

Fiction section

Edited by **Joe Gray**

Joe is a field naturalist and conservationist who lives on the island of Great Britain. He writes eco-fiction under the pen name Dewey Dabbar.

In this issue's fiction section, it is a pleasure to bring you the work of another new contributor. And, once again, we extend the diversity of writing styles that we have featured in our growing catalogue of imaginative prose.

Dreams Made of Sand

Taylor Hood

As he stared at the small brown mushroom, its five points radiating outward from the centre, his woodland solace shattered. Memories barrelled toward him, forcing him to relive the tears shed under the duvet, the blandness of an unfinished breakfast, and the agony of the ever-shifting digits on the car's dashboard during the long drive coastward.

He cursed the earthstar as he arose, burdened by his rucksack full of buckets and spades, his sweep net clutched tightly. He jogged with his shoulders hunched, and his head only lowered further when the broadleaved canopy gave way to ranks of skeletal conifers.

"Dad!" his son called, weaving carelessly through the trees. "Hurry up!"

Against a Scots pine, dead flaking limbs formed a tent. The boy crawled inside, vanished a moment, then jumped out with a leap and a roar, toppling branches on one side.

"Enough of that," the man commanded through gritted teeth. He glanced at his watch. "Let's go."

Oblivious, the boy brandished one of the branches like a sword, reducing half the structure to ruins. "I'm a giant!"

Just then, the man lunged forward and seized the stick mid-swing, before laying it gently on the ground. He opened his mouth to apologise but shut it instead, lest the words threatening to escape should burst out of him. With a strained smile, he motioned to the sunlit gap in the trees.

* * *

Pulling the brim of his Tilley hat firmly over his brow, he moved swiftly across the grassy expanse, darting intermittently for the cover of stunted pines. Here and there low-lying outcrops of stone painted yellow and green with mosses and lichens jutted out of the sward, which the boy bounded over or climbed.

Moving onto the dunes, they navigated around broad slacks and sea buckthorn thickets laden with flaming berries, gaining their first sight of the beach. A pair of dog walkers threw balls, their pets racing to fetch and return them, over and over. One family wrote messages and drew faces in the sand. Beyond the shoreline, the firth stretched out, dotted with several islands, the largest of which bore a lighthouse atop a hill, leftmost of a stack and isthmus. Far to the east, faded in its distant reaches, sat an iceberg of rock, its head blanketed by a hundred thousand gannets and their droppings. Further along the coast, inland, a green conical hill loomed, poised above the houses at its base.

The man held his breath, afraid that the slightest exhalation might topple the lighthouse, the rock, the hill, and the village as he took in the panorama before him.

Up ahead, his son waved at him among a swathe of woolly yellow flowers hugging the ground. On one of the woundwort stems a butterfly rested, its pale underwings spattered with black dots.

“What is it?” asked the boy.

“Small blue,” replied the man in a whisper. “*Cupido minimus*. Our smallest butterfly.”

“*Kapeedoo mim-mim-us...*”

The creature took flight and resettled, and the man’s heart leapt into his throat. The dusky hue of the upper wings, bordered in white, told him the insect was female. He swung his net with a twist of the wrist, then reached inside to transfer the fragile thing to a sampling tube he slipped out of his pocket.

He held up the glass for a closer look—and immediately realised his mistake. For the object shining like a second sun in the sky had already burnt its imprint into his mind.

It had batted away every inquiry of the world’s best and brightest on its weeks-long course through the cosmos. Missiles launched in hope found themselves bewildered by the object’s erratic trajectory, and when warheads hit, it simply absorbed the explosions like fingers snuffing out a flame. After the smoke cleared, there was no longer any talk of survival. Plans turned to placating the people, while those who still desired to understand spent their energy attempting to give form to that which was to end all things. Yet not even the most advanced imaging techniques could discern anything but its most basic dimensions, which always seemed to shift. After much speculation, the only certainty was that the object was palmate in nature—hand-shaped.

The man did not raise his head again as he pushed through dense tufts of marram. Before long, he reached the edge between the young dunes and the beach, where wind-stirred sand couch and sea lyme grasses tried their utmost to hold themselves together.

* * *

He sat hunched over, at cross-grain to the sea’s waves, transfixed by the small blue in the glass. Meanwhile, his son skipped over the strandline composed of

seashells, driftwood, plastic bottles and food wrappers. Two red buckets flapped winglike at the boy's sides, splashing water everywhere.

Taking one last look at the butterfly, the man sighed and tucked the tube deep into the sand. Silently he sidled over to where his son had set down the buckets and gestured for him to watch. He piled up layers of sand in the shape of a volcano and poured water into it from another bucket, making sure none of it spilled over the rim. With his fingers he massaged the sand-and-water mixture until it thickened, closing the mouth.

"There's our motte," he said, wiping his brow with the back of his wrist. "Now, it's your turn."

He shuffled to one side of the now-dormant volcano to give his son space to pack a smaller mound on top of it. Then it was time for the precision work. He directed the boy to take the wooden ruler from his rucksack and carefully slice off four clean faces, fashioning the keep. Soon, little eager hands had raised a high palisade around the fortress.

"This is fun," said the boy.

"Aye, lad." The man halted and set down his spade a moment. "You know—don't you—that I... Never mind."

