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Five
Dials

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GUEST EDITOR
Sophie Mackintosh

ILLUSTRATION
Manshen Lo

ASSISTANT EDITORS
Hermione Thompson
Craig Taylor

PUBLISHER
Simon Prosser

DIGITAL CONTENT
PRODUCER
Zainab Juma

FIVE DIALS STAFFERS
Emma Brown
Mary Chamberlain
Hannah Chukwu

THANKS TO
Maria Garbutt-Lucero
Chloe Davies

DESIGN
Andrew LeClair

@fivedials

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CONTRIBUTORS

RACHAEL ALLEN's first collection of poems, *Kingdomland*, is published by Faber & Faber. She is the co-author of a number of collaborative artists' books, including *Nights of Poor Sleep* with Marie Jacotey, and *Almost One. Say Again!* with JocJonJosch. She writes for *ArtReview*, *TANK* magazine and *Music & Literature* and is the poetry editor for *Granta* magazine and *Granta Books*. She currently a Burgess Fellow at The University of Manchester.

MARY JEAN CHAN is a London-based poet, lecturer and editor from Hong Kong. Her debut collection, *Flèche* (Faber & Faber, 2019), was the winner of the 2019 Costa Book Award for Poetry. Chan has twice been shortlisted for the Forward Prize for Best Single Poem and is the recipient of a 2019 Eric Gregory Award. She is Lecturer in Creative Writing (Poetry) at Oxford Brookes University.

LUCIE ELVEN has written for *Granta*, *NOON* and the *London Review of Books*. Her first novel will be published by Soft Skull in 2021.

NICOLE FLATTERY's work has been published in the *London Review of Books*, *The Stinging Fly* and *The White Review*. Her story collection *Show Them A Good Time* was published by Bloomsbury in the UK and *The Stinging Fly* in Ireland. She lives in Galway.

YARA RODRIGUES FOWLER is a writer from South London. Her first novel, *Stubborn Archivist*, was longlisted for the Desmond Eliot and Dylan Thomas Prizes, and Yara was shortlisted for the Sunday Times Young Writer of the Year 2019. She's writing her second novel now, for which she received the Society of Authors' John C Lawrence Award and was shortlisted for the Eccles Centre and Hay Festival Writers' Award. Her essays and articles have been published in *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *Vogue* and other publications. Yara is also a trustee of Latin American Women's Aid, an organisation that runs the only two refuges in Europe for and by Latin American women.

MEGAN HUNTER's first novel, *The End We Start From*, was published in 2017 in the UK, US, and Canada, and has been translated into eight languages. It was shortlisted for Novel of the Year at the Books Are My Bag Awards, longlisted for the Aspen Words Prize, was a Barnes and Noble Discover Awards finalist and won the Forward Reviews Editor's Choice Award. Her writing has appeared in *The White Review*, *The TLS*, *Literary Hub*, *BOMB* Magazine and elsewhere. Her second novel, *The Harpy*, will be published in 2020.

CONTRIBUTORS

MANSHEN LO is a visual artist living in London. Her approach to drawing has its roots in East Asia, whilst taking influence from sequential art and the ligne-claire style. Combining realistic line work with minimalistic compositions, she investigates the subtle tension between humans and urban space in contemporary life. Her selected clients include Pentagram, RIMOWA, *Bloomberg Businessweek*, *The New Yorker*, *New York Times*, *The Poetry Review*, MTV, and *The Atlantic*.

SOPHIE MACKINTOSH is the author of *The Water Cure*, which was longlisted for the Man Booker Prize 2018 and won a Betty Trask Award 2019. She has also won the White Review Short Story Prize and the Virago/Stylist Short Story Competition, and has been published in *Granta*, *The White Review* and *TANK* magazine among others. Her second novel, *Blue Ticket*, is published in August 2020.

VICTORIA MANIFOLD is a writer from County Durham. She was the runner up of the 2019 Berlin Writing Prize and was shortlisted for the White Review Short Story Prize in 2016 and 2018.

BRIDGET MINAMORE is a British-Ghanaian writer from south-east London. She is a poet, editor, critic, and journalist, and works in TV production. *Titanic* (Out-Spoken Press), her debut pamphlet of poems on modern love and loss, was published in May 2016. She is currently working on

a new book of poetry/prose, an extract of which was published in anthology *New Daughters of Africa* (Myriad) in 2019.

VANESSA ONWUEMEZI is a writer and poet living in London. She completed an MA in Creative Writing at the University of Birkbeck, 2018. Her story *At the Heart of Things* won the The White Review Short Story Prize 2019. She was a Showcase writer featured by the Literary Consultancy, UK, 2018, and has received a commendation for her flash fiction, *The Crossing*, from *Bare Fiction* magazine, 2017.

SOPHIE ROBINSON is a writer living in Norwich. Her poetry collection *Rabbit* was published by Boiler House Press in 2018. She is currently working on a piece of experimental nonfiction about addiction, sobriety, dead celebrities and bodies of water. She teaches Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia.

ANBARA SALAM is half Palestinian and half Scottish and grew up in London. She has a PhD in Theology and now lives in Oxford. Her first novel, *Things Bright and Beautiful* was published by Fig Tree in the UK in 2018. Her forthcoming novel, *Belladonna*, will be published in the USA by Berkley in June 2020, and in July 2020 in the UK by Fig Tree.

Five Dials

SABA SAMS is a fiction writer based in London. Her stories have appeared in *The Stinging Fly* and *The Tangerine*. She was shortlisted for The White Review Short Story Prize in 2019. She is working on a forthcoming collection.

KATHRYN SCANLAN is the author of *Aug 9—Fog* and *The Dominant Animal*. Her work has been published in *NOON*, *Granta*, *Another Gaze*, and *The Paris Review*. She lives in Los Angeles.

OLIVIA SUDJIC is the author of *Sympathy* (her 2017 debut novel), *Exposure* (an extended personal essay published in 2018), and her latest novel, *Asylum Road*, will be published in February 2021. Her work has also appeared in publications including *The New York Times*, *Paris Review*, *Guardian* and *Financial Times*.

ON JOURNEYS

W hat do we say when a year knocks the air out of us? When we started to put this issue together, the world was a different place. (I'm sorry to everybody I told, grandly, at the New Year's Eve party that it would be the best year of their life.) I was asked to guest-edit the summer edition of *Five Dials* and I decided to put together an issue on journeys: about where a road can take you and how it can change you. I had just finished writing a road-trip novel myself and had been spending a lot of time thinking about the seedy, celluloid glamour of roadside motels, how a physical journey can reflect an emotional one, the rich folklore of the quest and the lure of the unfamiliar, and how sometimes you just aren't able to outrun yourself. Ironically, I hadn't thought much about the perilous and transformational

journeys that 2020 might hold.

But then: a halt, a pause, a shock to the system. A major diversion on the route. The magazine issue that was conceived pre-pandemic turned out to be more fitting than I could have imagined. Suddenly we could not travel at all, and I found myself hungrier than ever for elsewhere, and for writing that could get me there, could throw me into the stratosphere if it wanted to. From classics (Jean Rhys, James Baldwin) to amazing contemporary fiction (Mieko Kawakami, Brit Bennett, Marieke Lucas Rijneveld) to well-loved favourites (Fleur Jaeggy, Renata Adler), the writing that kept me focused all had imagination, beauty and a strong sense of place. It grounded me and reminded me to keep putting one foot in front of the other.

If Covid-19 was a roadblock, what does that make the death of George Floyd? Another step along a road we have been walking for centuries? There is nothing unexpected, nothing new about the deadliness and the pervasiveness of racism. Ours is a society and a culture built on the wealth of colonialism and slavery, and it shows. Here in the UK, Black people are twice as likely to die in police custody as non-Black detainees. BAME patients are 50 per cent more likely to die from Covid-19 than white ones. Three summers ago, seventy-two Londoners died in the Grenfell Tower fire, the majority of them people of colour, and three years on, still no justice has been done. And this spring, Belly Mujinga was fatally assaulted at Victoria

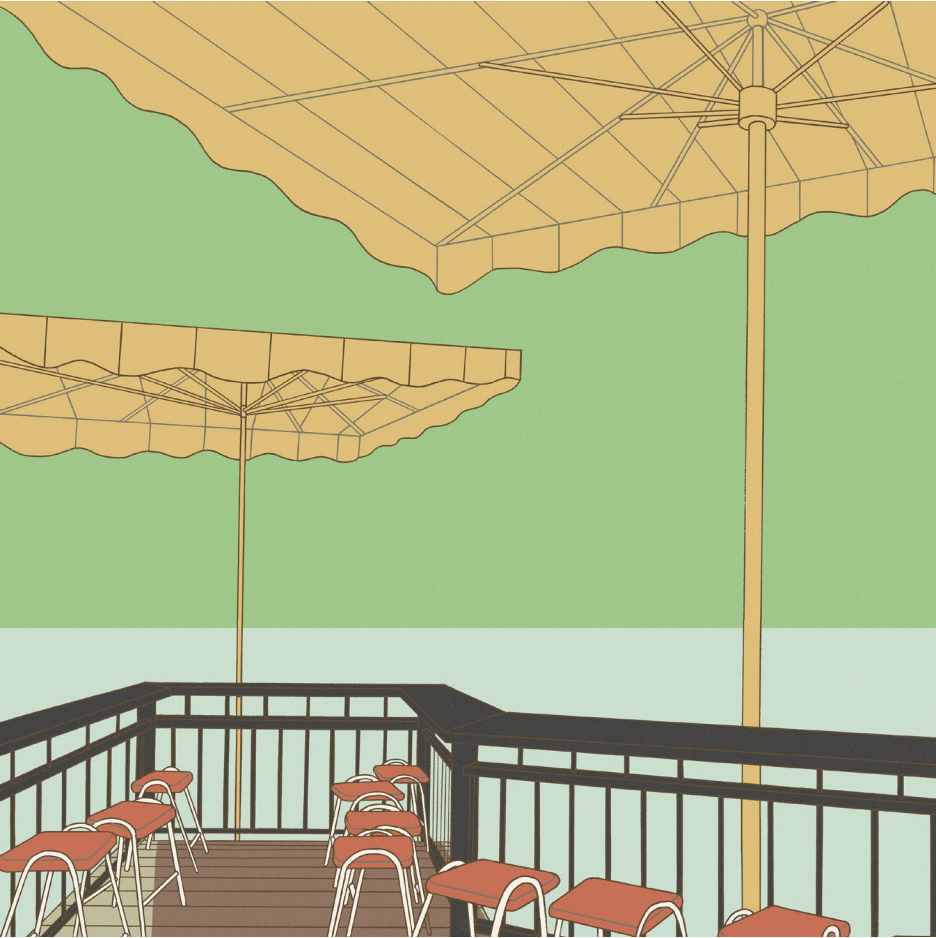
A LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Station just doing her job.

So we find ourselves in the summer of 2020. Across the US and across the world, protests have erupted in response to the killing of George Floyd and the killings of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Rayshard Brooks, Dominique Fells, Riah Milton and so many others: protests for justice and accountability, for the freedom to live, for an end to white supremacy. My words can never be sufficient to express the scale and the gravity of the loss that inspired this movement. But I can say thank you to everyone who has shared their journey, thank you to everyone paving the way. We stand with you and walk with you. *Five Dials* is always free, but if you enjoy reading this issue, please consider donating the price of a magazine to the Black Lives Matter fund.

Despite everything, I am reassured and dazzled by the writing gathered here, which takes us forward and backward and anchors us in the present, which reminds us of things lost and things that will return and things yet to come. Thank you, fiction. Thank you, poetry. Thank you, everything in between. And thanks to you especially, the writers of this issue, for your energy, beauty and vision. I'm so glad that you've brought us along for the ride.

—Sophie Mackintosh, June 2020



ON LOSING A CAT

softly a bell rings

Sophie Robinson

I have to tell you the story of how I lost my cat.

How to tell you the order of things.

I left my cat locked outside yesterday morning in a rush to get to work. I left the house early and was out until midnight because I went to work and taught my classes and then I went straight to a twelve-step meeting and then straight to dinner and didn't come home until after that. My neighbour says he saw my cat in our little courtyard at eleven thirty, but between eleven thirty and midnight the cat vanished. A whole night and a whole day have passed, softly, hour by hour, and he is still not home. This has never happened before.

I keep thinking about those thirty minutes. I keep thinking of how there's no right decision. I could've so easily come home, even just to let the cat in, but I didn't, and now my cat might be dead. But it seemed like an okay choice at the time and would still seem like an okay choice if my cat hadn't disappeared somewhere between eleven thirty and midnight to a place I don't know, a place I can't see in my mind, and for reasons I don't understand.

My cat is somewhere in the world, alive or dead, probably somewhere very close by. I keep thinking that really my friend C was very tired at dinner last night; at maybe ten thirty I saw her look at her watch in a certain way. I should have left then, and come home in time to let my cat in, but the other woman she'd invited to dinner was intriguing and cute and I had a little crush on her so I wanted

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to stay up and talk for longer. I have had a lonely, long week and also I had drunk three cans of Diet Coke whilst the other women drank maybe two bottles of wine so they were tipsy and a little sleepy but I was high on aspartame and in a fun sober mood. For once.

It is eight months today since I last got drunk. I used to get drunk every day. I watch what other people drink and keep tabs on it and should not. I find it hard to let go of my habits.

I am thirty-one years old and I am learning how to be alone. I have just come out of a relationship. This is where the cat comes from. We were together for five years but we were breaking up for about two of those. Back and forward. There were long periods of time where we mainly talked about the cat, who we got as a kitten off Gumtree when we moved together into a mouse-ridden flat in East London. The landlord wouldn't pay for an exterminator and the cat was the only way to get rid of the mice. My ex was worried it was a stupid decision but I had wanted a cat for the longest time so I brought one home one Monday afternoon. A fat white kitten with black patches around his eyes like a panda. We agreed that he was the softest thing we had ever touched and we loved him like the sun. He slept between us in a small double bed, paws tucked under his chin, and woke us up at dawn with his wet pink nose. He liked to watch us have sex. We nicknamed him *the sweetest creep in town*.

