

Issue #39

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Image by "cupid14"

J A M E S N I X O N

DEAF SINCE BIRTH

Her ears have been excavated
like caved-in mine shafts
that are newly famous for their innocence.
The walls have been jet washed, plastered
and painted for acoustic perfection
and echo with the conglomerate loudness
of pods of foreign tourists.

It's funny how you know
you're in the North East
even when you're underground.

And out of all of the sounds that
resound preternaturally,
the one that we love to hear
is the young child's
gorgeously stand-out voice,
like birdsong above traffic.

FITCH KIDS

As lively as a manikin
or a dictaphone of non-sequiturs
stuck on repeat.

They were hatched or decanted
in a factory setting and forcibly
unexposed to forms of communication.
Technicians weren't allowed to talk
around new stock,
could only recite isolated lines
from teen dramas.

I've been asked "how's it going"
twice already since tumbling down
the rabbit hole
into this zoo of stitched moose,
recently fumigated with a cubic kilometre
of Teen Spirit.

Nothing can prepare me for being told
that something "is so sick, like so sick"
or that "cool cool" or that I should
"have a nice day".
Each time the regimented words
roll out of their mouths like bricks
I can almost see them
hoping that I won't respond
and dare them to regurgitate another one.

MONDAY EVENING

We began a boisterous jam on Saturday morning and by Sunday afternoon had ironed out the kinks from a song that sounded like an icy cream soda at a summer fair. By Monday evening the music was warping like a bee-stung lullaby or a manic carousel.

Listless Ray slipped me a harmonica, saying it was a pink wafer, which cracked a few of my tea-hot molars.

Dave started cutting people with plectrums – a studio commando, rolling out from behind amps, and disappearing just as quickly in a cloud of wires and dislodged duct tape.

Mick put a stop to the party, skimming a cymbal through the air, that shaved Dave's cheek off and chopped some tongue too.

The record went to number five.



Image by Simon Kingsnorth

BUTTERFLY WINGS, RAW EGGS AND WHAT IFs

What if I'd never poisoned my neighbour's dog when I was ten? What if I'd never found that mutilated seagull on the beach that same summer? What if I hadn't caught chicken pox off Sinead O'Rahilly so's I'd have been at school, instead of peeking in through the half-open door, the day my kid brother plopped out, all bloodied and misshapen, like he'd melted a bit and reset in the wrong configuration? What if I'd been born on a Friday, loving and giving, instead of a fucking Wednesday, full of woe? What if I'd eaten all my greens, pulled up my socks, put my best foot forward? What if I'd told Digby I didn't want to go to the bloody party?

—It'll be a laugh.

—No, it won't.

—We'll get wasted.

—What's new?

—We'll get laid.

—Will we, now?

—Sure.

—Fuck off.

—So you're coming?

—I'm coming.

What if the neighbours had been cat people? What if I'd hated the colour red? What if Mammy had sat me on her knee while I was still small enough and told me all the things I needed to know? What if I had been the listening sort, the sitting still sort, the do-as-you're-told sort? What if butterflies only came out when it was dark? What if I'd have won the egg and spoon race just once? What if I'd said no just once, and meant it?

—Alright, darling.

—Who are yous?

—Friends of Jimmy's. You letting us in, or what?

—As long as you brought your own.

—Course we did, didn't we, Marshall?

—Yeah, Digby, course.

—Alright, but behave yourselves, so.
—Would fine gents the like of us do anything else, darling?
—Probably. In yous come.

What if they'd've kept their dog tied up? What if my old man didn't grow begonias? What if the butterflies didn't love my old man's begonias? What if they weren't such pretty colours, such shimmering yellows, such violent reds? What if that first one hadn't landed right in my chubby little fingers? What if Mammy had caught me pulling the wings off it? What if I cared, just a little?

—Beer, Marshall?
—Why not?
—Smoke?
—Aye, can do.
—Here, then, you roll.
—Did you bring beers, Digby?
—Do I look daft? There's plenty here, so why?
—Why indeed. What about all these easy lays you promised.
—They're here.
—Where?
—What about her at the door?
—Jimmy's lass?
—Sure.
—Fuck off.
—What?
—I like my balls attached to my body.
—So you wouldn't?
—Only if I suddenly came over suicidal.

What if dogs didn't like sardine sandwiches? What if I happened to quite like sardines and the dog had been a dolphin-loving vegan with high-falutin ethics? What if the dodgy swimmer that reached the egg first and made my kid brother come out all melty and warped had drowned in spunk and AN Other swimmer, not dodgy, had pricked the egg instead? What if the midwife had taken my twisted kid brother and put him out of my misery? What if Mammy had sat me on her knee when I was still small enough and told me she loved me better than him because I was perfect and he was a freak? What if I didn't go to parties that bored me shitless?

—What time is it?
—How the fuck would I know?
—I just thought...
—And that's your problem, Marshall, thinking. If people thought less, fucked more and got wasted in between the world'd be a grand enough place.
—Who's doing the thinking now?
—Have another beer.

What if the world revolved the other way? What if entropy wasn't the second law of thermodynamics? What if things tended towards order instead of chaos? What if gravity worked in reverse and things fell up? What if begonias were all carnivorous and butterflies were their favourite fare? What if chickens didn't lay eggs? What if butterflies didn't have wings? What if butterflies came from chicken's eggs and chickens were responsible for all the chaos in the world? What if up was down, right was left, stop was go, you was me? What if I hadn't suddenly come over suicidal?

—This properly blows. Dunno why I let you drag me along.
—'Cos you're in love with the good times.
—This is the good times?
—Can you remember any better ones, Marshall?
—I remember last Christmas, that piss-up at Monty's, Iceman taking a hatchet to his sideboard and us falling about laughing.
—I'm talking about proper good times. Times when you felt better than you do right now.
—Better how?
—Emptier? Fuller? I don't know. What does it matter? Smoke? Drink? Something for the weekend, Sir?
—It is the weekend.
—Something for now, Sir?
—Jimmy's lass?
—She was checking you out when she let us in.
—You're off your fucking head, Digby.
—This music's shite.
—Musak, you mean.
—Whatever, Marshall. I'm gonna get off my arse and do something, get some hardcore techno banging out.

- Not the sort of banging I was hoping for.
- It doesn't just walk up to you, you know. You should try getting off your arse, doing something.
- Leave me the weed.

