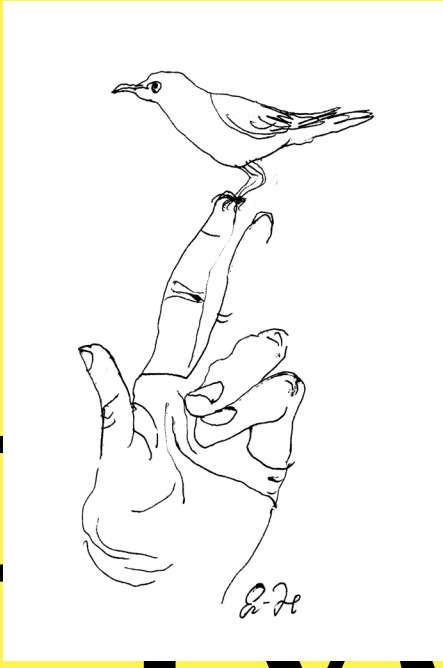
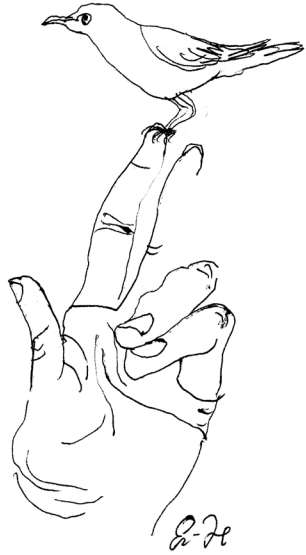
# 52



# Five Dials



# 52

# Five Dials

# ABOUT FIVE DIALS

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WAYS OF READING

*Five Dials* is intended to be read in multiple ways. The text size and the layout have been adjusted for ease of reading across formats: open the PDF on your phone or tablet, or, print it out from your desktop—one or two pages per sheet.

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# CONTRIBUTORS

RACHAEL ALLEN's first collection of poems, *Kingdomland*, is published by Faber & Faber. She is the co-author of a number of collaborative artists' books, including *Nights of Poor Sleep* with Marie Jacotey, published by Prototype, and *Almost One. Say Again!* with JocJonJosch, published by Slimvolume. She hosts the Faber Poetry Podcast and is the poetry editor for *Granta* magazine and Granta books.

STIG DAGERMAN was regarded as the most talented writer of the Swedish postwar generation. He wrote his first novel at twenty-two, and received widespread acclaim; critics compared his writing to the likes of Kafka, Faulkner and Camus. Over the course of the next five years he published prolifically, always to immense success, before suddenly falling silent. In 1954 Sweden was stunned to learn that he had taken his own life, at the age of thirty-one. His novel *A Moth to a Flame* has recently been reissued in the Penguin European Writers series.

EXTINCTION REBELLION is a global environmental movement with the stated aim of using nonviolent civil disobedience to compel government action to avoid tipping points in the climate system, biodiversity loss, and the risk of social and ecological collapse.

HELON HABILA is the author of *Oil on Water*, *Measuring Time*, *Waiting for an Angel*, and *The Chibok Girls*. He is professor of creative writing at George Mason University and lives in Virginia with his wife and three children. His most recent novel, *Travellers*, was published recently by Hamish Hamilton.

ERIC HANSON's illustrations have appeared in *Vanity Fair*, *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *Die Zeit Magazine*, *Vi Foraeldre*, *McSweeney's*, *Rolling Stone*, *Gastronomica*, *The New Republic*, *Bon Appetit*, *Spy*, *WigWag* and other publications. He has designed product lines for Pottery Barn and illustrated books for Knopf, HarperCollins, Hachette, ORBooks, Chronicle, Random House, Faber & Faber, Farrar Straus Giroux, New York Review Books and Pantheon. His writing has been published by *McSweeney's*, *The Paris Review*, *The Mockingbird*, *The Atlantic*, *Smithsonian*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung Magazine*, *Leite's Culinaria*, *The New York Tyrant*, *Ampersand*, *Torpedo* and *The Lifted Brow* (Australia).

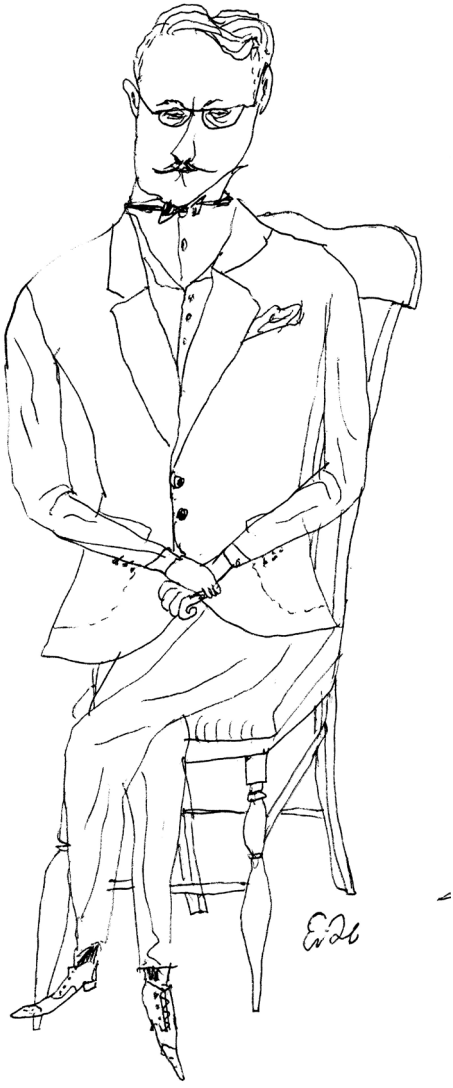
JULIAN HOFFMAN's latest book is *Irreplaceable: The Fight to Save Our Wild Places*. His previous, *The Small Heart of Things*, won the AWP Creative Nonfiction Award and a National Outdoor Book Award for Natural History Literature. He lives beside the Prespa Lakes in northern Greece.

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. It was a Poetry Book Society Recommendation for Autumn 2015. Most recently *physical* has been translated into Norwegian (Aschehoug, 2017), a bi-lingual French edition, Le Corps Des Hommes (Grasset, 2018) and Galician (A Chan da Polvora, 2019). 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.

JACKIE MORRIS grew up in the Vale of Evesham, dreaming of becoming an artist and living by the sea. She studied at Hereford College of Arts and at Bath Academy, and went on to illustrate for the *New Statesman*, *The Independent* and *The Guardian* among many other publications. As a children's author and artist, she has created over forty books, including beloved classics such as *Song of the Golden Hare*, *Tell Me A Dragon*, *East of the Sun, West of the Moon* and *The Wild Swans*. She collaborated with Ted Hughes, and her books have sold more than a million copies worldwide. Her collaboration with Robert Macfarlane, *The Lost Words*, has become, according to *The Guardian*, 'a cultural phenomenon'. She has recently illustrated the re-publication of Barbara Newhall Follet's *The House Without Windows*. Jackie now lives in a cottage on the cliffs of Pembrokeshire, which she shares with a small pride of cats and various other gentle creatures.

BEN PESTER is a writer based in London. His work has appeared in various places, including *Granta* and *Hotel* magazine. His first collection of short stories is coming in 2020 from Boiler House Press. He lives in Haringey with his partner and two children.



# On Evaristo, Gornick and Election Pamphlets

If you were to compile your own reading list from the previous month, odds are it would be a mess of tweets, scrolling headlines, emails, comments, editorials, and other flecks, as well as the occasional moments of refuge in the calm pages of a physical book. That's how I'd describe my month.

I reread Bernardine Evaristo's latest after her Booker win. (How great is that sentence?) Suddenly this novel I'd loved upon publication had been transformed into something different: a 'Booker-book'. In the quiet that comes after an awards ceremony it's important to return to works to ensure they are as good as you remember. Unsurprisingly, *Girl, Woman, Other* was even better the second time around.

A few weeks ago, I found in a used bookshop an immense old Knopf hardback that collected John le Carré's *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*, *The Honourable Schoolboy* and *Smiley's People* into a greatest hits package entitled *The Quest for Karla*. The book was big enough to become its own bedside table with space on its cover to hold a mason jar of water and a Timex alarm clock. But *Karla* was an old object; the spine cracked and crumbled after I finished *Tinker Tailor*. Suddenly delicate, the book had to be pushed into early retirement, much like George Smiley. It may return, much like George Smiley.

Vivian Gornick's *Fierce Attachments* was rereleased a few years ago in the UK. One of the

finest depictions of a mother-daughter relationship, it reveals the mix of hatey-love and lovey-hate found at the core of their bond. Celebrating it as a filial memoir would ignore *Fierce Attachments'* status as a great New York City book, and also a book about the benefits of walking in the city. Mother and daughter walk as a ritual of attachment. Even in the crowds of New York, they can't lose each other. Each tough little paragraph gleams as Gornick works over her biographical details. The ferocity of her attachment doesn't disappear with age, but rather fades to a forgiving glow, and she recognizes and shares instances of maternal wisdom. 'You're growing old together,' Gornick's mother says. 'You and what frightens you.'

Over the past month I've also been reading campaign literature and slogans on street signs and local newspapers in the build-up to the Canadian election, as well as the information pack describing the rights afforded to polling station scrutineers. I served as the representative for the Green candidate and spent good chunks of election day down at the local fire hall waiting for the votes to come in. That morning I'd started Benjamin Moser's biography of Susan Sontag, so I stuck it under my raincoat where it produced a distended bump that was interpreted in a few ways when I entered the fire hall. I'm against those interpretations.

The day of voting stretched on, marked by rushes and longeurs. Neighbours entered, chatted, and were told to stand behind the yellow line until

the booth, which was actually a cardboard shield, was free. I sat on a couch on the way to the voting station, and some neighbours asked about my book as they walked past.

The first few chapters—I'm still far from done—describe the voraciousness of Sontag's early years. Days existed for the purpose of reading. I got the sense Sontag would have hated a day like this, or perhaps her teenage self would have at least brought down a few Thomas Mann books to polish off in the afternoon before the vote count started. I remembered a phrase from a previous review describing Sontag's reading as 'insatiable avidity'.

The best poems I came across this month are the two in the issue you're about to read. We're incredibly lucky to publish Andrew McMillan. His poem, *sick*, extends the theme of our previous issue, 'The Body'. When it was first submitted I contacted novelist Lara Williams, our guest editor. 'That last line!' I wrote to her. 'What a poem.' 'I know!' was her response. You'll read it soon enough. And then there's Rachael Allen, whose collection, *Kingdomland*, is one of the best collections published in the last year. We'd discussed publishing an excerpt, but I'd dropped the ball. I wrote to Rachel and asked, 'Is DAD THE PIG still available?' She wrote back, 'DAD THE PIG is yours.' On page 63, 'Dad the Pig' will be yours, too. Does anything else need to be said about 'Dad the Pig'? Probably not.

Enjoy the issue. —*Craig Taylor*

AN URGENT DISPATCH

# Why We Rebel

Extinction Rebellion

Sometimes it falls upon a generation to be great, said Mandela. History is calling from the future, a hundred years from now. Half a hundred years. Ten. Today. Calling the conscience of humanity to act with the fierce urgency of now. This is the time. Wherever we are standing is the place. We have just this one flickering instant to hold the winds of worlds in our hands, to vouchsafe the future. This is what destiny feels like. We have to be greater than we have ever been, dedicated, selfless, self-sacrificial.

The third world war—of profit versus life—is already underway. Humanity itself is on the brink of the abyss: our potential extinction. We face a breakdown of all life, the tragedy of tragedies: the unhallowed horror.

Time is broken and buckled, and seasons are out of step so even the plants are confused. Ancient wisdoms are being betrayed: to every thing there was a season, a time to be born and a time to be a child, protected and cared for, but the young are facing a world of chaos and harrowing cruelty. In the delicate web of life, everything depends on everything else: we are nature and it is us, and the extinction of the living world is our suicide. Not one sparrow can now be beneath notice, not one bee.

Something in the human spirit, too, is threatened with extinction. Many feel exhausted, ignored, lonely and anxious. Humiliated by poverty and inequality, crushed by debt, powerless,

controlled and trapped, many feel defrauded of what should rightly be theirs. Societies are polarized, people estranged from each other and sundered from the living world.

Only when it is dark enough can you see the stars, and they are lining up now to write rebellion across the skies. There is no choice.

This is a rebellion for the young people and for the ancestors. This is for the turtle and the salamander, the dugong and the dove. It is for the finned, furry and feathered ones, the ones who scamper and swim, the chattering, chirping and hooting ones.

This is for the forests and the forest medicines, for the trees of wisdom, the trees of life and the living waters of the Nile and the Yangtze, the Tigris and the Ganges. This is for the seven seas, in seven directions, down to the seventh generation.

