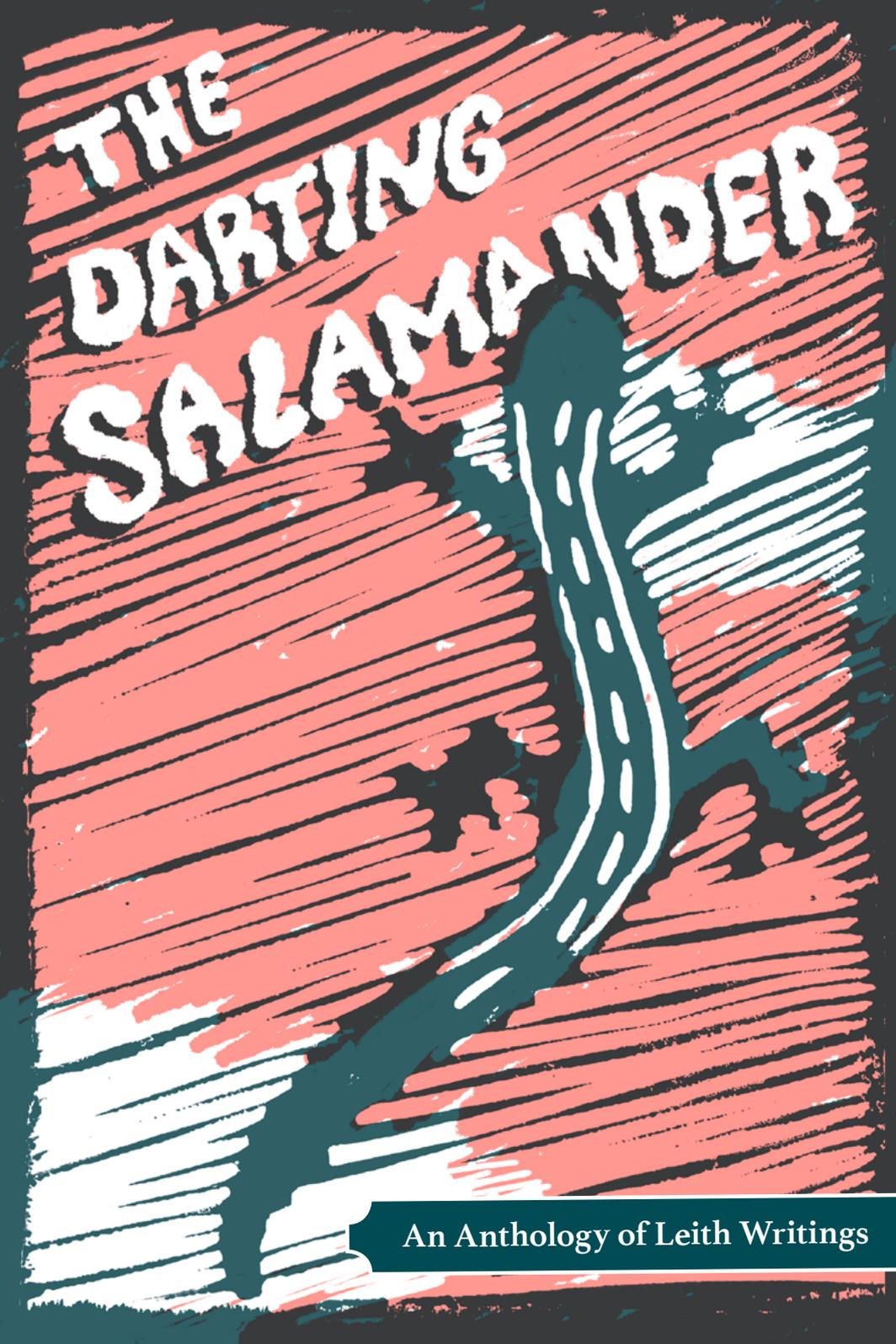


# THE DARTING SALAMANDER

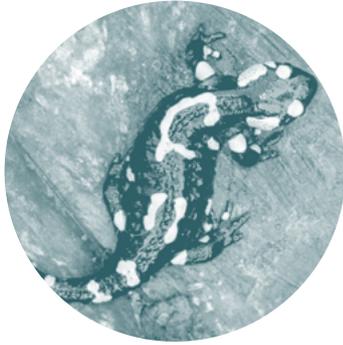


An Anthology of Leith Writings

# **The Darting Salamander:**

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## **Salamander:**

amphibian lizard capable of regenerating lost eyes, limbs and tail, and can be toxic to the touch. In legend, can survive the heat of flame.

## **Salamander Street, Leith:**

the only street of this name in the UK, probably named because of the many fiery and toxic glass and chemical works on the north side two hundred years ago. Within living memory, known as The Street of a Thousand Smells.

## **The Salamander:**

wedding gift from Francis I of France to James V in 1537 and later a Scottish flagship. Captured by Lord Hertford at Leith in 1544 and used on his return to England after the burning of Leith. Returned to Scotland and probably took part in the Battle of Pinkie, 1547. May have lasted until 1574; eventual fate unknown. Shown here with English flags, from the Anthony Roll, contemporary inventory of the English fleet.

## **Gerry's Salamander:**

In 1810 Eldbridge Gerry drew the boundaries of a voting district in Massachusetts in the shape of a winged salamander, disregarding the lie of the land and the workings of the communities; the origin of the word 'gerrymander'.

## **Salamander Street:**

independent publisher founded in Leith in 2019.

## **Salamander Street:**

song released on 2020 by Callum Beattie to honour a school friend who became a sex worker on Salamander Street, Leith.

## Foreword

The title of this anthology is compelling, both because it is set so clearly in the history of Leith, but also gives a distinct nod to the future.

Salamander is a little used street name around the world (indeed as the flyleaf notes there is only one Salamander Street in the UK and it is here!) and to that extent as folk travel along it in Leith, if they ponder at all, it will provide enigmatic thoughts as to origins. There are historians, much better versed than I, who bring deep knowledge to such issues, but I like the fact that one of the sub-species of the salamander is that of 'hellbenders'! As Edinburgh's port, Leith has been regarded for generations as being edgy, or whatever the 16th century equivalent word might have been! This was and is a compliment, particularly from other parts of Edinburgh where Leith has long been regarded with envy, but with some Morningside tut tutting! I reckon the anthology represents Leith so well in its continuing diversity and challenge. There is some really powerful writing here which will, I hope, make readers pause and reflect not only on the narrative, but on themselves as they fully absorb the thinking of our writers.

The Leith Trust, which I chair, exists to assist in bringing the diversity of Leith cultures together. When approached to support this project it was impossible to say 'no' as it is the strongest manifestation imaginable of that proposition. In the Trust's endeavours to create bridges we hold periodic Leith Conferences and at one some years ago I was firmly admonished from the hall not to take the grit out of the oyster which is Leith. I would never dream of doing so as the folk of today's Leith continue to dart purposively about!

**Andrew Cubie**

## The Darting Salamander

It was always up to Leith to make something of the year 2020, centenary of the 'Arranged Marriage' of Leith with municipal Edinburgh. This anthology was going to appear on the day of the wedding itself, 2nd November. But, with the arrival of Covid-19, in 2020 many things were lost or delayed. We emerge from the rubble exactly a year later, a date which we aim to make our own with a new annual edition.

From the entirety of recorded history up to 1828, the port of Leith had been, effectively, a feudal asset of Edinburgh, a howling anachronism that for centuries put port and capital city at loggerheads, cause of much friction and resentment. A strong community identity was formed in adversity.

In 1920 Leith had enjoyed a glorious near-century of municipal independence in which slums were cleared, clean water was piped to the new tenements, schools were built and loved, the hospital was the pride of the town, Shore was lit by electricity (well ahead of Edinburgh), the Leith Police kept law and order, there was a rattling good tram system (better than Edinburgh's), the port sent and received ships and goods to and from all over the world.

In 1920 Europe was emerging from the most destructive war in history, Leith suffering a disproportionately high death toll. And then this – the Edinburgh Extension Act was going to absorb everything. Edinburgh ripping off Leith, Leith losing its identity. Again!

The Act was no more than a bit of timely tidying-up of civil administration. It was aimed as much at Liberton, Corstorphine, Colinton and all, which had clearly become recent suburbs of the old city. Leith was surrounded by Edinburgh-administered Newhaven, Portobello, and the city centre. Amalgamation was the way things were going throughout the country. But it took no account of local feelings.

The Burgh Council held a plebiscite (a referendum). At 6:1 against amalgamation, it could hardly be more decisive. This overwhelming verdict masked a genuine debate. While many made much of past grievances and glories – all perfectly genuine – and rosy forecasts, the United Leith Trades Council declared that it could see nothing in the proposal that would harm the working classes; on the contrary, many benefits would ensue from making common cause with their fellow workers and fellow townsmen. Reducing a serious, important, complicated matter that needs careful process to a binary question for an answer on a day is always over-simplistic and divisive.

The Member of Parliament for Leith, Captain Wedgewood Benn, accurately representing his constituents' expressed opinions, spoke passionately in the House of Commons in opposition to the Bill. He said that the community of Leith was unique in its own strong self-identity and communal self-help. It's quite possible that, objectively, this was perfectly correct. But the Bill was enacted.

The overcrowded town spilled into the new Edinburgh, a good deal of it in nearby Craighentiny. Buses and trams ran throughout the new city. Leith's experience in the first quarter-century after amalgamation, dominated by depression and the Second World War, was no different from the rest of the country.

But for the first three decades of the post-war period – within present living memory – it cannot be said that Edinburgh treated Leith as a valuable asset. They were characterised by demolitions, depression and diaspora. Much of the housing, not properly looked after for half a century, was slum. Instead of incremental improvements, large-scale demolitions were ordered, with some people accommodated in town-centre high-rises and others despatched to municipal housing schemes around Edinburgh. About half of the 1960s building hasn't lasted fifty years. The much-loved Kirkgate with the wee Gaiety theatre, heart of the community, was razed; the shops bundled into the shopping centre run

by a management company. The last family business left long ago. If the Kirkgate had been sensitively smartened up, it would now be a bijou and a tourist trap.

Leith was not given Development Area status. While Broxburn and Penicuik prospered, Leith found itself at the wrong end of a vacuum cleaner as dozens of businesses took the lure of generous start-up and re-location grants. Leith rapidly lost its status as Scotland's premier east coast port to Grangemouth, and hundreds of jobs in and supported by the docks dwindled to dozens. The last ship built at Henry Robb's yard, where Ocean Terminal now stands, went down the slip in 1983.

By the early 1980s, Leith was a gap site. It became a dustbin as the authorities cleaned up Edinburgh ahead of the Commonwealth Games in 1986. Leith Hospital was closed, with good reason and much heartbreak. Magnificent Leith Central Station, useless as a railway terminal, could have been made into a concert hall and an arts complex, or a transport museum, or a Guggenheim. We have a super-store and a car park.

A strong community spirit builds up naturally in adversity, or in self-contained empowerment. It is less easy to survive when the community is under-valued, ignored, and dispersed.

And heroin arrived. And it clashed with a dreadful new virus, HIV. Just as the Scottish Office built its new administration block at Victoria Quay, and Donald Dewar worked a minor miracle in persuading the trustees of Former Royal Yacht Britannia to berth at Leith – her real home is the Clyde – many Leithers were aghast as Irvine Welsh told some truths about the heroin scene in Leith in his book *Trainspotting*, and Danny Boyle's film of the same name went worldwide. After all the town had been through! But heroin and *Trainspotting* is indelibly part of the Leith heritage.

