

Free State III



Fiction, Essays, Reportage.

Issue Three

September 2011

Free State Issue Three

September 2011

All copyrights © The Authors/Contributors

For information or to subscribe, please email info.freestate@gmail.com

To submit, please email submissions.freestate@gmail.com

Website: <http://freestatejournal.wordpress.com>

Editors: Martin MacInnes and Richard W. Strachan

Contents

- | | | |
|------------|---|----------------|
| 4. | You, me and Lemon Pledge - A Fairytale | Fiona McDonald |
| 7. | What You Mean to Me | Lucy McIver |
| 8. | Riverside: an Enquiry | |
| 20. | Rites | Osmin Croft |

You, me and Lemon Pledge - A Fairytale

by **Fiona McDonald**

Dougie the joiner brought the completed structure round in the morning. I helped him lift it in. I had tidied the living room special. He studied my bare arms.

'I could recommend a great cream for that, you know. Never seen it outside the chemists in Banff though. And I think that place had to close down.'

'Thanks all the same, Dougie'

We lowered his handiwork onto the plastic settee and I stood back as he 'gloved up' and uncoiled the packaging like the paper on a cornetto, his creation slowly, wondrously, appearing.

It was perfect.

Dazzling.

So sturdy and well-built, yet I still kept well back for fear of breaking anything. I sat on the floor and scooted against the wall. Dougie the joiner, the genius joiner, the master craftsman, stood back and smiled. It was almost as though he, himself, couldn't believe his own skill. He'd been dubious about the project from the beginning, in fact - he'd called me some pretty terrible names - but now his mind was entirely on this work of beauty, his occupation for well over a year now. He coughed and made an attempt at modesty.

'I know you were keen on the mahogany, but I think the walnut's a bit more stylish. This stuff's Brazilian.'

He paused, but I was still speechless.

'Don't worry about it, though. I know a guy. It wasn't too much dearer.'

'Uh beleeba', I blurted. 'I'm sorry. I can't. I mean. Dougie, you're a wizard. A magician.'

'Aye, the wonderful wizard.' He turned to me.

'She is yours you know. You can touch her.'

'Not yet.'

I felt we had to be alone. It did give me comfort to hear she was mine. Dougie had put in countless hours of work and had a major advantage as he, currently, knew this piece, my piece, a lot more intimately than me. Every

corner. Every crevice. Every knot in the wood. Beautiful, glossy walnut wood. Mahogany? What was I thinking? I wanted to know her just as well. I wanted to know her better than Dougie could imagine. I could sense him preparing to give me the rundown. The low-down. I begged him telepathically. You're the wizard, Dougie. Don't go all car salesman on me now.

'Everything as requested. Fine veneer, inside and out. No chance of woodworm or disease. Push to open doors which are cut from the same piece, so barely visible. All necessary joints in place. Ten fingers. Ten toes. Size fourteen. Hair to the shoulders. Shoe size six and a half. Eyes thirty mils apart. Bust 36C. Are you greetin?'

I shook my head as the tears flowed. Dougie seemed to decide the rest was best left until later.

'Anything else, just give us a shout. I'd leave you alone to get acquainted, but there is the small matter of my last payment?'

'Yes.' I shook my head. 'Yes, of course.'

I'd left the envelope in the kitchen next to the bottle of Merlot. Wine. What a stupid idea. This man, this perfect example of a tradesman, this carpenter to rival Gepetto, had given me the greatest gift I was ever likely to receive, expecting nothing but cash in return, and I had felt a bottle of plonk a decent enough thank you? Feeling itchy, I went back to the living room, taking care to avoid looking at my treasure for the time being.

'Dougie, what do you want more than anything else in the world?' I asked.

'Most in the world? For the Dons to make it to the final. But that'll never happen.' He laughed.

'More immediately, though, I could do with a plate of lamb bhuna. I'm off to meet Elaine for a pub lunch. Don't suppose you fancy joining us?' I smiled. 'Give her my love.'

'We still think you're being daft.'

