

# SLITHER MAGAZINE, ISSUE 202, 'LIVING HELL'

## EDITOR'S NOTE<sup>1</sup>

I am once again amazed at the efficiency of the next generation to turn their one-note overemotional responses to Events In Their Lives into commodifiable product for my webjournal.

There were 683 submissions this quarter, and just fifteen of them present some semblance of skill and attention paid to what I asked you to do. Scenes from a life. It can't get much simpler than that. Might as well have asked an AI to do it, and I don't even know what that means. It is half my fault; I can't exactly present the work I've chosen out of chronological order, so I haven't. "Ooh, 'crowdsourced autobiography'", I said, to myself, six months ago. Shouldn't have bothered. Twentysomethings (always twentysomethings): stop moaning about your comfortable if not amazing lives. We can't all be successful like me.

I've spent twenty-five years nurturing authors. I wasn't expecting having to publish anything this bad just because it's the best literature available. The industry has ended up with a lot of young people trying to write experience when they haven't had any. We're not talking about moving an hour up the road to live in a shoebox for three years. I do not care for your thinly veiled takedowns of your first ex-boyfriends. More effort is required.

We're losing subscriptions out the wazoo, and every time I fight for you. "They're bright," I say, to the Board. "We're going to see great work from them." I've lied to them and to myself. It's a dreadful time to be a literary editor. You're traumatised by something that happened when you were four. You're a very interesting lesbian. Within are my usual comments on the work, but my patience for this one gimmick has worn thin.

Bottom line: our angel investors have withdrawn, and this is a landmark final issue of *Slither*: we are not paying this month's writers. How long did these even take you? Enjoy the tear-sodden fruits of your two minutes of labour compared to my FIFTY-SEVEN HOURS OF SALVAGING YOU. I WENT FREELANCE FOR THIS. GOD.

You have disgraced yourselves again.

## CAN'T EVEN REMEMBER WHAT HAPPENED DURING YOUR CHILDHOOD IN THAT MUCH DETAIL CAN YOU

### TROY VANDIVER

Shoreditch media and culture journal *Placenta* lists this year's thirty under threes. Jonathan Ross presents the BAFTA for Best Comedy Programme to a small woman in utero,

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<sup>1</sup> Buzby Jubwell, (@aaaaaaaaaaaaa), adapted from deleted 'tweetstorm', *Twitter*, 2020. Accessed 3 12 20. 9:03AM.

who, between laughing shrieks, apologises that the recipient of this reward can't be here tonight.

## OCTAVIA ROTTINGER<sup>2</sup>

Sometimes a daffodil escapes the bed, severed by the disinterest of the wind, to soar freely amongst the insects, on wings of song, to live out the rest of their life in a new spot. Or, as here, languish in the tall grass before getting trod to death and eaten by a toddler.

## RALPH FIENDISH<sup>3</sup>

Apocalypso – superhero saving the world on the TV with a Tijuana bent – is going to be appearing at the mall in three hours' time. He does not know that Apocalypso is not real and played by an actor, which is fine, for his age. The joke isn't going to be that he is 37. His parents have toiled on the internet for forty days and forty nights to secure a meet and greet ticket, putting him a cut above the rest at the cost of his next 28 birthdays, which will take him to actually 37. They arrive in prompt time to wait for his hero to come out. He's going to be there in ten minutes. He's late. No PR or stage manager comes out to appease them. They already have their money. An hour and a half later, stumbling and stinking, here he is, incomprehensible for five minutes, taking off rocket blue and red bucket helmet to do a chunder in it, revealing a thinning pate. A mega dunce for allowing himself to exalt or be excited about anything, and never going to put his foot like in it like that again the stupid silly boy, he snivels all the way home.

## MADELEINE WONK<sup>4</sup>

Low conversations about literally anything else take place on their separate tables while Bald-o with the vein in his head makes the fat, also stupid one, eat the chewing gum under the desk because he forgot a bit of the Quadratic Formula. I try and focus on what's written on the board when all the blinds have been shut, because we are so thick we may as well be from the Dark Ages. Even if I could see it's all gibberish to me. No-one really wants to point out to him that that they'd invented the sun by the time they got to the Dark Ages, lest he threaten us with more booster classes. I'm looking at the worksheet and with each passing second I sympathise more with this tragic Bruce from *Matilda* figure. People file out looking fucking pleased about it while we start to sweat and panic. I'm not sure if this is worse than being brainy or not. Lord save me from any more MyMaths. I see Roman Catholicism's value now. Eventually, we are the only three left, and the teacher's comedy tight five has dialled down to facial-expressive contempt. I can't think of anything beyond this. We will be here forever until the sun has actually gone out and we're left to come up with a new human race. I run the 'would you rather' calculation.

