

**Strippedlit500**

Flash Fiction,  
Stripped

**Issue 1**  
**May 2016**



Short fiction from Paul Alex Gray, Shannon Bell, Elizabeth Bradley, Odette Brady, Lorrie Hartshorn, Keren Heenan, Barbara Jamison MacAskill, David Olsen and Gill Siddle  
Guest author John Xero

Edited by Margaret McGoverne | Cover Art by Barbara Jamison MacAskill

# Issue 1

We officially welcomed spring time back in March, but the blossom is still in place, so the theme of our very first issue is still in the air: New Beginnings.

With what else should our first issue concern itself? New venture, new site, new fiction. Our inaugural edition deals with new beginnings actual, emotional, metaphorical, and physical.

Beginnings only occur when something else has ended; a closed chapter, a broken heart, a planet destroyed, a body disposed of. We have twelve tales of happiness, sorrow, and grieving, scheming and macabre goings on with a couple of especially fierce little killers.

We begin with a tale of new worlds, and new challenges by Elizabeth Bradley. Lorrie Hartshorn spins a tale of a new show in town that offers more than meets the eye. Barbara Jamison MacAskill's tale of a couple of ruthless criminals finding new territories offers a new perception on old friends. David Olsen's new beginnings are more personal, and emotional. Odette Brady reminds us that the window of opportunity for new beginnings is finite. Paul Alex Gray writes of the partings that precede new beginnings. Gill Siddle's story is of a character who realises that new beginnings are sometimes, but not always a choice. Keren Heenan's characters are torn by the past, in trying to reconnect in the present. Shannon Bell's new beginning is gruesome, and bovine! I have included one of my own stories about a young lady preparing for the future.

Our very first edition has a guest story written by John Xero, 100 word fiction guru and editor over at [101fiction.com](http://101fiction.com). John treats us to a tale that you may want to read after you've eaten.

With thanks to everyone who submitted; these are your stories, this is your issues, and this is our new beginning: welcome, and enjoy.

Margaret McGoverne  
1<sup>st</sup> May 2016

[Strippedlit500.com](http://Strippedlit500.com)

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# Acknowledgement

The cover art for this edition is reproduced with kind permission from the artist, Barbara Jamison MacAskill.

For more information about Barbara's art, please contact [strippedlit500@btinternet.com](mailto:strippedlit500@btinternet.com)

# Initiation

By Elizabeth Bradley

Dust exploded all around Seraphima and she shielded her eyes as the shuttle winked out of sight. The silence that followed settled heavy on her ears. Seraphima scooped up her battered suitcase and looked to the settlement that lay before her. No turning back now she thought, passing a sign warning of wild animals on the stony path that led towards the pod-shaped buildings.

She had traveled here with another woman, who, the moment the hatch of the shuttle opened and she set foot on the planet's bleak surface, turned around and asked how much it would be to take her back. Without argument she shoved her credits into the pilot's hand and re-boarded. The pilot glanced at Seraphima. She shook her head. She was staying.

She had wanted to come here, she thought, kicking a pebble and watching it skitter down the path. She knew what she was getting herself into when she signed the one-year contract to teach the inhabitants of the newest federated planet.

A giggle coming from the bushes interrupted her thoughts, and a small girl popped out.

"Hi! What's your name? Are you our new teacher?"

"Of course she is dummy" said a fat little boy climbing of the bushes behind her. "Who else would she be?"

"I'm Seraphima." The little girl smiled. "And yes, I'm here to teach you the history of the Federation and about other planets."

"Wow. Have you been to other planets?" the little girl asked, wonder shining in her eyes.

Seraphima laughed. "A few."

The boy scoffed. He looked her up and down and said, "We'll show you where your house is. Come on." He made her uneasy but he had taken her suitcase and walked away, giving her no option but to follow.

"I'm Gemma," the little girl said, taking her hand. "And that's Clem. He's my brother. He doesn't like outsiders, but I like you." Seraphima felt a warm glow as she listened to Gemma chatter away. She had just pointed to a low greenish pod, saying it was Seraphima's when Clem

stopped and whistled. He dropped the suitcase and ran to Gemma. He tore her hand away and whistled again. Gemma started crying. “Run!” she screamed. The two children left her frozen there as they ducked into the closest building and slammed the door.

