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Five
Dials



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Dials

ABOUT FIVE DIALS

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WAYS OF READING
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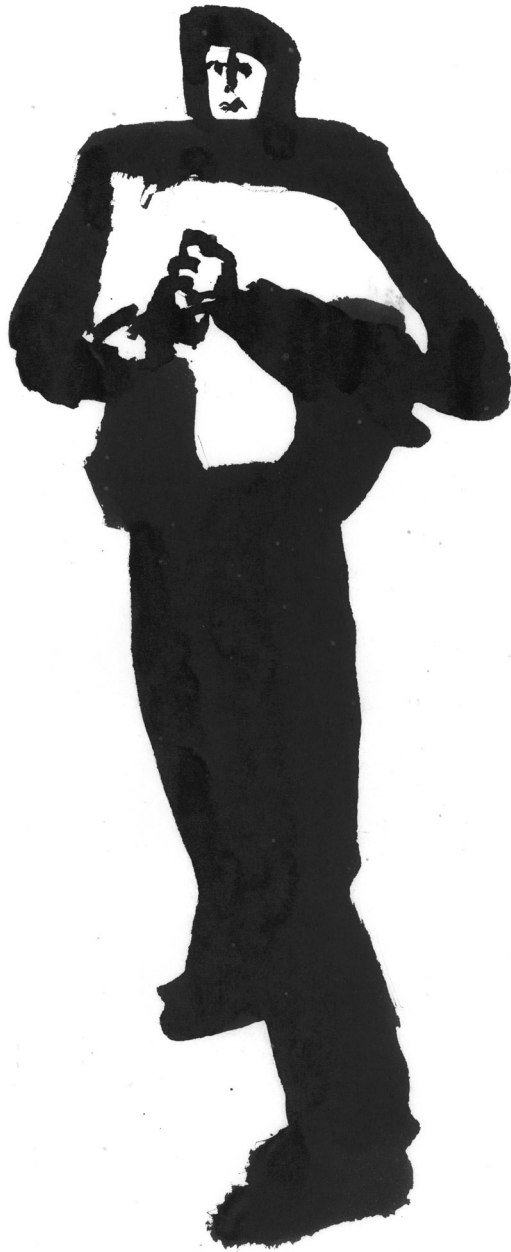
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‘Another thing
that fascinates me:
one sentence can
reveal so much
about a person.’

A conversation
with Lydia Davis

This month I read Lydia Davis's latest, *Essays*, before our arranged phone conversation. Davis's writing voice is always articulate and persuasive, especially when she examines a range of beloved subjects, from Joseph Cornell to Lucia Berlin to the word 'gubernatorial'. Unsurprisingly, she's just as articulate on the phone.

These days, so much writing advice concerns process, word count, software, cover design, and whether or not to endlessly self-publicize online. A conversation with Lydia Davis ushers more important issues to the fore. At the heart of *Essays* is a piece entitled 'Thirty Recommendations for Good Writing Habits.' The essay isn't just a set of tips. It lays out advice that could improve the life of anyone who comes into even glancing contact with literature.

Davis gently admonishes us to notice the world and seek out the correct words to describe it. Her own writing remains unfailingly exact. 'Finding the right word is one thing,' Brian Dillon notes in his recent review of the *Essays* in *The New York Times*, 'taking it for a walk another. Like most writers who are called 'experimental,' Davis shrugs off the label—it suggests rules or protocols, when in fact she proceeds by intuition, accident and divination.' In another *New York Times* review of the *Essays*, Parul Seghal goes even further, writing: 'She is our Vermeer, patiently observing and chronicling daily life, but from angles odd and askew.' That sounds

Q&A

about right when it comes to Davis's shorter pieces, which often redraw the assumed shape of a story. The essays are often more direct.

From the thirty recommendations, here's part of number thirteen. 'If you want to be original,' Davis writes, 'cultivate yourself, enrich your mind, develop your empathy, your understanding of other human beings, and then, when you come to write, say what you think and feel, what you are moved to say...'

Will this approach work for everyone? Davis is a keen observer of human beings—and animals. (She published a thirty-two page book, *The Cows*, about three much-loved cows that lived across the street.) Some humans are attuned to the workings of the world, the weather, the light, the proper nouns that surround us, as well as the peculiarities and revelations of conversation. Then there are those who aren't as perceptive. Most of us remain somewhere in the middle. But if we work at it, we might be able to improve our position.

How? 'Be curious,' Davis writes in her 20th piece of advice, 'be curious about as much as possible. Think, generally, about how curious you are, or are not, as a person. If you are not very curious, think about why not. And try to cultivate curiosity. If you are curious, you will learn things, and the more curious you are, the more you will learn. And curiosity may lead you deeper and deeper into all sorts of subjects.' Her own personal list is large—as evidenced by the contents page of *Essays*. Go find your own list of people, ideas, and words as

Lydia Davis

pleasurable to say as ‘gubernatorial.’

Most of us have a list lying around somewhere. ‘But there are many more things to be curious about,’ Davis writes before listing a few of her favorite examples. ‘At the Culinary Institute of America, how do they teach the students the right way to uncork a bottle of wine? When you blow on an ant, trying to move it, and it doesn’t move, why is it so good at bracing itself? Does it have strong little muscles in its legs? Why, exactly, does power corrupt?’

Become the kind of person who tracks down these and many other answers.

FIVE DIALS

Reading the *Essays*, a portrait emerges of an individual with a hugely varied set of interests, from Rimbaud to twentieth-century Dutch photographs. I often caught myself thinking, what kind of person would be interested in so many things?

LYDIA

Someone with a sort of productive ADD.

FIVE DIALS

It was surprising to see where your mind went to next

LYDIA

It can be a bit of a difficulty, because it’s hard for me to exclude things that seem interesting.

Q&A

But then there are only so many hours in the day.

FIVE DIALS

Essays contains a lot of advice. One recommendation is to always work from your own interests, never from what you think you should be writing. Is that something that you knew from the beginning, or is it a skill that must be learned?

LYDIA

I did follow my own interests and instincts from the beginning but, of course, I was also limited by what I was aware of as possibilities. When I was in my twenties I wasn't aware of certain possibilities. But I did still follow what I knew of as my interests at the time.

Some of the essays grew out of talks I gave to graduate students. I became aware of how young writers are manipulated, in a way. It didn't happen when I was their age. Publishers and agents wouldn't say, 'Well, those short stories are all very well but now you have to write a novel if you want to stay interesting to publishers.' They buckle to that pressure too often. The whole system is skewed away from working by yourself and being independent and confident in your own ideas.

FIVE DIALS

This advice comes from someone who basically invented her own form. That takes bloody-mindedness.

LYDIA

I like being bloody-minded.

FIVE DIALS

In the *Essays* you discuss a version of Rimbaud's *Illuminations* translated by John Ashbery. You note that the translations in the book appeared in literary journals one by one. They were done slowly, 'as translations ought to be'. What are the benefits of slow, ongoing translation?

LYDIA

I've certainly seen it both ways. I've seen, as they say, the slow, meaning you work hard on one poem that may be only twelve lines long or sixteen lines long. You work on it, come back to it, and look at it again a couple of weeks later, and so on. You're giving it a lot of attention over time.

I've also seen the opposite, where one translator will try to do a 200-page book of poems within a year, or within a half a year, or something, and just go at it the way you might translate something more pedestrian.

I remember once having a choice. I

Q&A

can't remember who the poet was—it was a Scandinavian poet. The choice was to either buy a collection done by one translator or another collection done by quite a few different translators. That was the one I chose because I assumed each translator had given whatever poems they translated more time and attention than the one who had done them all. It maybe wasn't fair. Maybe he or she took ten years to do it. Lots of time and attention are needed for a poem.

FIVE DIALS

Time and attention seem to be ongoing themes in the book. You mention you let some pieces of writing sit by your side for a while. You return to a story, finding ways to see the language anew. That seems to be a translator's lesson that can apply to your fiction writing.

LYDIA

Yes, it really is. You'd think I'd be very practised by now and I could just write a couple of paragraphs that wouldn't have any problems at all, but that isn't true. It's not at all true.

