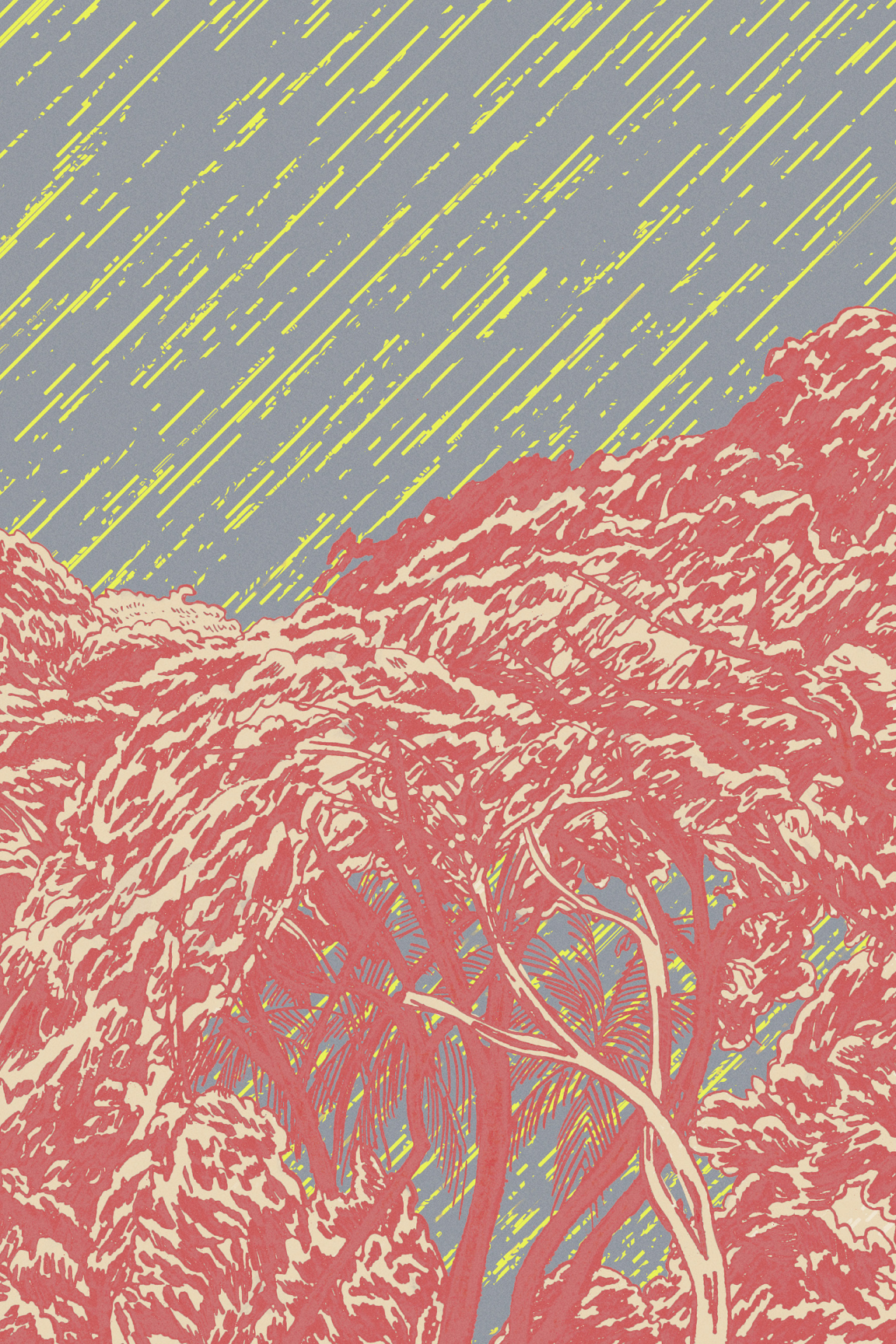


The background features a stylized illustration of a tropical landscape. The sky is a solid blue color, filled with numerous thin, parallel yellow lines that create a sense of motion or rain. Below the sky, there are rolling hills and a dense forest of palm trees. The entire scene is rendered in a limited color palette of blue, yellow, and red, with a high-contrast, graphic style.

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Five
Dials



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Five
Dials

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CONTRIBUTORS

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ANYU grew up in Beijing and spent parts of her life studying and working in New York and Paris. She received her M.F.A. from New York University, during which she wrote her first novel, *Braised Pork*. Apart from writing, she is the co-founder of YU, a jade jewellery brand based in Hong Kong. *Braised Pork* will be published by Harvill Secker in January, 2020.

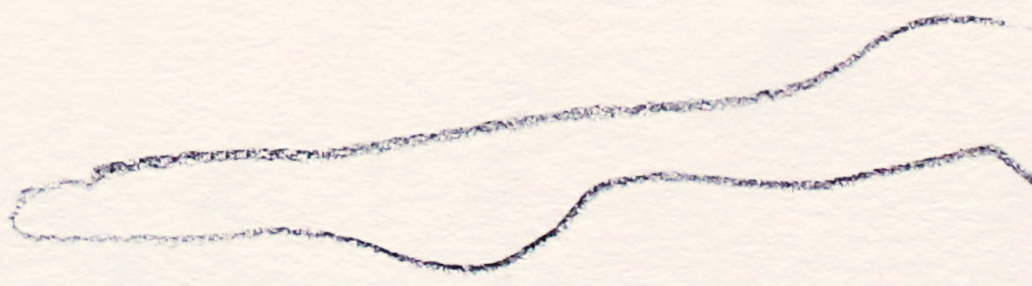


HOW TO ENJOY THIS ISSUE

- Expect debuts.
- Peruse the contributor list. This is Class of 2020. Maybe commit the names to memory, for referencing casually in conversation through the year.
- Read *Five Dials* however you want. Begin at the end and work backwards or start in the middle and meander about. Read on your phone while waiting for the bus, or on your tablet while watching the rice boil, or print out sections to read in the bath.
- If you have access to a colour printer at work, why not take advantage of it and print up the whole issue?
- Don't get fired.
- Meet a guy called Ming, who might just be Merciless. ›
- Consider the importance of a proper title for things. Have you chosen a title for your own debut? Sarah Elaine Smith has some spares, if you're in the market. ›
- If you've already written a debut, what was the title?
- Was it *Every Day is Mother's Day*? If so, thank you for reading, Hilary Mantel.
- Notice the artwork of the talented Nove Wong. Go visit her Instagram, @novewong. (She's a debut, too.)
- Join a cult. ›
- Pause to search the room for djinns. ›

HOW TO ENJOY THIS ISSUE

- Discover why Ingrid Persaud loves the wisest Agony Aunt in the Barbados. ›
- Celebrate the fine art of being alone. ›
- If you're reading on your phone, remember to lift your head while walking along the pavement. There's so much to see in the sky too.
- Read forbidden things and keep bad news to yourself. ›
- Imagine Tehran. ›
- If you're feeling peckish, treat yourself to a snack with An Yu. She knows a lot about braised pork. ›
- Resolve never to take a road trip in a legit camper van with Patrick Freyne. (“It looks legit,” he said, which is a sentence no one says about anything that looks entirely legit.›)
- Get ejected from a live art event. ›
- Heed Frances Cha's wise advice not to wrong a Korean girl, because she will fuck you up. ›
- Build a bridge out of language, and walk across it. ›
- When you're finished reading the issue, you may be hungry. Have another helping of braised pork.
- From our extensive list of new titles, choose the books you'll read later in the year.
- Start saving for these books.
- (Maybe support a local credit union to help you save for the books.)
- Send the issue to others.
- If you're not a subscriber, subscribe for free.
- Finish your own debut in time for 2021.





READING DIARY

Notes From a Small Rock

Ingrid Persaud

I average two books a week so you would think I could read just so just so. Not true. For a start, don't ask me to read nothing on a Kindle, phone or iPad. I'm not doing it. Period. Before my two eyes take in a sentence I like to pause and embrace my spirit animal—a dog of no pedigree. I need to sniff a book, feel the texture under my paws, rub the page against my skin. Then I can read. Even a novella like Mary Gaitskill's *This Is Pleasure* was too much reading on a screen. That little hardback went on the plane with me from London to my small rock, Barbados. For once I was glad the flight long, yes, because I got three hours for the reading and the next six to process Gaitskill's take on the #MeToo movement.

Told in the alternating voices of friends Margot and Quinn, *This Is Pleasure* is the story of Quinn who is guilty of sexual harassment. Were his actions solely rooted in an exercise of power I wouldn't bother with him. But check this out. Margot shows us Quinn as a man with genuine curiosity about concealed female desire. And women love that they can talk to him freely. So when a co-worker confided in Quinn that she fancied spanking he went with his fast self and sent her a video clip of John Wayne spanking an actress in some old movie. Later, his long list of offences included, yup, sending an inappropriate video featuring a man spanking a woman.

Discussing these issues in a highly sexualized

READING DIARY

space like the Caribbean ain't easy. Colleagues bussing a dirty wine with plenty grinding and gyrating pon one another carries a very different meaning in Port of Spain than it does in London. Gaitskill—thank you sister for provoking this difficult and uncomfortable conversation about these contested boundaries.

As usual my suitcase is full of books. And chocolate. We go talk about that addiction another time. See, living in Barbados you can't run out the road and buy the latest novels. Actually, I lie. Romance? Crime? Christianity? Lucky you. The few bookshops we have got you covered. So praise jah for Black Rock Books, a brilliant second-hand bookstore run by a grouch named Andy. But don't let him get you off set. That same Andy knew I needed *A Brighter Sun* by Sam Selvon. Last week I went and what did he have hiding in his desk? Selvon plus Shirley biscuits to share with a cuppa. What Selvon did with language is courageous and ground-breaking. Read it and weep. I had a mind he would have come through with the Selvon so I brought him Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys*. That is a perfect novel.

Now, I've read your mind and you can't understand why I'm not into the Amazon or Book Depository since I'll only read a physical book. Nah. That ain't for me. On this small rock order a book online and the only guarantee is that it will arrive within the year. Except that time in 2014 when I ordered *Middlesex* by Jeffrey Eugenides. Postman

reached with it. Only it was three years later in 2017. All you living in America and England only have to think about a book for a nanosecond and, boom. Siri/Google/WhatsApp/Twitter will rush to tell Amazon and next thing it's in your basket.

While I can't rely on ordering books online I'm happy as pappy because I have Dear Christine, agony aunt extraordinaire in Barbados' *The Nation* newspaper. Every week, come dry or rainy season, the population unburdens itself to Christine. Take this last letter from a woman who signs herself as 'Concern'.

Dear Christine,

Good day and God's blessings upon your work. You are doing a good job. I read your column all the time and anytime I read an article relating to married men it makes me wonder.

Men are like cow dung—dry on top and wet at the bottom. I am a married woman.

Christine, these single women give the wives a hard time . . . I don't mean to be rude but some of these women offer dirty sex to these men . . .

This is a quotation I made up, and it's to the men: 'When you are blessed with a fool, care that fool. Do not join with anyone to misuse that fool, because one day that fool will wake up wise as an owl.'

With inspiration like Dear Christine you understand why I chose to be a storyteller. And although I've carried on about having

‘See, living in Barbados you
can’t run out the road and
buy the latest novels. Actually,
I lie. Romance? Crime?
Christianity? Lucky you.’

that paper in my hand, lately I've been trying a thing. I've found that a book in my ears might be worth the same as a book in my hand. They say it stimulates the same parts of the brain. And watch me—if it's unabridged and read by the author? Oh luss, that is bliss. I don't want to put goat mouth on this new thing me and audio books have going but so far it's love like dove. Listening to Kevin Barry read *Night Boat to Tangier* as my bedtime story was divine. Talk about laugh and cry living in the same house. His characters, two old-timers, Charlie and Maurice, lifetime gangsters, leap off the page in a tragicomic reckoning. Spanning one night, we find them waiting in a ferry terminal hoping to spot Charlie's daughter, Dilly. As the night unfurls their talk meanders through choices—crimes, regrets, joys—all delivered in Barry's mellow voice. I am convinced it's me and he alone and he's reading to me.

Apart from the added benefit of drowning out the husband's music, I'm getting hooked on audio books because I can finally keep up with the literary Jones. I used to beg anybody coming from foreign to bring the latest must-read fiction. (If you're coming soon bring *Will and Testament* by Vigdis Hjorth for me please.) Now, if you see me bussing style. On a London WhatsApp group more than one person had mentioned *Fleishman is in Trouble* by Taffy Brodesser-Akner. Long time they would assume without a physical book I couldn't say boo. Man, I stuck those ear pods in and fifteen

READING DIARY

hours later I texted agreement with their verdict. It's a fun read with plenty to say about sex and love—mainly sex. The perfect companion for a day at Pebbles Beach, where calm turquoise water meets a cloudless blue sky. I gone. ◇

WORKS REFERENCED

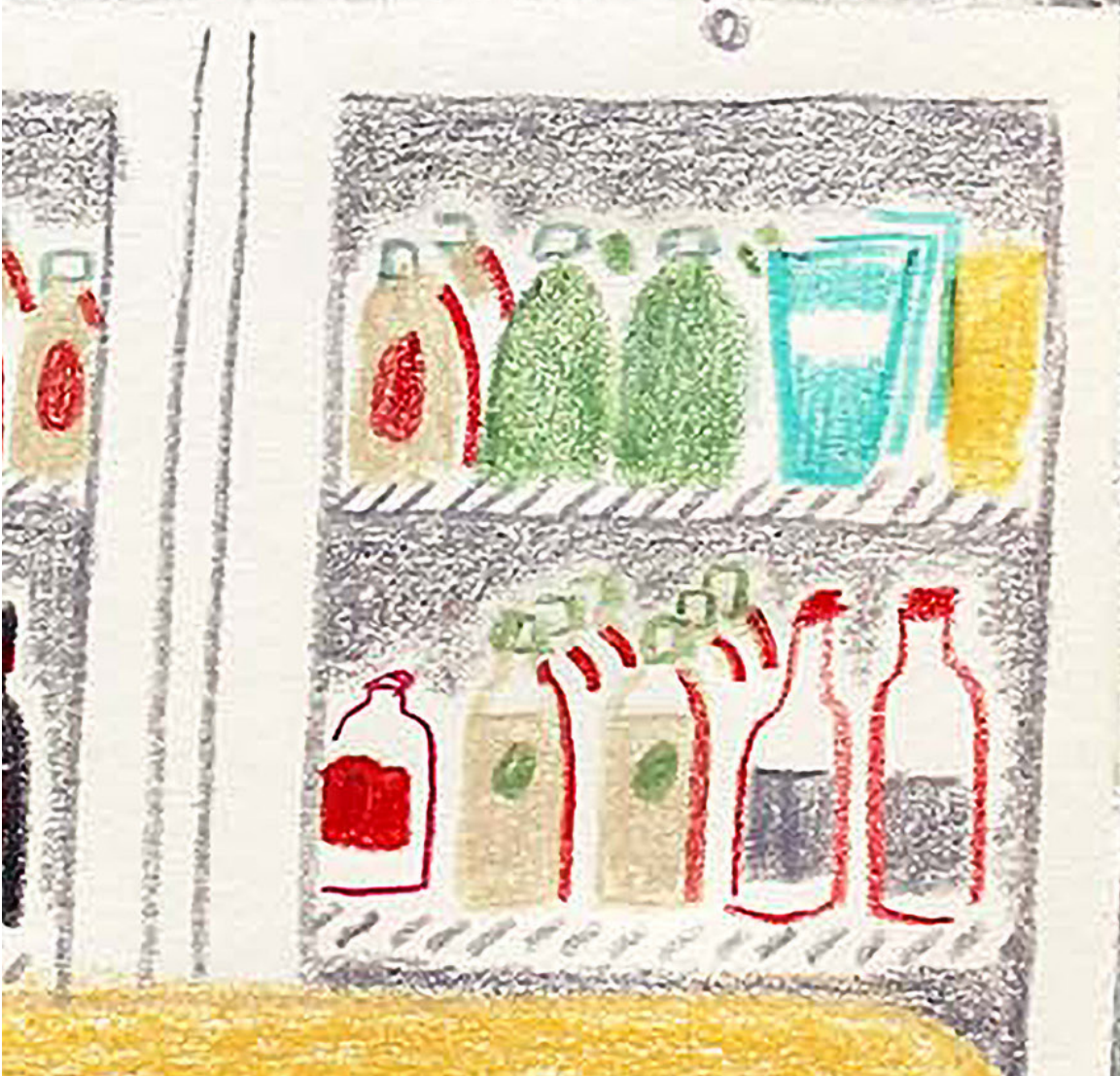
This is Pleasure, Mary Gaitskill, novella

A Brighter Sun, Sam Selvon, novel

'Dear Christine,' *The Nation* newspaper, agony aunt column

Night Boat to Tangier, Kevin Barry, novel

Fleishman is in Trouble, Taffy Brodesser-Akner, novel



ON TITLES

Donald Duck Orange Juice

Sarah Elaine Smith

'I am of the unaccredited school that believes animals did not exist until Adam assigned them names.'—C. D. Wright

My first novel is titled *Marilou Is Everywhere*, a name which was determined not exactly at the eleventh hour, but perhaps the ninth. And yet, the moment the title attached itself, it rippled backwards into all of the previous drafts (dozens), seeding itself into the past so that it became an inevitable end. For the title of a book is also, in a sense, its end. It is the thing the reader is returned to, once they have come out the other side of the book and turned it over in their hands. And, for anyone who doesn't read it at all, the title is the beginning and the end and everything in between.

At first, I didn't want to call it anything. Because if I called it a novel—or worse, *my* novel—the weight of my hopes could snuff it out. So I began in a document saved as 'donald duck orange juice.pages'. There was nothing here to take seriously, you see.

I named it after Donald Duck Orange Juice because I remember drinking it as a kid—it came in a can, and you had to punch two triangular holes in the lid with a churchkey. It was somehow both too sweet and too sour, and also too smooth, and I didn't like it, but it seemed to be everywhere. In the not-novel, I was trying to write about my

ON TITLES

childhood with as much unflinching honesty as possible, so it served as a reminder to me, something like a secret password. Before the novel was a novel, it was a place I had to let myself into, a room I had to unlock, and the title I gave it was a key, meant only for myself.

