

# Five Dials



NUMBER 21

*'Rock School'*

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*... plus contributions from Del the Funky Homosapien, Diane Cluck, Mocky, and members of Ladytron, Beirut, The Moldy Peaches, Liturgy, Great Lake Swimmers and Los Campesinos! And, as always, more.*



## CONTRIBUTORS

MIRA AROYO writes, sings and plays keyboards in the band Ladytron. Their latest album, released in 2011, is *Gravity the Seducer*.

OWEN ASHFORTH is best known for his solo project, Casiotone for the Painfully Alone, under which he released the album *vs. Children* in 2009. His new project is called Advance Base

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DIANE CLUCK's album *Oh Vanille/Ova Nil* was rereleased by 3 Syllables Records in 2010. She has collaborated with Jeffrey Lewis, CocoRosie, Herman Düne and others. The *Village Voice* once called her songs 'utterly captivating, sorta like an earthier Kate Bush'.

ZACH CONDON is the singer and songwriter for the band Beirut. Their album, *The Rip Tide*, was released in August of this year.

HELEN CONFORD is a resident of Tower Hamlets.

DEL THE FUNKY HOMOSAPIEN released his first solo album at age eighteen, which featured the hit song 'Mistadobalina'. He has collaborated with Gorillaz, Dan the Automator and Dinosaur Jr, and is the cousin of the rapper Ice Cube.

BOJANA GASKI was born in 1978 in Kikinda, Serbia. She holds a Master's degree in English language and literature and has worked as a primary, grammar school and college instructor for the last eleven years. She also works for the Kikinda Short Story Festival as a literary translator.

ADAM GREEN co-founded the band The Moldy Peaches with Kimya Dawson. Their song 'Anyone Else But You' was featured in the film *Juno*. His first film, *The Wrong Ferarri*, was shot entirely on an iPhone and released in April of this year.

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BRET HIGGINS plays upright bass in the band Great Lake Swimmers. Their album *Lost Channels* came out in 2009.

HUNTER HUNT-HENDRIX is the lead vocalist and guitarist of the 'transcendent black metal' band Liturgy. Their second album, *Aesthetica*, was released in May of this year.

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KID KOALA is a DJ, turntablist and graphic novelist. His graphic novel *Nufonia Must Fall* includes a soundtrack CD he composed. His album *Some of my Best Friends are DJs* includes a chess set as part of the packaging. His latest graphic novel is *Space Cadet*.

ALEXANDER LARMAN is a writer and journalist based in London. He writes about literature for the *Spectator*, *Guardian*, *TLS*, and others. His current projects include a biography of Lord Rochester and a play about C.S. Lewis and John Betjeman. He writes about culture at his blog, alexlarman.wordpress.com

JENNY LORD is the author of *Purls of Wisdom: The Book of Knitting*, which contains, among others, instructions on how to knit a chunky snood. She lives in London.

MOCKY has worked as a producer and songwriter with artists such as Jamie Lidell, Feist, GZA, Gonzales, Peaches and many others. His album *Saskamodie* was released in 2009.

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DANIEL SWIFT's essays, profiles, and reviews have appeared in the *Financial Times Magazine*, the *New York Times Book Review*, and the *Daily Telegraph*, and he teaches in the Department of English Literature at Skidmore College in upstate New York. His contribution is taken from his first book, *Bomber County*, which was published in August 2010.

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ELEN WADDELL is a member of the band Los Campesinos! Their new album, *Hello Sadness*, will be released later in the year.

HEATHCOTE WILLIAMS collaborated with Roy Hutchins on a show for the Edinburgh Festival called *Zanzibar Cats*, which won the Glasgow Herald Edinburgh Archangel Award. His work *Forbidden Fruit: Sixteen Meditations on Science, Technology, and Natural History* will be published by Huxley Scientific Press.

RACHEL WILLSON-BROYLES is a freelance translator and a PhD student in Scandinavian Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Her translations include Jonas Hassen Khemiri's novel *Montecore* and play *INVASION!* which had its American premiere in New York City in February, 2011. She lives in Madison, Wisconsin.

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Unless otherwise noted, all illustrations by LIZZY STEWART

# On Turning 21

## *and Thinking About Rock Stars and Greece*

We have finally arrived at *Five Dials* 21, which is an important achievement in the life of any magazine. At twenty-one we are now legal to appear in American drinking establishments, and we hope to be printed up and placed on the bar alongside bowls of peanuts and Doritos in places like Tuscaloosa and Albany. In the UK, turning twenty-one means *Five Dials* can now become an MP or drive a heavy goods vehicle or open a retirement account. Here in London we're coming of age in what can be described as an extended autumnal summer. Under the blue skies of the past few weeks, Londoners have been smiling at each other without warning or reason. It's early November and they're still eating lunch in parks and holding down napkins from sandwich shops as occasional blasts of autumnal wind whistle past, dislodging leaves. Everything is nice, the city seems to be saying. *Isn't it?* The sunshine makes the place look good and perhaps serves as a reminder of its positive attributes now that the clattering in London has died down, and by clattering I'm referring to the sound of people trying to pull the metal shutters from the front of the Brixton Foot Locker in August.

Did you read a lot about the London riots? We did, and after a few thousand words envisioned a phalanx of tired newspaper columnists assigning old prejudices to new events. Writers who regularly bemoan the state of the youth and the absence of respect in our society trotted out columns that seemed to be pre-written. The most interesting view we came across was, surprisingly, a short email from a friend of *Five Dials* who lives in Eastern Europe. We met Bojana Gajski in Serbia not long ago. She is one of the best English translators in Kikinda, a town in the north that is perhaps most famous for housing the enormous skeleton of a woolly mammoth that was unearthed in 1996. 'It was strange seeing those images of riots,' she wrote in an email in August, 'because for a long time London was a

dream that somewhat helped me.' Her expanded thoughts on watching the riots from afar can be found on page 6 in the latest installment of *Our Town*, our ongoing examination of this mostly wonderful but sometimes combustible city.

Elsewhere, because we're now twenty-one and in desperate need of tutelage, we asked some of the great musicians of the day to guide us through the world of books, which means artists from across the spectrum have provided the best bits of their favourite novels, non-fiction works and even cookbooks. This means we've finally been able to put into practice the *Five Dials* slogan we came up with years ago: When In Doubt Always Consult Del the Funky Homosapien. Del's contribution can be found on page 20. There's also advice from Diane Cluck and members of Liturgy, Ladytron, Beirut and even Adam Green, who used to record with The Moldy Peaches. As it turns out, the DJ Kid Koala is not just a one-time-wonder graphic novelist. We've got an excerpt of his new book. If you've never heard of these artists or think that a magazine that is now twenty-one should get its act together and start listening to talk radio, please read the article regardless.

We've also managed to secure not one but three stellar short stories from the Swedish writer, Jonas Hassen Khemiri. *Five Dials* subscribers who don't regularly read fiction in Swedish might need a hand to place him in the Swedish canon, so the following might be helpful. Jonas is definitely less crazy than Knut Hamsun and less intense than Ingmar Bergman. He's less blonde than Britt Ekland and has appeared in fewer Coen Brothers films than Peter Stormare. He has never been referred to as Octopussy (to our knowledge), unlike Maud Adams, aka Maud Solveig Christina Wikström. He is less muscular than Dolph Lundgren and will never be as good a statesman as Dag Hammarskjöld, the second ever Secretary-General of

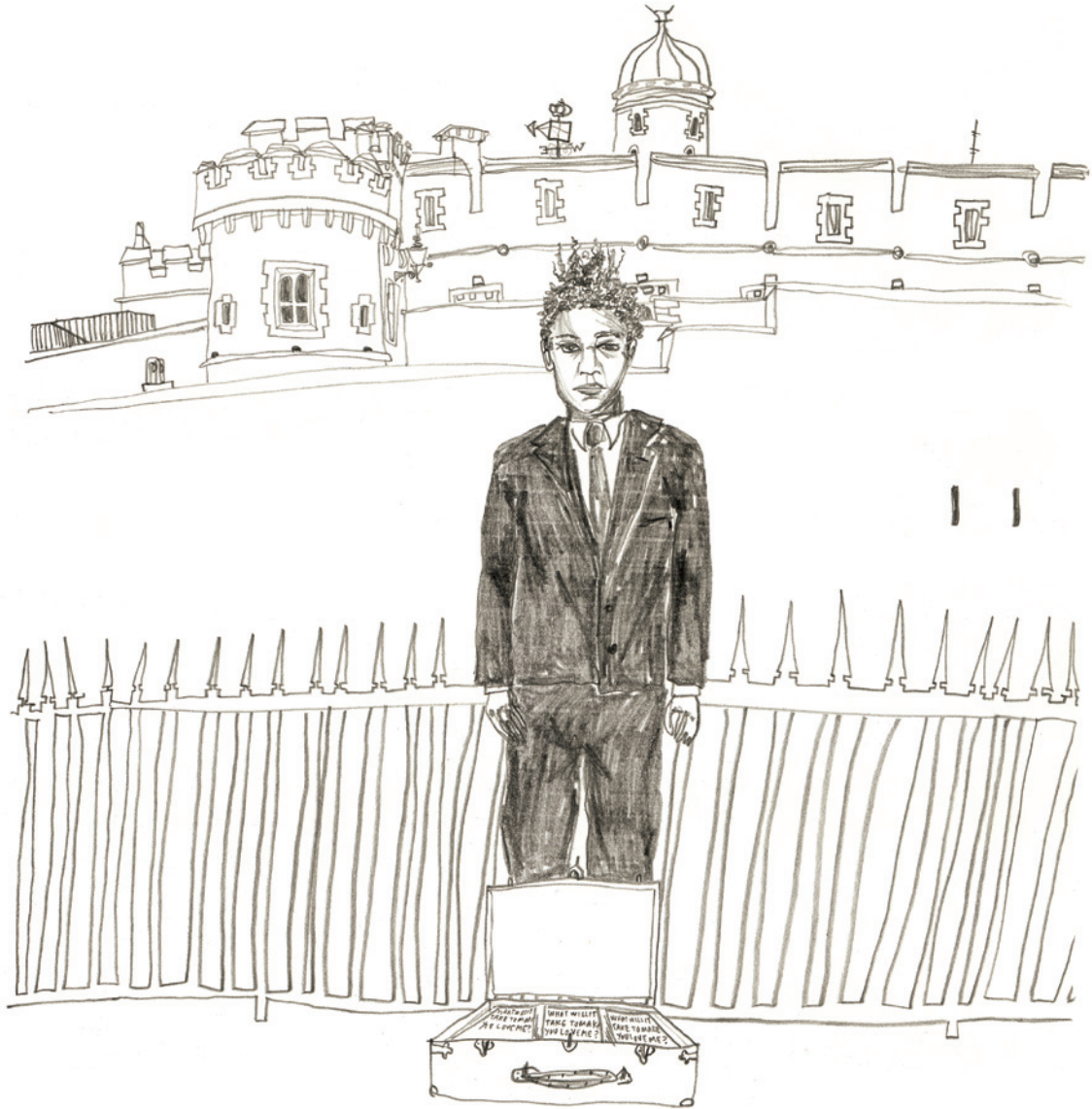
the United Nations. In musical terms, his writing might be a combination of The Hives and Roxette. Although Jonas lives part of the time in Stockholm, he tends to pop up in other locales. He made a short, funny speech to the New York theatre elite when he won an Obie earlier this year for his play *INVASION!*, and if you're a fan of the *Five Dials* Facebook page, you'll notice him in a trio of photos taken in upstate New York earlier this year. Jonas was on hand to launch *Five Dials* 19 from a sculpture park near Hudson on a drizzly afternoon. (He's the one holding the umbrella to keep our laptop dry.) After he had demonstrated that sort of dedication, how could we not include his stories in the magazine? They're also very good, which helps.

While it's important to enjoy the sunshine I mentioned earlier, we're not blind to the darkening gloom around us. The lack of autumn rain made it easier for protesters to set up and maintain the Occupy London camp outside St Paul's cathedral. Someone put up a 'Tahrir Square, Westminster, EC4' sign on the second day. We've been reading a lot of Michael Lewis, a lot of Galbraith, a lot of depressing chain emails about the state of the American economy, a few accounts of what it's been like down at the Occupy Wall Street protests. Lewis's new book, *Boomerang*, features a scene where an investment banker admits he's now buying nickels. Not nickel but rather twenty million nickels, because he thinks they might be one of the safest investments around. So, from sunny London we've traveled to sunny yet darkening Greece to launch this issue and collect material for the next. The theme: Things Simmering. We've collected writing from a groups of young Greeks who are both ready to dispel the Zorba stereotype and eager to give English language readers a sense of what's happening on the ground. But that's in the future. Before we get to issue 22, please help us celebrate 21. Print it up. Read it. It's kind of a big deal for us. Right now we're that excited person at the front of the queue, ostentatiously showing our ID to the burly American bouncer. We are very legal, so just watch us make contributions to our retirement plan. —CRAIG TAYLOR

# Our Town

‘The young need discipline and a full bookcase.’

—VIVIENNE WESTWOOD



SOPHIA AUGUSTA

Place: Tower Hill walkway, EC3

Date: July 22, 2011

Time: 2:30pm

*This issue's itinerary: East London, the English Defence League, hipsters, bankers, Socialist Workers, Boris Bikes, anti-fascist protesters, Sister Act, a man whose stomach hung down to his knees, Montenegro, a tall dark French man, turbo-folk, phone-booth souvenirs, feuds, revenge, London Bridge, the Monument erect, the Blitz, Mecklenburgh Square, Marble Arch, feathers and boas, Chepstow Road.*

## E1

### *Helen Conford meets the EDL*

One recent Saturday my boyfriend and I woke up and got ready to go out and find the English Defence League. We made sure to have coffee first. The EDL had stated they were coming to London from Luton and elsewhere to expose the residents to the truth of what our neighbourhood, Tower Hamlets, had become: the UK's first Islamic Republic. Given I had recently seen a sticker on our streets promoting the URL [convert2islam.org](http://convert2islam.org) (slogan: in 1300 years of the Islamic state there were less than 60 rapes), I wasn't sure even an Islamist would agree. Tower Hamlets at this moment is a potent mixture of hipster, banker, cockney and muslim, where it is not uncommon to see a man with two haircuts on his head and a tote bag in his hand shopping next to a woman in a burka in the cereal aisle of Tesco.

Following the August riots, the Metropolitan police requested powers to stop all marches in London. The EDL reacted by announcing they were going to stand still and perform a static protest, but even after checking the papers and the Internet it was surprisingly hard to find exact information about where they would be standing, and what time their stillness might begin. Like many things in East London, the protest and its anti-protest were for those in the know. As we turned on to Whitechapel Road it seemed possible we were too early – either that or it was all over: the road, four lanes wide, was bereft of traffic. Anti-fascist placards were stacked neatly against the side of buildings. A few Socialist Workers were standing behind crowd control barriers. We chatted to one, hoping to find out the whereabouts of both the EDL and the rest of the anti-fascist protest he was part of. He sold us a pamphlet, 'The EDL Unmasked', published by the *Socialist Review*.

Who were the EDL? The pamphlet described them as a mixture of the 'petty bourgeois' and the working class, football hooligans, and as the street violence arm of the BNP. Begun in Luton in 2009, as a response to a protest there against troops returning from the war in Afghanistan, they were proclaimed by their website to be a human rights organization drawing support from all those – whatever their faith, political persuasion or lifestyle choices – who peacefully oppose Islamic extremism. Recently on the *Today* programme, presenter John Humphrys mused that perhaps they were the Englishness Defence League. But if so, what kind of Englishness did they stand for? And would we fit it?

