

Five Dials



NUMBER 11

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... and indeed a little more.



CONTRIBUTORS

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ALAIN DE BOTTON's most recent book is *A Week at the Airport: A Heathrow Diary*.

PAUL MURRAY used to work as a bookseller. His new novel, *Skippy Dies*, is published this month.

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Excerpt from *Roberto Bolaño: The Last Interview* courtesy of Melville House Publishing, published in February 2010.

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All illustrations by Kate Bland

Designed by Dean Allen

On Wilton's and Lists

I HAVE A FRIEND who sometimes sends me lists. In lieu of a full email, or even a postcard, she writes a list about her life naming the detritus that adds texture to her life and they become surprisingly effective slices of biography, hinting at who she is at the moment and what is flitting through her life. The key is to write without thinking and let the list tell the story. Here at *Five Dials* we're always writing lists, revising lists and throwing lists away. Occasionally we even uncover a list to print in the magazine, such as Raymond Chandler's discarded titles, which you'll find inside. (My personal favorite: *The Lady With The Truck*) Instead of a full editor's letter, here is a list of what surrounded us as we put together our Wilton's issue.

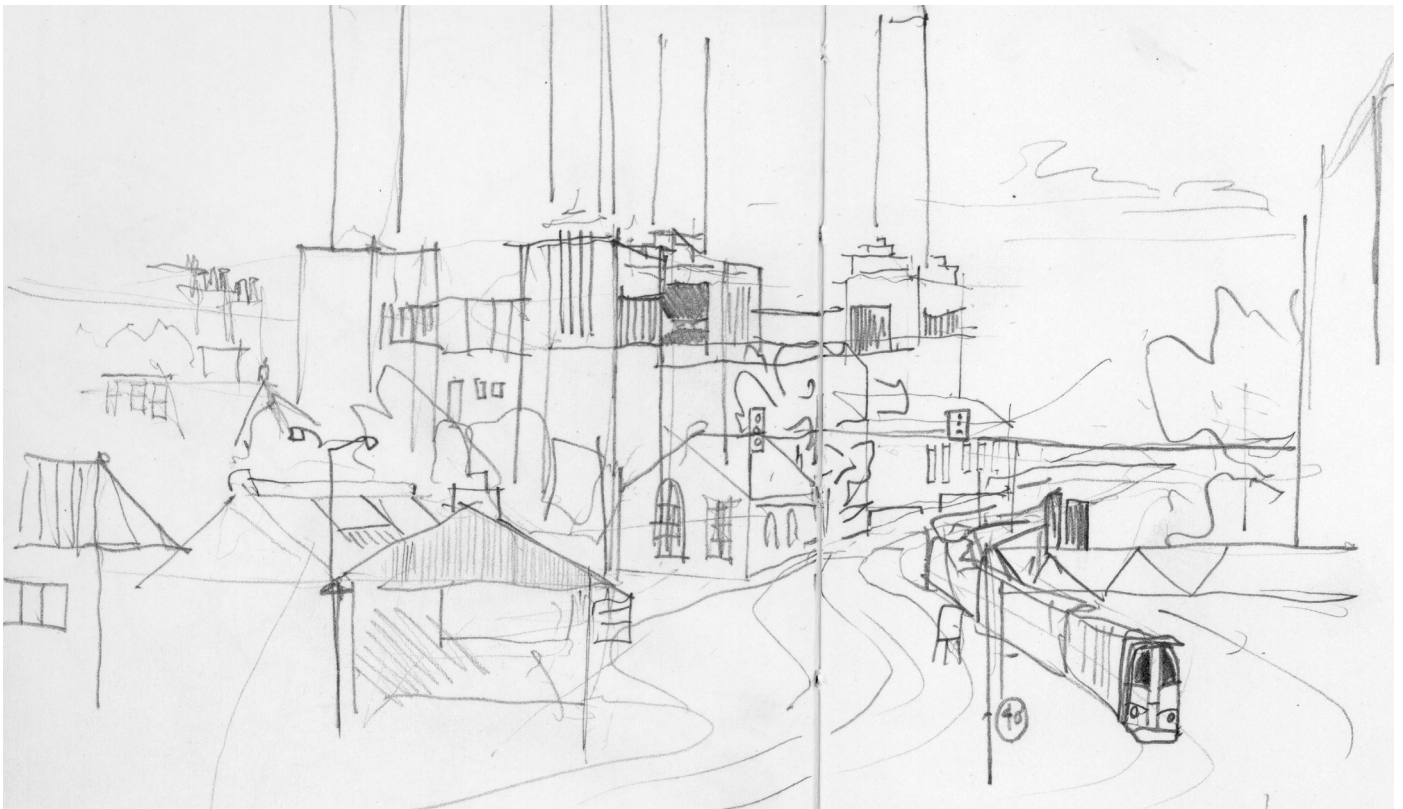
First, an explanation: our issues usually have themes but we've just been calling this one 'Wilton's' like it was an old Golden Retriever. 'Where is Wilton's right now?' 'Has anyone seen Wilton's?' It's not a huge issue but it's been typeset quickly by our designer out in rural France to be

ready for our evening at Wilton's Music Hall on February 26th, when Jonathan Safran Foer is scheduled to talk about eating animals and Paul Murray will read something just about as funny and sharp as the short story we're publishing in the issue. Just the other day I had the entry 'Murray - DEVIL' written on one of my many lists. (I write them on white scraps of paper in black pen so they look as severe and serious as possible.) The entry was not meant to remind me that Paul is the devil (he's not) but to prompt me into re-read his short story, 'Beat The Devil,' which I thought we'd be publishing in this issue. I say 'I thought' because yesterday Paul sent me an edited version of the story *he* thought we'd be publishing. As much as I'm a fan of 'Beat The Devil,' I love the new one, 'Saint Silence.' Sometimes you never know which way Wilton's is going to turn. The story anchors the issue, and is a good way to start the *Five Dials* 11 list. Without delay:

- Paul Murray manuscript
- February rain

- Evergreen Polo mints
- Pilot V5 Hi-Tecpoint 0.5 pen
- *Bliss To Be Alive: The Collected Writings of Gavin Hills*
- 'Buildings & Bodies' – a zine by Ryan Dodgson
- London bus route 168
- Green lentils
- *Sea Within A Sea* – The Horrors
- *Lionkiller Got Married* – Cass McCombs
- USA 5 – Canada 3, men's Olympic ice hockey result
- Clairefontaine notebooks
- *Hangover Square* – Patrick Hamilton
- *Jerusalem* – Jez Butterworth
- Kronenbourg Cold
- Grey macintosh coat
- *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* – Jacques Demy
- *Nobody Knows* – Hirokazu Koreeda
- Yogurt covered peanuts
- Dennis Severs' house
- Virgin trains
- Overpriced juice on Virgin trains
- Canada 7 – Russia 3, men's Olympic ice hockey result
- Artichoke hearts
- 'Range Life' – Pavement
- *The Journalist and the Murderer* – Janet Malcolm
- Jasmine rice
- Broken umbrella

—CRAIG TAYLOR



Roberto Bolaño

An extract from Roberto Bolaño's last interview, with Mexican Playboy

MONICA MARISTAIN: If you hadn't been a writer, what would you have been?

ROBERTO BOLAÑO: I would like to have been a homicide detective, much more than being a writer. I am absolutely sure of that. A string of homicides. I'd have been someone who could come back to the scene of the crime alone, by night, and not be afraid of ghosts. Perhaps then I might really have become crazy. But being a detective that could easily be resolved with a bullet to the mouth.

MM: Have you shed one tear about the widespread criticism you've drawn from your enemies?

