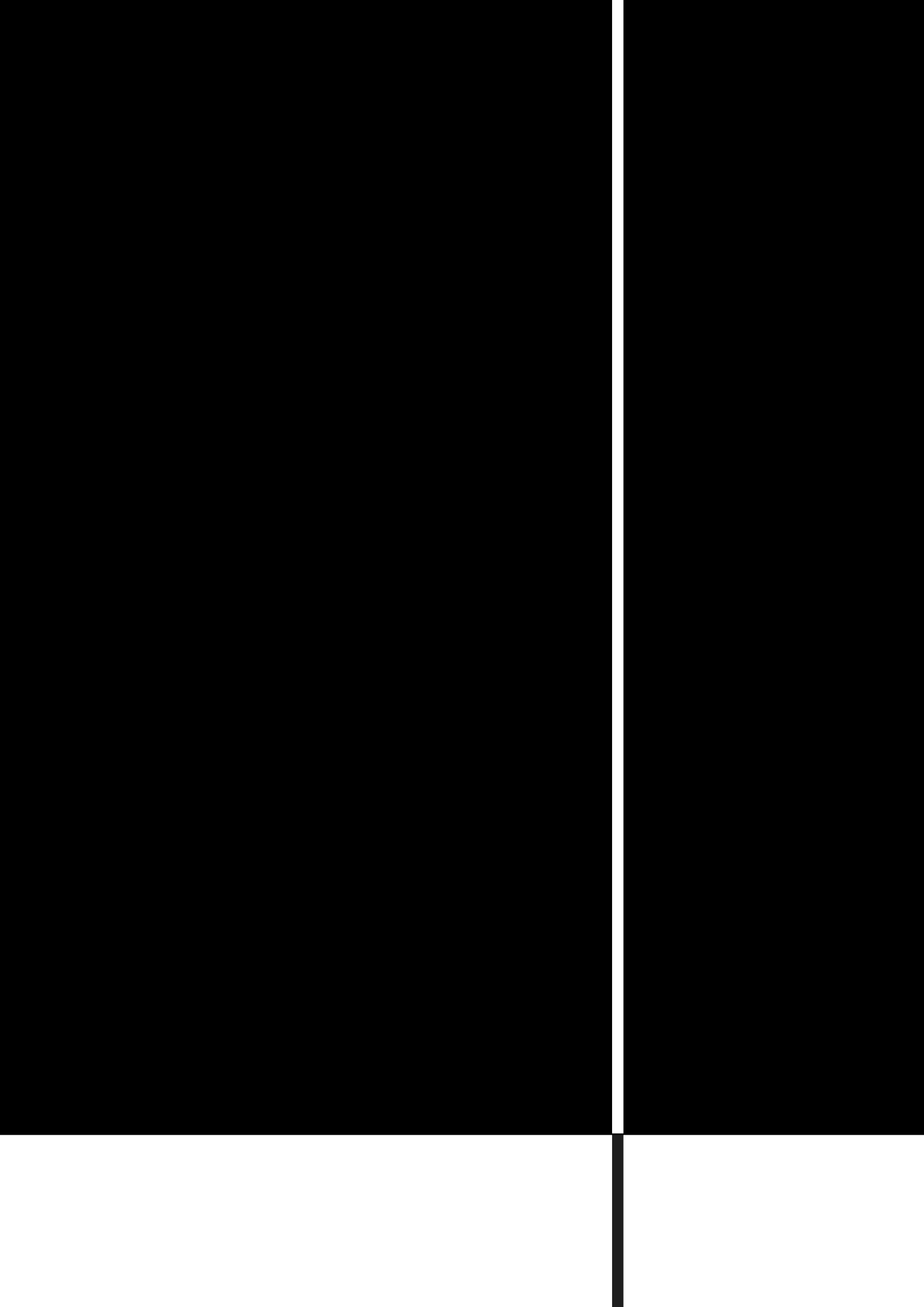


HAMISH HAMILTON PRESENTS

# Five Dials

No. 48  
Glitches



FIVE DIALS

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**Nicholas Barrett** is a journalist who works at the *Economist*. His work has also appeared in *The Financial Times*, *The New European*, *The New Statesman*, *The Times Literary Supplement* and *Vanity Fair Italia*.

**Sam Byers** is the author of *Idiopathy* (2013) and *Perfidious Albion*, which was published this year by Faber & Faber. His writing has appeared in *Granta*, *The New York Times*, and *The Times Literary Supplement*.

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# On glitchessssssssssssssss

Dear Readers,

Thank you for  
Dear Readers

These days it's sometimes difficult to find continuity  
in life because

fractious

broken apart

You might feel your mind if fragmented and so  
Glitches

Glitches

The new issue features

The new issue features

and who can ask for more than

and who can ask for more than

Joe Moran

Joe Moran

Niamh Campbell

Niamh Campbell

Sam Byers

Sam Byers

a horoscope from Sophie Mackintosh  
and an interview with Adam Phillips in which  
he examines what this age of social media and  
distraction is doing to our

Enjoy

Enjoy

# How to move on from Scorpio season

Your stars read by Sophie Mackintosh

The first step is to move blinking into the light. Then, maybe, to survey the wreckage. Then, maybe, to renounce the fear in your dirty heart.

It is a fact universally acknowledged that many non-Scorpios do not trust Scorpios, unless they have already made friends or fallen in love with a Scorpio. Other non-Scorpios will witness such relationships with alarm or possibly even fear. This is unfair, so don't do it. Be gracious.

Don't let your personal vendettas obscure your celestial views. It is said that you never know how many people you hate before you have to name a pet or a baby. The same is true of star signs.

Do your affirmations. 'Affirmations' is another word for repeating that everything is fine until it becomes somewhere approaching fine, or at least until you are distracted from your aforementioned dirty heart.

See also: if you've dug up things that look grim and useless, it is possible to polish them rather than to put them back in the ground.

It is a fact not universally acknowledged that Scorpios who are not brooding and sexy will carry the shame of this deficiency through their whole life. Abandonment of these kinds of residual shames is a key objective of Scorpio season, something that I have not cracked yet, personally.

The day before the season ended, I walked through a building I had been too afraid to visit for the past eighteen months. In that moment, it seemed that the fear was a skin I could peel off like wax. When I walked out, my terror was greatly reduced.

If safe activities like this are available to you, it's not too late to do them. Also the haircut, the tattoo, the disavowal of beige, of colours, of one particular colour, of fabrics, of clothing itself. But please bear in mind that, by the time you read this, it's likely that Mercury will be retrograding. Remember to be realistic about what constitutes safe for you. Keeping yourself safe is the key thing, regardless of season.

Mercury's conjunct with Saturn can make the world feel like two bricks moving against each other. Your teeth on edge. It's easier, sometimes, to blame the stars – though not necessarily fair. The dark truth about astrology is that it is only interesting to you because it holds your life up to your own gaze. You are greedy to know it. I see you, searching furtively for 2019 predictions already.

Jupiter in Scorpio means that Scorpio season isn't really over this year. It means you'll be hungry for the next thirteen months. So do not worry if your jeans feel tighter, if your heart feels swollen like the gourd you cut in half and baked. The gourd was soft and seed-filled on the inside, the way you imagine your body would be, should someone open it up.

All through 2019, the hair on your head and the grass in the ground will keep flourishing, even when you are not. But what's the difference? It does that every year. You're hungry all of the time anyway.

# Oblivion

By Niamh Campbell

It was July and a faintly faecal odour carried inland from the sea. The air in the city was close. The sky in the city was dry foam.

Even though it was evening the basement studio retained the heat, gathered and pallid, so that, on the sprung floor before the mirrors, women now stretched and wilted and fanned themselves dramatically. A queue had formed by the water machine. No breeze streamed through the galley windows. White keys shone from the piano in the corner. Caroline shook out a bag of change by the piano and began dealing with latecomers who hadn't paid her yet.

Drink plenty of water, she drilled.

People were leaving. They turned disoriented on the step, turned and made their way from the mews to the street, and each time feet in thonged sandals passed by the galley windows, slippers now in string bags, tights wound up. On a couch of throws the woman who taught contemporary dance at six sat slumped, scrolling on her phone.

All yours now, Caroline said.

Good stuff. The woman did not look up.

Caroline delayed a moment more, stretching her arms over her head. Her heart was hammering. She let her head tilt and fall back, enjoying it. She felt thirsty and nervous but wildly alive. There was a climbing sensation: something was climbing inside her.

She herself climbed the cramped staircase and passed the framed show posters. In the changing room she removed her tights and shoes and put back on the sundress, the white runners, before cracking and turning to the locker she had bolted on the wall. Her phone lay on a folded cardigan and there was one missed call, from Patrick's father: she phoned him back at once. She tapped a toe behind a heel as the phone rang on. When the old man answered he was, as ever, immensely polite.

Caroline, he said. How are you?

I'm all right, I'm all right, I was teaching a class. Not a problem at all. I am sorry to disturb you. Any word?

No word. At this the man's voice dropped, sounding conspiratorial; Caroline squeezed shut both her eyes, opened them, and nodded soundlessly. After a moment she said, OK. We will wait.

We don't know where he is.

And you say he has never done this, gone this far, before?

Never this long, the man insisted. Never more than a day.

All right. Well. We might have to think about something – I mean, about calling the police?

Let's give it a little bit longer, he said.

She could not say why. She could not say why the thought formed in her mind autonomously, as if it had thought itself, but she would not question it.

She pulled on the cardigan and then removed the cardigan and tied it around her waist. When she passed the studio downstairs the woman who taught contemporary dance was crouched at the hi-fi, playing one crunching riff after another, browsing through the contents of a playlist. It was as if she were deaf and didn't care that the music was blasting, erupting as blunt as a weapon – falling silent – beginning again. Caroline let herself out and walked quickly to where she had chained her bicycle. Even the mews was loud with evening traffic.

Wheels spiralling towards Islandbridge. Take a left before crossing the river; weave around stacked traffic on the quays; navigate the big break of O'Connell Boulevard and cross the bridge with two other cyclists in the path of a bellowing bus, like dolphins springing up before the prow of a ship, and it was easy not to think on this journey – not to reflect – because it was dangerous, palm-sweat dangerous, and still so hot, and Caro-



line's throat was dry. She became confused by the lane system and dismounted to push the bike as far as Pearse Street. The Garda station rose steely and square. There were squad cars parked about and posters on the double doors with instructions for tourists who had been mugged.

