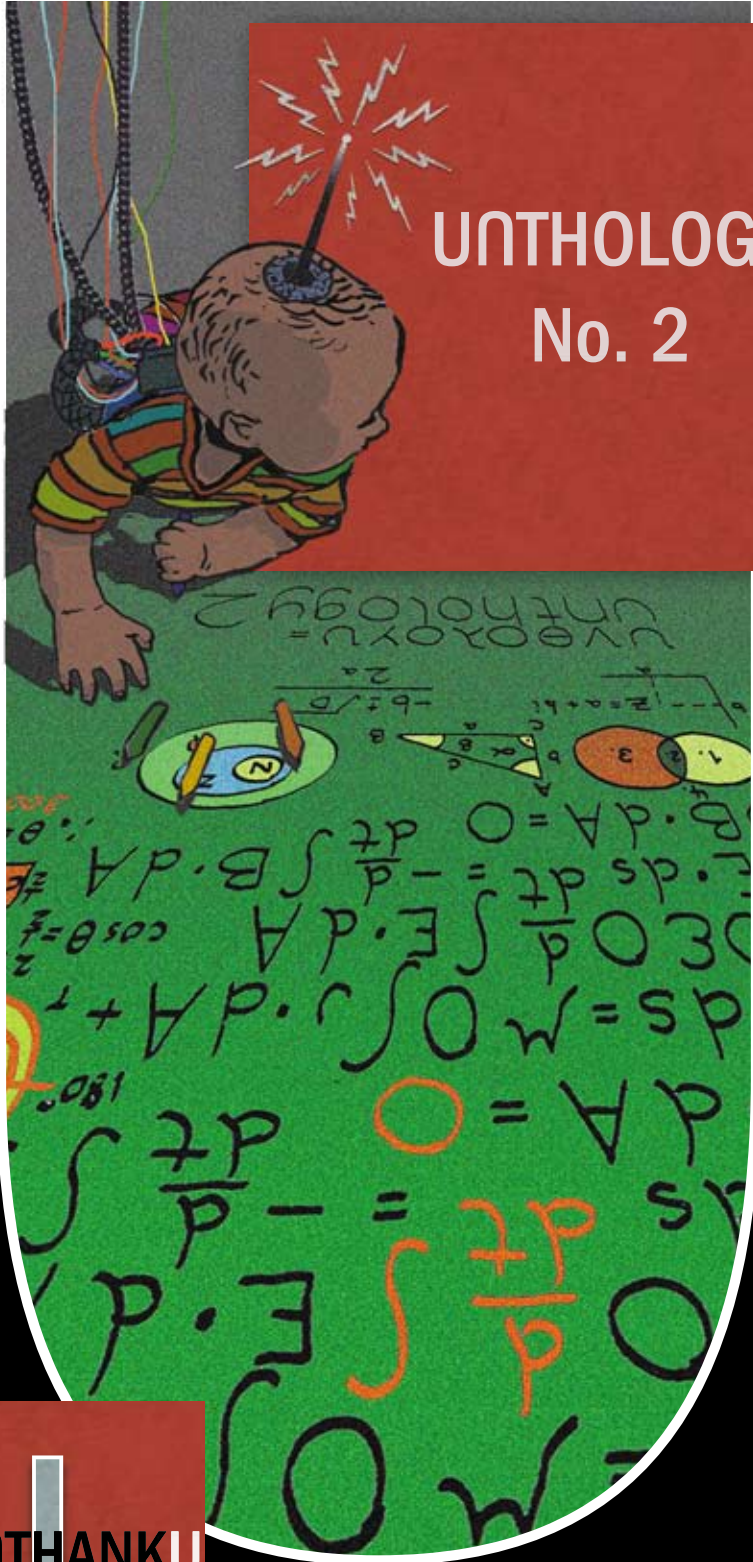


UNTHOLOGY

No. 2



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UNTHOLOGY 2

2011

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UNTHANK BOOKS

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Introduction

– The Editors –

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In the Introduction to *Unthology No.1*, which we published a year ago, we explained that the aim of this *Unthology* series of short prose anthologies was to reverse a trend. We mentioned the lack of magazines featuring short stories; the uniform tone of the stories that are published; the inability of anyone other than a 'big name' to have their short stories published before their novel, and we touched on the suspicion that in the internet era readers themselves were losing the ability and interest to enjoy more lengthy, developed short stories.