Sometimes the problems only show up after a while. You read it over and you say, 'Oh boy, I repeated this word three times in this paragraph.' You have to let it sit until it's not quite as familiar to you, and then read it

Lydia Davis

again. It goes against the times we live in, but I even reread my emails. I'm not the only one out of my friends. But not everybody takes time to make sure they're decently written.

FIVE DIALS

Another theme that came across in the *Essays* is your love of specialized language. As an example you list the Beaufort Scale, a measure that relates wind speed to observed conditions. Number 4 on the scale, for instance, is 'raises dust and loose paper; small branches moved'. Are you enamoured with other specialized language? Is there anything that's caught your eye recently?

LYDIA

It's more that any word that is new to me jumps out. New words are interesting to me. I can give you an example. I read the *TLS* a lot and I'm always finding new words. These words happen to be from two articles on natural history. Cladistics was one. Cladistics. And the other is mustelids. Mustelids, which I think are a carnivorous mammal. I haven't looked up either of these yet, that's why I can't tell you.

I love a word that I don't know because it's just a group of sounds, and yet I know it has meaning, a meaning hidden within it. Each new word opens up a new little world.

FIVE DIALS

You also see possibility in the digital world.
You mention the poetry of spam emails.

LYDIA

I had to stop myself from just copying out all of the scam emails I would get because the language was so interesting to me. Even the dramas: 'You've inherited a hundred million dollars', 'My husband died of cancer' and so on. That's not contrived language. It's sort of like finding treasure.

FIVE DIALS

There's something in spam constructions that even a practised writer could not come up with.

LYDIA

There is very beautiful language that's deliberate on the part of the writer, so I don't want to eliminate that.

Somebody I was reading the other day was quoting Shakespeare in a very interesting way. They were using the word 'slenderly'. It's from King Lear. It's Regan talking about her father. "Tis the infirmity of his age, yet he hath ever but slenderly known himself.' Meaning he doesn't know himself very well now, but he only but slenderly knew himself in the past. You read a word like 'slenderly' and it bursts in on you as new, even though it's in Shakespeare,

Lydia Davis

and if you had studied your Shakespeare it wouldn't be so new.

FIVE DIALS

Just to be clear, you had to stop reading spam emails because you were too interested in them?

LYDIA

I was starting to put together a long piece. I was trying to paste together, collage together, the material from a lot of scam emails that I was getting, to make one fantastic, crazy story. But I think two things stopped me. One was I got a better spam system where something stopped these messages. But also I thought, maybe everybody's getting them and maybe it's just too familiar and it's really not going to be so interesting, even though I could have made something out of them. Maybe it's just too recognizable.

FIVE DIALS

I would happily read any spam email book you publish.

LYDIA

It's still there. The material is still there somewhere in my computer.

FIVE DIALS

In the *Essays* you stress journals are essential to a writer's life. You describe your journal as your other mind: '... what I sometimes know, what I once knew.' When did you realize their importance?

LYDIA

It's like the old story. My uncle gave me a diary when I was twelve and even though I didn't write in it faithfully, beyond the first five days, it did start a habit because there it was and that was its purpose, whether I wrote in it every week or every month or even every year.

The first one lasted me quite a long time. I never stopped after that. I write inconsistently. Sometimes it's every day. I now have multiple notebooks: a gardening notebook, and a health notebook, and a progress on the second book of essays notebook, a reading notebook, and a travel notebook. They're all over the place.

I do think it's a circular relationship. In other words, if you write it down, it makes you more alert to the next idea, the next interesting thought, the next thing you might overhear or read. If you don't write it down, you're less alert and less likely to notice and remember.

FIVE DIALS

You mention it's important to revise work that may never see the light of day. Why?

LYDIA

It's partly just that I don't like seeing a sentence that isn't as good as it can be, when I see the obvious change that it needs. The revision we're talking about is not laborious. It's quick. That word should be changed to this. It's a good thing to do because then you're always in the habit of revising and you're always improving.

I don't like seeing it not right. Even if it's in a list, or something I might throw away eventually, I'll still underline a title, for example, because titles should be underlined. It's a sense of how things should be. It's not so much a pedantic school marm-ish correctness. It's the beauty of the way things should be.

FIVE DIALS

You don't want to let sentences slip past. You want to make sure they're beautiful?

LYDIA

Or: this sentence doesn't have to be beautiful in itself, but there's a greater beauty in fulfilling what it wants to be. It actually could be an ugly sentence, but the beauty is that it fulfils what it wants to be, what it should be. Do you see what I mean?

FIVE DIALS

I liked the idea that it's not necessarily for public performance. Enacting this ritual again and again to sentences that may never see the light of day helps all parties, helps the sentence, and helps you as well.

You mentioned that sometimes a notebook entry wants to become a story. Has it become easier over the years to spot the sentences that deserve to go on to something more?

LYDIA

I guess it has. I try not to let this whole experience of writing a story be laboured, ever. I don't particularly worry. In a sense, I let the story be more active than I am. If it wants to be a story, it signals it pretty loud and clear. Of course, some say they want to be stories and I shape them into stories but they fall flat. They are stories, but they're not all that interesting.

FIVE DIALS

That's their fault.

LYDIA

It's not a foolproof little interaction. Although I do come back to them if I think, well, if I did write it, there must be something there. Sometimes I come back and try to find out what it is.

FIVE DIALS

In the *Essays* there's a four-page section reflecting on a short excerpt, a 'translation from the Cheremiss' by Anselm Hollo which, in total, reads:

i shouldn't have started these red wool mittens
they're done now
but my life is over.

LYDIA

I think that all sounds right.

FIVE DIALS

You mention how those lines 'defy assimilation'. You said that you find that quality exemplary. What does defying assimilation mean to you?

LYDIA

Maybe the quick translation would be 'become familiar' or 'become natural' or predictable or expected, something like that. Something strikes you at first, but then on second reading you've already got it and you're not really surprised by it any more. My example from Shakespeare, 'slenderly', would probably keep on surprising me, for example. It would keep striking me as strange and fresh and new. That's what the poem did. It kept striking me over and over again.

FIVE DIALS

It struck in an emotional way, too, by the sounds of it. It changed as you read it at different times in your life.

LYDIA

Yes. And then I wrote a story very closely modelled on it, but it's not in a book yet. It's called 'Improving My German'. It's very similar to that poem. I won't try to quote it but it's about improving my German all my life so then I'll die with better German. I guess I was going for the same shock somehow. The end comes. We usually don't want to think about it much, but I do think about it, quite a bit actually. But I won't go into all that. I didn't hesitate to model my little story on that poem. I think that's a perfectly good thing to do. Anyway, that's what I mean by not assimilated.

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Were you always drawn to fragments? Or did that come after reading writers like Mallarmé and Joubert?

LYDIA

I started out by thinking that I had to write a traditional narrative short story, which is quite a bit longer. It's not fragmented. I tried to write poems. I did write poems when I was

young. They weren't terribly good. I suppose I was more drawn to shorter forms than longer forms.

I noticed that when I was teaching writing, I would give the students all different exercises and make them all do the same things, but some of them were absolutely novelists and some of them were absolutely writers of very short things. The novelists would try, heroically, to write something small but that wasn't their nature. They wanted to write at length. That was interesting to me.

I can be very long-winded. That's natural too, but somehow I must have been attracted by the short form. I know I was reading Kafka's *Parables and Paradoxes* and I was enjoying the *Diaries*, very short bits. It always did interest me, how much you could do with a very short couple of sentences. I wasn't so interested in writing some kind of great worldview, an immensely long novel that contained all of society and all of current events. The crystallization of language, of poetry, did interest me, what you could do with just a few words. That's still kind of amazing to me.

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I have one last question about the practical tips. You say that after a session of writing, leave some clear time in which you can note down

Q&A

what your brain will continue to offer you.
Why is that important?

LYDIA

It has a lot to do with the interplay between conscious work and unconscious work in your brain. There was a very useful writing book, whose name I've forgotten now, that I used to give to students. The author had an interesting pattern of conscious versus unconscious. In other words, conscious writing and organizing and then unconscious and less controlled writing. It has to do with allowing the less conscious and controlled part of your brain to continue to work. I find this happens all the time and it's very important. I've been working on something, and then I stop because I'm going to make lunch, but my brain doesn't stop. That's why I feel the advice is crucial, because if I went to the kitchen and turned on the radio or started talking to someone, then this couldn't happen, it would not be possible.

