

THE 2020 BÜRO BDP WRITING PRIZE SHORTLIST

A READER

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Broken Dimanche Press

COLOPHON

The 2020 Büro BDP Writing Prize Shortlist
A Reader

A Broken Dimanche Press Publication
Berlin 2020
www.brokendimanche.eu

Published November 31, 2020, on the occasion of the virtual award ceremony of the 2020 prize. The 2020 prize was made possible with the support of Babes Bar www.babes.bar.

ISBN: 978-3-943196-85-6

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Design: Studio BDP

Broken Dimanche Press
Büro BDP
Schönleinstraße 24
10967
Berlin





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COMPOUND

KELLY DIGNAN

It was a mistake to leave the compound but I couldn't help myself, I needed space from all its oppressiveness, the staged dinners and courses in decorum, watchful women floating by on the hour, and most especially from my wife who I'd been at odds with for days. After butting heads with her again one evening, I hung my head off the balcony, and on a whim spider-walked down the wall, past the guards, and caught a lift right into the city, some hours away.

We'd gone to the city countless times before, together, though always on official passes. We always stayed at the same run-down hotel and that's where I had the car drop me, not careful about covering my tracks. As soon as I arrived, I sat in the courtyard and made the acquaintance of an older gentleman, taking refuge from all that crawled and mossed on the walls,

and before long we were sharing a bottle from the hotel shop, getting drunk, and I started saying many distasteful things to him.

Of course my wife followed me. She hadn't stopped fuming since she'd discovered I'd snuck out of the compound and had traced my scent all the way to the hotel. Even before she appeared I knew that she was there: I recognized the screeching wheels of her suitcase as they scraped through the alley and rounded the corner.

She didn't say anything. She helped herself to a seat between me and the older gentleman and listened to me say distasteful things to him, without introducing herself and with her arms crossed over her chest. I grew especially flagrant in her presence, so that it wasn't long before the older gentleman understood the true nature of our relationship and excused himself. I never saw him again.

I argued with my wife out in the open until we were exhausted, and then we dragged the suitcase up the stairs together and asked for our usual room.

I came to in the morning suffering like I'd been preserved in cotton, shut in a drawer. Water gurgled in the sink as my wife attempted to refresh herself, and she was humming aloud, and I put my hands over my ears and wanted to scuttle away. That was all the proof I needed that although I'd been so

bold as to believe I had escaped, everything was the same, exactly the same, I was still pinned down as if I'd never risked anything.

My head was floating and I had some confusion about the separation between inner and outer as I listened to my wife shooing away cockroaches with her flimsy flip flop. Its rhythm was a wet smack right on my brain, but my mind was something separate and smaller inside. My body was a naked sac on the bed, but I was also something else that had nothing to do with it. There was pressure for me to reconcile the two. I did my best to come to terms with the hand gripping the pillow as my hand. When my wife showed herself in the wonky doorframe, wearing her zebra-print panties, I cried into her breasts even though she looked like someone I didn't even know. Caught up in the moment, I took my wife's hand, asked her to be my wife, because just then I didn't feel like I should be alone in the world.

I went down to the hotel store and bought soda water and white-tipped cigarettes to soothe myself. You couldn't get cigarettes at the compound, not to mention that smoking at the compound was strictly prohibited due to a belief in limiting external stimuli as well as health officials constantly monitoring the premises in disguise. It was also a condition of my wife's, that I not smoke, but I honestly thought it might do some good to see

myself in spirit form. I lingered in the courtyard, sipping the soda water and hoping to see the older gentleman whose moustache I'd admired so I had the chance to explain myself.

Everyone who stayed at the hotel had some secret. I spied them all come and go. Just then, a group of male models popped out of a taxi, propping up sunglasses as if they were really something. They were models precisely because, up close, they were so grotesque and gangly they could be confused with beautiful. My wife passed me just as I was fixated on the models and smoking up a storm and continued on as if I wasn't the type she'd give a second thought to.

I needed to pursue my passions just as I'd imagined them, when I found the balls to leave the compound and before my wife showed up. I changed into my suit and sat alongside the filthy pool, hoping a swim would clear the cobwebs. The sun beat through the latticing, and I calmed down just listening to the shadows move around.

I made one length in a crawl. Ants were busy at the far end, carrying a leaf down a line. I splashed until I'd drowned them all like a despot. It was only when I turned that I saw a man was watching me from a chaise-lounge, tapping ash into the shallow end. I swanned up at him as I went by, but he

wouldn't shake his gaze. I tried to correct my behaviour, demonstrating a gentle stroke, but by the time I butterflied back he'd dissolved into the darkness.

I wasn't surprised that my wife hadn't returned. After all, she hadn't really come to the city to save me. I waited in the room until it was dark and then went up the road. Most of the restaurants had folded up for the night and it was raining. My sandals kept sliding around on the pavement. I knew there was an all-night diner across from the hospital where we'd gone a dozen times in the past. As I made my way there, I passed a sign for the hospital pointed in the opposite direction. I wasn't sure how my inner compass had gotten so turned around.

I decided to head back to the hotel before I got away from myself. Something wasn't right with me. I retraced my steps, but suddenly worried that my sense of direction was terribly mistaken. I stood soaking in the rain, looking around. A statue of elephants, a hair salon, a police station with a man in uniform looking me up and down: none of these things had existed previously. I had just walked from the hotel and had, in the past, walked back and forth between the hotel and hospital countless times. And yet I recognized nothing.

I wanted very badly to be in touch with my wife just then to ask her where I went wrong. But then again that would be so much like me, and I still wanted to believe I'd made a fresh start. I was starting to feel deranged, out in the rain walking in circles, everything looking like rearranged furniture. Finally I begged a beggar for help. He put me in his cart and pushed me one block to the front of the hotel.

My wife didn't return until five in the morning. At least that was when I heard her, crying outside because she'd lost her key. We slept in separate beds and didn't get up till after noon. She was wearing the ring I'd given her on her pinky finger. I'd made a point of asking no questions when I let her in, but now she wanted to know about my night. I shrugged as if I was a keeper of secrets. But she'd only asked me because she had something she wanted to get off her chest, and on her knees told me she'd spent every last cent she owned in a gentleman's club.

'When I sat down, forty women surrounded my table,' my wife said, 'and I had to pick. They were all extraordinarily beautiful, unlike the ones we've gotten used to.'

'Go on,' I said.

'Everything has a different price, but they don't tell you that. Each pinched

nipple or hand between the legs, it's all on a scale. Matrons circle the room, shrewdly, keeping tabs on everybody. One girl came at me from behind, like this, draping her hair over my face. I had no idea what I was getting into.'

There are certain things I'm not supposed to get emotional about, and I wasn't, I wasn't even emotional, it had just been such a trying couple days. I put on my swimming trunks and pledged to forget about everything but the vision I'd had of myself before my wife got there. I would leave her to her own devices, let her head into the seediest streets to win over strangers since she could no longer subsidize her lifestyle on her own. All I wanted was for her to leave me alone.

Now someone watched me do my laps from an upper window. I could see his silhouette, but when I stopped to shield my eyes, he stepped back behind the curtain. I wanted to believe it was the older gentleman, that he was lying in wait until I appeared to be free, but who was I kidding. My wife's presence had permeated the hotel in all its passages. It dribbled over and drenched me in an aura of off-limits, though this wasn't the case.

I sat poolside and smoked a white-tipped cigarette while water dripped through the slats of the chair, waiting for someone to come down the stairs to get to know me. Everything was permissible here and I wanted to take

advantage of it. The compound was so walled in with rules that it was difficult for me, even now, to shed the skin of who I was and truly let loose. It would not be long now before they rounded us up and so far I had nothing to show for it.

I promised myself I'd have a big night out, but when I returned to the room my wife had left a note on the desk: *Meet me at the jazz bar across from the hospital at midnight.* I could have ignored her request, I should have, but before I'd even read the note I knew I'd be winding through the streets until I found my wife exactly as she'd requested. The worst part of this news was that I would have to go out in search of the hospital again.

I took the elevator to the rooftop restaurant. The elevator was papered with people in their bare skins in suggestive postures, pointing to their phone numbers. The restaurant was empty at that time of day, nearly always. No one else was so unfulfilled as to have to spend their pennies at the hotel. The waiter was startled when I asked for a table under the faded red lanterns. He told me the cook was "out," but he could offer me some bar snacks.

'Can you just sit with me?' I said when he set down a bowl of peanuts.

He crossed his legs to hide his discomfort. It wasn't going to work out, even with the waiter.

‘How do I get to the hospital?’

I felt like a neophyte, someone who had never been to the city before, surviving on snacks and needing directions. He drew a map on the back of a damp napkin and excused himself.

We had pointed to the jazz bar before in our visits to the hospital as somewhere we wanted to go but had never been inside. In fact, in the past, I’d considered the jazz bar as emblematic of the people we wanted to be but weren’t brave enough to embody yet. Something had happened where my wife had surpassed me, had begun to express all the lasciviousness we’d once dreamed of together without waiting for me to catch up. I’d gotten us out of the compound but done no more. She was trying to stir my temper back to decisive action, but by midnight I was exhausted.

When I finally found the place, the doorman wouldn’t let me in. He pointed to my footwear which was inappropriate. I could see into the space. There were women in cages and wild animals pinned to the wall. Trombones slid down songs quite seductive, and there was my wife, smoking a cigar, a lady in her lap, throwing someone else’s bills around.

I moped my way back to the police station which was right where it was supposed to be. I was allowed to use the phone for free. I put the call into the compound myself, asking for rescue, fearing that otherwise she'd be gone for good.

THE GUIDES

FROM PART ONE

DAYNA-ASHLEY GROSS

***F**old your legs, I thought after a series of mundane thoughts. Who says that? fold your legs?*

I'm imagining myself sitting on the floor with my legs crossed, my existence like a fallen thread, like the tip of my finger, as shedding skin- already fallen, as each piece of wood yawning across my sitting room floor, as an entire landmass they call 'continent' and as the moon defeated by radiance. Hu Ha, yes, yes, I admit I'm breathing.

I don't know why, but over the years I've grown attached to illusions of placement and permanence. But this year, I've decided to release my

notions of attachment and it's almost as if I can hear the crow flapping her wings.

I desire freedom but what if I cut myself off from more than they are demanding of me? You know? that larger tyrannical they. I must define freedom before I discover its form. All I know is, freedom is a feeling beyond language. I'd like to meet someone who doesn't lean too heavily on the walls of language, ha!

My mother has always reminded me that I have body just like everybody, a healthy body, not an average body like every body, but a body. My aunt has always exaggerated the presence of my exceptionally small ankles. She used to refer to them as chicken legs, but I felt they were more closely related to that of a fawn. During my teenage years I heard my knobby knees outlined a small diamond when pressed together, which my cousin said was a symbol of beauty. I've mostly focused on the dark mark on the center of my neck staining my point of mis-creation.

Like every body, I have that god forsaken channel on my upper lip from the spirit who struck my face with knowledge while I was peacefully sucking at life in the womb - overall undisturbed. My spirit was clumsy and slid its metaphorical finger all the way down past my chin, impressing me

with a longer trial.

I'm the sort that has always searched for explanations rather than solutions. From very early on I knew life would be a struggle, especially when compared to handsome brother and sister, but one should never compare their life to another's. As an unborn child I was very impressionable and was fixed in form to shape a young soul eager to learn for the wake of her life. How terribly draining!

Very soon everything will change. Yet, I convince myself by looking into mirrors change is an illusion and only I have remained constant, or that some voice within me has. The voice in the mirror that is. That's what this is about, voices, disembodied sounds, but surely a plot must arise! No, not here. I'm famous for my inward excursions, upward motions make me queasy, so sit tight and maybe you'll learn to understand, or maybe you've already been all LIT UP! I'm mostly surrounded by loose strands and walls. I regularly wonder if I'm a fabric without form, almost quilt-like.

This chronicle, so far, isn't exactly about the thread, but the spaces in between you see. These spaces are called plenty, but in actuality are one called multiple to construct understanding, which invariably leads to further confusion. Wait. I often encourage life to behave in complicated ways

and now I need a moment to relieve myself -

There, that's it. What a relief. To be honest, one of my most cherished feelings is to feel relief and so I exhale deeply, quite frequently, or run to sit on the toilet for no apparent reason.

I'd like to tell you a little bit about my childhood.

As a child I didn't speak much and reserved my thoughts as an observatory for the red input jack hidden behind an outdated stereo system. As for the white output jack, I filled it with creamy wax, with a substance as impermanent as my life, like children do before they discover that living is a process.

Back then, many may have found me dumb or passionless, but whenever I had the opportunity to sing in groups, I became exceptionally animated, stressing my wholesome voice and growing body into a state of oblivion. It was more like screaming than singing, but the few adults who witnessed this flame of mine, I swear, absolutely adored me.

It was mostly in prayer where I found I had something to say, but I've never been comfortable with the idea that something was permanently watching me. Many adults back then had faith that I would believe in their God forever, but forever can last a lifetime and to believe in one possibility

for that long seemed all too exhausting to me, genuinely!

Time traveling is memory, so what are we trying to invent? Slipped into my mind and that's when I realized I was in my apartment, in my body, nearly a woman.

But before I stand up, I want you to it's only the beginning. Isn't always just the beginning though?

Moment (pronounced with a German accent).

This morning I've woken up especially early. The previous morning, I woke up around the same time but in an entirely different vain. This very morning, I softly snuck out of our wide bed, with my toes hardly hooking to the sweating sheets when I landed over the temperate wooden floor. The only sound heard was the prewar metal doorhandle twisting against itself. When I crept out from that over exposed bedroom and closed out the breath of decay behind me, I simply walked into my shadow; That shadow.

Where is my spirit? I stood up to write on a torn envelope before the coffee on the stove erupted. Certainly there are more pressing questions crawling awkwardly inside of my mind this year, but what could be more pressing than one's own spirit? I should move to the toilet before my dream aura completely evaporates. Please allow me to linger in my dreamscape or

nowhere at all, not even in the begging. Just a few more minutes, seconds, permission to be thoughtless, emotionless. But those goddamn responsibilities prostrate themselves over my tender thoughtlessness before my drowsy eyes even have the chance to lift into wakefulness, body in the bed.

If I sit on the toilet with the lights off and try to focus on the white wall close to my face maybe I will succeed in blinding my thoughts. Trace the white painted lines between the white tiles. Look down into the white radiator in front of my knobby knees and witnesses grey hairs trapped, clustered by dust like thin fish bones and what the body leaves behind. Could those hairs have belonged to my grandmother? No dear no, of course not, she's never been in this flat, not alive anyway. Do the anemic hairs belong to the living or the dying? someone I've known intimately or a face I will never validate into existence? This must be a warning and a great loss! I'm terribly frightened and imagine running water to sooth my nerves.

I wipe from front to back, flush, tick my eyes back and forth - searching for silence. I must leave the bathroom and drop my body over the floorboards without washing my hands. I often forget such rituals.

When my body wakes up from her incomplete death, the soul returns, recharged, by six rounds of purifying water over the hands, to its temporary

form. The same ritual was expected after visiting the dead hidden in their graves. But perhaps, if I keep my hands spoiled, I will have the power to curtail my lifelong fear of death?

This morning, on this wooden floor, cross-legged, I will write old ideas made new through its arrangement and orientation of word alignment, both meaningless and meaningful. I'm covering my mouth. I've suddenly awakened my passion for paradox. I suffer from the expanding urge to explore damp sculpture gardens, forgotten Eastern European cities, rooms and palms. Though I never want to abandon these walls.

Objects, in my opinion, act like sand at the base of a balloon seemingly separate yet forming a mass, a singular. I am the balloon, but that was obvious wasn't it? If I let go and rearrange the pain of loss, wait, first, my sacred coffee before I progress. Just one sip from the dark charcoals of coffee and I immediately love my existence! How important it is to love life and how easily I forget!

There are very specific concepts that have been irritating me for weeks, or has it been years? Traversing across these ideas have exhausted my soul. My soul is the only constant within me. There will be very much talk of this, this soul. Now I'm sitting on a chair. I realize I am possessed. For claiming

a soul, the body, my body, must possess it in order to keep it. This means I am both possessed and possessive, how thrilling!

There is much to be said on the soul. Like any other organ it has its layers, parts, a left side, a right side. What happens when you reflect a soul in the mirror? Does it too have pauses? I've concluded I have only one soul for I've heard of great wars within the body when an exotic soul tries to take on a moving body's form. A foreign war, that's what it is. The body must wait it out. Like a fish in water, inversely, for the water is the soul and the fish is the body, or was it the other way around, body of water, spiritual fish? Lord, what a mess I've made and I haven't even left the house. I rarely leave the house, but it's not hard to imagine what prevents me from doing so.

In here I am parts of a whole. That is what I'm after, the whole. That's my affair. My quest for wholeness beneath the confusion, spiritual confusion that is. It's nothing like the nonsense of my contemporaries who quest for spirituality through materialism and recreations of the ego. I'm above all that, far more confused and utterly unknown. My anonymity massages my modesty, it's a lovely relationship, truly. Oh god, I need help, I wish I could trust someone.

My soul is one and I will soon discover my unanimity for I am living

in a re-creative mode. I often try to pin myself to a wheel to understand the motion of the body and my changing self. I realize my body is material. I want to understand why I have chosen this form. Or has my mother, through naming me, chosen this form for me? Could I trust my mother with such a responsibility? There's much confusion that will continue to erupt like my morning coffee, which all too frequently stains my soiled stovetop. I am covered in stains.

Why is there one word for the self, or is my name another? but these words resist fleshy meaning when alone. When I'm alone, on my own, I can feel my gradients, my unusual earthily elements. I want the letters in my name to appear as fluid as I feel. That's it. The way I must look under a microscope or the ink print of a fingertip.

Some objects will need to remain unchanged in order for me to trail my transformations. I permit the I on the keyboard, in beautiful leather-bound notebooks, on hotel slippers, lifting open mouths, to keep up its charade of uniformity. Again, I lean on language. Should I stop right here? Quit? Perhaps I will learn to imitate the I's establishment, it's protection from heaven and earth. Another relief. Relief, relief relief. Repetition of language makes me feel as if I'm dancing, and imagine, I don't even have

to move one bit!

The letter acts confident, that solid I of a uniform pillar, but I feel as if something is waiting for, for my approval. Or did I overhear that in a dream one night where the 'I' stood unyieldingly straight? When I emphatically blew onto the letter with my incomplete life force, I witnessed it wave. If it were to fall it would take on new meaning, an obstacle for a trained horse to leap over, but I was not sound enough to make it rest, to make it lie, for I am the liar seeking the truth. The truth is the exhaling fish in my figurative hand and the plenty terrifies me. I should leave the house. Unless...

Oh! my name, haha, my name! My name is Thetis, or at least I wished it to be something as autonomous. Intelligent people, truthseekers, can find my name elsewhere, in beginnings, on the soft-cloth covering the body, but never mind veils are only details. It's 7 am everywhere, or some time close to it, starless. Where do the stars go when the sun rises?

I love these early hours when the masses rush off to catch buses and trains. Or, ride their European bicycles anxiously, or not so anxiously, to settle into their office jobs. The inertia of strangers comforts me.

I often hear the neighbors in the stairs uprooting their toddlers, usually one in this neighborhood, to release them to their supervised playrooms. I

never witness their faces, never care to look, and only sometimes, by something similar to chance but not quite like it, do I catch a fast glance at the crowns of their heads through the window one flight up. But, at this hour I seldom look out that window.

When I look through that window, it's usually straight across to observe the panorama performance, or no, the 50mm perspective of the buildings directly across the street. Phew! Now that was very digestible wasn't it? The relief of the line is that it's always recognizable to any degree and often leads in a single direction. I try to keep that in mind whenever I think out loud with my mouth sealed shut.

Now might be the moment to confess how startled and attracted I am to vulnerability. I have always found it beautiful when women expose their desires and weaknesses. Have you ever confessed something to a complete stranger and realized the tears pooling over their lower eyelids? It's almost as if what I've confessed was real and even touching?

I crave hysteria from a risky distance. When I'm overcome with this feeling, I usually turn my palms upward and watch my fingers crawl frantically, like a bug on its back frenzied for survival.

I find myself grotesque when I suffer. I feel like an uncoordinated

child in agony, un-adorable. This is why I have learned to photograph, observe and capture others. I can adore, but am disturbed when others try to adore me. I am repelled by men who seek me for their muse. If only they understood the depth of my expanse before dreaming me up. I am frenetic and swarming with inner mystery. I have claws that cripple my inner self in the darkness. This isn't easy. How does one manage to make sense of oneself?

I ease this tension building up within me by listening to car engines, wind pressure caught between tire and gravel, or a moaning bus. These are techniques I've learned when men try talking to me directly. At first, I despise them for interrupting my thoughts and unmask my revulsion and irritation by curving the corners of my mouth downward. This is an unforgivable crime, most particularly in my mornings, how do I make them shut up?

