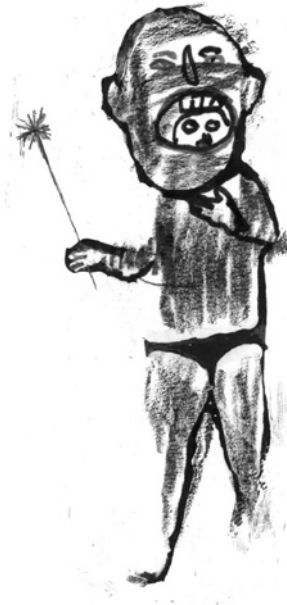


# Five Dials



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*Five Dials* is brought to you with the help of MATT CLACHER, DEBBIE HATFIELD, ANNA KELLY, NICK LOWNDES, JULIETTE MITCHELL, JAMES CHANT, and SIMON PROSSER.

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# On Alibis and Public Views

THERE IS A wonderful phrase on page twenty-one of the collected letters of Harold Ross, the gap-toothed, chain-smoking genius who edited the *New Yorker* magazine from its inception to his death in 1951. In the midst of some whip-lash advice, he instructs a young editor to ‘alibi furiously’. Better than any definition I’ve come across since, these words sum up the balancing act necessary for a publication’s early stages: welcoming, tickling, grabbing with one hand and keeping the world at bay with the other. The cry goes up: Send us work! – while the more nuanced translation reads: Send us undiscovered brilliance! Don’t send us . . . that other stuff.

*Five Dials* is not directly related to the *New Yorker* – we’re more of a stunted, irregular fourth cousin with an Estuary accent – but like them and many other publications, we are now on full public view. Subscription is free and once you’re on our private list, unlike those other magazines, your details will not be given to anyone. Our unveiling has brought forth response from readers and with response comes the option to reply or alibi with a determination unheard of since Ross’s *New York*. So, for issue three, as we are well on our way, now is as good a time as any to apologize to those we have collectively alibied: to the poets who glimpsed a new venue, like hyenas sniffing blood, and flooded our inbox with verse that rhymed, in one case, ‘fanny’ with ‘Mannie’. To the readers who have been kind, a very heartfelt thank you, and to the readers who have asked for directions to the *Five Dials* pub in Horton, Somerset, it’s halfway down Goose Lane. To the commentator in the *Daily Telegraph* who repeated a remark someone made about *Five Dials* being ‘very Web 0.5’, I’m sorry I haven’t been able to write personally to explain we are not Web 0.5; rather, sir, we’re clocking in at about 0.282, if that, and if you downloaded this PDF in the hopes of Facebooking John Updike or Twittering Eggers – whatever the hell that means – there may

be disappointment for you sooner rather than later.

Most of all, an apology to a reader named Alan Twiddle, one of the more senior staff at Alan Twiddle Sales and Marketing of Drifffield, East Yorkshire, who not only took the time to print up *Five Dials 1* on gorgeous paper, but sheathed it in what must be his company’s flagship product, a ‘Cover System’ made from a material that, according to his literature, ‘has passed the PAT test for photographic archive use’. Sometimes publishing on the web feels fleeting and ephemeral, but Twiddle assured us an unnamed ‘Canadian research laboratory’ vouches for his material. Anything shrouded in the plastic pockets will not noticeably deteriorate for at least 100 years. His issue will be proudly displayed

at our office until 2108 but no later.

Perhaps we’re fixated on the idea of a public view because so much of issue three concerns the pleasures, pains and tragedies of modern art. Writer Sheila Heti travelled to the sunny concrete of the Miami Art Fair and returned with an oblique view of swimming pools and millionaire collectors while Bob and Roberta Smith remained closer to home, laying out a plan to revitalize art in London and finally solve the problem of Trafalgar Square’s fourth plinth. There are artists, too, who have suffered dearly from this public view, perhaps none more than R.B. Kitaj. For those who know nothing of his pained and tragic life, Simon Prosser offers an introduction and Jonathan Safran Foer reconsiders the final correspondence he shared with Kitaj as the artist fought the hardships of his later years, and tried to stay true to his dictums: measure twice, cut once. Work is never the same from one day to the next. It might be the best advice you’re going to get from any free monthly these days.

– CRAIG TAYLOR



LEANNE SHAPTON

# The Ballad of Black Van

*Cheryl Wagner flees the New Orleans flood sleaze*

BLACK VAN was back with a wasted grin. Slicked hair topped by a cheap coal cowboy hat, he smiled red-eyed from the porch of a sadsack shotgun house sinking into the ground two blocks from mine in Mid-City. It was over a year since the New Orleans Police Department tossed him from his last squatted house in our neighborhood. Life was good; a group of shady plumbers hung out on the curb of his latest lair. He had minions again.

Carpenters, electricians, sheetrockers, citizen-sheetrockers, painters, plumbers – we had them all. Since the flood three years ago, my neighborhood has been a construction site. These weren't like the old ponytailed plumber who, in one of those moments of compulsive post-Katrina sharing, cruised up to our ruined house to tell us he grew pot on our back balcony in the eighties. The pot plumber had pulled up his t-shirt and revealed a deep pink surgery scar. He expressed concern that my boyfriend and basset hound and I looked in over our heads. Mired deep in the world's worst DIY moment, we were.

These plumbers, Black Van's plumbers, were the bad news ones. The ones who trolled the frayed edges of our struggling neighborhood at lunch and quitting time for drugs. The ones who frequented the flooded-and-fixed hourly motels nearby on Tulane Avenue. When I drove by on my way out of town for Hurricane Gustav, Black Van remained, laughing on the porch under his tipped cowboy hat. But the plumbers' eyes went slit. Their heads swiveled like periscopes or wrenches towards me in warning. *Get off this block.* Typical flood sleaze. I was over it.

'Screw you, Black Van,' I thought. 'You better not break into our house.'

A guy had just written into our neighborhood association email list to say his flooded-and-just-fixed house had been robbed and that maybe a direct hit from Gustav might not be such a bad thing. It was an ugly thing to wish on the hundreds of thousands of New Orleanians who had not pried open his side door, but I understood.

I didn't want to be cursing Black Van on my way out of town. I wanted to pretend I had mastered evacu-zenning out, leaving early and floating above the fray. My boyfriend Jake and I had just finished battening down the hatches on our almost-finished house. The insulation guy had just blown foam into our attic. It dripped into tiny stalactites. I wanted every penny back. We'd need it to move if we flooded again.

'Divorces will be made this week,' I predicted as we went to fill up our gas tank and get cash.

'No shit,' Jake said.

Inside my raised house, Jake and I hoisted the bicycles we got to replace our flood-rusted ones on top of our dining-room table to get three extra dry feet. They were Euro knock-off bicycles – faux-Dutch with real skirt guards. Mine was a perfect blue. I told the grey-haired lady across the street whose house had been flooded, then fixed, then burned, then fixed again that, yes, I would pray. The night before we had gone to a bluesman's eightieth birthday show. He played the guitar behind his head wearing two wristwatches. His stepson nagged him, 'Now do that dance.' Finally he popped his thin hips like the Depression baby he had been. He said he was glad he drove in all the way from Mississippi. He gave me a whiskey kiss.

After, Jake and I went to have a drink and a stuffed artichoke. Just in case. I held the goblet aloft.

'This is my last frosty mug.'

Jake shook his head.

'Don't say that.'

But it felt true. After three years of fixing my house while watching the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers try to fix theirs, this was the sum total of my faith. We still had primitive levees and concrete canal walls anchored in red velvet cake. We had devoted way too much of our lives to finishing our part, and the government was way behind on theirs. *Suck-ahs!* I was starting to hear the bystanders shout. *Prepare to watch your own heads roll.*

Black Van was another kind of reality check. I hated seeing him grinning from his slum mothership on my way out of town. He always dragged me down to his level. The entropy level. The Jerry Springer zone.

About six months after the flood, Black Van had appeared when almost no one was living in our part of Mid-City except a few haggard resettlers. Unless they had somehow lucked out, the resettlers were all living either without electricity in an upstairs with just a few walls like us or in toxic trailers. There was a mentally ill family who traded slaps and screamed 'Abuser!' as they clutched stuffed animals and wandered the drywall-dusted streets. On our block, a set of hard-luck kids whose parents had left them to their own devices jumped barefoot on mildewed mattresses between debris piles.

Into this wonderland appeared a pale drug addict with greased-back hair driving a van painted black with house-paint. It had Texas plates. Black Van set up shop on our corner. Whistling, he set out his display of stolen bicycles and tools for sale. He kept curling his finger and calling the little hard-luck, supposed-to-be first grader over. It was heartbreaking.

At the time, the thought of sliding any further down the slumhole was unbearable to me. I didn't like what Black Van or the hard-luck kids portended. I wasn't in the habit of throwing down with hoboos in the street. But the storm and flood and wasteland and months of manual labor and crying old ladies had worked on me.

I marched over to his pile.

'Whatever you're doing, you're not going to do that here,' I said.

'Lady, I'm here rebuilding this town,' he said. 'Lady, is that any way to treat someone here to help your city?'

Jake was worried. He thought the flood sleaze and his house-painted van looked like Greyhound stations and knives. Like Florida panhandle trash even though he had Texas plates. Usually mild, Jake started yelling. He wanted me to stay away.

Black Van got tossed from that first house where he hung with prostitutes who were also here to rebuild this town. Someone said his con was up. He had told the owner he would help gut and fix that flooded house, but he just fenced stuff instead. Someone else said he had just gone too far – one day a guy working

on our house with us saw him throttling a teenage drug dealer on his porch. The details, like Black Van himself, remain murky.

All I know is Black Van turned up squatting a flooded house on the street behind me a few months later. He didn't bother to lie to the owner about gutting and working on this place. He didn't have to. The old displaced lady who was playing host to Black Van would never know unless one of her neighbors told her. But one of the lady's few returned neighbors, a weightlifting gay gentrifier, had decided to ignore him. He was trying his best to slap some Key West style back onto the floodscape and was lonesome and scared on his flooded block. Any company was better than none.

But when Black Van lit up his crack pipe in broad daylight on the front porch next to him one day, the neighbor felt slapped in the face. He called NOPD to retract his hospitality. Black Van disappeared for a while again but showed up months later biking around our neighborhood with bolt cutters.

Then he was gone. People said he'd been arrested but no one saw it happen. Black Van had his stealth moments. He wasn't the Shed Thief. My neighbor the minister had held a pistol on the Shed Thief over my back fence and then called us on his cellphone to announce he was chasing him up Palmyra Street. He was not the Dog Thief – that rubber-gloved bandit with weird eyes who told me he was taking my basset. I said he wasn't and he said he was until a kind carpenter down the street helped me run him off. Black Van was just another thief and then, mercifully, who knows why, he wasn't.

When known criminals like Black Van disappeared for a while, hopeful neighborhood people claimed they were arrested and cooling their heels in Orleans Parish Prison. But maybe Black Van was just on vacation or a particularly pleasing bender. He had a life too.