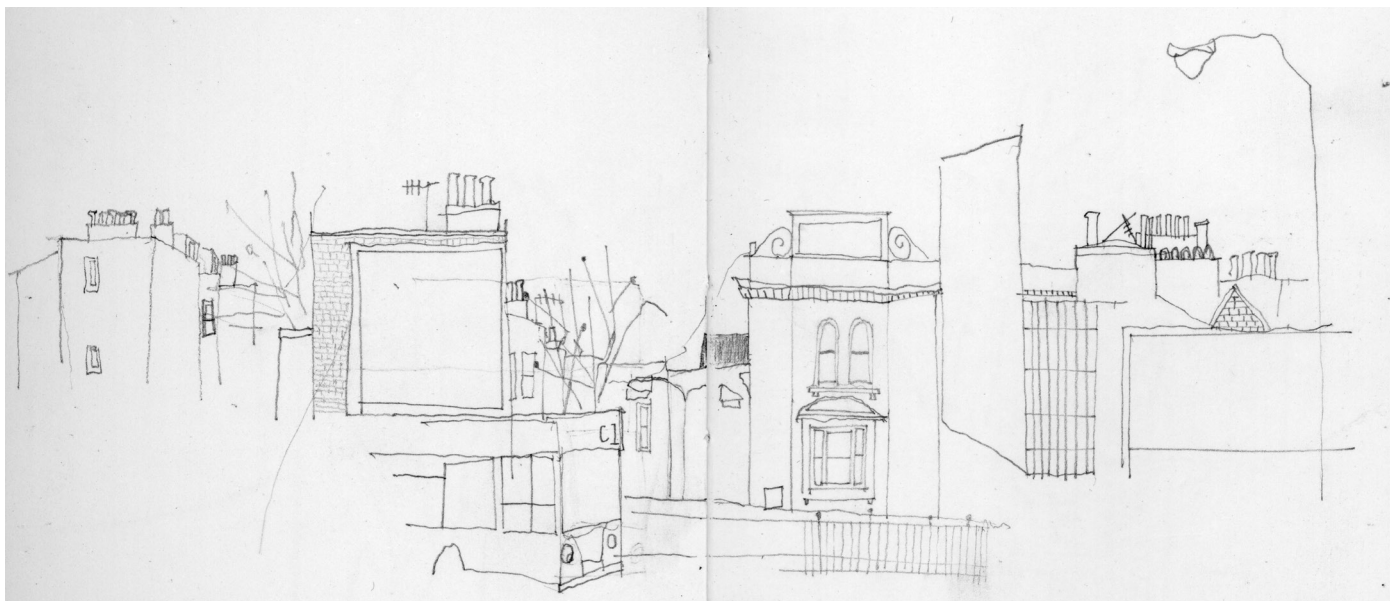
RB: In reality the five books are more like 5,000. I'll mention these only as the tip of the spear: *Don Quixote* by Cervantes, *Moby Dick* by Melville, the complete works of Borges, *Hopscotch* by Cortázar, *A Confederacy of Dunces* by Toole. I should also cite *Nadja* by Breton, and the letters of Jacques Vaché. Anything Ubu by Jarry. *Life: A User's Manual* by Perec. *The Castle* and *The Trial* by Kafka. *Aphorisms* by Lichtenberg. *The Tractatus* by Wittgenstein. *The Invention of Morel* by Bioy Casares. *The Satyricon* by Petronius. *The History of Rome* by Tito Livio. *Pensées* by Pascal.

MM: John Lennon, Lady Di or Elvis Presley?

was at the point of fainting. She had copper skin, long red hair and the rest of her was perfect. A timeless beauty. When I had to charge her, I felt embarrassed. As if saying she understood and not to worry, she smiled at me. Then she disappeared and I have never again seen anyone like her. Sometimes I get the impression that she was the goddess Kali, the patron saint of thieves and goldsmiths, except Kali was also the goddess of murderers, and this Hindu woman was not only the most beautiful woman on earth, but she seemed also to be a good person – very sweet and considerate.

MM: What do you wish to do before dying?

RB: Nothing special. Well, clearly I'd prefer not to die. But sooner or later the distinguished lady arrives. The problem is that sometimes she's neither



RB: Lots and lots. Every time I read that someone has spoken badly of me I begin to cry, I drag myself across the floor, I scratch myself, I stop writing indefinitely, I lose my appetite, I smoke less, I engage in sport, I go for walks on the edge of the sea, which by the way is less than thirty metres from my house, and I ask the seagulls, whose ancestors ate the fish who ate Ulysses: Why me? Why? I've done you no harm.

MM: Which five books have marked your life?

RB: The Pogues, or Suicide, or Bob Dylan. Well, but let's not be pretentious: Elvis for ever. Elvis and his golden voice, with a sheriff's badge, driving a Mustang and stuffing himself full of pills.

MM: Have you seen the most beautiful woman in the world?

RB: Yes, sometime around 1984 when I worked at a store. The store was empty and in came a Hindu woman. She looked like a princess and could well have been one. She bought some hanging costume jewellery from me. I

a lady nor very distinguished, but, as Nicanor Parra says in a poem, she's a hot wench who will make your teeth chatter no matter how fancy you think you are.

MM: What kinds of feelings do posthumous works awaken in you?

RB: Posthumous: it sounds like the name of a Roman gladiator, an unconquered gladiator. At least that's what poor Posthumous would like to believe. It gives him courage. ♦

Jon Savage reclaims 1974

The year the sixties ended and the eighties began

IT WAS thirty-six years ago today. Doesn't have much of a ring, does it? And indeed 1974 is an elision in most pop/cultural histories: a gap, a lacuna only partially filled by recent accounts of progressive rock – amusing and a necessary corrective though they might be. The political story in Britain is well told, most recently by Andy Beckett in *When the Lights Went Out: Britain in the Seventies*, his journey through 1970s politics. It was the year of two Labour election wins, the three-day-week and the miners' strike, the Birmingham IRA bomb, the slow upward rise of the New Right and free-market economics and the effects of the OPEC oil strike. It's as though all these events have crowded out all other memories of this pivotal year.

In fact, as Paul Tickell has recently suggested, 1974 is 'the year the sixties ended and the eighties began'. In pop, it's the year of terminal glam: *Diamond Dogs* and 'Rebel Rebel'. Bowie changes tack during the *Diamond Dogs* tour and opts for Philly Soul, while Roxy Music find affirmation with the surprisingly straightforward 'All I Want Is You'. There is a late, sophisticated glam-flash from Sparks, with two huge hits and two albums: *Kimono My House* and *Propaganda*. Brian Eno releases *Taking Tiger Mountain (By Strategy)*, with the proto-punk 'The True Wheel' ('we saw the lovers, the modern lovers, and they looked very good'), while producing Nico's one and only Island album, *The End* – most notable for the synthesizer ice-storm on 'Innocent And Vain'. Nico also crops up on Kevin Ayers's 'Irreversible Neural Damage' and the whole thing is wrapped up by *June 1, 1974* – an album recorded live on that date and featuring Ayers, Eno, Nico, John Cale and the rest of the Island community.

The big new teen sensations are the Bay City Rollers, a classic boy band plucked from the street and heavily manipulated. Apart from 'Saturday Night', most of their early records are pretty wimpy but in the years to come they will foster harder imitators: Slik, Hello (notable for their

1976 epic, 'Teenage Revolution') and the Sex Pistols. For those requiring hard rock, Dr Feelgood are a heart-stopping sensation on the live circuit and, by the end of that year, are busy recording their first classic LP, *Down By the Jetty*.

On the West Coast, it's the year of the two late-hippie-era masterworks: Neil Young's *On the Beach* and Gene Clark's *No Other*, which swings from cosmic exultation to despair (for more in this vein, hear if you can Syd Barrett's last ever studio session from 1974 and Nick Drake's 'Hanging on A Star' – two late sixties golden boys floundering in the brutal seventies). The Doobie Brothers clean up with the New Orleans chapter in their early/ambient travelogues 'Black Water'. American resident John Lennon makes his last good album, *Walls and Bridges*. In New York; the Dolls are running out of steam while the CBGB's scene is getting underway with Richard Hell, Television, The Ramones and Patti Smith – who releases her first 45, 'Hey Joe/Piss Factory'.

It's a fantastic time for black music, especially funk, jazz-fusion and soul: Funkadelic's *Standing on the Verge of Getting It On*, Bobby Bland's *Dreamer*, Gil Scott-Heron's 'The Bottle', Al Green's 'Livin' For You', Miles Davis' *Big Fun*, Weather Report's *Mysterious Traveller*. There are soul songs of surprising, if not shocking, frankness: Swamp Dogg's 'Did I Come Back Too Soon (Or Stay Away Too Long)?', Laura Lee's 'I Need It Just As Bad As You', Betty Davis's 'He Was A Big Freak' ('I used to whip him with my turquoise chain'). It's the year of the early disco breakthrough: from Patti Jo's 'Make Me Believe In You' (mentioned in Andrew Holleran's ur-disco text, *Dancer from the Dance*) and Gloria Gaynor's 'Honey Bee' through to huge US hits like George McCrae's hypnotic drum-machine mood piece 'Rock Your Baby' and the Hues Corporation's 'Rock The Boat'.

Similarly with reggae: the Wailers' *Natty Dread*, Rupie Edwards's *Ire Feelings (Skanga)*, Toots and the Maytals' *In The Dark*. The

first dub albums are beginning to appear by Skin, Flesh & Bones and Augustus Pablo (*Ital Dub*). The greatest of these is Keith Hudson's *Pick a Dub*. From its cover (tam-wearing Rasta smoking huge spliff under a coconut tree) in, *Pick a Dub* is a holistic masterpiece that does much to promote Dub as the present/future form. Hudson uses Augustus Pablo's melodica as a fanfare on the opening title track: it weaves in and out of a churchy organ, but everything is brought back to the fundamental bass, snare and cymbal at regular intervals before a brief scat vocal whoops into the fade. Every track is great but 'Dreaded Than' is pure, organ-drenched skank of filth, while 'Don't Move' is a perfect paradox: a dropped in and out vocal that says 'be still' while the backing track moves like a BMW pushed to the engine limit. *Pick a Dub* is one of the first dub albums to get a UK release, if not the first, and you can hear it blaring out all over west London.