My ex's ex-therapist says there's no such thing

as a good or bad decision. There's just this flat lake of choices glittering on the horizon. I am so afraid that my beautiful cat is dead or hurt or frightened. My chest aches. My ex texts: *It's okay S. We'll find him. Don't worry x*. She is one hundred miles away in our old home. I think of her there, worried. I cannot have killed our cat. My heart is a little broken already from all of our history and our distance, and from a tiny love affair I just had with someone I truly adore. I'm going to call this person F.

What can I tell you about F. F is foreign. F is a famous artist. F is twice my age. We had one sweet strange weekend together. I think I lost myself. I wanted more. F did not. I played my cards and now I feel foolish, lost. *My name is S, my name is S*.

F is touring Europe giving talks about their work at art galleries and universities and I am back in my little city, lonely and pining. There's nothing less desirable than someone who's made themselves totally available to you, which is what I did with F from the start.

It's hard to be nobody's favourite person. Maybe I'm dr snaxx's favourite person. I'm the one with the sachets of meat, the one he loves to watch pee, the one whose pillow he sleeps on, the one whose face he tenderly tries to lick in his creepiest moments of midnight intimacy. *The sweetest creep in town*. I got back here at midnight but if I hadn't wanted to impress this vague crush by boasting about my poems, my love affairs, my famous artist friends, by asking what I thought were

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great questions about her research into feminist film history, my cat would have been waiting for me on the doorstep like he always is. And there is no room in my head or my heart for a crush; it's all work and friends and my ex and dr snaxx and now F, so of course nothing happened anyway.

And if I think back to that conversation last night I think actually I talked too much, was too forceful in my desire to make up for something, to fill in the spaces where I couldn't feel myself. My head hurts from working and my heart hurts from my brief exposure to F, to sex and desire, and my heart hurts from my ex who I got this cat with, from all of my thinking about all the thousands of tiny reasons our long relationship broke down, from the hundreds of ways in which we failed each other or made the wrong decision for no good reason, when it seems to me now we could so easily have not. There was no point at which things seemed like they were going wrong and then suddenly there was no point at which they seemed like they could go right again. There was just a path and then a lostness. It's the moment of deviation I'm missing. The decision to lose must have happened without us somehow.

I cried at the photocopier at work yesterday. I was thinking of F and how they really don't adore me and probably never will and how I'm nobody's favourite person. Not nothing but not much, maybe a dot. On a piece of paper. If the piece of paper was F's life then yes, I would be a dot. The loneliness has

been pacing around inside me like an animal in my home, the home of my body, and I have been trying to feed it with work until it sleeps.

In the absence of people I am trying to make things happen. I wrote to a literary agent and haven't heard back yet and I wrote for the fourth time to a big publisher who said last summer that they might like to do my book but now it's February and they never answer my emails. The book is finished. It sits on the desk. It is burning a hole in my mind. It gets less good each day. I cannot wait for anything, I cannot sit with anything for long.

And if I think back over my fortnight or so of pining for F and nursing my loneliness like a pet I think I don't deserve dr snaxx, this sweet animal who truly loves me and has been a witness to the darkest times of my life, has seen me drunk and high and lost and low and waited for me to come home from parties for long nights and waited for me to get out of bed for long days and never once before run away.

The night F called to tell me we were really not on the same page I sobbed. I felt humiliated. My loneliness was very large. My cat climbed onto my chest, rubbed his chin on my chin, and I swatted him away. There's nothing less desirable than someone who's making themselves totally available to you. And besides, I couldn't bear to be anything but alone.

It's hard not to be loved but it's hard to

ON LOSING A CAT

be loved too, hard not to spoil good things by wanting them too much or not enough, hard not to push love away when you're lonely, hard to love responsibly, from the right distance and in the right direction. I have killed some of the tenderest things in my life. I have also burned myself out for drugs and booze and people who don't truly love me. I love my cat like a saint. He shits in a shallow plastic box in my kitchen and if he comes home I will clean it out cheerfully every day after work and never again unreasonably resent him for it.

It's getting dark now and I want to do one more sweep of the neighbourhood to find my cat this time but I'm afraid to fail. I don't live in a residential area. I live in the middle of this little city like an animal or a tourist. I live in a little house opposite another little house in a small courtyard. This courtyard is surrounded on three sides by alleyways that lead to the back entrances of shops, bars and restaurants. Beyond that there is a market square and many busy roads. On the fourth side of our courtyard there is a car park which is often empty except for two plastic picnic chairs. The alleyways are where people from the kitchens of the restaurants go to smoke on their breaks, and where they keep their bins and rat traps. I walk aimlessly up and down these alleyways making the little *tututututut* sounds I make to summon my cat and think, *I have never felt so lonely in my life*. I come home again. I think I should just sit here and wait for him to come back and then I sit and sit until I

can't sit any more so I resolve to go out and find him.

I do this many times over. Each time I leave the house it is with total conviction that I will find him this time. I play the whole thing out. I will see some part of him under a piece of the everyday world—a paw or a tail—and it will all be so obvious: *of course! that's where he was*. I'll scoop him up and he'll be spooked but unharmed and I'll laugh with relief and my life will seem ordered and bright again. I'll phone my ex to tell her and she'll be proud of me for finding him, for being responsible, for making good decisions. It will all be a story I can tell myself, can tell other people.

But when I go out there for real it's all different. The landscape of my neighbourhood seems utterly unmanageable. The sky is doing something between snow and rain. The cold makes my hands and face hurt. There's oil leaking from huge cans behind the smokehouse and broken glass and spilled beer outside the bars and a guy pissing in a doorway and two people laughing in a kind of staccato way that makes me flinch and everywhere seems like a hiding place. The world is a jumble, nothing has any order or logic to it, everywhere things are scattered here or there like tumbling dice.

I feel frightened of everyone I see. I want to ask them if they've seen my cat, I want to call for my cat, but feel ashamed to say his stupid name, the name I gave him. Earlier today I phoned every veterinary clinic in this city to check if dr snaxx had

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been brought in to them overnight. I am afraid he has been hit by a car on one of the many busy roads near my house. I am afraid to find his sweet body squashed. Each time on the phone I had to give his name along with my details: dr s-n-a-x-x. To give your animal a name that is not a serious name is like telling other people that you are also the kind of person who would lose your cat or leave them to die because you care more about your job or your tiny love affairs than you do for living things that need you. That you are a person who makes poor choices. A person who emails and gets no reply. A person whose texts are boring. A person who is not exciting to others. A person who could not stop drinking. A person who nearly killed themselves for no reason. A person who does not have a book contract. A person who does not understand how to make life work.

The search seems more hopeless each time. Every place I look for the cat seems like a stupid place to look because it's not *everywhere* and more importantly he's not there. I start thinking the reason I can't find him is because I've lost the conviction that he's under or behind a certain thing before I've even bent my knees to look. I can't visualize the moment of discovery until I'm back in the safety of my lonely home. I look under the same bin or car three or four times for no reason. I'm acutely aware that I'm on the wrong side of everything, seeing the ugly secret parts of the city, what it spits out, its engines, the seepage. Why did I

choose to live here? I feel guilty and feral.

In all honesty I'm not looking for my cat very much at all now. I look in maybe two or three places and feel so dispirited and hopeless that I go and do something else: loiter in the supermarket, get a coffee, a sandwich, browse the department store nearby. I start to think maybe I never had a cat. I start to think that the cat is certainly dead. There is no wrong answer, there is no wrong decision. Every time I turn the corner back into my courtyard I am certain my cat will be outside the front door waiting to be let in like he always is. He isn't.

When I'm alone I realize I can convince myself of anything. My tiny affair with F can take on any shape or form or feel depending on my mood. It could be the most or least important thing to ever happen to me. My cat can be dead or alive or found or lost for any number of reasons. The imposition of order upon the universe is a fiction.

F says or has said or I think has said that all feelings are equally interesting, but I don't feel interesting today. Nothing I'm saying to you is interesting. I especially have nothing interesting to say to F, who I suspect is annoyed at me for giving them a cold I didn't realize I had when we had sex. F is a very busy and important person. That sounds sarcastic or mean but I mean it truly and warmly, they are the most busy and the most important person I know. And because I know this and because I have these tender feelings for them (for their feelings, for their body) I feel bad that I

ON LOSING A CAT

made them sick.

I am astounded at the vast gulf of space between my apprehension of a certain thing and my acceptance of that thing as fact. Even though F has made it clear in both words and actions that they do not reciprocate my feelings, I still fantasise that if I could do or say just the right thing I could win them over. At work each day during my cigarette breaks I compose endless texts to F in the notes section of my phone, trying different approaches.

lighthearted: *hey how are ya?*

concerned: *how's your cold*

sexy: [picture of my tits]

playful: [picture of two oranges on a table arranged to look like tits]

topical: *saw that new german film we were talking about, so fantastic!*

professional: *how's [amsterdam? milan? zürich? ljubljana?]*

sentimental: *this is the nina simone song I was telling you about*

I don't send any of these texts, or sometimes I do send them. F doesn't reply, or sometimes they do. None of it matters. There are no wrong decisions. Nothing happens for a reason. The worst part is when I send the text because then I have to wait for the reply and my body wasn't built for waiting. I cannot sit with anything for long.

So I don't text or I do text or sometimes I just wait in vain for F to text me. And all the waiting and not waiting and texting and not texting is beside

the point because what I really want to say to F is something with my body or my face or the timbre of my voice, and I am forgetting how to talk like that. To F or to anyone.

But two women of noticeably different ages—what code would allow them to communicate? They face each other without terms or convenient words, with nothing to assure them about the meaning of the movement that carries them toward each other. They have to invent, from a to z, a relationship that is still formless, which is friendship: that is to say, the sum of everything through which they can give each other pleasure.

Michel Foucault, *Friendship as a Way of Life*

I wish I could give F pleasure instead of boring texts and a cold. I don't send the tit picture but I do send the two oranges and a few other things. F replies dutifully only if I ask a specific question:

me: *how are things?*

F: *good*

[two days later]

me: *are you feeling better*

F: *not really*

F does not ask me anything or do anything to encourage dialogue. I try hard to see this as an act of kindness rather than cruelty. I wish I knew what F thought of me. I wish I could find my fucking cat. I need to see things for what they really are. I am so bad at dwelling in what Keats calls negative

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capability: *uncertainties, mysteries, doubts*. My body wasn't built for waiting, I cannot sit with anything for long. The biggest tragedy of this is that's what poetry's supposed to be (a mystery) and I'm supposed to be a poet.

It's dusk. Outside the grey sky's turning black. I'm done with mystery. I dig a torch out of a cupboard, put my coat on, open the front door.



I want to tell you the story of how I found my cat.

I come home heart racing. I am clutching dr snaxx to my chest and can feel his heart thudding against mine. His fur and my coat are covered in burrs and thorns, his paw is cut, my ankles are scratched. I get water and a sachet of meat for dr snaxx which he inhales. I sprinkle little treats all over the floor for him. He chases me around. We dance like this. I feel like a necromancer. My belly feels heavy. My period has started. I am bleeding through my jeans.

Suddenly I can't breathe. I leave dr snaxx to chase treats across the grubby tiles of the kitchen and go upstairs. I run a scalding bath and strip in front of the mirror. There are smudges of blood on the insides of my thighs. A bruise the size of an orange appearing on my arm. *Here I am*. Leg by leg I sink into the bath's thick heat. My womb relaxes and clenches. A thin line of blood cuts the water like a plane in the sky, curls left then right. *My name is S*.

dr snaxx enters the bathroom and curls up on the mat. He is staring at me. I look into his eyes for a long time. I need to accept the difference between us. He will always in some ways be unknowable to me. I can never tell him about the things I do when I am not with him, about my job or my family or my affair with F or what it's like at the supermarket. We walked the same streets today and I saw the world as he sees it just for a second and I became an animal. I dip my head under the water for one long moment and when I come up for air the cat is gone. The room is full of steam. I breathe it all in, softly, whispering:

I am perfectly alone. I am perfectly myself.

I am perfectly alone. I am perfectly myself.

I am perfectly alone. I am perfectly myself.

I want to be honest with you. I truly love dr snaxx and I truly love F. You know that already. I wrote this whole thing after I found my cat because I'm not a monster and I do know how to love, at least some of the time. I had four Diet Cokes at dinner last night, not three. I want so much to be seen by the world but I'm afraid of the strength and force of my desire. Four Diet Cokes.

It's late. I'm finishing this essay after many hours. dr snaxx is asleep by the fire. Softly a bell rings. A text from F flashes on my phone. *Hey you.* A smile slides over me, slow and sudden, like a breaking egg. I shut my eyes and everything shines. My name is S. One day this will all be a story I can tell myself. ◇

FLASH FICTION

Old Meat

Vanessa
Onwuemezi

T here are people like that round here, she says. Leaning against the bold brick wall, some of it bright orange, some of it old tea and spice cakes. Her eyes squint into the wind, it bites, it doesn't put her off. Her face fills my view, cigarette smoke washes away, forehead hard, round, like my eyes are spy holes or her face the back of a spoon. How do you know? I ask. She runs through a long list of broken skin and tears, violation, in her words, of the innocence of a child. She jabs a finger there, at me, her arm a puckered blob, misshapen vase, old meat. They knew what they were doing, I said. They asked for the favours, the sweets and cigarettes, led themselves into dark rooms and locked the doors behind them, never told the truth, never screamed. Screamed, yes, broken skin, she says, look at their arms, thighs, they're screaming. She tells me about her nephew. How she'd squeezed his cheeks in—little balloons—till they were white, to make him laugh. Usually works. But the tears poured out of him and he was all closed up on the matter. Not a word, but there was screaming. A monster in our midst, she says. My head nods. Was that me, or the wind? Only God knows. ◇

HOME IMPROVEMENTS

'Grand Designs'
(series 16,
episode 4)

Yara Rodrigues
Fowler

A note to the reader

Before you start reading —
please play ‘Terra’ by Caetano Veloso out loud.

If you do not speak Portuguese, copy and paste the lyrics into Google Translate, and read that.

A programme called *Grand Designs* came on the TV, they were hungover slumped on the sofa.

Melí said—I like this show it’s a show where they build a house

Catarina nodded.

I know it sounds dry but it’s good. It’s always a house they’ve designed themselves and things fuck up, one time this woman’s husband left her and she had to finish the house alone and live in it

It is like a birth, Catarina said.

