

## **BEAT THE DUST**

### THE OPEN ISSUE

JULY 2010

#### Introduction

Rather than commissioning pieces, the fourth issue of Beat the Dust was open to all writers to submit work. No theme – anything was considered. So, expect blasphemy, a gravedigger in Disneyland, Mark Ronson having sex with Lady GaGa on a piano, a dwarf pissing on dolphins, an actual message in a bottle thrown off the Isle of Wight Ferry and a child killer. Yep, it's creamy literary goodness.

#### Malcolm Bennett



Author pic by Gaynor Perry

Malcolm Bennett's random song playlist:

**O:** Tita Merello - Se Dice Mi Tita Merello Tango

**P:** Peteco Carabajal - La Simple

**E:** Anibal Troilo Y Edmundo Rivero - Mi Noche Triste

**N:** Bajofondo Tango Club - Mi Corazon

**2:** Paulo Conte - Como Di

**0:** Carlos Gardel - Caminito

**1:** Shack - Daniella

**0:** Sam The Sham And The Pharaohs - Little Red Riding Hood

## **The Rebel**

Ivy strained the fat from the custard and sighed. It was the Lord's fourth portion that morning and she was bored. When she first got her job with God she'd been really excited, but now, after 320 years, her heart had begun to pine for the men of a shipyard or barracks.

"Ivy..? Ivy..? Iveeee?"

She tutted and, casting a casual glance at her untouched lager, picked herself up.

"Here you are, God," she said, placing the pudding before him.

"Cheers, Ivy love," God blessed heartily. "Yer a cracker, even if I did make you myself."

Ivy blushed and tried to cover her two massive wet breasts with two tiny dry hands.

"Give over, God," she giggled.

"Ere." God got serious and, turning the sound down on the television, forgave the custard for a cigarette. "Where's that bloody Jesus, then?!"

"God knows."

Just then God moved in a mysterious way. "What's got into that lad, he's out all the hours I send!"

Suddenly, Jesus flew in. "Hi, Dad." He landed.

"Where the bloody hell have you been?!" asked God.

"Look, I'm sick of your holier-than-thou attitude!" Jesus flapped. "There was a stay-behind in The Wilderness, so some Romans put me up for the night. Anyway, I'm off to The Last Supper for a pint with the lads".

The Lord mumbled and pulled out a small sack. "God's speed?"

"Thanks Dad. I'll need it!"

SNORT!!!

Rob Plath



Rob Plath's random song playlist:

- O:** Astrud Gilberto - Once I Loved
- P:** Elliott Smith - Between The Bars
- E:** Jeff Buckley - Mojo Pin
- N:** Cake - Satan Is My Motor
- 2:** Chet Baker - Easy To Love

**0:** Tom Waits - Bad Liver And A Broken Heart

**1:** Nick Drake - Way To Blue

**0:** Leonard Cohen - Dress Rehearsal Rag

### **as if it wasn't crowded enough**

sometimes it feels like loss  
plants another skeleton  
inside of you

as if it wasn't crowded  
enough  
with one set of bones

some nights you can  
feel them slowly turning  
in a tight embrace

this melancholy couple  
dancing within

and it's almost kind of sweet  
on those nights i drink away  
and whistle a solemn tune  
to this strange moving union

### **Gravedigger in Disneyland**

I am a gravedigger in Disneyland, walking down the streets  
with shovel on shoulder.

I brush by colorful cartoon people, and they point their bright fingers,  
mocking my mud crusted clothes.

I stop to lean on my spade and smoke a cigarette.

Meanwhile they dance down sidewalks like clowns, juggling bowling  
pins full of laughter.

My smoke curls up past their blinking rainbow lights, climbing up  
into the dark sky.

My heart's broken since I was 5 years old. Love  
just unglues it.

I throw my blade upon my shoulder and continue through  
the maze of neons.

### **sitting here in the bar i see lovers racing to their doom**

there is always a limited number of kisses  
between a pair of lovers  
before the wet string snaps  
and it is finished

always a pre-determined amount of embraces  
between a pair of lovers  
before an inner ribbon that tallies them  
is snipped

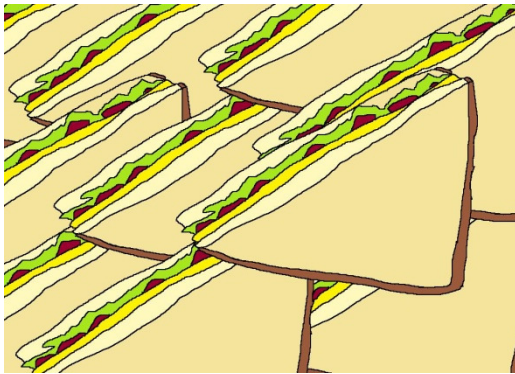
you pick up the slack  
tie the broken ends  
but there is always a tight cap  
upon unbudging love

i see their 'forevers' in the fading haze  
of smoke from my cigarette

i'd say to go slow, but who can really ration flesh fire  
once it sparks

so i lift my glass to flames & doom

### Socrates Adams-Florou



Socrates Adams-Florou's random song playlist:

**O:** Iggy Pop - China Girl

**P:** The Fall - Theme From Sparta F.C.

**E:** Jake Thackray - Sister Josephine

**N:** Smokey Robinson & The Miracles - You've Really Got A Hold On Me

**2:** Chet Baker - There's A Lull In My Life

**0:** Lonnie Donnegan - Cumberland Gap

**1:** Le Tigre - Deceptacon

**0:** Bronski Beat - Smalltown Boy

## **Lunch Break**

I am flicking through a fashion magazine. There are women and men in it. They are wearing clothes. I want to be a fashion model. I eat a piece of chocolate cake.

