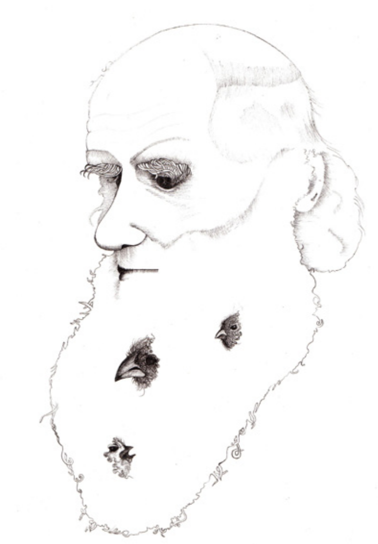
HAMISH HAMILTON PRESENTS

Five Dials



NUMBER 28

Heroes / Heroines / Other

Part 1

KATHERINE ANGEL *On Kate Bush*

GREG BAXTER *On Alban Berg*

PAUL EWEN *On Sonic Youth (Eating Their Breakfasts)*

MATTHEW DE ABAITUA *My Old (Will) Self*

BADAUDE *What If Didion Could Fly?*

TOM BASDEN *Fancy Some* Hot Moon*?*

. . . Plus: Peter Stamm, Sunita Soliar on rich of west London, William S. Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg getting down to it, new fiction from Lee Henderson and a poltergeist story by Matt Suddain. And the hidden, inner lives of some of the characters killed by Bruce Willis, Arnie and Harrison Ford. Plus more, including young jurors in love and AUSTRALIANS. Why? Because we're in AUSTRALIA.

CONTRIBUTORS

KATHERINE ANGEL is the author of *Unmastered: A Book on Desire, Most Difficult to Tell*. She holds a research fellowship at the Centre for the History of Emotions at Queen Mary, University of London, and is collaborating with experimental theatre group The Blackburn Company on a performance version of *Unmastered*.

BRONWEN ARMSTRONG lives and writes in North London.

TOM BASDEN has written episodes of the television programmes *Peep Show*, *Fresh Meat* and *Plebs*, which he co-created. He is also a member of sketch group Cowards. He has twice been nominated for a BAFTA, and has won a Fringe First and an Edinburgh Comedy Award. He hosts a literary cabaret night in London called 'The Special Relationship.'

GREG BAXTER is the author of *The Apartment*, a novel published by Penguin, and *A Preparation for Death*. He was born and raised in Texas, and he currently lives in Berlin.

WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS is the author of, among other novels, *Naked Lunch*.

LUKE DAVIES is the author of three novels, including the cult best-seller *Candy* (filmed, to Davies's screenplay, with Heath Ledger), and more recently *God of Speed*; *Magpie,* a children's book; and five volumes of poetry. In 2012 he won the Prime Minister's Literary Award for Poetry for his book *Interferon Psalms*.

MATTHEW DE ABAITUA's cult science fiction novel *The Red Men* will be republished by Gollancz in June. Shynola's short film *Dr Easy* is based on the first chapter of *The Red Men* and will be available to watch on Film4.com from late June.

PAUL EWEN is a New Zealander. His writing has appeared in the British Council's *New Writing* anthology, *Dazed & Confused*, *Tank* magazine, *Landfall* and in *The Times Higher Education Supplement*. He lives in London.

JAMIE FEWERY lives in London. His blog can be found at *bottledandshelved.wordpress.com*

MIA FUNK won a Prix de Peinture 2009 from the Salon d'Automne de Paris, a Thames & Hudson Pictureworks Prize 2010, was nominated for the *Guardian's* London Lives Competition 2010. She exhibits internationally and teaches art and creative writing at École de Dessin Technique et Artistique SORNAS in Paris.

ALLEN GINSBERG is the author of *Howl*.

ASHLEY HAY's latest novel, *The Railwayman's Wife*, was published in Australia in April 2013. It will be published in the UK in 2014.

LEE HENDERSON is the author of *The Man Game*, which won the 2009 Ethel Wilson Fiction Prize. His short-story collection *The Broken Record Technique*, won the 2003 Danuta Gleed Literary Award. He also curates the Attaché Gallery, a non-profit commercial art gallery found inside a black, hard-shell briefcase.

CALEB KLACES's first collection of poetry, *Bottled Air* is out now.

CETHAN LEAHY is a writer, film-maker, playwright and illustrator. *Animosity,* a play he co-wrote with Erin Hug, was staged in La Catheral Studios, Dublin, Ireland, in November 2012 and his novel *Moor* was shortlisted in the the *Guardian*/Hot Key Books Young Writer's Prize.

JOSEPHINE ROWE is a Melbourne-based writer of fiction, poetry and essays. She is the author of the short-story collections *How a Moth Becomes a Boat* and *Tarcutta Wake*.

NIKESH SHUKLA is the author of *Coconut Unlimited,* shortlisted for the Costa First Novel Prize; an ebook about the 2011 riots, 'Generation Vexed' (with Kieran Yates), and the Channel 4 Comedy Lab, Kabadasses. His stories have appeared on BBC Radio 4, the Book Slam anthology, The *Moth* magazine and The *Sunday Times*.

SUNITA SOLIAR lives in London. She is the short-story writer for quarterly newspaper *Fitzrovia News*, and her reviews have been featured in a variety of publications, including the *TLS*. She holds a Masters in English Literature from UCL and a Masters in Creative Writing from the University of East Anglia. She is currently working on a novel.

ADAM STERNBERGH is the Culture Editor of *The New York Times Magazine*. His first novel, *Shovel Ready*, will be published in January 2014.

MATT SUDDAIN is an author, journalist, playwright, satirist and minimalist composer. His first novel *Theatre of the Gods* will be published by Jonathan Cape in June 2013. He lives in London and his website is at *suddain.com*

CHERYL TAYLOR's work can be found at *cheryl-taylor.prosite.com*. She has been featured in the AOI's Best of British illustration annual *Images* on three occasions.

PAUL TUCKER is a writer and music journalist. He contributes regularly to *The Quietus* and has also written for *Clash*, *The Line of Best Fit* and the *NME*. In 2012 he co-edited *Peninsula*, a 3-AM Magazine of the Year nominee published by the University of Exeter.

JOANNA WALSH, aka Badaude, is a writer and illustrator. Her work has appeared in the *Guardian*, the *Times*, the *White Review*, and the *Idler*, amongst others. *London Walks!,* her book of visual essays about the city, was published by the Tate in 2011. This year her writing will be published by Granta and Union Books, with a short story collection from 3-AM Press.

Editor: CRAIG TAYLOR

Publisher: SIMON PROSSER

Assistant Editor: ANNA KELLY

Five Dials staffers: NOEL O'REGAN, MARISSA CHEN, SAM BUCHAN WATTS, JAMIE FEWERY, ELLIE SMITH, CAROLINE PRETTY, JAKOB VON BAEYER and EMMA EASY

Thanks to: JENNY FRY, MATT CLACHER, JEMMA BIRRELL and RENEE SENOGLES

Designed by: DEAN ALLEN

Unless otherwise noted, illustrations by: CHERYL TAYLOR

@fivedials

@hamishh1931

Subscribe: hamishhamilton.co.uk

A LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

On Heroes and Convicts

We're going to attempt this next bit by memory, so we probably won't get all the details right. Here's how it goes: the dazzling sun is shining on a crowded bazaar and eventually the crowd parts to reveal – what is he? – a master swordsman, flinging his swords about in an aggressive manner. He confronts the beleaguered American, who looks worried for a moment, and watches the demonstration, then shrugs and draws his gun, shoots the swordsman, and finally walks away as the melee erupts around him. We've seen this scene many times, not in dreams, but on various VHS cassettes back in the 80s and then eventually on one of those remastered DVDs, where a technician somewhere has made the blue sky above the bazaar even more dazzling and the audio of Denholm Elliott's cut-glass English accent even crisper. It was while watching this film on a DVD one evening not so long ago that someone else in the room said – just as Indiana Jones shot the master swordsman in a pat gesture that never fails to provoke a laugh – 'All those years of sword training. And for what? He didn't even get a fair fight.'

When we decided to put together this issue we asked some of our favorite young writers to explore the other side of scenes such as the one above. We know the heroes of these films, but what about the secondary characters? What about the henchman in *Die Hard* who displayed, at least once, a fondness for chocolate in between shootouts? What was he thinking? Or the young German soldier assigned to an unlucky convoy in another scene in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*? Or a cop just trying to do his job on the Mars of *Total Recall*? Or even a man in New York who took a left and ended in a lane Jason Bourne needed to use at high speed in a stolen NYPD car? We dedicated part of this issue to the untold narratives. You can find the resulting stories inside.

We've surrounded these voices with an array of characters who might also be considered heroic, depending on the criteria. Tom Basden, who is making his first contribution to the magazine, took time from writing for the television shows *Fresh Meat* and *Peep Show*, to finish a few chapters from what could be the greatest adventure ever written if he could only find a way to make said chapters join up into a cohesive whole. One of our best illustrators, Badaude, sent in a drawing of her favorite women in the literary firmament, but done up like superheroes, so that Lydia Davis and Joan Didion look ready to stop a bank robbery. Lee Henderson takes us to the arctic ice with his valiant climatologist; Matt Suddain's characters – let's face it – are anything but heroic when a poltergeist enters their well-tended lives. We also invited a trio of talented writers – Greg Baxter, Katherine Angel and Paul Ewen – to write about individuals who make them shudder with delight or question their definition of heroism or become respectfully quiet: in turn, Alban Berg, Kate Bush and the members of Sonic Youth, who we're sure still remember their encounter with Ewen in a restaurant in New Zealand. And then there's Matthew de Abaitua, author of the excellent *The Art of Camping*, who recalls a different sort of challenge when, years ago, he acted as an amanuensis for the writer Will Self. Yes there are drugs, or at least poppies involved in this story. Try as we might we can't force everything in the issue to adhere to our theme. It's probably better that way. As always, there's some fine writing on our hometown, London, and some poetry. Does Caleb Klaces poem 'Funeral' have anything to do with our theme of 'Heroes'? Probably not but it's a gorgeous piece of work. That's reason enough.

As for the issue itself and the pressing of the button that will deliver it to you, the subscriber, we're here in Sydney for the launch, and like many who visit this city we're engaging in clichéd behavior, which in our case has meant buying a copy of Robert Hughes's *The Fatal Shore* and reading it in different spots around town, warmed by the winter sun, during a series of aimless walks. (Winter sun that outdoes London's summer version, by the way, and makes us wonder what sort of sweat-soaked Armageddon occurs here in summer?) Years ago Hughes wrote one of the great primers on modern art, *The Shock of the New*, and presented the accompanying documentary series, and we've been told that if you watch the series before embarking on *The Fatal Shore*, you will hear, in your head, the narration of Australia's brutal beginnings in Hughes's inimitable voice. We're coming to it afresh, so instead of his cadence, we've been hearing the voices of his source material, in particular the primary sources he consults, including the few remaining letters from the convicts. Like those forgotten on the fringes of blockbuster films, these letters offer a swiveled viewpoint and hint at the millions of small tragedies that unfolded below deck as the grand narrative sailed forward.

It's difficult to imagine anyone fearing life in this lovely city with its monorail and glittering harbour and nearly maniacal levels of friendliness, amidst all these healthy, broad-shouldered Australians, all of whom seem to be walking towards or away from a yoga class. Walking around with Hughes's book feels like an initiation to a secret society. It does what good books do and reopens the casing of the world. What is sunbaked expensive property now was blood-soaked dirt and rock then. As for the letters, we were most moved on page 130 by one written in April 1831 by a convict from Wiltshire, Peter Withers, who was anchored at Spithead on the ship *Proteus*. He writes to his wife, Mary Ann, and the results hint at his own struggle to survive, to stay afloat, and, most importantly to him, stay faithful. Withers writes:

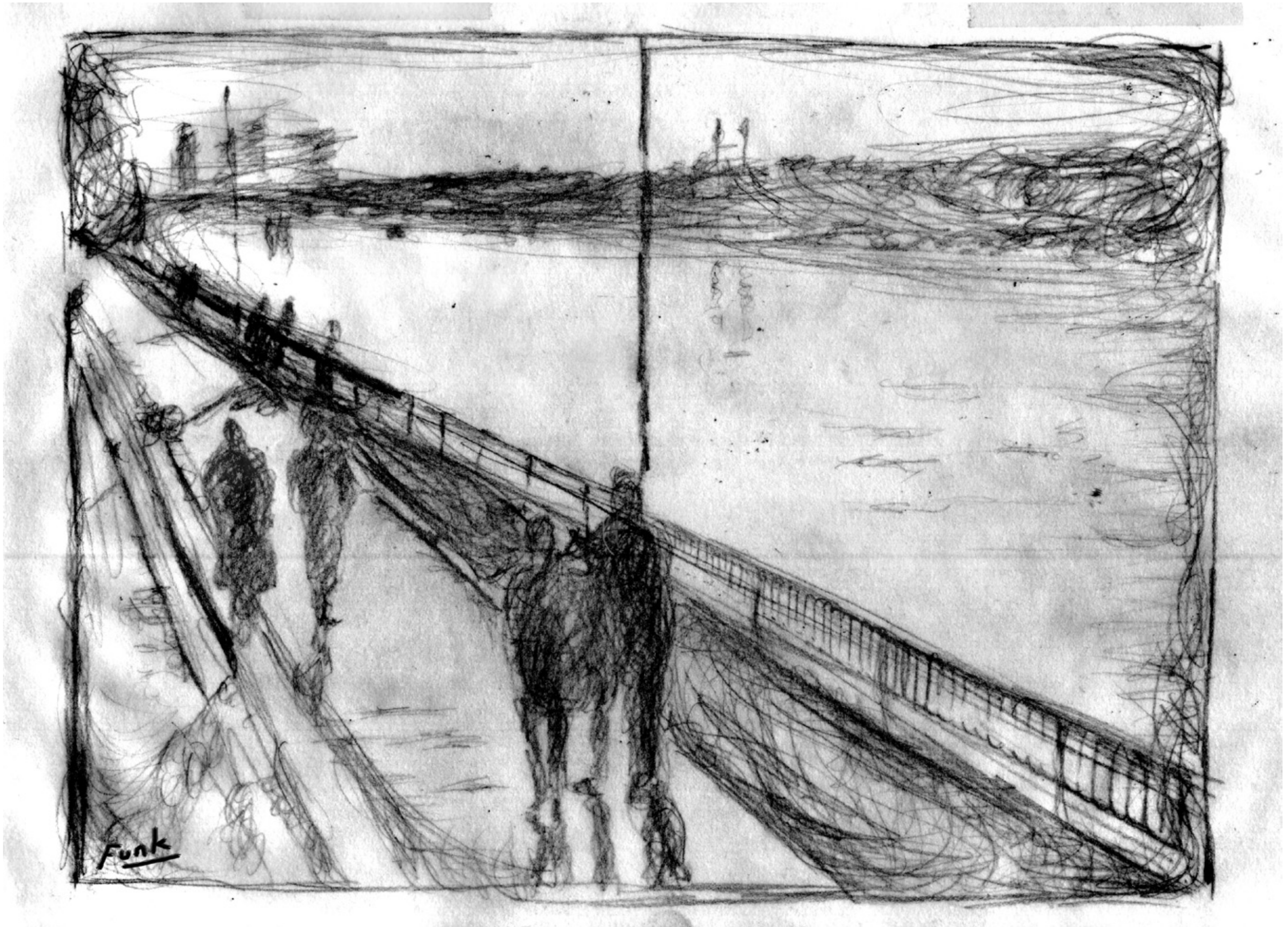
> it is about 4 months sail to that country But we shall stop at several cuntreys before we gets there for fresh water I expects you will eare from me in the course of 9 months…you may depend upon My keeping Myselfe from all other Woman for i shall Never Let No other run into my mind for tis onely you My Dear that can Ease me of my Desire. It is not Laving Auld england that grives me it laving my dear and loving Wife and Children, May God be Mersyful to me.

Hughes doesn't provide an outcome in his six-hundred page book. Voices like that of Withers flit in and out. Like most of these untold narratives, his strand isn't so easily tied. Enjoy the issue.

—CRAIG TAYLOR

Our Town

'I like the spirit of this great London which I feel around me. Who but a coward would pass his whole life in hamlets; and for ever abandon his faculties to the eating rust of obscurity?'
— Charlotte Brontë, *Villette*



Place: Embankment
Date: May 1, 2013
Time: 2:40pm

This issue's itinerary:
Connaught Square; an Egyptian tomb; bodyguards.;
my mother's Bentley; the Backstreet Boys;
fraud and petty robbery; Lordship Lane

Sunita Soliar on an international friendship

When I was fourteen a new girl joined my school from a country that none of us had heard of, and the news soon spread that her grandfather ruled over a former Soviet Republic. She was shy, plump and a little clumsy; I was a loner with my head buried in a copy of *Jane Eyre*. We had the same form tutor and soon became friends. I called her Aika.

When Aika first came to London she lived in a rented house in Chester Square, Belgravia, then her parents moved her to Hampstead, where she lived with two bodyguards, a driver and an ancient lady who unconvincingly wore the title of nanny. Later Aika's newborn brother would join them. I was struck by how utterly different this house was from my home. I grew up in a Georgian town house, just off Connaught Square, in central London. White and tall, it nestled up against the other houses on the terrace. Like all Georgian houses, it was designed for living: on the first floor, we had two bright reception rooms that we used as a music room and a drawing room; the kitchen adjoined the study, so that I could do my homework and chat to my mother while she cooked – or at least this was the peaceful life I wanted to believe we had. Across the city, Aika's house loomed up behind heavy gates, which opened towards it, as though magnetized by the structure. The house had a sweeping entrance like a hotel: a marble hallway, a central staircase, each room decorated in a blur of cream and gold. The air was still and unruffled, and engulfing shadows flickered across the walls of the indoor swimming pool. It gave me an eerie feeling, like being inside an Egyptian tomb.

Aika often complained that the house was in the middle of nowhere, that it took an hour to get to school, and there was nothing fun to do in Hampstead. Yet she possessed a strange power within its walls. She was boss of the adults who took care of her, and I marvelled at her life: she ate when she wanted to, commanded the bodyguards to take her out when she felt like it. In some ways this seemed like a paradise to me: I hated parental authority because my stepfather terrorized my household with violent rages, and I longed for escape. But I soon realized that Aika was entrapped too, and in many ways, this formed the basis of our bond.

The bodyguards went everywhere with her. One was thin and tall, the other stocky, and they would smoke, leaning against a black people carrier, and wait outside our school for the end of the day. At 4.15 p.m. they would spring towards the school doors, suspicious and hungry as a couple of wolves, as though they expected one of the other students to pull a gun on Aika. From everything she told me, it seemed like she was under constant threat in her country: I had heard that her family's regime was heavily criticized by Amnesty International for human rights violations, such as the torture of dissidents, and had also been accused of serious corruption and vote rigging. Here in W1, the bodyguards would clutch their charge and bundle her into the vehicle. I was fascinated by the spectacle: I don't think even Princes William and Harry had such an all-enveloping security detail, and these bodyguards added a strange blend of comedy and threat to the otherwise sedate street.

As we snaked down the road in twos, passers-by would note the two foreign men who walked behind us, glancing from them to our teachers. As we turned a corner the bodyguards would frown, perhaps assessing whether this were the designated route, getting their bearings.

The bodyguards also controlled who Aika could go out with, and the only reason that I can think of for them sanctioning our friendship was the way their eyes widened when they saw my mother's Bentley. At the time I didn't register what this meant, that the car's stodginess ticked the right box. All I knew was that we both felt alienated from our peers; we were two forlorn little girls, and what we had in common was our double lives – most people easily accepted the sunny exterior I projected of the privileged, clever girl, and it was one of the unsaid rules of my house that I was obliged to play this part in a charade of happy families. In many ways this was easier than admitting the truth of my stepfather's abuse of my mother. Similarly, only I got to know what a lonely, circumscribed existence Aika faced, and when we went out together it was a holiday from our lives; the world outside was not reality but a fantasy landscape.

We always went in her car, which was fitted with T.V. screens and headphones. We never walked or took public transport so that places seemed unconnected. We were alongside the Serpentine, then suddenly at Leicester Square, then Knightsbridge, and it was almost as if these places appeared for us, summoned by the faintest of whims.

We used to go to a Michelin-starred Chinese restaurant in Mayfair called Kai, where most of the diners were foreign businessmen, and where it was so quiet that laughter seemed inappropriate. We must have looked a strange pair, two little girls out for dinner alone at a chic restaurant, playing at being adults, when really the truth was that neither of us knew where young people were meant to go. The bodyguards would sit at a neighbouring table, within earshot, barely speaking, and without menus. I asked Aika if they were going to eat. 'Oh,' she said. 'I will order for them.' At the end they produced the cash for the bill, as though pulling it from a top hat.

We would also go to the Tate Modern because Aika was doing Art GCSE, or to the Trocadero, where we went on the Pepsi Max ride, the highest indoor, vertical drop. The bodyguards looked up at the ride then frowned at each other before reluctantly strapping themselves into their seats. When we got off, Aika said, 'Again!' and their faces withered, but I have a photograph of Aika, me and the bodyguards, mouths wide open as we grip the bars, all of us smiling.

Sometimes Aika would become quiet on the homeward journey, staring out of the window, her hand pressed glumly against her chin. She was in such a mood as we drove down Sloane

Street one day, and suddenly she jounced in her seat, and called 'Stop!' She spoke in Russian to her bodyguards and they pulled over outside Knightsbridge tube station. She leapt out of the car before anyone had time to follow her, and the next moment she was picking out yellow flowers from a stall. They were tulips, I think. She got back in, flushed and beaming, and I asked whom they were for. 'For me,' she said, her voice like embers. 'I like flowers.' At this point she was beginning to go dreamy-eyed over boys (and boys were obviously forbidden), and I felt how much she wanted a romance, or if not that, at least the romance of receiving flowers. My uncle had recently visited me and brought me some purple ones for my room; I forgot to tend them and the water went scummy and black in the vase. As we drove back, I thought I should have bought Aika's tulips for her.

Over time the bodyguards became friendly to me, and when we were out the shorter one would carry my bag. But every now and again as we walked through Piccadilly Circus to Haagen Daaz for dessert or through the children's department in Harrods, there would be a clatter, or Aika would be jostled, and they would pounce on her, eyes darting for the threat. I saw the quick, metallic flex of their biceps, and got the sense that they could kill or inflict great harm with even the smallest of movements. They would check that Aika wasn't hurt, and as I caught up with them they would look at me with a dim recollection of my presence. I studied them with new fear, wondering if they were armed with knives or even guns. Slowly, they would retreat from her, and I would be allowed back into the circle. Suddenly I felt completely unsafe.

They nearly lost Aika when we went to a Backstreet Boys concert for her birthday. The tickets were my gift to her, and I think she must have bought the extra ones for the bodyguards. I don't think they minded going as much as they might: they had some affection for her, but that was always a distant second to their fear for her safety. I suppose they weren't prepared for crowds of unruly, screaming teenagers waving pink batons at Earl's Court: in her home country, cordons and armed guards kept back crowds on ceremonial occasions. Aika once told me about a public concert in honour of her grandfather where everyone was screaming, but she was kept behind the stage with her family. 'It's very boring to watch from there – you can't see anything,' she said. After the concert the lights came up and we found our way back to the driver, and he phoned the guards, who had forgotten their mobiles in the car. We circled the streets and Aika rolled her eyes; the driver, who was English, was swearing under his breath, and I was nervous, somehow expecting that we would get into trouble when they reappeared. Eventually we found them at the entrance. They had a short exchange with Aika in Russian then got in, suppressing scowls. Of course there was no telling off, and my anxiety gave way to the humour of the situation. But it was a kind of comedy that was always on the edge: their blunder put them in a black mood, and at the time I didn't think of the real terror they would face if they lost her.

As we got older, the bodyguards relaxed their control of Aika: they allowed her to walk from the school door to the car by herself. 'I don't know what they do all day,' she said. 'Just smoke. If I were them I would have learnt English.' Perhaps this frustration reflected her own predicament: she loved painting and hoped to go to art school, but her mother started to visit and made her bunk for facials and manicures. One day, I met her mother. I had been expecting a Jackie O type, all knee-length suits and 1950s glamour. She was folding some clothes in Aika's room, her hair piled high on her head like a bird's nest, and she was wearing Aika's combat trousers and one of her tops. I felt relieved that my own mother did not dress like that, even at home. I suppose Aika's mother enjoyed the freedom of not being photographed, as she often was in her own country, where she was idolized as a fashion icon. As Aika watched her mother folding clothes, she looked sadly at her and later she showed me a photograph of herself where she was round as a hamster. 'I was so fat,' she said. 'My mum says I have to be careful what I eat.' Aika's appearance was certainly a talking point. One day after the holidays she caused sniggering at school: who gets fake boobs at 15, the other girls wanted to know. I tried to tell myself that it wasn't true, that she'd changed her way of dressing and that was why her chest appeared more prominent. I felt hurt that my friend was being ridiculed so unjustly, wanting to believe that she wouldn't do that sort of thing.

As I settled down to revising for my GCSE exams, Aika began to skip school. She started wearing make-up, and experimented with clothes, but she never got it right and you could hear the others giggling, asking what on earth she was wearing around her waist, calling her a fashion victim. I was in Harvey Nichols with my mother one day looking at hair accessories, when I saw Aika gazing at us from the other side of the display. I knew that she had always adored the image of my mother – she had once said, 'your mum is so pretty and perfect. You are so lucky.' I liked this idea too much to tell her the whole truth about my life, besides, I didn't dare. We had hardly talked recently and as we stood over the hair accessories, I didn't know where to begin. Her nanny was with her, smiling but unable to speak any English. Aika and I looked at each other, and as she fiddled with a clip, she said, 'I saw a nice belt for you the other day.'

I changed schools at the end of my GCSEs, and after university I heard that Aika went to a business school in Regents Park, known for its Ferraris and Berkin bags. Since then other friends have filled me in: Aika married rich, had children. I recently

heard an anecdote about how a famous hairdresser visited her apartment in Knightsbridge and she tried to tip him with a fifty-pound note. I have also read that she has near monopoly control of key industries in her country. A friend once told me, 'The Russians hate her because people from her country who live in Russia are the rich ones, but even outside of Russia everyone laughs at your friend.' I have seen her in photographs with what I take to be a vacant, tranquilized expression. I would much rather see her as a girl who has been displaced by wealth, a girl who occupies an uncertain position – the first generation of children of oligarchs – and a girl who is still trapped in a double life because I want to think that she is still like me. I suspect that this is wilfully naïve.

And when I seek *our* London, I find that Park Lane is slicker than before, with car showrooms sealed off from the public, accessible only by the residents of expensive apartments. The glossy surfaces of shopping palaces – Harrods, Harvey Nichols, Selfridges – bounce their light back and forth so you don't ever have to see what you really are. It is for those who, as Edith Wharton might say, exhibit a 'reverent faith in the reality of the sham' they have created, for those who desperately want to be consumed. Perhaps this is why I cannot find the world that Aika and I shared: that London no longer exists for me; it is a phantom, unreal city. ◊

N22

Jamie Fewery on the juries of Wood Green

Set back from the road and fronted by a set of never-used gardens and well-trimmed hedges is Wood Green Crown Court. Robed lawyers smoke outside, their wigs resting on the knee-high wall that separates the court entrance from the grass. Alongside the wigs sit their folders and loose piles of paper – documents that could easily be swept away on a strong wind, suggesting that the cases they relate to aren't very important. Fraud and petty robbery, rather than anything grisly and truly newsworthy.

Before getting inside we must first pass through a metal detection barrier. Leaving coats and phones in the boxes provided, jurors, lawyers, family, friends and witnesses filter through. Most set off the alarm and have to lift their jumpers to prove a belt buckle was the cause. Entry to the court is egalitarian. Whether you are there trying to prove guilt, or to discover if your son or daughter perpetrated a crime, the same door awaits. But when everyone else turns right, jurors turn left, where a list of the day's cases is pinned to the white brick wall of the waiting room, next to a collection of art from a local primary school.

The room is not dissimilar to an airport departure lounge. Banks of green-cushioned and metal-framed chairs are placed in horizontal lines and against every wall, interrupted occasionally by small tables piled with out-of-date magazines.

The chairs are important, finding a good one vital. If not called for a trial, this is where we will spend much of our time. The most sought-after spots are those near a plug and not beneath an air-conditioning vent.