Uh huh Or a death where the house is what remains

They cosyed on the sofa. Pulled in the curtains.
Melí made tea.

For that episode Kevin the presenter was in a woodland an hour from London in Essex. He held his hands out around him and walked in walking boots through mud. Hullo! There were no other houses and the trees had thin trunks you could put your arms around but they were tall and thick leaved

HOME IMPROVEMENTS

(dark leaves). There was no light in the woodland

We will build our house in amongst the dark trees, will not disturb the woodland trees, we will sit in the woodland between the dark trees

There was a couple. The man was an architect. I am building—I will build, this house for my wife he said. They had £230,000. She had been a teacher and now was an artist. I am building this house for my wife, the husband said. They were in their fifties, their children were grown up I will build this house for my wife, so that she can paint in it. My wife is in remission from cancer.

Quietly, he showed the presenter a small model version of his design. It was for a black cubed house with only one window. The presenter was hesitant, This house is a risky house Not everyone would want to live in such a house It may seem dark There is only one single window Although it is large. And around them only tall trees The thing is, the architect husband says, is that she needs a reflected light a calm a cool light like this to paint

Day 1 They stand in the mud surrounded by darkness We will not disturb any of the trees the husband said

Day 36 She wants to paint. She talks about painting

Day 78 The digger can't move through the mud, its wheels move There are no other houses in sight

Day 356 This is a risky house you know. They have

Yara Rodrigues Fowler

£240,000

Day 455 She is wearing a hard hat

Day 533 I wonder if I will get ill again. The house is

This house is a labour of love, he says to the camera

Day 548 the house-not-yet-house was looking dark

Not everyone would want to live in such a house

But

Finally—

The trees move close around the finished house right almost to touch its blackness with their finger fronds

Even in the daylight the house sits alone cool and black (and black all over) in the woodland.

Hullo! The husband says welcome welcome Welcome back. They walk through the corridor, dark no windows, and in the kitchen there is a cold lightless greyness too, but then Oh And And then, at the back, at the very back, a full flat glass wall to the woods, and on every wall the leaf to leaf light on every wall on every surface of the black house His painter wife is painting, she looks up

The presenter was crying This is a brave house
It's a labour of love

I love it I love this house. She says, Everyone should build one house in their life, if they can.

The presenter was crying This is a brave house, it is full of the terror of the woodland The terror of the woodland

Melí felt her throat throb and ache. She rubbed her

HOME IMPROVEMENTS

eyes and her face and looked at Catarina, who was crying.

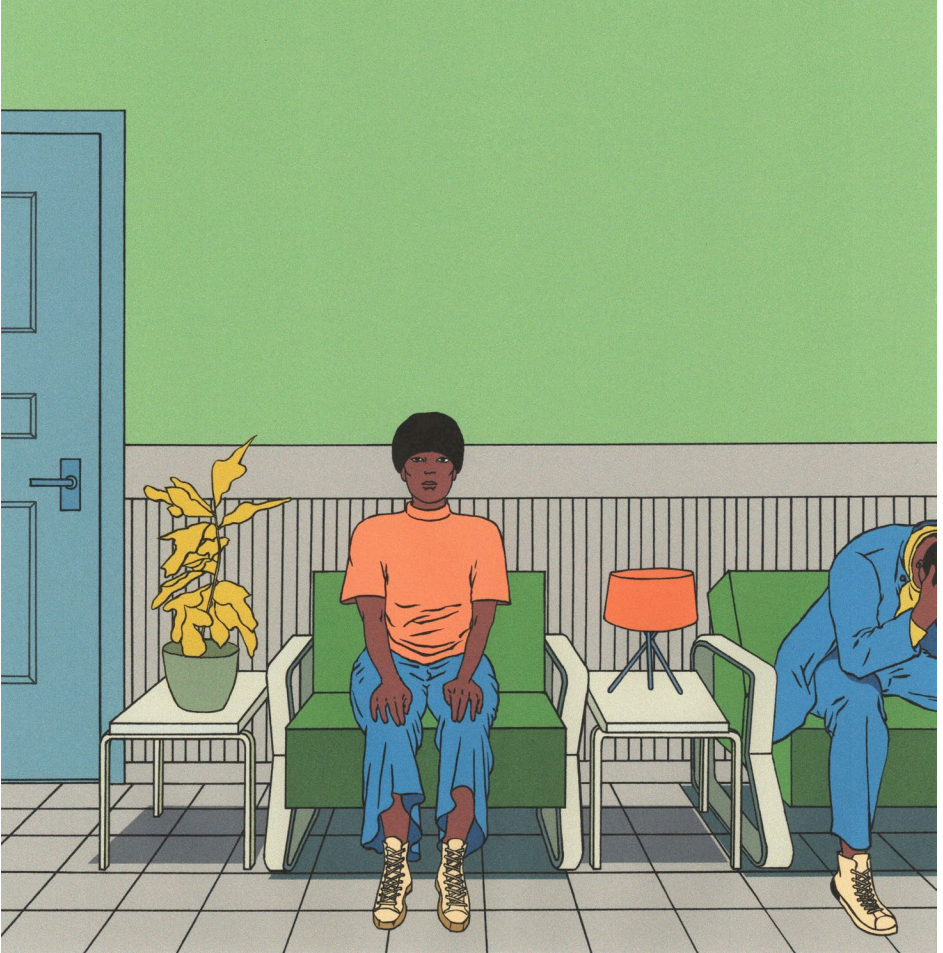
Catarina repeated, mug in her hands, the
Terror of the woodland Terra



Earth above the moon's horizon, as seen from Apollo 8,
24 December 1968 (NASA)

HOME IMPROVEMENTS

Caetano saw the photograph of Earth taken by Apollo 8 in a magazine while in jail in Rio de Janeiro in December 1968. 'Terra' was written about his encounter with that image. A few months later he would be exiled in London, where he would remain until 1972. The military dictatorship in Brazil lasted from 1964 to 1985. ♦



A LOVE STORY

The Night
Crouched
Over the Day

Lucie Elven

A s she stepped outside the morning after her dream about Roy, the night still crouched over the day. In the cold wind, a strand of her hair detached itself from the mass and sailed vertically over her head. Rain swept down the street like a bicycle. But Marion could have walked around like this for hours—a lid had been lifted by the dream and she was realizing she wouldn't be able to get rid of her new feeling for him. She introduced it to the ripe air, the mud, the saturated stone, the damp wet bridges, the blue and grey window frames, the pavements, the trunks of the trees that would make her sneeze when summer came, because they were all male, Roy had told her, part of an area-wide plan to prevent fruits falling on the ground and splitting.

Roy liked obeying, Marion thought, as she walked to her work at the theatre. In the bar the other night, when Roy had been checking his phone and Marion had asked him what was more important, the gossip she was telling him or his starchitect boss Ivor Bryn, he had played his part voluntarily.

'Your gossip, your gossip, your gossip,' he said, and set the phone down just out of reach of his long arms.

During her rehearsal, Marion told the dancers not to bow and relax in the curtain call, just stand in different formations as the lights switched on and off. It broke the illusion of a strict method to have the dancers let go completely, she thought.

A LOVE STORY

All through the month of March, she sent Roy instructions as to where to meet. She made their dates in out-of-the-way buildings at inconvenient times.

Ivor Bryn's application to design a skyscraper, however, was beginning to take over Roy's life. And Ivor Bryn didn't spare himself either, pursuing his application sometimes without eating all day.

In the afternoon commotion at Bryn's architecture firm, Roy learned that Marion wanted to see him in forty minutes, in a pub up a steep hill, on the other side of town, off an underground line with disruptions. One night, when Roy was supposed to be summarizing the progress on the skyscraper proposal, Marion took him dancing and Roy danced as if he was all water, trickling and rushing.

There were more dates . . . There was a time in April when Marion needed a date a day. Roy stopped calling his parents. With that, his brother Andy arrived, sent by his mother, bringing comedy DVDs, some beers, and a plan to stay as long as it took to restore Roy to normality. After two weeks, during which Andy worked on his brother and worried a lot, to the point where he got lost in the city trying to follow Roy to the places he went missing, Andy fled in his van.

Leaning over the designs for the skyscraper, or huddled deep in the office kitchen, which smelled of instant coffee and sweat, the architects called to each other. They noted that Roy, who was meant to

be leading the team, was not in the building. They could assume he would be gone until tomorrow. The day after next, Roy was absent again for a presentation. Hard anger heated them. Fear gripped their insides. They had to do something about these disappearances. It was impossible for them not to take this skyscraper project to completion, not to reach the end of their application. Everyone feared for their families if they lost this commission. The senior partners of the firm started a campaign lobbying Ivor Bryn to have Roy replaced. It was useless; Roy had always been so loyal.

Meanwhile Marion's dancers practised on the stage, making their skulls fall to the right, their shoulders to the left. They were telling the story of an immortal Beast. At the end of the piece, the tallest dancer's body was searched for with lanterns and found covered in her coat, planted, still standing, against the back wall. Had the other girls tried to save her? They were splattered with blood. How strong the Beast must have been, to have dragged such a heavy body all that distance. ◇

ON APOCALYPSE

Rachael Allen

FROM 'GOD COMPLEX'

i

I intellectualize the sky
that feels like it's opening up
but that is just my mind
following a ratty heron
as it blows through open space
towards a bad bit of cloud
more cerebral than I'd like.

+

The heron watched changes
into a mucky bubble
the dirty-linen colour of gum
and with that old chemical smell
of gum. Sere scenery all around.
I lie under the meshed structure
of the sky, in the bloodbath
soil of the racecourse
where the mechanics of a pure-bred
horse leg are oiled and machinic
synchronicity, and thank god
I am grieving while the climate dims.
What an effort otherwise.

ON APOCALYPSE

§

Are you
done with it?
Fly in the buttercream of a plastic rose.
I stand where we first met
and am inconsolable.
The river is moving too quickly and
the bloated strands all at once.
The river and the wires above it shaking like a fit
that perfectly matched my mood.
Crazed moon options in the sky.
Coastal grains
solar noon.
A catastrophic resistance to other people
that comes after a great saturation
of feeling, an adrenal failure.
I'm leaving Europe while the clouds look British.
History just goes binge purge binge purge
like me and like me it's heart busted by the river.
I'm knackered.
As knackered as the
Madonna della Misericordia.

★

Emotions are zooed into the borehole of a tree.
Even as I look in on them they are becoming extinct.
I would have had your children.
Beneficial and tempered,
marital, as water boatmen on the surface.
No-no really.
It's winking, this disaster horizon, walking backwards into rain
with only one emotional cloud. One emotional cloud and
the red outline of trees.
Price the tree's worth, that hosts a government of microbe wet-nurses
that supports a sequence of systems that lean on me (a man; a gut).

§

Green lawn, peppered
blue steak, burning intensely,
like an insect combusting
in one of those restaurant machines;
the dying egg in such an insect
is its ignited inflight system.

±

I am keen to pick back the cuticle of the earth
and see what's underneath, pick out the emblems
of woodlouse, parasite-fossils, the loads
of skin pregnant with old cells, deteriorating.

—

The fresh, camphoraceous
odour of car spills like
thick drink on the plastic-hot dash.
Driving as the sun banks
on a kidney-shaped lake
with the pine-smell swinging.

Heat is a trust-fund sustenance,
epochs ballooning and measured
in the BSL-3 lab.
What does all this feel like
(from a car). We see; black cows slope
their shapes like witches' capes
bent over on a riddling green.
Fields: greens of interlocking shades
regimenting into purple.

I am a fly on the end of a rod
and in that moment, an indeterminate
species, dead fly a prophecy
in the undead mouth of a fish.

ON APOCALYPSE

<3

What is it? Connectivity.
A screaming figure flailing
their torso on a concrete altar.
Mythical, an undiagnosed condition.
Blemish on your neck the shape and mark of a religious burn, I did that.
I call it the worship condition.
What's a taste in the mouth
like a body under the tongue
all purging out like gods purged from mountains.

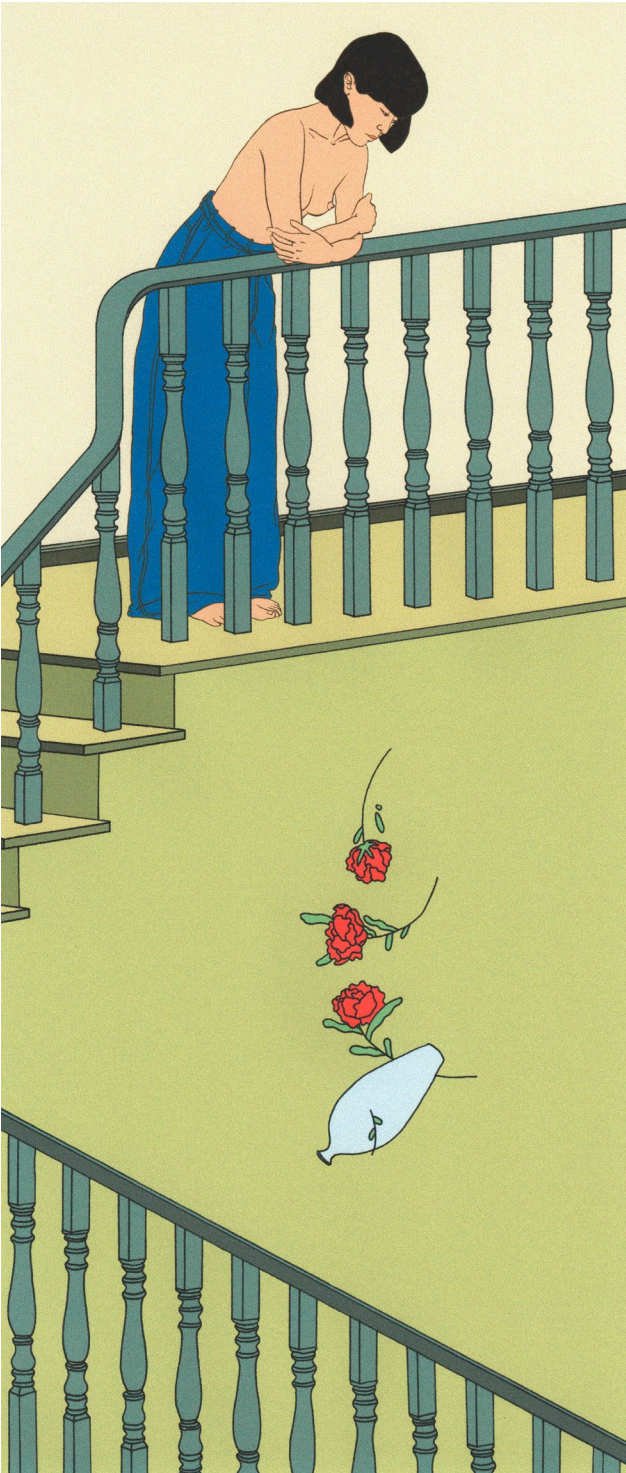
§

Red alert sounds in the fake suburb built
to practice catching terrorists
who gut real suburban homes
for their myriad developments.

