

HAMILTON PRESENTS



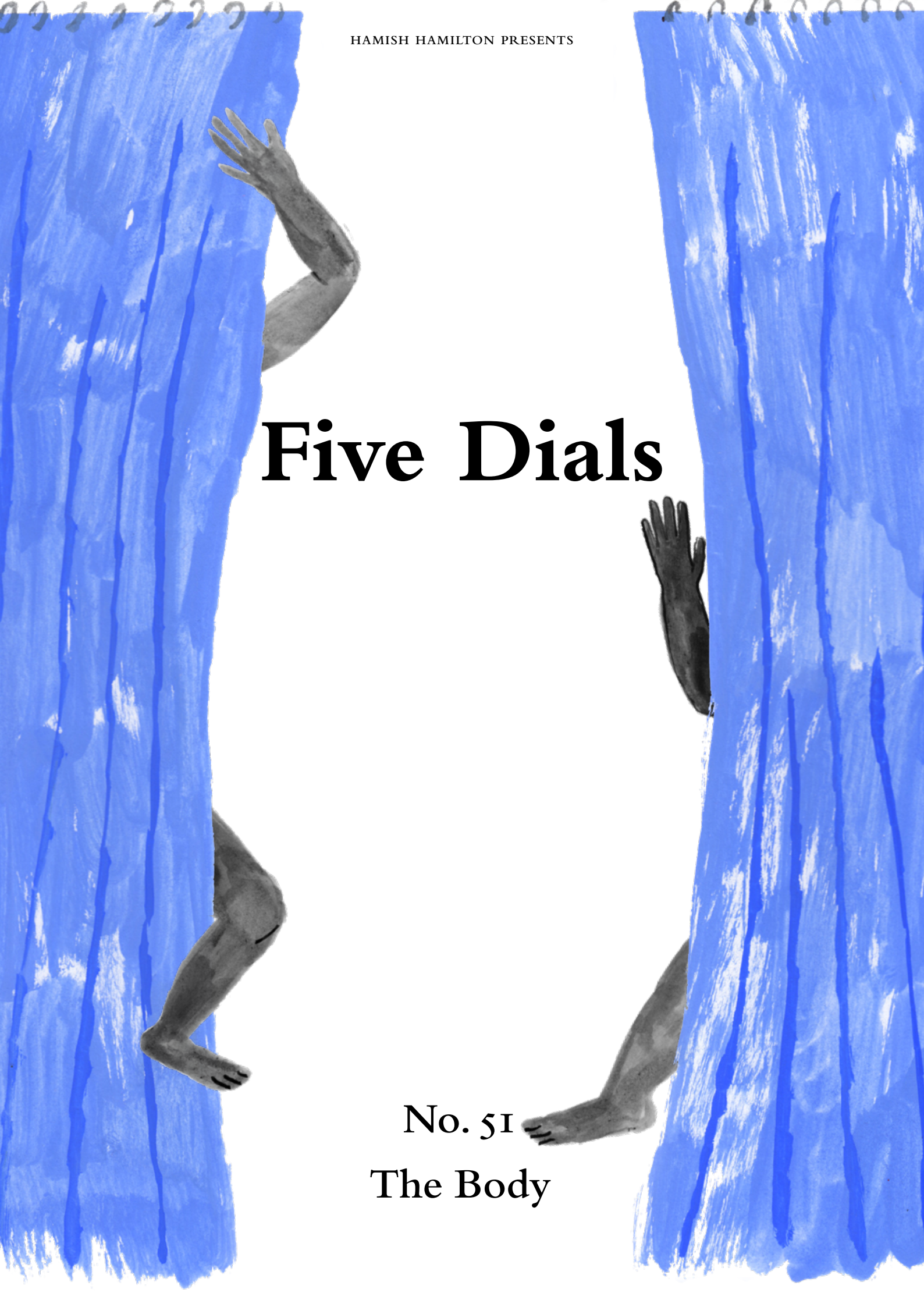
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No. 51
The Body

HAMISH HAMILTON PRESENTS

Five Dials

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The Body



FIVE DIALS

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Sara Collins studied law at the London School of Economics and worked as a lawyer for seventeen years before admitting that what she really wanted to do was write novels. She obtained a master's degree in creative writing with distinction from Cambridge University, where she was the 2015 recipient of the Michael Holroyd Prize. In 2016, she was shortlisted for the Lucy Cavendish prize for *The Confessions of Frannie Langton*, her first novel, a gothic romance about the twisted love affair between a Jamaican maid and her French mistress in 19th century London.

Joanna Kavenna's first book *The Ice Museum* was about travelling in the remote North, among other things. Her second was a novel called *Inglorious*, which won the Orange Award for New Writing. It was followed by a novel called *The Birth of Love*, which was longlisted for the Orange Prize. Her latest novel, *Zed*, is a satirical novel about life under a global media and tech corporation that knows exactly what we think, what we want, and what we do — before we do. Kavenna's writing has appeared in *The New Yorker*, the *London Review of Books*, *The Guardian* and *Observer*, the *Times Literary Supplement*, the *International Herald Tribune*, *The Spectator* and *The Telegraph*, among other publications. In 2013 she was named as one of *Granta's* Best of Young British Novelists.

Chris Killen is the author of two novels, *The Bird Room* (2009) and *In Real Life* (2015). He lives in Manchester.

Andrew McMillan's debut collection *physical* was the first ever poetry collection to win The Guardian First Book Award. The collection also won the Fenton Aldeburgh First Collection Prize, a Somerset Maugham Award (2016), an Eric Gregory Award (2016) and a Northern Writers' Award (2014). It was shortlisted for the Dylan Thomas Prize, the Costa Poetry Award, The Sunday Times Young Writer of the Year 2016, the Forward Prize for Best First Collection, the Roehampton Poetry Prize and the Polari First Book Prize. His second collection, *playtime*, was published by Jonathan Cape in 2018. It was a Poetry Book Society Recommendation for autumn 2018, a Poetry Book of the Month in both *The Observer* and *The Telegraph* and a Poetry Book of the Year in *The Sunday Times*. He is senior lecturer at the Manchester Writing School at MMU and lives in Manchester.

Emilie Pine is Associate Professor in Modern Drama at University College Dublin, and is author of the number one bestseller *Notes to Self*, published by Hamish Hamilton. Emilie joined the School of English, Drama and Film in the spring of 2008.

Jana Prikryl's new collection of poems, *No Matter*, has just been published. Her first book, *The After Party*, was one of *The New York Times's* Best Poetry Books of the Year. Her poems have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *London Review of Books*, *The Paris Review*, and *The New York Review of Books*, where she is a senior editor and the poetry editor.



Arundhati Roy is the author of *The God of Small Things*, which won the Booker Prize in 1997 and has been translated into more than forty languages, and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, which was long-listed for the Man Booker Prize in 2017. *My Seditious Heart*, written over the course of twenty years, and clocking in at a thousand pages, is a collection of Arundhati Roy's complete non-fiction. It was published by Hamish Hamilton in June 2019.

published by Freight Books in 2016 and in the US by Flat Iron in 2017. The collection was shortlisted for the Republic of Consciousness Prize and longlisted for the Edge Hill Prize. Her novel *Supper Club* was recently published by Hamish Hamilton.

Joe Stretch is the author of three novels, *Friction*, *Wildlife* and *The Adult*, which received a Somerset Maugham Award. He lives in Stockport.

Keisha Thompson is a writer, performance artist and producer based in Manchester. She has supported artists such as Kate Tempest, Hollie McNish, The Last Poets, Saul Williams, Amiri Baraka and performed in the 2008 and 2009 Brave New Voices festivals. She is currently touring her award-winning solo show, *Man on the Moon*. Her debut book, *Lunar*, features her poetry in addition to the show script. *Moonwhile*, a poetic EP released in June 2019, is available to stream or download at shebekeke.bandcamp.com/album/moonwhile.

Eley Williams' *Attrib. and other stories* (Influx Press, 2017) was awarded the Republic of Consciousness Prize and the James Tait Black Memorial Prize 2018. Her stories have been anthologized in *The Penguin Book of the Contemporary British Short Story* (Penguin Classics, 2018) and *Liberating the Canon* (Dostoevsky Wannabe, 2018).

Lara Williams is a writer based in Manchester. Her debut short story collection *Treats* was

Imagining the Body

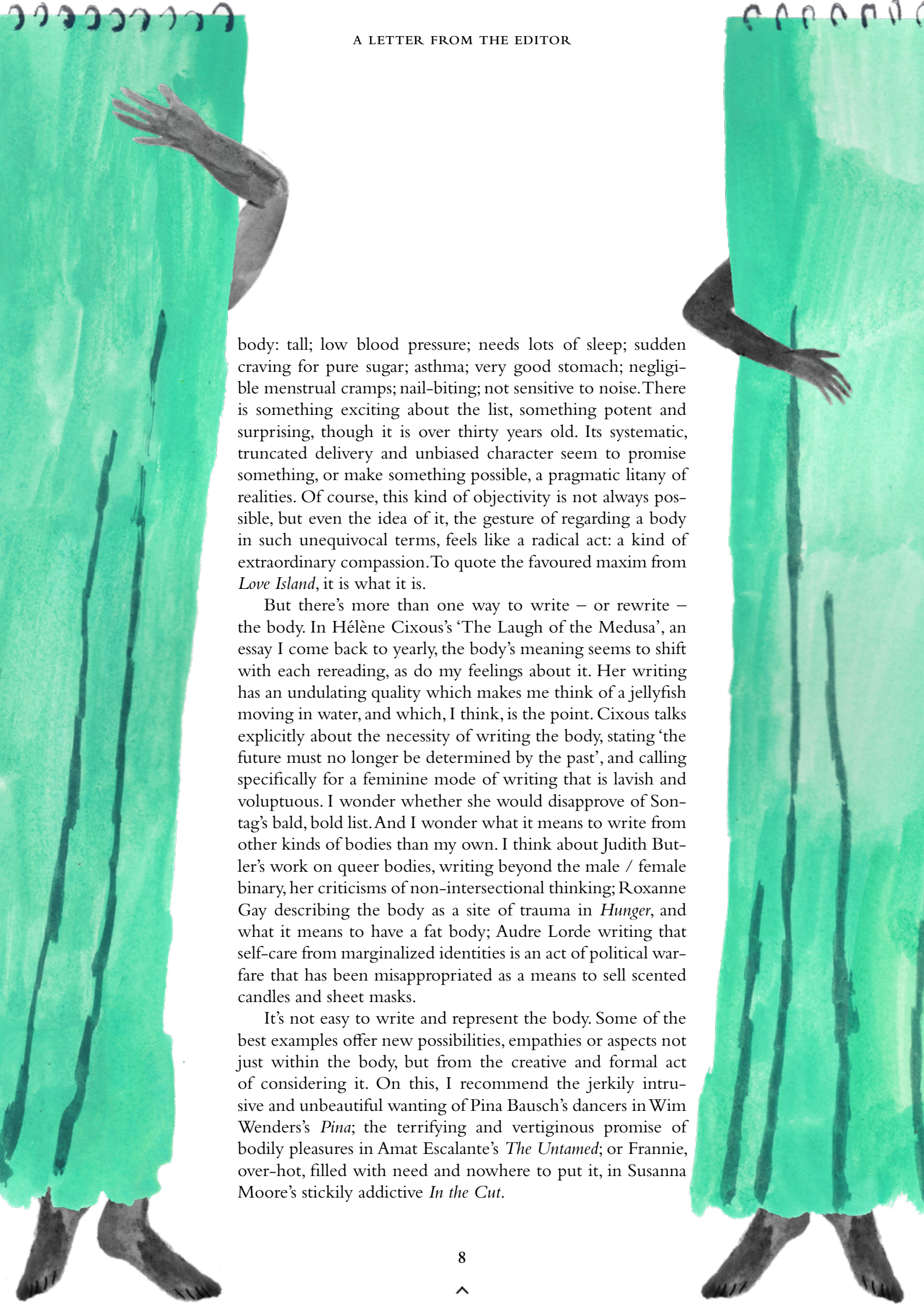
By Lara Williams

When I think about the phrase ‘the body’, the first thing that springs to mind, irritatingly, like a word-association game that confirms you are a pervert, is an episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. The episode begins as Buffy finds her mother collapsed across the couch. She has suffered a brain aneurysm: paramedics arrive and attempt to resuscitate before eventually declaring her dead. Later, Buffy tells Giles not to move the body, and is shocked by her own choice of words. And that is what the episode is called: ‘The Body’.

Though I wasn’t so aware of it at the time, *Buffy* is a show about things to do with bodies: infection and corporeality, abjection and penetration, strength and vulnerability. Week after week, the gang defend their mortal bodies from invasion by vampires and demons. Supernatural elements aside, in reality any one of these incidents would surely shape the characters deeply and violently, persisting as trauma for many years after the fact. And yet Buffy and her friends experience literally hundreds of such encounters. There is an episode where Cordelia is kidnapped and held in a basement by a classmate who intends to behead her. Another where Xander is possessed by a hyena and eats a live pig. These are just in the first season!

Buffy aired from 1997-2003 – which means, alarmingly, we can now consider it to be a full generation ago. Perhaps if it was made today we would expect a less cavalier treatment of the violence and its ramifications, more cognizant of the body as psychological battleground. But perhaps not. It is worth noting the *Buffy* actors all had white, thin, cis and able bodies: some of the safest bodies around. I’d like to think we could now expect more diverse casting in mainstream entertainment, but judging by the current contestants on *Love Island* (the rampantly popular reality TV show which dominates UK summer viewing), and the noticeably restricted screen time given to the few cast members of colour, this is really not the case.

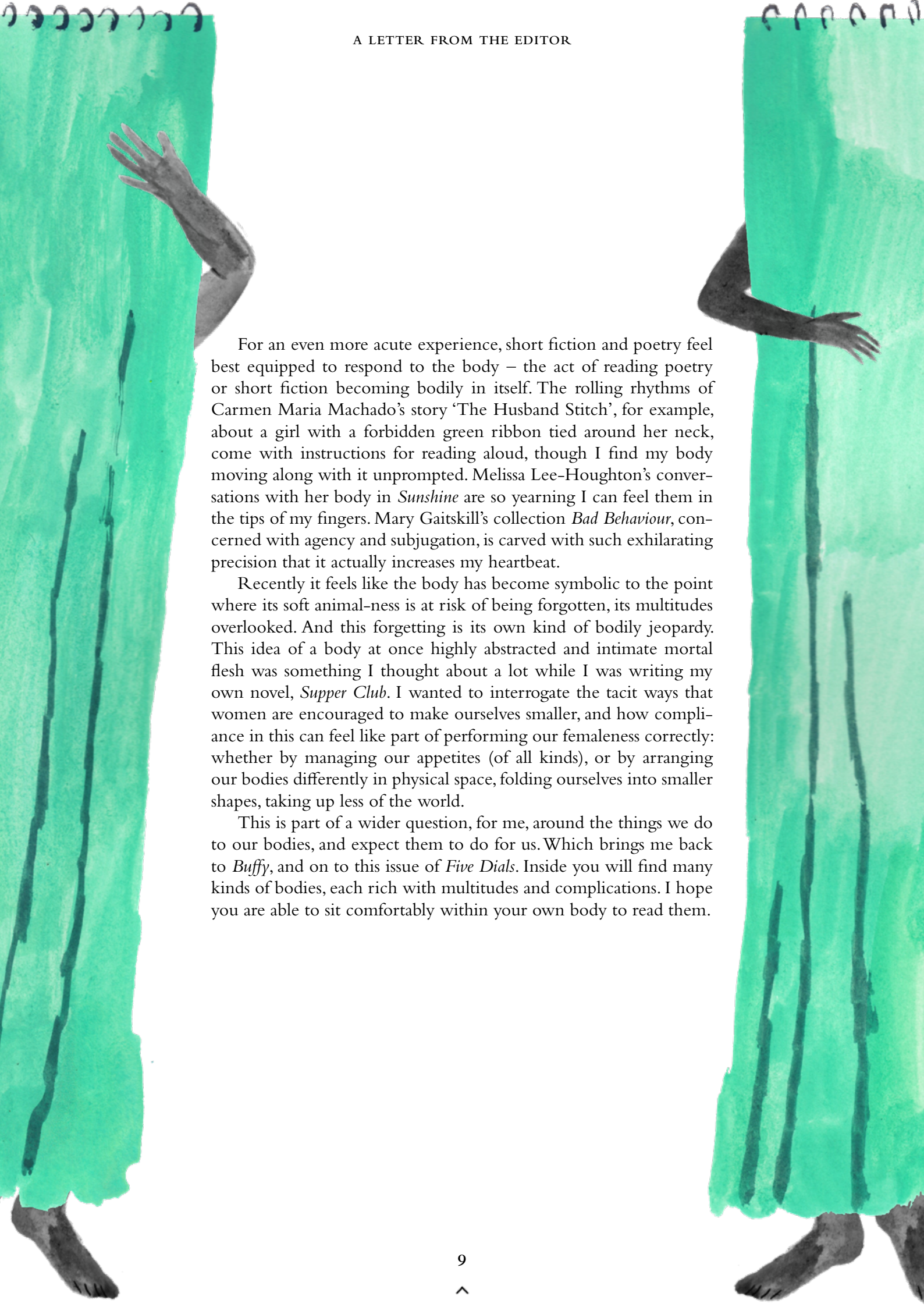
Reading through old issues of *Five Dials*, I came across some lists from Susan Sontag’s diaries. One is titled ‘Body Type’, cataloguing various observations of Sontag’s own



body: tall; low blood pressure; needs lots of sleep; sudden craving for pure sugar; asthma; very good stomach; negligible menstrual cramps; nail-biting; not sensitive to noise. There is something exciting about the list, something potent and surprising, though it is over thirty years old. Its systematic, truncated delivery and unbiased character seem to promise something, or make something possible, a pragmatic litany of realities. Of course, this kind of objectivity is not always possible, but even the idea of it, the gesture of regarding a body in such unequivocal terms, feels like a radical act: a kind of extraordinary compassion. To quote the favoured maxim from *Love Island*, it is what it is.

