



BEAT THE DUST

ANTICHRISTMAS ISSUE

DECEMBER 2010

Introduction

The literary theory issue of Beat the Dust in conjunction with one of the London universities, has had to be postponed due to budget cuts - bloody Lib-Con coalition. However, we've got a fine Antichristmas issue to end the year with - writers we've never published before, others we have and some of those with pieces they're not normally known for writing. Also, in true Blue Peter Review of the Year style-ee, we've asked all our contributors to select their Top 5 books and Top 5 albums of 2010. Not necessarily books/music released this year, but what they've discovered/played to death in 2010. So, without further ado...

Darran Anderson



Darran Anderson's latest book is Tesla's Ghost, a poetry collection published by Blackheath Books. He is currently working on a new collection of poems called Two-Headed Boy.

Top 5 albums of 2010

The album I've listened most to this year is the Howling Bells debut from a few years ago. Nearly everything I love about music is on that album. From this year though, my favourites are:

The Monitor - Titus Andronicus

The Suburbs - Arcade Fire

Disconnect From Desire - School Of Seven Bells

Boys Outside - Steve Mason
The Golden Archipelago - Shearwater

Top 5 books of 2010

The best book I've read this year is Riddley Walker by Russell Hoban, a genuine lost masterpiece, and Lanark by the legend that is Alasdair Gray. I've also been obsessing over the ramblings of Walter Benjamin, especially his Arcades Project, the writings and art of the wonderful Bruno Schulz, the poetry of Georg Heym, Ted Hughes and loads of other stuff written by skeletons. My favourites from this year though are:

C - Tom McCarthy
The Road - Vasily Grossman
Chronic City - Jonathan Lethem
The Canal - Lee Rourke
Any book released this year that isn't Freedom by Jonathan fuckin' Franzen

The Nihilists

"To break the tension, Fermi began offering anyone listening a wager on "whether or not the (atomic) bomb would ignite the atmosphere, and if so, whether it would merely destroy New Mexico or destroy the world." –The Manhattan Project, US Department of Energy, Office of History and Heritage Resources.

Before the harvesting and fermentation of barley and grape,
before the synthesis of amphetamines by Nazi chemists,
before the discovery of celestial mechanics,
dialectical materialism and female anatomy,
we discovered fire.

Led to it
not by scientific curiosity,
not malevolence or madness or even just stupidity
but the simple perilous vertigo of boredom.

Success was measured in terms of scale,
in terms of defying,
circumventing the laws of cause and effect,

how one tiny match could raise acres of crops to burning,
how it could set wind-bushes accelerating in flame
like herds of blind wild horses
being driven into the sea.
How many engines came shrieking
through the streets,
was marked in chalk
like ogham script,
like we were keeping score,
rolling bones or pitching coins
before we took to our heels
to where we could not be pursued,
to the space behind things.

On the other side of the planet,
they say if you see the flames of a bushfire
on the crest of the next valley,
it's already too late to outrun it.

Guttersnipes we were,
street urchins, prometheans
of the glass-strewn alleys.
From blindspots in supermarkets,
we would liberate
aerosols, batteries, gas canisters
for the cause
and cherish them like weapons
stolen from god's armoury
or provo silos,
until the time came to dispatch them

like offerings into the fire.

We would dive theatrically into ditches,
peering over the trench,
as the fire ticked and awaited

tick

the inevitable

tick

miraculous

tick

shattering of the eternal Sunday.

I lost my enthusiasm
when one day a friend sifted
the scorched, flayed wreckage
of an exploded tin canister
from the embers
and launched it, unheeded, in my direction.

It caught me in the eye
and whipped a Zoro slash
clean across my eyelid,
an atom's blink from blindness.

His grandmother dabbing the blood away,
the heady carbolic gasp of TCP on cotton wool
and some story of falling, aye that's it, he fell.

A couple of years later
one of our gang,
Pete, beat a man to death
outside a chip shop,
a man old enough to be his father,

who'd been on the blanket
in the H-blocks before he was even born,
over something, nothing,
and we never saw him again,
and I thought of that same boredom
still baiting us
that never goes away.

You wonder where you would have stopped,
when the burning outhouses became burning buildings,
when the decaying hangars of the docks,
the giant papier-mâché Gulliver that had been towed
down the river for some
festival or other and abandoned,
were not kindling enough.

And were it not for the rain,
for the low fronts advancing
on this sodden island
and the ocean on which it buoys and sways,
would we have just kept going?

The Lord Mayor of London
roused to witness the beginnings
of the Great Fire declared
with scorn,
"A woman could piss it out!"
and went back to bed.

Three centuries years later

a forgotten building site in Pennyburn,
between the bowling alley
and the barracks,
the shell of which would become
an outpatients for the clinically insane,
but until then belonged to us.
Drinking, gazing down into the deluge,
someone cursing the broken tape player
and a chewed cassette of *Siamese Dream*.
Scaffolding. Rooftops. Clouds.
Then the momentary silence broken,

"I think I've worked out why it rains..."

Stuart Evers



Stuart Evers' short fiction collection, *Ten Stories About Smoking*, will be published by Picador in early 2011.

Top 5 Books of 2010

C - Tom McCarthy. A novel fizzing with ideas, invention and beautiful writing, *C* is one of the true stand-out books of the last few years.

The Theory Of Life And Matter - Andrew Porter. In stories that are at once surprising and beautifully structured, Porter has created a note-perfect recreation of American loss.

The End - Salvatore Scibona. The opening section may sag a little, but what follows is truly exceptional.

Heart's Wings And Other Stories - Gabriel Josipovici. A selection of Josipovici's fictions culled from four decades of writing, shows a talent ignored by mainstream publishing.

If I Loved You, I Would Tell You This - Robin Black. An amazing and varied collection from one of the most exciting new voices to come out of the US in a while.

Top 5 Albums of 2010

I'm New Here - Gill Scott Heron. Probably the best comeback album in history, truly amazing, even if it doesn't manage to add up to more than 30 minutes.

High Violet - The National. Still not as good as their overlooked, Sad Songs for Dirty Lovers, but an amazing album nonetheless.

This Is Happening - LCD Soundsystem. Drunk girls is probably my song of the year.

The Golden Archipelago - Shearwater. Gorgeous and folky evocation of rural concerns.

Infra - Max Richter. A fractured and beautiful record of piano motifs and radio squall.