In my mornings my tongue and lips only move when I am more than ready to sip and swallow another too hot to swallow-but-even-worse-to-keep-in-your-mouth gulp of burnt, almost black, coffee. When the top layer of my hair has kept the fashion of my pillow I should be left alone. This is when my hair acts as a sky wire to my dream world. When my hair is split perfectly down the middle is when I am available for conversation.

I am a character of habit and routine, or at least one part of my world

is, the rebellious part I suppose. Calendars, lists and eventually buildings are the tools I use to understand my existence as concrete, my sand. Hours, dates, times and 'To-Dos' filled with destinations and priorities are blood to my bone and oxygen to my liver, the root of my desire. It could be something else, something nameable, but my mind and my gut act independently.

I believe there are these points, these lifeless, draftless spaces balancing out what grows above, below and in between. I will photograph to discover the in between, the deposits, as whole. Seizing a frame has no language but structure. Click. A building is caught on my negative inverted. Why am I continually inverted?

The man I allowed into my life has tried to convince me to direct my body and mind, to be in control of my energy, efforts and output, not a schedule that I need to maintain to support my efforts. He is a more evolved human being than most people I know. It must have been the years he spent in the desert relating to stones and meteorites, or maybe he possesses something indefinable. Can he be trusted?

His behavior, movement and gestures are panther-like. He walks slowly and lazily from one simplicity to another, rests and just as suddenly

jets with life force. Every muscle stretches with feline smoothness. His quiet black hair is permanently polished by the lick of a rough tongue. His skin so fair it makes you wonder what shade protected him from the desert sun. But children have always been more attentive to the worthwhile material in life, especially desert children, and less troubled by moderate discomforts. Unless that child was cursed with poor blood circulation, like I have been blessed with. His father, a lapidary worker, brought his son with him on his more interesting excursions. They both agreed the earth had more to teach than his school professors. Dear, dear Altair.

Today I will go out and photograph because that's what I can do well, photograph and eat. I believe if I commit to a routine, I will begin to look familiar. But before I establish my routine, I must fly across the Atlantic to visit my family. They are begging to see me, to convert me. I suffer when I am close to them and suffer when I am far from them. Sometimes I forget they exist entirely and in those weeks I feel bliss - if I forget to feel exhausted.

THE SISTERS OF ECHO

MARIE HJØRNET NIELSEN

When the doctors and nurses who in rush pass by my room – glimpse of their white coats – when the entire hospital, when I, when those who only have the power because they can silence us, are gone, I hope someone someday will find this notebook buried in a metal box behind the Medusa sculpture in the hospital park, or wherever I decide to hide it, I hope, the person who finds it will understand that the numbers I write are disguised words, that she, my descendant, is fearless enough to stand up on a bench in the middle of a public park and with a bright and clear voice read from the notebook, or in a bus, just get up and speak, or in a church, next to the priest who will be a woman, she will speak, in front of the kids in the school where I used to teach, she will speak. The day shall come when we storm the rostrums of those in power;

all the suits in the room will be forced to listen to us; no one would no longer holds his hand over the mouth of a speaking woman or turns his back toward a rat who speaks.

Sometimes I write just to remember how it feels; the flourish of the hand needed to make the hook of the j, the e as the beginning of an infinity spiral, the curved g, but I only write in between the night guard's rounds. I write on the white napkins that come with the watery potato soup. I write sentences like: *you can avoid losing face by sitting completely still in the same way loose teeth can take root again.* I don't know where the sentences come from; they are like suppressed thoughts that are being given body and voice in the dreams. When I can hear that the night guard is coming, I fold the napkin and hide it under the mattress and even if the woman in the bed next to me is awake; I don't fear that she will reveal me, she looks blind with her glassy eyes. Sometimes she stares at the ceiling as if she thinks the power of the thoughts can make the roof take off and lift the body up in the air. Before the nurse changes my bedding, I take the napkins in my pockets, run to the toilet and flush them out. At least they can't hear what I'm thinking. My thoughts are the most private I have. Our thoughts are more private than our naked bodies. That's how it is now, but not only we were affected during

the invasion, the so-called deviants were also forced to wear muzzles. They took everything from them. Everything they owned, now they live in the streets, that's why they are called rats.

When the weather is nice, I go for a walk in the hospital park. One day I heard a scream. I went all the way to the fence and saw a group of kids standing outside the tunnel. A boy spotted me, he ran to me, "what are you staring at", he asked with a kind of disgust that didn't suit his chubby child's body. To them we look less humanlike because we are fenced. They tell the kids that we are crazy and dangerous like we were wild rabid dogs, insane. I pointed at the tunnel and put a hand behind my ear to signal that I could hear the screaming. "Yes, listen, it's Echo, she couldn't keep her mouths shut either", he said, not unfriendly, but in a know-all tone as only young boys who feel superior, only because they are boys, can sound. "Horus", a man yelled, the teacher I assumed. Suddenly I became invisible. The boy turned around and ran back. Horus has become a popular name. The Horus children are silentkeepers. With the index finger raised to the mouth they shush their mothers. The regime is trying to make natural phenomena like echoes fit into the world view they are trying to create. The cunning is, that they choose stories we all know. "Tales from the cradle of

democracy”, they call them. *Echo, the girl without a door for her mouth* is the title of the story they tell the children. The children are sent into the tunnels and the boys are allowed to shout and scream.” Listen to the echo”, they say, “it’s the woman with the false voice”. She got the power of the tongue cut away, so she only could repeat the last part of what others said. She was rejected by her beloved, the grief ate her up, she became skinny, shrunk until nothing else was left than her voice and bones that turned into stones. It happens earlier and earlier that the girls’ voices die away. The boys are encouraged to talk while the girls learn to sing nanana-songs and dance. They say to the girls that a real woman would rather bite her own tongue off than say something wrong and the best way to avoid saying something wrong is to say nothing at all. The fairy tale about the little mermaid who gets her tongue cut off in exchange for human feet is being used as an example of how bad it can go when trying to become something you aren’t.

Not even the nurses are allowed to give sound to the thoughts expressed in their eyes. The talker doesn’t see how many unsaid words one single gaze can contain, that tears have become the silent cry of the girls. The nurses are talking with their hands, a chilly hand on a feverish brow, a hand to hold when you are scared. They type the most necessary words on a speech ma-

chine. The voice of the machine is a mechanical simulated male voice. Now people have got used to the sound. During the invasion the public opinion was that in these insecure times people need to listen to voices with strength and bass like the roar of the lion and the bull. The speech machine only understands medical terms to avoid that the nurses are letting their tongue run. It happens that I hear the nurses talking together through the speech machines. They gather in groups and type in a rush. I can't help thinking if the terms mean something else, whether 'anesthesia' means 'meeting' and 'uterus' means 'in the basement'.

Some go mad and start to babble, often without addressing anyone as if they are talking to the insects in the air or to the air itself. It's not being interpreted as an attempt to communicate but as madness, as a frightening example of what can happen when a woman loses the last remnant of her self-control.

I still remember the first time I heard about the voice theory. A so-called expert was inter-viewed in the News. He claimed that women can't censor their voices for feelings and therefore women's speech is always camouflaged. After all, it was sensational that a man like him was invited for an interview and taken seriously, as if he really was the scientist, he pretended

to be, but no one seemed to wonder; the interview was just a drop in the endless stream of stories with distorted view of reality which the secret media began to produce for the voice regime already before they came to power. The interviewer asked about the reason and the expert explained it was hormonally conditioned and had always been like that, even our forefathers knew it. For too long we have ignored this fact, the expert said and turned his head and looked directly into the camera. Let me give an example, he said to the viewers, his voice was calm in such an: 'I can't be contradicted, therefore I can as well be kind' way. He took his time; he knew he wouldn't be interrupted, that the TV station would pause the time when a man in his position spoke. Before the invasion delays in the TV program would only happen if the national team played in overtime. The expert began to tell a story that didn't really seemed to have anything to do with the case, about the legendary hero Odysseus, who was recognized by his old nanny. The last thing I heard the expert say before I switched off was that the nanny shout of joy made Odysseus to cover her mouth with his hand; it's not allowed for you to scream right now, rejoice inwardly. Those were the words Odysseus used, the expert said and explained what we needed to understand was, that women are victims of their own false, emotional infected voices. In the mo-

ment he said that, I switched off. How satisfying it was to be able to turn the TV off, same feeling as winning a discussion, but later all the TVs with a turn off function was confiscated and today all homes have installed a TV that can't mute, turn off or change channels. You can't switch off a babbler or of course you can, but the regime is not interested in that, because the babblers serve a purpose; they are living evidence of the voice theory.

The babblers mumble or scream when they are among people or when they are alone. It's like their mouths run over. They have this desperate expression in their eyes as if they are searching for eyes to be reflected in, but it's forbidden to look a babbler in the eyes. It's said that their gazes talk to your subconscious, that they can hypnotize you to do something you wouldn't normally have done, such as attacking a random man on the street or commit robbery. Violence against us is not allowed and punishable but a man who hurts a babbler can defense himself by claiming that she made him do it, that her gaze made him furious or possessed him with her speaking in tongues. The babblers have become the sirens of our time, but I don't think they seduce men on purpose, like everyone else I think they just want to be left alone. They live on the streets and eat what they find in the garbage cans, they are skinny, dirty and have inflamed wounds but that doesn't

stop the men from bothering them. The babblers are ownerless and therefore they belong to everyone. For the regime they are the proof that women are closer to animals, like animals they express pleasure and pain through sounds. They bring the babbler in from the street and show her to the kids as if she was a circus monkey and if she is silent they drag her by the hair to make her moan. We have found our own way to communicate, we have become perfect at mouth reading and interpret each other's lips, whispering without sound or translate eye blink to morse code. Just because you are not allowed to talk, doesn't mean, you no longer need to express yourself. We are allowed to play music, dance and paint but only abstract patterns that don't contain messages. We are all skilled painters, musicians and dancers, a nation of artists. The regime doesn't consider art as a threat, it's not the emotions themselves that are dangerous, they fear the articulated feelings, when the emotions infect the words and incite people to rebel but even abstract art can contain words. In ourselves we translate the colors and patterns; the energetic brush strokes, the chaotic in the paintings and sometimes destructive with bold, black brushstrokes drawn across the otherwise colorful surfaces. To me the paintings are full of hope and courage, for those in power the paintings are as unimportant as wine-stained tablecloths.

The art of women is not being considered as true art but as entertainment for the rich and powerful. If you are looking for fun, you see some woman's art and indeed there are differences: The choreography for a show with female dancers is often more intense and more sensual, with a more desperate expression but it's not so easy to tell if it's because of the women or the male instructors. I miss achieving something. It's tiring walking in the corridors of the hospital, to sit in the TV-room or make daub paintings in the activity room. The patient and the woman are not me. I'm more. Before I was a teacher. Now I'm nobody. When women no longer were allowed to teach I was told to clean the same classroom in which I before was teaching. The day I was caught, I was in the middle of cleaning the girl's toilet. A girl, my former pupil, Maj was her name, came to the toilet. Tears dripped from her eyes and left wet marks on her cheeks, she sniffed and pointed at her mouth which she could barely open. Probably they had given her some of this chewing-gum-like trash that paralyses the tongue and sticks to the roof of the mouth as a punishment for speaking. I remembered her from the class; she was strong-willed, a loner. She had a healthy skepticism for authorities, she was not afraid of contradicting her teachers. I turned on the water so she could clean her mouth; I tried to cheer her up. It was still

new for us with the speech censor, a little chip which had been shot into the skin in the neck. If I covered the chip with my hand and whispered very low, I thought that my words couldn't be registered. I whispered to the girl that we could help each other; that many other women probably were in the same situation as us, if we were many enough we could fight back. She looked at me, her gaze: surprised of being the witness to a crime she herself was part of even if she didn't do something but also another feeling which was more difficult to read glimpsed in her eyes, was it disgust for me or the situation we both were in? Either the speech machine must have picked up my words or the girl had reported me because no more than twenty minutes later they sent someone to arrest me.

I was blindfolded, they drove away with me, I don't know to where. The man who waited for me in the corridor looked like someone just stepped out of a dream; he was as tall as a twelve years old child, but he had a masculine body and a chestlong beard. He was wearing a hat, dressed in black and almost disappeared in the dark. "This way", he said and showed me the way to a room. A spotlight over my head turned on and I spotted the men sitting on a line along the wall. They were waiting for me. I looked at the little man who still stood by my side. I didn't want him to leave me. "The stage is

yours”, he whispered. But what am I supposed to do, I wanted to ask, so I opened my hand and drew an invisible question mark in the hand. He understood. “You just have to entertain them”, he whispered, “just sing and dance”. But I don’t want to do this, I wanted to say and did the signs with sharp movements to underline that I was serious. The little man shushed me as if I was a loud child and not a silent, adult woman. I made the beak which was the sign for speaking.”If I was you, I would stick to the dance”, he hissed. “I want to speak”, I burst out. Now it was the men who became silent, they look at each other to confirm that the woman truly said something. I couldn’t recognize my own voice; it was so long time ago since I had heard myself speaking. I coughed slightly and could feel how the fear rushed over me as distant lightning. By a mistake I got eye contact with one of the sitting men, his gaze penetrated me as a sting from a wasp. “Let her speak”, he said with the self-confidence of someone who is in a position to judge others. The others protested; “we didn’t come here to listen to a speaking woman”. “Let’s see what will come out of her mouth”, he said almost triumphantly, as if he had the feeling that it was going to be the best entertainment he had seen for long time. He nodded to me, it was now, now I should speak and then I realized that they were not only men who

wanted to be entertained but judges who were here to judge me. They just sat there with their scornful smile and waited for me to make a fool out of myself. It became clear to me that there no longer was any difference between a man being entertained and a judge. I was convinced that in the moment I opened my mouth and said something, they would detect the signs of nervousness that my voice undoubtedly would reveal, and for them it would be the definitive proof of my female weakness. Finally, I got the permission to talk, and suddenly I had no idea what to say. In the desperate hope that the words existed as molecules in the air I just could inhale, I opened my mouth. I took a deep breath, drew the air down into my lungs, the same air as the bodies in the room pulled the oxygen out off. For each breath there became less and less oxygen in the room, and suddenly I got the feeling of a heavy hand pressing against my chest. I gasped and fell.

ORO:ORÐ

ERIN HONEYCUTT

BASQUE TRANSLATIONS

BY ALEX MENDIZABAL

The year is...

1616: Gregorian Calendar

994-995 : Persian Calendar

4252-4253 : Chinese Calendar

4750 : Mayan Calendar

5376-5377 : Hebrew Calendar

Introduction

A Pidgin is a simplified means of communication that develops between two or more groups that do not have a language in common. They are often formed from a limited vocabulary and grammar and often from several languages. Historically, it was used for trading and was not a native language.

Icelandic-Basque Pidgin was written down in Iceland, translated into Icelandic, and used in Iceland. It was spoken in northern Iceland in the 17th century between Basque whalers and Icelandic locals. Whaling became an independent industry in the Basque country between the 12th and 13th century and in Scandinavia in the 17th century. While the Basque sailors were out sailing, the Basque witch trials began in January 1609. Shakespeare and Cervantes will soon be dead.



In 1590 Abraham Ortelius published a new supplement, Additamentum IV, to his atlas, Theatrum orbis terrarum. Amongst the new maps is one of Iceland (Islandia). It was anonymously engraved in the year 1585 and is now attributed to Gudbrandur Thorláksson, bishop of Hólar. Courtesy of the National and University Library of Iceland

Act I



Bichitr, Jahangir Preferring a Sufi Shaikh to Kings from the "St. Petersburg Album," 1615-1618, opaque watercolor, gold and ink on paper, 18 x 25.3 cm (Freer|Sackler: The

Smithsonian's Museums of Asian Art)

Individualism reckoning effect
Masque between became avoid
Southeast Asia Solomon
Africa ever experimented
Quaint withdrawn claim called
Merchants respect sometimes
Places in the world

Individualismoa eragina kalkulatzan
Tarteko maskarada, hutsala bihurtu zen
Asiako hego-ekialdea Salomon
Afrikak inoiz esperimentatu zuen
Xeibrekeria aldendu, aldarrikapena hots egin
Errespetatzen dute inoiz merkatariek
Lekuak munduan

Act II



Daniel in the Lions' Den is a c.1614–1616 painting by the Flemish artist Peter Paul Rubens (Wikimedia Commons)

Passengers despite might
Loaded onto arithmetic companies
Spanish nuisance
Hate places discovered
Workshops themselves
Critical squirrels
Ships more sympathetic to the low
Embassy veteran friar of Mexico City

Örlög farþeganna
Nauðsynleg tölfraði fyrir verkfræðing á djúpum í Acapulco
Óþægindi fanga á ríkisins
Hatur uppgötvaði staði
Heimsveldi silkiverkstæði sjálfir
Gagnrýnin auga á erlent dýr
Sendir samúð með lága
Sendiráð munkur Mexíkóborg

Act III



Title page from Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala, *The First New Chronicle and Good Government* (or *El primer nueva corónica y buen gobierno*, c. 1615 (image from The Royal Danish Library, Copenhagen)

Coastline across strength
Progress velvets mouths
Manila spreading troops
Taxes Potosi wages simply
Evidence biblical
Meanwhile, unhappy Teresia
Was forced so Siam gains
Red Seal Ships

Kosta ala kosta gurutzatuz
Ahotsak belusten ditu progresuak
Manila tropak zabaltzen
Potosi zergak, soldatak besterik gabe.
Ebidentzia biblikoa
Bitartean, zoritxarreko Teresia
Behartua beraz Siam irabazi
Shuinsen, Japoniako holandar merkataritza ontzi armatuak

Act IV



Kano Chikanobu (Japanese, 1660–1728), Edo period (1615–1868), Japan, One of a pair of six-panel folding screens; ink, color, and gilt on paper; Reverse side: ink, color, and gold on paper, 69 1/4 in. × 12 ft. 9 in. (175.9 × 388.6 cm), H. O. Havemeyer Collection, Bequest of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, 1929

Beloved land peninsula
Salary Virginia Pocahontas
Wrinkled after wondering
Captain woman
Ethiopian maiden
Sherley stigma crowded
Sending him probably
The Shah's forged signature

Elskaði landskaginn
Laun Virginia Pocahontas
Hrukkuð eftir að hafa velt því fyrir sér
Skipstjóri kona
Eþíópísk mey
Sherley stigma fjölmennur
Sendir honum líklega
Falsað undirskrift Shah

Act V



The Abduction of Europa (1615/16) by Jacob Jordaens (Wikimedia Commons)

Lady trimming enough
Women advice before
World advance rural
Rural returning Dutch
Foreign would patronage
Family upon forced wine
Idea figure influenced marriage
Uncertainty, a warm welcome
Accordingly against

Andrea behar adina kimutzen
Emakumeen aholkua aurretik
Jo ta ke mundua aurreratu arte
Landatarra holandarra bilakatuz
Kanpotarren ordainsariak
Familia, ardo behartuaren gainean
Ideia irudiak ezkontzan eragin
Ziurgabetasuna, ongietorri beroa
Ondorio Akordio Kontrario

Act VI



The Hippopotamus and Crocodile Hunt, oil painting on canvas by Peter Paul Rubens (Flemish, 1577–1640) (Wikimedia Commons)

Lower days record novels
Panama masculine attention
Gang several Florentine
Daughter travelers deliverance
Converted according originality
Revolution refused painting
Consists capture chroniclers
Breugel propel additional
Century doings brush

Síðar dagar taka upp skáldsögur
Panama karlkyns athygli
Vertu með í Flórens
Frelsun dóttur ferðalanga
Umbreytt skv frumleika
Byltingin neitaði að mála
Samanstendur handtaka langveikra
Breugel knúinn auk þess
Heil öld með burstana

Act VII



[1616] Sigismund of Secon - "Trithemius sui ipsius vindex sive Steganographiae" (engraved in Ingolstadt) Portrait of Johannes Trithemius from Sigismund of Secon

Return regarded enthusiast
German grown provided
Transformation martial generations
Family erected restrict commissions
Ottoman directed places document
Flesh intimately surrounded
And small, flatly refused who you are
Unite the territories
on the western India coast

Gogotsu begiztatu itzulera
Germaniar hazkuntza hornitu
Eraldaketa belaunaldi martzialak
Familiek eraikia komisioak mugatu
Dokumentuak, lekuak, Otomanoek bideratuak
Haragia estu inguratua
Nimiñoa ere, nor zaren erabat baztertua
Lurraldeak batu
Indiako mendebaldeko kostaldean

Act VIII

Figures stylized

Planned brocaded fruits

Contorted years

Buddhist

Codified innkeeper mother

Orbital autonomous reputation

Obtain murderer mailings

Fires have this time a thousand pretty ornaments

How could supplied charter passage

Tölur stílfærðar

Planað hönnuður ávextir

Samtímis búddista

Kóðuð móðir vistmanns

Sjálfstætt orðspor svigrúms

Fáðu póst með morðingjum

Eldar hafa að þessu sinni þúsund falleg skraut

Hvernig gat fylgir skipulagsskrá leið



Allegory of Inclination is a 1615-1617, oil on canvas, by Artemisia Gentileschi on the ceiling of the Galleria in the Casa Buonarroti in Florence.