The only reason I knew Black Van was back and up to his old tricks was that Lawnmower Man came sneaking out of my neighbor's alley last week. Lawnmower Man was another post-flood drifter who had decided to trawl Mid-City (or *Mid-Shitty* as some without a formerly nice garden in the neighborhood liked to call it). I felt bad for my neighbor. Her

father, the town's oldest traditional jazz musician, had recently died. Three years after the flood she still did not have even a few habitable rooms in her house. She had asked us to keep an eye on it. She was a nurse and looked disgusted most days when she came by after her shift to work or check on her property. One day a mystery chicken appeared to peck a flood debris pile and she threw her hands into the air. *That is an infection waiting to happen!*

Lawnmower Man was a heavy, middle-aged addict with a blond crew cut. The first day he reeled up our block, high as a kite, greeting everyone in a booming voice, I decided to stop weeding my replanted garden and go inside. Across the street, another neighbor, an elderly man who spent all day hammering, peered cautiously from the shadow of his FEMA trailer. For months after that, Lawnmower Man carried a bucket filled with drywalling knives that looked suspiciously clean. Then he disappeared. Then he reappeared, bent forward and dragging a rusted lawnmower. Yet I had seen him cut no lawns.

There was a man who actually cut lawns, a landscaper whose parole officer sometimes came by looking for him. He and I made a pact against Lawnmower Man. The paroled landscaper had landscaping tools that weren't fake – they were flecked with grass clippings and were his livelihood. He did not mean to be ripped off.

He was worried. A young Jesuit disaster volunteer living in a flooded-and-fixed apartment on our street had already had her door kicked in. She was creeped out that some guy had gotten her laptop and camera with personal pictures. I told her not to worry. They were addicts and not likely to post her partying on Facebook.

So, because I had promised the nurse and had a vow with the landscaper, I was aggravated when I noticed Lawnmower Man emerging from their shared alley recently. I went and got Jake and we followed Lawnmower Man off our block to see where he was going.

Tall and unshaven and burly, Lawnmower Man lugged his prop lawnmower two blocks straight over to Black Van's shotgun squat. He dropped off his rusty lawnmower, stepped inside, and came out carrying a large walking stick. It started to rain. Through the windshield wipers, I saw

him lurch down the street in his muscle shirt, peering into car windows with his big stick. Hunting. Black Van had somehow made Lawnmower Man his zombie.

For the Gustav evacuation, I did not need Black Van and his band of junkie plumbers in my rearview mirror. Driving the highway, I kept picturing Black Van cruising around Mid-City on my bike with his bolt cutters and cowboy hat. While we were all biting our nails elsewhere, he would be fattening his backpack with my neighbors' belongings and cruising in faux-Dutch style. I even had a front-wheel propelled headlight for when the streetlights went down. I hope he enjoyed it.

Our recovering neighborhood, though flooded deep after Katrina, is doing better than others. It is sputtering back to life. I have an abandoned house next door and across the street and behind me and a few more down the block. But I also have real live neighbors with fixed houses and flagpoles and spoiled dogs and only a FEMA trailer or two.

Yet still we have anything goes. We have flooded-and-fixed houses cut into overcrowded apartments filled with migrant Hispanic workers who sit shirtless on their front steps amidst plastic flower bouquets. We have teens who mug the Hispanics. We have Black Van and Dog Thief and Lawnmower Man and occasional shootings.

A short while after the world was peering into the TV news levee cams during Gustav to see if someone would drown in the grey water sloshing out of the Industrial Canal, a man a few blocks away emailed our neighborhood email list. He was peering into the online crime cam in his own rebuilt home. Some men were prying the hurricane boards from his house RIGHT NOW!

Some days it seems time is running awfully short. In the fight for our neighborhood, it seems it's not the house fixers or the flood sleaze that will win so much as the Gulf. The Gulf is the Gulf is the Gulf. It has pelicans and barnacled oil rigs and horizons gassing hot pink and closer every week. I can tell Black Van will make a better climate refugee than me. He's already got his house-painted, Dust Bowl wagon. He can don his black cowboy hat and rev off, mufflerless, into the sunset on the way to his next disaster town. ♦

# Annie Hall

*At a Woody Allen retrospective, David Rakoff encounters an old friend*

I'VE BEEN TRYING to remember, was it *The Sorrow And The Pity* they were lining up for when, sick to death of the medium-is-the-message windbagery of the pseudo-intellectual – now there's a term to blast me back – in front of him, Alvy actually produces Marshall McLuhan from behind a lobby card? The association strikes me as a natural one, since I'm about to gather with the other acolytes in an art house cinema. Will anyone in the queue reference or be moved to imitate the McLuhan moment, I wonder?

And where were they? Was it at the Regency at 68th street? (Was it even called the Regency? It hardly matters, since it's gone now, like the New Yorker at 88th, the movie house at 72nd and Broadway, the Thalia {{which does show up at the very end of the movie, when he runs into Annie after they've stopped dating and introduces her to a young, *young* Sigourney Weaver, fresh out of Yale}}, the Metro, the Bleecker and, of course, Theater 80. With all the rep houses having ceded their real estate to condos and their authority to Netflix, who is curating the tastes of the city's undergraduates? How will they even know about *The Sorrow And The Pity*? *Mondo Cane*? How can the budding homosexual flower without the occasional force-feeding of a double feature of *Now Voyager* and *All About Eve*? To wit – and to extend this parenthetical yet further: in senior year, at the last meeting of our Japanese literature seminar before Spring break, the professor – ageing, erudite, one of the few, perhaps only, Western recipients of countless Japanese cultural laurels – asked us our plans for the coming week. I allowed as how I would be staying in town in order to write my thesis. 'Well then, of *course* you'll be going to the Bette Davis festival every day down at the Embassy.' He said it as if stating an obvious prescription, like recommending medical attention for a sucking chest wound, or 'You'll want to call the fire department about those flames licking up the front of your house.' Only a self-destructive lunatic would

think he could survive the week by missing the Bette Davis festival. I took his advice and went every day. Did it help my thesis any? Hard to say. It was a long time ago.)

The time when a Woody Allen retrospective would have evoked that kind of fierce cinéaste devotion seems long gone, having been tempered out of us not just by the years (such performative loyalty is really the province of the youngsters who nightly go to Irving Plaza right near my apartment, passing the hours sitting on the pavement singing the songs of the artists they are about to see), but by Woody Allen himself. The tsunami of mediocrities like *Hollywood Ending* and *Melinda And Melinda* effectively obliterates why *Manhattan* mattered so much. I can't help feeling like he's dismantled the very admirable legacy of his earlier work by his later, overly prolific efforts. It's a more benign version of Ralph Nader (with the key difference that I hate Ralph Nader, whereas Woody Allen simply makes me a little bit sad).

Then again, no one worth a damn doesn't make the occasional bit of bad work: there are episodes of *The Judy Garland Show* that are absolute train wrecks of creaky squareness, made all the more ghoulish by the presence of an aphasic gin-soaked Peter Lawford, and I take a back seat to no one in my love for Judy Garland, the most talented individual who ever lived (ladies and gentlemen, my Kinsey placement); I read a lousy late Edith Wharton novel this summer, *The Children*, that was a tone-deaf, treachingly muddle; I don't care for Balanchine's *Scherzo à la Russe* and I've said it before, even though it is considered a cinematically signal moment by the *Cahiers du Cinema* crowd (zzzzzzz), I'm no great fan of the movie *Kiss Me Deadly*.

Perhaps taken as a whole, the twenty-eight films will start to exert their own internal logic and I will see and delight in how Allen mines his themes over and over again. Or perhaps it will be like the Broadway show *Fosse*, where a surfeit of

the choreographer's vocabulary made all of it suffer and the entire thing looked like the kind of shitty entertainment that takes place on a raised, round, carpeted platform at a car show. I'll see, I guess.

As one might expect for the 1:30 p.m. showing on the Friday before Christmas, there are only about a dozen of us waiting. Our ranks swell to about thirty people closer to show time, but at first it's just me and more than a few men of a certain age (whose ranks I join with ever-greater legitimacy each day), about whom it might be reasonably assumed that we spend an inordinate amount of time fixating on when next we might need to pee. Thoughts of age stay at the forefront in the first few minutes of the film, when Woody Allen himself (who, it must be said, in later scenes, stripped down to boxers, kind of had a rocking little body in his day) addresses the camera directly and tells us that he just turned forty. I'm older than that by two years.

How many times have I seen this, I wonder? Unquantifiable. The film is canonical and familiar and memorized, almost to the point of ritual. Perhaps this is the spiritual solace the faithful find in the formulaic rhythms of liturgy. It's as comforting as stepping into a warm bath. Diane Keaton is enchanting, there is no other word for it. She comes on the screen and you can hear the slightest creaking in the audience as corners of mouths turn up. There is Christopher Walken, a peach-fuzzed stripling. And there, doe-eyed, with drum-tight skin: Carol Kane playing Alvy's first wife, Allison Portchnik.

Allison Portchnik. Oy. I am generally known as an unfailingly appropriate fellow. I have very good manners. But when I fuck up, I fuck up big time. Suddenly I am reminded of how, three years ago, I was on a story for an adventure magazine, an environmental consciousness-raising whitewater-rafting expedition in Chilean Patagonia (about which the less said the better. It's really scary. Others may call it exhilarating, and I suppose it is, the way having a bone marrow test finally over and done with is exhilarating. And Patagonia, Chilean Patagonia at least, while pretty, isn't one tenth as breathtaking as British Columbia). On the trip with me were Bobby Kennedy, Jr., hotelier André

Balazs and Glenn Close, among others. Everyone was very nice, I hasten to add.

After lunch one day, my friend Chris, the photographer on the story, came up to me and said, 'I'd lay off the Kennedy assassination jokes if I were you.'

I laughed, but Chris reiterated, not joking this time. 'No, I'd *really* lay off the Kennedy assassination jokes. The *lunch line . . .*' he reminded me.

And then I remembered. I had been dreading this trip (see above about how totally justified I was in my trepidation) for weeks beforehand, terrified by the off-the-grid distance of this Chilean river, a full three days of travel away; terrified of the rapids and their aqueous meat-grinder properties; terrified of just being out of New York. All of this terror I took and disguised as an affronted sense of moral outrage, that such trips were frivolous, given the terrible global situation. I explained it to Glenn Close thusly:

'I was using the war in Iraq to try and avoid coming down here,' suddenly, unthinkingly invoking the part of *Annie Hall* where Alvy breaks off from kissing Allison because he's distracted by niggling doubts: if the motorcade was driving past the Texas Book Depository, how could Oswald, a poor marksman, have made his shot? Surely there was a conspiracy afoot. Then, with Bobby Kennedy, Jr. helping himself to three-bean salad on the lunch line not five feet away, I switched into my Carol Kane as Allison Portchnik voice and said, 'You're using the Kennedy Assassination as an excuse to avoid having sex with me.' Then I followed that up with my Woody Allen imitation and finished out the scene. Nice. No one pointed out my gaffe or was anything other than gracious and delightful.

Despite how well I know the material, the film feels so fresh. All the observations and jokes feel like they're being made for the first time, or are at least in their infancy. By later films they will feel hackneyed (in the movie *Funny Girl*, the process of calcification is even more accelerated. You get back from intermission and Barbra Streisand already feels like too big a star, a drag version of herself), but here it's all just terrifically entertaining. And current! Alvy tells his friend Max that he feels that the rest of the country turning its back on the city – It's the mid-70s. *Gerald Ford to New York: Drop*

*Dead*, and all that jazz – is anti-Semitic in nature. That we are seen as left-wing, Communist, Jewish, homosexual pornographers. And so we remain, at least in the eyes of Washington and elsewhere, a pervy bastion of surrender monkeys. There was an *Onion* headline that ran after a sufficient interval of time had passed post-9/11, that essentially read, 'Rest of country's temporary love affair with New York officially over.'