Military base on the edge of the beach
near the shoreside firing range
and offshore rigs, which look
as though they're moving slowly towards land.

</3

Home abortion with pineapple.
I knew with the first pain
I was sentenced. A search engine
apocryphal and winged.
My god was unnervingly resourceful,
I fell like a dog on the spike of a tree
failed heirloom of surname heraldry,
and died fast.
The civilians of the future collapse
in tandem, like when an old spine
craves dignity, and the world gets smaller.



ON SCANDALOUS PERSONS

Beatrice

Nicole Flattery

Nicole Flattery

The after-school classes in the Club are an acquired taste. The food is hostile too. It's served on small side-plates, the portions are scant, mainly vegetables with humorous titles like 'Fork Inequality!' But I like the titles, the humour, the broad, comfortable spacing of the tables in the canteen. Lydia often says she could be out, on the many criss-crossing streets, doing better things. She doesn't need to say this in class—I can feel her beside me, her body thrumming a constant, low hum of dissatisfaction. Or else she passes notes to me, notes full of errors, notes that read, this is boring, or this is stupid, or *come on*. I don't think Lydia could be doing better things—what might she be doing? I sometimes imagine her out on the street, pawing at blouses in second-hand stores, or eating delicate, flaky pastries, or preparing for her dour boyfriend, who is in a band. Anyway, this is a great place to be and everyone agrees. The older girls say the streets are finished, well and truly finished, and we're better off receiving our education here in clean, air-conditioned rooms.

I saw Lydia get tears in the corners of her eyes once. Large, fat droplets stuck to the surface, shimmering there, refusing to budge, stubborn as Lydia herself. It was the day she got called to the front of the class by Deborah. And, OK, we were not grateful for Deborah. Deborah we suspected was a novice, a stand-in, with hair that flared outwards suggesting she had an unruly heart, or she didn't use the products supplied freely in the

ON SCANDALOUS PERSONS

bathrooms. Deborah, in some way, wasn't in her right mind. And she called Lydia up to the front of the room to talk about her business. We had been growing our businesses since I was thirteen and a half. I'd felt an upswing in my own ambition since I turned fourteen. I watched Lydia as she walked through the aisle, and rotated my pen. It was the pen they had given us at induction, with the logo, the familiar logo, near faded, and the line '*Female CEO's of the Future*' printed on it. And the clump of gloating stars near the nib! Lydia disliked the stars, said they were brittle and unimaginative and likely cursed. I can only speak for myself, but it's hard to remember every detail about your business. So when Lydia hesitated at first, I wasn't scared. Then the moment of hesitation surpassed the accepted amount of time. Deborah pressed her again about her managerial goals, about the protestors by the river—were they still proving troublesome? And her profits, how much had they increased? I can still remember the look on Lydia's face—how could I forget it?—one of cautious sorrow as if the lightpink room and our instructor, the notebooks and the pens, definitely the pens, existed far beyond her attention, just a bubble she would soon huff away. Again, in that moment, I could see Lydia out on the street, pressing herself to a shop window full of cakes, icing around her mouth, a curiosity that couldn't be extinguished.

'My business,' she said, 'isn't making a profit any more.'

Nicole Flattery

There was a lot of nervous excitement in the room. I silently urged Lydia to have a change of heart about her profits.

‘Why not?’ asked Deborah who often remained with my father for a long time when he collected me, sometimes going so far as to pat him on the shoulder or the arm, sometimes even getting her wiry, colourless hair on his good jumpers.

‘I don’t know,’ Lydia continued. ‘I’ve been working days and nights.’

‘Nights?’

‘Yeah, and I’ve been putting on weight because any time I go into the vegetable aisle, I feel discouraged and I immediately have to leave. There’s a lot of different *shapes*. And when I take my legs out to shave them, they are like heavy pieces of luggage, not specifically attached to me, so I can only shave one. I just raze the blade right across it. It leaves a lot of coarse ingrown hairs.’

The room was stricken with this information.

‘You need to calm down, Lydia,’ Deborah said, with minuscule authority. She had no way of handling things. I thought of my father and the downward slope he must have been on the day I caught him pressing his fingers lightly into Deborah’s back.

‘I will not calm down,’ Lydia said. ‘This is my *life*.’

‘Why do you think this happened?’ Deborah asked, suddenly expressionless.

‘For no reason at all,’ Lydia started. ‘Some

ON SCANDALOUS PERSONS

ventures are successes and some ventures are failures and it's not anybody's fault. I mean, look at the dinosaurs. They all just died and they were pretty huge, intimidating guys. What chance did they have? What could they do about it?' She threw her hands up in the air. 'You can put all this effort in, and do your hair right, and wear your "Girls Do Whatever the F— They Want" T-shirt and you might get only a fraction back of what you put in. You could get less than a fraction. Whatever that is. The rest can go down the toilet. Things just don't work out, like Bea's parents' marriage or maybe the planet now, I guess.'

And this is how Lydia established herself as a scandalous person.

Her parents were called in an hour later. I know there was some debate as to whether my parents should be called too, yanked from their respective offices and thrown into the gridlocked traffic, because they had made a brief cameo in Lydia's announcement. No, it was decided. Only Lydia's mother came. They spoke about Lydia's deplorable behaviour. They zeroed in on her savage rudeness. Lydia's mother was told her daughter had a deeply set inclination towards drama, an inclination that might never relent, and it would have to be monitored for the rest of her life, like a heart condition. Lydia's mother wouldn't be punished over her daughter's behaviour in the female private-members Club, except maybe by murmurs from other members, and a desire to take

Nicole Flattery

a microscopic look at her own conduct as a mother. Lydia was allowed to regrow her business. They were both given bath soaps in the intimate contours of the logo. Lydia told me all this afterwards, in the hallway, beside the drinks machine. She strolled over when I was having a Coke. She kicked me lightly, which is one of her degenerate habits. She then took the can forcibly from my hands. Taking things by force is very Lydia, and maybe something she picked up from the kids on the street who, I'm told by my mother, rough people up and obstruct them from walking on the pavements.

'I want a taste,' she said.

'It's just Coke. You know what it tastes like.'

'It's delicious,' she said, smacking her lips after a big gulp. She made a sensual noise. She had tears in her eyes but I didn't mention it. 'Really yummy,' she repeated.

'I think you have a lot of strength,' I said, for no particular reason. It wasn't even something I believed. If Lydia was standing up to enemies, then I was unsure of who those enemies were. It was something I felt I could spend the rest of my life doing—casting around for enemies, ignoring my allies.

Lydia slammed her can against the bin. 'Someone is going to make a fool out of you some day, Beatrice,' she said, without looking at me.

I nodded, as if in complete agreement, and deposited two more coins into the machine. In no time another can of Coke arrived.

ON SCANDALOUS PERSONS

We no longer get out of cars. The streets are deemed too dirty and unsafe. We simply order things to our houses. Sooner or later, everything arrives. Streets are no longer decorated at holidays, large vats of glittery tinsel kept in storage containers which remain unseen, outside the city. If a new street is built, out of necessity, it's simply named after another street. I watch the kids on the pavements, strange in their unfamiliar, slitted clothing, from the car window, the glass growing clammy with my breath. The girls look like brides—chosen. In the car my mother is always careful about how she insults my father. The traffic is nearly always terrible.

Even though my mother is aware of Lydia's behaviour, she says I should still be OK to her because she keeps her clothes neat and tidy, and she will be beautiful when she's older and that will probably be hard for her. She won't be able to cope with that. There's such a thing as having too much. A lot of beautiful women go mad, my mother says. Some years ago, before the ban on streets, you would see them in the pharmacy late at night, sticking their fingers in the creams, not caring who they made uncomfortable. My father's girlfriend is like this. According to my mother, my father's girlfriend doesn't wear any underwear. She isn't envious when she says it. She's doing this and that in the car, turning right, turning left; her face scarcely changes.

'Your father's girlfriend doesn't wear any underwear,' she says. She pushes the gear stick

Nicole Flattery

roughly forward and drops back in her seat.

‘Oh,’ I say. ‘Does she claim to?’

‘Claim to what?’

‘Wear underwear.’

‘No,’ my mother says. ‘She’s open about it.’

This is what is known as a private, not-to-be-repeated, discussion. My parents’ divorce—that long stretch of spring where I sat in cafés with Lydia and drank flat Cokes—involved a lot of private discussions. My mother said my father punched her in the face. My father said that happened ten years ago, and it was an accident during a tickle match. That whole spring, I held the idea of my parents having a tickle match close to my heart. They continued with proceedings. Maybe they tickled each other so much they wore themselves to the bone. I must admit I wasn’t having a great time in those months. One night I turned up at Lydia’s house not totally under control, sort of frantic. I couldn’t get the idea of my parents playing with each other, being happy—and *tickling*—out of my brain. It was as if I had been studying the same photograph for several months. Then suddenly I felt constantly tickled as if someone was pressing underneath my armpits, as if, instead of just watching my parents, I was now part of the desperate, smushy scene. I was being piled on by layers and layers of people who desired only to tickle me, and I was finding it hard to breathe. Lydia got me a glass of water with a lime in it, and held my hand as we watched her goldfish make general,

ON SCANDALOUS PERSONS

unamused circles around his bowl.

That was the week they closed down the streets. The streets, the shops and the cafés had been deteriorating for a while because of alleged antisocial behaviour. Anyway, people liked their houses where items could be delivered; there were always dozens of things to do in your house. I wasn't too upset, but Lydia was. She said we were being denied a lot—that we would never be able to ask for the bill, or be sprayed with perfume we didn't like by miserable sales assistants, or meet people we weren't supposed to meet. I stayed at Lydia's for that whole week; she asked me to. We were twelve then and slept top-to-toe. Several months later, our mothers enrolled us in the Club for girls with goals, and we watched through our classroom window as the traffic became thicker and denser, the cars in every available formation; every vehicle full of people with important things to do; the smog twisting upwards, arranging itself into incomprehensible signs in the sky.

The next time I see my father I ask him if his girlfriend wears underwear. He takes me upstairs to their bedroom—I don't look around, I don't believe in snooping—and he stiffly empties a drawer, and piles his girlfriend's underwear into a high, unstable tower on the bed. There is a huge assortment; it all blends into one ludicrous, frilly monster. Is it considered pretty? I can imagine another woman, a more eccentric woman, wearing it as a floor-length skirt.

Nicole Flattery

‘It’s not in short supply,’ I say.

‘No,’ he says, in a sort of hopeless way.

‘Enough for every day.’

I can see different colours—thin lines, flowery panels, diamanté details. I can picture the shops where, a few years ago, she might have purchased the more elaborate pieces: the dark, cavernous changing rooms, her fingers pressing into her stomach, admiring herself in a formal way. My father’s girlfriend has the face of an angel and doesn’t speak much English. I enthusiastically snap a single string to show support for her and my father.

‘You know, in that art film she was in she agreed to wear a merkin,’ he says.

‘What’s that?’

‘It’s a wig. It’s a wig for pubic hair.’

‘Oh,’ I say. ‘Good.’

My father sits down on the bed, as if he is exhausted. ‘It’s important for you to know these things,’ he says. ‘Worldly things. And your mother lies. Your mother lies like you wouldn’t believe. It’s a tragedy, thinking of her in that stupid car all day, dialling numbers, making up nonsense.’

‘I guess so,’ I agree.

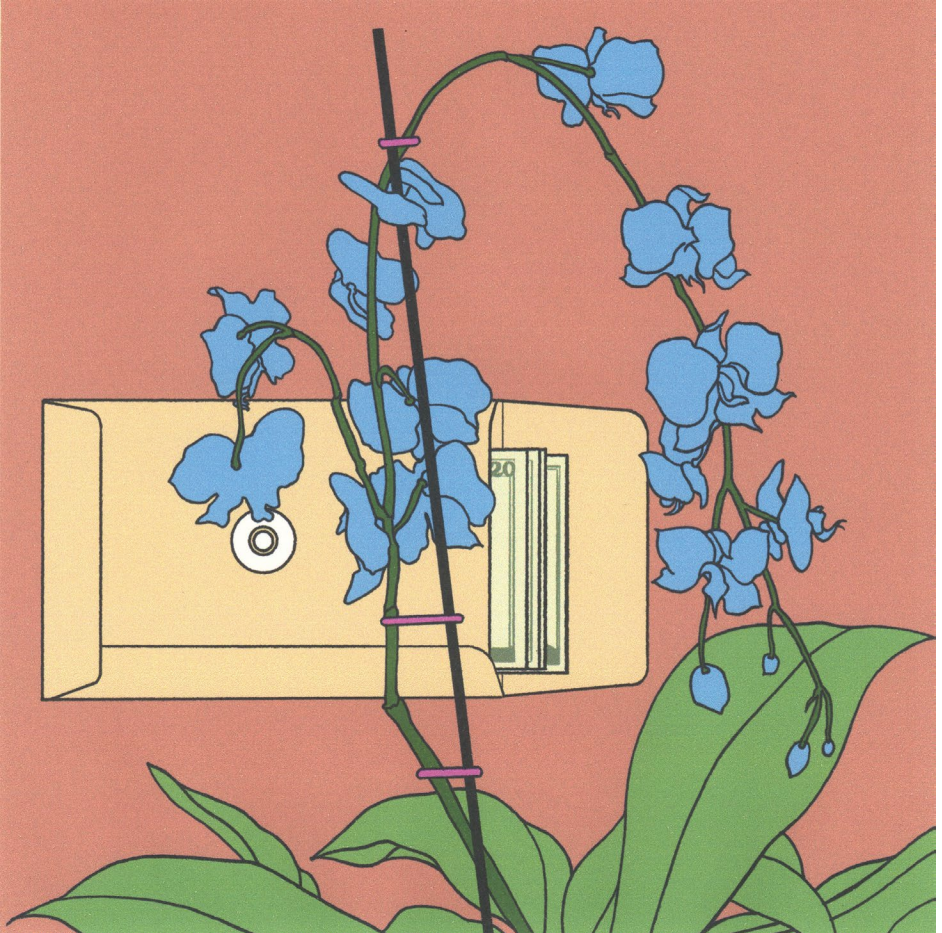
His lips brush across my cheek. ‘You need to find out these things, Bea, or some day someone is going to make a fool of you.’

