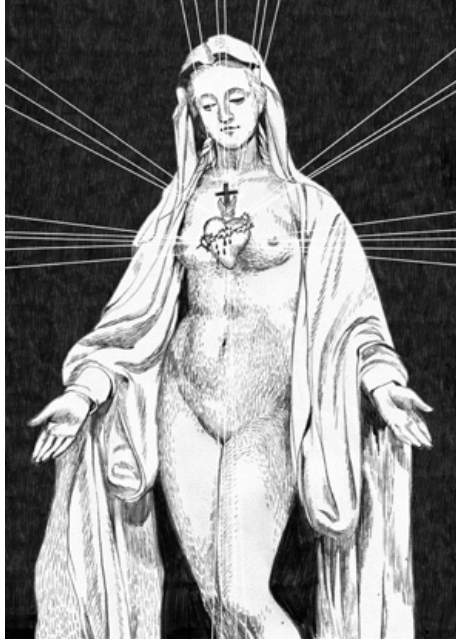


HAMISH HAMILTON PRESENTS

# Five Dials



NUMBER 33

*Five Dials* x [@readwomen2014](#)

Part II

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MOLLY MCCLOSKEY *New Fiction*  
ELIZA GRANVILLE *We need new fairy tales*

*Plus: Susan Sontag's lists, Juliet Jacques, a short story from Anjum Hasan, female anarchy in socialism, female anarchy in socialism, and a few of Masha Tupitsyn's Reel Men.*

*Plus: artwork from The Drone Age*



## CONTRIBUTORS

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ELIZA GRANVILLE lives in the West Country. Her novel, *Gretel and the Dark*, was published by Hamish Hamilton and Riverhead in 2014. She is currently working on another novel.

ANJUM HASAN's first novel, *Lunatic in My Head*, was short-listed for the Crossword Fiction Award, and her second, *Neti, Neti* (*Not This, Not This*, and published in Australia as *Big Girl Now*), was longlisted for the Man Asian Literary Prize. Her most recent collection of stories, *Difficult Pleasures*, is published by Penguin India and Brassmonkey Books in Australia. Her poetry has been featured in several recent anthologies of Indian poetry. She lives in Bangalore with her writer husband.

JULIET JACQUES was born in Redhill, Surrey in 1981. She is currently turning her Transgender Journey blog about gender reassignment, published by *The Guardian* in 2010-12, into a book for Verso. She writes regularly for *The New Statesman*, and her journalism and short fiction has appeared in various other publications.

SUZANNE JOINSON is the author of *A Lady Cyclist's Guide to Kashgar*, which was longlisted for the 2014 IMPAC Prize. In 2008 she won the New Writing Ventures Award for Creative Non-Fiction for 'Laila Ahmed.' She writes regularly for publications including the *Lonely Planet Anthology 2014*. She previously worked for the British Council in China, Russia, the Middle East and Europe.

OLIVIA LAING is a writer and critic. She's the author of *To the River* and *The Trip to Echo Spring* and is currently working on *The Lonely City*, a cultural history of urban loneliness. She lives in Cambridge.

DEBORAH LEVY writes fiction, plays and poetry. Her novel *Swimming Home* was shortlisted for the 2012 Man Booker Prize. She is currently writing a new novel, *Hot Milk*, to be published by Hamish Hamilton in early 2016.

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MOLLY MCCLOSKEY is the author of short stories, a novella, a novel, and a memoir, *Circles Around the Sun*. She was born in the US, though has lived in Ireland since 1989. She worked in Kenya, for the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs for Somalia.

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ZOE PILGER was born in 1984 in London, where she still lives. Her first novel, *Eat My Heart Out*, is published by Serpent's Tail. She is an art critic for the *Independent* and winner of the 2011 Frieze Writers Prize. She is working on a PhD about feminism and romantic love at Goldsmiths College.

AGATA PYZIK is a Polish journalist who divides her time between Warsaw and London, where she has already established herself as a writer on art, politics, music and culture for various magazines, including *The Wire*, the *Guardian*, *New Statesman*, *New Humanist*, *Afterall* and *Frieze*.

EMMA RAMADAN studied Comparative Literature at Brown University and is now pursuing a Masters in Cultural Translation at The American University of Paris. Her translation of Anne Parian's *Monospace* is forthcoming from La Presse, and her translation of Anne F. Garréta's *Sphinx* is forthcoming from Deep Vellum. Her writing has appeared in journals such as *Asymptote*, *Recess*, and *Gigantic Sequins*.

SUSAN SONTAG's second volume of diaries is entitled *As Consciousness is Harnessed to Flesh*. It was published by Hamish Hamilton in 2012. *Sontag on Film*, a collection of her writings on film, is in the works.

CHRISTIANA SPENS is the author of two novels (*The Wrecking Ball* and *Death of a Ladies' Man*) and two illustrated books (*The Socialite Manifesto* and forthcoming *The Drone Age*). She read Philosophy at Cambridge, followed by a Masters in Terrorism Studies and presently a PhD on propaganda and political violence at St. Andrews, which has inspired her artwork for *Five Dials*. She writes regularly for *Studio International* and the *Quietus* on art, literature and politics.

MASHA TUPITSYN is the author of *Like Someone in Love: An Addendum to Love Dog* (Penny-Ante Editions, 2013) *Love Dog* (Penny-Ante Editions, 2013), a multi-media art book, *LACONIA: 1,200 Tweets on Film* (ZerO Books, 2011), *Beauty Talk & Monsters*, a collection of film-based stories (Semiotext(e) Press, 2007), and co-editor of the anthology *Life As We Show It: Writing on Film* (City Lights, 2009). She is currently working on a collection of essays,

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MARINA WARNER is a prize-winning writer of fiction, criticism, and history; her works include novels and short stories as well as studies of female myths and symbols. Her recent books include: *The Leto Bundle* (2001), *Signs & Wonders: Essays on Literature and Culture* (2003) and *Fantastic Metamorphoses, Other Worlds: Ways of Telling the Self* (2004).

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# Marguerite Duras

*The master of desire. The ultimate writer of euphoria, of despair*



Duras is the master of desire. The psychological intensity of her work is played out not only in probing content, but in mesmerizing syntax and pulse, which makes the act of reading supremely intimate: her truthfulness resides in conveying an intimacy that is more than the sum of its parts. Several years ago, I used to reread *The Lover* at least once a year and would dip now and again into *Hiroshima Mon Amour*. The time has come to do so again, and to celebrate Madame Duras by rereading her other works too – not only her literary works, but her political views given in interviews. She once said, ‘Sometimes I think that Le Pen should be killed. Not by me ... But if there was someone brave enough to do it ...’ I quoted her in an art catalogue I wrote, back in 1993. Undoubtedly, our writers need more passion when it comes to politics. To read Duras is to recover passion lost.

*Susana Medina*

Raking over the live coals of lived experience. Telling tales on herself, knowing there's never only one way

about it. Telling the same story, staring its changing face down through the years. And you were wearing a man's fedora and gold lame shoes, *going to school in evening shoes decorated with little diamanté flowers*. And you were a beautiful girl, a whore, an ugly, beaten animal. And alcohol doesn't fill the gaps but filters anyway everywhere, in poisonous streams, poisonous rivers. *I'm acquainted with it, the desire to be killed. I know it exists*. No hope and not much pity, just the small teeth bared, the desire to get it all, to set it somehow down.

*Olivia Laing*

Marguerite Duras is one of those authors who always symbolized freedom to me – freedom to choose, to be sexually satisfied, to choose love and sex beyond other traditionally womanly things if she wanted to. Jean-Jacques Annaud's adaptation of *The Lover* came out exactly in this time, when I was budding sexually and was extremely prone to such things. Forbidden love set up in colonial Saigon during the time of Indochina, with its reversal of roles, shook

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*'At the moment of orgasm she could no longer tell whose body is whose.'*

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me (it's the fifteen-year-old 'colonizer' Marguerite who is a pauper here, and her twenty-years-older dandy Chinese lover is rich, though it is he who remains in a dependent, begging position in this relationship). When you're a teenager, you want to grow up and do those adult things so much that everything around this is just breathtaking. It was only later that I realized the nasty implications of the pairing of the fifteen-year-old 'pauperized' Marguerite with a Chinese man, and learned about her involvement with *Partie communiste française*, and then the Vichy government (though she was working as a secretary probably to protect her husband, who was in *La Résistance*).

Duras took up the problem of colonization, exploitation of the East by the West, and the way geopolitics and history cross with intimate feelings of love and passion, most movingly in her *Hiroshima Mon Amour* script for Alain Resnais' film in 1959 the most astonishing film to come out of *Nouvelle Vague*. The cinematography of the lovemaking scenes – the opening scenes, for example, where the Frenchwoman's body melts with the body of her Japanese lover – are some of the boldest ever committed to screen. Like a piece of body art or even earth/land art, covered in sand, earth, caressed by sun, fragments of hair, skin, sounds of orgasm and passionate panting melt into one sculpture, as it were, and allow us to understand what Duras once said in one of her books: that at the moment of orgasm she could no longer tell whose body is whose; she was a unity with her lover. The scandalous assertion that the atrocity of Hiroshima is somehow equated with her loss of a German lover, the public humiliation of her head being shaved, and imprisonment, was as shocking as it was revealing. It was best summarized by Janusz Zagórski, the designer of a Polish poster for the film in 1960 (Poland, then amid the relative relaxation of its post-Stalinist politics, tolerated such debauchery), who made the lovers' embrace melt with the atomic mushroom – simply breathtaking stuff.

Agata Pyzik

I started reading Marguerite Duras one spring, on a train from Paris to Nice. I had lost someone I had loved, and, feeling lost, I was trying to find my way back by leaving. 'The story of my life doesn't exist,' I read, as the train passed from long flat fields ploughed by clouds into cuttings of red rock sprouting umbrella palms; 'Does not exist. There's never any centre to it. No path, no line. There are great spaces where you pretend there used to be someone, but it's not true, there was no one.' This was Duras writing *The Lover*. She was in her late sixties, and this was the third time she'd tried to trace this particular story on paper (earlier

versions had been published as autobiography, and as the novel *The North China Lover*; she also wrote a film script). A famous and respected writer, she was still searching, still turning over the same material to see what was, what could be, there.

On the train to Nice, I read in French and, skimming quickly over the language's double negatives, I thought, briefly, that Duras's heroine/avatar told me, 'To write is not nothing; but no: Duras points out, as she does so blankly, of so many things in so much of her work, it's not true. What she says is, If writing isn't all things, all contraries confounded, a quest for vanity and the void, it's nothing.'

I didn't find what I was looking for in *The Lover*, it being so much less about romantic, and so much more about family, love, and hate, than I had supposed it might be, but I started writing partly because Marguerite Duras told me it was OK not only not to know who I was, or where I was going, but that not feeling like a subject could itself be a subject.

Joanna Walsh

From Duras I've learned that a first-person narrator is not limited by the imperfections of memory, but rather freed by them. There is no absolute truth in what is remembered, and so what is true in a character's history can be a fluid thing, manipulated to the benefit of narrative, even in purportedly autobiographical fiction.

