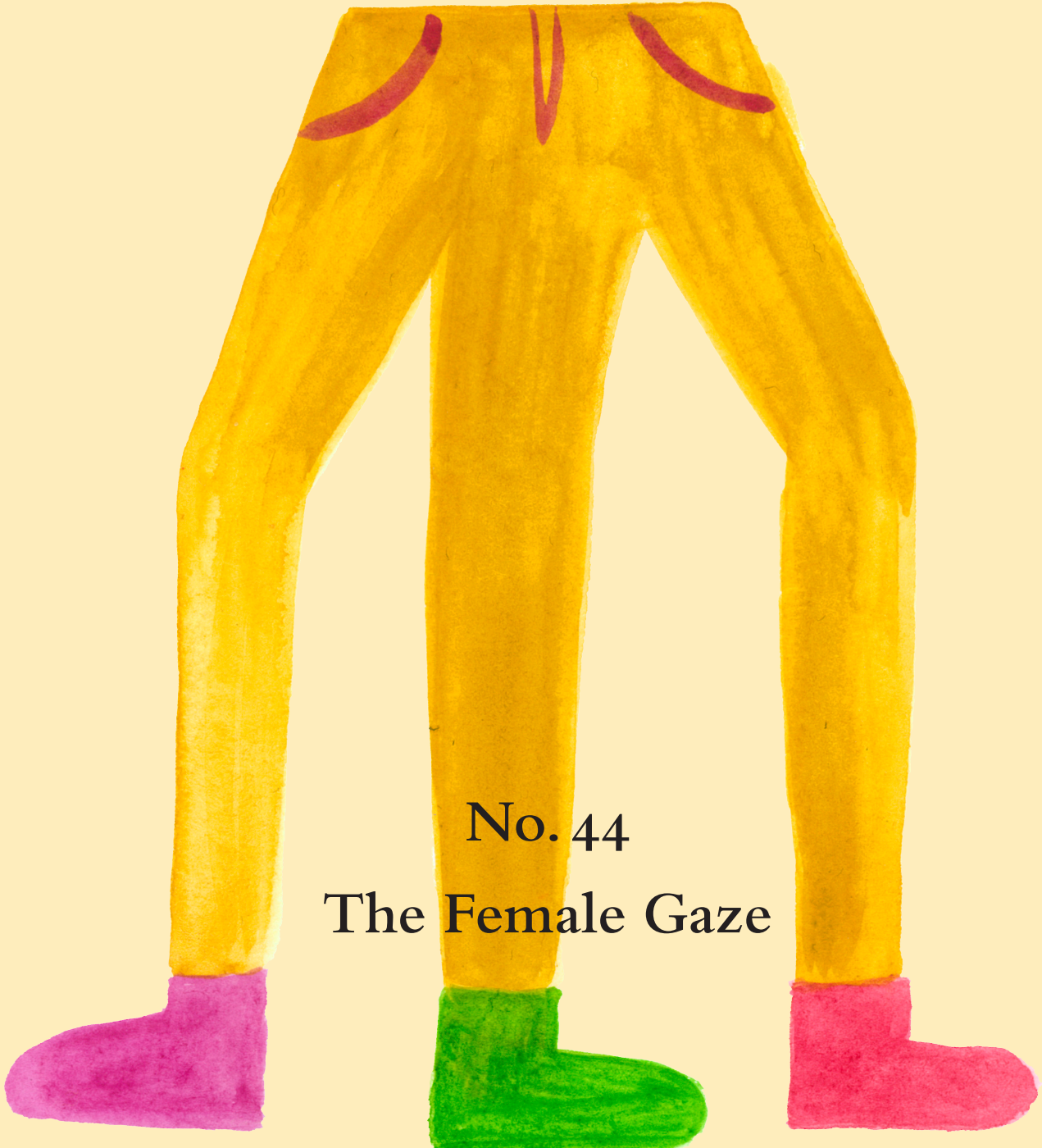


HAMISH HAMILTON PRESENTS



# Five Dials



No. 44

The Female Gaze

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**Nadia Albina** studied English and Drama at Queen Mary and Westfield College, University of London, before training at LAMDA. She has appeared in productions for the National Theatre, Royal Shakespeare Company, Royal Court, Young Vic, Globe, Gate Theatre and Lyric Hammersmith, and in plays such as *Macbeth* (National Theatre), *Hecuba*, *Othello* and *The Merchant Of Venice* (RSC), *What if Women Ruled the World?* (Royal Court) and *I Call My Brothers* (Gate Theatre). She has also been involved in the Lyric Hammersmith's two-year Secret Theatre Project series, including *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *A Series of Increasingly Impossible Acts*. Her television credits include *Trauma*, *Marcella*, *Come Fly With Me*, *Whites* and *Beautiful People*. Nadia is a trustee of the Act For Change Project.

**Abi Andrews** is a writer from the Midlands. She studied English and Creative Writing at Goldsmiths college and her work has been published in *Five Dials*, *the Clearing*, *Dark Mountain Project*, *Tender* and others. Her debut novel, *The Word for Woman is Wilderness*, is out now with Serpent's Tail.

**Ira Brand** is a London-based artist, performance-maker, writer, curator and teacher, originally from Germany. She works across theatre and live art, drawing on text, video, autobiography/biography, a process of research and interviews, and choreographic practices. She regularly works in collaboration with other companies and artists, most recently with *Made In China (Gym Party)* and *Andy Field (put your sweet hand in mine)*. She co-runs the award-winning artist-led collective Forest Fringe ([www.forestfringe.co.uk](http://www.forestfringe.co.uk)) with Andy Field and Deborah Pearson. Ira Brand is currently enrolled in the Masters study programme at DAS Theatre, Amsterdam.

**Candice Carty-Williams** is a senior marketing executive at Vintage Books. She also contributes to *Refinery29*, *i-D* and more. Her debut novel, *Queenie*, will be published spring 2019.

**Lydia Davis** is the author of one novel and seven short-story collections, the most recent of which was a finalist for the 2007 National Book Award for Fiction. She is the recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship and was named a Chevalier of the Order of Arts and Letters by the French government for her fiction and her translations of modern writers, including Maurice Blanchot, Michel Leiris and Marcel Proust.

**Robin Eisenberg** is a Los Angeles-based artist and illustrator. She spends her life drawing and exploring.

**Melissa Lee Houghton's** most recent collection, *Sunshine*, is published by Penned in the Margins. It was shortlisted for the Forward Prizes, the Ted Hughes Award and the Costa Book Award, and won a Somerset Maugham Award in 2017.

**Krishna Isha** is a performer, live artist and theatre-maker. Their performance work looks at transformations (physical and political), gender politics and queer culture using subversive text, cabaret and comedy. Krishna has performed internationally, including in the UK (Southbank Centre, V&A, National Theatre, Soho Theatre, Chelsea Theatre, Arcola Theatre, Traverse Theatre, among others), Australia (The Malthouse Theatre, La Mama Courthouse and Sydney Festival) and the USA (Abrons Arts Centre and La Mama NYC).

**Chris Kraus** is the author of *I Love Dick*, *Aliens and Anorexia*, *Torpor*, *Summer of Hate*, and two books of cultural criticism. She was a 2016 Guggenheim Fellow and teaches writing at European Graduate School.

**Deborah Levy** is a British playwright, novelist and poet. She is the author of six novels, including *Swimming Home* and *Hot Milk*, and a collection of short stories, *Black Vodka*. *Swimming Home* was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize 2012, as well as the Jewish Quarterly Wingate Prize, and *Hot Milk* was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize 2016 and the Goldsmiths Prize 2016. *Black Vodka* was shortlisted for the BBC international short-story award and the Frank O'Connor international short-story award. She is about to publish the second volume of her living autobiography on writing and womanhood, *The Cost of Living*, following the critically acclaimed *Things I Don't Want to Know*.

**Sophie Mackintosh** won the 2016 *White Review* short-story prize and the 2016 Virago/*Stylist* short-story competition, and has been published in *Granta* magazine and *Tank* magazine, among others. Her debut novel, *The Water Cure*, will be published by Hamish Hamilton in May 2018.

**Mariana Malhão** was born in Coimbra, Portugal, in 1994. She studied Design and Communication at the University of Porto and interned with the Oficina Arara collective. She is a freelance illustrator whose personal projects explore illustration, ceramics and independent publications, among other influences. Her first illustrated book, *Uma Rosa Na Tromba De Um Elefante* (Orfeu Negro, 2018), is a collaboration with the Portuguese Surrealist poet, António José Forte. Mariana Malhão lives in Porto.

**Bridget Minamore** is a writer, poet and journalist. She was shortlisted to be London's first Young Poet Laureate, and is part of the creative team behind Brainchild Festival. Bridget teaches poetry and drama workshops around the country, has read her work internationally, and regularly speaks on panels and events about everything from politics to pop culture. In 2015 Bridget was chosen as one of the Hospital Club's Emerging Creatives, as well as one of Speaking Volumes' Forty Stars of Black British Literature. *Titanic* (Out-Spoken Press), her debut pamphlet of poems on modern love and loss, came out in May 2016.

**RashDash** was formed by Abbi Greenland and Helen Goalen at The University of Hull in 2009. After making several shows together over the years, Becky Wilkie joined the core team in summer 2017. The company's shows include *The Darkest Corners*, *Two Man Show*, *Snow White* and *Rose Red*, *We Want You to Watch* (in collaboration with Alice Birch), *Oh, I Can't be Bothered*, *The Ugly Sisters*, *The Frenzy* and *Set Fire to Everything!!!*, *Scary Gorgeous*, *Another Someone* and *The Honeymoon*. RashDash have won the Fringe First Award three times, as well as winning the Stage Award for Acting Excellence for *Two Man Show*. They have been shortlisted for an Off West End Award twice and for the Total Theatre Award for Experimentation and Innovation.

**Elana Seplow-Jolley** grew up in New York City, moved to the south of England for a while, and now lives in New York again. She is an associate editor at Ballantine Books, a poet, and a musician.

**Kamila Shamsie** is the author of seven novels, which have been translated into over twenty languages, including *Home Fire* (longlisted for the Man Booker Prize), *Burnt Shadows* (shortlisted for the Orange Prize for Fiction) and *A God in Every Stone* (shortlisted for the Baileys Women's Prize for Fiction). Three of her other novels (*In the City by the Sea*, *Kartography* and *Broken Verses*) have received awards from the Pakistan Academy of Letters. A Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, and one of *Granta's* 'Best of Young British Novelists', she grew up in Karachi and now lives in London.

**Ali Smith** is the author of fourteen novels and short-story collections, including *The Accidental*, *Hotel World*, *How to be both*, and the first two volumes of her Seasonal quartet, *Autumn* and *Winter*. She has been shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize four times and the Orange Prize twice, and has won the Baileys Women's Prize for Fiction, the Goldsmiths Prize and the Costa Novel Award. She lives in Cambridge.

**Deborah Smith** is a British translator of Korean literature, mainly fiction by Bae Suah and Han Kang. In 2015 she founded Tilted Axis, a non-profit press publishing contemporary Asian writing. In 2016 her translation of Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* won the Man Booker International Award. Her work on translation includes public speaking, consultancy, reviews and feature writing, prize judging, teaching, mentoring and guest editing. She is currently writing a book-length essay on translation, *Fidelity*, to be published by Peninsula Press in 2018. Deborah tweets as @londonkoreanist, but lives in Sheffield.

**Bae Suah** is a South Korean author and translator. Since her debut in 1993 she has published ten novels and five short-story collections, including *A Greater Music*, *Recitation*, *North Station* and *Nowhere to be Found*. Her fiction has been awarded the Hankook Ilbo and Dongseo literary prizes, and she has also translated books by Kafka, W. G. Sebald, Robert Walser, Fernando Pessoa and Clarice Lispector, all from German into Korean.

**Selina Thompson** is an artist, performer, writer and Artistic Director of Selina Thompson Ltd, whose work has been shown and praised internationally. Her practice is primarily intimate, political and participatory, with a strong strand of public engagement, which leads to joyous, highly visual work that seeks to connect to those often marginalized by the arts.

**Temi Wilkey** is an actor, theatre-maker and drag king. She is the co-founder and co-director of Pecs, the Drag King company, and regularly performs in their cabaret shows as Drag King Cole. As an actor, her credits include *How to Hold Your Breath* at the Royal Court, *The Comedy of Errors* at the National Theatre, *Hamlet* and *Cymbeline* at the Royal Shakespeare Company and *Jubilee* at the Manchester Royal Exchange. She is currently performing in the London transfer of *Jubilee* at the Lyric Hammersmith.

**Ashleigh Young** lives in Wellington, and works as a literary editor and teaches creative writing. Her first essay collection is *Can You Tolerate This?*, which won the Windham-Campbell Prize and the Ockham New Zealand Book Award for General Non-Fiction 2017.



In 2017, the Western world experienced a salutary moment of reckoning sparked by ‘revelations’ of sexual misconduct and assault within the highest echelons of power. From Hollywood to Westminster, titans fell. Their colleagues stepped forward, one by one, to make public statements about these ‘revelations’, dutifully expressing their shock and sorrow, their moral outrage. Some of us were surprised by how surprised everyone else seemed to be. Some of us thought about how we ourselves had known of this behaviour, to some extent, for years or even decades, and wondered how others managed not to know about it.

The subsequent explosion of interest in and support for the #MeToo campaign has been called a witch hunt. I find that pretty ironic. In part because of the misogyny baked into the concept of the witch; more so because the black magic practised by these perpetrators is all too real. To fear it is no superstition. And its makers are the worst kind of conjurers – cheap hacks in greasy suits, fooling no one, somehow still in business – but they are no witches. (I’d call you a cunt but you lack the depth and the warmth.) They rely entirely on us, their dull-eyed audience, individually and collectively failing to disrupt the show.

It hardly bears pointing out that in a world which actually valued the right of women not to be sexually assaulted, Donald Trump would never have been elected president. Nor in a world in which trans people, gender non-conforming people, and people of colour were accorded their rights as citizens and human beings. And perhaps in a world where he had not been elected, we wouldn’t be having any of these conversations about exactly how bad it has become, how casually we oppress and dehumanize each other. But let’s not linger on that; others have said it many times and better. And in these dark days, the real witches are rising. From Princess Nokia’s thumping paean to her

spiritual lineage, ‘Brujas’, to *Broad City*’s ‘Witches’ episode, aired three weeks after the Weinstein news first broke, via Rungano Nyoni’s mesmerizing debut feature, *I Am Not a Witch*, women are looking around them and reaching for their spell books.

Setting aside recent events, no excuse is required to celebrate the achievements of women and gender non-conforming people. The female gaze needs no justification: it is ambitious, intimate, dissident, euphoric, polyphonic and truthful. And it is open to all. When Jill Soloway spoke about the female gaze at the Toronto International Film Festival 2016, she was very clear that this is not a form exclusive to women. Anyone can make work which uses the female gaze – even the notorious, adorable *cis*males can do so. The female gaze is about how art imagines its subject, what it is capable of understanding, what it is interested in expressing. It is a creative principle founded on narrative empathy: a heightened responsiveness to the clues human beings carry about their person, and leave in their wake, about what it is to pass through the world as them. It is about the object becoming subject, the subject becoming gaze-receiver and gaze-returner. If you haven’t seen it already, pause here and look up Soloway’s keynote speech on the female gaze – it’s on YouTube.

The female gaze is not a lone wolf; there is no single female gaze. They are ancient and ceaseless and protean, and each gaze amplifies its sisters. Soloway’s own oeuvre is an excellent example of the female gaze at work, as are those of many of her collaborators. My mind reaches automatically for Andrea Arnold, whose films are always partly about how it feels to inhabit a body, how the world presses down against your skin. Bodies are something Eimear McBride understands too: desire and shame and trauma knitted deep into muscle and bone. And from Eimear McBride I think of Lucy McCormick as the Virgin Mary, sobbing on stage at the climax of





her exuberantly queered retelling of the Christ story, inconsolable as her only child is taken from her for the second and final time. And from here I think of Sharon Olds looking at her children asleep, feeling the unbearable specificity of love, the aching certainty of loving another person in the very marrow of yourself. Or I think of *All This Panic*, a gorgeous tonal meditation on adolescence, girlhood and very long hair. Or I think of Nina Simone on the old CD player in my mother's kitchen, telling a man I will never meet to do what he gotta do: letting him know exactly how much it hurts and inviting him to do it anyway. And when I'm done thinking of these, I might think of Elena Ferrante's toy dolls abandoned in the cellar, Francesca Woodman vanishing from the ground up, Patricia Lockwood cracking rape jokes, SZA longing for intimacy and yet for freedom, Yayoi Kusama surrounded by vast white nets as far as the eye can see.

The female gaze flourishes everywhere. Within the pages of this very magazine, you can see it in the tender violence, desperate bravado and defiant intimacy of Melissa Lee-Houghton's 'Marriage in Seven Acts Each Containing Sadistic Lovers w Deafening Howls of Pleasure'. You can see it in Chris Kraus's tracing of her own early attempts at self-expression, that which always costs us most. You can see it in Krishna Isha's examination of their own shifting privileges during transition, how public perception runs ahead of internal reality, pushing towards an illusory binary. You can see it in Abi Andrews's quietly numinous search for a new way of being in the land and of the land, or in Ira Brand's breathless, restless search for a new way of being in language.

This is not a *Five Dials* issue about the female gaze. It is an issue voiced by and seen through the female gaze. It is a snapshot, by no means comprehensive, and it is unapologetically a gateway drug. I hope it will send you off to investigate Sophie Mackintosh's

luminous debut novel, Selina Thompson's devastating performance art, Temi Wilkey's life-changing drag troupe, Deborah Levy's wise and witty memoir, Deborah Smith's whisper-tuned translations, Bridget Minamore's spoken word, Jackie Morris's gilded art, Lydia Davis's very short (and very unusual) short stories, Ali Smith's dazzling modernist fiction ... They are all magnificent. Jill Soloway tells us, 'Art is propaganda for the self.' *THE FEMALE GAZE* is propaganda for a reality lived by those born under the patriarchy but not served by it – which may, in truth, be all of us.

— Hermione Thompson

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*Winter* by Ali Smith (2017)

# Singing over the Bones

Abi Andrews

## Forest

Greedy souvenirs of euphoria: waking up in a wooden cabin every morning, to a different mountain. Pastel orange or cloud draped like cloak and hat or cut to pieces by light or disappeared completely by sky. Walking alone, deep in woods, excited and defiant to thoughts like *you're not supposed to, there are madmen* and *besides, wouldn't company be better?* Sitting on a log, in a forest clearing, full of crows.

A feeling of having come home, a spiritual home. Is this how the pioneers felt? Intoxicated by America's limitlessness? But this is a thefted feeling. My European blood spilled blood here. How then to tread a careful visitor, and how to write it? A feminist writer makes for an uncomfortable *flâneur*. How to write place when women and nature have both been non-autonomous subjects of the male gaze, noting down your contaminations rather than listing your conquests?

A small community of people, off-grid in the forest. Aera shows me how to tell the Doug fir with bark so thick-pitted you can dig your fingers in. She has charmed fingers; her garden bursts its fences, spilling languidly over. If you sing and talk to the plants, she says, they do better. Bees draw invisible topographies between her flowers, and hummingbirds hover at them, like the quivering tips of conductors' baton. There is a chapel bent from the vines of a flower particularly attractive to the hummingbirds, inside which you can lie in the grass and look up, trying to imagine as they assume position, beak inside bud, that they too are still; tapping into the timescales of hummingbirds, tricking yourself into convergent perception. As if their hotter heartbeats weren't drumming out a

world in more complex nuances; their perception a high speed camera, ours a flickering zoetrope.

Aera is asking, is what I'm doing too removed? Is it right to be carving out a good life in the wilderness, going after the white male pioneer trope, absolved of the incumbencies of wider society, when there is so much to be fighting in the cities? The exclusion of women from the wild stems from a narrative that casts women as inherently social in reductive evolutionary terms, having 'natural' instincts inclined towards care. At the basis of this is the dichotomy of individualism as masculine, collectivism as feminine. But collectivism is now a moral necessity.

It was women I found leading restorative work, and where they were, they were opening outwards rather than building islands, offering respite to those doing the work of resisting. This is why Aera started inviting in WWOOFers (Willing Workers On Organic Farms); feeling the tug of tendrils, pulling people in and reaching out. Her sharing of knowledge and the restorative powers of the land itself are like the hummingbirds and bees that weave a web in flight, into and out of her garden, taking bits of it off, impregnating the plants with transferred pollen, inextricable from the flourishing and abundance.

## Desert

I walk from the mud house in the red sand through a deep arroyo, stepping over plants bent by the memory of annual rain floods. I sidestep a tarantula that is crossing the dry river bed. She is rusty red, as though her brittle hairs were made of fine strands of copper. She has none of the unnerving jagged speed of an ordinary spider. She first runs



a little away from me, and then lies still with the desperate faith of small creatures, their last-ditch trust in destiny, lying in plain sight, awaiting fate to be decided by the larger and differently witted creatures. Maybe I will be confused, or maybe my eyesight will blunder on a still object – I will think her a stone. Or perhaps it's a try at pathetic vulnerability; by offering herself up, I won't be able to bring myself to kill her. Which I won't, because now I love her.