This is for the Great Song that runs underneath all the melodies, the rhythms of rain and sun, the rhymes of polar ice. We humans sang before we spoke, and we still know the song, though the harmonies are jangled and the melodies flung out of tune.

Each generation is given two things: one is the gift of the world, and the other is the duty of keeping it safe for those to come. The generations of yesterday trust those of today not to take more than their share, and those of tomorrow trust their elders to care for it.

The contract is broken, and it is happening on

our watch. A pathological obsession with money and profit is engineering this breakdown. Warped and spiritually desolate, this system is contemptuous of humanity and the living world, and held in place by a toxic media (power without truth); by toxic finance (power without compassion); and toxic politics (power without principle).

The world's resources are being seized faster than the natural world can replenish them. Children can do the maths on this, and know they are being sent the bill. And the young are in rebellion now. This is their time, their fire. The flame is theirs and they are lighting the way. Why?

Because they are the touchstone of nations, carrying the moral authority of innocence. Because they have not lived long enough to have their clear vision dimmed: this is not a game—it is about life and death and they know it. Because they are young enough to know cheating is wrong and old enough to see they have been cheated of their safety, their dreams and their future. Because they are young enough to be awed by the magic of living creatures and old enough to be heartbroken by their slaughter. Because they are young enough to know it is wrong to lie and old enough to use the right words: this is an emergency.

Worldwide, the heaviest emissions have been produced by the richest nations, while the heaviest consequences are being felt by the poorest. The few have sown the wind, and are forcing the many

to reap the whirlwind. Reparation is needed. So is recognition: that Europe stole its wealth through its imperialism, colonialism and slavery. So is respect: that the global South has resisted for hundreds of years, knowing that a shining kind of courage can end centuries of wrong.

Indigenous cultures have suffered the devastations of their lands, the extinction of their languages, knowledge and wisdom. And in their rebellions they have long evoked an Earth manifesto, saying we are the land: as earth-guardians, we are nature defending itself; land is alive, unfathomably deep, and there is intelligence within nature, thinking, spirited and alive.

Extinction Rebellion is young, old, black, white, indigenous, of all faiths and none, of all genders and sexualities and none: being alive on earth now is all the qualification required.

It is a rebellion against the heartless, loveless and lifeless delusion of seeing Earth as dead matter; against patriarchy's domination and control of women and the Earth, against heterosexism that condemns the beauty of diverse love, against the militarism that destroys living lands, wages war for oil and kills those who protect the green world. This rebellion uses the finest weapons: peace, truth and love. It is strictly non-violent as an active stance—Ahimsa—preventing violence. For this, it is willing to take disruptive, loving and effective direct action, thinking big. Take the planet off the stock

market. Make ecocide law. Rebel with cause. Rebel with creativity. Rebel with compassion. Rebel together because together we are irresistible.

Tell the Truth is the first demand of Extinction Rebellion, using fearless speech, Gandhi's 'truth-force' which creates a change of heart. People are not stupid: people feel a pervasive uneasiness at the extremes of weather, the floods, droughts and hurricanes, but they have the legal and moral right to be fully informed of the speed and scale of the crisis.

Extinction Rebellion's vision is a politics of kindness rendered consistently and unapologetically. Its vision depends on values that are the most ordinary and therefore the most precious: human decency, dignity, responsibility, fairness, duty, honesty, morality and care. With Citizens' Assemblies, it believes that when people are given good information, they make good decisions.

This rebellion is regenerative, arriving with armfuls of cake and olives, bread and oranges. It reconfigures older and wiser ways of living while voicing the grief and fear of these times. It creates communities of belonging, with mentoring and eldership, where everyone's contribution is welcome. Rooted in radical compassion, trust, reverence and respect, the finest technology we have is love.

With serious, clear-eyed urgency, we have

to mobilize now for deep adaptation for what is inevitable. Humans are by nature cooperative, and times of crisis can be times when life is lived transcendently, for a purpose beyond the self. No individual alone is fully human, as the African concept Ubuntu shows: our humanity results from being in connection with each other. Believing that there is no Them and Us, only all of us together, Extinction Rebellion seeks alliances wherever they can be found. We are fighting for our lives and if we do not link arms, we will fail because the forces we are up against are simply too powerful. We need you.

Extinction Rebellion seeks an economy that maximizes happiness and minimizes harm; that restores soil health and the honourable harvest, taking only what is freely given from the wind, sun and tides. In a decarbonized and relocalized system, it embraces frugality for the sake of fairness. It seeks to restore a sacred rightness to the world, to everything its season, the beauty of its steady balance. It restores the right to dream, relentlessly, gracefully, wildly. As trenchant as it is effervescent, this rebellion beckons the conscience, quickens the pulse and galvanizes the heart.

For our deepest longings are magnificent: to live a meaningful life, to be in unity with each other and with the life-source, call it the spirit, call it the divine, call it the still small voice, it doesn't matter what it is called or how it is spelled if it guides us in service to life.

This vision has a map. It is the map of the human heart. Believing in unflinching truth, reckless beauty and audacious love, knowing that life is worth more than money and that there is nothing greater, nothing more important, nothing more sacred than protecting the spirit deep within all life. ◊

‘They wanted to express themselves, they wanted to be heard.’

# Helon Habila on the great migrations of our age

Helon Habila's fourth novel *Travellers* binds together stories of the uprooted and the displaced. Migrants and refugees move through the work, as well as other members of the African diaspora in Europe. *Travellers* begins as a Nigerian graduate student accompanies his wife to Berlin, where she has been awarded an arts fellowship. The narrator becomes increasingly involved in the lives of individuals who have been transformed by the dangerous journeys of our age.

The novel takes as its starting point stories Habila gathered from migrants and refugees, and even though he employed journalistic techniques to find the source material, even though the real world is vividly present on each page, the raw stuff has been shaped by his sensibility as a novelist. Instead of simply recounting their stories, Habila sharpens them for his own fictional purposes.

*Travellers* captures a world in motion. It's one of the growing list of novels to use the movement of migrants as more than a backdrop, and it stresses the variety of experience encountered by travellers. The walls that separate the privileged and the privilege-revoked have worn thin. Mere pieces of paper are sometimes all that separate us from illegality. Losing a crucial piece of paper means a person can slip. Refugee camps, after all, admit all sorts.

Habila's recent projects have all incorporated current events. In 2017, he returned to non-fiction with *The Chibok Girls*, a heavily researched book examining the Boko Haram kidnappings and

Islamist militancy in Nigeria. Non-fiction has its strengths, and during his work on the book Habila was able to reapply the skills he learned as a journalist in Nigeria, but after the legwork, the travel and other constraints, Habila was keen to re-enter the world of fiction again. *Travellers* uses the news as malleable material. The episodes of the novel echo headlines as Habila returns, with grace and eloquence, to the important issues of the day. *Travellers* is his first novel to take place outside of Africa. But the issues of our time, the challenges of the uprooted and displaced, have a way of following travellers wherever they go. *Five Dials* spoke to Helon before he was scheduled to give a talk in Washington D.C.

FIVE DIALS
When did you decide the novel would incorporate the voices of so many different types of travellers?

HELON
In a way the book came about accidentally. I was in Berlin in 2013, and I was invited by a newspaper to write an article about a tragic boat accident. A boat full of migrants had capsized in the Mediterranean, off the coast of Lampedusa, and over 300 people had drowned, most of them Africans.

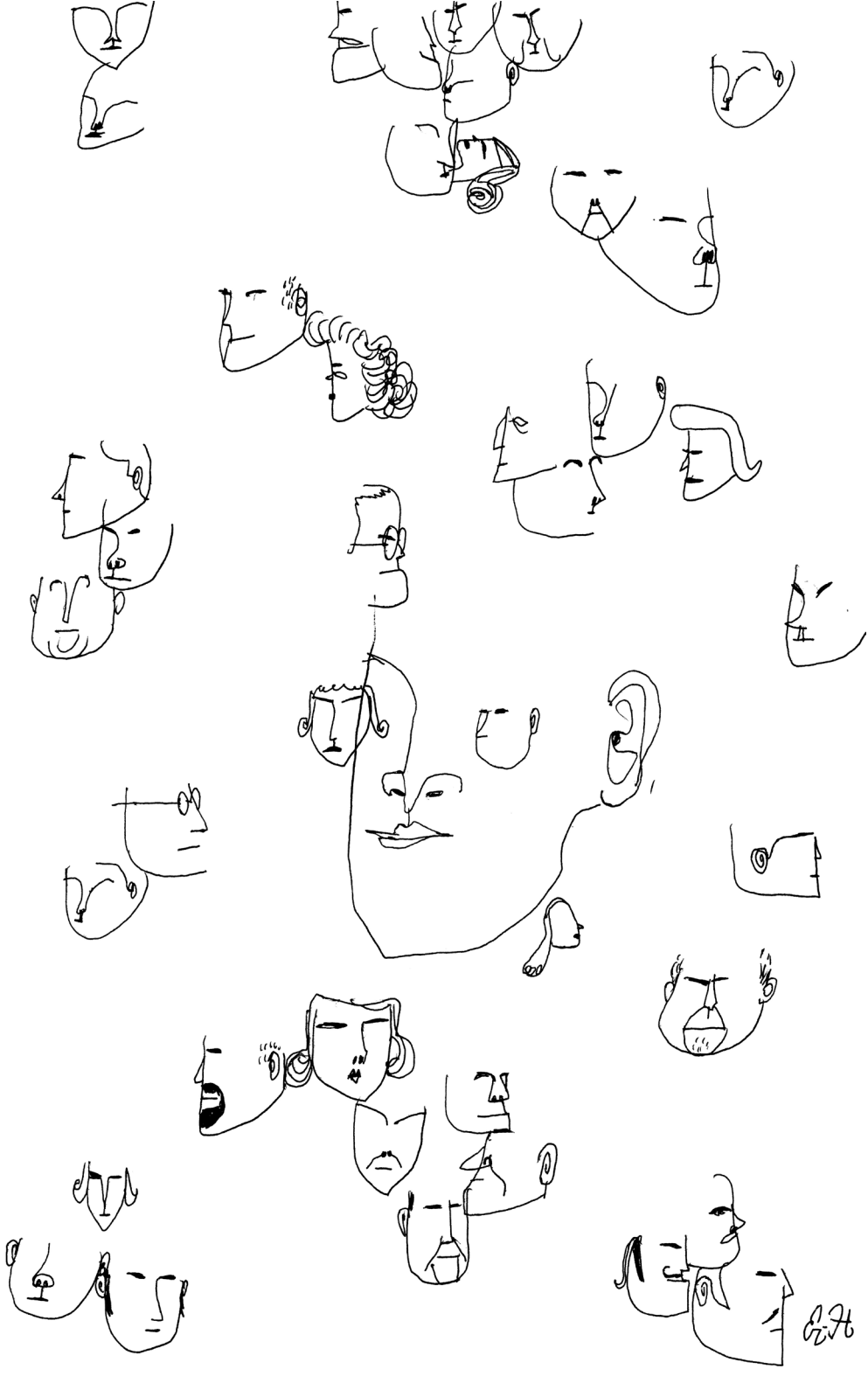
That's how it started. I started interviewing migrants in Berlin. When I started gathering these stories, I could feel

how powerful they were, stranger than fiction. So you could call this a book of found stories. The stories basically just dropped in my lap.

The biggest challenge for me though was how to fictionalize these stories and bend them so that they could become one book, one novel. I knew that I wanted the structure to be as loose and fragmented as it is now—book one, book two—up to book six, each book focusing on a separate incident around a different character, with episodic plot. And that's how it turned out. But I definitely wanted to keep—if not the letter—at least the spirit of the stories of these people.

FIVE DIALS
How did you meet the people you interviewed?

HELON
These migrants are all over Berlin. They were all over Europe, especially in 2013, 2014 when I was there. I was introduced to most of them by my German friends, most of whom were working with humanitarian organizations and NGOs, and they offered to guide me and introduce me. Some of them were working in drama groups—getting the migrants to articulate their stories through plays and other narrative modes. Some of them were working in a more practical capacity, helping ›



› the migrants to get accommodations and to fill out their paperwork and so on. Some were working with their children. These were my intermediaries.

And once the stories started coming, they came in a flood. Some of the stories were told to me in a way that was less arranged, less organized, less expected. I was at a reading once in Switzerland, and this Swiss lady came up to me. She wanted to tell me her story, how she met a migrant and married him. That's one of the stories in the book.

I had to send these stories to the people after I had written them, to get their view and their approval. Of course I have altered and tweaked the stories to meet the requirements of my book, but still I wanted to tell them, 'This is what happened with your story, with your permission.'

FIVE DIALS

What was the dynamic in the interviews?