I look up at the clock on the wall. It's half past twelve. On the table in front of me is the rest of my lunch. Chocolate cake and a bottle of mineral water. There is a thin sheet of plastic that my sandwiches were in before I ate them. My sandwiches had cheese inside them. And butter. And pieces of lettuce. And pickle. I turn the page in the fashion magazine and look at a man and a woman nearly kissing. They are covered in sweat or sea water. They are by the sea. I look at the clock on the wall. It's half and one minute past twelve.

I read an article in the fashion magazine about fashion.

Fashion is important to everyone whether they know it or not. I am wearing my work clothes. I am on trend.

I look at a picture of Alexa Chung in the fashion magazine. I look at a picture of Mark Ronson in the fashion magazine. I look at a picture of Agyness Deyn in the fashion magazine. I look at a picture of Gok Wan in the fashion magazine. Agyness Deyn and Mark Ronson and Alexa Chung and Gok Wan. Gok Wan is my hero. I think about Gok Wan complimenting Agyness Deyn. He says, Nice Bangers, Agnyess. He touches Agyness' bangers and then looks at the camera and winks. Agyness wrinkles her nose and winks at everyone.

I take a bite of chocolate cake and think about my bangers. I touch my bangers. I think about covering my bangers in the fat from the chocolate.

My boss looks into the room that I am in and says, hi. I say, hi. I have thirty three minutes of lunch break left. I am reading an article about fashion. I have lost my place in the article and start from the beginning again. I read an article about fashion.

I dream about being a fashion model on the catwalk. I don't fall over. People take photos of me spinning around on the catwalk. Mark Ronson is having sex with Lady Gaga on top of a piano. Lady Gaga is applauding Mark Ronson, who is applauding himself.

The clock says it is twelve thirty and three minutes. I am floating around on my dreams, right?

I stop reading the fashion magazine. I don't feel anything. My brain stops working. I feel hungry. I take a large bite of chocolate cake. My brain is fizzing. It is fizzing full of fizzy fashion and chocolate cakes and all of the lovely celebrities and the taste of chocolate. I think that the taste of chocolate is real. My boss pops his head round the door and says, your face is covered in sticky chocolate.

I look at my boss and smile.

I wipe my face with the fashion magazine.

I wipe the chocolate on Mark Ronson and Agyness Deyn and Lady Gaga and Gok Wan and Alexa Chung. They are all covered in chocolate. As I wipe the chocolate, I lick the pages. I lick the chocolate from all of their bodies.

My boss says, that is a communal copy.

He says, you can't just act that way, Mandy. My name is Mandy.

I say, sorry.

He says, it's OK.

He says, you have to buy it though.

I say, OK.

I give him £5.

He says, thanks Mandy.

I stand up and vomit onto the floor. I can see a picture of Gok Wan in my vomit. I say, I'm ill, can I go home.

He says, no.

He says, you look fine to me, Mandy.

I look fine to him. I sit down and carry on eating the chocolate cake and reading my fashion magazine.

Sara Crowley and Matt Kinnison



Sara Crowley's random song playlist:

- O:** Bad Company - Rock Steady
- P:** Jeff Buckley - Corpus Christi Carol
- E:** Foo Fighters - No Way Back
- N:** Them Crooked Vultures - Interlude With Ludes
- 2:** FFY - Kung Fu vs. Radio Astronomy
- 0:** Kate Bush - Mrs Bartolozzi
- 1:** Jay-Z Feat LaToya Williams - All Around The World
- 0:** Biffy Clyro - That Golden Rule

### **Sweeties Like Radioactive Worms**

A memorial pamphlet. Two cartoon strips, a photograph, and a recipe for Turkish coffee.

*"For the perfect Turkish coffee use a fuller bodied bean such as Mysore, Brazilian or Guatemalan. Add these to a small milk pan of cold water so that there is just over three times as much water as there is coffee. Open three cardamom pods, checking that the seeds inside are black and podgy - the lighter, thinner ones are a bit like mouthwash and will spoil the taste. Add these, and if you like sugar add some now. Bring this mixture to the boil VERY SLOWLY, just simmer and bring to the boil three times, letting the mixture relax and simmer again between boilings. It should be on the heat for about ten minutes in total.*

*Soft foam will have developed, and you should skim a bit off and put it in a pre-warmed cup. After the third boil, pour the mixture into the cup and leave to stand; there is an ungodly sludge that will need to settle, and you should remember not to drain your cup completely when you drink or you'll get a faceful. This sludge can be used to tell the future, but I'm afraid I don't know how. The coffee is best served with something uncommonly sweet, such as Turkish Delight, a Danish Pastry, or those Indian sweets that look like radioactive worms."*

Alive. Dead.