Our chairs are connected to one another, so if the person at the end moves with enough force, everyone moves with them. The chairs are comfortable for roughly half an hour, after which time we find ourselves shifting around every few minutes, trying to get into a position that will sustain us until something happens to break up the day, like assignation to a trial or the order to go home early.

The waiting room is tolerable. There is Wi-Fi and a canteen. A book, a magazine and a computer provides enough entertainment to survive a six-hour shift.

We, however, are waiting for our trial to finish.

A jury is said to be a cross section of society. Twelve are picked because between us we will have enough common sense, experience and knowledge to reach a decision that represents justice. Our jury, then, should be a cross section of London, or at least the part from which we have been summoned.

We are eight males and four females. Five of us are young, two old (though over-seventies can't serve), the rest middle-aged. One of us is black, one Asian, one Mediterranean. Everyone else is white. There are no regional British accents, no one with a disability, no one with a speech impediment. One of us is bald, one overweight, one heavily tattooed.

Before entering court we are left in the deliberation room, a private space away from the busy waiting room. It's quarantine for jurors. No one speaks. We have one thing in common and it is the only thing we are not allowed to talk about. The subject seems to have sucked all the life from the room. We know what happened, or at least a couple of versions of it. And we are all leaning towards a verdict, promising to remain open to new evidence until the last. Nevertheless, we remain silent.

Bored of waiting, a young Asian girl pulls out of her bag a Doris Lessing novel. She is the first to break rank. But following her, three others do the same, revealing an Edward St Aubyn, an iPad and a copy of *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Is this a cross section?

The judge enters. After he has given us a twenty-minute summary of the trial, reminded us of our role as jurors and told us that he will not consider a majority verdict, we are told by him we may talk. It's only then that the twelve of us hear what each other's voices sound like. Then we return to the deliberation room and wait for the voice that will start the discussion.

It comes from the man who wants to be foreman. He revels in the power, the ability to rein in a discussion that is getting out of control, to make sure that everyone has had their turn. He is

the tattooed guy. On his knuckles the motto of Chelsea Football Club, written above a pair of birds.

'Why me?' he says, tacitly asking for compliments on his tone, force, enunciation, whatever.

After his acceptance of the role the deliberations start. Some of us reveal where we live, if we are familiar with where the incident was said to have taken place. A girl points at the Google Map, given by the clerk of the court.

'I live there,' she says.

The discussion doesn't last long. The evidence given by the prosecution is so overwhelmingly accurate and corroborated by each witness that soon we're done.

'Shall we have a show of hands then?' the foreman asks. Everyone nods.

'Guilty?'

'Not guilty?'

When we leave we are friends. Laughing and joking with one another, asking about jobs, plans for the rest of the day, the evening. The bald man offers a lift home at the end of the day to anyone heading towards Muswell Hill. We have a shared experience now. Two hours ago we were twelve individuals, stuck in a room because we had to be. Now that we have all revealed a little of ourselves there is a new-found camaraderie.

The Jury Officer lets us back into the waiting room, to the smell of the limp broccoli and starchy sausage rolls of the canteen. We take seats next to one another, instead of trying to find ones where there will be no one either side of us.

Two jurors break away from the group and walk to the back of the room, where the communal books and board games are kept. They pick up a game, take a table in the canteen and unpack the box. They had been looking at one another throughout the deliberations. And after half an hour, when the rest of us have exhausted all we have to talk about, the two of them are still talking and playing.

'Four all,' he says. 'All to play for.'

'Right.' She resets her board in readiness for the next round.

She looks up at him, wondering if he is thinking that this might become one of those stories. *We met on jury service*.

'Is your person wearing a hat?' she asks.

'No,' he says. 'Does yours have a beard?'

'No.'

'Does yours have a beard?'

He smiles. 'Yes.'

'Ha!' she yelps, eliminating the clean-shaven members of the board.

'Is your person a man?'

'No.' He flips down two-thirds of his board.

'Is your person ginger?' she asks.

He smiles. 'Yes.'

She flips down everyone, bar one man, who remains like a single tomb in an empty graveyard.

'Is your person Roy?'

He nods. She clenches her fist.

'Five–four,' he says. 'To you.'

Before they begin their next round, the Jury Officer picks up the pointless microphone she uses to address the room.

'Hello. Yes,' she says. 'Yes, if I could just have your attention, please.'

Everyone stops whatever they are doing. Some place their open books on their thigh and turn to face her.

'I've just been informed that we have no more trials today. You're all free to go and be back here by ten tomorrow morning.'

The assembled jurors begin talking, mostly about how nice it is to be able to go home at half past three. No one mentions they'll have to return to pass judgment on another trial tomorrow.

Like a schoolteacher fighting to be heard over the general hum of an excited classroom, the Officer raises her voice.

'If you could all leave your lunch cards in the office, please!'

She places her microphone down and wanders back to the office, while we collect together our bags, coats and scarves.

At the table the Guess Who? players tidy the game away like kids taught to at the end of play. The rest of the jury is watching them. They are laughing at one another and, as they stand up, there is an awkward moment when he tries to let her leave the table first.

The two of them collect their bags and walk together out of the waiting room, down the corridor lined by primary-school art and back through the metal detector, which goes off again, but no one cares because they are leaving.

Outside it is snowing. They stop for a moment to look up and remark on the weather. She puts up the hood on her blue duffel coat and he moves the wrap of his scarf up to cover his chin. They start off again, past the wall where the lawyers smoke, through the gardens and bare hedges, on to Lordship Lane.

Both of them are getting the Tube from Wood Green, so they turn right out of the court complex. Their conversation continues as they walk past the leisure centre across the road and the blind-drawn houses with gardens used as skips, past the newsagent that still sells the *Evening Standard* for 50p and the cinema/Nandos complex.

Before they climb the few steps to the station, they stop and exchange numbers. She is going north and he south. They hug, and separate. ◊

POEM

Funeral

by Caleb Klaces

At the latest version of my funeral,

a queue of mourners curled

around the block and then again around itself.

Polite conversation amounted

to a picturesque ruin

that friends, relatives and others no one recognized

were tourists in, unsure how to appear

solemn not solicitous

as they pressed their hot hands

to the cold arms and cheeks

of those encircled or encircling,

a tidal hierarchy – they had all been

where the others had been; would all be

where the others were currently –

which turned wheels

which turned wheels and

the bodies that later thanked their occupants

with sex, anger and the dyed black distance

collapsed into the single clean

conscience of two

emptied into one another

and the other, bigger, shapelier emptiness

that surrounded them:

vortices expiring in Jupiter's eye.

A SERIAL

Four Extracts from My Novel

By Tom Basden

I've been writing my novel, which is called Hot Moon *at the moment, for about five years. On and off, obviously. Sometimes I go weeks without doing any of it because of holidays or getting caught up in the Jubilee celebrations or not being able to open an old document after upgrading to a new version of Microsoft Office. Other times I can literally write as fast as I can think and I'll do about twenty-four chapters over a weekend. I might change the title once I figure out if it's relevant or not. At the moment it isn't really, although there is a chapter where Owen, the main character, describes the sun as a 'hot moon' for no real reason, which I gather from that programme with Brian Cox (the one from D:Ream, not the one from the Bourne films) is a bit of a fudge.*

Also, I'm not writing it in order, which in retrospect maybe I should have done, but – and this isn't really an excuse – I've only recently managed to get a whiteboard. Ideally, the book would be a page-turner. The chapters are mostly pretty exciting and almost all of it is climaxes. Owen, the main character as I say, is a kind of superhuman everyman figure who takes it all in his stride, apart from the chapter where he gets very badly burned by acid and then fire. There are also some love stories, twists, celebrities, fights and metaphors in it throughout.

Any publishers who are interested in it should contact me on tombasden@hotmail.com. Any who aren't interested in it could also contact me, just so that I know not to bother with you in my mailouts.

Chapter 441
In which Owen and Rose get it on.

(I wrote this one very early on, even though it's probably near the end of the book. It's quite sexy, although I decided against putting in any descriptions of the actual ins and outs of it because I think it's a bit unnecessary, and ultimately boring after the first few thrusts. My initial go at this chapter went into much more detail about the actual business-end and used a lot of words like 'again' and 'etc.', which I gather is frowned upon among better writers. The following chapter is set in a budget hotel chain that I've invented in case of legal action, called 'Premiere Inn'.)

Owen's fingers buckled on the big buttons of his cardigan. Arg! he let out.

'Chill out, honey,' Rose calmed. She stroked his quivering fingers. 'Don't get jittery now.'

'I hate these bloody buttons!' Owen exclaimed. He grabbed a grapefruit knife from the compartment for knives in the drawer by the sink and carved the cardigan up. Rose watched in awe as Owen worked. Three minutes later he was free of his woolly prison.

'Wow,' Rose said.

'Where were we?' Owen asked suddenly suavely.

Rose slid open his belt, yanked down his trouser legs and started licking his thighs. Owen helped himself to the remaining pistachio nuts in the ashtray-cum-nut bowl. Rose was now visibly grinding.

'Take my hat off!' she urged. Owen obligingly knocked it off her head like a coconut off a shy.

'Don't get cute now,' Rose whispered, as her golden hair unravelled and rippled like a curtain, becoming a lighter hue against the black gown she had worn to the funeral.

She was now inside his shirt.

I shouldn't be doing this, Owen thought. What would Palmer say? He looked over at Palmer's urn. And I'm getting married to Miss Reed in two hours. What am I doing? His body jolted as she impaled herself onto him. Oh sod it, Owen thought.

Chapter 407
In which Palmer's been shot.

(This chapter is sort of the sister/companion piece to the previous one where Palmer is in an urn, because in this one he's been shot and he'll soon be dead. I've not yet written the funeral. This chapter's good and, if you read it carefully, satirical. It's also prophetic in a way, but that's mainly because it's set in the 1990s. I'm not a political writer particularly, because by the time you've had something published, the politics you're talking about ends up being out of date. I had to scrap several chapters about Blunkett, for example. However, cleverer readers will notice that I manage to discuss some topical stuff in among the action. This chapter also references Gravedenko, who's the main villain of the piece and Russian and would ideally be played by Terence Stamp in the film version of the book, depending on Terence's health /availability as and when the film gets made. It takes place in the cellar of a farm in somewhere like Hungaria or Cairo.)

The bullet wound in Palmer's stomach was spreading, if that's what happens, as Rose reached into her bag of medical implements: scalpel, stethoscope, splints, etc. She took out some large tweezers.

Palmer yelled with pain. Owen shushed him very forcefully, spraying them all with spittle.

'Gravedenko and his goons are upstairs, Palmer, for God's sake be quiet,' he commanded.

'I don't think I can, O,' Palmer said breathily, 'I'm in incredible amounts of pain.'

'It'll be from the bullet,' Owen said.

'No, I know that,' Palmer said as well, afterwards.

Rose plunged the massive tweezers into the hole in Palmer's stomach approximately the same size as a pocket on a child's snooker table and fished around for the bullet.

'Crickey, that's deep,' she informed them/remarked.

Owen had a brainwave. 'Could we use magnets?' he asked.

'No,' Rose said.

'OK, forget it then,' he said.

'We don't even have any magnets.'

'I said forget it!' Owen was tetchy now, because he hadn't slept for twelve days.

'I'm going to make an incision into his abdominal,' Rose told them, 'and then lift up the liver and intestines with this wire apparatus and scoop the bullet out with this doctor's spoon.'

'I didn't know doctors use spoons,' Owen said, intrigued, tilting his head in the way that people do when they're

intrigued.

'Yes. They do,' Rose said (echoing what my friend Ed Fallow, who's training to be a surgeon at St George's, told me sometime happens, so you see this part of the book is very much based on medical fact). 'They are allowed to use medical spoons.'

'Did you enjoy medical school, Rose?' Owen probed.

'I loved it, thanks,' Rose answered. 'We got really pissed and worked fucking hard and had a great time, even if we subsequently became jaded about the efficiency of the NHS.'

'I hear that,' Owen said. 'Every medical authority I know says it's a nightmare these days.'

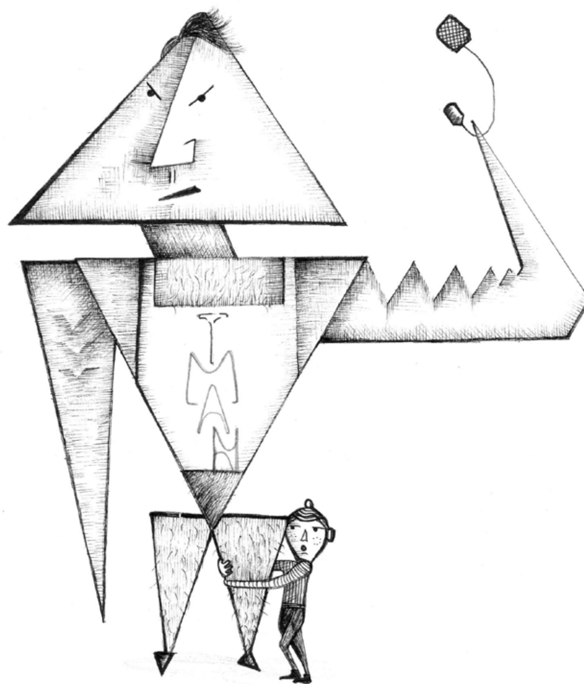
'But then privatizing it would be a catastrophe,' Rose went on, 'and we can't allow people to go without health care as they do in many other parts of the world. No, on balance, it's a good thing.'

'Yup. Agreed,' Owen said. 'Let's hope any future governments after this one headed up by Tony Blair don't go messing around with it and slashing budgets.'

'Exactly!' Rose said.

Palmer was losing consciousness now.

'I'm still in great deals of pain!' he shouted over. But Owen hushed him again, spitting on him a bit again, because footsteps were approaching. Russian ones.



Chapter 220

In which Gravedenko's goons set upon Owen as he's having a bite to eat.

(This is the only chapter of the novel that has actually already been published. Essentially, this is because I used to have a job through my mum's friend Angela Boson doing restaurant reviews for the Les Routiers Magazine in 2009. I took the opportunity to combine some of my novel with a review I had to do for a place in Kennington. This chapter is the result, and I think it's largely successful, though it didn't go down too well with the sub-editors and then, when they read it, the actual editors, and now my mum and Angela don't speak any more. In my defence, the main reason I did it was because whenever I met a publisher outside their offices or houses they'd tell me to get some of the book published because that would help them and other publishers take it more seriously. This struck me as, and still strikes me as, bananas and ironic, given that the publishers are the people who are meant to publish it anyway, and once it's been published I won't need them any more. It's like being told you can't get a job in the army until you've gone out and done a few skirmishes on your own, which I know from my friend Neil's experience in Iraq is very much frowned upon and illegal. Anyway, as a first ditch attempt to get something in print, I decided to turn one of my reviews (my last, as it turned out) into part of the narrative in way that I thought and still think is quite skilful.)

Owen looked around the restaurant, worried that Gravedenko might burst in any moment. He was hungry after getting into a fracas with and killing that nasty Doberman dog and the four Russian guys.

It was an Italian restaurant, La Cucina on Kennington Road. He ordered a small glass of Nero d'Avola red wine, a penne puttanesca, and a Caprese salad on the side, dabbing the dog bite on his head with a napkin from the napkin dispenser on his table. He liked it when you could take as many napkins as you wanted, so was already inclined to approve of this place. It's just one of the many welcome touches that tell you that La Cucina doesn't take itself too seriously.

Suddenly the door opened and Gravedenko's main henchman, Solomon, burst in to the cosy, well-laid-out trattoria and calmly made his way inside, sitting down opposite Owen. They stared at each other silently for a few moments, in a way that's very tense if it's in a film and less effective when written down.

'We have you surrounded, Mr De Silva,' he said coolly. 'I suggest you give us the map right now.'

Owen said nothing. His wine was delivered and he took a slurp. It was a nice full-bodied wine, with hints of fruit, especially grape. But at £5.20 for a small glass it was a bit pricey. Owen looked up at Solomon and sneered.

'I don't have the map. It's in a Big Yellow Storage place. So swivel.' (Despite saying 'swivel', Owen didn't give him the finger because, owing to their locally renowned children's menu, a lot of the clientele of La Cucina are families, so it didn't feel appropriate.) Owen took another swig of his blood-red wine.

Solomon hissed like an airbed being deflated, but not for as long, and suddenly yanked out his bloody gun. Because of his training, Owen was ideal in these situations and jumped up wrestled him to the floor. The gun went off and killed a waiter. Bullets from more of Gravedenko's goons outside then sprayed into the restaurant from all angles, killing three-fifths of a family (not the mum and middle son). Owen hid behind his flipped-over table, using the menu as a shield because it was so thick. In fact, La Cucina has so much on the menu that's it's a bit disorientating and very difficult to know what to order. I'd recommend asking what's on special. Owen grabbed a fork and threw it like how you'd throw

a knife at Solomon. It lodged in his neck and clearly hurt like hell because he flailed around like a fish does when it's drowning in, ironically, air.

In the middle of this the food arrived. The penne was 'al dente' – as it should be – and the sauce was a little overpowering and clearly contained canned olives, which was a disappointment. The Caprese salad was made with buffalo mozzarella, which was a plus, even if the tomatoes weren't as flavoursome as they should have been and, if I'm quibbling, rather too thickly sliced.

Once he'd hastily eaten he returned to the matter in hand, keeping the goons away from the door by throwing condiments at them or shooting them.

Eventually, Owen made a run for it via the kitchen, where he said hi to the head chef/owner, Paul McGuin, who's been running the place for five years now, having previously worked in the kitchens of several well-known restaurants, including the one in the Oxo Tower. It's nicely decorated and has a rustic feel, and, while fairly expensive, is a great place for a romantic meal for two or an office party.

Owen bounded into the Gents and out the small ceiling-level window into the backyard away from his Russian pursuers. He casually surveyed the poorly lit toilets as he shimmied out. The loos were a bit run-down and the soap dispensers didn't work, which they could really do with sorting out, given that they encourage you to eat the bread and oil with your hands. I give La Cucina three chef's hats out of five.

Chapter 75 or 124 or 500

In which Owen and Miss Reed are in space.

(I thought it might be useful to include one of the chapters that's set in space, because I can't stress enough that this book is very varied and that while sometimes the action takes place in a cellar or a restaurant in Kennington, at other times it's on the Moon or China or literally anywhere. This chapter is also the first one that I ever wrote, so it's got a special place in my heart, even if its place in the book is still unfixed. Essentially, once I'd committed to this chapter it meant a lot of things had to be included both before and after in order to make sense of it, which, in the main, I've not yet managed to do. By hook or by crook, at some point I will write all the explanation and story that's needed to make it work. Or it'll be a dream sequence. This chapter also features Miss Reed, Owen's on/off fuck buddy. I should stress that neither he nor she nor I ever describe her that way in the book, so there's nothing offensive about her or the way that she's treated. If anything, she's a sassy female icon like Beyoncé or Elaine from Seinfeld. *This chapter is either really imaginative or confusing, depending on your taste/intelligence. It's psychological too. In a metaphorical sense it's about two people in love not knowing what to do about it. In a literal sense it's about alien technology/eggs. I was pushing myself at the time and drinking a lot of isotonic drinks.)*

Owen and Miss Reed stood before the alien object in horror and wonder and matching Barbour jackets. It was huge. Owen had never seen anything like it before because it was made by aliens, and he didn't believe in aliens until about two hours ago when he had stamped on about four hundred alien eggs. What a workout!

What the hell was this thing, anyway? It was made from a material he had never seen before, obviously, and didn't so much have a colour or a texture, because it didn't have a surface. His brain struggled to take it in. It was almost impossible to describe, but here goes. There were struts, I guess you'd call them, which linked up countless prongs to a large band that looked like it was made from hard paint with no colour. Was it a weapon? It was wide, and covered in the alien equivalent of leaves, which didn't move despite the ferocious moon wind. It lit up. Each prong ended with a perfectly spherical dark dome, which was somehow incredibly sharp. Owen broke a bit off in his hands like you would with a poppadom. It was powdery and cool. The piece he had snapped off was the exact shape of the Nike tick, but that was a coincidence.

'Maybe it's some kind of lair,' Miss Reed ventured, but, to be perfectly honest, neither of them knew what the bloody hell it was. It was spectacularly ugly.

Owen followed the thick grooves along the west shell, looking for an entrance. Miss Reed bit both of her lips at the same time.

'What do we tell the academy?' she asked.

Owen shrugged.

'What do we tell the academy, Owen?' she repeated, having not seen him shrug.

'Oh – I don't know,' he mumbled. A burst of sulphury moon wind buffeted against their sturdy, newly fashionable Barbour jackets, and Owen suddenly realized that they were holding hands. Their eyes met each other's eyes. Miss Reed shyly pulled her hand away. Owen tutted.

Out of the corner of his eye, Owen saw another batch of alien eggs. Yes! he thought. He began to trudge away from her.

'I'm going to go stamp on those eggs over there!' he called out against the high-pitched kettle-like whistle of the whitey-yellow wind.

'You don't need to keep doing that!' Miss Reed shouted back to him.

Owen pretended he hadn't heard her.

'Owen!' she shouted again. 'The aliens are peaceful and kind. You don't need to keep stamping on their eggs!'

Owen thought about this, tilting his head slightly to the side, in the way that Orlando Bloom does when he acts in a film where his character is thinking about something.

'Yeah,' he hollered back, 'may as well though!'

Owen began wandering over to the cluster of eggs, big emotions turning inside him that he didn't understand. He forced himself not to think about them by humming the *Ski Sunday* theme and focusing on the rows of eggs lined up ahead of him on the grey moon floor.

'Please, Owen! Don't!' he heard Miss Reed call out behind him. But by now it was too late and he marched purposefully forward towards the fragile, octagonal eggs. Without breaking his stride, he began to tuck his trousers into his thick socks. ◊

Wearing the Suit

Greg Baxter hears Alban Berg in Berlin

Once or twice a month, between September and June, I go to the Philharmonic here in Berlin. I travel by underground from my apartment in Prenzlauer Berg to Potsdamer Platz, which takes about half an hour, and from there it's a five-minute walk to the entrance of the Philharmonic. I wear the only suit I own, a black one, with a white shirt and a black tie. I search the train for other men in suits, and for women smartly dressed, because I know they will be going to the Philharmonic too.

I have lived in Berlin for a short time, not quite two years, and I'll be leaving again in two years. The thing I do with greatest regularity here – aside from dropping off and picking up my young son from kindergarten, which is a ritual that inhabits a different part of my imagination – is make this journey to the Philharmonic. The rest of my life is strangely unbound by urgency – a need to be in places on time, a life of deadlines and productivity. I am out of contact with the people I know. I do not read any newspapers. I don't watch television or go to the movies. I ignore the post I get. Paperwork and bills get lost. I spend no time on the internet: I avoid crowds, both real and virtual. Between the hours I drop off and pick up my son, I rarely speak a word. Once in a while, I go for long runs, or on hot, sunny days in summer, I go swimming at an outdoor pool not far from my apartment. On rare occasions, I go to a museum, or I run an errand. I translate, for pleasure, a little bit of German – less, however, than I did when I first arrived. I don't look forward to books in the way I once did; although I read those I like more carefully, I read far fewer books, and less often, than I used to.

When I am not reading and I am not writing, I listen to music. I mean classical music. Usually I listen to whatever I've heard recently at the Philharmonic. I walk around, if the weather is agreeable, wearing headphones. If the weather is disagreeable, I go home and sit in front of my speakers.

For the last few years, I've found myself drawn most irresistibly towards atonality and twelve-tone music. I attend concerts that feature, predominantly, composers working with these methods, and I listen to this music on my headphones and at home, increasingly, but not wholly, to the exclusion of other music I like – and I like all kinds of music. Perhaps I'm obsessed. Perhaps a true and penetrating esteem for twelve-tone music requires a degree of obsession, because it's naturally less pleasant, less recognizably emotional, less discrete, less resolute than harmonic music. If one were to speak of euphony and appeal as equivalent, then one might say that the twelve-tone series preternaturally lacks appeal. Nevertheless, it arose as a historical necessity. Serial music, or twelve-tone music, or dodecaphonism (or chromaticism[1]), devised by Schoenberg, is the pre-eminent (classical) musical method of the twentieth century. Boulez said, 'We assert for our part that any musician who has not experienced – we do not say understood, but experienced – the necessity of the dodecaphonic language is *USELESS*.'[2]

I came quite late to a real engagement with twelve-tone music, and I sometimes wonder how it is that something so seemingly essential to the life of my imagination, so inextricable from my sense of dignified and feasible expression, could have remained mostly immaterial to me, even, at times, objectionable, for so long. I cannot quite explain why this is the case, but I am certain that my awakening came about with a sudden surge of interest in the Viennese composer Alban Berg, Schoenberg's most famous disciple.

On a December morning in 2010 I was driving by myself in the west of Ireland on an icy road after several days of snow, heading out to Achill Island. I was going to spend a few weeks there and finish revisions to my second book, *The Apartment*. I was listening to the radio. I was alone. The road had not been gritted – much of rural Ireland was iced over, thanks to a grit shortage – and I was driving an old car that didn't handle the conditions well. I couldn't drive more than twenty miles an hour. Alban Berg's *Violin Concerto* came on. I took my phone out and filmed the road as I drove; I recorded the music. During my time in Achill, without television or internet, I watched the recording many times.

I had heard of Berg before, and I'm sure I'd heard parts of the *Violin Concerto* a number of times already, but from that point onward I would be differently aware of the composer and his music– the sudden fascination seemed to signal an important moment in a shift that had occurred within me following the completion of my first book, *A Preparation for Death*. I had, all at once, lost my stomach for the violence of autobiography; I felt exhausted by the thought of confrontation; and I no longer felt driven by the zeal to speak in conclusions, or to coerce my mind to resolve uncertainties with assertiveness.[3] This path had been necessary, but it would no longer yield anything of value. In contemplating a return to fiction, however, I faced the same problem that had driven me, in the first place, to autobiography, which was the perfectly reasonable but also thoroughly polluted relationship between the imposition of fantasy and the presumption of its need to appeal. In my mind, the relationship was not intrinsically flawed, merely exhausted, and it could no longer be honoured, it could only be exploited.

Though I cannot remember what it was

1 The term 'chromaticism' is commonly – which is to say, in the vernacular – used interchangeably with the other terms, but this isn't entirely accurate. A piece of twelve-tone music uses all twelve notes of the chromatic scale (as opposed, for instance, to the harmonic or diatonic scale), and therefore is 'chromatic'. However, a piece that is chromatic is not necessarily twelve tone or serial. And Schoenberg did not devise chromaticism.

2 This quote comes from *The Rest is Noise* by Alex Ross, the extraordinary book on classical music of the twentieth century.

3 One realizes, also, as one composes an autobiographical book, even one written in the midst of the events it is depicting, that the autobiographical method, while constructive and substantively different from the fictional method, produces objects that are as fictional as novels.

I liked so much about the *Violin Concerto* that morning on the way to Achill Island, and though everything I've learned of Berg since makes me misremember aspects of that morning, I must have felt that I had arrived at a destination – the way a traveller, at long last, comes upon a city – one my fatigue had always inhabited, even before I recognized it in myself. Berg's music is highly dynamic, rich and unpredictable. But these characteristics belong to a broader context of dissolution, an urge toward self-annihilation. In it, the link between composition and appeal vaporizes: the music expresses the will to exist and the will to vanish simultaneously. Every expression of desire or hope or curiosity arrives at its own annihilation – every utterance is self-affirmation that escapes from, and is swallowed by, self-negation. It is easy – and by this I mean lazy – to perceive or portray this music as a study of emptiness. It takes energy and humility to perceive its subtleties.

Berg's music never, despite its struggle to be faithful to serialism, becomes monotonous. It is instead radiant, elusive, seductive. It is also plain-spoken. It contains no cloying or floribundant chords, no hard-charging lyricism. By its restraint in that regard, it indicts such characteristics – such base and gluttonous faith in euphony, flourish, layering, style – as evidence of degeneration and cliché. (Certainly, twelve-tone music arose out of a need to cleanse degeneration and cliché out of music, to reverse the damage done by the overlathing of orchestration in late Romantic music, to disturb our sense of what noises mean, and where feeling in music comes from.)

