

Five Dials

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Debuts

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Five Dials publishes electrifying literary writing of all forms and genres, by writers and thinkers underrepresented on bookshelves across the English-speaking world. Our commissioning rates are £200/1000 words for prose, £75/poem, and £1000/issue for artwork. If you're working on something which you'd like to tell us about, you can find us on Twitter and Instagram at @fivedials.

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Nicole Flattery

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Vanessa Lampert

had her first poem published in 2018. She has since won the Café Writers Poetry Competition, the Edward Cawston Thomas Fellowship Poetry Competition and the *Sentinel Literary Quarterly* Poetry Competition, won the Ver Poets Open Competition twice and come second in the Fish, Yeovil, Oxford Brookes, Ware, and Kent and Sussex prizes. She was commended in the National Poetry Competition 2020. Vanessa's work is recently published in *Magma*, the *Moth*, the *Oxford Times* and *Poetry Wales*. She has run workshops for Hive South Yorkshire, Aldeburgh Poetry Festival, the Poetry School, Stanza groups nationwide and as a volunteer in schools. Her first full collection *Say It With Me* was published by Seren in April 2023.

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Michael Magee

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is a lecturer in twentieth-century literature at the University of Bristol and an AHRC/BBC New Generation Thinker. *A Flat Place* is her first trade book.

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Leah Myers

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K Patrick

is a writer based in Glasgow. Their poetry has appeared in *Poetry Review* and *Five Dials*, and was shortlisted for the *White Review* Poet's Prize in 2021, the same year that K was shortlisted for the *White Review* Short Story Prize. In 2020, they were the runner-up for the Ivan Juritz Prize and the Laura Kinsella Fellowship. *Mrs S* is their debut novel.

Cecile Pin

grew up in Paris and New York City, and now lives in London. She writes for *Bad Form*, was longlisted for its Young Writers' Prize and was a London Writers Award winner in 2021. *Wandering Souls*, her debut novel, was longlisted for the Women's Prize.

Whess Harman

is Carrier Wit'at, a nation amalgamated by the federal government under the Lake Babine Nation. They graduated from the Emily Carr University BFA program in 2014 and are currently living and working on the territories of the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh as the curator at grunt gallery.

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The Every-

MICHAEL MAGEE

Five Dials asked writer Michael Magee to tell us about everything, or almost everything, he'd consumed in the previous month.

-thing List

Tár was good. We found a stream one night and watched it on the projector. I thought it was a biopic. Like a proper biopic about a real person. That's good marketing for you, Ellen said, a bit too smugly. She markets films for an independent cinema. It's literally her job.

All right, Don Draper, I said.

I know it doesn't make sense, marketing isn't advertising, but in my defence I was high. I had called into Fresh Garbage that afternoon and bought myself a new glass pipe. By the time the credits had finished rolling at the start of the film I was in full floaty mode. Didn't matter what happened from there on in; I was onboard and loving every minute. That's the beauty of smoking weed and watching films: even the bad ones are good, and the good ones are class. The problem is that you don't remember much. Whole films can disappear out of your memory within an hour of watching them, if you smoke enough. During lockdown, Ellen and I watched most of Pedro Almodóvar's back catalogue within the space of a week. As anyone who has watched more than one Almodóvar film will tell you, he's partial to a convoluted plot, the more dramatic the better, and he uses the same actors over and over again. Two years later, I can't tell you which Almodóvar film is which. The characters and the plot points have melded into one big film in my head.

‘That’s the beauty of
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the good ones are class.’

There's a series of books I like that does something similar, except there isn't much in the way of plot and, rather than recurring actors playing different roles, there are various doppelgängers who exist within different temporalities across seven books: Jon Fosse's *Septology*. It's split into three volumes or compiled in one big omnibus, depending on which Fitzcarraldo edition you choose. I went for the seven split across three. I wanted to see what the first one was like before I committed myself. Turns out I needn't have worried — I read it in two days and went straight to *No Alibis* to order the second one. While I was waiting for it to arrive, I read a different novel by a writer whose work I admire. To my surprise I couldn't get into it, and not because it wasn't a good novel. I had simply read it at the wrong time. It happens sometimes when you have an almost transcendent reading experience, that everything else just sort of pales for a while afterwards. The last time this happened was when I read *Anna Karenina*. It took me about a year to get over that book, but I couldn't put a finger on what made me feel so strongly about it. Then I read what Nabokov had to say about how Tolstoy had discovered a method of picturing life which 'most pleasingly and exactly corresponds to our idea of time,' and immediately understood what he meant: it was the passage of time, and how Tolstoy's prose is so

perfectly attuned to our sense of life passing by — from youth to adulthood, from adulthood to old age — that made me feel the things I did. I'll never have a reading experience like it again, I thought.

I took longer over the second volume of *Septology*. Four days, and after I finished it, I waited a week before ordering the third, which would arrive at the bookshop in a few days. There was nothing unique or distinctive about those days. I didn't have some great epiphany. But I did feel like I was coming to the end of something. What was strange was that I didn't dread it. Nor was I filled with expectation. I simply went about my days as normal, and that became part of the ritual of waiting. At ten o'clock on Monday morning I got a text: my book was ready to collect. I put my coat on and walked down to Botanic Avenue. There was no rush. I sauntered across the bridge over the Lagan at a leisurely pace. I even took a detour through the park and up around the Lanyon Building where groups of students walked back and forth across the quad. I was holding off, embracing that period between the end of one book and the beginning of the other, which brings you back to the same place each time, that opening sentence: 'And I see myself standing and looking at the picture with the two lines, a purple line and a brown line, that cross in the middle . . .'

I can't read when I'm high. Too many thoughts.

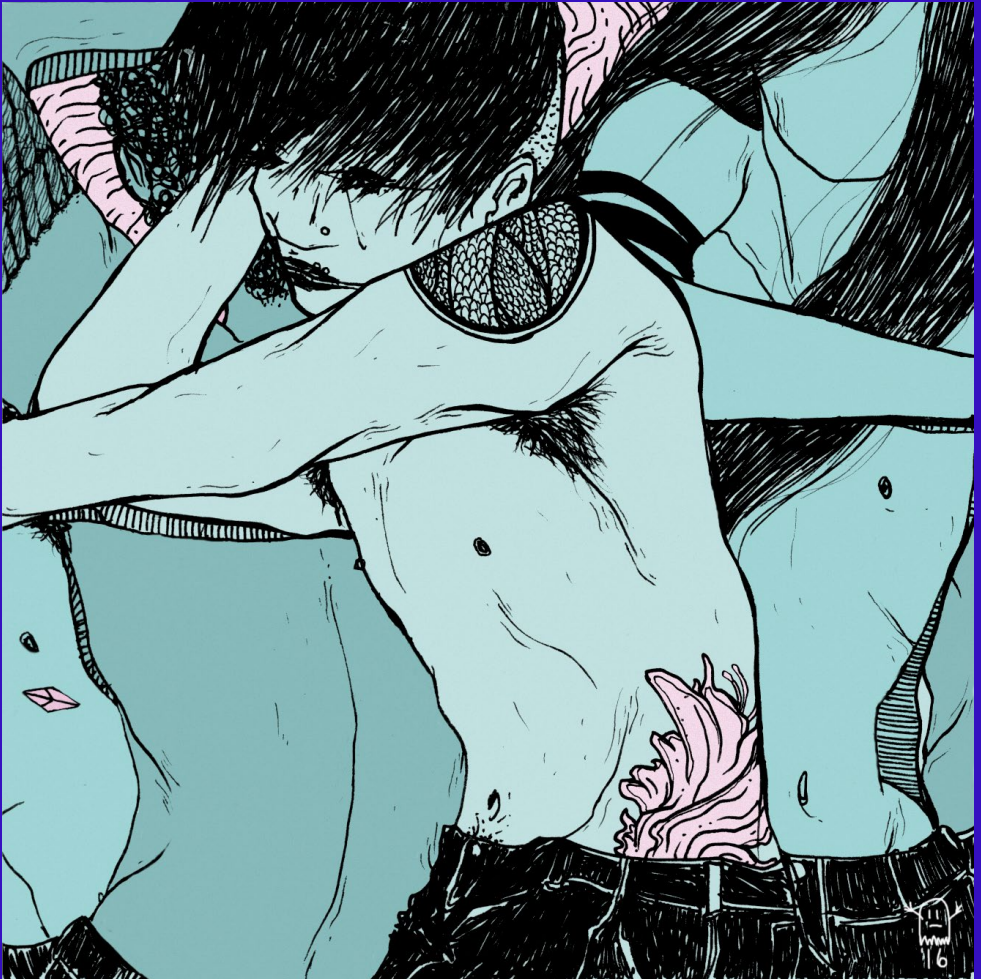
But if I was to compare the experience of reading *Septology*, I would compare it to smoking weed. Your mind is never more expansive and uninhibited than when you're high. Often, the present falls away completely. You become much more susceptible to the past and its intrusions. Even more so than usual, at least for me, and I live in the past most of the time. I suspect we all do. That's one of *Septology's* many great achievements: the weaving of the past and present, the cyclical nature of memory and how it permeates everyday life. Sartre hit the nail on the head when he said, 'We shouldn't believe that the present, as it passes, becomes our closest memory. Its metamorphosis may sink it to the bottom of our memories, just as it may also leave it on the surface: only in its own density and the overall dramatic meaning of our lives determine its level.'

I finished the last book on a Sunday afternoon. I was sitting on the pello chair we got from IKEA, it was raining outside and I found myself staring out the window, watching the spider at the top left-hand corner of the windowpane brace itself against the downpour. My cat was sleeping on my lap, and on the table next to me there was an empty cup and a bottle of water. For a while I just sat there, like Asle at his dining table, and tried to feel that closeness he experiences with God. It wasn't there. It hasn't been since I was a kid and my

ma sat on the edge of my bed at night and prayed with me. Sometimes when I'm out for a walk I'll go into a chapel and sit on a pew at the back of the nave and wait to see if anything happens. It never does, but there's something about being in that space, the quiet and the stillness, the high ceilings and the stained-glass windows, the light coming through green and blue and white, catching the corners of the mahogany pews, that makes me feel dead calm. It's like a semi-meditative state, that's the only way I can describe it. Everything outside me is shut out, I'm brought back into the centre of myself, and I give myself over to it.

This is what I'm looking for when I read a book or watch a film. At its most basic, I want the world around me to melt away. Recently, I read an interview Toni Morrison did with the *Paris Review*. She speaks about how there are some writers without whom certain stories would never have been written. She lists Hemingway in this category, and Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor. Writers who occupy a certain vantage point, who articulate an experience of the world through a particular lens. In that way, the writer becomes inseparable from the work they create. Not in an autobiographical sense, but in terms of how they go about the business of creating. Asle would describe this as 'the spirit of the picture,' which for him is what separates good art from bad art. The difference

is that for Asle the spirit of the pictures he paints is channelled through him from God, whereas I don't believe in God. I believe in Toni Morrison and Jon Fosse, Leo Tolstoy and Pedro Almodóvar. Their spirit is in their work, and for me that's enough. □



Three Poems

Self-Portrait as an Angel

I'm in town after my First Aid refresher
and there's an old lady, out cold
on the floor of The Dog's Trust shop.