We walked west along Whitechapel Road, past the East London Mosque which the EDL had hoped to pass, and the Whitechapel Gallery, which hadn't featured in their plans. It had been decided, but who knew by whom, that the EDL would not

enter Tower Hamlets after all. Their static presence was on the borough's very edge, in the centre of Aldgate roundabout (or is it a gyratory?). All that could be seen, as we reached Aldgate East tube station and ran into police lines some hundred yards from Aldgate, were the tips of some St George flags. The anti-fascist protesters stood quietly, but Twitter was alive: Stephen Lennon, the EDL founder, had already been arrested. On bail for an alleged assault during one of the EDL's peaceful demonstrations in April, he had breached his bail conditions to come to London and stand by his movement. To get round the police he had donned a big black hat and beard. He had come disguised as a rabbi, apparently surmising that, like in any good Mel Brooks movie or *Sister Act*, religious garb was the perfect disguise.

How were we going to see the EDL now? Between them and us was a mighty police cordon, encircling the roundabout a few hundred yards out of every road coming into it, cutting off sightlines as well as any chance of a close encounter. The 1,000 EDL were invisible at the centre of 3,000 police. The press reported scuffles: a protester had set a journalist alight with lighter fluid, a police horse was rearing. Apparently the journalist was inside the police cordon, experiencing the EDL up close and personal. The rest of London was not. Still all we could see were the tips of some flags. We walked the cordon, hoping to see a stray member. Eventually two men, perhaps in their early twenties, walked up to the police line. They were wearing T-shirts and tracksuit bottoms. Were they EDL? The police let them through – this must be it! Real EDL, entering their alternative reality as Bangladeshi families walked past with Saturday shopping. But how did the police know to let them through? Was there a password? We walked back to the 1,500 gathered at the anti-fascist protest.

About two hours after we first arrived, it seemed, in the way crowds slowly learn, that the static protest had passed its height. The EDL had not entered Tower Hamlets, and a happy energy spread through the crowd. Slowly, the protesters began to disperse. A number of them, including us, bought ice creams and sat in the sun. Traffic began to roll again. Talk on the street and the Internet changed to asking where the EDL were going to go – and how they were going to get there. Given how close the EDL were to Tower Hamlets, the police were not simply letting them disperse. Instead, the static protest was going to have to walk somewhere.

We got on a couple of Boris Bikes from Commercial Road and followed them, hoping for a closer EDL encounter. We crossed Tower Bridge and ran into a line of mounted police. On the other side were four figures. Clutching cans of beer, they held aloft their home-made signs. Of the four, three were physically impaired: one in a wheelchair, one with a cast on his leg, one

with a neck brace. He was wearing a T-shirt that declared him to be from the Bedfordshire section of the EDL. They stood and lay in the middle of the road, working to protect the inalienable rights of all people to protest against radical Islam's encroachment into the lives of non-muslims. (One of the campaigns currently on their website: the encroachment of radical halal butchers.) From the right angle they looked as though they were trying to recreate the Beatles' *Help* LP cover. Then the police parted to let us through, and there we were – campaigners, tourists, a cycling tour – among the coaches lined up to take the EDL home. Members milled about. They had the liveliness of anyone on a trip away from home. We leant our bikes against a wall and watched. A man walked past one of the numerous police vans, paused and then offered to sell the police some of his CS gas. 'It's twice as strong as the stuff you have.' And then, with a completely straight face: 'I'm not even joking.' A group of four men walked past with the bodily presence of people spoiling for a fight. They almost got one: a group of Asian boys similarly ready got close: ten or so facing up to around the same number. A man whose stomach hung down to his knees was on his phone: 'I need everyone back here now.' The numerous police, starting to relax in their vans, moved forward. But once again it melted away.

Later, one of the EDL coaches broke down in Stepney Green and perhaps they got their fight after all. But had they done anything to Tower Hamlets? Close up, the EDL members we saw reminded me of how life had been in the market town where I grew up. There were tribes, and you were on one side or the other. Violence would spread through the town centre as the sides met on a Saturday night. There were pubs you went into, and pubs you didn't. Often, they stood side by side, the line between the two clear even on the pavement. I'm not sure the residents of Tower Hamlets view their tribes the same way. They'd either turned out to oppose the EDL or, in the main, carried on with life as it was before. Perhaps they were shopping on Brick Lane, where we checked in our bikes on the way home. In December 2009, a minaret rose on the street. It stands among one of the busiest, messiest, most glamorous street markets in London. Where the space of one ends and the other begins is not clearly defined.

## N17

### *Bojana Gajski on the faraway riots*

Last August, just before the riots began in North London, I went on holiday to the beautiful little town of Perast in Montenegro. I live in Kikinda, a small city in northern Serbia, so in order to get to my holiday destination I had to travel through the seemingly endless, hypnotic fields of Vojvodina; dirty, angry, beautiful Belgrade; the gloomy parts of Serbia proper; and then the mountainous region of Montenegro that someone once told me reminded them of Scotland. (I do hope that's not true, for Scotland's sake.)

I spent most of my time trying not to think about, yes, the guy who doesn't want me, listening to my friend talk about the guy who doesn't want her, and healing my tortured teacher's soul with saltwater and sunshine while lying on the beach near the waters of the Adriatic Sea. One day, while out on my towel,

which I had stolen from my nephew, I was approached by a Frenchman – the tall dark stranger from a Hollywood film, you know the kind – who wanted to discuss the book I was reading. I have to hand it to him, it wasn't a bad start, but one thing led to another and we began talking about the events that were unfolding in Tottenham, a place that, until August, I'd only associated with a football club, since my father had been a footballer. The Frenchman told me he thought London now looked like it was in 'some fucking Eastern European country'. I had told him where I was from. But perhaps he understood 'Serbia' as 'Syria'. Or 'Sirius'. That was the end of our conversation. I and my stolen towel left.

Over the next few days I looked at images in the newspapers of raging young people drunk with temporary power. I watched footage of them moving through the streets on the television in my room. There was something painfully familiar about the sight of flame and broken glass and men with their faces obscured by bandanas. The images reminded me a great deal of wartime Serbia. And post-war Serbia. The Yugoslavian wars started when I was in primary school – actually, on the day they started I had my first kiss. The years that followed brought previously unimaginable violence into our lives. The economic sanctions imposed by the international community in order to punish our government punished my people in ways that will echo through many future generations. Fear was the ruler. The men who could take your dad away to war would only come at night. The plain coffin with someone's dead son, an unwilling soldier, would be left in front of the house to be found by the relatives in the morning. A whole generation was robbed of certain rites of passage, of everyday experience, of exploring, travelling. The shops were empty, medicine was scarce, the doctors corrupt. The university professors starved while the petty criminals and turbo-folk singers got filthy rich. The moral values taught to us by our parents and grandparents were mocked. The international sanctions went so far that Disney, for example, forbade our children's magazines to publish pictures of the characters designed by Uncle Walt. We grew up in a cage with the whole world watching us as though we were animals. The shame was worse than hunger and fear. I watched my parents sell the land and the vineyards that had been in our family for many generations to crooks and politicians just so they could feed us. Later I watched my mother sell her mother's jewellery so I could start my studies at the department of English. English has always been one of my greatest loves. My first words in that language I adored were 'yellow submarine'. I had an American pen pal for many years and in my correspondence to her during the war (amazingly enough, the letters managed to push through) I seemed a little like Anne Frank writing to Barbie. I told her about the power cuts and my fears and humanitarian aid food that got us all sick and about men with guns and about the music I liked and the boys I liked. She told me about the music and boys she liked. She kept me sane. I had my bootleg tapes and, later, CDs that protected me from the sounds of turbo-folk, television news about massacres, gunshots, ominous late-night knocks on the door and the speeches of politicians. The streets were full of terrified, hopeless, tired people who struggled to take care of their families. It was the young who rebelled. We had nothing to lose, so we protested against our tyrant, gathered

in the streets in bitter cold to get beaten up by the police, then returned home to find out there was no electricity and no food. I had to put up with my grandfather calling me a traitor and a spy for the West. (Stealing trainers and smashing shop windows came later, with democracy and lost football matches.)

All throughout that period of madness I dreamt of London. I wrote school reports on the city. Every year in our English textbooks there was at least one lesson about London and it usually involved a family (the Taylors: the son was always Ben and the daughter either Sarah or Susan) who would make a trip there from some other nearby town. As I was always the best in our class as far as English went, it was my job and pleasure to gather everything I could on London: general information; photos; those red double-decker and phone-booth souvenirs that someone's aunt had once brought back from her travels. I would then show them all to my yawning classmates and tell them about Big Ben ('Why Ben? Who's Ben?'), Buckingham Palace ('You mean, like, a real queen?'), the Houses of Parliament ('Boring...'), Tower Bridge ('Pretty!') and the London Underground, which they call the Tube ('The what?').

I made plans with my best friend, Božana, to visit one day. A few years ago she got a visa as a journalist and went without me, but she was always interested in the well-known attractions while I just wanted to roam its streets. I wanted to listen to people, to 'real' English, to all the other Englishes, to feel the city, to wander. As a child, I believed that no one was scared of the police there, that you had the chance to fight for the job you really wanted, that you had the chance to educate yourself without limitations imposed by others or by lack of resources, that you'd have enough money to travel to a nearby town, like the

Taylors did, and that no one on the bus or train would be a threat and you wouldn't have to wear hand-me-down clothes.

It sounds so naive now, but these thoughts are what keeps a person going when they feel inferior, ashamed and caged. People in beautiful London *all* led a relaxed, safe life. I imagined Londoners as being allowed to be different – polite, civilized, fashionable in a particular way, and satisfied. I imagined they didn't have our worries. I imagined they ate whatever they wanted. The textbooks taught us about something called the Yorkshire pudding and mentioned a lot of beef. I imagined they didn't have to buy bootleg CDs on the street and that theirs actually had song lyrics printed on the inserts and didn't make *that* sound. And the clothes. And all the possible places to have fun. In my mind as an adult – I pose as one – it's pretty much the same, only a little less naive. Or maybe more: I think of chances and diversity and energy and wonder if they are really to be found in London.

I still feel the ever-present desire to visit, but on that afternoon during my August holiday I also felt confusion and disenchantment. I've always understood the anger people here in the Balkans feel. It springs out of helplessness and the guilt of allowing such terrible things to happen to your country. Our violence is attached to centuries of feuds, revenge, cultural, religious and political clashes, our difficulties accepting change, our pride and gullibility. But in Britain? I looked at the images of violence, of stupidity and savagery, and wondered where the rage came from. Express your protest, by all means, but what had replaced the civility I'd talked about in my school reports? What had replaced the necessary illusion I'd constructed? How could the abstract idea of London comfort others far away when the city



suddenly couldn't save itself? It didn't take much for violence to flare in Serbia. I remember the hatred and the nudge towards the chasm. That's what scared and saddened me the most. Take it from someone who has been near the chasm before. It doesn't take much for fear and violence to take over. No matter how civilized, when someone threatens your family or manages to plant a seed of hate or misconception in you, or just puts you in a cage, you too will turn into that savage from the Balkans I've heard about for so many years.

I still want to go. So, so much. In order to travel I have to take into account the following considerations: I must get a visa (only for Britain still, not for other EU countries), which is expensive; I must save a lot of money; I must conquer my fear of embarrassing myself at the airport. I imagine parts of the London of my childhood dreams will be there – the symbols at least. But after August I know it is a place not so far from us, and I know it burns.

## SE1

*Daniel Swift follows Virginia Woolf through a shattered city*

After the air raid, Virginia Woolf went for a walk. 'The greatest pleasure of town life in winter – rambling the streets of London,' she had written, a decade before. She called it 'street haunting', and in the essay of that title she gives instructions on how this should be done. 'The hour should be the evening and the season winter, for in winter the champagne brightness of the air and the sociability of the streets are grateful,' she wrote; 'The evening hour, too, gives us the irresponsibility which darkness and lamp-light bestow. We are no longer quite ourselves.' Picture her, then, stepping out into the bombed city. It is perhaps a little earlier in the day than she might have liked, this afternoon in the middle of January 1941, and in less than three months she will be dead, but today she is here to take a quiet pleasure in the ruins.

'I went to London Bridge,' she notes in her diary:

I looked at the river; very misty; some tufts of smoke, perhaps from burning houses. There was another fire on Saturday. Then I saw a cliff of wall, eaten out, at one corner; a great corner all smashed; at Bank; the Monument erect; tried to get a Bus; but such a block I dismounted; & the second Bus advised me to walk. A complete jam of traffic; for streets were being blown up. So by tube to the Temple; & there wandered in the desolate ruins of my old squares; gashed; dismantled; the old red bricks all white powder, something like a builders yard. Grey dirt & broken windows; sightseers; all that completeness ravished & demolished.

She is watching carefully, making her way north and then west, through traffic jams and rubble, and she pauses for a while in 'my old squares', the wide and orderly spaces of Bloomsbury where she used to live. But then, quite simply, life interrupts: 'So to Buzsards where, for almost the first time, I decided to eat gluttonously. Turkey & pancakes. How rich, how solid. 4/- they cost. And so to the L.L. where I collected specimens of Eng. litre [English literature].' From Bloomsbury, she walked past the Air Ministry on Oxford Street on her way to Buzsards, a café known for its wedding cakes and before the war its tables out on

the street. After lunch, she goes on to the London Library in St James's Square. The fastest route is straight down Regent Street, and she had work to do on a new book.

Woolf's diaries, as the war begins, tell of a growing fascination. On the Sunday that Britain declared war, she was sewing blackout curtains at Monk's House, the cottage in Sussex she shared with her husband Leonard, and she wrote: 'I suppose the bombs are falling on rooms like this in Warsaw.' Three days later: 'Our first air raid at 8.30 this morning. A warbling that gradually insinuates itself as I lay in bed. So dressed & walked on the terrace with L. Sky clear. All cottages shut. All clear.' The bombs did not come that morning, but she waits and she watches. 'No raids yet,' she recorded on Monday, 11 September, but she saw 'Over London a light spotted veil' of the silver barrage balloons on steel ropes, to defend the city from low-flying planes. The winter comes, and then the spring; a German bomber flies over Monk's House; Holland falls, and Belgium, and Chamberlain resigns. She is always looking at the skies. 'The bomb terror,' she writes in her diary: 'Going to London to be bombed.' In May 1940 there are rumours of invasion, and at the end of the month: 'A great thunderstorm. I was walking on the marsh & thought it was the guns on the channel ports. Then, as they swerved, I conceived a raid on London; turned on the wireless; heard some prattler; & then the guns began to lighten.' Transformed by her poised imagination, the rain becomes a raid, and then the falling bombs return to rain. 'I conceived a raid,' writes Virginia Woolf, the great novelist, thinking bombers where there were none.

Of course, in these fixated times she was at work on a novel. She called it 'Poyntz Hall' but it was published after her death as *Between the Acts*, and it too imagines bombers. After the country-house pageant which is the centre of the novel, the Reverend Streatfield stands on a soap box to address the audience on the subject of funds for 'the illumination of our dear old church', and as he begins to speak:

Mr Streatfield paused. He listened. Did he hear some distant music? He continued: 'But there is still a deficit' (he consulted his paper) 'of one hundred and seventy-five pounds odd. So that each of us who has enjoyed this pageant has still an opp ...' The word was cut in two. A zoom severed it. Twelve aeroplanes in perfect formation like a flight of wild duck came overhead. That was the music. The audience gaped; the audience gazed. The zoom became drone. The planes had passed. '... portunity,' Mr Streatfield continued, 'to make a contribution.'

