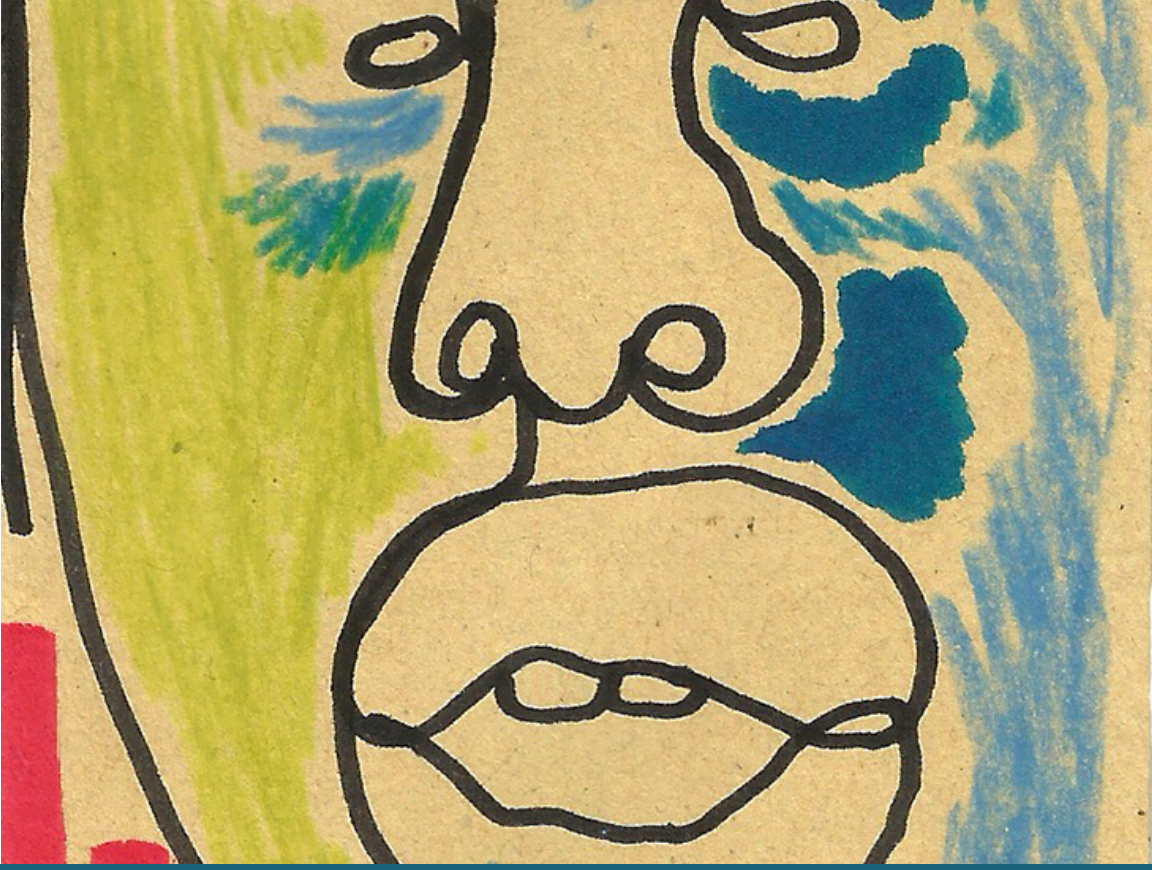

Five Dials

Spring
21

Five Dials

MASTHEAD

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

ARTWORK BY
Joy Yamusangie

DESIGN
Andew LeClair

DIGITAL
CONTENT
PRODUCER
Zainab Juma

THANKS TO
Chloe Davies
Georgia Taylor
Caroline Pretty
Mia Quibell-Smith
Maya Solovej
Christopher Wait

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 written pieces and £1000/issue for artwork. If you're working on something which you'd like to tell us about, you can find us on Twitter at @fivedials.


-ND, A LOVE LIKE BLUE WINE
A FLOOR BELOW DAYS AHEAD
FORMING CLAY MEMORIES WITH
SOFTNESS - OPEN PALMS. FORTUNES IN OUR LEFT HA-

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CONTRIBUTORS

SITA BALANI is a lecturer in contemporary literature and culture at King's College London. In her research and teaching, she explores the relationship between imperialism and identity in contemporary Britain. Her work has appeared in *Feminist Review, Identity Theory* and *openDemocracy*.

ELLIOT BARNES-WORRELL is an award winning actor, writer and director from south-east London. He loves grime music, anime and plantain. He hates writing bios.

KAYO CHINGONYI was born in Zambia in 1987, and moved to the UK at the age of six. He is the author of two pamphlets, and a fellow of the Complete Works programme for diversity and quality in British Poetry. In 2012, he was awarded a Geoffrey Dearmer Prize, and was Associate Poet at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in 2015. His first full-length collection, *Kumukanda*, won the Dylan Thomas Prize and a Somerset Maugham Award and was shortlisted for the Costa Poetry Prize, as well as the Seamus Heaney Centre First Poetry Collection Prize, the Ted Hughes Award for New Work in Poetry, the Roehampton Poetry Prize and the Jhalak Prize. Kayo was a Burgess Fellow at the Centre for New Writing, University of Manchester before joining Durham University as Assistant Professor of Creative Writing. He is Poetry Editor at Bloomsbury and writer and presenter of the forthcoming music and culture podcast *Decode* on Spotify. His second collection of poetry, *A Blood Condition*, will be released in the UK in April 2021.

SO MAYER is a writer and activist. Their books include *Political Animals*, *From Rape to Resistance* and *The Cinema of Sally Potter*. Their writing about queer and feminist film features in *Sight & Sound*, *The F-Word*, *cléo* and *Literal*, and their essays feature in Roxane Gay's *Not That Bad: Dispatches from Rape Culture* and *At the Pond: Swimming at the Hampstead Ladies' Pond*. After a decade in academia teaching film studies and creative writing at Cambridge, Queen Mary, King's College London and others, they work as a bookseller at Burley Fisher Books and with queer feminist film curation collective Club des Femmes. So is a Co-Founder of Raising Films, a campaign and community for parents and carers in film. They tweet at @Such_Mayer.

JACQUELINE ROY is a dual-heritage author, born in London to a black Jamaican father and white British mother. After a love of art and stories was passed down to her by her family, she became increasingly aware of the absence of black figures in the books she devoured, and this fuelled her desire to write. In her teenage years she spent time in a psychiatric hospital, where she wrote as much as possible to retain a sense of identity; her novel *The Fat Lady Sings* is inspired by this experience of institutionalisation and the treatment of black people with regards to mental illness. She

rediscovered a love of learning in her thirties after undertaking a Bachelors in English, and a Masters in Postcolonial Literatures. She then became a lecturer in English, specialising in Black Literature and Culture and Creative Writing at Manchester Metropolitan University, where she worked full time for many years, and was a tutor on The Manchester Writing School's M.A. programme. She has written six books for children, and edited her late father's novel *No Black Sparrows*, published posthumously. A second novel for adults will be published in 2022. She now lives in Manchester.

ELIOT WHITE-HILL, KWULASULTUN, is an Indigenous artist and storyteller from the Snuneymuxw First Nation in Nanaimo, Canada. His art practice is in traditional Coast Salish style. He works to preserve and pass down the teachings he has been given and to share his appreciation of the Coast Salish teachings and worldview with others.

JOY YAMUSANGIE is a visual artist, specialising in illustration. Joy experiments with a range of traditional processes such as drawing, film, painting and collaging to produce mixed media pieces. Their previous projects have included a public art installation commissioned by Tate Collectives, the London Borough of Culture Award and the cover for the 2021 Penguin edition of C. L. R. James's *Minty Alley*.

Emerging

Five Dials

In 2008 we started *Five Dials* as a digital literary magazine—hoping to have fun with it, hoping to keep it going for a year, maybe two, maybe until the London Olympics. Our first few issues featured Robin Yassin-Kassab, Iain Sinclair, Sheila Heti, Jay Griffiths, Joe Dunthorne, Gustave Flaubert and Alain de Botton, among others. All of them donated their work, free of charge, to become part of this magazine which would be free to all.

And then it just kept going, and we kept having fun, and we kept putting out a magazine as a PDF which anyone could download and read. We published issues on Quebec, Jaipur, Paris; on obscenity and on parenting; on David Foster Wallace, Europe, Camus; on women, on transformation, on heroism, on love. We launched issues of the magazine in venues around the world, often with the help of new friends, sending each issue out with a theatrical press of the semi-imaginary 'Send' button. Somewhere along the way, we amassed tens of thousands of subscribers.

And then 2020 hit, bringing with it first a pandemic, which threw the deep inequalities of our societies into sharp, unignorable relief, and then a wave of mass protests against unchecked brutality and structural oppression, anti-Black racism and white supremacy. Physically isolated from each other and from the rest of the world, we watched it all happening, and it seemed like the right moment to reflect on what we had been doing:

what it meant, what it offered, how it helped (or didn't help). And what we wanted the magazine to contribute to the future.

We all agreed that we wanted to pass the mic to the writers and artists who are underrepresented on bookshelves across the anglophone world, and whose stories, ideas, experiences and perspectives our literature is very much the poorer without. *Five Dials* has always welcomed writing from everyone, but there is an important difference between not locking the door and considering what it takes for a person to step through it. In order to do that, we knew, we needed to start paying our contributors for their work. As a creator, giving your work for free is an act of extraordinary generosity, but it is also one that only the most fortunate, established and secure can really afford. The very first step, perhaps the only absolutely essential one, in fostering a greater and more representative diversity of voices in the arts, is to ensure that everyone gets paid for their labour. Not paid in experience. Not paid in exposure. Paid.

So starting with this issue, Spring 2021, *Five Dials* is switching its editorial gaze to focus deliberately and exclusively on contributors from underrepresented communities: from Black and Brown communities, queer and trans ones, from Indigenous communities and traveller ones, from the working classes, from neurodivergent communities and disabled ones, and from many more groups that live and work and search and

argue and hustle and thrive out there in the world. We have worked out standardized commissioning rates for our contributors, both writers and illustrators, which you can find at the front of the magazine, in this issue and every issue from now on.