What He Wore

1. Red Jeans

They were two Australian women: blonde and tanned; one with a tattoo on her shoulder, the other with a pierced navel. I do not recall their names. They were in town for just a few days, the usual kind of tour, and we met them by chance on a sticky summer's afternoon in a half-empty bar. Marie, the one with the tattoo, told us they wanted someone to show them around. To take them to the best places. We offered to show them everything, but they had to meet a friend in Camberwell. We agreed to meet the following afternoon in Camden Town. We spent the whole of the rest of that day researching.

I met him at the Elephant's Head for a quick drink beforehand. I was late and he was sitting behind a table. He stood and I saw the jeans. They were tight and showed his DM-clad ankles. He had thin legs. The jeans were the colour of red wax crayons, white seamed and too snug at the crotch.

'You like my new strides?' he said. I didn't quite know what to say and simply nodded. He seemed to like them very much.

Several hours later, Marie and I were in the hotel bar, alone and bored. After a while she asked me, 'Don't you like to dress up, too?'

I shook my head. 'No. And besides, red isn't my colour,' I said and smiled.

She nodded and sipped her drink. I wondered if, upstairs in Marie's shared hotel room, he was struggling to take off those tight red jeans. I couldn't imagine he would; they would probably just fall to the floor like clothes do in movies.

2. Black cowboy shirt; yellow flower detail; sequinned buttons

It was a friend's stag party in once-fashionable seaside resort. We were sharing a double room at the Holiday Inn. I came out of the bathroom and saw him buttoning up his shirt. The room smelled of his aftershave and the gin we'd bought to drink while getting ready.

'Too much?' he said, turning to me and pointing at his cowboy shirt. He looked faintly ridiculous.

'Not at all,' I said. 'It suits you.'

'Good,' he said.

We spent most of the evening in Accident & Emergency. I told everyone to go on and have a good time; that it was okay, that I'd look after him. It was my fault entirely, after all.

3. *Vintage AC/DC t-shirt; dated circa 'Heatseeker' single, 1988*

'Personally,' I said, 'I don't really understand how a t-shirt can be ironic.'

'It's not *ironic*,' he said. 'I love AC/DC.'

'Yes, but look at it. It's a cartoon image of a woman with massive tits sitting on a nuclear warhead. If it's not supposed to be ironic, then, well, it's just . . . wrong.'

'Get over yourself,' he said. 'It's just a t-shirt.'

There was more wine in the glass than we both might have thought. The stain was so bad that he could never wear the t-shirt again; nor indeed anything that required irony. The splash from the wine also landed on my new shirt. That was ruined too. The girl didn't apologise to either of us.

4. *Swimming shorts; blue and jet Lycra*

That summer, Daniel Craig had a lot to answer for. We went to a Greek Island to get away from it all. He wore those tight trunks every single day. No one could look anywhere else. In the hotel one afternoon, I overheard two women talking about us. They had towels around their waists, their skin still kissed with water from the pool.

'Must be hard being the other one, though, mustn't it?' the older one said.

'Yeah,' her friend said. 'Imagine being the one without the dick!'

They both laughed then, their breasts jiggling in their skimpy bikini tops.

5. *Rolex watch; possibly fake*

He'd never been one for wearing a watch, but now he couldn't stop looking at it. It was a present from his new girlfriend, Ella, an American. She was older, had good taste, a throaty laugh, thick-rimmed glasses, and was always trying to set me up with her girlfriends. They

were usually rich and were always surprised to see me. It wasn't so much disappointment as being sold the wrong bill of goods. They were nice enough, but I couldn't imagine any one of them buying me a Casio, let alone a Rolex.

6. *Metropolis cufflinks bought from Tiffany's*

He slowly became accustomed to the work clothes he was expected to wear, but he always struggled with the cufflinks. He found them too flashy, especially in concert with the watch. It was just after Christmas and we walked down New Bond Street, then through the doors and under Tiffany's pistachio-coloured sign. He'd managed to lose one cufflink, a present she'd bought him, and it needed to be replaced.

'I hate this place,' he said. 'I feel like a fraud. Or like I'm being watched in case I do the place over.'

I looked at him in his new clothes, the shine of his shoes, the precision of his trouser creases. The woman behind the counter beamed at him as he told her what he was looking for. I looked at the displays of jewellery, the plump pillows, the rings nestling in their clefts and imagined Audrey Hepburn, wrinkled and elegant at the end of her life, putting her hand to the glass.

7. *Puma tracksuit, green and gold; Adidas Samba trainers*

We had decided to quit smoking and begin training for a charity run. It was September, the park mulchy with leaves, damp and brown in the early evening dusk. We met by the pub car park, him looking as though he had abducted the training gear of a 1970s' footballer.

'This is running,' I said, pointing at his footwear. 'Not a bloody fashion parade.'

'You sounded like an old man when you said that, you realise that, don't you?'

'Well, you look like a dick dressed like that. You realise that, don't you?'

He put on his headphones, pressed play on his iPod and ran off. He didn't say a word until we'd completed three circuits of the park.

8. *Beanie hat; black with plum detail*

The bottles were cold with frost, their tapered glass shaded grey in the evening light. They were lined up in columns, the clear ones in one line, the brown ones in another, the green ones taking up two. We were outside smoking, freezing in the yard at the back their house. He pulled down his hat and I couldn't see him too well, just a small parallelogram of flesh: his mouth, his eyes and nose. His ears were hidden by the hat.

'If it's the right thing to do,' he said, 'why does it feel so wrong?'

'Let's go in,' I said. 'It's freezing out here.'

He shook his covered head.

'I want to smoke,' he said. 'Stay with me and smoke.'

'Okay,' I said.

We talked outside for a long time. He was leaving her, he told me again. He had to, he said. Things had just got too much.

9. *My dressing gown; towelling; black with white piping*

The coffee was hot and the room smelled of bacon. He was smiling, awkwardly.

'Thank you for last night,' he said. 'It made everything make a lot more sense.'

'And you're sure?' I said. 'Honestly?'

He drank his coffee. His hair was wet from the shower.

'Yes,' he said. 'Yes I am.'

10. *Ozward Boeteng three-button suit; white herringbone Thomas Pink shirt; knitted tie; handmade oxblood loafers*

We hugged and spent the last hour before the ceremony drinking in a bar, just the two of us, not talking too much, not doing anything but smile.

Later, on a boat moored on San Francisco bay, he was sitting on a stool in his suit, his sunglasses protecting him from the water's glare. People had begun to arrive and he and I were watching them take their seats.

'I'm glad you're here,' he said eventually. 'This wouldn't be happening without you.'

