



Manchester Art Gallery and
Manchester Literature Festival
Commission 2018

New writing by Benjamin Myers
and Adelle Stripe in response to
Martin Parr's *Point of Sale*



Manchester Art Gallery



Manchester
Literature
Festival



Salford, 1986

Introduction

Martin Parr's photographs capture the frozen moment. They offer fleeting glimpses into passing lives, framed and constrained by the parameters of the print. Who are these subjects? We rarely find out; they are dispossessed of literal voices, as all photographic subjects are.

Instead it is left to our imaginations to fill in the gaps. We look through and beyond the pictures and wonder about the lives they are leading: their hopes, their troubles, their desires. We hear their words, their laughter, the chatter of everyday conversation.

I have taken the utmost liberty in attempting to bring these voices into being. To do so I have created imaginary monologues or overheard snippets of conversation, the fictionalised thoughts of real people echoing down the years from Salford in 1986 to this moment in Manchester in 2018.

Benjamin Myers

The Salford Terminator



Kwik Save is further than the others but you can get four cans of LCL for £1.80 up there. I like the exercise, me. Someone told us that LCL stands for "Low Calorie Lager" so when people ask how it is I maintain my impressive physique I tell them it's down to a low calorie diet and regular elbow-bending.

I bet Schwarzenegger would walk to Kwik Save. Actually, he probably has someone fetch his cans for him while he's pumping iron. If it was me running the errand for him I'd say "I'll be back..." on my way out.

Sometimes I tell people I'm an android assassin full of wires, and once I said "Your clothes... give them to me, now", just like The Terminator does, but it got me into a spot of bother because I was in a park and there was kiddies on the swings nearby. It was a misunderstanding. I've definitely not been back.

After this I'm helping me Mam get rid of some of her old man's clothes after he done a midnight flit at the weekend. It's the second fella in eighteen months. These shoes are his. They're too good to chuck.

They're Italian, like Paolo Rossi. Like pizzas. Like champagne.

Reinforced Gusset



Now the gusset on this is reinforced so that it won't perish. You could dangle a hanging basket off it and it'll still keep its shape. The Russians could drop a bomb on Salford, and this bodice will still be intact. Trust me.

The ribbon is made from a silk-like material and the shoulder straps utilise an elastic that has been approved by NASA, which means this piece is literally out of this world. There's a simple-snap triple clasp on the back for easy access for hubby's big clumsy fingers on a Saturday night.

And even the most stubborn unwanted stains will wash out at a high temperature. I have it on very good authority that Bo Derek has the exact same one, only her's is in lilac.

Manchester's Second Most Eligible Bachelor



I've worked my way through all the horrors. I started in '82 with An American Werewolf In London, then I moved onto the nasties and it has been three films a week ever since.

I've seen stuff that the general public can't get their hands on. Under the counter, like. Roy sorts me out: I Spit On your Grave, Cannibal Ferox, Cannibal Holocaust – all of that lot.

Some of them are on Betamax, so now that I've moved the engine parts out the living room I have two video players, one stacked on top of the other. I've got a little fridge in there and sometimes when I can't be bothered to move in the middle of a film I'll piss in a cup. It's one of the benefits of being Manchester's second most eligible bachelor. Morrissey's the first of course – it said so in our kid's Smash Hits. Moz said he wanted to play the field a bit before he settled down.

The amount I've spent on video rentals I could probably have bought myself a souped-up Kawasaki.

People reckon Texas Chainsaw... is bad but I thought it were funny, me. The bit where Leatherface comes bumbling through the house and the lass is trying to run away, and he puts her on the meat-hook....it always made me laugh, that bit. It just weren't realistic.

I'm on the martial arts now. Bruce Lee's not all he's cracked up to be. Chuck Norris could have him, easy. That bit where he gets killed at the colosseum at the end of Way Of The Dragon...that just weren't realistic either. Chuck would panel Lee, I reckon, but it's all scripted you see.

Mind, there's a guy I know in Hulme called Shuggie who could have them both, no bother. I've seen him karate chop breezeblocks with his head. He can't see colours as a result.