The duck-like passing planes gently, ironically, interrupt the platitudes of village life, but they are not wholly fictional. Throughout the spring and summer of 1940, Woolf had been watching the fighters scrambling over the Downs, to the Battle of Britain, and hearing the distant music as the bombers came and went. Some days that summer, her diary is little more than a war report: 'Nightly raids on the east & south coast. 6, 3, 12 people killed nightly.' And even on the nights when there are no bombers – 'Listened for another; none came' – she begins to imagine them, to transform them into something useful. On the last Thursday of May 1940 she went out for a walk and 'Instantly wild duck flights of aeroplanes came over head; manoeuvred; took up positions & passed over.'



So much of Woolf's diaries reads as the roughs for so much of her published writing, and the notes on bombing from 1940 find their way into an essay, 'Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid'. She wrote it in August for an American symposium on women in the war, and here she returns to the moment when the bombers are above. As she narrates: 'The sound of sawing overhead has increased. All the searchlights are erect. They point at a spot exactly above this roof. At any moment a bomb may fall on this very room. One, two, three, four, five, six . . . the seconds pass.' Here we are, waiting and watching, as so often she was, and this time, as always before, the bombs do not fall, and she goes on:

But during those seconds of suspense all thinking stopped. All feeling, save one dull dread, ceased. A nail fixed the whole being to one hard board. The emotion of fear and of hate is therefore sterile, unfertile. Directly that fear passes, the mind reaches out and instinctively revives itself by trying to create. Since the room is dark it can only create from memory. It reaches out to the memory of other Augusts – in Bayreuth, listening to Wagner; in Rome, walking over the Campagna; in London. Friends' voices come back. Scraps of poetry return.

In the moments after the air raid, the frozen imagination – nailed to one hard board – awakes again, and it does so by remembering, and creating; by making something new from fragments of the past, a memory of music, a line of poetry.

In the last week of August 1940, the weather was hot, and every day in Woolf's diary there are air raid warnings. On the afternoon of Saturday, 7 September, the Blitz begins, and two days later she and Leonard go to London. 'Left the car & saw Holborn,' she writes:

A vast gap at the top of Chancery Lane. Smoking still. Some great shop entirely destroyed: the hotel opposite like a shell. In a wine shop there were no windows left. People standing at the tables – I think drink being served. Heaps of blue green glass in the road at Chancery Lane. Men breaking off fragments left in the frames.

The bombs continue to fall on the city. In the middle of October, she and Leonard return to London once more. They pass their old flat, in Tavistock Square, now open to the sky – 'I could just see a piece of my studio wall standing: otherwise rubble where I wrote so many books,' she notes – and go on to their apartment at Mecklenburgh Square. Here, the windows had been blown out by a near bomb – 'All again litter, glass, black soft dust, plaster powder' – and they retrieve a few of their possessions: some diaries and notebooks; 'Darwin, & the Silver, & some glass & china'; her fur coat, now dusty; at half past two they climb back into their little car and drive out to Sussex. She had long been ready to leave the city. In September, she had written to her old friend Ethyl Smith: 'When I see a great smash like a crushed match box where an old house stood I wave my hand to London.' Now, 'Exhilaration at losing possessions', she writes, and 'I should like to start life, in peace, almost bare – free to go anywhere.'

Virginia Woolf was haunted by air raids, and after she killed herself at the end of March 1941, some were quick to blame the

bombers. Violet Dickinson wrote to Virginia's sister Vanessa: 'I think she was dreadfully bothered by the noise and aeroplanes and headaches', and Malcolm Cowley, reviewing the posthumously published *Between the Acts* in the *New Republic*, called her 'a war casualty'. The raids for her were a dark fascination, and in a long diary entry written on Wednesday, 2 October 1940, she is sitting at Monk's House watching the sunset and thinking of her death in an air raid. 'Oh I try to imagine how one's killed by a bomb,' she writes, and furnishes the scene:

I've got it fairly vivid – the sensation: but can't see anything but suffocating nonentity following after. I shall think – oh I wanted another 10 years – not this – & shant, for once, be able to describe it. It – I mean death; no, the scrunching & scrambling, the crushing of my bone shade in on my very active eye & brain: the process of putting out the light – painful? Yes. Terrifying. I suppose so – Then a swoon; a drum; two or three gulps attempting consciousness – & then, dot dot dot

Yet there is no full stop, and if there is a death-wish here it is overwhelmed by an opposite desire: to imagine the moment and to tell what comes after the air raid. She calls it 'the process of putting out the light', the last moments of consciousness, but she is not quite willing to let go of her deep literariness, for she is quoting Othello's words before he strangles Desdemona. 'Put out the light,' he curses her, and 'then put out the light'. It is a scene impossible to render, but 'I've got it fairly vivid': here is a trace of writerly pride.

After the air raid, a scrap of poetry returns, and a memory of August in Rome. There are sightseers in the rubble, picking at the fragments of blue-green glass, and perhaps a taste of wine from the blown-out wine shop. Later in the afternoon, perhaps, a plate of turkey and pancakes at a café on Oxford Street.

This is not to say that the things we recover from the ruins are easy, or even necessarily good for us. On the day of her death, Virginia Woolf walked out to the river that runs near her house in Sussex and collected a stone from the bank. Putting the stone into the pocket of the fur coat she had retrieved from the flat at Mecklenburgh Square five months earlier, she drowned herself.

But it is to say that we do not only find death in the ruins. That day in Mecklenburgh Square, Woolf took her books and china too, and the stationer's ring-bound journal in which she wrote her final diary entries. In the last months of her life, Woolf was planning an ambitious new book, a study that was to be about all of literature and all of her reading.

This was her grandest bid to bring something back from the ruins. She was not reading despite the bombs; she was reading with them, and the two – reading and bombs – are jumbled together in one of her last letters. 'Did I tell you I'm reading the whole of English literature through?' she wrote to Ethyl Smith on 1 February 1941:

By the time I've reached Shakespeare the bombs will be falling. So I've arranged a very nice last scene: reading Shakespeare, having forgotten my gas mask, I shall fade far away, and quite forget . . . They brought down a raider the other side of Lewes yesterday. I was cycling in to get our butter, but only heard a drone in the clouds. Thank God, as you would say, one's

fathers left one a taste for reading! Instead of thinking, by May we shall be – whatever it may be: I think, only 3 months to read Ben Jonson, Milton, Donne and all the rest!

She called this last book ‘Turning the Page’ or ‘Reading at Random’, and according to her biographer Hermione Lee it was planned as ‘a collection of essays which would make up a version of English literary history’. She only completed fragments of the first two chapters.

What survives the air raid? The imagination, and then the scrunching and scrambling as the mind seeks to re-create itself. Hermione Lee records an anecdote told by Somerset Maugham that reveals much of Woolf’s appreciation of bombing. ‘After a dinner party in Westminster,’ he recalled, ‘she insisted on walking home alone during an air-raid. Anxious for her safety, he followed her, and saw her, lit up by the flashes of gun-fire, standing in the road and raising her arms to the sky. She is beckoning to them, come closer.

## W11

### *A Carnival encounter*

Occasionally, after a particularly raucous Notting Hill Carnival, the festivities carry over into the Underground. For instance, once we were in a tube carriage far enough from the event to lightly dampen the noise and laughter, but close enough to ensure the carnival people hadn’t been diluted with Jubilee Liners at Bond Street and Victoria Liners at Oxford Circus. Which is to say the carriage was still full of feathers and boas and young men opening cans of Red Stripe and eye-glitter and many voices, some lifting into song or lowering to insult.

The tube train pulled into Marble Arch and a preacher stepped on wearing shorts, a T-shirt and a hat emblazoned with the name of his ministry. Perhaps he had been working his voice

into shape each week at Speaker’s Corner among the booming Muslims and the one American Christian who dresses as a cowboy. With a few loud ‘excuse me’s he captured the attention of the carriage. Women in Lycra turned and we all watched his accusatory white finger wave up and down. He produced great volume from a small frame.

‘Jesus Christ has taken me in,’ the preacher said to the carriage. Or rather, he didn’t say it to us but against us, and over the squealing, shifting sound of the train. He stood near an ad for tired eyes but he seemed to be burning with a luminous material. The shouts and sound systems of carnival were still in our ears, as well as the memory of a carpet of people spread out all along Chepstow Road.

‘Jesus Christ has taken me in,’ he announced.

‘Uh huh,’ someone replied. Someone else opened a beer.

‘Jesus Christ has given me a home in his heart, and since then I have not sinned.’

‘You have not sinned?’ asked a teenager at the far end of the carriage.

‘I have not sinned,’ the preacher repeated.

‘You have not sinned?’ the teenager asked again. The incredulity on his face may have been amplified by the carnival. ‘Then how do you explain them shorts?’ The teenager pointed at the preacher’s pair of shorts, which were red and tight and might have seen marathons in better days. They looked to be absent of liner. We all looked at the shorts. We all stared at the shorts. Then there was more laughter, waves of laughter, a lesser carnival erupted in the carriage, deep under the city, tracking east, and when the outburst of laughter and hooting subsided, the preacher stepped off at Oxford Circus and took a few chastened steps from the train. When the doors slid shut an older woman dressed in bright fabrics and a teetering headdress, still laughing, said, ‘Those *shorts*,’ which was another excuse to laugh. ‘Jesus bless.’



# An Attempt at Nuclear Physics

Story 1 of 3 by Jonas Hassen Khemiri

Translated from Swedish by Rachel Willson-Broyles

Welcome to the world! Take a deep breath, cry your first cry and open your eyes. Well done. Now you're ready to be fed, burped and taken care of. Take your first steps, say your first words, start school, become a teenager. Don't think there's anything wrong with you just because you lose control over your body or want to scratch your skin off or associate everything you see with sex. It's perfectly normal. Everyone is like that at your age. But soon you'll be an adult and start to forget. Soon you'll grow into your body, forgive your parents and start liking things like pickled herring, olives, German dramas, and a little piece of dark chocolate after dinner. Your feelings won't chafe as much as they do now. You won't feel compelled to go out into the rainy night air with the volume of your earphones so high that you barely feel the cold.

After some time as an adult, you'll meet someone. You'll exhibit all the symptoms of being in love. You'll place your tongue in the person's mouth and move it around in circles. You'll start to use baby-talk and invent corny nicknames. You'll go to couples' dinner parties and discuss things like travel plans, the weather, jobs and the stock market. Soon you'll be ready to do what I failed at: starting a family. And so that you don't repeat my mistakes I ask that you read on.

If you ever happen to be sitting on a bus and you hear two senior citizens talking about a friend who has died, DO NOT listen to them. Switch seats. Get off the bus. Break a window and jump out into the snow if you have to. If you still end up sitting there, then don't think about how one of the senior citizens sighs deeply and trembles her bird-like fingers and suddenly exclaims, 'Poor Signe. It was her heart, her heart failed her.'

Keep living your normal, routine life. Keep going to dinner parties and planning all-inclusive vacations. Keep taking your lunchbox to work and using expressions like 'tomorrow is another day'. Don't ask

tough questions. Don't go home and pile up facts about all the functions of the heart. Forget immediately that a normal heart only manages to beat two point five billion times before it gives up. Don't let yourself be affected by the morbid thought that we all have a heart that will one day stop beating. Don't think about how this insight feels like an avalanche. Think of something else instead. Focus on your career. Smile at family dinners. Propose toasts at midnight on New Year's Eve. Laugh when everyone is listening. Cry when no one is looking. Don't do what I did. Don't lie awake at night with your hand on your chest. Don't listen when your heart starts to whisper.

It will be easiest to hear at night. Your heart will start to wake you up when you're lying in bed next to your partner and at first you'll think that it's a burglar sneaking around in the dark, but soon you'll realize that the voice is coming from your own chest. Your heart will whisper that your partner has become boring and lets out little farts at night and has a fake laugh and stale morning breath. You don't laugh like you used to. Your conversations have become predictable.

Your heart will continue, night after night, until you give in. One morning you'll wake your partner up and hear yourself say all the phrases your heart has taught you: 'Honey. We have to talk. This isn't working any more. My love has disappeared. It's not you, it's me. I have to follow my heart.'

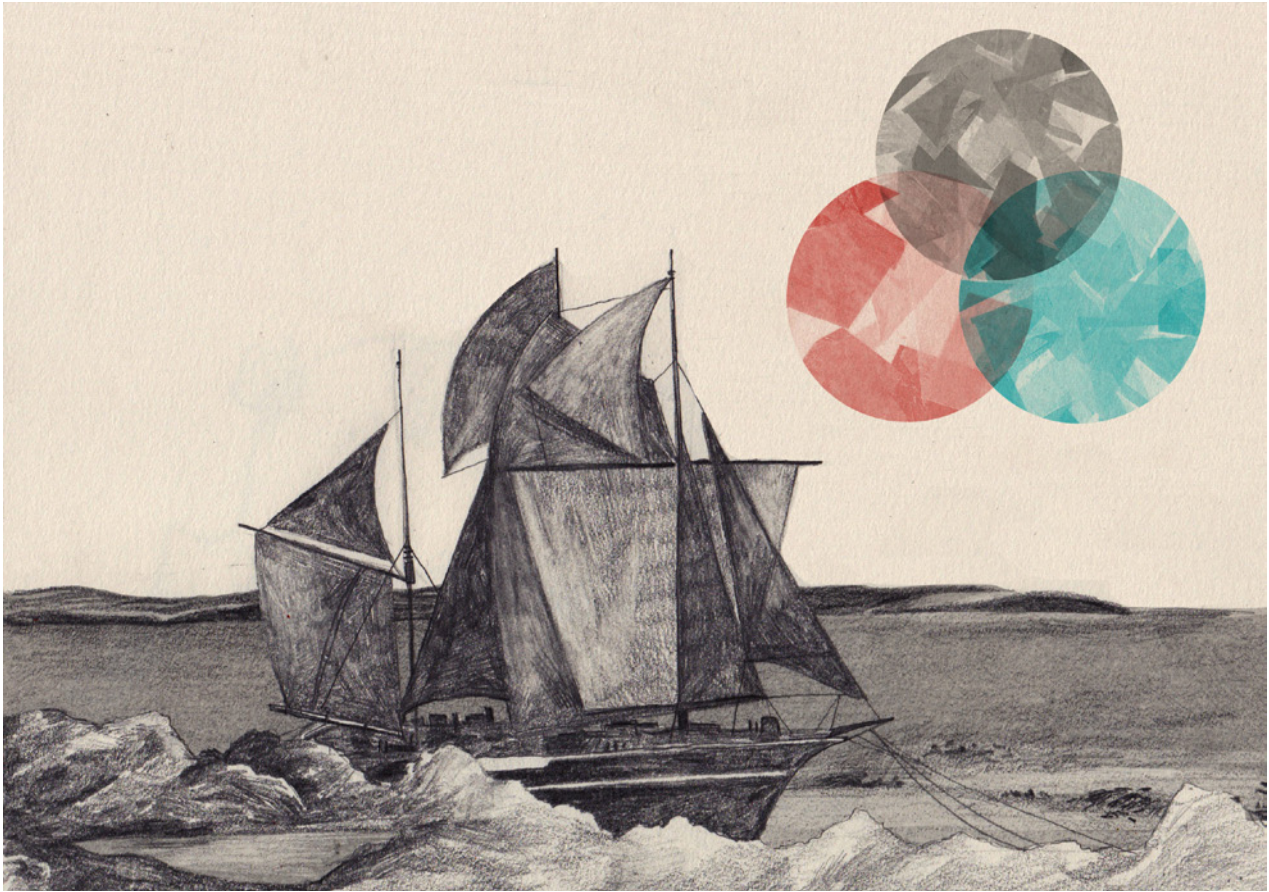
Later that day you'll move out of what, until now, was your home together, and when you're standing there on the street with a rolling suitcase in your right hand and a paper bag of geraniums in your left, your heart pounds triple beats and dances the cancan and yodels with the joy of freedom. You can finally do everything you've waited to do for so long. Your heart has you hostage. Your heart will force you further, from bar to bar, from city to city, from bed to bed, always on the hunt for that real, true, 100 per

cent. It will take many late nights, many drained glasses, many rolled-up bills on dirty mirrors, many panics at dawn, many disappointments.

