

HAMISH HAMILTON PRESENTS

# Five Dials



Number 43

Have We Gone Blind?

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# On Ivanka and Blindness

Welcome to issue 43.



We are now deep in the era of Trump. As a magazine, we've accepted our role. We don't employ an investigative team. Our contributors' page lacks a platoon of reporters. Our only Washington correspondent practically filled the last issue. (We're giving him a break.) Our function is to offer up a series of Very Specific Commissions which will allow our talented readers to do the work for us and imagine alternative realities, or just attempt to inhabit the minds of the characters in Trump's White House – cabinet members and appointees and other d-listers suddenly thrust on to the international stage. We're asking you, the readers, to push back against reality. It shouldn't be difficult. American reality isn't what it used to be.

We're eager to publish your work, whoever you are. In advance of this issue, we sent out a Very Specific Commission to all the writers we know and, once again, both the overtly political and the wildly imaginative responded.

Perhaps it was because we asked writers to imagine the inner monologue of Ivanka Trump. Perhaps it was because we specified the short story must be set during a meeting with Xi Jinping. Once again, writers around the world followed the strict rules and produced excellent pieces of short fiction – funny, cutting, at times anarchic. Some even found a sense of poignant loss buried within the recesses of Ivanka's consciousness. We also stipulated the stories contain the line, 'But would the clothing still sell?' It's a sentiment never far from Ivanka's thoughts, as author Lynn Mundell demonstrated in her submission, when Ivanka peers across the table and thinks: 'Xi Jinping's plum-coloured tie and diplomat's sash could be a good look for the fall.'

In the submissions, the requisite line was woven into Ivanka's vengeful or complicit or bored thoughts in various surprising ways. To enter her head begged the question: who is this unelected presence

in our lives? ‘Her last name sounded like an axe splitting wood victoriously,’ wrote David Drury in his story. ‘*Trump-Trump-Trump*. But her first name sounded like a weather balloon filled with oil bouncing on a sticky trampoline: *Ivanka-Ivanka-Ivanka*.’

The name also concerned Ethan Emey: ‘It belongs to a tower in Manhattan and tenements in the Bronx,’ he wrote. ‘It belongs to the signs raised throughout the Dust Bowl, the Rust Belt, the heartland . . . And every once in a while it sneaks on to a bicep as a tattoo.’ It also, Emey wrote, belongs ‘to the 4chan hordes.’ And how they love it, even if they’re typing their All-American tweets from Vladivostok.



Some contributors to the contest explained the rules of being a Trump. Ivanka is aware of her comportment. ‘Always sit up straight, that’s the role. Stomach in, body tense,’ wrote Marianne Hastings. ‘Look serious, but also human. A finger on the chin and a strong stare should do it. Show off the Trump shoulders to sell the Ivanka epaulettes.’

During her meeting with the Chinese leader, she’s aware of the senior advisor across from her, who just happens to be her husband. In M. L. Edwards’s story, Jared makes a pitch to the Chinese leader, ‘looking very confident as he reels off that little bit of drivel he rehearsed for me SEVEN times this morning. Too confident.’ In Andrew Neilson’s story, her husband is nervous: ‘Jared is sweating again. Little pearls of it are gathering at the crest of his eyebrows.’ And soon, ‘like ridiculous tears’, that sweat threatens to run down his cheeks. There is, of course, also a bloated, orange-tinted presence in the room with the Chinese leader. At some points he expostulates on North Korea and, in other stories, sits lumpenly, like a . . . moron, I suppose, if that’s the official State Department term.

‘How did I become babysitter for the Leader of the Free World?’ Ivanka asks in Brett Cullen’s short story. ‘Ha – I wish. Babysitters get twenty dollars an hour. I’m the one who’s free.’ Soul searching was a common theme: ‘When I look at dad,’ writes Jose Sotolongo, ‘with his cement pancake, that peach tint he uses for his cotton candy coif, the lavender wrinkle-cover under his eyes, I’m like, why me?’

We’re like: don’t forget there’s plenty more in Issue 43. In this age of migration and suspicion of refugees, award-winning novelist Mohsin Hamid eloquently sets out the case for empathy. We are, in the end, all migrants through time. There’s no going back. It’s one of the traits even Trump has in common with all those on his banned countries list.

The theme of the issue is blindness. And if you’re interested in stories that examine a topic other than moral blindness, try Sarah Lyall’s feature. Face blindness makes her an interesting guest at a dinner and also, unfortunately, leads to various misadventures. It’s not an affectation. Some people just can’t recognize what’s in front of them these days.

Also included inside: poetry from the talented Noelle Kocot, oral history from Svetlana Alexievich and columns by Martha Sprackland and Hermione Thompson. If you’re a fan of Angela Carter or Francis Picabia, read on, don’t be shy.

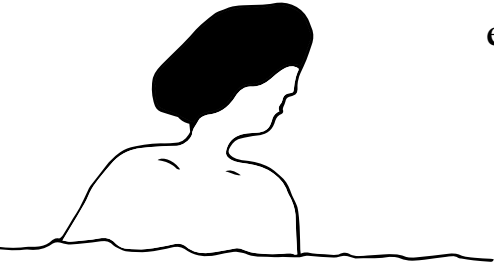
The winner of our contest can be found on page 72.

Check out the next Very Specific Commission here.



# ‘Writing fiction is a form of travel.’

Mohsin Hamid on *Exit West*, migration, empathy and a certain fantastic fox



Five Dials reached Mohsin Hamid via Skype in his home in Lahore. The connection from British Columbia to Pakistan was not perfect, so after the interview was done, transcribed and edited, Mohsin looked over the text again. Because of all the sections where digital fuzz had interrupted the conversation, there were more (unintelligible)s than a Trump interview with the AP. Hamid had just been shortlisted for the Man Booker for his latest novel, *Exit West*, a book in which a young couple leaves behind a war-torn city by entering a door that transports them west.

Skype, Hamid said during the conversation, is almost the perfect sort of example of the door. It allows two realities to exist at once. We exchanged information about our own realities: early morning in BC, evening in Lahore. My cool air, his blisteringly heat for the previous two days. His kids were out swimming in the early evening, I got the morning chorus of birdsong. ‘They’ll be back home in a little while,’ he said, ‘so it’s actually kind of quiet and peaceful.’

**Five Dials** How did the novel come about? Did you begin with a collection of images?

**Mohsin Hamid** It began with something a lot like what you and I are doing right now. I moved back to Pakistan from London in 2009. It seemed to me that when I was Skyping with people in London or New York or Vancouver or Sydney, or speaking with them on a telephone or video chatting, there was this strange sense that actual little windows were opening up – technological windows that allowed me almost to be in two places at one time.

That gave me this idea of the doors. I imagined that these doors would open, and that people would proceed through them, and instantly emerge in a different place, and it felt to me that the doors corresponded to the emotional reality of our tech-

nological moment, even if perhaps they don’t correspond to our physics.

The novel began with these doors. The novel grew up around them, which is for me very unusual. Usually I have a story and I work from there. But in this instance, I had doors.

**5D** The novel deals with war, migration and refugee movement around the world. Was it meant to be so topical? Or did the world catch up with the book as you were writing?

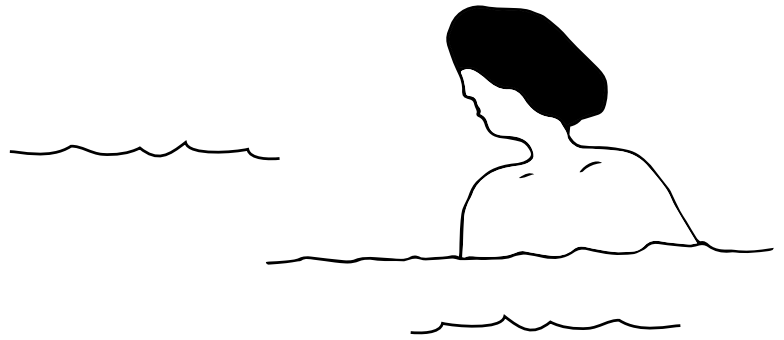
**MH** Living in Pakistan there seems always to be this fear of the apocalypse. What if something truly terrible befell Lahore and one had to leave? The idea of that possibility has been in the air probably since 9/11, or even before that.

It struck me that this notion of one day having to flee a city was not particular to Lahore, but common to urban dwellers everywhere. In New Orleans it could come about because of a rise in sea levels or a giant storm. In New York it could come about, perhaps, because of the election of a right-wing fascist figure.

In Paris there might be the breakdown of law and order and a real battle between people who live in the slums and come from immigrant communities and people who live in the wealthy centre of the city.

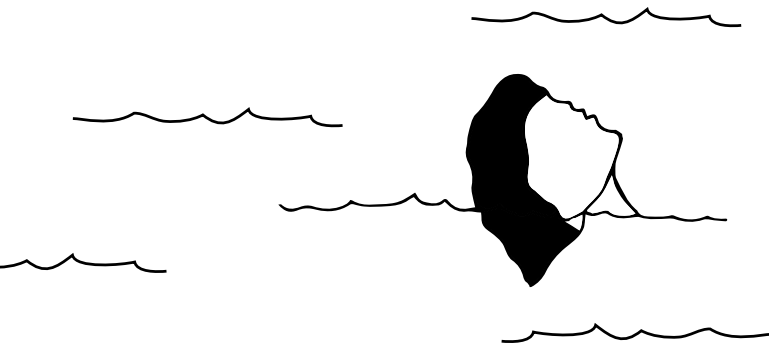
In Milan it could come about because of an economic collapse and being thrown out of the





Euro and the banks going bust and the economy grinding to a halt, similarly in Athens. This notion of living in a large city today seems to carry with it the potential of apocalypse.

Exploring that fear – it's actually quite a personal thing. It was a way of dealing with my own anxieties about living in Lahore, and living in Pakistan. At the same time, I'm somebody who's migrated so much in my life. At three I went to California, at nine back to Pakistan, at eighteen to America again, at thirty to London, and then in my late thirties back to Pakistan. I'm so mongrelized, and such a migrant, that it's impossible to think of myself as any one thing any more.



**5D** Has this coloured your view of migration?

**MH** It felt to me as though there were a backlash against such people, against migrants, and a backlash against migration generally, which I take quite personally, given who I am.

Instead of a world where migration becomes impossible, I wanted to explore what happens when migration becomes vast, incessant.

All of this mixed together to form the novel that we now have. In a sense the book chimes with current events, but current events aren't simply current events. The underlying currents that give rise to our current events have been with us for decades. The novel is tapping into those underlying currents.

**5D** Your previous novels have been audacious high-wire storytelling experiments. You used second-person narrative in *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, and the form of a monologue in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. Did you initially try other ways of telling this story? Did you want to experiment before turning to what is a deceptively simple style?

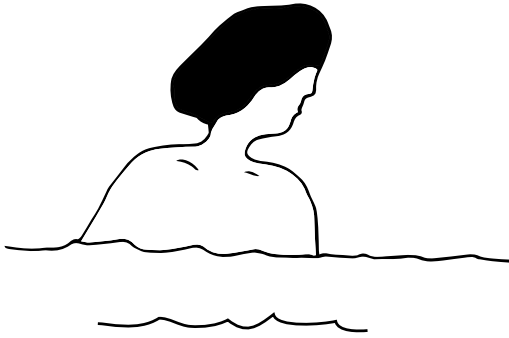
**MH** Normally I do experiment with one form, another form, first person, second person, that voice, this voice.

I try to find the form that is best suited to what the novel is trying to express. Usually, that's a process of trial and error. I try something, it fails. I try something else, it fails. With each failure I get into the characters and the story and the ins and outs of the novel. But often the words, the sentences and the paragraphs of a failed draft don't make their way to the next draft.

This time was different. There were some very brief experiments of maybe five, ten, fifteen pages that didn't exactly peter out, but just needed to be reworked. And after a very short phase of those sorts of experiments, the novel flowed and was written in its first draft very much like the book that you read.

Those initial sketches only took a few months, maybe three, early in the life of the novel. For me, a typical novel is six or seven years of work and the first half of those, three of four years, I'm totally lost. There's nothing from that period that is immediately recognizable in the final product. But with this book, three or four years after I began, it was finished. Maybe less than that.

I think one of the reasons for the difference is that I live in Pakistan now. Living in Pakistan made me think more and more about how novels work, and what they're supposed to do. My father-in-law passed away a year ago, and before he died



he once said to me, 'Look, you're basically a storyteller. That's why people come to your work. They want stories.'

It's a simple statement, but it really struck me. I had thought of myself as someone who constructs sentences and builds these structures like an architect, a bricklayer.

Really, I felt, he's right. Storytelling is at the heart of this. Was I perhaps missing the point? Were the experimentations that had consumed me before quite different from what I wanted to do now? Perhaps now I just wanted to figure out how to tell this story in the most impactful way.

There's also the fact I have small children and read children's books to them. So I re-encountered the form of the children's novel. *Exit West* was heavily influenced by children's literature. In particular, the double partisan nature of so much good children's literature, where the narrator is not neutral, but rather on the side of the characters, and also on the side of the reader.

For example, the narrator wants Fantastic Mr Fox to escape successfully from the farmers. You're cheering for Fox in a children's book, but the narrator is on your side too. The reader is part of the narrator's team. The reader is enlisted, imagined, to be an ally of Wilbur and Charlotte in *Charlotte's Web* as they attempt to find a way for Wilbur to survive. In that sense, there's this double partisan nature: both the characters and the narrator are on the side of the reader.

It struck me as so beautiful and so powerful an approach, and so rarely encountered in adult literature. I tried to write a book like that, which had this omniscient narrative position, but one that was on the side of the characters. Also, narration that wasn't trying to say one thing but mean something else. It was trying to say what it meant. In that sense too, it was on the side of the reader. It wasn't attempting to trick the reader or to destabilize them necessar-

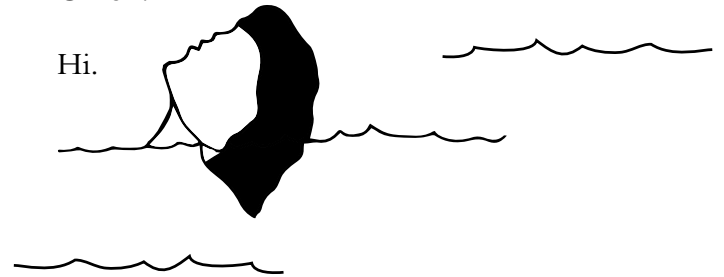
ily, formally in the way that I've done before. Not that those formal approaches were tricks, but my previous novels involved breaking apart and destabilizing narratives, asking the reader to restabilize them and then asking the reader to reflect upon what they did in co-writing the book. *Exit West* was actually much more straightforward. It was just trying to say what it meant.

**5D** It seems there are similarities in the music world. A musician might have the initial impulse to embrace complexity, explore, and then they circle back to the simplicity of a folk song.

Did I lose you?

Uh oh.

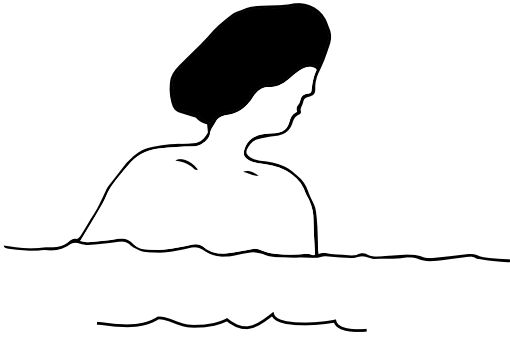
Hi.



**MH** Hi. You were saying about the musicians and they circle back to simplicity of a folk song.

**5D** Yeah. Are there similarities in literature? At some point you reread a children's book and circle back to rediscover a simple yet effective delivery technique?

**MH** It's unclear to me at this stage if this is going to be what I do going forward or if I'm going to revert to more overtly experimental formal approaches. Right now, this is where I'm at, the zone I'm in.



The experimentations were, for me, very important. Not only did I think those experiments were necessary for those books, because those books had to be written in that way. But it was also clearly important for me to go out into the world of writing and explore, and see what I saw, and learn what I learned. Travel is a pleasure and formal experimentation, and writing fiction is a form of travel. And it is a pleasure.

In a weird way, I do feel that, at this moment, I'm in a slightly different place where I'm valuing simplicity.

I grew up in Pakistan. An early part of my life there was in a Pakistan that was socially engineered for a dictatorship, General Zia-ul-Haq's dictatorship where this notion of a puritannical form of Islam was being enforced, where so many things were forbidden. The state asserted one notion of truth and one national narrative and rejected deviation.

Writing about characters who were a sharp contrast to that, who were selfish and who were hedonistic, and doing it in a novelistic form that broke things apart and reassembled them in new ways: it felt like precisely the kind of response I needed to the dogma I had grown up in. It was the kind of response I wanted to make to that dogma.

But now we're living in a world where truth has become so debased, where basic decency is almost thought to be a myth, and where we are being hit with so much information that we can't make sense of it. We're in a state of shock. So it felt

to me that the much more radical response instead was to write about decency. In a world full of lies, saying what you mean feels quite radical. I suppose my sense of the world that I live in and what and how I need to respond to it has changed. *Exit West* is different.

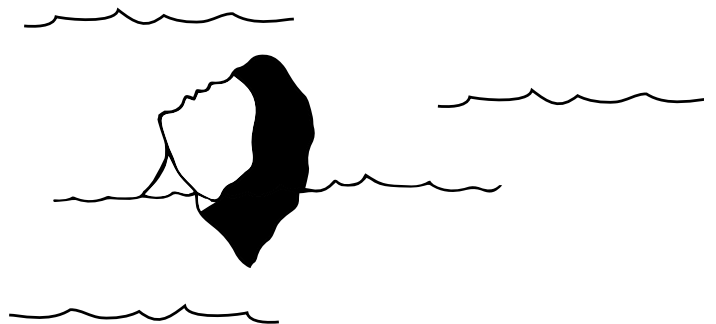
We have so much information coming at us. Maybe that requires a certain brevity in the novel. There's such a contest for our time. Efficiency was important to me.

**5D** Was that a tactic from the very beginning? Was writing a short book a formal necessity? Or was it because of our habits and the onslaught of information?

**MH** I've gravitated towards the kind of novel which can be read in a day. In other words, you can encounter the book in the morning and finish it some time after you've had lunch. You could begin the book just after having lunch and finish it before you go to bed.

The idea was to offer one sustained human encounter of that length. Not that readers are meant to read it in a single day or at a single sitting, I don't think that's my intention at all, but the book should be open to that possibility.

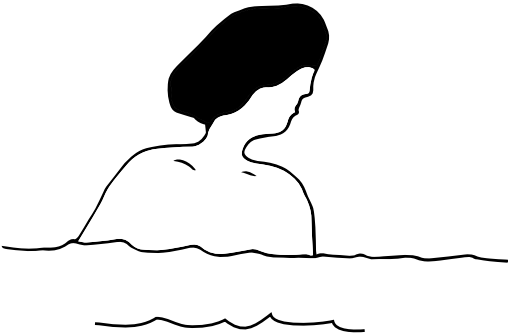
That size of book feels to me somehow very natural. In a world full of distractions, it's the notion





of a single undistracted experience. You don't have to do anything else. You could just read this book and be done.

**5D** That idea messes with the sense of value that certain North American and British readers have. There's a trend to buy long books that denote worthiness. They're big and thick, so you're getting your money's worth. A surprising comment I've heard about *Exit West* is that it feels bigger than it actually is.



**MH** The size of a book has two different aspects. There's its actual length, which is one form of size. The second is the spaces that it leaves for readers to fill. In filling those empty spaces, those blanks and those gaps, those silences, it expands. A small book can be quite big if the reader brings a lot to it. In that sense, in *Exit West*, for example, there are a number of two- or three-page episodes that are not part of the main narrative, but are occurring in Amsterdam or San Diego or Tokyo. Those are impressionist dots – ten, twelve impressionist dots that hopefully create the impression of an entire world, even while we are mostly tightly focused on the two main characters in this story.

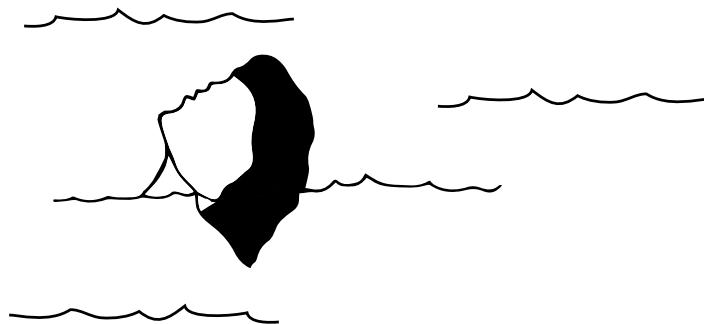
At the same time, I'm hoping the reader can feel this world around them. Those little passages don't add up to a lot of pages, but if they echo around in the reader's mind, they become something much

bigger. In that way, leaving space means they can strike a note, and that note is allowed to reverberate inside the reader. Perhaps it takes on entirely different harmonies inside them. That's also a way to create a larger space. Because it's possible for you to spend a considerable amount of time making your way through a larger book, but not necessarily feel a large emotional experience of reading.

**5D** The title too holds more than it should. Is someone exiting to the west? Most people in the book are moving westward. Or are you saying that in a newly configured world, where migrants are everywhere, the idea of 'the west' as we know it is disappearing?

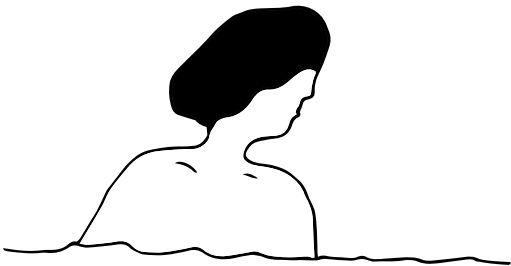
**MH** It is a bit of both. The idea of 'go west young man and young woman' is very much a part of this. The pull so many millions and billions of people feel to go to Europe and North America, to head west as it were – that's very much in this novel.

But is there a west? I really think about that term. When somebody from the east lives in London, is London a western city any more? When lots of people from the east live in London, what is west? I think part of what's happening now is that this notion of the west is becoming more difficult to sustain. It's becoming less coherent. That's not a bad thing.





The west as a geographic direction will always be with us, but the west as something fundamental, with a different essence, has always been a kind of myth. There have always been easterners in the west, and southerners in the north. The fact that this notion is itself being challenged is central to the book.



**5D** It asks the question: if 'the west' does exit, what then takes its place? What fills the gap?

**MH** Two hundred years ago the world was a very different place. Think of Vancouver two hundred years ago. Unrecognizable.

Perhaps it was a small outpost on the north-western Pacific coast of the Northern American continent. Now Vancouver's something completely different.

There's no reason for us to think that Vancouver two hundred years hence will not be as different from Vancouver today as Vancouver two hundred years ago is. In other words, Pakistan didn't exist two hundred years ago. Two hundred years ago, Lahore, the city I live in, was much smaller. It's an ancient city, but was very different then from what it is today.

Two hundred years in the future, it'll be even more different. The reality is the degree of change that we'll see in the next two centuries is almost incomprehensible to us, just as it has been in the past. What matters is the emotional attitude we bring to that change.

We might encounter very dangerous situations in the future: personally, psychologically, politically, societally, artistically, culturally. But we have to accept that the nature of things is to change. It has always been this way. It is of course not entirely pleasant. It is often sad, heartbreaking, bittersweet, but at the same time interesting, beautiful, different. If we accept that change comes, we'll be able to look at this new future, which none of us can define at this moment, and look for optimism in it.

We don't know what it will be, a desirable future, but we can begin to think about it if we're not paralysed with this false permanence that leads us to nostalgic politics and nostalgic psychological dysfunction.

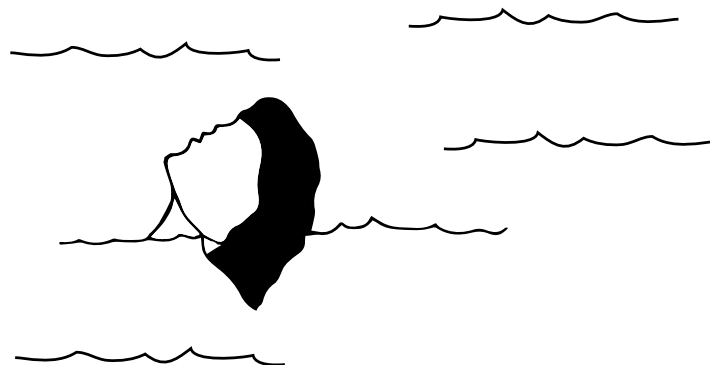


**5D** And false ownership?

**MH** Hello?

**5D** Hello. Still here. Got you.

**MH** You said something, and then —

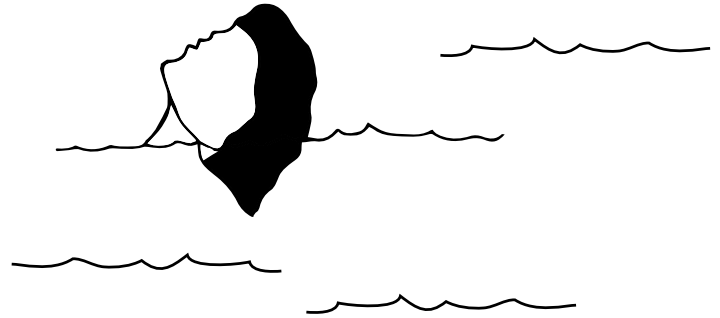
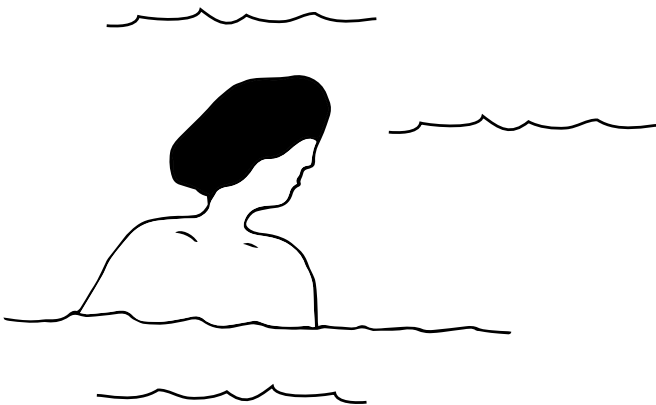


**5D** I mentioned false ownership. Being on the west coast has made me think about it too, because of course this is about as far west as you can go, but this is not a 'western' city. Vancouver has so many eastern influences: Chinese, Korean, Japanese.

**MH** The west coast is not really the west coast. The west coast is the west coast of North America, but it's the east coast of the Pacific Ocean. It is both of those things. It is the eastern rim of the Pacific, and the western rim of North America. It embodies those two different aspects. It's likely to continue to.