Berg's is a music of profound indistinctness, and its value lies not in its ability to articulate solutions to uncertainties, or to resolve conflict by imposing its assertiveness, but in everything it withholds, in its absences, in its restraint and its melancholy. The *Violin Concerto* is probably his most popular piece of music: his last, and his most accessible. Berg's other major works are the *Piano Sonata* (his first), the *First String Quartet*, the *Three Orchestral Pieces*, *Wozzeck*, the *Lyric Suite* and the unfinished *Lulu*. The piece I listen to most is probably the *Lyric Suite*: '. . . there is no music imaginable that shapes its resources with more seductive power and yet without once making dishonest stylistic concessions . . .[4]'

Atonality might be broadly described as any music that lacks a central key, or music that lacks harmony as its primary structural element. Dodecaphonism is a method by which composers can systematize atonality. Though atonality has of course always existed, and has always been used within larger tonal contexts to produce changes in mood, a deepened sense of confusion, contemplation, loneliness, fear, sadness, rage, defeat – think of atonality as a musical distance from the comfort of the familiar – it lacks, without systemization, coherence over long durations. By systemizing atonality, Schoenberg produced a way forward for musicians, a seemingly pure, and highly adaptable, space for new and variegated innovations to thrive.

By its nature, tonality is inseparable from harmony, because harmony is inseparable from the diatonic scale (i.e. both the major and minor scales of a key). Every note you play along the scale has a harmonious – a mathematically euphonic[5] – relationship to the key, and to each other. Tonality also implies plot and resolution. If the central key of a piece of music is C major, for instance, the meaning of the piece is linked to its plot – the distance the music travels from C major (from the familiar), the sense of conflict it attains in its travels, its dissonances and consonances, and more – as well as its sense of resolution. Will it return to C major in its final moments? Will it end with a homecoming? Will we leave the concert hall (or close the book, in the unavoidable literary analogy) feeling fulfilled or despondent? Our feelings are also affected by the major and minor scales, which have predictable emotional states – major is generally a happier sound, minor is generally a sadder sound.

The chromatic scale, upon which twelve-tone music is based, is not, by nature, harmonious, and our ability to sense the emotional states of sounds is disturbed – major and minor keys are no longer true indicators of feeling. Instead of eight euphonically related whole and half steps ascending or descending from a key, the chromatic scale contains twelve equidistant half steps, or semi-tones. The best illustration of the difference between the diatonic and chromatic scales is to compare them on a piano. To produce a C major scale on a piano, simply start at C, and move up by white keys only, until you reach the next C. Conversely, to play the chromatic scale that starts from the same position, or the same C you chose above in the diatonic scale – you simply strike every key – white and black – on the way to the next C.

The chromatic scale is full of useful but challenging non-harmonious relationships, and by systematizing it, Schoenberg made it possible to sustain a music of non-harmonious relationships for longer durations, which made large-scale atonal composition possible. In his model, all half steps in the scale must be struck before moving to a new starting position.[6] The notes of the composition are not arranged in relation to a central key, but in relation to each other. The destination of chromatic music is not resolution – whether we arrive back at 'home' is irrelevant; and its means of travel to the destination is not plot – we have no point of familiarity from which a plot might begin. Yet it can contain perceptible trajectories.

The great violinist Yehudi Menuhin, in conversation with Glenn Gould,[7] called Schoenberg's method 'curiously clumsy'.

'The sound is always the same,' says Menuhin. 'There isn't great contrast – intervallic contrast – between dissonance and consonance . . . So the only contrast

4 Theodor Adorno, *Alban Berg, Master of the Smallest Link*.

5 This is an inaccuracy I'm committing for the sake of expedience. It is wrong to call the relationship purely mathematical. The mathematics doesn't quite work. Interestingly, mathematical ratios are compromised by the well-tempered piano (the modern piano). However, our ears have grown so accustomed to the well-tempered piano that the relationship between notes on a harmonic scale sound mathematically pure, or at the very least, we cannot hear the impurity.

6 This is, of course, an injurious oversimplification, and what Schoenberg's method allows, by the creation of tone rows – rather than simple scales such as I've described – is the possibility for essentially infinite transformation of the chromatic scale, while still in the context of a rule-based environment where twelve tones comprise the tone row.

7 I highly recommend this fascinating and short conversation (searchable by 'Gould Menuhin Schoenberg' on Youtube): http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=av2XTNgA72w

there could be is between sound and no sound, and that is probably where there are so many pauses.'

He continues: 'There is a curious discrepancy between the gesture and the words. It's as if you'd taken the words apart of, say, a play like *Hamlet*, and merely strung together an arbitrary sequence of syllables that had no meaning as such, but the rhythm and the gesture of the play were copied absolutely, so that the person who knew the play would recognize where the love scene takes place, and the ghost, and so on.'

Gould calls it a 'marvelous analogy', but he perceives far greater dynamism, complexity and ingenuity in Schoenberg than Menuhin does. Where Menuhin hears caricature, Gould hears genuine originality. In the end they agree to disagree and play a piece by Schoenberg together, but not before Menuhin says, 'But I admire you and know that you have a greater understanding of Schoenberg than perhaps anyone else, and I have always had the motto in my life that anyone who liked something knew more about it than someone who didn't . . .'

Though I admire Schoenberg, and thoroughly enjoy his music – unique for its extreme dynamism, its severity of light and dark, and the subtle power of what Menuhin referred to as the discrepancy between gesture and word, I have never warmed to it the way I've warmed to Berg's music. I've always preferred Berg's vaporous continuity to Schoenberg's lightning extremity – though I wouldn't claim to know enough about Schoenberg really to categorize his vast body of work, and I would at once defer to anyone who disagrees with the above portrait.

According to Adorno, Berg never really severed ties completely with tonality, and, most importantly, the transitional quality to his music – the double-movement of arriving and expiring, of the imposition and obliteration of self – softens the radicalism profoundly, so much so that audiences often thought of Berg as the moderate among moderns. For Alex Ross, the contemporary music critic, Berg's style is the product of his faith in the twelve-tone structure (and in Schoenberg) that is both contradicted and strengthened by his fondness for elements of Romanticism and impressionism, and for his inner Mahlerian. For Ross, in other words, Berg's music is unique because it is infused with elements that are alien to, and seemingly incompatible with, twelve-tone music. Perhaps one of the things I like so much about Berg is the fact that he has not come to this method as an inventor but as an inheritor who understands its necessity, and therefore he must fight his instincts, restrain himself, to the cost of his very identity. We are not merely listening to sounds, but to a universe of struggle that underlie the sounds.

I have season tickets to the Philharmonic. This allows me to attend six large concerts each season at a considerably reduced rate. The season tickets are arranged into several different series, and each series tends – at least as long as I have lived in Berlin, which isn't long enough to make authoritative generalizations – to have a slightly different emphasis. This allows the people who prefer Brahms to hear a lot of Brahms, and the people who prefer Berg to hear a lot of Berg. I also buy tickets to the chamber hall – the smaller hall, where smaller, non-symphonic concerts take place – and these tickets are extremely affordable.

The building itself – the Philharmonie – is a marvel. The large hall, which seats about twenty-five hundred, and the chamber hall, which seats about twelve hundred, are two large, gold, asymmetrical, Expressionist – almost extraterrestrial – tentlike structures linked by a common lobby. The structures – what you see as you approach – are actually organic outflows from the acoustic qualities of the interior – a pentagon-shaped centre, from which the rows of seats rise in irregular directions and uneven heights. Everything has been subordinated to acoustic priorites. It is not an exaggeration to say that, even in the large hall, you can hear someone all the way across from you, at the very top, nervously clear his throat if the rest of the hall is silent.

When I sit in my regular seats, I sit beside a silver-haired man who hardly ever moves. He achieves a stillness that I always find astonishing and try to emulate. He claps very little. I clap very little. I hate it when somebody begins to clap before the music has settled, before we have collectively had a moment to weigh the experience. I hate to hear somebody whistle – which is rare – or shout *Bravo!* – which has happened once. I hate it when people lean forward. I cannot understand a desire to bop one's head. If you have a runny nose, bring some tissues with you, don't sniffle. If you have a cough, do not attend the concert. Do not read the programme while the music is playing. Do not applaud in the pauses between movements. Do not laugh if somebody does so by mistake. Do not fucking whisper. Do not suck on a throat lozenge. Do not, at any time, film the hall with your smartphone. Do not cross or uncross your legs – whatever position you are in, stay there. Sit still, even if you are uncomfortable. Show some respect to the conductor, to the musicians and to your neighbours. And try to understand that the most dignified response you can bestow upon a great performance is restrained applause and a mild or acute sense of disappointment in yourself.

If you want entertainment, go to the ballet.

The structures of the Philharmonie are echoed across the street by the strange and beautiful national library – also gold and asymmetrical, though with a little bit of blue in it – and are accompanied by an equally ambitious building not too far down the road, the sleek, black, low New National Gallery (Neue Nationalgalerie), designed by Mies van der Rohe. These buildings are between the Philarmonie and the Spree, the river, in a westward direction. In the other direction, towards the former East Berlin, you face Potsdamer Platz. Until reunification, Potsdamer Platz, destroyed in the Second World War, was an empty, neglected, derelict space. Since reunification, it has been the site of rapid development, and almost all that development has been abominable. The Sony Center is at the heart of it. Its domed rooftop is a representation of Mount Fuji (yes, it is). There are American diners. There are beer halls with 101 brands of beer. There is an English-language cinema in the Sony Center, and when *Batman* or a new James Bond movie opens, they shine spotlights with the film's logos on buildings. There is a gigantic shopping mall. A flash casino. Outside the casino, you can always spot at least a couple of Lamborghinis. There are miniature skyscrapers: in an effort not to overly damage the skyline, they've built a replica of a Las Vegas replica of a big city. Tourists eat at the handful of overpriced,

forgettable and mostly desolate restaurants with white tablecloths. Except for the underground and the commuter rail station that runs underground, as means of escape, nothing redeems the square.

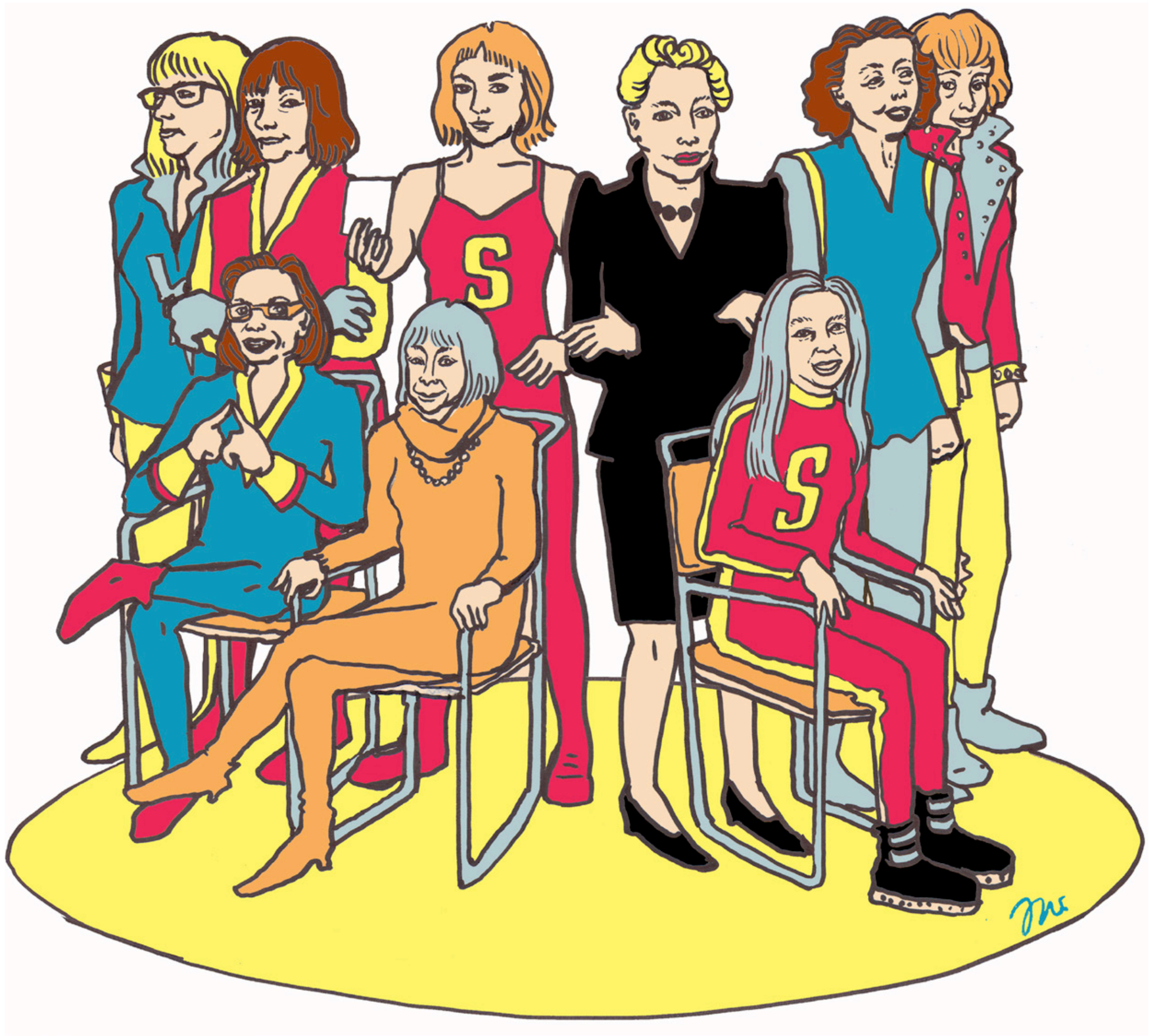
My father was born in Vienna, and we still have plenty of family there. I have made several prolonged visits in the last twenty years. Some of the visits have been so prolonged that it seems entirely accurate, to me, to tell people that I've lived in Vienna. I know Vienna by sight and by street names. I know the nicest places to get coffee, eat or get a drink. I always feel at home there. Certainly, my affinity for Berg is tied up in the sense of integration I feel in Vienna. But it is also linked to the fact that Berg's style, for me, contains the most fruitful and intriguing possibilities for literature, relative to his contemporaries. I could, perhaps, I think, under his spell, produce a book of transitions, wholly, a book devoid of assertion, a kind of writing that grows organically outward from its rejection of the need to appeal, a kind of writing in which each sentence has meaning, not in relation to a mood or an idea, but in relation to the act of dissolving the bond between the composition of a sentence and the exploitation of all we know about sentences – a book that eases out of existence as easily as it comes into existence, but is more than merely wish-fulfillment for a style, a book that subordinates, for genuine reasons, all other considerations to the considerations of contradiction and mystery.

I was lucky enough, when I visited Vienna, to always catch a concert or two at the Musikverein, where the Vienna Philharmonic plays. The Goldener Saal – or Golden Hall – of the Musikverein, where large concerts are played, is a traditional, rectangular space known for the mystery of its acoustic brilliance. The audience, for the most part, sits in straight rows within the rectangle. The room is spacious and ornate. The building, erected in the 1860s – one century before the Philharmonie in Berlin – is Neoclassical, and it's very near the inner ring road, in the first district. In Vienna, after concerts, I used to stroll up from the Musikverein to a small bar in the Kumpfgasse called Santo Spirito. They only play loud classical music there – sometimes so loud you cannot have a conversation – and every hour or two a projection screen scrolls down so patrons can watch a short film of Herbert von Karajan conducting. I went to concerts that predominately featured old masters, and when I enountered music of the twentieth century, or atonality, I did not press myself to sympathize with it.

Here in Berlin, years later, I hurry away from Potsdamer Platz after concerts. By ten in the evening, or ten thirty, it's weirdly vacant. The lights are on – the Deutsche Bahn building is brightly aquamarine in the windows; the Mount Fuji roof is changing colours, and these colours spill over all the buildings in the Sony Center; all the restaurants are open. But everybody is gone. The only human beings you will find are the bodies flowing from the Philharmonie towards the underground. The platforms get crowded, but a new train comes every eight or nine minutes. I get a beer in the station, and I drink it on the u-bahn, in my black suit, as though I am an exhausted Philharmonic musician. It would be something wondrous to know what that was like. Invariably, I have come from a concert that has featured one or more of the following composers: Berg, Schoenberg, Webern, Stravinsky, Scriabin, Hindemith, Boulez, Lutoslawski, Szymanowski, Dutilleux, Spohr, Faure, Shostakovich. So I'm in a mood that's both cheerful and apocalyptic. See how the world has dismissed us. See how we have prophesied our own extinction, an extinction that goes unnoticed in the spaces we have built to contain our new desires. I have one last drink at a cafe just down the road from my apartment – it's usually crowded, very dark. Music plays. Then I go home. ◊

Heroines!

by Badaude



L-R : Helen DeWitt, Ali Smith, Sheila Heti, Deborah Levy, Anne Carson, Chris Kraus
L-R : Lydia Davis, Joan Didion, Sharon Olds.

A Eulogy for Uli

By Adam Sternbergh

Film: *Die Hard*
Time of death: 1 hour, 40 minutes and 12 seconds

Of course the first thing anyone wants to tell you about Uli is that Uli had a hell of a sweet tooth. Well, sure – guilty as charged. The man liked his candy. Crunch bar, Snickers, Baby Ruth, Mars bar, Twix, Almond Joy, Bit-O-Honey: if there was a candy bar within reach, Uli was reaching for it. But don't let that define him. Uli was a lot more than that. aA lot of people don't know the whole Uli. For starters, he was a bit of a loner, despite the line of work he was in. Don't get me wrong, he was always up for a job, liked to be part of a crew, and he could always do what was asked of hi—, whether it was stringing explosives cable across a roof, or corral and herd the hostages, or just, you know, shooting to wound. A lot of guys—— and we all know thi— – you instruct them 'Just wound them,' and, well, they're going to 'slip'' Guys like Marco and Fritz? Are you kidding me? Heinrich? Those guys are plain nuts. Cannot resist the kill-shot. But Uli wasn't about kill-shots. He was about getting the job done right.

So maybe he kept to himself. It's not that he wasn't social—— he liked to laugh, and he could tell a good joke, and he loved to talk about his moustache. But it's hard when you're in a gang of high-stakes international thieves posing as terrorists, because hey, sure, it's kind of a mixed bag of people—— a few Americans, a lot of Germans, maybe one Italian and one guy who looks a lot like Huey Lewis—— but most of those guys, let's face it, guys like Karl, his brother Tony, Heinrich, Kristof, and, of course, Hans Gruber, they're always talking to each other in German, and really, if you're Uli, you're kind of left on the outside. You're kind of always trying to laugh at their German jokes and get their weird German references, and not let on that really you only just figured out, like two days ago, that 'va schnell' means 'go quicker''

But his philosophy was, Hey, I'm here to do a job, but that doesn't mean I can't have a little fun. You're sitting by a candy counter waiting to ambush a SWAT team? Why not grab a Crunch bar? He just liked to recognize those kinds of gifts when life presented them to him. And isn't that something we could all learn from him?

We can miss him, and we can mourn him, but he knew the risks. That's what this job is. One moment you're enjoying a sweet treat, or herding a bunch of screaming hostages on to the roof, then the next you open a door, and bam. Or, rather, bam bam bam bam bam. All because one cowboy cop decided to run around with bloody feet and shoot every person who happens to open a door and not really bother to say, Hey, who is this guy?

Who is Uli?

Maybe he's just trying to do his job, just like me?

Nope. Just bam bam bam bam bam.

Well, Uli, old friend, grab one last Crunch Bar, on me. Then get your ass to heaven, buddy. Schnell. Va schnell.

The Recurring Nightmare of Wilhelm

By Cethan Leahy

Film: *Raiders of the Lost Ark*
Time of death: 1 hour, 20 minutes and 55 seconds

The small army contingent rumbled to life. Made up of several cars, a motorcycle and a canvas-roofed cargo truck, the convoy was in possession of a great and terrible secret, which lay inside the belly of the truck, resting within a large and unfastened wooden crate. It was vital to remove it from the site immediately. The desert had become inhospitable to its European visitors.

Seven men were charged with protecting it.

The crate rocked as it passed over the stony road, and the men guarding it, save for one, flinched with every shudder. Each was, in his own way, troubled by the contents. Intellectually, they knew there was nothing to fear from an artefact – they were members of one of the most powerful armies in the history of the world – but this remnant of the old world disturbed them. Far from home, in the heat and sand, they were susceptible to the potent superstitions that seemed to float in the warm air.

The remaining man, Wilhelm, was also uneasy, but his mind was troubled not by what lay inside the crate but by lingering thoughts of his own.

'I had a dream last night.' Wilhelm said to the group.

Dieter stood across from Wilhelm, his hands steadying the crate between them. He sighed loudly.

'What's wrong with you?' he asked. 'I don't want to hear about your dream.'

'What's wrong with me?' Wilhelm replied over the roar of the engine. 'I didn't realize it was a crime to initiate a conversation with a colleague during the work day.'

'Initiating a conversation is fine. The problem is that you initiate the same conversation each day. Every day this week you've described whatever gibberish entered your head while you were asleep the night before.'

'That's true,' nodded Heinrich. He was crouched to the left of Wilhelm, picking a fly out of his teeth. 'It has proven to be very annoying.'

Wilhelm was quiet for a moment. He

looked out on the road. He was positioned at the head of the crate, which sat at the open end of the truck. He could feel the hot desert sun on his face and taste the sand in the wind.

'Anyway, last night I had a dream . . .'

'Oh God,' Heinrich said.

'Let him speak,' said Karl, a soldier positioned at the end of the crate, eager for distraction. 'I quite enjoyed yesterday's dream, the one with the man dressed up as a bat, punching clowns.'

'Fine,' said Dieter. 'Wilhelm, go ahead.'

Now the centre of attention, Wilhelm knew he'd need to engage his fellow soldiers. He drew in a deep breath and said, 'We were standing in a strange corridor. We all wore this odd uniform, gleaming white armour with a helmet that covered our faces and made us look like bugs. It was difficult to see out of the helmet, I recall. I was holding a strange gun with two hands. It shot fatal beams of light.'

'A strange gun that shot light?' asked Heinrich.

'Yes, it was in the future, maybe. I remember now. We were in outer space in a floating ship. We heard that there were intruders in our spaceship so we had to run to catch them.'

'Oh good, we are in this dream too,' said Dieter. 'Why don't you ever dream of girls?'

'One of them was a princess. She had really funny hair, like a pair of *Plundergebäck*. Anyway, we ran into this room where there was a massive gaping chasm. There were only two platforms. One was higher than the other. We were on the higher one. Suddenly the intruders . . .'

'Wait!'

'Yes?' said Wilhelm.

'What is the purpose of this room?' asked Dieter. 'Why is there a room with a great hole in it?'

'Dream logic, I suppose,' Wilhelm said. There were images that recurred in his dreams. He knew he would never question the dreams, just as he knew he would never stare down into the chasm. 'Anyway,' he continued, 'the intruders appeared on the lower platform. They saw us and ducked behind the wall. One shot at us.'

'At which point,' said Karl, 'you got hit, tumbled over the edge and fell to your death.'

'Have I told this before?'

The soldiers laughed. Confused, Wilhelm tried to solicit an explanation for this hilarity.

Wiping away a tear, Edvard, who had not said anything up to now, explained, 'Wilhelm, all your dreams end this way.'

'You even make the same scream each time,' added Karl. 'Argggh!'

'How did you know about the terrible scream?' asked Wilhelm. There was indeed a scream. He remembered it well, his plaintive and unmanly final note.

'Each time!' Edvard exclaimed. 'You have some strange dream and each time it ends the same way! You get shot or punched or knocked or something, you make that same scream and fall from a great height.'

Wilhelm narrowed his eyes at Edvard. He never had liked him very much.

'I guess it's similar,' Wilhelm admitted, and stared down the road. He had noticed a passing similarity within his dreams, but until now had not been struck with the obvious symmetry of the endings. He began to consider the possible meanings when he was interrupted by the sound of a whinny.

'Is that a horse?' Edvard asked. The men looked out and saw a man in a hat appearing from the tall rocks on a white horse. It was the archaeologist everyone had been warned about. He had been in charge of looking for the contents of the box for the Americans and was not pleased with the National Socialist Party's attempts to hinder him.

He shouted 'Giddy up!' at his horse and attracted the attention of the entire procession of Germans. Hans, stationed at the mounted machine gun perched atop the car, began to shoot in the direction of the archaeologist, who was advancing alongside the truck.

Crack! Crack! Crack!

The bullets popped through the air. As Hans was a poor aim, they pierced the canvas of the truck. A hot chunk of metal whizzed past Wilhelm's ear. A fear ran through him. He had felt this high excitement before; not in the battlefield or on missions, but in his dreams.

'He is catching up,' shouted Edvard as the archaeologist disappeared. Wilhelm, feeling uneasy, clung to his gun.

Clunk!

A hand made a brief impression on the trunk's canvas roof.

'That lunatic is climbing up the side.'

Wilhelm heard a scream and saw Heinz rolling out on the road behind them. He had been sitting in the passenger seat. Wilhelm steadied himself. It was not the same scream that he himself had emitted those countless nights. He placed his finger on the trigger.

Nothing was going to make his dream a prophecy.

Smack! Pow! Umph!

The sounds of a fight. It was impossible to tell from the grunts and slaps and pounds who was winning. The truck swerved on the road, narrowly avoiding a passer-by with a camel.

The truck braked, causing the crate to slide towards the front of the truck. Unable to stop in time, the car tailing the truck rammed straight into the back. In response, the truck accelerated again, sending the crate hurtling backwards. It flew past the men and, with a mighty thud, connected with Wilhelm.

Launched into the air, Wilhelm watched a grim realization flicker across his mind. He had done this before. He knew what came next and it frightened him. He didn't want to die in such a pointless, almost comedic way. He released all his fear and dread into a noise.

Wilhelm screamed.

He fell forward on to the bonnet of the following car and his head connected with the windscreen. The glass shattered.

For a few moments, Wilhelm lay motionless. Then he shook his head and brushed the shards from his cheek. The driver screamed at him to get off the bonnet, but all Wilhelm could hear was his own voice whispering 'I'm not dead' – three words he repeated with increasing speed and joy.

He had a second chance. He was not to be the victim of some cosmic joke. Wilhelm would live to see another day and not be another forgotten fatality.

The car swerved and Wilhelm slid off the bonnet. As he dropped under the wheels, he felt the scream rise up again but his head was crushed before it had a chance to escape. ◊

New York Traffic

By Bronwen Armstrong

Film: *The Bourne Ultimatum*
Time of death: 2 hours, 3 minutes and 42 seconds

He didn't exactly cheat death as a child, but still. The two car accidents happened so early in his life that neither brought forth feelings of mortality at the time. It made sense that he survived them. Why not? Why, so close to the beginning of his life, with all four grandparents still alive, plus both parents, and with an unbroken faith in the world, would he not crawl out of those two cars, each of which had flipped on to their roofs, and each of which were left with a glass-toothed empty space where the back window used to be.

After crawling out of the first wreck, aged eight, he looked down and saw a spattering of blood on the Velcro straps of his shoes. 'Blood,' he thought (and he often recounted this story), 'is dripping from my head.' But even at that moment his confidence in life was so intact that he could watch the dripping blood staining his shoes as he watched art lessons on public television – the colour spreads, the canvas reacts to the liquid.

The second time, aged twelve, he was in shock. One of the police officers at the scene handed him his copy of C.S. Lewis's *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, as he was five books into the Narnia series for the second time round. Gravel was dug into the space between the first page and the cover, embedded into the gum of the spine, and he remembered, he said to me, thinking how much that must have hurt the book, even though none of the pages were ripped. They told him he'd need a single stitch on the top of his head, one stitch, while the car was taken for scrap.

Sometimes, at night, never in a car, never while we were driving, but sometimes in bed, he'd describe to me what it was like when the Dodge rolled over, and he always mentioned the inner refusal, the soft *no*, and the disbelief, the memory, if it could be a memory, of his head as it bounced against the wine-red ceiling. He seemed to rediscover the dimensions of the Dodge (he didn't remember the first car), and the absence of fear at the time. Why shouldn't everything be fine? He was twelve. His placidity had been disrupted only when his father showed up at the hospital hours later and raked his fingers across his son's skin and rubbed his hands up and down his son's arms as they stood in the hallway. 'There was very little comfort in my father's touch,' he told me one night. 'He had been testing for solidity.'