Rest of the country's perhaps, but mine was just beginning when I saw the film at age eleven. By the time the voice-over gets to the coda about how we throw ourselves over and over again into love affairs despite their almost inevitable disappointments and heartbreak because, like the joke says, 'we need the eggs,' (if you need the set-up to the punchline, what on earth are you doing reading this?) I am weepy with love for the city. Although, truth be told, it doesn't take

much to get my New York waterworks going.

Walking out, my friend Rick, thirty-plus years resident said, 'I had forgotten how Jewish a film it is.' I really hadn't noticed. But I'm the wrong guy to ask. It's like saying to a fish, 'Do things around here seem really wet to you?' I wrote a book that got translated into German a few years back. There was a fascination among the Germans with what they perceived as my Jewish sensibility; a living example of the extirpated culture. I've said this before, but I felt like the walking illustration of that old joke about the suburbs being the place where they chop down all the trees and then name the streets after them. At least a dozen of the reviews referred to me as a 'stadtneurotiker', an urban neurotic, a designation that pleased me, I won't lie. Especially when I found out the German title for *Annie Hall*. *Der Stadtneurotiker*. ♦



# The Life of R.B. Kitaj

*Simon Prosser on an artist mortally wounded by his critics*

ON WALKING into the Main Entrance Hall of London's British Library it is impossible to ignore a huge tapestry – as big as the side of a small house – hanging to the left of the stairs, as vibrant as a patchwork quilt or a stained glass window.

The eye registers first the fragmented blocks of vivid colour – oranges, yellows, blues, greens, pinks and purples – and is then drawn to the corners: to a tonsured man in a suit, tie and glasses, wearing a hearing aid and being comforted by a naked woman, at bottom left; to the Auschwitz gatehouse at top left; to a tropical sky with palm trees at top right; and to a bandaged soldier in rag-tag uniform at bottom right. Finally the eye begins to fill in the central details: a wasteland of scattered figures and objects – books, a map, a lone sheep, a broken bust and plinth sinking into a toxic-looking swamp, another fallen soldier, a person drowning, a body propped up against a tree.

The whole tableau seems rife with clues, references, quotations, memories and histories, yet so subjectively and passionately rendered that all of these signifiers whirl and blur.

This single-loom tapestry, the largest ever made in Britain, is seen every day by a legion of writers and readers on their way to work in the Reading Rooms – which seems wholly appropriate when one discovers it is an image created by R.B. Kitaj, one of the most writerly artists of the twentieth century. That it is there at all though is surprising, its commission following as it did the so-called 'Tate War' of 1994, which pitted the artist against his Establishment critics in a sad tale of envy, love, death, revenge and eventual exile.

Born in Cleveland, Ohio in October 1932, Ronald Brooks Kitaj – the man in the suit and tie glimpsed in self-portrait in the tapestry – spent his early youth with his diasporic Jewish mother and stepfather in upstate New York, a period the artist later described as 'Smalltown

life; constant drawing, baseball and movies... first book-collecting which would grow into a lifelong disease'. In 1948 he left home, hitchhiked to New York, then embarked on a peripatetic career as a merchant seaman, reading Eliot, Joyce, Pound and Borges along the way, before being drafted into the US Army in 1956.

After two years' service – partly working as an illustrator for the Intelligence Corps – Kitaj enrolled at Oxford's Ruskin School of Drawing, his study funded under the terms of the GI Bill. He drew and painted each day at the Ashmolean Museum, attended lectures by Picasso-scholar Douglas Cooper, and began the first of a long series of works inspired by T.S. Eliot. As Andrew Lambirth later recorded, Kitaj noted that 'some few early modernist poets had arranged words to resemble pictures or designs, and I had begun to think I could do the reverse for art: to lay down pictures as if they were poems to look at'.

The following year Kitaj moved to London's Royal College of Art, where his slightly older age, his talents as a painter, his intellectual maturity and, not least, his ownership of a car helped make him a mentor and inspiration for a generation of fellow students – David Hockney, Derek Boshier, Patrick Caulfield and Allen Jones amongst them – who were to form the core of the early 1960s British Pop Art scene. While never strictly a Pop artist himself – his work was already too allusive, complex and uncategorisable for that (plus the only elements of pop culture which interested him were baseball and movies) – Kitaj was nonetheless a kind of godfather to the movement. His own interests, rather, lay elsewhere: in books; in a deep and growing interest in Jewish culture and religion; and in his passionate engagement with the Old Masters and with Cezanne, Picasso and Matisse (later to be joined by Mondrian and Duchamp).

With his first solo show at Marlborough Fine Art in 1963, Kitaj, in the words of painter Tom Phillips, 'single-handed and with one exhibition, brought the

intellect back into the forum of British art.' Gloriously coloured, occasionally collaged, mysteriously rich in theme and inspiration, Kitaj's canvases of the early- to mid-sixties remain among the finest work created in Britain in that decade and still have the power to compel and delight, whether in his earliest paintings such as 'Words' (1959) and 'Reflections on Violence' (1962) or in his mid-sixties works 'The Ohio Gang' (1964) and 'Walter Lippmann' (1966).

At this time, Kitaj was developing friendships with writers such as Michael Hamburger, Richard Wollheim, W.H. Auden and Hugh MacDiarmid and, as he was to recall much later in an interview with Andrew Lambirth, 'Andy (Warhol) came from soup cans and I came from books. Books and book learning are for me what trees and woods are for a landscape painter. I said that when I wuz a kid and I say it now with one foot in the grave.'

The late 1960s and early 1970s were a difficult period for Kitaj, following the suicide of his wife Elsi in 1969, his move from London to America to teach at UCLA and a concentration on screenprinting rather than painting which he came to regret. It was not until 1972 when he returned to London, soon to be joined by the great love of his life, the younger American artist Sandra Fisher, that he regained his momentum, with paintings such as 'The Autumn of Central Paris (after Walter Benjamin)' (1972–3), 'Land of Lakes' (1975–7) and 'If Not, Not' (1975–6), his masterpiece of the period now in the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art and the image reproduced in the British Library tapestry. Commenting on that picture, Kitaj outlined his debts to Eliot's 'The Waste Land', to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and to the Old Masters Giorgione and Bassano. But most of all 'If Not, Not' was a response to the central historical fact, for Kitaj, of the European Holocaust.

Towards the end of the seventies Kitaj adopted a more traditional way of working, drawing in pastel and charcoal, inspired in part by Degas, and it wasn't until 1983 and his marriage to Sandra (with Hockney as best man) that he returned to painting with gusto, driven by his deepening focus on what he termed 'The Jewish Question' and the attempt 'to do Cezanne and Degas and Kafka over again, after Auschwitz'. Looser



in style and frequently dryer in paint-handling, the 1980s work has a strongly expressionist feel, as Kitaj sought to capture his intellectual preoccupations on canvas. At the same time he was completing his *First Diasporic Manifesto*, published in 1989 and beginning with a semi-ironic quote from his friend Philip Roth: 'The poor bastard has Jew on the brain'.

The penultimate act of Kitaj's life was a tragic one, provoked by his first full-scale retrospective at London's Tate Gallery in 1994. In the years immediately before the show, Kitaj went into artistic overdrive, impelled in part by the Tate deadline, in part by a growing sense of his own mortality, and in part by his dream of developing what he called an 'old-age' style. In 1999 he remembered: 'I had about three years to prepare for the Tate show. And, yes, I was jolted into action . . . Those years before the Tate War were a blessing, a doomed blessing.'

As part of the retrospective Kitaj wrote a number of extended captions or 'prefaces' to particular works, merging once again his interest in words with his interest in images. Intended to supplement rather than exactly to explain his paintings, they nonetheless served to irritate several of London's most prominent critics, who damned both Kitaj and his work, calling the artist 'pretentious', a 'poseur'

and a 'name-dropper', in reviews which seem written in the shadow of envy and xenophobia. Kitaj's crime it seemed was to be an American Jewish intellectual as well as an artist.

Greater catastrophe, however, followed two weeks after the closing of the show, when in September Kitaj's wife Sandra died suddenly of a brain aneurysm at the age of forty-seven. The artist, with forgiveable logic, concluded that her death was caused by the great stress they had both suffered as a result of the retrospective's reception from the critics.

Grief-stricken and depressed, Kitaj was not to show any new work for two years, until the 1996 Royal Academy Summer Exhibition where he showed a picture with collage including the phrase 'THE CRITIC KILLS', co-signed 'Ron and Sandra'. A year later he returned to the RA with an installation including the searing painting 'The Killer-Critic Assassinated by his Widower, Even', depicting a monstrous critic with an unfurling tongue being shot by the artist in tandem with Monet whose work had helped inspire the composition. A collage of Penguin book covers – including *Men Without Women*, *Diary of a Madman* and *Dialogue with Death* – partially surrounds the main image.

In July 1997 Kitaj left London forever, recalling some years later that 'London

died for me when Sandra died'. He moved once again to Los Angeles, to a house named Westwest, where he devoted himself to reading, to spending time with his children and grandchildren and to painting Sandra and himself together in a series of dreamlike canvases. 'I do revisit Europe in imagination and dreams,' he said, 'but not much – I'm too busy getting on with my Third Act.'

Kitaj embraced his old age before its actual arrival, growing a long white beard and walking with the aid of a stick, and came more and more to resemble an Old Testament prophet or an elder from one of his beloved Old Masters, as can be seen in the beautiful late photograph by his friend Lee Friedlander of Kitaj surrounded by his sons and grandsons. He remained in touch with old friends – indeed the British Library commission came from from one of his first London acquaintances, the architect Colin St John Wilson – and also found time to make new ones, amongst them the writer Jonathan Safran Foer, whose essay on Kitaj follows.

Kitaj died at his home in Los Angeles in October 2007, just as his *Second Diasporic Manifesto* was about to appear in expanded form. Verse 336, as Richard Morphet has noted, reads: 'Depart this world still studying, mainly art and Jews.' ♦

## PORTRAITURE

# Something Else is Created

*Jonathan Safran Foer remembers Kitaj*

*My wife is pregnant. Eleven weeks. January 29 due date. She had her second scan this past Thursday and we saw arms and legs. So begins the Exodus from idea to thing. Something you think about all of the time, but can't – without aids – see, hear, smell, taste or touch, has to be believed in. (We believe that the child will be born, but also have to believe that it's there at all.) In only a few weeks, when Nicole will be able to feel the baby's presence and movements, it will no longer only be believed in, but both believed in and known. As the months progress – it turns, kicks, gets the hiccups – we will know more and more and have to believe less. And*

*then the child will come, and belief will fall away completely – it won't be necessary anymore.*

*But will it fall away completely? Isn't there some residue? And isn't that residue why parents are the way they are? The inexplicable, unreasonable, illogical emotions and behaviour must have something to do with having had to believe for the better part of a year. Parents don't have the luxury of being reasonable, no more than a religious person does. (Although the analogy is reversed: the religious are God's children . . .) It's not surprising that new parents tend to become more religious than they were before – experience with belief encourages belief.*

*I wonder if, per our conversation, many new parents start painting?*

THIS IS FROM a letter I wrote to Kitaj in 2005. The 'per our conversation' refers to an exchange we had about a John Ashbery essay, 'The Invisible Avant-Garde.' In preparation for writing this, I went back to all kinds of different texts – art criticism and history, Jewish literature and philosophy – as I know Kitaj would have wanted. He transposed the old woodworking adage, "measure twice, cut once" to reading books and making paintings. Books were how he measured his paintings. 'To experiment,' Ashbery wrote,

was to have the feeling that one was poised on some outermost brink. In other words if one wanted to depart, even moderately, from the norm, one

was taking one's life – one's life as an artist – into one's hands. A painter like Pollock for instance was gambling everything on the fact that he was the greatest painter in America, for if he wasn't, he was nothing, and the drips would turn out to be random splashes from the brush of a careless housepainter. It must often have occurred to Pollock that there was just a possibility that he wasn't an artist at all, that he had spent his life "toiling up the wrong road to art" as Flaubert said to Zola. But this very real possibility is paradoxically just what makes the tremendous excitement in his work. It is a gamble against terrific odds. Most reckless things are beautiful in some way, and recklessness is what makes experimental art beautiful, just as religions are beautiful because of the strong possibility that they are founded on nothing. We would all believe in God if we knew He existed, but would this be much fun?