*"Ethiopian Yirgacheffe – Originally cultivated in the 9<sup>th</sup> century to keep monks awake, it has a strange woody flavour. In a medium roast it is an ideal "any time of day" coffee and takes milk very well. Its caffeine content is moderate and subtle with a strength rating of 3/5."*

It begins with a shoulder twinge. He sings to the cuddly toys on his bed. The red, black and yellow striped snake, the beige elephant, the plump bear. He changes the bed linen, even though it's just for him. Clean white sheet, a simple pleasure. The twinge interrupts. The song becomes a curse.

No, that's not the beginning, nor the ending. It starts inside, maybe, with DNA, or it starts outside, maybe, with the smokes. Inside out, outside in. Whichever way, the cells mutate, spread, attack. Neoplasm. One plasm? Thickening, eating, spreading, mutating. Metastasis. Tumour. Lymph. Blood. Cells travelling around his body. Unseen, unfelt, until a twinge. A twang. An ouch - what the fuck!

*"El Salvador – A wiry, acidic top-end coffee and a reassuringly pudgy body. Grown at high altitude this is a definitive South America coffee. Medium to large caffeine hit with a strength rating of 4/5."*

Despite morphine his voice sounds the same as ever on the 'phone. The words shocking, heart jolting, but the delivery reassuringly familiar.

"They need to do a brain scan; they're not sure if it has spread that far. Would be a bit shit if it had."

"You don't sound like someone whose brain is being fucked with!"

"It can just take over, you know, this terminal cancer business."

The word clanging in the air. Huge, it swallowed all the other words that had been waiting to form.

*"Emsworth special festival blend - It carries a dark roast South American-type taste on a softer, mocha-ish bed. Very smartly done. The balance between the two things is seamless and even. Moderate caffeine content with a strength rating of 3/5."*

Yellowy lights and yellow hospital walls combine to produce jaundiced air. Germs wheezing. Inhale, exhale. Looking grey and exhausted, smelling sharply animal.

Losing count of magpies. One for sorrow, two for joy, good afternoon Captain, good afternoon Captain...

The world shrinks. He looks at it in tiny pieces. This bed, this arm, this coffee.

"Is there anything you'd like to say? Anyone you'd like me to contact?"

He declines.

"Tell everyone to drink more coffee," he says eventually.

He doesn't stop drinking coffee even when the radiotherapy and chemo burn his throat and make his voice a hoarse, angry sound.

*"India Bibi Plantation – the strange thing about this one is that its creamy, soft flavour conceals a gargantuan caffeine content that borders on being classifiable as a hard drug. It sneaks up on you – wait with mounting impatience as the world appears to grind to a halt around you in your newly accelerated state. Most exciting. Strength rating 5/5."*

The agony of a broken rib, a chest that clicks. One morning his arm fails, another his leg. He loses mobility and clings to dignity. A life, an enormous, glorious wash of creativity and imagination fragments and becomes

torn

pieces

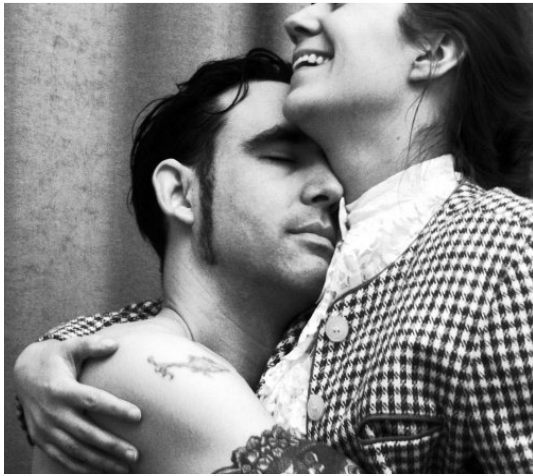
One day he doesn't want his coffee, and asks...

"Is it okay if I go now?"

They say yes

and  
hold him,  
talk to him,  
and he

### Jarred McGinnis



Jarred McGinnis' random song playlist:

**O:** Modest Mouse - Florida

**P:** Morrissey - The More You Ignore Me The Closer I Get

**E:** The Ink Spots- I Don't Want To Set The World On Fire

**N:** Beck - Asshole

**2:** Melvins - Night Goat

**0:** Eartha Kitt - I Want To Be Evil

**1:** Ministry - Lay Lady Lay

**0:** Andrew Jackson Jihad - Rejoice

## **Pissing on Dolphins**

There used to be a house at Sunset beach that some hurricane flicked away with waves and wind. All that remained was the cement seawall and a set of stairs that led from the beach to the non-existent house. God was correcting the mistake that was Florida, one beachfront property at a time.

Most evenings, while I counted the days before I left for college, I sat alone on those steps to watch the small waves toddle and fall upon the powdered sugar sand.