It's only now he's scared of those two accidents from long ago; or he was scared of them, like a sports fan who can't believe everything worked out and sits on the bus on the way home from the victory, scarf in hand, asking himself: Maybe we didn't win? Maybe the outcome was different? What proof do I have now that I'm far from the crowds?

'Maybe,' he said next to me in the dark one night, 'it happened. Maybe I died in one of those accidents and this is my reward.' (This would be on the nights he wanted sex, so the assumption of death was a compliment: his pleasant afterlife consisted of lying next to me.)

Or else he'd make the same claim during one of the good moments, even ones I classified as inconsequential. The last time was when he bought a Mountain Dew slurpee from a 7-Eleven in upstate New York a few weeks before the third accident; his first slurpee in years, he said. I didn't believe him. I took a long sip from the straw and held a mouthful of icy grains, sitting with him out on the concrete step next to the store, and I agreed that it was a reward; it was good, though it didn't necessarily mean he'd died in a car accident as a child to deserve it.

'You can have it, anyway,' I said. 'This doesn't have to be heaven, or *a* heaven.'

'A heaven of sorts,' he replied.

'Of sorts,' I said.

From what I heard, the third accident, aged twenty-nine, happened fast. The car that hit him didn't stop. The driver reversed immediately, dragging his battered bumper, and drove away again. The NYPD representative told me that the individual driving the car was being pursued, but he couldn't disclose much more. The individual had not been a police officer, even though he was driving a police car. There were gunshots at the scene, but my husband wasn't killed by a gunshot, thankfully. In some ways, I'm glad the driver of the car, the man who was being pursued, the man driving the stolen NYPD car, didn't stay at the scene. I didn't have to see him when I arrived there amidst the glass and lights. I didn't have to look at him sitting in the back of the ambulance with a reflective blanket over his shoulders. There was no eye contact. The man kept going. He had momentum. The job – if only the man knew – was finally done. ◊

'Get Your Ass to Mars'

By Nikesh Shukla

Film: *Total Recall*
Time of death: 44 minutes, 11 seconds

The day starts quiet, the day starts slow. I wake from a blissful dream where I'm floating in space: space with oxygen and I can breathe. I'm weightless and smiling. My head is fizzing from the heat. The thermostat's been broken since we moved in. My wife likes it hot. She says it reminds her of Malibu, where she grew up. I can hear Ella's listening to some angry, thrashing guitar. This usually signals her mood change from teary and hateful to angry and hateful. I pull myself out of bed and head to the shower.

My wife is lounging in the bath, bubbling is popping around me already – her greatest luxury is to have a bath first thing in the morning. The frivolous trappings of a housewife. I smile at her, her two playful breasts are bobbing in and out of the suds. Don't ruin the ravine between, I think to myself. She looks up at me, pausing the television and taking a swig of red wine. Frivolous. She barely looks at me. I ruin her luxury with my ablutions as I pee endlessly, loosening my morning dishevelment.

Then it dawns on me.

I'm on nights this week.

Fuck.

I'm too old for this shit.

Get your ass to Mars, they told me. You gotta get your ass to Mars, or you'll get left behind. Jobs down in the 'green' were welling up. The airport securities union had been on strike for a few years, after scientists had developed Johnny cabs to work at departure gates. 'More jobs for humans', we said, and we striked. But we couldn't survive on the lowly union subs we received. Food was expensive, air was expensive, my wife wanted a third breast implanted – times were tough. So I got my ass to Mars.

My wife was the easiest sell – cosmetic surgery laws were more relaxed on Mars. My daughter refused to give me an easy time. She bawled, she screamed, she kicked and she refused to talk to me, right up until the removal men came round with their hovering tea crates and packed up our lives to relocate us to Mars. She looked at me as we loaded a box labelled 'Ella's dolls' on to the truck and said, 'Dad, I hate you for doing this to me. I hope you die.' She was calm, understated, almost malevolent, like it would be by her hand.

I was too old for this shit.

I ask my wife what time it is and she tells me it's 5 p.m., MMT. I smile and close my eyes as I let the lukewarm water of the shower shiver me as it hydrates my poor air-conditioned pores. I make a passive-aggressive comment about her using up all the hot water, again, and she makes a passive-aggressive comment about her boredom, and I make another passive-aggressive comment about our hateful daughter and she makes a passive-aggressive comment about her pocket money, and then we're at 2–2, so we silently call it a draw. I slip into my uniform, crumpled on the floor where I left it a mere six hours ago. My limbs are wet with exhaustion, cold and I am unappreciative of the red glow outside our window.

Breakfast is dinner and I can afford myself a slice of last night's pizza. Headphones in, I head for the transit train. I listen to some pastoral soundscapes inspired by Martian carvings, I flick through a paper from the 'green' from two days ago and my mind wanders around a lot. Reminders of war, famine, death, pestilence from the 'green' makes me feel better about this new life here. I think about sending my brother an email, telling him to 'get his ass to Mars'.

I get a phone call about some new high-alert security protocols that have come down from the top. Some dick called Richter, a Cohaagen heavy, is throwing his balls about. There's gotta be more to life at this. I'm too old for this shit, I think. I close my eyes and try to reimagine that feeling from my dream, that weightlessness. You can never replicate dreams in your waking closed eyes. They always seem forced. I'm trying to get off the phone with my section leader but he's giving me the unnecessary details of protocol, i.e. the ones I already know. He has the ability of making everyone feel like a slacker. With his over-explaining and disregard for subtlety. So I'm trying to rush him off the phone, because call waiting is displaying my wife's name and she doesn't respond well to being kept waiting beyond the fourth ring.

'Hello,' I answer tentatively, knowing there's no way she's not going to be pissed off. She tells me that she's withdrawn money from our account and she's heading down to the green for two weeks.

'Two weeks?' I ask.

'Two weeks . . .' she responds.

She says she misses her family and wants to see them. But I know the real reason. She likes a particular brand of cereal and you can't get it up here on Mars for love nor bribery. I know she's going back to stock up. I know this because she tells me so. She's so predictable. Maybe a third tit will make her nicer, I wonder idly to myself, then panic I've said it out loud during a quiet bit in our conversation. I feel like the whole transit train is looking at me so I end the call. Two weeks. Two weeks. Two weeks of bliss. Two weeks of . . . mmmm . . . I could head out into town, check out the strip bars, see some real three-breasted girls, see what the fuss is all about. I could stay at home and try and find my daughter's diary, see what the little shit's problem is. I could do anything I want.

Two weeks.

At the security entrance for work, Winston looks up at me and says I look like hell. I complain about working nights and he laughs knowingly. He buzzes me in. The locker room is empty. Maybe we really are on high alert. I'm putting my music player and lunch in my locker when my pain-in-the-ass boss bursts in, screams at me for being late (I'm not – I'm always fifteen minutes early for my shift) and orders me to my post. This guy coming in, Quaid, he's dangerous, I'm told. Richter wants him alive. I snort and take my sweet-ass time locking my stuff up.

My boss's walkie talkie crackles. There's a new shuttle just disembarking and Harry's on lunch. He looks at me and I complain that I've still got ten minutes

of me-time. I'm off the clock. He calls me all sorts of names and threatens to fire me. Richter must be leaning on him. I shrug and head to my post, not before laughing about it in the toilets with Winston. Winston hates everyone.

I'm at my post, with my boss and Leonard, who never washes his uniform, and we're watching everyone come through. It's Leonard who picks out the redheaded lady with the yellow coat, but it's all three of us who express surprise as her robot head comes off. We really didn't see that coming.

My boss, star outfielder in our softball team, is the one who catches the head.

'Get ready for a surprise . . .', it says smugly.

I close my eyes, pretending I'm floating in space. ◊

MEMOIR

Self & I

Matthew De Abaitua offers his services

In the early nineties, my employer was the writer Will Self. We lived together for six months in a small cottage in Suffolk. I was his live-in assistant, or amanuensis, an obscure word that translates as slave at hand, a person to take dictation and copy out manuscripts. J. G. Frazer, the great anthropologist and author of *The Golden Bough*, also employed an amanuensis after his eyes filled up with blood during a lecture. My appointment was made after a similarly traumatic incident: Will's divorce, and his move out of the family home.

At the beginning of this story, I am twenty-one years old and my name is Matthew Humphreys. I want to be a writer so I apply to the Creative Writing Masters course at the University of East Anglia. I get in. The course passes too quickly. I have no idea what I am going to do next.

And then Will Self comes to town.

I have been in York for three days on an amphetamine-and-boredom bender. Sleepless, I cross the country on a train. Criss-cross. Cross-criss. I arrive home to a phone call from a friend suggesting I meet her and Terence Blacker, the university's writer-in-residence, in the pub. I should go to bed. I go to the pub.

Terence tells me that Will Self is looking for an assistant.

'I'll do it,' I say.

'You'll have to live with him.'

'Fine.'

'In a cottage in Suffolk. It's very remote.'

'I'll do it. I have no other options.'

As I said, this is the early nineties. Will Self has just published *My Idea of Fun*. The opening chapter features the protagonist ripping off the head of a tramp and having sex with the severed neck. I don't think twice about it.

The job interview takes place at Terence Blacker's farmhouse. Will Self arrives, six foot five, dressed entirely in black; light bends towards him like a black hole or a dilated pupil. He throws a gunnysack of weed at me and says, 'Make something out of that.' I make the special cigarette. The interview proceeds in a fashion in which I cannot recall.

(There will be some mention of drugs in this essay, which is unfortunate. Drug talk is as embarrassing to me as flares and wide-collared shirts were to my parents' generation. But then I got off lightly.)

The second interview is at a rented cottage in Knodishall, a tiny village near Leiston and Saxmundham in Suffolk, a few miles inland from the nuclear power reactors of Sizewell. Will Self collects me from Saxmundham station in his white souped-up Citroën. Will no longer drives, for philosophical reasons, but I wonder if this decision owes something to the four or five occasions that he nearly killed us in that car. On the drive to the cottage, he changes gear the way a singer goes up an octave: as an intensifier. The car provides him with an angry voice with which he conducts an unending and furious argument with the system – the system being, in this case, the tedious conformity of traffic which keeps everyone alive.

The interview is conducted on deckchairs in the back garden of the cottage beside the rusting frame of a greenhouse. We begin by shooting whisky bottles with an air gun, then follow up with the special cigarette. With the informalities out of the way, he lays down the responsibilities of the position: I am to acquaint myself with the oeuvre – not merely his works, but the works that he will be writing about. There is a library of drug literature in the study and I am to read it. Secondly I can bring no Class A drugs into the house, nor am I permitted to drink more than the government-recommended twenty-four units of alcohol a *day*. I am to do whatever I am asked. Nothing is beneath me: laundry, transcriptions, fetching and carrying, and even roughing up literary critics in the Groucho if they diss 'The Contemporary Novel'.

I agree to all these conditions, and the job is mine. I move into the cottage. The front room is Will's study, containing a desk, a selection of adored typewriters, a wheezing Amstrad word processor and printer with the special box of printer paper that it is my job to refill, a fax, again requiring its own particular stationery, and then the shelves, one of which is occupied by editions and translations of his own books. The walls are lined with Post-it notes containing gnomic images and observations to be worked into whatever he is writing. In the six months we live together, he writes no fiction.

The living room is small and bare, with no television. The cottage was flooded the previous winter, and the waters brought with them mud that seeded the walls with fly eggs. Now it is summer, the eggs have hatched. Coils of flypaper hang down from the ceiling, two dozen yellow gummy streamers each riddled with flies, some dead, some dying and some opportunistic. I watch a fly hop up and down the flypaper by using the backs of dead flies as stepping stones; when the feet of the free fly nudge a still living but trapped fellow, then it buzzes furiously in rape. The flypaper dangles below our head height; I buy a sofa for this room, and study the flies from a prone position.

The kitchen is where Will Self instructs me in the importance of clean work surfaces. On our first weekend together, he barters with the fishermen of Aldeburgh to buy the biggest lobster in their catch, a baleful blue monster in a tin bath they keep around the back of the hut. We sink a few pints while they kill it for us, and then return to pick up the dead beast, still warm and wrapped in newspaper; in my hands, the lobster has the armoured heft of a rocket launcher. Will's girlfriend Victoria arrives from London bearing fancy treats from a food hall, flavoured oils and cod's roe still in the womb; I make mayonnaise and fry courgettes and we dine on lobster in the garden by the flickering light of enormous candles. This is a good day.

My work begins. I buy second-hand furniture from the local town of Leiston and unpack the binbags holding Will's life, each packed in haste when he left the family home. He can't bear to open them. It is too painful. It is left to me to bring order to the possessions of a divorced man. I file their contents in a second-hand filing cabinet: juvenilia, receipts, bank statements, first drafts. The cashpoint receipts indicate withdrawals on a scale I have never seen before, in units of fifty: adult portions of money, not the scrappy tenners I survived on as a student.

Every day Will writes out a list of chores for me: I am to source an enormous map of London from the A–Z shop in Chancery Lane, and while there pick up two cartons of filterless Camel cigarettes from the tobacconist. The map must then be mounted on a flexible screen so that we can bend it around us of an evening and sit in it, in his preferred mode of silence, reading and drinking, until we are sufficiently intoxicated for bed.

In the morning, I rise first and sweep the fire grate. After breakfast, we retire to the garden. The grass is long and scorched. Will points out a single white opium poppy, drained and desiccated, growing in the verge. 'Ironic, isn't it?' he says. He has come to this remote cottage to avoid the narcotic temptation of the city only to discover its raw materials growing wild in his own backyard. And this poppy is merely an advance scout for an armada of white opium poppies growing in a hidden patch beside the wheatfield. The cropping of the opium is added to my task list. Someone has already bled the poppies of their sap, and so we make a tea by boiling the opium heads, mashing them, straining the resulting liquid, and serving with two fingers of Scotch. I name this brew Horlicks Plus. As the summer turns to autumn, the opium heads become infested and bugs leap from the boiling water when I cook them up. 'This is the most decadent thing I have ever seen,' says my friend, when visiting. 'You will see worse,' Will growls.

This period of domesticity soon comes to an end. Will goes away, first on a book tour of Brazil, then a long research trip to Australia that will later inform a section of *How the Dead Live*. I am left behind in the cottage on my own for six weeks, during which time I am instructed to keep the Whole Will Self Industry ticking over. I prepare a preliminary edit of his collected journalism. I take calls at all hours from friends and colleagues and add their messages to the pile. Oliver Stone's people call. They want to know who I am. I'm Will Self's people, I reply. A woman calls. It's Victoria. 'No, it isn't,' explains the voice at the other end of the line, 'Victoria is Will's mistress. This is his wife, Kate.' I apologize, and explain that because I am Liverpudlian, all posh women sound the same to me. She accepts my apology, or tactfully ignores it.

One day, I discover the corpse of a fly on a window ledge. It is covered with dust and has clearly been there for some weeks, evading the attention of our cleaner, who comes round every Tuesday to drink tea. Before he left, Will made a tiny sign in the style of National Heritage and Sellotaped it next to the dead fly, both as memorial and as a subtle rebuke to our cleaner; but, like the Hoover, it escaped her notice.

All day, I sit in his chair, at his computer, answering mail, paying bills, writing letters and bits of fiction. At dusk, I ride out to the sea and record my observations and the sound of the waves on a Dictaphone. I am never bored. I take the axe out to the glade to chop wood. The first log I swing at leaps up and strikes me on the forehead. I have blood on my face. Pheasants pecking their way through the undergrowth pause to laugh at me. Then things get unpleasant, for the pheasants.

Sometimes I speak to people on the telephone.

My mother calls. She doesn't like to call in case she interrupts *something*. Before Will left, my mum called to ask me for help with her word processor but I was out, and so she asked Will Self if he could provide her with IT support and, to his credit, he did. She tells me that she and my father are going to visit, staying in a caravan nearby. I don't know how they feel about my living with Will Self and I never ask. They know that I am losing my accent and that my speech has become a lugubrious drawl in imitation of my master.

My parents park their caravan south of Orford and pick me up, feed me, and then we drink. I am the youngest child and so it's no big deal that I am living such a feckless life. My father Eddie and I drown our differences in brandy.

And then Eddie asks me to change my name.

Why?

Because you've got the wrong name.

I am not who I think I am?

No, you are. But you could be somebody else.

It's a long story, and I still don't know it all.

When he was sixteen, Eddie had nowhere to go, nowhere to live, so he joined the police force. The sergeant looked over his paperwork and said, 'Son, you've got three names. I don't know how or why, and I don't want to know. For a start, you've got two birth certificates: one says you are Arthur Edward Langton and the other Arthur Edward De Abite-you-ah, but you put neither of these names down on your application. You wrote Edward Arthur Humphreys. So which name do you want? Who is going to be the copper?'

Eddie chose Humphreys. He didn't want to go into Merseyside Police with a foreign name like De Abaitua and he had no idea who the Langtons were. That's a long and different story.

Now he asks me to rectify the choice he made as a young man. Re-establish the patriarchal line. And I who have always been obsessed with alternate selves am briefly, drunkenly, fascinated by the idea. I am the youngest son – my older brother is too enmeshed in the world to change his name, my sister will soon get married and lose the name anyway. Since he retired from the police force, Eddie

had grown obsessed with his one great unsolved investigation: who is he? The evidence suggested he was a De Abaitua. If I became a De Abaitua then it would – for me – be like taking a character from a novel and making them real; for him, his son becoming a De Abaitua would be like finally catching a wanted man.

The next day, I have a punishing hangover. The hot sun makes me feel like an ant under a magnifying glass. I do not think any more about my name. Will is due back from his long trip and I am fearful and excited. While he was away we communicated occasionally. A postcard from Australia, which compared me physically to a koala bear while noting that we differed – the bear and I – in its habit of 'seldom drinking'. From Brazil, his fizzing glitchy monologues were amused at how deranged it all was. He called the country the Klingon Empire and held the phone out of the window so that I could hear the shooting in the streets outside. I heard no gunshots. Between publicity appearances, he didn't seem to be leaving the hotel much. In Australia, he was taken to sacred aboriginal sites where the trees bleed. None of it was helping.

For his return, I light the garden flares, lay in some Scotch and stock up the fridge. He doesn't arrive. I sit on the sofa listening to the radio and watching the necrotic lust of flies. I am the dog that longs for its master, nervously haunting the hallway and wandering the front lawn, looking out for any sign of an approaching headlight.

He is not coming. Perhaps tomorrow. I wait. No, not tomorrow. He eventually returns at one in the morning. The flares to welcome him home have burned out. He arrives in darkness. He is incoherent and has been on it in London. I am full of stories and messages but he is not interested. His eyes turn independently of one another, reluctant to focus on the place he has returned to, the place of no fun, of no interest.

'Don't wake me in the morning,' he growls.

Unfortunately, the next morning, the gas man arrives at nine sharp to move a gas line from the front of the house. It is the last item on my list of tasks. The gas man is an Australian with a blond ponytail.

'Please could you work quietly,' I say to him. 'The boss is in bed. He's a bit worse for wear. I'd really appreciate it if you didn't wake him.'

The gas man looks sceptical. The cottage is quite remote. My warning gives him pause. He didn't expect that.

'I will have to use the drill.'

'Could you drill quietly? I don't want to wake the boss. I'd just really appreciate it if he could sleep in.'

The gas man nods, but not in agreement, merely in acknowledgement that he has heard me but is not prepared to do anything about it. The waking of the boss is not his problem.

Drilling, hammering, clanging ensue. Nervously, I pace around the living room listening for signs of life from upstairs. I make three cups of tea in an attempt to interrupt the work. The whirring, the banging, the blasting continue. I take a cup upstairs. Smoke from the special cigarette seeps from under the bedroom door. I leave the tea outside.

'You woke him,' I say to the gas man. His ponytail flicks indifferently as he continues with the work.

Finally, he agrees to pause and we retire to the living room to drink tea. The gas man talks about surfing while I listen anxiously to the creaking of the bed upstairs and the sound of large footsteps padding across the bedroom floor. A door bangs open. The gas man flinches slightly. But from his expression I can see that he finds the situation ridiculous. To be afraid of waking up some man!

And then Will Self appears at the top of the stairs, naked, apart from a towel, which is draped over his head. The gas man squeaks, a quite unexpected sound to come from a man, that palpable squeak. Will's tattoos on his arms are blocky abstract shapes because they have been overwritten. But the eye is quickly drawn away from his body to apprehend the awful spectacle of his face. What has happened to his face? The gas man sets his tea down on a table. He is about to make a run for it. But first, one last look at Will's face. It has swollen disturbingly into a terrible topography of distorted features, each topped with welts and scratches.

Will treads deliberately, nakedly, down the stairs.

'I've been scratching at my face all night,' he says. 'I had image horror. Now it's infected.'

This explanation does not reassure the gas man. He moves briskly at a crouch into the garden.

'I have a plan to deal with my face. I am going to take the Sizewell cure. Get your trunks.' He hands me an empty mug, retrieves clothing from his suitcase and goes back upstairs.

Four and a half miles from the cottage, the twin nuclear power stations of Sizewell dominate the Suffolk coastline. Sizewell A is a functional concrete box, whereas Sizewell B is a dome of tessellated white tiles resembling God's compound eye. The waters around Sizewell are tropically warm as seawater is pumped in to cool the reactor and then vented back into the North Sea.

Once Will has dressed, and the gas man has been mollified with sugary tea and a honk on the special cigarette, we undertake a walk to Sizewell. As instructed, I have trunks, towels, a frying pan, some potatoes and sausages. Will walks quickly. I stalk after him across the flatlands, trying to keep pace. We don't talk much until we reach a house within sight and sound of the reactors. The house is empty and up for rent. From the back garden, the thrumming from deep inside the nuclear reactors is not merely audible – it is loud. A pylon stands astride the house. Its thick wire sizzles in the damp air. The dusk is heavy with static and mad electrified thought.

'We should live here,' says Will.

We walk on. We try to find a short cut through the reactor complex. Will suggests bunking over the fence. My job as Will's assistant requires a relentless willingness to participate in the unusual. The only way I can survive as a passenger on this brief journey we are on together – not merely as a metaphorical passenger but also as an actual passenger during his deranged bouts of driving, or that time, returning from a gig in Brighton, when he piloted the train into Victoria station in return for giving the driver a honk on the special cigarette – if I am to get through all this without losing my nerve and without, like the Bloomsbury PR women, crying and demanding to be let out, if I am to endure, I must have the courage of his convictions. But just because I am a grunt, enlisted in a very small and embattled infantry division in which Will Self is the sergeant major,

does not mean that I will break into a nuclear power reactor with a pair of trunks and some sausages, and a man with a mutated face, just so he can take a short cut to the beach. No way.

Not unless he insists upon it.

Reason prevails. We walk around the perimeter.

On the beach, the waves obsessive-compulsively arrange and rearrange the pebbles. There is a point equidistant between Sizewell and the sea where the sound of the churning reactor and the noisy sorting of the beach overlap, and there I stand and sway.

Will points to the pumping station out in the water, a derelict-looking rig and a hangout for gulls. He walks into the sea, and I follow him: we swim out to the rig until the water becomes as warm as a stream of irradiated piss. This is how we take the Sizewell cure.

Afterwards, we gather driftwood for a campfire. Driftwood burns ferociously and Will keeps loading it on to the fire. Being mere infantry, I do not ask him to stop. Our campfire becomes a blazing beacon and then I am instructed to cook upon it. The frying pan catches fire as soon as I place it on the conflagration, the oil burns, the sausages burn, the silver foil fuses with the potatoes to form a sort of vegetable cyborg: there will be no food tonight.

The fire is so hot that the pebbles pop and crack. Will is silent. The fire in the night expresses his fury in a way I am too young to understand. I am very much on the outside of his story, whereas he is at the centre of mine.

When the fire subsides, I talk about the visit from my father, and then I remember, for the first time that day, that Eddie asked me to change my name.

'What to?' asks Will. He has a professional interest in names. A few people still believe Will Self to be a pseudonym.

'De Abaitua,' I say, and I spell it out.

'It's Basque. I come from a short line of Liverpool Basques. It should have been my name, but it wasn't because my dad changed it when he was young. Now he wants me to change it back.'

'What does De Abaitua mean?'

'From the land of plenty. My ancestors must have appeared well fed.'

'It's a much better name than Humphreys, isn't it?'

I nod. I have always hated the name Humphreys.

'It's decided,' said Will, deciding. 'From now on, I will introduce you as Matthew De Abaitua to everyone.'

The breaking surf is luminescent under the moon. The wood in the campfire seethes and our shadows slide over the pebbles. The shadow: the ancient metaphor for the other self, the person you might have been, the dark you, the doppelgänger with the same face but a different name. I say yes, that's who I will be. I don't have to think twice. ◊

FICTION

Obsolagnium

by Matt Suddain

Wilde was in the bedroom when the slat-blinds snapped. It was a calm, clear night. Earlier, there had been lightning over the lake. No thunder; the sound waves had crashed into the lake. He'd looked up from where he'd been dragging branches to his new Timberwolf wood chipper and saw the purple veins of energy spread across the sky. He'd pulled the canvas tarp across his beast and hurried inside. He'd showered; scrubbed the yellowy-green tinge of lawn-cuttings from his hands and lower legs. Now he sat on the edge of the bed and lifted one foot and rested it on the opposite knee. He observed the skin flaking from his heel. He could slough it away with the lump of volcanic rock his wife had kindly given him for Christmas, but every week a sequence of mysterious processes would cause the dryness to return. He studied the dead, white zone and imagined he were looking down upon a wasteland. He imagined leaning down as far as it would take to perceive the microscopic communities who lived there. The muscles around his spine began to burn. He felt his eye muscles strain. He imagined the creatures going about their business, bustling around the bergs of dry skin. Wilde considered that if you had a powerful enough listening device you might even be able to hear the sounds of these societies who live unwittingly upon the heel of a giant.

When he heard his wife come in from the garden he sat up. The latch of the French doors needed oiling. He heard her go into the kitchen. As the spring water began to fill the kettle he heard the fox arrive, her claws chattering on the wooden deck. The creature had upturned two pots last night: a small fern and a baby apple tree. She'd pulled them out with her jaws and scattered the soil across the deck. But what could he do? She came and went, as foxes do. Their house was built where nature and civilization were in flux. They were cut off from the busy world by a lake, forests, and were miles from their nearest neighbours. There was another flash of lightning, this time followed by the murmur of thunder, the scrabble of claws on the fence and finally the sound of Olav sharply closing the slat-blinds in the next room. This was strange because he could still hear the kettle being filled. She navigated the house so quietly. He wondered if she was angry. Why would she close the blinds so abruptly? If she was angry with him about the foxes, then why didn't she just –

The blinds directly in his line of sight snapped up. That is to say, they changed their angle from closed to open. They made a sound like a fistful of bamboo switches *swakking* on a tree. 'Ah,' he heard himself say.

It was a peaceful night, despite the storms near the mountains. Their bedroom had two wide windows giving a disturbingly precipitous view across the bay. The moon was high and ripe. It was sliced into four even pieces by the Dutch pine slats. It was so quiet that Wilde could hear the high warble of an alarm from an empty house across the lake. It sounded to him as if someone were playing a loop from an old-time horror picture. Wilde sat upon his bed and angled his head. So.

'So, you're back.' he said to the seemingly empty room. There was a pause,

then the blinds snapped down again. He saw the hemp cord move, and then the blinds ka-snapped in the next window. Twice, up then down. With each snap Wilde saw the full moon flash like the signal from a ship. The moon was high above the lake. Wilde put his right foot on the floor.

'I've seen this. Why don't you do something new?' A beat before the lamp beside his bed flicked off, then the big lights turned on. 'That's very impressive.' Wilde had a calm, controlled voice. He had spent years in his local Word-Masters group and had risen to the level of Fabulist. 'Do it again.'

The lights began to flash in sync, slowly at first – lamp, light, lamp, light – then faster, until they alternated quicker than a human hand could manipulate them. Wilde stood up and tied his gown. The flashes were giving him a headache. He heard his wife approaching, saying even before she entered, 'Our fox is back. Oh God, what is this? Electrical fault?' She stood by the door.

'Don't think so.' To be certain, Wilde went to the small window near the bathroom. The other windows far across the bay were lit. His own reflection pulsed. Wilde turned back to his wife, whose face was madly juddering. 'Stop it, now!' he said to the air. The chaos stopped, and it was dark.

'So, what?' she asked.

'Spirit.'

He heard his beloved snort.