In Germany, Faust release *Krautrock* – the all-consuming drone that comprehensively trashes the genre that it helped to name – while Kraftwerk have an international hit with *Autobahn*: the Beach Boys transplanted to the autobahns of West Germany. (I've road-tested it *in situ* – on the A7 and the A24 – and it works perfectly: don't forget that there are no speed limits on the A-bahn.) Other 1974 albums of note include Can's *Future Days* (including the funky 'Moonshake'), Klaus Schulze's *Blackdance*, the Cosmic Jokers' *Planeten Sit In* and Sand's extraordinary *Golem* (thanks to Julian Cope for this tip), where outré electronica meets tribal chant in a primeval cave. Much more approachable is Cluster's *Zuckerzeit* ('sweet time') – a collection of ten instrumentals that range from the almost sickly ('Marzipan') to the darkly ambient ('James') and the disconcerting: 'Rote Riki', where bleeping androids fade into a sticky soundpatch of underwater creatures. Best of all is the uplifting opener, 'Hollywood', which builds and builds over nearly four minutes before resolving within a perpetual ascent. You want it to last for ever. *Zuckerzeit* is often credited with inspiring Brian Eno at a crucial moment – sure you can hear it on *Another Green World* and, even more, on the limited edition, all-instrumental, 27-track *EG Music for Films* – but it needs no retrospective justification: it exists in its own world, poised between playful-

ness, European melodicism and Romantic presentiments of darkness.

The final selection from this year comes from the outer fringes. In February 1974, The Residents release 1,000 copies of *Meet the Residents* on their Ralph Records label. The front cover detourned, in classic pro-Situationist defacement style, the Beatles' first US album: John Lennon has a drooling tongue, George Harrison sports fangs, Ringo has Dr Spock ears while Paul McCartney has a particularly disturbing insect face. The flip showed the Beatles in another classic shot, all in their Pierre Cardin collarless suits, with crawfish heads. Apart from being entertaining, it was part of a polemic against the hegemony of sixties culture (which by the mid-seventies had become oppressive to many): The Residents would return to the Beatles on 1976's epic sonic cut-up, *Beyond the Valley of a Day in the Life*, but in the meantime began their habit of warping sixties radio hits like 'These Boots Are Made For Walking' ('Boots') and the Human Beinz's 'Nobody But Me' which cuts into their oil crisis number 'N-Er-Gee' (excised from the later CD version, presumably for copyright reasons).

The Residents would return to this theme on 1976's *The Third Reich 'n' Roll*: 'People are speculating,' they wrote in the sleeve-note, 'whether The Residents are hinting that rock 'n' roll has brainwashed the youth of the world. When confronted with this possible philosophy, they replied, "Well, it may be true or it may not, but we wanted to kick out the jams and get it on."'" Manifestos mean very little if the A-music isn't there, and *Meet the Residents* is a dizzying collage of found sound and musique concrete with the deliberately dissonant and the near pop ('Smelly Tongues'), resolving into moments of strange beauty ('Rest Aria'). It took a while for the album and the group to find an audience, but towards the end of 1977 they sounded perfectly in sync with the times: beginning with similar aims to punk – how to blow away pop culture's false consciousness? – The Residents had the musical and conceptual ability to take that polemic much further, as they did throughout the eighties. But their first album still rings loud and unique.

To finish, some playlists:

1974, part 1

- *Mr Michael Bond's Address* – The Portsmouth Sinfonia
- *White Light / White Heat (Live 1974)* – Lou Reed
- *At Home, At Work, At Play* – Sparks
- *Funky Kingston* – Toots and the Maytals
- *She Does It Right* – Dr Feelgood
- *Standing on the Verge of Getting It On* – Funkadelic
- *Ain't No Love in the Heart of the City* – Bobby 'Blue' Bland
- *Going Down On Love* – John Lennon
- *The Fan* – Little Feat
- *Rikki Don't Lose That Number* – Steely Dan
- *Ife* – Miles Davis
- *The Bottle* – Gil Scott-Heron and Brian Jackson
- *Let's Get Married* – Al Green

1974, part 2

- *Sweet Home Alabama* – Lynyrd Skynyrd
- *The Thrill of It All* – Roxy Music
- *My Teenage Queen* – Harpo
- *Amateur Hour* – Sparks
- *Devil Gate Drive* – Suzi Quatro
- *Honey Bee* – Gloria Gaynor
- *Rock Me Again & Again & Again & Again & Again & Again* – Lyn Collins
- *Did I Come Back Too Soon (Or Stay Away Too Long)* – Swamp Dogg
- *Love Epidemic* – The Tramps
- *Doctor's Orders* – Carol Douglas
- *Don't Move* – Keith Hudson
- *Babylon Dubbing* – Skin, Flesh & Bones
- *The Big Rip-Off* – Augustus Pablo
- *Androids* – Robert Rockwell III
- *Crystal Waters* – Moolah
- *Scarlet Woman* – Weather Report



1974, part 3

- *Autobahn* – Kraftwerk
- *Make Me Believe in You* – Patti Jo
- *Pick a Dub* – Keith Hudson
- *Train to Rhodesia* – Big Youth
- *In Zaire* – Johnny Wakelin
- *Rock and Roll Records* – JJ Cale
- *Do It ('Til You're Satisfied)* – B. T. Express
- *Moonshake* – Can
- *Sweet Thing (Reprise)* – David Bowie
- *Time Machine* – Sadistic Mika Band
- *I Don't Mind* – Dr Feelgood
- *I Need It Just As Bad As You* – Laura Lee
- *Be Thankful for What You Got* – William DeVaughn

1974, part 4

- *Dreamer* – Bobby 'Blue' Bland
- *Black Water* – Doobie Brothers
- *Observatory Crest* – Captain Beefheart & The Magic Band
- *Ambulance Blues* – Neil Young
- *Age of Treason* – Donovan
- *The Calvary Cross* – Richard & Linda Thompson
- *No Other* – Gene Clark
- *Kometenmelodie 1* – Kraftwerk
- *Helicopter* – Sand
- *Electronic News* – The Cosmic Jokers
- *Mirrors* – Moolah
- *Hey Joe* – Patti Smith

1974, part 5

- *Satan Side* – Keith Hudson
- *Fingerprint File* – The Rolling Stones
- *Out of the Blue* – Roxy Music
- *Chant of the Ever Circling Skeletal Family* – David Bowie
- *The Needle and the Spoon* – Lynyrd Skynyrd
- *Fear is a Man's Best Friend* – John Cale
- *Piss Factory* – Patti Smith
- *DMT* – George Brigman
- *Irreversible Neural Damage* – Kevin Ayers
- *Innocent and Vain* – Nico
- *Erotic Neurotic* – The Saints
- *Krautrock* – Faust
- *Heiße Lippen* – Cluster
- *If You Go 2* – Syd Barrett
- *Hanging on a Star* – Nick Drake
- *I'll Be There If You Ever Want Me* – JJ Cale

Unused Book Titles

By Raymond Chandler

IN HIS NOTEBOOKS, the ever-inventive Raymond Chandler kept a list of possible titles for books, all of which we think deserve to be written. According to Chandler scholar Frank MacShane Chandler's interest in titles even led him to invent a writer, Aaron Klopstein, who committed suicide by Amazonian blowgun, but not before publishing two volumes of poetry (*The Hydraulic Facelift* and *Cat Hairs in the Custard*), a short story collection (*Twenty Inches of Monkey*) and two novels (*Once More the Cicatrice* and *The Seagull Has No Friends*).

We reprint Chandler's unused titles here as a service to writers. Our personal

favourite at Five Dials has to be 'The Lady with the Truck', but they all have distinctive merits – and most pull off that hardest of tricks: suggesting a story while also grabbing the potential reader's attention.

- *The Man with the Shredded Ear*
- *All Guns Are Loaded*
- *Choice of Dessert*
- *Return from Ruin*
- *Here It Is Saturday*
- *My Best to the Bride*
- *The Man Who Loved the Rain*
- *The Corpse Came in Person*
- *Law Is Where You Buy It*

- *The Porter Rose at Dawn*
- *We All Liked Al*
- *Fair With Some Rain*
- *They Only Murdered Him Once*
- *Too Late for Smiling*
- *The Diary of a Loud Check Suit*
- *Deceased When Last Seen*
- *Quick, Hide the Body*
- *A Night in the Ice Box*
- *Goodnight and Goodbye*
- *The Cool-Off*
- *Uncle Watson Wants to Think*
- *The Parson in the Parlor*
- *Stop Screaming – It's Me*
- *No Third Act*
- *Twenty Minutes' Sleep*
- *They Still Come Honest*
- *Between Two Liars*
- *The Lady with the Truck*
- *The Black-Eyed Blonde*
- *Rigadoo*
- *Thunder Bug*
- *Everyone Says Good-bye Too Soon*



Saint Silence

A new story by Paul Murray

OF ALL THE restaurant critics in Ireland, there was none so feared as James Duffy. His reviews were infamous for their brutality. ‘For mains, I ordered the steak tartare,’ he wrote of Rumpole’s. ‘However, the waiter must have misheard me, and thought I asked for a giant pus-filled herpes on a plate.’ Of the Chancery: ‘Dessert was a novel twist on Pandora’s Box, in which all of the world’s evils had been baked into a soufflé.’ Of Chez Patrice: ‘Have you ever wondered what a dinosaur’s heart might have tasted like? If so, the beef bourgignon is for you.’ No one was spared his vitriol: he excoriated both the humble (‘Punjab Palace’s chicken curry is like a twenty-minute bout of the Ebola virus’) and the very grand (‘The great Dostoyevsky once wrote: “What is hell? I maintain it is the suffering of being unable to love.” However, he hadn’t tried the chicken at La Coupoule.’)