One late afternoon, a dwarf was already sitting on the cement stairs. With both of his small rough hands, he held a beer can. He nodded his grey-stubbed chin to acknowledge my arrival.

"Beer?" he offered.

"Thanks. I'm Jarred." I lifted the six-pack by its two empty rings and plucked a can off like a ripe apple.

"Name's Odd. O-D-D. Unless of course you see fire-eating dwarves all the time. Odd's the name." The sentence sounded like it had been recited countless times and was punctuated by a click of the tongue and a wink.

"Fire eating, huh?"

"Yep, I used to work for Barnum and Bailey."

We watched the sun slide its way towards the Gulf of Mexico, and Odd told me about his life in the circus. When the last beer was gone, he made his way down the steps, supporting himself against the wall. He paused at the final step where the high tide barely licked, and began to urinate.

"Take that, you fucking fish," he said. "Come on, man. Do your part. We can fill this thing to the brim. Let's flood those rich fuckers' houses with piss and seawater."

I hesitated from shyness.

"C'mon. No fish is going to bite your pecker off. There's nothing like pissing in the ocean."

So I pissed in the ocean.

When I released my stream, he said, "That will put those dolphins in their place. Uppity fish."

After the sun set, I offered him a ride home.

"Much obliged. The buses are always full of sad old coons. It's depressing," he said.

He lived in a trailer park not far from the beach. Florida is like that. Hidden behind a million dollar condominium complex, a run-down shop will be rotting in its shadow with lawyers circling the location and waiting for the aged proprietor to die. When he does, they swoop down and suck the bones of his insignificant legacy and another million dollar condominium sprouts from its corpse.

The trailer park was one of these tiny vestiges of the Old Florida. The poor harsh Florida that air conditioning and vacationing New Yorkers have erased. There were about a dozen sad single-wide trailers scattered amongst the clumps of saw grass and palmettos. The seashell road grumbled and hissed under my truck's wheels.

"Look here, Jarred. I'm cooking up this deal, and I need some help getting around town. I'll pay your gas and give you ten bucks a day." The deal Odd was cooking up was a concession stand to sell Blooming Onions. Everything he needed, the fryer, the utensils, the diesel generator, was contained in a small aluminum trailer. After he got the trailer, he'd find a cheap used truck and once again he'd follow the mad teacup rides, the crooked games of chance and the Ferris wheels tucked onto their trailers like huge toys. That was the plan anyway.

Odd and I were supposed to meet the trailer's current owner at a convenience store near the freeway that ran like a black spine toward the border eight hours away. We had only been sitting on the curb a couple minutes before Odd stood up and went into the store. He returned with a six-pack.

While we sat drinking, a woman and child walked past us. I got nervous, thinking they were looking at me, a teenager drinking outside the 7-11. My thoughts then turned to the trouble Odd would get in for giving beer to a minor. They wore the same gaping mouth and blank stare. Their heads turned to keep fixed on us even after they passed.

"Man, sometimes I'm just not in the mood for that shit. She's pulling along that ugly little tadpole and they stare at me? Inbred Crackers." Odd threw his beer toward the road, and it sloped and clattered noisily before rolling to a stop on the grass median.

"Fuck 'em," I burped.

"Yeah, exactly. Fuck 'em."

The cashier came out heralded by the door's mechanical chime.

"Guys, you can't be drinking that here. You got to go somewhere else."

"Shh. We're busy drinking. Come back later," Odd said without turning to look at the guy.

"Listen, I could lose my job. Could you please just go across the street or something?"

"We'd be doing you a favor. You don't get paid shit. You got to wear that stupid hat and that red and yellow shirt." Odd turned and pointed a crooked finger at the offending garments. "We'll be going soon. Keep your bright red pants on."

The man went back into the store with the bing-bong of the chime following his retreat.

"Jackass," Odd said. "The circus had this gorilla called Tyrone the Terrible. He was fucking nuts. He'd tear up and down his cage. Scream and holler at all hours. Tyrone would bash his head bloody trying to grab one of three guys it took to feed him. They would fuck with that poor animal something fierce. Spraying him with water. Throwing his food at him. No wonder he was crazy. He got so bad they couldn't show him anymore. He'd scare the kids and throw his shit at the adults - here's our man."

We shielded our eyes from the headlight's glare as the truck pulled into the parking lot. After the money was exchanged and hands were shaken, the man unhitched the trailer and left with a wave and a toot of the horn. Odd whistled and brushed the trailer's shiny aluminum sides with his hand. He kept chattering about what a deal he'd got and how new it still looked.

"What happened to Tyrone?" I asked.

"Huh? They had to kill him. Some idiot backed an elephant too close to his cage and Tyrone pulled its balls right off. God, it was awful. Tyrone just sat there grinning with those bloody balls in his hands. That poor elephant died a terrible way."

"Jesus," I muttered.

"Man, I think this thing will do just fine." Odd continued looking inside the countless silver drawers and cabinets.

We hitched it to my truck and I drove him home.

That night he cooked his first batch of Blooming Onions. Like all great fair food, it is a greasy pleasure that is instantly regretted. The batter and grease that seduce the taste buds sit like a resentful toad in your gut.

