

LAY-BY
Vanessa Gebbie

Black, greasy road-dirt under Frank's nails.

The lorries, cars, they don't move any more. Or ... they do move, but Frank can't see them any more. They realigned the road.

Frank went out just now in his chair. And his bloody chair has slipped, one wheel off the new ramp.

Don't use it, sir, until the rails are in. Next Monday at the latest.

He's going to have to shout to the lorry drivers for help.

Bloody council realigned the road while he was away, tour of duty, then hospital. Frank now has to be in the bathroom to see traffic. But the glass is frosted; ferns and more fucking ferns. He can just see a blur. He feels the blur through the chair, thinks he remembers what his feet might have felt.

In the new lay-by, the lorries are static. Parked up. There's a great blank-sided whitish one now, blocking the light. Been there days.

Frank rang the council. *What d'you mean, lorry park? No, I didn't see any notices in the papers. Don't read the effing papers. Been away.*

Then he'd apologised. She sounded old.

Join up and see the world. Frank saw the world and the world is clouds, canvas, sand. Madnesses, large and small. The world is the wrong guns for deserts. The wrong boots. The wrong vehicles for IEDs.

The world is noise, shouts. Pain, planes, darkness, cards, and fucking flowers.

Frank's hands are dirty. He wheeled himself down the new

ramp, into the lay-by, hung around in his chair. Some bloke said to leave his lorry alone or he'd call the cops.

Didn't he know it takes more than just pain to get out here, down to the lorries, push up, one arm rigid on the arm of the chair? Almost standing, but Frank's legs don't remember. What's left of his legs. Reaching up with the other hand, pain like knives.

To simply write a few words. Like he used to when he was a kid. Writing a message to the world on the back of a dirty lorry.

I am Frank. They moved my fucking road.

A NIGHT ON THE LASH

David Swann

For Dave Gilliver

Two friends had ventured off the beaten track, but the resort they chose was down on its luck.

They wanted another drink, but, with nightclubs fussy about training-shoes and all the pubs shut, the only option was the chippie.

Standing in a stale doorway, eating handfuls of wet batter, they spotted a sign:

ANNUAL PARTY FOR THE ASSOCIATION
OF PARENTS OF CHILDREN
WITH HAND AND ARM DEFICIENCIES

Beneath that, in smaller type, there was an instruction:

PLEASE KNOCK

So they did, and nothing happened, until a young skinhead with no arms pushed past and hit the door with his skull.

That did the trick. Bouncers appeared. They lifted a little velvet rope and ushered the friends through, into the yeast and smoke of a dingy ballroom, where Eighties hits thudded from the gloom.

On the dance floor a desperate, snarling couple were flailing at each other with their bare hands.

At last, the other dancers yanked them apart.

The woman wept under the strobe lights, bits of hair clinging

to her fingers. Her lover was led away to the toilets.

Afterwards, the DJ put on 'Two Tribes'.

The friends took a leathery seat in the corner beside a child. They couldn't work out who the child's parents were, and had become too nervous to enquire, so they concentrated on drinking, hoping that someone would claim her.

Later, the child fell asleep at a stiff angle. She was about 7 or 8, they reckoned. Her hands rested in her lap, each with two fingers.

The friends gulped their drinks. After trips to the toilet, they discussed the bloody smear along the urinal. Had it been headbutted? Or punched?

Music thudded. The child slept on, her face smooth and unbothered.

The friends were approached by a man who asked if they knew Barry. When they shook their heads, the man punched his own head in anger. 'Gatecrashers!' he raged. 'At a charity do!'

He made them leave.

Outside, wind thrummed in the promenade's wires. When the friends tried to flag a cab, they noticed their hands. They studied their fingers in the wind.