Any Old Iron



They say I'm like one of them Wombles: I pick up the stuff everyday folk leave behind. They say there are no jobs these days but there's always money to be made. One man's rubbish is another man's treasure.

All you need is a cart and a pair of eyes. It's a case of knowing where to look. Lead pipes. Old bikes. Pram wheels. Washing machine parts. Busted irons. Car tyres. Anything. Someone gave us a life-sized Buddha once. It weighed a tonne.

I sold it to a bloke in Bacup who had made his fortune in sunbeds. He weren't even a Buddhist, he just liked the look of it. I used to have horses then. I used to have two horses. But I lost them in a bet.

Anyway, horses need hay and water and somewhere to graze and who needs the hassle? I'm a free spirit, me, and I'll just do it all on my toes now. And then when I turn those toes to the sky our Patrick will take over the business.

I'm the Womble of Wythenshawe, me, wombling free.

Since The Operation



She's not been the same since the operation, you know. How come?

She says the seepage is affecting her social life. Well, it would, wouldn't it?

She's made herself a surgical truss from an old sock and her Keith's judo belt, but she still has to change it twice a day.

Ah, it's such a shame. She were a brilliant tap-dancer. Did you get the Angel Delight? Aye. Butterscotch.

Punx Not Dead



Punk's not dead. No way.

Oi! is dead and new romantic is dead and the mod revival is dead, and Two-Tone ska is dead and new wave is dead and poxy heavy metal is dead, and poncey synthpop is dead, and goth is dead, and I'd rather be dead than listen to Duran cocking Duran, but punk will never die.

It's a way of life, see. It's about being an individual and staying true and saying 'fuck you'. Yes, twice please, love. Scrapings on one. And a pickled egg for me nan please.

The National



I've developed a system. It's taken decades, but I've got there.

See, what you do is – oh, hang on. They're starting.

There's mine in the green and yellow.

Late Night Extra, he's called. I've put the rent on this one. A dead cert.

The odds are long, but he's a sure-fire. How long? Long enough to feed and clothe the bairn for a year when I win. Long enough to silence the missus's mithering.

Come on, lad.

Come on, Late Night Extra.

Come on.

That's it. That's it. Over you go. And the next one.

Time to dig in.

Come on, lad. Clear it. Good boy.

Come on, Late Night Extra.

....

They're pulling away, man.

Come on.

Who's this jockey? He's bloody useless.

Come on, Late Night Extra.

Come on, Late Night Extra.

Where's he going?

Who's this midget jockey?

Come on, you piece of shit.

Come on, you tin of dog meat.

Fucking come on, Late Night Extra.

Whip him, man. Whip him... oh, he's down! He's fucking down.

That's it. It's all over, man.

That's it. It's gone. Everything. The whole lot. There's nothing left.

Nothing.

She'll kill me.

Nothing.

Black Forest Gateau



Black Forest Gateau is it?

Aye, love.

Well what's in it?

Here, have a look: Cream. Morello cherries. Glucose-Fructose syrup. Plain Chocolate Drops. Plain Chocolate flakes. Fat Reduced Cocoa Powder. Emulsifiers. Mono Fatty Acids. Wheat Starch. Acidity Regulators. Potassium Citrates, Calcium Sulphate, Calcium Citrates, Sodium Citrates, Citric Acid. Invert Sugar Syrup, Modified Maize Starch, Thickeners. Sodium Alginate. Pectin. Chocolate Powder, Dried Whole Milk, Salt, Concentrated Carrot Juice Flavouring. Sodium Carbonates. Beta-Carotene. Cocoa Butter, Concentrated Butter, Fat Reduced Cocoa Powder, Soya Lecithin.

It may contain fruit stones or pips. Sugar. Wheat. Flour and Egg.

Oh, and Water. Oh, that's a shame. I can't have it.

Why not?

It's the water. It bloats us something like rotten.

Eight Days Left

Adelle Stripe



The black ambulance pulled up outside the flat at three minutes to eleven. The pavement was overgrown with dandelion stalks and their feathers caught on Sean's trousers as he used a chipped brick to wedge open the gate. He pulled keys from his pocket and clicked the lock open revealing a cavernous space in the back of his vehicle, lined by shelves, with a trolley attached to metal clips. A stretcher was placed on top, and Sean unloaded it, wearing a pair of latex gloves that didn't quite cover the hair on his hands, and pushed up against his knuckles like a small creature being suffocated by a birthday balloon.