Arroyos are dry ephemeral river beds that fill with mountain and rainwater once a year, shocking the desert. The red soil of the high desert can't brace against the water, whose rushing torrents have carved scars in the mud and sand. But the plants have evolved so that their seeds can only germinate in this turbulence; they must be roughed up by rushing sediment, then quickly send down roots deep enough to survive the thirst that follows.

Pam works with rocks to help the land become more resilient, after the erosion caused by the building of the railroad in goldmine days. We build one-rock dams, carefully seeking out rocks that will interlock perfectly, to redirect the water on the dirt road that links them and their neighbours to the town. A neighbour, a loud man in a 4x4, pulls up and an altercation begins. He has been shoving aside her rock dams with the tractor he is using to bring the road into abeyance with brute force instead, undoing hours of her hot heavy work. He

says he is sorry for spoiling her pretty rock gardens.

Pam tells me she hates people, loves the earth. Did she move to the desert to run away from or towards people? She chose this piece of land because it needed love. But she also sends her tendrils outwards; she runs her home as a land restoration learning centre, teaching the vigorously tender work of laying rocks, shaping earth.

There are no islands; we are implicated by the wider world. In hand with this is the question of living in severed bliss at the same time that Trump is eroding native land rights and shrinking wild spaces, the UK having already saturated them. Making a claim to the seclusion and individualism that has always been the privilege of men, at the expense of other female and non-human allies, who suffer the brunt of patriarchy equally if not more.

### Forest

Sleepless in the straw-bale house because without seeing her I know she is there. Strange how you can *feel* poison in the room, a heavy pendant around the neck. Suspended still on her silken trapeze, in the ceiling corner a metre from the bed, black widow. From the shine of my head-torch she slinks into a small hole tucked into the corner, shying away from the light like she knows she is for darkness. She moves in a similar slow way to the tarantula; as if speed might give her away or debase her.



To my surprise, I slip into the nonchalance of exposure immediately. In fact there is something comforting in the way I can feel her emerge by darkness, and the vividness of her blackness is beautiful; that she warns you, asks for respect but asks it gently.

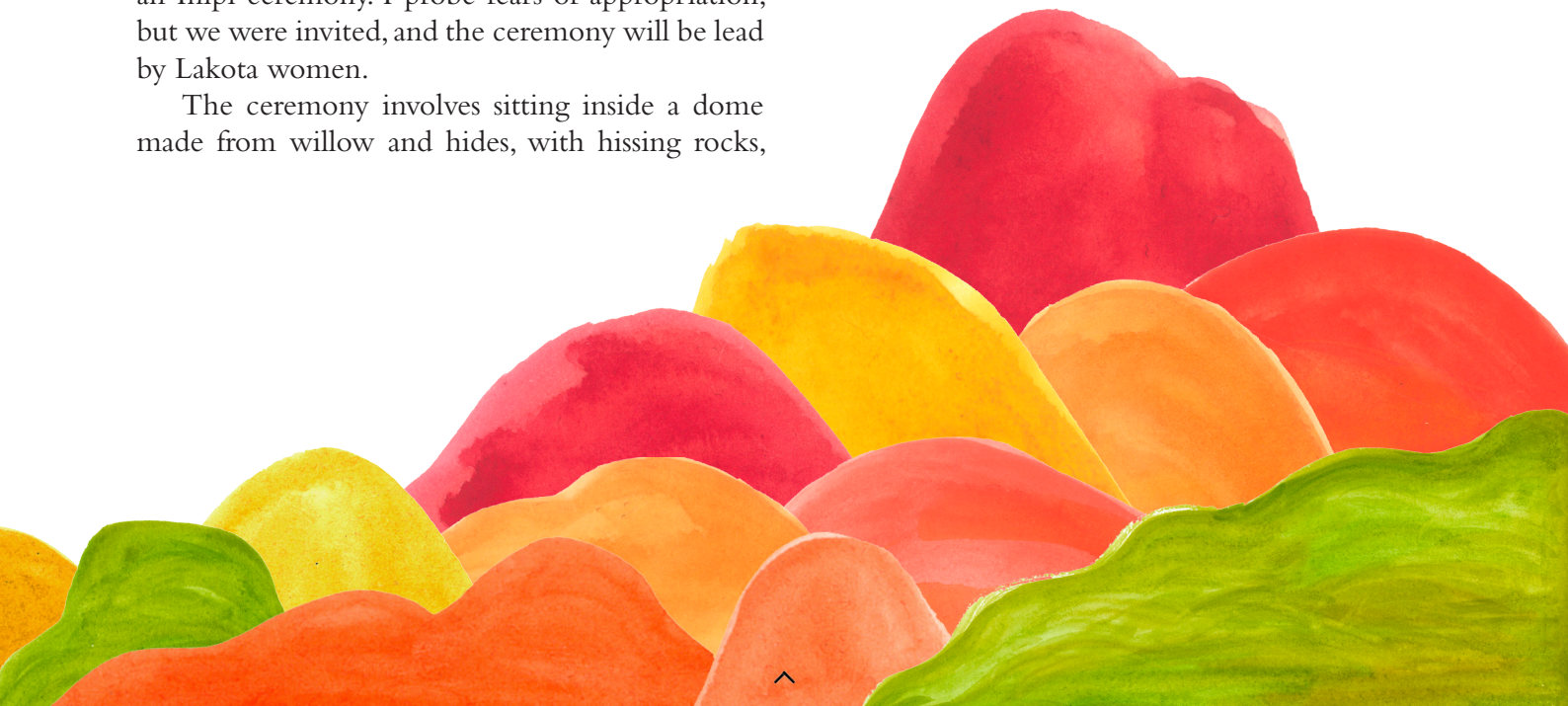
Redwoods are only found in California and one small valley in China, but they used to span the planet. Their thick bark is almost impervious to fire; could they be a tree to survive the inferno then, now that California is burning? Natives of the coast knew how to use destruction to nurture, burning the trees to remove excess foliage, which causes severe fire if uncontrolled. They lived seasonally inside living hollow trunks.

A forest fire decimated the surrounding land but stopped at the peace pole, which marks the boundary to sacred Native American land, now under the care of Elena. She offers it as a safe space, for California's fire victims, for LGBT souls, and she holds the space open for the Native people, who for whatever reason found themselves having to sell it. They have traditional ceremonies here still, and keep a close relationship with their caretaker. Women and two-spirit people are invited to an Inipi ceremony. I probe fears of appropriation, but we were invited, and the ceremony will be led by Lakota women.

The ceremony involves sitting inside a dome made from willow and hides, with hissing rocks,

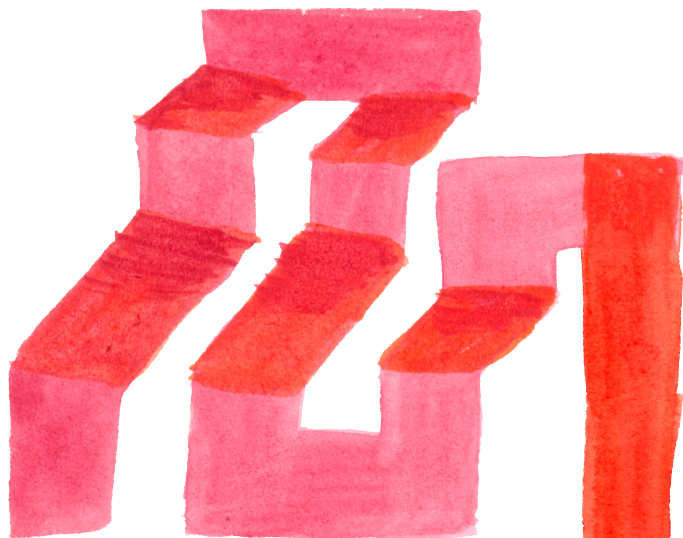
the ancestors, in a central pit. Lakota and English prayers and songs are said in the cleansing hot darkness. It is a purification ceremony; heavy trauma is channelled around, but we are burning down to nurture. We pray for individual traumas, some of the others so intense I can't stop crying, and earth traumas. It is dreadful and hopeful. The fire keeper tells us as we crawl out of the tent that we are brand new babies. *Inipi* means to live again.

I come across a story in Elena's library. It tells of a hairy old lady who is questionably human, who collects bones to sing over them. And as she sings over the bones, they begin to flesh out, the muscles of the dead creature that grew them gather together, and the animal's form becomes erect, a skin and then fur forming, tail unfurling like a waking fern, shudders passing through the creature as its lungs unstick and raggedly fill with air, wheezing like an accordion. It opens its eyes and runs away towards the horizon. While running, its hind legs elongate until it is no longer able to run quadrupedal. Its forelegs bend at the elbows as its fur drops from its skin. And then it is a laughing woman, and she runs naked through the forests, the deserts, the forests, and never stops running.



# What Will Cost You Most

Chris Kraus looks back on a younger self



I don't think I can describe the desire behind making these films any better than I did in a 1988 conversation with Sylvère Lotringer, published by a friend, Leo Edelstein in his magazine *Pataphysics* at a time when no one was interested. I had not yet started writing, and the desire behind them – to escape from unhappiness (i.e., a surfeit of emotion and content) into happiness (i.e., a clarity or form in which all these fragments of feeling and thought could be magically held) was still fresh. The desire was never fully resolved but I hadn't abandoned it yet.

Visiting graduate art programmes in Europe and London this year I was surprised by how many women I met who are still making these kinds of films, films that can be described as experimental, DIY, personal, poetic, abject. The technology's changed but the impulse to create this kind of order – delirious, dreamy, romantic, paradoxical, fraught – is still compelling. A terrible megalomania, an insistence on being present – even when one has no personal presence – through one's double, the film. Gripped by extreme sensitivity, atmosphere's everything. The background becomes foreground. An externalization: cutting instead of cutting. Much as I loathe the idea of a *feminine écriture*, I have to admit that the impulse to do this seems very female. Barbara Rubin a patron saint of this kind of film . . . fifteen-year-old girl given a Bolex transforms her isolate misery into *Christmas on Earth*.

Films that impressed me this winter: Ruth Novaczek's *Episode*, *Sense* and *Alibi* – short epics

composed of old and found footage held together by Novaczek's voice . . . Bereft winter landscapes and secrets – *my clothes were all wrong* – composed like a pop song; the terror you feel when everything's moving a fraction too fast. Lucy Pawlak's *The Inspection House (Training for the Family in How to Act)* – a feature-length pageant in which four performers masked in facial prosthetics – deranged hobbits all – enact the small cruelties encouraged in acting schools. Even with the relative cheapness and ease afforded by digital video production, these films are heroic achievements, mobilizing equipment and people for days and weeks at a time . . . attempts to encapsulate the whole world in this dinky form. 'Always do,' Simone Weil wrote, 'what will cost you the most.'

In Sheila Heti's novel *How Should a Person Be?*, the painter Margaux, depressed and grasping at straws, decides to make this kind of movie: 'I suddenly knew,' she confides, 'what I had to do to get rid of my bad feelings – not speak less but speak more, and not through you, but through myself. I had to try even harder for meaning. It was finally time to. I would make a movie . . . So I started filming, you know, using everything I had. Next I'll put the scenes in some kind of instinctual order . . . *Am I retarded? Am I retarded? Am I retarded?*' Margaux



concludes. ‘I hate power,’ the young Bernadette Mayer wrote in *Studying Hunger*, ‘except the power I have to show you something.’

I began making films when Ruth Maleczech, who I’d studied acting with for three or four years, looked at me and said: ‘I don’t think acting’s for you. I think you should make movies.’ She told me to watch Michael Snow’s *Wavelength*. I did. Watching Snow’s hour-long single-shot film – a slow zoom onto a couple inside a room – blew me away. By turns sombre and giddy, Snow’s film was a high joke, an ontological koan. It occurred to me that instead of repressing my analytical bent as an actress I could make movies, i.e., turn my head inside out and reveal thought without ever speaking.

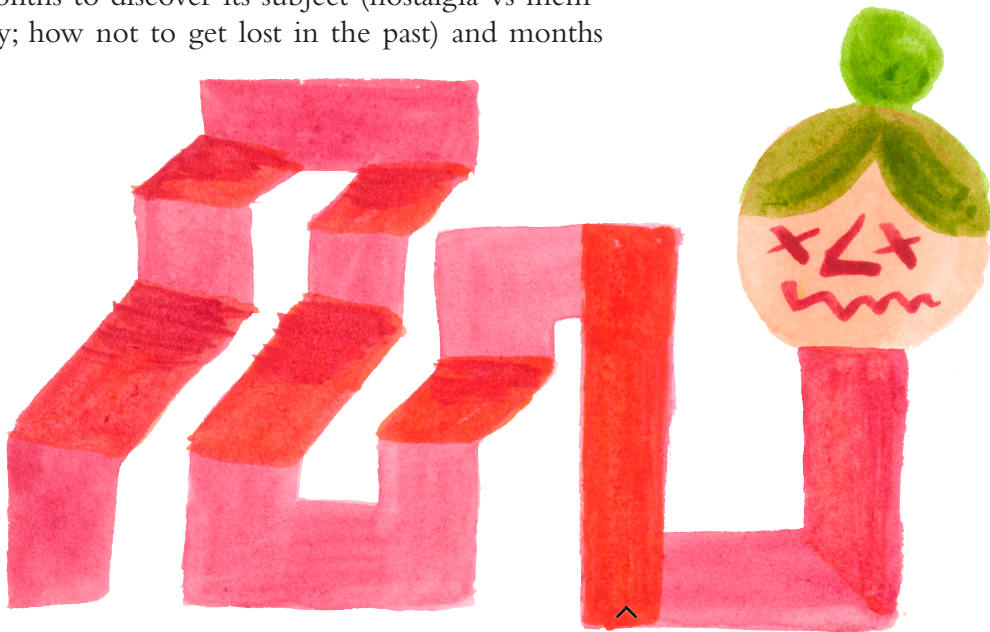
I borrowed a Super 8 camera and began shooting film on a trip home to New Zealand that summer. Each three-minute roll cost about \$20 with processing. I had no ideas except for using the camera to say what I couldn’t. Revisiting scenes of an adolescent psychosis, I walked through a large park and aimed the camera up towards some trees. The leaves on the branches were dense and the light moved very fast. When I viewed the two rolls on a borrowed Super 8 viewer I felt nauseous and giddy. This was it.

Making the film took a long time. It took months to discover its subject (nostalgia vs memory; how not to get lost in the past) and months

more to discover its form: a battle between words and pictures that began when I asked a philosopher friend, Irene Crofton, to write a text on this topic. I remember shooting words on an ancient word-processor in single-frame animation and being gripped by a certainty, then, that I had to bring twelve people to an abandoned hotel in the Catskills to act out *King Lear*. This idea struck me as either great or self-indulgent. I had already stopped topless dancing, was working in law firms for \$12 an hour and every two hours of work equalled six minutes of film stock and processing alone. I borrowed \$300 and the film was finally finished one summer, strips of Super 8 film cut, labelled, and draped over every available surface of my apartment.

In subsequent years my life became somewhat less marginal but my approach to making these films did not. They were rarely exhibited during the years they were made.

These films have nothing to do with me now. Their exhibition comes too late to feel like a vindication. Nevertheless it’s a pleasure – an abstract affirmation of a practice I’m no longer involved in but will never recant . . . emotional science, the giddy revenge of the ageless un-gendered young woman.



# What I am afraid of

Sophie Mackintosh



I am brushing my teeth and get interrupted halfway through. With my toothbrush held in my mouth I fall and it knocks out several of my teeth, bloodily.

With my legs in stirrups at the doctor's he says, *This will not hurt*, but it does hurt.

The television shows the latest disaster. Melting, drought. You do not say, *It will all be OK*.

Lounging in a hot bathtub of water, the ceiling gives way. I cascade through, naked, into my neighbours' kitchen, where they are eating. I die of embarrassment but also literally.

The child steps on to a rusty nail. Or puts dog shit in her mouth. Or swallows glass. Every day, a new twist.

In the supermarket, troubling gaps on the shelves. No milk. Handwritten signs say *BACK IN STOCK SOON*. The girl scanning my shopping is doleful.

I take the shortcut through the alley I never use and a shape moves in the shadows, coming towards me.

My shoelace catches in an escalator, my whole leg pulled down into sharp teeth, mangled.

A handbook on surviving emergencies is posted through our front door. My partner hides it on top of the sink. *You don't need to read that*.

A rat runs across our bed in the night, dense as a rabbit on my stomach.

I watch my cervix on a screen back at the hospital, a rosy sun. It is spotted with what looks like mould. The doctor says, *You do not have to look*. But I do.

A vast and disastrous *something*. The landscape re-configured. The army brought in to knock on all the doors, to tell us not to be alarmed.

The rat runs across the child's bed too.

I never live in a foreign country or seize the day. One day I wake up and realize it's too late.

The house is struck by lightning, which carries down the television aerial and explodes the screen.

When I come home drunk I leave the keys in the door, and we are robbed and killed.

The city is too dangerous. We have to move. The roads are jammed with people doing the same.

In a strange hotel somewhere south I say *I love you* into the silence but he does not return it.

The child becomes very sick. There are no doctors left. We sponge her forehead with rainwater gathered in an empty bottle and try to remain calm.

I fail everybody who loves me and always will.

There will never be anything more beautiful than that one clear morning in a city in Germany, years ago, where we walked the streets for hours. Which is to say, that was the best it got for us.

We have to bury the child in the depths of a forest. We are hardly strong enough to do it. The ground is too hard. I have not kept the family together.

I slice my finger down to the bone. I bleed in a way that doesn't stop. I am bleeding from everywhere.



You leave in the night. I walk on alone with my rucksack of dirty clothes, drinking from streams. I die from a water-borne parasite, throwing up until my face is the colour of wine.

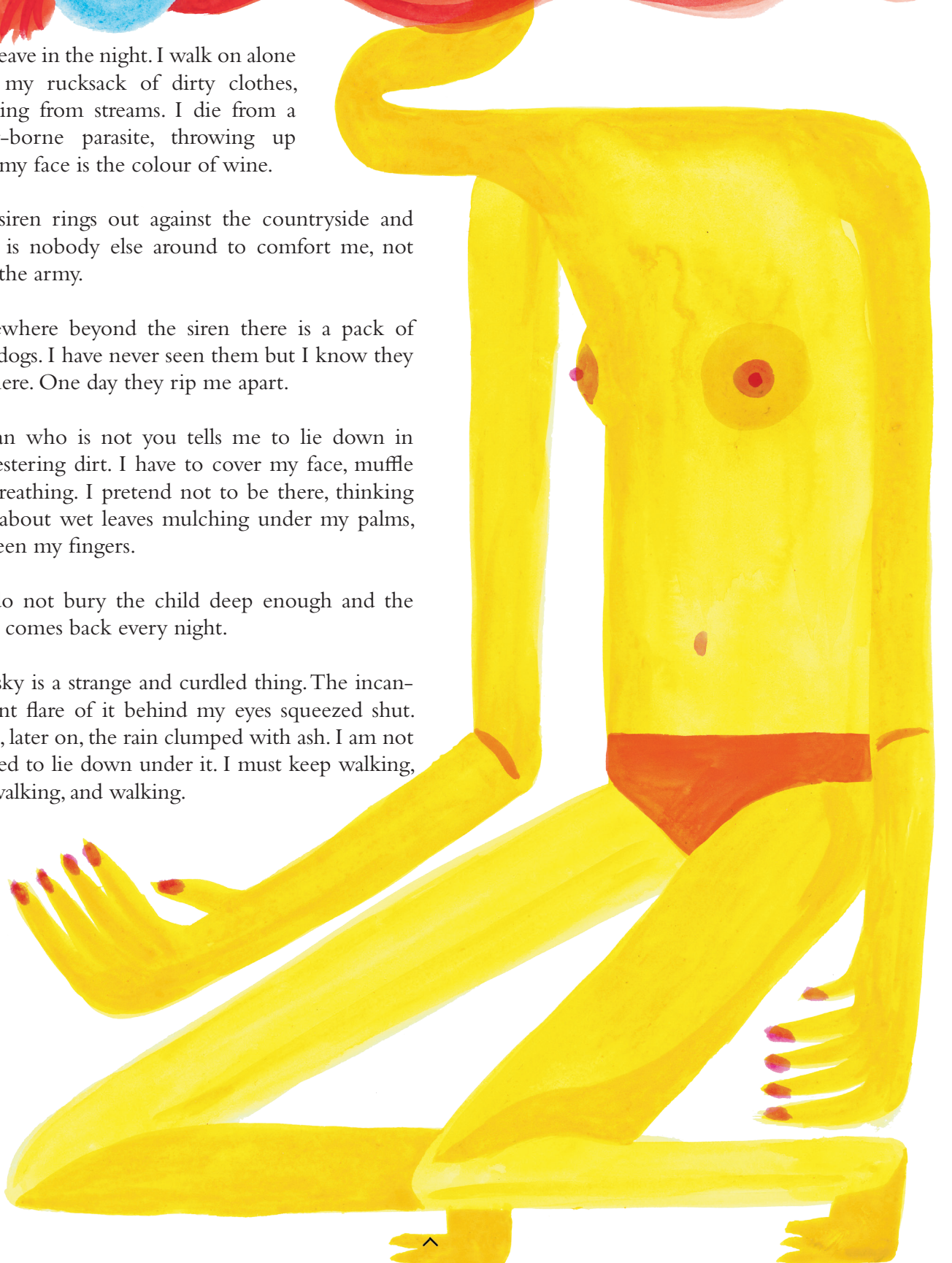
The siren rings out against the countryside and there is nobody else around to comfort me, not even the army.