'Or poltergeist.'

'Don't be ridiculous.'

They were standing in the dark. He could hear her breathing.

'A friend of mine from Ghana had a poltergeist. It's very common.'

'Why do you always leap to the insane?'

'Blinds!' said Wilde, and the moon winked twice. 'Lights!' and the bedroom came alive again, before the man in the gown lifted his arms like a wizard and yelled, 'Stop!' And they did. He felt for his slippers with his feet. 'Like I said, a friend in Ghana had one. He used it to bet on football – 'til the local witch doctor found out.'

'Ridiculous.' Olav tightened her own gown. 'They don't have witch doctors in Ghana. In fact, the term is offensive.'

'Well, whatever they're called. I only had my friend's word. But he did manage to buy a boat.'

'Did he even?' She folded her arms.

'Yes. And anyway this kind of thing has been happening for days now.' He moved to the windows and let some moonlight in. 'I've been misplacing things. Objects have been moving without explanation. I suppose you'll tell me there's an obvious cause?'

'No, on the surface this does appear to be a paranormal incident. Though of what nature I'm not sure.' Olav always spoke in an overly formal manner when she was trying to be rational. She finally placed her book on the bedside table and turned on the lamp. Then she undid her gown. 'Now, are you too consumed with poltergeist events to get some of this?' and she ran both index fingers from beneath her breasts to just above her hips.

It was a week later when their good friends Kristofer and Amelie came over from the city. Wilde had a broad circle of friends, but Kristofer and Amelie were his oldest, and they were very close. There was nothing unusual about their relationship, though the couples often bathed nude together and the byplay between them was sometimes intense. Wilde wasted no time in showing Kristofer his phantasm.

'It's some kind of trick.'

'Nope. Mood lighting.' The lights in the basement den stammered, fell dark, then rose again to give the room a honey glow. Wilde had never installed dimmers on his lights. 'How the heck . . .?'

'Gin, three parts!' They both observed the bottle as it rose to pour the gin across the shaker full of ice. 'Vermouth, dash!' Wilde had rediscovered a love for dry Martinis when he and Olav were in Oslo. 'The key is not to shake the mix, because the shards of broken ice dilute the gin. You have to stir. See? I don't even have to tell him any more.'

They listened to the pleasant sound of the cubes being stirred, and the ladies' laughing voices floating in from the pool area. 'These are fine women we have.' Wilde tapped his palm lightly on the bar top. Chinese mahogany. He had sketched the design himself on a napkin with a brand-new Blackwing pencil. 'We've done well.'

'Yes, now tell me about this . . . thing. How have you decided that it's a 'he'?'

'Great question, Kristofer. Thanks for asking. I suppose I just picked up on the *vibe*. I mean, we hit it off immediately, and when I ask for certain things, a trade magazine, a Phillips head, I don't have to clarify. He just *gets* me. On the other hand, Olav has difficulties at times when it comes to things like wash settings.'

'So it's confined to this house?'

'I think it ranges freely.'

The other day, Wilde was leaving for an appointment in the city, but his car wouldn't start. He'd called in vain to his invisible helper. As he'd gone to dial a mechanic, the phone rang. It was his nearest neighbour, Max, calling to tell him that a large slip had washed across the road, taking at least a dozen pines away. Later, Wilde's car had started first time and he left for his rescheduled meeting.

'You think this thing saved your life?'

'No, I think he saved me from missing my meeting. It was a very important meeting.'

The drinks arrived. They slid noiselessly along the bar top, as if cushioned on a millimetre or two of air. Kristofer sipped and squinted thoughtfully.

'Now, don't say "no" immediately,' said Kristofer at dinner, 'but think carefully about it.'

Kristofer was a passionate, restless man. He seemed ever in the act of scattering his energy. A piece of white flesh stood alert on the end of his fork. The red liquid in the glass in his right hand trembled. 'I want to make you an offer,' he said. 'I have a very important dinner party coming up which might change my entire future.' Kristofer was prone to exaggeration, but Wilde nodded. 'I'd like to borrow your entity.'

'I see.' Wilde put down his herring fork.

'I think they're going to pull out of this deal, I can just feel it, and I know that with your friend's help I could put things back on track. Don't say anything now, just think about it.'

'I will, Kristofer, I will.'

The four sat back and lightly pressed their stomachs as the dirty dishes vanished from the table.

Later, back in the den, Kristofer and Wilde were playing billiards. Olav and Amelie were giving each other neck massages. The entity had not been heard from in a while.'Kristofer, how important is

this dinner?'

'It's very important, Wilde. I would say that it's one of the ten most important parties of my life.'

Wilde chalked the end of his cue. It was custom-made from Spanish persimmon and had a brass joint in the middle where the pieces screwed together.

'The thing about poltergeists is that they're unpredictable by nature. You don't know how they'll behave.'

'I know that.' Kristofer was one of those people who felt he was an expert in subjects he'd only recently begun to explore.

'I want your assurance that you won't hold me accountable for what happens during your haunting, and that you'll return him to me after exactly one week.'

'Absolutely. Of course I will.'

There was a noticeable chill. Wilde soon determined that this was because the digital thermostat had inexplicably reset itself to 'Ocean Breeze'.

Several days later, Wilde got the phone call. He was outside with his Timberwolf, so he didn't hear the phone until the ninety-seventh ring. He secretly loved his chipper, though he went through the motions of pretending it was an ungrateful mouth he had to feed. But he thrived on the visceral thrill of turning thick limbs into a woody mist. He sometimes imagined he was a Mafia goon disposing of the parts of an informant. His wife had a theory – which he took pains to deny – that he sneaked material in from beyond the fence, just so he would have something to mulch. And she was right. He did do that.

They'd clashed over his chipper – which gave Olav a shrieking headache – and lately over his fox measures too. Wilde had ordered a special anti-climb fence from China. It was made from rotating maple slats. He had also installed cameras to record the fox incursions. 'And why,' his wife had asked, 'would cameras stop foxes?' They simply wouldn't, he had to admit. He just wanted to see the mother and her pups at work. It was not enough to hear them in the night.

Wilde came into the house, removed his gloves, wiped his brow with the back of his arm, and answered the phone by the one-hundred-and-ninth ring. He noticed that their machine was on but had not intercepted the call. Olav, who was sick in bed, stirred to hear his end of the conversation.

'Hello, my gorgeous, how are you? Oh? Oh. Oh, really. Oh, no. Oh, no, that's terrible. Fuck. What kind of names? Oh, Christ. No. I'll be up there before the end of the day. St Anne's? OK, I'll come up.'

Wilde went to the bedroom to change and he explained to Olav what had happened. The dinner party had been a disaster. The poltergeist had slightly overcooked the duck, and in the kitchen Kristofer had raised his voice to it. From then the poltergeist had seemed determined to sabotage the event. He'd spilled wine on guests, held saltcellars out of reach, turned the music up during vital parts of the conversation. After the guests had left (early) Kristofer had again yelled at the poltergeist, calling him all sorts of names.

'What kind of names?' Wilde had asked.

'I don't remember,' said Amelie, before saying, 'I think one of them was "ghost shit".' For a day the entity was silent, and they both assumed that it had returned to Wilde's. Then, deep in the night, Amelie had found herself in the grip of a powerfully erotic dream. She'd woken to feel a weight on top of her. Her screams had woken Kristofer from a dream about salamanders and he had gone on another tirade, this time calling the spectre a 'sleep raper' and a 'death slut'. He'd demanded that the spirit leave his dwelling – adopting the quasi-mystical 'dwelling' over the usual 'house' or 'home'.

Rather than obeying, the spirit had seemed to regard this as a direct challenge and for the next few nights he'd subjected his hosts to a barrage of terrible phenomena. He'd thrown objects across the room, and tipped beds and sofas without warning – once at the climax of the movie *Knight and Day*. He'd made the walls in the AV-nook (which had just been recarpeted) run with blood. He'd taped over important family videos. He'd compelled dozens of cats to enter their dwelling. He'd opened up a vortex into which he'd cast all of Kristofer's prized albums, many from his touring days. He'd written 'ADMIT IT, YOU WANTED IT' on the steamy bathroom mirror while Amelie was showering, and for Kristofer he'd written, 'I'M THE BEST SHE EVER HAD'.

Amelie had suggested that the way to deal with the situation was to ignore him. This strategy was catastrophically unsuccessful. The entity had pushed Kristofer down the stairs, putting him into a coma from which he might not wake. Amelie had dragged him to their SUV and they'd fled the house. The media had somehow picked up on the incident and it had become a major story.

'So yes,' said Wilde, as he pulled on a sweater, 'I will need to go to the hospital.'

Wilde drove his utility vehicle at almost reckless speeds along the familiar roads that skirted the mature pine forests at the edge of Lake Hesitation. He had been meaning to go into the city anyway to have one of his woods repaired, and to purchase a hybrid club, as well as a new coaxial cable for his fox-cam. At the hospital he comforted his friend and reassured her that he'd take care of everything. Then he went out and spoke to the waiting media, still with bits of wood pulp in his hair. He explained the situation and pleaded with them to give his friends space, and not to judge the supernatural kingdom over one horrifying incident.

'Human relationships are affected by conflicting personality types. Why should this not be so with the spirit world? If I should judge all Thai people to be nefarious operators because my friend once had his passport stolen and was poisoned by a Laksa, wouldn't I be called intolerant?'

His years in Word -Masters had paid off here, he thought, and he was particularly proud of 'nefarious'.

Then he visited the house, but found no presence there.

Later that night, as he sat on the edge of his bed, marvelling at the way his knees had become as wrinkled as tissue paper, he heard the blinds flip twice. He ignored it. He picked up his slippers and put them carefully beside the bed. The lamp flashed twice.

'Well, how the hell am I supposed to forgive you, Nathan?' he asked. He had secretly named the entity. 'You sexually violated my friend and put her husband in a coma. You blew it, man. There's no going back. You're the reason people in this country are afraid of outsiders.' His home heard nothing more from the poltergeist that night, or ever again, and when his wife came in and asked who he was talking to he said, 'No one'. ◊

The police came to Wilde's house to question him about the accident, about his relationship with Kristofer and Amelie, and about an incident eleven months earlier when the two couples had been holidaying together in France and Kristofer had drunk too much. It was clear that the two officers did not believe the supernatural explanations, but it also became clear to Wilde that they didn't suspect him of hurting Kristofer. It was clear that they thought Amelie had pushed the poor man down the stairs.

Wilde visited her every week, until Kristofer came out of his coma. Kristofer had suffered permanent damage. He was able to move home, though, and Amelie gave him faultless care. She endured it all, Wilde observed, with an unnatural grace, and without once complaining or wishing things had turned out differently. She was an incredible woman, Wilde often said to himself, and once in a while he even allowed himself the brief pleasure of imagining a world in which it was her, not Olav, he had married. He disciplined himself strictly to entertain this whim just once a month, for one minute, and always without guilt. It was, he thought, a healthy amount of fantasy, and it had never affected their relationship.

One day, Wilde was visiting Amelie in her kitchen. He complained of a neck spasm he'd got from hauling branches. He immediately chastized himself for putting his small problem ahead of hers, and it was worse when she insisted on massaging his neck. Before her marriage she had been an osteopath.

Then she said, 'It's time for Kristofer's feeding,' and Wilde was shocked to see the bowl, the spoon, the greenish pulp pass across the room.

'We are together now,' she explained quietly. 'He and Kristofer had their differences, certainly, but he's by far the best lover I've ever had, and the best companion. He anticipates my needs. Plus, he's fantastic with Kristofer. I just don't know what I'd do without him.'

Wilde felt powerfully repulsed. He politely gave his thanks and left. Granted, he did not know all the details of their interactions since the accident, but it could not be healthy on any level, he thought, to form a relationship with the person who had sexually violated you, even if they aren't exactly a person, but rather a disenfranchized consciousness. He was not sure if 'disenfranchized' was the right word.

He hardly visited after that. He couldn't bring himself to make the trip over the bridge to see her. The drive around Lake Hesitation was far too fraught with anger and regret. They would chat online from time to time, but to see her in that domestic situation made him feel betrayed and, if he were honest, slightly violent.

Also, he had got a sense that he was

not welcome there. It was nothing he could put his finger on. There was a tepid bitterness to the tea that had been made for him. When he came to start his car he was almost certain that the engine had turned over a split second before he fully turned the key.

A week after one visit his woodshed had burned down, destroying part of his fox-proof fence, disabling his camera system, and leaving his property open to invasion again. He had tracked the fire to a wiring fault and was certain that the incident was fully explained. Nevertheless, it had contributed to his overall uneasiness.

Olav would visit Amelie from time to time, before she passed away from liver cancer, and she would report back on their progress as the city's most unique family unit. 'Kristofer can sit up by himself now.' 'He sleeps through the night.' 'If he's aware that his attacker is his keeper he doesn't show any sign.' 'The media have mostly gone.' 'Between Kristofer's insurance and the money Amelie got from selling her story to various media outlets, they are living very comfortably.'

Olav's voice would echo from the kitchen, transmitted to him off a series of undampened planes. Wilde would sigh as he watched the crows settle on the branches by the frozen lake. That winter was particularly harsh, the worst in almost forty years. It heaped the bay in snow, froze the lake, sent storms that brought down lines. Wilde spent three days sitting in the dark alone, once in a while lifting a slat to see if any lights were winking from across the bay.

In December he went down into his den and found a still-steaming coil of excrement upon the bar top. Deep and brassy, almost a precise match for the wood. It was not made by a fox or rabbit, or by any animal he could think of. There were no other sign of intrusion.

In January he found the fox. The sun was low and she was lying in the snow outside the fence near the big maple. Her face was set in a defiant grimace, gums pale purple and her paws were crooked, all evoking, Wilde thought, the way Hollywood directors portray the peak of transformation from the human to the wolf. He scooped the creature up with a spade before he realized that he didn't know where he was taking it. He looked back across the fence to his Timberwolf and for a second imagined the gratifying crunch, the red mist settling over the snow. He tried digging a hole for her, but the earth was frozen over. So he stood with his spade and stared out across the dead, white zone until the image was burned in his eyes and he felt the coldness reach his feet. He was an open-minded man, but there were some things in life that were difficult to fathom. ◊

The Yage Letters

Burroughs and Ginsberg take all they can

'Dear Allen,
I stopped off here to have my piles out ...'

The faint oddness of *1984*'s clocks striking thirteen; John Steinbeck's straightforward assertion at *East of Eden*'s outset: 'The Salinas Valley is in Northern California.' These are good starts, the opening lines that great novels deserve. Suitably, it is piles that set William Burroughs on his trip. Piles, and the search for Yage, a mysterious Amazonian vine reputedly imbued with healing properties (aren't they all?) that would go on to fascinate Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg for the next ten years. More than just a far-out Beat movement drug journal, however, *The Yage Letters* is a caustic travelogue – part correspondence, part collaborative fiction – that places raging political satire alongside ethno-botany. That is, until the letters descend into something else entirely.

—PAUL TUCKER

January 15, 1953
Hotel Colon, Panama

Dear Allen,

I stopped here to have my piles out. Wouldn't do to go back among the Indians with piles I figured.

Bill Gains was in town and he has burned down the Republic of Panama from Las Palmas to David on paregoric. Before Gains, Panama was a P.G. town. You could buy four ounces in any drug store. Now the druggists are balky and the Chamber of Deputies was about to pass a special Gains Law when he threw in the towel and went back to Mexico. I was getting off junk and he kept nagging me why was I kidding myself once a junkie always a junkie. If I quit junk I would become a sloppy lush or go crazy taking cocaine.

One night I got lushed and bought some paregoric and he kept saying over and over, 'I *knew* you'd come home with paregoric. I *knew* it. You'll be a junkie all the rest of your life' and looking at me with his little cat smile. Junk is a cause with him.

I checked into the hospital junk sick and spent four days there. They would only give me three shots of morphine and I couldn't sleep from pain and heat and deprivation besides which there was a Panamanian hernia case in the same room with me and his friends came and stayed all day and half the night – one of them did in fact stay until midnight.

Recall walking by some American women in the corridor who looked like officers' wives. One of them was saying, 'I don't know why but I just can't eat sweets.'

'You got diabetes, lady,' I said. They all whirled round and gave me an outraged stare.

After checking out of the hospital, I stopped off at the US Embassy. In front of the Embassy is a vacant lot with weeds and trees where boys undress to swim in the polluted waters of the bay – home of a small venomous sea snake. Smell of excrement and sea water and young male lust, No letters. I stopped again to buy two ounces of paregoric. Same old Panama. Whores and pimps and hustlers.

'Want nice girl?'

'Naked lady dance?'

'See me fuck my sister?'

No wonder food prices are high, they can't keep them down on the farm. They all want to come in the big city and be pimps.

[. . .]

I ran into my old friend Jones the cab driver, and bought some C off him that was cut to hell and back. I nearly suffocated myself trying to sniff enough of this crap to get a lift. That's Panama. Wouldn't surprise me if they cut the whores with sponge rubber.

The Panamanians are about the crummiest people in the Hemisphere – I understand the Venezuelans offer competition – but I have never encountered any group of citizens that brings me down like the Canal Zone Civil Service. You cannot contact a civil servant on the level of intuition and empathy. He just does not have a receiving set, and he gives out like a dead battery. There must be a special low frequency civil service brain wave.

The service men don't seem young. They have no enthusiasm and no conversation. In fact they shun the company of civilians. The only element in Panama I contact are the hip spades and they are all on the hustle.

Love,
Bill

March 3
Hotel Nuevo Regis, Bogota

Dear Al:

Bogota horrible as ever. I had my papers corrected with the aid of US Embassy. Figure to sue the truss off PAA for fucking up the tourist card.

I have attached myself to an expedition – in a somewhat vague capacity to be sure – consisting of Doc Schindler, two Colombian Botanists, two English Broom Rot specialists from the Cocoa Commission, and will return to the Putumayo in convoy. Will write full account of trip when I get back to this town for the third time.

As Ever,
Bill

April 15
Hotel Nuevo Regis, Bogota

Dear Al:

Back in Bogota. I have a crate of Yage. I have taken it and know more or less how it is prepared. By the way you may see my picture in *Exposure*. I met a reporter going in as I was going out. Queer to be sure but about as appetizing as a hamper of dirty laundry. Not even after two months in the brush, my dear. This character is shaking down the South American continent for free food and transport, and discounts on everything he buys with a 'We-got-like-two-kinds-of-publicity-favourable-and-unfavourable-which-do-you-want,-Jack?' routine. What a shameless mooch. But who am I to talk?

Flashback: retraced my journey through Cali, Popayan and Pasto to Mocoa, I was interested to note that Mocoa dragged Schindler and the two Englishmen as much as it did me.

This trip I was treated like visiting royalty under the misapprehension I was a representative of the Texas Oil Company travelling incognito. (Free boat rides, free plane rides, free chow; eating in the officers' mess, sleeping in the governor's house.)

[. . .]

The medicine man was around 70 with a baby smooth face. There was a sly gentleness about him like an old-time junkie. It was getting dark when I arrived at his dirt floor thatch shack for my Yage appointment. First thing he asked did I have a bottle? I brought a quart of aguardiente out of my knapsack and handed it to him. He took a long drink and passed the bottle to his assistant. I didn't take any as I wanted straight Yage kicks. The Brujo put the bottle beside him and squatted down by a bowl set on a tripod. Behind the bowl was a wood shrine with a picture of the Virgin, a crucifix, a wood idol, feathers and little packages tied with ribbons. The Brujo sat there a long time without moving. He took another long swig on the bottle. The women retired behind a bamboo partition and were not seen again. The Brujo began crooning over the bowl. I caught 'Yage Pintar' repeated over and over. He shook a little broom over the bowl and made a swishing noise. This is to whisk away evil spirits who might slip into the Yage. He took a drink and wiped his mouth and went on crooning. You can't hurry a Brujo. Finally he uncovered the bowl and dipped about an ounce more or less of black liquid which he handed me in a dirty red plastic cup. Bitter foretaste of nausea. I handed the cup back and the medicine man and the assistant took a drink.

I sat there waiting for results and almost immediately had the impulse to say, 'That wasn't enough. I need more.' I have noticed this inexplicable impulse on the two occasions when I got an overdose of junk. Both times before the shot took effect I said, 'That wasn't enough. I need more.'

Roy told me about a man who came out of jail clean and nearly died in Roy's room. 'He took the shot and right away said, "That wasn't enough" and fell on his face out cold. I dragged him out in the hall and called an ambulance. He lived.'

In two minutes a wave of dizziness swept over me and the hut began spinning. It was like going under ether, or when you are very drunk and lie down and the bed spins. Blue flashes passed in front of my eyes. The hut took on an archaic far-Pacific look with Easter Island heads carved in the support posts. The assistant was outside lurking there with the obvious intent to kill me. I was hit by violent sudden nausea and rushed for the door hitting my shoulder against the door post. I felt the shock but no pain. I could hardly walk. No coordination. My feet were like blocks of wood. I vomited violently leaning against a tree and fell down on the ground in helpless misery. I felt numb as if I was covered with layers of cotton. I kept trying to break out of this numb dizziness. I was saying over and over, 'All I want is out of here.' An uncontrollable mechanical silliness took possession of me. Hebephrenic meaningless repetitions. Larval beings passed before my eyes in a blue haze, each one giving an obscene, mocking squawk (I later identified this squawking as the croaking of frogs) – I must have vomited six times. I was on all fours convulsed with spasms of nausea. I could hear retching and groaning as if it was someone else. I was lying by a rock. Hours must have passed. The medicine man was standing over me. I looked at him for a long time before I believed he was really there saying, 'Do you want to come into the house?' I said, 'No,' and he shrugged and went back inside.

[. . .]

So here I am back in Bogota. No money waiting for me (check apparently stolen), I am reduced to the shoddy expedient of stealing my drinking alcohol from the university laboratory placed at disposal of the visiting scientist.

Extracting Yage alkaloids from the vine, a relatively simple process according to directions provided by the Institute. My experiments with extracted Yage have not been conclusive. I do not get blue flashes or any pronounced sharpening of mental imagery. Have noticed aphrodisiac effects. The effect makes me sleepy whereas the fresh vine is a stimulant and in overdose convulsive poison.

Every night I go into a cafe and order a bottle of Pepsi-Cola and pour in my lab alcohol. The population of Bogota lives in cafes. There are any number of these and always full. Standard dress for Bogota cafe society is a gabardine trench coat and of course suit and tie. A South American's ass may be sticking out of his pants but he will still have a tie.

Bogota is essentially a small town, everybody worrying about his clothes and looking as if he would describe his job as responsible. I was sitting in one of these white collar cafes when a boy in a filthy light gray suit, but still clinging to a frayed tie, asked me if I spoke English.

I said, 'Fluently,' and he sat down at the table. A former employee of the Texas Company. Obviously queer, blond, German looking, European manner. We went to several cafes. He pointed people out to me saying, 'He doesn't want to know me anymore now I am without work.'

These people, correctly dressed and careful in manner, did in fact look away and in some cases call for the bill and leave. I don't know how the boy could have looked any less queer in a $200 suit.

One night I was sitting in a Liberal cafe when three civilian Conservative gun men came in yelling 'Viva los Conservadores' hoping to provoke somebody so they could shoot him. There was a middle aged man of the type who features a loud mouth. The others sat back and let him do the yelling. The other two were youngish, ward heelers, corner boys, borderline hoodlums. Narrow shoulders, ferret faces and smooth, tight, red skin, bad teeth. It was almost too pat. The two hoodlums looked a little hangdog and ashamed of themselves like the young man in the limerick who said, 'I'll admit I'm a bit of a shit.'

Everybody paid and walked out leaving the loud mouthed character yelling 'Viva El Partido Conservador' to an empty house.

As Ever,
Bill

July 10, 1953
Lima

Dear Allen,

Last night I took last of Yage mixture I brought back from Pucallpa. No use transporting to US. It doesn't keep more than a few days. This morning, still high. This is what occurred to me:

Yage is space time travel. The room seems to shake and vibrate with motion.

The blood and substance of many races, Negro, Polynesian, Mountain Mongol, Desert Nomad, Polyglot Near East, Indian – new races as yet unconceived and unborn, combinations not yet realized passes through your body. Migrations, incredible journeys though deserts and jungles and mountains (stasis and death in closed mountain valleys where plants sprout out of your cock and vast crustaceans hatch inside and break the shell of the body), across the Pacific in an outrigger canoe to Easter Island. The Composite City where all human potentials are spread out in a vast silent market.

Minarets, palms, mountains, jungle. A sluggish river jumping with vicious fish, vast weed grown parks where boys lie in the grass or play cryptic games. Not a locked door in the City. Anyone comes in your room any time. The Chief of Police is a Chinese who picks his teeth and listens to denunciations presented by a lunatic. Every now and then the Chinese takes the tooth pick out of his mouth and looks at the end of it. Hipsters with smooth copper coloured faces lounge in doorways twisting shrunk heads on gold chains, their faces blank with an insect's unseeing calm.

[. . .]

A place where the unknown past and the emergent future meet in a vibrating soundless hum. Larval entities waiting for a live one.

William Lee

June 10, 1960
Estafeta Correo
Pucallpa, Peru

Dear Bill:

I'm still in Pucallpa – ran into a little plump fellow, Ramon Penadillo – who'd been friend to Robert Frank (photographer of our movie) in '46 or so here. Ramon took me to his Curandero – in whom he has a lot of faith and about whose supernatural powers he talks a lot, too much, about – The Maestro, as he's called, being a very mild and simple seeming cat of 38 or so – who prepared a drink for 3 of us the other night; and then last night I attended a regular curing all nite drinking session with about 30 other men and women in a hut in jungly outskirts of Pucallpa behind the gaswork field.

[. . .]

Saw a shooting star – Aerolito – before going in, and full moon, and he served me up first – then lay down expecting God knows what other pleasant vision and then I began to get high – and then the whole fucking Cosmos broke loose around me, I think the strongest and worse I've had it nearly – (I still reserve the Harlem experiences, being natural, in abeyance. The LSD was Perfection but didn't get me so deep in nor so horribly in) – First I began to realize my worry about the mosquitoes or vomiting was silly as there was the great stake of Life and Death – I felt faced by Death, my skull in my beard on pallet on porch rolling back and forth and settling finally as if in reproduction of the last physical move I make before settling into real death – got nauseous, rushed out and began vomiting, all covered with snakes, like a Snake Seraph, colored serpents in aureole all around my body, I felt like a snake vomiting out the universe – or a Jivaro in head-dress with fangs vomiting up in realization of the Murder of the Universe –

[. . .]

I hardly have the nerve to go back, afraid of some real madness, a Changed Universe permanently changed – tho' I guess change it must for me someday – much less as planned as before, go up the river six hours to drink with an Indian tribe Dr Binder says are OK – I suppose I will – meanwhile will wait here another week in Pucallpa and drink a few more times with same group – I wish I knew who, if anyone, there is to work with that *knows*, if anyone knows, who I am or what I am. I wish I could hear from you. I think I'll be here long enough for a letter to reach me – write.

Allen Ginsberg

June 21, 1960
Present Time, Pre-Sent Time
Cargo American Express
London, England

Dear Allen:

There is no thing to fear. Vaya adelante. Look. Listen. Hear. Your AYUASKA consciousness is more valid than 'Normal Consciousness'? Whose 'Normal Consciousness'? Why return to? Why are you surprised to see me? You are following in my steps. I know thee way. And yes know the area better than you I think. Tried more than once to tell you not to communicate what I know. You did not or could not listen. 'You can not show to anyone what he has not seen.' Brion Gysin For Hassan Sabbah. Listen now? Take the enclosed copy of this letter. Cut along the lines. Rearrange putting section one by section three and section two by section four. Now read aloud and you will hear My Voice. Whose voice? Listen. Cut and rearrange in any combination. Read aloud. I can not choose but hear. Don't think about it. Don't theorize. Try it. Do the same with your poems. With any poems any prose. Try it. You want 'Help'. Here it is. Pick it up on it. And always remember. 'Nothing Is True. Everything is Permitted' Last Words of Hassan Sabbah The Old Man Of The Mountain. LISTEN TO MY LAST WORDS ANY WORLD. LISTEN ALL YOU BOARDS SYNDICATES AND GOVERNMENTS OF THE EARTH. AND YOU POWER POWERS BEHIND WHAT FILTH DEALS CONSUMMATED IN WHAT LAVATORY TO TAKE WHAT IS NOT YOURS. TO SELL THE GROUND FROM UNBORN FEET. LISTEN. WHAT I HAVE TO SAY IS FOR ALL MEN EVERYWHERE. I REPEAT FOR ALL. NO ONE IS EXCLUDED. FREE TO ALL WHO PAY. FREE TO ALL WHO PAIN PAY.