By the time I showed the book to someone, I had redacted my secret name and given it a ‘proper’ title: *Who Will Be My Neighbor in This New World?* This was a phrase I had once heard the Pope say over the radio—not this Pope, but the one before. Subsequent searches never yielded any proof that the Pope said such a thing, but I remember it very clearly. I was sitting at my writing desk, which I had for some reason set up in my closet, smoking my 555, ashing it into a tin ashtray shaped like a clamshell, and I heard these words, and found them beautiful.

I immediately began writing poems titled ‘WHO WILL BE MY NEIGHBOR IN THIS NEW WORLD’, all of which were dreadful. In poems, the title is the door that opens into an impossible world, and almost all my poems begin with a title. Each one strikes a flint in the darkness and throws back some gleaming, impossible image—a scale in the moonlight? the crush of oil?—which makes me want to push through the door and find everything else hidden within. But sometimes a title is more like a bookmark, falling through the stacks of pages I write, sticking to none of them. It is still a door, but to a world that remains

hidden, unexplored.

And so, nearly a decade later, I was delighted to have found this title a home. Or so I thought.

The problem was that, while I had hoarded the phrase in my memory for years, no one else could seem to remember it. I started noticing that, when I told people the name of my novel, I said it in a hesitant, somewhat fearful way, almost as if I myself could not quite recall it. My editor pointed it out more firmly—she liked the title fine but she didn't think it was memorable.

When I mentioned the idea of a title change to my friends, they expressed indignation. 'But I really, really love your title!' they said. 'What a shame they want you to change it.'

'If you don't mind,' I would say, 'what *is* that title exactly? Do you remember?'

In fact, none of them did, except for my friend William. And for this, I hope he has a plush seat in heaven.

Now let me say: If you ever find yourself in this situation, I encourage you to locate a list of discarded titles from well-known novels such as *The Great Gatsby* (aka *Trimalchio in West Egg*), *Of Mice and Men* (*Something That Happened*), *Portnoy's Complaint* (*Whacking Off*). You will feel much better.

The title changed many times after that. For a while, I called it *True Pure Gold*, a phrase I stole from the mouth of someone in a group therapy session. He

ON TITLES

‘In poems, the title is the door that opens into an impossible world. Each one strikes a flint in the darkness and throws back some gleaming, impossible image...’

liked to come by occasionally and berate the rest of us for being, essentially, spiritual liars. ‘You’re talking cream and living skim milk,’ he would say. ‘But not me. I’m living the true pure gold.’ That title stuck for almost a year, until my agent pointed out the resemblance to another book’s title. This was good luck, I now realize, because ‘True Pure Gold’ was too difficult to say, and I would not want my book to have a name that stuck in the throat like dry toast.

At another point, I wanted to call it *Bleach*, because I wanted the reader to understand that I was a tough writer, unsentimental to the point of offensiveness, and that my book was a dark book, which didn’t like you very much but *might* tolerate you buying it and reading it.

My editor helped me narrow the list down to three finalists: *American Nowhere*, *Two Daughters* and *Marilou Is Everywhere*. The first I liked because it sounded at least as antisocial as *Bleach*, but with a more trenchant air of cultural critique. My editor liked the second best, possibly because its minimalist footprint issued a broad invitation to the reader. And we both, I think, found *Marilou Is Everywhere* something of a wildcard.

For weeks, I tested these titles on everyone I met. I asked strangers at the grocery store and at the bookstore, I asked my friends, and I even asked the postmistress. If they saw all three in a display, which would they pick up?

It turned out that men, overwhelmingly, would pick up *American Nowhere*, and women

ON TITLES

would prefer *Two Daughters*. And as to *Marilou Is Everywhere*, well, very few chose that title outright, but many (including the postmistress) said, ‘Well, doesn’t *she* sound like a lot of fun?’

Now, when I look back at the lists, it is obvious which title was meant to stay. It’s like looking at a sea of mannequins with one real person standing in their midst. Only one has a face. Only one knows itself. The rest seem like amicable runners-up in the beauty pageant.

Marilou is not exactly a character in the book. Rather she is an alter ego—the nickname for Jude Vanderjohn, bestowed by her boyfriend, Virgil. It is one of the games of their relationship: they promenade down the halls of their provincial high school, calling each other Marilou and Cletus, discoursing like the high-tone gentry they are not.

When Jude goes missing on a camping trip, Virgil’s younger sister, Cindy, sees an opportunity to leave her tenuous home situation and colonize Jude’s life. Abandoned by their mother, Cindy and Virgil have been getting by on scraps for months, hiding from school truancy officers and drifting steadily further into feral abandonment. But it isn’t this bleakness alone that has made Cindy so hungry to become someone else. She has always idolized Jude—for bearing the world courageously.

Slipping into the role of carer for Jude’s grief- and alcohol-addled mother, Bernadette, Cindy finds herself crossing the blurred line between

surrogacy and deceit: pretending to be Jude herself. The fact that her impersonation actually convinces Jude's mom, even though Jude is mixed race and Cindy is white, only demonstrates how profoundly Bernadette has disengaged from reality.

It is an act of identity theft, but Cindy doesn't see it quite like that. She tells the reader, 'I didn't want to be Jude, not exactly. But I wanted to disappear, and she had left a space.' As a missing person, Jude has left a literal space, of course, but maybe that space had already opened up, long before she physically vanished—when Virgil gave her a new name, when they pretended to be finer than they were.

'Marilou is everywhere' is actually a line from the book. Long before Jude disappears, Virgil writes this phrase in glow-in-the-dark paint on the music room's back wall: a classic adolescent love note. After it became the title, that graffiti acquired the gravity of a spell, or a prophecy. Suddenly Marilou, the fantasy girl, was in fact everywhere in the book. She is the reason Cindy doesn't want to be herself any more. She is Jude's camouflage, a buoyant girlfriend untroubled by racial anxiety—while Jude herself feels like she's drowning. She is, in a sense, every missing white girl the community has panicked to find while failing to take Jude's disappearance seriously. A fantasy can transport you, but it can also suffocate reality, and when that fantasy takes the shape of a living girl, it puts her life in danger.

Marilou is, in the end, the name for all the

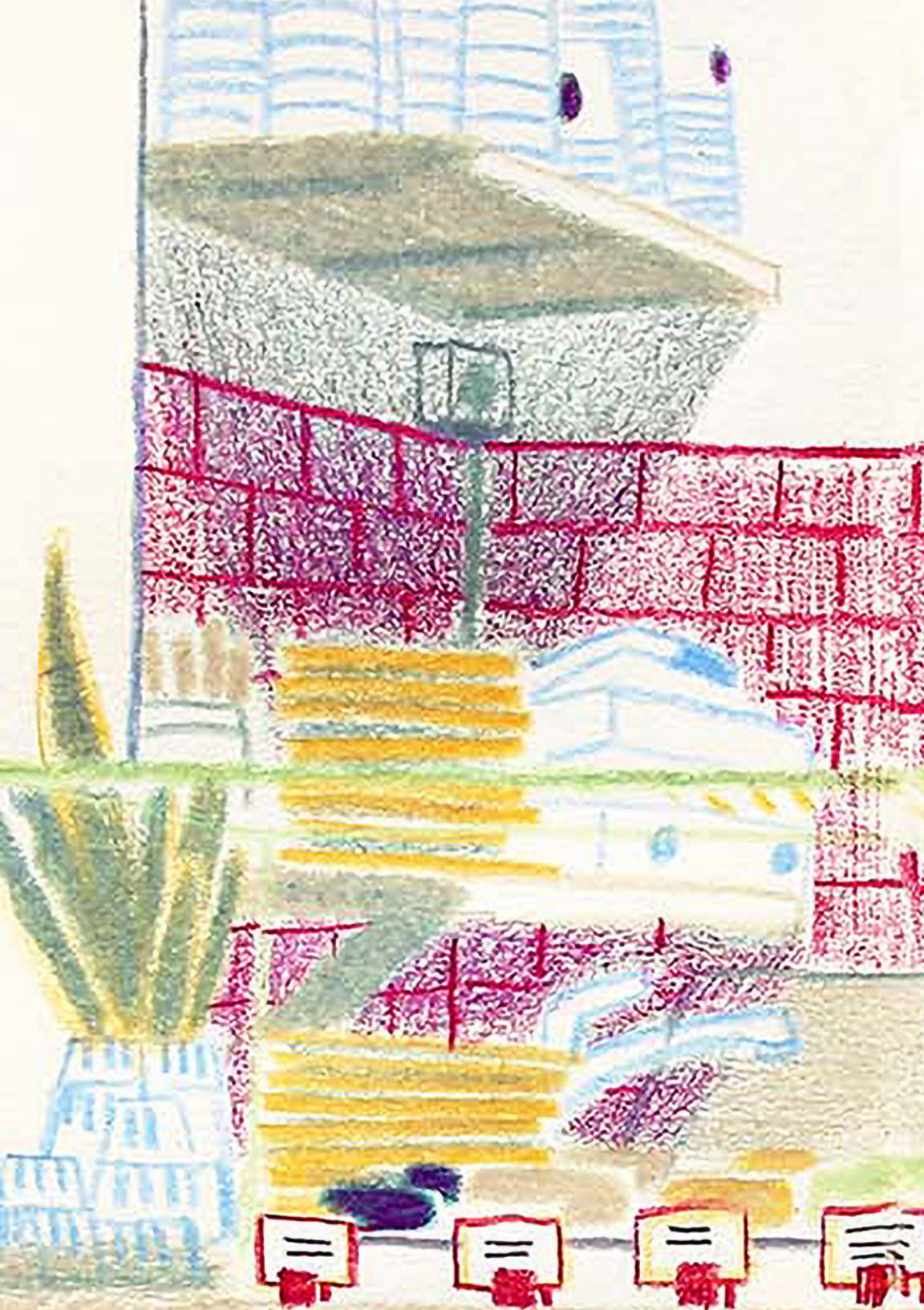
ON TITLES

women who go missing in the book, in one way or another, all the lives obscured by what we think we know of them, hidden by a slippery fantasy which was everywhere and nowhere at once. Marilou is negative space, and I suppose this is why it took me so long to see her. But, like dark matter, she is everywhere, and she moves at the heart of the book's mystery.

So the book got its title, but here's the really interesting question: was it a different story when it was named something else? Even temporarily? Did it become a different thing with each new naming? The answer is impossible, and the answer is yes. If the novel is a room, or a series of rooms, as I find myself calling it over and over, it only has real meaning when someone is standing inside it. And a title is how I tell you which corner of the room to stand in, from where you will be able to sight out the window and through the alley, into the ravine where I have hung my most precious mists. Where you stand determines what you can see. ◇

Sarah Elaine Smith

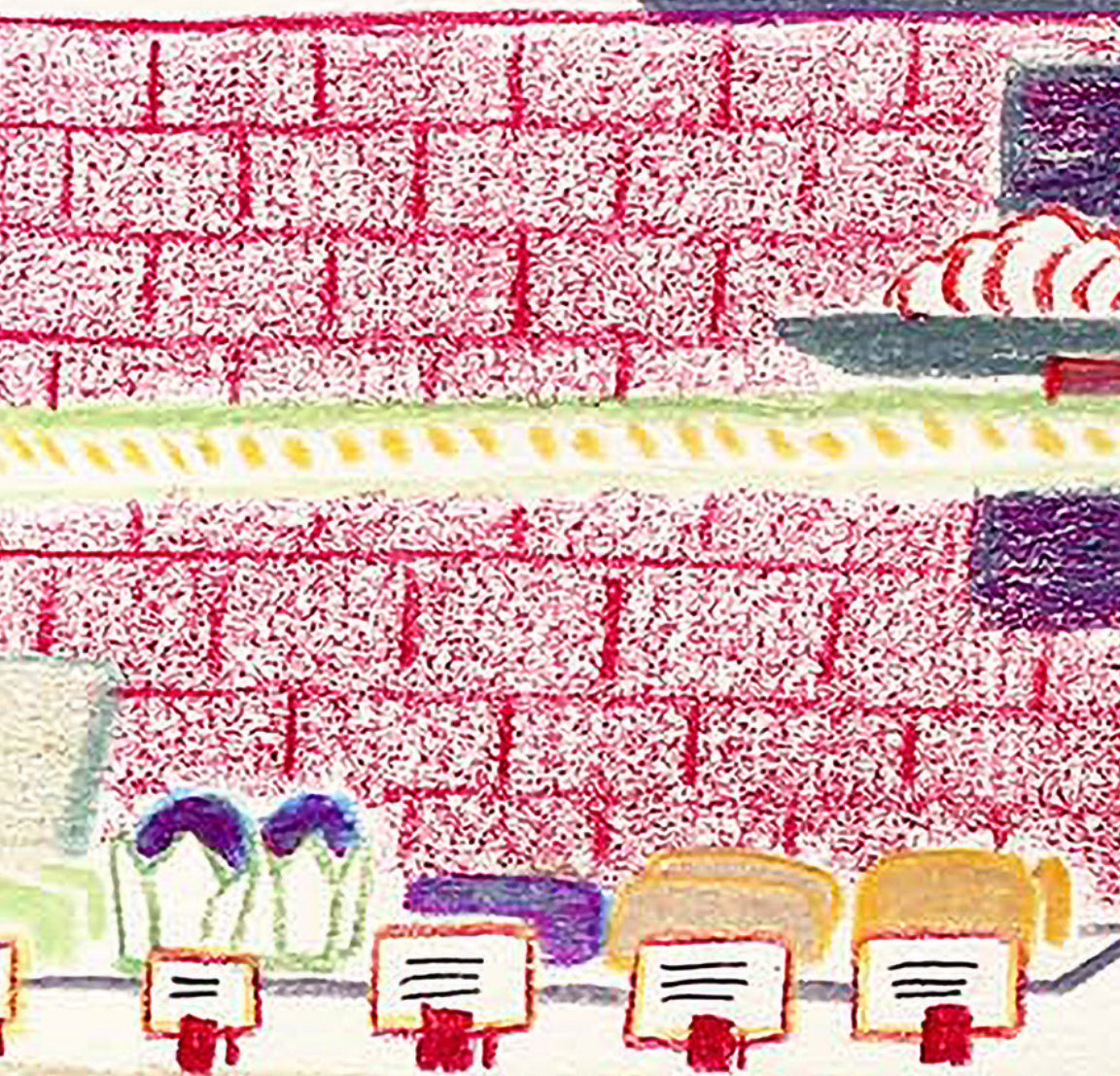
<i>Donald Duck Orange Juice</i>	<i>A Song</i>
<i>Who Will Be My Neighbor in This New World?</i>	<i>Gone in the Velvet Dark</i>
<i>Leatherette</i>	<i>Seeming</i>
<i>See-Thru</i>	<i>Gone Beyond</i>
<i>A Blank & Merciless Light</i>	<i>Bad Life</i>
<i>Donald Duck Orange Juice</i>	<i>Light from a Bad Star</i>
<i>Woes in Full Bloom</i>	<i>Chilly Blue World Without Boredom</i>
<i>The Rural Autobiography</i>	<i>Weary to my Heart</i>
<i>Sucked Shine</i>	<i>You Will Be a Moth</i>
<i>Bright Oblivion</i>	<i>Permanent Shadow</i>
<i>Drone</i>	<i>Watcher in the Woods</i>
<i>Idea Funeral</i>	<i>Are You Listening?</i>
<i>Went Backwards in the Boat Until We Died But It Was Nice</i>	<i>Hear Them Running</i>
<i>Alcohol</i>	<i>The Breath Returning</i>
<i>Life on the Farm</i>	<i>Where the Other World Sings Through</i>
<i>Cold Pizza</i>	<i>Gathering in the Head</i>
<i>Other Girls' Faces</i>	<i>A Door in the Air</i>
<i>Nirvana Song</i>	<i>Hiding and Gone</i>
<i>No One Leaves a Star</i>	<i>Trouble & Pain & Lonely</i>
<i>Brutality</i>	<i>Two Daughters</i>
<i>Etiquette Book</i>	<i>A Call in the Dark</i>
<i>Bunny Sweetness</i>	<i>Animal Bonfire</i>
<i>In Bloom</i>	<i>American Nowhere</i>
<i>Vines</i>	<i>Bonfire in the Hidden World</i>
<i>Baby Don't Hurt Me</i>	<i>The Daughter Opera</i>
<i>Kurt Loder</i>	<i>The Door in Your Throat</i>
<i>A Tolerance</i>	<i>Marilou Is Everywhere</i>



MOCHA

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BLACK	2.8
LATTE	3.3
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MATCHA	3.4

BONSOY ALMO



AN EXTRACT

Pisreógs

Elaine Feeney

I didn't tell a soul I was sick.

OK, I told a fat magpie.

She was the first beating heart I met after the oncology unit and she sat shiny and serious on the bonnet of the Volvo.

One for sorrow.

