



**N** National Centre  
for Writing

# A Life Written

An anthology of life writing  
Summer 2023

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## Contents

- |    |   |    |  |
|----|---|----|--|
| 08 | Volume One is Missing<br>Gwendoline Coates                                      | 36 | The Regent's Canal<br>Kevin O'Connell                    |
| 12 | Volume One is Hiding<br>— response to<br>'Volume One is Missing'<br>Shell Meads | 40 | New boy in Tottenham<br>Mick Parish                      |
| 14 | Climate Breakdown<br>Ian King   | 44 | A response to<br>'New boy in Tottenham'<br>Holly Trundle |
| 16 | A response to 'Climate<br>Breakdown'<br>Martin Craske                           |    |  |
| 19 | The Photograph<br>Ian King  |    |  |
| 21 | A Child's Poem<br>Christine Lester  |    |  |
| 26 | A response to 'A Child's Poem'<br>Zareena Hamill                                |    |  |
| 28 | Surviving<br>Anon   |    |  |
| 32 | A Life in Transit<br>Moirá Newlan   |    |  |

# Introduction

## Busy Exploring

In 'The Regent's Canal', Kevin O'Connell recalls a world-weary navvy saying, 'They say the old days were the best. Maybe they were, but I think you can put your foot a wee bit too hard on a man's neck.' This seems to me to encapsulate the knife-edge upon which memory is often balanced, with steep drops on either side of it into either nostalgia or cynicism. All the writing in this collection remains beautifully poised on that knife-edge.

Two pantoums vividly evoke childhood but do so in a clear-eyed way which enables the form to show both the remorseless recurrence of the fault lines in family relationships and the poets' eventual breaking of the cycle, through remembrance and resolve. Better does not mean happily ever after, merely knowing how to take the next step forward.

This freedom from sentimentality is carried through into an engineer's perspective on the climate crisis, a poetic reflection which eschews 'poetic' language in favour of densely packed factual evidence. 'Are we ready for human extinction?' it asks, a question perhaps only possible when we reach the time of life where our own

personal extinction ceases to be a distant hypothetical. The writer offers no answer; it is the question itself which matters.

Mick Parish's lively evocation of Tottenham in the 1950s and 60s reminds us of how London has changed since the Thatcherite 'big bang' and yet how it has stayed the same. The faces and the languages might be different, but the experience of poverty and alienation, poor housing and a broken education system still sets young people on the path he remembers with humour and compassion. As with all the best memoirs, the writing is as relevant to our own times as to the writer's childhood.

It has been a joy to work with this group of writers, all of them over seventy years of age and with such riches of remembrance and recollection to share. They have written about lives which have not always been easy but which have also been full of love and humour. An account of a wedding photo is a love letter as much to the Forth Railway Bridge as to the bride framed by it. There are kindly landladies offering scones to homesick students and a timely reminder that you can cheat at croquet with impunity once you are into your eighties. Above all, there is curiosity, an embrace of the next stage in the adventure. 'I'm too busy exploring—and getting happily lost—to worry about the end,' concludes Gwendoline Coates at the end of her piece, 'Volume One is Missing'.

I hope you will enjoy reading this anthology, collected from the fourth iteration of National Centre for Writing's A Life Written programme and the first to be delivered online.

**Sarah Bower**  
Tutor

As we reach our fourth and final *A Life Written* anthology in this series, we can only thank and admire the passion and determination of Dr Tory Young, Associate Professor of English Literature at Anglia Ruskin University. Tory has been the driving force behind *A Life Written*, from its inception in the socially restricted periods of 2020 to the more 'normal' times of 2023. Over that time, we have met and encountered many participants over the age of 70 who have blossomed to become confident, enthusiastic life writers.

We were delighted that Sarah Bower once again guided the writers with her skilful and compassionate tutoring.

This group of writers met entirely online, and I personally never met them. I wondered if the online remoteness from each other would impact their writing or even my reading and response to the anthology pieces. I am delighted to say that these anthology pieces not only continue to be excellently written but feel even more personal and intense.

I sincerely thank our Life Writers for the rollercoaster of emotions I experienced on opening the submissions folder! All the pieces are vivid and tangibly moving. The strong and varied responses from the Anglia Ruskin University students reflect my own visceral experiences of reading the writer's pieces.

Online or in real life – we continue to celebrate the comfort writing together brings. As society becomes more polarised, and we all feel more disenfranchised, it is heartening to witness our life writers emerging and being empowered to continue to share their experiences.

**Sarah Power**

Programme Manager, National Centre for Writing

# Volume One is Missing

## Gwendoline Coates

*Content warning: childhood trauma, suggestions of sexual abuse.*

### I: Acquiring

#### A Pantoum on Not Remembering

I wonder, how do you acquire  
a childhood memory to retain?  
And keep it safe from fires and liars, the mire  
of loss and unremembered pain.

Those childhood memories to retain,  
to hold in mind and not forget,  
and learn from our remembered pain  
without reproach, without regret.

To hold in mind and not forget.  
I wonder, how do you retrieve  
forgotten pain without regret,  
give credence and receive, believe?

I wonder, how do you retrieve  
what has been lost, and keep desire  
to trust, retrieve, believe?  
But firstly, how do you acquire?

