

# The Royal Society of Literature



## TALL TALES SHORT STORIES

20 years of the V.S. Pritchett Short Story Prize

ALCS

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## FOREWORD

**“Short stories are tiny windows into other worlds and other minds and other dreams. They are journeys you can make to the far side of the universe and still be back in time for dinner.”**

**Neil Gaiman** FRSL

As the RSL’s annual V.S. Pritchett Prize for unpublished short stories turns 20, we celebrate the form’s extraordinary capacity to express the complex experiences of our lives in exacting prose.

In this collection, we share the beginnings of stories that have won the Prize, and of stories by writers who have judged it. Their range demonstrates the agile power of the short story, a form that can take us between continents and through time, from the unknowable-ness of a stranger to the intimacy of our own private thoughts, and all in a fraction of the space and time a novel or play can. Read a collection of short stories and you watch the world through many eyes; feel the pressures of different peoples’ worries; experience the joys of their successes, the surprise of their discoveries. The short story fragments included here take us from North London to Barcelona, Delhi to the fictional Piper City. We find ourselves in the emergency ward of a hospital, watching a deer from the window of a cottage, and in a prison cell. Some of our writers create whole stories from the conversation between two characters, and others never take you beyond the stream of their narrator’s consciousness.

With the beginnings of these stories, we’re exploring how much of a world can be created in only 500 words. In inviting you, our 14- to 18-year-old readers, to finish the stories with your own 500 words, we want to see how many different worlds can be made from the same material. We want you, the next generation of writers, to take these stories forward.

V.S. Pritchett – remembered as one of Britain’s most skilled short story writers – wrote that “All writers – all people – have their stores of private and family legends which lie like a collection of half-forgotten toys on the floor of memory.” It is within the power of writing a short story to share these stories with one another, to find our own voices and make them heard. In times when we are connected across the world through new digital platforms, but isolated through political and social division, can you work with what a writer has started to make a hybrid tale? The writers in this collection have started the story – can you finish it?

**Molly Rosenberg**

Director

Royal Society of Literature

## Love Silk Food

*Leone Ross, 2018 and 2019 judge*

Mrs Neecey Brown's husband is falling in love. She can tell, because the love is stuck to the walls of house, making the wallpaper sticky, and it has seeped into the calendar in her kitchen, so bad she can't see what the date is, and the love keeps ruining the food – whatever she does or however hard she concentrates, everything turns to mush. The dumplings lack squelch and bite – they come out doughy and stupid, like grey belches, in her carefully salted water. Her famed liver and green banana is mush too; everything has become too-soft and falling apart, like food made for babies. Silk food, her mother used to call it.

Mrs Neecey Brown's husband is falling in love. Not with her, no.

She gets away from the love by visiting Wood Green Shopping City on a Saturday afternoon. She sits in the foyer on a bench for nearly two hours, between Evans and Shoe Mart. She doesn't like the shoes there; the heels make too much noise, and why are the clothes that Evans makes for heavy ladies always sleeveless? No decorum, she thinks, all that flesh out-of-doors. She likes that word: decorum. It sounds like a lady's word, which suits her just fine.

There are three days left to Christmas and the ceiling of the shopping mall is a forest of cheap gold tinsel and dusty red cartridge paper. People walk past in fake fur hoods and boots. A woman stands by the escalator, her hand slipped into the front of her coat; she seems calm but also she looks like she's holding her heart, below the fat tartan-print scarf around her neck. Then Mrs Neecey Brown sees that the woman by the escalator is her, standing outside her own skin, looking at herself, something her Jamaican granny taught her to do when the world don't feel right. People are staring, so she slips back inside her body and heads home, past a man dragging a flat-faced mop across

the mall floor, like he's taking it for a walk.

She trudges through Saturday crowds that are smelly and noisy. The young people have fat bottom lips and won't pick up their feet; she has a moment of pride, thinking of her girls. Normal teenagers they'd been, with their moods, but one word from her or one face-twist from Mr Brown, and there was a stop to that! She had all six daughters between 1961 and 1970: a cube, a seven-sided polygon, a rectangle that came out just bigger than the size of her fist and the twin triangles, oh! The two of them so prickly that she locked up shop on Mr Brown for nearly seven months. He was so careful when he finally got back in that their last daughter was a perfectly satisfactory and smooth-sided sphere.

All grown now, scattered across North London, descending on the house every Sunday and also other days in the week, looking for babysitting; partner-throwing; domino games; approval; advice about underwear and aerated water; argument; looking for Mamma's rub-belly hand during that time of the month; to curse men and girlfriends; to leave pets even though she'd never liked animals in the house; to talk in striated, incorrect patois and to hug-up with their daddy. Then Melba, the sphere, who had grown even rounder in adulthood, came to live upstairs with her baby's father and their two children. The three-year-old sucked the sofa so much he swallowed the pink off the right-hand cushions. The eight-month-old had inherited his father's mosquito face, long limbs and delicate stomach, which meant everyone had to wade through baby sick...

## Please Be Good To Me

*Emily Ford, 2018 winner*

Sami Lieberman was walking up the escalator at London Bridge station, looking at her phone, elbowing past passengers standing on the right, her tights itching from the unexpected hot weather. It was Friday evening, and the stress of the day was beginning to recede. She was thinking about the 141 she would maybe just catch, how she'd go to Hackney lido if the rain held off. She was thinking back to last weekend, when she'd gone down to Sussex to see her mother, who appeared to have aged startlingly in a short span of time; she was wondering whether they were out of dried cat food.

Each day she marvelled at the new station. London Bridge gaped shiny and silver as the inside of a spaceship. Workers in hi-vis jackets could be spotted putting the finishing touches to beams and concourses. The gleaming caverns seemed too pristine to sully with passengers, quite unlike the dusty train halls of Sami's childhood. Everything was different, but in a way that would be reassuring to the average British visitor, with its standard-issue shops: Pret A Manger, Accessorize, Paperchase. Sometimes she was thrown by a closed staircase or shuttered exit, and found herself cast out onto surprising streets.

The escalator tipped Sami off onto a dark, covered walkway that led to the buses. A blockage had interrupted the rush-hour flow of people, and in her peripheral vision she saw a group standing with suitcases, and a small, hunched figure on the outside. Engrossed in her phone, she picked up a snatch of conversation: 'I'm not sure, we're just visiting, have you asked the station staff?'

A voice replying, frayed with old age. 'Yes, I have, I have asked. I asked two gentlemen back there and they told me to go left and left again, and now I'm here, and I don't know where I'm supposed to go.'

Indignation failed to mask the speaker's anxiety.

Sami looked up. An elderly woman stood talking to four tourists, who smiled at her apologetically. A discussion had been had. The old woman was lost and had asked for directions. The tourists did not know where to send her.

Sami considered whether to intervene. The 141 was about to leave, and she hated to miss it, even though she had nowhere in particular to be. Since moving to London, rushing had become a permanent state. Sami thought for a second and carried on past, towards the buses. Then she glanced back, to where the tourists were shuffling their feet, as if to say they had done all they could. The old woman looked around helplessly. She had short tufts of white hair and bottle-top glasses that made her eyes look buggy. She was very old, in her late eighties at least. Maybe ninety. She carried a black holdall and wore a shapeless rain-jacket dotted with pockets, unsuited to the radiant weather. She had on baggy grey trousers and comfortable, old-lady shoes.

