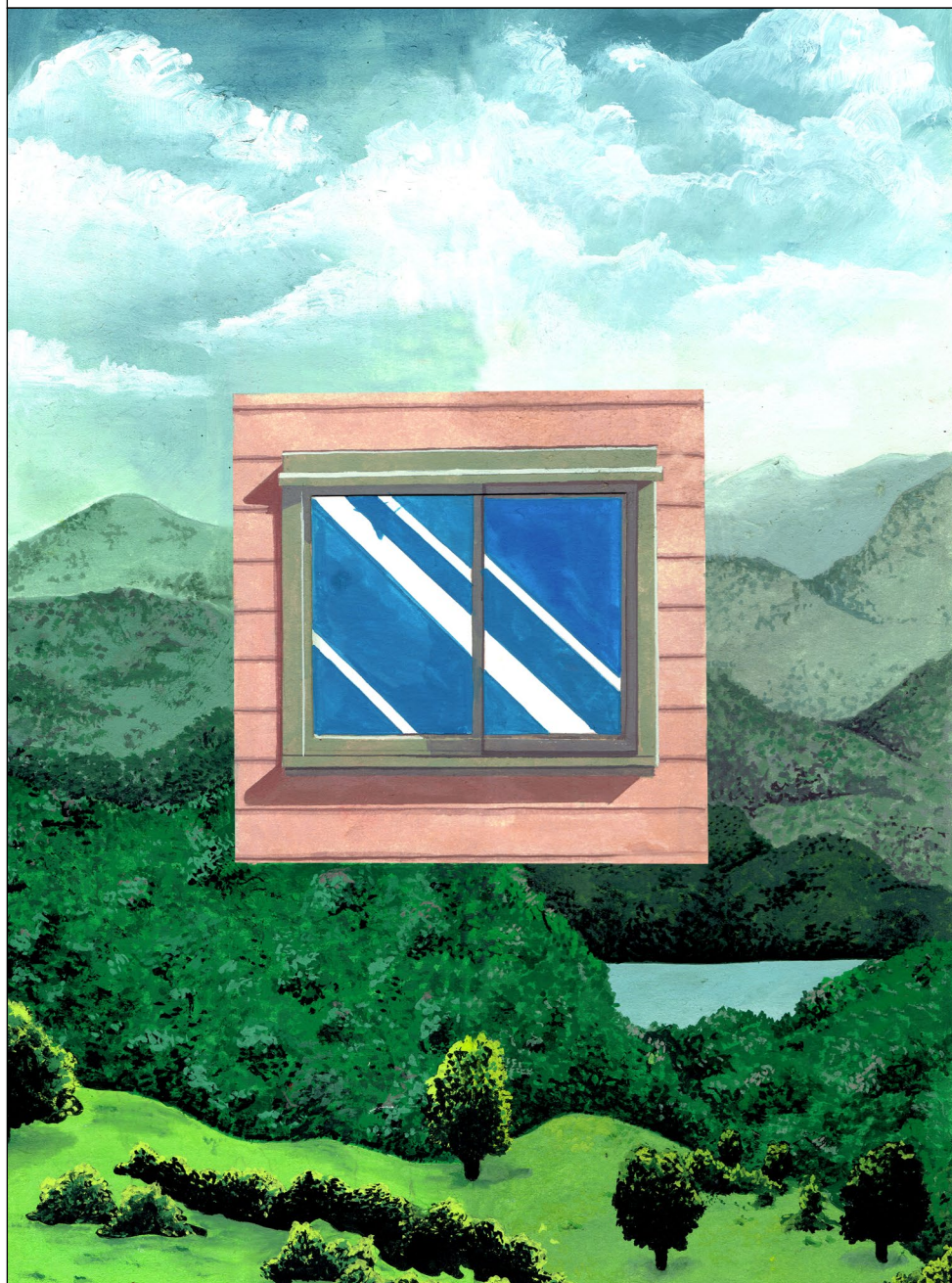


Five Dials

AUTUMN

22





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Joy and
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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 and Instagram at @fivedials.

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Helon Habila

is the author of *Oil on Water*, *Measuring Time*, *Waiting for an Angel*, *The Chibok Girls* and *Travellers*. He is professor of creative writing at George Mason University and lives in Virginia with his wife and three children.

Annie Katchinska

was born in Moscow in 1990 and grew up in London. She was a Faber New Poet in 2010. In 2018 she won an Eric Gregory Award and her pamphlet *Natto* was published by If A Leaf Falls Press. Her first collection of poems, *Aurora Town*, was published by Broken Sleep Books in 2021 and was shortlisted for the Seamus Heaney First Collection Poetry Prize.

Jee Leong Koh

is the author of *Steep Tea* (Carcenet), named a Best Book of the Year by the *Financial Times* and a finalist for the Lambda Literary Awards. His second Carcenet collection *Inspector Inspector* was published in August. He won the 2022 Singapore Literature Prize for his hybrid work of fiction *Snow at 5 PM: Translations of an insignificant Japanese poet*. Originally from Singapore, Koh lives in New York City, where he heads the literary non-profit Singapore Unbound and the indie press Gaudy Boy. singaporeunbound.org

Mattie Lubchansky

is a cartoonist and illustrator living in beautiful Queens, New York. They are the associate editor of *The Nib*, and their debut novel *Boys Weekend* will be out from Pantheon Books in 2023.

Ben Miller

is a writer and historian living in Berlin. With Huw Lemmey, he hosts *Bad Gays*, a podcast about evil and complicated queers in history, which has been downloaded nearly a million times; a book based on the show and passionately arguing for a more complex and political queer public history, *Bad Gays: A Homosexual History*, was published by Verso in 2022.

Tommi Parrish

is a trans Australian cartoonist and painter living in Western Massachusetts. Their debut work, *The Lie and How We Told It*, won the 2019 Lambda Literary Award for the best LGBTQ graphic novel.

Binyavanga Wainaina

was a Kenyan author, activist, journalist and 2002 winner of the Caine Prize for African Writing. His memoir, *One Day I Will Write About This Place*, was published in 2011. He died in 2019, and a collection of his essays on the African continent, *How to Write About Africa*, was published posthumously in 2022.

Yin Yin Thein

Myanmar freelance journalist Yin Yin Thein was violently arrested on November 18, 2021, by a group of 30 military and police authorities at her home in Indaw Township of Sagaing Division, according to local press reports.

Authorities confiscated her phone, laptop computer, and video camera tripods during the raid on her home, according to a *Mizzima* report, which quoted an anonymous relative who witnessed the arrest.

Yin Yin Thein was being detained at the Indaw police station on unclear charges, according to the *Mizzima* report and a report by the Assistance Association of Political Prisoners, a local rights group.

Yin Yin Thein is a regular contributor to the local *Lightning Journal* and *Monitor News Journal*, and is a member of the Myanmar Journalists Association, the *Mizzima* report said.

The Ministry of Information did not reply to the Committee to Protect Journalists' emailed request for comment on her legal status and treatment in detention.

Patrice Gbaguidi

Benin journalist Patrice Gbaguidi and his colleague Hervé Alladé have been jailed in Cotonou, Benin's largest city, since November 2021 on accusations that they violated the country's digital code because their report about a public official's alleged wrongdoing was distributed on social media.

Gbaguidi is the editor at *Le Soleil Bénin Infos* newspaper, which covers politics, the courts, development, education, and social justice, among other topics.

On November 18, Gbaguidi and Alladé, owner of *Le Soleil Bénin Infos*, went to the Central Office for Repression of Cybercrime in Cotonou after they were summoned there by authorities, according to a post on Facebook by Gbaguidi from that day, reports by the privately owned, local *Benin Web TV* and *DBMEDIA* news sites, and Zakiatou Latoundji, the president of the Union of Media Professionals of Benin (UPMB), who spoke to the Committee to Protect Journalists over the phone.

