

*The Grassic Gibbon Centre*  
*Literary Lights Prize for Creative Writing*

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# Shell

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# Kitchen

The first wisps emerged tentatively, as if to test the air. They crept through the darkness in silence, turning at the slightest draft, until they had finally reached the safety of the cooker hood. Droplets of water collected along its mesh panel and huddled together, but their respite was brief. Below, the whistle of storm winds already drew closer. Thick billows of white now streamed from the spout in a steady torrent as more droplets fled. The kettle was encircled by two concentric rings of blue and yellow flames, which flared brightly up its sides and licked at its belly. A face appeared in the polished steel and grew larger. Inside, tiny fists began to hammer against the kettle walls.

The high-pitched wail struck her like lightening. Boiling water scalded her hand as she whipped the kettle off the stove to hush it, trying to suppress a cry of her own. She stood there for some time in the flickering light of the flames, Bakelite handle gripped tightly, until the pounding in her ribcage subsided. Slowly, she put the kettle down onto the work surface, turned off the gas and felt her way to the sink. It had only been the kettle. She found the tap handle and turned it little by little, until the isolated drip of individual drops had developed into a thin trickle. Its cold caress soothed her burned skin, but the sound of the water as it hit the bottom of the basin was unbearable. In the hollow of the sink it was distorted into the relentless beat of a small tin drum, which ricocheted off its sides, spilled over the edges and turned the kitchen into a fraught echo chamber whose walls reverberated to the roll of distant thunder. She quickly turned off the tap. Tea, she thought. She had come to make tea. She had to focus. The tea caddy was on the middle shelf of the kitchen cabinet, the mugs just below. Infuser and spoons were in the drawer. She slowly moved two steps to the right, raised her arm and felt for the handle. Two steps back and it was open. Her fingers reached into the dark space in front of her and closed around the familiar shape. She carefully set the mug down on the worktop, then the tea. The drawer was trickier. It slid out noiselessly but was a mess inside. She hovered her hand over it for several minutes until she thought she could make out an oval outline, and groped at it. It turned out to be the apple knife and she cut her palm on its sharp blade, but by sheer luck a metal chain looped itself around her ring finger as she drew back her hand, and she pulled the infuser out along with it.

The tea egg was an ovoid steel container whose membrane had in several places been penetrated by an object with a sharp head. If she were to hold it up to her eyes by light, she thought while she screwed off the top and filled its bottom half with curled-up tea buds, she would be able to see into

its interior, look through the holes where it had been pierced and see the small tea pearls inside. A violent shiver caused her to spill almost half the tea in the egg thus laid bare. She hurried to close it again. The mug was a misty pillar of rising steam over which she let the egg dangle on its chain. After a moment's hesitation, she lowered the infuser into the hot water until its perforated steel hit the bottom of the mug, where it slowly leaked into its surroundings.

She tried to think of her mother. That was the real reason why she had come here. In her childhood home, the house she had been born in, the kitchen had been her mother's domain. She would reach up to the brass door knob and find her there among her pots and pans, forever chopping vegetables and lighting the oven. It seemed to her now that she had hardly ever seen her mother outside of this cramped space, or flitting back to it to put on dinner or make a cup of tea. Her mother had always made tea whenever a storm brewed in the air. She cupped the mug with both of her hands and tried to hold on to the memory of her mother's kitchen; it ran through the cracks between her fingers and drained the present of all the warmth and colour it had brought. She put the tea down and sidled along the kitchen counter in the direction of the door, her back to the window. She tried hard not to turn around, but after a few shuffling steps her left foot crushed several tiny objects and she looked down to see, and through the gap of her feet she could just make out a shadowy pattern of bars drawn onto the linoleum by the moonlight falling through the window, penetrating the curtains, and she turned and fled.