But if I don't do any of those things, then, as I'm making the sandwich, or whatever, my brain will continue to work on what I was working on and come up with another idea or a better phrasing or an expansion of a sentence.

This doesn't happen all day. It will die down after half an hour or an hour. So I do

Lydia Davis

think it's important. Somehow, even if your conscious thoughts are 'What am I going to have for lunch?', some other part of your brain is still working.

FIVE DIALS

I know you're constantly listening for pieces of overheard dialogue. Are there places these days where you can find such conversations?

LYDIA

A couple of answers to that. I'm not going to be flying any more, for the foreseeable future, because of the carbon footprint. I made that decision back in the spring, probably inspired first by Greta Thunberg and then by a friend who decided not to fly any more.

So that means I'm not in airports where I used to listen. I am in train stations, now and then. I'm on trains where I listen. Last night I voted and I listened from the little booth where I was filling out my voting slip. I was listening to the election inspectors. They're people I know from the community. I was hearing them telling each other stories.

I guess I am always listening, not necessarily copying down. But I'm also on the Village Board here. I'm on the Board of Trustees in the village, meaning I'm on the little tiny governing board of this little tiny village. When I'm in the meeting, which

Q&A

happens every month, I do absolutely write down things people say, phrases they use or terms they use. Like when you mow the side of the road I think the machine is called a long-arm mower, or something like that. I'll write down 'long-arm mower'. It's really anything that strikes me and interests me, I write down.

FIVE DIALS

I find it's a survival technique sometimes. It allows you to get through these circumstances. You're paying attention. You're picking up things. You're not intensely bored by life, no matter what.

LYDIA

I'm not bored in these meetings.

Another thing that fascinates me: one sentence can reveal so much about a person. I once had students do a writing exercise based on an example that's in Peter Handke's diary. There's a section about a woman slipping her foot back into her shoe in a restaurant. As an exercise in economy and character depiction in fiction, I'd say, 'Let's list all the things you can tell about that woman from that one gesture.' We would come up with a very long list. What does she do when she gets home? She obviously takes her shoes off right away, and so on. We know so much about her from

Lydia Davis

the one gesture in the one sentence.
That always amazes me.

FIVE DIALS

I remember being on a tube train in London and watching a man across from me pull a long blonde hair from his coat and look at it for a second and then let it drop on to the floor. When someone reads your work, they start to see the world differently too. Your stories seem to say: that's all it needs to be. A story can exist, just like that.

LYDIA

That's a good one.

FIVE DIALS

You're helping people view the world.

LYDIA

That's good too. ◇

Edna O'Brien,
Girl and the
author's right
to freedom of
movement

Nathalie Olah

The adage ‘stay in your lane’, beloved of creative writing and journalism circles, has become a mantra for a generation seeking to navigate an era of fast-moving identity politics. It pushes against a tendency more common to writing of the past, of the majority-white, upper-middle-classes spokespeople of an elitist media proffering their inexpert opinion on any given subject. Staying in one’s lane refers to the tendency by which we each recognize the limitations of our knowledge, and straying outside of it can lead to fairly justified reprisals from an army of online commentators. So how do we square this with the latest offering from Irish novelist Edna O’Brien, which sees her veer wholly outside of her lived experience, yet emerge, I think, triumphant?

Girl is told from the perspective of a fictional Chibok schoolgirl kidnapped by Boko Haram in the north-eastern state of Borno, Nigeria. Maryam’s account of events that beset the region in 2014 is partial and fragmentary. Much like Cora in *The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead, she navigates survival through the snatches of information gleaned from the various communities she joins and is more often discarded from. The passage of time and her chances of survival are only inferred from the passing comments of those she encounters—the jihadists, a nomadic tribe, the police, the military, the Church and her family. O’Brien’s preternatural gift for dialogue is no secret,

RECENT BOOKS

and building on the vernacular tradition of the early epistolary novels and the eerie, partial accounts of the early gothic, she understands more than any living writer the power of incomplete tittle-tattle, with gossip hounds being a common feature of her novels. In this sense, her stories are given to us piecemeal, mimicking the way that we receive them in the real world: through whispers, rumour and aspersion on the part of her fallible, third-party narrators. The gossip hounds of rural Ireland are really no different to those of rural Nigeria after all, even if the religious context has shifted slightly, and Maryam's escape from the jihadists comes laden with its own barrage of spitefulness and scorn. Like many of O'Brien's protagonists, her suffering is not just caused by the initial abuse but by the barbed comments of the neighbourhood watch committee, whose judgement is eternal.

Most haunting of all is an encounter marked by its *lack* of dialogue, however, when having escaped the jihadists' compound and fleeing through the forest, Maryam and her friend try to attract the attentions of a flying object only to recognize that its sharp, jolting movements are that of a drone. Rarely would we as Westerners encounter the true horror of a military drone *from the ground*, and not just its violent potential either, but its false mimicry of a sentience, its lurching movements belying a fundamental stupidity. It is the dawning shame of having projected so much hope on to an inanimate object that leaves the girls

feeling dehumanized and hollow; the realization that even beyond their acute agony lies a world of much more banal horror, where technological progress reigns supreme.

Likewise, depictions of death are made all the more poignant by their matter-of-fact delivery, and the speed with which Maryam is forced to endure and then forget the grief directed towards so many fallen friends. If a chief complaint of the information age is that the sheer onslaught of footage that we are exposed to via the two-minute segments on our news websites desensitizes us to the suffering of others, then O'Brien would seem to have found a remedy. What we lack in reporting isn't just the details—the familial breakdowns, the personal grief, the loss of human connection and love—but the fundamentally psychedelic aspect of trauma, which few writers have ever been successful in relaying. Perhaps Hamsun. Perhaps Hesse. Perhaps Didion in her later writing on grief. In *Girl*, O'Brien is lucid on the psychological miasma of trauma and how the tectonic plates of identity, once prised apart, are seldom brought back together into any cohesive whole. In assembling the tough exterior needed to survive her ordeal, Maryam's greatest challenge comes in its dismantling. How do we love in the face of so much horror, and vanquish our defences for the sake of our sanity?

O'Brien, in exploring the supernatural leaps of imagination required for any survivor of such extreme horror, never resorts to embellishment,

‘Like many of O’Brien’s protagonists, her suffering is not just caused by the initial abuse but by the barbed comments of the neighbourhood watch committee, whose judgement is eternal.’

or sentimentality. She is goading us always to confront a reality that we have so far had the luxury of ignoring, or else forgetting it with the press of a standby button. She is saying to us: there is no looking away, not if, as we claim to be, we are champions of all that is humane and just. Complacent in our luxury and free to declare ourselves allies to any number of progressive causes in only the most superficial of terms, without forfeiting any of our privileges or protections, will we nevertheless ignore the reality of those used as collateral in war? Of the continued suffering of women in other parts of the world?

Few writers can venture into these waters with the same deftness and sleight of hand as O'Brien. Since her earliest novels, she has schooled us in the depth of emotion capable of being unleashed through a few choice words—candid without ever being caustic, astute without being cold. Historically, she might not be an expert of Nigerian politics, but she is certainly up there with the best of our correspondents on the subject of trauma, sex and women's bodies—Bureau Chief of the International State of Women's Suffering. But her economy of expression belies a huge amount of investigative and journalistic work, too. Spending weeks at a time in Nigeria, she met survivors of the Boko Haram attacks and visited Abuja and Jos, staying in a convent and visiting women's groups and two Faluna camps. She credits many writers, journalists, NGO and charity workers in helping

RECENT BOOKS

her to obtain the information she needed, among them the author Teju Cole, whom she seems to have developed something of a longstanding admiration for and friendship with, as well as the brilliant journalist Sally Hayden.

To write a novel of this stature takes a village, and O'Brien is never too proud to admit it. Like the best of fiction, *Girl* is a clean block of ice belying a vast berg that stretches miles into the ocean. There is no detail that is unnecessary. O'Brien never burdens her narrative with extraneous facts for the sake of delivering a news report, or worse still, demonstrating the extent of her knowledge. She is a storyteller, after all. A bringer of feeling and emotion. That said, one leaves with a fairly sound understanding of the events that took place and the dynamics that led to their happening.

