



Lord Mayor's Creative Writing Awards 2017

Winner, Narrative Non-Fiction:

When everything turns to shit for a bit by Jack Callil

[NONFICTION]

Title: "When Everything Goes Shit for a Bit"

Name: Jack Callil

'Well, we can't rule out schizophrenia.' A brow half-raised, gossipy as if we're talking twists in our favourite trashy TV-soap. 'Or bipolar.' Vacuum-wrapped in a chequered shirt. Eyes that don't move when he smiles. A way of emphasising the last word of his sentences. Beneath the skin of my scalp I feel twitches, spasms, small branches writhing like little larvae and I don't feel real. 'So, what do you think of all—*this?*' I say I don't know. He looks back to my file on his computer. The screen and he glare at each other for a while. Patterns jump off his shirt like a Hermann Grid and I have to rub my eyes. Fingers click keys. A few moments pass while he bops, just a little, to and fro, gyrating on a large violet rubber exercise ball. He palms his stubble and adjusts his frames. To and fro. He frowns, turns then asks, 'Does this run in the family?'

Mum wipes her eyes on her sleeve while we drive home. When we walk through the front door she turns into her bedroom and I go into the lounge. I turn off the lights—it's the first war of the world. T.E. Lawrence. A misfit. Sent (despite the disagreement of General Murray) into the Arabian Peninsula. Intelligent, charismatic, insolent. *Little known fact.* Lawrence never had a day of battlefield training. He became chums with King Faisal I, was only 5'5" and caved his head in riding a—'Do you need anything, dear?' The lounge door cracks ajar and she looks in tentatively. The light around her seems to jump around. No thanks I'm okay, thanks, Mum, really—my voice sounds unfamiliar, like it's on tape, like someone else is speaking for me. 'Okay, then.' I feel another deep twinge, like a muscle contracting and it's too—too deep and I—the door clicks shut as she leaves. Lawrence grins. 'Well, we can't all be lion tamers.' Did the film's editors digitally

enhance Peter O'Toole's eyes to that shade of ridiculous turquoise? Too blue, a harsh contrast with the desert.

I watch a YouTube video of an autopsy. The professor holds the brain like a butcher. 'This was a cancer patient who died on the operating table.' Lesions then. Something called a subarachnoid haemorrhage. And, you know, this feels like porn, like an unwanted undressing, a nakedness, but I keep watching and watching and the top comment is *Today I learnt my brain doesn't like watching other brains*. Brain inflammation then. An unruptured aneurysm. Perhaps abnormalities throughout my nerve branches then: ophthalmic, mandibular, maxillary. My neck clicks. I hold my head in one hand. Well, maybe the walls of my arteries are weak then, my brittle red sheets, small balloons filling, filling—released. I click back on the video. The professor's hands turn the pink flesh over, impressing her thumb into hemispheres like Playdoh. 'It's so squishy, isn't it?' Or the Big Daddy then. Latin for 'crab'. A neoplasm. A small crowd of cells, growing, gathering to watch me go.

My psych is well-mannered, deferential, has good posture. I'm taller than him. His office is small and sour-white like left out cream. On the wall there's a picture of a field. I think about how he's seeing me from his chair by the computer and—and my eyes aren't right, I'm saying. I'm seeing blurs, static and I can't seem to think the same. My chest tightens. I feel like I'm not myself, I say—it's like I'm not here anymore. He nods. My words start sounding strange, scripted. I remember when I was still away I would lay on my bed and look at my body and I felt like it wasn't mine. He nods. His eyes swim like two spotted fish in small glass bowls. I even pressed my body as I lay there, I tell him. I pushed my thumb into my leg. He nods. 'Anti-psychotics are a last resort,' he mouths. 'Everything goes on your medical record. We should be cautious.' I nod. All his earthy skin crinkles together. I hear his lines. I shake his soft hand. He smiles. 50 milligrams of *Pristiq*. Desvenlafaxine. Selective serotonin and norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors. Packaged in box of twenty-eight. Pink.