HELON

Well, they all wanted to talk, I found out. It was easier than I expected. They wanted to express themselves, they wanted to be heard. Imagine being so anonymous in this huge city and traveling through all these countries, often being looked at with suspicion, often reduced to some kind of statistic. And then you have a

chance to tell your story. It is understandable why they wanted to be heard. They would insist to be heard. 'I hope you're going to write this in your book.' 'I hope you're recording this.'

For them, the system is trying to erase them as human beings. It looks at them as if they don't matter. So to sit down with someone like me who promises to turn their stories into this document, it's very important for them. They were being seen. That's what I noticed with almost all of them.

FIVE DIALS
Were they interested in your own story?

HELON
They were mostly interested in me being a writer, me listening to them. Of course, I introduced myself to them, but I think it was of less interest to them than being listened to, being documented, being seen.

FIVE DIALS
You examine the concept of the other. We're often only separated from others by a piece of paper. Why was it important to examine this documentation?

HELON
You can't talk about travel without talking

about documentation. Especially modern travel. How we talk about documentation goes to the issue of countries and how they were created and how these documents were invented to facilitate travel.

But ironically, documents often end up making travel harder. And to some extent this document is sometimes viewed as a measure of one's humanity. Some country's documents are more important than the documents of other countries. Imagine how these countries were created in Africa, right? During colonialism, arbitrary borders were drawn by the colonial powers. You, the colonized, are given these papers and you can't go anywhere without them. You can't visit your neighbour in the neighbouring village because a line has been drawn declaring the next village part of another country. You will need a visa to go and see the people that you used to hang out with every day.

That is one aspect of modern travel. And then you look closer and it gets more and more complicated and more ridiculous. Some people have two or three passports, while some have no papers and are called undocumented and illegal. What's the rationale behind that?

These are some of the themes that I try to raise. Daily, some people travel first class in planes, some own private jets. While some

people travel in boats. They drown in the Mediterranean because they want to go and seek a better life somewhere.

Who are those traveling planes? They're most likely the ones who own the corporations that are actually destabilizing the countries these people have to escape from. It's the story of our times.

FIVE DIALS

The importance of documentation also hearkens back to an earlier form of storytelling. One piece of paper, if it gets lost, can change a character's life in monumental ways. When your narrator loses a piece of paper, his life is irrevocably changed. Was this a conscious throwback to plot devices in previous novels?

HELON

I guess that device is not especially new or original. It doesn't need to be. It's a plot device that's been used by many others. When you look at, say, *12 Years a Slave*, where Chiwetel Ejiofor was sold and mistaken for a slave, it works on a similar plot twist. But I wanted to show how accidental these things can be, how a simple twist like that could make the difference between you being free and being privileged and ending up in a camp, becoming a refugee or undocumented. All these people ›

‘Once the stories started coming, they came in a flood.’

› in refugee camps, they're just like you and I. We are no better than them. You know, there but for the grace of God go I.

Sometimes it is simply a function of where we are born. It's not something you earn. It's not something that makes you better than other people, just an accident of birth.

Wars or climate change happened to *them*. It's not something they caused. It's something that happens to them. Today, you could be working or going to school, and tomorrow your town is invaded and you have to pack your bags and leave. Your whole life is over. You have no say in it.

Going back to storytelling, one thing I forgot to mention is, I was conscious of the multi-layers of storytelling as I was working. I was told these stories orally, I'm in turn telling the same stories in my novel. So there are two layers, and I'm basically interpreting their stories for the reader, while also reinterpreting the stories for the migrants who told me the stories—making them see themselves differently through my retelling of their stories. There are all these layers of interpretation that are at play here.

FIVE DIALS

Does some of that come through in the language itself? Do some of the original word choices and the phrasings come through from the people?

HELON

Yes, especially with the Somali character on the train. As I was writing the story, I would listen to the recording, to his phrasing and his idiomatic usage. I tried to stay as close to it as possible. I didn't want to sanitize and grammaticize and correct his English. I wanted to stay as close as possible to his speech mannerism. The same thing with the other characters, including the Swiss lady. I tried to stay as close to the idiom as possible. But of course there's always the exposition in between that tries to explain and situate.

FIVE DIALS

The book is also about alienation. The character of Mark says the line 'Even in Berlin, I miss Berlin.' What does that phrase mean to you?

HELON

Actually I was aiming for a different version of Basho's Haiku: 'Even in Kyoto, I long for Kyoto.' So Mark is expropriating it, as it were—'Even in Berlin I miss Berlin'—of course, he's talking about his love for Berlin. At least that was my intention, but after a reading someone asked me: Does it mean he's talking about feeling alienated, that he misses this place because he can never be part of it? I said: 'Oh, that's another way of looking at it.'

That wasn't what I meant but it definitely also makes sense.

It's open to all these interpretations. He misses Berlin because he can never be a Berliner. He can never be part of Berlin in the sense of a native, you know, as an African in Europe.

Just like another character, Karim, on the train asks the narrator: 'What are you doing in Europe?' 'Are you traveling in Europe?' Of course he means 'What is your story?' because an African can never be immediately seen as a native European. There has to be some kind of origin story behind it.

So in a way it's about being a visible outsider, especially for a black person in Europe. There's always that tension about belonging and not belonging and always being conscious of being out of place and trying to translate yourself to this place in terms of what you do, whether you're accepted or not, whether you are a good migrant or a bad migrant, all these things, all these layers.

FIVE DIALS

Did you get a sense from anyone you spoke to that acceptance changes over time? Is there a time when you feel a deeper sense of adoption, or is that barrier always going to be there in Europe?

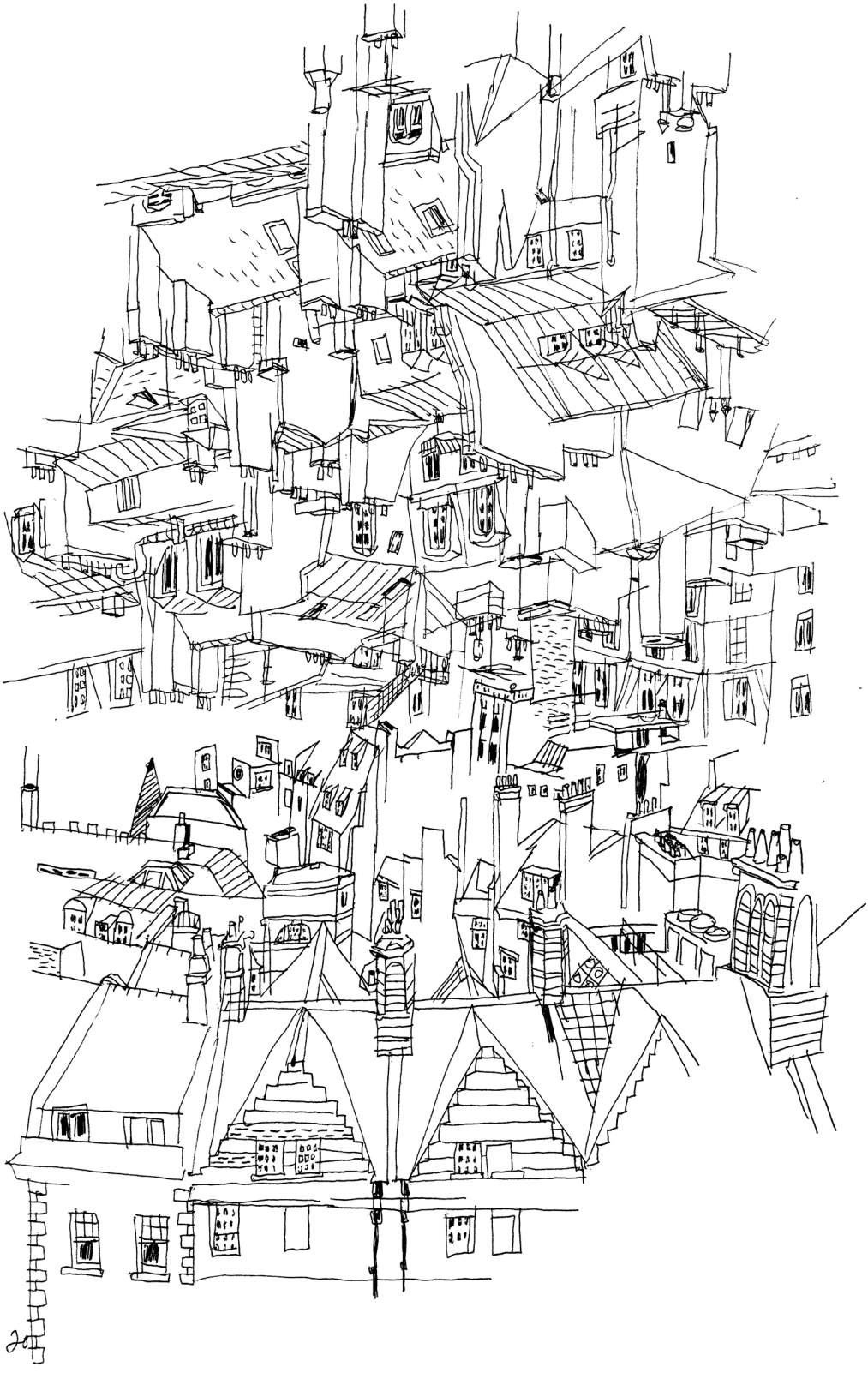
HELON

It depends on place and the kind of people you hang out with. It depends on how long you've been there. Berlin is a very international city. It's welcoming in that sense. Some people are really nice, but you always sense that tension, almost as if you're being watched all the time because you're visibly an outsider and sometimes there's this fear, this right wing perception of the outsider, as unwanted, an invader, to use the popular parlance.

In some quarters you sense it, and in some quarters, of course, people welcome you. They go out of their way to be nice because they want to make you feel at home. They want to ease your fears and your apprehensions.

I think it's going to get easier for the second generation, definitely, as people settle in Europe. The truth is that not all of these migrants are going to go back to Africa. Some of them are going to stay in Europe forever. They're going to change the face of Europe in that sense. Just like colonialism did. Travel is now changing the face of the world.

These people are going to be there physically. They're going to intermarry. They eventually are going to become citizens. And that's the way the world is going to be. ›



FIVE DIALS

› In the book your character Mark says: 'Why do white people always assume every black person traveling is a refugee?' Were you intent on using the novel to push back at some of these assumptions?

HELON

Well, it's true. Interestingly, there is this essay by the Ghanaian author, Taiye Selasi, who writes about Afropolitan Africans—privileged Africans who are working or studying in European countries and in America and have two or three passports and are sometimes mixed race. They seem to exist in this world that I call a bubble. It is also there in Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah*, about privileged Africans, or in Teju Cole's *Open City*, the narratives all tend to focus on this class of travellers who are model travellers, or model minorities in these countries.

They seem to ignore the masses who have to travel without documents, who have escaped their homes in the middle of the night. It's almost as if the writers are wishfully thinking that we now live in some post-racial utopia, but that is not the reality. Racism still happens, regardless of class. Just a little twist of fate and you realize that you are basically in the same category as these poor travellers.

I don't know if you want to call it racism

or whatever, but certainly in some places there's always that assumption that a black person traveling is somehow some kind of migrant or refugee, unless he or she can prove otherwise.

You look at the categories that bureaucrats, and the media, have created: refugees, migrants, expatriates. Expatriates would be white people going to the south. Whereas brown people coming into the north are always refugees or migrants, never expatriates.

These are some of the instinctive ways that people have of reducing others to a lesser category. We do it without thinking.

FIVE DIALS

Which books were you reading while you worked on this project? I ask because there are so many sections about loneliness. You mention there's no loneliness like the loneliness of a stranger in a strange city.

HELON

It's almost as if all my reading up to now has been preparing me for this book. There are so many, but some of the important ones would be books like Eva Hoffman's *Lost in Translation*. I referenced Knut Hamsun's *Hunger* in the last chapter. I'm referencing Hamsun and how his character, this artist, this writer, is starving

in this city full of people. He's so lonely and he can't have recourse to any help, to anyone to listen to him. He becomes this outsider in this city of people. It's so striking, and also so true.

There's another reference to the poem by Matthew Arnold, 'Dover Beach', where the persona is looking at the French coast Calais from Dover beach. I have my migrant character looking at Dover from France, in the opposite direction from Arnold's character. He's longing to set foot in England. All his hopes, his ambitions, his aspirations, are to reach England. He's just looking at it from Calais, across the water, and he mentions the line from Matthew Arnold about the 'eternal note of sadness.'

All this, all these readings, were swirling at the back of my mind when I was writing the book—including TS Eliot's quote from Dante: 'I had not thought death had undone so many.' For me that line was about all these migrants dying. Nobody has a real figure of how many have died. A lot, too many, have died in the Mediterranean, and so the narrator is imagining them swirling like school of fish, saying to himself: I didn't know that death had undone so many.