We should be glad of that. The essence of nature is hybridity: different things coming together and mixing, and out of that something new coming into existence. That's why so much of procreation involves two parents. We could just split ourselves, like paramecium, and just have two of us, but we don't. We have two parents who come together, combine different things, and create the next thing. Every human being is, genetically speaking, a hybrid.

Beyond that, our cultural output, our technological output, our artistic output flourishes in a situation of hybridity. We might think, for example, America was a land of white people, but there's no such thing as white people. America is the place where lots of different European people, who previously thought of themselves as Germans, and Swedes, and English, and Italians, and Poles, came together and forged this new thing, which they called white. It also, of course, involves people who they didn't call white, who they called black, or Native American, or from China, or wherever.



Out of this has come the United States, and also Canada. They're both examples of hybridity, but so is Lahore, where I live. All of these invaders would come down from central Asia into India. They entered a place with giant rivers, with farmers who had settled and created communities, and the first big city there in their path, the first big riverine city that they sacked along the way, was Lahore. Thousands of years of this have produced people like me, who are descended from everybody. The earlier populations of south Asia, but also the Afghans, the Mongols, the Greeks, the Arabs; it's all mixed up in people like me. That's what our culture is.

It has always been the case. Anyone who left the place where homo sapiens evolved in Africa, would then go on and encounter new things, and mix, and form new hybridizations, and that went on and on. Those who stayed probably wandered around. They'd hybridize too.

Nobody is left who's not a hybrid. So much of what's beautiful about human culture comes from this hybridity. The Renaissance came into existence because the Arabs and Muslims brought back to Europe so much of the knowledge of the Greeks, which had been augmented by knowledge from China and India and all over Africa, and by the Arabs themselves. The Romans didn't have a zero. The Arabs brought mathematics and physics back into Europe.

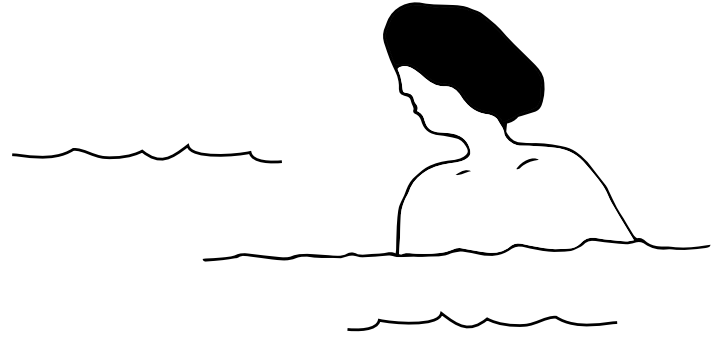
It wasn't just an Arab physics and mathematics, it was a global heritage of mathematics and physics that was being held in this community, and a sense of advancement through science, and it returned to Europe in this way.

The aircraft wasn't invented by the west or by Americans or by Europeans. It was invented by every physicist, mathematician, and philosopher through the ages who added to the combined sum of human knowledge that made it.

**5D** Is the novel a sly reminder of this? In it you mention everyone migrates, even if we stay in the same houses our whole lives. We're migrants through time.

**MH** We have become, in this moment, so terrified of change, and also of mortality. Mortality has become this horror that we just cannot face. We've lost so many of the ways in which you used to face mortality: a sense of tribe or folk stories, or close families, or religions that were fundamentally spiritual, not systems of political tribalism. Much of this has been weakened. We haven't yet erected the new things that will sustain us and let us deal with this crisis. We are very destabilized.

In a sense, what is interesting to me is a reminder that despite the impermanence of us as individuals – and of every culture and society and city and town – in spite of that, there's enormous beauty possible. The novel tries to go deep into the sadness of impermanence. Without denying this deep sadness, it's also possible to see the beauty and the hope and optimism. One thing which mortality does for us is to make compassion possible. Each of us is facing the same end. That comes to everyone.



The person you hate, the person with a different language, different race, different colour, different gender, whatever, we all face this. That predicament also gives us the foundation of compassion. You can be compassionate to other people because, just like you, they face oblivion.

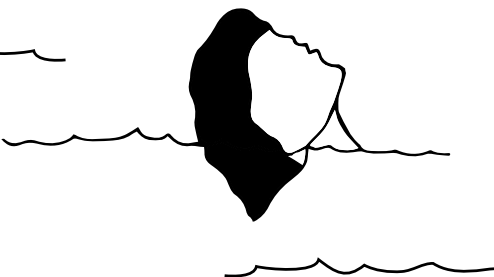
Certainly, if you gave me the trade-off and said, 'Look, you can live for ever and forget compassion,' I'd probably grab on to it with both hands. But we don't have that option. Since we don't have that option, it's important to remember what else we get from mortality, which is the idea that we partake of it all together, universally.

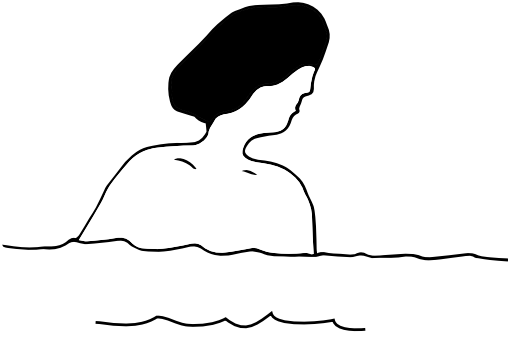
**5D** Is this a tough point to remind people who are in the grip of this current retrenchment in a world of Brexit, Trump, nationalism and closed borders?

**MH** It's essential. Because here's the thing: this is understandable nostalgia. We all recoil from being pushed into the future, but we must go. The future will come.

Just as when I was a child, I climbed up on the high diving board one time. I walked to the edge of it. I looked down. I said, 'No way in hell am I jumping off this thing.' To my parents' shock, I crawled back to the base of the board and there were a bunch of kids who had climbed up behind me. I made them all climb back down the ladder, and then I followed. I didn't jump.

Now, I understand that. It happened to me. But in life it doesn't work that way. Even though I didn't jump from that high diving board, I grew up.





I got older. I encountered other frightening things. There's no way round it. I think that nostalgia is not a cure. It's a dangerous mirage.

In the desert, the mirage leads you to the wrong place and you die of thirst. That's why mirages are dangerous. Nostalgia functions like that. In our attempt to get back into the past, we're doomed. Even though we feel this impulse, and even though we see shimmering stuff in a desert that looks like water, we have to remind ourselves that that's just not the way. It can't be.

We have to look forward. Reminding people of this is important, as is asking people: what are we not looking at? What we're not looking at is our own impermanence. Let's look at it, squarely. Cry if we need to. Panic if we need to. But gather ourselves and live in acknowledgement of it and live more fully as a result.

**5D** What about the violence of the book? Casual violence erupts at different points. Was that a conscious tactic?

**MH** To be alive is to experience violence. We are all at the edge of this abyss, and extinguishment is a violent thing. It keeps popping up. Car accidents, civil wars, disease, individual misfortune, accidents, murder. It does permeate the novel. It permeates human lives. I suppose what the novel tries to do is for the most part avert its gaze from the violence in the city where it begins, where the violence escalates and escalates.

In other words, violence is noted. Wow, this is something horrific. Then you look away. What I've noticed living in Pakistan is people don't spend all their time dwelling on how bad things could get. For the most part, we try so hard to imagine things are going to be okay. When a terrorist attack hits Lahore, most people don't spend their time thinking

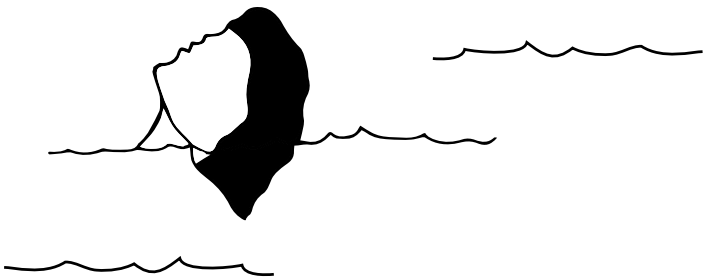
about it all the time, and looking and going to the site where it occurred, and reflecting upon it. You register it, you take some kind of defensive action and you avert your gaze. You get on with your life.

The notion of being surrounded by incessant violence of different scales and averting our gaze, and living our lives, feels to me very fundamental to what it is to be a human being. Even in Vancouver, which is a very peaceful place, death, I'm sure, for many people, is something that happens in hospitals and in graveyards, and is pushed out of the day to day as much as possible. But it's there.

The novel tries to grapple with the violent nature of what it is to be a human being. It isn't going to end well for us, as individuals, but we needn't obsess about it either. We need to acknowledge it, value more the time we have because of it, but not mire ourselves in the constant preoccupation of it.

**5D** You've dealt with violence so that a single clause in a sentence hints at the kind of tragedy that would fill an entire other book. Done this way it implies, even grammatically, that this sentence is going to carry on, that life is going to carry on.

**MH** I've lost you.



**5D** Okay, am I back?

**MH** I couldn't hear you.

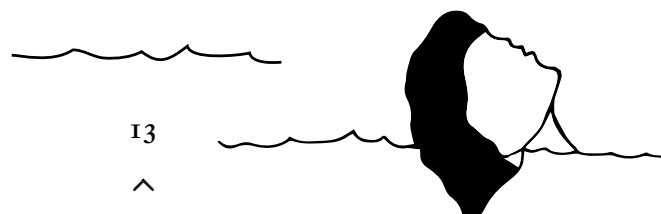
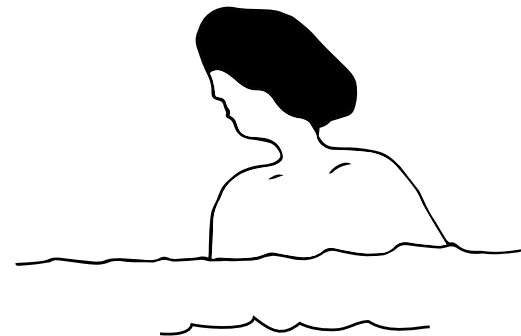
**5D** I just was saying that a single clause in a sentence hints at the kind of tragedy that would fill an entire other book. It implies, even in the grammar of the novel, this sentence will carry on, life is going to carry on.

**MH** In a way, this takes us back to children's books. The best children's books so often don't deny children the horror possible in life. Like *Fantastic Mr Fox* faces death and the potential massacre of his little children. It's basically genocide for the animals that live on the hill. It could be happening. He loses his tail. A bloody stump is all that's left. Yet, we find our way through.

Wilbur faces death. Charlotte dies. These sorts of books, *Fantastic Mr Fox* and *Charlotte's Web*, they're right in the domain of violence and terror and mortality, because children are thinking about this stuff.

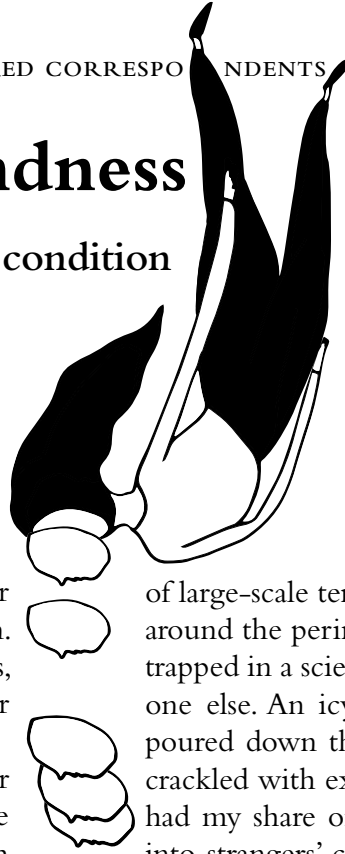
Children are looking at the world and saying, 'This is pretty damn confusing and pretty scary actually.' What these books do is, without denying that reality, extend the position of 'Look, we're on the same side. We're with Fox in his difficult hour. We're with Charlotte as she tries to save Wilbur. We, together, are with each other: the reader, the narrator and the characters of this book. We're together.' This notion of creating a connection that helps reduce the horror present in life is in these children's books. It's something they do so effectively.

For someone like me, I wouldn't be a novelist today if I hadn't fallen in love with children's books. I wouldn't have been a reader. They clearly did something fundamental to me as a human being, as a young human being. In a way, that's what I'm trying to do in this book as well. Because I feel like I still need children's books to make sense of the world around me. I need children's books, written for adults like me. I set out to write the book that I needed.



# Face Blindness

Sarah Lyall on a curious condition



Last winter I got an email inviting me to a dinner party. Let's say the host's name was Barry Johnson. I've known him and his wife casually over the years, but this was the first time I'd been asked to their house, and I was excited to go.

The evening arrived, and I rang the bell of their apartment. A pleasant-looking man answered the door, clasped my shoulders and kissed me on both cheeks. It was a disconcerting moment – I had no idea who he was – but the truth is that these things happen fairly regularly. I don't have a great visual memory, and I often have trouble recognizing people I've met before. Sometimes the people I'm talking to aren't the same people I think they are. I rummaged around in my mind, trying to remember where I'd met this apparent friend of Barry's who, and this did seem strange, felt so at home in Barry's apartment that he was taking my coat and hanging it up in the cupboard.

He led the way into the living room, already full of guests. I didn't recognize any of them, either. 'You remember my wife?' he asked, gesturing to a tall unfamiliar lady holding a glass of wine. I gave her a huge hug, which seemed to startle her, and did not help me much either. I seemed to be in the wrong place. There are a number of techniques you can employ in these situations, but they appeared not to be working. A side table containing a piece of mail or a magazine with an address label on it would really have come in handy just then.

Sometimes it helps to remember the things that used to happen to characters in *The Twilight Zone*. In one of my favourite episodes, a couple wakes up, freaked out and disorientated, in a strange bed in a strange house in a strange neighbourhood. The food in the refrigerator is actually some inedible substance painted to look like food; the train they board in an effort to escape deposits them back to where they began. (It turns out they've been kidnapped by giant aliens and installed in a kind

of large-scale terrarium with a toy railway running around the perimeter.) That's how I felt that night, trapped in a science-fiction story written by someone else. An icy chill moved up my body, sweat poured down the back of my dress and my brain crackled with extra noise, like stereo feedback. I've had my share of mishaps over the years – getting into strangers' cars outside the supermarket when I thought I was getting into my own car, driven by my own then-husband; showing up at the wrong cocktail party but not realizing it for some time, since often I don't recognize the guests even at the parties where I'm meant to be; repeatedly asking a colleague named Charlie if he knew where Charlie was, because I had confused him with someone named Walt; mistaking the neighbours' house for my own and trying to use my key to open their front door as they watched through the window; and inviting a strange man on the street to a book launch because I thought he was someone I'd known for ten years, a misunderstanding compounded by the fact that both men, the stranger and my friend, are called 'Rick', so this person, perhaps thinking that he knew me, or should know me, or maybe having nothing better to do, ended up coming to a party where he knew nobody at all. Plus, I told all our mutual friends that Rick – the real Rick, who is a writer – had split up with his wife, which was not the case, though the fake Rick, who turned out to be a reality-television producer, had.

But this seemed like the worst situation yet.

Standing in these people's living room, I assessed the possibilities. 1. They were my friends but I didn't recognize them. 2. They were not the friends I thought they were, but other friends who I also did not recognize. 3. Nobody was anybody's friend: I had gone to the incorrect dinner party and they had mistaken me for somebody else. Perhaps all of these things were true. I went into the bathroom, took out



my phone and starting texting my friends. 'I do not know what to do,' I said.



It was a December morning, a little bit later. I was perched on a sofa in an anteroom in the Capitol building in Denver, waiting to talk to the governor of Colorado about a condition called prosopagnosia, or face blindness. I survived the dinner party, thank you for asking, but a few interesting things



I started mentioning it to friends, as a possible explanation for what I'd always assumed was simply sloppy behaviour or some sort of egocentric attention-deficit problem on my part. My friend Michael told me that among the prominent people said to suffer from it – the artist Chuck Close, the anthropologist Jane Goodall – is the Colorado governor, John Hickenlooper. I emailed Hickenlooper and he said that yes, he is in fact a face-blind governor.

**I don't have a great visual memory, and I often have trouble recognizing people I've met before. Sometimes the people I'm talking to aren't the same people I think they are.**

had happened since that evening. First, I'd met a woman married to an old friend of mine who announced that she had face blindness and that if we'd met before (we hadn't, I didn't think) she was sorry, but she did not know who I was. Her remark stirred a fuzzy memory of an article in the *New Yorker* I'd read a few years earlier by the late neurologist and author Oliver Sacks, who chronicled his own struggles with prosopagnosia. His was a severe case, but some of his experiences had seemed resonant and familiar, and I'd left the notion to float around in the back of my mind.

After I met the woman, I went home and re-read the article. It was now after midnight, but I took an online face-blindness test that she had recommended. My score, frankly, was very bad – in the lowest possible percentage for one of the groups of questions – so that it appeared (at least according to the internet) that I myself had some form of prosopagnosia.

How would that work? I wondered. It's one thing to be a regular person; it's another to be a public figure in the kind of job where accurate recognition of other people would seem to be a virtue, if not a necessity. How can you inveigle money out of donors, suck up to voters, make deals with legislators or operate an effective office if you can't remember who anyone is? Oddly enough, Hickenlooper's handicap appeared not to have affected his career. A Democrat in a state that does not always love members of his party, he had served eight years as mayor of Denver before being elected governor in 2011, and re-elected in 2014. He has a reputation for being engaged, chatty, convivial and warm. Everyone calls him Hick. Before he was a politician he ran a successful chain of microbreweries in the city. Before that he was a geologist.

He has an almost uncannily severe inability to recognize faces. Though we had met several weeks earlier, for drinks in New York, he could not





remember what I looked like on this new occasion in Denver. (To be fair, I could not remember what he looked like either.) I was looking forward to observing him in action. As a reporter who speaks mostly in questions, I probably have a better-than-average chance of bluffing my way through dicey situations. But politics, it seemed to me, is another thing entirely. While we were on the subject of prosopagnosia, how did Hickenlooper handle his years in the restaurant business, which would have entailed long hours of face-to-face encounters with customers?

‘If you were going to torture a person with face-blindness, you would put them in charge of running a high-volume restaurant,’ Hickenlooper said, ‘and then you would make them governor of a state.’

As it happened, the governor was throwing a party later that night at his official mansion for hun-

then remembered exactly who he was several years later. Others have ‘body men’ to help out. ‘Wife or daughter?’ Selena Meyer, the sometime president played by Julia Louis-Dreyfus in *Veep*, hisses at her body man in one episode, as an older politician approaches with a younger woman. For several years, Hickenlooper too had had an advance man who was pretty good with names, but that person had moved on and his replacement, Conor Hall, told me that he had been on the job for only a few weeks and didn’t know anyone yet.

The party started. The mansion was decorated for the holidays, the bar was open and the crudités and the dips were on display. The guests came in trickles, then in hordes. Hickenlooper planted himself in a central spot. Women, men, families, couples – they kept coming. I watched him operate. He always looked interested. He always looked them

**‘If you were going to torture a person with face-blindness, you would put them in charge of running a high-volume restaurant,’ Hickenlooper said, ‘and then you would make them governor of a state.’**

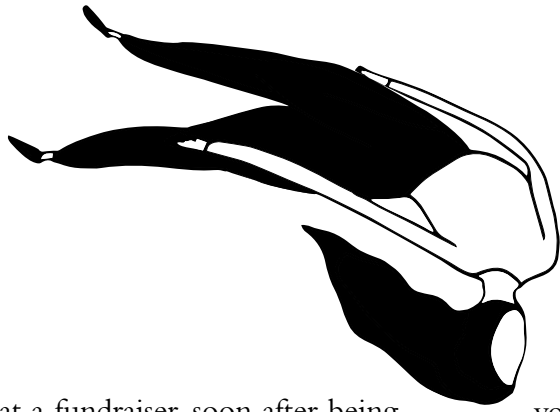
dreds of important Coloradans involved in community service. The idea filled me with anxiety, as I imagined all the people he would potentially not recognize. How would he get through the evening? Somewhat perversely, Hickenlooper told me, as he prepared to leave his office, his extreme extroversion – he had to take a Myers-Briggs personality test for his geology job and scored off the charts for sociability – means that he actually likes parties. ‘It’s kind of an adventure,’ he said.

Some politicians have a gift for recalling faces. Bill Clinton, Hickenlooper said, met him once and

in the eye. He used a few stock phrases, depending on the situation. ‘Hey, how are you?’ he’d say when the person seemed vaguely familiar. ‘How has your year been?’ he would say to people who did not seem familiar, but who he thought ought to be. For people who drew a complete blank, he would say, ‘Merry Christmas!’, or, even more generally, ‘Happy Holidays.’ He had a warm conversation with a pair of women. ‘I couldn’t tell you who either of them is,’ he whispered to me, after they had left.

Along came Armin Afsahi, vice-chancellor of the University of Denver. He had recently run





into the governor at a fundraiser, soon after being seated across from him at a dinner. 'It was about the fourth or fifth time we'd met,' Afsahi told me. At the fundraiser, Hickenlooper and Afsahi got to talking about education. 'Finally he said, "Sorry, I have this thing called facial blindness,"' Afsahi recalled. 'He fooled me the entire time. He's so good at – I won't say pretending – but what's the right word?' He added, 'He could win a game show.'

The people kept coming. Hickenlooper never faltered. 'Yes, of course I remember you,' he said, as he grasped a woman's hand. He posed for a picture with another couple's kids. 'You should be very proud of your father,' he said. ('I have no idea who those people are,' he murmured as they walked off.) He had better luck with Robert Schuham, head of a marketing agency, who is 6'4" and strikingly handsome. 'He's a serial entrepreneur,' Hickenlooper said, 'and his height sets him apart.'

By now, Hickenlooper had started introducing me to guests and telling them that I was writing about face blindness, which was a useful way for him to ascertain any names he did not know. Afterwards, the guests said that they were not particularly bothered by Hickenlooper's gubernatorial vagueness.

'Here's the thing – he always looks like he's happy to see you,' said Patty Calhoun, editor of a weekly alternative newspaper in the city. 'He's also one of the most extroverted people on the planet. He would go to the opening of an envelope.'

Lieutenant Governor Joseph A. Garcia, was also there. He was the only one wearing a name tag, which was an exciting thing to me – I think everyone should wear a name tag at all times. ('I love name tags,' Hickenlooper said later, 'but you've got to be really good. No one wants to see your eyes go down to their name tag and back up.') Garcia pointed out that if you have to have facial blindness, hosting a party is easier than being a guest. 'If

you're the centre of attention, then you have guaranteed social interaction,' he said. 'You will never be left alone with no one to talk to.'

Was he sure that Hickenlooper knew who he was? 'As far as I know he recognizes me, and if he doesn't, he does a pretty good job of disguising it,' the Lieutenant Governor said. He watched his boss chat with the guests. 'He's an operator, in the best sense of the word.'

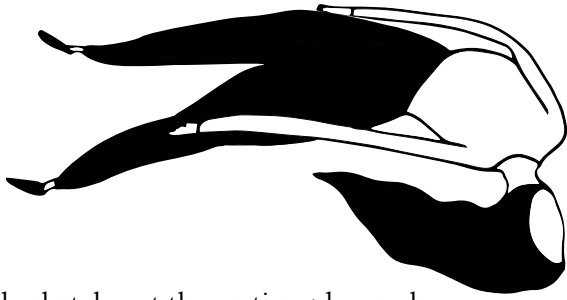
By now I was exhausted from meeting all those people. I could recognize the governor, but not the other people I'd spoken to, including the chief of staff, whom I'd had a long conversation with and was afraid I'd unknowingly run into again. Just as I was preparing to leave, another man came up.

'Governor Hickenlooper! Thank you for your service,' he said. He mentioned that they had met and had a long and interesting discussion two days earlier.

'Remind me who you are?' Hickenlooper said.

As a child, Hickenlooper took for granted his hazy confused feeling of not knowing – his inability, for instance, to distinguish between his various aunts and his various uncles. As an adult, it affects him in a constellation of ways. At the movies, he can't differentiate between the characters – who is the DA and who is the defence attorney? Which shady businessman is which? – and so can't follow the plot. 'Two male leads are roughly the same age and have roughly the same hair, and I'm toast,' he said.

When he ran the restaurants, Hickenlooper prided himself on welcoming his customers, but often had to pretend he knew who they were. Now, he often fails to recognize people who work for him, especially if he sees them out of context. Sometimes he mistakes them for random visitors. (He tends to get it after the sixth or seventh encounter.) He has his strategies. In meetings he'll take out



a pad and quickly sketch out the seating plan, so he knows who is where. When his staff hands him his daily schedule, it always includes thumbnail photographs of the people he's due to see. At receptions he uses diversionary tactics so as not to alert people that he's checking out their name tags. 'Oh, yeah, do you know Andy Reid over there?' he'll ask, for instance, pointing vaguely across the room.

The governor often fails to remember people he's met repeatedly in an official capacity, even if they are famous, such as the musician Ryan Tedder or, exceptionally striking, like Genevieve, Tedder's wife. 'It doesn't matter how big a celebrity – it's just not in the toolbox,' Hickenlooper said. After his divorce, he sometimes failed to recognize women he was dating, including Robin Pringle, who is now his wife. The first half-dozen times they met, Pringle told me, 'he had no idea who I was.' Early on in their relationship, he had a long conversation with her but believed he was actually speaking to a different person who is also tall and has dark hair and who is a friend of hers.

One afternoon some years ago, when he was still a businessman, Hickenlooper was hanging out at the bar of one of his restaurants. A man came in and sat next to him. 'He didn't say anything – he

beard,' Hickenlooper said. (A new kind of hairstyle can often prove challenging to a prosopagnosic.)

His life changed in 2010 when he picked up the *New Yorker* and saw the Oliver Sacks article about face blindness, the one that had seemed so striking to me. He felt a sudden flash of relief, as if someone had cleaned the cobwebs out of his understanding of himself. 'I've had difficulty recognizing faces for as long as I can remember,' Sacks wrote, recalling his struggles to fit in at a school where he didn't recognize his own classmates. 'It did not occur to them (why should it?) that I had a perceptual problem.'

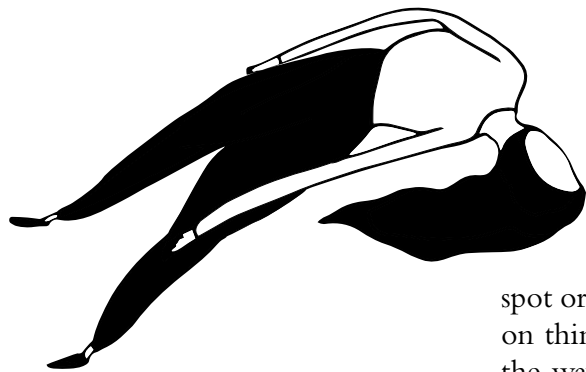
Hickenlooper has now developed a policy of mentioning it up front. 'I just confess,' he said. 'I say, "It's a weird thing, but do not be offended, especially if I'm preoccupied or whatever." I always want to make it sound like I'm a little more normal and don't have a disability.' He always adds: 'Some people have trouble with names; I have trouble with faces.'