WHAT SCARED YOU ALL INTO TIME? WHAT SCARED YOU ALL INTO YOUR BODIES? INTO SHIT FOREVER? DO YOU WANT TO STAY THERE FOREVER? THEN LISTEN TO THE LAST WORDS OF HASSAN SABBAH. LISTEN LOOK OR SHIT FOREVER. LISTEN LOOK OR SHIT FOREVER. WHAT SCARED YOU INTO TIME? INTO BODY? INTO SHIT? I WILL TELL YOU THE WORD THE-THEE WORD. IN THEE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD. SCARED YOU ALL INTO SHIT FOREVER. COME OUT FOREVER. COME OUT OF THE TIME WORD THE FOREVER. COME OUT OF THE BODY THEE FOREVER. COME OUT OF THE SHIT WORD THE FOREVER. ALL OUT OF TIME AND INTO SPACE. FOREVER. THERE IS NO THING TO FEAR. THERE IS NO THING IN SPACE. THAT IS ALL ALL ALL HASSAN SABBAH. THERE IS NO WORD TO FEAR. THERE IS NO WORD. THAT IS ALL ALL ALL HASSAN SABBAH. IF YOU I CANCEL ALL YOUR WORDS FOREVER. AND THE WORDS OF HASSAN

SABBAH I AS ALSO CANCEL. ACROSS ALL YOUR SKIES SEE THE SILENT WRITING OF BRION GYSIN HASSAN SABBAH. THE WRITING OF SPACE. THE WRITING OF SILENCE.

LOOK LOOK LOOK

AMIGOS MUCHACHOS A TRAVES DE TODOS SUS CIELOS VEA LA ESCRITURA SILENCIOSA DE BRION GYSIN HASSAN SABBAH. LA ESCRITURA DE SILENCIO LA ESCRITURA DE ESPACIO. ESO ES TODO TODO TODO HASSAN SABBAH

VEA VEA VEA

When will you return – ? The Cut Up Method is explained in MINUTES TO GO. Which is already out in the States. I will send you a copy but where to? George Whitman says to look up his old friend Silvester de Castro in Panama City. Connected with the municipal symphony and the University. Hasta Al Vista Amigo.

Best
William Burroughs
For Hassan Sabbah
Fore! Hassan Sabbah

PS. NO ONE IN HIS SENSES WOULD TRUST 'THE UNIVERSE'. SWEPT WITH CON THE MILLIONS STOOD UNDER THE SIGNS. WHO EVER PAID OFF A MARK A GOOK AN APE A HUMAN ANIMAL? NO BODY EXCEPT HASSAN SABBAH

August 28, 1963
San Francisco

To whom it may concern:

Self deciphers this correspondence thus: the vision of ministering angels my fellow man and woman wholly glimpsed while the Curandero gently crooned human in Ayahuasca trance-state 1960 was prophetic of transfiguration of self consciousness from homeless mind sensation of eternal fright to incarnate body feeling present bliss now actualized 1963.

Old love, as ever
Allen Ginsberg

FICTION

Ice

By Lee Henderson

The ice shelf I went to study was almost two thousand miles due north of a place like Manhattan, and roughly the same size. Don't get the picture I requested such a remote assignment. I didn't. With all I've got going on at the Alberta branch office for Northern Affairs, overseeing two dozen slatternly, distractible young career bureaucrats, plus the fact I'm an old man with an old man's point of view and a growing family of inlaws and grandchildren, it never dawned on me that out of all the other younger, more mobile, more ambitious staff available I would be singled out to survey the melting ice.

You know I'm more of an administrator these days, I explained to the committee chairman over the drinks he invited me to one evening. We were at a hotel bar in Edmonton and the wind across the parking lot outside was sending snow past the windows at a perfect horizontal. The year was 2011. I told him I hadn't been on the ice in years, not since the nineties.

But you were our unanimous choice, the committee chairman told me. As his hand squeezed my shoulder, he gave me a wink of regret that I'm sure I was supposed to interpret as congratulatory.

The committee chairman told me the deal: spend the entire summer on the glacier, write a full report of my findings as to its general condition, its beaches and its fragile terminus. That was all. Here was an even more unsacrificing environment that required my attention ahead of my petty, squabbling, vindictive and ultimately elusive family. And, really, what did I care about my selfish problems at the office? All it took was a handshake in a Four Points Sheraton and I became completely removed from all those seemingly inextricable affairs that had made my life at work and home so uninhabitable over the past few decades.

I knew going in that I would be isolated on this 4,500-year-old frozen shelf. I knew that the ice shelf was no longer needed to support any human life. The Inuits who used to hunt there every winter for hundreds of generations now found safer ways to get food than on the shelf. But it never occurred to me or obviously to anyone on the committee that the ice shelf itself might detach from the continent that summer and be set adrift, and that I would be aboard this strange island.

Take us to the second steppe, I told the pilot.

I heard him respond in my headphones: Yep, just point to the spot you want me to drop this bird.

As the helicopter peaked over the landscape before beginning its sidelong descent, I could see the ice shelf for what it was, how it spilled out from the eastern side of Baffin Island and floated out into the Davis Strait in the Arctic Ocean like a giant snow-covered Popsicle, a twin Popsicle, twice as long as its sticks. This most famous ice shelf formed south of the Iquarlirtuuq wildlife sanctuary and the Barnes ice cap, pushing snow and ice down between two Precambrian prongs of steep granite mountain, filling in the long fjords of these peninsulas with solid glacier edging further and further out into the frigid seawater, year after year, with stunning confidence and total impassability. But it was nonetheless a long Popsicle of snow and ice, even with its own mountains and valleys and lakes and rivers; wild, slushy terrain, home to fearsome, acclimatized creatures: polar bears, caribou, walrus. It was something to behold. And now the ice was falling apart.

Summer was steadily inching the temperature up to zero. All I wanted was to stake out a decent base camp, protected from polar bears. My first day I dug out a small snow shelter called a quinzee from a deep mound of hard-packed snow and made do with that and sleeplessness for the time being. Then, a day or two later as I was walking, I marvelled at a halo of blue atmospheric light in an area of the snow up a fair distance ahead, and I shoed my way towards it. I heard what I thought was laughter and watched a flock of snow geese pass overhead like men on their way to a formal ceremony. As I approached this lamplight under my feet, the sound of the snow, crunching

and squeaking with solidity as I walked, calmed me. I came to where the snow was tinged with this soft, even light, a robin's egg blue above what I took to be a good cave, and fell to my knees to listen. Recalling my young and tumble graduate school days, I thought of how at that age I would have put my shovel in right then and there. I was a safe enough distance back from the lip of the second steppe, which I noted during our landing in the helicopter was regularly calving large blocks of snow down a sheer cliff half a mile high. Here, too, the terrain was becoming craggy, but it appeared to be totally secure. With an axe I sought a nearby entrance to the cave, and within the hour had found my way down into it and learned of its true grandeur. I pegged my tent under a beautiful vaulted proscenium, as high as a Broadway stage, made of firmly packed snow and ice that was shallow enough at its ceiling to allow the nightless sky to fill the cavern with an incandescent blue, as though my new residency were submerged in a heavenly water, while all around me curtains and pillars of icicles glittered in the shadows as the cave progressed narrowly down to unknown, trickling depths. Fresh ice water drained idly from the south wall into a small bowl at one side of the cave, which I even used like a faucet and sink to wash.

I recall it was the day after I had my camp all settled and I felt prepared to do some research and reportage when I heard a crack I thought was a gunshot. Nothing moved. The report was as loud as if someone were right outside the entrance to the cave, firing a shotgun directly at me. A part of me wasn't convinced that it was a gun, even as I climbed to the surface to see who was there. Naturally, nobody was. The snow was once again a sublime blanket of silent white that not even the shadow of a single goose displaced. After a time I allowed myself to dismiss the incident and carry on with my work as if nothing major had happened, even as the shelf began to drift away from the shore.

Maybe I was too familiar with all the sounds snow can make and I wasn't sufficiently disturbed. Nothing surprised me in this ambient landscape of sere white, a lifeless white without fault or promise, blinding as fire at its horizons and monochromatic in all directions. I grew up on the northern prairies. But I knew the glacier shelf was different from land after the glacial retreat. This was a land that was not a land. An *un*landscape, more like

a mirror of the sky.

In the endless musical cycle of the seasons, the fermata of winter grows briefer every year over Earth's northern composition, I wrote in my report. *There is no rest for the ice today.* Poetry? I can only say I was lonely. On a clear, cloudless afternoon under the smouldering sun, I alone heard the old house of the ice shelf creak and groan and swell and gasp and pop and whine for hours, like it was being battered around. The north of my youth, its barrenness and silence, was replaced by the agony of constant erosion, of deep underlying tensions and humiliating collisions. The crack was only the first of many grisly noises I heard, but it was the one signalling the separation.

The committee had budgeted for a two-way radio to be my partner over the summer. It was some kind of miracle, after my stubborn colleagues and family, that I could charge my radio's electricity simply by winding it up like a pocket watch in order to listen to an hour of public broadcasts of classical music, or to call my man with the helicopter if I needed supplies or other assistance.

I said I would radio the pilot at the end of five days to give him a status update; and so not long after I heard the ice shelf break from the continent and I began, unwittingly, to sail out into the ocean, I reached my pilot and, because I had no idea anything had changed, told him my base camp was coming along fine. The weather was balmy. I didn't keep him on the line very long. I knew, besides the helicopter, the pilot also operated a bar and nightclub with live music out of a double-wide RV trailer he had plugged in at the nearby town of Pangnirtung. Pangnirtung, with its small population of Inuits, whose ancestors had lived in the area for over four thousand years, together with a few government-sent carpetbagging whites there for a season, all living in houses on piles.

Talk loud, I can hardly hear ya. Everything going according to plan out there or what? the pilot shouted. In the background on his end of the line there was much laughter and conversation and music.

Lap of luxury, I radioed back.

What's that you say?

I forgot Kit-Kats.

Kit-Kats, eh? That a favourite of yours?

Never mind, I said. I'll radio when I need fresh supplies. Bring a carton then.

I considered writing my wife a letter to send back with the pilot when he next

flew in: *I was sent against my will to the summer ice*, the letter might begin, but where would it go from there? *You left me in the winter for a hot zone*. I imagined her in her pashmina shawl and sandals, flanked by male escorts in penguin suits, standing in the middle of a million protestors in Cairo, mobilizing the women.

I did report on all the noises I heard, meanwhile, including the false gunshot. I reported that there was seldom ice floe around the shelf, just clean, clear ocean, which was tempting to swim in. I reported on all the rivers and lakes on the surface of the ice shelf and of the flumes of livid bacterial water that I saw disappear into a labyrinth of crevasses. Great lakes of fresh water were said to exist under the surface. I reported on the warm water in the potholes where I did decide to swim, and I reported on the occurrence of calving at the first and second steppes and the waterfalls that gushed down them. I also recalled how the sun careened about the sky. I chalked it up to summer at the pole and how the strange seemed ordinary here. I hadn't considered the shelf was turning. My compass was the landscape.

Day by day I was beginning to fall into a kind of easy bliss that made the hard work feel more like a vacation, hiking for hours amid cold nothingness as though in a trance, so absorbed in finding ways of articulating my impressions of this colossal, atavistic ice shelf that I forgot why I was alone. I put aside the miseries, treacherous and accidental, of home, family. I reported on and took pictures of whatever wildlife I saw, such as the birds, and I wrote a lengthy account of a solitary polar bear stranded on a nearby iceberg, like an Arctic Crusoe. The look on his face as he raised his black nose to the wind was *beyond pitiful*, I wrote, as if the polar bear was not sure whether to swim off to safety or to continue to ride the iceberg as it took him further out to sea.

Rereading this entry months later and looking at my pictures, I realized the polar bear was the one on the mainland and I was the Crusoe. I was adrift. And the look on this polar bear's face was not only pitiful, but also one of confusion – his entire kingdom sailing by, and me on it.

By the time a month had passed I was too far out to sea to reach the pilot by radio. I tried, but never with any luck. The weather was confusingly mild. The sky was a hot jellied azure without cloud. I got a tan. So I saw no reason why I couldn't get a radio signal. My porridge and other camp meals were eaten.

More than the warmth of my family, or the climate of the office I middle-managed, I found I craved a certain brand of chocolate candy-bar from the dispensing machines at the office of Northern Affairs that I hadn't thought to pack. At the same time the helicopter with my box of Kit-Kats would have been at a loss for where to land his cargo, his destination having vanished, this missing treat was all I could think about. This crispy candy-bar composed of segmented wafers coated in chocolate and separable into single finger-length sticks, which unfortunately found no equivalent in my dwindling food rations, was what I missed most about my former life. To break off and eat the Kit-Kat sticks. Instead, I was sucking on icicles and trying to slingshot a snowgoose to death.

That second month on the ice shelf made me ecstatic with the sense of adventure. Cut off from radio contact with civilization was the kind of mild threat I can say, honestly, I almost looked forward to before leaving. My rifle, and the superabundance of wildlife this time of year, made a hunt something of a non-issue, more like shopping. The ice shelf felt like a big vacation from my responsibilities at work and at home. I hardly needed sleep. The twenty-four-hour daylight on the ice shelf gave me a tireless mental endurance. After long hikes of discovery during the day, I found time to read and write in the evenings. Evenings without night. Midnight would come around and I would sit happily for hours, gulping back sealmeat and writing my thoughts out while the sun hung like a golden pendant in a rose sky, almost as cold as the sun was warm. To whomever, I wrote: *A jewelled sun frozen for hours and hours at the horizon but never touching down on to the blue velvet ice before making its ascent once more and touring the skies all day.* The Arctic solitude of never-ending daylight had its thawing effects. As I watched the rivers clumped with frazil and rime pour into the haptic sea, I didn't see it as anything more than the run-off of wild ideas passing through my mind, and the sound was just my sobs of relief. And the barnacled *Mona Lisa* faces of the grey whales as they breached in the ocean seemed to swim backwards and forwards simultaneously as thoughts tend to do; and the fat, teardrop-shaped walrus who squealed and farted and swam amok along the shores, catching fish between their whiskers, were all just my dirty thoughts during this brief fit of poetic madness in which I believed myself to be a kind of Shackleton of the mystical North.

So it was unbeknown to me that I was aboard a giant iceberg, moving steadily out to sea with every uncounted minute. The metallic blue waves I photographed and reported on were not lapping at a stationary coastline, as I assumed, but the sides of an enormous ocean-going vessel the seals were chasing after.

At the outset I knew there was no doubt the steppes were of importance to my report. There was no way for me to tell beforehand in what precise way the steppes would influence my report and so I spent much of my time obsessing over them, fearing them, even while my original assignment became irrelevant.

All I knew was that I needed to see the northern shores of the third steppe or the committee would find my report incomplete. Each steppe was itself the result of an immense quake along three fault lines that had appeared in the last decade of the twentieth century, going straight across the shelf east to west. The quake had created sheer cliffs that dropped nearly a mile and, after years of good sun, ran raggedly and serrated and with waterfalls, like three chipped-tooth stairs for an ice giant, mountains forming and vanishing at an accelerated pace.

The third and last steppe I feared the most and avoided the longest as it was the closest to sea level. Its drop into the ocean was less sheer and more sloped as its terminus collapsed into a thick slushy floe of sticky water called polynya, where thousands of puzzle pieces of runaway iceberg loitered. On the third steppe, temperatures in the winter plummeted to 70 degrees Celsius below zero. Nothing moves. The day I chose to make my first visit I wanted the weather to be below zero and not warmer. I did not want to encounter any sinkholes or avalanches.

It would have been years ago as a bachelor, when I was doing field work

in the North, that I first witnessed the Northwest Passage when it was frozen over. Millions of acres of frozen ocean joined with the last steppe of the ice shelf, flat and white for hundreds and hundreds of kilometres to the horizon just as I remembered winter in the prairies, where I was raised. Snow-blanketed waves, frozen as they stood. Long, flat slabs of ice like billiard's tables broken into pieces of snow called firn. Firn like untouched children's playgrounds. Firn like the walls of motels or prisons. Open holes in the firn near the floe edge where narwhal and orca came up to breathe. Then, early spring and the first floating pancake ice, then slush, the polynya gluing together the icebergs. Some icebergs I saw grew to the height of skycrapers, as manifold in design as military citadels, and among their flotsam, thousands of smaller icicled snow gazebos emerged, hundreds and thousands of neighbourhoods made of ice floating precariously on top of the sea. And for the imaginary man here to report on nothing and able to endure the lunar temperatures of winter, the narrow pathways ferruled mazelike through snowdrift valleys in a forbidding white world. A world unknown even to itself, and every year anew. By summer this elaborate outer sheath of ice got dashed and broken apart and slushed away by the sun.

As the walrus and seals and whales and birds arrived, I watched as, like a vagabond ghetto, shattered parts of the ice floe set off in smaller and smaller groups with icebergs disappearing into the chopping waters until once again only the ice shelf remained. Locked to our continent since the Ice Age, its shape has remained relatively constant until recently. Now even the core was fading.

I used to still meet smiling families of Inuit who thrived off the preserves of the ice shelf, camping near the areas that melted early and exploiting the breaking floe. I always wondered how the Inuit stayed so much in love in such small dwellings under these harsh conditions and pitiless terrain, when my own family still found it so hard with all our good fortune to agree where in the world we should all meet.

At some hour during the continuous stretch of day that was mid July on the ice shelf I cut off my beard and washed my sweaters, and, feeling determined to set out for the third steppe, I charged up my radio and for hours and hours all I did was listen to the waves of static or asked if anyone could hear me when I spoke into the microphone.

When the radio was turned off or uncharged I often sat and talked to the radio regardless. In time I saw more and more face in that radio, and less and less radio. Two speakers like bug eyes on either end, in between them a channel dial that was a long mouth full of teeth, and a string of buttons under a knob you twisted that made an almost perfect nose and moustache. I mused over my radio's face for lack of a moon in the sky.

Isolation provides a person with a startlingly clear picture of their own inner landscape, I told the silent, uncharged radio, as we assayed the uniformly white surface of the ice shelf from the peak of base camp.

I feel comfortable around you like I can tell you anything, the uncharged radio told me.

I never considered suicide, but I have dreamed of a place where I could not exist. Now look where I am. Nowhere and nothing, I said with a shiver.

People respect me, the uncharged radio confessed, but inside I feel like a total fraud.

Am I better off alone here instead of taking care of business back in Edmonton?

I faint at the sight of rust, so if you see any corrosion don't say a word to me, OK? said the uncharged radio. Just promise me you'll do something about it if you can.

Man versus environment, that's what it all boils down to, doesn't it? I said.

Radio versus man, the radio said.

Is that how you feel? I asked.

Don't listen to me, the radio said, I don't know what the hell I'm talking about.

So I shut up, too, turned the radio on, and dialled around to various stations of white noise hoping to find anything – classic rock, Russian news – until both the radio and I fell asleep.

My style was nothing heroic: I roped off every fifty metres as I approached the cliffs of the third steppe, so that when I fell down an icy fissure hidden under a layer of snow as thin and crumbling as store-bought biscuit soaked in tea, I dangled by my harness with a chance of surviving. Pulling myself up from the chasm took the better part of an afternoon, and when I got to the top I wept and dry-heaved for what seemed to be the first beautiful minutes of darkness and stars since I had arrived.

By the time I reached the jagged, messy terminus of the third steppe I was snow-blind and exhausted from panic, and I thought I might find some shelter in one of the weather-formed quinzees. Who knows how long I was out. I awoke blearily, starved, and pushed back out into the wind and sunlight to the shore to kill something. The ground here was sinewed by miles and miles of melt-ice lakes festooned by phytoplankton in blooms as thick and green as pea soup. As a graduate student I came here to study these cyanobacterial mat communities, and my predictions for their influx sounded almost satirically dire then, but still what lay before me now was starker. Today these pools stretched across the ice like psychotic stab wounds, sinking hundreds of feet under the surface. Strewn along the edges of these snaking ponds were the remains of thousands of broken shells of dead pteropods. After my first visit I named them 'potato chips of the sea' for how popular and abundant these tiny winged snails were as a basic food for so many ocean-going species.

I used to call this place Qigiktaaluk, but now I just called it Baffin. I was standing up to my knees in a frosty cove of murky green waves and dead snails, all set up to shoot the prettiest little grey and white spotted sea lion for dinner. when a hand came down on my shoulder that for all my wits I could have sworn was the hand of the Northern Affairs' committee chairman's, and froze me solid.

Don't move, he said. He took my rifle from my shoulder and turned me around so that I could see who I was dealing with.

You can come with us, the man said. He wasn't the committee chairman at all, thank God, but nevertheless someone of his seniority. We just loaded up if you're hungry, the man added.

He backed away a few feet and I got a look at his sun-reddened cheeks and nose, and his wild white eyebrows hung down over his wire-frame glasses like icicles, and his old watery blue eyes shimmered cloud-

ily with grey and pink muscles like they were fish eyes. There was a dent in his chin so deep it looked as though he had lost part of it to frostbite. His jacket was what he obviously thought was a cool combination of black parka and animal skins. He wore frayed acid-wash denim cut-off shorts, and his pale pink knees had knuckles like worn-out fists, and his feet were shoved bare into black spiked work-boots. Along with my rifle he carried his own store-bought poleaxe. Fit, hale, unprepossessing, and standing right in front of me, he looked my age. He was a lot older. He had on a pair of self-shading bifocals, which he pushed up the bridge of his nose as a matter of habit. Behind him I saw there were another five or six others, men and women of various ages, dressed in similar make-do wardrobes from the shambles of mountaineering and hunting expeditions, updated with ragged skin and furs, bone and baleen. Carrying animals from a hunt. And all wearing glasses. I was wearing my own prescription self-shading lenses.

Let's go, show you the way, he said.

I need to get my radio, I said, with a thumb pointed to the second steppe.

Never mind your radio, the man said. That's old news. You're here now, might as well get a last look for yourself.

At what?

What you're here to see, right? The terminus.

I fell in line with the others as the old man showed us all, single file, back up through the crag via ice switchbacks that led away from the shore, out of the cavity of this hulking ruin of snow and ice, to where I'd sheltered. Now the colours in the ice shelf ran from blue to blood-red as the sun skated sickeningly low against the lip of the horizon.

You're not Inuits, are you? I asked.

The old man eyed me. You expect to find us speaking extinct languages, talking about the sun as though he were our uncle. And here I go and tell you *we are you* – some of us are Aboriginal, but we are *all* scientists. All called to report on the condition of the terminus on the third steppe of the ice shelf.

My name's Doctor Gavin Stott, I said.

He said his name was Craig and he was from Minot, North Dakota. But some of us, he said, like Lucy Peltier and Oscar Weaver, are more your locals.

I recognize the names Peltier and Weaver, I said. Aren't they glaciologists?

Craig said: Peltier came at glaciers via atmospheric physics, I believe. And Weaver is a geodynamic modeller specializing in palaeoclimatology. I am the plain old glaciologist around here. Don't want to admit it, said Craig, but I still recall '92 as the year of my lucky third wedding. What a sylph. Half my age with a doctorate in cryosphere-hydrosphere-lithosphere interactions, eh. Please imagine how happy I was. Thought I was dead in heaven. Then came 1993 and the triple quake on the ice shelf gets me sent here from Northern Affairs to scribble a few words. What a load of dung.

I told him I had come before to visit in the 1970s and uttered a few non-committal words of my own about where I was the year of his report's deadline.

We all got jobs in '93. Some better than others, the man said, and started walking ahead of me, a good lead of ten steps with no apology. I had to follow trying not to look as if I intended to catch up with him.

On average I'd say you happen twice every year. I come across a professional trekker with her sunburnt nose pointed to the third steppe, drunk-stepping snow-blind and about to die. And did you see? We broke off from the mainland in June and are now drifting south-east.

I did not know that, I said, and took a deep breath. But now that you mention it, that would explain some mysterious things.

Yes, starting with a great cracking sound like a canon blast in your backyard?

Yes, I said . . . and that, too. That, too.

Many hours later I was staring into the spectacle of the little fire burning inside Craig's shelter, thinking about home. Our dinner had been around a large camp table inside a stretched igloo the group had built for communal meals. I drank

a boiling cup of fish soup or two and ate my fill of caribou. The conversation was all about the fact we were floating out to sea, and where possibly to. Some of the scientists imagined us docking at Ellis Island, or down the Rideau, or as far south as the Panama Canal. No one seemed to show any fear, however, that we were going to sink. After a dessert of candied Arctic char, Craig invited me to come join him and some others to sit by the firepit in his beautifully done quinzee. These yurts, snow burrows, and firn-made geodomes they inhabited were all thrown together by a fierce winter I knew to have a recombinant power the likes of Libeskind or Gehry. The third steppe was a panorama of a million panes of shattered firn ice, firn ice all covered in a thick coat of rimely snow, as if a mammoth snow-made tower had imploded here, and under this concrete-like debris was hidden a community of natural quinzees inhabited by a dozen or more people, each hovel appearing behind a different entryway.

Craig's was a spacious 1,100-square-foot cabin of slabs of firn with a loftspace designed with a king-sized bed, and a firepit in the centre of the living room on the main floor. I watched single particles of snow fall through the man-made vent in the ceiling above the fire as though the stars I could not see in the blue sky were dropping one by one from the heavens.

My children were spectres in the fire and my grandchildren the yellow and orange sparks tossed upwards to kiss the blue-snow ceiling of Craig's shelter, and now and again I saw my wife in the embers. Here was my family, without a shared continent between us. A wife on the streets of Egypt leading the charge of a women's rights foundation, followed everywhere by her male secretaries, her suffering lovers. Oldest child stationed by an NGO in Lima, another consulting on pollution in Tokyo and Yokohama and living in Seoul, a third teaching First Nations languages at Oxford. Could I say I was proud, even if none of us got along?

Is that your stomach? Are you still hungry? Craig asked me.

Opposite. Stuffed, I said, and shifted my weight back on my haunches, looking around the large enclosed space to compliment him on the layout and the tools hanging from the walls. Ice tools, which I pictured hanging from the belts of the scientists, before they joined Craig.

How much time do you figure we have till the ice shelf melts? I asked.

Craig sat up straight on his bench, crossed his arms and said: All depends where we sail. We seem to be moving at a fair clip. Third steppe is the worst for wear. Comes to it, we relocate the group to the first steppe where the ice is thicker. The latest estimates say the ice runs more than a thousand metres deep, as in double the height of the World Trade Center. So, any predictions how long we last?

Not me, I said.

Craig thumb-picked his nostrils clean. We might get lucky, he said, and moor nearby off some other peninsula and live out the rest of our lives as if nothing ever happened.

That's true, I said, and then thinking of something else to say, I added: Oh, I thought I might get my rifle back from you now.

Craig eyed me from under his glasses, not unfriendly-like. And with a voice full of a courteous sarcasm that I know us geoscientists save for dealing with bureaucrats, finally said: If I give you back your rifle, how can I be sure you won't for some reason turn it against me, or any one of us?

I looked at the old man and said: Because that would be murder, Craig. I'm not a murderer. I'm a climatologist.

Craig nodded and sucked his bottom lip. The firelight and shadowplay across the features of his face made him look ancient and guru. I'm glad to hear you feel that way, I am. But I still won't give you back your rifle, I'm sorry. It's just too valuable for the community to risk losing.

But it's my rifle. Where am I going to go now?

The man who sat down beside me in Craig's quinzee might have been forty at the outside, but he was so big and weatherbeaten he looked my age. His head was tanned beyond expression, bald up top until hair started growing again behind his ears; it was styled in a dark grey beaver-tail dreadknot that flapped against his back and smelled strongly of road tar. He was tall and slope-shouldered, the shape of an atom bomb, and wore a Rolling Stones T-shirt. His bare arms were that prickly gooseflesh of someone who can tolerate the chill because of obesity. Moreover, he was knackered, with purple bags under his eyes. I asked if he was my guard and he told me I wasn't a prisoner any more than he was. I asked if he had a Kit-Kat then. He told me he wished. I have one cigarette left, he said, and showed me. So we went outside to smoke it and watch the sun break out from behind a foreshortened thundercloud.