But there's more than one way to write – or rewrite – the body. In Hélène Cixous's 'The Laugh of the Medusa', an essay I come back to yearly, the body's meaning seems to shift with each rereading, as do my feelings about it. Her writing has an undulating quality which makes me think of a jellyfish moving in water, and which, I think, is the point. Cixous talks explicitly about the necessity of writing the body, stating 'the future must no longer be determined by the past', and calling specifically for a feminine mode of writing that is lavish and voluptuous. I wonder whether she would disapprove of Sontag's bald, bold list. And I wonder what it means to write from other kinds of bodies than my own. I think about Judith Butler's work on queer bodies, writing beyond the male / female binary, her criticisms of non-intersectional thinking; Roxanne Gay describing the body as a site of trauma in *Hunger*, and what it means to have a fat body; Audre Lorde writing that self-care from marginalized identities is an act of political warfare that has been misappropriated as a means to sell scented candles and sheet masks.

It's not easy to write and represent the body. Some of the best examples offer new possibilities, empathies or aspects not just within the body, but from the creative and formal act of considering it. On this, I recommend the jerkily intrusive and unbeautiful wanting of Pina Bausch's dancers in Wim Wenders's *Pina*; the terrifying and vertiginous promise of bodily pleasures in Amat Escalante's *The Untamed*; or Frannie, over-hot, filled with need and nowhere to put it, in Susanna Moore's stickily addictive *In the Cut*.

An illustration of two figures, likely women, standing on either side of a central text block. They are wearing long, flowing green dresses with dark, vertical, brushstroke-like patterns. Their arms are raised, and their hands are positioned as if they are holding or framing the text. The background is white, and the overall style is artistic and somewhat abstract.

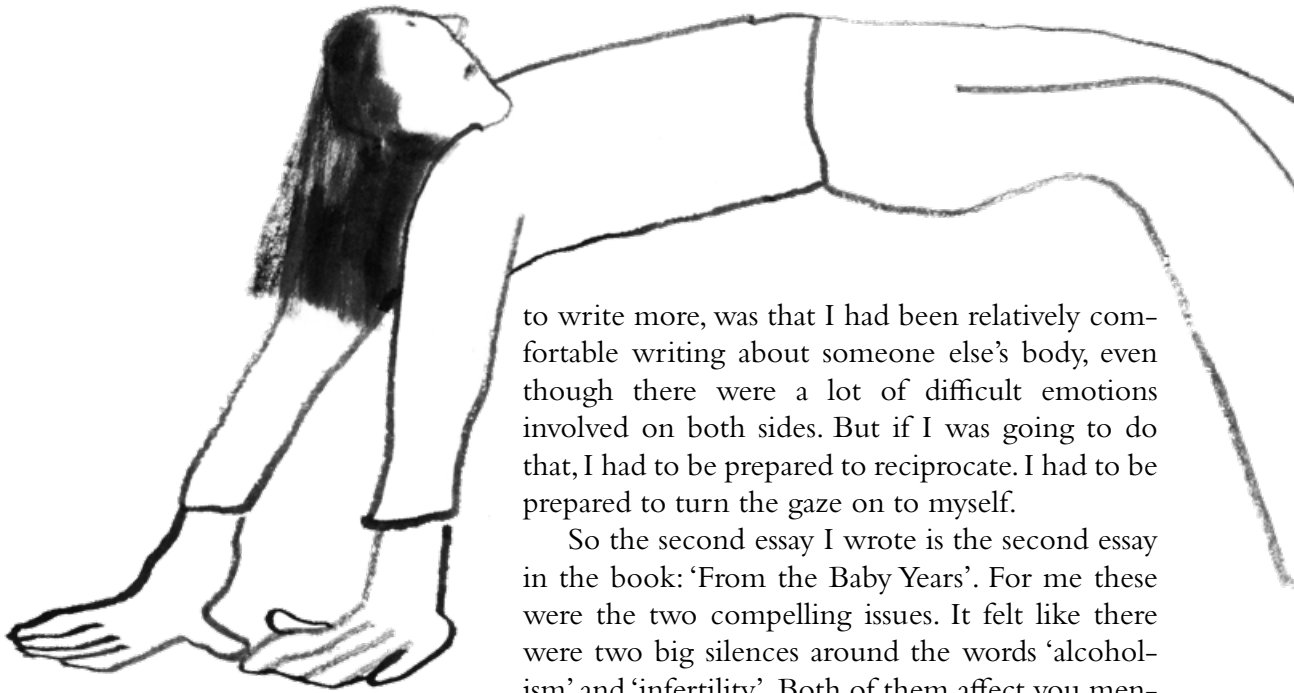
For an even more acute experience, short fiction and poetry feel best equipped to respond to the body – the act of reading poetry or short fiction becoming bodily in itself. The rolling rhythms of Carmen Maria Machado’s story ‘The Husband Stitch’, for example, about a girl with a forbidden green ribbon tied around her neck, come with instructions for reading aloud, though I find my body moving along with it unprompted. Melissa Lee-Houghton’s conversations with her body in *Sunshine* are so yearning I can feel them in the tips of my fingers. Mary Gaitskill’s collection *Bad Behaviour*, concerned with agency and subjugation, is carved with such exhilarating precision that it actually increases my heartbeat.

Recently it feels like the body has become symbolic to the point where its soft animal-ness is at risk of being forgotten, its multitudes overlooked. And this forgetting is its own kind of bodily jeopardy. This idea of a body at once highly abstracted and intimate mortal flesh was something I thought about a lot while I was writing my own novel, *Supper Club*. I wanted to interrogate the tacit ways that women are encouraged to make ourselves smaller, and how compliance in this can feel like part of performing our femaleness correctly: whether by managing our appetites (of all kinds), or by arranging our bodies differently in physical space, folding ourselves into smaller shapes, taking up less of the world.

This is part of a wider question, for me, around the things we do to our bodies, and expect them to do for us. Which brings me back to *Buffy*, and on to this issue of *Five Dials*. Inside you will find many kinds of bodies, each rich with multitudes and complications. I hope you are able to sit comfortably within your own body to read them.

Speaking to Emilie Pine

The author of *Notes to Self* on blood, the body and Beckett



As an associate professor of modern drama, Emilie Pine is used to employing the disembodied writing style of academic discourse. The voice comes from afar, or at least far enough away to offer critical distance. In her first essay collection, Notes to Self, Pine dispenses with barriers and distance and instead draws readers close enough to watch her examine, sometimes with brutal accuracy, subjects such as addiction, feminism, fertility, filial duty and sexual violence. Written in clear, astringent prose, the book is dotted with humour. Pine reveals herself in paragraphs that lack adornment. She dispenses with euphemism. Alcoholism is alcoholism. Blood is blood. Family, for better or worse, will always be family.

Five Dials called Pine at her home in Dublin to speak about her choice to face, from various angles, the subject of the body.

Five Dials There's so much in the book about the body, about different types of bodies, a body's reaction to alcohol, pregnant bodies. Was that a conscious choice or is the body an inescapable theme?

Emilie Pine Wouldn't it be lovely if I had that beautiful structure in place at the beginning? But no. I started out writing about my dad. The first essay in the book is the first I wrote. And what I realized at the end of writing it, when I was asked

to write more, was that I had been relatively comfortable writing about someone else's body, even though there were a lot of difficult emotions involved on both sides. But if I was going to do that, I had to be prepared to reciprocate. I had to be prepared to turn the gaze on to myself.

So the second essay I wrote is the second essay in the book: 'From the Baby Years'. For me these were the two compelling issues. It felt like there were two big silences around the words 'alcoholism' and 'infertility'. Both of them affect you mentally and emotionally as much as they affect you physically. I wanted to write about the confluence and about how bodies and narratives seem to go together. There are particular narratives that govern bodies.

One of the things I kept thinking after my miscarriage was: this is not my story. This is not the story I want to tell about my life. A large part of that centred on shame or unhappiness with my body. I felt my body was failing. So part of telling the story was about trying to write myself out of that narrative, which is a narrative that affects so many of us, but particularly women.

So much is projected on to our bodies, by ourselves and by the cultures we live in. I wanted to think my way out, because it creates so much unhappiness.

I started out quite reluctant because I'm an academic. I've spent twenty years trying to be uber-rational. The cultural message was that in order to be intellectual, you have to deny your body. So it felt dangerous for me to write about my body, suggesting I'm an embodied person as opposed to an intellectual person.

It was through the writing I realized those don't have to be mutually exclusive. It's not a binary: body/mind. The process of writing is like a debate

on the page, and a very self-conscious one about my body and its relation to the way I live my life.

I grew up in Ireland in the eighties. A more prudish society it would be hard to find. And the way around that is to name the thing. It's to use our words, which is what I say to my three year-old nephew: 'Use your words.' Use our language and don't fall into euphemism or silence. The whole time growing up, female anatomy was referred to as 'down there'. You were just all meant to know 'there' was this dark world we shouldn't talk about.

It's liberating to be in a context where those kinds of conversations are happening.

I did an event in the Lighthouse Bookshop in Edinburgh, and the owner of the bookshop got everyone in the room to chant 'period', over and over. At the beginning I thought, 'Are we going to do this?' And at the end of it, I thought, 'Right, we're done now. Nothing can embarrass us now. This is fantastic.' It felt like this communal permission-giving.

5D Can memoir be used as a preparation for the later stages in life, for the later incarnations of our bodies? You end the book with the final line 'I am afraid, but I'm doing it anyway.' It seems you gained a sense of fortitude for whatever comes next.

EP So I never call it a memoir. I understand that it is, right, but I don't call it that, because I associate memoirs with being written at the end. And it's so not.

It was written at the stage of my life where I felt I needed to do something different. I wasn't going to have kids. Part of me thinks, fine, it's not like you have to do something meaningful otherwise because you don't have kids. But that's how I felt, strongly.

The ending is a beginning. 'I'm doing it anyway' because I feel like 'OK, this is the next phase.' This is where I allow myself to imagine myself as a writer. Again, I am a writer because I've been an academic. I have multiple academic publications. But when I was a teenager and I dreamed of being a writer, that was not what I meant.

Writing something that is deliberately written in a way to connect and be as simple and open and honest and straightforward as possible was a real novelty for me. That was the stepping-off-the-cliff moment into memoir rather than analytic prose, into life writing.

I have written about other people's memoirs as a study of memory, and I've talked about narrativization and shaping and self-conscious narrators. And now I'm doing it. It was fun to make something rather than to criticize something.

5D Do you look back on the book and think, 'Oh, I've narrativized my existence here'?

EP The book is quite analytic. There are lots of moments where I say, 'I'm going to step back here', and 'Is this really the story that I'm telling?'



I interrogate the writing process as I'm doing it. Also, there are moments when I'm doing a reading publicly and I think, 'Oh, did I write this?'

There is a process of alienation to writing memoir. The book finishes, but you don't, so you constantly change. And in pinning something down and fixing it, no matter how self-reflexive that narrative voice is, it still is fixed in time and from a particular perspective.

There are times when I'm reading it where I think, 'Is this even my own experience any more?' Because I have written it down and other people have read it, and I have read it out loud, and I wonder who owns it now.

It's an odd process.

5D There's a section in the book where you say, 'Writing honestly about the self could risk the life I have made in the years since.'

EP It's all really exposing. And I think good writing has to be. You have to take a risk. Readers respond. Now I get quite a lot of emails and letters from people who tell me their stories.

At first I didn't understand. I didn't anticipate it, and I'm also not amazingly good with other people's emotions, so I was just like: what? But mostly now I think that if you are radically honest or transparent about your own life, it creates a mirror effect in other people, and they will reciprocate. That has been a profound experience for me – to realize there's a relationship that happens between writer and reader. And it comes back to that question of risk. I have taken a risk and again I didn't anticipate what the results of that risk would be, but because I've taken a risk, other people then can. Again, it's permission-giving.

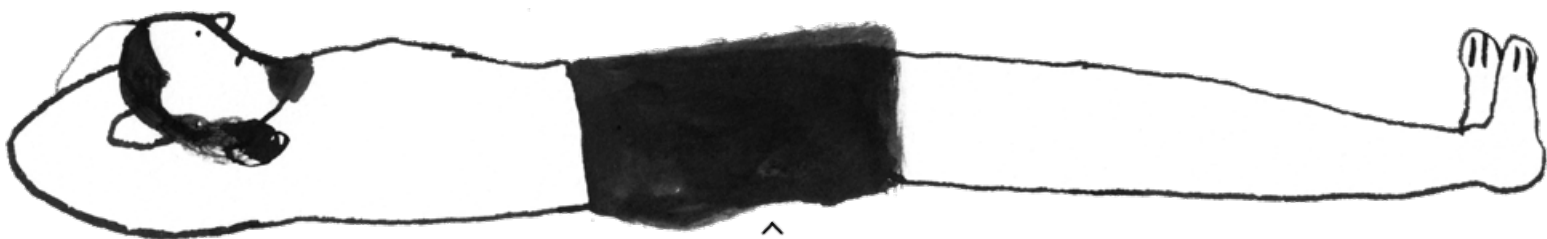
For me, I really felt a risk of being judged. I didn't anticipate having to set boundaries, because you can be as open and transparent in the writing of it, but in the promoting or the living of the book after it's published you have to be much more careful. I didn't realize that. I've had to learn it over time.

I understand why they do it. I understand why they go for the gutsiest stuff. But when I first started doing radio interviews they would ask me about being raped and I had to say, 'I'm sorry, I can't speak about that. It's in the book, you can read the book, but there are limits to what I can narrate.' This comes back again to gender, because I feel a lot of the time that women who are prepared to speak publicly about things that have happened to their bodies are then expected to perform, and to perform a particular role: the victim speaking out and the moral witness figure. That's enormously taxing on whoever has to perform it, especially because you're expected to cry or to emote or to be a particular kind of witness. And I'm not that person.

5D And the stakes are high if you don't perform in a certain way?

EP Exactly. And then you fall into this other category, where you end up rationally discussing something terrible that happened to you, as if it didn't happen to you, as if it were just a series of sociological facts or events.

That was enormously disempowering for me. Whereas I found the act of writing about it very empowering, because I got to pick my words and control the pace and decide how I wanted to tell that story, versus then how you're expected to



respond in an interview format, where everything is meant to be live.

