

**LIMOMOLUM
MELOLINUM
LIMILEMUM
LEMUNILUM
MIMULENUM
MIMEMIMUM
MIMOLELUM
LOLUMENUM
MENOMINUM
LEMOMILUM**



a text by Jeremy Hutchison

The comedian Billy Connolly is on stage, wearing a stripy suit. He is talking about Kirkcaldy, a town on the East Coast of Scotland.

Kirkcaldy! Fabulous town! Great place. They used to make linoleum. Now, the linoleum industry went down the pan. My personal reason is that no one could actually pronounce linoleum. They used to go into shops and say:

- *Hello, can I have a roll of minolomum.*
- *I'm sorry? What was that?*
- *I said a rodola nununun.*
- *A Roman an only one? We don't sell Romans.*
- *I never asked for a f***ng Roman! I said a romunamunum.*
- *I'm terribly sorry, I...*
- *God knows its simple enough: a romnum a num num...*
- *Oh f**k it, give me a carpet.*

So, linoleum went down the pan.

Maybe it was the unpronounceable name. Maybe it was the association with schools, hospitals, prisons. Maybe it was the invention of vinyl flooring: brighter, cheaper, easier.

Whatever it was, the demise of linoleum coincided with Thatcher's closure of the pits. As shafts were bricked over and assets stripped, tens of thousands of jobs vanished in Kirkcaldy. And with them went the queer smell of linoleum's industrial production.

, the school, the hospital, the prison, the toilet, the surgery, the pharmacy, the canteen, the bathroom, the sickroom, the delivery room, the sluice room, the equipment room, the operations room, the dispatch room, the mess room, the pump room, the waiting room, the visitor room, the common room, the staffroom, the cleanroom, the classroom, the blood bank, the food bank, the departure lounge, the custody suite, the baggage reclaim, the utility room, the changing room, the locker room, the day room, the X-ray room, the data centre, the driving centre, the detention centre, the control centre, the convention centre, the correction centre, the donor centre, the job centre, the health centre, the drop-in centre, the check-out centre, the ward, the radiology unit, the high dependency unit, the inmates unit, the visitor unit, the animal rescue unit, the interrogation room, the green room, the laundry room, the boiler room, the operating theatre, the church hall, the refectory, the sanatorium, the control block, the monitoring plant, the power plant, the emergency department,

It was invented by accident.

Somewhere around 1850, Frederick Walton returned to his workshop to discover that a surface had formed across an open can of linseed oil. A slick flat skin, solidified over the formless liquid beneath.

So, linoleum is a skin. Linseed oil is boiled then mixed with wood flour, powdered cork, pine resin and pigments. Once a cement has formed, this is skinned over a canvas. The material is then cured, trimmed and packaged.



It announces a specific ambition. To wipe away the mess: dirt, fluid, bile, mud. To defend the interior from the exterior. Its presence proves that management has considered a catalogue of grotesque eventualities. Vomiting youth. Bleeding child. Trayful of capsized milk. But no matter; the cleaners will be with us in the morning. And with a swipe, their bleached mops will eradicate any lasting harm.

And so linoleum's temporality is the present. A continual present. A *British* kind of present. In its triumph over the spillage, it triumphs over the intrusion of past into present. Disquieting behaviours leave no memory. No mess exceeds its moment. No event intrudes into the next. Turning our gaze downwards, we are comforted by the knowledge that the stains of history are continually erased.

I meet James and Deone by accident. I'm actually looking for a toilet. The one in the YMCA is out of order. So the man sends me next door, to the homeless shelter.

James is doing a jigsaw. I ask him how he's getting on. He's got the edges done. And quite a lot of sky. There's a large tree dominating much of the image. That'll be hard. But I point out that he's using the picture on the box for reference. That's cheating. We argue about this for a moment.

Deone is different to James. She's wearing baggies. She speaks fast. I don't imagine she does many jigsaws. But maybe a linocut? Never heard of it. But aye, that'd be okay.

I pull out the pieces of lino and put them in the microwave. To soften them up, I explain. This produces a slight smell; the same smell that Kirkcaldy was known for. Deone makes the Job Centre sign. James makes the Iron Lady.

The blacks come out a bit smudgy, but that's ok.