In the first years of this century, folk who had lived in Edinburgh all their lives came to Leith for the first time, to the new Scottish Office or

to Britannia, one of Scotland's biggest visitor attractions, conveniently alongside a nice new shopping mall with its middle-class destination department stores. Strangers reading tourist maps might be forgiven for forming the impression that Leith was a suburb of Ocean Terminal. The west side of the Water of Leith, where the old warehouses – so nearly demolished in the 1980s – and the looser street pattern permit nice restaurants, coffee joints and open spaces. Leith Links is proudly home to a statue of the signatory of the earliest rules of Leith's gift to the world: golf. The central axis of the town remains the Water of Leith, pleasant riverside walks replacing maritime industries.

The parliamentary constituency, which includes a large part of Edinburgh New Town, voted to remain in the EU referendum of 2016 by one of the largest majorities in the UK, a sign of a confident, cosmopolitan community. Hindus, Sikhs, and Moslems all have worship centres (in former Church of Scotland churches), and business and community interests in Leith. Many languages are heard in Great Junction Street. Leith Festival, direct descendant of the week of fund-raising for the hospital, is an annual showcase for a thriving and particularly Leith arts community, and a popular celebration of diversity. Leith Theatre is finding its feet again after almost four decades in mothballs. Edinburgh Sculpture Workshop, Leith School of Art, Coburg House, Custom House, and Out of the Blue in the former Drill Hall, all keen to make strong connections with the community, offer versatile creative facilities and inspiration. The *Leith* magazine (priceless) keeps us all in touch, and there's a bewildering range of community and charitable enterprises and inter-connected and creative digital initiatives.

Is all well in Leith, a century after amalgamation? The City of Edinburgh consistently wins accolades on several national and international matrixes: financial services generating prosperity, seat of government, excellent city to live in, cultural and educational hotspot, tourist destination and all. Meanwhile, in 2020 a cluster of post codes near Great Junction St was the eleventh most deprived neighbourhood in Scotland.



Leith was not the only European medieval port to adopt the icon of the Madonna and Child on a ship, but it has survived longest and strongest here. The Holy Family – many Leithers thought of it as the Leith family – is pictured under, variously, the sun, a cloud (the Holy Spirit), and a canopy. It's an image of divine love and security in a small vessel sailing on an unstable medium: the sea. The journey requires leadership, navigational skills, a place and a purpose for everyone on board and a commitment to the common endeavour.

PERSEVERE became the motto of the town of Leith, to help the folk through hard times. This, from South Leith Parish Church, may be the oldest example of the combination, dating from the 16th century.

They say that being a Leither isn't a matter of where you live, it's a state of mind and heart. No-one can live long in Leith without becoming aware of the icon and the motto and, without necessarily being religious, subscribing to their best intentions. Leith community has certainly changed shape, but despite the fears of 1920 and the travails of the second part of the 20th century, icon and motto have lost none of their potency.

This anthology reflects some of the many moods and angles you would expect in a complex and changing community. The panel made the selection blind, on merit, from a strong field of entries. There is loss and fond memory. There is celebration of Leith's maritime past, its place in the city, on the coast and in the world. There is humour, there is work, there is whimsy and reflection in this strange year of Covid-19 lockdowns and inverted boundaries. And there is heroin, which has no happy ending. No happy ending, maybe – but, somehow, hope and solidarity never disappear. An ending is always the beginning of a new story. We didn't struggle through the lockdowns of last year to come back the same.

Welcome to Leith's second century as a distinctive and inseparable part of its wider community. PERSEVERE.

**Tim Bell, October 2021**

## Near Edinburgh

Near Edinburgh

Lies a small town

Some say up

Others say down

A busy place

With lots of bustle

That's Leith you know

Showing its muscle

A trading port

Once its pride

Now Edinburgh's bit

On the side

With three cranes

All in a row

Embers left

Of long ago

Rust and decay

Tears at their souls

Time moves on

But takes its toll

New seed arrives

Replacing the old

Proud Leith continues

Its spirit bold

Upmarket dwellings

And shops to match

Leith's new face

It's quite a catch

But the past remains

Still holding on

Defying Edinburgh

Still staying strong

---

Alan E. Thomson



## Leith, Then and Now

He was born in Leith and only ten years old when his town became part of Edinburgh, but he never mentioned that. He left in his late twenties, during the Second World War, to enlist in the Royal Navy. But they declared him unfit for active duty because of pleurisy. The irony bit when he was welcomed by the Merchant Navy to go on the Arctic Convoys. Not just any job either but as a stoker on steam ships.

Somehow he avoided the U-boats, the dive bombers, the Arctic weather, though some friends didn't, and he came home to rationing and poverty, but still the pleurisy didn't get him.

Later, in my memory, he walked with his own wee boy around Leith Docks. Always on a Sunday afternoon and always the same walk – in at the Dock gate, near to where Malmaison stands now. That's where the police checkpoint stood, its black and white checked band to match the cap of the Leith Police – a quick hello to the man on duty, while the boy stood back, frightened to get too near.

The swing bridge, the blue one that is now riveted to the spot, was one to be watched. The spaces through its rotten boards threatened to suck the wee mite down into the swirling waters underneath. Then what seemed like thousands of pigeons diving out from the old flour mill – the only dive bombers the boy would ever see.

The man would stop only for each seafarer he met, and pass the time of day, or gaze at the ships they'd come on. Suddenly the boy and his Dad would be travelling to all corners of the globe on the magic carpet of his words.

They watched the seamen untying ropes, thicker than their wrists, from the iron capstans that lined the docks. The boy would swear, in later

years, that it was that action which brought a look of sadness to the old seafarer's face. For those ships were leaving for distant lands, while he would soon be turning home to Granton.

Before then the boy would run, darting under the bowdie legs of the cranes, plimsol left behind, jammed in the parallel rails, crane drivers calling out the danger, but the unflustered seaman walked quietly behind.

Onward to the sea wall and the Tally Toor and tales of Napoleon and his threats. The beach where once families ventured for their picnics lay deserted, not knowing it would one day become landlocked.

The man's face changed again, looking out across the Forth towards Fife. His own Dad came from there he said, Dunfermline and before that Dalgety Bay.

Then the moment the boy had waited for all day. Out through the dock gates at the Constitution Street end. No, it wasn't to hear poetic tales beside Robert Burns statue, but Angelo's ice cream that awaited his pleasure. Then father and son took the number 16 bus home.

But that was then, and this is now. That Granton boy became a man, did his drinking and his dating up the town. Didn't manage the journeys the seafarer had dreamed of on those Sundays. He brought his bairns up in Leith and took them walks through the docks. They were fascinated, by the sight of oil supply ships and the pile upon pile of pipes and factories and storehouses that service the black stuff.

Then they too grew up and from the ground sprung the Waterfront Developments.

And this is now.

---

Alan Addison



## A Fishwives' Tale

This is a story as old as time  
That happened last week  
A story about ghosts  
But it isn't a ghost story  
A fishwives' tale  
Of absolute truth

In the third hour of a Monday morning  
I was born with the umbilical cord wrapped around my neck  
Pulling tightly on my throat, a rope  
Of my Mother's own flesh and love and labour  
That carried blood and vitality to my body when still a part of hers  
Became a noose  
Pulling tightly on my neck in the immediate tension  
Between birth and death at 3am  
The Witching Hour  
Or in other words, the exact time when the wall between  
The physical world and that of spirit is at its most transparent  
I was born balancing in the state between being and not

This isn't a ghost story  
But it is a story about ghosts

If Edinburgh was cobbled roads and the castle  
And poets meeting on Rose Street  
Then Leith was dockyards and socialism  
Solidarity and strikes  
Speeches at the foot of the walk.  
Granddad worked at Henry Robb's Shipyard  
Leading the strikes against closure  
The men kept marching  
A last attempt to hold on  
Worried wives and hungry mouths await answers  
But Maggie's lips were cold and hard  
Opening only slightly to form the shape of a No

Decline of industry created a lot of ghosts  
Ghost towns, ghost harbours  
People became shadows  
But eventually things move on

To shopping centres and restaurants  
The same ones I can see from where I sit now  
On the bench at the harbour beside the lighthouse  
As I look out to silent shores  
That used to speak of revolutions  
Opinions, red in colour, echo from yard to yard  
The sound of a lonely harp plays out of the darkness  
And he is laughing

My Gran still lives on the corner  
Opposite the shop  
At the top of the hill  
Across the road from my Mum's house  
On the other side of her block of flats  
Was a pub called the Lobster Pot  
Frequented by my Dad and Granddad  
And praised by a lonely Tripadvisor review as being  
Full of rubbernecking locals who look like they've been  
glued to their seats since 1979  
It's now a Sainsbury's  
At the bottom of the hill is the harbour where boats sit idle  
Bobbing up and down with the tide

Tied to the side  
Out of work and out of use  
I used to go there a lot  
Standing on edges of water  
Has become a particular past time of mine  
The same sick feeling sick to my stomach  
The sea makes me sick  
I could watch it forever

My Great Gran used to read tealeaves at the bottom of cups  
And she knew things before other people did  
And I think they called it intuition  
But it was something much deeper than that  
She told me about a harp made of mosaic  
That sat proudly above the entrance to Easter Road Stadium  
Until 1950 when it was removed  
A passing Irish woman was incensed by this news  
And placed a curse on the ground  
Hibernian Football Club would never win The Scottish Cup  
Until the harp is replaced  
And eventually it was  
And finally they won



It was no coincidence that a replica harp was brought to Easter Road  
Just months before they won The Scottish Cup final  
And after one hundred and fourteen years I feel like  
What happened that day went further than usual final whistle  
Violent anger rushing feelings joy  
Commiserating slashing knives masculinity on steroids  
Babies conceived organised fists blissful fights  
Kissing strangers in pubs public outbursts  
It was communal catharsis of a whole place  
Not quite a city  
But that bit the city claimed as part of its own  
When we all know the line is still drawn at the Boundary Bar  
It's not the Boundary anymore though  
It's a German Beer Haus  
And it was no coincidence I saw Granddad that morning  
Three hours after midnight and seventeen years after his death  
Smoke seeps in so strong I can smell it

Even in sleep rolled up paper  
A glowing orange circle in the darkness  
He sits on a single chair with no surrounding  
A single chair in a vacuum  
And he is smiling  
He is nowhere  
He is in between  
Balancing like my birth between being and not  
The sound of a lonely harp plays out of the darkness  
And he is laughing

This is a story about ghosts  
But it isn't a ghost story  
And it isn't the end but a beginning  
Traces of the past are found in places of absence  
Where space is made for the future  
For the people and stories that will come after  
To live otherwise and better in the companionship of ghosts <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Derrida, Jacques, 'Spectres of Marx: The State of Debt, The Work of Mourning, and The New International' (New York & London: Routledge, 1994)

## In The Country of Last Things

Lockdown time seems to enjoy playing tricks. Sometimes it doesn't so much run, as flee. At others it didn't so much slow down as stagnate. Which is to say memory concertinas.

You know, all that stuff about the things we can't remember being the things we can't forget.

We clutch at old certainties, as if we already knew it was going to come to this.

Hard to think now that time used to run in Mesopotamian seconds and minutes, in ancient Egyptian hours, in the midnight chime of Roman days. All of which are human systems, cobbled together by ancient civilisations to stop everything from happening at once.