And what's more, we want to get in at the ground floor. To champion the writers who are just starting to find their voices, who are trying things out, who are 'emerging' (at any age), taking risks and taking us by surprise. We want writers with remodelling skills, with access to weird new materials, with fresh paint on the brush. We want to propel them forward and see how far they'll go. We want to be a magazine of the less established, a magazine of *new* new writing, a starburst of energy mainlined to your inbox.

The transformation will not be total. There will be a saminess when it comes to a few things: *Five Dials* remains free, it shows up in your email, it leads you away from the flash and jitter of modern life and into a calmer, wiser reading environment. The artwork will still make you want to buy a colour printer. And we will still bring the magazine to you in the world as live launch events: spaces to gather (oh how we long to gather), listen, discuss, interrogate, celebrate and recharge. We are very excited. We hope you are too. Enjoy Spring, and see you again soon for Summer. ◊

The Everything List

So Mayer

Five Dials *asked So Mayer to send us an omnivorous list of everything, or almost everything, they've consumed in the previous month.*

Bandcamp Fridays have been my pandemic sanity. February's auditory highlights included:

— Beverly Glenn-Copeland's *Live At Le Guess Who?*
— Laura Veirs' *My Echo*
— Leyla McCalla's *Vari-Colored Songs: A Tribute to Langston Hughes*

which led to … Three gorgeous books about music:

— Jackie Kay's *Bessie Smith*
— Sara Jaffe's *Dryland*
— Laura Veirs' and Tatyana Fazlalizadeh's picture book *Libba: The Magnificent Musical Life of Elizabeth Cotten*

Listening, differently, to a chorus of parent and carer voices on their pandemic experience while researching *Back from the Brink: A Scoping Study* for Raising Films, a process made bearable with:

— Goulash (first home-made attempt)
— Birds Eye Potato Waffle cheese sandwiches (two toasted waffles, cheese in between)

— Fantasy flódni (to be baked when it's possible to see twenty-four people)
— Tony's Chocolonely mini eggs

Three radical and various films about women at work and rest (which reminded me why I do the work):

— *Working Girls* by Lizzie Borden
— *Lingua Franca* by Isabel Sandoval
— *Cycles* by Zeinabu irene Davis

Two confluent novels of family and/as activism (which revivified me):

— Tara June Winch's *The Yield*
— Nino Haratischvili's *The Eighth Life*, as recommended by Elhum Shakerifar writing for Culture Club.[1]

Short breaks were enlivened by dipping into the multifarious voices of:

— *Dardishi*, Issue 2
— *Ache Magazine*'s *Cusp: Feminist Writings on Bodies, Myth and Magic*
— Inger Christensen's essay collection *The Condition of Secrecy*, translated by Susanna Nied
— Wanda Coleman's *Wicked Enchantment: Selected Poems*
— *Incomparable World* by S. I. Martin

And finally, three differently vivid TV shows whose characters live on with me:

— *It's a Sin*
— *Resurrection: Ertugrul* (two seasons down, 300+ episodes to go)
— CNN's coverage of Impeachment #2, its urgency heightened by Kim Stanley Robinson's climate-crisis novel, *The Ministry for the Future*.◊

(1) https://www.clubdesfemmes.com/portfolio-item/culture-club-reading6/

A SINGLE BOOK

Silence and *The Fat Lady Sings*

Jacqueline Roy

I was about fourteen when I first experienced what I now believe was severe depression. I was living in London with my white mother; my father, who was my black parent, had died when I was seven and the family had been completely devastated by this. We had very little money and although my mother was exceptionally good at managing on a minimal income, the threat of bailiffs coming in and taking everything was persistent and terrifying.

As a family, we were very isolated. Interracial relationships were unusual in the 1950s and '60s. My father's family were in Jamaica but we had very little knowledge of them and no contact details. My sense of identity was compromised; my father's death meant the loss of direct access to black culture.

My mother, who had no friends to speak of and no other family, had retreated into her own depression and some of her ideas, particularly around cleanliness, and how we should conduct ourselves, were very difficult for me to deal with as a child. I remember talking to one of the neighbours about her unhappiness. I was ten at the time and I was hoping she would be able to tell me what to do. When my mother found out, she was incandescent with rage. I had broken the number-one family rule: you never talk about family. I remember thinking, *All right, I'm on my own with this then*, and feeling despair.

Once I was in my teens, life became impossible. I experienced racist bullying at school

and my home life was also intolerable. I had one close schoolfriend but she was never able to invite me to her home because her mother, a supporter of the far-right activist Enoch Powell, would have ended the friendship immediately. There were no safe spaces. I became more and more withdrawn. Eventually, at eighteen, I was hospitalized. I was given a choice of sorts: be here voluntarily or be sectioned.

Black patients on the wards rarely had visitors. I don't recall seeing a single black family visiting a relative, not because black patients were unloved but because of the stigma associated with mental illness. There seemed to be far more shame in our communities—a sense that we had failed to be strong. I remember a black nurse telling me how ashamed and embarrassed he was to see me there; I had let everyone down, all other black people. His hostility was humiliating and scary. Additionally, in submitting to the institution—whether willingly or not—as black patients we were stepping outside of communities and airing our problems to the white world, contributing to those stereotypes that said we were threatening or in need of containment. Detention on a psychiatric ward was capitulation, submission, weakness.

As children my siblings and I were told by our mother that if we were weak or did something wrong, we would be letting down all black people. Later I saw this articulated in fiction by writers of colour. In Meera Syal's *Anita and Me*, for example,

the central character, Meena, is told something similar by her parents: that any misbehaviour on her part will be viewed as typical of her race. It's rooted in reality but it's an unfair burden. It's not really surprising that so many of us have mental health problems if individually we have to carry the weight of an entire community.

My mother visited just twice: once to take me out for the day and once when I wasn't allowed home for Christmas. She couldn't deal with my hospitalization. The consequence for me was that once again I was very much alone. My schoolfriend went away to university. I was left behind.

I was in a hospital with a good reputation, but as is the case with all closed institutions, those who are perceived as alone are inevitably more vulnerable because there is less scrutiny.

Members of staff who are disposed to behaving inappropriately know that they are far more likely to get away with it if they direct their frustrations towards people who are isolated. And as with all closed institutions, staff wield enormous power. The majority of them were caring (some genuinely dedicated, selfless and kind), or indifferent, at least on the surface (neither kind nor hostile, perhaps the most prevalent attitude at that time), but a significant minority enjoyed the power they wielded: verbal annihilations that stripped us of dignity and a sense of worth were a daily occurrence, and assaults were viewed by the most isolated of us as par for the course. Occasionally, someone would have the

courage to report a member of staff. He (they were always male) would disappear for a few days—suspended and under investigation, presumably—but then would return worse than ever, showing simmering anger at the audacity of someone daring to speak out, but being far more careful to conceal his activities. We learnt that there was no point in saying anything. We were never believed. We were 'ill', inclined to misconstrue the actions of others. It was the word of a sane person against that of a person whose sense of reality was skewed.

Such experiences make it difficult to trust your own version of events; people constantly tell you that you have imagined things or made them up. You are not a reliable witness; your testimony is always likely to be discounted. I am still thankful to a senior psychologist I encountered as an outpatient. I needed a letter from a consultant psychiatrist to confirm that I was free from 'illness' but appointments with him were so stressful that I didn't want to keep the last of these. I was worried that I wouldn't get the letter. I phoned the psychologist to explain and she said, 'Just say you're not well physically and don't attend.' She was part of the clinical team and the consultant was very well respected nationally and internationally, so I hesitated before I said to her, 'I don't wish to sound paranoid, but if you don't do what he wants he pays you back.' There was a long pause and then she said quietly, 'I know he does.' This confirmation that I wasn't being paranoid or ill, or too stubborn

‘I had broken the number-one family rule: you never talk about family.’

to accept the 'help' I was being offered, was one of the most validating and affirming things that has been said to me. My perspective was afforded acknowledgement and acceptance. It was seen as truth.

In the early 1990s I attended a Black Writers Conference. I had been published by this time, having written several books for children. One of the speakers, who was roughly my age, said that he didn't know a single black person of his generation who hadn't been either in prison or in a psychiatric hospital. He wanted to know where the books were that spoke of those experiences. It was then that I decided to write *The Fat Lady Sings*.

Looking back, I realize that one of the most damaging aspects of being caught up in the mental health system was the silencing process. It seemed to me that the absence of voices speaking about hospitalization could be a consequence of this silencing, so the silence needed to be broken. The writing of a novel that addressed marginalization, lack of voice, and, implicitly, racism, seemed the most effective way of doing this.

Race was never raised when I was in hospital, even though the state of my mental health and so many of my experiences could only be fully understood in the context of racism and marginalization. I spoke to a psychiatrist once about a flat I'd tried to rent and had been offered over the phone but which had suddenly been taken off the books when I went to see it in person. 'Was that

because of your curly hair?' he asked, as if to name the fact that I was black was somehow offensive. And indeed, in the 1970s, colour blindness was seen as the only polite response to black people. One of the reasons I ended up in hospital in the first place was the constant erosion of confidence and self-worth that racism brings. Discrimination (and there was an awful lot of it during the 1960s and '70s) is profoundly damaging to the psyche. A friend of mine who worked in mental health once told me that a patient she had encountered had been described as manifesting 'racism paranoia'. Impossible, then, to talk about the effects of being subjected to racism without the risk of being pathologized further.

There is no doubt, looking back, that those of us who were black on wards were treated differently. We were more likely to be perceived as being in need of containment and we were frequently over-medicated. My hospitalization consolidated my wish to be a writer, not least because it seemed that writers were forgiven any eccentricities—they were not expected to be normal. I wrote constantly to maintain a sense of worth, and to hold on to my reality in the early days in hospital, but eventually I was put on such heavy-duty medication that I could barely hold a pen, let alone a coherent idea.

When eventually I was discharged from hospital, against advice I took myself off all medication, mainly to be able to write again. I was frightened and unhappy but at least I was able to

‘We were “ill”, inclined to misconstrue the actions of others. It was the word of a sane person against that of a person whose sense of reality was skewed.’

express myself once more.