### II: Pretending

The lack of memory of my first ten years seemed like a phantom limb; an absence which insisted on having a presence. I would try on the memories of my adolescent friends as though they were a garment, to see whether I could make them fit. If they felt too small I would ease out the seams to make them larger than life, more dramatic, worthy of what I would want from childhood memory.

'Do you remember learning to ride a bike?' they might say. Or, more likely, 'When did you learn to ride a bike?' assuming that I would, of course, remember. I would simply make something up, cliché-ridden, based on what I'd heard the others say. I understood early on that if I couldn't remember anything at all it seemed to worry people. More questions would follow. 'What do you *mean*, you can't remember? You *must* remember!'

Worse, when it came to whispered exchanges in the locker room. 'What was your first time like?' I had no idea, which seemed pretty troubling. I knew that my sexual experiences from the age of about fourteen were not the first. Other girls could describe it in detail: sad, disappointing, painful, perhaps done to please someone, coercive. Rarely entirely happy or loving. It was easy to fit my unremembered first time into one of these categories, adding some lurid details, definitely a bit of blood, and I could get away with it. Making things up to fill the absence, I went for the exotic. But I stretched both fabric and credulity too far, like stretching the hole of a pierced earlobe. It needed a larger and larger ring of pretence to support it until the hole was so big you could see right through it, and the surrounding flesh was in danger of splitting.

### III: Investigating

Now I am seventy. I no longer care what people think and, to boot, I have read Meno. A student of Socrates, he asked his teacher how to go about finding something the nature of which is totally unknown to you. Pondering the same question two thousand years later, it seems the first step is to stop pretending. Pretence has created a fictitious landscape. Perhaps a real landscape might produce memory? I decide to investigate, and to start with geography. To make a track.

But, like a map of a nuclear exclusion zone or a military firing range, the map is blank. If I venture into danger areas, I might get irradiated or shot. Is it better to leave them as terra incognita? What happens if I remember things which are more traumatic in their remembering than in their forgetting? Once remembered I won't be able to forget again. I doubt I'll be able to pull that stunt a second time.

I work backwards along the track. But if there were any handprints in the archives and the caves, they have been lost in the moist breath of too many humans. Footprints have been erased by the sand, the wind, the rain, or shuffled out by others' feet. Memory wanders, like this meandering track, through a wild landscape, skirting obstacles, affected by the path of others. My life used to be here, but I find nothing.

Except the most important thing of all.

### IV: Accepting

I find peace. It is no longer sad to have lost Volume One. Not all books need a prologue. I will start my memoir with Volume Two, which is, after all, a heck of a story. And, like a novelist who allows the characters to take charge, I have no idea of Volume Three which is

yet to come. I'm too busy exploring—and getting happily lost—to worry about the end. I have accepted my unknown self. No longer dry, with so much potential in the absence. Like ichor, the aethereal blood of the gods, I have been released by rain.

### V: Rising

#### Petrichor

dedicated to all those who can't remember

The rain gods have been away,  
withholding their gift.  
We are all parched, backs arched  
our bodies dry as stone, petrified of drought.

The grass is dust, the soil as hard as rock.  
and we resort to sacrifice. Suffice to say  
that it will never be enough, though  
heads have rolled, and rib-thin cattle felled.

Until one day, at last,  
we see the aether growing dark,  
as Ichor gathers force.  
falling from the god-cloud-veins.

A drop, another drop, and more.  
The rain soaks every pore  
of land and plant.

Petrichor rises, and we give thanks.



# Volume One is Hiding

A response to 'Volume One is Missing'

Shell Meads

I play hide and seek with you.

You know I linger close, but exactly where you cannot tell. You seek me out with careful steps trying to hear the slightest breath or feel my movement. Almost too scared to find me because in finding me the game stops. You will have won but victory will be hollow. For once forgotten I can only be found as you see me now. Your initial thoughts and feelings have long since departed and maturity and influence cloud your judgement. Where unknowing has morphed into knowing too much and feeling too deeply. New memory taints what was before. Changed. No longer viewed through the wonderful prism of first knowledge but slightly dogeared and well worn. No longer holding the pristine and fresh feeling of creating memory but the lingering feeling of time past.

The game becomes tiresome. No longer a fun game of counting to ten but one that seems to require counting indefinitely. You sit and pause and realise that you no longer know why you agreed to play. What good is this game when there is only two. It goes round and round in circles and you always seem to be the one searching. Maybe it's time to move onto something bigger, something more grown up. For since the game begun you have changed. You no longer feel the thrill of the seek but wonder what could be next. If you gave up

seeking for me and those lost years of childhood, what could you find?

You leave the hidden to their own devices. No longer interested in their game or their secrets. Maybe one day they will be destined to be your seeker. Search you out in your least expected moments and arrive unforeseen and uninvited. Or maybe they remain hidden hoping that one day you'll wander those halls again searching for them. Either way you make your peace with the hidden childhood. Calling out your forfeit.

# Climate Breakdown

## Ian King

I started my engineering life in the 1960s, and I soon became aware that many systems in place were not very efficient. For example, if you looked into a coal-fired power station, which burns coal to generate electricity, you'd discover that its overall thermal efficiency would only be around 30% efficient. This is really low, and would pollute the atmosphere.