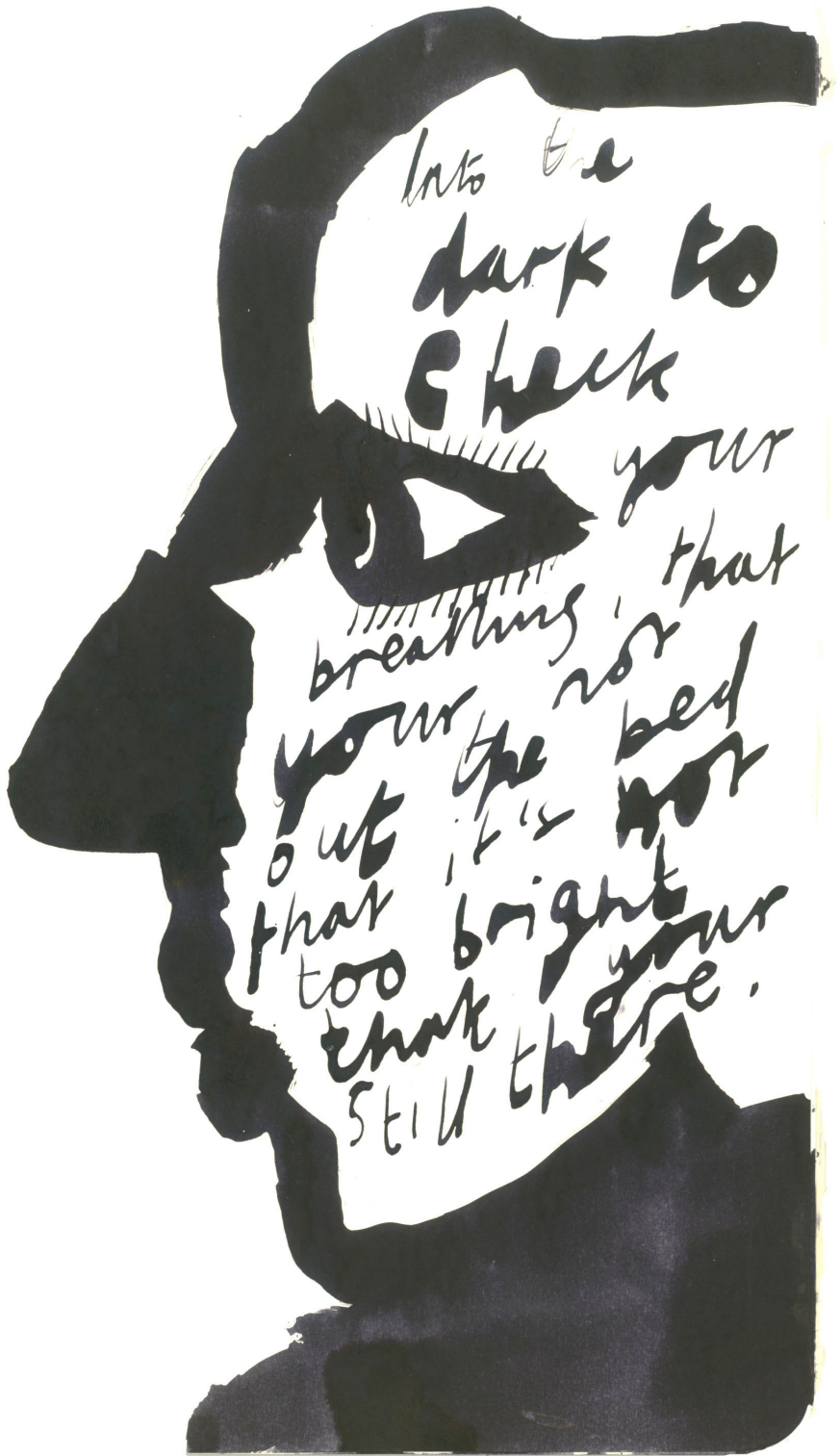
The 'stay in your lane' adage is therefore useful insofar as it steers those of us who occupy the more precarious world of freelance writing and online journalism: the stack-'em-high-and-sell-'em-cheap modes that leave little room for extensive research. With patience and respect, acts of solidarity are still possible through literature, traversing differences of nationhood and experience, but only through a level of expert handling that I worry is sadly on the decline. This totemic work of empathy and imagination sadly seems to represent an old vanguard that will not be replaced; whose efforts can't be built on by even the leading lights of a younger generation who will not be

insulated from financial struggle in the same way as their predecessors, and whose precariousness compromises their ability to confidently sew together narratives that might span years of research and multiple visits to foreign countries. *Girl* is a book that is poignant for many reasons, not least because it shines a light on the flimsiness into which so much of literature has been plunged on account of market forces.

It's title too—*Girl*—on the one hand refers to the anonymity of abuse and trauma, the disinherited state to which Maryam is reduced by her tormenters. It speaks of the commoditization and dehumanization of women everywhere, while prompting questions of innocence, or lack thereof, and the labels we're designated on account of virginity, rape, pregnancy, disfiguration and, finally, rest. But it also functions as a sly joke from O'Brien—a nod to her earliest novels, the *Country Girls* trilogy, and the ongoing struggle to document women's suffering. In this sense, *Girl* also appears as something of a homecoming and a reflection on her career as a writer more broadly. It demonstrates a circling back on the themes that initially prompted her career, and her lifelong commitment to exploring the most painful parts of the female experience without apology or compromise; it opens with a line that could easily have been spoken by O'Brien herself, and not Maryam, in claiming that 'I was a girl once, but not anymore'. Which, in its coupling with a final passage that summons

RECENT BOOKS

the heavens, the gods and all eternity, reminds us of Prospero in the final words of *The Tempest*, echoing Shakespeare's own sentiments in asking the audience to free him of the stage, and the medium to which his life had been devoted. ◇



Into the
dark to
check

your
breathing, that
your not
the bed
out it's not
that too bright
your
check there.
Still there.

AN EXCERPT

Ness

Stanley Donwood &
Robert Macfarlane

Look—five forms moving fast through the forests
to Ness.