A low roar behind her snapped her back to reality, and she ran, snatching her suitcase as she sprinted towards the green pod. The noise behind her was getting closer but she dared not turn around. She could feel hot, sticky breath on her back. The ground shook with a pounding rhythm. Swinging her suitcase behind her she felt it make contact, and heard a primal yawp. She crashed through her door and slammed it shut.

The beast roared one last time. After a moment she heard receding footsteps. Seraphima fell against the wall, sliding down to the floor in a heap. This is going to be a long year.

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Author Bio:

Elizabeth Bradley is a SAHM and writer living in rural Alaska. She loves bad reality TV and good wine. She is exploring science fiction worlds through flash fiction while working on her first novel. Check out her blog at [noplacelikenapaskiak](http://noplacelikenapaskiak.com) or follow her adventures on Twitter [@LizjSmith7](https://twitter.com/LizjSmith7)

# The Unloved Ones

By Lorrie Hartshorn

Resolution. That's what you want, right? An explanation. You want that final breathing-out, the one that comes before you take that shaky breath and start to, y'know, rationalise it all. You want that moment where It Was All Just A Dream! Can't give you that, son. Might find it on your own if you try hard enough - who knows?

So here's what we're going to do: I'm going to tell you a little story. Just float it up out there like them fungal spores - 'cause sure, it ain't pretty - and my recommendation for you is that you take one deep breath of your own and hold it while I do. I won't keep you long, I promise. You don't want to trust my word, and that's fair enough, but what's one little breath unless it's your last?

OK, let's keep it sweet. You want to know who I am and where I've come from, where we've all come from. You all do. Fine. First one's easy: I'm no one. Can't remember, never knew - doesn't matter either way. Next one's a little tougher. There's talk but ain't no official policy on this, you see?

We come rolling into town just like an ordinary show. Hiding in plain sight, boss likes to call it. Striped tents, big old wagons with covered cages on the back of them. Old-timey cars - Alec's the one who looks after those - with the friendliest-lookin' ones at the wheels. Good old-fashioned fun is what you ask for, and it's what you'll get from us - although whether it's as fun for you as it is for us is another thing.

The outskirts. That's always where you'll find us, kind of a chicken-and-egg thing. We need the space - the actual floor space, you know? Don't get no big old fields in the middle of cities now, do you? Beaches, promenades - them's good too, depends where 'bouts we are. And where there's space, there's folk that go wandering, folks that don't get missed. Easy enough to pick up a stray on the edge of some woods, out in the long grass, maybe down in the warm sand by the pier. Few sweet words, a glad eye - see where I come in? - the promise of a hot meal. We throw the net, you come swimmin'.

We never stay long, you'll have guessed. I know you can feel that churning underneath you now - you'll get used to it. Sometimes when you've been on the road so long, you get a kind of sea-sickness when it stops. I promise you - yeah, another one - you won't even feel it soon enough. You make yourself useful, you might still be here when we reach the next place. Maybe that's what you want, maybe it isn't. New beginnings aren't for everyone, I know.

You can go 'head, breathe it out now. Cough it out of you, son. Feel better for a while. Truth got a habit of stickin', you know?

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Author Bio:

Lorrie Hartshorn is a contemporary and literary fiction writer, whose work has been featured in a number of journals, including Compose, Paraxis, 1000 Words, The Pygmy Giant and Anthem. She blogs at [circlesunderstreetlights.wordpress.com](http://circlesunderstreetlights.wordpress.com) and is the founder of Halo Literary Magazine, a new journal of short fiction by women. Lorrie can be found on Twitter at [@Bigoldsupermoon](https://twitter.com/Bigoldsupermoon)



# MacMaster's Bad Lump

By Barbara Jamison MacAskill

MacMaster is still up. Square-shouldered and bearded, heavy booted and reeking of loneliness. He's had a few. Yawning, he sprawls as if thrown into his chair. Bad Lump pulls his head into his neck with the sting of MacMaster's breath. Bear paw hands fold over the cat's cringing fur. Clock ticking. Small ribs squirm for relief from their captor. MacMaster steadies his gaze at the small creature.