‘I know that,’ I say. ‘I already know that.’

We no longer get out of our cars. I sit beside my mother in the passenger seat, finishing my

ON SCANDALOUS PERSONS

homework from the Club. She doesn't look at me; keeps her eyes straight ahead. The questions on my sheet are about a dinner party. How do you gain a reputation as an interesting host? How do you manage a complicated seating arrangement? If you were to discover gossip about one of your guests would you keep it to yourself or share it? These questions are easy enough to get right so I stare out the window at the squat, boarded-up buildings. The rubbish bins stand strong and tall as if they fought, and won possession of the streets. We approach a group of teenagers and, out of the corner of my eye, I spy Lydia; her long, blonde hair in a damp plait, her knickers showing above her jeans. The other girls in the group are dressed like her. We stop at the lights and I turn and wave out the window. At least I think I'm waving—my hand is moving. It takes me some time to be able to raise my hand. And she sees me—I know she sees me—but she turns away, as if concentrating on something else. And I'm sitting there, beside my mother, as she whispers into her phone, waiting for Lydia to turn back, waiting for her to shout, 'Beatrice!' Waiting for something to happen. And I think of the goldfish in the bowl, his tiny body flapping across an empty, pebbled kingdom. The lights change to orange. Nothing happens. ◇



LOCKDOWN AND THE STAYCATION

Today's Square

Saba Sams

W e've been in quarantine three months. Ma's taken to sleeping way into the afternoon, then staying awake until five o'clock in the morning scrolling the news on her phone. I've taken to crossing the days off the calendar with my pink gel pen as they pass, using my jelly ruler to make the lines perfect. In the little square labelled 24 June, which is today, Ma's written *Tenerife 15.30*. Ma's handwriting always reminds me of the popular girls in school, who draw big, round letters and dot their i's with tiny circles.

I've been on holiday just once before. I was five or six, and I only remember it in snatches. In one memory, I'm in the shallows of the sea with my hands dug down into the sand and my eyes just above the surface of the water, like a crocodile on the hunt. In another, a man comes to our table at dinner with a cone of roses, and Ma buys me one, stands it up in my water glass while we eat. In my last, the aeroplane tilts towards the sun, and ovals of gold light slide over the passengers, who squint their eyes against it.

Ma's saved for the last four years so we could afford a second holiday. Before the company she worked for announced liquidation due to the virus, she used to get paid overtime in cash. She stored it in a plastic wallet at the back of the cupboard, behind the box of teabags.

At the weekends, Ma liked to get the plastic

LOCKDOWN AND THE STAYCATION

wallet out and count its contents. The day she found she'd saved enough, she swore more times than I'd ever heard.

Fuck off, she said. You're fucking joking.

She was using her phone to look up the flights; her laptop's been broken for ever.

I'm doing it, baby, she said. Fuck it, I'm fucking doing it.

Her thumbs tapped at the screen for a while. Fuck, she said after. Fucked up fuck.

For a 15.30 flight, we'd have to leave the flat at 10.30 in the morning. Ma mapped it all out for me. There was the bus to the station, and then the train to the airport, and then the shuttle to the terminal. There was bag drop and security, and then there was sometimes a long wait in the terminal, and then a queue at the gate to board the plane. I was excited for every part, even the waiting.

I keep looking at the clock: 10.30 comes and goes. I cross out the square on the calendar with Ma's writing in it, even though I usually save this for evening, when I'm absolutely certain that the day is done.

I make myself some instant noodles, sticky rather than soupy, which is how I'm starting to prefer them. At one o'clock, Ma's still sleeping. I open the curtains in the living room. The light floods in and bleaches the walls. It's nice out.

A few years ago, a man fell from our floor

and died. After that, restrictors were put on all the windows, so we can only get them open a crack. I push the window as far as it will go, and stand in the middle of the room, imagining the new air filtering in all around me.

Ma said we wouldn't still be in quarantine by now. She said it more than once. When all this started, I used to ask most days.

We're still going to Tenerife, right? I'd say.

Yes, baby. Don't you worry about that. Wash your hands properly, get between the fingers. Your mask can come off now.

Later, she stopped replying. I knew that meant no, but I kept asking anyway, just in case.

The day she paid for our flights and hotel, Ma took the money out of the plastic wallet and deposited it at the bank. There was still a little left, and whenever she worked overtime she'd add more, so that we had spending money for the trip.

A few weeks ago, when Ma's card bounced doing the food order, she took the plastic wallet down from the cupboard and left for the bank. I understood for certain then that Tenerife was no longer happening. I stopped asking for good, after that.

It gets closer and closer to 15.30. I panic when I think we're going to miss our plane, and then I remember. An idea comes to me, and I start on it before I can persuade myself not to.

I get up and go to the door. I put on my mask, and a pair of black rubber gloves from the cardboard

LOCKDOWN AND THE STAYCATION

box. I flick the door onto the latch.

The hallway is silent. In the beginning, people played music out their windows, and shouts carried up from the flats below. These days, there's nothing. I go to the stairwell, and look out the vent. All the equipment is there on the platform, same as always. Way below, there are two police officers standing on the green, the hi-vis panels on their bulletproof vests winking in the sun.

I slot my body through the vent, and climb out onto the scaffolding. The air tastes like cucumber, and I can feel the wind stroking my neck. I keep low to the wooden platform, crawling along it on my hands and knees out of fear of being seen. There's no barrier to keep me from falling, only a long steel bar that I'd be small enough to slip under.

The morning after the man fell from his window, I saw the police tape when I left for school. The body had been taken away, but they'd not yet got around to cleaning up the blood.

In the beginning, Ma and I would go down to the green to do star jumps and burpees in the fresh air. We'd take the stairs up after, all twenty-one flights, just to make it last longer. The stairwell goes down one side of the building, with a long vent in the concrete, so it's sort of like being outside.

The tiredness would hit me about halfway, and I'd have to stop for a break. Ma wouldn't let me touch the banister while I rested, not even with my gloves on. She'd stand with me while I got

my breath back, holding out my inhaler in case I needed it.

We can get the lift the rest of the way, she'd say. Don't push yourself too hard, baby.

I'd always refuse. While I breathed, I'd look out the vent and watch the builders on the scaffolding up the side of our block. They were some of the only people still working, apart from the NHS Heroes. I guess because they worked outside, they were told to keep going. They had a crackling radio, and they'd sing along to it as they swung bags of sand across to one another, or abseiled from one temporary platform to the next.

At the time, they were the only people I saw apart from Ma. None of them wore masks, and their faces were expressive as cartoons. I felt my whole body relax when I looked at them; my pulse would gently slow.

A few weeks ago, the builders stopped coming. They left their equipment piled up on one of the platforms. It was the highest platform, on the same level as our flat. The builders had taken the things that were more expensive, like the radio and the power tools, but they'd left the rest. There were bags of sand, orange trays of screws, planks of wood. There was even a cup of tea, half drunk.

The bags of sand have been tied at the top. I grab one of the knots and pull it towards me. The bag's heavier than I'd imagined, and it takes three wrenches to get it to the end of the platform.

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Once there, I tuck my hands under the hessian and attempt to lift the bag up and over the concrete wall, so I can roll it through the vent and into the stairwell. I'm squatting with my back to the drop, unsteady with the effort.

The sound the bag makes when it lands on the stairs is dense and short. I freeze, hunched over on the platform, waiting for someone to come out and catch me.

The second bag is easier, because by now I know what I'm doing, and harder, because I've used up most of my energy on the first. When it's over, I have to lie down on the platform and concentrate on my breathing for a while. I envisage the clean, new air filling my lungs, and pumping all through my body.

I use the same lift-and-roll technique to get the bags of sand up the stairs. It's only half a flight, but it takes me about twenty minutes of straining. Once I'm on level ground, dragging the bags through the front door is easy. I leave them in the hallway while I hang my mask up, throw away my gloves, and get my inhaler from the drawer in the kitchen. I spend a while on the sofa, just breathing.

I check for Ma, who's still asleep, before I drag the bags across the hall and into the living room. I use a kitchen knife to slit them. The sand is dark and gritty, but it will have to do. I scatter it about with my hands, breaking apart the wetter clumps as I go. When I'm sure it's packed to the edges, I use the

broom to get an even spread.

When Ma booked our trip, it was on two conditions. I couldn't miss one day of school all year, and I'd ask for extra homework tasks at the end of every week. We couldn't afford to go away in the summer holidays, because everything got so much more expensive then.

Home-school lasted a little longer than the star jumps and burpees, but once my teacher got sick and stopped sending videos, Ma said she didn't have the energy to keep it up on her own.

Every week, I leave the flat just once, to collect our food order from the lift. Ma would never have allowed me to do this earlier in the quarantine, but these days she's usually sleeping when it comes. The delivery person rings the bell and I buzz them up. They put the order in the lift, and when the doors open, I take it out.

Recently, the delivery man came up in the lift with our order. He must have been new at the job. He was wearing a blue cap and a knitted scarf across his face.

Stay back, he said.

I didn't move at all. I couldn't even if I'd wanted to. The man put the order on the floor outside the lift. He pressed the button and the steel doors slid closed behind him. I stayed out in the hall for up to a minute, staring at the box of food, before I picked it up and brought it inside.

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Every time I go out to collect the food order, I go to the stairwell to check the builder's equipment. I keep expecting them to come back for it, but every week it's still there. Part of me likes seeing it, because it means I haven't missed them. Another part of me is afraid, the longer they leave it, that the builders are never coming back.

It's practically evening by the time I hear Ma moving around in her bedroom. The sun's starting to sink behind the buildings, and the late light coming in through the window casts a single, luminous square across the sand.

I've spent ages on the living room. I transformed the sofa into a sun lounger by spreading a bath towel over it, and I turned the thermostat up as high as it would go. For a while, I didn't notice the difference, but now the radiators have started to hiss with the effort, and it's so hot in the flat I've had to change out of my clothes. I don't own a bikini, so I'm wearing my blue pyjama shorts, a training bra and a floral sun hat that I found under my bed.

For finishing touches, I've made my own seashells with cardboard and a bottle of pearlescent nail polish that I found in the bathroom. There's a sandcastle in one corner of the living room, just under the television, and I'm using Ma's mini speaker to play eight hours of Ocean Waves off YouTube on her phone.

Ma has a hard time getting the door open, because of the layer of sand. Baby? she says, as she pushes.

In here, Ma. Come look.

Ma is still only half awake. She's wearing her dressing gown with the blackened sleeve that she burned last week making pancakes for dinner. She could get a new one online, but she says she'd rather wait until the shops open again.

Ma's voice comes from deep inside her throat, like the noise the kettle makes when it boils. Jesus Christ, she says. What have you done?

I stretch my arms out at my sides. I made Tenerife, I say.

Ma is quiet. She scans her eyes over the room. I think it's going to be OK, but then the corners of her mouth start to twitch. She puts her face in her hands. This means she's crying. I go to her. One of her tears falls on my shoulder and trickles down my arm.

I thought you'd like it, I say.

I can feel the sobs heaving up through Ma's chest. I press my face into her dressing gown. We were supposed to go today, I say.

Ma's breathing wobbles. I know that. You think I don't know that?

I lean back to get a look at her face. She's biting her lip, and then she screws her eyes up. I can tell she's trying to stop crying, but she can't.

I'm sorry, I say.

Ma sniffs and wipes her cheek with the back of her hand. I know, baby, she whispers.

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I drop my arms down and move away from her. I look around me, at the sunken sofa with the towel thrown over it, and the dull, damp sand spilled all over the floor. I had to use the mop bucket for the sandcastle, so it's turned out nothing but a shapeless heap, and my shells aren't shells at all, but pieces of litter. The Ocean Waves sound like the static that the radio used to make in the car, and the radiators have made the air wet and sticky in my lungs.

It's stupid, I say. It doesn't matter.

I kick the sand, and a chunk of it flies up and brushes against the far wall. It leaves a few grains behind, dark red against the paint.

Ma steps around me and goes further into the room. Her footsteps are muffled. I close my eyes and pinch the inside of my wrist with my nails, twisting the skin there until it stings.

Baby, Ma says, her voice softer now.

I shake my head. I don't want to talk about it.

Baby, Ma says again. Open your eyes.

Ma moves the towel from the sofa onto the floor, right into the square of light from the window. She unties her dressing gown and shoulders it off. Underneath, she's wearing her bra and knickers, tinged grey from the washing machine. She lies down on the towel, one of her arms folded back to prop up her head. Her face is slightly swollen still from crying, but she smiles, her eyes closed to the light, and her body is yellow and shining.

Come, she says. Catch the last of the sun. ◇



ALSO ON APOCALYPSE

Mary Jean Chan

ALTERED NATURE

The birds had their tongues tied to silver strings as they hung mid-air in silence. I was kneeling on the wet earth, crying out. A disembodied voice informed me that nectar was being slowly harvested from their throats, that this was the only way. Heat from their flailing bodies pressed my eyes into my skull. I tried to hold myself together in the dream but could not. Once awake, I could not feel tender. The brutality of all architecture stunned me wherever I looked. What were we—as a species—doing? I finally summoned the will to write *Life* on my to-do list but kept postponing the task. I had been dreaming of the dying, because I could not ignore the news from home, country not so far from the heart. This viral uncertainty keeping me afraid of intimacy. I did not want to touch what others had touched, feared any public surface. Even the air was menacing, invisible droplets omnipresent. A persistent cough soon developed, as if to taunt me. My father, a rheumatologist, texts to say he is well, reminds me that he went through the SARS epidemic and never took a day off work. I have inherited this stubborn, Calvinist ethic. Today, I return to where breath feels possible. My therapist asks: *What do you want?* I think to myself: *mother's gaze / straight gaze / male gaze / white gaze...* I am ashamed to confess that I want to be reborn as the brother, the beloved son, the future patriarch. I want to see this torso in a different light—beam on it a kinder gaze as I wait for something to give. I read a poet's words: *Mostly, we do not fail to go on living.* There is fire on the streets of a city I still love and fire in the earth's lungs as the hour ticks on. Had I simply imagined this intimate scene: the mother lying prostrate at the feet of her child, begging for a miracle, or was it the other way around?

