

## Smoke And Sharp Edges

### A Letter Home

I promised I would write to you  
And so this letter sent,  
I cannot fathom your intrigue  
But for you I'll relent.

Four mornings gone I spied a fawn  
Back dappled by the sun,  
And there a tiger 'cross the glen  
Its body tensed to run.

For a time the beast sat still content  
To watch, as I, the fawn  
Until, with gracious pounce he caught  
And made his kill this dawn.

Through furthermore a weary day  
Our aching backs so bent,  
To some grand place where *he* could sleep  
No comfort in our tent.

The master roused us from our beds  
Our heads were quickly clear,  
So many curses filled my mind –  
You know them well my dear.

That day we passed a market place

Of wines and meats and spice,  
Beguiled by these scents we paused  
But only saw the price.

You would have swooned to see the silk:  
The beaded dresses sold,  
I would have bought you some small gift,  
Ah, guilt, I've no such gold.

Till dusk we walked beside the horse  
And trudged through muddy tracks,  
Our legs and feet and souls were sore  
And heavy were the packs.

Two jaded days of travel passed  
Until last night we stopped,  
Some welcome house where here I write,  
Now that the sun has dropped.

It seems we may bring back a guest –  
The master's much entranced,  
With the maid who welcomed us today  
To start this bright romance.

And that, my dear, is all to date  
I've nothing left to tell.  
I'll write again a few days hence  
But now I say farewell.

### Spring

The stillness of a waiting March  
Sits dreaming in the wind,  
And rocks through lesser frost and little sun,  
The end too long and drawn to count  
Slow morning's clinging chill,  
To see the measure of their seconds grow  
Until, with neither fuss nor dainty mark, they fill  
With glitt'ring flowers, paler than the sun,  
That once but haunted shades of laden cloud  
Now soars, and tarries here for long.

### Candle-lit

Little dancer why, at such late hour,  
Do you disturb my sleep?  
Who set you here, to flicker on my desk,  
And prance and curl and leap,  
Whisp'ring along to some small song  
Whose gentle time you keep?  
Perchance it was that pretty maid  
Who thought with light to say,  
Although true dawn has yet to break,  
Tomorrow is today.

## War

Face to face the armies wait;  
Distance silences the anthems of their hate,  
As banners wave in words ablaze  
Beneath that sky, so full of haze  
And heat and dust  
And quiet.

A single word ignites a roar, which swells,  
Distends and roars its own  
To lead those soldiers now which ride,  
Cast shadows in their wake to hide  
The twisted strings  
Which pull and guide their fate.

For freedom or for blood the armies stream,  
Calling for their foe to scream,  
Brandishing their sharpened blades  
To cut and slice and stab and slay.

Don't pause to see the victims of the fight;  
Their glassy eyes reflect the dying light.

Each man doubtless as they fell,  
To join their brothers lost in hell,  
That they would never live to tell  
The truth which pain had taught them.

Those burning eyes  
Will never see the world again;  
Their depths become the graves for fallen men,  
So turn away  
You soldiers, born into the night,  
To cry and blaze and kill with all your might.  
You too will join those corpses slain,  
Or else be ever haunted by their pain.

A deed in time is not undone,  
No matter how you turn and run,  
Hunted by the setting sun  
To count the hearts you silenced.  
Think what friends they left behind;  
What loves, what lives your blade denied.  
In death for this they've paid their price,  
But you will suffer – suffer with your life.

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## Sanctuary

It is a small place beneath the furrowed brow  
Of a forested hill, just below the mountain's feet.  
There is a little stream with fish to eat,  
And a creeping vine about the door, on which  
Hangs rip'ning fruit – the sun has made it sweet.

A chimney stack pokes through the fallen leaves,  
Red brick and moss, the stones are warm  
With gently rising smoke which wanders on the breeze  
And fills your lungs with woody scent  
As you watch long summer days till spent.

### River Bed

Can't you see them drowning  
Over in the stream?  
The weeds about their wrists  
And ankles,  
Their throats  
As they try to scream.

The sky has stained the waters  
Grey with softened rain;  
The mud has filled their mouths  
With Earth  
And rock,  
To drag them down again.

### Treasure

Stone walls,  
How much further will you marshal me?  
These passages, long by darkness bound  
Have lured here greater men than I,  
But there they sit, upon your ground.  
Did they search for treasure too?

How pale are those faces lying here,  
How cold they are in this, their home-made jail.  
The darkness drew them on with lies,  
Fed shadows to garrison their empty eyes,  
And made shrouds where their bodies fell.  
I think they saw no gold.