A spark from the Rayburn dive bombs the lino. MacMaster belts the oven door shut with a thud from his heavy boot then returns his gaze to the still-squirming ball of fur and nails.

" So...Bad Lump...caught any vermin today? Mmm? There's a touch of the serial killer in you, this much I know." He bends over tighter, whispering softly now.

Poor you, no friends to play with tonight...I know how you feel. We're two of a kind me and you...oh yes indeed..."

MacMaster slurps a kiss on Bad Lump's nose. "You're not a bad sort really...you're the only lump who cares for me..."

Fuming with frustration, bones crushed, tail wagging furiously, Bad Lump tenses, prepares his escape. Nails dig deeper into hairy flesh, ears flattened, a whistle of a hiss leaks from his yellow-brown teeth. MacMaster senses the declining mood. He holds the cat up, mid-air, underneath the armpits, free from claws. Tail licked between his legs, Bad Lump knows what's coming next: "Go on then! You're just like the rest! Gut-bucket!"

Rupert is waiting in the wings. There's work to be done; the hunt is on. Overweight and stumpy, he leaves belly prints in the mud. He's in bad nick. Serrated ears, asthmatic and dusty, he joins his friend. The two little stink bombs head for their hideout at the back of the tall woods. There they go. Fur and badness. Creeping in and ducking out. Slinking through wire mesh. There, a well-padded graveyard littered with half-soaked heads, a crunch of wings and teenie bones: a stinking banquet, by day a garrison of fat round shiny blue black bottled flies. Garishly, hovering, ghoulishly savouring the stench of rotten luck.

The sound of MacMaster snore rips the air for half a mile. As he snores, the little punks leave behind the debris scattered and splattered, slashed to ribbons. Another score on their hit list. Scissor-teethed, death-breath, needle claws. A pair of whiskered slayers is afoot. Aided

and abetted, low-riding, the small murderers inch toward their prey, intent on a hideous act of cruelty.

Afterwards, they return home, gingerly, limping hind-quarters, thrashed by an out-of-towner, a backpacker, day ticket stray. This is the field of conflict. Creature-hood.

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Author Bio:

Barbara Jamison MacAskill is an artist from The Highlands, Scotland. For contact information please see the “Acknowledgement” page in this edition.

# Choices Made (Part 1)

By David Olsen

She hadn't cared about him for a long time and he was absolutely fine with that. He just wished that they could both stop lying about it. Every time that she used the word 'love' she did so with a look of forlorn hopelessness in her eyes. It was a look that said that what was being spoken should never be heard and that what was unspoken was tearing her apart. Julian understood. He knew the truth of it all, better even than Eileen thought he did.

Lovelessness wasn't meant for the young and yet here they were. The feelings and reservations that were and that had always been were too strong and he was worn out from struggling against them for so long. However, unlike the legend of Sisyphus and his rolling stone, Julian could abandon his daily toil. So, on that cold Thursday morning in December, Julian walked away; from Eileen, his job, his family and everything else that had vexed him for as long as he could remember.

Julian had been satisfied that if he made a clean break with everything and everyone and every place that he knew, the issues that he had attached to them for so long would be left behind too. If only life's troubles could be as simple as a one-off process of detachment, Julian thought, as he pondered the view from his new apartment in his new city. The rain poured down on the streets below and he stood pondering what followed next in the story of Julian; the man who had tried so hard to escape his problems that he'd simply created a whole new set of exactly the same problems in a different place.

He hated the rain. It reminded him of the place he'd left behind and its regularly soggy and somber inhabitants. Worst of all, it reminded him of Eileen. The day they had met had been a typically damp one. Eileen was bundled deeply in her soggy coat, her dark hair lank and shapeless, obviously unequipped for the downpour. Julian had stood under his oversized and gaudily patterned umbrella, a supposedly 'amusing' gift from his sister a few months previous, and watched her approach. How could she be from this town and yet be so unprepared for the elements, Julian had thought with a sense of comfortably dry self-righteousness. Despite this ill-fated beginning, Julian and Eileen had worked out quite well for a time. But only for a time. Good things never really last, at least Julian never believed that they did.