Sami sighed and walked towards her. It would only take a few seconds. 'Where do you need to get to?' she asked, trying to sound non-threatening. The tourists dispersed. The old woman's expression rearranged itself into not quite a smile, hostility almost, at finding herself such easy prey for a stranger's pity. Her cheeks, nose, chin and forehead looked as though they might once have formed a coherent whole, but time had eroded their togetherness and now they hung loose, each feature drifting in its own direction.

'I'm going to Gatwick,' she said. Skin bagged in soft creases at her neck when she spoke. 'Gatwick Airport. You see, I asked the man in the station which way I should go, and he said go out and left, and left and then right, and I've done that, and now I'm all the way over here, and I don't know where I need to go.' ...

## The Street of Baths

*Fiona Vigo Marshall, 2016 winner*

NUMBER 5, The Street of Baths, is the abode of a refugee who never left home. Tucked away in the heart of the Gothic quarter, it's one of those vast old tenement blocks into which all Barcelona seems smelted: green blinds over balconies, plangent Catalan voices, canaries singing, the smell of wine-soaked wood, prawns and pimento frying. Stairwell haunted by the slap-slap of espadrilles as Jaume in his cream linen suit beats his way up and up, with the steady persistence of a man going home, who cannot deviate. The fact that he is dead makes no difference. Our typical family member is an insistent apartment-dweller; bounded by a balcony view, at home in two or three shuttered rooms. Whose garden is a few red geraniums on a red terrace, whose forest is the pine tree, that grows out of black soil grains mixed with sand, cigarette butts and bottle tops. To this he will always return.

I, also, am a revenant. The place I revisit can never change. I speak not of Barcelona but of some city that is her shadow, her doppelganger, her central avenue made up of walls of flowers and caged birds singing, her sombre, strolling widows, her gun-smoke and cruelty. Just off this central artery, the Gothic quarter is a perfect psychogeography of escape, the sinuous little streets slipping away into an anonymous warren, the big, blind old entries and stairwells offering refuge.

I slip in from the street, as I have always done, less reluctantly than in years gone by, when visiting my uncle was a duty imposed by my mother, who would not come herself; but still with trepidation. Tiptoeing past the empty pigeon-holes and janitor's desk, I can hear Jaume ahead of me, somewhere up the five floors of marble stairs; there is no lift. His espadrilles sound weary.

Our footsteps continue up, past landings of closed silence, past the pension on the third floor with its brown leather armchairs like squat meninas, shoulders framed by coarse lace. And up to the atico, to the nicotined sun through the skylight, and the little, peeling green door that might give onto the broom cupboard or the rooftop. In fact it is the small door of the unlikely, that opens only at the precise moment of need. Flung wide, it casts the oblong blackness of war, whose long shade you cannot see until you are inside. Who but a refugee would cover his walls with brown hessian, as if escaping to the strange land of the fashionable? Go in, down the two steps, and there is the portrait of Jaume himself on the left wall, navy overalls and mocking moustache, his ironic, blue eyes following you round the living room. It's an uncanny likeness, sitting on his stool there: truly what they call a speaking portrait. In the dusty silence, with its faint hum of camphor and sun-dried tomato, it speaks to me, anyway.

'Eh, me-edemoiselle,' in exactly the old Jaume style, speaking French in his Marseillaise drawl, as if spitting tobacco between clenched teeth. 'Long time no see. What's been keeping you?'

So lifelike, I could almost swear it's possible to lean into the portrait and brush cheeks with Jaume; surely he exudes eau de cologne and tobacco, the old smells of home...

## The Seduction of a Provincial Accountant

*Jonathan Tel, 2015 winner*

You could almost think you were in a foreign country. Once this was a treaty port, and there remain a number of European buildings, pretty and absurd. A pleasure steamer goes past, so close you feel you could reach out and touch it, with tourists raising phones to capture the beach. Farther out is a chemical transporter, bizarrely unshiplike in form, being composed of reservoirs and tentacle-like pipes; NO SMOKING is painted in characters larger than the name of the ship itself, and a lone seaman is on deck, leaning against a railing, smoking.

The man observing all this turns and climbs over the rocky foreshore, and encounters, coming the other way, a younger man wearing a T-shirt with English words on it. It seems one or the other will have to step aside, but actually neither does, for there is a vendor drawing their attention. He is cross-legged on a sheet of white vinyl; his DVD emits jaunty music while a paper cut-out of a cartoon dog, upright on the plastic, jigs in tempo. How does this work? What hidden mechanism makes it possible? 'Buy one for your children! Five yuan each, three for ten yuan!' and, imploring the older man, 'Buy one for your mistress!'

It is the younger man who crouches, and gets six, all different, the dog in addition to other creatures. 'My girls will love this!'

'Girls?' says the older man.

'Twins. In August they'll turn five.'

'Ah, twin girls! How cute! Nature helps you evade the one-child policy.' He adds, 'I have a daughter too, but she would not like this.'

While the vendor is calling out to some other tourist, the older man

explains, 'It is a con. The animals won't dance when you take them home.'

'They won't?'

'Look carefully. There is a fishing line sewn through the cut-out on display. He jiggles it with his thumb. The dog doesn't dance just because the music plays. How could it? Do you believe in magic?' The younger man takes off his glasses, and wipes them on his T-shirt. 'Why didn't you tell me before I bought them?'

The older man smiles. He presents a business card; the address is a prestigious district of Beijing. The younger man is not carrying his cards; no matter. He is an accountant employed by a third-tier provincial city. They shake hands, each taking a formal pleasure in saying the other's name. Qin writes Liu's information into his smartphone. He has an intuition in these matters: as soon he spied the accountant he knew what kind of person he must be.

'The weather is beautiful,' Qin says.

'It is indeed beautiful.'

'What's the weather like, where you come from?'

'The summer is hot. My twins love coming here. The Qingdao breeze is so refreshing.'

The conversation is clichéd and stilted, as it should be. This is how one approaches a person like Liu. Qin has perhaps never before encountered such a perfect example of the type...

## Synsepalum

*Irenosen Okojie, 2018 judge*

Manu was first spotted in the display window of the old sewing machine museum touching holes of light on a Babushka costume. He seemed to have appeared from nowhere, a piper staging gowns as soft instruments, framed by gauzy street lights. His fingers were curled into swathes of the costume's bulbous ruby red taffeta skirt on a mannequin, surrounded by elaborately designed sewing machines poised like an incongruous metal army. A spool of gold thread uncurled behind him, drinking from the night. A wind chime above the blue front door argued with the soft falling of snow. The letter box slot had a black glove with silver studs slipped into the slash like a misguided disruption. Manu gripped a large curved needle between his lips, wiped his brow with a spotted handkerchief. The ash in his pockets felt weightless. He inserted the needle into the skirt's hem, unpicking a shrunken, smoggy skyline. He gathered two more mannequins standing to the side, naked, arms stretched towards the skylight in a celestial pose. Their eyes stared ahead blankly as though fixed on a mirage in the distance which could be broken apart then fed into their artificial skin, into cloth. He placed them in the display window, naked calling cards waiting to be dressed. The spool of thread cut diagonally across rows of sewing machines moored on metal stands, rectangular golden plaques identifying each one. There was an antique Singer 66-1 Red Eye Treadle from the 1920s, a Russian Handcrank portable number from the 50s, a 1940s Montgomery Ward Streamliner US model, a compact 1930s Jones model from Bucharest with a silver flower pattern crawling up the sides of its sleek, black frame. Manu gathered the thread slowly, a ritual he performed between each creation. A splintered pain exploded in his chest. In his mind's eye, the ash from his pockets assembled into feminine silhouettes. He needed to make more dresses, more corsets, more fitted suits, more gowns. He needed to find more ways to make