Inside, there was something vintage and austere to the reception, with its orange tiles and absence of light – cool, with a bank of mangled snugs – and the circular counter with biros on beaded cords and names and the word *pigs* cut into it multiple times. Caroline hesitated and blushed. She made and unmade her ponytail. There were people waiting, people speaking quietly, and a young guard nodding to her now, impatiently.

I don't know what the process is, she said, for, like, reporting somebody missing.

And who is this? he asked. He took out a notebook and a pen.

When she said *ex-boyfriend* he wrote down *boyfriend* and Caroline said, no, no: *ex-boyfriend*. A moment later he asked, and how long were you married to him?

Never married, Caroline said.

She said, I'm probably being stupid.

I've found him on the system, the guard told her, reading out Patrick's parents' address.

The night he had been punched and blacked out, and woke up in the hospital. She had entered into the mystery and become incandescent, telling all the cab drivers, driving around, looking out for him. She had gone to his parents' house and sparked up the steps and was let in, although it was late, to the threadbare front room with its vast aristocratic ceiling of pennants and florets and fruit. To speak stoutly. To say, I am the woman who can deal with this.

Now she spoke frankly and sanely to the guard, looking him firmly in the eyes to impress upon him a regard for her frankness and her sanity. He

drinks, she said: I mean he basically has a drink problem and his parents are ashamed, I think, so they're playing it down, but he's in a bad way. In a bad frame of mind. I believe he might be a danger to himself.

To someone else?

No, only himself.

I can file this, the guard said, and then it will go out on to the system. He asked a lot of questions. He asked for the names and numbers of Patrick's parents. He asked for her name and her number and her address; she said, well, I'll give you my parents' address.

But the guard said, your Dublin address as well.

I can file this now, the guard said.

OK. Caroline squinted at him. Hmm, she said. OK. Will you wait just one minute?

Call his father again, the guard suggested, and see if there's been an update.

On the phone Patrick's father listened to her and then said, no, Caroline, and I'll tell you why. If he goes on to the system you see, as missing or anything else, it will come up the next time he is vetted for work.

Oh yeah, she said.

He might never work again. I have spoken to a family friend in the Gardai.

Patrick's parents had friends in the Guards and the courts and the medical establishment. They had friends in embassies and senates. They were always producing these friends in conversation as if they had only just thought of them.

So I hear you, she said. But it's been three days now, and what if something bad has happened to him?

It will be over for him, the old man insisted, as regards work, if he has any run-ins with the law. They will say, what's this, why were you reported missing?

I see. You don't want me to do it?

Can you wait? he pleaded. Can you wait, Caroline, and we'll try him again?

She had a thought. The thought was, they are trying to get into my head. This time it was less of a thought than a reflex. On the night she had sparked up their steps, on the night of excitement, the old man had looked at her over spectacles and said, I can tell you're a sensible girl.

When she'd hung up and explained to the guard, she asked the guard, well, what do you think about that?

I can hold on to this – the guard waved the notebook – and they can decide if they want to pursue it later.

They have asked, Caroline said drily, that you absolutely don't log it. So this conversation that we've had, I mean – this won't be on any system? I have been told to get assurance.

Not unless I log it. Nothing on the system for now. You should call us, the guard said sternly, as soon as you hear anything.

Caroline felt strangely sedate as she rode into the evening. For a while it had seemed as if nothing was ever going to happen again.

When she was high a crude synaptic stutter occurred and she found herself trapped in an unfolding moment, a single moment, for the guts of an hour, and it was absurd.

In this moment, she wrote, I became a foetus, powder pink, and shrank into myself. I could feel my knees on the flesh of my belly. I was reborn like a person snapping out of a dream, with a gasp of air, and the bucket before me – I wanted to puke – and the trails of sweat left by my fingers against the linoleum floor – the bucket before – and I wanted to puke, but it wouldn't come.

So I buckled and moaned and relented and became a foetus, powder pink, again, in a chamber of luminous skin. I awoke with a gasp like a person

snapping out of a dream to the bucket before me – I wanted to puke – and the skids of sweat shrinking away from the linoleum. But no matter what, I couldn't throw up.

I thought that vomit would put a stop to it.

You cannot imagine how nauseous I felt.

I am sick just thinking of it but that wasn't even the half of it.

She wrote, listen to this.

When it cleared I slid into the ritual circle and cried because I felt ashamed of myself. I slid on my thighs in the short denim dress that had become an orphan's attire, a white pinafore, as a part of my hallucination of May Day procession – I carried a Sacred Heart then, and my hair was cut bluntly across my forehead, and this was in the nineteenth century, and there was a nun I admired in the choir – earlier, that was earlier in the high. Now I just slid to the centre and wept. Now I felt derelict.

I don't know why I went into the centre of the ritual. I think that I wanted an audience, or help. I could say I was high but there was such a logic to it, a logic I couldn't verbalize, but which lassoed me into the centre and enclosed me like a bell. Both the sound of a bell and the shape of a bell. A cave of misty flickers. Anyway I became convinced of certain things. On two occasions, actually.

On two occasions, she wrote, during this controlled high I became convinced or became aware that the previous year of my life – of our lives, of your life and my life – *did not occur*, but in fact had been fabricated by my fancy for the purposes of pedagogical hallucination. Which is to say prophecy or example. Which is to say a kind of dumb-show on the wall of the cave or a parable encoding cautions, acting as a cautionary tale, saying: this is not how to live a year of your life, this is *not* how to be.

You see?

What generosity!

My mouth fell open (this was a trope) and I saw my palms shining upwards like the empty pages of a copybook. And when I went outside the world was almost goadingly harmonious. Fields behind the fences stretched to a sculpture of cloud and a copse of absolutely erect evergreens tapering monumentally against the blue sky and I knew that they had been placed there by calculation to create balance, whether by a landscaper or God or Gaia or even Kali, with people standing about in equal proportion as the musicians played Canon in D.

It was very much like an eighteenth-century pleasure garden. I began to think that the trees and the sky were actually *trompe l'œil* and I felt that this was sinister but articulate.

But when the Pachelbel swelled, she explained, it became too much, geysering through me, and I threw my arms out cruciform. When the Pachelbel began to fold up it was embarrassed for me, fixed in a smile of condescension, so that I felt self-conscious. The fact that the year had in fact happened, the previous year of my life and your life – of our lives, the shady places where our lives have intersected – settled into me firmly and then I was depressed, I felt very depressed, I sat listlessly watching trees sift into lizards and Rorschach tests for the rest of the afternoon.

It was terrible.

I think about it now and I have to sit back from the page, where I sit at the kitchen table of my apartment facing the railway and the park. The trees of the park are not transforming into anything; they bloom as bulbous and as charmless as brassicas. The mountains are soft scoops of navy and baize, the sky a self-loathing grey. Every day comes to this, she wrote: *a reckoning*. She underlined *reckoning* several times and provided a sketch of the tapering trees and the *trompe l'œil* arrangement with musical notes that looked like something drawn by a schoolchild, and wrote, see watercolour attached.

So the next day, she wrote, we did it again. We burned sage and palo santo. After the stuttering moment had stopped – more cartoonish this time round, with flying skulls – I became convinced once again that the previous year of my life *had not occurred*, merely *could occur*, if I did not heed the advice here proffered, to get out of the bucket-and-foetus linoleum rut, to see reincarnation as mimetic template, applicable everywhere and not only to the actual doctrine of reincarnation, which if I am honest the jury is more or less still out on.

Darling, only think of it.

Later in the dorm we spoke of *karmic history*.

As we were speaking, women with hairbrushes and rosehip oil, another woman rushed in and said, oh no, a frog, a frog. An amphibian as small and tender as a throat – as a throat disgorged, throbbing and delicate – had hopped under a bunk bed, and we were six or seven minutes catching him between the dustpan and the brush, whooshing him into the bush again. The night came down, fragrant, over privies with half-moon slats.

Only think of that. A world without accidents.

My joy, she wrote, at the thought of undoing a year at a stroke was matched only by my grief at having it – the year – returned to me as unwanted property.

Longing to be free.

Longing to be free.

So I went home and I was out of sorts for a week. I smudged and I cried in child pose and I dreamed of glowing love-hearts, glowing skulls, and I went to a spirit activation class, kindly civil servants shrieking and orgasming on the floor of a community hall – a hall with unihoc and basketball and yoga mats – and it was beautiful, even more beautiful than Canon in D, because shrieks and howls had become for me ambient sounds. There was laughter and dry electric frying. I sat in the centre (the centre again) bereft, unable to access

that space where a year might be wiped, where we might meet again and no cruelty pass between us and no bitterness – only this.

The spirit travels up your spine. It wants nothing more than to flower from your mouth. But if it can't it will stay in the spine and vibrate – it will make your whole body vibrate. Think of electricity trapped and wrapping in panic around the scrappy circuit board of a phone charger, desperate for release. Your body will turn into autonomous poses from yoga and contemporary dance. Nobody does ballet because ballet is deeply unnatural.

I got your email, he texted. This was the first sign that he had resurfaced.