And I saluted her with that greeting you give when you find yourself alone and awkward with one magpie and she flew away, piercing her black arc through the sky blue.

~~~

An arrow points to You Are Here. This is OK.

Breathe.

You are just a dot. Swirly Space.

Breathe.

No one will ever find you.

Good. This is a good thing.

Thump.

## AN EXTRACT

onetwothreefourfivesixseveneightnineten

Thump.

After saluting Magpie, I sped at one hundred and thirty-nine kilometres per hour out along the M6; stone walls hurled past and end days of August conspired with night, letting a cold dusk down. Thirty-nine. Fitting. On the car's windscreen, a fog was creeping around my eldest son's initials, traced inside a fat heart.

But I was Fine.

Father always told me I was Fine. So as the years went by I grew increasingly mistrustful of bad-news bearers. Miss Sinéad Hynes was fine. Father said so. I was Fine. I am Fine.

I will be Fine.

*By Jesus when I get my hands on her, I'll fucking kill her; I'll throttle her, that little cunt. She's fine, and she pretending to be sick. Truth is, there is absolutely nothing wrong with her a'tall, but I'll tell you what, there's a lot wrong with the old ewe twisted on her back all night, and she didn't even bother to check her, just even once, throw a quick eye on her. She wouldn't mind a china cup, that one. Where is she? Under here? Here? In the cupboard. Hot-press? Come out! Come out! Wherever you are! Feefifofum. I smell blood. Where in the name of good God*

*is she? Leaving an old ewe all the night through on her back. Reading books somewhere, and she isn't sick, she's fine. There's not a thing wrong with her. Fine. Hiding is all she's at. Afraid of work, that bitch, well, she can tell that to the dead animal, so she can, reading books. I'll give her books when I get my hands on her.*

My mother told me to have a hot bath or put on a nice hat if I was having a bad day. When I'd leave home, she'd stand in the doorway and knead the hollow space between my shoulder blades with her knuckles as I slipped past. She'd dip her index finger into the little hole at the feet of Jesus and flick droplets in my wake. He hung on a loose nail by the door, pasty and lean with bright red drips on his hands and feet, loincloth and blue eyes to die for.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

Growing up on the farm I kept bad news to myself, for going public with fortune or misfortune brings drama. I'd hide out underneath my single bed tucking the eiderdown flaps tight around me. Father'd bellow for things he needed urgently, hammer, ladder, cup of tea, plasters, jump-leads, pair of hands, mother, phone, vet. The phone for the vet was dragged in a rush out from the kitchen and my mother'd place the cream receiver into his large

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hand, dial for him, he'd have a palm on his forehead. Panic. Always panic.

I loved being outside with the animals, especially in the moments after they birthed; foals are the most incredible—how fast they rise and run with their mother. But I loved it best when I was completely alone with no one looking for me.

As I grew older and hair stung my armpits, spread between my legs, pimples erupting on my face, body betraying my early deftness, I borrowed more books from the library. I was clumpy and awkward and left the animals to themselves. I also stole some books from my mother's locker. Binchy or Cookson, some Wilde with witty phrases that made me laugh and had come free with Christmas cards. Books didn't see you. Stare at you. Notice your thick thighs that rubbed together as you moved.

Father despised all learning that came from books.

Later I read forbidden things. *Just Seventeen*. Judy Blume. McGahern. Edna. I longed for a Mr Gentleman to drive by, but people rarely came up our road unless they were lost or looking to buy an animal. When the house was empty, I liked to draw pictures sitting at the long kitchen table. Often birds, a fat robin landing in snow. Robins were my favourite, their blood breast and the unlikelihood of them being allowed to perch inside the house for

the misfortune they'd bring on our family, all the pisreógs we hid from—putting new shoes on the table, walking under a ladder, cracking a mirror.

This power made them mysterious, cheeky outsiders. Like loner magpies.

Freeze.

My mother would cry out often about traumatic events or the threat of them. Father would say, *It is no use in the wide earthly world crying alone in a darkened room for yourself.*

All shock was shock, good or bad.

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Before Magpie, I had been to Hospital a handful of times, three times to birth three boy children—the three kings. Once to have a thickened viscid appendix plucked off my bowel and once for an STD screening that turned out to be discharge from a burst ovarian cyst. Phew. You went to Hospital for a baby and it was a happy place. That's what my mother and the neighbours said. They shared packing advice, make-up bag, fluffy bed coat, Solpadine, Epsom salts, prune juice, new flannels, XL disposable knickers, yellow or cream clothing for baby, cream blanket with breathing holes, mittens, Babygro, blanket, hat, a change of clothes

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‘On the car’s windscreen,
a fog was creeping around
my eldest son’s initials,
traced inside a fat heart.’

and some snacks for your husband. You reacted accordingly because you knew you should be happy, it was a happy time and you'd be happy with your baby because Hospital was a gift when you went there for a baby. Any misgivings or nerves were shushed. The happenings inside maternity wards were not up for discussion.

If you were heavy all over like a small silage bale, they'd say it was a boy; if you were neat and all forward to the front, slung low like a soccer ball stuffed under your jumper, they'd say it was a girl. But all that mattered was health and happiness (and to make a bowel movement quickly and painlessly afterwards, that didn't rupture your stitches).

Once or twice I went in secret with a drunk friend and watched as they gawked up charcoal-laced vomit out through a crow-yellow mouth, twisted ankle or a broken nose from falling over in stilettos that got trapped in Galway's dodgy cobbles. As they spewed out sadness they grasped hard on to the steel roll of the trolley, knuckles pale and blue. I'd claw my foot along the floor and haphazardly begin apologizing.

No, she's not always like this, no, soz, I don't know her date of birth, or, soz, no, don't know her next of kin either. Soz.

Soz.

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Schuch. Schuch. Schuch.

I said over and over and

overandoverandoverandtodoverwegooverandoveragain.

Schuch. Schuch. Schuch.

This was how I would herd sheep. Chanting. I use it now to control the pain.

Count it. Chant. Bellow. Watch it. Observe your pain closely.

Then, equate it into a number.

Onetwothreefourfivesixseveneightnineten. End. All pain ends at ten.

I also went to Hospital to birth a daughter but we weren't far enough along to tell whether I was low down or carrying forward or if, perhaps, I was just fat with puffy feet.

She had no heartbeat.

Schuch. Schuch. Schuch.

~~~~

After Magpie it was impossible to focus, everything was hostile—where to fall asleep or in what position, how to avoid having sex with Alex, where to watch TV and what to watch. I flicked aimlessly through Sky Planner. I couldn't watch the shit I had recorded on Series Link. Not now, gawping at another *CSI*, or some overfed guy shoving a million meat-feast sandwiches into his mouth in a tacky Omaha deli. I couldn't coordinate an outfit. Not one for sitting around the house. I couldn't just listen to the radio. I was unable to do anything with sustained interest or longevity apart from cracking open boiled apple sweets between my back teeth. Though even that had its consequences; the skin on the roof of my mouth had thinned and tasted rusty from sucking the green-and-red drops.

With everything unpalatable, I froze. Ostrich. Attempted to blend in. Chameleon.

And while I understand the wacky madness of ostriches and the complex threat chameleons are under from forced domestication and threadworms, after Magpie, emulating them was the best I could muster, and yes, it was somewhat considered, and yes, many times it was neglect, and yes, I may be judged harshly for my non-disclosure of my bodily activity, and yes, at other times it was downright cruel, hiding my terminal status from Alex, but mostly it just was what it was.

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Dwelling in my body had become complicated, and negotiating language for its actions and more specifically the actions of my wayward cells was far from simple, even if now I know that everything has a point of simplification.

And it was utterly bewildering.

Abjectly terrified of the complications of social relationships, it suited me to go underground after Magpie, turn in on myself. This protected me from known drama-hacks, addicts, fuck-wits, mentalists, religious, super non-religious, egoists and lack-of-ego-sap-the-ego-outta-ya-ists that cling on around the sick.

Christmas came and went. Seasons here are reliable, the way they move along, constantly motored, and while people noticed how thin I was and commented on it, they also believed me when I said it was taking some time to shake a flu virus thing.

Spring arrived, shy and reserved, with a little frost spite. Daffodils popped, snow fell, winds came, lambs dropped, snowdrops hung delicately above soil, wind howled, sun shone on cobwebs, and the few old ewes that survived the long harsh winter were applauded.

I stayed at home and worked from our bed. But really I was under my duvet, googling, in case I

suddenly dropped dead and needed a soft landing spot.

I desperately wanted to pick up a book as I ran my hand along their spines over and over. But I baulked.

*Maybe you might help with the sheep herding and shir it'll take that pasty look off your face—is that infection back again? Aren't you a lot weaker than your mother? And all those antibiotics she's giving you. I keep telling her you're fine, and you have to fight it yourself. You can't keep falling in under sickness like this. Jesus Christ above in heaven, I don't know where we got you from. Well, you're certainly not following after my side. Fine strong people on my side, not pale city people. Weak they are, the city people, it's the smog, or the lack of work. Both probably. If you rubbed a bit of rouge on to your sour-dough puss, you know, I declare to Christ but you might look, indeed you definitely would look, a lot better. Men don't like to look at a pasty pale face, and you do want one at some stage I presume, because you'd hardly brave it all alone, you wouldn't last an hour. If the toaster broke, or you had to fix a plug, what good would that Moira Binchy be then? No fucking good a'tall. You should try to fight it, for fuck's sake, you should fight this better, with your fists or anything at all you have, you should claw your nails at it, pity you're still gnawing them off, the nails, but you need to fight it, you've no fight, with your puss all pasty, a cowardly girl. Did I really rear a coward? What age are you now? HMMMMM? Age? Twelve? Nearly twelve. You're nearly twelve? Twelve is a woman.*

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Fuck.

I grew meticulous in herding, obsessive, counted animals until I became dizzy and forgot the count. Start over. And over. I determined those I cared for from those beyond my responsibility. I fenced off the strays, ushered them into small verdant fields, leaving them to their sullen business deep in flaxen-yellowed ferns and beryl moss, dappled with hillocks and jaded flat thistles. There's bad land in the West of Ireland with its vertical drystone walls that criss-cross the fields.

I hate it. The rain-soaked greenness of the fields, glum Jenga-like walls. But I like order. I separated our neighbours' sheep from ours, identifying them by their deep ruby-red markings. H. Dark indigo-blue oily targets on their rumps. Sheep skimble/skamble, unlike cattle, and at times they'd run at me, big woeful eyes as though they were running to a cliff's edge or to the slaughterhouse.

As they cut all my clothes off in the ambulance I noted how very skinny I was. I was thrilled to see my hip bones. I wouldn't have to google Tips on Losing Weight for the foreseeable future. But I'd continue to chat to Google under the duvet. For solace. How to Live the Pain-free Life. Doing the Proper On-line Will. How to Control your Dying. Safe ways to Euthanize. Last Death Rattles. Irish Health Care Cutbacks. The Rate of Incorrect

Diagnostic Tests. Outsourcing of Diagnostic Tests and Positive Percentage Error. Kefir Grains. How-the-Average-Mid-Late-Thirty-Something-With-It-ALL-Feels. The Perfect Dinner: Cheap and Superfooded. How to Stand Comfortably in Heels All Day Long. In Hair Styles. Layers are Out. Structure In. Nail Polish Longevity. The Best Broth Recipe to Eat Cancer Cells. Chipped Your Tooth off Your Wine Glass? How to Fix It in an INSTANT. Best Fish and Chips in Galway. Why Galway is one of the Fastest Growing Foodie Heavens next to Glasgow. Why the Irish Love the Scottish but not (really) the British. How to Pronounce Quinoa. The Irish Treaty Commemoration Planned Parties and How We Feel About All of That Now We Often Shout for England in the World Cup. Dehydrating Your Nails to Help Your Varnish Stay in Place. Dehydrating Foods. UVA vs UVB Ratings on Sun Creams. How Elephant-Breath is replacing Duck-Egg Blue as the Hottest In-Life Room Colour. How You Become Antibiotic Resistant. Property Prices in Bulgaria. How to Enjoy Sex When You're Sick. How to Enjoy Sex after a Botched Episiotomy. Are Protein Power Balls Actually Any Good For You or Do They Contain Secret Sugar? How to Get the Thigh Gap? Why the Ugly Animals' Preservation Society is Legendary but the President for Life Element Uncovers the Dictatorial Fringes of Environmentalists? Doing an Online Will and How to Make it Toxic-Family-Proof. Doing an Online Memory Box. How the Sociopath can Manipulate

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the Elderly. Do Magpies Really Predict the Future?  
Are Magpies Prone to Sociopathic Behaviour?  
Detachment Theory. Is There a Way to Control the  
Anxiety of Thinking You're a Sociopath? Keeping  
Secrets. How the Blobfish Mates. Cremation with  
Tooth Implants. Anxiety Testing Online.

Taking a Social Media Break.

How to Switch the Internet Off.

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One January when I was around nine or ten, I went plucking green rushes to make my mother a St Bridget's cross. It's said the cross should hang in a house to ward off disease and protect it from burning down. I liked the sound of the stream near the rushes. Spluttering. Father had been threatening to burn the house to the ground due to our ungratefulness as his children, and I wanted to do something practical, for him and for the house, but mostly to cheer up my mother because she was terrified of fire. I hacked clean the first thin wild rushes, but soon began to distinguish hardy ones from lazy ones and, with a gentle pinch to the exact middle of each, I heated the sap between my damp fingers, then began bending at the centre point, finally overlapping them. Limp rushes can't prop up a cross that's expected to save an entire family, but I was only learning. The base has to be more solid.

Elaine Feeney

My first attempt was sloppy, and fell apart a little, but it cheered up my mother and became the Hynes' Family Cross. It hangs over the front door and, upon returning home, I'm reminded of my failures.

I wouldn't fail now. I wouldn't tell a soul.

Palliative. Doctor. Time. Time. Tick Tock Hynes.
Tick Tock. ◇

Pisreógs is extracted from As You Were.





TWO POEMS

Will Harris

PATHETIC EARTHLINGS

Planet Mongo is underdeveloped in certain respects—most of its terrain is purple rock—but they do have hovercrafts and telepathy so while you're flying from the imperial palace to visit your cousin beyond the purple rocks and the ice mound they call Frigia you can put a plastic halo over your head and think to your cousin, as the Mongo people say, and be talking to him as if you were inside each other's head or on hands-free. Though impressive technologically, this has one defect: you can't refuse to take a telepathic call. Suddenly you're inside their head and they're inside of yours, and what if your cousin is in a bad mood or having sex with his wife—or another woman—or masturbating over something terrible. I have a cousin called Ming and people say I look like him, which is uncomfortable because, though he may not be evil, he's done bad things. When I tell people this and say his name is Ming, they laugh because (I assume) it's such an evil-sounding name. Ming doesn't wear red suits trimmed with gold, isn't bald, and doesn't have facial hair like a court jester's parted legs, but sometimes that's how I think of him too. And if even I can't help thinking of him like that then maybe he couldn't help becoming kind of evil over time. I think to him, my hovercraft skimming over the purple wastes of Planet Mongo, and enter his consciousness just as he sits down on the toilet, malaria-obsessed, the only decoration in his bathroom a picture of his daughter he can't look at now without crying, wondering when it was his life turned so thoroughly fucking evil. He didn't start out wanting to be rich and powerful or to sleep with anyone other than his wife necessarily. I could be thinking to him more mercy than he would himself allow. We haven't spoken in nine years. Perhaps, like Emperor Ming, he's only sitting in his version of a palace, eyebrows arched, tormenting pathetic earthlings. I think to him, I really do, but you can never know for certain whose head you're in.

TWO POEMS

BREAK

I go downstairs, unlock the door and take the coffee pot outside where I empty the grounds beside the trunk of a tree that must have died before you moved in but which I'm hoping to revive with coffee. It might have been a palm tree once, though now it looks like Gandalf's withered staff. I spoon out the last wet grains, runny as the stool of a sick dog, and ask if I should feel ashamed that instead of emptying the grounds after finishing I wait until the next day. But it's fine, isn't it? I mean, if you were here you might complain but you're not—we're on a break—so it's probably

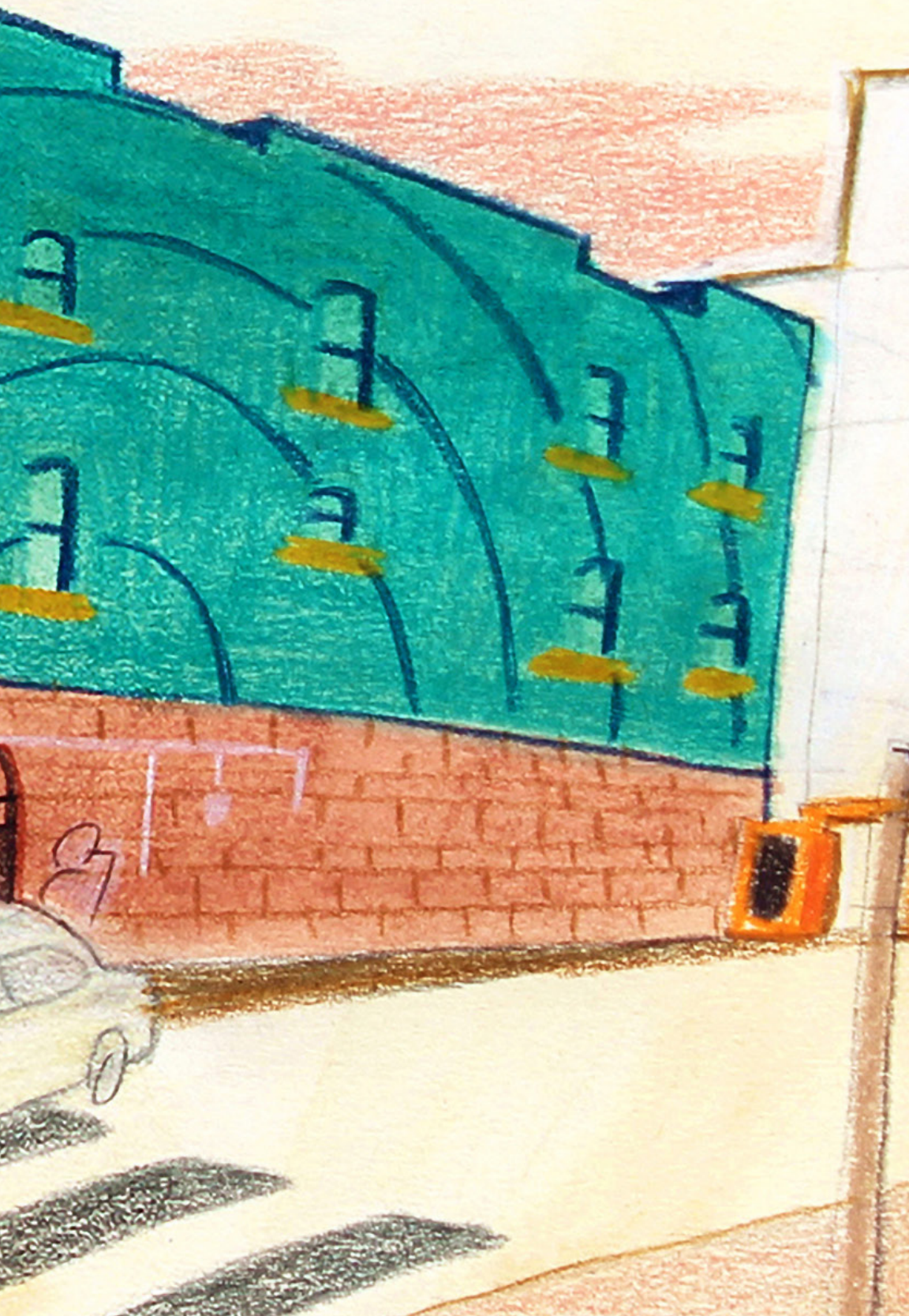
fine. I decide to set the poetry group a new assignment: to write into the break. I look up references to breaks in the Bible. The Book of Job has most. Job is broken repeatedly: He breaketh me with a tempest; He breaketh me with breach upon breach, he runneth upon me like a giant; How long will ye vex my soul and break me in pieces with words? Still, Job goes on trusting God. There is a Sharon Olds poem about sex in winter where she describes her lover as like God, but rather than vex her he runs his palm over her face and sends her down to be born. The left-hand margin is like the trunk of a

Will Harris

tree, each line break seeming to lead us, fronds shaking, out into the air. Who is this us, though? For both our sakes we haven't spoken in over a month, but still I frame my thoughts as if they were to you. I empty the coffee as if you were here, not in the sense that I talk aloud to you or picture you standing there, but in that I'm aware of something in me broken. That doesn't mean unhappy. I put on music and all I hear are breaks: the drum break in 'When the Levee Breaks', as sampled by Dr. Dre in 'Lyrical Gangbang'. The solo break in 'Chasin' the Trane' that John Coltrane was shown transcribed and couldn't

understand. The band drops back—is broken free of—and he moves beyond the song's constraints, but only so as to make space for what follows. Heartbreak. Breakdown. Breakthrough. Beneath the surface flow of time are nodes. You slip into the break and look around, see past and future, love and sickness rearranged. Reordered. You feel yourself both whole and breached. As me you. As you do. After the break, the band joins in. Everything and nothing is the same. Everything and nothing is after. I wonder if before dogs lose consciousness they know themselves as dying or if it's as I imagine, like daylight breaking through an open door.





