

# Five Dials

Summer  
21

Less is More

# Five Dials

# ABOUT FIVE DIALS

FIVE DIALS WAS  
ASSEMBLED BY  
Hannah Chukwu  
Simon Prosser  
Craig Taylor  
Hermione Thompson

ARTWORK BY  
Jon Key

DESIGN  
Andrew LeClair

DIGITAL CONTENT  
PRODUCER  
Zainab Juma

THANKS TO  
Rachael Allen

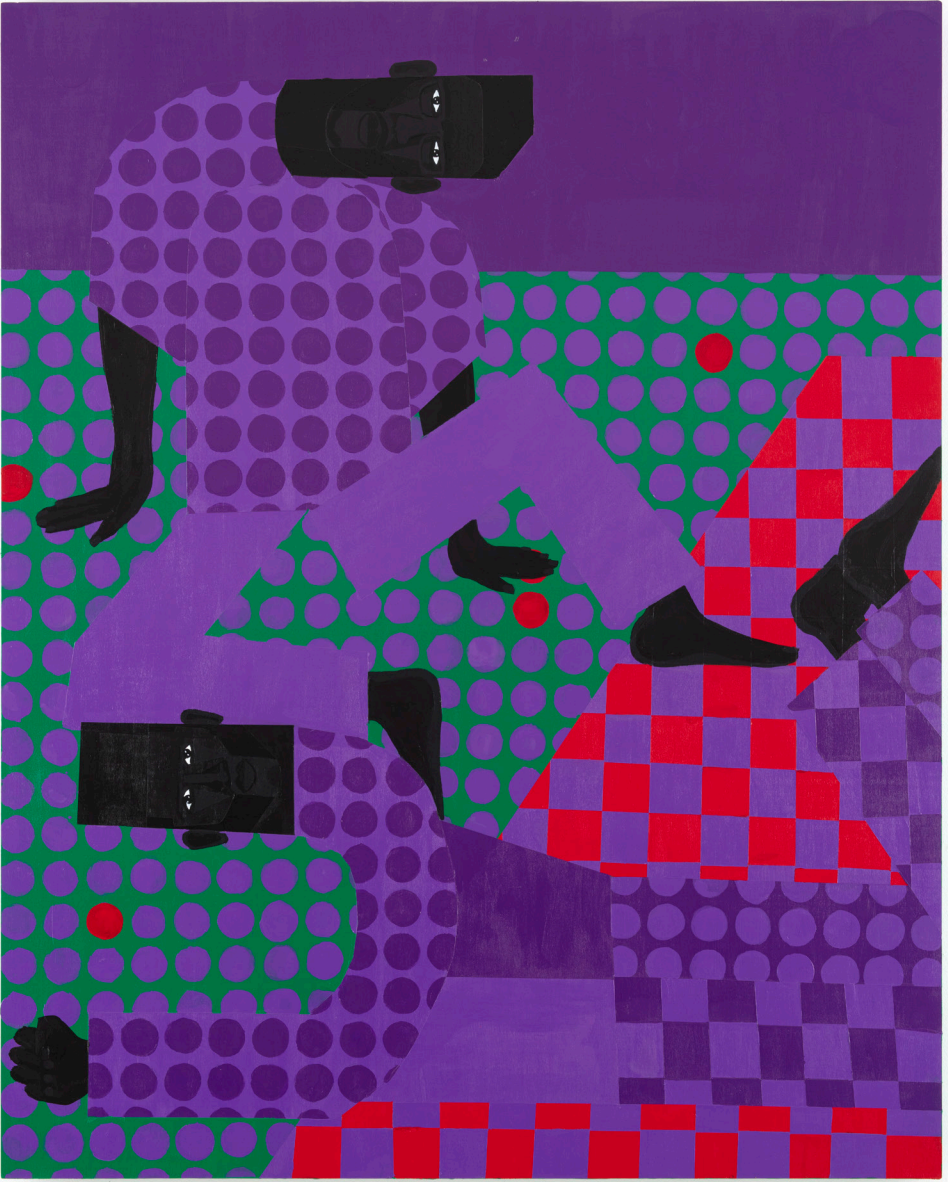
## COMMISSIONING RATES

### *Writers and illustrators*

*Five Dials* publishes electrifying literary writing of all forms and genres, by writers and thinkers underrepresented on bookshelves across the English-speaking world. Our commissioning rates are £200/1000 words for written pieces and £1000/issue for artwork. If you're working on something which you'd like to tell us about, you can find us on Twitter at @fivedials.