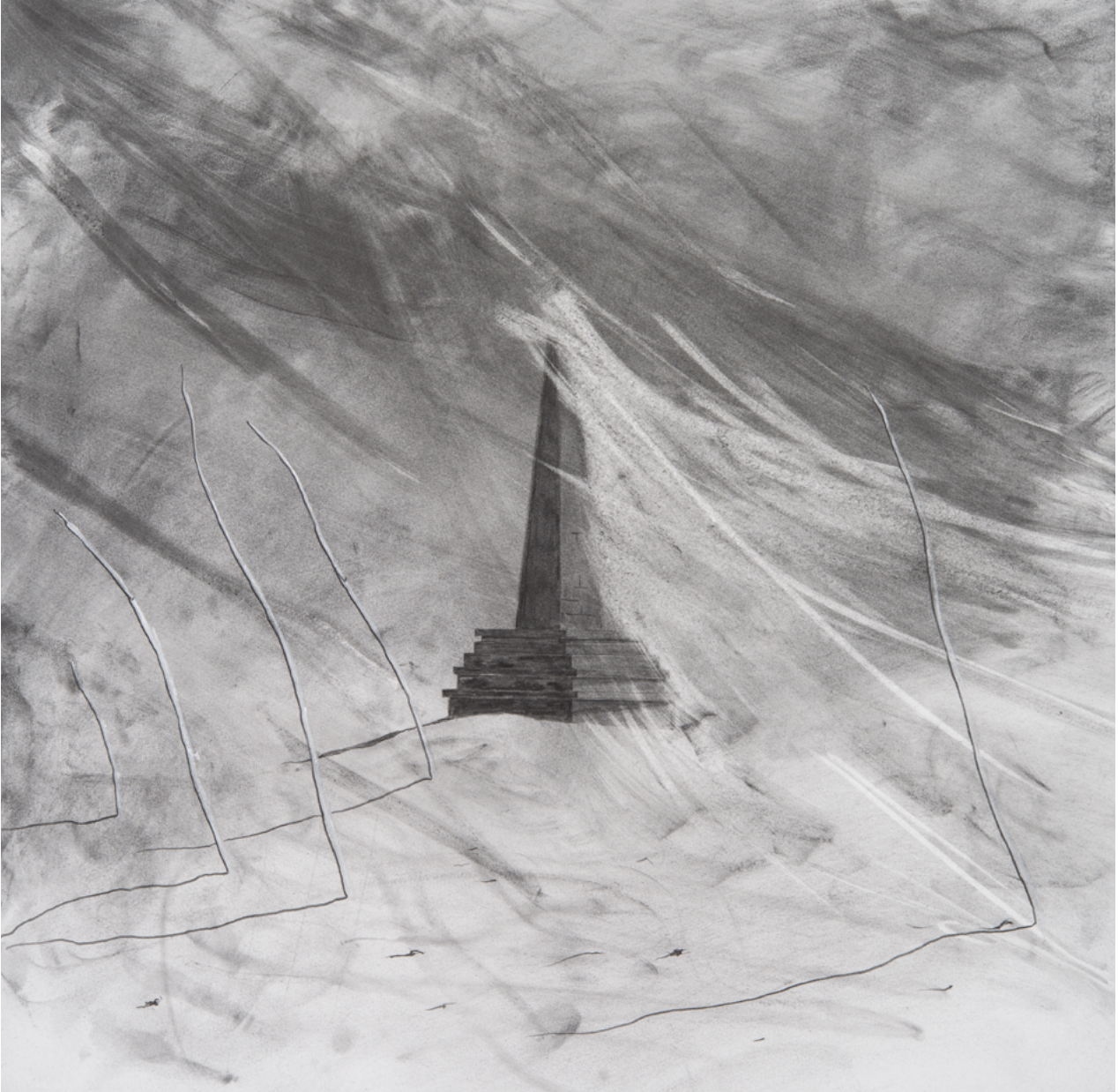
Well, she replied, I am glad you aren't dead.

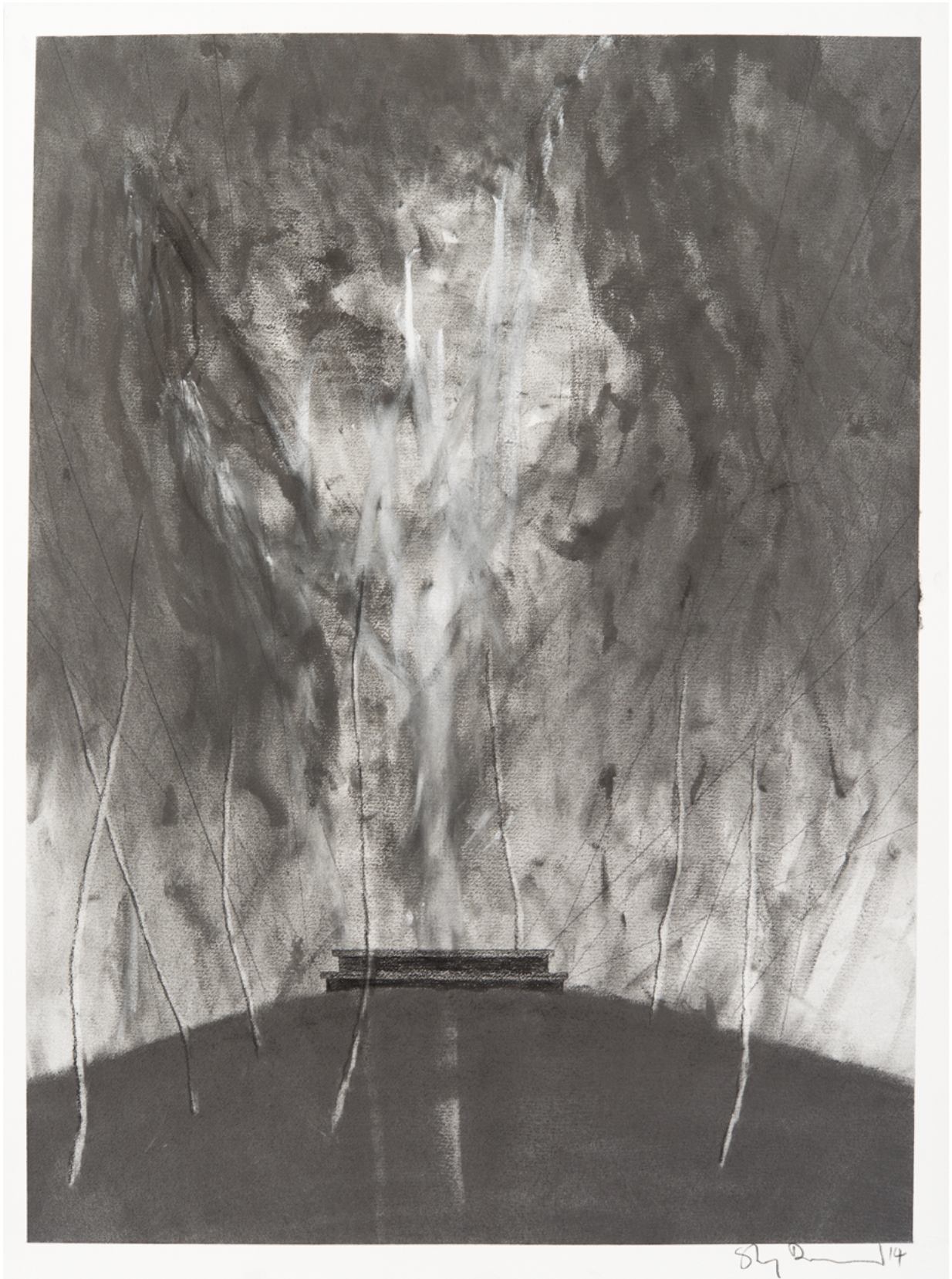
In her room he was rolling his shirt up and she saw a brutal bruise dug into his back, cried out in surprise, pointed to it.

I don't even remember how that happened, he said.