They were then ordered to appear before a state prosecutor at a court of first instance, where they were charged with 'harassment through electronic communication' under section 550 of Benin's digital code, and then transferred by police to the local prison, according to the same *Benin Web TV* report, Latoundji, and Brice Ogoubiyi, a friend of Alladé and director of the local *Nouvelle Expression* newspaper, who also spoke to CPJ by phone. cpj.org

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The Every-

MATTIE LUBCHANSKY

*Five Dials asked cartoonist
Mattie Lubchansky to send us an
omnivorous list of everything, or
almost everything, they consumed
in the previous month.*

-thing List

Overall, my media consumption habits are a bit strange. I'm a cartoonist, not a prose writer. The fine folks at this magazine have mistakenly requested me to type out something in words instead of asking for one of my usual drawings — a farting butt or a melting skeleton. As a cartoonist, I spend a lot of time at my drawing desk. It's there I'm able to absorb all sorts of stuff while doodling — TV, movies, podcasts, whatever. Away from the desk, I'll go for long stretches without reading, but then I'll enter into a ravenous period where I'll tear through a book a day. Here's what I've been taking in lately.

I recently saw, somehow for the first time, Mike Nichols's *Postcards from the Edge*. I've always loved Carrie Fisher's monologues. I fell for this almost immediately. It's funny and charming, and extremely tight from a scriptwriting standpoint, with satisfying set-ups and payoffs. The direction really struck me in a *they-don't-make-'em-like-this-any-more* sort of way. Never intentionally flashy, Nichols always places the camera right where it's supposed to be. There were a bunch of shots that had no business being in a little comedy, including the way the camera navigates the room in the scene where Streep and MacLaine are trading off musical standards at a party. The visual language is well developed. Streep and, of course, MacLaine were so good — funny, obviously, but also so warm.

Speaking of Shirley MacLaine, I sometimes watch the movies alongside episodes of the *Blank Check* podcast when they cover the oeuvre of a specific director. They recently examined Bob Fosse's catalogue and I realized I had never seen *Sweet Charity*. As a tri-state-area born-and-bred Jew, I've never been able to get away from musical theatre despite its, uh, immense corniness. I do, however, dislike most adaptations of musicals. This was a massive exception. The dance numbers — also something I don't normally go for — had me actually hooting in my living room. Somehow the economy of movement in Fosse's choreography still feels fresh. It's a preposterous accomplishment, after all this time. Getting into a Shirley MacLaine thing over here, I guess.

Me and my spouse caught *Nope* a few weeks back. People love to make movies about making movies, but this is the first one I can remember where the gruelling exploitation at the heart of the entertainment industry is unflinchingly revealed, but doesn't pretend it's all worth it in the end. You never even see the 'One Perfect Shot' the heroes of the story are chasing! Damn. I was floored.

As for reading, I've been reading, each time I see it, a sign on my block. It's at the site of some construction. It says WATCH FOR FLAGGERS. I don't think they mean it in the way they think they do.

‘As a tri-state-area born and-bred Jew, I’ve never been able to get away from musical theatre despite its, uh, immense corniness. I do, however, dislike most adaptations of musicals. This was a massive exception.’

As a fan of the comics, I felt compelled to watch Netflix's *The Sandman*. The art of adaptation is totally fascinating to me. If it's something I've read before, I can't help but imagine the choices made in the writers' room — moving pieces around, subtracting and combining and adding characters, trying to make a story fit in a new medium. The adaptation is competent, but it mostly served as a reason to reread the comics. The copies I bought at the Forbidden Planet in Union Square about ten thousand years ago were still on the big comics' bookshelf in my studio, and I tore through them. I'm wondering if and when the show gets to the one story with the not-great-but-still-better-than-many-depictions-of-trans-women-at-the-time, they'll still give her the last name Mann. Come on, Neil.

In an old life, I had a very long commute to another state, about two hours each way. This coincided with the explosion of podcasts in the late noughts and early tens, and I found myself keeping up with maybe a dozen at a time. I still listen to a ton, mostly while drawing or at the gym. The ones I am currently most excited about are *Trashfuture*, a tech-pessimist podcast that also covers British politics [I found myself explaining Rishi Sunak to another American friend the other day, despite neither of us needing to know a damn thing about him. Awful!]

and two RPG podcasts by a crew of improvisers and cartoonists called *Rude Tales of Magic* and *Oh These, Those Stars of Space!* Not doing myself any favours socially talking about musicals and real-play tabletop gaming podcasts in here, but you have to trust me; they are deliriously funny and unsettling, two things I'm always striving for in my own fiction.

At this point, I'm remembering that I'm a cartoonist and I should mention the comics I've got my nose into lately. I was upstate recently with some family and blew through *Heaven No Hell* by Michael DeForge faster than anyone should, and then I flipped to the front and immediately reread a couple of stories. I've been a huge fan of DeForge's since the *Lose* days and this collection of short comics really scratched an itch I didn't know I had. They were funny and weird and moving and angry (in the good way). One of those books where you get mad at yourself for not being that good. At the end of the day, though, it's inspiring for me to read something so specific and strange, to push myself to get weirder in my own work.

Entering the Disclosure Zone here, as Bors is a friend, but I've lately been really digging *Justice Warriors* (Bors, Clarkson and Sobreiro). It's got me going to the actual, physical, comic book store and buying monthly floppies for the first time in about twenty years. Fucked up!

I just read an advance copy of a book, *Shubeik Lubeik*, by Deena Mohamed — the English translation will be out early 2023 — that really hit me. A sprawling and singular story that takes a fun concept (what if a genie's wishes were not only real but capitalized and regulated?) and runs with it to some unexpected places.

Much like *The Sandman*, watching the TV adaptation of Brian K. Vaughn and Cliff Chiang's *Paper Girls* made me just want to reread the comic. The show itself held my attention enough — nothing to write home about — but I had forgotten the absolute preposterous, manic energy of the comic. Wow.

Every night around 5 p.m., I hear a dog screaming that sounds almost identical to a man. It lives somewhere near me, but I cannot figure it out. I'm not sure what the significance is. It's not as entertaining as a podcast, but it definitely counts as something I've been listening to.

I finally, finally, finally read Imogen Binnie's *Nevada* recently, and I feel like a dunce for not doing so earlier. A text that is loud and funny and trans and fearless. And the ending is a hall-of-famer. I would also like to use this space to formally apologize to my friend Calvin, whose copy it was, for getting water all over it. I thought I could read it in the pool, but I clearly lack the coordination for such a highly difficult manoeuvre. On the bright side, the wet pages dried in that wiggly way

that lets an observer know you've either been to the beach or gotten up to something sexy.

Back in the Disclosure Zone for a quick jaunt once more to talk about Elijah Kinch-Spector's debut, *Kalyna the Soothsayer*, which I read to be 'in conversation' for an event recently. It wasn't concerned with 'Elevating the Genre' or 'Subverting Tropes' (ugh) but it was doing *something* fascinating with the fantasy novel format.

A weird and wonderful thing I keep watching is Twitter user Gary J. Kings's video tone-piece called *The Hobbit: Dopesmoke Edition*. He's cut together shots of the animated film *The Hobbit* (1977) with audio from the band Sleep's stoner metal masterpiece *Dopesmoker*. If possible, download it. I cannot express how much this thing truly whips. I don't have any other way to say it.

Like every other person on the planet Earth I'm listening to the new Beyoncé for the eighteenth time as I type this. It's making me want to listen to CeCe Peniston and Donna Summer. At the end of the day, there is nothing new under the sun, not really, not even for Beyoncé. But when I look back on this list I'm reminded there's always something compelling to be made. □

MATTIE LUBCHANSKY'S EVERYTHING LIST

<i>Postcards from the Edge</i> (directed by Mike Nichols)	Film
<i>Blank Check</i> (with Griffin and David)	Podcast
<i>Sweet Charity</i> (directed by Bob Fosse)	Film
<i>Nope</i> (directed by Jordan Peele)	Film
WATCH FOR FLAGGERS	Construction sign
<i>The Sandman</i> (created by Neil Gaiman, David S. Goyer, and Allan Heinberg)	TV
<i>Trashfuture</i>	Podcast
<i>Rude Tales of Magic</i>	Podcast
<i>Oh These, Those Stars of Space!</i>	Podcast
<i>Heaven No Hell</i> (by Michael DeForge)	Comic
<i>Justice Warriors</i> (by Bors, Clarkson, and Sobreiro)	Comic
<i>Shubeik Lubeik</i> (by Deena Mohamed)	Comic
<i>Paper Girls</i> (by Brian K. Vaughn and Cliff Chiang)	Comic
A dog screaming that sounds almost identical to a man	Sound
<i>Nevada</i> (by Imogen Binnie)	Book
<i>Kalyna the Soothsayer</i> (by Elijah Kinch-Spector)	Book
<i>The Hobbit: Dopesmoke Edition</i> (by Gary J. Kings)	Video tone-piece
<i>Renaissance</i> (by Beyoncé)	Album





Cured of England

BINYAVANGA WAINAINA

The late Binyavanga Wainaina was a seminal Kenyan author, remembered as one of the great chroniclers of contemporary African life. 'Cured of England' was written in 2003-2004, after Binyavanga had spent some months studying and living in England for the first time.