5D Are you able to take on these letters that are sent to you? Does that become a chore?

EP No, it doesn't feel like a chore at all, but I don't enter into much dialogue. I see it as an act of listening – that can be, I hope, what people want. So I listen, or read, or whatever it is, and I respond, but that's where my boundary is.

I do find it really, really moving. The griefs people carry around make you look at the world slightly differently. And you know yourself when you've been through something.

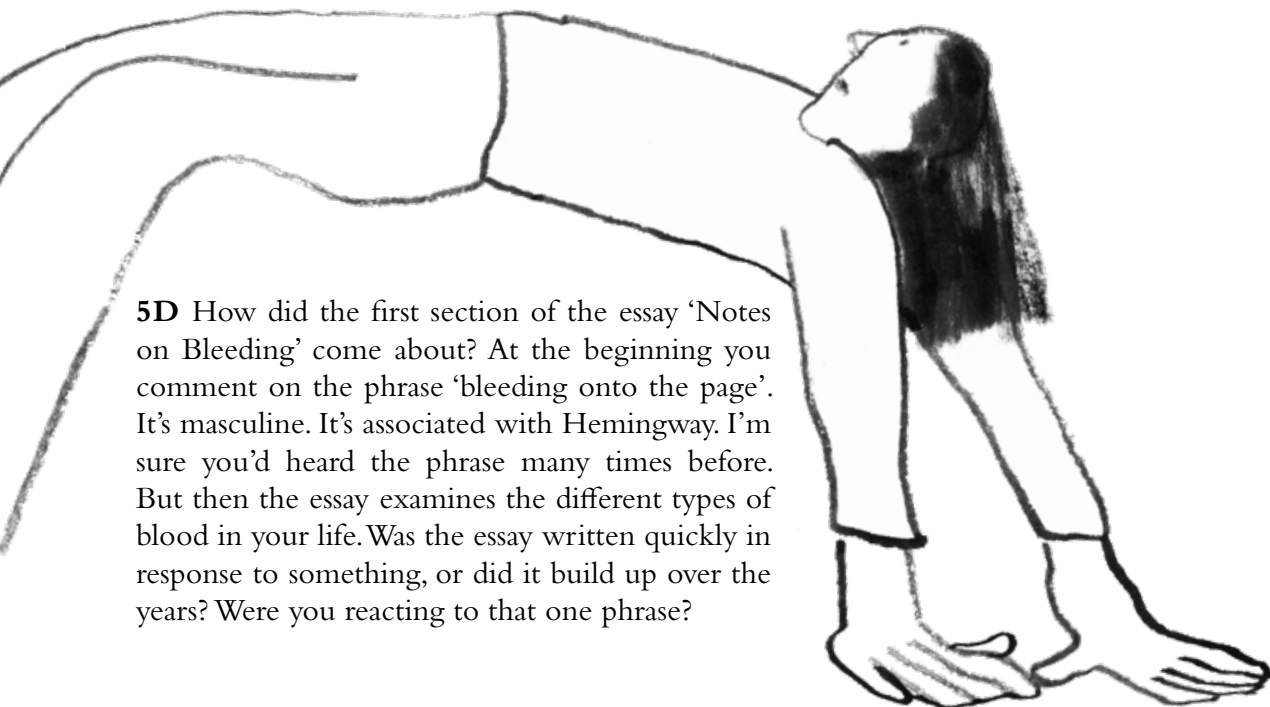
I work in a really big institution. I remember after my niece died, walking through work, passing hundreds of people a day who I don't know, and I remember thinking, 'Wow, what if each person I pass has something like this? Is carrying something like this?' You have a completely different view of how we work as a community.

EP I was at a conference, sitting listening to some appalling patriarch at the front of the room and I thought, 'I'm just done.' And I started writing. He was giving a lecture about a female writer. He was conflating the writer and the character and it deeply irritated me, as if, again, women could only write out of their own bodies, or out of their own experience. And he was all about feelings and how women manage – female writers manage – to put feelings down on the page.

The worst part of it was he thought by talking about female writing he was being some feminist. And lots of people in the room were sitting, nodding. I was sitting in the room going, 'What?' So, I just started writing. I had thought it was a Hemingway quote, but apparently it's non-attributable.

That's why it just says vaguely, 'the male writer who penned this phrase'. But it seemed to me to equate writing with this hyper-masculine approach. And that's why it's associated with Hemingway. It was to do with war and those kinds of wounds and bleeding. I just thought, 'Well, let's go for it and see where this takes me.'

5D How did the first section of the essay 'Notes on Bleeding' come about? At the beginning you comment on the phrase 'bleeding onto the page'. It's masculine. It's associated with Hemingway. I'm sure you'd heard the phrase many times before. But then the essay examines the different types of blood in your life. Was the essay written quickly in response to something, or did it build up over the years? Were you reacting to that one phrase?



The essay was meant to be about how women champion each other, but also how women fall into traps of becoming competitive with each other. It ended up actually becoming, as you know, a treatise on my body, which I never thought I would write, but it just seemed what was called for.

5D Just to go back to the initial moment: what were you writing on at that conference? Did you have a notebook with you?

EP That's part of the joke of the title. I write on every scrap of paper. I literally have this pile of notes to self. I think it was written on the back of my conference paper. The palimpsestic nature of writing. If I were being pretentious about it.

5D Then there's the verb choice too when you come to describing blood. The squelching ...

EP You've got to! Actually loads of those verbs were hard to get. I was trying to describe blood and was running out of words. Ferrous ... Just trying to think of ways of getting across the visceral experience of what it smells like as well as what it feels like. So I was reaching for the thesaurus at various points. That idea of it being something disgusting. I quite like writing about disgusting things.

5D Do you have favourite writers you wish could have similarly turned their gaze back on themselves?

EP To do that you have to begin with the premise that your body is a valid subject for discussion. Most of us don't feel that way. I had to be coached the whole way through by the editors. I kept saying, 'No one is going to read this. This is unbelievable. I can't believe the solipsism of writing about myself.' And they were like, 'You're not writing

about yourself, you're writing about everybody. Try to forget an audience.' It's really hard to forget an audience when you're writing about yourself. You can get on your soapbox if you're writing about the rest of the world.

It comes down to the risk of writing about yourself as an embodied person when you're trying to operate in a world that pigeonholes women as their bodies and devalues them as a result. I'm always fascinated by Joan Didion's work and how very rarely her body sneaks in. Because she gets migraines she has one essay about migraines. But it's very rare. In *The White Album* you get a reference to her being physically ill and not feeling up to it, but then she shifts very quickly to what that means for her writing and her writing schedule. I sometimes feel like the body is this thing that hovers on the edge of lots of women's writing, non-fiction writing, as if it's not something that they can even really talk about.

I was always struck reading Zadie Smith's work how sometimes she'll allude to high heels and wearing high heels and taking them off because



they're painful. Maybe I'm fascinated because I don't wear high heels. Again, in that one image, the idea of the pain of performing as a woman is held up. It's not a significant part of either of their writing, but there are these tiny little moments.

5D In 'Notes on Bleeding' I got the sense you were implying that some writing can begin to counter the onslaught of imagery women are subjected to.

EP I think that's very deliberate, the setting up of writing, or thinking, as a way of opting out of the visual and cultural narrative – the unspoken rules we have to unlearn. I think of writing as a form of thinking. By putting writing on to the page, it's an extension of a thought process. You identify. You're able to create a critical distance and step back.

That essay was difficult to write. A crucial turning point for me in that essay was to identify the act of judgement that looks to be projected outwards. It's not. It's always projected inwards. That negative cheerleading of other women is actually of yourself. That was important for me to identify, something I would not have been able to articulate before I started writing.

I do think that there are lots of performances of femininity that are physically really bad for women, really unhealthy. And at the same time I have to say

that women are smart enough to make their own decisions. So you're caught in that double bind, saying, 'This is my subject position, but that's OK. You can go and do your own thing, even though I think it's potentially troublesome or troubling.'

So again, trying to resolve this. I don't think you can. It's really false if you come up with a pat explanation. You have to allow for there to be differences, and I think that that's what good feminism is, even for me.

Even still, there are some things that were off limits. I had to decide they were off limits. And then there are other things where I think, you just have to grit your teeth and go out there, and say, 'This is what's right for me.'

5D Is this sort of writing also a way of rehearsing future defiance? In the essay 'This is Not on the Exam', you describe a faculty chair who makes demeaning comments towards you, and you write about feeling ashamed that you didn't object. Is there a way to use the page to examine the incidents that can and do often recur in the lives of women?

EP Yes. Interestingly I was at an event where I did a reading for creative writing MA students, and one of the questions from a woman was: 'What do I say when that happens, because it happens all the time?' And there were a lot of people in the room nodding.

I didn't really have an answer for her, but I do think that you need an answer. What I would say is those scenarios are pre-scripted. This is again part of what we have to unlearn. And that script goes: objectionable person says something sexist. The rest of us get uncomfortable and the person about whom it is being said stays silent.

And that is a form of tact. Tactfulness is, oddly, designed to protect people's feelings and not be





disruptive, to avoid conflict. But actually tactfulness is a kind of silence. And as a result you have to create your own untactful script that you then pre-script in order to replace the other script so that you can come ready. You think, 'Right, if somebody says something, this is what I will say.' You have to have your response ready because in the moment you will freeze.

In the moment I tend to freeze or just think, 'I want to get past this.' And that collective denial is on one level really superficial, but on another level it's so pervasive, it's so repetitive, that it leaks into other environments as well.

So I think that word 'script' is a useful term to think about how we encounter scripts all the time that are pre-made. We have to have our own way of responding with our own scripted messages.

The avenues are limited. You think, right, do I get angry? Do I risk looking like the irrational person? What I have found is the only way to respond is to say, 'I'm sorry, I have no idea what you mean.' You take them seriously, oddly. 'Could you possibly explain that to me because I have no idea what you mean?'

And then they get embarrassed and they're like: OK, fine. You have to do that. You have to somehow find a way of shifting the embarrassment from you on to them. And then there are people who are bulletproof and who will never be embarrassed.

5D Do you feel that Beckett has an influence on your writing? I remember reading how Beckett is important to you. He's always describing the body. For instance, the feet in *Waiting for Godot*.

EP His work is about the connection but also the separation between voice and body and about how the body betrays us in various ways, like Estragon's feet in *Waiting for Godot*, aching and changing and

swelling and so on at different times of the day. So how the body betrays us and is our weakness. But then how the body becomes contorted in his work at the same time. He's unable to move away from the body. So he's fascinated by how we punish bodies and how we think about bodies.

I'm really fascinated by the way in which the body is constantly restricted in Beckett and yet it continues to exist. He cannot get rid of it all. He can bury Winnie in a mound of sand up to her neck, but we know that her body is still there under the sand. The continuity of the body is, I think, really powerful in Beckett.

I teach his plays all the time and I have students who go, 'What is this about?' They get really bothered because there's no plot. I'd never read Beckett before I went to see *Endgame* and I remember thinking, 'Oh, I get it. This is about life, right?' I think it's quite realistic. I know he's an avant-garde playwright but it seems to me to be completely normal, about how we feel, and think, and feel alone and lost and not seen, and how there are stories that we need to tell and nobody wants to listen to us. We're all abandoned in this sea of nihilism. It seemed to me to fit. I was eighteen, sitting there going, 'Yep, that looks like life.' I'm sure that says something terrible about me ...

5D I felt like the last line in your book is a tribute to Beckett in some ways. Over the course of the book, after this self-examination and acknowledgement of pain, you state that you can be afraid but you're going to go ahead. You're going to do it anyway.

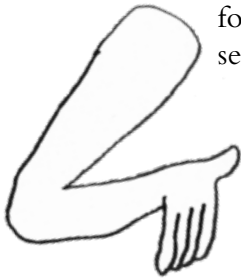
EP And then of course Beckett uses Berkeley's theorem: 'To be is to be perceived.' That has got to be at the heart of all life writing, right? You are asking to be witnessed in some way.

Pelt

By Eley Williams



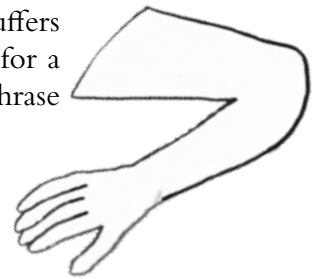
Hannah is trying to read but her eyes are listing across the page. For weeks now it's been a case of listing eyes and a brain grown brawny but listless in her head, both eyes and brain idling but untetherable. She imagines her optic nerve and her brain stem trailing off mid-sentence. The margins of the page in front of her act like pinball buffers for her attention and sightline. She tries to focus and it works for a second but then she realizes that she has mistaken the printed phrase



It came to her in a flash

as

It came to her in a flesh

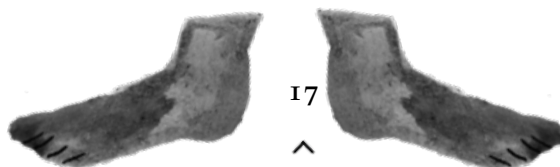


which means that just for a little lifetime she must consider *flesh* as onomatopoeic, the scrub and the flick and the sluice of the word, its yielding plashiness. Hannah shifts against her pillow as another lapse of thought folds on to this first lapse. The marrow of her thoughts fills and swills within her skin. My body is a temple, she thinks, and my *temples* indicate the site of headaches, the sides of my head behind the eyes, between the forehead and the ears. The lapsed thought as skin formed on a cooling drink, the bowed meniscus of an idea. 'Oh,' she says aloud, putting down her book, 'c'mon. Concentrate,' but the thought begins to thrash and flail. Hannah wonders whether – lying here beneath the skylight and all this time spent watching fleshless things like shadows and light and shadow-light cobwebs – she is *flesh-ing* in this bed.

flesh (v.)

1520s, 'to render (a hunting animal) eager for prey by rewarding it with flesh from a kill', with figurative extensions, from *flesh* (n.). Meaning 'to clothe or embody with flesh', with figurative extensions, is from 1660s.

The skin as interrogative, the skin as permissive, the skin as heft, the skin as loft, the skin as inscription and site of rupture. She picks up her book but immediately regrets it, so instead watches her thumbs keeping the pages in place and thinks about the quality of their grain and surface. She smooths a jagged piece of loosed thumb-skin (a *spill*? A *spell*? *Hangnail*? *Cuticle* or *eponychium*, the last from the Greek *ἐπί*,





meaning ‘on top of’, and *ὀνύχιον*, meaning ‘little claw’?). Then this line of thinking ricochets from nowhere across her memory, disembodied but brawling: ‘Parchment is affected by its environment and changes in humidity, which can cause buckling.’ Material as active participant; skin as shifting, altered, adaptive tissue.



Hannah has been in bed for a week. She knows the different textures and pressures and eccentric lumps of her bed like the back of her hand. Better. She does not know the back of her hand very well at all. One speaks of toughening up, of being callous, or calloused. She has been reading about bookbinding. Her friend texts her a picture of a tree that is so old it has subsumed the wrought iron of a nearby fence into the flesh of its living trunk. Hannah turns again against her pillows so that her skin does not get any funny ideas and become one with her bed through proximity and hotching inaction. Hannah knows that you can tell the age of a tree by counting its exposed rings. Listlessly, this fact reminds her of something else she read once that will never be of any use to her: the zero-G environment of space causes the human spine to stretch, making a person slightly taller when unclaimed by gravity.



Every podcast she listens to seems to be sponsored by a mattress company: when did that start? Parchment is the processed material made of skin and traditionally used for the commitment of writing. To process: to be limed, scraped, put under tension. In the British Library, the oldest parchment in the country may be touched only with gloves. Hannah used to be in the British Library all the time before this bedriddenness. In the British Library, one might bring kid gloves, skin on skin, the pages turning and the touch engaged.

Hannah’s friend texts her another image. They do this occasionally, using the bed-stuck Hannah as a kind of embodied scrapbook. The picture shows a man who drove his truck for twenty years and sat with his head at an angle out of his vehicle’s window. When he came to retire, the side of his face that had always been in the sun was entirely different from the sunless side: the ruches of it, the bad-brittle parchment of its texture. The face as an open book, verso page, recto page, the skin as the story.