Writing *The Fat Lady Sings* and giving voice to the experience of being a psychiatric patient was a very important form of validation. It is a fictional account, however, and not a piece of autobiography. I deliberately kept my own direct experiences out of the novel, partly through a need to preserve my privacy—something that had constantly been denied to me while I was a patient—but also because if I had drawn on actual events and incidents from the wards, I would inevitably have been telling the stories of other patients I had encountered, and that seemed like a breach of trust. Therefore, it had to be an imagined narrative and I created the characters of Merle and Gloria to tell the story. These black British women, hospitalized and on a psychiatric unit, develop a friendship that becomes vital to their survival. Friendships between those who are in any kind of residential care are perhaps the most sustaining and validating aspects of such experiences and I wanted to represent this in the book.

One of the difficulties I encountered in structuring the novel was the question of how to use first-person narrative voices for my characters. I needed to find a way of producing an account that conveyed much confusion but was also coherent enough to be intelligible to the reader. It seemed very important to allow the characters to speak for themselves in order to interrogate and perhaps reverse the silencing process that is such a big part of

institutionalization.

The solution came when I saw a television interview with two members of the Hearing Voices Network. One of them explained that auditory hallucinations often convey truths to hearers about their circumstances. The example they gave was of a young man whose voices kept telling him that the police were coming to get him. It turned out that he had been sexually abused as a child by a police officer who said that if he ever told anyone, the police would find him and kill him. It was a revelation in terms of providing a solution to the problem of narrative voice in the novel. The voices she hears function in just this way for Merle, telling her things about her circumstances that are hard for her to deal with consciously. They often narrate her parts of the story.

My aim with the character of Gloria was different. I wanted her to raise questions in the reader's mind about the way institutions deal with difference. One of the ideas put forward in the book concerns normality. Definitions of mental illness are predicated on notions of difference. Not being normal. Not adhering to convention. Black people are at a huge disadvantage in this respect because the models that measure sanity are based on the values of the dominant culture. Societal norms are implicitly founded on whiteness. Cultural differences are often seen as threatening, incomprehensible or irrational. To be sane is to be comprehensible, understandable, knowable.

Gloria poses these questions through her observations about what goes on in the unit. She cuts through much of the nonsense that is told to the patients on the unit, exposing the false assumptions behind these. Surprisingly perhaps, hospitals, whether treating mental or physical illness, are often places of laughter. Extreme situations breed gallows humour. I tried to bring this out through Gloria. She also presents a foil to some of the grimmer aspects of psychiatric treatment and mental health issues, a necessary space for the reader to retreat to if it all seems too much.

When *The Fat Lady Sings* was first published in 2000, I decided that I would not confess to having been hospitalized even though I was often asked about it. 'Confess' seems like the right word here: I was frequently treated as if I had sinned as a result of those experiences. I believed that such a confession could potentially damage my credibility as an academic and my ability to be heard on issues of race—not unrealistic at that time, when there was still so much stigma attached to mental illness. In some ways I regret this because I was perpetuating the idea that to be hospitalized is something to be ashamed of, and indeed, I was ashamed in some respects. I think there is less stigma now, although it hasn't gone away entirely, and even as I write this I feel trepidation about exposure. However, I was silenced when I was in hospital and in the aftermath of that, and if I continue to stay silent, I am colluding with those structures that were so damaging to me.

Things have changed since the 1970s and even since the late '90s when the novel was written. Swingeing cuts to the health budget have eroded psychiatric care in Britain to the point where it is virtually non-existent; people are frequently denied support, however great the need, unless they are thought to pose an immediate and specific danger to the wider community. Waiting times, even for six weeks of support through counselling, are over a year in most parts of the country. In the 1970s, black people in particular were over-admitted to hospitals, usually under section, and pathologized. Now that few psychiatric units exist, they are more likely to be imprisoned instead. Prisons are the new mental hospitals; still the same need to control and contain, but played out slightly differently.

It is also the case that community care, an idea based on sound and far more humane principles than inpatient treatment, turned out to be little more than a money-saving exercise. While psychiatric wards were often hellish places, people now experience the hell of minimal support when they are in crisis.

Racism is one of the biggest contributors to poor mental health. The 2016 referendum vote to leave the European Union legitimated and consolidated a rise in racist attitudes and activity. For the first time in more than thirty years, I was told to go back home as I walked along a British city street. Friends reported similar incidents. I heard a young black man say that he had believed he was

British, but since the referendum, he hadn't felt as if he belonged in the place of his birth. I'm hopeful that the Black Lives Matter movement will continue to counter some of the feelings of alienation that black people are experiencing, but I also fear that coronavirus will mean that limited resources will be pared back even further and the support won't be there if the sense of alienation continues.

Racism has a huge impact on black communities. Education tends to reinforce the marginalization of black people: black children are excluded far more frequently than their white counterparts; there is an absence of black writing on curriculums and the decolonization of history seems a long way off. In October 2020, the year of the Black Lives Matter protests, Kemi Badenoch stated in Parliament that the teaching of 'white privilege' was actually illegal. Badenoch, the Conservative Minister for Women and Equalities, demonstrated that black people do not make up a single homogenous community. I am using the term 'we' here in awareness of this and I fully acknowledge that we are not all equally affected by racism. However, many black people find it hard to get work that is equal to their ability. We are frequently in low-paid employment if we're fortunate enough to get a job at all. We often live in poor housing as a consequence of low wages. We deal with the effects of aggressive and biased policing and a judicial system that is frequently weighted against us. We are told every day, in

numerous ways, that we don't belong. We are silenced when we try to talk about race. We are implicitly or explicitly urged to go back home. We have been disproportionately affected by death and illness from coronavirus. None of these things is conducive to good mental health.

The Fat Lady Sings was published more than twenty years ago, but sadly, today it still feels all too relevant. ◊

A MONOLOGUE

Dear Cuz

Elliot
Barnes-Worrell

The following monologue was originally written and performed as part of My White Best Friend (and Other Letters Left Unsaid), an online festival hosted by the Royal Court Theatre in July 2020. Ten writers of colour were commissioned to write a letter 'saying the unsaid' to a person in their life who needed to hear it. Each letter was read by an actor representing the recipient, who sight-read the text (encountering it for the first time) live for an online audience.

To the actor: Read everything. The stuff in brackets. Everything. Say it with your chest. Take your time.

Dear Cuz,

This is for you, but please be aware that this is also important for all the white people in our family, and for every white person who has someone mixed race in their family.

So … Mathew, I think it's safe to say we have always been inseparable; no matter how much our lives differed in reality, it's always been Elliot and Mathew, and the mad shit we've done together.

I've always seen us like brothers.

I wonder if you agree.

Fuck it, I know you agree. Having me as a brother is lit as fuck and I know you're smiling now, innit. Smiling 'cos I called you my brother. Smiling 'cos you're an only child and being an only child

is long and dead and being my brother is sick. So yeah, you're like my brother. There's only a month and some change separating us anyway, so we've always been the same … kinda. Our mums are sisters. They lived in the same council block together in Camberwell, and then moved to within two miles of each other; they both instilled in us the same 'You can be whatever you want' dream. There's nothing much more to say: we're like brothers.

I know this bit is bare long, but I'm just putting you in a place where you can listen from. I'm not going to edit this shit: I do too much editing of myself in real life among you all to have to do it here too. OK. Let's go back then.

We did everything together. Bare sleepovers, bare terrorizing our parents, bare watching porn on VHS, bare house parties, bare video games, bare cartoons, bare smoking weed, bare going on camping trips as a family, bare sneaking away and drinking beer.

Remember when it was your mum's fortieth and we were too young to drink alcohol, so we'd take it in turns to go down into the kitchen and steal a bottle of wine and smuggle it upstairs. I was always good at it. Then you insisted it was your turn and you came back with a bottle of extra virgin olive oil. For fuck sake, I laughed so much I thought my organs were going to come out my bum. Remember when we almost set fire to my house because we tied some pyjama bottoms to the light bulb in my bedroom to mimic the eclipse which

‘I’ve always seen us like brothers.
I wonder if you agree.’

had happened that year (that was 1999: we're old, man), then we forgot about them and they caught fire and I had to carry them through the house on fire to the bin outside and then we pretended that nothing happened. We got punished that day. I wonder if you were punished in the same way I was? Probably not.

Going to your house was always so fun. Your house is big and your garden has two floors. I know innit, mad. Two-floored garden. (Yeah, our mums came from the same place, but yours got with a white man, made money, only had you, and invested in property. Anyway!)

There was always room for us to play and be silly. I know it meant a lot to you when my mum would drive me round, because when it came time for me to go you would run alongside the car till the end of the road. I used to love it when you did that. You ran so far and fast just to see me that little bit longer.

I think I was always ignorant of the differences between us as kids. You were tall with straight hair, skinny, wore glasses. I was short with curly black hair, also skinny, and had buck teeth. That was it really when it came to appearances … back then, at least. I could run faster, was stronger and you probably thought I was really brave. You would goad me on to do silly and dangerous things, living through me. And I liked to have an audience, and your attention, so I would keep doing the dumb dangerous shit because you loved it. I crossed the

railway tracks, climbed over the gates into the park after closing and picked up toads. I could pick up toads and you were scared of them. I'd pick them up and put them somewhere else, protecting you from their slimy skin, and you thought that was amazing!

I think I thought that I had more than you back then. That's fucking mad, but that's what I thought. You, looking at me with those eyes, those 'my cousin is so cool' eyes—that made me feel like I had more than you.

When we were about twelve or thirteen it shifted a little. Secondary school is mad; secondary school in the early 2000s is very, very mad.

Before then it was all running in parks and we were just the same, but during secondary it was different. For me it was very different.

I still came round to yours all the time and you came to mine, but our lives on the outside were different. I don't think you ever really understood what my brother and I went through at secondary school. How the streets treated us, the police treated us, how white people started looking at us…

You knew I carried a knife to school. You knew getting the bus to your house from mine was risky as fuck, so I took that knife with me. You knew that. But I don't think you ever understood it or if you did you never made comment on it. I kinda liked that, I liked that you didn't.

Seeing you was like an escape from all of that shit. It was just Elliot and Mathew, the same as when we were small, and I was so grateful that you didn't

‘We got punished that day.
I wonder if you were punished in
the same way I was?’

treat me like the streets treated me. You were being kept innocent. You were keeping me innocent in your company.