ON THE ART OF BEING ALONE

The Solitude of Seeing

Amina Cain

When I was growing up in Ohio, I dreamed regularly, clear-eyed, of leaving, and my daydreams were almost entirely made up of me walking around a city by myself, never with another person, or I was in an apartment alone at night making myself a meal. For a time I wanted to live in Manhattan, and in my mind I saw it like the camera sees it in Chantal Akerman's *News From Home*, that film made up of beautifully held long shots of New York City. In certain scenes, you hear only the sounds of the city, and then the voiceover comes in, like a wave that flows over everything, insistent, and mesmerizing in that insistence, and then is gone. The text of this voiceover is made up of letters Akerman's mother sent her from Belgium, and the voice is Akerman's, so that you are hearing her voice, and these letters that are addressed to her, but you never see her. Rather you see *through* her eyes. The letters seem as if they are for you, and in this way you are alone in that city too. For me, *News From Home* embodies solitude.

I don't know why I imagined those scenes of myself alone so often. Though it's true I like solitude, I also like spending time with people, and I've only lived alone twice, both times for less than a year. I suppose it was because I was imagining my *own* relationship to something, to escape, to self-determination. It would be me who left my small Ohio city, the only person ever to have made this exact journey. I wanted desperately to choose what

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my life would look like, not what had been chosen for me. I saw the world then as a warm and open place, full of possibility, and I wanted to experience as much of it as I could. To be open to it in return, I knew I'd need to leave by myself.

When another person is accompanying you, they fill the space between you and certain kinds of experience. It is important that that not always happen. A person should be like Ralph Waldo Emerson's transparent eyeball, absorbing everything around them. We can't see in quite this way with someone else by our side.

The first time I left the US, to go to China for three months, I felt like that eyeball, walking around Beijing at dusk, jet-lagged, the neon signs flashing in the street. How exhilarating to finally be in another country. It had taken me quite a while to do it. Later, walking along the Bund in Shanghai, looking at the water and the buildings that ran alongside it, I felt close to some energy I hadn't encountered before: a combination of the newness, for me, of China, and my own self, in it. I became new in China too. I'm sure I would have felt good if someone had been with me, but it's different.

In my novel *Indelicacy*, the narrator, Vitória, wanders alone through her city. She is a *flâneuse*, and one can only be a *flâneuse* when alone, right? For her, walking is absorbing, absorbing is writing, and writing is being alive. So too is going to the ballet and to concerts and to the museum, and to

the botanical gardens, all of which she does most frequently alone. This is when she most often experiences pleasure and, until she becomes close to two other women, it is when she is most herself.

Female solitude is weighted with a particular power in literature. In Elena Ferrante's *The Lost Daughter*, Leda is relieved when she finds herself suddenly alone. In the absence of her daughters, she feels light, she works how and when she wants, she changes her eating habits and begins to listen to music again. She is being returned to something vital, allowed to live and think at the proper speed, at a slower, looser pace, with fewer distractions, and this transforms her mentally and physically. She becomes stronger, younger almost.

So too in Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Lolly Willowes*, Laura wants more than anything to be alone. Before she breaks free from her family and moves to Great Mop in the Chilterns, she often imagines herself in a place like it, her daydreams so lucid they resemble hallucinations. Once she has arrived and settled in her new home, she experiences, like Leda, an intense relief. Wandering into a meadow of blooming cowslips, she kneels to smell their fragrance. For a moment she is weighed down by her past unhappiness, and then it is lifted: 'It was all gone, it could never be again, and never had been.' I keep thinking and writing about both *The Lost Daughter* and *Lolly Willowes*, and in that way the novels have become part of my inner life, which is also always a part of one's solitude.

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To be in favour of solitude is not to be against community or friendship or love. It's not that being alone is better, just that without the experience of it we block ourselves from discovering something enormously beneficial, perhaps even vital, to selfhood. Who are you when you are not a friend, a partner, a lover, a sibling, a parent? When no one is with you, what do you do, and do you do it differently than if someone was there? It's hard to see someone fully when another person is always attached to them. More importantly, it's hard for us to see our own selves, and perhaps anything at all, if we are not ever alone.

To write, to do any kind of work well, I believe we must at least have a solitude of mind, a solitude of seeing. Of course, there are those who collaborate, but I imagine that, even then, there must be moments of retreat. We retreat to read. We retreat to think. And so often that thinking can be blotted out by someone else's presence. Dorothea in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* does her deepest and finest thinking when she is alone, not when she is with Casaubon. In Sofia Samatar's short story, 'Olimpia's Ghost', Gisela is alone too when she writes her brilliant and expressive letters to a young Sigmund Freud, and she is alone when she dreams her vividly theatrical dreams. There is life that surrounds each one of us no one else should enter, or they will drive it off.

Now, I am married and often with my husband,

though we are careful about giving each other some space to be alone. This past summer, we flew from where we live in Los Angeles to Rome, landing there at night. After dropping our luggage off at the guest house where we were staying, we wandered nearby, looking for a place to eat. We saw the Colosseum standing in darkness, with no one nearby, and then we sat outside, waiting for our meal, experiencing our first moments of Rome together. I felt a similar euphoria as I had my first night in Beijing, but now the relationship was between my husband and me and Rome, or between the two of us while in Rome. It was not just a relationship between me and Rome, or between him and Rome, in the way it would have been if we had each been travelling on our own.

Maybe we would have felt our separate relationships to the city more acutely if our marriage had been ending, like Katherine and Alexander Joyce's marriage seems to be in Roberto Rossellini's film, *Journey to Italy*. Katherine, played by Ingrid Bergman, sees most of Naples by herself, in scenes that are both quiet and disquieting. She is in a very particular solitude there: she visits the tourist attractions in the company of a tour guide, a person who offers her no real connection, an embodiment of her aloneness. When other tourists are present, she remains separate from them, watching them solemnly from an emotional distance.

My husband has had to be away a lot for the

‘When no one is with you,
what do you do, and
do you do it differently than
if someone was there?’

last few months, so while I've been writing this I've often been alone. Like Leda, the solitude has returned me to something. I feel more desirous when I am alone—mostly for my husband, but also for life, for experience, like I was when I was younger. I listen to music more intently. It seems to mean more. I feel a kind of euphoria, and a kind of peace. As Gabrielle Bellot writes in 'Alone with Elizabeth Bishop', 'Aloneness can be comforting, if you understand its shadow-language, its candlelit corridors, its night-sky vastness.' Of course, each time my husband leaves, I know he'll return. If he weren't coming back, my time alone would mean something different.

If I'm honest, I don't want solitude in the absolute way that Lolly Willowes wants it. I sometimes get bored of my own self, and I quickly miss spending 'together alone' time, when you can be with another person quietly, doing your own thing in the same space. I have always liked this kind of intimacy, and my husband and I are good at it: it means a different kind of peace when he is here with me too. It is not pure solitude but I am not, it turns out, a purist.

The art of being alone, for most of us, is best appreciated within its limits. Once Vitória has gone off to the country, completely on her own, she finds the experience disturbing, too much to endure. She feels as though she is stalking her own soul. Even Leda eventually begins to break down when left to her own devices for too long. Her isolation gives

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her tranquillity, but it also allows her past to come swinging in, some of it violent.

Perhaps solitude is a practice as much as an instinct, and its pleasures are very much contextual. Sometimes being alone is terrible. I don't ever want to feel as lonely as I did fifteen years ago, when I went to the bathroom at a party and thought, when you go back out, none of the people you love will be there, as they had been at parties past. Equally, I do not want the sharp isolation that comes from proximity to uncaring strangers, or to those who have become unhappily like strangers. As Rossellini's Katherine says to her husband, 'I don't think you're very happy when we're alone'—and Alexander responds, 'Are you sure you know when I'm happy?'

What I want is to be like the narrator in Jorge Luis Borges's 'Argumentum Ornithologicum,' alone with my visions. I want to know I have seen what is only visible when I am by myself:

I close my eyes and see a flock of birds. The vision lasts a second, or perhaps less; I am not sure how many birds I saw. Was the number of birds definite or indefinite? The problem involves the existence of God. If God exists, the number is definite, because God knows how many birds I saw. If God does not exist, the number is indefinite, because no one can have counted. ◇

Amina Cain

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'Argumentum Ornithologicum', Jorge Luis Borges, short story



‘We have an expectation that loss comes all at once.’

A conversation with
Avni Doshi

A vni Doshi's *Burnt Sugar* is a love story: a tale of obsession and betrayal. But not between lovers: between mother and daughter. Their unsettled relationship spans decades. Back in her youth, Tara was wild. She abandoned her loveless marriage to join an ashram, endured a brief stint as a beggar (mostly to spite her affluent parents), and spent years chasing after a dishevelled, homeless 'artist'—all with her young child in tow. Now she is beginning to forget things, mixing up her maid's wages and leaving the gas on all night. Her grown-up daughter, Antara, is faced with the task of caring for a woman who never cared for her.

Avni called from Dubai to discuss the novel's origins, her choice to set the novel in Pune, as well as the deeper themes of the book. Why is there such a particular pain that comes with watching dementia take over a parent? How are a family's memories constructed and reconstructed? What part did Gabriel García Márquez play in the creation of the novel?

FIVE DIALS

Could you describe the origins of the book?

AVNI

Some of women in my mother's family have followed gurus. In fact, if you watch the documentary *Wild Wild Country*, you'll see some of my mother's aunts in the film.

Q&A

I remember being about ten years old, and hearing the women in my mother's family, talking about a cousin. They were saying that she was gone, that she lived in an ashram now with her guru. I knew even then that this was surprising. She was studying to be a doctor, dedicating her life to science and research. How could she be in an ashram? But somebody had convinced her to come and meet a guru who had traveled from the Himalayan mountains. And once she saw him, something happened—something transformed her. She left, never to return.

I didn't visit her until I was in my late teens or early twenties. She was completely different, living outside of society. At the ashram, they grew their own food, built their own homes, and existed completely off the grid.

But I remember, as a child, being struck by the entire mythology that was built around her, the way people spoke about her. There was a kind of reverence, and an anxiety, that came with the mention of her name.

As a figure, she stayed in my mind.

FIVE DIALS

What was she like when you saw her again?

AVNI

After all that time, the first thing that struck

me was that she looked much thinner. There was something ascetic about her, something withdrawn. She was dressed in all white.

White garments are common among renunciates in India. White is the color of grief, of mourning, of death. Hindus mourn in white, but at the same time it's also a sign of someone who's chosen a spiritual path. I think of white as a non-colour, a non-identity, that marks someone as apart from the normal plane of existence.

FIVE DIALS

You first heard the story of this cousin in Pune. Could you describe the city?

AVNI

Pune, where the novel is set, isn't as big as Delhi and Mumbai. It's full of students. Pune is also where the Osho Ashram is. That's one of the things that put Pune on the map.

Pune is always considered quite an international place. There were always a lot of expats living there, spiritual seekers from all over the world. Especially when I visited as a child, I remember how international it felt.

And then there's the club, The Poona Club, which plays a central role in the book. For me The Poona Club is interesting because clubs in general in India have a disturbing colonial past. But now in the contemporary

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moment, they exist as a benign, happy space, a little rundown and old-fashioned, where Indians have supplanted the British. You can still get service by ringing the bell on your table. And so the club to me is a space where the history isn't acknowledged, but is unconsciously re-enacted every day.

FIVE DIALS

In the novel, Antara and her mother enter an ashram. It's not particularly peaceful. Through the child's eyes, it's more like a place of terror. Why did you want your characters to enter that setting?

AVNI:

I was interested in continuing with the theme of being inside and outside of society. And the ashram is completely outside of mainstream society. Everybody ascribes to it notions of free love and experimenting with consciousness. They do strange meditations that involve pretending to be animals. They practice ecstatic dancing. There's the suggestion that every moment has the potential to turn into an orgy. There is an insecurity there, which was interesting to explore.

Once Antara and her mother are in the ashram, they have a community. But Antara is pushed to the side because her mother makes the decision to prioritize the relationship she

has with the guru. For Antara, there's a sense she doesn't really belong.

FIVE DIALS

She's a survivor

AVNI

As I was writing it, I had to stop sometimes and think: is this something that Antara can take? I didn't want it to read like a list of abuses. But I also wanted to be truthful about what neglecting a child means. When you're leaving them either to their own devices or as a parent putting your child in the power of other adults, what does that mean? What can that look like?

FIVE DIALS

When did the fragility of memory become an important theme for you to explore?

AVNI

Memory was always interesting to me. I read a lot of Márquez when I was younger, and when I was working as a curator, one of the shows I curated hinged on the way memory and amnesia operates in his writing.

In earlier drafts of the novel, memory wasn't as central theme. It became more pressing for me when my grandmother was diagnosed with Alzheimer's a couple of

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years ago. That's when I did a deep dive into Alzheimer's research. I started looking at all the alternative research being done with functional medicine. That was fascinating. I became obsessed and it became an integral part of the novel.

FIVE DIALS

A sense of obsession creeps in to the book. When her mother gets ill, Antara researches all of these different causes of Alzheimer's. In many cases she's smacked down by the medical establishment.

AVNI

Exactly. And I experienced that. I'm interested in alternative forms of healing, and ancient forms of medicine, things that are outside the realm of the conventional.

I think that naturally crept into the character. There's so much trust in medicine. Once you start looking outside of the mainstream paradigm, it ruffles a lot of feathers.

FIVE DIALS

In the book you write that dementia is a particular loss—a long and drawn out loss where a little bit goes missing at a time. What is the effect of that sort of loss?

AVNI

There's some dissonance when you experience it. We have an expectation that loss comes all at once. You lose the person physically, mentally. There's a void when a person has gone.

My experience with dementia is that because the mind is going piece by piece, you're left with this body that looks perfectly healthy. It's able to do all the things it always did. The person looks the same except they're not there, and there's something almost uncanny about the experience because you feel you're in front of a wax figure: beautifully preserved, smiling, almost eternal, but vacant. In a sense, it's a death without the loss of the body.

There's something about this kind of loss that is difficult to digest. My mother finds it almost incomprehensible that her mother is sick. She can't quite fathom it, and sometimes she turns around and tells me, 'She's doing it purposely.'

I have to remind her, 'She's not doing it purposely. She's losing her memory.'

I don't think it's simply denial. The dissonance between what she's seeing and what she's experiencing in her interactions with my grandmother is too great. At times you almost feel it's something out of a horror movie. You're talking to this person who

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doesn't know what you're talking about, or doesn't recognize you. It's unsettling because we create memories together. We make memories collectively.

FIVE DIALS

You write in the novel that memory is a work in progress always being reconstructed.

AVNI

Exactly. An issue that doesn't get talked about much in Alzheimer's care is how much caretakers suffer, and what caretakers go through in the process of looking after loved ones who are losing their memories. They're finding that it even affects the way the caretakers are able to remember and create their own memories.

Because we collectively engage in memory making, when one person is no longer participating, others begin to doubt their own recollections. It's almost as though memory loss is contagious. As I was researching, I couldn't help but return to *One Hundred Years of Solitude* where throughout the book you get a sense that a contagion of amnesia is taking over the village, generation by generation. It's fantastical in the novel, but is remarkably like the experience of being with someone with Alzheimer's.

FIVE DIALS

The novel touches on the issue of sacrifice, specifically the sacrifice of caring for one's own parents.

AVNI

There's a scene in the novel where Antara goes to the mall and buys a single bed, and the salesperson asks, 'Is this for your child?' And she answers, 'No, actually it's for my mother.'

The book undoes the romantic image of newlyweds preparing to welcome a child into the family. Instead, ailing, aging parents are being brought to their children's homes. There's something almost dystopian about it.

FIVE DIALS

In the case of the novel, the history between mother and daughter is troubled and unstable. It has to be confronted.

AVNI

Definitely. There's baggage that Tara brings with her when she enters her daughter's house. And secrets that Antara has not shared with her husband—secrets that Antara is trying to forget.

FIVE DIALS

Near the end of the book Antara says about her mother: 'The more deranged she becomes,

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the greater her clarity of purpose.’ Could you explain that?

AVNI

I was interested in the line between madness and clarity. To some degree, the more mad these characters become, the more insane their behaviors become, the closer we get to who they really are.

Under the polite veneer there’s a shared history of trauma. To some degree it’s never been acknowledged, never dealt with or discussed. And this leads to resentment. The closer the characters teeter on the edge—on that precipice of insanity—the more they are able to hone in on a purpose or a meaning or something that feels true. It isn’t as performative.