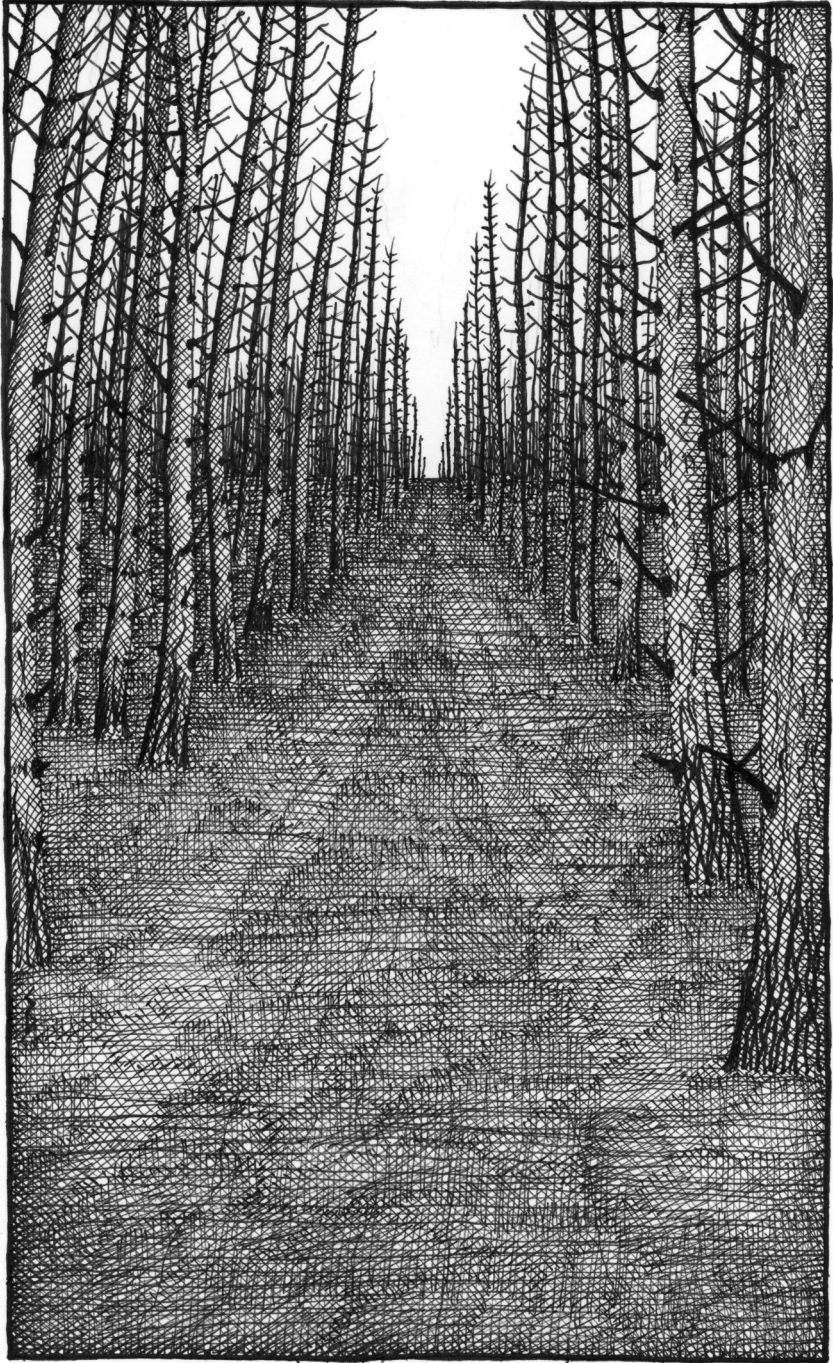
Look—here *it* comes, its bones are plastic, it builds itself
from pallet slat & bottle-top, rises from sift, is lashed &
trussed with fishing line. It is drift: it has cuttlefish nails
& sea-poppo horns, it breathes in rain & it breathes out
rust.

Look—here *he* comes, his bones are willow & he sings
in birds. He rises in marsh, slips forwards by ripple &
shiver. Between his tree-ribs birds flutter, then swoop
ahead to settle, sing, quiver. His head is a raven's, his
eyes are wrens' nests. By day from his throat fly finch &
fire-crest & in anger he speaks only in swifts.

Look—here *she* comes, her skin is lichen & her flesh
is moss & her bones are fungi, she breathes in spores
& she moves by hyphae. She is a rock-breaker, a tree-
speaker, a place-shaper, a world-maker.

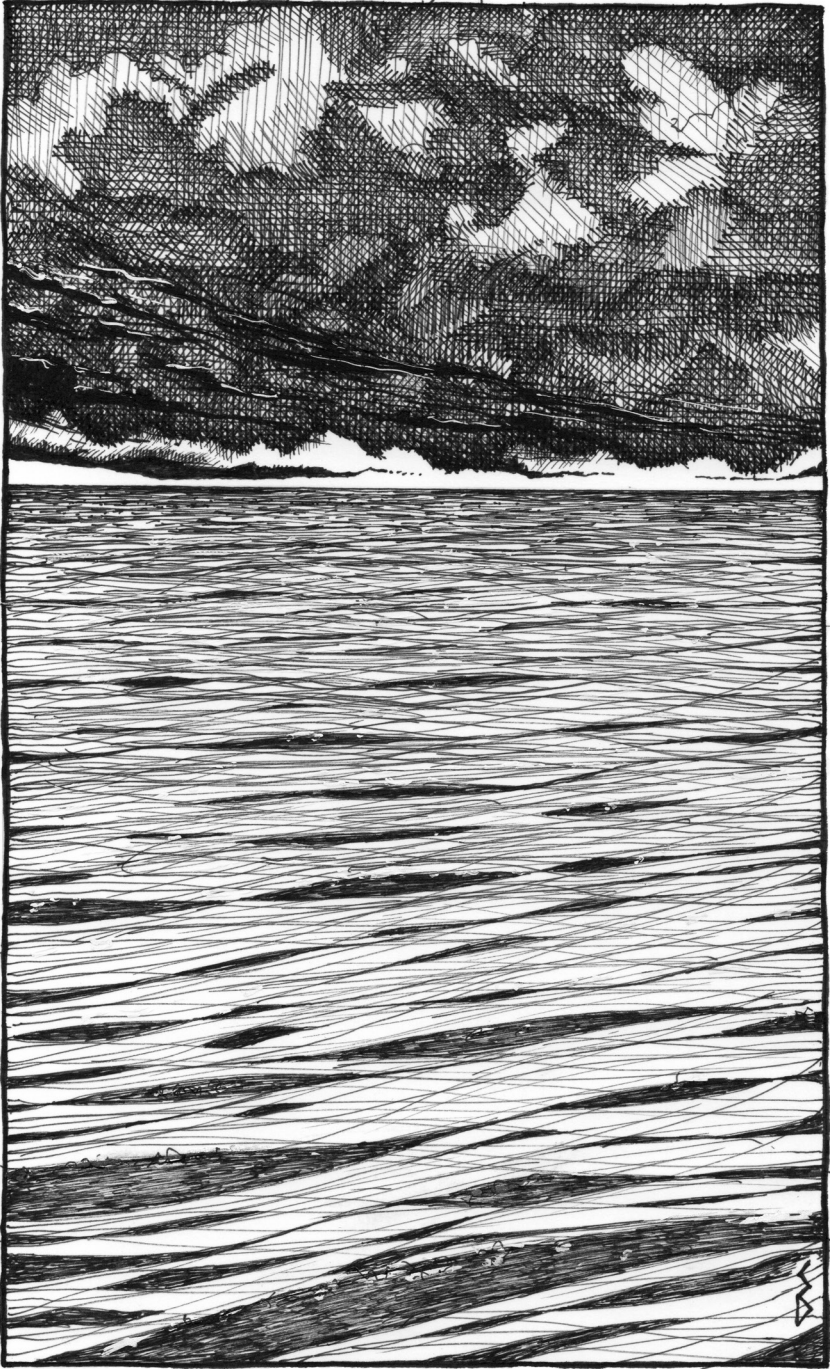
Look—here *they* come, their eyes are hagstones & their
words are shingle. They rise on the shore, rock-cored,
flint beings, scattering chert to signal their passage,
sending stones through time to foretell their seeings.