Newly reminded of the throat's poor design,
I'm on it, I'm there, skilfully easing her
into the recovery position, wishing

my Mum was here to see me win at life.
The shop assistant is talking on her phone,
crikey Jan, this can't end well, why me?

so I mouth the word AMBULANCE,
professionally. The old lady begins to stir.
She hits me. *Get away* she says.

*You can't trust no bugger, get away,
or I'll kill you.* Two paramedics rush in.
One shouts, *don't you worry my love,*

*we'll have you home and dry in time for
'Can't Pay? I'll take it away.'*

I think of that old lady now, in her kitchen,

opening a small tin of butter beans,
or buttoning her cardigan for bingo. Life!
isn't it strange? You wander into a shop,

eyes peeled for a bargain, and it's pointless
because your time's up, but then it isn't
because there's an angel behind you

giving you shelter beneath her wings,
and she's kneeling on the floor beside you
giving you another run at life.

Girls Later-Life Orgasm Ode

O high crest of the much steeper slope
than you once were, I used to skip
bare-legged, hell-for-leather, without equipment
to reach your breathless summit. Forgive me,
of late I'm prone to abort such a quest
for sleep. It's just what comes over me,
that seducer with a better guarantee.
Once-so-eager, now more toilsome chum,
long have I loved and shall love you,
but must confess, I mourn the loss
of Oestrogen. Sweet companion she who
so tirelessly oiled the wheels of your machine.
O cumbrous, occasional friend, alas,
those grassy paths of dappled sun
are lost to me now, overgrown, gone.
My wearisome love, you offer me
only your onerous, northernmost side.
Is it strange to admit it's still you I pitch
my sights on? Committed to the long haul
with my ice pick, rope and crampons.

Maternal Ambivalence

In infants school our teacher chalked
'orphan' on the board to show us *no f*.
She meant Howard, no harm intended,

it was different back then. *Orphan* she said
eyes on Howard, whose hair shone like glass.
Howard who'd spit on his mucky hands,

and swing the length of the monkey bars
singing *Jesus bids us shine with a pure clear light*.
Howard, who lived in a Barnardo's home.

I want to say all his big losses came early.
Misfortune turned and walked away from him
while he was still new and his hair shone like glass.

Many times since I've said to my sister,
next time round let's not have kids. We've laughed
and raised a toast to that. I'll leave this world

not knowing what happened to Howard
who couldn't spell. I just can't unhear him whisper
my Mummy told me, one day she'll come back.



*On the Perils
of Research*



the Pleasure of Surprises

Nicole Flattery's first novel, Nothing Special, is a 'blade-sharp coming-of-age novel' (Spectator) set amid the sleaze and glamour of Andy Warhol's Factory. Flattery deliberately writes against a misty-eyed reverence which has often characterized portraits of sixties New York City, that notorious crucible of creativity, revolution and exploitation. Instead, she asks her reader to consider who is able to survive such a crucible — and what version of them emerges from it. With the flinty wit and composure her readers will recognize from her critically acclaimed story collection Show Them a Good Time, she interrogates art, sex, friendship, women and men, youth and regret.

Cecile Pin's first novel, Wandering Souls, follows three orphaned siblings cast adrift on the merciless tides of geopolitical disruption — carried away from their home in post-war Vietnam to wash up (after some wandering) in Thatcherite Britain. Polyphonic and meticulously wrought, it is a reminder of the psychological cost of migration, and a thoughtful meditation on the narrative bonds that hold us to one another, unbroken even by death.

Five Dials invited Nicole and Cecile to meet and discuss their work in March 2023.

N Hi.

C Hi Nicole. Where are you now?

N I'm in Dublin. In my spare room. Where are you?

C I'm in Camberwell in London. Just in my living room. I think we had the same publication day: 2 March.

N I feel like everyone had that publication day. I was like, 'Oh my God, is there any book that's not out today?'

C No, it's been good. I had quite a fun launch as well. I thought no one would show up, but it was great!

N That's the fear, isn't it? But it's good to actually mark it rather than just letting it pass.

C It can feel a bit anticlimactic when you've been working on the book for so long.

N Yeah, definitely. Were you working on yours for a long time?

C Yes and no. Because it's partly based on family history, I had it in my head for a long time but I really started working on it in 2020, during the pandemic, and more intensively in January 2021 until the summer of that year. How about you?

N I've been working on [*Nothing Special*] since 2019. I properly started writing it during the pandemic as well. So, yeah, a while.

C I loved your book by the way.

N Oh, I loved yours too. We should have started with that part!

C How did you get the idea to write about Warhol's Factory?

N I was reading Olivia Lang's *Lonely City* and it mentioned Warhol's book [*a: A Novel*]. I got interested in the idea of working on something which won't have your name on it — which is what happened to the women who actually wrote that novel for Warhol. I found that quite sad, that these women worked on something for so long and there has been no trace of them since. Our idea of history only includes the big players and I

wanted to do something with that. All my stories are about people, or women particularly, in the orbit of celebrity. It's funny because initially people were like, 'What is she doing? She's Irish. She won't know anything about New York.' And maybe I don't. But now that it's come out, a lot of the reviews are like, 'This makes sense. It makes sense that she would do this because all the thematic concerns are the exact same.' So, yeah, it was a challenge. But please talk to me about the writing of your book, because it involved lots of research as well.

C I felt really paralysed about wanting the book to be accurate and represent the Vietnamese boat people well. But there isn't much written about that part of history, especially about the Vietnamese people that came to the UK. So a lot of it was just looking at archival documents and photos and videos of the camps at the time. I didn't want to ask my mum too many questions either because I wanted the characters to come from me. And I wanted to separate the fiction from the truth, to really make the book a novel even though it's partly based on real events. So, at first, I was doing almost too much research and that was stopping me from actually writing the book.

N I did the same thing. I was like, ‘I can’t write anything unless I know everything.’ I’ll never do that again. Not that it’s a race, and I’m sure all that knowledge was useful to me, but I really slowed myself down.

C At one point, a friend pointed out to me, ‘Are you sure this is not just a way of procrastinating your writing?’ And I just said, ‘Oh yeah, you’re right.’

N People were saying this to me too, but I wouldn’t listen to them. I was like, ‘You don’t know what you’re talking about. Maybe you should write a book if you’re so great.’

C Once I got into the mindset that I was writing fiction, I realized it was okay if I got one small detail wrong, and I just hoped people would be kind about it and understanding. I felt more free after that.

N My research was quite fun actually. I was like, ‘Ooh, the 60s!’ But I feel like your research could have been quite challenging and upsetting.

C It was a bit upsetting at times. It involved

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learning a lot about, for example, I didn't realize the sexual assault that some of the women went through, or just the sheer number of deaths. But there were also some heart-warming moments. I was reading testimonies of refugees who came to the UK, and lots of them felt like they had been welcomed quite well by the British people. So, I tried to put that in the book as well. I get a lot of people telling me they read the book and cried but I really wanted to also show the good sides of things. They experienced a lot of discrimination and hardship, but I also wanted to show that there was some goodness in their story. Did you mostly do your research through reading?

N There is an unending trove of stuff about Warhol. Almost too much. So I felt like I had every kind of reference point: books, films, music, all that stuff. I was also hyper aware of the book I didn't want to write. The book I didn't want to write was like Austin Powers, like, 'It's the 60s, baby!' I did not want it to be like an Instagram filter or a really terrible TV show. That led to me taking things out more than putting things in. Was there anything like that for you, something you didn't want to do in *Wandering Souls*? Did you feel challenged to write a

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different kind of story than people expected?

C I didn't want to just write a trauma story. That's why I included some kind of non-fiction bits and different narratives in it. Initially, the focus of the book for me wasn't really the narrative thread, which is about Anh, Thanh and Minh, the three protagonists. At first, I was more interested in writing about grief.

N You write really well about grief.

C Thank you! And more of the feelings that come from grief and displacement and so on. I found it quite scary to write the characters and I don't like writing dialogue. At first, I was quite distant from the characters and it took a few drafts for me to feel comfortable making the narrative itself longer and more lively. Also I'm not used to writing young characters because I don't usually read books that have child narrators. I was very scared of writing it in a way that felt cringey, or a bit young or naive. It took a lot of work to get their voices right. How did you find writing a teenage character?

N Everyone keeps saying in their reviews, 'She's not

likable at all but she's trying her best'. I'm like, what? She *is* likable. She's only young.

C I thought she was very endearing.

N It's interesting what you said about the child narrator because my initial problem with writing *Nothing Special*, I thought, was going to be New York. I was writing during COVID, I lived there for a year once, but I couldn't go back there and walk around, obviously. But I was surprised that the challenge really came in remembering what it's like to be seventeen, more than what it's like to be in New York. Mae is desperately trying on different parts of herself in the way that you only do when you're that age. I think she only really started to make sense to me when she started speaking. Did you find that?

C Yeah, I had to add more dialogue to really make their voices come through. Are you someone who knows a lot about their characters before you start writing them? You know, some writers write down their characters' astrology signs and all these things?

N Their favourite TV shows. No, I'm a real re-drafter

and I don't plan. I didn't plan at all with this book. In the opening few chapters, the characters were totally different. I changed all of them as things developed and I wrote in new characters where I hadn't expected there to be any. I'd be interested in doing things differently the next time around. That's the exciting thing really, isn't it? You have to kill the last book by doing something new. I'm more interested in having a little bit of a shape next time.

C I had the vague skeleton for the book before I started it. I wrote the final chapter quite early on, actually, because the book has short chapters and fragmented narration, so I didn't write it in a linear way. If I didn't feel like writing part one, I would go and write part three. But same as you, I wasn't married to that skeleton. I changed things as I went along and, same as you, I didn't really know who the characters would be until I began writing them. I found that so satisfying. That moment when you start thinking of your characters as friends. When you start having moments of, 'Oh, they would act like this, actually, not like that.'

N Definitely. They surprise you like people surprise

you. I noticed in both of our novels there is a jump in time. Did you always plan to do that?

C Yeah, I think so. I wanted the book to come into the present day to show that the issue of refugees is still ongoing. For example, I talk about the Essex lorry event, where a lot of Vietnamese refugees died. I wanted to include Jane, Anh's daughter, in the book, because I wanted to show how trauma can be passed down from generation to generation. So yeah, that was something that I was keen on doing from the beginning. How about you?

N When I started writing, I was like, 'What do books that I've liked the most do?' And I was like, 'they always show a change in time and play with your expectations.' And also, I wanted to show that these things that happen to you when you're seventeen, they have more of an effect on you than you initially realize. You carry them into the rest of your life. I wanted the book to be more about Mae than about Warhol. It has to be about her relationship with her mother and it has to be about the relationships she has when she's older. That was my intention from the beginning.

C I love how the book is about Andy Warhol but he barely appears in it. I was at a talk with Ottessa Moshfegh and she said that in *Eileen*, the protagonist is a person who you would usually expect to be the sidekick. She was interested in writing about someone we would think of as a secondary character.

N I think both our books do that. You're taking people who aren't written about very often and putting them front and centre.