Everything happening at once... almost exactly where we find ourselves now.

Yesterday (which is to say my yesterday, not yours) I found an old diary during an all-too-predictable lockdown de-cluttering session.

Written when I was a young man, its entries recall a time when women made my heart shatter rather than stop. A time when there was no tomorrow, which, if you come to think about it, there isn't. Ever.

They served to remind me that the past is measured not in years but in memories. Not by the workings of a clock but by the tricks of the mind. Which is to say memory, the only thing that saves us from the lockdown abyss.

So the only lesson that this all-too-present bonebound me could possibly teach the vague young diarist who was once me is this: dreams don't come true, they never did. They only exist to take us places we would never go.

And yes, like I said, I found that old diary.

Do you ever feel you're on Mastermind and your specialist subject is you, yet you're still going to lose?

Which may be the perfect question for this, our very own age of endarkenment – one that finds us considering why what should have happened is happening to other people in other places.

The devil knows, I do not have the photographs, but it seems to me our times are crying out for fictions to be real in.

And here, a diary entry directly contradicting that pipedream...

“Went to see Claude Lanzmann's Shoah. Struck by the words from a J.C.O. in the Warsaw ghetto: ‘After the war I drank, if you could lick my heart it would poison you.’”

And these, maybe Lanzmann's own: “‘The truth kills the possibility of fiction, it makes fiction obscene’ resounded.”

And then, another diary with this: “Outside the soldiers were still shooting at people but nobody was dying! And then it came to me: nobody was dying because the soldiers must be firing rubber bullets.

“It all made beautiful sense, we may have been battered and bruised, but we were not going to die.

“Two hours later the police took over and we all filed out to identify ourselves. Everybody was held in the square except the two of us whose passports declared us British citizens. We were escorted past an armoured car – gun telescoped on the square – and ushered in the direction of our hotel.”

My first impression on reaching the end of the street is the one I have still. Ahead of us was the ocean. The suddenly returning sun frying what little wind there is. The reflecting skin of the water suggesting beaten gold.

On its surface a blood-coloured triangle of yacht is skating towards the horizon, where an oil tanker seemingly hangs in the air like an unanswered question.

We are today, doing what we were doing that day, searching for heroes.

The difference is, as these times have taught us, we are looking in all the wrong places.

---

Billy Gould

## Haikus and Heavy

The gang was a sore point with the Inspector. For years they'd swaggered around his beat, raising two fingers to him and his men. And they were getting better at keeping a step or two in front of him ... not one arrest in the previous twelve months. Then Inspector Drummond got wind of weekly meetings behind closed doors in the gang's hangout, the Fiver pub. They were up to something, he could smell it. Something big. He leant on his informer and told him to find out what he could. He didn't like what he heard.

"Poetry nights! They must think I'm fucking stupid," said Inspector Drummond. "I've got to get somebody into that gang and find out what's really going on."

But where could he find a policeman the buggers didn't already know? And what's more, it looked like he would need to be a handy man with a rhyme or two. A tricky one.

The first attempt was with Constable Dundas, a fast-track graduate from Oxford doing the rounds as part of his training. Ex-public school, Dundas could turn out poems at the drop of a truncheon, or so he said. Casually popping into the Fiver one Tuesday night, he dropped heavy hints that he was up for a bit of verbal badinage if anyone was game. After a while he was shown into a back room. Ten minutes later Dundas was thrown out of the pub and in front of a bus which, luckily, wasn't moving at the time. He crawled away to a waiting police van and safety.

At his de-briefing Dundas explained to the Inspector that no-one had sussed he was a cop ... it was just that they didn't like his liberal use of the half-rhyme.

And maybe, thought the Inspector, that cut-glass accent hadn't helped

much either. He knew he needed to do better.

A month later and the Inspector thought he'd found the perfect man. Constable Mossman was a local lad, so no problem with the accent, and he'd gone to the Academy, he might even know some of the gang members already.

"It's a wonder you never got involved yourself, lad," Inspector Drummond said at their first briefing session.

"Well, the truth is sur," replied Mossman. "Ah wis in the gang fur a while but Ah made the mistake o' tellin them about my passionate interest in flooir arrangin. And Ah think that made them a wee bit suspicious o' me."

"Why?" asked the Inspector.

"Dunno, sur."

"I find a decent flower arrangement enhances a room no end." The Inspector looked away and smiled to himself. There was a slight pause.

"Carry on, Constable."

"So Ah wis thrown oot fur bein too sensitive. Which wis well wrong cos Ah knew Basho, the gang's leader, wrote poetry. But of course he wis provin his sexual credentials every night o' the fuckin week, wisn't he! Furfucksake, sur, he even let some o' the boys watch!"

"Do I know this Basho, Constable?" asked Drummond.

"Basho wis a big guy, sur, aboot six feet when he wis fourteen, so fuck knows what height he'll be now. That wis the age he started workin in the pubs and we started some serious under-age drinkin. Ah suppose the gang jist turned a blind eye tae the poetry as long as the pints kept comin."

"Which, at long last, brings us bang up to date, Constable."

"Aye, sur. When mah Inspector said ye needed somebody tae infiltrate a

gang o' poets, I thought to myself... it's that auld gang o' mine. Still rankles about the flooirs mind. I mean, what bunch o' gangsters write poems, but take the hump at rearrangin some bonny flooirs, eh? That Basho must've got them aw interested in versification. It's jist no' fair, that's aw I'm sayin."

"It's just a front lad," said the Inspector. "It has to be."

"Aye well, I dinnae ken about that, sur. Anyway, no' long efter Ah left school my family moved through tae the West and Ah joined the polis. Ah never kept in touch with naebody back here so nae bugger kens Ah'm in the filth."

"Excellent, Mossman," said Drummond.

"Ye'll need tae pardon my language, sur, but Ah've been gettin intae the part and Ah cannae stop fuckin swearing..."

The Inspector wasn't the brightest intellectual flame that ever flickered, but he did realise one thing, this man in front of him might be his best ever chance of getting somebody into the gang.

"Poetry," he said. "That's a joke!"

"Only if it's fuckin funny, sur," said Mossman.

"You're right there, lad, and this isn't funny at all. They're up to something and I mean to find out what."

"That's what Ah'm here for, sur. Ready tae go under the covers tae defend queen and country fur an extra five bob a week."

"Bring this lot in, Mossman," said a grim-faced Inspector, 'and I'll make it ten."

"Big fuckin deal, ye two-faced bastard. Sorry sur, Ah jist cannae help it."

Mossman listened to the rest of the brief as the Inspector lectured him about the gang. There was a lot of information but he knew it had to be

rubbish, rumours more than facts – it was one reason the gang stayed ahead of the cops.

So Mossman spent the next few weeks looking up some old pals and found out a few details for himself. After all, it was his arse on the line.

.....

Leary eyed Mossman up and down and then whispered the coded gang greeting.

“Away tae fuck ye stupid bastard.”

The correct response came back quickly.

“Fuck this fur a game o’ soajirs.”

Well, thought Leary, he kens that much. But so fuckin what? Half o’ Leith kens those code words. Leary’d never seen this baw-faced git before, he was certain of that. Another test was needed.

“Whit about the poetry then? Whae’s the best poet around here?”

Mossman was ready.

“That big bastard, Basho, him that runs the Fiver. A pure fuckin radge that man. Great guy though, writes some lovely lines, he’ll gie ye a haiku wi yer pint o’ heavy, ken.”

“Aye?” said Leary, “if...?”

“Ehm...” Mossman played for time, “if...he’s no throwin’ some bastard through a windae, like.”

“Right!” affirmed Leary. “His mood swings can be slightly unpredictable.”

It was now a month after Mossman first volunteered and there he was, standing outside a dingy pub, trading code words with a human gorilla. Feel the fear and do it anyway, the Inspector said. Smell the fear more like.

After casually bumping into a few of his old school mates around the various pubs, and dropping big hints about his own budding poetry, Mossman had been invited along to see one of the gang leaders. Eliot would decide if there was potential there or not.

If there was, Mossman could then try and survive the initiation into the gang. If not, then God help him if he was ever caught writing on a toilet wall in any of the pubs in their patch.

The session with Eliot (he wanted his close mates to call him ‘T.S.’, but he didn’t have any) went well. They shared a few bits of work-in-progress, gave each other some tough but fair criticism, and drank at least a dozen pints of heavy each. That was the clincher and Eliot gave the nod, Mossman could proceed to the next stage of enlightenment.

And so, less than a week after that, half-drunk and dreading what was coming, Mossman stood with Leary, Eliot and Basho on the roof of a tower block near the waterfront.

The flat concrete roof of the building was covered in clothes poles and around its edges were its walls; thin metal rectangles, all bolted together and filled with the best vandal-proof, unbreakable glass the Council could buy. Not one square inch of glass remained, leaving perilous gaps for anyone to fall, or to be pushed, through.

“Bit windy fur a readin, boys?” said Mossman, his nerves beginning to get the better of him.

“Whit readin?” asked Basho. “Grab him, lads!”

Mossman was tied to an uprooted clothes pole – crucified more like as

the metal bar lay across his shoulders, arms stretched out and hands tied tight to the bar.

They walked him to the edge of the roof and forced him to sit with his legs over the side. Much against his will, Mossman peered over the edge. Below him was nothing but a three hundred foot drop to a really bad hair day.

As he tried desperately not to think about this, one of the gang members lifted the metal bar above Mossman's head and gave him a solid shove in the back.

Mossman fell feet first over the edge of the roof.

And the bar fitted snug and tight across the metal frame of the safety barrier, stopping him falling any further.

"Jesus Christ!" he screamed, "nae bugger telt me about this!"

Two thin ropes were all that now kept him from being scraped off the pavement with a shovel.

"Ah hope ye fuckin concentrated at the Scouts!" Mossman shouted over his shoulder, "when ye wir learning those knots I mean!"

He'd really tried to find a rhyme for 'scouts' but couldn't. Then, too late, Mossman thought of 'doubts'.

"Ah wis nivir in the Scouts," replied Leary, "but if ye huv some doubts..."

You bastard! thought Mossman.

"It's nae skin off mah erse," continued Leary, "Ah'll jist phone fur the hearse."

"That is a nice fuckin rhyme, Leary," said Eliot.

"Aw, fuck man," said Mossman, the fear in his voice palpable, "Ah wis only kiddin."

"Naw, naw, nae problem...if ye dinnae like mah knots..."

The ropes were slowly undone and thrown over the edge, past Mossman's unbelieving eyes. Now he was hanging on with just the strength in his hands.

Mossman knew he couldn't last much longer.

The gang were enjoying every minute.

"Fuckin magic view up here," said Eliot.

"This is pure inspirational," replied Leary, "Ah can feel another rhyme comin oan."

"And Ah can feel a pish comin' oan" said Basho. "Excuse me boys, but when yuv got tae fuckin go..."

Mossman's grip on the bar was gradually weakening. And that was before he felt someone pissing on his hands.

"Well..." he said bitterly, "whit a fine bunch o' piss artists yuv proved yersels to be."

"Now that..." said Basho, "wis a nice pun under extreme pressure."

Mossman's arms were in a torture of pain. The laughing stopped, there was no sound above him. He tried to see if they were still there but could see no-one.

Seconds ticked Mossman's life away.

"Awright ya bampot," said Basho, "ye've had enough, let's get ye back in."

Hands reached down to grab his shoulders and Mossman was hauled back up and over the edge to safety.