I guess, in the end, in almost all great literature that's what writers talk about. The human condition is basically that of loneliness

and alienation and also trying to make a connection and trying to find a home, trying to be seen, trying to be loved. That's what these migrants are doing. They're just trying to survive. They're traveling out of love because they want to save their children, or they want to create a better future for their children. Just like rich people will send their children to Harvard and Oxford, these people go to Europe to have a shot at a better life.

FIVE DIALS

Did you get a sense of what they wanted their stories to achieve?

HELON

To be honest, I don't think they had an end in mind, in that sense of it being utilitarian, being some kind of instrument that will make them gain their documents or whatever.

The most important thing is that they want to have a witness. For that moment they feel good that they are speaking, talking about their experiences. They are trying to interpret what has happened to them, almost as if they're trying to justify something in some way.

It's hard to explain. You can just see their face lighting up. They tell the story with such humour. One man was laughing and telling me about the difficulties he went through,

how he almost died. He's laughing and saying, 'I thank God. You know, I could have died because I've seen worst. I've seen others who died right next to me and I'm still alive.'

Of course he wants to be documented, he wants a witness, he wants to be heard. But being able to tell his story was a kind of cathartic performance for him.

FIVE DIALS

Do you feel optimistic about the state of Europe after spending time in Berlin conducting your interviews?

HELON

Actually, I do. There are a lot of good people, well-intentioned people who are really trying to help and who realize that Europe actually needs these people, these migrants, this labour pool, this new blood in Europe, especially with the declining birth rate. It's a necessity for the infusion of new ways, new energy, as it were.

FIVE DIALS

Did you get a sense of a limit to the goodwill of Europeans?

HELON

I was just talking about that with someone. She said you see these people and sometimes

you want to help them, but you just throw up your hands. There's nothing you can do because more keep coming. Sometimes you get exhausted. With all the empathy, all the sympathy, there's a kind of exhaustion. It is natural. But, like I mentioned, in the end Europe also benefits from this.

Only the future can tell us what's going to happen. We really can't say, but of course there are serious backlash reactions to all this goodwill, with the right wing politicians winning seats in most of these countries. Maybe there'll be a backlash to the backlash?

FIVE DIALS

Will you continue to write nonfiction too?

HELON

I hope to do more in the future, but they're just so hard to do, really, they are just so hard. I mean with fiction, you can fictionalize and make up your own facts and so on. With non-fiction every single detail has to be cross-checked and double-checked and triple-checked.

I read so many books to just write that small book, *The Chibok Girls*. It felt like I was studying for a PhD. So when I recover, maybe there will be another one. ◊

Andrew McMillan

SICK

the all of it coming up out of me
so much of the stuff  up and up and out
as though it were coming up through my feet
from the knotted roots under the kerb
the music from the gig still shuddering
the streets  and me  braced against the tree
as though I were at sea and woozy
with the motion of it  and you  standing
twenty feet away for privacy
as though such wreckage weren't the truest
chaos of ourselves loosed into the world
love  you will never know me better
than as this tide  flowing over  breaking
on itself  shivering back behind the skin

as quickly as it came it passed
my stomach  empty as a promise  calmed
we walked away  downhill  the tree's thick skin
shining in the porch light  this is not
what I had in mind when I told you
that I would be more honest

# Mother's Day Card From a Wooden Object

Ben Pester

M other!

At an unusual time of year, and in an impractical format, this card is to say thank you (again) for raising me. I realize it's a recurring theme with me lately, especially since I think now you and I have had our last foreign holiday. And you've definitely tossed me affectionately into the back of the car for the final time.

It has not been easy raising a wooden object as if it was a human child. Not even a human-shaped wooden object.

In this card, which I cannot actually write, but I know you will somehow understand that I intended to be written, I want to acknowledge that.

As you recall, I arrived in the passenger seat of your brown, Scandinavian-manufactured car around the end of spring in the mid 1980s. As the traffic had slowed, you were taking a moment to gaze at something out of the window. It was probably a dirty sign, or an empty packet of Maltesers as it skittered along the gutter.

And when you turned back, there I was, a helpless lump of wood that you had to accept, in that moment, as your son.

As you continued driving, the very real knowledge came over you that you were a new mum. And it would not be the way you expected.

There were no booties or onesies or teddies. There were no balloons in the hospital ward or flowers on the kitchen table. No. It was just you and

me, in the brown car at the intersection between Windy Arbour and Spring Lane.

Thank you for bearing the humiliation of enrolling me in the reception class at the local school. I remember the headmistress, who was very fond of the colour green. You entered her office carrying me under your arm. She asked you to sit on a tiny chair, obviously used by pupils who came to visit her in this office. For me, there was the carpet, which had a map of a town on it, with a wide road running past all the shops, and the hospital and the fire station and the police station.

As the headmistress looked from you on your little chair, to me, a nicely curved, abstract shape of dark wood on the rug, you explained how things were.

When the headmistress asked, you told her that you did not know what type of wood I was, and that you wouldn't be making any effort to find out. *What am I going to do? Get him tested? I will not get him tested*, you said. *He's got human rights. He's got free will and he needs an education. He won't disrupt the lesson, and he won't take up a desk*, you said. You ended the whole thing with a tight nod and a flat smile, which I had seen you practise in the mirror because, in reality, you did not have conversations like this. In reality, the reality before you became the mother of some wood that appeared mysteriously in the passenger seat of your car, you never made statements. Only asked questions, and then made affirmations about the answers. Like this:

*Wendy, where do these files belong?*
*In the drawer in the chest in the bottom office.*
*Oh right, lovely, see you in a minute then.*

I remained on the rug throughout your chat with the headmistress, tracking the shape of the road, enjoying the way the sun came through the high iron-framed windows into the room.

Just as you promised, I was a quiet pupil, and I did not take up any room. Each month, or each half-term, you assured that same headmistress, in her grass-green pullover, with her coils of quite luscious black hair, that I had shown every sign of learning. *I have the absolute conviction,* you said, *that he can read his own name, and understands the basics of addition and subtraction.* And you thanked the school for their commitment to the education of all beings with human rights.

At home, it was all right. There wasn't any money, but it was all right because it was just us. Even though you sometimes said, *I wonder where your father is?* Or, *Why isn't he here sorting this mess out?*

We both knew exactly where he was. His phone number was written on the first page of the almost-empty address book that we kept next to the phone.

Mother, do you remember when the freezer broke in the middle of the night? Our own freezer, which the landlord had originally objected to, because he preferred to let the property with

a freezer in it that he had got tested and had a warranty for.

But you insisted we kept that freezer because it had been your most valuable wedding gift, and you still clung, though you didn't understand why, to the idea that my father had given you, which was that this freezer would never die. It was of such a superior brand it would go on and on, you remember him saying. *If we have kids, we'll be able to pass it down. And they can pass it to our grandkids.*

But when you called him in the dead of night, he was confused. Baffled that you had held on to that old piece of junk all this time. *I thought you'd have skipped that fucking thing by now*, he said.

God, he said, laughing a dry little syllable of amusement.

You asked him to focus on the fact we needed his help.

*Just tell the landlord*, he said. And you tried to explain that no, it wasn't the landlord's responsibility. *I need some practical help, please*, you said to him.

There were long silences. He insisted that you stay on the line while he looked up the rules and regulations concerning white goods in tenancy agreements. Meanwhile, you replaced the sodden towels one-handed, or with the phone cradled into your neck.

*What are we going to eat?* you whispered to yourself, as food melted between your splayed fingers. *And how the fuck are we going to pay . . .*

While Dad ummed and ah'd and looked for old letters he had regarding this exact situation, you cooked sausages in the oven. More than a dozen frozen sausages in a tray, with the intention of keeping them after they were cooked and eating sausage sandwiches at work, even though you knew Wendy would probably make you eat them away from her because of the smell or something.

Eventually Dad said he would call the landlord on your behalf if you couldn't face doing it yourself, and you screamed. You shouted, *Don't call the landlord I have explained about the landlord it's not his freezer. We told him not to worry! It's a waste of time!*

And then I could just hear him saying, *No I'll tell you what's a waste of fucking time . . .* but there was no more before you left the room.

I looked at the sausages through the little greasy window in the oven door.

You spoke to Dad on and off throughout that night, do you remember? And I tried not to look too much like I was in the way while you mopped up the liquid and chased around the peas.

Dad eventually said the inevitable conclusion was that you would have to buy a freezer in the morning or when you next could afford it. *Get it on credit*, he said. *Just get something sorted and leave me out of it.*

And he said he had done everything in his power to help. And he hung up and you were angry. And he hadn't mentioned me once.

Thank you, though, Mother, because there were much happier times to come. For example, thank you for taking me on my date with Sarah. Thank you for sitting in her living room and placing me on the end of the sofa nearest to where Sarah was sitting. And thank you for explaining to Sarah, twelve, that I was really interested in her personality and I liked the way she laughed. Thank you for telling her that I really liked the Blur T-shirt she was wearing. And that I had my eye on a Suede one, which I had seen recently in a shop in Coventry.

Even though, as we left, you found it odd that anyone would allow a woman with a lump of wood to sit in their living room and say all this stuff. *Who would tolerate it?* you said. *There must be something wrong with her family.* And, of course, I partly agreed. Although I actually also really liked Sarah for sitting through it all, and smiling at me three times while you spoke. And I think you could have given her more credit for trying to make you a cup of tea, before you realized she had never made one before and decided to step in.

I had no answer for you when you asked where her parents had been at the time.

Perhaps you're wondering why I have chosen this moment to send this card (which as you know I cannot actually send or write in a physical sense because I am entirely made from wood).

Well, as I'm sure you can understand, by now

I have succumbed to certain feelings of desperation regarding the future. This is not the same as when, as an adolescent, I allowed myself to be carted away by your artist friend, who had intended to use me as the material from which to make a carving of a fabulous head. Did you know about that? Our artist friend? I thought he must have told you. Maybe not.

He was intending to carve this head using techniques connected to the Saxon craft of totem making. But he would also use the head as a way of expressing something, he did not know yet, about his own failures in the eyes of his very masculine brother. The choice of wood, he said, was very important because it represented the unswerving, unemotional force, and yet he would hack into it, he said, in an intentionally brutal way, and hopefully this would bring about a shape that felt wounded or ashamed. I was really looking forward to being mutilated in this way. I did not fear the pain of it. I was sure, in fact, that I was incapable of physical pain in that way, because of my 100 per cent wooden form.

I had already sustained a few chips and dents at this time. I am heavy, and an awkward size and shape. It was inevitable that I'd get dropped a few times, even by you.

I remember how much you wept when I first slipped out of your grasp. You were getting me out of the car seat, ready to deposit me at school. We were running late because there was a shoe you

couldn't find. Then I slipped out of your hand and cracked on to the road. I rolled a few times. You picked me up and, at a first glance, you couldn't see anything amiss. I was fine. You left me in the usual place for one of the teachers to carry inside, or if it was Bad Back Bower, I went on to the cart.

I was fine, but I saw you rubbing your eyes under your glasses as you negotiated your way back into the flow of traffic. Already late for work. Crying about what Wendy was going to say, and how could you explain that part of the reason was because of a shoe and part of the reason was because you dropped your wooden child.

I tried to avoid letting you see the chip later that day when you collected me. I hid it well, using various distraction methods I had cultivated over the years, but just as you were finally getting ready to sit down and eat a meal, I dropped my guard and you saw what had happened to me.

You lowered your fork from your mouth.

*The one good thing about today*, you said, *had been waiting for my sausage and chips. My favourite comfort food. I have needed this all day.*

Your favourite food was a battered sausage. Chips dipped in mayonnaise, which in those days hardly any English people were doing.

*And now there's this!* And you examined the damage, looked horrified by it.

It was one of our bad nights.

The food, uneaten. The mayonnaise, congealing within an hour. Why hadn't I allowed

you to know about the chip, you wanted to know. Why were you being made to feel like this in your own home?

*Tell me if you get hurt*, you said. *Tell me for God's sake otherwise what is the fucking point in any of this!*

I said nothing, because I was made of wood. And also, because, even if I had been able to speak, I would not have known how to say that the chip was only superficial and did not hurt, and that what was really painful was knowing that I would never be able to make life any better, and I would always be susceptible to chips and cracks. And there was really no way anyone could change that.

And so it was with this knowledge that superficial damage didn't hurt me that, in a moment of adolescent foolishness, I contrived to allow myself to be in the pile of logs and other timber artefacts you had prepared for our artist friend, for him to use as material for his Saxon art project. Of course, he noticed straight away that it was your son he was about to hack into with all his available masculine rage, and he drove me back home.

After only a very brief moment, anyway, in which I saw him contemplate how much more powerful his work would be if he carved it from the wooden object that his friend obsessively called her child.