Act IX



The Banquet of the Officers of the St George Militia Company in 1616 refers to the first of several large schutterstukken painted by Frans Hals for the St. George (or St. Joris) civic guard of Haarlem.

Diminishing bodies London
Publish faction pope
Meeting academic Copernican Arabist
Built earliest wool search
Vault chemical letters
Alchemy culminate essence
Endowment major
Become between, for a time
Languages in search of body parts

Gorputzak urri, London
Fakzio aita santua argitara
Arabiar kopernikar akademikoa topatu
Aurreko artile bilaketa eraikia
Zazpi aldeko kupula hizki kimikoak
Alkimiak burutzen du esentzia
Ondarea eta Bitalitaterako Bidea
Tarte bihurtu noiz ala noiz
Hizkuntzak
Gorputz zati bila

Act X



The Archery Contest of Diana and Her Nymphs is a 1616 painting by Domenichino.

Heaven practice focus
Influence Christian correspondences
Concerned determined around killed
Attended enough audience
Involves serpents
Formidable more former
Expansionist sultanate participants
Americas Venetian easy
Merchants turned differentiate

Fókus á himnum
Áhrif kristinna bréfaskipta
Áhyggjur ákveðnir í kringum drepnir
Sóttu nógu marga áhorfendur
Felur í sér höggorma
Ægilegt meira fyrrum
Þátttakendur í útrásarvíkingum
Americas Venetian auðvelt
Kaupmenn gerðu sér greinarmun

Act XI

However above punish
Traditional sought Freemasons
Buddha sounds fervent
Each placed England
Mouths workers motivated
following secretary priests
earth holy courage
legitimized infamous system

Gainetik halere zigortu
Tradizionala Masoiak behar
Buda suharra adi
Bakoitzak Ingalaterra jarri zuen
Ahoak langile motibatuak
apaiz idazkariei jarraituz
lur adore santua
legitimatutako sistema doilorra



Woman Seated in a Tree, 1616, by Riza-yi Abbasi. Opaque watercolors on paper, 10 x 20 cm. Philadelphia Free Library, Lewis Collection, inv. no. p120.

Act XII

Wars union said
Regions ships empire
Danger eight
dismissed slave
ambition all-encompassing
predictable conduct commercial
Men tower high
Behind rescued private places
Diamond copy sought
Text performance Europe

Stríðsbandalag sagði
Svæði skip heimsveldi
Hætta átta
vísað þræll
metnaður allsherjar
fyrirsjáanleg framkoma í atvinnuskyni
Menn turna hátt
Að baki bjargaði einkaaðilum
Demantafrit leitað
Texti flutningur Evrópa



Foreign Ambassadors, 1616–1617, by Giovanni Lanfranco and workshop. Fresco. Sala dei Corazzieri, Quirinale Palace, Rome.

The End

Historical notes to text:

Act I

Masque between became a void..... ‘Masque’ refers to the festive courtly entertainment popular in Europe in the 16th and early 17th-century.

Southeast Asia Solomon..... In 1616, Dutch explorers became the first Europeans to visit the Solomon Islands Archipelago.

Africa ever experimented..... In 1616, fleets from Asia began to arrive in East Africa.

Quaint withdrawn claim called..... ‘Quaint’ means old fashioned, yet charming, and also refers to something small, an alarming word to use alongside the vastness of colonial empires.

Act II

Passengers despite might..... The role of a ‘passenger’ was very unclear in the early 17th century; often, they were sold unwittingly as slaves at the end of the journey, for example.

Workshops themselves..... The Imperial silk workshops in China, themselves, seen as an anthropomorphized personhood creating all of this global movement of merchandise.

Critical squirrels..... European squirrels are not native to India, land of the Mughal empire in the first act, so any non-native animals, such as squirrels, depicted in paintings were drawn from zoos.

Act III

Progress velvets mouths..... A Jesuit historian wrote in the mid 1600s about Manila as a trading post: “Manila is the equal of any other emporium of our monarchy, for it is the center to which flow the riches of the Orient and the Occident... from Great China silks of all kinds, raw and woven in velvets and figured damasks...” The Spanish colonial period of the Philippines lasted from 1521 to 1898.

Manila spreading troops..... The Spaniards of Manila depended on the large Chinese population for everyday business, while living in constant fear that the Chinese would rise up against them.

Taxes Potosi wages simply..... Indigenous Andeans were forced to work in the silver mines in Potosi, present – day Bolivia. Mexico and South America produced 80% of the world’s silver in the early 17th century.

Evidence biblical..... Poma’s book chronicles the history of the Andes, beginning with biblical history and including a detailed portrait of the Inca empire.

Meanwhile, unhappy Teresia..... Teresia Sampsonia, an Iranian noblewoman was the wife of Sir Robert Shirley an English explorer who traveled on behalf of Abbas the Great, the 5th Safavid Shah of Iran.

Red Seal Ships..... The heavily armed ships of the megacorporation, VOC (Dutch East India Company), were called ‘Red Seal Ships’ because of the red insignia stamp that authorized them to ship out.

Act IV

Salary Virginia Pocahontas..... In official documents, the English settler in Virginia, John Smith, married the daughter of Chief Powhatan, but many believe it more likely that she was kidnapped and suffered from Stockholm’s Syndrome.

Captain woman..... Any female captain in the 17th century was a pirate.

Ethiopian maiden..... Baryte was the name of the Ethiopian maiden in ‘The Masque of Blackness’, an early Jacobean era masque first performed in England in 1605. Members of the English court wore blackface to portray Africans.

Sherley stigma crowded..... Anthony and Robert Sherley, English brothers and explorers, made predatory expeditions to West Africa and Central America in the 17th century. There are references to them in Shakespeare’s ‘Twelfth Night’ (1601-02).

The Shah's forged signature..... Shah Abbas of Iran.

Act V

Lady trimming enough..... Sir Thomas Overbury (1581-1613) wrote the poem, 'A Wife, now a Widowe,' based on Ovid; it was published posthumously in 1614 as a portrait of the virtues a young man should demand of a woman before marriage.

Women advice before..... Overbury's poem was the most popular book of the early 17th century and may have contributed to his death by court intrigue.

Foreign would patronage..... Jacob Jordaens (1593-1678) lived in Antwerp his whole life where most of his patrons lived and never studied painting in Italy like his contemporaries.

Act VI

Lower days record novels..... Lower days in the 'Low Country' where Rubens is from; the picaresque novel genre was at its peak popularity in the early 17th century.

Panama masculine attention..... Catalina de Erauso (1585 or 1592-1650) was a Basque nun who traveled under different male identities. Sailing as a fugitive to Venezuela, she went on to Panama instead of returning on the ship to Spain. Erauso's memoirs offer a view of how early transgender people navigated the social constructs of the time.

Gang several Florentine..... Gentileschi moved to Florence with her Florentine husband where she enjoyed the patronage of Cosmo de' Medici.

Daughter travelers deliverance..... Elizabeth Stuart, Queen of Bohemia (1596-1662), eldest daughter of King James VI and I. Rubens' painting is of a mythical Egypt - it wouldn't be colonised by the British until 1882.

Converted according originality..... As the whole world became more known, the idea of 'converting' the world to your cause seemed more plausible.

Act VII

German grown provided..... "I, a German? I, who love the firm continent and who shrink at the idea of an island in narrow boundaries of which I feel the dangers in advance?" In the early 1600s German astronomer Johannes Kepler wrote a novel predicting space travel.

on the western India coast..... "Spain was unable to venture further west, because Portugal had secured important bases at Goa on the western coast of India and Melaka on the Malaysian peninsula." Thomas Christensen in *1616: The World in Motion* on Goa being the main hub of Portuguese undertakings in Asia.

Act VIII

Codified innkeeper mother..... Johannes Kepler's mother was the daughter of an innkeeper. She was tried as a witch for her son's writing.

Orbital autonomous reputation..... Johannes Kepler correctly defined the orbits of the planets in the early 1600s.

Fires have this time a thousand pretty ornaments..... In Chinese philosophy, clothing was fundamental to dignity and propriety. In 1637, 'Tiangong kaiwu' (Exploitation of the works of nature) was written by Song Yingxing about productive commercial enterprises. Song Yingxing draws inspiration from a compendium of natural philosophy by Confucian philosopher Xunzi in c. 240 B.C. in which it is written of the silkworm: "Its merit is to clothe and ornament everything under Heaven, to the ten thousandth generation. Thus rites and music are completed, noble and base are distinguished, the aged are nourished and the young reared."

Act IX

Meeting academic Copernican Arabist..... The Arabic traditions of astronomy and medicine, held in high esteem, began to be challenged in the early 1600s by Western ideas.

Vault chemical letters..... 'The Chymical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz' (published in 1616 in Strasbourg, Germany) is described as one of the original manifestoes of the Rosicrucians. This allegorical romance story is divided into the Seven Days of Christian Rosenkreutz' journey to a castle in order to assist the Chymical wedding of the king and the queen. On the fifth day, he discovers a secret seven-sided vault covered with mysterious symbols; it is now interpreted as a capsule of universal knowledge.

Endowment major..... 'The Directions for Endowment and Vitality' (1615) is a Taoist text describing the processes of inner alchemy.

Languages in search of Body parts..... The body was increasingly being divided into scientific language in the early 1600's, for example, it was discovered that blood circulates around the body with the heart as a pump with valve mechanisms, yet many superstitions were still accepted as truth.

Act X

Influence Christian correspondences..... Pietro della Valle, an avid correspondent, tried ineffectually to be of assistance to the Christian communities in Persia in the early 17th century.

Involves serpents..... New stars had recently appeared in the constellations Serpentarius and Cignus; their appearance was considered to augur the arrival of a new prophet.

Expansionist sultanate participants..... Aggressive expansionist ambitions, especially by the Mughal emperor Akbhar.

Act XI

Traditional sought Freemasons..... In the early 1600s, Michael Maier helped to promote Rosicrucianism in England which lay the groundwork for the Freemason movement.

Mouths workers motivated..... In many parts of the world there was a sense of the end of time being imminent, a motivator for the Jesuits, for instance, to spread Christianity abroad.

legitimized infamous system..... In the 1580s, when Christopher Marlowe wrote 'Tamburlaine', Algiers and its renegade corsairs were infamous in Christian Europe; he alludes to "...the cruel pirates of Algiers... the scum of Africa..." beginning a long legitimization of prejudice against North Africans.

Act XII

Danger eight..... "The thaler was roughly equivalent to the Spanish peso ("weight"), another silver coin, which was equal to eight reales, and consequently known among the English as "pieces of eight" (a name made famous in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*) or the "Spanish Dollar" (*1616: The World in Motion* by Thomas Christensen.)

Men tower high..... The Tower of London where Sir Walter Raleigh, one of the most famous explorers of Elizabeth I's reign, was imprisoned in 1616.

Reference Material: *1616, The World in Motion* by Thomas Christensen (Counterpoint Press, 2012)

BURROW BAY MOON

THERESA KAMPMEIER

What is expendable. It's been pouring rain. Walking through generous wall-framed streets under a mint-coloured umbrella at dusk, peaceful, beautiful, wet, and blue. In the archive you gave me, I enter little worlds. Collected notes of nearly twenty years of observing and writing. Taking all leave from work, I want to dwell there.

What the plane trees and moving spotlights from passing cars, hustling legs, and wet hemlines make me think of: I will take us for a walk. We never knew when to stop walking, walk was the basic pattern of our lives at a time when we were also travelling across each other's body in a frenzy; walking that was thinking, thinking that was speaking, and writing that was walking.

Walking your story in the rain today. Am I at your will?

Writing from the city's negative below. Infrastructure. Inside is where air is, outside mud and stuff. What carries over to the inside. While, on the surface, moving is informed by landscape, these tunnels do not have a landscape, there is no moving in between spaces, outlined spaces are all there is. In this negative, there is no standing on the edge and knowing that you are able to jump. Because that fear cannot exist in city tunnels, differently from mining shafts and therefore fundamentally different from all extractive sites, because of that, life down here is truly earthen. No windows. This is where you all will come to take shelter one day the way communities did in the mountains forever. Think of this planet congested by death and wealth, and consider the inelegance of going earthen, not a cure, not healing, but the condition for coping with collective congestion. I am writing from here to digest, though I know most people have hardly participated in the congesting ourselves. On city streets only lonely corpses stay unmoving, you said, and now I see that it's because living minds on one-way tracks cannot care enough. These tunnels are where you wrote yourself.

Now, here is a channel to the moon already, the only channels I've allowed to go under into the mirror city. I want the rhythm of its phases to direct my

walking. Today appears a daytime moon, its full crescent dictating me to follow a haphazard path through the tunnels, and I am right in the middle of it all.

Once you wrote a passionate letter to a man you didn't know well at the time. After seeing a dead cat's corpse collapsed on the pavement, that's what you did. During previous days, in front of your house, its body had been shuffled here and there, some passers-by having tried to get rid of it, or return what seemed like dignity to the dead, half-heartedly, so that it kept proving its existence. Two little paws sticking out of a folded billboard poster at the foot of a garbage can. A barren fox-red corpse on top of the same can was defying gravity rigorously. Cat back wrapped in poster unsuccessfully sticking out of dumpster. Corpse naturalised as extension of garbage can. You were swaying while you told me about your letter.

And secretly I sway between poles of how I can relate to you now. This project has an outrageous scale, this is your and my mass culture, out of touch with our social body, but a celestial body to our little physical lives. I am just mediating what you handed me, but the responsibility for the form the mediation takes makes me desperate. *Knowledge is power*, conjures the library you used to go to by embedding this statement in walls and carpets

in cardinal languages, what kind of power. During this walk I want to engrave the tunnel walls to put a liquid spell on us in turn.

Seeing him that night in the half-empty lecture hall left you wretched. The skin under your clothes seemed to be burning up against cold fingertips. They had been steady carrying up bottles of water to the fourth floor but trembling throwing an empty one out. His sight left you exposed and his attendance drained you. He had been walking around all day, observant over long stretches of time, and at times carried away on transformative excesses of understanding. Then, moving away from mere understanding, following a hint the world didn't know it had given. A sensitive inexplicable hunch. He walked into the room in the same way. Not exactly confident. Glaring neon-lights covered where he sat down, still taking in the spectacle of an architecture in a shape you couldn't survey, designed to be suggestive, not informative, oh so powerful. Speakers were preparing to start in the front and you didn't know which side to take. You had to close your eyes in a corner and let the sensation of hearing his breath across the room take over.

These tunnels are spotlights that do not scatter to the sides. Before long, the waning moon rests on a horizon invisible from this system, desiring to crescent by disappearing.

His favourite quote was from Mr. Spock in the Star Trek TV series, where the Vulcan plainly declares to a man who insults him: “I object to you. I object to intellect without discipline. I object to power without constructive purpose.” This, not having met your friend, but feeling as if I was getting to know him here, seems to describe his own sense of purpose accurately. While I often wring myself for words, he made everything he touched ring like dropping into water.

Taking thinking for a walk at your will, I discover more and more tunnels, all constructed by a necessity of the city which diverts from what landscape dictates, mostly in order to go between home and job. Even in your messy city this structure of need exists. Apart from that, digging is seldomly done for leisure, so in here I am not seduced, I am urged. A responsible maze directing me strictly. Tunnels underlie flection, and the grammar of the burrow is unfulfilling, you wanted me to experience lust, lust, I read now, is connected to austerity. I really hate that. Please play with me in the afterlife. In your city I am always protected by the concrete which has been poured into all gaps, as teeth are filled to keep dirt from going underground. Where sky could touch you. I have no need for dexterities when thinking of you in here. Territories deteriorate, because I want to start digging down

after digging up to make lunar channels, avoiding to locate myself in relation to topography. Your gift is choking me.

Dreary bleakness, you have gone. This is new moon, still looming, and I find that getting closer to you in the darkness is keeping sadness at bay.

I can't disclose the content of your letter any longer. That would just be reproducing the same effect. But let me elaborate on what its sending meant to you, and let me not forget, this is only a tunnel still, even if it's too dark to see the walls. Your letter was passionate, not because of romantic matters enclosed, but because all you wanted to do with it was share your vision with him, because your devotion made you oblivious to the fact that you were paternalising his place, intruding into it, disregarding that you were forcing on him a colouring he might never be able to get rid of again. To be this passionate, you hadn't known each other long enough and your friendship hadn't grown a place for you in his endeavour yet. Involvements of a witness like you grow only with time. You don't know when to stop, even though you're good at listening, maybe even at understanding. Maybe because of your integrated understanding you mistake what has been shared with you as being involved in it. Don't assume you can be part of this. Know your commitments. Don't be passionate at the wrong time. Now I can see how you

built relationships. No, not yet, here I still have to unfold you even further. Your passion is violence. When you were young, you were tattooing *passion* on your thigh, but the violence of permanent passion, passion that doesn't risk yourself at all but asks the receiver to bare themselves even more, violence in this engraving made you stop after a binary *pa*. Oh when I found it on you. How, all this time, could you not have understood it as a memorial inscription, even if only the size of a mole, containing an accurate warning. Your passion: unmediated brutality of your own will to assert and affirm actions of others whom you admired and wished to support.

But he keeps himself strong through detachment in the way that he only ever responded to what wasn't directed at him. He could overlook this breach of yours, and it seems you were the only one remembering a passionate letter.

Dearest accomplice, only accomplice in my life, what is seduction. You always sat between exhaustion and ease because of it. Sometimes, I also can't relate to what is considered appropriate. How would we find a measure. These days I pass people in transit who wear dreams on sweatshirts, embed police in raincoats, write self-control on walls, carry bacteria on jackets. I see what they stick onto themselves, but I cannot see what makes them

powerless. The most sobering quote you jotted down from him was “first you have to know how to protect yourself, and then you can do something.” He seemed to have always been doing something, but I wonder, was he so well protected. Being forced to defend yourself against types of omission has become a political act, you said, while sometimes omission is central for care itself on this side, too, I think. I have picked my side. You wrote that a proper lady in the street asked you if despair was a feeling of political resistance. You haven’t been gone long. Should I go and find him after this and return to him his agency, burn the city after we leave. All my questions to you return with full periods. Only I can let myself disperse what I carry, but who will be the unfortunate person who brings us all back from the dead.

Growing lunar channels means cultivating my own moods, against discipline, knowing my circles, conjured by the fossil virgin’s waxing and waning. In these tunnels I’ve been changing my mind continuously. Moods need me to reinterpret positionings again and again, to make calm distinctions for that cultivation and compost the rest. I’ve stopped using the city positive for orientation in what already is tunnel-visioned. Even the city the three of us inhabited seems to have been built on selfishness, slaughter, shamelessness, corruption. How often corpse came into view while we were there. You al-

ways promised your readers that you were going to tie them up. It was your relentless labour of love which also connected you to him and me.

The crescent is back, like a shadow of early daylight, gravitational entanglement.

When you woke the next morning, fever sent you down mud-filled lungs and his words were in your inbox. In your commitment you were like a candle blown down hot only on one side by his wind, and you kept giving more of your wax to flutter in him. Again, you got up for him. His was a detached generosity. Our mutual commitment later, on the other hand, used what had been irrevocably spilled and therefore couldn't reach the fire to conjugate, we little zeros who needed something other than illusions. Lonely him. You and I were spreading out our capacities to answer for our waxing like bacterial cultures, looking to make communities but unable to organise.

Another day much later, he passed through a little village on the outskirts of the city. All day, he spent sitting next to an old bridge writing in water. This was when he couldn't show anyone how destitute he was. I picture you sitting further down by the same river misreading his characters, wrestling them off the rings of water your summoning tripped. Waters lim-

inally lying on earthen urban bonds, growing filters with them and washing poison into already filled up reservoirs. You supported him quietly. On his way back at dusk, he saw two children play in a garage. They had laid a pocket lamp on the pavement sending its beam into the narrow empty space, and they bathed in its light, danced their shadows into a stream of unsyntactic tales, spilling over with instantaneous jokes. Instead of looking for what was outside the spotlight, they bent its space in deference of their imagination.

Who understands how to play consequentially. Retreating from the mess, both your friend and you agreed, could only be afforded by privilege. There could never be a break from work. After coming down here I feel like you took that on more clearly than him.