"Man, ye're stinkin," cried Leary, "huv ye pushed yersel?"

There was a lot of laughter, and then they slapped Mossman on the back as they half-carried, half-walked him across the roof. Then down through the access door and into the waiting lift.

“Yur in the gang, ya radge!” called out Eliot.

“Whit a guy!” said Leary, “Ah didnae huv tae last that long!”

“Aw that flooir arranging,” said Basho, “must’ve built up some muscles.”

Mossman flashed him a quizzical look.

“Oh aye, Ah remember a’right. Ah wis wrong. Shake.”

They shook hands.

The lift stopped at the ground floor.

Mossman felt fantastic. He was in! He’d passed the initiation!

As they left the crowded lift Basho gave him his gang name. Houseman. His name would be Houseman from then on.

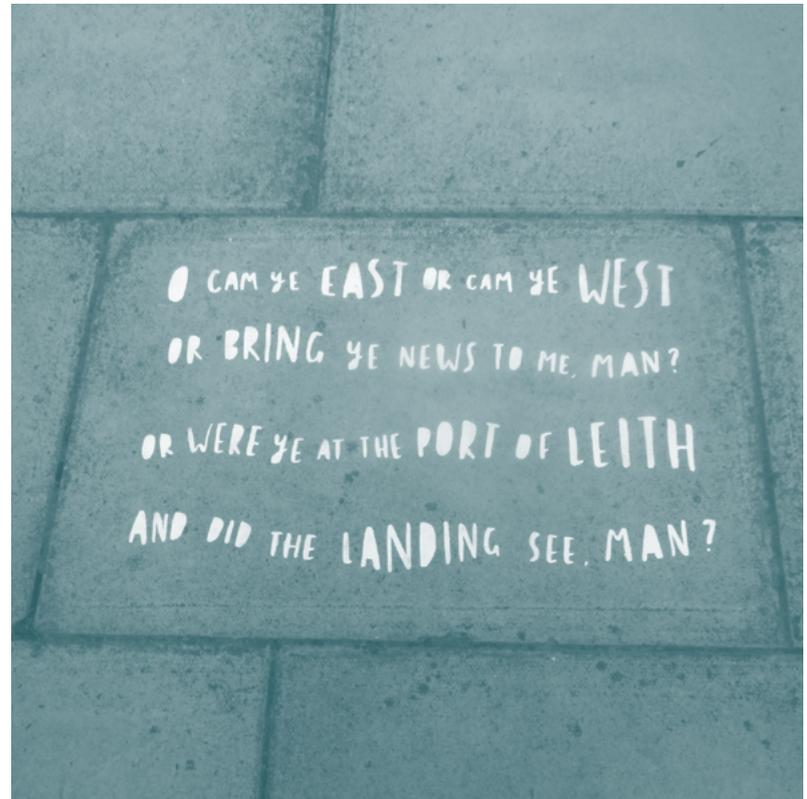
And it was then that the undercover cop realised that Inspector Drummond was wrong, completely wrong. Nothing sinister was taking place on those Tuesday nights at the Fiver. There really were some hard-case punters standing in a back room, reading out their latest poems. And, aye, maybe there would be the odd punch-up, but that happens sometimes amongst mates. Especially if one of them’s got writer’s block.

And Mossman... And Houseman knew something else. He wasn’t going back to being a policeman. That was gone for good now. Hanging by a thread for your life had taught him one thing the Inspector would never understand.

Poetry. That was where the real action was.

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Ali Rutherford



## Leith Swing

O cam ye east or cam ye west  
Or bring ye news to me, man?  
Or were ye at the Port of Leith  
And did the landing see, man?

Step off the ship, sailor, whaler, there's  
bed and board, a Home from home,  
a jug of beer, perhaps a letter.  
Your next berth is waiting.

Masts are thick in the river mouth.  
Step on a smack to Kirkcaldy daily.  
Tuesdays or Fridays - a swift packet  
to London; Saturday to Dundee or Perth.

There are docks for deep sea trade  
to any port from here, and stevedores  
aplenty. Let the street names be your chart:  
Baltic, Elbe, Cadiz, Portland, Madeira.

Roll that barrel to the wine bond, cart  
gunpowder safely, stack the timber;  
bring the hemp and tallow ashore.  
Our whisky is casked and ready.

Smugglers have snuck in, but mariners  
have prospered: sat their tickets, built  
homes in Trinity. They've levied dues,  
sent pilots out, raised flags to warn of shallows.

Step into the Corn Exchange. Watch  
how you nod at the auctioneer or you'll sail  
with a poor cargo; and the last laugh will go  
to the row of cherubs on the wall frieze.

Leith Bank has gone, the Exchange, the Council  
in their Chambers, the grand Assembly Rooms.  
Burns and Victoria have seen much come and go:  
the railway torn up; the Swing Bridge stilled,

trams dismantled – Leith Walk a waiting boulevard.  
Churches have shut one door but opened others  
to recent Leithers: to Muslim, Hindu, Sikh.  
Hibernian is still the team, Persevere the motto,  
humour the life-blood. And now, regenerated,  
entrepreneurs once more are facing outwards,  
warehouses are reclaimed and des res rising  
like the tide. Leith is reborn and reassembled.

O cam ye east or cam ye west  
Or bring ye news to me, man?  
Or were ye at the Port of Leith  
And did the landing see, man?

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Christine de Luca

## Growing Pains

John Grady and Dylan Hutchison came upon the bottle of whisky in Duke Street. It was balanced on the exact edge of the pavement as if contemplating escape from the deep misery of its existence. In the light from the cars and street lamps, the liquid was spellbinding amber, a beautiful lady with a hard heart.

“My mum's got a ring that colour,” said John. “Said it belonged to my granny but I know she pinched it from her sister. I heard the row night after night until my auntie never spoke to her again. She even went to her funeral with the ring on her finger.”

“Funny how beautiful it looks,” said Dylan. “You can see why it's nice to put it to your lips, something that looks as good as that.”

“Why hasn't it toppled into the gutter? A bus just passed and it almost blew me clean off my feet,” said John.

“You expecting to be a scientist one day soon? You and me will always be looking and never understanding. Sometimes think schools are a waste of time in Leith, the little we learned at them,” said Dylan.

“We've learned one thing,” said John.

“And what's that?” said Dylan.

“That we don't want to be hanging around here. Some angry man will be back before long. Somebody must be missing that whisky. This might very well be a trap we've fallen into. Like a great big net is about to fall out of the sky and bind us up,” said John.

The boys had had a miserable night, fed up to the back teeth and shivering in the night air. They were on their way home from a school disco, which had been a long evening of rejection and failure. The girls only favoured

certain boys, the ones with money, the ones who drove cars. They had no eyes for the fat boy and his pal with the spotty skin.

The bottle of whisky made no sense. The cap had been removed but there was hardly a mouthful drunk. The boys stood above it, looking nervously about them.

“Did you smell it?” said Dylan.

“What do you mean?”

“Might be piss.”

“Away you go.”

Dylan was stuffing his face with the last of a bag of chips they had grabbed from the Gold Sea chippie at the end of Henderson Street. His breath smelt of vinegar and cheap brown sauce.

“I’ve never drank whisky. It scares me half to death. My dad stinks of the stuff on Sunday morning and when he burps I want to be sick,” said Dylan.

“You can’t look a gift horse in the mouth.”

“I’ve never looked any kind of horse in the mouth.”

The boys heard a shouting from behind the church walls, two angry male voices.

“Sounds like we know where the owner of the whisky might be.”

John picked up the cap, lifted the bottle and screwed it on tight. It wouldn’t fit snugly in his duffel coat pocket. The head of the bottle stuck out and it bobbed backwards and forwards against his hip.

“Hope I don’t take a tumble. Let’s have a look at what’s going down,” said John.

John Grady had always been foolhardy. His mother said it was because he fell out of his pram and bumped his head. Whatever was the cause – and God himself is the only one who can give us a definite answer – the result was plain to see. John was always the first to jump into deep water.

The boys slid past the gaggle of black bins at that corner of the street and nipped through the open graveyard gates. The lighting from the Kirkgate shopping centre was brighter than a full moon. They spotted two men by the side of the church. They were pushing against each other, testing the water, trying to judge would the other punter throw a punch. The boys were lying on the ground watching the action through a makeshift cross, two old bits of branch stuck together with rope. Hard nails had been hammered into the surface of the wood to capture something of the agony. The cross hung at an odd angle as if it was about to fall to the ground at any moment.

“I think it’s Bobby Jenkins,” whispered John.

“Your next door neighbour? He looks different.”

“He’s grown a beard. He looks like Popeye.”

“Who’s Popeye?”

“Now you’re taking the piss.”

John nipped along the wet grass behind the headstones. Dylan was at his heels. An empty can of coke rattled past their feet. John took another peek to see what the two were up to.

“Bloody Hell.”

“What’s up?”

“He’s flat on the ground,” said John, “a knife sticking out of him.”

“Who?”

“Bobby Jenkins.”

Bobby was on his own now. He had turned himself on to his side but his eyes said that it was all over.

“It's like a film. It's like a bloody film,” said Dylan. “Where has the other bastard gone?”

“I can't leave him there,” said John.

“You can't get involved. Your name will be in the papers. The murderer will know who you are, where you live. You'll be a marked man,” said Dylan.

“We have to see if he's breathing.”

The wind was gathering strength. The lid of the rubbish bin opened and slammed down. From the front street came the raucous laughter of a crowd of girls. They were weekend drunk, clippety cloppety on high heels, louder than is good for you. From out of the shouting came the voice of a single girl, singing a Sam Smith track. She had a hauntingly good voice. The boys watched as they passed at the end of the church road. They all wore little bits of shiny clothing, thin short skirts, their legs flashing, hair blowing about, holding on to each other. They were in an optimistic world, a world where you were free to be hopeful. A window opened above the girls' heads and a head appeared, smoking a cigarette. The head followed the girls down the street, wishing to know them better.

Dylan started crying.

“What's up with you?”

“I never wanted to come out the night.”

“What are you? A baby or something? I didn't know this was going to happen. Some people never get to see a dead body. This is my second. I sneaked a look at my auntie when she was lying in bed waiting for the

undertaker to arrive. She had the smartest teeth. Didn't look like they belonged to a dead person.”

A shoe made an appearance on the footpath beside them. Dylan peeked at Bobby Jenkins' body. Sure enough, one foot was missing a shoe. The wind continued to push it about. The boys couldn't take their eyes off it. It made no sense, that shoe without a foot, doing a mad dance. It was a shiny, black leather shoe and the heel was worn down badly on one corner.

“It looks like it has a mind of its own,” said John.

“It wouldn't surprise me if his ghost stood up and came to claim it,” said Dylan.

“I'm going to have a look,” said John and just as he raised himself up he heard an agitated voice coming alongside the church. He quickly knelt down.

“Yeah, meet me at the Dockers' Club. I need you quick as you can. This ain't no joke I'm talking about. I don't need no smart talk from you. You hear me. I'm in the church grounds. I'll meet you in five minutes.”

The murderer finished the phone call and started a text, his fingers hitting the letters with great force. He shifted the knife from the body and wiped it clean on a length of grass.

The boys stayed still, hardly daring to breathe. They smelt cigarette smoke and the man grabbed the body.

“I can't shift the damned thing. Weighs a ton.”

They heard his fast, heavy breathing, so close it burned their ears.