## Hotel Room

It was not what she had expected – and she had pictured it all in her mind, every last detail of it. She should be looking at the dusty pinks and sea glass green of a harbour at sunset, in watercolours; or at the reproduction of a romantic seascape by one of the old masters, of a white lighthouse embattled by raw forces of nature, drawn into a whirling vortex of waves and clouds or blazing red under a fiery sun. It was, however, an old railway poster. There could be no doubt about it – its bright colours and flat design gave it away. A block blue sky and swathes of ochre sand, divided by a line of tall buildings on the horizon, formed an idyllic backdrop to a pair of deckchairs arranged side by side on the beach, facing the sea. A white towel lay draped over the chair closest to her, cascading in elegant folds over its arms and onto the fine sand, and on top of it, limbs arranged in an equally graceful fashion, there was a woman in a red bathing suit. Her face, only visible in profile, was smooth and, despite the lack of detail, conveyed an expression of pure joy. Her husband, for they could only be husband and wife,

sat in a slightly elevated position in the other deckchair, shielding her from the rays of the sun. They both smiled dotingly at something just outside the picture, tantalisingly out of view. It was not what she had expected and yet, in a strange, twisted way, it was exactly what she had hoped to find.

She wondered what the object of their fond gaze was and how they had ended up here. It was the kind of poster her mother would have seen in the local station as a young girl, when train travel was still an adventure and platforms more closely resembled outdoor galleries than the drab, overlooked space between departure and destination they were now. Perhaps, its bold colours had stopped the hotel's founder in his tracks as he walked past it on his way home from a business meeting. This was precisely the type of couple that would spend a happy weekend in his new hotel, the sort of people it had to attract, he would have thought, and at once persuaded the station master to let him have it in exchange for a small sum. For many years, it would have been on proud display in the lobby, but as the golden age of the railway waned and its posters slowly fell out of fashion, it would first have been made to migrate to the dining room, then to one of the upper corridors, until, finally, it was relegated to this room with a view of the backyard.

But what did it matter, in the end, what it was, and how it had come to be here? The only thing that did matter was that it was here, in this room, and that its presence had spoiled everything. She had to think back to her school days, to a task their rather eccentric art teacher had set her class one day. Every child had been given a little square cut out of the print of a famous painting, with instructions to glue it onto a blank sheet of paper and expand it by imitating its style. She had received a detail of the sky in Van Gogh's *Starry Night*, and she could still recall how special she had felt looking down on her precious scrap of blue and yellow swirls, as if she held in her hand a window into the artist's soul. They had all set to work excitedly. In the space of an hour, however, a palpable sense of frustration had settled onto the art room, and her teacher had wrung his hands at their paint-stained pinafores and exclaimed how he had never before taught such a class of untalented dilettantes. Just like the paintings this exercise had spawned, the effect of the railway poster on the hotel room was eerie. It jarred with its surroundings. The warm ochre tones of the sand imbued the yellow wallpaper on the other side of the frame with a sickly hue. Its geometric honeycomb pattern of pale hexagons around black flowers took on a sinister meaning, with every black flower now a walled-in creature of misery – there was a whole meadow of flowers in solitary confinement on the wall, irrevocably isolated from their own kind.

Just like the fine golden sand of the poster seeped into the wallpaper, the intimacy of the two deckchairs, arranged side by side on the beach, distorted their surroundings and interpreted the meaning of the furniture in the room. There, in that corner, they seemed to say, are two armchairs, but unlike us they are facing each other directly in a confrontation. The larger chair looms angrily over the other

one, which is cowering in the corner. But what were all these ridiculous thoughts about posters and chairs? She shook her head sharply as if to dispel them and pulled the bathrobe tight over her chest. It had come sealed in plastic film and she had felt so thrilled as she had ripped open the package and pulled it out, pristinely white, about to be worn for the first time. Next to the armchairs, at any rate, there was a little table with a small electric kettle and two cups sitting neatly on their saucers – an invitation to soothe the larger armchair and turn it to a less confrontational angle. She busied herself with the kettle, like her mother had always done, and carefully set the steaming cup of tea down on the far side of the table. He took it. Then, with a casual flick of his wrist, he threw its contents at her. She did not feel the hot liquid as it hit her breasts and belly. The only thing she could think about as he twisted his fingers into her stained bathrobe and pushed her towards the bed was that she had been wrong, that the woman's bathing suit had not been red after all.

## Bathtub

Swans usually mated for life, but here the male had either left the nest or been pushed out of it by its other half. The remaining swan stood at the edge of the precipice, craning its long neck, and peered down the baby pink porcelain walls into the pond. Hot water rushed out of its bill and hit the surface below in a thundering crescendo; steam rose from the fiery stream and filled the room with a dense white mist. She sat perched on the edge of the bathtub with her feet balanced on the slippery rim on the other side, like a bridge about to collapse. A trickle of sweat ran down between her breasts and over her belly. She reached for the tap, turned it off, and tested the water with her fingertips. It had reached the required temperature.