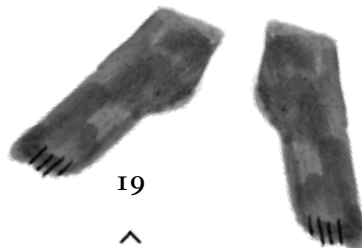
Hannah hates how useless she feels in her bed despite dedicating her time to the act of flesh. She wonders how she might be useful. In order to learn about the processes of the human body and its anat-





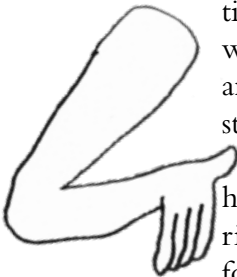
omy, for hundreds of years doctors relied on cadavers and inert flesh in order to explicate what lies within. For Hannah, this is linked with the reports of so-called ‘bodysnatching’, the illegal trade in dead bodies that had been disinterred and provided medical schools with their for-the-slab learning tools. The most famous of these bodysnatchers might be Williams Burke and Hare. Skim-read, skin-red, the word *morbidity* meaning ‘diseased state’. A book said to be made from Burke’s actual tanned skin can be seen at the Surgeons’ Hall Museums in Edinburgh; a calling-card case made from skin taken from the back of his left hand fetched £1,050 at auction in 1988. Hannah wonders what she and her bed would make on eBay. Skin and its contents as kitsch, as memorabilia, as distasteful, as a simile run away with itself, bodies as something unspooling and laid bare, flushed through and flushing hot with every thought and every digression. Skin as my trivia, Hannah doesn’t think. My thought-bubbles and speech-bubbles made manifest or stark in the attempt of expression.

Hannah picks up her phone and takes a picture of herself looking bored. Before she sends it to her friend, she zooms in on her face. Not on her expression, but on an inch of skin until it fills the screen. It doesn’t look soft or hard or in focus or blurry. She wishes, not for the first time, that there was an X-ray app on her phone that she could use to filter her self-portraits, and instead of her outside appearance she could send a little portrait of her organs’ arrangement or enviable bone density. She knows that an *écorché* is the name given in art and anatomy to a figure that is drawn, painted or sculpted in a way that reveals the muscles of a body entirely devoid of skin. You can see them in medical textbooks or accompanying articles, or in the title sequence of *Grey’s Anatomy* reruns: a depiction of the human body where the skin has been peeled back or is quite absent in order that the inner truths of tissue and bone and other segueing finickinesses of anatomy are on full display. Architect, linguist and cryptographer Leon Battista Alberti wrote that if painters intended to depict a nude figure they must first arrange the muscles and bones according to correct anatomical arrangement. Once this creation of porches and dumb-waiters and girders is completed, only then can the artist add flesh to the form. The term *écorché* literally means *flayed* – these skinless figures communicate, and reveal, their outermost protection denied to them. Hannah takes another photo where she points at her

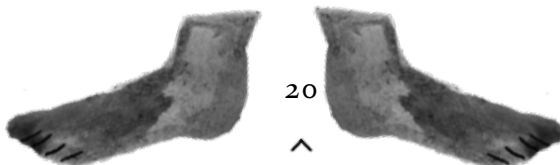




chin for no good reason. There is a gentle revulsion. In some depictions, the figure of the *écorché* is shown pointing to itself, to clarify what is to be explored. The word *écorché* has two acute accents: their angle enacts the lifting of the dermis. Hannah clicks send on the text, stares at the cover of her book and considers sleeping.



All in all she will forget this boredom. She will forget this hyper-awareness of her body and how it got under her skin and harried her from within and without, and without, and without. She will forget that she was scared of sleep where her body was absurd and full of joists and gristled-over angles. She'll forget her dreams were only of napes and Mandelbrot-fractal dewlaps, a foot-long tragus and feet-deep canthus. She'll forget all that. As it is, Hannah in bed can barely move for her body but she can sleep, at least, with no skin in the game and at full pelt.



God's Photograph

By Joe Stretch



Perhaps someone called it that casually and it caught on. It describes the event well, I think. It was as if God looked down from heaven and photographed us, using a camera with a devastating flash.

When I see how it affected people – or when I hear someone famous describing how they have coped – I never feel entirely negative.

I was dealing with a difficult divorce. I'd been made redundant by the newspaper and was living in a house I intended to renovate and sell. Then, after a year of no contact, Hannah and Emily began to visit. Not seeing them had been agony. I still had strong feelings for their mum, too – for a while I'd slept on a bedsheet we stole from our honeymoon hotel. But, generally, I'd learnt to accept the situation.

I hardly recognized the girls the first time they came north. They'd grown. They were dressed in leggings and faux-leather jackets. Hannah, my eldest, had turned thirteen during the divorce, but looked older. I'd been standing on the station platform, looking out for two little girls with plain faces and simple hair.

Kevin, my ex-wife's new man, had bought Hannah a pair of fur-lined suede boots. She was quick to show me. We were still on the platform, in fact. She stuck out her foot, bent her leg at the knee, and posed for me.

Kevin played rhythm guitar in one of those 'didn't-quite-make-it' nineties bands. I'd actually bought his first single, in my twenties. Once, not long after my wife had gone to live with him, he called me and I recited his lyrics to him sarcastically. That was a crazy thing to do, really.

After his music career failed he'd started a business selling flip-flops and he'd made a lot of money. The price of the boots was nothing to him.

'Very nice,' I said to Hannah.

The girls visited every month or so, just for a weekend. When I suggested activities, Hannah would inevitably grimace, and Emily tended to copy, irrespective of how she felt deep down. The only thing Hannah truly enjoyed was shopping and occasionally I'd just crumble and drive to the Trafford Centre. I remember once, on their second or third visit, I gave them each ten pounds and sat in the food court while they shopped. I watched a Cirque du Soleil show on a big muted television – foreign individuals dangling on lengths of colourful fabric.

When the girls returned they were weighed down with bags. They'd each bought the calendar of a young singer they liked. For March, the singer wore a pair of white underpants and sat frowning on a four-poster bed. He was incredibly muscular. I suggested they draw smiley faces on the dates when they'd be visiting me, or at least write 'Dad'. But they told me the calendar was for other things.

After they left, I discovered an item of Hannah's clothing. Kevin phoned and asked if I'd found anything. I said I hadn't. I was embarrassed to be discussing it with him. I denied all knowledge of the lost item, which weakened my position.

Not long before Christmas Kevin called again, this time to discuss a roller disco. Hannah had been invited to one and it fell on a weekend when the



girls were due to be with me. I'd planned to have an early Christmas with them. A pretend Christmas Day.

'She needs this,' Kevin said, about the roller disco. He talked about her self-confidence, which struck me as manipulative.

'She's comfort eating,' he said.

'Is she?' I said.

He believed that older boys wouldn't attend the roller disco. I asked how he could be so naive. I started talking about what I called 'the base reality of things'. In response, Kevin asked about an incident between me and Hannah at a supermarket. So I knew they'd been reporting to him. I retaliated with some stuff about Kevin's band. He laughed it off. I was just extremely sad about my Christmas plan.

The supermarket incident occurred on the Saturday of their previous visit. After a glum trip to a leisure centre I'd decided to do a shop. We were looking for cereal, but ended up in the clothes aisle. I was trying to get my bearings when I heard Hannah and Emily sniggering. Hannah had taken a fur-lined suede boot from the shelf. She was pretending she preferred the supermarket boot to her own pair. It was the first bit of enthusiasm she'd shown all day and Emily was getting involved too, egging Hannah on by laughing.

'Take off your boots, Hannah,' I said. I took a pen and a piece of paper from my rucksack. 'Now,' I said.

People were watching.

I asked Emily to identify the differences between the supermarket boot and Hannah's pair.

'Don't do it,' Hannah said to her sister.

'Come on,' I said. 'I'm waiting.'

There were no differences, of course, except for the branding, which I didn't bother to note down, and the price.

The problem was they didn't have a friendship circle up here. They were on their phones a lot. Worried they were missing out.

Then, on the weekend of the cancelled Christmas, God took his photograph.

Without the girls to entertain, my aim was to keep myself busy. I got up early on the Saturday to sand the skirting boards, paint the doorstep and steam the woodchip from the living-room walls. Around mid-morning I checked on Hannah's various profiles. There was a lot of excitement about the roller disco, and a few crude remarks. Later, mid-afternoon, I stood at my bedroom window, wondering where the morning had gone. On the street outside, children took turns jumping off the kerb on scooters. It was unspectacular, but I watched them, and so I was inside the house when it happened.

God's Photograph – it really does describe the event perfectly, I think. The powerful flash. The temporary blindness. And then – and I suppose this is where the metaphor falters – the sound of screaming as the white heat altered us.

I lay in a bath of cold water, breathing through a child's snorkel. I felt the new skin around my face cool and set. I thought about ways I could reach my girls.

A week later, I called them.



Emily's voice had deepened. She'd been at home on the computer when it happened. I asked where her sister had been. She confided that Hannah had been with a boy in the car park of the roller disco.

'An older boy?' I asked.

'She's lost her eyelids, Dad,' Emily said. 'Has to use drops.'

She passed the phone to Kevin after a while. He wanted to take my ex-wife away for a weekend, as a treat, to the place where she grew up. She was struggling, apparently. 'Aren't we all,' I said, but not aggressively. There was a good tone to our conversation. People were coming together. Even people like me and Kevin, who were very different kinds of men. The plan was for Kevin to drive the girls as far as a Midlands service station. I agreed to meet them there.

I opted for redundancy when the newspaper went digital. The work was bogging me down and I didn't want to spend my life on the Internet. But the switch to property wasn't yielding the income I'd hoped for. The front wall of the house had started to bow. I'd taken all the interior doors off to have them dipped and hadn't bothered to pick them up from the dipping yard.

In February I drove to the service station. I arrived early, sat in my car and listened to the radio. I went and browsed the magazines, then went for a pee. The toilets stank of shit and the hand-dryer was jammed on. All the mirrors were smashed but I could still just about see myself.

I called a number that was scratched into a cubicle door, which was a crazy thing to do. A woman answered. I could hear a dog barking in the background and what sounded like a television.

'Who is this?' she said. Her voice was very deep indeed.

'What do you look like?' I asked.

'Who is this?' she said.

'Describe it to me.'

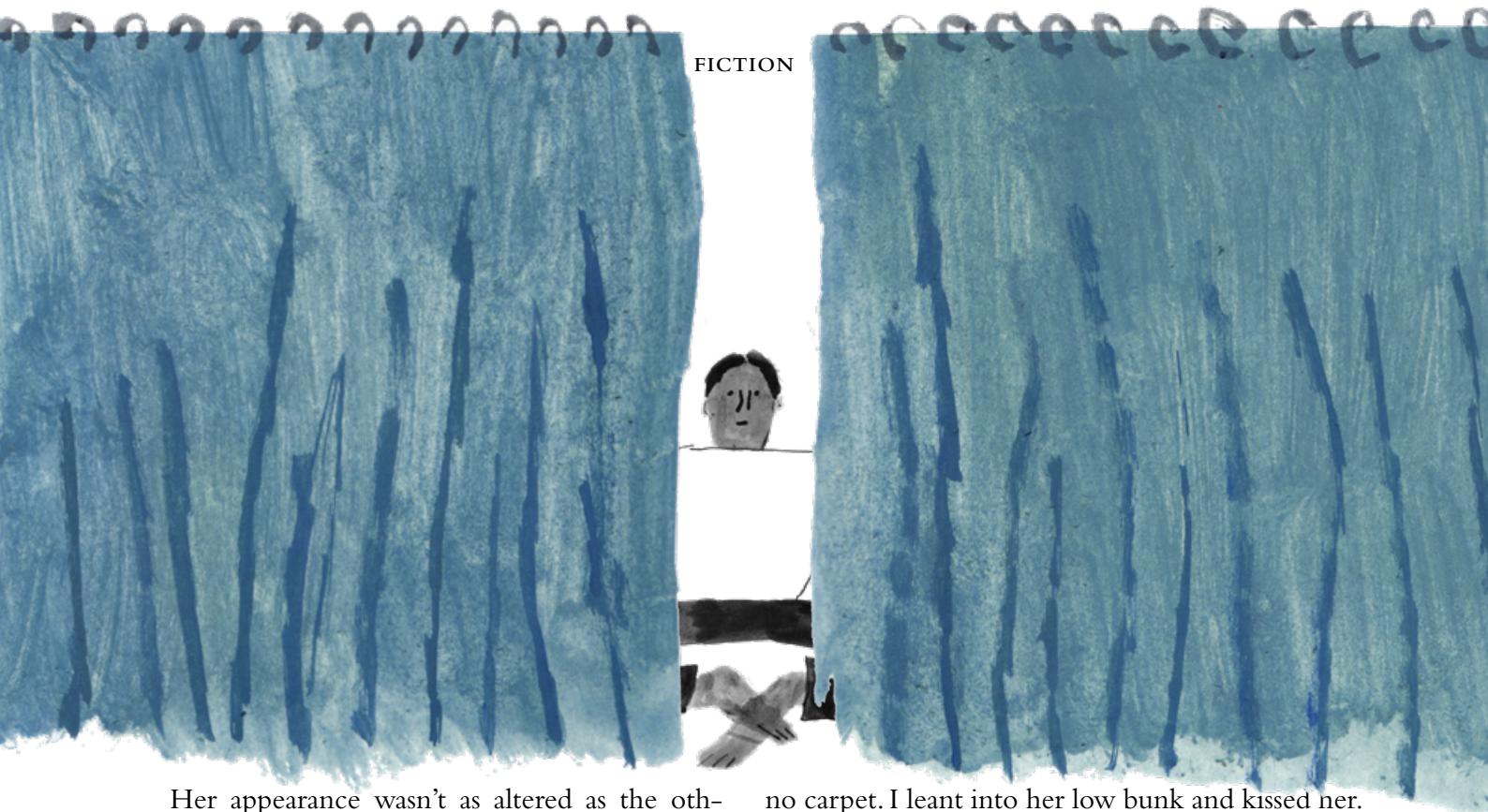
It was night when Kevin drove his people-carrier into the car park. It was spitting. We shook hands in the cone-shaped beams of his headlights. He'd stretched an old beanie over his head. It was always interesting to see how someone had been affected. My ex-wife stayed in the passenger seat, wearing a blouse and blazer, her face obscured by reflected light.

'Sorry we're late,' Kevin said.

He had been a handsome man. In the nineties, his band were criticized for how handsome they were. Journalists accused them of being manufactured, which was a terrible thing back then. Others felt it was their looks that had earned them a record deal, not their music. That was unfair, I think.

'No problem,' I said.

A rear door of the people-carrier opened. Hannah crossed straight into my car without looking at me. It was dark, but I saw that she'd ballooned. Emily climbed out and ran to me. She was too old for me to lift up really, but I held her for a second then let her slowly slide down.



Her appearance wasn't as altered as the others. She'd been indoors, as I had. She said she was excited to see the house. The depth of her voice was quite shocking. 'Is it finished, Daddy?' she said. I squeezed her shoulder and told her to go and join her sister.

I looked at my ex-wife, at her blouse and blazer at least. I hoped she might lean forward so I could see her face, but she just folded her arms.

'Hannah sleeps in a mask.' Kevin was walking back to his people-carrier. 'Emily's no problem at all.'

'Enjoy your trip.' I nodded. 'It's a beautiful area.'

The big news on the drive north was that a boy from Hannah's year had sent Emily a Valentine's card. He'd recorded what Hannah called 'a love message', which played whenever the card opened. Emily was embarrassed, of course, and refused to tell me what exactly the boy had said.

Hannah sat slumped on the back seat. The truth is, until she started bingeing, she'd been all set to become a healthy young woman. Every hundred yards or so the motorway lights lit her face. She tilted her head and administered eye drops. She'd used a bronze foundation to blend the new part of her face with the old.

'All right back there?'

They were both zonked by the time we got home. I'd made up the bunk beds. They refused to get undressed in a room without a door, so I nailed the old bedsheet to the frame, as a kind of curtain. I promised to do the same in the bathroom in the morning. Emily said she didn't mind that there was

no carpet. I leant into her low bunk and kissed her.

