



# Global Short Story Competition

## February 2014

Winner : Catherine McNamara  
The Sneeze

Highly Commended : Vanessa Couchman  
Into the Abyss

# The Sneeze

Catherine McNamara

Karen Dessange has been feeling testy. The thought of what Gaetano has just done with her credit card account. Vaporising it, in a word. Shifting what used to be joint to a slim flow into her muddy domestic account and saying what does she need to nourish the banks for? She rears along Chaussée de Vleurgat and feels an angry, head-throwing-back sneeze coming on, fissures through her nostrils along the hot catchment behind her eyes. She slams into the rear of a Fiat Panda and sees three people stumble out as she wipes snot from her cheek. Fuck. A north African man. A fully pregnant woman. A boy with a block of iron-coloured hair.

She climbs out onto the footpath. Says in French,

What were you doing stopped here? What do you think this is?

Before realising the woman is standing stiffly, cupping her belly, the little crying boy hammered into her hip. The father explains that a vehicle came out from the right. Karen remembers the idiotic road rules here.

She asks if the woman is injured.

The woman's face is dragged downward, steeped in pallor. The little boy's hands are fanned out, one clasping her thigh, the other in the seat of her jeans. Why do women let their sons touch them like this? She nods several times, looking to her husband who looks at the beaten rear of their car, which Karen's Gaetano-sponsored insurance will pay for. The



woman takes a few steps along the footpath and straightens her back, the son stuck to her. Both the father and Karen watch her steps, her crappy sandals and the silver belt looped around her waist. The right thing would be to take them to the hospital. Karen looks at her own undamaged vehicle. It's a large looming Audi she won't be able to run for much longer. She sees shopping bags in the back of the Fiat, a sheath of spinach leaves sitting brightly. It hits Karen that she has ploughed into these people, pitching them forward like crash dummies in their seats. She clutches her handbag, feels prickling along the canals of her nose.

Shall we fill out the forms?

She is certain something will be amiss. No insurance, no licence, dud working visas. She retrieves the documents from her car. When she opens the forms on the roof of the Fiat she turns aside and sees the man's eyes are full of water. Karen hands him the pen and he writes with difficulty, sometimes smearing his face. His hands, she sees, are of a stone-like beauty, hewn or carved with shallow creases. The woman now holds the small boy on a hip, his face in her neck. She wears a loose shirt tucked into her pants which has a scissored diagonal design, her breasts in wide prominent pouches.

Karen takes her pen, fills out her declaration and signs. She hands the man his copy, hears herself again offering to take them to the hospital. Now they stand facing each other on the footpath and the man's eyes are dry. He takes a step away from her. Karen is tall and knows this happens often.



His wife removes the clinging child from her body and settles him in the car, then lowers her body into the front seat. For the first time she hears the woman speak to her husband in a high-pitched Arabic spatter of sounds. The dented car pulls out into the traffic.

Karen hoists herself into her vehicle, turns off the hazard lights and pulls over to an empty parking space. She blows her nose and sits there feeling light-headed. She had been going out to lunch. When her phone rings she sees that it is her sister Melanie, who has always been concerned for her. She does not answer. After a while she begins to drive. She drives through the city and on to the forest. It is a deep, ink-filled day with all colour saturated and distinct. The trees embrace over her car. She looks at her rings on the steering wheel and the toneless skin of her hands. She is not wearing nail varnish. When she was a child her hands had sat in her lap, had played scales and struggled with a Liszt duet. She used to scratch her brother's bare back in fights. She has not held a warm, living thing in her hands for a long time. There are avenues that twist into the forest. Lean men are jogging past. She feels prickles in her nose again and clasps a tissue to her face and the stinging impulse eases back into her cranium. She blinks away hot light in her eyes, she thinks of insertion, cavity. She sees a man whose back and bottom look like Gaetano and she slows the car, slows the car. She accelerates down the avenue.

Deep in the park is a grand dilapidated museum she once visited as a schoolgirl. She follows signs to the car park. She puts her handbag strap over her shoulder and strides along the façade. The stonework feels vivid and heated although



the day is cool. Karen looks up over the building then down to the lake where swans squat on the grass or dock together some way off from the shore. Inside she wanders from collection to collection, from the tired mammals with their wet obsidian eyes to the pygmies installed behind glass panes. She moves through the masks and sculpted pots, hair combs and head rests. After a while she has seen enough. She is alone in the room. She walks over to a row of sepia photographs.