C It's true that there's not been a lot that's been written about the British–Vietnamese diaspora. And I really wanted to make them feel seen, even for a few hundred pages. And it's been really rewarding, because I've had messages from readers saying, 'Oh my God, this is my family's story. And I never read about them. I've never seen them in books.' So that's been a very nice and moving thing that came out of the book.

I've noticed that both our books are quite short. Not too many pages. Did you ever think about making yours longer?

N I gravitate towards things being shorter. I think, because I wrote short stories before the novel, my natural inclination is to cut and not to broaden. I wrote whole chapters of this book that I didn't include. I gravitate towards brevity in everything. Like if I see a good three-hour film, I'm like, 'there was a great two hour film in there.' Shorter length allows a little bit more ambiguity. I don't like fully explaining everything.

C Yeah, I gravitate towards a shorter story too. There are exceptions. I went to see *Seven Samurai* at the movies the other day, by Akira Kurosawa, and that was three hours and forty minutes. I was really dreading it.

N I think you can make an exception for Kurosawa.

C Afterwards I was like, 'Oh yeah, this is perfect.' But you have to be a really good writer to write a four-hundred- or five-hundred-page book! And I also wanted to leave some gaps in the story, leave some things unsaid — for example, how Anh and Thanh and Minh's parents and siblings pass away. Give space for the readers to have their own interpretation. My first draft was probably a bit too short, I needed to go

back and make the narrative thread longer, but now, I'm happy with the final length.

N It's a one-sitter, you know, a weekend. That perfect weekend with a book. I just don't think length has anything to do with emotional impact. I just read *Small Things Like These* by Claire Keegan:

really good. And her books couldn't be any longer. I wonder if I will ever write something longer, but I don't think I will — unless people are demanding, unless they're like, 'I need a four-hundred-page book from you.' I don't think anyone wants that, or they haven't told me if they do.

C And you're working on a second novel.

N I'm working on a second novel, yes. It's going to be first person again and it's going to be from a female point of view. It's set in Ireland though, which is good, which means I don't have to panic. For my first book I was like, 'No research', and then with *Nothing Special* I was like, 'Actually, research would be great. It will make me feel like I'm really doing something and finding ideas outside myself.' And now for the next one, I'm like, 'Oh no, I really don't want to do very much!' How about yourself, are you

working on something new?

C Yes, I'm slowly starting work on book two. I'm finding it hard to write when I'm doing publicity and the more social-facing part of being published. I left my job in October, so I used to work during the day and then in the evening I would write. But now that I have more free time, I feel like I'm less productive. Especially if I have an event in the evening, or a podcast: I'm nervous during the day, and it's hard for me to focus on writing. I want to really start working on it more this summer. But I think it'll be more contemporary — maybe set in London because, same as you, I want to do less research for this next book! Also, a story that is a bit less personal. The first one was based on my family history, and this one will have less to do with me, which will be nice.

N Every writer I know finds the same thing [about writing while you're promoting a book]. Your whole day is spent getting your adrenaline up for this hour-long event, and then it's over. I was in a group of friends and everyone was talking about their New Year's resolutions like, 'Be more punctual!' or do this and that. And I was like, 'Maintain my inner

life'. I think it's really important to not just be the person that sits up there on the stage, you know? You still have to watch films that you're interested in, read stuff, try and keep thinking. Because I find the thinking part of it really, really difficult. So yeah, that was my New Year's resolution. I don't know if I'm doing it though.

C And I'm still finding it hard to know exactly how much I want to share in interviews. Just knowing how much of myself I want to put out there. Do you have that as well?

N Yes. And I've often said really stupid stuff. But I'm actually getting a lot less personal questions for this book. I'm just being asked about Warhol and research. Do a lot of your questions feel very personal?

C Yeah, a lot of them. I think it's normal. When I read a book, I'm also curious about how much of it is personal. A lot of people have been curious about how much is based on my mum's story, or confused about who the characters are based on, or they think the modern character is based on me, but I just encourage people to treat it as fiction. The book is set in

the UK and my mum went to France, so from the get-go, the stories diverge quite drastically. But I don't mind talking about it too much, because it gives me some control over how much I share.

N I find that fascinating, because I do feel like every piece of fiction, book or play or film, contains a trace of the person who made it. More than a trace. But certain people get asked more direct questions, like, 'I deserve to know how much of this was made up and you have to tell me,' even though every book is an imaginative exercise.

C Yeah, I know. And it doesn't really matter, does it?

N No, it doesn't affect your enjoyment of a book at all. □



NO PURPOSE EXCEPT
NOW IT
IS EXISTING

12
16

A Writer Who Can't Read

ʔaʔcłtiŋ'.xwəŋ'

: to be speaking in a Native American language,
talking Indian

ʔaʔcłtiŋ'.xwəŋ'č'i! / Speak your native language!

Hazel Sampson was the last native speaker of the Klallam language. Her mouth learned to form its shapes and syllables before she was introduced to English, long before my own mouth existed at all. Her eyes could graze the written word and she could understand it without pause. She died on 4 February 2014, at the age of 103.

Hazel was from a time when the S'Klallam Tribe was whole, before they were split into three. Later in her life she was relabelled as a member of the Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe. According to those who knew her well, none of that mattered to her. She was S'Klallam; the colonizer splitting her tribe didn't change her identity. I sometimes wonder if she would be ashamed of me if we had met.

ʔaʔkwłn.t

: to protect, take care of, nurse, adopt someone
or something

ʔaʔkwłn.t cn. / I take care of it.

A Klallam dictionary was published 14 November

2012. It was created by Timothy Montler, an emeritus professor at the University of North Texas, far from the coastal home of the language he worked to preserve. It is a heavy book, filled with annotations on who worked on which part. Montler worked closely with some of the last living native speakers of Klallam, including Hazel, though she declined to be part of it in an official capacity. The entries span over a thousand pages, all carefully curated to protect a legacy that didn't belong to the man who was the driving force to create it. I admire his drive and his passion for preservation, even though it is another spike of guilt that sometimes makes me feel like I am not doing enough.

Technically, now, Klallam is a dead language. A dead language is one that has no community, even though some may be taught to speak it. People can form the words and reanimate what once was, but Klallam has long since breathed its last natural breath. Still, Montler's efforts and nursing of this cause kept it from going extinct and becoming nothing more than a crumbling memory, as so many languages have.

ʔ.ʔi

: to imitate, to mock

ʔ.ʔi cn. / I'm mocking.

—

A writer who can't read is a sorry sight. When I

don't understand a language, I want to skim over it. I want to let my eyes gloss over its twists and bends so that I do not have to feel lesser for not understanding. I have never been able to accomplish this. No matter the language, I fixate. I try to determine what each word means and how those curves and edges are meant to be pronounced. This is especially true for Klallam.

I have never been able to grasp the way the words of the Klallam language function. It is a garland on street signs and walls around Sequim. It is a marker on every newsletter and update sent out from my tribe. Whenever I see it, I try to will it into something understandable. I stare and hope for the words to shift around and suddenly make sense, as if my blood is enough to grant me literacy.

Still, when it is spoken to me, the speaker may as well be silent. When I see it written, it looks more like art than script. The curls of the letters and quick dashes of accents create something beautiful and striking. It stirs me in the same way the stars do. I am smitten and I want so desperately to understand more, to navigate the patterns and relive the stories they tell.

All that adoration brings me no closer to understanding.

I cannot pronounce a single word of the S'Klallam language, not even those that appear on these pages. I have crafted them through copy, through a careful

‘I cannot pronounce
a single word of the
S’Klallam language,
not even those that
appear on these pages.
I have crafted them
through copy, through
a careful study of the
dictionary entries so that
each letter is correct.’

study of the dictionary entries so that each letter is correct. Some small part of me hopes that this will better my comprehension, but it feels like an imitation, a mockery.

?a?kw.sc

: teach me, teach you

?a?kw.sc u cxw? / Will you show me how?

—

The introductory pages of the Klallam dictionary include guides on both the common and unusual characters and how to pronounce them. The character I have come across the most, *?*, is described as ‘being produced deep in the throat, right at the vocal cords.’ It is called the glottal stop. It is the noise you make when you voice catches in your throat, or you interrupt yourself. The dictionary describes it as being the sound between the syllables of ‘uh-oh’.

If I try to say the word for ‘teach me’: [*Catch*], *ah*, [*catch*] . . .

The character *kw* is pronounced like the beginning of ‘quick’, with rounded lips and the tongue rolling from the back of the mouth.

[*Catch*], *ah*, [*catch*], *kweh*, *ooo*, *ess* . . .

The letter *c* is a trick in the Klallam alphabet. It is not the kicking sound at the start of ‘catch’ or ‘county’, or even the hiss at the end of ‘truce’ or ‘ace’. It is

pronounced as *tiss*, with the tongue behind the teeth as if you have just finished saying ‘rats’.

[*Catch*], *ah*, [*catch*], *kweh*, *ooo*, *ess*, *tiss*.

Even when I have been shown how to say each part I am still lost in the pronunciation. I cannot even ask to be taught.

?.wənə

: to not exist, be none, nothing, nobody, no one.

?.wənə? s̘č.ts kwsə ɲə'na? č̘i sl'ał'əm'.cəns. | *My daughter doesn't know the Klallam language.*

—

Four generations ago, my family only spoke Klallam. My great-great-grandmother, Nora Cook, lived with my great-grandmother, Lillian, and her family. She watched as Lillian refused to teach her children anything but English, and still she refused to allow English to pass her own lips.

Lillian's choice was one made out of fear. She wanted her children to be safe, and being safe to her meant being White. She couldn't change their features, but she could control their culture with a heavy hand. The language was one of many things they did not inherit, and it was left to decay alongside traditional songs and rituals. Because of her decision, my grandmother Vivian never learned the language. My mother never thought about it. Now I am left

to put the pieces together, with a fear of failing that makes my hands tremble as I do so.

caʔč.ct

: to continue on, move ahead, move on.

caʔč.ctcn. / *I moved ahead.*

—

Today there are a number of high schools and middle schools on the Olympic Peninsula that are teaching Klallam as a second language. I am mostly happy about this fact. The thought of young minds absorbing this part of the culture so that it doesn't vanish or become a relic of lost times brings me a level of peace. Many may not be fluent or may forget large chunks of the language in a few years, but for now they know it. For now, these classes — and classes taught by the tribes to whom the language belongs — serve as respirator, giving the chest of Klallam a synthetic rise and fall.

I wish I could be fully happy. I want so badly to let go of this guilt, this greed that makes me want to say that I should know it before they do. I am the one who has neglected to learn so far; I'm the one still standing in my own way. Klallam has already become relic, and I am scared that my attempts will morph it into an accessory rather than a respected cultural aspect. I often think about how Hazel might have felt when she

saw the dictionary completed. On the one hand, she contributed to its pages, even if it was indirect. She was part of how Klallam was crystallized and preserved. I imagine her worn hands running over the pages and looking for the entries she helped create. I picture her with a smile on her face.

Then I think about how it must have felt when the novelty wore off. How did it feel to be the last authentic inhale of a language? I wonder if the weight of being the end of an era stooped her shoulders or tugged her brow downward. I wish I could ask her why she didn't teach her children or grandchildren the language she helped preserve later in life. I fear that I know the answer already, that it would be the same as Lillian's: safety. There's a safety in vanishing what defines you as different from your oppressor.