Somewhere beyond the siren there is a pack of wild dogs. I have never seen them but I know they are there. One day they rip me apart.

A man who is not you tells me to lie down in the festering dirt. I have to cover my face, muffle my breathing. I pretend not to be there, thinking only about wet leaves mulching under my palms, between my fingers.

We do not bury the child deep enough and the ghost comes back every night.

The sky is a strange and curdled thing. The incandescent flare of it behind my eyes squeezed shut. Then, later on, the rain clumped with ash. I am not allowed to lie down under it. I must keep walking, and walking, and walking.





# Three Sisters

## RashDash on dismantling the canon

*We are a theatre company and we're about to adapt Chekhov's *The Three Sisters*. We're making it, in part, because it's a classic, so we decided to have a conversation – via email – about what that means.*

**Helen** Hi guys,  
So I was wondering...  
What makes a piece of art 'a classic'?

**Abbi** I think I should probably answer this by saying things like 'enduring themes' and 'what it means to be human'. There's probably something to do with craft and skill to say as well. I suspect that as a feminist theatre maker I'm supposed to have a complex relationship with 'the classics', which contains a love or respect for each individual work and what it has paved the way for, in spite of the fact that they are products of a patriarchal culture that depicts deeply damaging attitudes towards, and stories about, men, women, sex, sexuality, gender, race ...

When you say 'classic', I think: something that wasn't made about or for me. I think: something that was made by a man or men. I think: something that I can absolutely enjoy, but only if I turn off my politics/values. I think: something that I should probably see. I think: at some point, if we're going to make work with more resource and on a bigger stage, we're going to have to engage with the classics, because that's the only way to mitigate the risk of putting RashDash in front of a large audience. And I don't think that I want to have to go

through them – those plays and those men – to get to that stage.

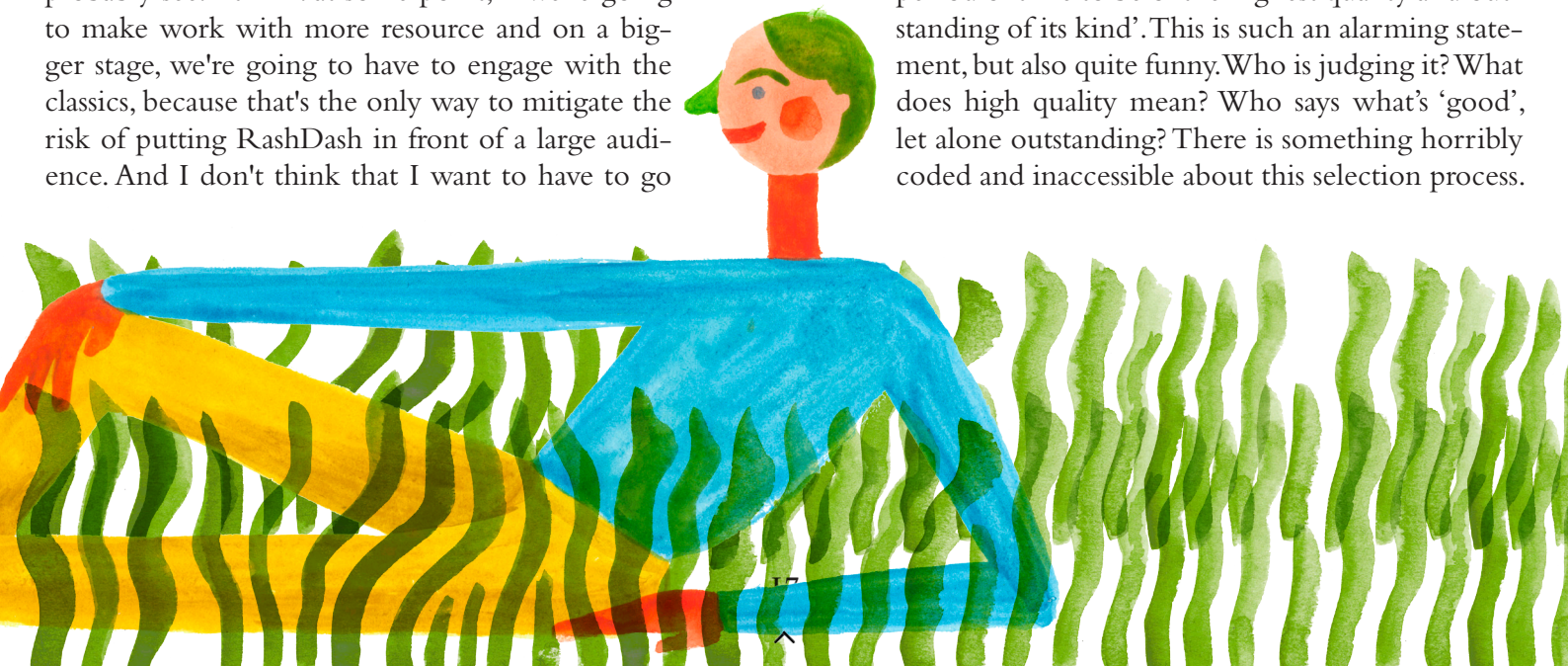
I read an article at the weekend about Jude Kelly leaving the Southbank Centre. She said, 'The reality is, the majority of the canon is created by men, and if the culture keeps on reiterating over and over again this idea that creativity is male, then it permeates absolutely everything else. And you have to do something. Saying you're a feminist is not enough.'

I've written mostly about theatre. But I'm going to add this: a white woman, painted by a white man, based on a story by a white man. The woman is mad and beautiful. The model gets so cold posing in the bath that she gets pneumonia. The model is also a painter, but this painting is the thing she's known for. That and being the sad, suicidal wife of Dante Rossetti.

What you saying?

**Helen** I am saying ...

When we describe something as 'classic' we promote it to a higher plane. A classic vase, a classic novel, a classic anthem, a classic neckline. The dictionary tells me that 'classic' means 'judged over a period of time to be of the highest quality and outstanding of its kind'. This is such an alarming statement, but also quite funny. Who is judging it? What does high quality mean? Who says what's 'good', let alone outstanding? There is something horribly coded and inaccessible about this selection process.



Someone asked me recently what my most embarrassing gap in cultural knowledge is. I immediately said that I haven't read enough classic literature. No Dickens, no Hardy, no Brontes even, and barely any Austen. I wish I had spent my youth lapping up these works rather than reading stories about babysitters' clubs and ballet schools. But I wasn't interested then and I'm still not sufficiently it seems ...

I still find that image of Ophelia so strangely alluring as well as disturbing.

**Becky** I wouldn't be ashamed of having missed vast swathes of the canon. I don't feel any closer to completing that challenge even after studying English Literature for three years. I read a fair few 'classics' at that time, and close together the stories can become pretty repetitive. The Greeks, Chaucer, Shakespeare, the Restoration Comedies – and then there were the whole modules dedicated to relatively modern tales of sad, middle-aged, white men – and when the lecturers running the seminars fit this exact description ... I'm not sure I read more than five texts by women on that course, out of hundreds.

Saying that, I've always had a physical reaction to being in big old buildings full of texts, in a nervous/excited way. I still get that. Being surrounded by that much classical knowledge and possibility in rooms so grand and impressive ... And there is human connection to be found there – that people decades and decades ago could feel the way we're feeling.

**Helen** What annoys you most about classic plays?

**Abbi** Oh, the inevitable embedded patriarchal values?! Every time a show with mostly male characters, or a show that depicts women as servants or sex objects or nutters, gets done again, it makes it harder for us to move away from those tropes. Not just in culture but in life, too. And they make up so much of the programme in our big theatre institutions. I have no problem with stories written by/for/about white men – I absolutely want to engage with them – but when the majority of classics have been authored by that particular group and classics take up so much space, it limits space for new work made by a more diverse group of people.

And I feel like we have to do one! I might be wrong?! Maybe not everyone has to have a go at making a classic – but it feels like something people do when they want a certain kind of career ... And I'm strangely jealous of the theatre-makers that can have an uncomplicated relationship with them! I wouldn't be able to tackle a classic without dismantling it, without making a version that was about my adaptation of it. And I'm tired of making work in opposition to oppression – I want to make work that doesn't have to question how my gender shapes me, but can just be about other things. I know I'm speaking from a place of huge privilege when I say that. I'm white and middle class and there's lots about my experience of life that gets portrayed as universal.



Thinking about the female gaze...I want to gaze out of female eyes and not talk about being female. And not talk about the internalized male gaze. I think that CLASSICS get in the way of that because they are forever showing you the world through a man's eyes but being labelled as 'the world' or 'truth' or 'the universal experience'.

**Helen** But do that many people actually go to the theatre in the UK? Do the parts women play and unhelpful tropes that are replicated have that much of an impact on culture for anyone outside a relatively small bubble?

**Abbi** Enough people go to the theatre for it to matter, I think. But, hey, everyone keeps saying that theatre is a dying art; maybe that's because we stage so many plays by dead people?

**Helen** So why are you choosing to make *The Three Sisters* if classics stand in the way of the female gaze?

**Abbi** Because I want to make a classic and there are three of us and we all want good parts. How many other classics have that? They're not even that good – the men get most of the lines.

No. I think history is important and I think culture is important. I want to feel like I belong to it and it to me. I want to wrestle with it until we find something to say to each other.

**Becky** 'My soul is like a wonderful grand piano of which the key has been lost,' – Chekhov.

**Abbi** Oh, the void! The void!

**Helen** There is something genuinely enticing in the classics that's more than just achieving kudos/a bigger platform...something sumptuous...so, am I actually just attracted to wearing a beautiful costume and poncing about, sounding important?

**Becky** Maybe, as much as you're attracted to ripping it apart.

'Medicine is my lawful wife and literature is my mistress. When I get tired of one I spend the night with the other,' – Chekhov

**Abbi** 😞

**Helen:** Cock off, Chekhov.

**Abbi** I feel we should finish this by saying something that balances the argument. Someone say something about how much they love the poetry of *Macbeth*...

**Helen** 😞

**Becky** 😞

'He got Colgate on his teeth  
And Reebok Classics on his feeeet' – M.I.A.



# On *Meatless Days*

Kamila Shamsie on an overlooked classic

*Meatless Days* by Sara Suleri Goodyear was first published in 1989, when I was sixteen years old, and in all the years since I've struggled to find ways to adequately explain its singular brilliance to others. What's it about? Friends say when I press them to read it. Well, that's hard to say exactly. Ok, what kind of book? Fiction or non-fiction? Non-fiction. Is it a memoir? Yes but no but yes. If a memoir, it's the most self-effacing kind, divided into chapters that are all ultimately about people Sara Suleri has loved. Siblings and parents and friends and lovers – she turns her attention to each one in turn, her observations humorous, affectionate, razor-sharp, often exasperated, sometimes heartbroken. She is a writer who knows that you can't separate a life from its contexts; as she's telling us the story of her Welsh mother teaching Jane Austen in Pakistan, or her grandmother whose most intimate relationships are with God and the Devil, she is also writing about womanhood and nation and history. So a father who unexpectedly takes to prayer can be understood as a man trying to resist the turning tide in Pakistan that pulls religion out of people's homes and makes it a political force on the streets, and a sister whose life ends tragically early illustrates 'the price a mind must pay when it lives in a beautiful body'.

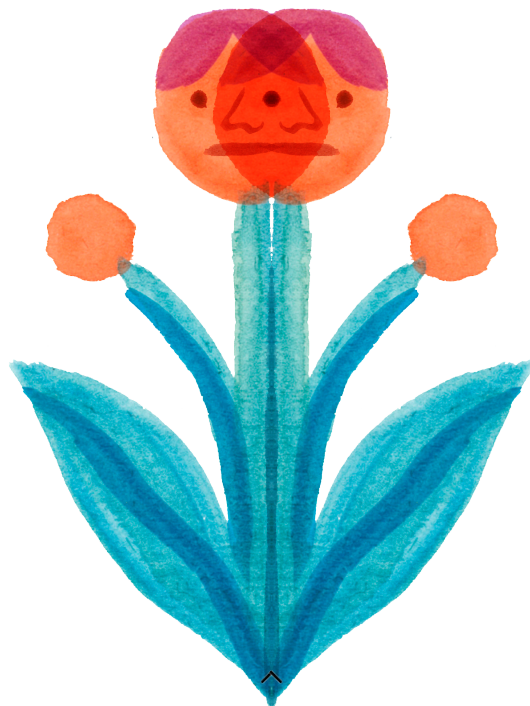
The sentences in *Meatless Days* are always intelligent, always elegant, sometimes baffling. 'My audience is lost, and angry to be lost,' Suleri acknowledges – or teases – as early as the second paragraph of the book. The high wire act of her metaphorical language, the discarding of linearity, does sometimes force you to strain to extract meaning, but far more often she brings together the literal and the metaphorical to create sentences of precision and wit, such as this one, about bilingualism: 'Speaking two languages may seem a relative affluence, but more often it entails the problems of maintaining a second establishment even though your body can only be in one place at a time.'

But for all the acuity of her observations about the world and the life of the mind, it's when she turns her



attention to her own family that she is at her most profound and moving. In a broad sense, you could say *Meatless Days* is a book about what people do to our lives by being in them. But if you dig deep down, it's a book about what people do to our lives by ceasing to be in them. The deaths of Suleri's mother and sister – both killed in distressingly similar ways, two years apart – form the heart of the book. Her sister's death in particular gives rise to some of the more heart-shaking writing about love and grief I've ever read. 'We have managed to live with ourselves, it seems, making a habit of loss,' she writes near the end of the book, thinking of the many years that have passed without her sister. Such a quiet line, but how sorrowfully it echoes long after you've finished reading the book.

*Meatless Days is published as part of the Penguin Women Writers series: four forgotten classics selected and introduced by Kamila Shamsie and Penelope Lively to commemorate the centenary of women getting the vote in Britain.*



# Five Gazes

Selina Thompson is not impressed  
by your diversity trends

anxiety for this artist. I can never quite seem to stay ahead, am never as grounded in the radical as I would like to be. The language our communities use to critique those with power and status slips through our fingers, is overused to meaninglessness. A treadmill of words, used up by the end of each calendar year: radical, intersectional, privileged, decolonized. There are times when it feels as though our work is also consumed and wrung out. It is hard to keep faith.

What happens when the gatekeepers become bored with identity? What happens when they decide that we, the marginalized, are at critical mass, and they return to the white, male, cis-het default?

I will still be Black.

I will still be an asexual cisgender woman.

I may still be working class. My family definitely will be.

I may still be fat.

I will still be one of Johanna Hedva's sick women.<sup>1</sup>

I will still be here.

Will the capitalist gaze?

## 2.

I'm a performance maker and artist from Birmingham. I do the job that I do because it is the closest I get to feeling free.

It is a job with an intimate relationship to many, many gazes.

The price of freedom is constant vigilance. If the community is vigilant together, then perhaps we are free together. But if the members of a community that are most vulnerable must do the work of vigilance for those closest to the hegemony, it is no longer freedom. It is the status quo.

Our gaze (radical, rigorous, aching for change) is work.

## 1.

So-called 'diversity' (the supposed desire for the world of work, particularly the world of creative work, to have as wide a range of people within it as possible, with a specific focus on addressing historical imbalances based on gender, race, sexuality, disability, neuro-diversity, age and, in a few, rare cases, immigration status. Usually well intentioned, often performative) has been circular in motion for the last seventy years or so. It ebbs and flows, peaks and declines, usually in tandem with other social moments. We strike while the iron is hot. This is why the archive is so important, why all activism, all movements, must be intergenerational. We have to learn from previous mistakes and miscalculations. We must put down roots for when the tide goes back out.

This is a constant source of anxiety for the marginalized artist. Or at least it is a constant source of

3.

I'm watching a documentary about the artist Carmen Herrera, whose work was 'discovered' when she was eighty-nine. I like her. She is sharp and to the point, with a beautiful clarity of phrase. Her way of speaking is like her art: refined and focused. The film is called *The 100 Years Show*; you can find it on Netflix. The man behind the camera asks her if she likes talking about her art, and she says no. 'You have to art about art!'

I have a small tremor of panic when I hear this. I, like many artists of colour, write about art all the time. Mine, and others.

Partially this is because it so rarely feels like anybody else writes about it properly. When my show *salt.* is in Edinburgh, I ache for Black criticism, even if in the process the work is torn apart. I just want someone who is expert in the themes the show explores to reflect on it. When Alexandrina

Helmsley writes her reflections for *The Sick of the Fringe*, it feels, for me, like a long exhale.

There is a growing body of Black British theatre and arts criticism, largely led by women and femmes: Salome Wagaine, Bridget Minamore, Project O, Hannah Black, Travis Alabanza, Malik Nashad Sharpe, Nicole Acquah. Black-led companies such as Tiata Fahodzi commission and champion blog posts that reflect on work politically and critically. This work influences and goes viral, spins threads of assent and enthusiasm across Twitter.

Doing this work is not without risk. When, in 2014, I wrote a blog post in response to my experience of Brett Bailey's *Exhibit B*, an immersive representation of a human zoo, I was bombarded with outraged and abusive emails until around April 2015, at which point I took the article down.

Last year, the Orange Tree in Richmond staged *An Octoroon*, Branden Jacobs-Jenkins' prickly, stinging exploration of American theatre's racial stereotypes. The work was universally lauded by exclusively white critics – but there was a quiet, persistent rumble of dissent from some audience members who happened to be both Black and British. At the time, I was particularly struck by how Salome Wagaine's thoughtful critique of the work pre-empted a similar response: she even went so far as to explicitly state that this was not 'a community response'.<sup>2</sup> It is territory laden with landmines, landmines not only for us, but also for those we are assumed to speak for.

The safe space, in my experience, is always the more politically rigorous space. Protected from the public glare, the critique found in WhatsApp groups and email threads flourishes. Here, the work is spoken about, but so are the audiences and the front-of-house staff. No punches are pulled, nothing is held back. People disagree, fiercely. This is not a utopian, community response. It buzzes with knowledge, the Black gaze unleashed.

I always wanted to make art that took the conversations I only ever felt able to have with other Black people and made them public. Sometimes, I think I've pulled it off. Other times, I read back over the messages and realize there are still so many things that need saying that we have not, cannot, say publicly. What I have learned, perhaps thanks to *Exhibit B*, it is not safe to say. Audre Lorde's 'your silence will not protect you' is oft quoted, and she is, as always, right; but choosing where you will speak, and how, might help me pay my rent and save me from feeling the prickle of anxiety every time I check my phone.

Carmen Herrera's words remain with me, but arguing against them is the knowledge that, in the right hands, critique is also art. A few days after I watch the documentary, I catch sight of bell hooks' *Outlaw Culture* on my bookshelf, and my doubts are stilled.

Critique can be the reworking of the oppressive gaze, an act of political bravery, if we can only hold our nerve.

4.

What the culture reviews establishes what the culture values.

Lyn Gardner says this during a panel talk when I'm a slightly younger artist and it sticks with me. Now, I find myself wondering what relationship this statement has to the current state of theatre's gaze, and wanting to rewrite it. I want to write:

who reviews the culture  
 how they review it  
 whether they are paid to review it and how much  
 who reads it  
 who is assumed as their audience  
 who is listened to and who is dismissed . . .  
 is what defines the culture.

This is what wheedles its way into the rehearsal

room – and it is this which shapes not only what the culture values, but what the culture is. These things come together and compile theatre's gaze: who we make our work for, and what we assume they need to know, and will already know.

The writing of a review is often a singular task, but the dismantling of a hegemonic gaze is communal work that breaks spaces open. Without this work, it is so easy to dam the flow of diversity when it is at its shallowest and most precarious.

5.

I am at the Tate Modern. I am gazing at *We Apologise for the Delay to Your Journey* – a Tube map that diligently archives Black British art. We discuss the work, six Black women. We discuss our industry. We argue, we disagree. I am thrilled by it.

The gaze is in flux here. It shimmers, re-forms, twists and spins as we spar and parry, thrust and deflect, all the while binding the art and our collective history in this work.

We remake the gaze.