There’s a part early in the book where I write that maybe it’s performance that keeps people alive. Later I believe it becomes clear that actually the performance is deadening. These characters come alive when they stop performing, when they let their insanity and their trauma and their damage shows through.

FIVE DIALS

You also touch on the way that there can be an inadvertent beauty in dementia, especially in one of the final scenes where Antara’s mother is holding her grandchild and thinking that it’s

her daughter. A lot of people who deal with parents with dementia say that occasionally there are moments of almost absurd beauty. These moments arise from the illness. You couldn't expect someone to behave this way normally. But here they are doing something very odd, very different. But moving, in a way.

AVNI

I think about it as sublime: beauty moving into terror. In the scene you mentioned, there is something moving about the fact that Tara thinks the baby is her own. It is as though she has been transported, and in her illness there is a kind of redemption. But there's also something very disturbing about it, something that takes everybody else in the scene out of their bodies for a time.

When one person is so clearly removed from the present, it throws the entire moment into question. The experience of time is fragmented, and we begin to see Antara's subjectivity begin to fragment as well. ◇





ON THE ROAD

Stories about Driving

Patrick Freyne

Paul got the camper van from a dealer in second-hand camper vans somewhere on the German-Polish border.

‘It looks legit,’ he said, which is a sentence no one says about anything that looks entirely legit.

His trip to fetch the camper van, spotted on a website, did not go completely as planned. It started with him misplacing his passport somewhere between Dublin and London and having to get an emergency one organized in the small hours of the morning by a civil servant friend based in Knightsbridge. This young man lived in a beautiful government-owned high-ceilinged apartment which we sporadically filled with guitars and cigarette smoke and from which I once, in bafflement, watched an older, wealthier neighbour doing tai chi. This civil servant friend was one of many people we took for granted over the course of our low-key, high-stakes rock career.

With Paul’s passport sorted, he flew on to Germany and bought the camper van, which he then had to drive all the way back to Ireland. He had to do this in twenty hours because the band had a very special gig.

Why was it a special gig? I can’t believe you asked that. They are *all* special gigs.

That night we were supporting a low-profile American rockabilly band you have never heard of and that I have already forgotten in a minor venue in Dun Laoghaire. It was *clearly* a very important gig.

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Paul drove from Germany without stopping except to fill the van with petrol and to fill his stomach with coffee, and arrived at Dun Laoghaire with moments to spare. He didn't look entirely sure that he had arrived. He stumbled out of the camper, blinking in the waning sunlight as I tapped my watch theatrically.

'I'm here?' he said, and we could hear the question mark at the end.

He was deranged with lack of sleep. At a certain point while driving, he told us, he began seeing a little boy run across the road in front of him. The little boy did this again and again. The boy was chasing a ball. After swerving to avoid this ball-chasing boy many times, he realized the little boy wasn't real. So, he stopped swerving and just drove through him. Eventually the boy was accompanied by ninjas, he said. He drove through the ninjas too.

He told us this story because he wanted us to congratulate him on how clever he was. He had figured out how to drive while hallucinating. It never occurred to any of us that the correct response to hallucinating while driving is to stop driving and to sleep, not to learn how to correctly recognize hallucinations.

So, yes, we congratulated him. Because the alternative option was believing that not being involved in a horrific motorway accident was more important than potentially missing a gig in Dun Laoghaire with a minor American indie band.

Why did we think like this?

Patrick Freyne

‘Because they are all special gigs.’
Well done. Now you get it.

I drive a lot for work nowadays, as a journalist, but usually on my own and usually to some place where I have to make strangers have conversations with me. It’s a lonely and sometimes existentially troubling job that I do without a band to bolster me. And yet, due to some psychic hangover from those early days, I still love driving through the outskirts of cities.

I like the warehouse buildings and the wholesalers and the industrial estates and the big showrooms that sell kitchen counters. I like the glow of the petrol stations and promise of the drive-through takeaways and the truck stops and the service stations that are always laid out in the same way. I like the light poles and the big metal signs and the painted road patterns and the flyovers and the ways that all of those things curve off in different directions at different speeds depending on tricks of perspective and light as I drive through. I like to imagine what future aliens will make of all these weird metal and concrete artefacts. I think about journeys I’ve taken in the past. I think about journeys I will take in the future. I wonder, vaguely, if it’s possible to be buried in a place like that. Yes, I’d like to be buried where the industrial estates meet the outer suburbs. Sometimes I imagine that I’m dead already and that this is limbo. It’s not so bad.

My friend E, another writer, tells me I like

‘It never occurred to any of us that the correct response to hallucinating while driving is to stop driving and to sleep, not to learn how to correctly recognize hallucinations.’

‘liminal spaces’. Which means, I think, that I like marginal in-betweeny things. This is true, but the reality is that I also like these areas because they suggest safety and comfort and normality. Nowhere with operating kitchen showrooms and office parks is currently being bombarded or starved of food supplies and, deep down, I am a practical member of the bourgeoisie who respects this. And I like these areas because being near them usually means a journey is either ending or beginning. One possibility gives me hope. The other relief, I guess.

The camper was off-white and cream and yellow, all the best colours, and its steering wheel was on the left. There was a little table behind the driver’s cab on which we ate dinner and played cards, and there was a toilet at the back which we were forbidden to use for its intended purpose—it wasn’t set up right—and where we stored gear. This was a home away from home, albeit a home without a working toilet. It was a headquarters. It was a hotel. It was a place to have band meetings at which we all wielded big hardback notebooks and scribbled notes in different-coloured pens. We were music industry professionals and behaved accordingly.

The van wasn’t the only expensive thing we bought with band funds. We purchased a Fender Rhodes electric piano and speaker which we collected from one of the Ballymun towers several years before those towers came tumbling down. It belonged to a man who left the country in the

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seventies and never returned, a story that intrigues me now but flew over my head at the time. It had been taking up space in his sister's flat and it had to come down the stairs because the lift wasn't working. It cost us £300. The Fender Rhodes was too big and heavy to bring to gigs in our hatchback cars, which suited Paul and me just fine. 'We can use the Casio,' said Paul, because, in fairness, we could use the Casio.

'But now we have the van,' said the D, the bass player, who liked things to look well, and while the Rhodes was insanely heavy, it did look well. So now that we had the camper van we had to lug the Rhodes to every gig. The van also meant we had no excuse for not bringing anyone who wanted to tag along to gigs with us. 'Now we have the van,' we said a lot.

I only learned to drive because otherwise we would have had to be driven to and from gigs by our dads, and that's not a great look for any band.

The first time I ever drove on my own, I drove my mother's car from Newbridge to Portlaoise and back in the dark without any lights on. I didn't notice this mistake at the time. Afterwards I realized I'd turned on the rear windshield wipers instead of the headlights, which meant that if the worst had come to the worst at least my rear window would have been impressively clean when the paramedics came. The paramedics did not need to come. I was guided home, instead, by the angry car horns of

other vehicles and my own apparently incredibly good night vision.

Unsurprisingly, it took me several years and multiple attempts to pass the driving test. The first time I tried it, the tester actually reached over and grabbed the steering wheel at one point because he was scared.

Our initial band vehicles were hatchback cars. Mine was a maroon Opel Corsa that had its own damp microclimate and a persistent mould that probably deserved study. I loved this car. It was basically a cube, and I became obsessed with the art of filling it with musical equipment. I could fit two guitars, a drum kit, two amplifiers and three people within as long as we placed the smallest person (D) in the back seat, wedged against amps and in serious danger of being skewered by a loose drum stand. I was inordinately proud of my packing skills and offered to demonstrate them a lot. Nobody was as impressed by this as you might expect.

As our entourage expanded—extra guitarists, road managers, sound engineers, support acts—we started to take two hatchbacks out on the road. We toured the UK this way several times. Twice we brought our friend Ian with us, because he had his own van that he used for a fledgling tiling business. It did not look like a van for a fledgling tiling business. It was a hearse formerly owned by a local eccentric who had purchased it for his amateur embalming business. It did not look like a hearse for an amateur embalming business. The

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amateur embalmer had fitted it out with hydraulic suspension and American-style police lights and a siren. The local eccentric, I can only suppose, wanted to look like a US police embalmer.

A bouncing police-hearse with potentially illegal sirens was not the ideal van to be driving around England's motorways. It was stopped first on the way through Holyhead by customs officials who wanted to see Ian's driving licence. Ian only had a provisional driving licence, which wasn't permitted on UK motorways.

'Oh, in Ireland we're allowed drive anywhere with that,' he lied to the customs people.

At first, they seemed ready to believe anything of our post-colonial backwater, but one of them thought to ring the Irish Department of Transport to check, and rushed off to do so.

'Is that true?' asked D. 'Can you really drive on that licence?'

'Sure,' lied Ian.

The customs man couldn't get through to the Department of Transport. Ian surmised that the customs man hadn't been able to get through because it was the day after Ireland's first Irish match at the 2002 World Cup. 'Nobody in Ireland goes to work after a World Cup match,' he said.

The customs people believed him. They were unsure what to do after this, so they stood around lamenting the state of Irish traffic legislation for a while before letting us drive through.

A week later, on the way back, the customs

people asked Ian to open the back of his quasi-police car/hearse so they could search it.

‘I can’t do that,’ said Ian.

‘Open the van,’ said the customs people.

‘I can’t do that,’ said Ian.

‘Open the van,’ said the increasingly aggravated customs people.

‘I can’t do that,’ said Ian again, acting, as far as the aggravated customs people were concerned, like international drug mogul Pablo Escobar (if Pablo Escobar drove around in a modified police car/hearse).

Ian literally couldn’t do this because the back door of the hearse was broken, but he was interminably slow at explaining this. In order to open the door over the preceding week, Ian had had to crawl across the amps and drum paraphernalia in the dark before kicking the door open with his boot. You know, just like Bono has to do with his van. The customs people looked very tired when they were talking to Ian.

Sometimes I find myself on car journeys with my mother, to see family down in the south of the country or to go to a hospital appointment. ‘You’re a very good driver,’ she always says. She says this because she’s a nurturing baby boomer who believes in the importance of encouraging her middle-aged infant.

She thinks I’m a very good driver only because she has seen other members of the family

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drive. Those nameless family members zip in and out of traffic and drive right up to the bumper of other cars in the fast lane and they mutter curse words and shake their fists. If they had guns—and at least one of them formerly had access to guns—they would fire them out the window as they drove instead of using the car horn or the headlights.

Yet, my mother probably praises them too. ‘It’s very impressive how you terrified that young woman in that Fiat,’ I imagine her saying. ‘She’ll certainly think twice before coming out on the road again.’

I really enjoy my journeys with my mother. I quite enjoy driving when I’m in no hurry and I can amble along the roads chatting. But I’m not sure I really am a good driver. I don’t drive particularly recklessly and I give people space, but I also daydream. I have, at least once, fallen asleep while driving. I am also very easily spooked when someone in the passenger seat suggests an alternative route. Once spooked, I hit kerbs and I veer over yellow lines and I end up having to stop at a service station for a coffee to steady my nerves.

‘Okay,’ my passenger usually says with a sigh. ‘We’ll go the way you know.’

One day I woke up midway between Galway and Dublin to find the camper van filled with the gentle sound of snoring. It was a comforting sound that seemed to come from all parts of the van at once. My eyes tried to focus and I saw spotlights

illuminating the white line in the darkness ahead.

I started to work things out. Where was I? A car or van of some kind. What part of the van? The passenger seat. What time was it? It was nighttime. Was the van in motion? Yes, it was. Where was the source of these snores? Why, it was Paul.

I screamed.

‘I only dozed off for a second,’ said Paul, who was also, I should mention, the driver.

‘You can’t sleep when you’re driving,’ I scolded, as though he had done this on purpose just to annoy me.

‘But it’s your job to keep me awake,’ he said, which was also true.

Falling asleep is a hazard of night driving. A few years later another musician friend woke up upside down in his car in a field after finishing a gig an hour or so earlier in Galway. He was, thankfully, unhurt. He was helped from his upturned car by the estranged husband of a minor television celebrity. Then, in the darkness, the two of them unloaded his musical equipment from the wreck of his very old car and placed it into the celebrity spouse’s four-wheel-drive jeep.

I wonder what they talked about as they drove towards Dublin? There’s an accelerated intimacy that happens when people share a journey together. I find it amazing to this day. Maybe it’s some sort of tribal memory of a time when all journeys took weeks and bonding with your travelling

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companions was important for survival. Maybe it's just the flipside of the reduced empathy that turns all pedestrians into soulless targets for a driver's road rage. One way or another, every time we had another musician in the car or van with us, I overshared. I did this no matter how little I knew them. I told them things about my life. I told them about my fears. I invited them to meet my family. I asked them their opinions about medical issues. I suggested we go on holidays together. I told them all about the fights I was having with the rest of my band and asked for advice. I tried to enlist them on my side of the argument: 'Isn't D being unreasonable about the Fender Rhodes?'

I usually never saw these people again. I cringe thinking about these moments, but it still happens whenever I'm giving someone a lift. If you want me to marry one of your more wayward siblings or to leave you some money in my will or need an investor for a crazy scheme, then book some time beside me in the passenger seat of a car.

On the other hand, I loved being on tour with my actual friends—my band, our partners, our friends' bands. For a worried young man fearful of rejection, there is something relaxing about having your friends trapped with you in a tight metal space from which they can't escape.

We toured on a budget. We were not with a label. We were often on the dole. And yet, somehow, going on a tour of Britain while on social welfare seemed like a good idea by the time D was finished

‘I was pretty sure this had never happened to Brett Anderson from Suede. He might have written songs about sniffing solvents, but he didn’t splash about in them.’

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outlining the maths in his ledger. This is a *good* decision, we'd think.

We survived because we were thrifty. We arrived into venues from Wrexham to Brighton in our white suits and embroidered jeans and rat tails and cowboy hats and handlebar moustaches and a cooler filled with food bought at budget supermarkets. We talked about 'salad' a lot, which one promoter assumed was a slang term for drugs until D started tossing a salad near the sound desk.

Supporting some major-label compatriots in a tiny club in Exeter, we were surprised by the sight of a huge tour bus blocking the street outside as we pulled up alongside it in our wagon train of hatchbacks.

'We heard through the grapevine that we're going to get dropped from the label,' said the singer. 'So we decided to waste as much of their money as we possibly could.'

I was very impressed by this greedy fatalism. I walked the length of their tour bus in a state of envious awe. There was a big television and bunks with curtains on them. This was not only a far superior form of transport to our own, it was also a far superior form of accommodation: we slept on the floors of local promoters, for the most part. On one occasion I wandered a house in Cardiff at two in the morning trying to find somewhere to lie down that wasn't sticky. On another we had to share a sitting room with a man who spent the whole night watching the *Big Brother* live feed. Sometimes,

in Holiday Inns, we slept five to a bed.

When I was small and easily frightened, my family would regularly travel late at night from my grandparents' farm in Kilkenny through winding roads and darkened fields to our home in Kildare. I hated looking out of the window then because I had a vivid imagination and was terrified of seeing something inexplicable and strange in that darkness. Even now when I drive at night, I believe there is something uncanny out there waiting for me. In those days I would close my eyes and think about more explicable things, like my cousins or toys that I wanted to own. This isn't possible now if I want to arrive at my destination in one piece. In those days I usually fell asleep before arriving home and then I would be lifted into my bed by my dad. Being carried to bed by my father made me feel safe. Probably safer than I've ever felt since.

Several years after we stopped our endless touring, I whispered to Paul, 'I'm glad we never became successful.'

He looked around as though about to say something sacrilegious and whispered back: 'Me too.'

There were a number of reasons we had seen the light. I had, by this point, spent time with several touring Americana bands. These consisted largely of wise, seasoned musicians, usually heading past forty. They didn't drink so much any more and

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they were very kind with their advice to younger musicians, but they seemed weary. They could be heard worrying about finances and sighing when they saw low ticket sales. Their lives didn't look like that much fun. These bands were trapped by the decisions made by younger versions of themselves. They were now too small to tour in comfort and too big to quit. That, at best, was our future trajectory as a band.

And here's the thing: we were never very rock and roll people. I liked being in bed early. I liked steady income. I no longer enjoyed filling cars with amplifiers. I wanted to be able to meet my bandmates, my best friends, for coffee with no band business to discuss.

I have a theory that everyone has a *natural age* and the nature of their dysfunction at any point in life is based on how near or far they are from that age. For some, their natural age is exactly nineteen and their life ever since has been a disappointing descent from that hedonistic bliss. I have always felt that my natural age was around forty-four. I love cardigans and slippers and safety and books by the fire. I am forty-four now.

Paul never saw forty-four. In the week after his death I tried to be useful. So I did what I always did: I played music and I drove. I played music at the funeral and spent a few days driving people who had come for the funeral around the city. Then one morning, when it was over, I found I couldn't get out of bed and stayed there for twenty-four hours

thinking of hatchbacks and camper vans and Paul.

At two in the morning, off the motorway somewhere between Cork and Dublin, Paul woke me. He had a problem, he said. He couldn't open the petrol tank on the camper van and we really needed petrol. He wasn't sure of the science of it, he said, but he was pretty sure the van needed petrol to make it go.

He had already tried unsuccessfully to wake D. D is a practical man, but he was very wedded to the idea of a good night's sleep and as a non-driver he saw the camper van as our domain. There were other people sleeping in the camper too, people I love, but let's not beat around the bush here: when it came to practical concerns, they were fools.

So, I got up and, blinking in the light of a petrol station forecourt, I slapped my hands together like I've seen more practical men do. I found that what Paul had said was true: the cap of the petrol tank felt almost welded shut. With a big effort, I wrenched the plastic external casing of the petrol cap off the van entirely. This left the metal internal casing lodged in the passage that, under more normal circumstances, brought petrol to the engine.

'Oh no,' I said.

'I knew that was going to happen,' said Paul, unhelpfully.

But Paul was an optimist. He imagined that he could see a little hole in the obstructed petrol tank and that he'd be able to pump petrol through

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it if only I would create a funnel with the magazine I was reading, which, not that it's important, was probably *Select* or *The Face*.