ʔəw'k'w

: to give out, be all gone, be depleted, be done, no more, finished. □



Two Poems

A Caged Thing Feed

Your mouth slips out a sound, a sound of the world
dying and reborn again,
an utterance of expanding space, time, sound flinging
out of your warm

fleshy mouth, out from your pink oyster mushroom lips
and for a second,
with your back burning white in the afternoon sun, you
become an arctic fox

rolled over a damp mossy log. Your paw-hands dressed
in skin stretch along
my many grooves like a spill, round red knuckles
flushing pale at the grip.

The unfathomable patience we commit to, to prolong
this shared annihilation,
to remain inside the brink. I will take my time with you
— trace your temples,

your chest, every palm crease, the constellation formed
inside your spine's bow,
the cool flint of your ankles. Through an open window,
in the sun's fullness,

a wasp sneaks in — dusting shadows over your nose
bridge, while our bedsheets
knot themselves up. Here, I can hear your animal heart:
bang bang boom.

Naturalist

I check if my head is still attached to my neck —
if my heart still beats, if any teeth have let

go, unfastened from sockets, ground to powder,
fusion of rapture and ache in equal measure;

first comes sting, bliss soon after, eyes roaming
the cryptic dark of a just-surfaced fantasy.

Below, Ginuwine's *Pony* mounts the subwoofer,
chip shop vinegar cartwheels up the stairs.

I feel like I've been initiated into new territories,
like I could dip my fingers in the odd blotch

staining the mattress and paint myself with it —
bound through the village a howling thing.

A robin chimes outside. I see her bright red breast.
The thumping heart of a young, naked, ash tree.





HE SAYS HE'S A FEMINIST BUT DOES HE DO THE DISHES?

DECOLONIZE

YOU ARE ON NATIVE LAND

SKODEN

It's Me

She connected best with her body in winter. It was not quite here, but soon, the leaves already fallen and pounded by shoes. Life more night than day, she liked her torso wrapped, candlelight, birds that withheld, car tyres blurring through puddles. She'd picked up a copy of *In Cold Blood* and managed to read it studiously. Felt, suddenly, that she understood the world. The book made her feel aware of herself, her own breathing, like a genius, the words swept along in her blood's tidal movements. And if she was a genius, this was the season for it. Mysterious in an ex-boyfriend's bomber jacket. His thermals, too, she liked the bunching of the crotch against her pelvic bone. She'd also wanted to steal his scarf, which had a smell worth possessing — not out of love but a sense of transference, as if his masculinity was an altar easily prepared.

At work she scrubbed a counter and played over this missed opportunity. He'd been nice enough that he might just have given her the scarf had she asked. She could have framed it as a request for a *memento*. That would have delighted him. To think of her thinking of him, face pressed into the wool, his fantasies had always been exactly that dull.

It was the beautiful hour before opening. A folded darkness through the cafe's display windows, she loved to slip between it, turned on only one light in the back room. Worked happily in the shadows. She took down

the chairs, refilled sugar, salt and pepper. It was difficult to see, grains tipped to the floor, she swept them up again. A few people walked past. Commuters. Burrowed into their heavy coats. To them she would appear only in flashes. Maybe they wondered about her.

She checked the time. The first interruption would be the delivery van, bringing imitation French pastries, cakes, breads. The cafe was a franchise, one of plenty in these richer, smaller towns. People wanted things they could only poorly pronounce. If she hurried, and if the driver was on time, there might be a spare five minutes she could use for her book. Otherwise, she'd have to wait until her lunch break.

Fingers warmed in her armpits. The heating took at least an hour to make a difference. Double-checked the long, stainless steel coffee machine. Blasted steam out of the tubes that frothed the milk. The needle on the pressure gauge flickered and then steadied.

Heard his horn. He was on time. She took latex gloves from a box, following the freakish hygiene guide given to all employees. With the driver she'd worked out an attitude. Spread her legs slightly, folded her arms across her chest, pulled on her chin as they talked, leaving behind a residue of latex. He was very strong, he carried the plastic trays of baguettes, chocolate tortes, croissants, able to talk all the while. His wingspan twice as big as hers. It drove her crazy. The handsome

vein in his neck, eugh, she found and pinched her own. She'd begun a routine of press-ups before her morning showers, an attempt to bring more of herself to the surface. Noticed only the strengthening of her wrists, no thickening, her muscles otherwise unchanged. A success so mild she'd most likely invented it. So she carried the trays with pretend gusto, two, three at a time. Looked down so he would not see the effort across her face.

They finished stacking. That's it today. He dusted flour from his hands. Thanks. She positioned her body opposite his, liked the small talk. You getting on OK? Yep, ready for spring but it feels miles away. I don't mind this time of year. He raised his eyebrows. Really? Then yawned like a lion, it was large and alarming, forced her to think of his sleeping habits, how he left his sheets, what time he had to wake up for work. Afterwards he swallowed chunkily. Wrapped his tongue around his front teeth. You must be the only one. He looked up at the sky, no stars, hoping it would prove his point. Faint moonlight moved quick as steam, clouds fast. More rain later. Yeh most likely. Handed her the invoice and opened up the van door. Saluted as he reversed out onto the quiet road.

She made the sandwiches at speed. Baguettes split and buttered. Nothing French about the vats of margarine. She always tried to continue working in the dark, until she inevitably cut herself, running the bread

‘She made the sandwiches
at speed. Baguettes split
and buttered. Nothing
French about the vats
of margarine.’

knife across her fingernail. Brie and cranberry. Wet ham and cheese. From plastic bags she pulled handfuls of rocket like cut hair. Keys turned in the front door and she knew it would be the manager, the atmosphere soon to be spoiled. Crack of the switches, the brutal overhead lights of the cafe came on. Felt the sound of her sigh as the manager appeared in the doorway. Honestly, why do you insist on standing around in the dark? It's calming. Please, are you serious, it's work, it isn't supposed to be calming.

The manager was good-looking and tired. Hair in a tight bun. She would let it down once a day, now, after removing her coat, readjusting, hair-tie between her teeth as she swept it up again, pulling the bun even tighter. The office took up a tiny section of the back room, next to the giant fridge, opposite the sink and food-prep area. It had a lonely computer, ancient, an even lonelier peg for the keys. Only a metre wide, the manager was forced to shuffle inelegantly into her spinning chair, which, if actually spun, would slam her elbows into the wall, her knees into the desk. Once sitting she could hold herself precisely still, cross her legs, let one foot almost slip from her shoe.

She carried the finer cakes to the fridge and set them on stands. Wiped strawberry cream from her sleeve. Arranged beige pastries on a shelf above. They would

open shortly. No time to return to her book. The sun arrived low and would stay that way, startling around certain street bends and buildings, reaching the cafe in slow-moving swatches of orange. She turned around the open sign and tightened her blue apron. The book stuck in a grisly locker, the radiators snapping with too much heat. If she was unlucky, her ex-boyfriend would come in, wearing his scarf, and order an espresso sullenly. A drink he didn't like but insisted upon.

The manager wore ugly heels designed for a much older person, her arches supported. She clacked between the tables. Ready? Ready. The door was unlocked. A few women hovered on the pavement. Still fledgling despite their later years, eyelids patted sky blue, hair daring with streaks of pink. They linked arms, joked melancholically about age. Tried not to rush in once they realized they were allowed. Gazed into the fridges and began calorie counting, fussing over the tables though there were only a few to choose from. Each ordered a cappuccino. She watched them gently drag off the powdered chocolate and lick the spoon. Tore croissants into pieces. Asked for extra jam. Their little routine. The manager returned to the office to scroll through more lists, make her orders, send emails to who knows who.

Truman Capote was nicknamed Bulldog at school. Another thing she wanted for herself, a new piece of

her past designed and introduced. To have spent her adolescence enjoying the fact of an angular, tense face, a pouted bottom lip. Named not only for the animal but after a journalist, notebook and pen always in hand, observing, even at eleven.

Another round please! More cappuccinos. One woman peered into the fridge, grey pushed at her pink roots. Maybe something else to eat and why not! Announced to herself, to anybody listening. She smiled, agreed, recommended the small fruit tartlets, only a mouthful after all! Made sure to echo the woman's grammar. That was how to get tips. The jar sat pathetic by the till. Someone had turned the dot above the *i* into a smiley face. She fantasized — and weren't fantasies part of her new genius — about the manager accidentally calling her Bulldog in front of the customers, then blushing, correcting herself. The women took the tartlets, her friends gathered around the plate, oh you shouldn't have, oh but I did.

Unlike adolescence, she was changing because she wanted to. But it seemed so insincere to only be able to affect the immediate. She might never be a Bulldog. She had never been a Bulldog. She wiped up dribbled milk.

More customers arrived, anxious about space, would they all fit. A group of six, and one more, they chimed, one more will join us. She helped them drag

tables together. Young, colleagues, in clean shirts. The weather had turned. They shook umbrellas, a few worked water out of their hair, shivered to make clear they were cold.

Sorry about all that. One broke away and came to the till. Simple makeup, a big mouth. A thick bob forced behind her ears. She knew her. Clouds parted around her face. Cheekbones swallowed a little by time, but still there. Elle. Her name had not been that far away, not really. Elle, who tugged at her collar, reached around to itch her back. Did not seem to recognize her in return, only looked at her expectantly, she wanted to order. Disarmed, she could not announce herself. Spoke slowly, took control of her voice. No problem, no need to be sorry. Really, we're literally about to order a million coffees, so it will be a problem soon. Honestly, it's fine. At the centre of Elle's thumb was a bright bruise, burnt green, her nails bitten short. That word, *million*, the kind emphasis of it, was a tic from childhood — she betrayed herself. Or maybe Elle knew and sent a message, wanted her to be the one to say it first, to ask the devastating question: remember me?

Elle's suit was ill-fitting, seams squeezed, one button missing, shoulders transported from elsewhere. Older, there was now the sense of a bear about her, like her humanness could be quickly cast aside. Hard to believe they had once shared a single plastic chair, tried

to write their names while holding the same pen. She thought about her own body, the lack of Bulldog, the dire state of having no visible animal.

Elle grinned, made easy eye contact. I guess I'll get things going, cappuccino please. Sure. In Elle's presence she felt pathetic. Agreed to the cappuccino and turned her back to make it, grabbing the large white cup, setting down a saucer, feeling a pulse in her lower spine, her tailbone, some murky and resonate piece of skeleton. Hoped that when she moved back to the counter Elle would be gone, lost to her colleagues, all matching from a distance.

Yes, she was back in her chair and did not look up. She chatted to the woman next to her. Both had their palms stuck to their faces. Nodded in turn. Others queued now, asking for their cappuccinos, double shot, single shot, extra chocolate, don't be shy with the chocolate.

An older woman, part of Elle's group, clapped her hands. Announced RIGHT, FOOD, make your choices ladies! Waved a silver credit card and winked. Breakfast is on the company!