FEATURED ARTIST

# Stanley Donwood















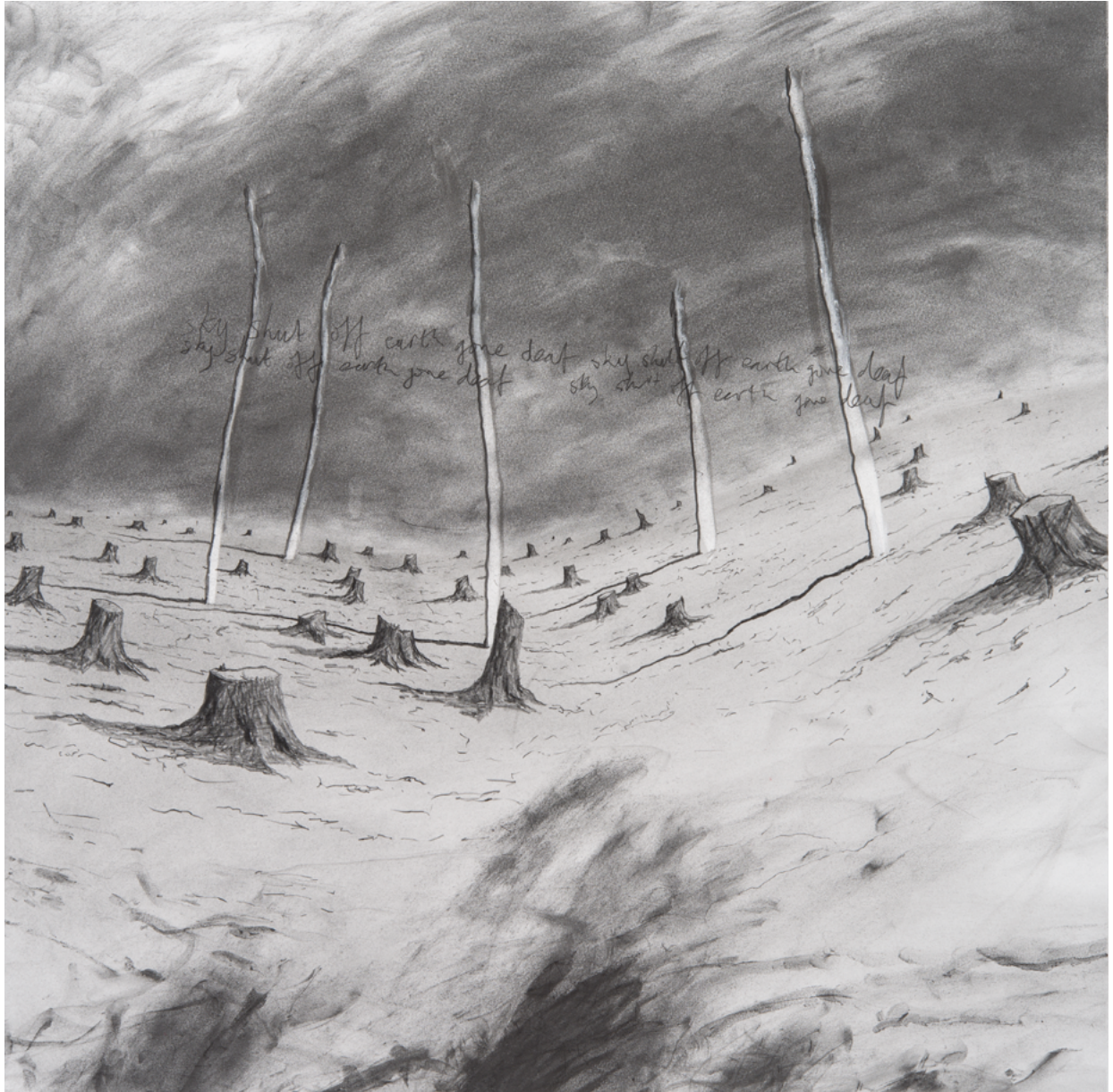




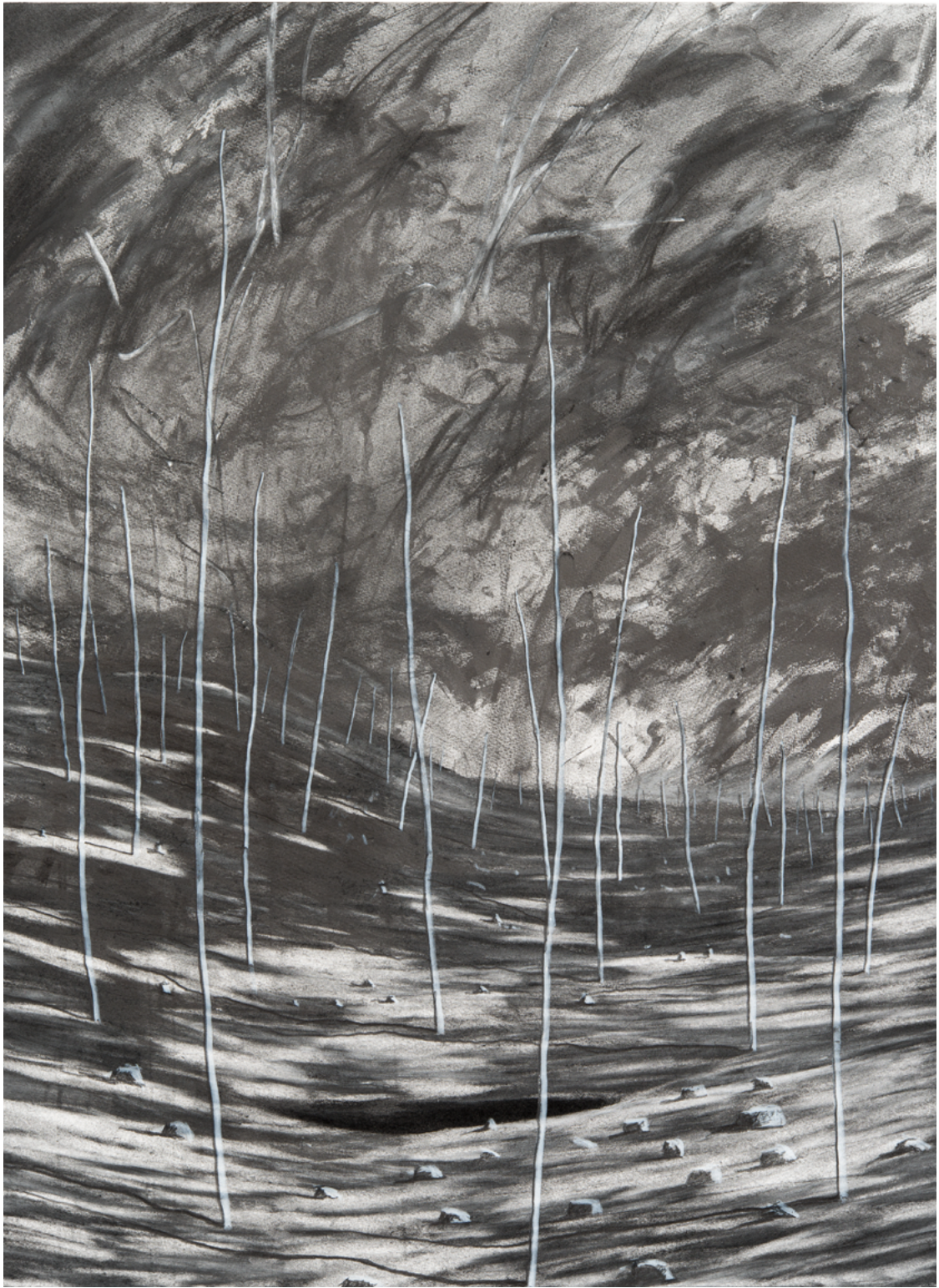
















# An Album Can Last A Day

## How Autechre Soundtracked Our Algorithmic Existence

By Sam Byers

It doesn't so much begin as swoop into land: thirty seconds of silence followed by the gathering swell of sputtering static and a sighing, weary chorus of what might be low-flying aircraft. At around the fifteenth minute, new sounds cut through the haze: a thin, whining synth tone, a muddy kick drum, a time-stretched glitch that seems to hint at something mechanistically vocal. The beat coalesces, settling into a stumbling four-four time that periodically teeters off-tempo. The music sounds as if it's dragging itself along, trailing its own decomposition in its wake. As it proceeds, it seems to encounter sonic events external to its own body: glassy, resonant chimes and squelching bass tones that refuse to fully cohere. Then, after nearly twenty minutes, the palette changes completely. The low end falls away, giving ground to what sounds like the chirrup of game console bleeps and the high-pitched hiss of an ancient dial-up modem. Finally, almost thirty minutes in, a new forcefulness takes hold. A sonic presence somewhere between a fuzzboxed string tone and a reverberating organ dominates the soundscape. A beat constructed from a muffled kick and layered industrial clatter takes hold. Everything – melody, rhythm, time itself – seems to snap into compelling focus. Musical touchdown has taken thirty drawn-out minutes – the length of some albums. But this is something different. It is the latest Autechre project, and it lasts eight hours.

I use the word *project* advisedly. Autechre's latest offering, *NTS Sessions*, premiered over four weeks on the titular Internet radio station, isn't exactly an album, and neither is it strictly a live performance. Given that the material it contains is entirely by Sean Booth and Rob Brown, who make up Autechre, it's not a mix either. When streaming began, intrigued and excited fans spent as much time discussing taxonomy and method as they did content. Now that the Sessions have been made available as official downloads, some of those ques-

tions have been answered. The releases comprise new material, and are made up of discrete, titled tracks. Exactly how they're supposed to be thought of, however – as a sequence, as a single entity with convenient breaks, or as something somewhere between the two – depends on how you listen.

Autechre's disruptive approach to form is not without context. In many ways, *NTS Sessions* is the logical next step in a progression that began with 2013's oppressively dense two-hour *Exai*, and continued through 2015's nine-hour data-dump of live performances and 2016's five-volume, four-hour *elseq 1–5*. These are releases made possible by the disembodied liberation that accompanies the demise of physicality in the music industry. Unshackled from the constraints of a side of vinyl, or a CD, Autechre are able to release music that effectively has its own relationship to time. A track can be an hour, an album can last a day. Where for many artists our digital present is characterized by fragmentation, immediacy, distraction, for Autechre it facilitates the release of intimidating edifices of music that require ever more time and attention to engage with. In much the same way as extended minimalist performances by the likes of La Monte Young required listeners to settle in all night, Autechre's newest works require an acceptance that meaning will not be delivered in easy-to-digest packages. Instead, it will unfold, sometimes changing imperceptibly, and sometimes seeming not to change at all but to hover in non-progressive suspension. In this state, the roles of listener and sound are reversed: it's not always the music that changes; sometimes it's you, and the world around you, with the music becoming a fixed point against which you can measure your own inexorable journey through time.

Neither album nor performance, *NTS Sessions* represents both the lofty pinnacle and furthest-flung edgeland of Autechre's approach. Eight

hours of unspooling, artificially conscious sound that, miraculously, pushes further into the possibilities of their technique while offering a surprisingly coherent and comprehensive overview of their palette. The tracks may be ‘new’, but the sounds from which they’re constructed are familiar to the point where they feel patented, as if Autechre now ‘own’ certain sonic signatures: fizzing, angry crackles; quasi-melodic glitch patterns; and, most of all, sounds that exist in the uncanny valley of the almost-acoustic, leading the listener, frequently, to imagine processed vocal tones, prepared piano, warping strings. If anything were to be described as Autechrean, it’s this effect: the duelling decoding processes that take place in your own brain when you hear the whisper of the organic in something so defiantly artificial.

In much the same way as downloads have enabled Autechre to jettison certain release formats and purchasing protocols, digital technology has also allowed them largely to do away with what we might traditionally think of as instruments. Up until *Exai*, much of Autechre’s work was about wringing previously unimagined sounds from the circuitry of synths and drum machines. In their quest for the new, they literally dismantled their own tools – opening up the mechanistic bodies of their noise-boxes and rewiring their guts to create a sound palette unlike anyone else’s. These sounds were then, usually, sequenced in a software environment in which progressions could be arranged, effects automated, and a timeline fixed in place on the screen’s layout. From *Exai* onwards, however, they have removed an entire stage of their compositional process and switched to working entirely in a programming system called MaxMSP. Not a single sound or effect you hear in Autechre’s music now comes from anything we would ordinarily think of as hardware. Instead, it has been coded from scratch, built from nothing using raw data itself.

The effect of this change in process is to destabilize the very notion of composition. Much, if not all of the music is generative. What has been ‘composed’ is not so much a series of notes and beats but a cluster of decision-making algorithms that not only spit out sound but manipulate that sound over time. Left running, these artificial intelligences would produce an infinite, automated music, one that evolved and shape-shifted continually and moved, one assumes, towards a state of ever noisier chaos. Autechre, then, are no longer producing music as such, but controlling the extent to which the engines they’ve designed spew streams of music on their behalf.

This accounts for the eerie, semi-organic sense of intelligence that is always at play in the substrata of Autechre’s sound world. In Autechre-land, distortion, for example, does not simply hiss. It cycles through frequencies, moving from a low rumble up to a squealing, strangled sibilance, entirely unconnected from the sounds it was originally supposed to augment. This, ultimately, is Autechre’s singular contribution to contemporary music: the boundary between sound and effect, impulse and echo, rhythm and texture, is completely broken down. Because any element, even static hiss, can be tuned, ‘melody’, in the old sense of the word, could come from anywhere.