## IMOGEN SCREAMING<sup>5</sup>

The brambles crack underfoot, and after that there's squelch. There's that pungent

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<sup>2</sup> The juxtaposing natural beauty with human corruption bit was a lot cuter when William Blake was doing it 231 years ago.

<sup>3</sup> Contributors: Equity is not as impressed with your pseudonym as you are.

<sup>4</sup> Trauma  $\neq$  'doing maths', love.

<sup>5</sup> This has to be someone on a wind-up. No-one, not even an idiot youngling, would be thick enough to ADMIT TO A CRIME.

humidity, and boggy autumnalness, that makes your brain fold in on itself. The lilypads are still lying about the pond, and it would be quite nice to be one, lying there, without having to do very much or think in a past or future tense. Just now. That'd be nice. Then I think about how I'd invariably be dribbled on with gummy frogspawn and get myself out of the abstract. I don't like to look at the steep banking leading down into the pond. We have a mutual agreement not to broach the topic. The water has a slivery viscous quality, a dark translucence. No such agreement stands between us. "*I know something you don't know*," sings the vile feel. There's no wildlife. I can't remember if we ever had any, the noise, a swoop, but I decide now I don't like it. Maybe word's got round. I venture, looking for the right tree. They all merge into one, and the carvings will have faded through fifteen years of rain. I replace the bouquet, reduced to dry tendrils that I really believe might spring out and seize me. Her jagged initials are there, just, despite attempts to scratch them off the bark. Cast apart from the others, I step back over the brambles to come out into the stacks of tall grass, pulling up my hood while making a mental note to do this in the sunshine next year.

## POGSON CROISE

Sicking up. Feet and hands and knees on me, a small, ant-like woman who feels like equipment. Crawling forward, the disgusting hippie using me as a soapbox rides the wave. A bearded man mountain has a can of carrot juice. Me and him (hate him) and some quite nice bums (love them) await word. Kill confirmed – body broke, trapped between triangular wooden dock supports. Head clean off downstream. Police are getting swept away with us, complicit. Some Cops Are Top Lads, Actually. Some "BASTARD" busy with a baseball bat trods on my hand and breaks a nail. Granddad<sup>6</sup> watches the same thing happen somewhere else in the space of days. Views the world through the zoetrope of strict organisations<sup>7</sup> of good people and bad people at war over land, gold, crap. Violence, in this one specific scenario only - hm - unconscionable. Reassessing – yeah – how he votes. Reality breaks and geezers work flat out to drag it back kicking screaming to shitvoid. I get seventeen tweets. It's getting pulled out, stuck on a sturdier podium in a room with worse lighting. 'Constable charged with shoving thumb up arse while Rome burnt'; the *Mail*. Walking home from work tonight, something and nothing has changed.

## MID LIFE CRISIS FOR YOU (you are 24).

### TREMELDY MORDITOR

Bombing it over to ask the groom where's my fucking Boney, just because I had a wobble and didn't want to come to their Tory Scum Manor Wedding. Great band name. There is going to be Rasputin tonight even if it's me using a spoon to play it on his kidneys like a harp, after I've dug the kidneys out of him with the spoon. Getting the seether when I bump into someone not looking where they're going, and am loud to make it their fault. Oh.

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<sup>6</sup> 'Rough few hours. Contributors came to have a calm and reasoned discussion about payment, so smashed the office window in with a baseball bat and hauled me through it into the back of a girl's grandfather's van, that's as big as a whale, so we should hurry up and bring our jukebox money.' *Tweet*, 5:32PM

<sup>7</sup> The others were to follow in a convoy of their own cars. I make the Love Shack joke. They tell me to shut the fuck up and start talking about 'the aux cord'. "I don't work for free, I am barely giving a fuck away," they gloat to a beat. All this effing and jeffing.' *Tweet*, 6:09pm.

