

Dear Reader,

Welcome to Issue Zero of Breve New Stories. This is the beginning of a journey in literature that will bring together the known and the unknown. Between these pages you will find one short story and one flash fiction piece, both original and both from a new UK talent.

Breve New Stories believes in the power of short literary fiction and in the importance to give space to the rich and diverse talent of new and emerging authors. Follow us, get inspired, spread the word....and have a good read!

The Editor

Inside Issue Zero:

<i>In a Land of Canaries – Lauren Bell</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>“A” Death – Michael Hampton.....</i>	<i>17</i>
<i>The Authors.....</i>	<i>24</i>

In A Land of Canaries

Lauren Bell



Any moment now and I'll see it, a flash of bright yellow poking out from beneath pressed suits and tailored dresses. They think they're above suspicion, that no-one will suspect a thing but they are wrong. I am on to them like glue, following them through glass-filled streets, recording anything I deem unusual into my quiet notebook which absorbs everything.

The sky here is unlike anything I have ever seen before. It appears to be made from the purest of blues,

reminding me of baby blue felt attracting cotton wool clouds as though they are dandelion seeds. Everything seems to fit together like a giant jigsaw puzzle; the sheer glass buildings which remind me of inflatable towers and the workers who rush around like clockwork mice. Everything has a function here.

There are clocks too, an uneven row of them all displaying the same time and growing out of the ground like mechanical flowers. As I walk past, I hear them hiss like serpents. I quickly hurry out of their sight, afraid that they might be living after all.

A canvas of clouds loom overhead, sugar white inventions, promising anything but rain. They are soft, comforting, reminding me that peace is only a cloud wisp

away.

Except something isn't quite right with this artificial microcosm; there are no irregularities, no imperfections within the glass city. It is too pristine, too perfect, too surreal.

You can easily get lost in a place like this, a land of glass and time where a hundred thousand selves are reflected back in a single pair of eyes. Each building is a gigantic hall of mirrors revealing another facet you thought concealed or lost.

The Wharf is a maze, complex like a concrete crossword. I look for clues, possible cracks which reveal its less than perfect nature and find nothing.

But then I notice a smartly-dressed woman, a

single necklace of cultured pearls around her throat and two-tone shoes to match the rest of her quirky outfit walking towards the row of clocks, hardly giving them a second glance when they shriek, hissing out loud as though they are leaking gas. A look of sheer horror creeps over her face as she stands rooted to the spot, staring at the clocks. Then she glances at her watch, the horror easily discernible to a passer-by and runs straight into the building, the polished double doors reflecting the street outside. I make a note of the sudden unexplained horror which painted itself across the woman's face and, most importantly, the time.

Up close, the clocks are nothing special; they are seemingly ordinary inventions complete with round

faces and movable hands. But there is something strange about this hissing sound they make which makes them seem alive.

*Yellow...yellow...a flash of yellow...a flash of feather...
a flash of yellow feather.*

The words scramble themselves inside like an omelette gone wrong. They are heavy, dense like sponges swollen with fluid.

*Yellow feather, a flash of yellow, a flash of feather, look
for yellow.*

I see no yellow, no feather, nothing that resembles what I am looking for.

I decide to call it a day.

*

Over the next few days I change my routine, walking along different streets, observing hundreds of people but only really noticing the odd few. There is a middle-aged man with a polished leather briefcase who regularly checks his watch, then scans his surroundings before deciding to make a quick dash for it in the growing throng. Another man, much younger this time who preens his hair and straightens his tie, checks his phone – the time blinking back in bold lightning white. He swallows hard, spins around on his heels and decides to go back the way he came.

I watch hordes of women with painted faces, coiffed hair and Prada shoes ask strangers what the time is or turn their heavily made-up faces to the interactive

screens. If they see an agreeable time they smile and saunter off into the crowd, if not, they barge past women with children, elderly tourists and anyone else who happens to be in their way.