'Really?' I said.

'I think it will work,' said Paul, firmly. 'Trust me.'

I didn't trust him. But I did convince myself that this was *my* idea, which is what I often did in lieu of trusting my bandmates. So, I carefully crafted a little funnel with my magazine and angled the narrow end of this funnel to where Paul believed he saw a hole in the jagged metal remains of the petrol cap.

Then he started pumping little flurries of petrol into my magazine paper funnel. One of our beloved friend/fools stirred within and stared out of the window vacantly. What did he think was happening? He waved, turned around and went back to sleep.

The funnel, despite the effort that had gone into its construction, disintegrated because, well, it was made out of paper. So now there was a wash of petrol streaming through my cupped hands, a picture of Brett Anderson from Suede was affixed to my wrist and a little pool of liquid was forming at my feet.

'I'm not sure this is working,' I said, while Brett Anderson from Suede's mournful eyes judged me and I felt faint due to the petrol fumes. I was pretty sure this had never happened to Brett Anderson from Suede. He might have written songs

about sniffing solvents, but he didn't splash about in them.

'Yeah, I think you're right,' said Paul, but he kept pumping petrol anyway, his shoulder to my shoulder, as though he wanted to make completely sure this was a lost cause before we moved on to plan B. (Plan B was ringing my dad to come and rescue us.)

'What's up?' said the guitar player, who had poked his newly awoken head between our fume-addled heads.

God, I'd love a cigarette, I thought, as I gazed at the lovely Marlboro Light hanging from the guitar player's lip. I stared at it, glowing there in the darkness a half a foot above the gentle stream of petrol that was flowing through my hands and on to my trousers and into a glistening puddle at my feet.

I think of this moment often. I think of it whenever people say, as they occasionally do, 'You had a band and released records and went on tour!?' That's amazing! Do you ever imagine what might have been?' And I nod sagely, because I *do* imagine what might have been. First, I imagine this moment in a petrol station forecourt with petrol streaming through my hands. And then I imagine myself running around on fire and screaming on the edge of the N7. That's what might have been, my friends. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise.

ON THE ROAD

EPILOGUE

In 1988 my whole family was in a car outside a town called Urlingford on the old two-lane road that, in those days, ran from Cork to Dublin. A driver came out of a side road, nearly hitting another car and then veering across the road into the path of our own. We very nearly died. For some reason it never occurred to me to write about this when I wrote the first draft of this essay.

My mother was driving and my grandmother, who had recently lost her husband, was in the passenger seat. I was in the back seat on the left, behind my grandmother. My sister was in the middle seat and my father, with my brother on his lap, was on the right. I have no idea why my father wasn't driving. When my mother and father were together in the car, he almost always drove. On this day, for some reason, he wasn't driving. Maybe my mother wanted to talk to her mother. Maybe they wanted to talk about my grandfather.

And then a car veered across the path ahead. I closed my eyes at the moment of impact. I heard metal and glass shattering. I hit my face against the front seat and reckoned with the pain of that while I felt our car slide wildly across the road. When the car stopped moving, I could feel blood run down my chin and I heard a loud silence for a long moment before I heard my sister and my brother start to cry. I thought, 'At least they're alive,' but I waited for another beat before opening my

eyes. Everyone was moving. I had blood pumping from my nose. My father and my sister and my brother seemed to be okay (I later found out that my brother had banged his head quite badly). My mother and grandmother were clearly in a lot of pain.

There was a house nearby and we were brought in there while an ambulance came. My mother couldn't walk, and two people had to support her. My grandmother was very shaken. I sat with her in a small sitting room as she clutched my hand and called me a 'brave boy', and a kind woman who lived in the house made us cups of tea.

After a while I went outside and stood with my dad staring at the wreckage of our car. The front bonnet was compressed to almost nothing beneath a cracked windshield. 'It's hard to believe anyone walked out of that,' my dad said quietly. The man in the other car was unharmed, despite having fallen out of his car on to the road as his car skidded away. This seemed miraculous. My nervous system was jangling.

When the ambulances came we were brought to hospital, where we learned that my mother's knee had been badly broken in the crash. My grandmother had some broken ribs. I had a bruised and bleeding nose, but an X-ray showed that nothing was broken. An army colleague collected my father, my siblings and me from the hospital and, a few nights later, my mother still in hospital, another army friend called around with a bottle of

ON THE ROAD

whiskey. We were all very shaken.

My mother needed to have many operations on her knee. It was very painful. She stopped kneeling at mass. In the following weeks my brother started to have fits in his sleep and was diagnosed with acquired epilepsy. So terrified were people in those days of the word ‘epilepsy’ that shortly afterwards my father’s parents offered to leave us their farm in case my brother was so debilitated he could never work. They didn’t know what else to do. My father declined the offer.

Afterwards there were court proceedings. I don’t really know the fine details, but my sister and I were awarded £2,500 each. Seven years later I used my money to fund my band’s first record. My brother, however, was awarded £50,000 by the courts in relation to his epilepsy diagnosis. Years later, after his symptoms had disappeared, I felt like I could have done so much more with that money. This essay could have included a tour bus.

I thought about this crash regularly for many years—and then, apparently, forgot about it to the extent that I initially didn’t include it in this essay. I do know that the first time I ever shut my eyes and didn’t want to open them again was sitting in the back seat of that ruined car and I know that I imagined that moment every time I shut my eyes for some years afterwards. In that moment anything could have happened. ◇



FICTION

From *Braised Pork*

An Yu

A week after her move, Jia Jia was sitting at a small, round table with four chairs in a quiet corner of a Shanghainese restaurant.

A waitress in a black skirt suit handed her a menu that felt as thick as a novel.

She was half an hour early and relieved to be away from her grandmother's for the first time since moving in. She had told Ms Wan that she was ill with a fever and could not finish the last section of the wall painting until she felt better. Instead, she sat in her room and toiled over her own fish-man paintings in vain. The room was too small, too restricting. She did not remember it being that way. Every day, she felt as though she was in a tank of water, suffocating. Her aunt was rarely home, but in the dead of night, Jia Jia would hear her whispering and fighting with her grandmother about Li Chang.

Jia Jia studied the expertly shot food photos inside the menu. She decided that she would begin her conversation with her father by complimenting the quality of the menu's paper—it felt like waxed cardboard. It would be an appropriate way to praise him for his restaurant choice, she thought.

She had not slept much the night before, unable to decide on what to say to him, worrying over her decision to move into her grandmother's home. She imagined how cramped it would be after Li Chang came back. Should she ask to move into her father's place? He had a spacious three-bedroom apartment to himself. He was getting older, he would surely be pleased to have a daughter around to take care of him,

to keep him company, to brew him some tea and chat with him at night. She had made up her mind that this time she was not going to get upset over his usual nonchalance. At the very least, she reasoned, she would have more space to work on her art if she lived with him.

She closed the menu, sipped on the Dragon Well tea that was brought to her, and waited for her father to arrive. An elderly, grey-haired couple was sitting at the table next to hers.

‘I hit my arm on something sharp last night,’ the old woman said. She looked like an older version of Ms Wan—heavy head, bony body. Even her bob haircut was the same.

‘Where?’ the old man asked.

‘In the bathroom.’

‘Are you all right now?’

‘I found a plaster.’

The waitress brought a plate of braised pork belly and placed it between them. The old woman picked up a piece with her chopsticks and dropped it carefully on to the old man’s rice. She then fetched another piece and stuffed it directly into her own mouth. They both chewed.

‘It tastes good,’ she said, munching open-mouthed with difficulty, revealing the few teeth she had left.

The old man nodded.

‘Lunch was good yesterday,’ she said.

‘It was good to see the kids,’ he said.

‘Good, good,’ she said.

They stopped talking and continued to eat. Their eyes were quiet, composed, without a single trace of worry. Sometimes they looked at each other, but most of the time they looked down at their food. They seldom smiled, but through the folds of their skin, Jia Jia saw everything that she did not have. She watched them as if they were the last scene of a film, living a happy ending, entirely removed from her own reality. An overwhelming feeling of dejection rose inside her. Head down, eyes closed, she listened to their silence and yearned for it to be hers.

Jia Jia's phone rang loudly in her bag.

'Ms Wu, I have a buyer for you!' Her estate agent sounded like a TV football commentator, all professional enthusiasm. He spent minutes explaining who the potential buyer was: a family of four, an agreeable couple with two children, earning a high income working for American corporations. It seemed as if he was trying to sell the family to her. Finally, after he was satisfied with his expository prologue, he offered Jia Jia the price.

'That's too low. Far too low,' she said.

'The market is bad.'

'Irresponsible!'

'Ms Wu—'

'It has to be higher. A one-bedroom sold for that earlier this year! One-bedroom! Mine's a four-bedroom.'

'I understand—'

'No, you don't seem to. I need more.'

'Ms Wu, it's much more difficult to sell your

FICTION

apartment. I'm already trying my best!

'You're not trying at all,' she said.

Jia Jia detected her father standing at the entrance of the restaurant speaking to the receptionist. He was looking inside, nodding, and scanning the restaurant for her. The receptionist pointed in Jia Jia's direction, and her father's gaze followed her arm.

'It's much more difficult, you have to understand,' the estate agent continued. 'Because of your husband.'

Jia Jia reverted her attention. 'What?'

'It's not good. Buyers don't like it,' he said.

Her father was walking towards her table now. He looked old. She had not seen him since Chen Hang's funeral, and even then, she had not had much of a chance to study him carefully.

'Your husband killed himself there. It's difficult to ask for a normal price,' the estate agent said.

'He didn't kill himself,' Jia Jia said. 'Tell me, why do you think he would kill himself?'

'Ms Wu, I wouldn't know.'

'He didn't kill himself,' she said again, and hung up.

Her father sat down opposite her and beamed. His eyebrows were grey, long and angled upwards, like dragonfly wings.

'I thought you were in Europe!' he said.

Still maddened by her agent, Jia Jia snapped at her father, 'That was before your son-in-law died.'

The old man sitting next to them looked

disapprovingly at her. His wife signalled him with her eyes to mind his own business.

‘I see, was it that long ago?’ Jia Jia’s father laughed. ‘When I saw your call, I thought something had happened. Did everything go all right? You said you were moving in with your grandmother.’

‘Oh, sure, it was easy.’ She handed over the menu. ‘It’s really good.’

‘Yes! You’ve been here? They make delicious ribs. Vegetables are—’

‘The menu. The pages.’

‘What?’

‘The quality of the paper is good.’ Jia Jia pointed at the menu and waited for his reaction. He flipped one of the pages back and forth twice, studied the corner briefly, and lost interest.

‘Let me get you some starters,’ he said. ‘Xiao Fang is stuck in traffic.’

‘That woman is coming?’

‘Don’t say “that woman”, it sounds bad. You used to call her Auntie Fang Fang. She just wants to see you.’ He summoned the waitress and ordered some pigs’ ears, marinated bran dough and cucumber salad.

Jia Jia waited until the waitress had walked away before she spoke quietly, trying to make up for her terrible attitude a moment earlier. ‘You look older. Is she taking good care of you?’

‘She’s found me an acupuncture doctor. My shoulder feels better now.’ He patted his left shoulder. ‘If you’re not feeling well, tell your Auntie Fang Fang,

she's done a lot of research on doctors. She's a good woman. Remember when she used to take you fishing?'

He continued talking about Xiao Fang. Jia Jia struggled not to listen. She searched for an appropriate moment, a small opening in his passionate monologue, to ask him about his own family: her family. *What about us?* She wanted to know.

'...after we got married last year,' she heard him say.

His voice sounded distant and hollow, as if it came from the centre of an empty concert hall. Jia Jia squeezed her left wrist with her right hand and realized that she had forgotten to pull up her sleeve to reveal the jade bracelet she was wearing. It had been a wedding present from her father. That morning, she had checked three times to make sure she had remembered to put it on, so that when she poured tea for him, he would be able to see it circled around her pale wrist, pine green and translucent. But she had forgotten about it entirely.

She tried to remain composed and courteous, but she must have reacted in some way; her father was looking around uneasily at the waitresses and customers who had turned to look at their table.

'You what?' she asked.

'We got married in December. I'm sorry we didn't tell you, I didn't think it was a good moment.'

Jia Jia searched her mind desperately for something to say, something that would not blow

up this dinner, that would not drive her father away from her. But she suddenly could not stop thinking about her mother, the way she'd lain in the hospital bed, pale and hopeless like a white flower petal that had been tweezed off its stem.

'Do you have Ma's bronze dragon?' was what she finally managed to say.

'Dragon?' he asked, still absent-mindedly looking down at the menu while unfolding his reading glasses.

'Never mind.'

Jia Jia poured a cup of tea for herself and reached for her chopsticks as the waitress placed the appetizers between her and her father. She attempted to pick up a peanut. Her chopsticks kept failing her, though she had always been skilful at using them. *Beautifully elegant with perfect technique*, a friend of Chen Hang had once said. What was the matter with her today? The more she dropped the peanut, the stronger her desire to pick it up. Finally, she managed to bring it to her mouth and put it in.

Silence descended. Like a well that had suddenly gone dry, Jia Jia could think of nothing more to say to the man sitting in front of her.

'I should leave,' she said and got up from the table.

She rushed past all the square tables, the signs for the bathroom, the round tables and the reception desk. Not once did she look back at her father, but she could see him, sitting there alone, and the old couple sitting next to him who were observing what

might have been the most curious event of their day.

Someone bumped into her shoulder, apologizing. Jia Jia looked up and saw Xiao Fang. She focused on the face of this person whom her father considered to be a 'good woman', trying to read what was on her mind.

'Jia Jia! Are you looking for the bathroom?' Xiao Fang said. This face, too, had aged since they went fishing, years ago.

'Have you, by chance, seen a bronze dragon in my father's home? It's about this big.' Jia Jia held out her hands and indicated that the object was around the size of a big coffee cup. Before Xiao Fang could answer, Jia Jia found she could not look at her face any more. This woman who was here, and her mother who was gone. She lowered her head again and marched down the escalator.

Back at her grandmother's house, Jia Jia crawled under the bedcovers and imagined her father and Xiao Fang sitting at the round table in the corner of the Shanghainese restaurant, devouring a plate of braised pork belly. They were effortlessly in sync, becoming one another, like Leo's parents. They were on the opposite shore of a deep river that Jia Jia could not cross, on an island that had no space for her. Tears came in waves, her throat tight with a strangling pain, and she held her left hand, still wearing the jade bracelet, over her mouth to cover any sounds that she was making. ◇



‘I always begin novels with an image and the image I had for *Aria* was a very young woman, pregnant, running at night in the snow.’

A conversation with
Nazanine Hozar

Nazanine Hozar was born in Tehran at the onset of the Iranian Revolution. She emigrated when she was eight years old, moving with her parents to Canada, and leaving behind a country in the grip of the Iran–Iraq war. Her debut novel, *Aria*, goes back to imagine an Iran that existed before the one she knew—the one in which her own parents came of age—following the fate of a young girl born years before the revolution. She spoke to *Five Dials* about finding the one within the whole and vice versa . . .

FIVE DIALS

I wanted to start with your letter to the reader, which is printed on the back cover of the book. I'm particularly interested in this line you have about the novel being, 'an attempt to understand my own poisonous sentiments, which meant I had to ultimately find a way to empathize'. Could you expand on that? Were there any characters who surprised you by winning your empathy?

NAZANINE HOZAR

There was only one character really who played that role—someone who ends the novel by doing something terrible. I had the poisonous feeling about him, so I had to play a little game with myself to get around it, to find the empathy: I had to work backwards.

You see, I always begin stories by

Q&A

knowing how they're going to end—I write the ending before the beginning and middle—and with *Aria* I realized I was writing my rage on the page. I thought to myself, this is a problem. This is a very biased narrative—even if I feel like my opinion is correct about what Iran is and what that regime is, it's not a very nuanced or complex look at it. Because 'evil' is not a common thing, I think, most people just end up in situations. So I had to take this character who ends up as a figure in a really notorious prison, a hard-line revolutionary, and I had to make him a child, a character you can love.

I believe it's true in most cases that the 'real' self is the sweet, loyal child. That self can fall into the cracks because of circumstances related to so many things: poverty, religious influences, rejection, class differences . . . Even a single, quite unimportant-seeming event can scar someone, as you see in the novel. Those trivial events become the milestones in a life, causing tangents, poisoning minds.

FIVE DIALS

I'm interested in that idea of the single fact that sends your life down a different path. The novel is structured around many such counterfactuals which turn out to be enormously significant, working in a kind of randomized domino effect. One example

is the colour of Aria's eyes: she's born into a culture where blue eyes mean something, and so it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, people treat her differently because they believe she is different.

NAZANINE

Exactly. You used an interesting term just now, 'randomized domino effect'—but a domino effect ends up being an inevitable thing, right? Once it's set off, it's no longer random at all; one domino goes and it's inevitable that the next must too. And that inevitability closes over people's lives like a trap in any situation where people are enslaved to forces beyond their control. These small things that seem so random never really are. Something as trivial as having blue eyes (which for some Iranians of a certain, more superstitious background means being the devil's child)—or just being a girl!—of course such a thing will put you in the position of being unwanted, being discarded. But at the same time, part of what saves Aria is the fact that she's fair-skinned and auburn-haired, and that affects who she is allowed to become too.

The concept I'm thinking about for this random inevitability thing is 'causality'. It means that the surrounding atmosphere becomes infused with the consequences of a single event. In this case, if baby Aria being left

Q&A

in a garbage dump is the primary cause, then everyone around the small area of that event will automatically be affected and changed by that event even if they don't seem to have any connection at all. And for me that idea is really a microcosm of all of Iran: if it's happening to one small figure, it's happening to everyone, and vice versa.

This was why I chose the novel's title too. Aria is the character, of course, but the word also means 'the Iranian people'. It's so necessary to the book, because it means exactly that—the one and the whole.

FIVE DIAL

It feels like a novel about what happens when that interwoven community—the bond between the one and the whole—starts to fracture and break down. We see that breakdown manifested as revolution, but even before then it is present as violence and conflict in the domestic space, and as a rising sense of chaos channelled through Aria herself.