No, it wouldn't. And it wouldn't be belief, either.

Everything that matters is an all-or-nothing wager, even when there is the appearance of stability. Essential things are essential because we know they could be the other way. For the first year of my son's life, I would wake up, often several times a night, convinced he was on the verge of some terrible accident. These visions were horribly painful, but the stakes weren't negotiable. Look at Lee Friedlander's photographs of Kitaj: before 19 September 1994 he had one face; after, he had another. We are helpless before our nightmares, and we don't get to choose our faces. Except in art.

Kitaj would never let a conversation end without having asked me about my work. 'Always the same,' I told him the first time we spoke.

'Never the same,' he said, almost sternly.

Kitaj believed in the things he said, wrote and painted. When he referred to himself as a Diasporist, it wasn't a literary idea or a pose. He saw himself as a microcosm and continuation of Jewish history: always moving, always resisting and changing and poised on the outermost brink, always wagering everything, *never*

*the same*. It was a fate that he inherited and chose.

I spoke to Kitaj only a few days before his death. I'd gone out to L.A. to give a lecture, and was hoping to see him, if only for a few minutes. He wanted to watch the Cleveland Indians in the American League Championships – he wanted to watch them without company, that is – and liked to go to bed by 6 p.m., before his body infringed on his pride. It left a window too small to fit through. So we ended up talking on the phone, only a few miles apart.

'How is your work?'

I told him it had taken a dramatic turn. For the first time, and quite unexpectedly, I was immersed in a non-fiction project. I felt very much out of my element. Things would almost certainly fall apart.

He said, 'That's all nice to hear.'

I thought about calling him to offer condolences when the Indians lost the series, but sensed that I shouldn't. (It occurred to me, too, that he didn't want to see me on that trip to L.A.) As a young man, Kitaj painted densely – libraries and museums and peoples crammed into each work, entire epochs. His paintings seemed to be larger than their canvases. In the middle third of his life, the paintings began to depopulate, more space was allowed in, lines stood alone, there was less to announce and more to say. And then, toward the end, there was Sandra and Kitaj, when there were people at all.

A pencil disappears with use, and so does an artist.

I once told Kitaj how much I admired the portrait of Philip Roth, which hung in the entryway of his house. He spoke about the magic of portraiture, particularly Jewish portraiture. I couldn't always follow his mysticism, and at the time wasn't sure what he meant when he said, 'When a Jew draws a Jew, something else is created.' *What else?*

He suggested – generously it felt – that he draw me. He no longer had the stamina to draw from life, and so asked me to send him photos of myself.

'Bad photos,' he said. 'Out of focus, unclear.'

Kitaj was my hero. And despite myself, I couldn't help but feel that being committed to paper by him would make me more like him, that as the pencil is trans-

ferred to the page, so would some small bit of him be transferred to me. *I would be created.*

The first photo I sent was flattering, if a bit oddly shot as a concession.

A postcard arrived a week later: 'Thank you for sending the photo, but I'm afraid it's far too good.'

And a few months later, another postcard: 'The new photo is too good, as well.'

It went on like that.

After my son was born, I stopped sending photos. It wasn't a conscious decision, and I'm not sure what was behind it. Maybe a child makes a portrait – even a portrait by one's hero – feel less necessary. Or maybe a child relieves the vanity that has survived into adulthood, and it's vanity that makes one want one's portrait done. Maybe I was too preoccupied. Or maybe mine was no longer the face I chose.

I never found a way to say it, because I valued Kitaj's friendship and art too much, but I wanted him to draw my son. In retrospect, I'm sure he would have been delighted by this, but at the time it felt impossible to raise the subject. So it became a secret obsession, which I didn't even share with my wife. What was it, exactly, that I was obsessed with? With the thought that some of Kitaj could be transferred onto my son?

And why were all of the photos I'd sent Kitaj 'too good'? Was his original offer meant only as a conversational nicety? Was he too proud to admit that he didn't have a drawing in him? Or – and this seems more likely to me – was there a lesson he was trying to teach?

Giving a word to a thing is to give it life. 'Let there be light,' God said, 'and there was light.' No magic. No raised hands and thunder. The *articulation* made it possible. It is the most powerful of all Jewish ideas: expression is generative.

It's the same with marriage. You say 'I do' and you do. What is it, *really*, to be married? To be married is to say you are married. To say it not only in front of your spouse, but in front of your community, and, if you are religious, in front of God. And this knowledge of the power of expression is also behind the anxiety about making graven images: we know that *things* can become *ideas*.

They can become gods.

As far as I know, Kitaj didn't believe in God – not in any traditional sense – but he believed in saying things to God. He believed in prayer. He believed in saying aloud and painting what he would have prayed for if he believed in God. He painted his prayers.

Kitaj was the most religious person I've known; his painting was his faith. To paint, for him – to paint at the outermost brink – was to risk participating in the ongoing creation of the world. His work was *work*: he strove to repair the world, to fill out the spaces with words and images, to make paintings like bandages to cover the wounds, and paintings like wounds to make the injuries visible.

OUR SCATTERED AUTHORS

## A Very Practical Joke

*Sheila Heti at the Miami Art Fair*

I HAVE A PAINTER FRIEND. Her name is Margaux Williamson. Last December, her Toronto gallerist decided to take some of her paintings to Miami, where for a week the city would be one giant art fair. Collectors from all over the world, the top galleries in London, Tokyo – everywhere – would gather by the beach. The fanciest art would be shown at Art Basel, the original and largest of the fairs, and of the dozen smaller fairs which would circle it, one, called Scope, was where Margaux's work would be.

Though her dealer had already left for Florida, Margaux continued painting. I told her to deliver the newest paintings by hand, not ship them, and offered to take the trip down with her. Then I watched, the morning we were to board public transit to the airport, as she stuffed three oil paintings packed in bubble wrap into her large duffel bag, along with twenty t-shirts. We were only going for three days.

On the plane ride down, we read an article in the *New York Times* about a painter who would be attending that week, a twenty-five-year-old guy who had studied at Yale, and was represented by one of the top SoHo galleries. Basel would be his debutante ball. From Miami

*Something else is created.*

*What else?*

The subject of his work was the world itself. He wasn't capturing it, but generating it. He was *changing* it—not only in the art-critical sense of altering the way people look at things, but in the Jewish sense of filling it out. Parents sometimes disappear into their children, as pencils sometimes disappear into drawings, and teachers into their students. Kitaj disappeared into the world, and by so doing made more world.

With Kitaj's death, our period of knowing him is over. There will be no more shows of new work, no more manifestos, no photographs of him, no postcards, no

afternoons at his kitchen table.

What does it mean to believe in the dead?

After Sandra's sudden death, Kitaj asked Isaiah Berlin if she would be there for him on the other side of death's door. 'My dear old friend . . . told me no. What does *he* know?'

What, at the end, did Kitaj know?

His last published words were, 'WORK IN PROGRESS TO BE CONTINUED / (No End in Sight).' How, despite millennia of living on the outermost brink, could a Jew really believe this? And how, in this attention/imagination/compassion starved world, could an artist? How could Kitaj, who knew his end was in sight, have written that no end was in sight? ◇

dangerous neighbourhood that the city had been trying to fix with art.

Having delivered the work, and then dropped our bags at our cookie-cutter hotel, we decided to get dinner in Little Havana, at the other end of town. Then, in the evening, we'd return to Scope, see the work and also visit NADA – North American Art Dealers Alliance – a fair that was slightly fancier than Scope.

At four in the afternoon, we stepped onto a bus, mid-way through a discussion about what you need to know in writing, and what you need to know in art. We came to the same conclusion: you have to know where the funny is, and, 'if you know where the funny is, you know everything.' As the bus drove on through the sun, sitting up in front, across from a seat labelled 'In memory of Rosa Parks,' we tested out this theory.

- s. I think Manet is funny.
- m. Yeah, Manet is very funny.
- s. And Kierkegaard is really funny.
- m. Really?
- s. Yeah.
- m. I see him as so sweet. I see him so much more like poetry.
- s. He's funny. Do you think Nietzsche's funny?
- m. I haven't read him much. Baudrillard?
- s. Haven't read him enou– hmmm. Baudrillard?
- m. Yes! Kafka-funny. Matthew Barney's funny in his seriousness.
- s. Richard Serra's not funny.

- m. No.
- s. But he's still great . . . but maybe that's the fault.
- m. He seems to take himself and art *very* seriously. It's nice to take it seriously while also leaving your back door open. I mean, your pants down.
- s. (*Laughing.*) You mean slipping on a banana peel.
- m. You know, I didn't realize that you – you can't really slip on a banana peel unless it's rotten.
- s. Right.
- m. Which is what happened to me.
- s. And was the buttery side down?
- m. It was all black. So it was hard to tell.
- s. Right. The Ramones are funny.
- m. Yeah!
- s. Pollock?
- m. Not funny.
- s. What about Rothko?
- m. He's okay . . . I mean, all those guys are – I mean, one of them would have been enough for me.

*started* the Civil War. He tried to get the French involved but they wouldn't listen. They filled him up with pastries and desserts. They tried to get us to use the metric system and we said, No, go away – we like our rulers. Thomas Jefferson said, You always get the rulers you deserve.' 'Do you know any other poems by heart?' 'No.'

Then we found a cab and returned to Scope, where the lights were down and lengths of tape had been pasted across most of the booths. Calling Margaux's dealer, we learned that the fair had closed three hours earlier.

'Three hours!' I exclaimed. 'We missed them both!'

'We had to have our dinner,' Margaux replied.

We sat on the pavement in the very bad neighbourhood as some boys with skateboards played with a cat, and waited forty-five minutes for another cab to take us to the beach where the city was host-

- s. You don't think?
- m. No, I think we've – both of us have read this extensive article about him, like of *course* if you saw one piece by Takashi Murakami, like we have such nuances because of articles and because of context and because you've seen their past work and because, you know. And these are so many young artists trying to show all of that in one go.
- s. But the point here is not to decide who's the greatest artist, right?
- m. Not at all. Not at all. But it is a chance for – it is a chance to let the younger artists in. It's a chance to let the smaller galleries in. I don't know what it is. It's not everything.
- s. No, it's true. If you think that going to an art fair and having your pictures in a booth will make you famous, it won't.
- m. But no one thinks that. No one's thinking that at all.



After finishing our dinner, we went to NADA and arrived as it was closing. Because of this, we walked super-fast through all the booths: like it . . . hate it . . . don't like it . . . don't care . . . and left after stopping briefly to say hello to a pale, blonde Chelsea dealer we both knew and she leaned in to kiss me, but not Margaux. 'Connecticut!' Margaux raged as we left the building. 'All the Connecticut bitches hate me.'

