



# Five Dials

Summer  
22

Debuts

# Five Dials

# ABOUT FIVE DIALS

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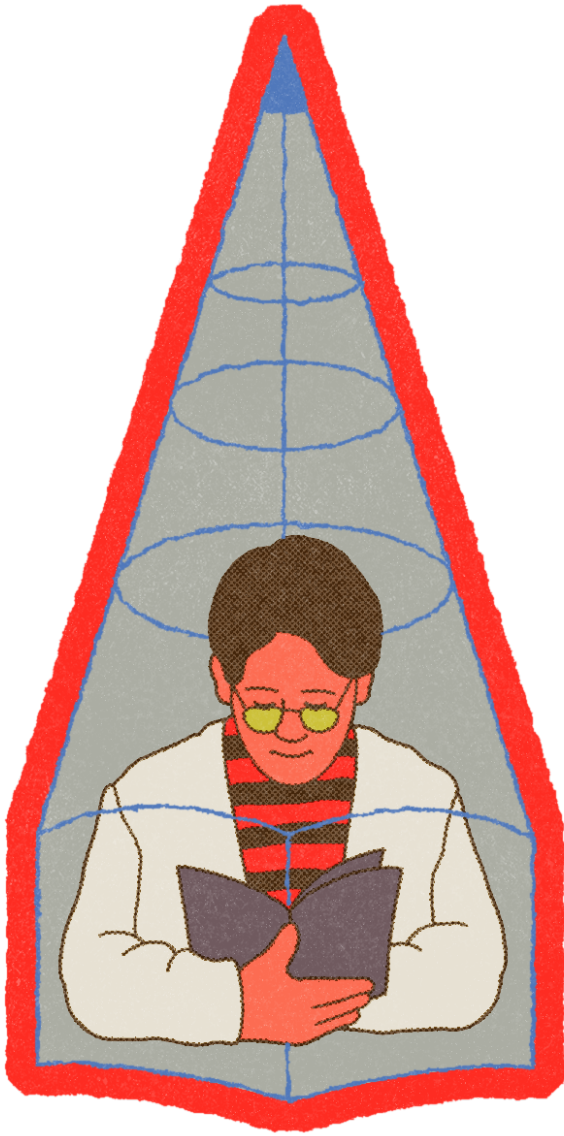
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## COMMISSIONING RATES

*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 prose, £75/poem, 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.



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## Five Dials

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FICTION

You Will Be  
Strange,  
But You Won't  
Be Strange Alone

Eloghosa Osunde

Ivie didn't know where to find a friend with a head like hers. She was convinced that throughout the world, there wasn't a single one. She tried to make friends often, just to pick their brains. But every time they opened their mouths, she could already see how their minds were furnished. Like good-people houses—tidy, simple/sane/single-coloured thoughts for walls, predictably shaped aspirations for futons and flat-topped desires for tables. None of their minds looked like hers: a sideways house with peeling walls, machines running unsupervised, trains veering off their tracks, tripling echoes and stamped palmprints everywhere.

Ivie's classmates reported her all the time for doing one strange thing or the other. 'Look at her, she flips her eyelids back and looks at us from below those pink flaps.'

'Look, she's drawing scary faces on the cover of her notebook!'

'Look, she finished the homework in less than five minutes!'

*She's not normal, they stressed. She frightens us.*

But the teachers had nothing to hold on to, because Ivie always back-to-normalled before they could turn around. Ivie's mother was not the kind to let teachers discipline her child on her behalf, and she made that clear. Try it and she'd be there in a matter of seconds, torching the building to the ground.

Ivie started a new thing of drawing doors on flat surfaces. She drew them on her notebook

## FICTION

covers, on her tabletop, on lockers, on bathroom doors where other kids signed their names: (‘\_\_\_ wuz ’ere xxxx’). On this day, she decided to draw a big door on the maths classroom wall during break time. A small crowd of classmates gathered behind her, stunned by her audacity. ‘Teacher will kill you today,’ one said. He loved to announce bad things; he was their bringer of doom. But Ivie continued shading the doorknob, not minding their warnings.

When she was done, she turned to them and said, ‘This door can open. But you have to believe it’s possible.’

‘It’s a lie!’ the students said in chorus, some of them chattering other comments to multiply the doubt. They booed her, slapping their flat fingers against their mouths.

Ivie shrugged. They watched her as she turned the doorknob, opened the door and disappeared through the wall. The door stayed ajar for a few seconds, which Promise, the boy who was never content with just seeing, saw as the perfect window out. He flew at it, lunging himself at the inviting opening with big pride in his heart. The classmates watched on. They just wanted to see what could happen. Promise didn’t mind being strange as long as he could be special. He wanted people to look at him, even if the reason for it was his freakishness. Besides, he’d always loved magic.

In a way, the blood that gushed out of his head when the door slammed in his face can be counted as magic. It was redder than blood had any business

being. The class screamed. They *saw* it. They saw Ivie enter, and they saw the door slam in Promise's face when he was almost there, but they couldn't tell their teacher that. They just pointed at Ivie, who was out and unscathed now, crying uncontrollably. She didn't mean to hurt anyone. If he'd told her he was coming, she'd have made it safe.

'It was her! It was her!' they shouted when the teacher came in. Other students began crying too. Ivie stood still in her little body, her eyebrows furrowed in believable confusion as the sound out of her mouth died to a sob. The teacher looked at the blood and at Ivie and at the rest of the class, then yelled, 'You! Principal's office! Now!' There was no need for questions. There was a split-open forehead to deal with.

So, 'We're calling your parents,' the principal said. Throughout the ride home, Ivie rested her head against the cold window, listening to one of the toys on the floor of her mind sing to her. It was everything she needed. This particular toy was a train that only came when there was serious trouble. On rough, rough nights when she needed comfort, she always called for it. Now, she could hear the song, but she knew the trouble coming was louder than the music; she could feel it.

At home, her mother—who was already always-tired—yelled her angry vein on to her forehead. Her eyes were a terrible red. That vein always meant stress, which for Ivie meant trouble. 'Every time you, you, you! Are there not other

## FICTION

children in that school? Why always you? For God's sake!' Ivie was backing away from her mother's anger but the woman kept taking giant strides to meet her. Her mother seized her by both shoulders and carried her up the stairs towards the guest room. 'You won't be going to school for a week, because they don't want you there. Look at this letter and think about your life!' She left it to perch on the floor. 'This is where you'll be until the week is over. You'll eat here, sleep here, everything here. Sick of you!'

Her mother slammed the door and locked it. Ivie had never slept in this room before. It was for all the things her family didn't want any more but didn't quite have the heart to throw away. It smelled like oldness and dust. The room was tired of being abandoned, and it told Ivie this, so Ivie chose then to begin crying. Any sooner would have been too early. Would have made her mother yell, 'You're not a child any more! You're almost ten! Soon, you'll be going to secondary school, you have to stop all this nonsense.' In truth, she was still three years away from ten, but Ivie knew that time moved differently for her. She could be in the bathtub on a Monday morning after a long weekend playing in the garden and the next moment it would be Friday lunchtime and she'd be looking down at her right hand, spooning beans and dodo into her mouth. Who knew, she could open her eyes tomorrow and be in front of ten birthday candles, surrounded by family, expecting her to make a wish. Time tricked her like that all the time. It never worked for her like



it worked for other people.

Ivie lay down on the guest bed and let the tears slide into the pillow. She couldn't imagine the last time it'd been washed. Not even the cleaner entered this room. She turned on to her stomach—a way of reminding herself that she existed already, she didn't need to be made. Already, she could feel herself starting to float, but she didn't want it, couldn't afford it. To be sorry, you had to *feel* remorse, and to feel remorse, you had to stay in your body, you had to keep your mind plugged in. Without remorse, she would keep being herself, which was the worst thing she could do, as shown by that vein. *Why why why why why why am I like this?* She noticed the feelings sliding through her body: sadness. rage. grief. shame. sadness. sadness. Who made me like this?

In this restlessness, Ivie tossed in bed, registering where her body made contact with the pillow and the sheets. The next time she opened her eyes, she'd just been spat out by a dream where she was coming too close to a girl who refused to turn around. The girl smelled like her. Ivie looked hard at the girl, trying to call her with her mind. When she slid her hands under the pillow, she felt a book. Thank God, something to do when all this crying is done, when her stomach starts churning and she can't walk to the kitchen to fix herself something, because not-allowed.

She looked at the cover. It was the girl from the dream. Her heart shivered. The book was by someone called Helen Oyeyemi and the title was

## FICTION

*The Icarus Girl*. Ivie didn't know what Icarus meant but she liked that the girl on the book was moving away from everyone looking at her. She turned the first page and tumbled inside. By the end of the first chapter, her stomach had risen from shock. Who was this Jessamy girl? And what was this door opening? And what could a door mean, if she didn't have to be the one to draw it, to unlock it? For the first time, Ivie felt herself solidifying. Growing true-life weight. Inside and outside the book. Inside and outside her head. For the first time, she was a real girl with a real head. She herself—materializing on a page. ◇



# TWO POEMS

Jay Gao

## Beeswax

Not far from the ruins, by the latrines, fumbling  
for a foreign coin, you came to a stop, to that  
ineffable mark of slowness, stasis, earbuds pressed  
in like two bullets or errant commas. Did you  
realize then the desire to negate prefixes we used  
to celebrate, memorialize? Old lore: the wet cut  
grass near the graves, once primeval, once curated  
green with dread, now smelled vacant of rosier  
glass ghosts. Archives must be rewritten from time  
to time, yet every word which captured joy felt  
tainted here, and all our private language risked  
evasion, speech transmuting into inky steam, so  
that even the loveliest discourse became as deep  
as vintage static, like an affidavit for pre-recorded  
magic, for two monsters below two hostile suns.

# TWO POEMS

## Nostalgia

Although advised that ghost stories were an acceptable topic of conversation, I was still surprised to discover small talk sucks up all the time in the afterlife. After my death, my first true appraisal is to be forced to host a nation-warming party. I have to invite all those bullying argonauts from my childhood who now arrive, matured, with the full gamut of their remorse. First, I ushered them into the living room, then left to fetch a platter of finger foods, the egg from the last ever bird on the planet I, a few hours earlier, hastily pureed into a delicious mayonnaise without guilt. Upon my return I found those lads at rest, collected fondly together, like a pile of pink petals trembling from an old gifted lotus root left to me with zero instructions of care. What am I to do with you, I asked myself, staring down at the shed skin of my ripe guests. I pushed their legion presents to one side, every bottle of wine sloshed as if it contained a set of gears, a trapped clock waiting to be let out, to turn into a ship. Later, when the lads are partying on the roof, when I am tasked to clean up their inevitable carnage, their broken bottle-necks, their crisp packets, their loosened morale, I forget the most vital host rule—that the living are obliged to prepare a banquet for the past; even after all my mortal practice, time preparing for the life that comes after, I was never taught how to invite the dead back on to the table, how to break bread with ghosts. No guidebook instructions for signalling a civil time for my strangers to exit tonight.



‘The book is inflected by a general sense of apprehension that we all have at present—an awareness of the possibility of world-ending events.’

Missouri Williams  
on *The Doloriad*



*The first thing you'll need to know about Missouri Williams' *The Doloriad* is that an environmental disaster has destroyed the earth and most of humanity, leaving behind a family led by a figure known only as the Matriarch. As her many descendants struggle to survive outside an unnamed city, they're forced to scavenge and sift through the ruins of the old world. Recreation comes in the form of watching old episodes of a television show called *Get Aquinas In Here*, in which Thomas Aquinas is called on to solve all sorts of dilemmas. *The Doloriad* is strange, dark and unapologetic—a dispatch from a ruined future in which the trials of one extraordinary legless child named Dolores threaten to bring about the destruction of the Matriarch's order. It's a formally daring novel. The sentences stretch on and on, and then on and on again. The imagery is shocking, the language epic. In her memorable debut, Williams risks it all.*

*Five Dials spoke to Missouri Williams at her home in Prague.*

## FIVE DIALS

One thing I loved about the book was its sentence structure. The sentences are long; they unfurl. Were you following instinct? Or was this a conscious choice?

## MISSOURI WILLIAMS

It wasn't conscious at all. Around the time I was writing I was diagnosed with epilepsy, which affected my language skills and memory.

## Q&A

I can see that in *The Doloriad*, because the structure of the sentences is so weird and so circling. They begin with one thing, beget another, and then circle back again. With a lot of the sentences, it's like they're forgetting how they started and trying to reassure themselves by going back and back and back endlessly. That's definitely how I was feeling a lot of the time. But then on another level, I feel like the style arose out of the necessity of explaining those characters and their lives. It was surprising to me, because I'd written other things before, but when I wrote *The Doloriad* I felt like I found my style, even if I wasn't sure where it had come from.

FD

What about the speed of writing? In order to write these unfurling sentences, were you working at speed?

MW

I write first drafts quite quickly, I think. Because the sentences all have their own rhythm, it's like they propel me to keep on adding. A lot of the sections of *The Doloriad* were written in one go, like the episode with the epileptic brother and the cheerleader, for example. I wrote that without stopping for any breaks. It felt like such a cohesive thing. I spend a lot of

time editing, however. Speed produces something, but that something is far from perfect.

FD

Can you give me a sense of your relationship with Prague? Obviously the city influenced the book. How does it influence your writing life?

MW

The city definitely plays a major role in how I think about space and even time. A lot of *The Doloriad* is borne out of the experience of being a stranger in this city, and someone who didn't initially speak the language. A major theme in the book is the idea of being at home somewhere, of being welcomed. Ultimately the Matriarch's experience of the city is one of failure: she never integrated, and she never learned the language. That's why she hates the place so much. Her brother's experience is different. And then Prague is also a very empty city—it doesn't feel densely populated. In the summer, everybody goes away to the countryside, and so the whole city becomes this massive graveyard. If you're not lucky enough to leave, then you're stuck in this deserted, sweltering city.

‘A lot of *The Doloriad* is borne out of the experience of being a stranger in this city, and someone who didn’t initially speak the language.’

FD

We have to talk about the fictional TV show featured in the book. It's called *Get Aquinas in Here*. Where did the idea for the show come from? It's very important in the world of the novel.

MW

It's so stupid, really. I had a teacher of religious studies back when I was at school and he would tell us about various theological problems and would always say: Well, eventually Aquinas comes and sorts this out. It was his answer for everything. At the time I was still a teenager and it made a deep impression on me. So the idea comes from that, but I have no idea when or why I decided it had to be a television series. But it definitely has something to do with my style—I've always been interested in combining high and low forms of culture. So if Aquinas were to appear in the debased world of the novel, it had to be in quite a bastardized form. And that's the show. And it's even worse because it's a really trashy one.