NAZANINE

This was a very deliberate thing—to show violence in the home, including from people like Aria. Because when you have people so easily able to beat children, wives, each other, when the culture is so violent already, then of course you have the ability to enact violence

on a larger scale, of course you're going to end up with ordinary people able to execute other human beings, people in the streets able to shoot and kill.

When we try to understand why political upheaval and atrocity happen, you first need to look at the cultures in which they happen. I don't know if you've ever seen the Michael Haneke film, *The White Ribbon*—it is set in Germany, a precursor to the First World War, and he's looking at how it's possible that this terrible war took place. So he looks at how, inside the family home, there was so much abuse—from father to children, husband to wife, children to children—and if it's possible to have this level of horrendous violence taking place within the family home, all that can so easily be transferred into civil society. It creeps in from the sidelines, as you say.

FIVE DIALS

In that sense, even though the novel is set in the past, it feels like a very contemporary warning about what we're seeing in lots of countries right now—including the UK and the US.

NAZANINE

Yes! If you look at what's happening in the UK with Brexit or the US with Trump, there's a lot of 'how can we have elected this person or that

Q&A

person', but you just have to look at how real people *talk* to each, how they communicate on Twitter, how they deal with conflict, and then it's not so surprising. I know *Aria* is about Iran but I think this story could be about anywhere. I don't even think of it as a political novel. It's a human story that just happens to have a revolution in it.

FIVE DIALS

One of the things that struck me in your portrait of pre-revolution Iran is the incredible diversity of religions and the surprising equilibrium that exists between them. Of course there are still resentments, prejudices, superstitions between different communities, but there's also a pragmatism about coexisting and a willingness to let things go in order to keep the peace.

NAZANINE

Well, you know Iran used to be the Persian Empire, and as that empire alone it was around for 2,500 years—as a civilization in total it has existed for over 7,000 years—and it has a vast history of religions. One of the oldest religions in the world started in Iran; it was the centre of the Islamic empire for a while, most of the Islamic scholars in the world were based there; and then it has a long history of Christianity from the Armenian culture—

the list goes on. So of course there would be significant remnants of that diversity. And I'm not going to say that people were always accepted—there was extreme prejudice, there were forced conversions, and if you wanted to have any kind of government job then you did have to convert. But there was—there still is, I think—a kind of greater trust, a level of acceptance and tolerance.

But the problem now in Iran is that religion has been forced upon people, since the revolution, so there's a growing hatred of it, many people have turned away from it altogether. My friends who live in Iran often tell me how everyone's always angry, always upset, always full of rage, because they're living in a society where they're constantly forced to do things they don't want to do. Forced to lie, to put on a show, to backstab—because you have to, to get by.

Unfortunately, you see, people went into the revolution without knowing exactly what democracy was. You have to remember it was a country where 70 per cent of the population was illiterate. So you have a 30 per cent literacy rate, and of that you have maybe 15–20 per cent of the population properly educated, and of those only a fraction who really understood what democracy was. Which meant the movement was very easily hijacked. That's why revolutions so rarely work: people find

Q&A

the courage but they don't know what's going to come out the other end. The only example I can think of in recent history where a revolution has properly worked is the Tunisian one—and they are a very educated population. And they won the Nobel Prize for it.

FIVE DIALS

That's an interesting point, because I was struck in the novel by how even the more educated and privileged characters are pretty naïve about the consequences of their actions. Even the characters who you might expect to be able to see the situation clearly, they have a powerful capacity for denial—almost a self-preservation mechanism that stops them from perceiving the severity of what they're living through, what's coming for them.

NAZANINE

Oh yes. But that's really how it was—there are people I heard stories about who were so similar to those characters. It's actually terrifying to think of it. In the early 80s especially, fifteen-year-old kids could make a joke about Khomeini in their high-school classroom, and they would be arrested. Just like that. Three, five, ten years in prison. So many stories like that.

It's mind-boggling, the lack of knowledge, the lack of education. So many

hadn't even taken the time to study previous revolutions—say the Maoist regime or the Russian revolution. My parents come from the highest educated class, and they tell me stories about walking around their university with all this Tolstoy and Russian philosophy—just carrying the books around in their hands—but they would never actually read them because they were too long. And this was most people. This was how it was. And then these same people are causing one of the biggest revolutions of the twentieth century.

FIVE DIALS

Aria is populated by strong-willed female characters, none straightforwardly likeable or conventionally maternal, but many brought by circumstance into motherhood anyway. Were you deliberately exploring those tropes—the 'difficult' woman, the unmotherly woman?

NAZANINE

I always begin novels with an image and the image I had for *Aria* was a very young woman, pregnant, running at night in the snow. So yes, motherhood was key. While writing it I was obsessed with Leonardo da Vinci. He had two mothers, a biological mother and a mother who raised him, and his childhood was back and forth between the two. In his work you can often see the split between the two

mothers—there's a painting of a baby trapped between two mothers, for example, and there has even been analysis of the *Mona Lisa* as two faces in one, the good mother and the bad mother. So I wondered, for *Aria*, what if there are three mothers? What does that do to a child?

The maternal relationship is the most fundamental relationship in your life—I wanted to know what happens when there's an element of rejection in that relationship. That rejection might occur because the child is female: the mother abandons her baby not because she hates her but because she's worried someone is going to kill her. Or it might be that motherhood has been forced upon a woman: she has no interest in the child, she is cruel to it, beats it, but there are still moments when she does something good for the child too, even though she doesn't have to. Or you can imagine a mother who wants a child so badly, precisely because she has lost one, but once the new child comes along she finds herself feeling detached, she doesn't actually know how to be nurturing. So I was interested in motherhood put to the test, where there are complex, ambivalent feelings, or even no motherly feeling involved at all.

FIVE DIALS

And then we see these women's difficulties in

‘That’s why revolutions so rarely work: people find the courage but they don’t know what’s going to come out the other end.’

Q&A

expressing motherly love surface in the child they raise, right? Aria grows up into a person who is not very good at showing her love for people, or even processing that love. I would say the novel is partly her journey of trying to unlearn those lessons. What do you think? By the end, has she learned how to connect to people?

NAZANINE

The best she can, I think. I don't think you can live that childhood and be fully functioning—you'd need a lot of therapy, at least—and obviously she hasn't had that. She lived through the revolution instead. But I think, in the end, there's hope for her. In the end, Mitra teaches her a lesson, you know.

FIVE DIALS

About sacrifice?

NAZANINE:

Yes. And about real love. And that is her saving grace. In fact, many people teach her about sacrifice—they all end up teaching her. That is what allows her to become someone who doesn't waste her life. Because they all gave for her.

FIVE DIALS

Can we close by talking about identity and

migration? Aria is a social and an emotional migrant: she is welcomed into and exiled from several families, moving between communities, homes, identities. As an emigrant yourself, were your own experiences of relocation and dislocation in your mind as you wrote?

NAZANINE

To be honest, no. My migrant experience has not found its way into my work as of yet.

I have spent most of my physical life in Canada, but my mental life, strangely, is still in Iran. I physically left but my mind stayed behind. That's why this book took shape. The next novel I'm working on also takes place in Iran, and is very much driven by things that really happened there.

Perhaps this is because I left during the war. I lived in Iran as a child at the height of the worst time, the early to mid-80s, when the regime was very repressive and fundamentalist, so its imprint on me felt very heavy. Not in terms of brainwashing, that is, but in the sense of anger, the poisonous feelings we spoke about before. During that same time, the war with Iraq had moved into the cities, there were bombings all the time. My school was bombed. And the taste it left in my mouth, all of it, was too bitter to fade.

So my Canadian immigrant experience

Q&A

doesn't have much to do with Aria's peripatetic life, but what may have played a role was my childhood in Tehran. When you have missiles falling on you, or the 'morality police' constantly harassing you, and at school you're terrified to open your mouth in case you say something wrong and they come for your parents, it creates a constant state of fear, and specifically of not knowing what will happen next. All that fed into Aria. She never knows what will befall her next, where she will end up. That's the connection I have with her. The feeling of not knowing. ◇



AN EXTRACT

Sincerity

Niamh Campbell

I n a close room with a sacred heart a tin tub filled with water issued steam, gingerly, under hanging lamps. Cormac could see people standing along the walls, pressed shyly back against cement, and hear, at intervals, the shuffle of their feet.

There was a bare chair, wood, with a backrest like a fan. Cormac watched his colleague Alice-Ann, who had bought the tickets, sit in this, realizing that the gesture marked her as involved. A girl—the actress or the artist—entered from behind a partition. She wore a ghostly white gown. It seemed more of an aesthetic choice than a concession to historical accuracy. She walked slowly and stiffly and her face was closed in pain.

On reaching the bath the girl began to undo the gown, to pluck weakly at the strings that kept it closed over the front, and in the time this took, its excruciation, her breath shallow, Cormac looked dutifully at the set-up and the props, noticing an incongruously modern light switch by the opposite door. A load-bearing beam with cracked and ham-pink paint. Rain rushing over a windowpane and tiny springs of water coming through: slightly arched and salivary splashes on the sill.

Someone, a middle-aged woman, moved closer to the bath; she crouched, contemplatively, on the boards of the floor.

All waited.

Cormac was thirty-six and had been moving in art circles for a long time. He saw himself

AN EXTRACT

watching and watching the watching and still felt awkward about it.

The actress, naked, was entering the bath. Her stomach was soft and she had no pubic hair. Tan lines mimed a swimsuit. Cormac felt aroused and even more annoyed. Why did they have to choose an actress with a taut, young, sexy body? Was that really necessary? Were you really supposed to ignore that? He would not get flustered—not in this tense, close space—but it was flagrant and unfair. Even underhanded, Cormac thought.

Please, said the girl quietly, can you bring me the soap?

A bar of soap, dry and sharp-cornered, like a block of white cheese, sat in a dish at the opposite end of the bath. The middle-aged woman sprung from her hunkers and reached to hand the soap to the girl. Alice-Ann did not, however, stir; she watched the girl intently as the girl began to lather, shivering; as the girl began to keen softly, wincing and gasping a little, as she washed. The pain was centred on her breasts. She moved as though her breasts were tender and agonizing. She had little pop-up, youthful breasts. They were very nice to look at. Cormac tried not to look.

Someone was singing somewhere—upstairs—voices—and it was, of course, ‘Ave Maria, gratia plena’.

Sitting forward in the water, the girl whispered to them, do you know where my baby is? She asked, do you know where they took my baby? It was four

days ago.

The women shook their heads, no.

Do you, the girl looked right at Alice-Ann, do you know?

I don't, Alice-Ann replied. Her voice came out huskily and she cleared her throat, perhaps unthinkingly, at once. Cormac couldn't see her face now, only the carved black bob of her hair, so he couldn't tell if she was entranced or uncomfortable. Probably she was facing it all impassively, and analysing it.

Some more people had entered this phase of the show. They were doubling back, trying to conceal themselves behind the watchers at the wall. The girl in the bath looked pityingly, for a long time, at all of them. Cormac moved away from the wall and left the room: he took the opportunity of folding himself in with a small group of people shuffling through.

In the next room there stood a coffin on wheels and stems; two girls keeping watch in aprons and smocks; a hush, a peephole in the wall, a grill; the face of a woman glaring back at them.

The face demanded, *what?*

This room is even worse, Cormac thought. He thought of leaving entirely. He'd left things—few things, but some things—in his time; this, however, would be kind of difficult to leave. Not because anyone would prevent him but because the statement implied by a man walking out of a piece about laundries reverberated in ways he wouldn't

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intend and didn't want to unpack afterwards.

The coffin on its stems was quietly awesome and horrific. All coffins took him to the first coffin, the coffin of his brother Thomas, who'd been killed by accident when Cormac was at school. That coffin on its stems, indenting the marshy rug before the fireplace, sometimes tipped into his dreams, to roll complacently down inclines, like a pram.

Impishly, he figured: I'll say this to Alice-Ann. I was *triggered*.

Alice-Ann, unbelievably, was still in the previous room. The sequence, he guessed, had one or two more instalments. A door to the side of his eye disclosed frantic movement in a small, bright room. Cormac thought: it's so small, if I move in there I'll have to get involved. One of the sadistic actors would draw him into a conspiracy, or a waltz, or an interrogation. He knew how these things tended to go.

Another woman had approached the coffin and was reading the nameplate with a quizzical expression. Her copper hair was caught up at the back, half knotted in her scarf, and by the lamplight her complexion was a peach-and-cream diffusion, copper-pretty, golden-hued. She did not have the face of a model but the simple, rosy distribution of her features could be made to look achingly noble, achingly delicate, against perhaps an off-white canvas, exposed architectural girders, a fascinator or a flower crown. Like a series of shots he and Alice-Ann had done years ago: *Corn Princess*. Must find

those again, he thought. I was proud of that.

The girl at the coffin had become conscious of his attention and looked up, alarmed. Cormac turned away and faced a blacked-out window in mild despair. Alice-Ann had progressed—she was sliding into an alcove in a corner of the room. So she was going to take this one in as well. Cormac wondered if, at this point, she were tormenting him consciously; if it had started to become comical to her. At the same time he knew that her depth of perception, her focused and unnervingly intelligent understanding of art, was genuine.

Watching her now, he could see she was fully absorbed. She had not even been afraid of the naked actress.

What? asked the woman at the coffin suddenly.

Cormac started. The room had been so absolutely quiet but for ‘Ave Maria’ upstairs, just water running by and the muffled sounds of action in the small adjacent room. Now everyone, all of the audience lined up at the walls, was looking at him.

What? repeated the girl. She was staring at Cormac. He could not tell if she was an actress or not. Had he been staring at her? No. She was an actress, or unhinged. About to lash out. He looked back and shook his head. No. Don’t bring me into this.

What?

Oh God, was she an actress or not?

The women in smocks, sitting in chairs, had not looked up. She had to be an actress then. And

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yet she wore a raincoat, a cheap pashmina scarf. Facing him, her cheeks were high and flush with body heat.

I—don't know what you mean, Cormac said weakly.

From her alcove, Alice-Ann leaned forward. She balanced herself against her knees. She was smiling ever so slightly at him. She was watching with everybody else.

Do you know the way out? the girl asked him. She asked him openly, loudly, and remained standing by the coffin, tensely erect and still.

Definitely an actress then. Cormac's heart sank.

Uh, no, he said.

The audience, blissfully left out of this shit, continued to watch him with interest.

You must know, the girl insisted.

Well, I mean there's a door downstairs, Cormac said. He heard a rustle of laughter and felt emboldened.

The girl did not respond to this but stared at him with what looked like unmitigated hate. Cormac jumped when a hand sneaked on to his shoulder. It was another actress—in a smock this time, a housecoat, clearly defined—and she whispered, shush, come with me. It was a relief to leave the room with the coffin and the smocks, the girl with her accusatory mania, the awful stretching silence between them.

This actress led him back the way they'd come, but instead of turning into the room with the bath she pushed a fire escape through and revealed a concrete

staircase to the street. Cormac felt the blast of the October evening, the sound of traffic, the greasy glint of rain. The actress said, run!

And then, as he advanced towards the stairs: come back through the front if you like.

The steps led to a side street of old, sagging cottages. Here the rain had stopped and it was silent—an imperfect silence, weighed on at the edges by the distant sounds of cars—and peaceful, cosy, with windows of television tumult and lamplight. These brown and sack-like cottages, stuffed down laneways and behind old houses, were worth hundreds of thousands of euros now. He turned and saw the wide gap of Dorset Street. A kebab shop flashed green and yellow neon palm trees: yellow, green.

Behind, and up the stairs, the fire door shut with a clipped metallic clank.

Oh, thank god, Cormac said out loud, laughing.

On the pavement, as people were exiting the building all at once, Alice-Ann pulled on her gloves.

What did you think of that? she asked.

Intense, Cormac decided. Really intense. ◇

Do not wrong a
Korean girl
because she will
fuck you up

Frances Cha

‘You get that from your grandfather,’ my father would say to me, whenever the subject of my writing would come up.

He would say it with satisfaction, pleased that I had inherited *something*, anything at all, from his side of the family.

My grandfather died when my father was five. He had been one of the first Koreans to study for a PhD in America and when he died in an accident in Boston, he left behind four sons and a young widow whose rage and sorrow and subsequent poverty twisted her life. He had been studying Russian Literature.

‘You will have a career and a life surrounded by books.’ This has been the declaration of every fortune teller I have been to in Korea. They take the date and time that I was born and do their calculations on a piece of paper. This type of fortune telling, called *saju*, is not divination or crystal ball-gazing, but rather a study of statistics and history—historically speaking, people with my birth date and time have had this path for thousands of years.

In college, I tried to study other subjects. I really did. I spent my entire freshman year consciously choosing anything but English. I even tried Economics—after all, my father was an economist and I had been pretty good at math in high school, hadn’t I? It was a thorough fail – I had to drop the class after a disastrous second midterm. I seem to remember my father laughing about that, although by then he was already sick.

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I took a job at a well-known Korean company in Seoul after he died. The job was a favor from one of my father's friends. By that time, my mind had already sunk into a dark well. The only thing that brought me joy was following the leader of a K-pop boy band that was taking over the charts in Korea. By joy, I mean that he was all I thought about, so as not to think of other things. I was trying not to talk about having to leave grad school in order to be with my mother.

Do other widows grieve as much as my mother does? It has been eleven years now, and she still weeps in devastation for my father. I used to call her from boarding school, to see what she was up to during the day, and she would tell me that they were at the zoo.

'Your father and I are on the elephant train!' she'd say.

'On a Tuesday? In the middle of the day?'

'He played hooky from work to be with me!'

He brought home flowers and she would yell at him for wasting money. But he still bought them. He took her on his business trips. They had known each other since they were twelve. To this day, my mother is still floundering. Many nights, she is drowning.

In my novel, one of my characters goes to sleep every night listening to a pre-recorded voicemail by the K-pop idol she is obsessed with. Of course, that was me and I was her. I would call in to hear the voicemail of the day, and his

voice would uplift my heart for a few wondrous minutes, and I would play it back several times until I memorized the whole thing.

Over the years, I had several chances to meet this idol star—sometimes through family friends who worked in the entertainment industry, other times through work—but I always refrained. I preferred to adore from afar. I used all my contacts to go see their performances—in concerts, broadcasting studios, variety show filmings—but from an assured distance.