### *Copy-editors and proofreaders*

We are currently looking for copy-editors and proofreaders to work with us on a freelance basis. No past experience is necessary and we particularly welcome applications from people from backgrounds that are underrepresented in publishing. We work closely with freelancers to make *Five Dials* the best it can be by checking spelling, grammar, consistency, house style and more, so an exceptional eye for detail is essential. If you think you'd make a great copy-editor or proofreader, we'd love to hear from you on [ed2enquiries@penguinrandomhouse.co.uk](mailto:ed2enquiries@penguinrandomhouse.co.uk).



# CONTENTS

## THE EVERYTHING LIST

Charlotte Geater  
shares with us every-  
thing she's read, watched  
and heard—lately  
10 ›

## NEW POETRY FROM

Anthony  
Anaxagorou  
20 ›

K Patrick  
26 ›

Gboyega Odubanjo  
30 ›

Stephanie Sy-Quia  
36 ›

## Q&A

'Shorter is expected to  
be less substantial. It feels  
arbitrary—why would  
length be correlated  
with impact?'

A conversation with  
Natasha Brown  
42 ›

# CONTRIBUTORS

ANTHONY ANAXAGOROU is a British-born Cypriot poet, fiction writer, essayist, publisher and poetry educator. His poetry has been published in *POETRY*, *The Poetry Review*, *Poetry London*, *New Statesman*, *Granta*, and elsewhere. His work has also appeared on BBC Newsnight, BBC Radio 4, ITV, Vice UK, Channel 4 and Sky Arts. His second collection *After the Formalities* (published with Penned in the Margins) is a Poetry Book Society Recommendation and was shortlisted for the 2019 T.S Eliot Prize. It was also a *Telegraph* and *Guardian* poetry book of the year. In 2020 he published *How To Write It* with Merky Books: a practical guide fused with tips and memoir; looking at the politics of writing; the craft of poetry and fiction and the wider publishing industry. He was awarded the 2019 h100 Award for writing and publishing, and the 2015 Groucho Maverick Award for his poetry and fiction. In 2019 he was made an honorary fellow of the University of Roehampton. Anthony is artistic director of Out-Spoken, a monthly poetry and music night held at London's Southbank Centre, and publisher of Out-Spoken Press.

NATASHA BROWN has spent a decade working in financial services, after studying Maths at Cambridge University. She developed *Assembly* after receiving a 2019 London Writers Award in the literary fiction category.

CHARLOTTE GEATER lives in Walthamstow, and is a freelance writer and editor. Her poetry has been published in *The White Review*, *Clinic*, and *Strange Horizons*. She won the 2021 UEA New Forms Award for a novel in progress which is about cancer, local history, and obsessing about the deaths of Lord Byron and Ada Lovelace.

JON KEY is an art director, designer, and writer originally from Seale, Alabama. After receiving his BFA from RISD, Jon began his design career at Grey Advertising in NYC before moving on to work with such clients and institutions as HBO, Nickelodeon, The Public Theater, and the Whitney Museum. As an educator, Jon has taught at MICA, Parsons, and the Lebanese American University, and is the Frank Stanton Chair in Graphic Design at Cooper Union. Jon is also a Co-Founder and Design Director at Codify Art, a multidisciplinary collective dedicated to creating, producing, supporting, and showcasing work by artists of color, particularly women, queer, and trans artists of color.

GBOYEGA ODUBANJO was born and raised in east London. He is the author of two poetry pamphlets: *While I Yet Live* and *Aunty Uncle Poems*. Odubanjo is an editor of the poetry magazine *bath magg*.



## Five Dials

K PATRICK is a writer based in Glasgow. In 2020 they were runner up in the Ivan Juritz Prize and in 2021 they were shortlisted for The White Review Poetry Prize.

STEPHANIE SY-QUIA's debut long poem, *Amnion*, is forthcoming from Granta Poetry in November, 2021.