Safe behind the counter she busied herself. Handed out Danishes and palmier. Remembered Elle's fine hair, braces. Fine hair but lots of it, braces like snagged starlight, but at school she'd been ashamed of them, sealed her lips, even when smiling. She paused by

the coffee machine, pretending to recycle empty milk bottles so she could bend towards the ground and catch her breath. Checked the time. Stalled at 9am. Minutes, seconds, turned solid as sculptures. Hours until an escape, back to her book and her bad men. Capote's bad men. The dark pleasure of his searching, love bloomed like mould, he made you wait for the murders. She was motivated, infuriated, her opinions soared.

There Elle sat. She listened while another colleague told a long story, a petty scandal in their office. Finally, the punchline. When Elle laughed she rolled back her lips. A bear with perfect teeth. She missed, with a pang, the braces, their slicing shame.

The manager opened the connecting door a crack. Motioned for a coffee. She liked a latte three times a day. It had to be piping hot otherwise she'd request, with great sadness, to have it remade. Once, when she was still new, she'd tried to reheat it in the convection oven. The tall glass cracked, the milk burned to the machine in brown bubbles. A furious smell. Like torched fur.

More customers. Disappointed at the lack of space. The latte would have to wait. It made her happy to keep the manager waiting. A man and woman squeezed themselves onto the remaining seats. Huffed, put out by the large group. Wanted tea, wondered why there were no scones, took ham and cheese baguettes.

The husband, she noticed the wedding rings, was bossy but tried to hold it back. His expression puckered. Knew where he wanted to sit but insisted his wife decide. She dithered. His trousers hoiked as he lowered himself into a chair. Revealed slumped socks, skinny, chapped ankles.

She slowly swept the floor to delay the latte as long as possible. Rain streaked the windows. Her ex-boyfriend's scarf had been red, as if from a cartoon, wool but softened slightly, like felt. His scent, embedded in the fabric, had been very good. Memorable, high seas and shrubbery, he had money, his cologne international and hard to find. She had tried for a while, in lieu of the scarf, to track it down. When they fucked he'd move her face, believing in eye contact, that he could shift her deeper waters. Did not understand how easily he gave away his own, that he believed in himself, that he was the protagonist in his own agonizing truth. Men knew nothing about masculinity. It thrilled her.

The manager's face appeared again, she raised an eyebrow, tapped her wrist where there was no watch. One sec. She finished her pointless sweeping, edged the brush into pristine corners. The manager did not like games. Stepped into the cafe. Hissed, it's clean enough, my latte, if you wouldn't mind, if I'm not disturbing you. Her high forehead, her height, turned the customers' heads, she rolled her eyes for their benefit, you just can't

find the staff these days! Elle's group, her colleagues, nodded empathetically. The manager leaned next to the coffee machine. Watched closely as she warmed the milk gently, packed in the coffee. Took a sip. Not bad. Lifted it to the room, triumphant, as she left.

Elle came to the counter. Ran her eyes along the food, chose nothing. She seems like fun. Very. Always like that? Yeh. She spoke in an exacting whisper. Shoulders bulged beneath her polyester. I know the feeling. With her head made a tiny gesture at the table behind, isolating, she assumed, her own boss, most likely the woman with the silver credit card.

For a second, maybe two, they dared eye contact. There was no hint of a before, only a consideration of the immediate present, Elle chewing her lip, thoughtful. She tensed her forearms, gripped the cracked plastic countertop. You at least spit in it? Oh, there's never enough time for revenge. Elle snapped her tongue against the roof of her mouth, another piece of her past self that had survived, the small shock of this signal sounding across a decade. No, I suppose there isn't. Tragic, really. Yeh.

They had become friends in school unexpectedly. Elle had been gentle. Unlike her. On reflection, she suspected that she herself might have been unnecessarily cruel at fourteen, never outright a bully, but she liked to roam about with the boys, hint

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The door was unlocked.’

at being a slut, and back then, without actual sex, it meant putting other people down. They'd bonded over English. Accidental, not dissimilar to now, shared a look across a room occupied with other business, and in that one look they'd formed a privacy. Held the silence of monks. Solemn, intense. Hadn't it been during a lesson on First World War poets? Even at fourteen, with a fourteen year old's scale of disaster, they'd felt it together, the bitterness, the hot blood, bodies bent and blown by chaos. Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen, hags, sludge and scraggy knees. Boys dead, what was the line, and God would not give them antlers through their curls, nor talons for their feet. She hadn't forgotten, not really. Until now there had been no reason to remember. Could be her genius had started elsewhere. Sooner. A technicolour found and then abandoned.

Elle returned to her seat. Watchful now, though, she could sense it, eyes down on the table until she turned around to make another coffee, and then she could feel her, tunnelling between the tendons of her neck.

She collected plates, started with the couple, then down towards the larger group. Moved behind Elle's back, reached over her shoulder to take her empty coffee cup. Actually I'm not quite finished. She put her hand around her wrist, loosely, released her fingers

slowly, absentmindedly. Stayed in the conversation that happened around her. She watched Elle's bruised thumb touch her index finger, then move millimetres north to round her mount of Venus. The table gleefully discussed a colleague's birthday while she was in the bathroom. Wanted a slice of cake they could sink a candle into. They solicited her suggestions. How about the ganache? Considered it amongst themselves. Fabulous! Perfect! The candle, pink and already used, was handed to her, she was charged with lighting it, with beginning the song. Elle returned her gaze to the tabletop. The woman with the unoriginal voice added AND PUT IT ALL ON THE CARD.

Her genius had led her here. She lay the candle beside the credit card the woman had given to her. Lunch a million miles away. On her haunches, lowered to the cabinet, she cut a piece of the cake. Then cut another, for herself, to be eaten later. She would put it on the card. Did not wear her latex gloves. Dragged her pinky through the cake's edge, icing piled up, and right there she sucked it clean. Lifted her eyes and saw Elle was back to watching her, this time unafraid, she wanted to be caught. Kept her face placid, as if she had seen nothing. She straightened and watched Elle in return, felt the thud of those solid seconds, twisted pieces of brass knocked her skull, her shoulders. A mouthful of them.

For a while she'd had no memories at all, it took determination, to wipe the slate clean and start again, to feel a self finally rise out of the blankness that had been her life. When her ex-boyfriend came, still inside her, he'd sob softly, as if someone at the foot of the bed had held up an autocue (NOW SOB SOFTLY). She'd felt then, if she'd only clamped her thighs hard enough, that she could remove his dick and keep it for her own. Did all geniuses think like this? The charged altitude of her thoughts. She knew that fantasies lasted, that reality forced them into confession, the nasty sort of eternal, etched into stone. The only place fantasy left a trace was the body. Allowed to change, to breathe, to animal.

Neither she nor Elle gave in. She stood still. Let the watching churn through her chest like a water mill. Thought of antlers sprouted through her curls, talons pushing at the heels of her trainers, the murders that would happen at the end. Ganache in her mouth — it was the most expensive thing you could order, the chocolate they used was virtually a delicacy, gold leaf strayed across the dark surface. The woman emerged from the bathroom. Wiped her hands on her navy-blue skirt. The table looked at her urgently, washing out Elle's stare. Now was the time. She lit the candle. Started the opening notes of Happy Birthday as she walked past the till. Elle, along with the others, looked at the woman, whose hands had sprung to her cheeks,

turning left and right, saying you shouldn't have, really, my goodness, you shouldn't have, the catchphrase that haunted the cafe. Surrounded by her colleagues who cheered and clapped.

They had kissed only once. Chaste, alone in the classroom, Elle's braces slashed her bottom lip. The same monastic silence. Love, then, only a mild creature. What do you think, she'd asked afterwards. I guess I would do it again. On the blackboard in front, the names of poets, their ages, their themes. Me too I think. They could not have known that they had been seen, through the square glass set into the door, by the teacher. Everything dealt with in a caring and terrified way. Not like that, they'd insisted through a meeting, it's not like that, not when you're older, when you're old enough you'll realize. She had stayed at the school and Elle had left that Christmas. In January she was nowhere to be seen. Remembered relief and lust. Did not try to find her and felt no regret. Waited, instead, for the kind of future that had been promised.

The table tucked a million tiny forks into the cake. Closed their eyes in a shared ecstasy. It was finished quickly, chairs dragged across the floor, they had to get back to work, what a shame. The woman studied her bill but did not notice the extra slice. Surprised to find she tipped generously, a note tucked into the jar. Thank you. No, thank YOU.

Elle took her time. Slipped off her jacket with the missing button, dusted the front, put it back on again. Pulled a pen from an inside pocket and scribbled something down on a napkin. The others were already outside, chatting on the pavement. Did not make her eye contact until the final second, looking up from her shoes only inches from the till. Really, thanks for putting up with us. No problem. She grinned again, and how new, how unnerving it was, to see her mouth, those perfect rows of teeth, no glimmering metal. It was nice meeting you. Same. Yeh? She raised an eyebrow. Yeh. Good, that's good. She glanced out the window at her colleagues, who danced a little in the wind's chill, absorbed in gossip, husbands, sick days, missing items from the office fridge.

Elle cracked her knuckles. She noticed a ring, thick and gold, around her pinky finger. Elle rolled her shoulders forward. Hunched, receded a little. Took a shallow breath before she spoke. There was no memory of this particular mannerism, but it was surely teenage, a kind of anticipation, toes curled over a cliff-edge.

This is maybe cheesy, and I don't usually do this, but if you fancied getting a drink sometime, I know a place. Elle twisted the napkin in her hand. Released her shoulders. You seem cool, I wasn't totally sure, you know? It can be hard to tell. Elle looked at her not with recognition but a strange kind of empathy, her

pupils contracted. Elle searched her body like a galaxy, looking for a lesser-known constellation. She tried to return the look, flickered over Elle's face, but did it too quickly, made it suspicious. Should she just say it now? Announce herself, announce them both, commit each other to stone? Before she could decide, Elle handed over the napkin. She reached out and took it from her. A number written in blue and a looped sentence that read, *It's me, E!*

That January, after Elle had left school, hadn't she seen her a million times? All it took was a particular footstep, a stray hair tucked behind an ear, a certain pitch of laughter. For months afterward, she thought most girls were Elle when they weren't. She could barely bring herself to look into their faces, did not want to feel the slide of disappointment when she didn't see what she wanted.

Elle reached over the counter, pointed clumsily at her name. E, it's what my friends call me, I mean my real friends, I mean they're not bad people, it's just work. She wanted to discount her colleagues. Give some sense of another self, the one she had grown into and exceeded. Elle had made a decision. They didn't have to speak about before, the way things had gone, effortlessly she offered a rewrite. E, it suited her. She'd made a new shape for herself.

A drink sounds good. Yeh? Nice one. E bumped

her fists, bigger and lovelier, against the countertop. I'm Max, by the way, I don't think I said. No, you didn't. She chose her ex-boyfriend's name. Out of her mouth before she could think. It's been good meeting you, Max. E went to extend her hand and then hesitated. Put it back into a fist. You too, E. She waved instead, despite only standing a couple of feet apart, the counter between them.

E waved back. See you. Max watched her big back move through the door. She paused, held it open and grinned. Don't forget to call yeh? I won't. Outside E clapped the back of the nearest colleague. They moved in a slow pack down the street, unhurried despite the rain, conversations unfinished. She hoped she would turn around one last time. Kept her eyes on the window. But E walked out of sight. She turned back to the coffee machine. Would pick a task. Heard the manager swear through the door, the disobedient computer, she pulled down a glass for her second latte. In her mind, she pressed the napkin in the pages of her book, between the introduction's final words and the first chapter. For now, she slipped it into her pocket. Lunch break soon. □



Instead of a Plaque
in the Sidewalk,
How About the
Building Next to It?