To calm her down, I asked her to recite what I knew to be her favourite American poem.

'Okay. James Joyce –' I prompted.

'James Joyce was stupid, he didn't know as much as *I* know. I'd rather throw dead batteries at cows than read *him*. Everything was fine until *he* came along. He

ing a Peaches concert. I pulled out my tape recorder and we discussed Margaux's hopes for the fair. I couldn't understand how anyone could get famous in a place like this, where there were thousands of artists and so many galleries, and all of the art just laid out to speak for itself like cereal boxes on supermarket shelves, but without even the words. The art had all started blurring together for me, and I suggested that we had as yet seen nobody truly great.

m. Well, of course there are people that are really truly great here, but how could you see that? Like for instance, if Takashi Murakami had one of his sculptures there, you wouldn't know how good it was.

s. No?

m. Not at all. Not at all.

s. I would be thinking that if I were an artist here.

That evening we went to the concert on the beach, and had a brief, awful fight after I suggested that all the art that Margaux liked was 'only almost good.' Then we met up with Margaux's dealer, and the three of us walked in the rain to find a good place to drink around there. On the walk we spotted a pizza shop, and since it had been five hours since Margaux and I had eaten, we got some slices and sat at the counter and ate them. As we were eating, a boy and a girl in their early twenties, who were clearly part of the art crowd, came into the pizzeria and

addressed Margaux directly.

'Are you Margaux Williamson?' the girl asked, wide-eyed.

'Yes.'

'Oh, I *love* your paintings! I've seen them on the internet,' she said. The three of us were startled.

The boy added, 'I met you at the art fair in L.A.. I'm a painter, too.'

'We're from Baltimore,' she said.

As they continued to talk about her work, my mind went to a video Margaux had made of a friend's performance of a song he'd written for his band, Tomboy-friend. They had put it on YouTube, and one viewer had listed himself as a fan: a man, supposedly, from Afghanistan. Planning the band's first concert, Margaux had carefully chosen the title: *Big In Afghanistan*.

The next day we attended the main fair, Art Basel, which we had to pay twenty dollars to get into and line up for, then, in the cavernous, cold convention centre, retrieve a full-colour map to direct our way around. There were coffee kiosks set up, in case visitors got tired making their way from one end of the hall to the other, and it was here we found the wealthiest art patrons.

Basel was being sponsored by a bank and on their banners, which had been hung outside the convention centre and in the corridors leading to the rooms with the panel discussions and the temporary bookshops, was this message: 'USB welcomes you to Art Basel Miami Beach.' Below it was a quote from Andy Warhol: 'Everybody's sense of beauty is different from everybody else's.'

Looking at it, Margaux grimaced, 'Oh yeah. It's saying you can be rich and stupid about art. You're all welcome.'

After several hours, growing weary from all the art, and cold – I had only worn a sundress – we left the fair. Outside, down at the bottom of the flight of concrete stairs, a woman sat staring off into infinity, slowly winding a ball of string around her body and the handrails.

We stopped and looked at her, then walked on through the streets, where every one of the houses was painted a different, pastel colour.

Then I heard my friend say calmly, 'I don't care about success. I have it in my heart now.'

Earlier that morning we'd laid on the beach for several hours, squinting into the hot sun and reading our books, then swam so far out to sea that a lifeguard in his motorized vehicle had to drive down the beach and blow his whistle at us to come back to shore, while everyone stared.

After that we headed over to Basel, and upon leaving the convention centre we found a fancy hotel and went straight through the lobby out into the back, where we pretended to be guests and lounged by the pool, and watched as couples played with their babies.

I began leisurely musing on how the piece might go, but she corrected me. 'No no, the story is: how do you do this while staying in Canada? How do you do this without going to Yale?'

'Probably not by lounging near a pool, or spending all your time on the beach, or arriving late for all the art fairs.'

After another hour, we pulled ourselves from the lounge chairs and went to see our final fair of the trip, Aqua. Aqua was the smallest and friendliest of the fairs. It was a two-storey hotel with all the rooms opening onto a courtyard in the middle, and in each room was a gallery. The beer was free, and we saw a tall, slim, handsome Asian man dragging a cabbage behind him on a leash as he made his way into and out of the rooms, looking bored. There was a gallery owner from Winnipeg we were friends with, and we spoke to a dealer from New York who was hoping to represent Margaux, who'd met her for the first time at an art fair in L.A..

Now we sat down with our drinks on the edge of an enclosed waterfall.

m. We've talked about this so much, about professionalism and careerism. But my goal is not to be in the most prestigious gallery. I'm so not interested in that. It would be nice, but I have too many goals for that to be the main one, you know? And I think that it can still happen if that's not your goal. Like, my goal is to make art and have people see it, and I think sometimes that's what a prestigious gallery does. But mainly I feel – I feel the most important job is to make more art. And I always was very anxious about getting a New York gallery or galler-

ies outside of Canada, because I need that to make a decent living. That's all.

s. Hmm.

m. But I think it's good for artists to see this stuff – especially from Canada.

s. To show that there's a lot of great art out there, a lot of people doing art?

m. And also to know that it's not important.

s. What's not important?

m. This.

Later that night, we wound up at a party at an extravagant hotel with our friend, the painter Clint Griffin, who was down this time not with his own paintings, as in the past, but with his shipping business; he had driven down canvases for some of the Toronto galleries exhibiting here. Now all the women we had seen in the streets – with their tight skirts and high heels, their false cleavage and their tans, their make-up and their heavy, long hair – were drinking colourful cocktails with us around a glittering, empty pool.

'Have any of your paintings sold?' Clint asked Margaux.

'I don't know. I don't think so. Maybe. I haven't asked.'

I spent the next twenty minutes pretending I was a waitress at the hotel, asking the guests at the long banquet tables if they were done with their dinners, then taking the plates over to Margaux and Clint, where we ate the remainder of their steak and salmon.

Then, after some pina colodas, we ran into a rich couple strolling along the beach. They spoke of how they were thinking of buying a twenty-three-thousand dollar *Rouchet* print, and had just come from having dinner with the gallerist who was selling it. Their collection included a Gerhard Richter, and they had so little wall space left, that whatever they bought in Miami would end up 'in rotation.' *If* they bought. Though they had flown from California, it was not necessarily for them to buy, but if they saw something they liked, the woman said, they had the *ability* to buy, 'although it's not like we have zillions of dollars.'

When I told this to my friend Misha later, he said, 'She has so much money that she has to make up an amount of money that doesn't exist to say how much she doesn't have.'

We began discussing the art and the fairs we had seen and the fairs we had liked.

M. It's funny. It seems Basel has worse art and better art and the other fairs have less bad art and less good art.

WOMAN. What now? Say that again?

S. She's saying that Basel has more terrible and more wonderful art and the other fairs have more nothing.

WOMAN. Oh, so more extremes.

MAN. Now, the big Basel convention one feels more like stocks to me.

CLINT. Yes.

Then the woman wanted to know, after I told her I was down here to write about Margaux's art experience, how she might recognize Margaux's paintings.

S. Well, they're narrative, and there's characters in them, and it's kind of like, beautiful, otherworldly. It's hard to, um, I don't know how to explain it because you've seen so much art, probably – how to make it stand out for you.

WOMAN. But you have to *work* at it!

You can practice with me right now, because you're a writer and you're writing about it –

S. The ones in this – in this – were very green and – uh, if you go to the gallery –

WOMAN. You've got to find the words!

If you can't, then you're in trouble, sweetie!

A rage went through me – I wanted to punch her – what did she know! Besides, I had never told her that I had millions of words but not zillions!

We left the couple and walked back to the hotel. After another pina colada, the three of us stripped down to our underwear and jumped in the pool. We were the only ones swimming. Twenty minutes later, tiring of the pool, I beckoned to a man sitting on a bench near the edge of the water.

'We need towels!' I called, and I observed him wave down a hotel man, then collect three fluffy towels. We swam to the shore, thanking him as we got out. He smiled and replied, 'No problem.' It was Keanu Reeves! He was very smart and nice. But Margaux grew embarrassed as

we walked away.

'Oh God, I wish we had seen a really more famous, more annoying celebrity. But I *like* his work. I *seriously* have on my MySpace page, like, Werner Herzog, Laurie Anderson, Gertrude Stein, Keanu Reeves.'

'Really?'

'Yes! Ugh! I wish that all the people I liked were either my best friends or total strangers... As they are, of course, but...'

We returned to our hotel really drunk, and Margaux talked to me as I stood at the sink, attempting to wash from my favourite dress the red wine we'd spilled on it earlier that night. In three hours, we would have to get up and go to the airport and fly back home.

M. I just feel like, Oh, you had such a funny version of what this fair, you know... Like the fairs are *nothing* about celebrities or excitement. They really are – it really is this little, self-contained art world, but because we were so happy with each other and we had so much fun, I got distracted and didn't arrange any activities.

S. Hmm.

M. But of course, every experience is fair. I have that – it's a real flaw of mind. I really just want to show everyone

everything I possibly can. But it's not necessary. You have your *own* art fair, you know?

We got into the double bed that we were sharing and I quickly passed out, but I had forgotten to turn the tape recorder off, and after a few minutes Margaux can be heard asking me if I am up; I wasn't, though I made a little affirmative grunt to suggest I was.

And she said softly, perhaps asleep herself:

'I feel like either it's a dream, or it's some kid I know from Texas, like this black kid, nice kid, smart kid, and like he just – he just wanted... He hated all the football games but he really liked the part when we were winning, or something.

And he would just make the t-shirts from when we were winning... and he would make everything from when we were winning.'

After a twenty-second pause she spoke again:

'He really wasn't interested in the game.'

A thirty-second pause, and:

'And then everybody got mad at him.'

Then Margaux fell asleep, and after several minutes of silence, the tape recorder shut itself down. ◇



## Stansted

My dad used to work  
for the Civil Aviation Authority  
in a round building just off High Holborn.  
And whilst he was there he worked on the planning permission  
for the control tower at Stansted.

This was the most tangible of his achievements  
and for years, whenever dads were mentioned, I'd say:  
*My dad was pretty involved with the 'Stansted Project'*  
I'd say: *My dad was one of the top guys.*  
And only very occasionally,  
when proud freckle-faced boys needed to be silenced:  
*My dad built Stansted with his bare hands*

And yet I never really knew exactly what he did,  
I just needed some short phrase  
for boasting rights.

I didn't know it like I knew  
his mahogany trouser-press,  
the brass bowl for his change,  
the way his cheek felt cold  
when he came back from work in the rain  
smelling of trains  
and the morning's aftershave.

Or the skeleton clocks he spent his weekends making,  
meticulous time-keeping under glass domes,  
the way he'd rest his hands on his stomach after we'd eaten,  
the brown sweater with the hole in the cuff.

Or how his check shirt would show  
at the neck of his workshop overalls,  
the silver popper at the top undone.

The occasional Kit-Kat wrapper in his car:  
*Dad, you've been eating chocolate . . . Ummm.*

And I've never asked.

I just see him out on a flat field  
that is not yet a runway,  
clipboard in hand,  
directing other men,  
windsock blowing in the breeze.

# Bob and Roberta Smith, Artists

## *The Art World Needs More Traceys*

WHERE DOES ART SIT ON THE SOCIAL DIVIDE? · Art has always been on the wrong side of the social divide. Art has never been for the people. Art exists now as it did for the Medici. Art is about social control and expression of wealth. The situation of art is now dire. Unless artists and the funders of art wake up and act, the period of Art and Social Engagement which spawned the likes of Joseph Beuys, Gustav Metzger et al, is over. As the post war era ends, so does the belief that art can change the world. Worthwhile art will soon be dead.