I start to babble about anything, just to talk, but she has to go talk to some relatives. I think. It's loud. She might be being genuine – she's turning back to me, looking apologetic – and bumps into some guy who she is a lot less apologetic to. I try not to look at her arse, even though she's not related to me: I've checked. It's getting late and the party's thinning out when she pops up again. She gets right to it and asks me to dance. Shit. Oh shit. My dad is stood past her shoulder in my eyeline, with that glare he does – Sutcliffe eyes. He likes to joke that he sold him the hammers. He went on hunger strike for four days and still managed a dirty protest when I came out. So I find my mouth telling her that no, thank you, I would not like the first of many eeeeeeee evenings. I let him rule me because it's his house and and it's very comfortable to just live there for no money and hate myself.<sup>8</sup> I turn back, I think maybe hoping my brain will try to convince me to snog her in public anyway. She's gone.<sup>9</sup>

"I saw you talking to that Indian lass," says my dad, expressionless, as we stand in a corner. "Yeah," I say, a gagged witness.

## ZORTON, DESTROYER OF WORLDS

I am a pilot. I am a teenage girl holding a stone above my father's head so I can marry my cut-from-diamonds boyfriend under a New Zealand arch. I am a convicted killer atoning for my sins by sending an obscene amount of money in envelopes with very polite letters to affected families that, all things considered, seem offensive. I am a giant mecha kaiju single mum. I am an alien flatshare sitcom. I am a fictional woman whose characteristics and situation are poached<sup>10</sup> unconsciously from two separate but high-profile television programmes. I am a Harry Potter fan accidentally buying plutonium on the internet. I am placed in a school for mutants owing to an administrative error. I am a plantation owner cancelled on Twitter for only hiring white people. I am the groom of the world's shortest marriage after arranging the first dance to be MIKA's 'Big Girl (You Are Beautiful)'. I am an influencer trying to produce content, living in a one-bedroom with seven other influencers trying to produce content. I am crashing.

## GENIEVEVE MANDIBLE

Describe every year as your worst one yet on Twitter, complain about the impact of Twitter on your mental health, but insist to yourself you have to keep Twitter for your freelance theatre critic business.<sup>11</sup>

## PHOEBE GODWRATH

Kevin Wrong's life will have led up to this moment where he will be asked by the priest and asking himself if he wants to cast his life and possessions in with what he will have been led to believe is the most beautiful woman ever. She will know that she is actually marrying Mister Wrong (lol) and her thoughts will wander to the Spanish waiter throughout

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<sup>8</sup> A big house to live in? Must be very hard for you.

<sup>9</sup> *You're depressed? Not quite sure about your place in the world? Want control, and happiness, and success in your life? WHAT ABOUT THIS POOR WOMAN.*

<sup>10</sup> 'The journey is deeply unpleasant. After two escape attempts, they frogged me. A boy with prior reservations about this 'sort of maybe a kidnapping, yeah?' stopped checking on me. They've put a gym bag full of what feels like lead on my back. I cannot breathe through my mouth; something wet on the floor teases my lips. I am Sisyphus; I will not break. Plenty of time to get work done.' *Tweet*, 6:32PM.

<sup>11</sup> 'Twitter is not that bad. Look! Help! Ah!' *Tweet*, 6:33PM.

the ceremony, reception and consummation night<sup>12</sup>. His to Victoria from school, and how and why he could've been so stupid, and whether it would be a stalker move to search her up on Facebook. She will realise he is not a lost Michelangelo but built out of bits of old Frankenstein I win in a charity auction. (The scientist, so fuck off.) They will know better and abscond with their other other-half to the other side of the planet before reasoning with anyone over their beige cliché life moves. Neither of them will be happy, or let their ugly children leave the house without their heads in sacks. At each other's throats within a year at most, and in separate abusive relationships with Mister and Misses Heineken, wishing for their own deaths. Kev will voice all of this on the altar through snot and tears, and go through with it anyway, and all of it will happen. He will be fat and depressed and live in a bedsit. She will think the divorce a blessing from God and about converting to the church they stood in and wasting her life as a missionary to a primary school after she cannot find real love. They will end up like this because I make them up. What are you going to do about it?

## CLAIRE ECLAIRE

Combing through the *Metro's* 'Tube Crush' section, trying to remember the azure or verdant or ruby coats or trousers or pendants we were wearing last week. A doom has set upon the carriage. None of us deal in eye contact, or come up from our phones for air as per the blood contract. We think 'cos he's got words like 'azure' and 'verdant' and 'ruby' he's going to be William Shakespeare, but there's no evidence Shakespeare ever took a bath. Definite mindfreak, this one. We've waited so long for one of us to wear a colour to catch him out. A ruthless slab of nothing in Public Relations casts the lure in an obscure purple. Quality Street purple, my best guess – but he won't write that, that makes *sense*. Skipped, PR's steel is broken, stemming tears with her sleeve, stepping out onto Marble Arch. 'Hard luck, mate', we say, in fluent eye roll and neck twinge.