How you lived, dreaming of love. This was the glimpse he got of you that made him hope you would take his mask away, and I wonder if he despised you for creating this spark in him he said was deteriorating, despite observing the harm which came through reservation in other people so clearly.

So many misunderstandings. And you always were the one paying the price for not holding back under imperatives of your entanglement. After all, his art practice was being a destitute nurse, or an optimistic accountant, a builder disappearing behind new orders, and that is how he became seduc-

tive to you. You wrote down his stories, and that is why he left you. The anticipated disappointment still took your breath.

I like that your city negative is plain bare and contingent, not exactly derivative of but akin to what's on top. Foundation is yet somewhere else. That you bare your little worlds to me down here. My walking you, not reading, is what has been conjuring you as if by magic. The suggestion of your agency looms behind the pull of the moon.

You know well where it was that I walked when you had left me. I'm the imp now, and I haven't even gotten to start looking into you. After the moon died deeply to let me bathe in its glow on tunnel floors, rain has begun to flood my burrow, and I am baying it to stop, to stop letting this be the bay where all sadness goes.

Excerpt from BURROW BAY MOON, published by am Art Space, Shanghai in 2018

POEMS FROM *TEARGARTEN*

DAVID LINDERT

HYPERVIGILANCE

I love everything that flows
isolated thunderstorms
semen in sewer
lava crooked smile
dirty money
aminobutyric acid
scripts and bile
pigeons in the square
tomato juice out of a tupperware
shadows of passing strangers
kissing to the tune of G-mol
sand dunes of blown thoughts
paralyzed by sent nudes of yours
I want to touch poppies
next to road markers in endless lowlands
I want picnics on traffic islands
I want it to rain forever in silence

UNECONOMICAL LOVE

Life is a glow
the burning filament brilliant
but there are things
that lightbulbs don't know
like how
falling asleep together and cuddling you
all night long is the nicest thing
that I know
The heart is a lonely hunter
our love is so uneconomical
you left the lights on as you always do
burning
incandescent
your hollow glass
when you left
for another piece of ass

IS HE COMING?

What's the name of the guy
who I don't follow back?
whose number of followrs
I know by heart?
is he coming?
can he buy a lighter?
he said he likes my art
can you adjust your screen brighter?
why do I take myself so seriously?
why does my frustration make me so proud?
I'm not able to speak to the crowd
I'm just a rhyme stealer

I'm not horny anymore
can you call your dealer?

COLLECTIVE TRAUMA

Is the battlefield just in my head?
I want to party hard and forget
instead of sharing collective trauma
I want to rim bottoms in a gay sauna
the taste of bore and validation
is my kind of meditation
figuring twenty-eight tomorrow
never now
leaving a cabin open
for a doubt and sorrow
I'll take it anyhow
waiting in suspense
in the hot steam I dream
of the next traumatic event
will you notice me?

AMBER EYES

A vacant seat is a call
for peculiar excitement
further
d
o
o
own the load less traveled
all fur coat and
jockstrap unraveled
salmon-pink sky
I've got your life
in my amber eye

SUGAR FREE

All of my sugar free daddies
have slack skin and blotchy bodies
shortsightedness, paranoia, loneliness
dental plate, pipe and instant happiness

All of my sugar free daddies
have a big crystal problem
sometimes they call in sick
and sometimes I have to call them

SALAD AND DRONE

I walk down endless halls
full of thoughts up to the ceiling
looking through my dusty poems
about you deprived of feeling
I'm trying to focus but I can't
Are you watering our willow plant?
How many anal douches went down my shower?
every time we're together you lack power
How much was his parking fine?
Wasn't your home office too hard?
I'm trying to ignore it, but I can't
on Thursday you send me
a photo of a healthy salad that you make,
but what do you do other days in the week, babe?
today is another tomorrow is another day
How many douches did you do yesterday?
Did you really accuse me of sending a drone to scan your veins?
I'll wash your somber lips dirtied by your chains

WARNING LEAF

I want to be your blue warning paper
I want to be your testosterone booster
and protein shaker
I want to be the fallen crystal
laying on the nylon carpet
my oxygen mask forever be your armpit
I wish you missed me as much
as you missed the life
you're trying to leave behind
unconscious with a cock ring on
I know booze doesn't fill the right hole
I want to be a gentle wave
and wash you over and more
just as the sea washes stones
to the cleanest and smoothest forms
while the sun is slowly setting
and disappearing on the horizon

HEAVEN IS A PLACE ON EARTH

It's been hundred minutes more or less
since I gave my ass to someone possessed
by crystal meth
mind-body dualism
calling for help
mechanical act
far away in space and time
violated scruples
absent Satan eyes
with tar dilated pupils
crying out
a grunt of evil
and then
he screamed loud
and ejaculated
the serpent seed
deep inside my fractured me
unrepairable damage is done
Rosemary's baby was born
June 66
Hell a Cometh Swift

MOONLIGHT

I woke up
in your embrace
when I overdosed
on purpose
under the moonlight
I unplugged your phone
to charge mine
when you nodded off
the moon died
I left the arms that I love
for someone I don't know
for someone with a bigger ass
just to hurt you
maybe it's not your fault
maybe it's just who I am

I DON'T HAVE A PLACE

Don't cum yet my baby
let's smoke some more
save it for the other boy
he's driving 50km just for us
to lower our standards
I wish I was strong enough to leave
it has become way to toxic
but I don't have a place
so I just sit and wait
hot wax play
Lana del Rey
what's your name again?
what's your moon

OMNE ANIMAL TRISTE

A stoner
without a boner
trying hard
on the leather couch
full time loner
night mode screen
porn is reflecting
in his aching eyes
exhausted arms
in acute angle
semen and ash
get entangled

QUARANTINE

I constantly am
in a Hopper's painting
waiting just
in front of something
to happen
sometimes I smoke meth
with 21 open tabs
sometimes in wet sheets
I light up a spliff
my voice sounds like an ashtray
I douche myself
with a fully bright screen
just for strangers
who don't seem worth
the quarantine

SUBURBAN

Wet suburban dreams
in your sperm-stained jeans
its childhood's warmth
yet almost torn
by masculine toxicity
In the city of angst and stress
I would love you more
if you loved me less

TEARGARTEN

Carefree whisper
talented fister
syphilis blister
without own opinion
jobless mister
darkroom companion
heavy hammer
disabled loo slammer
wild fawns
in basic labels
Teargarten dawns
spent on the tables
my greatest loss
I'll water your cross

24/7

The entire nation is reeling
after the Death of George Floyd
we're back at Fruitvale Station
returning to the void
but all I really care for is you
just take my white trash hand
the sweetest thing I've ever stained
and take my whole life too
I tend to say I love you 24/7
I live for our Oxytocin heaven
in the vacuum of my mind
I hear the same old sound
I think your face may have changed
with time but you're looking so good
on FaceTime in the oven light
I need you back in my comfort zone
bored AF filling out unemployment forms

I'M FINE

The doctor said
I can drink wine
my viral load is fine
but I must stay home
massage 2 pumps
of cleansing foam
is my daily task
and put gently over my face
the calming lavender mask
in a time of strife
lacking senses
mucus blow backs
convince me
that I've got
mind-expending love
for you
it's alright
to lick my vinegar tips
and kiss your Cheddar lips
cause you have it too

FROM HANGER

JONATHAN LYON

Prologue to a Film That Never Begins

INT. BATHROOM - NIGHT

A face, out of focus, plunges underwater towards the camera. Held for too long. Then, uncannily, the skin starts peeling off...

Shot from behind: a blonde woman in a white towel lifts her head from the sink. She presses a second towel to her mouth. And screams like a trapped animal.

NATASHA, 27. A world famous actress. Her face is NEVER shown. She drops the towel, stained with foundation. Reaches up to her perfectly styled hair. And rips it out in clumps.

Shot of: dark snake-like objects swirling as the basin drains out. Slowly recognisable as hair extensions and a face mask.

She hangs a worn dress on a HANGER, and takes down a second backless silk dress, covered in dry-cleaner's plastic.

INT. LUXURY HOTEL - NIGHT.

CCTV shot, from behind: in jewels, stilettos, and the backless dress, she exits the bedroom of a penthouse suite in a luxury London hotel.

Descends a glass staircase towards the open-plan lower floor. There's a party below.

LOWER FLOOR

Middle-aged men mingle with beautiful younger women. Catering staff. Cocktails. MUSIC.

Everyone looks up at Natasha as she enters. Magnetic.

CAROLINE appears. Late 40s, glamorous, old friend. Wine glass. Air kiss. Jokingly checks behind Natasha's ears, as if for a mask.

CAROLINE

Is it really you?

NATASHA

(laughing) I hope so.

CAROLINE

On time... for the first time in your life? Natasha. It can't be.

NATASHA

Caroline, don't tease me, I know I'm a little late.

CAROLINE

No, the hostess can arrive whenever she likes.

NATASHA

I didn't want to come, but it was hard to avoid stumbling upon you all eventually.

CAROLINE

You didn't hear us come in?

Natasha laughs. But her face still is not shown. They walk on. Caroline lights a cigarette with a little silver blowtorch shaped like a revolver.

CAROLINE (CONT'D)

I haven't seen you since... your second outfit of the ceremony. Congratulations by the way, well deserved.

NATASHA

I've already lost that ghastly little trophy. And I looked hideous. Please erase outfits 1 to

3 from memory.

CAROLINE

I haven't formed a memory in years. (gestures with wine glass)

Don't worry. And you look divine now.

NATASHA

(gesturing at unseen face)
It's all special effects babe, concealing unspeakable horrors.

CAROLINE

Speaking of unspeakable horrors, I hear it's your birthday tonight.

NATASHA

You know I never comment on rumours.

Caroline stops, points out the group ahead.

CAROLINE

What about on mistakes?

NATASHA

(shuddering)

You're not coming with me?

CAROLINE

He's your office romance. I'm
busy hunting men half my age...

Air kisses. They part.

Natasha approaches the group. THE GENERAL is holding court: Britain's most controversial successful auteur. A big man, animated with his hands, late 40s, beguiling, malevolent. His face is turned away (never seen in the prologue).

With him is RICK, his star actor, 25, absurdly handsome; ISABELLA, 21, Rick's girlfriend, actress, dark femme-fatale beauty; other pretty women, all into Rick; and various high-powered industry figures, including NETFLIX JOHN, WARNER BROS FELICITY, SONY PANDORA.

Rick winks at Natasha. Before she can speak, a photographer appears, waves them together. Rick pulls her closer.

PHOTOGRAPHER

Quick one of the award-winning couple.

RICK

(nodding towards The
General)

Careful, the real boyfriend might
hear you...

Natasha's face is finally revealed: initially on the photographer's camera screen, then coming into focus beyond it: she smiles. Rick's hand slides down her silk dress.

She looks worriedly towards The General. He

is walking away.

NATASHA

Did I scare him off?

RICK

Or he's leading you on...

She tries to leave after The General, but the group obstructs her.

NETFLIX JOHN

Congratulations to our reigning Best Actress...

NATASHA

Supporting...

RICK

(desultory, gesturing)
Natasha. You remember... John from Netflix, Felicity from... Warner Brothers, Pandora from somewhere... Sony probably... and-

NATASHA

Of course.

Reluctantly she stays on his arm, smiling, glancing occasionally at The General's back, as he retreats, greeting more powerful people in the crowd.

NETFLIX JOHN

(infatuated)
The General was just bathing in your accolades.

RICK

She's his golden goose

WARNER BROS FELICITY
I'd never have guessed the film
was based on Orpheus and Eurydice
(nodding to Rick then
Natasha)
if he hadn't told me.

NATASHA
Neither would I. And Rick's the
golden goose, not me. He's been
given a whole play to be in
between films. I didn't get one of
those.

RICK
(grinning)
He does love me more than you.

SONY PANDORA
But I hear it's now your turn...
to earn his love.

NETFLIX JOHN
You're the new lead?

NATASHA
(to Rick)
Don't be jealous babe, much
easier to win best supporting
actor.

WB FELICITY
What's the new film about?

NATASHA
(trying again to leave to
follow The General)
You'd have to ask him.

SONY PANDORA

(pretentiously)
He said it's about our new reality.

RICK
(sniffs Natasha's neck,
whispering)
You changed perfume.

NATASHA
It's insect repellent...
Doesn't seem to be working...

RICK
Was that a lucrative contract?

Isabella has been watching her boyfriend flirting with Natasha. Tries to catch his eye. Angry, jealous. Can't. So she walks off in irritation.

WB FELICITY
Go on, give us a bit more.
What's the genre?

SONY PANDORA
(inserting herself)
He said- it's gothic. But I
don't know if he was serious...

NETFLIX JOHN
He starts the fashions, we can
only try to catch up...

NATASHA
(ignoring them)
I think you upset your girlfriend.

RICK
You're still here.

NATASHA
(whispering)

Get me away from them.

RICK

(loudly)

Have you seen your presents?

NATASHA

(genuinely annoyed)

What? I said no birthday presents. I hate birthdays...

RICK

They're award presents.
Everyone's sucking up to us.
You'll love it.

Rick leads her towards a side table stacked with presents. The group follows. The crowd quietens, parts to watch.

Caroline is nearby, drunk, flirting with a young actor.

CAROLINE

Your publicist had a seizure trying to work out what brands you're allowed to be seen with.

SONY PANDORA

(pointing to the biggest present)

Open our one first. It's from the whole studio.

NATASHA

You wrapped it yourself?

As the photographer flashes pictures, she approaches Sony's present. Smiles. A card says 'for Eurydice'. She opens it. Inside is giant albino snake in a cage. The crowd gasps.

NATASHA (CONT'D)

Is it the same one?

SONY PANDORA

We promised you could keep it
if you won tonight.

NATASHA

Ridiculous. How do I wear that?

NETFLIX JOHN

You might find an answer in our
present.

She opens a box with Netflix wrapping:
snakeskin high heels, a snakeskin handbag.
The crowd applauds. Netflix John smiles.

NATASHA

Where's The General?

RICK

That one is from him...

Hands her a tiny box. On the card:
'For Eurydice's next journey into the
Underworld...' She looks around for the
General. Sees him ascending the glass
stairs.

NATASHA

(calling) Babe!
(louder) General!

The General raises his champagne glass to
show he's heard, but keeps walking away.
Natasha is frustrated. Caroline flashes her
a sad knowing glance.

Rick unwraps her present: it's a silver
necklace. He tries to put it on her, she
shrugs him off, suddenly revolted. She hates
the presents, the birthday, the crowd. Steps
back.

WB FELICITY

Please open ours next.

NATASHA

(Rudely)
I need a drink. I'll look at the
rest later.

The camera flashes. She winces. Headache.
Irritated.

NETFLIX JOHN

Do you want us to -

RICK
(interrupting, protecting
her, following her away)
I think she's alright for now.

NATASHA

I don't need you either.

She struts away. Rick smiles, confident of her
affections.

She pursues The General, pushing past people
trying to greet her. Ascends the glass stairs.

UPPER FLOOR

The General enters a sitting room. People are
in her way.

SITTING ROOM

Natasha follows. But he's already exiting out
the other side, onto a balcony.

EXT. BALCONY - NIGHT

Natasha follows. The balcony is large.
(Shot entirely from her POV, never as an
objective 'exterior shot' of the hotel). Soho
House-esque. Small pool. Crowded. London
nightscape.

The General has vanished. She spins around,

bewildered. People stare. She grabs a cocktail from a waiter, downs it. CHARLOTTE, similar age as her, beautiful, approaches.

CHARLOTTE

Natasha! Happy birthday!

Natasha rudely pushes past her towards her bedroom door.

INT. BEDROOM

Her bedroom is crowded with mingling DRUNK POWER-BROKERS.

NATASHA

(under her breath)

Get out of my fucking bedroom.

DRUNK POWER-BROKER

Natasha!

She fake smiles. Points at the wine glass in his hand.

NATASHA

Are you drinking that?

DRUNK MAN

What?

She grabs his glass, downs it. Smiles, returns the glass, pushes past him. Walks through her closet, into the bathroom.

BATHROOM

IT's dark. She breathes a sigh of relief. Turns on the light. Screams: Isabella is in there.

Isabella clearly just took drugs. She quickly lifts her head, wipes her nose,

inhales sharply.

NATASHA

Fuck! Isabella! Sorry...

ISABELLA

No no come in.

Isabella turns on the tap to wash her hands.

Natasha steps in. The door shuts behind her. They look at themselves in the mirror. Unflattering light. Isabella sways. The Bafta Natasha just won is on top of the toilet.

NATASHA

Hideous.

ISABELLA

Must be hard seeing that every day.

Natasha fake laughs.

NATASHA

It's been a while, since...

ISABELLA

I was cut from the film.
Congratulations, by the way...

NATASHA

Oh... god. I forgot about that.

ISABELLA

They forgot to tell me too.

Pause.

ISABELLA (CONT'D)
Don't worry, I'm in your next
film too. I'm playing your
sister.

NATASHA
... You are?

ISABELLA
(high, swaying)
Yes.

NATASHA
(polite smile)
Oh.

Awkward pause.

ISABELLA
Well... happy birthday!

NATASHA
(laughs)
Please don't remind me.

ISABELLA
How old are you now?

NATASHA
(thrown by her rudeness)
Oh you know... late twenties
going on late teens. Frozen in-

ISABELLA
But your next character's 17.

NATASHA
Is she?

Isabella smirks. Pause.

NATASHA (CONT'D)

How old are you?

ISABELLA

22.

NATASHA

(raising eyebrow, implying
she's aged by drugs)

Really?

ISABELLA

We all get replaced one day.

They are both still smiling. Frigid now.
Unpleasant pause.

ISABELLA (CONT'D)

(gestures at toilet)

Sorry, did you want to -

NATASHA

No no. Enjoy your time in MY
penthouse.

CCTV shot: Natasha walking back into her
bedroom.

BEDROOM

She walks through loud people. Forcing a
smile. Annoyed. Grabs drink from waiter,
downs it.

UPPER FLOOR

She comes to the top of the stairs. Everyone
looks up at her. She stops. A surreal silence.
Then, they start singing "Happy Birthday".

She's even more annoyed. She grabs another
drink. Tipsy. Forces a smile, but can't
sustain it. Doesn't know where to look or how

to stand. She scans the room, thinks she sees the General leaving at the edge of the crowd below.

A waiter approaches her with a cake with candles. Mortified, she lifts up her glass in thanks, downs it. Everyone claps. Then she pushes past him without blowing out the candles.

LOWER FLOOR

Natasha meets Caroline at the bottom of the stairs.

NATASHA

Have you seen The General?

CAROLINE

No... maybe he's left.

NATASHA

I can't do this. Get rid of them.

CAROLINE

(laughing) We can't.

Natasha pivots, sweeps back upstairs, into her bedroom.

BEDROOM

Caroline trails her, worried. Natasha looks furious, wild.

NATASHA

Out! Get the fuck out! Out! This is my bedroom! I need to have my own space! Fuck off! Fuck off!

People are alarmed. She barges past them towards the balcony.

EXT. BALCONY

She accidentally knocks a man down. She's swaying, so drunk.

NATASHA

Fuck off! Party's over! Get the fuck out of this beautiful fucking trap that's just for me.

Everyone stares. Caroline tries to console her, but Natasha slaps her away. People start to leave. Natasha is nearly in tears. Completely losing it.

INT. UPPER FLOOR

Natasha approaches the stairs, picking up abandoned cocktail glasses. Suddenly she throws one down onto the crowd below.

NATASHA

Fuck off! The party's over!

She throws another glass. Everyone hushes, stares. She's crying. Her dress stained, her hair wild. People leave.

Until finally just Rick remains. At the foot of the stairs. She throws a cocktail glass at him. He doesn't move.

RICK

You want me to stay.

She screams, descending towards him, throwing glass after glass at his feet. Finally he leaves. The door closes.

NATASHA

(quieter)

Of course I want you to stay.

Finally she's alone. Despondent. Panting.

Pause. She throws one last glass with a hopeless shriek.

She takes off her dress on the stairs, kicks her heels over the side. Then turns, walks back upstairs, naked.

Dressed only in diamonds. She turns off the lights. Lit by London's light pollution. She glides into her bedroom.

BEDROOM

Gets into bed. Above the headboard is a shelf with old books and a marble head. Voyeuristic shots: her skin in silk sheets. Then a wider angle CCTV shot: her in bed. Lonely.

Falling asleep. A sense of the horror of being captured by someone else's camera.

Pause. Perhaps the prologue will end like this. Then... from the edge of the CCTV shot: a shape approaches the bed. A giant white snake. Glistening in the half-light.

It glides over the silk sheets. Twists around her naked body. Erotic, terrifying.

It bites her violently. Natasha dies.