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Hygiene was of interest to the British Empire. The smooth surface of linoleum assisted the complex task of bringing order to chaos. Unfurled across the globe, its marbled surface became a stage for British administrative domination. An identical floor could be laid over the government buildings of Calcutta, the airports of Rhodesia, the operating theatres of Egypt, the classrooms of Hong Kong, the mailrooms of Australia, the interrogation rooms of Iraq. An entire planet could be hygienically surfaced, gently correcting wayward tendencies.

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After breakfast, I head down the hill towards Kirkcaldy harbour. BHS is boarded up. Thornton's is selling discount Easter eggs. Easter was two weeks ago. I take Tollbooth Street, passing the alcoholic service, the counselling service, the pawn shop. The empty harbour looks across the Forth, towards Edinburgh.

I squint. Hundreds of men are disgorging cargo from boats: linseed oil from Canada, jute from Pakistan. They haul it across the road to the factory.

I squint again. Empty. A triangular sign pokes out like a beak from to the factory's facade. FOR SALE. Interested parties should call Shepherd Commercial 01592 205 442.

I'm in the kitchen. Sitting on the stool with my head resting on the table. Looking down into the linoleum floor: not *at* it but *into* it. Into its miasma of colour, allowing my eyes to shift in and out of focus.

My sister's hamster is the same colour as the linoleum; sandy brown, with small flecks of white. Sometimes we lose the hamster. Hammy. It escapes its cage and finds its way under the kitchen floor. It's not quite clear to me how this happens. I picture the hamster sliding across the linoleum surface and fusing with it; an animal confused with floor. I know this is impossible: hamsters cannot become floors. But a six year-old is permitted to think this way.

The old factory is like the prop in a pantomime: all facade, no building. Supported by iron girders, it leans against the Adam Smith School of Accounting.

Adam Smith, author of *The Wealth of Nations*. The father of modern capitalism, free market economics, globalisation, deregulation. Adam Smith, the son of Kirkcaldy.

The School of Accounting is derelict. The windows are dark. Looks like it hasn't been operational for some time.

Linoleum produces other responses in my infantile imagination. Although my parents are not political, some opinions are felt so strongly, they come to acquire the weight of a political opinion. Central to the family politics are stiletto heels, and the women that wear them. They form impressions on the linoleum floor. The tiny point of their heel makes craters, and these collect dirt. Following my father, I am troubled by this.

We are sometimes visited by Rosemary Plant: a towering blonde with a monument of curls. My father and I watch this statue bearing down on the pea-sized point of her heels. Her every move punctures us. When she leaves I watch him, crouched on the floor. He rubs the pocked indentations with his thumbnail. Already, they have started to collect dirt.

Poor Lottie McConnell. We locked her in the curing oven. It was an accident, obviously. But she was in there for an hour, in the pitch black. One hundred and eighty degrees. His colleague corrects him: it never got up to one eighty - not while Lottie was in there. True, he concedes. But she was in there a good hour before anyone realised what had happened. After that she took some time off from the factory. A good few few months. The c*nts tried to kill me, she said.

After the session, we have a cup of tea.

I ask about Universal Credit. She sighs. Don't get me started. It was Ian Duncan Smith's pet project, she says. Universal Credit was his way of 'making work pay'. Of getting people on the ladder of prosperity. She hands me a booklet from the Department of Work and Pensions. Pages of black type. All this, it's done nothing but criminalise the most vulnerable. I mean, you've seen the people we work with, right? Many of them are extremely unwell. They're in no state to go looking for work. But if they don't apply for three jobs a week, they get sanctioned. Sanctioned if they're five minutes late to sign on. Sanctioned if they miss an appointment. Sanctioned if they're unwell, in hospital, at a funeral. First time, they lose their benefits for thirteen weeks. Second time, twenty-six weeks. Third time its one hundred and fifty-six. They have nothing to live on. And I mean, nothing. She looks away, visibly moved. So there you have it. The ladder of prosperity.

I click on a website called the *The Worst Things in Kirkcaldy*. It's a forum. Most of the entries are anonymous. But top of the list is one by Fiona Edwards from Edinburgh University: *The worst thing in Kirkcaldy is the job centre. Fifty percent of Kirkcaldy's population stand outside to collect their benefits. I would like to take a shot-gun to them all.*

I pause to imagine Fiona Edwards from Edinburgh University, on the steps of the Job Centre, with a Winchester rifle. Single gauge. Around her, a scene of devastation. Unemployed bodies slumped over the railings, pouring blood across the pavement. The automatic doors swing open and shut on a job-seeker's corpse, pounding it with a dumb mechanical certainty.