For more than fifty years, Miss Major has played the crucial role of surrogate mother and grandmother to countless trans and queer people around the world. (She likes the term ‘My gurls’). The price of getting to this point has been high: the lives of two of the three people she’s called “the loves of my life”; five totaled pre-1977 Cadillacs; two homes destroyed by fire; both of her original kidneys; an eye; a toe; and all but one tooth — she called it Snaggle — that stuck to her gums solo for years before she drove to Dallas, Texas on her seventieth birthday and treated herself to a new set.

Miss Major Griffin-Gracy is a veteran of the infamous Stonewall Riots, a former sex worker, and a transgender elder and activist who has survived Bellevue psychiatric hospital, Attica Prison, the HIV/AIDS crisis and a world that white supremacy has built. She has shared tips with other sex workers in the nascent drag ball scene of the late 1960s, and helped found one of America’s first needle exchange clinics from the back of her van.

With Miss Major Speaks: Conversations with a Black Trans Revolutionary, she is a debut author.

F The book is comprised of an introduction to your life and then an extended interview. Why did this interview form work so well?

M Number one, to be honest, I didn't think people would be as interested as it's turned out they are. [My co-author] Toshio came to me with this idea for a book and I guess it felt like I still had things to say after the documentary [MAJOR!] came out after all.

At the time, Toshio asked me if he could record our conversations. Something that people have told me is they like my voice, that it has been a comfort to them and so I think that rather than write things down, Toshio could pick out the things that could be of use to some of the younger generations of activists looking for a few words to help them through the uncomfortable times.

F How did the conversations unfold? Were they conducted in a formal setting? Was there a set agenda? Or was it off the cuff?

M The conversations took place on planes and trains and automobiles. Toshio started

recording around the time we were in Scotland, before I'd moved to Arkansas and we finished on the floor or the bedroom here at home.

F The focus of your life and work has been in the US. Why is the book relevant to gurls around the world?

M Because we're really all just part of one family, as much drama as some of us throw at each other. This trans thing connects us in a way people who aren't trans just can't understand.

I think when I was in Spain at the UN conference [on Human Rights] is when it really hit me, looking around that room seeing all the gurls from different countries out in their stuff. Regardless of what they wore, there was something universal in the room.

F At numerous points in the book you discuss the importance of role models and elders in the trans community. What's the benefit of being an elder?

M Us older girls, we've done the time. There aren't a lot of us that get to be this age but

those of us that do — there were points when we were hanging on by the end of our fingernails. So we know a thing or two about survival in a world that wants us gone.

F The book is full of good advice. You met Frank ‘Big Black’ Smith while in prison. He lets you know that ‘during things like the riot or getting justice done — stuff like that — you can’t throw anybody under the bus.’ What’s a piece of advice you like to impart to trans readers? What’s a piece of advice you’d like to impart to cis readers?

M *One* piece of advice? Well, I guess they’d have to read the book but if they want one, I’d say that there are a lot of things they teach you in kindergarten that turn out to be true. For instance, despite all our differences, we are more alike than we are different, for better or for worse.

I did get asked a few times before Toshio but I guess it just felt like ‘I’m still fucking here, I’m still alive’ and, writing a book about my life, it felt like there’s some finality to it, and I’m not done yet.

So with the book we decided to make it something that wasn't just about me and my life, but more so about 'Here are a few things that I've learned, take them or leave them, and hopefully they can help the next girl after me.'

F Do you walk around in a constant state of teaching Transgender 101 to strangers?

M Uh-huh. All the time. Everywhere. In the store, the clerk's going to talk to you. The boy who's putting out the produce is going to talk to you. If you bump into somebody else shopping, they're going to quiz you. You're always, always on. And when it starts, it's almost always not something you can stop. You're in survival mode, and they're in inquisitive mode. If you wanna get outta there, you gotta say something, and hope they can get their shit together.

F One of the things that strangers and people who've known you a long time mention is the way you decide what gender means to you. Your self-expression. That it's not a binary — which is still a radical idea to most of the world. Some of the younger people already feel it, but you might be

the first person that they've heard it from who is on a stage, from someone who they respect. People spend so much time and money in a struggle to 'pass' as cisgender.

M Passing is not this goal I started out with. I simply got tired of losing teeth. I used to go into restaurants and wait till they had a table open where my back could be against the wall, just so I could see if someone tried to creep up on me. When I started out, people would say, 'Why are you like that?' 'Because I like titties, and instead of going around touching other gurls' titties, I can touch my own. Child, I'm just a gay guy with tits.' Shocks the hell out of them.

It's like being on a road, it doesn't matter if it's the yellow brick road, or pavement, or gravel. It's still a road, and where it takes you is wherever you're going. And I think the journey is how you use that road — if you stay on it and the path that it's leading you down, or you venture off and do something else and create a path of your own. After a few journeys comes another road. Part of that journey is realizing you are gonna be fine as you are. Better than

‘It’s like being on a road,
it doesn’t matter if it’s
the yellow brick road,
or pavement, or gravel.
It’s still a road, and
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fine. No matter how dark the damn path gets, there's always a light. And if you can't find it, you keep going till you see one. You don't ever, ever give up. You never say, 'Shit, I can't do this anymore.' Yes, you can: you just have to keep moving forward. It can take years, and some of us are late bloomers, but you figure out how to negotiate through this straight, cisgender world as everybody else does who's not white and doesn't come from money. You have to maintain and hold on to the ground that you're standing on, ward off the things that are out there that bring us harm and keep yourself safe and stay strong. I don't mean you need to go to a damn gym, but keep yourself mentally, spiritually and emotionally strong, because those are the things that are hard to get over.

When I started out, it was like, somebody fight me, we're good. I'll heal. But you say something, call me 'n*gger' as I'm walking down the street — I'll remember that. Give it a couple days and I'll see something to remind me that you said that to me. I want the gurls to be able to shield themselves from things like that. To have it roll off them just like water does off a duck's back. So that they can be

strong and resilient and be the best version of themselves that they can be. Underneath all of this is people who clock us and beat us up, and kill us. They can kill us as a person, but they can't kill the idea of who we are. They can't get rid of the feeling of being transgender or non-binary. They can't eradicate it from the world.

F How do you picture the future? What does your utopia look like? What's the future you imagine?

M I'm sick of that question, too. Do I look like a psychic?

F OK, but you are thinking about the future, and that vision obviously has worked out in some kind of way. You inspire a lot of people to believe in community, even though it feels like some great world-ending catastrophe is happening.

M I don't know what's gonna happen tomorrow. But I'm here, so I might as well fucking enjoy it, and help my community if I can. I would hope that the future is a place where there's less emphasis on surgery and gender markers. I would hope that someone would step away from this book recognizing that 'transgender'

does not encompass just one type of person.

It's a battle just to be who we are and be respected for what we've done, and it does feel often like there's no end in sight. There's no way to knock off all those who are in a position of power. These structures, it's not a matter of just killing those on top — and even if it were, how's that going to work? They always have a bullseye on our foreheads, and they'll pull a trigger when it serves them. They need to be constantly reminded that we can see their bullshit. Motherfuckers, I'm half-blind and I can see it.

People should be doing anything they can to shake down the status quo. And we need to be remembering that when we're dealing with the powers that be, it doesn't hurt to ask for more. If you manage to get to someone from the upper crust of society, take that chance for all it's worth. Whatever it is you're asking for, ask for more. Sometimes, they'll try to get away with giving you something you can't actually live off, because at some point the motherfuckers decided the thing to do was to give dead trans women a bronze plaque on

the sidewalk and call it a day. Just like the one outside Compton's Cafeteria in the Tenderloin. You wouldn't know it was there if you tripped and fell and it hit you in the middle of your forehead. So, if they try to pull that shit, what you do is say, 'Woo — thank you very much, that's so very nice of you, but the thing is I don't know anyone who's ever lived on a plaque.' That plaque better be the size of a two-bedroom apartment.

Instead of a plaque in the sidewalk, how about the building next to it? Because landlords don't want to rent to my community in the first place and paying rent today, you're talking about three or four jobs — with three or four roommates — just to afford a little place where you can lay your head down to rest. □



One Poem

She's on the Ching Again

To all the late-night dancers at the Thompson's Arms

She's on the Ching again, babe,
buzzing alone on the dancefloor
where she loves us all like chosen family.

Sweat glittering like tinsel,
she's Sylvester, a mirrorball,
in her own little world with the feelings inside her.

She's Scouse-soused tonight,
her voice electric blue flight,
her eyes twinklin' stars of dew in the limelight.

Energised on gossip,
her bald head's a piston,
her gob, a serenade that echoes under rigging.

Lavender and golden,
we've all gotta wind it,
all gotta be her tonight; she has spoken.

With stories to regale yer,
with 'er hands, she's conductor,
and she's vibin' to feel yer, yer feel me? Yer feel her.



Sound, Space, Dislocation and Connection:

Experiencing
dub reggae
for the first time

Dub reggae music is a psychoacoustic force field: a supernatural power of limitless range. It is experienced on many levels and as many things: physical sound, embodiment (and disembodiment), emotional and psychic connection.

Walking into a dub reggae dance hall in Southall for the first time, sometime in the summer of 1978, I felt instantly unsteady, afraid of what I'd walked into, unsure whether my body could withstand the force. The sounds were ghostly and the speaker boxes detonated high volumes and low frequencies that pounded my chest, invaded my gut and head. I was fifteen years old.

But something about the rhythmic patterning of the drums was familiar, atavistic, and I knew I had to stay. Besides, once you're in a ram-jam dancehall session, it's hard to extricate yourself. There is the musical pressure from the bassline and there is the wave-like pressure of the dancers, the massive, that sucks you into their pulsing centre. That first night I quickly realized the only way to find my centre of gravity was to lean into the shape-shifting organism of tightly packed bodies feeding off the 20,000-watt-powered drum and bass.

I'm not sure if a solitary body can receive and contain the dread dub beat — it exists as a communal experience. That night the dancers were artists, every

one of them, their bodies in communion with the music. They and the music and the ganja smoke created the dance hall environment, constructing space and time: a place beyond the control of the outside world and of Babylon, dynamic and transformative.

Dub reggae dances take place in the liminal hours between midnight and dawn, on the constantly shifting terrain of their own soundscape. And there were shifts in that long first night when the dropout, delay, reverb and echo manifested as physical space and I found myself alone in new audiotopias, caves and sinkholes filled with ancestral knowledge.

Gradually I got used to the strange, elating feeling of being deep inside my body and at the same time outside of it, floating in otherworldly dimensions, moving between cramped dance hall and wide-open spaces. I felt an increasing awareness of my body and mind, my sexual desires, my need for love and connection, for spirituality, for voice and power in the outside world. As the night went on, I started anticipating the absences in the music, the dropping away of vocals and instruments, hearing fragments of the unspoken parts of my own inner voice — a growing awareness and appreciation for absence as presence. The music worked its way through me, ‘from the top to the very last drop,’ as the DJs would say. It was a

psychological shakedown.