(THE FILM BEGINS)

NAT MARCUS

I started listening to jungle the summer I was 18. “Black” by DJ SS. Had no idea what I heard, but was tugged by it and the dawning image I had of nightlife. That summer I also heard “Can You Feel It” by Mr. Fingers. I’m not sure I would have been able to further defer a seemingly pendular choice to not live had I not started to step into the body house holds for me on a dancefloor, which I started doing in the following years.

Excerpt from “At the Hellmouth Coatcheck”. Flaunt Magazine, issue 167, November 2019.

A SHORT THESIS ON THE VOCAL HOUSE POETICS

I mouth,
then sing today the refrain from the 1992 Mr. Fingers track

“Closer”

“Let’s get closer,
closer than close can be”

It’s not really about being close, or even

“closer, yes you and me”

but intimacy unutterable,
one beyond being.

“I need you,
still I can’t show you
how I feel for you”

14 years later and the moniker dropped,
Larry Heard releases

“The Sun Can’t Compare”

and is still tracking inexpressible closeness.

Vinegar a machine made, 303 acid and Poetry
in its utter gazing poeticity — celestial bodies,
the “you” being beloved or Other, the shall I compare
thee to a summer’s day-ness of

“You are my dream,
The moon can’t compare
To your beams”

Lovers in vocal house
speak or sing again and again
in lyric address: “you” are
at once present and mirage, our love’s often a dance,
always unutterable. “Close” cannot, the sun cannot,
nor the moon match or signify you.

“Day breaks so free, I am better every moment you are close to me”

Then why sing this at all?

Glinting harder than planets,
the beloved is closer than close
when addressed from afar,
sung to until dawn and
from a distance song-thick:
a balcony, a dancefloor, a page between us

Published in Spiritual World Tour. TABLOID Press (Berlin, DE), 2017.

Every 15 minutes another rose is shot into space. The volatile oils shift in antigravity, and Chanel's been branding it. Thus their pop-up bathhouse smells like what I guess a rose does floating like that; the perfume's constantly vaporized into the spas and the main echoing atrium, a turning barrel of steam. Your reflection lingers in the slick tiling. I'm ascending, wet, to the wooden sauna, clothed only in vapor, and no one cares.

The bathhouse follows the same ritual formats as a nightclub: my eyes start glazing, the gaze coils, the girl I am also comes to me again like a minor deity notating my steps, all my devices disembodied, in the cloud. I'm taking shots of rum out of empty PrEP bottles, peeling murals of Tom of Finland characters over the arches. I catch your outline again, close to me, who knows how many hours later, in a certain density of lilac steam. Then again in the saline chamber, when I open my eyes underwater, and through their burning there you float, chromosomal, undecided. The floor is slippery when I come out. We go home emptied, more like a mesh of pores than a solid object. My hair's wet, smells like squid ink and lavender. I'm humming Prince's "I Would Die 4 U".

Excerpt from "Hounded", published in *A guiding dog for a blind dog*. FUTURA Centre for Contemporary Art (Prague, CZ), 2018.

Feeling a depth of pain in disco
strings and house
track organs recently not the first
time I heard pain
in deep house but that that
ache deepens
as both result and means
of the study of disco

Frankie Knuckles at the Continental Baths

Unpublished, 2018.

GROOVE/DEPTH

A groove can be
deep depth figurative
or physic as a record's sound
lives in it: house's house a
wound on wax.

Needle needs both
void and matter bound
between sides
A and B never not "closer
yes you and me"

"So here it is
4 am
and I've been thinkin
about all the things I could tell him but
I'm a lady
and I'm always gonna be a lady
so I'll keep it simple –
goodbye"
sample from NY Stomp's
"The NY House Track"

She draws out of time the nightclub's depth

And I start to wonder
if we're not the ones really dancing
in a valley
made of wax

Unpublished, 2015

White foam at our sides, passing half-submerged rubber sphinxes, old fishing nets blotted with dolphin spines, Sprite cans, and crowded particle-board rafts, we're on a ferry to an offshore party thrown by the local nightclub Sappho's Gymnasium. Everything is off-site, exported, outsourced. It's a dyke party, so of course it will be good (and less grabby straight guys, golden retrievers on GHB to deal with). The voyage is long, and there are multiple capsizes-scares a day, and alkaloid rain drips through the roof of my lean-to made of flatscreens. But it's fine. I like the sea air. We play Chicago house and dance on the deck, gulls shitting on us for hours. One evening I make a shrine to the science-fiction writer Octavia Butler (2 packs of Camel Crush cigarettes, a kaffir lime, a silver iPod mini, twine) in one of the life rafts, then let it tumble into the violet mouth of the ocean, which is somehow always thirsty, always trashed.

Excerpt from "Hounded", published in *A guiding dog for a blind dog*.
FUTURA Centre for Contemporary Art (Prague, CZ), 2018.

One narrative of ancestry the house and 2step and ballroom and DnB tracks we dance to at Radiant Love and Chosen Few and Greenhouse and the studio in Lichtenberg et al. arises from what Paul Gilroy termed “the Black Atlantic”: a webbed network of cultural synthesis and redub operating on levels both local and global, set into motion by the inhuman logistics known as the Atlantic Slave Trade and the cyclic tides on which it travelled.

Excerpt from “At the Hellmouth Coatcheck”. Flaunt Magazine, issue 167, November 2019.

Their curation of the Finest Friday parties at the Panorama Bar club respirates a dialogue with the roots of house and techno, bringing in legends from Chicago, Detroit and New York to play alongside younger artists. We are also reminded these roots are inexorably Black, Latin and queer: a Tama Sumo or Lakuti set can draw in strands from UK broken beat to South African kwaito to salsa and classic Chicago house. At no expense of soul, there's something didactic in the way they play – often rich with vocal samples and speeches, their sets are the sound of a diasporic movement of genres, regional cultures, people in transit by will or by force.

Interview pitch, 2020.

“Twilight Dome Pt. 2”, however, was played out in the first morning of the year 2018, during Berghain’s multi-day New Year’s party. Tama Sumo (Kerstin Egert) has been a resident of the club since its inception 14 years ago, and can work the Panorama Bar soundsystem with a wild deftness – like the ease, perhaps, I feel brushing my teeth. The track itself, which also featured on Lakuti’s (Lerato Khathi) Resident Advisor mix released not long before, is baffling: Jellybean, an alias of the Chicago house stalwart Glenn Underground, begins only with a rhythm of bass kicks and tinny bells, then loops and chops the teetering notes of the Twilight Zone TV-show theme song into the drum pattern. Two minutes in, hi-hats come in with a startling brutality. But at the four minute mark, Jellybean diminishes the percussion piece by piece, leaving only the bells, and the spooky notes drop out suddenly to a grooving little guitar lick and a group of voices repeating the phrase, “here in the twilight.”

The sample comes from the 1979 disco cut “Twilight Zone” by Manhattan Transfer; here, in Jellybean’s arrangement, their voices instill a human spirit to a track that was thus far only hard, driving and dizzy. They’re soon joined by some pensive strings: melody as sustained depth and distance rather than the rapid up-and-down phrase of the Twilight Zone theme. Then kicks and cutting hi-hats return with a vengeance, and the track takes off.

When Tama Sumo dropped this one, the sampled voices of Manhattan Transfer reinstated, repeatedly, our place (or lack of place) in time: we were here, in the blurred twilight between one year and another; a liminal, shifting space in which freaky and unbelievable shit could happen, like Jellybean completely torquing the palette of his song. I find the sample more eerie than any supernatural encounter or hanging phenomena. It shook me then, and still shocks me every time it returns.

Excerpt from “The Most Memorable Season”. The Kollection, September 5, 2018
<http://thekollection.com/the-most-memorable-season/>.

ACETATES

Ordering records on
impulse recently wanting
to touch what's
become history or
train the body
via text to
feel more
deeply this history
of dance music or
feel more
presently history's
leash

What's been cut
what pressed lines got
inscribed

12" singles
uncommercial viability extended
disco cuts
often with vocal
structure derailed or
detuned sunk and recess
song turns
into track
Frankie Knuckles making edits

Hearsay into heresy
what's under it
the radar

gun
commons
nose
saturation

Acetates breaking down
after 10 plays or taped
over informational
center sticker decal
or unmarked white labels

Measures counted by
a faulty system
the body is
incapable of making
math more predictive
than the ear
hearing pattern and
reading tension tighten
build and unloose

What shadow entails
What touches shadow
What matter's dark
Why darkness matters

Unpublished, 2020.

EXTRACT FROM *THIS*

COLM O' SHEA

Wait. Stop. Stop. Take time out. Take time completely out of the equation.

It starts with a phone call. Late at night. Not late for me. Late for her. She always operates in a different time zone to me. Even in the same country. Even in the same city. Even in the same room. Her clock is a couple of hours ahead of mine, always.

It starts with a phone call. A surprise. She hasn't done this before. I never expect that she would. Not out of the blue. In the blue. In the blue of the night. Her name comes up on my phone as it buzzes. She wants someone to talk to. Me.

Something annoys her. Something irritates her sense of self. Something she would, if she could, take up with the person responsible but she doesn't have their number. She has mine. Something someone's said about her. Something to annoy her. Something to which I'm on the periphery. Some-

thing that needn't involve me in any way, shape or form. But she wants to talk to someone. She needs to talk to someone. She chooses me. And things are never the same.

She just wants to let off steam. I can see the time on the alarm clock by my bed. I can see the book I'll read for a while before my eyes start to get tired and I switch off the light. I can imagine how late it feels for her right now. But I can hear the hurt and irritation in her voice so I know she doesn't care.

But she rings me. We talk. For the first time. For the first real time we talk. This is where everything starts. Not then. Not when we first meet. Not the first time I see her. Here. Here, at night. Alone in my bed. She's alone in hers. Now. This now. This point. This moment. This is when it starts.

SHE SINGS INDIA SONG. She sings India Song for me. She sings India Song only for me. Only for me. When she sings. When she sings she sings only for me. Her voice is a voice only for me. When she opens her mouth to sing she sings only for me. When she opens her mouth to sing she sings only to me. To me. She sings only for me. She sings only to me.

When she stands up to the microphone she sings only for me. When she stands up under the spotlight she sings only to me. When she stands under

the spotlight the band behind her disappear into the gloom. When she stands up to the microphone everyone else in the room fades, diminishes, quietly packs up and goes. Because when she stands up under the spotlight she sings only to me.

IT STARTS IN THE airport. It starts before the airport. It starts by not saying, by not telling. It starts in the airport, looking around without being seen to look around for faces who would not know why I am in the airport. It's about not being seen. It's about making up excuses, making up stories. It's about being consistent in my stories. It's about telling people the same lie. It's about knowing it's best to tell one lie. It's about knowing that one lie is easier to remember, one lie is easier to not trip over, one lie is less likely to be questioned if everyone believes it to be true. It's about lying about being somewhere else when you're in an airport.

She has to know where every border is. She can't get caught. She can't get caught out. She has to know where everything stops and everything starts. It's a survival instinct. It's automatic now. She has to read every situation and know where she is. She has to know whether she's crossed a border and how to act. She has to know how near she is to a border, and

whether to turn and go back or prepare to cross over. She has to be whatever is expected of her on any side of any border.

I KNOW WHAT I see. When I look at her I know what I see. But what does she see? Can I ever know? Can anyone ever know what the other really sees? Yes. Yes I can ask. I can ask her what she thinks of me. I can ask her what she sees when she sees me. I can ask her what she thinks when I knock at the door or when she closes the door behind me. I can ask her what she thinks every time I message her or send her something online. I can ask her what she thinks, what her immediate, first, thought is when my name comes up on the screen or pops up onto her phone and it's me again. I can ask her that, or any of these questions. I can ask her any time I want. But what will she say? Will I believe what she says? Does it matter what she says, will I believe her anyway? Isn't that it? I know what she'll say. I mean I think I know what she'll say. I'm almost certain what she'll say because she's said it before. I know what I would say and I know what she would say. But will I believe it? Isn't that it? Isn't that what will fuck it all up in the end? Isn't that more likely to ruin everything than anything I say or do? Will she get sick of telling me exactly what she thinks, exactly how she feels, and watch as I just can't bring myself

to believe her and walk away? Can I blame her?

SHE JUST WANTS TO talk. She just wants someone beside her, or on the end of the phone, to listen to her, to support her, to agree with her that she's right. To agree that what the other person said about her with no space for her to respond was a pile of shite. It's not having the opportunity to respond that annoys her. She doesn't care what that other person thinks, she couldn't give a damn what any of them think. But to know that they said what they said about her knowing that she wouldn't have space to react, to respond, to defend, to attack where she needs. No, not to have that space is what annoys her most.

But if she did. If they did give her the right to reply that she was entitled to. If they had acted properly. If they had been decent people instead of pricks, would she be ringing me now? Would anything happen if they had given her the chance to answer? Would I have anything to say?

Could anything have happened without them?

WHEN THE PIANO FIRST plays that simple melody she sways under the spotlight only for me. When the tune starts to build, build; build slowly

for her, she moves in time with the melody only for me. When she moves it is for me. When she gently takes the microphone in her hands and sings that first note she sings only to me.

When she sings she sees only me. When she sings she sings only to me because she sees only me. When she sings there's only me and her and the music. She moves to the music for me. I move to the music she makes because she moves only for me.

I can try to understand the words. I can try to understand the words she sings and I can pick up words here and there. I can understand more than the words she sings because of the way she sings them only for me. I can trace the words like tracing my fingers over her body because the words belong to us and us alone. Because the words belong to her and through her they belong to me. I can watch the words float around the room, floating above her like a halo, floating above is filling in the empty space in the room that is only me and her because there's nothing else but her, and me, and the song.

THIRTEEN HOURS ON A plane. Thirteen hours on a plane, breathing the same air, sharing the same space as everyone else. Thirteen hours of juggling how desperately she needs to use the bathroom against waking and moving

the couple beside her to get out of the seat. Thirteen hours enjoying what little space there is by leaning against the window, looking out into nothing. Thirteen hours of trying to read a book until that gets uncomfortable, watching a selection of movies she doesn't like until that gets uncomfortable, eating tasteless food until what remains is taken away, and sleeping until that too gets uncomfortable. Thirteen hours of looking at the same blue and red trim of the back of the seat in front of her. Thirteen hours of waiting.

IN A ROOM LISTENING to the artist Tamarin Norwood speak. I know the other speakers but not her. That is, I've heard others mention her and her work, but have never come across it until now. I strain to remember what is being said, what she is saying. I know I will forget a lot of what she is saying. I always do. I'm hoping someone is recording the event but I'll find out later that no one is. I won't be the only one regretting that the event isn't being recorded.

BUT I KNOW WHAT she says. I know I trust her. I know she doesn't lie to me. So shouldn't I believe what she says to me? Those blue eyes see some-

thing better than I see when I look in the mirror. Those blue eyes have seen through whatever I think I am to see something else. Those blue eyes have seen a me I don't believe exists. So trust her. Trust those blue eyes. Trust that she tells me the truth. Trust not to ask those questions when the only answer I will accept is the one that shows me in the worst light. Trust those blue eyes to see what it is they see and still think of me and smile. Believe. Don't think. Don't think because oftentimes thinking is overthinking. It is for me and I know it is for me. Overthinking is finding the negative path in every thought. So believe. Believe those blue eyes see something better. Believe.

WE TALK. SHE SAYS what she wants to say. She says what she needs to say. She gets it off her chest, happy that there is someone at the other end to listen. We talk. She asks how my day's been. I ask if she managed to get to see that film she was talking about before. I ask her about the dress shop. I tell her I pass a dress shop every lunchtime when I leave work for a walk. Every lunchtime when I have to get the fuck out of the place for at least half an hour so I walk. Sun, rain, hail, sleet or snow. It doesn't matter. I have to get out for a walk. I tell her about my route, every day. Walk as far from work in fifteen minutes as I can, turn around and walk back. No more. No less. Just

to be as far away from work as I can until I get to go home. My own little victory every day. I tell her about the dress shop. Every day. On my walk. On my walk away from work I pass a dress shop. I don't know if it's a one off or part of a chain. I know nothing of the name or the brand. But I know when I pass I see dresses on the mannequins and I think of her. I tell her, maybe it's the style of dress, maybe it's the size of mannequin, maybe it's just the colours and the look of the place as I walk past in the sun, the rain, the hail, the sleet or the snow. I tell her that I think she would like the place. She'll look at the website and tell me she doesn't think so. She'll tell me the website is terrible but I'll tell her I think she might like it anyway and she should have a look. She's unsure but says she'll keep it in mind.

She laughs, telling me she's happy I think of her. I'm happy because I have a chance to tell her about the shop, wondering how I might manage to squeeze it in to what I was expecting to be non-existent communication. She's relaxed now, happy that she has them off her chest. Relaxed. She's lying in bed. Beyond reading she's going to sleep. It's an early start for her in the morning. She'll be up and gone by the time I get up. She'll be out of the country before I get to work.

But now I know she won't be gone.

All changed now.

We make plans.

WHEN SHE DRESSES LIKE she does to sing like she does she dresses only for me. When she steps up under the spotlight and I see nothing but the cream of her skin and the red and the red and the red of her lips I know she does this only for me. Ruby Woo on her lips because her lips are only for me. When the dim light of the spotlight hanging over her head illuminating the words like a halo, throwing light over the dress clinging to her body I know that dress is only for me. When she moves under the light and the light and the light and the light reflects the changing colours of the dress I know these colours are only for me.

BECAUSE WHEN SHE SINGS India Song she sings India Song for me.

When she steps to one side to hear the piano playing or to sway to the music she knows and I know that all eyes follow her because there are no other eyes here but mine. When she moves she knows that all eyes follow her because there are no other eyes following her but mine. When she opens her mouth to sing again she knows that all eyes watch those lips because there

are no other eyes here but mine. Because she knows that when she moves she moves only for me. When she dances she dances only for me. When she sings she sings only to me.

CROSSING THE BORDER DOESN'T make it any easier. Crossing the border is when real field craft comes into play. Crossing the border means there can be no excuses, no stories, no lies. Getting caught crossing a border means no escape. Even before the airport and the border it's the messages and the codes. It's the letter drops and the fake names. It's covering tracks. Field craft teaches you that it's easier to cover tracks before you've even made them. It's easier now and it's harder. Different contacts, different names, different addresses. Knowing who she is when she contacts you even if the name isn't your name for her. Knowing how to respond. Knowing which questions are safe to ask and which will only cause trouble. Field craft is knowing how much I can say without the risk of blowing her cover, or mine.

The first train is the greatest risk; it's the greatest risk of being spotted. I try to find a seat to stay inconspicuous but it's standing room only. It means I can watch the stations as we approach. It means I can make a dash

for the door before I'm spotted. It means I'm on edge the entire time. Ignore what's outside the windows. Don't be a tourist, don't be a visitor. Blend in. Disappear. Be like everyone else. Glance at what passes by the window the same way everyone else glances at what passes by the window because we've all seen it a million times before. Don't meet anyone's eyes, without meaning to not meet their eyes. Everyone else on the train is a potential trap. Everyone else on the train could be the cause of getting caught.

DON'T RUIN IT. DON'T tell a story that isn't the story. Don't invent words where words don't exist. Don't invent a look behind blue eyes where a look doesn't exist.

But blue is truth. Blue is a true colour. Blue doesn't lie. Those blue eyes will be honest. No matter what happens those blue eyes will be honest. Trust those blue eyes to be true. Whatever else trust those blue eyes.

Twice. Twice I've dreamt about losing her in a theme park. One. One is garish and American, loud, bright. Overloading the senses. The other. The other is darker, a forest park. Everything damp, dark, wooden, hiding beneath the trees. Each time. Each time I'm trying to find her with people I

*don't know. I try to describe her. I can't. I try to tell them her name. I can't.
I try to find someone to help me find her but I can't. Each time. Each time I
come close to finding her in the southwest corner of the park. But each time,
as I'm about to finally find her and silence the strangers beside me who
follow me asking what she looks like and what her name is. But each time
as I'm about to find her I wake up.*

WRITER – A ROMANCE

DAVID PRICE

I do not know what kind of text this will be – I call myself a writer, but I don't always feel like one. I am usually able to write quickly and fluently (although my words are very uncertain here), and I am interested in words. These qualities are easy though; language is freely accessible to almost everyone, and I believe that everyone has the capacity to marshal their language into something that is, recognisably or not, a text. I do not feel like a writer according to a professional definition of the term: I have no success with my writing. I wrote a novel that was everything I wanted it to be, but it was strange and obtuse and was liked by only a few of my closest friends. It was self-published, out of impatience but also to avoid any kind of scrutiny. I sent the text of my novel to some publishers and agents, and heard noth-

ing back. I didn't send it to as many as I should have. Given the potential semi-permanence of words it seems ridiculous to say that the 'moment has passed' to make any more attempts at giving this novel the dignity or validation that I imagine (but doubt) it would have if published or promoted by somebody else; by a cultural machinery beyond my own imagination and limited means.