What if I hadn't worn red the day I poisoned the neighbour's dog? What if my kid brother's first word, spoken when he was seven, was my name, not "dog"? What if Mammy had bothered to hard boil the egg before she sent me out to race with it balanced precariously on a tablespoon? What if I'd worn my wellies that day? What if schools didn't make kids run with eggs balanced precariously on tablespoons? What if butterflies ate raw eggs? What if Jimmy's lass hadn't just walked up to me?

- What's that you're smoking in my kitchen?
- Weed.
- Is it, now?
- Aye.
- Well, you gonna give us a drag, or what?
- Here.
- Yous aren't really friends of Jimmy's.
- Nope, not me. Digby, maybe.
- Why'd they call you Marshall?
- 'S my name.
- Why?
- Dunno.
- You get a badge to go with a name like that?
- Nope. Least I got a name.
- Fiona.
- I don't like it.
- Fuck you, then.
- If you insist.

What if Digby's mammy had kept him away from me on account of her bad feeling about me? What if Digby's mammy hadn't forgotten to resist the night Digby's da came home wasted and climbed on top of her? What if the little swimmer that reached the egg that made up one half of Digby long before Digby was Digby had been X instead of Y? What if he'd come out a minute past

midnight instead of a minute before and been a year younger, a year lower? What if he'd beaten me in the egg and spoon race? What if I'd beaten him in the egg and spoon race? What if our eggs had been hard boiled by our mummies? What if the neighbour's dog had turned up his snout at my poisoned sardine sandwich? What if the tide had been high enough to cover up the dead seagull the day we went to the beach that same summer? What if Jimmy's lass hadn't just slipped her hand in mine and led me up the stairs? What if I wasn't so horny and easily led?

—Are you drunk, Marshall?

—I don't think so.

—High, then?

—Maybe. A bit. Not too much.

—What's too much?

—When your cock goes numb.

—Not numb now, is it?

—Why don't you check for me?

—Like this?

—Yeah, just like that.

—You got any tattoos, Marshall?

—Nope.

—I do. Wanna see?

—Do I?

—You might. It's on my hip.

—What is it?

—Guess.

—A butterfly?

—Aye, how'd you know?

—Had to be, always is. Let's see it then. Before my cock goes numb.

What if butterflies were never red? What if eggs were never raw? What if dogs were never greedy? What if kid brothers were never twisted freaks? What if mummies were never stupid enough to leave ten year olds in charge of seven year olds? What if begonias never got black-fly, green-fly, white-fly, and were never needing to be sprayed with weed killer? What if weed killer never came in bonny red spray-gun bottles? What if tattooed red butterflies never came out at night to land right in my nicotine-stained fingers? What if friends never

dragged friends along to parties with shite musak where they sat around getting stoned, drinking other people's beer and leching after their lasses? What if friends never absented themselves from said parties to shag the backs out of said other people's lasses while said friends were trying to swap said shite musak for hardcore techno? What if said other people never came back suddenly from booze runs to be told some cunt was upstairs shagging the back out of said other person's lass?

—How's your cock now? Numb yet?

—Nope, just pleasantly tingly. What about you?

—I don't have a cock.

—'S that why you helped yourself to mine, there?

—Dunno. Think it was the name.

—What?

—Marshall. How many chances am I gonna get to fuck a Marshall?

—As many as you want.

What if doors didn't fly open and enraged boyfriends didn't charge through them while horny, easily led boyos were getting sucked off by lasses with butterfly tattoos and strong tongues?

—What the fuck?

—Jimmy!

—Ah, Jesus Christ.

—I'm gonna fucking kill you.

—Jimmy, stop it, don't. Jimmy, you'll kill him. Jimmy!

—Get your arse up. Get dressed. You and me are taking a wee drive.

—Hey, c'mon, there's no need...

—I've just fucking decorated this room, so I ain't blowing your brains out all over it.

—Jimmy, please, don't!

—Don't worry yourself, Fi, you'll be getting a good hiding when I've done with this cunt.

What if I'd never pulled the wings off that butterfly: life destroyed? What if I hadn't dropped my egg and spattered yellow snotty goo all over my sandals, my toes: life destroyed? What if I hadn't found that half-dead seagull and

started in on it like it was a game of "Operation": life destroyed? What if I hadn't been in the back garden, out of earshot, watching that son-of-a-bitch dog wolf down sardines avec weed killer, while my mutant kid brother was falling down the stairs, breaking his neck, dying in a pool of beautiful red: life destroyed? What if I hadn't done more than enough to deserve having my brains blown out by Jimmy Mac-something who was bigger than me in every fucking way possible? Life destroyed.

What if Digby hadn't come out of the living room, hardcore techno blazing behind him, just as Jimmy was driving me down the stairs with his gun up my arse? What if Digby really had been a friend of Jimmy's? What if Digby really hadn't been a friend of mine? Life destroyed.

—What the fuck? Fuck's sake, Marshall.

—You know this piece of shit?

—I do, aye, Jimmy.

—Do I fucking know you?

—Don't you remember me, Jimmy? That job we did together.

—I ain't done any jobs with you. Don't even know your fucking name.

—Oh, sure, now I'm hurt. How can you be forgetting a name like Digby?

—Whatever your name is, this's got nothing to do with you. So stay outta it and we'll be on our way.

—Sure, sure. And where would you be taking him, now?

—Never you fucking mind.

—Marshall?

—It's alright, Digby. We're just going for a wee drive.

—Aye. Like fuck yous are.

What if Digby had been me and I had been Digby? Simple – Digby still would've ended up dead, a metal slug barrelling through his skull, dropping him like he was rolling off a tablespoon, mashing his brains raw-egg style. And I still would've walked away untouched, leaving a trail of footprints, each a wing ripped off a beautiful red butterfly.



Image by Vivek Chugh

TED BUNDY

A thirteen-inch Zenith colour TV
sits like a breadbox
on top of my laminate dresser.
I never believed I could die
until the night I watch
"The Deliberate Stranger" on it.
I sit on the edge of my bed
with one hand in the popcorn bowl
and the other twisting fingers
through the afghan folded there.
Even in thirteen inches
Ted looms large.

I would help a cute man
with a broken arm.
I would get in the Volkswagen
and never feel the fake cast
split my head open.
I am his kind of girl.
I wake to my severed head
on Ted's couch.
I look under the bed
for my own dismembered body.
I smell metal and hear knives
on the other side of the door.