As a child she used to pee in the bath. She would never tell her mother that she needed to go, and had always found it oddly satisfying to leave more of herself behind in the bathtub than just the dirt on her skin. Her favourite bedtime story had been *Alice in Wonderland*, and she would imagine that she had accidentally drunk a bottle of shrinking potion, shrunk to the size of Thumbelina, and was now being sucked into the plughole along with her own pee. She must have lain there and dreamed about her journey down the drains deep into the belly of the earth a thousand times. Sometimes, if she had done something naughty that day, she imagined how it slowly became warmer and warmer the further down she travelled, until the heat was unbearable and it was clear that she was headed where her mother had just told her all the bad girls went.

It was infernally hot. She slowly lowered herself into the bathtub and rocked herself back and forth, back and forth, as she waited for the storm.

## Onion

She stood at the top of the cellar stairs, staring into the darkness, and the rough-hewn stone steps shrank away from her. Or was it the light, this lack of light, the way the carpet of the main living area was so abruptly cut off, that played tricks on her mind? The first few steps – four, to be precise – in the immediate vicinity of the landing were life-sized and had all the correct angles; right angles, that is. They were perfectly rectangular, even if their surface was somewhat uneven, with a uniform tread depth and exactly the same width. From step number five onwards, however, or at least as far ahead as she could make out in the gloom, this logic of regularity gave way to irrationality. There, the steps gradually narrowed and grew smaller as their distance to the top increased, giving the appearance of a funnel boring deep into the very centre of the earth. The angles were all wrong. What should have been parallel lines, a simple case of staircase edge meets wall, instead leaned towards each other to converge at a single point just out of sight. How had she come to be here, at the edge of reason; she had no recollection of it. She put her foot on the first step. It was solid and held her weight. Then, she abandoned the ground floor completely and descended into the abyss.

Her descent was slow. She held on to the handrail with both hands and stepped into the void with her right foot first, and only when it had found a secure footing on the irregular stone surface of the next step did she shift her weight onto it and follow with her left foot. The grey rectangle at the top of the stairs grew smaller and smaller, and then she was swallowed up by the dark and it was gone. On she went, further underground. A rich, earthy smell filled the air. She did not know how long she had been going for, or how far she had gone. There was no indication of time, no counting of steps in the belly of the earth. There was only the here and now of the stone steps, and then no more steps, no more stone. Then, there was light.

A single light bulb hung from the low ceiling, naked. When she moved, shadows danced on the bare walls. The room was empty but for a small pile of onions, which lay one on top of another in a corner and had done so for some time because one of them had left and rolled away from the rest. Her feet walked her to it. It was enwrapped in several layers of thin, papery brown skin, which was so fragile that half of it crumbled away as she picked it up from the floor, exposing the pale flesh underneath. It nestled snugly in her palm. She looked at the small, defenceless being in her hand and ran the side of her thumb down its smooth green surface. Concentric layers of fleshy leaves enveloped the bud at its centre and were in turn sheltered by brittle brown skin and held by her fingers. Shadows danced

on the walls. Her thumb moved up along the soft membrane, up and down. Then, it bent and tickled it, and there was laughter, and then her thumb bent some more and clawed into the pale flesh. The pungent stench of sulphur filled the air and stung her eyes as she bore deep into the onion, fingers piercing layer after layer to get to the seed of life inside. Liquid flowed from ruptured flesh and left a slimy trail down the length of her forearm, the shadows danced faster until, finally, the tears came.

## Shell

She did not know why she had come back. It looked different – the ice cream van had packed up and crawled away, no longer sounding its melancholy tune. She took off her shoes and let the cold water wash over her bare feet. Everywhere she looked, there were seashells. Whole galaxies of miniature universes lay scattered across the shore, waiting to be marvelled at with childlike wonder. She picked up a shell. The top of its spiral staircase had broken off and revealed a glimpse of the iridescent pearl interior. Here, a small being had once retreated into itself, a snail or perhaps a hermit crab, and had left behind a hollow filled with memories, its essence still alive inside the walls. She thought of her mother. Then, she threw the shell into the sea and watched as it was claimed by the incoming tide, so that it could, once more, become a home.