After a while, the feelings that they shared had evolved from like to love and back again. Neither of them voiced it, but the love didn't last. The problems that Julian had always felt would be solved with the power of love, like so many songs before had promised him, were forever present. They lurked beneath the surface, just out of reach and obscured, but ever-threatening nonetheless. When Julian had said goodbye, Eileen had seemed surprised. Deep

down she understood, he had thought to himself. She was probably just as relieved as he was, she was just better at hiding it. Either way, his choice was made.

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## Choices Made (Part 2)

By David Olsen

That had been four years ago. It was Christmastime again and, whilst the people of the world celebrated goodness and cheer, Julian found himself somber and melancholy at the result of his life's efforts.

He'd said goodbye to Eileen. He'd said goodbye to a decent, albeit boring, job. He'd said goodbye to a family that never really cared about him anyway. Now he stood in an apartment a lot like his last one, looking out at weather that he thought he had left behind, preparing to go out to meet a new girlfriend who probably loved him even less than Eileen had at the end.

All of his problems had followed him to where he stood today. Or had they? Maybe Julian had simply travelled full circle from within one air of malaise to a new one; wholly different causes with exactly the same end result. It didn't really matter. He was here now, dealing with his brand new but all-too-familiar anxieties.

What if he moved on again? Would that be a solution or would the same gnawing anguish track him down? He imagined a wolf with the smell of blood in its nostrils, tracking the emotionally wounded form of Julian across land, sea, distance and time. There was no escape from the troubles that were carried within you. Julian thought of this and smiled, in spite of the turmoil in his mind. He couldn't be alone in this realisation. That alone gave him some comfort. Although he had his own issues that tore him apart, others suffered similar indignities. Julian was not alone in his loneliness. For that, he was grateful.

Still, the thought of moving to a new life once more was a tempting one. Wherever he went, however, life would follow him. The same old concerns would be there upon arrival. The same anguish and doubts would remain, deep inside, like an odd sock at the bottom of a suitcase you thought you'd unpacked.

Julian wouldn't run again, not this time. In a world of uncertainties, that was the only thing he could be sure of. It was time to deal with the pain he carried daily, not by running away, but by charging headlong into it. Mastery of the feelings that crippled him would only come from

addressing where his problems truly stemmed from. He was his own problem, not the world at large. Wherever he went, the sense of dissatisfaction followed. Where was it coming from if he was not bringing it himself? Could he ever truly be without them if they actually were a part of his soul?

Julian left his apartment building and walked out into the downpour. His umbrella left behind, the water soaked through his coat and plastered his hair to his head. Today was a day to make a change, or two, or several. He was tired of unhappiness, tired of listlessness.

Today was the day that he would rewrite his own story and chapter one would begin with a walk in the rain.

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# Meat

By John Xero

In the end, aren't we all just meat and bone and guts all piled into a greasy sack?

"You gonna eat that?" Benny asked through a mouthful of hash brown, waving his fork at the last sausage on Mitch's plate.

Mitch looked blankly back at him.

There's machinery in there as well. Bits of gristle and flesh that make things go up and down and wave around. Flapping things. Springy things.

"Earth to Mitch. You home, buddy?"

Bits of potato sprayed from Benny's flapping mouth hole.

There is something else, call it a spirit or a spark. Hesitate, perhaps, to call it intelligence. Something that coordinates and something that rises above even that, something that defines an individual.

Mitch shrugged loosely, "Sure. Have the sausage."

Benny didn't hesitate. His fork leapt the Formica tabletop and speared the sausage. To his credit he did pause, a moment, before biting it in half.

Long enough to speak.

"You don't look right. You're thinking."

Outside the café the world scrolled onwards. Meat sacks in their tin cans. Meat sacks taking smaller meat bags for walks on bits of string. Meat sacks hanging on to each other as if they might suddenly fall off, or fall apart.

