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Susmita Chatto, The Book Bag



Best
{ BRITISH }
Short Stories

2021

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CROMER

To the memory of David Wheldon (1950-2021)

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NICHOLAS ROYLE

INTRODUCTION

WOULD PEOPLE WANT to read about the pandemic, somebody asked, fairly early on, in the pandemic. Probably not, or not yet, came the answer. At some point, yes, of course, and then the challenge would be *how* to write about it.

People certainly wanted to read during the pandemic, and to write. For me, last year, more than ever, it was a question not of casting around for good stories to include in this anthology, but of making hard decisions regarding which to leave out. I don't mean that in the sense of certain authors being 'left out of' or 'omitted from' prize longlists, in the words of newspaper reporters whenever longlists are published, as if their inclusion should be taken for granted as a starting point, merely because of their status.

More stories written during the pandemic, about the pandemic, will be written and published this year, or next year, or in five years' time. Most of the stories I read last year - or this year but published last year - were probably written the year before. Some, however, were clearly written, as well as published, in 2020; indeed, some publishing projects happened specifically in response to the pandemic. Take, for instance, *Seen From Here: Writing in the Lockdown* (Unstable Object) conceived and edited by Tim Etchells and Vlatka Horvat and available as a PDF on a pay-what-you-want basis with all proceeds going to the Trussell Trust, a charity campaigning to end hunger in the UK. Contributors to

Seen From Here included Courttia Newland, M John Harrison, Will Eaves, Eley Williams and Rachel Genn. Genn's piece, like many others, experimented with form and approach, as did her contribution to *On Care*, edited by Rebecca Jagoe and Sharon Kivland, and published by artist and writer Kivland's excellent small press, founded in 2015, Ma Bibliothèque.

Another relative newcomer, 3 of Cups Press describe themselves as a 'micropublisher dedicated to providing a platform for voices otherwise unheard in the mainstream'. Their 2020 project *Outsiders* was an original anthology edited by Alice Slater, with a foreword by Irenosen Okojie. It comes with a prefatory page of what I might call trigger warnings under the heading Content Notes, but for only ten of the fifteen stories, which made me wonder about the other five, and, at the back of the book, a list of resources under headings relating to mental health, abuse/assault and LGBTQ+. Highlights among the stories for me were Anna Walsh's 'The Walker', Heather Parry's 'The Curse' and Julia Armfield's 'Wendigo'.

The Swan River Press comes of age this October, when it celebrates its eighteenth birthday. Founded in Dublin in 2003 by Brian J Showers, Swan River Press publishes mostly short story collections and short story anthologies. Its anthology series *Uncertainties*, which specialises in strange stories and tales of the uncanny, reached volume IV in 2020. Edited by Timothy J Jarvis and featuring a cover painting by artist, sculptor and writer B Catling, whose interwar ghost story *Munky* also graced Swan River's list in 2020, *Uncertainties IV* includes top-drawer stories by Lucie McKnight Hardy, Gary Budden, Claire Dean, Camilla Grudova, Marian Womack, Charles Wilkinson and others.

Author and Influx Press co-founder Gary Budden published a new collection in 2020 with Dead Ink entitled

London Incognita (great title. Number of literary editors who commissioned batch reviews of *London Incognita* and my own new collection *London Gothic* (Confingo Publishing), when they were published at more or less the same time last autumn: zero).

Among other single-author collections published last year, I enjoyed getting stuck into Anna Vaught's *Famished* (Influx Press), a feast of mostly snack-sized, sometimes quite dark, treats. If you've ever considered a tasting menu and doubted that the experience would be satisfying, you might look upon this collection and think 100 pages would be hardly sufficient, but by page 100 you'll feel both stimulated and full. There's more food in Malaysian-British short story writer Elaine Chiew's globe-trotting collection *The Heartsick Diaspora* (Myriad Editions) and more darkness in Nigel Humphreys' tombstone-sized *Beyond Dead* (Zagava).