'I'm thinking shopping tomorrow,' I said. 'Young ladies?'

I drew level with Hannah's bunk. She was applying her eye drops. She'd got into bed without removing her clothes. Her suede boots had been flung on to the floor. They were completely worn out.

'Hannah?'

She shifted her weight beneath the covers and the brackets of the bed creaked softly.

'Shouldn't you have a quick wash? Rinse the make-up off?'

Her face snapped towards me. Her eyes blood-shot, blinkless – an expression of endless startlement. But we all looked that way, to varying degrees.

Emily peered out from the bottom bunk. 'She doesn't have to,' she whispered.

'Very well,' I said.

Hannah guided the plastic fittings of her sleep mask into her eye sockets. She pulled the strap tight and fastened it. Her make-up was peeling. The stump of her tongue emerged and tried to moisten where her lips had been.

'Good night,' I said, 'young ladies.'

I stood in the dark of the landing, not quite ready to go downstairs. After a while, a boy's voice came from the girls' room. I stepped close to the bedsheet and listened. He spoke for about ten or fifteen seconds, no more. His speech impediment was probably connected to disfigurement, though not necessarily. The thing was – what hurt – was that I related to so much of what he said. Much of



it was the sort of thing I'd like to tell Emily and Hannah. That I very much admired them. That they seemed very nice and funny. That I'd like to hang out with them, if they wanted to.

I thought about the things we might do in the morning. *Anything they wanted* – that was my plan. Emily must have been closing and opening the Valentine's card because the love message kept playing. And I must say I felt for Hannah, lying there in her mask, listening.



Jana Prikryl

Got

off a stop early but no harm.
A pleasant walk. This is a different place.
Lady at the counter doesn't know it either,
no use asking.
Lucky you turned when you did
and saw the ceiling of the Brooklyn Bridge
not ten feet above. Never noticed
the whole thing's umber, made of brownstone.
How same this town is, same as itself, unyielding.
It gives you time, almost, to make
observations such as this, it draws them out
like the East River pretending
to be a river when it's merely an appetite.
I'll take it from here, you think, I know the way.
Just barely convincing.
Then you saw St. Peter's down below, confirming
this is Dumbo
and thought yes, finally they've made it right
with Malta: set forth on the long downward path
of sandy steps a touch too long and shallow
for human locomotion faster than deep reluctance
southwest, Spanish gravel, attractive, toward the church,
when houses along the way start exploding.

Fit

It's the magnetic nearness to centres
of power that makes nearness a kind
of sameness and sends the needles haywire,
ordeal to just find a good tailor.

That Russian lady without
a huge amount of tact knew what to do
with a velvet dress the colour of fire
bought on consignment and the handsome

Algerian near Tompkins Square
all hands-off deference carved
a linen dress three sizes too big to just
my shapes and knobs, and then I sent

my boyfriend there with a Hugo Boss
suit equally too big, and he hacked it
into something like a joke so that
was the end of that.

A shy person so razed
by the occasional leap beyond shyness that years
pass before she can smooth the bodice
of her dress down with both hands,

at last convinced being ridiculous
is not what they could accuse her of.
Shyness, not reserve—the reserved have less
to fear of what comes next,

the meadows, the shepherds
discoursing on the fitness
of the lobby of the Pierre for their
upland bivouacs—the reserved not only

sidestep facts but deal in forms
the shy find beneath them, scattered
about underfoot,
common.

Her Lovely Meaningless Face

Sara Collins on *Wide Sargasso Sea*

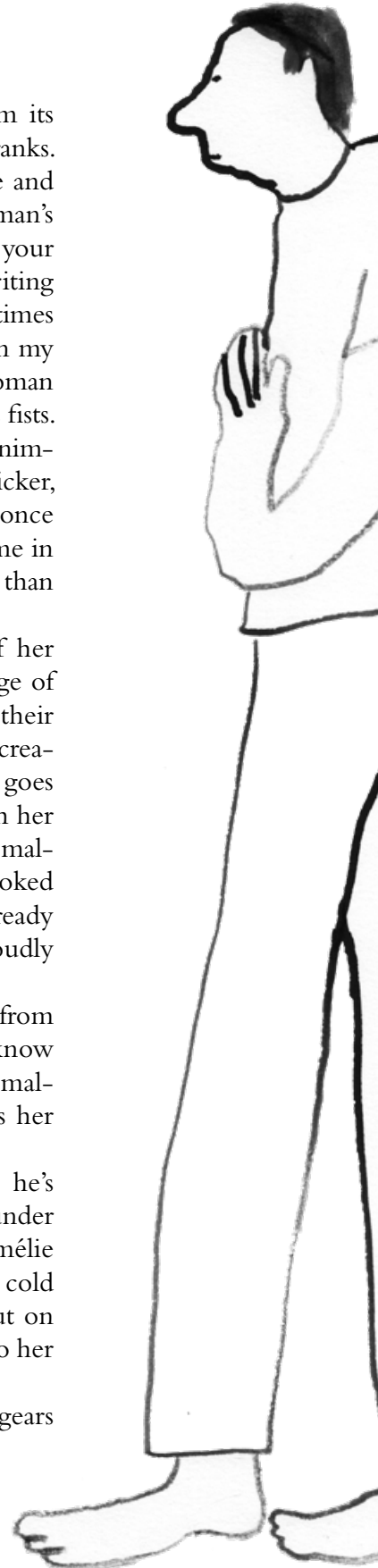
The deep satisfaction of reading *Wide Sargasso Sea* comes from its pains as well as its pleasures. All those white people closing ranks. Edward Rochester chipping away at Antoinette Cosway's name and her sanity. Jane Eyre's happiness negotiated over another woman's dead body. It feels dangerous to read, as if it could chase away your own sanity. And it's Jean Rhys's best novel, no contest. While writing my own novel I found myself drawn again and again to it, sometimes only to look at the cover of the W. W. Norton edition I keep on my desk. It's a Pierre Mornet illustration: in the foreground, a woman reclining in a white slip looks out from a bed of hibiscuses big as fists. There's a burning plantation house in the distance, wearing a nimbus of fire. The woman's skin seems to grow darker, her lips thicker, the more you stare at her. Her shape seems to shift. Her gaze at once mournful and erotic and flat. Something about her always puts me in mind of Amélie, the 'half-caste' housemaid who is nothing more than a bit player in Rhys's novel.

When I return to the book now, it's usually in search of her and not the ill-fated Antoinette. Amélie appears on the first page of Rochester's narrative. She travels with him and Antoinette on their rain-soaked honeymoon journey up to Granbois: a 'lovely little creature but sly, spiteful, malignant perhaps'. The minute Antoinette goes off to a local woman's house, 'Amélie, who had been sitting with her back to us, turned round. Her expression was so full of delighted malice, so intelligent, above all so intimate, that I felt ashamed and looked away.' Only the first few pages of Rochester's narrative and already this sudden, shocking, sexual pinch, his pulse drumming more loudly in response to the maid than to his own wife.

Then Amélie does nothing much for pages and pages, apart from sweeping up some dead moths and delivering letters. But we know what's going to happen. We knew it the moment her delighted malice crept into Rochester's text. She's the sexual pot-stirrer; it's her job to come back and stir that pot.

Along comes the afternoon when Rochester's convinced he's been poisoned. After running himself ragged and falling asleep under the wild orange tree, he sits on the bed, waiting: 'for I knew Amélie would come'. Sure enough, she does. She spoon-feeds him cold chicken and fruit, and: 'Her arm behind my head was warm but on the outside when I touched it was cool, almost cold. I looked into her lovely meaningless face, sat up and pushed the plate away.'

Here I stop, reread, and stop again, while the novel changes gears





with that single phrase: *Her lovely meaningless face*. The way those words work on me is visceral, not sensory, dredging up old, sour annoyances. For this is the clichéd story of the Caribbean: the story of men like Rochester helping themselves to women like Amélie. The lord of the manor, the dark maid, his fair wife next door, with her ear (and the rest of her unloved flesh) pressed to the wall, straining both to hear them and to block them out.

The scene continues. Rochester dishes out money and asks Amélie about her plans for her future. She gives him a needle-thin response: 'She wanted to go to Rio. There were rich men in Rio.' First, she plans to walk to Massacre: 'My legs strong enough to carry me.'

Her legs call to mind her body. The body that will endure the hinted-at transactions with all those rich Rio men. But her face (*lovely, meaningless*), the animating part of her, with all its malice and intelligence, remains unremarked upon. Rochester's only response to it has been to look away.

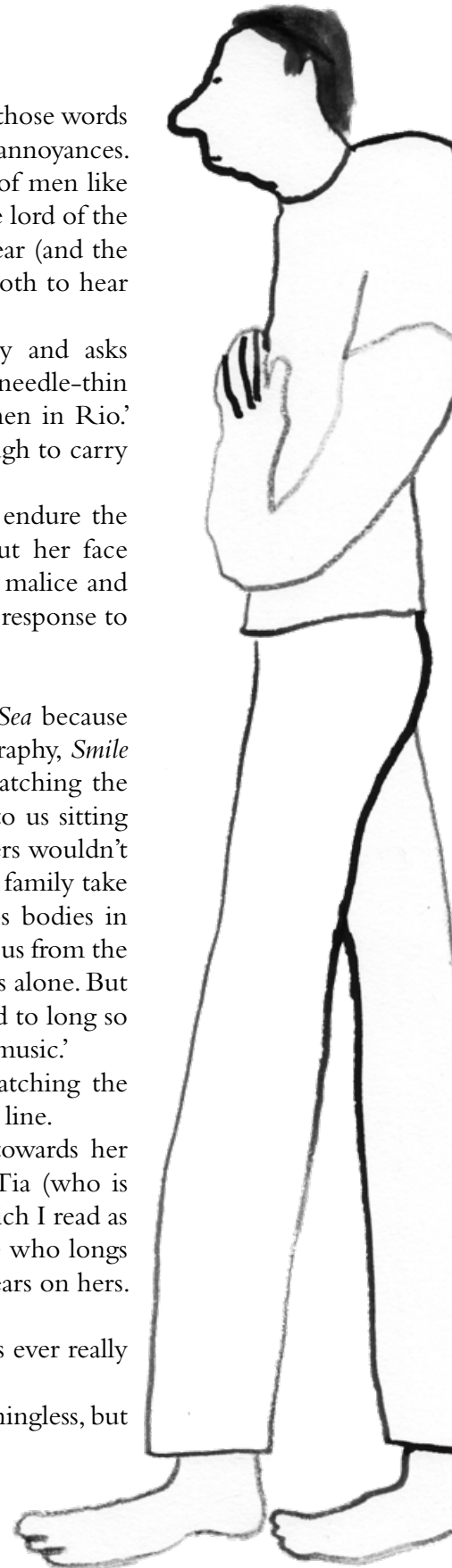
It seems to me that Jean Rhys wrote *Wide Sargasso Sea* because she knew that skin can drive you mad. In her autobiography, *Smile Please*, she recounts an early experience in Dominica watching the carnival through an open window: 'The life surged up to us sitting stiff and well-behaved, looking on.' Rhys knew the dancers wouldn't welcome her, because she was white, nor would her own family take kindly to her joining in. She's telling us that race keeps bodies in their separate ranks. This is how bodies work. They cleave us from the world and each other. They make us lonely. They make us alone. But then her text is pierced by a sudden, colicky desire: 'I used to long so fiercely to be black and to dance, too, in the sun, to that music.'

I'm arrested by that idea also: young Jean Rhys, watching the dancers, longing to be black. Her own body the dividing line.

Early in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, when Antoinette runs towards her friend Tia in the aftermath of the fire at Coulibri and Tia (who is black) throws a stone at her, there's a similar moment, which I read as a suggestion that Antoinette, like Rhys, is a white Creole who longs to be black: 'We stared at each other, blood on my face, tears on hers. It was as if I saw myself. Like in a looking glass.'

Has *any* white Creole in possession of all her faculties ever really longed (fiercely or otherwise) to be black?

This is not a rhetorical question. Skin should be meaningless, but



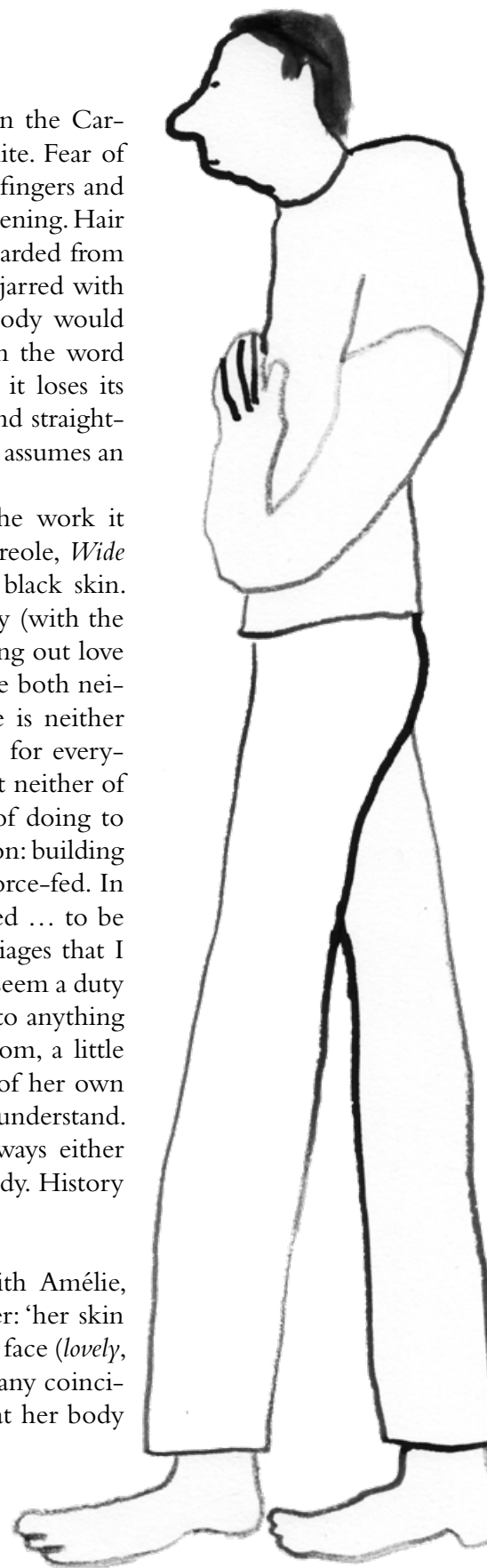


most of the white Creoles I knew growing up in the Caribbean wasted a lot of their energy on being white. Fear of becoming black was the wolf at the door. Babies' fingers and toes were plucked over religiously for signs of darkening. Hair was monitored for the slightest kink. Skin was guarded from the sun with crib-learned paranoia. Rhys's desire jarred with all this. How could she know the way a black body would mediate her experience of the world? That when the word 'Creole' slips from a white body to a black one it loses its benevolence? Not to mention all the bleaching and straightening and contorting required before a black body assumes an acceptable shape.

As much as I hold the novel dear, for all the work it does to penetrate the experience of the white Creole, *Wide Sargasso Sea* never seems to cross the border of black skin. Black bodies in the novel are either strong or sexy (with the exception of the old woman, Christophine, handing out love potions and aphorisms). Amélie and Antoinette are both neither-nor: Amélie is mixed race, while Antoinette is neither white enough for the English nor 'black' enough for everyone else. They both stand outside closed ranks that neither of them can join. Yet Rhys is in some ways guilty of doing to Amélie what Charlotte Brontë did to Bertha Mason: building her from the stale images she herself had been force-fed. In her autobiography, Rhys wrote: 'Black girls seemed ... to be perfectly free. Children swarmed but negro marriages that I knew of were comparatively rare. Marriage didn't seem a duty with them as it was with us.' This doesn't add up to anything more than simply craving a kind of sexual freedom, a little time off from the supposed stiff good behaviour of her own 'kind'. Wanting something she didn't, or couldn't, understand. The black body, always sly, lascivious or lazy. Always either overlooked or mercilessly patrolled. Always all body. History its own unique affliction.

How lovely *our* bodies are, how meaningless.