I turn off the lights. Peru. Herzog. Brian Fitzcarraldo, animated by the frenetic Klaus Kinsky who wrote over his daughter's story with his own. Who raped her for over a decade. Frankenstein's blond monster. Who for a moment now is dreaming of building the first opera house among dense rainforest in the small city of Iquitos. An expedition down rapids, broadcasting from a roof-strapped gramophone Enrico Caruso's *Bella Figlia Dell'Amore*. A dulcet baritone. It resonates over clusters of Native Peruvians, each manipulated in both narrative and reality to help lift an entire boat over a small mountain in a ravaging downpo—wait—I stand up. The pressure, again. I hold my head. A flash of pain grabs my skull like a fist and I can't—I can't do this. I can't. I sit down again and stay still. I feel another tremor. I grab my blanket and pat it flat and everything, everything just needs to stop. I wait. I wait, and—and so, you see, these Peruvians—*little known fact*—along the river, these Peruvians watch Kinsky. They watch him ranting and raving, abusing cast and director alike. They say to Herzog, 'We don't fear him because he speaks. We fear you because you don't.'

'Now, you've probably seen one before in the movies but this is a Snellen Chart. Q R U B N W S. Just read the lines like that in descending order. Great, that's looking good, no problems there. Okay, just going to put a few lenses over your eyes and we'll see if that makes a difference. Great, okay, aces. Do you want some water? No? Now, this great lumbering thing I'm scooting over here is called a Digital Retina Scanner. Massive, right? Destroy all humans! Just kidding. We're just going to use it to have a look at your fundus. Mm, yes, back wall of your eye where your retina and the optic nerve are. Now, these here, these are atropine drops. I'm going to pop some in and what it'll do is dilate your pupils nice and wide for us, pull that iris open wide like a curtain. So, here we go. One there, and two. Wonderful, have a look. Sorry? Oh, just a few hours at most. And we'll just adjust your chin into that rest there, just like that. Yeah. Now, you're going to see a few

very bright flashes of light, okay? It's really like a printer scanner. But it's going to be bright, like really bright. Ready? Okay. Here we go.'

I lie in bed. I seem to watch myself sleep now. Instead of being inside my thoughts they unfold in front of me like jittery improv and it's a dark, private show between myself and—voices, I keep hearing muffled voices, sound-bites, murmuring. My mouth tastes metallic. I turn over. Sometimes it's a snap, like an exhaust firing or the crack of a shotgun. I flip over my pillow then throw it away. Thoughts bubble up like CO₂ and break apart with a pop and can I think of thinking itself or am I an arrow trying to point inward? My chest shudders. I hear another voice speaking as if in another room. I shiver, then sweat. I get up and go to the bathroom. I look in the mirror. I look at myself and feel a cold fear at who stands there. I touch my cheeks and stare remotely at my reflection. I'm trapped inside a stranger. I leave. I go and sit outside on the cold couch out on the porch. It's covered in pine needles from a thrown-out Christmas spruce. This isn't what was meant to happen. I was—I was meant to be—I was meant to be me, not this. I look out into the dark garden and feel at that moment there's nothing between myself and the yard and I am no-one.

Leone. Lower Manhattan in the 1920s, 30s, and 68. Robert De Niro crawling around as Noodles in the Apple's criminal, lavish underbelly. Dad's with me, sitting down the other end of the couch. I can't get comfortable. I keep readjusting my hair over and over and—and—it's a sprawling, interconnected narrative, that real NYC-mafia-mania following hoodlums, cronies, bloodshed, lust—and De Niro's maniacal mien, grinning knowingly at the end in the opioid smoke. And, well, what do you think? Was it all in his head? Afterwards we sit for a while. *Little known fact*: Sergio Leone once peed on—Dad turns to me: 'I never expected you to unwind like this.' I look at him. Um, I say. I look down. Wait, what—Why? Are you, are you disapp—Stop it. You know that's not—of course, he's just surprised, I am too. Of course, it'd surprise anyone. But why did you say that, why did you say it like that? I ask him. He looks at me with no expression and—and—I can only see the grin, the grin—there's something in the grin. Dad, I can't—I can't tell.

The MRI room feels like a set. Tiffany-green. Loose scrubs. Floodlights. 'Do you want to listen to music?' I do, I say. I really do, though, please. I'm explained the process. Lay completely still. You'll hear noises. A head-clamp is involved. Don't move. It only slightly clamps. Large magnets. Tell us if you want to stop. Mirrored glasses are placed over my eyes like a scuba mask. The machine comes alive and the technician forgets to turn the music on. The sound of the whirring magnets makes me think of a B-grade scriptwriter penning: JACK lies in the MRI machine, it begins to make WEIRD MACHINE NOISES. The spin of the nuclei in all my hydrogen atoms aligns and I swear I can feel it but am definitely imagining it. Florence and the Machine abruptly kicks in but is quickly interrupted by an ad from Mitsubishi: '*...and mapping and satellite tracking. Twists and turns and smiles. And miles. Infra-red eyes. Self-drying brakes. And one, little, key.*'