A light? Vain hope, do not arise.  
What light could find us this far down?  
It is in those barren eyes, scattered all around,  
And trapped within a dead man's frown.  
No treasure in here lies.

### Subterranean

Six feet below the sun  
The worms are lords  
Within this earthy realm,  
But something larger stirs.  
There are others like it  
Down below,  
But none that move  
Or weep or moan.  
They all are trapped  
In darkness here,  
But only this one knows.

Still again.

Is true that shadowed ceiling not the sky?  
It cries as much, but not I think, for us  
Or even those who wear that stony grey,  
Stained as it is, half set across their skin.  
They do not gleam of gold.

No: even sorry skies would not wait to mark,  
Why marking would condone this foolish hunt,  
The witness of which they always bear,  
And for this they shed their tears.  
But no sky shakes as this of echoes;  
It would scatter these thoughts  
And spoil them in the wind.  
No talk of treasure here.

Oh dark! Did that light appear at all?  
Or placed here by Dread to taunt and call.  
The time is lost, if ever it could tell  
But no more, not for those page-faces  
Blank in all.

Did they find riches where they fell?

**Dawn or Dusk**

Knives, knives and arrows  
That broke the skies  
And spattered them with gore.  
Stained clouds remember them  
When the sun is low,  
Those battles fought so long ago,  
And cry  
To wash away the darkened land,  
But the clouds  
Still red with blood.

**Word count: 1131**

## Changing Hands

In the beginning it hadn't been sure, but when the furniture started to disappear, the house was certain that its worst fears had been realised. At first it had tried to stop them: making the doorways just smaller than they seemed, adding subtle lighting to the oldest photographs on the shelf, but nothing had worked. They'd even stripped the carpet.

The couple had been together a long time; it had known them fresh from college, all eye-lashes and laughter. It remembered the first room that they had decorated: curtains and rugs and bean-bags, but with more fondness the later restoration. Bare timbers were the scars it could brag to the concrete children next door.

The first television had been a novelty. The set looked worn out before it had even been plugged in, but the house made a welcome corner for it, wherever it went. New TVs passed through, but the house made sure that it never lost track of the first. It would shroud it beneath shadows whenever they thought to rent a skip, and followed it on its inevitable progression through the rooms. The stay in the kitchen had been short lived – steam disagreed with the set which crackled almost constantly in complaint. Two bedrooms had followed, one for a guest that never came, before finally settling in a room already a predestined pink.

Unfortunately, the baby boy born one spring had defied prediction, and the house's youngest occupant spent his teenage years slathering the walls with posters. He had gone now too, the house knew not where, but sometimes let the echoes of his voice bounce against the plaster.

But now it was quiet. Even the holiday constants - fridges, freezers - had been removed. The corners, kept so loyally cobweb free, were now laced with dusty strands. The house could do nothing but sit and hope for an errant breeze to lure away the fiends. But the windows were locked. The solemn uncle (or some relation at least) had left a dark space on the carpet where it had once stood, counting away days with the ticks of its heart.

The house thought of the boy and his Lego trains, and the bricks it knew were tucked beneath the skirting board. They had fallen there and the house had kept them safe. It sat and let the hallways clog with dust and memories which almost creaked on the floorboards as they passed.

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If it could, the house would have jumped at the footsteps just outside the door. It couldn't, so it sat as still as ever and waited. The key that turned in the lock was so familiar, and the door swung open with an eagerness the house was sure it had lost. Shoes paced the halls, in each room lifting dust from the boards. When at last they reached the front room, they stopped before the empty fireplace.

The house felt a pressure on the floor as another, smaller, pair of feet made contact. This one wore no shoes.

"This was your Grandparents' house." A deeper voice than it remembered echoed off the empty walls: "Hello again, old house."

## Insanity

Sand skittered in waves, nipping at ankles and clinging to sweaty skin, just catching the setting sun. Shadows rested deep across the faces of the travellers and deeper still in the troughs carved through the land, balanced on the periphery of night.

The water tasted of metal: warm and bitter, but gratefully received. Soon the dunes were consumed by darkness, only the barest silver outlines visible; from a distance, they could have been mounds of lush grass. The stinging sand now coaxed shivers from the bare skin that it prodded, scraping at raw burns that the cool winds had begun to soothe.

Someone had lit a fire. The twigs were bleached white, artefacts of the desert so dry they crumbled at a touch, burning out before the chill in the air could be relieved. Nevertheless they huddled close around it, faces pallid in the sullen glow, only silence between them. All but one.