But then one day, of course, you'll catch sight of the person you've been waiting for. The person who can be a she or a he or an in-between, just like you. And your heart will force you to go right up and introduce yourself and soon you're sitting there next to each other on a park bench and soon your topics of conversation are linked like a zipper and soon you're convinced: this is the person you'll be with the rest of your life. On the way home you kiss each other in a starkly glaring underpass and when you walk home alone you're not alone. For the first time in your life you leave second-person singular and become first-person plural. For the first time in your life you feel whole.

This is love at its strongest. These are kisses that combine the feeling of jet-packs, roller coasters and electric shocks. The two of you will never get stuck in embarrassing silences. You will never get enough of each other's salty upper lips. You will never stop laughing at that joke from that awful nineties comedy you see on the first night you're going to sleep together. Chevy Chase plays the perfect family father who's going to celebrate Christmas with his perfect nuclear family and he's just gotten a gigantic Christmas tree that's way too big for the house and the rich neighbour says scornfully, 'Hey man, where do you think you're gonna put a tree that big?' And Chevy Chase just smiles back and answers, 'Bend over and I'll show you.' And even though it's a dumb joke you can't stop giggling and that whole first night you say it to each other over and over again. Darling, where's the remote control? Bend over and I'll show you. Darling, how was the dessert? Bend over and I'll show you. Darling, where should I put my toothbrush? Bend over and I'll show you.

That joke will accompany everything you do in the coming days. You sneak into an exhibit opening where they serve free wine and you hear a visitor comment on the gigantic sculptures with the words: 'I mean, I don't get why people think big things are so extremely entertaining.' And you look at each other and mime, 'Bend over and I'll ...' You see a TV inter-



view with a celebrity mom who's being asked about the delivery of her baby and the idiot reporter asks again and again, 'But exactly HOW MUCH did it hurt?' And you look at each other and think, 'Bend over and . . .' You're sitting at that Chinese restaurant and holding hands under the table and stroking each other's thighs when no one's looking and the kid at the next table asks, 'Mom, how do you make a banana split? And you don't even need to look at each other, you two are so much the same person with the same train of thought that you collapse into the same laughing heap. All while your heart is rejoicing and shooting fireworks.

A few weeks later you're living together. A few months later you're planning your first vacation. You're finally 100 per cent happy. So happy that you're ready to ruin everything. One evening you tell the love of your life about your encounter with those senior citizens on that bus, or maybe it was a train, what feels like a hundred years ago. You describe how you became fascinated with the heart and how the average heart only manages two point five million, or was it billion, beats? And you say, 'It's thanks to listening to my heart that I'm sitting here.' You smile at each other. A week or so later you wake

up in the middle of the night. You hear whispers. But they're not coming from your chest.

The next morning you're woken up by the love of your life, who says, 'Honey. We have to talk.' The love of your life maintains that you have drifted apart and that you don't laugh like you did before and that those feelings have disappeared, and the only thing you can answer is, 'Bend over and I'll show you.' But your voice is full of tears and neither of you laughs. Your heart loses its balance and falls headlong down into the pit of your stomach.

You'll try to fix your broken heart at the local bar. You'll sit there in the corner behind the gambling machine and try to convince your heart that there is hope, you just have to keep looking and not give up. But your heart is worn out. It doesn't have the strength any more. It's seen everything and wants to retire. You're the one who will have to take over. You're the one who will have to persuade yourself to get drunk and try to hit on everyone who looks remotely like your former love. You're the one who will soon be notorious for being the Chevy Chase-freak at the neighbourhood bar because everyone you succeed in per-

suading via money or liquor to go home with you has to kiss you in a particular pee-smelling underpass and then watch the classic nineties comedy and laugh in the right way at the right joke. Your chest yawns and sighs while you drink yourself blind and sit in the back of night buses and roar, 'It was my heart, my heart failed me.'

Then one sunny day you'll wake up and decide that you've had enough. You refuse to end your days as you began them; you refuse to return to being fed, burped and taken care of. You refuse to waste away. Instead you'll sit down and write a will that warns young people against repeating your mistakes. Then you'll do what I'm about to do in a minute. You'll suck air into your lungs, you'll tighten your stomach muscles until sweat breaks out on your forehead, you'll hold your breath until everything goes black. You'll explode your egocentric heart. Your lungs will fill with blood and the whispers will fade away and through your tear-quivering eyelashes you'll see the horizon swing sideways and then disappear upwards. Deep inside you'll know that you're finally free. Well done, you'll think. You're ready now.

# Against Nature by J.K. Huysmans

*Alexander Larman on dandyism, decadence, debauchery*

JUDGED BY most standards of polite behaviour, Duc Jean Floressas des Esseintes, protagonist of Joris-Karl Huysmans' 1884 novel *À Rebours*, or *Against Nature*, falls somewhat short. Huysmans makes the case early on for his anti-hero being one of the less clubbable of men when des Esseintes is said to 'realize that the world is made up mostly of fools and scoundrels'. Although he allows himself the odd moment of fun – 'unnatural love affairs and perverse pleasures' – it is not long until he hides himself away in a lavishly decorated villa on the outskirts of Paris, making sure that he is 'guarding against hankering for human society, any nostalgic regrets'. And that, which concludes the novel's prologue, is more or less it for plot. If you're looking for incident, stick with *War and Peace*. Plenty of both there.

If analysed from a literary perspective, Huysmans' novel is simultaneously beguiling and hugely frustrating. Beguiling, because in its otherworldly marriage of naturalistic description and surreal incident, it summons up a world quite different from virtually any that had been seen in literature before. And hugely frustrating, because it tantalizes the reader with the thought that, had the likes of Joyce and Eliot been born twenty years earlier, they would have read Huysmans and taken the whole concept of modernism in an entirely different direction. Eliot's Prufrock might seek to assert his necktie rich and modest with a simple pin, but des Esseintes has beaten him to it by wearing 'suits of white velvet with gold-laced waistcoats' and 'by sticking a bunch of Parma violets in his shirt-front in lieu of a cravat'. Yet, like Prufrock, he is unimpressive of appearance; he is 'anaemic and highly strung', with 'hollow cheeks' and the lingering remnants of childhood illness.

From such unprepossessing beginnings comes one of the greatest examples of the literary decadent and dandy. The great dandy should feature some, and preferably all, of the following examples of unusual behaviour:

- Unusual, flamboyant and eccentric dress sense.
- A healthy contempt for the universe, whether religion or his fellow man.
- An exceptional intelligence, often not academic but made up of a fierce desire to question society's norms and values and hold in contempt what others hold sacred.
- An affinity for the perverse in all its forms.
- A self-destructive side that will ensure a youthful death.
- A fierce loyalty to a few people and ideas, ranging from the trivial to the profound.

Des Esseintes scores highly on this scale; the last doesn't apply at all, given his essential nihilism, and arguably the fourth is less relevant after his youthful debauchery, but the crucial mix of personal vanity and contempt for the universe is here in spades. He doesn't score as high as Lord Rochester, for whom all the above apply, but it's hard not to see Huysmans looking at such noted French decadents as Edmond de Goncourt (who had, one imagines in the voice of *Withnail and I's* Uncle Monty – we shall return to him – instructed Huysmans to only be interested in 'cultured beings and exquisite things') and, especially, Baudelaire, from whose work the title and central philosophical conceits of the novel are taken. Like *Les Fleurs du Mal*, *Against Nature* is essentially a sensual book where impression and surface are all, where the gaudy pleasures of rich and almost cloying language wash over the reader, for whom resistance against the sybaritic excess can only be futile.

Des Esseintes proudly describes himself as a pessimist, not in the sense of a miserable bugger shrugging but in something closer to Schopenhauer, with the clear-sighted vision that you can only be saved from utter disillusionment with the world if you never expect anything from it in the first place. Perhaps ironically, he shares this with Larkin, the ultimate miserable bugger poet of the twentieth

century. When Larkin writes in 'Aubade' of religion, 'that vast moth-eaten brocade created to pretend we never die', or sneers in 'Vers de Societé' of how 'the big wish / Is to have people nice to you, which means / Doing it back somehow / *Virtue is social*', one sees how clearly the strain of intelligent cynicism that Huysmans is espousing stretches into the literature of the next century. Perhaps tellingly, in 1884 the significant literary developments – Tolstoy's publication of *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, the first staging of Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* and Engels' *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, as well as the publication of *Against Nature* – were all taking place outside the English language.

Which is not to say that the literate English-speaking audience weren't taking note of this extraordinary book. Whistler went out and bought several copies on the day it was published, telling all and sundry who would listen that it was a work of timeless genius. One of those who didn't tell him to go and copulate with goats was Wilde, for whom *Against Nature* was a key text. He announced that 'the heavy odour of incense seemed to cling about its pages and to trouble the brain', and makes extensive allusions to it in *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*, referring to 'the strangest book that he had ever read', and going on to comment that 'it seemed to him that in exquisite raiment, and to the delicate sound of flutes, the sins of the world were passing in dumb show before him'. It would have been clear to any of Wilde's circle which novel he was referring to, something that he discussed avidly with correspondents and, more reluctantly, at his trial. Yet there is a crucial exchange between Dorian and his Wildean mentor Lord Henry Wotton, which sums up the book's extraordinarily complex appeal:

'I am so sorry, Harry', Dorian cried, 'but really it is entirely your fault. That book you sent me so fascinated me that I forgot how the time was going.'

'Yes: I thought you would like it,' replied his host, rising from his chair.

'I didn't say I liked it, Harry. I said it fascinated me. There is a great difference.'

'Ah, you have discovered that?' murmured Lord Henry.

*Against Nature* is not a likeable or particularly enjoyable book. It has no plot to speak of, no sympathetic characters or even many notable events. What it does do is to exert a weirdly woozy hypnotic fascination, somewhat akin to smoking a huge amount of opium in some lavishly upholstered velvet-draped boudoir and half listening to some rambling yet utterly compelling story, told by an adventurer.

The book's most influential appearance in the twentieth century was possibly in Bruce Robison's seminal film *Withnail and I*. While the book itself only appears once (as Marwood prepares to pack and leave behind the decadent life he has been embroiled in), its influence is clear throughout the film. The two protagonists of the film lead a similarly debauched life to des Esseintes, although their existence is less one of gilded luxury and sumptuous furnishings as it is drug-fuelled paranoia and hysterical squalor. Yet there is the same sense of Withnail, in particular, being as much a man out of time and place as des Esseintes, with his arch, Byronic hero-meets-Dickensian grotesque persona reinforcing the sense of a misanthrope who simultaneously loathes and is misunderstood by society. And of course, the character of Uncle Monty represents nobody so much as the decadent outcast with charm, money and lechery in equal measure, simultaneously discoursing on the finer points of Baudelaire and attempting to rape Marwood.

At the end of the film, Withnail is left alone, doomed to recite Hamlet's 'I have of late, wherefore I know not, lost all my mirth' soliloquy to a group of uninterested wolves in Regent's Park. This is the unifying factor between dandies, decadents and debauchees, the certain knowledge that they are doomed, and that, like Eliot's Gerontion, they will stiffen in a rented room before their time. Whether it is Rochester dying at thirty-three of his alcoholism, coupled with syphilis and the all-encompassing 'pox', Sebastian Horsley's heroin overdose or Julian Maclaren-Ross finally succumbing to poverty and despair, it is a sad but essential aspect of the dandy that their life and career should eventually end tragically.

Des Esseintes does not expire at the end of *Against Nature*. For Huysmans, one feels, this would be all too straightforward an ending. Instead, he, like Withnail, is condemned to a fate rather worse than death, as his iconoclastic lifestyle leads to a descent into ill health. At first, he appears to have achieved his crowning achievement by taking no other food or nourishment than a peptone enema three times a day, but the cruel irony is yet to come, when his doctor ('who was imbued with all the prejudices of a man of the world') informs him that, in order to recover his strength, he must 'abandon this solitary existence, to go back to Paris, to lead a normal life again, above all to try and enjoy the same pleasures as other people'.

This strict edict – that the dandy and decadent must come to ignore their own inclinations and tastes in favour of embracing organized fun, the safe, everyday excitements and distractions that are considered acceptable for the average person – is society taking its revenge, a more refined and long-lasting revenge than simply allowing the dandy to die. Des Esseintes might retort, as any dandy would, 'But I just don't enjoy the pleasures other people enjoy,' but it is no good. The book ends with true tragedy, as he realizes that 'like a tide-race, the waves of human mediocrity are rising to the heavens and will engulf this refuge'. The dandy will seek refuge, spiritual and physical, in trying to escape these waves of mediocrity, but a flesh-and-blood human is no match for the inexorable tide of uncaring, implacable destiny. Yet their words, and lives, serve as an example to the rest of us. Whether it's Wilde, Rochester, des Esseintes, Byron or anyone else, the dandy's willingness to stand outside society and condemn banality serves as far more inspirational than any prurient account of simple carnal pleasures. For ultimately, dandyism must stem from one man, a man who had the courage to stand up in a rule-bound, restrictive and cruel society and, armed with little more than faith and certainty, could declare that he was the way, the truth and the life. Those who follow in the footsteps of such men will never truly be alone.

# The Needle and the Damage Done

*What is the best title for a book on knitting?*

*A few months ago, author Jenny Lord finished her book on knitting, a complete how-to that includes original patterns, advice on sourcing the best yarn and plenty of practical tips. Finally, she had to decide on a suitable title. She asked other writers for suggestions. Below are the responses. None was used.*

Paradise Knitty  
Tough Knit!  
I Just Knit Myself  
Tender is the Knit  
Knit or Die!  
I've Got Knits  
Knit on Your Life  
Knit Without My Daughter  
Knit Gonna Happen  
Knits Landing  
Hunger by Knit Hamsun  
Knits and Berries  
Hot Knits  
Knitty Knitty Bang Bang  
Holy Fucking Knit!

Who Gives a Knit?  
Around the World in Knitty Days  
Knit Rider  
I Just Knit My Pants  
Knit, Knit, Knitting on Heaven's Door  
The Whole Nine Yarns  
The Needle and the Damage Done  
Working on the Knit Moves  
In the Heat of the Knit  
The Yarn and the Restless  
If You Got Knit, Flaunt Knit  
To Infiknity and Beyond  
Champing at the Knit  
The Knit and the Pendulum  
Lickety Knit

Superneedles!  
Knit Happens  
Come and Get Knit ...  
Bring Knit On!  
Thass da shizKNIT  
InKnit  
InKnit Tho  
Knit Tings  
Knitcracker  
Get Your Knits out for the Lads  
Moonknit Sonata  
The Knitty Professor  
This is Doing My Knit in



# Control Alt. Delete

Story 2 of 3 by Jonas Hassen Khemiri

Translated from Swedish by Rebecca Delgado

The first composition is a hopeful intro where we get to follow how you're waving farewell to your family; first we see your mother letting a joyful tear roll down her cheek and your brother wishing you good luck, and then you jumping up next to the movers and waving goodbye one last time and soon you're on your way, away from your former life, away from narrow-minded chit-chat. You and your new future, you and the new keys to your new apartment in the city with a prefix that only has half as many digits and half as many zeros as your hometown. We watch as the movers take their leave and it's dusk now – in the dim hallway, shadows hide behind stacks of Chiquita boxes and puffy black plastic bags filled with clothing. Then there is you, in sole focus, standing there in your new hallway under a dangling light bulb with a new smile on your lips. All that's audible are musical notes that carefully twine their way down from the floor above. A neighbour. With a piano. It sounds like that old classic jazz tune 'Night and Day', you think to yourself, and you walk towards the bathroom humming along.