I don't remember noticing the lyrical toasting of the DJs that first night. I was focused on learning how not to be taken over by the music, how to draw down its power, charge myself with it, dropping into deep-hipped skanks and steppers moves. But maybe the second or third time I went back to the dance hall, I started to listen to the flow of the DJs, the way they were able to drop their words into the unexpected absences within the music, a form of sampling or remixing, creating another version from an existing track, each echoing into other iterations on and on and on into time. I saw then how the DJs were the lead characters in the scene, calling out to the dancers. And we would respond, blowing on whistles, chanting, shouting out, doubling down on our dance moves, becoming part of the performance. Another version.

The DJs were letting off steam about the issues on the streets: sus law, exclusion, the realities of life for first- and second-generation immigrants in Britain. This ephemeral flow between selectors, dancers and ancestors was the defiant sounding of resistance against Babylon, and there was a feeling of the dance hall becoming one consciousness, all our frustrations voiced as one. All the same, I wanted to take the mic myself and hear my own voice sing-talking about being a young Black woman. My fears about Enoch Powell

and the National Front, safety on the estate where I lived. Why wouldn't a woman DJ grab the mic and chat lyrics about politics and love and belonging? Dub takes you outside yourself, into a kind of superhero body that makes you believe that you can do anything.

Tape recordings of the dance hall sessions were often made and sold or passed around, a kind of archive from which musicians created music. But those nights in the dance halls were also a living archive, stored in the minds of every dancer, DJ, 'box bwoy' and stringer — and in mine. Of course, I can't know for certain, but perhaps that archive was the germination of the novel I was to write some forty-five years later, *Fire Rush*. Music, words, improvisation, performance as a dynamic art form. Everything in the mix. No limits. A novel can be performance on the page.

Dub reggae was groundbreaking — or ground-*brucking* — a fitting metaphor on many levels. Groundbreaking because the floor seemed to crack beneath you and the world would fall away, and through those chasms you would be transported, transformed. Groundbreaking because it was the first of its kind to deconstruct existing music to make something new on the mixing board through a process of extraction and addition — sampling, rewinding, removing vocals and instrumentals, leaving ghostly fragments. Finding new

‘Why wouldn’t a woman
DJ grab the mic and chat
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love and belonging?’

things that art could be.

Back on that very first night, I felt myself part of a powerful body of people, part of the revolution. I took on the power of the music and for the first time in my young life I felt a sense of agency. At times, I felt invincible. I remember leaving the session in the early hours of the morning, coming out of the black-out space of the dance hall and into sunlight. Walking with two friends along the empty high street, I was aware of silence and stillness around us and inside me; a new space inside my body, a resource I had not been aware of before.

A man was pulling up the shutters of his corner shop. It felt strange to see him going about his everyday business when something so momentous had just happened to me. And as I moved further away from the dance hall, towards the housing estate where I lived, I was aware of a soft ringing inside my head, the aftercall of dub music, reminding me of what it was to be alive and free. □



You
Come
to
Think
of
the
Court
as
.
Alive

Chetna Maroo's first novel, Western Lane, has a subtly translucent quality, its meaning coming into focus gradually like dawn light on the horizon. It traces the delicate, interlocking pattern of loss and renewal, understanding and misunderstanding, which marks the years of growing up, as three sisters grapple with the death of their mother and seek out new places to belong. Five Dials spoke to Chetna about grief, solitude, and the game of squash.

F *Western Lane* feels like an old-fashioned kind of novel — which I mean as the greatest compliment — despite the arresting immediacy of its voice. There is a depth of feeling fostered by extraordinary restraint, which I think is quite rare in contemporary fiction — it seems to belong to a different era. So I wanted to start by asking you about your literary influences, contemporary or historical, and how you relate to the idea of a literary lineage.

C I like the idea of books coming from other books, though it's difficult to distinguish the ones that are simply loved, or whose reading is a sort of apprenticeship, from those that become an influence. As a child I read whatever came my way. I loved comics, fairy

tales, sci-fi, detective stories. Later I gravitated towards classic literary fiction, starting, I think, with *Jane Eyre*, then George Eliot, Tolstoy, Chekhov and, later still, more modern writers such as Toni Morrison and Alice Munro. All have come into my thinking about writing, but to draw a map of the deepest influences (and knowing that the map might look different on another day), I'd add Tove Jansson, her novel *The True Deceiver* as well as her Moomin books, wonderful, existential stories about family, belonging, art; Jhumpa Lahiri's short stories; Tarjei Vesaas' *The Ice Palace*; plus everything I've read by William Maxwell, Kazuo Ishiguro and Elizabeth Strout.

I can see paths connecting some of these writers. Ishiguro has spoken of what *Jane Eyre* taught him. Strout has spoken of Munro and the Russians, and Vesaas must have had *The Snow Queen* or some other fairy or folk tale somewhere in his mind when writing *The Ice Palace*. If I were to look for common ground between all these writers, I'd say their books stay with me, and it's not usually their characters or what happens that I remember most, but their worlds and the feeling I had

when reading them.

- F** *Western Lane* is a novel about sport — specifically squash — and at the same time, I’m going to stick my neck out and say that it’s not really *about* that at all. Training on the squash court becomes an obsession, a means of catharsis, a social lifeline and a channel of communication for Gopi and her father. How did you choose squash in particular?
- C** The simple answer to the question ‘Why squash?’ is that this was where the novel began for me: it started with the feeling of being inside a squash court, with a voice saying, ‘There were three of us.’ I knew it was three sisters in the squash court. I knew there was a father on the balcony above, instructing them. And I knew they all felt the presence of an absent mother. It’s unusual for me to experience such a clear starting impulse for a story but I trusted it.

The family in the novel are immigrants in Britain with roots in India and East Africa and, perhaps, in the back of my mind, there was an awareness of the history of the sport. Squash was invented by the British and brought to

colonized countries throughout the British Empire. While it remained a relatively elite and niche sport in Britain, it became extremely popular in some of those countries, notably Pakistan and Egypt. By the 1980s, Pakistan had been dominating the sport for decades, producing one legendary champion after another. The father in *Western Lane* brings the mythologies of these champions into his daughters' lives, insisting, 'We're brothers. Indians and Pakistanis.'

In a game of squash, you're very aware of the walls around you. You're taught to hold the T (the centre of the court), as you and your opponent move around one another, fighting for space. You come to think of the court as alive. As she grieves the loss of her mother, Gopi develops this awareness of space and of how the other players are moving, and she learns to move in sync or deliberately out of sync with them. At the same time, she's always aware of her pa watching her from the other side of the court's glass wall or from the balcony.

There's also something about the squash court

‘There’s also something about the squash court itself that makes sense to me. The simple white box: it is such a strange, specific, unfamiliar place, and, partly because of the unfamiliarity, it’s a place where time seems suspended...’

itself that makes sense to me. The simple white box: it is such a strange, specific, unfamiliar place and, partly because of the unfamiliarity, it's a place where time seems suspended and the outside world can be forgotten. For Gopi and Pa, who are mourning what is gone and frightened about what is to come, the court offers a place outside of their daily lives in which to live.

F Yes, I love that sense of suspension. It's almost a magical zone, but at the same time it's haunted by the things we know are waiting outside. In fact, one of Gopi's training drills is literally called 'ghosting': when she's practicing the strokes without using a ball. There's an overlap, isn't there, between the magical-thinking psychology fostered by competitive sport and by grief?

C I think so. Maybe it's because both experiences can induce a heightened state where the subject becomes extremely receptive. With sport it is the energized state arising from deep concentration, physical exertion and repetition. With loss, as well as the powerful emotion of grief and the knowledge that everything has changed irreversibly, perhaps it

is the simple fact of proximity to death.

F An important theme of the novel is sisterhood: the loss of their mother puts a particular kind of emphasis and strain on the bonds between Mona, Khush and Gopi. How did you go about writing that three-way relationship?

C The story is told by the youngest sister, Gopi. When writing the scenes with the sisters, I tried to somehow get into Gopi's body, and I became very aware of where the sisters were placed and how they were moving in relation to one another. For example, at times, Gopi mirrors her sister Khush. They are intimate, often physically close. The sisters crowd into the bathroom together, brush their teeth together, hold each other's hair back over the sink.

But I think it was the way the girls interact in the squash court that became a sort of template for the three-way relationship. There's a scene in my earliest drafts where they're all in the court and their father is outside, watching but not giving instructions. The girls pair up so that two are playing,

moving around one another, while one is standing at the front of the court observing, and they keep swapping around until they finally come out of the court together. This felt true to the dynamic of groups of three — one is always slightly on the outside but the relationship is fluid, and even the two who are playing together can be in sync and in competition at the same time. There are moments when they are a collective of three but, however intimately connected they are, each sister exists in her own world.

F One of the things I love about *Western Lane* is the tension between feelings of aloneness versus feelings of being held and being known. That fine balance seems to underpin Gopi's experience of playing squash but it's also central to many relationships between the characters. It's echoed too in the family's relationship to the outside world, their position as immigrants in Britain. Is the idea of exile a useful one here?

C I think of the members of the family as being, at times, unmoored or lost.

The family are Gujarati Jains living in an

industrial, multiracial town in Britain. The father and mother still have connections to their roots in Kenya, Tanzania and India, but the girls have grown up in the West. I think this break between the family's roots and where they are now is felt in the difficulty of language: the girls can speak Gujarati, their mother tongue, but not well enough to converse easily with their own mother. Language becomes a wall, an obstacle to knowing and being known by her. Gopi tells us, 'That was why we had always listened to Ma so closely, and watched her. Maybe it was why we pulled at her, pushed into her, made ourselves physical in her presence.'

A few weeks ago, I spoke with the writer Yiyun Li at an event to launch the novel in America. We talked about Western Lane, the sports centre where the family go to play squash: a rundown place where the paint on the walls is peeling and the two squash courts are often empty. We talked about how there's a bar but that too is almost always empty, a swimming pool whose sounds can be heard from the squash court, how factory workers come to play squash on Saturdays and how, although it's a community centre, *Western Lane* feels empty,

isolated. And Yiyun Li asked: *Is it an isolated place, or is it a place where only lost people go to find themselves?*

I loved this thought. I love the idea that *Western Lane* is a place where lost people go to find themselves. □



Mud

If you stay on the Bristol city train travelling north-west till it runs out of track, and time, you'll find yourself at Severn Beach. The train stops there, and then — after a short, confused pause — it starts to move backwards, returning the way it came.

It's a miracle the train comes that way at all. Severn Beach was a resort town in the twentieth century. 'The Blackpool of the West', they called it, optimistically, ignoring the yards of mud where a beach ought to be, and unloading trains full of day-trippers to play and eat ice creams. The resort died as the century went on, like most seaside towns. And yet, even when Austerity Britain cut train lines to other resorts — Clevedon, Ilfracombe, Minehead — and indeed slashed the trains to more popular places, this little line has survived. To this flat place, where there's almost nothing to see or do.