It was strange to be so close to a man who had ended the life of another. They heard him wipe down his clothes. He killed his cigarette with his foot before walking quickly out to the main road.

“Let’s get home,” said Dylan. “We’ll take the long way. I’m not taking any chances.”

“Did you get a look at him? He was fatter than you. A red face like my uncle Bertie. You don’t think of fat men being killers.”

Dylan didn’t rise to the bait. Trust John to try to be funny no matter what. They walked along Duke Street, trying not to run, thankful for the company of the traffic. Their ears were churning with the noise of their voices in their heads. At the Turkish cafe a man sat outside at a table drinking coffee and talking to his Labrador dog. His breath was visible in the cold night air. The dog was sitting to attention as he unwrapped a biscuit and broke it into the smallest of pieces. A car pulled into the side of the road and a window slid down.

“Say, boys,” shouted the driver, “you know where we can get a good fish supper?”

Dylan stood behind John who knelt down at the car. He saw that there was blood on John’s shirt collar where a spot had burst. In the passenger seat a man fiddled with a phone. It was only when he looked up that John recognised the man from the churchyard.

“Mike, you got any gum?”

Mike opened the glove compartment and fiddled around for a pack of gum.

“Hey, kid, you want a stick?”

“No thanks. Try the Gold Sea,” said John. “It’s at the end of Henderson Street. They do a good fish supper.”

“You, Sam Grady’s boy?”

‘Yes, sir.’

“You still at school?”

“Year 5,” said John.

“You stick in. Your dad is a good man, a man of principle. We were in the First Leith Battalion, Boys’ Brigade together. He was a good winger in those days. Fast as a greyhound. I remember he had long hair like George Best. It was the fashion then. Not like now. You have the same look about the eyes as your dad. Too mischievous for your own good. You tell your dad Andy Rawlins is back in town, and this is my brother, Mike.”

Andy Rawlins reached out of the car window and took hold of John’s arm and, without a word being spoken, his brother passed him a knife.

“I’m not a man for making up a pretty story when the truth is a much uglier set of circumstances. Life’s a bastard and the sooner you learn that the better.”

John looked at Dylan who hadn’t moved. There was no help coming from that direction.

He took the knife and ran it along the palm of his left hand from the base of the thumb to the pinkie. A trail of red blood seeped out.

“Next time I’ll cut you so you can’t use your hand again. And as for your pal there, I’ll feed him to my dogs.”

His hand reached across John and took hold of the neck of the bottle.

“Funny thing, my brother lost a bottle of whisky just like that very bottle.”

The bottle slipped out of the pocket into his big hand.

“The problem with your generation is you think you’re grown up something like a man but you’re just kids, who have never had it so good. Central heating and computer games have made you soft. When I was a kid I took nothing for granted, didn’t expect anything to fall into my lap without that I had worked hard to get it or take it. I learned the value of not only having the guts to throw a punch but knowing that there are worse things than a bit of pain. You can get over pain but you can’t get over the reputation of being a coward.’

Andy Rawlins revved up the car and the stink of the exhaust filled the night air.

"I'm in a mood for a fish supper now. You get a bandage on that hand of yours. Don't forget to give my regards to your dad. Maybe bump into him in The Dockers'. Tell your pal to get home quick. He looks frozen half to death."

The window slid up and the car roared across the wet cobbles.

"I thought he was going to kill you," said Dylan.

John pressed his jacket against the palm of his hand.

"And what were you going to do about it?"

"Did your life pass before your eyes?" said Dylan.

"Well, I thought I have seen Hibs win the cup but I've never been with a woman."

"And that was going to be the last thought you ever thought?"

"What do you think I should be concentrating on the last seconds of my life?"

"I don't know. Your mum and dad? Your wee sister?"

"You are a right sentimental eejit. Let's get to bed."

"Does it hurt?"

"Just a bit. He didn't mean to hurt me. I'll wash it when I get home."

"You know where that knife's been."

"Aye."

The boys took hold of the thought, remembering the blade deep in Bobby Jenkins' body.

"Do you think they knew we were there in the churchyard?" said Dylan.

"I don't know."

"Are you going to tell your dad?"

"Are you off your head?"

"I wonder if the polis have found the body?"

John shrugged.

It was ten minutes fast walk to Dylan's house and John's was up the hill and round the corner. John ran the last bit, his heart thumping at his chest. He had to fiddle with the key and lock, his hands shaking and tears in his eyes. As the door opened, he heard the theme tune to 'Match of the Day' coming from the living room and, when he pushed the door shut behind him, he couldn't remember being happier.

.....

In a Leith churchyard, the ghost of Bobby Jenkins raised himself up on his elbow. He saw a wonky cross. The carpenter must have been drunk when he put that up, he thought, and he remembered the church doors being flung open and a little boy, happy as the day is long, being swung up to the sky between his mum and dad and it was so exciting to be up later than his bedtime. There was a huge Christmas tree in the church, the tree rising and rising up to the roof. The tree was full to bursting with bright lights and golden tinsel. From the gallery hung millions of fairy lights, which sprayed out good cheer to all mankind. A smiling man looked down from on high as if he was in the prow of a sailing ship. He spoke of a baby being born and it was all a miracle and his hands waved about him and they sang cheery songs about three boats and wise men and mangers. There wasn't a sad face in the whole church.

It was the best night of his short life.

---

Stewart Lowe

## Edinburgh, '86

If it wasn't the needle  
It would've been the sex  
They claimed  
A door half kicked-in covered in  
The obscenities of the day -  
Hot off the deil rags of hearsay

### JUNKIE

Twenty-three  
Looking like a decade past  
For each indistinguishable year  
Fatigue-fucked joints groan and grind  
A glazed gaze, a mask of bone  
Grey skin pulled tight  
A pin-eyed congregation  
Scouting for respite  
As he pours himself into the urn -  
One more punctured lamb  
Clad in stigma's crown of thorns

### SCUM

He's used to feeling the barbs  
The sting of sharpened pricks  
He could never kick against  
A map of entry wounds upon his wrist  
Arms, legs, feet, neck  
As muscle was sculpted away  
And filth-filled veins  
Writhed – like the tentacles  
Of an earth invader –  
On show, then gone

### BUFTIE SEE U LATER

Another statistic  
A broken mirror reflecting Death  
A cadaver's fading hand, outstretched,  
Till glass grazes flushed fingertips  
And cooled flesh lets him know they're his

## SMACK HEAD

He'd wanted to be an artist –  
A silver palette to mix the score –  
Mam recognises him from an old tattoo  
That doesn't fit properly anymore –  
Wanted to have kids –  
A child's hands scrawl up on the wall –

## FREAK

If he could bind his hands in wire  
Or cleanse his eyes in lime  
He'd take back the fated curiosity  
Of that first time  
Ignore the three little words  
Every lost soul yearns to hear –  
Try this, mate –  
And seek his peace elsewhere

## QUEER

Delirious reminiscence through pain  
Picking poppies in the Edinburgh rain  
Feeling the current of blood now warmed  
Feeling like it was flowing gold  
The old relief of cooked mercy  
But mercy would grant her reprieve  
Then leave –  
No sympathy for criminality

## CUNT

Infectious ignorance trickling through the  
Capital of shite-for-blood  
Aureate undertow turned blackened sludge  
The resplendent sheen of life long gone  
One shot for the requiem

If he could, he'd remember sun shining  
On skinned knees  
Cooled by the drip of melted ice cream

Soor Plooms with Da whilst shouting at Hibs  
And Summer days spent finding the biggest stick  
To throw into the Water of Leith  
He'd like to watch the river  
Make its way into the port  
Beautiful but contaminated – he was taught  
A hand entwined with his ma's  
As a seagull's song had made them smile

VILE

She adjusts the picture on the nightstand  
Of the wee angel she once knew  
Who love wasn't strong enough to save  
Though Lord knows she tried to

BROTHER

UNCLE

FRIEND

SON

---

Sophie Leah

## The Granarchists

Her feet echoed in the stairwell. They still sounded as young as they had sixty years before when she had chased her wee brother out into the street to get her mother's messages. A mist sat heavily in the air almost reaching the pavement, it should have been light but looking down Duke Street you would never have guessed it was the summer there. Pat breathed in the air deeply enjoying the smell of rain. Before turning to walk to work she patted herself down to make sure the pockets on her navy raincoat contained her keys, phone and purse. She had never bothered with handbags after watching her mother for years lugging her life around with her. As she walked towards the bottom of Easter Road rebellion stirred in the young heart that was buried beneath the convenient disguise of age. All the seagulls saw from the top of tenements was an old woman, hunched at the top of her back, pushing forward with her whole body, driven by the urgency of borrowed time.

The Mecca bingo hall on Manderston Street had always been their meeting place. For covert operations it was an ideal location. Pat had been a cleaner there since the nineties. She would usher the women in before the place opened. They would sit in the hall beneath bad lighting and the crumbling cornicing of the Capitol Picture House. The women could remember their girlhood through the lens of what had been showing on Saturdays spent out of their mother's hair, watching the matinee, giggling at the boys' antics and whispering through John Wayne films. It felt like a full circle that; now they met there undercover every month like Edinburgh witches of the past, hoping to have something to hand down to the women that were behind them.

Pat stood outside smoking the vape her granddaughter had given her, waiting for the other women to arrive. Reena and Bev came around the corner of Leith Walk. She still saw them as they had been before. Like

her feet on the stairs of her lifelong home, echoes of their past remained etched in their faces, they were who they had always been. Pat loved them.

After they had cautiously entered the building, the women sat around a table with mismatched cups filled with tea. There were three of them, two seats remained empty for Sheila and Mags who were no longer with them but who no doubt on account of not being able to let things go, would still be attending from beyond the grave.

“First things first. When are they getting better tea bags in Pat?”

Pat looked at Reena, offended as if her dislike of the tea bags was a personal vendetta against her. She took her vape out of her blue pinny pocket and took a deep draw maintaining eye contact with Reena before saying, “Bring your ain.”

As so often with any confrontation between Reena and Pat, they remained locked in a standoff and nothing was resolved. The tea bags would probably remain the same, an agreed point of contention.

“Never mind the tea bags, there’s bigger things tae discuss.”

The three women looked at Bev. Her precariously piled hair wobbled as she spoke, the white of it only held in place by a couple of garish bows, the kind you might find on a Christmas tree.

“The Drum property development.”

“Bill says it’s no going ahead.”

“For noo maybe...but the shops are all gone” Pat tailed off. She didn’t trust the council. She had seen enough men puffing their chests out in her life to recognise that their words counted for nothing when ego was concerned.

“Well I brought the recipe with me regardless, hen.” Reena reached into her handbag and pulled out a slip of paper. Pat could see the beautiful

handwriting from her seat. A lost art form she thought.

“It’s no even really a recipe...mare like a formulna, even Bev could work it oot.”

“Eh, what dae you mean by that?”

“The Leith tart competition? 1995? My recipe was meant tae be fool proof!”

“My oven was on it’s way oot! Nothing tae dae with my baking.”

“Ladies!” Pat interjected her patience wearing thin. “Let’s get oan with the matter in hand, so you can get oot of here.”

Reena slowly opened the bit of paper. She placed it in the middle of the table. The women leaned in. It read, ‘2lbs to every tonne’.

“That’s easy enough is it no?”

Pat nodded slowly at Bev and Reena.

“We should start buying a couple of bags of sugar a week maybe mare... so we’re ready.”