'Yes it would,' I said. 'Of course it would.'

She arrived then, her dress a seething white, its train held by a maid of honour in a silver whisper of a gown.

He got up from the stool.

'Well, how do I look?' he said as he adjusted his tie.

'You look great,' I said. 'You always look great.'

'You too,' he said. 'You too.'

Belinda Webb



Belinda's debut novel, *A Clockwork Apple* was published by Beautiful Books. She is currently working on a work of autobiografiction called *Mary Burns*.

Top 5 books of 2010

The Wrecking Light - Robin Robertson
The Human Chain - Seamus Heaney
The Glass Room - Simon Mawer
The Ghost Light - Joseph O'Connor
A Scattering - Christopher Reid

Top 5 albums of 2010

Heligoland - Massive Attack
The Hits Collection - Jay-Z
I Speak Because I Can - Laura Marling
Praise & Blame - Tom Jones
Recovery – Eminem

Manchester 14, 1986 (from her collection *Running Home*)

'Oh go on, *B'Lin-Der!* Take your Dad off, *go on!*
She'd plead from her seat on top of the boiler,
Her stage.
Yet her ring-side seat too.
A view through the cracked dirty window
Onto 'the pit',
Mounds of glass and cans
And the occasional bed,
As well as sometimes holding
Burnt out cars;
The joy they'd offered soon expired.
But now the kitchen floor held the performance
Just in front of the corner of dust and dirt and lager cans
Swept up into one pile
Until it got too big
And had to be put into a black bag.
'Before your Dad gets home'.

And now she was asking me to 'take him off'.
So I climbed bare-footed into one clay-caked work boot
And then the next,
Trying to retain my balance.
I pushed each arm into his brown checked jacket,
Swamping myself.
I would clod back out of the kitchen, down the metre long
Corridor
Where I would take a deep breath and,
Hand in one pocket
Like a pigeon,
Do the 'Paddy Walk'
As my Mum called it –
Adding,
It was from which you could always tell an Irishman.
And she'd laugh and cry: 'take him off *B'Lin-Der,*
Do your Dad's voice!
And then she'd halt the act:
'Oh, wait! Wait a mo!'
Whilst she pulled down the large red switch
On the stained wall behind her
For the cooker's ring to red,
Long cigarette in one hand,
Watching the smoke whisper up from the other stove scars
Pressing it down hard
To add yet another circular scar.
Unsticking it she sucked
To bring it to life,
Until bright orange
And fine.
'Right, go on then...'
My cue.
And so I'd once more begin,
Hand in pocket.
I would sometimes find sweets in there,
Old pear drops;
He had a sweet tooth
On the sly.
I'd say nowt
And take one,
Leaving the rest without a word.
And as I did the 'paddy walk' from one end of the brown corridor
That stank of damp clothes, cats and stale drink,
To her seat on the boiler,
I felt the exaggerated stitching in the pocket's corner.
Remembering when it wasn't so:
As I, my eyes closed, pretending to be blind,
Held onto his pocket
As we walked down Chester Road
From the maisonette
To the West Indian shop,
A late summer evening.

We passed his pubs
And left the condemned bullring
And Crescents
Behind us,
And then, he, somewhere else,
Far away from Hulme perhaps,
Forgot to say
'Mind the kerb!'
And up I flew
Taking his pocket with me.
'Arragh!'
He cried as I held up the pocket:
First prize.
My eyes now wide open.
'Are ye alright?' he asked, laughing - checking my knee.
'Yep!' I said,
Feeling bad for his good jacket.
Here, gimme dat', he said.
And he stuffed it in his other pocket.
I held his hand,
That I had seen too often wounded
From his repairing of roads.
He must have sewn that pocket on himself
Later that night
With those same wounded hands,
For it was on ever since.
Sometimes,
Over the years,
When I struggled with the silence
I'd say,
'D'ya remember your pocket, Da'
And he'd nod.
And continue reading his paper,
Or watching the news.
And now I was taking him off
To make his wife laugh.
Skitting, he'd have said – skitting demented.
Or was that her?
'Oh *B'Lin-Der!* You *are* funny!
Do his voice. *Go on!*
'No,' I say, 'I don't want to.'
'Do. His. Voice.
Do-as-you're-bloody-well-told!
Go on!
*'Arragh, if I don't get up
No-one'll get up.'*
Ha ha ha, she laughs,
And it descends into silence
Whilst she twiddles her hair,
Takes a glug from her can
And keeps the cigarette
Alive;

The bearskin hat of ash.
 I am about to climb out of his boots
 And remove his jacket
 When she says
 'Do it again, *B'Lin-Der!*
 I turn and sigh
 And begin the routine again.
 I shuffle the boots back down the corridor
 Turn
 And proceed
 Like a good soldier.
 'No-one tells me anything that goes on in this godforsaken house!'
 Laugh. Glug. Smoke.
 'Joan, Joan, would ye put a bet on for me, would ye?'
 Laugh. Glug. Smoke.
 I stop in front of her.
'You're nothing but an auld bitch, a black and tan hooer, and nothing short of it, ye English live on nothing but beans, the Queen and that Maggie fuckin Thatcher need blowin' up, the whole lot of them, half of the layabouts on this estate are a good for nothing, shower of bastards, and I'm no Paddy! My name's Thomas and don't you forget it!...and you –'
 Silence.
 'Right! Now that's enough. You kids always go too bleedin' far. Put your Dad's things back.'
 Yet sometimes, not so funny.
 'Ok, I'll do you now...' I say, eyeing her beloved sling-backs,
 A pencil of kohl,
 And an empty bottle...
 'You-will-bloody-not!
*'These kids today, always have to take things too fucking far!
 If I had my time over again...'*
 And so I return to the potatoes
 Soaking in the sink
 Ready to peel
'For your Dad's dinner'.

Ford Dagenham



A Ford Dagenham book should probably have hit the shops by now, but such is the unjust 'it's-all-about-who-you-know-kissy-botty-in-with-the-in-crowd' nature of the world we live in, one hasn't as yet. He has completed a poetry collection and is currently writing a work of fiction called Hospital from which the piece, Superman Died, below, is an extract.