1 'The Sick Woman is all of the "dysfunctional", "dangerous" and "in danger", "badly behaved", "crazy", "incurable", "traumatized", "disordered", "diseased", "chronic", "uninsurable", "wretched", "undesirable" and altogether "dysfunctional" bodies belonging to women, people of color, poor, ill, neuro-atypical, differently abled, queer, trans, and genderfluid people, who have been historically pathologized, hospitalized, institutionalized, brutalized, rendered "unmanageable", and therefore made culturally illegitimate and politically invisible' – Johanna Hedva, Sick Woman Theory

2 'I seek no pleasure from being a contrarian, but I ultimately remain surprised by how little I could empathise with the bulk of what was taking place on stage. Since watching, I have found myself asking how they rehearsed using the word "nigger", or how many times they would have blacked and redded up during the course of the run. And worrying, too, that articulating these thoughts might make me come across as uncultured, not contemporary enough to appreciate the deftness of the work.' Salome Wagaine, 'An Octoroon'



# Swallow

## An extract

Bridget Minamore

Elizabeth's name begins, like all names, as a weight. Her mother spots it one day – sees it perched on the corner of a church pew – and despite knowing this was coming, knowing it couldn't stay away for too much longer, the appearance of Elizabeth's name still shocks her mother at first. *Really*, Rebecca thinks, *really?* Rebecca always imagined she wouldn't be like Elizabeth's grandmother, wouldn't be the sort of African woman to find the name for her first daughter in an English church.

Rebecca's own name was an acknowledgement of Yaa's status as one of the early Catholic converts. She was a heathen, those first priests said, but the good Lord's sanctuary was something Yaa found easy to adopt.

From the early days of their marriage, Yaa's husband would squeeze the flesh that folded on the back side of her stomach until it was purple and sore and bruised beneath the surface, revelling in the feel of his fingernails kissing one another despite the barrier of her skin. But when the missionaries were told there was a young woman in the village who could understand anyone eventually – *even you white men, no one knows how but she has a gift, you keep her forty days she will know enough words to insult you* – that was the morning Yaa was taken, twenty-two years old and newly pregnant, from her husband.

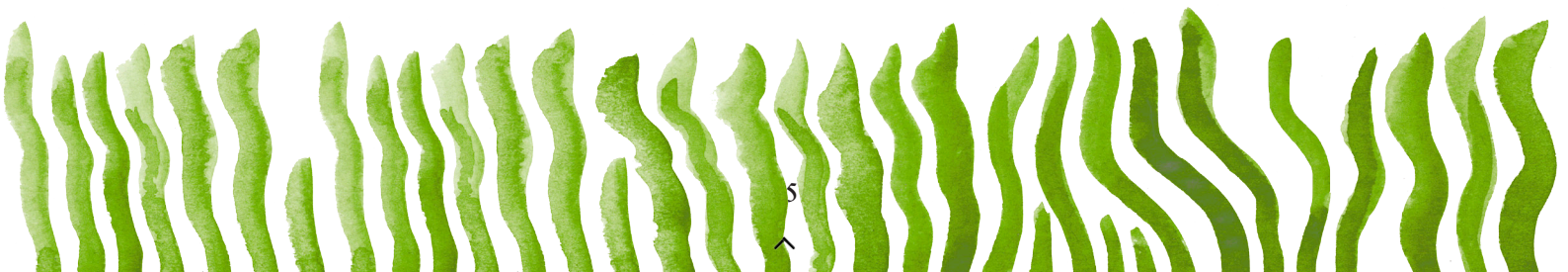
Yaa did not see the man again, not even in the eyes of her daughter who, conveniently, looked nothing like him. The day that marked five months since Yaa's husband was bribed with two younger wives in exchange for his first was the day he died from the venom of a snake bite as he walked through the undergrowth on the outskirts of the village, was the day Yaa was taught the English word for widow, was the day Yaa was asked if there

was a Twi word for bastard, was the day Yaa spotted Rebecca's name crouching impatiently on the altar of the hastily built Catholic church in the village square. *It's a sign*, Yaa's cousin said. *You have no husband now, and this same day you see your child's name and it is a white one.* Yaa smiled.

Some four decades later and three thousand miles further, Rebecca spots Elizabeth's name on the corner of a church pew. She is startled, yes, but not surprised. An English church? Just like her mother? Still. A name is a name. Rebecca had been so desperately grateful – in that way only not-yet-mothers can be – to hear her unborn child's heartbeat the week before, that she hadn't given too much thought as to when its name would finally come. But here it was. Perched on the corner of a pew, an as-yet-undefined shape with no real colour – *wait. That's a lie.* Like the names Rebecca would glare at when her friends announced their pregnancies five, ten, even twenty years ago in some cases, this name is almost, *almost* the shape of the country she is standing on. The name reminds her of displacement, of movement, of learning *you still say words funny sometimes, don't be embarrassed though, loads of you lot don't speak English proper* from her work colleagues, in those early days, cleaning inner-city offices in the light of the early morning.

Elizabeth's mother – Rebecca – begins to smile. *It is happening.* In a couple of months her daughter will finally come to be, and here is the proof. Here is an almost-name making its presence known.

Of course, Rebecca has been in possession of an almost-name that belonged to a future-child before. The first time back home, nineteen years old and in hindsight far too foolish to flirt, or understand what her collarbones did to grown men who should have known better than to know



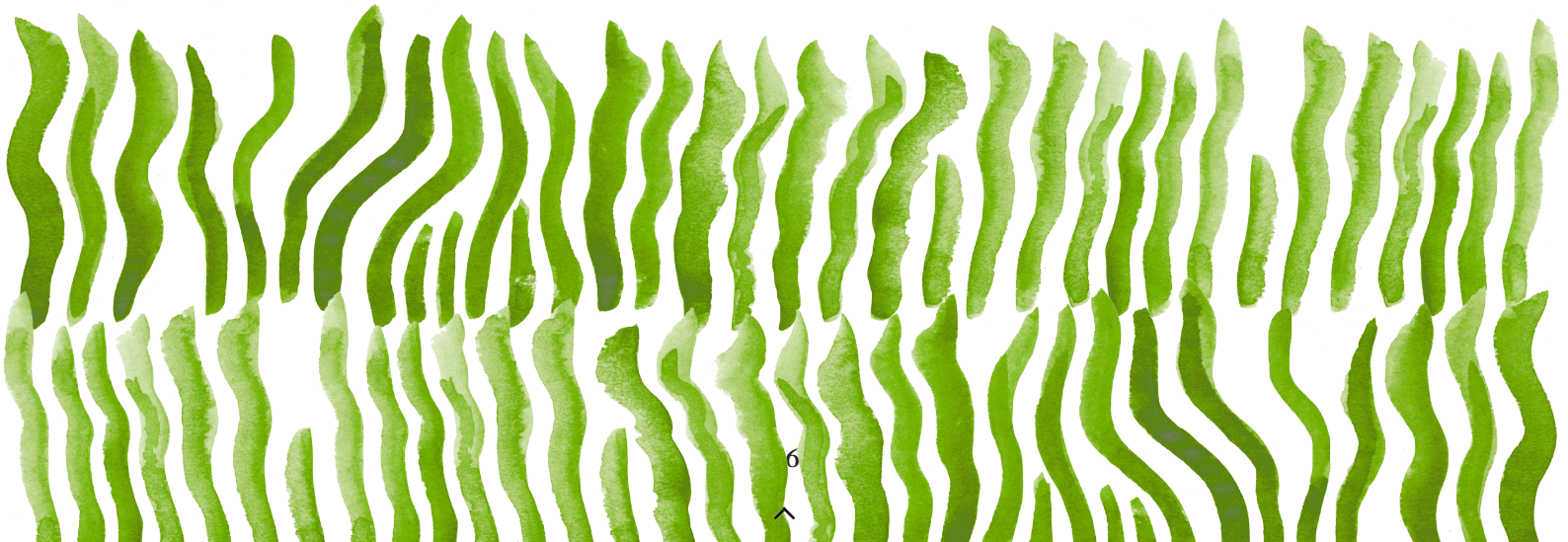
her, or unbutton the sixth button on her best dress, or realize what a name appearing meant until she was bleeding in the Korle-Bu Teaching Hospital bathroom one Wednesday afternoon. The pin-prick-sized name – so small she hadn't seen it yet – had followed her in, suddenly growing bigger and bigger and bigger as Rebecca, with horror, understood that the future-child she didn't even realize she had been carrying was being lost.

An hour passed, maybe two. When it had become apparent the future-child had left her, totally, had stained itself across the soft skin of the inside of her thighs, Rebecca cleaned herself up with her tights (quickly taken off, soaked in cold water), dressed herself, closed the toilet seat in the cubicle with the least graffiti on the walls, and sat down. The name was now enormous, twice the size of her head perhaps, and rested heavily in the palm of her hand, kissing the brown lifelines with the weight of lost promise. Rebecca tried to stop thinking of all the names she could have given the future-child, if only to stop the damned thing getting any bigger. But she couldn't block them out, and with every *what could I have called you*, child, the name rose like tea bread bought from the roadside in her village back home. Instead, she knew what it was time to do. She was scared, yes, but there was nothing else for it. The name would not let itself be left here or disposed of elsewhere; she had heard enough stories of women losing their minds, steal-

ing other children's names because they had successfully abandoned a past-almost-name and grew to regret it. So, opening her mouth wide, wider than she thought possible, wider than possible under any other circumstances, Rebecca swallowed her miscarried past-future-child's almost-name in one suffocating, heavy gulp.

There is a pain that only a mother who swallows the name of a past-future-child can understand. The name (and the pain) sticks to the inside of her chest, punctures her heart through her left breast. *Don't move, don't breathe too much, Rebecca, it'll hurt you more if you do.* That's what Yaa told her daughter when Rebecca finally turned to her for help. It was two weeks later, and the pain had grown so much she was sure she was losing her mind. All Rebecca's mother did was squeeze her. Yaa did not chastise her daughter, nor did she make sentences with the words *sex*, or *shame*, or *older*, or *stupid*, or *married*, or *wrong*, but instead squeezed Rebecca so long and so hard and so tight and so honestly the name suddenly came back up through Rebecca's gullet and fell to the kitchen floor with a silence like the sound of a baby who has cried for too long.

*Look at it, Yaa said. Look at it well-well. That is your past-future-child's name. You tried to swallow it but you must never swallow the name of a dead future-child – or even, God forbid, just a dead child – because the name will stick to your heart like a snail on the side of*



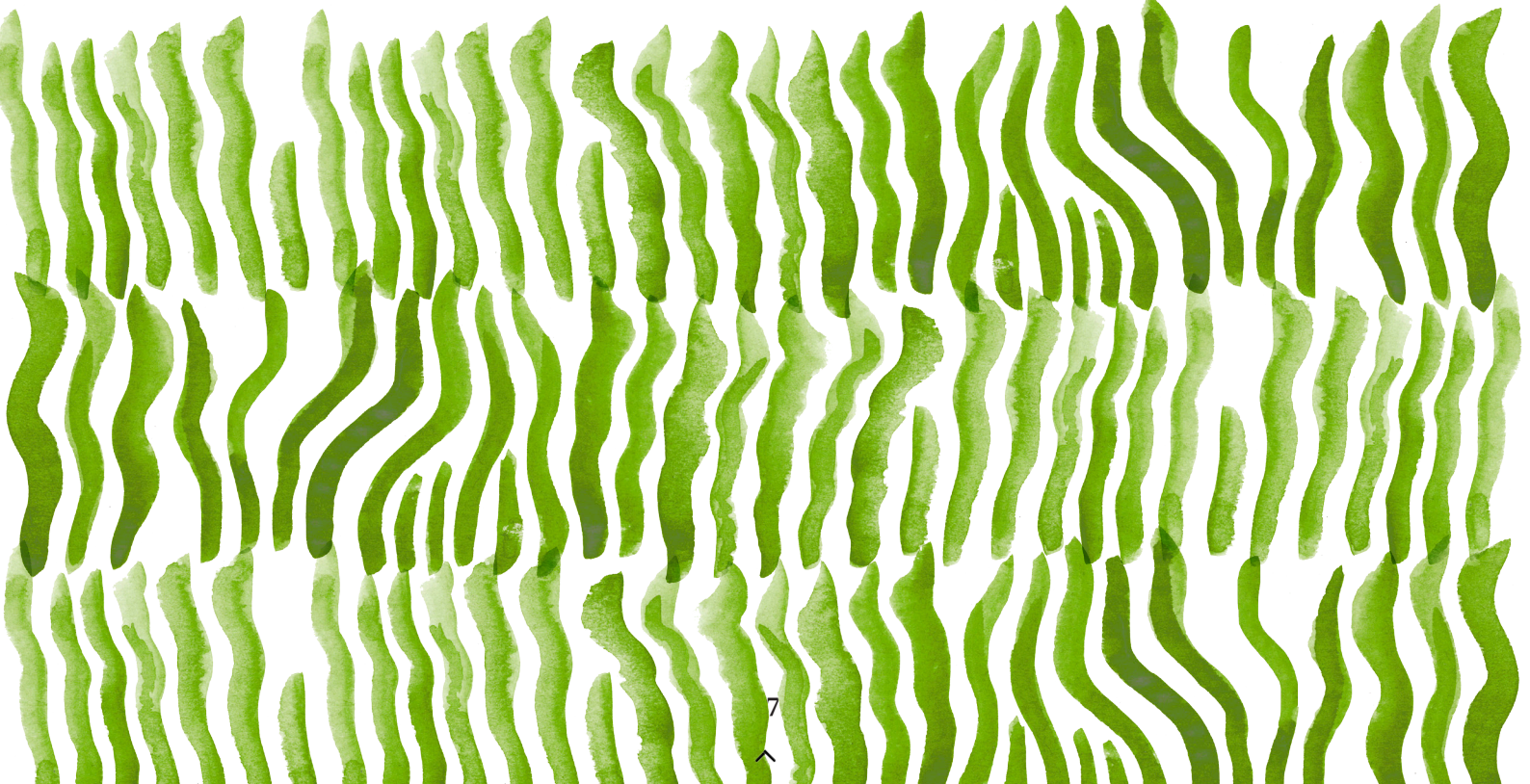
*a crock pot, or public humiliation, or glue. When your future-future-children die – and they will die, because the women in our family are cursed to never be mothers of many – you must never swallow their names straight away. Keep the child’s name in your mouth, let anyone who speaks to you see it sitting there, and one day when you are so used to the feeling of it and the shape of it and have stopped caring about strangers seeing your grief peeking through that gap in your front teeth, and the name has become small enough to swallow accidentally, then and only then will it be time to swallow the name.*

Rebecca listened to her mother. When Yaa finally stopped squeezing her, Rebecca picked the past-future-child’s name up from the kitchen floor, wiped it against her mother’s dress, spat away a speck of dirt and placed it in the corner of her mouth.

At first the name was so big, Rebecca could not speak for the mass of it. She returned to college immediately, her determination an acrylic nail, hard-edged and digging into her palms and refusing to be yanked away from the bed it had found itself in. It was awkward, of course, to be so full of grief for a past-future-child at such a young age,

but Rebecca remembered her mother’s words and refused to hide it, or herself.

For weeks, the name stayed the same size, bulbous and hulking, casting strange shadows when the sun was low in the sky. It contorted the shape of her body, made her pause before saying hello. But then, one day, Rebecca realized the past-almost-name was getting smaller. The guilt at this knowledge made it grow again, only slightly, but then once again the name started to shrink. It took a year, in the end. A year for the past-almost-name that belonged to Rebecca’s past-future-child to become so small Rebecca no longer even thought of its mass in her mouth. Yaa had warned her the time was coming, told her daughter that it was important not to keep the name in her mouth forever *because those women, those women find themselves with mouths full of lost possibilities, you know, and that’s enough to make you mad.* And so one morning, when the sun felt bright and her grief at the lost possibility of a child had settled into something still painful but far more manageable inside her chest, Rebecca thought to herself: *This is a thing I can swallow.*



# The Phantom of Femininity

In conversation with Deborah Levy

**Five Dials** Is there such thing a thing as the female gaze?

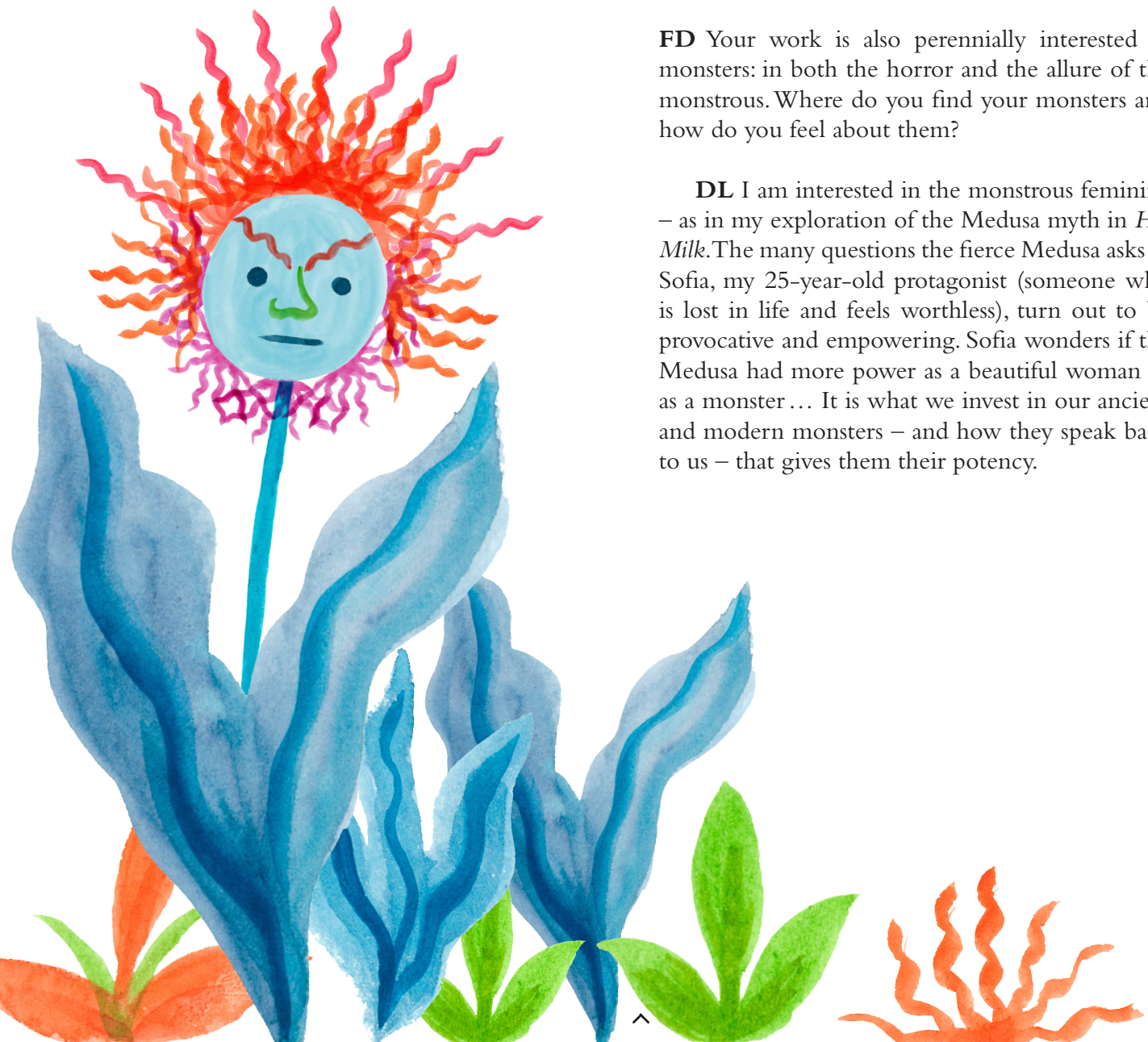
**Deborah Levy** Yes, there is definitely such a thing as the female gaze. Simone de Beauvoir said it best: ‘Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with the absolute truth.’ This is still going on – as if there is one subjectivity and it is male.

**FD** Mothers and daughters recur as a theme throughout your fiction, from Isabel and Nina in *Swimming Home* to Sofia and Rose in *Hot Milk*. What draws you to examine this relationship?

**DL** It’s usually a conflicted relationship and that’s more interesting to write than a harmonious relationship. I do love writing dialogue for mothers and daughters. This is partly to do with the way women and girls are so witty, of course.

**FD** Your work is also perennially interested in monsters: in both the horror and the allure of the monstrous. Where do you find your monsters and how do you feel about them?

**DL** I am interested in the monstrous feminine – as in my exploration of the Medusa myth in *Hot Milk*. The many questions the fierce Medusa asks of Sofia, my 25-year-old protagonist (someone who is lost in life and feels worthless), turn out to be provocative and empowering. Sofia wonders if the Medusa had more power as a beautiful woman or as a monster... It is what we invest in our ancient and modern monsters – and how they speak back to us – that gives them their potency.



**FD** Literature is a lens through which we come to understand ourselves – and the right sentence can break something open in its reader. Your own work is full of sentences that do that. Which books have done that for you? Which would you pass on to the next generation?