John Muckle's *Late Driver* (Shearsman) is a deeply pleasurable tootle around airfields, navigations and country roads by scooter, Jag, skiff or Daimler to the faint strains of Glenn Miller and the creak of leather seats in the back. The author initiated the Paladin Poetry series. I don't know much about poetry, but I know what I like.

I also like music. Who doesn't? OK, some people, apparently, but, as I write these words, I'm listening to surely the best single released in 1980, John Foxx's 'Underpass', and as I write these words - actually, give me a minute while 'Underpass' finishes - I'm listening to Foxx's 2015 album, *London Overgrown*, which works remarkably well as a soundtrack to his first short story collection, *The Quiet Man* (Rocket 88 Books).

Among the magazines that persisted heroically through the pandemic were two of my favourites, *Lighthouse* and *Structo*. 'How to Think Small', in *Lighthouse* issue 21, was so good, its author, Alice Franklin, should be thinking big. *Structo*, meanwhile,

unless I was not paying attention prior to 2020, has gone smaller and is now exactly the same size and format as *Lighthouse*. Surely it used to be one of those awkward, bigger sizes? I don't have my back copies to hand to check. But I do have issue 20 to hand, which contains a story by Tom Benn called 'Stuart Hall and Stuart Hall', which is so good it makes me wish this book were called *Best British Short Stories 2021 and Best British Short Stories 2021*, so that, presumably, it would have two different selections of stories and I would be able to fit in twice as many.

One or two of those stories would come from *Black Static*, which, during 2020, kept to its bi-monthly schedule, publishing devilishly good tales by Françoise Harvey, Abi Hynes, Stephen Hargadon, Daniel Carpenter, Lucie McKnight Hardy, Simon Avery, Tim Cooke, Danny Rhodes, Matt Thompson and Christopher Kenworthy. Others still could have come from issue two of online US magazine *Action, Spectacle*, featuring among its guest editors AJ Ashworth and among its prose contributions excellent stories by James Wall and David Rose.

I used to have an occasional moan that *Granta* would publish stories, novel extracts, essays, memoir and other forms of non-fiction without labelling each piece, so that you didn't know what was what and you might waste your time reading, for example, a novel extract. Now, editor Sigrid Rausing offers - I almost said 'pens' - a reflective intro that helps me avoid the novel extracts. 'Pen', in the sense of 'to write', is one of those words, isn't it, like 'don' and 'atop' and 'unceremoniously'? In issue 152, Adam Nicolson performs a magic trick in 'This Fearful Summer', a story of the plague sweeping through a seventeenth-century English village, by making almost 400 years disappear.

Issue 12 of *The Lonely Crowd* was celebrating five years of excellent publishing but had a contemplative, at

times poignant, feel to it, unless it was simply that lockdown was getting to me. An impressive roster of authors included Elizabeth Baines, Mike Fox, Deirdre Shanahan, Jonathan Gibbs and Justine Bothwick. Editor John Lavin wrote movingly about the death of his father. 'I was in a place beyond words where there is no comfort.'

The *New Statesman* published two stories in 2020: Bernardine Evaristo's 'The White Man's Liberation Front' in the spring special and Lawrence Osborne's 'The White Gods' in the Christmas special. The *New Yorker*, meanwhile, continued to demonstrate its support for the form by publishing a new short story every week. Among those by British writers that appeared in 2020, I enjoyed Tessa Hadley's 'The Other One' and Hari Kunzru's 'A Transparent Woman'.

Scottish magazine *Extra Teeth* had launched in November 2019 - take a bow, Jules Danskin and Heather Parry - and landed again in August 2020 packed with good stories, among them Isha Karki's 'Hair', and striking design.

Open Pen is another magazine that kept going. I enjoyed Jacob Parker's 'BorrowMyBaby' in issue 25. I also enjoyed Barbara Robinson's 'Borrow My Hubby' in *Confingo's* autumn 2020 issue. Both stories had some fun with their unlikely set-ups before digging down to find something more peculiarly affecting. In fact, right at the end in the case of Robinson's story. The very last word.