My fake ID could get me
into clubs walking distance
from this room.
Clubs where Ted's face
appears on every boy
who offers me a daiquiri.

I am dressed to start living
it up in this bright big city.

Just on the other side of the door
it is out there waiting for me
but I am too afraid I might die
to go out there and live it.

I see Ted in the shadows
Ted on the streetcar
Ted at the I-Beam
buying me fruity drinks.
I hate this taste in my mouth
of paralysis
and the way I sink into
the shag carpet quicksand
of my shrinking room.

Wherever I go Ted is there.
Outside my bedroom window
in the garden in the moonlight
picking zucchini the size of my head.

GOLDEN GATE

San Francisco is a stone statue.
Instead of Lady Liberty
she is Free Your Mind. Instead of
curves she has edges
sharp as slate. Ancient beauty,
she has wisdom spots and tan lines,
a wild mop of salt and pepper
hair blown back and frozen there.
Those who love her look twice
and then once more.

George does yoga in Golden Gate Park.
He is lean and black and glowing
with a scruff of beard and John Lennon glasses.
When he does crow pose
in nothing but a blue Speedo, people stop.
Offended. Admiring. A dash of both.
George rolls the fattest, wettest joints
from the stickiest, greenest weed
and lavishes them upon me.
We listen to Billie Holiday
in his one-room Dubose Triangle walkup.
We smoke Camels in the window
and watch the hootchie mamas
and even though they are down on the street
looking up at us, it is George
who serenades them. They are happy.

I ride my Lombard Street cable car
backwards and forwards gloomily.
"You're too black and white,"
George tells me.
"Look for the gray."
In the foggiest city in America

gray rolls off rooftops,
drifts up from sewer grates,
speeds down the street
like a chase car in a bicycle race.
“I don’t need to look for it,”
I tell George. “It’s right in front of my face.”
He shakes his head.
“Little girl,” he says, “you still got
a lot of learning left in you.”

This is the story I tell at his funeral.

THE BIG ONE

On the fourth floor of the humanities building
in the redwood and eucalyptus forest
of my university, the ground rolls up
like a steadily building Pacific wave –
one of those pounding Ocean Beach
in earshot of this classroom.

Levelor blinds slash
like daggers across the windows.
Those of us raised here dive for desks
too small for book bags.
Twelve on a threshold for fifteen seconds
and the door police beat against us
like we are rioters.

Outside, the redwoods loom,
giants bent on crushing us.
A mushroom shape of smoke
rises behind Twin Peaks.
Some punk with a walkman radio
shouts the highlights –
“The bridge fell into the ocean!
The Bay Bridge is gone!”
It takes hours –
the Underground closed up
like a Mom And Pop eatery in the suburbs –
on a long MUNI bus ride so crammed
we have no choice but
become friends with each other.
As the teetering bus rises over
Potrero Hill a collective gasp –
our city black as the bottom of an oil drum.

We limp over broken concrete
in the dark – find our ways

past strangely quiet crack dens –
I clutch the handrail like a blind opossum –
creep up four flights of stairs
and meet neighbours for the first time.
Sixteen of us gather
in the weirdo's apartment.
Candles, candles everywhere and only gin to drink.
Teetotallers gulp five-olive martinis.
Straight-edgers take bong hits.
A huge vat of spaghetti on the gas range –
we won't hear till much later
how lighting stoves blew up houses at random.
We can't get enough pasta into us.

Sitting in a circle we listen
without interruption as each one
details exactly where, when, and what
we were doing the moment
the big one hit. No one has batteries
big enough for a boom box.
All we can do is sit, drink, smoke,
make new friends.
We will wonder about each other
days later, power restored,
news of our demise greatly exaggerated.
Just as slowly and just as quickly
as those fifteen seconds ticked by,
our names will drift away.
When we see each other in the hall,
we will nod like lovers embarrassed
by our ill-advised one-night stand.



Image by Benjamin Earwicker

E M I L Y R O S E C O L E

RED MOLLY CLAIMS HER PRIZE

*"Says James, 'In my opinion, there's nothing in this world
Beats a '52 Vincent and a red-headed girl'"*

- Richard Thompson, 1952 Vincent Black Lightning

I was his junkyard queen crowned in steel & leather
scraps, our lady of peeling paint & busted engines.
His Vincent painted thunder across my thighs,
bucked like a wild Arabian, sleek & alive.

I fell in love with his knife wounds, each shiner & split lip
I'd dress in alcohol. He knocked back fistfuls of fennel
seeds swollen with Jameson, said they were good for breath
& courage, as if he needed more of either.

I let him open my ear with his teeth,
fill my hollows with his scent, menthols & gasoline.
I'm a smart girl. I knew what road
we growled over.

Two days before his twenty-second birthday, someone's shotgun
peeled his lungs apart like a knife slitting peach flesh
from pit. I did my duty, salted his chest with tears. He dangled
the key on his ring finger, smeared it red as his sheets.

Coffin barely closed, I swung onto his prized machine &
rode my inheritance hard, tasted sundried wind,
savoured the power of drive.

THE SNOW QUEEN TAKES A HOSTAGE

I. What Grandmother Said

Winter distorts everything. Swarms of snow-bees shake their wings, coat each girder and shingle in slick down.

Watch for the Snow Queen, darling child, but keep your distance. She can prick your chest with a sickle and fill your throat with ice. If she finds you, think of climbing trees barefoot, of sunlight filling the cups of daffodils, of clean sheets, of candles guttering at dusk. Remember that all things are breakable, that everything thaws.

II. She Arrives

She steals into town like a magician: all misdirection, and fills the sky with falling mirrors. Daughter of the north wind and arctic sea, her bones are packed with the corpses of leaves, her teeth are brighter than fern frost, cloak heavy as a blizzard's howl. The wolfhounds tugging her sleigh bare their curled teeth. Her eyes pass over a locked window.

III. What She Offers

One kiss, and I'll flash freeze memory at the roots, erase every name your mother called you, every bottle your father ever threw, every jeer the children hissed. Leave this place where rats skitter through your walls and moths tongue holes in your favourite coat. Ride with me. I promise ice-blossoms in every window, a pair of blades sharp as a snowflake's edge for your skates, a palace where nothing shatters, nothing moulders, nothing ever melts. Come closer, child.

LEDA LEAVES MANHATTAN

Three days after it happens, I grab a Greyhound
going west. All I have: a duffel stuffed with socks, t-shirts,
oil paints, a coffee-stained photo of my mother. A little cash.