HOUSESITTING

What I Like About Drinking

Kathryn Scanlan

What I like about drinking is that after one or two drinks I will eat chips from a bag at the counter in my kitchen and enjoy them without worrying about what might be on my hands and whether I should've washed them first. I'll think about how, an hour earlier, I used my right hand—the same with which I am now conveying a chip to my mouth—to pull off my boot after a walk around the lake, and how dusted that boot was with dirt from the path, and how much dog shit is mixed into that dirt like a dough. There are geese at the lake too and we all know how much a goose will shit—it's unbelievable until you see it for yourself. I once walked the paved perimeter of a man-made pond with my father in winter and though it was a small pond it took us half an hour to circumnavigate because the pathway was one long, green, lumpy smear. This is but one human consequence of human omnipresence—shit on a shoe. I'll think about that, and about what might be—probably is—on my hand and how I should've washed it, but it won't interrupt my eating of chips or my enjoyment of them as it would if I were sober, and in fact might encourage me to eat faster and more sloppily than before.

Then, too, a little later, when I figure I ought to eat something other than chips for dinner, the filthiness of the egg I take from the carton in the refrigerator will not bother me as much as it does when I haven't been drinking. We get our eggs from a farmer who lets his chickens run wild. Due to all

HOUSE SITTING

the bugs, grubs, lizards, small snakes and young mice eaten by the egg layers in their natural habitat, the yolks are huge and orange and delicious. But the farmer can't be bothered with washing the eggs, and in every dozen we buy there will be five, six, seven, eight eggs with brown or green shit on them, some with little pieces of straw stuck to the shit. Those we'll reach around until the clean ones are gone, and then we'll wash the shitty eggs—or not—and cook and eat them. I didn't know much about the mechanics of egg production until a few years ago, when I took care of a woman's chickens for several weeks. I didn't know, for example, that a chicken's egg emerges from the same chute as her shit and piss which, as it turns out, get mixed together first, which is why bird shit is so runny. I didn't know that a chicken's egg is molded in the exact shape of a chicken's womb. I didn't know how strange it would feel to enter a chicken coop in the morning and, after I'd released the impatient hens to peck around the yard, steal their pretty pink and blue and sand-colored eggs, or how when the hens returned to roost at night they'd look for their eggs and seem confused, maybe even forlorn, when they couldn't find them.

The woman's house was down a dirt road in the desert. I had no car and the nearest town was too far to walk, so when I got dropped off I tried to bring enough food to last. Towards the end I was hungry with little left to eat, waiting daily for an egg to appear. When one did, I thanked the chickens

Kathryn Scanlan

and thanked the egg and broke it open.

Money I should've spent on food I'd spent on four bottles of wine and two bottles of tequila. At dusk I'd sit outside with a bottle and a glass and watch the chickens until it was time to lock them up for safekeep. Then, alone, I'd return to the bottle, which gave me a large, grand, hopeful feeling, like I might go out looking for anything I wanted and find it hidden beneath a clump of straw like a sunset-colored gift. ◇

Bridget Minamore

ROOT CAUSES

We were so poor we didn't know it. On cloudless nights we looked for the moon so we could howl at something that wasn't our stomachs. On the nights even the moon said fuck off we hacked ourselves into a pack and paid for cheap Polish vodka and slid sweet packets into our sleeves so our family didn't need to feed us. Years later, scattering folding chairs into crop circles in church halls, saying the serenity prayer like a ghost note, we debated how much money our light fingers and seared throats kept in our parents' wallets.

ON HUNGER AND THIRST

INVISIBLE

We lived in an era of invisibility. The fraud boys disappeared into our Direct Messages when they suspected they had been seen too publicly; we basked in attention from boyfriends we had only met on MSN Messenger; unseen girlfriends were easy to get. In the early days, we were wooed by wastemen who pretended they weren't wastemen so paid for holidays and Air Max and watches and weave. Occasionally they'd evaporate too early too—sometimes only their money did.

Sometimes we'd walk with nothing chasing us then turn around to find mandem. They'd materialise out of air thick with weed smoke and menace and opportunity; on these days we'd make ourselves invisible too, let ourselves fade away into roads with the right postcodes. We'd spot plain-clothes feds—*always so fucking noticeable*—and find ourselves fleeing until we knew they wouldn't find us. Some of us vanished better than others but certain things always helped: the back doors of bendy buses, the fact everyone wore black, how we knew no-one

who didn't look like us could even attempt to tell us apart.

KEISHA DA SKET GETS CHIRPSED

‘Everybody knows the story about Keisha da Sket,’ says an Older.

It’s true. We do.

The day she ate her BlackBerry because some roadman tried to pull a pin out of her on road so she swallowed it whole and parts of her exploded into something the gyaldem who perch on the pavement agreed looked like dog shit.

After, when the remnants were between her lips and dripping down her elbows, and we could see straight through her stomach because of the hole the blast made, and the roadman said *you’re butters anyway*, everyone agreed her rust-stained mouth still looked full.

FAMILY ALBUM

Three Stories

Megan Hunter



FAMILY ALBUM

ENCOUNTERS WITH SPACE

There was that time when Mavis stole a cup of whisky and they drank it together on top of the hay. This was where Mavis's father thought she went with boys but instead here was Kathie, her mouth whisky-thick, Mavis holding her by the wrists.

When they were children this is the way they would fall, Mavis always above Kathie, one mouth breathing into another, their breath a circle, a single route. Sometimes, Mavis would lower her mouth down further, less like a kiss than a kind of lever, a mechanism unable to hold, her wrists failing with a spiced weariness on either side of Kathie's neck.

That time with the whisky, Mavis dipped with more intention, until the night outside seemed to merge with the darkness inside their heads, to expand their minds to the size of a galaxy, a place they could explore together. Mavis didn't know whether Kathie felt this too, but she hoped for it, Kathie's lips moving exactly in line with her own, the heartbeats through their smocks no longer staccato but one continuous noise, like the drowning of the sea.

Now, there were fewer times like this, mainly on nights when the house was racked with a storm and coldness reached their sheets. On these nights Mavis rose above Kathie, knowing more clearly now the universe that filled their minds, the places they could live in for ever.

Megan Hunter



FAMILY ALBUM

THE LUCKIEST

People said Greta was the luckiest baby in the world. She had two mothers, and two fathers, and though they were elderly there was no tension between them, as there is between most parents, moving like power through a pylon, buzzing across fields and rivers, through the sky, warning birds.

There was Maisy, who was the lugger and the masher, the one most likely to have Greta under her arm while she brought it down over a pile of boiled squash, the baby's eyes blinking out from her armpit. She knew when Greta's nails needed cutting, which was often—she was like Maisy herself in this way—and when the consistency of the baby's stools indicated too much soft fruit.

Maisy was the one who noticed the extra space that opened in Greta when she was only a few weeks old, a kind of sinkhole, a place through which you could see the centre of the earth. A *fissure*, the doctors called it, but Maisy said it was just Greta, made sure the hole was always clean. Then, when the child was four, it closed over for good, miles of underworld hidden from view.

Maisy's best friend Rose, Greta's other mother, seemed to have lived before she was born; she had seen from a young age the way that people resembled spruces, growing upwards and outwards into the clouds, never looking back at the realities of the earth. Rose was Greta's great admirer, a kind of goddess who remained in the heavens of the

afternoons, who could be said to have given Greta her soul just by looking at the baby in a certain way.

As Greta grew, it was Rose who she learned to spend time with, listening to the pace of her breath, getting used to the way her heart worked. Rose liked to rise at midday, and recline on the porch without a book or a radio for at least an hour. *I like to feel thoughts moving over me*, she told Greta once the child was old enough to understand. Rose lay on the long white bench with a cushion under her head and felt consciousness pass over her as the wind did, steady as the sun through the day.

It was Rose who objected most to Greta going to school, who talked about the need for a child to explore the wild places of the home and the mind, to spend days getting lost in the woods, becoming so bored that madness flickered at the edge of life, its colours as elusive as a headache. Her own childhood had been largely free from school, and was *the rock that she built her life on*, as she put it, the long, stretching foundation that everything else came from: her peacefulness, her thinking, her afternoons.

Only Derek disagreed, the one who had been to school all the way through, who had earned the right to work in an office. He said that Greta should go to school *like a normal girl*, as though she had not appeared in their yard like a pumpkin, grown amongst the bushes. There had been a bright star in the sky that night, and they all tried hard not to say *Jesus*, though they all thought it.

FAMILY ALBUM

Why should God not come like this? Derek found himself whispering the first night, creeping into his wife Maisy's room, seeing the baby flat out on her chest, dressed only in a diaper. It seemed that, even in sleep, he had never seen his wife's face look so completely herself, so entirely at peace.

Derek and his brother Francis had been children when the factory accident happened, and they never told their mother how close they had been, how the green cloud had come right over the wood where they'd built their den, a rising face through the trees. They never told her the way it made them cough and retch, how they washed the stink out in the stream, recovering quickly in the shock of the cold. They even feigned surprise as first Francis, then Derek, were unable to make a child, to create new life in the world.

Francis thought of Greta like a toffee found at the bottom of a bag, or in an unwashed pocket. Something almost forgotten, so good it obliterated everything else about a particular moment, leaving only sweetness and surprise. Coming in from a long morning working the garden, wiping the wetness from his face with a salty cloth, he would see the child playing meticulously, setting out her dolls in a row, placing acorn cups around their heads, a solemn tea party. His rush of feeling was not less than the first time he'd seen Rose, sensed somehow the acres of room in her being.

Francis gave no opinion to the school question, and later was the only one to shrug about

the boyfriend question, the roar of the motorbike ripping into the yard, the swing of Greta's skirts over the seat. He only saw Greta, felt as he always had; that she was a blessing, that every second she was in their presence they were fortunate, that one day she would be gone just as she had come: without process or ceremony, like the opening and closing of an eye.

Maisy hated the boyfriend most, hated every sign of the boyfriend, the long mornings Greta slept in, making her pillows yeasty and damp, the odd plastic case hidden badly at the back of her underwear drawer, the springing, gaping rubber mouth inside. Neither Maisy nor Rose ever had any need for contraptions, had only welcomed every part of Derek and Francis, watched every month as they were flushed out on a tide of blood and pain.

Rose pretended not to care, to barely even notice the motorbike, the new ways Greta found to style her wilful black hair. But she sat up every night with her knitting needles, only moving them when someone came into the room, otherwise sitting still as a robin on a branch, her head tipped for sound. There was only one night she didn't come back.

On every other night, Greta would come into the house as though it was not late, as though the door did not creak and let in the cool, anonymous breath of the night-time. She'd kiss Rose on her head, letting her mother smell the beer, the smokiness, the rough savoury rub of the boyfriend's skin. And together they would walk up the stairs, to join the rest of the family in sleep.

FAMILY ALBUM



GROUP, 1931

Long after the children were dead, people spoke of them, and in this way claimed they were alive, formed by tongue and voice box of strangers they never knew, rather than the whole bodies of those they loved.

The people who spoke of the children did not know how total their absence felt to their parents, the way it changed everything, took presence from the trees and rivers, took life out of the air itself. They did not see the way that Nettie Hatchard's mother knelt in the dirt and dug through it with her fingernails, searching for her daughter at first, then making herself a shallow grave, a place she rolled in, howling, filling her mouth with soil.

LOCKDOWN AND RELATIONSHIPS

Small Circle

Olivia Sudjic

I feel better in my car, alone, than I do any other place. I used to drive everywhere, even journeys I could do on foot. The body is silver with black leather insides and several secret compartments. I long for the sound it makes when the doors lock me in, a soft intake of breath like the first drag of a cigarette. But my husband flipped my car that week.

I was still waiting for a replacement. As always, he was *handling it*.

I took public transport to visit my sister. This was just before the lockdown when such journeys were still permitted, if frowned upon. I persuaded my husband of its essential nature. I was caring for a vulnerable person. It takes about an hour on the DLR and then the Tube, and then it's another twenty-minute bus from the station. She's staying in one of the properties my husband owns, and has since changed my name in her phone to LANDLORD.

I walked along the platform behind a woman purposefully dragging the point of her umbrella. It made a long, pale scream along the ground. When the woman with the umbrella saw she'd attracted my attention, I closed my eyes. The previous day, this same journey, another woman had sat in front of me and wept openly. I'd not made eye contact with her so maybe it was even the same person.

Inside the carriage, I stood by the doors, feet wide apart, careful not to touch anything.

When I arrived at the flat I forgot for a

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moment and punched the code into the access pad with my fingers. I remembered when I called the lift and managed to use my knuckle. Her door was ajar again to save her having to get up. Voices from the television seeped into the hallway. I pushed the door with my sleeve over my hand. She was on the sofa. The same she was sleeping on at night so as to be near the toilet. Back to walking now, at least, but slowly, painfully, with a frame to support movement. Out of place, I thought, as I had done the first time I observed it against the backdrop of showroom furniture.

I stood waiting for her acknowledgement but she kept staring at the screen. After a few moments I went through to the sink to wash my hands. She was watching a documentary in which Arctic icebergs broke away and headed toward the Atlantic. If this calving kept on happening, the narrator said, humans would be returned to a state of constant migration. We were nomadic before the climate settled, only now there were so many more of us it would get much more violent.

‘So,’ she said at last. ‘You came back.’

‘I told you I was coming.’

‘I know. I’m surprised you managed to, that’s all.’

‘This is an essential visit.’

Before she fell, my husband had moved her in to another property he owns (I lose track), this time not far from where my sister and me lived until we were teenagers. She says she had driven over to

see our old house, and if she hadn't done that she wouldn't have had the accident.