In the 1970s, we had the OPEC oil crisis, and I became even more aware of energy shortages, and how the environment was heating up by the rising levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. In the 90s, I became responsible for energy conservation in my role as Director at Oxford Brookes University and was trusted to make the university as green and environmentally friendly as it could be. In fact, I was very proud that Oxford Brookes became a leading light for green universities.

Today, we live in a world where Greta Thunberg has been the leading light on raising awareness of global warming, and millions across the world are watching David Attenborough's documentaries. This Pantoum poem reflects strongly on my views, because in my life I have always tried to do my best to look out and try and save the planet, and I hope others will be inspired to do the same. We only have one planet.

There's a cliff called climate breakdown.  
Co2, oil, Gas, Methane, Rising Tides.  
On plastic we will choke and/or suffocate.  
Singing 'Sirens' harbingers of death.

Co2, Oil, Gas, Methane, Rising Tides.

The climate crisis is already here.

A shared vulnerability

-our communities

-our ecology

-our energy

-our food supplies

-our health

No magic cure, hard work, commitment and a shared vision.

The climate crisis is already here.

Out of control, floods and fires across the continents.

Rising temperatures, it's far too late.

There is no 'plan..et B'.

Out of control, floods and fires across the continents.

No magic cure, hard work, commitment and a shared vision.

Are we ready for human extinction?

There's a cliff, called climate breakdown.



## A response to 'Climate Breakdown'

# Martin Craske

I remember the warm summer days.  
I remember building sandcastles and splashing about in the paddling pool.  
The older children playing on the bales of hay in the field behind our house.  
Endless ice creams and lollies, the fun of water pistol fights with my sister.

And the future was yet to be written...

I remember the cold winter days.  
I remember building snowmen and trudging across the garden through deep snow.  
The older children playing snowball fights in the field behind our house.  
Wearing thick woollen gloves and scarves, my breath carrying in the cold of the air.

And the future was yet to be written...

I remember the hot summer days.  
I remember building flatpacks and painting the walls in my first home.  
The laughter of children playing water fights in the street outside.  
Electrical fans whirling and dancing in rotation, the sweet embrace in

the cool of the breeze.

And the future was yet to be written...

I remember the mild winter days.  
I remember the celebrations for the end of one century and the start of another.  
The children spellbound as fireworks lit up the night sky.  
Shouts of "Happy New Year!" and "auld lang syne" being sung, carrying in the warmth of the air.

And the future was yet to be written...

I remember the hot summer days.  
I remember building sandcastles with my daughter and her splashing about in the paddling pool.  
The children playing in the streets under sun hats and layers of sun cream.  
Roads and pavements melting like butter, the grass and plants wilting in the heat of the breeze.

And the future was yet to be written...

I remember a cold winter's day.  
I remember building snowmen with my daughter and teaching her to make angels.  
Watching her playing in the snow for the first time in her life.  
Capturing the moment in my memory, an emotion forever suspended in time.

And the future was yet to be written...

I remember the sweltering summer days.

I remember the grass and plants dying and the roads and pavements cracking open like an egg.

Silence playing in the street outside and the smell of wildfires carrying in the air.

The necessity of ice creams, lollies, and drinking water just to stay hydrated.

And the future is still to be written...

### A postscript

If you haven't figured it out already, I am not a natural poet. It is a medium of writing I am not remotely comfortable with. But in trying to respond to Ian's 'Climate Breakdown' with my own memories, I found that the long descriptive paragraphs of my first attempt just didn't flow the way I wanted it to. Hence, the above effort. Sorry about that. The years? 1976, 1981, 1995, 1999, 2003, 2006 and 2022.

While there is no denying that our climate is in flux, I remain hopeful that science and technology will one day find a solution. Just search online for "nuclear fusion breakthrough".

The future can be rewritten...

# The Photograph

## Ian King

Scotland, in particular South Queensferry, near to that wonderful city of Edinburgh.

Oh, look at that spectacular Forth Railway Bridge, one of the best cantilever railway bridges in the world. Seven years in construction and finally completed in 1889, the same year as the Eiffel Tower.

The Forth Railway Bridge's magnificent and deeply rich burgundy red colour stretches across the top of my photograph as indeed, it stretches across the Firth of Forth. Its central cantilever beautifully frames two people looking to the camera, with the sunshine glinting on the surface of the deep blue waves of the Firth of Forth.

The beautiful Scottish lass dressed in her alluring off-the-shoulder, stunning turquoise blue dress and sporting an equally stunning fascinator, looked magnificent whilst at the same time counterbalancing the blue of the Forth.

He dressed in his summer lightweight suit with a contrasting pink tie, held his right arm firmly around her waist.

They both had flowers; she a creative bouquet of white roses and he wearing a white rose in his lapel.

The bridge across the top of the photograph perfectly framed the happy couple within its central cantilever.

How truly wonderful, she a Scottish lass from Edinburgh and he an engineer from England, beautifully set beneath that bridge in South Queensferry on their wedding day.



The Photograph

# A Child's Poem

## Christine Lester

*Content warning: self-harm, child neglect*

### A child's memory

I was unhappy at home  
I felt that I did not belong  
that I was unloved and all alone  
But I needed to be strong.