Remember when I was coming to meet you after school in the park near yours – we were both about fourteen. You were with some of your 'friends' from secondary school and I was coming by myself. You met me at the gates to the park, remember, the ones I used to climb over. You told me that you had told your friends that I was a 'knife-carrying drug dealer from Peckham' so I should 'act the part'.

I did come from Peckham. I carried a knife to school. I also sorted out some weed for people every now and then. So it was true, but it felt … off. They would never be the words I would use to describe myself. Why not 'my cousin is a really fast runner and has an unbeatable score on snake'?

I remember you had this expression in your eyes, excitement. Like the kind of excitement you feel going to the zoo and standing close to a tiger. A thrilling excitement, so close to danger, but never really in any. Always knowing you wouldn't get hurt or end up in the cage with it.

I didn't quite understand what that was then. I thought it was more of me being the brave cool one that you looked at with adoration and longing. I was the gate climber, the toad catcher, the drug dealer. It was kinda the same.

So I performed for you. I spoke slang and knew how to fight and had a knife on me (because I was scared of the bus journey) and your

friends loved that shit, and so did you. After the performance, we went back to yours, played video games, watched films and had a sleepover like always, and I was safe. I didn't understand then that you had just made me earn that safety. I was enjoying the eyes of wonder and admiration from your friends. I was enjoying the fact that you knowing me was making you cooler. It kept you safe. It protected you. It was a calling card: Not only is my cousin black, he's got a knife, is from the streets of Peckham and sells drugs. That way, people might respect you, and not rob your Nokia 3310. And when the park incident rippled through the classrooms of your school, it did keep you safe. You never got your phone robbed.

That day in the park was the first time you made me perform my blackness for your benefit.

Let's jump forward now. This was only a couple years ago. I've forgotten that park incident by this point, I don't 'sell drugs' any more or carry a knife. That trauma haunts me, but doesn't dominate me.

So it's you and me in my kitchen talking and I wish I could remember how the N-word came up. It's funny, when a word like that is used: your memory is almost always only of the word and not much else. We're talking about something, like we do. Fuck it, I'm gonna make something up here. We were talking about cartoons, and in this cartoon, the fish said the N-word to the badger and the fish is voiced by a white person. That's not what it was, but fuck it, the actor reading this isn't my cousin, this

isn't a theatre, and it makes for better reading… So I say, 'It's crazy that the fish said the N-word,' and you contribute to the conversation by saying, 'Yeah, it's mad that the fish said "Nigger".'

Notice, Mathew, how I said 'N-Word' and you said 'Nigger'.

I say, 'Yo'—I probably started it with 'yo', I often do when I'm defending myself—I say, 'Yo, Mathew, be led by the black person in the room, man. If I choose to say "N-word" and not "Nigger", why the fuck would you use that word? I have a choice to say "Nigger" and I chose "N-word" instead, so you gotta follow suit, and even if I did say "Nigger", you gotta say "N-word".' I said it more or less like that. It wasn't a question or up for debate. But you're a journalist now, and love arguments, so you say something like: 'We should be able to say the word "Nigger" when discussing it.'

Bro. FAM. BLOODCLART!

I love you, Mathew, but … WHAT THE ACTUAL FUCK, MAN. It is so easy for you to debate something that does not pertain to you, to throw my life and experience up in the air like a plaything, interrogating it and then disregarding it when you've become bored. You ask me, 'Why are you getting angry, we're just talking,' and I'm like, 'My entire body is up for grabs in this "talk/debate/argument", and yours ain't, like what the actual fuck,' and I'm crippled, 'cos you're some hyper-intelligent journalist who knows how to say shit that makes me look like a dickhead, and there's no

one else around and I can't vent to anyone about it because you are so surgically attached to me that if I tell anyone in my circle they'll treat you differently, and I love you too much to let that happen. So I defend myself, we don't agree, we smoke weed, I cook you dinner, and we get on with the day and maybe watch the fish/badger episode on TV, I don't know. You leave, and when you're leaving you say something like. 'Why do you act black?'

This echoes around my head all the time. As someone mixed race, our 'blackness' is always up for grabs. The popular opinion is that we get to 'pick and choose', but that is not the case and definitely isn't for me. YOU get to label us one way or the other when it suits you. It suited you a decade ago in the park, me being black as fuck, but now a decade on you want me to be less black for ease of conversation.

(Note to actor reading this: I wonder if you said all the 'Niggers'. I wonder how you feel now. Small thrill?)

Anyway, now we're here, we lived together for a bit last year, we've been to Japan together since the N-word event in my kitchen, you've coached me through a break-up, and I coached you through one too. We're probably somehow closer than ever (despite all of the above), we're inseparable again like old times, and even more than that you're kind of in and among all my black friends. Then 25 May

happens, and it happens differently for me than it does for you.

You probably watched that video several times, because you work for the BBC and that's your job. I still haven't. You probably came up with strategy, and investigated, and worked on some articles about it, while I fell into despair and didn't come out of it. I watched people that look like me cry in such a huge way it was like they were inside me shaking my ribcage. I called all my black friends and cried with them. We just cried together on fucking Zoom. It was kind of beautiful, looking back. Black men just crying silently together, horribly alone, isolated, quarantined, looking into their screens at one another.

Then there was the day after, when every Becky I've ever met, and every Tom, Fred, Jake, Jack, George, Phil, Tim, and every other monosyllabic white man's name who I know or have brushed past on the Tube, called or texted me to let me know they weren't a bad person.

(Ten points if I've guessed the actor's name who's reading this, or maybe you're one of the lucky ones with a two-syllable name.)

Some of them said touching things and weren't selfish about it; some of them helped close the hole in my heart. But you. My blood. My brother. You did not. Nothing. Nothing from you, your mum, your dad, my aunty, my uncle, my other uncle, my

cousin, my other cousin, my other other cousin, their partners. No one. No one apart from my mum. No one on the white side of my family said shit.

You're not distant family. You're my every-birthday-and-Christmas family. Nothing from any of them. And nothing from you, Mathew.

So in the white family WhatsApp group (I call it the White Walkers WhatsApp group, 'cos it feels like they're trying to kill me, and they're all as disappointing as that show is), my big brother and I wrote: 'We are leaving this group. As the only black members of this family, we have found it very upsetting that none of you have contacted us during this awful time to see how we are doing. Please don't contact us now as we need time and space to process.'

You, of course, contacted us straight away, and we didn't answer. You got mad that we didn't answer. You said, 'You're painting me out to be a bad person.' You told us that 'as a white man it can be very awkward talking about race'. We told you we didn't want to talk about race with you. We then said, 'Give us the space,' and you said, 'That's not fair.'

Needless to say, we haven't spoken since.

Our mums raised us the same. They both told us, with love, that we could be whoever we wanted to be. That was my mixed-race gift and curse: gift, because I went boldly into situations ignorant to the hurdles and limitations of my skin colour; curse, because I fell over those hurdles blindly and hurt

‘Our mums raised us the same.
They both told us, with love,
that we could be whoever
we wanted to be.’

myself in a way that, if I'd known they were there, I might not have.

I saw everything happen to, and for, you. I watched you, the shyer one scared of toads, live a boundless life of opportunity, while I didn't. Both my big brother and I have struggled financially. We have both been to therapy. We have both been harassed and/or arrested by police.

And I am successful, I'm really fucking successful. Look now, there's someone reading this letter pretending to be you, they're probably even a good actor. I've somehow convinced a white theatre to listen to me, a theatre that, like you, could honestly work a lot harder (I hope the black writers are getting more money than any of the white readers), oh, and I'm being paid for this, not like how you're getting paid, but paid, which means I'm in the top 1 per cent of writers and still…

I used to think I had more than you. I was so confident and carefree. Now, I wouldn't dare climb over a gate, I don't make friends easily now, I'm more nervous around people. I have barely any white friends at all and only one straight white male friend. I view them with suspicion and anxiety. I'm always waiting for them to fuck up. Even the guy reading this, I probably won't ever be your friend, you will need to do a lot of reading first, and not tell me about how much you've learned, and even then I'll be waiting for you to fuck up, and why would you do all that work when you could just take this cheque, add the credit to your CV and move on in

whiteness, never being challenged.

But you, Mathew, with black brothers, someone I protected my whole life. I caught the toads you were scared of; I became blacker and scarier at the cost of my mental health for you. I didn't tell any of my boys about the N-word incident so they never treated you differently, and now, even now, I'm calling you Mathew; it's not your name. Your name is not Mathew. I just don't want these people, who you'll never meet, to know your real name, because I love you and don't want them to judge you.

I don't want you to feel the pain that you've made me feel.

That is why this is so hard.

I wish we could go back. Have sleepovers, watch porn on VHS, smoke weed, drink olive oil and watch cartoons. There is a massive hole inside of me now. I have to navigate that chasm and try not to fall into it. I have to fill it somehow. I have to fill it without you. You can't help me with it.

This letter isn't a plea for you to change or face what you have done to me. It's not to start a correspondence while you remain unchanged.

It's a goodbye.

Goodbye, I love you. ◊

‘A kind of letting go’

In Conversation with Kayo Chingonyi

Kayo Chingonyi is a Zambian-British poet, editor, academic, MC, producer and DJ. His poetry explores many facets of identity and belonging, possession and dispossession. It is infused with a bitter-sweet longing for lost things—places, people, selves—for a past which feels at once painfully close and impossibly far gone. His first full-length collection, *Kumukanda*, was a love song and an elegy to 'the arctic north of boyhood'. It was published to widespread critical acclaim in 2017, winning the Dylan Thomas Prize and the Somerset Maugham Prize, and shortlisted for many more.

In person, Kayo is a thoughtful, watchful presence, softly spoken and precise. *Five Dials* caught up with him over Zoom, in the dog days of the UK's 2021 winter lockdown, to hear about his new collection, *A Blood Condition*.

FIVE DIALS

So I wanted to start if we can with titles. The title of your first collection, *Kumukanda*, refers to a coming-of-age initiation, and then more broadly to various kinds of passage into adulthood and catalysts for that transformation. *A Blood Condition* returns to lots of the themes of your first collection, inheritance being one of them. Among other things, the title evokes an idea of prophecy, the flipside of inheritance: looking forward at what will or must happen, instead of looking

back at what has come to pass.