Top 5 Books of 2010

Dog Soldiers - Robert Stone
Last Exit To Brooklyn - Hubert Selby Jr
Atlas Shrugged - Ayn Rand
The End Of Faith - Sam Harris
Soledad Brother - George Jackson

Top 5 Albums of 2010

Grinderman 2 - Grinderman
Rocket To Russia - The Ramones
Lookout Mountain Lookout Sea - Silver Jews
Nifedge - Frozen Gold
The Future - Leonard Cohen

Superman Died

Over thirty not special no job for two years. Got one now. Up I'm giddy and showering in steam and glittering spray. I'm a rough chowd mouse dressing bedroom cold no radiator. CALVIN my pants say but not KLEIN. Stomach's a hot ball too early for food. I make coffee 6.30 AM. Out the front BP refinery is streaking orange up the dirty dawn from its chimney flames. Today I start work again. It's St. Gomers Day.

On news TV a woman has slimmed to unhealthy-thin for journalism. Sat on the sofa she's discussing motives. A pocket pop princess adopts a baby in Africa. And Superman has died.

In trousers I can't do up I leave smoking. Old men beige anoraks shuffle to Mo's for Daily Mails. MORNING we say. One man stumbles slowly on steel sticks face pale grey as uniform cloud.

We're alive. We're out. Alive and out. In the cold empty air. But Superman's died.

7.10am bus shelter. A woman wears a coat holds a carrier bag with her dog's shit in. I am staring into my grey and silver reflection in a puddle. I am looking up at myself. I am shining. Fag smokes going down bad my mouth fills with drool and I gob it all over the verge. I have loose guts and wired limbs. Not been up this early for two years unless it's been one of those nights. Red LCD tells me a First Bus 100 is due at 7.19AM.

Amused that I'm going to hospital but am not sick I actually feel a bit sick. Nothing amuses the bus driver. He deals with the ticket machine and change like he wished he'd never agreed to.

Half empty bus I sit near the front cos I'm over thirty. Up the back ipods pop. No one is talking. Fat man on sideways seats is talking to a woman. Frayed laptop bag between his feet full with model aircraft mags. Violin case across jogging bottom thighs. He's happy white hair. She's attentive long coat.

Through dirty windows are fields still half dark shine with mist and moisture. They fill me up in the empty places where food should be. Bus is droning like a headache round roundabouts and uphill with a hundred hatchbacks.

7.30 AM I am staring into a puddle outside Maternity gagging on my fag smoke. I am grey and silver. I shine. A woman is wearing a leopard print dressing gown dancing in the wind smokes a Superking speaks to a small phone.

Flipping the butt away I am heading into main reception. Just as cold. Sliding doors don't shut. Been here before of course. Relatives have died here and I've had accidents.

Inside Main Reception old woman volunteer mans a desk wears a patterned scarf against the draught. Nervous cold sweat in my pits like first day at new school. In the Men's I'm doing a terrible shit in the toilet bowl holding my head in my hands.

On the phone they said I'd be met here 8 AM. A woman in blue NHS fleece vaguely medical tunic underneath introduces herself; JANINE. Asks if I'm Johnny.

I'M YOUR SUPERVISOR, I'LL TAKE YOU TO OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH FIRST she says. It is gone 8 AM. It is official. I am working being paid. It is an anti-climax.

A long plastic corridor lined by wooden doors reminds me of school. Tired eyed nurses head outside. Tall grey men in blues push empty beds. I see the wobble of a heat haze quarter of a plastic mile away. We walk.

SUPERMAN DIED I say.

CHRISTOPHER REEVE? I HEARD. POOR FUCKER. OOPS SORRY.

S'ALRIGHT I say.

PROBABLY A BLESSING. IN A CHAIR LIKE THAT.

I WAS NEVER A BIG FAN OF THOSE MOVIES I say REMEMBER THE STICKERS IN SUGAR PUFFS THOUGH BUT NEVER WENT TO SEE THEM AS A KID. GOOD SUNDAY AFTERNOON HANGOVER MOVIES THOUGH. ZOD AND ALL THAT TRAPPED IN HIS SQUARE IN SPACE. Janine is short and I lean down and talk quietly as we walk.

I WAS LIVING IN CORNWALL THEN. MILES FROM A CINEMA says Janine. THIS WAY. Hanging a right.

Janine likes Bowie met him outside a Bristol gig. HIS EYES ARE DIFFERENT COLOURS COS HE WAS HIT IN THE HEAD WITH A CRICKET BALL Janine announces like its gospel. His LPs are in the loft and her ipod is loaded with Muse. Sweat pours in my pits and I pop an arse fart. Dragging double doors show busy wards breakfast bustle.

Outside cross a road heavy with hatchbacks and black Beemers. Full English daylight of grey glare now. A big black building looms like evil. LAUNDRY Janine says. NEW DERMATOLOGY, JUST OPENED Points at a two storey block in orange brick. Occupational Health behind concrete nurses' flats toiletries behind frosted glass.

YOU WONT BE COMING TO THIS PART OF THE SITE OFTEN Janine says. IT'S A BIG SITE Buzzes her pass at the door.

Large woman loud blouse watches me fill in a form.

SUPERMAN DIED I say.

I KNOW. IT'S SAD.

We carefully sit on school chairs. Called I go into a side room. A tiny nurse under thirty stabs a needle of hepatitis in me. It is a shaft of tiny fire. MIGHT AS WELL GIVE YOU THE LOT the nurse says needles spread next to her. WE USE THESE ON HORSES nurse's eyes tell me she's joking. She works I watch.

SUPERMAN DIED I say.

I HEARD she says PROBABLY A RELIEF, POOR MAN.

Leaving Janine says BACK TO BASE.

BACK TO BASE I repeat.

The office is one floor below Reception. No windows dirty skylights. Ambulance sirens echo in.

I'VE NEVER WORKED SOMEWHERE WITH WINDOWS I say.

AAH.

A phone rings. Computer cables twist between printers and pedestal cabinets. At a small table men and women say MORNING. Too many names begin with a J.

I'LL FIT IN I say I'M CALLED JOHNNY. Hilarity ensues. I sit down and eat fruit out my bag. Someone hangs my coat up.

BEST TO LEARN THE COMPUTERS FIRST Janine says. I am in the corner Janine sits too close. I learn pressing Y and N and ENTER on a green screen display. Everyone comes and goes. PDAs are handed over for uploads and downloads. Except from the black guy. He reads The Sun.

Janine takes a long phone call. Julie is the boss. Hippo massive behind her desk like a throne of biscuits. Looks like she's been crying. Looks glazed. Looks far away. Looks medicated. Asks me my sizes for uniform quietly in case I'm sensitive. I'm not. I give her them best I know.

I walk about. Look at stuff. Janine still on the phone. I go up to the black guy.

AMBROSE? I say. He nods.