I felt that I did not belong  
One of five but so alone  
But I needed to be strong  
I wanted love in my home

One of five but so alone  
What is wrong with me  
I wanted love in my home  
Is that so hard to see

What is wrong with me  
Others get dresses, I get none  
Is that so hard to see  
What have I done

Others get dresses, I get none

Others at pictures, I am alone  
What have I done  
Mother has a heart of stone.

Others at pictures, I am alone  
I have to leave from here  
Mother has a heart of stone  
What do I have to fear

I have to leave from here  
To make a new life  
What do I have to fear  
I need to live without strife

To make a new life  
Make a home in the army  
I need to live without strife  
Am I barmy

Make a home in the army  
But I do not belong  
Am I barmy  
I have to be strong

But I do not belong  
I have a child of my own  
I have to be strong  
I am no longer alone

I have a child of my own  
Now I belong  
I am no longer alone  
But still I have to be strong

Now I belong  
I am no longer alone  
But still have to be strong  
I was unhappy at home

### Background behind the poem

I am the second of five children, I have an older sister, who is eighteen months older than I am, and one sister who is five years younger, and the last born were my twin brother and sister who are six years younger than myself. My father had been abandoned by his parents when he was aged two, and was brought up by his grandmother and two maiden aunts. His grandfather had died earlier and the only married aunt had no children. This meant that he had no idea of the role of a husband and father entailed and although he did his best, he failed to protect me from my mother's ill treatment.

As a small child I used to dream that my parents were not my parents and that one day there would be a knock on the door and there would be a motherly woman who says, 'there has been a mistake and you have my child and I want her back' and I would be taken away to a home where I would be loved. As I grew older I knew that this was a fairy story and if I wanted to change my life I would have to do something about it myself.

So at seventeen, I joined the army. Although I did not know it at the time, I am autistic, dyslexic and dyspraxic so I did not last more than the six weeks basic training. I did not go back home. Before joining the army I had worked at the Sainsbury's supermarket near my home. In those days 1966 Sainsbury's did all recruitment at a national not local level so after leaving the army I turned up at the headquarters in Blackfriars, London, explained what had happen and asked for a job in London and a place in a hostel in London. In those days there was full employment in the south so supermarkets like Sainsbury's recruited in the north and housed the young people in hostels. Being a good worker I got both things I wanted so I went home to pack my things and leave for good.

Two years later I was an unmarried mother of a half Jamaican daughter, the product of a work romance. We never married but had a son together as well and stayed friends until he return to Jamaica when he retired. Two of the things my mother did to hurt me was to come home with loads of new dresses for my three sisters and nothing for me. As an adult I asked why and was told that she did not buy me dresses as I never wore them, so I asked why she did not buy me something like shorts or t-shirts instead as I did wear those. The answer was that she was shopping for dresses. My brother thinks that she was also autistic, which may be why she acted the way she did.

The other occasion mentioned was when my parents took my siblings to see *The Lady and the Tramp* and I was left home alone. My elder sister suggested this as she had seen it before and said that I would cry at the scene when Tramp was in the dog pound and shame everybody. I asked my father why he allowed it and he said because he thought I wanted to be left alone so I told him that this was not true, and that the occasion was the first time I ever thought of killing

myself as I felt so alone. My father and I had a good relationship until he died but my mother and I never did so.

## A response to 'A Child's Poem'

# Zareena Hamill

All writing has often appeared to me as preserving an act of introspection. Yet on reading a memoir for the first time, the sense of maturity characterises the form especially. While the subject of memories is personal and brief, my first impression of receiving a memoir was nothing short of admiration for the authenticity of its content. It was Christine Lester's memoir that interested my own ideas of reflection, and when better to remember than your own childhood? The memoir entitled *A Child's Poem* was unshakable to ignore, so I chose it. I feel required to be cautious with this subject particularly, as these themes are somewhat painful to read as well as to hear. In spite of knowing this, *A Child's Poem* represented the importance of childhood memories, the impact on future adults and the manifesting characters of past generations, retrospectively. By sharing this story, her journey from adolescence encompasses a pure use of poetry that provokes the emotions and memories that otherwise would be ignored out of psychological pain.

Reminiscing on her childhood, C. Lester found herself as an 'unhappy [outcast] at home' and like a scratched record in her parenthood her nostalgia cements into her fearful expectations that come with she will treat 'a child of [her]...own' in a similar way. It started for Christine Lester with the dreaded sibling comparison that her domestic life settled into. She recalls her maternal relationship, and how emotionally displaced she felt from that social disconnection. Despite any isolation she repeats that scratched record whilst she

'needed to be strong'. The dynamic at home turned into a somewhat conditioning phase for her young adult life whilst she'd 'dream ...[her] parents were not ...[her] parents'. The relationships we form in our lives shape us, whether voluntary or not. With C. Lester, her memoir is a clear example of the role the imagination plays in unwanted conditions, especially hope. It is both an act of bravery, as well as a personal truth that Christine Lester shares with the reader as well as her "child" that she entitled her memoir to.