When I got the text telling me which hospital she was in, I couldn't think of anyone I still knew who lived in the vicinity except the woman I'd hired to be our mother's carer a year ago. Jean was surprised to hear from me again—she answered my call suspiciously, as if worried my mother had been resurrected.

My sister woke in the hospital to find Jean at her side. She's not forgiven me for this. The best explanation I could give her was that I'd been *detained*. Even before this I was supposed to stay within a small radius

Jean is an angel but she has her own family, she'd hissed into the phone. Had I paid her to come all that way? What must she think of us, these white women who don't even look out for our own families?

My mother had not recognized her family toward the end, though at the very end it seems she did. When Jean had called one day to say Mum was asking to speak with her daughters, my sister said it was proof my mother's soul was separating.

She'd got interested in a phenomenon known as 'terminal lucidity'. Dementia patients, for example, might recognize their family, sit up and have a normal conversation right before they pass over and leave their body. She was convinced my mother had returned to us, or remembered who we used to be.

My sister claimed even *she* found it hard to

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recognize me now.

Most things she says to me are to underscore just how much I've changed since getting married.

My mother used to say my sister was jealous because I turned out to be the pretty one. Beauty is not something you can share, she said. Not like money.

I unpacked milk and some other basics into her fridge and emptied her bins while she told me about residual pain and the people who'd wronged her by not calling lately. I like to hear about these things—the same complaints about her solitude, her lack of husband, her lack of money. The solitude was all I longed for now that I had the others.

The hospital were freeing up beds in anticipation so they discharged her earlier than planned. After leaving the hospital she'd moved into the property I could now visit her in. The previous place was essentially a building site—an impractical home for someone with so many broken bones to convalesce in during a pandemic—but I'd also wanted her to be closer. I don't want her to get better or move further out again. There, she was just inside my radius, even if I no longer had a car to visit her.

When I came back from doing the rubbish she had turned the television off and was looking at me intently.

'He has you trained,' she said at last, 'doesn't he?' And then, turning mischievous, 'What if you stayed over this evening?'

I laughed but didn't answer.

'I mean it.' She looked at me harder, serious again. 'You don't have to go back tonight if you don't want to. I have a bad feeling about it.'

He was watching porn when I got home. I busied myself with sanitation. With taking things out of cupboards and putting other things into pans to be warmed, gazing at the river and zoning out in an attempt to ignore the embarrassing sounds emanating from the bedroom.

We're in a development beside the Thames Barrier. Before bed, we went for our walk as usual. To the sunken meadow in the park right by the river. The blossom was out in big clouds against the darkness. There was a computer-generated image I could not get out of my head, stuck to the park gates, showing what London would look like if the defences failed to hold back higher levels of flooding.

'How's your sister?'

My stomach tightened.

'The same.'

'OK. And how long does she plan on being there?'

My husband flips properties, as well as cars. That's how he cleans his money.

'As long as it takes to recover, I guess.'

'Is she still drinking?'

When she fell, she'd apparently gone up to the accessible bit of the church roof where we used to sit and watch the sunrise after big nights out. I don't

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know that I've seen a sunrise since. The new owners of Mum's bungalow had been home when she drove past, she said, so she couldn't do more than circle a few times. She did not want to knock and introduce herself. That's when she thought of going to the churchyard.

The impulse as she described it was nostalgic, but there were parts of this story I was still missing and others which did not make sense, even for my sister who is always repeating herself, but not in a way that makes things any clearer. How, for example, had she managed to slip? Who'd been there to call the ambulance? In my memory there was a low wall that would've prevented falling unless someone else had pushed her. How had my sister managed to fall from that protected part of the roof while men like my husband managed to flip their cars and get right out again?

It occurred to me then that he could have wrecked the car by sending it down a verge while he stood back. He rarely does anything by accident.

Most nights, if I can't sleep, I scroll through strangers' photos. When I've exhausted those I visualize my escape. Sometimes these are low-key. My car. My sister. Other times I'm on a speedboat, wind in my face, skimming over the flat surface of the river by night, which stretches before me like a polished floor.

As it started to get light outside the bedroom I heard a soft thud against the glass. I crept out of bed to unlock the balcony. There was a small brown ball

outside. A bird. When I picked it up it weighed less than a remote control. I didn't know if it was dead or in a state of shock. On a whim, I took it back inside and laid it on my pillow.

Dom was still sleeping. The bird did not move. Then I came back out of the room, picked up my phone and headed down toward the entrance.

Once outside I called my sister, listening to my footsteps as I waited for her to answer, picturing LANDLORD flashing. OK, I imagined her saying, unfazed by what I was telling her, evidently expecting it.

The phone kept ringing and then I felt a sharp pain at the back of my head. The phone flew out of my hand and skittered across the road. Suddenly my eyes were level with Dom's suede loafers, his ankles thick and pale beneath his dressing gown. I knew by instinct not to scream, and no one would've heard it anyway. I felt my arm release from the socket as he dragged me upward. Then I felt a liquid cooling, saw my blood making perfect dark coins on the pavement. If someone realized I was missing, at least there would be evidence.

My vision came and went. A sunrise like nothing else. Both of us were silent except for breathing. We entered a car park. My own car was parked there. For a moment I thought I was hallucinating. There wasn't a scratch on it.

He opened the boot and folded me into it. I was dizzy and it was dark but it was also good to be reunited.

LOCKDOWN AND RELATIONSHIPS

The car began to move. Gentle, foetal rocking. My eyes did not adjust. It seemed possible they weren't really open. I tried to feel for the catch with my good arm, like in films, but couldn't find it. I wondered where he would take me. There were now so many secluded places.

But after only a few minutes the car came to a halt again and I heard him exit. I lay still, holding my breath. The boot opened. His thighs, stomach, chest, chin appeared. His eyes.

Where am I? I said stupidly.

He lifted me and slung me over his shoulder again. I let myself be carried, blood rushing to my head, still trickling from my nose. I realized then we were still in the same car park. The concrete with its painted numbers, the yellow light and was disappointed.

Back inside, he laid me on the sofa with several wads of tissue for the bleeding. He made himself a breakfast of beans on toast, and ate it talking on the phone. The conversation was about someone who'd gone on holiday and was now stuck there. No more flights. Stuck there indefinitely. He seemed satisfied with the small circle he'd driven me. A lesson. A warning. I was useless now just like my sister. My arm would correct itself he said, it would go back to its original shape, eventually. ◇



A NIGHT TO REMEMBER

Joyride

Anbara Salam

W e're late for dinner at the White House. Again. At the edge of the sidewalk, George pats his tuxedo pockets and pauses. 'Oh.'

'What?'

'I forgot to lock the car.'

I look over my shoulder. The lights are on in the Blue Room, which means drinks are already being served. 'Does it matter? It's hardly going to get stolen here—' I gesture to the empty stretch of street along Pennsylvania Avenue, and to Walter, the Secret Service agent, standing halfway up the lawn.

George raises his eyebrows.

'Fine,' I say.

George goes back to the car at a half-trot, a pace that is not much more than a walk, but is at least a gesture towards hurrying. The night is colder than I'd first thought, and his breath is a white ribbon down the street. I put my hands in the pocket of my fur, finding the hard, grainy nub of a LifeSavers mint at the bottom. After checking to see that Walter isn't looking, I flick it onto the lawn.

By the time George gets back, his face is red. I hope it doesn't look like he's already been drinking. 'Ready now?' I say.

George gives me his arm, and after a moment, I take it. As we walk up the path, I can feel he's waiting for me to apologize for getting into it on the drive. But instead, I say, 'I hope you already ate.'

He laughs, squeezing my arm.

The pendant light is on in the alcove, and

A NIGHT TO REMEMBER

in the reflection of the glass I check my teeth for lipstick. Walter signals to Anthony, the agent on the side door, and we're ushered inside, our coats taken.

A new agent with a ratty little face leads us to the Blue Room, opening the door and announcing us. As he stands aside, Hall waves from the window seat where he is smoking, his tie already loosened.

Eleanor comes towards me, shoeless. She looks pointedly at the ugly soldier clock on the sideboard: 'Ever punctual.'

'That's my fault,' George says, stepping forward to shake her hand.

'It is,' I say, and Eleanor laughs. She goes to the bar trolley in the corner, rubbing one stockinged foot against the other. 'What can I fix you?'

'Oh, please, Mrs President, allow me to do the honours,' George says, as I say, 'Sherry.'

Eleanor tucks her hair behind her ear. 'No,' she waves at George, 'sit. Whisky?'

George nods.

I cross to the sofa where Thomas has stood up to greet us. He pats me absently on the shoulder. To George, he says, 'You've heard we're switching to base rate plus scale? Gene thinks United are rolling it out this summer.'

I leave them to talk salaries and join Hall in the window seat. Eleanor delivers George's whisky and my sherry, then sits on the other side of Hall. She drapes her arm around his shoulder.

'I am sorry for being late,' I say.

'She was about to send agents out to retrieve

you from behind enemy lines,' Hall says, and Eleanor taps him, good-naturedly.

The dinner bell rings, and Eleanor leans on Hall to slip her shoes back on. Thomas offers his arm to walk me in to dinner and I take it. We are seated next to each other, Eleanor directly across from me.

'What do you think of base plus scale?'

Thomas says, filling my water glass.

'AA and Western are already ahead of you there,' I say, but I swivel in my chair towards Eleanor, hoping to put him off.

The soup bowls are delivered, and Thomas says, under his breath, 'You ate before you came, I hope?'

'I've learned my lesson,' I say, staring into the bowl.

'Cream of broccoli,' Eleanor announces. 'It's amazing how much you can get out of the stalks, even when they're already brown.'

There is a polite silence at the table as we all begin eating our soup. George is trying to catch my eye across the table but I concentrate on spooning up the soup as quickly as possible, not breathing through my nose.

'Have you been up recently?' Eleanor says. She always calls it that, 'up', as if it's a direction.

'Yesterday,' I say. 'Beautifully clear.'

'I never even left the building yesterday,' Eleanor says, with a rueful smile.

The soup bowls are taken away and the next

A NIGHT TO REMEMBER

course is set on the table. 'Seafood cutlets with watercress sauce,' Eleanor says. 'It's mostly Potomac River catfish.'

'Mostly,' Hall repeats, darkly, and I try not to laugh. The watercress sauce is thin, the cutlets cold and rubbery. I swallow each mouthful with a large sip of water.

George clears his throat. 'I hear the NRA are planning to send out pilot questionnaires for the pay analysis?'

'Well, they want to compare the four-and-seven-cent rates against the hourly rates,' Thomas says.

George frowns. 'What about the five-and-nine rate? How does that figure in?'

Hall rolls his eyes at me across the table.

'I'd love to come up with you one of these days,' Eleanor says, fiddling with the locket around her neck. 'Do you think we could arrange it?'

'Of course, whenever you like,' I say.

'Maybe the first week of May? Or—' she turns to Hall— 'wait, I think I'm in Saskatchewan that week.'

'But the issue is the mileage,' Thomas is saying. 'Even from last year, mileage per seventy hours is up to ten thousand five hundred—'

I put down my knife and fork. 'How about now?'

Eleanor looks at me for a moment, then laughs.

'I mean it.'

She blinks at me.

I put my hand on Thomas's arm. 'You could lend us a craft, couldn't you? A quick trip to Baltimore and back?'

Thomas wipes his mouth slowly with his napkin. 'Well, I'm not sure.'

'Surely it wouldn't be too much to ask, for the First Lady?' I say, pointedly.

Slowly, Thomas says, 'I suppose—'

Eleanor claps her hands. 'Oh, this is the greatest idea! Thank you, Thomas!'

Hall raises his eyebrows. 'And are you going to pilot us?'

'Why not?' I say.

'I'll call ahead to Hoover Field,' Thomas says. 'We can use a Condor. And Parker will take us up.'

'Parker?' I say.

'He has the security clearance,' Thomas says, faintly amused.

'Fine.' I slip my gloves out of my purse. 'If we go now, we'll be back in time for dessert,' I say, standing up. 'What is dessert, anyhow?'

'Yellow butter cake,' Eleanor says.

Hall smiles. 'Thank heavens for that.'

The passenger cabin of the Condor feels more like a three-star hotel; the lace curtains are ruched with a gauzy trim, and the seats have individual pink satin pillows.

'The first airliner in the world to provide sleeping berths,' Thomas says, stroking the back of a chair.

A NIGHT TO REMEMBER

‘Yes, we know,’ Eleanor says, with a smile, ‘and equipped with fully retractable landing gear.’

I enjoy the look of surprise on Thomas’s face. Slipping past George, I take the seat next to Eleanor. George stares for a moment before sitting down next to Hall.

Parker salutes us from the cockpit, and within minutes, we are thundering down the runway. The wheels lift off the tarmac, and we are away. As we tilt up, the cabin roaring, Eleanor grips my knee. I can feel the heat of her palm through the silk.

After I spot the black scribble of the Patuxent River, I stand up, gesturing for Eleanor to follow. We hurry down the aisle.

Hall looks up as we pass. ‘Don’t—’ he says, but his voice is muffled by the cockpit’s curtain falling behind us.

I stand behind Parker. ‘My turn.’

Parker turns, his gaze landing on Eleanor. After a moment, he nods, shuffling to the fold-down stool in the corner. I slip behind the cockpit, realizing now that I’m still wearing my kid gloves. ‘Turn off the lights,’ I say. I have to say it twice before he hears me, and the lights in the cabin dim. Next to me, Eleanor gasps. The lights of Maryland shimmer and skip below us, the clouds are omelettey puffs sliding under the body of the plane.

‘It’s beautiful,’ Eleanor says. Her eyes are shining.

‘Your turn,’ I say. She hesitates, but I put my hands over hers onto the yoke. Her fingers twitch.

Anbara Salam

‘You can do it,’ I say, releasing my grip.

Eleanor takes a breath, the plane lurches, a pounce, a serpentine loop. She laughs, and the sound of her laughter fills the cockpit.