FD

This is a novel that is rich with imagery. Did the imagery arise from your love of language? Or is there usually a visual that guides you?

## Q&A

MW

I think I work with very decided images. There's the first image of Dolores and the wheelbarrow almost toppling over because she makes this gesture to acknowledge her uncle as he approaches her. This very small movement sets everything awry. For me, that first image contained the whole novel. You have these characters who are trying to realize their desires, but they're constantly let down by something in their nature which sabotages them. So the images that accompany them have to convey that, they have to be absolute. A lot of the imagery in *The Doloriad* is very influenced by epic poetry, especially in its repetitiveness. It's called *The Doloriad* after the *Iliad*, and both there and in the *Odyssey* certain images are repeated the whole way through: rosy-fingered dawn, the wine-dark sea... Every character and thing has their epithet. I wanted to have some of that in *The Doloriad*, for it to be bright, flat, and repetitive, only here the epic mood is transplanted into a very different context. My agent used to be so obsessed with the wheelbarrow, which is almost always the 'metal' wheelbarrow. He thought it was so funny because of course that descriptor doesn't need to be so relentlessly repeated. But we agreed that it had to be the *metal* wheelbarrow, that it belonged to the style.

I was also very interested in the force of repeated imagery. So if you have something the same the whole way through it grinds on the reader, just like it grinds on the characters. The sun is always so bright and the forest is always so green and so dense. When those images and adjectives are repeated they push down on the reader; they start to feel overwhelming. And then like I said above, throughout *The Doloriad* the voice and sentence structure are always pushing for certainty. In this world, consciousness has been shattered, all reference points have been lost, and all these characters have been affected in some way. So the form of the novel mimics that and is constantly looking for something to anchor itself on. It wants certainty.

FD

Did any of your images surprise or shock you?

MW

Yes! But right now I can only think of two things. Both are in the sequence where the Schoolmaster finds Marta's corpse by the river. The first happens when he crawls down the street and he notices a trio of cars. He starts thinking that they're alive and that they're talking together, but he's excluded from their conversation; he can't possibly understand it. And then he starts thinking that the city is full

## Q&A

of objects which are more alive than they are, the schoolmaster and the family. He imagines this great community where all of these abandoned cars and buildings are whispering together, and he's shut out from it because he's a human and not one of them. When I reread that passage I thought that I must have been so lonely that summer, which surprised me because I hadn't realized it at the time.

The second image occurs when the Schoolmaster finds Marta's body: he thinks that there's a warning indexed to her like the number on an old coat, meaning one that's been languishing in a cloakroom for a long time without its owner coming to collect it. I thought it was such a strange image to connect to this moment. But I kept it in because it's so jarring and so innocent. It belongs so strongly to the world that they've lost, and it's almost completely incomprehensible in the context of a dead body and the threat of violence that hangs around it. But I wanted to respect the strangeness of that image and draw out that contrast.

FD

Tell me more about respecting the strangeness of the piece. Was there ever an impulse to excise the strangeness from the work? Did you have to fight yourself to keep in and respect the strangeness?



MW

I didn't have to fight myself. *The Doloriad* had quite a slow path to publication because it was bought by Dead Ink in the UK in 2019. And then after I'd edited it for a year, it was bought by FSG in America. Anyway, in that year I made so many changes that improved the novel. But in a sense I doubled down on how strange and aggressive it was. It was strange and aggressive before, but less so, and even then people had rejected it for being too strange. But over that year, it became so much more concentrated and even more violently itself, and it became a better novel because of that.

FD

Did that amount of time allow you to appraise the novel from different angles?

MW

Yes, definitely. I had to because it's such a horrible and offensive book. I'm aware that it has upset and probably will upset a lot of people. If you write something like this, you need to make sure you are doing it for the right reasons. You have to be able to provide an explanation for yourself, even if it's not one that you ever decide to share with other people. Especially when you're dealing with something so painful. These things should be considered.

## Q&A

FD

Were you thinking of climate change while writing the novel?

MW

It was on my mind. Not in the sense that I started writing with the thought that I wanted to write a novel about climate change. *The Doloriad* began with an image and a feeling. But I've always been interested in how we relate to the world around us and to animals. Like what duties do we have to the world? If we destroyed it, should we rebuild it? If so, how should we rebuild it? And in a world without us, what new possibilities can arise? However, the nature of the disaster that has destroyed the world of *The Doloriad* is never specified. The novel is less concerned with climate change than it is with a changing relationship to non-human animals and things. The role of objects in the novel was something that I considered very carefully.

FD

Did you specifically read about climate change while writing? Or were you just taking in stories about depletion of species and extinction.

MW

It's more that the book is inflected by a

general sense of apprehension that we all have at present—an awareness of the possibility of world-ending events. This isn't unique to our time, but perhaps we have more forums on which to imagine it, and so many people doing so. I didn't research climate change or extinction events very closely. I figured other people were writing more realistically about it and that there was enough out there without me. I wanted *The Doloriad* to feel grounded, but just grounded enough. I would never pretend that *The Doloriad* was a well-researched piece of work. I was interested in different things.

FD

How important was plotting to you?

MW

It was important. Maybe that's strange of me to say because *The Doloriad* is a relatively plotless book. But I knew how it needed to end, and all the events that happen along the way, even though there aren't that many of them, are essential to the story and its movement. But the book is more driven by character and ideas, I guess. I was very interested in family, and especially in a family losing control of itself. I've always been interested in claustrophobic, closed environments, spaces where a person can have an absolute kind of power over others.

## Q&A

And I wanted to imagine what that would look like if it were to collapse. So the shape of the story was always there, but it wasn't important to me that it be that gripping. I never felt as if a lot had to be happening. It just had to have a feeling of slow disintegration. But I have a lot of patience as a reader and I read a lot of gruelling fiction, so maybe it feels more natural to me to write something that's not straightforwardly enjoyable. And when people say: Oh, there's no plot, I'm like well of course there is. It's just not the kind we've come to expect. Why should it be?

FD

'Why are you starting from that assumption?'

MW

Yes. I mean, hopefully you do enjoy this book. But I don't think that's my first concern.

FD

Were you looking to incorporate sources like the Old Testament and Shakespeare and the Greeks?

MW

*The Doloriad* draws from a lot of different sources, but it's a way of thinking that feels quite natural to me. It's just a consequence of my childhood and education. Maybe I had a really weird upbringing, I don't know. There's a

## Missouri Williams

Piers Plowman reference in there. Maybe that makes me sound like a freak, but that's how it is. However, I did want there to be a sense of history, and what they've lost. And then for those words and phrases, which were once beautiful and full of meaning, to be exhausted in this kind of setting. The children simply cannot understand them.

FD

What was your eclectic education?

MW

I was homeschooled most of my childhood. I only attended school when I was in my middle teens and had to play catch up to everyone. My parents had a very specific homeschooling ideology. I was allowed to do whatever I wanted. I could read anything I liked, and so I spent my whole childhood reading. But then I could barely even add up properly until I was 14. So you gain some things and you lose others.

FD

But we do have calculators for adding up. We don't yet have a machine to create fiction. So maybe it was a good choice.

## Q&A

MW

That's a positive way of thinking about it.

FD

I read a very short review of the novel, a one line review, that just said 'Not for the faint of heart'. You've talked about the aggressiveness of the book and some of the shocking imagery. Should we be making art for people who are faint of heart?

MW

Art should be forceful in some way. It should leave you thinking about things, and if those things are uncomfortable or painful, then it's even more necessary. We go to different books for different reasons. Often I'll read something that isn't particularly demanding because I know I'll enjoy it in a straightforward and easy way, but we also go to art in order to have confrontation with the world and ourselves. Hopefully it's one that we're enriched by. *The Doloriad* is about important things. And I've never wanted to apologize for the way in which I saw fit to address those things. I think it's important to see that kind of unhappiness and maybe it should hurt. Even if the methods I chose are flawed, that cruelty exists and that cruelty is part of our world. It's something that we

need to see and acknowledge.

FD

The line ‘Nature hateth emptiness’ jumped out at me. Nature goes forward. People move forward, even though they might not know the best way to proceed. Where did that line come from?

MW

It’s actually a mangled quote from a poem by Andrew Marvel, but I can’t remember which one. But this seems appropriate because no one in the novel can remember where things come from either. Anyway, their Uncle remembers it in that form, and thinks that it is a powerful truth. It was an idea that really interested me. Even when they have nothing to hope for and are trapped in this unbearably hostile reality, some blind, mechanical instinct keeps people going, keeps them producing, and the whole world kind of lurches forward alongside them.

FD

I sense a little bit of hope. Life will continue in some form.

MW

I think *The Doloriad* is a hopeful novel. It probably doesn’t strike many people as being

## Q&A

that way. But at the end there is some kind of reconciliation between different ways of seeing, and you have a sense that for the next generation—and this is the most hopeful ending of all—maybe things will be different. Once the Matriarch's imperative to conquer and crush has been discarded, there is space for a new and more inclusive way of being, one that does away with the hierarchies of the past. Something is opened up. So yes, I do see *The Doloriad* as hopeful.

FD

Take that, 'faint of heart' reviewer. ◇





DISPATCH

# Dungeness

Kevin Brazil visits  
the garden of  
Derek Jarman

I was the only one in the carriage as the train left St Pancras. It was a bright Friday morning in May 2020. Before the doors closed, a man lazily wiped the handrails with a tea towel. He wasn't wearing a face mask. As the train pulled out of the station, I saw a sign I had never seen before: *St Pancras Cruising Club*. I made a note to join when I got back. Stratford International, Ebbsfleet International, Ashford International: stations that promised a now almost impossible escape from this island. At Ashford, change for Rye; from Rye, a cycle to Dungeness. With hands covered in latex gloves and disinfectant gel as if I were travelling to visit a patient in hospital, a patient to whom I was a threat, I stuffed the flakes of a croissant under the mask over my mouth. It had been months since I last ate a croissant, and I had forgotten what they tasted like. I had forgotten that they never taste right in England.

After Stratford, the train glides across marshlands and between motorways, pylons and graveyards of abandoned red buses. At the Dartford Crossing, it passes the Queen Elizabeth II Suspension Bridge, the only crossing of the Thames east of London. Every time I've taken this train, the bridge has appeared weighed down with trucks and lorries carrying the containers that, when offloaded, fill the yards along the river in expanding grids of rectangular colour. These yards were once the site of the docks themselves before they automated and decamped, like their former workers, to the coasts of

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Essex and Suffolk, both equally without sentiment. One way or another, everything has to get on to an island, and everyone has to get ahead in this world. Then the train suddenly plunges underground, passing beneath the miles and miles of warehouses that filter the goods in those shipping containers out into the homes and businesses of the city. The tunnel goes deep in order not to disturb the perfect flatness that robots require to move across warehouse floors. A variation as small as two millimetres can threaten to disrupt their automatic movement and our ceaseless consumption. These warehouses have become so large that, further out in the countryside, they are painted shades of blue so as to blend into the sky. It is an illusion worthy of Capability Brown, whose eighteenth-century gardens took landscapes long reshaped by human agriculture and transformed them back into wilderness, disguising with the appearance of nature the very source of those landowners' wealth.

High-tech bridges cloaked in the trappings of monarchy; industrial heritage either rusting in nostalgia or ruthlessly redeveloped; country homes disguising the extraction, human and agricultural, that paid for them. An illusion: this is what the English landscape had always been to me, which is why the English themselves have always been so hard for me to understand. They too seemed to only present me with surface appearances or to use an imagined past to disguise who they really were. By that summer, I had lived in England for ten years,

and it had never felt like home. With the borders closed, if only temporarily, I had to imagine what it would be like to never leave, to face up to the fact that I had decided that this was where I was going to make my home. For there were reasons I had decided to live in England: people I wanted to live with, people who didn't exist in the home that was given to me. That summer I was travelling to visit one of them again.

On this trip to Dungeness, my third, the trees outside London looked like they were presenting the colours of their foliage for the very first time. Approaching Rye, the trees disappear, and green fields become criss-crossed with canals and daubed with white sheep. To one side of the cycle path between Rye and Dungeness, along a barbed-wire fence that separates the path from the dunes that open on to the sea, a parade of giant red flags marched in single file. As I cycled past, I heard what first sounded like delicate firecrackers and then like an axe striking a tree. In a Ministry of Defence firing range, soldiers were shooting, perfecting the art of killing.

Dungeness is a spit of land jutting out into the English Channel. It is a plain of sand and shingle, flat and low in all directions, with no fences or walls. Along with Cape Canaveral in Florida, it is the largest formation of shingle on the surface of the earth. It receives the most sunlight and least rainfall of anywhere in England. The landscape is pockmarked with old wooden cottages and new

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artists' studios and littered with abandoned ships, empty oil tanks, shipping containers and half-finished breezeblock huts. Looming over everything are two lighthouses, black and white, and a nuclear power station that sends lines of pylons and wires inland away from the sea. Fishermen come from all around the surrounding towns and villages to fish in what they call 'the boil', the currents heated by the hot wastewater expelled by the reactor, whose high temperatures attract the smaller sea creatures upon which fish come to feed. The fish get trapped in the currents and some are killed when they get sucked into the reactor's cooling system, providing easy prey for the flocks of seagulls who circle overhead. Dungeness is the end of England, and it feels like the end of the world.

Dungeness is home to Prospect Cottage, two small single-storey buildings made of caulked black wood with lemon-yellow windowpanes, a triangular roof of corrugated iron and a chimney with two orange terracotta flues. On the front, two large windows frame a narrow door. On the gable end to the right, a staircase rises to a small yellow door opening into an attic. On the left, the text of John Donne's 'The Sunne Rising' is mounted in carved black wooden letters, dismissing the claims of the sun it faces: 'Love, all alike, no season knows nor clime / Nor hours, days, months, which are the rags of time.' The back of the main building slopes down to a kitchen with a long horizontal window, divided into squares. A second smaller cottage added on to

the right forms half a courtyard at the back. Inside it now is a kind of sunroom stuffed with soft-chairs, browning cacti and a Jesus hanging on a crucifix. From 1987 until his death in 1994, Prospect Cottage was where Derek Jarman came almost weekly to escape the demands of producing his films and the treatments for the illnesses that slowly consumed him. As the sun set each day behind the three nuclear reactors looming over the rear of the cottage, it was where he came to find the time to read, write and be alone.