I shook his hand and gave him the envelope.

'Enjoy your lunch.'

'Any problems, Dorothy, give us a call.'

I locked the door behind him, turned on the lights and drew the curtains. I eased on the cotton gloves. Finally, I was able to touch her. I needed to know enough about her to be comfortable. To be assured. Somehow, I

expected her to slip away when my fingers got near her, like a ghost or a hologram, but she was firm and smooth to the touch. She'd been lighter than I expected. I felt the hinge on her mouth. Her smile seemed more genuine up close. Kinder, rather than bemused. I gently pressed her stomach, imagining her non-existent innards. It was only when I pressed more forcefully that the door swung open. Terrified, I closed it. It was as though she had suddenly become unreal, grotesque even. Like that John Hurt film with the alien. What was that called? I started scratching my neck. The doors were a necessity, though, and, despite my sudden shock, they were something to be lived with.

I jumped when the doorbell rang and shouted 'what?' rather too rudely. A familiar voice shouted back.

'I just want you to know that I love you.'

I couldn't pretend not to have heard.

'Thank you', I called without moving.

'Can I come in?'

I stood up, guarding the sofa.

'Not right now.'

'Why not?'

I was under no obligation to speak again, and so sat and listened to a vicious outpouring of kindness and understanding until the voice gave up and left. The regrets I had been expecting didn't come. I felt nothing but anticipation as I stared at the beautiful, glossy walnut woman. Nobody could part us. We were to become inseparable. I couldn't wait. There was nothing I needed to do 'for old times' sake'. I'd had enough of the old times. Bring on the walnut. Just you, me and lemon pledge.

Dr Green has a special cane for rapping things and I recognised his rap on the door.

'Who is it?' I asked anyway.

'It's Mr Green', came the reply.

'Doctor Green', I insisted, smiling, and he rapped the door again.

'Open up, Dorothy.'

I unlocked the door and led the doctor through to where she sat. My seat, but her seat.

'Exquisite', he said eventually, hand on his chin.

'Indeed', I said, mimicking him. He placed a hand near her stomach.

'May I?'

'Wear the gloves', I demanded and he obliged, popping the door open as I stood back, and peering inside with his torch.

'I can't say entirely what I was expecting, but your acquaintance has created a marvellous vessel.'

'He's a genius joiner,' I agreed.

'Quite. I think this will work very neatly.' He stepped back. 'How do you feel about it?'

I stared at him in disbelief. How could I articulate such elation?

'Well...Just look at her, Doctor. Just look at her. She's...um...She's Brazilian walnut!'

The doctor smiled.

'And how do you feel about the procedure?'

'I trust you completely. You're my doctor!'

'I do wish you'd stop calling me that, Dorothy. You know I'm not really a doctor.'

'Well, I wish you'd stop calling me Dorothy. You know that's not my real name. Call me the Tin Man. Call me the Walnut Woman.'

The doctor began unfolding a long table.

'I must ask again if you're definitely prepared to go through with this procedure.'

'Of course! I'm going to be beautiful! No more creams and ointments and constant embarrassing pinkness. I'll be perfect.'

'I don't wish to lift the structure just yet, but I trust all the joints and doors are in place?'

'They are, although...'

'Although?'

'Well, I don't much care for having the doors.'

'I suppose the Tin Man had no need for a bladder.'

Table set up, the doctor told me to look at the walnut woman, and then to close my eyes.

'Oh! You will look after my brain, Doctor?'

'You're in safe hands, Dorothy. And soon you'll have fine new hands of your own. Keep thinking that.'

I closed my eyes.

'Fine new hands. Fine new hands. Fine new hands.'

I felt the dull thud of Doctor Green's cane on the back of my head, and then nothing for a long, long time...

I awoke to the Doctor's cry from the front door.

'No visitors! Never mind what she wants. She's in a bloody coma!'

