
And dew laden dales

As one, stand together  
Undefeated once more  
Let us show the invaders  
The way back through the door!

DARREN SCANLON

## **THE LIONS ROAR**

Northumberland to Newcastle  
And Cumbria's lofty hills.  
Durham down through Cleveland  
To Yorkshire's misty dales.

Across to dear old Lancashire  
It's Mancs and Scousers too.  
Cheshire, Staffs and Shropshire  
The Severn lands of dew

Across into the Midlands  
Leicester, Notts., and Brum  
Derbyshire to Warwick  
You can hear the voices hum

From Humberside and Lincolnshire  
Northants and Norfolk too  
From Suffolk back through Cambridgeshire  
East Anglian pride so true

From Oxfordshire and Gloucester  
Wiltshire, Bristol and Bucks  
Berkshire, Hampshire, Surrey  
Where aisle of Wight she tucks

Hertford, Essex and London  
North and south the Thames  
Through Kent and down through Sussex  
The south coast to defend

Across the west to Devon  
Dorset, Somerset blends  
And right on down through Cornwall  
Until we reach Lands End

So many hearts of England  
Will hear the call to arms  
From factory, field and fairway  
From steelworks, docks and farms

From ere they come  
To answer the call  
To defend our shores  
And prevent her fall

For Britain is in direst need  
Defend her to the core  
Unite as one, with claws now raised,  
And hear the lions roar!

MARGARET FIELAND

**FADED GLORY**

*Faded glory, darkest night,  
battle through a raging fire.  
Wounded, dying men run by,  
struggle through the mud and mire.*

*Faded glory, worn-out joy  
dreary days of growing fear.  
Heavy weight of unshed tears  
burdens all we hold most dear.*

*Faded glory, spoil of strife,  
land mines waiting to explode.  
Charcoal clouds of shadowed woe  
darken gray, untraveled road.*

*I lift my face to glowing gleams,  
the warming rays of shining sun.  
At last my tears begin to flow.  
The war is over, battle won.*



