It is heartening that since *Unthology 1*, although we've not witnessed a great upsurge in mass market enthusiasm for either collections or anthologies, we have detected plenty of green shoots and many rearguard actions among groups of writers, editors and readers who are not prepared to see the form wither just yet. *Unthology 1* found itself well-received by online journals like *The Short Review* and *Sabotage*, the former of which is doing as much as anyone to keep the discussion in circulation. Salt revived the old *Best British Short Story* annual, under the editorship of Nicholas Royle, and with it gave many of last year's stories a second wind. The BBC's National Short Story Award and accompanying Comma Press collection continued to generate press, as did first collections like Stuart Ever's *Ten Stories about Smoking*. The publication of Lydia Davis's *Collected Stories* proved a revelation to many readers who had not

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encountered her work before. Even so, in a landscape that is perhaps slightly less forbidding than is often assumed, *Unthology* still stands slightly apart in championing the format-buster, the novelette and the adventurous as well as the classic realist short story. We like to see stories rub up against one another like hassled commuters crammed into a train carriage. We like to see them fight for elbowroom.

The quality of writing presented to us this year has been inspiring and the quantity of it almost overwhelming. We continue to hold no restrictions on word count, content, theme or author-profile and humbly hope that this is encouraging to those who send us work and partly accounts for this deluge of excellent writing. Long may it continue.

The stories collected here come in many guises. Some are truly short, some not so. Some are really quite dark, focusing on the psychology of a warped individual or one of lives terribly afflicted. These may be leavened with humour but the world-view of the protagonist must be accepted first and stuck with if you are to be afforded the laughs. There is a huge diversity of styles, from the incredibly terse to the relatively ornate. There are mini-satires of contemporary habits or cliques, fugues on travel and places away from this tiny isle and there are alternative futures and parallel presents which are utterly recognisable but luckily still not yet the norm.

Possibly the main element provided by this selection is surprise. It might be the traditional shock of revelation right at the end of a piece or the jolt as you realise what is happening or who has narrated, but it might equally be amazement at the success of what at first seems quite an elaborate or bold enterprise, one initially uncomfortable to read or not as accessible as we are used to. We are sure that all of these stories deliver on the surprise factor, engender in us real thought, and enable us to look at the world with different eyes and with our balance readjusted.

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**Opening Extracts From
Unthology 2's
Thirteen Contributors**

Stuck

– Sarah Evans –

‘Frigging snow,’ Simon grumbled into his phone. ‘And bastard airports,’ he added for good measure. He waited, a finger plugging his ear to blunt the roar of chat and laughter from the bar. ‘Sel?’

‘Yes.’ Selina’s voice was as crisp as the snow falling outside the misted window into Wenceslas Square.

‘Well it’s hardly my fault I’m stuck here, now is it?’ He sounded more defensive than he’d meant to. ‘I can’t help the fact it’s snowing.’

‘Not the snow itself, no.’

‘Well then, what?’

‘I can’t talk to you when you’re pissed.’

‘I’m not pissed!’ Immediately he noticed how the world was a little bleary. But he wasn’t drunk. Not yet. ‘You’re not even here.’ He could almost hear the soft *fu* of her exasperation. ‘What?’ he repeated.

‘I hardly need tell you, I always thought Prague was a mistake.’

But it was *his* bachelor party; he hardly needed to remind her of that and he wasn’t going to.

‘...this time of year...’ Her voice jabbered on. ‘...weather so uncertain...supposed to be saving...’ He held the phone a little away from his ear. ‘...mortgage...I managed perfectly well in London...’

Differences in Lifts

– Lander Hawes –

In the office where I work there are two lifts, positioned next to each other at the rear of the lobby. For a long time I assumed they were both identical in every way; their design is identical, and they are machines, and as we all know, there should be little or no variation in the working processes of identical machines.

After a few months of using the lifts daily, I began to notice that the lift on the right had a door that closed more quickly and forcefully than the door of the lift on the left.

‘The door on this lift is dangerous,’ I said to Paul, my colleague from the marketing department, one day when we were riding up in the right hand lift together.

‘Oh is it? Fucking typical,’ he said.

Then, a few days, or a few weeks or even months later, I entered this lift holding a mug of tea. I’d just made this mug of tea, and it was scalding hot, and as I stepped across the threshold of the lift the door closed and knocked my arm, making me throw the hot liquid forwards, narrowly missing a girl standing at the back by the mirror.

The door of the left hand lift could never have done this.