We crawled into Tom's record shop last night, Sbu, Tamara and I, and soon we were listening to hip-hop, and Scottish Bagpipes, and sixties Soul, and American Folk music, and Reggae and A Tribe Called Quest. This all happened in a small town, Hay-on-Wye, in Wales, where I have been based for over a month. The awkward selection of music came about because Sbu, who is here from Jo'burg to try and find peace and quiet and karma, happens to be a DJ, as does Tom — and for hours they belligerently tried to outdo each other, and outside the door of this record shop, sheep roam, hills undulate gently, rain pours and pours and pours and even coughing requires planning permission. A large battered-faced man walks in, and hugs Tom, singing, 'Arsenaaaaaaawl'. He is wearing an Arsenal t-shirt and jeans, and is about as inebriated as we all are. His face veers from teary mournfulness (Manchester United beat Arsenal a few hours before) to Karaoke Joy: holding his horny fist like a microphone in front of him, and rapping, and singing reggae, his voice sliding off the register, and Tom's dog starts to whine. He grabs hold of me, and hugs me, and says, 'I love you People! I love all of you!!!!' He looks at Sbu and says, 'Thierry Henriiiii!!!' And I want to slink away, and he cracks up laughing and says,

'I love all you Welsh people.'

I walk out of the shop at midnight, into the rain,

bagpipes sneering in my head to machine gun rap lyrics, and the town clock rings, and for the past month, for the first time since I came to this tea-cosy covering iron-fist country, I am happy.

Hay-on-Wye is a border town. Not really Welsh, not English, startlingly beautiful, it has become a retreat of sorts for people who want to live in an in-between world, to avoid the relentless institutional busy-bodiness of England proper. Richard Booth, the 'King of Hay' bought Hay castle and moved here in 1961 with a dream to build the largest second-hand and antiquarian book-selling centre in the world. In the late seventies, Hay declared independence from Britain and hit the headlines all around the world. Much decadence took place behind the castle walls, Marianne Faithfull and other celebrities started to hang out here; the town fathers complained, and wore stone-faces, while counting the coins that flew in; and today there are 30 bookshops and over a million titles on sale here, and every summer Hay-on-Wye hosts the biggest Festival of Literature in the UK, and Richard Booth still has the biggest second-hand bookstore in the world, refuses to do business on the internet, and issues titles from his castle.

On the declaration, in 1977, Richard Booth was dressed in his royal robes with crown, orb and sceptre made from an old ball-cock and copper piping. When he

was later asked whether the move was serious he said, 'Of course not — but it's more serious than real politics..!'

On the Hay Peerage website, the reasons for Hay's declaration are given:

'In a world increasingly ruled by impenetrable bureaucracy, and self-interested big business organisations, the Kingdom of Hay was created as an alternative to embrace the good humoured common sense of ordinary intelligent people, which of course ought to be the basis of good government everywhere, always!'

The history of Hay is the history of Hay Castle. It sits at the highest point of Hay-on-Wye town. If you stand in front of it, Wales gently undulates in front of you, dotted sheep chewing, impossibly green, and you start to understand words, impossible to translate into any African language I know, like *cosy*. But the whole of England, and Wales, is a willed place — this landscape in front of me; even its forests and wildernesses are all built in the image of man. It is no coincidence that there are no poisonous snakes; all threatening fauna and flora has been tamed. The castle and its inhabitants have loomed and leered over these valleys, like fate. There is nothing stable or cosy even about the history of Hay Castle. Until the Normans came here and built the castle in 1100, there was no sign of settlement here. From that time, the Welsh occupied the mountainous areas, and the Normans the lowlands and valleys. In

1216, the castle is thought to have been destroyed by King John; in 1231 it was burnt by Llewellen; in 1264 it was captured by Prince Edward, and reduced by Simon de Montfort in 1265; in 1402 sacked by Owain Glyndwr; in 1460 destroyed by Welsh rebels.

Around 1700 things seem to settle down a little, the castle is let out as apartments. In the 1800s, it is leased by a succession of vicars. In 1961, following a long tradition of eccentrics in these parts, Richard Booth takes it over. And there have been eccentrics here. Legend has it that Maud or Moll Walbee was a Giantess who built Hay castle in one night, who could hurl boulders more than a mile and that she met her end in a dungeon, thrown there by King John who had her starved. Then there was Reverend Francis Kilvert who lived near Hay in Victorian times, and wrote much about life in those days here. He had a quite un-vicarly interest in the female form.

Most locals in Hay are pragmatic, friendly and mostly unmoved by the dramas of the arty types that descend here from time to time. Property prices have gone through the roof here, and there are new housing developments coming up everywhere, with Londoners looking for second homes. Most locals have been priced out of Hay. Although the town has successfully kept out the chain stores and fast-food franchises, many think that the next few years will determine whether Hay will

succumb, like all of England and much of Wales has. In other border towns, cappuccino shops and curios sit on the front lawn of the castles, and the towns fade to near death when the tourist season stops; it becomes unclear where a living town stops, and where a twee theme park begins. Richard Booth has fought for years to employ local labour, and most locals are very vocal about keeping the monthly farmers markets, the weekly market day, and the huge pony sales. Booth's battles are mostly against the deadening influence of institutional Britain: the Arts Council, even the Hay Festival of Literature has had its battles with him, though they seem now to have come to terms.

For a while, I thought that 'them thar' hills in the distance was where a true Welshness lived, but so far the hills have only produced for me, a software designer who links up to the net via satellite and a woman I met on the train who edits legal journals. A few weeks ago, drinking coffee at Shepherds, a black woman walked in, and we looked at each other with excitement. I wanted to do a *Colour Purple* thing and touch her face and say, throbbingly, 'Mama! Mama!' Only Marva Lord is way too young and good looking to be motherly. We shared a coffee and she asked me if I wanted to attend Black History Month in Hay. I laughed — thinking who will attend, all five black people in Hay? But I go, and find the hall full, and learn much about black Welsh history,

and we hear some dub poetry with Michael St George, and dance till morning to Dennis Bovell live, and DJ Asif playing Asian hip-hop. I met Atinuke, a Nigerian storyteller of captivating skill who lives in West Wales, and has only met two other black people there. She tells me she loves living in a village where her son can run about freely.

The Wye River glides parallel to the main centre of Hay. There is a lovely walk along the river I like to take. I sit on the benches, and from some angles I could be in the Kenya highlands. There is something disturbing about this landscape, farming sanitised to table-mat prettiness by farm subsidies. When I first came here, it looked to me like the Kenya highlands accomplished — this is the image the white settlers to Kenya wanted to recreate. Now, after a few weeks, I miss the untamed gush of Kenyan rivers, the genuine wilderness, the layers of social possibilities, the opaque, unknowable history, unfriendly landscapes spread before you; the differentiated, independent and contrary way that rural Kenyans have translated our times. I love Hay, but there is only so much of this unbearable niceness of being that I can take.

I have lived in England for most of the past twelve months, and I am leaving in a week, and I can't wait. I hate Blair, hate that earnest snitching school prefect

‘When I first came
here, it looked to me
like the Kenya highlands
accomplished — this is
the image the white
settlers to Kenya
wanted to recreate.’

voice, hectoring, hectoring. I hate the sullen, limp, service in shops and pubs. Most of all I have had enough of the Nannyness of the country: the warning signs everywhere, threatening this bludgeoned citizenry to BEHAVE or you shall be FINED, or charged or, or, or...

I have seen *scaffolding* protected by CCTV cameras.

England is drawing a pension: it has a good investment portfolio, brings out its war medals when it needs some money, it pretends vibrancy by creating little retirement-style set-pieces, all carefully controlled, all pretending edginess. Maybe one day, when America achieves its version of self-fulfilment, when there are no fundamentals, or fundamentalists to adjust, everything will be *cute*, an endless array of humourless white picket fences. A Steve Martin movie.

