

HAMISH HAMILTON PRESENTS

# Five Dials



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Part I

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## CONTRIBUTORS

SUSAN BARBOUR is a poet, scholar, and sommelier. Her poetry has appeared in American and British journals including *Oxford Poetry* and *The Paris Review*. She recently completed a DPhil at Somerville College, Oxford and will be a post-doctoral Fellow at Caltech and The Huntington Library next year.

LAUREN ELKIN is a novelist, academic, and literary critic. Her first novel, *Une Année à Venise* (Editions Héloïse d'Ormesson) was awarded the Prix des Lecteurs at the Rue des Livres literary festival, and will be published in paperback this June. She is co-author, with Scott Esposito, of *The End of Oulipo?* (Zero Books). A frequent contributor to the *Times Literary Supplement*, *The Daily Beast*, *The White Review*, and other publications, she is currently writing a book about women and cities, entitled *Flâneuse* and forthcoming from Chatto & Windus in 2015.

JENNI FAGAN lives in Edinburgh. She is the author of *The Panopticon* and her second novel, *The Sunlight Pilgrims*, is due to be published this year. Recently selected as one of Granta's Best of Young British novelists, her poetry has been nominated for The Pushcart Prize. Jenni is writing the film script for *The Panopticon* in production with Sixteen Films.

RACHEL GENN's first novel *The Cure* was published in 2011. She has an unnatural fascination with regret and its role in addiction, and is currently Leverhulme Artist-in-Residence at the University of Sheffield, researching and creating an installation; a quasi-institution called 'The National Facility for the Regulation of Regret.' She teaches on creative writing MAs in Sheffield and Manchester. 'Antiparos' is an excerpt from her novel-in-progress, *What You Could Have Won*.

## WHAT'S THIS ISSUE ALL ABOUT?

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# A Letter

by Jenni Fagan

*Dear future, if you are reading this, then a word to the undead from the see ya's and long gone's, be beautiful, this gift, life.*

This is a note to me, written when I was a teenager. I didn't know who my see ya's and long gone's would be when I reread it nearly twenty years later. I had already had a lot of people disappear. I had written myself a lot of letters. A lot of notes. Memos. Doodles. Photographs. Ways of archiving and articulating the fleeting process of now. I must have been a smart teenager. It's a nice sentiment. I had friends then who were still alive who are not here now. It's something to live by – be beautiful, this gift, life.

I often knew I would need messages from other mes, in other times. The relationship between self (past, present and future) is a complex thing.

Personally, I have never spent any vast time in my life with any one single group of people. Like anyone. Growing up in care can be like that. The longest I ever stayed in one place was seven years. I have been many things to many people, but I only ever had two cats. Gringo and Quita. I adored them and lived with them for twenty years, which is a lot longer than I ever lived with any human.

Humans. Such a funny word.

The process of continuity – within myself – has included writing.words.every.day.

Words in journals, notes, letters. I have a piece of black slate hanging up in my kitchen and written on it is: *Write Like The Green Man*. It refers to a painting I did in oil years ago. I threw black oil paint on to a piece of paper and tore it apart and revealed right in the middle was this perfect pagan man with a pointy beard and ears and one eye staring at me.

Instantaneous. Irreplaceable. A reminder to quit overthinking so the real art of life can come through.

Writing = flying.  
Reading = falling.  
Remembering = distance.  
Hope = defiance.

I am the MC5's Rambling Rose.

I am a doodler.

I worked in a little grunge place when I was fifteen and

a man called Spider did piercings in the cellar and my boss would send me out to the pub for a tray of beers which I'd carry back up a cobbled street on a Friday afternoon and distribute among the tattooed. We'd have heated discussions about books and orgies and whether the coven at the top of the street would ever make a human sacrifice. It was told that they did.

We got a note in the shop one day that simply said, *All staff must stop doodling*. Another note arrived that said, *And smoking on the shop floor*.

I knew the job was never going to be same post-doodle era.

I can't really articulate what words have meant to me in my life. I am here. That's what the words say. This is my voice. This process of brain to finger to ink is already gone but the words remain.

The  
words  
remain.

All things move and change and my life has been a dislocation.

This  
very  
fact  
compels  
words.

Yet, what of letters? I have fallen in love via letters. I have sent stupid letters that I regret, offering my heart to people I would now not even talk to in the street. I have been myself in letters and I have been other people. I have extended my reach and understanding of who I am and who I might be.