Torrential rain. A priest. A woodcutter. A commoner. Perched under the Tokyo arch they deliberate on what happened, what exactly happened here in this story. I need a story. I need—a samurai was murdered, his wife raped and a rogue bandit suspect. They offer testimony. Each one is fallible, giving us words, images, memories, anecdotes, thoughts and you're just not sure, you can't tell what's happened. Everything's a lip out of place. Everything's only what we say it is. And, *little known fact*, even the assistant directors didn't know what—'Jack, I'm going for a walk, did you want to come?'—they, they didn't know, the assistants didn't know what it meant. They asked Kurosawa what *really* happened but he said everyone should be able to understand. 'Hey Jack, come on. Come out with me.' Dad, I can't. I can't, because our stories are all we have, see?—'Jack?'—and when they break—'There's no solution,' they said. That's it though. 'There's no solution.' They asked again, 'Come on, tell us, what happened?'

Cortisol kills brain cells. It kills and—and I can't remember how I was before. I can't flee myself or fight myself. Fear as intransitive. No object needed. My head spasms on the left side. I try to count to ten but the voice speaking the numbers doesn't seem like mine. I just stand there.

Released by adrenal glands naturally. Heightened when in danger. A glucocorticoid. I won't count to ten in someone else's voice. I can't—I don't know where I've gone if I'm still here. Who am I if I'm not who I've always been? And yet—it kills cells. Okay, count to ten then. It doesn't matter, just count to ten. Count to ten. It kills them. My throat tightens. Where have I gone? The roof is shimmering, television static. I look up and shake my hands in small arcs, watching the blur. Like winning Solitaire, the flurry of cards. I jump up. I run out of the lounge holding my head. Dad. Dad! He comes running over. I feel cold. Pressure. It's the pressure. Dad. I feel—I feel like I'm going to die Dad. Dad I don't—I think I'm going to— and we stand together by the decking door, letting the night air in. Me shaking, him telling me to breathe. In and out, he tells me. In and out. In and out.

Man, James Stewart, I'll give you the moon. And Jimmy the raven (*little known fact*), that crow sitting atop Bailey's desk is a bona fide avian star. A bird featured in over 1,000 feature films. 30s through 50s. Capra loved him. But Jimmy: he's shakin' dust off his feet, discarding crummy hometowns to trot Italy, Greece, the Parthenon, the—he has plans. It's his show. But the vagaries of things get in his way, stand shoulder-to-shoulder by the door. Days drip on and suddenly without realising he's sacrificed it all. He doesn't know who he is anymore and he wants to die. But then deus ex machina so cloy it was—jeez, it was sappy. A guardian angel. A guardian angel in a black Trilby who reveals to Stewart his worth to his friends, his family—supernaturally in black-and-white shows him what he means to everyone and 'Whaddya mean no identity!' and 'My name's George Bailey!' and it's so heavy-handed I begin to cry. I sit and I cry. In the dark of the lounge I cry heavy, stupid tears to have a God and for someone to show me a way out.

The television is off. I sit and I watch the off television. I sit there for a really long time and watch the off television. Bright light presses up against the blinds and eventually I get up. I grab Charlie's lead, pull on a brown overcoat, slip into boots, pick up headphones, touch for my phone and I feel tired, really tired but outside Ballarat is an open freezer door. You wake up against your

will. 'Do something that's routine, something you like, every day.' We walk. I watch him ferret through wild sedge, nose seeking, ears pricking and what was that?—we both turn: nothing. The sky is speckled, impressionist dabs. A television on a dead channel. 'Do something routine.' I watch him. Burrow. Sniff. Walk. Burrow. Sniff. Walk. He pauses at the maw of an underpass and then around at me, waiting.

'I haven't heard anything yet. Just wait a few more days.' He says this seriously. No smirk, furrows. Only two bulbous eyes looking out thick specs at me. I shake his soft hand. He gives me a grin. 'Sorry my hands are cold, too cold in this office.' In the waiting room I sit until Mum comes to pay the bill. A low-budget horror soap is playing on a television bolted high in the corner and a blonde woman is screaming with the sound off. Odd choice of programming for a psychiatry office, I think. At home, I go and sit at the kitchen table. Reticulated light comes in through our fly-wire windows and I look at it for a bit. Then I stand up and go lay outside on the decking. Charlie comes and sits nearby my arm but yips suddenly at the peal of a car horn so I scoop him in. The sunlight makes his eyes squint and for a moment I try and watch what he's watching but it seems like everything and nothing.