I went to visit the Notting Hill Festival. Thinking ah! Here I shall find some vibrancy. Dance. Share time with black brothers. Leave exhilarated. No. There were more policemen than people, it seemed. The carnival was deemed too exciting to allow people to *participate*. So we stood, in patient Anglo-Saxon lines, and watched the multi-coloured floats go by.

VS Naipaul is disdainful of multi-culturism in the UK. He says immigrants to the UK should have to assimilate. I too am suspicious of multi-culturism — it tastes like Rainbow Nation, a line of bullshit to

disguise much grit. But what does it mean to assimilate in England? To chat about George and his Dragon? To adore the queen mum? To live politely surrounded by great buildings and museums, not wanting to intrude on the great times of people long dead? Maybe VS meant for one to acquire a generic sourpussness; to be fastidious and dislike sex; to live in Surrey and avoid people. Or maybe one could find contemporary English things to latch onto to become a good citizen: Posh and Becks; making art where toilet paper is splattered on the Union Jack. Or football matches, where real feeling flares to life and violence often follows, as it always seems to when people let themselves be passionate here. Maybe to be English is to hate Blair, but vote for him. Maybe it means to make sex harmless: to call it a bonk, a shag. To make it possible to make nearly naked women of extravagant endowments, sexless.

There are things I like and respect about the English. Their ability to find small pleasures, build large internal and personal lives in small places; their grit, their endurance is truly great. I love the way the country sprawls, a messy, organized, incredibly varied place — no singular slogans, no chest banging nationalism. I like their refusal to take anything seriously. But these things were acquired in more challenging times. Now they seem hollow. So the English make jokes about people in Britain who do

have a strong and passionate sense of themselves: the Scots, the Irish, and the Welsh especially. England gave up its own identity to institutions, and people are aware that they lack something. English humour is especially savage when it targets anything with an actual ethnicity.

What England has that is living and great is institutions. The National Dictionary of Biography; The Museums; Common Law; even the National Health Service, thousands upon thousands of great living institutions. These have written inside them the combined intelligence of a country that has had a history much greater than its size. All the passion, all the glory, all the bad, the good, the pungent is all invested in these systems. But for people, for an ordinary social life, for the future, England is to be endured. The English, especially the younger English, are bored. This is probably why so many policemen are needed at the Notting Hill Festival. Institutions mediate everything — and institutions are nervous about having people gather and find their own way of dealing with each other. A newcomer to London finds himself chafing against the weight of these institutions — which mask a totalitarian nature by being polite; which never yield to any request you make that does not suit them. When you have learned to succumb, the city becomes tolerable. So maybe this is what VS means:

succumb to the dictates of the institutions.

Now, I suspect that it is drugs and football that keeps people feeling that things matter. Somebody grabbed me the other day. A chemically enervated acquaintance. He grabbed my shirt and said, his eyes popping, ‘I want to Live! I want to Live! ****! ****! Can’t live here! I want my children to fart, to be rude. To live!’ The next day he waved at me politely. Not a trace of the night before on his face. Kenya is not so great. We can’t pay our national bills and will probably never own an empire. But thank god we still have something meaningful to do. □

This essay appears in How to Write About Africa — a posthumous collection that brings together Binyavanga Wainaina’s pioneering writing on the African continent, following his untimely death in 2019.



Five Poems

JEE LEONG KOH

From 'Ungovernable Bodies'

Leroy (Roy), 27 October 2006 (Fri), the Web

*White. Trained nurse. Good dancer. Strong shoulders. 24 yo.
Frottage and jerk-off. Lived in Queens for past 10 years.*

Your years, so negligible, made me the spider,
ancient, dark, hairy, pop-eyed and eight-legged,
spinning the elastic, ecstatic web on the floor
of this club for Asian men and their sticky lovers.

Where did you find the fatal attraction? An uncle
who fought in 'Nam or a grandfather in Korea?
A Filipino socking American marines on TV
or swinging incense in a childhood church?

Did you, in your middle age, look with anguish
into the dead eyes of the pandemic at Elmhurst,
cursing the bosses' business dealings with death?

Did you survive? We may pretend we are spiders,
but when the wings drop off from our shoulders,
we are, like you, stuck, struggling like blue bottles.

**Carlos, 2 November 2006 (Thu), Splash Bar,
then my place**

Black, Caribbean. Big arms, very smooth and hairy in parts, uncircumcised, lives with mother in Brooklyn. 69, he came during blowjob, wants to fuck me.

If the doctors could see us now, thrusting
and receiving in our mouths our sensitive
uncut dicks, would they still think your race
impervious to pain, my race inscrutable?

Our pleasure appears so much like pain,
as blue-grey light in New York may swear
either night or day, the tall hour chiming
our spasms, time, time, time and no time.

It has been found they are less likely to give
black women the painkillers they ask for.
They gun down peach blossoms to avoid

temptation. Sons of unheard mothers, it hurts
to want more, my body curling and uncurling,
your body very smooth and hairy in parts.

Brian, 6 November 2006 (Mon), NY Jacks

Thirties? White, cute face, a little balding and paunchy but nice shoulders, easy to talk to, grew up in London.

The problem with *Great Expectations*, Brian, isn't that Magwitch, shipped off to Botany Bay, never to return on pain of death, is compared to a black slave, when the poor white man

can, and does, work off his penal servitude and, with a stroke of luck, obtain a sterling fortune, to raise up a London gentleman. Bad comparison, sure, but it's non-structural.

The problem is Pip, our hero. Redeemed, he turns shipping clerk, joins his best pal in Cairo, becomes a partner of the firm and, good man,

lubricates the Suez Canal of the British Empire. The problem is me. Fucked from afar, I can't, and don't, teach the text but as a *Bildungsroman*.

Antonio, 21 November 2006 (Tue)

*New job at AIG, moving to three-bedroom apt in Corona.
Frottage, 'more exciting between the thighs'.*

Exciting as fuck, more exciting — new job,
new home, the prospect of new friends
with benefits. What will all the excitement
call out from you, my frottage-loving man?

One year into my private-school teaching,
the girls rosy with health, hope, happiness,
my colleagues well-informed and travelled,
New York as stimulating as amphetamine.

I wonder if I should have taken the other
offer and taught in New Jersey the kids
who'd go hungry but for school lunches.

They would have eaten me alive, my mind,
energy and time to write. I'd have been
truly fucked, instead of excitingly frottaged.

Antonio, 13 December 2006 (Wed)

*I called him to my place. He came very quickly
after I move my arsehole against his hard dick.
I jerked off while he bit my nipples.*

I called him and he came very quickly.
You can't say the same of your god,
capital, who requires dreams deferred,
insurance cheque collected after death.

I concede the long wait can be spun
into the twists and turns of a bestseller,
heat added continuously to the pot,
or the tired arc — rise and fall — of a play,

but you cannot know the satisfaction
of making a man come just by moving
your arsehole against his hard dick,

or turning to yourself, the god licking
your nipple pinched between his teeth,
shooting your load, that lyric intensity.



Ben Says

AN INTERVIEW WITH **BEN MILLER**

As defined by its two authors, Bad Gays is a book about 'the gay people in history who do not flatter us, and whom we cannot make into heroes; the liars, the powerful, the criminal and the successful'. Its contents page includes an array of names whose lifespans cross the centuries: from Hadrian to Roy Cohn, with a stop to visit the Bad Gays of Weimar Berlin. The project is capacious enough to include Margaret Mead, Yukio Mishima and Ronnie Kray.

Ben Miller is the co-author, with Huw Lemmey, of this unconventional homosexual history and the co-host of the podcast from which it sprung. The question at the centre of each of these enquiries has been: why do we remember our queer heroes better than we remember our queer villains? The book contains a long cast of the infamous, but 'unlike our heroes,' Miller and Lemmey write, 'people like Oscar Wilde, Audre Lorde and Alan Turing – we rarely remember them as gay. And yet their sexuality was just as important an influence on their lives as those whom we celebrate, and their stories have much to tell us about how the sexual identities we understand today came to exist.'