Cari Luna

I first read *The Ravishing of Lol Stein* when I was working the night shift at a club in London, aged twenty-five. The second-hand copy I had bought online was a 1966 edition showing a fey woman with flowing hair near an open window. It looks like a soft-porn romance novel. To the contrary, it is a visionary work that I went on to reread many times, and which powerfully shaped my own writing and research. The window, a 'stage of light', is one of the most memorable images of the novel. Lol Stein, still hysterically numb after a night of heartbreak years before, wanders through dead streets of a seaside town to a rye field, where she lies down and watches the window of a hotel, lit from within. She can see two lovers; she is locked out. Duras writes: 'She does not even question the source of the wonderful weakness which has brought her ... she lets it act upon her.' Beneath Lol's hypnotic inertia, her failed grace, is resistance. She excuses herself from a world which doesn't want her.

Zoe Pilger



The purpose of language for Duras is to nail a catastrophe to the page. She thinks as deeply as it is possible to think without dying of pain. It is all or nothing for Duras. She puts everything into language. The more she puts into it, the fewer words she uses. Words can be nothing. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. It is what we don't do with language that gives it value, makes it necessary. Dull and dulling language is successful. Every writer knows this, makes a choice about what to do with that knowledge. It's hard, sometimes even absurd, to know things, even harder to feel things: that's what Duras is always telling us. Her films are novelistic – voice-over, interior monologue; her fiction is cinematic – she understands that an image is not a 'setting', it has to hold everything the reader needs to know. Duras is never begging with words but she is working very hard and calmly for us. Her trick is to make it all seem effortless. When she writes she ignores the sign on the gate that says Trespassers Will Be Prosecuted and keeps on walking. She needs a stiff drink to recover. Too many stiff drinks. But such a sublime walk.

Deborah Levy

I think of the seaside and of Mediterranean plazas when I think of Duras. A woman parking her car, long shadows falling across the square, the woman entering a hotel and ordering a Campari to drink, and then another. In much of Duras's work the heat isn't just present, it is destructive, pulsating. Frustrations, desires and regret simmer beneath the sun.

I read everything I could get my hands on by Duras over the years. Hunting through *The Lover* for sex in my teens, taken apart by *The Ravishing of Lol Stein* in my twenties and devouring *Trilogy*. Recently it is her non-fiction that appeals. In *Practicalities* she writes about the link between building houses, being a mother, madness and writing. She describes the various houses her own mother kept, usually in unfriendly landscapes (seven-hour treks along unmade roads) and the sense of the unhinged that can come from making a home against the odds: 'I believe that always, or almost always, in all childhoods and in all the lives that follow them, the mother represents madness. Our mothers always remain the strangest, craziest people we've ever met.'

Duras lists the contents of her mother's kitchen cupboards: gruel, quinine, charcoal ... and then she lists the contents of her own: eau de Javel, Spontex, Ajax, steel wool, coffee filters, fuses, insulating tape ... and what she gives us, if we read carefully, is a manifesto for female survival.

Books about desire and how desire undoes us can be written in front of cupboards scrubbed clean. In the same book she reports that her house at Neauphle-le-Château is damp and it is sinking. She has tried to put in an extra stair but when the mason digs a hole to reach the ballasting he just keeps going, there is no bottom. 'What had the house been built on?' The earth can't be trusted. Bricks and mortar can't be trusted.

Homes constructed for holding on to children and men can't be trusted. Everything is vulnerable for Duras and it is that quality in her writing which resonates – perhaps too

closely – for me.

Suzanne Joinson

One of the qualities that works of art possessed when I was first grown up was mystery. I didn't mind not understanding. I liked the vertigo of the sensations they gave me, speaking to my emotions, going straight through to my nervous system, without my developing an intellectual or analytic grasp of their meaning. The powerful effect which the film *Hiroshima Mon Amour* had on me led me to Marguerite Duras's novels, and to screenings of her own films, such as *India Song*, and, much, much later, to read, with great admiration, *L'Amant*, her late and well-deserved international bestseller. *L'Amant* doesn't have the mystery of the earlier works; it's intelligible even though the reasons for the love affair remain exceptional and unusual. But Duras's early oeuvre brings writing closer to music and dance: words and images form structures of enthralling, hypnotic sound and cadence and pattern, with repetition used to deepen the incantatory potency of the drama – to call it a story would be putting it too strongly.

At an early stage in my writing life, Duras defined artistic subjectivity for me, and she did so as a woman who wanted to fashion artistic and psychological liberty for herself, always working at a pitch of high intensity and making uncompromising aesthetic demands on herself. It makes me feel sad to think about all this, as I haven't seen her like come again.

Marina Warner

In 1958, Alain Resnais was searching for a writer to make a film with him about Hiroshima. He had read *Moderato Cantabile* by Marguerite Duras. They met in her apartment in the rue Saint-Benoît, in the heart of Saint-Germain-des-Prés. They spent five hours drinking together and talking about all the ways it was impossible for them or anyone to make a film about Hiroshima. Three days later she sent him a dialogue between lovers. Working through the night, she finished the screenplay in three months. From Japan, he sent her postcards, sending his regards to her lover Gérard Jarlot, and detailing his own discovery, in the bombed city, of locations she had imagined from Paris: the café by the river, the nightclubs, the atomic dome.

In the finished film *Hiroshima Mon Amour* the woman says to her lover, 'You kill me. You give me pleasure.' This yielding of self is voiced as we are swept through the streets, velocity denying the division between pain and pleasure. The passage across Hiroshima holds the sensation of the lovers' bodily yielding and contact. 'Devour me. Deform me,' she says.

Duras is, for me, the ultimate writer of euphoria, of despair. From *La Douleur* to *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* to the brief S/M texts of her later career, she folds extreme sensation ecstatically into her reckoning with politics, grief and history. She finds in her writing forms of expression matched to a sense of eroticism bound up with violence, proximity, an unfixing of the self.

Emma Wilson ♦

## Ox Heart

an extract from *Eat My Heart Out*

by *Zoe Pilger*

As soon as the driver opened the doors of the bus, I began to run, hysterically. Hallelujah! Hallelujah! God is love, god is light. Light is Dave, the light-maker! Where is he? I had expected Dave to run after me, but he hadn't. I ran into Tesco on Clapham High Street. I grabbed a basket and skipped down the fluorescent meat aisle. I swung the basket as though it were a holy thurible able to bless the packets and packets of gleaming red ruby meat, rippled with a fat so white it hurt. There was purity in the world. There was passion in the world. I was alive. Hallelujah!

I stopped, entranced, at the offal section. The hearts, ripe and obscene, seemed to morph into Dave's pendulous testicles – I was sure they would be pendulous – blood-bursting and full of the promise of future generations. We would mate! We would mate!

I clawed at the hearts with love streaming through my veins. There would be twenty, thirty children! There would be eternal children! Dave and I would move in with his parents in Devon and I would waddle about the rose-covered cottage, as happy as a fat pregnant duck. His kindly mother with twinkling eyes and flour on her hands from making so much bread would pat my stomach and possibly perform an age-old family ritual of swinging a locket around my stretch-marked belly in order to tell whether I would be gushing forth a little Dave or a little Ann-Marie. If I had a boy, I would call it Sebastian.

I put the packet in my mouth and tore at it with my teeth. The watery blood that swirled around the edges of the meat ran straight into my throat. I bit down on the heart with urgency. It crunched like a hard peach. Dense, slaughter-heavy scents overwhelmed me. I had an urgent need to masturbate. I put the brown and messy meat between my legs, crouching awkwardly on the floor. The fluorescent lights became gamma-ray bursts.

'Ann-Marie!' Dave was running down the aisle towards me. He stopped, sweating. 'What are you doing?'

I threw the packet back on the shelf. 'It should be perfectly obvious what I'm doing, Dave.' I stood up. 'You've ruined it now.'

'Ruined what?'

'I was having a wonderful time – remembering you.'

'Well, here I am!'

'No, Dave. You don't understand. It's better if we skip

## Diary of a Steak

an extract from *Diary of a Steak*

by *Deborah Levy*

THURSDAY

Name: Buttercup.

Nationality: English: a vast repertoire of emotionally and physically unstable symptoms.

Born: East Grinstead.

Distinguishing Marks: White head. Black patch over left eye. Big boned. Pierced ears.

Father: Prime Hereford. Solid block of face. White feet. Shining eyes.

Mother: Friesian. Sharp straight eyelashes. Long nose. Dark lips. Big boned.

FRIDAY

I am not mad. Pank you.

FRIDAY

They gave me a bottle of ammonia to smell. I said it was rose water. They gave me charcoal to eat. I told them it was chocolate. They gave me a top hat. I told them it was my baby and suckled it in front of the distinguished gentlemen farmers and independent experts on brain disease.

MONDAY

We won the war.

TUESDAY

Tell the world we are proud of our hotels and bovine vertebral columns.

I am the national anthem.

THURSDAY

I can feel some erotic hysteria coming on.

It's coming.

My theatre of rib and shadows.

SATURDAY

My momm y wen to the incinerator. She was not allowed to suckle me. I'm a herbivore but I was made into a carnival. ◊

▲

this part. If we fast-forward to the beginning and the middle and the end and let the tragic chorus begin and let me feel sad and maybe I'll even write a poem about it. Maybe I was close to writing then – with the meat.' I gestured to the hearts, which looked as though they had been mauled by a pack of wolves.

A Tesco worker came striding down the aisle with a mop. She was irate. 'Didn't you hear the announcement?' she was saying.

I ran out of the supermarket, grabbing a copy of *Grazia* on the way. I didn't stop until I reached the Tube. I hid behind the public toilets. There were no police cars. Then I saw Dave, panting. He was looking for me. I watched his discomfort for a while, then, when his back was turned, I ran and jumped him from behind. Dave didn't fall though; he was stronger. He held on to the park railings, saying nothing, until I began to feel foolish. I got down.

'You're playing games,' he said. 'You're always playing games.'

People were staring at us in the carriage; probably because we looked like a couple from a romantic comedy, totally made for each other, both appearance-wise and personality-wise.

I got out *Heidegger: An Intro* and said: 'I won't be needing this any more.' I offered it to the man sitting opposite; he had a bushy beard and looked vaguely like a philosopher himself.

'Who needs knowledge and even education at all when you have love?' I said. 'I was only getting an education anyway because that's what you're supposed to do. And I never really understood any of it. All I ever really wanted was someone to love, who loves me. The rest of – all of it – just seems like a waste of time.'

'Really?' said the man opposite. He was holding the book as though it were a bomb.

'Yeah,' I said. 'See.' I snatched it back and flipped to a random page. 'Concept of Authentic Life: My existence is owned by me.' I gave it back to the man. 'I mean, who needs authenticity when you've got romance?'

Dave laughed uncertainly. ◇



# Sontag's Choice

*Selected by Joanna Walsh*

American writer and critic Susan Sontag was a compulsive list-maker. Her famous list of things she liked (diary, 21 February 1977) included 'making lists'. Here are a few lists from her diaries, published in *As Consciousness Is Harnessed to Flesh*.

## Verbs (1964)

Slash	Slip Away
Flake	Barter
Judder	Tamper
Spurt	Blunt
Sprint	Bash
Jar	Whimper

## Nouns (1964)

Panache	Armature
Parameter	Scuffle
Neologism	Cistern
Guts	Persiflage
Integument	Tempo
Snap brim fedora	Furore
Gruel	Imbroglia

British Pops (1964)

Lonnie Donegan

Chris Barber

...

Chris Richard + his Shadows

Cilla [Black]

Helen Shapiro

...