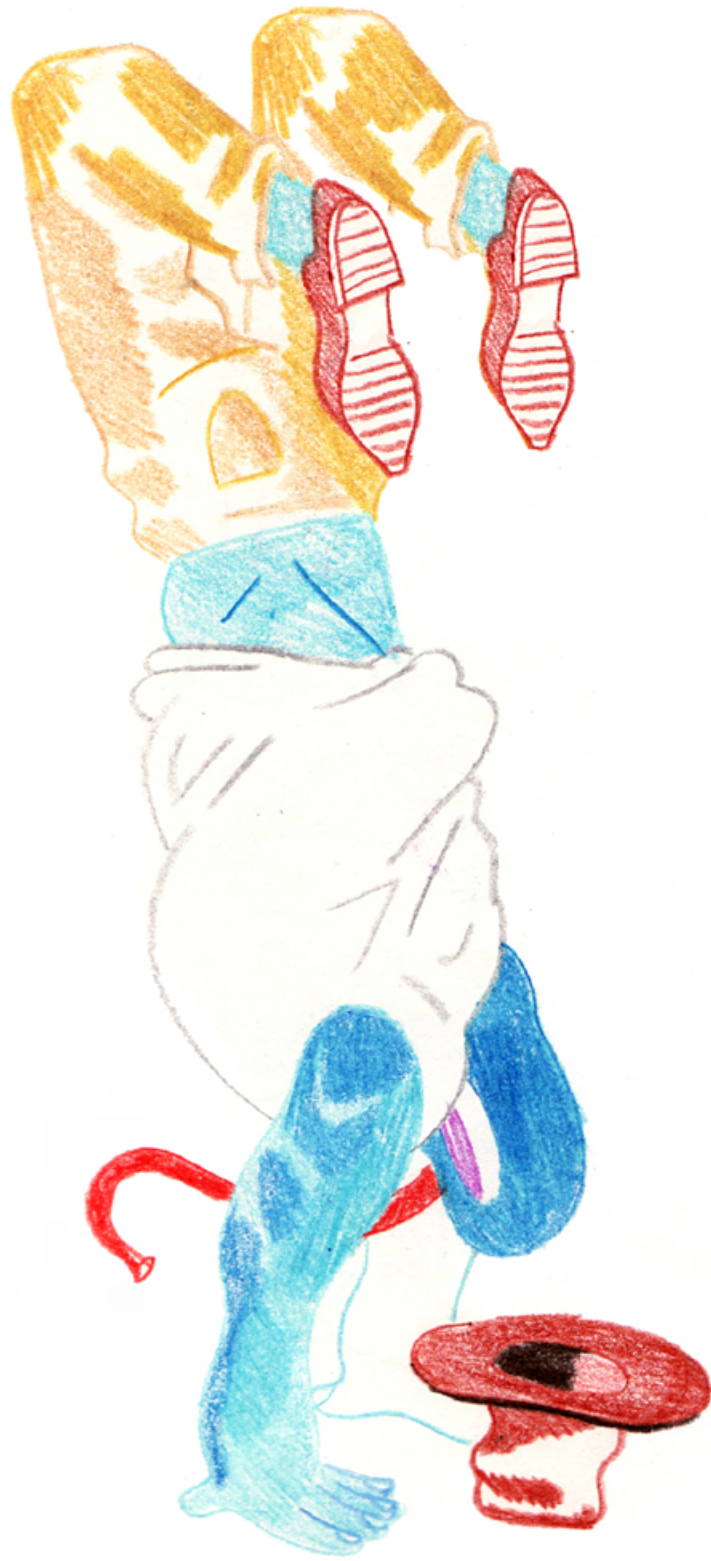
An invaluable thing.

I burned twenty years of journals a few years ago. All letters to myself, all ways of understanding, a huge vast landscape of random chance that makes up a me.

That process was personal. I burned it. I liked that it was mine and served a purpose in words that was solely for me.

I have an eight-page letter from a friend in Australia, a selection of letters sealed in black envelopes with red wax, I visit friends and occasionally find a doodle, or note, or postcard I sent years ago; it is time travel, you know – this sense of words on a page but in handwriting! Handwriting seems





so much more able to preserve the timelessness of then and the transience of now.

I have written letters I will never send.

I have waited for letters that will never be written.

I have written letters to my dead friend debating which part of her is now skeleton and if, indeed, she still refuses to forgive me, now she has decanted so definitely to the other side.

I have written letters to God. I have written letters to my newborn son. I wrote a letter that looked like a crossword with each word going vertically so only bits of words stood out. At one point I would have liked to write in blood (my own). I may write a letter to myself at age of forty, fifty, sixty, seventy, eighty – will I make it there?

I experienced time travel once. It was profound and chemically induced and I won't describe it here, but it let me know that I am already all the mes I will ever be and somehow at some point this trail of words I leave like breadcrumb crumbs will lead me to a place called home.

Perhaps that is the letter I am writing today, in a bed I am about to give away, a bed I slept in with a lover (who I have now left), a bed where I brought my newborn baby and cried in the middle of the night while breastfeeding and where I felt that white rage of finally understanding why a child should always, always be held!

I am looking out a window that in three weeks' time will be looked out by another and I will not be here; I will be gone and unpacking suitcases in what will be my thirty-seventh, or thirty-eighth, or fortieth home.

It's back to the city and when it stills at night-time I will be tip-tap-tip-tap-tapping.

I often don't know what I think until I write it down.

You could say every piece of writing encompasses time travel. We cannot pause these fleeting seconds, we cannot stop them and rewind them and say, 'I would like to do that bit again, that bit where I do not see my best friend again, that bit where she stands in a train station in Peckham and tells me she thinks it will be a long time before we meet again.

I  
would  
like  
to  
do  
that  
bit  
again.

Dear you – thanks for reading. Dear me – it's okay, all the weird, the strange, the uncertainty, the imperfection, the

over-thinking, the joy, the pain, it's all okay, even when I am most acutely aware, uneasy, uncertain, it is still, even then, OK to be. Me. You. I. And well fucking done for quitting swearing almost completely! Your boy has a beautiful voice.

Gertrude should have made me tea.

My.cats.waited.for.me.every.day.for.twenty.years.  
and.I.can.still.feel.what.it.was.like.when.they.slept.under.the.covers.with.me.every.night.when.I.got.back.from.New.York.

Dear sun, keep shining.

Dear future children who may share a biological link to the thing I presently call ME, know this: there is always love and who we came from were harder and tougher and more resilient and they check in on you.

Dear ancestors, I know what you meant when you sent your honest and heartfelt respects.

Thank you for the goodness.

I do think of them. The ancestors. That long tenuous line. The ghosts in this house are not sad I am leaving. They never liked the Cramps. They were hoping for more peach. They didn't understand my tip-tap-tip-tap incessant-as-it-is and they disapproved of my original burlesque prints and my bent towards Bowler Hat Grey.

I have written great things in letters and found that was the only place they could be said.

I STILL SEND.  
I STILL RECEIVE.

You don't know me but ... I bet your books look good on the dancefloor.

I like big brains and I cannot lie.

Dear Universe,  
it's me

Jenni.

I don't know what this letter is. It is what it is. It is anything. That's what letters are. They are a woman in bed wearing glasses and listening to an ex-lover presiding over the dissolution of the books in another room. They are a toddler cycling around on a brand-new red tricycle. A letter as a hello. A Good Day! It's my initials carved on a pub balustrade by the Thames. It is consciousness. It is graffiti. It is goodbye, dear heart.

