HAMISH HAMILTON PRESENTS

Five Dials

No. 50

The Five Dials Awards

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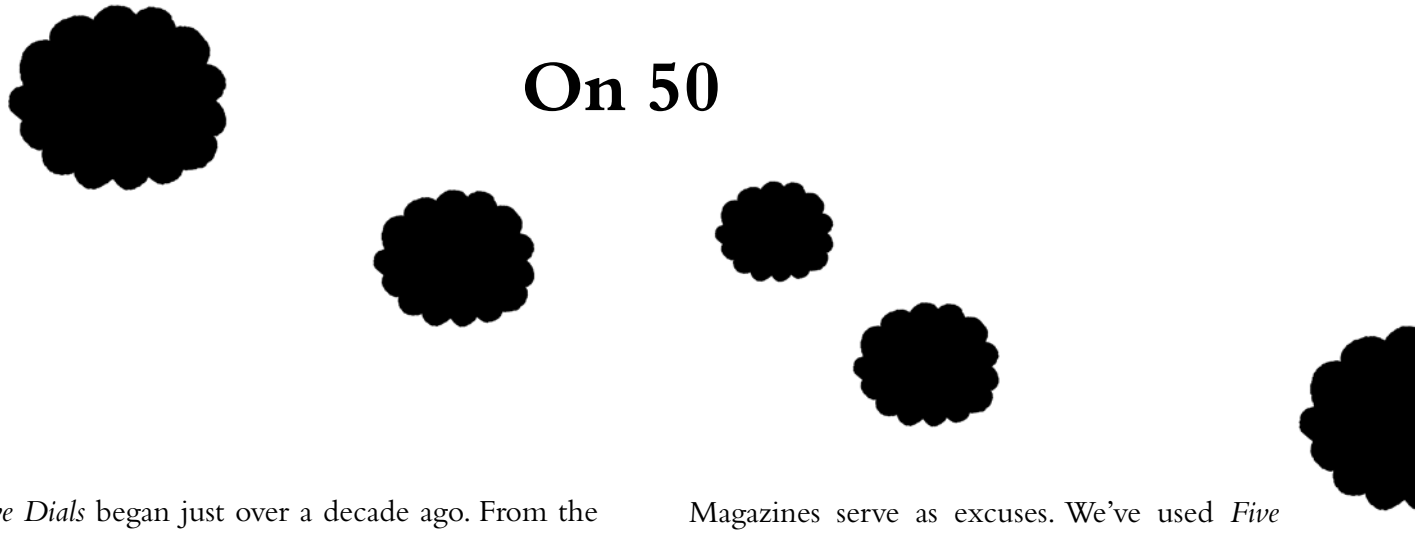


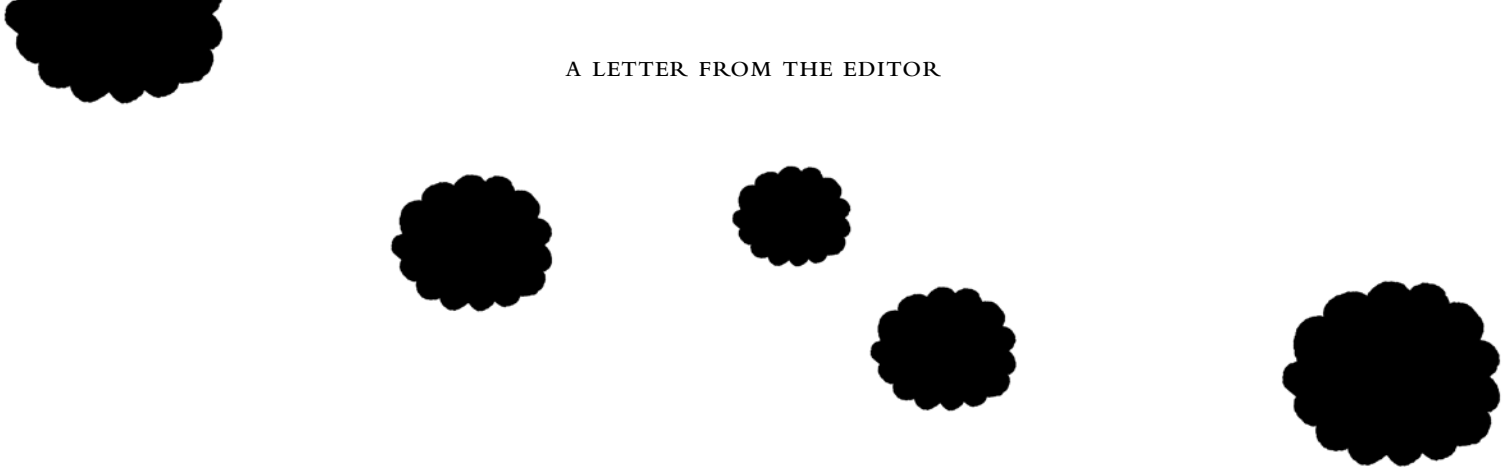
Five Dials began just over a decade ago. From the start, we were forced to adapt. After all, if the banks were collapsing around us, what sort of life span could be expected for a literary magazine? *Five Dials* debuted as a digital publication, and we've remained weightless, delivered to inboxes in the shape of that fusty, indestructible file format, the PDF. We love print, but decided against printing the pages ourselves. After the appearance of the first few issues, readers sent in stories of printing their own copies at work. One man bound his magazine with a bright red ribbon. A woman wrote in to tell us about the homemade *Five Dials* she'd assembled, and which articles she'd chosen to excise. Time passed. Our readership spread to countries all over the world. We hope subscribers new and old still take advantage of free access to work printers.

Five Dials assumes many shapes. Some of our issues are a few pages long. Some run to 100. Like an accordion, we expand and contract – whatever the song calls for. We've been led by two guiding principles. First, ensure a healthy mix, so that established names share space with debut writers, or slush pile finds, or non-writers, musicians, casuals or co-workers. Second, look to the past. An issue might include archival work pulled from the files of Hamish Hamilton, or an essay that has lingered untranslated overseas for years, or even a commencement speech if it happens to delivers a relevant message. (Our choice did. 'I would urge you to be as imprudent as you dare,' Susan Sontag told the Wellesley College graduating class in her 1983 address. 'BE BOLD, BE BOLD, BE BOLD. Keep on reading. (Poetry. And novels from 1700 to 1940.) Lay off the television. And, remember when you hear yourself saying one day that you don't have time any more to read – or listen to music, or look at painting, or go to the movies, or do whatever feeds your head now – then you're getting old. That means they got to you, after all.')

Magazines serve as excuses. We've used *Five Dials* to follow our own curiosities, engage with our time, and take pleasure in publishing the relevant. In an age of specialization, it's still possible to summon the old general interest impulse and set, for instance, political protest writing by Arundhati Roy next to a Lydia Davis story next to a Paul Davis illustration. If the mix doesn't work, no matter, try and perfect it in the next issue. Move forward. There's at least one reader out there who is ready to snip away the stories she doesn't like.

Five Dials has been our excuse to hold events, gather friends, meet new friends, collaborate with artists, poets, novelists, publishers, musicians, screenwriters, teachers and cooks. It has brought us face to face with readers all over the world. In Berlin, Sydney, Montreal, Jaipur, or wherever, we've been reminded that those who read books are odd and excitable, loyal and generous, and keen to welcome a publication that mirrors their enthusiasms and infatuations. They stick around. Plenty of names on the list of subscribers have been with us for years, which might just be an administrative oversight on their part. It still feels meaningful to us. We've always been inclusive. If you can make it to a *Five Dials* event you're invited in. Why not? Publishing *5D* for a decade has reminded us that a magazine can reach out. The secret handshake consists of an implied Q&A. The Question: 'Do you read books?' When the answer is 'Yes' or 'Every day' or 'Who doesn't?' we know we've found our people.

Upon reaching milestones, some magazines like to list their favorites articles. You'll find some of our own gems in this issue. For us, memories are more impressionistic. One is watching friends and fellow writers press the buttons of various laptops to send out the issues. We've reenacted this cheap piece of theatre all over the world, from a field in New York state to a stage in Cornwall. Another defining memory for the digital age is the pleasure



of scrolling for the first time though a new issue, watching new illustrations pass across our screens, thanks to our designer, Nina Jua Klein, and our digital producer Zainab Juma.

Our publishing schedule has never been too disciplined. Our editorial staff remains fluid and provisional. We've been lucky to receive the gift of time and energy from a long list of talented allies who have written, reported, reviewed, or just plain used the magazine for their own ends, often to explore hidden passions. (Inside you'll find an expression of love for Poundland.) We're grateful to all our contributors over the years.

Perhaps the best reason to produce a literary magazine is to watch the migration of good work. Short pieces grew into Penguin books. We've seen poems lift from these pages and come to rest in Faber collections. The fonts change but the words remain the same. We've witnessed early drafts reappear in novels. We've given authors the space to test out new styles, or new registers, or, in one case, a brand new identity. In one issue Sheila Heti examined a new way of being. We've watched as one of the contributors to our Female Gaze issue went to number one with her debut. Congrats again, Candice.

Over the past decade we've been lucky enough to exist in a thriving ecosystem, which has given us a chance to read, support, excerpt and herald the work of friends and allies: Galley Beggar, Rough Trade Books, Influx, clinic, Fitzcarraldo, Test Centre, Notting Hill Editions, Penned in the Margins and many more. And we're thankful for our relationships with bookstores around the world, the ones with real addresses, where we've hosted events and, occasionally, stayed overnight.

After assembling a well-mixed issue, it's important to place it in the hands of talented designers. We've been lucky enough to work with some of the greats, from Dean Allen to Antonio de Luca, Ian Keliher, Joseph Bisat Marshall and our resident genius, Nina Jua Klein. (And we can't make things look beautiful without our great friends at Visual Editions.)

So, thank you. And not just for reading the magazine. From some of our subscribers we've received the kindest words anyone on the staff of a digital magazine might expect to hear. 'Hey. I fished you from my spam folder.'

Enjoy the issue.
See you at 100.

‘Older black women, who writes about that?’

Bernardine Evaristo reveals to *Five Dials* why she nearly populated her novel, *Girl, Woman, Other*, with one hundred characters

Bernardine Evaristo is the award-winning author of eight books of fiction and verse fiction. Her other writing includes short fiction, drama, poetry, essays, literary criticism, and projects for stage and radio. She is currently Professor of Creative Writing at Brunel University London and Vice-Chair of the Royal Society of Literature, and her upcoming novel Girl, Woman, Other *was published at the beginning of May. She spoke to Hannah Chukwu.*

Bernadine I suppose each book I write speaks to the one that came before. So the book I wrote before was *Mr Loverman*, which was about a 74-year-old gay Caribbean man living in London, and there were some secondary figures in his wife – a woman in her sixties who didn’t know he was gay – his two middle-aged daughters, his grandson and his lover Morris. But I felt by the time the book was finished I was really interested in the three women’s stories – in particular the two daughters, because one of the things I realized as a writer is that I try to write the stories that aren’t out there. A lot of us writers of colour will say that we want to write those books that we feel should be out there.

When I was writing *Mr Loverman* I kept thinking, ‘Who writes about seventy-something-year-old older black men in this country?’ and I couldn’t think of anyone, let alone writing a gay character. Then, when I was writing the wife, I was thinking, ‘Older black women, who writes about that?’ I’m not sure, but I don’t think anybody does. And then writing about middle-aged women in their forties and early fifties: I thought, ‘That’s also unusual.’ And by the end of writing *Mr Loverman* I realized that there are so many stories of the different black generations in this country that we don’t hear about. One of the things I’ve noticed is that younger writers often don’t reach my age and carry on publishing, and I think younger writers often write from a younger perspective; and I noticed that if they write from an older perspective that person is usually mad in some way – they have dementia or something. They can’t conceive of that person having a happy, healthy life.

So because there aren’t many of us writing from a black British female perspective there is a real paucity of characters of all generations, but I think especially middle-aged and older generations. A lot of black British female writers have come and gone since I’ve been around. I’m becoming a veteran. I’ve always given myself a lot of freedom to write from any perspective, I go with the characters that go with me – and that may be a male protagonist, like in some of my other books, but with this one I really felt like they were women’s stories that I wanted to write. I thought, how many female characters can I write that are all protagonists in a single story, and make it work?

Going back to the origins of this novel, it was actually a commission in 2014 by BBC radio to write a story for the anniversary of Dylan Thomas’s birth. I wrote a short story with four female black characters. I wrote the story in the form that the novel is in now – I call it ‘fusion fiction’, a slightly experimental form. When I wrote those four characters I knew I would use it for the basis of my next book.

At one point I thought, ‘Maybe I could have one hundred protagonists.’ Toni Morrison has a quote: ‘Try to think the unthinkable.’ And I thought, ‘That’s unthinkable.’ You know, one hundred black women characters, how can I do that? I need a more poetic form. Now there are only twelve main characters.

Five Dials There are so many different voices in this novel. Where did the voices come from? Are there some that resonate more with you?

BE In the eighties I did run a theatre company, I was a dyke, so Amma has a little bit of my history,

but I'm not her: I did not sleep with three hundred people – that's all exaggerated. And then Yazz is one of my god-daughters, who's very bright and very feisty. Dominique is a composite of women I knew years ago. As somebody who used to write for theatre and used to act, I love getting inside my characters and creating them, and even though this book isn't in the first person, it feels like it's in the first person because the reader is inside their heads. It's a bit like Carmel in *Mr Loverman*, except Carmel is written in the second person; this is in close third – it's like they're talking to you. That process, I love it. I also had to have a non-binary character, because that's such a big part of the conversation at the moment. I've got twelve characters, different sexualities; I needed someone whose gender is changed in some way. Writing their character with 'they' was a challenge – because I thought, 'How do I do that and not bring attention to the "they" all the time?'

5D Why did fusion fiction feel the most appropriate way to tell this story? And why was it in novel form?

BE With *Mr Loverman*, there are no standard full stops throughout the text, but each chapter ends with a full stop. So with *Girl, Woman, Other* there's a full stop at the end of each section. There was something about the flowing way in which I was able to write the story that meant I could go all over the place. There was something about just having the punctuation with the shape on the page, which is almost like prose poetry. There aren't any paragraphs. So that as you're reading it, the sentences flow into each other.

The fluid way in which I shaped, lineated and punctuated the prose on the page enabled me to oscillate between the past and the present inside their heads, outside their heads, and eventually from one character's story into another character's story.

5D I'm interested in how that then becomes a novel. Why not a long-form poem or a play?

BE It's a prose poem, if anything. Fusion fiction for me puts the emphasis on the fiction. It was quite fluid to write and I really enjoyed that process, but when I came to edit, it was really hard. The freedom I gave myself in terms of form meant that I couldn't quite see what was wrong with it in the way that you can with real punctuation and lineation. Fusion fiction as a form might be easier for poets, because managing the revision of it in 120,000 words is very challenging.

5D Your characters are all connected across a vast span of history. Can you tell me more about your interest in ancestry?

BE Oh yeah, I'm obsessed. I'm not even Nigerian you know, I found out on ancestry.com. I got myself tested and they told me I'm from Togo and Benin, but it's all the same – those counties were fake constructs. Apparently I'm a fake Nigerian.

5D How did ancestry feed into the story, and why did that feel like an important way to link the characters? There is a recurring theme of mother–daughter relationships in the novel, for instance.

BE It was just an inter-generational thing. I wanted it to span every generation. Even though I don't have a protagonist who's a young teenager, a lot of the characters went through that stage. So you have a sense of who they were as children, how they became adults, and then how they are as mothers. That's something I'm deeply interested in, how we become the people we are. Coming from a radical feminist alternative community in my twenties, and then seeing these people in their forties and fifties, I've seen people become extremely, almost con-

servative, and establishment. And having lost all the free-spiritedness, oppositionality and rebelliousness of their younger years. To me that's fascinating. When I meet young people today and they are a certain way, I think, 'You don't know who you're going to be.' That feeds into the fiction. How do we parent our children? What are our ambitions for our children? How does that link to how we were raised? How does gender play out?

With ancestry, I wanted some span of Africa – from East Africa to West Africa and the Caribbean. That's who we are in this country; our roots are all over the place.

5D I found the intersection of class, race and gender fascinating, and especially the way you depicted regionality. You depict the experience of being a person of colour in rural northern England, for example, which is unusual.

BE I had to do that, because we are way too London-centric. I had to explore what it was like being a black person living in rural Britain. With Grace and Hatty, these historical figures, I wanted them to be powerful and strong and still independent – all the things that people don't imagine for us. I don't watch *Countryfile*, but I watched an episode this week and there were two black women and one of them was the presenter. I thought, 'Oh, this is *Countryfile*? This is different!' It's positioning people of colour in places we're not usually perceived to be.

5D Where did you find those stories?

BE My imagination. I'm very interested in black British history. There's a lot of evidence that black people have been in this country probably since forever. *Emperor's Babe* was set 1,800 years ago. There are all these parish records of people leading ordinary lives that people have curated, and that fascinates me. Grace and Hatty really come from my interest in that and my slight annoyance that when we talk about the black presence in this country we talk about Windrush being *the* seminal moment. Windrush was a *Caribbean* moment for a start, not an African moment. My father came in 1949 from Nigeria. He's not part of the Windrush generation, he has a very different history. Also this deeper history that we still haven't imagined enough; I wanted people to imagine what it must have been like living as women of colour in the far north of this country in a rural society all those years ago. There is also a lot about colourism in the book. I try not to be heavy-handed, but I talk about how the colour gets washed out through the generations; then people's relationship with the blackness of their African or Caribbean ancestry when they no longer look like they have it. In my family, in one generation it'll be gone.

5D That sense of rootedness in those areas is so important. You take one of your characters to America?

BE Yes, I took Dominique to a women's commune. She's originally leading a radical, feminist life in London, but actually she took it to an extreme in a separatist community. I wanted to explore a relationship between two women which is as controlling as a heterosexual relationship can be. I wanted to explore the complexity of our existence.

I also wanted to talk about complex topics like white privilege. We can't just use white privilege as the way in which we look at how people are oppressed in any society, it's a lot more complex than that. That's one of the reasons I wanted the novel to be expressed through so many different viewpoints. I wanted the novel to have opposing viewpoints, so that people read that and they just

don't say, 'I get this journey in terms of gender or sexuality or race,' but that they're constantly confronted by points of view that they may not agree with. If you put the characters in a room together, they'd probably be arguing. But I think that's much more realistic and true to who we are, which is just complicated.

5D There's such a wide range of emotion in the book. The book has been described as a celebration of black Britain and the spectrum of femininity, and it *is* a celebration of all the things we are and have been and will continue to be. But then there are some heavy moments and heavy relationships in there. Was there a point you thought the book was becoming too sad, or going too far in one direction?

BE No. I know that the politics must be sewn in seamlessly through the characters. And there were a lot of things I wanted to talk about, so I was aware that I had to be careful about making sure it felt natural, that my exploration of politics felt natural and germane from the characters, as opposed to feeling shoehorned in. I didn't want anyone to feel bludgeoned by it. I wanted them to get into the characters and then see things from their point of view, and to offer differing opinions. I wasn't worried about the book being sad because I naturally turn to humour. I wanted it to be substantial and have depth. You have to dig deep into people's emotional world and dive into some of the characters' pain. I hope I did that well – so that you see characters not just as they appeared to be, but also their emotional world.

5D Speaking of inhabiting a character's emotional world, I loved the novel's relationship with and exploration of theatre from the 1980s up till now. How has theatre changed over that time?

BE Theatre has come full circle. In the eighties and nineties, up to 1996, there were thirty to forty BAME theatre companies in this country. Theatre of Black Women, which I founded with two other people, was the first black women's company, but after us there were two or three others, and then there were loads. They were funded by the Arts Council and the Greater London Council and it was a really vibrant alternative theatre landscape and network. Then most of those companies disappeared for one reason or another, often due to lack of funding or artists moving into the mainstream. Even so, there has been very poor representation of people of colour in theatre in the last three or four years. There's been a huge awareness – #blacklivesmatter triggered a lot of soul-searching which has resulted in a lot more productions and cross-racial casting than has existed for decades. We're going through a very interesting period where people of colour are rising to prominence and being cast in roles that they wouldn't necessarily have been cast in just a few years ago. The landscape for black artists has changed. I literally mean the last four or five years. A friend of mine, Adjoa Andoh, is an actress and a director and she's directing and starring in an all-black all-female version of *Richard II* at the Globe Theatre. (I actually haven't told her that there's a play like that in my book.) She's co-directing with Lynette Linton, who's just taken over as artistic director at the Bush Theatre. So it's a very interesting time for black women in theatre.

5D I got the impression that Yazz and Amma's story comes full circle in a similar way. Yazz is at university in the present day and is aware of systemic racial problems through listening to her mum's experience. She's full of second-hand rage that she doesn't know how to channel, because she isn't seeing the same vigour for grass-roots campus protests that Amma grew up with.

BE I'm shocked that so many things haven't changed. I'm sure you have stories from university that other people have from thirty or forty years ago. We have a long way to go. We need grass roots and leadership, we need to move beyond tokenism, because when you're a single individual of colour sitting on a board or running an organization it's very difficult to get things to change fundamentally. You need several of you working to achieve that.

5D When you finished the novel, did you feel like there was a voice that you wanted to give more prominence? Is there anyone you wished you'd given more space?

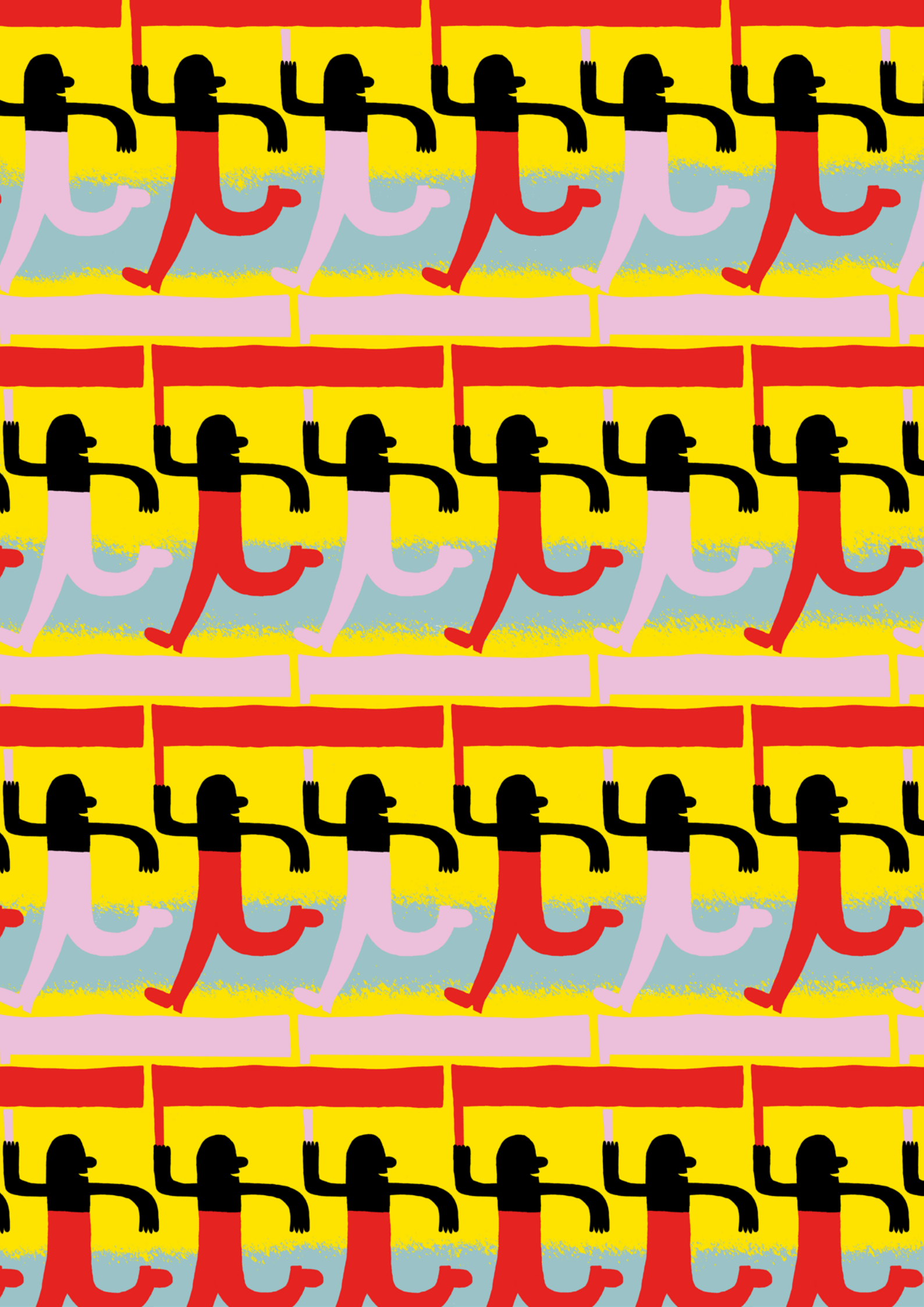
BE Waris, who's a Somali Muslim. I realized that I probably didn't have time to do the research to create her as one of the protagonists. Part of me thinks, 'Should I have given her more space?' I didn't feel as free to create a Somali Muslim teenage girl as I did with Caribbean and West African characters, because there's a lot of cultural touchstones I'd need to know a lot more about. I don't always have readers who are from the communities I'm writing about, and part of that is because I have artistic freedom, but if the publisher said, 'You should show this to somebody from that specific community,' then I would do that. But I have to stand by what I've written. And hopefully I'm not offending somebody. But you can never guarantee that.