ARE BLACKLISTS IMPORTANT? · I have an artist black list. I have not written this list down but it is there in the back of my brain. Curators are also on this list and people who have blanked me at openings.

When I think about it most people are on my list (not my wife). Holding these lists is not a good idea. I say, delete your list and move on. Not because people are not bastards but because list-holding drives you bonkers.

HOW DO YOU GET THE KIDS INVOLVED WITH ART? · I have said this before and I will say it again - The people who work in the education departments in galleries are much more interesting than the so called 'curators'.

If you have to put together education programmes it means you have to constantly think about the art and what it will mean to people. Then you have to go out and find young artists who have the time and the hunger to work with school kids doing projects. The education staff know the best young artists and they know how to think about what art is in a totally un-biennale way. The curators just fly around from one biennale to a triennial thinking: 'I wonder if I can persuade that Mexican or this Brazilian to come to Stoke or somewhere for a show in December', while the 'education lot' have to deal with that shit.

A humiliating thing happened to me recently. I was short listed to make a

sculpture in Trafalgar Square, otherwise known as the 'Fourth Plinth Project'.

Because I have a big pedagogic gene I got involved with the education programme attached to the Fourth Plinth Project. I did a talk to teachers at the outset of the competition and recently the organizers invited me to 'attend' the prize giving for the 'Kids Fourth Plinth Project'. The kid's prize giving was timed to be a week before the actual announcement of the winner of the commission. I was a bit queasy about going because I knew that the organizers would know who the actual winner was but I thought if I did not go it would look bad. I resolved to slope in the back of the auditorium and observe. However, when I got there Ekow Eshun, from the ICA, pulled me out and made me join him in giving out prizes to all the children, thirty two in all. Ekow and I were photographed with each child. I thought, if I don't win this a lot of children will ask their mums and dads 'Who is that strange man in the photograph?' To which mum would reply: 'Oh some loser.' I asked one child what it was like to win the Fourth Plinth Prize. He just laughed.

WHAT IS A KUNSTVEREIN? · Since 1994, I have shown extensively in every part of Germany, in substantial buildings in city centres called 'Kunstvereins'. The Kunstverein is an extraordinary organization that does not exist in this country. It is formed by guilds of artists. Artists at the end of the 19th Century gathered together to create a gallery space in which to show their work.

The Kunstverein in Karlsruhe is a grand 'arts and crafts' building on three levels. Others are more modest. Artists in the town can become a member of the Kunstverein for an annual subscription. This entitles them to inclusion in a group exhibition once a year. These shows can be like our Royal Academy Summer Exhibition. Some interesting work but overall a bit of a free for all. The rest of time curators put on what they feel is interesting work.

What I like about the idea is that a service is provided for all artists whether they are old and a bit washed up like the YBA's or young and groovy or simply late bloomers. The 'Institution' provides a focus for artists. There is a structure in place for inclusion but also a structure for discussion. If we had Kunstvereins in every town with a groovy curator and an education team, think of the useful jobs for artists that would exist. Necessary work could be achieved. Let 10,000 Kunstvereins bloom. Let art be the evergreen language that renews our great nation.

WHAT ABOUT INCLUSION? · You have to let people do what they want. Good will is created by opportunities offered and destroyed by selection. My advice is to include everyone. Two of my favourite exhibitions have been chaotic inclusions of everyone interested in making a work about a particular issue. *The Peace Show*, at Brick Lane Gallery in 2000, was based on the idea of the Greenham Common Peace Camp. Everyone who had a work was included. It was a ground breaking event and a very busy opening. David Beech turned up in his pyjamas and recreated John and Yoko's bed in.

The next year I was asked to design the graphics for *The Climate for Change* exhibition. *Climate for Change* was a massive show on four floors of an old factory in Southwark. The show was great and allowed everyone who wanted a chance to make a work about climate change have the opportunity. It is ghastly and Orwellian when organizations that are set up to promote art become the gatekeepers of Art. A few years ago, I formed *The Apathy Band*. We are a 'big jam band' anyone can join in. Art should be like that; include everyone, even painters can be useful, kiddie's workshops etc.

WHAT ABOUT FAMOUS PEOPLE? · Getting famous artists involved with your show just because they are well known is bad.

They give you an 'Art toenail clipping' and steal all the press.

This is never a good idea. However it is good to curate someone everyone has heard of if the work relates to the situation in a good way; or because that artist has a dynamic which it would be interesting for other artists to work with. Themes are good.



*Margate Rocks: Art and Ecology* was good. Sometimes themes are rubbish. The curators who dreamt up *Pensi con la Menti* (or what ever it was) at the last Venice Biennale should be horsewhipped.

IS TRACEY EMIN NECESSARY? · Thank god for Tracey Emin. Without Tracey anyone with even a hint of the 'Estuary' in their voice might as well give up. A few years ago I went to the ICA bookshop where they had cocktail stick flags on display. They had Tracey Emin's signature on them. Two Asian teenage girls were looking at them in awe and amazement. They bought two of them for quite a lot of money. I was impressed. The 'idea of Tracey' was what had excited them. She was an icon for them. I know from teaching art to students in the East End of London that Tracey is a powerful role model. Her art is good too. The art world needs more Traceys and people like that woman who paints pictures of Diana with a magenta face. They are good.

There are far too many upper class idiots involved; artists who speak like Prince Charles. You have to remember if you are posh but stupid you used to have to be a priest. These days art schools are the refuge of the moneyed dyslexic. My sister went to a posh school. She was an only child for eight years and my mum and dad worked hard to send her to the Lycee Francais. She loved it there. It is an amazing school. The teachers used to tell the kids; 'You are the top 1% of the population'. She did very well.

By the time I came along, two kids later, my mum and dad were broke and I went to an enormous comprehensive in Wandsworth where there were stabbings. The teachers used to say if you work really hard you might get a job, if you are lucky. It didn't bother me. I have never wanted a proper job. I think the problem with public schools is not that they offer opportunities to the well-off but that they give the rich unbelievable self confidence well beyond their ability. This is why we have Boris Johnson as Mayor. He believes he is more than capable of running London but it is clear, as he sacks one advisor after another, he hasn't got a clue. Why would he? He has no idea about the aspirations of Londoners because in the normal run of his life, up till now, he has never worked with them. Boris should

have gone to art school. He could be making casts of his body by now. His Eton School chums could be selling them to other Eton school chums for loads of money. Other chums in the media could be 'bigging' this up in magazines and calling the whole process 'culture'.

HOW SHOULD AN ARTIST BE PAID? · Always, always, always pay artists in cash. The best show I was ever in was called *Pimple Life*. The show was in Tokyo. We were paid a fee before we left England and I thought that was it. I flew on an eleven hour flight over the Ob in Siberia to Japan. On the flight was Rebecca Warren who

was also in the show. When we arrived we were met by our Japanese assistants who would help us while we were there. They gave us each £3000 in yen as spending money. Rebecca, Fergal Stapleton and an American artist called Chuck (or Chip or something) had the best time ever. We stayed in the hotel where they filmed the racist film *Lost in Translation*. Cocktails were expensive in the roof top bar. A round would cost £250 but it was good. When we got back there was a further payment in our banks. That was the best show I have ever done. I can't remember what I did but I am sure it was good. ♦



*Bob and Roberta Smith's proposal for Trafalgar Square's fourth plinth.*

# Nice Day for a Wahhabi Wedding

*Sophia Al-Maria*

**M**Y LITTLE SISTER Sarah got married when she was seventeen.

I expressed some doubts to my mother. She defended my sister's decision. 'Honey, your sister is on a different path. She's always wanted a home and family. You want glory and riches.' I was hurt at the time, but I have since decided that it was not a judgment, merely a statement of fact.

Being half American and half Qatari my sister and I are very lucky to have had so many paths to choose from.

If you ask my littlest sister, El-Bendari, what she wants to do when she grows up, she will tell you without hesitation: marry a boy from our tribe. El-Bendari is five years old this year. Already she has decided that her wedding will be the high point of her life, the funnest and best thing there is. El-Bendari wants a wedding, not a Shetland pony or a music career.

There are no astronauts or doctors in my family.

As teenagers, my Qatari cousins and I spent most of our time knee-deep in discussions about our weddings, drawing designs for fantasy gowns and tossing coins over which no-good cousin we'd end up marrying. Officially, I was understood to be betrothed to my eldest uncle's eldest son. I discovered this the first time I came to Qatar by myself. My uncle took me aside for a chit-chat. 'You know, you are going to need to get married one day,' he said, 'and your choices are – my son Amer Jaber.' I was the eldest daughter of my father, Amer Jaber was the eldest son of my father's older brother; it made sense. Later I confronted my father. Was I really betrothed to my cousin? 'Well, yeah, kind of,' he said. 'We always match up that way, as long as your blood is compatible.'

My beloved presumptive, Amer Jaber Al-Marri, was known to everyone in the family as Godzilla. I sometimes imagined (not without pleasure) a King Kong type scenario in which Godzilla clutched me in his chubby fist as I channelled Fay Ray in my black abaya. He squeezed me with his sausage claws as he swatted buzzing helicopters out of the Doha skyline. I had

a great view, but I didn't marry Godzilla. His father, my uncle, a powerful local imam, became impatient.

Godzilla ended up with my cousin Moza.

I worried about them. Godzilla was clearly going to be a lot to handle. I had always liked him well enough, mostly because he was in possession of what seemed to be the only (pirated, of course) English copies of *The Smurfs* in all of Doha, or at least our tiny corner of it. But his vhs collection did not stop with *The Smurfs*. One time I peeked into the salah at my uncle's house to find Godzilla and his brothers watching a video of women practising all-nude callisthenics before a hairy man in a jumpsuit. I think it was called *Gym Nasty*, though perhaps I am making that up. But Godzilla definitely had a reputation as the town perv.

I danced at their wedding with extra abandon, having dodged the fastest bullet of my young, eligible life. But everyone knew it was supposed to be me looking elated and nervous and miserable in a spumescent white dress. Only later did it occur to me that each dramatic swerve and hair-flip generated gossip about poor terrified Moza.

Sure indications that a wedding is imminent are the squeals of pain ripping through the cement houses of the lucky bridal family. A shrill female howl of 'M-Hagg-Sanaa!' signals that the halawa lady has arrived.

'Halawa' means sweet. The sweet is a golden glop of boiled sugar water the consistency of thick honey. When the halawa lady rolls in, agitated and late, neighbours in their droves descend on the bride's house, hoping to get a wax, too. The lucky lady comes first, though, and her waxing is extra-sweet: for her wedding she is allowed her first-ever full-body wax. This takes place offstage, in a side room, with the door locked and the key hidden. But the screams make it exciting for everyone. As do the probing questions from the halawa lady, when it is your turn: 'So, are you getting married?'

And if that answer is negative, an implied 'Then who are you doing this for?' buffeted with a harrumph.

Nowadays some girls do a certain amount of auto-depilation with razors, but this is still controversial. When I moved to Qatar I brought a pink Bic razor with me from Washington and promptly caused a scandal. My grandmother made me take it out of the bathroom and hide it. (Who was I doing this for, indeed?)