women feel beautiful through his creations. The designs rose from dark, undulating slipstreams as if in resurrection. They were watery constructions, insistent, whispering what materials they needed, leaning against his brown irises until they leaked from his eyes onto the page while his fingers sketched feverishly. He walked to the atelier at the back, a hub flourishing under the gaze of light. There was a long, wooden work table, more sewing machines dotted around it. A coiled measuring tape sat in the middle as if ready to entrap a rhinestone covered, meteorite shaped white gown that would crash through. Materials spilled from the edges towards the centre; rolls of bright silk, piles of linen, open boxes of lace, streams of velvet. There were jars of accessories, decorations winking in the glass; zips, studs, feathers, small jewelled delights waiting to adorn the pleat of a skirt, the breast of a jacket, dimpled, soft satin. A black leather suitcase leaning against one wall spilled tiny grains of invisible sand from its gut. The air's pressure contorted a candy hued ballerina style dress carelessly flung over a guillotine. It was on this night while leafleting, Noma was drawn to the seductive glow from the museum, orbs of light mutating in the front entrance's bubble of glass, a coloured small window in a door, a geometric code for the eye...

## Ray the Rottweiler

*Alice Jolly, 2014 winner*

They tell stories about him in the pub. Used to work in the cider factory. No, the morgue in Hereford. Son of a millionaire-film-star-celebrity with an Aston Martin and all. Family keep him out the way down here. Well, you would do, wouldn't you?

The stories go around with the pints of Westons and the salt and vinegar crisps. Grows a ton of wacky baccy out the back somewhere. Used to be married, but his wife was eaten. Yeah, eaten. Well, you've seen the teeth on them, haven't you? Buried her in the garden. Ever actually seen him? Nah. Only once at night, digging. Great big hole in the garden. Body-shaped. Yeah.

No one sees him, everyone agrees on that. And certainly no one goes to see him. Except me. Now. Walking down the track towards his crooked, bulging house, the sound of barking already loud and the spring-nearly-summer air stained with the smell of dog shit. Josh in the pushchair and me with some biscuits – rather burnt at the edges – which Josh and I made earlier this morning.

Just to be clear – I'm not the home-made-biscuit type, or the sociable-calls-on-neighbours type. But in this world where we now live – two miles to the village, ten to the nearest town – Ray The Rottweiler, three fields away and down a track, is our only neighbour. So I felt I ought to try. But now that I'm getting closer I'm beginning to wonder.

It's all dog. Dog everywhere. Slobbering dog faces at every window. Paws sticking out through a chewed gap at the bottom of the ruined front door. A dog's howling head is even poking out of the chimney. OK. Well, maybe not – but you get the picture.

Josh is sitting up straight in the pushchair now, his hand stretched forward. I approach the high gate. The garden is bare earth, littered with dried dog turds. Rottweilers pace up and down by the fence.

Hello, I call. Hell-o-o-o.

The Rottweilers rush against the gate. My voice is drowned out by another burst of barking, whining, scratching. Best to go home now, I tell myself. And anyway I can't stand the smell of dog hair, dog shit, dog pee, dog breath, dog meat. But then a face appears, at an upstairs window. The face of child, surely, rather than an adult? A voice shouts. Ge-e-e-et out of there, get down. Off. Shift, you fucking mutt. I wait for a moment, wishing again that I hadn't come.

A battle seems to be taking place behind the front door. Slobbering muzzles appear, a hand gripping a rolled up newspaper, then the back of a man, narrow and frail, in a dirty white T-shirt. He fights his way out backwards through the crack in the door, batting at the snarling dogs with the newspaper.

But even as he does that, the garden dogs are on him, leaping and licking, their heavy tails slapping against him. Down. Out of it. Go on now, you buggers. He whacks at them with the newspaper as he starts down the path towards me. He's tiny, barely five foot four, with the body of a teenager. His face is red and worn, with wobbly lips, prominent teeth, watering eyes.

At the gate, he smiles and says something. But the dog noise is so continuous that I can't hear. He waves his hand, indicates that I should wait. Then he moves away to a shed closer to the house. Soon he reappears with large bones and chucks these far down the bare-mud garden. The dogs go after them and the level of noise drops. He smiles crookedly, nods and comes back to the gate...

## Sahel

*Peter Adamson, 2013 winner*

The day that Kadré has waited for through the long months of the dry season had broken without the usual blinding light. He sits up, and within a second his heart has begun to pound with the weight of all that the day might bring.

He rolls his head to loosen a crick in his neck. Just outside the door a chicken scratches. The sound of pouring water. And something else. The months of morning dryness have gone from his throat. He swallows, pleasurably.

*“When will you go?”*

His mother has placed a bowl of tamarind water by his mat in silent acknowledgement of anxiety. She is moving around in the shadows of the hut, setting things straight, squaring up his school books, pulling the rush door to one side, letting in the day. The light is opaque, muted, as if seen through a block of salt. He tastes the moisture in the air, pulls the damp into his lungs.

*“Straight away.”*

When he has washed he scrapes out the last of the porridge, pushing in sauce with a shard. She hands him his shirt, eyes brimming with concern.

Usually, on such a morning, there would be only one topic. For a week the skies above Yatenga had been heavy with promise. And yesterday, towards evening, the first warm drops had spilt over onto the dust of the compound. Soon the whole village had been crouched in doorways, whooping relief from hut to hut in the dusk as the rain, hesitant at first, had begun to insist. “Yel-ka-ye” they had shouted – “no problem” – eyes drinking in the dark blots exploding in the dust, darkening the

thatch, patterning the jars outside each door. Later, after the meal had been eaten and the youngest children put to bed, a silence had settled on Samitaba as the adults and elders had returned one by one to squat in their doorways, hypnotised by the rhythm of the rain, awed by the completion of the earth’s slow stain.

But this morning the talk is not of the night’s rains, or of the seeds being sieved from the ashes, or of how many fingers of grain are left on the warm floors of the granaries. This morning the whispers are only of Kadré and his journey to the office of the Préfet.

~

Assita watches her son go, passing between fresh ochre walls and the still dripping thatch. From today, all of their clothes will need more washing. With a heave she lodges the day’s grain on her hip and sets off towards the touré, still watching her son as he makes his way to the road under the eyes of the village. The roofs have been washed, and today the jars will be manoeuvred over the muddy depressions where last night the loose waters splattered heavily onto the earth. All around the familiar sounds of the morning drift across the compound. Firewood being dragged. Water splashing into pots. Utensils being scoured with ash and straw. But all eyes are still on Kadré as he passes the last of the huts and turns towards the road. A few of the women, going about their chores, smile their encouragement. A few of his own age, lacking tact, call out.