Confingo's spring 2020 issue was good, too, with notable stories by Livi Michael, Graham Wilson, Fran Harvey, Gary Budden, John Saul and Robert Stone. Stone's 'Swallow' reminded me of M John Harrison, in the selection of details and angles that suggest a male character's view of a female and in the routes and trajectories of their dancing around each other, but, for all the random cruelties that might glisten darkly among

the kindnesses in Harrison's stories, he would never commit to paper – he would never even allow himself to think – what happens at the end of Stone's story.

Ambit published some excellent work in 2020, not least by Giovanna Iozzi, Tom Heaton, and Sonia Hope, whose single page piece about a visit to a ceramicist was the stand-out for me in issue 240. I would be no use at judging whether a short story writer's attempts at poetry were any good, whereas I hope I can spot when a poet makes a successful visit to the world of short fiction. Mel Pryor's 'Maman' in *Ambit* issue 239 shows a sophisticated understanding of narrative, structure and character to match her use of language.

Short story writer Claire Dean set up micro publisher Curious Press as an outlet for her handmade chapbooks and 'pocket-sized workshops', and two new stories duly appeared – 'DiscountWonderStore™' and 'Old Snow' – which, had they not quickly sold out, I would have urged readers to obtain, as they are things of great beauty. As was 'Ada & Carter', a new list story by artist and writer Andrea Mason, published by The Aleph. So, too, 'Loom', a short story by Matthew Turner set in and around the empty mansions of London's Millionaires' Row and published as an illustrated chapbook by Gordian Projects. Nightjar Press – full disclosure, my Nightjar Press – published ten original stories in chapbook format during 2020, two pairs of titles in the spring, two pairs in the autumn, and a bonus pair to cheer everyone up at Christmas, when we also published a mini-anthology, *The Invisible Collection*, containing eleven new stories, on the theme of invisibility, by students, alumni and staff from the Manchester Writing School at Manchester Metropolitan University.

If the chapbook is the best way to publish a good short story – an outstanding story deserves its own cover, covert art, maybe even an ISBN (which requires the

publisher to send copies to copyright libraries) – the anthology is surely the next best thing. Outstanding stories rub shoulders with other outstanding stories at a glittering party hosted by the editor. Returning to the theme of empty London property, *Denizen of the Dead: The Horrors of Clarendon Court* (Cripplegate Books) is an anthology fuelled by anger at the activities of property developers in London. So incensed was editor (and novelist) Stewart Home by the story of one particular development, he invited an entire high-rise block's worth of talent to contribute new stories on the subject. Step forward Chris Petit, Tom McCarthy, Bridget Penney, Iphgenia Baal, Tariq Goddard, Steve Finbow, John King, Chloe Aridjis and many others. I loved it.

I also loved *Zahir: Desire and Eclipse* (ZenoPress) edited by Christian Patracchini, in which poets and writers of fiction and non-fiction respond to the Borges story, 'Zahir'. I couldn't resist Emma Bolland's story, and would have loved to be able to squeeze in Octavia Bright's 'How to Lose Yourself' as well. I even derived enormous enjoyment from a novel extract, *On Mooning Considered As One of the Fine Arts* by Andrew Gallix; the novel, *Loren Ipsum*, is forthcoming from Dodo Ink.

The New Abject edited by Sarah Eyre and Ra Page is the latest in Comma Press's series of tales of modern unease. I picked Meave Haughey's 'The Reservoir', but felt uneasy at not also being able to make room for Margaret Drabble's 'The Leftovers' and Alan Beard's 'The Room Peels', which was dedicated to the memory of his friend and mine, Joel Lane, whose collections *Scar City* and *The Earth Wire* were reissued last year by Influx Press in beautiful new editions. The inclusion in *The New Abject* of a story by my favourite living artist, Mike Nelson, had me digging out my copy of *The Alpine Fantasy of Victor B and Other Stories* (Serpent's Tail) edited by Jeremy Akerman and Eileen Daly, a 'unique

collection' of short fiction - published in 2006 - by contemporary British Artists, and rereading B Catling's fine contribution, 'Heart of the Forest'.