Mersey [*Beat*]:

Beatles

Dave Clark 5

The Rolling Stones

The Beasts

The Pretty Things

The Birds

...

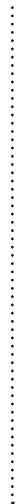
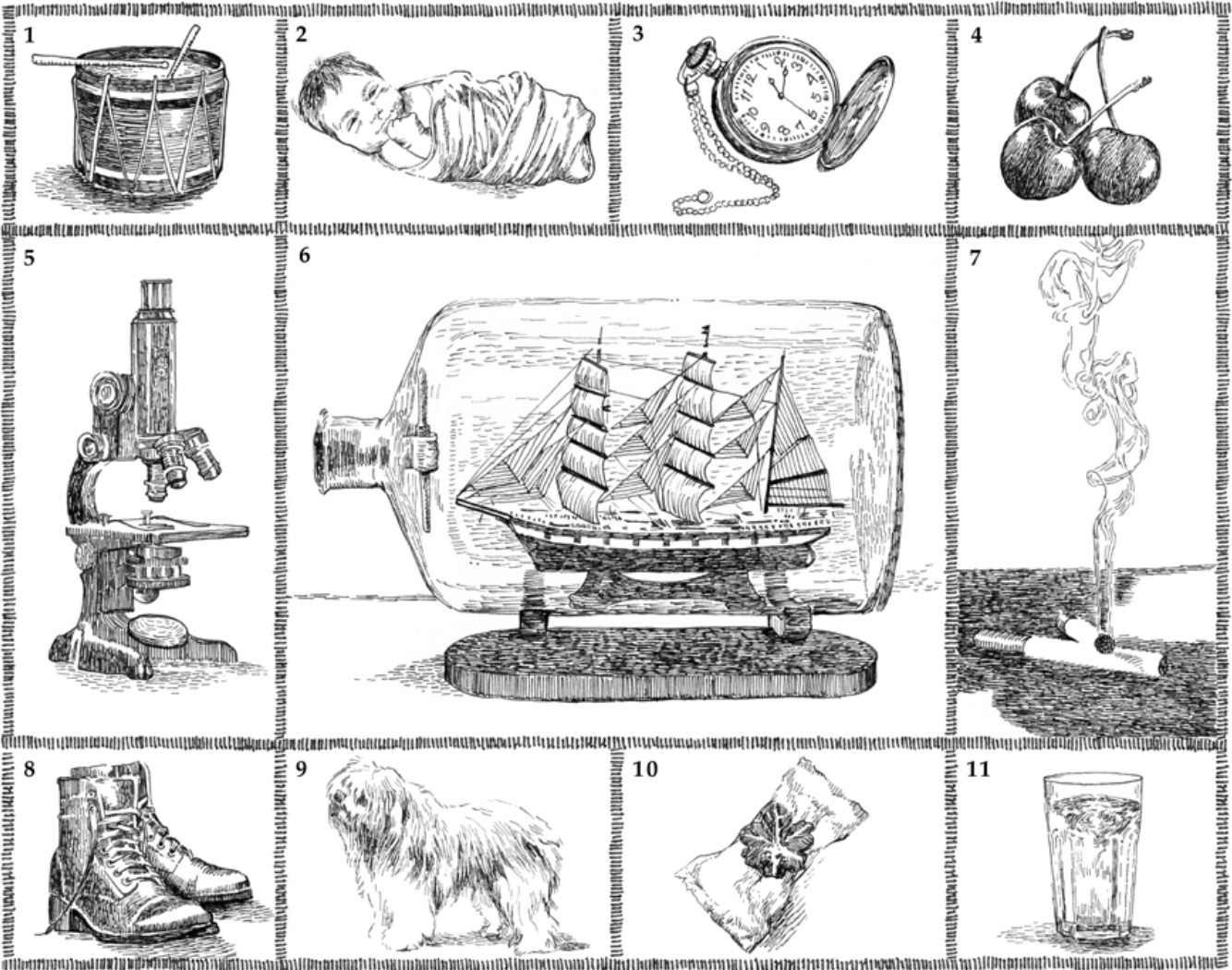
Dusty Springfield

## Body type [SS is describing herself] (1964)

- \* Tall
- \* Low blood pressure
- \* Need lots of sleep
- \* Sudden craving for pure sugar  
(but dislike desserts – not high enough concentration)
- \* Intolerance for liquor
- \* Heavy smoking
- \* Tendency to anemia
- \* Heavy protein craving
- \* Asthma
- \* Migraines
- \* Very good stomach – no heartburn, constipation, etc.
- \* Negligible menstrual cramps
- \* Easily tired by standing
- \* Like heights
- \* Enjoy seeing deformed people (voyeuristic)
- \* Nailbiting
- \* Teeth grinding
- \* Nearsighted, astigmatism
- \* Frileuse (very sensitive to cold, like hot summers)
- \* Not sensitive to noise  
(high degree of selective auditory focus)

## Regenerative experiences (1965)

Plunge into the sea  
The sun  
An old city  
Silence  
Snow-fall  
Animals



### Untitled list (1965)

... been sheared off  
... worked into the grain of  
...pounded flat by  
grudging  
spurned  
incredulous  
spew  
launch  
unfits one for ...  
equivocal  
pollute  
reshuffled  
choice insult ...  
debased  
dispersed  
makeshift  
despondent

### Qualities that turn me on (someone I love must have at least two or three) (1970)

1. Intelligence
2. Beauty; elegance
3. Douceur [gentleness, sweetness]
4. Glamor; celebrity
5. Strength
6. Vitality; sexual enthusiasm; gaiety; charm
7. Emotional expressiveness, tenderness (verbal, physical), affectionateness

### Twelve travellers (1972, China)

Marco Polo  
[Matteo] Ricci  
Jesuit who painted  
Soulié de Morant  
Paul Claudel  
Malraux  
Teilhard de Chardin  
Edgar Snow  
Norman Bethune  
My father  
Richard Nixon  
Me

### Cemeteries (1972)

New one in Marseilles  
Haramont [a village outside of Paris where Nicole Stéphane had a house]  
Linguaglossa (Sicilia)  
Londo Island  
Highgate (London)  
Near Taroudant [Morocco]  
Panarea [island off Sicily]

### Three themes I have been following all my life (1972)

China  
Women  
Freaks  
And there's a fourth: the organization, the guru

### 'New' British novelists (1976)

B. S. Johnson  
Ann Quin  
David Plante  
Christine Brooke-Rose  
Brigid Brophy  
Gabriel Josipovici

2/21/77

Things I like: fires, Venice, tequila, sunsets, babies, silent films, height, coarse salt, top hats, large long-haired dogs, ship models, cinnamon, goose down quilts, pocket watches, the smell of newly-mown grass, linen, Bach, Louis XIII furniture, sushi, microscopes, large rooms, ups, boots, drinking water, maple sugar candy.

Things I dislike: sleeping in an apartment alone, cold weather, couples, football games, swimming, anchovies, mustaches, cats, umbrellas, being photographed, the taste of liquorice, washing my hair (or having it washed), wearing a wristwatch, giving a lecture, cigars, writing letters, taking showers, Robert Frost, German food.

Things I like: ivory, sweaters, architectural drawings, urinating, pizza (the Roman bread), staying in hotels, paper clips, the color blue, leather belts, making lists, Wagon-Lits, paying bills, caves, watching ice-skating, asking questions, taking taxis, Benin art, green apples, office furniture, Jews, eucalyptus trees, pen knives, aphorisms, hands.

Things I dislike: Television, baked beans, hirsute men, paperback books, standing, card games, dirty or disorderly apartments, flat pillows, being in the sun, Ezra Pound, freckles, violence in movies, having drops put in my eyes, meatloaf, painted nails, suicide, licking envelopes, ketchup, traversins [bolsters], nose drops, Coca-Cola, alcoholics, taking photographs.

Things I like: drums, carnations, socks, raw peas, chewing on sugar cane, bridges, Dürer, escalators, hot weather, sturgeon, tall people, deserts, white walls, horses, electric typewriters, cherries, wicker/rattan furniture, sitting cross-legged, stripes, large windows, fresh dill, reading aloud, going to bookstores, under-furnished rooms, dancing, Ariadne auf Naxos. ♦



▲  
PORTFOLIO

# The Drone Age

*by Christiana Spens*









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*The Drone Age* is published by Blue Pavillion.

Inspired by the work of Eduardo Paolozzi, Richard Hamilton and Gerald Laing,  
*The Drone Age* is a pop art response to current affairs.

Work from the book will be exhibited at Gallery 17 in Edinburgh in September.



# This Didn't Happen to You

by Molly McCloskey



He met her for the second time in the back of a Land Cruiser, one sunny, spring-like morning in Addis, where neither of them was living at the time. It took him a moment to recognize her. It had been three years and another continent – the east coast of Sri Lanka, in a room decked out with artificial limbs. She'd been a protection officer working with Tamils and was at the medical centre having tea with a doctor friend of hers. Matt had only just

arrived in Sri Lanka; Anna was leaving in two weeks. He had remembered her intensely for a few days, then forgotten her entirely.

Matt was based in Dadaab now, the sprawling refugee camp in the east of Kenya. He was an engineer, managing water and sanitation projects, and he'd flown into Addis the day before for meetings. But he had nothing on till the afternoon, so that morning was going to the jobs fair for Ethiopians – partly because he thought an old colleague might be there, mostly to avoid paperwork that needed doing. The fair was at the hideously glitzy Sheraton – what a friend in Nairobi had described as Versailles overlooking the slums.

He had been to Addis once before and had found it instantly dispiriting. He had long since learned that every impoverished city is ground down in its own particular way, but where Nairobi had a kind of pent-up energy, a charge to the air that felt unmistakably sexual, Addis seemed diffuse, and a little lost. Out of the window of the Land Cruiser he could see out figures squatting on the footpaths, so thin they looked folded in upon themselves. There were people missing legs or arms, and there were others who were physically intact but were clearly deranged. They wore layers of rags and raved, like mad truth-tellers, as they wandered up and down the footpaths.

He turned to Anna. 'So where are you these days?'

'Uganda,' she said, 'since July. Between Gulu and Kitgum.' She was working as part of a team that was attempting to prepare for the return of the hordes who'd been displaced by the war. She too had come to Addis for meetings, but unlike Matt was actually interested in the jobs fair. This year, it was focusing on the disabled, and Anna wanted to see what was

being done for them. Where she worked, there were a lot of maimed.

On the second floor of the Sheraton, there were people with white sticks and others in wheelchairs, and a few sat on ornate sofas, reading job descriptions in Braille. The doors to the patio were open and the morning sun fanned across the carpet. At one of the stalls, two people signed to each other, smiling. A dwarf led a blind man by the hand, and

they too smiled. Everyone seemed to be smiling. All these people, all these unemployed, disabled people with their so-slim chances of a better life, smiled. Through the rooms ran an air of trust and quiet optimism that Matt seldom experienced at such gatherings, and it filled him with sadness. The man who was the official signer for the event wore a pin on his shirt that showed, in sign language, the sign for I love you. Anna asked about the button, and the man taught her how to sign it. Matt got coffee and croissants for the two of them and they took a table out on the patio, where the opening speeches were going to take place. The sun was just warm enough to make sitting out pleasant; the coffee was perfect, the croissants light and flaky. The whole scene was idyllic and bizarre, as though they had chanced upon some enlightened and progressive land where jobs were plentiful and compassion commonplace, where strangers said I love you upon meeting, and all shapes and colours mingled freely in the palace of Versailles.