He told me he was a radiocarbon dater and when he accepted the assignment to come here he was acting chair of his department at a prestigious university in the city of Waterloo. At the time of his departure, he said his oldest child was a car thief and his wife had just left him for someone she met going to AA.

I nodded my head. OK, go on, I said. Now I get you.

The radiocarbon dater told me how he had been assigned by Northern Affairs to come to the ice shelf and report on what he discovered, but when he got here he found the same thing I did: Craig.

In college we never learned about 1978, when the first glaciologist, Dr Baruch Craig, was sent to the shelf, he told me.

I'm Gavin Stott, I said, and put out my hand. I'm a good old climatologist.

The radiocarbon dater shook my hand and said: Stott. Oh, OK, I've heard of you. I'm Keeling. Vincent Keeling.

Keeling. The name rang bells. I looked at his face more closely for the imprint of familiarity, something that might anaesthetize me to the sight of that asphalt blob of dread dangling off the back of his sweat-ringed neck and proposing to be his hair.

Here comes Peltier, I'll introduce you, Keeling said. She was my thesis advisor when I studied in Helsinki.

But just as Keeling began to open up a discussion, Peltier ran right past us, shouting: Airplanes!

Now I saw other residents of the third steppe ducking into the nearest quinzees for cover. I heard the screams of two jets incoming and the upset climatologists around me only made me want to smile. I wondered if my helicopter pilot was among the search party flying above us. Keeling took one last haul and gave me the roach end of his cigarette. Before running off he put a hand on my shoulder and, with a wink I took to be commiserating, said: Finish it off.

I hid under the ice. ◊

LET US GET SOME ACTION FROM...

The Five Dials Back Section

ILLUSTRATION BY NEAL JONES

This Particular Back Section May Include The Following Elements:

- The Best Bit
- ☑ On Something
- ☑ Food and Drink
- ☑ How It Gets Down
- I Knew Nothing
- The Serial
- Five Minutes to Midnight

PLUS OUR SPECIAL BONUS SECTION:
LUKE DAVIES — A VERY AUSTRALIAN APOCALYPSE
ASHLEY HAY — LORCA'S LOST POEM
JOSEPHINE ROWE – ON THE PREMIUM SOLUTION

On Kate Bush

Katherine Angel listens to a voice of uncomfortable beauty

⋆ ⋆ ⋆ ⋆

Heroes: defiant, individual, courageous.

⋆ ⋆ ⋆ ⋆

I have an ambivalent relationship to the things I love, to the heroes – the writers, artists, musicians – I worship. I skirt around them with some kind of discomfort. I close my eyes to the whole oeuvre: I like to leave something remaining, something unknown. I like to know there is something left over, something I have not yet encountered.

My hero-worship is sullen, blinkered – a little phobic. I don't quite know why.

It might be because I want to save something for later – to eke a pleasure out.

It might be because I fear disappointment. Perhaps I have found the apotheosis of what they do – and so I fear the deflation of their work in encountering some inferior part of it.

Or it might be because the currency they deal in – the stuff of their work – is so challenging that I have to dispense it to myself in carefully controlled ways.

⋆ ⋆ ⋆ ⋆

There is something about Kate Bush's voice – her physical voice, as well as her voice in a literary sense – that has often struck me as heroic. Heroic because it is reckless, stubborn. She seemed to emerge, as a teenager, almost wildly confident, staggeringly daring.

Her early, young voice has often been described as shrill. It has a bird-like clarity, but one tinged with a nasal overtone, which makes it both beautiful and slightly uncomfortable. But from the very beginning, her voice – again, both her actual voice and her literary, musical voice; the sensibility she offered up – were experimental, and utterly indifferent to audience. In *The Kick Inside*, her 1978 debut album, she was already playing and teasing with what her voice could do. In 'Wuthering Heights', her lifelong flirtation with Elvis is already manifest: when she sings 'Heathcliff, my only master', her voice dips down and up again, and she fills the cavity of her mouth with air to hint at that Elvis tic which was itself a kind of flirtatious, camp reference to the swooping lines of an operatic tenor. (She has said of 'King of the Mountain', a song on *Aerial*, released in 2005, that addresses Elvis, she was trying to mimic aspects of his voice.)

In that first album, she was already pushing her voice, testing what it could do.. *The Kick Inside* announced something crucial to Bush: her voice wears its body on its sleeve. You can hear the workings of her organs, the rearrangement of her component parts. In 'L'Amour Looks Something Like You', in her striving for the extremities of the her voice, she lets you hear its workings; in the swooping octaves – again, the operatic Elvis is here – you can sense her pushing down on her diaphragm; her voice alerts you to its physical labour. Kate Bush, from the very start, didn't care how the experiments she enacted on her voice might be registered in the listener. She just played, and pushed.

⋆ ⋆ ⋆ ⋆

But then heroes can also be demigods, belonging in two worlds at once (at least). Partly here, partly elsewhere; made up of many things, human, animal, divine. Liminal, crossing thresholds.

⋆ ⋆ ⋆ ⋆

Bush's work is full of transformations, of metamorphoses. She is animal and bird and woman and child and man all at once. These things erupt out of her across all the albums. Her voice is hysterical, malleable, the stuff of dreams but also of nightmares. She pushes it to the edge of discomfort. It is immensely playful, and it's also somewhat frightening.

In 'James and the Cold Gun', still in that youthful *Kick Inside*, a repetitive background riff towards the end of the song – something like 'Ja-Ja-Ja-mes-a-hee-ya' – in a high-pitched voice that rises halfway through the phrase to a peaking, slightly disgusted squeal. It is as if she feels unwell and also has her teeth bared. In 'Them Heavy People', she sings 'Rollin-a-rollin-a-rollin-ah' and again she becomes, for a second, a strange creature making a not quite human sound. She is not fully animal. But if she is fully human, she is slightly demented. Somewhat possessed, though it's not clear what by.

The playfulness, and the metamorphoses, find their most intense fruition in *The Dreaming* of 1982. Here, her voice plays with persona, and with gender – for instance in 'There Goes a Tenner', where a girly 'oh oh oh' is in counterpoint with a more masculine, again Elvis-y, 'We're waiting'. In 'Sat in Your Lap' she is in distinctly ironic mode, dramatizing herself: 'Just when I think I'm king, I must admit'; you can hear a self-mocking expression wrap itself around her mouth. This album sees her stretching her voice in ways that are almost frightening: who is she? King, not Queen. Whose voice is this?

Bush was experimental with form, with extraordinary instrumentation and orchestration, but also with the core of her voice itself. She is interested in what a voice is, and what it can do. She uses her voice like an instrument to rend and tear, to sometimes painful effect. There are places where she inhabits a deeply uncomfortable space between singing and screaming – in 'Suspended in Gaffa', and 'Leave It Open', where she becomes a rabid, masculine machine, spitting out the word 'harm'. And then, just when you think the song has become as strange as it could be, she pushes it further; she becomes animal: a donkey – and elsewhere on the album, a herd of sheep.

In 'Houdini', she sings yet again on the raspy, uncomfortable edge of her voice, before it reaches a scream. It's painful, you almost want her to break into a full scream – it would be a release. This nearly happens in 'Get Out of My House.' And yet it's not quite there; it's profoundly ambiguous. The threat of disintegration, however, is always there, hovering flirtatiously, dangerously.

⋆ ⋆ ⋆ ⋆

The kind-of-scream is something Kate Bush has in common with Prince, who worked on her 1993 album *The Red Shoes*. Prince loves to scream – he really loves to scream – and he does so to electrifying effect in 'Purple Rain' and 'The Beautiful Ones'. Like Bush, he uses the entire scope of his voice as an instrument: to play, and almost to abuse. They are both fearless with respect to the strangeness and power of the human voice – as a physical phenomenon, a tool that can produce sounds, but also as a means of conveying something, in particular the beauty of what is frightening, what is unpleasant.

Kate Bush and Prince both do this harmonically, structurally, instrumentally and rhythmically. Their music is full of rupture, of abrupt shifts, of irresolution. They embrace the form and want to test and break it at the same time. They tease you with pure pop conventions, which they then pull into painful corners. If pop is their material, they lean in against it, hard. When I listen to 'Purple Rain', to 'U Got the Look', to 'Let's Go Crazy', to 'Little Red Corvette', I see fabric being torn, pulled, stretched; I feel something being wrung out of something else. It's exhilarating, and it's almost too much.

* * * *

Listening to *Purple Rain* and *The Dreaming* again, writing this, I remembered some words from Richard Holmes's *Footsteps: Adventures of a Romantic Biographer*, where he describes his journey as a young man through France, retracing R. L. Stevenson's own steps:

> I woke at 5 a.m. in a glowing mist, my green sleeping-bag blackened with the dew, for the whole plateau of the Velay is above two thousand feet. I made a fire with twigs gathered the night before, and set water to boil for coffee, in a petit pois tin with wire twisted round it as a handle. Then I went down to the Loire, here little more than a stream, and sat naked in a pool cleaning my teeth. Behind me the sun came out and the woodfire smoke turned blue. I felt rapturous and slightly mad.

In Prince's music, pleasure becomes pain; and pain, pleasure. In Kate Bush's, what is human is animal; and animal, human. Madness, moreover, is pleasure, and pleasure almost mad. These states are never far away from one another; and in this alarming, demanding music, the pleasures and the frustrations of trying to express ourselves – the unsettling places inside us, and the transformations that can happen there – are at the centre of the work. It's what makes the music never-ending, never closed, an entirely open system. It's what makes it rapturous and slightly mad. ◊

FOOD AND DRINK

The Shameful Breakfast of Sonic Youth

By Paul Ewen

At my leaving drinks, my maître d' (who'd had a few) admitted that I really was one of the worst waiters the hotel had ever employed. But, she confessed, the management all agreed that my application letter remained the most extraordinary the company had ever received.

Noahs was a five-star hotel in Christchurch, the largest city on the South Island and the second most populous in New Zealand. I'd come to the 'big smoke' to study, arriving fresh from a rural town called Ashburton, population 15,000. When I say 'fresh', read 'naïve'.

Shy and sensitive types will always be crushed by the service industry. University may have opened my mind to many great things, but my hospitality job taught me a lot about human nature. It's fair to say I've been scared of people ever since. My role consisted primarily of serving breakfast in the brasserie. Occasionally I would also be pulled on to the longer lunch and dinner shifts, which meant even more people, more courses and more stress. The hotel attracted guests with a combination of money, status and power. The majority of these had only the money part, but I suppose their status was inferred by staying in the flash hotel, and they could exercise power by reproaching service staff like me. And they did. They would scold me. The most frequent reprimands came from the American guests. Perhaps they found my mild, unassertive manner not to their liking. My frightened eyes possibly disturbed them, and maybe I bowed too low, and too often. Many were of retirement age, travelling in package groups, and they had very specific ideas about how breakfast should be served in New Zealand: exactly like breakfast was served in the United States. If coffee cups weren't filled immediately, their owners would start bubbling up like the very coffee pots they sought. Crispy bacon was also very important. In New Zealand it's traditional to eat bacon cooked in large flat strips or rashers. But our American guests insisted on overcooked bacon, shrivelled up into curly bits of crunchy charcoal.

'That'll kill you, that stuff,' I thought about saying, but of course I didn't, no freaking way.

The name of the brasserie was 'Brogues', which was humiliating in itself. My uniform included a green polo shirt with 'Brogues' written on it, in a style similar to the logo from the American sitcom *Cheers*. I wore smart black trousers, black shoes (not brogues), and an olive-green apron that wrapped around my waist like a cummerbund. My hair, which was long at the time, was pulled back severely for hygiene reasons. I looked rather prissy, and if any of my friends ever popped by, they'd say, 'CHECK OUT THAT DICKHEAD!'

Folding napkins didn't help. They had to be folded in a florid style, so the cutlery could be inserted inside, as if in a little bed. But perhaps worst of all was the restaurant music. It wasn't 'piped', like muzak. Rather, it played through a stereo, on CDs. Those CDs were:

Fleetwood Mac – *Greatest Hits*
Simply Red – *Stars*
George Michael – *Listen Without Prejudice*

I remember them well because they were played over and over and over again.

Sometimes now, when I see a pretty folded napkin, I think of those songs and I weep into that napkin.

Not all our guests found me offensive. The Japanese honeymooners were shy and timid too. And the local nightclub staff, arriving straight from their late shifts, clearly appreciated the soft approach after their heavy nights. Another sort of guest was also sympathetic: the ones with the money, the status *and* the power. For the most part, the famous guests were actually rather lenient to the worst waiter in the Southern Hemisphere.

Owing to our isolation on the South Island, on the other side of the world, a visiting celebrity was a massive deal. Many touring acts only stopped at Auckland; most never got beyond Sydney. So those who went the distance and ventured all the way to Christchurch were exalted all the more. The Queen and the Pope both dropped by, which was massive. Various overseas sporting teams visited too, although our local players were generally regarded as the world's finest, full stop.

Fortunately for me, many of the stars I admired were alternative musicians, modest enough to accommodate their far-flung fans. Billy Bragg, De La Soul, The Mad Professor, African Head Charge, Pop Will Eat Itself, Pavement, Fugazi: these were some of the acts I was grateful to experience in Christchurch. On one occasion, on my way into a gig, I saw a sign outside which had been altered to read: NO HOUSIE TONIGHT. FAITH NO MORE.

My interest in alternative music was heightened by my other day job. After serving breakfast, in between lectures, I worked at student radio. Occasionally some of the bands would drop by the station for an interview. Of course, I wasn't asked to interview any of them. Not even the New Zealand ones. Maybe I made them some coffee, because I was good at that. Still, it gave me a small connection with their worldly scene. The more established acts often stayed at Noahs, and if they happened to be on my section for breakfast, I'd experience an even closer connection with them, but it was a terrible one.

Both Billy Bragg and the Violent Femmes have reason to feel short-changed by the service of their coffee/breakfast in Christchurch. Perhaps they remember the awkwardness, the shame. But despite my admiration for these acts, which only accentuated my anxiety and desperation, my worst heroic encounter was with some genuine rock gods. When the members of Sonic Youth were put on my section, I almost did a wee beneath my apron.

It was the morning after their gig, which took place on 12 February 1993, some twenty years ago. The band was on their 'Pretty Fucking Dirty' tour, and after discreet enquiries with the front desk, the news that they were staying with us was confirmed. This stirred emotions in me of both excitement and exquisite terror.

The Theatre Royal, New Zealand's sole surviving and operating Edwardian theatre, was a Christchurch institution. I'd seen Billy Bragg perform there, the Violent Femmes, Midnight Oil, and even Julian Clary on his 'Glittering Passage' tour. Sonic Youth were supported by a terrific Dunedin band, The Dead C, and understandably, the crowd were very excited. A student radio acquaintance managed to drop from the upper tier of the theatre on to the middle tier before clambering across the box seat, jumping on to the huge stage speakers and then dropping down on to the stage, evading security by leaping into the mosh pit. It was a most impressive feat. Later, singer/bassist Kim Gordon had to tell those in the mosh pit to calm down after they tried to mount the stage. In fairness to the crowd, she had just played her bass guitar, laid flat on the stage, with her stiletto heel. I think the song was 'Dirty Boots'.

Who knows what time I got home, but I had to be up again at 5 a.m., ready to start work at 6. Feeling hung-over never did my nerves much good with all those clattering cups and spoons, nor with the engine of my tinny 50cc scooter, which I parked opposite the hotel, beside the picturesque Avon River. As I pulled on my smart black trousers, I was probably retching at the thought of over-easy eggs.

Thankfully, the members of Sonic Youth weren't early risers. Even though they had to fly to Wellington to perform again that very night, they still managed to have a sleep-in, probably after going ballistic at some after-gig party. If it were me, I would have ordered room service, but perhaps the breakfast cards had already been collected from the door handles by the time they crashed in at some ungodly hour. Thurston Moore turned up to the brasserie first, and the other members, rather than getting their own tables on other sections, all joined him in my zone.

My retired American guests were hard work, but Sonic Youth were from New York, which I'd heard was the hardest town in America. A friend had recently visited there, and told me of an encounter he'd had emerging from a subway station. Completely lost, he was relieved to see a NYC cop nearby and approached him, politely asking for directions. The cop, who was wearing mirrored sunglasses, said,

'DO I LOOK LIKE A FUCKING TOURIST MAP?'

Sonic Youth had the word 'fucking' in their tour name. If I messed up their bacon, maybe they would stab me.

When I wasn't at work, my long hair would be my stage curtains, which I'd close and hide behind. But when it was pulled back in a ponytail, the stage curtains were drawn and I was exposed. Just after Thurston Moore arrived, my maître d' found me hiding behind the bar.

'What are you doing?'

'Can we change the CD?' I implored her.

'Why?'

'Because that guy at Table 14 is from Sonic Youth!'

'What the heck is Sonic Youth?'

'It's a band! From New York! They're on their "Pretty Fucking Dirty" Tour! And we're playing "Father Figure"'!

When I approached Thurston Moore with the coffee pot, I must have looked like a sparrow with broken wings. Placing his filled cup back on the table, I dislodged his cereal spoon, which went clattering over the polished wooden floor.

'I'll get you another one,' I bleated.

'It'll be fine,' he said.

But I dashed off to the cutlery drawer, returning with a new gleaming spoon.

'Around here they like everything to be pretty fucking clean,' I peeped.

Kim Gordon didn't say much, either. She had replaced her stiletto boots with trainers, or sneakers as we called them then. Soon afterwards Lee Ranaldo joined the table. They weren't sitting in the same positions as their stage set-up. Thurston

Moore was on the bench seat at the back, where Steve Shelley the drummer should have been, but he hadn't even turned up. Kim Gordon was at the back of the table too. She should have been on the other side, at the front, ideally with Thurston Moore and Lee Ranaldo at either end. Lee Ranaldo, who was on one of the front chairs, held his glass out for some water, so I poured from a large jug. Just before it reached an acceptable level, near the top, a large cluster of ice tipped into the glass, causing it to overflow and cascade on to his crotch. My attempts to dab the water with a napkin were politely rebuffed. So I ran away, my forehead sweat dripping into the jug, melting the rest of the ice.

My maître d' had let the George Michael CD play out to its natural ending, and after a wondrous spell of silence, Simply Red kicked in with 'Something Got Me Started'. I cowered over the condiments dresser, silently thumping myself in the face.

If the other customers noticed Sonic Youth, they probably thought they reflected badly upon the restaurant, perhaps later describing it as 'shabby' in their guest comments. But for now, they were simply feeling neglected, wondering where their meals were, why their coffee cups were empty. I wanted to tell them about the people on Table 14, how the Theatre Royal had thumped and heaved the previous night, how they'd missed an amazing gig stuck back here, probably complaining about the lack of TV channels, or sleeping noisily due to respiratory problems. But instead I simply bowed all the lower, scuttling between tables with an inane smile, like Manuel from *Fawlty Towers*.

Sonic Youth didn't glass me, or spoon me in the guts. When I apologized for the music, I thought I might even get a laugh, but I didn't. There were no further incidents, although their serving plates rattled like anything when I shunted them away.

After my shift I left my scooter and wandered the streets in a daze. At some point I found a public bar and settled in. Later that night my parents were called by the police to say that my scooter had been pulled out of the Avon River, just near where I'd parked it, but no body had been recovered.

NOTE

On 22 February 2011, Christchurch was struck by a 6.3-magnitude earthquake that severely damaged the city and killed 185 people. My parents lost supporting walls to their house, and my mother was hit by falling masonry and hospitalized. The Theatre Royal was significantly damaged and is currently closed until the second quarter of 2014 for repairs. Noahs Hotel (later renamed Rydges) received only superficial damage, but because of its position in the 'drop zone' of less safe buildings nearby, it remains closed too.

Billy Bragg returned to the city post-earthquake, holding a benefit concert at Burnside High School. For the most part, however, the people of Christchurch feel more isolated than ever. ◊

HOW IT GETS DONE

Peter Stamm

The author of Seven Years *on his latest story collection,* We're Flying *– plus modern life, beautiful sentences, and the artistic necessity of unfulfilled sex. Interview by* ANNA KELLY

In We're Flying, *we meet many characters whose lives seem characterized by a sort of oppressive mental weight, and who seem to be doing anything but flying. Why did you choose this title for the collection?*

To me flying means not only to be free like a bird, but also to be insecure, in danger, not to be grounded. So it's a positive and a frightening thing at the same time. I think that most of my characters are somehow detached from their lives and are hoping to fly away, and also to find a place to land.

Your character in 'Go Out into the Fields . . .' is a painter who is asked by a little boy why he is painting. For the painter this is 'the most terrible of questions'. Why do you write?

Dürrenmatt used to answer this question by saying 'for professional reasons', but that's probably a bit too easy. I guess there is in many people a wish or a will to oppose an inexplicable and often confusing reality by using something they have made themselves. Writing is a way of creating order and meaning by giving form to a piece of reality. And then it's also fun to play God, as an author friend of mine called it. That's just three of many possible answers.

Was that a terrible question?

No, I think it's a question every artist is constantly asking him or herself. The only terrible thing about it is that it's so hard to answer.

Your characters and their lives seem closely related to the spaces in which they live. Claustrophobic urban apartments, remote dwellings in mountain villages – in one case a forest. Do your characters have something to show us about life as you observe it in particular places in Switzerland today or are their preoccupations expressive of modern life in general?

I think the latter. Of course 'how we live measures our own nature', as Philip Larkin said in Mr Bleaney; that's why Mr Bleaney's room tells us a lot about himself and his life. But the questions and problems my characters deal with are universal. I was never interested in describing a particular place. As the painter (who is, by the way, Camille Corot) from 'Go Out into the Fields . . .' says:

'You paint what you see with the maximum of precision, but you don't care about the precision of the depiction. You try to capture the feeling, the inexact feeling, as exactly as you can. What counts is decisiveness.'

The characters in this collection are often outsiders, who are unable to connect and mentally isolated, even if they are superficially part of a community. Are they special cases that are interesting to explore psychologically, or do they

reflect something more common about being alive?

They are certainly not cases for psychiatry. The story about the girl who lives in the forest is based on a real event. I met her after I had written it – she had sent me an email when she heard about the story – and she was special, but not insane at all. On the contrary, she was probably more aware of things that don't work out in our society. Readers often tell me that in my stories they read things that they feel themselves, but are unable to express.

You write as confidently from the female perspective as you do from the male. Do you have to think differently if you're writing from a female point of view?

A little bit, yes. But the sexes are not so different after all. And as a man I'm much more interested in women than in men, so I tend to think about them more often and try to understand why they do what they do. I would never want to be a woman, but I love to write about them and imagine their perspective.

There is often a strong atmosphere of sexual tension in your stories, but it often remains unrealized – or culminates in sex which seems strangely unsatisfying. Why is this?

Fulfilled sex is nice in real life, but in fiction it's just boring. It's not the sexual act that interests me but what it does to us. The tension between our normal daily lives and this animal side to us. We are strongly driven by sex, but we don't talk about it very often, at least not in a fundamental way.

Your style is incredibly distinctive and individual. We're reading these stories in Michael Hofmann's highly skilled translation, but when you're writing the original German, how do you craft your sentences? Do they come out fully formed, or do you write and rewrite and polish them until they're perfect?

I do a lot of polishing, especially in the short stories. I probably reread them thirty or forty times when I'm working on them. I don't rearrange the material or make big changes, usually; most of the time the form is there in the first draft. But as I don't allow myself to use many technical means, every word counts. Some translators have told me at first they thought it was easy to translate my work, but then they realized it was really hard. So I'm very happy to have Michael Hofmann, who is doing a wonderful job.

Are you involved with the English translations of your work?

When Michael translated my first novel, I was stupid enough to make a few suggestions, but I soon realized that it made no sense. The translation is as much his work as the original is mine. Sometimes Michael asks me a few questions, but not many. There might be something that can stay undecided in German, but not in English: who is speaking a certain phrase, for example. Then I must decide.

It's clear from your writing that the visual is very important to you, and you often write about painting and architecture. Could you imagine pursuing any art form other than writing?

I think I could have become a painter, but I took a decision to go on with writing some thirty years ago and want to stick to it. Writing (and also painting) is hard enough, so I try to concentrate on it. But one of the main characters of my next novel is again a painter.

Are there any Swiss authors who haven't been translated into English and who you think deserve to be more widely discovered?

I'm not sure, but I think Markus Werner has never been translated into English. He is a wonderful author with a beautiful language. ◊

We're Flying is published by Granta

New writing for the Sydney Writers' Festival

FIVE DIALS
TAKES SYDNEY

THE HEROES AND HEROINES ISSUE

FEATURING: PLENTY OF AUSTRALIANS, ALLEN GINSBERG AND EVEN WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS. PLUS WRITING ON KATE BUSH AND SONIC YOUTH AND WILL SELF AND POLTERGEISTS, MEN STUCK ON ICEBERGS, JURORS IN LOVE, AND A DRAWING OF ANNE CARSON WITH SUPERPOWERS.

SATURDAY MAY 25TH, 2013
PIER 2\3 CLUB STAGE

PIER 2\3, HICKSON ROAD, WALSH BAY SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA

FOR MORE INFORMATION GO TO WWW.FIVEDIALS.COM

The Time

Luke Davies

The idea of actually killing had never been in my consciousness before, except as grand abstraction, but things changed rapidly in those first days of rubble and mayhem; there came a point, in the state of heightened alertness that simply being alive now entailed, when I knew I might be capable of anything. Within days of this realization (it was not, I might add, a time of restful sleep) I had taken a stranger's life. The experience was liberating.

I had fallen into the habit of talking to myself, quietly, casually. The counter of existence had been reset and, statistically speaking, the aberrant might now call itself the norm; it was nice to hear the sound of someone's voice, even if my own was mostly the only one available. The silence of the world felt not like any reproach to that world's now so radically and comprehensively curtailed follies: all was suddenly so new that it seemed as if one's way of thinking had changed for ever, and that grandly abstract concepts such as reproach were simply archaic. Cause and effect, unadorned and exotically simple, were in effect.

I didn't listen to my iPod, for example, and not because I knew that a charged iPod would last only a few hours and that such a strangely precious sliver of the eternity now stretching before me might result in an unbearable sense of music's carrying too much moral weight. Nor was it because a system of charging, MacBook after MacBook, via USB cable, for the cumulative battery life of all the MacBooks I could freely take from the Apple Store at the ruined Westfield mall at Bondi Junction (the doors of which I joyfully smashed open with a sledgehammer freely taken from the nearby Mitre 10) – or indeed from any Apple store, or even any house I cared to enter – would be a system that would last at best a few years, as batteries aged and failed. And not even because music suddenly seemed absurd. It was more just that the world, in its unnerving new silence, seemed so much more immense than ever before, and that even the tiny iPod earbuds made me feel hemmed in, and disconnected from possible danger.

Nonetheless I had regularly taken to laughing: even a gust of wind, and the rustling of leaves along a gutter, might force from me a spontaneous, delighted *Ha!* Or I would slap a stick against a tree and whoop at the sharpness of that retort. On the seventeenth day I sat revving an ugly red late-model Camry, overlooking a park in Cammeray where I had played Rugby League as a small child and in which was a Moreton Bay Fig tree (now alas figless) full of featherless sulphur-crested white cockatoos (now alas neither sulphur-crested nor white) who watched me with nervous, branch-pacing alertness. It struck me that the restless anxiety of the cockatoos was due to my continuing revving of the motor, an act for which, in the instant of becoming aware of it, I had no explanation; I had simply forgotten to cut the engine, lost in a particularly pleasing memory of the coach telling my father I was the best tackler on the under-7s. Then I cut the engine, and stepped from the car. All I simply shouted, from the bottom of my lungs, was 'Hellloooo!' I did not account in advance for the sudden distress of the freaked-out cockatoos, nor for their comically tragic attempts at flying away (now alas not such a straightforward or aerodynamically feasible activity). I stored a note inside my head: what animals remained would be busy finding new responses to new stresses. Don't pet the cats. When I restarted the car, the engine backfired. My concern for the further diminishment of the cockatoos' collective serenity did not dampen my howl of delighted, surprised laughter at that clean, clear *bang!*

So I didn't listen to my iPod. Nonetheless I woke every morning bolt upright from sleep with a song already fully fledged inside my head. I had no control over the contents. It might be The Hollies singing, 'Sometimes, all I need is the air that I breathe,' or Joy Division, 'Walk in silence, don't turn away in silence'; I learned I had to accept the day's song with equanimity. (On the day I first teamed up with Breezy, it was the Gram Parsons and Emmylou Harris version of 'Love Hurts'.) There seemed to be very few people alive. I had had desultory conversations with perhaps six people in those first few weeks, and had seen, at wary distance, another ten or twelve. There was not a lot to talk about, beyond acknowledging (but only very broadly) something of the shared experience of numb shock. I had no inclination to 'team up' until I'd gotten a better idea of what, precisely, I wanted to do with my new life and how, precisely, this world was going to work. I would have thought survivors would have rushed to console, congregate, cooperate, and perhaps, somewhere, this was either already happening or soon to happen. I understood the notion of community, of course, and I knew also that at some point over the next months or years the dogs (assuming their survival) would become a mortal threat to anyone not practising safety in numbers. But I just wanted to be alone with my head and my thoughts.