SUPERMAN DIED I say. He nods.

He glances at Julie the boss. THE TROUSERS THEY GET YOU ARE SHIT. WEAR YOUR OWN BLACK ONES. I DO.

CHEERS I say. BUSY?

NEVER he says I DO FUCK ALL BARE MINIMUM JUST HERE TO GET MY FOOT IN THE DOOR. KICKING ME UPSTAIRS TO PURCHASING NEXT WEEK. NO MORE WARDS FOR ME. DESK IN AN OFFICE. I'M JUST THEIR TOKEN BLACK MAN. WON'T SACK THEIR ONLY MINORITY DEMOGRAPHIC. His pager is bleeping but he turns it off.

Richard comes in talks quietly at me cornered. White beard big face busted veins all over. Has a house in France. DON'T ASK HIM ABOUT IT! everyone warned.

CAREFUL IN HERE JOHNNY THEYRE ALL WOMEN he warns. He's got more but Janine smashes the phone down says FUCK'S SAKE! and we go for fag smoke. Jill is over fifty lot

of eyeliner smokes Mayfairs. Jenny over thirty curvy mumsy comes out for air eats a Kellogg's cereal bar. Janine has two Superkings at least a break. Out a side door is a shelter like a bus shelter for smoking. Halfway through a fag I say WILL THIS BUS NEVER COME? Hilarity ensues. They talk about harsh diets and Harry Potter. A van with AAAH Pharmaceuticals written on it goes under opening barrier. I smile *aaah pharmaceuticals!* Black vans and long black cars are backing up next to us. Shiny sides reflect the skies. There is a long open lift goes to a concrete loading bay. Men in smart suits getting out eye us.

MORTUARY? I say.

YES. WALKED BY THEIR STAFF ENTRANCE ON THE WAY OUT. I'LL POINT THEIR DOORS OUT ON THE WAY IN.

A porter smokes a brown roll-up sits down breathing rough. He looks green. He looks ill. A woman is wearing a trouser suit and teal scarf like she's going to some Gloria Hunniford Open House suggests she get him some water. Smoke from her Benson blows in his face. My ash falls into ancient cobweb. There is graffiti in the dirt on the plastic glass going back to 96.

NO he says GET SOME MESELF. JUST GOING IN. He struggles up the concrete steps. Stops collapses in the doorway. Caterpillar Feet all we can see. Gloria Hunniford rushes up. A porter coming out is straight on his phone. Finished smoking we walk the long way round stay out the way. In the office Ambrose is still sat with The Sun. Julie the boss is weeping quietly. No one says anything. She stops and starts forwarding emails to everyone about laughter being the best medicine photos of kittens attached. Not set up on Outlook yet I read Janine's. Politely I laugh. Gloria Hunniford stops by. We find out the porter had a heart attack. Right outside the mortuary doors. Rushed to A&E he gets a bed in the Cardiac ward.

Lunch is corned beef baps. We do a crossword out a book at the table. I say IDYLL and am labelled clever. IDYLL'S IN EVERY CROSSWORD I DONE I say.

A different Julie I recognise from interviewing had her hair in cornrows then. Tattoo inside her wrist is a butterfly. She says EXPECT ILLNESS HERE. Jill is moody warns me of MRSA like her granddaughter got when she was born upstairs. NURSES SAID IT WAS COS THE DAD CUT THE CORD BUT HE DIDN'T she says. Still furious her face screwed up. Cornrow Julie snorts NO ONE CARES ABOUT US IN THIS DEPARTMENT. WE'RE UNDERDOGS. I am nodding quietly. Tomorrow I have induction in Post Grad Centre. IT WILL BE BORING Janine says. She is explaining how to get there. STARTS AT NINE, DON'T BOTHER TO COME IN HERE FIRST. COME SEE US AT LUNCH.

More green screen Y and N and ENTER. Some faxing. Janine does a dance when Young Americans comes out the radio. Julie the boss leaves the office suddenly. She doesn't come back. She is talked about in worried whispers. I feel like I've always been here.

4 PM everyone's leaving. I am blindly following everyone down dirty back stairs. A small swastika has been biroed on a door and crossed out again. There is a shed indoors with page three pin ups and West Ham posters on wooden walls. There is a sea of bright yellow clinical waste bins. Colleagues turn round as one apologetic say SORRY in a chorus THIS IS THE WAY TO THE CAR PARK explain where buses are. I am lost in cold corridors and stale stairwells emerge outside Maternity again. Get a bus in dim light.

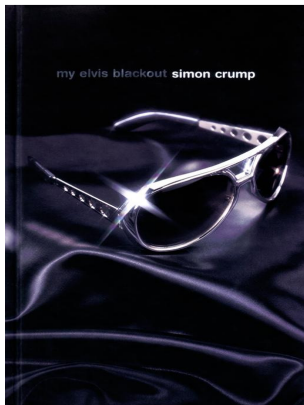
In I go shower in glittering spray.

Soup comes out a tin gets heated. I am watching rerun Cheers. Cliffy has a potato that looks like Nixon. He points out where there's even a bead of sweat. I sit at the laptop. I am writing Hollywood Haikus inspired by films I've seen. I open a bottle.

Later TV is a show where girls giggle pretending to be a princess judged by a butler who's a charisma free zone. I pour out a stirrup-dram. The bottle is empty.

I can't sleep till 2am. Maybe tomorrow I'll meet a nurse.

Simon Crump



Simon Crump's latest book is Neverland: The Unreal Michael Jackson Story. He is currently working on a book about Emile Zola called Zola & Me.

Top 5 Books of 2010

Lourdes - Emile Zola
The Kill - Emile Zola
For A Night Of Love - Emile Zola
The Dream - Emile Zola
The Debacle – Emile Zola

Top 5 Albums of 2010

Come On In - R L Burnside
Bad Man - T Model Ford
Most Things Haven't Worked Out - Junior Kimbrough
Dr Ragtime & Pals - Jack Rose
Sound Like Somethin' Fell Off The House - Old Gray Mule

My Elvis Blackout

You can hear three exclusive audio extracts from Simon's novel, My Elvis Blackout - Diary of Larry Geller, Elvis's hairdresser and spiritual guide, read by Caroline Small; Lady in Red, read by Scottish writer, Duncan McLean; and Elvis Cookbook, read by musician, Slade Madison.

A full audio version of My Elvis Blackout, including Richard Hawley reading Yorkshire Elvis (yee-ha!) is coming out as an app in 2011.