I spark Marlboro menthols in the lavatory, spit smoke
into the no-flush toilet. Stench curls and thickens.
Fluorescents buzz overhead. Floor lurches beneath

my feet. Nothing is steady anymore. Door clicks shut;
I slump back to my window seat. I need to be landlocked,
waterless. I have friends in Kansas City. I'll crash

on couches, find some doctor to take care of me,
if it comes to that. I'll pursue a new hobby: take a shotgun
to the edge of a lake and shoot at every shadow of wings.



Image by Anita Berghoef

TEMPS

It's no long-term solution, just something to keep me busy and balance the books. Just until something better comes along. I get in at eight-thirty. I work with three other people in a small room that's cut off slightly from the main office. The job's simple: I pick up some sheets of paper, input some information into the computer, then pick up some more, and so on.

Sometimes we talk, sometimes we don't bother. After all there isn't really that much to say.

"Can you check these entries?" Sam says, handing me a printout.

I take the printout from Sam and put it to one side. Our desks are angled in such a way that I can see pretty much everything Sam does. Right now he takes a drink of lemon squash from a clear glass on his desk. He gulps it down like I imagine a cow or horse drinks from a trough, drinking for a good nine or ten seconds before gasping loudly for air. I blink for longer than usual and get back to work with increased urgency. I need to get my numbers up.

"Cheers for checking those. Nice one," he says.

I make a noise in reply.

"We won't need to check anything when the new system is put in," he says.

"Yeah, it's taking them ages to set it up though," I say.

"Ian said they were meant to have put it in ages ago. But it can't be that long now. It should make things a lot easier."

I check my phone. No messages have come through. My phone menu is in Spanish because I tried to learn it a while ago.

"My chair's uncomfortable," says Ed, one of the other guys who works in the room. He's quite new.

"Yeah, so's mine."

"My back hurts though."

Some time passes and it's lunch time. I've got some sandwiches, each with a block of cheese and a small, pink rectangle of meat. I go and sit in the tea room. Some people go and sit in their cars for lunch, some go home. Most sit and watch television.

The program is a cooking show. This is what we watch every lunchtime.

"My sister's boyfriend is going to be on this," Shelley says.

"Oh yeah?" says Robin.

"Yeah," Shelley says, looking around quickly. No-one looks up.

Back at the desk I start inputting some more sheets. I've now done forty. I'm just about halfway through, and beginning to think about the end.

Dave comes by to talk. Dave is always walking past our room. He always turns his head as he passes to see if anything interesting is going on. Like a dog, kind of. Howard says Dave does this 'cause he doesn't want to miss out on a joke, and Howard knows Dave best.

"How many have you inputted today?" Dave says.

"Getting on for forty," I say.

"I've barely done any," Dave says. "I keep having to check printouts for that new girl."

"Is she learning all right?"

"Yeah, still not quite there but she's all right. Almost doesn't seem worth her learning with the new system being set up."

"Yeah, although it's taking them ages to set it up."

No-one says anything else. He stands at the door for a bit longer, then leaves. I pick up another sheet.

Some time passes. There's not long left of the day and I still haven't quite finished. I'm nearly there, but they keep pushing up the amount you have to do. My eyes are dry and itchy. My wrist aches.

The next day Ed is gone and there's a new guy, Fred. I say "Hi" and go and sit down. Fred wants to be a writer, and this is just a between-thing to save up some money.

"What do you want to write about?" I ask.

"I'm working on a novel at the moment," he says. He tells me all about the plot of his novel but I'm already not listening. I think about lunch break. It's four hours away.

At lunch break the cooking show is on. The chef serves a lemon tart for dessert and all I can think about is how yellow it is, just all that stuff on the top, that weird, fluorescent yellow colour.

The afternoon goes on for ages. I manage to finish early and spend the last ten minutes staring into space but then Jane comes in and I pretend I'm working.

"Could you do these five for me... erm..." She's trying to remember my name. "Ian?"

"No," I say. "Ian left a while ago."

"Oh right," she says. She gives me the sheets.

Wednesday Fred has left and there's a new guy called Phil. He is studying music with the Open University and he tells me about his band. I do a puzzle. He keeps talking all day. At lunch he says, "Can you show me where we eat?" He smiles at me.

I show him the tea room and we watch the cooking show. Today one of the four contestants breaks down in tears when he doesn't win.

Phil tells me more about his band.

"We're pretty new to the scene but we're close to a breakthrough."

"Yeah?" I say.

"Yeah. We're going on tour with this other band."

I nod.

Thursday I can barely type because my hands are shaking so much and I spend the whole of lunchtime in the toilet. I don't look at Phil for the whole day. I keep making mistakes which Sam notices when he checks my work. One time he points one out I dig my nails into my wrist and grip the skin and then twist it and it leaves a red mark in the shape of an arrow.

"You made another mistake here," Sam says when I sit down after lunch.

I say, "Okay," then I go to the kitchen and take the bottle of lemon squash from the kitchen to the toilet without anyone noticing. I pour it out in the toilet and piss in it then put it back in the kitchen. Later Sam goes out to make a glass of lemon squash. He comes in with it and sits down. He takes a long swig from it and carries on working.

"How does it taste?" I ask him.

"Just like normal," he says. "You almost wouldn't know."

On Friday as I walk into the office I try and think about what I want to do at the weekend but nothing comes to me. When I come into the room I see Ian sitting back in his usual place. I suddenly feel like I'm falling.

"Hi," he says. He carries on typing.

"What are you doing here?" I say, still not moving.

He looks up again. "It fell through. I'm between things. I'm just back here for a bit until..."

"...something better comes along," Sam and I say in unison with him. Ian goes back to typing.

Jane comes in and informs us matter-of-factly that someone called Ben was found dead in his home this morning and there is a new temp called Bill coming in to take his place. As she says this I begin to shake uncontrollably and just as she's leaving I say, "No."

She says, "What?"

I say, "That's not possible."

"What's not possible?" She's annoyed and wants to get back to work.

"Ben can't be dead."

"Why not?" she snaps.

"Because I'm Ben." I stare at her as I say this.

"No you're not," she says irritably, as she walks out. "You're Fred."

I turn back to the computer and start typing again. Maybe I am Fred.