KAYO CHINGONYI

Yes, I think it's a renegotiation of the same themes. But maybe, as you say, there was a move away from the nostalgia of the first collection and towards a way of being in light of all of those things that are explored in both books. I think of *A Blood Condition* as a book about letting go—of the past, mostly. And there's a lot more of the future in the book, certainly. It's more hopeful in that sense. I'm thinking about it as a kind of letting go of certain things, both thematically and in terms of form, which maybe I won't return to in poetry again. But yes, it's very closely aligned with *Kumukanda*.

5D

Could you say a bit more about the forms you're leaving behind?

KC

I really like using variations of the sonnet form. I like rime-royal sonnets a lot. I use those a lot in *Kumukanda* and have come back to them in this book. I find it interesting to use forms without necessarily telegraphing or broadcasting it (although I guess I'm doing that now). I like the rhythms and resonances that arise out of certain closed,

received forms, but I'm also getting into free verse again, which was my main mode for a long time before I wrote *Kumukanda*. Some of the poems in *A Blood Condition* really explore that free-verse prosody, and break out from 'traditional' form, for want of a better word. I think that's something I'll be exploring more in subsequent collections and subsequent writing: the possibilities of a more improvisational or experimental form.

5D

It puts me in mind of the way that music, and specifically rap, has inspired and informed your writing, which is something you're spoken about before. Rap lyrics are one example of that more free-form approach to literature.

KC

Yeah. There is some rap prosody in *A Blood Condition*. '16 Bars for the Bits', for example—a 16 bar is a rap verse form. I'm thinking about that a lot more in my writing now: the form of rap is a little bit looser, more conversational and more direct, maybe. And I'm interested in that. Interested in seeing what arises out of the relationship I have to different traditions in poetry.

5D

I want to ask you about the 'Origin Myth'

‘I’m very taken with
the subjunctive in all things
historical. What are the other
possibilities and tributaries that
branch off from what happened?’

sequence, which comes very early on in the collection, and also speaks to its title. Each poem in that sequence starts with the final line of the previous poem, which feels like another reference to this idea of inheritance, but also, of course, to infection, each piece a link in that chain. It's a sequence about the HIV epidemic. Could you talk about how you came to write about that?

KC

For me, the virus has a very personal resonance. I was born in Zambia, I'm from Zambia, and some parts of Zambia have an adult infection rate close to 25 per cent. So it's part of the legacy of the place, really, this virus. When I was thinking about the idea of a blood condition, that's one of the things I was thinking about. It's a source of national grief in Zambia because there's no family untouched by the virus. And my family is no different. So I suppose I was always going to write about it if I was going to delve into inheritance and talk more directly about my Zambian-ness. You know, the book opens with a very Zambian poem. So yeah, there's a very personal connection to HIV and also the politics of its spread. Writing about it was a way of tapping into that personal and more widespread resonance.

5D

Zambia's presence in the collection is very striking. Sometimes you're writing about your direct experience of the country, but there are also pieces set before you were born, imagining versions of the country that you have never lived through. It's almost a nostalgia for a prelapsarian version of the place. In the very first poem ['Nyaminyami'], for example, you show us the river people and the river god, and of course it's not a totally utopian vision but it does have this mythic pre-Fall quality to it. It feels very folkloric, that first piece.

KC

Yeah, I'm very taken with the subjunctive in all things historical. What are the other possibilities and tributaries that branch off from what happened? And I think, for Zambia, and also for Africa generally, I'm always struck by the wealth: in terms of knowledge and talent and creativity but also natural resources that can be taken and used for all sorts of things. There's such wealth there. But the proceeds of that wealth weren't redistributed. And the thing that happens is there's a kind of generational lack, almost, an inequality that arises from that.

So I was thinking about the alternate possibilities for such a place. Alternate

possibilities, to be honest, is one of my perennial themes. There are lots of alternate versions of people and ghosts and attempts to describe a situation from another perspective [in my work]. It's something that interests me a lot: what might have happened, had things been different.

I think that's part of the reason we get drawn to nostalgia: this overwhelming sense that we can't go back to a particular place but we're still called back to it and it still has a hold on us. For me, Zambia is like that. The place that I left when I was a kid doesn't exist any more. And the place that existed before I was born doesn't exist any more. And so I'm piecing it together. There's a sense in which it can never be real for me in the way that it once was. These poems are a way of connecting to a lived reality that I once experienced but which I can't any more. I would have to stay there for a long time for it to become my lived reality again. For me to really know it.

5D

I think alongside that sense of possible alternate versions of history there's also a real sense of possible selves or other selves in the collection. A lot of those selves come out of place, not just Zambia, but when you're talking about different areas of London, of the north of England, it feels like there's a slightly

different self that emerges from each of those places. And maybe you're trying to create enough space for each of them to exist or to work out how they can coexist.

KC

Place is something that I always come back to, just because I've moved around quite so much. I've always been fascinated by how different ways of shaping language, as you say, allow us to inhabit different parts of our psyches. There's something very particular about the Mancunian sense of confidence in the north, for example. Part of that is the way that Mancunian speech works: it's very present and foregrounded, you know. And then there are softer inflections that you find, and you can kind of romanticize that and say it means that the people of that place are more softly spoken.

I'm just fascinated by what happens to people in different places, how their perspective shifts. Since I've had the opportunity to travel to and live in many places, I've had the chance to be influenced by so many different things. And I feel compelled to write about that in order to complicate the idea of a stable self.

5D

There's a tangible ambivalence, particularly in

poems like '16 Bars for the Bits' or 'Postcard from the Sholebrokes', which hold a specific tension between the problems experienced by those urban communities and making a case for their beauty. People are struggling to pay their rents, knife crime is rising, there is danger and instability, but the intimacy of your gaze on those places is powerfully affirmative. There is a deep sense of claiming those spaces, knowing them and feeling yourself to be of them.

KC

I'm always trying to get past that kind of superficial reading of a place as being one thing or another. Trying to get into what complicates a place, what makes people stay there, what makes people think of a place as home even as it might be difficult to live there.

I've travelled to a few places that people warned me were dangerous, or whatever else, around the world. And the thing that brings me peace when I travel to those places is that it's home for lots of people. By and large, that's what the place is. It's somebody's home. It's somebody's space of connection and belonging. Being respectful of that is really important.

So that's what I try and do in writing about places that I didn't necessarily grow up in but which I inhabit. Trying to find

that respectful way of talking about their difficulties, but also just what it's like to walk through the area and notice its beauty, complicated or qualified though it might be.

5D

One of the words that I wrote down in my notes is *reverence*, which is kind of what you're talking about with respect, right? Your work has a deep capacity for reverence, in response to those places, for seeing the numinous quality of everyday spaces and what they actually mean to a person who occupies them.

KC

Yeah, I think so. And also willingness to find out new things. To have your preconceptions but be open enough to learn about the history, the stories, the resonances that you might not see as readily on the surface. When you start to talk to someone who's really connected to a place, you start to capture its magic. In writing about place often I'm trying to do that, trying to speak about how a place can haunt you or captivate you.

5D

Haunting puts me in mind of the pieces about your mother. There's a more palpable yearning there, for the places that remind you of her and the memories embedded in the place.

‘I like for that protective film to slip
away at times too. For something to
be very plainly stated. The balance
between that vulnerability and a
more reserved perspective is—
I guess it’s my wheelhouse, really.’

KC

Going to certain places in London is always reminiscent of experiences I had with her. And I kind of like that, that confusion that my body goes into when I'm there, because it's a way of holding on even as you have to let go—which is really what those poems in the collection are about. You can let go of the person but being in the place somehow allows you to inhabit history momentarily. And that feels comforting after a while. Initially it's very stark and difficult but I can find comfort in it now. It's useful to just go there and let those feelings wash over me.

5D

You have a line, 'the part of me lost to the realm of ledgers or legend', which I think could apply to almost every poem in *A Blood Condition*. It's about making your peace with the past that you can't bring back—and the version of yourself that belongs there.

KC

Yeah, it's definitely the through-line that connects the pieces in the collection. This desire to find a new perspective or direction on all of this material; to find a way out of one reading of it.

5D

Should we talk about the 'Genealogy' sequence, which is more explicitly about losing your parents? It's interesting in light of your point about the bitter-sweet consolation of allowing yourself to experience memories—because the poems in 'Genealogy' are almost holding themselves apart from the memories. Each one contains a moment so carefully confined, literally bracketed, like you're only able to look at it briefly, for fear of being overwhelmed by it.

KC

I think that's a very astute reading. Part of the reason that I write some of this stuff in poetic form is because there's a limit to what that form can contain. I mean, not necessarily, it depends from poet to poet, but in my writing there's a balance I'm trying to strike between the form and expression. Between improvisation and something more fixed. If I go too far into improvisation, then I become lost somehow. And so the form anchors things in a way that I find useful, in a way that directs my perspective and my gaze. But also, in making public the very direct and difficult feelings that I'm exploring in this book, I have to find a way to feel safe. And I think poetic form can do that sometimes. Especially the way I use it: it's not a trick exactly, and

not a mode of obfuscation, but certainly it helps me to say things that I would otherwise find difficult. It's a frame around experience, a way of broaching something that feels uncomfortable. And for me, unless I have that, I can't explore these particular subjects. It's too difficult.

The thing that I find particularly moving about that, when I read it in other people's work, is the reluctance of it—you get another perspective on their grief or the difficulty [of expressing it] in terms of the form they're using. And I really wanted to have that sense of resistance in the book. Because it's not something I find easy. And so I felt it was important to keep that friction, I suppose. The form affords me a bit of that.

5D

You said in another interview that poetic practice is a kind of masquerade, which I think was about *Kumukanda*, a collection that has lots of masks in it. I guess that's another way of thinking about what you're saying here: form almost like a protective layer between you and the material that allows you to feel more in control.

KC

Yeah, I mean, it does, and at the same time it invites interpretations which are outside of

your own perspective, which takes control entirely away. Which I think is a good thing. It's one of the things I most enjoy about publishing work: it stops being mine in quite so direct a sense. But yeah, there is some layer of protection in using certain forms or in writing in a certain way. But I like for that protective film to slip away at times too. For something to be very plainly stated. The balance between that vulnerability and a more reserved perspective is—I guess it's my wheelhouse, really.