Miller and Lemmey have been examining 'evil and complicated queers from our history' on their podcast for three seasons, but the book became a chance to shape a coherent narrative. 'By examining the interplay of their lives and their sexuality,' they write, 'this book investigates the failure of homosexuality as an identity and political project.' Failure seems like such a heavy verdict, but

Miller and Lemmey assure readers that the argument is incomplete. ‘There is indeed hope for queer forms,’ they write, ‘and our history contains many vital, living histories of struggle, alliance and solidarity.’ The darker stories they tell in Bad Gays might, they hope, ‘exist in productive tension as we think about the future of gay lives in Europe and the United States.’

Five Dials (Q) caught up with Miller (A) as he was taking a break at a library in Berlin, and we spoke about the good, the bad, the perfect well-placed parenthetical and the outrageousness of Roy Cohn.

Q What is a Bad Gay? How would you define the term?

A There’s a couple of kinds of Bad Gays that we talk about in the book. We always joke that there’s bad people who happen to be gay and people who are bad at being gay. And both. The concept of the Bad Gay was something that we came up with when we started making the podcast. And it’s something that we both created to use as a solvent against a queer public history that we often thought was really basic, and that often took place on a 101 level and that didn’t reflect the richness of the conversations that we were finding in

the scholarship that we were reading, or the richness of the conversations we were having among our friends talking about these issues, talking about these histories, talking about these pasts. So, we decided to focus on these evil and complicated figures to tell this counter history of the evolution of gay and queer identities as we understand them now through the lens of these people, who either did them badly or did very bad things in the course of helping to create them. How do these people bake poison into the collective cake that we're still eating?

Q How did the contents list come about? Who was bad enough?

A With the podcast we've now profiled sixty-two names, but that's a whole variety of people. We started out making the show only about men. We thought we were on safer ground there, and then we were called in by some queer female and trans listeners who said, no, we want this to be about us too and we trust you to tell these stories, which is a really great note of confidence and something that we've definitely started to do. When it came time to make

‘We decided to focus on these evil and complicated figures to tell this counter history of the evolution of gay and queer identities as we understand them now through the lens of these people, who either did them badly or did very bad things in the course of helping to create them.’

this into a book, we wanted not just to have a series of unrelated profiles, but instead to tell a coherent through narrative. On the show, we go in a whole lot of different directions.

Sometimes we're talking about someone like Ernst Röhm, who's one of the first openly gay politicians in the world, who also happens to be one of the first Nazis, and a very high-ranking Nazi official, who gets purged by Hitler after he takes power. And then sometimes we're talking about someone like Liberace, right? Those are obviously thematically very different, tonally very different. And they're telling us really different things. It's fun on the show. We get to visit all these different places and have conversations about all these different people.

For the book, we decided to focus on the identity that we inhabit, both of us, both authors, which is the identity of the white gay man and its history. So how did the white gay man evolve from its late nineteenth-century origins, when it was essentially a contradiction in terms? If you were assigned male at birth, in today's language, and wanted to have sex with

men, you were considered gender-inverted, potentially. How did that evolve into being this common-sense identity figure that we all inhabit now — a figure that many of us walk around claiming has been around in the same way for ever — which it hasn't. That's the story we decided to tell for the book.

Q What surprised you most about what you uncovered? Was there somebody new who was added to the book who surprised you as you were researching?

A What surprised me the most — and I can't speak for Huw — was how unbelievably current so many of these stories felt. I'm supposed to be the historian who talks about how the past is a foreign country and they do things differently there. But there are so many of these people whose conflicts, whose lives, whose struggles, whose good and bad decisions in the context of trying to make a life out of what they've been given, are shockingly resonant, I would say, with my own, with our own. It was very important to both Huw and me that we were always implicated in these stories. It's not that that we're comfortably

looking back and talking about how everyone got everything wrong, but rather that we're talking about how we ourselves evolved out of a political process that we think contained a lot of profound mistakes and violence towards other kinds of people.

So that was what was the most surprising. I want to push back a little bit on the word 'uncovered', just because, with some exceptions, this is not a book of primary-source research. We were not travelling around the world to thousands of archives. We were able to write about these people because there have been generations of historians who have written about these people, who have uncovered these stories, who have developed these analytics. What we were trying to do is synthesize that into this narrative and bring it to a broader public in a different way.

Q Why was an individual such as Roger Casement important to include in a list of Bad Gays? You write that he was part of a group of gay men, 'not a group that understood itself necessarily as such, but a group we can definitely think of as relatively coherent in hindsight, who understood

their homosexuality as part of a broader project of metropolitan anti-colonial radicalism'. Why was he given a chapter?

A Casement is fascinating because he's definitely someone who is more on the complicated side of 'evil and complicated', someone whose badness has a lot to do with how they were remembered or the state of the public conversation about them when they passed on rather than our evaluation of what they actually did. Casement was an Irish anti-colonial journalist who did reports for the British government on atrocities being committed in the Belgian colonies in the Congo and in the Spanish colonies in Latin America, and did so as part of a British colonial project trying to make the British Empire seem like the good, liberal empire, which it wasn't. He then ends up taking the anti-colonial stuff a little too seriously and runs guns to Sinn Fein in 1916 for the Easter Rising. He's arrested for treason, and during his trial the British discover and publish his diaries. Not only his 'white' diaries, so-called, which are these journalistic diaries in which he discusses what he's seeing and takes his notes, but also

his ‘black’ diaries in which he’s writing down everyone he has sex with, how big their dick was and how much he paid. The discovery of these diaries meant that he died amid scandal. There were Irish nationalists who maintained that the diaries were forged by the British in order to discredit Casement, which I think is really interesting. They’re not forged, as far as anyone can tell. That seems to be the best and most-informed historical consensus on them. And so you get this really interesting portrait of someone’s life, someone’s solidarity, and how their solidarity and their desire are interlinked, and how those two things are the conditions of possibility for one another. It’s a story we had to include.

Q It feels modern.

A It would make a great movie. We don’t want — well, whatever, I won’t speak for the gay community — I don’t want some anodyne boring Netflix movie starring a former Disney channel star about two gay teens falling into some kind of chaste love. I want a series about Roger Casement sucking and fucking his way across the colonies in this ethically

complicated series of relationships. And then having this downfall and being this really important historical figure. That's a much more interesting story to me in terms of where I come from and who I am than the other option.

Q At one point in the book, you move from individuals like Frederick the Great and Lawrence of Arabia to a group of people. Why was it important to include a chapter entitled "The Bad Gays of Weimar Berlin"?

A There's a few different places in the world we could have stopped and done some kind of a group chapter. But Weimar Berlin felt so rich to us because, first of all, it's a place that I personally do a lot of academic research on, so it's a place that I am passionate about. And there's a lot of stories that I'm aware of, that I'm passionate about telling. And it's also a place that is such an important site for the creation of the homosexual identity, as we understand it. I think, because of the success of books like Robert Beachy's *Gay Berlin*, it's more in people's common parlance. There were just too many people to include in the Weimar Berlin chapter, too many people to try

to whittle it down to one. To whittle it down to one seemed to make no sense because there are so many different sides to that story. And that story has become such an emblem for so many people, but they often, I think, get the facts and the shape of the story wrong. There's still a popular sense of Berlin at that time being this Liza Minelli, sequins and dirty underwear, skeezy nightclub city. And then the Nazi rise to power is understood as this almost inevitable backlash to the decadence and decay. In fact, what's going on in Berlin is: yes, a whole lot of sex, and that's not something we shy away from, and yes, a whole lot of partying, and yes, a whole lot of really long and fun evenings. But also — and not that these things are separate, these things are often happening totally wrapped up in one another — what is happening is the articulation of several different understandings of what a gay identity is. All of which are related to our ideas about this now, none of which completely correspond with it, and which are understood and accepted differently by different sections of society at different times.

We talk about Ernst Röhm, the Nazi politician

I mentioned earlier. We talk about Friedrich Radszuweit, a publisher who runs the only mass-movement gay organization in Weimar, which has a hundred thousand members, the League for Human Rights. Actually, later in his life, he turns pro-Nazi. And we talk about Magnus Hirschfeld, who has become the German national hero of the Weimar homosexual emancipation movement, German, gay liberation writ large, but someone who has an immensely complicated relationship with race and immensely complicated relationship with sex work, and immensely complicated relationship with all sorts of things. And so we talk about those stories together to get at the diversity of thinking, of acting, of experience that's going on at that time, and hopefully we try to move the conversation about that time into a place where we can think less about this exceptional series of parties and more about a place where a lot of thinking and living and acting — and also sex and partying — is happening at the same time in ways that shape what the identity means moving forward.