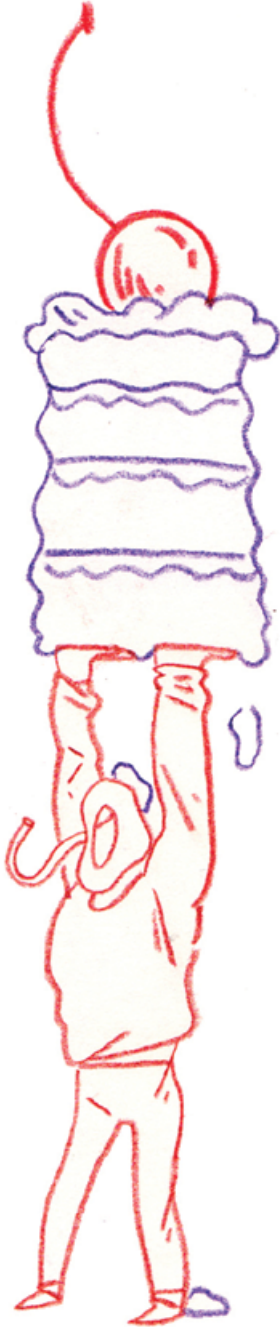
OA0 4now.  
me  
x ◊



POEM

# Tune

by Susan Barbour



The bus-boys at the Aqua Grill are whistling  
*Sweet Susie ... Oh Susie Q ... Oh I love you*  
and I wonder, how do they know my name?

My skirt like flame around my knees I watch  
my pointed toe meet with a sudden engraving,  
a finger-sloppy tracing in frozen cement: *Hi Suzy*

And it seemed that things could not be  
this connected – like that redhead just now,  
how could she have known as our pathways collided

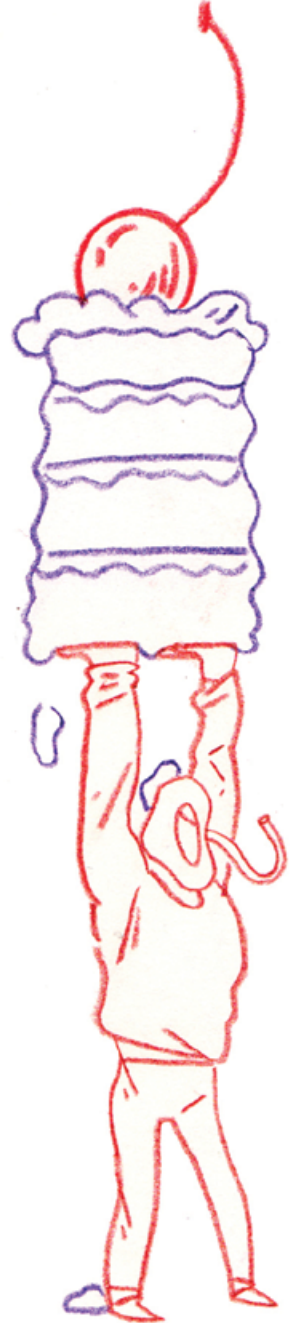
which side I would veer to yet we gracefully pass,  
a dance I know well. And that white dog  
leashed laxly by its white-dog owner jingles bells

on its collar to the tune in my head. Hell I know  
they weren't whistling *Sweet Susie*, come on now,  
that's not even the name of the song. But this greeting

before me I swear – do you believe me? –  
it's there, you can find it – was calling my name.  
Not two steps after my silly invention it appeared

there before me to call out my bluff. When the world  
spells around us its everyday magic all the time  
right before us and under our feet we can sense

its shy seamstress watch leaves spinning sideways,  
feel wind wrap round us and sweep back our hair.









## Sing Out, Louise

Lauren Elkin on whispery girls, desperate theatre girls, and the Hathaway backlash



Day More' box-step routine from the *Les Misérables* Act One finale. But as much as I enjoyed the music, I left the theatre feeling that the power of the story didn't translate, its focus dissipated in spectacle. It was exactly the kind of thing that's killed contemporary musical theatre, turning it from a once-proud populist art form into a bloated carcass with the words 'WE WILL ROCK YOU' tattooed on its forehead.

In the film, 'the girl' is played by a very young Czech folk singer with a quiet, whispery voice, totally lacking the power of her theatrical counterpart. Her voice is pretty, but you could never fill up a theatre with it. All well and good, except that 'the boy' is played by a musician who positively roars his way, wonderfully, through the songs. When they sing together, she provides a muted, fluting harmony to his trumpet's blare.

In the musical spheres there is no gender, there is no power; a flute can shadow a trumpet, and mean nothing beyond sound. But it still seemed that some other translation had happened from film to stage. Something was nagging at me. Why couldn't the girl in the film have a strong voice like the boy?

*I am pretty, my voice is pretty,  
I am trying not to take up too much space*

Not long ago I saw the musical *Once* in the West End. It's based on a 2006 Irish indie film with a small, subtle love story at its centre: lonely boy meets lonely girl, lonely girl inspires lonely boy, they don't sleep together, both go back to their estranged partners. To give the story interest on the stage, the producers have cast a motley crew of quirky, omnipresent side characters, a group of singers and guitarists, cellists, fiddlers and mandolinists who leap about between scenes, providing musical interludes and moving scenery, doing their best 'peas and carrots' routine, miming intense interest in absolutely everything. When they all play their instruments together it's an electrifying shower of strings and chords and urgency. At the end of the first act, they do this syncopated jump-kick-step dance (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8RebiKimp4>) with all their instruments, and I can tell you that you haven't lived till you've seen a man dance with a cello. As iconic a moment as the infamous 'One

The more I thought about the imbalance, the more I realized I had been listening to it for quite a few years. In indie music there's been a fad for faint, whispery, almost disembodied female voices, nearly always coming out of very thin white girls (the more robust, the less white, the bigger the voice). Seabear comes to mind (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bf-Ce9846hU>), or Art in Manila (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-wn-5aD6fHQ>), or Lasorda (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z4K7CCtoJ08>). I'm not sure the girls don't know they're doing it – the singer Grimes is a frequent offender, and one of her songs is called 'Be a Body', as if she's trying to transcend indie girliness to reinhabit her woman's body ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fb\\_oLzBv894&feature=kp](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fb_oLzBv894&feature=kp)). It's one thing to whisper for aesthetic purposes, but when a musical choice turns into a pandemic, you have to ask what's going on.