“I got Jim tae get the balaclavas oot the loft already so they’re ready tae go.” Reena said as she pulled her coat on clearly hoping to wrap the meeting up.

“This will halt everything instantly? We really jist have to get the sugar in the cement?”

“Aye,” said Pat, “the cement cannae set right. Night before construction starts we need tae be in there.”

“A spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down...” Bev sang in her best Julie Andrews voice. They laughed and embraced before leaving the bingo hall. Their plan tasted sweeter than the sun that had already burnt away the mist outside.

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Katy Nixon

## A Pharmacist's Tale:

### Leith lurches from virus to virus

The solicitor glanced at the proposal that I had handed to him, and handed it back to me. "Oh, no, I don't think that you should do that," he said.

I had gone to consult him in 1985 to ask him to act for me in buying a pharmacy at 36 Ferry Road, Leith. To be fair to the lawyer, he was a partner in a solicitors' firm which was a large defence practice and he probably thought that I, though not quite a 'Morningside Lady' (I live in Fairmilehead) would be unused to the drug addiction and criminality which were becoming associated with Leith at that time. If so, he was mistaken.

I had worked in Boots, Shandwick Place, Edinburgh for several years, at a time when there were fewer pharmacies than there are now. In the evening, the nearest open pharmacy was Boots, Argyle Street, Glasgow. There we saw the famous and the infamous. The pharmacy staff were adept at recognising forged prescriptions, of which there were many more than there are nowadays – mainly because doctors looked after their prescription pads less well. At that time I think that Boots, being the only multiple pharmacy around (no Lloyds or Well then) dispensed all the prescriptions in Edinburgh for drug addicts because independent pharmacies did not want drug addicts visiting their premises, either because they thought that they were unpleasant people or that their regular customers would think so, and would be discouraged from visiting the pharmacy. I was at Boots when we started dispensing methadone as a heroin substitute. Prior to that we had dispensed morphine for injection.

Something else that I learned in Shandwick Place was the areas of Edinburgh whose residents were the most difficult to deal with. I shall

not name these, but Leith was not among them. Strangely enough, the pharmacies in these areas were more expensive to buy than a pharmacy in Leith.

The earlier formative experience was the fact that I had been brought up with delinquents. My father was headmaster of an approved (later called List D) school at Whittingehame, in East Lothian. If you have ever been there, which you probably haven't as it is distinctly off the beaten track, you will know that to say it is quiet would be an understatement. We lived in a flat in the school and the boys were my playmates, because there was nobody else to fill the role. Every so often, one or more of them would abscond, and, as they nearly always made their way home, it meant a run in the car to collect them, usually from a housing estate of a city or large town. I liked it when a boy from Kirkcaldy ran away, as he did fairly frequently, because that meant two trips on the ferry at Queensferry. My mother once asked a boy who was leaving the school what he would miss most about Whittingehame and he said, "That you knew that you would get your tea every night". She asked him what normally happened at home. He said, "My mother might give us a 'piece' or, if she had any money, she might send us out for chips." I once asked one of the drug addicts who came to 36 Ferry Road how he knew one of the others and he said, "We were at school together". I asked, "Which school?" and the answer was an approved school that I had visited with my parents.

Over the first few years in Ferry Road, dispensing of methadone increased, and all pharmacies, except for those in certain upmarket areas of cities, took it on. Pharmacies in some parts of Edinburgh have never done it. If a patient there came in with a prescription they would be told that it would take two days to obtain it. That was because, as I said before, the pharmacy would be afraid that having addicts as customers would discourage the more numerous regular clientele.

I have, on the whole, had good relations with drug addicts. I have tried to be what we all remember good teachers were – getting a reputation

for taking no nonsense and meaning what you say. If someone refused to leave the premises until I gave them what they wanted I would threaten them with the police, and if they still refused, I would call the police. By the time the police arrived, no doubt the individual would have vanished, but they knew that I did not make idle threats. After that, I could relax, chat and joke with them. In recent years, when I have only been in the shop infrequently, addicts I do not know come in and address me by name. I realise that their lives must be pretty boring if their conversation is about the Saturday pharmacist.

I think that I was aware of HIV and AIDS when I started in 1986 (the solicitor having agreed to act for me in the end) but I do not think that I knew much about it. Over the next few years, we all learnt more and became more afraid – as the government intended. In the pharmacy we became aware of deaths, and, of course, those of children were the saddest. People of my age were grandparents and some were losing their children to AIDS or drug addiction and, thankfully only occasionally, a grandchild to AIDS.

One of my first staff was a lady who had been a bread merchandiser in supermarkets. Soon after she started a girl came in and gave her a list of symptoms. “Do you think that I’ve got AIDS?”. The new counter assistant thought to herself, “I was selling bread last week”. When you put on a white coat, people think that you know everything.

The most important characteristic of pharmacy staff is that they should be pleasant people with a sympathetic ear. The counselling that they have always done is, I am sure, not at all appreciated by the officials running the Health Service. I don’t mean the counselling that the NHS expects them to do, such as telling people not to take certain tablets on an empty stomach, but knowing what to say to people who come into the pharmacy having been told that they have just a few months to live. Or talking to people who are only there because they are lonely and have no one else to talk to. I confess that my staff would tell you that I was not always as

sympathetic as I should have been to the latter group.

When I meet up with former staff, we reminisce about the fun we had. One young man came in and asked the prices of the condoms. The assistant told him the prices of the various thicknesses (and flavours). “Really”, he replied, “that’s much cheaper than up the road.” “Well, you’ll know where to come in future,” said the assistant. Then she realised what she had said. Another lady came in with a prescription for Viagra for her husband. “Do you want to wait for it?” “No, I’ll tell him that you don’t have it. I just want to go to bed and have a good night’s sleep.”

After about fifteen years, my son, Fraser, came into the business. One of the staff introduced him to a customer as ‘Mrs Clark’s son’ but he said that he did not want to be known as that, just as ‘Fraser’. Two weeks after that I had a phone call in the evening from Leith Police Station to say that the shop had been broken into. “We’ve tried your son’s number but there was no answer,” said the policeman. “It didn’t take long for that to get round,” I thought.

Break-ins are an occupational hazard for pharmacy owners, but ours were only ever attempted ones, in the days before we had metal shutters. They were a nuisance in that you had to get out of bed and attend, but not a major problem as no one ever got away with anything. One night the police phoned at 4.05am to say that someone had put a brick through the window. The next day a drug addict said, “You had your window broken at four o’clock last night.” Some time later I told another Leith pharmacist about that and he said, “He did exactly the same thing to me.”

Shoplifting and swearing were never acceptable as far as I was concerned. Aged over seventy, I have recently chased a shoplifter in the street, in the rain holding an umbrella. I managed to find the culprit in a nearby shop where I accosted her and asked, in a voice that was not quiet, that she return to me the item, “Which you have just stolen from my shop.” She complied with my request. The problem with swearing was that as my hearing became less good I would have to ask, “Is he/she swearing?”

before I told off the offender.

Of course, the vast majority of customers were not drug addicts or shoplifters but upright Leith citizens. I became aware of family connections and in what way people were related. Two sisters were thin and both had asthma. A third sister was a heavier build and troubled with chronic constipation. I wondered if the asthmatics resembled their mother and the other sister their father.

One day I stood in Ferry Road and realised that, if I lived there, I would have doctor, dentist, and library within a minute's walk. Even a swimming pool is only ten minutes away. At home, in Fairmilehead, none of these are within walking distance.

Leithers pay less than people in some parts of Edinburgh for services such as tailoring or shoe repairs. Indeed, I am not sure if it is still the case, but essential foodstuffs were also always cheaper in Leith. I remember two customers telling me that I would not see them for a fortnight as they were going to look after their daughter's children in Baberton while she was on holiday. They were back in Leith a few days later. Still babysitting in Baberton, they told me, but, "We're not going to pay the prices up there!". I mentioned this to a man I happened to meet who worked for a butchery chain and. He said that there were three levels of pricing in his firm – Leith had the lowest.

After we relocated to Lindsay Road, Clark Chemist became more like 'Fraser Clark Chemist' and I was present in the shop less frequently. However, I was required to assist with the huge volume of dispensing generated by the coronavirus pandemic. People thought that they had to stockpile medicines until the authorities realised that this was not, perhaps, a good idea. At this time, I did realise that Fairmilehead has one advantage over Leith. For my daily exercise I can walk from home to the foothills of the Pentlands, where social distancing is easier than in places that a Leithers can reach on foot.

AIDS was a tragedy, and still is, in certain countries. I can picture young people who died, especially the guy who broke the window at 4am, and the little girl who had contracted it from her mother. In this country, the ways that it can be spread are, fortunately, limited, and, although it has not gone away, we no longer fear, as we once did, that it is likely to make its way into the general population.

We are only at the beginning of the coronavirus story, but the indications are that the problem is, if anything, more serious. Covid-19 would appear to be much more easily spread than AIDS and economic experts are talking about its effects being unprecedented. We have still to discover the long term effects on health, education and other fields where we might not yet have thought that there would even be an effect.

AIDS had a devastation effect on Leith but the town coped and became stronger for it. Now the economic fallout from Covid will have knocked it back again. Life is hard there and it has always been a case of two steps forward, one back. It has created a gritty community with lots of characters and I feel proud to have been a very small part of its history. I am grateful to the citizens of Leith for giving me so much in the last thirty-four years.

## Leithbookworms in Lockdown

On National Writing Day 24th June 2020, Leithbookworms in Lockdown watched a short video by Lorraine, Adult Literacy Edinburgh. The challenge was to write 24 words, in no more than 7 minutes, in our WhatsApp group.

### Plant'ain

One day I planted a thocht.

It grew and grew richt oot ma heid until it couldnae stop...then like a bubble

Pop!

Carol Marr

### All the time in the world

During lockdown I watched two boys walking their dog at 3am.

They came strolling back at 7, laughing!

Yvonne McDonald

### Haircut

One day my mother bought me scissors. 'Don't cut your hair' she warned, leaving the room.

I was 7. I grabbed the scissors.

Chop!

Ginnie Bell

I dreamt of us talking across a table, coffee cups brimming,  
sun shining thru dusty windows,  
exchanging in trust.

Perhaps it can happen again.... xx

Sally Freedman

One day, when the wind blew, we kissed.

Then it was Wednesday. The sun shone and

I watched you as you moved on.

Tamsin Grainger

### Stranded

Looking forward to bike ride

home. Air pissing out of valve.

Can't be fixed. Waiting for the car

to rescue me and bike!

Lisa Randall

## Leap

The garden has walls too high for our fox cubs to scale.

I can't either.

I remember Before.

But will there be After?

Liz Banks

## Birds

Great idea, Lorraine, but, more important, where did you get that wallpaper?

I watched you twice just to gaze at those beautiful birds.

Ginnie Bell

## Fox

Coughin' cub may soon be coffin cub.

I'll miss her red fur, her chutzpaw, her bold, clear stare and triangles of face and ears.

Liz Banks





### Laying lines 1904

*Laying a tramway is heavy manual work, but these men, here at the Foot of the Walk, made sure everything was ready for the first electric trams in Leith in August 1905.*

## Along the right lines

### A tram driver's view of Leith in 1920

My dad always wanted me to work in the shipyards in Leith and when I left school he got me a job at Ramage & Ferguson, where he had worked all his life. But it wasn't for me – a bit too physical. What I really wanted to do was to drive Leith Corporation trams, so I applied and got a job. I started as a parcel boy, then moved on to be a conductor, which was a step in the right direction – but when there were vacancies for drivers I did the training and passed the test.