Around us the stars slip by; silver and white, the colour of a corn moon, the colour of yellow butter cake, of a joyride. ◇

WHAT YOU MIGHT CALL A HOLIDAY

Trip

Victoria Manifold

WHAT YOU MIGHT CALL A HOLIDAY

and had found a more successful commute I had been unable to shake the general sagging of life, the nameless longing and the hollowing out of my chest, the pounding and the beating and et cetera. I still used my teeth to tear off my fingernails but now, instead of spitting them on the ground, I placed them carefully in my pockets to be disposed of at some unspecified point in the future. I had assumed this was progress but he, impatient and vast, couldn't tolerate it. And so we were having what you might call a holiday and my ankle was, at first, functioning normally.

There had been days previously when he'd discarded dripping condoms onto rented floorboards or when I'd watched him wipe the sloppy end of his dick on thin and brittle curtains. But these were strange and untouchable things in the past now. Forget them! Now we were in the foyer of a hotel and I was mopping my armpits with the free museum guide. He, embarrassed, moved a distance that would suggest to onlookers we didn't know each other. But I considered my behaviour an adequate punishment for him waking me that morning by scratching his testicles until the whole bed shook. So that the further he moved away from me the closer I got to him and everyone at the breakfast buffet could see he had chosen for a life partner this uncouth and sweating beast. Yes, I had won this round. I added up the points in my mind to see who was further ahead, where the balance was tipping in the battleground of our relationship.

Victoria Manifold

He was still ahead but I was gaining ground.

But this was a holiday! We could abandon the war for now! There was still fun to be had! At least I had convinced myself that this is what fun was. Following the itinerary that he had printed out at home to take in the pre-agreed sights. A strict regimen of breath-taking views and areas of historical interest. Timetabling visits to small quirky bars that served tiny slices of offal on hard black bread and staying in the second-best room at the cheapest hotel. As at home I still held my breath and squeezed my skin but only during the allotted time and in the most efficient way.

Ordinarily my days had no such shape. Time was an amorphous lump, terrifying and unwieldy. I clocked in and tried to carve it as best I could. I worked under a fluorescent light far away from a window. The ground was not solid. The air was heated and cooled to the exact same temperature every day. From 9.00 to 5.00 Monday to Friday I was suspended in a kind of aspic made of banalities and unnecessary correspondence, of weak hot drinks in an ill-equipped kitchenette. But on the trip the scenery changed all the time, nothing stayed the same for too long. And the segments of time ticked by as we wiped down the laminated itinerary and went to

the museum

the famous coffee shop

the great landmark

the zoo

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and look! there is the
 masterpiece
 painting
 exotic
 animal
 exquisite
 dessert
 ground-breaking
 architecture
 stolen
 artefacts

We walked the old-style cobbled streets and admired the new-style blue skies. Huge ornate buildings crowded around us like great iced cakes, pushing us out onto the roads. Whipped peak after whipped peak—exhausting! We must get our coffee here, he said, it's so much better than at home. So much more *authentic*. We mounted the slope to the imposing museum, careful to maintain *reverence*. We must see every room, he said. To get the full *experience*.

Slowly he took in every item and read all the nicely mounted captions on all the walls. I sped ahead, eager to get to the gift shop and buy a postcard I could display in my carpeted cubicle and thus prove I was cultured and above all that really, that I was somehow better than the people who sat a few feet away from me for 8 hours a day, that I understood the mid-century abstract artist's idea of a face was very different from what they considered

a face to be. I wandered from room to room, past tastefully lit marble busts and oil paintings in the preferred style of the time. Elongated noses, hooded eyes, smooth brows. I closed my eyes and laughed at their outdated fashions, their complicated hairstyles studded precisely with real freshwater pearls. I showed off my lovely teeth and I said to them, 'Look at my lovely teeth, admire them.' But their eyes didn't follow me around the room as I had been led to believe they would.

There are things you can do for luck, things to protect yourself from harm. I had kept the fingers of my left hand crossed until they atrophied and I had taken the secreted fingernails from the pockets of my clothes and eaten them. But this protection spell had failed and had left me sadly constipated. I secretly visited pharmacies and, knowing little of the language, purchased hopeful laxatives so that I then blocked the museum toilet with huge black shits that could not be flushed away even after hours and hours of trying.

And yet as I carried on through each of the museum hallways I was still a hundred miles or more ahead of him and wondering what if, what if instead of being involved in wars and ships and suchlike, Otto von Bismarck wrote something close to a comic opera just for me? What if Errol Flynn gave up acting to neatly embroider saucy haikus or sombre limericks onto linen for me? What if Michael Fish never discovered meteorology and instead trained Weimaraner puppies to give up

WHAT YOU MIGHT CALL A HOLIDAY

their paws just to me, only me? What if what if? But I couldn't hold this thought in my head long enough. It floated off as soon as I saw the novelty eraser display placed prominently at the gift shop checkout.

Carved rubber shaped like tiny plates of food and kitchen appliances that I held tightly in my fist until he came to find me and laugh haughtily at my lack of engagement in the important spoils of a formerly violent nation.

Many years before, when I was jobless and could barely afford to eat, a man had given me £20 to kiss another woman while he watched with gloved hands across a Formica table. After I'd tasted her tongue for two or more minutes he slipped off the gloves and pushed the note across the table. I offered to split the money with her but she was

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educated and £10 was a laughable sum to her. So I'd taken the whole £20 and, for reasons unclear to me at that time or any other time, bought a hideous silk scarf. An utterly useless item that I never wore so that it was as if I'd never even had the £20 to start with.

But, when I had packed what I considered tastefully erotic underwear for this trip, I had stuffed in the scarf too, hoping it would finally be of use. Back at the hotel that night I threaded it between my fingers and suggested he tied me up and fucked me hard. He felt this suggestion pathetic and instead took a shower. When he left the bathroom an hour later it smelled greatly of semen and I thought perhaps the steam would make me pregnant. I became aware of how I held my body, which way would stop impregnation and which would help it, and which of these things did I want? And so movement became painful to me, as each step of my feet or thrust of my toothbrush was a decision that could lead to childbirth, a torn vagina, milk-heavy breasts, a lifetime of love and pride. I could only stay very still until the steam had vanished. And then I got into bed next to him, a great expanse of mattress between his body and mine and the sheets pulled up to our chins. Despite the little hatreds that bloomed between us I wanted to wrap my arms and legs around him until he shrank, until he was so small I absorbed his body with my own body and kept him safe inside me for a long time. But as I opened my mouth to tell him he made an ostentatious pantomime of being asleep, fake snores rising out of him like

zzz

zzz

zzz

zzz

WHAT YOU MIGHT CALL A HOLIDAY

And then it passed and so it was the next day and the next day again. On to another imposing museum or fashionable gallery, a vintage boutique where he could buy wide wale corduroy that smelled of the toby jugs my Aunty Margaret kept on a high shelf. And perhaps it was at the fourth or even the fifth of these places that, descending a marble staircase and only two steps from the bottom, I tripped and fell. Something snapped. A taste of dirt filled my mouth as I lay in a heap at the foot of the stairs and, his embarrassment now doubled, he stepped over me and went straight out of the door.

I lay there a while, a message coming through on my outmoded phone, the obsolete brand. He had left the country, boarded a new flight at great expense

or

he had met someone else in the antiquities room and they had fallen in love

or

it was his sister telling me he had died in a terrible accident and I had missed the funeral

or

he had arranged to meet all of his former lovers. He still loved them and always had done, much more than he had ever loved me. They were somewhere else now. Don't bother to find them.

or

Years went by in this way as I wore a face that advertised my humiliation. Winter came. Happy

New Year et cetera. My identity became entirely constructed from waiting but there came a point when I just had to get up. A security guard offered me a handful of boiled sweets wrapped in plastic and my ankle had swollen enormously. So much so that the flesh had spilled out and covered at least half of my shoe, like an accident with expanding foam. I focused my eyes on the V of the guard's V-neck sweater and on the blue of his navy blue hair. He was trying so hard to have a kind face but the various lines covering it conspired to give the exact opposite impression so that I could not trust the barley sugars and sherbet lemons that lay in his outstretched palm.

Ignoring his offer I removed my shoe and bound my ankle in the hideous silk scarf. But it was little more than an aesthetic accoutrement and as soon as I put my foot down I vomited up a great pile of coffee and pastries onto the museum floor. It spewed out of me in massive undulating waves and in between each one I offered up apologies to the nearby staff. Pools of sick swished around my now sadly deformed ankle. I watched a flood of bile glisten on the AstroTurf as visitors were evacuated to higher ground.

I had forgotten which street and district the second-best room in the cheapest hotel was. So, dragging my leg behind me and carrying my shoe, I took a room at the closest youth hostel, although I was well past my best. I begged for the bottom bunk of a bed and around me televisions played dubbed

WHAT YOU MIGHT CALL A HOLIDAY

versions of *Scooby-Doo*, *Pearl Harbor*, *Beadle's About*. Lips moved out of sync with sounds, the music bounced off the piss-yellow walls. The mattress was bare and the tea tasted of ripe fruits. The bread was dark and dense and I rolled it into balls and I swallowed those balls whole as I rested my head for just one moment on the thin synthetic pillows, cradling like a baby my now useless shoe.

There were people coming and going
through sets of revolving doors.

through sash
windows

through venetian
blinds

Each of them had a different face

or

the same face

or

a combination of
the same face and
a different face

or

I lay on my bunk and asked a young woman the best way to reach the airport but rather than giving me directions or bus timetables she handed me a small canvas bag of plastic rocks. **USE THE MOON TO CHARGE THEM**, she screamed at me. **OK**, I screamed back but I started running at the same time as screaming and ended up in the middle of the road. It was **OK** though, the cars were

all those little pastel-coloured hatchbacks and so could not hurt me. They simply bounced off my ankle like ants made of hardened ice cream.

The tiny drivers raised their voices at me but I couldn't understand them. I had learned the basics of the language, of course, but only from an ancient book that espoused an arcane mutation of grammar. I tried to make myself understood but if what I was saying had been a colour it would've been vomit but vomit in a swirl, like vomit in cartoons, like the orange-flecked vomit from school that got soaked up with sawdust.

From the middle of the road I went to cafés to drink more coffee, to eat more pastries. It was now the height of summer and in the heat the wasps had crowded into the display cabinets housing the sticky buns and every person, including me, ate one or more wasps without complaint and even came to enjoy the taste of them in the end.

Filled with the local delicacies and insects as I was it became impossible for me to find my way back to the youth hostel. Instead I rode the well-known Ferris wheel, raising my leg from the gondola to admire my beautifully swollen ankle. It was ten times its normal size, a hundred or a thousand times. It was swollen past all believable proportions. And it was there, swinging above the city, that I received a telegram from my sister telling me, *'It's not too late—you can freeze your eggs.'* How did she even get hold of a telegram in this climate? She'd re-nationalized the railways in order to let me

WHAT YOU MIGHT CALL A HOLIDAY

know that surrogacy was an option.

But ha! I had torn out my ovaries and chucked them in the bin

or

What I meant to say was I had boiled them alive

or

I'd packed them into Tupperware boxes and bound them too tightly with packing tape, they were starved of oxygen

or

Something like that.

But my sister had called on her landline to tell me what I had was better than

a cup of fat
with a hair in it

And my mother? My mother told me I would catch cancer just to spite her, undergo chemotherapy that would render me infertile just to ruin her day. Don't I want her to have grandchildren? But it was difficult to hear from my gondola where I could see over the swell of my ankle and out all the way into the distance. See all the houses that were the size of big houses. And right on the outskirts, away from all the areas of outstanding natural and man-made beauty, I could hear the stray dogs howling for their suppers.

So I simply told them that this was the year that everything that's ever been in style will come

Victoria Manifold

back into style. We'll be flooded with style so to speak. And at that time I truly believed it. But all I got from them was the persistent dialling tone and the sound of babies pouring from their taps and then, faintly, the screech from my mother
put your fallopian tubes to work.

It was tiring. I was tired.
I had become very tired.

Tired, I began to hope that someone would murder me.

After all it would've been be
a victimless crime.

They could've buried me
in a nearby park. In a shallow
hole. Barely concealed.

A local dog walker could've
quickly discovered my body
and we'd have gotten it all
over with so soon.

But there in the south,
so far from home did local
dog walkers still discover
the shallow graves of dead
women?

I couldn't count on it. And so I said to all
the men in the other gondolas, 'Don't kill me ...
[pause] ... yet.'

Now that I was really living I began to enjoy
the astronauts raining down from the heavens,
glittering. And my mouth was teeming with

WHAT YOU MIGHT CALL A HOLIDAY

bacteria, gorgeously. Ulcers were sprouting up along the line of my gums, pop pop pop pop, one after the other like a scene, like an animation, like Busby Berkeley. I enjoyed the pain of them for a while, enjoyed the theatre. But it was only moments later that I took all my paperback books and, from the top of the famous Ferris wheel, threw them all into the barely famous river. The pages became waterlogged and soft but the characters inside were still all rich and brittle.

I had nothing left to read and summer was coming to an end. The well-known Ferris wheel closed up for the season. I dismounted my gondola and went to the airport by bus, probably. I assume that bodies were packed in tight, that the smell was overwhelming, that my foot ached and I dragged it behind myself as I boarded, as I got confused by the currency and offered too much or too little for my fare. It is likely that the fumes made me light-headed and sick but really there was no bus, it was just a click of the fingers between the gondola and the airport. Between here and there. Between now and then.

I pressed my identity card to the Plexiglas cubicle whilst around me surly guards with giant arms modelled a number of automatic weapons. It was fashionable and new. I told them I would like to go home and although the crackle of the loudspeaker obscured the announcements I was sure I had boarded the right flight. I became excited at the prospect of the journey. Excited to

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eat the small cold sandwich with its tough over-refrigerated bread. Excited to leave behind those breakfasts of pork and pickled cabbage. Excited to press my knees into the hard plastic of the seat in front of me.

Excited to assume
the bracing position
to secure my own mask
first before helping others
to open the plastic pouch
and remove the vest

to

But now it is over and we are almost touching down on the runway. Wings tilting and there are the familiar sounds, bodies shifting smells around. My heart beating in my chest, where it has always been. Beating away. Beating. The dirt filling my mouth again. My ankle throbs and I taste iron. The rush of raw air. We have defied death yet again. A cheer, huzzah! Nearby birds are thin and dirty, small and alone.

But now it is the beating
beating
now the bump
now the tarmac
now the
now the ◇



57

Five
Dials