In the gift shop she buys a bracelet of coral and brass beads and sits down for a coffee. She goes outside, down to the fluttering lake now bereft of swans. For a long while she sits there. Amongst the photographs there was a girl, a grinning naked girl whose teeth had been filed into white sticks. Karen's eyes had roved over her body like a dark caryatid, full of weight, the skin mapped with scarification like wallpaper, a string around her hips across her sex. The girl laughs, standing against a sheet before a white man in a cloak, a man in grinding boots. One hand on her hip, one bent behind her head with a shadow of arm hair, her breasts in glowing points. Karen has never seen such quivering life. She sits up straight on the bench, feels a surge caress her body.

But you, O Dika, wreath lovely garlands in your hair,  
Weave shoots of dill together, with slender hands,  
For the Graces prefer those who are wearing flowers,  
And turn away from those who go uncrowned.



# Highly commended Into the Abyss

## Vanessa Couchman

“Are you quite sure about this? I mean, a woman on her own up here...,” the agent said.

“Absolutely sure,” I said with a half-smile and held out my hand for the key. I pulled my sleeve down over my wrist.

“Well, if you need anything, you’ve got my number.” The agent reversed his small red car down the track, leaving a cloud of white dust and a trace of diesel fumes.

I looked around. Bindweed vied with brambles to choke the roses and lavender but the basic shape of the garden remained. The cottage was built in the local honeyed stone, the green shutters bleached and peeled by the sun and wind. The description on the internet had not been promising but the rent was low and it was far away.

The next day, I set about the neglected kitchen. I swept away skeins of cobwebs from blackened beams, wiped ancient dust from the buffet and scrubbed the stone slabs. The odour of mushroom gave way to that of river-washed rock. Vapour rose from the floor, caught in a slice of sunshine.

I sat back on my heels and wiped a hand over my brow. That would have to do for now. Taking a rickety wooden chair, I placed it just outside the door and sank onto it, careful not to jar my ribs. I raised my face to the May-warm sun. My head nodded in the limbo before sleep. Something jolted me back to consciousness. Grief-stricken, hopeless sobbing came from the house. I twisted around.



“Who’s there?”

Heart thudding against my ribs, I stepped over the threshold. The sound was overhead. Looking around, I grasped a broom handle and inched up the stairs. Outside the bedroom door I paused and then flung it open. The noise stopped in mid-sob, like someone switching off a radio.

Motes of dust coiled in the oblong of sunlight. The wind soughed and moaned in a pine tree.

I’m imagining things; it must be the strain, I thought.

I went outside and walked down the track, breathing in the clear country air. Just before the road, another path veered off, overhung with branches, and weaved between wild privet bushes. It ended at a broken-down fence. A few metres beyond the ground stopped abruptly at the edge of the river gorge. A constant rushing revealed the river’s presence far below. A buzzard sailed high overhead. I climbed through the fence.

“Don’t go that way,” a woman’s voice hissed close to my ear. I stiffened and looked round. No one was there.

Am I going mad? Or am I just over-tired?

I clambered back onto the path and returned to the cottage. The stone reflected back the soaked-up warmth of the day. A nightingale trilled deep in the thicket. The house welcomed me and the evening sun formed a bright patch on the flagstones.

Heavy-limbed, I climbed into bed and slid into a dark sleep.



I reared up with a sharp intake of breath. The banging was real. I sat still for a few moments, palms sweating and heart beating a tattoo. Hinges grated. The wooden shutter swung to and fro, beating against the stone wall. I closed my eyes, released the pent-up air in a long sigh and swung my legs over the side of the bed.

After fastening the shutter, I lingered a moment and leant on the sill. The river bounded over the rapids below. A distant owl hooted. The faint scent of lavender rose up, mingled with drying hay.

I went back to bed but lay awake until dawn.

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I parked my car in the shade of the plane trees, overshadowed by the white gorges, and walked across the bridge to the market place. Knots of people stood in the square and chatted or bustled about, filling their baskets with bright fruit and vegetables. Early tourists, conspicuous by their shorts and untanned legs, occupied the tables outside the café.

I wandered about, getting the measure of the stalls and taking in the ant-like motion. I could melt into the crowd here, lose myself. List in hand, I approached a promising-looking stall piled high with produce. A man in front of me paid, turned around and smiled as he caught sight of me.

“Hello. How are you settling in?” the agent asked.

“Fine. The place was rather grubby but I’ve cleaned it up. I’ll start on the garden next.”

“Good. It could do with it. Now you see why the rent’s so low.” He waved at the stallholder. “This is Madame Bouyssou. She only sells local produce so I always buy from her.”



A matronly woman, encased in a flowered apron-cum-dress, gave me a gap-toothed grin.

“This is Mademoiselle...,” the agent looked at me and frowned.

I hesitated. “Sorel.” The unfamiliar name stuck in my throat.