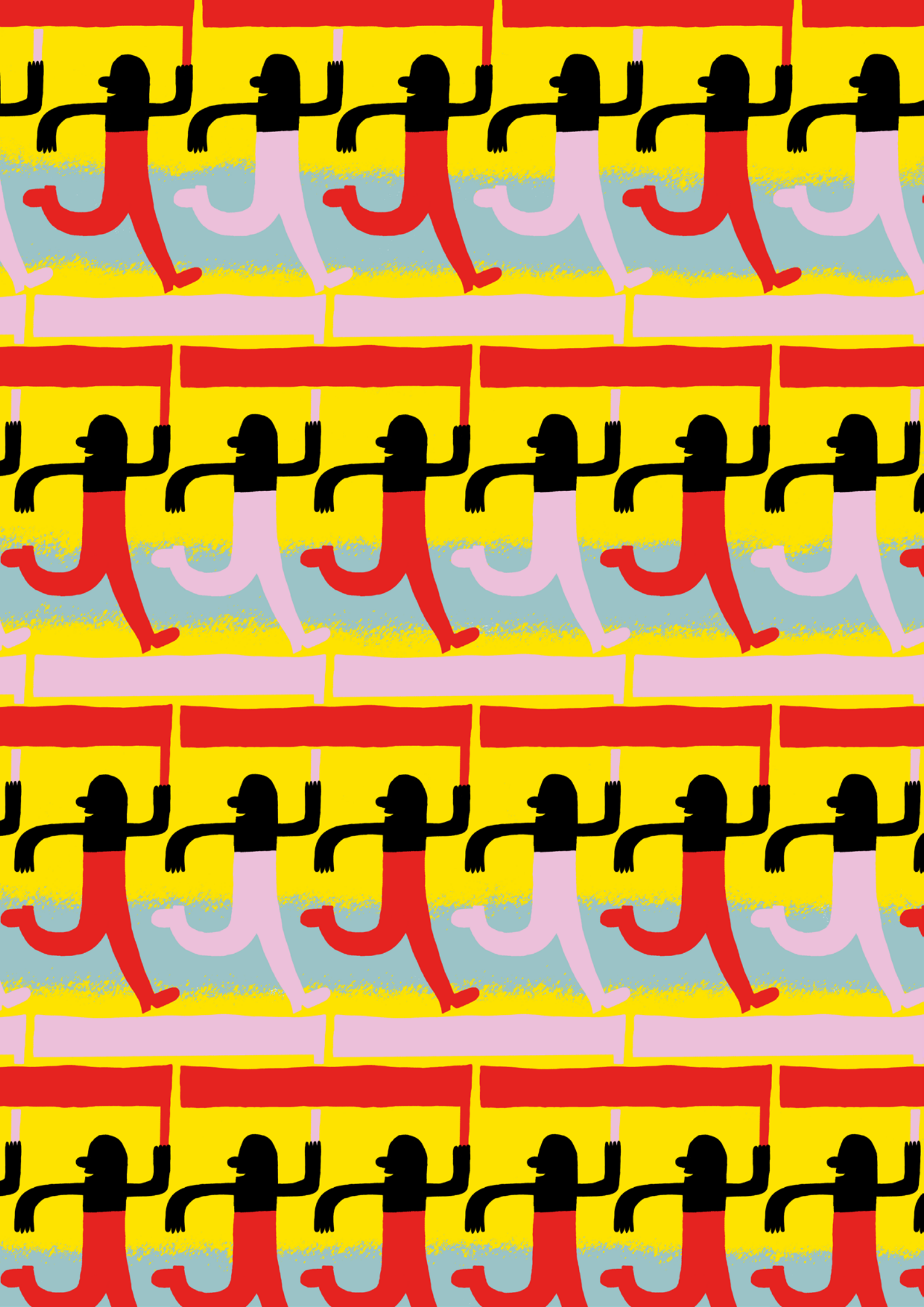
5D I thought Waris was brilliant. I thought she balanced Yazz out, because Yazz is a force of nature who has good intentions but often says problematic things, and Waris and her friends remind her of her privilege.

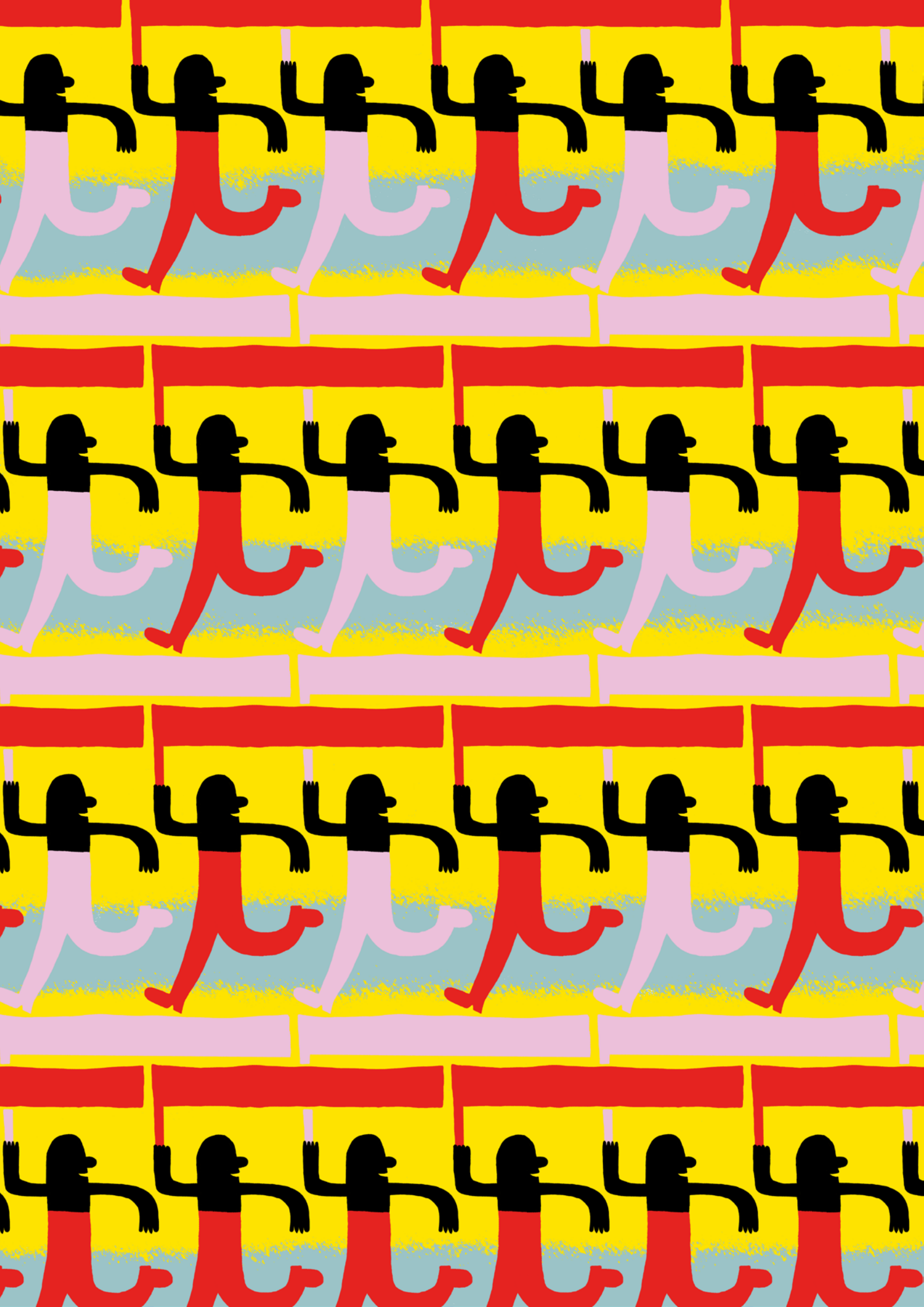
BE They do, and Courtney as well. The bit about Roxane Gay, I had to put that in, when Yazz cannot believe that her white friend might know more about Roxane Gay than she does!

The Five Dials Awards

After fifty issues,
there are
so many winners







Best Self-Portrait

WINNER
Candice Carty-Williams

Average

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.

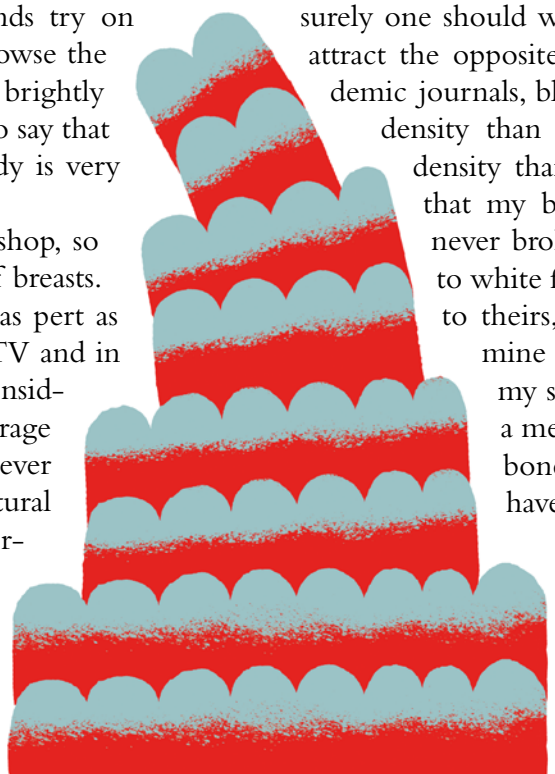
At 5'6", I am slightly above average height for a woman in the UK. But when I was at school, two of my best friends were 5'11" and another was 6 feet tall – so the news of this statistic was very confusing to me when I first came across it. The average clothes size for that same, theoretical UK woman 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



FROM
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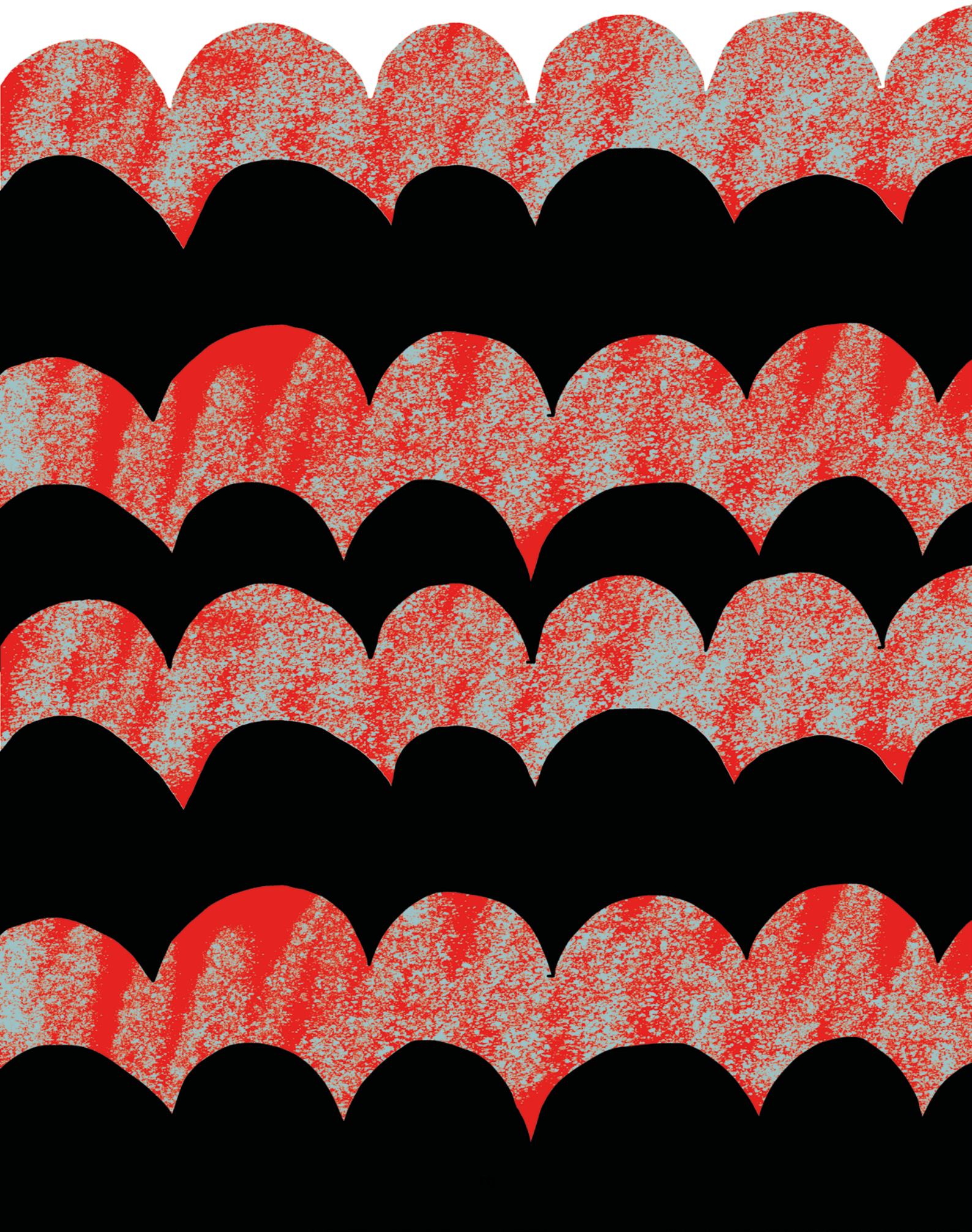
and painfully visible at the same time. Not being average sets me apart from the crowd, while not being desirable, the result of being different, renders me unseen. Measuring myself against what I have been told is 'normal' has an insidious toxicity. I am so self-critical that I've never been able to 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 foundation 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.



Most Heartfelt Remembrance

WINNER

Robert Macfarlane

Celebrating Roger Deakin

In 1968, Roger Deakin bought the ruined remains of an Elizabethan house, and twelve acres of surrounding meadow, on the edge of Mellis Common in Suffolk. Little survived of the original sixteenth-century dwelling except its spring-fed moat, overhung by hazels, and its vast inglenook fireplace. So Roger put a sleeping-bag down in the fireplace, and lived there while he rebuilt the house around himself.

Walnut Tree Farm, the house he eventually completed, and in which he died in August, 2006, is made largely of wood. It is as close to a living thing as a building can be. When big easterlies blow, its timbers creak and groan 'like a ship in a storm', as Roger put it, 'or a whale on the move'. He kept the doors and the windows open, in order to let air and animals circulate. Leaves gusted in through one door and out of another. It was a house which breathed. Spiders slung swags and trusses of silk in every corner. Swallows flew to and from their nest in the main chimney. As I sat with Roger, ten days before his death, a brown cricket with long spindly antennae clicked along the edge of an old biscuit tin.

The fields, well tended but unfarmed, were also busy with life. Sparrowhawks busked for custom overhead, deer picked their way through the hornbeam wood and tawny owls hooted from big ash trees. The land was separated into fields by a mile of massive old hedgerow, in places five metres high and five wide. Roger had a habit of driving his cars until they were about to give out, then backing them into a particularly deep area of hedge and leaving them there, to be grown through by the briars and nested in by birds. Walking the fields with him, you would come across old Citroëns with their frogeye headlights, peeping from the brambles. 'All that needs is a new engine, and we could drive it to France,' he would say, hopefully, as we passed one of these.

Roger wrote as idiosyncratically as he did everything. Thinking my way through his house now, I can count at least five different desks, between which he would migrate according to his different moods. His sleeping-places changed, too. Over the years he had established in his meadows a variety of outlying structures, including two shepherd's huts, an old wooden caravan with a cracked window and a railway wagon that he had painted Pullman-purple. He once emailed me happily about having been out in the wagon with the rain whacking on the roof. 'An amazing thunderstorm last night as I lay listening. Like being inside a kettledrum with a whole symphony going on out there and with thunder in wraparound quadraphonic!'

When he wasn't writing, he was usually swimming, most often in his moat. Swimming helped him think, in all sorts of ways. 'This weather's agony,' he e-mailed me three springs ago. 'It makes me want to write and write, but it also makes me want to GET OUT THERE. The moat is bloody cold, but a good solution because then I can't wait to GET BACK INSIDE IN THE WARM.'

In his relaxed contrarianism, his environmentalism (he was a founder member of Friends of the Earth, and co-founded Common Ground, the organization which has campaigned so significantly for 'local distinctiveness') and his enthusiasm, Deakin was a latter-day Thoreau. Except that where Thoreau lived by his pond for a total of several months over several years, Deakin lived by his moat for nearly four decades, watching and noting the habits of the trees, creatures, wind, sun and water around him. Walnut Tree Farm was a settlement in three senses: a habitation, an agreement with the land, and a slow subsidence into intimacy with a chosen place.

It was while doing lengths in his moat that Deakin had the idea for what would become *Waterlog*. Published in 1999 in a small print run, the

book quickly became a word-of-mouth bestseller. Starting from the moat, Deakin set out to swim through the rivers, lakes, streams and seas of Britain, and thus to acquire what he called 'a frog's-eye view' of the country. The result was a masterpiece: a funny, lyrical, wise travelogue which was at once a defence of the wild water that was left and an elegy for that which had gone.

You finish reading *Waterlog* invigorated, and with a changed relationship to water and to nature. It is a book, as Heathcote Williams nicely punned, which leaves you with a spring in your step. I have often thought that a better indicator of a book's worth than its sales figures must be the number of letters that the author receives from readers. Roger got nearly seven hundred: he kept them all, and replied to each one on a handmade card.

The influence of *Waterlog* was immense. Despite its thoroughgoing Englishness, it won admirers in Australia, Canada and Europe. It prompted a revival of the lido culture in Britain, and even the founding of a wild-swimming company (a commercialization of which Roger quietly disapproved). It also inspired untold numbers of readers to take to the open water.

So it was that, for instance, on a cold grey April day in Sutherland in 2004, I was to be found in the sprawling and remote Loch Sionascaig, in the shadow of Suilven, back-stroking out to an island while the rain fell hard on my face, already looking forward to telling Rog about the swim. The loch was a mile or so from the road, and the pleasure came at a price: I returned to my car peppered with midge and tick bites. As I reached the road, another car came into view. Its driver stopped and wound down her window. 'You've been swimming,' she said. Dripping wet, and standing in my trunks, I could not deny it. 'A bit early in the year, isn't it?' she said. The midges were discouraging longhand explanations, so I said that a friend of mine had written a book called *Waterlog* about wild swimming, and now I couldn't keep out of the water. She gave a surprised smile, reached down, and picked up the audio-tape of Roger's book, to which she had been listening as she drove that lonely road.

Travel with Roger was even more unpredictable than travel under his influence. The dark-green Audi in which he journeyed to his last escapades had moss growing in its foot-wells ('three different sorts', he pointed out, proudly), and a variety of useful knives in the glove-box. Its boot always held a bivouac bag, a trenching tool of some sort and a towel and trunks, in case he passed somewhere interesting to sleep, dig, or swim. When lost while driving, which was most of the time, he had a habit of slowing almost to a halt on roundabouts and squinting up at the road-signs while I assumed the crash position. He was always proposing adventures: a night stake-out of a new badger warren 'in a mysterious wooded tumulus in Thornham Woods', or a joint attempt to traverse an acre of ancient woodland from one side to another without touching the ground, like the hero of Italo Calvino's beautiful book, *The Baron Of The Trees*. 'He's over sixty,' a friend said to me, 'and he's still got the energy of a fox-cub.'

One July we went to Dorset to explore the system of hollow-ways or ancient drove-roads which seams that soft-stone county. We ended up sleeping in a hillside meadow, and cooking in the bed of the hollow-way. 'A Vedi shepherd in the Pindos once taught me how to make a smokeless fire', Roger remarked idly, before creating a tiny and, yes, smokeless fire that was hot enough for us to boil water on. His extraordinary life meant that he often began stories with sentences of this kind. 'When I was living in a cave in Southern Greece…' 'Did I tell you how a hunter once shot at me because he thought I was a bear?' (The point of the story was how pleased he was to have been mistaken for an

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animal). We had plans to travel together to Cumbria, and at some point, Australia. He wondered if we could earn our passage out to the Antipodes as oarsmen on a quinquereme. I wasn't sure that we could.

For the seven years after finishing *Waterlog*, Roger was at work on a book about woods. He disapproved of the habit of fetishizing single trees – chieftain pines or king oaks. Trees to him were herd creatures, best understood when considered in their relationships with one another (he loved the way that oak trees, for instance, would share nutrients via their root systems when one of their number was under stress). Trees were human to Roger, and humans tree-like, in hundreds of complicated and deeply felt ways. Researching his book, he travelled to Kyrgyzstan, Australia, Tasmania, America, and throughout Europe and the British Isles.

Over the years the project sprawled, digressing into studies of the hula-hoop craze, Roger's anarchist great-uncle, the architecture of pine-cones. The numbered notebooks containing his research fill a wall of the main study at Mellis. It's now clear that a brain tumour was trying to scatter his thoughts, stop him finishing the book. But enough was done by the time he died: *Wildwood: A Journey Through Trees* was published in Spring 2007, and is another major work.

When my daughter Lily was born, Roger became a de facto great-uncle. For her first birthday, he gave her a tiny wooden steam engine, wrapped up in sycamore leaves. Before her first visit to Mellis, he said he had made her a present: this turned out to be a leaf-maze – thousands of bright yellow mulberry leaves that he had raked and shaped into a Lily-sized labyrinth. He showed this level of kindness and thoughtfulness to his many friends. This unstinting giving, this warmth without self-interest, drew people to him: I have never known a person so loved. It was a measure of his generosity and his devotion to nature that, even when he was ill with the cancer which killed him so fast, he could still speak unjealously of the ability of trees to heal themselves.

In early August 2006, I drove to Mellis to see Roger for the last time: held his hand, talked a little, until he fell asleep. The next day, I went with two friends, who had also known him, out to the north Norfolk coast. We swam in wild waves at dawn and dusk, and in the evening we read aloud the pages from *Waterlog* describing that magnificent coastline. We slept in the pine forests which run down almost to the sand at Holkham. I spent half the night in a hammock he had lent me, and half of it down on the needle carpet, where it smelt of sap and resin.

Roger died a week later, still in the house that he had built around himself thirty-eight years earlier.

WINNER
Albert Camus
FOR
Paris as Desert

Best Description of What is Hateful and What Is Inspiring in Paris

What is hateful in Paris: tenderness, feelings, a hideous sentimentality that sees everything beautiful as pretty and everything pretty as beautiful. The tenderness and despair that accompany these murky skies, the shining roofs and this endless rain. What is inspiring: the terrible loneliness. As a remedy to life in society, I would suggest the big city. Nowadays, it is the only desert within our means. Here the body loses its prestige. It is covered over, and hidden under shapeless skins. The only thing left is the soul, the soul with all its sloppy overflow of drunken sentimentality, its whining emotions and everything else.

(translated by Philip Thody)

FROM
Five Dials No. 8

WINNER
Ian Fleming
FOR
In Conversation with Raymond Chandler

Best Admission

'Your hero, Philip Marlowe, is a real hero. He behaves in a heroic fashion. I never intended my leading character, James Bond, to be a hero. I intended him to be a sort of blunt instrument wielded by a government department who would get into bizarre and fantastic situations and more or less shoot his way out of them, or get out of them one way or another. But of course he's always referred to as my hero. I don't see him as a hero myself. On the whole I think he's a rather unattractive man …'

FROM
Five Dials No. 7

Funniest Financial Term

WINNER
Paul Murray

The 'Things are Going South' Q&A

Five Dials What's the funniest financial term? Credit default swap?

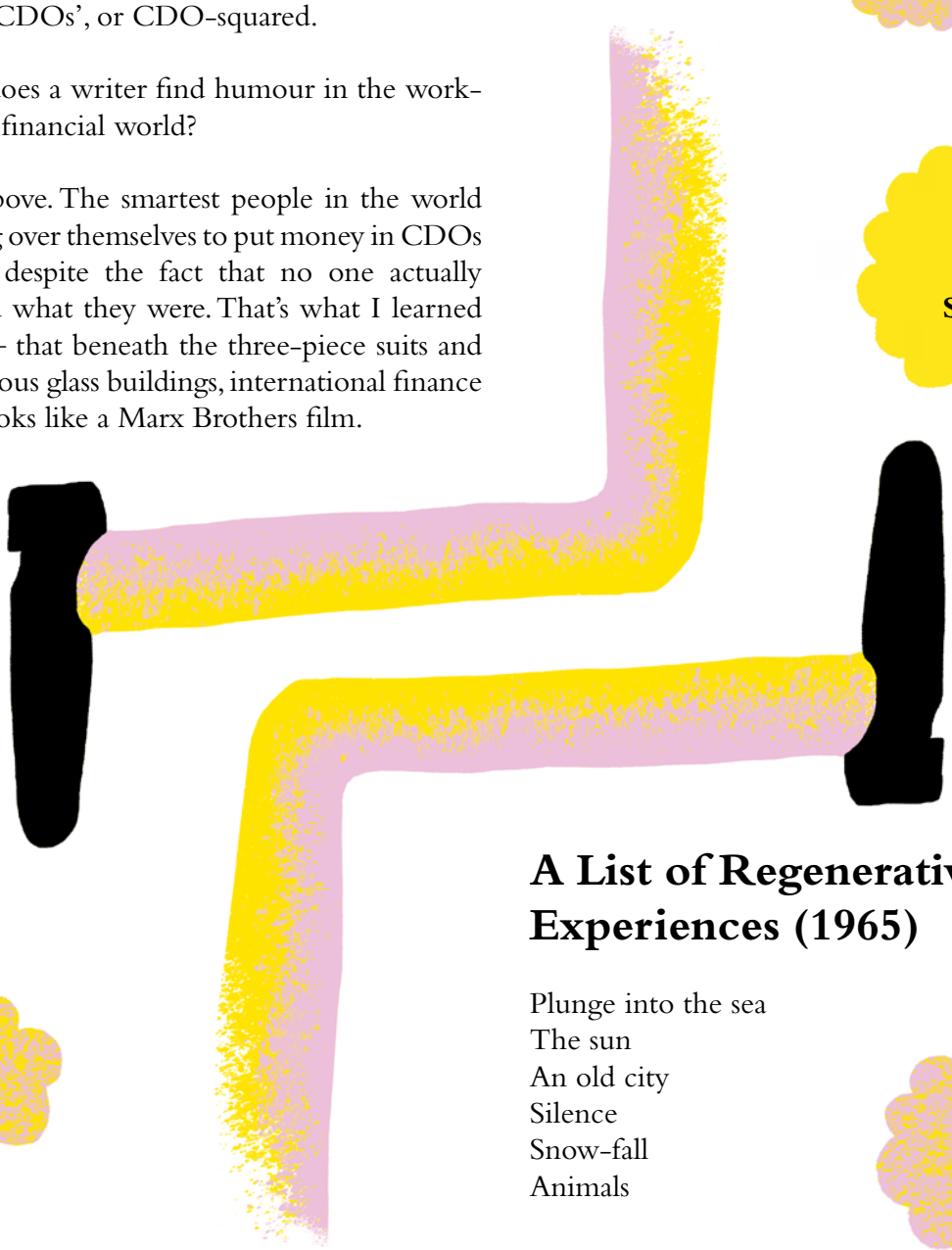
Paul Murray I'm a big fan of the collateralized debt obligation (CDO) and its spin-offs, the synthetic collateralized debt obligation and the 'CDO-of-CDOs', or CDO-squared.