Is it a short story or is it an essay? Maybe Claire-Louise Bennett's *Fish Out of Water* (Juxta Press), in which she writes about the portraiture of Dorothea Tanning (another artist who turned to fiction), is a reminder that I should get over my need to categorise things. Is Douglas Thompson's *The Suicide Machine* (Zagava) a novel or a short story collection? The same question has been asked about Claire-Louise Bennett's *Pond*, although I didn't hesitate to reprint a story from it in *Best British Short Stories 2016* and I've no doubt that Thompson's 'Our Father the Sea' deserves its place in the very book, if you are reading these words, that you may be holding in your hands.

In the one-that-got-away slot this year is Belfast-based writer Emma Devlin's story, 'Home, Sisters', which was published in the *Irish Times*, not, as I had thought, in 2020, but in 2019. It's an excellent story, which I wish I'd read in time to include in last year's volume.

Finally, *Brixton Review of Books* doesn't publish fiction every quarter, but when it does it's worth waiting for, such as Jen Calleja's 'Edit History' in issue 11, and, in issue 12, 'Max's Pizzeria' by Amber Musawi. In this story, a Miss Folly telephones Max's Pizzeria to order a pizza - large, half pepperoni, half cheese - to be delivered to her home. She gives the postcode, ST0 0RY, which is *Best British Short Stories'* spiritual postcode. I hope neither Amber nor *Brixton Review of Books* will mind if I quote her biographical note in full: 'I'm Amber Musawi and I'm eight years old. I'm Anglo-Iraqi and live in Brixton with my Mum, Dad, and little brother Alexander. My favourite book is *Coraline* and I love to play football.'

NICHOLAS ROYLE
Manchester

August 2021

TOM BROMLEY

RINGS

MY RUNNING CLOTHES appear to have shrunk. I can feel the stretch across my festive stomach, the way they no longer reach down to cover off my midriff. There's a pale pink ring of flesh peering out over the ledge of my jogging shorts, a stuffed crust of late-night cheese and other 'Because it's Christmas' indulgences. Not that it needs to be Christmas.

It's early, barely 7am. The roads through Stratford-sub-Castle are silent as I follow the track that swerves away from the street, a footpath that funnels up between two fields towards Old Sarum. It's a gentle morning, pewter grey, a swirl of mist wrapping around the hills like a throw. Stillness is in the air, everywhere except the pounding of my feet. I can hear their echo, feel the shush of grass and slip of mud underneath. I feel my breath, too, sharp gulps of air sinking into my lungs.

I can taste, too, the wine in my mouth from last night. A good bottle of red, or at least it seemed that way then. I'd watched the fireworks on TV, listened to the boom of the local ones outside. In the distance, I heard a car alarm go off, triggered by the noise. Inside, my phone was peppered with New Year messages. *Have a good one mate! Should have come out! Here's to a better 2020!*

The footpath tops out and joins another, a lower ring around Old Sarum. It's overgrown with hawthorns hanging low enough that I stoop and stumble. I cut right, onto a path that scores up a field to the next level of

ramparts. A scattering of sheep glance up as I struggle past. By now, my heart is really beginning to thump. I can taste the dehydration on my tongue. My stomach threatens a stitch.

I join the next rampart, run away from the city. After about a hundred yards or so, there's a path to my right, up into the wider ring around Old Sarum itself. It's puddled with the recent rain, the sort of run-up between two slopes where only momentum carries you through.

But then I am up and the open ground around Old Sarum stretches out before me. There's the remnants of the original cathedral, before Old Sarum was left behind and they built a new church down on the plain. Legend has it they fired an arrow from up here, and where that landed was where the cathedral was built. Today its spire, tall enough to touch the sky, sits hidden. But I make like an archer anyway, aim my imaginary arrow at where I think it might be, and fire.