The morning after his sexual encounter with Amélie, Rochester begins to '[feel] differently' towards her: 'her skin was darker, her lips thicker than I had thought.' Her face (*lovely, meaningless*) has undergone a metamorphosis. Is it any coincidence that he has 'no wish to touch her' now that her body



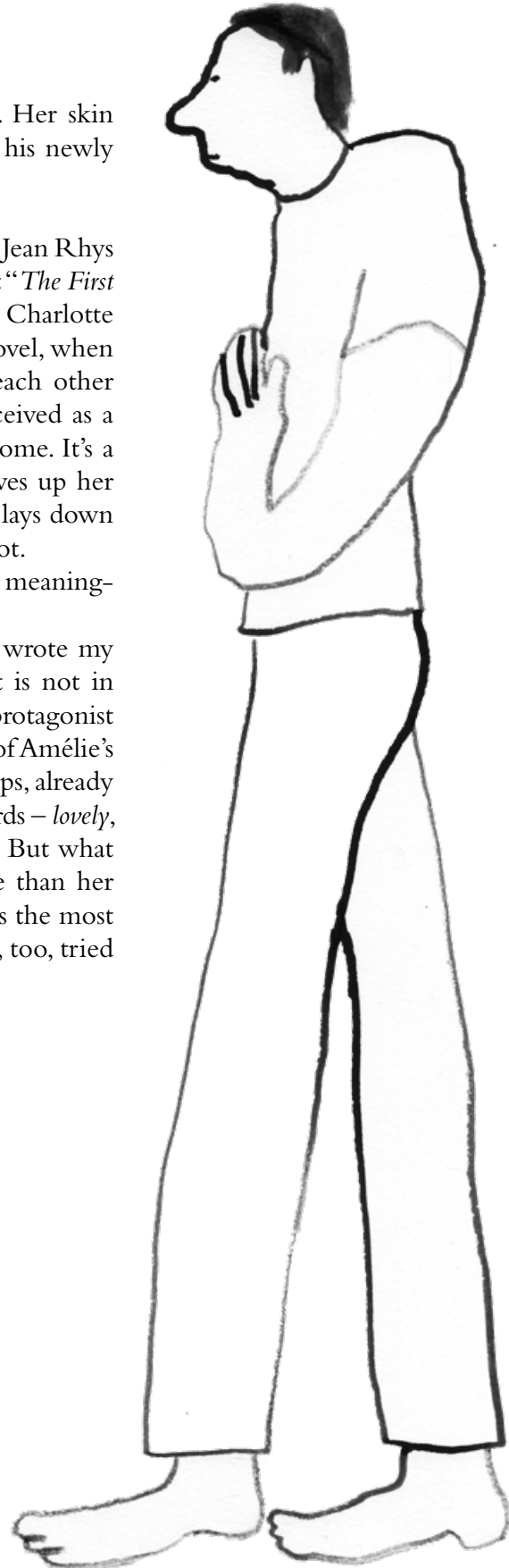


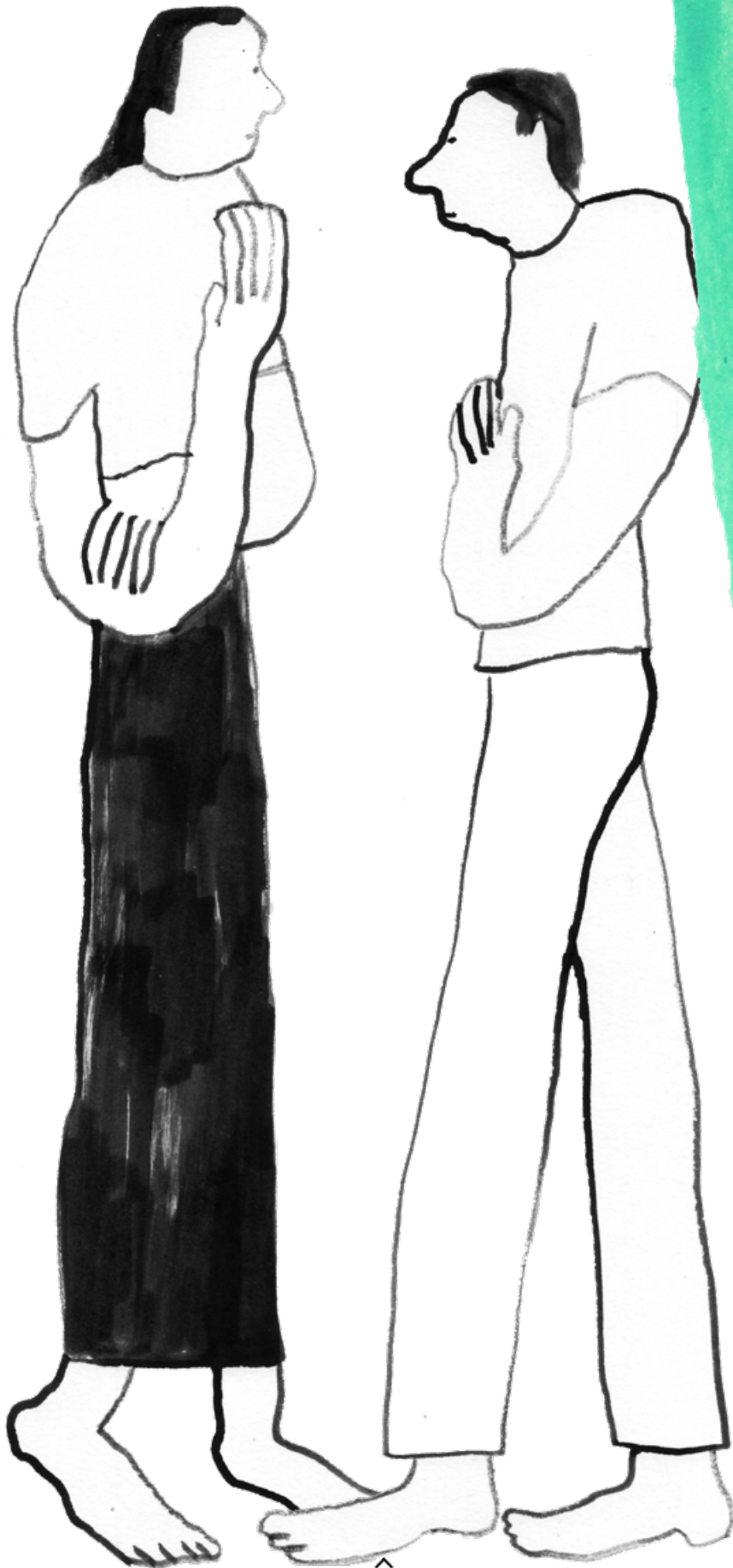
is asserting itself? Dark, and getting darker. Her skin coming between them, in a way that even his newly minted marriage did not.

While she was writing *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Jean Rhys said in a letter that she'd thought 'of calling it "*The First Mrs Rochester*" with profound apologies to Charlotte Brontë and a deep curtsy too'. In Rhys's novel, when Antoinette (now Bertha) and Jane startle each other in the hall at Thornfield, Antoinette is perceived as a ghost, which in a sense is what she has become. It's a figurative disembodiment. And then she gives up her body entirely, finally transcending skin. She lays down her life in service of Jane Eyre's marriage plot.

But what of Amélie? What of her lovely meaningless face?

With a curtsy and apology to Rhys, I wrote my own novel partly in response to Amélie. It is not in any way a retelling of Rhys's book, but my protagonist was loosely inspired by the lingering image of Amélie's face, already dark, and growing darker; her lips, already thick, and growing thicker. And by those words – *lovely, meaningless* – which chiselled up old angers. But what if I could make her mean something more than her body? What if the 'half-caste' housemaid was the most intelligent person in the room? What if she, too, tried to transcend her skin?











Nadia's Body

By Chris Killen



Please ensure that your statistics do not fluctuate too far above or below those recorded during your initial assessment.

Now that Nadia was no longer working, we had to start selling things. Our laptops. My phone. Most of our clothes save for two or three pairs each. We could buy them back afterwards, we reminded ourselves. Better versions even.

The night before, she had me help check her BMI one last time. We'd been using the bathroom scales she'd brought home from the flea market and the calculator app on her phone. The numbers on the dial were so tiny I had to get down on all fours to read them.

'It's still one twenty-four,' I said.

'You're sure?'

I did the calculation again, then a third time.

'I'm sure,' I said.

She climbed off the scales and I stayed for a while on my hands and knees watching her put her clothes back on, trying not to feel sorry for myself.

In the twenty-four hours before extraction please do not eat or drink anything other than water.

At her goodbye meal, Nadia ordered so much stuff for me that I felt worried I wouldn't be able to fit it all in: wraps, fried balls, glazed tubes with sweetly spiced paste inside.

'How is it?' she'd ask, sipping her water.

'It's good,' I'd say, trying to construct a smile that said *Thank you* and *I'm sorry* and *Obviously I wish it was me* all at the same time.

First thing she did when we got back was kick off her shoes and climb up on the scales again. I wordlessly got down on all fours and peered at the display.

'It's the same,' I said, resisting the urge to wrap my arms around her bare legs and burst into tears.

General anaesthetic will be used during the procedure. As with all work of this nature, some inherent risk is involved.

'We're ready for you now,' the nurse said early the next morning.

It was happening. It was finally happening. Here we were in a peach-coloured waiting room, which was nothing at all like I'd been imagining: less like a futuristic glass dome, more like a dentist's.

Nadia squeezed my hand.

'I'm guessing he can't come in too?' she said.

The nurse shook his head.

'In that case, see you in a month,' she said, smiling at me.

How was she holding it together?

'See you in a month,' I said in a voice that didn't sound like mine.

As she leant in to kiss me, I could still see the nurse in the doorway, holding his clipboard, watching us.

Dude, I wanted to say. Give us some privacy.

To find out more about our state-of-the-art storage facilities, click here for a guided tour.

Shamir was especially nice to me the whole month Nadia was away, even though I suppose we both knew I wouldn't be working for him once she came back. He gave me the best houses, the ones out in the hills with intercoms and huge driveways and expensively dressed people who actually tipped.

I felt glad to be out on my bike, riding around in the dark.

I tried to stay in the present moment, like the meditation app on the phone I'd sold used to tell me, to focus on things like the wind on my face and not riding over any shards of broken glass, and



most of all not to let my thoughts drift towards stuff like what Nadia's body was doing at that exact moment, or where Nadia was being kept in the meantime.

If I ever accidentally *did* picture her, it was as this cartoon brain in a jar. Which obviously wasn't how it worked. But that's what I pictured.

Sometimes, I'd arrive at an especially fancy house and as I approached the huge front door I'd get this ominous feeling that Nadia's body would be on the other side of it.

When I wasn't out on delivery, I attempted to be asleep as much as possible, although sometimes I'd just find myself standing there in the empty apartment, like a supporting character between scenes, listening to whatever miserable thing was going on in the alleyway.

You might find that full readjustment takes a few days. Restrict your normal activities and take plenty of rest.

I'd been expecting this big tearful reunion, but when I arrived to collect her, Nadia was so out of it she barely even acknowledged me.

'Just let her sleep it off,' the nurse said, easing her out of the wheelchair and handing her over like a Nadia-sized doll. It wasn't the same nurse as before but it might as well have been. Some sarcastic-looking dude in a pale blue gown, the kind of guy who wouldn't even look away while you kissed your girlfriend goodbye.

We took a Shutl home, Nadia lolling in and out of consciousness, her head bobbing against my shoulder.

'Does my hair look different?' she said at one point, tugging at the ends of it.

'I don't think so,' I said, although in truth it looked like someone had gone at it with scissors. But hair would grow out, I figured.

'What's that smell?' she asked a little later.

It was her, I realized: a weird mix of not washing and perfume, neither of which were things Nadia normally smelled like.

On the way up the stairs she stumbled then turned around and sat down heavily, pulling up the hem of her dress, moving in groggy slow motion.

'What's this?' she said, pointing out a fresh pink scar on her kneecap in the shape of a question mark minus the dot.

'It's nothing,' I said.

'Fuck,' she said a moment later while tonguing her teeth then opening her mouth to show me.

I peered in at the chipped front tooth: a tooth we could afford to fix now.

'Let's get you into bed,' I said, easing her back to her feet, then pushing her up the last of the stairs from behind, taking hold of her waist while I punched in the key code, suspecting that if I let go of her she'd actually topple all the way back down again.

I led her over to the bed, easing her down carefully on the edge of it and slipping off her shoes, then drawing the curtains.

'Where are the scales?' she said.

'You need to rest,' I said.

'Scales.'

So I fetched them out from where I'd hidden them under the bed, holding her hands as I helped her on to them.

I squinted at the display, trying to make out the tiny numbers on the dial, then got down on my hands and knees again.

'It's the same,' I lied.

Then we got into bed still in our clothes and I hugged Nadia's body tightly from behind, finally allowing myself to imagine all the places it had been without us.

Keisha Thompson

As all boys did so I tried to do

*In response to Roger Robinson's *As All Boys Did**

headers
grey Filas
salt
on slugs
Ren
and Stimpy
protests in
McDonald's
when they
gave me
Barbie
instead of
a car scars
upon scars
corduroy knees
face first to
the wind
to win the
playground
race Chinese burns
and head locks

until I was asked
to 'show 'em my privates'
pretence deciphered
not one of them
don't let them see my
church dresses
butterfly wings
singing football chants
louder than the next lad
Tekken and Need for Speed
a fist to the screen then a stern
look from my mother ... No more
PlayStation till you learn to calm your temper

I was an open-mouthed breather

flipping collectable coins playing to
the binary of biology this species
bird faeces on the shoulder is a good
sign I've been stabbing trees cutting
doll's hair off kickboxing and blue socks
wrestling and mud and mud and mud and
mud throwing rocks in the park instead of bread

straddling the shed coming to the edge like Evel Knievel
ready to break bones hoping I will crack myself open
show them the rotting spice everything nice and pink
like blood curdled with piss this is what I am made of



Count

2-3-4

before you tell me it's the 21st century I beg you count till you get to 234

Count

in Hasau?

in Igbo?

in Yoruba?

Count

their names, as quickly as they fled from them as they were herded into trucks

with the livestock and the food enlightened by fear

Count

234 slaked hymens tawny backs mealy-mouths

234 articles on terrorism

A

father faints a mother holds her tongue like an altar – *ayaya Alunde Alunde*

Money

slips between hands like oil the unspoken profit of patriarchy or patriotism?

Obama is counting on securing his place before China steps in

It

has taken two weeks for this news to germinate where was Alex Crawford – reporting on Pistorius or was it Peaches? A Russian model posts a topless picture – *bring back our girls* across her shallow chest a Yorkshire woman tells Jeremy Vine we should just *give them money* immediately an African issue means charity an American reporter jokes *bring back our country* as a member of UKIP reduces it to black on black crime over Rooibos tea and a Twitter feed – are you still counting?

I

have finished started again searching for the algorithm of powerlessness distracted by the fractal patterns of social diffusion someone get Chomsky on the phone or Desmond Tutu – should we speak to Diane Abbott? I don't know maybe we should listen to what some black woman thinks about all of this ... but in the meantime zoom in on those ululating tonsils the dance of their despair – I wonder if in

234

days we will indulge this family again as though their last name was McCann?

For

give me for forsaking the power of symbolism when pragmatics are out of reach
– could I stand here red top placard and sing *bring them back bring them back bring
them back* believing that somehow

One

of those girls will hear me.

Absence

By Joanna Kavenna

My father always loathed the winter, and often barely survived. It was hardly surprising, then, that he died in the autumn; or rather it was hardly surprising that it was autumn when he gave up trying to stay alive. For many months afterwards, I walked around with a pain in my chest, as if my heart were actually broken. What could be done? About death – well, that was clear: nothing could be done. Death is nothing and everything. The body dies and our loving and much-loved parents vanish from the world. Yet they continue to exist vividly in our thoughts, and this strikes a painful contrast. No physical trace of my father remained on earth: we had poured his ashes into the sea. Yet he was almost constantly in my thoughts, and I saw him everywhere, as an apparition in crowds, merged with those who resembled him. I once went to a restaurant in London and found three versions of my father having dinner with their families. By this I mean that there were three men in the restaurant who looked preposterously like my father: kind, sensitive men with high cheekbones, grey-black hair, an awkward way of leaning across a table. It felt as if I were dining in my unconscious, or the world had abruptly become a physical representation of my thoughts. I left early, in case absolutely everyone in the restaurant turned into my father. Soon afterwards, I succumbed to the urge, always latent, to travel. I had a commission, at least, and this was my alibi.