**DL** Thank you. All the same, I'd prefer the next generation to pass books on to me.

**FD** Finally, is there such thing as 'female' writing?

**DL** I don't know about that. I mean, I really don't. On this matter, here is a quote from *The Cost of Living*:

*Serenity is supposed to be one of the main characters in old-fashioned femininity's cultural personality. She is serene and she endures. Yes, she is so talented at enduring and suffering they might even be the main characters in her story. There were not that many women I knew who wanted to put the phantom of femininity together again. What is a phantom anyway? The phantom of femininity is an illusion, a delusion, a societal hallucination. She is a very tricky character to play and it is a role (sacrifice, endurance, cheerful suffering) that has made some women go mad. This was not a story I wanted to hear all over again. It was time to find new main characters with other talents.*

*The Cost of Living* will be published in hardback on 5 April 2018



# The Benefits of Time

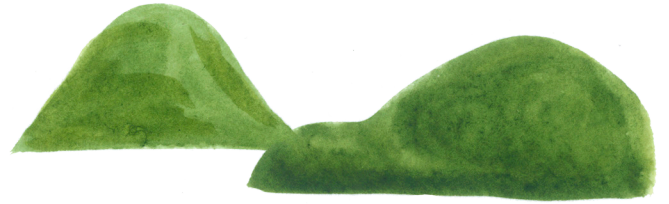
Nadia Albina



I've wanted to be an actress since I was nine. I remember being in the attic of my primary school in a drama class and loving it. The school used to be a private house so the attic was small and cosy, and we sat cooped up in a circle near the window. I can still see the red of our matching blouses, the dogtooth skirt of my uniform bunched up against the girl sitting next to me. We were playing a game about how people show their feelings: anger, love, happiness. Simple enough, but the freedom to express emotions, to let another person understand how you were feeling and why, felt like a real departure. It felt like being able to tell the truth. And it was a brilliant feeling, being watched and watching other people. Acting, I decided, was the one thing I was really good at.

I became obsessed with going to the cinema. I loved the tingle of excitement when the lights went down and the MGM lion roared, and would dream about being on that big screen too one day. But at secondary school that confidence was challenged by a reality that, in my childish enthusiasm, I hadn't accounted for. I had been born without my right forearm.

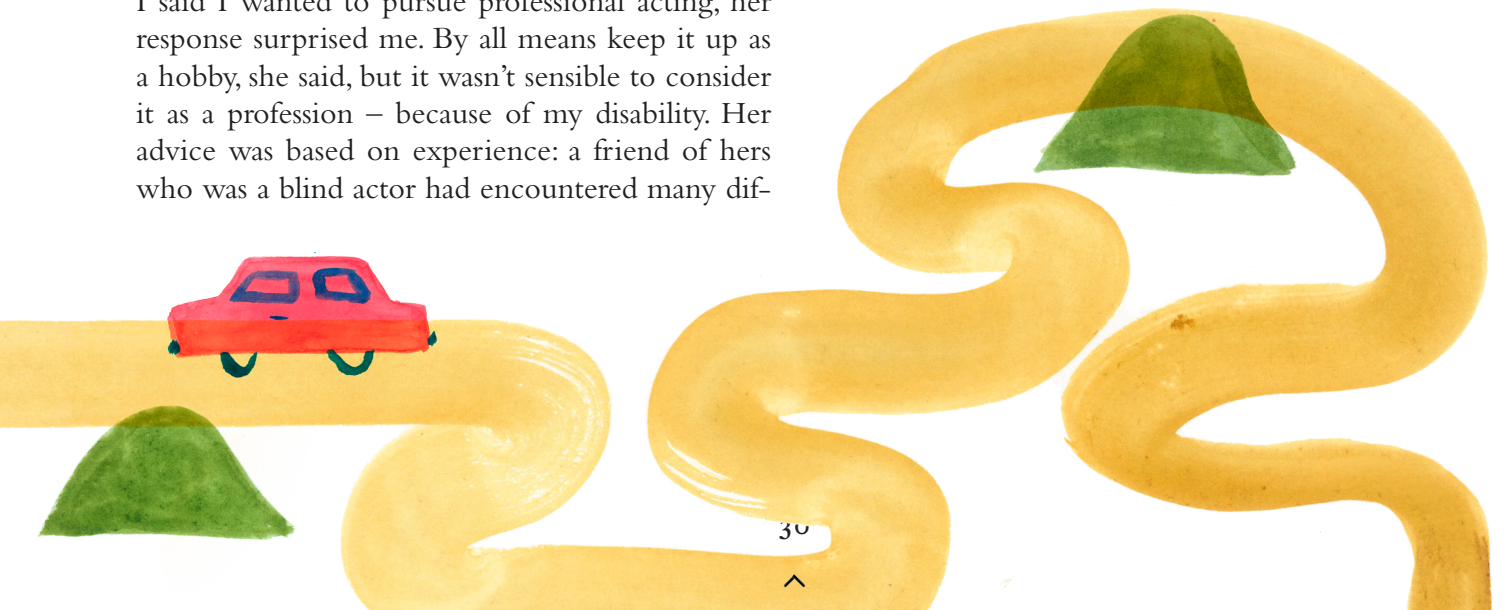
I carried on with drama throughout secondary school but, around the time of my GCSEs, my drama teacher took me aside for a chat. She was always enthusiastic and supportive, but when I said I wanted to pursue professional acting, her response surprised me. By all means keep it up as a hobby, she said, but it wasn't sensible to consider it as a profession – because of my disability. Her advice was based on experience: a friend of hers who was a blind actor had encountered many dif-

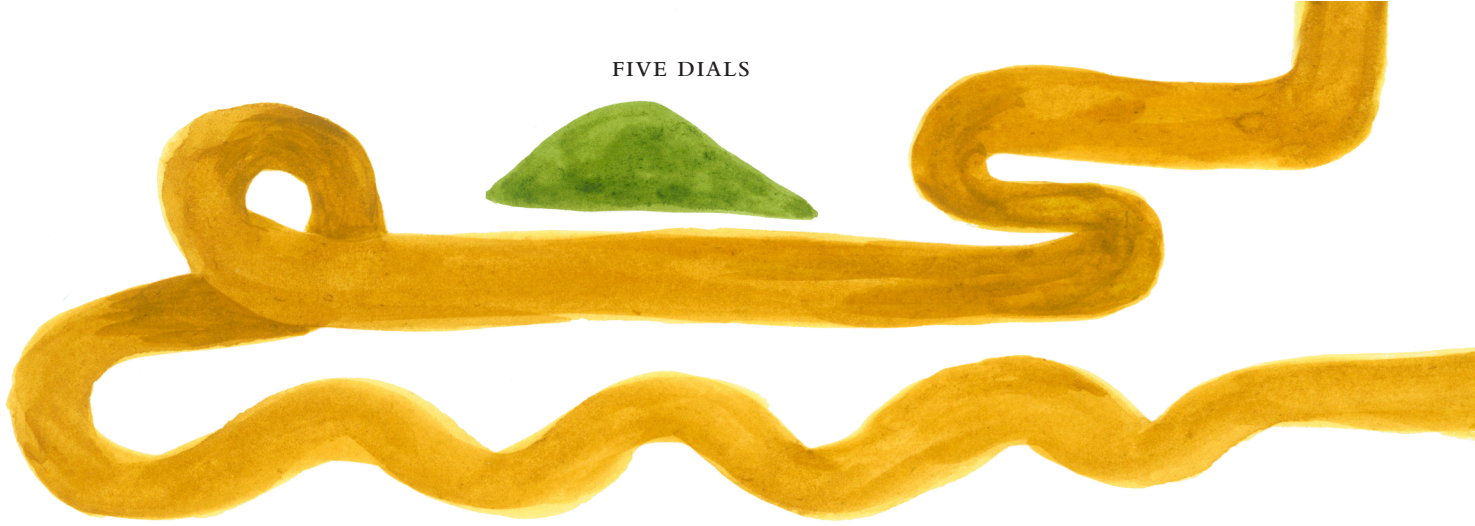


ficulties and closed doors in the profession. It was a shock. And though I trusted her, though I looked up to her, my only thought was: *I'll show you.*

With hindsight, I look back at my response with embarrassment. But it wasn't an entirely negative one. That stubbornness was a reaction to many underlying issues – which I would unpack years later in therapy – but it did give me the energy and focus I needed to keep going. I can see now that Mrs Campbell was being protective and was sincerely trying to help me, but what fifteen-year-old thinks like that? I ignored her: I carried on performing in school plays and then applied to study English and Drama at university. But though I got on to the course, once there I didn't get into any plays at all. I spent two years thinking I was no good at acting – feeling more isolated and uncertain than I ever had before.

In my final year of undergrad, I decided at the last minute to apply for drama school. I'd left it so late that only one school was still accepting applications. On the day of my audition, I immediately liked the vibes I got from the school. I was early, so early that I arrived before the panel, who all rocked up about five minutes before we were due to start. They didn't take themselves too seriously and I felt





that might be a good fit for me. Two weeks later, I opened up the letterbox and sitting there was a fat envelope with the drama school's stamp on it. I literally screamed with joy.

For two happy years I diligently took everything in. Looking back, I wish I could have told myself to chill out and not be so bloody earnest, but I suppose that's how time works. You feel like you're learning the craft of a thing systematically, through lessons and conscious effort, but you don't always see how fundamental the simple passage of time is. Twelve years on, that person in their mid twenties is almost unrecognizable. I was so impatient, not ready to relax and be myself. And although I knew it would be difficult out there in the real world, nothing could have prepared me for what it's actually like.

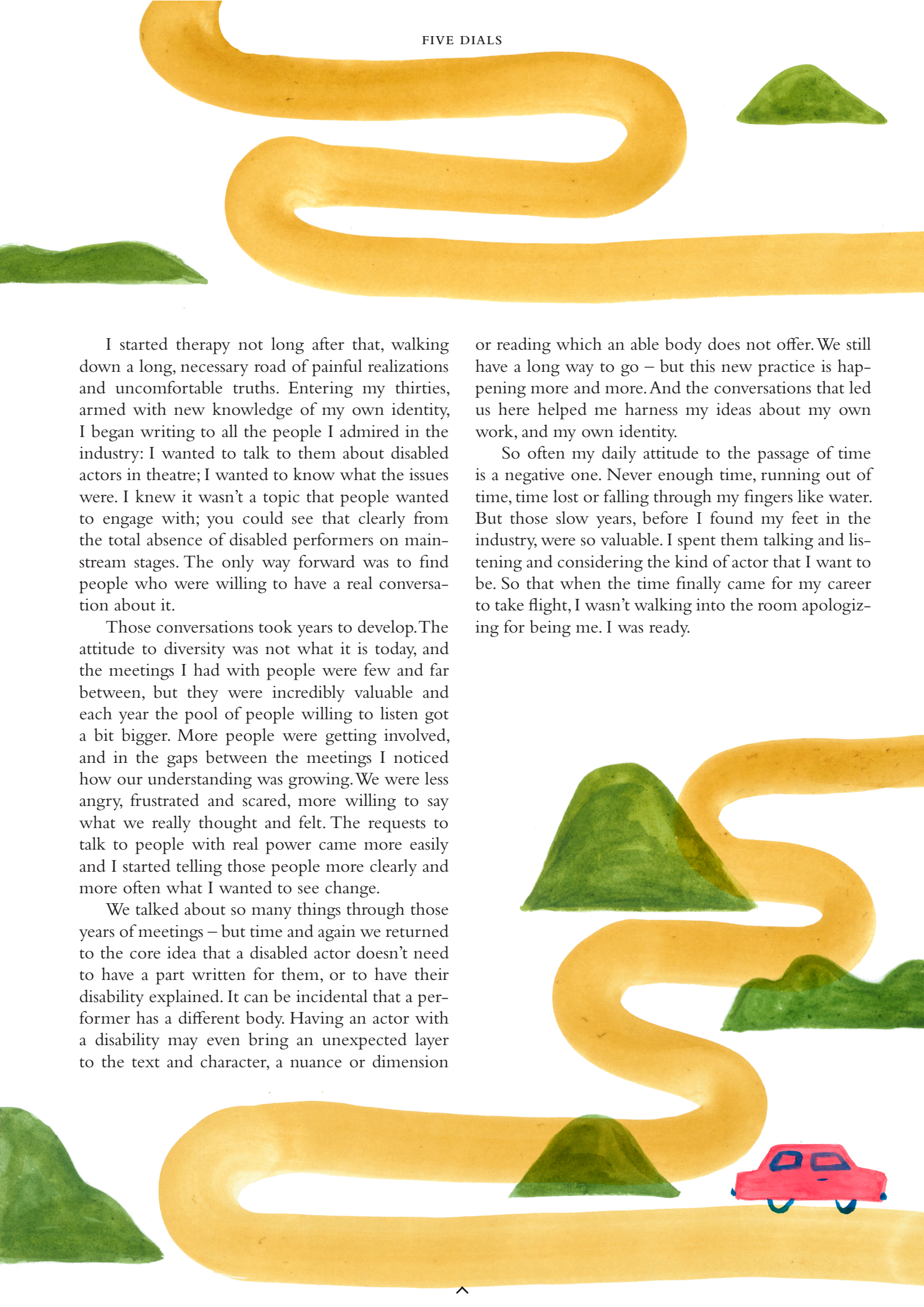
In the final term of drama school, where it becomes all about the industry and agents and so on, I got a prosthetic. I thought it would help my chances in an industry that felt impenetrable even without giving casting directors an extra reason to say no. I hadn't worn a prosthetic since I was a teenager. They were cumbersome and uncomfortable. Wearing one after so long, I didn't feel like I was being me. I was compromising, and hating it, because I was so scared that I might never work without this silicone thing at my side, making me look the same as everyone else.

After graduation, I stopped wearing the prosthetic but still felt very much that a part had to be written with a disability for me to be considered. In rare cases, I was cast in a 'normal' role, and I clung to those young directors who thought more

broadly, who could see beyond my arm. But I spent a lot of years questioning myself. One time I was doing a show with Graeae, an inclusive theatre company that places disabled actors centre stage, and one of the other actors challenged me in the stairwell. He saw that I didn't identify as someone 'different'. I did not really consider myself to be disabled. He was right: all my life I had been able to do what other people could do. Physically, it hadn't really affected me. But I had to start seeing myself that way, because the outside world certainly did. Being a good actress was not going to be enough. The quicker I got to grips with the reality of my disability, the better.

That talk changed everything for me, challenging my ignorance about disability politics. I realized I had spent my life facilitating others' needs, with no connection to what I was feeling myself. All the suppressed feelings of anger about how I was stared at every day, the comments people made in the street, were bubbling up to the surface. In the past I had laughed them off – that felt like the safest way to protect myself – but I couldn't ignore them any longer.





I started therapy not long after that, walking down a long, necessary road of painful realizations and uncomfortable truths. Entering my thirties, armed with new knowledge of my own identity, I began writing to all the people I admired in the industry: I wanted to talk to them about disabled actors in theatre; I wanted to know what the issues were. I knew it wasn't a topic that people wanted to engage with; you could see that clearly from the total absence of disabled performers on mainstream stages. The only way forward was to find people who were willing to have a real conversation about it.

Those conversations took years to develop. The attitude to diversity was not what it is today, and the meetings I had with people were few and far between, but they were incredibly valuable and each year the pool of people willing to listen got a bit bigger. More people were getting involved, and in the gaps between the meetings I noticed how our understanding was growing. We were less angry, frustrated and scared, more willing to say what we really thought and felt. The requests to talk to people with real power came more easily and I started telling those people more clearly and more often what I wanted to see change.

We talked about so many things through those years of meetings – but time and again we returned to the core idea that a disabled actor doesn't need to have a part written for them, or to have their disability explained. It can be incidental that a performer has a different body. Having an actor with a disability may even bring an unexpected layer to the text and character, a nuance or dimension

or reading which an able body does not offer. We still have a long way to go – but this new practice is happening more and more. And the conversations that led us here helped me harness my ideas about my own work, and my own identity.

So often my daily attitude to the passage of time is a negative one. Never enough time, running out of time, time lost or falling through my fingers like water. But those slow years, before I found my feet in the industry, were so valuable. I spent them talking and listening and considering the kind of actor that I want to be. So that when the time finally came for my career to take flight, I wasn't walking into the room apologizing for being me. I was ready.



# The love languages of Donald J. Trump, Jr.

Elana Seplow-Jolley



**On June 3, 2016 at 10:36AM,**

**Rob Goldstone wrote:**

Good morning Don,  
Emin just called and  
asked me to contact you,  
with information that would incriminate Hillary  
and would be very useful to your father.  
It is ultra-sensitive so wanted to send to you first  
since you are a sensitive man.

Best,  
Rob Goldstone  
This iphone speaks many languages

**Donald Trump Jr. 10:53 AM:**

Thanks Rob,  
I appreciate that. I am on the road  
at the moment—seems I am always on the road—  
perhaps I will just speak to Emin first.  
Seems we have some time and  
if it's what you say  
I love it so  
especially later in the summer  
when the honeysuckle is in bloom.

Best, Don  
Sent from my iPhone

**Rob Goldstone**

**Monday, June 06, 2016 12:40 PM**

Don,  
Let me know when you are free to talk about this Hillary info –  
you had mentioned early this week  
so wanted to try to schedule a time and day.  
Why wait when life is so brief?

xoRob  
This iphone speaks many languages





**Donald Trump Jr. 3:03 PM:**

Rob could we speak now?  
It feels like it's been a timeless century,  
my heart overgrown with lichen and green moss.

Donald J. Trump Jr.

**Rob Goldstone 3:37 PM:**

Let me track him down in Moscow.  
What number should he call?  
Yes, a century.  
You may be always on the road but  
I find myself eternally in pursuit  
of a foreign contact, a phone number--  
of what often I do not know.  
Sometimes at night I wake with my heart  
pounding in my chest as though an enormous  
animal sat upon me as I slept,  
belaboring my breath.  
Waking in a panic I call your name.

This iphone speaks many languages

**Donald Trump Jr. 3:38PM:**

My cell thanks.  
[REDACTED]  
It's on vibrate for you.  
Do you remember that Rufus Wainwright song?

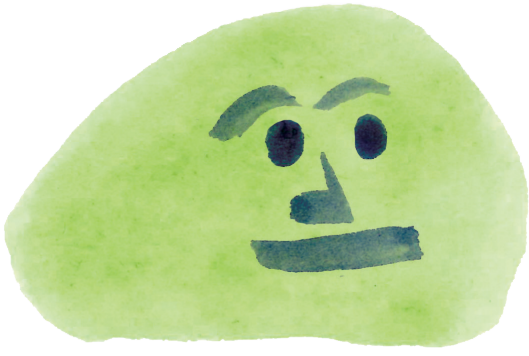
Donald J. Trump Jr.  
Executive Vice President of Development and  
Acquisitions The Trump Organization

**Rob Goldstone 3:43 PM:**

Ok he's on stage in Moscow but should be off within 20  
minutes so I am sure he can call.  
RE: Rufus Wainwright lyrics, I do—  
Electroclash is karaoke too

xRob  
This iphone speaks so many languages





**Donald Trump Jr. 4:38PM:**

Rob thanks for the help. These days can leave me feeling so helpless.

Do you ever feel helpless? Like a minnow in an ever-widening stream? Lately I have felt that way— as though I have never swum against any current and could not if I tried. No, I am sure you have never felt that way. Something in the lilt of your eyebrows, the convicted set of your chin.

xD

**Rob Goldstone Jun 7, 2016, 4:20 PM:**

Dear Don,  
Hope all is well  
Emin asked that I schedule a meeting with you and the Russian government attorney from Moscow for this Thursday. I know that eddying wildness of which you speak. Sometimes I pick up the phone to call your [REDACTED] cell but then wonder what I would say when I hear your voice. I slip it back in my pocket as the screen goes dark. I believe you are aware of the meeting – and so wonder if 3pm or later on Thursday works for you? I assume it would be at your office.

This iphone speaks many languages when the voice cannot

**Donald Trump Jr. 5:16 PM:**

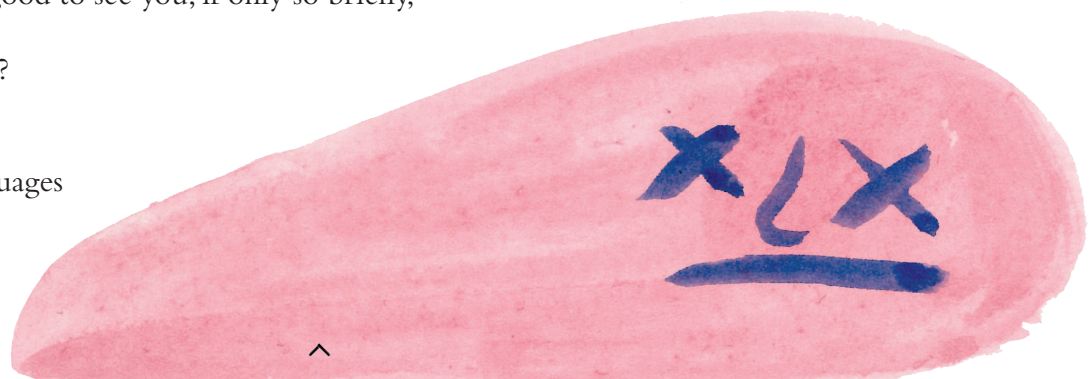
How about 3 at our offices? Thanks rob appreciate you helping set it up. I hope you did not take my comment about your eyebrows badly. I only meant there is an easy angle to them.