All that was worlds away now: the sun, Anna, their lives together in the cities of that continent, the tentative sense of optimism you wanted desperately to safeguard because it was among the finer impulses on earth.

It was Christmas morning and Matt was in Dublin, in his

city looked hard and ramshackle, but there were coloured lights everywhere and Christmas trees in windows, and in the tattiness was something wondrous, too.

No one but Kevin and Biata knew Matt was in Ireland – not his widowed father in Rathfarnham, not his sisters or their families, not the one friend from college with whom he'd maintained sporadic contact. There was no hurry, he was planning to stay for a while. He would go to his father in a few days.

He had left the tree lights on the night before, and when he came downstairs this morning – the sitting room empty, his stockinged feet soundless on the floorboards, the lights blinking incessant patterns through the gloom like some code he had to crack – he felt like the last man on earth. Before bed last night he'd unwrapped what Kevin and Biata had left for him: socks, a scarf, two vouchers, a hardback that told the inspirational story of someone, somewhere, who'd done something good. There was nothing under the tree now, and it looked denuded and somehow sad with itself.

He made coffee and stood at the front window, which overlooked the canal. Nothing moved. There was not a person on the street. A thin fog smudged the view. The

*'He had remembered her intensely for a few days, then forgotten her entirely.'*

brother's empty house. Kevin had decamped with his wife Biata and their two-year-old to some frozen village in the Polish interior to spend the holidays with his wife's people. That was how Kevin had put it, my wife's people, as though he were making good on some ancient promise. Matt pictured them in voluminous hooded robes, walking sticks of crooked branch, the child slack-jawed in a sling, as his parents trudged the snow-covered plain until a squat cabin hove into view.

He had flown into Dublin the night before. Nairobi–Amsterdam–London–Dublin. Bad planning but he'd hardly minded that it took for ever. He had often felt in the no-place of airports – nexus of so many lives, actual and possible – moments of a reassuring weightlessness, when the world seemed vast enough to vanish into. From the back of the taxi, he'd looked out on to Drumcondra Road and then the north inner city. There were kids in hoodies, some moving with an edgy and purposeful air, others stumbling, in a murk of drink or drugs; there were people smoking outside the doors of pubs, huddled into themselves and fidgeting for warmth; there was a man weaving drunk on a corner and a cluster of plumpish young women in minis and heels who parted to avoid him, then tottered back into formation. The

willows looked stricken. Rising from the primordial ooze of the canal were two broken branches and the algaed half-trapezoid of a shopping trolley, all breaking the surface at skewed angles. The canal and its banks had the look of a misty bayou, a look of stunned aftermath, as though civilization had been here and gone.

He had fallen in love with Anna that night, in Addis, over dinner. He didn't believe in love at first sight, that was just chemistry, just nature taking an extreme short cut. But he did believe in love after four hours' conversation. He believed that whatever happened after that, whatever they were to discover about one another and whether those things bound them or drove them apart, what he felt for her that first night was love.

Anna was in her early thirties, French Canadian, lithe and bird-like, visibly pained and unrelievedly wry, a little hardened by years in Chad and Sri Lanka and a devastating love affair with a war photographer named James who was as beautifully ethereal as she was. Four weeks after they'd split up, James had been killed in a horrific car accident while holidaying in Mozambique. He had survived the Balkans, Columbia, Afghanistan, a smattering of African

conflicts, and then had died in peacetime in some terribly ordinary way. Matt knew a few stories like that, the irony so stark you thought surely it must mean something. It was a holiday Anna and James had been meant to take together, and if they had, James would still be alive; Anna didn't like Mozambique, she'd have insisted on somewhere else. And even if he'd convinced her to go there with him, her presence would've altered things. She'd have dallied over breakfast, they'd have driven the road an hour later, or been on a different road altogether. She wasn't blaming herself, she just found the fact of randomness overwhelming.

In the first months of Matt's getting to know her, Anna was still raw enough to cry about it – though she always insisted she wasn't crying over James, she was just crying, because, well, look around, there wasn't exactly a shortage of things to cry about. Whatever the reason, she cried when necessary and was lovely as she did, one delicate hand cupping her forehead. Then she would quickly regain her composure, as though the whole thing had been a coughing fit rather than an emotional disturbance.

What saved her from becoming tragic, or morbid, was her resilience and a silly streak. One day, she'd told Matt that she and a friend named Robin used to dance in their little

had introduced Anna to James, and it was Robin who had come to stay with Anna when James was killed.

Matt didn't sleep with her that first night in Addis, he was too ... maybe the word was astonished. He felt astonished at having rediscovered her and yet the sense of freefall had none of that anxiety that the early phases of love and desire tend to engender. Instead, it was shot through with an unexpected calm.

The next morning he was looking at the news on the Internet and read a blog entry about a Canadian nurse who was teaching people how to use condoms. It was headlined: 'Sex Nurse in Kenya Making a Difference One Banana at a Time'. He forwarded the link to Anna, and when he saw her that evening at a dinner one of her colleagues had arranged, she caught his eye where he was standing with a cluster of other people, and said, 'That made me laugh!' And the mood – that first flush of love that can so easily grow precious, enamoured of itself, as though falling in love were some totally unprecedented accomplishment – relaxed and expanded. For a moment they just smiled at one another until he detached himself from the conversation and came over to her and she leaned forward and kissed him on the

*'Matt didn't sleep with her that first night in Addis, he was too ... maybe the word was astonished.'*

office in Chad, shaking off the gloom of their jobs or their lives or the world outside – look around – by performing mock ballet for each other's amusement.

They were in a grocery store in Nairobi when she told him this.

'Well, go on, then,' he'd said, 'show me.'

And to his surprise she had. Twirling down the aisle, all arabesque and pirouette and giggles, while the locals looked on, a few charmed enough to offer a wan smile, most too tired – of their own hardships and of the sight of overpaid, cavorting wazungu – to respond with anything but apathy.

A woman about Anna's age laughed and called out, 'Lady, you are verrrry good!' Those r's that rolled on for ever.

Anna took a low sweeping bow and said to Matt, 'Robin was the real ballerina, I was just the understudy.'

She had a hundred anecdotes in which Robin figured. Robin was from Trinidad. She was Anna's closest friend. They'd met on a training course in Copenhagen in 2001 and had hit it off immediately, beginning a correspondence that hardly wavered in its consistency, that was both intense and girlish, full of dark realities and office gossip. They'd overlapped in Chad, and had both wound up working in Juba, in South Sudan, though at different times. It was Robin who

cheek in greeting.

'Good day?' she asked.

'Stuck inside, mostly. Finishing a report on what happens when you have 200,000 people and twelve toilets.' He had long ago begun to couch his work – the business of shit and piss – in tones of droll indifference.

She gave him a wincing smile. 'Well, we're going out to talk to some people from the Disabled Vets Association tomorrow. Why don't you come?'

He took a sip of his beer. 'I wouldn't miss it for the world.'

On the way back to the hotel the next afternoon, he couldn't get his bearings. Addis seemed all wide hilly boulevards that looked just like each other, behind which lay webs of shack-lined dirt roads. The baby blue Ladas, the city's taxis, chugged past like toy cars in varying states of disrepair. Anna was texting – the office, her mother, Robin – and Matt was thinking about his return to Dadaab in the morning, wondering if he would ever see Anna again.

They were stopped in traffic. The sound of chatter suddenly filled the back seat. He looked over and saw that she had lowered the window and was giving berr to a clutch of

beggars, a couple of teenage boys and two women.

When the Land Cruiser moved off again, he said, 'Do you often give to beggars?'

'Fairly often,' she said, staring absently out of the window.

He looked at her and couldn't tell if he was in the presence of goodness or naivety. How many times had he seen children make a beeline the minute they spotted a foreigner? The reflex of expectation. He thought of a teenager he'd seen in Sri Lanka, some months after the tsunami, wearing an orange T-shirt on the back of which was printed, simply: Tsunami. He said, 'If you give money on the street, doesn't it just reinforce the whole trap, the whole donor-beneficiary trap?' He knew there was an argument to be made, but he hated the sound of himself, of this desiccated language he had learned to speak.

Anna shrugged, turning to him. 'If they have nothing,' she said, 'what does it matter?'

She was right, of course. When it came to it, survival trumped psychology. But then he said something that shamed him as soon as it left his mouth. 'It depends what we mean by nothing. Are they starving? The people you gave money to weren't starving.'

Anna was quiet. He didn't think she was judging him. She

mother had died during his final year at university, at the age of fifty-three, five months and twenty-one days after her diagnosis. In her absence, the already strained relationship with his father grew quickly brittle. Matt was too young then, and too consumed with his own grief, to make allowances for his father's behaviour, and had heard in the things his father said, not the ravings of an agonized mind, but merely all the criticisms that had been kept in check while Matt's mother was alive. When Matt announced that he was leaving, his father accused him of desertion. As though he were a spouse, or a soldier.

After lunch, Matt walked towards the city, along the canal, down Grand Parade. Rust-coloured reeds as tall as he was rose along the banks. The black water ran like a tunnel through the fog. He went as far as Percy Place, then crossed the humped bridge and skirted round the church that was planted in the middle of the street as though set down there from on high. The street bulged either side of it like a snake who'd just eaten.

The fog had thickened slightly; it was the colour of ash and cold to the skin. He walked slowly, as though moving through a billowy afterlife. He imagined himself in the wake of a freak disaster, one that had left structures intact

*'When it came to it, survival trumped psychology.'*

knew as well as he did that such calculations were written, implicitly, into every day of their lives. Otherwise, they would all go around giving their money away all the time. He turned back to the window. The vehicle sat high on its big tyres, so that he was not so much looking out at the beggars as down on them, and he felt ugly, and not a little bit colonial, dispensing arbitrary favours, or not, while considering the distinction between starving to death and merely suffering from malnutrition. It was mean of him to have tried to call her out on a simple, well-intentioned act; he knew enough about her by now to know that she had seen far worse than he had in the course of her work, and he had no right to interrogate her.

He thought then that his time in the field was over, in any meaningful way, because he could no longer distinguish between rational decision-making and a kind of burnt-out petulance. But he would hold on for another three years, because of her, and because he didn't know what else he'd do.

**M**att had never in his life spent a Christmas Day alone, and he hadn't spent a Christmas in Dublin for fifteen years. He had left the city soon after finishing his degree. His

but swept living things from the earth. The traffic lights played sentinel to empty streets, something homely and proud about them, like lighthouses, safeguarding people against their own misjudgements.

He saw no one until he was on the far side of Merrion Square. Then, a couple, a young family, a middle-aged man walking a small white dog. He turned up Grafton Street, where perhaps a dozen people strolled like survivors in the quiet. Everyone walked slowly, and because there were so few of them about, they took note of each other, glances of shy curiosity, infinitely gentle, as though they could not quite believe this world they were living in. When he'd gone as far as the quays, he turned back towards home.

Passing through Merrion Square, he saw two feet sticking up at the far side of a shrub. His throat tightened as he stepped closer, but the man was only sleeping. He might've been forty or he might've been twenty-five, there was no telling. He had the caved-in face of an addict. Matt thought of gathering him up and taking him home, and imagined the house swept clean of valuables by morning. His mother's eldest sister had met her future husband when he was sleeping rough under a bridge in Canada. It was 1957. They were both immigrants. She'd brought him home and propped him

up in front of a fire and within months he'd passed his test to become a bus driver, and for the rest of his life was a devoted husband and an upstanding citizen. He had a beautiful singing voice and he used to sing while she played the piano, and they were ordinary, good people who loved each other through many a long winter.