5D How does a writer find humour in the workings of the financial world?

PM See above. The smartest people in the world were falling over themselves to put money in CDOs of CDOs, despite the fact that no one actually understood what they were. That's what I learned over time – that beneath the three-piece suits and the big serious glass buildings, international finance basically looks like a Marx Brothers film.

Best List

WINNER
Susan Sontag



FROM
Five Dials No. 38

A List of Regenerative Experiences (1965)

Plunge into the sea
The sun
An old city
Silence
Snow-fall
Animals

FROM
Five Dials No. 33B

Best List of DJ Names Found Near Our Old Office

WINNER

Simon Prosser

All the DJs on Brick Lane

While we were planning the launch of *Five Dials*, the Hamish Hamilton offices temporarily migrated east to Brick Lane in Shoreditch. Sharing the old Truman Brewery building with a variety of fashion designers, club promoters and, on the ground floor, the Vibe Bar, we were never short of things to do in the evenings if we had the energy. Every day a new clutch of printed flyers was stuffed into the metal rack next to the elevators, advertising a bewildering array of nights out, almost all involving a DJ or two. I started compiling a list of every DJ on Brick Lane in the summer of 2007.

DJ Doudou
DJ Teezer
Harty
Mushka
Yemi Sawyer
Ed Moss
Andy Newcombe
Simon S
Sleazy Guy
WaP
Nik's Brother
TBX
Ace
Hoop
Lil' Gav
Matt L-S
Ben Tidy
Cookie
Domu
Craig & Ade
Joel Martin
The Off Key Hat
NIYI
Mr Fox
Oscar T. Cash
Cashback
No Way
Lok
DJ 3000
Luke Slater
Alexander Robotnick
Oliver Ho
Matt Bodyjam
Luke Clinic
Sander Kleinenberg
Rene Amesz
A Skillz
Scott Nixon
Damian Gee
Maria B
David Mothersole
Dave Vega
Gabriel & Dresden
Behrouz
A Man Called Adam
DJ Nerm
D-Code
Manish
Zaki
People Like Us
Little Rico
DJ Koh
Danny Breaks
Huw72
Mistah Brown
DJ Skeletrik
Kila Kella
Trafford
Pistol Pete
The Wildcat Tamer
Lord Vagabond
Ramon Santana
Angelo Exchange
MK
Gorowski
Simbad
Freddy MC Quinn
Loic Deniro
Lyric L
Kenny Party Crasher
DJ Corsair
Jonty Skruff
Cormac
Fidelity Kastrow
Love Technician
Switch
Mampi Swift
IC3
Harry Love
Clipz
Marley Marl
Macpherson
DJ Yoda
Pendulum
Andy C
Boy 8-Bit
Jagz
Kooner

Danny C
Bad Chemistry
Mark Sun
Anil Chawla
The Coordinators
Anna Kiss
Christiano
Will Konitzer
Nina Rodriguez
Lusito Quintero
Clemy Riley
Chris Samba
Terry Bedeau
Carlo
Dave Spoon
Mason
Big Daddy
Cheshire Catz
Shane Kehoe
Patrick Hagenaar
Welfare for the Digital
Ben Dela-Pena
Alex K
Tomoki Tamura
Largo
Toni C
TBX
Ace
Eel
Freeze Da Booty
Hunter
Modsleep
Attan
Hoop
Skip B
Slutcrusher
U-Cef
Coco Varma
N-Type
Geeneus
Youngsta
Hatcha
Benga
Aplleblim
Headhunter
Di Distance
Kode 9
Chef, Scientist
Supa
Spyro
Vectra
Slimzee
Scratcha
Karnage

Soulchild
Kissy Sell Out
Erol Alkan
Punks Jump Up
Infadels
MC Trip
Joe Ransom
Sinden
Paul Devro
DJ Hype
Friction
Fabio
Brockie
Pascal
Taxman
MCs Fearless, Fun,
Fats & AD
Atomic Hooligan
Sick Rick
Ali B
Dana D
Simon Kurrage
Mr Shiver, Shepdog
DJ Koze
Allez-Allez
Justus Kohncke
Swayzak
Michael Fakesch
Funkstorung

Best Description of the Late-era Rolling Stones

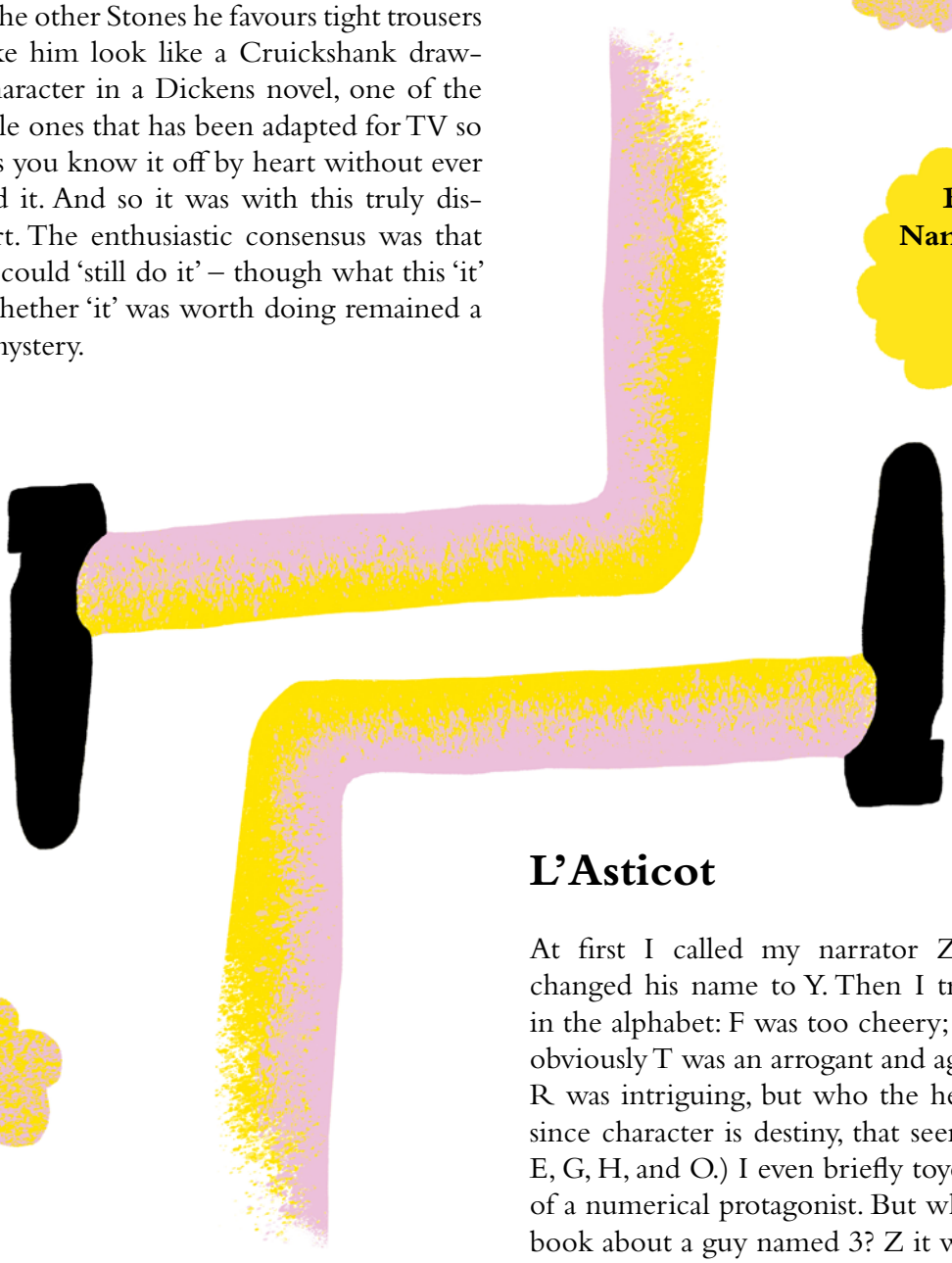
WINNER
Geoff Dyer

Fabulous Clothes

People speak of Mick Jagger's extraordinary longevity and wealth but that is only half the story. The other, more interesting half is how, despite this wealth, he has managed to dress so badly for so long. Like the other Stones he favours tight trousers which make him look like a Cruickshank drawing of a character in a Dickens novel, one of the interminable ones that has been adapted for TV so many times you know it off by heart without ever having read it. And so it was with this truly dismal concert. The enthusiastic consensus was that the Stones could 'still do it' – though what this 'it' was, and whether 'it' was worth doing remained a source of mystery.

Best Rule for Naming Characters

WINNER
Steve Toltz



FROM
Five Dials No. 8

L'Asticot

At first I called my narrator Z. Unsatisfied, I changed his name to Y. Then I tried every letter in the alphabet: F was too cheery; X clearly a fool; obviously T was an arrogant and aggressive bastard; R was intriguing, but who the hell was R? (And since character is destiny, that seemed to rule out E, G, H, and O.) I even briefly toyed with the idea of a numerical protagonist. But who would read a book about a guy named 3? Z it was, then.

FROM
Five Dials No. 8

Best Article About a Panda Bear

WINNER
Amy Leach

Radical Bears in the Forest Delicious

There once was a king of Babylon who was too proud, so he was given the mind of an animal and put out to pasture. For seven years he roamed the fields on all fours and munched on grass, after which period he was allowed to return to his palace and rich robes of purple, his barley beer and skewered locusts and royal hairdresser, who gave him back his dignified ringlets. (Along with an animal's mind he had been given the animal's hair stylist.) It is not specified which animal's mind Nebuchadnezzar received, but from his glad return to civilization and fine cuisine we can infer that it was not the mind of a panda bear. If he had had a panda's mind for seven years, in the end he would have rejected the restitution of his kingdom; he would have somersaulted away, to continue leading a free, elusive, unfollowed life.

Having followers is an honour pandas dream not of. There is no tragopan so trustworthy, no bush-pig so dependable that they would want it tagging along. Pandas even head away from pandas, like the stars in the universe, spreading further and further apart (you can never be too far away to say goodbye) – except their territory is neither infinite nor expanding, and in order to deliver more panda bears into existence, they can't just scatter into particles at the end. Pandas come together every two years or so; marriage isn't always marriage of the mind.

Maybe if they had been given a choice they would have picked a less conspicuous coat, one better to correspond with their reclusive spirit. Admirers can be secret admirers and afflictions can be secret afflictions, but pandas cannot be secret pandas, since they contrast dramatically with green ferns, grey rocks, pink rhododendrons and their own bellies and ears and legs. They are showy bears, sensationally visible, which might actually be an advantage for a solitary species: the easier to avoid you, my dear. Camouflaged animals must always be bumping into one another.

What does the animal do all day that is not engaged in society; its duties and pleasures and ferments? There may be some wedging in trees, some gazing into the mist, some fiddle-faddle. Sometimes the panda breaks an icicle off a branch and tosses it into the air over and over till it melts. Sometimes, trotting pigeon-toed across a hillside, he trips, then rolls, because he is round; having enjoyed that, he climbs back up and rolls back down. He might pick wild irises or crocuses and recline among the fern-fronds to eat them, or lounge underneath a weeping willow, munching on the little leaflets that dangle into his mouth.

Mostly what pandas do with their time is eat bamboo. Bamboo, that sturdy wooden grass, makes up to 99 per cent of their diet, and they eat it for up to fourteen hours a day. They have to con-

sume it constantly since they are only assimilating about 20 per cent. Their penitential diet is a mystery; pandas are like celery saints – everyone else is convivially dining on stuffed eggs, truffled finger-lings, little pies and oranges, enjoying the tableside crooners, while out behind a bush sits a celery saint with his basket of celery: crunch, crunch, crunch. Eat enough pies and you can put aside the desire for food and pursue something else, such as a cowhand. Rare is the romance of the celery extremist.

With their carnivorous anatomy and herbivorous behaviour, it is as if pandas are pledged to an ancient covenant – as if they used to be *bon vivants* like other bears, blood and berry juice staining their muzzles, slugabeds all winter, until one day they fell into a trance and received a deep message: 'You are standing, pandas, on the very borders of the eternal world, but you have become charmed with infatuating food; the subtle poison of sensuality courses through your veins. You must disregard custom and the strong clamouring of appetite and passion. It will take, at times, every particle of willpower which you possess; but give yourselves wholly to a bamboo diet, and guided by firm, unspotted principle, your lives will become pure and noble.' Thus was formed that radical sect of bears, the Bambooists. Modern-day Bambooists show a remarkable resistance to temptation: a stream runs by, serving up fresh fish, and what does the panda do? Wades across, to get to a stiff thicket of bamboo on the opposite side.

But willpower might not entirely account for such abstemiousness any more. Bamboo is not power food, and the bear that eats it is not a power bear, and swiping fish from the river takes energy, as does sleeping all winter. If you're going to sleep for seven months, you need to eat your hickory nuts, your ungulates, your honey. Bambooists have to stay awake all winter to eat bamboo – incidentally, witnessing the sapphirine sparkles of snow falling from a branch, the cliffs draped with icy fringes, the white snow powdering the green bamboo leaves. (Could any dream compare with winter?)

What does a panda know that studies just a few cloudy-mountain miles of the world? From her experience she must know about fallibility. Icicles melt, flowers fail, intangibly small babies grow tangible and autonomous, and one day when you come back from foraging to collect yours from the tree fork where you left him, he is gone. Mushrooms, moonlight, everything is ephemeral, with one exception: bamboo. Bamboo never fails, bamboo is eternal, evergreen, green in the orange season, green in the white season, green in the green season, poking up sweet little shoots into the spring rain. Blessed is the bear that trusteth in bamboo.

For lucky pandas it is true, bamboo never fails. Bamboo can be eternal for a hundred years, which is four times as eternal as panda bears; but there is in the character of bamboo a devastating defect. Most grasses stagger their dying, piece by piece, like an orchestra – though a trombonist goes down, the

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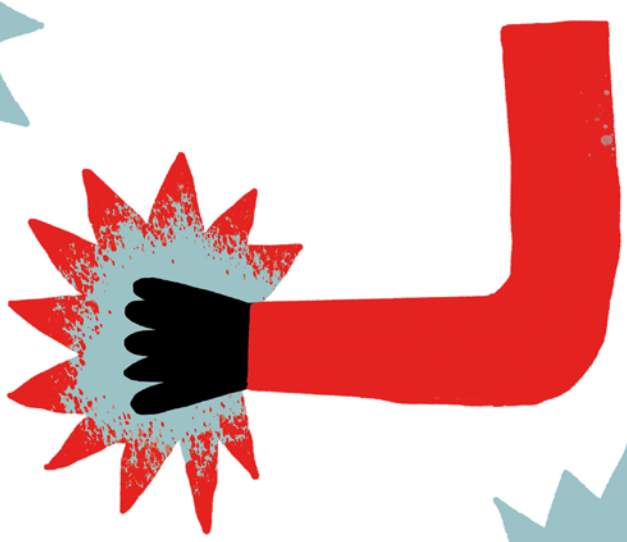
collective life carries on. The trouble with bamboo is that it crashes all at once: after a century of continuous availability, the entire thicket flowers together, dies together, and like a dead orchestra it can take twenty years to get back on its feet.

At this point an animal might wise up and become a Whateverist. With so many edibles in the world why consume, almost exclusively, a miserably nutritious, erratically fallible one? It's not as if bamboo is pleasant to eat, like horse beans; bamboo splinters poke and scratch the swallower all the way down. That old covenant was arbitrary and perverse; bamboo is a silly staple; specialism is folly. Consider pragmatists – when the linguini runs out, a pragmatist will eat the centrepiece, and when that is done he will eat the tablecloth. As pragmatists have no principles, their numbers are myriad.

But pandas betrayed by bamboo go looking for bamboo. For there is such a thing as specialized hunger, being hungry for one thing – similar to specialized loneliness. Sometimes they don't have to travel far; pandas eat several kinds of bamboo, and even though arrow bamboo collapses, there might be umbrella bamboo growing nearby. Sometimes they have to go farther afield, and sometimes they travel in pitiful directions – would you know which way to go to find a hotbed of celery? – until their coats don't fit very well any more. Vagrancy used to be easier on the animals, because there used to be more forest. Even if an expedition wasn't efficient, it was foresty all the way, just as the journey from earth to heaven is milky all the way. Now, between patches of forest, there are villages and gravel mines, steep cornfields, dance tents, frightened people waving blankets, mushroomers, other things to avoid.

People have tried to help pandas become pragmatists, to see sense, to switch to alternatives during a bamboo strangulation. And in captivity they comply – they eat the yams and bananas and fish set before them. But compliance is not conversion. When they are set free, pandas return to their ruinous fidelity to bamboo, shuffling past opportunity – for on the far side of that hill might be the Forest Delicious, where they can lie back, in the million-column sanctuary, a bamboo cane in each forefoot, crunching on the one and then the other, munching on flappy bundles of leaves. There are fewer than twenty-five hundred free pandas left and they're all in the same boat, made of bamboo. When it goes down, they go down with it, into dark water, and they won't switch to another boat, not for all the tea in China. Pandas have their own wisdom, unaccountable and unamendable, whose roots shoot down deeper than we can penetrate, and if they mind anyone at all it is someone more elusive than man.



Best Response by Roberto Bolaño

Q What kinds of feelings do posthumous works awaken in you?

Roberto Bolaño Posthumous: it sounds like the name of a Roman gladiator, an unconquered gladiator. At least that's what poor Posthumous would like to believe. It gives him courage.

Best Answer to the Question 'What are We to Do with Our Unconscious Self-destructive Impulses?'

WINNER
Deborah Levy

FROM
Five Dials No. 11

A–Z of the Death Drive

What are we to do with our unconscious self-destructive impulses?

The uncivilized death wish that simmers within us even though we always say please and thank you? Freud did not believe that accidents were chance events. All accidents in his view are manifestations of the death drive, the urge to walk into traffic when we cross the road or stand too near the edge of the platform when waiting for the tube. He even came to believe that to suffer from vertigo on a mountain is to suffer from the unconscious urge to throw ourselves off it. Ballard agrees: 'Deep assignments run through all our lives . . . there are no coincidences.' If the car offers us an instrument to play with our destructive and aggressive impulses, it's no wonder behaviour on the roads often resembles the playground at school.

FROM
Five Dials No. 30

Best Description of the Pleasurable Ache of Good Fiction

WINNER
Nick Hornby

FROM
Five Dials No. 34

The 'Jokes / Not Joking' Q&A

Five Dials In your discussion of Michael Ondaatje's *Coming Through Slaughter*, you mention the book leaves you with a sort of ache that nonfiction can never provide. Explain that ache.

Nick Hornby It's a musical thing, I think. There is a certain type of fiction that does recreate the feeling you get from music and you have it all the time that you are reading the book, and maybe the sensation stays with you a while after. And I think, in the end, that is the real value of fiction. There are memorable characters, of course, and great lines, but I think it is about feeling, and feeling with intelligence.

Best Very Specific Anagram

WINNER
Demetri Martin

Palindromes for Specific Occasions

A father trying to connect with his estranged son by offering him some pizza:

Son, I'm odd. Domino's?

FROM
Five Dials No. 26

Best Hippy Parenting Moment

WINNER
Arthur Bradford

Raise Them Up Hippy

I was thinking about this strange thing my mother did back in about 1975. She was driving in a car with my twin sister and me – two five-year-olds – when she announced that we were going to rob a bank. 'We're all out of money,' she said, 'but I've come up with a plan.' My sister and I waited dutifully to hear the details. 'I've got a small gun for each of you,' she said, 'and some little black masks. We'll stop at the bank in town, run in there and make them give us money.' 'Steal their money?' asked my sister. 'Where are the guns?' I asked. I recall a familiar feeling of dread welling up inside me at that point. It wasn't anxiety about committing a crime, for we hadn't done anything like that before. No, my anxious feelings stemmed from the thought that our family was acting weird again. Once more, we were about to go and draw attention to ourselves like a bunch of freaks. Everyone was going to know we ran around naked and ate food that didn't come from the stores, like strange granola, and drank milk from goats. They would know we were hippies! As it turned out my mother's plan fell apart under our questioning, and at some point she announced that we were not actually going to rob anyone. We did go to the bank and get money that day, but we used the drive-up window and a cheque. Apparently we weren't broke. I'm a parent myself now, with two small daughters, and as such I find myself re-examining these instances from my youth with a new perspective. What exactly was going through my mother's head when she told us that yarn? As I parent, I think I finally understand. In fact, I think I understand the whole hippy parenting thing a lot better now. There's a funny kind of wisdom that hits a person who reaches the same age his parents were back when certain memories were formed. I don't mean to suggest that concocting stories about robbing banks is a typically hippy thing to do, but I do think there was something in the air back then that moved some parents to throw out the rulebook on what constituted proper child-rearing. Many of these hippy parents had been brought up in the new American suburbia where conformity was celebrated,

so for them, the goal was to shake things up and raise a generation of free-spirited little children of the earth, a next generation of soldiers in the revolution. Did that actually happen though? I think back on my childhood and realize that we're raising our daughters in a decidedly less rebellious fashion. I'll make a sweeping general guess here and say I bet most children of hippies have chosen to eschew the chaos of their upbringings now that they have kids of their own. Maybe that's our own way of rebelling, or maybe things are more 'normal' for our kids because our parents already did so much of the rebelling for us. Although I'm sure my parents would not really qualify as hard-core hippies, they definitely subscribed to the mood of the day among their set of college-educated baby boomers, which was decidedly back to the land. We lived in rural Maine in the 1970s, and the 1970s there were sort of like the 1960s everywhere else. Our mother, in particular, embraced the bake-your-own-bread, make-clothing-on-a-loom aesthetic. Our father worked for the state government at the time and probably wasn't so enthusiastic about these new trends in parenting, but he tolerated it as much as he could, or he simply tuned out when things got too weird. Perhaps this was one reason they got divorced soon after we were born.

Best Poem About Swimming

WINNER
Joe Dunthorne

Twenty-four lengths

A girl wearing a two-piece
and waterproof mascara
joins me in the slow lane:
we breaststroke clockwise.
During my seventh length,
she strokes my forearm
as she passes. At nine
lengths I touch her calf.
She has shaved well.
Underwater, she's magnified
with sharp hips I could
handstand on. Her toenails
are painted. At fourteen,
she frog-kicks me in the thigh
but keeps on swimming.
I stop at the shallow end,
there is a wisp of blood
trailing from my leg.
I use the locker key
round my wrist to worry
the nick until it seeps
like a put-out candle.
I swim and swim
and don't feel tired.

FROM
Five Dials No. 1

Best Poem About a Lake

WINNER

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson

head of the lake

head of the lake in a basement full of plastic flowers
perogies and
cabbage rolls

at the head of the lake
thinking under accusation

at the mouth of the catastrophic river
disappearing our kids

at the foot of the nest
beside trailer hitches, coffee, spoons

we made a circle
and it helped

the smoke did the things
we couldn't

singing
broke open hearts

i hold your hand
without touching it.

we're in the thinking part of the lake
faith under accusation

at the mouth of the river
and the spectre of free

at the foot of Animikig
beside bones of stone and red silver

in a basement full of increasing entropy
moose ribs, wild rice.

in realization
we don't exist without each other

she says: there's nothing about you
i'm not willing to know.

FROM

Five Dials No. 49

Best Advice For Eating Out in Grimsby

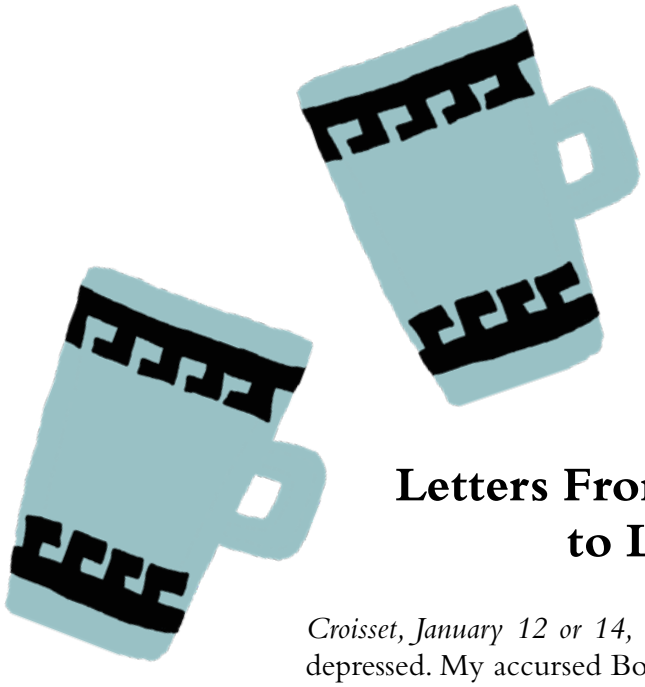
WINNER

Alain de Botton

Q A friend of mine has recently been left by her boyfriend and is very upset. I'd like to cheer her up and thought of taking her out to dinner somewhere nice. I live in Grimsby and wondered if you had any nice ideas for restaurants in the town or the vicinity?

A I rarely dine out – but the greater question is whether you should be taking your friend out anywhere in the first place. Your intended goal is to make her feel better about the (unspecified) romantic disaster she has suffered. And if this is the goal, we must analyze what it is truly useful to say to someone who has been left in love.

Part of the pain of a sad love affair comes from the preconception, which is fostered in a thousand Hollywood films and in the generally optimistic atmosphere of the modern media, that love is a happy business. This optimism makes us suffer doubly when love goes wrong for us: we suffer not only from the pain of the loss of love, but also from the pain of being in pain when we are supposed to be happy. In this situation, it is apparent that the most useful thing one can do with someone who has been abandoned is to provide them with evidence that life is not in fact a happy process, whatever the songs say. This will appease their feeling of persecution and place their own pain in context. Rather than a restaurant invitation, I therefore suggest that you send your friend a box containing: the Pensees of Pascal, the aphorisms of La Rochefoucauld, the collected works of Chamfort, Schopenhauer and Cioran, and selections from the work of Seneca. Your friend may particularly appreciate the Roman philosopher's remark (you may even want to embroider this for her on a cushion or bedcover): 'What need is there to weep over parts of life? The whole of it calls for tears.'



