

'I remember one face,' she says. 'Not one individual student, but the impression left by them all, inverted like a photographic negative and stamped into my memory like an acid hole. I'd recommend Henry Soothill for clarinet,' she adds, reaching for a card. 'He's very good. He plays for the symphony orchestra.'

'All right,' says Mrs Henderson sullenly, and she takes the card.

That was at four. At five there is another knock. The saxophone teacher opens the door.

'Mrs Winter,' she says. 'You've come about your daughter. Come in and we'll discuss carving her into half-hour slices to feed me week by week.'

She holds the door wide so Mrs Winter can scuttle in. It's the same woman as before, just with a different costume — Winter not Henderson. Some other things are different

"I ask my students,' the saxophone teacher says, 'is your life a gift worth giving? Your normal, vanilla-flavoured life, your two-minute noodles after school, your television until ten, your candles on the dresser and facewash on the sink?"

too, because the woman is a professional and she has thought about the role for a long time. Mrs Winter smiles with only half her mouth, for example. Mrs Winter keeps nodding a few seconds too long. Mrs Winter inhales quietly through her teeth when she is thinking.

They both politely pretend not to notice that it is the same woman as before.

'To start off with,' says the saxophone teacher as she hands her a mug of black-leaf tea, 'I don't allow parents to sit in on private lessons. I know it's a bit of an old-fashioned policy—the reason is partly that the students are never at their best in that sort of environment. They become flushed and hot, and they laugh too easily and their posture changes, folding up tight like the lips of a blossom. Partly also, I think, the reason I like to keep things very private is that these little half-hour slices are *my* chance to watch, and I don't want to share.'

'I'm not that sort of mother anyway,' says Mrs Winter. She is looking around her. The studio is on the attic level, and the view is all sparrows and slate. The brick wall behind the piano is chalky, the bricks peeling white as if diseased.

'Let me tell you about the saxophone,' says the saxophone teacher. There is an alto saxophone on a stand next to the piano. She holds it up like a torch. 'The saxophone is a wind instrument, which means it is fuelled by your breath. I think it's interesting that the word for "breath" in Latin is where we get our word "spirit". People once had the idea that your breath and your soul were the same thing, that to be alive means, merely, to be filled with breath. When you breathe into this instrument, darling, you're not just giving it life—you're giving it *your* life.'

Mrs Winter nods vigorously. She keeps nodding a few seconds too long.

'I ask my students,' the saxophone teacher says, 'is your life a gift worth giving? Your normal, vanilla-flavoured life, your two-minute noodles after school, your television until ten, your candles on the dresser and facewash on the sink?' She smiles and shakes her head. 'Of course it isn't, and the reason for that is that they simply haven't suffered enough to be worth listening to.'

She smiles kindly at Mrs Winter, sitting with her yellow knees together and clutching her tea in both hands.

'I'm looking forward to teaching your daughter,' she says. 'She seemed so wonderfully impressionable.'

'That's what we think,' says Mrs Winter quickly.

The saxophone teacher observes her for a moment, and then says, 'Let's go back to

that moment just before you have to refill your lungs, when the saxophone's full of your breath and you've got none left in your own body: the moment when the sax is more alive than you are.

'You and I, Mrs Winter, know what it feels like to hold a life in our hands. I don't mean ordinary responsibility, like babysitting or watching the stove or waiting for the lights when you cross the road—I mean somebody's life like a china vase in your hand—' she holds her saxophone aloft, her palm underneath the bell '—and if you wanted to, you could just . . . let go.'

On the corridor wall is a framed black-and-white photograph which shows a man retreating up a short flight of stairs, hunched and overcoated, his chin down and his collar up and the laces on his boots coming untied. You can't see his face or his hands, just the back of his overcoat and half a sole and a grey sock sliver and the top of his head. On to the wall beside the staircase the man casts a bent accordion shadow. If you look closer at the shadow you will see that he is playing a saxophone as he ascends the stairs, but his body is hunched over the instrument and his elbows are close in to the sides of his body so no part of the sax is visible from behind. The shadow peels off to one side like an enemy, forking the image in two and betraying the saxophone that is hidden under his coat. The shadow-saxophone looks a little like a hookah pipe, dark and wispy and distorted on the brick wall and curving into his chin and into his dark and wispy shadow-hands like smoke.

The girls who sit in this corridor before their music lessons regard this photograph while they wait.

New Releases

Ox-Tales: Water, Air, Fire, Earth

Various authors in collaboration with Oxfam

Profile Books



The four-book strong *Ox-Tales* collect together work from the best of British and Irish writers today under themes closely related to Oxfam's work around the globe – water projects (Water), aid for conflict areas (Fire), agricultural development (Earth), and action on climate change (Air).

With an eclectic array of established names in both popular and literary fiction, the collection provides a fabulous insight into the literary landscape today, and all for a good cause. *Ox-Tales* includes both previously published and un-published work from Mark Haddon, Joanna Trollope, Lionel Shriver, Alexander McCall Smith, Vikram Seth and many more. Helen Fielding's *Trouble in Paradise* provides an intriguing insight to the writer beyond Bridget Jones. While Jeanette Winterson's *Dog Days* poignantly explores the often-overlooked bonds between person and pet. The stories provide wonderful snippets into the writers' process, but also on the wider implications of their context.

Ruby Beesley

Jane Feaver

Love Me Tender

Harvill Secker

Love Me Tender tells the story of simple people and their complicated lives. Fixating on a small community in rural Buckleigh, Feaver balances a large cast of characters and their stories of unrequited love, anger and disappointment.

With scandals and secrets that implicate everyone, from the local mayor to the postman, Feaver does not shirk the difficult task of exposing the vulnerabilities of her characters. Despite the portraits of emotional pain, the chief undercurrent of Feaver's novel remains one of hope. The difficult, and sometimes, disastrous lives of the inhabitants of Buckleigh become irreversibly tangled with one another. Although, the heightened proximity of each person to their neighbour allows for few private or personal matters to remain as such, it also prevents any one person from having to face their challenges alone.

Love Me Tender is a thrilling look into the highs and lows of the small-town blues, and showcases Feaver's talent and sustainability as an author. For more information on Jane Feaver visit www.rbooks.co.uk.

Jordan Von Cannon