I catch my breath. The mist softens and dampens the view - the city below and rolls of hill beyond are little more than faint sketches. I'm feeling hot, except for the ring of fat that refuses to tuck in, now a sharp shade of pink in the cold. I'm not one for resolutions, but this year needs to be different. I'm a big man, as Michael Caine would say, but I'm out of ...

Shape.

It's unclear what it is at first. First a charcoal drawing, then its antlers sharpen up as it clicks into focus and colour, a deep brown against the greys. It has white spots as though someone has dusted it with icing sugar, dark chocolate eyes that scour me. We watch each other - the deer is as lithe and toned as I am fat and unfit. Then with a duck of its head, it is away, running back into the mist.

From the other side of Old Sarum, another shape. Shorter, darker, more blurred. A black dog, a glossy Lab. When it sees me, it stops, too. But then, unlike the deer, it

pads across. As I hold out my left hand, palm forwards, I wince at the whiteishpink circle on my third finger. Still not used to that. The dog sniffs my hand and drops a tennis ball, which it is holding in its mouth. I try to ignore the warm skin of saliva and throw it at an imaginary set of stumps.

Unlike the lightness of the deer and the dog, I hear the soft scrunch of the owner's footsteps before I see her. She's like a pencil sketch at first, the way a draughtsman captures a person in a few lines. That's how I describe it to her later, the gentle arc of her curves. She's wrapped up warm: a red puffa coat, navy scarf masking the bottom half of her face, a matching beanie hat pulled down to leave just a filmstrip of face. As the dog-owner approaches, the Labrador rushes out from behind her, straight back to me. He drops the ball, panting, expectant. I crouch down and hurl the ball away again.

'He likes you.' Her eyes are a rich brown that feels familiar. That's what I notice first. That and the faint red rings around them.

'Lovely dog,' I say.

'He is.' The owner glances away, nods as the Lab hares into view. 'Loyal.' This time he drops the ball at her feet. With an elegant flick, she launches it forward.

'Hey,' I say, as she follows her dog, scampering off into the mist. 'Happy New Year.'

The dog owner turns back towards me. 'I hope so,' she says.

YASMINE LEVER

DEFINITELY NOT

BLAKE SQUINTED THROUGH the lens of his video camera at his girlfriend, Kat. She looked spectacular in a baggy blue and white striped T-shirt, her blond hair twirled into a top knot.

'You're amazing,' Blake said.

Kat twisted her right foot over her left ankle like a pretzel. Kat's ankles. The sexiest ankles in the universe.

'So hot.'

'Thanks.' She sat, her spine ramrod stiff, her turquoise fingernails gripping the edges of the black velvet couch.

'I wanna make this movie really dirty,' Blake said.

'Not too dirty, eh?' She tugged the top of her shirt exposing the curve of her clavicle.

'Nope. Not too dirty.' Blake fiddled with the screws, tilting the camera forward on the tripod. 'Just *really* dirty.'

Blake grabbed the bottle of Jameson resting on the table. He swigged. He revelled in the burning sensation in his chest. He pushed the record button on the camera, then darted across the room to join Kat on the couch, the bottle of whiskey still in his hand.

She looked like she was bracing herself to jump out of a plane.

'You're fine with this, right, Kat?'

'Yep.' She inched closer to him. She smelled like a flower show. 'Although ...' Kat grabbed the bottle and

sipped. 'Watching you turn the camera on. I guess it made me slightly uneasy.'

Blake strode over to the camera and turned off the record button, trying not to let his disappointment leak out.

'I'm not saying I'm not fine with this, Blake.' She flicked her bangs away.

'Everybody's doing it these days.'

'Does that mean we have to do it too?' Her bangs fell back over her eyes.

Did she consider this a chore?

'This is supposed to be fun.'