Best Complaints About The Writing Process

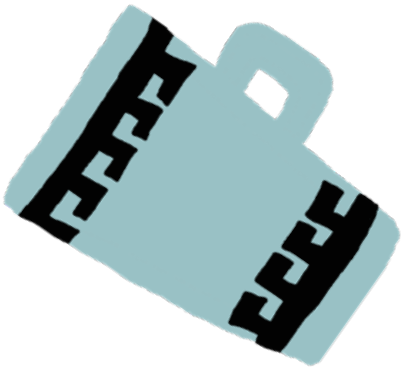
WINNER
Gustave Flaubert

Letters From Gustave Flaubert to Louise Colet

Croisset, January 12 or 14, 1852 · I am hideously worried, mortally depressed. My accursed Bovary is harrying me and driving me mad. Last Sunday [friend and dramatist Louis] Bouilhet criticized one of my characters and the outline. I can do nothing about it: there is some truth in what he says, but I feel that the opposite is true also. Ah, I am tired and discouraged! You call me Master. What a wretched Master! No – it is possible that the whole thing hasn't had enough spadework, for distinctions between thought and style are a sophism. Everything depends on the conception. So much the worse! I am going to continue, and as quickly as I can, in order to have a complete picture. There are moments when all this makes me wish I were dead. Ah! No one will be able to say that I haven't experienced the agonies of Art!

Croisset, February 1, 1852 · Bad week. Work didn't go; I had reached a point where I didn't know what to say. It was all shadings and refinements; I was completely in the dark: it is very difficult to clarify by means of words what is still obscure in your thoughts. I made outlines, spoiled a lot of paper, floundered and fumbled. Now I shall perhaps find my way again. Oh, what a rascally thing style is! I think you have no idea of what kind of a book I am writing. In my other books I was slovenly; in this one I am trying to be impeccable, and to follow a geometrically straight line. No lyricism, no comments, the author's personality absent. It will make sad reading; there will be atrociously wretched and sordid things. Bouilhet, who arrived last Sunday at three just after I had written you, thinks the tone is right and hopes the book will be good. May God grant it! But it promises to take up an enormous amount of time. I shall certainly not be through by the beginning of next winter. I am doing no more than five or six pages a week.

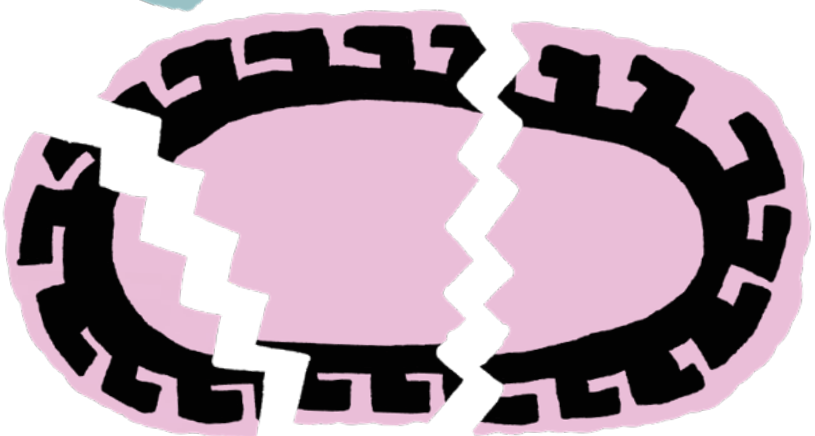
FROM
Five Dials No. 1

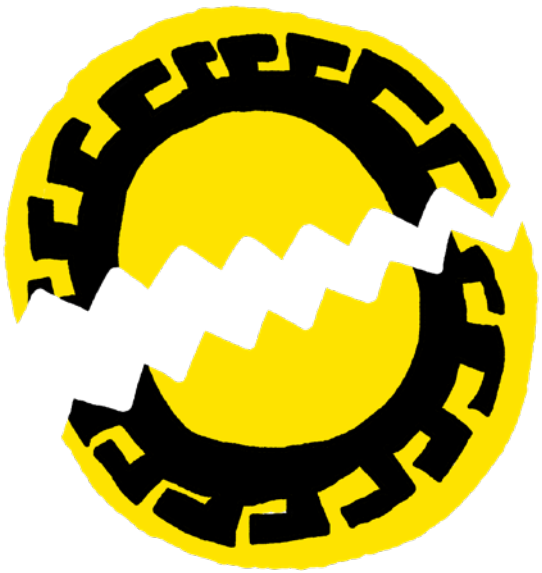


Notes During Long Phone Conversation with Mother

for summer – she needs
pretty dress – cotton

cotton nottoc
coontt
tcoont
toonct
tocnot tocont
tocton
contot





Best Description of an Evil Plumber Roaming the Streets in Post-Katrina New Orleans

WINNER
Cheryl Wagner

The Ballad of Black Van

Black Van was back with a wasted grin. Slicked hair topped by a cheap coal cowboy hat, he smiled red-eyed from the porch of a sad-sack shotgun house sinking into the ground two blocks from mine in Mid-City. It was over a year since the New Orleans Police Department tossed him from his last squatted house in our neighbourhood. Life was good; a group of shady plumbers hung out on the curb of his latest lair. He had minions again.

Carpenters, electricians, sheetrockers, citizen-sheetrockers, painters, plumbers – we had them all. Since the flood three years ago, my neighbourhood has been a construction site. These weren't like the old ponytailed plumber who, in one of those moments of compulsive post-Katrina sharing, cruised up to our ruined house to tell us he grew pot on our back balcony in the eighties. The pot plumber had pulled up his t-shirt and revealed a deep pink surgery scar. He expressed concern that my boyfriend and basset hound and I looked in over our heads. Mired deep in the world's worst DIY moment, we were.

These plumbers, Black Van's plumbers, were the bad news ones. The ones who trolled the frayed edges of our struggling neighbourhood at lunch and quitting time for drugs. The ones who frequented the flooded-and-fixed hourly motels nearby on Tulane Avenue. When I drove by on my way out of town for Hurricane Gustav, Black Van remained, laughing on the porch under his tipped cowboy hat. But the plumbers' eyes went slit. Their heads swivelled like periscopes or wrenches towards me in warning. Get off this block. Typical flood sleaze. I was over it. 'Screw you, Black Van,' I thought. 'You better not break into our house.'

FROM
Five Dials
No. 3

Best Encounter with a Centenarian in Abkhazia

WINNER
Oliver Bullough

The Dying Breed

Efrosinia Leiba had gorgeous eyes. They were clear, clear blue flecked with green and hazel, like the deep sea or a mountain stream. They belonged in the face of a young woman, and when I looked into them I forgot the sunken cheeks, the liver spots and the thinning hair. She might have been 105 years old, but her eyes were enough on their own to make her beautiful.

She had a wit to match. Even translated from the swishy consonants of the Abkhaz language, she was hilarious, with an unexpected talent for off-colour one-liners. She waited for each of her sallies to be decanted into staid Russian prose, then giggled with delight.

'See this young man,' she said, lifting a shrunken hand to caress the neck of a stylish Muscovite who was sitting on the bench with her. He shrank away from her touch, perhaps afraid for his cream sweater. 'He'd better put a ring on my finger or I'll have to take him to bed illegally.'

FROM
Five Dials
No. 5

FROM
Five Dials
No. 33B

WINNER
Olivia Laing

Best Appreciation of Marguerite Duras

Raking over the live coals of lived experience. Telling tales on herself, knowing there's never only one way about it. Telling the same story, staring its changing face down through the years. And you were wearing a man's fedora and gold lame shoes, *going to school in evening shoes decorated with little diamanté flowers*. And you were a beautiful girl, a whore, an ugly, beaten animal. And alcohol doesn't fill the gaps but filters anyway everywhere, in poisonous streams, poisonous rivers. I'm acquainted with it, the desire to be killed. I know it exists. No hope and not much pity, just the small teeth bared, the desire to get it all, to set it somehow down.

WINNER
Simon Prosser

Best Possibly Dreamt Conversation with W.G. Sebald

Rings of Saturn · For many readers this is the most beloved of Max's works. It begins with the narrator recovering from a bout of illness which is often assumed to be psychological. When I asked Max about this he said that the problem was in fact orthopaedic, and based on his own experience of a damaged back following his months of tramping the East Anglian coast with one foot slightly raised above the other due to the angle of the sloping shore. (Though in writing this, I wonder if I dreamt this conversation.)

FROM
Five Dials
No. 5

Best Exchange About Clarity

WINNER
Diana Athill

FROM
Five Dials No. 7

5D Is absolute clarity possible when we write about our own lives?

DA Absolute clarity, absolute honesty, one cannot swear to. Minds deceive each other. You can't quite remember. Was that something that happened or was I told it happened? All you can do is try your best. You think you have it right and then, to your horror, you discover someone else remembers the same thing in a completely different way and they're equally sure they're remembering it right. Nothing is worse, really, than hearing accounts of some awful thing that's happened – a split up marriage or something. And you hear two perfectly convincing accounts of the same thing. They're absolutely different. Very disconcerting.

One's mind does get blunted with age. One's instincts get blunted. The way one thinks things tasted much better when one was a child was simply because you were completely tasting them and now your sense of taste is not as good as it was.

Lives are long and capacious these days. People are able to lead more than one kind of life and with memoir it's nice to occasionally get into other people's shoes and say ah, that's how it would be like. That's the point of memoirs, I think. There are also old diaries. They give you interesting detail about life. I love them.

5D Do you have any old diaries of your own?

DA I haven't got any old diaries. I don't keep them.

5D Do you think a biography of yourself would be wildly different from your last memoir?

DA I don't see the point of why any one should write a biography about anybody who has written as much autobiographical material as myself. It's all there. Someone will though. There are always hundreds of people who can't think of what to write about. They're usually earnest ladies in America doing theses. But it will be pointless and I'm going to leave them absolutely nothing to work with except in my written work. I throw things away anyway. I live in a very small place. I simply haven't got room.

This is very sad in a way because the people who buy archives

have been approaching me – an American on one hand and the British Library on the other. They say 'We'd love to buy your archive.' And they pay! They pay for old envelopes. I've got nothing. I've thrown it all away. I just can't be bothered. I don't even keep my fan mail. That sounds quite tactical. It wasn't a matter of policy. I just started throwing things away.

5D Does the possibility of a biography excite you in any way?

DA No. I don't particularly want to be written about. If I was a novelist that would be different. There could be literary criticism about my novel and that would be fine. But I'm not a novelist. In what I have written I have tried to get my life as it really was. I haven't projected a picture of myself being different from how I am. I hope I have succeeded. A biography? No. I only just started this arc of being fairly well known. Mostly I wasn't. Most of my life I was a rather inconspicuous publishing lady.

Best Description of Which Words To Dodge As a Translator

WINNER
Anthea Bell

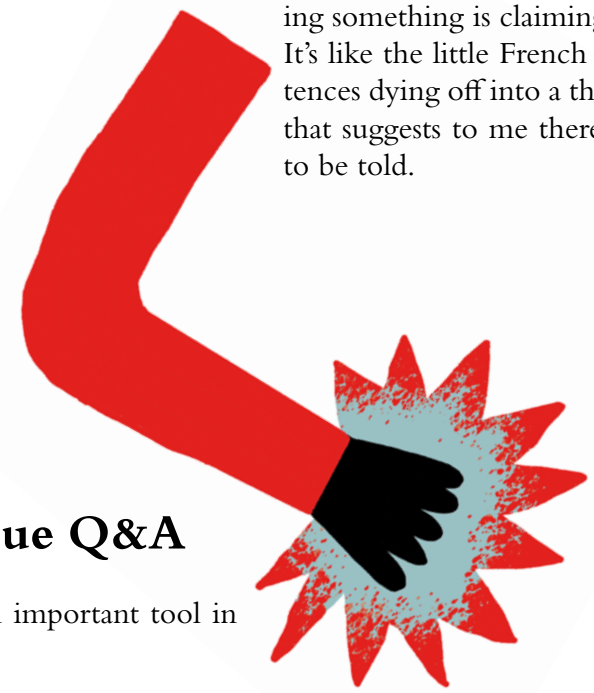
A Little Trick of the Mind: Four translators discuss their profession

Q Are there words you dodge?

A There are certain words. I spend my life trying not to use 'so-called' for German 'sogenannt'. In German it's just a throwaway word but in English if you say 'so-called' it looks as if you're implying something is claiming to be something it's not. It's like the little French habit of punctuating sentences dying off into a three dot ellipses. In English that suggests to me there is something sinister yet to be told.

Best Endorsement of Laughter as a Means to Fight Censorship

WINNER
John Mortimer



FROM
Five Dials No. 5

The Obscenity Issue Q&A

5D Why was laughter such an important tool in the battle?

John Mortimer Censorship is ridiculous, really. Laughter is an important tool in anything, absolutely anything you're defending. It's very good for people to be caused offence, by the way. They should be caused offence three times a week and three times on Saturdays. It keeps them alive.

FROM
Five Dials No. 6

Best Description of How To Write A Song

WINNER
James Murphy

On Losing My Edge

'Losing My Edge' was not written. It just came out. I was playing drums and singing, which is why the rhythm gets funny. I turned on the beatbox, sang, and made the song. The only part of the song that had been written before was the list of bands I call out at the end, and that was recorded separately. I had a lot in my head. The subject matter was all there. It was fertile. It was really fertile. I got almost all the lyrics down in one take because I was so invested in it. It was everything my life was about.

FROM
Five Dials No. 13

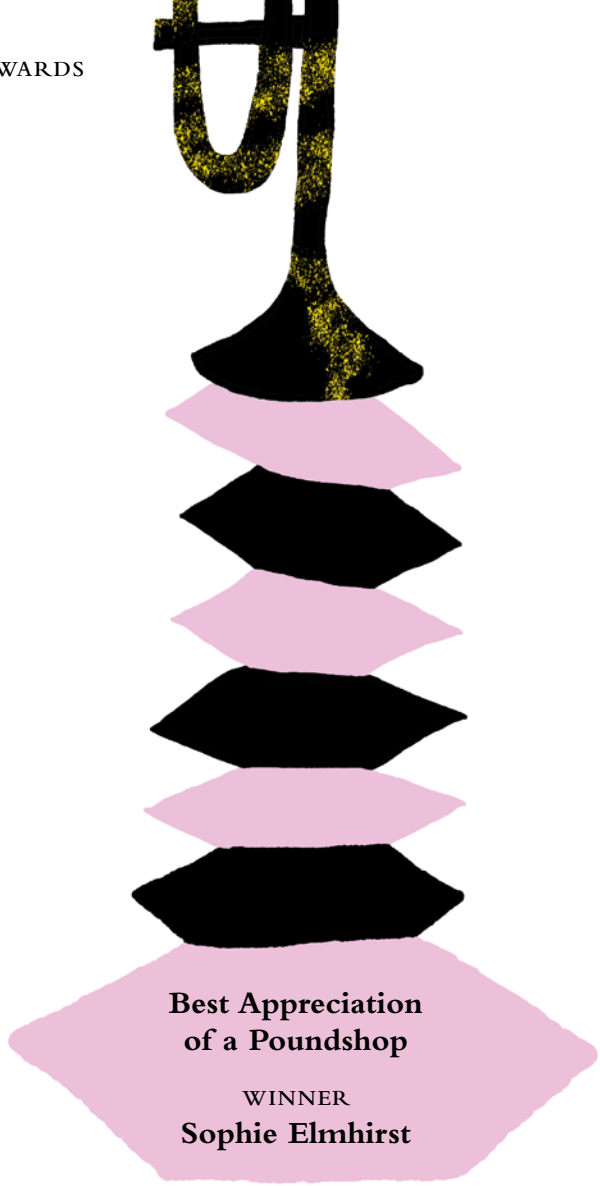
Best Answer to the Question: What Should We Compare Britain to Right Now?

WINNER
The Broken Britain Issue Q&A

'A game of Tetris where you have put a crucial piece in the wrong way and you can't stop the next piece coming.'

Lewis Hill, 29, marketing executive, London

FROM
Five Dials No. 12



Best Appreciation of a Poundshop

WINNER

Sophie Elmhirst

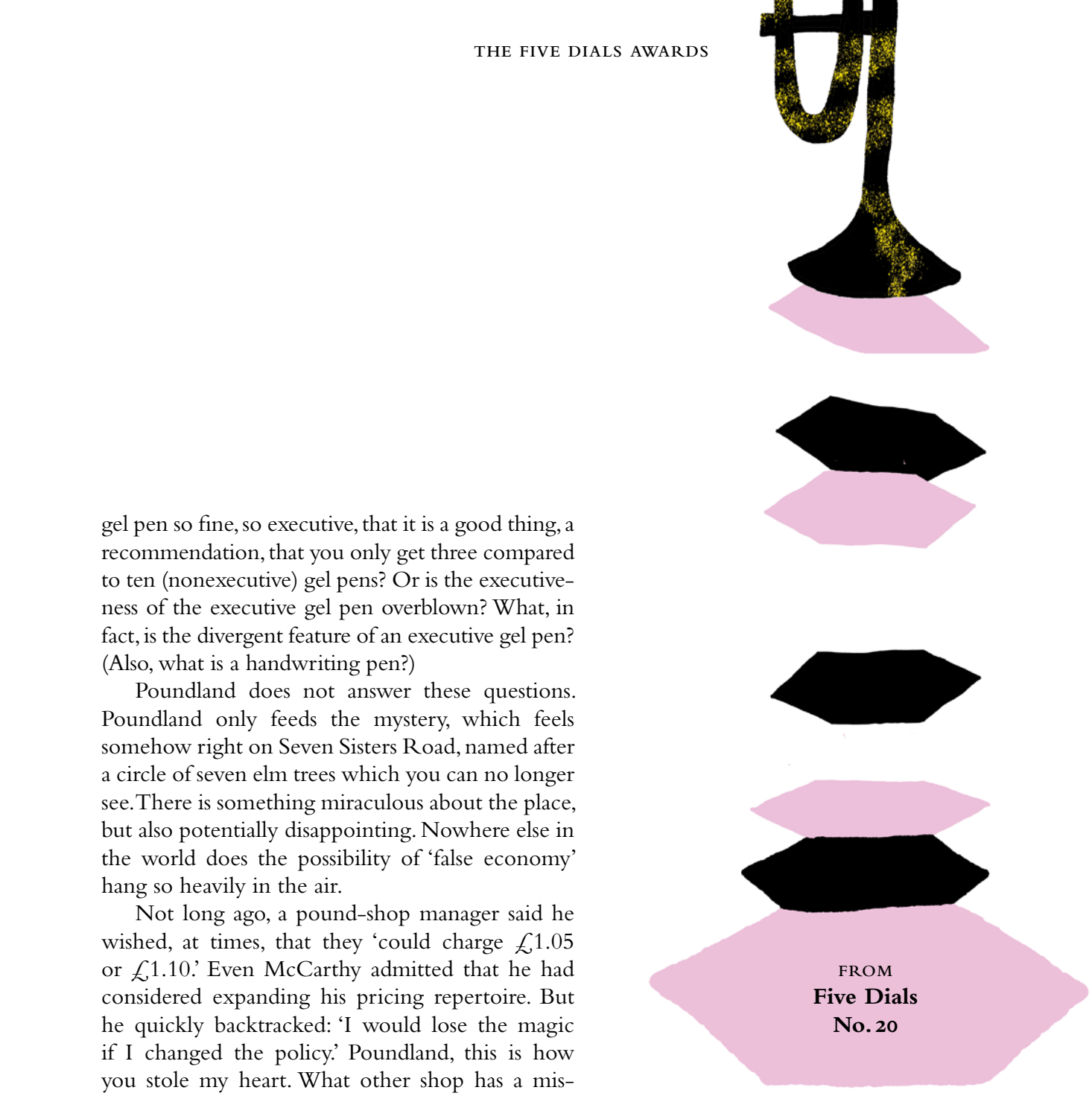
The pound shop: a concept so simple, so pure, you have to keep reminding yourself of its parameters. Everything costs £1. Everything. A tin of HP baked beans: £1. A packet of Weetabix Oatibix Flakes: £1. Five fluorescent Alice bands: £1. Twenty-four ladies' razors: £1. A bumper pack of Wotsits: £1. Sadie Frost's autobiography, *Crazy Days*: £1.

Poundland – for this is another country, with its own laws – rewires the retail experience. Your eyes flick from product to price tag – how much does this tennis racket cost? – but there are no price tags. Even a tennis racket costs £1 (a tennis racket!). If you haven't been to a pound shop for a while, there is a natural period of acclimatization. You want to stand in the aisles and shout, 'Look! This mop! One pound!' (According to Poundland chief executive Jim McCarthy, the most frequently asked question in his shop is, 'How much is this?') Even Poundland seems to be amazed by itself. Under certain items there are little signs: '£1. Wow! Wow!'

My Poundland, the Poundland on Seven Sisters Road, nestles between pawn shops and betting shops and charity shops, and is but a few steps from the Manhattan Bagel Bakery and the Ocean Breeze fish bar. Seven Sisters Road is a jammed, juddering throroughfare that links Holloway Road and Finsbury Park – it is not like Manhattan, there is no ocean and not much breeze, unless you count the gentle wind of pollution that blows along the street. Walking into Poundland is as close as I can get as a low-earning adult to the feeling I had when entering a toyshop as a child. It's a wonderland, brimming with possibility. I can feel my heart beat. That might simply be from the noise, though: inside the shop is a cacophony of jaunty signs and jostling customers and announcements over the Tannoy that invite you to follow Poundland on Twitter (which I can only think might get repetitive).

But as with any masterpiece, there are flaws. I want to buy pens and some Flash cleaner but am told by the patient shop assistant that you can use your credit card only for purchases over £5, which seems at odds with Poundland's guiding principle (I panic-reach for loo paper, batteries and chewing gum to make up the amount). Also, don't come to Poundland if you're a completist. Reading glasses (£1 a pair) are available only in six strengths. The Dalmatian dressing-up kit (£1) will equip you with ears and a tail, but leave you exposed elsewhere. The lino floor tiles (a packet of four: £1) will cover a neat corner of a room, enough for a chair, perhaps, or a shrine.

You'd think that the economics of Poundland were simple. You'd be wrong. Take pens. I have never seen such a selection of pens as those lining the shelves of the Seven Sisters Road Poundland. The display is a thing of beauty, and confusion. £1 will buy you seven ballpoint pens or four rollerball pens or three executive gel pens or six ball pens or six handwriting pens or ten gel pens or sixteen retractable pens or two never-get-lost pens (belt clips attached). What, you might ask, is the substantive difference between a rollerball pen and a ball pen, or a gel pen and an executive gel pen? Is an executive



gel pen so fine, so executive, that it is a good thing, a recommendation, that you only get three compared to ten (nonexecutive) gel pens? Or is the executiveness of the executive gel pen overblown? What, in fact, is the divergent feature of an executive gel pen? (Also, what is a handwriting pen?)

Poundland does not answer these questions. Poundland only feeds the mystery, which feels somehow right on Seven Sisters Road, named after a circle of seven elm trees which you can no longer see. There is something miraculous about the place, but also potentially disappointing. Nowhere else in the world does the possibility of 'false economy' hang so heavily in the air.

Not long ago, a pound-shop manager said he wished, at times, that they 'could charge £1.05 or £1.10.' Even McCarthy admitted that he had considered expanding his pricing repertoire. But he quickly backtracked: 'I would lose the magic if I changed the policy.' Poundland, this is how you stole my heart. What other shop has a mission, a creed, a statement of intent so clear that the slightest deviation would render its raison d'être, its vision, its very name, devoid of meaning? The boss is right: there is magic at work. In Poundland, you know exactly what you're going to get – things for a pound – but there are tantalizing unknowns: how many things? Forget pens. Thirty-five HB pencils, with erasers: £1. Thirty-five! Wow! Wow!

FROM
Five Dials
No. 20

Best New York City Poem

WINNER
Melissa Broder

African Priestess, Columbus Circle

She said: Do you believe in anything?
I said: I weigh my food.
I said: I cried for an hors d'hoeuvre.
I said: I gave away Gramma's pizzelles

to a crackhead at Penn Station.
She said: There's no crackheads at Penn Station.
I said: They were made with eggs.
I said: I hoped the eggs would cure him.

She said: You're killing the wrong person.
I said: His eyes were like cherry clafoutis.
She said: I don't care how you slice a cake.
She said: It's still a cake.

I said: Flourless flour noted.
She said: You violate the goddess.
I said: Butterless butter noted.
She said: Your ass is grass.

I said: Creamless creamer noted.
I said: Sugarless sugar noted.
I said: Maybe I'm lonely.
She said: Bingo baby!

FROM
Five Dials No. 11

[Things I may no longer bring on airplanes:]

Things I may no longer bring on airplanes:
1. Box cutters
2. Airplanes

All that is sullied melts into flesh.
Hebrew, the original HTML.
How will I open my box on the airplane??

I saw a bat another bat
& two batlike swifts
that might've been bats.

FROM
Five Dials
No. 18B

Best List
(in the Form of a Poem)

WINNER
Michael Robbins

Best Argument for the Necessity of Cheese

WINNER
John Banville

The 'B' Issue Q&A

5D I remember Murakami talking about the physical fortitude necessary to get a novel finished. Do you find that too?

John Banville You have to keep healthy. You have to keep in shape. I don't mean you have to work out, but it is physical, and it's physically wearing because of the extraordinary shifts in mood, in one's inner weather. You start off in the morning and your eyes are still half-closed, and around eleven-thirty you start thinking about lunch. Then lunch is a glass of water, a cracker and a piece of cheese. Then you really start working. By three in the afternoon it's hard work. By six, when you're absolutely exhausted, you have to come down from that. Well, come up from that depth of concentration you've got yourself into. And you have the first glass of wine, and your world begins to feel human again. Those shifts every day must be wearing on the system. So you have to protect against that, as best one can.