Hang Up

– Shanta Everington –

Ian stares at the words on the screen, waiting for the phone to ring. His chin rests on his palms, his elbows on the desk. Eyes blur. Elbows buzz. It’s been nearly two hours. He sighs and leans back; refocusing and stretching out his legs, letting his head roll. He’s glad to be on shift alone tonight. Not strictly by the rules but what with the new girl being sacked for internet dating on duty, and Graham off with his guts again, he doesn’t like to let anybody down. The men in suits aren’t happy with the stats as it is. And besides, Marjorie said he could ring her mobile any time if he needed to debrief. He thinks of the new girl. All eyebrow rings and attitude. A year older than Lisa.

He closes his eyes and sees the letter from Sarah. Twenty-three years reduced to ink on paper. Real ink, like always. He laughs a silent laugh, rolling his pen between forefinger and thumb, craving a smoke.

Dear Ian, I think you should get a solicitor.

Gottle O’ Geer

– Melissa Mann –

It’s decided. From now on I’ll be inseparable from a ball of wool in case the urge to knit should overwhelm me at any point during the course of my day. Above us, the sun shines loudly in a sky silent but for the odd remark of cloud. Carlsberg o’clock by my reckoning. Had I not been

sacked, I'd be in the gents round about now, drinking the first of my twelve-a-day, necking one down while my supervisor moves his bowels in the cubicle next to me. Happy days. Used to hide my cans in the cistern – a kind of improvised cool-box, if you will. Ingenious I thought rather than grounds for dismissal, but then what do I know about genius? I'm a Smith. We Smiths tend to live as we die, in our sleep, which is why I resent having to come here of course. Being an alcoholic is my one claim to a personality. Without it I'd be dull as ditchwater like all the rest.

The Swan King

– Ashley Stokes –

This will be the last time that he sees her. He will be in Milan, in the Piazza Fontana. Her head will rest on the shoulder of a tall, grey-haired man. In his unstructured jacket and frameless glasses, the grey-haired man will have the air of a business consultant or European media executive. Slender still, she will be wearing a bronze-coloured leather coat and high suede boots and be tanned even though it is winter. They will be holding hands and will laugh as they stride across the piazza. Adrian will not be alone in noticing them. Everyone else in the piazza, the bystanders and tourists will pause and watch them as they head towards the cathedral.

The familiar twinge will pulse behind his eyes. In crowds, Adrian is still goaded, even after all this time, by the faces of people he once knew. He will always be mistaken and often embarrassed and ashamed by this. In Milan he will not have time to wonder why he keeps thinking he sees her.

This time it is her.

Nine Hundred and Ninety Something

– Nick Sweeney –

The sea was lapping with some contentment round the harbour at Bakirköy, known as the Marina. A bit of a paradox, as the Marina welcomed no seafaring vessels, only drinkers to populate its bars that

kidded you into thinking they were places in, I don't know, Cape Cod, or Key Largo. At seven on a Sunday morning, they looked forlorn, as did my friend Don Darius. He gripped my arm and fixed alarmed eyes on me, and said, 'Where am I?'

Turquoise May morning down by the Marmara Sea, I could have said, but I was in no mood for poetry. 'Outdoor bar on hard seats,' it was my misfortune to remind him.

'It's Damn Bull.'

'You're damn right.'

Being the kind of guy who can be happy in a place like Istanbul, I only appeared to be agreeing with him. Don, I knew, had issues with the place. 'My wish to be here is cancelled forthwith,' he was telling people, like, a day after arriving.

The Poets of Radial City

– Paul A. Green –

A Cultural Epicentre

Visitors to Radial City can enjoy a wealth of cultural activity. Whether you're tempted by orchestral tournaments at the Polyphonic Hall, a *vernissage* at the Medusa Galleries or a guided walk around the City's Time-Tableaux, you'll discover a constantly changing world of artistic creativity. The City's famous sidewalk cafes – the Cafe Bourgeois, the Helicon – are alive day and night with aesthetic and intellectual debate.

If you prefer more sensuous delights, you can taste the pleasures of cabaret, dance and performance art in the Hospitality District at exclusive clubs like the Dancing Ghost or vibrant gritty venues like Uncle Bonnie's.

And wherever you go, you'll hear music, from concerts at the Beavertdale Stadium by electrical guitar bands like the famous Memes, discovered here by Astral-FM, to the plangent pipes of picaresque Ruralist minstrels wandering the precincts of the Basilica of St Barnabas.

Hours of Darkness

– Tessa West –

She set off at ten. Just past the traffic lights she crossed over, turned left into a small road and decided to follow it to the next junction. She knew he wouldn't be far away.

She walked between a long line of parked cars and tiny front gardens behind low walls. Incompletely pulled curtains framed glimpses of a woman holding a baby, a man with his head in his hands, a screen showing soldiers advancing across a white desert.

