



## BEAT THE DUST

April 2008

Darran Anderson interviews himself



Q: What keeps you from flinging yourself out of the nearest window?

A: Whiskey. Comrades. A red-haired Irish woman. Cabaret songs, murder ballads, carnie tunes, dustbowl laments and other forms of popular music.

Q: Where are you?

A: An attic flat in the city of Edinburgh, in a street where there's a gramophone emporium, a cheese mongers, an antiques shop, three pubs and a church for your sins. There be dragons beyond that.

Q: What literary figure could you beat in a fight?

A: I asked Craig Davidson that question and he said Hemingway, who he'd no doubt give a run for his money. I'd hedge my bets and go for Maeve Binchy, Helen Fielding...J K Rowling at a push, though it'd be touch and go.

**icon** by Darran Anderson

My step-grandmother,  
gone now and turned to bones,  
(a Reubens nightmare)  
had an icon of Christ  
nailed to her living room wall  
with a Sacred Heart

that breathed in its red glow.  
 She talked about it as if it were alive,  
 feeding it with her fix  
 of three rosaries a day.  
 At six  
 I could barely piss straight with fear  
 thinking about it,  
 pulsing day and night.  
 One day I found the lead that lead  
 to the plug,  
 the socket and the switch.  
 The same day  
 God evaporated.

**the arsonist** by Darran Anderson

*After Larkin.*

If I were asked  
 to build a religion  
 I would make use of fire.

The flashover is the moment  
 of consecration.  
 The roar of the backdraft  
 the very voice of God.

The Holy Ghost in the silent  
 invisible flame of Hydrogen  
 burning in air.  
 Water, the antichrist.  
 Baptism in a dousing  
 of aviation fuel.

Lord what miracles could be conjured  
 at 760 degrees,  
 what a heaven we could make in hell.

I pass the nightlights of the station  
 on my arc, the shoes and overalls  
 of the fighters lining the floor  
 where they hurriedly left them,  
 the engines gone in flight.  
 They will not  
 come back to wear them,  
 not this time.

Joseph Ridgwell interviews Tara



Me: 'So Tara, I hear you're now married with two kids, living out in the suburbs and slowly dying of boredom.'

Tara: 'Yeah, and I hear you're still pretending to be a writer and slowly drinking yourself to death!'

Me: 'I prefer my lifestyle option.'

Tara, falteringly: 'And I prefer mine Joseph.'

Me: 'So, would you be up for an extra marital affair?'

Tara, blushing but suddenly coming alive: 'Well, now you come to mention it.....'

**days when the world was wide** by Joseph Ridgwell

I was homeward bound and all alone, just how I like it. The sky was turning grey, a melancholy colour of uniform dreariness. I saw a dark bird swoop low and a skinny cat cross the road, its tail hanging in the air like an enigmatic question mark. There were no easy answers to anything.

All around songbirds could be heard, anonymous minstrels heralding the inevitable dawn. I walked along, jacket collar up, hands bunched inside dirty coat pockets, thinking about the enormity of what had just happened. Tara was leaving, going away, that's what she said. There were tears in her blue eyes and a hint of eternal regret that nothing would be the same again. Time to move on she'd said, time to exchange one dream for another.

That was our last night together, for sure. The relationship was over. I recalled her naked body, the pert breasts, resolute thighs, fresh pussy and I felt a stirring, it wasn't much, but I felt it. I remembered the way she spoke, her soft mouth, her funny little ways and almost choked. It's always the little things that get to you. I found a cigarette, fired up and took three rapid drags. From my back pocket I pulled out the bottle of red and drained the last dregs before tossing it in the gutter. I watched sadly as the bottle rolled to an undignified stop, lying there like some dead thing.

I smoked the fag down to the butt then flicked it away. A thin trail of grey smoke drifted in the cool breeze. So, there would be no fairy tale ending after all. Deep down I never really believed all that romantic stuff anyway, the ephemeral shit. Just a lot of empty words and forgotten promises scattered along a street of broken dreams. The relationship was always going to end someday; it just had to, that was the way of things.

I approached my house. It was still there, same bricks, same mortar, same windows, same everything; the one permanent in my life. As I put the key in the door I wondered if I would cry over the break-up. So far I hadn't and I didn't think I would. Maybe when it was all over, later on in life, I might; it was possible. But for now there was the reassuring realisation that I was still living in days when the world was wide.

### Tom Leins interviews himself



Q: What is this short story about?

A: Demonology. And Southern Hospitality.

Q: Are you trying to find your way out of Hell?

A: I couldn't even find my way out of Paignton...