The words I'm typing into the computer look like little people. I make it to lunch and instead of eating my sandwich I just rip it into pieces and crush it against my face. I go and sit in my car and run the engine and then I shriek random words while pounding my head against the steering wheel. On the cooking show one of the soufflés is poisoned but only the viewer knows.

Later Dave comes in and I think he says, "How many have you inputted today?" but all I hear is someone very slowly and clearly and emphatically saying the word "Shit" again and again, in a horrible, deep, booming voice, and I just stare at the screen until he goes away.

I get to seventy sheets and then flex my fingers, stop, and adjust my keyboard. I lean forward. Then I lean back. Then I say, "I don't want to do this anymore."

Sam looks up. He looks at me for a few seconds. He nods.

"It's a bit of a pain."

I nod. Then he says, "But the new system will be in soon. Everything will change when it comes in. It'll be better then."

"Yeah," I say. "But they've been talking about it for ages, and whatever it is it still hasn't come."



Image by Richard Dudley

MOVING

Immingham.

We had never heard of it before, out East,
Where the roads were just coloured veins
On the skin of a map; the names of towns
Reading like roll call on a war memorial.
We had the address of the new house,
And we passed the paper it was written on
Between us like the bread of Christ. Sacred.

Adventure. We crossed the moorland roads,
That snaked between the heather and hills
Like a great liquorice tongue. Motorbikes
Buzzed past like flashing hornets,
Reservoirs winked below the road
As if some great secret were being unfolded.
This would be the change. We arrived,

Yet the house was nothing new. A squat husk;
A concrete clad bunker, windows
Shuttered to keep the light in – bordered
By a garden sharp with nettles and the lost
Metal of a washing machine. Untameable,
Bound in by a missing fence and the graffiti
Of those arrived before; the weather turned,

Trying to rub out the scene. The fog clambered,
The way men in mud leach forward.
It was as though we were lost in the fabric
Of a glove, each thread wrapping around us,
A tightly woven screen. The greyness
Of it seemed to seep out of the stonework
Like the fumes of some exhausted dream.

CROWS ON THE SHED

Refugees attacking an aid truck
In desperation; tearing bread to bits
As though their belief in God is gone.
Not so much a fog but a belch of feathers,

A diesel slick straining the blue sea of sky.
When they came, no one knows, but they stay;
Lined up on the roof like an identity parade,
A raucous lintel of dark matter.

So far removed from how it was, when you
Would scatter crumbs for the sparrows and thrushes;
Delicately nibbling their way through
Each course, a dinner party amongst friends.

This is what memories become after death –
Not the valour-breasted robins
Of your garden; but this guttering
Fabric of blackness, as veils at a graveside.

PORPHYRIA'S LOVER

From Robert Browning

The rain set early in tonight,
As I made my way across town,
The sky cracked with brilliant light
And the wind tore power-lines down.
I sat in the taxi – back seat –
And reapplied my lipstick's gloss.
He'd begged, pleaded for us to meet
Frankly, I couldn't give a toss.
As long as he had the money;
And he wore the right protection –
I'd be his girl, sweetheart, honey,
The centre of his affection.
He stood before me in the hall,
All creepy smile and vacant look –
I let my golden, damp, hair fall,
Skewered my coat upon his hook.
I asked how he wanted to pay,
He gave me a fistful of notes,
I stripped down to my lingerie
And stuck my tongue right down his throat.
But he didn't want any of that,
So I took a seat at his side.
He was lonely, wanted a chat,
A friend to whom he could confide.
We talked and laughed, he sniffed my skin
Laid his head out on my shoulder –
He called me his girlfriend, wife, kin,
Said together we'd grow older.
Sure I cooed as I kissed his head,
He ran his fingers through my hair,
He breathed its scent, so soft he said –

That moment he was mine, mine, fair.
I made him face away, eyes closed –
And coiled my hair into a noose,
wrapped it around his neck and squeeze
Until his head hung dead and loose.

HOUSE FIRE

It was no surprise the thickness of the smoke,
As though it poured from your mind.
Ours would have been a gentle fog;
The kind that dampens the corners
Of the world. Not this toxic black
That bellows from broken windows
rising like a flock of birds scared into flight –
The smell of burn, of bonfire night
of memories well alight. Family
photos curling like infected nails.
And the sight of you, in the back
Of the ambulance all smoke hazed
And sooted as like some chimney sweep
Rescued from a Dickens tale. Unremorseful,
Yours eyes charred chestnuts. Enjoying
The glamour of it all.

Even now, after all these years, we find you;
As we strip wallpaper, uproot carpets –
It stirs as black mist as though you're dusting
For the fingerprints of your former life.
It snarls, twists, sticks in our throats;
As if your ghost itself is trying to reform.



Image by Wes Funderberg

INCUBATOR

Dirt has trodden itself into the shop
and inside the uprooting begins:
things dormant shudder in their rows
metals and plastics that quake the roots
the walls and labelled shelves.

Machinery gone natural disaster.
In the glassy mirrors of the fridges
the shining strips of can light flicker,
with a groan things clunk and smash
in the vast belly of the freezer.

Outside, ten fat brown spiders
grow their own silk homes
again on paint-dripped walls
and spin shadows against the white.

Examine this, living creature:
the embryonic split of orange juice
that hangs, suspended, in the bottle
waiting to form into life.

MY FRIEND, THE BRACHIOSAURUS

After Jurassic Park

Gentle friend you were resurrected
for us to roam a foreign Earth eat leaves
you don't recognise barely breathe.

No hindlegs strong enough to stand
no gut strong to process new plants
no strength of ancestry no future.

Bastard dinosaur you were recreated
by man built your own family from
your sisters became men to procreate.

Too misshapen for man-ruled earth
artificial ruled the natural they named
an asteroid after you before you lived.

You are artificial natural the most
you are ancient the most new cyclical
you are man dinosaur earth Brachiosaurus.

4AM

The evening is past its prime: the pumping
mass of nightclubs shut, and the time
for a kebab shop run has passed.

The stars are out. Night, pure night,
unfiltered through drunken eyes, now reigns,
and the light on the end of my cigarette
another sun.

The night dwellers amble home,
newly contemplative of a life other than their own.

All the while I watch a car freeze over,
and one by one my limbs go stiff,
icy like the windscreen wiper
crackle and split hit the ground
amidst the ash and dwindling embers
scattered fragments of glass
and distant incandescence.
And overhead, the sky.