Q It's quite a cast list in that chapter.

A I mean, which one would you have cut? How could I have cut any?

Q Much of the book seems to stress that it's ok to head towards complication, to enter into the complexity of this particular time and place. You note there are things there to celebrate and to ally with, but that maybe it's better to look for what is still hidden, and what can still cause discomfort and pain. You include the phrase, 'the ghosts of a past that refuses to be past'.

A History is not a science. History is poems about ghosts.

Q Were there some easy choices to include in the list of names on the contents page? It seems like Roy Cohn is a natural choice for a book entitled *Bad Gays*.

A Roy Cohn had to be included in the book. Absolutely.

Q What kind of Bad Gay is Roy?

A Roy Cohn is one of the great shits of human history. He's someone who comes to political

consciousness, having affairs with men while also being a lawyer in Joe McCarthy's twinned Lavender and Red scares, during which gay men and suspected communists are being purged en masse from the US government. He then becomes a high-powered lawyer, who takes on extremely conservative and right-wing causes, including being an advisor to Nixon, to Reagan, to Donald Trump in Trump's younger years. The whole time he's having affairs with men — the whole time. This is an open secret. He's constantly refusing to do any kind of legal support work for gay liberation. And up to the minute he dies of AIDS, he completely refuses to acknowledge that he's gay. It's a completely unrelenting, nasty life.

Q Let's talk about the style of the book. You include a chapter on Pietro Aretino, an Italian satirist in the sixteenth century, who loved to use the vernacular. It seems like you and Huw were determined to bring vernacular into the book as well. When did you settle on the style of the prose?

A We both knew that we wanted something that, as Aretino says, speaks to people in the

language with which they are familiar. So that was the approach that we took — to try to combine really smart analysis and discussions of real conversations, but delivering it in an accessible tone, one that assumes that our reader is a smart grown-up capable of looking something up if they don't understand it. But we're not trying to impress with fancy language. We're livening up the text with some of the human details that make all these stories actually interesting and compelling. You can get so much across about some big abstract historical process if you can figure out how to describe what it looks like to someone at their kitchen table on a Thursday. And that's the approach that we decided to take, although in this book, maybe it's not at the kitchen table, but somewhere a little more scandalous.

Q Who was in charge of the asides in the text? Or was that equally divided? I'm thinking of places in the book like the point where you mention a Hungarian journalist and campaigner named Karl-Maria Kertbeny, who coined new terms in his lifetime, including the word 'homosexual'. 'Although he wrote his own texts calling for legal reform, he claimed solely an "anthropological interest" in the

subject.’ It’s at that point you throw in the aside: ‘Whatever you say, queen.’

A On the show, whoever’s narrating will have this interlocutor who often throws some of those funny lines in there. But I think both of us now understand the rhythm enough to be able to just draft one and think that way on our own. I will say that Huw wrote my favourite line in the book, which is in the James I chapter. ‘There’s power in being the king that sits upon the throne. But there’s also power in being the throne upon which the king sits.’

Q I myself was a fan of the point in the chapter on the ‘perpetually horny’ Hadrian where there’s mention of the ‘twink theft’ that causes trouble for him. A Roman emperor guilty of ‘twink theft’.

A That was also Huw. That was wonderful. There were a couple of those places where our editor would push back on things and we would always say: ‘Listen, we’re gay. We know what we’re doing.’

Q There’s also a lot of talk of failure in the book.

This includes, as you write, ‘the failure of white homosexuality as a political, identitarian and emancipatory project.’ When did you come to that conclusion?

A Failure is a harsh word and it’s one that we use to provoke, but it also is our assessment in the book. I don’t know that I would have put it that way before we started the project, but I think both Huw and I were always struck by the fact that, in terms of amassed civil-rights victories, white male homosexuality is one of the most successful political projects in the twentieth century. On the other hand, we’re looking at the trail of exclusions and violence that it left in its wake and thinking about how unsatisfying it feels to both of us now, and how fragile those victories seem to be. That was where we wanted to find a story in the book. That’s what we were going for.

Q There’s another section where you both write of the history of homosexuality as ‘a long history of failure to understand ourselves, to understand how we relate to society’. And you end that section hoping for new words needed to understand it, recognizing that what it means to be gay has

shifted. What do you imagine those new words might be?

A We enter the book with a kind of dance through possible pasts that might be useful to think about, as we think about what that solidarity might look like. I'm not sure what the words will be. I don't think either Huw or I are particularly invested in making everyone call themselves something different. What we're more interested in is a kind of lived solidarity. And that solidarity we find in several places in history that we dance back through at the end of the book and propose as places to move on from. My personal favourite of those stories is the story of the mid-1930s Marine Cooks and Stewards Union on the California merchant marine fleet. It's an explicitly anti-racist, pro-gay and communist labour union. Allan Bérubé has the classic essay about it. There was a union steward in the Marine Cooks and Stewards Union named Frank Powers who once was threatened by someone on the ship, I forget the details, and he beat someone over the head with a soup ladle after they used a homophobic slur. He said something like: 'Well, now you're never

gonna mess with me or the union ever again.’ And I think that is a nice place to start, you know? No red-baiting, no race-baiting, no queen-baiting.

Q I’m always interested in how people end up at the end of a project. How have you ended up? How has this project illuminated your own life?

A I feel as always, but even more so, in awe. Not just in a kind of awesome sense, but also in the real sense of the word awe — of the scale of history and of how much people have done and of how much any given person, me included, is not the first person to be thinking about something, both in awe of that and terrified by it. And also, somehow, comforted by it. It is, when you think about it, enormously consoling, just knowing that you’re not the first person to be thinking about something. People have had many of these problems, have had many of these conversations before. History doesn’t move forward, but instead moves in fits and jumps and cycles. We’re moving backwards and forwards — sometimes simultaneously — all the time. □



Apsu,
or
Pittsburgh
Bus
Stop
in
the
Rain

This is a story about ending a man's lineage. It is not a work of fiction. There are two women in this story. I will play both of them. The man? Throw any stagehand with a pipe dream under the spotlight.

The first woman and the second woman meet in the Mesopotamian Hereafter. The Apsu. They languish in that familiar dark mistiness, not unlike the place where their fates first crossed; the second woman meets the first woman's husband at a Pittsburgh bus stop in the rain.

I'm the second woman.

The first woman's husband is not tall but true broad. Good-muscled. I don't notice him. This day I wear my jawline hickied and my shirt crumpled, heart broken again. A croissant wrapped in paper napkins in my bag, cached for a snack.

It's never bone-dry here. Never anything but chilled to the bone and no bones about it. Pittsburgh breeds honest girls. When the flesh finally rotted, the Mesopotamians moved their dead from the bench tomb to the bone repository, a good place for the ancestors to mingle. Pittsburgh bones, fleshless and relocated, stay Pittsburgh-cold.

The first woman's husband and I board the groaning bus. 71C outbound downtown to Oakland. Everyone on board is careening towards the universities. He models it better, tucking into a window seat with a

‘There are two women
in this story. I will play
both of them. The man?
Throw any stagehand
with a pipe dream
under the spotlight.’

stack of papers. *Neurological something something* I catch out of the corner of my eye, *Parkinson's Research*. I sit next to him because I expect him to stay pinned to the work for the ride.

In the Apsu there is little to do but limpen. It's too silent to trade stories. The first woman looks me up and down. She green-eyes my shade. I am a bright sullen, a lovely cadaverous. Just over the hump of emaciation!

A rider on the bus who flexes as he holds the handle takes a pretend tumble and is on my lap. A grope of the breast, taking a pinch of my lovehandle with him. He scrambles up, apologizes (half-assed!), and disembarks. Hush, the bus says as it brakes, hush. The first woman's husband giggles and asks me how much this happens, men tripping over themselves for me.

All the time, I say. In another version of this story, the version where I know the right lines, I might tell him he's doing it too.

I point to the paper and offer that it looks interesting. He works with Parkinson's patients, trying to develop neurobiological solutions for loss of fine motor skills. They're all so good, he melts his vowels. And I wonder aloud if that's true or, like the dead, they're pitiful.