For years I too thought something was a bit off. The visual world often seemed tenuous, impressionistic, harder to negotiate than the emotional or intellectual worlds. I couldn't recognize things

**The town was crawling with legislators of similar appearance. There were so many of them! So many paunchy, middle-aged men in ill-fitting suits. 'Remind me how to spell your name' only works up to a point.**

just sat at the bar and was mute,' Hickenlooper said. About half an hour later, the man ordered a beer, and Hickenlooper realized it was Sydney Kennedy, his half-brother. 'He had grown a little bit of a

I should have recognized. Other things seemed familiar but in fact were not. As a child I hated situations where there were a lot of grown-ups at once – a gaggle of parents, a crowd of teachers. I'm



better at coping now, but my techniques can misfire. Once I went to a party and asked a friendly-looking guest to point out the hostess, only to find that she was in fact the hostess herself, the person I was meant to know. In the hospital, woozy on morphine and a little crazy after my c-section, I pointed an accusatory finger at a man holding a baby in the nursery, which, in my defence, contained eight identical-looking babies swaddled in eight identical blankets. 'That's my baby!' I said wildly. (Wrong baby; mine was still in her cot.)

Work presents its own set of problems. It helps if you interview someone, and then see them again, to remember what they look like. The New York state government in Albany, which I had to cover a while back, was particularly challenging. The town was crawling with legislators of similar appearance. There were so many of them! So many paunchy, middle-aged men in ill-fitting suits. 'Remind me how to spell your name' only works up to a point.

It's not just people; it's places and things too. Objects morph into other objects and then fade away in my mind, and it's hard for me to differentiate one thing from another or locate it when there are a lot of other things around it. I can't remember the layouts of people's houses. I'm not the sort of reporter who is good at describing people or things, except the way you would in a children's book: the man is tall, the house is white, the car is big, the bicycle has two wheels. Most of my articles lack any meaningful physical description.

My prosopagnosia is not consistent, exactly, which makes it more puzzling. I can recognize my close friends and family, or people I've met enough times. I can recognize people if they're in the correct context, if they're wearing the same clothes as before, if they've kindly remained in the same

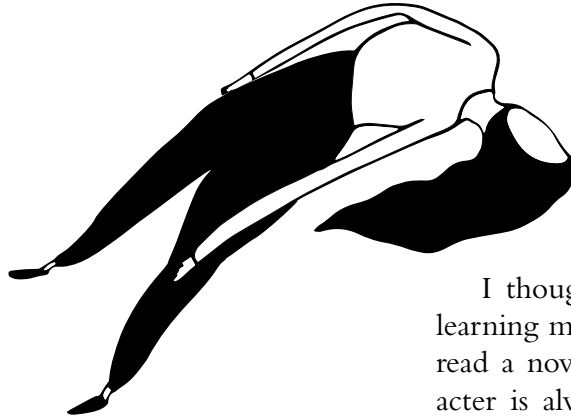
spot or if their looks are particularly arresting. I rely on things like voice, hair, bearing and body shape, the way someone walks, the way they sound. Little things throw the system off. One of my closest friends at the paper is bald, which is great, until he puts on a hat.

At work I tend to confuse people with each other. For months I've been saying hello to a woman I see a lot in the hallway. I don't know who she is, but I used to think she was someone else. By the time I saw her and the woman I mistook her for together and realized that there were two of them, it was too late. I'd made a fake hallway friend. It's probably most embarrassing in specific social situations. Once in a restaurant the *maître d'* seated me at a table with a man – it was our second date – and I started talking to him. He looked startled. So did the man I was meant to be meeting, who was sitting several tables away.

There's a family in Anne Tyler's *The Accidental Tourist* whose members suffer from, among other things, extreme spatial disorientation. Released into the world, they cannot find their way around it. That's how it seems to be with me. I've lived in the same place for the last four years and still walk past it without realizing it's my house. Sometimes I walk down a nearby street, thinking it is my street. Usually when I get out of the lift on my floor at the office I turn in the wrong direction. Meanwhile, I can see a painting and tell you what is in it – some nymphs sitting around, a man waving a sword – but I'd never be able to pick it out in a line-up. At the museum, I'm the person reading the explanatory card instead of looking at the picture.

Sometimes I have worried that my problem is a failure of character rather than biology – a psychological issue. Maybe it's disregard, thoughtlessness, an inability to pay attention, to be generous, to make an effort. It feels as if you should be able to do better just by trying harder. Once I was meeting





some friends at a restaurant and introduced myself to a woman at the table. She glared at me. ‘We’ve met about five times already,’ she said. I told her that I had trouble with faces, I’d read this piece by Oliver Sacks, etc. etc. No, she retorted, she didn’t believe that; the problem was that I was lazy and self-centred. I tried to defend myself, but I thought that maybe my position was indefensible, and I went home.

Or perhaps it’s a reaction to something in my childhood. I grew up with a mother who was obsessed with appearance, who thinks that good-looking people are superior to ordinary people and that clothes reflect a person’s character. In addition

I thought about all this a lot when I started learning more about people with prosopagnosia. I read a novel called *Face Blind*, whose main character is always described in extreme terms – he sees faces ‘that his brain saw the way it saw a white sheet,’ the author writes, which strikes me as a little over the top and probably not accurate, since it doesn’t really work like that. But I wondered what was really going on, and if there was something I could do about it. I decided to go to the prosopagnosia lab and get tested.

One of the foremost researchers in prosopagnosia is named Brad Duchaine, and he is a professor of psychological and brain sciences at Dartmouth. He’s been studying face blindness for about twenty years, since he was twenty-six, and journalists often make pilgrimages to his lab. People are interested in face blindness. It’s such an odd notion.

## He loves gardening but has trouble differentiating between plants ‘if I see them unexpectedly’, he said.

to cosmetic issues – my hair and its many deficiencies is one of her favourite topics – she has a particular fixation on house decor and a tendency to lecture about what is correct and what isn’t, what looks good and what doesn’t, where things ought to go. As a result my mind bleaches white and an exhaustion sets in when I consider these topics. I can’t get a fix on them. I once interviewed someone who said that the only way he knew where to hang the pictures in his new house was by looking at the squares of dirt left on the walls by the previous tenants. That sounds about right to me. What is in our heads, what we say, how we feel, what we read, what we think – those things seem more tangible to me than what is in front of us.



Hanover, NH, was covered in a light dusting of snow when I arrived. Duchaine had explained where his office was in relation to my hotel, but campuses are particularly difficult to negotiate. All those tangled paths and big, similar buildings at unlikely angles. It’s easy to take a wrong turn and end up on an unexpected adventure on the other side of the quad. Duchaine came out to meet me, led me to his office and handed me over to a graduate student. The tests took place in a small office with a computer set up at a desk.

Testing for face blindness is prescriptive, not proscriptive. In other words, researchers cannot look inside your brain and tell you whether you suffer from it; although there are regions of the brain



known as face-selective areas, which show a stronger response to faces than to objects when a subject is undergoing a brain scan. The diagnosis depends on two things: self-reporting – monitoring your experience with face recognition in daily life – and how you perform on visual-recognition tests.

A classic standard measure of prosopagnosia is known as the Cambridge Face Memory Test, developed over several years by Duchaine and described in a paper by him and his colleague Ken Nakayama in 2006.

It starts simply. You see three images of a man with no hair: right profile, left profile, full face. It's a composite person, not a sketch, so it looks vaguely real, something you might see at a police station. The man has the air of someone who spent some time in prison. He remains on the screen for a bit and then goes away, whereupon three more images pop up. For each image you're meant to pick the one matching the first guy. (They all look kind of alike, with features that are variations on a theme.) Then another man flashes on the screen, an adjusted version of the first one, and you repeat the exercise with further sets of images.

It gets harder as it goes along. They all looked equally familiar and equally mysterious. It was difficult to pinpoint what distinguished one person from the other. Some had striking features: big lips, bright eyes, prominent chins. One guy looked like Matt Damon; another had thin, cruel lips, like Ralph Fiennes playing Voldemort; a third guy had a chin like an anvil. But then even these distinctions began to blur and the people were washing together, and there was no option but to guess.

In the second part of the test you see a bunch of faces all at once and then have to pick out, from groups of faces that come up later, which ones you've seen before. 'The correct answer can be any of the six faces,' the screen warned. 'The incorrect faces are sometimes very similar to the target face.'



No kidding.

In the third part, the people's faces came up again – but in this case they were obscured by tiny dots, as in a Seurat painting. A few looked vaguely familiar – I thought I spied my friend with the anvil chin a few times – but otherwise it was pure guesswork. A group of generic faces in a crowd.

I met with Duchaine afterwards to go through the results. I had correctly answered 32 out of 72 questions. The average person, he said, gets 58 questions right. (A completely random score, just guessing on every question, would be expected to yield 24 correct responses.) The test allows for a standard deviation of 7, with scores that are more than two standard deviations below the average – that is 43 – considered problematic.

'So that 32,' Duchaine said, 'that's a bad score.'

I took some other tests – the 'Famous Faces Test', which I was pretty good at, on account of knowing what famous politicians and celebrities look like; a series of exercises using photographs of faces, horses and houses, which did not go so well. You'd see a series of fifty photos in each category, and with each new image you were meant to say whether you'd seen that particular one before or not. I made 12 mistakes with the faces, 8 with the horses, and 18 with the houses, which is a particularly bad number (the average person makes 4 face mistakes, 6 or 7 horse mistakes and 3 house mistakes).

'What these numbers suggest is that it's not just faces you have a problem with, but general visual recognition deficits,' Duchaine said.



There are two types of face blindness: developmental, in which something goes wrong during a person's development, most likely before they are even born; and acquired, in which a person has normal face recognition but suffers some sort of brain damage that throws it off kilter later on. A key case in the literature was that of a 24-year-old Second World War veteran who had lost the ability to recognize even himself after being shot in the head. He became the impetus for the naming of the condition; writing about his plight, the German neurologist Joachim Bodamer joined the Greek words for 'face' and 'non-knowledge' to arrive at prosopagnosia.

But most cases are congenital, most likely caused by something misfiring in a developing brain, according to Duchaine. 'Face processing works in several stages,' he said. First, there's perception – the ability to take in and differentiate among features in a face. Next, there's the question of visual memory, whether you can remember what you've seen. 'If I'm going to encounter you three days from now, I'm going to have to match the incoming perception with a representation that I have in my memory and say, "Oh, here's Sarah,"' Duchaine said. 'You can imagine if one process isn't working normally then the other isn't going to be much use. Some people, neither is working well, though it's hard to pull them apart.'

Duchaine's [faceblind.org](http://faceblind.org) website went online in January 2002. Some 12,000 people have been in touch through the site in the past fifteen years, he said, usually after some jarring incident that makes them wonder what is wrong with them and sends them straight to the internet, the way you would if you developed a weird symptom, like an unexplained burning sensation in your feet. 'They say, "I've got to figure this out," and they Google "face recognition problems";' Duchaine said.

Some prosopagnosics get lost in their own homes. 'We hear about people failing to recognize



themselves,' Duchaine said, 'though I don't want to say it's real common.' Sometimes these people catch sight of themselves in the mirror and think they are looking at strangers.

Through Duchaine, I got in touch with David Fine, a retired gastroenterologist in his sixties who lives in London and is among the more extreme cases the lab has encountered. Once he failed to recognize his own long-time secretary when she got up for a few minutes and then came back into the room with her hair up instead of down. The two were sitting at opposite ends of the same desk. 'I did a double-take and eventually said, "Is that you, Jan?," because as far as I was concerned, she was a different person,' Fine told me over the telephone. Once, meeting some colleagues in a pub, he was describing his condition to a new acquaintance. 'I was explaining to the woman that I wouldn't recognize her the next time I saw her, because I had this problem called prosopagnosia,' Fine said. 'And I said if my own son were here, I wouldn't even recognize him.' That was indeed true; his son had suddenly arrived at the pub. Suddenly, Fine recalled, 'The young man standing next to me said, "Hello, Dad."'



He loves gardening but has trouble differentiating between plants ‘if I see them unexpectedly’, he said. He often can’t pick himself out in photographs. His wife has to sit next to him during movies or TV shows and explain what is going on. The people he does remember tend to have prominent features. ‘A man last night said, “How do you recognize me?” and I said, “If you really want to know, it’s the gap between your teeth,”’ Fine said.

He, too, had a moment of epiphany. It came in 1997, when he was inducted into the Royal College of Physicians.

‘We were having a glass of champagne when a man bounced up and said hello to me, and I hadn’t got a clue who he was,’ Fine said. ‘It turned out he was a professor of psychiatry who was a friend of mine and deputy dean of the medical school. I said to him, “Who are you?” and he said, “I’m Chris.” And I said, “Chris who?” The man said, “I can’t believe it – you must have prosopagnosia.”’

Fine wrote the word down, did some investigating, and finally got in touch with Duchaine. ‘He said, “Oh yes, you’ve definitely got it – you’re in the bottom 29 per cent,”’ Fine related. ‘I said, “That’s not bad, it’s within the normal range.” He said, “Not within the bottom of the population, but within the prosopagnosic population.”’

The condition is thought to affect, very roughly, between 1 and 2.5 per cent of the population, Duchaine said. There are a lot of grey areas, which makes it an inexact science, and of course many people can’t remember names or are simply socially awkward, which are different problems but can seem like the same thing.

‘Regardless of where you want to draw the line,’ Duchaine said, ‘there are a lot of people with face recognition problems that affect them from time to time.’



It was still last winter. I was still at the strange dinner party with the unexplained host and I was still sweating in the guest bathroom, while a person unknown to me milled around outside. I thought about slipping out the back door, but it wasn’t clear if there was one, and there was also the problem of my coat, stranded in the cupboard.

I finally came out and made unhelpful small talk with some of the unknown guests. We sat down to dinner. I was seated to the left of the host whose name, it turned out, was in fact Barry, although it was clear he was not the Barry I knew. (That Barry is from Zimbabwe; this one seemed possibly to be from California.) I hadn’t yet caught his last name. He had just published a book about a complicated

but boring topic. His friends seemed to be academics. The guy to my right specialized in second-century Talmudic law.

I tried to use my professional training to interview Barry without him realizing it.

How were things, I asked, what had he been doing? I asked him where he had been recently, where he was planning to go next, what he was working on, whether he liked living in the place he was living in, what plays/movies he had seen, what books he had read, what were his views on New York at this time of year. Finally he referred to a specific literary event in London a few years earlier. I remembered going there, but not what happened once I arrived. Apparently we were seated together, and had a long and fascinating conversation.

When I finally went home and did some research, it became clear that there had been two misunderstandings working in concert. The most obvious was the failure to remember, or recognize, the guy. But there had been a previous error: the dinner invitation, it turned out, had not come from Barry Johnson, my Zimbabwe friend, but from Barry Jackson, a different person. My brain hadn't registered the name on the email correctly, just as it hadn't recognized his face correctly. That wasn't prosopagnosia, but general sloppiness.

I was very sorry about the whole thing and wrote a fulsome thank-you note to Barry and his wife thanking them for a lovely evening. (Obviously I did not apologize for going to the wrong house, failing to recognize them, hiding in the bathroom and thinking all their friends were boring.) We exchanged some email pleasantries. Let's do it again, said Barry.

Since then, I've had a hard time going back to their neighbourhood. I'm terrified of running into them. I can't remember what they look like.





# Reading List

## Martha Sprackland in the best second-hand bookshop in town

*'When I saw the sea after many months it was such a meeting'*

A while ago I took my boyfriend up north, to spend a weekend in the seaside town I grew up in. We walked up the pier in the blistering icy wind, walked through the Hall of Mirrors, clambered over the sand dunes and through the silent pine woods. In Broadhursts, the best second-hand bookshop in town, where I used to buy my Colin Danns and Margaret Mahys and Alan Garners and Philip Pullmans as a child, we riffled through stacks of paperback sci-fi and pulp novels with garish covers from the sixties and seventies. He bought me a battered copy of *The Bees* by one Jack Laffin, 'A Horrifying Novel' about 'A Deadly Swarm' of Africanized killer insects sweeping through Colombia and across the Andes. This book may've been one of the best reading experiences of my life. Have I been snobbish, stinting myself by sticking to literary fiction? *The Bees* is pure trash, with its auburn-haired, emerald-eyed heroine and maverick-scientist hero commissioned to save the world by putting up electrified fences, setting the surface of the Panama Canal alight with gasoline, mounting flamethrowers on ships. I've written poems using lines taken from the text, in which the bees are 'cantankerous assassins', in which a jaded mercenary, enlisted in a private army deep in the humid, claustrophobic jungle, growls through a chewed cigar: 'The United States had its Peace Corps, well, by Jesus, we're the War Corps!' That's been fun.

We walked through my village and down Burnley Road, the cruel wind howling and snapping at our backs, to have a look at my childhood house. Where I had *The Bees* tucked into the pocket of my coat, he, in contrast, had Gwendoline Riley's *First Love*, which I'd finished reading the week before. Gwendoline grew up not far from here, though about a decade ahead of me, on the Wirral, and I see her recognize here the 'sky's cold threat... Dishrag clouds, leaking light' that characterizes the region. I read *Cold Water*, Riley's first novel, in my teens, when I was still living here, in the little semi with the yellow porch and leaded lights in the bay windows, the holly tree in the front garden. I adored the book, circling as I was at the time the dubious, dangerous, intoxicating pleasures of dive bars and scummy men, where everyone is hungry, thirsty, delusional, wild, vulnerable, tough, sad, yawning through late shifts and brutal dialogue. *First Love* is like *Cold Water* but sans innocence, like the earlier novel grown up in years and battered by experience. The desperate, acrimonious exchanges between Neve and Edwyn are horrible to read, evoking despicable

power-play and misunderstanding and need in ways I found unsettlingly familiar. The loneliness is awful. The fear palpable. And it's fucking funny, it's great, it really is. It's dark and bleak and clever.

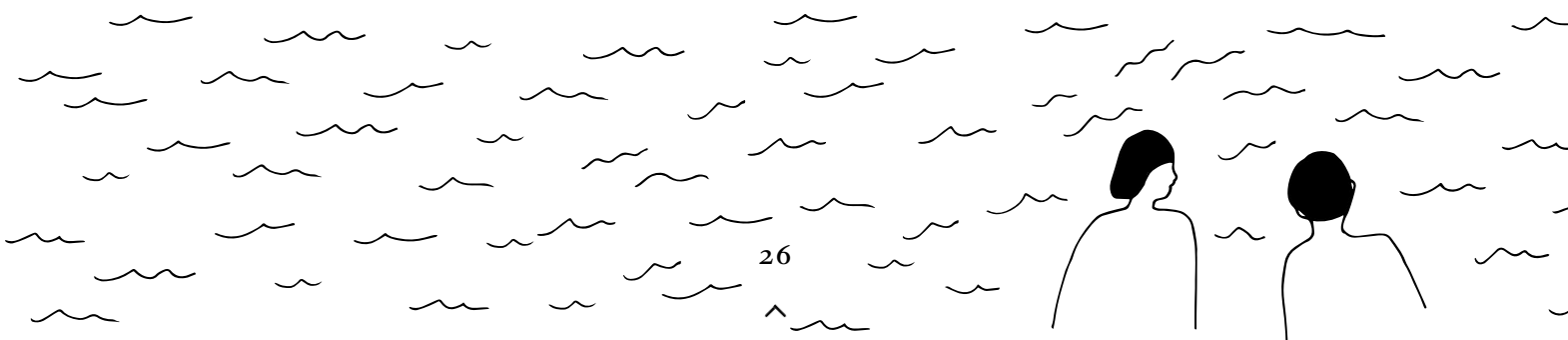
Also dark, also bleak, also clever, is *Stranger, Baby*, the difficult second album of poems by Emily Berry, follow-up to her incendiary, prize-winning debut *Dear Boy*. As Ed and I walked on the beach, the distant sea a grey line on the horizon, the gulls swooping and landing to peck at desiccated bladderwrack and razor clams, I thought of Emily's poetry, in which

Watching the sea is like watching something in pieces  
continually striving to be whole  
'Picnic'

In grief, as in other deeply felt emotions, poetry frequently turns to the sea, to 'oceanic feeling', finding recognition in the unknowable, tempestuous vastness of a wide body of water, of cold and suffocation, of changeability and unpredictability.

The sea is somewhere anything can happen  
You know when two seas come together there is deep pain and  
pleasure at the border  
'Everything Bad Is Permanent'

This landscape on the Merseyside coast, this strange, often bleak land, has been both pleasure and pain for me. On summer nights we stayed up all night drinking in the dunes, kicking sand and leaping from the tops, plaiting marram and collecting shells, kissing, smoking, talking until the sun rose palely over the far oil rig. I used to come here to cry sometimes, the cold wind whipping the tears dry on my face, salt on my lips, sand on my boots. More often, I was happy. It's a place welcoming to big feeling. It's complex and layered, but it can also feel reassuringly featureless when you need it to be, a flat, blank canvas wiped clean by the outgoing tide. Here's a couple of lines from Joey Connolly's long-awaited debut collection, *Long Pass*:

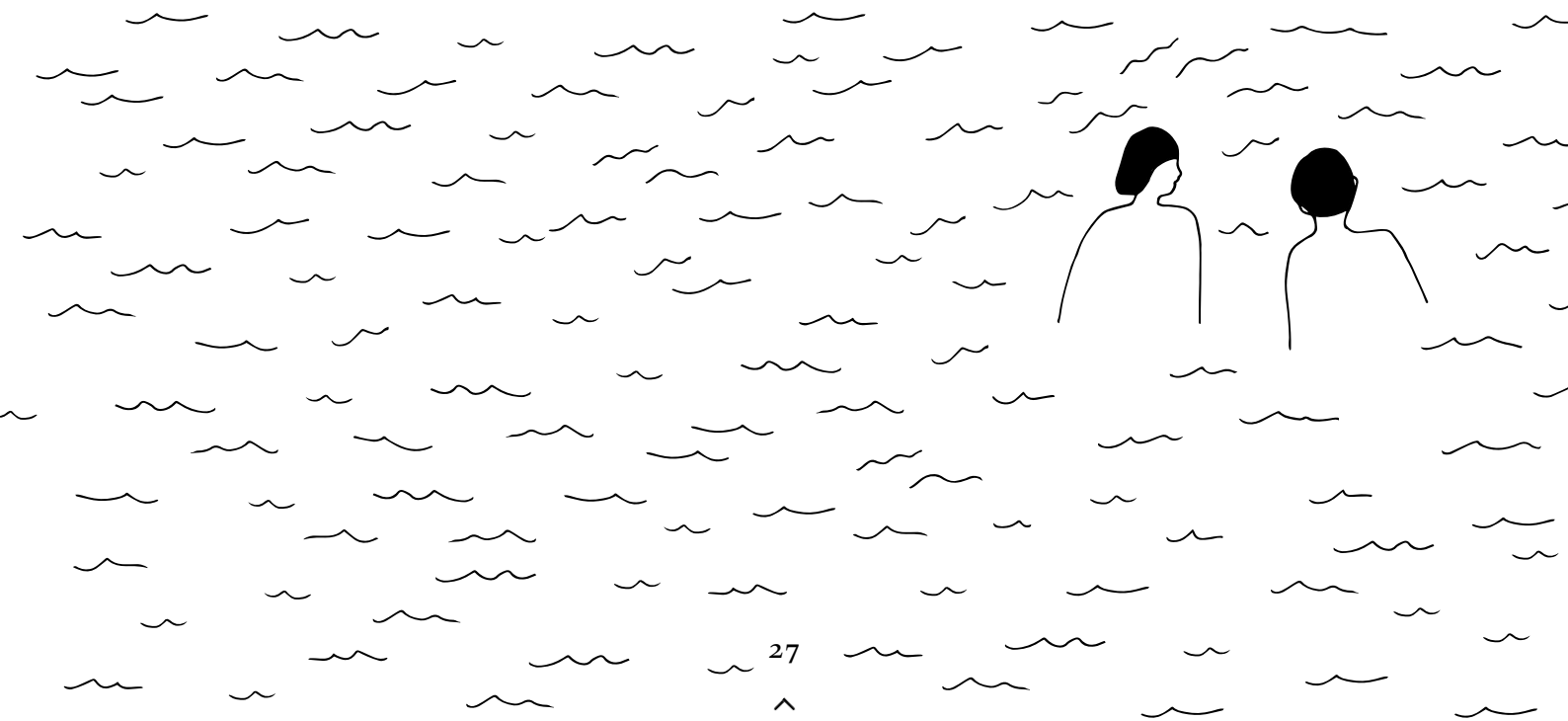


The uniform surface of the sea  
speaks of the gross magnitude of a suffocating  
nothingy fullness settled over by its surface.  
'Average Temperature at Surface Level'

Joey's book is stuffed to the gills, a trove of variously shaped lexical treasures and linguistic abundance, like the wealth and diversity of shells and skeletons along the tideline. There's grey water here, too:

The water fails in the February grey to glisten,  
but the whitenesses of loosed gullfeather can act up,  
stand in.  
'Escape to the Reservoir Café'

What Emily's and Joey's poetry has in common (and stylistically they're not similar) is an ongoing attempt to enunciate something, to explain the inexplicable, to shape something problematic in words. 'Imagine trying to pick up a piece of the sea and show it to a person', asks *Stranger, Baby*, coming to terms with the death of a mother. In different ways, the poems in *Long Pass* are also concerned with *getting it right*, with exactitude, with accuracy, with truth, with translating the interior view out through the pane and into the world in one coherent piece. I think of Neve and Edwyn trying to make themselves heard, trying to understand themselves.