The boy shrugged and fell back into his own little world as he carved in the lines of bricks, poked holes for windows and doors, and inscribed arches with the edges of seashells. And all the while, the twin sun flamed in the sky. The more the man fought to ignore it, the hotter it seared until it became a finger tugging at his nerves, playing with him.

Another check of his watch and half an hour had flown by. The motte and bailey, with its water-filled ditch, outer walls, and gateway, stood strong and proud, each shimmering grain a dagger piercing his soul. Even so, he was about to congratulate the boy on his work—when a yell cut him off.

A figure with dishevelled hair and ragged clothes stumbled his way down the beach. Sharp, scornful laughter erupted from him in bursts, punctuating the steady flow of his wailing. He clawed the air, trying to swat down the birds, hurled a spaniel's yellow ball into the sea, and uprooted a parasol, causing the couple beneath it to flee.

Before the man could shield the sandcastle, the stranger crashed into it and sped away.

Motionless, he surveyed the ruin.

Before him lay the remnants of a most ancient country—*his* country: its mountains ground into a thousand grains, every tree flattened, and all lakes and rivers drained away, leaving only barren wastes. And there, supported by the land itself, rested the detritus of humanity, the crushing weight of concrete, metal, glass, and rubbish from every factory and corporate office. Yet among the wreck were fragments of beautiful and storied things—of carved capitals, roofless galleries open to the sky, and once-tended gardens.

Gradually, his shoulders slumped, and a warm wave washed over him. He had spent thirty years reading the story of nature, contemplating the vast transformations of land and sea, the multitude of species blinking in and out of existence, the birth and inexorable death of all suns and all worlds. To be a

student of change meant accepting what could not be changed—that every story must end.

Nearby, the whimpering couple drew his attention away from the mess that had been his and his son's sandcastle. Having returned to their spot, they sat clasping their knees before the stricken parasol, sending worried looks at The Hand. On the beach there was only one fearful species. He would not be among them.

He removed his wristwatch and let it fall. Then he slowly gathered himself as the coast-shaping sea furled and unfurled its foamy fingers, while gulls wheeled above, defying gravity's pull, and the beach's infinite grains leapt upon the wind into green palms, sculpting the dunes higher. Careless of whether the epilogue came in a day or in a million years, every animal and plant, every force, was following its own lifeway.

Except the butterfly, whose wings flashed across his mind.

He scrambled in search of the sampling tube with the small blue caged inside, now half-buried in the sand—and unscrewed the lid.

Fluttering free and graceful despite the gusts, the creature guided him backward in time—back to when he had scattered the ashes of his own dusky-haired, blue-eyed companion. In the days before the coming of The Hand, she had stopped painting butterflies and spoke only in warnings about the world that she loved. Soon after, they found her body in the forest near their home, her letter for him stuffed in her jacket pocket.

“Just as the world disintegrates,” he said under his breath, *“so does my mind...”*

But the letter had not mattered; he could never have swayed the people who were supposed to have known her best. And so, instead of spreading out from a woollen cocoon over the land and rising to the sky on myriad wings—as a gift to the beings who had sustained her and inspired so many creations—a cremator pulverised her and spat her out as poison. Another manifestation of a dying world, she would have said. He nodded solemnly. Releasing the small blue now was a small solace, but it was enough.

The boy, who had stood enchanted by the butterfly, quietly regarded the remains of the sandcastle, a finger pressed to his lips.

* * *

In the depths of a rock pool, a starfish grappled the shell of a clam with slow but unyielding force. The man reached out instinctively to deliver the mollusc from its demise but stopped himself, leaving that under-water drama to transpire. He rejoined his son and helped him gather water out of the churning sea.

“I wish we could stay,” said the boy, “but... I've got homework.”

“Lad,” said the man, trying to hold back tears, “we can stay as long as you like.”

“Really? How?”

“School's... closed Monday.”

Together they walked back up the beach, their buckets brimming once more. A driving wind blew the man's hat from his head, but he let it go.

“What do you want to make next?”

“How about... a caterpillar. They’re baby butterflies, right?”

“Good thinking, little caterpillar!”

The boy, half groaning, half giggling, reached into his bucket and splashed his father, so the man grabbed and spun him round, before setting him down cackling. With laughter still bubbling between them, they turned their attention to their task. On top of the castle ruins, they carefully shaped the segments of the insect’s body, lump after lump in a line along the sand. The boy picked a stick to describe the ridges of its back, while the man went in search of pebbles. As they pressed in the stone eyes—a sudden change in pressure gave them pause.

The Hand, burning golden-white, streaked through the atmosphere, setting the clouds ablaze.

Terrified beachgoers, their resolve crushed, sprinted back toward the dunes.

A shockwave barrelled forth in the object’s wake, followed by a deafening roar.

The caterpillar disintegrated.

But the father, spreading his fingers through the quivering canvas of sand, found his child’s hand, took it in his own, and lifted them both as they met the end.

About the author

Taylor is a Scottish writer, naturalist and artist. After working in ecological consultancy and scientific editing, he wrote his MA English Literature (by Research) thesis on Earth-centred sacrality in the fantasies of Lord Dunsany and JRR Tolkien. He also holds a BSc (Hons) in Wildlife Ecology and a Level 3 Extended Diploma in Countryside Management.



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