Considering Autechre’s music in light of this generative process forces us to reconsider not only what we think of as composition but what we think of as performance. Are Autechre ‘playing’ their music, in the traditional sense, or are they simply unleashing it – firing up the micro-intelligences to which they have delegated the decision-making and allowing them to run riot? As if nodding to this, Autechre have always played their live sets in total darkness. The effect is both compelling and profoundly disorientating. When I saw them ‘live’ at the Royal Festival Hall, the audi-

ence were advised to hold their ticket in the air if they needed to exit the performance, so that ushers wearing night-vision goggles could come and escort them out. During the hour of tentacular, unspooling, monstrous music that followed, during which I felt by turns physically disassembled and cosmically transported, I was not entirely surprised to see more than one faint white shape in the air in front of me, as one audience member then another waved their white flag of submission. When the performance ended and the lights went up, casting us all uncomfortably back into a reality we had so comprehensively departed, the stage was empty, Autechre having already left under cover of darkness. No bows, no waves to the crowd, no encores. Just their now-silent laptops in a state of temporary hibernation, and an audience flailing for descriptions of what they'd heard. 'It was like a tunnel,' I heard someone saying on the way out, 'and I was in the tunnel but then the tunnel became, like, liquid.'

Blacked-out stages, a sense of the musicians as subversively absent, a set of sounds that are systems in themselves, arising not from anything tactile but from a matrix of interrelated algorithms: Autechre seem to steer us towards ideas of post-humanity, or even non-humanity, as ways of understanding their work. This is, however, a misnomer, and what interests me is that it's a fallacy that stems from a wider, perhaps wilful misunderstanding of how algorithms and the supposed 'artificial intelligences' they represent function. In interrogating our misconceptions of Autechre's sound world, we are forced to confront a deeper misconception, one that brings to the surface dangerous flaws in the way we understand our contemporary reality.

Speaking with Joe Muggs in a rare interview, following the release of *elseq*, Sean Booth explained Autechre's work with MaxMSP in the following way:

I wouldn't say it's a living entity, really. It's about as much like an entity as a shit AI in a game is. That's how intelligent it is, which is not intelligent at all, but it might at least resemble the way a person thinks ... It's not another mind at work in our stuff. It's just our habits, transcribed. With this kind of algorithmic music, because the algorithms are made by people, it is people music! You get that thing of, 'Eww, it's not human!' But that's so far off how I think of it. I think of it as being more human, because there's all these decisions in there, and they're human decisions. They're what people chose to do.

The language of both techno-utopianism and dystopianism invites us to think of large tracts of our daily lived experiences as outsourced to, and overseen by, decision-making engines that are no longer human in nature. From the mouths of the Silicon Valley tech-bros whose interest is in convincing us that we're entering a new era of algorithmic convenience, this language tends towards the emancipatory. We no longer need to think about things like what to buy, what to consume, how to navigate the cities in which we live, how to correctly expose a photograph or when to have sex without getting pregnant, because now an artificial intelligence can handle that 'thinking' for us, leaving our minds free to focus on what is important. To its critics, this vision is positively terrifying, with key aspects of our global existence, from stock markets to voting behaviour to the policing of crime now not only overseen but *shaped* by artificial means. Both sides of this discussion, however, ignore the point made by Booth: no intelligence can ever be truly artificial, because no algorithm can ever be genuinely independent from the person or group who designed it. All the technology we use, every app we download, every alert and

notification and targeted ad, is simply ‘what people chose to do’, and in every supposedly algorithmic decision we can sense not only a human hand but a very human set of prejudices, from racist face-recognition technology to phallogocentric health apps. We have outsourced nothing. We have simply encoded what was already there.

This is why listening to Autechre’s late-style work engenders such feelings of vertigo and creeping uncertainty: what we’re listening to is not simply rhythm and melody, it is the musical expression of the limits and possibilities of the decision-making processes that shape our world. In that sense, Autechre have not, as we might say of a favourite band, soundtracked our lives, they have both soundtracked and concretized the evolving context in which our lives unfold.

Too often, in art, we consider that which is least treated to be the most authentic. We moan about films being over-reliant on CGI, or music being ‘overproduced’. On Instagram, a *#nofilter* movement deifies unaltered photographs, as if to suggest that a sunset stripped of the inevitable distorting overlay not only gets closer to some base-level ‘truth’ of the visible world but elevates the person posting the image above the vulgar trickery of his or her peers and binds them to some (often misleading) contract of honesty and beauty. Autechre, through the compositional techniques they have perfected, invite us to consider the possibility that at the extreme edge of processing lie a new rawness and spontaneity – a beauty that is not naturally occurring. The effect of this is defamiliarizing, perhaps even upsetting. What we’re listening to is, in many ways, the realization that ‘nature’ doesn’t hold exclusive rights to the sublime.

This is a feeling intensified by Autechre’s ability to conjure a surprisingly tangible landscape from the non-space in which they operate. Such is the pinpoint accuracy of their sound design, effects

such as reverb and panning are pressed into the service not just of augmenting sound but of seemingly augmenting the very space in which sound exists. You can’t ‘hear the room’ in Autechre’s music, because there is no room there to begin with, but as you listen, you are transported through multiple environments: decaying, dust-covered industrial buildings where every rustle and clang reverberates; oceanic realms of dampened amplitude; even the emptiness of deep space, soundtracked by little more than the whisper of blood in your ears. The implication is obvious: it’s not simply Autechre-land that’s drenched in effects, *everything* we experience is an effect, from dopplering sirens to growling engines to the perspectival trickery of the sun dipping below the horizon line. Processing is all we have. Effects are the bedrock of our fragile authenticity.

*NTS Sessions*, after around seven hours of music, ends with a single, hour-long drone piece. From the ones and zeros of their MaxMSP interface, Autechre summon what sounds like a church organ heard at a distance: a vast, swelling body of echoing sound. Tellingly, it glitches. The resonant tones stutter and stumble. Beneath the swell, that engine-like bass tone can be heard again, anchoring this digital interpretation of the sacred in the unreal. Often, Autechre’s titles are the post-language consonant-jumble of filenames: ‘t1a1’ or ‘9 chr0’ or ‘shimripl air’. This one, as if returning us to a place of clear meaning after an epic voyage through encryption, is unexpectedly literal: ‘all end’. It feels apocalyptic, yet calming and transcendent. There is a sense of acceptance, perhaps even submission. We have not been transported at all, merely shown where we always were: in a continually reconfigured, semi-automated world, entirely of our own making.

# Sinatra Sang in Sentences

By Joe Moran

The style guides say: keep your sentences short. Write cleanly, cut as many words as you can, and don't overburden your reader's short-term memory by delaying the arrival of the full stop. But sometimes a sentence just needs to be long. The world resists our efforts to enclose it between a capital and a full stop. The sentence has to withhold its end because life is like that, refusing to fold itself neatly into subject, verb and object.

A long sentence should exult in its own expansiveness, lovingly extending its line of thought while being always clearly moving to its close. It should create anticipation, not confusion, as it goes along. The hard part is telling the difference between the two. I once heard Ken Dodd say that the secret of a great comedian is that he makes the audience feel simultaneously safe and slightly on edge. He has about half a minute from coming on stage, Dodd reckoned, to establish that he is harmless. He must quickly convey calm and control, so that the audience members relax into their seats, safe in the knowledge that nothing truly awkward is about to happen. But he must also create a sense of unpredictability that makes them lean forward. A good long sentence has that same tension. It should frustrate readers just a little, and put them just faintly on edge, without ever suggesting that it has lost control of what is being said.

A sentence, once begun, demands its own completion. It throws a thought into the air and leaves the reader vaguely dissatisfied until that thought has come in to land. We read a sentence with the same part of our brains that processes music. Like music, a sentence arrays its elements into an order that should seem fresh and surprising and yet shaped and controlled. It works by violating expectations and creating mild frustrations on the way to fulfilment. As it runs its course, it assuages some of the frustration and may create more. But by the end, things should have resolved

themselves in a way that allows something, at least, to be said.

A long sentence can seem thrillingly out of breath, deliciously tantalizing, so long as we feel the writer is still in charge. It is like listening to a great singer as he holds his breath and prolongs a phrase. The secret to Frank Sinatra's singing is his gift for fluid phrasing. Matt Monro may have had better technique, Tony Bennett more lung power, Nat King Cole a smoother tone, Bobby Darin more swing. But Sinatra beat them all at breathing.

As a young singer, Sinatra listened awestruck to his bandleader Tommy Dorsey's astoundingly smooth trombone playing. The note holds seemed to defy human lung capacity. Dorsey would play a musical phrase right through, seemingly without taking a breath, for eight or even sixteen bars. Sinatra sat behind him on the bandstand to learn when and how he breathed, but could not even see his jacket move up and down. Eventually he worked out that Dorsey had a pinhole in the corner of his mouth through which he was taking furtive breaths. Sinatra came to see that singing, too, was about breath control and that the secret was never to break the phrase. In music, *legato* means 'bound together': a seamless flow, with no break between the notes. Sinatra wanted to sing legato, running the whole phrase into one smooth breath.

He worked out on running tracks and practised holding his breath underwater in public pools, thinking song lyrics to himself as he swam. His breath control got better and, where he had to breathe in a song, he got better at hiding it. He moved the microphone towards and away from his mouth as he sang so that you never heard him inhale. If he had to sneak in a little breath somewhere he made sure it seemed deliberate, as if he were letting the message sink in. He learned this trick from watching the horn section in Dorsey's



band during long instrumentals. When he sang, it sounded as if he was making it all up as he went along, pausing to pluck a word out of the air, lagging a fraction behind the beat – like a long, lithe sentence, *ad libitum* but always in control of what it was saying.

Unlike writing, which runs with its own irregular pulse, music has a regular rhythm with a steady downbeat. Musical metre controls time completely: a half note hangs in the air for exactly half as long as the whole note. This allows harmonizing singers and instruments to pursue separate agendas and yet still pleasurably coincide. But music also depends on phrasing, which is more subtle and varied than metre. A musical phrase lasts for about as long as a person can sing, or blow a wind instrument, in a single breath. What phrasing does to music is more like what a sentence does to words. A skilled singer can make the phrasing, the sentence structure of a song, work with or against the metre.

Pub crooners and karaoke singers never sing in sentences. They focus too much on lung power and hitting the notes and not enough on the words. They just belt it all out, taking gulping breaths mid-line, killing the meaning and the mood. But skilled singers know that the words matter. They might hold a note for effect, or add a bit of melisma, but mostly their phrasing will mirror the way the words of the song would be spoken. Songs are written in sentences, and phrasing is about singing in sentences, not song lines.