Jarman was a film-maker, a poet, a painter and, for many, a saint. That was the myth others imposed upon him by virtue of a life of activism that often simply took the form of being himself in public without shame. Every artist creates their own myth, an origin story about why they have to make the work they do. Otherwise, creation becomes, if not impossible, then haunted with bad conscience. Why am I making this? Greed, a need for attention, the lust for money, the mere chance of the day. Jarman, who believed so much in the power of myths that he spent much of his life attacking those that warp our desire, presents his origin story in his journals published as *Dancing Ledge* (1984), *Modern Nature* (1991) and *Smiling in Slow Motion* (2000), and his collective history of British gay life, *At Your Own Risk* (1992). He was born in 1942, the child of a fading Empire, of a New Zealander father recruited into the RAF and an English mother whose father was a tea trader in Calcutta. After decades of

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repression and an art-school education in London, he joined the waves of queer people emerging into the public in a riot of pleasure throughout the sixties and seventies, living in warehouses and cruising on piers and joyfully threatening patriarchy, heterosexuality and the family with films like *Sebastiane* (1976), his first full-length feature—a homoerotic life of Saint Sebastian, the dialogue completely in Latin—which contains, or so Jarman claimed, one of the first erections shown on a film approved by the British Film Classification Board. But just as in the myth of Icarus, whose wings melted by flying too close to the sun, the dream of sexual liberation fell back to earth with the election of Margaret Thatcher and the arrival of HIV. Jarman became one of the first prominent British people to announce they were HIV positive in 1987 and demonstrated by publishing books, producing films and exhibiting paintings that this was no barrier to the richest of lives. Thus was born the legend of Saint Derek who, in choosing to use his life to raise awareness of the spread of HIV and what it meant to live with AIDS (including what it meant to continue to have sex with AIDS), saved the lives of thousands of people.

Jarman spent more and more of his time in Dungeness from 1987 onwards, planting his garden, writing his diaries. His body weakened, his eyesight failed, his memories bloomed. Now tourists come to Prospect Cottage from around the world, and a few months before my visit, a fundraiser secured enough



money to preserve the cottage and its garden as a memorial to his life. His death had become a work of art, as had happened with his beloved Saint Sebastian, suggesting that such a transfiguration may have been what Jarman had wanted, perverting the rituals of Christianity even beyond the grave.

Like the tourists, I too had become a worshipper of Saint Derek. My prayers began when I first saw the grainy beauty of *The Last of England* (1987), late at night on Channel 4, the source of so many illicit teenage pleasures in those years when the internet hadn't fully arrived in the rural Ireland where I grew up. Not just because of his art, his activism, his good looks and his transcendence of shame. But, above all, because of what he achieved with the Prospect Cottage garden. He had decided how he would be remembered. He had made his own memorial.

Yet the Prospect Cottage garden is, for me at least, more than just a memorial to Jarman's death. To reduce it to that gives his life a destination, a telos, a conclusion. The problem with this is not that his whole life becomes defined by the fact that he died of AIDS; this has become a tragic cliché imposed on the lives of a whole generation of gay artists, but to elide the reason for their deaths can itself become a cliché of disavowal. Rather the problem lies in the shape imposed on a life by the ending itself: a line that moves from beginning to end. This is a line we can only see once that end has taken place, which means it is a line none of us

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can ever see while living. This makes it the most unnatural of shapes to place on a life, or at least, no less unnatural than any of the shapes we can put on a life. The Prospect Cottage garden was one of Jarman's works of art, a story in itself, not the end to his life story. It has its own shapes, its own lines. It tells its own endings, its own beginnings.



The landscape of shingle in which Jarman planted his garden is no windswept desert devoid of living things. Its stones are home to thickets of sea kale with their spiky purple fringes, delicate blooms of sea campion the colour of dark red wine and fresh clumps of sedum, whose tips shade from green to pink. These plants share the shingle with the waste of an entire country. Plastic bags shining white in the sun, black rubber tyres worn smooth by the wind, a purple blanket made of synthetic fur, settling in folds for centuries of slow, glistening degradation. Among the plants and litter, like way stations on a pilgrimage, are rusting fragments of mysterious machinery. Shipping chains lie coiled on the ground in perfect circles. A giant metal wheel with a serrated rim lies on its side, a brilliant rusting orange against the dun ochre of the shingle. This tableau of frozen motion is mounted on a platform made of driftwood. Dungeness makes a spectacle out of the persistence of plastic and the ruins of industry.

The Prospect Cottage garden was formed

by scavenging these scraps of civilization and the plants and stones between them. In front of the house, flints planted upright into the shingle mark out flower beds: rectangles, squares and circles. At the back, plants nestle within raised beds made of driftwood planks and among the spherical weights that were once used to drag down fishing nets. When I visited in May, the beds teemed with purple foxgloves and pink opium poppies, with crimson valerian and indigo viper's bugloss, with white sea roses and pink peonies, and between all this colour rose voluptuous clouds of curry plant, just on the cusp of blooming. Jarman began to lay out his garden the year he was diagnosed with HIV, which was the same year in which he met the love of his life, known in his diaries as HB, who eventually came to live with him at Prospect Cottage. For Jarman, the time of the gardener, the time of transience and cyclical returns, was as much about staying in the eternal present of love as it was a means to turn away from an impending future of death: 'The gardener digs in another time without past or future, beginning or end.' Each summer, the flowers return, the best reminder of the transient present of the gardening, and perhaps this is why Jarman also wrote that 'Dungeness is at its best in the golden light of summer'.

I preferred the garden in winter, when I visited it the year before, when all the plants were dead apart from the clumps of gorse that surrounded the cottage-like prickly fortified walls. In the astringent

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January sun, the garden's other unnatural plants could assert their presence. These, to me, were truer to the gardener who had planted them than the flowers and blossoms of summer. In front of the house, clusters of grey stones were formed out of oblong flints planted upright into the shingle. Smooth stones, with holes worn through them by the sea, were fixed on top of thin branches of wood, bleached white by sun and salt. They looked like the first totems created to sanctify reproduction, male wood piercing female stone. Yet here they were petrified and frozen amidst the act of copulation and had become nothing more than the prettiest of decorations.

In the back garden, rusting metal poles stood topped with hooks and coils amidst a freezing January wind. Chains with flaking links marked out circles and loops between empty beds of earth, the spaces in which wood and metal had been bred into new hybrid species. Thick logs of bleached wood bristled with clunky, primitive iron nails. Tall driftwood planks were crowned with iron triangles and coiled metal springs, evoking medieval weaponry or crude chastity devices. Closer to the cottage, new species were forming from the coupling of other materials. A necklace of stones hung down from a small wooden pole, strung along a loop of metal chain. A dead branch pierced a round of cork and a hexagonal bolt. A rusted spring coiled around a pointed stick that forced its way through the hole of a stone. These inorganic couplings

and triplings oscillated between looking like dead creatures and the organs that produced them. They were simultaneously the symbols and reality of their own monstrous gestation.

These winter plants are more faithful to the landscape from which they spring than the organic beauty of sea pea, peony or digitalis. Dungeness may be classified as a nature reserve, perhaps the only nature reserve that includes a nuclear fission reactor, but it is a place that shows up the illusion of its own classification. There is no longer any 'nature' that can be isolated from the impact of our species; there is nothing we haven't touched with our metal, our plastic, our litter. For some, this is a tragic fall from grace, a sin to be expiated by seeking out wild places or rewilding the places we have. But nothing is as artificial as 'wildness', nothing as inhumane as wanting to expunge others from the land so that you can enjoy a view. Dungeness is a reminder that this fall from nature is what makes us who we are. Or rather, that we shouldn't think of ourselves as living after a fall at all. We can't create reservations to preserve something called nature because we are always at once of and apart from the world, as much in our ageing bodies as with our shimmering synthetic fabrics. Simply because of what we are and what we do, we cannot be ruled by an appeal to what is natural. Jarman dug his garden in this landscape that dispels the illusion that there is anything natural about the world in which we live. His winter plants try to pass on memory in a world

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where this doesn't just naturally happen. Where we have to make it happen.

These winter plants are also more faithful, it seemed to me that second visit, to the life of the person who made them. In his films and in his life, Jarman waged a joyful war against all notions of what was natural when it came to sexuality and desire. His goal, however, was not to replace them with a newer and better nature but to rejoice in the creation of what we normally call artifice in order to dissolve the division between the natural and the artificial once and for all. Jarman knew that the cure promised by his garden was a chimaera, but he loved it all the same. 'I plant my herbal garden as a panacea, read up on all the aches and pains that plants will cure—and know they are not going to help. The garden as a pharmacopoeia has failed. Yet there is a thrill in watching the plants spring up that gives me hope.'

The garden at Prospect Cottage is an illusion: a panacea, a placebo. The plants do not grow from the shingle: how could they? They grow from clumps of manure filled into holes dug into the stones. And the solitude Jarman sought and experienced at Prospect Cottage was achieved by a similar kind of *trompe l'oeil*, a painter's deception of the eye. Jarman's diaries record the weeks spent tending his garden at Dungeness, the days spent painting and writing alone, the hours spent in bed dealing with pain and sickness; but they also record almost constant motion back and forth to London, to hospitals and Pride

demonstrations and nights cruising on Hampstead Heath and gallery openings and coffee in Soho, and they record the constant care he received from his companion HB. Dungeness, he knew, merely offered him the ‘illusion of isolation’, for isolation can only ever be an illusion. However much we think we need to be alone, whether to paint, or write, or simply survive, the absence of others is simply a sleight of hand. We might not see them, but they are still taking care of us, perhaps no time more than when not being present. They gift us the presence of their absence. Anonymity, alienation, the fiction that is autobiography, so much is based on forgetting what it really means to be alone: that we could never be just ourselves, even if we wanted to.



Jarman’s concern with England runs throughout all his films, surfacing more clearly in some more than others. In *Edward II* (1991), he sought to weave queer desire into the history of English power, not to destroy that power. This film adapts Christopher Marlowe’s 1592 play of the same name, making explicit the subtext widely believed, then and now, that Edward II had a sexual relationship with his courtier Piers Gaveston. In order to rewrite history for his present or write it properly for the first time, the film mixes contemporary and historical costuming and props, as in Jarman’s

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previous film *Caravaggio* (1986), which similarly attempted to bring to the surface the same-sex desire of a historical figure. Yet, if *Caravaggio* is a stilted museum piece, *Edward II* brings past and present into a time-bending collision, as when Jarman cast his fellow queer activists of the early 1990s as Edward's rebel army, supporting the king with their signs: *Silence = Death, Gay Desire is Not a Crime*. These films betray an erotic fascination with male power and male suffering, with men who have the power to inflict suffering and men who have the power to endure it. The soldier dying in the trenches is an unemployed factory worker and is Saint Sebastian bleeding on the stake. The figure of the king and the imagined community of the nation is a means of amplifying the intensity of that power and suffering to extend the bounds of that power's reach and to bind those suffering into a brotherhood of men. That is why Englishness is inextricable from Jarman's vision of queer sexuality and why his sexuality was inextricable from his Englishness. Chains and nails like beneath the peonies and daffodils of Dungeness.

Jarman's queerness is not just English. It is used to desire England: its innocence, its stoicism, its gardens and, above all, its beautiful young men. It only cares for women when they tend to these men, as with the nurse in *War Requiem* (1989) or when they take the form of queens for them to worship: Amyl Nitrate in *Jubilee* (1978), Tilda Swinton as a post-industrial Britannia. This came



from his love of illusions, and this was what taught me that England is the most illusory of places. The leisure of country estates was built on the labour of slaves; immaterial wealth is conjured into existence behind the stone pillars of the Bank of England; a vicious sense of superiority hides behind the politest of smiles; all the languages of the world flourish behind a facade of received pronunciation. Maybe Jarman's saving grace is that he knows these illusions are illusions, that he is like Prospero in his film adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1979), who knows when to put down his wand and accept 'our revels now have ended'. But maybe he is more like Shakespeare's contemporary, the alchemist and magician John Dee; maybe he truly believed he could turn base metal into gold; maybe he truly forgot the emptiness behind his illusions of England.

There are a lot of things I like about England. I like the Tube, I like Alison Moyet, I like Manchester drag queens (all of them, without exception), I like Camberwell Green and Burgess Park, I like the suya spots on the Old Kent Road, I like the coleslaw at Nando's, I like 'Flowers' by Sweet Female Attitude and I like 'Making Plans for Nigel' by XTC. I like *The Continuous Katherine Mortenhoe* (1973) by D. G. Compton and I like Jane Austen (who, contrary to popular wisdom, didn't like England at all). I like John Akomfrah and Shelagh Delaney, I like the Free Cinema Movement and I like Yorkshire rhubarb.

And there are a lot of things about England I

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don't like. I don't like country houses, I don't like the Mitfords, I don't like (whisper it) Virginia Woolf, I don't like cricket (though I also don't understand it), I don't like the royal family (they should be abolished), I don't like the Proms, I don't like a privatized postal service, I don't like Yarl's Wood Immigration Removal Centre, I don't like that there is a gap in the National Archives where records of the torture of the Mau Mau should be and I don't like that anyone in England has been forced to use a food bank, even once.

But I'm here, and so is everyone else, each with their idiosyncratic likes and dislikes. So, what then? Part of what has made England feel like it has been slowly collapsing since I moved here in 2010 is that the people who live here can't even find a way to ask the question: how do we want to live together? The luxury of finding that question boring is a bit like that afforded by those views of fake wilderness on eighteenth-century country estates. It is the luxury of not even having to see those people upon whom you depend, for by living anywhere, you depend upon others. It is not at all like the fear that prevents one from asking that question because, having asked it once before, you were answered in no uncertain terms that you belong only so long as you remain silent and invisible.

England was never a nation state in the classic sense (although, what was?). It was the centre of an Empire, where people living in England chose a government that ruled people living elsewhere

who had no say in that government. By any metric, that means the English weren't participating in a democracy until about the 1960s, so maybe the problem is that living together democratically is just new to us all. By the time the Empire collapsed, and Britain joined the European Community, it had brought people to England who never could and never had to feel English and who sought solace in a Great Britain, or a United Kingdom, right at the moment when it began to devolve itself out of existence. English nationalists are right that immigration and the European Union mean the end of England; they are just wrong to believe their England ever existed. England can't be a nation state like most other places—though it is not unique and a belief in exceptionalism is the true vice anglais. People in England need to find a way of being together that breaks the spell of old illusions and remains aware of the artifice of the new ones they will have to agree to have in common. It needs a way of being together where people can be alone in their idiosyncrasies. I often wonder if England needs to become more like Dungeness.