I tried to speak, but couldn't. I remembered my

Mona Lisa smile. Here I was, alive and in my brand new skin. My perfect new Brazilian walnut skin. I was her and she was me. We had become each other. I was the Walnut Woman. I stood easily, although my stomach hurt. I walked to the door, my perfect new feet not letting me down. The Doctor turned to me. 'And she's in operation! Marvellous, if I do say so myself. Don't try to speak. You'll probably be hungry. Just let me know and we'll pop that stomach open for a test run.'

I nodded. I nodded beautifully and serenely. The Walnut Woman is beautiful and serene.

'Now, sit down for me for a moment. I don't want you to speak yet, but if you know your name, then nod.'

I nodded.

'Your date of birth? Three words beginning with P? The current Prime Minister?'

Nod. Nod. Nod. The doctor patted me on my perfect arm and walked to the kitchen to 'prepare my lunch'.

'You're going to be fine. Absolutely fine.'

I stared at my arm. At the five greasy fingerprints left there.

Where were his gloves?

I looked down. There were another three fingerprints at the door to my stomach. I counted seven on my left leg. No. Nine. No. Fifteen. More on my right leg. I stood and found the mirror in the hall. All over my face. My neck. My chest. My shoulders. My hair.

All at once, my entire new body began to itch.

What you mean to me

In the optician's chair
you are one in a series of lenses
placed in the frame
making the letters alter,
lenses clicking in
and out at the rate
of a cloud sinking.

You so unfocus
that through the blur I see
times of sand shifting,
wearing, daily wearing,

and through the blur trees
are wandering as dryads
and dryads are stopping
as trees. I walk and you stop,
framing in green branches
pinnacles of desert rock.

My footsteps pace on back-turns
to see the view before I knew it
the same repeated and never the same.

The optician says
'This one...
...or this one?'

Lucy McIver

Riverside – An Enquiry

The bridge, chrome and concrete, leads across no river but the motorway. From the back of Partick bus station it connects Beith Street to the Saltcoats Road and Castlebank Street. Markers have been carved into the paving stones on the footpath, a roll-call of industrial expansion and contraction, first founding to inevitable decommission; the chronological progress of the Govan shipyards, from the 19th century to the present day.





Riverside, where the Museum of Transport has been absorbed into something larger than its previous two iterations, making explicit the connection to location and theme, the city's enduring legacy as shipbuilder to the world. The architect Zaha Hadid, world-renowned, has designed in chrome and steel and plated silver skin an expressionist dream of a dry-dock shipyard – the familiar crenellated roof, stretched and cursive. On the opening weekend, cars were backed up on the motorway for half a mile. Police took charge of the traffic, and road-rage fist-fights were narrowly averted. Old-fashioned buses had been hired for the day, ferrying passengers from the centre of town out to the west end; nostalgic joyrides for people unborn when the vehicles were first in use. 'Heritage' is nostalgia for something you cannot personally remember.





The museum sits at the nexus of the city's shipbuilding history, at the point where this bleeds into the wider issue of post-industrial redevelopment. It occupies a denuded zone of wasteland and rotting dockside timber.



Behind the museum, at anchor, lies the *Glenlee*, the 18th century tall ship, with sails furled, where modernity can be abandoned for £5 per adult ticket. The ship's walkway, the gangplank, is a time-machine giving access to a pre-industrial past in strict juxtaposition with the postmodernist hub the vessel is moored beside. Here, the rudiments of sea travel would have been essentially static for hundreds of years. Sailors lived in heightened intimacy with the properties of their ship.



At the front of the museum, sea cadet bands, trainee sailors, strike up martial music, brass marches. Inside, sepia photography in cabinet displays shows the ocean liners taking emigrants across the Atlantic for Canada and the USA. Tens of thousands of people would have embarked at this dock, their final footsteps on native soil. Now, redeveloped, the river looks curiously small-scale, far too narrow for the ocean-crossers that would have towered over the surrounding tenement buildings.

The tenements too are gone, of course. Only the hourly sea plane takes passengers any distance, curling off towards Ban. On the other side of the river, windowless 1960s social housing in uniform rows occupy the space where additional yards would have stood. You can still see the slipways, where ship hulls would have broached the water. Archive footage shows the gathering inertia, that tidal plume of spray, erupting in slow motion.