# The Everything List

Charlotte Geater

Five Dials *asked Charlotte Geater to send us an omnivorous list of everything, or almost everything, she's consumed in the previous month.*

I am chronically ill, and often I want to watch something but am too tired to focus on a feature film. On evenings like this, I will try to watch a couple of short films instead. A few shorts I watched and enjoyed very much in May were: *La Chambre* (dir. Chantal Akerman), *100 Boyfriends Mixtape (The Demo)* (dir. Brontez Purnell) and *Atlantiques* (dir. Mati Diop). But then sometimes my stamina outstrips the rest of my household, such as with *Wheel of Time* and *Into the Inferno*, two Werner Herzog documentaries during which my partner fell asleep (he chose both of them).

Speaking of focus, three books consumed mine totally, one after the other, on forging lives that are queer (and/or disabled) and determinedly non-normative: Shola von Reinhold's *Lote*, Larry Mitchell's *The Faggots and their Friends Between Revolutions*, W. N. P. Barbellion's *Journal of a Disappointed Man*. *Lote* in particular is an incredible work of imaginative fiction and aesthetic conjuring, unearthing and creating new spaces for Black queer decadence.

I have also been dipping into the work of various poets without reading them cover to cover. I return again and again to Agha Shahid Ali's

## THE EVERYTHING LIST

collection of ghazals, *Call Me Ishmael Tonight*, and the gorgeous romanticism of poems like ‘Even the Rain’, beautifully textured and vivid, as he plays with quotations from e e cummings and Frank O’Hara. Others I have encountered this month include Rainer Maria Rilke, Rebecca Perry, Lucy Ives, Mahmoud Darwish and Algernon Charles Swinburne.

I had cancer surgery back in February, and while I am probably mostly physically healed, thinking about cancer is still taking up a lot of my time. I have been reading in very short bursts, often only a page or two at a time, both *The Undying* by Anne Boyer and *Everything Changes: The Insider’s Guide to Cancer in Your 20s and 30s* by Kairol Rosenthal. The latter is from the US and is outdated even there (published in 2009, it has a lot of information about navigating the US health system before big Obama-era changes), but is very worth getting hold of if you need something to keep you company without coddling you or trying to empower you with a lot of exhausting talk about fighting, survivorship, etc. Despite the title, it’s not a workbook or a guidebook; it compiles some of the most honest interviews I have ever read, from people who are going through it, and have gone through it.

May has also yielded:

— Three feature films from the 1930s, a decade of sharp humour, class commentary and truly

bizarre musical numbers: *Easy Living*, *The Lady Vanishes*, *Murder at the Vanities*.

- Two feature films from the 2000s with a beautiful sense of place and time, changing: *Millennium Mambo* and *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*.
- One feature film that is deliciously glamorous, gothic and full of choices that are in gloriously bad taste (including, but not limited to, Keanu Reeves's acting): *Bram Stoker's Dracula*.
- Indie pop music that I have been using to try to convince myself that summer is on the way: Japanese Breakfast's recent singles, 'The Summer I Got Good At Guitar' by Fresh, 'Love Comes in Waves' by Andy Bell, and Pop Perfect's Spotify playlists, especially 'Indie Pop Dream Jangle Fun', which updates monthly with new music.
- And finally, *Umurangi Generation*: a video game where the objective is to take photographs in various different settings. It's a work of near-future Māori science fiction; inspired by cyberpunk but turning a decidedly critical eye over that genre; its world is shaped by political crisis, graffiti and alien jellyfish. ◇















Anthony Anaxagorou

15 x 22

I'm standing feet apart    believing the truth in my head  
attempting to reach my brother    David Dave Dee D  
    Enough of us overidentify as fundamental  
    the movement refuses a fad    Raise your privilege  
if you're having a great time!    Our faces  
are stuck between the barriers of a dream    *save our future selves—*  
*tomorrow's children!* I've been up rinsing my son's favourite fruit  
filling my jeep before for the big drive: I've turned notifications off  
I'm trying to limit what I become    wherever I go next  
I want to remember.    Years back. In L.A    Hamza fired a gun  
into the abdomen of paper    his arms a loaded tremble  
    We're the only species on earth with crooked teeth  
laughing in our brand-new English    Outside the abattoir air  
stayed perfumed By now we've broken everything that didn't need breaking  
    & I can't stop  
chewing on the city's vein    the same saline flags billowing in the countryside  
over the post-war council estates You wasted my dead's habits & it's only Tuesday  
I'm scrolling & moving & every time it's this—  
    honeyed blood carrying the coffin towards a pulse