'God, the English are a queer bunch,' announces the boy in *Wittgenstein* (1993), Jarman's penultimate feature-length film. *Wittgenstein* is a biopic, of sorts, charting the philosopher's lifelong attempt at 'trying to define for us limits of language, and what it is to have communication, one with another', a journey that saw him shift from viewing language as a picture of the world towards seeing

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it as the expression of a form of life. This was his discovery, as he tells his lover Johnny in bed, played by Jarman's own companion, HB, that: 'There is no private meaning. We are what we are because we share a common language and common forms of life.' Two images of solitude bookend the film. Near the beginning, the boy Wittgenstein sits at a sewing machine, surrounded by a cacophonous circle of adults reading books at him until he can no longer stand it and covers his ears and closes his eyes. 'I was to spend a lifetime disentangling myself from my education,' he tells us. To the extent that Wittgenstein has a lesson for the English, this is it: if they are ever going to be able to live with one another, they will first have to undertake a lifetime of unlearning. They will have to dispel themselves of their illusions. They will have to remember their past for the very first time, so they can tell it to others so they can decide whether to make England their home. The second is an image of an adult Wittgenstein in a giant birdcage, sitting with a bird in a smaller cage, reflecting on the contradiction between trying to live a philosophy where meaning is simply the common use of language in public and living in a world where the public expression of his homosexuality is impossible. Wittgenstein tells us that he wanted to move philosophy away from being a picture of the 'lonely human soul, brooding over its private experiences . . . locked out from contact with others by the walls of their bodies'. But he could only do so, the end of the film reveals, by

## Kevin Brazil

moving to Ireland to live alone in a cottage by the sea. In order to learn how to speak to others, he had to first be alone.

The English aren't half as queer as Jarman would have liked to think. In the end, he never dispelled himself of the illusions of Englishness. England was where he wanted to find a home: among gay kings, queer soldiers and punk queens. We all need illusions in which to feel at home. England was his. But his England wouldn't be mine. England, Jarman taught me, perhaps despite himself, has always been a kind of illusion. In the landscape over which it fell, I could live my own illusion. I didn't need to copy his. ◇

FICTION

# The Eron

Daniel Wiles

# Child

Iss evvy on me shoulder. Weem walkin up to riders ayes pond because Father says thass where all the bess trout am. Ayit funny ow ya can walk out an iss gerrin dark but ya doe know it? Arm oldin me rod on me shoulder. Ar think iss evvy but iss gerrin lighter each time we goo. Arm lookin at the geoses on the bonk a the cut. Theym all uddlin about an bitin emselfs. Father tells me to urry up.

Doe they get run over by barges? ar say.

Who?

Gooses.

Nay, they can fly away.

Sometimes ar think we ay all alone in this place, what wi all the animals an fish an trees an grass an worms unda the grass. An one minute iss day an nex iss night, but then iss day again. An if theres all these type a creatures then ow did they get there? Arm askin me father what culla e thinks the sky is. E says pink not perple. Arm tellin im iss perple. Thass mar favourite culla that is. Ya doe see it anywhere but on flowas an the sky. An chocolate. On me eighth berthday, ar was gave a shillin. Father an Mother said ar could spend it owever ar wished an. Why muss we walk all this way to riders ayes when weem all the cut movin nex to us? The bess trout am in. Perple is the bess culla because ya doe see it anywhere but the sky an flowas an chocolate bars.

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Father.

What?

Ow far away am we?

Not lung now.

Ar can ear a barge comin. Iss like a thunder when iss summa an iss bin ot all day an then the rains am comin an ya can smell it all dusty an warm an that when it rains. But iss nice when iss doin that because ya doe see it mose often. Mother said that all thunderstorms am different. An when ar asked why, she said Why am yow always so inquisitive? An ar said When ar was forty-two ar was a soldier in the army an the army said ar was the bess soldier in the army. Yes ar was. Whenever ar said anythin like that, she would smile an say Sure yow am.

The people on the barge am standin at the back end arrit drivin it an iss an old man an woman an a girl an the girls wavin at me.

Wave, son.

Arm wavin at em an iss like theym walkin with us because barges ay fast an they sound like thunder an ar can smell that sweet smell a the dusty warm ground. Wunda where theym gooin. Maybe live on the barge. Me an me mates when weem over the cut in Essinton we sin an old lady. Me one mate Bob says shis an old witch. Everyone calls er Witch Wendy. Er ang about on the other side a the conol bonk an teks bits a scrap iron on to the barge, iss an arf barge, an we shout Oi Witch Wendy an er tells we to fock off wavin about them scraps. Then er lobs em at we. Picture me an the lads duckin an



## Daniel Wiles

dodgin lumps a iron on the bonks an the mallards  
an coots throwin emselfs up in the air. Since then  
we always went lookin for er. Er was kind to we  
sometimes an waved an told we some funny stories.  
Ar doe think er was mad, juss lonely is all. Imagine  
on that arf barge all by yaself chuggin along the cut  
wi nobody to spake to. Wunda where er is now.  
Bob says ers dead.

We used to goo an play out all the time. Cor  
goo too far now because Mother said we need to be  
back in the bunka quicklike when the planes come  
over. Ar still see me mates, juss less. Iss me brothers  
ar never see any more since they went away.

Am watchin the barge drift away down the  
conol. Iss robbin the perple sky. Now it looks cold  
blue and yella. The barge is gone now but another  
un ull be comin along soon to replace it. Like  
another sky replacin this un. Ar can still ear the  
crickets singin in the yella footbushes along the  
bonk. Always wundah why they stop singin when  
ya get lookin for em an me rod is stuck in the  
yedges above the footbushes.

Come on son, we need to urry up now, me  
fathers shoutin.

Me father said e wanted to get to the pond  
before night-time. Arm pullin at me rod an it woe  
move at first. Then a snap. It shoots out. Now arm  
on the floor. Ar look at the conol sidewuds. The  
barge is gooin unda the iron bridge that looks like  
a ladder an me eyes am confused to see a wall a  
water an nex to that a wall a grass an Father fallin

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from it to the sky.

Ar get up an Fathers walkin fast, that type a fast walk e does that reminds me of a mallard or somethin larger. A goose. Theym fly away when the barges come. Theym fly but what got em to walk like that because Father cor fly away an Bob says is old man says. When walkin like at iss like ees tryin arda than the rest a us. When e walks normal ar forget an other people they doe know about is back until e tries to move wi aste.

E day tell me ow it appened but Bob says is old man says it was gangrene or some such nastiness that e got from France. Says is old man knows it because eyad sin it because they was there together. Says it looked to im like the conol on a warm summas day, full a algae an muck an windin in iss shape. King George sent im a letter an ar asked to see it but. Father is wavin is cap at me an shoutin somethin. Ar bess catch up.

## Man

Orace comes runnin swingin about is rod along the cut. This boy. E may be the death a me. All this stoppin an startin. Iss unsafe. Anyone could be watchin. Weem out in the open. Why did ar bring im? Ar could be there by now. Shouldve started from the ouse earlier. What if ar miss it? They gave everythin, they faced oblivion an now theym gooin back. The least ar can do is. Swifts rush from the trees to the yedges and back again. The sun is down.

About ten minutes to ryders ayes. Stop worryin. The world doe wait for yow so if yow cor make it in time then ow can it be elped? Yow can fret an fret all yow wish. Same with any part a ya life, if yow fret an fret about somethin bads to appen or about ow things am changin, it woe elp or stop it. Sometimes ar wunda if by the end a it all yowm back where yow started. In the womb an ready for another three-score-an-ten. Of sin some old men that was so small an so shrivelled they was akin to prunes. An if they—

Sorry Father.

Less get gooin now then.

That rod looks too big for im. Ees fumblin it about and draggin its end along the floor. We walk over the iron bridge an Orace says Why doe we fish eeya? An ar say This ay where the bess trout am so urry up. Ow many times I told that boy an still e asks. If yowm over the trench an yowm still askin why then yowm already dead. Maybe ar shouldve juss told im the truth.

Down the other side a the iron bridge iss about eight minutes to ryders ayes. We walk quicker along the open bonk a the cut an unda the foundrywerks bridge thass painted blue an fatta an shorta than the iron bridge.

Theres an eron on the bonk staring into the water. Ar stop and old the boy's shoulder. E asks me what it is an I say Yow ay never sin an eron before? An e says No. Om sure ees sin one before, juss doe remember it. I look up at the failin day an back

## FICTION

down at the eron an clap me onds an there it goos. Iss huge wings dull over the top an shinin white underneath thrown up in the air an across the cornfields. Goo, goo, goo. Arm startin to jog along the path now, clearin out for the eron to come back an carry on fishin, as they always do. Orace says somethin but ay sure what. Moths shoot about an the sky thass failin more an more quick an ar start to run faster but iss painful but they faced oblivion an now they goo back at least ar can. Ar tern into the woods that lead to the pond an ryders ayes fields an theres a flat slap an then a splash. Orace ay beyind me. Leave im. Doe leave im. The sickness falls slow in the trench an theres a splashin an—

## Child

Iss the biggest baird of ever sin. Iss liftin up an up an up an even the reeds along the conol am bein brushed away by the wind. Iss flyin over the cornfields slowly an iss me favourite baird. When ar was sixty-six I was a pigeon flyer an I kept em an loosed em out to fly all about an watched em lift up an up but fast not like. They was me favourite bairds when ar was sixty-six but now the eron is me favourite baird. Fathers tellin me to urry up. Ees runnin away slowly an ees me favourite person. Arm startin to run an all. Father looks like a grey shape like the baird, grey on top an white underneath an a black ed. It lifted up an up. Fathers runnin off down

the bonk into some woods. Arm runnin an all. Ees me favourite person an ees gooin up an up an up an up an up an—

## Man

Orace is flailin an swingin about in the conol. Why doe e swim? Swim, ar shout, come on. Still e smashes about in the water. It looks like ees bein eaten by somethin. Ar drop me pole an the fishin box. Ar run to the bonk an kneel down an old me ond out. Ees swingin an chokin an somethins wrung wi im. Ar step into the cut. Iss any to me chest an ar can feel the silt heavy on me boots. Ar stumble on the rocks under me feet, like swole skulls theym uneven an slidin an fallin. Ar grab im an shout Calm down, calm down. E chokes an throws the water frum is throat afore settlin. Is eds above water an e looks at me. Is bodys still under. Ar try an lift im from the water an still cor bring is body out. Iss tekkin im. Ar grab an pull on is shert but iss stuck. The water tekkin im an stealin im like them bein took by the trench an by the land mashed up an barbed wire. Iss ard to see now an iss like the darkness closin over me eyes a foggy lens or dusty or somethin. Wheres them fires an wheres the boys body an is face gangrene. Shut eyes an feel. Feel where ees stuck. Around is back ees caught with the rod through is shert. Ar move me ond along the pole and pull it but iss stuck like a flagpole an iss jammed tight inbetween the cut like

## FICTION

a stick in a barrel.

Whass gooin on Father?

Doe worry.

Ar old im with me right ond an unbutton is shert with me left, he cottons on an rips at them an all. Is belly freed an it ay white but iss black an red an pulled apart an the grey stuffins stuck out like mould on bread. Ar look at im an ees pullin is arms from the shert an ar say Stop, stop, stop stop stopstopstopstop. Now arm panicked an e looks up at me.

What Father?

Down at is belly ar look an e looks down an all an jumps an grabs at the mould lookin burst from it an ar say Stop! An e screams an pulls an scrunches it with is small onds an throws it across the cut an now is bellys smooth an white an e wriggles about splashin. Ar old is belly an squint an say Calm down, calm down. Iss nothin, iss nothin. Ar lift Orace out an on to the bonk an climb out meself.

Ow many av fell in this cut? Or any cut for that matter. Whammels swim about in it enough. Nearly every mornin growin up, ard tek the whammel up the cut an fust things fust itd be a great splash, an eed be off wi is fat staffy skull bobbin above the water. Whammels doe care about danger in me experience. Whether iss a cut or a trench or an open field. Yow ear stories about people perishin in the conols. Ar knew that rod was too big for im. Why did ar bring im? Why day ar leave im to the water when ees thrashin an messin about? Because

## Daniel Wiles

ya cor leave a man beyind. But if ar ad told him the real reason we was gooin out, maybe e woe ave fallen in, an took it more serious. In this world there ay much ya can save of their innocence, but what little ar can, ar will.

It ay far to the pond, ar say.

Ees lookin down at the cut, shertless an sniffin. Me rod, e says.

Leave it.

Iss dark Father, ar day realize—

Come on now, it ay far to the pond.

We get gooin. Oraces words, *Iss dark Father*, replay in me ed. Ar look up an around. It is dark. Run. Run. Must run.