Further west, the pathway by the wasteland blocked off by security fencing, curiously reflecting the image of an ocean liner, ploughing through the grass sea, is the Glasgow Harbour apartment complex. There is the influence here of the Wapping dockside redevelopment; six figure apartments looking across a similarly silent river to the economically ravaged Rotherhithe.





From the side, the Glasgow Harbour buildings look like a diminishing sequence of steps. A sequence of buildings. The website boasts an investment value of £1.2 billion.





The complex overlooks the last remaining Clydeside shipyard, BAE Systems Govan; key players in the construction of the Royal Navy's latest destroyers, the Type 45 class, the most advanced military ships in the world. Work is now being undertaken on the aircraft carrier that will be delivered just in time to enter mothballs, or to be sold off to the Indian Navy.



The landscape of this area invites the usual psychogeographical tropes, or the detached clinician's style of mid- to late-period JG Ballard. In that sense, this is a pre-imagined environment, bleached of any real meaning, familiar to readers and mental cartographers of a certain literary taste. All utterance on the subject is effectively pre-rehearsed, and takes place as a pre-scripted monologue.



The past here is not strictly visible; there is no stratigraphy of accumulated time. An area that used to be continuous is now semi-erased into a zone of isolated sections, linked only by theme. But when an industry dies, what else can take its place?

Rites

by Oswin Croft

There were two men and a woman. I had deduced that perhaps one of the men was a brother to her and the other was her husband or boyfriend. They made strange companions, they didn't seem to be drunk like most of the men who wandered alone around here. What do they have in their bag? A butane gas stove for making coffee, rice (the staple of their meals), a clear plastic sheet that has kept out the rain and wind in telephone boxes in Cadiz where they first slept rough, as well as the building sites of Barcelona, has kept off mosquitoes in Montpellier and now sits unused stuffed into an old olive coloured Moroccan army bag. A tin opener, one of those small ones with no handles, manual, always works. Keys to a house and barn they no longer own. A cheque book, two pens, six bars of soap, tinned kidney beans, nine shoes, clothes of assorted sizes, a book in Spanish about child care.

Four days a week there would be a market in the back streets. There are many stalls at these places selling all you need to eat; artichokes, white asparagus, fresh oysters, figs, bananas, nectarines and apricots in abundance, cherries and the list goes on. There are many colours and smells from the fruit and vegetables as they ripen in the heat and rot and the vendors cut their prices as the day wears on. They shout 'une Euro!' although this refers to nothing they sell. They shout and beckon and smile at passers-by who focus on getting the best quality they can and scan the boards for the best price. Then you have odd stalls with extension cords and boxes of knives, iron wool and bleach. Miscellaneous items such as potato peelers and in-soles. People drag their bags on wheels behind them and check items off a list of groceries scratched on a scrap of paper. Tourists look on interested at the brisk, sometimes bad tempered exchanges between the sellers and their clientele. There is the echo of boys playing basketball in the court on this street, their cries mixing with the bustle of the crowd and the audible slap of the ball off