A line of police tape cordoned off the stairwell, which stank of disinfectant, and was lit by a flickering neon tube light that spluttered through its fly-encrusted casing as if a message was being sent from the other side. Sean rolled his shoulder sockets and cracked the bones in his knuckles as he waited for Biggun, who was still sat in the front seat, rolling a cigarette for afterwards. He was always waiting for Biggun, a man who ran on his own clock.

As Sean leaned the stretcher against the wall and gestured to the vehicle, it tipped to one side. Biggun emerged from the passenger seat, leaning his head down before arching his long body out of the car. He was dressed in an overcoat, with a crest on the breast pocket. The company logo was embroidered with a set square and compass beneath it, layered in silver and midnight blue.

Biggun was not quite the seventh son, but the third of his brothers who had followed the family trade. They all had a certain look: long crooked fingers, gaunt cheeks, tall lumbering bodies, and hooded eyes that sank lower with age. Sean wondered if the outfits somehow accentuated their features, but even in civvy clothes, Biggun stood out.

They first met in The Foresters, a rowdy local pub on the main road with an Irish landlord whose mother Biggun had embalmed. He often drank there on a weekend and had a small following on Sunday nights, where most of his friends would turn up to hear him croon. The licensing laws restricted him from using a backing track, so he prepared his own musical accompaniment from a pre-programmed Casio MT140.

His most popular request was a version of Video Killed the Radio Star, where he mimicked the synthesiser-chorus to side-splitting laughter and extended applause. Sean thought he was quite peculiar, standing there in a shirt, tie and knitted wolf sweater, singing as if his life depended on it, and offered to buy him a drink for his effort. Biggun ordered a white wine spritzer with a straw, a detail which stuck with Sean all these years later.

Biggun ambled up the path and stuck his chin out in an official way. Together they walked up to the second floor and a police officer with a muzzy and helmet was standing outside with his arms folded.

—We've come to collect the deceased, Sean said. Station called us this afternoon.

The officer took one look at Sean, pushed his face into a walkie talkie, and pressed a button leaking white noise that echoed down the corridor.

—Ugh, mmmm. Dunno about that, mate. I'll have to check. Bit of mess in there.

Sean shuffled about in his pocket and pulled out an identity card. He was sure that he'd

seen the officer before, his face seemed familiar. Perhaps he'd nicked him on his last drunk and disorderly. He hoped not, the less said about that the better. After three written warnings Sean was on borrowed time.

Biggun moved to the front and pulled his serious undertaker face, which, without blinking, instructed the officer to open the door into the dingy flat, that faced north, and was overlooked by the back alley of a kebab shop.

Sean wiped his big broken nose with a cloth handkerchief and walked into the living room, which was quiet, aside from the sound of pans rattling out the back. A dog barked in the flat above, and he listened to the slow tick of a carriage clock that sat on the shelf, next to a pile of Reader's Digests. The temperature was overwhelming.

—Left the heating on, Biggun said. They always do. It's not going to be fun in here.

—Something not quite right about this place, Sean said, as he ran his fingers along the woodchip walls. Seems dark considering. Don't you think?

Biggun grunted and sat down on the sofa. He pulled out a form from his top pocket and started to fill in details with a dried-up biro that refused to give ink.

—Is she in the back then? Sean asked.

—That's what the man said, Biggun replied. Been in here a few days, as you can smell. Anyway, it's dark cos of the flies.

He signed his name at the foot of the page and gestured to the glass.

—Look, he said. Bluebottles. Bit drowsy, can't have been hatched long.

Sean grimaced as he watched the flies rustle into life behind the nets. His hangover had caught up with him, the sickly-sweet stench of last night's session oozed from each pore. That, combined with the foul odour emanating from the bedroom, almost made him retch.