## Child

Ay sure what it was, iss juss one minute yam runnin an ees gooin up an up an up an the nex all water an chokin an ow did me rod get all snapped off an lost in there an ow? Ow was it? Ar was oldin it on me shoulder. On me shoulder an nex thing it was tryin to kill me. We were gooin to the pond because thass where all the bess trout am. An then ar get mud an pondweed all over me an it was slimy an horrible. An ar miss me brothers an me mates but at least ar got Father who was gooin up an up as the eron did an all an e still wants to goo even tho the lights gone why am we still gooin even wi the lights gone an me rods gone an all. An now ees runnin

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through the woods an arm beyind im an me boots  
am squelchin an clothes am evvy wi water. Why am  
we still gooin an why did e look so scared an still  
does? The other side of the woods is the fields an the  
other side a the fields is the pond but e stops an ar  
run past im an e says Stop. Before ar fell in the conol  
it was light the sky was like a pale yella an blue but  
when ar was out the conol iss juss blue an the stars  
an the moon am above us an iss quiet apart frum the  
railway line over the back a the fields by the pond.  
Iss mad ow it terns dark any gradual an ya cor see it  
proper, not like ternin off a berner or a lamp. Them  
trains am usually for coal an that but sometimes  
they got people on. Iss already past us but it ay too  
small that so ya cor see it. Iss full a people this un,  
an Fathers lookin at the train with iss yella lights an  
theres a load a people wearin green an some a them  
angin out the windas an wavin an—

## Man

4. 'STAND TO' will take place one hour  
before daylight and one hour before dusk. At this  
parade every available man will be present. Rifles,  
ammunition, equipment, clothing, etc., will be  
inspected. The firing position of every man will be  
tested at dusk to see that the rifle pressed down on  
the parapet is aimed at our own wire. Gas helmets  
and respirators will be inspected in accordance  
with the orders in force. Orders will be issued and

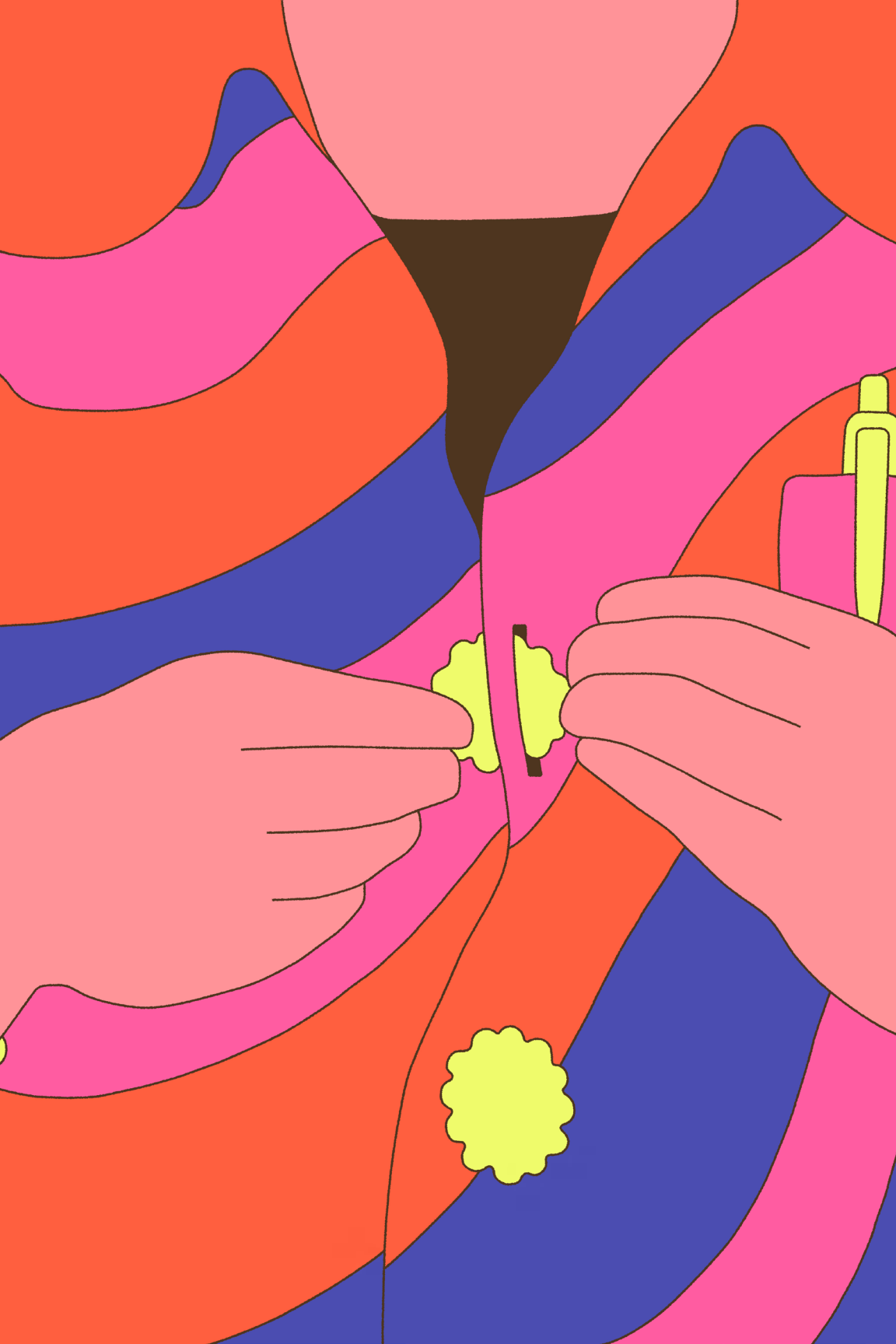


steps taken to see that men understand them.

## Child

Them people on the train theym far now like them on the barge they took the sky an all. Fathers watchin em goo. Ees oldin is at in is onds. Ees drippin wet an arm drippin wet an all, but tomorra weel be dry again, an tomorra itll be light again. Arm lookin at Father an ees still watchin em goo up an up an up. Like me mates. Like me brothers. Like the eron. ◇





FICTION

The Dog Star Is the  
Brightest Star in  
the Sky

Talia Lakshmi  
Kolluri

‘Tell me a story,’ said the fox, bathed in the light from a low-hanging moon, the surrounding snow lit by a cool silvery glow. The moonlight touched everything. The fox, her fur fair and glittering; the mountains in the distance; the glacier nestled in a valley leading to the wide expanse of ice fields and snow around her; the sea beyond the coast; and the icebergs that rose up from the dark ocean. The fox was nestled in the crook of the bear’s neck, who was himself curled on the snow, his back a jagged mound in the incandescent night.

The white bear.

‘Tell me a story,’ she said again, ‘tell me a story about the beginning.’

‘I don’t remember the beginning,’ said the white bear. He yawned widely and sat up, blinking. He looked out at the tundra around him. The surface undulated like a world in miniature, mirroring the surrounding mountains. He thought of the edge of the coast, buried in permafrost, stretching to the sea. The white bear lowered himself again and the fox returned to him.

‘It doesn’t matter if you remember it. You know it. That’s what matters.’

‘Maybe all I see is the end. Maybe the end is so big that it swallows the beginning. Maybe there is no beginning any more.’ The white bear was tired.

‘Tell it.’ The fox pulled her head out of the bear’s coat and nipped him in the cheek as if to say again, *tell me*. The bear breathed deeply and felt the

ground beneath him shift.

‘In the beginning,’ said the white bear, ‘there was nothing but the bear.’

‘You? The bear is you?’

‘Not me, not just any bear. The first bear.’

‘Yes,’ said the fox, burrowing back into his coat. ‘Start again.’

‘In the beginning, there was nothing but the bear. And then he growled and from his icy lungs the whole world unfurled. First he spit out the stars. White like snow. Shimmering like snow. And they lit up the world he was making. And then came earth. Dark soil that he shaped in his paws. With his claws he scraped out valleys and pushed the earth into mountains.’

‘These mountains?’ asked the fox. She turned towards the peaks that held in the tundra from a distance.

‘All of the mountains,’ said the bear. ‘He built rolling hills and vast spines of sharp peaks. He pushed some so high that they almost reached his stars. With his enormous paws he spread sand into wide and windy deserts. He scattered rocks and boulders. He bored out caves. He moulded the world until his paws ached and he could build no more. And when he looked at all of it, the first bear wept at the beauty of what he had made. His tears filled the seas and pushed their way through the land into rivers, where they finally pooled into lakes. And when the water touched the soil, all the plants began to grow. The bear growled louder and louder,

calling forth all the animals from deep inside himself until all the water and all the land in the whole wide world was filled with life. Birds flew out of his mouth; insects buzzed from his ears; every living thing came from the bear. And then he brought forth the very last thing.'

'What was the last thing?' The fox's voice was muffled because her snout was buried in the white bear's fur, but he knew what she was asking. She asked the same question every time.

'You know what the last thing is,' said the white bear. He thought suddenly of the icebergs he would see on the next day's hunt. How the ice turned blue at its curves. He thought of the floes that he would ride across the water.

'I want to hear you tell it.'

'The very last thing brought forth by the very first bear was a fox.'

'Tell why it was a fox.'

'Because the first bear needed a guide through the new world he made. He needed someone to see it with. Someone nimble, who would watch out for him.'

'He needed a friend.' The fox leapt out from the bear's neck, spun in a circle and curled up once more.

'He needed a friend.' The white bear tucked his head around the warmth of the fox's body and closed his eyes against the night. And he dreamed, as he always did, of the world as it was now, the world as it was before he was born, and in the moments

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right before waking, he dreamed of the first bear.

The white bear knew he had been alone for a long time. Ever since he left his mother, he had been alone.

It hadn't always been that way. The white bear remembered being nestled in a snowy den with his mother and his twin. They wrapped their legs around each other as their mother told them stories about how the white bears used to live. All of them together, gathered in crowds on the floes. Riding them like ships. They would travel around the whole world on the ice. An army of white bears. Exploring everything that was theirs; all that had been made by the first bear, who was the mother and father of all the bears.

'When?' his twin had asked. 'When you were a cub?'

'No,' said their mother.

'When your mother was a cub?'

'No.'

'Then when?'

'A long time ago,' she said. 'Before I was born, and before my mother was born, and her mother.'

'Then how do you know how it was? How do you know there were others?'

'I just know,' she said.

The white bear and his twin couldn't imagine a home other than their den, and the luminous blue of the packed snow inside. They could not understand a world other than the curves and turns of the surfaces of the glaciers they travelled with



their mother. They mimicked her and raised their noses to the air when she began tracking a seal before a hunt. The white bear was astonished at the oily scent of its breath driving over the ice, and he lay on his belly with his twin at the seal's breathing hole that their mother led them to. But when the seal emerged, it was their mother who caught it. She taught them what to eat and what to leave behind.

‘For the foxes,’ she said, ‘in case they come.’

‘Like the first bear!’ cried the twin.

‘Like the first bear,’ said their mother.

And when the hunt and the feeding were over, the white bear and his twin, drowsy and intoxicated by seal fat, would climb on to her back and cling to her fur as she made her way across the snow to their den. And so it seemed that the three of them were the only bears in the world.

When they were grown, the white bear, his twin and their mother parted and disappeared from each other as they crossed the tundra. Starting from a single point and then receding into the white.

And then one day the fox came. The white bear tried to remember when she arrived and began to skitter after him like an uneasy shadow, pouncing on his footprints as he plodded across the snow. But the memory kept drifting away from him and he couldn't catch it. Was it . . . no, perhaps it was . . . and then it would slip from his teeth.

‘You should go now,’ said the fox. She hopped from the snow up on to the white bear's shoulder. He was crouched behind a snowbank on his

## FICTION

stomach. A long dawn had given way to a short day and they had found a seal. The fox was worried that the white bear would miss it. He had brought them closer to the edge of the coast, following the scent of its breath, but he was moving slowly. When the white bear paused to raise his nose to a stream of air, the fox wound her way around his legs; dancing and pouncing until the white bear moved again. When they finally spotted the seal, the white bear pressed himself to the ground behind a low mound of snow. He lay as still as he could and imagined himself transforming into a hill in the ice fields.

‘No, it’s too early and you’re making too much noise,’ said the bear.

‘But you’ll miss it!’ The fox jumped down and then up again, sending a spray of glittering powder to scatter in the sun. The deep blue of the sky stretched to the edge of the white bear’s vision.

‘I don’t know where it’s going to go,’ said the white bear. ‘I’m just watching it.’

‘A watcher like you will always be hungry. Should I get it for you?’ The fox was anxious. The first time she ever saw the white bear was from a distance. She had been crouched over her diminished cache of eggs, and as she sucked the yolk from the last one, she decided she might follow the bear and live on the carcasses he would leave behind. *The bear is alone*, she thought to herself, *like the first bear*.

But now it was the white bear who was diminished. It had been nearly one full ice season

and he had caught almost nothing. The fox would pull fish from the edge of the water, or voles she heard under the snow, and share them with the white bear. But they couldn't hold back his hunger.

'You're too small.' The white bear stayed motionless and watched the seal turn its face towards the sun and stretch itself on a vast ice floe. The white bear wasn't sure how close it was, the ice; and also, if it would hold him. 'I'm going now,' the white bear finally said. He reached one paw forward and then stalked slowly along the snow, keeping his body close to the ground until he felt the pressure beneath his feet that told him it was now ice that bore him. The seal grew as the bear advanced. Like a dark sun. Like a magnet drawing in the hungry. How many days had it been since the white bear had last eaten?

The fox followed him along the ice, and the white bear imagined her face behind him. The face that by now he knew so well. Eyes and nose dark like the deep sea. Coat white like the snow. She was exactly like the white bear.

And also she was nothing like him.

They were close enough now that the white bear could see the seal's size, and the gulf of water that had carved its way between the floe and the coastal ice. And the white bear became weary. He thought of this distance as a thing that had no meaning any more. A thing that stretched and stretched until something broke. And then the broken pieces would stretch again, until they broke

again, until the whole world was spread thin and shattered.

The white bear thought that perhaps he would always be hungry.

‘I have to go in,’ said the white bear.

‘The water?’ asked the fox. ‘You’re not strong enough any more.’ She stood near the bear’s shoulder and looked out over the gulf between them and the floe, now an expanse larger than the last one the bear had faced. The fox’s paws barely made a mark in the layer of snow that covered the ice. She remembered the last time that they hunted together, and failed together. The icy claws of the winter ocean piercing her coat and reaching all the way to her skin. Even after shaking the water from her fur, the chill stayed with her and at night she had nestled at the white bear’s throat, shivering.

In the distance an iceberg, newly calved from the glacier, rose from the water like a desolate island. The white bear saw that the deep blue of its contours was the same as the sky.

The white bear thought of the fox’s prints in the snow that same way that he thought about stars. When he watched the night sky, he felt that they rotated around a point and he sat at the centre. And he was at the centre of the fox’s dancing paw prints as they made their way across the snow, across the ice, and into the sea, where her prints vanished as if into a darkened dawn.

Did she know how much he needed her now? How he didn’t remember solitude any more and

would go anywhere she led him because she was the brightest star?

The white bear leapt over the edge and plunged into the water. He did not wonder if the fox had joined him.

In the grip of the sea, the white bear pressed his ears down, shut his nostrils, and became weightless. When he was a cub, he had been afraid of the ocean. It seemed cold and unforgiving and woven through with currents that would pull him away from his mother and his twin. But now he relished this feeling of being suspended above the inky depths. If he listened carefully, he could hear the whales slipping through the deep as they travelled the whole of the sea. He wondered sometimes what other creatures the first bear had scattered in the water when he made the whole world, and what of the first bear's creation had already disappeared forever.

The white bear began to swim.

He pulled his paws through the water and felt it ripple as it passed between his toes. And he remembered when he and his twin were taught to swim by their mother.

'You will live alone,' said their mother.

'But why?' asked the white bear, then just a cub.

'Because there isn't enough any more,' she said.

'Of what?'

'Of anything. There isn't enough ice. There isn't enough food. There aren't enough bears.' She stood with them at the edge of the ice as the three

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of them peered into the sea. 'You must learn how to hunt. And you will do this alone. Until you mate and your mate has cubs and they are sent to do this alone.'