DECIDUOUS

Baby teeth were never lost
but others nestled in the hollows
of the cheeks, like clusters;
little caves of white sharp stones,
slates of future things unbitten.

Imagine now they teethe:
itch to swarm the mouth,
emerge through kept gums
from skull gaps, close in
on milky infants to champ.



Image by "backtrust"

QUICKSAND

I was on my way to the butcher's when I stepped in quicksand. I hadn't really thought about quicksand in years. Maybe *Indiana Jones* or one of those Humphrey Bogart movies where he's a boatsman, and he wears a hat. I imagined the sand's texture to resemble grape jelly. It's actually more like the inside of a rhubarb pie.

I guess it's not that odd to step in quicksand, but the thing that really threw me off was that it was in the middle of ninety-seventh street by the Marshall's. I wasn't on my way to Marshall's though. I was trying to get some tenderloin. The stuff was up to my thighs. They tell you not to struggle, but struggling is my first response to most everything. I'd struggled my way to thirty-five. I struggled myself into a nice desk job where I sold a very expensive type of athletic cup that most people didn't really need. The support was incredible though. I sometimes just wore it around my studio apartment. I was like a squirrel is hugging your genitals. Maybe it was indescribable.

In any case, the quicksand was up to my thighs, and I wished I had the athletic cup because, really, who knows what's in Manhattan quicksand? My phone was ruined. I'd say about a hundred people passed me by. A few cars rubbernecked at first, but now they weren't even stopping. A clerk from Marshall's put a traffic cone by me so no one else would get stuck. I guess that was decent of him.

He wore a white shirt and a blue apron. He'd sweated through at the armpits, and he had a haggard look about him that told me something had taken him by surprise many years earlier, and he'd never recovered. I know that feeling.

I tried to wiggle toward him, but it sucked me in a little further. "Is there any way you might call someone for me?" I asked.

He took his flat palm, ran it down his wet face. It sounded like the crush of flesh under tires. He wiped the salty sweat onto the orange cone and set it down in front of me. "Listen, I've got my own problems."

"I understand," I said.

The street lamps flickered on, and the traffic lights glowed. I became tired, though I'd never tried sleeping standing up before. My body sagged forward. The air cooled. I dreamt of a young trapeze artist I'd seen as a boy.

How precise her steps were, her taut skin and blue tights. I'd wondered if women like that really existed. Years later I met one, but I was not her trapeze artist. I was a man who'd existed many times and never in the right place. Always falling into quicksand and showing up to parties while the girls were still dressing.

At sunrise, the man who sold cat-skin handbags and cell phone cases laid out a thin rug he kept under his stand and began his morning prayer. It was very moving. Someone tried to come over, waving five dollars at him, but he wouldn't say a word. The sun beat on his dark skin. I envied his sovereignty.

The next day was hotter than the last. A man and a woman stopped to look at me. They were very blonde. One was blonder than the other, but I wasn't sure which. They were like small sun gods, and I enjoyed looking at them.

"Where are you from?" I asked. It's very boring being in quicksand, after all.

They whispered to one another in a strange language.

The man's face glowed like Mayan sacrifice. The woman's hair drifted to cinder.

I looked up in the sky because I knew that's where they were from. I pointed. "Up there?"

The blonde woman agreed. She nodded. The blond man seemed unsure and smiled with embarrassment. They walked away, the man tugging the woman by her porcelain arms. I regretted speaking to them. How would you like it if the Venus De Milo started asking you questions, I thought. Not that I was the Venus De Milo, but it was the best example I could think of. I hadn't eaten in a very long time. It's like they say, you never realize how much quicksand will take from you until it's gone.

On the third day of quicksand I smelled my body becoming part of the earth. The sand gripped my waist. I rested my hands on its back. The city can be very cruel to those it deems unworthy. The night was so quiet. I only heard wind. The pavement grew sticky and moist like liquorice gum.

My parents came to visit.

"So are you happy?" asked my mother. She brought a small basil plant. It smelled like June in Sicily, and I remembered feeling hot and content

like a dog in the sun.

“To tell you the truth, Ma, I don’t like it here much.”

“Why don’t you just get out?” asked my father.

I was too embarrassed to tell him I couldn’t. I wanted to prove to him that I could. “It’s actually not so bad here. I have more space than my old apartment.”

“Well that’s good to hear,” he said. “That place was a real dump.”

“We just worry about you,” said my mother. She started blowing gently on the basil leaves.

“What’s that for?”

“I heard they like it. Everything needs caring for.” The purple in her hair deepened in the baking sun. She squeezed my burnt, chafing arm. “We miss you. You ought to stop by.”

I nodded. “I will. It’s just hard to get to Queens from here.”

“Your mother, she worries,” said my father, watching the cat-skin vendor praying with a look of bewilderment on his face. “Does he always do that?”

“A few times a day,” I said.

“Well he ought to get a better rug. That rug is filthy,” said my mother. She often worried about other people’s rugs.

They both kissed me on the cheek. My mother hugged me. It hurt and felt wholesome. I hadn’t felt whole in a while.

The quicksand wrestled my body. It clung around my chest. It’s amazing how many different types of hubcaps there are. The way women pack their flesh into shoes. How every cigarette stump is warped like childrens’ ear lobes. There is a grimness to the bottom of the world.

I was asleep when I saw her. Really, I couldn’t lift my head, so I only saw her ankles and knees.

“My name is Alice,” she said. Her voice sounded like gasoline. There was something combustible in it. Something I wanted to capture and inhale. “Are you a sinker, too?”

“A sinker?” I asked.

She squatted down, and I saw her thighs.

“You know,” she said suggestively. She dipped her hand languidly into the quicksand. First her nails, then her knuckles, the curve of her palm. A

rush of air blew inside her skirt.

“There’s a name for people like us?” I asked.

Her tan legs rubbed together. “Could I join you?”

I tried to nod my head, but the quicksand wrapped around my neck. Alice slipped off her golden sandals and dipped her foot in. She shook with pleasure. Then, without hesitation, she plunged her other foot in and began to sink. The murky sand engulfed her calves and thighs, and her skirt settled around it like a parachute.

“I’ll wait for you,” I said.

“I hope you do.”

I would. I would wait for her to sink into the earth with me, and we would live forever, sinking downward like the roots of ancient and forgotten willows growing hotter and deeper toward the centre of the earth until we fused and became unflinchingly whole.