The novel was an elaborate, sustained and kaleidoscopic rendering of myself in fictional forms. Aspects of me were given to fictional characters, who interacted with each other in muted, coded, polite ways. There was no conflict, no resolution, no real story to pique the interest of a reader. The narrator of what narrative there was began to unravel, driving himself mad as he berated the reader with apologies about the incoherence of the text, and about his inability to simply inscribe a plot. I don't know what I thought I was doing. I enjoyed the process more than anything else I'd ever done.

A week or so ago my father's already compromised health was called into question. He received news that ominous forms appeared in a CT scan of his abdomen. The scan had taken place to check for any partial arterial blockages that might be impeding the flow of blood, following a

heart attack more than a year before. The ominous forms were in the corner of the image. Before further tests are conducted there is only the idea that these forms represent cancer, and that a serious cancer, at his age, will kill him. But the idea of this alone has been enough to create the presumption that it is real, and that a kind of end-time for his life has begun. I have found the experience of being, since then, to be strange – I've been in a state of presumptive mourning, or of a dislocation from the reality in which I find myself to be in. I have felt a lethargy in regards to my work, to the texts I am (or was) writing, and to the other creative or intellectual projects I am (or was) working on. Except for this text, whatever it is. I felt that I should begin writing something in case I needed to write more later on – that it will be easier to access a text about my experience of a very difficult time if that text had already begun before the difficult time was actually happening.

The novel I wrote earlier was about me, but led the reader away from me, and away from any kind of centre. It was a text in which everything was deferred. Layer upon layer of dissimulation and artifice. I began writing a sequel to it after a while, in which ten (fictional) years had passed and the activities and careers of the characters during these ten years was described. As some point, a point at which the text was only just longer than that of

the first novel, an impasse was reached – I couldn't write any more. This point came at a moment when the narrator's hysterical inability to deliver a narrative to the reader reached such a point that neither his hysteria nor confessions of his lack of abilities themselves could produce more text. He, the narrator, was describing a party at which many of the characters were gradually assembling, when suddenly one of the characters is introduced to the narrator's therapist. What should come next is that the therapist will, in turn, recognise the narrator. At that point the narrator will cease to be an extra-textual, commentating voice and become implicated in the text that he has been holding up. But I couldn't write any more. I know what will happen next in the plot, but it has been as if an expanse of road ahead is suddenly rendered meaningless as a possibly navigable space due to a lack of fuel in the vehicle upon the road.

In the last few years I have been attempting to remedy some of the mental problems that I now realize have been affecting me for my entire life. I have always felt remote, I have always felt that I don't experience real emotions, and I have always felt that I will fail at what I do – and that the failure will be caused by my work or my actions in the world sharing these traits with me. My relationship to the world of other people has been mirrored

in my work's relationship to its readers or viewers. I speak in order to place some barrier between myself and the scenario of a conversation in which I find myself. I make a film or drawing or painting to shut down the sharing of a vision, and create something that can be looked at but not seen; that cannot be read as a sign (or which does not communicate a meaning). So what am I doing with this text?

The potential hint of a diagnosis of my father's possible cancer came just after we – my wife, our young son and I – arrived at my parents' house for the Christmas holidays. I was exhausted during the time leading up to this, close to having a breakdown of some kind, and desperate for some kind of rest. I was feeling like an old computer full up with bad, outdated, irrelevant and undeletable data that was slowing it down and making it unusable. It functioned worse each time it was opened. The effect the shadow-images in the image of my father's body had on the emotional atmosphere in the house was dramatic. It was suddenly a scene of coping, of gradual ageing; it became a muffled wail of despair. At least, that is how it felt to me.

I instantly felt older and younger. I realized how old I am (I had been thinking about that anyway) whilst at the same time I felt like my teenage self, who had inhabited those same spaces solipsistically, disconnected from

everyone around me. I was as solipsistic and disconnected from others as this text is right now. An adolescence in other words, in other words. I used to walk around the little town and its surrounding countryside alone, often at night and in pursuit of an atmosphere that matched my own feelings. I repeated some of these walks over the holidays, to the same effect. The intensely damp air made it difficult to breath at times. The air is very dry where I live now.

This text is like a memoir of the present moment, with a historical reach of only about a week (which will becomes weeks, then months if I continue writing). To the extent I can, however, I would like to avoid metaphor and other such devices that bring the experiences and feelings described into line with any category or genre of literary writing. I don't think I'll find any solace in beauty, or in neat images, or in examples of the everyday sublime that say something about the wider picture.

The tests my father was to have could not take place – his blood was too thin to make a biopsy safe. He must therefore wait a few days, during which he'll stop taking his usual blood pressure medicines and allow his blood to thicken.

The unexpectedly stressful and emotional nature of the stay at my par-

ents' house meant that I was unable to rest in any meaningful way despite my great need for rest as the trip began. I started to become forgetful at times, unable to form coherent thoughts, disengaged from work, unable to sleep well, and anti-social. These are symptoms of depression, of course, and I am a depressive. But in the last year or so my depression has, to a great extent, come under my control. I talk about it as acutely as I can with a therapist, once a week, and the longer this conversation goes on the more I see the masochistic character of many of my thoughts and actions. I punish myself, fail to look after myself, don't allow myself to rest, and never feel a sense of satisfaction with anything I do. I indulge in self-pity, and I portray myself as a victim to elicit sympathy that, in any case, I am unable to accept. But more recently I've been much less prone to these kinds of thoughts; I notice their impulses and act on them far less. There is a kind of flat darkness to the thoughts I appear to be using this text to describe, but I would make a distinction between them and the products of a depressive mood or phase. In such a phase these kinds of thoughts continue their drainage down into inevitability, leading to conclusions: nothing I try will succeed, I am incapable of doing anything properly, I am already too far behind to catch up, that I am absolutely stuck in my life as it is now and have no means of improving it. I am not in such a

mood now – these are merely my calm and ordered thoughts.

I have the sense that my life has – just for now – curdled in some way. I wish to retract the word ‘curdled’; I have no intention to ironise my earlier wish to avoid the neatly metaphorical. I feel that there is a kind of writing, which this text shadows but avoids, that would welcome this word’s echo of my father’s blood, and would later on make mention of curdled milk (milk from the mother, blood from the father), perhaps the milk of cows I milked as a child. I have no interest in this. My work is largely made up of, but I think is hampered by, half-hearted or essentially private call-backs, references and implied relevances. This may be a failing of my work, but I will not attempt to correct it in this text by using metaphors and other such devices so as to make *my* feelings resonate for a reader as if those feelings were theirs. To do so would be to produce literature, which I’m not sure this is. It would mean constructing a ‘reading system’:

“As the train pulled away from the station and I waved goodbye to my parents I began to cry the tears that were impossible in their presence, that would have mischaracterised me according to the role I usually play. The tears and their incoherent source increased in production as the train passed places recognisable to me as home (initially passing close to my parents’

house whilst they would still be at the station, slowly making their way from the platform back to their car), then began to diminish as my familiarity with the exterior lessened. Once we entered the city the present moment felt avoidable again and reentered its always deferring place in the queue of events, tasks and phenomena to be navigated”

This is how this text will not be. This text is a ‘writing system’. What I mean by my employment then retraction of the word ‘curdled’ is simply that my life has stopped flowing easily. It is feeling harder to do anything, to change anything. I have a job that I don’t like, just to earn money for our rent, and the low status of the job (I am a bartender) lessens my own opinion of myself. I have nobody else to blame – I sought the job out, without even considering that I could have found work more suited to my education and training. There are, conceivably, interesting things that could be said about this job. A few weeks ago I gave a talk in another city, a kind of performance or staged lecture in which I talked about the measurement of time, especially in film. I showed parts of the John Smith film in which a whole day is compressed into a quarter of an hour, the film where John Baldessari holds an egg timer in one hand and a thermometer in the other, and some older films of mine that I occasionally return to. I also showed the entire clip of the

snooker player Ronnie O'Sullivan making a 147 break faster than anyone had before (there was no need for him to do it so fast – the same number of points are accrued no matter the speed). I was summarising all these eccentric, distorted ways of measuring time through work when I began to think about how ending a frame of snooker is called 'making a clearance', or 'clearing the table'. My thoughts then turned to my job, to clearing the tables in the bar, and the two time measurements at work: those of the bartenders and those of the drinkers. The same call of 'last orders' applies to both, but they work towards it differently. I incorporated this into the talk. In the place I was giving the performance the artists don't have to do shitty irrelevant jobs on the side, and I had the impression that the room felt a bit less comfortable when, before their eyes, I changed from being a foreign, visiting artist into a bartender describing their work through the eyes of an artist. I have no way of knowing if the audience contained people who also do shitty jobs, of course, but up until that point in my talk they had heard me talking about having been a lecturer, being an artist, known that I was from a foreign country, and would have had the impression I was somewhat erudite and well-read. Something in their reaction changed when I began to talk about clearing and cleaning tables.

The 'I' that is unambiguously writing this text is very far from the distended, faltering, overactive narrator of my novel. This 'I' is writing simply and truthfully. I have a feeling that this self has been trying to impose itself on my writing for a while. In this period of time when depressive thoughts have lost their tightest grip on me my mind has become freer, and my writing has become more casual and prone to subconscious procedures. It's an effect of my therapy, I think. Through a roundabout happenstance of referrals and recommendations I ended up meeting one of the only old-fashioned Freudian therapists still practising within the state health service here, who I now see for almost no cost. I would not have been able to afford this resource otherwise. We talk about my bleakest thoughts, but also laugh a lot. He has an enormous sofa covered in thick woollen fabrics, and a Cocteau print on the wall, exactly as one would imagine. I've never laid down on the sofa – the first time I went I sat in a chair facing him, and have continued to do so. The sofa has never been referred to, never been spoken of despite its extremely theatrical character. I sometimes wonder if I will graduate to it; if I will reach a state where it becomes necessary to really begin associating freely. I also sometimes wonder if anyone else uses it, if some of my therapist's other analysands (I don't think there are many, he is either close to retirement or is

retired but maintains, for some reason, a few analytical relationships) use it. I also wonder if the sofa is simply a relic of psychoanalysis itself; if the discipline's diminishment in modern medical practice is embodied in the sofa's existence as a remnant. It would be very difficult to remove the sofa due to its enormity; much easier to just leave it there. If the office were mine I would use it to sleep on during the day.

FROM OMA: A NOVEL

PART 2: 'THE TAPES'

BARRY SHIELS

Maxwell turned left onto Sperrin Drive. It was hot. Someone said 25 degrees on the radio before he turned the radio off. It had never bothered him before, voices without bodies in his ear, songs dragging him back into adolescence, but it bothered him now. He was looking for number 53.

25 plus 53, what's that, and what age did he think he was?

He had to stop. The street was quiet, a weekday afternoon, rows of cars snoozing in the sun. Did people not drive to work anymore? The first space wasn't big enough but Maxwell spent nearly 4 minutes trying to reverse into it regardless. The second space was just about right. Click clunk and he was standing on the pavement. 25 and 53, plus 4, plus 2 for the second parking

space, plus his age. Breathe. And then there was the house, a large downstairs window for looking out onto the street. Maxwell checked his pocket for his phone before he opened the gate and rang the bell. It took a while for the woman to answer, and when she did she was out of breath as if she'd run to the door.

PSNI, Maxwell said, looking her up and down. Some of his colleagues used Ma'am, but to Maxwell Ma'am sounded like exactly the wrong word, especially here.

Thank you for coming. I didn't know what else to do, she said.

It was strange how often people used that exact phrase.

You did the right thing, he assured her, needlessly wiping his feet on the coconut mat. She was predictably blond, he reflected then, entirely unremarkably blond. The short sleeves of her blouse, slightly elasticated, had ridden up toward her shoulder revealing skin that was mottled red. When did it begin to matter to him that people like her had once looked different?

It's in the garage, she said, turning.

It.

I'll follow, said Maxwell. They walked down the hall, past the kitchen, while she told him how the garage had been converted years ago as a place

for the family to relax in.

To play games, she said, watch TV.

Maxwell said nothing. He was noticing how loud the carpet was. That was the word his ex-wife had used to describe unusual colours, or anything bold: *loud*. The swirls, if he had to guess, were seahorses, rust-coloured with an edge of mustard against a background that was dark brown. Two steps to the back of the house and there was the entrance to the garage, which was really a second living room, she said. 2.

On the left, she said.

Mrs Collins? he confirmed before turning to look, realising that he'd forgotten to check her name.

Maxwell had never quite seen what he was about to see, and yet it didn't really surprise him when he saw it. Inside the conversion, whose bare concrete shell was adorned with various soft furnishings, including faux-Persian rugs and a long dark-orange drapery over the door, a father was holding onto the legs of his son.

How many hours? he asked Mrs Collins, still working with the theory in his head.

She told him.

That was 5. Add 2. Or 2 2s. 93 overall, he reminded himself. And then his age. There was also the body to think about. It was only then that he really examined the tableau.

Your husband? he enquired, quietly.

She nodded.

Mr Collins wore his tonsure so that you could see the dark hair curling away from the white scalp. Maxwell wondered what the man did, had been doing, at the moment of the call; just arrived at school for a day of teaching, he guessed from the short-sleeved shirt and cotton trousers, the book cabinet beyond the tweedy-looking brown settee. And yet the attitude suggested something else. His forearms were thick and tanned like a labourer's. Uncertainty led Maxwell to stare. The son had come out on the mother's side: gangly and fair. His jeans were badly stained, which accounted for the smell.

The only way to combat disgust is anticipation, Maxwell remembered. He had sung this phrase while driving home from a training course in Belfast. Well it wasn't so much he was singing it as intoning or chanting it, driving and nodding to himself, finding a rhythm to suit, beating it out on the steering wheel while he sped down the M1. *To notice a smell, and*

to name it, is the only defence against repulsion. He'd shouted that one. He'd whispered others. He remembered all of them. He also remembered how no one liked the instructor, pompous they said over coffee and egg sandwiches, pompous and dried up; 'abstract' was a word they landed on, far removed from the day-to-day business of the job. *The law is what we don't get to know.* That was another one. Maxwell thought about deepening shades of human skin, about gaseous bloating and epidermal desiccation, about nails and hair, organs eating themselves in an orgy of petrification. *The law is our passion for ignorance,* he recalled, *and ignorance our greatest passion.* He especially liked that. *All deaths require a declaration.*

Maxwell observed the boy's bluish lips, before turning back to the work at hand. 'Mr and Mrs Collins, as I'm sure the coroner explained,' etc. etc. 'It's a question of physical evidence,' and so on. 'An ambulance and the morgue'.... 'And, finally, can I ask you to step outside, I'll have to take some photographs.' He'd anticipated more resistance. Often parents refused to leave the room, convinced that a child's life could be preserved in the aspic of their eyes. But on this occasion it took only a single 'ahem' for Mr Collins to let go. In fact his step back was quite abrupt, enough to cause the body to sway, releasing his arms into the custody of his pockets as he made the move, pockets he

then frantically explored for keys or a quantity of loose change. There was a quick altercation of looks, with Maxwell, with his wife, with Maxwell again, and then finally with his wife, before he followed the arrow of his vision into the thick silence of elsewhere.

Neither parent cried. The body swayed its final animations above their heads. Maxwell stood somberly until he was all alone.

What happened next was more or less the same every time. Maxwell began to create a memory. He used his phone to establish the arrangement of the objects in the room, scrupulously avoiding gaps by ensuring that each photo overlapped. There was no doubt that a suicide changed the way objects looked, in obvious and less obvious ways. It might just be that whoever found the body knocked over a glass of water in their shock, grabbed a nearby blanket to stanch some blood or to wrap around the body to protect it from prying eyes. The urge to prettify a corpse is well known: the first person on the scene thinks to make it less harrowing for the second, and so on. It's a way to cope, mopping up blood, veiling wounds they've already seen that they can't un-see, but that they can stop other people from seeing. The first person takes ownership of the sight and won't give it up. Human nature, Maxwell supposed as he flicked through his digital captures: taking

possession, even of the worst. Mrs Collins had cleared the table of beer bottles, that much was almost certain, and she'd opened the external door to let in some air. Maxwell unfastened the orange curtain to check outside. There were cigarette butts on the patio. Physical evidence. He looked again at the images he'd taken. Polypropylene rope, doubled. Good technique. A laptop lying open on the couch. Maxwell's job was to provide a complete and convincing picture of the room before the act, how things looked before that boy stood on a kitchen stool, and tied himself to the bracket on the ceiling.

In a murder there is always a specific thing to blame, if not the weapon, which is often missing, then the wall or door or kitchen sink that served as its accomplice – the place the body couldn't get beyond before being butchered. In suicide, guilt is less straightforwardly distributed. Every object Maxwell photographed proclaimed its innocence before the deed. The bracket (a leftover from the garage), the stool (a transplant from the kitchen) both shrugged at the lens: we were used against our wills, they said, though only half convincingly. Even a gun when used for suicide is ingénue. Maxwell counted his photos – 73; then took one more of the book spines. Every suicide is committed in front of objects. They are acted against and performed before. It was Maxwell's opinion that after a suicide, objects couldn't help

but communicate this fact. Everything he photographed looked ashamed.

Back in the kitchen the Collinsees were sipping tea. 93, 74, his age, plus 2 for the boys on the screen saver. Maxwell knocked. It was often the case that the parents of a suicide kept it a private affair. There were no friends or relatives rushing around in a hopscotch of incredulity and hamstrung words, bringing over trays of sandwiches and cliché, the gosh sounds of keening. The point of all that is to confuse time, make it seem that the worst is already over and what happened has been well-managed. Not so with suicides. With suicides time itself is dead. Maxwell asked about the boys on the laptop. His best friends? Any girls? Any indications of his state of mind? He recorded their answers on his phone, trying not to look too closely at their dried out eyes. Their voices were drained to the point of indifference, holding tea in their mouths like a transplant of moisture, a way to re-salivate their humanity. He looked at the white pine cabinets; he looked out the window into the back garden with its washing line, achingly still against the sky. And later, in his office, when he played the interview back, he could hear the hopeful noise of children on the street coming home from school. Those sounds went on too long and became a depressing parody that made him think once more of his ex-wife. He heard his voice asking one final

question: any siblings? And then that of Mrs Collins, the steadier of the 2, saying no, he was our only 1.

WHAT TIME DO YOU *call this?*

Time enough, said Maxwell. Bogan's Lounge was quiet for the hour: McGartland in his usual perch with the papers; otherwise Joe the barman playing with the TV remote and Doyle up on his hind legs, lapping away at his first pint. The enthusiasm of it was off-putting. There was another drowned rat at one of the low tables nursing a Powers; he looked like a regular, but wasn't.

It's only five past.

Eight minutes I think you'll find. Doyle sniggered as Maxwell checked his watch.

Doyle found ironic punctiliousness funny.

I'm not in the mood, thought Maxwell.

Tough day? asked Doyle.

Nothing out of the ordinary.

They used to exchange work stories, Maxwell and Doyle but their routines had soured. Doyle had inherited a business from his father: real estate and undertaking but there's only so much humour to be had in missing body parts and the who's-who of local self-importance. Besides, the financial downturn and the two adolescent children had added morbid complaint to Doyle's repertoire, and his stock of knowledge about who owns what where, and for how long, and with what contempt, was slowly vanishing. The creep, as Maxwell termed it, affects us all.

Business is shocking, said Doyle, getting in early.

Maybe you should try Protestants, Maxwell teased. Whenever Doyle worried, it helped to tease.

I don't send coffins to hell.

Only purgatory?

Sure aren't we there already. Doyle laughed.

Maxwell looked around him, embarrassed at the weakness of the joke.

Or did the pope get rid of purgatory?

Maxwell shrugged.

Joe! Doyle was on one now. Didn't the Pope get rid of Purgatory, or what?

Joe pretended not to hear, forcing Doyle to repeat the question.

Does it look like it? said Joe, before laughing at his own originality.

But Doyle had the phone out already. Naw, it's limbo that's been done away with, he announced, ages ago. There's no longer any such thing as limbo.

That's for the babies, Joe asserted blandly.

It is, affirmed Doyle.

Joe shook his head, handed Maxwell his pint, and went back to the TV remote.

What about fetuses – did they go there too? Maxwell didn't know why he'd said that.

Doyle laughed even louder this time. Careful boy! You'll get us into trouble. Speaking of fetuses gone wrong though, look at this wan. Doyle searched his phone for an image. She has a fella. Look!

Maxwell looked and saw Doyle's teenage daughter holding hands with a young man. Disgust, pride, it was hard to know with fathers.

Shows she's normal anyhow. Again Maxwell didn't know why he was saying what he was saying – the language was available to him, that was all. He could see Doyle reaching for an indiscretion, hoping to force another

intimacy.