I arrived in Bristol in January 2022, with my dying cat in tow, and noticed the mud immediately in those first few dazed, pale days. There was so much of it. I went down to Clifton Suspension Bridge and looked into its chasm, where water made sharp fanning tracks in the mud, silver-smooth as mucous. I set off to find us a new home, me and the cat, and Severn Beach was the first place I looked. There would be space for us both there, I thought. Most people got off at Shirehampton or Avonmouth; few clung on till the end of the line,

unless they had bikes and binoculars, bundled up for a day seeking birds. And, I thought, I could swim. It was a beach.

You can't swim at Severn Beach. Beyond the shingle, thick mudflats keep you apart from the water. They're not joking, those mudflats: they seize you immediately, up to the ankles. The water isn't truly the sea, either: it's the Bristol Channel. You can see Wales on the other side. But I looked for a house for us there because I liked it anyway. The pristine, empty flatness of the shore, which you can never step into, only watch from the edges; no one looking back at you, no figure breaking the horizon line. Flat spaces like that make me feel safe, and thrilled, and full of ideas.

I viewed some houses. There was one with AstroTurf in the garden and ceilings so low I found myself flinching as we climbed the stairs. Another had a garage stacked high with empty reptile tanks. The estate agent and I looked at each other, and an awful giggle fought its way out of my throat. In the end we stayed in Bristol. Many reasons: the cat got sicker and sicker; Severn Beach was a long way from her vet. Sometimes I visited that vet twice in a day, walking forty minutes each way past the vintage shops and restaurants, carrying a vial of her urine for testing. Imagine doing that from the neighbouring county: waiting at the end of the train line with my little pot of piss.

By September, the cat was dead. It was the end of everything good. I had nothing to do, and nowhere I needed to be. I could go on day trips, pointlessly. In February, I went back to Severn Beach, taking the train from Montpelier, where now I lived without her.

The mud came into view once we had passed Sea Mills. Towards Shirehampton, more mud, shining along the banks of the river. Impossible to reach the water, let alone get into it. At Severn Beach station there was a poster of a smiling young woman in sepia, one hand on her hip, the other holding a ball in the air. MEMORIES OF TIMES PAST: HERITAGE TRAIL. The railway came to Severn Beach in 1901, the poster said. Before this it had been a handful of farms and cottages, below sea level, flooding regularly. But when the railway arrived, so did the amenities. They built a swimming pool called the Blue Lagoon; they brought sand in to hold back the mud. You could hire a deck chair for 2d and buy refreshments from a bicycle sidecar. You could ride a donkey.

But beach resorts started to go out in the 1960s, the poster continued dolefully. People bought cars and drove them to destinations that weren't on the railway line. Maybe places with less mud. So the authorities demolished the Blue Lagoon and shored up the flood defences instead. I could have swum at Severn Beach, once; I was just six decades too late.

The single road leading down towards the beach

was quiet, terraced houses, a Union Flag in one garden, blue railings running past Shirley's Cafe on my left. I knew the cafe from previous visits. It was the only busy place I had ever seen in the village, the place where you got everything: chips, and jars of chutney, and flags, and second-hand books, and bowls made of driftwood. Every table was full and shouting, and the queue up to the counter weaved and split and hovered, not sure where to put itself. A shelf offered Heritage Trail pamphlets. I pocketed one and then left, just about managing not to hit anyone with my backpack.

Blue sky hung over the edge of the railings as I approached the shore, and clouds dipped below the line of the low concrete sea wall that split the coastal path from the beach. And when I stepped up on to the wall, held the grey railings with both hands and stared over, the sky closed around me. The dark grey line of the horizon, where Wales was, made a sure smooth band I could feel around my body, holding me. The first look was the best, I knew. The long release of breath I didn't know I was holding, as flatness stretched out on every side. And the noise in my head flattened too, let out like air.

The bright sky printed itself on the mud, glowing, and on the sea crawling up to the line where the mud stopped. Grasses made mossy patches, holding themselves more lightly on the shining surface than

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I could tread. And all around, birds had pricked themselves gently in patterns, like shortbread. Their footprints turned to pockmarks in the wetness. Over on the right was the howl of the Prince of Wales Bridge, fanned with white suspension cables, ferrying trucks and cars from England to Wales. Its boom of traffic was like the boom of wind or sea, and the bare back of the landscape absorbed it without trouble. Mud says, *leave me alone*. It says, *come no further*. I wanted to touch it, but it didn't want to be touched. Not by humans; only by plants and water, and light, sure-footed animals. That was all I wanted, too. My cat's fur against my face, like soft grass. Straight ahead of me, on the water, birds were sailing: black-headed gulls with their confident, perked tails, unreachable.

Arriving at the shore from Shirley's Cafe, you can go either right or left along the beach. That day I started by going left, making my way down the concrete slope to the shingle and towards the water, till the ground started to pouch and glisten warningly. The mud on this side is mostly grassed over, dotted with chunks of wood washed up by the tide, turned to grey fossils by the salt wind. I tried my weight on a grassy patch but it sank beneath me, almost taking my boot. I pulled it back out with effort. The grass sailed by me, half rooted, half buoyant.

What's good is to take your time: to walk up and down the shingle and look at stones. In the deep south-west, the fossils grow big and gnarly. I'd seen some in Exeter Museum: ancient, thick, curling shells larger than my two fists together; the blank eyes of a crocodile creature so flat and hard it looked like a child's drawing. Severn Beach is out on the fringe of that region, but even there you can find fossils. Dark rocks with little discs inside them. Notched white tubes. Sea lilies, perhaps. I picked up a couple, but they were like ones I had at home already; I let them drop.

Instead, I found myself picking up other stones, as I did so often. Hard to know why particular things draw you on a particular day. This time it was ones with a single white band, curled right round like a ring, clean or craggy against the smooth dark rock. I'd loved a girl once who liked the striped stones. It was a long time ago but I picked them up anyway. In her poem 'The Pool', the early twentieth-century poet H. D. watches a pool of water with awe. She asks it questions; she experiments with ways to touch it, very lightly. The very last line shows her no closer to knowing anything about it: 'What are you — banded one?'

I didn't miss the girl, not anymore. But I missed having someone to fetch and carry for. To bring stones to. Someone to ask, in my awe and my distance, *what are you — banded one?*

I traced the bands of the rocks, over and over again, and let some fall and put some in my pocket, without being able to explain what I was doing. There was no one to explain to.

The shingle gave way to straw, and I got bored. I turned round and headed back the way I'd come, pausing to investigate a piece of tree trunk that was lying on its side with both ends in the air, like a happy seal. Something was growing there: white fungus, like discs of chewed gum, with thousands of tiny holes bubbling through the centre. I passed the place I'd started and carried on walking. When the shingle ended, replaced by wide concrete steps up against the sea wall, wet and slippery with tidal water, I hopped up and made my way carefully along, staring down at the mud below. Lots of things half lost come to a stop, down in that mud. A piece of machinery with three wheels. BLAKEBOROUGH AND SONS LTD. VALVE MAKERS. BRIGHOUSE. A pair of scissors, sunk by the blades, handles leaning back over the mud's meniscus, too tired to go on. A metal gate, its thin railings half-sieving the mud in which it was sunk.

I'd taught a class about mud in an MA course on elements in literature. Mud hangs about in flat landscapes because flat places are usually — in Britain, at least — a compromise between earth and water: water held back precariously, or only sometimes.

Beaches, marshes, bogs, wetlands. Mud is one element turning into another, always on the way in or on the way out, as elusive as the moon. Mud makes promises it can't keep: a place to stand, solid ground underfoot. Without my cat, I had nowhere to rest myself any longer. No footing. And everyone else was on the other side, on the blue water, sailing like birds. Whenever I took a step closer, I sank.

Back on the main path above the beach, the rocks were shocked with rings of yellow lichen, like overlapping flowers pressed into them. And nestled between two rocks, bizarrely, was a bunch of purple tulips, the sort you buy in the supermarket. I had some back at home, in a glass carafe — candy-striped and yellow, £3.89 from Aldi. You can buy yourself flowers if you have no cat to eat them and get sick. Mine had just started loosening their thick mouths. The purple tulips balanced, still and sheltered, as the wind blew over the rocks. In Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, the lonely adolescent Rhoda imagines the gesture of gathering flowers and presenting them as a gift. She doesn't know yet who to; she has no one she loves. But she feels the desperate severing force of love without an object:

*To whom shall I give all that now flows through me,
from my warm, my porous body? I will gather my
flowers and present them — Oh! to whom?*

And then later, when her friend Percival dies, that gesture gives shape to her grief. Rhoda picks and binds a bunch of violets, and goes to Greenwich, to the river, where she makes an offering:

Now I will relinquish; now I will let loose. Now I will at last free the checked, the jerked-back desire to be spent, to be consumed . . . Into the wave that dashes upon the shore, into the wave that flings its white foam to the uttermost corners of the earth, I throw my violets, my offering to Percival.

I left the tulips behind — someone's offering to something, or to nothing at all — and moved on, under the Prince of Wales Bridge, its large echoes milling among pale green supports. Towards the village were motionless trees in the sunlight, blown into a tilt by forgotten wind. They'd been planted on the edge of the old boating lake, long since drained and filled.

At the end of the shore path is a bird reserve. It was closed off that day — more flood defences being built. Holding the water back is work that never ends. But as I approached, I could see a figure climbing over the railings, coming from the forbidden side, long supple legs stretched out. I couldn't make the figure make sense because it seemed to be an old lady. It *was* an old lady. She sat down on the bench on my side of

the fence, where a bicycle was propped, apparently waiting for her, and got out some dark bread and a jar of jam.

I walked past her to the railing, clambered up and hooked my legs over. I wasn't as brave as she was: I wouldn't go right over. I just stared across the mud, at the small glittering birds dabbing themselves in the distance.

'I'll be off this bench in a minute,' said the old lady, pointedly. 'If you want somewhere to sit down.'

'Oh no,' I said. 'Don't worry. I'm sitting up here because that's where I want to be.'

I laughed, but the old lady ignored me. Her skin was very deeply grooved, in even lines. She went on eating her bread and staring out across the sand, thin legs in mud-coloured corduroys. That, I thought, was how I would like to grow old: my skin folded as sharply and cleanly as the slats of a blind, close against my face. But only white people, with their thin skin, take that tortoise shape. My face would undergo — was already starting to undergo — a shift far more tectonic. Things slid, and thickened. The tide dragged itself out one day and never came back in, and the pockmarks dried firm.

I reached into my pocket for the orange I'd brought with me, peeling back its loose skin, dropping its dry strings on to the path.

'I just came to get some seaweed,' the old lady

said, unexpectedly.

‘Oh? To eat?’

‘Of course not to eat,’ the lady said scornfully.

‘Imagine eating the seaweed from around here. No, it’s for my allotment. Seaweed rots really well.’

She stood up and started cramming a bulging sack I hadn’t noticed into one of her bicycle panniers. It gave her some trouble.

‘I’ll see you later,’ I said, and I slid down from the railing. ‘Good luck with your seaweed.’

‘It rots well,’ said the old lady, already behind me, as I headed back up the path.

On the way back to the station I saw a black cat in a house window, on the sill just inside the glass, sunning itself. Its legs were stretched right out, its eyes shut and its head back, and it did not move as I came up to it, as I spoke to it through the pane. The next thing I knew I was back on the train. The announcer was calling for Sea Mills. My body had taken itself home. □





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