He'll miss his appointment at this rate. And that will mean a thirteen-week sanction, at the very least.

Big Mo is about three metres tall. And bright orange.

She'd probably be six if she stood upright. But she works twenty-four hours a day, hunched like an obedient triffid. She wasn't expensive. At least, her body wasn't. Its her software that costs the money. Thirty thousand quid per algorithm, he says. Around the factory they call her Big Mo. Why, I ask him. That was the name of the woman she replaced. All day, the woman would lift and stack. Endless boxes of lino tiles. Now the robot does it. Who does it better, the woman or the robot? Let's just say a robot doesn't need a union. Or a tea break.

Everyone reads the first few pages of Smith, he says. The part where he discusses the division of labour. The thing is, no one reads to page four hundred. No one quotes the passage where Smith warns that the division of labour is monstrous; that it turns a person into a machine.

Before leaving on Friday nights, the lassies would scoop handfuls of linseed oil and put it in their hair. Then they'd wrap it and go to bed. Next day it would look lovely for the dance. Heavy and sleek. Terrible smell.

He's out of the shelter, and in temporary accommodation. It's been a few months since I saw him. I ask him about Amazon. About the conditions in the fulfilment centres. Well, he says, I mentioned having a union. And they told me

*OH NO NO NO! YOU DON'T NEED A UNION!
YOU DONT NEED ANY MORE MONEY!*

Most companies let a union in. Amazon wouldn't have it. So, he says, they came up with this idea. A Workers Forum. Which is basically a pretend union. It works like this: you get a few representatives. They go to meetings with the big knobs. And then the big knobs tell them very politely to shut the f**k up and go back to work.

He looks out of the window for a moment. Then something occurs to him. A surge of enthusiasm brings him to his feet:

BUT YOU KNOW WHAT? THE MANAGEMENT DID GIVE US A NEW SWEETIE MACHINE! YES! FOR THE CANTEEN! MY GOD! WHAT A VICTORY FOR THE PEOPLE! JUST WHAT WE WANTED! WE'D ACTUALLY LIKE MORE MONEY AND SOME KIND OF REPRESENTATION AS HUMAN BEINGS IN THE WORKPLACE - BUT NEVER MIND! AT LEAST WE CAN GET AN OVERPRICED YORKIE BAR!





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I'm struggling to imagine why anyone would take valium.

A man has collapsed in the common room of the shelter. His eyes drift around in their sockets. James and Deone barely raise their heads. They are concentrating on their linocuts. He hasn't taken junk, they correct me, but valium.

Valleys.

He's younger than me, taller too. But I'm not afraid of him. He's whimpering around the room, looking for something that isn't there. In a moment he forgets what it was. Then drifts down the corridor and shuts his bedroom door.

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The Vivace range offers a palette of powerful linoleum designs. It is produced by mixing eight elegant colours, while still retaining a predominant hue. Asian Tiger is one of twelve products in the Vivace range. It resembles an endlessly grazed knee. This reminds me of my sister. The careful fascination she would display around bodily wounds: peering studiously at curled shavings of skin, immaculate poolings of blood, pink swirls newly revealed in her textured flesh. Pain would be tempered by a fascination for the mysteries hidden beneath the skin. Time would hover. The shock of the fall, a split-second occurrence, would produce layers of tiny white rolls, withdrawn over gleaming red muscle. Whispers. Breathly wonderings at the secrets of living meat. Rolled out in two-metre strips, the grazed knee of my infantile sister is one of twelve products in the Vivace range of powerful linoleum designs. Thickness: 2.5mm, NCS S 3060-Y90R, LRV 15%. www.forbo.com/flooring.

My factory tour is coming to an end. We pause to watch two men on the production line. Their task is to remove off-cuts. Sweep, drop. Sweep, drop. Choreographed elbows respond to the dropping of the blade. It's not a terribly interesting job, he concedes. To be honest, there was the problem of apathy. We had to address that. After seven hours on a shift, you'd have ladies throwing perfectly good linoleum into the rubbish and putting all the rubbish into nice boxes, and sending that to the suppliers. So they rotate the workers now.

From *The Independent*, 15th April 2016

A man missed his Job Centre appointment because he was in hospital after being hit by a car. He was sanctioned.

A man missed his Job Centre appointment to attend his father's funeral. He told the centre in advance, but he was sanctioned.

A woman missed her Job Centre appointment because she was at a job interview. She was sanctioned.