A phraseologist like Sinatra overlays the metre with something like confiding speech. He is all about the lyrics – you can hear him enunciate every syllable – and it feels as if he is saying as well as singing them to you, stretching out and twisting the pitch of words as we do in speech. Sinatra sings in sentences. Perhaps he hated rock 'n' roll for this reason, not because he thought it ugly and degenerate, as he said, but because it did not care about

the sentences. The rhythm of rock 'n' roll always drowns out the syntax. Even a great phrasemaker like Chuck Berry has to make his sentences fit the backbeat.

It always irked me that in record shops Sinatra was filed under 'easy listening', the suggestion being that his songs were as undemanding as elevator music, and best heard as the background buzz in a cocktail lounge. Another unfashionable singer filed in the same section, and whom I unfashionably loved, was Karen Carpenter. The emotional power of Carpenter's singing comes not so much from her vocal tone, gorgeous as that is, but from the fact that she, like Sinatra, sings in sentences. Singing for as long as she does on one breath, in complete sentences over twisting melodies, is an amazing feat – not just of lung capacity but of tricking her throat into thinking that she is not about to swallow.

By the end of a Carpenters song you feel wrung out, as if someone has emptied their heart in front of you. All that has happened is that you have been sucker-punched by the dexterity of a technical virtuoso, effortlessly unspooling a long sentence. Easy listening is hard singing – and easy reading is hard writing.

Every writer is a poet by default and every sentence a little poem. The longer the sentence, the more closely it resembles poetry, or should do. A good training exercise for the long-sentence writer is to read some of the countless poems written as one long sentence, often just a simple collection of modifiers. Henry Vaughan's 'The Night' has no main verbs or connectives, just a lightly tied bale of appositives that rename the noun in the poem's title: 'this world's defeat; The stop to busy fools'. George Herbert's 'Prayer' repeats the trick: 'the soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage'.

American poetry, from Walt Whitman to Amy

Clampitt, offers a vast lending library of these one-sentence poems that pile up free modifiers parted by commas. So many poems work as long, loose sentences – running over many lines, or the whole poem, and inviting us to wonder at how much they can fit inside themselves, and whether they will ever be an adequate vessel for all that needs to be said.

In fact a long, loose sentence turns into a poem if you just add line breaks:

*The London Underground  
marks the hardest of borders  
between tourist and native:  
the tourist fumbling for change,  
squinting at the ticket machine  
and trying to work out  
which zone he is in,  
then flinching at the barrier  
as if unsure it will open for him,  
while the native absently  
places her card on the reader,  
and walks straight through  
in one balletic action,  
knowing the exact moment it will open  
without even breaking her stride,  
and then gauging the spot on the platform  
at which the doors will open,  
and answering the beeping sound  
that announces the closing of the doors  
by instinctively contorting her body  
to fit inside the carriage,  
pulled along by habit  
and the momentum  
of other moving bodies,  
as at home in her habitat  
as a swift on the wing.*

Poems, like songs sung well, are made of sentences as well as lines. The sentence is part of a

poem's music just as much as the metre. Line and metre are the flimsy frame behind which the unsailable syntactical rhythms of the English sentence rumble on. For many poets, the unit of composition is not the line but the sentence spoken in a single outbreath. Robert Graves said that a poem came to him in 'the usual line-and-a-half that unexpectedly forces itself on the entranced mind'. Poets write in sentences, just like everyone else, then play them off against the metre. Metre, like rhyme, is so strict that it has to pull against something to create its agreeable tensions. Without sentences, poetry would just be sing-song.

Think of a long sentence as a poem and it will always be clear, because each part of it will unravel in little musical phrases, with all the different parts colouring one another without it ever feeling discordant. The one indispensable quality in a long sentence is that it must divide into these smaller pieces to be chewed and swallowed one at a time, and still always be moving, with each short phrase, towards completion. A long sentence should feel alive, awake, kinetic, aerobic – like a poem.

For the American writing teacher Francis Christensen, learning to write was also about learning to live. He believed that teaching his students how to write a really great long sentence could teach them to 'look at life with more alertness'. It should not just be about ensuring that the sentence is grammatically correct, or even clear. The one true aim, he wrote, was 'to enhance life – to give the self (the soul) body by wedding it to the world, to give the world life by wedding it to the self'. He wanted his students to become 'sentence acrobats' who could 'dazzle by their syntactic dexterity'.

The poet Elizabeth Bishop similarly liked sentences that 'attempted to dramatize the mind in action rather than in repose'. In an essay she wrote for *Vassar Review* in 1934 while still a student, Bishop explored how Gerard Manley Hopkins

catches and preserves 'the movement of an idea – the point being to crystallize it early enough so that it still has movement'. A single stanza of Hopkins could be, she wrote, 'as full of, aflame with, motion as one of Van Gogh's cedar trees'.

Bishop's own poems are like that. Spoken by a restlessly darting, apprehensive voice, they live inside their slowly cumulative sentences, loose trails of words full of qualifications, self-corrections and second thoughts. Bishop also thought of the long-sentence writer as an aerial artist. Her favourite lines from Hopkins were 'reminiscent of the caprice of a perfectly trained acrobat: falling through the air to snatch his partner's ankles he can yet, within the fall, afford an extra turn and flourish in safety, without spoiling the form of his flight'.

I like this metaphor but am not quite persuaded by it. Is the writer of a long sentence really like an acrobat? Should a long sentence be as showboating as the turns and tumbles of the trapeze artist? I side more with Thoreau, who warned the writer against 'trying to turn too many feeble somersaults in the air'. And I am reminded of Burt Lancaster and Tony Curtis in *Trapeze*, attempting to draw reverential gasps from the increasingly bored circus crowds, while down below an elephant stands on its hind legs or a bear rides a bicycle. A trapeze act is all jumpy, interrupted suspense – the somersault over as quickly as it is seen, with that awkward smack as the anchorman grabs the forearms of his flying partner and the ropes quiver. I am not sure I want to write sentences like that, more death-cheating jeopardy than unforced elegance. And if learning to write is also learning to live, then I don't want to live like that either.

A better metaphor for the long-sentence writer, perhaps, is the high-wire walker. I know that will sound overblown, perhaps deluded. A writer is not risking all, as did the young French-

man Philippe Petit one August day in 1974, when he secretly strung a wire cable between the twin towers of the World Trade Center and walked across it in the morning rush hour, a quarter of a mile above a street in Lower Manhattan. And yet Petit made the comparison himself. On the steps of the courthouse after his arrest for this illegal act, he shouted, 'I am not a daredevil, I am a writer in the sky!'

The trick, with both a long sentence and a high-wire walk, is to give off an air of controlled anarchy, of boundless freedom within clear constraints. Wire-walking may be a little more perilous than writing, but both are, ultimately, all about technique. Petit prepared like a scholar for his New York walk, studying photographs, calculating the effects of high winds and building sway, sneaking into the building to case the joint and recce the anchor points. But once he stepped out on to that thin steel cable he had to rely, like the sentence writer, on learned instinct, got through assiduous rehearsal. The high-wire artist must arrange his body so that it fights the wire's urge to rotate, like any cylinder, when stepped on. He must teach his feet to land on the cable in such a way as to absorb its swaying and then coax his centre of mass to move up to his torso, using his ankles as the pivot point. He must know to pass the wire between his big and second toe, along the sole and behind the middle of the heel.

A high-wire walk has the rhythm and momentum of a long sentence. 'I don't see fear in my life,' Petit said. 'That's how people die: they are frozen rather than acting and thinking.' The walk, like a sentence, takes place in time as well as space. It cannot be done all at once, and only succeeds if it is in constant motion. The high-wire walker must be ever alert and dynamic – although, like a sentence writer putting in a comma or semicolon, he can pause at the *cavalletti*, the anchor ropes that create

little oases of three-dimensional steadiness and stop the wire swaying too much.

In the middle of the wire between the twin towers, as if neatly punctuating a sentence, Petit knelt, lay on his back and waved at the puzzled birds hovering over him. The crowds of people gazing up from the streets below relaxed a little, but could not quite exhale. As Petit neared the South Tower they began to breathe out, and as he made it there they sighed with relief – at least until he turned round and did the whole thing again, making seven more crossings before surrendering to the waiting police. Eight sentences: a high-wire paragraph.

As a metaphor, *walking a tightrope* means treading a fine line, living on the edge. But Petit was not interested in this death-defying aspect of high-wire walking. He refused to wear a safety harness, not because it would make the walk safer, but because it would be ‘inelegant’. He also refused to play to the crowd as a big-top tightrope walker might, by making it all look harder than it was, or pretending to lose his balance and nearly fall. Not for him the stunts of Blondin at Niagara Falls, walking the wire on stilts, blindfold or pushing a wheelbarrow. It was as if he were doing it all for his own amusement and for anyone who just happened to be looking on. Even after the walk he employed no agent, refusing to trade it for money or renown. It was simply, as Paul Auster put it, ‘a gift of astonishing, indelible beauty to New York’.

A long sentence too should be a beautiful, indelible gift. It should give pleasure without provisos, not buttonhole and bedazzle the reader with virtuosity. It can put the reader on edge a little, so long as this does not feel like its main point, so long as it feels as if the sentence has no ulterior motive other than the giving of its own life-delighting self. This is what those algorithmic ‘readability scores’

on Microsoft Word will never tell you. They deal only with reading ease, not the knottier, exacting pleasures of expectancy and surprise, the teasing way that long sentences suspend the moment of closure.

I am a fully terrestrial being, afraid of flying and scared of heights. On the top floors of tall buildings, I don’t even like being close to the windows. I could no more walk on a tightrope between two towers than I could flap my arms and fly across. Just looking at photos of Petit on that wire makes my legs wobble. But how I would love some day to be able to write a sentence of such pointless, big-hearted, joy-bestowing beauty, one that would make a stranger drop what they were doing and, in the middle of a crowded street, look up.

# Social media is a kind of refuge. It's a refuge from dealing with the more enlivening conflicts within one's real life.