I know it looks easy, driving a tram, but it's not. You don't have to steer, of course, but you have to watch out for pedestrians who forget you can't swerve to miss them – particularly after the pubs get out on a Friday or Saturday night. When I started, most of the traffic on the streets was horse-drawn – carts, brewers' drays, coal wagons – but more and more of these motor cars and lorries started to appear. There were lorries for the shipyards and the docks and all the factories in Leith and posh motor cars for the people from the big houses along Ferry Road and in the Trinity area – people who would probably never need to catch my tram.

As drivers we quickly got to know the routes. The Leith trams couldn't run into Edinburgh, not because they weren't allowed to, or even because Leith didn't want to, but because Edinburgh trams were cable cars, with cables under the ground, while Leith's used electricity from overhead wires, just like every other sensible town and city in Britain. So our passengers heading from Leith up to Edinburgh had to leave our modern electric tram half way up Leith Walk at Pilrig and cross the boundary to catch an Edinburgh cable car, hoping that the cable wouldn't break during their journey, which would leave them stranded. This happened so frequently it became a standing joke. We got them quickly to Pilrig

and Leithers joked that, “If ye’re in a hurry, get off at Pilrig and walk the rest.” And of course you know who got the most from this – the railways. You could catch a train at Leith Central station at the Foot of the Walk and arrive at Waverley station in just five minutes.

Leithers had to brave the elements as they transferred trams at what everybody called ‘The Pilrig Muddle’. It was fine in the summer but not much fun in a freezing winter gale. Mind you, it was the same for us Leith drivers because on most of our trams there was nothing to protect us from the elements. Even with the heavy coats they gave us it could be pretty miserable. All of our trams were double-deckers but not all of them had tops for the passengers sitting upstairs; at least their journeys were usually fairly short while us drivers had to brave the weather for long 12-hour shifts.

Leith’s not a big place compared with Edinburgh but whoever designed our tram routes did a good job and made sure they allowed people to get to where they wanted. We had just five tram routes but even then a driver had to have his wits about him to remember what route he was driving, particularly at the Foot of the Walk when you had the choice of lines to Great Junction Street, Constitution Street and Duke Street. But if you were only travelling in Leith there was no muddle at Pilrig. From there we could get you to Ferry Road, to Granton, to Newhaven, to the docks, to the Links, and even along to Seafield. The busiest bits were around the Foot of the Walk, where there was always a lot going on. You had the shops in Great Junction Street and the shops and pubs and the theatre doon the channel in the Kirkgate, which was really the heart of Leith. Trams never went down the Kirkgate – it was far too narrow and always noisy and busy.

All our trams passed the Foot of the Walk and when I was a conductor I had to be quick on my feet to collect all the fares on a packed tram. It was the same at the Dock Gates when shifts were changing – lots of men anxious to get home, or maybe to the pub.



Foot of Leith Walk, Leith

### Foot of Leith Walk, Leith

*Children always appear when there's a postcard photographer about - paying more attention to them than the tram heading towards the Foot of the Walk.*



### First through electric car at Pilrig

*Crowds turned out at Pilrig to watch the first Edinburgh Corporation electric car pass through Pilrig on its journey from Stanley road to Liberton on 20 June 1922. I wasn't driving it, sadly, but I was in that crowd – that's me wearing a hat!*

But there were quieter bits on the routes and it wasn't all tenements, docks and factories. People are sometimes surprised that Leith has so many parks and green spaces – the Links, for instance, and Victoria Park – and after we were away from Leith Walk and the docks we could relax a bit and enjoy the views across the Firth of Forth to Fife. The speed limit for the cars – we always called them cars – was 12 or 15 miles an hour. Sometimes we had to crawl along Great Junction Street so we were able to get up a wee bit of speed along the coast – maybe more than a wee bit over 15mph if we knew there wasn't an inspector about! And we usually knew when there was an inspector about because drivers of passing trams warned each other if they had spotted one.

What people didn't realise was that some of our Leith tram routes were actually in Edinburgh. The boundary between Leith and Edinburgh ran along the middle of Ferry Road and down Pilrig Street, so if my car was heading westwards along Ferry Road or north along Pilrig Street these tramlines were actually in Edinburgh. And of course the Boundary Bar at Pilrig was half in Leith, half in Edinburgh, and pub closing times were later in Leith so at 9.30 the drinkers moved swiftly from one half of the bar to the other for another half-hour on the bevvy.

Our cars were designed to carry people so when the Newhaven fishwives were heading into Edinburgh with their creels of herring they loaded them on to the front platform right beside the driver. You had to like the smell of fish, which hung around for ages, but you usually got a wee poke of fish to take home for your tea. And of course there were the prams that had to travel with me on the platform.

During the Great War the shipyards and the docks were really busy and to keep the trams going we had to recruit conductresses – clippies – to collect fares because so many local men had joined up to fight. Some of the older drivers weren't at all happy about working with women because they had to watch their language, but the women often gave as good as they got and stood no nonsense from passengers – or drivers. I must admit I fancied one clippie in particular and we'd meet up on a Saturday

night after my shift for a wee drink and maybe a night at the pictures or at the Gaiety Theatre in the Kirkgate.

After the war things changed a bit. My dad was still working at Ramage & Ferguson's yard, but Henry Robb who was a yard manager there set up his own business in 1918 and many of Dad's mates went to join him. But Dad was loyal and was happy to stay where he was.

Mind you, Dad wasn't so happy when Edinburgh was extending its city boundaries and wanted to 'amalgamate' with Leith – forcibly take it over, he said. The Leith town council decided to ask Leithers what they wanted and held what they called a plebiscite. Only 5,357 people who voted were in favour of the amalgamation, with 29,891 against, but the Edinburgh council ignored this and went ahead anyway and in November 1920 Leith became part of Edinburgh.

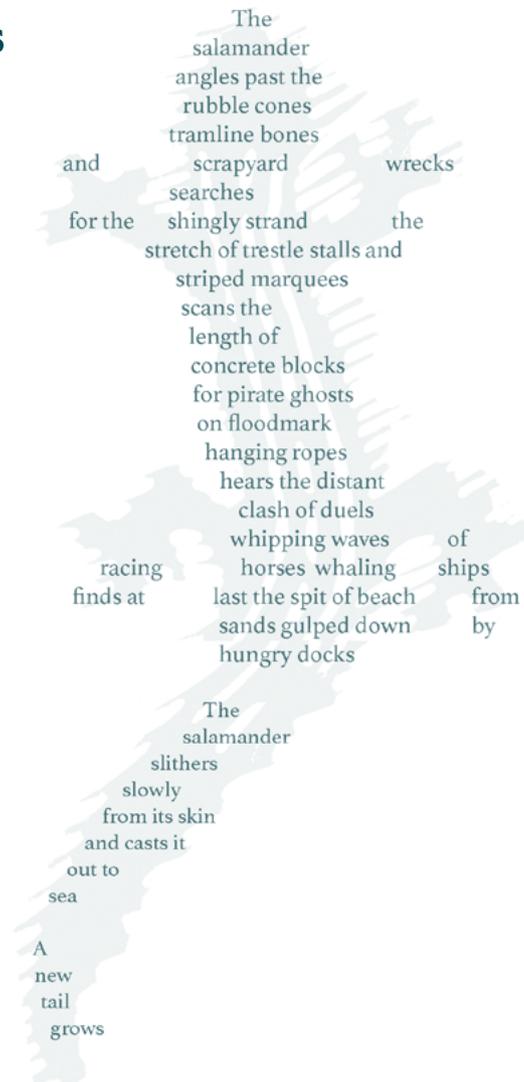
Our 37 Leith trams became Edinburgh trams and now that they're getting rid of the cable cars at long last, I'm driving routes that start in Leith and take me straight through Pilrig – no muddle – and up into the centre of Edinburgh and to parts of the city I've never seen before. I usually drive the number 7 from Stanley Road to Pilrig and on up the Bridges to Liberton. Sometimes it will be one of the old Leith cars, maybe one where the driver is still in the open, but if I am lucky I get one of the brand-new Edinburgh Corporation cars where the driver is protected from the weather by a windscreen and the upstairs passengers have a roof. And with no need to change at Pilrig, most passengers have stopped getting the train for their trips into the city centre.

Otherwise things are not very different. We got new uniforms, Newhaven fishwives still plant their creels on the front platform, and mums and dads can still ask to park their prams beside the driver. And my mum still comes down from the tenement in Great Junction Street to meet me at the car stop with my packed lunch. Oh yes – and that clippie from the war years? I married her.

---

Gavin Booth

## Leith Sands



The salamander  
angles past the  
rubble cones  
tramline bones  
and scrapyards wrecks  
searches  
for the shingly strand the  
stretch of trestle stalls and  
striped marquees  
scans the  
length of  
concrete blocks  
for pirate ghosts  
on floodmark  
hanging ropes  
hears the distant  
clash of duels  
whipping waves of  
racing horses whaling ships  
finds at last the spit of beach from  
sands gulped down by  
hungry docks  
The  
salamander  
slithers  
slowly  
from its skin  
and casts it  
out to  
sea  
A  
new  
tail  
grows

---

Annie McCrae

## The Van

It's just a van, but to me it feels like Galilee. You can tell as soon as people step on it if they recognise what sort of van it used to be. They look up at the ceiling first, then around all the corners, then along the benches, which now have heaters underneath.

"Did this used to be a prison van?" They usually ask after a few moments.

"Yes," we say, and sometimes, "it used to take people to prison, now it takes them to freedom."

As often as not, with a smile and a scratch of the back of the head the response is: "I've been in a few of these in my time."

I haven't, of course. And while I can find our van, with its white walls and open windows a little claustrophobic at times, I can't imagine what it must have been like in its previous incarnation, with six or eight tiny cubicles. What it must have felt like in a noisy box one meter square, with all the other noisy boxes shaking around you, wondering "how the hell did I end up here?" and "how am I ever going to get out of here?" But that, at least is a feeling I know a little bit about. Maybe that's why I like it here.

I make the coffee and I usually spill it because I am clumsy, and the hot water from the urns usually splashes all over my hands. Everyone takes sugar. If you don't get chance to ask, you put at least two sugars in to start with and then you often have to add more. Every now and then someone asks for five or even six sugars and I feel like a fanfare should sound, with flashing lights: a record has been broken, you've won the prize today. Rotten teeth are generally the least of folk's worries, as we hand polystyrene cups to shaky hands, and offer a trinity of doughnuts: jam, plain, or custard – the Avant Garde option.

We park at the bottom of Leith walk, opposite the old central station.

There is something rather fitting about that. Because the station has gone but the wall and the old bar remains, the toilets even and the old tiled corridors still deep underground. Relics of a time locals remember but incomers like me only recall from Trainspotting. But there is no banging soundtrack here. Nothing edgy or cool or glamorous anymore, if indeed any of it ever was. Drug culture of Leith in 2020 is, as far as I can tell, at times ugly, at times scary, but mainly just very, very sad.

It has the same sense of forgotten-ness as the old station, I suppose. I talk to people who have been on methadone scripts for twenty or thirty years. They were probably first placed on prescriptions with the best of intentions as part of ambitious schemes to not only cut drug use but mainly curb the spread of HIV, but the medication was always supposed to come with other kinds of rehabilitation and support that somehow never seemed to come. So, we have forgotten generations, relics of a system of support that never came, and the result is a sort of half-life. Methadone forms a kind of base line; an initial anaesthesia and more often than not street drugs are piled on top. Not ones you've heard of usually. It's like the planets, and dinosaurs, and long division: all different nowadays from what you learnt at school.