Assita crosses the broad circle of chaff and peanut shells, already seeing in her mind her son arriving at the edges of the town, crossing the bridge, passing down the muddy main street to the square, climbing the steps to the veranda of the administration building, standing before the list on the notice board, looking to see if his name is one of the ten. She transfers the broad bowl of grain to the other hip. Ten names only. The ten chosen from hundreds, perhaps thousands, from all the schools of Yatenga. The ten who will be leaving...

## Singing Dumb

*Martina Devlin, 2012 winner*

Mrs Nash is in a hurry coming through our door. “The guards are on their way!” She drops onto a chair, fanning herself with her hands. “It’s the pair from Doon barracks. They were in Con Sullivan’s shop asking for your house. I slipped out the back, ahead of them.”

Mama looks upset. She puts Baby Bridie in the pram, and takes off her apron. Brakes squeal outside. I peek through the window: two men in navy uniforms, caps down low on their heads, lean their bikes against the hedge.

They have come to take me away. I’ve been expecting them. But I run toward the kitchen table and hide under it.

Mama bends down between the table legs. “Kitty, come out of there at once. Wash your face and hands in the basin of water in my room. Quick as lightning, now.”

I do as I’m told, but I stay upstairs. Ned is sent to fetch me.

“Mama wants to know what’s keeping you. We’re all to go outside and play, except you. The guards want to talk to you. You’re in trouble.”

I long to crawl under Mama and Dada’s big bed, in among the spiders. They scare me – but not as much as what’s downstairs. But I know there’s no use, the guards will only reach in with their long arms and pull me out. Maybe I could sneak out through the window and climb down the drainpipe. Then I could hide in the shed till the guards leave.

“Better do what Mama says. Don’t worry. When they lock you up, I’ll help you escape,” Ned promises.

Only the guards and Mama are in the kitchen when we go down. Mrs Nash is gone. Even Baby Bridie is gone. My big sister Josie must have taken her out. Me and Josie share a bed – her feet are always freezing.

“Off you go now, Ned,” says Mama. Ned wants to stay and watch.

The guards are standing by the door, wearing clips on their trousers. One has silver Vs on his sleeve. He winks at me but I look away. I know they have come to put me in jail. I wonder where their handcuffs are. Mama is by the dresser. I go to her, wanting her to hold my hand, but she’s twisting hers together. I’m hoping she can make everything right. But when I look at her face, I see she can’t.

“Isn’t she the grand girl, Mrs Tobin,” says the guard with the silver Vs. He has a silver chain, too, above his belt buckle – it goes round a button and into a lumpy pocket on the front of his jacket. He rubs the chain, and I see the top of his big finger is missing. It has no nail. Probably, the handcuffs are on the end of that chain. “What age would she be, seven?”

“Only barely, Sergeant O’Mahony,” says Mama. “She’s just a little girl. She had her seventh birthday the week before it happened, on Peter and Paul’s Day.”

I’m surprised to hear Mama call me a little girl. She’s always telling me what a big girl I am...

## Hermitage

*Aamer Hussein FRSL, 2012 and 2017 judge*

Mridul, the young monk, arrived at the hermitage on the hill while Abbot Siddhant was meditating after his midday meal. Mridul had walked up the mountain path for miles, from the monastery in the forest to which Siddhant had sent him three months ago as an observer after his arduous training.

Mridul drank a glass of water and ate a bowl of boiled rice as he waited for his teacher.

What brings you here? The abbot asked his disciple after accepting his greeting.

Mridul's forehead was furrowed, his lips dry.

There is a disturbance in the forest monastery, he said. The nun Trishna has been ordered by Abbot Ajit to go into retreat.

What caused this? Siddhant asked.

The congregation reported that she was singing with too much joy in her voice in the morning assembly, Mridul replied.

And then Siddhant remembered when, many seasons ago – twenty, or was it more? – as abbot of the monastery in the forest, he had reprimanded Ajit for singing with too much authority in his voice, as if the singer, not the song, was of primary importance. Siddhant had put Ajit through various trials and the young monk had put himself through mortifications until his song had fallen into silence and then, when he regained his voice, into placid unison with the other singers of the congregation.

And how many seasons had passed since Siddhant, taking with him only three disciples, had departed the forest for the cool air and harsher soil of the hills, leaving the forest monastery in the hands of his disciple Ajit, who, better than anyone, had known what it was to conquer his own arrogance?

I have heard, the abbot said, that since Trishna arrived, too much time is given to singing in the forest monastery. That is what I sent you there to observe. And though I didn't expect to see you here quite so soon, you've done well to come back.

That night, the two men set off on their trip to the monastery in the forest at the foot of the hill. They arrived after sunset the following day. After a night of scant rest, Siddhant took a place in the back of the reed-roofed hall in which the morning assembly was held.

The gentle chant of the monks and the nuns took him deep into a well of emptiness, until he was pulled out of his silent reflection by a rich male voice, rising and soaring above the other voices of the congregation.

That voice is the voice of the young Ajit, he said to himself, but instead of the victorious tones of his younger days, he is now singing of longing and pain. But in his inner ear, he had overheard, not the voice of the young Ajit, but another voice: that of a youth who when he was meant to sing a hymn had sung, instead, the words of a popular love song. And Siddhant saw, in his mind's eye, a female form, bowing from the waist reflected in running water, face tanned golden, great brown eyes, thick black hair coiled loosely on a golden nape, bare shoulders over a white sarong, feet digging into moist soil, the form for which the youth had sung, instead of a hymn, a song of love...

## The Redemption of Galen Pike

*Carys Davies, 2011 winner*

They'd all seen Sheriff Nye bringing Pike into town: the two shapes snaking down the path off the mountain through the patches of melting snow and over the green showing beneath, each of them growing bigger as they moved across the rocky pasture and came down into North Street to the jailhouse – Nye on his horse, the tall gaunt figure of Galen Pike following behind on the rope.

The current Piper City jailhouse was a low cramped brick building containing a single square cell, Piper City being at this time, in spite of the pretensions of its name, a small and thinly populated town of a hundred and ninety-three souls in the foothills of the Colorado mountains. Aside from the cell, there was a scrubby yard behind, where the hangings took place, a front office with a table, a chair and a broom; a hook on the wall where the cell keys hung from a thick ring; a small stove where Knapp the jailer warmed his coffee and cooked his pancakes in the morning.

For years, Walter's sister Patience had been visiting the felons who found themselves incarcerated for any length of time in the Piper City jail. Mostly they were outsiders – drifters and vagrants drawn to the place by the occasional but persistent rumours of gold – and whenever one came along, Patience visited him.

Galen Pike's crime revolted Patience more than she could say, and on her way to the jailhouse to meet him for the first time, she told herself she wouldn't think of it; walking past the closed bank, the shuttered front of the general store, the locked-up haberdasher's, the drawn blinds of the dentist, she averted her gaze.

She would do what she always did with the felons; she would bring

Galen Pike something to eat and drink, she would sit with him and talk to him and keep him company in the days that he had left. She would not recite scripture, or lecture him about the Commandments or the deadly sins, and she would only read to him if he desired it – a psalm or a prayer or a few selected verses she thought might be helpful to someone in his situation but that was all.

She was a thin, plain woman, Patience Haig.

Straight brown hair scraped back from her forehead so severely that there was a small bald patch where the hair was divided in the centre. It was tied behind in a long dry braid. Her face, too, was long and narrow, her features small and unremarkable, except for her nose which was damaged and lopsided, the right nostril squashed and flattened against the bridge. She wore black flat-heeled boots and a grey dress with long sleeves and a capacious square collar. She was thirty-six years old.