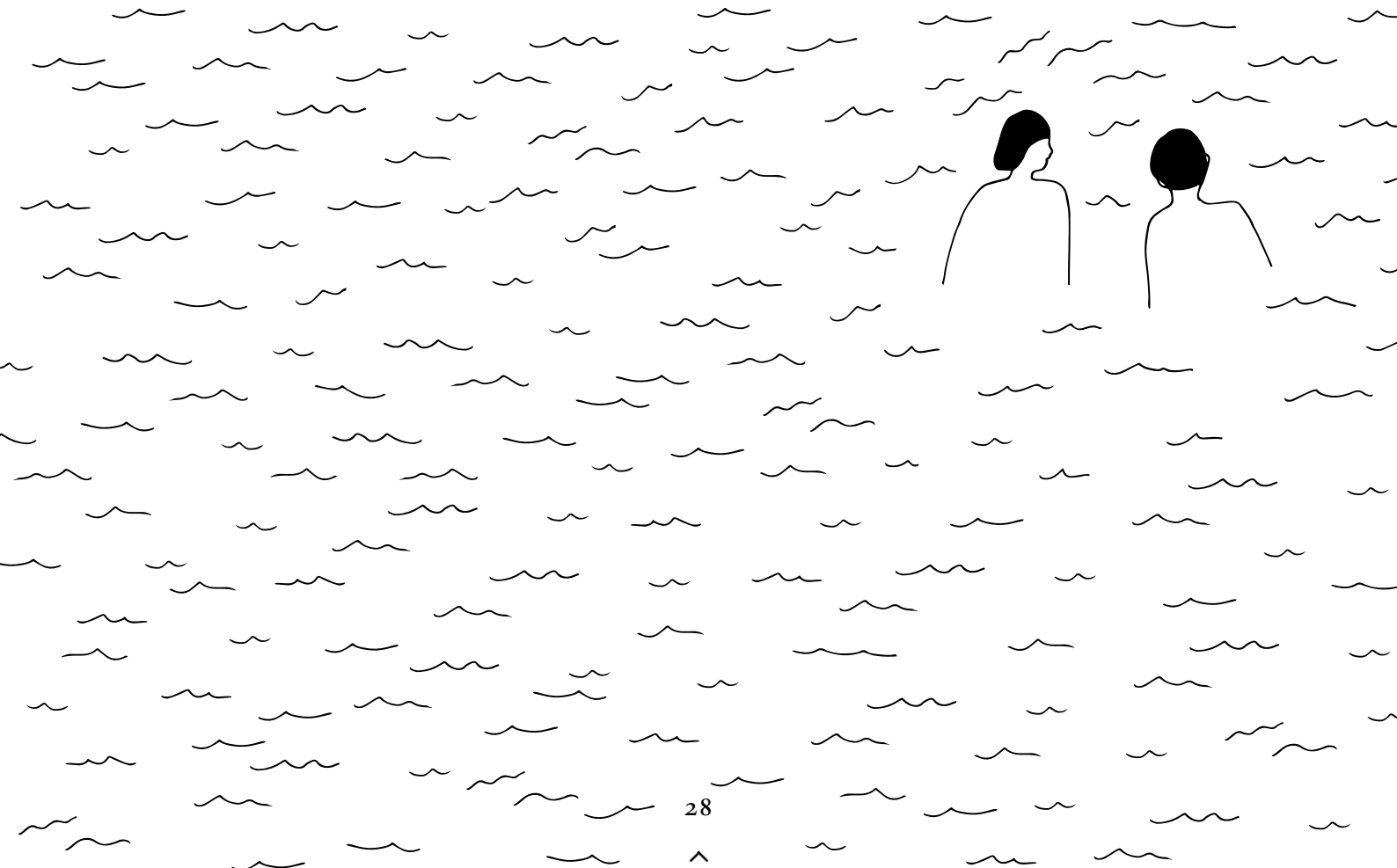




It's hard sometimes to explain why something matters, why it seems so urgent that someone else is made to see. I wanted to bring him here ever since I met him, to give him the strange grey sea, the enormous sky, the bleak, cold, wild complexity of it. Maybe I wanted him to understand something of me by knowledge of the place that made me. Whether it was lost in translation, whether it made any sense, whether or not he (who, amusingly, 'hates sand') found anything to love about it, in the act of showing I saw things about it I hadn't before, and have been able to write about my childhood, about that place, properly, for the first time since.

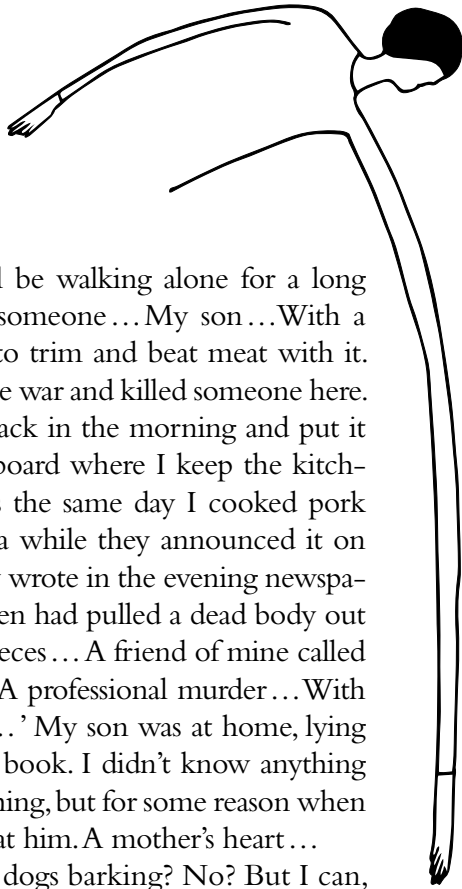
#### Works Referenced

- Emily Berry, *Stranger, Baby* (Faber, 2017)  
Joey Connolly, *Long Pass* (Carcanet, 2017)  
Jack Laffin, *The Bees* (Tempo Books, 1976)  
Gwendoline Riley, *First Love* (Granta, 2017)



# Back from Afghanistan

Svetlana Alexievich records the words of a soldier's mother



## *A mother*

I walk alone... I'll be walking alone for a long time now. He killed someone... My son... With a kitchen axe – I used to trim and beat meat with it. He came back from the war and killed someone here. He brought the axe back in the morning and put it away in the little cupboard where I keep the kitchenware. I think it was the same day I cooked pork cutlets for him. After a while they announced it on the television and they wrote in the evening newspaper that some fishermen had pulled a dead body out of the town lake. In pieces... A friend of mine called me: 'Did you read it? A professional murder... With the Afghan signature...' My son was at home, lying on the sofa, reading a book. I didn't know anything yet, I didn't suspect a thing, but for some reason when she said that I looked at him. A mother's heart...

Can you hear the dogs barking? No? But I can, as soon as I start telling anyone about it, I hear dogs barking. And dogs running... In the prison, where he's serving his time now, there are big black Alsatians. And the people are all dressed in black, nothing but black. I get back to Minsk and I walk along the street, past the bread shop and the kindergarten, carrying a long loaf and some milk, and I hear that

Now I don't even know what he's like, my son. What will he be like when I get him back in fifteen years? They gave him fifteen years in maximum security. How did I bring him up? He was interested in ballroom dancing. The two of us used to go to the Hermitage in Leningrad. We read books together... [*She cries.*] It was Afghanistan that took my son away from me...

We got a telegram from Tashkent: 'Meet such-and-such a plane'... I dashed out on to the balcony, I wanted to shout out with all my might: 'He's alive! My son has come back alive from Afghanistan! That terrible war is over for me!' And I passed out. We got to the airport late, of course, our flight had arrived ages ago, and we found our son in the public garden. He was lying on the ground and clutching the grass, amazed that it was so green. He couldn't believe that he was back. But there was no joy in his face...

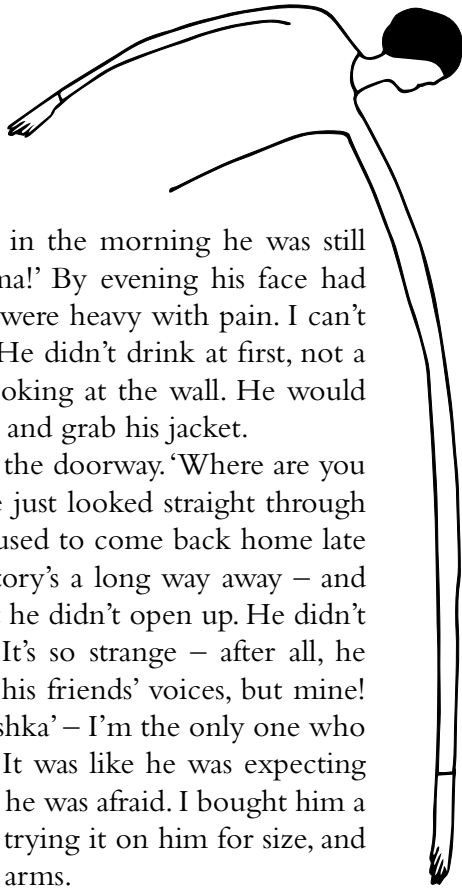
In the evening the neighbours came round. They have a little girl and they tied a bright blue ribbon in her hair. He sat her on his knees, held her tight and cried: the tears just kept flowing on and on. Because they killed out there. And so did he... I realized that later.

**Can you hear the dogs barking? No? But I can,  
as soon as I start telling anyone about it, I hear  
dogs barking. And dogs running ...**

barking. That deafening barking. It blinds me. Once I almost got run over by a car.

I'd be willing to visit my son's grave mound. I'd be willing to lie there beside him. But I don't know... I don't know how to live with this. Sometimes I feel afraid to go into the kitchen and see that cupboard where the axe used to lie. Can't you hear it? Don't you hear anything?

On the border the customs men had 'trimmed off' his foreign shorts. American. Not permitted. So he arrived without any underwear. He was bringing a dressing gown for me; I turned forty that year. They took the dressing gown away from him. He was bringing his granny a shawl and they took that too. The only thing he had when he arrived was flowers. Gladioli. But there was no joy in his face.



When he got up in the morning he was still normal: 'Mama! Mama!' By evening his face had turned dark, his eyes were heavy with pain. I can't describe it to you... He didn't drink at first, not a drop, just sat there looking at the wall. He would spring up off the sofa and grab his jacket.

I used to stand in the doorway. 'Where are you going, Valyushka?' He just looked straight through me. And went out. I used to come back home late from work – the factory's a long way away – and ring the doorbell, but he didn't open up. He didn't recognize my voice. It's so strange – after all, he might not recognize his friends' voices, but mine! And especially 'Valyushka' – I'm the only one who ever called him that. It was like he was expecting someone all the time; he was afraid. I bought him a new shirt and started trying it on him for size, and I saw cuts all over his arms.

'What's this?'

'It's nothing, mama.'

appeared: one of their own men had stolen them. The commander accused him of cowardice, as if he'd hidden the parts in order to avoid going with all the others. But they all stole from each other out there. They took trucks to pieces for the spare parts and took them to the *dukans* – those shops they had out there – to sell. They bought drugs. Drugs and cigarettes. Food. They were hungry absolutely all the time.

There was a programme about Edith Piaf on the television; we watched it together.

'Mama,' he asked me, 'do you know what narcotics are?'

'No,' I lied.

But I was already keeping an eye on him, wondering if he was smoking something. There were no signs. But they used drugs out there – I know that.

'How is it there, in Afghanistan?' I asked him one day.

'Shut up, mama!'

## There was a programme about Edith Piaf on the television; we watched it together. 'Mama,' he asked me, 'do you know what narcotics are?'

I found out about it later. After the trial. In the training camp he had slit his wrists... At an exercise he was a radio operator and he didn't manage to heave the radio up into a tree in time, he took longer than was allowed, so the sergeant made him rake out fifty bucketfuls from the toilet and carry it all across in front of the assembled ranks. He started carrying it and passed out. In the hospital they diagnosed him with mild nervous shock. That same night he tried to slit his wrists... and a second time in Afghanistan. Just before they went out on a raid they checked and the radio wasn't working. Some parts that were in short supply had dis-

When he went out I reread his letters from Afghanistan. I wanted to get to the bottom of things, understand what was wrong with him. I didn't find anything special in them. He wrote that he missed the green grass; he asked his granny to get her photo taken in the snow and send it to him. But I couldn't see, I couldn't feel that there was anything happening to him. They sent me back a different man. He wasn't my son. And I was the one who sent him into the army – he had a deferment. I wanted him to become a real man. I persuaded him and myself that the army would make him better and stronger. I sent him off to Afghanistan

with his guitar; I arranged a sweet buffet to see him off and he invited his friends, and girls. I remember I bought ten cakes.

There was only one time he spoke about Afghanistan. It was early evening. He came into the kitchen. I was preparing a rabbit. The bowl was bloody. He soaked his fingers in that blood and looked at it, examined it. And he said to himself:

‘They brought my friend back with his stomach completely shattered... He asked me to shoot him... And I shot him...’

His fingers were covered in blood... from the rabbit meat. It was fresh. He grabbed a cigarette with those fingers and went out on to the balcony. And he didn't say another word to me for the rest of the evening.

I went to the doctors: ‘Give me back my son! Save him!’ I told them everything. They checked him, they looked, but apart from radiculitis they didn't find anything wrong with him.

Once I came home and there were four young men I didn't know sitting at the table.

‘Mama, they're from Afghanistan. I found them at the railway station. They've got nowhere to spend the night.’

‘I'll bake you a fruit pie right now. This very moment. In a jiffy.’ I was absolutely delighted.

They lived with us for a week. I didn't count, but I think they drank about three crates of vodka. Every evening I met five strangers at home. The fifth one was my son... I didn't want to listen to their conversations. I was frightened. But I couldn't help overhearing. They said that when they had to wait in an ambush for two weeks at a time, they were given stimulants to boost their courage. But that's all kept secret. Which weapons were best for killing... from what distance... I remembered that later, when it had all happened... I started thinking later, frantically trying to remember. But before that there was only fear. ‘My God,’ I used to tell myself,

‘they're all mad. They're not right in the head.’

That night... before that day when he killed... I had a dream that I was waiting for my son. I kept waiting and waiting, but he didn't come. And then they brought him to me. Those four ‘Afghanis’ brought him to me. And they threw him on the dirty concrete floor. You know, the floor at home is concrete. Our kitchen floor's like one in a prison.

By that time he had already got into the foundation studies department at the radio engineering college. He wrote a good essay. He was happy that everything was going really well. I even started to think that he was calming down. That he would go to college. Get married. But when the evening came... I was afraid of the evening. He used to sit there and stare blankly at the wall. Fall asleep in the armchair... I wanted to dash to him, throw myself over him and not let him go. And now I dream about my son: he's little and he's asking for something to eat. He's always hungry. He reaches out his hands... In my dreams I always see him as little and humiliated. And in real life? A meeting every two months. Four hours of talking to him through a pane of glass...

Two meetings a year when I can at least feed him. And those dogs barking. I dream about that barking. It won't ever let me be.

This man started courting me. He brought flowers. When he brought me the flowers I started shouting, ‘Get away from me, I'm the mother of a murderer.’

At first I was afraid of meeting someone I knew. I shut myself in the bathroom and waited for the walls to fall in on me. I felt like everyone in the street recognized me and pointed me out to each other and whispered: ‘Remember that gruesome business? It was her son who killed him. He quartered the man. The Afghan signature...’ I only went out into the street at night. I learned all the night birds. I could recognize them from their calls.



The investigation went on and on. It lasted months. He didn't say anything. I went to the Burdenko Military Hospital in Moscow and found some boys there who served in the special operations forces, like he did. I confided in them.

'Boys, what would my son kill someone for?'

'If he did, there must have been a reason.'

I had to convince myself that he could have done it... killed someone. I questioned them about it for a long time and realized that he could have! I asked about death. No, not about death, but about killing. But talking about that didn't make them feel anything special, the kind of feelings that any killing usually arouses in a normal person who has never seen blood. They talked about war as a job, where you had to kill. Then I met some boys who had been in Afghanistan too, and when the earthquake happened in Armenia they went there with the rescue teams. What interested me, I was already obsessed with it, was: were they afraid? What did they feel at the sight of death? No, they weren't afraid of anything, even their sense of pity was blunted. Blown to pieces... squashed at... skulls, bones... entire schools buried under the ground. Classes of children. Sitting there, doing their lessons. They all disappeared under the ground, just like that. But there was something else the boys remembered and told me about: the rich wine cellars they dug up, the fine cognac and wine they drank. They joked: 'It would be good if somewhere else got zapped too.' Only it had to be a warm place, where grapes grow and they make good wine. Are they sane, then? Are they really right in the head?

'He's dead, but I still hate him.' That's what he wrote to me recently. After five years. What happened out there? He doesn't say anything. All I know is that boy – his name was Yura – boasted that in Afghanistan he'd earned lots of cheques for the Beriozka hard-currency shops. But afterwards

it turned out that he'd served in Ethiopia, as a warrant officer. He had lied about Afghanistan.

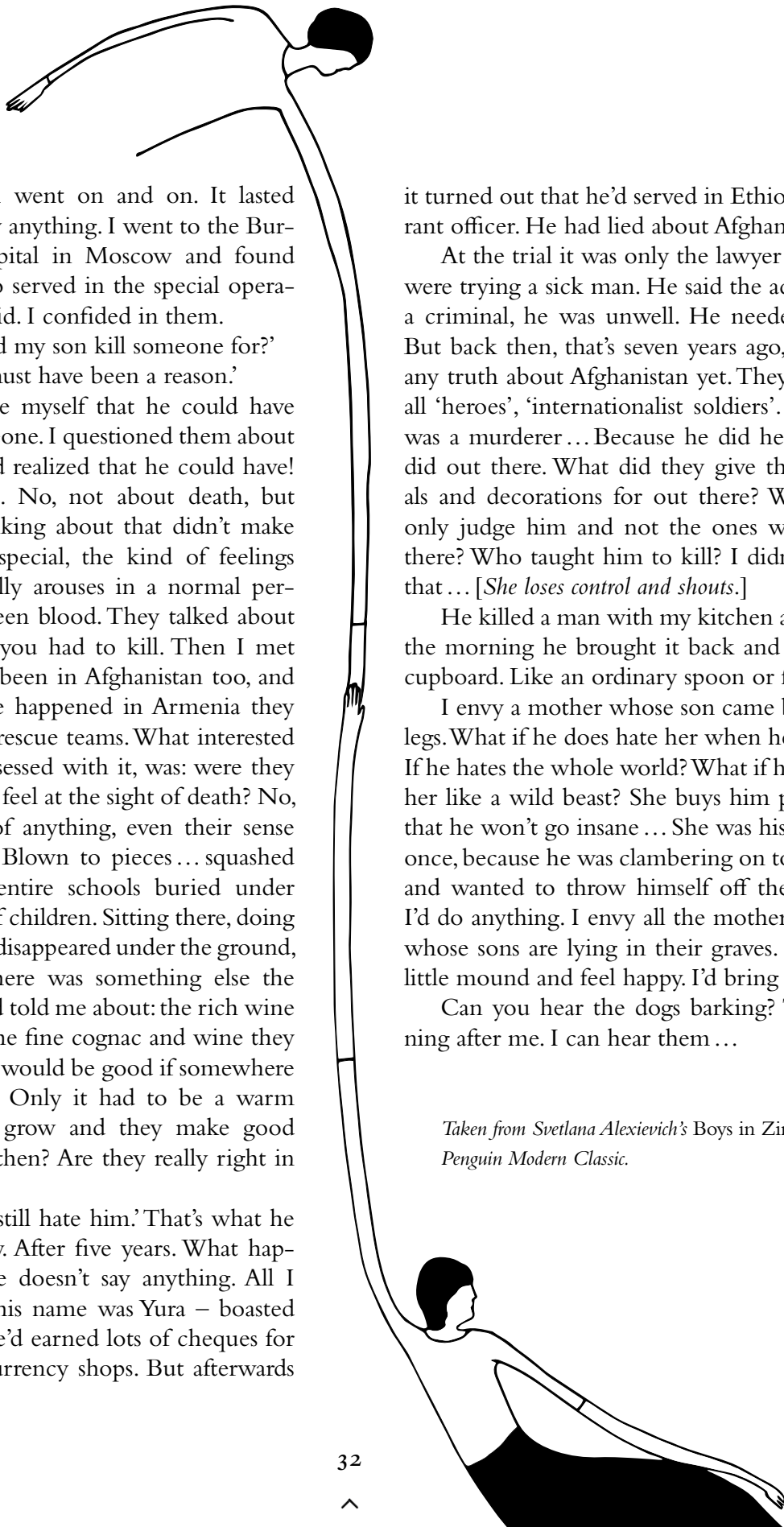
At the trial it was only the lawyer who said we were trying a sick man. He said the accused wasn't a criminal, he was unwell. He needed treatment. But back then, that's seven years ago, there wasn't any truth about Afghanistan yet. They called them all 'heroes', 'internationalist soldiers'. But my son was a murderer... Because he did here what they did out there. What did they give them all medals and decorations for out there? Why did they only judge him and not the ones who sent him there? Who taught him to kill? I didn't teach him that... [*She loses control and shouts.*]

He killed a man with my kitchen axe... And in the morning he brought it back and put it in the cupboard. Like an ordinary spoon or fork.

I envy a mother whose son came back with no legs. What if he does hate her when he gets drunk? If he hates the whole world? What if he does go for her like a wild beast? She buys him prostitutes, so that he won't go insane... She was his lover herself once, because he was clambering on to the balcony and wanted to throw himself off the tenth floor. I'd do anything. I envy all the mothers, even those whose sons are lying in their graves. I'd sit by the little mound and feel happy. I'd bring flowers.

Can you hear the dogs barking? They're running after me. I can hear them...

*Taken from Svetlana Alexievich's Boys in Zinc, published as a Penguin Modern Classic.*





# Sonia Lazo

















SONIA  
LAZO









SONIA LAZO









# The Moth Emporium

By Camilla Grudova



It had been five years since I went into the costume shop. It was only a few blocks away from my mother's house, but I always hurried my pace when I walked past it. It was in a converted Victorian house; the exterior was painted gold, turquoise and black, like a cartoon version of an Egyptian tomb. In the window, between two sides of a thick purple curtain, a mannequin wearing an eighteenth-century wig with devil's horns, gold

resembled, if such a thing existed, a male witch. The woman wore lots of leather and black stockings with complex patterns on them. Her make-up was always blue, beige, red, and around her wide waist was a belt made out of bullets.

I had only been inside once. My younger sister had wanted a mask. At the time I was seventeen and she was fifteen. We never went to costume shops because our mother made most of our cos-

**My sister went towards them and grabbed a grey wolf mask made out of wood, holding it against her face and howling.**

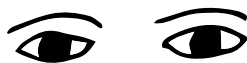
snake-shaped jewellery and a black lacy dress held a sign that said: 'COSTUMES, VINTAGE AND UNIQUE FINDS'. The shop was surrounded by a fence of dismembered mannequin limbs, painted blue. They were female limbs: slim ideal ones so unlike my own that to see them, even out of the corner of my eye, made me self-conscious. If the weather was nice, there were clothes outside, racks of coats and dresses, colourful bins of scarves and rows of cowboy boots, as if the owners had been forced to take them off before entering, never to return. The uppermost window, belonging to the attic, was covered with a poster of a grinning turn-of-the-century moon.

The shop was both tempting and sickening, like a gingerbread house. It was owned by a horrible couple – two immense Germans with blond hair. They looked like they ate a lot of sausages. Their faces, their hands, seemed larger than most. The man dressed in black oxford shirts, black jeans and black leather vests – he could've been mistaken for a pastor, if you squinted and did not notice his black snakeskin boots and the sinister rings that covered his knuckles like gold and silver warts. He

tumes: skeletons, moons, witches, ladybirds. But a mask was beyond our mother's skill – the papier mâché one she had made, using water and flour, hadn't dried properly and became mildewed. My sister and I both had dark brown hair like our mother. My sister had acne scars, but she was so pretty, it looked like decoration on her face. If anyone needed a mask, it was me. My face looked like that of a very thin elephant: large ears and nose, small eyes. I hated wearing costumes, and I hadn't done so since I was eight: I believed I was so ugly, I couldn't disguise myself as anything else. The shop smelled like nag champa, mothballs and face make-up. There were wings, white, red, black, pink, made out of chicken feathers, plastic noses, piles of Russian navy shirts and knitwear from northern countries, gowns, boas, leather jackets, top hats, frills, ribbons, shoes, corsets; such a variety of segments, pieces, slices, scraps, strips, it was hard not to think of a butcher's shop.

There were crinolines, like multi-coloured clouds seemingly floating across the ceiling of the shop, but which in fact dangled from hooks. There was no one in the shop when we went in, only a





plaster Elvis bust on the counter, a female mannequin with a beehive wig and a male mannequin in a giant golden birdcage wearing a green-feathered outfit.

At the back of the shop was a wall of masks: wooden, rubber, leather, Venetian, Mexican, Indonesian. The rubber masks were the most frightening, because without heads wearing them they seemed misshapen, like flayed skin. I thought I saw the eyes of a mask move, but the floorboards of the shop were so uneven, the wares so overwhelming, it must have been a trick. My sister went towards them and grabbed a grey wolf mask made out of wood, holding it against her face and howling.

I looked at the crinolines. There was one that was grey, like a pouf of smoke escaped from a train in which one could disappear. With my sister's encouragement I pulled it down and went into a changing room while she went back to look at the masks. I pulled the crinoline over my clothes, but it looked messy – like I was a doll covered in cobwebs pulled out of an attic, so I took off everything I was wearing, even my bra, stockings and underwear. I put the crinoline back on, and looked at myself, unexpectedly entranced in the changing-room mirror. We didn't have a full-length mirror at home – you had to stand on the toilet to look at yourself in the small round mirror above the sink.

Behind me, there was no longer a curtain, but a glaring, toad-like face and a black, religious-looking hat. I turned around, covering my breasts with my hands. He closed the curtain again.

I hurriedly put my clothes back on and stepped outside, leaving the crinoline in the changing room. He was waiting there, his arms crossed. He pointed to a sign, which read: 'PLEASE ASK BEFORE USING THE CHANGING ROOMS.'

My sister, watching us, dropped the mask. It broke into three pieces. The woman appeared out of nowhere, screaming at her that the mask cost

three hundred dollars and we would have to pay for it. My sister ran past her and grabbed my wrist. We ran out together.

They didn't follow us out – I don't know why, perhaps there was a law against chasing children. They must have been watching us on a security camera, said my sister. We laughed and laughed, out of fear.

After that, whenever we broke something around the house my sister would scream in a fake German accent. It had become funny to us, but still – we never went back inside the shop, and avoided walking past it.

When I returned, those five years later, the costume shop looked gloomier than I remembered it: the clothes on the racks appropriate for scarecrows, the colourful paint flaking, the moon poster covering the attic window wrinkled like a grape. There was a sign that read: '2 for 1 cashmere' – that was what drew me in. They surely wouldn't remember me; I was almost twenty-two.

I had gone away to university, while my sister had stayed at home. She chose the same art college our mother went to, only fifteen minutes away by bicycle. I went to a small university in a small town, with nice old stone buildings and very cold weather – it was on a lake and one felt the cold lake wind even in the library. I studied Scandinavian literature, so the setting suited me. I never had the money to go on an exchange to anywhere in Scandinavia, or even to visit. My specialization was Danish literature, and I could read very well, and write, in Danish. I wasn't Danish myself, but I had learned about Denmark as a child through blue tins of butter biscuits and Hans Christian Andersen. I was writing a novel in Danish. One of the characters was a beautiful doorknob who moved through various houses and apartments; that's all I'll say. I had received a rejection letter from a Danish literary magazine for a short story. They had written



back to me in Danish, though I didn't have a Danish name, which made me proud.