The indie ethic prizes the 'natural', the amateur, over the

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*'Annie, why don't you talk about your hair a little?'*

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polished and professional. Punk paved the way for this kind of sound, making a virtue of being raw, and self-taught; the riot grrrls were purposefully abrasive, and had little or no interest in looking or sounding pretty. But an unfortunate result of this upending of conventional value systems seems to have been that it's become *uncool* to sing well; normal is boring, as they say, and the indie musician takes this to heart. Another version of this affectation for female singers is to be more explicitly quirky, modelling the musical equivalent of the cinematic manic pixie dream girl by doing a scratchy voice with such tweaking of vowels you might think you were listening to someone's granny in Canarsie doing her best Judy Garland, accompanied by the harmonium with washboard percussion. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s34bnIM-rcs>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sKbMRVFjW8&t=30s>)

The singing body is itself a quirky instrument; accordion-like, it takes some squeezing to create a sound supported by breath, which nevertheless isn't all breath. The whispery girls sing like they have nothing beneath the neck, no apparatus to produce more than wistful wisps of song. The indie boys, on the other hand, let their voices soar ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SWSz\\_PAFgNc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SWSz_PAFgNc)), resonating through all the lovely halls of their sinuses and vocal palates ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o\\_qFaFl7Jvc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o_qFaFl7Jvc); <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BTQLWYWnYB8>). As a woman, and a musical one at that, I'm concerned about this. Why do we have to keep singing quiet, pretty harmony to tortured indie boys? And what happens if we don't?

*I am pretty, my voice is pretty,*

*I am trying not to take up too much space*

Let's consider an adaptation that went the other way, from stage to screen: Tom Hooper's 2012 film of the hit musical *Les Misérables*. The show's ingenue, Cosette, is meant to be a bright lyric soprano (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o11wBtKViY>), but the actress who played her in the film, Amanda Seyfried, sounds like Disney's Snow White, all twittery and nervous. Seyfried, who I've always liked because she was a chesty Jewish girl (at least I think she's Jewish) taking Hollywood by storm, was sweet as Cosette, but she was vocally miscast. I'd rather have seen her as Eponine; Seyfried does have a strong voice and a good belt ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ag8JyPCe\\_do](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ag8JyPCe_do)), but she is lovely and blonde, so she was cast as the soprano ingenue, while a darker, more ethnic-looking actress played the impoverished Eponine. (This should give more people pause.) Seyfried's chest voice was silenced, and the result was musically unsatisfying. Coincidentally, when Seyfried truly launched her

career in Hollywood, her gorgeous chestiness disappeared then, too. (She claims it was weight loss; some speculate it was surgical.)

Some die-hard *Les Mis* fans have been unhappy with Seyfried's performance, but on the whole people leave her alone. Compare this with Anne Hathaway as Cosette's doomed mother, Fantine. Her interpretation of 'I Dreamed a Dream' was flawless, a moment of what musical theatre does best: resorts to song when speech will no longer do. There is an unbroken connection between the body and the voice and the soul in Hathaway's performance; a lesser actress might have given in to pathos or sentimentality, but Hathaway walks right up to the edge where powerful performances live, and overshadows everyone else in the film.

As the film came out, as Hathaway began racking up awards, the Hathaway backlash began. She was accused, as *Us Weekly* put it, of evincing 'what some believe is a false, cloying sense of earnestness'. As she accepted the Oscar, she demonstrated that once again by gazing at her award and peeping in a little voice, 'It came true,' making many viewers (including me) cringe. *She sucks*, Twitter exhaled, as if in some kind of collective catharsis. She's a 'huge nerd', she's 'annoying', she's 'OBSESSED' with herself, 'which is gross, but still' (whatever that means). 'She just be doing way too much.'

Way too much. There is too much of her, too much face, too much eyes, mouth. And yet this is the source of her power: 'She devours the song, the scene, the movie, and turns her astonishing, cavernous mouth into a vision of the void,' wrote Manohla Dargis, admiringly, in the *New York Times*. Compounding her intensity, Hooper's camera zooms so far in on Hathaway's already sizeable mouth that I'm surprised they didn't offer a one-off Oscar for the greatest performance by a uvula. Hathaway also lost weight to play the role of starving, tubercular Fantine, but what she needed, judging from all the vitriol, was a diet of the personality.

Having been acting since she was a teenager, Hathaway has grown into adulthood being schooled not only in her craft, but in how to be female in the public eye. Garry Marshall, who directed her debut film *The Princess Diaries*, told *W Magazine*: 'I remember at a junket ... she was talking Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, and Disney was getting nervous, and I said, "Annie, why don't you talk about your hair a little; we'll talk Nietzsche later.'" Like the Starbucks Mermaid, she was the figurehead for a corporation; she was the centre of a blockbuster film, the kind where big studios use a story of a young girl to relieve a lot of other young girls of their money. The figurehead young girl (and thereby her audience) must be kept in line, the frizzy hair tamed and straightened, even if – Disney *oblige* – there's some kind of moral about being your true spunky self tacked on at the end, as a hair falls elegantly



▲

*'The girl's not cool. She knows she's not cool'*

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loose from the chignon. 'I feel like I have to apologize for myself in front of most people,' Hathaway admitted to *W*.

*Annie, why don't you talk about your hair a little*

The whisper-voiced indie singer has her corollary in the crooning diva, the kind you can't escape on Broadway these days, incarnated by Lea Michele, the processed cheese of American musical theatre who, after a successful career as a child actress, caught the theatre world's attention in the 2006 musical *Spring Awakening* and now stars on *Glee*. Her voice is so polished it's antiseptic; it has no texture, no edges, no interest. On *Glee*, the joke's on the kids who throw Slushies on Lea Michele for being a desperate theatre (or Glee Club) girl. We the audience are supposed to pity *them* instead, because she's actually awesome, a pop star in a high-schooler's skirt. They hate her, we are given to understand, because she *dares to dream*, to reveal her inner soul through her art. What she has to reveal, however, is nothing more interesting than a stick of Polly-O string cheese, and less fibrous.