The second woman's grandfather has a terrible case of Parkinson's. He stutters and stammers. But he cheated on his wife as a habit for thirty-five years. Good.

The first woman's husband laughs at this, calls me morbid. I oblige. I am a very morbid girl. The word 'girl' juts out too much. I might be odd.

Eventually, we round the bend. He misses his stop by two, and I ask him to dinner. He isn't wearing a wedding ring. Or I don't notice it. Or (and I hate myself) I am not the kind of person who looks?

The Mesopotamian soul might be called the *etemmu*, but that would be inaccurate. Think of it more as a substitute for the dead, a silhouette, a pattern for. The first and second woman's *etemmus* are side by side in the Apsu because, seriously, there's nowhere to go.

I sit down to work and receive a lengthy text message from him. Complicated, the glaring word. But could go to dinner. I don't mind much. I rummage through my purse, brush against the croissant, leave it. I turn my attention to the task at hand (a spreadsheet, maybe?) and notice the mildewy smell of my shirt.

When he does pick me up, I only let him do it in a convenience store parking lot. You don't tell a man you met on the bus your address. But then, do you get in a car with a man you met on the bus?

We get to dinner safely. His fingernails are clean and he opens every door for me. I order something sugary and he's whiskey on ice. Nothing consequential is said the whole time but that he was gifted a science kit as a boy and now is a scientist, and I decide that's

admirable. He asks one thousand questions and I try to give impressive answers (Scriabin, Knausgård) but know that anything will wow him because sexiness is otherness.

I can't make out anything specific about him in my mind. We, me and the first woman, might be *etemmu* in the Apsu, but he's a silhouette in the earthly realm too. Calling other people half-formed, that's not okay. But when the shadow fits.

Complicated. He waits until I've come back from the bathroom to tell me:

Pay attention: I'm the first woman.

His wife, he wails, his sweet wife, and he is going to rush me to the hospital. But first he crates the dog, steps over our wrinkled formalwear (this is a nightmare). He carries me, rag-dolling, out of the door into the car. I choke, I breathe too little, I'm swollen up and down my neck. Can he drive a bit faster? Should he have called an ambulance? There's someone ahead of us with their tail light out and, by God, mistakes abound.

Epinephrine. The doctor asks us what I ate, and I tell him nothing. I insist nothing. The starchy hospital sheets rustle, underscoring my protests. My husband stands at my bed side, getting impatient now. Well, what had you been doing before this happened?

I am embarrassed, but my husband, he isn't. He isn't embarrassed by anything at all. He smooths

his long hair behind his ears as he tells the doctor, flaunting more of his face.

Ahem. Seminal plasma hypersensitivity. Read into it. Yes, it is very real, and yes, it can be life-threatening. But, hm, I'm surprised that you didn't figure this out sooner?

Because perhaps some people have values, I feel like saying. Some people believe in this Wedding Night. But I don't say anything because I usually don't speak until I'm screaming.

But anyway. In the Apsu, there is no judgement. No good place or bad place. Heaven, Hell. It's one-size-fits-all. Like some horrible polyester Halloween costume from a bargain store, but for eternity.

How does the cream rise to the top? Those with progeny, a good hoard of devoted children, receive the little comforts of life. The second woman smack-lips a croissant (or knows she will, some better way). She gets the good afterlife. The first woman flares her nostrils.

I'm the second woman.

The first woman's husband discloses to me on our second date (salsa dancing); they had waited till, never been with anyone else. It was no wonder she didn't know. But a few months in, the first woman decided to experiment, find out whether she was allergic to all men. The subject was irrelevant; some man she met some typical way, tested in the marriage bed. So, the

first woman's husband is well within his right to be salsa dancing. He stamps his heels.

He twirls me around the dancefloor with the seriousness of someone who learned salsa from his grandfather. The first woman's husband presses his hips towards mine. I try to keep some distance. I let him touch my face in the car to see if I could ever stop hearing the story of how we came together.

I imagine myself years down the line, not hearing the story any more — innocent, almost, completely clean — but this is a futile fantasy. In his face I see the first woman, beautiful and punitive.

The open buttons of his shirt on the mythic Third Date. I perform shyness, for him, but really, usually, a maven. I restrain, stay hungry.

If a corpse is not buried properly, the *etemmu* of the dead might escape the Apsu and wreak havoc. Hauntings, possessions, misplaced keys. The first and second woman, we were regrettably treated too well. In the Apsu, we're an upper mantle away from anything fun.

Me and the first woman's husband, we send each other hundreds of text messages. Long phone calls. Walks around (and around and around) the block. Cannot scrape me out of the folds of his brain. He prophesizes his departure from this first woman, our someday-son, a whole life, that it's inevitable when you meet someone on the bus these days.

But then I break it. This is untenable.

I am the first woman.

And regardless of what he does with his science kit — the beakers and the Bunsen burners, the pipettes and the litmus papers — this is the end of our lineage. At least the one we had together. Because it was never the allergic reaction that caused reproductive unviability. Dry cold dead bones: they're a Mesopotamian symbol of infertility. No love to whet us, dismantled from the start, we couldn't beget the generations.

And no, it wasn't just an experiment. It was a mausoleum.

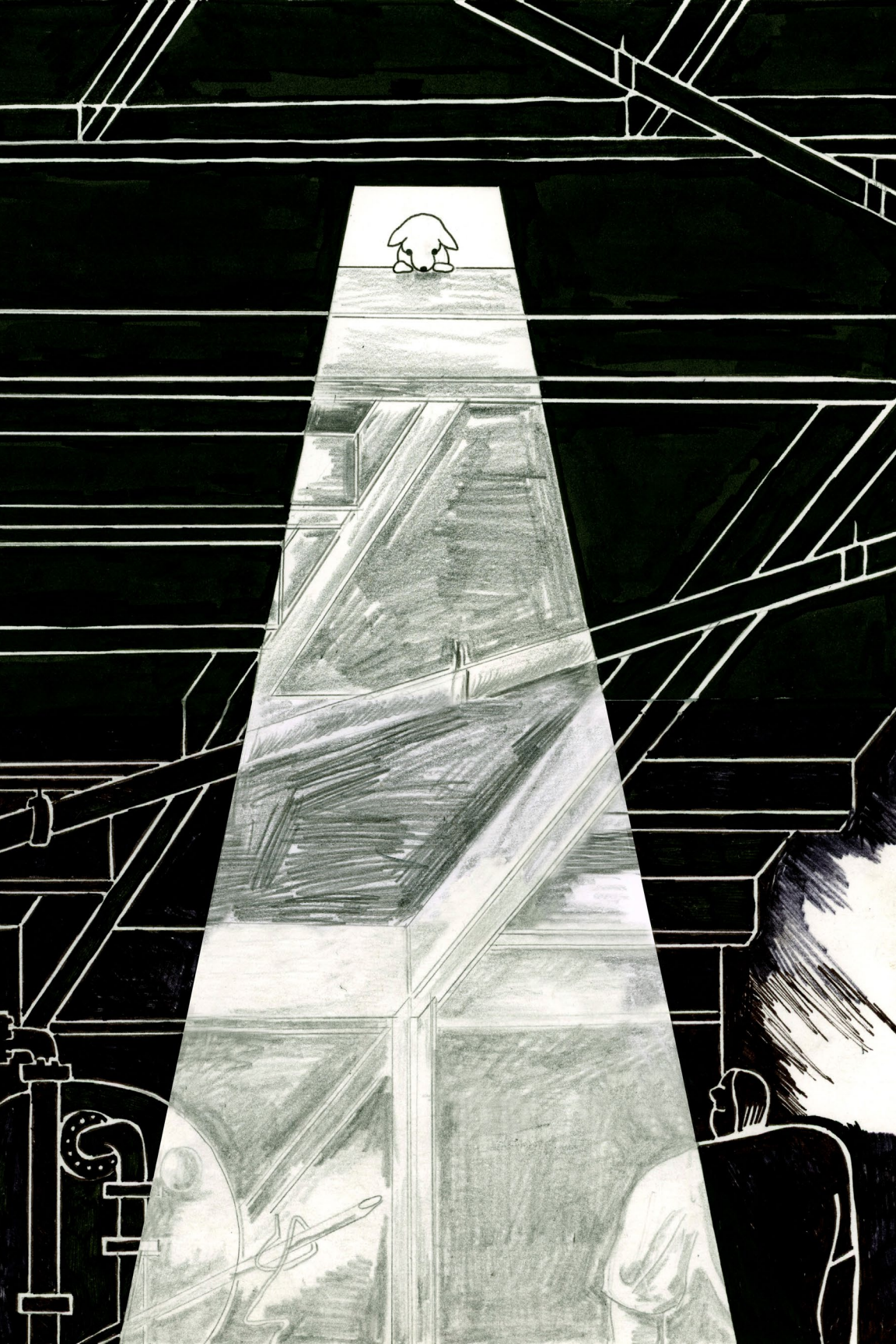
Reconcile? The first woman points out a stalactite and stalagmite formation, reminds her of the Crystal and Fantasy Caves on a family trip to Bermuda (day they got chased off the beach by the weather). The second woman reminds her to stay insipid here. The Apsu is a place to endure, not to enliven. She finishes her croissant. They might be in this together.