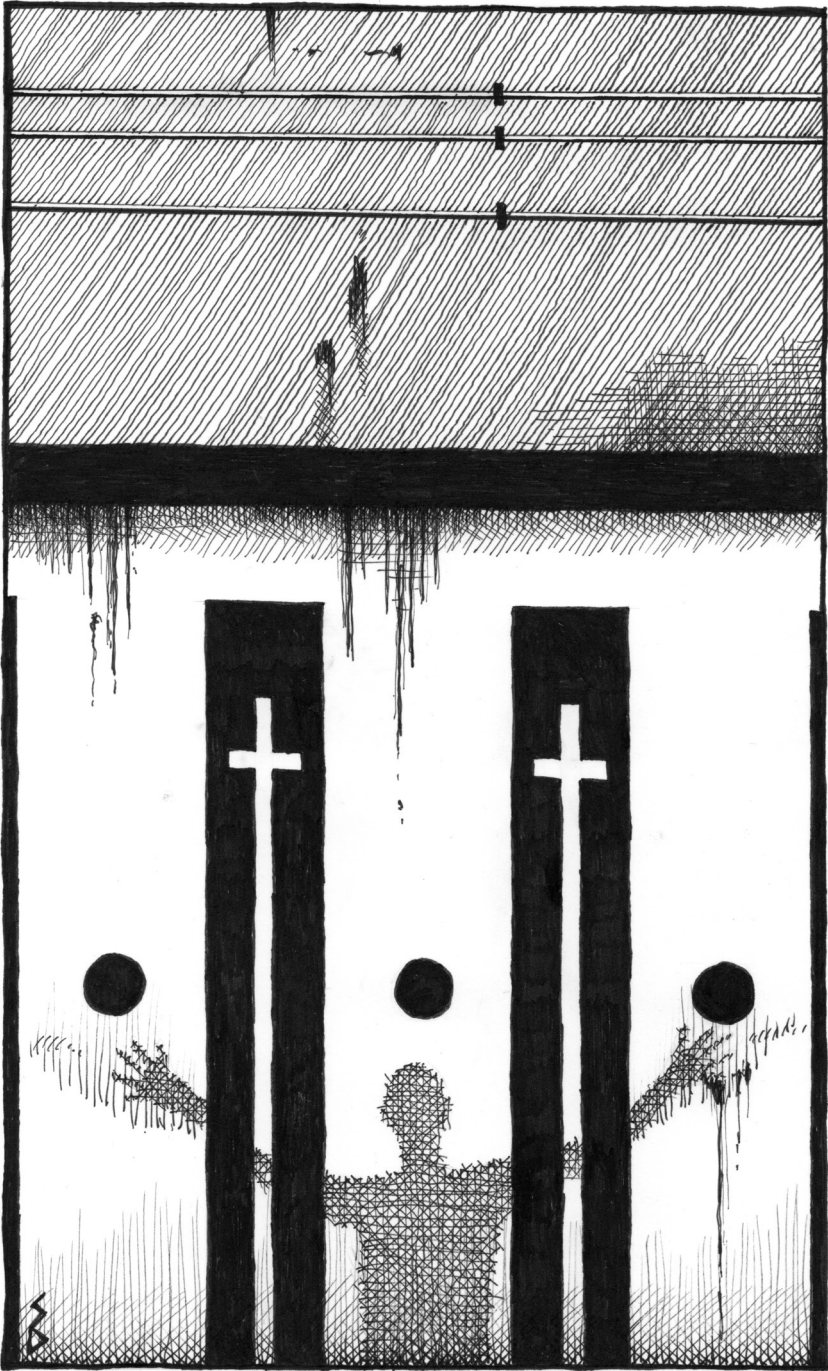
Look—here *as* comes, who exists only as likeness,
moves as mist & also as metal, cannot be grasped or
forced, is the strongest & strangest & youngest & oldest
of all the five, slipping through trees, past houses, rolled
by the wind at years each minute—rolled by the wind
as if through time & in it.

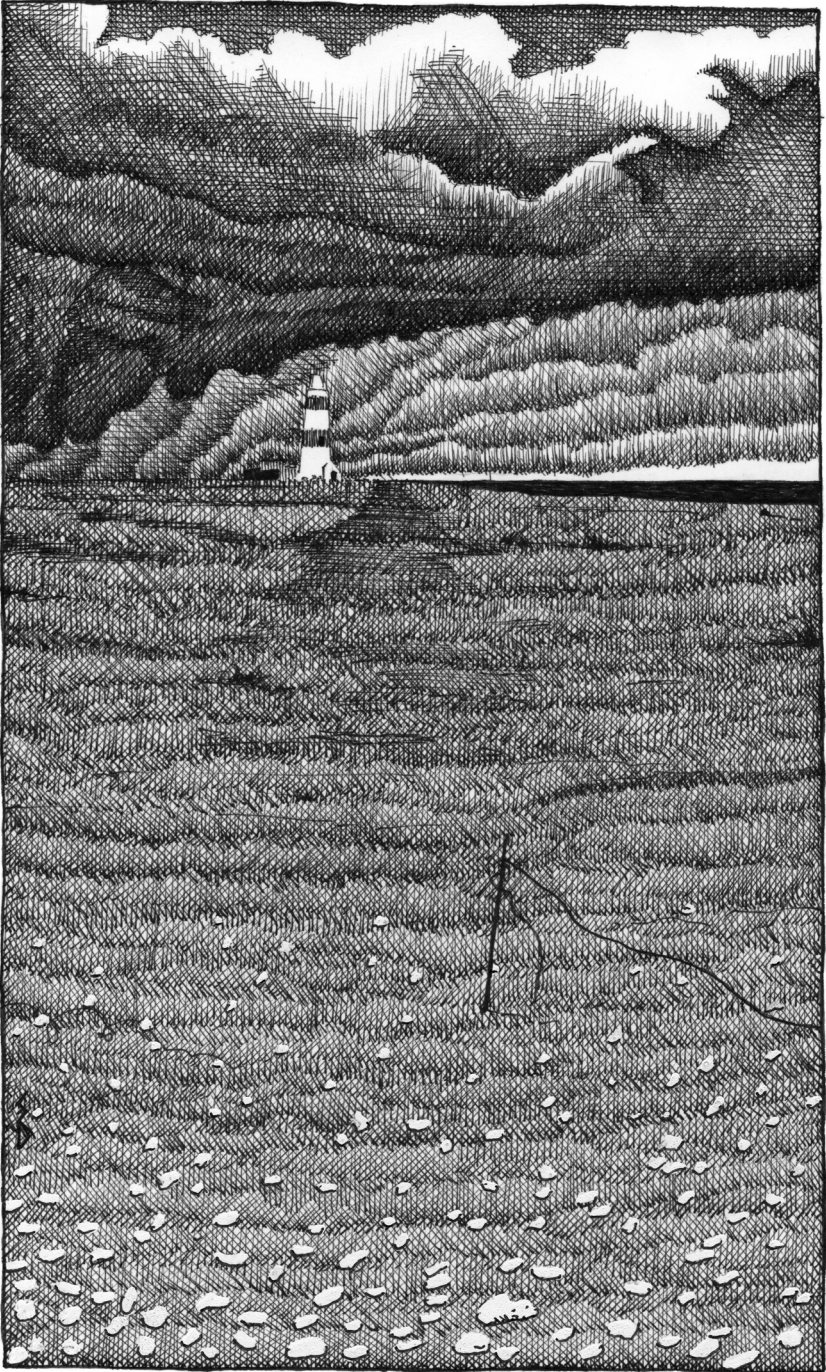


it, he, she, they, as

All five know where they must go &
with what they must grapple &
where they must go is to the Green Chapel







Listen. Listen now. Listen to Ness.

Ness speaks. Ness speaks gull, speaks wave, speaks bracken & lapwing, speaks bullet, ruin, gale, deception.

Ness speaks pagoda, transmission, reception, Ness speaks pure mercury, utmost secret, swift current, rapid-fire.

Listen again. Listen back. Listen to the pasts of Ness. Listen inland to the long-gone wood, which rings with the cries of *wildcat & brock, heorte & hind, doe & bocke, hare & fox, wild fowle with his flocke, patrich, pheasant hen & pheasant cock, with green & wild stub & stock.*

Listen to the wrench of the door in the Centrifuge Dome. Listen to the rise of the still encroaching ocean. Listen to the silence of the merman who *would not talk, e'en when tortured & hung up by his feete.* Listen to the rumoured motion of the rumoured bodies on the rumoured shore.

Shut up & listen, though, will you? Really listen. What the fuck is that, coming from the Green Chapel?

SPORTING NEWS

On Cricket

Benjamin
Markovits

My dad grew up playing sandlot baseball in Middletown, New York. (I don't really know what a sandlot is but it occupies the same space in my imagination as a soda jerk.) For some reason, he never communicated this passion to his kids. Sometimes, in picnic weather, he dragged us out to the park carrying softball, bat and mitts. It was a sort of equal opportunity family occasion, effortful (carrying the gear, finding the space, setting up the bases) and not totally satisfying, because you didn't really win or lose and spent most of the time waiting for another turn.

Once, playing catcher, I stood too close to home plate and my sister's backswing caught me in the eye socket. Maybe I was five years old. We were living in London at the time and my father scooped me up in his arms and ran to the nearest hospital—about ten blocks away. For years I still had the little leather shoes that fat drops of blood from my forehead had fallen on to and stained.

We got more into cricket. For my dad, baseball had been a way of feeling like part of the country, and we spent enough time in England as kids (about five years) that cricket played the same role for us. It needed even more gear: stumps, bails, batting gloves, flat bats and linseed oil. And whites—the traditional cream-coloured trousers and shirts—though we never bought those because none of us ever played on a real team. We just messed around in the backyard. Cricket has the advantage that the

strike zone is a real thing, it's made of the stumps and the bails, so getting someone out involves indisputable empirical evidence—leather knocking against wood, little sticks falling off and other sticks standing crooked in the ground.