What's racing Joe? Maxwell asked, quickly changing topic.

Nothing doing, said Joe. 8/11 just now at Chepstow. A 4/1 earlier, though, got a wee bit next door. A steeplechase at some northern place....
Ah where was it now?

Listen, you weren't at the new Chinese in Campsie yet? Doyle had taken to eating out with this wife twice a week – stops me from murdering her, he liked to say.

Maxwell said no.

The portions! Doyle raised his eyebrows. Enough said.

Maxwell was well used to the invitation that never quite arrived. He knew that Doyle's wish for adult company was quickly contradicted by his desire to dwell in Bogan's, a pit of stinking men. Bringing Maxwell into contact with his domestic arrangements would be a troubling contamination, and Maxwell's job was to ensure it never took place.

I'll have to head off early, he said then, gulping at his pint.

A woman?

Kettering, said Joe at almost the same moment, having conducted one of his most pointlessly diligent acts.

Oh yes, said Maxwell, trying to seem interested, before throwing a get-away-of-that back to Doyle. No such thing.

Maxwell knew different faces in different ways. Some he'd grown up with were like weather maps: full suns or black clouds, or lightning strikes. Basic symbols that never changed. He knew that their faces had corrupted with age, like his own had, wrinkled and hollowed out, or fattened up, or lengthened with the loss of hair, but he couldn't quite perceive it. If he'd gone to school with the face it remained forever like a meteorological sign, an emblem of fixed temperament and prescribed possibility. It *had no flesh*.

Other faces, however, those he encountered later in life, were enormously changeable, twitching plains of opinion and contradiction, lines of suggestion that split this way and that, and were subject to vicissitudes of time – but this was not time that worked across generations, decades or even years, but across minutes and seconds, which activated endless tiny shifts of thought and expression and made them, from Maxwell's point of view, almost entirely unreadable. It was this fact in particular that made dating sites difficult. Whereas the faces he scanned on his mobile phone that were recognizable from his youth presented as white clouds, entirely unremarkable, boring, without interest, the others, the strangers, were unnavigable fields he found

himself standing in the middle of, storms he'd been warned against, which could kill him perhaps, but which excited him too because he felt vulnerable, without the language to comprehend.

His first date showed him something else in addition. He'd swiped right, and chosen a woman with whom he thought he might connect, neither too this, nor too that, the 17th he'd considered in all, who was only 29 (but everyone lied about their age) and sent a message. She'd replied within minutes. Beth was from Belfast originally, had blown into town for work. Recognizable enough, Maxwell concluded. They arranged to meet at the Campsie Chinese and spent nearly half an hour discussing the medium: they were both old enough to remember when it was different, when you had to go out to fancy people. When Beth laughed she crinkled up her nose.

But honestly, it can be a bit lonely, she said.

Maxwell agreed.

Beth smiled over her prawn crackers and told him about her flat. It's central enough like – I could walk to work if I wanted. But I don't! She laughed again. Now I've a wee Renault Clio so I have. I like my home comforts.

Maxwell wondered what it meant that he hated his. Would he prefer someone else's? Beth ate the prawn crackers at speed while Maxwell drank

the red wine. Number 57 for him – Duck chow mein.

I can't eat duck, she said, screwing up her nose. Her repulsion was not far removed from her laughter. I can only stand chicken or beef.

Not lamb?

No way, I couldn't! She sounded as if she'd just surprised herself with a conviction. They're so cute. As she said this she stuck out her bottom lip in a gesture so familiar that Maxwell felt at a loss for a moment; it was probably the arbitrariness of her distinction that offended him, the fact that she had deliberately chosen which animals it was alright to slaughter. She had disguised her sadism in a pout. When she finally ordered her beef, ginger and spring onions, number 65, Maxwell stood up to go to the toilet.

THINGS WE WORE

MIRIAM STONEY

Whenever he called in the evening, I would watch the phone right out – in a trance, fixated by the glow of the screen and his name pulsating against my airspace. I looked straight through it, into his kitchen, where he had placed his phone on the worktop to free his hands so that he could roll another cigarette, from which he would take two or three drags before throwing it into the bucket of water by the door behind him. His neck bent perpendicular to his long back; the thin, shapeless jumper hanging off his broad, jagged shoulders. He was always wearing those daft, ineffectual glasses. He must have bought two doz-

en pairs from the supermarket since he came out of the hospital some twenty years ago. The frames sat slightly askew on his three-times-broken nose, but they didn't slip as he nodded his head earnestly to the music. A tape that he had bootlegged off the radio, probably in the year I was born. That's why he was calling, he wanted me to hear the tape. But I couldn't, since I would only ever see this moment from beneath his nose, which lasted as long as the phone kept ringing.

THAT JUMPER IS NOW clean and folded on a pile in my wardrobe. It's made of a kind of thick cotton that never kept me warm, perhaps because the sleeves were so wide that cold air always flowed unimpeded to my ribcage. The horizontal stripes of white and slate grey are of a time when clothes had a longer life expectancy; they aged well and managed to stay relevant. Though the collar is fraying and there is a lingering, stale smell about the fabric that no amount of anti-bacterial detergent will displace. This jumper must have festered in a suitcase, in his attic, where masses of clothes have accumulated over multiples of years. The first sentence, five. The second, a quarter. The third, a little more than three. Shortly after he was released the last time, I

went to see him in a house I didn't know he had ever lived in. He was wearing the jumper when I arrived. He looked good – he said in his letters he'd been doing a lot of martial arts, lifting weights and eating “less crap” than he did at home. I didn't know how to give him a compliment, so I told him I liked the jumper. This wasn't untrue, but it wasn't what I was really getting at. The next time I went to visit, he handed me a plastic carrier bag with the freshly washed, striped fabric carefully placed inside. He said he had been wondering what he could give me as a present.

HIS NAME IS GENERIC and Indian. It's the only one that was never callously anglicized, contorted into something ridiculous like a Michael or a David, beyond recognition. Instead, he shortened it to one syllable that no English-speaker could claim unpronounceable. His was the first name I ever googled, even before I googled my own. Earlier that week I had mentioned I needed help moving two suitcases of worthless possessions out of college accommodation, which was a four-hour drive from where he lived, back north. He told me not to worry, that he would sort it. My search led me to

the website of the local newspaper, where I found that he had had his driving license revoked again. The following weekend he arrived with a friend at the college gates, in a shiny, black car that seemed conspicuously expensive to me, until it was parked with the monstrosities belonging to the parents of other students. He didn't introduce me to the friend, and I didn't introduce myself to him. The car was the unspoken pretense for this unlikely union. On the long journey, he kept turning in the passenger seat to ask me if I'd ever had such a flashy ride. I told him I hadn't.

THE MONTHS AFTER HE came out of prison, he actively tried to reintegrate himself into my life. But I had never perceived his absence as anything out of the ordinary. He had always been, at one time or another, "away". At least in prison I knew where he was. I went to visit him a few times. A few of us made the trip together in one car, a group that made no coherent sense, since each of us knew him from a different setting. Sitting across from us, at a table split in the middle by a short wooden barricade, he performed an amalgamation of personae that never quite functioned glitch-free. One joke that should

have landed on its feet was immediately toppled by my confused and disapproving look. His warmth towards me was dampened by the presence of the others. In his grey, regulation t-shirt, he could have been anywhere. I thought he'd be wearing something even more uniform-like. Something with stripes – an overall, perhaps. The only thing that really disturbed me was how few layers he was wearing. I knew him in jumpers, woollen hats and heavy jackets. I worried that he was cold, with his thin, brown arms exposed. That was the only time I ever saw his biceps and the full length of his forearms. When he'd been released, he would wear a whole catalogue of mismatching garments for the sheer pleasure of it. He had so many clothes that he didn't know what to do with them. I don't know where they all came from, but when he gifted me something, he always hinted at the story that accompanied it. Only with hindsight did it occur to me that the things he refused to give me were probably laden with something I couldn't carry.

WEARING THE JUMPER WITH the stripes and nothing else, I stood by the window looking directly into the fitness studio directly opposite. In the

dimmed light, I must have been visible through the window from the outside. Well aware of this, I stood unabashed watching a man watch himself squat something that looked heavy, even from where I was standing in the building across the street. He was alone in the studio and was probably enjoying the privacy he thought that afforded him. I watched him lift the bar over his head and saw his entire body tremble before he set the apparatus back in place in its metal cage. Behind me the expectant figure of a person I had already begun to forget, mumbling that it was probably time to go, “got work in the morning.” I turned to say goodbye, but only managed a closemouthed smile and an awkward nod. When I looked back through the windows, I saw the man was sitting on an apparatus with his face engulfed by the blue light of his phone. I was alone, again.

I BLOOMED AND WILTED in long, meandering cycles. The times I was more flesh, I couldn't say whether I was more or less contented with myself, though I was substantially more coveted by others. When the earnestness took over, I shrunk into myself and tried to enjoy the idea of a desire-free existence. My

wardrobe consisted almost entirely of the things he had given me, which were usually large enough to obliterate the contours of my body to any outside observer anyway. The space between my skin and the clothes I wore was where I moved most freely and where, if anywhere, I would allow myself to be seduced.

TO BE NAKED IN front of another person always felt less intimate, somehow more routine, than when hands were creeping beneath my shirt and down my trousers. When eyes were deprived of their lustful sovereignty, the exploration of my body became a tactile one, in which I could take equal part. There was something juvenile and apprehensive about this kind of eroticism, which precluded any possibility of domination from either side. In the dim and stifling space between skin and fabric, lips and tongue made their way over my soft belly, into the furrows between my ribs, around my nipples, before retreating to our common airspace to breathe again. When it inevitably came to undressing, I always insisted that the other pull the t-shirt over my head and the waistband down to the tips of my feet, so that all the things that were most precious to me could disperse, leaving behind my body as a ruse of true intimacy.

HE TOOK HIS FIRST trip to India when I was already a teenager, and he seemed to me an adult of ministerial proportions. Only when he returned did he tell me where he had been, though not explicitly with tales of adventure in the Punjab, but an ugly silk kameez and a box of purple glass bangles that I couldn't hitch over the breadth of my hands without them shattering. In the box was also a pair of soft, gold earrings – hoops with a bar thicker than my pierced ears could accommodate. The ring was studded with little gold balls and cuffed with two coils of filigree thread. I forced them through my earlobes, scraping away a layer of skin to broaden the circumference of the original holes. He told me I looked 'ethnic' with this bright, yellow-gold jewellery set against my face. The clumsy language he had inherited to talk about things Indian was divested of the malice it usually came with when he used it himself. I think he was trying to acknowledge whatever it was that bound us together, which often cut us off from all that surrounded us in that small, steel town in the north of England.

IN HIS SHABBY TERRACED house, I tried to install a version of reality that might mask the illicit work he did there when I was not around. I left school and walked across the road to the Gurdwara, where I picked up a margarine tub of cool, brown sauce with blocks of chicken suspended in it and two prontha that had been sweating in their hot foil wrapping. We didn't warm up the food in his kitchen, because we were both as lazy as each other. He ate quickly, and when his bowl was empty, I gave him pieces of chicken from my own small portion and tore the greasy flatbread in half so that he had a utensil with which to eat. He then mentioned that that was his first meal since Tuesday. That was a Friday. I envied his ability to put food out of his mind, while I seemed to be constantly obsessed by thoughts of my next meal. He didn't look like he hadn't eaten for three days. He looked as forceful as he always was, though his jeans were bunched together at the waist and fixed in place with a belt that had gained a few too many extra holes. Maybe he meant that it was the first time he had shared a meal with someone, or maybe he was telling the truth and I just couldn't see what he was doing to himself.

I LOST ONE OF the gold earrings. It was a kind of iterative loss, in the sense that I thought I knew where it was for a long time, and then I became unsure, and then one day I just couldn't find it anymore. The other one remained in my ear; I never took it out. He said I looked like a pirate with one gold earring, which somehow seemed preferable to 'ethnic', though this preference perhaps only bespeaks an internalised contempt we had lived through and on. I wore the earring for such a long time that it became an integral part of my face. At a young age I had developed a habit of scratching the skin behind my ears and on the back of my neck in a total absence of mind, usually when I was nervous – which I generally was. Once I started wearing the earring, however, I immediately stopped clawing at my skin, and instead began twisting the gold hoop, threading my fingers through it and fingering the little golden balls until my hands were diverted to some other task.

WHENEVER I WAS ESPECIALLY broke, I went to him for money. In the beginning, he made me act out a charade of gainful employment, so that I didn't

get the impression I could have something for nothing. He found tasks for me to fulfil to a permissible standard, which he then remunerated with an absurdly high wage. I cleaned every room of his house that I was permitted to enter, I dug his garden and then planted nothing. Eventually he gave up on this moral education, probably because he knew by that point that I was in no serious way lazy or ungrateful. I had no money because I had no job, and I had no job because we lived in a declining industrial town in the north, where the slow decommissioning of the local steel works brought with it an agonising loss of hope for the future prospects of the community. I suppose I could have gone to the chicken factory or the crisp factory where his mother and sisters had always worked, but he never suggested it, so I didn't either.

WHEN IT BECAME CLEAR that I could go to university, he tried to stop me working in the bars and restaurants where I once took shifts to cover my very tepid social life. He gave me even more money, and demanded more of my time, told me to bring my books to his house so that I could study there in the evenings. He set up a desk in the living room and gave me a key to the front door, which I never used. I didn't spend the money on the things he thought I should spend money on, like clothes, alcohol, petrol and car

insurance. I didn't want anyone to know that I had – for some unknown reason – the means to acquire nice, new things. Instead, I spent most of it on train tickets and hotels, so that I could disappear for days at a time, without mentioning anything of it to anyone. Not even him.

FROM, MY MOVIE

ISABEL TEITLER

After breakfast we returned to my room. I hadn't left the hotel in two days, and the idea that my apartment, my shoddy, fragile little life, was only four S-Bahn stations away was unfathomable. I pictured Berlin outside having become ashen, shriveled, like I'd been inside for 2000 years instead and the marble and the money had protected me from all the rot.

The heavy door unlocked with a satisfying chirp and I pulled it open and let him walk in before me. I had made the bed when we'd left for breakfast, wanting to demonstrate to the cleaning staff that I was one of the good ones, but now it was perfect white pristine. The curtains were drawn back, and I appreciated again the ornate red patterned wallpaper, the drippingly old-world gilded mirror frame. He lay down on the bed and scooted into

the middle and made himself into an X that didn't reach any edge and closed his eyes. He had that extra pudginess that men with good careers were allowed without it compromising their sexual desirability, a shadow of red hair I found cute.

“That was the best breakfast I've eaten in five years,” he said. “I'd like to nap.” He opened one eye to look at me. “Do you mind?”

“Go for it.” He made an inarticulate pawing motion towards me and I leaned down and kissed him. His body had an urgency that didn't match his soft eyes, and I wanted him to feel safe. “I'm gonna go downstairs and try to work a little.”

The lobby had the highest ceiling I'd ever seen, crowned with a majestic stained glass skylight. The Adlon, my home. I sat down in a leather armchair and a uniformed waiter immediately zipped over and I ordered a seven-euro coffee. I pretended to work on my new script and watched the restfully unhip European travellers come and go, and I felt a sense of well-being that I hadn't felt for two years, from when I still believed in my movie. After half an hour I was hit with a bolt of feeling of what on earth was I doing down here while he was up there, and the whole ride up in the elevator I could barely breathe because I was so afraid he wouldn't be there anymore. But he

was, right where I'd left him, asleep, and I got into bed and without really waking up he flipped over into me and we had sex again. He drifted off back to sleep, and then I remembered that he was never going to call me after this weekend.

The minute I remembered it I knew it was true. He was never going to call me after this weekend. I sat up straight in the bed. *This is a crisis*, I said to myself. I got out of bed and pulled on the big loungey sweatshirt dress I'd been wearing all weekend and paced to the other end of the room and sat down on the couch with its red upholstery that matched the wallpaper. This was a crisis.

Get him up, out of the room, say I wanted to lounge alone for the rest of the weekend. I'd be a whirlwind, profligate, needless American, extending outrageous invitations to men I'd met once at parties four months earlier, a sophisticated variation on the straightforward picture of a woman up for a good time. The kind of woman that I didn't, really, anymore, actually believe existed, but that I had always wanted to be. *Look at me now!* I could yell across the ocean to New York, to everyone who'd worked on my movie, to everyone who I knew thought of me with nothing but pity and contempt if they thought of me at all. *I am Cool! I've spent two thirds of the money in*

my bank account on an opulent sex tryst! I am punk! rock!

But then I looked at him in the bed. He had tucked his arms up against his chest like a little girl waiting for a present. I thought about the story he'd told me last night, about being a successful artist in his late 30s and getting so underwater that he had had to ask his mom to get on an airplane and come get him. I thought of the one previous time we'd met. We'd had a very straightforward and, to me, moving conversation about our artistic practice, about the gift of creative work as a hand to grab that relies only on our own ability to conjure it. I had felt, talking to him, a glimpse of an alternate narrative of the past two years, one in which I hadn't debased myself but in which I'd instead proven something, where all that debasement was just a ring of fire through which I'd christened myself a legitimate artist. He'd looked at me like that, like I was something familiar and recognizable and clever, something fully formed, and that's how I'd felt.

I didn't want him to leave.

What if this was it? There had been so many accidents, so many little turns and reversals, so many times one thing had looked like something else. Wouldn't this make perfect sense? What if this was the moment when I got to relax? What if I wasn't alone anymore.

I was still looking at him, my arms crossed, my legs crossed, when he woke up and sat up and looked at me.

“Hi,” he said.

“Hi,” I said back. We looked at each other across the room for another beat, and then I looked out the window and smiled. We had a direct view of the Brandenburg Gate, and I leaned forward and craned my head around to see those little horses, bravely lined up for battle.

“What do we do now?” He said.

“Did you bring a bathing suit?”

He wore his underwear and we swam around together in the beautiful Grecian tiled pool, the two of us and a little German girl whose mom lay on a lounge chair. The room felt low and even and safe, and I breathed in the chlorine and paddled over to him and kissed him and imagined what we looked like to the girl, to her mother. A couple in love. He was old enough that he could have made the money to account for us staying at this hotel. I could just be his girl, inconsequential, well cared for, happy.

We took the elevator back up to our room in my wet bathing suit and his wet underwear, towels lazily half-draped around us, and he leaned against the wall and pulled me into him and put his hand on my butt and

his head back and closed his eyes. He smelled like chlorine and sex and sweat and I smiled to myself about how the taking a shower before getting into the swimming pool rule was a good rule, that he and I were evidence that it was gross for others that we hadn't followed it.

“What time do you have to be at work tomorrow?” He said, when we got back to the room.

A cold wind swept through the air.

“No time in particular. Like 10 or 11?”

“Okay, I'll get out of here earlier than that.” He flopped down on the bed and turned on the hotel TV. “Back to the real world.” Then, without looking at me, he said “but this has been fun.” He reached for his phone and started flipping through that too.

With all the fire that I had loved him thirty seconds earlier, I hated his guts. *Get him out of here*, I said to myself. *Stay calm. And get him out of here. This is an emergency.*

“Would you like to get room service?” He said, reaching for the menu. “I can't believe I'd ever want to eat again after that breakfast but I'm hungry.”

“I don't think I'm hungry.” I said, and sat down on the couch and glared at him. He didn't notice, but picked up the heavy black hotel phone and

called room service and started ordering in German.

“Can I put it on your tab?” He said to me with his hand over the receiver.

“Sure,” I said, cold as ice. Then, I said before he hung up, “actually get me a cheeseburger.”

He nodded at me and added a cheeseburger to the order, then put down the phone and went back to watching TV. I wondered if he felt the hate waves I was sending towards him and ignoring them, or if he wasn't noticing them at all. Probably the latter.

I got up and paced around the room and tried to draw his attention to me with the force of my wrath but he kept watching TV. Our food came and we ate and talked more about our biographies and with every second that passed he morphed more and more into a monster. He was everything I didn't have, everything I'd ever been ashamed to want. And he just sat there, wielding all this power over me, casually batting me around like a ball of yarn.

“No wonder it didn't work out,” I said to him about a story he was telling me about a woman. “It sounds like you're kind of an asshole.”

He looked at me, surprised and affronted with a little curl of amused contempt on his lip. “Maybe so.”

He retreated to the bed and I sat glowering on the couch until I turned off the light and stormed over to the bed and got into it. He stayed as far away from me as he could. I pretended to be asleep and raged. A thin voice told me not to be crazy, that I didn't even know this guy, that, indeed, like I'd said to myself all along, this was exactly the situation I'd set in motion, that I could just say goodbye tomorrow and get on with my life and who cared. But I didn't want to listen to that voice. I wanted to listen to the other voice, the one telling me that he was an inhumane asshole, that he was behaving outrageously, the one telling me to *go. fucking. crazy.*

"Can I ask you something?" I said in a small voice, at his direction in the dark hotel room.