I am both women. And we both know how it goes: Sometimes things end and it doesn't break your heart. It's just empty space. There's little left of anything that was but a silhouette, it's hard to tell anything, anyone apart. Adieu to you, just *etemmu*. I was heavy-petting on the beach one night, rolling around in the stinking sand, and a stranger came up and watched us, me and the man I was with, and for the briefest

of moments, as my lover was cawing the stranger to get away, I couldn't tell the two men apart, they were one and the same, all of us, and there was nothing perverted about any of it, because, after all, how many dead horseshoe crabs had I flipped over on that beach? Can a man make love knowing his bones will be the last to dry out in his ancestral repository?

But anyway. In the Apsu, there is no judgement. No good place or bad place. Heaven, Hell. It's one-size-fits-all. Like a cheap styrofoam bike helmet that cracks the second your head hits the pavement. □





One Poem

Opal, Fructose

We make everything liquid. Sugary, steeped in, made sticky with
dribbling over the edges blurred, a muffling.
the space cannot be allowed to remain the same as it was

In the clearing I pick up a shirt someone dropped, it smells of sweat.
Crumpled, hot denim. The ground is a layer from which
all these leafy bodies can sprout and liquid rises, liquid

Flattened streets; diverted traffic; craters; shortness of breath
rises up from the earth, cold and gooey. Fingernails
peeling apart like rice paper. pick and pick until

the sap, words, visible, markers – Happy and healthy After some time
When I look back Doing much better Glowing though paler –
Under the rubbery leaves, who will stand there –

Chilled honey. Overgrown purple grapes. Thickened with syrup.
to distinguish *whom we have lost* from
what we have lost in them a clear material hangs

in front of our faces, flops into my eyes
though I'm cheerful and speaking about the future
or am I just talking

No house is exempt
Lack becomes an object A three-second burst of the song
everybody'll need all summer We melt everything down.

We melt the missing, watch a solution ooze across
the frame. And the colours drip down and the dyes
in this cotton collect in a puddle,

words ripped grass markers for a gap, the song
drops like a sheet of water, the lyrics can be anything we need,
we can pour them into any empty container.

I look directly at you. I get down and pull, the earth
comes up and beneath it splash, sucking noise, strong smell of fruit,
the building up of residues

*Quoted material from The New Black: Mourning, Melancholia
and Depression by Darian Leader (Hamish Hamilton, 2008)*



On Biyi Bande

Since his unexpected death on 7 August 2022, a lot has been written about Biyi Bandele's life and work by colleagues, friends, family and fans. How he started his writing career as a precocious 14-year-old, by winning an award, and how another writing award, the international student playscript competition award, which he won for his script *Rain*, took him to London in 1990. He hit the ground running once he got there, publishing his first novel, *The Man Who Came in from the Back of Beyond*, in 1991. This was followed by further novels and stage plays and radio plays. It is amazing how prolific he was; it is also amazing how his earlier fiction and plays don't get talked about much.

His output was as diverse as his subjects. Work about life in his new home in England sat alongside pieces about the Nigeria he left at quite a young age. He left before the inordinate lecturer strikes and school closures and the collapse of Nigeria's education system, before the June 1992 election protests and the death of Moshood Abiola, before General Sani Abacha's reign of terror and the death of Ken Saro-Wiwa. He left before most of the events that would become the go-to subject matter of a new generation of writers — writers who'd begin to come of age over a decade after Biyi left Nigeria — and because of that his subject matter is more diverse and eclectic, much harder to classify. His writing career began just before the rise of the celebrity

African authors, the Caine Prize, the big book deals, the celebrity media interviews; and he was lucky for that because he was spared all the noise and the distractions and the pressure that often comes with that kind of exposure.

And yet, to some of us, Biyi was not unnoticed. He was the name on our lips when he won his award and left the country to pursue his writing career; I guess we saw him as an exemplar, a possibility that one could make it solely on talent and hard work and ambition, in an environment that was becoming gradually darker and more restrictive. I particularly was inspired by him because of how much we had in common: I was born the same year as him, he was older than me by just one month, and like him I was born in the north, not more than a few hundred kilometres from where he was born in Kafanchan; he moved to Lagos to pursue his writing career, I did the same; he won an award and left Nigeria, I did the same; and we ended up making our home away from our country in order to become the writers we wanted to be. The only difference between us is that his writing break came early while mine came relatively late — although we were the same age, I didn't publish my first novel until over a decade after he published his.

I met Biyi for the first time when I went to the the Caine Prize ceremony in London in 2001. His play

Brixton Stories was being premiered and he kept a ticket for me and the other Caine Prize shortlistees. After that I was to meet him again about twice, the last time being over a decade ago. Like most people, I'd rediscover him through his movies and TV dramas: *Half of a Yellow Sun*, *Fifty* and *Blood Sisters*. A lot has been written about them.

What hasn't been written about much is his photography, particularly the series he started posting to his Instagram in June, and only stopped about two days before his death on 7 August. He had been returning to Lagos and quietly taking these pictures, and now I can only describe them as Biyi's last love letter to Lagos, his paean to a city we all love to hate. They capture a city that is loud, proud, brash, industrious, inventive, self-reliant, one foot stuck in tradition and the other stretched towards the modern. There are pictures of women shopping in the narrow corridors of Balogun Market, of children laughing, of disabled athletes throwing around a ball, of young lovers looking directly into the camera. The pictures are accompanied by helpful, sometimes terse, often witty commentary by the artist. There are sunny days and cloudy days. There are people playing music on a roof, and beautiful twin sisters shyly look down from the camera, laughing. The pictures capture the mood and the atmosphere of these Lagos streets with the care and precision of a painting. Among the few

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Perhaps it was this joy of rediscovery that made him gravitate to classics like Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, which he adapted for the stage, and Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, which he adapted for the screen. Perhaps it was his way of trying to rediscover the past, almost as if, having missed most of his country's recent history, nothing would satisfy him beyond going all the way into the distant past depicted in these works. His most ambitious novel, *Burma Boy*, is one such excavation, set in an inflection point in Africa's history. In it he painted a picture of ordinary Nigerians, like his own father and my father, who fought for Britain in Burma, one of the Second World War's bloodiest theatres; a war they didn't understand and in which, despite the discriminations and humiliations, they still managed to acquit themselves with honour and dignity.

Biyi's last film, we are told, is an adaptation of Soyinka's tragedy, *Death and the King's Horseman*, for Netflix. How ironic that his last work is a rumination on death, and how sometimes the pleasures of this world can interfere with our sense of duty. Elesin Oba, horseman to the recently deceased king, must

hurry and join his king in the great hereafter, for the very health of the universe depends on this. But the horseman is, alas, sidetracked by the pleasures of this world, including wine and women, leading to unimaginable catastrophe. And yet, the horseman is able to redeem himself, to some degree, in the end. Perhaps, what the play is showing us is the possibility of such redemption and self-reinvention, that art is never a straightforward journey but one filled with twists and turns. But that it is okay to falter sometimes, that is what it means to be human.

If Biyi's life as an artist taught us anything, it is the possibility, and the necessity, of such self-reinvention. There's so much unfettered joy and freedom in these street photographs. The artist's gaze is turned away from any outward expectation and is firmly fixed on what is in front of him in an expressive, pure and honest way. Through each eye in these pictures the artist is looking back at the viewer, saying, 'I see you.' □





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