

The smell here is ripe already, and the exhibition is only in its second week.

I chose a prototype from among my students, and he looked like easy meat. A hot meal, a pint, that was all it would have taken. A couple of handmade cigarettes, tightly rolled, some kind words. Come back and see my private studio, mate. Check out some of my work in progress. I could use an assistant. A gopher. Someone to fetch and carry. A little tap on the head would have done the job nicely. But it just didn't feel right.

The fifth tank is the torso, bisected, vital organs exposed.

The sixth is his scalp with its seaweed swirl, the face an empty skin.

The seventh tank, his denuded skull.

All the critics agree. With *Disintegration* (2008) I have created something pure and disgusting and true.

*"I chose a prototype from among my students, and he looked like easy meat. A hot meal, a pint, that was all it would have taken."*

The idea, the answer, came to me one morning over bacon and eggs. It was so obvious. I drained my coffee cup, rinsed my plate, made a few calls. The great man was in town and he was interested. A date was set for seven.

The eighth tank holds his lower jaw and teeth, picked mostly free of flesh. This tank is murky water-filled and home to several fat-bellied fish.

He arrived late and I opened the door. The hedge fund ploy had drawn him in. Assembling the tanks, I had done that already. Mark my words, I knew what I was doing. I had bought a hacksaw, an electric carving knife, a scalpel. I worked quietly, swiftly through the night. I must have poured ten pints of blood down the sink.

The ninth tank, labelled "Soul," is empty.

The tenth contains his peeled left hand. The eleventh, his buoyant genitals.

You get the picture.

To my delight, the initial reviews have been very favourable. Very kind. A connoisseur, a billionaire art collector, has been in touch. With his investment, I shall be free to begin my next work, even more ambitious, but following similar themes. With a little luck I may yet know success.

## Rain on Film

Tim Woodall

It starts in the thunderstorm, just before dawn; a dulcet choir of raindrops at the window. It begins casually beneath dark,

swelling rainclouds, with the image of a Calligraphy pen scratching blue ink onto a sheet of paper. My eyes are tightly shut, blacking out the friction, but I see words being carved out, words that will eventually tell a tale of sadness, loss and possession in a fictional town somewhere in Middle America. For a few moments the strength of recollection forces me to believe I have woken up in the past; forces me to believe that I am sixteen years old again and being dragged out of slumber by the unwelcome knocking of a cold, winter morning.

I open my eyes and the memory dies. Everything stays dark. All I know is that it is *here* and it is *now*: I am 27 years old, hurtling toward 30 at the speed of an express train, and it is raining heavily. This will not be a morning spent walking to school, an afternoon waiting to return home, an evening spent listening to music, watching

TV shows and (*God, do you remember how you'd always be —*) writing stories.

I lie still for a moment waiting for my eyes to adjust to the darkness, and realise I am shivering. It is cold — the kind of December weather one would be accustomed to if one were in Britain — but not cold enough to make the body tremble and shudder, especially when said body remains hidden away beneath the duvet. No, it is not the cold that is doing this, but the memory; the vivid memory of a boy who loved language and found comfort in the page.

I suddenly feel the weight of that old Calligraphy pen between my fingers, and it brings back teenage days of scribbling words (often ones learnt from whichever book I happened to be reading that week) onto A4 sheets of paper, folded across the middle to create make-shift paperbacks.

The pen drops and I am alone again. I look at the clock to find it is nearly five-fifteen am. I summon strength and, despite the cold, find it is remarkably easy to get out of bed.

By the time I step out into the rain, Calligraphy pens and self-published novels couldn't be further from my thoughts. Crossing the street I am once again spellbound by the realisation that I live in Los Angeles now. It's been nearly three years since I moved here but waking up in California has a knack of making it seem like you've just arrived. I light a Marlboro under the umbrella and head down the street to where the car is parked.

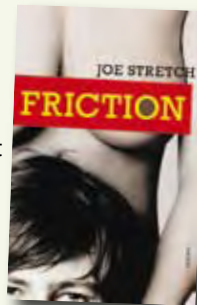
The sky appears a little lighter when I arrive at the magazine offices. I meet a young

## New Releases

### Friction

Joe Stretch

Vintage



**F**ric<sup>ti</sup>on, the debut novel by Joe Stretch is really something else. It recounts the lives of six individuals through their hedonistic pursuits in everyday life. No one seems to be happy and everyone is striving for something else.

*Friction* analyses the mundane and bizarre, where shopping has become the new religion and sex has nothing to do with love. As the novel progresses, the six characters' lives begin to intertwine in ways that are almost always self-destructive. The underlying feeling throughout the novel is the sense of apathy, which seems to be omnipresent.

*Friction* is a social commentary on today's lifestyle and culture. Each character represents the dark and twisted side of humanity. Joe Stretch points out the inwardness of our culture through bites of humour and sadness. *Friction* is a creative debut and it's more than obvious that there will be a lot more to come from Joe Stretch in the future.

Shirley Stevenson

### The Room of Lost Things

Stella Duffy

Virago



**R**obert Sutton is the proprietor of a dry-cleaning shop under a railway arch in Loughborough Junction, London a fixed point in a rapidly changing world. He has decided to move on, his successor, Akeel, a young East Londoner learns that there is far more to running the business than simply removing stains, as Robert explains it is also the resting place for the contents of his customers' pockets — and for their secrets and lies.

Duffy's skilful writing evokes real geographical locations and themes of globalisation alongside the increasing uniformity of the world, with the gentrification of seemingly every scrap of land, or building into luxury apartments. Robert's shop provides a window into the lives of the vibrant characters that he encounters.

Duffy's multi-layered insight into this corner of London life is compelling and breaks down stereotypes of every kind. A highly recommended read.

Shona Fairweather