I went to stay on a fruit farm in Antalya, a two-minute walk from the beach. Well, this was hardly so very bad! It seemed absurd to be so miserable when the sky was such a pristine shade of blue.

The farm stood on a slender tract of land, between the mountains and the sea. There were trees everywhere, laden with pomegranates, oranges, lemons, avocados and gourds. You could paint the gourds if you wanted to do something calming, but I couldn't calm down at all. I drank a lot of pomegranate juice. The garden was full of antiseptic grass, and whenever I was bitten by insects I seized a handful and rubbed it on the wound. This seemed ironic; it was so easy to heal those small physical wounds with antiseptic grass, but there was nothing to do about my tearing sense of loss. Each morning I woke after a night of strange and disturbing dreams, and walked down to the shore.

I often arrived at the beach before sunrise. At times the moon was full and the sea was silver. On other days I swam with the dark sky above, dark depths below; it felt like floating in space. When I swam the pain in my chest subsided, just for a while. Occasionally I panicked and became convinced that I had swum too far out to sea, but then I'd catch a glimpse of pale mountains above, and this reassured me. The waves were sometimes hard and vigorous, and then some days the ocean scarcely moved at all. As dawn light seeped into the water, shoals of fish became visible, swimming around and almost through me, or perhaps I swam through them. There were tiny electric-blue fish, translucent fish with yellow stripes, flatfish like silver leaves, nibbling at the rocks below.

I worked on my commission during the days, and in the evenings I sat under a canopy and a waiter called Kemal brought me plates of aubergine, salad and fish. He was named after Ataturk, he



explained, like so many men in Turkey. *You know about Atatürk?* he asked. The great reformer. This Kemal, the waiter, was a socialist, he also explained, and he despised the current regime. He spoke freely, and this was brave, even though I was only a tourist. While Kemal went to serve other guests, I read Jorge Luis Borges – for the commission, and in general. In one story, ‘The Aleph’, Borges devises one of his many fictional concepts: if everything is possible, in this weird mess we call reality, it is therefore possible that there is a point at which uncertainty vanishes and we can understand everything: ‘a small iridescent sphere of almost unbearable brilliance’. This is the Aleph, the point at which there is no longer any confusion at all. What would that be like? I would know, for example, if my father’s death was really peaceful. I’d told everyone it was, but how did I know? I would know, as well, the significance of his death, if that was the right term. I would also know if that was the right term. All things would be clarified. It might be wonderful but, as Borges suggests, it might be unbearable as well. Perhaps my father had perished in the midst of agony and existential terror? Perhaps confusion about such things is necessary.

Yet this was only one meaning of Aleph, a fictional meaning, furthermore! Aleph (or alef or alif) is also the first letter of the Semitic abjads, including the Hebrew ‘Ālef, א; the Phoenician ‘Ālep, א; the Syriac ‘Ālāp, ܐ; the Aramaic Ālap, ܐ; and the Arabic Alif, ا. There’s a theory that the symbolical predecessor of these ‘A’ letters is an Egyptian hieroglyph representing the head of an ox. The earliest alphabet might conceivably (but not definitely) be represented by the shapes on a 3,400-year-old piece of limestone from ancient Egypt. It was found in the tomb of Sennefer, an ancient Egyptian official. On this piece of stone, hieroglyphic symbols represent the words ‘bibiya-ta’ (‘earth snail’), ‘garu’ (‘dove’) and ‘da’at’ (‘kite’). In this epoch, ‘G’ was sounded like ‘C’, we’re told. There are some other symbols that have not yet been deciphered, but it’s possible they spell out ‘elta’at,’ meaning ‘lizard.’ The writing system is incomplete, and important details may have been lost. Things vanish all the time, of course: symbols, fathers, entire civilizations – all sorts of things. It’s possible that the symbols meant: ‘and the lizard and the snail and the dove and the kite’ – and that these formed a mnemonic, to help these long-dead people with their ABCD, or their ABGD.

There is also aleph-null, or aleph-zero, which is the smallest infinite cardinal number.



This differs mathematically from ∞ . Or perhaps both concepts are another of Borges’s fictions.

After my father died, a kindly astrophysicist told me that once something has come into existence, it is forever present in one form or another. The atoms simply go elsewhere, into the vast infinities of space, and become something else. You only need something to begin, and then it never ends at all. This was a beautiful sentiment and it was consoling to know that minuscule aspects of my father were still theoretically somewhere in the universe, but I wanted to hear the sound of his voice, speak-



ing words. Anyway, there were a few further questions that concerned me. Were these little scattered regions of my father somehow sentient? Did some fragmentary aspect of my father know that he was now drifting through the eternity of space? How did consciousness – my father's or anyone else's – relate to fragmentary atoms? Slightly, infinitely, or not at all?

At the fruit farm, on certain evenings, I tried to write. It was quite hopeless. I wrote: *A is for Aleph*. B is for – but I couldn't even get to B. I was stuck during those first few days on A. *A is for Absence*. The absence of those we love. The physical absence, at least, which contrasts with their vitally paradoxical presence in our thoughts. My commission was the philosophical tradition of dualism, mind versus body, or mind as body, but I was stuck on impossible questions: the relationship between language and the self; the impossibility of drawing any conclusions about anything when Borges's Aleph was a fiction, not a reality. After all, the alphabet of any civilization is a system, in which we broadly concur; yet each one of us is unique. We are inducted – before we can consent – into this system of squeaks and murmurs. There is no Ur-self existing before the imposition of language, because our selves are formed through language and we can't remember our pre-verbal experience in the world. Language is intertwined with the development of the body; our mouths become accustomed to making certain sounds depending on the culture into which we are born. We speak to ourselves in a borrowed language. But we don't know – not having ventured into the Aleph point – where this language even

came from. Languages dwindle into originating darkness, and we live and die in a state of beautiful unknowing – the whole thing is madness!

One day I took a boat – the *Adali Kapitane* – to a bay shaped like a horseshoe, with these grand mountains rising all around. The sea here was full of turtles. You had to swim out a couple of hundred metres and then they were clearly visible. They were mostly about the size of a small table. When I lived in Sri Lanka there were turtles the size of a dinner table, but these turtles were definitely smaller. They moved around on the sandy bottom of the ocean, and sometimes they'd use their fins to push the sand away and nibble meditatively at weeds. Every so often a turtle would surge up to the surface and breathe for a while; this was when you could swim alongside them. At this point I often saw a little yellow eye within the scaly skin. I always wondered what the turtle was thinking, as I swam beside it, always maintaining a respectful distance. I couldn't imagine what it was like to be a turtle. Of course, it didn't think in anything I would recognize as language. I say 'of course', but equally I had no idea how turtles formulated their thoughts. Often I thought they looked slightly miserable, but that was clear anthropomorphization. Perhaps they were just tired of me swimming beside them, even at a respectful distance. I bobbed around in the ocean, which was always twenty-five degrees, or thereabouts, like a large, comforting bath.

Throughout my stay in Antalya I never progressed beyond *A is for Aleph*. Language seemed quite alien, during that time, and I was only really



content when I was underwater, when my thoughts were mostly non-linguistic. I finished the commission on the mind/body, or mind-body, and when I returned to England it was autumn again. A few months later I started writing a novel about the minds of people and AI machines; about omniscient technologies at their own Aleph point; about the attempt to create an immaculate language which would remove all ambiguity and confusion (this fails); about how all our glittering technologies can't return our beloved, much-missed parents, though our love for them, our longing for them, remains. At some level I must have decided to skip the rest of the alphabet, because I called this novel *Zed*...



On Citizens' Rights to Express Dissent

Arundhati Roy fights to speak

In February 2001, a criminal petition led by five advocates was listed before the Supreme Court of India. The petition accused Medha Patkar (leader of the Narmada Bachao Andolan), Prashant Bhushan (legal counsel for the NBA), and Arundhati Roy of committing criminal contempt of court by organizing and participating in a demonstration outside the gates of the Supreme Court to protest the court judgment on the Sardar Sarovar Dam on the Narmada River. Based on the petition, the Supreme Court sent notices to the three accused, ordering them to appear personally in court on 23 April 2001.

The case is still pending in court. The maximum punishment for committing contempt of court in India is six months' imprisonment. Arundhati Roy did not have a lawyer at her trial. Reproduced here is the text of her affidavit in reply to the criminal charges.



IN THE SUPREME COURT OF INDIA
ORIGINAL JURISDICTION

Legal affidavit led in New Delhi, 16 April 2001. 150

CONTEMPT PETITION (CR) NO: 2/2001 IN THE
MATTER OF: J. R. PARASHAR & OTHERS VERSUS

PRASHANT BHUSHAN & OTHERS AFFIDAVIT
IN REPLY FILED BY RESPONDENT NO: 3

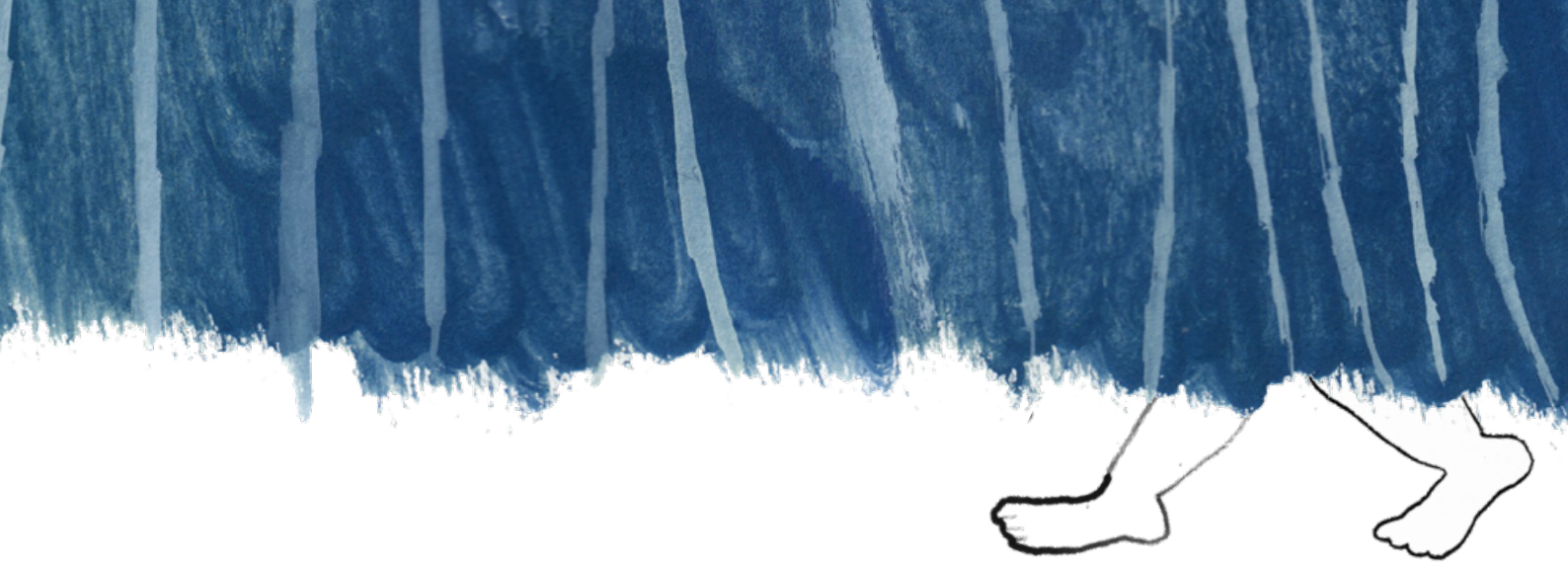
The gravamen of the charges in the petition against me are contained in the FIR [First Information Report] that the petitioners say they lodged in the Tilak Marg police station on the 14th of December 2000. The FIR is annexed to the main petition and is reproduced verbatim below.

First Information Report dated December 14, 2000

I, Jagdish Prasar, with colleagues Shri Umed Singh and Rajender were going out from Supreme Court at 7.00 p.m and saw that Gate No. C was closed.

We came out from the Supreme Court premises from other path and inquired why the gate is close. The were [we were] surrounded by Prasant Bhusan, Medha Patekar and Arundhanti Roy alongwith their companion and they told Supreme Court your father's property. On this we told them they could not sit on Dharna by closing the gate. The proper place of Dharna is Parliament. In the mean time Prasant Bhusan said, 'You Jagdish Prasar are the tout of judiciary.' Again medha said 'sale ko jaan se maar do' [kill him]. Arundhanti Roy commanded the crow [crowd] that Supreme Court of India is the thief and all these are this touts. Kill them, Prasant Bhushan 'pulled' by having 'caught' my 'haired [sic] and said that if you would be seen in the Supreme Court again he would get them killed'. But they were shouting inspite of the presence of S.H.O and ACP Bhaskar [of] Tilak Marg [Police Station]. We ran away with great with great hardship otherwise their goonda might have done some mischief because of their drunken state. Therefore, it is requested to you that proper action may be taken after registering our complaint in order to save on our lives and property. We complainants will be highly obliged.

Sd. Complainants.



The main petition is as shoddily drafted as the FIR. The lies, the looseness, the ludicrousness of the charges displays more contempt for the Apex Court than any of the offences allegedly committed by Prashant Bhushan, Medha Patkar, and myself. Its contents are patently false and malicious. The police station in Tilak Marg, where the FIR was lodged, has not registered a case. No policeman ever contacted me, there was no police investigation, no attempt to verify the charges, to find out whether the people named in the petition were present at the *dharna*, and whether indeed the incident described in the FIR (on which the entire contempt petition is based) occurred at all.

Under the circumstances, it is distressing that the Supreme Court has thought it fit to entertain this petition and issue notice directing me and the other respondents to appear personally in court on the 23rd of April 2001, and to 'continue to attend the Court on all the days thereafter to which the case against you stands and until final orders are passed on the charges against you. WHEREIN FAIL NOT'.

For the ordinary working citizen, these enforced court appearances mean that in effect, the punishment for the uncommitted crime has already begun.

The facts relating to the petition are as follows:

Contrary to everything the petition says, insinuates, and implies – I am not a leader of the Narmada Bachao Andolan. I am a writer, an independent citizen with independent views who supports and admires the cause of the Andolan. I was not a petitioner in the Public Interest Litigation petition in the case of the Sardar Sarovar Project. I am not an 'interested party'. Prashant Bhushan is not my lawyer and has never represented me.

Furthermore in all humility I aver that I do not know who the petitioners are. That I never tried to murder anybody, or incite anybody to murder

anybody, in broad daylight outside the gates of the Supreme Court in full view of the Delhi police. That I did not raise any slogans against the court. That I did not see Prashant Bhushan 'pulled' anyone by having 'caught' their 'haired' [sic] and said that 'if you would be seen in the Supreme Court again he would get them killed'. That I did not see Medha Patkar, leader of India's most prominent non-violent resistance movement, metamorphose into a mediocre film actor and say, '*Sale ko jaan se maar do*' (Kill the bastard). That I did not notice the presence of any '*goondas*' in a 'drunken state'. And finally, that my name is spelled wrong.

On the morning of the 13th of December 2000, I learned that people from the Narmada valley had gathered outside the gates of the Supreme Court. When I arrived at the Supreme Court at about 11:30 a.m., gate No. C was already closed. Four to five hundred people were standing outside. Most of them were Adivasi people who, as a consequence of the recent Supreme Court judgment that allowed the construction of the Sardar Sarovar Dam to proceed, will lose their lands and homes this monsoon to the rising waters of the reservoir. They have not been rehabilitated. In a few months they will be destitute and have nowhere to go. These people had travelled all the way from the Narmada valley to personally convey their despair and anguish to the court. To tell the court that, in contravention of its order, no land has been offered to them for rehabilitation and that the reality of the situation in the Narmada valley is very different from the one portrayed in the Supreme Court judgment. They asked the registrar of the court for a meeting with the chief justice.