Salena Godden



Salena Godden is “the Mae West madam of the [literary] salon”, The Book Club Boutique. Her memoir, *Springfield Road* is due out in early 2011 published by Harper Press.

Top 5 Most Read Authors of 2010

Ernest Hemingway
Charles Bukowski
Flannery O’Connor
George Orwell
Carson McCullers

Top 5 Most Listened to Artists of 2010

John Lee Hooker
Muddy Waters
The Animals
Betty Davis
Cat Power

he's alive and well in pedragelejo

if i approach his table
he'll pretend he doesn't understand me
it's highly likely he refuses
to speak english anymore
or sign autographs
i really should factor in
he may hate poetry and poets
recognising him

but he looks well
he looks brighter
than the other old boys
playing dominoes
gutsy and strong and silent
he drinks plenty of beer
chain smokes cigarettes
he stands out with
that defiant air of bravado
a cocksure arrogance
like i bet he has a good one
swinging and throbbing
in his brown baggy pants

i am drawn to
the mole on his cheek
bushy knotted eyebrows
creased forehead
and the grey, greasy hair

that pot belly in a sports shirt
a sure give away

i order a bottle of wine
my spanish is terrible
the english laugh
at my pronunciation
the make of the wine is
bocadero or bocadillo
but i just ordered
a bottle of sandwiches

but it's then
i decide he doesn't just
look like him
in fact it is him
the 1970s' version
the spit of the
black and white photo
from the cover of
ham on rye
post office
or factotum

i forget which
as i sit on my hands
fighting a raging
compulsion
to go sit on his lap
and play with the hairs

sprouting out of his ears

i want to tweak

his purple

bulbous

nose

any minute now

i will call out the names

charles? hank? chinaski?

and if he looks up

if he smiles at me

even once

i am gonna get up

walk over there

cup my hands

about his big head

and kiss his

lovely craggy

face.

Catfish McDaris



Catfish McDaris' latest book is a poetry collection called Making Love To The Rain published by Propaganda Press.

Top 5 Books of 2010

Witchcraft In The Southwest - Marc Simmons
The Life & Times Of Mexico - Early Shorris
Viva Posada - Carlos Cortez
The Alienist - Caleb Carr
Tracking The Serpent - Janine Pommy Vega

Top 5 Most Listened to Artists of 2010

Amy Winehouse
Lady Gaga
The White Stripes
Derrick & The Dominoes
Jimi Hendrix

Rock Steady

A little girl's poodle pooped on his lawn. He got so pissed off, he rubbed her face in it, and then ran over the dog repeatedly with his lawnmower. His neighbor had a watermelon patch that encroached on his property. He took his twelve gauge and turned it into a battlefield of burst melons and spent shells. His notorious temper could supposedly burn stone. He once punched through the windshield of a car to grab his brother, breaking most of the bones in his hand, for an insignificant indiscretion. In a poker game, he got so tired of losing he threw a full bottle of whiskey at the ceiling, showering the other players with glass and booze, even though he'd held the winning hand.

Now the notorious Stoneburner was after me. His bombshell wife and single malt Scotch had overwhelmed my good sense. We ended up in the no-tell motel. Ruby was a hot tamale, built like a brick shithouse. I could swim in her deep purple eyes. I knew all the strokes.

The way I figured, I had two choices: run or stand. I didn't have any run in me. A serious promise of a third nostril, though should have a definite calming effect on a bully with a bad temper. Self defence is justifiable. Women like Ruby always make men think with the wrong head.

While contemplating this thought and savoring the smoky hint of the Scottish moors at the local watering hole, Stoneburner walked in. His beady eyes locked on mine. He picked up an ashtray as he approached and took a large bite out of it. Seeming to relish the glass snack, blood dribbled from the corners of his mouth. He smiled nastily at me with teeth covered in red slime.

Now most men would have felt a sudden urge to urinate or a tightening of the sphincter. Unfortunately for him, normalcy was one attribute I had never acquired. All I thought about was, that stupid fucker must be hungry. I slipped my nickel-plated nine-millimeter from my waistband. I aimed it between his eyes and my hands were rock steady.

"You're looking pale and peaked, Stone. You should get yourself some Fred Flintstone vitamins with iron. Or maybe you'd like me to add a little lead to your diet?"

Stoneburner was no longer crunching or smiling. He was staring down the barrel of my pistol. When a man meets death, different things go through his mind. Religion, why me, give me one more chance, mama save me. We came to an understanding and after that day his life changed for the better.

Of course some things take longer to change than others. A week later, after another exhausting booty call afternoon with Stone's wife, Ruby remarked. "You are much better than Sheldon, even after we went to see the marriage counsellor."

I thought, who the fuck is Sheldon? Does it matter? I plunged my face back between her perfumed thirty eights. Eventually all good things come to an end. My court-ordered community service awaited me like Damocles sword.

The catsup bottle drifted through the lake, bouncing off orange peels, beer cans, used rubbers, hypodermic needles, and crack pipes. The city was paying me \$2.00 per hour to pick up trash; hardly enough for life, but wine and a nickel bag weren't beyond the horizon.

Fishing the bottle out, I noticed something inside. Unscrewing the lid, I unrolled a note. It read: I am a woman with a healthy sexual appetite. Some might say I am a nymphomaniac. I once wore an entire motorcycle gang to a frazzle. My measurements are 38-24-36, so I have no trouble attracting men, but after one night they crawl away like a Kafka cockroach. My name is Desire and my phone number is 777-6969. Please call right away.

In a frenzy, I searched my pockets. I found nine cents. I only needed forty one more for the phone. I started stuffing trash in my bag like Quicksilver with a raging hard on and his ass on fire.

I tried not to think about cockroaches, that some females mate once and remain pregnant forever, or some can hold their breath for forty-five minutes. I refused to be thwarted; I felt impervious.

Steve Finbow



Steve Finbow's latest book is Balzac of the Badlands out on Future Fiction London. His short fiction collection, Tougher Than Anything In The Animal Kingdom will be published by Grievous Jones Press in 2011. He is currently working on an Allen Ginsberg biography for Reaktion Books.