In a thought-provoking piece in the *Daily Beast*, Kevin Fallon called Anne Hathaway 'the real-life incarnation of [Lea Michele's character] Rachel Berry from *Glee*', one of those 'desperate theatre girls'. Their deep need to be liked is precisely what makes them so unlikeable. The desperate theatre girl is a complex figure. The girl's not cool. She knows she's not cool. She knows the best she can do is try to be gracious and give credit where credit's due. If Anne Hathaway is apologizing for herself or giving a shout out to the 'sound wizards' of *Les Mis* in her Oscar speech – 'congratulations on tonight, you guys' – it's because she's trying to be gracious and self-aware while there's a wave of hatred about to crash all over her award-winning shore. She has to apologize for being so damn talented that people shower her with awards, and Twitter has to hate her because they know, underneath that gracious exterior, she had to fight like hell to get to where she is. She tried really hard, and she won.

This problem of the try-too-hard creative girl is regularly played out to great comedic effect on the HBO series *Girls*. Hannah may be totally irritating, but she's at least interesting in her insensitivity (asking her editor's widow at his funeral

if she can maybe recommend another editor she could send her work to is one of the show's best moments). But one of the show's favourite targets is uptight Marnie trying to live her dream of being a singer. At the release party for her ex-boyfriend's app, in a bid to get him back she sings a cover of Kanye West's 'Stronger'. All the too-cool-for-school hipsters are like, *Who is this trainwreck?* In another episode she drags Hannah onstage to sing the now-classic *Rent* duet 'Take Me



for What I Am'. In a lapse of judgement, she and her boyfriend celebrate their reunion by making a cheesy video of Marnie singing Edie Brickell's 'What I Am', her Auto-Tuned voice as bland as a freshly painted wall. On *Girls*-world YouTube, the video garners comments like 'Please stab this Disney Princess in the face and shut her the fuck up!' On the real-world web, *GQ*'s blog called her 'every girl in every a cappella group in every college in every state'.

More than Hannah, whose attempts at being a writer are actually going pretty well by the end of Season 3, Marnie represents the show's critique of the American 'live-your-dream'

‘Lose weight, lose texture, quieten down’

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platitude in which all dreams are valid merely by being ours. She is too pretty; her voice is too perfect. Only the imperfect is interesting. To carry a nice voice, a performer has to have the personality to keep it compelling. Note the repeated performance of songs that are declarations of self-hood in a show that challenges the idea that young women are narcissistic by saying yes, we are narcissistic, so what? Marnie keeps asking us to take her for what she is, who she was meant to be. In return, she hears: it’s nice that you are what you are but could you shut the fuck up?

It’s a brilliant *mise-en-scène* of the way our culture wants women to sound: be perfect Disney Princesses until a certain age, but you’d best not speak up once you’re past the point of being adorably spunky. The show invites us to cringe at these girls baring it all – whether it’s Lena Dunham taking off her clothes or Marnie’s musical antics. Tellingly, Marnie never did quite fit into Hannah’s cool Brooklyn, and in Season 3 she moves back to Manhattan.

*Annie, why don’t you talk about your hair*

The 1959 musical *Gypsy*, quite a meta commentary on the conundrum of being a female entertainer, reveals (pardon the pun) show business to be, for a woman, a striptease. The female performer may have a talent, or she may not. Either way, she needs a gimmick, a trio of burlesque dancers reminds us – if you wanna bump it, bump it with a trumpet. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gFRSawe33sA>) You have to have a sense of humour about yourself if you’re going to bump and grind and expect to get paid for it. But when Gypsy Rose Lee becomes a star, her only ‘gimmick’, if you can call it that, is that she strips in such an understated way that the men beg for more – no horns or butterflies or Christmas lights. The less-is-more school of stripping, you might call it.

Gypsy Rose Lee – who used to be plain old Louise – learns this from growing up in the shadow of her baby sister June, a blonde curly-topped child star who loves the limelight and whose big number, performed over and over on the vaudeville circuit as the two girls are dragged by Mama Rose, their domineering stage mother, across America, is ‘Let Me Entertain You’. When June runs off with her backup dancer, Mama Rose turns to Louise to be the cash cow (after once making her literally play the cow in June’s farmyard-themed act). A spot opens up for a headlining stripper, and Mama Rose pushes Louise into the spotlight, handing the conductor June’s signature song. ‘Sing out, Louise,’ Mama Rose instructs. ‘Just walk and dip. Remember: you’re a lady. You make ’em beg for more and then – don’t give it to ’em.’ A star is born. ‘Let Me Entertain You’, as we see in a montage of increasingly risqué performances, becomes Louise’s stripping song, reframed

to hint at a very adult kind of entertainment.

Meanwhile, Rose’s boyfriend, Herbie, walks out on her, disgusted by the lengths to which she will go to make her daughter a star. ‘You want your daughter to bump and grind and take her clothes off in front of a bunch of hooting savages? You want her to be ogled and leered at, is that what you really want?’ Herbie’s the moral centre of the show – maybe someone should show this film to Miley Cyrus’s mom? – but in the world of show business he has a lot to learn. ‘Herbie,’ Rose retorts, ‘you can walk out when they want you. But you can’t walk out when you’re a flop.’ Always leave them wanting more, that’s how you win.

The desperate theatre girl can’t leave them wanting more; she always has more to give, more than they want from her. Mama Rose is the quintessential desperate theatre girl; that’s why she’s the monster of the piece, a complicated, fascinating monster who gets all the best songs. The moral of the story is: no one loves a ham; the more retiring voice is the more interesting one. Mama Rose ends up all alone, as deluded as ever, singing to herself on an empty stage.

*Always leave them wanting more*

Even if Anne Hathaway had taken a cue from Gypsy Rose Lee in her Oscars speech, I reckon they’d still be after her for her commanding, tonsil-baring performance. It’s one thing to laud women entertainers who don’t have talent, but it’s quite another to tear down entertainers who have loads of it. This sets a trap for female vocalists. *Lose weight. Lose texture. Quieten down.* Why is it that women are disliked for trying too hard? ‘When,’ asks Kevin Fallon, ‘did effort become a bad thing?’ It’s been coming on real slow, but it’s reached an apogee in our times, and it has to do with gender. As Fallon points out, can you imagine people calling Hugh Jackman a ‘desperate theatre boy’?