The balls are especially beautiful, deep red. Cricketers in the field pass the ball among themselves between plays and rub the shine off one side against their white trousers, which acquire a pink stain as the afternoon wears on. They do it to create a rough surface, which might make the ball swing in mid-air. Or reverse swing—the idea is the same as a spitball. But it also seems to involve a kind of ritual pleasure. You're standing around in the outfield doing nothing much, and someone tosses you the ball. You give it a few hard rubs against your thigh, like scratching a dog, and send it along. Games can take all day; you need something to do.

My son plays now; he even owns whites. I still live in London, and a twenty-minute walk from our house can take you through an implausible number of cricket clubs. Implausible because of London real-estate prices, and a cricket club requires a large expanse of beautifully maintained lawn—not to mention a decent pavilion or clubhouse, which includes the dressing rooms and bar. On Friday evenings in spring and summer, the quiet neighbourhood streets around the grounds are jammed with cars, parents dropping off or picking up. There's a barbecue rota, and people buy home-burnt hamburgers from the grill and beers from the

clubhouse and sit around and watch whatever there is to watch—a bunch of kids running after a ball, and sometimes hitting it with a flat stick.

It still doesn't seem to me like a real sport. The sports I played competitively, soccer and basketball, involve almost constant motion. You can always try harder, and trying harder means not just concentrating more but running until it hurts. Cricket involves a lot of standing around. You pay attention to the weather; you pay attention to the condition of the field. Batsmen between pitches (that's not what they call them) will stamp out cracks or bend down and pick up a bit of grit from the ground surface, which might affect the bounce of the ball. Like my dad seeing a crumb of cookie on the carpet. It's like golf in that respect, or sailing: sports that require you to attend to or be in tune with nature.

The language of cricket commentary is typically English, vague-sounding and intuitional. The ball is 'doing something' if it swings a little in the air; the pitch has 'a bit about it' if a spin bowler can get the ball to grip and turn. Some of it also sounds like code, the kind of code kids would make up for a secret club. Field positions include gully, third slip, backward point and silly mid-on. There are also words for the different kinds of shot or stroke and ways of swinging the bat: square cuts, cover drives, reverse sweeps. It seems like half the pleasure, from the spectator's point of view, comes from being in the club and knowing the code.

SPORTING NEWS

Playing in a match isn't all that different from watching one. An editor I know once invited me to 'turn out' for his village team, so I drove one morning to the Essex countryside and parked by the green. A street actually ran through the outfield; players sometimes had to wait for cars to pass. Various locals showed up to make a day of it, spread picnic blankets out and unwrapped sandwiches and opened thermoses of tea. Our team was batting first and since I was pencilled in as a 'tailender' (someone who bats only when everybody else has gotten out), I spent the morning sitting on the picnic blankets, eating the sandwiches and drinking the tea. At a certain point after lunch it was my turn to bat. So I walked out into the middle of the green, faced a few balls, got out, and walked back to the picnic blankets.

There's a radio show called *Test Match Special*, which makes good summer-afternoon listening, pleasant background noise for housework, cooking or napping. Since a test match takes all day, the show has to fill the hours, and the commentators spend as much time talking about the cakes they've been sent by avid listeners as the game in hand. They remember old matches and josh each other in a partisan way; most are former players. But they talk tactics, too. Cricket is one of the few team sports where the captain makes real-time significant decisions on the field of play. Cricket, like everything else, has been infiltrated by analytics, but the data is open-ended enough and

‘Cricket, like everything else, has been infiltrated by analytics, but the data is open-ended enough and complicated by so many hard-to-predict factors, like weather forecasts, that conversations about strategy remain conversations about intuitions, feelings and long memories.’

complicated by so many hard-to-predict factors, like weather forecasts, that conversations about strategy remain conversations about intuitions, feelings and long memories.

Even for old pros, the game seems to retain an air of childish messing around—you've got a ball, you've got some sticks, you've got a bit of grass, let's see what we can come up with. What if you threw it like that, and I hit it like this . . . That's the sense I get, watching my son play. One of his favorite picture books (and the one I liked to read to him most) was the Quentin Blake story *How Tom Beat Captain Najork and His Hired Sportsmen*. A boy, Tom, is being raised by an iron-hatted aunt and spends his days playing outside, with sticks and mud and bits of broken wire, until his aunt decides to lick him into shape. She asks Captain Najork and his hired sportsmen to teach him a lesson, and the captain shows up and proposes various contests to establish his superiority. The trouble is, all these contests involve the kinds of thing that Tom is good at—sliding around, balancing things on other things, playing with sticks. He wins every time, hands down. That'll teach you not to fool around, he says, with a boy who knows how to fool around. You learn the same kind of thing playing cricket. ♦

surviving
like islands
dipping
down
embracing
the ^{acing} water



A SINGLE BOOK

The Lover by
Marguerite Duras

Philippe Besson

I was seventeen years old when I read *The Lover* for the first time. It was the autumn of 1984, the book had just come out, and people were talking about it a lot, saying that Duras would end up winning the Prix Goncourt. I had never read Duras. I only knew that she was old. The book even begins with a description of her age: she says she has a face ‘scored with wrinkles’. She stresses that—her wrinkles, her beauty lost to this so visible ageing—she even speaks about a ‘ravaged’ face; and then, just after, in a short paragraph, she writes: ‘So, I’m fifteen and a half, on a ferry crossing the Mekong river’, and in one sentence, one single sentence, I find myself catapulted to Indochina at the end of the 1930s. There I am, on the ferry with a young girl in the fullness of youth, a young girl with her infernal beauty suddenly restored, while her Indochinese lover awaits his cue, just the other side of the rail, comfortable in his luxury car.

Afterwards, it never stopped, I was transported, as though I were being swept along by the muddy waters of a rushing river, captivated by this story of skin, bodies, sweat, secret embraces, by this fevered love that takes place behind shutters, by the scandal of this love affair because the young girl is so young, because the lover belongs to the colonized people. I was fascinated too, of course, by the madness of the mother who fights in vain against the elements, against the Pacific, by the violence of the elder brother, which can surface at any moment, by the

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fragility of the younger brother, by death prowling in the vicinity, by the fatality that bears down on each character. I trembled at the final moment of separation, when the brazen girl, now almost a woman, stands on the deck of the ocean liner, returning to France for good; and yet separation was predestined in the story, it was even its condition. And I burst into tears reading the last lines: 'he still loved her, he could never stop loving her, he would love her until his death'.

I have reread the book a dozen times. Really. That's not a number plucked from thin air. And every time I experience the same amazement. Every time. By now I know the text by heart, I shouldn't be surprised, and yet I am; it's an eternal renewal.

When, thirty years after my first reading, I threw myself into writing *Lie With Me*, it's *The Lover* that I placed in front of me, on my desk, in plain view. The 1984 edition, yellowed, dog-eared, stained. I knew that I was going to write about my seventeen-year-old self, about what happened the year I turned seventeen, and I have never forgotten that that was the year I read *The Lover* for the first time. But there was something else: I had understood that I was going to call forth my memories, like Duras did, that I was going to write about the memory of adolescence, like Duras. And that, above all, I was going to write about how the events that came to pass changed everything, absolutely everything in my life, how nothing

‘I was her. The child who
offers herself up, with false
innocence, that was me.
And the lover relegated to the
shadows, to obscurity, that was
him, the same one to whom
I offered myself.’

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was the same afterwards.

I knew straight away that I would move away from places and moments, like Duras. So, you understand, I was not trying to imitate her – that would have been grotesque, and I could never reach her heights. No, I only wanted her to be with me, all the time, for her to guide me, her voice to guide me, her way of recounting things to guide me.

I wanted to approach that uncertain age, adolescence, when everything seems possible and everything is forbidden, like she knew how. I wanted to express how burgeoning love carries everything in its path. And I had to describe the dizzying secrecy, how necessary it was to hide our relationship, to stay silent, because we too were a scandal, outcasts, in our own way. I had to say that sexuality took the place of everything else, like in the story, that our bodies were our own unique language. I had to say that our love was destined to fail from the very first moment and yet that is why we launched ourselves into it. I had to talk about the weight of family, the family who turn a blind eye or the family who condemn, and explain that we were the victims of our environment and of our education. All of this was in complete and utter harmony with the tale of young Marguerite.