Odd concentrated like a surgeon. He placed the onions into the cutter and made its layers open like a carnation. He dunked them into a thick brown batter, the onions sizzling and bubbling in the hot oil. Several neighbors, tugged away from their trailers glowing TV-blue, followed the smell of frying onions. He boasted and bragged and offered Blooming Onions to everyone.

"Compliments of the house," he said and climbed back onto the beer cooler that served as his stool. At the center of each of his creations, he placed a plastic ramekin filled with an orange-pink glop of special sauce.

"That shit ain't special. It's ketchup, mayo, and relish. You buy gallons of each, stir it all together. It costs nothing. If some customer wants extra sauce, I'll dish it out with a smile." Everyone stood around the trailer with Odd volleying jokes and stories from behind the gleaming silver box still hitched to my truck.

But, Odd couldn't find a truck that he could afford. After every failed attempt, he cursed about the guy ripping him off on the trailer and wondered what the hell he was going to do with twenty gallons of ketchup.

"Hey, Odd. I wanted to stop by and say goodbye before I left."

"Left? Where are you going?"

"College. University of Texas."

"Texas. Christ, nothing but steers and queers out there, and you ain't got horns. Well, damn. I didn't know you were a college boy. Shit, Jarred. When you leaving?"

"End of this week."

"Damn." He paused for a second. "Well, good luck."

"Thanks."

We sat on his front step and talked. He told his jokes and stories, all of which by then I had heard. Throughout the night, we never mentioned the concession stand that was growing dull and rusted under the palm trees outside. I ended up getting too drunk to drive home and fell asleep in his reclining chair. In the morning, Odd's snores emanated from his room. I closed the front door behind me and left.

### Paul Ewen



Paul Ewen's random song playlist:

**O:** Tall Dwarfs - Nothing's Going To Happen

**P:** Little Annie - I Think Of You

**E:** Anti Atlas - Broken Doll

**N:** Loves Ugly Children - Surf Nazis Must Die

**2:** Unitone Hi-Fi - Wickedness Increased

**0:** Global Goon - Scott Cronce Is The CEO

**1:** Salmonella Dub - Orbital (Yasmin Dub)

**0:** Keith Hudson - Michael Talbot Affair

#### **Message In A Bottle No. 4: Isle of Wight Ferry**

Dear Sir/Madam,

I hope with all my heart that you will receive this message most promptly and directly.

I am currently on board a Wight Link ferry, and the name of the vessel is *St. Faith*. The waves are a bit choppy and I believe myself to be in treacherous danger.

It is not the tide that causes me to fear for my life, however. Rather, it is the murderous thieves that abound, running loose aboard this channel prison, causing me to creep about, terrified between the Promenade Deck, the Sundeck, and the Upper Lounge.

The carpet throughout the ship is a lovely crimson colour, sprinkled with tastefully designed yellow, blue and brown squares. I know this because I've just been sick all over it. Also, I must tell you that I am very, very drunk.

But the important thing is this. On the bottom level of the ship are the various numbered car decks where passenger vehicles are parked for the duration of the trip. And right now it sounds as if every single car has been forcibly broken into, because there is an almighty racket of car alarms resounding throughout the ship. With every rough patch in the surf, half a dozen more go off. It's the thieves! There must be hundreds of them! They're stealing everything! They're going to gut me like a fish unless you save me!

I am now going to insert this message into a plastic carbonated soft drink bottle, cap it and throw it overboard. I will throw it into the huge wake behind the ship that resembles a zipper opening the ocean's trousers.

I'll give you 20 minutes to save me before I throw myself off too.

Don't spare the horses!

In great expectation,

Paul Ewen.

## Sam Taradash



Sam Taradash's random song playlist:

**O:** Tengo la Voz - Nortec Collective

**P:** 300 Pounds Of Joy - Howling Wolf

**E:** Arco Arena, Cake - Comfort Eagle

**N:** Lupin The 3rd '78 - Tokyo Ska Paradise Orchestra

**2:** You Go To My Head - Bud Powell

**O:** Get Out My Life, Woman - Joe Williams

**1:** *Andy's Chest* - Lou Reed

**O:** Go Go Gadget Gospel - Gnarl's Barkley

### **Baby Monitor**

The baby monitor squeals and my hand jerks to it, pulling my mind out of a dreamless, unsteady sleep. Before I know where or who I am, I've pressed the receiver to my chest to muffle it and I'm counting off the steps from the bed to the source of my alarm. My baby daughter, May, is crying in the dark. Her voice rings in my head and down my stiff, aching back. It makes my stomach cramp and my veins clench. Something's wrong with my baby. Straight to her crib, then, and pick her up before you even turn on the light. From the shadows, my mind is in spasms, rattling and asking, "What's wrong?" again and again. I'm a good daddy, so it's my job, my duty, to make sure she's cared for right.