THE SECOND composition is performed steadily and rhythmically and we get to follow how you're repainting the hallway and nailing picture frames to the wall, and as soon as you've settled in the apartment you get in touch with the unemployment office because it's going to be different this time. Your administrator wears a blouse with flower prints just like the last one did, but she is a thousand times more helpful and doesn't say anything about it being too late to start over and doesn't comment on the four-year gap on your CV. Soon you're mailing your first applications and you've become buddies with the old lady at the post office, and soon you're waving to the guy at the ticket counter at the station, and soon you're starting to think that every subway ride is like a journey within the city's bloodstream. In the evenings you hold a toast with yourself and only every now and then do you talk to someone from home, and when you do you always use your newly acquired city voice, which is a perfect mixture of one who is bored and one who is constantly 'on the go', and sometimes they exclaim how you sound just like a genuine urbanite! Then late-night music. The pianist from

above. Your neighbour insists on playing the same jazz song night after night on repeat, and when you can't sleep you pull out a mop and thump it on the ceiling, and when that doesn't work you drag the rolling pin a couple of times across the radiator, but usually he just plays a bit quieter and when you pull out a chair and put the water glass against the ventilation shaft, its ripples prove he is still sitting at his piano tinkering away.

THE THIRD composition begins in major but ends in minor and here some months seem to have gone by because it's suddenly winter and you've spent Christmas in your hometown. You've come back to your city apartment with your ears wounded from questions like 'How is work going?' and 'How's your love life?' and 'Did you hear that Åsa had a baby?' and 'Have you seen any celebrities by chance?' Whenever people ask, you tell them about the time you saw Gunde Swan at the fancy boutique, and other times you say you saw Arne Weise shopping at an ordinary department store, and every single time you get impressed seconds of doubtful silence when they're not really sure whether you're serious or making things up. Back in your apartment (which suddenly feels smaller than you remember it) you find lying on the hallway rug a load of rejection letters from employers saying, 'Thank you for your interest, but we do not have any need for PC coordinators specializing in Windows 98 at this time.' You have barely made yourself a cup of tea and calmed your nerves before the clock has struck midnight, and wouldn't you know it, that fucking neighbour from upstairs starts playing the piano and you feel ENOUGH IS ENOUGH!! No normal or sane person plays the piano at these hours and especially not the same song over and over, 'Night and Day' twenty-four times in a row, until you are forced to jump up from the couch, tighten your bathrobe and head towards the stairwell. His letterbox doesn't have a name on it and you get a little bit nervous since, after all, he could turn out to be a psychotic killer high on Rohypnol who's just waiting for his chance to puncture you with his sharp piano fingers shaped like ice picks. But no, of course that doesn't happen. He's too scared to open his door. The





wuss. You ring the doorbell again and again, and you peek through the letterbox slightly and you hear 'Night and Day' echoing throughout the stairwell and you cock yourself then shoot out some choice words. Frustrated, you go back down to your place and try to fall asleep with earplugs and relaxing green tea. When that doesn't work, you try to drown out the music with your relaxation CD then make a new attempt at falling asleep. But 'Night and Day' is still roaring from upstairs and finally you give up, sneak into the stairwell and steal the neighbouring tenant's morning newspaper to read the job ads over breakfast.

THE FOURTH composition is played hypnotically and dreamily, and here we notice that a year must have gone by because your hair is suddenly all outgrown and the belt to your bathrobe is limp and threadbare. Scribbled on the wallpaper are black and green doodles that resemble musical notation song titles and programming codes. Sometimes you play around with the thought of becoming the first person in world history who will survive the rest of their life without sleep because there's no point in even trying to sleep when you're neighbours with such a complete fucking PIANO MARAUDER who every NIGHT AND DAY continues with his constant MUSICAL TERROR. You try to seek support from the other tenants in the building, but everyone is silenced by the fear of the piano man's ravages; and some people even refuse to open up their door to you, and others open up but don't remove the safety chain, and one old man claims that the piano man's apartment is vacant, and the old lady on the third floor gets white as a ghost and says she hasn't heard a piano at all, and the guy on the fifth floor has the nerve to make a joke about it being cool to have some jazz groove in the building. The only one who agrees with you is the Pakistani grandmother, who nods and smiles when you yell, 'It simply can't go on like this!' Back in the apartment you find yet another reminder letter from the Unemployment Office that says this is the absolute last warning! Get in touch with us immediately! And you fold the letter and put it in your bathrobe pocket.

THE FIFTH composition is the most dramatic, with key changes and tempo shifts, and here you've gotten in touch with the landlord and hired a lawyer and put the Central Complaint Bureau's hotline on speed dial, and the eviction process is now marching fully forwards. Soon the victory will be yours and everyone has been so helpful, except for maybe the police, who have threatened to take action if you even come close to thinking about calling them again. But what difference does it make – liberation is soon to come and the only thing that annoys you is that you still don't know what the piano man looks like. Obviously you're dealing with a poor psychopathic long-bearded loner who's shut himself in *up there* and who would benefit by being admitted to an institution; it's really first and foremost for his sake that you've made such an effort, and it's best for the apartment building and for his own good that the eviction notice will soon be carried into effect. But there's still something that won't give you peace of mind, something that makes you go down to the recycling room one night, that final night as you're listening to his endless playing again and again. Now you've begun searching for clues and your sights are set on suspicious items such as tuning forks covered in blood or plastic bags full of piano strings. But the only thing you find that has any kind of piano connection is an empty vinyl cover to the album *Ebony & Ivory*. Disappointed, you leave the recycling room and head up to the attic. You pass his door and now the notes are as strong as if they were blasting through organ pipes. Letterboxes and windowpanes vibrate from the booming chords, and outside you hear the sound of dogs howling in synch and the occasional car alarm triggered by the sound waves, and you're almost forced to cover your ears when you open the door to the attic. With stressful steps you start going from storeroom to storeroom looking for anything – a photo, a clue, an explanation – but all there is that same generic mix of downhill skis and old lampshades. Except ... wait ... over there, can you see it? Of course you can, how could you miss a gleaming golden music stand? And there in the same storeroom, hidden behind a black garbage bag – a vibraphone. In an old cardboard box you find sheet music and a black notebook, and if you can just

climb up on to that ledge ... and fold down the chicken wire ... and then gather yourself and reach down as far as you possibly can, it should actually be possible to get the notebook ... yes ... ah, you have it! You quickly make your way down from the attic with weasel-like footsteps, and once down in your apartment you open up the faded notebook. Small notations are written from 1949 onwards – the owner, who's named Isa (or possibly Ida), is listening to jazz and dreaming of a career as a pianist performing in the Saint-Germain quarter of Paris. Then it's suddenly 1956 and Ida (or maybe Isa) has moved to Umeå and is in love with a clarinet player named Jens. They visit the folk park Erikslund and participate in improv sessions with Stockholm jazz ensembles, and sometimes close to the wee hours Isa or Ida or maybe both at once timidly dare to approach the piano, and so it happens that some great musician from Stockholm, maybe Anders Burman or Putte Wickman, gives her encouragement and she promises never to give up her dream. She plays 'There Is No Greater Love' for an entire night, and the next day her darling Jens proposes. She plays 'God Bless the Child' for two weeks and becomes pregnant. She plays 'The Masquerade Is Over' and Jens confesses his infidelity. She plays 'Solitude' and Jens (that dog!) leaves her. She plays 'Here's that Rainy Day' and it's raining. She plays 'Blue Skies' but it continues to rain. She plays 'Fly Me to the Moon' and dreams about Neil Armstrong. She plays 'Baby Won't You Please Come Home' month after month until Jens is standing on the doorstep once again, begging her a hundred times over for forgiveness. They try to patch their marriage together with 'Speak No Evil'. But nothing seems to help because the handwriting becomes wobblier and the ink stains blotchier. At last it's 'You Don't Know What Love Is' and 'You Took Advantage of Me', and then finally four months of '(I'll Be Glad When You're Dead) You Rascal You'.

Here you lift your gaze from the notebook.

Here you realize the piano has gone silent.

Somebody's knocking on your door.

THE FINALE is open for free improvisations.

# The Best Bits of the Best Books

*In which many rockers, rappers and folkies tell us what to read*

*If you're anything like us, you've spent plenty of time watching music videos or shaky handheld live footage on YouTube and said to yourself, This is all well and good but what do these people read?*

## Zach Condon

### Beirut

*The Savage Detectives* by Roberto Bolaño

Bolaño has been a relief to have on tour. He seems to have the same idle and poetic amusement with city and street names as I do. It's nice to take a stroll through Mexico City while stuck in a coffin-like bed on the sleeper bus.

## Mira Aroyo

### Ladytron

*Slaughterhouse Five* by Kurt Vonnegut

*Slaughterhouse Five* is probably my favourite book. It was given to me a few years ago by my husband, who really loves it. I must have read it on some mode of transport as that seems to be where I get a chance to read these days. I was surprised I hadn't come across it when I was younger, especially since it turned out to be one of my dad's favourites too. It is a real treasure to discover a book like this. It makes you want to share it with everyone around you.

Humans have the capacity and certainly will continue to kill each other and go on futile missions against one another, but I love how kind and positive Kurt Vonnegut is about humanity. It's a philosophical and ultimately uplifting work that weaves together dark parts of history, science fiction and a good dose of post-war Americana.

Kurt Vonnegut is a great source for quotes and wise vignettes. My favourite part in *Slaughterhouse Five* is a realization made by a visitor from Outer Space who studied Christianity to find out why Christians found it so easy to be cruel:

He concluded that at least part of the trouble was slipshod storytelling in the New Testament. He supposed that the intent of the Gospels was to teach people, among other things, to be merciful, even to the lowest of the low.

But the Gospels actually taught this: Before you kill somebody, make absolutely sure he isn't well connected. So it goes.

The visitor from Outer Space then goes on to suggest that the mistake was making Christ the Son of God. Instead, he could have been a nuisance of a bum with no powerful connections and just as he was crucified the heavens would open and he would be adopted by God:

From this moment on, He will punish anybody who torments a bum who has no connections.

## Ellen Waddell

### Los Campesinos!

*We Need to Talk About Kevin* by Lionel Shriver

The first time I picked up *We Need to Talk About Kevin* I lost patience one chapter in. I was in my first year of university and was attempting to get back into reading for pleasure. My brain was beginning to dry out thanks to the weighty theoretical textbooks. I wanted to read something entirely fictional and escapist, a habit I enjoyed when I was young and my parents were going through a bitter divorce, a habit I quickly grew out of when my stepmother accused me of sticking my head in a book rather than dealing with anything.

I wandered into the local Waterstone's and found myself in front of the Orange Book Prize display and was instantly drawn to *Kevin*, not only because of the notable validation from well-regarded peers, but because the book was about the fallout of a high school shooting. The last

book I had read on that subject – the brilliant *Hey, Nostradamus* by Douglas Coupland – had become one of my favourites. You go with what you know.

The book is written as a series of letters from Eva Khatchadourian to her estranged husband, Franklin, as she attempts to understand why their son brutally murdered several of his classmates. Eva switches between the present (the aftermath and visits to her son in jail) and the past (the upbringing of Kevin) as she attempts to decipher and come to terms with her son's transformation. She is a cold and fallible narrator who makes no allusions to her own lack of maternal instincts, but she also provides evidence the child may have carried these impulses from birth. She debates the differing parenting techniques she and her husband employed, her own feelings of resentment and general unease towards her son, and speculates on possible tell-tale signs leading up to the killings in an attempt to figure out whose fault it could have been, if anyone's.

I stopped reading it the first time. I liked the sound of the 'nature vs nurture' subtext in principle, but when it came to the actual execution it was a heavy and distressing book to read and I wasn't able to handle the subject matter. It was not the year to dissect the difficult relationship between a mother and child, let alone explore the taboo subject of not liking your own. It was the year to get into Anne Rice. I decided to give the book another shot after university when I felt wiser, or at least less emotionally sensitive. As I read it I became absorbed and engrossed, but the absorption was noted and understood for what it was. Feelings arose because of the great writing but then I would shut the book and have a cup of tea. I could turn it off, or at least that's what I thought.

I was nearing the end of the book in my kitchen one day and was filled with morbid curiosity. Soon I would find out exactly what had happened on the particular Thursday when Kevin decided to slaughter his peers. I was not prepared for the curveball twist that came, the one that occurs near the end and destroys you as a reader – the horrible personal tragedy the narrator has been carrying around since page one and the brutal language that describes it. I don't want to give away what happens – please read this book – but it's so dreadful and so well executed it

leaves you floored. I sat down on the floor of the kitchen.

There was one sentence in particular which shook me so hard that I gaped open-mouthed at the words before audibly saying 'no'. It reminded me of all the Greek tragedies I had loved – the glorious horror of *The Bacchae* – as well as the despair in Dante. Then I sobbed. I sobbed a lot. I had to lie down on my sofa for a while to deal with the shock of it. My mother found me there an hour later, confused as to why I was so upset over a book. It was the way Shriver painted this vivid image of the unthinkable from this narrator who never seems to let us in. I felt so bad for her, so helpless for her, and I understood why she was so removed. The reveal never gave in to fake melodrama, only hinting at hysterics at the scene she finds, something you would not even picture in your worst nightmare. It felt real, too real, and my response was a testimony to the authentic nature of the writing.

I reread that chapter the other day, just to see, and I had the same response. I wish I had not reread it in a way, and that I could scribble out that part, but at the same time it makes perfect sense. It makes the book perfect.

## Mocky

*The History of Forgetting* (Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory) by Norman M. Klein

This book is a collection of docu-fables and interviews investigating the history of LA, its cycles of gentrification and immigration, its public transportation boosterism, and the way entire neighbourhoods are razed. It has special significance for me right now because I just moved to LA from Berlin, a city with its own destroyed and recreated neighbourhoods, where I'd lived for ten years. This move has involved many of the same adaptations that are described in the stories in this book. My studio in Berlin was turned into a parking lot within weeks of my departure, and the neighbourhood where I lived (Kreuzberg) is changing so fast it's hardly recognizable. I am creating a new life out of a fiction of what 'might be' possible in an LA located in an America that resembles a crumbling empire. The countless stories of reinvention describe a world in LA much like Ber-

lin, where one can create one's own reality and live inside a bubble.

*The History of Forgetting* has been an inspiration to me as I pack up my partner and our 22-month-old son, and leave behind the cushy world of the Bohemian European Artist lifestyle and once again reimagine ourselves, this time as new school digital-era pioneers heading to a post-American Dream America.

My 'best bit' is the chapter entitled 'Stories in an English I Don't Speak'. It centres around an upper-class Vietnamese immigrant to LA detailing his life in Vietnam during wartime and the struggles he and his family undergo while attempting to integrate with American society. After countless horrors and living through things most of us don't even want to imagine, he ends up in LA and still manages a modicum of optimism that speaks to the power of Los Angeles's skills of hypnotization:

I now speak enough dignified English to operate a cash register at a gas station. I hit the keys with the enthusiasm and ambition of a chicken at a food tray. At the window, I see young men approximately my son's age, and marvel at their grace, and their new cars. I wait for the right woman to come along. I have quite a speech prepared for her.