The white bear and his twin looked at each other and then their mother. They thought separately of their den, and the press of her coat, and how it was her who caught them if they stumbled down a snowbank. The white bear thought also of her milk and how it was warm and it fed him and his twin and how, with it, there was no need to go into the liquid obsidian of the sea.

'I want to be with you always,' the white bear said then, 'so I will never be alone.'

'It will be all right,' said their mother. 'You will be like the first bear. The first bear was alone.'

'The first bear had the fox. He wasn't alone,' said the twin.

'I don't know if there are any foxes any more,' said their mother. 'Maybe the foxes are gone.' She dove into the water and the white bear and his twin followed her. Buoyed by the air in their coats, they pulled at the water with their paws and stayed close to her. The surface of the ice at the top of the water looked a little like clouds to the white bear and his twin, like a storm brewing above the calm of the sea. Later, as the white bear and his twin stood on the ice and shook the water from their fur, born almost anew after a plunge into the ocean, he looked around at the tundra for signs of a fox. And there was nothing. *I will be alone*, he thought to himself.

Now, as the fox followed the white bear,

swimming at the edge of his vision, he remembered his surprise when she arrived. He had been alone, and now she was with him.

He saw the light shift, and he looked for the edge of the ice floe. The fox swam beside him whispering quietly to herself the words of a song the bear could not remember, but felt he knew just the same.

The white bear reached the edge of the floe and saw it had been broken. What had once been a kind of jagged continent had splintered into a diminished icy island.

The white bear surfaced, drew in a deep breath and slipped quietly under the ice, hunting for a shadow, and hunting for the seal.

‘It’s that way,’ said the fox. ‘I can see it.’ Her voice took on a strange quality underwater. It sounded, to the white bear, like it was coming from a great distance.

‘I know,’ said the bear.

‘It’s a fat one.’

‘Hush,’ said the bear. He moved further along under the ice, blowing bubbles like pearls. He emerged quiet on the other side. His eyes fixed on the seal’s back; smooth and speckled, the sun following the curve of its body; its markings forming a pattern like dark stones scattered across a sandy shore.

The white bear tried to remember the last time he had seen a seal like this. Since the fox arrived, he had seen one, but had failed to catch it.

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The one before that had been when the white bear was alone. There had been the bounty of a whale carcass once, but that was when the white bear was younger. He had seen other bears at the carcass. Several of them, and they had stood together, close at the shoulder. The white bear marvelled at the warmth of them. The steam of their breath. The sounds of their voices. He imagined all of them leaping on to a floe at once and pushing it away from the coast to explore the world together. He looked for his twin, but did not see him among the feeding bears. He wondered if his twin would be familiar to him any more; they had been apart for so many seasons. When the carcass was spent, they all scattered and the white bear was alone again. The sea ice had come and gone several times now since he last saw any other bears. The ice used to spread further and last longer. But now it seemed as though everything was water and barren land and the white bear would be swimming between them forever.

Sometimes the white bear liked to roll on to his back in the snow and gaze up at the canopy of the night sky or watch the terns flying overhead in daylight. When the fox first arrived, she would climb on to the mountain of his belly and curl her nose into her tail. And then she would ask, as she always did, about the first bear. But as the hungry days stretched further and further, the mountain of the white bear eroded. Instead, the fox walked on deft feet across his chest, balancing on his bones, and curled up at his throat, where the warmth of his



body lingered.

The white bear quietly lifted his head above the surface, treading water. The fox emerged next to the bear and watched the seal with him. 'Has it seen you?' she asked.

'No,' said the bear. 'Not yet.'

'You should go before it sees you.'

'I know.' In one swift motion, the white bear rose from the water on to the edge of the floe, two great paws pushing him until the whole of his body was on the ice. The floe rocked and he dove towards the seal. The fox followed. But it was too late. The seal turned and tumbled into the water.

'Follow it!' the fox cried and leapt into the sea. The white bear dove in after her. But the seal, ungainly on the ice, transformed into something elegant underwater. It slipped away from the white bear in curving spirals. And the bear's coat, saturated by the sea, pulled the speed of his limbs to a crawl. He remembered a dream he had once of running. He couldn't remember if he was running towards or away from something, but the air in his dream felt like the sea did now. Thick and cumbersome, reining his legs in so that he couldn't move fast enough. He was unable to catch anything. Unable to escape anything. The seal whirled away into the blue and the white bear was left to return to the floe. He surfaced again with the fox by his side. He lifted one wet paw on to the edge, then another, and then heaved himself on to the surface.

The light above the surface felt as though

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it would shatter him. So different from the quiet diffusion underwater.

The white bear stood on his hind legs and stretched his body as tall as it would go. He wondered if the first bear had stood like this before he carved out the valleys and wept to fill the sea. The bear's shadow betrayed his hunger. His heavy limbs looked out of place against the concave curves and jutting bones of his torso. Spread out before him was the world the first bear made. Cold, and desolate, and beautiful. ◇

A version of this story appears in *What We Fed to the Manticore*, Talia Lakshmi Kolluri's first collection of short fiction. It will be published by Tin House on 6 September 2022. Published with permission from Tin House and Curtis Brown, Ltd. Copyright © Talia Lakshmi Kolluri, 2022.



‘We’re a product  
of our days,  
not our choices.’

An interview with  
Moses McKenzie

*Tracing the path of a young Black man from Bristol, McKenzie's debut novel An Olive Grove in Ends paints an unforgettable portrait of life on the streets, futures overturned, and dreams in peril.*

## FIVE DIALS

What was your writing process in *An Olive Grove in Ends*; where did the book really begin?

## MOSES MCKENZIE

My process always begins with my opinions, as I'm an opinionated person. So I'll start with my opinions and I'll think—what is it I want to say, what do I want to explore and learn about? So much research goes into a book. My opinions then become the themes and I'll write them down in around two to five short sentences. I pitch my opinions as if they're facts just cause of the house I grew up in. My themes become my characters and then my characters become my plot.

## FD

Could you tell me about the inspiration behind *An Olive Grove in Ends*?

## MM

I wrote it as a love letter to my area, and as a love letter to my little cousin.

FD

The language you use to create that setting is so evocative, it makes the setting almost its own character. I feel like I could walk those streets and recognize them through your writing. How important was it to you that the novel was set in Bristol? Do you think it could have been the same novel if it was set somewhere else?

MM

It could have been a similar novel. The themes could be the same in other areas in England. Any place has ends, so wherever that is, this could have been set. But it would've been different cause of the people. Obviously in my area, the two predominant Black communities are the Jamaican community and the Somali community. If you were to set this novel in London, it wouldn't be that homogenous. If you set it in Birmingham, the two communities would be Jamaican and Pakistani. Which would then change the novel. Because it would change how all those cultures would influence one another. So thematically, I think it could have existed in other places, but the setting, I don't think there's anywhere like Bristol. Even statistically, it's one of the most racially segregated cities, and then it's

just Jamaican and it's just Somali. Like—the Nigerian community here is not big. There is a small Kenyan and Sudan community, but they kind of all have to fall into either Jamaican or Somali community. Cause there's just so many of us.

FD

That makes so much sense. One of the themes that jumped out to me the most was this idea of these crossroad-moment decisions that the characters in your book face about what kind of direction to take. You write really beautifully about what it means to have choices, whether we actually have the ability to make choices, and how that affects our direction. Could you talk a little more about that idea?

MM

The book starts with my opinions, and that was the main opinion that the book started with. We're a product of our days, not our choices. I do workshops in schools, and I was talking in one the other day where one of the Year Sevens—which is mad—asked me: 'Do you think everyone is in control of their narrative?' She hadn't even read the book, but I guess she asked me based on the things that I had been saying. But that is what the book is about. And my answer was no, I think there's not a single person in the world who's entirely

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in control of their narrative. Cause there's not a single person who's detached from society. Or from their ancestors. No one's an island—every choice we make is a product of other people's choices and of the world that we live in. And that was the point I was trying to make, because we have to make allowances for that. And I think a lot of us know that, and say that vocally, but it needs to impact how we live and change our lack of compassion. We don't show that kind of compassion very often. And then you have to look at our judicial systems in that way as well. Understanding the fact that we are a product of our days, as opposed to our choices and even the choices that we can make. I don't believe in our choices being written, I believe in free will, but even within that free will, we're exercising such a small amount because we can only do what we were taught to do. We can only respond in a way that we were taught to respond. We have the tools that we are given and learn other tools. For example, if you're raised without being taught resilience, then how do you then build resilience? That's a lifelong thing. You know what I'm saying? And that's a lifelong thing with very actionable steps and a lot of people, again, don't even have the tools to root and to be self-aware and then to take those actionable steps. And that's only internal tools, but when you look at external tools, we live in a world



where access to those tools costs money.

How do you navigate that? Especially if you're from like a working-class or a lower-income background. So that's essentially what the novel is about. And it's set in my home, to showcase my area. And as I said, I've written it for my little cousin who grew up in the street behind me. So it's showcasing that, and I've written it for a very specific audience, an audience who will completely recognize that. Do you know what I'm saying?

FD

I love what you say about us being a product of our days. Cause I think that's so beautifully articulated in your book. How has the response been from the audience that you were hoping would read it?

MM

Well, I've heard from a lot of people, and everyone's rocking with it.

FD

That's amazing. That must feel so gratifying. The theme of the importance of community is explored with so much nuance in the book. Because there were a lot of negative consequences attached to loyalty and dependency. I'll give an example. Looking at the central friends—Sayon and Cuba's

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relationship. There are moments where leaning on each other is what gets them through something really difficult. But then that relationship can also lead to both of them making bad decisions or ending up in situations that they don't want to be in.

MM

Well, I don't actually know how many bad decisions they make. I think criminality for me personally—and for them in the novel—would never define what a good or a bad decision is. But I think the community you're in and the world that you exist in obviously defines your morality. The law will also have an impact on your morality, because even if there's something that I don't believe is wrong, I don't want to go to jail, so that's the deterrent. That's what jail's for—deterrence, not rehabilitation. It works for some people and it doesn't work for others. And when you're raising a community where, for example, violence is normal and committing crimes is a normal thing or a way to make money and a way to make it out, then morality is blurred. As it always would be. I mean, there's loads of parts of the world where child marriage is legalized. It's absolutely accepted. And parents will encourage or even force their children into child marriages with no conception or

## Moses McKenzie

understanding or appreciation or belief that it is wrong. Whereas I believe that's absolutely wrong. I think the community that you're raised in very much defines your morality.

FD

That comment about community is so interesting. Especially as the protagonist has so many moments where he's feeling so trapped by his lack of choices that he wants to leave his community, he wants to escape. But he also grapples with feeling that actually Bristol is where he wants to stay.

MM

I think the whole language of being raised in the ends revolves around trying to make it out. That's the language that you hear from when you're a youth all the way through. Everyone trying to make it out. And I think for some that's perfectly valid. But I think when everyone is trying to make it out, it can cause problems in the community. With the start of my generation—kids who were born in the eighties—I've seen a lot of them leave my area. And that's people in any walk of life from my area. They all wanted to leave. And now they've left. And when they left, they sold houses to white people. And they could directly contribute to the gentrification of this area.

So when we talk about the language of making it out, we can look at the reputation of my area as an example. Even if you type 'Easton' into Google now, the first thing that comes up is 'Is Easton safe?' That's been the narrative of this area since the nineties, I believe. Or, well, it's been the media's narrative since Black people came here. When I was growing up in Easton, St Paul's in particular was portrayed as one of the worst places to be. They'd regularly highlight all the crime in our areas as if the rest of the areas didn't have any crime, even when there were actually a few areas with significantly more. But anyway, when you buy into that narrative and say, OK, we just need to make it out, the area changes. And what you sacrifice is the community. You sacrifice the love, you sacrifice the bubble of Blackness. And the appreciation of that is not strong enough. We live in a country where we are less than 4 per cent of the general population. We can't move freely. So it's so important to be around our own people. And when these areas fracture and split up, you are completely shattering community. And in a way, that can't really be fixed; I can't see where the next wave of immigration from a Black country is coming from. Especially when you look at the people in charge of our country.

So this less than 4 per cent, I imagine, will stay consistent for a long time.

And then when you compare that to the States, for example, I think it's around 12 per cent of the population that is Black, and there exist cities like Atlanta, which is like 51 per cent Black. And I believe that will never happen in this country. So the effects of leaving your area are so much more significant than in, for example, America, which we often compare ourselves to. And we often look at them as if they're in a far worse position than us, but in a lot of cases, they're in a far better position.

FD

You're so right. I agree with that. I wanted to talk a little bit, as well, about the way that you drew characters who make up the community in the novel, because I think that's one of my favourite things about it. All the characters are drawn with so much complexity. I was really also struck by how you make these parallels between characters that you wouldn't think have that many similarities. Cuba and Pastor Lynn, for example. They aren't people who really interact with each other in their adult lives, but there's a lot about them that is very alike: their loyalty, their strong belief in their own ethical codes. Were those parallels that you created on purpose?

MM

I think there are a lot of parallels, and a lot of characters who are essentially versions of one another. Sayon and Cuba obviously have a lot of similarities. One thing I find interesting is the language a lot of the people I've spoken to about the book use in their perception of Sayon and Cuba as being very different. And I think they are versions of each other. And that's understandable in a sense, because it's written in first person. The narrator appears to be far more introspective, but in reality he makes the same decisions and often reaches the same conclusions as if the novel had been written from Cuba's perspective. If Cuba was the narrator, then we would've looked at Sayon as the cold harsh dangerous character, and we would've had more empathy for Cuba. A lot of people see Cuba more as the person who's roped Sayon into this. But I believe that Sayon always would've been involved. I think a lot of people are just versions of each other, because a lot of people are raised in the same place. And where I'm from, they're raised in relation to Christianity or Islam, the two religions obviously almost exactly the same, so I think it's just the environments that create similar people. And even outside the book, in general, I don't believe much in difference. Whether I explore it consciously in the book or not, I just don't

believe much in difference between people.