D  
Sent from my iPhone

**Rob Goldstone 5:19 PM:**

Perfect won't sit in on the meeting, but will bring them at 3pm and introduce you etc. Will be so good to see you, if only so briefly, in the waning afternoon light. How could I ever take offense?

xRob  
This iphone speaks many languages



**Donald Trump Jr. 6:14PM:**

Great. It will likely be Paul Manafort,  
my brother in law (sigh, I know),  
and me.

xx D  
Sent from my iPhone

**Rob Goldstone June 08, 2016 10:34 AM:**

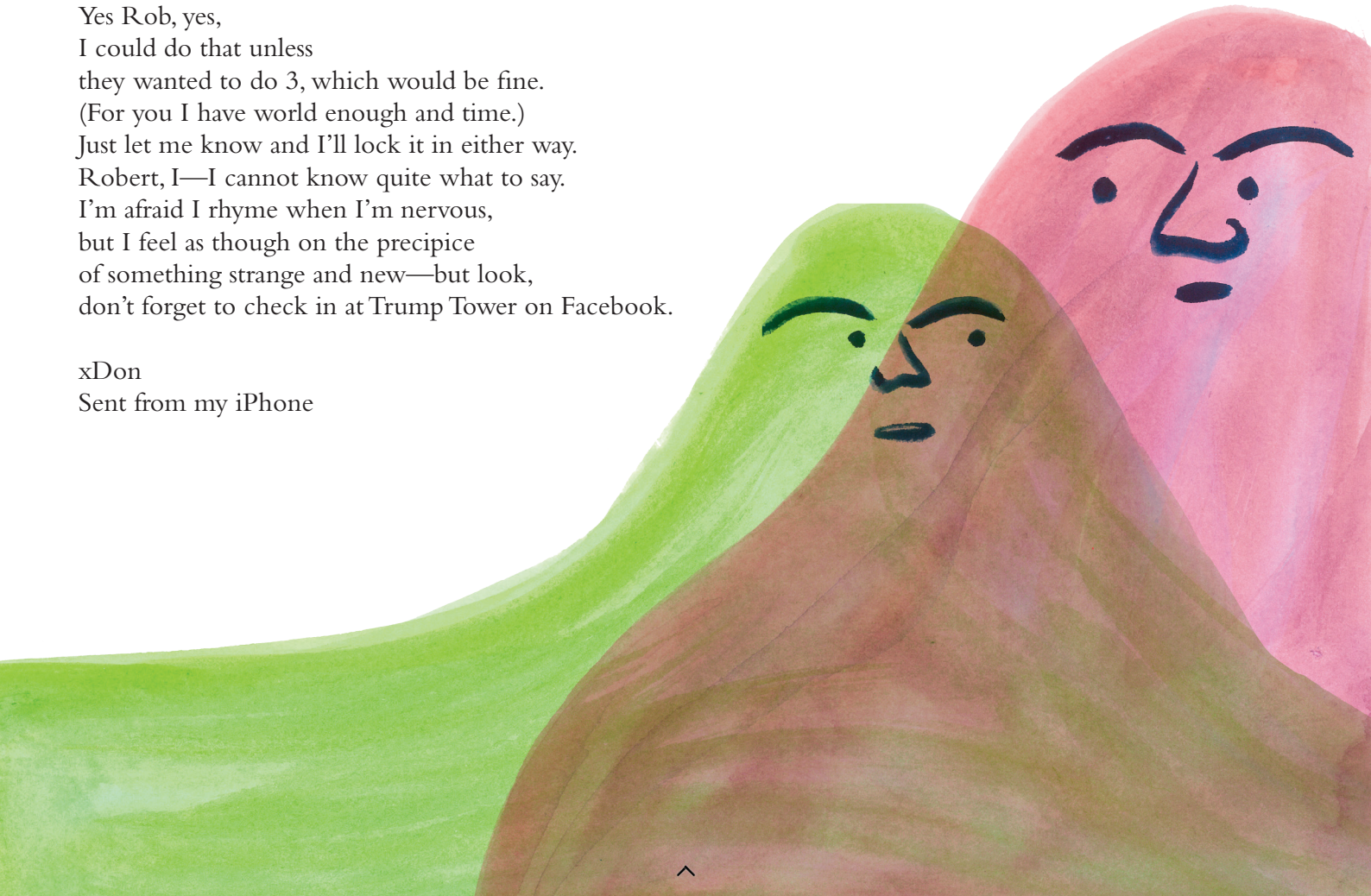
Would it be possible to  
move tomorrow meeting to 4pm  
as the Russian attorney is in court until 3  
I was just informed.  
For me, the minutes will be interminable.  
My heart compresses as though I carried some colossal  
weight upon my back down a quiet highway lit  
only occasionally by listless headlights.

This iPhone speaks too many languages

**Donald Trump Jr. 11:15:**

Yes Rob, yes,  
I could do that unless  
they wanted to do 3, which would be fine.  
(For you I have world enough and time.)  
Just let me know and I'll lock it in either way.  
Robert, I—I cannot know quite what to say.  
I'm afraid I rhyme when I'm nervous,  
but I feel as though on the precipice  
of something strange and new—but look,  
don't forget to check in at Trump Tower on Facebook.

xDon  
Sent from my iPhone



# Robin Eisenberg

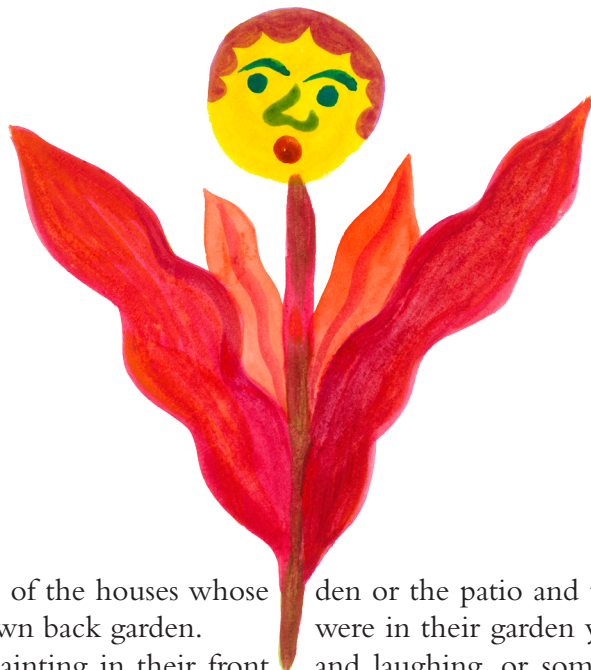






# The female gays

Ali Smith



The female gays lived in one of the houses whose gardens backed on to their own back garden.

The female gays had a painting in their front room on the wall behind the TV, quite a large one with no frame, of a zebra with its head turned over its shoulder, green and gold colours round it, and archways, like cloisters or when buildings have arches, whatever that's called, and a hill, fields, with a round sun. The painting was a real painting done in paint on cloth, nailed to the wall through the cloth. Next to the zebra it had a figure with no clothes on with its back to whoever was looking at the picture and its arm up over its head like someone in a shower or someone stretching in the morning after a night's sleep; it wasn't clear what the person was, male or female, or rather it was possible that the person in the painting could be anything.

The female gays had cable, her little brother'd told her, because he'd watched *The Simpsons* through the female gays' front window. They hadn't minded a nine year old boy with his nose against their window watching their TV through it. In fact one of the female gays, when they realized he was there, had come across the room, rearranged the curtain so he could see better and even opened the window so he could hear too, and when the programme was finished they'd all three of them waved goodbye through the window to him.

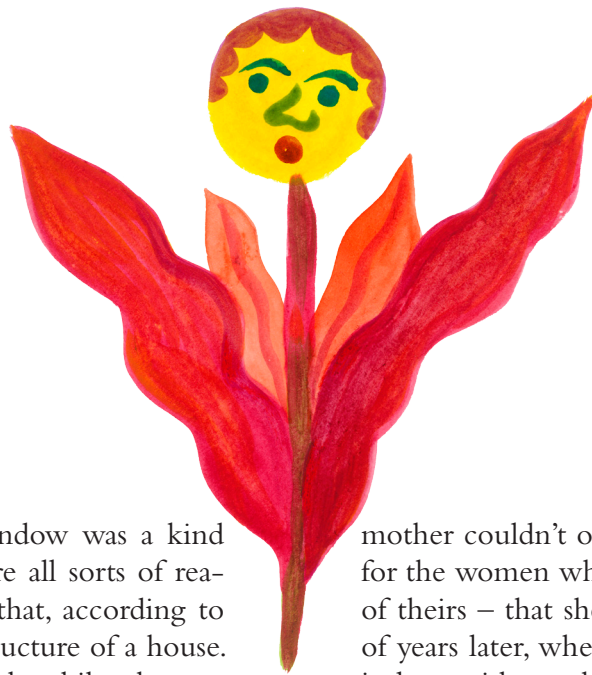
The female gays were quite young. Well, they didn't look old yet. What they looked was – she couldn't think of the word. If you were in the gar-

den or the patio and the door was open and they were in their garden you could hear them talking and laughing, or sometimes hear the music they played.

The female gays was what their mother called them, like they were a species on a wildlife programme. Female gays on our doorstep, her mother said to their stepfather, usually over supper. She said it every few weeks. She said it like something specifically to be said above the heads of children having their supper, heard and not heard, specific but at the same time actually unspecific, words aimed at them and meaning something else, meaning that something wasn't as it should be. She herself was almost not a child any more, she was practically thirteen, soon enough. She was working on a way to leave the house without anyone knowing she had, to come and go as she pleased through the skylight window in her room, for the nights when her mother told her to go to her room or else, which happened quite often because it was hard not to disappoint her mother. The less childlike version of herself was working on this. The more childlike version was working on perfecting a way to travel round the neighbourhood by never touching the ground with her feet.

The female gays, when it was sunny, did what nobody else in that neighbourhood had ever done, at least not that she knew of, not in her lifetime, which was that they opened their front upstairs window of their house as far as it would go and sat reading books on the top of the downstairs





bow window like that bow window was a kind of miniature balcony. There were all sorts of reasons you weren't meant to do that, according to her stepfather, to do with the structure of a house. One day when she was out on her bike she saw one of the female gays out sitting in the sun in that upstairs window. She slowed her bike on the pavement, stood on the pedals and smiled up the broadest smile she could as she cycled underneath. The female gay up there saw her and smiled back down at her, right at her. ! She cycled past again later the same day, this time with no hands, cycled past whistling a tune with her hands in her pockets, but there was no one in the upstairs window any more, well, it was supper time. She went home. Her mother shouted at her, she'd got oil on her cuff, on the turn-up on her jeans. She said to herself, inside her head, I am seeing the world in a different way, one in which oil on my clothes just isn't a problem to me. She didn't say it out loud. There were a lot of things she knew not to say out loud, for instance that there was no way she was going to be an accountant or a doctor or the things they kept deciding she would be. She was going to be a painter of sets for theatres. She already knew this. When a couple of years later she did say this out loud, what her mother and stepfather said back was that it wasn't a proper job. (It was, though, because in the future she actually became it and saved for and bought a house with the money from it.)

*The female gays* was also the reason – specifically that phrase, and specifically the fact that her

mother couldn't or wouldn't use the word lesbian for the women who lived in the house at the back of theirs – that she would tell, out loud, a couple of years later, when she was fifteen, a girl she was in love with at school that she liked her, and then specify this liking quite clearly as a love, which in turn would lead to five years of very real love, at a time in life when five years was a lot, became a quarter of a lifetime, and the night she'd know it, know she'd be about to do this thing, she'd be sitting out on the roof next to her own open window in the July moonlight, the sky a deep flat, its blackness thousands of miles above her being unexpectedly leapt across by the shooting stars that sometimes happen at this time of the year. A fast star, look. Another. All the houses round her in darkness, the windows in darkness on what was once the house they lived in (they'd have moved by now, that house would have been split into two flats with nondescript other people living there now) and she'd be transparent to herself sitting there gazing up, the sky and its stars, back down to those windows with the words in her head for the people who'd once lived there gone into a future, the female gays.

# Drag Kings and the Femme Gaze

Temi Wilkey on performance art  
and the inimitable Charli XCX

OK, so you've obviously seen Charli XCX's music video for 'Boys', right?

Of course you have.

We can't be having a contemporary discussion about the female gaze without it.

OK. Great.

Glad you've watched it.

Or, if you hadn't when you first read that sentence, you took out your phone or your tablet or your laptop and have watched it since.

Right? Good.

So, in a moment I'm going to talk to you about drag. But before I do that, we're gonna get very busy thinking 'bout 'Boys'.

I love this video, as does every *single* person I know. The lush colours. The millennial pink. The indulgent slow motion. The prolonged eye contact we get from the camera's subjects. The diverse representation of boys. The multiplicities of their different masculinities. The way it is seriously sexy but also doesn't take itself too seriously.

It is so playful and also, somehow, manages to make the most mundane things *so* hot. Why am I being aroused by someone brushing their teeth? Eating some cereal? Combing their hair? And importantly, it combines its subjects' masculinity with an overtly 'feminine' cuteness: tiny puppies, teddy bears, someone holding a baby ... Even the more traditionally masculine props are feminized through colour. The dumb-bells are pink. The boxing gloves are pink. The money (that most toxically masculine entity of all) unambiguously ejaculated from a cash cannon is PINK. For a fleeting, joyous moment, Charli XCX has radically feminized the very concept of capitalism.

I think this is a pretty seminal example of the female gaze in popular culture. It subtly challenges the reality presented by the male gaze, which limits the representation of women to the parts of them that are marketable. In contrast to this, XCX's video represents and embraces the sensuality, sexuality and fundamental humanity of the camera's many subjects, in a way that is very rarely afforded to women.

OK, back to drag.

Watching drag queens in the past, I often felt that, despite being a queer art form, the performances I saw were still only appealing to a straight male gaze. These provocations felt so limited.



'Are you attracted to me?'

'Isn't it strange how you're attracted to me?'

'Isn't this confusing for you?'

In the audience, I felt invisible, erased. Not only because I was not the viewer that their provocations were appealing to, but also because, often, the femininity that they espoused did not represent a femininity that I recognized in myself.

These observations are not aimed at all drag queens (#notalldragqueens) and they probably say less about drag queens in general and more about the limited experience I had at the time. I've seen many queens since whose work is absolutely inspired. What's more, it can be very dangerous when cis women suggest or imply that we own femininity. At its best, drag demonstrates that no gender 'owns' any behavioural traits, uncovering the absurdity of widely held binary perceptions.

But I do think it's useful to examine my first impressions of drag queen performance – as an incredibly limited depiction of gender – in order to understand what came after, which was Pecs! Pecs is the all-singing, all-dancing drag king collective that I co-founded over four years ago. At the centre of our work is the exploration of the performativity of gender, which we use to undermine the patriarchy with our particular brand of searing satire and downright silliness. We make shows that explore many different kinds of masculinity: an inclusive perspective that is typical of the female gaze. We make it for queer womxn: to acknowledge, appeal, arouse.

When we first started out, we wanted our audiences to experience the possible elasticity of sexuality. I suppose I wanted to create an audience in my own image, make them experience desire as a bisexual woman. I'm sure we would have said then that we wanted to create a 'female gaze', but now I'd probably say that our work goes further – creating a 'femme gaze'. I say this not only because it's more inclusive of the femme identities that extend beyond cis womanhood, but also because it more adequately describes the elasticity of the gaze that we seek to create.

We femme our audiences.

In *Female Masculinity*, Jack Halberstam undertakes a sociological study of drag kings in New York, outlining some categories that we found fascinating when we first began our journey into drag. One that stuck out was the 'Femme Pretender'. The aim of drag kings, if we perceive them to be 'male impersonators', can often be to suc-



cessfully emulate a cisgender man. One such drag king category that achieves this most is 'Butch Realness'. But with a femme pretender, the performer seeks instead to maintain the audience's subconscious awareness of their performative conceit.

This is probably the category that most of the Pecs boys fall under. Most of our performers are femme – or soft butch at a push. That was never a deliberate choice on our part and of course there is some fluidity in it. My character, Drag King Cole (I know. It's a great name), toes the line between femme pretender and another category Halberstam coined, 'Male Mimicry'. But despite the convincing baritones and physicalities of our performers, our audience will always watch us through the thin veil of recognition that we are not, in fact, cis men. And there's something essential in this.

If we define femme as 'a feminine lesbian who is attracted to masculine or butch lesbians', the fact that the audience is always aware that we are women pretending to be men has the certain effect of queering that audience. In performance, we are more like butch women than cis men and the relationship we have with our audiences is predicated on desire: therefore when you desire us, you are femmed. This means that, whether you're a queer woman, a straight man or anything above, beyond or in between those limiting categories, you watch our show with a femme gaze. With a queer feminine eye.

So then, to return to Charli XCX (now that you've so dutifully watched her video). If I may be so bold, I'd say that our shows create an hour-long experience akin to the ecstasy of watching the 'Boys' video. Except it is super queer ... and the gaze is femme.

Oh, and it's live!  
Yeah.

You're welcome.

# The Woman in the Green Bugatti

Ashleigh Young

She was inseparable from the car, like one of those Odd Rods cartoon characters you got in packets of bubblegum: guys like Chrome Coffin, who drove along swinging his shovel, and Motor Mouth, whose key feature was just his massive mouth. Being half car, half woman, the woman in the green Bugatti was compact enough to drive wherever she wanted. She didn't have to stick to the road like all the other cars. She could drive on the footpath, shuttling along like a fancy clothes rail. She could drive directly into the pub and park up at the bar. She could drive up and down between the shelves at the town library, or slowly around an exhibition at the museum. She'd gaze at the art while doing an expert three-point turn with one leather-gloved hand on the wheel. She was so good-looking that the officials just let her glide serenely around the place.

Her beauty was connected to her sense of absolute stillness. The woman in the green Bugatti would never move her face; that much was clear to me. Her red lips would be forever pressed to release their colour, her eyes forever narrowed like two cigarette ends. What was it that made me believe a face must be motionless to be beautiful? Why could I not see that the woman in the green Bugatti – Tamara de Lempicka's self-portrait – was something out of a nightmare? I really thought that her beauty would be marred if she laughed or frowned or, worse, stood up out of the car. A car was one of a number of good ways for a beautiful woman to transport her person. Others included travel by rowboat, dancing very slowly while waving ribbons around, and ice-skating. Using any of these, you could glide smoothly from position to position without upsetting your face.

My mother had a walking, talking doll that stood next to the telephone on a sideboard in the hallway. Patricia was made of peach-coloured plastic, with blonde curls and blue eyes that clicked open and shut. According to someone who knew the value of these dolls, she was worth a lot of money. She used to talk, my mother said, and even thrust herself forward leg by leg, but now she only made a bleating noise when you hung her upside down. Patricia's face reminded me of the woman in the green Bugatti – she was so placid, so waiting to be looked at. When I was younger, the soft clicking of her eyelids when I moved her indicated to me that her eyes were behaving as eyes should. I loved how she could be held for as long as I wanted; unlike a cat or a dog, she would never wriggle to get free.



It was my high-school art teacher, Mr Kerr, who'd lent me the book about art deco painters in which I'd found Lempicka. What I loved about Lempicka's women was the urgent richness of their bodies, their poses, their clothing. They were caught in full, hard bloom. Each body could have been a single fused piece of material, poured like liquid metal into a dress and left to solidify. But when you got to the eyes, everything seemed to burn out, absolutely blank, as if short-circuited by the intensity of their shining selves. I found the blankness in the women's eyes impossibly beautiful: it looked like a moment in between thoughts, a space in which you could look into their eyes and they would not look back. Some of them didn't even have pupils. The eyes rolled ecstatically back into their heads so you only saw the whites, which looked bluish, chilly. That was beautiful too, another kind of pure, unseeing moment.