Days later, Mocky sent a quickly dashed follow up via email:

hey man,, i have to be quick as im getting on the highway with wife and child,,, but i bought the book on a trip to LA last year and brought it with me back to berlin , started reading it on the flight and was totally intrigued and couldnt put it down,, theres a photo on the front of the LA skyline taken from griffith observatory,, and we have a family pic of our first time up there with the exact same skyline,,, hope this is good

## Kate Harkin

### Sky Larkin / Wild Beasts

*Fordlandia* by Greg Grandin

I'm currently on tour so my 'best bit' selection isn't from a well-thumbed friend, but a new acquaintance: *Fordlandia*

by Greg Grandin. I'm sat in the dressing room of 1301 U Street NW, Washington DC, which is a venue called 9:30. The streets are single letters in this part of town and this club is just digits. Luckily I've brought collections of entire words with me: *Fordlandia* is perched on an amplifier along with the youngest of a family tree of red notebooks that have followed me around since I started writing songs. Apart from rare glued-to-hand pageturners, I usually can't get immersed in fiction the way I want to on the road because of the inconsistencies of tour life. I've unconsciously gravitated towards non-fiction so far-fetched that it reads like fiction, somehow easier to get immersed in with the help of marker posts of familiar history along the way (notably, Eric Larson's *The Devil in the White City*).

*Fordlandia*'s premise seems like a tall tale; a lost jungle city. I'm no auto enthusiast but this story of Henry Ford's attempt (and failure) to build a slice of America in the heart of the Amazon with his eyes set firmly on taming wild rubber has gripped me. I'm only a third of the way in, but so far (according to the red book) I've been tickled by these 'best bits', written clunkily as a list because tour is a time for fuzzy-brained fossicking:

In 1928 the *Washington Post* announced, 'Ford will govern a rubber plantation in Brazil larger than North Carolina. This is the first time he has applied quantity production methods to trouble.'

Central from the start of American expansion was a 'deep disquietude', a 'chafing feeling that something had gone wrong' both in old Europe and in the failure to achieve perfection in the New World.

Fordlandia's 150ft water tower was the tallest man-made structure in the Amazon at the time of its construction.

Henry Ford, pictured wearing a suit made out of soy fibres.

## Hunter Hunt-Hendrix

### Liturgy

*Sexus* by Henry Miller

My favourite book is *Sexus*. My favourite passage in the book is the closing section of Chapter 9, after Henry is given some money, which is then taken and returned to him. I was first pointed to it by a quota-

tion in Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*. As he examines Mona's sleeping body Henry contemplates Creation and Realization. 'Ascension! The creative life. Passing beyond one's self. Rocketing out into the blue, grasping at flying ladders, mounting, soaring, lifting the world up by the scalp, rousing the angels from their ethereal lairs, drowning in stellar depths, clinging to the tails of comets.' The entire passage is very long and goes from politics to ethics to art. He describes the continuity of creative realization with the pulse of Being, and also its futility. He writes of the kernel of non-sense that produces and is produced, and the effort of realization that is like child-birth. The 'Arkwork', it could be called. I have never read a more moving, beautiful description of creativity. It resonates deeply with my experience – reading and rereading it is both inspiring and comforting.

## Del the Funky Homosapien

*The Big Payback* by Dan Charnas

The latest book that I've been feelin' is *The Big Payback* by Dan Charnas. Man, this book is so fresh. A lot of the stories I kinda knew about but the detail of the book is amazing. My favourite character in the book is Rick Rubin. I feel him and I have similar tastes and sense of humour. Like how he would take the 808 and just turn the knob *alllllll* the way in one direction and create the loudest, most distorted sounds and use those. The story about him having Russell Simmons get in the mic booth to spit some rhymes just for shits and giggles was hilarious! Also the time where Rick Rubin hears that the album by the artist Paris that contained a song called 'Bush Killa' was getting shelved cause it was too controversial and decided that he wanted to put it out for the simple fact that he could. Just to give a big middle finger to censorship. I feel him on that. Beyond that *The Big Payback* is the most informative book on the playmakers who put their money where their mouth was for this culture called hip hop when nobody believed in it.

## Diane Cluck

*The Self-Healing Cookbook* by Kristina Turner

One of my very favourite books is *The Self-Healing Cookbook*, a macrobiotic prim-

er by Kristina Turner. I purchased a copy when it first came out in 1996 from a now-defunct independent bookstore in Lancaster, PA, where I grew up. I chose the book based on a strong, intuitive draw; I had never read or seen anything like it at the time. I'd read Gilda Radner's autobiography a few months earlier, in which I first encountered the term and idea of macrobiotics – a way of eating based on seasonal, local, whole foods and methods of preparing them. The book's descriptions of seaweed and funky green drinks captivated me and remain in my memory even now. I was intrigued by the notion that people out in the world were eating foods I'd never heard of before; I had encountered a mystery into which I felt I was meant to be initiated. I grew up eating a standard American diet. It's often pointed out that the acronym for that phrase is SAD. At the time I discovered macrobiotics through *The Self-Healing Cookbook*, I was recovering from a bout of mononucleosis that had lasted several months. I began incorporating ideas from the book as I cooked for myself in the dormitory kitchen at college. It was the beginning of my explorations into food and diet as it relates to health, something which became an integral part of my adult life.

*The Self-Healing Cookbook* is printed in a combination of handwriting, line-drawing and typewriting that I find especially friendly. One of the best bits of this book, as I see it, is:

### CHOOSING VEGETABLES FOR YOUR MOODS

Most people can sense how stimulating foods affect their moods. Coffee gives you alertness, followed by a let-down. Chocolate makes you feel loved, then mildly depressed and wanting more chocolate. Red meat fuels assertiveness, but also leads to lethargy.

Unlike these extreme foods, which tend to exaggerate moods, vegetables have very subtle effects on your moods and personality. Use them to shift your moods gently in the direction you want to go.

### FEEL TENSE, ANGRY OR STUCK?

Eat crispy, succulent veggies:  
chinese cabbage or bok choy  
green beans  
romaine lettuce

cucumber or radish  
cauliflower  
celery  
snap peas

These will help you relax, lighten up and feel clear. Have them either lightly cooked, or in salads.

### FEEL SUPERSENSITIVE, OR TOO EMOTIONAL?

Eat more cooked veggies . . . especially roots, winter squash and sturdy greens:

daikon  
carrot  
turnip  
butternut or buttercup squash  
kale  
collards

These can calm you and help you get down to business. Give you a firmer grip on life, and fuel productive creativity.

If you swing between these two extremes, choose appropriate veggies to balance your moods each day.

I return to Kristina Turner's book regularly, often in times of transition or illness. Like many Americans, especially those self-employed in artistic professions, I don't have medical insurance. Self-education in the realm of mental/physical/spiritual health has been important and even life-saving for me. I take it super-seriously and at the same time really enjoy investing time and energy in learning all I can about how to take care of myself and the people in my community. Medical care can be prohibitively expensive, but this book serves to remind that much of returning to health and staying well involves working with our intuitive roots.

## Jóhann Jóhannsson Composer

*The Rings of Saturn* by W. G. Sebald

A friend recommended this book to me a few years ago. I read it over a long period. I wanted to make it last, like a dream I didn't want to end, and I've been coming back to it regularly since. It's kind of a travelogue, a walking tour and a book about memory and its fallibility, weaving

together the ordinary and the fabulous and monumental. There's a lot about empires, ruins and decay, about grand, failed projects and a lot about abandoned seaside resorts, and run-down lighthouses. It goes off at tangents like a dream does. It reminded me a bit of one of my favourite films, *Sans Soleil* by Chris Marker. The best bit? One good part is where the author reconstructs a BBC radio programme he half slept through about Roger Casement, the anti-slavery crusader who reported on Belgian colonial abuses in the Congo and who was subsequently tried and executed for treason because of his role in the Irish Easter Rising.

I read the book here in Copenhagen where I live, but I've taken it with me on trips as well. Sebald is a good travelling companion. There's definitely a tone and a type of melancholy in the books that exists in my music as well, as well as an attraction to all kinds of ruins and decay. The way his themes radiate in different directions but still have a resonant centre is similar to what I tried to do on my Fordlandia album.

## Adam Green

### The Moldy Peaches

*The Soft Machine* by William S. Burroughs

My favourite book is *The Soft Machine* by William S. Burroughs. I read it constantly and it's better than *The Little Prince*. Chapter one starts with a description of rectal mucus. And who could forget the romantic scene where two gentlemen shoot Demerol by candlelight? People say that William S. Burroughs is similar to Jonathan Swift, but I think he's more like a gay R. Kelly who knows how to read.

Chapter seven, 'The Mayan Capers', is the second-best chapter and you will be proud of him for writing it. This is a good book to read in a Turkish bath, while squatting, or even icing your shins waiting to get divorced. Don't read page 168. When you finish the book there's a 'Last Page Award' to ensure that you're a winner. Also kudos to the author for early use of the word 'Heavy Metal'. Does anybody know if you can get the film rights to it? This year's gotta-read-it book.

## Bret Higgins

### Great Lake Swimmers

*Demian* by Hermann Hesse

A book of tremendous significance to me growing up, and still remains so, is Hermann Hesse's *Demian*. The book is a psychological study of the nature of man, and his relationship with himself and the world in which he exists. One part that struck me significantly when I read the book for the first time was Hesse's own introduction, wherein he characterized the inner nature of man as our carrying 'the vestiges of his birth – the slime and eggshells of his primeval past – with him to the end of his days'. Hesse goes on to shed further Jungian-inspired light on the nature of man, stating that 'we all share the same origin, our mothers; all of us come in at the same door. But each of us – experiments in the depths – strives toward his own destiny. We can understand one another; but each of us is able to interpret himself to himself alone.'

## Owen Ashworth

### Casiotone for the Painfully Alone

*We Have Always Lived in the Castle* by Shirley Jackson

My favourite book is *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* by Shirley Jackson. It's such a fantastic and strange story, full of mystery and sweetness and terror. I love Shirley Jackson's plain language. It's direct and bare, but chillingly vague right where it needs to be. There are shadows between the sentences that just fill me with dread, and that's the best way a book can make me feel. I've tried really hard to recreate that same sort of terrible Shirley Jackson feeling in my songs. There's so much about this book I love, but, for me, the best bit is the jacket of the Viking Press first edition, which is so weird and simple and absolutely the perfect complement to the text. The colours, the empty space, that shifty cat in the grass, the scrawl and slant of the whole thing and the way it forces you to cock your head and squint at it, and of course that wonderful title all force an uneasiness that I find very appealing. I don't even remember who

the cover artist is, but they were as much of an influence on my design aesthetic as Shirley Jackson has been an influence on my writing.

I bought my first copy of *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* in 2000. It was a crumbling old paperback from a second-hand bookshop in Berkeley, CA, called Shakespeare and Co. I read it during my shifts in the box office of the Albany Twin movie theatre. The cover and the first few pages had fallen off by the time I finished reading it, so I bought another copy to loan to friends. My friend Jenny Herbinson gave me the hardbound first edition as a birthday present a few years later. It's one of my favourite things that I own, and I've reread it several times over the years.

## Miranda Mulholland

### Great Lake Swimmers

*Cue for Treason* by Geoffrey Trease

Some books you come to in your own due time (usually the right time, in my opinion) and some are brought to you by enlightened individuals with a passion for reading. I had a particularly wonderful grade 6 teacher, who possessed not only a fierce love for books but the most expressive and beguiling reading voice. She could probably have made the phone book interesting, but her taste in books for 12-year-olds was unsurpassed. We would sit cross-legged on a shag rug in front of her chair, rapt as disciples, and the classroom would disappear. The first book she read to us (and my perennial favourite since then) was a historical fiction called *Cue for Treason*, by Geoffrey Trease. It had everything to dazzle a little precocious performer-to-be: a strong-willed heroine, adventure, theatre, evil plots, codes and a touch of innocent romance. What was the best bit? Well, if I told you that, I would ruin the surprise, wouldn't I? I believe that the books you read as a child shape you for your whole life. They help forge your identity, ignite your imagination and teach you empathy. *Cue for Treason* marked the early beginning and the firm entrenchment of a life-long love affair with books. For me, that was the best bit.

# Kid Koala's Hidden Journal

## *Jakob von Baeyer meets the DJ*

*Eric San, aka Kid Koala, is a scratch DJ who considers himself more storyteller than virtuoso. He's worked as a solo artist with the alternative hip hop group Deltron 3030 and has reached a worldwide audience through his collaborations with Gorillaz and stadium tours with Björk and Radiohead. His new album project, Space Cadet, includes a graphic novel painstakingly illustrated with etchings done over a period of four years, a period which overlaps with the birth of his daughter. The intergalactic storyline unfolds gracefully in what San has referred to as a lullaby, a simple story of friendship, love and loss. Five Dials spoke to him about collecting records versus comics, and his new familiarity with children's books.*

**5D:** *People don't associate you with graphic novels.*

**KK:** I still say I'm not a visual artist, I'm a musician. But that said, whenever I'm working on music I always have a visual narrative in my mind. I try to score to a character through scratching or a chord cycle that resonates with the emotions of that character. It informs the music, and the music informs the visual. The two worlds aren't really separate to me. The place where music and visuals often meet is film.

I've always drawn. I did a lot of animation in high school so I've always been interested in the concept of storytelling using sequential art. But I would say the majority of my inspiration comes from silent films because I grew up watching a lot of Charlie Chaplin movies. So that was integral to most of my books and still is. Even the idea of scoring the music afterwards and trying to get it to support what you're seeing on the screen. I guess these would be like paperback silent films but 'picture scores' is the term we're using because it's not actually a film, it's just key panels. Almost like a screenplay I guess.

**5D:** *Like an elaborate storyboard of a film.*

**KK:** Within the book format I love the concept of timing. I love how you can

stretch time. There are things you can do in books that you can't do in films, so I like to take advantage of the freedoms. I don't really have the patience to do films. If I get it up to the storyboards and the sequential panels then I'm pretty much happy.

**5D:** *Which graphic novels have had an impact on your work?*

**KK:** In recent times I have started to play at comic art festivals and I've started to do launch parties and this year I'm going down to Comic-Con, so I've been meeting more graphic novelists and it's just mind-blowing, the stuff that's going on. But actually, my record collection is about 20,000 records and my graphic novel collection is like 20. When I was a kid growing up I had friends who were into comic books and I do remember getting into the early Ninja Turtle stuff. This dark gritty story with Ninja Turtles, who wouldn't like that? But I only had a paper route and didn't have enough money for two vices so I picked records.

**5D:** *Because they were cheaper.*

**KK:** Yeah. I could go to Salvation Army and for three dollars could get, like, five records.

**5D:** *So to go back to the comics and graphic novels you initially looked at. Are there any storylines or panels that stick in your mind?*

**KK:** I like a lot of Chris Ware, Jhonen Vasquez and the alternative stuff. I didn't really get that much into the superhero side of things. Again it's more inspired by *The Tramp* by Charlie Chaplin than by Batman.

**5D:** *The work of Chris Ware and Jhonen Vasquez has cinematic qualities as well.*

**KK:** The pacing of the Chris Ware stuff is great. Really slow, lots of moments captured. And then I like how Jhonen

would load panels with layers upon layers of jokes. Sometimes you wouldn't pick up on them on the first reading and you'd go back to them and find something in the back corner of the room he's drawn in there. I like records like that and books like that – things that keep on giving every time you read.