5D

It's a very fruitful space. I'm thinking about what you said about not being able to approach or express some things any way other than through poetry. And I wonder whether there are any instances of the reverse: things that you couldn't express in poetry, either because that protective framework isn't enough, or they just wouldn't make sense to you in the form?

KC

I'm not sure if I can think of anything specific … I suppose generally I find it really difficult to write about a situation which has a number of different possible interpretations or perspectives in poetic form, because my poetic form often involves a single speaker. Others

use multiple voices particularly well, but for me that doesn't really work as well. So I think whenever there's multiple voices, I have to think about either multiple poems or moving outside of poetic form.

But it's something I'm challenging myself to do more in poetry: to incorporate several registers and voices and that kind of thing. I think it's possible, but I guess not necessarily for the poet that I am at this particular moment. Which is really the only poet I can be *[laughs]*. Multiple-voice things I tend to write in other forms because it allows me to go into sufficient depth. My poetry is very much about suggestion and concision, so I can't go into certain levels of depth.

5D

I'm wondering about the political perspective in the collection. It feels to me like there's more of an explicit political position in this collection than your last one. And as you say, a lot of it is connected to your writing about Zambia, and the extraction of various kinds of resources that has happened there. It's almost an anti-capitalist lens (maybe I'm just reading that on to your work because I tend to see it everywhere). And I wonder whether that was something that you were deliberately moving towards or whether it just emerged as you wrote?

KC

Yeah, I mean, that's been there as a through-line the whole time. Some of my earliest poems are directly politically engaged—though none of them are available to readers now, thank goodness. I've always been a very politically engaged person and it stands to reason that my poetry should contain that. I've been thinking a lot recently about anti-capitalist activism, nationhood, sovereignty, land rights, certain ecological issues, but it's not a new thing. Perhaps what's new is that it's treated with such a direct or directed perspective. Whereas in other work, I've been content to gesture to those political inflections. I think in this work, I wasn't satisfied with that. I needed to make it explicit at certain points.

And yes, I think that is a response to what the world has been like in my lifetime. I graduated from my first degree in 2008, into recession and austerity, and started writing the poems that formed my first book. The country has also changed since I first moved here in 1993, in lots of different ways. I couldn't write about the things I've inherited without touching on all those political resonances because that's where my political engagement comes from. You know? I was raised up in that. If I'm interacting with that heritage, it's going to be political.

5D

The collection is very much marked by loss of various kinds—I think that's often the thing that politicizes people further, right, when you recognize what you stand to lose, or you start to join the dots of why things have been lost, who's responsible, who could have prevented it.

KC

Yeah, I think so. You ask the most pointed questions in situations of loss. Questions about existence. Those *why* questions come out a lot more in those particular moments. So, yeah, I think it does make sense, in the context of a book so much about loss, that there should be so many *why* questions as well.

5D

One of the real sources of joy in the collection, one counterpoint to that loss, is music, which features in all your work. It feels like one of the constants that move with these various versions of yourself, as they evolve and exist in different spaces and different communities. And so I'm interested to ask whether you were listening to music while you wrote it, and what, if any, are the musical influences in the collection?

KC

For part of the time I was working on the collection, I started to listen to my mum's tapes, her lifetime collection of tapes, all of which I inherited. So there's instances of things that she recorded in different genres, a real mixture of genres from eighties and nineties dancehall to country, which were two of her favourite musics. Listening to all of that was a way of getting into a kind of sonic heritage that was just there in the background for me as a small child. Music was always part of every home that I've been in.

And then in terms of do I write listening to music: sometimes. I think what's truer is that I write in the spirit of music or a piece of music. More often than not, my way into a poem is to find its tune, for want of a better word. And once I can recognize what that tune might be, then it really helps me to continue. It's a kind of propulsive force. I'm engaged in a musical practice, through language, in writing poetry, so whether I'm listening to something or not, there's that spirit guiding what I do.

And certainly, when it comes time to edit the work, I'm really interested in how it sounds. Sounding it out is a big part of the process. That strikes me as a musical process too, and one that really helps me to decide when a piece is finished.

‘For me, at its best, on the page
or in the air, a poem is a way
of codifying certain kinds
of sonic pattern.’

5D

Where do you stand on hearing poetry aloud versus reading it? Is there a dimension that you don't get if you're just meeting it on the page?

KC

I think it's just different. Firstly, I would say it depends on the person who's reading, because for some people reading on the page is so connected to performance that they can imagine or hear the performance in their heads. Particularly when you have someone like John Cooper Clarke, say, his work is really famous in performance, so when you read it on the page, you can't help but hear his Salford twang.

I guess for me, at its best, on the page or in the air, a poem is a way of codifying certain kinds of sonic pattern. And you can do that on the page just as well. But it's just a different kind of music that's enacted. It's the difference between reading sheet music and watching a performance. And, you know, you can read sheet music and get a lot of pleasure from what the composer has done. And you can enact it in your head—but you have to be trained in reading in that way.

You make compromises [as a poet] both on the page and in the air for the people who do not experience poetry as clearly in those forms. So when you're reading your

poem aloud, you might make a concession to somebody hearing it for the first time who is not able to read it. And when you're on the page, you surrender some of that improvisational lightness in favour of the possibility of looking again and again at the same thing. And I think, if you're doing it well, then you balance those two poles and you create something which is fixed and improvisational at the same time. Ideally. But I think if anybody ever got it completely right, they'd probably stop writing poetry and do something else.

5D

I wanted to end (perhaps predictably) by talking about the end of the collection, because it brings us to a point that feels hopeful and celebratory, turning to romantic love and also returning to the Zambezi River. We've passed through the crucible of your reckoning with these various inheritances, and I wondered whether there's a deliberate sense of homecoming, or of cyclicality, in that moment of renewal and looking to the future.

KC

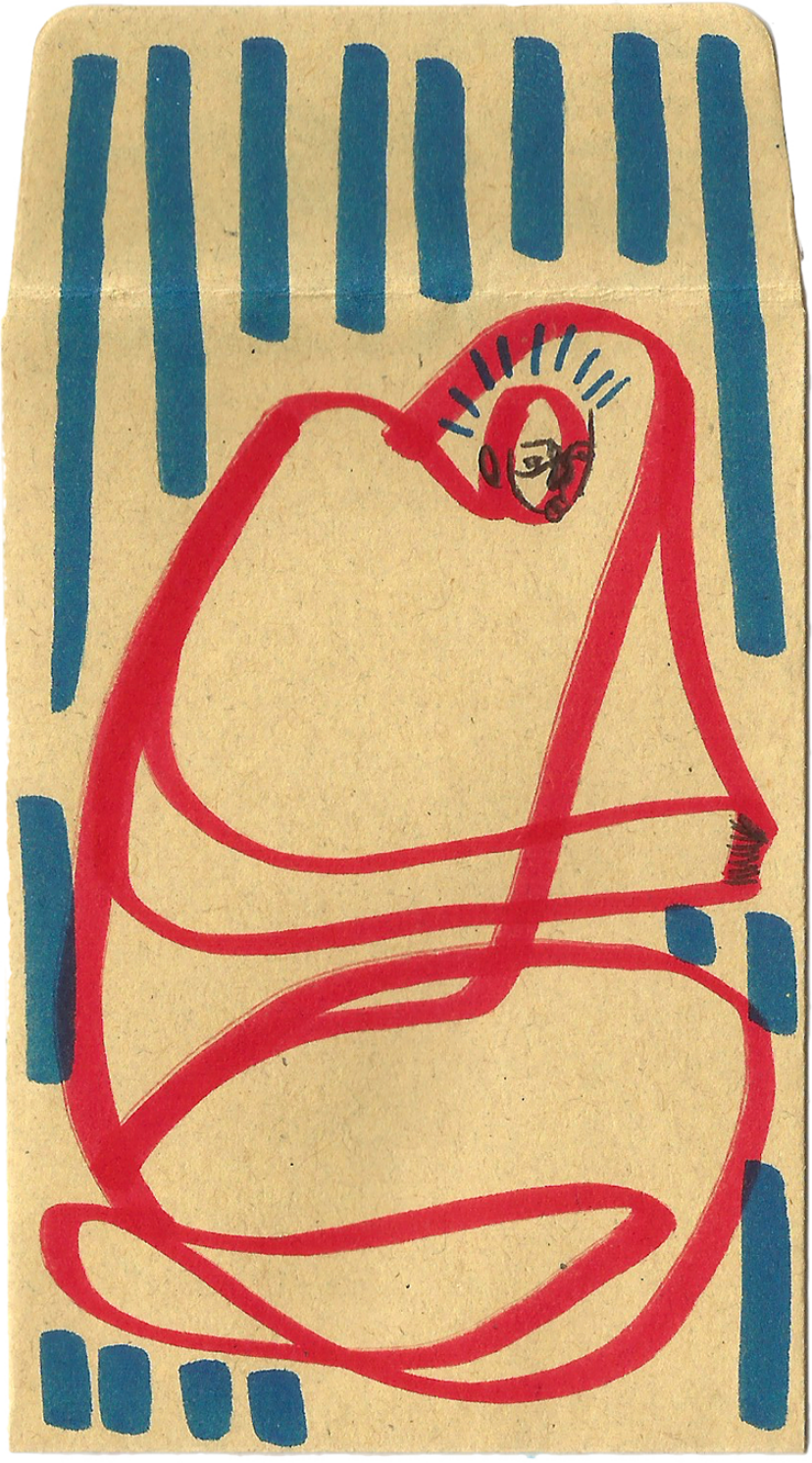
I have to credit my editor, Parisa Ebrahimi, for the cyclical return to the river at the end of the book. She's really a genius in putting a book together. She's really exceptionally gifted

at that. And she hit upon the idea of separating that long poem throughout the book and using it as a framing narrative.

One of the things that that does is open up a space for transformation. And that transformation is partly about acceptance—any kind of lasting and working relationship is built on that level of acceptance, I guess. I was thinking about the hope that can arise from doing certain kinds of work with what you inherit and coming to terms with what you inherit. That's why the end of the book looks so much to the future, which is unformed, and feels so open. Because once you move through what's past, there's a possibility that opens up in life again: this feeling that everything isn't determined already. There's a space for new experiences and possibilities.