His venomous style brought a large following, and his columns were read by people many thousands of miles away from the Dublin restaurant scene. As his influence grew, more than one Michelin star fell to his pen, and a handful of eateries, after their Sunday mauling, were forced to close their doors for good. On one occasion he found a bullet in his soup; on another, he was accosted on the street by a chef who’d been given a bad review (‘Is there such a thing as a Duck Auschwitz? If so, could I ask Le Printemps to please stop sourcing their ducks there?’). He came after James waving a meat-cleaver and had to be dragged to the ground inside by two waiters and a sous-chef.

His detractors said that James didn’t understand food; they questioned whether he even *liked* food. It was true that he didn’t look like a restaurant critic, being lean and wiry instead of portly and rubicund. Nor did he have any background in haute cuisine; instead he had stepped in when the paper’s regular critic fell ill, and discovered an aptitude for withering deprecation. It was not quite true, however, to say that he didn’t like food. He liked

food as much as anybody. It was the restaurants themselves that galled him.

Until recently, Ireland scarcely had any restaurants; in the last decade, however, all that had changed. These were the boom years, when a great if mysterious windfall of wealth saw the country trade in its hairshirt for the here-and-now. Once the Irish had piously wished life away; now they were banging on its doors, bulging wallets in hand, demanding it offer up the best that it had. Spa weekends with Hammam hot rock treatments; personally tailored golfing trips to Barbados; and restaurants, countless restaurants, springing up everywhere, each with some clever new twist and a new audacity in its pricing. Pleasure was the new religion, and the restaurants were its temples. The top chefs became famous, appearing on talk shows, glowering, faces heavy with Photoshopped gravitas, from the covers of magazines.

James didn’t care about the chefs, or about the extortionate prices they charged; if a bunch of gormless peasants wanted to waste their money being scowlingly served food from a menu they didn’t understand, that was their business. It was the promise these restaurants made that got to him – the promise that all this *meant* something. In the new dispensation, a meal was no longer just a meal. A mi-cuit of foie gras rolled in new season truffle, a surprising little palate-cleanser of rhubarb sorbet, a *très sympathique* glass of Brumaire – this succession of sensory delights was as good as it got; it was the very point and pinnacle of existence. For James this was a lie too great to be brooked. What lasting consolation could you really find in a lump of dead flesh, no matter how primped and prinked and finessed? When faced with the unspeakable agony of life, how could you represent the pleasures of a well-cooked meal as anything more than the faintest of whistles in the dark?

Most people agreed that there had been a marked improvement in the city’s cuisine since his scathing reviews had begun. That meant nothing to James: he had no

love for the city’s gourmands, who all seemed to work in PR, and crammed the restaurants with their darting eyes and strained smiles, desperate to prove how cosmopolitan they were. He wasn’t writing on their behalf, or anyone else’s: in fact, he thought restaurant reviewing a ridiculous profession, worse even than running a restaurant. It was a joke. Underneath everything else his job was a joke he was playing on himself.

When he wasn’t eating out he lived frugally in an apartment in Chapelizod. His work allowed him ample time to himself, most of which he spent reading, though occasionally he would go online, and look up a certain page, and watch another life lived out in glossy snapshots of parties and nights out – a life that seemed the inverse of his own, a parade of smiling shiny faces and twittering good-hearted meaningless comment. Then snapping his laptop shut he would go for a run in Phoenix Park; if it was late, he shared the avenues only with the mist, and the cars that cruised by with their lights off, seeking temporal pleasures of their own, the white limbs that waited amid the dark ones of the trees.

Then one day word came to him of a new restaurant. It had opened its doors a month ago, but the management evidently preferred not to advertise; instead they had let a ‘buzz’ build up by word of mouth. The gimmick with this place was that it was run by an obscure order of monks. The restaurant was their refectory; the food they served was made from ingredients grown on the monastery grounds by the monks themselves, who – this was the part that really got people going – had taken a vow of silence, and spoke to the diners not a word. Silence! In Dublin, this was undeniably something new. The newspaper’s interiors correspondent, who’d eaten there the previous night, spoke of it with the glaze-eyed rapture of a cult inductee. ‘It’s not like anywhere else I’ve ever been,’ she told James. ‘There’s no point me even describing it. You simply have to experience it for yourself.’

James fully intended to experience it for himself. What could be more annoying than a new restaurant run by an order of silent monks that had created a serious word-of-mouth buzz? The discovery that St Silas’s, as it was (annoyingly) called, didn’t take bookings only heightened his

pre-emptive loathing. On the late summer evening he drove out to the suburbs – the suburbs! – the review he had already half-written in his head was toxic even by his standards.

He followed the directions the interiors correspondent had given him until he arrived at a pair of tall iron gates. There was no sign or any other indication he was in the right place, but he passed inside and wound his way through a dark grove of trees until at last a tower came into view. Or rather part of a tower: the upper half had evidently collapsed, and the remnant was shrouded in weather-beaten netting. Just beyond was a bigger building. Its light-grey facade was stern but not unfriendly; yellow light poured out from a doorway where a man in cassock and sandals greeted James with a bow and an inquiring expression. So they really were silent! Feeling inexplicably foolish, James asked for a table. The monk tapped at his watch and flashed his hands at James twice. ‘Twenty minutes?’ James said. The monk shrugged apologetically, and gestured first at what appeared to be a small stone oratory, then at the grounds surrounding them. ‘All right,’ James said, rolling his eyes. He gave his name to the monk, then set off to explore.

It was one of those tricky summer twilights, when instead of darkness falling everything seems infused with an eerie blue that blurs the lines and subverts the ordered forms of day. Perhaps this strange light made the grounds of the monastery appear larger than they were; wandering through the bosky groves, James quite lost track of time. He came first upon a sleeping beehive, and then an orchard; elsewhere a topiary filled with leafy animals, and a flourishing vegetable garden. Before he knew it half an hour had evaporated, and he had to hurry back.

The same monk met him at the door, and this time led him through and downstairs to a long, low room. Like the exterior, it was simple without being austere: the lack of adornment allowed one to appreciate the deftness and care with which each irregular stone had been fitted into the walls, and the rough texture of the stones themselves, casting all kinds of shadows in the wavering light of the torches. In an alcove a plaster statue stood, a haloed figure that James guessed represented the order’s patron.

The maître d’ turned James over to another monk, a younger man with a beard, who steered James to a bench at a trestle table. James’ heart sank. Weren’t there any private tables? Looking around he saw that there were not. He sat down with lowered eyes to avoid making contact with his neighbours. The waiter handed him a handwritten menu, and withdrew to a discreet distance. ‘I recommend the pie,’ said a jovial man in a florid dickie-bow sitting opposite James. This was a joke, evidently, as there was only one dish, carrot and sweet potato pie, on the menu. Issuing a tight, discouraging smile to the jolly man, James motioned the monk back over.

‘Am I missing a page or something?’ he said.

The monk shook his head.

‘You don’t have any starters?’

The head shook again.

‘No specials?’

The monk gently pointed with his pen to the sweet potato pie. ‘Fine,’ said James mock-acquiescently, ‘I’ll have the pie.’ The monk bore away his order, and James shook his head in disbelief. This was ridiculous – a child’s idea of a restaurant, barely worth his time reviewing. He was thinking seriously about leaving when the monk brought over a small basket of bread. It was surprisingly good in a basic sort of a way, warm and moist and yeasty; eating made him feel marginally less irate, sufficiently so to stay on, and even to risk the jovial man’s conversation by raising his eyes and looking about him. The atmosphere was different to the ostentatious clamour of the places James usually frequented. The other diners, among them several of the city’s more dedicated gastronomes, appeared unusually at ease, as if they’d been released from some undefinable burden. Was the serenity of the monks rubbing off on them? More likely, he decided, that they saw the restaurant as a sort of glorious joke, a joke the monks themselves weren’t in on. Who could fret about fitting in here, after all, among men who took their fashion cues from some lunatic out of the fourteenth century?

‘He was a Castilian nobleman,’ the man in the dickie bow said from across the table.

‘I’m sorry?’

‘Saint Silas of Tres Cantos. I saw you

look at the statue. He was a Castilian nobleman, captured by the infidel while travelling to the Holy Land. They tried to make him renounce God. So he bit out his tongue.’

‘Saint Silence,’ James quipped. ‘I take it these guys still have their tongues though? Pretty hard to taste the food otherwise.’