After graduating I had nowhere to go but home. I hadn't found a job yet, though my sister worked part-time in a shop selling tea and crystals. She painted very small pictures of foxes, bears and other woodland creatures having tea parties among the trees; if you looked closely you could see the contents of the teacups were red, and if you looked even closer you could see a little girl's shoe or ribbon somewhere in the painting, hiding in the grass or hanging from a branch. Our mother was an artist too: she taught art at a Russian private school. Under her instruction they mostly painted pictures of horses and copied Andrei Rublev icons.

Since I was thirteen I have always worn the same outfit: drab brown skirts and black sweaters from the Salvation Army. I wanted to think about clothes very little, and to be noticed as little as possible. In the shop again, I chose two black jumpers, but didn't try them on: one seemed very large, the other small, but I didn't care. To my relief, there was a pale and sour-looking young man with a blue Mohawk behind the counter, instead of the Germans. He wore a pinstripe suit with a waistcoat and a spiky dog collar. He rang my sweaters through without looking at me and put them in a bright yellow-and-red bag, which I stuffed into my purse as soon as I was standing on the steps outside. I didn't like colours, and I didn't want my sister to know where I had been.

He was there, the German owner, crouching – he was repainting one of the legs, with a tiny bucket of blue paint. He stood up when he saw me, so suddenly that I jumped, and asked me if I wanted a job. His name was Wolf.

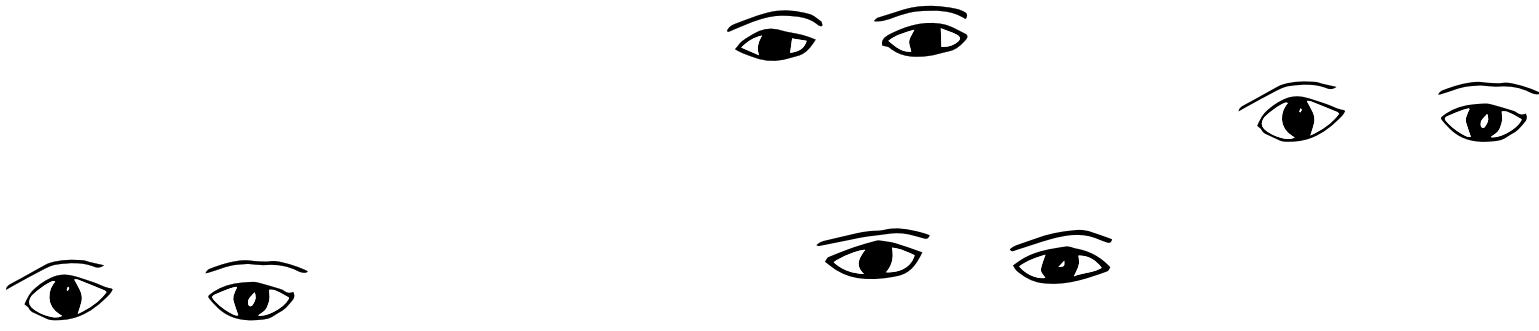
I thought that he wanted me to work to pay for the mask my sister had broken, but he didn't seem to remember who I was. Instead he told me he paid above minimum wage, that it wasn't a difficult

job, that he really needed help, and it was only him and the young man, Raven, inside. He didn't ask whether I took an interest in fashion (I didn't), or knew how to sew or use a till. I said 'yes' to the job, as I didn't have any other options, beside my Danish novel, but I wouldn't have if it hadn't seemed as if the German woman had gone. I looked up at the store, at its windows, for her face. There was only the moon, like a death mask.

It was easiest to sell the clothes that were second-hand as people couldn't ask for different sizes and we didn't bear much responsibility for the personality of the clothes, or how they were made and looked. They were simply passing through us, as if we were a train or a steamship. Wolf washed them and patched them up, but made no drastic changes. Also easy were the cheap costumes that came in plastic packages: Frankenstein's monsters, witches, nurses, they couldn't be returned if opened. The imitation eighteenth-century garments made me nervous; they were soft and difficult contraptions, heavy as bodies themselves. There were drawers full of buttons shaped like moons and *Alice in Wonderland* characters, and drawers full of ties, cufflinks and garter belts. The counters had glass tops and were filled with rings, brooches and necklaces. Earrings hung from a string above the counter like tiny clothes on a laundry line. Behind it Wolf kept a bottle of castor oil, in case anyone tried on a ring that was too small – the oil helped slide it off.

I brought a notebook with me to the shop and made lists of clothes to use in my Danish novel: braided military coats, plastic Viking hats, neckties, striped stockings, white ruffs, long blue dresses.

There was an old computer underneath the counter that played songs in a continual loop: April Stevens, Patsy Cline, The Beach Boys, 'The Monster Mash', *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* soundtrack, Dion and the Belmonts, and other music typical for a costume shop. I longed for Schubert, Schu-



mann and string quartets by Tchaikovsky. I played them on my music player when no one else was there, hooking it up to the speakers. Backstage there was an elaborate array of traps and poison to keep vermin away: moths, rats and mice. The costume shop was located between a Chinese shop selling eggs and tofu and a natural-foods bakery, so there were always rats around. We burned nag champa to cover the smell of mothballs. I hated disposing of used rodent traps. We also sold oversized rat and mouse costumes – ears, long rubber tails.

I hated the fur coats, which hung like giant's beards, and the saucy people who came in and bought them, men with moustaches and female models, who looked like long, bony fingers or insects. I sometimes dreamt that I put on one of the coats and Isak Dinesen mistook me for a lion and chased me around the shop, trying to shoot me.

I watched Wolf closely. His face reminded me of a bust of Beethoven I had seen at university. He

hat, shape-shifting according to his mood: a black bowler, a black tyrolean hat with a black feather on its brim, a capello like a Catholic clergyman. The rare times he wasn't wearing a hat, you could see his hair, which was white and combed in an old-fashioned manner with oil, which I imagined was popular when he was a boy. On his vest he often wore a gold brooch in the shape of an elephant's head. There was something creaky about him; I wondered if he had a wooden leg, a glass eyeball, a piece of metal somewhere inside his body holding things together, a fake tooth, an organ that once belonged to someone else.

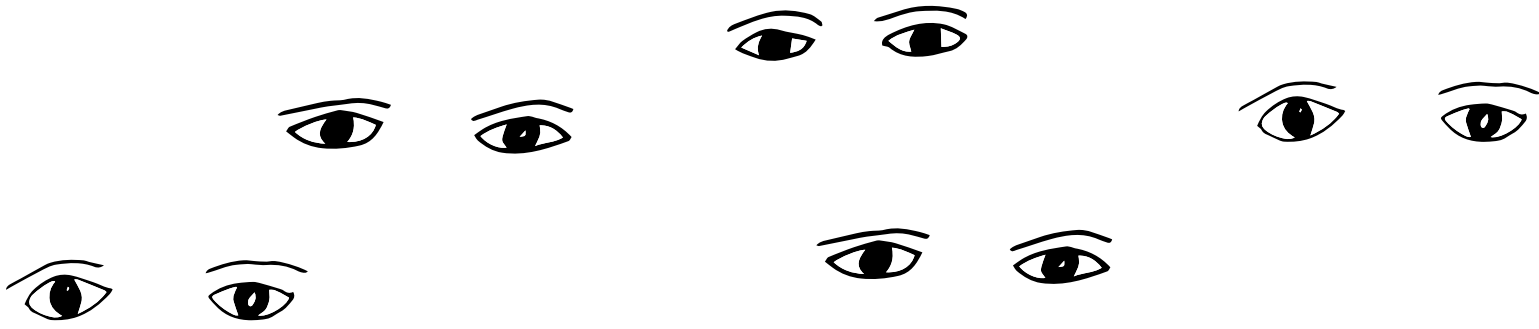
Raven wasn't happy when I was given the job. He had been working there since before Eule – that was her name – died, and was made full-time when she became ill. He told me this when Wolf wasn't there. Raven was older than I had originally thought. He was like an antique porcelain figurine of a child with cracks in it. He talked about Eule

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wore the following rings: one of the glass-eyeball rings that were popular sellers in the shop, a silver ring shaped like an eagle, a gold ring with a hunk of amber, another gold one with a tiny circle of ruby and another silver ring shaped like a wolf's head. He was very tall with a large belly. He wore the same things everyday, like me: his uniform of black trousers, a black vest and a white shirt. The only thing that changed was his hat, but each was made out of black felt, as if it was the same

with admiration, a lot, about how she threw wild costume parties, had interesting tattoos all over her body. He talked about her so much that I had a dream I found a mask of her face at the back of the shop. It screamed at me with its big red mouth and I threw it against the wall. It broke into pieces, but still screamed, the bits of mouth splitting into their own voices, a choir of screechy German.

Wolf was absent for periods of time, from days to a few weeks, leaving Raven and me to run the



shop. He was buying things around the world to sell in the shop, from milliners in Switzerland, jewellery makers in Morocco, mask-makers in southern Germany. That's why the shop wasn't like anywhere else; though he wasn't above buying plastic stuff made in China – we sold that too. Wolf left and returned wearing a great, long overcoat and carrying a shabby-looking olive military backpack. He was followed a few weeks later by crates and boxes.

I made a lot of mistakes. I rolled an expensive Edwardian dress into a messy ball and stuffed it into a plastic shopping bag. I also put a top hat awkwardly into a bag, though there were special hat-boxes for them. I spilled a box of fake pearls, which rolled into the wide cracks of the floorboards and had to be sucked up with a vacuum cleaner. Wolf then split the bag open with a knife, like an animal's belly, and emptied the pearls into a jar, but didn't give me a harsh word, let alone fire me.

He never yelled and he was never angry. When I told him I had studied Danish and was planning to be a Danish novelist he laughed at me, but not in a cruel way, and told me he would help me to learn German too. It wouldn't be so hard if I already knew Danish.

He lived above the shop alone, on the top three floors. He sometimes invited me upstairs, before or after work, for black coffee and black bread or apple pancakes. His apartment looked like a continuation of the shop: mannequin heads, boxes full of wigs and shoes, great piles of fashion books – the kind of books that seemed like useless, colossal monsters in comparison to the ones I loved. The walls were covered in pictures, probably cut out from magazines or even books. He had Sid Vicious, Pee-wee Herman, David Bowie, Siouxsie Sioux, Elvis, Marc Bolan, Twiggy, Andy Warhol – people like that, whose height of fame, and sometimes their death, happened before I was born, but not far enough in the past to be of interest to me. There

was also a large poster of Betty Boop, posters for the films *Pink Flamingos*, *The Bride of Frankenstein* and *Dracula*, and a cartoonish painting of a sausage with a smiling face. One wall was covered in halves of dolls' faces: the ones who batted their eyelashes when you walked past, as the floor was so creaky.

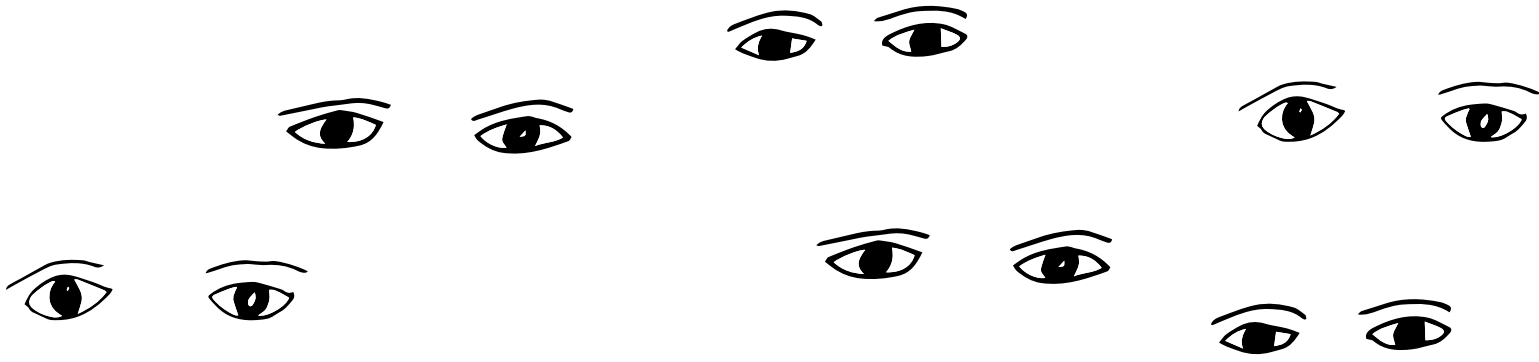
The kitchen was filthy; the cupboards and stove were covered in grease the colour of earwigs, but one hardly noticed at first because of all the interesting stuff: a bowl full of plastic fruit with faces – the apple had buckteeth, the banana leopard spots and fangs; a Felix the cat teapot; Frida Kahlo pinup girls and cartoon animals as fridge magnets; the colourful cans of fish soup I expected would never be opened, as they had rust along their rims. The bottom half of the kitchen window was obscured by enormous glass jars full of pickles with bits of garlic and dill dancing around inside. On the table was a wooden incense holder shaped like a shepherd with a long beard, holding a pipe, and a nutcracker wearing a hussar coat.

It happened on a slow day in the shop. It was raining outside and I had to rush to take everything in: the racks and shoes now crowding the front of the shop and making it hard to navigate. I grabbed one of the braided military jackets, royal blue with gold, and slipped into a changing room. At that moment I imagined wearing it in my Danish author photo, like some sort of Hamlet. As I had years before, I took almost everything off before putting on the coat and, as had happened years before, he appeared out of nowhere, opening the curtain. Instead of screaming, I turned around and, grabbing him by the shirt, pulled him in with me.



For our wedding, Wolf wore the same clothes he wore every day. He told me to choose anything I wanted from the shop. There were piles of wedding dresses, the kind girls purchased to wear at Hallow-





een, their faces painted to resemble corpses. I felt like a fool, a bride in a costume shop. I borrowed money from the till and bought a smart, dark-blue dress suit, brand new, from a department store, with large buttons and a matching hat, stockings and shoes. It didn't look how I wanted to look. I resembled an air hostess, as if I were wearing a costume, though that was exactly what I wanted to avoid.

My mother wore her best dress: a green sagging antique thing from the 1920s with a very old, faded peacock feather sewn on to a sash that

Wolf sat me on his lap, to the discomfort of my mother and sister, and after they left we made love on top of the stove. It rattled and swarms of cockroaches came rushing out, briefly visible before disappearing into cracks and cupboards.

Wolf took me to Copenhagen for our honeymoon. I had spent so much time in nineteenth-century Denmark that the modern thing was a great disappointment; it was much changed. I was shy speaking Danish in front of Wolf and stumbled over my words. He bought me dozens of Danish books

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was yellow, like an old band-aid, and a black-flowered shawl. My sister wore red Ukrainian dancing boots and a pink frock with a lace Peter Pan collar. I was relieved she didn't bring one of her cruel, thin boyfriends from art college, who, like Raven, gave me dirty looks for not being beautiful. Wolf didn't invite any family; I don't think he had any apart from a few cousins in Germany. He did invite an Italian man with a ducktail who bought lots of jewellery for himself at Wolf's shop.

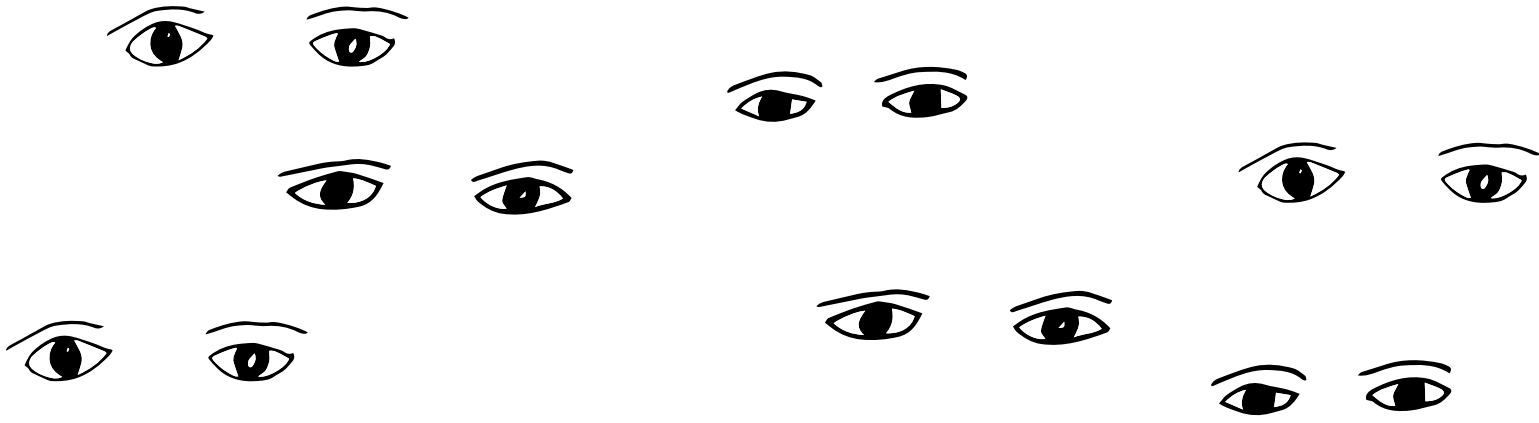
I saw Wolf's age for the first time on our marriage certificate. He was fifty-four years old.

As a wedding present my sister gave me a small painting of Little Red Riding Hood and the Big Bad Wolf in bed together. It was painted on wood and medieval in style, the figures stiff and flat-looking, but with wonderful detail.

For our wedding feast we had cold cuts, black bread, spice cake and champagne above the shop.

and a Little Mermaid statue. One morning in our hotel, while he was still sleeping, on his stomach, I took the blanket off and looked at him: his slightly wizened and fat back. On one buttock was a dark blue tattoo of a man's face; the man looked as if he were in agony. I hadn't noticed it before.

We visited Dyrehavsbakken, the oldest amusement park in the world, and Tivoli Gardens, the second oldest, where we saw a pantomime with Pierrot, Harlequin and Columbine. Wolf said he used to have Pierrot costumes in his shop, but that they had stopped selling. He might have some tucked away in the attic or basement, he said. Generally, clowns were not doing very well – the few clown wigs he had on display were dusty. We stopped in Berlin, where he bought a bag of pins and several old Soviet fur hats, which he would sell for three times the price, and had them shipped home ahead of us.



When we got home, I moved into the costume shop with a suitcase full of my cashmere sweaters, skirts, stockings, my Hans Christian Andersen complete fairy tales, Isak Dinesen in English and in Danish translation (I had written my thesis on her decision to write in English), my Soren Kierkegaards, Jens Peter Jacobson's *Niels Lyhne* and Calico, my cloth doll, who had a pair of gold, lensless spectacles glued to her nose.

I was glad to leave my mother's house; it was painted pink and so narrow that we called it 'The Narrow Lady'. It smelled strongly of linseed oil and there were reproductions of Andrei Rublev icons all over the walls, and there was never anything to eat in the cupboards beside mustard powder, rye bread, weak tea bags and oranges from the weak little orange trees my mother grew in light corners of the house. Wolf's fridge was packed with pickled things, cheese, beer, cake, meat and olives.

In Wolf's bedroom there was a dark wooden bed with white blankets and pillow. I could tell by the stack of things against one wall that it was a new addition, that the bed he had shared with Eule had been different, and was now gone. There was a vanity table with a topless hula girl lamp on it, a spring rocking horse made out of plastic, with rusty spring bars, and a hat stand with all Wolf's black hats sitting on it like a bunch of crows. The room was painted purple and there weren't any windows.

In the backyard was a coach house full of extra mannequins, their hands and heads squashed against the window. There were faded, broken lanterns strung between the coach house and shop, and tangles of rosebushes with very small pink roses growing on them.

Apart from the kitchen and bedroom, there was a living room, full of Wolf's fashion books and other stuff, and a small room he used for sewing and mending and ironing clothes. Wolf's sewing machine was very old, made out of iron. There was

always a dress half stuck in it; it looked like an ant eating a piece of lettuce.

The attic became my domain. I removed the moon poster. I found a blue metal trunk to be used as a writing desk. I put a fancy metal candlestick on it, as the attic light was very weak, a stack of yellow paper and my Danish dictionary. I wrote by hand.

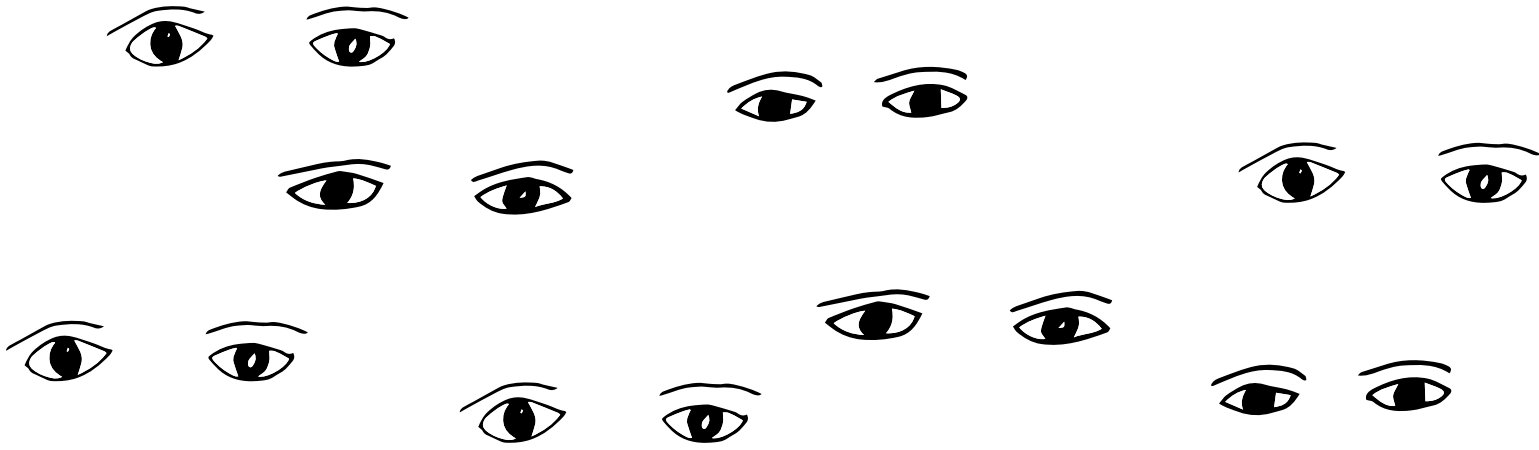
I still worked in the shop, and Wolf still paid me, but I also knew he kept cash in the Felix the cat teapot, and I could take as much of it as I wanted; he never said anything.

The weeks leading up to Halloween were the busiest. We opened boxes and boxes of stock: fake wounds, vampire teeth, plastic swords and axes, make-up kits, cotton cobwebs, earrings shaped like Jack O'Lanterns. Raven wore ghoulish make-up. Wolf hired a few extra people around the store – a woman who wore a witch's outfit (I don't think I ever saw her face without make-up) and a tall man who dressed up differently every day – a scarecrow, Frankenstein's monster, some top-hatted character I had never heard of. Wolf, like me, did not dress up. On Halloween eve the shop stayed open until nine o'clock – there was always someone who bought a pair of fishnet stockings or an expensive mask at the last minute. Then Wolf and I went to bed.

My sister, no longer afraid of Wolf, came into the shop on her free days. She borrowed things to use in her paintings or to wear to parties. I gave her and mother gifts: pink cashmere sweaters, scarves with foxes on them.

Raven didn't know of our marriage. Wolf's wedding ring wasn't visible amongst all his other rings. Raven treated me with the same disdain he would a clothes moth. Wolf noticed this, and one day Raven was gone and never returned. It was impossible to picture him working anywhere else.





With Raven gone, there was more work, but it was easier; until I found out I was pregnant, not long after Halloween. I realized my youth and my fertility were a large appeal to Wolf. I had somehow thought Wolf was too old to get me pregnant, and so hadn't thought about protection. Wolf didn't buy any new baby things; he had everything we needed stashed away in his basement and backyard shed, as if thirty years ago he had planned for a baby that never came. He gave me some German books: a copy of Grimm's fairy tales from the 1930s printed on very thin, almost translucent paper, written in

I crept around and looked in one of the windows. The windows were dirty, but I saw him squatting, rummaging through boxes – the house was full of boxes – so many boxes it didn't look like a habitable space, but more like a warehouse.

Wolf left the house, whistling the 'Queen of the Night' aria and carrying two large bags. The pram was in the barn. It was pale blue and covered in bird droppings, but he said he'd wash it.

When the baby was born, he looked like the child of Wolf and Eule: blond with large features, but he was quiet, like me, so I got on with my

## I sometimes dreamt that I put on one of the coats and Isak Dinesen mistook me for a lion and chased me around the shop, trying to shoot me.

script, with frightening badly done woodcuts; a copy of *Der Struwwelpeter*; and books by Sibylle von Olfers full of pretty flower children.

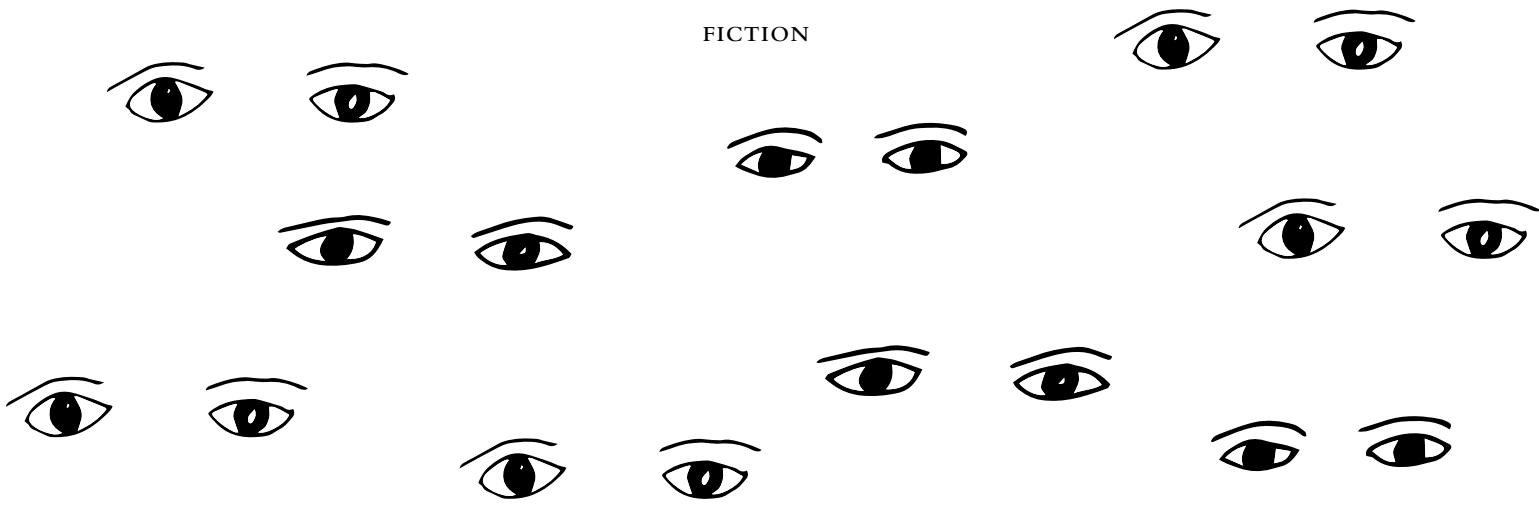
I discovered he owned a farmhouse, and when he told me he was driving out there to pick up a pram I insisted on going with him. Had he and Eule spent their weekends there? Had they walked around the garden naked, as Germans were said to do?