## LIFE DOES NOT END PAST THIRTY<sup>13</sup>

### JONTHE MYLES-JUDSON

You're challenged in these four walls to meet some guy, probably a guy, in a car park three days from now at noon. He has specified, specifically, that he will be bringing a pipe wrench that he values deeply and calls Persephone. Take your lunch break and get down there so you can get pulped so help him God. This is your own fault. Suggesting an American woman haranguing a black man in a public park for petting her affectionate dog may well be a racist has now meant laser focus on you. The other forum members are on your side and you're not going to fight him just because he called you a fat fuck in the 'what do you look like' thread. You're on a health kick, you bought a Peloton that barely fits in your garage, but you drew up a schedule and feel good when you stick to it. He has a Zen Buddhist as his profile picture. You pull yourself away with a board game on your kitchen table, playing with your real family that you really have, that he insists is a metaphysical construct in your private messages for attention. You stop,<sup>14</sup> because your wife has made your favourite. Your son got 9/10 on his spelling test and

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<sup>12</sup>'Many hours pass, I lose the already faint outline of the van's doors. They, my route to freedom, have kept me from yelping for death. So I cave. "Cry more, boomer," they say, spitting on me from their bench seat.' *Tweet*, 9:34PM.

<sup>13</sup> At least some (all two of you) have deigned to write the old and decrepit. Congratulations on the bare minimum.

<sup>14</sup> 'We stop somewhere. The tyres crackle against ground. The doors are flung open, and they carry me over their heads. We are somewhere coastal.' *Tweet*, 11:20PM.

the last one was a trick question. You have a nice living room that has armchairs that plug into the wall to recline and is the future. You're really enjoying a Daniel Craig Bond marathon even though there are plenty of holes to pick in *Quantum of Solace*. You turn your laptop off and tell your wife her hair looks different, good different, and jump when the bushes in your front garden sway<sup>15</sup> in your peripheral vision.

## STIGMATA ANDREWS

Leonidas offers a firm and hairy hand as I twist<sup>16</sup> myself to sit on the edge of the back seat of the car. They would've sent a limo, they find me very impressive, but these are hard times, you know. I don't think his name is really Leonidas, nor do I think he's offering it in the nice, optional sense that offering really means. He has not spoken for the duration of the forty-five-minute car ride, which means, on balance, that he's killed someone. I'm led into a thin 'to let' building. The carpeted stairs have no handrails. I'm conscious of losing my footing descending into darkness.<sup>17</sup>

I'm 'offered' a chair and the thickest cigar I have ever seen. I take the seat and puff the cancer. They really are very impressed with me. It's a tight operation and it's what they need. He references his whole team to engender a supportive workplace. They have lots of money, and if I look at these, these are their plans. What if this is something I don't want to do? A silence breaks and they confer. They really don't want me to decline. They have my spouse and grandchildren, and video evidence of me at the traffic lights. An underling speaking up for me is shot square in the head. "Shut the fuck up, Leon."

The man's got the pop factor.

## JUDY FIXATION

Witness reports say his last words<sup>18</sup> were 'go on and shoot me then, cunt'.

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<sup>15</sup> "WooOOOOoooAAAh," they say, swaying me over their heads like one of those fairground swings that I think someone died on last year in Wales. I catch a panoramic glimpse of the beach, and the sea below the cliff face we are parked on. Yes, I am tweeting as they do this.' *Tweet*, 11:22PM.

<sup>16</sup> "Chuck him, chuck him," they sing, with each swing of the me-pendulum. I think they might not chuck me until they do.' *Tweet*, 11:23PM.

<sup>17</sup> 'I have landed on the ground and sat on my phone at a million miles an hour. The screen has smashed; I tap this with my bloodied stump fingers, trying to relieve some pressure off of my bottom, which contains more than the recommended daily amount of glass. Some pesky enterprising A&E Doctor will have this written up as an anecdote in a Christmas stocking book.' *Tweet*, 11:24PM.

<sup>18</sup> 'I try to move and cannot. It's getting harder to type, and I can feel a heaviness in my chest as my breathing becomes faster and Mother calls to me. My proteges, so eager for my business card and e-mail address last month, point and laugh: they have paid *me* in exposure, hahahahahahaaaaa.' *Tweet*, 11:25PM.