After the halawa, the bride has to get the henna. Usually the henna lady is different from the halawa lady. And there are different styles: North African henna is geometrical and closely resembles fish bones; Indian henna is darker (if you mix the henna paste with lemon, it darkens) and has feathery motifs, like peacocks; Gulfi henna is rounded and organic – there must be no hint of an image, so it tends to be floral.

For her wedding the bride gets the whole deal: head and shoulders, knees and toes, all the way up her thighs, like stockings. Her sisters and cousins get hands and arms and sometimes, more recently, an American-style tramp stamp on the lower back. When we talk about our weddings, we are only barely talking about our marriages. The marriage ceremony itself is a modest affair that usually takes place in the home of the bride, so she doesn't have to move. It is essentially the signing of a contract, witnessed by family members, sometimes with an imam present but usually not. Tea is served, and cookies. The last ceremony I attended was for my stepmother's brother. Sweetly, he had brought his bride a pair of lovebirds in a cage, but the poor little budgies died a week later.

No, when we talk about our weddings, we are mostly talking about the parties. The duelling receptions, male and female. Usually there are two tents set up next to each other on one of the huge swatches of empty lot near where we live. Sometimes they take place at a wedding hall, but that's quite decadent. My sisters dream of having theirs at the Sheraton or the Four Seasons, the men and women in separate air-conditioned ballrooms. But we have never been to such a wedding.

The best wedding I have ever been to involved a whole baby lamb splayed out over a hill of rice. The lamb still had its

eyes. Out of its back rose a tier of trays with condiments: yoghurt, pickles, pepper, salt. The meat was buttery, and butter soft; you tore pieces off with your hands. Usually the food at weddings is disgusting. *Gahawah*: yellow coffee made from unroasted beans with lots of cardamom. Sour grape leaves. Tasteless rice in hillocky clumps. Cellophane-wrapped wedding favours with shrivelled pistachios and sugared almonds in nougat, which sometimes breed tiny worms. Plasticine fruit tarts.

But El-Bendari loves wedding food, especially the tarts. She loves everything about weddings, lives for them, though she won't be allowed to dance until she's a teenager. My five-year-old sister's thoughts about weddings aren't so very different from those of the eager old women who array themselves about the stage at the women's tent. A child has the same voyeuristic lusts as a widow, we just don't call them lusts yet. On wedding nights my sister stays awake long after the bride has bid the party goodnight, watching from our grandmother's lap as the older girls display their tail feathers. This is the main event: nervous virgins and divorcées take their places on a catwalk that is at once auction house, runway, soundstage and wilderness. Black-robed mothers of marriageable sons move in close, in anticipation.

Each eligible girl clammers on to the stage and is announced by the wedding singers, who are always Sudanese. The singers are called *daghagat*, and they play drums and sing into battered microphones, feedback issuing from the cheap speakers. All the songs sound kind of the same and yet people have favourites. I have a favourite, but I have no idea what it says or how to ask for it, as the words are almost unintelligible through all the static.

The serious matchmaking happens after dinner, after the bride has been whisked away by the groom and his family. (When the groom comes everyone covers themselves again and the newly amalgamated family dances around together, the mother of the bride throwing riyals in the air, on her daughter or on herself, depending on which way the wind is blowing.) Earlier in the night is when the 'practice girls' dance, girls who are not especially eligible, or do not wish to be taken seriously. I always dance early, to the consternation of my grandmother.

The female hemisphere of the wedding party is always well lit and bustling long after the men say goodnight. Flesh bursts the seams of silk dresses; the party bursts the woollen tent. The goat-hair flaps can barely shield their glittering secret from the lazy male gazes that peer from behind the headlights of idling Land Cruisers. It's a feast for the eyes, all the lacy borders and receding hemlines.

If you were to whip out a camera in the middle of a wedding, the done-up dolls of Doha and their honour-obsessed mothers would gore you quite mercilessly. Security would be called, your film torn out, your memory card burned with a hot incense coal. When I was little there were no photographs at all; the bride had to go to a photography studio, where a woman whose job it was to do so made sure that no one did anything funny with the negatives. These days there are official wedding photographers, usually Filipino

ladies. There are no group photos. After the photographer has finished with the bride, unmarried girls swarm to get their picture taken, something to send to their secret cell-phone boyfriends.

Last February, before being frisked by the stern security mama at the entrance to my cousin Jameela's wedding, I slipped my palm-sized digital camera into my underpants. Over the last five years, my family's wedding festivities have grown grander, more flamboyant and more revealing, while my shrinking camera phone has become nearly undetectable. I'd smuggled it countless times before, always to good effect. Sometimes the most perceptive girls would pull me behind the stage and ask to be photographed in awkward glamour-shot poses (pinky finger under chin or head cocked into plastic rosebush). After all, my photographs were free, while the Filipino photographers charge five riyals a pop!



But this time I felt an unfamiliar twinge of guilt as I aimed my Pentax camera lens out from under the arm of my abaya at a trio of unsuspecting second cousins.

Each of them was resplendent in carefully chosen colours. Afra swayed back and forth in a beaded tunic that quit mid-thigh and rained glass droplets down to her French pedicured toes. Abrar lounged in a golden tiger number, striped spandex stretched taut over her arms into fingerless gloves. Abtihah, who was turning out to be the belle of the ball, stood tall and slim, her torso and hair littered with crumpled purple ribbon rosettes, misted with lilac scent. All three were wearing coloured contact lenses (blue, yellow, purple) and deep red henna all the way up their arms. I had to suppress an awe-filled sigh at their finery. I photographed them as they commented sardonically on the young and unmarried unsheathing themselves for the delectation of the shrouded older women.

As she stood between her sisters, I noticed that Abtihah had an unusual glow about her festooned head. Just as the strangeness registered, her violet eyes flashed an unfamiliar warning – she'd spotted the metallic gleam of my camera. We all used to laugh at the ugly girls who made such a fuss about the stray snapshots that sometimes circulated around the tribe. Now, suddenly, Abtihah stood there, petrified, stock-still as her sisters gesticulated around her. Meanwhile, shameless in the tall grass, I poached the pristine reputation of my beautiful cousin with every snap.

But every photograph I took of her was inexplicably blurry.

A few weeks later I learned that Abtihah had got engaged to our cousin Dheeb (Arabic for 'wolf') that very night. This news explained both her glow and the imperceptible twitching revealed by my photographs. Full to the brim with promises, Abtihah was too bright for me to capture. Lashed to her dignity by the braided ropes of fate, she had been petrified of being photographed and risking the honour of her new family. The official photos of my cousin Jameela and her sisters folded neatly into a pocket-sized memory book from the Al Saad Ladies Photography Company. The bride's mother took me aside recently to show me the album. Her daughter is unrecognizable behind layers of white foundation and raver-girl glitter. The bride's face is further masked by the romantic sheen that has been air-brushed on by the professional photographers; I swear the curve of her smile is artificial. In the cover photo, Jameela squints out of a heart-shaped cutout. She almost looks like she's crying through the Gaussian blur. My aunt dismisses the tears with a wave. 'Her eyes were watering from the huge lights – we were lucky her mascara didn't run.'

As she beams down at the collection of her daughter's 'memories', she confides in me how happy she is that her daughter's new husband loves her so much. She tells me about how, on the wedding night, as they prepared to leave, the groom removed Jameela's rhinestone necklace and kissed her powdered neck. 'Such tenderness was proof!' she exclaimed. 'He loves her so much!'

I wonder briefly about my aunt, her marriage to my uncle. We flip through the rest of the photos.

My aunt sighs again and mumbles something about the Allah-given gift of love. 'Aagbalish,' she whispers, giving me a matronly squeeze. 'You'll be next.'

Maybe. But probably not. I don't know what I did to deserve it, but I no longer seem to be attracting suitors (or rather, their mothers.) I have been to scores of weddings by now, and I know when I'm not welcome on a dais.

The first time I danced at a wedding I was fourteen years old and wearing a red Chinese dress with a shocking slit up the leg. My hair was tied back into Chun-Li style buns, so I couldn't do any of the 'sexy' figure-eight-style hair-flipping moves I had practised at home with my cousins. Thus restrained, I resorted to a mixture of Egyptian-style belly dance and Midwestern clod-hopping. The mothers-with-sons who lined the stage clapped and squawked in their hoarse gravelly voices, 'The American dances!' At first I felt embarrassed to be introduced as 'the dancing American' instead of 'Saphya! Daughter of Mohamed', or 'Saphya! Granddaughter of Amer!' But when my father heard about my debut, on the other side of the tent, he seemed proud. Which in turn made me feel triumphant despite my humiliation.

I realized that this was what weddings were for: generating gossip and cultivating infamy.

As my mother might say, my kind of glory. ◇



# The Agony Uncle

*Alain de Botton will ease your pain*

**PROBLEM ONE:** *I run a small company in Devon. Recently, I've had to take some extremely 'tough' decisions as regards my workers. I've had to fire 20% of the workforce and, at the same time, I'm having to hide from the remaining ones that probably another 15% of them will have to disappear next year. I am turning into a 'Machiavellian' person, and this deeply disturbs me – as I always wanted to be a nice guy AND a good boss. But perhaps the two are not compatible? Can one be good AND effective in business? – Roger Stern*

**Y**OUR USE OF the word 'Machiavellian' is fascinating – and may merit a short digression into history. In the autumn of 1512, in a farmhouse outside Florence, Nicollò Machiavelli wrote a book of advice on how to govern a state, addressed to the recently restored rulers of Florence, the Medicis. Machiavelli's *The Prince* followed in a long tradition of advice books begun by Seneca and Cicero. Both Roman authors had advised rulers to be clement, tolerant, generous and peaceful – a line of advice propounded over the centuries.

But Machiavelli gave the Medicis some rather stiffer counsel. If they wanted to survive and lead Florence to glory, they would have to be ready to disregard every traditional 'Christian' virtue when circumstances dictated. Cicero had argued that a ruler would turn into a beast if he used force, and a fox if he used fraud. Machiavelli, turning the idea on its head, argued that a ruler had to 'imitate both the fox and the lion.' He needed to be a centaur, half-man, half-beast, to survive in a harsh world.

It was no use being idealistic and high-minded, if the rest of humanity wasn't going to be: 'A ruler who does not do what is generally done, but persists in doing what ought to be done, will undermine his power rather than maintain it.' Nor should a ruler worry about being thought cruel. 'It is much safer to be feared than loved.' Rulers should be ready to deceive, kill, plot and torture.

It is common to dismiss Machiavelli as a vulgar (or to some people, thrilling) immoralist, with no conception of good and evil. But the truth is more complex and awkward. Machiavelli was very much a moralist, he fervently believed in good

and evil, it was just that the highest good in his eyes was the flourishing of the state, not blood-free hands. The state was the criteria by which actions should be evaluated. Something was bad in so far as it harmed the state, and good in so far as it aided it. The awkward point is that the qualities which can make you a good ruler are not necessarily those which will make you a good person according to a Christian moral system. And yet Machiavelli stressed that the *moral* duty of a good ruler should, in difficult moments, be to the state, not to his Christian conscience. Rulers could be blameless in killing people so long as they did so for the glory of the country.

Machiavelli's writings draw attention to an unfortunate possibility: that we may not be able to be 'good' people simultaneously in all areas of our life. Perhaps it is impossible to be an effective ruler *and* a good Christian, or a good businessman *and* a humane person. It points us to a need for choice – we may have to decide what we truly think of as good, and sacrifice some other virtues in its name.

No wonder Machiavelli has been so hated for shattering the noble idea that we can in theory combine all the virtues.