Best Use of the Word 'Moil'

WINNER
John K. Samson

FROM
Five Dials No. 24

The Festival Issue Q&A

FROM
Five Dials No. 13

5D What were the first poems to have an effect on you?

John K. Samson The Lutheran liturgy, if it qualifies, was likely the first big poem for me. I started hearing it from a very early age. It is sort of sung and spoken at the same time, clunky and awkward in parts, but beautiful, and the text often seems arbitrarily draped over simple melodies. For example, a line like 'we give him thanks,' is somehow stretched into seven syllables and, to my ear at least, sounds perfectly natural. Is this because maybe it is translated from German? Guess I should know more about it. Like many Canadians of his age, my d knew some sections of 'The Cremation of Sam cGee' by Robert Service by heart. I remember ving the word 'moil', getting really excited about The 'men who moil for gold.'

Best Way To Enjoy Wine

WINNER
Aliette Martin

An Appreciation of Sybille Bedford

Sybille Bedford kept 'wine books', listing the names of the dinner guests, the location – at home or at friends' houses – the menu and, opposite each course, the wine carefully chosen to accompany it. She adds comments on the wines, an anecdote about a guest, or describes the mood of the evening. Many wine labels, often inscribed at the back with the names of the guests, have been carefully put away in her wine files. A collector's mania? No, a passion, a conviction that knowing wine is an experience of a lifetime, an inexhaustible curiosity, with the constant hope of being happily surprised.

For Sybille Bedford, food and wine were a way of life, a philosophy, an art – which is why she was able to be so sure and incisive in her judgements. Browsing through her copy of Richard Olney's Simple French Food (1974), I discovered, opposite his recipe for Gratin Dauphinois and the instruction 'put the peeled cloves through a garlic press' – these last words fiercely underlined by Sybille with the green pen she used to mark her books – a peremptory inscription in the margin, in capital letters and doubly underlined: 'NO!' She had firm cooking principles. Never press garlic, always finely chop the cloves.

FROM
Five Dials No. 18

Best Set of Instructions

WINNER

Jonas Hassen Khemiri

An Attempt at Nuclear Physics

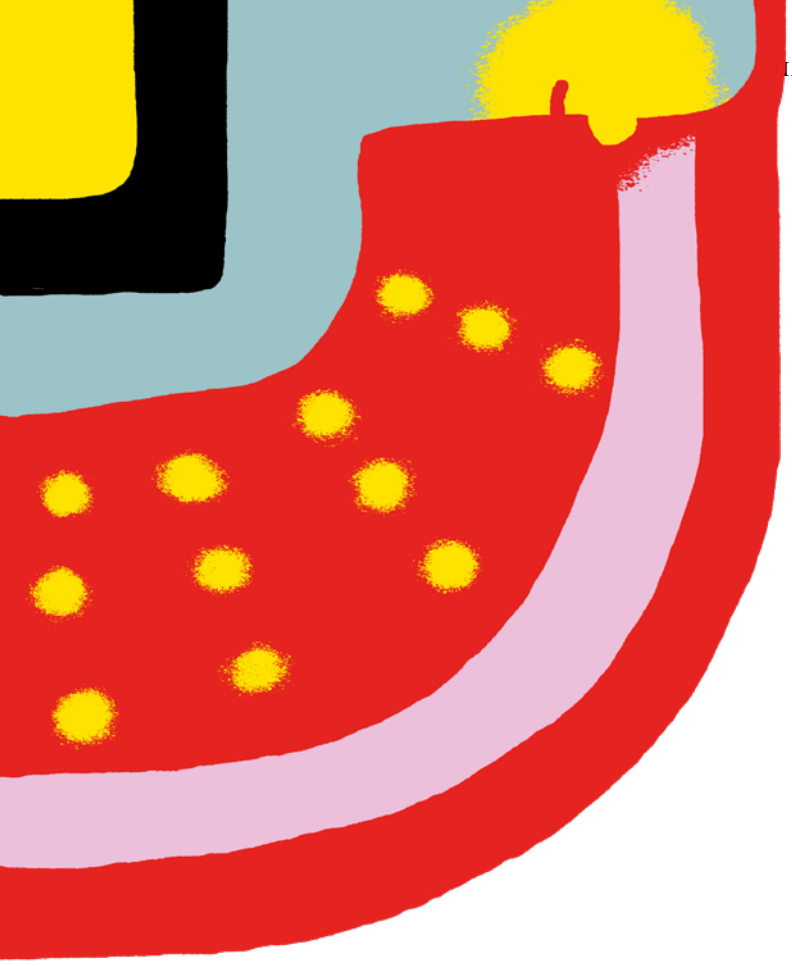
Welcome to the world! Take a deep breath, cry your first cry and open your eyes. Well done. Now you're ready to be fed, burped and taken care of. Take your first steps, say your first words, start school, become a teenager. Don't think there's anything wrong with you just because you lose control over your body or want to scratch your skin off or associate everything you see with sex. It's perfectly normal. Everyone is like that at your age. But soon you'll be an adult and start to forget. Soon you'll grow into your body, forgive your parents and start liking things like pickled herring, olives, German dramas, and a little piece of dark chocolate after dinner. Your feelings won't chafe as much as they do now. You won't feel compelled to go out into the rainy night air with the volume of your earphones so high that you barely feel the cold.

After some time as an adult, you'll meet someone. You'll exhibit all the symptoms of being in love. You'll place your tongue in the person's mouth and move it around in circles. You'll start to use baby-talk and invent corny nicknames. You'll go to couples' dinner parties and discuss things like travel plans, the weather, jobs and the stock market. Soon you'll be ready to do what I failed at: starting a family. And so that you don't repeat my mistakes I ask that you read on.

If you ever happen to be sitting on a bus and you hear two senior citizens talking about a friend who has died, DO NOT listen to them. Switch seats. Get off the bus. Break a window and jump out into the snow if you have to. If you still end up sitting there, then don't think about how one of the senior citizens sighs deeply and trembles her bird-like fingers and suddenly exclaims, 'Poor Signe. It was her heart, her heart failed her.'

Keep living your normal, routine life. Keep going to dinner parties and planning all-inclusive vacations. Keep taking your lunchbox to work and using expressions like 'tomorrow is another day'. Don't ask tough questions. Don't go home and pile up facts about all the functions of the heart. Forget immediately that a normal heart only manages to beat two point five billion times before it gives up. Don't let yourself be affected by the

FROM
Five Dials
No. 21



morbid thought that we all have a heart that will one day stop beating. Don't think about how this insight feels like an avalanche. Think of something else instead. Focus on your career. Smile at family dinners. Propose toasts at midnight on New Year's Eve. Laugh when everyone is listening. Cry when no one is looking. Don't do what I did. Don't lie awake at night with your hand on your chest. Don't listen when your heart starts to whisper.

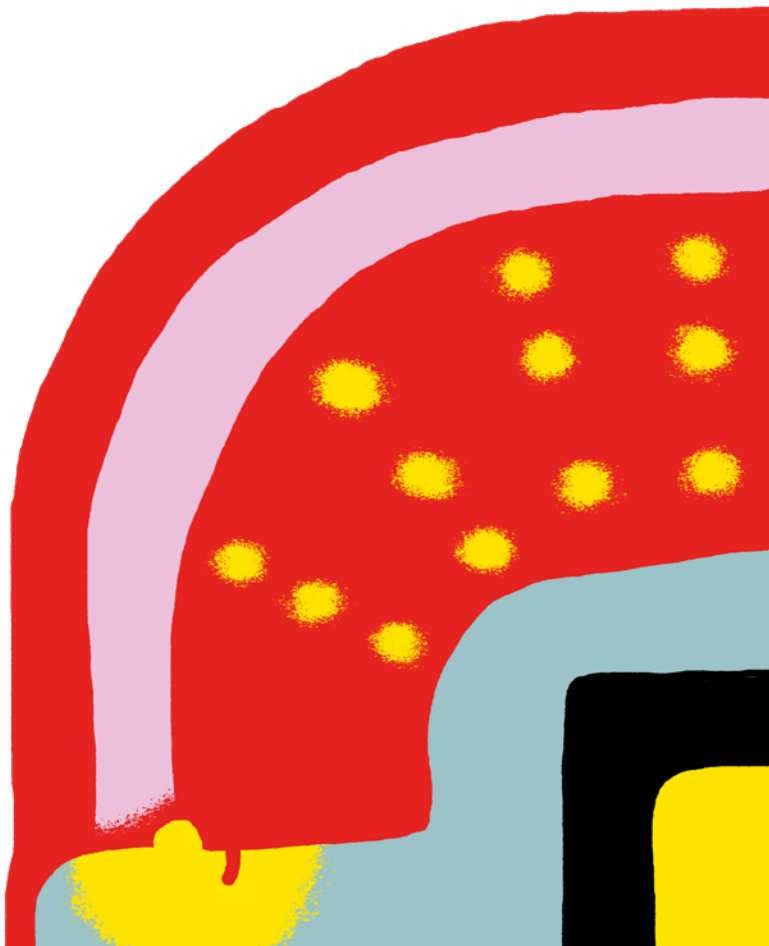
It will be easiest to hear at night. Your heart will start to wake you up when you're lying in bed next to your partner and at first you'll think that it's a burglar sneaking around in the dark, but soon you'll realize that the voice is coming from your own chest. Your heart will whisper that your partner has become boring and lets out little farts at night and has a fake laugh and stale morning breath. You don't laugh like you used to. Your conversations have become predictable.

Your heart will continue, night after night, until you give in. One morning you'll wake your partner up and hear yourself say all the phrases your heart has taught you: 'Honey. We have to talk. This isn't working any more. My love has disappeared. It's not you, it's me. I have to follow my heart.'

Later that day you'll move out of what, until now, was your home together, and when you're standing there on the street with a rolling suitcase in your right hand and a paper bag of geraniums in your left, your heart pounds triple beats and dances the cancan and yodels with the joy of freedom. You can finally do everything you've waited to do for so long. Your heart has you hostage. Your heart will force you further, from bar to bar, from city to city, from bed to bed, always on the hunt for that real, true, 100 per cent. It will take many late nights, many drained glasses, many rolled-up bills on dirty mirrors, many panics at dawn, many disappointments.

But then one day, of course, you'll catch sight of the person you've been waiting for. The person who can be a she or a he or an in-between, just like you. And your heart will force you to go right up and introduce yourself and soon you're sitting there next to each other on a park bench and soon your topics of conversation are linked like a zipper and soon you're convinced: this is the person you'll be with the rest of your life. On the way home you kiss each other in a starkly glaring underpass and when you walk home alone you're not alone. For the first time in your life you leave second-person singular and become first-person plural. For the first time in your life you feel whole.

This is love at its strongest. These are kisses that combine the feeling of jetpacks, roller coasters and electric shocks. The two of you will never get stuck in embarrassing silences. You will never get enough of each other's salty upper lips. You will never stop

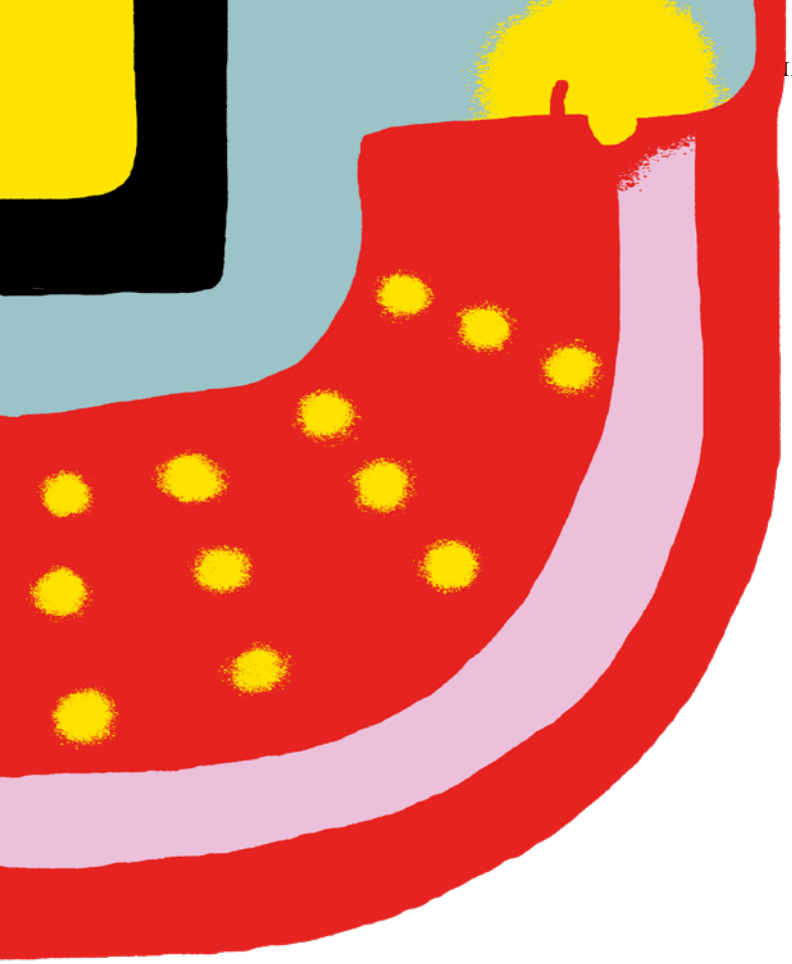


laughing at that joke from that awful nineties comedy you see on the first night you're going to sleep together. Chevy Chase plays the perfect family father who's going to celebrate Christmas with his perfect nuclear family and he's just gotten a gigantic Christmas tree that's way too big for the house and the rich neighbour says scornfully, 'Hey man, where do you think you're gonna put a tree that big?' And Chevy Chase just smiles back and answers, 'Bend over and I'll show you.' And even though it's a dumb joke you can't stop giggling and that whole first night you say it to each other over and over again. Darling, where's the remote control? Bend over and I'll show you. Darling, how was the dessert? Bend over and I'll show you. Darling, where should I put my toothbrush? Bend over and I'll show you.

That joke will accompany everything you do in the coming days. You sneak into an exhibit opening where they serve free wine and you hear a visitor comment on the gigantic sculptures with the words: 'I mean, I don't get why people think big things are so extremely entertaining.' And you look at each other and mime, 'Bend over and I'll ...' You see a TV interview with a celebrity mom who's being asked about the delivery of her baby and the idiot reporter asks again and again, 'But exactly HOW MUCH did it hurt?' And you look at each other and think, 'Bend over and ...' You're sitting at that Chinese restaurant and holding hands under the table and stroking each other's thighs when no one's looking and the kid at the next table asks, 'Mom, how do you make a banana split? And you don't even need to look at each other, you two are so much the same person with the same train of thought that you collapse into the same laughing heap. All while your heart is rejoicing and shooting fireworks.

A few weeks later you're living together. A few months later you're planning your first vacation. You're finally 100 per cent happy. So happy that you're ready to ruin everything. One evening you tell the love of your life about your encounter with those senior citizens on that bus, or maybe it was a train, what feels like a hundred years ago. You describe how you became fascinated with the heart and how the average heart only manages two point five million, or was it billion, beats? And you say, 'It's thanks to listening to my heart that I'm sitting here.' You smile at each other. A week or so later you wake up in the middle of the night. You hear whispers. But they're not coming from your chest.

The next morning you're woken up by the love of your life, who says, 'Honey. We have to talk.' The love of your life maintains that you have drifted apart and that you don't laugh like you did before and that those feelings have disappeared, and the

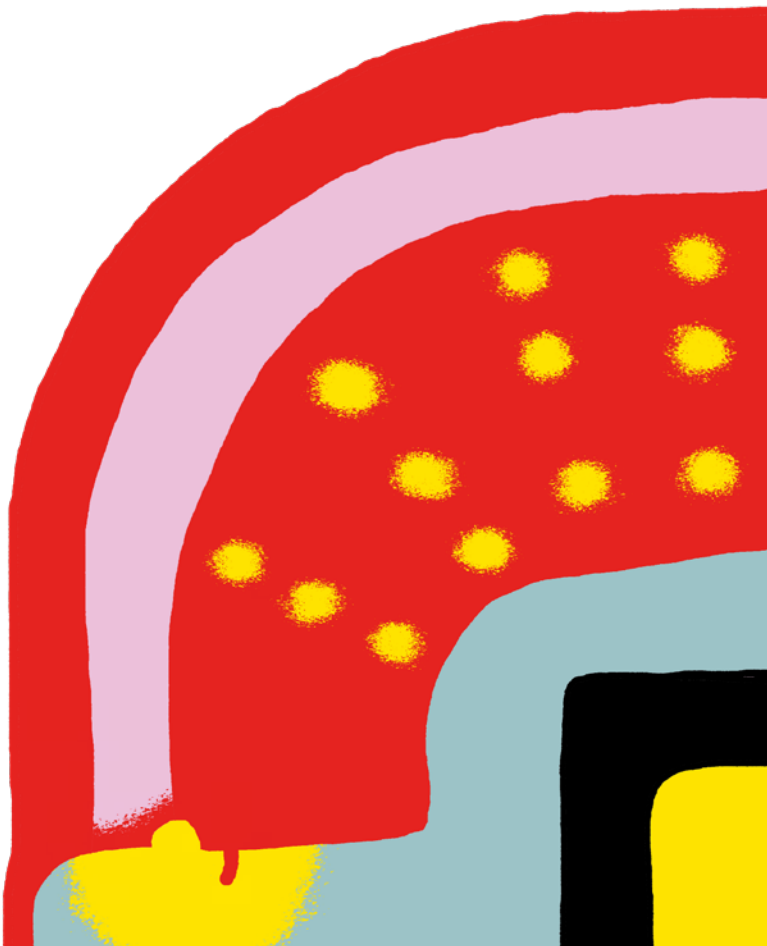


only thing you can answer is, 'Bend over and I'll show you.' But your voice is full of tears and neither of you laughs. Your heart loses its balance and falls headlong down into the pit of your stomach.

You'll try to fix your broken heart at the local bar. You'll sit there in the corner behind the gambling machine and try to convince your heart that there is hope, you just have to keep looking and not give up. But your heart is worn out. It doesn't have the strength any more. It's seen everything and wants to retire. You're the one who will have to take over. You're the one who will have to persuade yourself to get drunk and try to hit on everyone who looks remotely like your former love. You're the one who will soon be notorious for being the Chevy Chase-freak at the neighbourhood bar because everyone you succeed in persuading via money or liquor to go home with you has to kiss you in a particular pee-smelling underpass and then watch the classic nineties comedy and laugh in the right way at the right joke. Your chest yawns and sighs while you drink yourself blind and sit in the back of night buses and roar, 'It was my heart, my heart failed me.'

Then one sunny day you'll wake up and decide that you've had enough. You refuse to end your days as you began them; you refuse to return to being fed, burped and taken care of. You refuse to waste away. Instead you'll sit down and write a will that warns young people against repeating your mistakes. Then you'll do what I'm about to do in a minute. You'll suck air into your lungs, you'll tighten your stomach muscles until sweat breaks out on your forehead, you'll hold your breath until everything goes black. You'll explode your egocentric heart. Your lungs will fill with blood and the whispers will fade away and through your tear-quivering eyelashes you'll see the horizon swing sideways and then disappear upwards. Deep inside you'll know that you're finally free. Well done, you'll think. You're ready now.

Translated from Swedish by Rachel Willson-Broyles



Best List of Unused Book Titles

WINNER
Various Contributors

The Needle and the Damage Done

A few months ago, author Jenny Lord finished her book on knitting, a complete how-to that includes original patterns, advice on sourcing the best yarn and plenty of practical tips. Finally, she had to decide on a suitable title. She asked other writers for suggestions. Below are the responses. None was used.

Paradise Knitty
Tough Knit!
I Just Knit Myself
Tender is the Knit
Knit or Die!
I've Got Knits
Knit on Your Life
Knit Without My Daughter
Knit Gonna Happen
Knits Landing
Hunger by Knit Hamsun
Knits and Berries
Hot Knits
Knitty Knitty Bang Bang
Holy Fucking Knit!
Who Gives a Knit?
Around the World in Knitty Days
Knit Rider
I Just Knit My Pants
Knit, Knit, Knitting on Heaven's Door
The Whole Nine Yarns
The Needle and the Damage Done
Working on the Knit Moves
In the Heat of the Knit
The Yarn and the Restless
If You Got Knit, Flaunt Knit
To Infiknity and Beyond
Champing at the Knit
The Knit and the Pendulum
Lickety Knit
Superneedles!
Knit Happens
Come and Get Knit ...
Bring Knit On!
Thass da shizKNIT
InKnit
InKnit Tho
Knit Tings
Knitcracker
Get Your Knits out for the Lads
Moonknit Sonata
The Knitty Professor
This is Doing My Knit in

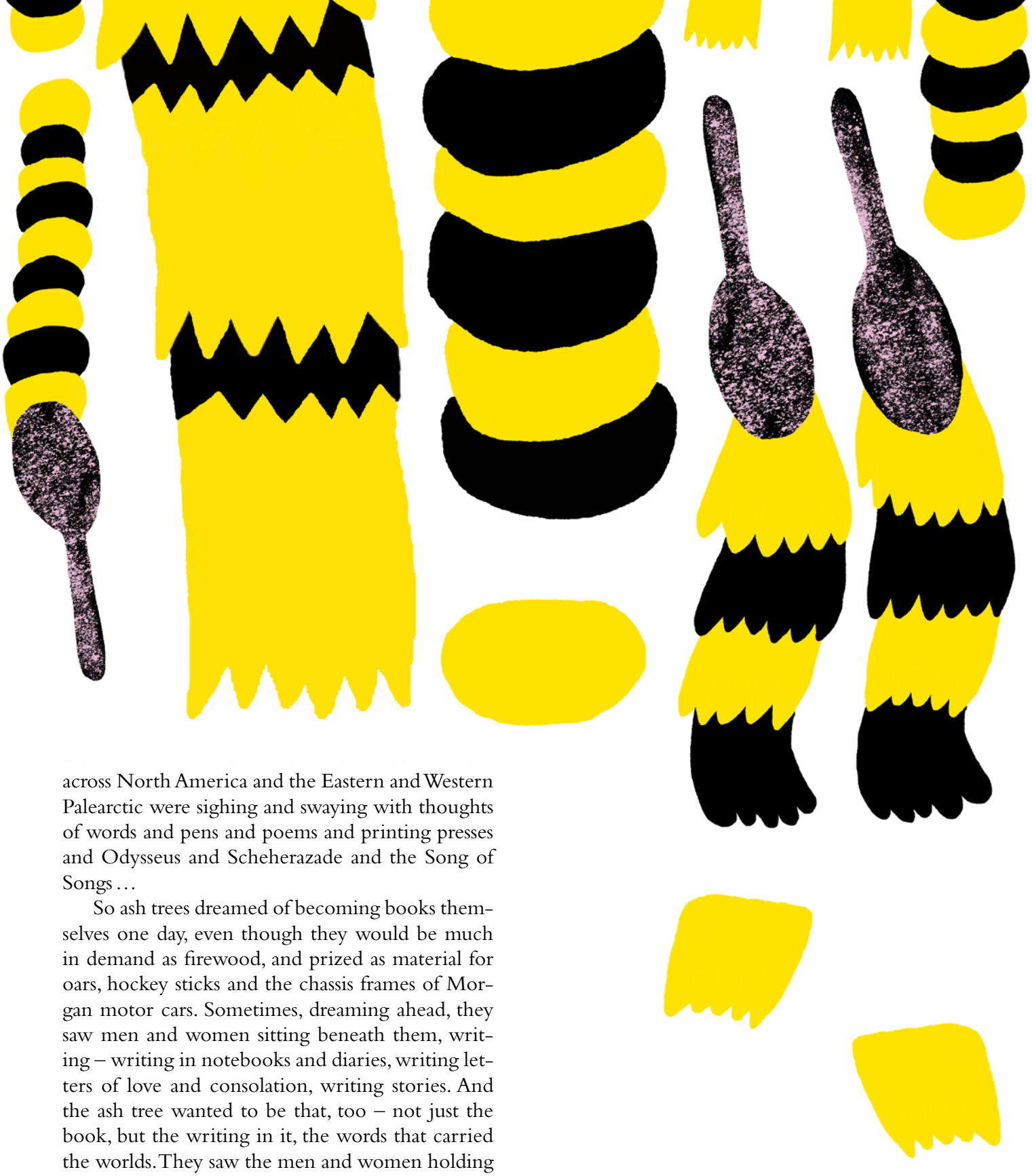
Why the Ash Has Black Buds

The trees have always had some idea of what happens to them when they die. In forests they saw their neighbours toppled by wind or age and rot into earth, and their roots sent up descriptions of peat and coal in vast beds and seams. Later, when humans came along, trees saw the stockades, the carts pulled by horses, the chairs and tables set out in gardens, and quickly put two and two together. Trees growing beside rivers saw themselves in the hulls and masts of boats, and trees in orchards understood that the ladders propped against them had once been trees, and when men approached with axes to fell them, the trees recognized the handles.

Trees often wondered what their particular fate might be. Would they subside into the long sleep of coal, or blaze for an hour in a cottage grate, or find themselves reconfigured as handle, hurdle, post, shaft, stake, joist, beam – or something more elaborate and rare: an abacus, a chess piece, a harpsichord? And out of these dreams a rumour moved among the trees of the world like a wind, not quite understood at first, it was so strange – a rumour that when they died, instead of being burned, planed, planked, shimmed, sharpened, many trees would be pulped. This was an entirely new idea to trees, whose self-image was all to do with trunk, sturdiness, backbone, form. But trees are good at getting the hang of things, and soon they understood that from pulp would come the white leaves humans called paper, and that these leaves would be bound into books, and after a short season of anxiety in which conifers shed uncharacteristic quantities of needles, the trees came to terms with this new possibility in the range of their afterlives.