# NEW POETRY

Endgame

at the close of capitalism catch me waving  
my big flag at the show

a haircut inspired by Barthes' coinage  
*gusts of life*

senior ladies leaning out of windows  
their imminent deaths a thing of the past

that's me in the corner suffering conclusions  
that's me itching to sing my killers to sleep

leaving them supine & horny in a retro spa

*All Together Now* as if we were smuggling winter  
into Dartmoor as if this were a collective effort to find

the oath I buried inside an organ

the magus knows my mother thought to smother  
the hour I was born in forgive me I'm reaching

beyond the pabulum for a straw man to leave my plasma  
on muscled colonies so saccharine I could die

*All Together Now* as if we were the history of a pale body  
tanning in unison

it's not life we want more of  
it's beauty

these days you can watch the world soften in high  
definition

watch a man fire into a crowd until the man  
becomes a government

my grandmother dug up the last of her savings  
then went on to fill her purse

# Anthony Anaxagorou

the cicadas are screaming to know  
why I'm not pushing them away

why their singular music moves me to the point of vapour  
the soloist dropped her golden plectrum down a drain

& the magus believes the future is undergoing

its final autopsy      perhaps that explains why  
the highest grossing movies always contain  
some kind of high-speed chase

& why most conversations between strangers  
begin with the mention of weather

which in itself is a kind of light.

# NEW POETRY

## My Weapons Are Working People

Heat from my father's chest North  
London parkland sweating like ice  
chocs a cranium of thick black hair  
inflicting memories smoking slats of  
anxiety tonight we're here to weigh up  
streets demanding justice as if each of  
my weapons are working people each  
politician repatriating trauma It All  
Becomes Political went my father's  
rejoinder what I would add if I could  
hold him the way I do these words on  
a wooden stake but I never could say  
what I felt man to man to woman  
falling under our estranged selves  
genders impaired our love dragging  
what it was like to the headlines I read  
another white telling us to go back to  
where we once were alive before the  
butcher's apron a stint of bad science  
+ tabloids erect with military men  
lofts loaded with records your sweet  
granddaddy probably hated us golden  
oldies Union Jacks relics of a dirty  
haunting how does a Luton fascist  
relax on Christmas day follow that  
logic through to banter when Tom  
from school joked I should suck my  
dad's brown cock at home when I told  
him he punched a hole through the  
watercolours of his steak I ran quick  
through Cable Street past Churchill's  
stone overseeing six rough sleepers  
under the lights who each knew why  
nobody ever stopped to ask them  
what happened my brothers today  
we're all placards facemasks no amity  
knuckles like hockey pucks feral



# Anthony Anaxagorou

crows stuffed into rucksacks there's  
zero reward for whoever learns to fly  
without their true name I'm still  
looking for a place to park my sundry  
blood my son in my father's lap the  
skin around his neck limper than an  
outline of Saint Bakhita I'm behind  
the museum tonight on the road  
philosophy loses steam proximate to  
my feet is the call for sand & isn't the  
future made up this way of people like  
us becoming the history of the way we  
tried to breathe

K Patrick

### Hypochondria of the heart

A teaspoon is the precise size of childhood. An egg cup, almost. Lid lifted off an egg. The happy inevitability of an egg yolk. Breakfast happens before the body. Light full of small animals—dust, birds, flies. My tongue is still dreaming. I make coffee in my favourite mug. Later on I might feel embarrassed. But now, for now, I am famous with possibility. Only in the morning is there enough room to efficiently exit this form. I am dust, bird, fly. I look great in this light. Butter makes the knife saintly. Sleeve slips, mouth slips. My handsome dog wears her stilettos across the wooden floor. Light gets bigger, bringing in the table edge, the old wine glass, the elbow. An audience might applaud my scene. Knife licked clean, teaspoon sucked clean. The mirrors I make are the only mirrors I like. A piece of eye or nose in the blade, the curve. When I am alive it is extraordinary