In the act of writing her memoir *A Child's Poem*, Christine Lester opens up about the fragile nature of childhood pain whilst invoking the bravery of herself as a writer in sharing not only a personal truth, but one with a pain often shared in experience but rarely communicated. If the purpose of 'A Life Written' is to note the temporality of the writers behind their work, then it is from her memoir that C. Lester sets the example for emotional maturity where her narrative humbly faces a lifelong pain that most would ignore. She embraces a journey of maturity from her military training to redefining motherhood, so that she may actively be a guide in her own child's growth. This is an intelligence that although underestimated through her childhood, a reader of *A Child's Poem* could understand the power in choosing to be nurtured by painful truths rather than in its stalemate.



# Surviving Anon

John maintains his education as a biologist led to his fascination as to why vertebrates evolved to have red blood and insects blue? When he was older he knew he had acquired from his forebears traits that he could not change. He had to learn how to live with the difficulties they caused. Much later in life he perceived that evolution and society had also shaped his children's and his grandchildren's lives.

In 1905 the government set up a Royal Commission to examine the workings of the 1832 Poor Laws. Its members included eugenicists who believed poverty was inherited and by selective breeding it could be reduced. In 1909 the Eugenics Society of Glasgow was created to 'support the sterilisation of paupers and their transportation to island camps.' William, John's father was born in Glasgow on 4th March 1910. In December 1912 the Glasgow newspapers reported that William's parents were found guilty of child neglect and cruelty whilst drunk. William's mother was sentenced to three months in Duke Street Prison. William's father escaped prison in order to pay for the upkeep of their children interred in Stobhill Hospital. Here William's baby brother died from malnutrition.

In 1920 William's father died. His mother moved into her daughter's one room apartment and slept in the kitchen cupboard. Her children William and Ellen were cared for by William's schoolfriend's family. They were Italian and owned a pub. [...] When the Depression came in 1930s William left his mother, his two sisters

and friends in Glasgow to work in England.

He lodged in the century-old housing area built for the Royal Small Arms factory in Enfield. In the factory where he worked he met the daughter of an Essex farm labourer. [...] Two weeks after war was declared on Germany they married. Seven months later, his wife was admitted to the Salvation Army Mothers' Hospital, London, with toxemia (pre-eclampsia) and John and his brother Alan were born six weeks premature. John maintains that the hospital didn't expect the three of them to survive.

John maintains at the hospital where four decades earlier he had worked as a ward orderly, when he had expected to remain so. John's mother laid tucked up in an iron hospital bed with the corners neatly done, her arms twitched; she always greeted him with a hug when he visited, even when with his wife and their two children, and the smell of freshly baked bread pudding and cinnamon. Each of them wanting a corner slice warm with the escaping sultanas burnt to a cinder. As a boy he had seen her knead together the suet, sugar, sultanas and the overnight soaked white sliced bread of austerity. It was baked in rectangular tin that was blackened from decades of use. John proudly told his mother of his promotion to UK Research Manager, but she was tired and fell asleep. She was dying of cancer.

John maintains that at six or seven years old he fell off the wall of the street's war-time water tank onto an iron spike. His mother had to use the rent money to pay the doctor's half-guinea fee. Now when John was ten years old, three weeks before the summer holidays, he had awoken with a headache, sweating and covered in a rash. His mother kept him at home. She sent his brother to school. Doctor Fisch, a Jew who had fled Hitler's Germany, came and muttered

something incomprehensible to his mother and him. Later, two men rolled him onto a stretcher, carried him downstairs into the ambulance. His mother was in tears surrounded by the neighbours. The doors closed. He slept. This was his first separation from his twin since conception.

The South Lodge Isolation Hospital was in the richer and more greener part of Enfield. John maintains he shared the ward with another boy who also had Scarlet Fever. During visits they were forbidden to get out of bed. John's mother came every Sunday, but he could see only her face at the round glass window of the door and not hear what she was saying. He never saw Alan. He never knew if he was alive or not. After six weeks he was discharged. At home all their books had been baked or burnt; clothing, bedding and the house fumigated. They were banned from the Cubs for 'being unclean'.

In the new school year they were moved from their old class 4B to the highest class 4A. John maintains he and Alan stood by their desks as their new teacher introduced them: these are the Smiths. They are so clever that we are obliged to have them join us. Of course if they rise to such heights with us we shall all be so surprised. John maintains he sat down bewildered, not understanding the words. In the summer, the same teacher asked the class if anyone had their 11+ results today? John and Alan put up their hands. The teacher's gaze passed over them and on returning, asked: Smiths, tell us the bad news. John answered: we're going to the Grammar School. John felt his face reddened as the whole class looked at them – the silence lengthened. John wondered had they heard him? Turning his back to the class, he chalked the first tick of success against their names on the blackboard saying: if the Smiths have passed then you all have. All day John felt he had let the class down.

John maintains his parents were pleased, but the neighbours warned his mother about the expense and the subsequent alienation that grammar school kids had for the working classes. Inevitably there were arguments about the money needed for two school uniforms. His father's application for a grant received the answer 'I regret to inform you that the income scale [...], does not permit the award of a grant.' John's father explained they don't take into account there are two of you. His father purchased some Provident Cheques. At the school's sole outfitters in the High Road, they tried on the full uniform. Mum said we look very smart. She proffered the 'Provi-cheques' in payment. The shop refused them. We left without the kit. John's father, when next on night shift, during the day visited the headmaster, who told him the minimum uniform was a cap and tie. In that first assembly they were two grey rocks among a sea of navy blue blazers.