Look at the opening moments of Anne Hathaway hosting the Oscars with James Franco in 2011. She does her fake-mad schtick about not being nominated that year, and then turns the full glory of her smile on Franco. ‘You *are* nominated!’ she beams at him. ‘Are you nervous?’ Franco, who looks like he’s smoked a big old doobie backstage, is all ‘Huh? Naw. Whut?’ They’re a perfect diptych of consummate cool guy and the girl who tries too hard.

The punishment for being too much is being disliked. Fear of this is something that motivates women much more than men, and in show business it can make or break your career. The female performer has to learn to please people without seeming to be trying to please them. The whispery-voiced indie girls aren’t just afraid of saying too much; they’re afraid of saying anything at all. ♦

# Antiparos

by Rachel Genn



Up to now, I have only noted down decisions that are poor to extremely poor and/or seem to be defences against shame. The blaming pathology will have to wait until she levels out. I have not mentioned the video once this morning.

From the cafeteria, I can see down to the beach: her rectangular shelter is flapping in the dry wind, framed by the rendered arch to the cafe's terrace. It is a faded, jungle-patterned sheet stretched between four bamboo sticks secured in the sand. It stands twelve inches above her face. In that face, by now, the teeth will be chattering in the heat. Only yards from her, the main knot of Greeks are setting up volleyball, laughing in short barks as if they are rationed or perhaps because it is still early. They were up very late. There

he is again, pulling himself from the sea, and so I switch my eyes to the floor but no one can see me from there. I look down again to see him dragging his heels forcefully back through the sand to make the boundaries of the court, his leg muscles a joke: an art student's dream.

In the corner of the cold cabinet, there is a doughnut with a panther-pink glaze and I know that it has been put out for her. An idiot among the metal saucers of tzatziki, the doughnut has a cold sweat on it. I should buy it and eat it, because if she sees it, she will be positive that they can get to her even in the Cyclades. I have told her that being positive is a danger sign; there's always room for doubt in the mentally healthy. She becomes positive very easily since Burning Man. (The

tendency has been there since the beginning.)

Athenians, in the main, are taut and deep brown and much taller than I imagined. From the shade in the cafe, I can get a good look at them down at the shore, but it's already clear to me that this place exists for the best-looking people from the capital. I capture and hold on to a flash of small brown breasts. I get to admire the sheen on the torsos of these first weekenders from the mainland and feel that my eyes deal with them in fistfuls (NB: make a note of that). They are forever emerging from the sea after swimming back and forth to the scrubby little island called

Dilpa, two hundred yards from our shore. They drink frappés up to midnight. They are into coolly communicating jokes to each other. Their real thing is to quip quickly and make an appreciative moan rather than laugh openly. The handyman in particular makes laughter seem idiotic. No doubt, these cats got their boots on.

When not swimming or having faraway parties at sunset with music (now they're laughing), these people are limbering, ankle-deep in sand. The men are colossal and unperturbed by deep water or big insects like dragonflies or the extreme heat. My skin (Highland and Island) is much, much fairer, perhaps it's not inaccurate to say finer, than theirs. Obviously, I have tried nudity, but now I am forced to wear shorts.



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*'I know already that the handyman is the centre of everything round here'*

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He's coming as I knew he would. I don't look at the doughnut. I quickly choose some feta with oregano and olive oil, plus fried courgettes with dill and tzatziki. I pay him and he treats me impatiently; slams the till and runs back out to the game as I watch him leave me. There are more players now. The arch is filling up; a new arrival to the group. Not a child. Too hairy. A dwarf then. Whoever it is gets a hold of the handyman fondly enough to be family, but I can't imagine this handyman is related to a dwarf. A stick-thin woman, a 'salty-lookin' battle' with white-blond hair, follows the handyman and hugs him and takes a moment to twirl his long curls with both hands then nips his cheeks. I can tell she likes to be heard and shouts out a rousing slogan (in what? French? Hebrew? Dutch?) that clearly ends in 'Gigi' and the handyman bows deeply, holding his hand palm out towards the dwarf. 'Gigi' must be a name for the dwarf. A pet name for the dwarf. Here come the dirty blondes, probably Swedes, probably brothers, and they join in with their preparations for the game, bouncing hard and high like Masai. This is not easy in sand. They have a caramel-toffee tan that brags 'here for the season', and are lithe, but definitely not Greek. I measure their dicks against the other volleyballers. It's a matter of habituation: a few more days and I will not do this any more. I can talk my eyes out of it.

I know already that the handyman is the centre of everything round here, carrying armfuls of drainage pipes or sides of meat wrapped in light blue cloths and newspaper, watering basil and oregano that thrive in gasoline canisters painted red-gold and green, kept tight against the terrace walls. I have seen him perforate a basil leaf in a series of curves with the white shell of his nail then smell his fingers, then rub his fingers through his hair. Of course, I would prefer if he didn't see me watching him. He keeps the rustic showers pristine with a comically small squeegee. I whistle when I go into a stall. He polishes everything he passes with the

cloth that wraps the meat. Gigi cannot be his name, which is why I am happy to give him the nickname for now.

There is a party on this island that we are not yet part of. I hear it. It starts with one lonely 'hide-beater' and builds. Nothing so crass as a flyer, an invite or even evidence, though they have MTV and know who she is. Dilpa is where it's at; a smaller, rougher island that I can see but they can swim to. One ferryman and a rowboat, who disappears after his daily crossing but, before he does, thinks nothing of stunning an octopus on the side of his boat (the sound, a meaty Hank) and firing the black ink in an arc so wide that sunbathers sit up.

But because we love each other so much, island life for us rapidly becomes isolated. When night comes, the real party heats up somewhere else while we sit in a ghost camp and I am encouraged to agree with her take on why we are so good for each other. I flow with her high while she explains how the timing of her album is exactly right; I wonder if she thinks that talking about how we are together constitutes our togetherness, as if she shut up about us we'd be repulsed by what we found us to be. If I try to locate the distant music, or look for clues as to where it might be coming from, she insists that I get closer to her, judge a melody, listen to repeats of verses (commitment is never admitting you're bored). She insists I wait for her on her visits to the camp bathroom where I see him polishing the laundry troughs in his party clothes and I hear her sniff through the running of the taps. I set off back to the tent before she emerges from the stall saying, 'I really can't believe that I only want you.' Later, I will suggest less kissing.