# NEW POETRY

## Procession

A sculpture has just emerged from bed.  
Gone, sleepily, to the middle of the gallery  
floor. Queer recognition is difficult  
to explain, except: each knuckle has a  
slight ache. What else? I avoid the eye of  
the security guard. Down the back is a  
peculiar flight, something as shameful as  
disappeared wings. Intercostal muscles,  
paused in bronze, answer a specific desire.  
I want enough time to run down my  
fingertip, enough time to enjoy the same  
lick as light across the ribs. My footsteps  
form a loud circle. A procession, I process.  
In the gallery sound has a certain precocity.  
I catch the security guard's belt buckle  
instead. The sculpture's ears, their size, have  
heartbreak. Maybe chiseled out of spite?  
A glance rejected in a different room.  
Another hurt detail of the otherwise  
impossible. Nose, nipples, bellybutton.  
Can't keep a hurt detail down. We're  
talking hip to hip. The security guard's  
tie is loosened, tightened. Naturalism is a  
horrible word. Even gesture gets a second  
chance, in the eyelids especially. In the  
brow too, an exhaustion barely concealed.  
This one isn't heartbreak but the long  
attempt to be only casual. I came here to  
have a nice time, it's working



Gboyega Odubanjo

### The Cow and the River

we wouldn't actually lay our hands on the cow.  
it was symbolic but i wasn't going to do it anyway.  
i was never sure if cows could carry our sins  
and even if they could i couldn't know how a cow  
carrying all that sin would be received in whatever  
world it ended up in. i saw my friend and we spoke  
but i couldn't hear what they were saying because  
of the singing as we all followed the cow to the river.  
we've always been close. always liked asking  
each other questions that were hard to answer. like  
what would you choose as your last meal. or how come  
a scapegoat isn't actually a goat but a cow  
or sometimes a person. i wasn't near enough to the river  
to hear the cow itself but i could tell when it happened  
because of the noise from everyone else.

# NEW POETRY

## Genesis

hello hello to i'm only taking what was mine already  
bossman. i'm gonna look right at the camera when i take  
what was mine to have and sell if i need to. hello hello  
to he gave me a key to the city i've just gone and made  
copies given one to my bredrin his bredrin. in the beginning  
he said man in my likeness in my image man like me. like me  
you know. he said in the name of my man and my man  
let man dry hump on the riverbed if he's got nowhere else  
to go and the mood is agreeable. don't worry we'll change  
the sheets when we're done we'll air out the firmament.  
he said give man sea and sky so if every cloud has a silver  
chain around its neck we'll be having that too. he said let man  
fix the sun to his incisors if it shines right. hello hello  
to rah. all of this for man. hello to show me.



# Gboyega Odubanjo

The Drums Speak of the Boy  
the place the child was found  
  is where the gods stay  
                        we don't fish or gather there  
we are all very shocked  
                        boys they are stubborn  
                        it is not clear how the child  
  got past the authorities  
                        a deer that is bound to die  
will mistake a warning for a chorus  
                                the boy was smart  
and that is why it took us  
  so long to find him  
                        a water insect that dances  
on the surface surely has its  
                        musicians located on the river bed  
there will be nothing that can  
                                tell a large group of people  
                                what do with their necks in this song

# NEW POETRY

## The Boy and the River

there once was a boy in the city who was both a boy and a river. rather because of the nature of the river all it took was for the boy to drop into

it and this one drop would mean the river was now a boy. the river had of course known many people some of them surely boys but it had learned

not to get too attached. so when one day the river found itself by the boy neither expected much. the boy shocked to see what could so easily

be himself in the river bent to greet it. the river who had forgotten what it was like to be looked at stepped towards the boy and it was good.

the boy the river. their body passing through the city under bridges. jumping over barriers.



Stephanie Sy-Quia

## Epithalamion

*(a song to cover the cries of a bride; the commemoration of a definitive marriage; to be at the threshold)*

I know how to cook rice, now.  
I have eaten cakes whose names sound like hope  
and seen strings of pearls like disappointment  
hung in  
the market that smelled of grease.

I AM WRITING NOW from the inky heart of empire, its assonance no  
more unknown to me.  
I shall knock the pillars out from under you  
and label you up

in room upon room of Wedgwood blue.

All the uses of my body and what others would have me put it to. Blood  
is so contrived.  
Texts are porous.  
I am walking

from one  
to the other.