Cap and tie grammar school boys

# A Life in Transit

## Moira Newlan

By the time I enrolled at university, I had already lived in four different family houses, including the one where I was born. Perhaps that set a pattern of transience, for many more lodgings would follow over the next twenty years, before I could call a place my own.

My first room in Edinburgh, shared with another student, was tucked into the attic of a large semi-detached villa, its once golden stone long turned a shade of grey through years of coal burning fires. The digs were expertly administered by Mrs Lamb, the motherly woman who fattened up her fourteen young female inhabitants with cooked breakfasts and generous dinners to cope with any lurking homesickness and the northerly climate. The Sunday afternoon high tea topped the calorie counter with an array of savouries, scones, and double decker cakes. We all put on weight. Three subsequent undergraduate years were passed in differing fashion. The short stay in student halls, eminently sociable and luxuriously heated, was followed by a house share in a freezing Edinburgh villa. My room was spacious, but it served as a passageway to reach the small bedroom at the back. As if to balance the spatial allocation, my next room was a tiny, windowless affair set in a friendly sandstone tenement. My degree was one year longer than most, and with my close friends gone, I reluctantly agreed to spend my final year in a rather sterile room in a characterless flat share with scientists, their views far less liberal than mine.

My postgraduate teaching year took me to a room listed somewhere in the Goldsmiths' College information pack sent to prospective students. This institution is set in the New Cross area of London, which in those days was far from the desirable location it has since become. The surrounding southeast suburbs were equally run down, with few exceptions. I was one of the luckier ones to find a room in Blackheath, a handsome area with a large common, close to Greenwich Park. I lived in one of the attic rooms of a terraced house, owned by the proprietor, a woman with a stricken expression, who would cry up to us every now and again, seemingly unhappy about sharing her home with anyone at all. The three-day week cast us into candlelight and further challenged our struggles with the Baby Belling stove on the tiny landing. Somewhere during that year, we both moved out, me to a beautiful white stuccoed semi on Shooters Hill Road which had seen better days.

My first paid employment took me to the centre of the country, in both senses of the word. I found out about a room, available in an old workers' cottage in the grounds of the 18th century mansion. I paid my £4 a week rent, cheap even then, to Diana who usually preferred to stay in town with her mother or with her partner. His suave image did not fit the alternative spartan accommodation. The toilet lay across the courtyard, the bath set under the worktop in the kitchen. When spring eventually arrived, I set up my easel in the adjoining apple store, where rows of neatly arranged green fruit kept me company. It's hard to imagine now how I coped, but I clearly did, as we all did, unaware of the rising standard of living advancing towards us.

In the main part of the old house, lived the owner, Mrs Twist. She was well into her eighties but had not lost the expectations and habits of her youth. Occasionally, several of the motely residents would

play crochet on the lawn in front of the house. She would inevitably cheat but enjoyed herself immensely, a glimmer of the rebellious and spoilt young woman she must have been. '*You can't possibly take tea before 3 o'clock!*' she protested once. I do not know what she thought about all the New Zealanders who would pass through the mansion's west wing where one of their own was staying during his two-year secondment. They brought their sleeping bags, camper vans and old bangers plus food and wine to share. Doubtless, they revelled in the new experience of sleeping within the walls of such history and the tranquillity of the countryside after navigating our crowded cities.

Three years later I would follow that handsome New Zealander to his homeland. There, I would share a room and a bed, first in a sunny old wooden house shared with others, then just the two of us in the villa he was able to buy. But we didn't live happily ever after. I moved out. Another room, another home.

There followed a sorry sequence of transitory accommodation. One proved too cold, set as it was in a sunless lea of a ridge. Even the proximity of the sea could not compensate. The weak morning sun would make a fleeting appearance before sliding surreptitiously out of view. My charming but psychotic housemate sealed the decision to move on. A bright sunny room followed in a wonderful rambling villa in the best part of town, but the tenancy was doomed from the start with its limited tenancy. Next came a single storied villa with splendid sea views. The access was less appealing, less practical, involving two flights of steep steps. In the capital city, you either climbed up or down, and only in the wealthiest suburbs did life take on a more horizontal dimension. I would happily have stayed in that villa with the health food fanatic, and the weaver, but the owner thought otherwise. Notice was served. I duly departed, hauling my stuff yet again into the

borrowed transit van. In those days, it was still possible to fit my life into the back of a medium-sized vehicle.

I climbed up to my final stop in that faraway city, to a home owned by a trusted friend with a flatmate who cooked divinely.

# The Regent's Canal

## Kevin O'Connell

*Content warning: outdated language which may cause offence today*

Thrown out of Algeria, where I had been teaching in a state high school for « Insufficance professionnelle, manque de respect pour un inspecteur general » and the third thing I can't remember, I was at a loose end. Paddy, who worked for Murphy's digging the roads—you can see their green lorries all over North London—suggested I went down the yard and asked the agent. The agent said, 'Sorry son, no vacancies,' but, as I was walking away, he called me back and asked my name. When I gave him my name, which happens to be Irish, he said, 'Start at 7.30 on Monday.'