Benny shoved the last piece of greasy breakfast into his toothy hole. The ground pork went round and round in his mouth, and his tongue flapped words at Mitch, meat in meat in meat in meat, "What's up, buddy? The job getting to you? I seen it before, grave digging ain't for everybody, most people don't like to think too much about death, you know, about what happens to our bodies afterwards, just dropped in a hole. I mean, sure there's all that serious business, pomp and whatchamacallit circumstance, but that's more for the living, ain't it? Or is it Jeanine again? It is, ain't it? Jeanine. I thought we were over that. She's old news, and we're better off without her. She was never good enough for you, buddy."

Bits of meat, doing meat things, making more meat to do meat things all over again.  
Mitch sighed and focussed on Benny, "She was too good for me, Benny. We both know that."

"Hey, I'm trying to cheer you up here. Besides, you're a thinker, look at you, thinking away, and let's face it, she... well, she wasn't, was she?"

And inside the meat some brightness you might call a person. Some shine that makes them special. Except, get rid of all the flesh and guts and bones and bits and there is no spark, no spirit, there's nothing, at all, just blood stains and scratch marks.  
Time and bleach gets rid of even those.

"Listen, buddy, what say I fix you up on a date. There's this friend of Sally's; she's not, well, she ain't the prettiest, but she's proper clever, and funny. You gotta get over Jeanine. She left you. Walked out of your life. Vanished. You gotta stop waiting on her to come back."

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Author Bio:

John Xero has been publishing flash fiction on the internet for a decade and a half. Fiction of all lengths is the \*legal\* way you strip away all the fleshy bits and expose the monsters within.

He is the editor at [101fiction.com](http://101fiction.com). He will almost definitely one day maybe tweet more [@xeroverse](https://twitter.com/xeroverse)

# Fed-Up Waiting for Keith

By Odette Brady

On Valentine's day I tried to make it work. I shut my eyes and thought of all the hunky men in my books, the many pairs of big arms packed into my romance novels. I wanted a big hand to cradle the back of my head and kiss me with a fresh, wet mouth. I thought imagining it hard enough might make it real. On Valentine's day Keith forgot to put the heating on and I was cold. I had to make him hurry up, I couldn't muster the enthusiasm to be made love to. I just wanted it to be done with so I could roll over and sleep, and dream.

When we met we were young and we had fine facial features. As we've aged our faces have become fleshier. Keith's face is all meat. His dreams are still refined. That's all they are though: dreams. He told me he was taking me to Belize. I would have been happy enough if he'd dug the garden. The wet lawn and red blood in the skin of my eyelids – eyes closed and turned to the sun – would have been bliss. Dinner on decking, clematis on trellis. It would be ours. But he watched the rain and paced while I waited. He picked his nose and flicked through the sport channels while I read my books. He'd made snide comments about Christmas all through December, I thought he might cheer up by January. He looked miserable as sin when it came and it dragged me down. He trapped me in the slump of his jowls. Valentine's day was his last chance.

Meanwhile, my sister was digging her own garden. She ruined her hands on her unvarnished spade and clogged her nails with black soil. Her elbows became leather in February's frost. She took dead looking twigs and gave them time and affection. She threw seeds over the clay and she was patient, she waited, smoking cigarettes in the kitchen. In March I joined her and we waited together. We drank instant coffee and passed the time listening to the clock. We watched blade by blade of grass. Green overcame the black and shiny ground as days got longer. In return for her efforts purple flowers opened up and roses formed buds that were straight off the cover of a romance novel. By summer we had a lawn. In August we ate dinner on a blanket on the grass, closed our eyes and threw our heads back into the heat of the sun. Such was the bliss of my sister's realised dream. I didn't think about dinner on decking again. I forgot about clematis on trellis.