*If the preparation of the heart is taken seriously the right words will come.*

As she walked, Patience silently repeated the advice Abigail Warner had given her when she'd passed on to Patience the responsibility of visiting the jail. Patience was always a little nervous before meeting a new prisoner for the first time, and as she came to the end of Franklin Street and turned the corner into North, she reminded herself that the old woman's advice had always stood her in good stead: if she thought about how lonely it would be – how bleak and frightening and uncomfortable – to be shut up in a twelve foot box far from home without company or kindness, then whatever the awfulness of the crime that had been committed, she always found that she was able, with the help of her basket of biscuits and strawberry cordial, to establish a calm and companionable atmosphere in the grim little room. Almost always, she had found the men happy to see her...

## The Premises

*Michael Newton, 2010 winner*

The first time I saw him, I knew he'd be trouble. "I've come to inquire about the room," he said. I recognised his type. He didn't look at me much, just gawped at the hallway and into the kitchen.

"You're...?" I said.

"Nigel Milner. Ten thirty appointment," he said. "I hope the room's not gone."

"No, the room's still free," I said.

"You're not the landlord, are you?" he said. "I thought it was a woman?"

"No," I said, "but I'm responsible for showing the room."

"So, you're in charge?" he said.

"Just responsible," I said.

We walked all the way up to his room.

"Third floor," he said. "Quiet is it, up here?"

"We keep a quiet house here," I said.

It was a good day to show the room. It catches the light that time of day, the morning sun. The street looked its best too, with all those blossoms.

"I'll need those shelves," he said. "I've a lot of books."

"And what do you do?" I asked him.

"I'm a tutor," he said.

"What university?" I asked him.

"Not at university. TEFL," he said. "A local college, over by Finchley Road."

"I see," I said.

He looked around him and sniffed.

"The bed's not so big," he said.

"I thought it was just you?" I said.

"Just me," he said. "That's right. But you never know, do you? I mean I'm a grown boy. You know what I mean."

"I'm afraid Mrs Van Baren doesn't want anyone bringing girlfriends into the house," I said.

"She the real landlady, is she?" he said.

"She doesn't like strangers in the house," I said. "Would that be a problem?"

"It reminds me," he said, "of my time in Barcelona. I rented a room in a big house owned by a high-toned American lady – you know, the Elaine Stritch type. And when she showed me the room, she said to me, 'Love may be a very fine thing, but I'm afraid Mr Milner, I don't want any of it on my premises.' Same story here, is it?"

"It's a reasonable request," I said. "After all, this is Mrs Van Baren's home."

"Doesn't matter to me," he said. "I'll read some of my books on those shelves."

"I don't get much time to read books," I said. "I like Radio 3. And paintings."

We went to look at the bathroom.

"She's not interested in who takes the room, though, is she, this Mrs Van Baren?" he said. "Not interested enough to see me herself, I mean."

"She trusts me to do what's right," I said.

He peered at the green-grey hard water stains in the bathtub and ran a speculative finger along a shelf.

"And what do you do?" he asked me.

"I'm looking for a job," I said. "While I'm looking, I look after Mrs Van Baren."

"Need looking after, does she? Don't her children do their bit?" he asked, glancing out of the window onto the gardens.

"She never had any children," I told him.

"I see," he said.

But he didn't bloody well see. He didn't see the meals I'd cooked, those walks I'd walked, the shopping I'd done, the washing I'd done, the ironing, the bath-times. Making tea for her, making things comfy. The hours sitting with her, listening to the BBC, shutting doors against draughts, opening windows against the heat, fetching the rug against the chill...

## The Not-Dead and The Saved

*Kate Clanchy FRSL, 2009 winner*

They've been asked to wait in Paediatrics. It is five o'clock, already; and the sun is streaming in through the high, unopenable windows. Thrum, thrum, thrum, resounds the concert in the Day Room, and his name is Aitken Drum.

The Son is lying on top of the blanket. He has lately taken to wearing aggressively small jeans which he customises with black thread and biro drawings in the style of Aubrey Beardsley. He taps his dirty fingers on his ripped tee-shirt. His large, glittering brown eyes sweep the empty ward.

'Look' he says, in his new, adolescent, scratchy voice, 'A Not-Dead'

'What?' says the Mother. The Mother has been putting off her tiredness for so long that it tends, like a neglected middle child, to leap at her at the least chance. Just now it is sitting on her lap, arms tight around her neck, breathing the scents of Paediatrics into her mouth: strawberry syrup, toasted cheese, pee.

'A Not-Dead,' says the Son. 'Look. Under the window.'

Mother cranes round. She sees a baby sleeping in a plastic cot. It is wearing a pink woolly hat and cardigan and has oxygen tubes in its nose.

'See,' says the Son.

'It's a baby,' says the Mother, crossly, 'Someone's baby.' But the baby's eyes are too far apart, and it has a cleft palate, and its whole body has a flattened, spatch-cocked look, as if it is trying to separate into

two pieces, East and West, and the Mother is already worrying that there might be a crisis and she will be called upon to Do Something. The Mother is not a good choice for the parent of a chronic invalid. She is inhibited and impatient (often both at once) and she fears sick things: fallen fledglings, injured cats. Someone else always has to pick them up. Her ex-husband preferably, who is bluff and easy with illness, who would carry the Son, as a six year-old, casually around the hospital in his arms, the tubes draped jokily but handily over his shoulders – talents he is now wasting on a new, completely well, wife and child

'She should be dead,' says the Son, 'Like in nature. I mean if that baby was born in a primitive tribe she'd be dead in seconds.'

'So would lots of people,' says the Mother. 'So would I.'

'I would,' says the Son. He raises his fists to his forehead, surveys the puncture wounds inside his elbows, and adds: 'I'd be the deadest.' The Mother sighs. Once, the Son was prodigious and original, and the Mother was daffy and whacky, and they were on the same side: now they seem doomed to partake in endless EFL Oral Exams, with the Son taking the part of the difficult student, the one with the nose stud.

'You were a perfectly healthy baby,' she snaps.

'Not really,' says the Son 'Only apparently. I was born with it, remember. My tumour. That's what the new guy reckons.' Oncology is a new favourite subject. So is genetics, and blame. The Mother decides not to meet the Son's eye.

'Anyway,' she says, 'we're not primitive.'

'No,' says the Son, leaning back on his pillows, 'We've got the technology now. And cos we have the technology, we have to save her' ...

## A Better Man

Jacob Ross *FRSL*, 2008–2011 judge

She'd been looking forward to the two-bar electric fire in the living room to warm herself. She'd just walked out of a drizzle that had misted the world outside from the time she got up this morning – as if the night before had bled into the whole day.

Shehu had his elbows on the little dining table when she entered the flat, his face turned up towards the ceiling. Her bulging laundry bag sat on the floor behind him.

He did not return her greeting and a familiar heaviness came over her. She crossed her feet, swallowed on the creeping dryness in her throat, leaned a shoulder against the wall of the narrow corridor, and waited.

She sensed another presence in the room before she noticed the woman seated sideways on the old sofa, one leg over the other, a silver-strapped sandal dangling from her foot. Her purple nails were busy on the keypad of her phone. The woman kept her head down, a pile of tinted braids making a curtain around her face – the Congolese girl who'd just taken up residence with six other women in the flat above.