The ganger was called Tom Murphy. Tom was a quiet man of about 50, with red hair. He spoke little and, when he did, he mumbled as though reciting the rosary. He was slow and deliberate and never gave orders but worked at his own pace and the others followed, stopping from time to time but never for very long.

We were working on a derelict embankment behind Saint Pancras Station. Camden Council wanted a flight of steps down to the Regent's Canal tow path. Our job was to prepare the ground and lay a concrete base.

Tom lowered the rope ladder and we climbed down. Then we connected the jack hammers to the hoses, while above Tom started the compressor and opened up the air valves. My drill kept sticking in the rock, so Tom took over and I shovelled. When Casey lowered the bucket of the JCB, I filled it up.

The drilling had opened up springs and, before long, we were up to our knees in freezing water. Tom told me to fetch some wellingtons from the van, while he set up a pump which sucked the water into the canal. The whine of the pump, the hissing of the compressor and hammering of the drills made me dizzy so I stopped to watch a man go by on a barge.

It was a nice warm day for him, with his pipe and feathery clouds scudding across the sky. Casey lowered the bucket again and back to work.

John Fitzpatrick, the young engineer, arrived in his 4x4. He surveyed the work from the top of the embankment, so as not to get his cowboy boots wet and kept calling Tom, Paddy. He said we had to lay the concrete base quickly before the council surveyors paid a visit. After he had gone, Tom spent some time blowing his nose, then said, 'That man knows as much about building as a pig about a holiday.'

At one o'clock Tom turned off the compressor, it hissed for a minute then silence, apart from the chirping of sparrows. While the others went to a café, I walked along the tow path with Tom to a pub, which had seen better days, much like the clientele installed round the bar.

The jukebox played a selection of Irish and C&W music. On the wall was a poster for a gala in Kilburn organised by the All Ireland Counties Association. There was also a painting of a bridge over the canal, in which a lemony sun shone wanly on the water, bringing to life the cold winter afternoon. I ordered drinks from the young barman who wore a yellow T-shirt with a picture of a kitten lapping champagne from a spilt glass bearing the caption: HAPPINESS IS A NICE TIGHT PUSSY.

He left the Guinness pouring into the pint glasses to serve another customer, returning just as it reached the top. He set the two pints

on the counter, leaving them to settle before topping them up with a harp etched in the foam. We sat next to two older men, who were staring into their empty glasses. One was very big indeed and the other small and wiry. The big man leaned over to Tom and asked, 'Is that blackguard who owns your firm still alive?'

He had the complexion of putty and a few bristles on his head, 'In those days,' he went on, 'you had to be a blackguard. If you didn't blackguard them, you were finished entirely.'

Tom offered to buy a round and the big man got up to help him. His jacket looked like a cast off of *The Incredible Hulk*, after one of his turns, outgrown and split down the back. 'He's a desperate man,' said the little man of his friend at the bar. Then he talked about the old days in London.

'God be with the days,' said the big man on return.

'Hard times,' said the little man.

'Hard times but good times. Not like today. The young ones don't want to work at all. D'you know what a young fellow said to me the other week?'

'Give me a hand with this bag of cement,' he said, 'Would you believe that? By Christ, I could carry two bags on each shoulder. These young pups, the work doesn't agree with them at all.'

Spokes of dusty sunlight found gaps in the frosted windows; there was that companionable smell of tobacco and stale beer, tinged with the aroma of cleaning fluid and urine every time the toilet door opened. Then Tom stood up, saying, 'Maybe they're right. Many a good man broke his back working for Murphy.'

On the walk back he added, 'They say the old days were the best. Maybe they were, but I think you can put your foot a wee bit too hard on a man's neck. That's what the gangers did, for all the good it did them.'



# New boy in Tottenham

## Mick Parish

*Content warning: child neglect, violence, sexism, domestic abuse, self-harm*

Hello my name is Mick, I was born in South East London in 1951. I grew up in the basement of a damp, rat infested shit hole. With an outside bog, and just one cold water tap that was over the butler sink, in the kitchen. My old man was a violent alcoholic, and he would often beat me. He sometimes carried a gun. My mother was one of 13 children. She had a severe personality disorder. When she couldn't cope she would go with other men. She was also violent towards me and my younger sister Linda.

I was born left handed, and severely dyslexic so when I started school at the ripe old age of 5... well, what a fucking lough that turned out to be. Not only was I being told by the teachers, that I was thick, dumb, and stupid, they would pinch their noses and say I smelled. It was also great fun having the piss taken outta me. While having to get into this hand me down queue for shoes, and some worn, but nice clean clothes, that didn't always fit. But ha fucking ho, it was much better than the clothes I was wearing.

When my little brother Gary was born. I was 7, me little sister was 5. My old mum was pissed off with the life she was living. Especially with the beatings she was getting from my old man. So she fucked off, with one of her boyfriend's. Fuck, what was I gunner do now? I was already looking out for me little sister. My 'orrible old man, would say, that my mum was a fucking old whore. Denying Gary was his, he would leave him crying for hours. My head felt like it was in a vice, and

just wouldn't shut up. I was having terror nightmares, it was like I was always falling to my death. I was fearful of going to, and from school. So I started to disappear outta me head, and down into the bottom of my garden where no one could get at me. It was the ONLY place I felt safe. My body was left in the classroom. The teacher would have to continuously shake me to bring me back.