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Author Bio:

I am a fiction writer from London with a fascination for everyday people and all the things that make us similar. More of my stories can be found at [odettebrady.com](http://odettebrady.com). I tweet as [@odettebrady](https://twitter.com/odettebrady) and my weekly serial novel can be read at [soapnovel.wordpress.com](http://soapnovel.wordpress.com)



# Games

By Margaret McGoverne

The end of school was in sight. After the holidays, I was off to university. But for now, I had to do games. We had no money for sports equipment, and games were a distraction for me. I was a disappointment to sports; asthmatic, clever, weedy. I couldn't sprint; a plodder. The PE teachers disdained me. But I loved cross country running, bounding over brooks and swerving to avoid nettles. I surrendered to the dirty pleasure of the run.

In the playground stood the games hut; musty, crusty socks, lost shirts and football boots. Each week I walked, shamefaced, to borrow a hockey stick. The gym mistress, a powerfully built Australian with a jutting chin and a tanned neck, always barked the same question;

"Why haven't you got a hockey stick? It's a compulsory piece of kit!"

A hundred sticks hung from hooks on the wall of the hut, leaver-bequests and lost property. Without looking, I would grab the nearest one. My kit was stuffed in my school bag; gym top washed and bleached to a buttery cream. I didn't have hockey boots; I wore black plimsolls. Cheaper.

I ironed my gym kit the night before PE in my bedroom. My father was visiting, drunk again, and angry with me for locking him out the night before. He had banged on the front door, glaring through the letterbox.

"If you don't let me in I'll..."

Tonight he told me I was no longer his daughter; he would have nothing to do with me anymore.

"Suits me!" I shouted, retreating to my bedroom to play records. I wrapped myself in scraps of beautiful words and music, a comfort blanket of art. I would escape to university, and never come back. I dreamt of taking my mother away, but she would never break her ties with him. They loved to hate each other.

My father would cadge when jobs were scarce. With his drinking, jobs were always scarce. He had just been in hospital; his lungs were bad, but he continued to smoke. It was a raw, cold spring, my birthday. I asked for a hockey stick but there was no money to spare. Inside my card, an IOU. Next week, mum promised.

Thursday morning; hockey today. I had a plan: I would hide in the school toilets with a book for

an hour. My mother's scream brought me to the kitchen; my father, face down on the floor, still and cold, had bequeathed me nothing but bad temper, and relief.

###

Thursday. My first day back at school. He was cremated, dead and gone from the earth in seven days. Family travelled from far and wide for the funeral, all promised to stay in touch. An uncle pressed money into my hand, "Buy yourself a treat lassie; some records, something nice to wear." I bought a hockey stick.

This Thursday, I was equipped. Joining the queue to board the bus, the games mistress brayed, "Where were you last week? Hockey season's over! Leave that stick behind. Where're your running shoes?"

I ran in my plimsolls, ruining them. It was alright. I was a plodder but that was alright too; I would finish the race. I was in it for the distance.

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Author Bio:

Margaret McGoverne is currently writing her first full length novel, while being distracted by short stories, flash fiction and her [blog](#) about all things writing. Margaret can be found on Twitter at [@MMcGoverneWrite](#)

# So Long Sunshine

By Paul Alex Gray

We sit on the floor of my soon-to-be old room. My legs crossed with one hand keeping the tip of my skirt down. Marc's leaning back, smug smile slathered to his face and I think he's playing the unblinking game again. We hear the moving van drive off.

"Manitoba eh?" he asks.

He always thinks he's so funny.

The window is open and I wonder if I should close it. We took down the blinds and dad insisted on putting back the old curtains that apparently hung there when we first moved in. They move lazily half translucent and casting tiny pieces of dust. I watch them glow and shine in the light.

"Let's ditch this place," says Marc. "In fact, let's never come back."

He guides me out into the hall, that first wooden board at the top squeaking like always. We pass by my Mom, checking empty cupboards. Everything echoes a little too much.

"Just a few more minutes, Sarah", she says.

Marc leads me to the porch. All the furniture is gone and I can see more of the bushes where we once found a hundred thousand ladybugs – or so it seemed. My skin tingles in the sun. I could be lying out back, baking slowly.

"Hope you packed your snowshoes," Marc says.

"Honestly," I reply, wanting to say more but feeling all out of breath.