Matt was worried the gates would close and the man would freeze. He had seen a patrol car parked outside the square; it was still there when he went out, and he told one of the guards about the sleeping man.

The guard said he wasn't to worry. 'We always do the rounds.'

In the course of his life, Matt had walked past a hundred such men, men who by the next morning could be dead. He'd told the guards, not because it was Christmas, not because he was home, but because there were so few people left, so few survivors, that each one of them seemed precious and necessary.

After Addis, it was two months before he saw Anna again. They'd kept in touch, a few weeks of emails and they'd agreed to meet on Lamu, off the coast of Kenya. It felt like a honeymoon, with its air of confirmation and beginnings.

would look like when it had finished imploding, and the spectacle appealed at some deep level to a people habituated to fatalism. They tried to picture the eighties, that grim era often referenced as a kind of bogeyman come back to punish them for their hubris, but now with spanking new motorways and repoed McMansions.

He and Anna drove to the West, and all through the midlands she gawked at the abandoned, half-built houses and unoccupied estates. She took pictures on her phone and emailed them to Robin. She said they looked like the devastation after some natural disaster, and Matt said, 'They look like last night's party.' It was true, the houses managed to exude an air of shame, or to induce shame, like the detritus that greets you the morning after, the sordid evidence of your excesses strewn in calamitous accusation.

In Dublin they walked the streets, and in front of the Aran sweater shops, with their ton-weight cable knits and their prim woollen cardigans, passed gaggles of middle-class teenage girls dressed like hookers from some grim pocket of Eastern Europe. They took the DART to Howth; Anna liked Howth better. They ate oysters and sole in a restaurant overlooking the water and drank a bottle of white wine, and afterwards brandy, which neither of them ever drank. By

*'On the whole, Anna tried not to show any disappointment with his country.'*

They lolled about in a seafood-and-sex stupor for four days, and decided they'd try to make it work. What followed was several months of back-and-forthing between Uganda and Kenya, then a year together in Juba, a brief stint for her back in Chad, and finally, the two of them in Nairobi.

Once, he had brought her to Ireland. It was the summer before she fell apart, or whatever it was she had done. She'd had the usual notions about his country. It never ceased to amaze him how, no matter what happened here, no matter how much Big Pharma came to town, how many hi-tech companies the place played host to, how many drug seizures made the news and how conspicuous and sudden had come the consumption of everything, the nation was expected to remain innocent. All the world could change, but here was childhood, artless and wide-eyed.

The visit with Anna was the first time he'd been back since everything crashed. Immediately he'd felt it, the sense of held breath, everybody waiting for the axe to fall, and then the axe after that. But along with the anxiety and the anger and the talk of negative equity and denuded pension funds, there were traces of the queerest sort of pride, like the pride people take in monstrous hangovers. Also in evidence was a perverse curiosity. No one knew what the place

the time they tripped back out into the daylight, a slight breeze had picked up. Everything was sparkling. The boats bobbed cheerfully at the pier, and all the colours looked clear and true. Matt put his arm around Anna and pressed his face into the crook of her neck, into her hair, and in a muffled whisper said, 'I want to marry you.' She turned to him and looked straight into his eyes until tears formed in her own eyes and rolled down her cheeks. Then she drew him to her and held him tightly, and he had no idea what any of this meant in relation to the sentence he had just, to his surprise, uttered.

On the whole, Anna tried not to show any disappointment with his country, and he tried not to feel a satisfaction in disabusing her of her illusions. God knew she had few enough of them left. This was a woman who spent her days interviewing refugees, trying to sort the true stories from the concoctions, gauging whether the truth was bad enough to warrant furthering a person's resettlement application. It was a perverse kind of competition people were forced to engage in, and she had told him how almost immediately her idea of what was endurable became warped; so much got relativised, measured against what she'd heard already that day, that week, that year. This was a woman who, when



he'd asked her one day how work was, had answered: 'The new normal is having been raped only once. Having been raped just once, by a lone man, is now regarded as a narrow escape.'

He knew what she was thinking, they had discussed it often enough. She was wondering which was the more shocking: the ease, the prevalence of brutality; or the way people survived it without losing their minds. Of course not everyone did survive, but enough did that Anna could spend whole days humbled by the fact, made quiet, in the grip of an awe so sincere it looked strangely like prayer.

Sometimes he felt like a child beside her.

By the time he'd reached the canal again, dusk was leaching into the fog, and the air had gone a steely grey. The street lights were furry globes. He looked at the sheen on the water, the opaqueness overhead. He looked at the trees along the opposite bank, different kinds he couldn't name, all bare and black-branched, and he thought that he preferred them like this, stripped down to their own severe beauty.

He had slowed to the point where he was no longer walking. Movement seemed a disruption, though he hardly knew to what. It was dark now. Nightfall was time made visible.

*'In the sound of her voice, he heard whole worlds, worlds she was taking with her and away from him.'*

He thought again of his uncle, in the hour just before his future wife appeared under the bridge. If his uncle had been granted a wish, he would not have dared to think so big as what in fact was given him. The opposite, of course, might also be true. If we knew of the misfortunes to come, would we carry on at all? Or would we carry on better? Would we do justice to the present instead of enduring it? He wondered – and this was the question he asked himself more often than any other, more often even than why she had left – whether he would have experienced any of it differently had he known they wouldn't last. But then he probably did know. There was always that slight hesitation, always the sense of her not being entirely present and with him. There was the day he'd told her he wanted to marry her and she had been moved to tears but she had not returned the promise. And there was her way of withdrawing into herself, like an injured animal, when she was pained or troubled, as though unwilling to entrust herself to him. It had been that way since the first – he remembered it even from the day in the Land Cruiser in Addis, the people begging, his stupidity, her way of going silent as a form of speech – so that when trouble hit, trouble closer to home than the horror stories she'd mostly learned to leave at work, it was hardly surpris-

ing that her reaction should've been to retreat from him.

Matt had met Robin only once, when she was passing through Nairobi and the three of them had had dinner. She was almost exactly what he'd expected, which was hardly ever the case with someone he'd heard a lot about. She was both sharp and warm, animated, he kept thinking the word vivacious, though it made her sound shallow and she wasn't that. He found her transfixing, actually, not in a romantic or erotic sense, but because she was so alive. He felt lifted by her presence and he could see that Anna did, too. Anna's intensity eased a few notches, and she felt lighter beside him, and happier. It was the kind of friendship Matt had never shared with anyone, the kind that makes the world a different and a better place. When they dropped Robin at her hotel, he and Anna walked back to the car arm-in-arm, and Anna was very soft with him, playful and loving, as though she'd been in receipt of something nourishing and vital and wanted him to share in it.

The day Robin was kidnapped in an ambush outside Kinshasa, Matt was in Geneva conducting a seminar on Sanitation in Emergencies. Anna was alone in Nairobi. She phoned him at 4 a.m. Details were sketchy. They had been taken the

previous evening – Robin, the driver, and a local woman who was travelling in the UN car with them, against regulations. By the time Matt returned to Nairobi three days later, the driver had been let go and the local woman, her name was Justine, had been killed.

It was sixteen days before Robin was released. There were rumours of a large sum having changed hands, and there was the horrible, inescapable irony that had Robin not bent the rules and tried to help Justine by giving her a lift, the woman would still be alive.

Robin didn't contact Anna following her release; it was said she had hardly spoken to anyone. She went home to Trinidad. The word going round was that she'd been raped.

It wasn't fear, exactly, that took hold of Anna in the weeks after that; it was more like an incapacitating shock. She was unreachable. She wouldn't allow Matt to console her.

In a moment of exasperation, he said, 'This isn't about you.'

She looked at him, her expression puzzled and oddly blank.

More softly he said, 'I mean, this didn't happen to you. It happened to Robin and to ... to Justine.' He felt foolish saying the woman's name, as though he'd known her. As though he knew anything at all about who she had been, or what her days had consisted of, or the people who grieved her.



Anna's contract was up for renewal in five weeks and she said to him, very by-the-way, as though they'd been mulling it over together, 'I'm going home for a while.'

It had all happened so fast, the kidnapping, the murder and Robin's release, the rumours that filtered out, Anna's decision to leave, and to leave him. Matt felt like he'd missed something, like he'd skipped some pages, and suddenly there she was, standing in the driveway outside his Jeep, her two huge duffels on the ground beside her.

It was one of those balmy, deceptively gentle Nairobi evenings. He drove her to Jomo Kenyatta out a choked Mombasa Road and watched her from outside the glass until she disappeared behind some checkpoint. From the parking lot, he sent her a text and she phoned him from departures to say goodbye, again. In the sound of her voice, he heard whole worlds, worlds she was taking with her and away from him. And then he drove home, feeling like a dream she'd had.

The day Anna got on the plane to go back to Montreal, Matt knew he would leave, too. He had just been offered a new post in Nairobi, as a water and sanitation policy analyst for all of East Africa. Everyone assumed he'd take it. In fact, he felt flat with apathy. He had, he knew, reached

back. But in moments of slippage he doubted it all, perhaps because she wasn't there to fortify it. There were times he wondered was love anything more than a collusion of belief.

In the wake of her departure, familiarity fell away. Places they'd got to know together grew strange, so that his own life felt to him like an unfamiliar neighbourhood he'd wandered into. There were days he looked around him and all he could see was need, pressing from all sides, each person transmitting to him an urgent message of need: a look, a word, an upturned palm. He felt a sense of depletion that was unambiguous and almost pleasant.

Each evening, on the way home from his office in the Parklands area of the city, he had to navigate the big roundabout near the mall. At rush hour, rank with fumes and in a lurching state of gridlock, the roundabout took on the air of a living thing, and he felt a kind of pleasure in witnessing it, sitting in one of the feeder lanes as the day cooled and the light went pale over the jacaranda. A throng of cars would work themselves into a complicated jam, and when the resolution came, in the form of a peristaltic spasm, and the cars burped off in their various directions, he could almost feel a collective cheer going up.

Nearly every evening as he waited he would see to his

*'The more they try, the more they go to an excess, the more pointless it is.'*

the point in his career where his dealings would be almost exclusively with other high-ranking bureaucrats. Soon, having done his time in the field, he would be given a post in Geneva or New York, and the circle would be complete.

When he turned it down, when he said he thought he might leave altogether, people said, 'You mean leave leave? But what will you do?' However chaotic the worlds in which they moved, there was an apparent, counterbalancing order – the hierarchies strictly defined; the deprivations precise, the sites of indulgence clearly mapped, the faces recurring and familiar; each city, zone, autonomous region stamped with a number purporting to quantify its dangers – and they believed that beyond the borders of all these crises lay a world of vagueness and uncertainty in which he could only take his chances.

He had a few months left in Nairobi while he was finishing his own contract, then he would go to Dublin to do he didn't know what. Just breathe, maybe. It would be Christmas, and the country would feel like it was under lockdown, and he was almost looking forward to it. The cold, the silence, the few hours of nothing at all happening.