‘They take the vow of silence when they enter the monastery,’ the man in the dickie bow said. ‘They believe that speech is a vanity that distracts us from God.’

‘What about opening a restaurant?’ James said. ‘Aren’t they worried that will distract them from God?’

‘They’re trying to raise money to restore their bell-tower. Perhaps you saw it on the way in? Once they have enough, I imagine they will close their doors again. In the meantime, we have a unique opportunity to see into their world. And of course to sample their famous cooking!’

James had never heard of their famous cooking until a couple of days ago; but when his food finally came, he was shocked. It was as if you could taste – he struggled interiorly for the words – you could taste the *life* in each ingredient: you could tell that these were things that had grown, from seeds, in the earth. ‘Good, isn’t it?’ twinkled the man in the dickie bow from across the table. Yes, it was good; sitting back, meal done, against the wall, James felt, though he knew it was absurd, a kind of glow, as he imagined people must feel after they do something kind, like visit someone in hospital or give to the poor.

The night wore on; the man in the dickie bow went home, and James too began to think about leaving. The bill, when it arrived, did not come to very much; it would take them a long time to get their belltower repaired at this rate.

Meditating on this, he didn’t realise at first that the monk, who’d come to collect the money, had not actually left the table, but was hovering there with a concerned expression.

‘Is there a problem?’

The monk very gently brought his fingertip to the edge of James’s credit card. Then with his other hand he pointed to a sign pinned beside the stairs: WE ARE SORRY, WE CAN ONLY TAKE PAYMENTS IN CASH.

James's first reaction was embarrassment, because he didn't have any money, but very quickly it turned to anger at being put in this position. 'Why didn't you tell me earlier?' he said.

The monk looked contrite.

'I don't have any cash,' James said, becoming angrier as he felt his face go red. 'I very rarely carry cash, very few people pay cash these days. You have a lot to learn about running a restaurant, if you don't mind me telling you.'

The monk nodded humbly. James, who'd been bracing himself for some sort of confrontation, found himself wrong-footed. 'Well I don't know what you expect me to do now,' he said, feeling, with a certain amount of resentment, his anger ebb away. 'Because I can't pay you.' There did not seem to be a contingency plan in place; the monk sighed and shrugged fatalistically, like a farmer watching a flood take the harvest. 'I mean I suppose I could send you the money,' James said grudgingly.

The monk's face lit up. He clasped James's shoulder, grinning and nodding to beat the band, and as if everything had been resolved he lifted James's coat from the chair and motioned him into it. Now James was positively confused. 'Don't you want my address? Or my phone number?'

Apparently this had not occurred to the monk. He thought about it a moment, then waved it away, turning his beam onto James again.

As a food critic, James was used to aberrant behaviour from serving staff – in his view most waiters were halfwits and layabouts who shouldn't be let anywhere near a restaurant – but *trust* on this scale he had never encountered before. For the first time he took a long look at his silent interlocutor. He didn't *seem* like a halfwit. He was around the same age as James himself, with a few grey flecks in his beard that complemented intelligent grey eyes; he smiled readily, and gave an impression of equilibrium and ease. James wondered how he had ended up here. 'I'll post you a cheque later in the week,' he said.

The monk smiled again and put a hand on his shoulder.

'Thank you,' James said impulsively, as the monk withdrew; then he climbed the stairs towards the star-laden night sky.

He gave St Silas's his first-ever unam-

biguously good review. Not a rave: the lack of choice seemed, on reflection, to rule out that. But he attempted to praise its strengths with the same honesty and directness that he felt the restaurant embodied.

'That's not like you,' his editor said.

'I'm allowed to like somewhere once in a while, aren't I?' James said.

'Just don't make a habit of it,' his editor said.

He needn't have worried. The next restaurant James visited was, according to its press release, 'themed to the legendary granduer [sic] of the SS *Titanic*,' and it succeeded quite spectacularly in justifying the many puns that this unwise concept suggested. The chef seemed to believe that French words existed simply as a kind of decoration, and bore no further relation to the actual dish: James's *petit-pois* risotto came without a single pea, and his *tarte aux pommes* was made of peaches. His waitress bore a resemblance to Myra Hindley that was positively uncanny. Quite early in the evening, in a kind of inversion of its doomed namesake's maiden voyage, the restaurant ran out of ice.

And yet for all its ineptitude James couldn't motivate himself to give it the drubbing it deserved. The floundering attempts at sophistication just struck him as sad, and making fun of them suddenly seemed sterile and pointless. It was as if something were blocking that wellspring of venom he was used to draw on. After a day of battering fruitlessly at the piece, he gave up and went out to his car. He didn't know where he wanted to go; then he remembered he had never posted the cheque to the monks. A half-hour later he pulled up outside the monastery.

It was early in the week and there was no line at the door, but downstairs the warm hall was filled with people, chatting to each other happily as they ate. The same monks were waiting the tables (of course they were, he realised, they were monks, they lived here) and when he saw him James's waiter from last time greeted James with a friendly smile. Rich aromas decked the air, and James realised he was hungry.

Tonight they were serving leek and parsnip gratin, garnished with a salad of beetroots, spinach, hazelnuts and goat's cheese. James, off-duty, did not linger over the subtleties of flavour; he ate

quickly, and when he was done sat back contentedly against the wall and let a pleasant feeling of tiredness wash through him. He ordered fruit salad and a coffee, and then, as there seemed to be no hurry to get him out, he took a book from his pocket.

It was Nietzsche's *The Gay Science*, which he had first read many years ago. Before long he was quite absorbed, and only when a fresh cup of coffee materialised at his elbow did he look up. 'I'm sorry, I didn't actually order –' The monk bowed, and made a courtly gesture of giving, cupping his hands to his breast, then moving them out towards James. 'Thank you,' James said, impressed: for all their swank, Dublin restaurants almost never gave coffee refills. The monk inclined his head at James's book. James tilted up the cover. The monk looked at it, then composed his features into a furious scowl, and stroked at an imaginary walrus moustache. 'Yeah!' James laughed. 'Old Friedrich.'

The monk went off about his business. An educated man, James thought, and he wondered again what someone like that was doing here, waiting tables, withholding his gifts from the world. James felt a desire to know more, and a little later, as the monk cleared the far end of the long trestle table, he addressed him: 'I'm a restaurant critic, actually,' he said.

The monk noted this with a polite nod of the head, without being diverted from his task.

'I reviewed this place a couple of weeks ago,' James said. 'Gave it quite a good write-up – you've probably noticed it being busier.'

Again the monk smiled graciously and indifferently, like a girl you were failing to chat up at a bar. James was piqued – then he checked himself. These men had turned their backs on the vanities of the world. What did they care about restaurant reviews? This seemed fair enough; at the same time, James was concerned that the monk should know that *he* was not a vanity – that on the contrary, he had built a career on inveighing against the fripperies of the modern world, so in a way he and the monk were kindred spirits. He wasn't sure how he should introduce this. The problem with talking to someone who'd taken a vow of silence was that anything you said, no matter how insight-

ful, must come across first and foremost simply as more noise, another unsolicited contribution to the clamour of the world. It was a bind; still the thought that the monk and he should continue as they were – separate, ignorant of each other’s true selves – seemed repugnant to him, so under cover of requesting the bill he spoke again.

‘Do you guys really never speak?’ he said.

The monk shook his head.

‘So what do you do all day?’ James said.

The monk thought for a moment, then mimed his response: Cook, dig, read, sleep, pray.

‘And you like it?’ James said.

The monk merely smiled.

‘What was it that made you decide to come here?’

The monk reflected, then pointed towards the ceiling.

‘God, of course,’ James said. ‘But there must have been a specific event? It’s a big step, after all, totally renouncing the world.’

The monk considered this. After a moment he drew a circle in the air with his hand; then he brought the same hand around in a slow circle to take in the whole room. ‘This place is the world?’ James translated tentatively.

The monk nodded.

He appreciated the monk was being mystical, but this answer still seemed to James annoyingly evasive. Because when all was said and done, the monastery was demonstrably not the world. How could you say it was the world, when it didn’t even have any women in it? And furthermore, sitting around all day praying was not real life.

‘Don’t you get tired of it? Praying, I mean?’ he said.

The monk laughed soundlessly, and made an expansive gesture with his hands, stretching them wide apart, as if describing an enormous fish: which James took to mean, There’s a lot to pray for.

‘But what good does it do?’

If the monk was offended by the question, he showed no sign of it; he simply shrugged again, and smiled at James, as if to turn the question back onto him.

Again the empiricist in him felt a frustrating tricksiness to this response. With a hint of malice, he gestured to his book again and said, ‘You know what he says

about God?’

The monk did not respond at once; then he brought his fist to his eye, as though wiping away a tear. James was not sure what this meant: did he agree, and was he lamenting the death of God? Or was he saying that Nietzsche was an unhappy man, whose words came out of his loneliness? He wanted to press him, but at that moment there came a honk from the other side of the room, as another of the monks hauled a bench aside in order to sweep beneath it. In the last few minutes the refectory had almost emptied out.