'I need you to leave. Right now.' Shehu swung a long arm at the bag.

She said nothing for a while, her eyes shifting from the young woman's down-turned head, to him. She felt brave enough to ask him why. The woman made a clucking sound, sucked her teeth and carried on with her finger-tapping.

'You're not contributing anything,' he said.

She knew that Shehu was not talking about money. He'd stared at her face, then along the rest of her, and everything he did not say was in

that glazed look: two months in his bed with him and she still would not let him to touch her.

'I have nowhere to go.'

'What's new? It's Friday, you have the whole weekend to find a place.'

He swung himself to his feet, threw a withering sideways look at her. Without the frown, Shehu was good-looking and laidback. Half-Fulani, he'd told her. And proud of it. The other half he never mentioned.

He was happy, he'd said, to give her time.

'Shehu...'

He grumbled something under his breath and strode toward the kitchen. The last word she caught was, '...useless'.

It was this that hurt her most.

Her feet took her through the drizzle to the 349 bus stop. She thought of phoning Gabriela, the laughing, older Saint Lucian woman who shared her shift, and lived on Stamford Hill. She imagined Gabriela offering sympathetic words, then advising her to call 'one of her people'.

She pressed her back against the dripping railings of the playing field that ran parallel to the main road, the yellow laundry bag against her feet. The 349 arrived, hissed to a halt, then moved off. More came and as each one left she raised her head at the misted windows, reached for her phone, then changed her mind.

She watched the lights of the grocery store and small post office across the road go off. Shortly after, the Indian man came out, locked the door and pulled down the shutters...

## **A Dangerous Place**

*Cynthia Rogerson, 2008 winner*

Sheila is getting used to the heat. The way the air doesn't go anywhere, but just sits midstream, slightly stale. A whiff of salt from the bay, eucalyptus from the hill, exhaust fumes from the freeway. Something else underneath. Maybe the smell of things rotting. The air tastes used.

She bought clothes for their move for California, but the Marks and Spencer's dresses stick to her skin and she's recently taken to wearing cotton shorts and sleeveless T-shirts from Macy's. Not flattering, over her dimpled thighs and upper arms, but vanity is out the window. All that matters is being able to do the shopping, the cleaning, the cooking. She moves in slow motion.

One mystery. Though it is baking hot there are no places to hang up clothes. Every house has a dryer in the garage. Pronounced gaRAGE. Sheila can adapt to most things - she's here, isn't she? And they are not short of a bob these days. But she is not going to spend good money drying clothes with electricity when the sun can do it for nothing in half an hour and leave her clothes smelling sweet. So one of the first things she does is make her husband drive her to a hardware store to buy a clothes line and pegs.

Her new line hangs between the lemon tree and the pole her sixteen-year-old son Jamie hammers into the ground for her. She watches him do this from their kitchen window, his narrow frame tensed, sweat coating his freckled nose and sunburned ear tips. As poignant, in his clumsy metamorphosis to adulthood, as a toddler emerging from infancy. Such a brief appearance, this version of Jamie. A matter of months, the blink of an eye.

He could use some help tying the line, she can see he isn't quite able to take the strain. But she stands and watches, her hands absentmindedly drying a dish with a tea towel. She sees that he doesn't want help. A proud manliness has come over his face.

She has three sons; has the hang of boys by now. Pretending they are better than they are is the only way to keep them getting better. Confidence is all. So she patronises them, even her Murdo, her fat, red-faced, puffing husband. She patronises him, always says what a winner he is, and look where he is now. A transfer to the San Francisco offices. A very long way from Inverness.

Jamie is her baby, the older two are still in Scotland. Jamie might have left school if they'd stayed there, he is old enough and he hates school enough. But here, in this strange and lush place, he is only a sophomore in high school, has another two years before he will leave. This is good. This place slows down everything. Even childhood lasts longer, and god knows, thinks Sheila, everyone could do with a bit more of that.

It was a good move, coming here. Good for everyone. Isn't this the place everyone dreams of coming? You can't do better than California.

Yet she has to keep checking, keep justifying it to herself. Such an awful risk you take when you stop living the life you were raised to live and try living somewhere else. You can't know in advance if it is the right decision...

## The Buck

*Gabriela Blandy, 2007 winner*

He's out on the hill again today. I can see him from the kitchen window; those pointed antlers and that bright, white tail. He stomps his feet and a silver mist forms around his snout.

Whatcha looking at? I think as he stares down into the valley where our cottage is.

He jerks his head up, and then strolls down the hill, like a man with money in his pockets and a fine destination. After a moment, he stops and then lets out a call. It nearly has the teacups rattling in their saucers it's so deep and booming. In the meadow, Fraulein pauses from her grazing and looks up; it's not yet time for her to be milked, but when it is she'll amble up to the gate and be there expecting me.

I'm waiting for the news to come on about those astronauts and biding my time in the kitchen whilst the day sorts itself out. It's cold at this time in the morning and my coffee's steaming all about my face. I take careful sips, keen to feel the warmth in my belly, but well aware that a burnt tongue can last two days and be a heck of a nuisance.

Fraulein lifts her head and moans into the blushing dawn. It's a sound like no other. There's thought in there, I know it. She's feeling something this morning. I guess we all are with these astronauts heading on up to where the air's different and bodies get light enough to float away.

What must that be like? When the weight of the world disappears and you're left like cotton in the breeze.

Tim's calling me now. The news is on. We've been waiting a while for

this launch. Bad weather's had it delayed. It's a good thing because we had the Stone's baby trapped in a car wreck two days ago and everyone's mind on that. She was in the hospital three nights with me worried enough to turn to God, and it's been a while, that's for sure. 'It's on Marissa!' Tim says and those three words are enough to make me glad I married him. I almost didn't on account of watching too many movies with women that say no (even though they mean yes) just to watch their man get worked up, and me thinking that was the thing to do, back then.

'Don't be silly Rissy,' Tim said, down on one knee and smiling as if he was already carrying me over the threshold, even though I was shaking my head. 'Don't be silly, Rissy.'

That's what he called me then, when we were both in our teens and everyone had a nickname. Sometimes he still calls me that: when the evening's silent and the moon's half out and we know nobody's calling. He'll find that spot on my neck and kiss me gentle, and it will feel like silk on my skin, which I've never felt, but in his kisses. 'Rissy' he'll whisper, and there'll be something tip-toeing down my spine, hot and cold at once, and I'll be back to that girl with eyelashes that curled on forever. I'll remember how he looked that day he came off the football pitch and said: 'man, you sure know how to cheer,' and tugged my pigtails.

'Marissa! You're gonna miss it!' ...

## Master Sunny

*Henry Peplow, 2006 winner*

Mr. Bakhri's shoes looked tired. The leather was wrinkled, like the folds of skin around old men's eyes. As he walked, he watched his shoes – stepping over piles of cow dung and finding the ridges of mud between puddles. He smelled the clouds of scented steam from the street vendors and the tang of traffic fumes. When he looked up, he saw the line of shoeshine boys in Connaught Place.

'Hey, Mister! I can clean your shoes!' 'Sir, I'm the best – he's just a baby!'

They banged their brushes against wooden boxes so it sounded like drums. 'Me! Mister! Me!'