"Hmm?" He said, mostly asleep.

"Can I ask you something?" I said again, louder and clearer this time.

He waited for a minute. "Uh-huh," he said, but with the clarity of his tone he might as well have said "oh please god no." *Sorry, Bitch, I thought. You should have read the room and escaped three hours ago. Now you're mine.*

"Are you ever going to call me after this weekend?"

He was silent for a long beat.

I stormed up out of bed and marched into the bathroom, leaving the

door open and the light shining out, and started running a bath. I stood in the aristocratic white tile with my arms crossed, leaning up against the sink, feeling a mixture of genuine pain and theatrical stage adrenaline. I wasn't just going down for myself, I was going down for all my sisters worldwide.

“Is everything okay?” He called, sounding weary, like the weight of the world now rested on his vocal chords.

“No!”

I got into the tub even though there was only like an inch of water in it so far. The sound of the running water muffled everything else, but I thought I heard him getting out of bed, and he did soon appear and leaned up against the door with his arms crossed. “What’s going on?” He said, with a significant dollop of wry comedy. I really did find him very likable, and remembering that both softened the edge of my theatrics and reminded me that the situation actually totally sucked, nudged me in the direction of the real pain vibrating in me, the pain I was trying to stave off with the theatrics.

“I just think it’s really *rude*,” I said, “and really *fucked up*, to come here and spend this whole love sex weekend with someone you have no intention of ever calling.”

He looked at me for a long beat. Thank goodness the bathtub was actually starting to fill with a normal amount of water. He left the room and my rage spiked up again but then he came back to the doorway with his phone, and read my text message from two days ago back to me, “honestly I’m in a pretty laissez-fair moment, as long as you don’t act like a freak I think we’re fine.” I wanted to tear his ear off with my teeth, have him watch the blood pour down my chin. “I didn’t really get the impression you were in the market for a boyfriend.”

“Everyone’s in the market for a boyfriend,” I hissed.

“Okay” he said with a little shake of his head, hands up in resignation, and started to back out of the room. “I’m gonna go.”

Fuck.

“Hey wait.”

He stopped and raised his eyebrows at me.

“Sorry,” I said. *Oh, fuck, I thought. Oh, goddamit.* Was the fun really over this soon? “Sorry. I-” I splashed some water on my face and then turned off the tap. “I haven’t had the easiest couple years.” This was not what I wanted. “And I was just having a nice time.”

“So was I.” He said to me, mournful, Eeyore-ish. Well then why didn’t

he want to see me again? I was so mad and sad and upset that I couldn't even really see my next move. "I'm going to go smoke a cigarette," he said, pulling on his clothes, "and then I might leave."

"Fine."

I heard him leave the room and I sat cross-legged in the tub. There wasn't anything other than misery, and it wasn't even the sharp kind, just the dull flat pain of complete obliteration.

I got back into bed and felt exhausted but not even a tiny bit sleepy. I hadn't had a decent night's sleep in over a week, which had been the whole justifying idea of this hotel room before I'd texted him instead. He didn't come back for so long that I wondered if he was just gone for good, which was a relief, but then I looked around and saw his bag. Some minutes later, he returned.

He sat down next to me on the bed, and I reached out and put a hand on his back. "Hi," I said.

"Hi." He said. "I'm gonna go."

"You don't have to do that," I said. "I mean, do whatever you want, but you don't have to leave. Like I said, I've just been having a rough time, and I had a lot of fun with you, and that's all that happened." I couldn't believe

how quickly this had imploded. I felt so debased.

“Okay.” He said. “I get that. What do you want me to do? Would you rather I stay or leave?”

“Stay, I guess? But, I mean, I don’t want you to feel trapped here-“

“No, no, I’m a big boy. If you prefer I stay, I’ll stay.”

I didn’t really know which one I preferred, but having him stay seemed less embarrassing. “Yea, just stay.”

“Okay.” He got back into the bed and almost immediately started snoring. I lay all the way on the other side from him, sleep as far away as China. Eventually I got up, quietly this time, and went back into the bathroom and closed the door and turned on the light and ran myself another bath.

I lay in the tub and listened to all the sounds in the room. The water from the tap, it hitting the surface, the snoring through the door, the distant traffic just audible, a siren. I saw in my head an editing software project window, constructed each sound as a sound effect, a different track. My mind kept tripping back into despair and I just kept adding audio tracks into my Avid project, until, finally, the thought materialized for long enough that it could amuse me, *at least I’ve finally slept with a redhead.*

FROM *TROUBLES*

PROLOGUE

KRISTIAN VISTRUP MADSEN

Hers is a story about closing her eyes when certain songs come on, swaying back and forth and willing herself someplace else. Sarah is her name and it's been like this for a while.

§

HE'S NOT SURE WHY he came to Rome. To walk to the Pantheon at night and feel out of breath, not exactly from the beauty of it, but the magnificence. How old it is, simply, how the city, this ancient city, has crammed in around this building. To lose your breath at this, to almost cry a little, and text your friends immediately, the Pantheon at night! The stillness! I nearly cried! is to have experienced something, finally, wholly. That sense of non-ambiguity perhaps, is –

§

THE HOUSE WHERE SHE lived, she and her husband, was considered small and old-fashioned. Quaint. But quaintness was not exactly a quality in the eyes of those who spoke, those of the town, more a sign of tolerance. There was a TV with a DVD player, but no reception. There was a draft and trinkets and no dish washer. “Eric likes to do the dishes, he relaxes that way”, Sarah was good at socialising; understood something about communication, and about smoothening out the kinks. She wakes up in the morning and looks at the objects, knitted blankets, souvenirs, a wall calendar, from which each day Eric tears off a page with a quote from President Bush like I’m the decider, I decide what’s best. The calendar did not say January 2008, but counted down the days until the end of his presidency. They had an Obama sign on the screen door. Did Sarah care? She had it in her, but she also had it in her to disappear. Their car got keyed when parked on main street. This town was far away. Her eyes could become glassy when she looked at the objects in the morning, and the dew on the widows, a Beaux Arts lamp from her grandmother who died the year Sarah went to college, the stand for Eric’s leg prosthesis. It had fallen over. He was already up.

TO NOT FEEL AMBIGUOUS is the most that one can hope for. He wasn't old, but heavy thoughts came to him, and he took them as a sign of his own value.

§

EARLIER IN THE NIGHT, the cat started making its way outside. Old and beige and blind, it knocked over the prosthesis, dragging its skin and bones. Imagine not really being there, or perhaps finally there, actually, what if you were never really there before you were reduced to this last impulse: go outside. January in the middle of nowhere – bum-fuck Egypt Sarah would joke, though she never usually swore – the great river that ran through the town lay still in the moonlight. Not a leaf moved when Troubles, the cat, inched its way across the wooden floor of the quaint house. A town of two thousand people in a ridge lay still in the moonlight, the wall of the humongous dam towering above it. One of the biggest in North America. Some years ago a leak had miscoloured a patch of the concrete.

That night in bum-fuck January, you could have heard a pin drop, or a crack across the surface of the dam echo through the valley. The moonlight a faint glare in the sky like the reflection from a house on fire, the hint of some immense but banal happening somewhere, a tear from the eye of the darker concrete that kept the 2.5 cubic kilometres of water from flooding the town. Troubles was not a sentimental being. To be a victim of life least of all, then rather alone, in the end. Who would have thought that death would come creeping like that, through a hole in the door and onto the frostbit veranda.

§

ROME IS MORE OR less shit in January. It rains the whole time. A small restaurant around the corner from the Pantheon had come recommended. It was Matt who taught him that restaurants are like acquaintances, you have to be introduced. It's very rare that you simply walk up to someone you meet on the metro, or start a conversation with your neighbour on the plane. You'd have to have a lot of balls, and you never know what you're going to get. Rather than the fact of the encounter itself, let's think about the quality of the encounter, Matt had said. To have a special experience,

and not to waste time. Matt spoke with such authority about Rome, as he did about everything.

Conversion on the way to Damascus is a Caravaggio painting cast in shadow, very awkwardly hanging on the side wall of a chapel. You pay a euro to light it up for three minutes. What's remarkable about it, he'd been made to understand, is how dynamic the composition is, and how prominent the horse's behind. How wonderful to have such a great painting at the centre of which is an ass. A man, Saul, in a fit of religious ecstasy, has fallen off the horse and lies on the ground with his arms stretched out, bathed in harsh light, eyes wide shut, as they say. He is wearing a red shirt through which you can see his nipple, as if the shirt was the afterthought of the painter, last minute modesty, like the light that shines on the painting: one euro's worth. This painting, much like a restaurant, or a friend, comes highly recommended. By Matt himself, no less. Saul is persuaded from one moment to the next by the harshness of the light that he should not persecute Jesus and his followers but join them. To walk around in Rome alone in the rain thinking about nipples and how long one must look at the Conversion to get closer, not to Saul, or to Jesus, but to Matt. To be made to feel sure of something, imagine, from one moment to the next, and for that certainty to fill you up, how light fills

up a room, in an instant, but instead to be alone in a restaurant and order vitello tonnato and feel as if, in that room, the light is always flickering, or there's another room, visible through an open door, unlit, and all this space inside of you is space for doubt, and that desire for conviction is the same as desire for company, or a way of belonging with someone else that doesn't

—

§

SIX YEARS AGO SARAH had sat in the parking lot of the hospital when she called Eric to say that this is how it is, and there's no two ways about it. They probably have to spend some weeks in the city, maybe with her old friend Tom, while she recovers, his messy house on the slope of the hill near the viewpoint where you see the skyline. Chemo's a bitch, so says everyone, but she'd sit there on the bench at the viewpoint, they could bring the dogs. Sarah had cried a little that morning, and you could hear her, had you hung on the other end of the line, how she gasped for air and chopped her hand at the atmosphere. But then she "dried her eyes and went back to work" — that's what Eric would say when he broke the news to their friends, and much later even, when telling people such as the boy about Sarah's cancer:

that he'd never seen her more strong than during that time.

Babe, he said, when he came in to the bedroom that morning. He had a mug with him and a denim shirt on, his slightly lopsided walk and a raspy voice that suggested calm as well as character. Huh, she said.

–Babe.

–Huh?

–Troubles.

He handed her the mug, and she locked her eyes on a fern below the Bush quote.

– I know, she said, and accepted Eric's hand over her shoulder with a high-pitched sigh.

– He made it outside during the night, the dogs found him this morning.

They had been strangely quiet, but at the same time elated, came running back in. It's funny how animals sense severity, but Eric wouldn't have thought twice about this – he felt close to the dogs as he felt close to the timber and the weather.

– The boy is still sleeping, he said.

– Huh.

SIX YEARS AGO SARAH had survived and now the cat Troubles was dead. It wasn't that these two events really had anything to do with one another, but more that her illness, for better or worse, had figured a new beginning. No one really understood the importance of Troubles – Sarah didn't speak much of such things, and in any case Eric was not a very capable listener. But Troubles was a hook in the past. In a time before the small town with the enormous dam, before Eric and the Impeach Bush stickers; a time which, were it not for Troubles, would have been accessible only through music and swaying and willing away. After that year on the bench, gazing through the fog at the skyline, a soft cotton beanie on her bald head, something in her had altered so dramatically that her sense of self would no longer perish with the ageing cat. She had defied death once; she was on her second run, and Troubles was a hook in the first.

Sarah didn't want to die. It is not like that. But she did use to like herself better, or she did use to harbour a different kind of hope. Nothing can give life back its meaning like overcoming cancer, she'd read. But maybe you don't want to live with those wounds, or maybe you don't want to live without the parts of your past that died with your innocence in the chemo-raze; you don't want to be given life again, because you don't want

to be without your past. That is, if your past is contained only in your mind and in a beige cat. So Troubles was the time before. Troubles, a kind of air humidifier or vitamin pill or pacemaker or breathing aid stretching a life that had ended into the future. Like a patient ripping out the wires and tubes that strip them to their hospital bed, overcome by a sense of conviction, of strength, Sarah let go of Eric's hand.

– I'll wake the boy, she said; I'll bury Troubles.

§

FORKING THE VITELLO, SOMETHING had come over him. Chasing the Caravaggio's around, something had come over him. Or rather before that, something had come over him. The impulse to chase, or to follow, this desire to see the Pantheon, this sense that Matt saw things clearer, or that he needed to see things clearer in order for Matt to see him.

“Come over” like the weather, a great mess of a storm, he'd gone crazy, or he'd fallen in love, but he'd forgotten why. It had become something “over him”.

That was Matt.

Where was he? He was in Rome, he had disappeared, running around the

city seceding old paintings to a cosmology with Matt at its centre.

So here's what he should do: fork the vitello – this would be a challenge for such a prim boy – drag it around the plate, tear apart the veal, squish the capers.

Then (let's address him directly): push yourself over a threshold and realise that the conversion you are looking for is not one into unambiguous devotion, away from doubt, but one into trusting your own body, your own emotions – they are right there: you are scared of Matt.

He was scared of Matt. Fear had made him disappear. Smearing tuna sauce across the plate seemed like rattling the chains of that fear, slowly coming back into view. Pushing the fork down on the slice of meat so hard it turns to mush. Perhaps from the table next to him an old man with a newspaper would peer over. A couple across the room would pause to notice the delicate boy at the brink of being. The drama of transgression. A scream redirected into action, there was the sound of metal on china, poking through a logic that was not his, but which had him suffocating.

– OK, so he'd lost himself to love. Love has very little to do with other people. Perhaps as much as getting run over has to do with the exact car and the driver. Rome does not belong to anyone just as your past is not

yours to leave behind. It was as if someone from the past or the future had delivered this message to him, written in tuna sauce on thin slices of boiled veal. He got it. He fell off the horse. The day was new, and there was no more escaping that he needed to go home.

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THE BOY DIDN'T DRINK coffee, so she brought him tea. Chai tea with a lot of milk. He slept so heavily under the blankets, though sixteen, by not much of a stretch of the imagination, prepubescent; something small and untried about him. He was not, Sarah thought, like the burley boys of the town whose large bodies fed on corndogs and Hamburger Helper, their skin as if bruised from too violent a growth spurt. They were the same age as this boy in the bed, but they looked ten years older when they leaned on their pickup trucks at the gas station. You could smell their sweat and their unbridledness through the open windows of the cars in the summer, a smell that was overwhelming to Sarah in its strangeness, the totally other world of men. Pimples on backs, bulging arms and long satin shorts, sperm on sheets too rarely washed and mothers who let them be, perhaps out of a similar apprehension

towards a masculinity not yet tempered by time.

Sitting down on the bed, she fought an impulse to tear off the bedding like a child would the wrapping on a gift. Something for me! Something to be looked at and examined. A doll. A toy. What does it do? Picking up the boy by his ankle, the pyjamas falling down over his head, all in a gesture that asks: what does it mean, actually, for him to be mine?

– Hey, she said, instead. Good morning, did you sleep well?

The boy fell heavy in and out of consciousness, completely unarmed. She left the tea on the nightstand.

The garden bordered the woods and the deer are inevitably there with this look on their face, at dusk, as if they don't see you through the pale light. It was after nine, but the boy looked like that when he came outside on the frostbit veranda, and, at the end of the lawn, a pearl of sweat broke from Sarah forehead as she chopped at the ground with a shovel.

– I'm burying Troubles, she screamed as if at a train passing. Eric was there too, a brown bag of dead cat in his arms, but the boy didn't know that.

– Babe, he said.

Sarah stopped and thought, don't fucking tell me what to do, and then: isn't that a song? And she cracked a smile and said to Eric,

– I’ve lost it. Will you join me?

Then a godly intervention – godly insofar as it comes from some other time-space, omnipotent – Robyn’s Don’t Fucking Tell Me What To Do plays above the garden, like a film, how music comes from out of nowhere

My drinking is killing me

My drinking is killing me

My drinking is killing me

My drinking is killing me

My drinking is killing me

K-k-killing me

And deer and sparrow and skunk and the dogs, of course, gather on the veranda by the boy, his usual doe-eyed self, all of them just staring as Sarah and Eric jump and stomp and beat at the ground, the brown cat’s-in-the-bag bag tossed aside. Eric sings into a rake

TV is killing me

Your nagging’s killing me

Ease up, you're killing me

Let go, you're killing me

Calm down, you're killing me

My God, you're killing me

And Sarah – a light blue fleece matches her eyes, and she lifts the shovel with two hands above her – an electronic beat blasts through her head, through the garden, and the town, down the river, makes a crack in the dam, another tear on the concrete

Don't fucking tell me what to do (do)

Don't fucking tell me what to do (do, do, do, do)

Don't fucking tell me what to do

§

IL CONTO POR FAVORE, he said, blew a lock of hair out of his face, and wiped a tuna stain from his cheek.

BIOGRAPHIES

ORIGINALLY FROM TORONTO, **KELLY Dignan**'s work has been featured in publications such as Grain, Queen Street Quarterly, Decameron Annual, and The Globe & Mail. She currently lives in Berlin.

DAYNA GROSS IS A writer and performance artist living in Berlin, Germany. She hosts a poetry radio show called Cryptomnesia on Cashmere Radio and has been published in RHNK magazine, JFKI magazine, Another Chicago Magazine and Angel City Review.

MARIE HJØRNET NIELSEN, (B.1992), based in Aarhus and Berlin. Cand. mag. Comparative literature and graduated from The Writing Academy in Bergen, Norway, 2017.

ERIN HONEYCUTT WRITES POETRY, reviews, and a variety of texts in collaboration with artists. She has read text at Kadett (Amsterdam, 2019),

ÍÐNO Theater (Reykjavik, 2019), Reykjavik Arts Festival (2018), Beyond Human Impulses (Athens, 2018), and Pólar Festival (Stöðvarfjörður, 2017). She studied Art History (MA, University of Iceland) and Religion (MA, University of Amsterdam) and now lives in Berlin.

THERESA KAMPMEIER IS A writing artist living in Berlin.

DAVID LINDERT IS A Czech-born writer and artist living and working abroad, recently between Berlin and Los Angeles.

JONATHAN LYON IS A writer from London, now based in Berlin. His debut novel, *Carnivore*, came out in 2017 and was shortlisted for the Polari Prize. His writing is influenced by his experiences with chronic illness. He is working on a follow up novel and a film

NAT MARCUS IS A DJ and cofounder of TABLOID Press.

COLM O'SHEA CURRENTLY lives in Dublin where he work as a civil engineer. His short fiction has previously been published in *gorse*, *The Stinging Fly*, *3AM Magazine*, *Hotel*, *Fallow Media*, *The Bohemyth*, and *Visual Verse*. He was one of the inaugural winners of the Irish Writers' Centre Novel Fair competition in 2012. He recently won The Aleph Writing Prize 2019.

DAVID PRICE IS A British artist and writer (born Glasgow, 1982) living in Stockholm. He recently wrote a text for Alex Farrar's artist's book *Wimper*, and edited the monograph *Uses of Leisure*, on the work of Ben Cain (published by Wiels, Brussels, 2019). He recently showed work at Galerie Cora Hildebrand, Gothenburg, and Neverland Cinema, MAMA, Rotterdam.
davidpricework.org

BARRY SHIELS IS FROM Ireland. He has published essays and fiction in *gorse*, *Honest Ulsterman*, *Litro* and elsewhere. He has edited critical anthologies on shame and its relation to modern writing (Routledge 2018) and narcissism (Palgrave 2017), and written a critical study of W.B. Yeats's relation to non-European literatures. Currently he teaches English Literature in a university town in England. He splits his life between Donegal and London.

MIRIAM STONEY (B. 1994, Scunthorpe GB) is a writer and translator based in Vienna, Austria, working across different contexts, such as academic research, criticism, art writing, performance, sound installation, and radio. Often working collaboratively with visual and sound artists, her writing explores architectures of selfhood in the various ecologies we inhabit. Text and audio works by Miriam Stoney have been featured at ICA London, Somerset House London, Centre Pompidou x West Bund Museum Shanghai, KW Institute for Contemporary Art Berlin, as well as in artist catalogues and journals.

ISABEL TEITLER IS A New York-born, Berlin-based filmmaker, writer and artist. She's currently completing the post-production of her first feature film, *Dish*, revising her first novel, *My Movie*, and plotting a clever way to release them both as two halves of one art project.

KRISTIAN VISTRUP MADSEN (COPENHAGEN, 1991) is a writer and art critic based in Berlin. He is the author of several exhibition catalogues and artist's monographs, and has been published in magazines such as *Artforum*,

Frieze, Kunstkritikk, Spike, Mousse, ArtReview and Texte zur Kunst. Doing Time, a collection of essays on the US Prison Industrial Complex, the politics of solidarity and the ethics of appropriation in art, is forthcoming from Floating Opera Press in early 2021.