Feeling bad for trapping the monk in a theological discussion so late at night, James rose to his feet. ‘Well, whether it’s the prayers or not, you people certainly know how to cook,’ he said, putting on his coat. ‘I’m in restaurants every week, and you could teach some of these fancy chefs a thing or two.’

The monk nodded, and ruefully patted his paunch. James laughed again; but as the other man walked away he felt a sting, and he called out impetuously, ‘Wait!’

The waiter turned back, the same benign smile waiting on his lips.

‘I don’t know your name,’ James said falteringly, as if this were a vital element of the meal that had somehow been neglected. The monk, though, expressed no surprise or circumspection; he pointed with a smile to the white curl of scrip that still lay on a platter on the table. ‘What? Oh, Bill? Bill, is that you?’

The monk chortled silently.

‘Bill,’ James repeated with satisfaction, and with a glad heart he mounted the stairs.

That night as he lay in bed he found himself continuing his debate with the monk. On the one hand he disapproved of Bill’s rejection of the world. Why should he or anyone else have a free pass out of the tumult of life? When good people were so few, didn’t each of them have an obligation to contribute in some way, to try and improve things? At the same time (the answer came back, silently out of the dark) what good had James ever done? Did railing against pretentious restaurants actually make the world a better place? What had his three-year rolling war against overpriced eateries and misapplied French actually achieved?

Well, maybe nothing; maybe James

would have been just as well becoming a monk himself. And yet he didn’t believe Bill had joined the monastery simply because he thought it was the best thing to do. James was an atheist; still he knew that it would take more than God to do something like that. Bill had suffered some terrible pain – someone or something had hurt him terribly, so terribly he could no longer bear to be in the world. Which was a shame, James thought, because the world, the stupid dumb world with its endless joyless gorging, could learn a lot from someone like Bill, if he might only be coaxed back into it again.

For a long while he lay there passively as thoughts of their mutual impotence – his useless denunciations of society, Bill’s silent retreat from it – circled above him like gloating vultures. And then he recalled the last words he’d spoken to Bill that night, and the beginnings of an idea floated up through his mind.

‘I might bring a guest to dinner next week,’ he told his editor the following day.

‘Do what you want,’ his editor said.

‘You’ll cover the cost?’ James said.

‘Go crazy,’ the editor said.

Driving out to the monastery again, James felt a mixture of nervousness and childish glee. How long was it since he had acted on impulse – since he’d even had an impulse? When he got there the restaurant was closed (the first sitting was not until half twelve) so James raised the knocker on the great wooden door. As he waited for a response, he looked about him at the small cassocked figures stooped over the vegetable garden and the birds fluttering through the trees. In the prevailing harmony the tumbledown belltower struck the only dissonant note; he began to see why they were so anxious to have it restored.

The door was opened by another man, smaller than Bill and older, and without Bill’s pleasing sense of equanimity and calm. ‘Is Bill here?’ James said, irritated by the man’s unsatisfactory appearance. The scrawny man looked surprised; but James shifted impatiently from foot to foot, and the man relented and ducked back inside.

When Bill appeared, he looked surprised too, but not displeased: the smile with which he greeted James was as warm and open as ever. James wasn’t sure if this

was because he was glad to see James, or because he was just generally glad; but he also didn't know if it mattered. 'James,' he introduced himself. 'I was here last night?'

The monk waved away these preliminaries, as if it were the most natural thing in the world for a diner to reappear the following day. Then his hands fell to his sides and he waited. With a mouth that had suddenly gone dry, James began to present his idea. As he'd mentioned last night, he was a restaurant critic, he said. Usually he dined alone, but lately he felt he'd become a little too fixed in his perspective, and what he'd wondered was whether Bill, who obviously knew about food, might like to accompany him some night, to share the experience, so to speak... as James went on, the manifold absurdities of his plan, which had seemed so straightforward, so *right* in his bed last night, danced in a high-kicking chorus line before his eyes. Bill was a *monk*. Even if he wanted to, was he allowed to leave the monastery? And if he was forbidden from speaking, how exactly was he going to inform James's 'perspective'? He began to blush. What was he doing here? What did he really want from Bill? A slice of his peace, was that it? Was he hoping to absorb some of Bill's tranquility, as if the monk were some scented candle from the shop in the mall? Was James, in the end, no different from –

But wait: Bill was smiling. He was smiling, he was nodding, he was, it seemed, all for it: in fact he motioned James to wait while he went to fetch his coat, and laughingly James had to call him back and explain that the meal wouldn't be until next week. Now it was Bill's turn to blush – quite a charming effect, James thought, in a face remarkable for its placidity. 'Well I'll come for you Thursday night,' he told him. Bill took his hand and pumped it vigorously – he had a robust, firm grip, confirming what James had thought, that beneath this pacific demeanour was a staunchly independent soul, a man's man who took the world on his own terms. Then he stopped, and simply held it, and held James's gaze with his own, his eyes the colour of battered steel: and James thought again how much more eloquent these silences were than words.

He drove away from the monastery with a sense of triumph: and he let him-

self feel it, did not smother it or distort it with irony.

On Thursday night he returned to find Bill on the monastery doorstep, shivering in his cassock like a holy debutante. 'Hi!' James exclaimed, climbing out of the car, and the pure unalloyed happiness in his voice was matched by the expression of delight that crossed his friend's face. After a comical muddle of handshakes they bundled each other, laughing, into the car.

The restaurant, Grey's of the Green, was long-established, but had recently been revamped, with a mind, James suspected, to getting in on the haute-cuisine gold rush. The refurbished room jangled with the trademark gold-rush confusion – oak wainscoting, sequined throw-pillows, flock wallpaper, mirrored ceiling, like a cross between an Edwardian drawing-room and a Moscow brothel – and the new menu, beneath the usual Frenchified jargon, bore no trace of any philosophy other than the profit motive. Before he'd even got to the table the review had begun to coalesce in his mind: but then he looked back at Bill. The monk was gazing about him at the overcooked furnishings and the handsome scowling waiters with the wonderment of a child. How long had it been since James felt that way about being in a restaurant? How long since he'd even come through the doors ready to enjoy himself, as opposed to amassing faults for an as-yet unwritten review? He closed his mental notebook and stowed it away. Tonight, he decided, he should experience the night for what it was.

And it was a good night. He'd wondered how Bill would fare, removed from his natural habitat; but although heads had turned as they came in to view this anomalous figure in his sandals and his long brown robe, Bill himself seemed as much at home here as he did in the monastery. Not only that, but after careful consideration he ordered the one dish on the menu that showed any sort of flair or promise, and from the extensive wine-list he picked a bottle that complemented both his and James's choices perfectly. 'I'm impressed!' James said; Bill blushed – it seemed James alone could make him blush.

James's meal was not significantly better than he had expected, and at first he responded with his usual quips: 'It's great

to find a chef who really *understands* the microwave'; 'How many children's tears do you think they needed to make this sauce?' While Bill laughed, the silence that followed seemed ever so gently rebuking; furthermore the monk gave no sign of anything but enjoyment of his own meal, and James began to feel churlish for his negativity. Maybe the food was mediocre, maybe the décor was mismatched – still, was this not a place where two friends could sit and be together, could share each other's company, in warmth, in plenitude? Was that not worth something? Was that not, in fact, most of the point of a meal?

And so he followed Bill into silence, and they remained like that for a long time. It wasn't awkward; James found it restorative and restful. He supposed this was what was meant by a companionable silence. Perhaps it was the real destination of any conversation, if we'd only allow it to get there, he reflected. So often our words just get in the way of our real thoughts and feelings. Beneath our wordy self-distortions we are all so similar! If only we could trust each other to see that, to recognise that all we want from anyone is to recognise the fact of us. He felt that Bill recognised the fact of him; with a sudden surge of emotion, he thought that Bill might understand him better than anyone. The mere presence of Bill rendered his thoughts more intense, more impassioned, more truthful, took him past the rote mockeries of his column towards something bigger....

From the other side of the table the monk raised a finger. He tapped at his wrist, where a watch might be, and then made a gesture of writing. 'How long have I been reviewing?' James translated. 'About three years. Long enough.' He smiled apologetically. Bill gestured to the left and behind him. And before?

Before. How long had it been since he'd talked about before? As far as the world was concerned he'd sprung into existence with his first review, and that had suited him fine. What was the point of dredging up things that no longer were? Yet tonight (perhaps the wine had something to do with it; he'd had more than his usual glass, and it was heady stuff, seeming to swim with half-buried truths and associations of its own) he found himself – opening up, that's what people

called it, and that's what it felt like, some rusty hinge grinding within him, some great slab of a door swinging out. He told Bill about his college years, slaving in solitude on a doctorate no one would read, and the directionless years after, slogging in low-paying, soul-crushing jobs to no discernible end. He told him about his time on the paper as a second-stringer, hanging around the courts amid a relentless procession of hooded deadbeats till he felt no different from them. In his ears his life sounded exactly as dull and desolate as it had actually been; yet from across the table Bill silently encouraged him on, his gaze fixed unwaveringly on James, as if ready to jump in should he slip or falter. James knew what was coming, of course, and as the years converged and she came nearer he felt a frost of panic stealing over his body. But he clung on to the kind gaze of the monk and – with the sense of taking a leap into some vast black chasm – he told him.