There, the first hints of pink light start to glimmer in the room. I picked out that lamp special. It comes on kind of rosy first, then gets brighter and whiter, so it's more gentle on May's eyes. As the light comes on I can make out shapes in the room: the crib, the songbirds of North America mobile, the other monitor, and that stupid clown mural Mommy asked her deadbeat brother to paint. I hate those clowns, and I wonder again why they're in May's room. But she shrieks again and the tearing sound from the baby monitor, which I'm still clutching, shreds every other thought in my head. I quickly turn the volume low before focusing on her again.

First she needs a diaper check; my baby shouldn't be spending the night wet. But it's dry. Of course, she usually doesn't need changing until her 5 a.m. feed. Is she thirsty? Give her a drink. No, not that either. Look at her struggling. She's still working on her coordination, but when my mighty May turns her head back and away, then puts up her hands and start swinging, she's saying, 'No, don't want it!'

But what does she want?

Maybe she's too hot. Check her temperature, forehead to forehead. God only knows why Mommy put her in the thick pajamas this time of year. But Mommy knows best, doesn't she? So May gets all bundled up, just in case. See what Mommy knows now?

Waiting and watching her like this, I want to scream too. Why can't I make this right? I mean, she's my little miracle, but she's just a baby. People have been raising babies since forever. So what's wrong with me that I can't take care of my daughter? Then May screams, and that sick, guilty feeling pulls the bottom out of my stomach one more time. She's hurting; nothing else matters. So I lower my binoculars, roll down the driver's side window, and re-focus on the bedroom from across the street. The night breeze is cool against my face, but doesn't seem to cut through the heavy, stale air in the car.

There, I can see Mommy checking your temperature with her hand this time. But it's not a fever, is it, May? Look at her kicking away, she's too fussy to have a fever. And even while I'm cored out from the sound of her crying, I see that kick and I have to smile. She's like a little Michelle Yeoh doing Supercop: pull the left leg up, then the right, then throw out a quick one-two, *wa-tchow!*

I remember feeling her doing that exact same kick before she was even born, thumping my hands from inside Mommy's tummy. All that time I wondered what she was doing in there. I used to put my face right up to that belly, to the wall of her room, and I'd ask her, 'Are you asleep in there? Are you comfy? Are you happy, curled up there in the dark?' But she's out there, kicking and crying now, and I still don't know why.

Then Mommy turns away, and I see the hall lights come on through the window of my old room. The stairway lights come on next, shining through the front window, and finally the light in the kitchen. I focus again, and can see my poor May, all red from crying. Mommy keeps walking between the fridge and the sink, rocking May and saying, "Oo-loo-loo-loo", as if that's going to help. I told her a thousand times, what May likes is when I hold her next to my heart while I buzz like a giant bumblebee, making low, slow buzz-uzz-uzz-es. She likes the vibrations, rumbling through my chest to her.

But Mommy always says, "Oo-loo-loo-loo" because her mommy always said, "Oo-loo-loo-loo". And Mommy always knows best, because Mommy's mommy always knew best. They've got all the answers, don't they? Except for how to help my little girl, who's still crying.

And it's been at least five minutes now of full-bore, wide-open screeching. May never cries this long when I've got her. I can see her, inside, hurting. I can feel her, out here, across the street, and it's cutting me in half. For the hundredth time tonight I want to rush inside, get my daughter and take her somewhere else, somewhere clean and warm and quiet and safe. I want to take care of my May; that's what a good daddy is supposed to do.

But then I realize that I've got my hand on the car door and I'm about to open it. The inside lights in my car are always shut off, but opening the door might activate the motion lights outside. And even though I'm outside of the 100-yard limit, Mommy knows she can just call the cops and get Daddy sent to jail anyway. And if Daddy's in jail, he can't work, he can't send money, and he can't help May.

So I take a deep breath and put the binoculars down on the seat. Even while my insides burn, I close my eyes and go over the possibilities again. Not hungry, not wet, not fever. I roll my neck, hear it click and grind, and think again. Maybe teething. Or a rash. Or a spider bite or an allergy or even a nightmare. It could be anything. Anything. And Mommy's not helping.

But when I'm telling myself one more time why I can't go inside. When I'm trying again to block out that vision of me walking into the house to rescue May, I hear it: quiet.

I grab the binoculars and look through the window again. Mommy's holding May in one arm, and jiggling something in front of her. I refocus, and see a yellow dish scrubber, one of the useless kind with the hollow handle for soap that Mommy insists on buying. But the bristles are curled back like a flower and it's caught May's eye. She's waving at it and her cheeks are fading from angry red back to pink.

That's it.

My baby's okay.

That sick, hollow feeling starts to fade, and I realize I'm hungry. I've been here since one am, and there's nothing left to eat in the car. The last McDonald's cup doesn't even have any of that waxy water left in the bottom. I start to wish for a donut, or even a coffee, but my throat's already raw with indigestion. So I look back to the kitchen and see my mighty May almost catch that stupid, flowery-looking scrubber with a two-handed grab, and I know my lovely little girl is going to get it in the next pass or two, just watch.