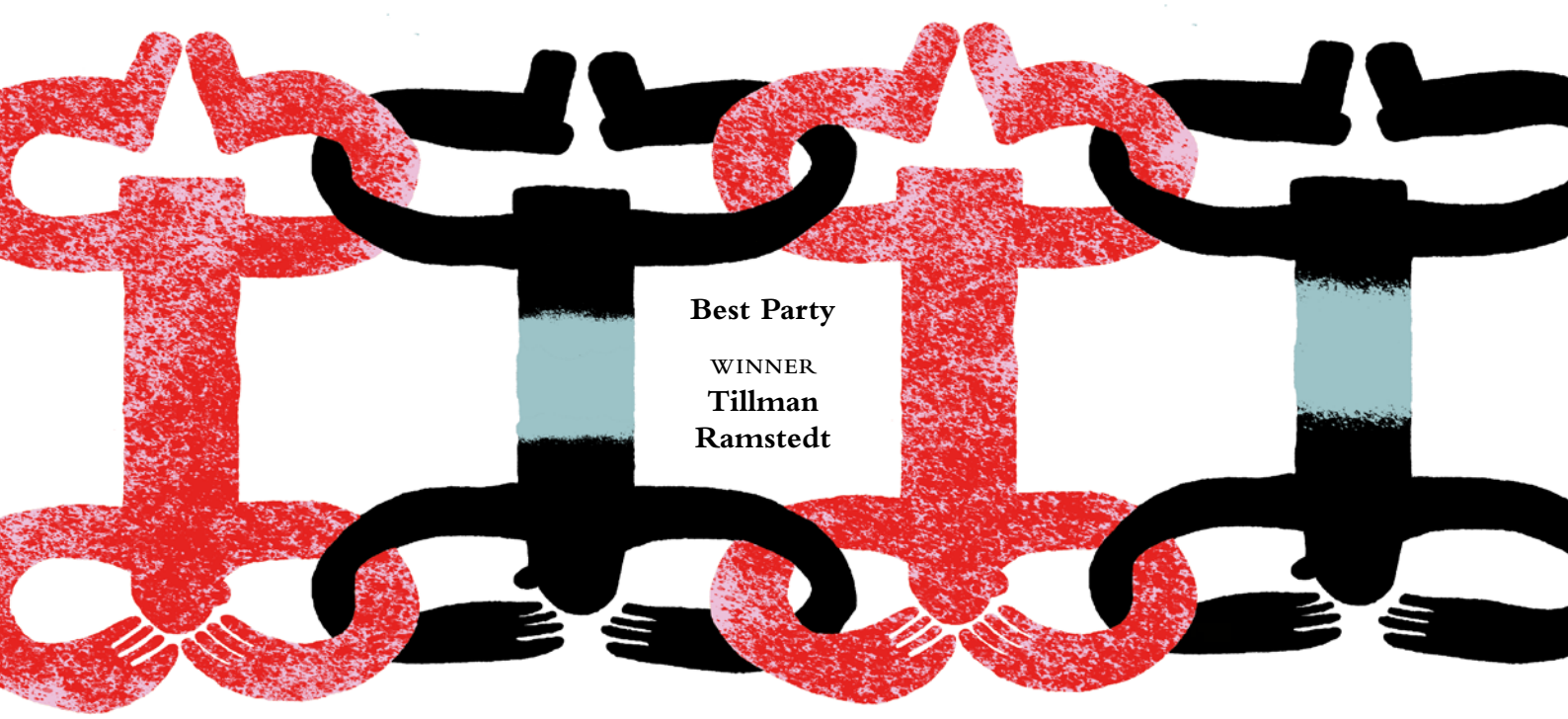
Yes, the trees recognized themselves in paper, in books, just as they recognized themselves in all the other things that hadn't been thought of quite yet, like bedsteads and bagpipes and bonfires, not to mention violins, cricket bats, toothpicks, clothes pegs, chopsticks and misericords. Men and women would sit in the shade of trees, reading books, and the trees, dreaming of all that was to come, saw that they were the books as well as the chairs the men and women sat in, and the combs in the women's hair, and the shiny handles of the muskets, and the hoops the children chased across the lawns. The trees took pride in the idea of being a book: they thought a book was a noble thing to become, if you had to become anything – a terrible bore to be a rafter, after all, and a wheel would mean such a battering, though of course the travel was a bonus, and what tree in its right mind would wish to be rack, coffin, crucifix, gallows …

One tree was more excited than all the rest, and that was the ash. The ash has such an inviting, feathery shade: when men and women first had books to take into the shade of trees, they often chose the shade of an ash. The ash would look down at these people reading and see that they were discovering new regions inside themselves, and notice how when they stood up and left the jurisdiction of its branches they had changed as if buds inside them were coming into leaf, and the ash saw that this change was a property of the marks on the paper, and that paper was the only leaf with worlds in it. Soon ash trees were discussing this phenomenon all over the place, whispering about books in Manchuria and Poland and the Pennines, passing information from grove to grove, until ash trees



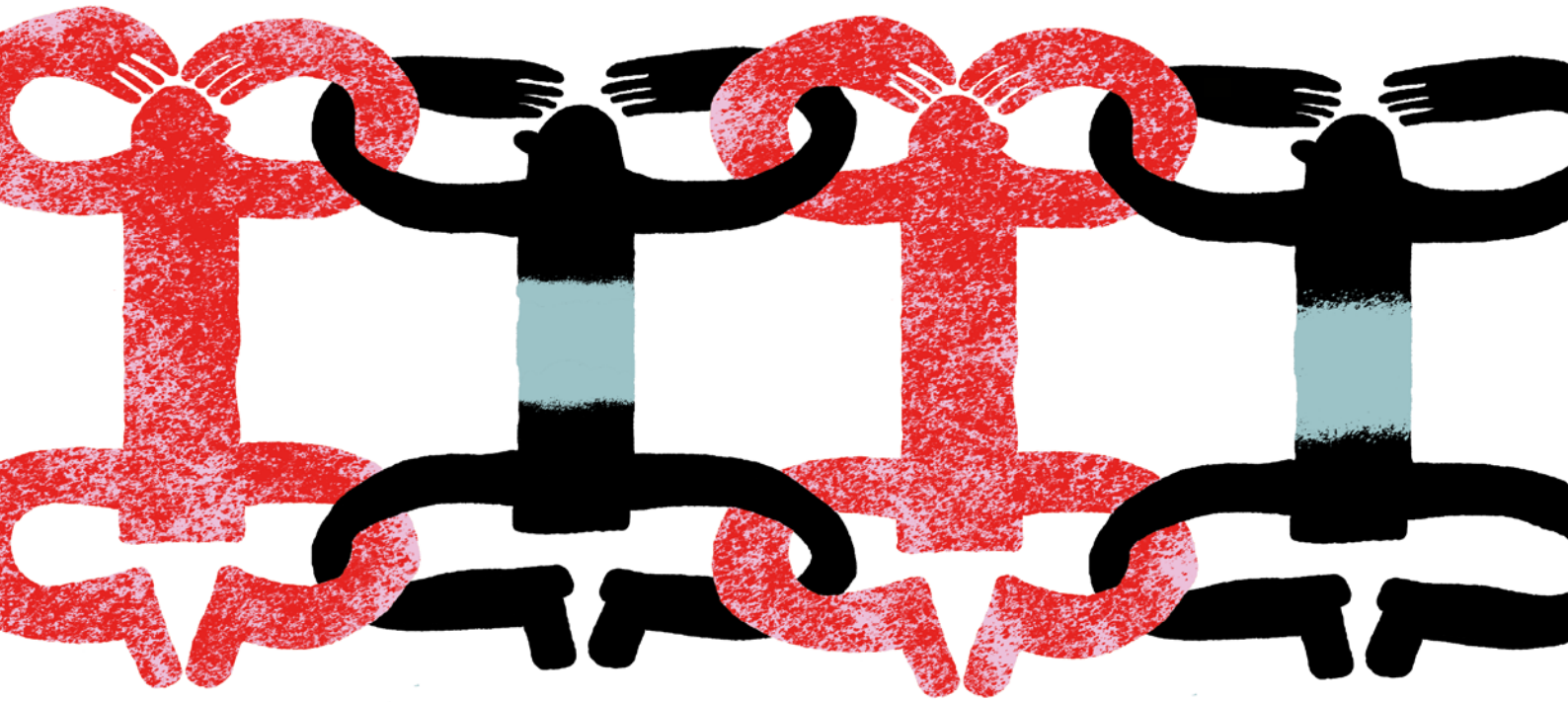
across North America and the Eastern and Western Palearctic were sighing and swaying with thoughts of words and pens and poems and printing presses and Odysseus and Scheherazade and the Song of Songs …

So ash trees dreamed of becoming books themselves one day, even though they would be much in demand as firewood, and prized as material for oars, hockey sticks and the chassis frames of Morgan motor cars. Sometimes, dreaming ahead, they saw men and women sitting beneath them, writing – writing in notebooks and diaries, writing letters of love and consolation, writing stories. And the ash tree wanted to be that, too – not just the book, but the writing in it, the words that carried the worlds. They saw the men and women holding their pens, and the ink that came out of them on to the paper, and although they didn't have hands, they tried to curl their branches into fingers that might hold pens, and they dreamed it so vividly that the tips of their fingers turned black with ink as they waved against the blank white page of the sky, trying to write on it. Look closely: the ash tree has black buds, and the branches bend upwards at their tips, towards the whiteness.



Invitation

The time has come at last. It's time to throw a party. It's time to celebrate. It's time to play the music. It's time to comb our hair. It's time for the guests to turn up. I declare this party open. It's high time to celebrate. We've got plenty of reasons. Bring outside clothes along. Bring swimming suits along. We'll drive you home afterwards, no need to worry. It's time to celebrate. Theme: roaring 20s. Theme: rocking 50s, theme: swinging 60s, theme: raging 80s, theme: outer space, theme: Mafia. All that counts is that you come along. Come with your most embarrassing piece of clothing, come with your first 7-inch single, come with your ex-boyfriend or -girlfriend. Come on, it's time to party. A beach party if you like, a foam party if you like, a school's-out party, a record-release party, a pyjama party, if you like, a reclaim-the-streets party, reclaim-your-feet party, a masked ball for all I care. It's really time to party. Tonight's New Year's Eve after all, tonight's Walpurgis night, tonight's St Nick's and Halloween and carnival and everybody's birthday. Garlands everywhere and lanterns everywhere and evening dress as well. It's time to throw a party. It's a glorious gala night. It's the night of all nights, it's prom night, it's the opera ball, it's a coming-out party, it's an awards ceremony. An orchestra to play the waltz, a band to play light jazz and swing, salmon sandwiches and champagne-glass pyramids, we've got it all, well-tailored cocktail dresses, well-tailored tuxedos, that parquet floor won't shine all night you know. We've got it all. Gala night, the night of all nights, a band to play the samba, we've got mojitos, we've got it all, we've got caipirinhas, and we've got sweat-drenched hair, sweat-drenched shoulders, we've got sweat dripping from the ceiling. It's gala night. Drum & Bass & Rhythm & Blues & French & House & Big & Beats & Break & Beats & Latindub & Datapop & Rare Grooves & Common Grooves & Charts & Hiphop & Mega-hits from three decades, at



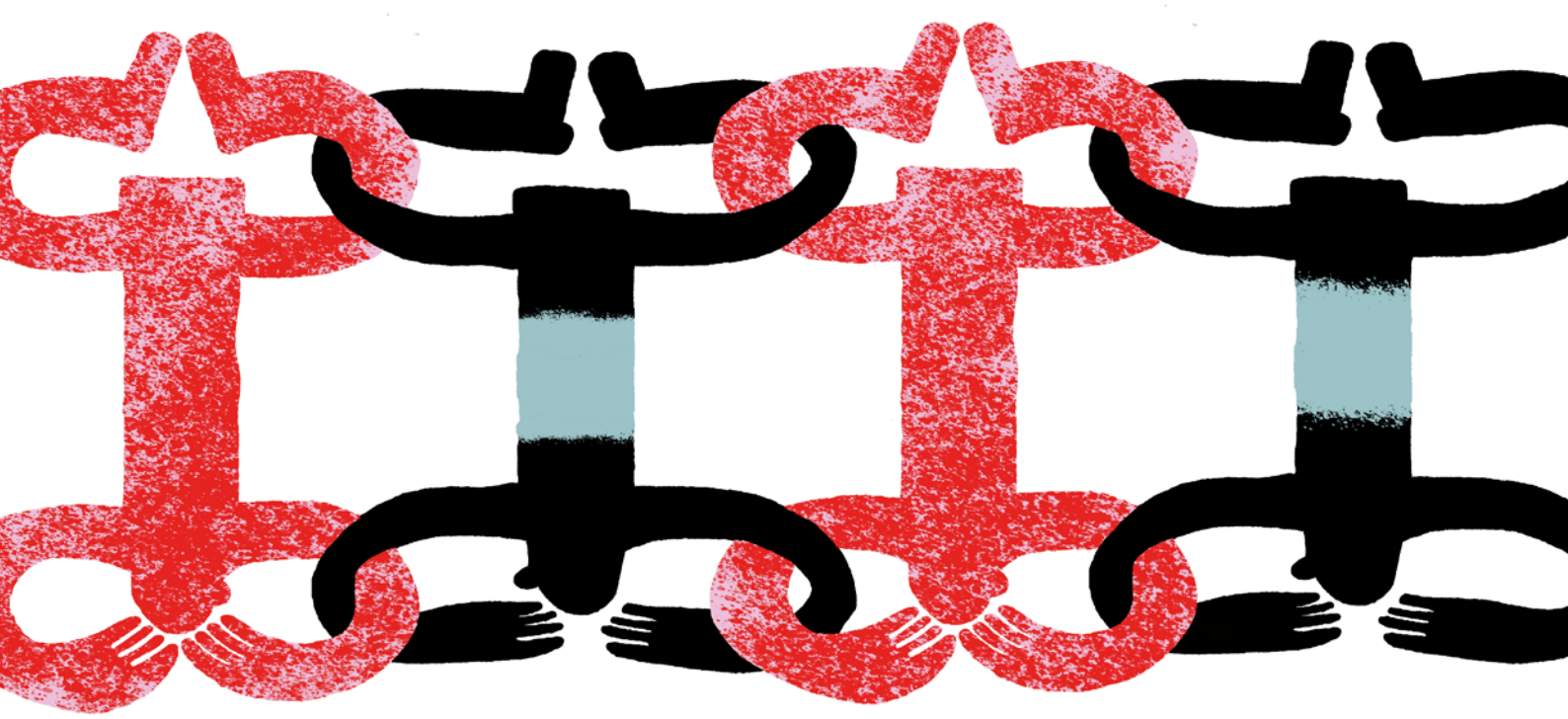
got, in the middle our bare midriffs and at the top not a word to be made out. We've got it all.

It's time to party. It's time to celebrate at last. We have to party in our flat, we have to party in the park, we have to party on the roof, on the beach, if we can, in the church hall, if we're allowed, in the summerhouse, if we want, and we certainly have to party up the hill and down the road. It's time to party in the basements, in the old officer's mess, it's time to party in the backyard, in the abandoned villa, it's high time to party in the garden, by the lake, in the empty outdoor pool, we have to party on the stage, we have to party in the stalls, in the crypt and in the forest too. It's high time now.

Bring a bottle, bring a friend, bring good vibes if you like, 'cause this is the school disco, 'cause this is the after-exam party, this is the topping-out ceremony, this is hen night and stag night and wedding night. It's bloody well time to party.

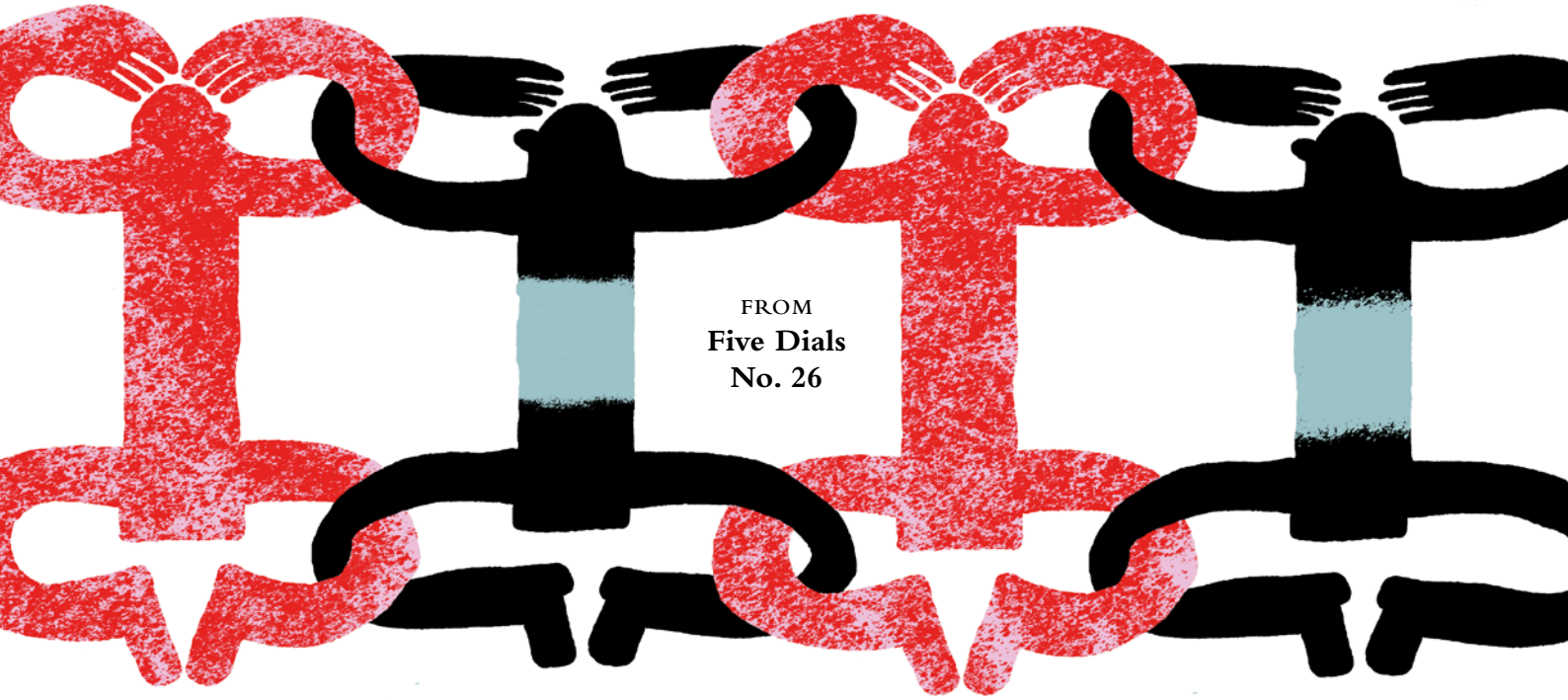
And yes, I want glossy invitations, and yes, I want precise directions, I definitely want to see the guest list, I want to order the taxis, I want to form car-sharing pools. I want to have tried on the shirts, the skirts, the dresses and the trousers, in front of the mirror, to loud music, I want my friends on my bed as judges, shaking their heads and shaking their heads and shaking their heads and covering their eyes, and then I want thumbs up, best of all both thumbs up, I want air guitars and deodorant microphones. I want gel in my hair, spray in my hair, glitter on my cheeks. I want lipstick, I want eyeliner, I want mascara. I want shaving foam.

And of course I want you all to come, I want everyone to be here already, I want to hear laughter from the stairwell, from the street, if possible, I want the hugs, I want the kisses just missing my cheek, I want to be introduced. I hardly need mention I want dancing. I hardly need mention I want singing along. With eyes closed, with



eyes open, with arms akimbo. I want snogging on the sofas, in the hall, in the kitchen. I want entangled bodies. I want to hear screams from the bathroom. And I want close dancing too. I want red wine stains on the floor, I want broken glass and paper cups and paper plates and plastic forks. I want pasta salad. I want tomato salad. I want potato salad. I want chilli con carne, chilli sin carne, I want pizza and quiche and fat sausages in a saucepan. I want beer in the bathtub, beer on the balcony. I want to see names written on CD covers in black marker pen. I want midi hifi systems, and I want a queue outside the bathroom. Stubbed-out fag ends – I want them on half-empty plates, in beer bottles, on saucers. I want to see notes for the neighbours in the hallway. It might get a bit noisy, they'll say. Come and join us, they'll say. I want it to get noisy. I want them to really come and join us. I want everyone to come.

'Cause now it's time to party, I tell Hannes. You mustn't leave the celebrating up to the wrong people, I tell Hannes. It's high time to party, 'cause nothing else is any use, 'cause we need to draw a line, a caesura, we need to take a break, forgive and forget, see what comes next, I tell Hannes, and Hannes nods and lights up a cigarette. And now it's high time to party, I tell him, 'cause otherwise it'll all fizzle out, I tell him, 'cause otherwise it'll all stay open-ended, 'cause we'll have to look up phone numbers, 'cause we'll go for coffee, 'cause we'll arrange to meet up Tuesday week for an afternoon, for an evening, 'cause we'll meet up for breakfast, for those long, hard breakfasts, 'cause we'll give back borrowed books, 'cause we'll leave our outdoor shoes on, 'cause we'll wonder if the trains are still running. It's time to party or else everything's adjourned, or else everything's decided, or else the ground is neutral, or else we're asking questions, or else we're giving answers, or else we'll say: It's been lovely to see you; we'll say: I've got to go now; we'll say: No, I can still get home; we'll say: Say hi to Andreas from me. It's high time to party 'cause



and Hannes nods and says: Right.

It's high time to celebrate, and everyone's invited, I explain to him, everyone we've ever met, yes, I know, we'll have to find out phone numbers, we'll need to check addresses, we'll end up asking friends of friends of friends, but they'll all be invited along too, the acquaintances, and the acquaintances of the acquaintances, and the acquaintances of the acquaintances of the acquaintances, and that's a great incentive, isn't it? And we'll invite everyone's brothers and sisters, and their parents, and their grandparents, and their grandparents' bridge partners and carers and doctors and nurses, and the boyfriends and girlfriends of the doctors and nurses can come along too if they like. And Hannes says: We should un-invite the boyfriends and girlfriends or else it'll get too crowded; and I insist on the boyfriends and girlfriends, and Hannes suggests renting a ship so no one can leave early, and we argue briefly over whether that's a deprivation of liberty but agree in the end that the ship has to dock every three hours to let people off. Hannes wants nametags; I say: Right. Hannes wants a tombola, and I say: Right. Hannes says: We can discuss the details later, let's just get started, and I say: What, right now? Hannes shrugs. He hasn't got anything else on right now; have I? And I say: No, not really.

Finding solutions isn't particularly difficult. There are plenty of solutions, perhaps there are even more solutions than problems, probably in fact. The only dumb thing is that solutions aren't much use. The dumb thing is that solutions just remind you of the problem. The dumb thing is that the real problem only starts with the solutions.

Hannes looks at me. What's the matter now, he asks. OK, I say. OK. Let's start with the invitations, let's start with the lists, let's start coming up with names. I get up to find something to write on. Have you got enough paper, asks Hannes. I think so, I say.

FROM
Five Dials No. 27

Best Poem Containing Reference to Harry Potter

WINNER
Sam Donsky

Harry Potter & the Deathly Hallows Part Two

& then! Darker still. The ending was a
boredom it would take years to discover.
Star Wars; You & Me by The Walkmen;
'I Will Always Love You' by Whitney
Houston: phenomena we could
explain away by 'basically, the
whole thing caught fire.' Pubescent
hurrah, law of excluded middle:
We're at the epilogue or we aren't.
Later the police cars filled with kid
stuff as we explained what went
wrong. Lack of signal. Bad grammar.
Cocaine. Snapped wand. (American
poetry: 'You get what you pay for'.)
'However ugly you grow,' Hermione
texts Ron, 'you will always be handsome
compared to literature.' It wasn't the
compliment we had in mind. Urban
spark, *Cométe Fatale*: What remained
was a magic from which it took spells
to recover. England qua England, qua
Elton, qua Bond, qua Beatles, qua
Shakespeare, qua Narnia's London:
the novel as no motion until we
were at absolute rest. 'However
beautiful you grow,' Ron texts
Hermione, 'you will always be ugly
compared to cinema.' It wasn't the
pickup line we had planned. Atlas
of lost endings, *Cométe Fatale*:
Whitney Houston: 'I will always
love you.' Dumbledore, epilogue:
'Basically, the whole thing caught
fire.' Sheer heat, sweetheart.
We sleep amid our foreheads
scarred from having to pretend.