The lounge was decorated with a nut-brown paisley carpet, pampas grass paper in the alcoves, and ruched curtains that stroked the top of the red-hot radiator. A jelly

air freshener was propped on the windowsill, and its peach melba scent rose from the ornaments, which were neatly arranged in a line. Faded silk begonias in china vases and optic fibre flowers lined the mantelpiece, which framed a small gas fire with brass surrounds. Photographs of average relatives and frumpy weddings were hung on the walls. The cream leather sofa had crocheted arm rests, and behind the squashed cushions a faded patch of matter, comprised of head-sweat and tint from the past twenty years, formed a grubby circle. Airmail envelopes with happy birthday stickers were piled up against the telephone.

—I'll just grab a glass of water before we go in, Sean said. Bit parched today.

He walked through a beaded curtain into the kitchen, where a cup and saucer, and microwave meal dish, were piled in the sink. Sean stuck his head under the reluctant tap, which coughed cold water onto his face. This is going to be rough, he chuntered to himself. Not another one. Eight days left in the flat. If she's gone stringy I won't manage. Keep it together Sean, nip your nose.

—What are you doing in there, checking your eyelids for holes? Biggun shouted. —Told yer, just having a drink, Sean replied. Getting some air before we go in. He walked back into the living room and pulled his gloves into place.

Biggun sighed and shook his head.

—Every bloody time, Biggun said. You'll have to get used to it, one of these days. Here, have one of these...

He pulled a nose-clip from his top pocket and pushed it into Sean's hand.

—I am used to it, you know. Seen enough, haven't I?

—Well by the looks of things you haven't, Biggun said. Look at the state of you. Get some eucalyptus oil next time. Easier on the nostrils, like. Of course, I don't need it. Immune to such odours.

Sean started to laugh.

—Chop chop, Biggun said. Let's get it done.

—Do you think she'll groan? Sean asked, as he unrolled the plastic body bag and laid it out on the stretcher.

—Too far gone for that. Pat'll have a job getting her in shape for the family.

—They want to see her?

—Yup. Insisted. They all live in Australia, according to the station. She's the last one left over here. So we best be careful, Biggun said. Especially with the face. That's the bit that counts. Don't be touching the mouth. Her lips will need to be stitched through her dentures. Jaw can be wired. Just hope her eyes aren't too bad...

Sean took a deep breath and placed his hand on the bedroom door, it rattled with his tremor. His forehead glimmered with beads of sweat, which trickled down the side of his cheeks.

—Did the neighbours find her? Sean asked.

—No, they just thought it was the bins again. Stopped answering her phone, apparently... Only another fifteen minutes and this will all be over, Sean thought. Her skin best not stick to me, or I'll be sick. Cold pint of lager in an hour. Then I can forget about it all. There's other jobs out there. Don't have to do this forever.

Biggun held a tissue over his face and started to hum a non-descript tune from beneath that made the paper flap up and down, bum bum bum bum. Biggun always hummed before turning the body, a tried and tested distraction technique. He stood over the mound of blankets and pulled the sheets to one side. Sean waited by the door and switched on the light. A small grey foot with blackened toenails poked out from the bed as a toy koala rolled onto the floor.

—Everything alright? Biggun asked.

Sean forced a smile and swayed from side to side.

— Never been better, he replied.

Adelle Stripe was born in 1976 and grew up in Tadcaster. Her debut novel, *Black Teeth and a Brilliant Smile*, is inspired by the life and work of playwright Andrea Dunbar. It received the K Blundell Award for Fiction and was shortlisted for the Gordon Burn Prize. Her writing has appeared in publications including *The Quietus*, *New Statesman* and *The Guardian*. She is a lecturer at York St John University and lives in the Calder Valley.

Benjamin Myers is a writer and journalist whose work encompasses literary fiction, poetry, nature and crime. His recent novel *The Gallows Pole* was shortlisted for the 2018 Walter Scott Prize for historical fiction and received a Roger Deakin Award. Other novels include *Beastings*, which won the Portico Prize for Literature and *Pig Iron*, winner of the inaugural Gordon Burn Prize. His most recent book, *Under The Rock*, a non-fiction study of people, poetry and place, was published in 2018 to critical acclaim. He has been published in several languages. He lives in the Upper Calder Valley, West Yorkshire.

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Manchester Literature Festival

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