“She’s renting the old Couderc place up on the plateau. Well, see you around.” He gave a mock salute and sauntered off down one of the twisting alleyways.

Madame Bouyssou’s smile faltered. “You’ve taken on that place, then. Are you all on your own up there?”

“Yes, but that doesn’t bother me.”

“You’re not from around here, eh?”

“No.”

The woman nodded but her brow was furrowed.

“No one has lived up there for a long time. Not since that dreadful business.”

I frowned. “What business?”

“Monsieur Viguié didn’t tell you, then?”

She jerked her thumb towards the alleyway where the agent had disappeared. I shook my head. Madame Bouyssou sighed and pursed her lips.

“Well, it was common knowledge that Guy Couderc used to knock his wife about. She always claimed she’d walked into a door or tripped over a pavement. That sort of thing happens around here a lot more than people think. Up in those isolated farms, where the winters are long.”



An icy knot formed in my gut. I pulled my sleeves down over the bruises.

“Jacqueline’s body was found one day at the bottom of the gorge. Guy claimed she had thrown herself off. Depression, he said. Living with him would have been enough to make anyone depressed, but everyone believed he’d pushed her. No one could prove anything, of course, so he got away with it. He had a stroke a year later. He was getting a bit cracked; her ghost wouldn’t let him alone, night or day, he said. Served him right, I say. Excuse me.”

She turned to serve another customer and I hurried away, queasy in my stomach. In the café I ordered a cognac, which I downed in one gulp. After the first jolt of alcohol, the warmth spread through me.

When I got home, the stone glowed in sunlight and the choked roses blushed through tendrils of bindweed. The scent of rosemary overlaid that of dry earth and cut grass.

Dry-mouthed, I took the path towards the precipice. I approached the rotting fence.

“Don’t go that way,” the voice whispered. A sudden chill gripped me and I walked fast back to the cottage, looking neither to right nor left. I swallowed a sleeping pill and pulled the quilt over my head.

A couple of days passed and I heard no more sobbing or whispered voices but I avoided the path to the gorge. Instead, I hacked away at the garden, pulling up the weeds, untangling the brambles and pruning bushes. I would have to look for a job soon but banished the thought for the moment.



Every evening, I sat outside the kitchen door, eased my knotted shoulders and savoured a glass of wine, enjoying the last rays of sun and the improbable red and purple sunsets. Little by little, the tautness eased and the bruises turned to blue and yellow and then faded.

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“Open up, you bloody bitch! I know you’re in there.”

The kitchen door rattled under the assault. I sat upright, torn from visions of wooded hills, meandering rivers and cuckoos calling. I clutched my dressing gown, nerves screaming.

The wood splintered. I stumbled down the staircase and tried to wedge a chair under the handle but he gave a final push and the lock gave way. Why hadn’t I bolted it? He blocked the entrance, chest heaving, his handsome face contorted with anger.

I stepped backwards hard against the wall.

“You stupid cow. Did you really think you could get away? You’re coming back with me where you belong.” His spittle sprayed me across the room.

“H-how did you find me?” I couldn’t control my voice and shook like a cornered hare.

He snorted. “It wasn’t difficult. You left plenty of traces. Your internet history for a start.”

I fought to master my breathing. “I’m not coming back. I’ve had enough. You have to let me go.”

He loomed towards me, arm raised. His whisky breath seared me. I tried to duck underneath his elbow but he



grabbed my wrist with his other hand and twisted it behind my back. My groping fingers closed on the broom handle and I pushed it up between his legs. Something gave me extra strength, as if another hand were wielding the broom with me.

He howled and clutched his groin. I stumbled out of the door and staggered over the stones towards the road. There, blocking the entrance to the track, was his car. Behind me, his footsteps rang on the hard-packed stony drive. I turned onto the path against my will, an unseen force guiding my steps. He was closing on me fast. The air burned in my lungs. I couldn't go much further. The fence and the precipice were ahead, anyway.

“Don't go that way,” the voice rasped. “Don't go that way!”

I ducked behind a bush, gulping in air in ragged gasps. Surely he must hear me? He stopped, panting, a metre from my hiding place.

“Where are you?” He looked from right to left. The moonlight sharpened the angles of his profile. I must have been quite visible but he didn't see me.

He pushed through the fence, cursing as his sleeve caught on a rusty nail. I held my breath, waiting for the voice to turn him back. But there was no voice. He stood on the rocky shelf looking out over the edge of the precipice.

A blast of wind from nowhere howled and gusted. He struggled to keep his footing on the rock but the wind carried him with it over the edge.

His cry arced with his body down to the rocks below, followed by an echo like laughter.





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