Like this I am primeval as a woman in a sundress.  
I have become one of the gritty women, with freckles peppering the  
loose skin of their arms.  
I am walking through a many-furrowed field which in relinquished  
seasons is feathered with asparagus.  
In this late light of an early century, the ash shades of earth and stubble,  
I plight (give, pledge) you my troth (fealty, loyalty, truth).

A marriage should not be a forsaking of all others. It is instead a many-  
witnessed act enabled by all others. I stand before you today (I imagine  
myself say) with the emotional health to choose this person because of all  
of you. I can face the enormity of this decision because of you. I know  
what love is because of you: its bluntness, its grittiness.

Let us enter into oaths knowingly. So I ask you now in the presence of  
this company.

In defiance of state.

## NEW POETRY

It is the vowing which interests me.  
I call upon these persons here present.  
The cause for which marriage was ordained (this is not included in the  
civil script, having been cut in twain at the time of the burnings)  
to love and to cherish  
from this day forward  
incumbent on me  
all that I am I give to you.

(but were they their all, at the time of their giving? And how did they  
know?) (I am suspicious of this knowledge which apparently simply  
descends.)

Then they shall give their troth to each other

(the deep bone know)

from this day forward  
put asunder  
against all manner of foes.

There are long conversations: in bars, in kitchens, in the illegal extensions  
of council house flats. We get drunk too much. We know nothing about  
wine. We spend our money on shoes. We press our palms together to  
dance in the amber-coloured oak-panelled dark. We bowled forth to a  
city that didn't really want us.

When my mother vowed in the face of those persons then present  
to commit to my father to the exclusion of all others,  
that cold day in October with the Assyrian lions  
and the red buses streaking by,  
the imminent grapes,  
my mother was protecting my father  
from the violence which could come for him  
in the night or the day, at work or at rest,  
and take him back to the islands where little love waited for him.  
My mother was twenty-one, bullish and  
knew nothing.  
It was her boldest act in the time of walls falling.

All over the world.  
My father resents this narrative.  
He says it was love.  
Which it was.  
But we must not forget

# Stephanie Sy-Quia

the bodies that eyed this union for a full year after. My parents are brave  
and the choices I make will be made  
in the vault of this precedent.

They made us a world where private, witnessed love could win over  
nations and all the stories they told.  
They made me richer, for all these confusions.  
My parents made a promise in the face of the state. They stared it down.  
When asked all the monumental questions they replied: I do.

Between them and those present.

But my parents also did something which was within the most primal  
framework of the state.  
I propose something different.  
A love so unsanctioned, no promises exist for it.

Hitherto, society has been underpinned by the institution of marriage.  
The covenant. The sacrament. It has been used for the warehousing, at its  
most recent and benign, of intelligent women.  
I call for a reordering of its ceremonies. I call upon those here present  
today. I solemnly swear. I pledge to relinquish the matrimonial retreat  
which has ordered us unto this brink.  
As we hurtle towards the coughing future, I promise to hold tight to you.  
I promise to hold you up and hold you close and hold you down  
when you feel you may go spinning off the earth.  
All that I am I share with you.  
I promise my presence in good times and bad. In suchness, and even in  
the eventuality of wealth.  
I wish you good fortune in the time that we will travel through together,  
and the changes  
that we will forgive in ourselves and in others.  
I promise to stand by your side as we move through changing worlds.  
I promise to respect you, and query you when I am in doubt.

I made my friend smile. One of his best smiles, the ones that knock the  
knees out from under the sun.  
I had made him a birthday banner.  
He saw it coming up the garden path.

I was in the dining room.  
He smiled up at me.  
It tackled me sideways, this smile burning into my memory,  
tackling all my pre-empted by surprise.  
My beautiful beaming friend.  
I made him smile.

## NEW POETRY

It was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen.  
It tackled me sideways.  
Him smiling on the garden path, turning twenty-three.  
That flush of love.  
My friends whom I adore.  
It stuns me how it runs so deep.  
I am amazed. How? Where the warning?  
This friendship form to take.  
It sloshes in the cup.  
I swore no solemn oaths.  
And yet in these times when I brim and spill with grief  
at the time's consequence,  
I find myself at the foot of this most sacred undertaking:  
to love and defend in the present tense; with no deferral or commingling;  
to be my lone line self and look the monumental questions in the eye;  
to defend you all until my lungs give out.