I spent most of my time driving long distances, following no particular algorithm of navigation other than, at times, memories of places I'd been to – the route so regularly taken through the cross-city tunnel and across the Anzac Bridge to my mother's house at Lilyfield, for instance, or the M4 to the Blue Mountains, where there were a couple of stretches unimpeded by burnt or bombed vehicles and where on one occasion I reached 190 km/h for a short period just before the Penrith turnoff. (Beyond that speed, I found I had no desire to go.) I returned most days to the Eastern Suburbs. I reserved a day or two a week for the gradual and ongoing task of barricading all ingoing roads to North Bondi. I planned eventually to be the King of the Ben Buckler peninsula, though in those first months I denied myself the pleasure of actually staying there each night, since the thunderous boom of the waves crashing endlessly on the rocks below at my favourite spot, the cliff-edge at the end of Brighton Boulevard, was overwhelming, making one effectively both deaf and blind to danger, and as I've intimated, at this point in the New History all I was saying was give silence a chance. So I hopped from apartment to apartment, from bed to bed, a good few blocks inland. To relax, I read books. (Going for walks

was strictly work.)

Another funny thing: I assumed that at some point I would become horny again. I spoke briefly to two women in those first three weeks, both of whom were in any case 'attached' to male companions as we engaged in our wary and supposedly post-traumatic elliptical conversations and went our separate ways (and what a liberation! No more *Let me get your email*; no more email); but I did not as yet experience absence of sex as absence. It's not that I was too busy laughing at my good fortune in being one of the apparent few left alive. Good fortune had never been a surprise to me. It's more that the sensory world was so packed with necessity that every event, every minute of every day, was for now sufficient unto itself.

And yet I learned that what had been experienced as, for want of a better word, 'civilization' – the ability of the individual mind known as mind and of the joint mind known as society to reflect on its own advancements in organizational greatness and moral splendour – had indeed been no more than a glitch, a couple of hundred or couple of thousand years that had turned out to be the exception to the rule.

The rule was: be smart, be sharp.

Because the old bodies – all the bodies that had suddenly become a part of the world, all at once – they were nothing, in the big picture. Hand sanitizers were my religion; I wore face masks, drank only bottled water. After the first few weeks the smells were not so bad, and the two primary visual revulsions I had been experiencing were now minimized: insect activity in decaying corpses, and the resemblance of recently dead bodies to recently living humans.

It was the *new* bodies that were the problem, because I needed to make sure I was not one of them. When I started killing, it was not as if I woke one day and (after expelling the morning song from my mind) said to myself, 'I should hunt down, and then assassinate, fellow-survivors.'

But *someone* must have started the ball rolling. *Someone* was out there proving that, no, kindness and goodwill were not our default state as a species, and that, yes, that pre-emptive self-concern known as violence would, in the absence of any structure, make its will felt in the world, and that there was no reason why I should be defeatist and allow anyone to be any better at killing than me, since we were all effectively starting with the same tools and tricks and we were all now, you could say, the same age. In the Old Time I had won a major literary award, a not inconsiderable sum of money for a starving poet, and had deposited the cheque into a term-deposit set up by my cousin the investment banker in the Citigroup Building. Because I loved a good jaunt up sixty-three floors of fire escape, and because, as I may or may not have said, my algorithm of navigation was sometimes the revisiting of the even-only-vaguely familiar, and because I had been so astonished by the view when he took me to lunch in Citibank's private dining room the day I met him to give him the cheque, I found myself now, with high-end binoculars I had freed from Georges Cameras on George Street, looking about for signs of life. Chimney smoke rising from a terrace house in Ultimo alerted me to human presence. I watched the building, rigidly focused through the binoculars for more than two hours, for comings or goings. Someone else must have been watching too. I saw the ute that arrived, I saw the three men and their rifles, I saw the tiny figures frogmarched outside, cowering, pleading, and shot to death. Six or seven people, just like that. The men so casually loading the dead people's supplies into the tray of the ute.

We were all already in a kind of afterlife. Watching the killing from my eyrie, I felt as if I'd just come across a particularly challenging clue in a nearly completed cryptic crossword. I've always experienced a quiet and mounting excitement when nearing the end of a cryptic crossword. I started collecting weapons, and began my Programme of Self-Improvement.

Another funny thing I forgot to mention: it didn't feel necessary to shit behind closed doors into a toilet any more. It wasn't as if I was suddenly the biggest hygiene problem in a world filled with decaying corpses.

The first time I killed is also how I teamed up with Breezy. I had become more, not less, wary in my daily habits, it goes without saying, since the above-outlined First Event and the subsequent deteriorations. I was sitting in one of my shady recesses, between fallen concrete stanchions, from where I had a good high view of things. The day fairly baked with heat. Breezy (I did not know her name at this point, of course, and don't imagine in any case it was her name in the Before) was a gangly girl covered in sores who was being dragged into an open patch by a man whose erection was already flailing, ungainly and menacing, in anticipation. His pants were unbuckled but still above his knees, restricting his movement, and as the two of them tumbled to the ground for the third or fourth time she belted him, hard and fast, twice in the face, and staggered up, and almost got away. He grabbed her by the waist of her pants and body-slammed her to the ground. I winced, hearing the crack of her head on the concrete. Stunned now, she moaned, blood trickling from her mouth. She knew what was coming next. I related, in this as in all events, to the fact that nothing was a surprise any more. (In the case of rape, it had never been.) He stood above her now for what seemed a needlessly triumphant moment, his cock like a rudder, stroking himself as, deeply concussed, she touched her cut lip, as if that cut were a mysterious quandary which needed her urgent attention right this instant.

I shot him in the head, because now was suddenly the time. My Programme of Self-Improvement meant that I was newly proficient with weapons-handling and that I was, albeit very much the hobbyist, an adequate marksman. Nonetheless my hands were shaking as I cocked, aimed and fired: not because it was wrong to kill (it wasn't, I now understood) but because I didn't know how different would be the fact of action from the theory of action. Cause and effect, unadorned and exotically simple, would rule forthwith. Here is what I knew, though I no longer had to think it, or think *about* it: while he was still standing over her, in that last moment of his Triumph of Anticipation, I knew that if I aimed for his head then the risk of my accidentally hitting the girl would be greatly reduced, for within mere moments they would be locked down together in a meatier union, and then I would surely be no Jason Bourne. As it was, it was a single shot, and a neat hole, *pop!*, and he crumpled sideways to the ground, one of the New Bodies.

The story has a happy ending, for Breezy and I partnered up for a while, and exuberant succour was had all round, insofar as one could connect in those troubled times. She had become, like me, by neces-

sity, proficient at uncoupling the emotional texture of her past life – such an easy life, for everyone – from the immediate rawness of the present one. This made her seem distracted at times, but it was only ever in fact a deeper engagement with the simple pleasure of inhabiting a body, and of breathing. Nonetheless, when we came together, and our breathing increased, that felt not so much like an uncoupling as an extravagant unshackling.

Eventually she took a showroom Porsche Cayenne, a big black turbo-powered four-wheel drive – strangely enough, as is the habit in the motor industry, it was named for the following year, as if the act of owning such a car was a way of transporting oneself into the future – and drove away, stockpiled with weaponry, an adequate markswoman herself now, towards Adelaide, to see if the city, or rather her family, had survived; and to find her future.

We were all so full of hope in those times. It's not as if things truly pieced themselves together. But I woke each morning with a new song in my head. ◊

A SINGLE BOOK

Poemas

Ashley Hay meets Federico García Lorca

I was living in Sydney when I met the eminent Spanish poet Federico García Lorca. It was 2007, and he'd been dead for over seventy years. I don't mean to say this was the first time I'd heard of him; I mean I found myself in the same room as him in the way that's possible when words, and their stories, travel through time. In those days, I was worrying at the edges of my own story about a poet and a poem, and I was thinking about what it meant to be not just a writer of writing, but also a reader of it. Perhaps it was this that made him more predisposed to manifest one fine spring afternoon, but why ever it happened, it demonstrated perfectly the vivifying conduit of new words.

It began when a friend of mine, D., mentioned that he was thinking of selling a book of poems. It was a special book: a family copy of the first edition of Lorca's first book, *Poemas*. It had belonged to D.'s great-uncle, Pepin, who'd been at college in Madrid with Lorca, Salvador Dalí and Luis Buñuel. This foursome had been the core, some said, of the famous Generation of '27 that drove the Spanish avant-garde in the years before the civil war. Personally dedicated (*A Pepin de Federico*), it was also inscribed with the name of the college (*Residencia de estudiantes*), the date and place (*Primavera 1923, Madrid*) and the poet's autograph. And while those other three, more famous friends were all long-since dead, Pepin himself was alive, living in Spain and heading towards his 104th birthday.

Now, D. was thinking about selling the book, and he wondered if R., another friend of mine who was an antiquarian bookseller, might be able to help – given that it was a first edition, given that it was signed. D. was coming to Sydney the following week – where I lived and where R. worked – and would bring the book with him. He wanted to set up a meeting. Images of the book's spine – its buff binding, stamped with G. Lorca and *Poemas* in small gold capitals – and of its pages, creamy-white and only slightly speckled with foxing, arrived in my inbox. And we arranged to meet at R.'s place, an apartment full of light and overflowing bookshelves, and a view that took in the entire western face of the city, arranging its skyscrapers like the spines of more and more volumes.

A hardback is a simple object – just a rectangle, but gratifyingly firm and solid compared to the flux and bend of its paperback cousin. It was something to sit and hold a first edition of Lorca's poems; it was something to gaze at its inscription, to enjoy a tangential frisson of ownership through its message to my friend's great-uncle. Across the dedication, Lorca's lettering had the large-looped optimism of a young man making a grand gesture: there was a flourish under his name and the year, 1923, had been written so quickly, so openly, that the numbers tended towards straight vertical lines.

I traced my finger across the bravura 'F' at the beginning of the name. There was something tangibly thrilling in touching this, in feeling the slight indent the pen had made, pressed down by Lorca as he wrote. It was the sense of 'something almost uncanny' that *New Yorker* writer Mary Hawthorne described when 'bearing witness to the silent, gestural language of Proust's actual handwriting on the actual paper he wrote on' and feeling herself 'immediately transported … back in time to the very moment of its execution'.

It was a direct line to a dead poet, and it felt like a moment both intimate and fortunate.

We seem geared to invest power in objects, attributing both currency and a kind of vitality to relics and rarities. Catholic historians call it 'mystic potency'; Walter Benjamin calls it 'aura'. Some people's sense of religion leads them to find it in St Stephen's forearm or Buddha's tooth, while others find it in Marilyn Monroe's eye drops or a lock of Elvis Presley's hair. Or a book inscribed by a long-dead poet.

And so we sat; there was passing between the three of us a conversation sparked by Lorca and his poems. D. talked about the stories he had heard from his great-uncle about his time at school with the poet, the painter, the film-maker – these three great imaginers. We talked about the potent success Lorca seemed to have had, of those three famous friends, in what proved to be a far shorter life. I remembered an article about the ongoing hunt for Lorca's remains, buried somewhere in a mass grave after his execution by Spanish Nationalists in the hills above Granada in August 1936. And as we passed the book between us too, it felt like a shimmer of recovery, as if some piece of the poet had escaped from that brutal and sudden end and was somewhere nearby, close to this high, light Sydney room, under a familiarly blazing sun, over seventy years later.

R. talked about the value of first editions, the value of autographs and dedications, the sliding scale of worth depending on the relationship between the dedicator and the dedicatee. He talked about whether or not the *Residencia* itself might be interested in purchasing the book, about

the ways such sales might be put into effect, now that everything was possible online.

His glasses perched on the end of his nose, R. closed the book at last and turned it over.

'Of course,' he said, 'it's fabulous.' And he riffed a little on Pepin's centrality to the whole enterprise of surrealism, on his function as the nexus, the lynchpin of the group, the one who had the ideas that Dalí and Buñuel and Lorca then went and explored.

'And Pepin didn't have to do anything,' he said at last, patting the cover again. 'Fabulous, fabulous.'

'Every country I've ever been in,' said D., 'I've seen my uncle – on the TV, in documentaries. He was in the Spanish Film Festival when I first came to Australia.'

And he worried, in the vague yet engrossed way of parents, about his own small son getting at the book with scissors and crayons – or, worse, selling it when he was twenty-one to raise money for a motorbike.

R. opened the pages to the dedication again and we sat there, the three of us, staring at the sliver of ink that delineated the great myth of the life and times of Federico García Lorca, and of his shocking death. The world was going on in all its spaces beyond that room, and important things were happening. But this moment, this instant, unknown to anyone but the three of us, felt significant and special.

D. wondered if his uncle had intended for him to sell the book all along, as a particular kind of asset or bequest. R. fantasized about the possibility of flying immediately to Barcelona to talk with the old man about his famous youth, his famous friends and his long life beyond their deaths. I imagined the Pepin of years before, a young man in his twenties, as he accepted this gift, this freshly made book, and as he perhaps wondered, for a moment, what sort of poet his friend might go on to be, what sort of literary life he might have.

D. sat forward a little in his chair and leaned towards R., who still held the precious pages. 'There's a dedication to Pepin's brother, my grandfather Filín, in the book too, further in –' He reached over to take the volume, but R.'s fingers were already flicking through the leaves.

And there it was: a dedication – *Dedicatoria especial a Filín* – and just below, in a tighter, more concentrated or urgent version of Lorca's hand, six lines of writing; six new lines of writing by Federico García Lorca that were unknown to the rest of the world. It was as if the book thickened, lying there on R.'s outstretched palms, and when I think of it today it still makes me catch my breath.

'Even my mother didn't know it was there,' said D., taking the book and smoothing out the page. He frowned and cleared his throat, and when he began to speak his English was a little thicker than usual, as if the Spanish he was translating on the run was hanging on to its edges.

'It's something like this,' he said.

The eternal angle
Between land and sky . . .

He paused. '*Bisectriz*: it's a geometric term,' he said, as if to himself. 'Something precise, like bisecting. Bisected, I guess, or maybe cut or divided.' Suggesting the presence of one poem with his choice of one word, and the presence of another with another.

The eternal angle
Between land and sky
Divided by the wind

The immense angle
Of the straight road
Divided by a wish

As simple as a breath; a thought; as brief as a benediction.

'Of course, it's fabulous,' said R. again.

And as we stared a little longer at the page, the line that had brought the sense of Lorca to Sydney through something as procedural as his signature began to thicken to connect two vastly separate moments. Here I was, momentarily arrested in 2007, wondering at this unexpected epiphany; there was the poet, permanently pinned in 1923, concentrating as he conjured these lines like a blessing for a friend.

I thought about Filín, about the immensity of having a poem written just for you. I thought about the way the scratch and stain of the words must have followed each other across the page, mapping the direct path between Lorca's imagination and an available white space. I thought of the moment R. had turned to that spot, and the thrill of discovery – not just because this was a new thing left by a famous man, but because of its gentle wish, its vast promise, the potency of its clear and simple imagery. They were a gift and a revelation, and I stared at the script of their words, trying to press this scant and unfamiliar language, and the instant of first seeing it, on to the most permanent part of my mind.

And there he was. Lorca had come into the room, considering us for a moment, just quietly, as we considered him. It wasn't metaphor; it was truth. Lorca was real and tangible, no less concrete or compelling for having arrived from a confluence of ink and imagination.

In *Negotiating with the Dead*, her series of Empson lectures, Margaret Atwood suggests that 'not just some, but *all* writing of the narrative kind, and perhaps all writing, is motivated, deep down, by a fear of and a fascination with mortality – by a desire to make the risky trip to the Underworld, and to bring something or someone back from the dead.' And I cannot describe it better than to say it felt at that moment as if the four of us – D., R., Lorca resurrected and myself – were passing an afternoon in a surprising and unexpected conversation.

The Australian poet and novelist Dorothy Porter explored the edges of this in her 2010 essay *On Passion*, her writing on this differently charged by her own death just months after she completed it. 'There is something very unsettling about a book,' she wrote. 'Uncanny. A book written by a dead author – and most are (indeed there will come a time when I'm a dead author myself) – is nothing less than a haunted house, which lures the reader into conversation with a loquacious, enchanting ghost. We forget how mysterious, verging on the supernatural, reading is.'

We talked, we gazed, and Lorca sat with us. And then the book was closed, and Lorca went away. It was as if there was nothing more that could be said beyond this unexpected revelation. We might have had coffee; we might have had tea. Either way, the air of the afternoon had changed by the presence of a simple rectangle of cover boards and paper pages.

In the end, my friend D. kept his copy of Lorca's *Poemas*, transporting it carefully when he moved back to Europe and keeping it well away from all the scissors and crayons he imagined at work in his son's hands. There was no auction, no sale; no hustle or frisson as the world assimilated a tiny new set of lines composed by Fed-

erico García Lorca into the enormity of its library of words. I cherished the potency of its secret.

I still have a photograph of the book's open spread pinned to a noticeboard above my desk, and I glance at it, hoping that it might catch, some day, the magic of the instant when we understood what we were seeing on that page, or that the Spanish words might sink into my stubbornly monolingual memory. In the end, I did what all shameless appropriators do, by transforming the moment into a plot point in a novel. It's set as far away from Spanish poets as it's probably possible to get, on the south coast of New South Wales, just down from Sydney, but it has a discovered poem at its core. I imagined a whole swathe of things to put into this story – the sight of an ocean alight with phosphorescence; the shock of a woman becoming a widow; the mess of a body assailed by a train. But I knew where I was when I wrote about the thrill and the power of that first gulp of unexpected words, of a new message from a now-dead poet. And I thank Señor Lorca for that.

Not long ago, the manuscript copy of Lorca's *Poet in New York* was sold for £120,000 ; it's currently on display in the New York Public Library. Where everyone can see, in Lorca's own hand, his last message to his editor – 'back tomorrow' – as he left the papers on the man's chair and headed home to Granada on 12 July, 1936. Where he was killed five weeks' later by a death squad in the Spanish Civil War. Australia in 2013 in the UK. ◊

FICTION

The View from Pont Champlain

by Josephine Rowe

This is the first thing that Julia learns about the woman in seat 11e: her impossible hunger. That's almost correct. The very first thing she *notices*, watching Tema sleep beneath the red airline blanket is: she has an untroubled face. Julia is not so naïve as to assume that the sleeping woman is without trouble – only that it must have twisted some other part of her anatomy. Perhaps she has a bad liver or low bone density or angina. But her face is like the view from Pont Champlain in deep winter, like the St Lawrence river bedded over with a thick eiderdown of snow. Then Tema opens her eyes and Julia snaps back to the personal screen, where Ransom Stoddard is riding into Shinbone. Tema presses the call button and orders a Sauvignon Blanc and two ham and cheese sandwiches from a stewardess whose liver and bones and heart – Julia hopes – are all in superb working order, because her brow tells of some lonely, unapproachable disaster, lines like a horse tangled in a wire fence. The stewardess brings the sandwiches piled up on a white china plate, and a glass filled with wine the palest possible shade of green. She lays it all out on the foldaway table, and the woman in seat 11e folds her blanket down around her middle and begins to eat. *Heart attack fare*, Julia thinks. The pink meat layered between thick slices of butter-yellow brioche and dripping a rich white sauce. Not the kind of thing that Julia could even think about eating. Her body just wouldn't know what to do with it. But amidst the sick light of televisions and the in-flight paraphernalia, the sandwiches seem somehow honest and good, vicariously comforting.

Julia was bumped up to Premium shortly after take-off, owing to some mix-up with a honeymoon couple who were assigned seats on opposite sides of the cabin. (She is not, she knows, an ungenerous person, but who gives up an exit row – prepaid – to spend thirteen hours crushed up against a window, hemmed in by two strangers? It just wasn't a fair trade. Hence the Premium solution.) At meal service her special trays follow her up to the front of the plane, to the large plush seats, the white linen and real cutlery, reminding her of her initial and true status. *Remember who you are, Ms Julia S. Barlow*, says the paper label on the preheated foil package. *You are a diabetic vegan, and you belong in Economy, with the bland pastas and the plastic knives*.

Perhaps because she is a diabetic vegan from Economy, Julia had not known, before now, how one might simply press the call button and order up some well-presented *casse-croûte* to ladder out the hours between one meal service and the next. There is an indignity to it, the trundling of heavy carts down the sleepy aisles, 'Pork or beef? Pork or beef?', like animal feeding time. There is a grotesqueness to this eating when not hungry, to the rearranging of meals to coerce the belly into a new time zone. But Premium is a foreign country, and they do things differently here. She watches Tema with the sandwiches. Quick neat bites, interrupted by dabs of a serviette and mouthfuls of the wine, which is never allowed to run dry – there is always someone leaning over, bottle held expertly at the base.

Later (somewhere over Samoa, she thinks) she learns that Tema's is a residual hunger, a ravenousness left over from the years she spent trying to live alone, in a city that consumes the lonely as if they are anthracite. The conversation starts easily enough – the retrieval of a dropped eye-mask, followed by something off-hand, innocuous ('How's the wine?') – and soon Tema, returning from an arts festival in Adelaide, is making the shape of a shoebox with her hands and saying, Thirty-five square metres, on East 7th Street. Above a shop that sold mannequins. These mannequins would occasionally feature in her video installations and sometimes – disquietingly, inevitably – in her dreams.

There was no kitchen in the shoebox apartment, and Tema spent nearly three years subsisting on apples and muesli bars, the occasional hard-boiled egg cooked resourcefully in the electric kettle. Dependable, unmessy things that could be eaten one-handed so that she didn't have to break from work. She liked food that snapped loud, things she could feel her teeth on: carrot sticks, celery, almonds.

'Like play-lunch,' Julia says, and Tema smiles at this and repeats the word.

'Oh, snacks,' Julia clarifies.

'Right,' says Tema. 'I thought it was good, you know, to always be a little hungry. That it sharpened the senses or something like that. But no. This is much better,' and she wipes her finger round the lip of the plate to collect the last smear of béchamel sauce. 'To hell with the starving artist guff,' she says. 'I just want to shake that 26-year-old by the

shoulders and feed her a steak.'

She'd grown so thin over the three years in that city, in the Great Back There, that a pale, downy hair had grown to cover her torso, almost like fur. Her body attempting to compensate for the mass it had lost to misguided artistic integrity – a primordial effort to insulate her thin frame from the bitter East Coast winters.

'It's called *lanugo*,' she tells Julia now, conspiratorially. 'Like a board game crossed with a rare species of whale.'

Julia laughs in a generous if baffled way, but what she is thinking is, *Christ, the things people tell each other on planes. The things they'll say to people they think they'll never see again*. In spite of this, she feels a need to respond in kind, to make herself *knowable*. She could tell Tema – wants to tell her – how Canada has become something treacherous, untrustworthy. Thin ice. Piney minefield of the heart. She wants to explain her dread of seeing the country code appear in the screen of her smartphone, that it can only ever mean – as it does now, this very flight – that somebody else is sick, is dying, will likely be dead before the aircraft touches down in LAX. Her life in North America is being swept up behind her. Who is left there now to remember the things she herself cannot, the stories that have been told to her in order to round out the first obscure years, to complete her own narrative? Falling though the ice at White Lake, aged four, the very first time she Might Have Died. Who now remembers the old yellow dog from John Street, the monthly drives across the border, into Quebec? The brittle hymns of Aunt Christine, alone for good in an apartment in Mile End filled with china deer and books in French? She wants to tell Tema that her face is like the view from Pont Champlain, but knows she will not understand. Knows she will laugh and say, 'What? You mean the Montreal skyline?' And Julia will have to say, 'No no, looking south, towards Sainte-Catherine. The coldest winter I can remember. When the St Lawrence was …'

But still, of course, Tema will not understand.

Instead, Julia tells her about the smokehouse of her East Ontarian childhood. The one her grandfather built on the roof of the existing house, around the chimney, so that the fireplace would serve two purposes. They had to be careful about what they burned there; hickory and oak were the standard. Birch was OK if the bark had been stripped, and any fruit tree was welcome. Pecans were good, but never pine cones, and Julia's grandfather did not believe in burning corncobs. He swore the meat would hold the memory of everything in its flavour, and would sometimes throw a handful of cloves or cinnamon bark into the flames to prove this point, though Julia couldn't taste any difference. Once without thinking she'd uncurled a linen bandage from around a newly mended scrape and flung it into the fireplace. Her mother caught her out and she was made to climb up to the roof and prop open the smokehouse door so that the tainted smoke could drift harmlessly away and the meat would not be ruined.

Since you're going up there, you might as well bring something down, her mother told her. Whatever looks ready to you.

She had hated and feared the choking, salty air and the smoke-blackened walls. Her grandfather would sometimes lathe delicate strips from these walls and bury them in the salt shaker, so that the salt took on their charry flavour. This, she misses, and only this. She does not miss the hanging deer parts, shoulders and saddles and hams. She does not miss how the rich, gamey smell of the half-cured animals settled deep in her hair, skin and clothes while she worked at freeing the meat from the rafters – the ham of a doe her father had shot more than a fortnight before, which had lain submerged for a week in a brown sugar brine before being strung up in dreadful reunion with its neighbouring limbs.

She'd emerged with the meat held at arm's length, her muscles tensed against the weight of it. She put her nose to her shoulder and sniffed. There it was: venison. This was where her relationship with meat had ended. On a rooftop at thirteen, her hair full of smoke.

The smokehouse story is cut off by the unexpected pitch and heave of turbulence, by Tema's wine glass toppling, drenching her blanket through to her thighs. The air suddenly acrid, like the dregs of a party. Together they mop up the worst of it with serviettes, and when the seatbelt lights blink off Tema gets up to find a tap. Julia tucks her legs up and Tema climbs over to the aisle, her shirt riding up to show a warm curve of stomach, a flash of creamy lace. Julia thinks, *Surely. Now that we have shared these things, traded these splintery little histories. Surely something comes of this. We do not simply end by gathering our belongings from the overhead and shuffling down to the miserable basement customs to be detained, processed and finally released – sweaty and irritated – to our respective parts of the continent*.

Though of course, this is what happens. In Los Angeles, Tema will be far ahead, wheeling a large red suitcase through the returning citizens queue. Already being waved up to the window of a uniformed official, offering her finger and thumb prints for identification while, far back, far beyond waving distance, Julia joins the dense, uneasy queue. Hair full of deer-smoke, heart heavy as a foreign encyclopaedia. Julia looks at the Customs Declaration card. Question 10, *The primary purpose of this trip is* … What. What.

She will go up there, after the funeral, to the outskirts of Arnprior. Climb the front stairs of the little house that has been empty for three months, where milkweed and fleabane have already started to poke up through the boards of the porch, and some animal has chewed the rattan doormat down to straws. Where the pantry shelves have been cleared of everything, to discourage pests, though no one has thought to empty the shakers of their salt and pepper, or the red ceramic cruet of its oil. She will make do with these, with whatever is left, battling the overgrown vegetable garden to triumphantly pull up the last of its yield – a few thumb-shaped kipflers, a beetroot the size of a cat's head, a handful of soft new herbs.

She will climb to the empty smokehouse, scrape a butter knife along the old walls and catch the ashy rain on a painted saucer. From the cellar (mercifully unplundered), she will bring up wine too good to drink alone and pour a glassful into cut crystal only ever seen at Christmas, taking deep swallows from it while she cooks. She will set a place for herself at the table. The good silver. Red linen. A heavy, earthenware bowl that took its shape from her grandmother's hands.

When the meal is ready she will eat with ravenous purpose, as if preparing for a long, lean winter. ◊

This page not actually left blank.