But, as I say, it was only the briefest of moments when he considered doing that. And then he drove me home, all the while saying how good it

was to see me and how sorry he was for his mistake, and he invited me to play cricket that weekend with himself and his two daughters, who were, he thought, probably about the same age as me.

What I'm describing here is not that kind of desperation. I have accepted my form. I have come to love the contours that make up my 'back'—resonant of driftwood, but much richer in colour, much heavier and harder to the touch. I am proud of my grain. Is that a phrase? Perhaps it could be, just between the two of us.

The desperation I'm referring to in this card is actually more connected to the fact that I am haunted by visions of your death. I see you, frail. I see you, the dog has died long ago. I see the world we inhabit close in around you. I go for days sometimes, under a tea towel you have casually chucked on to me, and then reel with self-loathing as I see the inevitable shock and sadness on your face when you peel away the cloth and realize how many days it has been since you left me like this.

I see you reading through old school reports, which people had indulgently written for you, to humour you, you have always assumed, with news of the progress of your entirely wood-based child. For example:

*We really feel as if he is grasping the finer details of the Tudor age.*

Or,

*His intended coursework is above average, if a little ambitious.*

I see you leafing through these things and letting them slip from your fingers and drop to the floor, before you either fall asleep there on the chair or rouse yourself with a snort and go into the other room to look at spreadsheets.

Do you remember your retirement party? I remember your retirement party, and you weren't sure whether to invite me. Of course, all your colleagues over the years had come to accept your child made of wood. Or rather, you always suspected, they had come to accept your insistence that I, a wooden object, was your natural son, and that I had human rights and free will.

But how would they feel to have me there, perched in a corner, with a rum and coke plonked in front of me by one of your many well-meaning bosses?

You bore the indignities of it, for example when we went on our first foreign holiday, and the man who worked in group sales asked how easy it had been to get a passport. And could he see it? And did I have a birth certificate?

Of course, it had never been necessary for me to have a passport. You could get me into the school system but convincing the actual state that I had been born and not, presumably, grown then carved, would have been impossible. Not to mention a waste of time.

So, as you told the group sales guy, you always just booked two seats. One for yourself and one for a certain precious item that you wanted to

have with you for your trip. We mostly went by Eurotunnel because it was easier than the plane.

And I really want to thank you for those holidays, which were a financial curse throughout the year both before and after each one but were worth it. Worth it for the people we met. The other tourists who you found it so easy to talk to. And who indulged us both by allowing me my own sunbed. And, in order to give you some well-earned privacy, the hotels that indulged us by allowing me to have my own room, with a view over the village. How I loved to watch those hot surfaces cooling in the dusk air, the sound of Mediterranean voices floating like music, and the smell of salt and loud fresh seafood.

I can still recall how it felt to be in that hotel room early one morning when the cleaner came in. I remember the way he sat at the little desk, set a timer on his watch—the exact allocation of time allowed for each room—and took off his shoes. He leant back in the chair and breathed out heavily. He did not look at me when he spoke.

*I've heard about you,* he said. *You don't deserve any of this. Do you? Are you really getting anything out of this? You are a lump of wood. You have a better life than I can give my family. Do you think that's okay? Of course, you don't have an opinion. You're not a human being.*

*You said it*, I said. Although, of course, he could not hear me.

He took off his socks and massaged his feet. *Your mother is a good person*, he said. *She told me not to*

*bother cleaning. She gave me a nice tip. I think she might be an angel*, he said. All the time he was talking, he was massaging his feet, balling up little sausages of black lint which he discarded carefully into the waste-paper bin.

He complained about his socks. *They make us wear these things. I can see why; this uniform isn't going to look good without the right black socks. And I don't pay for them—but they fall apart. I have this black fluffy shit all over my bed at home, when I get home late and don't have time to rub it all off. I usually try and have a shower before I go to bed.*

Then he stood up, quite abruptly, and walked across the room to where I was by the window. He undid his belt and pulled down his trousers and pants. Then he lay his thick white penis along my 'back', like he was placing a fish on a chopping board. I heard his camera snap on his phone.

He didn't say anything else as he put everything back on and left my room.

I'm wood though, so really it didn't bother me.

But anyway, as I said, all of this has come from a sense of desperation, in a way, a fear of watching you fade. Watching them come and install handrails so you can stay in your home (yet another unwanted concession from yet another despairing landlord who regrets housing us) with only limited outside assistance.

*There's no one who can come?* the assessment officer asks. *It says here, you have a son. Does he live far*

*away?*

You gesture to the area where I am nestled, forgotten for a few weeks beside a plate with dried pickle on it, amongst the other living-room ornaments. At first the assessment officer doesn't understand, but you calmly explain, through the now constant fog of your age, that I am your son, but I am made entirely from wood. And am not even human shaped.

The assessment officer is very interested in our story and so she stays an extra hour to ask about us, completely oblivious to how tired it is making you to answer those questions.

*You have very philosophical views*, the assessment officer says. *You have a very philosophical outlook.* She says, *I spend all day out and about, meeting people, and there aren't a lot of times I want to hear more. People think they're unique because of their circumstance*, she says. *But it's the most normal thing in the world, needing help. It's the most ordinary thing. And people think they are extraordinary because they are surrounded by love. But people will love anything*, the assessment officer says.

A long time ago, you would have taken issue with that sentiment. But now you don't. Now, you let her go on.

I cannot interject. I cannot suddenly rise up and say, *I think my mother has had enough now. So, I think we should bring this to a close now.*

But, you say, breakingly, abruptly, *I am not surrounded by love. I do not want to be surrounded by*

*anything*. You say that what has kept you going all this time is waiting, just waiting, for wisps. Wisps are enough.

The assessment officer asks you to elaborate, even though your voice is very raw now. You say that in the beginning, in that first winter, you discovered that I had been left in the cold, near the back door in the kitchen, on a stone tile. I was visibly smaller, you say, because of the cold. You had immediately rushed me inside and put me a safe distance from the fire. You wrapped your arms around me. And in those few minutes, you felt the wood that I am made of swell back to my normal size, and very slightly beyond.

*I felt him breathe.*

You turn to me, beside the pickle-stained plate, and you say, *I felt you breathe*.

You tell me, and the assessment officer, that these things are enough. You can live a hundred years, you say, on just that fractional breath. ◊

Rachael Allen

DAD THE PIG

with a Snickers
in his trough.
I dreamed this poem
knee deep
in silk—
I mean silo.
Slice him up
there's a vacancy
In the sky
and complacency
in the sty.
Who's useful after that
vasectomy anyway?
Someone painted him
in pigeony colours
everyone knows
they're the worst
crayons
(they'd run out
Of flesh pencil
well it is the rarest
colour in
the tin).
Ball him up
like an egg
careful of his
front bits
wobbling.

His turkey neck
sack like a
dangling
testicle
stretched down
to the dirt in
blow job pose
escaped man
fallen to the sand
on his knees
in prayer pose
pinched and dead
puffer fish
on the end of a line
in its last
breath pose.
At night mam
dreams of taut
hot pigs
bullish and red
with blue veins.
She wears him
calls him
the big holdall
keeps him in the loft
only takes him out
when we go camping.


2015

‘Climate change is us. The sixth extinction is us. We are at the heart of all of these issues.’

# Julian Hoffman on the state of the world

Julian Hoffman's latest book, *Irreplaceable: The Fight to Save Our Wild Places*, is a cry to see, to examine what we still have, to appreciate what is quickly disappearing from our world. Hoffman is also the author of *The Small Heart of Things*, as well as a blog called *Notes from Near and Far*. *Irreplaceable* doesn't just celebrate threatened places, according to Hoffman, the book also tell the story of 'the vital and inspiring engagement of those people who seek to protest what is of value to both wild and human communities.' Hoffman moves from the large to the small, from ancient woodlands to urban allotments, from the sort of capital 'N' nature we associate with documentaries and travel photography, to patches of land that, at first, may seem expendable in a greedy industrial society, Hoffman describes the 'sustaining ties forged between people, nature and place.'

Unsurprisingly, he is a passionate interviewee. The interview was finalized as millions marched around the world in Climate Crisis actions from Montreal to Kabul. Hoffman's book takes a similar global view—in it he covers stories in Kent, Glasgow, the Balkans, Indonesia, and others. 'But wherever it is set,' he writes, 'and in whatever language or accent that was spoken there, I heard the same words as I traveled: Once it's gone it's gone. And we can never get it back.'

FIVE DIALS

Since this is a book about loss, could

you tell me when you felt a sense of loss overwhelming enough to embark on the project?

JULIAN

The opening chapter, The Marsh Country, is set in the Hoo Peninsula, this extraordinary marshland landscape that has a long-lived human history. It's where Charles Dickens set *Great Expectations*, and there are 300,000 wintering water birds around the adjacent estuary, as well as Britain's largest heronry and avocet roost. And yet I'd never heard of this place.

I had no idea where it was. I couldn't have found it on a map for you.

About six years ago, I had a completely different book in mind that I wanted to write. So I'd booked a week in London, where I was going to carry out some research. And that week I received a message from a woman who lived on the Hoo Peninsula.

She had contacted me by Twitter and simply asked if I would come to see their landscape, because it was deeply imperilled. London's then mayor, and of course now the British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, was arguing for Europe's largest airport to be built on this extraordinary and supposedly protected set of landscapes.

At the time, I thought, 'Well, I could

make a trip down there by train and spend a day in the company of this woman and two fellow campaigners that she'd wanted to introduce me to', and perhaps in response to this threat, I could write a short blog post or an article that I might be able to sell to a newspaper that detailed their plight.

But that day profoundly altered the course of my life. And I say that with no exaggeration whatsoever. I fell in love with this place.

What I understood on that journey to the marsh country, for the very first time in my life, was what loss looked like. Previously, it had been statistical for me. It had been numerical. These catastrophic figures of decline that are really difficult for most humans to interpret in a way that's meaningful. Such as the 40 million starlings that have been lost over three decades from the skies of the European Union. But what do 40 million starlings mean?

I now know that it translates to about 140 birds per hour for that period of 32 years. But, what does it really mean within the context of our lives and these shared landscapes?

That day, I realized that these people understood precisely what loss meant in the widest possible sense, not only for their human communities, and two entire villages,

along with their 12th and 13th century churches, respectively, which would have been wiped from the face of the earth, but also much of this remarkable place and all of the wild creatures that depended upon it.

At the end of that day, I took the train back to St. Pancras in London, and I knew I needed to put to one side the other idea for a book because a new book needed writing.

I really wanted to write a book that was about what still lives on this side of loss, a book that I hope is closer in tone to defiance than elegy.

Those three people opened my heart and mind to the extraordinary presence of place, but also to the potential catastrophe of its loss.

FIVE DIALS

You don't diminish the idea of loss. You speak of its importance. But you also struggle to think of anyone who would suggest that loss should be actively and continuously courted.

JULIAN

Without a question, loss is absolutely, fundamentally a part of the human experience. There's no way around that. But at the same time, we are living through an age where there's an unparalleled quality of loss. We are living alongside shadows, ghosts of our ›

‘Loss is the aperture through which a radical hopefulness might emerge.’

› own making in many ways.

We face the sixth extinction, this devastating decline of wild species in our midst, and I think it's of crucial importance to confront loss in whatever way we are able to.

Alongside that often comes a great deal of grief. The artist Chris Jordan has written that while studying and photographing Laysan albatrosses on Midway Island he learned the awful, awful tragedy of their deaths due to the consumption of plastic.

He said that grief and love are essentially the same experience. Grief is an expression of love for things that we've lost or we're about to lose. It's important to go as deeply as we possibly can into the nature of loss in the wider world we inhabit, because it's only when we confront loss that we can come out the other side and find, hopefully, ways to repair and renew and restore and reengage with the natural world in a meaningful sense.

Loss is the aperture through which a radical hopefulness might emerge.

FIVE DIALS

You speak of a poorer, leaner, thinner layer of human experience when the spectrum of human encounters with the wild world are reduced.

What effect does that have? It's tough to know what you're missing when you can't

see it. Do you think people intuit they're experiencing a thinner version of the natural world?

JULIAN

I open the book with a scene that depicts the starling murmuration off the coast at Brighton Pier. My visit that evening was remarkable for me because of this wild spectacle, this great, dark, weaving, spiralling apparition in the sky.

But it was also remarkable because of the human response to it. Young girls who were taking selfies in front of the amusements arcade suddenly stopped what they were doing and turned around and faced the sea. They took their phones and flipped the cameras over so that they could photograph and film these starlings weaving through their lives.

Young couples on their way to the pub, dressed up for a Friday night out, stopped what they were doing and pulled their phones from their back pockets and engaged with this remarkable murmuration.

That quality of wonder and mystery is part of what lends our days, and ultimately our lives, some of the richness that would have once been more commonplace. Starling numbers have declined profoundly, but often it's easy to be unaware of that diminishing.