FD

That's so interesting. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

MM

Well, this is a conversation I have with my brother all the time. I believe there are a finite amount of emotions, and there have always been a finite amount of emotions. So if we look at the history of people, we think of most of it as very removed from us without realizing that every single day that we exist, we are creating a part of history. But we look at our predecessors as simultaneously far more intelligent than us and far less intelligent than us. And we often look at them as morally corrupt. But then at the same time, every generation that follows ours, we say: 'This is the worst generation.' Whereas when you have an appreciation of history, I think you kind of realize everything's exactly the same. That in terms of human behaviour nothing's ever changed and it can't change. Because human emotions are finite; the only thing that changes with emotions is the fact that they're relative. So I'm talking about how much someone experiences an emotion, and the depth of the emotion that they experience. And if human emotions are finite, then no

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matter how the world changes, we can only continue to interact with it in the same way. So nowadays, let's say, social media gives us small hits of dopamine, so we feel happy when we're on social media. Two thousand years ago, hopscotch gave us small amounts of dopamine. That happiness—it's the same feeling; therefore, the same responses will come from those feelings. History will continue to repeat itself, and humans will respond in the same way. ◇





FOUR POEMS

Holly Hopkins

## Zombies

We thought they'd be flesh-robots  
with dowsing rod arms, relentless.  
But when they rose they were so tired,  
just wanted to rest up,  
wet wood against a wall,  
dummies from a damp museum.  
They were excellent listeners.  
There were plans to pair them  
with the lonely and the elderly,  
designated benches for them to chat,  
but what little vim they had ran down.  
We forgot about the cremated –  
to be as light as dust.  
A single fleck of soil nudged  
and then another, miles away.  
It took time, but sped up  
around the iron-filing stage.  
Then the swarm:  
each individual a brown cloud, no body, no brain,  
no dead-weight arms, no suitcase of meat.  
Ever been in a sandstorm?  
It feels like being bitten, at first,  
then burned. They blew right through us.

## FOUR POEMS

### Rows of Differently Coloured Houses

By the sea, who was first  
to buy their house a tin of yellow paint?  
It stuck out like a golden tooth.  
Then Captain's House went pink  
and Belvedere turned green:  
each street a string of plastic beads  
and even when the sea's a rotten fish,  
the town's as hopeful as a baby's quilt.

And here we are, on Megabus, curling  
through the inland towns that didn't get a train  
or sea, or any special scenery.  
Lakes of post-war pebbledash  
grey on grey on grey on grey.  
Everyone hunched against the rain  
as if it were a painful package, shouldered.

And if the borough council set aside  
enough for everyone to pick a colour?

*How dare you?  
As if that's the problem!*

Stegosaurus, primrose, marmalade,  
strawberry, summer's day, champagne.

# Holly Hopkins

## Stay Home

Remember when we were flat hunting?  
Our budget: ex-council, rented-rotten  
and don't trust the gas certificate;  
like what we thought we'd been living in.

There was that studenty mixed-doubles  
with a rabbit stoppered in a hamster cage.  
There were slim men asleep with rucksacks  
and coats rolled on the ends of their beds.

I can't stop thinking of it.  
That flat in Tower Hamlets where every wall  
is bunks. So tight, two people on opposite sides  
can touch knees across the gap.

Some beds are made with pillows at both ends.  
Some beds have neatly bundled clothes  
and a grungy dog or plastic horse tucked  
where a grown-up sleeps round a child.

## FOUR POEMS

There are kids mute and staring at us  
from the upper bunks, but the estate agent  
keeps going like a pre-recorded tape.  
There are adults folded away on their shelves,

a woman silently works the kitchenette,  
and we can't get out fast enough.  
I could whizz you up a metaphor,  
a neat pun, appropriately shamed:

*My stomach fills with fluid, legs with fluid,  
still filling, so large, so disgustingly large  
I could displace a minibus of people.*  
Stupid. Self-serving. I just needed to tell you,

again, what you certainly already know.  
That in London, where they closed  
Victoria Park and Brockwell Park,  
people are living eight to a room.

Victoria Park and Brockwell Park were both temporarily closed  
in spring 2020. Lambeth Council, who manage Brockwell Park,  
said the closure was 'to ensure people observe the critically important  
social-distancing measures needed right now to fight coronavirus'.

# Holly Hopkins

## Inheritance

*To fight climate change, I can announce this government will institute 4 hours of community service per week, per man, and 7 hours and 12 minutes per woman.*

At least that statement would be honest. No more pretending it's just a few more minutes, just a little bit more effort. That climate care can be achieved via a listicle of easy swaps.

And if you were to actually follow through? How many minutes per reusable nappy? And no tumble dryer, just winter babygrows over radiators like shucked skins. No sprays in bottle-guns, all soapy water and your elbow grease. Cloths not kitchen roll. Faffy washable food wraps. A bus to the bring-your-own-containers organic store, every moment weighing up which stranger you'll trust to hold your baby if someone needs the wheelchair space—it takes two hands to collapse your pram. Oh, it's so much healthier to cook from scratch. Make making the packed lunches therapeutic. Make do and mend. Trawl Freecycle and eBay in the evenings—it's like a game! The special bathroom bin houses the dark red odour of reusable sanitary items awaiting your attention.

I'm not saying this work doesn't need to be done, just that we need to be honest about who'll be doing it.

My mother-out-law stares at me after this rant. She's so extraordinarily kind. Her face takes on a spongy look, maybe of a woman passing on an heirloom, maybe of a woman biting back, *What did you think we've been shouting all our lives?*

Women in the UK work 1.8 hours of unpaid domestic and care labour for every hour worked by men (Office for National Statistics).

MEMOIR

# None of the Above

Travis Alabanza



I

used not to be able to imagine myself in the future. When people asked what I wanted to be when I grew up, I just imagined the then-tiny version of myself in a tiny costume of a fireman or being a small version of a tree. When I grew older, and the concept of the future became clearer, I realized I still found it hard to visualize. I could see others in it, imagine my mother growing older, or lovers at the time ageing, yet when I pictured myself I still could not see anything. I'd often copy and paste whatever I looked like in that moment on to the idea of myself when I was fifty or sixty. So, if I was talking about having kids when I was forty, I would picture the current version of myself with children around me.

I remember one time I was in bed with a partner, one of the ones who asked me what I wanted to call my \_\_\_\_\_, and our hearts were beating in that tempo often found after sex: slow but charged, vulnerable yet playful. They asked me, 'What do you want to look like when you are older? I think you will have Gillian Anderson energy.' I reminded them I am Black, and that Gillian Anderson is sexy but very much white-woman vibes. But then I paused. I realized I could not picture myself. I couldn't see a version of myself ageing.

It has always bothered me, not being able to visualize what I may look like in the future. Knowing I so desperately want to be there, but not

## MEMOIR

knowing how I want to be physically. Hoping that by then we have found a way to evaporate into genderless blobs of our energy, talking to each other without ever being perceived. Sometimes I make jokes to my friends, when we talk about the future. I say, ‘Oh well, by then I’ll have my titties,’ and we all nod and smile. Excited at my visions for myself. Yet I have been saying that joke for four years now, and I still feel exactly the same lack of excitement at the prospect of making that vision a reality. I could do it, sure, but it is not a vision that moves me.

Other times, I try and imagine myself forty years old, a beard around my face and a suit on. I’ve started working out loads and I’ve found a gay man who likes me for my fun and free personality but has stayed for the muscles and just-acceptable femininity. We are both campy gays who are proud faggots behind closed doors, and we met on Tinder, where you can’t hear the femininity in my voice anyway. Any time a sprinkle of my gender expression comes through, all my partner has to do is look at my physique, and he is reminded that we are safe enough to settle down. He looks happy; I can’t tell if I do. Because I cannot really see myself in the image. I cannot really imagine that image with all of my limbs still intact, or my voice still speaking. I feel I would have to run away somewhere new, start afresh, cut off contact with anyone that knew me, so no one could say, ‘We know this is not you, we know you are not happy’—but at least then I would have safety. Some security. A break from

harassment. Yet I am not sure any of that matters if I also do not have my voice.

My favourite daydream of myself in the future is when I see myself as Pete Burns, walking to get a can of Coke from the shops. I do not mean that I look like a version of Pete Burns, I mean that I literally am him. Pete Burns, may he rest in perfect peace, was an androgynous icon to me, yet to many his face was confusing. Heavy amounts of plastic surgery, razor-sharp eyebrows, and a still-harsh deep accent. Often, he said, 'I'm just Pete,' when asked questions about himself, as well as saying he was a man. Yet in my imagination, it is the 'just Pete' that sticks, in a way that our imagination sometimes wants to make things simpler for our own benefit. My version of him has him walking to the shops just screaming, 'I'm Pete!' to anyone who dares to challenge him.

I think it is the 'just Pete' of him that makes me daydream of being him. The way in which, through surgeries, cosmetic procedures and glam, he almost avoided the need to gender, instead forming another category within his body. The kind of image that makes saying, 'You look like an alien,' the largest compliment possible. I find it an admirable daydream. The perseverance, time and strength it takes to have work done to your body is not lost on me—even more so now that I spend most hours of the day thinking about it—and to land in a space where others do not know where to place you, yet in an intentional extreme of that, feels

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liberating. I daydream of having so much plastic surgery done to my face that none of my phones can recognize me. That all the laughs and heckles I received in the past on leaving the house would at least now make sense. It does not feel sad. Rather I hear myself saying, ‘Before you treated me like I was not human because I was gender non-conforming, well now look: I have spent all this money to appear like I am not from this planet—laugh all you want, because maybe now I am in on the joke.’ Something about it feels intentional. I imagine Pete Burns walking to the shop to get a can of Coke, and there is something in the image that feels like he has taken back control.

I just wish I could see my face in that imagination too. Or that I could stop imagining what I may look like in the future, and instead work to create it. To move out of this stagnant space that the gender binary and its violent consequences have left me in. To stop thinking and instead to feel. I have a feeling it is a product of sitting inside for almost a year, that when you are outside and living fully you do not have this much time to pathologize yourself—instead you are too busy doing. You have no time to wonder how something may be viewed, because you are too busy fighting for your right to do it.

Well, maybe that is it. I need to remember the *doing* within my transness. How, in my opinion, I was only trans when the world and you started *doing* things in reaction to me. That my transness was a choice I made so I could live more honestly, and like

that movement and power, I now have the choice to *do* what I wish. I cannot control what others may read me as, nor can I control how others may treat me, but I do have control over what I do. And I can make the choices that will leave me feeling like I can find a version of myself within them. So that my face is not a pixelated vision.

The way the world punishes gender non-conformity is one of our greatest losses. If the gender binary was not so painfully dictated to us, and we allowed people to own their gender more freely, we would have so much more life. It is impossible to navigate this world as visibly gender non-conforming and not to carry scars, for the weight of all the memories of things said and done to you not to stick to your skin. Impossible not to feel how your body has been given to gender violence and the fight you undertake to claim it back. But when I think of my friend saying, ‘This is for us,’ despite all the knowledge of how the world strips us of our agency, it reminds me that it will all be in vain if I also let *them* take my choice. If in all of this, I allow them to strip me of my declaration of self.

I do not know what I will look like in ten years. Even if I decided now what I wanted to do with my body, I still would not know. Surgery and hormones are not magic wands, they are unpredictable and changeable. What I do know is that I do not want to be led by fear, or by sacrifice, or by others’ projections on to me. I want to be led by my desire, my choices, and my ability to carve

## MEMOIR

my own rules. Powered by seeing so many others create destinations on their bodies that are not dictated by *them*, I want to remain committed to forming myself in the way I wish—no matter the consequences.

I will not know the answer, because to know an answer about something as illogical as gender is an impossible task, but I do promise to do it for *us*, for *myself*, and not for *them*. ◇

Extract from *None of the Above*, forthcoming from Canongate in August 2022.



On folklore,  
superstition and  
remembered cities

Louise Kennedy  
and Ayanna  
Lloyd Banwo in  
conversation



## LOUISE KENNEDY

Ayanna! I think your book is brilliant. My first question is about your use of myth and magic. My short stories were very grounded in Irish mythology and the early Christian traditions that had their roots in paganism. I am very interested to know how much, if any, of the story of the parrots is rooted in folklore. Or if you made it up.

## AYANNA LLOYD BANWO

Louise! The days have been running away from me and it is getting harder and harder for me to chase them. Sometimes I just sit down and watch them get smaller and smaller in the distance and wave. How are you coping with all the book stuff? Is it more manageable for you since you have been published before?

That aside, I love your book. I've been wanting to read it since we were both on that *Observer* list [the 10 best debut novelists of 2022]. I was in Belfast last week for the International Arts Festival. A quick 24-hour turnaround but I did manage a little walk through the city, so when I later read the scene where Michael and Cushla take that first drive (definitely want to talk about Michael and Cushla in another email!) and she mentions the Town Hall, the Opera House, the Europa Hotel (where I stayed), I felt like I was in the car with them for a second, but in a very

different Belfast.

Today's Belfast wears its history so lightly, the little I saw of it. All shiny and clean and new and old and green and urban and open and safe, sophisticated but accessible. The sun was out, and I had a Guinness at The Crown. It felt like if I had a few more hours, I could easily see a lot more in a way that I never could in London. I wonder what it was like for you going back to 1975, and having the different layers of the city intersecting with each other in your mind. For you, of course, I'm sure the city doesn't wear its past lightly at all. Being a tourist makes liars out of places, doesn't it? You only see the face it shows you, unless you stay a while and listen to the stories it has to tell you, so much more than what you can see.

Speaking of more than you can see. Folklore! I absolutely must get your short stories too. I just had a conversation with another Trinidadian writer and we talked about the way this part of the world sometimes seems stripped of its mythologies and magic and folklore, exchanging them instead for empire. Irish writing doesn't feel that way though, bless you all. You know, every time I say I made that story up, it feels like cheating. I spent so much of my life reading and hearing folk tales, legends from so many places, that it doesn't seem possible to make something up completely. The basic idea of a paradise from

Louise Kennedy & Ayanna Lloyd Banwo

which humankind is absent and then comes in as a destructive force is certainly not new. Talking animals, sacred trees, ancient sacrifices, secret societies that keep the world spinning. But, yeah, it's not a Trinidad folk tale as it exists. Trinidad and Tobago is so rich in folklore—Papa Bois, who guards the forest; La Diabliesse, a beautiful woman with a hidden cow foot who lures wayward men to their deaths; the shapeshifting Lagahoo with a coffin strapped to his back, dragging his chains behind him—but it was the corbeaux that drew me. They are not figures of Trinidad mythology at all, but they are definitely an unmissable part of the landscape.

LK

What a brilliant reply. Thank you. We are well and truly off!

Time is indeed running away. Perhaps it is because life became so slow during the pandemic; now we are liberated it is flying again. Also, I am fifty-five, so the days are really galloping away. As for promoting the book... my stories came out in April 2021, at the tail end of the last long lockdown, and most of the promotional work was via platforms like Zoom. All my adult life I had found that sort of thing—public speaking, I suppose—terrifying, but it was easier to be scared at my kitchen table than on stage. For *Trespases* it has been

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a mixture of online and in-person stuff, and it seems the practice I got last year helped me get over the nerves. The other big thing that has been going on is the 200-mile round trip I make to Galway every second Tuesday to get a bag of big drugs in my arm; the melanoma I thought I had got over in 2019 reappeared last autumn. Which sounds tragic, but even on the worst days, something good to do with the book makes me forget myself. And the big drugs are working.