'You know what? It's fine.' She held the bottle out to Blake.

'No, thanks. Already pretty sozzled.'

She placed the bottle on the coffee table, grabbed Blake's face and kissed him. She tasted delicious, a combination of whiskey and lemon-flavoured chewing gum.

'I love you, Kat.'

'You do?'

'What do you think?'

'I love you too.'

She pressed her face into his neck. He ran his hand along the ridges of her tortoise-shell hair clip. Her hand met his.

Blake first spotted Kat in the college dining room one month after they started as New York University freshmen. She sat eating lunch opposite a friend of his, but he was too nervous to bring his tray over. One week later he hopped onto the downtown six after checking out an Edward Hopper exhibition at the Met. She lounged in a seat in the same subway car, baby-blue headphones over her ears, her sandalled foot resting on a silver pole, wearing a white, wavy dress, like an orchid planted in the

middle of a tar pit. He paced the car, navigating around the schizophrenic shouting in the air, rather than plunking his ass on the unoccupied seat beside her. When she exited the train at Astor Place, he decided to return to the dorm instead of meeting friends for food in Little Italy. He shot through the closing doors, raced up the subway stairs and overtook her. He introduced himself when they stood in the line at the nearby Starbucks. They walked back to the dorm, sipping sugary frosted drinks, small talk relaxing into longer conversation. That evening they ate together in the student cafeteria.

He never thought the night would end in sex. Not when she invited him to hang in her room, telling him her roommate, Rhona, was upstate visiting her grandmother. Not when they sat chatting on white-painted stools, leaning in so close that he could smell the lingering scent of her coconut shampoo. Not even when they found themselves lying side by side on her single bed, bodies stretched on top of her pink-patterned comforter, the warmth of her knee touching his. One minute he was glancing at the postcards from her friends taped onto the wall. The next minute they were kissing for a long, long time. They threw off their clothes, sinking low in the mattress, hands contouring each other's curves, fingers falling through each other's hair, his head emptied of thoughts, his heart filling with her. The next morning, they woke in each other's arms, legs overlapping.

Blake spent the first year of college learning how to be with someone. When he was twelve, his mother jumped to her death from a hotel balcony. Even at that young age, Blake knew his parents' relationship wasn't a happy one. He knew it took so many vodkas to soften his mother's disappointed stare that sometimes she couldn't even walk across the room without falling. But he had no clue she'd been that acutely desperate. His dad dealt with his grief by disappearing into local bars late at

night. Blake retreated into movies, dreaming of one day fictionalising his trauma on celluloid. It wasn't that he didn't have friends. But they tended to be an uncomplicated lot, and Blake hung on the fringes.

Kat's parents met in rehab, which was maybe why she seemed so able to grapple with other people's psychic conflict. Her mother made understated jewellery with healing stones, and her father taught English at Williams. Kat spoke proudly of her parents' ability to turn their lives around, although she admitted their commitment to their recovery sometimes left her and her sister feeling neglected. Blake vowed he'd never, ever make her feel neglected. She claimed her dad could be overbearing and a bit of an intellectual bully, which she believed contributed to her mother's tendency to give in on the rare occasions they had disagreements. Blake thought this might be why Kat tended to flip-flop between both her parents' behaviour, sometimes surrendering when she didn't really want to, sometimes ramming her opinions down other people's throats.

Being with Kat, Blake no longer felt like an outsider looking in on his experiences. He loved her tendency to pepper her conversations with two alternating streams, such as poking holes at a friend's definition of racism while wondering whether to splurge on a pair of snakeskin boots. He loved that whenever they ate out, she would substitute potatoes for a salad, then dive her hand into his French fries as soon as the waitress placed his plate on the table. He taught her how to make the perfect chocolate soufflé. Egg and air. She introduced him to her favourite film, the erotic French drama, *Betty Blue*.

They moved into a one-bedroom apartment on McDougal Street right before they started school as sophomores. She taught him to line his shoes side by side