Image by "myka87"

J A C K H O U S T O N

ALLINTHISTOGETHER

We're squeezed into the corners
cups of tea perched on knees

while they take up
the middle of the room
as if they own the place

Polite we sigh and blow
to cool our drinks They flap ears

& the breeze created
moves the very air We try
to make the best of awkwardness

pointedly not noticing defecation
or the stamping of feet

But our attempts at conversation
falter Through their tree-trunk legs
we can't see eye to eye

Then one of them trumpets loud
and lowers a trunk to slurp

at your tea You force a smile & turn

toward the window The day outside

is bright & clear & free

COMPLAINT

The waiting room
smelt like somebody
I didn't know's front

room. The doctor,
a gently voiced
young man in a light

pink shirt, called
me in politely. I took
a chair: the only one

he offered. He asked me
what my problem was.
I showed him it.

He said not to worry,
not to come back
in unless it changed

shape, or colour,
or began to weep.
So I did. Not worry,

that is; just carried on.
Nothing to worry
about is nothing

to worry about, right?
I covered it up
with a scarf: a nice silk one

from M&S

Mark got me – he's so kind.

Everything was fine

until the day it split

open and a pus-yellow

tongue poked out.

It started to slowly lick

its own... lips?

And then it began to wail.

UNMARKED

A blank,
the garden's been
wiped clean
by fresh snowfall.

The flowerbed
forgotten. No effort
of lawn
remembered.

A void
stretching frozen
all the way
to the fence.

And right now
all I want
to do
is leap into it.

'NOIA

everyone is talking
& hiding their pretty
mouths
so you can't see
their lips
whispering
about how they hate
you how they
hate you how
they hate you



Image by Simon Kingsnorth

THE COMPANY OF MOTHS

The summer my family broke up I stayed on my aunt's farm and slept in a bedroom with no curtains. Its wide window faced vast silage fields I couldn't see; they were invisible in the anonymous darkness of the countryside. I kept a shadeless yellow light on when I couldn't sleep, and read books my older cousin left there years before: *Z For Zachariah* and a novelisation of a plot from the soap opera *Home And Away*.

Out in the yard, a cat or fox would trigger the security light, a giant bulb, like from a football field. A panic of moths would drown it in minutes. Light would drip from them as they bounced in a swirl, like they were part of a bigger life form. A few would break away. Their little screaming faces tore up to my window, as their wings beat like they were trying to attract my attention. Inching my face nearer to the glass, I studied their silent mouths stretched open, and imagined their tiny voices pleading for me to let them in. There had been a lot over the past half year to teach me about pity.

One night I let a moth in, more by accident than to see what would happen. It flew straight for the bulb, circling it a few times. It bounced off, like it wanted to land, but couldn't. The bulb gave an aggravated hum. The moth flew to the wall. I tried to lift it off with the cover of the book, but it flew to a poster of some boyband, *Bros* or *Brother Beyond*, my cousin had left behind, landing on one of their faces. Even if I did catch it, I would have to choose between setting it loose in the hall or trying to sneak it out the window, where others were waiting for their chance to come in. I was learning to distrust my kinder assumptions, and knew that I couldn't keep the moth in the room with me, where it would nestle in my hair and eat my clothes. I whacked the book hard against the moth, crushing it against the wall. The dead bag of dust floated lazily to the ground like it didn't mind. And even though the others had seen me do it, they clung beating at the widow, queued up, preferring the unobtainable light and the whack of my book to the darkness outside.

SONG OF THE RAT

On the morning train from Ladywell to London Bridge, sweat swamps my toxic pours. The sharp bright morning light tickles my tired jaw, that softly stings from shaving. Underslept and squeezed into the carriage, my saliva tastes of the sleep I've missed. The heavy fabric of my winter coat rubs against my cheek, reddening it further. The heat of being so tightly packed with other people makes the coat stifling. I can hear beats from someone's headphones. Overheard music always sounds aggressive on the morning commute. Looking at everyone's expression as we all wish we'd all fuck off, it is the perfect soundtrack.

The train stops mid-track, just after leaving the station. If it moved we would still be stuck in these uncomfortable contortions of elbows, shoulders and bags, seeking to eliminate the spaces that separate us, while fighting for the most natural stance with our turns and pushes that aim to seem reasonable. The train moves again. It will be at least another fifteen minutes before we reach the nearest station. We are stuck until then.

A girl is crushed tight against the door, in a way that you know she would die if the door malfunctioned and opened. She pushes back with equal force against everyone, but unable to gain personal space opens her mouth and sings "It's a fine day," as if acknowledging we are all primed to explode. No-one meets her eye. We all will the train to go faster, or the song to stop.

ME, TOAD AND THE IDIOT TOOTING SKAG

Toad unfolds the tinfoil. The Idiot rubs his hands and stands back. Toad drops off-white crumbs, like marzipan, onto the creased silver sheet. Its surface is dented, so the early evening light, already darkened under the shelter of trees, reflects unevenly back in broken beams. Struggling across short distances they collapse in on themselves. The foil appears to glow, as it holds the light close and concentrated.

I swig straight vodka from a bottle and peer at them through the glass. I feel distant, like I am watching this scene on television.

Toad pulls a pen from his pocket and holds its empty tube between his teeth. He flicks a lighter below the tin foil. The little whitish lumps melt into an oily liquid, reflecting rainbows. Toad hoovers up the fumes like an anteater. He holds them for a second, then blowbacks his breath into The Idiot's mouth. The Idiot's chest swells with pride. Toad offers me a puff, but it's not my bag. He sits down against a tree stump and drools.

The Idiot's voice rings in my ears, as he gleefully relates his drugs hell. I suppose I am his first audience. This story will grow with lies of clogged veins, defibrators and HIV scares, until he is an old man demonstrating how he once injected into his impotent cock.

No one else will come here tonight. Alone in the autumn evening in the side-clearing, not for the first time, I drain my bottle and think about sleep. But my legs don't want to walk the many miles home.

AFTER THE PARADE

Glass crunched under my mum's car tyres as her Corsa crawled up the road, which had been clean when we drove down it a few hours earlier, before the parades passed through. As the wheels rotated I felt each chip of glass dig into the hard rubber, tearing at the air inside. The tyres fought back, powdering the glass, but it was a losing fight; the glass only needed one good hit to win.

Parade-goers still lined the roads, drinking carry-outs.

"If those hoors bastards have to have their fucking parades, they should be made to clean up the fucking roads afterwards," Mum shouted, eyeballing the nearest group.