I decide to keep watch for a bit, to note down any patterns which might help to reinforce my theory. For a while, nothing of interest happens, and then a grey-faced man with slicked back hair walks past, one hand in his coat pocket, the other one swinging freely by his side. I notice a ring on his index finger, the stone a brilliant emerald gleaming silently, and for some reason decide to include it in my notebook. I look back up, the brilliance of the stone still firm in my mind and see the man quickly stuff his free hand into his other pocket. I also

note down that there is a definite flash of yellow before his hand disappears completely.

*

He is not the only one to conceal this secret. Since then my trusted notebook has recorded another twenty individuals who conceal their yellow feathers. And that's forgetting the other fifty I'm not sure about.

Sometimes you see it in the blink of an eye, although that's not nearly enough evidence for such a strong conviction. I'm certain there must be hundreds more out there, possibly thousands all hiding a huge secret beneath respectable attire.

It seems my notebook isn't enough. In order to uncover the truth about Canary Wharf and its workforce

I require hard evidence. That's where my camera comes in.

*

I stand here along with everyone else, my camera in hand, snapping away at sky-coloured buildings and the flower-like clocks. I blend in with the hundreds of tourists who come here in an attempt to capture the greatest picture and leave with many more. The camera shutter snaps away like there is no tomorrow, the eyelid temporarily blinking before snapping up again. I record concrete, glass and trees. I discover cracks, shadows and feathers.

A stray one floats before me; a rough and rather ragged thing which doesn't look like it has come off a

bird. It floats past in a drunken wave before dropping suddenly to the ground. I bend down and pick it up. It feels coarse between my fingertips – an ancient and tired-looking thing. I place it in my notebook and then close it tightly, pressing down on the cover, praying the pages will give this feather a new home. It isn't a photograph but it is hard evidence.

I make my way through the streets on this very quiet Friday, noting the images I have already captured, when up ahead a short balding man crosses my path. He turns in my direction but doesn't see me, despite me being the only other person in the street.

I decide to follow him.

*

He walks with a brisk gait as though he has clipped heels, and pulls his coat close around his wire-thin frame and makes as if to run. Except he doesn't.

The Wharf is overshadowed by cloud today, the thick padding overhead seemingly pressing down on the buildings below. I'm surprised they don't shatter.

Suddenly from on my right, a door swings open and half a dozen people flock out in front of me, obscuring my view of the balding man. I yearn to push them out of the way, to part them the way Moses parted the Red Sea and make a beeline straight for him. The crowd seem to know this though and continue to chatter and laugh, throwing their arms out whenever they refer to something.

I decide to change my tactics and slip into a different street losing the excess noise and clutching my notebook tighter. It feels wrong, it feels lighter as though something is trying to escape from inside. I think about all of the words I have written down – my spider scrawl creeping across each page and wonder if words really do have a mind of their own.

And then I remember the feather.

*

The book actually flutters in my hands and I already know what will happen if I open it. I picture the feather fighting its way from amongst the ink-filled pages, soaring high into the sky on its very own zephyr, my heart longing to be with it.

I still haven't found the fast-walking man which is a shame because there was something I wanted to ask him. I wanted to know what it *felt* like. Did he accept his difference or was it a burden he had come to despise. I also wanted to ask him what it felt like to be free, flying with wings, impossibly weightless. But I guess I'll never know now. At least I have my feather.

The book continues to be restless, growing frantic with unexpected lunges, flapping about like a fish out of water. The feather is all I have got, the only evidence that something truly magical and wonderful is happening right here in the heart of our capital city.

Now I have both of my hands clamped around it, struggling to keep it contained, whispering to it to settle

down. It doesn't hear me, and if it does, it doesn't listen.

I am out in the open again and still the book persists, the feather yearning to be set free; and despite my purpose, the reason that has brought me here, I open the book and hold it up to the sky. The bright canary yellow feather bursts from between the pages as though it is caught on a fishing line and zips out in front of me speeding its way around the corner and out of sight.

I hurry after it determined to see its ascent into the sky when I spot the fast-walking man in a group of about fifty others, all huddled around the flower-like clocks. The escaped feather attaches itself onto a lady's coat and the world grows deadly silent. My heartbeat comes alive in my throat, the impossible thumping causing my temples to beat in sync.