Mr. Bakhri looked along the line. He pressed his palms together, the tips of his forefingers against his lips.

'Here, Mister, here! I can clean your shoes so they are new again. See your face in them, sir!' It was a small boy, who squatted so his face peeked between his knees.

'You can do this?' Mr. Bakhri turned to face him, 'shine my shoes so I can see my face in them?'

Now Mr. Bakhri was talking, the boy closed his knees a little to shield his face. The other boys banged their brushes and called out across the square.

'I can do it,' said the boy. He started to mix the polish in his tin.

Mr. Bakhri rested his right foot on the wooden box and lifted the turn-up clear. He watched the boy's hands as they danced from the tin of

black polish to the brushes. The boy took one brush and spun it in the air, so it turned circles, landing with a 'plop' in his hand. He looked up, and smiled.

A showman, thought Mr. Bakhri. He watched past the swell of his belly as the boy smoothed the wax onto his shoe. He loved the feeling of the brushes rubbing his feet – the sweeping rhythm as the bristles massaged the polish into the leather. As the wax warmed, the scent of it rose so he felt he was in a bubble.

He closed his eyes and let the hubbub of Delhi fade. The chorus of car horns, the boys banging their brushes and the calls of the street vendors melted away until Mr. Bakhri heard only the swish of the brushes across the leather of his shoes. The swish became a wave rushing the beach and Mr. Bakhri felt a breeze that stole the frown from his brow.

He felt the sun, warm on his back, like the press of a hand. Mr. Bakhri sensed something moving in the muscles of his face—he seemed to be unfurling, like the release of a fist. He felt his eyes soften and remembered his mother's kisses – one on each eye – as he lay down to sleep. Before he could stop it, he started to smile...

## Beef Queen

*Cherise Saywell, 2003 winner*

She blows into town on a warm breeze wearing hot pants and a bikini top and not much else apart from the dust that sticks to her skin. I am at the post office stooped over the water fountain when she rides in, all neon-lit new. I look up to see her slide out of a car dragging a lumpy calico bag off the seat and gasping with the heat. She must be from Sydney or Brisbane, or somewhere where people blend in, where nobody looks. She can't find the button to turn down her sound. She yells something at the driver as he rides away. I can't tell if she's being aggressive or gregarious. I can see that she's not from here though. Nobody takes up that much space. Instead, people fill it with backyards and gardens, patios and pools and double parking.

She arrives during Beef Week, our annual festival. Shops and offices close and we are let out of school in celebration. There are hoedowns and bush dances and a rodeo. Men in cowboy hats with great wet circles under their arms queue to get bucked off the backs of bulls. The show-ground is dotted with tents and caravans, pocked with horseshit and hay. Town fills up with dust and grit.

There is a parade too. Beauty queen entrants with frizzy perms glow in shiny dresses. They are draped across the fronts of Holdens and Ford Falcons, wearing sashes announcing their allocated pedigree: 'Miss Guernsey', 'Miss Santa Gertrudis', 'Miss Murray Gray'. The winner will be the Beef Queen. Their namesakes lumber their sweating meaty joints ahead of them, snorting.

There is so much activity that unusual incidents are diluted. There are so many people that hardly anyone stands out. But I find it hard not to notice this new girl.

A few days later she is serving burgers in a little caravan at the showground. 'Beef', announce the painted slogans on the outside of the van, 'tender steaks and juicy burgers'. She flips the patties on the grill and plops heavy burgers into bags. 'Come and get it,' she yells, needlessly, for there is a long queue that fairly sweats its carnivorous appetite. 'Prime Cuts' her T-shirt exclaims, tight across her bust, and beneath, 'National Grain Fed Beef'. She wears a badge too. Her name is Sharon.

Up close she is not remarkable to look at – sun-blond, like every other girl in the summer, thin and dark eyed – except for her mouth. Funny how things that are supposed to be ugly can sometimes be alluring. Her top lip is hitched into a luscious cleft – the remnants of a hare lip – and is decorated with a slick of red gloss. She presses her lips together, pushes them into a scarlet pout. When she licks them her mouth is a painted flower with petals whorling and unfolding.

Curious, I decide to order a coke.

'What, no burger?' she says when, finally, I get to the front of the line. There are quieter stalls nearby, where tubs of ice chill cans of drink beaded with cool dew.

I open my mouth and at first nothing comes out. Then...

## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

**Leone Ross** writes novels and short stories. Her work has been nominated for the Orange Prize and shortlisted for the Edge Hill Short Story Prize. Her short story collection *Come Let Us Sing Anyway* (Peepal Tree, 2017) was called ‘searingly compassionate’ by *The Guardian*. She teaches at the University of Roehampton London.

**Emily Ruth Ford** is a writer and translator. She studied English at Oxford University and Creative Writing at UEA and spent ten years as a journalist for *The Times* and others, with postings in China and India.

**Fiona Vigo Marshall** worked as a journalist in London and Mexico City before going into publishing. Her short stories and poems have been widely published and her novel *Find Me Falling* was published by Fairlight Books in 2019.

**Jonathan Tel** is a fiction writer who has lived and travelled in many countries. ‘The Seduction of a Provincial Accountant’ is part of a novel, *Scratching the Head of Chairman Mao*, to be published in the US by Turtlepoint Press in 2020. He used to be a quantum physicist. He’s won the Commonwealth Short Story Prize and the Sunday Times EFG Story Prize.

**Irenosen Okojie** is a Nigerian British writer. Her debut novel *Butterfly*

*Fish* won a Betty Trask Award and was shortlisted for an Edinburgh International First Book Award. Her short story collection *Speak Gigantular* (Jacaranda Books, 2016) was shortlisted for the Edge Hill Short Story Prize, the Jhalak Prize, the Saboteur Awards and nominated for a Shirley Jackson Award. Her latest book is *Nudibranch* (Dialogue Books, 2019). She was elected a Fellow of the RSL in 2018.

**Alice Jolly** is a novelist and playwright. She has won the PEN Ackerley Prize for memoir. She teaches Creative Writing on the Master’s degree at the University of Oxford. Her fourth novel *Mary Ann Sate, Imbecile* was a Walter Scott Prize recommended novel for 2019, was on the longlist for the RSL Ondaatje Prize and was runner-up for the Rathbones Folio Prize.

**Peter Adamson** was founding editor of the monthly *New Internationalist* magazine. He went on to work for UNICEF where he was responsible for the annual State of the World’s Children report and the annual report on child poverty in OECD countries. He is also the author of three novels.

**Martina Devlin** has written 10 books and a play and is based in Dublin. Her latest work is a collection of short stories, *Truth & Dare*. She writes a weekly current affairs column for the *Irish Independent* and is a PhD candidate at Trinity College Dublin where she has been awarded the Pyle Bursary for her research.

**Aamer Hussein** was born and brought up in Pakistan and came to study in London, aged 15. He now lives and works between London and Karachi. Since 1993, he has published seven original collections of short fiction including *Turquoise*, *Insomnia* and *The Swan’s Wife*, three volumes of selected stories, and two novels. He is a Senior Research Fellow of the Institute of English Studies at the University of London. He was elected a Fellow of the RSL in 2004.

**Carys Davies** is the author of two collections of short stories, *Some New Ambush* and *The Redemption of Galen Pike*, which won the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award and the Jerwood Fiction Uncovered Prize. Her debut novel, *West*, was shortlisted for the Rathbones Folio Prize, runner-up for the Society of Authors' McKitterick Prize, and winner of the Wales Book of the Year for Fiction.