That's why the book ends as it does: because it mirrors the experience of going through the inherited stuff to find peace. The end of the book reflects that peace. And it reflects on how vulnerable we remain but how possible it is to be hopeful in spite of that. I think that's the main thing I was left with, from working on this book. ◊

A Blood Condition will be released in the UK on 22 April 2021, published by Chatto & Windus.



Without Mourning

Sita Balani

you've put the living underground
and kept the dead up here
that is so wrong
that is so wrong
— Anne Carson, *Antigonick*, 2012

On 19 March, I read an article in the *New York Times* about the bodies in Bergamo, about funerals conducted without mourners, about doctors forced to let patients die to spare ventilators for those who stood a better chance of survival. Sitting in London watching the pandemic unfold in Italy, knowing we were a few short weeks behind, I was suspended in a state of vertiginous horror. The fear was primal, not only of death but of the possibility that even the most fundamental threads of the social fabric could be rent, that we would be in freefall, with nothing to hold on to. I thought of myself as someone who knew capitalism was a barbarous, cynical system, impervious to suffering, despite the veneer that liberal democracies smeared over their brute economic imperatives. But, of course, some part of me believed that some things—the individual, death, funerals, mourning—were sacred, even under capitalism. Aren't these the illusions that make life bearable?

Many anthropologists suggest that mourning is the closest thing we can find to a universal, that death rites, though their forms differ, are

practised by all peoples. I've always been moved by the similarities between mourning rituals across cultures. Hindus, Jews, some Christians and no doubt many others gather in the home of the dead for a period of longer than a week and shorter than two. Whether people sing, cry, pray, or chant, this time is sacred, ritualized, and unfolds in domestic space. In Hinduism, the religious tradition I know best, this time is one in which the chief mourners have little choice but to give themselves over to the wider community, who arrive with white sheets for the floor, with tea for the kitchen, with flowers to garland a photograph of the dead. These practices impose a structure, firm but gentle, at a time in which one's own capacity to make decisions is almost always impaired. One need not begin from religious conviction to find solace, even beauty, in this process. Indeed, for me, the most striking thing is precisely how human mourning rituals feel, how intricately they respond to the experience of loss. They don't feel divinely ordained but like the ordinary work of human hands, like a living storehouse of collective wisdom.

In April, my aunt died. Hansa Rajani—Hansamasi—had been born with a learning disability, and as an adult was diagnosed with schizophrenia. She had several physical health conditions. She spoke little English. In the weeks leading up to her death, her sisters tried to explain why they could not visit, but she still waited. My

mum sent a parcel of gifts that would arrive too late. At the mercy of a government whose architect, Dominic Cummings, professed a commitment to eugenics, the measures that could have been put in place to protect her from a deadly virus were deemed unnecessary. She was alone in hospital, unable to advocate for herself, to say how she felt or what she needed, without family or a familiar carer. In a country rife with the hatred of the old, weak, sick or different, her life was viewed as dispensable. But not to us. Hansamasi was dealt a tough hand in life, but she fought like hell to live. She was smart and cheeky and understood more than she let on. She told you off if you upset her and she didn't suffer fools. She was utterly, gloriously herself in a way that few of us achieve. She had a deep love of family. We would have celebrated her seventieth birthday last June.

As I write this, I hesitate—backspace, rewrite, backspace, rewrite—because politicians have cheapened the idea that everyone is valuable, loved, a person with family, thoughts, connections, friends, idiosyncrasies and dreams. They rehearse this idea—always remembering to say 'unfortunately', 'sadly', 'tragically'—and then make decisions that treat these families, thoughts, connections, friends, idiosyncrasies and dreams like rubbish to be discarded. But our people are not nothing. And the careful, intricate, committed rituals of mourning are one of the ways in which we insist on the value of life.

‘For me, the most striking thing is precisely how human mourning rituals feel, how intricately they respond to the experience of loss.’

Unable to gather together in person, my family–like many others I've spoken to since—attempted to rebuild a structure online to hold our grief. Every night for two weeks, we met on Zoom, gathering four generations across three continents to talk, pray and sing. At first we tried to sing together, but in the fractional delays, the glitches and warps of digital connections, our voices scattered and clashed. We quickly constructed a new way, with an order of service sent out on WhatsApp during the day, so we knew who would sing which bhajan or recite which prayer, and who would share a memory. In person, these rituals unfold more organically, with knowledge passed on through repetition and observation rather than being codified or explained. Usually, as the evening draws to a close, we drink tea and chat, and it feels possible to laugh again, to tell stories, to exhale. Despite the loss of these more relaxed moments of connection, I'm grateful for our new makeshift rituals, especially as so many others have had to bear their grief alone, unable to access even the limited connection afforded by these new technologies.

The funeral, however, was far more difficult to reimagine. We were used to conducting active and tactile funeral rites. The process of anointing the body can be confrontational, scary even, unused as we are to thinking about death. Under late capitalism, secular death rites are often focused on the individual—on celebrating the specifics of their life—so they tend to be driven by narrative rather

than ritual, by individuality rather than by universal processes. In contrast, religious death rites are often conducted in the same way regardless of who has died. They are also active and embodied processes, and the fear that their tactility induces in mourners is also what makes these rites so powerful; the experience of terror, horror, disgust is one that feels equal to the circumstance. In thinking about the rituals surrounding death, I find myself drawn back to Antigone—the paradigmatic figure of frustrated mourning. Her refusal to adhere to Creon's edict against burying her brother, despite her own life hanging in the balance, evidences the force of her desire to conduct proper death rites. As Antigone insists, these 'unwritten, unshakeable' traditions are alive. Being unable to observe them can feel like a death of its own.

According to Freud, a loss that is not mourned becomes melancholia. We might lose a person and, in being unable to accept the loss, we misrecognize the source of our despair, turning against our own egos and, subsequently, away from the world. The process of mourning, then, is one in which we come to build a bridge between the world of the living and the dead, to incorporate the latter into our sense of self, so as to make living with their absence possible. Over the past few months, I have had countless dreams about funerals. In many of them, some peculiar form of social distancing is being observed; one took place in a football ground and the mourners stood in the dugouts, our voices

rising in prayer over the pitch. Sometimes I am late and cold and searching in vain for a lost book of matches. Often I don't know whose funeral I am attending; if I do, it is someone long since passed or alive and well. It is as though my unconscious is attempting to complete something unfinished: to do the work of mourning but without the structures that usually make that possible.

In his writing on melancholia, Freud is theorizing an internal process, and the loss is often one of which we are not consciously aware. In the pandemic, the conscious, active process of mourning has been cut short or transformed beyond recognition, and we're yet to develop an understanding of the psychological impact of this change. But after Hansamasi's death, I began to think about the experience of curtailed funerary rites as having profound political consequences as well as being the source of deep personal distress.

While it is a biomedical necessity that funerals are prevented in order to curb the spread of the virus, there are other ways in which the scale of the loss could be acknowledged. In July, a national memorial service was held in Spain; more recently, in the USA on the eve of Biden's inauguration, he led a service for the 400,000 US Covid victims to date. While there is a risk in these events of affirming nationalist sentiments, they nonetheless make grief collective and public. Perhaps most importantly, they acknowledge the scale of the loss. This happened. In the UK, however, a silent

edict against public mourning is being enforced through subterfuge, trivialization and distraction. The prime minister has not met with grieving families; there has been no public memorial. The daily death tolls are announced in the same news-cycle drip feed as information about furlough or travel restrictions. There is no minute's silence, no reading out of names. This is less the treatment of the dead as numbers and more the use of numbers as a distraction from the dead. In the face of this weaponized distraction, we try to come up with fixed points of comparison to hold the dead in our minds: four planes packed with people falling from the sky; the Titanic sinking every day; a stadium of the dead. But with each analogy, we must confront the fact that even if it were a ship, a plane, a stadium, even then, perhaps an authoritarian government would shrug their shoulders, lie and conceal, prevaricate and posture, and even brag, shamelessly, about their success.

In *Antigone,* of course, the pathologies are political too. The edict against mourning Polynices' death is both evidence of political dysfunction—of a jealous and despotic king who rules against the natural order—and a harbinger of further doom. In the play, two orders clash: the law and the law; the law of men and divine law. This clash is why theorists have turned to the play again and again to think about law, about gender, about citizenship and about power. In her witty and idiosyncratic translation, Anne Carson gently

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mocks these readings of *Antigone* as political allegory, namechecking Hegel, Lacan, Judith Butler, George Eliot, Brecht and Žižek within the first two pages. My own reading of the play over the past year has been stuck in the terrain of the literal. I can't help but read the character of Antigone psychologically—as someone trying to love her messed-up family under the heel of a cruel and cynical regime.

The early days of the pandemic taking hold in the UK were a terrible, shimmering nightmare. For many of us, the days were emptied of the clutter of everyday life, of the commute and the meetings, and into this space broke a flood of fear. In this suspended time, students comforted grieving teachers, clients saw their therapists' eyes fill with tears on their computer screens, strangers sent their condolences to the bereft on Twitter, and the whole cold shining edifice of professional life, the boundaries between strangers, and the careful gradations of intimacy and distance seemed to blur and swim in our collective vision. Death, or the threat of death, was omnipresent and, for a very short time—just as the first, too-late lockdown was announced—it felt possible to acknowledge the terror this brought. But as the death count rose, it felt like the space for grief contracted. As more people died, the less we were able to look at them. I began to fantasize about more explicit modes of violence that would make my fury visible. I

imagined men with guns at the door, the familiar iconography of state murder, because it seemed like that was a situation in which one could intervene. I considered dousing myself in petrol and lighting a match in front of the Houses of Parliament.