He sat some distance apart, shying away from the flames, the firelight barely smouldering in dark eyes. His face was covered, swathed in the same dark cloth which he wore, melting his form into the growing blackness. Gazing out into the tangled shadows, he waited. In the silence phantasmal shapes reared, whispering and muttering behind his back. They slithered, just out of sight, purring into his ears then sinking into the sands when he turned to see.

The light faded, shapes now indistinct as the gathering clouds made the darkness absolute. In the surrounding quiet his breath seemed harsh, and his senses strained beneath the night. As if answering this call, echoes seeded themselves in the silence, intangible fragments which congealed into sinister mutterings. The shadows drew in, easing relentlessly around his shoulders, even as he shook them off.

A wraith departed from the darkness which cradled the man. It crawled across his form, seeping through cloth and painting his skin with ice. Others joined, biting, scratching and all the time *whispering*. The words hissed in his ears, at which he batted and clawed, but still the voices remained. Now they were inside.

The man that they found in the morning was set aglow in the first light, but it was not the man they had left the night before. He was twisted, curled against the whispering world, and thrown apart as it had invaded his mind. His ears were torn and bloody, deep lacerations cut by his own nails had spilled gore to stain the sand.

His petrified eyes were wide, the whites shot with crimson and raw from the slow creep of the desert which already feasted on his unmoving form. The others dared not look too closely. A rapid wind sent them on their way, and soon began to consume the body. If they had waited, they might have seen a shadow. They might have seen it rise from between the ashen lips, a bare ripple under the desert sun. They might have seen the inky form sink and slink across the sand, patiently tracing their tracks.

They might have looked back, but they did not.

## Landscaping

On an average summer's day, you might have found Maya Fume sitting in the garden, in the shadow of her favourite willow, playing by the light of the afternoon sun. But today was not a normal day.

Maya was kneeling on the grass, trowel clasped pincer-like in an over-sized gardening glove. It was her father's, but he had long since given up on the garden. She regarded the ground before her, the newly planted pansies waiting for their brothers. Her mother had left for work and she had exactly five hours and thirty three minutes left to put her plan into action.

A sudden flash, accompanied by an equally unexpected crash, found her face-down in the dirt, ears ringing. It took several seconds for her brain to re-boot and process enough of the situation for her to sit up, and wipe the freshly spread compost from her eyes.

She blinked and looked around. At first glance nothing appeared to have changed: the sun was still in approximately the same place, the leaves of the three willow trees still rustled in the breeze, and she was alone. The only difference was the face-shaped imprint in the half constructed flowerbed. She stood, brushing down her muddied frock, and craned her neck to peer over the fences. At once the disturbance became entirely apparent.

The wooden panels had suffered serious burns, and the blast which had knocked her to the floor had buckled the struts, which were now embedded in the grass on her side. There was no movement from her neighbour's vicinity, so Maya hitched up her skirt and scrambled over the debris. The crater was smaller than she would have expected, but smoked softly. The ground around it was littered with upended tussocks of grass, and she approached with caution.

The hole contained very little as far as she could see, but the bottom was deeply shadowed. She circled, trying to get a better view but the object had hit towards the East and was unlit this early in the morning. She bit her lip and cast about, gaze falling upon a stack of glass panels, propped up against an overgrown greenhouse. A spark of an idea began to form, so she hurried over to the pile.

The glass was heavier than it looked, and each sheet was either broken or badly chipped. Glad of the thick gardening gloves, Maya levered her fingers beneath the top pane and lifted. It grated against its neighbour with a painful screech. Once the glass was high enough for her to fit her hand underneath, she hefted the pane and clutched it to her chest, heading back towards the pit. There she set it down on the grass, angling the surface to reflect the sun.

It took some time, but eventually a beam of yellow light penetrated the gloom of the crater. Maya wedged the glass in its position with some of the chunks of earth scattered around, and crawled forwards to take a closer look.

Illuminated within the hole was a small cylinder, metallic and glinting. Intrigued, she picked up her discarded trowel and reached in, using the tool to dig at the object. After only a few seconds of struggle she abandoned this strategy; it was too far down. Instead, she moved to the other side and began to dig, widening the hole.

The ground here was hard and littered with flints which hindered her progress, and Maya's arms soon ached. The hole was now a little larger, and she tried once more to reach the object. This time she managed to reach in up to her arm pit, and felt the pressure of the metal against the trowel. She knew how angry her mother would be about the mess, but a guilty rebellion spurred her on. A twist of the implement soon saw the peculiar item free.