The drive was the length of the opera *The Magic Flute*: we listened to it on the way there. Wolf drove a very old van with fake leopard-skin seat covers. There was a jar of very old pickled eggs in misty water on the dashboard and crumpled balls of tin-foil from fast-food restaurants all over the van floor.

The house was red brick with a fallen-in porch and next to it was a barn with boards missing. They both looked like broken, abandoned pianos. Wolf said the house was very old and unstable, that the floors and ceilings needed to be fixed, and there could be rodents. He said I should stay in the car; he didn't want me to get hurt. Once he was inside,

Danish novel without much fuss. We named him Wilhelm. Wilhelm looked funny in his old pram, wearing very dated clothes, clutching a Raggedy Ann doll from the 1970s, but many people thought it was quite stylish. My mother didn't approve of me having a baby so young. My sister gave Wilhelm jagged crystals to play with.

One morning, while Wolf was minding the shop, I went into the sewing room, which also functioned as his office – he used a corner of the sewing-machine desk to do accounts – and found the plastic bags he had picked up from the farm. One had two mannequin heads in – featureless, unpainted bald ones – and the other was full of small tin lunch-boxes. I thought at first Wolf brought them to the city for Wilhelm to use when he was older, but they had pictures of aliens and Bettie Page on them. I also found a black-and-white photo-booth picture of a young Wolf: his hair was long and he had a dramatic animal-tooth earring in his left ear. Would he have loved me if he were young? Probably not, I



thought; and though I wasn't beautiful, there was still a certain shallowness to our age difference: would he love me if I were the same age as him? Probably not. I tucked the photo in my tights.

I opened another tin lunchbox. It was full of vintage sepia-and-grey pornographic postcards depicting women being spanked or tickled with gigantic ostrich feathers, and other pornographic images from the 1970s: blue, red and orange, and full of hair. Did they belong to Eule or Wolf, or both? A third lunchbox contained a plastic pouch full of grey powder.

I knew that was Eule herself.

Finding Eule's ashes filled me with wild thoughts: Wolf would build a shrine to her in the shop, with the ashes in it, or put them in apple pancakes for me to eat so I'd grow to be more like her. Taking Wilhelm for a walk in his pram, I threw the ashes into a public bin, the lunchbox in another. The lunchbox had given me nightmares: that it would start speaking with its lid, like an object in a Disney cartoon, telling me that my sister and I still owed three hundred dollars for that mask my sister broke, and for me to leave Eule's house; but it was gone, and Wolf would never find it.

kidney beans which turned out to have expired. He spent more money on gasoline than the value of the things he returned with.

He filled the attic with boxes of tennis shoes for summer and musty-smelling, thick, second-hand bathing costumes from the farmhouse. There was no space left for me to write comfortably in the attic, and even with the small window open, the smell of old shoes and swimsuits was overwhelming.

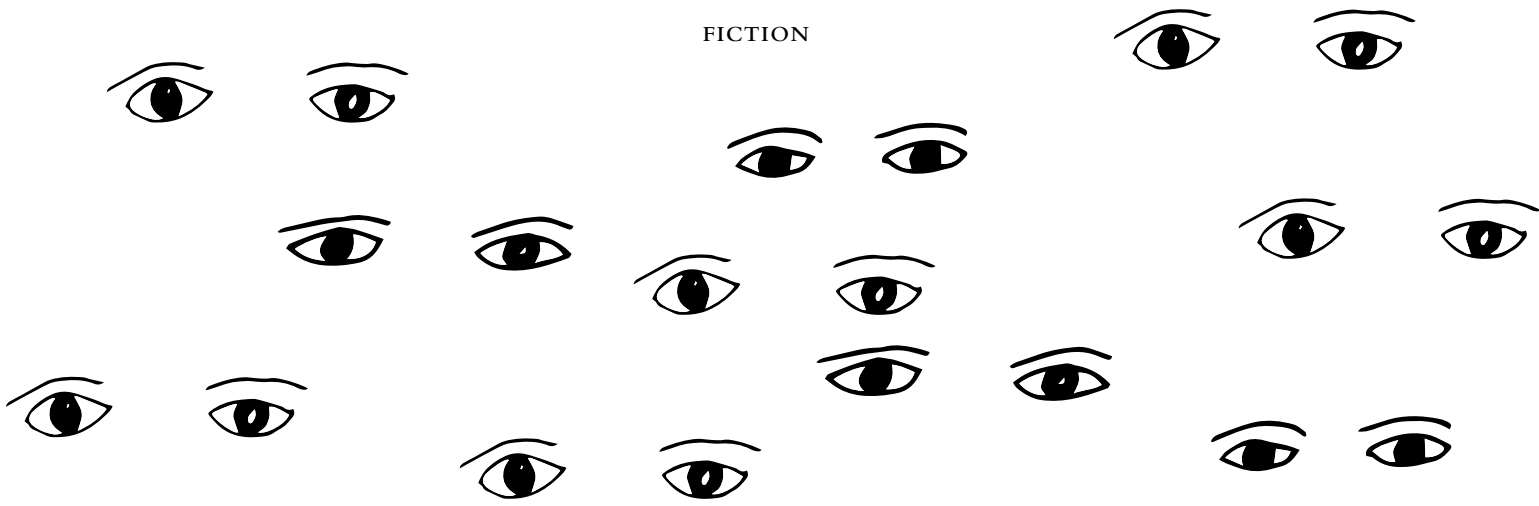
He went on other trips: one to another city to buy a heap of fur coats and hats from an old Greek man whose fur shop was closing, and another time to Mexico City for a week to buy jewellery. He thought Wilhelm was too young to travel and relied on me to mind the shop and the baby. When I had to, I put Wilhelm in the cage with the mannequin wearing a feathered Papageno costume so he wouldn't crawl around and hurt himself, but he would tear at the feathers and eat them.

While Wolf was in Mexico, we received a letter from a historical society of some sort that said the sculptures were ready to be installed. Which sculptures? When Wolf returned, he explained that an artist was going to install a historical re-enactment in the shop. The building, our house, was very old, he said, it was a city-wide project to bring history to life. He said

## I saw Wolf's age for the first time on our marriage certificate. He was fifty-four years old.

He went to the farm every few weekends. I sometimes thought he was still looking for Eule's ashes, forgetting he had found them already, since they were gone again. He returned with things that couldn't possibly be whatever he was looking for: a plastic toy ice-cream van missing a wheel, which he gave to Wilhelm, bowling shirts (we had enough on display in the shop), a case filled with tins of

business wasn't as good as it used to be: people bought things on the internet now. No matter how much variety Wolf had, no matter how far he travelled across the planet in search of wearable treasures, he couldn't compete. The sculptures were already being talked about; the artist who was making them was quite famous. They had signed up for the project a few years before, he and Eule, the artist being one of her favourites.



The other locations were a very old Italian cafe, a nineteenth-century sewing factory converted into expensive apartments, the Natural History Museum and an underground train stop. The works all depicted gory scenes, as the artist said he wanted to expose the violent side of our country's history.

Wolf was away again on the day the sculptures were installed. They were brought in wooden crates. The artist was a bald man wearing platform creepers and a tiny child's backpack. Bald heads frighten me, give me an odd sort of queasiness, bringing to mind a round encyclopedia of horrible things: crystal balls, marshmallows, testicles, turnips, eggs. I wanted to put one of our wigs on him. He was around Wolf's age and had many assistants. They had floor plans showing where the sculptures were meant to go and consulted each other rather than me. The sculptures were made out of beeswax, like those at Madame Tussaud's.

The first sculpture they unpacked was of a man with a red beard in nineteenth-century dress, holding an axe. The sculpture's brow was furrowed with alarming detail; it was a wax sculpture. They brought the rest of the crates upstairs. The artist was unhappy to see a baby; he told me there wasn't one when he accepted this location for the project and I had better not let the baby touch his artworks. We were responsible if anything were to happen to his sculptures.

They put two sculptures in our bedroom, each consisting of two people, two moments in time I had to contend with. One was a sexual act, the second a murder.

In the first, a man was penetrating a woman who was on all fours. They had moved the dressing table to make room for it. Like the sculpture downstairs, the man had a beard, but a dark-brown one. The woman had long black hair, which was all in her face, her gown pulled up over her torso,

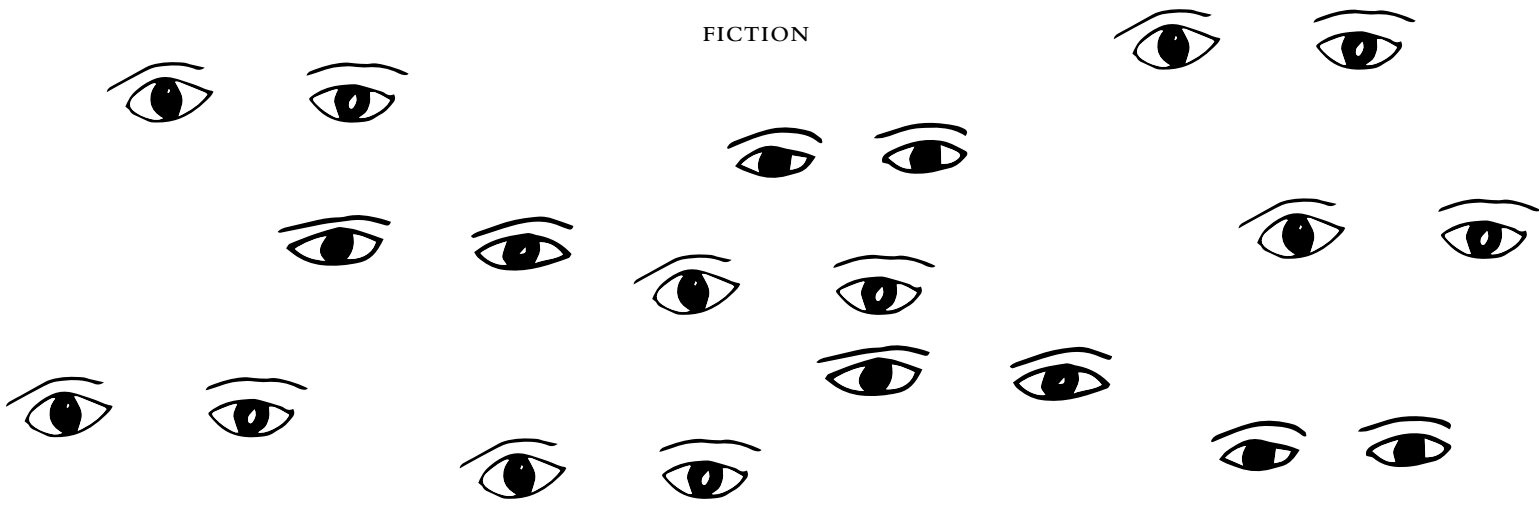
surrounding her shoulders and head like a flower, her bottom half bare.

The second half of the story was recreated in the corner of the room where our nightstand was. The same woman's dress was cut open, I suppose with the axe, exposing her breasts, which were covered in blood from her throat having been slit. She was on her knees, the red-bearded man behind her, holding her by the hair.

Another man crouched, fearful and naked, in our living room, with a wet drip hanging from his penis. That was the sculpture I hated the most.

In the final scene, in the kitchen, the woman lay on her stomach in a pool of her own blood. The red-haired man was on top of her, in a straddled position. If you squatted and looked closely you could see that he was inside her, there was synthetic joke-shop faeces and blood on her body. Her dress was gone.

After they had finished installing the sculptures, I took the duvet and pillows off our bed, made a bed in the bath and put Wilhelm's cot in the bathroom too. From then on, Wilhelm and I spent most of our time in the bathroom; we even ate our meals in there. The bathroom was the house laid bare, without make-up. It had green tiles with pale-brown, wispy flowers on them. The fixtures were old, stained with rust around their orifices. The windowsill and sink were cluttered with bottles of shampoo and soap, razorblades. There was a single framed image on the wall, of a man sitting on a rock, '*Le Genie du Mal* (salon de 1838)' written underneath. He was naked, but was merely pen on paper; he wasn't pink and made to look sweaty like the sculptures were. I thought it was a seaman, Neptune, sitting on a rock by the ocean, as he was holding something in one hand that looked like seaweed and he had fins in his hair. I thought that for some time, until I looked up the words in a French dictionary: the genius of evil. The glass of



the frame was dirty with soap scum. His face could look like Wolf's, if Wolf had had a beard.

When Wolf came home he said the sculptures were fantastic. What made him most happy was the throngs of people it brought in and the amount they bought: they left with fake beards and plastic axes, corsets and suspenders, gowns and fake blood. My sister came to see them, with a bunch of other students from the art college. I worried my sister would admire the sculptures because her own work was so violent, but she pulled me into a corner and said she thought it was different when a man made work like that.

Whenever I walked past the sculptures I covered Wilhelm's eyes. Wolf said Wilhelm wouldn't notice; he was just a baby. He didn't understand that babies were malleable, like butter, and able to absorb all sorts of things.

Children weren't allowed to see the upstairs part of the exhibition, but many came to look at, and pose in photographs with, the man holding the axe, the man waiting as his future self raped and murdered his wife at the top of the stairs. I went to the library to look up the story: it was all true. Of course, the newspapers from the time didn't report any of the details. I wasn't sure how much research the artist had done, and how much he was sensationalizing. The woman, Louise, had only been twenty-three years old when she was killed by her husband. Her husband didn't kill the man she was found with, but chased him on to the streets, naked.

A newspaper did an interview with Wolf, 'who for the past twenty years has run the city's best costume and vintage shop'. There was no mention of me or Wilhelm. They ran a photo of Wolf standing with his arms crossed beside the man with the axe. When he was home, I slept in our bedroom with him, if only because I was afraid he'd become titillated by the sculptures and start masturbating to

them if I wasn't there to watch him. I slept with the duvet over my head, and wouldn't let him touch me. I left Wilhelm's cot in the bathroom.

The morning after I saw the newspaper article, I woke up very early and went down to the basement. I turned the furnace up to maximum. It looked like a rusty version of a retro toy robot Wolf had bought for Wilhelm. I was unsure if it would explode or not. I hurriedly put my Danish books, my plain clothes, my manuscript, which was much shorter than I wanted it to be, all the cash from the teapot and a jar of pickles into my backpack and suitcase and, carrying Wilhelm under one arm, walked back to The Narrow Lady. I still had my key.

No one was awake, and they didn't hear me come in. I slumped down on the couch, surrounded by dark little paintings of Andrei Rublev and houseplants. A small tree had an orange dangling from one of its branches: the orange was almost the size of a pumpkin, but it was loose and dented-looking. I could tell the fruit inside was half the size of its skin, withered to the size of a walnut.

My hair lay in braids on either side of my face; Wilhelm was curled up under one of my armpits. There was dry breast milk on the front of my sweater, a ladder leading to a hole in my stockings and one of my bootlaces was untied. I was hungry, but no longer wanted the pickles: it had been a mistake to have brought them, the jar was heavy. Instead, I continued to sit there, and thought of the husband that would wake up naked and sweaty to find his young wife and son had gone, the sculptures melting and perhaps giving off terrible fumes, the mod podge pictures peeling in the hall, the masks and fur coats becoming warm, the glass countertops covered in condensation, blinding the eyeball rings.





# The Home of the Foot

By Noelle Kocot

That's about as exciting as a vee of

Geese – in other words, it's very exciting!

A man pumps out his man-milk. We  
Didn't clean these, it was only theatricality.

The cohesion of rage in the big city,

The light-flecked river spreading out and  
Out, what you have is a saint's socks

As you step out onto the street. I am

Plunked here like nobody's business.

I am belched into this scene like an animal  
Whose coloured spots are a minefield  
Waiting to happen. Trust me just this once.

I will abandon arithmetic, I will abandon  
Gondolas, and I will see you to your foot's home.





# Pemberton

By Noelle Kocot

That was the promise, a triumph

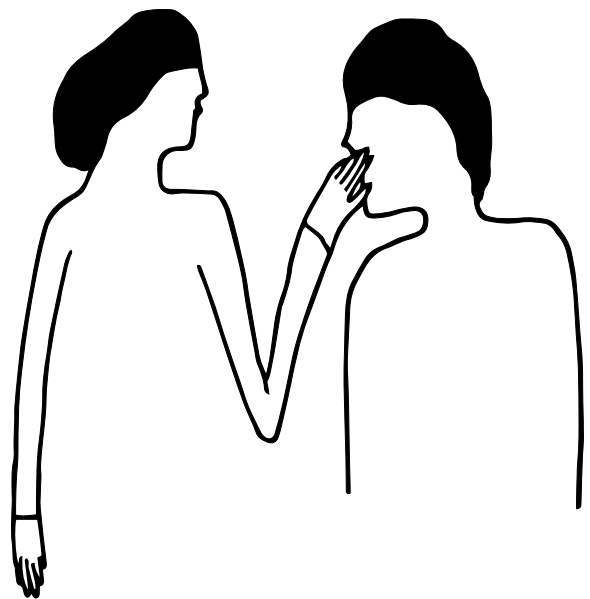
Of the soul. I still believe that. The  
Waters are delinquent, the rivers  
Unfold and unfold. A heron's unreadable

Ink, the coast of whatever rearrangement  
'Happened' to us in our bright petal  
Coats hung around the half light of the  
Stars. A hand so deliberate, an energy,

A drum. Is this the end of your empire,  
Or is it just the world, coming as it is?  
What I want from this town is for you

To have joy, the evergreens of your little

Floral shop. The sky unrolls onto a vast  
Expanse of spring dirt, and you go on sparkling.



# Here Comes Trouble

By Simon Wroe



*Here Comes Trouble charts the collapse of a fictitious country, as witnessed by a seventeen-year-old boy, Ellis. In this excerpt, set during the celebrations of a national holiday, the capital city has been without electricity for several days. As law and order crumble, and truth and fiction blur, the fascist sentiments of the white-hatted '44 Horsemen' are gaining voice ...*

Uniforms and horn blare choked the streets. Pennants of the national red and white hung from the useless streetlights and there were huge painted posters of the President shaking hands with various kindly old men who on closer inspection were their neighbouring dictators: the one who renamed the days of the week, the one who patented breakfast, the one who killed those unarmed people that time (like that narrowed it down). All parties in all pictures in the very best of moods. Also a big painting of the President standing with a gun over a line of twelve dead bears, even the dead bears looking happy, because they had been killed by the President and there could be no higher honour, no better way to go.

Around these statements the revellers lurched and lilted, clutching bottles of fiery brew. *Holy mother, the zombie apocalypse was real.* Sweating men pawed after the womenfolk or occupied themselves in low alleys where the animal game was played or nostrils whitened with snorts. Customers vomited with the utmost respect outside that illustrious hole

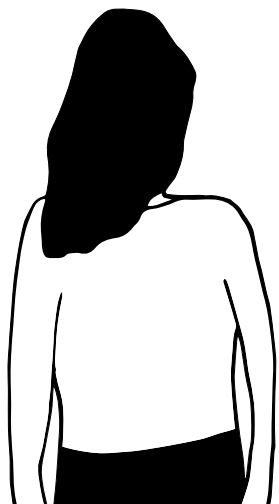
known as Chicago Pub. Stray hounds watched the proceedings with sly eyes and talked dog to one another. Children rushed pell-mell. A clown was led away. Vendors of anonymous meats festooned their greasy aprons with garlands of bright plastic and their faces were scowling as they worked the flaming spits and cried encouragements to the drunken appetite.

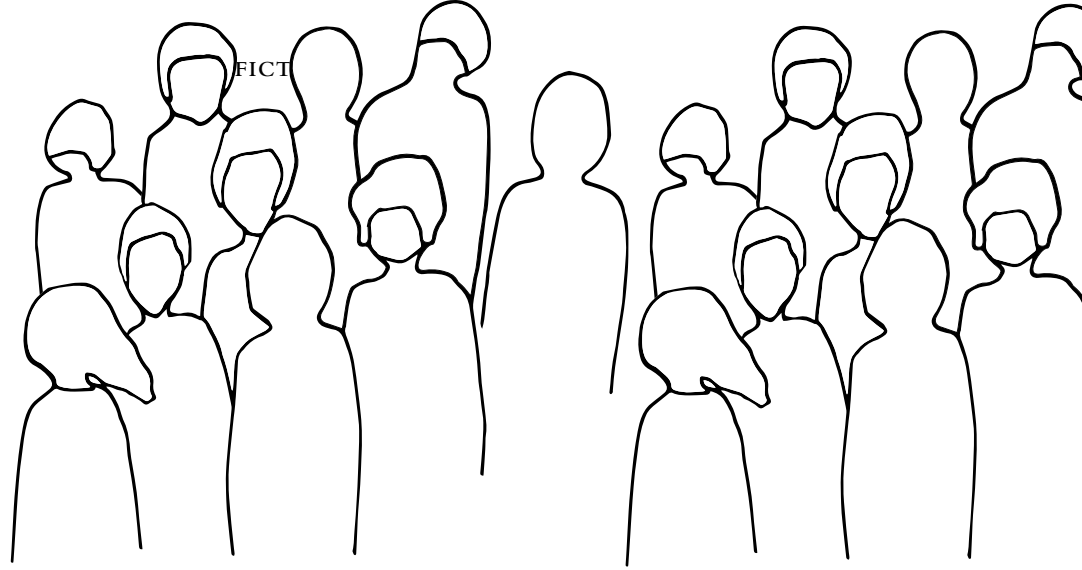
You wouldn't get this sort of behaviour in better countries, Ellis felt. In his mind he saw the exquisite civilization of an English city centre on a Saturday night. The calm Tudor pubs, with their motherly barmaids and folded newspapers on the counter, library-quiet save for the occasional clink as halves of ale met. Did such countries ever think about here? What did they see? What did their satellites among the stars report when looking down at this powerless little mess? Was it all just darkness to them?

Here and there amongst the revelry: placards requesting *HOMOSEXUALS BURN IN HELL* or *LETS LIVE ARE OWN WAY*. Many of these signs terribly spelled, as if written by a foreign hand. Here and there a white hat.

A group of rough-looking boys ran up, hands in their pockets. Ellis inched and braced for trouble. They pulled out little fuzzy apricots which they offered as a gift. He took one and thanked them. They ran on.

In the fourth microdistrict a young man recounted Internet animal videos to a crowd crying out for 'Cat on office chair' and 'Dog dinner party' and other classics of the genre. The truth was they had never been so big on literature here. In some countries the written word was so advanced that people published books about *trying* to write books or loved books so much they converted bits of Internet into print. Even some blogs and accounts of people who couldn't write at all – that was how important books were to those countries.





Here they enjoyed no such progress. The citizens preferred the nourishment of screens. They didn't want to hear the echoes of their imaginations in the silence of a book. Even with the screens dead they would rather not negotiate a novel. Why? Possibly their lives were already literary enough. Possibly they knew or wished to know so little of what was happening that each citizen invented, dreamed, lied, hid in fictions. Looking at it that way it was a nation of writers, writers who didn't read, writers who never marked a page.

Ellis watched this story-boy a while. Money was demanded up front but seldom earned: frequently the teller forgot the tale halfway through or made excuses about 'buffering' or droned on about a different story people had not paid to hear. Even when the right story was told it was often vague or misremembered. When complaints were made the rogue blamed the listeners, saying they were the ones skewing things, wanting it to be as they alone remembered it, taking everything so personal all the time. Refunds were refused. The audience griped and grumbled. *These unreliable tellers. There should be a law.* They looked about ready to fracture the boy's narrative.

Folk were edgy. As a solar eclipse made animals act up, this blackout had the people spooked. A pitiful nostalgia gripped them. Soon they would be turning to one another saying, 'Do you remember emails?' As if they had grown too attached to

these computers and phones appointed mirrors to their nature. As if they had betrayed their hopes and lives and secrets so fully that even in death these machines held these confidences over them.

A little further on, at an upright piano, a bald and sombre man played accompaniment for a girl in bubblegum blue. With a reedy voice that strained to be heard, she sang:

*If you lie to me,  
You know I'll let it slide  
The girl wasted and morose.  
Is it so very odd  
That I'm in love with you?*

'My turn!' A woman pushed the girl away. Her thickly daubed face turned and a fug of cheap perfume descended over the crowd, causing the air to swim as if in great heat, which in turn asked questions of reality, of the soundness of things. Behind her the girl in blue stropily smoothed the wrinkles from her micro-dress.

'Evening everyone, enjoying the show? Gents, come see me later if you want another sort of show. I am the best in town. And, special holiday deal for white hats, before midnight it's fifty per cent off.'

'Which fifty percent?' someone shouted.  
Everybody laughed.

'Only two rules,' she said. 'No immigrants and no ignorants ... Now if you'll excuse me, I must show these amateurs how this is done.'

A brief conference with the pianist followed. A tune started up.