walls and concrete. Fruit flies wheel unnoticed in the shade until the people begin to leave as the tables are cleared. Then trucks spray-painted in gaudy yellows, crazy blues and pinks pull up, their sides covered in tags and meaningless letters, then the tables and awnings are deconstructed themselves as quickly as possible and piled in growing towers along with crates and rusting orange bolts. The heavy crash of metal poles is carried many streets and can be heard in the cool of the courtyards in adjacent blocks, the havens of men and women in their resting hours when it is too warm to venture onto the dusty, congested streets. Here they read books or cut their children's hair or water the plants. As the trucks move off the street-cleaners move in and spray away the garbage and chase away the flies and mongrel dogs that sniff at dropped items and with their dogs, their owners. Old drunks who congregate on benches and share stories. Old women who share the local gossip about the children at school or the shops closing down or the 'soldes' or lament the sickness of their husbands. This is where I saw the family again, at the end of the market. They were picking through the detritus of the day, the fruit dropped and bruised but edible, the centimes that slipped from hands as they poured change into a purse, the half smoked unsoaked cigarettes or unscratched lottery tickets. They had obviously had a difficult time since I saw them last and the woman was very close to the time of giving birth. Her belly bulged like the cracked fruit in the gutter and she rested her hand on her aching back as she stooped to examine half an avocado before throwing it back. The men were unshaven and looked thinner, they must have been giving her the majority of the food and a savage pride was visible in the way they positioned their bodies and stared at onlookers who dared to pry into their working. At the end of the street, the one I took to be the brother stood and waited as he reached it first. He stood erect in his striped shirt untucked, his black cotton trousers rolled up, his feet dirty in sandals. His green eyes stared back protectively at his brother in law, his dark beard disguised his strong jaw and high cheek bones, hid his handsomeness. Then I saw his head turn slightly to watch over his sister

and it knocked some of the pride from his stance and he looked very lost. As they reached him he turned his back and walked on, leading them and not looking back.

It was 27 degrees their weary feet found a small fenced off garden with a fountain tempting in the middle. Haroun and Ansar helped Kesi over, she was getting bigger and it was galling for her to lose her freedom of movement and to work. They wouldn't let her anymore and they had worry enough when most mornings she was sick and they had to fetch her water. She was never scared though and stronger in her resolve than they were. Kesi pushed them to work and shamed them into working harder through example. I helped her lower herself down and supported her by the elbow and held her clothes clear of the spikes. Me and my brother in law laughed quietly like school boys again and threw off our shirts and played in the fountain and laughed for a long time, abandoned. It was so cool and she couldn't help but laugh at these over sized boys unshaven dancing with delight in the dark. Remember, Haroun, the holiday of San Juan back in Cadiz, we danced on the beach by camp fires, I knew I was in love with your sister then. You drank too much Sangria and couldn't get up to work the next day you felt so sick. We will never forget that night with all the family there. Our mum and dad and brother and sister, cousins, aunts and uncles all together again. We ate lamb and chicken and polenta and peppers slow roasted over the fire. We danced and danced. After a time they quietened down and washed in the water and got off the summery dirt and pollution and a lot of skin and weariness. Then they set down their sleeping bags to lay on, spread their plastic sheet over and tried to get some sleep before the Sun rose and they were moved on.

When we made it to France, it seemed that we did not have reason enough to stay. We were not running from war. We were not persecuted. Most of those who run from persecution don't make it at all or are picked up by smugglers. There does not seem to be a refuge for people like us.

I remember when we first came to the outskirts of Paris, the banlieue to the south. There were miles and miles of houses and no sign of them ending. It was very different from the fields and rivers and villages we had passed through. We had the feeling we always had when we reached a new city, fear and trepidation. There was also a hopeful look in Kesi's eyes, she was challenging the morning Sun and the strange inhabitants of this alien place to show her a thing which she could not do. I would not speak to her and Ansar watched her carefully for some sign to speak or for her next wish. I had become used to deferring my opinion for hers in these situations. She was the most alert too, we had slept in our sleeping bags on benches by a river the previous night and I had lain awake most of the time listening to the water and the cars flying by. The grass was deep green and you could feel the origins of the morning's mist in the air like a curse. Sure enough, as the Sun rose and began to warm the earth again, there was the roar of thunder far away. At first I thought it was just a passing truck, but it came back again and again, clearer and more hideous each time. The river no longer sounded soothing, it was a cold presence that would sweep us away if given the chance. I woke Ansar and told him we needed to reach shelter quickly. He reached out to wake Kesi, but she was already bright eyed and ready to leave. We gathered up our bags and continued our weary walk by the ditch that ran parallel to the motorway littered with plastic bottles and all kinds of waste. A train track began to wind serpentine into view and we made to follow it. The wind began to speed up and blind our ears, the light began to darken as it does before rain and the air became heavier and a train howled by carrying steel, tonnes and tonnes of destruction within feet of us, it was unbearable. We saw a sign and a station come into view and we became wary and hopeful. We discovered the direction for Paris and boarded the next train that arrived. We did not have tickets and prayed we would not be asked for them or see any policemen. We were afraid all that day.