He had never spoken about her before – he had whittled his circle of friends down to zero precisely so he would not have anyone to tell. Even now, after all these years, he could not bring himself to use her name, and he referred to her instead – absurdly – only as 'that person', 'the person', 'they'. And though he gave Bill only the briefest of sketches, he felt, as he spoke, as if he were living it again – the opulent afternoons in the apartment, the never-ending nights in hotels, the deadlines blithely missed, the money he did not have no object, the passion, the laughter, the sense of unity and the strange discovery that unity with another brought unity with oneself, and peace, and light, and happiness, he could feel that too, how happy, just how fucking happy he had been.

The waitress was asking if they wanted anything else. Bill patted her wrist and sent her away. Tears were running down James' cheeks. Gently Bill motioned: And?

James shrugged hopelessly – all his hope lost, all over again. 'What we were doing...they didn't think it was right. Even though it *was* right, it was so obvious that it was right. Still morally ...they didn't feel they could...'

He was back in that hotel room, on the edge of the luxurious bed, the bottle of champagne he'd ordered – it was their

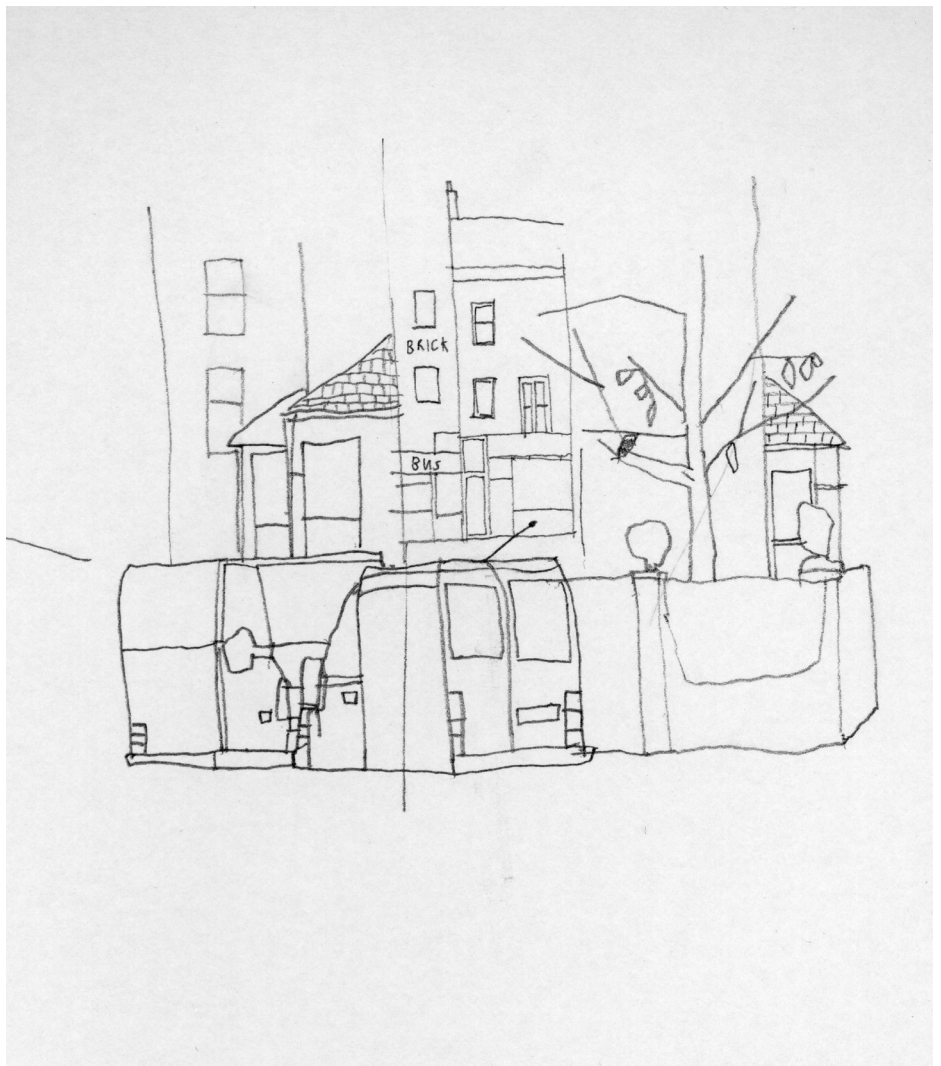
anniversary, the anniversary of the day they'd met – unopened in its bucket, and she was telling him, slowly, so she could be sure he'd understand, that she didn't want to do this to her husband any more. He'd been sobbing like he was now, and he heard his voice Neanderthal with grief gibber, 'But you don't love him!'

'That's not your call to make,' she'd said, as if snapping closed a purse. And she left him there, with the champagne and the complementary truffles and the scented oils lined up around the bath.

This last scene he did not describe, nor its aftermath. But Bill understood; his grave eyes understood that the rest of James's life had begun on that day, a life defined by absence that he walked through like a dead man, each fresh morning in the bright rich newly golden city bringing nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing. A hand reached across the table and pressed against James's cheek, and the memory was displaced momentarily

by another, earlier one – of when James was a child and sick and the doctor had put the stethoscope to his small heart and held it there, listening with what must have been the same frown of pure care that Bill wore now. His hand remained there, pressed to James's cheek; and for a moment James closed his eyes. Then rousing himself he called for the bill.

Outside the cool of the night wrapped itself around him and the tears dried on his cheek. He waited for embarrassment to envelop him after his orgy of self-revelation, but it didn't come. Instead he felt at once exhausted and renewed, as if he'd been on some epic pilgrimage. He knew it was the goodness and strength of Bill that had done this; Bill, who he'd known for all of two days. Driving back to the monastery (he was over the limit, he knew, but felt clear and together as never before) he wished there were some way he might sit the world down with him as James had sat down, so that it might for



once have a chance to partake of something noble and fine. Ideas fizzed through his mind of how this might be done – fanciful notions, he knew even then, but he indulged them nevertheless for the sheer joy of it. A regular column, for instance, a series of dialogues, ‘Conversations with a Mute’, in which James would treat of various problems of society with a rectitude leavened and tempered and enlarged by Bill’s compassion and encompassing humanity. . . . ‘If only I could get you out of that monastery,’ he said idly, dreamily even, as they rolled down the dual carriageway. From the passenger seat Bill’s eyes caught his – a strange sharp gaze, as if James had posed a question he already knew the answer to – but he made no further response.

Now they approached the tall gates of St Silas’s. Slowly they made their way up its silent groves. Bill peered from the passenger window, and James felt a momentary pang of sorrow, like he was leaving his child at boarding school. Yet at the same time, as they passed the orchard and the vegetable garden, the topiary and beehives the monks tended with such care, the oratory where they would gather next morning, it seemed that he could almost see the God that inhabited Bill’s world. He pulled up a little way from the main building so as not to disturb the sleeping monks. A few lights burned in the old stone building, but around them all was darkness. James turned off the engine. The pain of earlier had subsided and been replaced by a warm, vital sense of grace. He wanted to laugh, he wanted to amble down byways with his hands in his pockets. Then Bill leaned over and planted his lips on James’s.

For a moment James could not comprehend what was happening; he sat frozen in his seat, as though paralysed by the rush of alien sensations – the labial pull, the scrape of Bill’s beard, the tropical heat and smell of his breath. Then he raised his arms and thrust him away. In doing so he caught Bill with his elbow square on the nose; the monk gasped and rocked back into his own seat. Blood pumped through his fingers and onto his brown robes. ‘I’m sorry, I’m sorry,’ gabbled James, fumbling in the glove compartment for tissues. Bill stanchied the flow and sat there with his head back, making little huffing noises:

and realisation crept over James, turning his horror at wounding his friend into a different kind of horror and then a white-faced fury – ‘What the fuck?’ he turned to him, he pushed him, and then said louder, ‘What the fuck?’

‘I’m sorry,’ Bill said – he *said*, he spoke, his voice through the tissue adenoidal and high, ‘I’m sorry, I thought –’

‘You *thought?*’ James repeated. ‘What did you think?’

Bill lowered the tissue and faced him. Black clots of blood flecked his beard and his eyes were at once penitent and pleading and gormless.

‘You thought I was a faggot?’ James shouted. Anxiously Bill motioned him to keep his voice down, but James just shouted louder, ‘You thought I was a fucking faggot?’