We had very little food, and no fire to keep us warm. I was so lost on what to do. When this voice appeared in my head, it spoke much louder than the other voices. It changed me, told me to tell the bullies, including the teachers, to fuck off. So I did, I just didn't care anymore. 'Fuck you' was my attitude. I started to self-harm, so I could get to see this nice lady that would make a fuss of me, putting on a plaster, or bandage, wherever it was needed. I fell in love with her... COR, she was lovely.

I loved to put a big, very smelly, dog shit parcel through some unkind arseholes letterbox. My old man must of had enough of me too. So he dumped me in North London, Tottenham. Fuck, I hated it there, not knowing anyone. I missed me mum, missed where I used to live, even though it was a shit place. I would go back there in my mind, it was so real. I would be back down in the garden, I could feel the breeze, and the warmth of the sunshine on my face. I would make us all happy, being back together again. I could never show how I really felt. I had to hold it all in somehow. My VOICE, would make up these terrible violent stories. About the teachers, in my new school, and the bullies, and the arseholes from where I was living. The stories made me feel good, made me strong.

I loved to fight, and became very good at it. Kids soon learned, that if you fucked with me, you would soon get a right hander. I was about 10ish years old then, and in a gang, and we all looked after

ourselves. But me n Chris, were the best fighters around, for our age, and much older. We would sometimes punch the fuck outta one another, to see who was the best. At the time, I'd say we were pretty even. There was this new kid who just landed, called Andreco, he was Greek. He reckoned he was only 12 years old, but I'd say more like 15/16 because of the size of him. He was strong, built like a brick shit house. It's like he had gotta bit of brain damage, he wasn't all the ticket, and he was always being bullied. I don't like bullies so let him hang out with us, he wouldn't get bullied anymore.

Andreco's mum and sister were street girls, they dressed up in short skirts, stockings, and high heel shoes with lots of makeup, and low cut blouses showing off lots of tit. The mum's boyfriend was their mad Irish pimp, that carried a meat cleaver. He was also the step farther to Andreco and his sister. Andreco would always have black eyes, and bruises, he always looked like he had been dragged through a hedge backwards.

Me and Chris would get and brake down loads of fireworks. Collecting all the gunpowder, then pouring it into little sent bottles, packing it down with a small cork, or anything else that would do the job. Leaving a firework fuse poking out. Then when someone, for no good reason, had a go at us, we would sneak back, wait until the coast was clear. Then, with our little bombs, we would blow their front gate off, or blow a big hole in their back fence. The first time we did this, we was so shocked of how big the explosion was. Blowing this fucking great big hole, in old misery guts' back fence. It was so funny. Then seeing his face when he came running out. We was in stitches, and couldn't run for laughing...



My Little Brother  
Gary, He was a right  
Little fucker x  
580161  
He was born 1958  
The photo would of been  
10 say 1962 He didn't  
Bein only 48 years old

## A response to 'New boy in Tottenham'

### Holly Trundle

So much sadness. So much anger. So much damage done. I wonder how someone survives all that pain. Then Mick said about the gun powder, and it brought to mind my Dad's Sunday afternoon stories of the bombs he and his brother made. Light relief with a gin and tonic. Light relief for two young boys surrounded by bombed out houses in wartime London. Last week a doodlebug stopped whining as it approached their house, then stuttered back to life and flew on a few more streets. It killed one of their school friends.

In those days you could go to the chemist and buy chemicals, my Dad would say, leaning his strong hand on the tablecloth, in characteristic half open fist. My son and I hold our hands the same way. Canberra or Broome would be near that hand, Darwin would be near the mustard, Melbourne by the gravy jug. My Mum was born near Melbourne, and the Australia map always stretched under lunch on Sundays.

You could buy chemicals in those days. We mixed them in glass jars in the shed at the bottom of the garden. Dad was warming to his story now, his eyes glinting and a smile beneath his tobacco-stained moustache, with a scorched crescent at one end where his pipe rested most of the day. His teeth were slightly crooked there, where he had been holding a pipe for most of his life. He and his brother would make bombs in their garden shed. Sometimes they got the mix wrong and there was an unexpected explosion. They just put it down to experience and started again.

The best story, the one we children asked for again and again was when they made a rocket. They set it firmly in the ground, ready to light the fuse. A man was walking past their garden, on the other side of the high fence. He had steady, heavy-booted footsteps. Dad would slap the dining table, slap, slap, slap, slap. Knowing the story backwards, forwards, upside down, my brothers and I would smile and lean closer to watch Dad's hands and face. They lit the fuse and hunkered down to watch the rocket rise. Slap, slap, slap, slap. The rocket took off, wobbled a bit as it rose, then veered towards the fence. Slap, slap, slap, slap. The rocket lifted above the fence, then turned, flattened its flight, whizzing along above the fence. Slap-slap-slap-slap-slap-slap-slap-slap! Drumming his hands on the table, faster, faster, the atmosphere electric in the dining room around him, the mustard pot jumping, my Dad would burst out laughing. The poor chap didn't know where it came from, but he ran like the blazes, with that rocket right behind him! Tears ran down Dad's cheeks into his moustache. We didn't make rockets after that. Our Dad was scary sometimes, but on Sunday lunchtimes he relaxed.





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