

A Scottish Arts Club Short Story Competition Finalist

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JUNK

BY HEATHER REID

It wasn't that he'd expected applause or gasps of amazement, although either would have been welcomed, but if he'd harboured any dreams at all of being acknowledged as a writer, tonight was the occasion when he let those dreams go.

'Shards of light?' Ralph Muller had queried after the obligatory period of contemplation – a minute's silence for the dear departed - '*shards?*'

'I liked it.' Hazel Rennie ventured, contorting her face apologetically as if to dislodge a raspberry pip from a molar. '*Shhhaaar-ds.*' Sitting opposite, Morris Foxtan coughed abruptly and Malcolm fancied he heard the word *twaddle* disguised within its emission. But it was left to Ralph to deliver the fatal blow. 'Maybe it's one to sit on for a while,' he'd concluded. 'Give it time to mature and then - perhaps - come back to it.' He'd shuffled his papers - his novel - anticipatorily. 'Is that you finished, Malcolm?'

Bernadette was outraged. 'Sod 'em,' she said after he'd laid the bones of the evenings meeting before her like the mangled carcass it had been, 'they wouldn't know decent poetry if it bit them. And that guy – Muller - who died and made him Caroline Duffy?'

Touched by her loyal, if misinformed, support Malcolm chose to withhold the fact that at the group's previous meeting his use of the word *azure* had provoked a response close to apoplexy in a number of its younger members. No, he'd made up his mind. It was time to move on from the writing, to try something a little more suited to his abilities.

He took down the cardboard folder from the shelf above the computer, thirty or so hand written poems, alongside their accompanying rejection slips, that he'd secretly hoped might one day make a collection. He flicked the pages through his fingers and they breathed back at him: dead wood and disappointment. He could hang on to them, something to make

the grandchildren laugh twenty years down the line, but, what was it they said, kill your darlings? OK, fine. But, as he prepared to feed the pages into the shredder it felt sickeningly like infanticide. He'd given birth to these pages, a labour both long and difficult, the least he could do was christen them before burial.

He'd dabbled with collection titles in the past, something quirky but essentially meaningless was required: *Knitting fog with Keats*, *Quadrilateral Winking*, *Mangled by Muller*. *Azure Shards* he wrote at last in heavy blue marker pen across the cover of the file then, scoring it out, substituted it with the more fitting, *To a Blue-Lidded Bin*, adding a few rhyming lines by way of an elegy underneath. It was nearing midnight by the time he finally laid the body to rest, placing it carefully on top of the rinsed out yoghurt pots, milk cartons and unsolicited flyers that he suddenly feared would be all that ever remained in the world to denote his existence.

The letter, if you could call it that, arrived two weeks later, a used brown envelope, un-stamped and presumably hand delivered. It was addressed to Malcolm although the original recipient's details, a Mr Mallory from Pitlochry, could just be made out beneath a heavy scribble of biro and where it had originally been opened the envelope was now folded and secured with a single paper clip.

He opened it in the kitchen whilst he waited for the rice to cook. Bernadette was late home on Thursdays and supper was his responsibility. Inside was a piece of square cardboard of the kind often found beneath supermarket bakery products, shiny on one side and freckled with darkish grease marks on the other. It bore the faint odour of something spicy, cinnamon rolls perhaps or hot cross buns, and Malcolm held it to his nose before examining its message. *Thanks for the poem. Loved it*, it read, in loose blockish letters which here and there disappeared into the darkened spots of grease giving it the rather ominous feel of a ransom note. The signature below read simply *BLB*. He tipped the envelope upside down and shook it to loosen any further contents, but it was empty. BLB? The handwriting was not familiar but the B was presumably Bernadette, she must have found his poems when she put out the bin that Thursday after the writers' group. And then it came to him: BLB, - Blue Lidded Bin. Clever! And sweet too. Bernie wasn't, by her own admission, a poetry person but she clearly understood how much its loss had meant to him. 'Thanks,' he said when she returned home that evening.

‘For what?’ she’d responded, and he’d squeezed her arm to acknowledge that he understood the game and appreciated the sentiment. It would be two weeks until the recycling bin was collected again, he would work on something special for then.

His second poem took its inspiration from the cardboard on which Bernadette’s note had been written, eight rhyming couplets penned from the point of view of a hot cross bun disposed of on reaching its sell by date. *I am very hot and very cross*, it began, ending with a reflection on the evils of waste in a world where millions starved, one of his wife’s particular bugbears. He took his time completing it and was pleased enough with the result to create a file for it on his computer which he titled ‘Junk.’ In keeping with the spirit of the original note he inscribed the poem onto card he’d saved from a packet of crumpets and placed it in the recycling bin on the Wednesday evening prior to collection day. Two weeks later he was thrilled to find a second note behind the door, this time penned on the back of a decapitated rooster torn from a box of cornflakes. *Brilliant*, it read. *Keep them coming!!!* *BLB*. Again Bernadette seemed chary at acknowledging his thanks and so he undertook to present her with something a little more unique next time.

The idea for poem number three came when he was replacing the empty toilet roll in the bathroom and the architecture of the tube, the grooved line that curves from top to bottom, caught his eye. It would be a tricky endeavour but with some careful penmanship he thought he could achieve it. In reality though, the poem: *Flush/Don’t Flush*, about the expediency of disposing of certain products down the loo, ran to three stanzas and required close monitoring of the household toilet paper situation to ensure that he was the one to gain ownership of the empty rolls. It took several attempts to spiral the poem along the curved line of the tubes but eventually he was satisfied with the result when he laid them side by side on a sheet of paper placed on top of the bin’s contents to ensure they didn’t get mixed in and lost. Again, two weeks later, a note through the door: *Amazing. More, more, more!* This time on the lid of an egg box.

Over the next few weeks Malcolm fashioned a sonnet of love from the blue-lidded bin to its friend and neighbour the brown-lidded bin, a pantoum entitled *Please Be Careful Where You Stick That Gum*, and, in a week when he’d been laid low with the flu, a Haiku about tissues, each receiving a corresponding note of thanks two Thursdays later. The final note however arrived on a Tuesday, sealed in a windowed envelope and typed on clean

white paper. It was from an Alistair McGregor in the council's Environmental Department inviting him to an interview with regard to his work. 'We have been considering ways in which we might promote the need for recycling household waste in a consumer friendly manner,' it said. 'Your work was drawn to our attention by the local refuse collectors who have been displaying it on the notice board of their office. We would be grateful if you would allow us to publish some of your poems in poster form and work with us on possible future projects. We would of course be prepared to negotiate some remuneration.'

He met Ali and Steve at the launch of his first collection, released to coincide with an exhibition of his work at the cities museum alongside 'junk sculptures' by a local artist and artsy photographs of environmental pollution. They'd found *To a Blue-Lidded Bin* when checking the receptacle's contents, as they were required to do before disposal, and had been loath to destroy what was clearly a labour of love. It had been Steve's idea to reply in the guise of the recycling bin and they had been delighted when Malcolm responded in kind. Their notes, which he'd kept, were photographed and interspersed with Malcolm's work in a collection he had intended to call 'Landfill,' but, after Bernadette had argued that this seemed somewhat counterproductive settled instead for 'Rubbish Poems, which, strangely enough, had been her suggestion all along.

1495 words

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The winner of the £800 prize and runners up will be announced at the Scottish Arts Club Short Story Awards Dinner on Saturday 15 October 2016