You have made me gentle,  
you have made me brave.  
In these the weeks of our need,  
we have come to one another  
on the tides of work and day.  
We are charging at the best before of our rage, a most minimum thing  
this age commands.

I will defend you all until my lungs give out. I will love you all my life.

All these things being said, it is not always necessary to operate only at the  
register of vow;  
you may suffice yourself with subtext  
and all its crowds.

And the bitten truth is this:  
when I am with you, teleology drops away, and the days need have no  
given meaning. For, in the quiet of your company,  
I am of consolate closeness  
and bristle of it along every pore.  
And standing by your sides,  
I feel steadied and prepared  
to face the yawn of years.





‘Shorter is expected to be less substantial. It feels arbitrary—why would length be correlated with impact?’

A conversation  
with Natasha  
Brown

Natasha Brown's *Assembly* is a concise, fragmentary novel that runs to 100 pages. Within these tight constraints she finds room to examine the lingering colonial structures that prop up British society, as well as the legacy of slavery, and the pinpricks of everyday misogyny and microaggression. The novel outlines the lengths one Black British woman will go to challenge these constraints and reject what is expected from her, even after she has achieved what looks to be enviable status in the world of finance. When Brown's narrator is asked by her employers to speak to young students at school assemblies, she is held up as an example of diversity and achievement. But does this path to assimilation come with its own cost?

*Assembly* is set at an estate in the English countryside where the narrator has been asked to attend a party thrown by her boyfriend's parents. As she prepares for the event, she considers the path that brought her into the heart of inherited wealth and old money. What happens if one lets go and refuses to ascend? What happens if one's body no longer cooperates, no longer functions in such a society?

*Five Dials* spoke to Natasha at her home over Zoom.

## Q&A

FD

What did you read as a child?

NB

My childhood reading was largely dictated by the books my family had. Especially my grandparents' collection. I used to spend the summer holidays at their house and often explored their bookshelves.

FD

What sorts of books were on the shelves?

NB

My grandmother was a nurse, so they had quite a few medical books. A lot of other non-fiction, too—there was one called *Black British*. It's from the sixties and featured contemporary data and commentary on what's now referred to as 'the Windrush generation.' They also had a lot of classics, which I enjoyed reading. Plus some children's encyclopaedias.

FD

When you weren't leafing through Windrush statistics.

NB

I wasn't reading that one as a kid.

FD

Were you still reading a lot when you went on to study maths at university?

NB

For a while, I stuck to a single set of books. It was familiar. *Self-Help* by Lorrie Moore, Raymond Carver's *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, Hanif Kureishi's, *Intimacy. Drinking Coffee Elsewhere. The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. It was a small collection, but it shaped my tastes.

FD

You don't get seduced into reading about the lives of writers, the biographies?

NB

It didn't really occur to me to do that. For me, books were self-contained.

FD

Did you encounter books early on that shocked you? Books that created some sort of feeling that you hoped to emulate with your own writing?

NB

I've read a few things that I found unsettling. Bret Easton Ellis's *Less than Zero*, probably more so than *American Psycho*.

## Q&A

I didn't aim to shock when writing *Assembly*. The narrative elements aren't especially shocking. It's a story we've seen before, I think. Perhaps it's the narrator's agency that unsettling, it's a slight subversion of the genre's conventions. I suppose I did want to draw attention to that.

FD

Were there any books that held shocking or resonant imagery for you?

NB

Maybe not a book, but the film *Death Becomes Her*. I caught a glimpse of that when I was younger—a point where one of the characters had a hole in her abdomen. The image stayed with me. My parents eventually let me watch the entire film, so I could understand the context.

FD

I'm always interested in what lingers as someone progresses through their creative life. I didn't expect to hear *Death Becomes Her*.

NB

That was definitely one.

FD

Your novel is around 100 pages long. What is special about short books? Were there short books earlier in your reading life that made an impression?

NB

I've always enjoyed shorter books as much as longer ones. It surprises me that sometimes shorter is expected to be less substantial. It feels arbitrary—why would length be correlated with impact?

FD

Is there a longer version of *Assembly* somewhere?

NB

Not at all, I didn't edit it down from a longer version. I tried to follow the screenwriting advice that every scene should be essential to the story. And each scene should achieve multiple storytelling or thematic goals. It necessitated a carefully planned approach, with lots of rewriting, but that was my goal when writing.