I love that you stayed in the Europa, and that Great Victoria Street was even a little familiar from *Trespases*. Many of the buildings in that area are probably listed, which has preserved it. It is interesting what you said about Belfast wearing its history lightly. We left in 1979, and after that found the city increasingly unnavigable, the new road they call the Westlink effectively disconnecting both the Falls and Shankill Roads from ‘town’. It is hard not to wonder if this was deliberate: one doesn’t have to go too far east, west or north to find marks left by the Troubles, while the commercial centre could be Manchester or Nottingham. To write *Trespases* I did lots of different things to conjure the Belfast of my childhood . . . watching YouTube, playing songs from the charts, hours of conversation with my family. In the end I had to trust my memories.

Where were you when you wrote *When*

*We Were Birds?* I read somewhere that you have been in East Anglia in the recent past. Are you still in the UK? I am asking because I need some distance from whatever I am trying to write about, temporal, geographical, emotional. Do you find that? I've been thinking too about how your novel is full of magic yet very much grounded in reality, and how affecting that is. The poverty that drove Darwin away from his mother and the belief system that had bolstered them all his life; the scene where he collected his shaven hair in an envelope, then burnt it, made me cry. The swagger of the gravediggers, even after Darwin's discovery of their nocturnal enterprises. Yejide and Seema's giddy encounter with boys.

Empire could have replaced folklore in this country too—Elizabeth I sent her soldiers across the Irish Sea with instructions to 'kill all the storytellers, break their harps', or words to that effect, but the myths and stories were too deeply bedded down in the landscape. There is even a word for this in the Irish language, *dinnseanchas*, which translates as 'lore of place', almost a form of deep mapping. Earlier I googled 'corbeaux': they look so sinister in flight. Also, it says the word refers to those who carted away dead bodies in plague times! Now that would be a really shite job.

Are you able to write at the moment?

ALB

Ah fuck, Louise (sorry! I cuss). Cancer is an absolute shit. Keep fighting up and praise to all the goddesses that were, are and ever will be for the good big drugs. I am happy that this beautiful book you have written has been giving your days another shape while you fight and heal.

One of the things I have been thinking about is how different the shape of my days have felt since my book came out. These days I seem to be governed by emails and calendars and deadlines, but not so long ago, during lockdown, time passed much more slowly. And it was all about pandemic news, the fear and panic of daily numbers and infection counts and death tolls, but as frantic as that was, I still had to deliberately place things in my day to fill them. I wrote, I took walks, I facetedimed my partner (we later got married during the last of the lockdowns!). I was also in Norwich then. (I'm in London now.) It was not that long ago but it feels like a distant memory, in all its surreal strangeness. I got so much writing done. I am writing now too, but it feels like I have to work at it a lot more.

That is so interesting that the further you go from that commercial centre in Belfast, the more you find physical reminders of the Troubles. But within the commercial centre, is there a kind of Forgetting? Lots of listed historical buildings are preserved, you said,

but which history? There is something about that word too, ‘Troubles’, so subtle and almost euphemistic. Like the way old people back home will say they ‘just have a little sugar’, when what they have is diabetes, lol.

You know this conversation about magic and reality keeps coming up—even the term ‘magical realism’. My everyday life is informed by traditions that believe in the power of the non-material world. For instance, I grew up with people saying you must never leave your hair lying about when you trim it, because birds might build a nest with it and then you will go mad, or that a powerful enemy could take it and use it to do you wickedness. Also, we live with flesh and non-flesh. And human flesh is not always the centre of the world. Nor is the living. The dead are present, the land is alive. I think that is my reality, really. What do you think?

I am not surprised at all that there is a word for these deeply embedded stories in the Irish language. You really can’t uproot the spiritual essence of a place permanently. It bubbles up when you are not looking, despite all efforts. Language is like that too. I alternated between a hardback copy and the audio book when I read *Trespases*, because I wanted to hear the pronunciation of the Irish words. I don’t think I could have written my own book in standard English—not even the third-person narration. It would not have sounded

## Q&A

right. Are you a very oral writer? Like, does it have to sound right to you in your ear as well as look right to you on the page? Do you speak Irish?

When I started writing *When We Were Birds* I was still in Trinidad and it began as a short story. All I had was the cemetery and a man walking around, checking to make sure there was no one left behind before he had to lock up. What I really had was the place—no plot, no fully developed characters. A year later, I started turning it into a novel in Norwich, in East Anglia—flat, big-sky, fen country—which is the furthest possible place from Trinidad landscape-wise! I guess, like you, I had to mine my own memories (which weren't that far away). But as the novel developed I decided the place was Trinidad, but not—the city was Port of Spain, but not—and that's where the fictional city of Port Angeles was born. I guess that was my distance? The imagined geography felt more 'real' for the novel; it felt right to bend the geography to the narrative instead of the other way around.

I want to ask you about love. It took me a long time to realize that I was writing a love story between Darwin and Yejide, because what was in the forefront of my mind were all these 'bigger' issues about lineage and grief and inheritance. And then it hit me like a



Louise Kennedy & Ayanna Lloyd Banwo

bus: oh my gosh! Of course this is what it is. The way you frame each chapter with a news report—attacks, arrests, deaths—means the Troubles are never far behind, even when the reader is getting lulled into this crackling and incredibly sexy love affair between Cushla and Michael. You never let us forget what REALLY shapes their days. But when the novel was just a twinkle in your eye, did you always know that this beautiful and fraught and complicated and maddening love story between Michael and Cushla was at the heart of it all?

LK

You need never apologize to me for swearing. I fkn love it. And thank you for invoking such power on my behalf. It's a rare moment that I allow myself a glimpse of a scenario in which the drugs don't work, and when I do, those are hard days. But thankfully few.

I found lots to do in the pandemic too. The dreaded PhD got finished, the short story collection was edited and published, and I pushed the novel through a few drafts. All of it was stuff I had been working on before though; I really could not have written anything new then. As for the correspondence. There is no stopping it. I had an out of office on my email for four months, and wrote 'I have cancer. Stop asking me to do shit.', and on my Twitter profile. Neither made a blind

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bit of difference. I'm not complaining, just a bit tired now. Lots of great books are published every year that don't get the attention ours have. So we are lucky articles. And you got married! I loved hearing about lockdown weddings; to make the commitment without all the carryon speaks volumes.

The listed buildings in the commercial centre are often those from Belfast's supposed heyday as a centre of industry. That these industries largely excluded Catholics from the workforce—some exceptions were made, such as in textile production, where the small bodies of women and girls were useful—is problematic for me. The museum they call 'Titanic Experience', for example, does not interrogate that history. The 'Troubles' is indeed a strange expression, perhaps because it is from earlier conflict, the vicious sectarian violence that gripped Belfast in 1920—21. It was resurrected by a journalist in 1969 and stuck. And 'just a little sugar'! Love it. When I tell people I have 'a bit of cancer', they can't cope.

I was trying to avoid using the term 'magical realism', as the idea of genre freaks me out. Like, do any of us really know what we are writing? And don't you find it weird when readers and critics see things in your book that were not intended? Sometimes I think that in fiction we leave ourselves very exposed; like, it is perfectly bloody obvious what our

terrors and hopes and obsessions are. As for beliefs. I spent my twenties and thirties trying to slough off the Catholic faith in which I was brought up. Since I got sick I have become increasingly agnostic, or perhaps receptive. It isn't merely that 'there are no atheists in a foxhole' thing; I don't actually have words for what it is, but there is something. It is fascinating to hear about superstitions to do with hair. My paternal great-grandmother believed that cutting one's hair on a Sunday brought terrible luck, and I still cannot bring myself to do it. I don't know where it came from, and have never heard of any other family taking such precautions. She also read teacups, and was sometimes tormented by what she saw in them.

Yes, I knew I was writing a love story, a doomed one at that, but had no idea what was going to happen along the way. The Troubles were meant to be the backdrop, but when I began trawling my memory for what it was like to be a child then I remembered the news, and how anxiously the adults clustered by the radio. The geography of the city in those years was superimposed with roadblocks and checkpoints and peace walls, so it was more important to get a sense of that than to be always accurate; I totally get why you needed to meld the actual place with the one in your imagination. I love how you wove the two

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stories of Yejide and Darwin together. There is a sense that they are on a similar trajectory, yet their worlds seem so incompatible; what joy when they do get together. And I also listened to the audiobook sometimes. It gave me a deeper sense not just of your use of language, but of the rhythms in your prose. Beautiful, actually.

### ALB

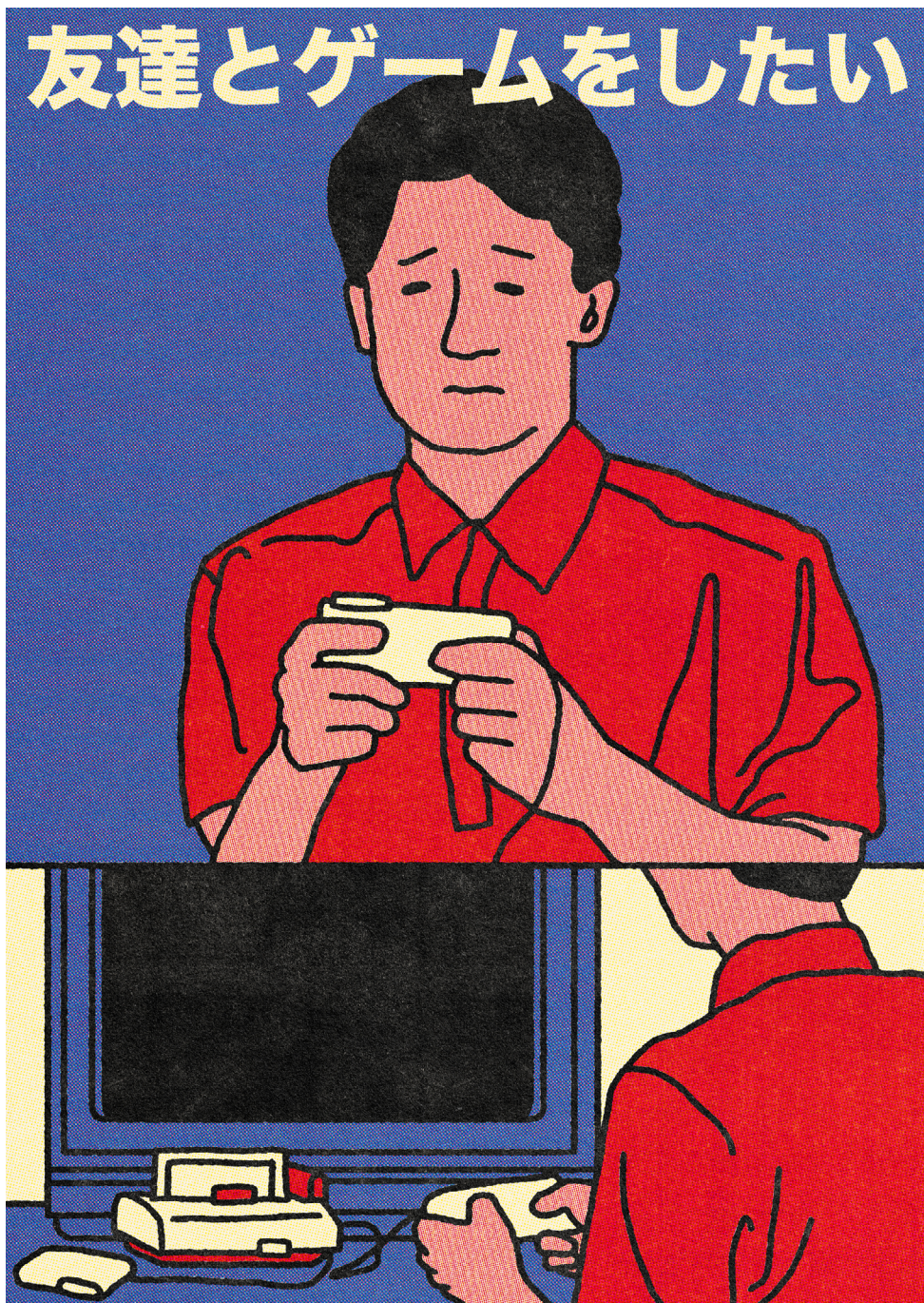
You finished your PhD! Congratulations! I am hoping to finish mine this year (fingers, toes, eyes and tits crossed). I am cackling at your out of office and have a vivid image of a very earnest PR person writing an email like ‘in the event you haven’t died, would you be able to . . .’ (My humour runs to the morbid side sometimes.) One thing, though, it keeps the thing honest. The calendar never lets you forget that these stories we make are part of a machine that must be fed. There is an innocent fantasy about writing the books and having people read them as some kind of benign and accidental miracle. But actually doing it? Oh, my sweet child, this is a business and that business needs to eat. As do we.

This whole thing about buildings and heritage and history is fraught in the Caribbean also, bound up in the tourist industry, in some islands more than others, and part of a sick nostalgia for a past that wasn’t beautiful at all—hotels and restaurants that were plantation

houses in a former life, houses built by artisans and tradespeople who could never afford to live in them. The houses in *Trespases* made me think a lot about the house in my next novel. The small markers of home for ordinary people—the velvet settee, the Tupperware, the slightly beat-up stove top, the marks on the Formica counters, the crochet doilies on a dressing table. I love the ways ordinary houses are full of little altars.

Fiction absolutely makes us very exposed. No matter what we think, we hide under the cover of ‘it’s not me, that didn’t happen, I just made it up’—our deepest haunts are right there. It doesn’t have to be autobiographical to be absolutely true. I wish I had better answers about religion. I didn’t grow up with much of an official religion at all, other than stories, which meant I found there was something to take in from pretty much all of them. ‘Receptive’ is a good word. The gods are big, the universe is bigger, and my mother is the biggest. In the midst of all things, most of my prayers are to her. And I believe in grandmothers too! My grandmother says she saw all her children in dreams before they were born—always the same dream—a baby on a beach, washed up from the waves and she would pick it up and see the face, and when her baby was born it was the same baby. They knew things, so much more than we do now. Here’s to us getting old enough to know things too. x ◇

# 友達とゲームをしたい



# Five Dials