Most days, he still believed in them, still believed that if he was steady enough, patient enough, he could ease Anna

left a man on the ground with no legs, begging for change. Drained by the day, lost in his own thoughts, Matt would find himself staring, his gaze blank but intense, as though the man were a vision both banal and inscrutable. There were always kids, too, knocking on his window or weaving through the waiting cars and along the shattered footpaths, moving with that straight-backed strut the kids there had. There were hawkers selling puppies and pirated DVDs and dodgy Ray-Bans, and there were workers hanging out of stuffed matatus and others starting the endless trudge home. There were young men so skinny their torsos looked incapable of accommodating all their organs.

But while the Jeep idled, it was mostly the man with no legs Matt looked at. He wanted to feel something, something more than just this weariness. He wanted Anna in the passenger seat, her hand on his thigh, the ballast of her. He wanted to see himself get out of the car, day after day, and give the man money. Once he had, he'd pulled the handbrake, stepped out and handed him 2,000 shillings, an absurd sum that he hoped the man would not be robbed of. But most days he simply waited for the knots of traffic to admit him, then fought his own way around the circle and headed towards home. ◇

# The Woman in the Portrait

By Juliet Jacques



*Self-Portrait with Model* remains the best-known work by German artist Christian Schad, known as ‘the painter with the scalpel’ for the cutting, forensic nature of his work. The son of a wealthy Bavarian lawyer, Schad was born in 1894 and fled to Switzerland in 1915 to avoid military service. There, he became involved with the Dadaists, attending their legendary Cabaret Voltaire in Zürich, before moving to Italy and adopting the *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) style that replaced Expressionism as Germany’s dominant Modernist form in the mid-1920s.

Painted in 1927 and currently on display at the Tate Modern, where it is on loan from a private collector, *Self-Portrait* is noted for its mood of suspicion and hostility, and the disconnection between the artist and his ‘model’, but her identity has long been a mystery. It is not his then-wife, Marcella Arcangeli, an Italian medical professor’s daughter whom he married in 1923. Schad claimed that he saw the model in a stationery shop in Vienna, where he lived from 1925 to 1927, but the remarkable find of two diaries from 1926 and 1927, by a ‘transvestite’ known only as Heike, a hostess in Berlin’s El Dorado nightclub

who worked as a maid at Magnus Hirschfeld’s Institute of Sexual Science, has radically changed perceptions of Schad’s work. They were recovered from an attic in Nice, near Hirschfeld’s home after his exile from Germany. Along with Schad’s letters to Dadaist friends, recently discovered by art scholars, they explain how Heike came to be the woman in the portrait, and provide a fascinating insight into gender-variant life in the Weimar Republic.

★

On Friday 4 February 1927, Heike went to the El Dorado, a gay club in Berlin which had just moved to Schöneberg, opposite the Scala Variety Theatre. The following day, she wrote:

*At the El Dorado last night, with Dora and the girls. I got my hair done like Asta Nielsen in Joyless Street, and I wore my long black dress with the beads that Marie got for my birthday. Conrad [Veidt] was there, getting drunk with Marlene [Dietrich] before her act.*

*I went on stage and introduced Marlene. A man at the front kept staring at me. I saw him go to the bar and buy some chips for a dance. As I stepped down, he grabbed my hands, told me he’d just moved to Berlin, took me to the bar and bought a bottle of absinthe. ‘You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen,’ he told me. ‘Listen,’ I said, ‘I’m the third sex.’*

*‘That might be Dr Hirschfeld’s line,’ he yelled, ‘but you transcend sex!’ He invited me to his studio in Vienna to model for him. I said I wanted to be in the movies but Conrad told me it could never happen.*

'Ignore that two-bit somnambulist! Once they see my portrait, no director could resist you! As far as the pictures are concerned – you are a woman!'

We danced. He kept staring into my eyes, smiling. I tried to kiss him. 'I'm married,' he said. He gave me a card with his address, told me to write to him and then left. Dora asked what happened. 'Nothing,' I said.

★

After work on Friday 25 February, Heike arranged to meet Schad. She thought they would go for dinner and then to the theatre, and her diaries detailed her dreams of leaving her domestic service to become an actress, but Schad's note to Richard Huelsenbeck, posted earlier that week, suggests that he never intended to meet her in public.

*Welt-Dada,*  
Went to El Dorado to find The Model – Heike. She – he – is Uranian – an invert – but thinks I'll make her the new Pola Negri – will take her to a hotel – see what transpires.

★

Heike's diary for Tuesday 1 March gives her side of their encounter in Berlin's Hotel Adlon.

I got to the Adlon at 5pm. From Morning to Midnight by Georg Kaiser was on at the Neues Schauspielhaus, and I asked if we could go. 'I need the time to paint you,' said Christian. I saw that his easel was already set up. He drew the curtains. 'Take off your clothes and lie on the bed,' he told me. 'Would anyone cast me if I was famous for being naked?' I asked.

'How do you think Garbo got on Joyless Street?' he replied, laughing. 'Take off your clothes and lie down.' He glared at me as I removed my hat. He stared at my hairline, then caught my eyes. I turned around and took off my blouse, and then my shoes and skirt, and started to pull down my stockings. 'Keep them on', he said. I turned back to him. 'Just the stockings.' I took off my bra and the inserts, and he just stared at me as I put them on the floor. Then I removed my drawers and lay on the bed.

He looked at my penis. I thought he was going to be one of those men who vomit, but he just stood there, breathing heavily. 'I thought you said we transcend sex.' Silence. 'The Doctor says we're more beautiful than other women, because we have to –' He threw me on to the bed. 'Enough about Hirschfeld!' He kissed me. I thought he was going to kill me, he was so coarse and so rough – he just wouldn't stop. Finally, he got tired.

'I know what you're thinking,' he said, looking at my sex again. 'I can't.' 'Why not?'

'They'll send me to prison!' He looked into my eyes. 'I'm not an invert!'

'No, you're not,' I said. 'I'm a woman, and as soon as Dr Abraham gets there with Dora, I'll be complete.'

He laughed. 'You're all the same, aren't you? Hirschfeld, Abraham – you just let them own you!'

I stroked his hand. 'Are you jealous of them?' I said.

He turned me over and screwed me harder than I'd ever been screwed. I screamed. 'Be quiet,' he whispered, 'someone might hear.' Then he stopped and shoved my face into the pillow. I sat up and looked at him.

He slapped me hard on the cheek. He sat with his back to me. 'My wife ... my son ...'

I stared at the wall.

'I'm sorry,' he said.

'I'll talk to Conrad and Marlene,' I replied. 'They'll introduce me to Pabst and Lang. I'll start with bit parts but they'll see, and once they do, I'll pay for your art, I'll –'

'Shut up, you idiot!' he said. 'They might make films about freaks but they don't cast them!'

'I thought you liked freaks,' I said, reminding him that Marie had seen him at the Onkel Pelle.

'Not when they seduce me!' he yelled. He stood over me.

'Should I leave?' I asked. He nodded. 'I'll go,' I said, 'just don't hit me again.' He didn't move. 'I'll put on my clothes, just let me out!'

Silence.

'What about the portrait?' I asked.

'I can do it from memory,' he said.

He went and stood by the window. I got dressed and went to the door. 'Goodbye, then.' He looked at me and then turned back. I heard him open the curtains as I left.

Soon after, Schad painted his Self-Portrait. It was premiered in a group exhibition of *Neue Sachlichkeit* artists at the *Neues Haus des Vereins Berliner Künstler*, although we know that Heike was not invited. Schad sent her a letter, dated Monday 3 October 1927, quoted in Heike's diary two days later.

Heike,

The exhibition opened at the Neues Haus tonight – sorry you weren't there, and about the Adlon, but nobody can know that you were the woman in the portrait – I hope you understand. Marcella and I are finished – perhaps I will see you at the El Dorado.

Christian.

★

*Self-Portrait* immediately caught the attention of critics, who cited it as one of Schad's most arresting works. In one of his first pieces for influential politics and arts periodical *Die Weltbühne*, journalist and psychologist Rudolf Arnheim drew a comparison with another of Schad's works, which has assumed a new dimension since the discovery of Heike's diaries.

*Self-Portrait with Model* is outstanding, with Christian Schad including himself among the dilettantes, bohemians, degenerates and freaks who populate his world. With the decadent city as a backdrop, Schad is in the foreground, wearing just a transparent shirt which serves only to highlight his nakedness. The artist stares at the viewer, as if he has personally intruded on Schad's clandestine moment of intimacy, his face filled with revulsion, heightened by the narcissus that points towards him, coming from the near-naked woman behind him. He blocks her midriff, perhaps protecting her modesty, or maybe hiding something from the intruder. Unwomanly despite her round breasts, she wears nothing but a black ribbon around her wrist and a red stocking, looking away from the artist, stunned if not scared. They both look alone: there are just a few inches between them, yet the distance is huge, and it is impossible not to wonder if Schad's self-disgust and the scar on her cheek



are connected.

The 'model' is unnamed, but she bears a striking resemblance to the transvestite in Schad's *Count St. Genois d'Anneaucourt*, which depicts an aristocrat caught between his public image and his desires, and between virtue and vice. The Count stands in the centre, ambivalent, seemingly hoping that the viewer will help solve his dilemma: the demure, respectable woman to his right, or the tall invert to his left, his cheeks plastered in rouge, his huge frame barely covered by the transparent red dress that exposes his backside? Either way, the transvestite's resemblance to the 'woman' in *Self-Portrait* is noticeable, although Schad claims that the model was chosen through a chance encounter in Vienna.

★

Heike saw *Self-Portrait* later that week, recording her thoughts in the final entry of the recovered diaries.

*Went to the Neues Haus to see Christian's exhibition. I was alone – none of the girls could make it – and as soon as I got there, a group of society women stared at me, and then went back to the paintings. Of course they were fawning over the one of the dandy who wants to have sex with the hostess from the El Dorado but can't because it's not respectable. 'So brave!' they kept saying. 'So bold!'*

*I decided to find the picture of me, even though Dora told me not to. I should have listened to her. I'd tried not to expect anything, but hoped he might have tried to bring out something of me – something to show Marlene or Conrad, or even the girls – but then I saw Self-Portrait with Model.*

*I stared at it. Some woman glanced at me like I was dirt, looked back at the painting and then walked away. He'd made a very good likeness of himself, but he'd brought my hairline down and changed the style, made my nose bigger and given me breasts. He knew how much I wish mine were like that! Of course, they were there because he doesn't want anyone to find out how much he likes the third sex, and in the picture, he was blocking me from the waist down. He remembered my stocking though – he was so desperate for me to keep it on – and he added a flower. The gallery attendant said, 'It's a narcissus, it represents vanity.' Then I noticed the scar on my cheek – the attendant just shook his head when I asked what it meant. A man said they were common in southern Italy – jealous husbands put them on their wives. I could feel the tears coming. I ran back to the Institute and wept, and told Dora that I never want to see Christian or his painting again.*

★

In summer 1932, Schad had another encounter with Heike – almost certainly his last. We know this from another letter to Huelsenbeck, dated Sunday 7 August.