**Michael Newton** has written a history book about children who grew up in complete isolation (or were brought up by animals) and the people who tried to help them to join society. He has also written a history book about assassins and their victims, and a book about movie stars – from Charlie Chaplin to Scarlett Johansson. He's still writing short stories.

**Kate Clanchy** is a writer and a teacher. 'The Not Dead and the Saved' was the second short story she ever wrote, and it won the BBC National Short Story Prize as well as the V.S. Pritchett Prize. She believes this is because poems are nearer to stories than novel and she wrote lots of poems first. She was elected a Fellow of the RSL in 2010.

**Jacob Ross** is a novelist, short story writer, editor and creative writing tutor. His crime fiction novel, *The Bone Readers*, won the inaugural Jhalak Prize in 2017 and his novel *Pynter Bender* was shortlisted for the 2009 regional Commonwealth Writers' Prize. His latest book, *Tell No-One About This*, is a collection of stories written over a span of forty years. He is Associate Fiction Editor at Peepal Tree Press, and the editor of *Closure: Contemporary Black British Short Stories*. He was elected a Fellow of the RSL in 2006.

**Cynthia Rogerson** is the author of five books. *I Love You Goodbye* was translated into six languages, shortlisted for Scottish Novel of the

Year, and dramatised for BBC radio. *Wait for Me Jack* was published in 2017 under Addison Jones. A *Sunday Times* top summer read, it's also an audio book. She holds a Royal Literary Fund Fellowship.

**Gabriela Blandy** is a Performance Coach for Writers. She has an MA in Creative Writing, with Distinction, and is an accredited Life Coach and NLP Practitioner. She runs monthly workshops at City University for professional writers. She has her own YouTube channel for writers and her content can be found under #WriteNoMatterWhat. She is currently working on a memoir and a feature documentary about writing.

**Henry Peplow** lives in an old barn in the Chiltern Hills. When his two boys were young, he started a children's novel to amuse them. He's still writing it, even though the boys have grown into adults. He works making films, loves laughing and hopes one day to finish the novel.

**Cherise Saywell** is a novelist and short story writer. She was brought up in Australia and lives in Scotland. 'Beef Queen' was her first published story. She has published two novels, *Desert Fish* and *Twitcher*. Her stories have appeared in journals and anthologies and been broadcast on BBC Radio 4.

## V.S. PRITCHETT: A BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

1900-1997

Born in lodgings over an Ipswich toyshop in December 1900, Victor Sawdon Pritchett was named after Queen Victoria, who was still – just – on the throne. He disliked his name, and chose to be known instead as V.S. Pritchett, or simply VSP. His beginnings were not auspicious: he described his mother, Beatrice, as “a rootless London pagan, a fog-worshipper, brought up on the London streets”. His father, Walter, was frequently in debt and not infrequently bankrupt.

Insolvency prompted numerous moves from one red brick villa to the next, and VSP’s childhood neighbourhoods included Woodford, Derby, Palmers Green, Balham, Uxbridge, Acton, Ealing, Hammersmith, Camberwell, Dulwich and Bromley. Every move reduced his mother to tears.

VSP was forced to leave school at fifteen, and sent to work at a Bermondsey sweatshop where animal skins were processed to make leather.

While this start in life would have seemed dismal to many, VSP – known as “the professor” by his family – had a gift for finding enchantment in his surroundings. Perched up trees, or on the rooves of sheds, he escaped into books, and he loved wandering the suburban

streets, in the gaslight and smog. Men and women who might have struck most people as ordinary or unsavoury seemed to VSP exotic, surprising, even romantic. So when he came to create fictional characters, he never censored them: “I’d much sooner see them go on unpunished,” he wrote. “I think the incurable side of human nature is what appeals to me.” He believed in “portrayal of character for its own sake”, and in reviewing for the *New Statesman*, which he did from 1928 to 1978, he was praised for combining “generous connoisseurship” with “inspired psychology”.

VSP began to publish books in his late twenties, and from then on he was prolific. He was a novelist, biographer (of Honoré de Balzac, Ivan Turgenev and Anton Chekhov) and travel writer, but his real genius was for short stories.

His work has been compared to that of James Joyce and Chekhov, but he was inclined to credit the influence of Irish writers – Sean O’Faolain, Liam O’Flaherty, Frank O’Connor. Ultimately, though, his style was all his own. As the American short story writer Eudora Welty wrote, “Any Pritchett story is all of it alight and busy at once, like a well-going fire. Wasteless and at the same time well-fed it shoots up in flame from its own spark like a poem or magic trick, self-consuming, with nothing left over. He is one of the great pleasure-givers in our language.”

**Maggie Fergusson**

Literary Adviser

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## Acknowledgements

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## Authors' Licensing and Collecting Society

Writers earn their livings in a number of different ways. Competitions like the V.S. Pritchett Prize can provide important additional income for writers, but reliable annual income is pivotal to a sustainable career in writing.

The ALCS is key to that. ALCS makes sure writers receive the money they are entitled to when someone copies or uses their work. They collect money from all over the world, then pay it to their members. So far they've paid a total of £500 million.

They're a not-for-profit organisation, with over 100,000 members, and open to all types of writer. The money they collect is for 'secondary uses' of writers' work – such as photocopies, cable retransmission, digital reproduction and educational recording. These sorts of rights typically bring in small amounts of money that are difficult for writers to monitor individually, so the most effective way to gather them is collectively. It takes tireless investigation, as well as experience and expertise.

ALCS also campaigns and lobbies on matters important to writers – both at a national and international level – to ensure writers' rights are recognised and rewarded. In 2019 they paid out over £34 million to writers and continue to make a career in writing possible for many.

## Tall Tales, Short Stories

In 2019 the RSL celebrates 20 years of the V.S. Pritchett Prize, the great range of the short story form, and what is possible when we use other writers for inspiration. Alongside this anthology, past winners and judges of the competition will be visiting UK state secondary schools to run short story writing workshops. The RSL is also running a competition for 14- to 18-year-olds – we've given you the beginnings of these stories, can you give us their endings in 500 words?

## The RSL and the V.S. Pritchett Prize

The Royal Society of Literature was founded in 1820, and is Britain's charity for the advancement of literature. Nearly 200 years on, we work for literature by being a voice for its value – showing how it changes society and the difference it can make to a life – by sharing it with people of different backgrounds and experiences, and honouring and encouraging writers at different stages of their careers.

First awarded in 1999, the £1,000 V.S. Pritchett Prize was established to commemorate the centenary of an author widely regarded as the finest English short story writer of the 20th century. The Prize seeks to preserve a tradition encompassing Pritchett's warmth of feeling and mastery of narrative. Stories are judged anonymously by a panel of writers. From 2019, the RSL gives 50 free entries annually to writers on low incomes to make the Prize accessible to writers from different backgrounds and experiences.

The 2019 Prize was presented to Ursula Brunetti at an event hosted by Faber & Faber on 11 November 2019.

The RSL is grateful to ALCS, the Pritchett family, and Sir Christopher and Lady Jennie Bland for their long-standing support of the Prize, to *Prospect* magazine for publishing the winning story each year, and to those supporters who wish to remain anonymous.

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