‘You came back to the restaurant!’ the monk cried. ‘You came back, you asked me to dinner, you told me about your, about the man who didn’t think what you were doing was right –’

That wasn’t a man! That wasn’t a man, James wanted to say, but anger overwhelmed him, and now Bill was babbling something else, in a nasal Midlands accent James would never have imagined for him, a whiny shopkeeper’s voice redolent of mediocrity and penny-pinching – saying that he’d been hurt just like James had, that that was why he’d come here, but for a long time now he’d been having *doubts*, he’d been wondering whether he was really cut out for the monastic life, and then James came along and stirred up all these feelings, and he’d said tonight some things that Bill had thought – they just seemed so *alike* – and was James absolutely sure he might not –

James couldn’t listen to any more. In a single motion he climbed out of the car, crossed to the passenger side and hauled the stained monk out. Struggling to get free Bill tripped on his robes and fell backwards on the grass. He lay there below James, holding his hands up in surrender, and in a small trembling voice he said, ‘You have to let someone in.’

James stood over him. He was trembling too. Bill’s words he did not even hear. ‘If I ever see you again I will break you,’ he said.

The review he submitted for Grey’s did not mention a dining companion. It

launched a series of columns of unprecedented savagery. Yes, his editor said, this is the good stuff!

He did not see Bill again, but in the weeks that followed he thought often of him and how grievously he had misjudged his character. Silence in the end was just as deceptive as words, it turned out. Silence had enabled the monk to present himself as someone quite other than who he was – someone strong, someone good, someone who had renounced the fevered graspings of the world to search for something truer – when in reality he was no better than the porcine wage-slaves at their gilded troughs. Worse, because most of them were too dumb even to know they were pretending. Bill knew; weak Bill had fled everything, had fled himself, intended to spend the rest of his life hiding out like a common criminal. Until James came along! James came along, and it all came slobbering out, the same dismal useless endless wantings as everyone else. God, that voice! That awful wheedling pleading voice like nails on a blackboard!

A couple of months later James became sick. The doctors put it down to overwork and told him to take some time off. His editor arranged a trip to Bali, all expenses paid in return for a fifteen-hundred word piece. For two weeks he sat by the pool, watching fat whites order cocktails from the third-world staff. Flying home, he read in the complimentary newspaper the air hostess gave him the tragic story of an Irish monk who had committed suicide by hanging himself from the rope of a recently-restored bell-tower.

There was more – struggle with alcoholism, statement from the abbot, monastery closing its doors – but now the lights went out as the plane approached Dublin. This was normal procedure, the hostess explained, a reading lamp could be found overhead should you desire it.

James folded the newspaper closed and turned to the window. As the plane banked the lights of the city came into view, a sixty-watt galaxy in an ocean of darkness. He pressed his hand to the cold glass. He imagined the body falling through the shaft and the single surprised outburst of the bell, before it died away and silence, sweet silence, prevailed once more. ◇

The Agony Uncle

Alain de Botton will show you the way

I work in banking and, with the world recession deepening (especially in my industry), many of my colleagues and I are beginning to panic. Any thoughts? —Max, London

Firstly, I have huge sympathy. Secondly, it may be consoling to remember, in times of crisis, that one is not alone. Your position isn't fundamentally different from anyone else's in a capitalist economy. Beneath many regional variations and differences in style and management, the rationale of almost any business can be broken down into a simple and, characteristically for the language of economics, arid equation:

INPUT	=	OUTPUT
Raw Materials		Product
Labour		Profit
Machinery		

Every business attempts to gather raw materials, labour and machinery at the lowest possible price and then combines them to make a product that can be sold for the highest possible price.

From the economic perspective, there is no difference between any of the elements in the input side of the equation, between, for example, a machine, a raw material and a human being. All are commodities which the rational executive will seek to source cheaply and handle efficiently in the search for profit.

And yet troublingly, there is one difference between 'labour' and other commodities, which economics does not have a means to represent or give weight to but which is nevertheless unavoidably present in the world; the fact that labour – unlike machinery and raw materials – feels pain. If production lines grow prohibitively expensive, these may be switched off and will not cry nor, at three in the morning, punch the wall at the seeming injustice of their fate. A business can move from using coal to natural gas without the neglected energy source walking to the end of a cliff and committing suicide. But labour has an enduring and, for executives, regrettable habit of meeting

attempts to reduce its price or presence with emotion. It sobs in toilet cubicles, it drinks to ease its worries about the future, it screams if suddenly asked to clear its desk by mid-afternoon and sometimes it chooses death rather than redundancy.

This emotive response to what are, for businesses, rational decisions alerts us to two very different imperatives co-existing in the world of work:

An Economic Imperative – which dictates that the primary task of every business is to make a profit. All activities must be related to this end and are justified by it. The imperative may at times demand that workers be laid-off. And at other times, when labour is in short supply, it may mean that new workers are hired and existing ones granted more generous salaries. Yet at no point is the workers' joy or pain ever the essential factor behind business decisions; profit alone is the guiding star.

A Human Imperative – which leads employees to long for both financial security and respect through their work; to seek to provide for their families over the long term and to have jobs in organisations that value them so that they can value themselves. Employees may appreciate that they have been hired by companies primarily because of their contribution to a balance sheet, but this does not invalidate their hope that they may, with time, come to be perceived in a rounded or human way, as creatures worthy of sympathy rather than moving parts in a machine – a hope fostered by the fellowship that naturally builds up over time in offices and factories. It can seem practically and emotionally catastrophic to imagine that an employer, towards whom one has shown loyalty and good humour for years, would one day, with minimal courtesy, for reasons of profit and loss, show one the door, acting with the calm brutality one might display towards a broken lathe or calculator.

These two imperatives – the desire of individuals for security and respect and

the desire of companies for profit – may for long periods coexist without apparent friction. But what makes anxiety a lingering presence for all wage-dependent workers in a capitalist economy is the knowledge that in any serious choice between the two imperatives, it is the economic one that must always prevail.

Employers who have made their workers redundant may complain of painful feelings of disloyalty. They should be fairer on themselves. They have been chillingly loyal to something, only not to the human imperative; they have reserved their impressive loyalty for the unremitting imperatives of business.

According to Karl Marx, the triumph of the economic imperative is a recent historical phenomenon, a product of the modern age and of advanced capitalism. In the feudal period, he proposes, the economic imperative was strongly counter-balanced by a human imperative: lords and masters did not treat their workers like tools that could be picked up and put down again at will. Workers were considered to be members of their employers' extended families and were shown corresponding loyalty. Christian teachings helped to foster an atmosphere of concern for the vulnerable – and a tacit agreement that, in difficult conditions, workers would not heedlessly be thrown out of their jobs and made to fend for themselves.

One does not have to romanticize the feudal past, nor unduly castigate the bourgeoisie, to appreciate aspects of this argument. The social history of almost every nation holds up examples of acrimonious conflict between the interests of employers and those of employees, of 'capital' and of 'labour.' In Britain in the nineteenth century, the industrial class promoted a philosophy of 'laissez-faire', an exceptionally unapologetic expression of business's characteristic demand that it should be allowed to treat workers in whatever ways it sees necessary to maximize profits – even if this happens to minimize workers happiness a little or (as in the British nineteenth century context) maims them before their ninth birthdays.

Struggles between labour and capital may no longer, in the developed world at least, be so extreme. The concept of rights for workers has gained widespread acceptance from business. Seven-year-

olds are rarely seen in Western factories except on school trips. But there remain enough conflicts to suggest that the tensions between the economic and the human imperatives have not disappeared – nor cannot indeed ever conclusively be overcome.

Left to its own devices, the logic of business would demand that workers be treated as a commodity like any other, without any claims or privileges. It is a contravention of business's natural desire to pursue profit that workers in certain

countries cannot be laid off immediately in great numbers, that they must on occasion be offered severance packages, that mothers are legally allowed to take time off after giving birth and that energetic, nimble children have been barred from employment in industry.

Despite improvements in working conditions and legislation protecting workers, employees remain tools, albeit tools who have won rights through the efforts of trade unions, used in a process in which their own happiness or economic well-

being is incidental. Whatever camaraderie may build up between employer and employed, whatever good-will workers may display and however many years they may have devoted to an organization, whatever apparent security they may enjoy (symbolized, for example, by taxi accounts and get-well cards after accidents), they must live with the knowledge and attendant anxiety that their jobs are not guaranteed – and that they themselves are a means to profit, and certainly never an end. ◇

POEM

African Priestess, Columbus Circle

By Melissa Broder

She said: Do you believe in anything?
I said: I weigh my food.
I said: I cried for an hors d'oeuvre.
I said: I gave away Gramma's pizzelles

to a crackhead at Penn Station.
She said: There's no crackheads at Penn Station.
I said: They were made with eggs.
I said: I hoped the eggs would cure him.

She said: You're killing the wrong person.
I said: His eyes were like cherry clafoutis.
She said: I don't care how you slice a cake.
She said: It's still a cake.

I said: Flourless flour noted.
She said: You violate the goddess.
I said: Butterless butter noted.
She said: Your ass is grass.

I said: Creamless creamer noted.
I said: Sugarless sugar noted.
I said: Maybe I'm lonely.
She said: Bingo baby!