**PROBLEM TWO:** *You, Mr de Botton (a very strange name!), claim to know everything. So explain this to me: why does everything go right for some people and wrong for others? I know some good people who have had one disaster after another (me) and bastards who only seem to get rewarded for their nastiness. Why?*

**A** TRADITIONAL WAY to answer the question, associated as much with the Old Testament as with right-wing governments, is that good things happen to people when they are good (hard-working, righteous etc.), and bad things (poverty, unemployment) to people when they are bad. In the Book of Deuteronomy, the Bible assures us that the godly person 'shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water . . . and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper. The ungodly are not so: but are like chaff which the wind driveth away.'

Given that this is obvious nonsense, the Bible does fortunately include a far more

convincing explanation for why innocent people suffer and fail to prosper. Written in the 4th century BC, the Book of Job tells the story of a righteous, God-fearing man from the land of Uz, who seemed to have been rewarded for his goodness because he was very rich and had a large loving family. But then disasters began to pour down on him. The Sabeans stole his oxen and his asses, lightning killed his sheep, the Chaldeans raided his camels and a hurricane killed his children.

He was thrown into despair. Why had God allowed such things to occur to a righteous man? His friends knew why. Job must have been sinful, he must have done something wrong. Job's friend Bildad the Shuhite told him, 'God will not reject a blameless man.'

But God stepped in with a superior, more consoling answer, in the shape of a set of questions to Job. 'Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? . . . Have you journeyed to the springs of the sea, or walked in the recesses of the deep? . . . Who gives birth to the frost from the heavens? . . . Do you give the horse his strength, or clothe his neck with a flowing mane?' Here were attempts to remind Job of the range of things which God controlled. He did not think only of man, he was looking after horses, the frost and so on. Though Job had an assured place in God's world, all things did not converge on him. It was therefore impudent of men to insist at all times on interpreting their own fate egocentrically – to decide that everything which happened to them was done with reference to something about them. Not every drought which hurts a man was designed to punish him. When a hurricane destroys a house, it is not necessarily because its inhabitants were bad.

Though God's answer was designed to increase Job's faith by teaching him that he was not the measure of the universe, it remains useful even to atheists struck by misfortune. It suggests to us that we cannot always explain our destiny with reference to our moral worth. Events which appear to have singled us out, may be obeying their own capricious laws. When the Chaldeans raid our camels, when lightning kills our sheep or we are sacked, we do not always have to blame ourselves. We may have been caught up in the path of large, impersonal forces, which know nothing about us. It may not make our problems go away, but it can assuage a bitter sense of responsibility for failure and disaster. ♦

## Jean-Paul Sartre to Simone de Beauvoir

*These few letters from Sartre to Simone de Beauvoir are taken from the collection Witness to My Life, which was published after Sartre's death, translated by Lee Fahnestock and Norman MacAfee, and edited by de Beauvoir herself. From playful declarations of affection and detailed descriptions of everyday life, to philosophical conjecture and in-depth discussions of books, the letters offer a fascinating insight into one of the most famous relationships of the twentieth century and are testament to an incredible intellectual affinity which lasted a lifetime. Yet, blithely interwoven with the intimacy of shared ideas and emotions are also Sartre's unflinching accounts of his affairs with other women, and although complete honesty and transparency was a fundamental tenet of the pair's relationship, these are still difficult to read without squirming with jealousy on de Beauvoir's behalf.*

*But perhaps I should reserve judgement about Sartre – at any rate, that's what his eerily prescient words in the letter of 16th September seem to implore us to do.* — ANNA KELLY

July, 1939 · My darling Beaver,

When it comes to you, my little darling, everything is idyllic. I got both your letters at the same time. You've finally read Heidegger, it's worth your while and we'll talk about it. The day after tomorrow I'll see you, my love. I can't sit still. I have little stirrings of hope now (I was logy and drowsing) but I'm also more nervous. Now I can tell you that prospects weren't at all rosy these



past days. When I arrived there was fear of war for *the following day* (there was an aborted coup in Danzig, the papers are now calling it the July 2 coup), and I was petrified that war would erupt while I was still in Saint-Sauveur. Do you realize what that means? And then later, on Tuesday, things calmed down. But then on Wednesday I got a letter from Tania that annoyed me, pure delirium of passion on my part. And then I calmed down. I'm so nervous and out of sorts here that yesterday, while reading an idiotic and sentimental scene from a piece in *L'Illustration*, suddenly I was teary-eyed. With no thought or qualms on my part but due, I think, to the strangely larval, overagitated state in which I find myself. But it's over. On the other hand, I think I've done some excellent work. You'll be the judge of that.

I love you with all my heart, my little one. You are my haven, and I need you.

I send you all my love.

Late July, 1939 · My darling Beaver,

I received your two delightful letters, which I read without skipping a single one of the descriptions (which are very spare, incidentally), and I was very moved by your small compliments. Dear God, how nice you are, my Beaver. You fill me with regrets and longings, and yesterday I was completely morose not to be with you. Who wanted this? you will ask. I did, probably, but without you it's like Paradise Lost. I love you.

For now I'm relentlessly devoting myself to my personal life (we said it better, I think: personal doggedness), but personal life doesn't pay. To tell the truth, Tania is almost always charming and affectionate, and it is very nice sleeping with her, which happens to me morning and evening, for the moment. She seems to get pleasure out of it, but it kills her, she lies on her bed dead to the world for more than 15 minutes after her revels. The thing is, it takes the violence of arguments or the touching quality of reconciliation for me to feel alive. Last night we

had a terrific argument but it was worth the effort (...)

Adieu my darling Beaver, she has just arrived and I am finishing right in front of her. You know my feelings, but I don't dare to write them, because it's not that difficult to read upside down.

16th September, 1939 · My darling Beaver,

There's a package for me at the post office. A small one. From you? That would be the first sign of you I've had since Ceintry. Except that for me to get it the postal clerk has to sign a discharge, and of course the postal clerk isn't there. Letters, none. There were 100 this morning for the whole division but of course not one for the AD. That's already some progress. Our first sergeant hasn't had a letter in twenty-five days. This silence is beginning to weigh on us. I think that our existence would be different – perhaps more vulnerable – if we had daily news from civilian lives. I'd so like to know what's going on in your life. I get the impression that after some few days of gloom, Paris is beginning to come back to life. Am I wrong? Have you gotten back to your novel? Are you giving your attention to 'the social life'? For me, I feel out of touch with social matters. This war is so disconcerting – still Kafkaesque, and rather like the battle in *The Charterhouse of Parma*. It defies thought; I struggle valiantly to catch it, but ultimately everything I think holds good for field manoeuvres, not for the war; the war is always screened, elusive. Actually there's nothing new. I'm calm, but the calm doesn't much satisfy me, it isn't a calm based on good reasons, and I justify myself in my little black notebook. Whoever reads it after my death – for you will publish it only posthumously – will think that I was an evil character unless you accompany it with benevolent and explanatory annotations. In short, I'm morally a bit disoriented (don't worry, moral preoccupations don't spoil my appetite), like the guy who, getting ready to lift a heavy barbell, suddenly realises it's hollow and, at the same time, that deep down he was hoping it was. Needless to say, he finds himself flat on his ass.

17th November, 1939 · My darling Beaver,

No letters from you today. I'd foreseen it for one of these days, because the day before yesterday I inexplicably

received two at the same time. Since I have no anxieties and even find this gap *natural*, for the reason I've just mentioned, it allows me to understand all the better what I miss when a day goes by without anything from you; it is a sort of Goethesque wisdom that allows me to *attend* the various events of my life without actually partaking of them. With your letters I feel Olympian at little cost, because I regain a world we hold in common, which is *good*, be it in war or peace, like a tormented novel that ends happily. I think that it comes from the

absolute and total regard I have for you: the moment that exists, there is that absolute, the rest must clearly follow, even the worst. I imagine that is what you must be feeling when you call me your 'little absolute.' My darling, I love you very much.

I got an exalted letter from Dumartin spontaneously proclaiming himself my disciple, avowing an admiration that is not intellectual but human, and ending by asking me to correct twenty pages of a novel he has just written. There are a few pages of subtle humour in it

that I liked very much, as when he says, 'I spent two months of isolation and *individuality* in England'. But I am even more amused by this shower of former students that still associate me with their little concoctions, one (Hadjibelli) asking me for a bibliography, another (Kanapa) a definition of Aristotle's physics, the third that I read his literary work. Alas, I'll have to answer them all. I'll devote one whole day to it. I've finished the difficult passage in my novel and in a way that pleases me. But will you be satisfied, little judge? ◇

## The Best Bit

Suzanne H., London, age 29, on *The Sea Wolf*

THERE WERE ONLY women in my last book club so I was interested to see how this new one would operate. It's five women and five men and the book choice goes back and forth between the sexes. It's weird though. When a girl announces a book it's often quite, I don't know, girly and this almighty groan goes up from the boys. And then they show up – those men who do show up – after reading something like *The Lovely Bones* and there's something in their eyes, you know, and they discuss the book but they're obviously just waiting for the ball to go back into their court. Then they pick something male and a groan goes up from our side of the room. It's getting worse, too. Last time at book club, Tanya flipped over the bowl of Kettle Chips and said, "I will not read that. I just cannot read that." She was like, "*Stalingrad* by Anthony Beevor? Look how many pages that is." She was really upset, you know, and she looked over on the boys' side and they were all bunched together on their couches and all the girls were on the other couches. She was there in the middle of the room trying to clean up the Kettle Chips, really angry, kind of shaking and she says, "When did Book Club become this?"

It was a real moment, you know? So then one of the boys comes forward, like he's about to make some sort of gesture of reconciliation. It can hap-

pen, you know. Oprah picked *The Road*, after all. But instead he says, "I'm sorry for *Stalingrad*. We'll choose Jack London instead." Like that's any better! More Boy's Own adventure? It's not the one about wolves, thankfully, even though this one's got Wolf in the title. And I'm ready to hate it. I do hate it, all that posturing and chucking bodies off the ship and nautical terminology. The next week I get a text from Tanya saying "Have you read that part yet?" I text her back saying "What part? All that stupid sea-faring crap?" So I keep reading, I keep at it, still thinking, which bit? And then it comes. All the men have been so ugly in the book. The hero is this sickly writer and there's a Cockney chef who sounds like the kind of guy you see down in Dagenham on Saturdays. Then there's this bit where London describes the evil captain, Wolf Larsen. "The terrible beauty of Wolf Larsen's body" and all. "As he moved about or raised his arms the great muscles leapt and moved under the satiny skin . . . I remember putting his hand up to feel of the wound on his head, and my watching the biceps moving like a living thing under its white sheath."

Well, ok, I have such a hard time with some characters. They always have things like "tight smiles", "innocent eyes" and I can never quite get a picture of them. I'd say I could see Wolf Larsen quite well

after that. Our book club met again and it was the same as ever. The boys were looking smug and the girls were ready to reclaim the next book. When I started talking I realized after about five minutes I had only mentioned that satiny skin bit and all that "bicep-moving-like-a-living-thing" business. After a while I just stopped speaking. The girls looked over at me. A few of the boys were just looking at their hands. I guess I was quite flushed, you see. Finally someone said – I think it was Tanya – "Should we maybe talk about the themes of the book?" ◇



PAUL DAVIS



*Saturday Night* (2005) · Margaux Williamson





*Death Performance* (2008) · Margaux Williamson



*Ok or Self portrait as Future Buddha (2007) · Margaux Williamson*