Gaze downwards over the lip of the building's

edge, now fifty floors up. The updraft blows back your hair and you slip a little towards the unending sleep at the bottom. You see yourself from behind as others may discover you and laugh out loud at yourself. The space above your head makes itself known and you are impressed by how much greater it is than the space below. You think of flying. You think of stepping back into troubles. You become a laughing liquid form of all your composite features on the road below, everything folded up.

Folded and marked by fingers and dried out a photo of the family standing by the gate. I'm standing in my denim shirt smiling broadly, everyone smiles. Father in his white shirt and braces, sleeves rolled up to reveal his broad forearms, a short stocky man. My mother, short too, her graphite black hair falling over her shoulders somehow reflecting the burning Sun. She was wearing her best cherry red floral sleeveless dress she would often wear to church, the large cross she always wore easy to see. Her bright green eyes match those of my sister, Kesi, standing next to her with her arm around her. You can see the chickens, just, scratching in the yard and one of the dogs, the low terracotta coloured house and barn too. I can almost smell the straw and feel the hides of the horses. My older brothers smiled for the camera although, even then, they must have had thoughts of leaving. They were as tall as me, dwarfing the older ones. Both strong men in body with quick tempers, with severe features, prominent cheekbones, from my mother's side. We all took after her, my father would often joke that he had no part in us, aside from his good nature. It troubled me when even this didn't seem to be true. Such as that terrible night when my brothers stated their intentions to leave, it felt like a mutiny, although we wished them all the best and no voices were raised in anger. My parents took the news with quiet acceptance and disappointment written in their sad mouths that trembled with reproachful unspoken words. I did not feel then like my father's son. In the photo though I see our smiles match and I can stare at those two smiles for many minutes.

Kesi and Ansar sat talking on the street, their heads close together, the baby between them both clinging to Kesi. We had managed to secure a place in an emergency shelter on account of the baby. We had never been so frightened in our life at the hospital. All the way we had said it was just us, an autonomous unit, we couldn't trust anyone else. We had never wanted to talk about the birth before it happened. It seemed as if the baby would not survive past labour or the weeks after. We had never wanted to think about opening up to strangers and letting them put our family's future in their hands. And what would happen when the police found out about us and if the baby died would we be murderers? That happens to people, when they don't get help. It was unspeakable. It felt like a crime to turn up at the hospital doors with a woman screaming, her legs covered in blood.

I walked to the top of our block and peered over the edge. To support them both, it was too much to take. I don't think of myself, I have to protect what is best for all of us and never look for help. So here we are. In two rooms, working, eating within four walls. Is this what we ran to? We worked so hard on that farm. Then we gave it up and left any friends and family behind and did our best not to make new bonds, we only strengthened the ties between us three. I took a deep breath. They strain and stress. Then the baby came and there was a new human to think of and care for. The other two resent her, I know it. They never talked about her during the pregnancy. I have to follow them everywhere, I can't escape them. The pain had been so inhuman, I became an animal made from nerves and I could feel my bones strain. How could they possibly understand? Car fumes and melted tar drift by on the breeze. My baby and Ansar, what can I do with them? I am losing my strength to stand my ground.

Contributors

Oswin Croft is an English Literature graduate from St. Andrews and has just relocated to London from Paris. He writes short stories and poems, some of which can be seen on his blog ozzythepolarbear.wordpress.com. This extract is from a novel he hopes to complete and publish at an undetermined point in the future.

Fiona McDonald is a playwright from Edinburgh. She is currently writer in residence for Tightlaced Theatre (www.tightlacedtheatre.org) and has had work showcased all over the city. This is her first real attempt at prose writing.

Lucy McIver lives, works and occasionally writes in Edinburgh. She has many aspirations and a long reading list.