



Source: Greg Myre, 'Israeli border towns cope with Hezbollah attacks', *New York Times* in *International Herald Tribune* online, 14/07/06.

Tags: [music](#), [travel](#), [animals](#), [home](#), [child/parent](#)

Writer/s: [Caitlin Newton-Broad](#)

© 2008 Barbara Campbell and the writer/s

Stories you tell in the North.

A half-blind Labrador bites your arse on a run through the Pennines and takes out the back of your shorts. When you protest to the dog's owner, a farmer, he produces a rifle and points it your way. You run. End of optimism.

You take a man out drinking to celebrate the end of his nervous breakdown and end up missing the last train home. This means you are obliged to drink the whole night until sunrise, staring the man in the face across the pub table. End of optimism.

You dream that your body becomes grotesque and hairy. The only way to conceal your new scary body from esteemed visitors to your dream is to wade into a lagoon filled with mosquito larvae. You continue polite conversation with your esteemed dream visitors, submerged in the foul lagoon from neck down. Impossibility of optimism.

Stories you tell in the North.

There are journeys on a Greyhound. Oh yes, and rings of cigarette smoke. There are songs about journeys on a Greyhound. A vivid Chris Wilson tune, a country lament and the saddest song goes something like...

'You packed your things in a cardboard case. You burned yourself with a cigarette Move, if you think it's too slow Move, if you think it's too slow-oh-oh-oh-eeee'

The singer smudges the words across the guitar twang and calls up the travelling Blues. He puts you right there, on the seat on the bus next to the man who is dying on a Greyhound, plummeting along a motorway. Full stop music to end optimism.

There are stories about working in a weaving shed in the 1970's. Oh yes, a game of cards and a cup of tea.

There are stories about working in factories, the one about the rise of industrial labour, the deafening roar and clatter of machinery that left a whole generation in Northern England deaf as doorposts. That labour has moved East now. A whole continent deaf and ringing to

the tune of factories. Lace, you wouldn't think it had a shred of pain woven through it. Lace, now that is a light substance. Until you imagine fingers, the fixed and burning eyes, the deafening roar of the lace makers' machines. There are stories of families split across continents in order to work in factories—fathers from daughters, mothers from grandmothers. You tell me this like a catalogue.

A woman keeps watch over her restless neighbourhood, from the third floor balcony. Doesn't matter, Winter, Spring, Summer. She keeps an eye out. This Neighbourhood Owl never was an optimist but that never dints her acerbic curiosity. She has eyes peeled for bicycle thieves, open doors and wrong night meetings, exchanges of goods and goods in the carpark, ah, this one has an eye for everyday calamity.

You found it hard to accept when your mother said, 'I never was an optimist'. Oh, you wanted to protest. You can see (big OH) Optimism as a natural state sitting parallel with Hope, sitting neck and neck with Expectation and Surprise. Your mother, the ferocious daughter of a Northern tailor. Your mother, the tight-lipped neighbour. As a child you wondered when is that point, that pivot, that leak in time that turns a state of open expectation to its opposite...When does this happen?

Right now—let me name that exact moment. Right now, as I am speaking, I am tuning into my own downstairs neighbour who is playing Grease the Musical and the sounds are stabbing up through my floor. My neighbour has all his doors flung open and it is a cold, cold night. He is playing Grease loud and he's wheeled his telescope into the drive again. With the occasional bellow, my neighbour lets out empathetic roars and moans and wantings to the night sky. He is playing music, looking at the rings of Saturn. He is smoking Holidays and drinking on the driveway, with his face creased tissue-paper, a hot eye to the viewfinder, hips swaying.

Pretty soon, it's 1am, he will run out of steam. There will be a point when the singing will stop. He will wheel the telescope inside and put himself to bed. That moment will bring the quiet. Quiet of all that wanting. So that all I will hear is the roar-roar of the main road and that marks the end of night.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Caitlin Newton-Broad.