## Q&A

FD

I picture you sitting with paragraphs and patiently working over sentences rather than producing a profusion of language that has to be sheared back at some point.

NB

Exactly. I like to focus in on each sentence, editing excessively as I write. My daily writing target is a hundred words, which sounds small, but it can take quite a bit of time to get there.

FD

There's so much implied in the novel, so much left for us to uncover. How did you ensure that?

NB

There's an emergent sub-genre I've noticed in fiction, the 'black millennial woman.' It seems that the genre and the identity are perhaps becoming conflated. I wanted to interrogate this relationship, but it was also something I could lean on.

While I wouldn't call the novel satire, I borrowed from the techniques of satire. Assuming the reader is already familiar with this identity/genre and its conventions, only a light touch is required to establish the story. Writing this way, I hoped, would allow space for readers to bring their own interpretation.



FD

Has Lydia Davis been an influence?

NB

One of the things I love about Lydia Davis's writing is that language itself feels like a character. Her story 'French Lesson 1: Le Meutre' is a perfect example. It introduces a few French nouns, and by the end the subtleties of those words are apparent and contribute to the narrative.

FD

You've mentioned before your admiration of the poet Claudia Rankine. What did you learn from her? Did you want to emulate her ability to weave politics into the work?

NB

There's a precision in Claudia Rankine's writing, especially with the use of the second person. When I read *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* it changed my understanding of what writing could achieve.

FD

At one point in *Assembly* Britain's colonial history is addressed directly.

NB

Yes, but I was interested in the process of

## Q&A

politicisation: how, even in the information age, recent history is rendered uncertain. That was the focus, rather than an attempt to debate any specific facts.

FD

How much did you need to know about the beliefs of your protagonist before writing?

NB

Not much at all. I focused on all the other characters first. I wanted the narrator to be a person who fills the space that's left behind by all these other people. That's her defining characteristic. We don't learn much about her or her beliefs. Instead, we hear what other people think of her, and what they assume she thinks. I wanted to create an experience of being denied agency, of being wholly defined by the assumptions of others.

FD

Do you draw from real life? Do you sometimes see something resonant or mysterious and file it away?

NB

*Assembly* required a lot of research. When a translator asked me for specifics about one character's house, I was able to send over the listing I'd used as inspiration.

FD

With all the external research, what are you taking from your own life?

NB

The book has been interpreted as very personal and very biographical, which I guess is a compliment.

FD

A weird compliment.

NB

It seems to me that within publishing there's a belief that women like the narrator don't exist—or if that if they do, they're anomalous. I think it comes back to the phenomenon of a genre being conflated with a real-life identity. Because of course, a handful of books can't possibly span the breadth of a diverse demographic. But the requirement for comparative titles essentially causes confirmation bias. If we haven't seen a character before, how can their story be 'comped'? I guess the idea that the narrator *is* me offered one route around that.

FD

Is there a satisfying element of writing about small moments, small but telling moments like microaggressions?

NB

Not really. I didn't find a lot of those satisfying or even interesting to portray. I think it comes back to the genre: we expect to see this character slighted, so that's what we get to see. For me, a key idea in the book is the impossibility of transcending such conventions—in fiction, or in life.

FD

How important has bell hooks been to you?

NB

The essay 'Postmodern Blackness' was a key influence for my approach when writing *Assembly*. hooks makes the case that 'racism is perpetuated when blackness is associated solely with concrete gut level experience conceived either as opposing or having no connection to abstract thinking and the production of critical theory.'

Even though it was written about twenty years ago, much of that essay feels so relevant to now. I found it especially encouraging while approaching some of the more 'experimental' aspects of *Assembly*.

FD

When did you come across the essay?

NB

I've made an effort over the past few years to broaden out my non-fiction reading—more postcolonial theory, along with more critical theory in general. I encountered that essay in the book *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory*, which was a great jumping off point.

FD

Why was this omnivorous reading so important to this particular project?

NB

So much scholarship has been done in the decades past that is relevant to today. Familiarity with what has come before is crucial, I think.

FD

What do you hope people will take away from the book?

NB

I prefer to leave it open—death of the author, and all that. ◇



# Five Dials