Q: Are you the one who has been running around Paignton with a pistol in his jeans?

A: Only in my dreams.

Q: What would you suggest to anyone who has read your work three times and still not understood it?

A: Read it four times.

Q: Where can we find out more about this violent, unstable landscape you write about?

A: [www.myspace.com/tomleins](http://www.myspace.com/tomleins)

### **teenage peepshow** by Tom Leins

My band got the name 'Teenage Peepshow' from a video we all watched at Gavin's house one Friday night after closing time. It isn't a very nice video but then again, Gavin isn't a very nice man. Everyone was loaded up on grease and chemicals. I had a bellyful of contempt and a throat-full of sick. Everyone seemed to enjoy the video. Except for me. I spent most of that hour staring at the gas fire roaring behind the fake logs. That's an hour I'll never get back... The girl in the video was an amphetamine-fuelled amputee. She had brown watery eyes and left a stump-stain on the sheets when she'd finished. There were pink puckered scars where the legs came to an abrupt end above the knee. I don't know how she lost her legs – I wouldn't even attempt to guess. Russian pimps are among the nastiest, so I'm told. She looked Russian. Or Polish maybe. Every aspect of this manmade horror boiled the gutter blood in my veins. As soon as I saw Duane unzip his trousers I slid out of the room and sat in the kitchen, where I sipped from a coffee cup full of tap water until the sick transmissions were over. Almost two years later, to the day, Gavin lost an eye in a street fight with a guy who looked like a gypsy (but wasn't). I remembered the date because it was my birthday. I remember seeing the eyeball next to him on the buckled concrete. I stood over him unable to speak. When Nathan went back into the pub to use the phone, I found a loose cigarette in my coat pocket and slipped it, unlit, between Gavin's pursed lips. He lay in silence on the pavement until the ambulance arrived. It was too late to save his eye. Later that week we had our first ever gig. Before we went onstage I saw a flyer with our band name on it and sicked up a bit of blood. We played a good set but the landlord refused to pay us. In the car park, Nathan called him a cunt and the landlord swung at him with a tyre iron. Fuck it. I still think of that video sometimes. The girl's exquisite scars,

nervous sexuality and clean pink tongue. I think about it and cry. The band only played two more gigs then Nathan left the country. Now I have saint-like aspirations and a sock full of pound coins. Gavin won't know what's hit him.

Jenni Fagan interviewed by a borrible from the dark metropolis



Q: Why did you want to write this piece?

A: Real people and real situations sometimes grab my attention and don't let go.

Q: Why are you drawn to dark material?

A: It means something to me and writing is my reaction. I've always written more about things that bother me than things that don't.

Q: Do you drink Red Death?

A: No I drink Nog at the minute, or gin.

Q: Why is your cat so insane?

A: It's a long sad story, perhaps he's been listening to my stories for too long.

Q: What do you think about in the queue for your groceries?

A: The universe. I might ask each checkout operator that serves me over the next month how they feel about this tiny pinprick we call home, spinning in a great vast infinite unknown.

**water of leith** by Jenni Fagan

It's four am and the hostel is quiet, thirty-five homeless residents sleep or nod or lay unconscious in their rooms. The old Edinburgh building sits near the Water of Leith; it was once grand. It has high roofs and used to boast ornate cornices and working fireplaces. It still has the sash windows but the paint, like the carpets and the furniture is generic, clean, hospital-like. Despite the sterility and over-use of cleaning products, the smell of stale decay, alcohol, vomit, burning spoons, sex and despair lingers on. And underneath all that something else, something rotten. On the first floor a dog sits with its ears pricked, looking upward. His owner passed out three hours ago on a duvet strewn with crumpled cans of Red Death. On the first floor the girl on night duty sleeps under the breakfast table. She locked herself in the TV room at 11pm and will not, under any circumstances open the door again until 7am.

The cobbled street outside is quiet. Bin bags sit out at the back of pubs and restaurants. The summer sky is cloudless and light, seagulls caw by an open window on the third floor and circle round. The window is jammed open; it kept sliding down but he rammed a chisel in it and