I stand, a unified beating mass, and watch as the

clocks hiss their way into our hearts and minds, the fifty or so people shedding their skin to make way for bright yellow feathers as they ascend into the sky.

“A” Death

Michael Hampton



1.

Have you ever noticed how common it is for signage above shops to contain a faulty or loose letter, so that the trade name might contain a wobbly plastic K, a rusted J, or a W that has worked itself loose from the fascia? When times are hard and money for maintenance all the more scarce, especially in small local businesses prone to cash

flow problems, these are the kind of tell tale deficiencies that reveal themselves to the naked eye. Of course there are other examples of neglect, but these are usually confined to the staff toilet or back yard, mainly indoor plumbing or drain issues. Knackered photocopy machines are another example, or old kettles that don't switch off automatically and end up scalding somebody too. However the signage on the front of a business premises is key to the way it announces itself to the world, and gains its foothold in the high street, or side street for that matter, since this phenomenon of the loose letter on the verge of dropping off seems to occur more in the half-lit, slightly scruffy part of town, where no-one is too fussy, and there's never enough time or inclination to

deal with cosmetic stuff when you are in the mean grip of a double dip recession.

2.

Some extremely banal occurrences take place right under your nose. Travelling on the top deck of a suburban bus for instance reveals sights that might normally be denied the pedestrian or car driver: the serial numbers on the back of gravestones in a pet's cemetery, that grubby old burglar alarm marked 'Avant Garde' which looks to no longer be working (and is therefore charmingly retro), or the façade of a closed down café smothered in peeling decollaged posters awaiting a refit or demolition, but which temporarily adds a Parisian touch to an otherwise drab suburban street.

3.

PATAK'S was a large suburban cash & carry next to a set of traffic lights and on the bus route home, so as the vehicle paused, you could survey all its vinyl information: offers and credentials for IN STORE PROMOTIONS, FOOD & WINE, and SUPPLIERS TO THE CATERING TRADE. It was easy to read this advertising in sequence, but up above, over the awning which stretched the length of the premises, five large letters comprising the name PATAK were quite conspicuous, more especially the letter A which had contrived to fall off its fixture and come to rest on its side upon a little ledge, jammed between the T and K. An errant pointy "A" that had probably gone unnoticed by anyone, and for an unspecified period of time. Behind this dislodged "A" was a pencil fine dust outline, not unlike the mark left behind when a picture gets taken down from the wall after many years in the same place; so literally drop shadow lettering.

4.

The man's body was spreadeagled on the pavement, and at first it was impossible to read the situation clearly, although several onlookers or passers-by seemed to have been put out of routine synch by this event. The bus slowed in traffic as car driver's stopped to rubberneck. For a change I was sitting downstairs, and therefore confronted by the untoward sight; looking through the grimy window and across the road even though I suspected nothing good would come of my voyeurism. Someone had already covered the victim up, with a black bin liner would you believe, but his head protruded, accompanied by a patch of dark red that had trickled onto the ground. The bus started to roll forward as the lights turned from red to green, making the grotesque scene clearer. That red plastic "A" in PATAK'S had finally skittered off of the shop's fascia and proceeded to

bury itself apex first inside the head of this hapless fellow.

5.

Several days later a short article in the local news rag reported the accident in the most neutral terms. An as yet unidentified man was dead (his next of kin were still to be informed), killed without the slightest warning by an airborne capital letter.

A Death, might be the title of an existentialist novella, set in Tsarist Russia, or Iron Curtain Poland, with an acute psychological focus on the anti-hero's individual demise. Whereas "A" Death is absolutely contemporary, death no longer even a question of rebellion or bureaucratic nicety, but an accident, and a gruesomely random one at that: death distilled and dealt in the form of a plastic letter, deadlier than a ninja's shuriken, the precise intersection of a passer by out

shopping for groceries, and a piece of flying debris, in fact almost as bizarre and ill-fated as death by extraterrestrial space junk.

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Authors

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