Top 5 Books of 2010

Last Days - Brian Evenson
A Day And A Night And A Day - Glen Duncan
C - Tom McCarthy
Witz - Joshua Cohen
Chronicles: Volume One - Bob Dylan

Top 5 Albums of 2010

Californian Punk 1977-80 - John Savage Presents Black Hole
Best Of The Box Tops - The Box Tops
Grinderman 2 - Grinderman
The Suburbs – Arcade Fire
Upside Down: The Best Of The Jesus And Mary Chain

I Do

I sleep

like Superman flies

one arm outstretched

fist clenched

the other furled

waiting to strike

while you lie

like kryptonite by my side

I walk

like the Johns

Wayne & Travolta

balls to the fore

testicles the fulcrum

of my universe

while you wait

boundless hungry & blackly holed

I fuck

like the divine Marquis

anything & everything

male & female

young & old

all things in-between

while you wait

knowing you are the one

I breathe

like Gog & Magog

the soupy air of London

deep draughts

heady elixirs

of the megalopolis

while you lie

millions of miles & minutes away

Heidi James



Heidi James' latest book is her debut novel, Carbon out on Blatt Books. Her novel in progress is called Wounding.

Top 5 Books of 2010

Richard - Ben Myers
Species Of Spaces And Other Pieces - George Perec
Pure Immanence - Deleuze
Reading With Clarice Lispector - Helene Cixous
The Passion According To G.H. - Clarice Lispector

Top 5 Albums of 2010

Real Life - Joan As Policewoman
Steady The Buffs - The Buff Medways
Live At The Troubadour - Tim Buckley
Just A Gigalo - Louis Prima
England Made Me II - Selfish Cunt

Hero

Proximity is what pains here. Our rooms, though separated by thick walls, still suffer the sound of the others. Surrounded by penitents, suffering and scouring themselves – a dark folly. These women, they pace the floors, especially when they first arrive, not believing their arrival. They don their habits laboriously, crying about this new life that will soon comfort and cherish and be hard to leave. These women, newly ordained, your flesh, your heroes who've killed their husbands, or children perhaps, one or two at least have, sick in the mind, the flesh turned traitor, the brain all smoke and mirrors that entreats and cajoles, others that had money troubles, man troubles, carrying - in a perverse pregnancy - foreign bodies across borders. They say it's always men that caused the trouble, but it's foolish to blame men, it's the species, unconscious, stripped as we are of thought, moment to moment, bound by our impulses, we leap into our actions, stupid to blame biology, us animals, nothing but bald animals.

On the wall across from my bed I've a cross, a crucifix I suppose, as it displays the prize of Christ's withered flesh, given to me by a priest when I got here - shameful which means more than merely guilty - I was ashamed, aware of your satisfaction and disapproval. I keep it, the cross, though it offers a relief different to the one no doubt intended, because we all need someone to look up to. And it's better than a picture or a painting. Painting is just trickery, an optical illusion, colours that confuse, all pretence and vanity. That's what it is, pretty much all of it. Pretence and vanity. There's the toilet in the corner too, and a television. I've no need for the TV, though it's my right to have one I'm told. When I finish my work I come back here and close my eyes. I've no business for socialising on the wing.

Also in my room I have a plastic beaker in which I keep loose change, coins that travel in from the outside, and between us here, in the canteen, buying ketchup or chocolate and tobacco. It's a new economy, but one modelled on the old one. I enjoy the feel of the pieces, each with its history of exchange. I let them fall one by one into the beaker, reminding me of clammy fistfuls being fed into the jukebox in the children's room at my Father's local, which leads me then to remember the scalding sweetness of pineapple juice. And further, to the clack of balls on a pool table like the ticking of prayer beads pressed by careful fingers, or an abacus, counting. I try not to remember these things; no good will

come of it, this remembering. What it is, memory, is another lie that demonstrates an idea of a unified self. I refuse to believe that.

I'm saving the jar of coins as a wedding gift for the girls two doors down. They hold hands on their way to work in the library and entertain with their small night-cries. I've not seen them kiss, but once saw the girl wipe the tender residue from his lips. The wedding is sometime soon; when a means of celebrating is brought in, I suppose. A love born of proximity, a marriage that will dissolve when they leave, and won't be described in the letters home to their husbands or boyfriends. That's alright. I lie in my bed, thin covers touching my body and penetrate my flesh with my mind. I'm right here, comforted by the mysterious machinations of my body. A little fart or rumble from my digestive system, calms me. I'm not alone; I'm with my body. Like a pet dog, I accompany myself. Routine fulfils also. I enjoy the repetition of work, of urinating. I was saddened by the cessation of my monthly bleeding, if only because it marked happy returns, of living. I lie in bed, and watch my breath butt against the heavy cotton sheet.

In here, with our simple bureaucracy, it's an old way of life. We acknowledge paper and pens, keys and locks – we submit requests in the old fashioned way, and wait patiently for permission. We reciprocate your way of life, with our deeds or crimes, whatever. In turn, in thanks, you thrill in our penance and your new safety. It's a double reciprocation. We are the heroes of your society. We purge the filth, inhabit it, so you don't have to. We shoulder the burden of what you dare not do.

We become that what we always were on the outside. We have our role, our loves, our enemies. I see them, as I see you, small hands grasping at each other, mouths speaking words that are cut from sense, mouths existing without bodies, kissing, sucking at, talking, expelling contorted air. I am what I've always been, subject to, among other things, grammar, authority, bureaucracy, and eventually, I am unrecognisable.

Ashley Stokes



Ashley Stokes' latest book is his debut novel, *Touching The Starfish* published by Unthank Books. He has just completed a short fiction collection, *The Syllabus Of Errors*, which is due out in 2011.

Top 5 Books of 2010

Conversations - JG Ballard. Edited by V.Vale
C - Tom McCarthy
Sabra Zoo - Mischa Hiller
The Canal - Lee Rourke
When Money Dies - Adam Ferguson

Top 5 Albums of 2010

21st Century Man - Luke Haines
Your Future, Our Clutter - The Fall
Hypnoprism - Momus
No Music - Stereolab
Lovetune For Vacuum - Soap&Skin

Island Gardens (short fiction extract)

At the railings, the boy with the case was still mauling the red-headed girl in the red baseball cap. This time Grant noticed her knuckles. They stood out like the spine of a fish as she gripped the boy's cheek. His arm was stuffed up her green vest top and when his elbow jerked, the hem of the vest lifted. Each time Grant walked by the vest had ridden up a little higher. At this rate it would be over her face by the time he next came round. He laughed at this. He had to laugh at something and turned back to face Eros once more.

The steps were flush with girls: girls in mini-dresses, girls who fanned themselves with thick magazines and others who stared at the sky as if something there stared back. There were plenty of girls with oompa-loompa spray-on tans and boyfriends slathered with brand names. At the language school in Berlin where he taught, Grant called these proliferating trans-global types the Loomparettes and the Adverts. It felt peculiar not to have their attention now, Mr Woods, the English teacher with his word games and conversational exercises and what V called his so English English. He was starting to sweat, so paused in the shade of the statue. Still no sign of V.