They stepped out onto the road in front of us. Another group a bit further up, who'd heard her too, walked out to join them. A couple of the lads held empty bottles like weapons. There was no room to drive around them.

"Drive through them," I said.

My mum looked at me like she couldn't believe I'd said it. I could see the fear in her face. The group closed in, compacting themselves within spitting distance of the car. The seat below me felt unsteady, like one of the wheels had punctured.

"They're not going to hurt an old woman," I said. "Drive."



Image by "beermug"

FAILURE DAY

The One Percent's more gung-ho bitches
bitch that their taxes go towards
this holiday. None do. It's private,
mid-spring when the crops burn.
Pink slips tend to appear around that date;
roaches swarm, and jellyfish.
Spouses leave, and the one left waits
for talk-show hosts' routines about the day.
At their desks, despite stern memos,
the employed for a moment contemplate
without distance, analyze without theory.
Motivational speakers have
their hands full, sweat more than usual.

The fact about when hybrid batteries
die is well-established; don't tell *me*
it's coincidence. In the arts,
kids wonder whether a Personal Style
is possible or if it's even uncool
to think of. In his cave,
the last ecstatic of an unknown faith
embraces the dull sky and cries,
You are my sunshine. Bars
tactfully add an hour to Happy Hour.

MINIMA MORALIA

They've found something,
about a quarter mile
beyond the wire fence. They peck at it,
step back, consider,
reposition themselves, re-enter
the circle. *Is there anything?*
No one else joins, and when
someone calls from above,
they take off. It's just mud.

All afternoon, a large group
divides itself among
that spot again, the banks
of the reservoir (avoiding geese),
and lawns. There are fights.
Was anyone responsible
for the corpse of a squirrel
deep in the ivy, far
from cars? They all profit;

likewise from the otherwise futile
grass-seed. Towards dusk
more fights, which the largest seem
to ignore. They all gather
in the bamboo above the cracked
driveway, and scream and scream
at each other for hours. One
remains on the walk
the following morning, not starved yet.

TALENT

It's basically oval
with wires, contacts, tubes;
only now do the engineers
see how these might have been hidden.
The techs look bedraggled,
their gaze directionless, their dislike
of the General subdued but constant.
The project managers in careful ties
are telling him in different ways,
This gives us the stars, but the techs
are wondering who "we" are and what
he'll do with stars; they want
to sleep. The scientists,
also post-partum, tell themselves
that at least they're dealing with him:
Congress would subpoena them for witchcraft.

They're all ill. Something seeped;
not gamma rays but something unsuspected,
perhaps time. The General, pig-pink,
in green with medals, addresses them
with vast blocks of words;
language for him is performative.
He knows they see him as a pig.
It's part of the project, as are
congratulations, and the fact
that the thing (it has the inertia of
a battleship) will be stored
until such time as it can, if it can,
be weaponized. While they
one way or another find oblivion,

who are now gazing at the object
quietly floating three feet off the floor.

GOOD IN A ROOM

Myths are distorted facts.
I try to explain the distinction.
They look at me goggle-eyed,
as opposed to their heavy-lidded
earnest look when I explain
Bergman films, Sartre, the idea
of ontology, getting a bit sloppy
when I reach poststructuralism. I'll say this
for them: they never actually snore.
Then they go off to hunt cows.

Yesterday it was Malevich's Black Canvas.
But the problem
is that explaining one thing means explaining
whatever came before or to the side,
and gets sloppy. They return with a few
of those awful wizened potatoes and offer them to me.
Then I berate myself for being intolerant,
elitist, uncaring, and I beat
my chest and weep, and *they* weep...
the effect of tears on those almost inert faces!

In a million years they'll invent the still.

I'd love to have an original idea
but there's no one here to have it with.
So I describe original ideas,
adding that anyway they always occur
at the edge, they're a limit-phenomenon, a coloration,
a tincture, they never emerge in a vacuum.
Then I have to explain vacuum,
which leads to Adorno, "the truth
is the whole," Marcuse, Hegel, being Jewish.



Image by Rick Sampson

C O N T R I B U T O R S

James Nixon lives in South London and is the editor of the poetry blog and anthology series *Fry Your Friends*. He is currently studying Creative Writing at postgraduate level at Royal Holloway, University Of London. His poetry has previously featured in *Smiths*, the *Boston Poetry Magazine*, *Long Exposure Magazine* and *The Patchwork Paper* and is forthcoming in *Neon* and *The Wait* anthology. James is passionate about the arts – his heroes include Charles Bernstein, Junior Kimbrough and Terrence Malick.

Tracey Icton is an author and Creative Writing tutor from Teesside. She won the 2013 HISSAC short story prize, was runner up in the 2013 Cinnamon Press Short Story Competition, won the 2011 Writers Block NE *Home Tomorrow* Short Story Competition and was shortlisted for the 2012 Bristol Short Story Competition. *Green Dawn At St Enda's*, her debut novel and part one of her Irish Trilogy, will be published by Cinnamon Press in early 2016. Her website is www.trywriting.co.uk and more information about her PhD research is available at www.northumbria.ac.uk.

Debra McQueen teaches school, rides a motorcycle, and loves to travel. This year she's published a scandalous resignation letter in *WORK* (www.workliterarymagazine.com) and poetry in *The Legendary* (www.downdirtyword.com). Her creative nonfiction appeared in *The Art Of Medicine In Metaphors* in 2013. She's from San Francisco, now living happily in South Carolina.

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Matthew Di Paoli obtained his MFA at Columbia University for fiction. He has been published in *Black Denim Lit*, *Carte Blanche*, *Blue Penny Quarterly*, *Poydras Review*, *Pithead Chapel*, *Gigantic*, *Fiction Week Literary Review*, *Newport Review*, and *Post Road* literary magazines among others. Currently, he is releasing his novel, *Killistanbul*, with El Balazo Media.

Jack Houston's other works can be found online on the *Morning Star's* Well-Versed page, *Ink Sweat & Tears* and *The Lake*. His poems are forthcoming in *South Bank Poetry* and again on *Ink, Sweat & Tears*.

Gerard McKeown is an Irish writer living in London. His work has been published in *3:AM*, *Litro*, *Neon* and *Fuselit*, among others. He has performed as support for acts as diverse as John Cooper Clarke, Stewart Home, and Frank Sidebottom. More of his work can be viewed at www.gerardmckeown.co.uk.

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