**5D:** *Do you recall when you were first introduced to Vasquez's and Ware's work?*

**KK:** There are a few graphic novel stores in Montreal that are quite specialized and Drawn and Quarterly got set up here as well. It was just seeing different things in the window and thinking, 'What is that? It looks interesting.' In Drawn and Quarterly I liked Adrian Tomine. It was great, a really wonderful format. I would say that was probably in the mid-90s. I didn't grow up on manga or anything like that and my parents frowned on the idea of spending money on records or comic books.

**5D:** *You don't think you could make a film because you don't have the patience for it. But I heard the panels for Space Cadet took years to etch.*

**KK:** That was on my own time and on my own budget like most of what I do. I work within my means. I have filmmaker friends and they tell me about their budgets and the production teams they have to put together for their projects, and I'm like, 'Wow, I don't know how I could organize three hundred people.' At a live show maybe. My wife is actually a set designer for film and it's insane to me, the level of artistry that goes into film. I guess I'm a little more D.I.Y. Like, 'What can we do with a bunch of etch boards and a tape recorder?'

**5D:** *What was your process when you were working on the book? You must have needed quite a bit of space and time for those original etchings.*

**KK:** That was the biggest joke on me. I found these etch boards in France that I had never seen in Canada. I bought a couple while I was on tour there and I was in the hotel room goofing off, trying to get my head around drawing in reverse, so to speak, and I really enjoyed it. It

was a meditative thing to do on tour in between gigs. That's actually when a lot of it happened. I would finish one panel over the course of a week-long tour. But the joke was first that I was going to do a book set in space. Because these things were black I wouldn't have to work too hard.

SD: *You could let the ink do the work.*

KK: Yeah, I'll just sprinkle some stars here and there and the book will be done in a month. But the next thing you know, of course . . . I pencilled out the pages in a notebook, so I had a screenplay of sorts and then I went to the big etch boards and I drew them on there. The second I tried to work indoors I realized it had to be lit. Oops.

I decided to just surrender to it. I didn't want people to come to me asking, 'How's that coming along?' I thought this is going to take as long as it does and since I'd never made anything using this kind of technique I didn't know how long that would be. And here we are eight years

later. Of course, it wasn't eight years straight. I've done several albums and been on several tours in that time.

SD: *Did you have an idea of the narrative the whole time or were you finding your story as you went?*

KK: Most of the story was written in 2004. Four years later I became a father. After that happened things changed for me and I started working on the idea of introducing some flashbacks that would examine the bond the characters have. It changed a little, but the main skeleton of the story was done many years ago.

I remember every sketch and every page as a part of my life. I was working on one panel when we were waiting for the baby to arrive. I don't know if there's ever been a director's commentary on a comic book, but if you showed me any of those pages I could probably tell you which country I was in and what else I was doing at the time.

SD: *It's like a hidden journal.*

KK: Just for me. Hopefully it doesn't come across like, 'It feels like he ate fish when he did this one.'

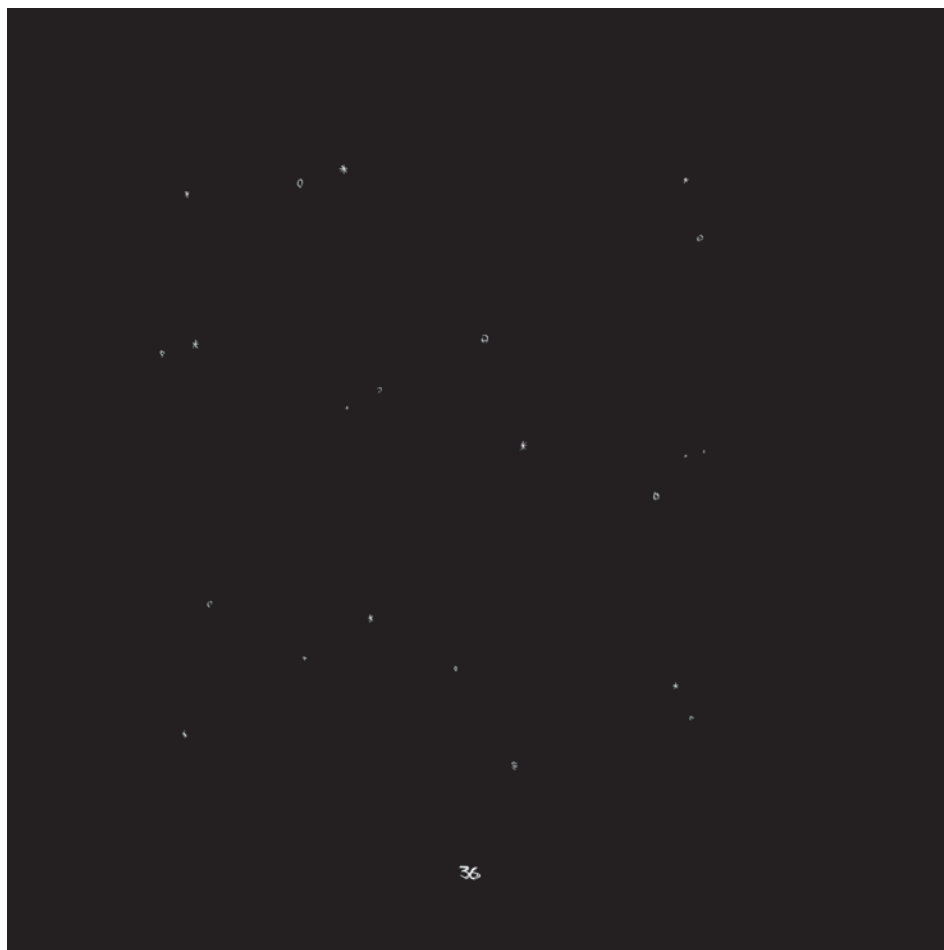
SD: *What are your reading habits when you're on tour?*

KK: These days I've mostly been reading children's books, when my daughter is on tour with us. She's into reading things five, six times in a row. It's interesting to see what kind of stuff she's drawn to. I can tell when her eyes glaze over she's thinking it's boring. If you showed her *Space Cadet* she'd think it's boring. There are no colours, no butterflies. Where's the fun in any of that?

SD: *You're not showing her the Chris Ware books?*

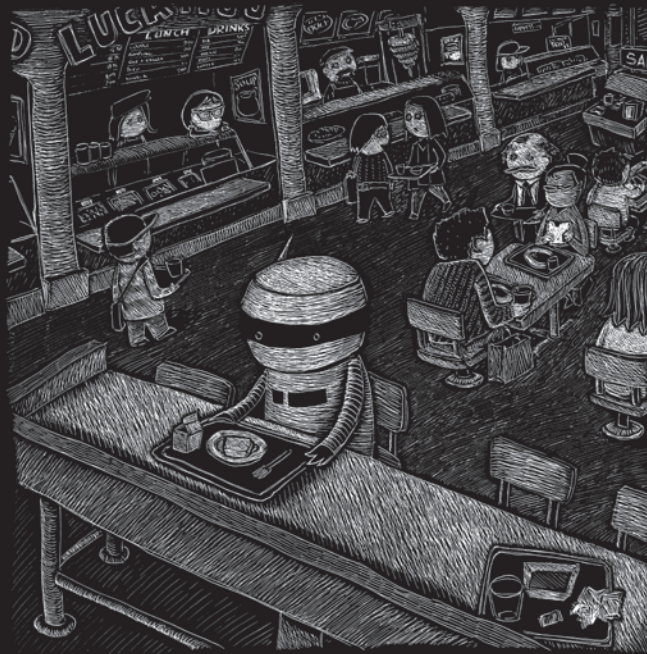
KK: She might like those because of the colours.

*Kid Koala's Space Cadet project was launched on 19 September and is available at [ninjatune.net](http://ninjatune.net).*

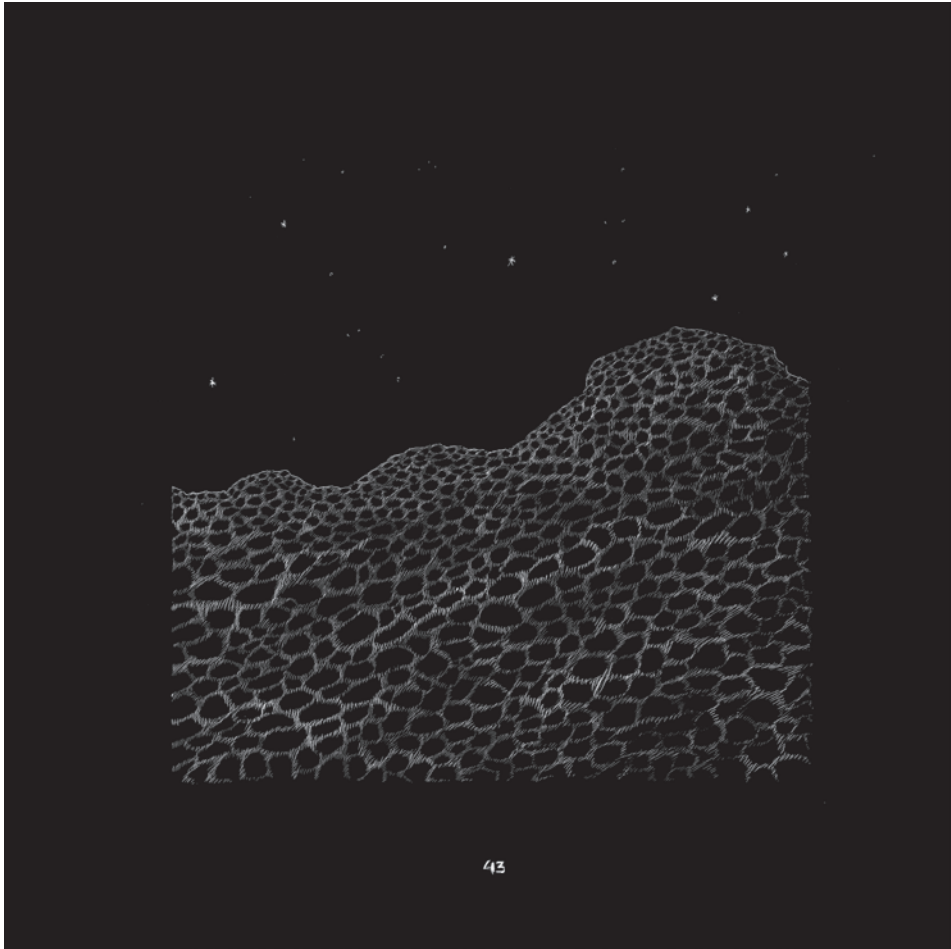












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# Unchanged Unending

Story 3 of 3 by Jonas Hassen Khemiri

Translated from Swedish by Rachel Willson-Broyles

Honestly. I wouldn't change anything because our love was the most beautiful thing I've experienced and there's nothing, nothing, I regret. Do you hear me? I promise and swear everything was perfect. Together we were like the love that everyone goes around waiting for, you know, the love all the films and books and songs fail to capture.

If I had to? If someone were to put a pistol to my head and really force me to change something now, afterwards, then I would probably change our first meeting. I mean, not because there was anything wrong with it, but honestly, how romantic is it to meet in the waiting room at a hospital?

Or a hospital is probably okay. It's a little dramatic, sort of. We can keep the hospital. But if I had to change something I'd probably put us in a different waiting room. Instead of catching sight of each other at the STD clinic our eyes would meet at, like . . . I don't know . . . the cancer ward. Is there one of those at Södersjukhuset? We'll say there is. We're sitting there on the cancer ward and our eyes meet and time stands still and you're so fantastically beautiful that I can't concentrate on my magazine.

Do you remember that? How I just sat there and pretended to read the gossip pages for several minutes just because I didn't dare meet your eyes?

And as long as we're at it I'd like to exchange the magazine for something that's a little more me. Let's have me sitting there in the waiting room reading *Anna Karenina*. And instead of you leaning forward and saying what you said ('Damn, it's nice not to be the only one worrying about my holiday hookups'), you lean forward and say something about Tolstoy's insightful manner of depicting, like, women or animals or the class society. That can be our first meeting. And instead of running into each other at the bus stop again and starting to talk about how shady it felt to pee in that plastic cup and how hard it is to stop in the middle of

peeing, we run into each other at the bus stop and start talking about how tough it is to have a loved one with cancer. Yeah, that should work.

And now we're standing there by the bus stop and you ask me for a cigarette and I compliment you on your tattoo and you tell that funny story about how you decided to get it in Thailand when you were high as a kite and then you woke up and went around for several weeks hoping, hoping, it was just a henna tattoo. We'll keep that part – just as it was. But can we please take out the totally idiotic question I asked next? ('So, was it a henna tattoo?') I'm still ashamed about that. Other than that there's nothing I want to change.

Nothing.

Okay, maybe the weather, actually.

We'll take out that windy fall rain and replace it with sunshine. Or even better. Let's say that we meet for the first time right when spring is starting to come to life. The scents are filling the city and everyone is pleasantly unprepared for the warmth and they get transformed into goldfish and agree that it's sure as hell never been this warm before. Let's have that kind of sun shine on us as we're standing there at the bus stop, and instead of taking the bus we start wandering down Ringvägen. Trees are shining green and your teeth are shining yellow and our shoes are sticking to the summery-warm asphalt because fuck it, it's not spring any more, it's suddenly become the most beautiful summer in the world. Distant sounds from basketball-playing kids and broiling sunshine and we're just wandering along there and enjoying it and talking about exactly the same things we chatted about on that rainy fall day on the bus. You remember, right?

We continue on the topic of tattoos and I tell you about that guy at my job whose reason behind his fully tattooed upper body was that he had a buddy

who was a tattooist and he got a really sweet deal. Now he had all the designs he wanted, but if he were going to get another tattoo he would want something classic, something that would really last.

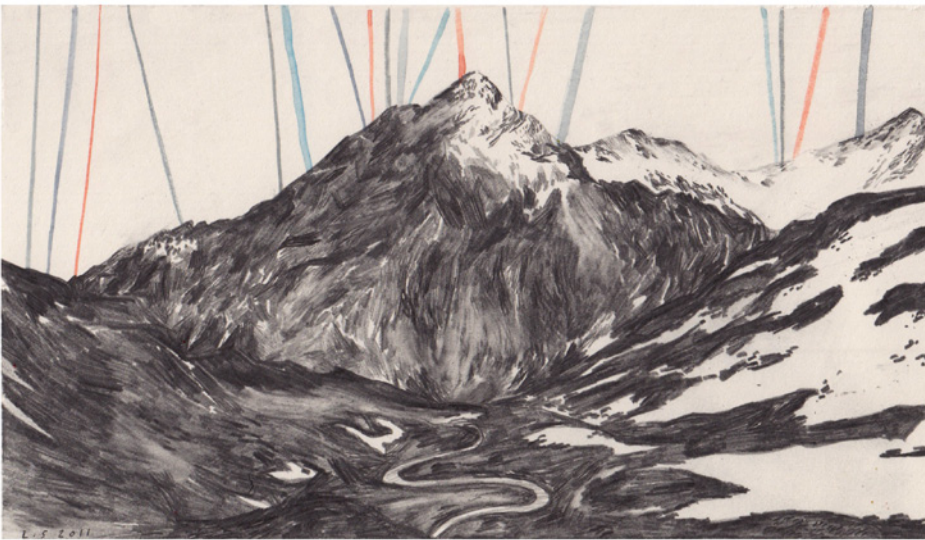
'Like what?' you ask, and you ask it just like you did on the bus because there's no one, no one, who can ask things with more sincere curiosity.

'You know Piglet from Winnie-the-Pooh? He wants to get a tattoo of a huge-ass Piglet with a cowboy hat like at an angle, you know, with six-shooters and a sheriff star on his chest.'