Adam Phillips in conversation with Nicholas Barrett

*In his 2016 biography of Sigmund Freud, Adam Phillips describes the development of psychoanalysis as an attempt by the secular Jews of Vienna to recreate the experience of talking to their rabbis. Phillips has said that talking to him is like talking to your mum about your day when you get home from school. When I arrived at his office in Notting Hill, I was offered a coffee and ushered into a sizeable study. As we talk he listens intently. When he answers, he looks back and forth between me and the window as if he's describing an ongoing incident in the street. Every wall is a bookshelf, but all the best real estate has long since been taken and so when Phillips sits down in front of me he is surrounded by piles of books that grow out of the carpet like saplings competing for sunlight in a forest clearing. Behind him sits a large wooden desk untouched by technology; he doesn't use email.*

*A recent study found that around 37 per cent of workers in Britain reported having a job that either made no difference to the world or made the planet slightly worse. Perhaps the reason that talking to Adam Phillips feels so cleansing is that so many of us assume that if we talked to our parents, friends or partners about our day and how we felt about it we might bore them into a state of silent torture. And so Phillips' desire to listen carefully is valuable. And yet behind the kindness and curiosity there is a radical message: that 'fantasies of satisfaction are saboteurs of pleasure' and that anything that you believe can satisfy you can frustrate you in equal measure. I wanted to ask him if capitalism, democracy and the will to live depended on naive expectations. I also wanted to know whether social media was destroying our capacity to be interesting to others and interested in the world around us.*

**Adam Phillips** Do feel free to ask me anything.

**Five Dials** How do you choose the topics of your books and essays? And how do you know when an idea is worth pursuing in the form of a book?

**AP** It doesn't involve conscious deliberation. What seems to happen is that things occur to me, and it

feels like a very unconscious process in the sense that when something occurs to me it will often do so in the first instance as a sentence or as the initial sentence and then when I start writing it becomes what it is. So I don't research things, for example. And things either work or they don't. But if something occurs to me I assume it's because I am preoccupied by it and have thought about it, and so when I start writing it then has its own momentum. But the actual process of things occurring is very unclear to me. One of the first things I wrote was an essay on tickling, and on that day I had seen a mother and child in the clinic where I worked and the child was tickling her mother all the time and we talked a bit about it, but not particularly intently. Then, that evening, I went to have supervision and my supervisor told me that a French magazine called the *Nouvelle Revue de Psychanalyse* wanted people to write short essays on any topic of their choice, and I went home and I found myself writing two and a half pages on tickling. I literally went to my desk and it wrote itself. I was slightly amazed by this, and slightly thrilled by it. Now that's a relatively straightforward example; mostly it's much less discernible than that. I don't know where things come from. I do know that things strike me.

**5D** Do people ever suggest topics to you?

**AP** They do, but I resist that. I can give lectures on a given topic, but it doesn't seem to work when there's too explicit a demand.

**5D** Do you have an idea in your head as to what kind of person reads your books and why?

**AP** Not really, partly because I don't go out very much. My life is really my work, my family, my writing and my friends. I have a sense that all

sorts of people might be interested in my books. I imagine they're mostly university-educated people. But then I hear anomalous things. I've got a very close gay friend who's told me that he's met several people in gay sex clubs who have talked about my work and enjoyed it. I obviously like that it's anomalous and unpredictable. But I'm not conscious of writing in any sense for an audience. I don't write for my profession, for example. I write, in the abstract sense, for anybody who might be interested.

**5D** Why don't you go out much?

**AP** Because I went out a lot when I was young and I sort of adored going out and now – I don't know what this is to do with – I like it less. I have less appetite to do that. My pleasures are much more domestic and circumscribed.

**5D** In 'Why I Write', Orwell suggests that writers are motivated by egoism, aesthetic enthusiasm, historic impulse or political purpose. Do you agree? And if so, does what you do fit into any of those impulses?

**AP** All of them in different ways. It's a very ambiguous title, this 'Why I Write' thing. I very much doubt that people know why they write. They know that they write, and they sometimes know the consequence of what they write, but in my case it's very mysterious. I didn't have, as a boy growing up, any ambition to be a writer. And when I became interested in books as an adolescent, I wanted to be a reader. And then I wanted to be a child physiotherapist. And then I wanted to be a psychoanalyst. And the writing sort of happened to me. Like all children, I wrote essays in school, and in university, and I quite enjoyed it but it just wasn't a big deal in my life. And then,

when I started writing, I loved writing. I find it so exciting and interesting as a way of thinking. Why I do it, I don't know. I do know that it gives me a great deal of pleasure. Of course, I like being praised, admired, hated, read – all those things have their own pleasures – but the real pleasure is the doing it.

**5D** Do people hate you?

**AP** I've had some very critical reviews.

**5D** What do we gain when we re-describe our experiences and what do we lose?

**AP** We never know beforehand, but the wish to re-describe is the wish in some sense to enhance or to amplify, so in the attempt at re-description you want to move the story on or open the story out. And there's always a risk of getting stuck with a description. And – I don't know why this occurs to me now – that the reason we look after our parents is by agreeing with what they say to us. We want to both protect them and also we want to be reassured that there are authoritative figures who know what's going on. Growing up is choosing who you want to be judged by and that means being freer to re-evaluate and rethink what one is being offered or encouraged to believe. And so I think of re-description as potentially a kind of freedom. It doesn't mean that all ways of re-description are better than the thing we described, but it can be. So it's as though it makes aspects of things available that might previously have been concealed.

**5D** Who do you want to be judged by?

**AP** I want to be judged primarily by my friends and then secondarily by people I admire.

**5D** Kafka said that ‘we need books that affect us like a disaster, that grieve us deeply, like the death of someone we loved more than ourselves, like being banished into forests far from everyone, like a suicide. A book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us.’ Was he right? Or is that completely antithetical to a therapist living under the injunction to ‘first do no harm’?

**AP** I’m not myself very taken by the melodrama of catastrophe. I love that thought about the axe that breaks the sea inside us and all that. Indeed, when I was an adolescent I had that phrase typed up and sellotaped to a mirror. There are lots of good effects of books and Kafka is describing one of them. The problem with what Kafka’s saying is that it has the rhetoric of depth, as though it is essentializing what literature is about. It seems to be that literature can be wonderful as an amusement, as a distraction, as a stimulus, as a provocation, a whole range of things. It then depends on sensibility, what you yourself happen to find yourself enjoying. I myself don’t think tragedies are deeper than comedies; I don’t think anybody’s deeper than anybody else. For me, it’s much more a question of what gives me more life, what’s more enlivening, what gives me more life in the way I’d prefer. Because the risk of the Kafka position is that if literature’s traumatic ... trauma has two effects: it either actually petrifies one and immobilizes one or it stimulates one. I wouldn’t want to promote the wonderful value of traumatic experiences. I think traumatic experiences are what we have to deal with, and ideally there would be as little trauma as possible in life.

**5D** You’ve remarked that talking to you is like talking to your mum about your day when you get home from school. A lot of ordinary people assume that they wouldn’t have the time or the money to try psychoanalysis. Would they be wrong?

**AP** No, they’d be right. The problem with it is precisely to do with time and money, and that’s why it’s been an almost exclusively middle-class occupation. Two things are true. There’s an economic reality that puts us all under pressure: people have to earn a living and it’s hard. That’s a fact. I also think it can be easy to recruit time and the lack of it as a rationalization for not doing the things that might not matter to one a great deal. One might be fearful of what one might suffer in talking to somebody else and also fearful of what one might enjoy. And so it’s always worth wondering what people’s reasons are for not wanting to come to a talking therapy. Not that they might be wrong – they might be right. But given that psychoanalysis is just an extension and a re-elaboration of what people do ordinarily, which is talking to each other when they’re troubled, I don’t think there are a lot of reasons for not doing it.

**5D** You’ve tried to get away from the idea of psychoanalysis as ‘a middle-class seminar on the meaning of life’, but when you said that it reminded me of Camus, who said, ‘The literal meaning of life is whatever you’re doing that prevents you from killing yourself.’ As long as people feel despondent, is it not inevitable that therapy will become a discussion about how and why we should be alive?

**AP** It’s much more specific and concrete than that ideally – in the sense of it’s very much about how it’s come to this for you. In other words, it’s a historical story and it’s a story of what makes your life feel worth living to you or not and how this has come about. Whether or not that translates into a generalization about life with a capital L is questionable. But I do think a lot of people go through a period in their lives when they wonder whether their pleasures are sufficiently sustaining or whether there is enough pleasure in life, and

these seem to me to be good questions. It seems to me a crucial question to wonder what makes one's life worth living, if anything.

**5D** That sounds quite dangerous. What if you were to arrive at the conclusion that there wasn't enough pleasure in life?

**AP** Well then, you must act on that. The risk is that people could be a bit like alcoholics who need everybody to drink. So the people who happen, for all kinds of reasons, to enjoy their life could make the people who don't feel that they're somehow inadequate or failing in some way. Whereas it seems to be entirely plausible that some people's lives are unbearable to them and to go on protracting it is like torturing them. So it's like the thing Winnicott said: when people come to see me saying they want to kill themselves, I don't dissuade them, I just make sure they do it for the right reason and the right reason is their right reason, not mine.

**5D** Is that ethical?

**AP** I think it is. I think it's unethical to keep people alive if they can't bear their lives.

**5D** It seems like a lot of our frustrations come from the idealized notions of democracy and meritocracy that we picked up as children. Are our aspirations an enemy of our satisfaction?

**AP** It's a very good question. The risk of cultural ideals is that they're recruited to make us feel like failures or humiliate us. It seems very difficult, and interestingly difficult, to have inspiring and realistic ideals for ourselves so that we keep a sense of possibility without being poisoned by hope. Democracy, which I take to be the willingness to listen

and bear what you hear from a diversity of voices, is a good ideal. It doesn't strike me as impossible, but it does strike me as very, very difficult. But for me and the people who agree, this is an aspiration worth sustaining. Because fascism and all the fascist variants are all a false solution. In other words, there's a wish to delegate authority, there's a wish to pursue one's own servility, and people should be wary of their fear of freedom.

**5D** 'Poisoned by hope' is an interesting phrase. What does it mean?

**AP** Giving people unrealistic hope, such that the hope as it fails makes them feel worse than they felt before they had it. I could, for example, promise my child that they were so wonderful they could do anything they wanted to do when they grew up, and the child could be full of grandiose expectation and be thrilled by this. But it could end up over time that the child actually can't do everything and isn't a genius and that this is radically dispiriting, as though he's been made a false promise. So one is poisoned by hope when one is made what turn out to be false promises.