Dad's got the car all set up, ready to go, all four doors wide open. Knowing Dad, there will be a full tank of gas, a couple of juice boxes and snacks ready to go. He looks up at me, then down, then does a double take then turns back again. I'm sure I'm freaking him out now. He moves back around, busying himself with something in the car. Marc lets go of my hand and I grab it back.

"I'll write you," I blurt out "I'll call you, when I get there."

He smiles, and it looks like he's about to say something profound.

“Oh, wait!” he says, dashing off.

Mom comes out and shuts the door behind her. She moves down the steps and out to the car. The light flickers through the trees. Things are going too fast. Dad starts the car.

“Let’s go,” he says, but softly and without any urgency.

I stare up the street, past letterboxes and bikes laying out on lawns and kids up the street throwing water balloons.

“You don’t want to forget this.”

Marc hands me the baseball. The one we both claimed we caught and somehow always seemed to end up back at his place. I take it, squinting in the light, turning the ball in my hands. The surface feels raw and the stitches flow like a story, round and round.

Marc squeezes my hand and I think I should kiss him. The wind is picking up. It rises and races through the trees and it makes the leaves shout in whispers I cannot understand.

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#### Author Bio:

Paul Alex Gray enjoys writing speculative fiction that cuts a jagged line to a magical real world. His work has been published in 365 Tomorrows, 101 Words and Devolution Z. An Aussie now living in Canada with his wife and two children, Paul spends his days working in the software industry. Follow him on Twitter [@paulalexgray](https://twitter.com/paulalexgray)

# Mother's Day

By Gill Siddle

Eileen's youngest wasn't coming home this year; she was away at university, one of the good ones. Eileen didn't mind, not really.

Eileen's world was red brick and cobbled. She'd grown up two streets over and had moved into this house, bursting with pride, shortly after her wedding. She had raised four children, now grown and gone. Encroaching modernity had never stopped her doing things the proper way, the hard way but these days there was less to do and her hands felt idle.

A card and a gift arrived, postmarked from the sandstone university town that felt further away than it was. A simple card with a heartfelt message, nice. The gift was luxury hand cream. Eileen stared down at it in her silent living room. She climbed the narrow, steep, thickly carpeted stairs and put it in the bathroom cabinet. At dinner, she gently laughed off the gift as frivolous and unnecessary but a nice thought. Her husband silently nodded while he worked the beef stew around his mouth, an image unchanged for forty years.

As she cleaned her teeth that night, she moved the cream further back into the mirrored cabinet. Guests may see it, she thought, they might think she was showy. She dried her hands and looked at them. The story of forty domestic years was in her skin.

She lay awake. Sleep would not descend. Thoughts of her children frayed the edges of her mind. Where does it all go? Are the years, the work, to be smoothed away? Gently, subconsciously, her hands wrung each other under the heavy blanket. Her husband slept soundly, loudly. She rose and crept to the bathroom.

Under the harsh strip light, she opened the cabinet and took out the hand cream. She unscrewed its gold lid and filled her palm with the white perfumed lotion. She placed both hands together and squeezed, causing the viscous liquid to squelch between her fingers, some blobbed onto the pink rug. She repeated the action. She trailed the cream up her arms, dampening her nightdress. She filled her palm again and again. She smeared it on her face, layer after layer, until the heavy perfume stung her eyes. When the tube was empty she looked in the mirror. She was grotesque. Two sad eyes stared, marooned in the gelatinous mire. Silently, she took the hand towel from the rail and wiped it all off. She put the empty tube and the towel in the bin. She went to bed and slept.

#### Author Bio:

I don't really have an author bio as I'm not an author but I do have a blog. It's called Escape Grey and charts what happens when you quit your job and your flat in search of a life that fits. So far this adventure has, amongst other things, reignited a love of literature and language and has seen me pick up some editing work. It has been the experience of editing that has inspired me to pick up the metaphorical pen in recent weeks. I'm on twitter and Facebook too:

[www.facebook.com/Escape-Grey](http://www.facebook.com/Escape-Grey), [@gilliansiddle](https://twitter.com/gilliansiddle)

# Reunion

By Keren Heenan

Time is thick, achingly thick, but just for a moment, and then it rolls greyly on. They are released and their eyes shift away from each other. Mother and son and twenty years of trapped time bristling between them; busy with its rumblings and churnings, its hurts and hot, sharp words, its bitter hate-filled silences and regrets. All things unforgiven festering under false new skin.