In daylight the cylinder, about three inches long, was heavily pitted and shimmered pale blue. She deposited it on a clear patch of ground and knelt on the dirt, reaching out gingerly. The surface was warm through the glove but not unbearable, so she picked it up and held it in her palms. It was neither a light as it appeared nor as uniform as she had at first assumed. A hair-line crack circled the tube about the centre, with even smaller lines radiating out in a clearly unnatural pattern. A faint glow seeped between the two

halves, intensifying by the second. Maya set down the object with haste, feet tangling in her skirt as she backed away.

Light trickled through cracks until the entire pattern was pulsing, accompanied by a whispering which seeded itself in the air. Frowning, the girl leaned closer, sure that she could almost make out words from the little device. Curiosity overcoming wariness, she scooped up the object and brought it close to her face, the luminescence reflecting in her eyes.

“Hello?” Her voice came out as a whisper, quieter than she had intended. The muttering seemed to swell, and she put it to her ear.

“Hello, Maya.”

**Word Count: 1889**

### Creative Writing Commentary

My aim in my poetry has been to focus on a single idea and convey that image to the reader. 'Treasure' was originally inspired by one of the War Poems by Wilfred Owen ('Strange Meeting'), and the concept of being lost or trapped in a dark tunnel. The way that Owen explores this sense of captivity can be seen in "Yet also there encumbered sleepers groaned, /too fast in thought or death to be bestirred."<sup>1</sup> Likewise I have used the images of the dead: "How pale are those faces lying here/ how cold they are in this, their home-made jail."

This section was altered from the original, "With eyes set about and hands/ which clasp the broken ground/ and keep vain orisons at their sides." as it no longer quite fitted the context, altered from the first draft. Although I liked the desperation conjured from "vain orisons", it did not as well reflect the captivity and desolation which I was aiming for, as the replacement does.

Also, within this poem are significant influences from the works of Shakespeare. Although not reflecting any particular poems, the style and language of the lines are drawn from *Titus Andronicus*. The stanza (5),

No; even sorry skies would not wait to mark,  
Why marking would condone this foolish hunt,  
The witness of which they always bear,  
And for this they shed their tears.

Is similar in language to the speech made by Titus to the tribunes: "Why, tis no matter, man; if they did hear, they would not mark me, or if they did mark, they would not pity me, yet plead I must; therefore I tell my sorrows to the stones".<sup>2</sup> I used this language to reflect despair and a desperate situation, as the plea that Titus makes.

Similarly, the character of Dread—"Placed here by Dread to taunt and call"—personifies the abstract to a figure of concentration, as in *Titus Andronicus* where Tamora enacts the character of Revenge. Here I have used the technique to show both the insanity that captivity has induced, and the need of the speaker to have a figure to blame.

Many of my poems, including 'Sanctuary' and 'A Letter Home' contain strong elements of the pastoral, using traditional poetical vocabulary to explore this. These poems use rhyme to suggest the harmony of the natural setting, as in Christopher Marlowe's 'The Passionate Shepherd to His Love', where the lines "That valleys, groves, hills, and fields,/Woods, or steepy mountain yields" reflect the rural setting.<sup>3</sup> I have used this in 'Sanctuary'—"It is a small place beneath the furrowed brow/Of a forested hill, just below the mountain's feet"—to highlight the tranquillity of the setting, and idealise the rural theme.

'A Letter Home' is written in ballad form, something I chose to mirror the style of the narrative, with the regular line breaks and rhyme. This poem was greatly edited, as the original did not have a regular ballad metre or rhyme scheme. Using the feedback from my teacher, I changed to a classic ABCB pattern, with iambic tetrameter and trimeter alternately. This more accurately reflected the tone and style, without losing the original character.

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<sup>1</sup> Wilfred Owen, 'Strange Meeting' in *The War Poems* ed. Jon Stallworthy (London: Chatto & Windus, 1994)

<sup>2</sup> William Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus* in *The Norton Shakespeare* ed. Stephen Greenblatt (London: Oxford University Press, 2008) 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, (Act 3, Scene 1, line 33-35)

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Marlowe, 'The Passionate Shepherd to his Love' in *Christopher Marlowe, The Complete Poems and Translations* ed. Stephen Orgel (New York: Penguin Books, 2007) 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition

As in many of my shorter poems, the style of language was largely drawn from Shakespeare, particularly the comedic tone in *Much Ado About Nothing*, and I wanted the context to stay true to this style. Through the formality of this poem the relationship between the speaker and another mentioned character develops: "So many curses filled my mind – /You know them well my dear." This direct address puts the reader in the position of the intended recipient of the letter, and gives a window into the life of the speaker, typical of the ballad and key to this piece.