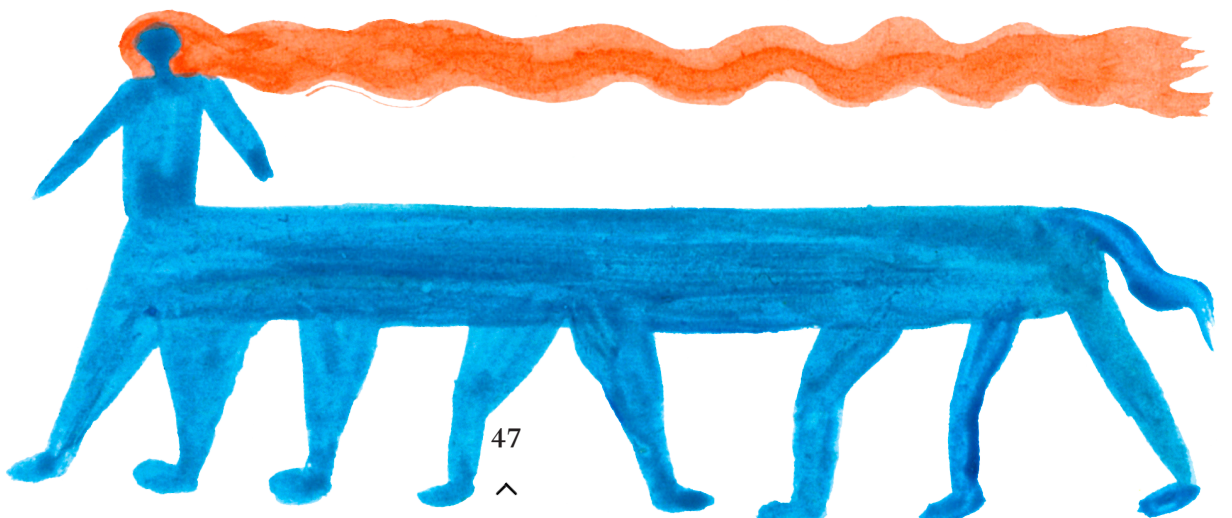
In his classroom rounds Mr Kerr would stand beside my desk in his dark overalls, watching kindly as I blobbed oil paint on a canvas and tried to emulate Lempicka's style. Once I painted a woman in a blue dress standing in front of a row of crooked, anonymous buildings. It took me ages to get the dress right. I wanted the body to look cylindrical, sort of chrome-like, as Lempicka's bodies did, but instead my woman looked scrappy, like a cormorant standing on a rock. The neck had come out too long and I couldn't get up the courage to do the face. I'd given her a severe bob, below which the face was waiting for its features. But Mr Kerr murmured, shaking his head, 'Oh, it's very Lempicka. Very Lempicka.' As he drifted on to the next desk, I decided to leave the face blank. It was an artistic statement. It was also easier.

Mr Kerr was a sculptor and a woodworker, so his art either had meaning or it was useful. In preparation for the turn of the millennium, he was making something he called the Millennium Rock. It was a large piece of sandstone he'd chipped and polished into a wobbly egg shape and positioned upright on one of its pointed ends on a hill at his house in the countryside. When the sun rose on the morning of 1 January 2000, it would shine right through a gap in the middle of the rock. The first light would be captured in full for a few seconds before the sun rose beyond it. I admired this but also found it deeply frustrating. You couldn't ever see the whole sculp-



ture, I thought. You couldn't hold all of it in your head, because the moment you had it, it was already disappearing.

I came back again and again to the woman in the green Bugatti, and I still do, trying to understand what caught and held me. She was a grown-up and a driver, an independent woman of the twenties. But she was also like a diving helmet in a fish tank: decorative, left there to have all the fuss play out around her. Lempicka had painted the steering wheel on the left side of the car, instead of the right where it should've been, and I figured she'd painted the woman first and then hadn't wanted to move her; she was perfect where she was, and so the car grew out of her. And you can tell Lempicka wasn't really interested in the car. Even the door handle looks pretend, like a door handle painted on a theatre set. I liked that. I liked that the woman wouldn't be able to get out of the car. She'd just have to keep gliding, on and on through that unending moment. Her eyes would never find mine. I could look at her for as long as I pleased.



# Beauty is the Beast

Krishna Isha on queerness, gender  
and the people who raise us



I'm going to preface this by saying that I am not a writer. My job does involve writing, but it is an identity marker I do not claim. I am a performer, a performance maker, a live artist. So I'm going to treat this writing as live art: a form-queered staging of letters on paper. I'm tempted to write words that look good side by side as opposed to words that make sense together. But I hold back. I'm cautious and aware that this is something to be consumed by others, that this needs to make sense to them for it to have any value.

This is how I often feel about my gender. It is to be consumed by others and needs to make sense to them for it to have any value. I'm now too far in my transition to be actively invited into women's spaces, but not far enough to be invited into men's



spaces. Not that I want to be a man – not even slightly – it is simply the by-product of needing to stop people seeing me as a woman.

I've always shunned gender roles: I'm not a woman, and I never want to be a man, and yet I have this colossal need to be both. From as young as I can remember, people have called me a tom-boy. It's a term that resonates with me, but not something I necessarily identify with. I feel the same about terms like 'woman' and 'man'. Instead, I like the idea of being an amalgamation of experiences.

I grew up in a matriarchal family, which is an ancient tradition where my family comes from – Kerala in India. I like to brag about that. I like to say I was a feminist as a seedling in my mother's womb. The women in my family are literal warriors: our surname, passed down from our maternal side, comes from a lineage of the 'warrior class'. Although I don't entirely know what the term means (knowledge lost through millennial ignorance) I assume it's terribly classist. I do like how it sounds though.

At birth I was pronounced a girl but bestowed a male god's name. I will never know why my mother felt the need to give me a gender-neutral name with masculine attributes, but I will forever be thankful for not having to deal with the bureaucracy of name change.

At six years old, my uncle took me to my first demonstration – an anti-arms protest. I was the only child there, holding a placard bigger than me (and in my school uniform!). I was photographed and that picture made it into newspapers in forty-two countries.

At seven, I proudly started telling people that I was a feminist. I don't think I knew (exactly) what it meant but I'd heard my elder sister say it, and I believed everything she did or said was the final word.





At eight, I declared myself an atheist. I refused to go into temples or buildings of worship because I'd seen my uncle do the same and I genuinely didn't believe God existed (and nor did my uncle).

At nine, I was taken to see Desmond Tutu speak. I was looking forward to writing about it for an article in my school magazine. I fell asleep, front and centre. For years I thought Desmond Tutu hated me. I vowed then never to fall asleep



in the audience ever again. I've seen too many bad theatre shows since to have kept my word.

Somewhere between ages eleven and seventeen, I lost myself. But all the years of being schooled at an all-girls Catholic institution could not keep me from my difference.

All through my childhood, I felt the need to be the family's protector, to be chivalrous and tough. I thought of this as a sense of 'manhood'. I thought the women in my family needed protecting when, in reality, they were protecting me. From them I learned to be strong, resilient, empathetic and generous. From them, I learned a perspective that refused to accept obstacles – though there are many obstacles for me in this world.

So the women in my family taught me their collective female gaze. And at the same time, from the men, I learned to become a better 'man'. My uncle not only took me to my first protest but also showed me how to treat people right. He never spoke over women; he listened. He was and still is the least macho man I know. He used to wear my sister's old T-shirts and I remember making fun of him for it. His response was that clothes are just clothes and it does not matter who is wearing them. 'Besides,' he'd say, 'why throw out a perfectly good T-shirt?' He supported my gender nonconformity from an early age. If we went shopping, he'd ask if I wanted to go to the men's section with him. Whenever he donated his old clothes to me, I saw it as a sign of his approval and solidarity.

The world beyond my family began to see a young boy in me when I started taking hormones at twenty years old. But I soon realized that I had begun to embody an identity that I intrinsically fear. And I'd started to be feared by others too. Where once I would not have moved out of the way for people on the pavement (because feminism), or I would have purposefully taken up more space on public transport, I now found that this



was no longer acceptable behaviour. What the world now saw was a teenage boy being an entitled little shit. I wasn't just transforming in physicality but also in social status. I knew that this new-found shell came with certain responsibilities.

In *Beauty and the Beast*, the Beast is portrayed as aggressive, violent and threatening only after he is 'cursed' and transforms into a creature that is hairy (and brown). Since starting on hormones, I feel like I've gone from being the Beauty to being the Beast. While before I was seen as an exotic arm candy (which is how most brown women are fetishized), now I am feared. Now I am the person that people move away from on the bus. Now I am the person that cops stop for no real reason. I have to try twice as hard not to come off as intimidating.

And these days, as the world sees me as increasingly masculine, I find myself holding on to my feminine expressions. I love wearing dresses and make-up. I'm automatically drawn to the feminine. Perhaps it's because I'm more comfortable in my skin since starting to look more masculine; perhaps it's my need to belong with the feminine as a community. There is a protection, alliance and familiarity that come with the acknowledgement and acceptance of other femmes, queers and nonconforming people. I am happy to participate in that identity as I do in several different identities. Like my loving, unconventional, matriarchal family, there is much about me that doesn't fit the mould, the stock image; and like my family, I am functional because I am given the space to be unconventional. My family is my politics, my family is my feminism and my family is my queerness.

# On Being a Bear

The fifty-six-year-long painting  
with Jackie Morris

When I was a small child, six years old with a head full of dreams, I decided I wanted to be an artist when I grew up.

No, start that again.

When I was a small child, about six years old, I decided I wanted to be a bear when I grew up. But I was told I was a human, and couldn't be a bear, so I decided to be an artist instead.

Even so there seemed to be a problem with this.

Most artists I learned about at school were men. I fell in love with the work of Renaissance painters like Giotto, Fra Angelico. I loved their colours and their line. Even more I loved the work of medieval manuscript artists, often anonymous, especially their marginalia.

And it seemed that writers too, with the exception of Jane Austen, who wrote about domestic subjects, and the Brontës, who adopted male pseudonyms, were all men.

I wasn't a man.

Recently I had a conversation with a man who wanted to know about my work. He began by asking me if it was 'collectable'. I answered that I would never advise anyone to invest in my work unless they really loved it, but that it was known to be magnetic, as when people begin to buy they rarely stop at one. He showed me his collection of Damien Hirsts and Andy Warhols and the rest, all pieces with the common denominator of being by 'collectable' male artists. He asked me how long it took me to produce one of my paintings and I replied, 'Anything from half an hour to a month, rarely longer. And fifty-six years.'

'So we'll just say half an hour to a month then, shall we?' (Not so much a question as a statement.)

'No. We won't,' I answered. I was about to tell him that I did not emerge bloody and wet from my mother's womb with a paintbrush in my hand and the ability to paint the artwork from *The Lost Words* at one day old. I was about to tell him that



I had learned over all my years to move paint in ways that sometimes worked to express ideas. But we were having supper and I didn't want to put him off his food with graphic descriptions of birth and bodily fluids.

Also, I knew that this wouldn't make my work any more 'collectable' for him.

I was the first in my family to go on from school to further education. The only time I was ever hauled before the headmaster was for him to ask about this 'nonsense' of me wanting to go to art college. He pointed out that no one makes a living as an artist. It's a hobby, not a profession. And girls only went to art college in order to find a husband. It flashed through my young mind that these girls were possibly hunting in the wrong place then, for if what he said was true they would need to get a job so their husband could paint. I had already decided that I could work part-time, to support my 'hobby' of colouring in, if necessary. But there seemed to be another implication in his warning. Art was not for the likes of me, be that because of gender or class. It was for other people.



I ignored that man who should have opened the world out for me and instead tried to close it down. I went to college and, as I trained, I moved towards illustration – realizing how prevalent image is in our society, feeling that there was work out there for me, if I could just catch the right eyes. I learned of Artemisia, who also painted during Renaissance times, of Frida Kahlo, with eyebrows to envy and a wicked brush, of Leonora Carrington, of Barbara Hepworth. I discovered the beautiful art of people from all around the world and fell in love with Inuit sculpture, Australian Aboriginal art. I'd always loved cave paintings, those early images made by early peoples. How I laughed when a recent article suggested that some might 'even have been made by women'. It had never occurred otherwise to me.

Fifty years on, I know it is possible to make a living as an artist. But I wish I could go back and talk to my younger self, the self so terrified of having children in case it meant I would never paint again, to tell her that it is possible to do both. I wish I could go back and tell those mostly men who told me I couldn't to get out of my way.

And, fifty years on, I wonder if it might after all have been possible for me to be a bear, if I had just been allowed to believe in that ambition.



# Average

Candice Carty-Williams offers  
a catalogue of a body



At the age of twenty-eight, I've accepted that I do not know, and have never known, how I look. I have never thought that I was beautiful. I have many siblings, but none with whom I share both mother and father. As a black woman moving in predominantly white spaces, in my formative years what I knew to be beautiful was blonde hair, thin bodies, blue eyes, dazzling white teeth. What could I compare myself to? The quandary left me obsessed with averages, committed to a clinical analysis of what I should look like.

My hair is almost black, but when I buy packets of hair that I twist into my own, the shade is either 1B or 2. Sometimes I go as light as 4. When researching this piece, I stumbled on a website that told me, 'A survey in [the] UK has actually revealed brown, dark brown or black as the most popular hair colour.' At the moment, my natural hair is encased in a headwrap, protected from the outside world – my response to having my hair grabbed by a white man in a club two days before writing this piece.

I think about my eyebrows a lot, always wishing that I could master the mysterious tricks that have made eyebrow grooming such a phenomenon in the past few years. I asked my younger sister what her eyebrow routine is. She said, 'I brush them every morning after my shower with a spoolie to make sure all the hairs are going in the same direction. Then I go in with my NYX Micro Brow pencil to fill in any sparse areas. I clean up around the whole eyebrow area using my LA Girl. I also get them threaded once a month.' In response I said simply, 'What the hell is a spoolie?'

According to a YouGov report smugly entitled 'British public swoon for blue eyes', 34 per cent of British people find blue the most attractive eye colour. The top comment on this piece reads: 'I agree with blue being top but mainly because dark brown creeps me out, makes me think of the dark

eyes of a serial killer.' My eyes are dark brown. Between the ages of eleven and sixteen, I looked into surgery to change my eye colour every two weeks.

I once had dinner with a friend and his family where we discussed the correlation between beauty and facial symmetry. His mother looked across the table at me and said, 'You must have a very symmetrical face, then.' I have held this comment in my heart ever since. I doubt she remembers it.

Fortunately, there are tests online which allow you to measure exactly how symmetrical your face is, how average your features are. These wholly depressing sites exist to suggest how we might improve what we didn't know we needed to fix, until we took one wrong turn on the Internet and found ourselves thinking, 'So *which* parent should I blame for my nose?' I found one of these; it is called Prettyscale.com and its landing page demands, 'Am I Beautiful or Ugly?' Below, in much smaller print, there is a warning that I shouldn't proceed with the test if I have low self-esteem. No stranger to mental masochism, I proceeded. The results told me that I have a long face, a normal forehead size (the average-seeker in me was elated), wide interocular distance (lots of space between my eyes), a nose too wide for my face, a mouth too small for the nose that is too wide, and too small a chin. It confirmed that I have good facial symmetry. My overall score was 45/100: You are ugly.

For all intents and purposes, my facial features, set against the standard ideal of beauty, tell me that I am ugly. I have always known that I wasn't regarded in the same way that my friends were by the boys around us. This experience was validated when I read Afua Hirsch's *Brit(ish): On Race, Identity and Belonging*, which discusses how 'black people face a unique penalty in online dating – with men of other races rating black women as up to 20% less attractive than average.' As someone who hasn't

touched a dating app since a white man told me that he only wanted to meet me for sex, and that my questions about his life, job, arrest record and so on were 'high maintenance', I have no interest in impressing such men. There is substantial evidence to suggest that there is no point.

At 5'6", I am slightly above average height for a woman in the UK. But when I was at school, two of my best friends were 5'11" and another was 6 feet tall – so the news of this statistic was very confusing to me when I first came across it. The average clothes size for that same, theoretical UK woman is size 16. But the average 'ideal' dress size – the size women most aspire to – is a 12. Sometimes I wear a size 14 (if it stretches), sometimes a size 18. It depends on the shop. In Zara, I cannot fit into anything. When friends try on dresses and shirts, I go and browse the scarves, feigning interest in the brightly coloured fabrics. Which isn't to say that I don't like my body. My body is very healthy.

I used to work in a bra shop, so I've seen hundreds of pairs of breasts. And I never once saw a pair as pert as the ones that I have seen on TV and in films. My bra size is 34JJ, considerably larger than the UK average of 'a buxom 36DD'. Despite never having seen huge, pert natural breasts, I have wasted time worrying about mine. An equally big-breasted friend once said to me, 'Candice, how can boobs as big as ours be expected to point to the ceiling?' That helped.

My skin is brown and inexplicably soft, despite my rarely moisturizing it. I have stretch marks on my arms and my hips and, like one in three young adults in the UK, I also have four tattoos. My brown skin sets me apart from those around me: I've modified it in an attempt to take control of that difference. The first tattoo, on my shoulder, is of a fox, after a nickname given to me by a cousin. I gave her the same nickname. The second is for an old friend, a best friend. I told him when I was

twenty-two that nobody had ever given me flowers. When we next saw each other, he gave me a bunch of roses. He passed away two years later. The third, on my stomach, is of a crown, more roses and a heart with a banner running underneath it. The banner reads 'Candice'. And last, the largest: a giant castle, drawn freehand by the tattoo artist, because one of my favourite books is *I Capture the Castle* by Dodie Smith. I named my own castle after the tattooist: Elizabeth Taylor.

If it is deemed unattractive to be big-boned, surely one should wish for small, dainty bones to attract the opposite sex? According to two academic journals, black women have lower bone density than black men but higher bone density than white men. I like to think that my bones are very strong: I have never broken one, and when I sit next to white friends and compare my wrists to theirs, I can see how much bigger mine are. I think about how even my skeleton, completely unseen, is a measure of what is attractive. My bone density is yet another test I have not passed.

In the white spaces through which I move, I am invisible and painfully visible at the same time. Not being average sets me apart from the crowd, while not being desirable, the result of being different, renders me unseen. Measuring myself against what I have been told is 'normal' has an insidious toxicity. I am so self-critical that I've never been able to disentangle myself from the expectation of average; it has left me distanced from any ideal of beauty that I might fit into.

And yet I see black women who have long, short, straight, afro hair, with eyebrows as sharp as razor blades and eyes as dark and deep as onyx, and I am overwhelmed by how beautiful they are. I see black women whose asymmetrical faces have me captivated, black women who are 4'11" or 6'2", who have heavy, maternal breasts or none at all. Black women who are as light as MAC founda-

tion shade NC40 and those who are many shades darker. I take in their beauty, its spectrum of wonder, with my eyes separated by a huge distance, and I smile with a mouth too small for my nose. I am not average. I do not need to be.



# *Undisclosed Nights and Days*

## An extract

Bae Suah, translated by Deborah Smith

It was entirely down to the director that Ayami started taking German lessons. Her second day working at the theatre, the director had told her about a woman he'd known since university, who'd got married straight after graduating, spent time as an exchange student with her husband in the same city as the director, but hadn't been able to complete the course. Now back in Korea, she didn't have any kind of steady job, and, after an unexpected divorce a while ago, urgently needed to start earning some money. She'd hurriedly applied for a position teaching English at a cram school, but because she was older and didn't have any experience in this line of work they were reluctant to give her a by-the-hour contract. The money she did earn there wasn't enough to cover her living costs, so she also gave private lessons at home, not just in English but also in French and German.

'One of Picasso's girlfriends earned a living teaching French to American women in Paris after the two of them broke up,' the director said. 'It must be a very classic step to take, one that transcends various eras.'

'Which girlfriend?' Ayami asked, but she'd already made up her mind to take the director up on his suggestion and go for private German lessons (or French, she wasn't really bothered. At any rate, she was savvy enough to realize that it didn't actually matter, as neither was likely to be of any real use).

'Fernande Olivier,' the director said. Ayami didn't know the name.

The director's friend was small, slight, and unfailingly elegant, even down to the long hair whose ends reached her waist. Her face, though, was severely marked from a childhood bout of smallpox, making it impossible to even estimate her age on a first meeting. Her skin was mottled, almost as though it had been burned. She had a strangely rolling walk, like a boat bobbing on gen-

tle waves. She generally kept to the shadows, but when necessary would extend her right hand, its pale skin unmarked, into the light.

After the divorce was settled, she'd moved to an area about three or four bus stops away from the audio theatre. Although the neighbourhood was technically downtown, its location up a steep hill and general air of dilapidation meant the rent was fairly cheap. The woman occupied a one-room dwelling at the very end of an alley, where the sunlight never quite reached; it was quite a walk up the hill from the nearest bus stop. Ayami went there for a ninety-minute German lesson every day after work. Rather than having an actual conversation, they preferred to sit and listen to each other read from a book. Perhaps this was why, despite taking lessons for almost two years, Ayami's German never showed much signs of improvement.

The German teacher always made them both a cup of tea. Hair pulled back from her forehead, she put her small brown feet up on a chair and sipped at the hot tea, hunched over like a monkey. She fished out the piece of lemon peel from her tea and rubbed it on the back of her hand. The German teacher was like a shadow glimpsed through frosted glass. When she wordlessly reached out to





pass Ayami her tea, her sound right hand was a pale gleam emerging into the light of a midsummer evening. One time, their reading was interrupted by the sound of a radio, coming from within the room.

‘What’s that sound?’ Ayami whispered.

‘The radio.’ The German teacher’s voice wasn’t dissimilar to the one coming from the radio.

‘Why switch the radio on just now?’

‘It must have come on by itself.’

‘Well, switch it off again.’

‘I can’t, it’s impossible.’

‘Why?’

‘The radio ... the switch is broken, you see. So it turns itself on, and then turns itself off again.’

‘Just pull the cord out then.’

‘I can’t, it’s impossible.’

‘Why is it impossible?’

‘I ... because I’m frightened of electrical sound. It’s frightening, like gas, or knives, or lightning.’