**5D** Aren't capitalism and democracy both dependent on promises?

**AP** Yes, very much dependent on promises. There are certain promises of satisfaction and certain promises of prestige that are radically misleading. It's a version of redemption. As in, 'my life will be redeemed if I become rich enough, famous enough and acquire the right commodities'. Whereas it can be the most debilitating story about a life. There may be things to do other than profiteering, for example. There may be a lot more nourishing pleasures than the pleasures you can get by shopping.



**5D** You have a job that allows you to help other people and a hobby that allows you to express yourself. How do you relate to people who feel jaded or superfluous to the happiness of those around them?

**AP** I feel fortunate about what I am able and free to do. I'm very aware of how much thwarted ambition there is around and how much capitalism makes people unhappy. It's as though one is promised the possibility of a life that is actually quite impossible for most people, and there is something really terrible and dispiriting about a culture that's based on envy and where there's such a radical inequality of wealth and opportunity. So I don't see how you could be easily or unequivocally happy living in a culture that is sponsored by so much exploitation and unhappiness.

**5D** Why do we put up with it?

**AP** Well, that's the question. I don't know the answer to that, because obviously everybody is wondering about this a lot of the time. But psychoanalysis gives us a bit of a clue about it, which is that first of all, people are able to make their suffering pleasurable. So you could think that masochism is one of our most useful devices and the most debilitating. Because if I can enjoy my suffering I won't protest against it. So there's the cultivation of masochism, which is a terrible thing. I also think that there is a fear of freedom and fear of pleasure. I don't mean that this explains everything at all. I've always been very struck by a story that Sartre tells, I think in *Being and Nothingness*. Basically, there's a young married couple and every morning they come down to breakfast together and the husband goes off to work and the wife sits by the window crying all day and when the husband comes back she perks up. Sartre says that the obvious interpre-

tation of this is that the woman is suffering from a separation anxiety but the real interpretation is that when the husband leaves she's free. She then has to think about her own desire. Well, it's a very good representative story because there's a fear of possibility and also people under capitalism live under a great deal of intimidation and fear. We are led to believe that the world can't be otherwise. It's like the thing Žižek says about it being easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.

**5D** It seems that in the last few years we've moved on from capitalist realism and that politics today is more about protecting cultures from globalization.

**AP** I can see that, and it could be like being a sort of fuddy-duddy left-wing person, but one of the formative experiences in my life was working for the NHS, and the collapse of the NHS seems to be a symptomatic catastrophe. And actually the solution to the NHS is very simple, and it's taxing wealthy people more and putting money into the health service. But, for all sorts of reasons, people are not willing to do this. And it becomes, fundamentally, a question of what kind of world you want to live in, and I would prefer to live in a world where everybody's health needs and educational needs are met.

**5D** A YouGov poll has suggested that 37 per cent of British workers say their jobs do not 'make a meaningful contribution to the world'. Is that something we should be worried about?

**AP** Very worried. People feeling that they're spending their time doing futile things doesn't work for anybody. Lots of people want to do good. They do want to address the suffering of other people and themselves. People are much kinder than we're led

to believe. The fundamental thing is that people, by nature, identify with the suffering and the pleasures of other people. It then becomes too painful and culturally disregarded, so that people gradually mis-identify from people and they become increasingly able, as they grow up, to think of 'us and them' and to be, as it were, relieved that 'I'm not suffering what other people are suffering'. Wilde is right when he says that everybody's everybody. I am other people. I can't just say I'm not X because I am X. And I think there's a commonwealth and the commonwealth is disregarded and disidentified from.

**5D** We're sitting in the middle of a city with 8 million people, but our emotions evolved in much smaller groups. Are we ready for this kind of society?

**AP** It may be simply an excess, that having contact with so many people evokes more than we can bear and we have to insulate ourselves and in that insulation we suffer a kind of alienation. But I agree: the transition between growing up in a family or a small group of people and going into such a huge world is very, very traumatic.

**5D** Do you feel that kind of alienation? Just by living in London you probably walk past a hundred homeless people a day.

**AP** It would be melodramatic and self-pitying to say it's unbearable but there's something unbearable about it.

**5D** And yet it is bearable.

**AP** And we're bearing it and that's the problem. I can bear it. I can more than bear it.

**5D** You've called boredom a 'precious process' in

which 'real desire can crystalize', but whenever I get bored I look at my phone. Am I destroying my capacity to be interesting?

**AP** Yes. You might be, because the risk is all the pre-emptive solutions, so it would be about tolerating frustration. One of the problems of capitalism is that it doesn't, in a sense, allow people who have money to feel their frustration, because when you feel an absence of a loss or a lack you very quickly have an image of what will satisfy that. Whereas psychoanalysis says wanting is much more difficult than it looks. It's quite difficult to know what one wants, and it might require conversation and thought and experimentation. In that moment when you feel bored and immediately look at your phone, it's as though you've assuaged something, whereas sometimes you've distracted yourself rather than engaged with yourself. In may be worth, as an experiment in living, trying, when you have that impulse to look at the phone, not looking at it. It's like all the things one wanted to do in the past when there was a kind of boredom – it could be masturbation, shopping, having a bath, phoning somebody, reading something. Well, the question is: why does it have to be filled? What is the unbearable feeling that is being pre-empted? Because there may be more in the unbearable feeling than one lets oneself know.

**5D** If you don't look at your phone, you have to be alone with your thoughts for a while.

**AP** Exactly.

**5D** Why is that scary?

**AP** Partly because it's unknown; you don't what your thoughts will be. Plus there's no thought without feeling. So you're going to be feeling all

sorts of things. And then the questions becomes: will I be able to contain my feelings and will I be able to contain my feelings in the absence of somebody else? And these are real and also interesting fears. It would be better not to be too daunted by those fears.

**5D** What distracts you?

**AP** I'm more inclined these days to resist distraction, but I too can phone my friends. In a working day, if I feel restless I will wander around here. [*Phillips gestures to the street outside the window.*] I won't go shopping as much as wander around or eat. The great distraction we all have is food. In our distractions we become cultural clichés, we revert to type, and if one doesn't do that then there's the possibility of discovering something else. The restlessness itself is not a disability. There should be gaps in desire.

**FD** When I read *Missing Out*, I could only think of it in the context of social media, which seems to present a toxic ongoing reiteration of the un-lived life. All the research seems to suggest that spending too much time on social media makes people unhappy. Why do think people find it so appealing and go back to it endlessly? Why is it addictive?

**AP** It's a kind of refuge. It's a refuge from dealing with the more enlivening conflicts within one's real life. Winnicott has an interesting phrase where he talks about depression as 'the fog over the battlefield', as though rather than feel the intensity of a conflict one might want to anaesthetize oneself. And there are a lot of cultural anaesthetics available, of which social media is one. I'm also slightly wary though, because I remember my parents being very dispirited by pop music, for example, and what I think is happening is we're either being really cor-

rupted and diminished by capitalism and/or new kinds of people are being produced. So that social media is not unequivocally moral degeneration. It could be that there will be a gradual creation of different kinds of people, so that people will both suffer the disabilities of social media and they will then need to find a self-cure for this, and/or people will use it very creatively. In other words, we could think that we don't really know what it is yet and we're going to get a lot of Jeremiahs faced with the new thing.

**5D** Do you ever worry about social media undermining the public sphere and making it harder for us to be curious by only showing us things we think we already want to see?

**AP** Yes I do, and I also think that this could simply be to do with one's age. Virtual reality is very limited, because I do think there's an exchange between bodily cells that goes on that is both conscious and unconscious. We're having a conversation now, but more things are being exchanged between us than we know about. So we'll end up thinking about this particular encounter in ways we can't predict now, and there's something about that that is very fundamental. After all, we start body to body and we develop through that, but the risk is we then gradually become disembodied through virtual reality, and I think disembodiment drives people mad.

**5D** Do you think conversation as we know it is immortal or is conversation always changing?

**AP** It's always changing like everything else is. But it's also useful to think about the ways in which we might want it to change, as well as the ways in which it's changing in spite of us.

**5D** How would you want it to change?

**AP** When you read or go to see a play by Oscar Wilde, you think, ‘Wouldn’t it be fabulous to be able to talk like that,’ so on the one hand, given my education and class and so on, I would like conversations to be more amusing, provocative, intriguing, alive. But also, it’s just amazing that people can speak and that they speak to each other and what they are capable of saying, if you see what I mean. So rather than being prescriptive – and this is one of the reasons I like psychoanalysis so much: it’s an experiment in what people are able and want to say to each other. Because it seems to me that the potential of conversation is unknowable. But we also know from our experiences that conversations have tremendously powerful effects of a very unpredictable kind.

**5D** Now that we’re into the epilogue of the interview, I was curious to ask you if you’ve heard of Jordan Peterson. Are you aware of him?

**AP** Yes I am, but I don’t know why. I’ve definitely heard of Jordan Peterson, but give me a clue.

**5D** He’s a right-wing professor of psychology. He’s very appealing to young men who may feel alienated by modern culture. He says you shouldn’t express opinions about the world until you’ve tidied your bedroom.

**AP** I suppose what I’m wary of more generally is of people’s craving for gurus. I’m not at all wary of people’s admiration for people or of people’s interest in people and so on. But I just don’t think it’s a very good idea to pool one’s self-esteem into somebody else. What I like about democracy is that there are a lot of competing and collaborating views around but we’re not under pressure to

all agree. So we don’t endlessly have to be electing consensual objects of desire. It’s like believing that, say, all men really want to be with a supermodel. Now it seems to me that this is absolutely and manifestly untrue, but what it deals with is the fact that people’s desires are very idiosyncratic. People desire and are moved by people for lots of different reasons, many of which they don’t know, and that can feel so troubling or estranging.

**5D** I see the hunger for authority as being almost omnipresent. Everybody wants authority.

**AP** Yeah. But if I sit here and nod, that itself may be too much of a concession. Because it’s more interesting as a question. Which is: if they do, why do they? And what’s the alternative? If I don’t want authority, what do I want? That seems to be an interesting question. The troubles with authorities are that the authorities tell us what we really want, and how could anybody do this? They could make suggestions. They could free us to experiment with what we might want. But no one knows what someone else wants any more than anyone knows what’s good for somebody else. I as a parent have to have some idea of what’s good for my child, but as adults it seems to me that we have to have a conversation about this and it’s an open-ended one.

**5D** The demagogues get away with it.

**AP** They do. But just because something’s always happened doesn’t mean that it always has to go on happening. There was a French Revolution. Things do happen.