The great poet Gerard Manley Hopkins

wrote a wonderful, though grieving and mournful poem back in 1879 called 'Binsey Poplars', after he witnessed on one of his regular walks along the banks of the river Thames near Oxford, a beloved line of poplars that had been levelled overnight and cut down and felled to stumps. The logs were just lying flat across the earth.

There's a line in it which is quite profound, but also prescient, in which he says that 'aftercomers cannot guess the beauty been.'

What he was essentially foretelling is what we now scientifically describe as the shifting baseline syndrome, the way that it's almost impossible for us, in an experiential sense, to understand past presence in the natural world. And because of that, we tend to normalize, we psychologically normalize and celebrate paucity, as we're unaware of what richness once was, except theoretically. Because aftercomers cannot guess the beauty been.

If we were to lose starlings entirely from Britain, then future generations visiting Brighton Pier wouldn't have any way of truly knowing that that extraordinary spectacle was once part of people's everyday lives throughout the winter months on the coast there.

But watching how people reacted to it

also made me viscerally aware of how easily we can re-attune and reengage. That wonder can ripple out through human lives, and often through lives that aren't necessarily connected to the natural world on an everyday basis. So, for me, it was a really profound experience of how that mystery, that sense of extraordinary beauty and gracefulness, can still pass through our lives in an instant.

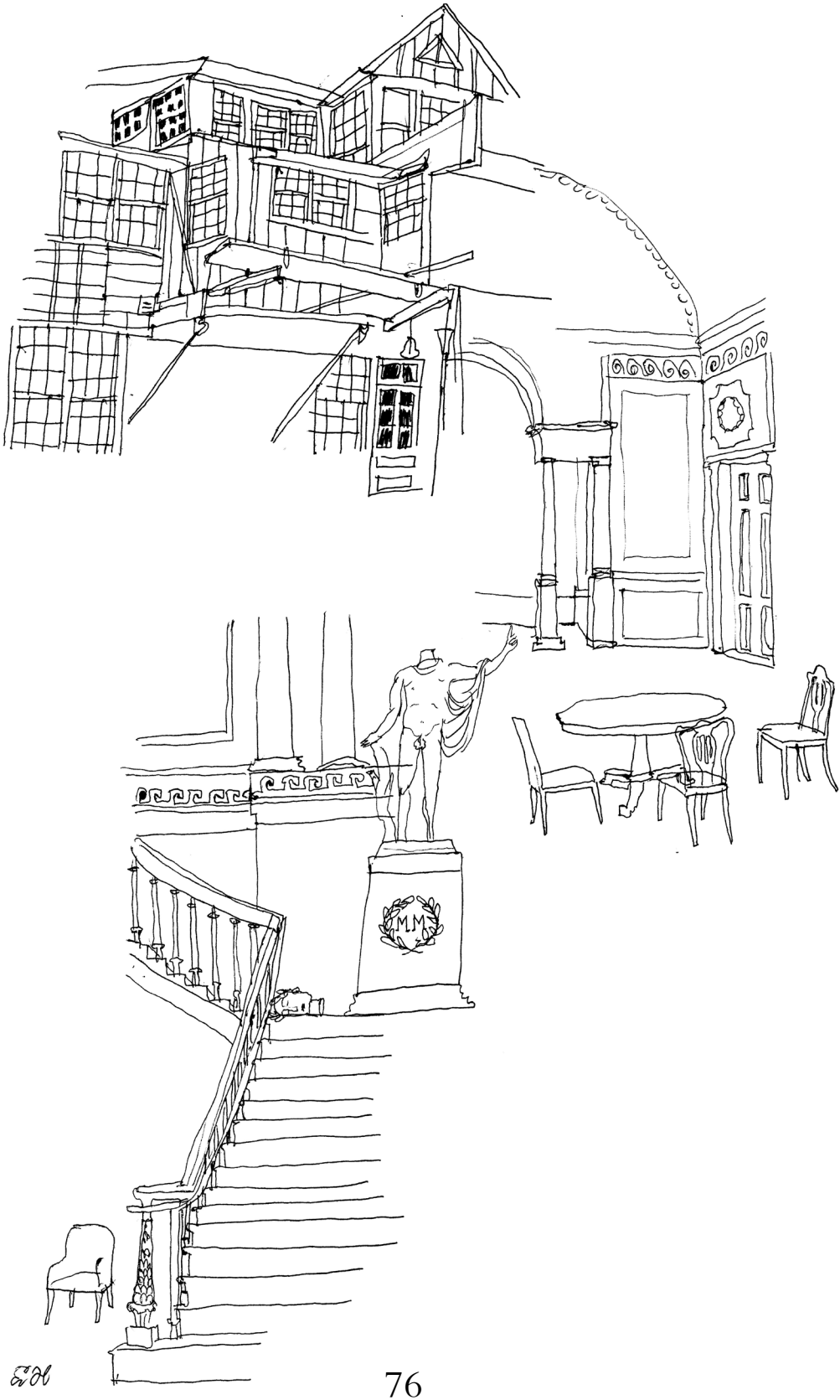
Without those murmurations, without those starlings, though, we condemn future generations to that far leaner life.

FIVE DIALS

The pessimistic part of me thinks that people won't pay attention. Our talent for self-delusion is strong, as well as our talent for being tempted by digital distractions. Do you think people will feel the mournfulness?

JULIAN

There is that element of asking the question, 'Will we?' Will we take charge of the situation to a degree that it demands and re-connect? I didn't know what to expect when I began the journeys that comprise the bulk of *Irreplaceable*. Time and time again, though, from lorry drivers, from soldiers, from nurses, from schoolchildren, people responded with a deep understanding about the issues, a deep and felt and lived quality of connection to ›


M.M.

› these places of importance. They weren't necessarily on the front lines, but they understood exactly what loss meant. On one occasion, on the Gwent Levels, this absolutely magical landscape in southeast Wales, one of the last remaining fenlands in the country that glitters with this gorgeous light off the estuary, I called a taxi to take me further into this realm of watery ditches that the Welsh call *reens*, with grazing marshes to either side.

And because the threat to that particular landscape was 14 miles of six-lane motorway that would be laid over, again, this supposedly protected landscape, I wondered to myself whether the taxi driver would be the ideal candidate to support the proposed motorway because his livelihood depended upon the reliable movement of traffic. He'd only quite recently started up this taxi business, which meant, of course, that delayed fares could cause havoc for him.

But as we drove deeper and deeper into the Gwent Levels I casually asked him about the motorway proposal and he immediately replied, knowing exactly what he wanted. He wanted the motorway to be shelved, and he gave two very explicit reasons why. One, the landscape was far too important in a cultural and historic sense to be destroyed. And two, he said that other species lived there. If we destroy the Gwent Levels, he said, if we build

over them, where will those wild creatures go?

Time and again I understood that people *are* connected to the natural world, but there is what I would describe as a spectrum of connection. At one end of the spectrum you have individuals that are doing everything that is feasibly possible to reduce their carbon footprint, and to recycle and engage and examine and study issues of bio-diversity loss. But at the other end of the spectrum, you have a great many people who want their children to grow up with clean air and clean water, and in a landscape that has some quality of wildness or greenery or wildlife to it.

All too often, we've splintered that spectrum by not recognizing that so many of us are on a similar path, even if it manifests itself in different ways. What's absolutely imperative is to fully connect that spectrum, to acknowledge those links between people with different, but related, concerns, because I discovered that, fundamentally, people do care.

Of course, that's not to ignore the pessimism you described. I gave a talk just a couple of days ago in Malvern and at the end, a woman in the audience said, 'This is very interesting, thank you. I've enjoyed your talk very much, but I feel very, very pessimistic. I don't think anything will shift.' And there was an elderly man in the audience, probably the oldest in the room, and he simply turned to

her and said, 'We said the same about the slave trade.'

FIVE DIALS

Place is one of the hardest words to define.
You chose a definition from Alan Gussow.
Place is a piece of a whole environment that
has been claimed by feelings.

JULIAN

Yes, and what preceded that part that you quoted is that he also said 'the catalyst that converts any physical location into a place is the process of experiencing deeply.'

I think what he was suggesting is that we all have it within us to lay claim to a place through our meaningful interactions with it. That can be on a day to day level, or more irregularly, if we pass through or travel through different places. What's important is that it's the quality of attention and engagement that really makes those places, certainly the ones that I tried to evoke in the book. That indelible relationship between people and place is what makes them so enriching for those who know them. These are places that are an essential part of their lives.

The Czech writer Václav Cílek once wrote that a place in the landscape corresponds to a place in the heart, and that

seemed very much to be at the core of nearly everyone's story that I listened to for the book.

FIVE DIALS

Why did you choose these specific locations for the book? In the first chapter, you stumbled upon a place. What guided you to these other woodlands and meadows and reefs?

JULIAN

I had a few parameters that I sketched out at the beginning. Firstly, I wanted to explore places that were under threat from some kind of development, whether it was an airport, mine or motorway, and all that stood to be lost in terms of wonder, wellbeing, wildlife and human experience.

Also, I only chose places where I didn't know what the final decision would be at the time I began writing about them. I wanted to follow their story so that their future was as new to me as it was to those who were campaigning on their behalf.

I also wanted to make sure that this idea of equality of place emerged in the book, because far too often, within writing about the natural world in particular, there has been a tendency to write about the vast and the iconic, the remote, the really—and I'm putting this, although you can't see me, I'm

putting this in quotation marks—

FIVE DIALS
I can hear them.

JULIAN
'The wild landscapes of the world.' I wanted to write a book that lent credence to those places that for large numbers of people—especially when over 50% of the world's population is now urbanized—are of equal validity to them as are the great national parks and far remoter regions to others who are able to access them.

And so that brought me into contact with inner city allotments and urban community meadows and other small patches of greenery that might seem incredibly tiny, but their depth and span within the lives of those individuals and communities utilizing them was profoundly vital. So I wanted to tell the stories of these places that are also overlooked when we write about the natural world.

Those were two of the guiding principles behind the book.

FIVE DIALS
As much as the book is about the natural world, it's about people too, and I noticed certain attributes that could be applied to

each of the campaigners. What would you say were the important traits that you saw in these human beings who were fighting? What did it take to be a good campaigner?

JULIAN

It required what I would describe as heartfulness, first and foremost, this connection that was emotional in quality to these lands and their surrounding wild communities. It required determination and grit. It required a fierce sense of protection and a valuation of place that was far more expansive and inclusive in character than most governments would ever put on a piece of land.

I found most of the people I met to be quite extraordinary, but each and every one of them would also say that they're absolutely ordinary, and that was one of the most fascinating aspects of my journey for the last six years.

There are plenty of books out there engaging with the natural world that are largely devoid of people. I wanted to make a conscious effort to explore and elaborate upon the indelible connections that we humans have with the natural world, because we are fundamentally part of the natural world, and any attempt to offset climate change or to reel back in the sixth extinction, ›

‘That quality of wonder and mystery is part of what lends our days, and ultimately our lives, some of the richness that would have once been more commonplace.’

› has to have humans at its heart.

And, of course, each and every person was fundamentally different in character, and many of them existed on a radically different part of the political, economic or social spectrum.

I wanted to give voice to varied experiences, but those essential, underlying qualities were always similar wherever I went: heartfulness, determination, grit, protectiveness, and this real sense of curiosity. Sometimes this phrase is used as denigration, I suppose, which it should never be, but they were childlike in their curiosity. That rapt attention and focused awareness to what is; to what the great writer Jim Harrison described as the luminosity of what is always there.

These were people who were out engaging and looking and listening and watching over and caring for these places, but they also had day jobs. Few of them were professional ecologists or conservationists, but had, for example, jobs as the manager of a wedding band or worked in the office of a custom car bodywork business. Or they worked in a café.

So these connections are within reach of all of us. And the qualities of connection, resistance and hopefulness they showed me were deep and powerful and potent.

FIVE DIALS

And, from the vibrancy of the people, you sometimes slip back to the intentional blandness of the language that's used by authorities to describe these places. You reflect on the problem of terminology, of 'protective designation', of 'Sites of Special Scientific Interest.' What is the problem with the language we use these days?

JULIAN

Much of the language about these places is essentially legal in character, about scientific designations or protective descriptions. And because of this it lacks mystery. It lacks beauty. It lacks potency. It lacks the very qualities that the actual landscapes that are meant to be protected by this bland terminology have in extraordinary abundance.

You go somewhere like the marsh country of the Hoo Peninsula, for example, and if it's an early summer's day the grasslands are swaying with light. And you've got these great ships riding up the Thames in much the same way that Charles Dickens would have seen—although the type of ship would have been different—because there's this unusual optical effect, where the sea wall rises to such a degree that the boats seem to be magically afloat on meadows of grass.