now it won't budge. He'd nicked the chisel thinking it might work for the teeth but he couldn't so now it's in the window. He is bent over, desperately trying to shove the legs in but they won't fit. Spittle gathers at the corners of his mouth and he emits guttural noises in time with the wordless song in his head. He has to keep the song going and he has to make the legs fit cos the smell is leaking out; it's getting stronger by the hour. He sprayed a full can of Lynx but even the old timers are looking at him funny and the old timers stink. He stops and slides to the floor. He wants to hit his head but he can't, not now. His arm's itching where he fixed earlier. Pus oozes through a t-shirt already crusty with blood and layered sweat. He turns his head against the wall and listens. He thinks he can hear the lad on the other side, listening back. He's been doing this every other hour since it happened but he can't remember when that was. He looks up at the same tiny brown spatters across the ceiling - anything to avoid the eyes. He'd wrapped a Lidl bag around the head earlier but it's slipped and now his friend is staring at him. The seagulls caw and his eyes follow little spiral tracers in the air from the gear and the lack of sleep. His heart is a fuzzy thud in his ears. He kicks the kettle out the road on the floor. He's trying to remember the words of the song because the air is too still. It's so still he can hear the crack of the belt across his mate's jaw, the sound ricocheting off the walls. The same sound the kettle made when he wrenched it out the wall and threw it, the cable snaking behind it. He'd felt like the stillness outside had sunk into the room, crept round them, slowed down the spatters of boiling water arcing through the air. Each thud and kick and grunt and cry after that had echoed, spiralled upward, suspended itself in the air, seemed to elongate and draw itself out while outside the seagulls cawed. He leans closer into the wall and listens and tries to slow his raggedy breathing, just like before. He can't hear anything but he knows someone is listening, he can feel it.

He wants to stop for a fix but he can't, the gears gone. The day after it happened had been his mate's giro day. He'd rummaged through his pockets, found his book and a clipper he'd nicked off him the week before. He'd pocketed the clipper and taken the book down to the post office. The girl in front of him had turned, recoiled and glared when he joined the queue behind her. Her kiddie'd stared at him too as she paid her bills. The post office woman shouted next, ignoring his stink and his twitch and his shakes and his clammy hands. She'd slammed the money under the silver drawer and called next before he'd even turned to leave. He'd scored, sorted himself out and at some point gone to the charity shop and bought the suitcase. He stands up and folds the torso over once more and stamps the leg down, hears a crunch but keeps on stamping. He sits on top of the suitcase and bounces down as hard as he can. He manages to yank the zip a quarter of the way round; it leaves a red mark on his finger. He kicks and pushes and shoves and yanks until finally the zip fastens all the way round.

The dog on the first floor is whimpering at his owner; his chest rises and falls in shallow raspy snores. The bumps and thuds on the stairs stop for a second then there's a low dragging along the landing carpet before the bump and thud and drag begins again. It's 4.43 am when he reaches the front door. He eases out slowly, teeth gritted, the roar in his head building. The street is bright and clear. He winces at the light and scans for anyone going by. He can hear a bin lorry somewhere but he can't see it. He aims for the bridge twenty yards away. Above him the seagulls circle. He is wishing he hadn't put the bricks in already. He'd been collecting the bricks from the building site, four or five in his rucksack at a time. His face is red and as he groans he splutters, saliva landing on his ice cold skin. It's 5.33am when he gets to the top of the bridge. He stops in a doorway for a fag; the roar in his head's striking him off balance. He hauls the suitcase up, legs shaking with the effort. He can hear the bin lorry getting closer. The suitcase falls into the Water of Leith with a splash and he's mesmerised by the tiny droplets of water arcing back up through the air. A car turns the corner behind him as the bin lorry pulls up alongside The Raj restaurant. He walks quickly, glancing behind him at the suitcase already sinking, slowing as he goes up Great Junction Street to the bottom of Leith Walk. He sits down on the benches under Queen Victoria, the bird shit she's covered in gleaming in the morning sun.

At 7am the morning staff unlocks the door and goes to the bathroom. She doesn't notice the damp under her trainers on the stair. She's rubbing her eyes and thinking thank God, that awful smell's started to go.

*This story is a work of fictional reportage inspired by actual events and subsequent news coverage. On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of July 2003 at 10.33pm Edinburgh police fished out a weighted suitcase from the Water of Leith after receiving two anonymous tip offs to check the water. The suitcase contained the body of Timothy Wallace, a 24 year-old homeless man from Edinburgh. A thorough post-mortem verified that Timothy Wallace had been battered to death. On the 16<sup>th</sup> April 2004, Kevin Gibson began a life sentence for what is now known as the 'Horrible body in a suitcase murder.' Gibson, 24, was a resident in Dunedin Harbour Hostel at the time of the murder. It is speculated amongst homeless people that the body was kept there for some time before being thrown into the Water of Leith. Wallace admitted at the High Court in Edinburgh that he had thrown the suitcase off a bridge but claimed another man was the murderer. In the court, trial judge Lord Dawson ordered him to serve at least fifteen years. He will be eligible to apply for release in 2019.*

\* Red Death is a name commonly used for a well-known cheap Scottish lager.