*Welt-Dada,  
I promised myself I'd never go again, but last night I found myself in the El Dorado. It's been five years, but I'd only been there ten minutes when who comes on stage but Heike, from my Portrait. She wore this glittering red dress, almost transparent, and I felt scared. As she got down, I called her. She recognized me and tried to run to the bar. I grabbed her wrist.*

*'I won't hurt you.'*

*She looked at me, trembling. A couple of the inverts came over. 'I'm fine,' she said, and sat with me. I thought about when you said that being with her would be the perfect Dada gesture because she was so spectacularly ugly in the Portrait, but I was stunned at how good she looked – just like when I first met her.*

*'You look incredible,' I told her. She thanked me. 'I can't believe that Marlene is in Hollywood and you're still here.'*

*'You were right,' she said, 'they don't cast freaks.'*

*Silence.*

*'Did Dr Hirschfeld ...'*

*'Dr Abraham got there with Dora,' she said. 'I'm fourth in line. Next year, they hope, if things calm down.'*

*'Which things?'*

*'Adolf Hitler says that Dr Hirschfeld is the most dangerous man in Germany,' she told me, 'and if he gets in ...'*

*'My career is finished,' I said.*

*'Your career and my life!' she shouted. 'The club, the surgery, the Institute, everything!' Silence. 'I might die on the operating table, anyway, like Lili.' She took a draw on a cigarette. 'That might not be so bad.'*

*'You don't need surgery,' I said, 'you're beautiful as it is.'*

*'If that's so, why did you cover me?' she asked. 'It wasn't a mistake – I could tell from that scar you put on my face.'*

*'I was breaking up with Marcella,' I told her. 'I didn't want to hurt her any more by letting her know I'd been with you.'*

*'The Count's shameful secret,' she said. 'Your shameful secret.'*

*'She's dead,' I said. 'Drowned. There's no need to stay here. Come away with me.'*

*'Where can I go?'*

*She started crying. I held her hand and I was sorry. She went back to her friends. I doubt I'll ever see her again. Will paint to work out how I feel about this. Let's talk soon.*

*Christian*

★

In October 1932, Franz von Papen, the right-wing Chancellor of the Republic, banned same-sex couples from dancing together in public, effectively killing the clubs in which Heike worked. The Nazis came to power three months later, and as well as stepping up the attacks on Germany's LGBT population, they resolved to destroy its Modernist culture.

Perhaps surprisingly, Schad was not targeted, and unlike many of his Dadaist associates and Neue Sachlichkeit contemporaries whose works featured in the notorious Degenerate Art exhibition, he stayed in Berlin, being allowed to submit to the Great German Exhibition of 1934. He remarried in 1947, five years after meeting the young actress Bettina Mittelstädt. In 1943, his studio was destroyed in a bombing raid, and when he resumed painting in the 1950s, his style had become kitsch. He died in Stuttgart in 1982, aged eighty-seven.

After Schad's letter, we know no more about Heike. The Nazis raided Hirschfeld's Institute on 6 May 1933, seizing its records and burning its library before repurposing the building and making the El Dorado into the SA's headquarters. Dora Richter had already tried to flee Germany but failed, and was never seen again after the attack. We can only assume that Heike disappeared with her. ◊

# Does it matter? It doesn't matter! An invitation to destruction

On Věra Chytilová's *Daisies and female anarchy in socialism*. By Agata Pyzik



In avant-garde Czech director Věra Chytilová's *Daisies* (1966), two young women do *nothing* for the entire film, apart from: eating; lying on their bed in flamboyant costumes; rolling in a meadow; chatting up men and making them pay for them in exclusive restaurants; catching flies; sitting/lying down, 'négligé, in stupefaction, like mechanical dolls; awkwardly trying to attract men to then run away from; and throwing and wasting enormous amounts of hard-won and fought for socialist food, in an obvious act of disdain for Czechoslovakian men and women workers' toil and socialist values. If anything, *Daisies* is driven by a sense of play, so rare in cinema, with an open-ended structure, which at its best works as a series of episodes. If the stabilized socialist society of the Eastern Bloc (as we can call it in the 1960s) could be characterized by the rigidity of norms, conformity, lack of spontaneity, oppression, stiff rules directing every moment of life, then everything the two Marias do is aimed exactly at disclosing the organism's diseased bones, as if even the slightest blow of unruliness could easily overthrow this carefully constructed mediocrity. In fact, the state's power wasn't that frail at all, as the 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion and the end of the Prague Spring made most clear. But to maintain the ideology – similarly in

Poland or USSR – the conformity of others was essential.

Made two years before the Prague Spring, *Daisies* was the product of a deep socialism, with all its sleepiness, sheepishness, closure of perspectives and a return to private, family life. *Daisies* goes against all this. Shot in radical, strong, 'hippy' tie-dyed colours, it also went against the greyness of socialism, creating an anarchic alternative. *Daisies* remains one of the rarest and strongest satires and subversive fantasies of a life under socialism which never really took place.

Maria and Maria from Chytilová's film remind me of the 'theory of form' developed by the Polish modernist writer Witold Gombrowicz. In his view, form is something negative: a pervading power of conformity, turning us into pitiful members of mass society, an opposition to which would be a romantic aristocrat of the old type. Yet Gombrowicz was rather up for the un-made man, a man without qualities, without feelings, without dependencies. No wonder he never came back to communist Poland, but before he became canonized as a writer in France, he preferred the life of a sexual outcast in Buenos Aires, much in the Jean Genet lowlife/whore affirmative way.

The two Marias are on a mission to unmake the socialist stereotypes of womanhood: mother, wife, worker, nice girl

▲

‘They exist between automated dolls from horror movies and eccentrics from a Beckett play.’

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from youth organization, homemaker. They want to live on the margins of this society, still manipulatively using their girlishness to obtain their goals: a free dinner, adoration, and lots of fun at men’s expense. At the same time Maria and Maria’s excesses visibly bring them little *jouissance*. Whenever they’re up to something fiendish, they have their little exchange: *Does it matter? It doesn’t matter!* Precisely: whatever they do, it doesn’t matter. The fun derived from breaking the rules, from constant line-crossing, lasts perhaps two minutes, only to make room for the usual dullness and boredom (even hopelessness) once again. The more they try, the more they go to an excess, the more pointless it is. They’re on a quest for form. They are women – which means that within society they don’t have an inherent form just by themselves. What for Gombrowicz was a blessing and a liberation – escaping the overpowering form, becoming a dandy of the spirit, a ready product to be admired – for them becomes the reason they fall. ‘We will be hard-working and everything will be clean,’ they promise. ‘And then we’ll be happy.’

People who have fallen out of form are a frequent topic in socialist-era Czech film, because not working was the highest form of subversion in countries where it would straight away qualify you as a ‘loafer’. In *A Report on the Party and the Guests?* Jan Němec’s 1966 film, a group of upper-echelon system beneficiaries lose their form. In turn, they are left adrift – without the system that made them feel important, they’re nothing. Planning a nice picnic with their wives, they are suddenly taken over by a mysterious group of people – apparatchiks? Government officials? Best not to ask too many questions. Again, there’s an obsession with food which can never be consumed, just like in Buñuel’s *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*.

Are the *Daisies*’ Marias bored, or empty, or simply stupid? Their waste of time, labour, food, and the pointlessness of their own ways, suggest they are outcasts of society – and they suffer because of that. Is this film really a praise of anarchy? The girls are rather dejected and depressed by all of the increasingly scandalous pranks they perform, so joyless. They exist between automated dolls from horror movies and eccentrics from a Beckett play. Self-reflection makes them unhappy. The two Marias are also women reclaiming their time, which normally is supposed to be spent on work, nursing men and children. They try (and fail) to realize their dreams, like the one of being pure virgins, parading on a meadow with a wreath on their heads. They plant flowers and vegetables on their bed; their room is a laboratory of fantasy. They seem constantly hungry. The motif of food and femininity in *Daisies* is strictly surrealist and has great traditions in Czech art, which produced some of the most interesting art in that spirit. Food as fetish, as sexual

object, was often a factor in Czech surrealist art and film, from the 1930s paintings of Toyen to the animations of Jan Švankmajer.

In Švankmajer’s work, food becomes basically ‘existential’ and stands for the general hopelessness of human existence: the hopeless mundanity, the routine and repeatability of everyday activities, such as eating three meals a day. This is also deeply felt in the short film *Meat Love*, and is a motif that he repeats in his late film *Lunacy*, which was partly inspired by Marquis de Sade, a huge influence present also, in a sardonic way, in his *Conspirators of Pleasure*. The world of Švankmajer is always impossibly twisted and distorted to the degree that we barely recognize the familiar elements, stripped down to the libidinal rudiments of id, all consuming, violent and unpredictable.

The screenplay for *Daisies* was developed together with Pavel Juráček and Ester Krumbachová, two artists in their own right – especially Krumbachová, a strikingly original costume designer, writer and director, and a somehow tragic, unfulfilled figure, who collaborated with Chytilová also on the oneiric *Fruits of Paradise*, and co-wrote several exuberant surrealist Czech classics, like *A Report on the Party and the Guests* by Jan Němec, Karel Kachyňa’s *The Ear*, and *Valerie and Her Week of Wonders* by Jaromír Jires, but then, as a self-reliant director she didn’t have similar success. Watching her only film, *The Murder of Mister Devil* (1970), we see that despite being possessed by an extraordinary visual imagination, on her own Krumbachová couldn’t go beyond a combination of visual gags, without a principle organizing it. In *Mister Devil*, the visual means overshadow the actual content. We see a perfect bourgeois woman in a perfect flat preparing a real feast for her rather unimpressive functionary partner/husband. The feast is completely disproportionate to the small scale of the evening, yet the dishes just keep coming and coming, more and more breathtaking, and the whole film reminds me rather of Marco Ferreri’s *La Grande Bouffe* or a similar transgressive anti-capitalist 1970s fantasy.

Yet given the title, and the superb poster, in which the screaming man is drowned and eaten in a ice-cream sundae by a smiling Medusa-woman – designed by Eva Galová-Vodrážková, in the best traditions of the Czech and Polish school of poster, with excessive irony and surreal/dada spirit, from which Linder Sterling must have learned some of her technique too – it was a strongly feminist statement playing with anti-feminist sentiments, about a woman who’s using one of her only ‘weapons’ – food – as a way to make everything in the world implode.

Food and wasting food is a great taboo, not only in socialism but also in capitalism. The two Marias walk on food, crush it with their high heels – an analogue scene is repeated



by Ulrike Ottinger in her *Bildis einer Trinkerin*, with the character walking on broken glass. Yet their consumption seems far away from a joyful carnivorous feast. Was excessive eating truly subversive within the socialist state? It definitely was, especially in the light of woman's role within society, of her body being ogled and consumed, combined with her role of a family food provider. This is related to the sexualization of women eating, which today instantly brings to mind images from hardcore pornography, with the scene of a zoom on a woman's face, as she licks sperm from her face, the so-called money shot. The sexual attraction of a 'money shot' is a pure male fantasy – but the thing is, as theorist Mark Fisher points out, that the pleasure lies not in the fact the girl really 'enjoys it', but precisely that she willingly pretends to do so. As a good worker, it's not enough she just sucks somebody's dick, she must do it with a smile.