But then Mommy turns away from the window and I can't see any more. She hits the switch on her way out and the kitchen goes dark. Then the lights go out in the stairwell, next in the hallway. I turn up the baby monitor and press it to my ear, and I can hear Mommy humming something, and a little rustling before— nothing, except for the blood rushing in my ears. Then slowly, slowly, the light from May's special lamp fades to pink. That soft rosy color gets dimmer and dimmer, just like it's supposed to. But I've been staring so hard I'm seeing flickers, and from out here I can't tell when that warm light glowing over my baby has finally, completely gone out.

## James Rippingale



James Rippingale's random song playlist:

**O:** The Dope Show - Marilyn Manson

**P:** Gimme Danger - The Stooges

**E:** We Are The Pigs - Suede

**N:** Suicide Bomb - Primal Scream

**2:** Get It On - Grinderman

**0:** Dropping Bombs On The Whitehouse - The Brian Jonestown Massacre

**1:** The Ants Invasion - Adam & The Ants

**0:** For Your Pleasure - Roxy Music

### **Boneyard**

I placed two origami orchids in the hands of the dead child  
And a single kiss against the tape that covered his mouth  
The ghost trails of lipstick blurring into red vignette  
Under rain that flowed gun-blue through the gutters

I did it so someone would find me and make me real  
Call up my reason and my history in police statistics  
Taken from the bloom-blood of images that I left with the body  
Because no one listened before I became a killer

But they made me a star and gave me a name with metre and pulse  
That controlled the news like a crossbow at the temple  
And I became the answer to the question of the alley after dark  
A jackal-headed God appeased by arteries that only I could open

You need only what I give to hear the whisper of my music  
It comes as the shudder and the shiver in the eye's aversion  
As I pass you in the queue and the crowd and the supermarket  
Just waiting for the light to fade

Michael Keenaghan



Michael Keenaghan's random song playlist:

**O:** Frenz - The Fall

**P:** Rococo - Cocteau Twins

**E:** Don't Cry - Neil Young

**N:** Kamikaze - PJ Harvey

**2:** Love in a Car - The House of Love

**0:** Mass Production - Iggy Pop

**1:** Daddy Died - Alan Vega

**0:** Several Girls Galore - My Bloody Valentine

## **Wasteland**

By the edge of the park was an area where a railway had once been, but now it was cordoned off by a tall fence and dense with bushes and trees. One Sunday afternoon as Chris and I were playing out, Kenny, who was a couple years older, offered to take us over there to show us two secret underground bunkers he'd discovered. We weren't sure if we believed him, but all the same, it sounded interesting.

The fence was topped with barbed wire, but Kenny brought us to a concealed slit and we were in. We headed up through the thick foliage, beating our way with sticks. Finally Kenny said, "Stop here, this is it." And sure enough, we watched him lift a hatch from the earth. Steel steps led down to a concrete room. Kenny lit a candle to show us the surround. "See, told you I weren't lying."

The walls were damp and stained, the floor spongy with old rags and newspapers. Chris found a tin that contained some rusty old tools, and Kenny found some pages from a magazine that he wouldn't let us see. He told us we were too young. "Too young for what?" Chris asked.

"For sex," Kenny said, folding them and putting them in his pocket. "Me, though, I know all about that kind of thing. I've had sex plenty of times."

Kenny was already at secondary school so he probably had. He went to some kind of special school, but told people it was because he had special talents. He hung around mostly on his own or with kids who were younger, but nobody questioned him. Kenny was pretty hard.

He sat on a chair and we watched him light a cigarette. He inhaled then blew out the smoke

in rings. The light from the candle painted his face in shadows.

"This is where I bring them," he said.

"Who?" Chris asked.

"Girls, who else."

"What for?"

"For nookie, you mug."

He stood up. "Come on, let's go. I'll show you the other bunker. The next one's better. It's haunted."

We headed up, and set off deeper into the woods. The day had grown overcast.

"Watch out for the human traps," Kenny said.

"What?"

"This area's out of bounds so they put down traps, don't they. Get caught in one and it'll take your fucking legs off."

"You mean rat traps?" Chris said.

"No, human - I'm serious, watch where you step."

Chris looked at me and I shook my head. Kenny was probably only trying to scare us. But even so, the place was starting to make me nervous. I wanted to leave, but didn't want to be seen to be bottling out.

"There's guards as well," Kenny said, looking up and around him. "I've heard the army does secret training here. That's why this area's private. You get them camouflaged in the trees with rifles. If we get spotted then hit the floor. Either that or run."

"I don't know about this," Chris said, hesitating. "I think we should turn back."

"Don't be silly. It's just stuff I've heard. It's probably not even true. We haven't come all this way for nothing."

He led us on. The foliage was getting denser. Distant thunder sounded.

"This next bunker's great," Kenny said. "There's all these weird symbols painted on the walls and stuff. It must have been used by a bunch of weirdos once."

"What for?"

"Devil worship I reckon. Rituals and stuff. They sacrifice things - animals and that. Babies even. That's what I mean when I say it's haunted."

Chris stopped. "I'm not doing this. I'm going home."

He started to head back, but Kenny grabbed him. "Listen, wanker, are you fucking chicken or something?"