Some drugs seem to be like Russian roulette; they might just kill you straight away and strangely no-one seems to mind that. It's as if life is not so much cheap, but so fragile and precarious anyway. I've met a lot of people I've ended up loving doing this and I've loved a lot of people I ended up losing: sometimes we hear about another death every week. Apparently life expectancy for drug users is somewhere in the thirties, if you can call that an expectancy.

It's not just the fragility of life that breaks my heart; it's the tragedy of the half-life. That when people are living so much of their lives intoxicated, they are not really living. They can't really connect, to God or anyone else. I have met people who can't finish their doughnut without falling asleep, who have no memory at all anymore. They are so separate from

everything, even themselves.

I remember when I first came here I thought, this can't possibly work. You can't just park a van, open the doors, offer doughnuts and sugary coffee and tell people God loves them. Like a lot of Christians, and Catholics like me especially probably, I wasn't particularly comfortable with the idea of evangelism of any kind. Words like God-bothering, bible-bashing, shoving-it-down-people's-throats came to mind.

But the thing is, if you are really into something, and it has really helped you and made you happy, you do want to tell people about it. Like people who are really into slow-cookers. Or shape-wear. Or Sudoku. They don't sit there in silence while their friends say, "If only I knew how to keep stews warm all day/hold in my ever-expanding belly/keep my brain sharp now I've retired."

Somehow, this was the place where it all became real for me. The gospel, alive in a situation where the good news really is Good News. Faced with someone telling you they have no hope, that no-one loves them, suddenly it becomes true in a new way to say that you believe that God loves them, that he sees their suffering, that healing and freedom are always possible. And I believe, more deeply than I have ever believed anything, that if Jesus ever came to Leith the first place he would go would be the van. This has given me a new sense of what it means to follow Him, to go to the places He would go.

So many times, I had heard people talk about meeting Christ in other people, but I hadn't really known what it meant. But in this pain, in this grave, grave suffering you see the total humiliation of those who suffer because of all of our selfishness. We who allow inequality and injustice because we are privileged enough to be able to shield ourselves from our neighbours' pain. We who are privileged enough to have more socially acceptable ways of numbing our own pain. We who are privileged enough to be protected from our own mistakes, so that when we mess it up we can only mess it up so badly.

We think, of course, that we are different, but I don't believe it. We are just luckier than people whose pain is too unbearable and didn't have enough safety nets. People who were born as addicts. People abused by parents, abused by step-parents, abused in care and then maybe abused in the army for good measure. Mothers who have had children taken from them, fathers who have seen sons die. The stuff of nightmares being played out all the time in streets near you.

But it's not just the agony of the crucifixion here. Everything is always more visible round the edges and where the suffering is huge the grace is massive too. I have seen tragedies but also remarkable instances of God at work more visibly than anywhere I have ever seen before. Transformations. Sometimes radical and drastic, sometimes more subtle, as ours is a gentle God who whispers more often than he shouts. Men who were once noisy, drunk and lairy, emerging as intelligent and thoughtful. And as often as not helping and supporting me in my own difficulties, "Are you ok Sal?" "You've lost weight Sal?" "You don't seem quite yourself..."

Like Mr X for example. He had a lot of scars, emotionally probably but physically for sure. From a fire apparently. He looked like someone for whom everything must be a struggle, everything must be exhausting. He used to like to talk to me, Mr X, about God. He liked to pray and he liked to talk about prayer, and he wouldn't be embarrassed about doing so openly on the van. Although in general on the van people are pretty open, in fact anyone making fun of us is usually pretty heavily chastised by the regulars: These are good Christian people, show some respect, mind your language.

I was sitting on a wall in Leith feeling sorry for myself at a bleak time. I was in the process of losing my job when he found me. He said he hadn't meant to walk that way but he changed his mind at the last minute, and he was troubled to see I was crying. "I reckon you're too good for them," He said. "I think God has a plan for you, because the way you talked to me helped me to pray, and I am taking less pills."

Which is how it works, isn't it? Discipleship, faith, community. Someone helps you along the road, meets you where you are, and often it stops being clear who is helping whom after a while. He's dead, of course, Mr X. You only get so many goes at Russian roulette. And it's probably not theologically sound, but I imagine God smiling at him in heaven, or Jesus saying, "I was hungry and you fed me, I was sitting on a wall having a cry and you comforted me. When there was an opportunity to make a choice and speak up for me, you took it."

Because we all make choices, and I think it counts for something to have a place where people can come to at the start of making better choices. People have come to see us on their way back from prison, on getting out of hospital, and also on their way to getting into fights, sometimes to be diverted and decide to do things differently. To have a doughnut and a sugary coffee instead of going to attack someone. Grace happens in the moments when we pick the kinder, healthier option for ourselves.

Perhaps that's why I have found so much healing on the van myself. So much freedom. To step into a space where God is at work and learn how it feels has enabled me to practise stepping away from other places where God cannot be, in distraction, in fake-ness, in half-life.

We are all called to be Holy as in 'whole-y', and we need each other. We can learn a lot from people whose vulnerability is visible, and in kindness and service we see glimpses of the best of each other, and a vision of that place where we might all share doughnuts together one day, free of pain and fear.

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Sally Fraser

## Danny Murphy's Christmas Present

Spud stirred restlessly in his bed. It wasn't the first Christmas Eve he had spent in a hostel. It seemed crazy, but that damn streetlight just outside his window was brighter than usual. Somebody had brought in a wee parcel for him through the day, leaving it at the front office for him to collect. It was lying on his bed and growing more irresistible by the minute. Long, rectangular. Could be a nice syringe and needle set, maybe even some decent-quality smack in with it. Oblivion would be just the ticket, man. He got a warm glow just thinking about the rush it gave him back in the day. But he also knew, for sure, it would take the life out of him. He could never go through cold turkey and re-hab again. Impossible, man. The only time you get a free shot is when somebody is trying to take you down to their level. What sort of bastard would do that to him? Grimly, Spud could think of a few.

Hoping as much as fearing, he ripped it open. A box, with lights spelling LOVE. £2.99 at Primark, he had seen it in the shop window a couple of days previously. Nice. He found a key taped to the side, with a label: GF8WPD. He pulled on his trousers and a thin jacket.

– Ye cannae git back in tonight, Spud, warned the night-shift guy on the door.

– Disnae matter, he muttered.

It was a long cold walk up Ferry Road, the early Christmas morning traffic now dwindled to a few taxis. The same Primark box was in the window of GF8WPD. He used the key to let himself in. Danny Boy was playing on a loop: *Oh Danny boy, the pipes, the pipes are calling...* She was expecting him. She had played it as he packed his bags all those months ago; leaving because he was frightened of her goodness, and she seemed sweetly to understand and accept that he needed to go. That, and he couldn't face the consequences of something he had done.

He sat down gently on the bed beside her. Black. He wasn't quite sure which of the African countries she was from. Actually, it was complicated. But she had shown she knew how to put an awful past behind her, and invest in a better life in a decent country, through hard work and love and loyalty. She stirred and opened her eyes.

– Spud. You've come. Turn that bloody song off. Then kiss me. See in the corner over there? He's going to need his daddy.

---

Tim Bell

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### First Edition

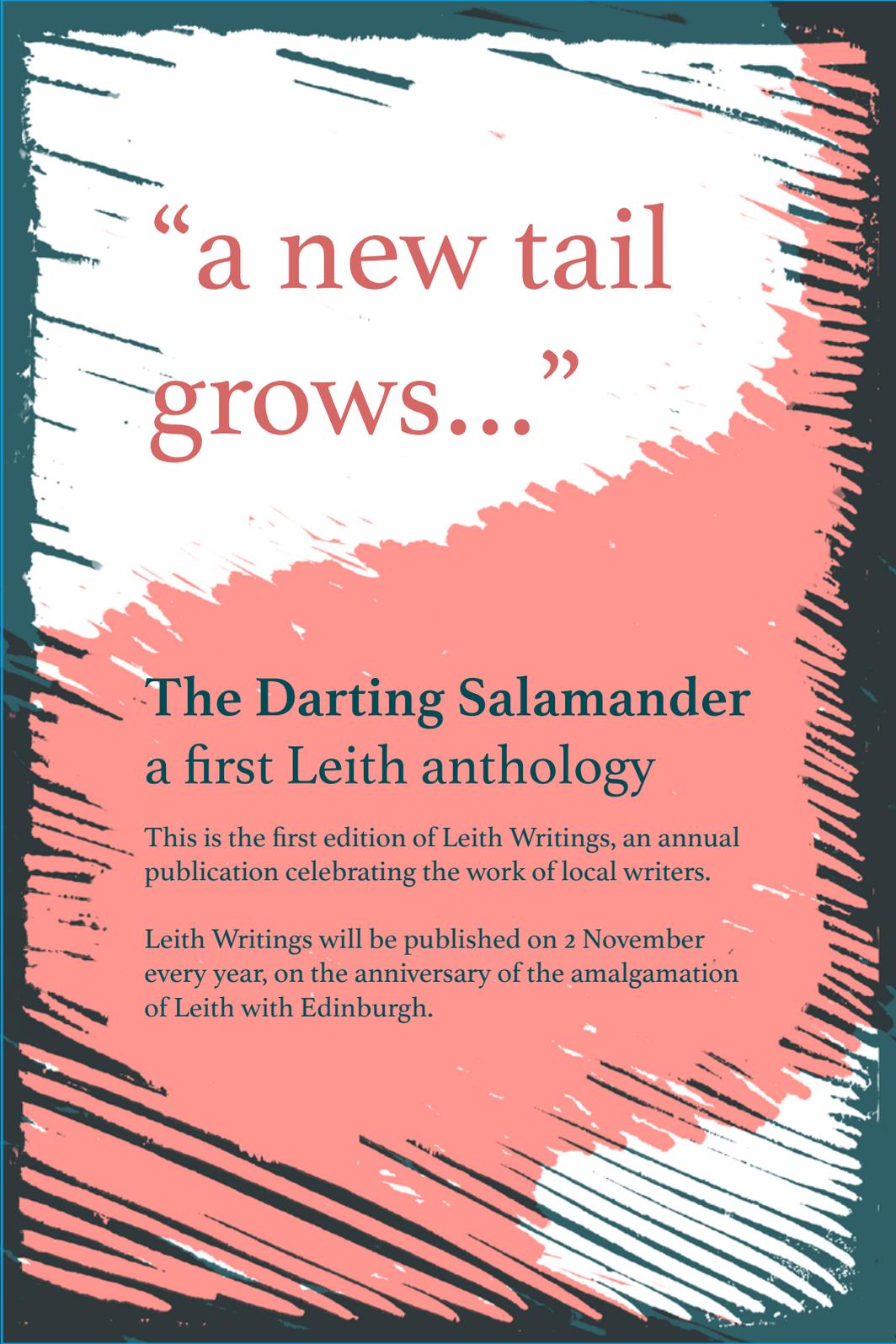
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“a new tail  
grows...”

## The Darting Salamander a first Leith anthology

This is the first edition of Leith Writings, an annual publication celebrating the work of local writers.

Leith Writings will be published on 2 November every year, on the anniversary of the amalgamation of Leith with Edinburgh.