At first she didn't realise he was a person. He looked like a pile of earth or leaves heaped up against some steps and it was difficult to make him out because one of the street lights was not working. He was lying face down, one knee loosely pulled towards his chest. His arms were spread out like dislocated wings, his head turned to the side. He had fallen just as a victim hit on the head is supposed to fall, ready for someone to draw round in chalk so the position remains marked on the ground after the body has been taken to the morgue.

Stations of the Cross

– Ian Madden –

Long past midnight and Christopher Staunch is sitting at his kitchen table staring at four cardboard bow ties – all maroon – and mulling over the errand that had spurred him out earlier in the evening.

Licking a thumbnail discoloured by powdered thyme, it's not the herb he can taste so much as the pastry in which it had been wrapped.

Outside the wind is still raging; pushing at doors, knocking over plant pots, flinging milk shake cartons with drinking straws still in them into the sky and away.

There is no overhead lighting in his house. (Not his house exactly but the compound dwelling assigned to him by the company when he came to work in the Sultanate). He long since removed all the bulbs from the ceiling fittings and bought table lamps for every room. In the kitchen at night the only illumination is from the underside of the wall units. He finds it calming.

Recovery

– Charles Wilkinson –

The deterioration in my eyesight has been most welcome. I need only take off my glasses to defamiliarize the world: the scene outside the bus now fur-like, the fuzz on the peach of the day – and on the hoardings great yellow suns that could be oranges. Only the largest street signs are legible. Shops fronts have names but offer blurred services. The scaffolding on the red-brick building that I know to be a library looks softer, frayed at the edges like rope. Women, smudged black *niquabs*, make their way to the supermarket; their grey-paint shadows run off them. Faces have lost their hard lines. Even the man three seats in front of me has a comfortable haze of white hair. I prefer it this way. I am sitting right at the back of the bus, protecting myself with Victor Shklovsky. I am not just a man, wearing a crumpled linen jacket and trousers that have no creases, on a bus heading into the centre of Birmingham: I have heard of Viktor Shklovsky; even read Victor Shklovsky – though a long time ago. I had tenure.

Siramina

– M. Pinchuk –

I had arrived from the mainland on the afternoon ferry, the only tourist on board. It had been blazingly sunny when we left – in fact, it had been sunny for the whole month I'd been in the country – but about halfway through the crossing, the sun disappeared and the rain bucketed down. The locals seemed to expect the wet weather: they all carried umbrellas or rain ponchos. I'd had to dash for cover and then root around in my suitcase for ages before I found my raincoat. Most passengers stayed on deck, facing down the storm with loud talk, and drinking home-brewed alcohol from jam-jars. I wasn't brave enough to join them. I spent the journey inside, huddled near the door, trying to keep my mind off the stench of mould and sweat, wondering where the sudden rain had come from. I caught sight of the world outside only when the door opened to let people in or out.

The rain washed away all colour, painting the sea and sky an even, pearly grey. In the depths of the downpour the horizon disappeared, and I lost my sense of direction.

127 Permutations

– Stephanie Reid –

An ordinary street in an ordinary town. In that street, an ordinary house: Number Seventeen. Inside the house; six bedrooms, one lounge, two bathrooms, one kitchen and seven occupants.

The seven occupants, (hereafter referred to individually as persons (A) to (G) and collectively as *the household*) have shared Number Seventeen for two years. Friends/lovers since university, the household interacts smoothly. Minor traumas, upsets or hostilities are tempered by a shared appreciation of world cinema, cabernet sauvignon and Mozart. Efficient access to bathrooms has long since been agreed and the division of domestic responsibilities is now so embedded that the original cleaning rota hangs framed in the lounge – a testament to the stability of living arrangements at Number Seventeen.

These strong foundations support each member of the household. This is how it has always been and how it will continue.

Classified

– Joshua Allen –

Thursday, 7th October, 57 years since the birth of the Third Reich (TR 57)

It is best to start with the most urgent matter: the subhuman. He hangs around the library making faces at the books, occasionally sliding one out and underlining the blurb in his drool. They say he was married once, before he was imprisoned for child molestation. He is a dribbler due to the high impurity of crack cocaine, and the high frequency of assaults, in prison. He is called John.

I've decided to start this diary because I feel that the dormant Reich is about to break free again from the insidious fetters of Judaism,

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Negroism, Communism. It is only I and my Aryan brothers, those who are conscious of their race and its essence as a cosmic superlative, that have kept the legacy of 1933 from being lost entirely to this poisonous amnesia. But who am I? If whoever reads this is a Nietzschean, they will of course be concerned with the *individual*.



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