Chris looked down. "No."

"Well get fucking moving then," Kenny said, pushing him on ahead. "I'm leading this trek and you two do as I say, do you hear me?"

We carried on, Chris holding back tears.

After a while Kenny softened up a bit. "Listen, when we hit bunker number two I might give you a fag to share. Have either of you smoked before?"

We told him we hadn't.

"You'll like it," he said. "Smoking your first snout is like having your first legover with a girl."

We headed through a passage thick with nettles. We were there. "Right, you two can lift the hatch this time. Weighs a fucking ton."

We crouched down and heaved it open, both falling back from the effort.

Crows cackled out from the trees. Then we saw Kenny staring straight ahead. "What's up?" we asked, and a noise came from his mouth.

At first, it looked like a pile of rags hanging from a tree. Then we saw it was a man. Hovering in the air. He was dead.

Kenny shot back through the woods and we followed on screaming. Then next thing, Kenny was gone and we were lost, panicking, desperate to get out. We finally found a part of the fence and scrambled over, cutting ourselves on the barbed wire. We flagged a dog walker, Chris having an asthma attack and me stumbling over my words telling the man what we'd seen. He told us to stay where we were and ran to a phone box to get help.

Chris and I had to have stitches on our cuts and speak to the police. Looking back, though we got over it all fairly quickly. Nobody wanted to tell us much, but we found out anyway. The man had been an escapee from a mental hospital, and had been hanging there for a couple of days. We never talked about it much, managed to put it behind us.

Kenny, on the other hand, never seemed the same again. Not to us anyway. He mostly avoided us; a nod in passing maybe, that was about it. It affected him, and we soon learned why. His own dad had killed himself in exactly the same way.

A couple of years later, my family moved out of London and I lost contact with Chris and everyone else. Bumping into an old friend years later in the nineties, I heard Chris became an electrician, got married and moved to Australia. Kenny, I heard, stayed with his mum until she died. He never really settled into any kind of work and did a few years in prison. Quite sad really.

I'm thinking of all of this because yesterday down in London on some business, I took a mad whim and visited my old area for the first time in decades. I was eleven when I moved away; I'm thirty eight now.

Getting out of my car and walking around, it was quite a shock. The woods had gone. So had the park. So had the street where I grew up and several streets around it. A retail park and a housing estate were there now. If I tried to pinpoint the vicinity where we'd seen the man hanging, I wouldn't have known where to start.

I sat in an empty cafe and had tea and a bun. I stared out the window as a light rain fell over the half-let retail park and the blocks of flats behind. The area was unrecognizable. I almost wished I hadn't returned.

"We're closing," the woman said, turning the sign on the door.

I left.

As I reached my car, a man shuffled past me on the street. Khaki jacket, growth of beard, Tennents Super. I stopped and watched him as he went. He, in turn glanced over his shoulder for a second before carrying on. There was something about him - I was almost sure.

"Kenny," I called out. But he had gone. Turned onto the estate.

Sam Mead



Sam Mead's random song playlist:

**O:** Tightrope - Janelle Monae

**P:** Burial - Peter Tosh

**E:** She Lives In My Lap - Andre 3000

**N:** Splurt (Sreamix) - Slaughter Mob

**2:** Take It Easy - Prince Buster

**0:** Feel Like Makin' Love - D'Angelo

**1:** She's Gone - Hall & Oates

**0:** I'm Ready - Dipset

### **The Forgetfulness of Fire**

I witnessed a blaze.

Afterwards, while holding a wooden board covered with the photographs of all the local fire starters, a policeman demanded of me:

“Point out to me  
the author of this  
inferno.”

I was unable –  
the man I had seen was  
as non-descript as love.

I tried, though:

“He was as tall as his  
highest point.

He was slim and extremely  
heavy set.

He wore a distinct beard  
that was entirely clean-shaven.

Um,

his eyes were the same  
color as one another”

In a press conference about the incident  
later that evening, the police chief would  
announce that:

“There has been absolutely  
no progress made on this  
case.”

On the walk home – as I  
dragged my  
disgrace like  
a dog with no  
legs -

I was approached  
by a flame; one of  
those from the fire.

I recognized him  
instantly,

he was handsome  
and

in flux

We sat on a bench  
and talked for a while.

He asked me for a light,  
which I thought was  
odd.

Of course, I wanted to ask,  
“why the light?”

But instead I asked,  
“do you like your job? Or, is it,  
you know, just a job to  
you?”

He replied,  
“Well, it’s more than just a job –  
it’s really who I am –

it doesn’t really feel like  
work anymore.

I just,  
(Pause)  
burn.”

“Mmm” I said.

Then, I asked,  
“If you don’t mind me asking  
...who started you?”

(Now my head was filled with  
heroic visions of my glorious return  
to the police station with the  
culprit's name – the press  
conference – the flashbulbs –  
the fleeting guilt of fame)

The flame looked at me  
and for a moment I thought  
I had offended him,

But then he replied,

“To be honest  
I'd really struggle  
to describe him  
to you.

In fact, I say *him*...

It might not  
even have  
been a  
man.”