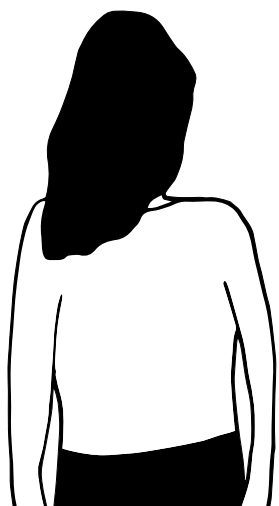
*We're trapped in the maze  
There's no getting away.*

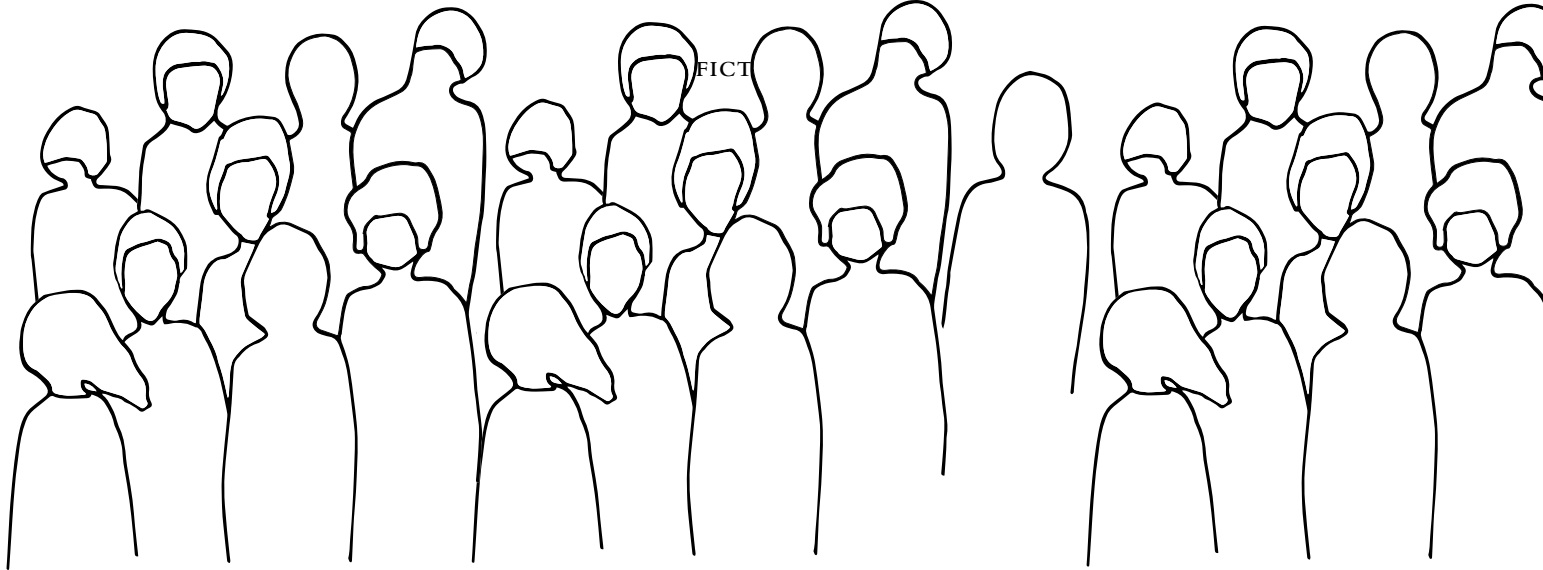
Hidden in that woman was a foghorn. The punters gasped and goggled like fish on dry land.

*Why can't you see?*

The words of the old song brought forward through the years without a scratch on them. The whore engaged in faithful reproduction.

*Because I love you so much, darling.*





Everything was falling apart and no one seemed to care. Sometimes, sometimes, Ellis felt that as a people they did not have an inner core, an identity to hold on to in turbulent times.

Towards Independence Square a soldier grabbed him.

‘Hey! Boy! Where’s your smile?’

Ellis didn’t feel much like smiling and told him so.

‘What’s that got to do with anything?’ A little baggy was produced. ‘Come on, try this white.’

‘No thanks.’ Ellis was too gloomy to even ask what the powder was or how it might turn him inside out.

‘What, you can’t snort with me? You think you’re better than the rest of us? This is a national celebration!’

The soldier tried to grab his collar. Ellis ducked his grasp and ran.

‘Hey!’ he cried. ‘Arrest that boy! He’s a traitor!’

‘Shut up, Bronco,’ someone else shouted. ‘Let’s get chips!’

Ellis let the crowd swallow him. Drums joined the horns and the tattered streets surged. Shoulders shook. Rumps metronomed from side to side. Even the old and lame were moved to dancing, so jovial was the occasion and so mandatory also. Perhaps it does not sound genuine, this dancing. Perhaps it does not sound like it could not be both.

On a float in front a swaying boy with his face painted like the girls outside the barracks dropped

his head on to his chest and gasped and stomped and rolled his eyes in their sockets as his body rocked and juddered with insistence, taking him one way and then the other but never so a person could tell what he might do next for he followed his limbs mysteriously like the tune he heard was his and his alone. He looked like no human being but a machine possessed of pistons and automated parts.

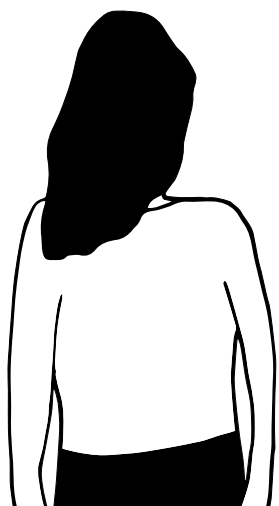
He was the one electric thing in this dim and wayzgoose city.

The people and soldiers howled, hooted, clapped like mad.

Now another boy joined him, this one topless, writhing and twisting his body like a rat in a trap. Crude and forceful were his movements, without the mystery of the other boy’s. They danced around each other as the crowd hollered. The first boy paid the second no attention and kept moving in his obscure and electric manner but after a time this seemed to anger or unsettle the second boy for he grabbed his companion roughly and looked ready to abuse him in some way. The watching crowd cried out at this, half of them delighted by the turn of events, the other half displeased the first boy’s dance had been so concluded, and there were scuffles and threats and bodies pulled off bodies, all watched in glee and majesty by the soldiers at the perimeters.

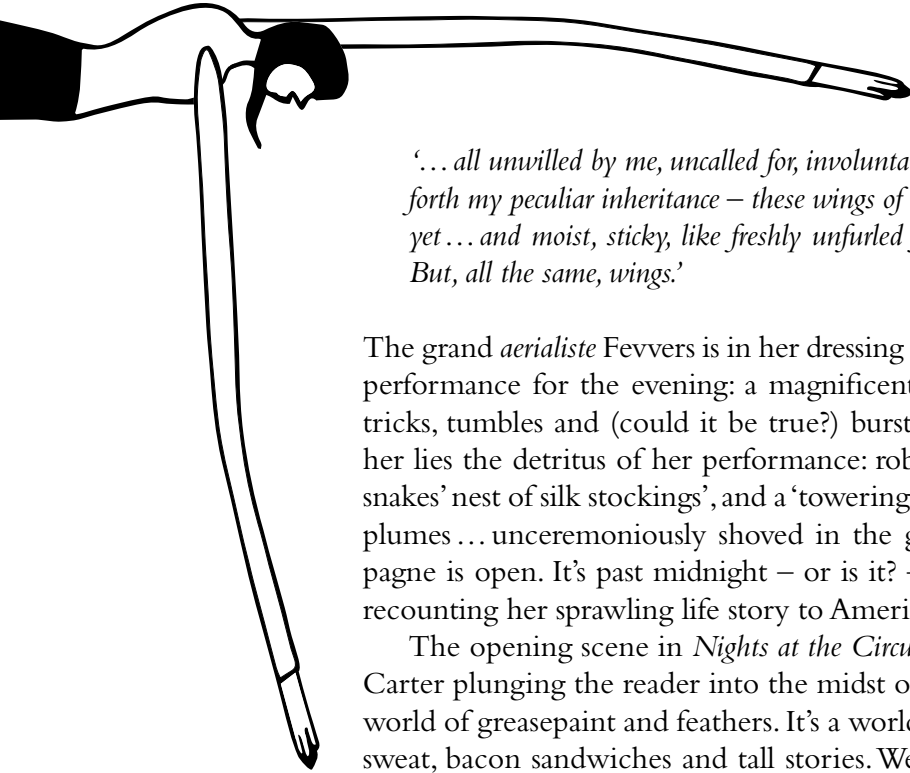
Here is what Ellis thought: *All these people were asleep. They were sleepwalking to their doom.*

But here was another thought: *Perhaps, like him, they were unhappy and chose to say nothing. Perhaps of him too someone was saying, ‘He is sleeping.’*



# Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*

Rosalind Jana

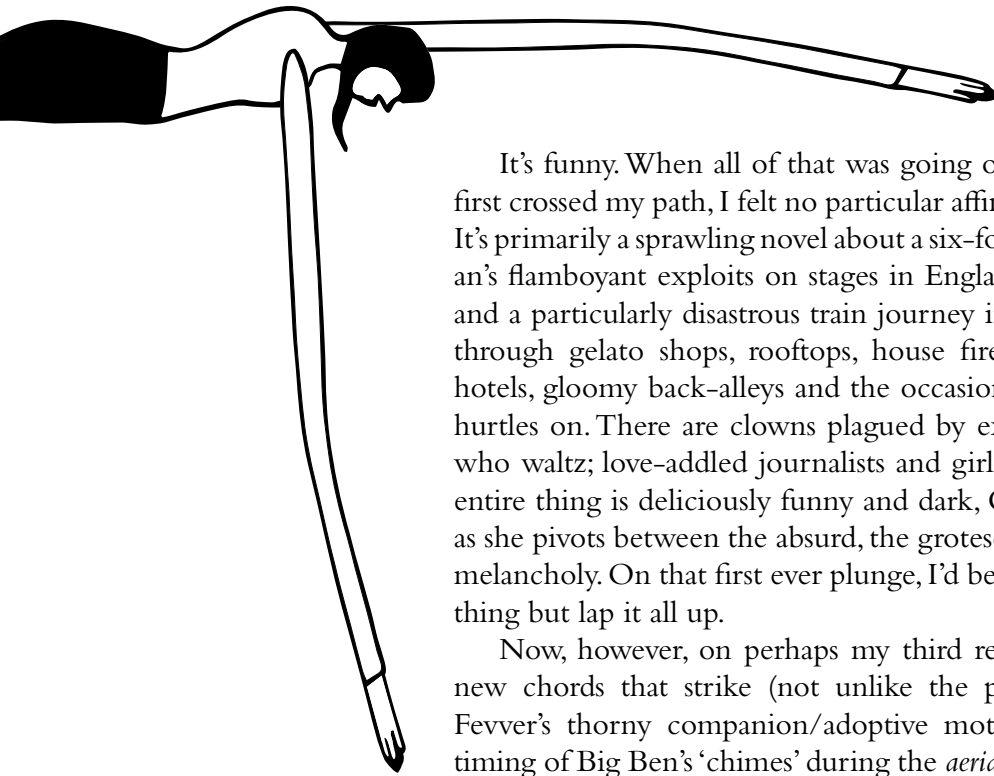


*'... all unwilling by me, uncalled for, involuntarily, suddenly there broke forth my peculiar inheritance – these wings of mine! Still adolescent, as yet... and moist, sticky, like freshly unfurled foliage on an April tree. But, all the same, wings.'*

The grand *aerialiste* Fevvers is in her dressing room, having finished her performance for the evening: a magnificent spectacle full of trapeze tricks, tumbles and (could it be true?) bursts of actual flight. Around her lies the detritus of her performance: robes, cosmetics, 'a writhing snakes' nest of silk stockings', and a 'towering headdress of dyed ostrich plumes... unceremoniously shoved in the grate'. A bottle of champagne is open. It's past midnight – or is it? – and she's holding forth, recounting her sprawling life story to American journalist Jack Walser.

The opening scene in *Nights at the Circus* is something to behold: Carter plunging the reader into the midst of this nineteenth-century world of greasepaint and feathers. It's a world brimming with sequins, sweat, bacon sandwiches and tall stories. Well, one story. It might be tall. It might be embellished. Or it could be entirely accurate and accounted for. Whichever way it's *quite* the tale, our protagonist Fevvers flourishing up her early life for the journalist's ears. It begins with a newborn baby emerging from an egg ('for I never docked via what you might call the *normal channels*, sir, oh, dear me, no; but, just like Helen of Troy, was *hatched*') and a childhood playing a variety of living statues in the waiting room of a brothel (from 'Cupid' to 'Winged Victory'). Taking a left turn via a stint in Madame Schreck's shudderingly horrible 'museum of woman monsters', it finishes up with her present status as a larger than life woman by turns enthralling and appalling as she takes her winged routine across Europe, courting notoriety (and the occasional diamond trinket) with each new swoop.

When I initially encountered *Nights at the Circus*, I was also coming to terms with my own peculiar inheritance: one that had also broken forth from between my shoulder blades. Or, rather, it had twisted beneath the skin and taken my shoulders with it. Fevvers hits puberty and spreads forth wings. I got to my mid-teens and had the much more mundane (and decidedly less magic realist) experience of scoliosis. My spine, rather than growing upward, had decided instead to wilfully bend out to the side in an S-shaped curve. Fevvers' wings were freshly unfurled foliage. My back was newly curved like a branch: tilting my ribcage unevenly and making one shoulder stick out in a little triangular nub.

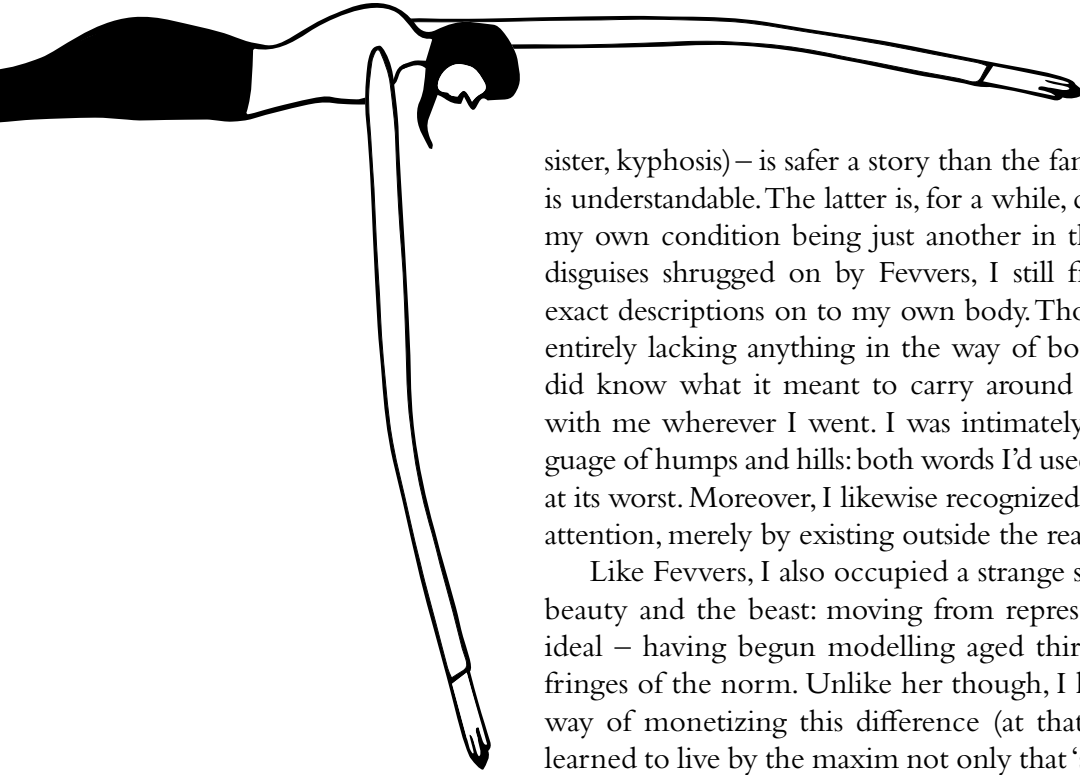


It's funny. When all of that was going on and *Nights at the Circus* first crossed my path, I felt no particular affinity with it. Why would I? It's primarily a sprawling novel about a six-foot-something bird-woman's flamboyant exploits on stages in England, circus rings in Russia and a particularly disastrous train journey in Siberia; skipping lightly through gelato shops, rooftops, house fires, dressing rooms, grand hotels, gloomy back-alleys and the occasional brush with death as it hurtles on. There are clowns plagued by existential angst, and tigers who waltz; love-addled journalists and girls who play at ghosts. The entire thing is deliciously funny and dark, Carter at her raucous best as she pivots between the absurd, the grotesque, the glittering and the melancholy. On that first ever plunge, I'd been too dazzled to do anything but lap it all up.

Now, however, on perhaps my third revisiting, there are strange new chords that strike (not unlike the possible trickery Lizzie – Fevver's thorny companion/adoptive mother – conjures with the timing of Big Ben's 'chimes' during the *aerialiste's* story, their sounding of the hours unexpected). They ring loud, these unexpected points of recognition: a fresh, insistent understanding of how this novel isn't just about what we see and believe, or want to believe; whether Fevver's avian anatomy can be proved 'fact or fiction', if such a thing even matters... Rather, it's also an exploration of what it means to possess a body widely considered abnormal. How had I never noticed that before? Onstage, Fevver's fully fledged physicality is powerful, commanding both attention and money. Offstage, though, those folded wings mark her apart:

... when Lizzie lifted up the armful of hair, you could see, under the splitting, rancid silk, her humps, her lumps, big as if she bore a bosom fore and aft, her conspicuous deformity, the twin hills of the growth she had put away for those hours she must spend in daylight or lamplight, out of the spotlight. So, on the street, at a soirée... she was always the cripple, even if she always drew the eye and made people stand on chairs to see.

A little while later, Lizzie adds that Ma Nelson – the proprietor of the brothel this startling bird-girl grew up in – 'thought up the scheme, how we should put it round she was an 'unchback'. Of course, the irony here is that an actual condition – a variation on the condition I've experienced (hunched backs are often caused by scoliosis's twisted



sister, kyphosis) – is safer a story than the fantastical reality. The former is understandable. The latter is, for a while, dangerous. And yet, despite my own condition being just another in the long line of temporary disguises shrugged on by Fevvers, I still find myself mapping these exact descriptions on to my own body. Though I was, to my chagrin, entirely lacking anything in the way of bosom during adolescence, I did know what it meant to carry around a ‘conspicuous deformity’ with me wherever I went. I was intimately acquainted with the language of humps and hills: both words I’d used to describe my own back at its worst. Moreover, I likewise recognized the capacity I had to draw attention, merely by existing outside the realms of the normative.

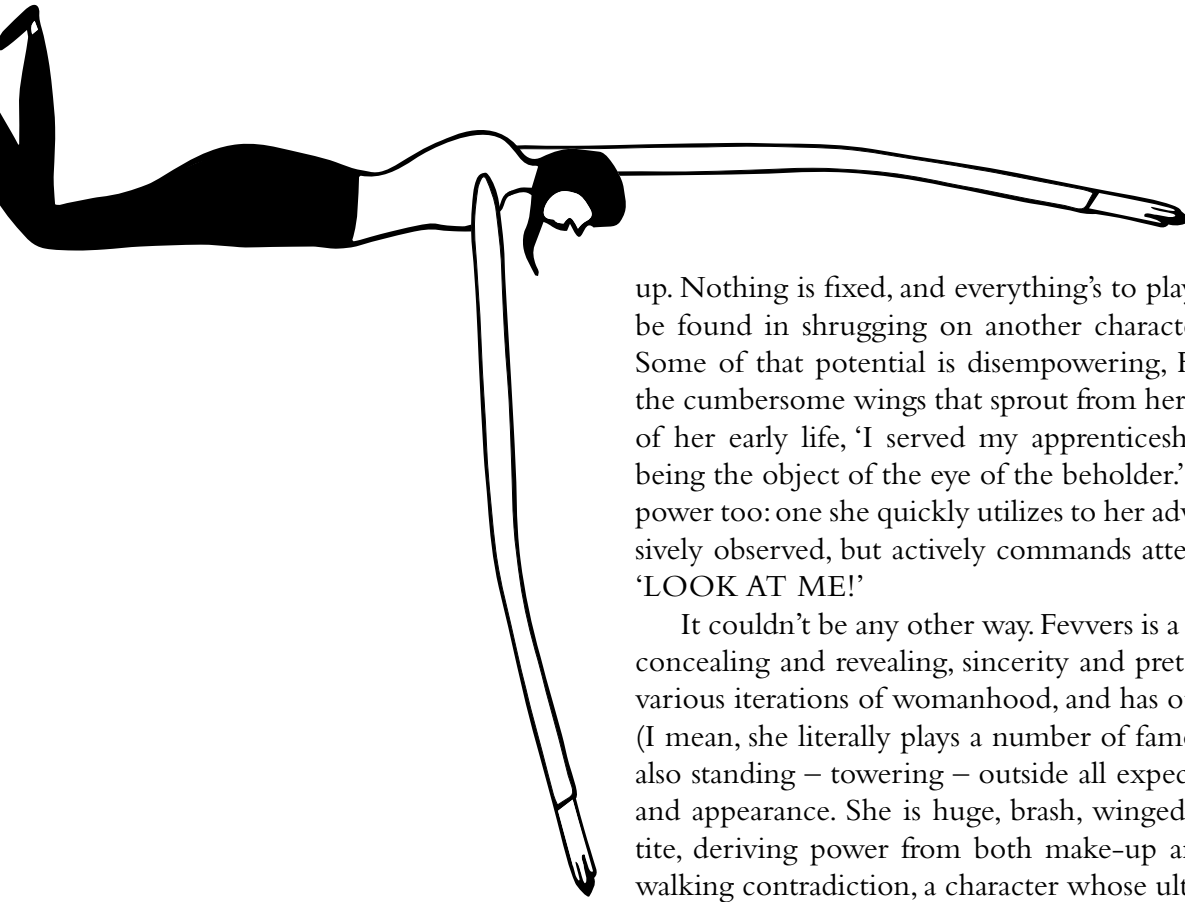
Like Fevvers, I also occupied a strange status somewhere between beauty and the beast: moving from representing some odd physical ideal – having begun modelling aged thirteen – to existing on the fringes of the norm. Unlike her though, I hadn’t yet worked out any way of monetizing this difference (at that point, at least: I’ve since learned to live by the maxim not only that ‘shit happens, and then you write about it’, but also ‘shit happens, and sometimes writing about it pays the bills’. No stages for me. Just the outlines of a page. Plenty of potential for performance offered up there too).

I have always called *Nights at the Circus* one of my ‘favourite’ books. But it becomes a slightly different favourite each time I return to it, full, as it is, of new treasures to pick up on, additional details to notice. I couldn’t have articulated anything about grotesque bodies or the uneasy tension between desirability and anomaly as a teenager. Back then I was swept up in Carter’s narrative, treating it as one of the many escape routes from my own physical reality rather than anything even vaguely recognizable. Now, it offers up something else. I’m sure that the next time I return there’ll be more to glean again.

However, there’s one thing I’ve always identified with, right from the off: pure love of spectacle. Like a wardrobe ready to burst, *Nights at the Circus* is also a tour de force of costumed artifice, brimming with recognition of what the journalist Jack Walser identifies as ‘the freedom that lies behind the mask’. That’s a freedom I’ve always adored; one that, perhaps I see now, became ever more important for me when things were physically beyond control. I couldn’t change the shape of my back (I had to wait for a surgeon to do that), but oh could I dress up and distract.

In fact, Carter’s approach to Fevvers’ unnatural anatomy is part and parcel of the novel’s various rounds of metamorphosis and dressing





up. Nothing is fixed, and everything's to play for: endless potential to be found in shrugging on another character beneath the spotlight. Some of that potential is disempowering, Fevvers often reduced to the cumbersome wings that sprout from her back. As she wryly notes of her early life, 'I served my apprenticeship in being looked at – being the object of the eye of the beholder.' But in that gaze there's a power too: one she quickly utilizes to her advantage. She isn't just passively observed, but actively commands attention, especially onstage: 'LOOK AT ME!'

It couldn't be any other way. Fevvers is a figure who slips between concealing and revealing, sincerity and pretence. She rattles through various iterations of womanhood, and has others projected on to her (I mean, she literally plays a number of famous female statues) while also standing – towering – outside all expected models of behaviour and appearance. She is huge, brash, winged, glitzy and full of appetite, deriving power from both make-up and make-believe. She's a walking contradiction, a character whose ultimate mantra is perfectly summarized in the novel's final line: 'It just goes to show there's nothing like confidence.' It's a sentiment that resonates differently each time it's reached. Is it sincere? A revelation? Yet another layer of performance? Something I want to, yet again, relate to my own experiences? Whichever way, it's one I recognize. One I've always loved. One I always will.

# Restless Momentum

Craig Taylor writes a letter to Margaux Williamson

Dear Margaux,

Your painting is a permanent presence in my life, and I don't mean I carry it with me from place to place. I glance at it throughout the day. I notice it from across the room, like we're at a party and the magic is still there, the silver thread is stretched taut. I don't want to overanalyze the sensation; the painting doesn't stare back. Even if you do believe eye contact is possible with the Mona Lisa, this one won't return your gaze. It's a painting of a torso.

How could you know about my dealings with your painting? You can't monitor these interactions from Toronto. I wonder if you even consider how many of your works are viewed regularly and how many remain in bubble wrap somewhere; how many hang from a wall and how many are tucked away in storage. What do people get up to once they've purchased your work? Does it matter?

I stuck your painting on the wall behind the teetering stack of books I call a standing desk. I'm not exaggerating when I say I feel its presence every day. It moves into my line of vision and recedes. The painting remains static; I flit and shuffle paper.

The painting presents a rougher, more elusive version of the world than I see in the other line drawings and photos on my wall, which all look less vigorous and vital in comparison. Nothing matches the torso's calm. Feel free to write back and fully explain its power.

I tried to gather some calm from it yesterday as builders attacked the apartment upstairs throughout the morning until I finally heard the sweep of plaster flakes, and, in the quiet of the afternoon, made a call to the woman who owns the place, whose young son had held a drunk-teen party up there a couple nights before the builders showed. While I spoke to her, I stood at my desk, tapping my fingers on the book stack, staring at your painting, as she told me: 'Look. I'm trying to be a good mother and a good tenant.'

I was staring without seeing, a way of lightly interacting with art – staring and meditating and resting on its familiarity. As I spoke to her, I didn't see anything new, but sometimes details reassert themselves in these moments. It depends on the time, the light and who is on the other end of the phone. 'I didn't know he collapsed in the lobby,' she said.

Sometimes I look at the whole image; sometimes at the strokes of paint, the greys and the brown of the skin. Hopefully I draw from it something other than formal beauty, a lesson connected to its creative



origins, from your rigor as an artist. The lesson is simple: Remember to do the work. Fill the canvas, every bit of the canvas, or choose not to fill it. There's a blank spot on the bottom right corner of the painting, but that's a choice, right? The corner is a reminder, to me, that there must be a point when you walk away, when the work is done, the plaster gets swept up, even if someone might say: This needs more work.

When asked for a description, I say it's a painting of a torso. I add that the torso is the engine of the human because I don't want to sell it short. In fact it's a torso *and* an arm. Who needs more than a torso? 'To me Art's subject is the human clay,' Auden once wrote, 'And landscape but a background to a torso.'

You've captured the rumple of a white t-shirt. The man's arm is raised; there's action implied. The individual could be black or white. The title is 'Nike of Samothrace (Ryan with a feather boa)' but for ages I couldn't even make out that last detail. I only recently looked at the work, stared at it in a new way, perhaps while talking on the phone, and thought: 'Oh. Look. That's the boa.'