And then, finally, I understood why the shock of my first reading had been so violent. I was her. The child who offers herself up, with false innocence, that was me. And the lover relegated to the shadows, to obscurity, that was him, the same

one to whom I offered myself. The young girl who wants to 'write books, novels' and to whom her mother, a teacher, replies 'after your diploma in mathematics', that was me, obeying my teacher father when he demanded that I spend long years studying rather than acting the clown. The one who receives, too late, the proof that she was loved, that was me, discovering a confession of lost love in an unsent letter.

And their Indochina was our Charente. Their far away, restricted world, beginning to fall apart, that was my own world, which was withering, quietly dying. The disdainful gaze of the indigenous people, I felt that too. You can never forget what it is like to walk in disgrace.

And their 1930s were our 1980s. Because they marked, for each of us, the end of innocence and the necessity of joining the adult world. And because they were a time of menace, war here, plague there.

In the end, it was only transposition. All that happened was a slight shift of terrain. Otherwise it was all the same. Marguerite Duras, in writing *The Lover*, had written my story.

Writers write our story, believing they write their own. When they are at their most intimate, they are at their most universal. When they give away everything about themselves, they speak for all of us. The emotions they felt, we felt them too. We recognize their desires, their regrets, their defeats and their indefatigable hopes because they are our

A SINGLE BOOK

own. This is the great story of literature: it holds up a mirror.

Let me tell you: sometimes, I would like to return to that moment in 1984 when I opened *The Lover* for the first time, not yet knowing what was to come, the amazement that would follow. I would like to be that boy again, standing on the edge of a precipice, about to throw himself into the void and learn to fly in the same movement. ◇

Translated from the French by Isabel Wall.

everyone
and i mean
EVERYONE
is lucky to

someone
it just so
happens
you
are
unlucky
to
me



FICTION

Nothing But Blue Sky

Kathleen
MacMahon

I went back to Aiguaclara this summer. Primarily, because I had failed to go back the previous year and had come to see that failure as a breach of faith. It was, at the very least, a breach of the tradition that Mary Rose and I had first established on our honeymoon. Throughout our marriage we returned to Aiguaclara for two weeks every summer. Most often it was the same two weeks at the start of July, although one year we had to delay going by a week, to facilitate a family wedding. Another year we had to fly home early for a funeral. But there was never a year we did not go, until last year. That was the first time the chain was broken, and I was anxious to repair it by going back.

The other reason I wanted to go back was that it was in Aiguaclara that Mary Rose and I were at our happiest. We had laid claim to it as our place, jealously keeping it a secret from everyone else. Whenever people asked us where we were going on our holidays, we would vaguely mention the Costa Brava. If pressed, we might mention the name of a neighbouring town along the coast, but Aiguaclara was the word that could not be spoken. So precious was it to us that we could not bear the thought of sharing it.

Year after year we landed there, blinking like newborn rabbits after another interminable Irish winter. Pasty and stiff after completing another lap of our lives, Aiguaclara was our pit stop. It was the place where we mended ourselves, marinating

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gently in a brew of salt water and sunshine. In Aiguaclara, we paused to take stock of our lives, coming to terms with the passing of another year and making plans for the one to come. Aiguaclara was where we held our AGM; it was the place where all of our most illuminating conversations took place, unplanned, over an extra bottle of wine on a random weeknight. Mary Rose and I never had a tree with our initials carved into the bark. There was no bridge with a padlock bolted to the railings as a testament to our love. What we had was Aiguaclara, and it seemed to me that the pain of being there without her could hardly be greater than the pain of being anywhere else without her. At least in Aiguaclara there might be some memory of our lives together that I had until then forgotten. That was the hope I had, in going back.

When you return to a place year upon year there is always the fear that something will have changed. Mary Rose and I first went to Aiguaclara twenty years ago, and every time we went back it was with dread in our hearts that we would find something altered, that the idyll we had found for ourselves would no longer be idyllic. Maybe a new multistorey hotel had been built on the seafront, or a noisy disco opened in the centre of the village. In Ireland, one of those things would no doubt have happened, with planning permission secured in exchange for a brown envelope, but the Spanish seemed determined to keep things just the way they always had been, which to us was an eternally

pleasant surprise.

We would fly into Girona, picking up the hire car and pointing it out the road towards the coast, through fields of ladylike sunflowers and farmhouses of dark gold stone. In the distance, sandcastle towns rose out of the low hills. Trees like standing feathers lined the roads. Sun pouring down over everything, casting stencils of shade. The road cut through a dozen dreary villages that seemed to have no industry at all but the roadside sale of ceramic urns and pots.

‘How can a whole region survive on the sale of ceramic pots?’ I said, the first time we rolled through the town of La Bisbal d’Empordá. Its arched colonnades were more fitting to a place ten times its size. Every second shop seemed to sell ceramic pots.

‘I don’t know,’ Mary Rose said lightly, her voice rising with the question, as if she too would like an answer. That was back at our beginnings, when she was amused by everything I had to say. Her sympathy was worn down in time, and the patterns in her voice flattened, as I insisted on revisiting the same topics over and over again. I find it hard to let things go.

‘Who buys all these pots?’ I would ask, as we drove through La Bisbal on our route to the coast.

‘I mean, how many ceramic pots does one town need?’

She would sigh and shift her bare limbs around on the hot seat of the car, her voice trailing off as she

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answered me with forced patience.

‘That I do not know.’ In time it became a joke between us. ‘Ah,’ I might say, as we spotted the welcome sign on the edge of town. ‘La Bisbal. Home of the ceramic pot.’ Mary Rose would set about winding the window down to drown my voice out. The rushing wind lashed her hair across her face as she shouted over it. ‘I’m on my holidays! I do not know and do not care who buys those pots or what they do with them. Do you hear that? I DON’T BLOODY CARE!’

In time, a new motorway was built, carrying the coast-bound traffic southwards out of the airport instead of north. The new route went nowhere near La Bisbal d’Empordá, and the mystery of the ceramic pots was never solved. Mary Rose and I learned to identify new landmarks on the route south: a cement factory that provided me with the reassurance of some local industry, a fertilizer plant that gave off a homely stink of manure, a desolate-looking water park. In my treacherous heart I invariably experienced an air pocket of relief that we did not have any children who would beg to be taken to that godforsaken water park. Mary Rose was no doubt thinking the exact opposite. How she would have loved to have had a reason to spend a day there.

‘Look, there’s the turn,’ she would say, pointing out a sign for Platjes.

From there it’s only a few short kilometres to the coast. The landmarks accumulate as the holiday

countdown begins. A familiar supermarket is followed quickly by a garden centre full of nothing but cactus plants. A kart-racing track. A billboard with a crocodile on it. Our conversation always slowed as we struck out across the last stretch of countryside towards our destination. We peered hungrily at the outlying fields of corn. The final few farmhouses. The last crossroads. Then we were among the pine trees, on a road that plunged in hairpin twists down the mountainside to the sea. All winter long, Mary Rose and I longed for that first glimpse of Aiguaclara through the trees. A necklace of white stone buildings, like square beads strung along the shore. A slash of sandy beach. A shock of batik sea. The spectacle of summer, same as it ever was, and another year somehow or other miraculously weathered.

This year I took the same route from Dublin to Girona. I hired a car at the airport and made for the coast. Through fields and farmhouses that were all bathed in the same burnished gold. Past the fertilizer plant and the water park. Past the garden centre and the kart-racing track. I took the turn-off for Aiguaclara, but this time there was none of the usual fear in my heart of finding something altered. This time I was aware that it was me who had suffered a change, and I wondered how I would find a formula of words to explain it. All the way down the hill, as I threw the hire car around the twists and turns of the road, I was practising in my head the answer I would give to the question I knew I would

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inevitably be asked when I got there. No matter how many times I say it, it still sounds stubbornly implausible. ◇



FEATURED ARTIST

Lizzie Stewart

What I read in 2019.



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Five
Dials