It can only get worse. In Athens a couple of Jacks (Americans) had shouted out to her on the street. On the ferry over from Paros she wanted to play zoot-not-zoot (a title I coined, but am really tired of). I know exactly which entries to *The Zoot* are real, which ones are fake. Yes, I bought the book. Learning jive was a blast

but now she drags *My Zoot Your Zither* around as proof of our deep spiritual involvement. If anyone comes close to talking to us, she touches it as if to summon the spirit of jive to scare them away.

Sitting on deck, she sensed my retreat and asked, 'Hey! You evil 'cos this canary such a fine dinner?'

'Can we take a rest from it?' I said, tilting my chin at the sun. At this, her scarf (mushrooms that look like body parts and weeping wounds but hey, it's old and it's French), her glasses, her cigarette, all quivered. I was rational for both of us and continued, telling her how this ferry was an old Japanese trawler doing the daily run between Paros to Antiparos since 1976. Mid-sentence, a stranger demanded she hi-five them and, when she had, she looked guiltily at me and laughed like a child once the stranger had passed.

'Go on,' she said.

I don't go on for people who don't give a fuck about what I'm saying.

She overdid everything for the rest of the ferry ride: told a staring passenger to fuck off, then pretended that she hadn't looked for my approval. Overexcited, she asked for the bag and went to the bathroom. As we approached the modest grey-green hump of Antiparos on the trawler, she started jumping around, finally performing an exaggerated running man in a way that she thought was cute. Her lack of inhibition was definitely getting worse.

From the jetty, we took a wide dirt track right and curved on an incline through dunes and blowing a fanfare she said, 'Now ain't dat barrelhouse?'

She knew where I stood on that so I just said, 'There's no doubt this place is beautiful.' There was a view down to a shallow bight of sand, with green waters punctuated by a smaller wild-looking island in what looked like a lagoon. We entered under the sign for the campsite and walked towards an unlit cabin with peeling turquoise paint which seemed to have office status. I looked through the windows and confirmed it: a wall calendar advertising ventilation ducting. I

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*'If only he knew that she was oiled up and nude under the sheet'*

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wondered how she would handle it here without the supplies. The prediction was a couple of days.

Gigi was the first Jack we saw and appeared from behind the cabin in cream cheesecloth. He was carrying a compact generator and smelled of sweat and oil and slightly foreign (pine?) cleaning fluid. The cheesecloth was wrapped and tucked into a short kilt and made his skin look black in the dusk. With his legs apart like a wrestler, feet turned out and hands on hips, he could have slipped off the side of an urn.

'The Camping Antiparos?'

'Isn't this it?' She pointed to the sign.

'Are you the handyman?' I was looking at the generator.

'You need hat,' he replied, very seriously.

'No I don't, thank you,' she said.

'Bamboo hat!'

'What's a hat?' She shook her head slightly, looking to me.

'Who's the Greek here?' I chuckled. I could still keep things nice and light when I wanted to.

I put my hand on my head and finally looked at his face. 'I don't need a hat, thank you,' I said. I could not have been any clearer.

'No hat!' he declares, patting his crown while wagging his finger. 'Hat!'

He pointed to a row of small bamboo enclosures ('Huts!' she cried, foolishly clapping her hands) that stood in a row along the edge of the campground. He went over and opened a rickety door constructed from odd lengths of old bamboo strapped together with binding. Inside was a six-foot-square corral. Behind these huts were the boundaries to the camp, live bamboo thickets hissing in the sunset breeze. I stared morosely at the hut floor and I half expected a miniature herd of bulls to come out, or a tiny marching band.

'In here, you can sleep, two-fifty drachma.'

'We have a tent.'

I swung the nylon pod round to my chest and patted its bulk. I know something about camping. I wasn't carrying

this from island to island for nothing.

I didn't say this, I hardly knew him. He shrugged. We understood each other.

Once the pegs were hammered into the iron earth, the tent was finally up and I heard the switch in the distance, from the lone drummer to the beat of party music. She began her routines but I was very distracted by the insistence of the beat and more distracted still by the noise of people. Every so often, many voices lilted in consensus and then I caught a Greek hooray for something none of them had expected. I looked around the campground and saw tents and hats but no people. She didn't find this mysterious at all and kept singing into my face. I can't listen and speak, it's a thing I have. She drank the last of the ouzo then demanded the bag. I let her have it. It wasn't all I had, but I didn't give her everything because she is incapable of leaving so much as a salting. While she went to find the bathrooms, I noted the mg/kg ratio in the book.

It was no surprise that next morning started very one-legged. Let's blame! My favourite game! Paros, then here. We missed ferries because we needed 'supplies'. Arrived late because she took our 'supplies'. Say, let's blame in the thirty-degree heat!

'Extreme blaming!' I shouted, and I escaped the tent but not without passing through a fucking anemone of scarves to reach the air. Gigi arrived just at the point where I was, hammer in hand, trying to peel away a scarf that had plastered around my sweaty neck. From inside the sweltering tent, unaware of our visitor, she was whimpering, telling me that if we didn't fucking arrive late to every fucking campsite we would know where the fucking shade was going to be for the fucking morning.

'Call 911, we got a blamer!' I said to him with a redneck spin on it. I'd also had a lot

of ouzo. I smiled at him but he shook his head. I knelt in panic to pull out the pegs from the orange earth. He tutted with a finger over his lips as if it was best to keep quiet to prevent more damage. When I tried to continue, he put his dark brown hand over mine and kept it there while he squeezed his eyes tight to emphasize that something was not right. Then he forced me to notice, directing me by the chin and pointing to each tent, his eye, the peg in his hand. There were no pegs in any other tents and he proceeded to pull ours out in strong smooth movements.

Calmly, he helped her from the tent and then removed our bags.