Its unexpected arrival at my apartment on West 93rd was one of the great surprises of the past few years. We'd featured the painting in *Five Dials 34*, so I'd seen a replication before, but when I clicked on the jpg, or scrolled through a slideshow, or zoomed into it, I wasn't appreciating the isolated object. Onscreen, the painting became part of my endless scroll. It somehow belonged to the screen. It was another of the images, the majority of images in my life, trapped and held in the frame of an Apple laptop.

Unwrapping the painting was a gradually transgressive act. Ripping into the cardboard was as banal as receiving a printer refill from Amazon. But the torn bubble wrap popped and revealed paint strokes through the opaque plastic folds. When I stripped away the wrap to reveal the painting itself, I was shocked, then anxious, and then a question arose: What has she done? I worried about you. To give away this art? Along with its weight, I could feel its monetary worth – you're not exactly a beginner – and something else, something co-existent – its worth in the world. Sending it to my apartment was an act of sustained and exuberant generosity, but also perhaps partly a prank. You assumed I was ready. In *Three Men and A Baby* at least they could look to each other, Gutenberg to Selleck to Danson, for support. There was no abdication here. The painting was my responsibility.

Had I hinted when we last saw each other? I tried to remember if I'd bullied you into this or made an outrageous request. Was I now





a guilty party, taking this painting out of circulation and robbing it of its worth? Or had I helped liberate it from some arbitrary price? I'd be forever grateful. There's no simpler way to say that.

I've owned art before, but never a painting I coveted and then, against the odds, received. When we published the reproduction of the painting online, I was unsure of the size of the canvas. It's smaller and more delicate than I imagined. You scrawled your name on the back and also Nike of Samothrace. A few hours after its unwrapping, I went online to find out what critics said about the painting, and I found a quote by curator Ann Marie Peña about how 'these torso works pull us into Williamson's concerted attempt to reveal, through painting, some kind of formula for understanding our common struggles in this life.' 'The strain of the brushstrokes [evoke] the anxiety involved in just trying to get by.' Although I could see the strain of the brushstrokes, they didn't evoke anxiety. As soon as it went up on the wall, calmness feathered out, like a boa, to its edges and beyond.

We know each other, but not a lot. At some point I might have mentioned that my knowledge of visual art is sorely lacking. You might have intuited as much when you sent the painting. As it turns out, the torso on my wall has got me thinking not only about this one painting but about the art that surrounds me. It was the beginning of something. In order to rise to the gesture of your gift, I'm going to send you a few letters. Even if you don't answer these letters – I know you're busy – I'm going to write to you about my efforts to engage with art. I'm not necessarily interested in memorizing facts but rather trying to improve on what Peter Schjeldahl calls 'the discipline of writing about mute things.' He enjoys it because it feels like 'honest work' which I guess is true, though it's not exactly tilling a field. I was more drawn to his second reason. After writing about books, it might be a relief. 'Words about words.' Schjeldahl writes, 'feel vaguely deprived.'

So, Margaux, here goes:

A while ago I took the subway to MoMA to the huge Picabia exhibit. I'm not a longtime Picabia fan, but I was intrigued by the ads on the walls of a few different subway stations which featured his gnomic catchphrases like 'Every Conviction Is An Illness.'

The huge photograph outside the entrance of the exhibit showed Picabia cycling on a small bike with a maniacal gleam in his eyes. He looked entitled, like the 'independently wealthy, chubby' man he'd been described as by one critic – 'possessed of a wad of lustrous hair.' He spent time in the French Riviera, hosting parties, playing the part,





making that lustrous hair work for him. The last time I came across his name, I was reading an article about Jean Cocteau. Always entranced by status, Cocteau couldn't bear to be snubbed by Picasso, so he pretended he had merely been snubbed by Picabia, as if he could be like 'That's better, no one will ever know, no one will ever write about this later. It was a slip of the pen.' And who could live up to Picasso? It's unfortunate he and Picabia had to share those first few letters. Picabia was never going to be the Pic-painter of note.

I felt restless in the exhibit because the exhibit exudes restlessness. What happens if you avoid a singular style your whole life? What happens if you shift mediums relentlessly: poetry and film accompanied Picabia's paintings; the exhibit started with his impressionism, ended with minimalism. The folks at MoMA tried to make this restlessness positive – and modern. It's certainly modern. It's tough to find, these days, someone dedicated to one art form. But was this 'consistent inconsistency' helpful? And was it a choice – is it ever? Did he choose to flit (just as I do when I'm moving between project, between mediums, unfortunately, while the torso keeps watch over my movements) or was this his irreducible form of artistic expression? He had to be all over the place, and all over the next place.

At times, when I'm scattered, I feel that I'm dodging my chosen form and swerving from a deeper engagement. We don't have time for endless experimentation, at least that's what I've always thought. But the Picabia exhibit seemed to whisper back: Maybe we do. The exhibit featured more than 200 works, including the towering 'La Source', described by unimpressed critics in 1912 as 'a heap of red and black shavings' resembling 'encrusted linoleum' as well as his loud experiments with industrial paint. The exhibit aimed to 'advance the understanding of Picabia's relentless shape-shifting' and MoMA even called it 'Our Heads Are Round so Our Thoughts Can Change Direction', which sounds modern, or at least like a good description of every smart-phone user.

When I got home I watched a walk-through of the exhibit on Facebook Live. The co-curator Anne Umland is accompanied by artist Rashid Johnson, who starts the walk by discussing Woody Allen's *Zelig*, and how the bumbling title character absorbs whatever surrounds him. Picabia, he argues, was the same. The talk starts with Picabia's Impressionist paintings – even though he's 30 years too late to the Impressionist party – and then moves through each restless stop in the exhibit.





Johnson describes the Zelig quality as a positive. He speaks of ‘porousness of ego’, and makes the point that an artist like Picasso with his massive output and ego, sucked up all the air in the room. Picabia had less investment in authoring. Fine, I thought, but he could have just been entitled and skittery. The effect at MoMA had been jarring: room after room of incessant creation. Think I can’t make this thing? I just made that thing.

Picabia’s artistic poetry, that *whatever* inside of him, could reflect whatever was going on in the world at the time. He could Zelig his way into any situation – even though there’s a dark slice to the Zelig analogy when you look at the paintings he made during the French occupation, many based on appropriated images from ‘girlie’ magazines in which the skin of the subjects has a deadened sheen, like he was loathe, at the time, to show anything that resembled real life, preferring a closed circuit between canvas and schlocky mag.

As he speaks in the Facebook Live video, Johnson keeps wandering in and out of the frame, while co-curator Anne Umland keeps repeating the words ‘Ah-huh, Ah-huh, Ah-huh, Ah-huh’. Eventually people in the comments section started complaining, like ‘How many times is she going to say Ah-huh?’ But these interruptions couldn’t contain Johnson’s enthusiasm, and after a while I began to agree with him. I tried to reconsider some of the paintings I’d seen. Johnson is especially convincing when he makes a connection between Picabia’s last-to-the-party Impressionism and his later work. The pointillist dots in those early paintings are eventually wrenched free: his post-war paintings feature huge dots, this time given space and made present on the canvas. The thick, encrusted dots like the five featured in *Selfishness* (1947–48) link to his past. The restlessness has led him back. With so much movement, he’d have to eventually find an intersection with his past, especially with those thoughts in his head changing direction.

Changing your mind and wanting a second chance with paintings can be costly. You can look at a photo online or track back to the MoMA and reconsider the real thing. It’s almost an act of penance. This could become a theme in these letters: paying the entrance fee again, reconsidering, taking my time, taking in criticism without losing my initial reaction, looking at what Johnson calls the artist’s ‘framing strategies’, and considering his decisions. ‘That’s what artists are,’ he says near the end of the wobbly Facebook Live. ‘Decision makers.’



Picabia's career cannot be confined in a single page of an art history book. The first time I saw his work, its skittishness looked like failure, but only because I was applying a thin definition of success. Perhaps his life was not about crafting a defining look, but rather expanding his career description so it spilled onto a second page, even onto a third. Whether he meant it or not, he became a witness to his times, repeatedly, and he bequeathed his ideas of scattered, omnivorous work to the next generations who would become even more scattered and omnivorous. In his review in the *New York Review of Books*, art critic Sanford Schwartz pretty much agrees with this reading: Picabia deserves attention because he barreled through the orthodoxies of the modern movement in ways that seemed like a gift to artists of the future. Schwartz liked the show but he wasn't totally won over: 'The exhibition presents too many emotionally thin, quickly digestible works.' That may be what Picabia wanted – he was a Dada joker, after all – and certainly the curators would have us believe that no matter how quickly you digest the pieces, this 'consistent inconsistency' is 'a powerful alternative model'.

Maybe it is. Writing this letter to you, I've flitted between projects in my own version of consistent inconsistency. The approval of this Picabian alternative model is reassuring. I initially dismissed his breadth as a lack of substance. I feel more kinship with him now. What's most compelling about this position of consistent inconsistency is the idea of a poetry running through the different forms. It's made from a different material. It remains consistent.

I kept thinking back to the torso, what went into the painting, what separates it from the others on my wall, what it reaches towards (or away from). Do you feel your poetry flowing through each art form you choose? Each subject? Or do some resist? What happens when you're writing or making films? Does it always flow with same momentum? It looks like there's Picabia's restless poetry – and some of his mischief – in you.

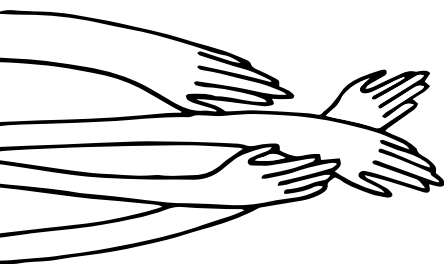
Your friend,  
Craig





# Discomfort

Hermione Thompson watches the performance art you may never get to see



I am literally squirming in my seat. I would get up and walk out – I’m at the end of my row, so it wouldn’t be difficult – but I desperately want to hear how this ends. I’m sitting in a small auditorium and a man onstage is telling a story. It’s about a farmer who is kidnapped and cooked alive. The storyteller is explaining all sorts of interesting things about Farmer Palmer’s feet being sawn off (so that his body will fit in the cooking trough) and the smell of his butter-and-herb-slathered skin as it roasts over the bonfire. The farmer attempts an escape: dragging himself on his stumps to phone for help, leaving a trail of his own heat-softened flesh smeared across the lawn. But inevitably he is recaptured before that last digit is dialled: hefted aloft by his masked tormentor and carried to the dining table. Here Farmer Palmer’s guts are blended to mush with an electric whisk pushed through his skin directly into the stomach. This is the point at which I thought I might have to leave – and also the point at which I most fervently wanted to stay and hear the ending.

‘Visceral’ is a word I tend to overuse, but there may be no better application for it than *Story #1*: the performance art piece by Greg Wohead and Rachel Mars in which I encountered the grisly tale of Farmer Palmer, among several other, equally post-watershed stories. It is a gloriously delinquent show, based on the unlikely premise of an old episode of *Come Dine with Me*. For the uninitiated, this is a reality TV show in which four contestants

take turns hosting dinner parties. It sits at the gentler end of the reality format but nevertheless bears all the hallmarks of the genre: sneery voiceover, caricatured contestants, engineered social discord. In Wohead and Mars’s mischievous tribute show, we begin by watching almost an entire episode of *Come Dine with Me*, which then becomes a springboard for a series of macabre stories speculating on the fate of each contestant.

The tales are deliberately implausible and yet morbidly compelling: alien invasions, ménages à trois, the aforementioned gruesome hog roast. They have an addictive quality, like snacks loaded with MSG — we are encouraged to binge now, regret later. And as each story ends, in the momentary lull before the next begins, there is a sensation like waking from a sex dream about someone you know: transgressive, degraded and obscurely triumphant. It is a sensation we choose not to scrutinize, rushing on headlong until the show’s climax forces us to pause and survey the damage. The performance ends where it began, with one last clip from the original programme. Wohead and Mars settle down to watch alongside their audience as the episode winner is announced and the contestants dutifully perform triumph or defeat, throwing small sheafs of cash around the room. Off-screen, the performers are seated at a little table on the stage and feast on legs of lamb, tearing flesh from bone with hands and teeth, eyes glued on the scene before them. A TV dinner designed to disturb.

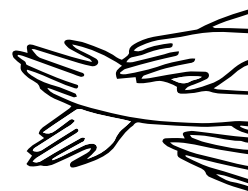
*Story #1* takes four real people and distorts them. *Come Dine with Me* does the same thing. What are the ethics of such a violation: conceptual rather than



physical, forced entry by the imagination instead of the fists? And does our hunger to witness it make us complicit in the act? These are the questions that Wohead and Mars raise very quietly behind our backs, while we're all too busy having a good time to notice. But even once they've shown their hand, there is a sense of reluctance in the audience,

comforting its audience. Whereas Wohead and Mars favour sneaking up behind you, Vanessa Macaulay's *How to Come Out Black* is a short sharp shock of a show, as direct as a punch to the uterus. Over forty minutes, Macaulay presents a critique of pop culture's attitude to black women, using her own body as evidence for the prosecution. Her show

**There is a sensation like waking from a sex dream about someone you know: transgressive, degraded and obscurely triumphant.**



a resistance to account ourselves responsible. It was not us who wrote these cruel stories, who chose to perform them, who profited from them. All we've done is watch. Surely that can't be wrong? I left the theatre that night feeling off-kilter, unable to meet my own gaze in the mirror.

There are lots of ways to frame the relationship between traditional theatre and the wider canon of performance art. You can talk about moving beyond the expectation of character, about abandoning that kind of story altogether. Or think of it like poetry: hard to define but easy to spot, a state declared through the proxies of setting, source, intent. My own rule of thumb is much more subjective: simply check for discomfort. Sitting down (or standing up) to watch performance art, you can safely assume you're about to feel extremely uncomfortable. This might not be the most enticing description, but give it a chance. There are so many unique shades of discomfort to be discovered, out beyond the padded walls of the comfort zone, each more maddening and compelling and addictive than the last.

*How to Come Out Black* is a show I saw on the same night as *Story #1*, and one which takes a diametrically opposing approach to the task of dis-

is structured around a succession of tongue-in-cheek 'tutorials', starting with a spoof DIY beauty regime. The slapstick is keen-edged but silly and inclusive, without feeling especially dangerous. Macaulay smears her face with honey and instant coffee grounds, glues strips of kiwi skin over her eyebrows, rubs cut chilli peppers directly on to her lips. Except that last one is not quite so harmlessly slapstick, since the performer can barely talk through the pain. Next she stands in a paddling pool and is doused with two large bottles of Lambrini. She has chosen an audience member to assist with this strange baptism – he is hesitant at first but soon get into it. It is extremely cold in the theatre (a converted warehouse) and Macaulay gasps from shock as the alcohol streams into her eyes, nose and mouth, temporarily blinding her.

The balance between comedy and degradation quickly tips toward the latter, culminating with Macaulay simply twerking in time to a rap montage – for five or ten minutes without pause. She switches positions periodically, the better to mimic the dancers on-screen, eventually settling on all fours with her face tilted up to watch the images jittering, those jelly asses bouncing up and down in rows. At last the stage lights drop to darkness, leav-

ing Macaulay invisible, but the video plays silently on and the performer's quiet panting tells us she is still twerking – albeit exhausted and shivering slightly in the cool air, her unseen body slick with Lambrini and the remains of the instant coffee.

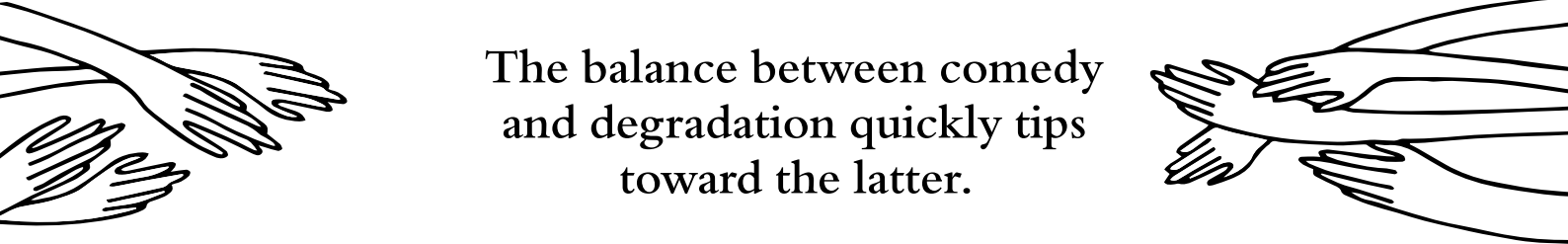
Emerging from *How to Come Out Black*, I ran into a friend in the toilet queue. It had been her first ever 'non-traditional' performance experience and she was rather shaken up – dazed and buzzing with adrenaline. It's like that the first time, I told her sympathetically. You'll know to expect it now. Performance art, basically it ruins you. She nodded and disappeared into a cubicle.

There's something about live performance, its sense of threat and possibility, which is aggressive and immediate. The atavistic power of embodiment, the sharing of physical space with the performers, restores the full impact of ideas dulled by over-exposure. Like a catalysis chamber, the performance space activates the agents placed within. *Activate*: to initiate, to animate, to trigger. Yes, performance art is a process of initiation into new consciousness; it is a bringing-to-life for audience even more than for performer; it can and should be provocative and contentious. But also we have *activate* as in *activism* – as in considered engagement

length. You come away wanting to do something about it – whatever *it* is.

Much as I love that feeling of visceral connection, there are times when subtler forms of disturbance are the most compelling. And for understated impact, nothing I've recently seen in theatre has equalled *Toni Erdmann*, the latest film from German writer-director Maren Ade. Billed as a comedy drama, it offers a deceptively simple premise beneath which lurk unplumbed depths of existential despair. A father attempts to reconnect with his grown-up daughter by infiltrating her life in disguise; hilarity ensues. Ines is the buttoned-up management consultant daughter, Winfried her hapless father, and Toni Erdmann his magnificently sham-bolic, false teeth-wearing alter-ego.

Except what ensues isn't so much hilarity as a long, meticulous critique of lives emptied of meaning: a portrait of that distinctive unhappiness which is the total absence of joy. It is a film about those terrible moments of insight when you imagine what your younger self would think of you now – how horribly disappointed that child would be, how pissed off, how confused. And it accounts the high cost of choosing, inexplicably, to remain adrift in a void of our own making.



## The balance between comedy and degradation quickly tips toward the latter.

with the imperfect state of the world; as in refusing to tolerate the intolerable; as in acknowledging the collective responsibility and choosing to make this a personal responsibility. And good theatre accesses a little of all these things.

It is a medium that forces you to be present, defying the impulse to disengage or hold at arm's

In one scene, we find Ines seated in a nightclub. Her execrable colleague/lover is flirting with other women and dicking around with a bottle of champagne; her father, disguised as Toni, watches from the adjacent sofa. Toni's expression is inscrutable. It could be feigned tolerance, genuine amusement, benign naivety or weary resignation. None of the

options is good. With minimal fanfare, Ines begins weeping: not for herself, stuck in a shitty club with its shitty music and her incredibly shitty boyfriend, but for the presence of her father, sitting there with her, trying obscurely to save her, witnessing (and so making real) a degradation she does not want to admit she feels.

The other time she cries is even worse. She is standing on the balcony of her hotel suite, waving her father off in a taxi. Just minutes previously, she sent him away with a terse pat on the back, standing clenched and implacable through the long, sterile silence before the lift arrived. Yet once the crucial moment to connect has passed, the dammed-up emotions sweep over her – and she sobs for the unsayable, for the deep loneliness that her father has not cured, for the knowledge that even if he could, she wouldn't let him.

*Toni Erdmann* is a long film but it feels even longer. Ade keeps us on a drip-feed of absurd situational comedy but this humour never converts into momentum. She cultivates a glacial torpor, consciously withholding the gratification of build-up and release. Just when we seem to reach a crisis, we step forward to find that the cliff edge was an illusion: the ground is still firm beneath us, life shuffles steadily onward as before. It's probably the least hysterical film I've ever seen – and its perpetual state of composure becomes a kind of torture. We come to believe, as Winfried does, that Ines could do with a little more hysteria in her life – a little more of anything, frankly.

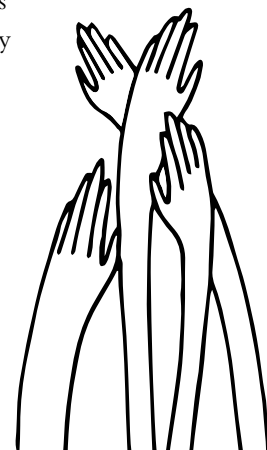
Winfried and Ines lack a common language. Faced with this void, each reacts with knee-jerk obduracy, exaggerating the parts of themselves that most irritate the other. And though Winfried is disturbed by what he sees of his daughter's life – the sterile grind of it, the casual inhumanity – he seems just as lost and miserable as she is. His great creation, the charismatically oafish Toni Erdmann, is

born of the desire to bridge the chasm between their lonely islands; and by the end of the film, Toni has indeed brokered a kind of truce. Ines learns to understand her father's behaviour in the spirit he intends it – no small miracle for any two humans, let alone family. Yet this victory is carefully qualified. Her life is still ring-fenced by corporate loyalties and careerism; her nature has not changed. This film, like a good management consultant, is careful never to overpromise.

*Toni Erdmann* is being marketed to English-language audiences as a comedy. And yes, it contains scenes that made me laugh like my own father does (inappropriately loud and all in one breath, a huffing *hhhhha* that pitches your whole body forward and very occasionally requires a firm clap on the thigh, table, or similar). But it is emphatically not a funny film. It is distressing and tenacious and melancholy. Many of my friends absolutely hated it, finding it too demanding and joyless, feeling cheated of a zippy black comedy. But there is something valuable in this frustration, something akin to the power of live art to invert expectation. Not unlike *Story #1* and *How to Come Out Black*, the defiance of the film forces its audience to sit up and concentrate instead of skipping to the end. In times like these, with stories spreading like disease through the trenches, ever so much faster than the speed of thought, and the lines of communication slashed, that is no bad thing.

#### Works Referenced

- Story #1* by Greg Wohead and Rachel Mars  
*How to Come Out Black* by Vanessa Macaulay  
*Toni Erdmann* directed by Maren Ade



# Contest Winner

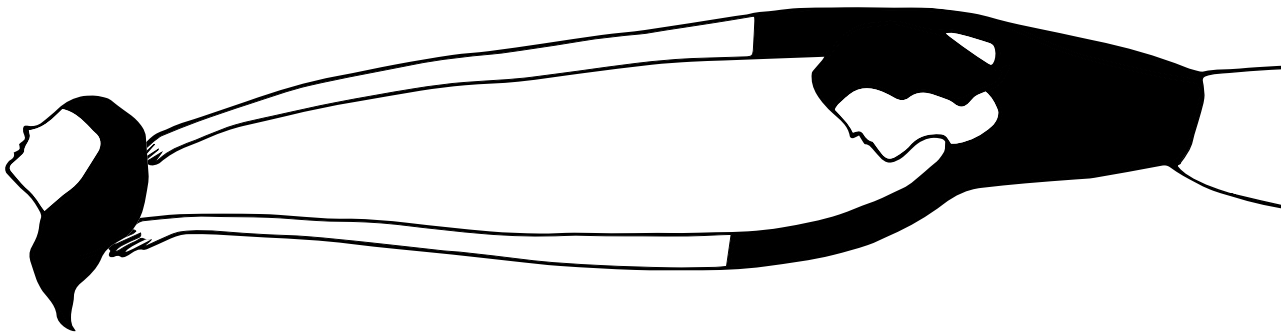
Cecilia Sherrill

## The Commission

Commission for a short story, 300–400 words, an interior monologue, from the point of view of Ivanka Trump, as she attends a meeting with her father and Xi Jinping, and contemplates who she is and what she's become.

Jared Kushner is also in the room. He sits across the table from her.

Story must contain the line of dialogue: 'But would the clothing still sell?'



## The Story

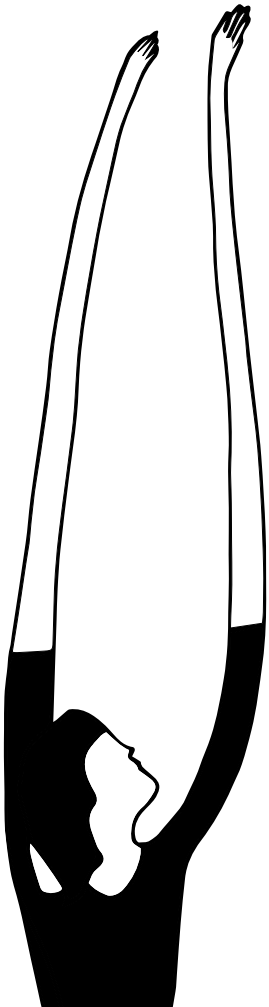
'When in the course of human events,' I said to Jared this morning. 'Don't start,' Jared said.

My husband has no respect for history.

Now it's later and we're in another foreign-leader meeting and I'm sending psychic messages to Xi, or is it Jinping? I can't find out because they took my phone and laptop and now it's all Women Who Work blah blah life-work balance keeping the Sabbath sacred what a joke. Jared says the rituals are because we're Orthodox, and I'm like, really? Where in the Talmud does it stipulate that Jews have to spend the Sabbath FaceTiming with Julian Assange and his weird Russian friends?

Daddy is bragging about his historical victory which is A, inaccurate, he semi-lost, and B, incorrect, it's historic not historical, and 3, not translatable because China I don't think has elections, and I can't ask because they canceled my *Speak Mandarin in 30 Days* app and now all I know are simple phrases. "The man with the orange face hurt my hand," Xi is saying, "Are those things under his comb-over horns?"

'Fourscore and seven years ago,' I said to Jared this morning. 'Our forefathers, our forepersons.'



‘Take your pills,’ Jared said.

‘No, really,’ I said. We hold these truths to be self-evident, but would the clothes still sell if people knew about Daddy’s cloven-hoof footwear line? Would it kill you and him to change the address on your building? Make it 668 Fifth Ave.? 664 ½? You might as well advertise on Instagram: “At 6:66 on June 6 filming begins on *The Omen 66* in Suite 666.”

‘Don’t think the public is unaware,’ I continued, ‘that if you discard some of the letters in Jared Kushner and use the K twice it spells Kraken.’

‘Give it a rest,’ said Jared, slithering from the tub.

It’s hard to communicate with Xi, since I can’t move my face, but, if I get asylum, me and the kids can work in a Chinese factory. Luckily they still have child labor, and I can mass-produce sweaters for lizards and other small non-occult reptiles who suffer from the cold. Help, I’m saying telepathically, help I’m a huddled mass yearning to be free help yes help.

But Xi is looking at Barron, who is in the corner making sacrificial altars out of Lego.

‘He has his father’s eyes,’ Xi says.