And here you started laughing like only you can in that out-of-control way, and you snorted and gasped and smacked your palm against the bus pole and grumpy umbrella men cleared their throats, irritated, and ladies pursed their lips and exchanged meaningful glances but you just ignored them and let your volcanic laughter blast holes in the bus ceiling, and I remember how on that rainy bus on that warm sunny sidewalk I already thought I loved you. That it was you and me for always. That's really the only thing I'd like to change.

Everything else was perfect.

How we met the second time on that blanket and just talked, talked, talked until our apple cores turned brown and the afternoon turned into dusk. How I came home at night and was so full of energy that I didn't fall asleep until it was time to wake up. How we met the third time at that bar and the fourth time at your place and how we never had time to say everything we wanted to say before it was time to say goodbye. How we kissed in the hall. How our lips were like the same kind. How our tongues. How our wrists. How our colours. How our awakened closeness made me want to cuddle with the whole world and how the tattooed guy at my work recoiled when I tried to hug him the next day. How everything in our conversations seemed to be connected. How all the movies we saw in the beginning just became meaningless titles and memories of close breathing and warm sweaty hands and tips of tongues wandering along rows of teeth. How so many of those films still feel like favourites anyway, even now, afterwards. How everything in



us was each other. How for the first time in my whole life I stopped looking for another. How I could wake up at night and lie there beside you in the dark and nose your collarbone and listen to your breathing and think that our sheets were us and every song was us and all the words were us and everything in the entire world was so much us that sometimes I panicked and wondered who was me.

What do you mean stop it? I mean every word. It was exactly like that. Like finding your mirror image for the first time, the one that perfectly matches everything that you.

What?

Well, because.

Things end.

Things change.

But I.

Don't regret anything.

At least not about the way I.

Some little things maybe.

For example, I would make sure not to accidentally call Sophie Calle Frida Kahlo that time when we were lying on the blanket and talking art. And I also regret mixing up *faire la cuisine* with *faire l'amour* when I was trying to tell your French relatives that you're so good at cooking. That was a little awkward.

About you?

No.

Absolutely not.

Maybe some little things.

Words you used and stuff.

Like that you always complained about how your cell bill was totally gastronomically huge, remember that?

Stuff like that bothered me after a while.

Nothing else.

And that you were a little too eager to be the centre of attention.

And that you were so morbidly curious about everything and everyone and just asked and asked even though it was stuff that had nothing to do with you.

And I'd probably also turn down the volume of your laugh because of course it was beautiful and volcanic, but sometimes it fucking went too far, I mean, people stopped on the street and pointed when we were in Greece, remember that?

But those are all just little things and they have nothing to do with the real reason that it didn't. I mean.

Of course it was both our faults.

Not just yours.

Even if.

Yeah.

Even if.

Sometimes I think.

No, let's not start over.

If I had to change something about the end?

Well.

There are probably some things I'd fiddle with.

I mean.

It can't have been fun for you to read those texts, which I understand could be.

Misinterpreted.

But all that was just a joke, you know.

We had like jargon that was a little.

If I got a text that said, 'My bed misses you' or 'Let's do stuff in the buff' it didn't necessarily mean that I was.

I mean.

Yeah, you know.

And you were a little paranoid too, you know.

Besides, you had no right to read my texts.

Well.

That was about it.

Then of course some things happened that were absolutely not my fault and of course that's hard for me to.

Change.

Afterwards.

But of course I wish you had never.

Attempted.

But of course we found you in time and all things considered.

It was.

Lucky.

Do you remember anything about that night?

It was the most beautiful summer night ever, with night-time couples walking hand in hand and I remember how I sat in the back of the ambulance and the sirens screamed and the neighbourhood was coloured blue and I held your spasming hand and thought that it was the wrong weather again because on a night like this it should storm and hail and not be sunset and smell like lilacs. And I also thought that the ambulance should have gone to the emergency room at Södersjukhuset instead of St Görän's because ...

What?

No!

Sit down!

Put down the candlestick!

Calm down.

I mean, not like that.

I just mean.

Then.

Our story would have ended so nicely because.

It would have been, you know, like a circle.

And.

Is that such a strange thing to say?

What do you mean by that?

That's not cold.

It's just that.

I don't know how to.

And it would have been so perfect if we'd met at Södersjukhuset in broiling sunshine and said goodbye to each other at Södersjukhuset in storming hail and of course there's a lot I regret; I regret and I want to change so much, more stuff than I can admit, and I just hope that you can forgive me some day because nothing, nothing, has been like us.

# Being Kept by a Jackdaw

by *Heathcote Williams*

At a country fair a couple called Dave and Di Nelstrop  
Came from Bow, in Devon, to sell tansy pancakes –  
They had skillets; a brazier; a mound of flour and eggs,  
And drew customers to their tent by the good smell.

Behind a striped awning stood a tall stack of wooden cages  
They'd brought with them. Each had an injured bird.  
One was a large crow, a raven, they referred to as Aubrey;  
His door was left open and he caught me in his glare.

Between bites washed down with a blue mug of sweet tea  
I began confessing to something I'd always yearned for.  
'Ever since childhood ...' They looked patiently quizzical,  
'I've wanted ...' I paused again, transfixed by the crow –

He hopped on black legs; scanning me with a needle eye,  
Black as those Victorian jet stones from Whitby;  
He'd expose a scarlet throat and then he'd caw in my face  
With a sound as old as Egypt that said, 'I know you.

'I've pecked your ancestors' bones and nibbled your DNA  
And I'll penetrate your soul with my carrion cries.'  
Aubrey's eerie presence triggered an old boyhood dream  
Of having a jackdaw on your shoulder, like a pirate.

Whispering secrets in your ear, this jackdaw would speak  
In a language that only you could understand.  
You and the jackdaw. You and this bird. A medieval bond  
Like young Arthur's falcon trained by Merlin.

Only a jackdaw would be much more worldly wise;  
Independent, and even faintly criminal.  
Lifting jewels from open windows if you were broke;  
Teaching you things no one else knew.

As I watched Aubrey retire to his cage, demanding food  
And a cloth draped on top so he could sleep,  
Dusk settled and Aubrey fell silent, then I blurted it out,  
'I've always wanted to look after a jackdaw.'

Dave Nelstrop said casually, 'Oh, we've got one.  
A fledgling. It was too poorly to bring.  
It's being fed by a dripper. With touches of brandy.  
It just fell out of its nest in a bell-tower.'

They promised to bring it when next they were passing.  
'Does it have a name?' I asked when they arrived.  
'Could call it Jack,' Dave suggested. 'Surname of Daw.'  
He grinned, 'Until something else better occurs.'

But 'Jack Daw' seemed workman-like and so it stuck.  
Then I stared, bewildered by this quaint creature:  
Once childishly romanticized it was radically different  
From the parrot on Long John Silver's tricorne hat.

At close quarters its feral behaviour was dominated  
By a consuming curiosity but who was it, exactly?  
This bird that had lived its life in a tower, then fallen,  
And whose cowl made it look like a hoodie monk.

It would wake at dawn then shadow me till dusk.  
We'd find mealworms then warm up some milk.  
The one fact it knew was that in order to survive  
It'd have to convert me into its servile minion.

So Jack behaved like some tyrannical movie star  
Demanding full attention day and night,  
With a vampire's knack of spotting the submissive  
Then getting them to run endless errands.

Almost immediately I became the bird's captive,  
Existing solely to attend to its needs,  
Wondering if I'd experience Stockholm syndrome,  
Which makes you fall in love with your captor.

But this bonsai pterodactyl was quite hard to love –  
A dive-bombing comet of energy and appetite.  
At daybreak its beak was pushed between my lips,  
Searching for a morsel from last night's meal.

A bony road-drill picking at your teeth was how Jack  
Alerted you to the unpalatable fact  
That instead of being an independent human being  
You were now mobile carrion ruled by a bird.

My body clock was retuned to keep jackdaw hours:  
To wake at dawn, then to feel tired at dusk.  
It was unsettling to fall asleep as soon as it got dark,  
Realizing electricity had made you a moth.

Yet there were long days of elation: digging up a patch  
With a jackdaw perched on your head;  
Keeping watch from its new tower and swooping down  
To display its skills as a metal detector.

Buried bottle tops would be brought to the surface,  
Along with fragments of bright silver foil  
Invoking the ghosts of picnics past, then sixpences  
Were teased out and offered as treasure trove.

'He's trading you level,' an old countryman said,  
Stopping by to watch such transactions.  
'You give him food and shelter. He gives you coin.  
What you'd call satisfaction all round.'

When the philosopher Thoreau was hoeing his garden  
A young sparrow alighted on his shoulder;  
Thoreau said he felt 'more distinguished by that event  
Than by an epaulet'. I knew what he meant.

Another visitor, Bernie Skuse, a poacher from Bristol,  
Said, 'Tell you what we used to do, boy.  
Sharpen the edge of a coin and set it under his tongue.  
Cuts through the tendon, then he'll talk.'

I thanked Bernie but said I wasn't sure that I wanted  
To torture Jack into speaking my language –  
Guessing he'd just tell me what I'd taught him to say  
And I imagined he had thoughts of his own.

Bird-like thoughts. From a miniature mind, aeons-old,  
That had evolved feathers and grown them from skin.  
Initially earthbound, it had had Icarus' dream of flying,  
Flinging itself higher and higher till it stayed aloft.

I'd now also dream nightly I had wings on my shoulders,  
Navigating with feathers sprouting from my heels.  
Then since I'd wake with feelings for this elf reinforced,  
I'd wonder if Jack was the projectionist of such flights.

Then gradually I suspected that he was preparing to go.  
Being mended, the fierce bond that he'd made  
First with the Nelstrops, his rescuers, later with myself,  
Was now weakening at the sight of other birds.

Each evening there were flocks of rooks and jackdaws  
Passing overhead on their way to the estuary.  
Jack looked up at them and gave a quietly uncertain cry  
Belonging neither to one world nor the other.

Each day was spent on my shoulder and each day  
He'd fly off, and would always come back –  
He flew in circles but they'd increase in diameter  
As the time came for him never to return.

I'd look up at the sky, scrutinize tree after tree  
And ask people if they'd seen a jackdaw.  
'Pinch something of yours? That's what they do.'  
And I would realize that in a way he had.

When seeing a clattering of jackdaws – the collective noun  
For these gregarious birds that pair-bond for life –  
I'd be more alerted by their gatherings than by anything else:  
The tribe of jackdaws' peripatetic parliaments.

Spread across fields, seething carpets of glistening flecks –  
I'd scrutinize each jackdaw in turn.  
Watch them scavenging a sheep's carcass on the hillside,  
Hoping to jog one avian memory.

A judgemental friend said, 'You shouldn't have tamed it.  
You've put its life in peril. I heard of someone  
Took a bird in, then when they released it, it was so tame,  
It landed on the barrel of a sportsman's gun.

'Got itself blown to bits, didn't it?' I became troubled.  
I hadn't tamed it but undeterred they completed  
Their unsolicited obituary with, 'Just a bird, wasn't it?'  
I then buried myself in folklore, it being less brutal.

To country science nothing's 'just a bird' but can foretell rain  
Or death, when jackdaws nest in a chimney.  
A jackdaw can signify a birth whenever seen on the rooftop;  
Each movement in nature is meant to be read.

'The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog'  
Contains all the letters of the alphabet,  
As does this, 'Jackdaws love my big sphinx of quartz',  
Yet no arrangement of the letters solves the riddle –

The riddle that I was left with, far harder to resolve  
Than the age-old riddle of the sphinx:  
'What goes on four legs in the morning, two at noon  
And on three legs at evening time?'

The answer being man himself, who crawls first on four,  
Then stands on two, then on three, counting his stick –  
But the impossible riddle the jackdaw had posed was why  
Man has determined to end his life with no legs at all.

Yet while civilization proves to be of questionable value  
In helping him to find his niche in the universe,  
A jackdaw can behave as if completely assured of its place  
And with a comic beauty that's close to perfection.

Someone told me that Hermann, Kafka's father, had a sign  
In front of the family's fancy goods shop in Prague.  
It was a painting of a jackdaw set above their trade name –  
For *kavka* meant 'jackdaw' in Czechoslovakian.

I discovered Kafka had always identified with his namesake:  
He described a jackdaw kept by the coal merchant  
Near Tein Cathedral as 'my relative', saying he sympathized  
With its longing 'to disappear between the stones'.

Kafka told the young poet Gustav Janouch, 'We find relations  
With animals easier than with men,'  
Adding that, 'animals are closer to us than human beings'.  
The coal merchant's jackdaw struck a chord.

Unsurprisingly, for birds are the uncredited inventors  
Of music, and all of them continue singing for joy.  
Cost-free, unlike man's derivative warblings for profit.  
'I hope you love birds too,' said Emily Dickinson,

It is economical. It saves going to heaven.' I do. It is. It does.  
I still see that questing figure and pick up on his cries.  
The *tchack tchack*, eight times. And the eyes, the pale blue iris  
And intense pupils that could study things miles away.

Jack Daw. A foot long. Black, shot with steel blue. Grey nape.  
Demonically sprightly. Bustling and strutting.  
Jerkily swaggering, then pausing to shuffle along the ground  
As he turns everything over, clods and stones –

Searching for something reflective to present with a flourish  
While ripping up rival possessions, like books, into shreds.  
'Anyone,' Kafka said, 'who keeps the ability to see beauty  
Never grows old.' A jackdaw's hop puts a skip in my step.

CODA

## Human Resources, Hollywood Style

by Raymond Chandler

I think my favourite Hollywood story is about the Warner brothers, Jack and Harry. The day after Hal Wallis (who had been head of production at the studio) ankle and left them flat, there was deep gloom and a horrid sense of catastrophe at the executive lunch table. All the boys huddle down at the bottom of the table to get far away from Jack Warner when he comes in. All but one, a pushing young producer named Jerry Wald (supposed by some to be the original of Sammy Glick in *What Makes Sammy Run*) who sits down near the head of the table. Jack and Harry Warner come in. Jack sits at the head of the table and Harry just around the corner. Jerry Wald is near and all the others as far away as possible. Jack looks at them with disgust and turns to Harry.

JACK: That sonofabitch Wallis.

HARRY: Yes, Jack.

JACK: A lousy fifty dollar a week publicity man. We build him up from nothing. We made him one of the biggest men in Hollywood. And what does he do to us? He picks up his hat and walks out and leaves us cold.

HARRY: Yes, Jack.

JACK: That's gratitude for you. And take that sonofabitch Zanuck. A lousy hundred a week writer and we took him in hand and built him up and made him one of the biggest men in Hollywood. And what did he do to us? Picked up his hat and walked out on us cold.

HARRY: Yes, Jack.

JACK: That's gratitude for you. Why we could take any sonofabitch we liked and build him up from nothing to be one of the biggest men in Hollywood.

HARRY: Yes, Jack.

JACK: Anybody at all. (He turns and

looks at Jerry Wald) What's your name?

WALD: (to Jack) Jerry Wald, Mr Warner.

JACK: (to Harry) Jerry Wald. Why, Harry, we could take this fellow here and build him up from nothing to be one of the biggest men in Hollywood, couldn't we Harry?

HARRY: Yes, Jack, we certainly could.

JACK: And what would it get us? We build him up to be a big man, give him power and reputation, make him one of the biggest names in Hollywood, and you know what would happen, Harry? The sonofabitch would walk out and leave us flat.

HARRY: Yes, Jack.

JACK: So why wait for that to happen, Harry? Let's fire the sonofabitch right now.

*From a letter to his publisher, Jamie (Hamish) Hamilton, 22 June 1949*





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