Best Advice You'll Never Receive on a Creative Writing Course

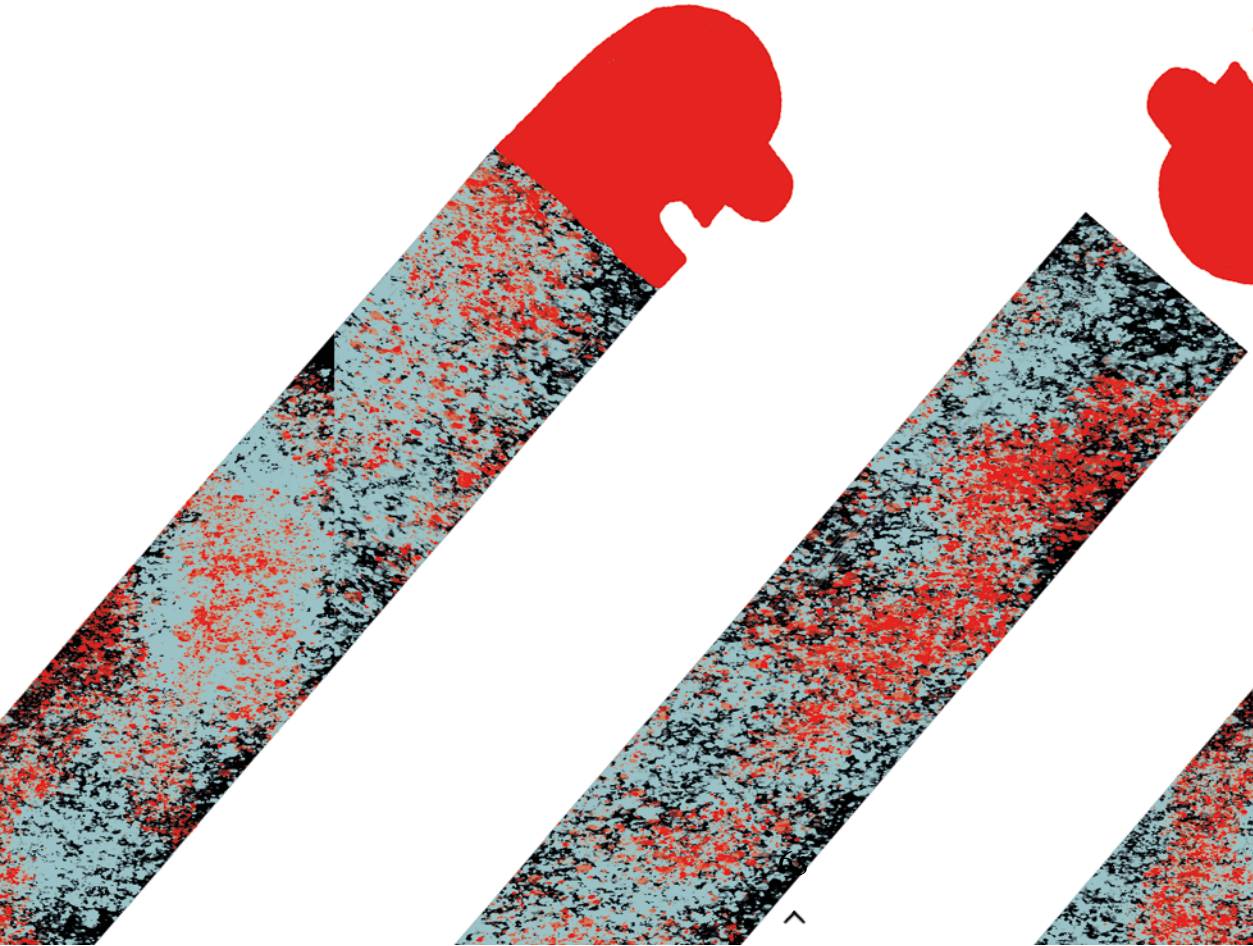
WINNER

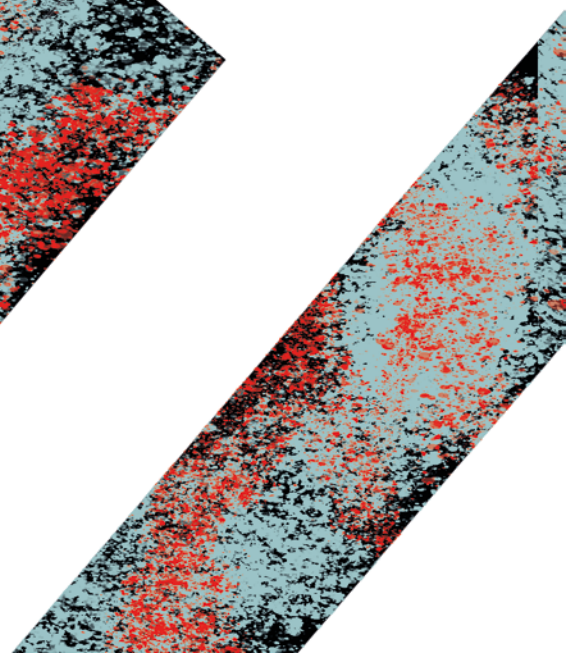
César Aira

1. 'Irony is a courtesy, a secondary effect of good manners. It involves distancing yourself, opening up a space for ideas or positions other than your own. I've never taken myself very seriously, which has given me permission not to take anything or anyone very seriously. Ultimately, irony toes the dangerous line of disdain. I guess it depends on the person using it. I think my irony is tinged with kindness, it's more humorous than acid, a smiling acceptance of the world just as it is.'

2. 'I use gaps in memory as a way to make jumps in time, give my stories a less linear rhythm, and create surprise. It's also a very plausible technique; it's quite realistic, because our lives are made up more by what we forget than what we remember. Generally speaking, I'd say I'm a fan of forgetting; it's liberating, and usually errs on the side of happiness, while memory is a burden. It's an ally of remorse, resentment, nostalgia, and other sad emotions.'

3. 'I don't like books that, like a prostitute, offer themselves to the reader.'





4. 'I follow my whims; I follow the spontaneous decisions made in the moment. For serious deliberation and sensible decision-making there's real life, where I conduct myself like the most proper middle-class family man. Writing is my freedom, where I receive orders from no one, not even from myself.'

5. 'If a little bird enters into the café where I'm writing – it did happen once – it also enters into what I'm writing. Even if a priori it doesn't relate to anything, a posteriori I make it relate ... In spite of all my admiration for Surrealism and Dadaism I never liked the mere accumulation of incongruous things. For me, everything has to be sewn together in a very conventional fashion. I always think of something. And what I think of also changes the course of the plot. Since the next day something different will happen at the café, the plot continues to change accordingly. more interesting to me, more writable, than a linear plot.'

Best Argument for Using Notebooks

WINNER
Richard Ford

Five Dials Do you use notebooks?

Richard Ford Absolutely.

5D What kind of system do you have?

RF My system is just that I write stuff down in here, and then I store these things away in the freezer in my house.

5D In the freezer?

RF I put things in the deep freeze. Then I eventually get them out. Maybe I'll have twenty of these things, thirty. I'll just sit down at the word processor and type out everything that I see in my notebooks I find still interesting, and at the end of that period I begin to see the possibilities for a book, a story or something. It is also a way of assuring myself that I'm writing about the most important things I know. Because what I put in here are things that I thought were interesting at a certain moment – maybe important, maybe not, but interesting. Then I have a chance to look at them all again and decide if they really are interesting and important. Sometimes they aren't, so I just ignore them. Throw them away. But it means my books are always about a whole bunch of things that I think are worth putting in a book. Sometimes it's words that I want to see, like 'Great Falls, Montana'. I see those words on the page, or 'independence'. I wanted to see that word on the page. Sometimes it's events I want to have happen. There's a passage in *Canada* in which Remlinger is driving Dell up to Leader, Saskatchewan. There's a bunch of pheasants out in the road. He just drives right through them, doesn't slow down, just keeps on and kills most of them. That's been in my notebook since 1983.

5D It's been in the freezer that long?

RF I've had it in there since 1983.

Best Poem About Cutting Down a Tree

WINNER
J.A. Baker

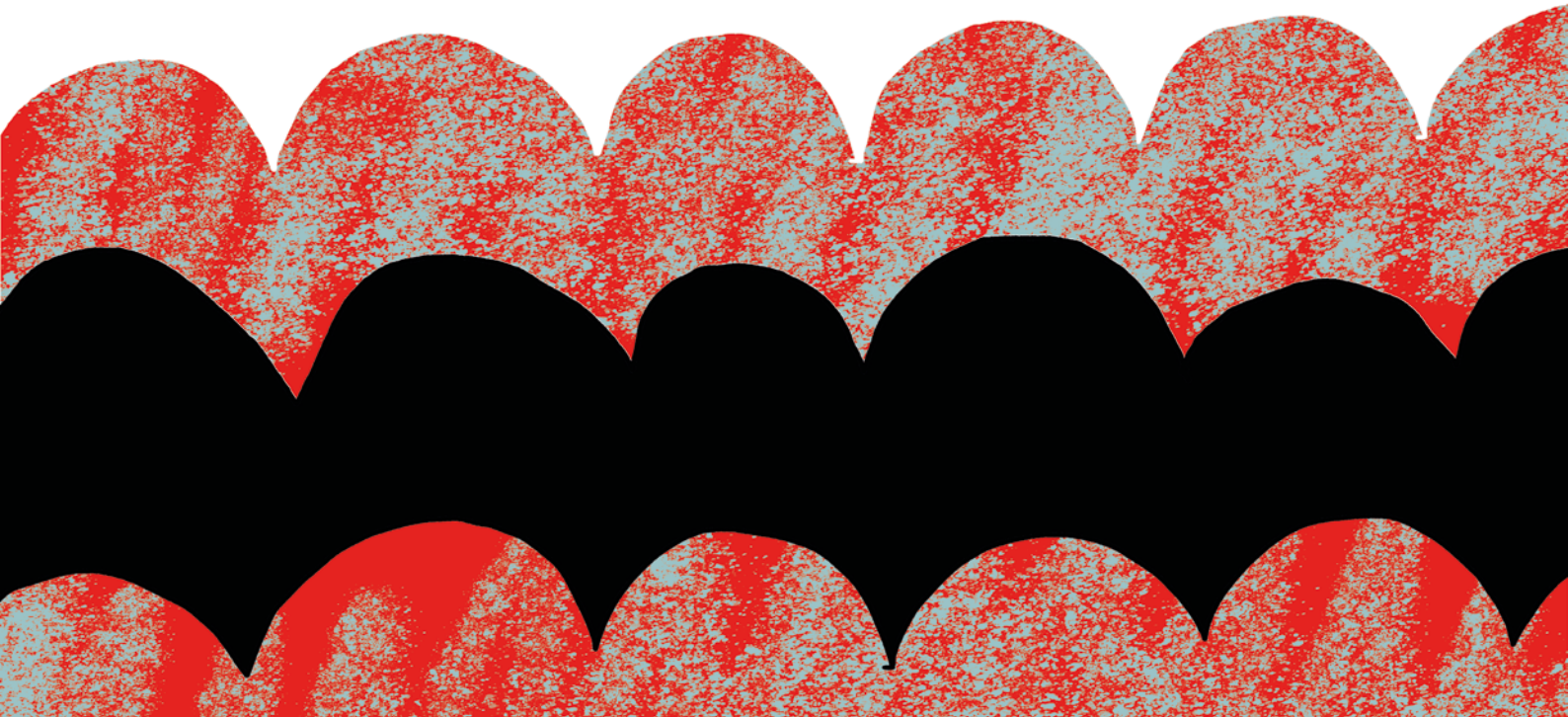
FROM
Five Dials No. 36

Death of the Birch-tree

Lean is the dull steel flashed white in the sun
Like a sudden lifting of the white-leaved abele,
Flushed from the raw thongs of the birch-tree
The white wood flies through the mists of morning.

The ringing singing of the axe-blade widens,
The keen cold frost edge flashing with dew,
The smell of the bruised sap darkens the air,
Raw and lithe is the air that shivers.

Sheer from the cruel north of my cleaving arms
Fierce falls the arctic fang of the axe-blade
And the light is shed from the heart of the birch-tree.



Best Answer to the Question: Must Poets Lead Lives Full of Poetic Experience?

WINNER
Jack Underwood

FROM
Five Dials No. 37

I Guess You Had to Be There

The danger with reading poems in relation to their authors' biographies is not so much that seeking an 'original' version of a poem goes against its very nature as a language construct, often built deliberately to resist such speculative manhandling, but because it implies rather lazily that the 'poetry of life' translates inherently into the 'poetry of poems', as if writing poems involves nothing more than putting line breaks into your diary. If poems were just poetic life experiences written down nicely, you'd find a lot more about Center Parcs, paintballing and roller coasters.

Biographical readings of poems are bad news because by fetishizing 'the life of the poet' they encourage those of us who write them to imagine that we are somehow beholden to poetic experiences that are of automatic or special interest to others – all we have to do is feel things, experience things, and be ready to write it down all poemy, and ZING! Poetry happens. Obviously this rather undersells the hard, objective work we do to make poems interesting for other people, and all that beautiful making things up and lying to people that poets do so well.

Poets generally know that more is required of them than Xeroxing their dream-journal, and yet the self-absorbed, anecdotal poem, relying solely on the emotional junk food of shared experience, and true-life-tragedy, is prevalent. Carby, salty dough balls of feeling to fill you up, these poems can quickly garner sympathetic connections, but equally quickly drain out your other ear, precisely because they fail to do little more than describe an emotional experience. However good the poet is at describing, unless the reader is an open valve of empathy and patience, they will always feel as if the poetic event or question – or as poetry scholars like to call it, 'the whole fucking point' – has already taken place elsewhere. No one wants to turn up to a poem only to find someone enthusiastically telling you, 'It was awesome – you should've been there!' Good poems, as far as I can tell, happen precisely because you are there, making them happen with your brain: 'This is amazing!'

I have nothing against life, as the great Anne Sexton wrote; indeed, I recognize that poetry mainly relies on life's troughs and wobbles, but writing a poem is an interrogatory act, rather than merely an expressive or anecdotal one, or in other words: your life might need to take place in order for you to write your poems, but your poems should never be merely a record of your life taking place. At some point poetry should seek to connect with the lives of others, and it's the manner with which you seek those connections, and the depth of them, that is where you should be putting your hours in.

My wariness of poignant experiences probably also arises out of my own failure to recapture

'a moment' in poem form – those life-affirming coincidences never came out as significantly on the page; or worse, I realized I'd part-way contrived them – but my favourite cautionary folk tale on the subject of poems is the one told to me by the poet Peter Scupham when I was just starting to write poems.

It's a muggy July evening, Old Hall, Burlingham, Norfolk. For two weeks the hot weather has been slowly bringing a storm to the boil. The world is in one of its moods and the wind fusses with the lawn furniture. Any moment now and everything will fall. Peter is reading in the kitchen, and Margaret, who's been watching things develop outside with concern and excitement, comes in

'Peter, the barn door is open. It's swinging about like mad. I'm worried it'll come off its hinges.'

Checking the sky before he goes, Peter treads quickly across the lawn to where the barn door is lurching and swinging like the end of a drunk argument. He catches and stops it with his wellington boot and slowly, against the resistance of the gale, brings the door back into place. He quickly pulls the catch across and winds the string around the metal housing for the missing bolt, until the door is fastened. There. Good. That should do it.

As he turns back towards the house, Peter's eyes are drawn, almost of their own accord, up to its roof: darkly silhouetted against the broody sky, Oberon, their pet peacock, has climbed to the very top of Old Hall, and is perched there like a church weathervane. The bird calls out. It sounds like the word 'pew', but stretched into a high-pitched, mewling cry: thin, pained and elemental.

As it calls, a bolt of lightning cracks down in the distance behind him. It is both a trickle and a flash, halving the sky above the house, bisecting Oberon's silhouette perfectly. There is a one-elephant-two-elephant pause and then the noise of thunder comes rushing across the miles of bald cornfield, reaching Peter, and at that moment the storm breaks. The rain arrives all at once.

In the time it takes to form a question, Peter is soaked. What just happened? There was the peacock in silhouette, its mournful call, the lightning, the thunder, and suddenly the rain … but he has to get under shelter quickly, so he jogs in his heavy wellies back to the house, and, closing the door behind him, his mind still blown, all he can think to himself is, 'I promise to never put that into a poem.'

So why did Peter make that promise? Because sometimes the experience itself is a poem, and the fact that experiences elapse then elude us, slide into memory, is part of what makes them poetic. If that sounds overly romantic then consider whether trying to recapture a lived experience might actually amount to a kind of writerly arrogance. The weather, the bird, the house, the whole complex and wonderful collaboration of elements, can only be mocked up using 'terminology', can only be condescended to, described. Letting an experience be bigger than your ability to comprehend it is part of recognizing what the sublime is.

If a poem should not seek to recount a poetic event, but be a poetic event of its own, then we have to do more than just describe. Description, I hereby declare a little too grandly, is the opposite of poetry. Description is when we try to indicate in language the material existence of something, so that a fish, say, is 'scaly', 'oily', 'smelly', 'wet', 'shiny', etc. All these descriptive words refer to the material reality of the fish: it has scales that secrete oil, an oil which reflects light, making the fish shiny, but also the oil makes the fish smell fishy, because it is a fish. All this adds up logically. Poetry, on the other hand, begins when you describe the fish in terms of things that do not refer to its material reality: the fish can also be 'mechanized', 'unpopular', 'deeply

religious', etc. When you assign qualities further away from the fish's material reality the reader has work to do; they must participate in overcoming the problem of that distance between the reality and the leap away. This is the logic of metaphor. This is not description.

To return to Peter's peacock on the roof, to merely relay the details in a poem would be to reduce them to a decorative anecdote. A poem needs to pose questions as much as it describes dramatic elements, then it creates a distance for the reader to travel across: the story becomes just the symbolic starting point for a wider engagement with what the symbols might mean. That's the hard part – working out what to do with the story, what it is 'about' (and I mean 'about' in the sense that it also means 'around', because the meaning of a poem isn't a fixed point, it oscillates). No matter how powerful or moving the experience, it might not mean anything beyond that. You have to make it meaningful for somebody who isn't you.

I called Peter and Margaret the other day to ask them about the story. Predictably, I'd got it all wrong. Well, most of it. Here's their version:

'It was a bitter January night, some twelve years ago, when we drove back to our lonely tumbledown Elizabethan house. We always tried to imagine ourselves driving back and seeing it for the first time, thinking "Do we really live here ?" so as not to lose our sense of its strangeness and unlikeliness. We did, at that time, keep two peacocks, Oberon and Titania. That night the stars were brilliant, and as we drove up we saw Oberon, perched on the chimney of the Granary, carved out of starlight and moonlight. He was quite motionless, and his long train – sometimes loosely referred to as his tail – was spangled and glittering with frost. The whole scene seemed to have been given to us as if we had become participants in a Russian/Indian fairy tale . . .'

No lightning bolt, no storm, no peacock calling out, no swinging gate.

Sometime over the last decade I've made all these things up. There's not even any mention of a promise not to write a poem (though it's possible there was one) and I've rather cruelly written Margaret out of most of my version. In retrospect I think I borrowed the swinging barn door in the storm from another time at Old Hall a couple of years later. I've made up the story of Peter's experience out of an assemblage of my own memories and experiences. But what does this mean for my argument against the anecdote? Especially now we've found out it wasn't an anecdote to begin with!

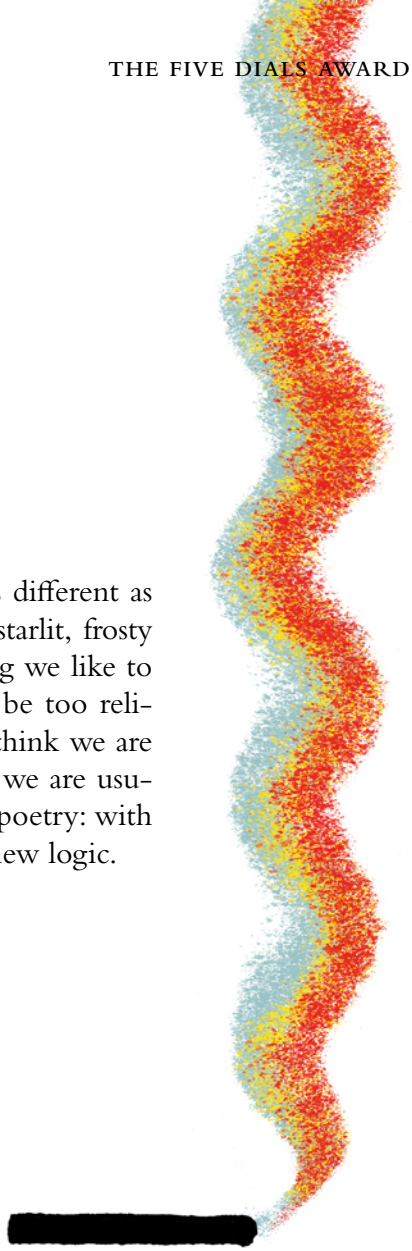
I suppose I've taken Peter and Margaret's real experience and leaned it against another idea about writing. I've used their version as a symbolic starting point and flooded all its rooms with my own ideas and experiences. But I think the moral of my version is still partly hiding in Peter and Margaret's account:

'We always tried to imagine ourselves driving back and seeing it for the first time, thinking "Do we really live here?" so as not to lose our sense of its strangeness and unlikeliness.'

I love this idea: in order to understand their life at Old Hall they have to imagine they don't live there! They have to make a leap away – it's just like with the fish. The moral is the same as before, but inverted: you have to imagine yourself apart from your reality in order to not lose sense of your reality's strangeness.

Perhaps this is all self-evident and there's no essay to be had, but the foggy nature of memory, the weird mediation we enact when we apprehend reality, and the fact that that reality changes even as we apprehend it, all points to the idea that you should not trust the seeming proximity between the nature of a poetic experience and the supposed 'rendering' of one in a poem. Experiences

and poems written about them are as different as a thunderstorm in July and a clear, starlit, frosty night. We are free to draw on anything we like to make our poems, but we should not be too reliant on our material. Often when we think we are being faithful to the poetry of reality, we are usually being unfaithful to the reality of poetry: with its strangeness, its unlikeliness and its new logic.



Best Description of a Literary Breakfast

WINNER
Emily Berry

A Clear Mirror to the Rays of Things

This means that when breakfast does make an appearance in literature, it's usually out of the ordinary, a breakfast of note. It might be absurdly excessive, like the bananafest in Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, which includes 'banana omelets, banana sandwiches, banana casseroles, mashed bananas molded into the shape of a British lion rampant', not to mention 'tall cruets of pale banana syrup' and 'a giant glazed crock where diced bananas have been fermenting since the summer with wild honey and muscat raisin', or piously austere, as in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, where the little women in question donate their festive breakfast to a family of poor Germans: 'That was a very happy breakfast, though they didn't get any of it; and when they went away, leaving comfort behind, I think there were not in the city four merrier people than the hungry little girls who gave away their breakfasts, and contented themselves with bread and milk on Christmas morning.' It might be comic, tragic, sublime or (like many poet's breakfasts) contemplative. As the Canadian poet Gwendolyn MacEwen observed: 'we are dangerous at breakfast, at breakfast we / investigate the reasons for our myths / viciously'. If breakfast is, as Hunter S. Thompson called it, a 'psychic anchor', then the job of literary breakfasts is to unmoor us from the routines we move through daily, unseeing, and look at the world afresh.

Best Explanation of Why the Islamic State is Bad at Governance

WINNER
Jason Burke

New Threats, Old Threats, Non-threats, ISIS

Five Dials Why is it so hard for extremists to govern? Are they bad at the boring bits?

Jason Burke It's hard for anyone to govern, especially if you simply don't have the people with the experience and skills necessary to organize, say, rubbish collection, but particularly so if there is a series of fundamental conflicts between various elements of your overall project. The Islamic militants follow an agenda which has a global, expansionist drive at its heart, but which is supposed to convince people who are usually much more interested in local issues. All politics is local, and almost all conflict is too. So the aggregated vision of a global war between belief and unbelief, Islam and the West, etc., etc., isn't a great deal of use when trying to explain why sewers don't work in Abyan province or Falluja.

FROM
Five Dials No. 38

Best Dutch Drinking Game

WINNER
Lucas Ellerbroek

Guess the Beetle ('Raad de Kever')

A classic Dutch drinking game.

The players stand in a circle facing each other.

One of the players, the Kevergever (Dutch for 'beetlegiver'), walks outside of the circle with the other players chanting 'beetle, beetle, beetle'.

Unseen, he gives one of the players the beetle. When the Kevergever rejoins the circle, the players chant 'one, two, three' and one more thunderous 'BEETLE!' after which each player points to the person they think holds the beetle.

The person to whom most fingers point, has to down his or her drink, regardless of who has the beetle.

The other players also down their drinks.

Best Reminder of Our Own Humanity

WINNER
Mohsin Hamid

The *Exit West* Q&A

Five Dials In the novel you mention everyone migrates, even if we stay in the same houses our whole lives. We're migrants through time.

Mohsin Hamid We have become, in this moment, so terrified of change, and also of mortality. Mortality has become this horror that we just cannot face. We've lost so many of the ways in which you used to face mortality: a sense of tribe or folk stories, or close families, or religions that were fundamentally spiritual, not systems of political tribalism. Much of this has been weakened. We haven't yet erected the new things that will sustain us and let us deal with this crisis. We are very destabilized. In a sense, what is interesting to me is a reminder that despite the impermanence of us as individuals – and of every culture and society and city and town – in spite of that, there's enormous beauty possible. The novel tries to go deep into the sadness of impermanence. Without denying this deep sadness, it's also possible to see the beauty and the hope and optimism. One thing which mortality does for us is to make compassion possible. Each of us is facing the same end. That comes to everyone.

The person you hate, the person with a different language, different race, different colour, different gender, whatever, we all face this. That predicament also gives us the foundation of compassion. You can be compassionate to other people because, just like you, they face oblivion. Certainly, if you gave me the trade-off and said, 'Look, you can live for ever and forget compassion,' I'd probably grab on to it with both hands. But we don't have that option. Since we don't have that option, it's important to remember what else we get from mortality, which is the idea that we partake of it all together, universally.

FROM
Five Dials
No. 43

Best Neighbours

WINNER
Ali Smith

The Female Gays

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.

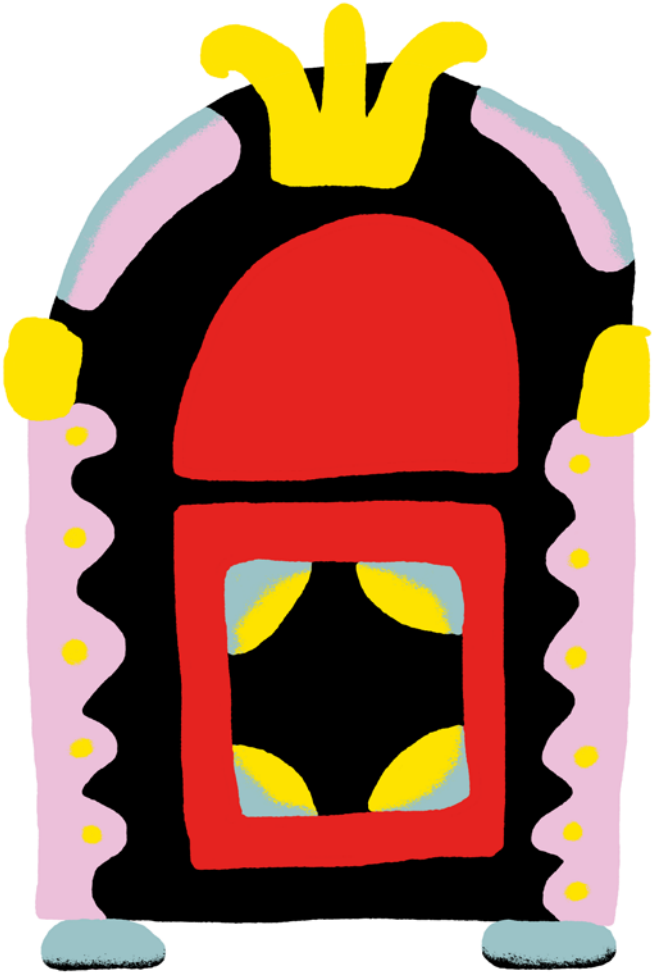
The female gays had cable, her little brother'd told her, because he'd watched The Simpsons through the female gays' front window. They hadn't minded a nine year old boy with his nose against their window watching their TV through it. In fact one of the female gays, when they realized he was there, had 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 garden 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 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.