Later, to write the character of Ara—the one who is obsessed with this singer—I delved back into my middle-school years in one of the provinces outside of Seoul. Mine was the first year that the middle schools were designated by a lottery system, and I got cast to one that was the furthest from my house. It was a school on the very outskirts of that already provincial town, surrounded by fields of wildflowers. I took a small rattling village bus there every day, wearing my little red checkered uniform and navy blazer. The girls I became friends with were part of the bad crowd.

Do not wrong a Korean girl, because she will fuck you up. I have doled that advice out over the years. I think the most physical violence I have ever seen in my life was during those years, when girls would drag other girls to the bathroom and punch them senseless. Boys would get into gang fights under bridges at night and we would watch. They would smash each other's heads with wooden

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beams and beer bottles. I wrote about that too, in my book.

I heard that one of the boys in my year went into a vegetative state and that he was on life support. He was always nice to me, and sweet to his girlfriend, who was not as nice. In fact, she caused me a lot of anguish in those years.

In my memory, that school now seems like something out of a fairy tale. I remember walking to my friend's house after school, through endless fields of reeds. I remember screaming a lot during that walk because I would constantly be stepping on frogs. They would pop violently under my feet. I had to wipe the blood and guts off my shoes when I reached her house. It was a restaurant for taxi drivers and her mother was the cashier and lived in the back of the restaurant. I wrote about that, too, but I left out the frogs.

I remember writing my first 'book'. I was perhaps twelve or thirteen and I was visiting my since-estranged oldest uncle in Banghakdong, north of the river. He read the book solemnly—I had stapled together some yellowed paper I found in his study—and put it down and faced me. I was both triumphant and tremulous, but keen to appear blasé.

'A downturned nose would not be considered beautiful,' he said finally. 'In the Western canon, a beautiful nose is an upturned one.'

I was stunned, then profoundly mortified. The story was about a beautiful girl with golden hair and freckles and, apparently, an ugly nose. He who had

‘This time, I am writing about
Korean beauty. Dreaming about
a K-pop star. Fights in middle
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middle of a forest.’

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translated numerous books about white people into Korean was surely an authority on how to describe white beauty in books.

I have a sneaking suspicion that the reception to publishing my first ‘real’ book will be quite similar to that experience twenty years ago. Essays I have read by debut writers stress as much. *Very few people you know will actually read your novel. The ones who do, you will wish they hadn’t.* Currently, happily, I have no reviews except for the ones asked of my precious few writer friends. This time, I am writing about Korean beauty. Dreaming about a K-pop star. Fights in middle school. A hanok estate in Cheongju. An orphanage in the middle of a forest. It is unfathomable that the words I have been writing by myself in the dark will be naked on a bookshelf, for however brief a time, for anyone to pick up, to pick out mistakes and reject—to have an opinion on.

Thrilled. Terrified. I am waiting. ◇



ONTRANSLATION

Translation
as Apology,
Correction and
Bridge

Julianne Pachico

First of all, I must make a confession: I'm not actually a translator. I know, I know—who am I to discuss the impact of translation, right? However, I am a bilingual and bicultural writer, and I believe the perspective I have to offer is a valid one. I would argue that my previous writing has functioned as an act of translation: more specifically, a translation of Colombia for English-speaking audiences, and of my childhood to my adult self.

My parents (from the US and UK) lived in Colombia for thirty-five years, working in international development as left-wing hippie economists and sociologists. I lived in Colombia for the first eighteen years of my life, arguably the most formative. I grew up in a bilingual environment: English at home, Spanish everywhere else. But if I'm honest, I never truly reconciled switching between the two languages. My English life and Spanish life were separated, and I don't think I was ever truly able to join them. I was good at crossing between the two, but I always kept them separate—two different parts of my life. Every time I go back to Colombia now (which is at least once a year), I feel like a different person when I speak Spanish. More lively, more vivid, more—me.

Writing fiction has become my attempt to correct what feels like a shameful error to me: my inability to bridge these two languages, these two cultures, two lives. Overall, my fiction so far has been an attempt to translate my childhood to my

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adult self. It is my attempt to understand what I ignored as a child—what I didn't pay attention to.

In Colombia, I was always treated as a foreigner—I lived there on a visa acquired through my parents' jobs; when I travel back there now, it's on a tourist visa—but in both the UK and U.S. I am treated as a foreigner as well, thanks to my accent and lack of cultural knowledge (don't ask me about U.S. college football, or famous UK comedians). My family was among the few foreigners who stayed in the neighbourhood during the violence that arose in the 90s and 2000s, in my hometown of Cali. The other international students at my school slowly dwindled, trickling into the single digits as one after the other moved away, until my sister and I were the only 'gringo' students left in our increasingly tinier classes.

As a result of the violence around us, which manifested itself in a variety of ways—most intensely in the form of kidnappings of fellow classmates, least intensely in the form of whispered rumours during lunch breaks about how our middle-school Colombian history teacher had been fired for 'dating a communist'—my family withdrew in an attempt to keep us safe. I didn't ride on a bus until I was eighteen years old. I was never allowed to go out alone without saying where I was going. When my sister and I walked the dogs, our chauffeur-slash-bodyguard-slash-gardener-slash-all-round-handyman strolled at a respectable distance behind us, keeping an eye on 'things'.

Whatever these things were, I never thought too long or hard about, but each time there was another incident (a mass kidnapping at the local church my father attended, hostile phone calls to my mother that resulted in an extra bodyguard) it made a thrumming pit in my stomach open up again, a pit that was so familiar and ever-present that it barely seemed to be there at all, let alone worth commenting on.

It wasn't until I moved away from Colombia that I became interested in it. While living there, my main concerns were the books I read, the friends I hung out with and the overblown, intricate melodramas I invented in my head, as intensely sensitive and introverted teenagers (which I most definitely was) are wont to do. But I enjoyed reading about Colombia after moving away: novels, non-fiction, works of history and journalism. I marvelled at the history I didn't know about, the civil wars of the nineteenth century, the failed attempts at land reform—why hadn't we been taught about any of this in school? Why hadn't my classmates and I been more upset or disturbed by the Trujillo and Bojaya massacres, which I learned about in college when reading an anthology of famous human rights violations? Or maybe we *had* heard about them, and we simply hadn't been paying attention.

Writing fiction has been my attempt to correct this error: to translate this inattention into attention. In an interview with *BOMB* magazine,

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Colombian novelist Juan Gabriel Vásquez spoke of a similar struggle he experienced when trying to write about Colombia—more specifically, Colombia’s violence and its legacy. ‘Part of my crisis,’ he writes, ‘was this inability to write about Colombia. I didn’t understand my country, its history, or its politics.’ For Vásquez, ‘Literature is a question of method. Your job as a writer is to find the method that is best suited for the story you want to convey, the characters you want to conjure up.’

It is through the writing of *The Lucky Ones* and *The Anthill* that I have slowly come to terms with my method as a writer. And for this method, translation is key. Both of my books are attempts to translate my childhood: the violence and racism that surrounded us everywhere. The violence and racism that seemed everywhere and nowhere at once, normal and unexceptional, not worth commenting on.

Writing my first two books has also led to my interest in translation in a more practical sense—that of translating literary works (fiction and non-fiction) from Spanish to English. I’ve been extremely lucky to have been put into situations that have made me think more critically about translation. Last year I was invited to attend a workshop in Buenos Aires hosted by AATI (the Argentine Association of Translators and Interpreters), during which a group of translators spent a week translating a story from *The Lucky Ones* from English into Spanish. At one point, I

‘Up till that point, I’d never had the experience of seeing the words I’d written on the page as something so *physical* before.’

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was asked to stand up and act out a gesture from the short story in question. ‘Is she *pressing* the hand against his mouth,’ the translators asked, frowning thoughtfully, ‘or *wrapping* it? Can you show us?’ Standing in front of the room, I tried to act out *pressing*, rather than *wrapping*. Pressing is a quick gesture, immediate and sharp. With wrapping, my fingers became vine-like, tendrils extending. Which did I mean? Which did I want to use?

Up till that point, I’d never had the experience of seeing the words I’d written on the page as something so *physical* before. What to me was a throwaway line, a mindlessly chosen phrase, was discussed with an intensity I’d never before witnessed in any writing workshop, either as a student or as a teacher. What did it say about the relationship between the two characters, to have someone *press* rather than *wrap* their hand on the other’s mouth? What did it say about their feelings towards each other?

It sounds like such a small and trite example, but the smallness and triteness is the very point. It also sounds terrible to say this, but before then, I’d never thought about how important words are—the significance of what you choose, as opposed to what you don’t. Up till then, writing to me had been more of an intuitive act, akin to fumbling around in the dark. Translation has made me think harder about the impact of the words I choose. It has made me a better editor, a better teacher. And it has made me a better writer: more deliberate and

intentional.

There is something both profoundly satisfying and infinitely frustrating about moving between two different languages. For the time being, I write fiction in English, because I live in England (for now). That could (and probably will) change. But let me tell you a secret: I am translating works of my own now—slowly, secretly, without hope or expectation. It feels like a private ritual, a form of training. I take inspiration from Daniel Hahn, Sophie Hughes, Jen Calleja. I don't know what will become of what I'm translating. I don't know where it will go. I don't know if what I am translating will ever be seen by anyone other than me. All I know for sure is there's a feeling of deep satisfaction that comes from completing a paragraph. One paragraph at a time. Day by day. Bit by bit. It feels like building a bridge between then and now, my Spanish past and my English present. It feels like . . . writing. ◇

ON DJINNS AND WISHES

This Story Will Save Your Life

Deepa Anappara

D *jinn Patrol on the Purple Line* is a part coming-of-age story and part-detective novel about three children who venture into the most dangerous corners of a sprawling Indian city to find their missing friends. The main narrator is a nine-year-old boy named Jai, a fan of reality cop shows. When children start disappearing from his neighbourhood, he decides to use the crime-solving techniques he has seen on TV to find them, and asks his friends Pari and Faiz for help. What starts as a game for the trio turns sinister as the disappearances edge closer to home.

Djinn Patrol draws from a spate of real-life disappearances of children in metropolitan India to examine the impact of a tragedy on an impoverished community neglected by the outside world. But we see the events unfold through the eyes of children, and they bring their humour, warmth, and belief in ghosts and djinns to the story.

Djinns, though variously interpreted across different regions, are considered to be spirits that may be good or bad, can possess humans and appear in human or animal form. The following extract is about the ruins of a palace where good djinns are believed to live; people pray to them, hoping the djinns will grant them their wishes. After the institutions of the State abdicate their responsibility towards the characters in this novel, they turn to the supernatural for help. Mythical stories, about ghosts and djinns that will protect them or take revenge on their behalf, offer both the storyteller and the

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listener a degree of comfort, and a sense of control that is absent in their own lives.

AN EXTRACT FROM *DJINN PATROL* *ON THE PURPLE LINE*

We believe djinns moved into this palace around the time our last kings died, their hearts broken by the crooked victories of white men who claimed to be our rulers. No one knows where the djinns came from, if Allah-Ta'ala sent them, or if they were summoned here by the feverish utterances of the devout. They have been here for so long, they must have watched the walls of this palace crumble, the pillars soften with moss and creepers, and pythons slither over cracked stones like dreams wavering in the light of dawn. Every year they must feel the wind trembling the champa trees in the garden, shearing flowers as fragrant as vials of attar.

We can't see djinns unless they take the form of a black dog or a cat or a snake. But we feel their presence the moment we step into these palace grounds, in the rustle that tickles the backs of our necks like the branch of a shrub, in the breeze billowing our shirts, and in the lightness we feel in our hearts as we pray. We can see you are frightened, but *listen, listen*, we have been caretakers of this djinn-palace for years, and we can assure you, they have never harmed anyone. Yes, there are bad djinns

and trickster djinns and infidel djinns who want to possess your soul, but the ones who live here, the djinns who read the letters that believers have written to them, they are the good djinns Allah-Ta'ala shaped out of smokeless fire to serve us. They are saints.

Look now at the crowd thronging these grounds, flinging cubes of meat up into the sky for kites to catch, leaving foil bowls of milk for dogs on the odd chance that one of the kites or the dogs is a djinn in another form. These believers are from all faiths. It's not just us Muslims, Faiz—you said that's your name, right?—Faiz, see, here there are Hindus and Sikhs and Christians and maybe even Buddhists. They come here clutching the letters they have written to the djinns, and they will paste their petitions on the powdery walls. At night, when the gates are locked, and the ash tips of joss sticks collapse to the ground, the djinns will read the letters scented with incense and flowers. They read fast, not like us. If they find your wish genuine, they will grant your request. As caretakers of the djinns' home, we have seen that happen many times. But don't take our word for it. Over there by the champa tree, you will notice a grey-haired man barking orders at four boys carrying cauldrons of biryani. For years his daughter had a constant cough that no medicine could cure. He took her to government hospitals, to private hospitals that looked like five-star hotels, to a godwoman who lived in a hut by the Arabian Sea, and to a baba's

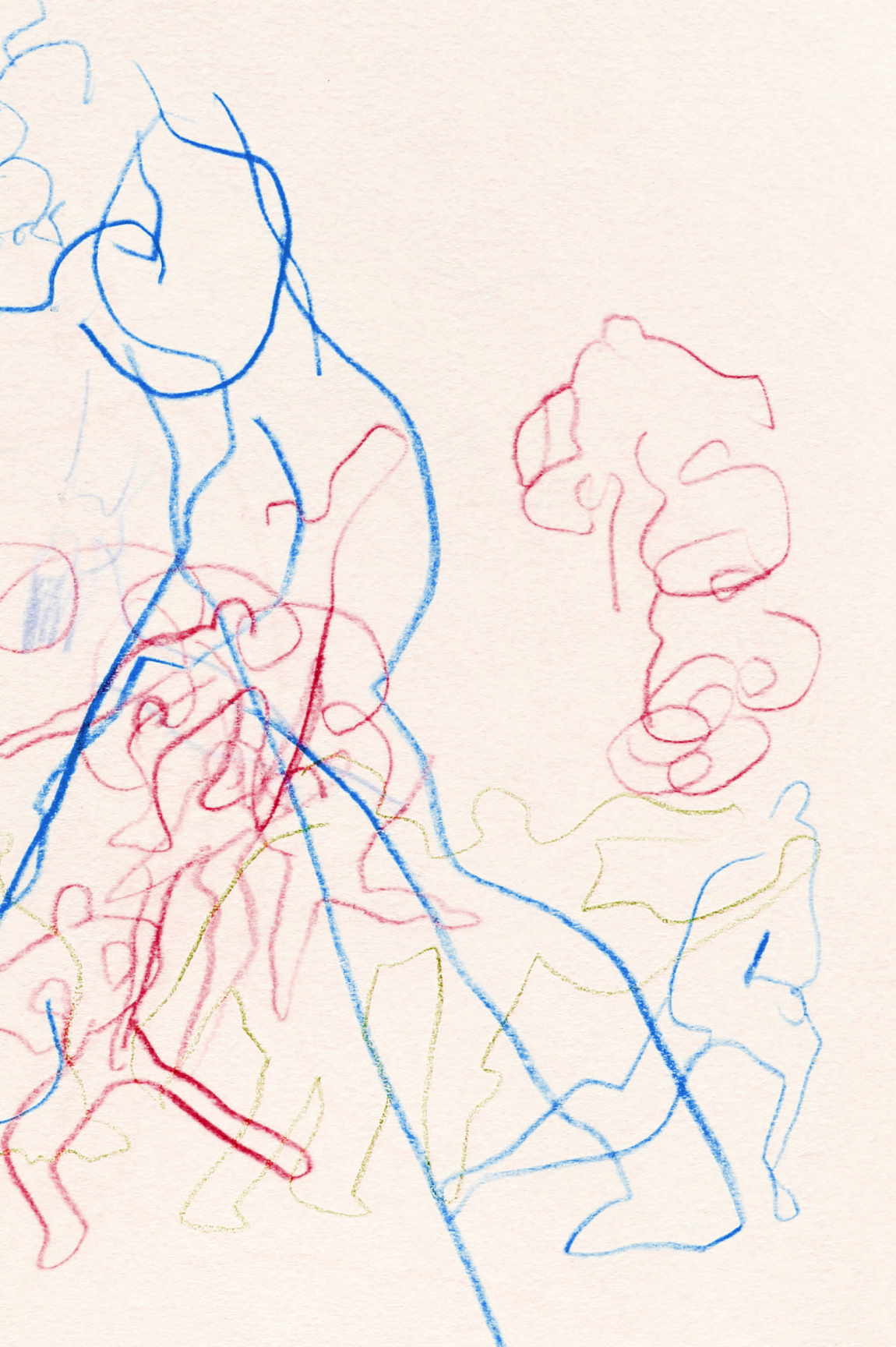
‘We believe djinns moved into this palace around the time our last kings died, their hearts broken by the crooked victories of white men who claimed to be our rulers.’

ashram high in the Himalayas. She was X-rayed and CT-scanned and MRI-ed. She wore rings with blue gems and green gems and purple gems for good health. Nothing helped. Then someone told them about this place and the father came here with a letter for the djinn-saints. He would have done anything for his daughter by then, pulled out all his teeth and tied them up in a satin cloth like pearls if that was what the djinns wanted.

His letter to the djinns was brief. Some people write pages listing their grievances, and they attach copies of birth certificates and marriage certificates and sales deeds of houses that are being divided, unequally and disagreeably, between brothers and sisters and uncles and aunts. The father, however, just wrote: *Please take pity on us and cure my daughter of her cough.* He showed the letter to us, that's how we know. He pinned a photo of his daughter from *before* to his letter, *before* the cough made a rattling skeleton out of her.

And now, see for yourself. The daughter is the girl in the green salwar-kameez standing by the champa. Her hair is covered fully with a scarf so as not to tempt the djinns—even the good djinns have a weakness for beautiful girls, we will be honest with you—but doesn't she look well? There's colour in her cheeks, strength in her bones, not a bend in her spine, and her cough is gone. She's getting married next month. The father is thanking the djinns by feeding biryani to visitors. You have done the right thing by coming here. Now you must go

inside, join your ammi and your brother. It's darker there, certainly. The curls of smoke from joss sticks and candles have stained the walls black. ◇



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Five
Dials