A number of representatives of peoples' movements in Delhi, and other supporters of the Andolan like myself, were also there to express their solidarity. I would like to stress that I did not see Prashant Bhushan, the main accused in the petition, at the



dharna. Medha Patkar, who was there, asked me to speak to the people for five minutes.

My exact words were: '*Mujhe paanch minute bhi nahi chahiye aapke saamne apni baat rakhne ke liye. Mein aapke saath hoon*' (I do not even need five minutes to tell you why I'm here. I'm here because I support you). This is easy to verify as there were several film and television crews shooting the event. The villagers had cloth labels hung around their necks that said, 'Project-Affected at

in the case of the Sardar Sarovar Project. I did not raise slogans against the court. I did not, as the petition claims, say, 'Supreme Court *bika hua hai*' (The Supreme Court has sold out). I certainly did not 'command the crowd that Supreme Court of India is the thief and all these are this touts'. (Perhaps the petitioners meant 'crowd'?) I went to the *dharna* because I have been deeply distressed and angered by the Supreme Court's majority – and therefore operative – verdict on the Sardar Sarovar Project.

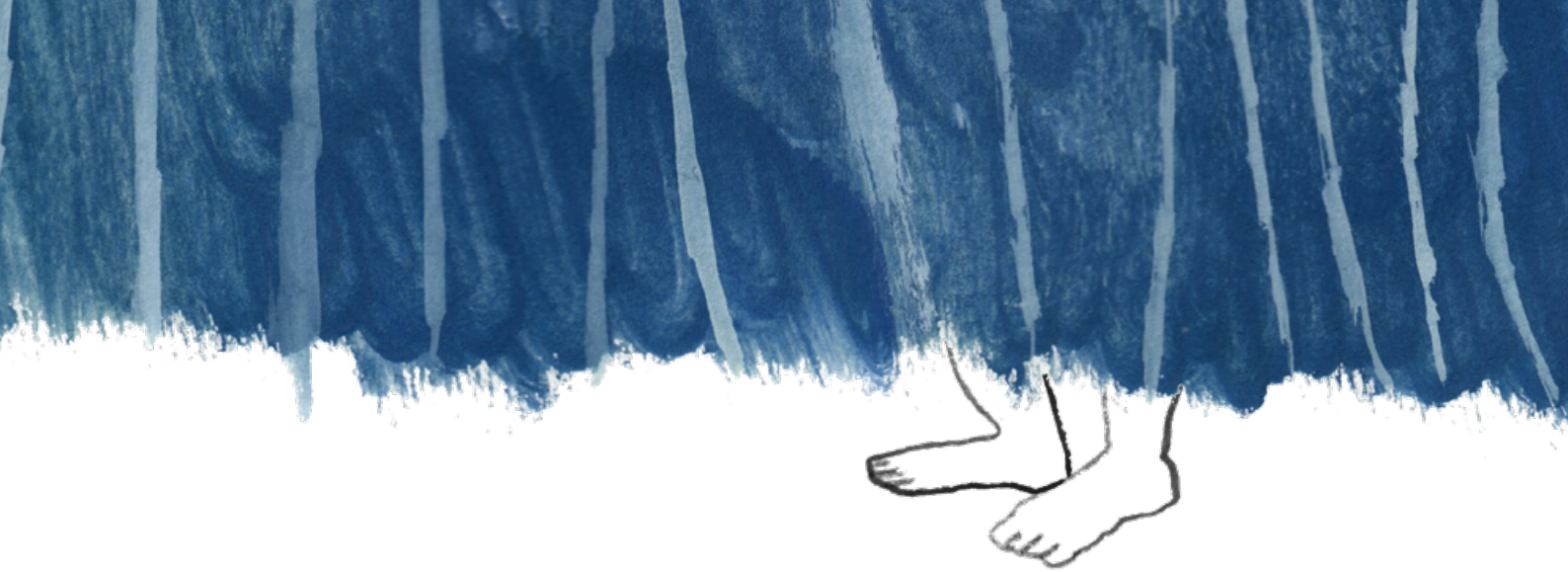
**If the court uses the Contempt of Court law,
and allows citizens to abuse its process to intimidate
and harass writers, it will have the chilling effect
of interfering with a writer's imagination and the
creative act itself.**

90 Metres' (the current height of the dam). As time went by and it became clear that the request for a meeting with the chief justice was not going to be granted, people grew disheartened. Several people (who I don't know or recognize) made speeches critical of the court, its inaccessibility to common people, and its process. Others spoke about corruption in the judiciary, about the judges and how far removed they are from ground realities. I admit that I made absolutely no attempt to intervene. I am not a policeman or a public official. As a writer I am deeply interested in people's perceptions of the functioning of one of the most important institutions in this country.

However, I would like to clarify that I have never, either in my writing or in any public forum, cast aspersions on the character or integrity of the judges. I believe that the reflexive instinct of the powerful to protect the powerful is sufficient explanation for the kind of iniquitous judgment as

The verdict allowed the project to proceed even though the court was well aware that the Narmada Water Disputes Tribunal had been consistently violated for thirteen years. That not a single village had been resettled according to the directives of the tribunal, and that the Madhya Pradesh government (which is responsible for 80 per cent of the oustees) had given a written affidavit in court stating that it has no land to resettle them. In effect, the Supreme Court ordered the violation of the fundamental rights to life and livelihood of hundreds of thousands of Indian citizens, most of them Dalit and Adivasi.

As a consequence of the Supreme Court judgment, it is these unfortunate citizens who stand to lose their homes, their livelihoods, their gods and their histories. When they came calling on the Supreme Court on the morning of 13 December 2000, they were asking the court to restore their dignity. To accuse them of lowering the dignity



of the court suggests that the dignity of the court and the dignity of Indian citizens are incompatible, oppositional, adversarial things. That the dignity of one can only exist at the cost of the other. If this is so, it is a sad and shameful proposition. In his Republic Day speech, president K. R. Narayanan called upon the nation, and specifically the judiciary, to take special care of these fragile communities. He said, 'The developmental path we have adopted is hurting them, the marginalized, the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, and threatening their very existence.'

I believe that the people of the Narmada valley have the constitutional right to protest peacefully against what they consider an unjust and unfair judgment. As for myself, I have every right to participate in any peaceful protest meeting that I choose to. Even outside the gates of the Supreme Court. As a writer I am fully entitled to put forward my views, my reasons and arguments for why I believe that the judgment in the Sardar Sarovar case is awed and unjust and violates the human rights of Indian citizens. I have the right to use all my skills and abilities, such as they are, and all the facts and figures at my disposal, to persuade people to my point of view.

The petition is a pathetic attempt to target what the petitioners perceive to be the three main fronts of the resistance movement in the Narmada valley. The activist Medha Patkar, leader of the Narmada Bachao Andolan and representative of the people in the valley; the lawyer, Prashant Bhushan, legal counsel for the Narmada Bachao Andolan; and the writer (me), who is seen as one of those who carries the voice of the Andolan to the world outside. It is significant that this is the third time that I, as a writer, have had to face legal harassment connected with my writing.

In July 1999, the three-judge bench in the Supreme Court hearing the public interest petition

on the Sardar Sarovar Project took offence at my essay 'The Greater Common Good', published in *Outlook* and *Frontline* magazines. While the waters rose in the Narmada, while villagers stood in their homes in chest-deep water for days on end, protesting the court's interim order, the Supreme Court held three hearings in which the main topic they discussed was whether or not the dignity of the court had been violated by my essay. On the 15th of October 1999, without giving me an opportunity to be heard, the court passed an insulting order. Here is an extract:

Judicial process and institution cannot be permitted to be scandalised or subjected to contumacious violation in such a blatant manner in which it has been done by her [Arundhati Roy] ... vicious stultification and vulgar debunking cannot be permitted to pollute the stream of justice ... we are unhappy at the way in which the leaders of NBA and Ms Arundhati Roy have attempted to undermine the dignity of the Court. We expected better behaviour from them ...

The order contained a veiled warning to me not to continue with my 'objectionable writings'.

In 1997, a criminal case for Corrupting Public Morality was led against me in a district magistrate's court in Kerala for my book *The God of Small Things*. It has been pending for the last four years. I have had to hire criminal lawyers, draft affidavits, and travel all the way to Kerala to appear in court.

And now I have to defend myself on this third, ludicrous charge.

As a writer I wish to state as emphatically as I can that this is a dangerous trend. If the court uses the Contempt of Court law, and allows citizens to abuse its process to intimidate and harass writers, it will have the chilling effect of interfering with a writer's imagination and the creative act itself. This



fear of harassment will create a situation in which even before a writer puts pen to paper, she will have to anticipate what the court might think of her work. It will induce a sort of enforced, fearful self-censorship. It would be bad for law, worse for literature, and sad for the world of art and beauty.

I have written and published several essays and articles on the Narmada issue and the Supreme Court judgment. None of them was intended to show contempt to the court. However, I have every right to disagree with the court's views on the subject and to express my disagreement in any publication or forum that I choose to. Regardless of everything the operative Supreme Court judgment on the Sardar Sarovar says, I continue to be opposed to Big Dams. I continue to believe that they are economically unviable, ecologically destructive, and deeply undemocratic. I continue to believe that the judgment disregarded the evidence placed before the court. I continue to write what I believe. Not to do so would undermine the dignity of writers, their art, their very purpose. I need hardly add that I also believe that those who hold the opposite point of view to mine, those who wish to disagree with my views, criticize them, or denounce them, have the same rights to free speech and expression as I do.

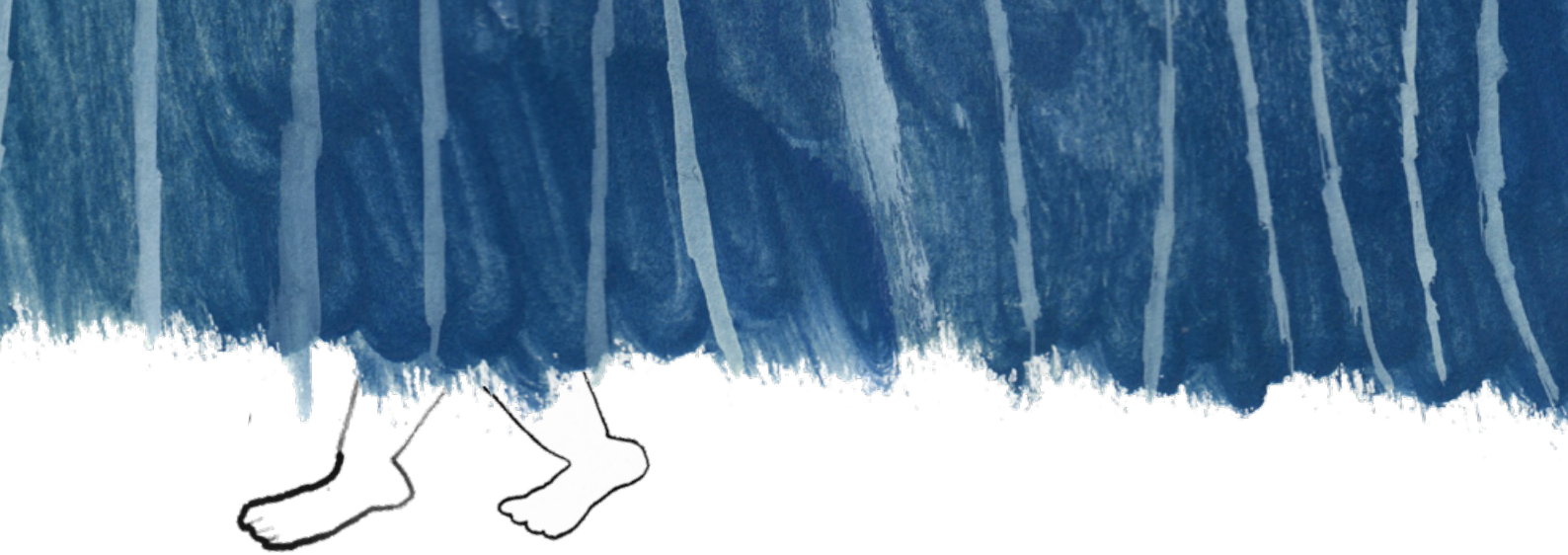
I left the *dharna* at about 6 p.m. Until then, contrary to the lurid scenario described in the petitioners' FIR, I can state on oath that no blood was spilled, no mob was drunk, no hair was pulled, no murder attempted. A little *khichdi* was cooked and consumed. No litter was left. There were over a hundred police constables and some senior police officers present. Though I would very much like to, I cannot say in good conscience that I have never set eyes on the petitioners because I don't know who they are or what they look like. They could have been any one of the hundreds of people who were milling around on that day.

But whoever they are, and whatever their motives, for the petitioners to attempt to misuse the Contempt of Court Act and the good offices of the Supreme Court to stifle criticism and stamp out dissent strikes at the very roots of the notion of democracy.

In recent months this court has issued judgments on several major public issues. For instance, the closure of polluting industries in Delhi, the conversion of public transport buses from diesel to CNG [compressed natural gas], and the judgment permitting the construction of the Sardar Sarovar Dam to proceed. All of these have had far-reaching and often unanticipated impacts. They have materially affected, for better or for worse, the lives and livelihoods of millions of Indian citizens. Whatever the justice or injustice of these judgments, whatever their finer legal points, for the court to become intolerant of criticism or expressions of dissent would mark the beginning of the end of democracy.

An 'activist' judiciary that intervenes in public matters to provide a corrective to a corrupt, dysfunctional executive surely has to be more, not less accountable. To a society that is already convulsed by political bankruptcy, economic distress, and religious and cultural intolerance, any form of judicial intolerance will come as a crippling blow. If the judiciary removes itself from public scrutiny and accountability, and severs its links with the society that it was set up to serve in the first place, it would mean that yet another pillar of Indian democracy will crumble. A judicial dictatorship is as fearsome a prospect as a military dictatorship or any other form of totalitarian rule.

The Tehelka tapes broadcast recently on a national television network show the repulsive sight of the presidents of the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Samata Party (both part of the ruling coalition) accepting bribes from spurious arms dealers.



Though this ought to have been considered *prima facie* evidence of corruption, the Delhi High Court declined to entertain a petition seeking an enquiry into the defence deals that were referred to in the tapes. The bench took strong exception to the petitioner approaching the court without substantial evidence and even warned the petitioner's counsel that if he failed to substantiate its allegations, the court would impose costs on the petitioner.

On the grounds that judges of the Supreme Court were too busy, the chief justice of India refused to allow a sitting judge to head the judicial enquiry into the Tehelka scandal, even though it involves matters of national security and corruption in the highest places.

Yet, when it comes to an absurd, despicable, entirely unsubstantiated petition in which all the three respondents happen to be people who have publicly – though in markedly different ways – questioned the policies of the government and severely criticized a recent judgment of the Supreme Court, the court displays a disturbing willingness to issue notice.

It indicates a disquieting inclination on the part of the court to silence criticism and muzzle dissent, to harass and intimidate those who disagree with it. By entertaining a petition based on an FIR that even a local police station does not see fit to act upon, the Supreme Court is doing its own reputation and credibility considerable harm.

In conclusion, I wish to reaffirm that as a writer I have the right to state my opinions and beliefs. As a free citizen of India, I have the right to be part of any peaceful *dharna*, demonstration, or protest march. I have the right to criticize any judgment of any court that I believe to be unjust. I have the right to make common cause with those I agree with. I hope that each time I exercise these rights I will not be dragged to court on false charges and forced to explain my actions.

The petitioners have committed civil and criminal defamation. They ought to be investigated and prosecuted for perjury. They ought to be made to pay damages for the time they have wasted of this Apex Court by filing these false charges. Above all they ought to be made to apologize to all those citizens who are patiently awaiting the attention of the Supreme Court in more important matters.

POSTSCRIPT: In the trial that followed, the Supreme Court asked Arundhati Roy to apologize for this affidavit. When she refused she was convicted for Contempt of Court and sentenced to one day in prison. She served the sentence in Delhi's Tihar Jail.