Almost a year on, no political movement has emerged to make visible or contest the social murder that continues to claim thousands of lives every week. Without such a movement we stand little chance of changing the conditions of who lives and who dies and how. We are in a bind: without confronting the scale of death, we cannot build a movement; without a movement, we cannot make these deaths visible in a political system designed to hide the bodies. The left has for too long lived by American labour organizer Joe Hill's slogan, 'Don't mourn, organize!' But our most powerful movements for justice always do both. Think of the monthly silent walks organized by Grenfell United, in which the wider community marches alongside the survivors of the fire, refusing to follow the lead of the government, whose every action treats the residents of North Kensington as an inconvenience. The history of struggle is a history of people mourning the loss of those they did not personally know. Think of Southall in 1979, when 8,000 people paid their respects at Blair Peach's open coffin at the Dominion Cinema. The teacher was killed after being struck on the head during an anti-fascist demonstration outside Southall Town Hall. He had put his body on the line to protect

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the community in Southall; in turn, they mourned him as a son. Think of the global uprising following the assassination of George Floyd. Look at the movement against the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill, unfolding in the wake of the death of Sarah Everard and attempts by the police to prevent a vigil in her memory. These movements embody Douglas Crimp's insistence, in his essay on the Aids epidemic, that we need mourning and militancy.

Authoritarian regimes know all too well the power of collective grief. Following the brutal rape, assault and subsequent death of a Dalit teenager in Hathras, Uttar Pradesh, in September 2020, the authorities cremated her body against the wishes of her family. As Brahma Prakash explains:

This decision not to allow the family to grieve at the woman's last rites was not a lapse. It conveyed a profound meaning. It was a clear sign of the insecurity of the state. It was a sign that the young woman had achieved martyrdom. But it was an inconvenient martyrdom. It was not the kind of martyrdom that could be televised to rally the nation's collective conscience. It was a death the authorities would rather have ignored.

We have seen similar events in the UK. When darkness fell on Clapham Common on 13th March at the forbidden vigil for Sarah Everard, police stormed the bandstand where women were

gathered, attempting to shut down the event. As photographs emerged of women in cuffs being dragged across the Common, the political force of suppressed mourning took on a new clarity. When we wish to make injustice visible, we fill up city squares, shut down roads, block bridges. Now, when public space itself has become muted and paranoid, we need to build a new architecture, of life and of protest, which makes space for, rather than denies, the omnipresence of grief. Mourning is a bridge between the living and the dead. If we want to change the conditions of life, it's a bridge we must stand on together. ◊

‘It’s best to understand the rules before you break them’

Eliot White-Hill, Kwulasultun, on solitude, Coast Salish style, and reconciliation

The previous issue of *Five Dials* was illustrated by artist Eliot White-Hill, Kwulasultun. His work combines aspects of the traditional techniques of the Coast Salish, the Indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest, with modern themes. For instance, the depiction of a figure tossing a mysterious liquid down its gullet might, at first glance, look traditional until the viewer reads the title: *The Coffee Drinker.* The artworks we published in *Five Dials*, including *Tutumiye' (Little Wren Shrieks of Existential Dread)* are each connected to Coast Salish life. We welcomed the chance to speak to the artist about their origins, as well as some of the important issues facing Indigenous artists today, including reconciliation.

Five Dials spoke to White-Hill, Kwulasultun over Zoom on a day when the air was warm, the birds shrieked outside, and most humans had been told to stay home. The pandemic had forced us all to come to terms with a particular brand of solitude.

FIVE DIALS

How have you handled all the solitude in the past year?

ELIOT

For us, solitude plays such a significant part when a person is looking for help or guidance, or if they're training or preparing themselves. They'd go and bathe in the mountains, sometimes for multiple days in a row. It's all

very intimate and personal. They'd welcome what comes when they're alone.

That said, there's been a little bit too much solitude this past year.

5D

Let's start over with an introduction.

ELIOT

I'll introduce myself the traditional way. *O si:em nu siyeyu, entha pe Kwulasultun tu ni cun utl Snuneymuxw. Huy ce:p qu kwuns ulup sqaqip utunu kweyul.* So that is: My name's Kwulasultun and I come from the Snuneymuxw people. And I'm so grateful to be with you today talking.

It's important to me to begin work that way, to frame the conversation by showing where I'm coming from and who I am. I practise Coast Salish art, our traditional art form, here in the Pacific Northwest. Coast Salish art is unique among the different peoples here. My art was featured in *Five Dials* 58.

5D

What are you trying to explore with your art?

ELIOT

Who we are and where we come from and the way our ancestors saw the world. And

the way we continue to exist here, surviving and thriving despite colonization and despite everything that we've had to overcome.

5D
What should readers know about Coast Salish art?

ELIOT
When people think of Indigenous art from the Pacific Northwest, it's usually going to be something called formline, a technique that uses ovoid shapes, high contrast, and positive and negative space. Coast Salish art is kind of the opposite of that. Instead of the interior negative space, everything is filled in.

5D
How would you describe traditional Coast Salish techniques?

ELIOT
In traditional Coast Salish art, you have your figure, a silhouette, whether an animal or a human or whatever it is. You're afforded a lot of creative freedom with the silhouette. It's always going to be a little bit different from individual to individual.

You would then fill the silhouette in with Coast Salish shapes: the crescent and the circle and the trigon, which is like a triangular

crescent—a shark tooth. There's a grammar to the way that these designs are used.

Most often the shapes are used to depict the flow of motion or energy within the design or the body. The orientation of the figures is important in the Coast Salish world. We do things from right to left or counter-clockwise. In the design on the cover of the previous issue, the crescents flow down the line where the spine would be. That's really old-school Coast Salish design.

All of it is intrinsically tied to our identity—who we are and where we come from and its use within ceremony and ritual. The carvings aren't just decorations; they're specific references and stories about either the artist or the family who owned the piece.

It's so tied to ritual that it's almost not an art form. When you think about what art is and the goal of making something that's beautiful, or expressing something visually—this is different, almost an ascetic kind of art.

5D

Does modern Coast Salish art bend or break the traditional rules?

ELIOT

It's best to understand the rules before you break them. Once you understand how it's supposed to look, then you can start

experimenting. There's a philosophical principle in Coast Salish culture that we call Uy Shqwaluwun, which means 'to be of good mind'. It's the state you have to go into and maintain when you're making art, or even in your everyday life. You try to keep the bad energy away.

It's about being present and opening yourself and connecting with the world around you, the people around you. When you can achieve that, the art will come.

My great-grandma would say that if you're making something, you talk to that thing. If you're weaving with cedar bark, talk to the cedar bark and tell it what you're doing. Ask it to help you, because that way it will open itself to you. That's when the connection happens. With my art, I try to keep that in mind while working on pieces, even if I'm drawing on my iPad. It's still engaging with this almost metaphysical concept of where our teachings come from.

My great-grandmother, Dr Ellen White Kwulasulwut, was an amazing person, an educator and a linguist and a healer, such a dynamo. I realized how spoiled I'd been, being able to go and sit with her all the time and just listen to her.

After she passed, I started researching and reading everything that I could find about Coast Salish culture, from the old

ethnographic texts and documents and colonial records. That's what drove me. All these different textbooks and accounts—they have facts and tidbits about who we are, but to understand us, you must turn to our own forms of self-expression.

I learned how hard it is to find our history. Take the word *Snuneymuxw.* Over the years, people have called us ten or fifteen different versions. In order to research, you have to know all of those different versions just to access information about us.

Then there are all the different ways that our language, Hul'qumi'num, has been written or described. One of the earlier texts is an informal journal kept by a missionary priest named Thomas Crosby who lived here in our community, in Snuneymuxw, in the 1800s. It's a book called *Among the An-ko-me-nums of the Pacific Coast*. That's what they called us at the time: *An-ko-me-nums.* A bastardization of Hul'qumi'num. And then Coast Salish people from this part of the world were called different things by different people who came here. You begin to realize, if you don't know the names that have been placed upon you, you won't access that part of your history.

There are all these barriers and gates. It's the part of the erasure, the impact of colonization and colonialism. They didn't want the knowledge to continue. So much of

the way we're talked about in these old texts is how we're going extinct. These researchers thought they were doing work on a people who wouldn't exist in a hundred years.

We're still here. We're still here and we're still connecting with the land and we're still connecting with who we are.

5D
Do you think settlers are daunted by the prospect of learning about Indigenous culture?

ELIOT
I think so, and sometimes it comes down to just pronouncing stuff. One of the things I hear all the time is the use of *x* in Hul'qumi'num, which is a guttural sound, like a Scottish *och,* you know. People see an *x* on a sign and they just give up. Like: I can't figure this out. How can we overcome that?

5D
Where do you think we're at with reconciliation?

ELIOT
It's tough with reconciliation and the government's inability to follow through on the promises that they've made. That's something that weighs heavily on me because it has an immediate impact on us and our

land. I look at the pipelines that are being forced through, the total disrespect for our relationships, for our sovereignty as nations.

But one of the most important things is that we stop looking at reconciliation as something that's just going to happen and is on the horizon. Instead, we have to look at it as a relationship that unfolds moment by moment, instant by instant. There must be a change in how we walk together as people on an individual-to-individual level, as well as a change in the way that we interrelate as nations on a national level.

It's a chance for people to re-evaluate the way they think and act in relation to Indigenous peoples and in relation to the land that they're on, a chance to start thinking critically about what we've been taught.

It is moment to moment. If you're in a situation, it's about being present and asking yourself: is my behaviour changing the narrative? Or is it just framing the narrative? How am I participating as somebody who's here?

5D

There's a lot of playfulness in your work, too. How much of the modern world do you inject into the designs?

ELIOT

So much of my practice is trying to be present. I live in the modern world and so I draw a lot of inspiration from the modern world. But I try to speak to modern settings where the supernatural is creeping in. It's not just a strictly traditional supernatural. There's a tongue-in-cheek metaphysical kind of weirdness too. I love absurdist humour, I was obsessed with Monty Python growing up.

So many of our traditional designs are deferential to beings or supernatural states or emotional states. It got me thinking: what are some of these modern-day states? Who are the supernatural beings of the modern day? One design, *The Coffee Drinker,* is a representation of a person slamming coffee. They become a supernatural being who embodies a heightened state.

Then there's my wren design, *Little Wren Shrieks of Existential Dread.* How do we know what birds are chirping about? Why do we think they're so happy? Maybe this wren is just screeching, you know, just letting it out.

5D

Does this approach help you from becoming too reverential?

ELIOT

Tradition, while it is so important to us, isn't

always going to be perfect. We're human. Where can we start to poke fun at ourselves? We have to be able to look at ourselves and be critical, but not in a harsh, hateful way. We have to examine all these different ways to open up the conversation and talk about our culture in a way that hasn't been really talked about before. Certainly not in the history of Canada.◊

Five Dials