She adjusts her glasses, as if they've let her down, shown her something unbidden – how small, how soft and clean he'd once been, all the world in front of him then. But she won't turn, can't turn. The back of his head across the crowded square, she knows this will drive the knife further into her chest. Your father is dead now, and I'm not long for this world the doctor says. She thinks the words, loudly, clearly, but can't and won't turn, and her feet take her further away, settling in to the rhythm after that pause, that brief hover of one foot as their eyes met across the heads of school children jostling and cursing and play-punching each other.

He wipes the back of his hand against his mouth, flings his wrist aside as if to dispense with it. Sinks one hand palm out into the back pocket of his jeans, something violent and obscene snaking into his skull, something on old legs and brittle as glass. He can't believe it's the same handbag. Remembers the brass clip at the top, can still feel the metal between his fingers as he unclips it, muting the sounds of the snap! Eyes on her back as she bends to the fridge or the bench, preparing another meal he won't bother eating. The last one ever, thrown at his back as he leaves, no longer bothering to mute the snapped metal clip, no longer bothering to look aghast as another piece of jewellery goes missing, and through the red mist of his mind he takes her thin form and flings her against the wall not bothering to see if she rises.

You have a grandson, and his mother keeps asking about you; who are you, where are you. He thinks the words, loudly, clearly, but can't and won't turn, and his feet roll on in their soft white sneakers, heel-toeing away from her half turned body, school kids shouldering her out of the way, bustling past with backpacks knocking her handbag. His feet find their rhythm as he rolls along.

When the hand on her shoulder comes, it's electric.

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## Author Bio:

Keren Heenan has been awarded in a number of short story competitions, and has been published in Australian journals and anthologies, and in Fish Anthology (Ire) and Aesthetica Annual (UK). Follow Keren on Twitter [@keren\\_heenanan](https://twitter.com/keren_heenanan)

# COWardly

By Shannon Bell

The cow watched me and chewed its cud.

“Stupid fuckin’ animal.” I gave it the finger.

“You’re lumpy as fuck,” it said. “Tragically lost in the void between younger and older, yet to figure out which tribe owes you a badge.”

That’s not possible. A talking cow? And how could a creature renowned for been dumb see straight to my core, voicing feelings I kept hidden in the basement of my soul?

I stormed across the paddock. The cow laughed as I walked away.

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I looked at the ‘Free Meat Tonight’ sign in the window, stepped into my restaurant, and checked that every person had a platter of thick, juicy steaks in front of them.

“I’m lumpy as fuck,” I said into the microphone. “Tragically lost in the void between younger and older, yet to figure out which tribe owes me a badge.” They all stared at me, confusion written on every face. “It’s ‘all the meat you can eat’ night, so dig in.”

The cow wasn’t laughing now. Oh no. Right now, most of the cow was steaming on plates in front of my diners.

I popped one of its eyes into my mouth and chewed with relish. Its heart and brain were placed before me, swimming in a rich sauce. Yes, it was rude to do it in a room full of customers, but I licked the bowl clean.

A long, low “moo” ripped up my throat, bolted past my lips and echoed through the restaurant. Heads turned, followed by gasps and screams.

Furry ears and blunt horns protruded from my head. A large, pendulous udder bulged out from my stomach and I felt my feet thickening into hooves. My nostrils flared, large and wet and dripping bovine snot onto the tablecloth.

The cow laughed, its mirth ringing through my mind.



Author Bio:

Shannon Bell is addicted to words. You will find him madly writing away in the spare time he has available between holding down a full-time job, being part of a dysfunctional family and looking after his attention seeking dog. His stories have been published in three issues of Dark Edifice magazine, two Short & Twisted anthologies and three issues of 101 Fiction. You can follow Shannon at [@ShannonBell1967](#)