Kirkcaldy was a distant place in my childhood imaginary. It was a town where my family had once owned a linoleum factory. Nairn. That was my granny's name. The factory had been founded by her grandfather, or something similar. I wasn't too sure. I wasn't too sure how to pronounce Kirkcaldy. Or linoleum, for that matter.

At some point the family sold the business. So all I knew about linoleum was our kitchen, and my father on his knees. Rubbing the floor with his fingernail. Erasing a trace.

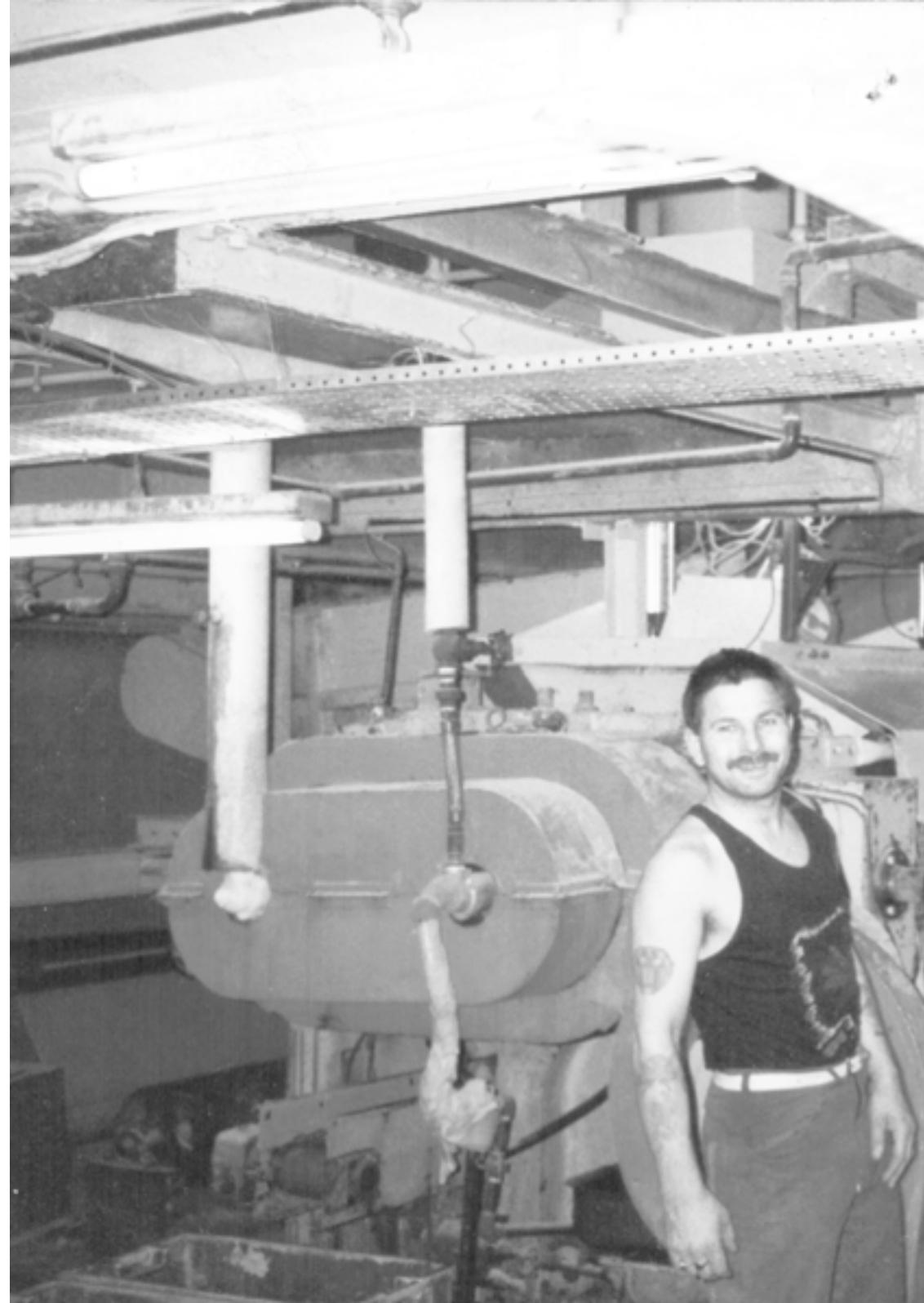
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