With the tent emptied, he hooked two fingers around the strut, picked it up by its frame, and toyed with it to highlight its handiness. Then he placed it in an empty patch of shade.

When he left, of course we fucked, something about the heat of the tent and the inescapable stink of pine made it compulsory here. I told her the heat put me off kissing. She tried to kiss me (NB: from impulsivity to compulsivity).

Still in the cafeteria, I scan the beach again, scoring the shallow bay for Gigi. Instead, my eyes reach the shelter. I know she won't come out because, when paranoid, she waits dumbly until I say something she wants to hear. Only this morning, I told her that a fresh start is always just around the corner but she called me a smug motherfucking yard-dog and said I was just as needy as her. Then, instead of lamenting the senseless gorging on the last of the blow from Piraeus (I pretended to scour some serious shitholes for that), she began acting as if it were her intention to be well and truly rid of it. The inevitability of failure sat grotesquely at the back of all this. I could see it, but she looked forward, talking the talk (NB: the newly abstinent adore hyperbole – This is



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## *'That dwarf's ass? It tighter than Plymouth Rock'*

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the easiest!).

Without awareness, about mid-afternoon there could be a catastrophic failure of will. Up to then, there is the excruciating breakdown in decision-making (possible chapter titles: 'Does it hurt to choose?'/ 'Why it hurts to choose?'/ 'Hey! Choosing Hurts!'). I have tried to explain that in some respects addicts want the regret. They long for the longing; are only satisfied when there is nowhere else to go. In fact, I could pitch that this is the crux of my book: the very key to HOW COCAINE CAN BREAK YOUR BRAIN is that regret is part of the addiction machine. I am on this. This summer is where I get to answer the endless fucking logic questions.

Back down at the beach, my tray balances a frappé, the glass is tall and packed with ice, and though she asked for coffee, I have a mint tea that will make her comedown less unstable. My feet are burning, but no one on the beach would know. I see Gigi dividing his glances fairly between the ball and her shelter. If only he knew that she was oiled up and nude under the sheet. A smart breeze lifts up the flap and I see the chocolate-dark corona around her nipple through the flap and my head swings to the Greeks and there he is again, looking, waiting. His colour matches hers.

I put the tray down beside the sheet. 'He loffs you, you should offer yourself to him.'

She is looking for too long at the maths notebook and its ruffling pages. I won't be able to rely on her natural discretion for much longer.

'Psychiatrists do it with squares?' she dares. 'Do I look over your shoulder when you are writing songs?'

'You couldn't write a song.'

I flick a look at the pages to see what might have been sampled.

No need to panic. I find the paper I need, degraded decision-making in long-term cocaine users, from an up-and-coming Italian group.

I look over at the Greeks. I have what they want and I, like the North Wind, can get her out for them if I want to. So you wanna see the big star? I let my smile sit for a second.

'Hey Chirp, quit catching cups and get from under the dreamers and see this.'

She stays silent but I know she can't resist it.

'Come on, peola, catch some rays.'

'I thought you said no Zoot,' she says.

I change tack because I need to find the party. I roll up the Italian paper, push it under the flap and speak through it: 'Welcome to the Hellenic butt-nekkid volleyball competition where wigs are curly and asses are furry!' I make the throaty sound that instantly suggests a distant but raucous crowd.

'It's volleyball,' she says, 'and nude guys. The prize is rice pudding. I've been here before.'

She won't move.

'What's that, Ma'am? Yes, there is a dwarf on the team. Who is the dwarf? Ma'am, you just asked the question on everybody's lips back home.' I look to the Greeks. The dwarf just about kisses Gigi. The volleyballers cheer as if this was all they ever wanted to do.

'Henry, can we do this later?'

'But I need help with the rules. You are Greek, aren't you?' Can I feel a smile? I am nothing if not a persuader. I am at my very best as a persuader. 'For instance, can a nigger hoof it?'

'G man, you know that ain't in the book.'

She's in the game!

'OK, Ma'am. Can a cat one-time it?'

'One-time it with his head? Sure, or his hand or his foot. And one-time ain't in the book either.'

'Shheeeit. Buddy Ghee done did that with his dukes.'

'That's digging,' she says.

'I dig. Now what's the rest o' the rules to this piece o' shit homo-erectus pussy-ass game?'

I have upped a gear, we're nearly there. 'Baby, his nuts nearly juss buss loose! The dwarf just nearly de-rocked his little self.'

She peeks out again. I pretend I have binoculars. 'They near nuff went up his own ass! Damn! They gonna take some lickin'. His little pecker be all red an' swellin' up.'

'Pecker is not in The Zoot' she says. 'I ain't comin' on that one.'

'Gigi is breakin' it up. Check it. Get your peola ass from under there.'

'Gigi? Who the hell is Gigi?' She pokes out her head and Gigi looks over.

'Either him or the dwarf,' I say.

'I get it.'

'What?'

'This is about getting to the party.'

I must not blow it now. 'You used to be my Barbecue. What has happened to you?'

She reaches out for her glasses, pale yellow, patterned like bamboo, but I rake them towards me to get her out in full view, saying in a shocked whisper, 'I did not know dwarves did that!'

'This sho' better be a hummer. Boot me them cogs.'

I pull the glasses to my chest but she warns me, 'Don't play me no cut-rate Jack or you won't see me this early black.'

Out of the shelter at last, she keeps her eyes closed until she's put on the giant sunglasses. They don't suit her. I'll tell her later. I keep rolling. 'I would give fews and two to film these cats. That dwarf's ass? It tighter than Plymouth Rock when he eats sand like that. Them is some fraughty issues.'

She wolf-whistles weakly and lifts her glasses. 'Geez, I wish he could mend his drapes. Where his dry goods? I won't be able to clock him in the dim for shame.'

Gigi looks and Gigi smiles. Gigi beckons – Come and play! – and I know he means her.

'Gigi is gamin' for the dwarf.' She says it without any edge at all.

My heartbeat deepens in my chest.

'You plum crazy? Gigi ain't that way.'

'That gate be swingin',' she says.

The sun pulses.

'You killin' me,' I say.

I shade my eyes and I look again at the game. ♦





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NUMBER 33

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