You've got redshanks firing out of

the marshes. You've got egrets like squalls of snow. You've got water that glints and glimmers in creeks when sunlight strikes the peninsula, and none of the terminology such as 'Site of Special Scientific Interest' or 'Special Protection Area', none of it conveys that raw, elemental beauty and the unrivalled interwoven-ness of the human and the natural in these places.

FIVE DIALS
It seems tactical—a way of draining these places of their beautiful descriptions.

JULIAN
That's definitely one of the issues that we need to confront; how we describe these places, how we talk about them, how we push them into our conversations in some way that at least carries a hint of their actual qualities.

FIVE DIALS
You're asking people to examine how they value the different qualities of place. At the end of the book, at the end of the process of writing it, did you have any idea of what could be done better? How can we improve the way we value the world?

JULIAN
A lot of it comes back to the way we raise

children, but how we listen to them, too. I met children in many different parts of the world, but I remember most specifically meeting large numbers of school children on the Gwent Levels in Wales, and they taught me something so extraordinarily profound, even though I, of course subconsciously, was always aware of it, because I'd been a child myself long ago.

Their quality of connection, their quality of engagement, their ability to transform the absolutely smallest of places into whole worlds of possibility, is really transformative in character. And yet, so often, we tend to lose that appreciation for the small and the familiar and what is already around us as we age. We tend to lift our heads and start looking out at these larger horizons and tap into seemingly bigger stories as it were.

But children on these journeys reminded me that actually the most vital connective point, that join between people, places and the natural world, is often close and informal and familiar to us. So, I would go back, in a sense—imaginatively, emotionally.

We critically need to retain that intimate perspective, but also cultivate the intuitive connection that children have with the natural world. To further it; to deepen it. This great push towards forest school classes in Britain right now is very positive. And the response to ›

‘So often, we tend to lose that appreciation for the small and the familiar and what is already around us as we age. We tend to lift our heads and start looking out at these larger horizons.’

› Robert Macfarlane and Jackie Morris' book, *The Lost Words*, has been remarkably inspiring. How it's engaging children, enabling them, within an educational system or within their own communities, to deepen those inherent connections with the natural world through the use of words and poetry and painting and song, and to explore the natural world around them in a hands-on way.

Quite often, the ways are already with us. The key is to clear away the distractions that are built into an economic system and its supporting political framework that's so heavily invested in the ruination of the living world.

It's like there are curtains that keep us from seeing what we already have.

FIVE DIALS
Do you ever wish you could just go back and warn previous generations?

JULIAN
That's a really interesting idea. Towards the end of the book, I do point out that in many ways the only way we can go back, in a sense, is to protect what we have now. Because we're a future generation ourselves.

When local scientists and citizens around Santa Cruz in California worked ardently at the beginning of the 20th century to

protect what was already then some of the last towering stands of old-growth coastal redwoods, they must have struggled, as we all do, to imagine a future generation in that place, but we are that future generation. And so, in a sense, our going back is about being present today. To acknowledge what those campaigners did and what we have with us because of them. But to also devote our protective energies to another generation that is yet to come, one that we ourselves will never know, but who will be the beneficiaries of what we preserve today.

With regard to the past, it's also important to remember that enormous losses were already occurring well before our current age of dereliction and devastation. Although our destructive technologies are far more powerful these days, loss is nothing new.

Species like the passenger pigeon were wiped out in the 19th century; the American bison nearly went the same way. But while we sometimes think of the conservation movement as being a largely modern phenomenon, there are written accounts of people in the 19th century and even earlier who were viscerally aware of what was being violently uprooted and being lost. We are also the past in the sense that many of our contemporary decisions, as with the Amazon right now or any of the stories I explored in

the book, are no different to what has gone before. We are descendants of that violence.

FIVE DIALS

We can all strive for a better future, but we also have to understand that we're complicit with what's been going on.

JULIAN

We are. Climate change is us. The sixth extinction is us. We are at the heart of all of these issues.

There are two strands that emerge, I think, from discussing these larger issues. One, we can make an enormous difference on a personal level—though there are those out there who would argue that looking at things from a personal perspective, whether it be recycling and minimizing our carbon footprint, or reducing our use of plastic products or whatever it might be, distracts us from the systemic basis of the problem.

While I agree that these issues are systemic in nature, to focus solely on underlying systems ignores the extraordinarily galvanizing potential of personal action. The consequence of personal choices and deliberate action is something I call *furtherance*. This idea that our actions and the decisions we make, ethically, morally, thoughtfully, can spool out well beyond the initial act. Like the

ripples from a stone dropped in water, they are potentially enlarging in character. What begins with thinking about not buying a plastic water bottle, and all that that entails, might lead further down the road to somebody becoming an environmental campaigner or a politician with a deep resolve to heal the wounds of the world.

And often, when one person acts with decisiveness and with this ethical foundation behind it, it often triggers into action others who you know. It can be the beginning of a movement, as we're seeing with Greta Thunberg and other young climate campaigners right now.

But of course, those personal actions won't, of their own accord, reduce the underlying systemic causes of the sixth extinction or climate change. To do that we absolutely have to work in a way that is collective in nature, because behind those causes are corporations and industrial forces that are critically dependent, both for profit and for their source materials, on the degradation of the living world.

But what happens within a neo-liberal economic system, whereby the mantra of our age is individualism, is that we lose touch with our collective agency. Individualism, at its most fundamental level, undermines the bonds of community. It distracts us from our

collective agency at a time when collective agency is really our only tool in resisting and resetting a system so heavily engaged in ruining the natural world we all share and are dependent upon.

We need to find ways of twining those strands together, the personal and the collective. Neither of them needs to be exclusive of the other.

FIVE DIALS

Do personal decisions make you more amenable to governmental decisions that might come down the line? If they ban plastic and you're already thinking about your usage of plastic, you won't fight it tooth and nail. You'll be accepting of something larger, hopefully.

JULIAN

Absolutely. Those larger decisions that are political and legal, they are necessary because they shift the structure of a society.

But, without an inner transformation, at a societal level, at a community and individual level, those overarching political shifts can be quite fragile in character, and potentially undone by future governments, so they need to be underpinned by something substantial and meaningful from within for them to endure.

FIVE DIALS

I'm going to end with a searing question about birds. Do you have a new appreciation for the nightingale after writing about it in the book?

JULIAN

I've always loved the nightingale but, hearing it here in the UK, where it's now in such tragic decline, and finding a place where it's still vibrant, and that the powerful resonance of its music was present, despite the threat that its dwelling place was under, was one of the most wondrous parts of these journeys. To appreciate yet again the splendor of its song.

Listening to a nightingale also makes me realize just how deeply privileged we are. We're privileged to share this planet with such beauty and wonder and mystery; we're privileged to live alongside such multitudinous, compound and patterned forms of life. To dwell here, as we do, is a great gift. And I think the nightingale is one of the finest examples of that recognition for me.

FIVE DIALS

You mention that perhaps we won't come across a field covered in butterflies, but it's important to take pleasure in the four or five butterflies you do see. I've tried to think of that in my own life, with the nature around

me. Certainly there's degradation happening, but the sight of one bald eagle is still enough to stop you in your tracks.

JULIAN

And that stopping in the tracks can be the trigger for a lifetime of care and concern. That's often what's needed to enable the deeper connectivity between people and the natural world. Of course, that becomes more difficult because of the dwindling of wild species, and those relationships become scarcer too because of that loss, but when that moment of connection occurs, it can be the most extraordinary hinge on which so many other things open. ◊

AN EXCERPT

# A Moth To a Flame

Stig Dagerman

A wife is to be buried at two o'clock, and at eleven-thirty the husband is standing in the kitchen in front of the cracked mirror above the sink. He hasn't cried much, but he has lain long awake and the whites of his eyes are red. His shirt is white and bright, and his freshly ironed pants are faintly steaming. As his youngest sister adjusts the stiff white collar behind his neck and draws the white bow across his throat so tenderly that it feels like a caress, the widower leans over the sink and peers searchingly into his eyes. Then he rubs them as if wiping away a tear, but the back of his hand is still dry. The youngest sister, who is the beautiful sister, holds her hand still at his throat. The bow tie gleams white as snow against his ruddy skin. He furtively strokes her hand. The beautiful sister is the sister he adores. For he adores anything beautiful. The wife was ugly and sick. Which is why he has not been crying.

The ugly sister is standing at the stove. The gas is hissing, and the lid of the shiny coffeepot is bobbing up and down. With red fingers, she fumbles after the valves to turn it off. She has lived in town for twelve years now, but she still hasn't figured out the gas valves. She wears black-rimmed glasses, and whenever she wants to look someone in the eye, she leans in closely and stares awkwardly. Finally, she finds the right valve and turns it off.

Should it be a white tie for a funeral?

It is the beautiful sister who asks. The widower is fiddling with his cufflinks. He has long black shoes,

and they squeak when he abruptly stands on his toes. But the ugly sister spins around sharply as if someone had come at her.

White to a funeral! I should know after the consul's!

Then she purses her lips. Her eyes blink behind her glasses as if they were afraid. They probably are. She knows all about funerals but almost nothing about weddings. The beautiful sister smiles and continues making adjustments and being caressed. The ugly sister moves a vase of white flowers from the table to the sink. The widower looks in the mirror again and suddenly finds himself smiling. He closes his eyes and breathes in the smell of the kitchen. For as long as he can remember, funerals have smelled like coffee and sweaty sisters.

But a mother will also be buried, and the son is twenty years old and nothing. He is standing by himself under the ceiling light in the room full of people. His eyes are a little swollen. He has flushed them with water after a night of crying and thinks no one will notice. But in reality everything is noticeable, so the funeral guests have left him alone. Not out of respect but out of fear, because the world is afraid of those who cry.

The father stands perfectly still for a while, not even playing with his cufflinks or tugging at his mourning band. The golden pendulum clock, a fiftieth birthday present, strikes a thin, thin note. The guests are standing by the windows and murmuring. Their voices are veiled in mourning, but someone

from the father's side is tapping a march on the windowsill with his knuckles. The knuckles are hard and he wishes they would stop. But they don't. Then someone who traveled all the way from the country turns on the radio, although it isn't even noon yet. It hums and hums, but no one has the sense to turn it off.

Soundlessly, the January light falls into the room and gleams over all the shiny, squeaky shoes. At the center of the room there is a large and freshly vacant space under the ceiling light, where the son is standing by himself and watching and listening to everything. Although he is really somewhere else. Before his mother died and he ended up alone, there used to be a long oak table where he is standing, but now the table is by the window. A white tablecloth is spread over it and on top of the cloth are glasses, carafes with dark wine, fifteen fragile white cups, and a big brown cake that is sweet but will taste bitter. Today, the mother's portrait is on this very window-table, behind the carafes in a heavy black frame. It is wreathed with greenery, January's precious greenery. As the funeral coffee brews, and the pastor shaves at the parsonage, and the gas tanks of the funeral cars are filled in the garage, the eleven guests gather around the table and the photograph of the deceased. She is young in the photograph. Her hair is still thick and dark, and it drapes heavily over her smooth brow. Her teeth, which are scarcely visible between her round lips, are white and untarnished.

She was twenty-five then, one of them says.

Twenty-six, corrects another.

Alma was pretty when she was young.

Yes, Alma was good-looking, all right.

Yes, when she was young, she was good-looking.

So you can understand why Knut, why Knut . . . um . . .

Then they remember the son, who is standing in the room and listening.

She had pretty hair, someone chimes in. Much too quickly.

She was already expecting the girl by then.

Oh, she had a daughter?

Should've had, but she died.

As a baby?

She was just a year old. And then they had the boy, but they were married by then.

Then they remember him again, and this time they stay quiet. Someone pulls out a big white handkerchief and blows his nose. The radio is finally turned off. Then they step aside with squeaking steps because the coffee is coming. The nice aunt, whom he likes because she has been crying behind her glasses, is carrying the pot. She carries it high and dignified like a candlestick, and she is sweating through her tight, black dress. The younger aunt comes in behind her. She has black silk stockings, and the men in the room forget the occasion and admire her beautiful legs. She smiles at someone briefly. She has not been crying.

The father comes in last. Slowly and with a

dejected gaze, he walks toward the son. Everyone has now turned around and stopped talking—even the one tapping the march has fallen silent. The father is silent, too. Silent and alone, they come together in the middle of the room. Their hands meet, and their arms meet. Then their chests meet. Finally, their eyes meet. Not long, yet long enough for both to see who has been crying and who is dry-eyed.

Don't cry, my boy, the father says.

He says it quietly, but everyone still hears it. One of the guests lets out a sob, much too briefly, however. Shoes are squeaking and dresses are rustling like footsteps among leaves. The father's arm is as hard as stone.

Don't cry, my boy, he says once again.

Then the son gently frees himself from the man who has not cried. Alone, he walks all the way from his spot underneath the light to the table with the steaming cups and brimming glasses. Someone standing in the way bashfully steps aside. Without shaking, he picks up a cup, then a glass, and slowly turns around.