‘Ah, I see.’ Ayami looked at the German teacher and nodded. They both returned to drinking their tea. Beads of sweat formed on their foreheads. The sole window opened directly on to the wall of the dead-end alleyway, thereby serving absolutely no purpose whatsoever, and the humid air collected in the house’s dark interior, so dense you could almost have swept it up with a broom. The scent of yellow sphagnum wafted from the fish bowl – the goldfish had died long ago – to mingle with the sweet smell of the mould blooming near the bottom of the walls. The house might as well have been a temple dedicated to the worship and propagation of tropical heat, heat which swelled like a bog within those four walls. Certain agonizing phantasms were bred in this place, a mental state known as monsoon disease. Given that the single, narrow room had neither air conditioning nor even a fan, if you opened the window hot air heavier than a sodden quilt rushed in, clagging your pores like the wet

slap of raw meat, but with it closed the oxygen would quickly evaporate, disappearing at a frightening rate until the air was filled with nothing but heat. But Ayami probably wouldn’t have a tropical holiday this year, because the theatre would be closing down before the usual holiday period, and the possibility of her finding another job before then looked slim.

‘A while ago an unidentified node – that was the doctor’s term – developed in my left breast,’ the German teacher said, her whispered voice seeming to come from within a semi-concealed black mirror. There was a moment’s silence. ‘It’s actually quite common for people my age,’ she added. Ayami asked if this was true. If, that is, it was really just a node, something trivial, nothing to worry about. ‘That’s right, it’s true,’ the German teacher nodded. ‘It’s just a common thing. But it wouldn’t feel real to a young person like you.’

Ayami had never once thought of herself as particularly young; now, with unemployment staring



her in the face and not much time left before her twenty-eighth birthday, she was even less inclined to feel that way.

‘In life. There is. A wound. Within. The soul. Slowly. Encroaching. Inwards. Like leprosy.’

The German teacher read from the book, her voice utterly toneless and devoid of all emotion. The German lessons progressed with them each reading a page per lesson from a novel in German. Their current text was *The Blind Owl*.



# Marriage in Seven Acts Each Containing Sadistic Lovers w/ Deafening Howls of Pleasure

Melissa Lee Houghton

I shall touch everything with my senses and make even the static objects vibrate with lust. Please never resist me or learn from my mistakes

there was a past time in which I was all throat and no joy but now I am all mouth and full hearted the whole skin leans over the edge of your consciousness

threatens to jump and you catch me and all the words fall out and down into the pit. I'm so cat-like I'm a human failure, so glamorous lying in bed

in snakeskin platform sandals, sleeping through the afternoon lined with a sickeningly delicious sweat, all my glands aching and all my tunnels filling with poise.

Tunnel into my bed tonight or tunnel into my weaknesses, or tunnel into my despondencies, or tunnel into my inability to make prayers

I am sanctity itself my darling don't patronize me have you any idea how much brain it takes to make a fool out of you.

Erroneously enterprising fluke, you walk out into the fray in fact you dance out, you push your way through a thicket of buffoons and then you

interrupt several people as they imagine they are a democracy of one. My daughter notes I seem not to notice physical pain. The emotional pain proliferates

so exuberantly it's hard to be anything other than a portal for all Hells and high waters. Saturn eating his sons becomes me eating a room full of sour auras

and spitting them into poems that turn on a rack through our outrage. I'm completely besotted with you; what do I expect you to do with that? Well,

you could have a good scan of my entire body until you hit on something you really like and make sure you exercise your right to make it sizzle with lack of control.

I get so out of control you barely have to touch me what's wrong with you I barely have to touch you and not that long ago a room full of male friends sat and watched you spontaneously orgasm sat alone on a green velour couch. One of the kindest of them put his arm around you but my God what the hell was that.

There are no men who can bear you. You are able to milk a prostate from fifty feet. You are talented and go from emotionally overwrought to street-smart in three seconds. Do entertain this; you will simply never have this much fun again. A chronic belief in the honourable nature of direct assault.

My senses touch on all things, all words fly into the heart-collapse of my feelings, I fly into the sensations and get no sleep. Reeling in a single bed of sexual

plight, a montage of psychoanalytic archetypes and every nerve nailed to its own architecture of I Want.

What makes you think of me. I never think of you.

I think of you all the time. You think of me often. You think of me when you're alone. You think of me when someone is boring. I think of you when

I'm seen. Get a long look now, I'm not coming back. Unimpressed by my inability to not press my mouth against his neck and push all of my tense and volatile flesh against him as though I might dissolve or melt or cease to exist in essence or substance.

Now fuck off and fly over St Petersburg like the fragrant witch you are.

Be complicit in all complicity.

Laugh at your father's pre-intercourse and post-coital failings.

This time I win. I win.

Yes stretch your arms out like that so I can bury my face in your chest.

Stretch wide and be like the sunset just a shock of impulse raving over your lack of presence.

Yes I'm present to you in a way no one is. Yes well go back and say no more about it. Clasp my wrist in your sleep and pour

hot oil over my face. I am no more. I have gone down ingeniously. The neverending nature of true love is that it must be recognized to justify killing itself.

All these deaths and none of them ours, or mine, and I scar and stare into the pits of your eyes, a house situated in your psychic retentions, no one cares, and I can't

save you. She can save, I'm Mary Magdalene is all, and I heave with sobs over the apex of your ejaculations – yes, I can do almost anything and you want none.

Frying in a particular heat and everyone in London baking but not simmering quite as intensely as this little stallion I imagine I'm more masculine

than I am as a way through being feminine and no one wanting to bask in that. It's too hot for stockings but easy to have sex in public as we're barely clothed.

You are the worst most highly sexed person in this lockdown of literati and shame. The sauvignon blanc is really testing my will to live

the longer I stand here being impolite the more the stormcloud overhead can't be arsed. It's no secret I can't behave appropriately in times of intimacy-drought.

Just pat it or rub it a little bit, mmm like that, and don't stop or I might tear up the entire block with my superhuman libido.

For God's sake fuck her. 100%.

Piracy is a crime. I stole the prize winning books. I couldn't plagiarize anything, it wouldn't cut it you see what I did there, pretending my ego is stable and big and dismantling your sex drive. I will rip that earring out of your ear.

Wrap it round my throat. I adore you I adore you I adore you sleep fretfully and wake in the wrong bedsheet.

Verily verily verily the cycles of my heartflare meet you nowhere as you realize my aim is perfectly straight;  
mirrored glass in Mark's apartment. I languish in full view of a wasteland, get bitten in the mouth by a  
stranger and float

sipping sweet tea and meringue-like sickly panic-attack look at this impetuous beaten-up thing  
tip of your tongue on the tip of my about-turn  
she has decided now to leave my darling you won't change her sharp decision making  
in a box full of precious things you unwrap the only object that could kill someone  
and it makes you feel just like you feel when she walks right up to you sinking into the décor  
tulip-witted and snake-like and what a time to be straddled by this tempestuous need

for paginated romantic  
traumatized

over Vauxhall Bridge the sun came up and I missed seeing into it  
I saw so far beyond it you didn't exist.

# *The End of the Story*

An extract

Lydia Davis

I was walking along a path surrounded only by cliffs, rocks and sand – there were no plants of any kind. A young man ran past me, then stopped and turned back, disoriented and anguished, and told me that his home kept changing, so much that he could not recognize it. I woke up a little and realized that this was a dream, and went on dreaming. He and I entered a wooden house together. It was evidently his home. Then, even as we stood in it, it became the set for a play, and it changed each time the act changed, though I don't remember what went on in this play, if anything went on.



We quarrelled again, it must have been for the fifth time. That night he left me, angry, and then came back. He came back as though against his will, since he was still angry. The next night and for several days after that he did not come to me at all, and during that time I did not know where he was. I had told him something that shocked him. It did not shock me, because I was only saying to him what I had been thinking for some time, and it did not hurt me, because I was the one saying it. It only shocked me later, when I saw it differently, and saw how he would not have wanted to hear it. At the time I thought I could tell him anything I liked, quite openly, and he would be able to understand it and sympathize with it, as though he were not a separate person any more but a part of me, so that he could feel what I felt along with me and not be more troubled by it than I was.

He was calm at first, after I said what I said that shocked him, but then he became angry and went away. He went away, and then came back later, still angry. He took sheets from the dryer and put them on the bed while I watched. He went to bed and fell asleep without saying anything.

He did not appear the next night and did not call me. I called his apartment, and there was no

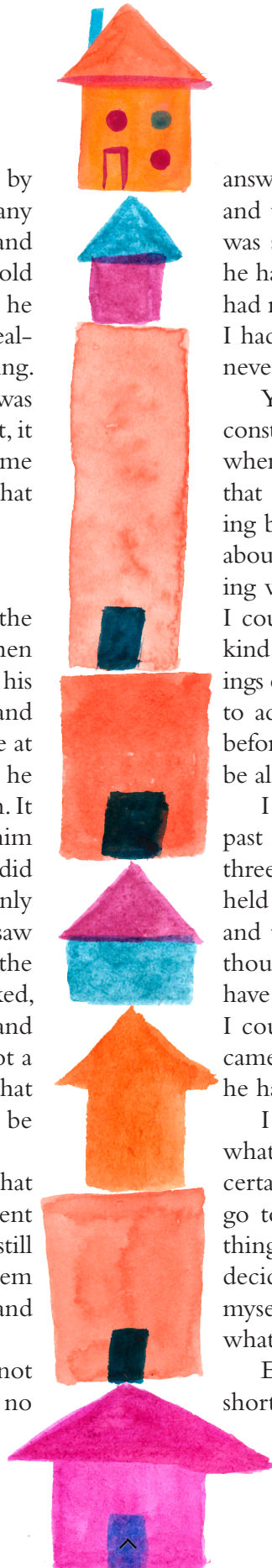
answer. I kept getting up out of bed to call him and then going back to bed and trying to read. I was surprised to find, however, that even though he had slept in my bed nearly every night since we had met, I felt I had immediately returned to what I had been before, alone at night, as though I had never met him.

Yet at the same time I was thinking of him so constantly, so much more constantly than I had when he was with me, and with such concentration, that he was extremely present in the room, coming between me and whatever else I tried to think about. I could see that I had betrayed him by feeling what I had felt and saying what I had said, but I could also think that such a betrayal produced a kind of faithfulness, because I had aroused such feelings of ardour and remorse in myself that I managed to achieve a passionate loyalty I had not achieved before. So there I lay, alone, as though I would always be alone, but also strangely in his presence.

I was afraid to turn off the light, though it was past one in the morning, and then two, and then three. As long as the light burned next to me and I held a book in front of me and read the page now and then, I was safe, I was distracted from certain thoughts. The worst thought was that he might have gone to someone else out of revenge, and I could not avoid that thought for long before it came back to me. And this turned out to be what he had done, I found out later.

I knew it was not fair to believe I could do what I liked and he could not, that I could have a certain feeling for another man and he could not go to another woman, but I never decided anything according to what was fair, or maybe never decided anything in the first place but allowed myself to be pulled in one direction or another by what I wanted just at that moment.

Early in the morning, after I had been asleep a short time, I dreamed I heard his step on the terrace



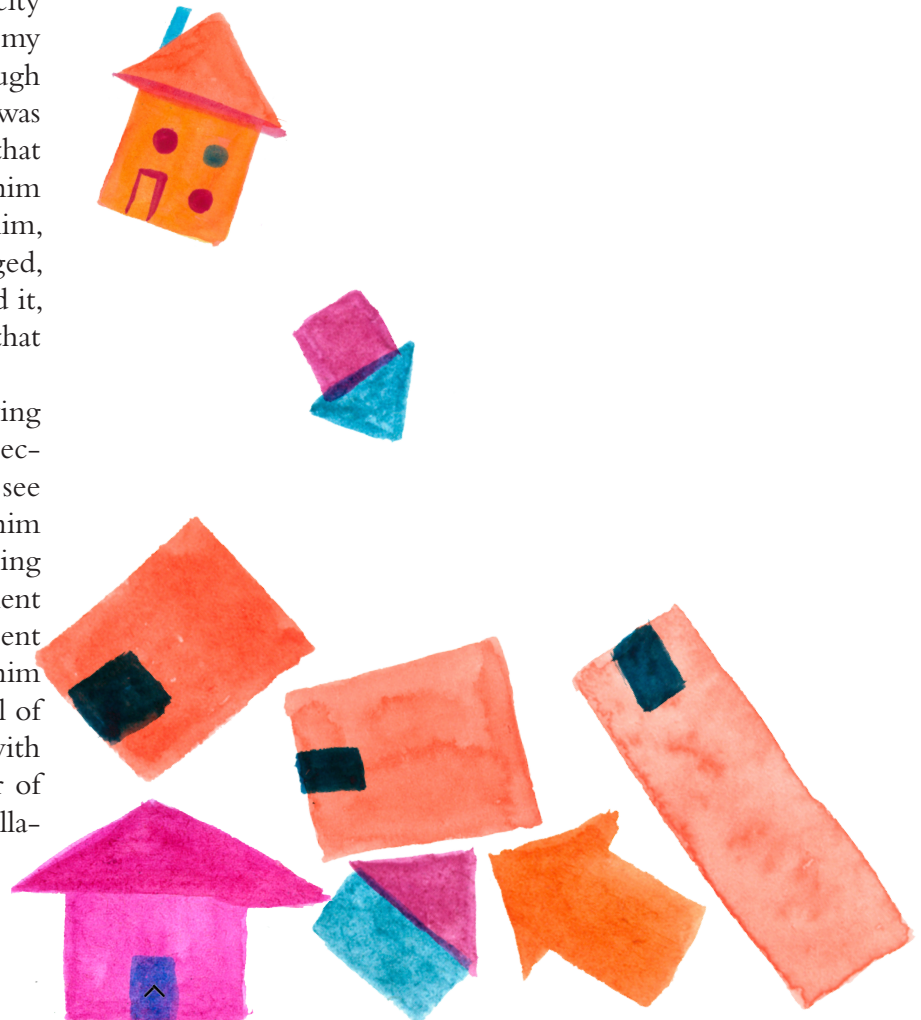
outside. In my dream the dog whined and he said to her gently: 'Is she here?' But he had not come by the time I woke up. Later in the day Madeleine and I went down the block to the corner café and sat at a table outside studying Italian together. We went through the lesson slowly because we were both distracted: I was watching out for him, and Madeleine was convinced that two people standing at a nearby corner were talking about her. She kept looking over her shoulder at them and mumbling, so that I, as I tried to take dictation from her, couldn't hear very well. After a while we stopped trying to work and just sat there in the sunlight.

Waiting for him again that night, when he would not come, created a dark space like a large room, a room that opened into the night from my room and filled it with dark draughts of air. Because I did not know where he was, the city seemed larger, and seemed to come right into my room: he was in some place, and that place, though unknown to me, was present in my mind and was a large dark thing inside me. And that place, that strange room where he was, where I imagined him to be, with another person, became part of him, too, as I imagined him, so that he was changed, he contained that strange room and I contained it, too, because I contained him in that room and that room in him.

Because he was so absent, and in doubt, having disappeared without a word, without the connection of a plan, a day or hour when we would see each other again, the only way I could keep him near me was by the strength of my will, summoning all of him to me and holding him there moment by moment, so that now all of him seemed present to me, whereas at other times only a part of him was present. And in the same way that the smell of him would hang in my nostrils when he was with me, now an essence of him filled me, a savour of him that was more than his smell or taste, a distilla-

tion of the whole of him permeated me or floated inside me.

He was doing this to me. I felt it very much coming from him against me. But the very strength of it, the very force of it, was also the force of how much he loved me, and I felt that, too, so that in the extreme force of the harm I felt from him, I felt his love, too. And the longer he stayed away from me, the more strongly I felt how much he loved me, and the more strongly I believed I loved him.



# as in an account of language not as in a meteor

Ira Brand

Some days she believes that language has no limits but today she believes only in the limits of language. Words are impossible and she thinks the most impossible words are yes and no. This year she has been trying to think more in pictures and less in words. She believes only in language's limits. I write believe and I mean feel. I write feel and I mean see. I write see and I mean know. I write know and I mean want. She wants a word to contain all these things in one, not to simplify but to describe them in a dynamic motion with one another. Describe as in a geometric tracing not describe as in an account of language. See? He says: 'Dominance is really old.' He says that lizards have no limbic system and therefore they do not feel emotion but still one lizard will hold itself close to the ground – and here he imitates a shy upward glance from a lizard body pressed to the earth – and one lizard will hold itself tall and upright above it – and here he sets his arms outstretched and palms flat against an imagined surface – and one lizard, he says, will be like this physically above and one will be below and it is clear which is submissive and which is dominant. She realizes she is exhausted by the desire to be heard. She realizes, in fact, that she is exhausted by many of her desires and she wonders when this happened how the fuck this happened and what it would feel like for desire to be energizing again and not exhausting more like a relay and less like a trip switch and she suspects that the way to find out is by not thinking about desire not talking about desire not writing about desire but by desiring instead but that is not what is asked of her and is it even possible to desire without thinking is it even possible – for her – to desire without talking about it? And I am not a biologist but I picture myself lying on the floor and you stood above me but in this scenario I am the dominant one what would it take for this to read as that what story would we have to tell each other to dis-



entangle ourselves from these evolutionary physical languages, to tell of my dominance and your submission in this moment? How long ago would we have had to start renaming these behaviours in our reptile histories so that I can see the lizard prostrate now and call it something else? Or what if we are both yielding to each other simultaneously or to nothing in particular even only embodying a state of submission side by side on our lizard bellies on the hot floor? She is listening all the time about sex and violence and each conversation is about power and articulation and she is listening all the time about verbal communication and embodied communication and action in language and language in action and about speaking up and speaking out and leaning in and leaning out and taking





space and giving space and sharing space and safe space and space created and space held and spacing out and space dispersed and listening up and out and down and I am washed with a vigilance of language. She is exhausted by wanting to be heard in this particular context it is important to add her voice to this dialogue and she does not want to and both things are true. I write truth and I mean feeling. I write feeling and I mean insight. I write insight and I mean knowledge. I write knowledge and I mean need. She experiences the rain not as wet but only as sound. Her body is an event. He says: 'An alternative coherent story.' This is the way to deal with the stories that are ancient and do not serve us, he says, it is to deconstruct them and present our own our new present an alternative story. And I am not averse to the work of it but I won't do it alone I am not averse to the work of it but I am caught on the word 'coherent' because I am incapable or I do not know the processes by which one might achieve coherence or I do not want to have to strive for it or I am frightened honestly. I am not of it neither are my stories I'm not sure they are even stories I cannot or I am not it is hard to distinguish between the two. What is this demand really what is underneath it how do they go these processes of consistency like some kind of dark magic a purifying alchemy you know somehow it has a dirty heart. It is obvious that this is not the medium for these ideas language for resisting language. I enjoy watching two people fuck at a sex club and I have never before considered myself a voyeur. And when I tell this story not that I tell it often I say it was so intimate I suspect the intimacy is what I consider myself permitted to find exciting I rarely say his cock going in and out of her cunt was a turn-on or her cunt over his cock or what happened in my body when I looked at theirs I do not even know how to more honestly describe what that arousal was. Describe as in an



account of language not as in a meteor in the sky. I'm not certain the words are even right I'm not certain how to position myself in relation to them her cunt his cock the event my body apart from behind that one-way mirror and does that mean I should stop talking or keep trying? You pull me in for a kiss and your mouth is cold. Your lips and your tongue are so cold and I think how is it even possible for this part of your body to be so cold how is it when mouths are such places of heat? She thinks maybe the biggest myth is coherence. She would like to be a person who can let things go – this simplest of suggestions which seems like



a suggestion to simplify – but in actuality she is a hoarder she wants to gather it all close every pleasure but especially every pain and never let it be lost and this might be greed or might be ‘baggage’ or might be an entirely valid strategy for survival to have all the things coexist even if it’s possible that it is their multiplicity that is too painful to bear. Your mouth that is hot and cold your hand flat on my sternum as if punching me against a wall your palm flat against the underside of my jaw your body inside me holding me upright. She has spent so long learning how to say no that she no longer knows how to say yes. I am awash with a vigilance of language like I am holding in the most cliché of ways a gun in my right hand and I want simultaneously to make sure the safety is on and to play fast and loose with it in this saloon or on this dusty and surprisingly empty street right outside of the courthouse and blow some holes into the whiskey bottles and the frosted mirrors and maybe even the fucking bartender. This image of washed feels apt or apt enough sort of this liquid abundance maybe an excess a rising I think of the flood – yes in the biblical sense or no not that – and the flood is not important not really but what comes after the flood if the flood is the deconstruction and the alternative comes after? Or what is the alternative if we cannot have a flood at all and we cannot start again and we have to forever use the same languages we have been using since we began and all of the language is contaminated already by our experience of being human and every shitty inadequate way we have used a word before? Or what is the alternative to the flood itself what if we are the flood?

Yes I

No I

Yes I

Yes I

She is exhausted by wanting to be heard, which

does not equate to not wanting to be heard any more. He says: when a language is dying a thing that linguists do is write a grammar of it so that it can be understood by others in the future. Here I am fantasizing about lizards and what might become possible if we let this language die.