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 down-



stairs 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.

Best Comment on Brexit

WINNER
Chris Power

Even Worstward, Oh (Brexit Beckett Rag)

Three years. Three years on and ever worse. Sick of the either we tried the other. Now sick of both. Try again. Fail again. Fail best.

Strong and stable. Missaid. Long since strong. Long since stable. Ever tried. Ever failed. Fail again. Fail worse. Call failing succeeding. Call failing sovereignty. Take back control. Take back right to fail. Lead failing way. Lead all away.

Hard Brexit stands. Say it stands. Remain does not remain. Hard was hard. Is hard. Remain softening softens into ooze.

Control is ours. Our control. Don't say weren't meant to win but won. Don't say. Dim future now on edge of void. Voted leave we left. Negotiated collapse. Head sunk we plod on. Ever worstward on.

Three years on. Worsening in dim void. From bad to worsen. Right and right again. Further right. Farthest right. Once lying. Twice lying. How small. May Davis Johnson Leadsom Gove McVey Mordaunt Grayling Fox how small. They worsen. They lessen. Anyhow on. Say all gone Britain. Alone in dim void with hands empty. Plod on. All others gone. Head sunk plod on. Worse now better later? Worse later. Go back? Try kneeling.

Three years on now best. Best at worst. Fail again. Best at being worst.

FROM
Five Dials No. 45

Best Appreciation of a Long Sentence

WINNER
Joe Moran

Sinatra Sang In Sentences

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.

FROM
Five Dials No. 48

The Zlatan Ibrahimović Prize For Humility

'I hit it, and could tell straightaway that I'd struck it really well. The ball had this wonderful trajectory, and at first nobody realized what was going on, then they all just lost it – started screaming, and I thought, 'finally'. After that damn injury... this is what I'm used to, this is what I do – this is what it's like when I conquer. Then I headed in the winner from an Ashley Cole cross in the ninetieth minute. After that, I felt like God.'

Zlatan Ibrahimović, *I am Football*

Funniest Apocalyptic Moment

WINNER
Hanna Jameson

From *The Last*

Nadia once told me that she was kept awake at night by the idea that she would read about the end of the world on a phone notification. It wasn't exactly Kennedy's Sword of Damocles speech, but I remember that moment word for word.

For me, three days ago, it happened over a complimentary breakfast.

I was sitting by the window, looking out into the encroach¬ing forest, the cleared path around the building leading to the rear parking.

There was a hum of chatter, from couples and one or two families on early checkout, but I was the first of the conven¬tion down. We had all stayed up late drinking the night before, but I tried not to deviate from routine, even if it hurt.

We weren't supposed to even be at this hotel. The con¬vention had originally been slightly nearer Zurich, further north. But there had been a fire at the intended venue eight months before. The move had been arranged without much fuss and the location changed to L'Hotel Sixième, which we had joked was in the middle of nowhere. A pain in the ass to get to.

I was reading the opening chapter of What We Talk about When We Talk about Photoreconnaissance: The Legal and Performance History of Aerial Espionage, taking notes for an upcoming lecture series, and my phone was on silent.

A glass of orange juice to my left, and a black co ee. I'd spilt a little on the tablecloth in my eagerness to drink it and get a refill. I was waiting on eggs Benedict.

It's the banality that pains me.

The last text I received from Nadia was sent at eleven thirty the night before. It said: 'I think everyone in my line of work is doing more harm than good. How can anyone love this job any¬more? I miss you so much, you always know what to say when I'm feeling like this. I feel bad about how we left it. Love you.'

I hadn't replied to her crisis of faith because I thought I could get away with the delay. She knew the time difference meant I was probably asleep. I wanted to give it some thought and reply in the morning with something measured and reassuring. There was still a need for excellent journalism, she could still make things better . . . Something like that. An email might be better.

We all thought we had time. Now we can't send emails anymore.

A strange noise erupted from one of the tables, a shrill exclamation. The woman didn't say anything, just cried out.

I looked up, and she was sitting with her partner – I assume – and staring at her phone.

Like everyone else in the room, I thought she had just become overexcited by a message or a photo, and returned to my book, but within seconds she'd added, 'They've bombed Washington!'

I hadn't even wanted to go to this damn convention.

I can't entirely remember what happened in the hours that followed, but as I started scrolling through my own phone, the push notifications and social media timelines, I realized that Nadia had been right. It played out exactly as she feared. In fact, the headlines are almost all I can remember at the moment.

BREAKING: NUCLEAR ATTACK ON WASHINGTON IN PROGRESS. STORY DEVELOPING.

BREAKING: 200,000 FATALITIES ESTIMATED, SAY EXPERTS.

BREAKING: CONFIRMED: PRESIDENT AND STAFF AMONG DEAD IN NUCLEAR EXPLOSION. AWAITING MORE INFORMATION.

Then there was some aerial footage, from London, and we all watched the buildings vanish into

dust in real time, under an iconic pillar of cloud. That was the only footage available so we watched it over and over. It didn't seem as real as the head¬lines. Maybe we had all been desensitized to the imagery by too many movies. Watching a whole city vaporized like that seemed too fast, and too quiet.

A plane went down on the outskirts of Berlin and we only knew Berlin was gone because some-one in the plane had uploaded a video of them going down. Dust in the engines maybe. I can't remember what she was saying; she was crying and hadn't been speaking English. It was probably just goodbye.

BREAKING: NUCLEAR WEAPON DETONATES OVER WASHINGTON, HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS FEARED DEAD.

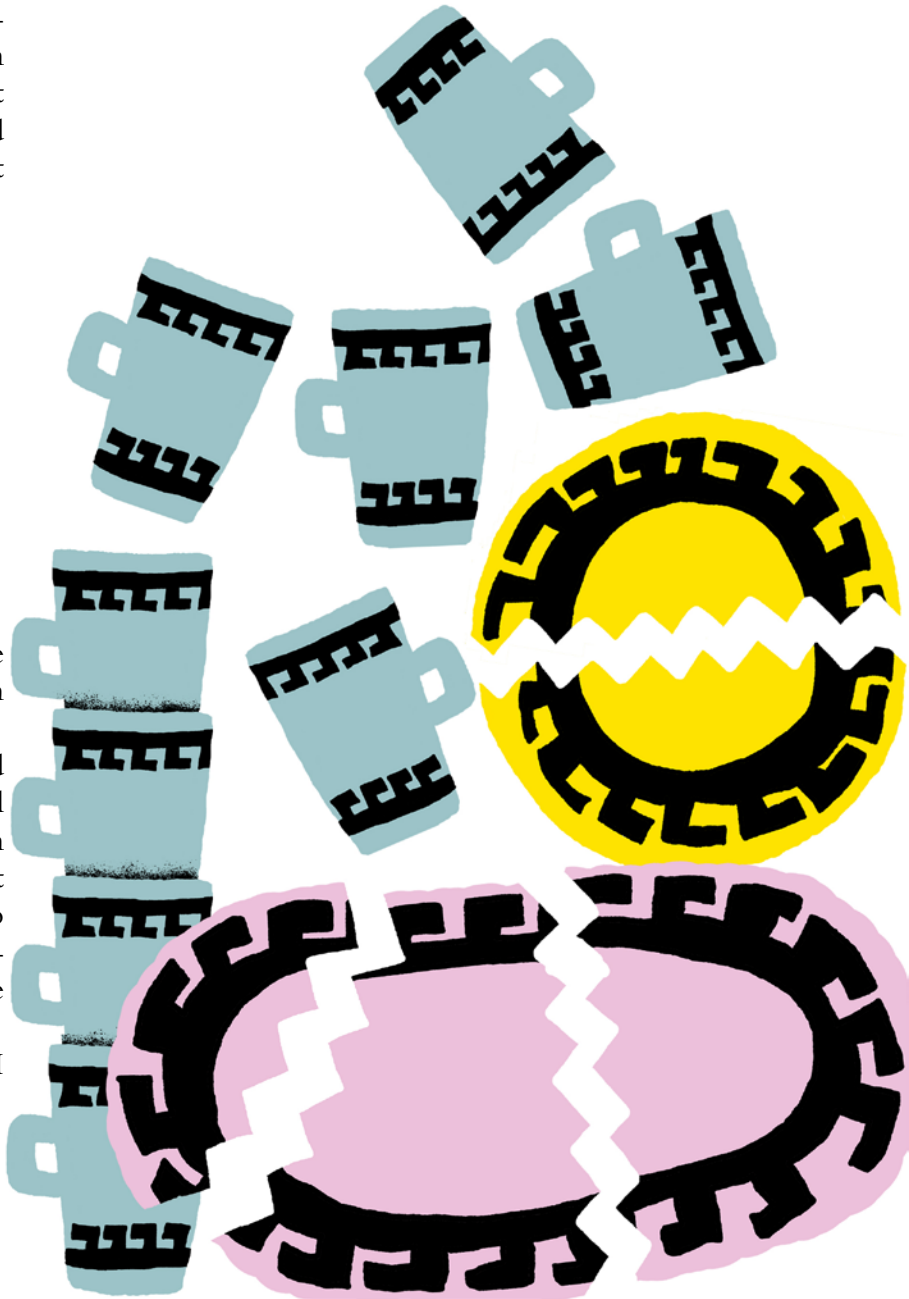
BREAKING: CANADIAN PRIME MINISTER CALLS FOR CALM AS NUCLEAR ATTACK HITS US.

BREAKING: US WITHOUT GOVERNMENT AS NUCLEAR BOMB DEVASTATES WASHINGTON.

Maybe I was lucky, watching the end of the world online, instead of living it, reacting to an explosion or a siren announc¬ing one.

We're not gone yet. This is the third day and the internet is down. I've been sitting in my hotel room watching what I can see of the horizon from my window. If anything happens, I'll do my best to describe it. I can see for miles over the forest, so when it's our turn I imagine I'll have some warn-ing. And it's not like I have anyone to say goodbye to here.

I can't believe I didn't reply to Nadia's email. I can't believe I thought I had time.



Killing Time

Anna Funder on the power of Heinrich Böll's first novel

In 1998 I came home to find my mother, at that time very ill, turning around from a white cardboard shoebox – the box she stuffed our family photos into – with a felt pen in her hand. The sun was behind her and her turban looked oriental, jaunty, terrifying. She had written her initials on the box, and below them:

1941 — ?

It does not matter how close we get to that question mark, it is still unthinkable. The question mark remains a question mark until we have passed that date and gone into the zone of unthinkability ourselves. We cannot imagine the date of our demise. Our minds baulk. On the one hand it's too grim. And on the other we tempt fate if we count on a certain period as rightfully ours, when the outrageous end can come out of a clear blue sky like a fridge, a bomb, a car crash. Or a rare cancer.

It is the terror of imagining the date of our death, a thought which goes against all our human hardwiring, that is the propulsive power of *The Train Was on Time*. The novel incarnates and then inhabits this taboo space, which makes the work function, surprisingly – once you've swallowed it – like an inoculation against despair.

It's autumn 1943. A young German soldier, Andreas, is boarding a train to the Eastern Front. On the platform he thinks of throwing himself under its wheels, but also of desertion, to save his skin. 'I don't want to die,' he says to his friend the pastor, 'that's what's so horrible – that I don't want to die'. From the first page we're in a world where the fascist state has reversed our natural will to live; it requires instead a will to die. Life has been so debased by the glorification of death in war that it's shameful to want to keep living. As the train pulls out Andreas panics, calling to his friend, the pastor, 'I don't want to die, but the terrible thing is that I'm going to die . . . soon!'

It's not so much the train that sets the action in motion, but the word 'soon', because:

> Now and again what appears to be a casually spoken word will suddenly acquire a cabalistic significance. It becomes charged and strangely swift, races ahead of the speaker, is destined to throw open a chamber in the uncertain confines of the future and to return to him with the deadly accuracy of a boomerang. Out of the small talk of unreflecting speech[. . .] it falls back on the speaker like a leaden wave, and he becomes aware of the force, both frightening and intoxicating, of the workings of fate.

This is what happens when you say something you didn't know you were going to – and suddenly know it's true. Words tossed off in pain or love or as a joke throw open a trapdoor to the subconscious, that place where we hide things from ourselves, including our own, intuited, deadline. Writers write out of what we know and what we don't. We use words to jemmy open first ourselves, and then the world. We may think we are working to separate the surface from what is going on underneath, to 'show workings', as my benighted school maths teacher used to say. But the truth is we don't know what we'll find; we are working a mine of premonitions. If, as Beethoven had it, 'Character is fate', to get a sudden insight into your self may then be to have a presentiment of what fate has in store for you. Like this:

> To lovers and soldiers, to men marked for death and to those filled with the cosmic force of life, this power is sometimes given,

> without warning; a sudden revelation is conferred on them, a bounty and a burden . . . and the word sinks, sinks down inside them.

Andreas is groping in the dark of his unconscious mind for the deadline beyond which he cannot imagine himself. He is going towards the —?. We ride the train with him station by station towards the end, which becomes more and more certain: how many months, days, weeks does he have? It depends on where his imagination stops. He counts down the hours between each intuited deadline and now and – strangely – doesn't know what to do with them. Andreas is shocked that he eats with such relish, cross that he kills time playing cards and wastes it sleeping. Life, apparently, will take what it needs to keep going. Turns out that it's a value in itself, not a sack to fill with jewels, experiences. No cause, however just or glorious, however many patriotic songs are sung to it, can justify throwing it away. It is precious beyond belief.

We need to imagine Böll, at 30, writing this novel in a half-destroyed house in his hometown of Cologne. It is Stunde Null – Zero Hour – and the world is in ruins. One baby, born during the war, has died; he lives with his wife and two infant sons. Born in 1917, during the previous war, his generation was fodder for the next. Böll's family was pacifist and Catholic; at school he was one of very few who refused to join the Hitler Youth. Conscripted into Hitler's infantry as a young man, he served in Poland, France, Romania, Hungary and the Soviet Union. He was wounded four times. At the end of the war he deserted, hiding out with his wife for a time before rejoining as the war was ending so as not to be killed by his own side. The Americans, he said, 'liberated' him when they took him prisoner.

This, Böll's first published novel, was the beginning of a life in which for the next 40 years he spoke out against bureaucratic idiocy, injustice, administrative and media terror and the German habit of subservience to authority, which he identified as the root of totalitarianism there. Böll became the great, revered Everyman of German letters, the conscience of a nation that had, so recently, suppressed its own. He was the president of PEN International, and as wildly popular in the Eastern Bloc as he was in the West. In 1979 he politely refused a medal from the West German Government saying, 'Medals don't suit me. I'm not that kind of guy.' In 1972 he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature.

It is 70 years since this novel was published, but today it feels like we're coming into that station. This is possibly because as one gets closer to being past, the past feels closer. Though I don't think it's just me: today fascism is on the rise, totalitarian tyrants rule billions of people, men and women are being sent to wars of just and unjust causes, causes which are, all of them, utterly irrelevant when a person faces their own question mark, their own ride to Stryy. Böll's novel blows a stent in the human heart, and shows us the terror there. It feels more necessary than ever.

The Train Was on Time

by Heinrich Böll

As they walked through the dark underpass they could hear the train rumbling up to the platform overhead, and the resounding voice came smoothly over the loudspeaker: 'The troop-train now arriving from Paris will depart for Przemy'sl via…'

Then they had climbed the steps to the platform and were standing by the leave-train from which beaming soldiers were emerging, weighed down with huge packages. The platform quickly emptied, it was the usual scene. At some of the windows stood girls or women or a very silent, grim-faced father … and the resounding voice was telling people to hurry. The train was on time.

'Why don't you get on?' the chaplain asked the soldier anxiously.

'Get on?' asked the soldier, amazed. 'Why, I might want to hurl myself under the wheels, I might want to desert … eh? What's the hurry? I might go crazy, I've a perfect right to, I've a perfect right to go crazy. I don't want to die, that's what's so horrible – that I don't want to die.' His voice was cold and hard, as if the words were pouring from his lips like ice. 'Don't say any more! I'll get on all right, there's always a spot somewhere … yes … yes, don't mind me, pray for me!' He grasped his pack, boarded the train through the nearest door, let down the window from inside, and leaned out, while overhead the resounding voice hung like a cloud of mucus: 'The train is now leaving … '

'I don't want to die!' he shouted. 'I don't want to die, but the terrible thing is that I'm going to die … soon!' The black figure on that cold grey platform retreated farther and farther into the distance … farther and farther, until the station was swallowed up by night.

Now and again what appears to be a casually spoken word will suddenly acquire a cabalistic significance. It becomes charged and strangely swift, races ahead of the speaker, is destined to throw open a chamber in the uncertain confines of the future and to return to him with the deadly accuracy of a boomerang. Out of the small talk of unreflecting speech, usually from among those halting, colourless goodbyes exchanged beside trains on their way to death, it falls back on the speaker like a leaden wave, and he becomes aware of the force, both frightening and intoxicating, of the workings of fate. To lovers and soldiers, to men marked for death and to those filled with the cosmic force of life, this power is sometimes given, without warning; a sudden revelation is conferred on them, a bounty and a burden … and the word sinks, sinks down inside them.

As Andreas was slowly groping his way back into the centre of the carriage, the word soon entered him like a bullet, painlessly and almost imperceptibly penetrating flesh, tissue, cells, nerves, until at some point it caught, like a barbed hook, exploded, and ripped open a savage wound, making blood pour out … life, pain …

Soon, he thought, and felt himself turning pale. At the same time he did all the usual things, almost unconsciously. He struck a match, lighting up the heaps of sitting, stretched out, sleeping soldiers who lay around, across, under, and on top of their luggage. The smell of stale tobacco smoke was mixed with the smell of stale sweat and that strangely gritty dirt which clings to all soldiers in the mass. The flame of the dying matchstick flared up with a final hiss, and in that last glow he saw, over by the narrowing corridor, a small empty space. He carefully picked his way towards it, his bundle tucked under one arm, his cap in his hand.

Soon, he thought, and the shock of fear lay deep, deep. Fear and absolute certainty. Never again, he thought, never again will I see this station, never again the face of my friend, the man I abused right up to the last moment … never again. Soon! He reached the empty space, set his pack carefully on the floor in order not to wake the sleeping men around him,

and sat down on it so he could lean back against a compartment door. Then he tried to arrange his legs as comfortably as possible; he stretched the left one carefully past the face of one sleeping soldier, and placed the right one across a piece of luggage that was shielding the back of another. In the compartment behind him a match flared up, and someone began to smoke silently in the dark. By turning slightly to one side he could see the glowing tip of the cigarette, and sometimes, when the unknown man drew on it, the reflection spread over an unfamiliar soldier's face, grey and tired, with bitter creases in it, starkly and terribly sober.

Soon, he thought. The rattle of the train, it was all so familiar. The smell, the desire to smoke, the feeling he had to smoke. The last thing he wanted to do was sleep. The sombre outlines of the city moved past the window. Somewhere in the distance searchlights were raking the sky, like long spectral fingers parting the blue cloak of the night … from far away came the ring of anti-aircraft guns … and those darkened, mute, sombre houses. When would this Soon be? The blood flowed out of his heart, flowed back into his heart, circling, circling, life was circling, and all this pulse beat said was: Soon! He could no longer say, no longer even think: 'I don't want to die.' As often as he tried to form the sentence he thought: I'm going to die … soon.

Behind him a second grey face now showed up in the glow of a cigarette, and he could hear a subdued, weary murmuring. The two unknown men were talking.

'Dresden,' said one voice. 'Dortmund,' the other. The murmuring continued, became more animated. Then another voice swore, and the murmuring subsided again; it petered out, and again there was only one cigarette behind him. It was the second cigarette, and finally this one went out too, and again there was this grey darkness behind and beside him, and facing him the black night with the countless houses, all mute, all black. Only in the distance those silent, uncannily long, spectral fingers of the searchlights, still groping across the sky. It seemed as if the faces belonging to those fingers must be grinning, eerily grinning, cynically grinning like the faces of usurers and swindlers. 'We'll get you,' said the thin-lipped, gaping mouths belonging to those fingers. 'We'll get you, we'll grope all night long.' Maybe they were looking for a bedbug, a tiny bug in the cloak of the night, those fingers, and they would find the bug …

Soon. Soon. Soon. Soon. When is Soon? What a terrible word: Soon. Soon can mean in one second, Soon can mean in one year. Soon is a terrible word. This Soon compresses the future, shrinks it, offers no certainty, no certainty whatever, it stands for absolute uncertainty. Soon is nothing and Soon is a lot. Soon is everything. Soon is death …

Soon I shall be dead. I shall die, soon. You have said so yourself, and someone inside you and someone outside you has told you that this Soon will be fulfilled. One thing is sure, this Soon will be in wartime. That's a certainty, that's a fact.

How much longer will the war go on?

It can last for another year before everything finally collapses in the East, and if the Americans in the West don't attack, or the British, then it will go on for another two years before the Russians reach the Atlantic. They will attack, though. But all in all it will last another year at the very least, the war won't be over before the end of 1944. The way this whole apparatus is built up, it's too obedient, too cowardly, too docile. So I may still have anything from one second to one year. How many seconds are there in a year? Soon I'm going to die, before the war is over. I shan't ever know peacetime again. No more peacetime. There'll be no more of anything, no music … no flowers … no poetry … no more human joy; soon I'm going to die.

This Soon is like a thunderclap. This little word

is like the spark that sets off the thunderstorm, and suddenly, for the thousandth part of a second, the whole world is bright beneath this word.

The smell of bodies is the same as ever. The smell of dirt and dust and boot polish. Funny, wherever there are soldiers there's dirt. The spectral fingers had found the bug…

He lit a fresh cigarette. I'll try and picture the future, he thought. Maybe it's an illusion, this Soon, maybe I'm overtired, maybe it's tension or nerves. He tried to imagine what he would do when the war was over. He would… he would… but there was a wall he couldn't get over, a totally black wall. He couldn't imagine anything. Of course he could force himself to complete the sentence in his mind: I'll go to university… I'll take a room somewhere… with books… cigarettes… go to university… music… poetry… flowers. But even as he forced himself to complete the sentence in his mind he knew it wouldn't happen. None of it would happen. Those aren't dreams, those are pale, colourless thoughts devoid of weight, blood, all human substance. The future has no face now, it is cut off somewhere; and the more he thought about it the more he realized how close he was to this Soon. Soon I'm going to die, that's a certainty that lies between one year and one second. There are no more dreams…

Soon. Maybe two months. He tried to imagine it in terms of time, to discover whether the wall rose this side of the next two months, that wall he would not be going beyond. Two months, that meant the end of November. But he can't grasp it in terms of time. Two months: an image that has no power. He might just as well say: three months or four months or six, the image evokes no echo. January, he thought. But the wall isn't there at all. A strange, unquiet hope awakens: May, he thought with a sudden leap ahead. Nothing. The wall is silent. There's no wall anywhere. There's nothing. This Soon… this Soon is only a frightening bogey. November, he thought. Nothing! A fierce, terrible joy springs to life. January: January of next year, a year and a half away – a year and a half of life! Nothing! No wall!

He sighed with relief and went on thinking, his thoughts now racing across time as over light, very low hurdles. January, May, December! Nothing! And suddenly he was aware that he was groping in a void. The place where the wall rose up couldn't be grasped in terms of time. Time was irrelevant. Time had ceased to exist. And yet hope still remained. He had leapt so splendidly over the months. Years…

Soon I'm going to die, and he felt like a swimmer who knows he is near the shore and finds himself suddenly flung back into the tide by the surf. Soon! That's where the wall is, the wall beyond which he will cease to exist, will cease to be on this earth.

Krakow, he thought suddenly, and his heart missed a beat as if an artery had twisted itself into a knot, blocking off the blood. He is on the right track – Krakow! Nothing! Farther. Przemyśl! Nothing! Lvov! Nothing! Then he starts racing: Cernauti, Jassy, Kishinev, Nikopol! But at the last name he already senses that this is only make-believe, make-believe like the thought: I'll go to university. Never again, never again will he see Nikopol! Back to Jassy. No, he won't see Jassy again either. He won't see Cernauti again. Lvov! Lvov he'll see again, Lvov he'll reach alive! I'm mad, he thought, I'm out of my mind, this means I'll die between Lvov and Cernauti! What a crazy idea… he forced himself to switch off his thoughts and started smoking again and staring into the face of the night. I'm hysterical, I'm crazy, I've been smoking too much, talking, talking for nights on end, days on end, with no sleep, no food, just smoking, it's enough to make anyone lose their mind…

I must have something to eat, he thought, something to drink. Food and drink keep body and soul together. This damn smoking all the time! He started fumbling with his pack, but while he peered towards his feet in the dark, trying to find the buckle, and then began rummaging around in his pack where sandwiches and underwear, tobacco, cigarettes, and a bottle of schnapps all lay in a heap, he became aware of a leaden, implacable fatigue that clogged his veins … he fell asleep … his hands on the open pack, one leg – the left – next to a face he had never seen, one leg – the right – across someone's luggage, and with his tired and by now dirty hands resting on his pack he fell asleep, his head on his chest …

He was awakened by someone treading on his fingers. A stab of pain, he opened his eyes; someone had passed by in a hurry, bumped him in the back and trodden on his hands. He saw it was daylight and heard another resounding voice hospitably announcing a station name, and he realized it was Dortmund. The man who had spent the night behind him smoking and murmuring was getting out, cursing as he barged along the corridor; for that unknown grey face, this was home. Dortmund. The man next to him, the one whose luggage his right leg had been resting on, was awake and sat up on the cold floor of the corridor, rubbing his eyes. The man on the left, whose face his left foot was resting against, was still asleep. Dortmund. Girls carrying steaming pots of coffee were hurrying up and down the platform. The same as ever. Women were standing around weeping, girls being kissed, fathers … it was all so familiar: he must be crazy.

But, to tell the truth, all he knew was that the instant he opened his eyes he knew that Soon was still there. Deep within him the little barb had drawn blood, it had caught and would never let go now. This Soon had grabbed him like a hook, and he was going to squirm on it, squirm until he was between Lvov and Cernauti …

Like lightning, in the millionth part of a second it took him to wake up, came the hope that this Soon would have disappeared, like the night, a bogey in the wake of endless talking and endless smoking. But it was still there, implacably there …

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FIVE DIALS