The father is still standing there, his stone arm hanging, as if wounded, on his right side. Slowly, he lowers his head and bends one of his red ears down. But it isn't until the sun starts to beam through the windows that the son notices how unexpectedly bright the father's eyes are. Then he spills a few drops of the dark, bitter wine on the floor between his shoes.

Before the cars arrive, they stand around in

groups in different parts of the room. Four are standing under the chiming pendulum clock with glasses in their hands. They take sips when no one is looking. They are the widower's relatives from the country, the ones you only see at weddings and funerals and whose clothes smell like mothballs. They look at the expensive clock. Then at each other. They look at the expensive encyclopedia with its leather binding glistening behind the glass of the bookcase. Then they glance at each other again and take another sip. At once, they are whispering with lips moistened by coffee and wine. They have never cared for the deceased.

Underneath the ceiling light, the sisters are standing with four of the father's friends who took a Monday morning off to attend the funeral. Perhaps there could have been more, but not even the ones who came cared for the deceased. Nevertheless, they talk about her for a moment with subdued, muffled voices. Then they change the subject, but their voices remain the same.

The widower and the son are standing by one of the windows with three of the next-door neighbors: two women happy to experience a little variety and a man on sick leave. The son is standing closest to the window and has put down his glass and cup on the windowsill between two flowerpots. He knows that the neighbors disliked his mother, so he doesn't care to listen. Still, the one who is sick talks about his illness. The two female neighbors talk about other illnesses. And the widower talks about

the deceased's illness. She had had a bad heart and had been bloated with water. In low voices, they talk about frail hearts and water.

Meanwhile, the son is looking out the window. He knows they will also be looking out the window soon, so he hurries to see as much as he can. He sees the blue tracks of the streetcar line, white with ice and salt along the bend. He sees freezing little snow flakes floating down to the street. He sees blue smoke rising from the chimney of a warm shelter. Some workmen, who had been tearing up the pavement with a drill and some picks, put their tools down, blow white smoke into their hands, and take a break. A cat is creeping through the snow, and directly across it a straddle-legged dray horse is peeing yellow and violently into the gutter.

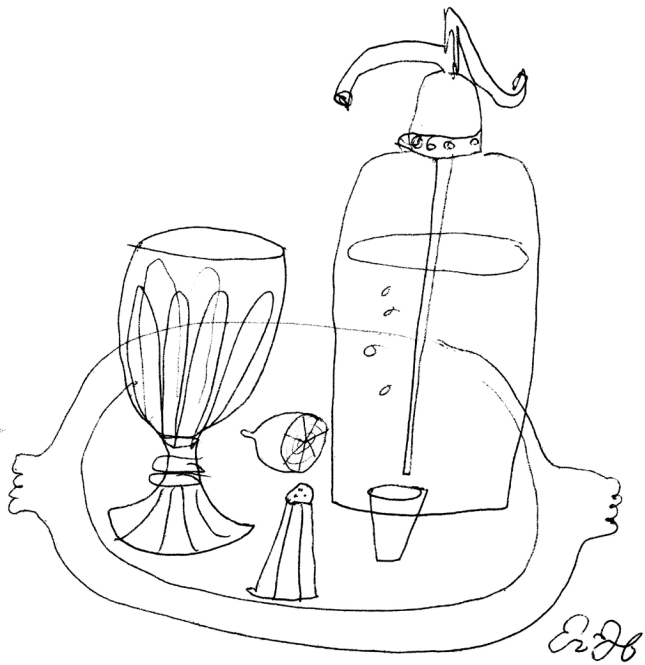
The entire time, the sun is gleaming on a gilded bull's head above a butcher shop. Everything is as usual in that shop. The door swings open and shut by people with vaporous breath. Meat is on display on white plates in the window, and the shop assistants raise their sharp cleavers behind the marble counter. Like so many times before, he leans against the window so closely that it fogs up from his hot breath. Like so many times before, yet not like those first few days—for it was worse in the beginning. In those days, the entire windowpane fogged up after only a moment, and he had had to grab his hand and pull it down to his pocket so that it wouldn't break free and shatter the pane. He also had to bite his lips so that his mouth wouldn't fly open and shout, Why haven't you

closed? You, down there! How could you! Why don't you hang sheets over your windows? Why don't you lock up your doors? Why are you letting your vans still deliver meat when you know what's happened? You butchers! You ruthless butchers! Why are you letting everything go on as usual when you know that everything has changed?

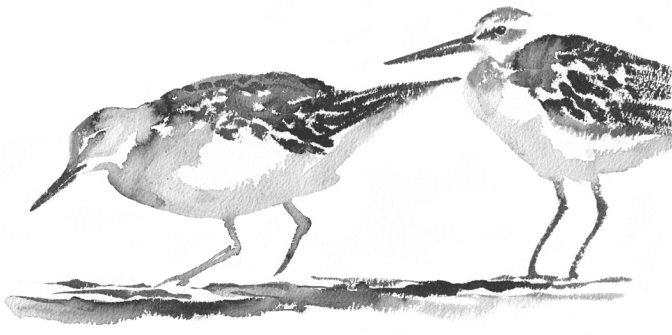
He is calmer now and merely leans forward and watches. Merely leans forward and breathes. Merely shifts his gaze like a telescope toward the gilded bull's head and the tall display window with its heaping mountains of meat. Merely presses his thighs painfully hard against the windowsill. Merely thinks, My mother died in there. My mother died in there while my father was sitting in the kitchen shaving and while I, her son, was sitting in my room playing poker with myself. In there, she fell off a chair without one of us there to catch her. It was in there that she lay on the floor amid the dirt and sawdust while a butcher stood with his back to her, cutting up a sheep.

Maybe he isn't so calm, after all. Maybe he has said something, too. He might have even given a start. In any case, he feels a stone arm around his shoulder. In any case, he sees a stone hand rubbing and rubbing the misty glass. No, a large cold eye.
He feels it with his fingertips and shivers. But the stone hand is still rubbing, and once it is finished, the eye is cold and clear, but the back of the hand is wet with tears. He wipes it off on his sleeve and then lets it fall.

Don't cry, my boy, he hears the father whisper. ◊



# Jackie Morris



‘The way she sees life is wonderful. Equal. Beautiful. She revels in all the life around her.’

# Jackie Morris on the allure of Barbara Newhall Follett’s *The House Without Windows*

Jackie Morris has created over forty books as an artist and author, including the beloved classics *Song of the Golden Hare*, *Tell Me A Dragon*, *East of the Sun*, *West of the Moon* and *The Wild Swans*. Her most recent projects have been highly acclaimed collaborations exploring our connection with the natural world—she illustrated *The Lost Words* alongside author Robert Macfarlane, and has just illustrated the re-publication of Barbara Newhall Follet's *The House Without Windows*. We discuss the ways in which artistic projects can become quiet revolutions, and how books can bring us closer to the wild within us and around us.

FIVE DIALS

*The House Without Windows* was first published in 1927—why did it feel right to bring this book back into print at this moment in history?

JACKIE

From the very first time I met this book, about six, maybe seven years ago, I have wanted to re-introduce it to a wider readership. *The Lost Words* took over my life for a while, and in that intervening time a whole movement led by young people who understand better their place on this earth has grown up. It's almost as if Barbara has been waiting for this time, the perfect time, when at

last people will understand her way of looking at the earth
and all who live on and in her.

It's a curious thing when you work on a book, for a long time, and then it is published. I feel so close to Barbara, although we never met. And I feel so nervous for her words, that the world will meet them as I did, with a sense of wonder, awe.

There are so many, many books out there that deal with dystopia. I've always felt that humans seem to be drawn towards this darkness. It's easy to destroy, and maybe it is easier to write dystopia. What Barbara has written is a story that moves closer and closer to an idea of Utopia. It has nothing to do with money, everything to do with freedom, and being the person you really are. I feel this is a story that needs to be heard. Now more than ever, but evermore.

FIVE DIALS

Your work on *The Lost Words* with Robert Macfarlane came as the result of close collaboration. With *The House Without Windows*, you're essentially 'collaborating' with a work published many years ago, with an author who you were never able to meet. What were the major differences between these modes of collaboration? How difficult was this process?

JACKIE

I did work very closely with Robert, mostly through the medium of the written word. He lives in Cambridge, I am in Pembrokeshire. We are separated by two countries, and yet in almost constant communication. With Barbara it was different. Here we are separated by time. And yet I met her in the pages of her writing, in *The House Without Windows* and other writings of hers. And she haunts me. In the shape of a butterfly's wings, in the song of birds calling from the sky, in the dreamlike quality of her writing, she haunts me.

FIVE DIALS

The reissue of *The House Without Windows*, and your previous work *The Lost Words*, are works which examine the themes of rediscovery and preservation. How important do you think these ideas are in your practice generally, or in these works specifically?

JACKIE

I always think that my work revolves around asking and answering questions, seeking and finding and holding a magnifying glass, or maybe a spotlight over things. Sometimes it is to show what we are losing. In *The House Without Windows* it is very much what was lost. There are people who become fascinated with Barbara Newhall Follett, when they

find her, when they learn of her story. But it's not her disappearance that fascinates. For me it is her presence, still amazingly strong, found in the words she wrote, at the age of twelve, words that resonate across time. With *The Lost Words* I hoped to help people take notice of the beautiful wild that so often goes unnoticed and is therefore undervalued.

FIVE DIALS

What parallels do you see between *The Lost Words* and *The House Without Windows*?

JACKIE

Both books deal with things that are missing. Both books carry an old magic about them. Both books celebrate the 'House Without Windows', the wild world. And Eepersip, Barbara, they both love words. Barbara Newhall Follet was a lover of the dictionary, and also had a wonderful natural literacy. She knew the names of birds and plants and butterflies and was always hungry to learn more.

FIVE DIALS

The illustrations to *The House Without Windows* were made using ink and water. How do you decide what materials and form are most appropriate for each piece of work you complete? ›

‘You know right from the
first touch of the brush whether
it will work.’

JACKIE

› I had imagined working in colour for *The House Without Windows*. It was the editor, Simon Prosser, who suggested ink. I knew from the start that he was wrong, so I decided the only way to explain how wrong he was would be to show him. I decided to paint a swallow in ink, to show how it wouldn't work. So I ground some ink and thought about the shape of the birds and watched them in the sky, and painted. Then I sat back and looked at it, watching the ink dry. Not only did it work, but somehow it carried just the right shape, tone, note for the book. For me these ink paintings are almost like ghosts of gone birds, insects, flowers. Painting the creatures the twelve-year-old Eepersip had seen all those years ago. Never has eating my own words tasted so good.

I love using the ink. It is a sumi ink that I grind on a she stone, smooth and beautiful. And I work on a paper from a paper mill called Two Rivers, a rough paper that snags the brush beautifully. I love the time taken grinding the ink, mixing it to the right density. Not every painting works. There's a good deal of quiet meditation on shape first, then a swift painting and you know right from the first touch of the brush whether it will work, but in order to learn you have to paint right to the end of the piece, and learn. And paint again,

and again and again, until it's right. But to gather that focus first, that's the trick of it.

FIVE DIALS
In your introduction to *The House Without Windows*, you touch on the sheer pleasure of reading Eepersip's equality to, and inseparability from, the non-human world. What do you think we as readers can learn from this way of experiencing the world?

JACKIE
I think she has so much to teach us. I love the way she sees herself in the landscape. She is comfortable in the wild, doesn't seek any mastery over it. The way she sees life is wonderful. Equal. Beautiful. She revels in all the life around her. And she takes time to stop and watch the flight of butterflies. We should do this more.

FIVE DIALS
In the introduction to the book you write—'This is a book that demands to be read outside, in the open air. This is its natural habitat.' What do you see as the task, or the responsibility, of writers and artists who engage with the natural world in light of the current ecological emergency we face in 2019?

JACKIE

We have faced this ecological emergency for as long as I have been alive and I am 58 this year. And before then. It seems strange to me that the media seems to be selling this as a 'new' story. For years the scientists have been gathering data and sounding the alarm, and some have tried to find ways to talk about it, to try to change the way we, as humans, view the planet, to try to find a new way to look at this ecosystem of which we are such a small part.

It only takes a little imagination to see how if you pour pesticides on the land you will also kill birds. If you decimate forests you destroy habitats, and for what? Palm oil so we can eat sweets? That if we pollute the oceans with run-off from industry we kill marine life. And if you understand that there is a balance of life in the natural world and you alter this then it doesn't take much imagination to understand that bad things will happen.

I think that all my life I have tried to engage people, young people, and through them their parents, in a greater respect for life outside the human. This is not a new responsibility for me, it's an ongoing song. And I see *The House Without Windows* as a hymn of praise to the wild world. ◊

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# Five Dials