She should have been here three-quarters of an hour ago, but she'd never visited London before and the sheer density of the crowds funnelling through the West End disorientated even him. In sixteen years he'd come back to England only for funerals, and on those occasions spent no time in London. The city appeared transformed and disrupted. The Far Eastern futurist style of the new, high-rise buildings unnerved him, as did the strange North American atmosphere at street level. Every second shop was now a coffee shop and every coffee shop was the same coffee shop. He might easily lose his bearings, so a perfectly understandable problem could be delaying V. Her map-reading skills may have let her down. There was overcrowding on the 'U-train' as she called it, or she'd left her mobile somewhere, or deleted his number by mistake or misunderstood the arrangement. He had called her five times already and left two voicemails.

A feeling congealed in his gut. The Germans have a word for this feeling. They call it *ahnem*: a sensation that something is wrong without knowledge of its cause. The Germans have as many words for anxiety as the English have for horrible people. When he'd once explained this to V, she'd giggled so much she'd spilt great splashes of red wine on his floor.

He found a space on the lowest step between a Loomparette and her Advert. V liked these words as well. She said she enjoyed learning all of the silly names he gave to things and people. It thrilled him that she liked the way he spoke and what he did for a living and didn't like his oldest friend, Alex who called him an 'underpaid lingo gypsy'. Since arriving back in London, four days ago now, he had missed the sense that, in Berlin he was creating a private language with V. Kicking around in Alex's spare flat this morning, waiting for the time when he could leave for their rendezvous on the steps, he admitted to himself that the shilly-shallying was over.

At the railings, the long thin case slithered from the boy's shoulder. It dangled from his elbow, twirling as he put both his hands up inside the green vest. Her spiny knuckles flexed as she massaged the seat of his tracksuit bottoms. The strap then slipped over the boy's elbow towards his wrist. The end of the case clunked on the pavement.

Grant wondered what was in the case. Maybe a collapsible snooker cue. The boy did not look like a snooker player, though he might be a pool player. Maybe earlier he'd fleeced some aging hotshot and was celebrating here with Knuckles, his beguiling muse. They were existentialists. They went from town to town and lived in cheap hotels with names like Zodiac Heights or The Magic Mountain. They would head out straight from the statue of love at the heart of the city to where the desert meets the ocean and the breakers roll like satin on the ancient sands. Or perhaps they had simply hooked up in a pool hall. Her eyes swam into view in the glass front of a vending machine. He'd bought her a *Twix* and it was life without compromise thereafter. Maybe he'd wagered his soul for her hand in a green-baize showdown with a locksmith called Flinty 'The Octopus' Ray.

Grant had not been inside a pool hall since he'd last lived in London. After they graduated he shared an unheated flat with Alex for six months. During that summer, before Alex became the sort of bloke he is now, with two properties in London and a holiday home in Umbria. The trader, bespoke-suit and bonus-flush Alex who Grant imagined was at this moment high up in one of those Far Eastern futurist buildings, but wishing he was down here in the Circus waiting for a Russian girl with a beautiful name and beautiful eyes and a lovely turn of phrase. Despite being from Berkhamstead and educated at Oundle public school and Churchill College, Cambridge and whose father was Britain's ambassador to Indonesia, Alex had, at one time decided to make his living by trouncing the peasants at pool. He wasted his days in a spider hole of a venue behind London Bridge station that went by the name of *4Play*. To reach the required standard, he said, all he needed to do was crack the jargon and spit like a player. Vicariously Grant discovered that a pool hall has a food chain of 'algae', 'guppies', 'fish' and 'sharks', that there were 'ghost balls', and 'bait shots' and something called 'riding the nine', that a ball with a bit of spin was an 'English'. Eventually Alex gave up the gig, man, because he'd been trussed by too many handcuff artists with names like The Cockman or Double Geegees. Meanwhile, Grant decided to do something useful with his talents and decamped to St Petersburg to teach English to newly liberated surgeons and electrical engineers. He thought of Alex trying to put a bit of 'English' on a white ball and laughed quietly to himself, despite the crushingly heavy sensation hardening in the pit of his stomach. When he became aware of someone standing in front of him, the sensation started to lift.

The vest girl wore at least three silverish rings on each of her fingers that rode up against the knuckles. Grant couldn't tell how old she was. The cap was pulled over her eyes. The boy was late-teens at most, shaven-headed and seemed to have far too many plates and ridges in his skull. His tracksuit bottoms, a stylish white affair with navy blue piping, had a great mass of unravelling cotton spilling out from one of the pockets.

'You well bate, blood,' said the boy, separating his fingers and stabbing his thumb upwards.

'Pardon?' said Grant. As he stood up, it crossed his mind that back in Alex's unforgiving pool hall world this one's opening shot would have been a 'Reverse English'.

'You want a piece you step up, standard?' said the Reverse English.

'Standard what?' said Grant. 'Standard lamp? Standard Oil? The Standard Model of Particle Physics?'

'You done now, blood, I's banking.'

'I think there's been a misunderstanding here,' said Grant. 'I think there's something that you need to have a quiet think about, so I'm going to walk away to let you do that.'

He checked around for V and then strode briskly towards Leicester Square. He would cross by the Angus Steak House and track back to the steps. The Reverses would move off. They would go for a Happy Meal or get horny again and make a baby called Tupac or Fing.

A brood of black cabs made a buzzing sound as he waited at the crossing for the lights to change. Then the heat of the day seemed to press down on him. He wished he'd punched the exhibitionist little twat's lights out. Something came back to him. Being fourteen, fifteen. Kids like the Reverse English rolling their shoulders across a pedestrianized area after the bad film had ended. Their bones and baseball caps and the low-voltage slappers they impressed.

By the time he actually made it to the other side of the road he'd told himself that this language was a dead language. He was nearly forty years old. He did not live there any more. He did not even live here. He knew that any sort of altercation always fired him up. In the moment he did the adult thing, but afterwards wished he'd acted with certainty and force. He paused under some arches and asked himself what Alex would have done. Alex would have threatened to sue them. He would have shouted in their faces that he lives in Blackheath and is a yellow belt in karate. Grant sniggered and was about to wander back to the steps when he noticed something oblong and slender poking up from behind the people filing across the zebra: the Reverse English's cue case.