Inspiration for the poem 'War' came from battle images in 'Blade of Fire' by Stuart Hill, particularly the desert settings. This is another poem which has a rhyme scheme which, although not strict, helps to reinforce the emotion of the fire and despair of battle. This lack of harmony highlights the underlying troubles in the narrative. A technique which I have used quite heavily here is the repetition of lists; "And heat and dust and quiet", "To cry and blaze and kill" which builds the intensity of the same idea.

The rhymes and structure of this poem represent the ritualistic nature of the battle; following orders and the regiments of armies. However, this often breaks down at the end of stanzas as the distance from the battle is conveyed: "Beneath that sky, so full of haze, and heat and dust, and quiet." The line breaks in this section progressively shorten to give the impression of distance and the separation of the world. Through the last line I have tried to express a final intensity, reinforced by the anadiplosis – "But you will suffer – suffer with your life."

This poem also dips into the second person in the latter half, the speaker taking on an accusatory tone. This accusation displays the emotion of the speaker, the need to cast blame on someone, even the unconnected reader.

For the second section of my coursework, I chose to write flash fiction. In these three short pieces I aimed originally to explore emotion from different points of view, and how I could use these perspectives to give a glimpse into the world of the character. Neil Gaiman suggested, "Short stories are tiny windows into other worlds and other minds and other dreams. They are journeys you can make to the far side of the universe and still be back in time for dinner."<sup>4</sup> This is what I have tried to develop within my work.

Many short stories focus around a change – something unfamiliar where emotions will be at their height, and this is what I have explored in 'Changing Hands'. Although the narrative is never told through speech, the crux of this piece is memory, and it is through this that emotion is expressed.

At first the memories are happy, focusing on the original contentment, "It remembered the first room that they had decorated: curtains and rugs and bean-bags, but with more fondness the later restoration. Bare timbers were the scars it could brag to the concrete children next door." Through this extended personification I show the nostalgia, and have developed this as the piece continues to show the sense of despair and abandonment, the progression of which induces sympathy from the reader. "The house could do nothing but sit and hope for an errant breeze to lure away the fiends. But the windows were locked." This style of personification has been largely inspired by Terry Pratchett, who often brings to life usually inanimate object, such as the travel chest in *The Colour of Magic*.

In a very different tone is "Landscaping", from the point of view of a young girl. From this perspective I could explore emotions in a new sense, through the eyes of a child, and the nuances of this. The way in which a child thinks is often simple, but creative, and this is what I have tried to express: "She regarded the ground before her, the newly planted pansies waiting for their brothers." In this sentence the reader is afforded an insight into the workings of her mind, as she personifies the flowers. I continue this

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/326418-short-stories-are-tiny-windows-into-other-worlds-and-other>

[Accessed: 4<sup>th</sup> April 2014]

through the piece, which I feel helps draw the reader into the character as they experience her thought processes, although indirectly.

Again, this piece does not include much speech, so must carry the plot through description alone. In order to do this without making the piece very dry, I have told the story through the eyes of Maya, although it remains heterodiegetic. For example, "The glass was heavier than it looked, and each sheet was either broken or badly chipped," describes the scene, but as serves as an objective correlative for how Maya is experiencing it. This allows me to include detailed descriptions without them becoming bland. This hint of an interior monologue as a style is largely influenced by Flaubert and Henry James, allowing the character to tell their own story.

Unlike my other two works, this piece was designed to evoke rather than describe emotion – a ghost story told around a campfire. To achieve this sinister tone I have used many short sentences, especially at the end of paragraphs. This and the personification of the desert as a consuming force builds the emotive images: "His petrified eyes were wide, the whites shot with crimson and raw from the slow creep of the desert which already feasted on his unmoving form. The others dared not look too closely."

Feedback on these pieces from group workshop sessions has predominantly helped me to distil my work, cutting out the unnecessary to focus the essence (preferring simplicity through Occam's Razor). This made a significant difference in 'Landscaping', which saw many sections uncluttered. Often this was because the sentences were too complicated for the thought processes of a child, so did not reflect the style.

Although the subjects of my pieces vary greatly, there is an underlying theme in my poems of returning to nature, both in its tranquillity and power ('Sanctuary' and 'River Bed' respectively). As well as this I look at the often damaging impact of humanity - there is a distinct comparison between rural life and the destructive forces of war. Poetry, more than any other form, allowed me to explore these themes and the emotion within them. To improve both sections of my work, I would explore different styles and how these can change the tone of a piece, perhaps moving away from the very traditional language in my poetry to experiment with a more modern style.

**Commentary word count:** 1625

**Creative pieces word count:** 3020

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