In *The Face* magazine in 1988 there was a photo session called 'ALEX EATS', with a relatively unknown skinny model shot repeatedly as she eats in various settings, the stress placed on the food that's being wasted rather than consumed. Overeating excessively, yet retaining her skinny flesh, Alex was openly mocking existing eating disorders. It was the beginning of the 1990s waif-like model fashion, when magazines openly promoted an anorexic and unhealthy look. In the cardinal scene of *Daisies* involving food, the two come upon an abandoned banquet, with a table groaning under the weight of gluttonously arranged piles of food, a real Balthazar's feast, uncannily displayed in the midst of socialist scarcity. What ensues is the girls breaking into a final, elemental jouissance, where the food is consumed and destroyed, transforming into an ultimate orgy. Like children left home alone, they destroy as much as they can. They seem still addicted to the classic denominators of beauty – they must parody the fashion catwalk, dressed in mayonnaise, salad and curtains, to finally get rid of the nagging beauty ideal. They try to be flirtatious, yet they are ultimately afraid of sex: they much prefer their own company to the boring men.

It seems that a woman's body can never be right, no relationship she has with food can be liberatory. Too fat/thin, or not thrifty enough. In *Daisies* the meaning of food is contradictory: the two Marias neither really chew and swallow their food nor take pleasure from their anarchic waste of it. But this association of women and food runs incredibly deep. Women are supposed to take pleasure from eating and preparing food, which makes their bodies equally prone to consumption. Natalia LL, the pioneering Polish feminist conceptual artist, made a still shocking series of so-called *Consumption Art* in the 1970s. The films and film stills show LL, then an attractive bimbo-blonde, 'consuming' various phallic foods: she's licking and slowly unfolding a banana (then also a symbol of luxury) and sucking it intensely; she drinks cream and lets it dribble all over her mouth and face. She smiles seductively as she does it, licking her lips with visible lust and voraciousness. She nailed perfectly (and prophetically) the conflation of capitalism and pornography and

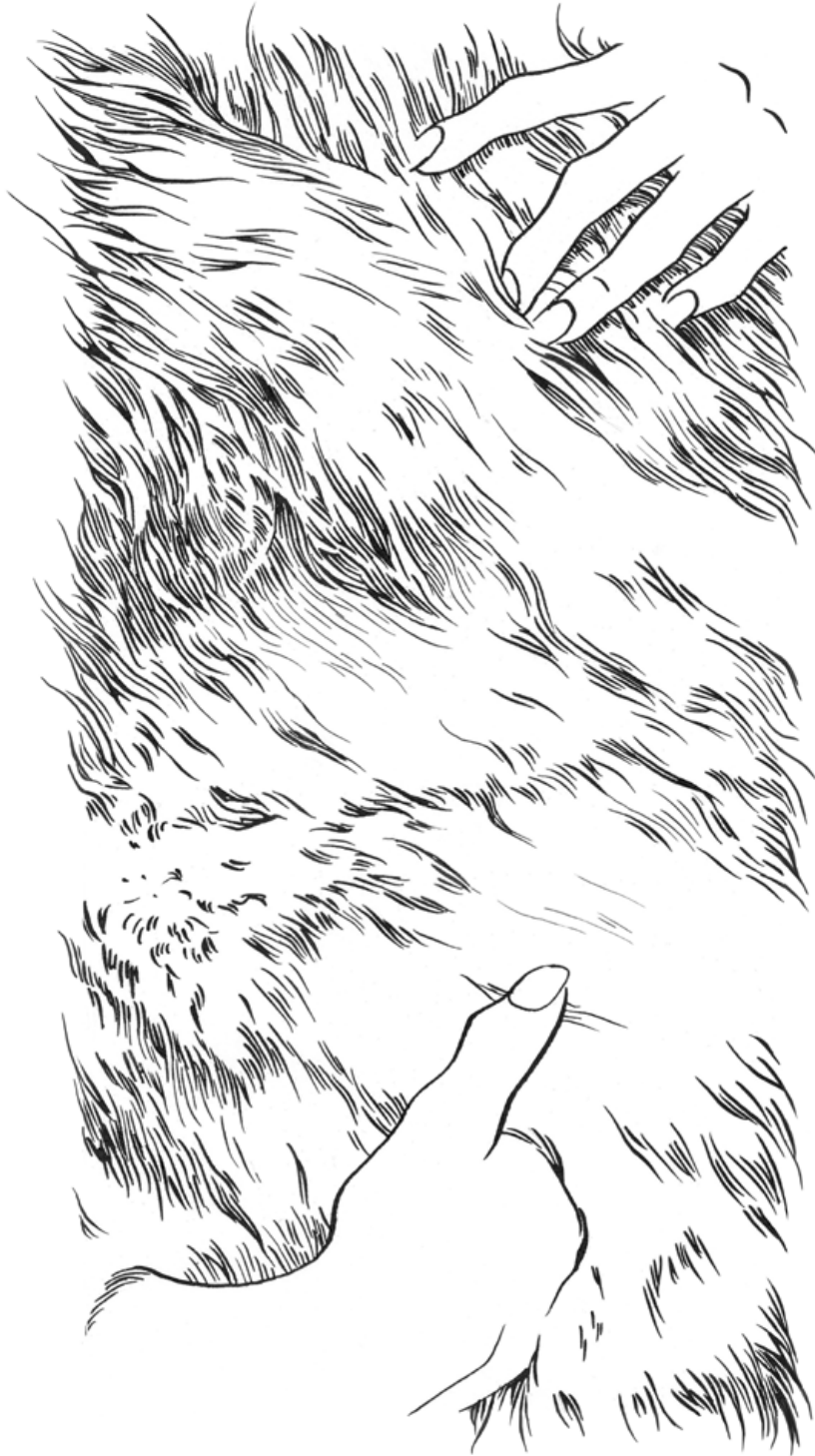
the role the exploited woman's flesh plays in it. Not only was consumption as such a highly ironic notion in PRL – LL, like many women artists from the socialist republics, felt the burden of being thrown into a role of a 'harmless chick', whose only role is to look good and conform well within the image of healthy socialism.

The Croatian artist Sanja Iveković, coming from the much more liberal Yugoslavia, similarly thematized woman's role as a 'sex kitten', in the women's magazines promoting consumerism and 'self-care', of endless making up, beautifying, sexing-up through buying clothes and cosmetic products. She exploited this in the hilarious series *Double Life* (1975), where she put together magazine advertisements with photos of sexy half-naked models in erotic poses, with her own self-portraits miming their seductive gestures. Unlike Cindy Sherman, 'deconstructing' the rules of the capitalist spectacle by pretending to be various people, Iveković stresses the sheer idiocy of porn or consumption in a country that remains much poorer than the West, with its ridiculous pretensions to Western 'glamour'. But there are much darker undertones to it yet. In the compulsory consumption of the Yugoslavian state she saw the obliteration of women's reality: in *Black File* (1976) she juxtaposed the photos of sexy pin-ups from men's magazines with paper cut-outs about missing women, arranged like a police file, 'Where is Liljina?' or 'Brankica gone missing'. Women under pressure come back in *Structure*, where Iveković again plays with the ironic caption-image pairing, putting old photographs of women, some looking like from they were taken from nineteenth-century physiognomy books or catalogues of mental diseases, and pairing them with ironic commentaries, like 'Expecting her master's return', 'Sought consolation in horse racing and nightlife', 'Had enough of being a good girl' or 'Executed in Bubanj in 1944'. As if death was the only apt punishment for nice girls gone bad.

In a way, our rebellious Marias are ironically 'punished' by their creator in the end: after all of their transgressions, food- and time-waste they are angrily dunked in the water – but by who? Is it the factory workers, this imagined socialist collective, the Party's construct, who take revenge after all of the previous damage they've done? Thrown hopelessly in water, the girls realize the error of their ways and childishly promise, 'We're sorry, we're so sorry! We'll be good from now on.' Yet when they try to 'mend' the food and plates they were so joyously destroying before, it only adds insult to injury. So the world crushes them – literally – with an enormous chandelier! Once again they lose as women, because this is a punishment which cannot be taken seriously. Society's standards and the two Marias' standards cannot meet. They're utopians fighting the world's hopeless logic, and this won't do in the harsh reality of the mundane potato salad. Yet if you are one of those who cried after the smashed food, to whom Chytilová ironically dedicated her film, you really deserve what you get. And the film ends with Second World War footage of bombs falling on European cities. The world must end, because it's so fucking boring!◇

# Little Red

by Eliza Granville



There was once a gaunt and symmetrically featured woman who had earned and squandered a fortune as a fashion clothes horse during the brief period when she was able to stand sideways without exhibiting any curves whatsoever. Because of her striking titian hair – it ran in the family – and her prima donna temper, she was simply known as *Red*.

When it became obvious that her young daughter had inherited her looks, Red convinced herself that the girl would succeed where she had failed, that is to say, she would damn well stay thin and make it to the very top of the modelling profession. From that day on, austere diets and stringent grooming practices dominated both their lives. And since she was always dressed in miniature versions of her mother’s outfits, the daughter became known as *Little Red*.

One day the mother put down the phone, sighed, and said: ‘That was your Gran. She’s a bit down today. Not that time of the month again, I suppose. She needs some company, but I’ve got a late shift at the supermarket. Be a sweetie: hop on the bus and see if you can cheer her up.’

It was three days into the Easter holidays. Little Red was already bored enough to agree. Anything would be better than sitting at home watching the flowers grow. Not that she didn’t like her Gran. She did. It was just that she’d rather have been out with her mates. They’d all gone to Florida. Being a single parent meant that Red could only afford one foreign holiday a year.

‘Take her my new Tina Turner *Love Songs* album. Make sure she plays it. That’ll put paid to her fifty-is-the-end-of-the-line nonsense.’ Remembering Gran’s penchant for chocolate profiterole lunches, Red also slipped a tin of no-fat condensed soup and two apples into Little Red’s designer backpack. ‘No hitching, mind. No hanging about the bus station, either. Keep to the main road. Don’t go taking shortcuts through those back streets on your own. That place is a jungle. And don’t talk to strangers. All men –’

‘Are filthy predators,’ Little Red finished for her, stifling a yawn, ‘but rich businessmen are the most filthy predators of all.’

Living in the country made the big city both inviting and terrifying: an irresistible combination. Little Red walked slowly, staring at displays in department store windows and chewing sugar-free gum. She soon discovered that the most interesting shops lay along the side streets, with even smaller boutiques in the

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*‘Tom’s eyes flicked sideways, then back to the road. “In bed, is she?”’*

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tiny courtyards and passageways hidden behind those. She wasn’t really breaking her promise. These were nothing like the nightmare back alleys her mother had described. Besides, she had a foolproof system: left, right and right again – hey presto, back where she started.

Unfortunately, it wasn’t long before her sense of direction failed her. The terrace that should have curved back towards the main thoroughfare ended in a cul-de-sac. Little Red was lost.

It was then that she realized she was being followed. A cough. A snigger. A feeble attempt at a wolf whistle. Little Red whirled round, suddenly nervous. Half a dozen youths, aflame with lust and aggravated acne, lounged across the road, blocking her escape. Twelve synchronized eyes explored her skin-tight leather jeans and her cleavage, which owed everything to Wonderbra and not a lot to puberty. A wall of scruffy jeans and beaten-up trainers closed round her. Grubby hands yanked off her backpack and rifled through the contents.

And that was when her knight in shining armour appeared – only he was wearing a grey suit and driving a Rover. The knight leapt out, leaving the engine growling softly. ‘Hello, what’s going on here?’

The boys melted into the shadows. Little Red felt like crying. ‘Thanks,’ she mumbled, picking up the CD and the soup. The apples had been kicked into the gutter and were past eating. The knight smiled.

‘You’re all shaken up, my dear. Can I offer you a lift anywhere?’

Little Red looked at him carefully. He was grey-haired and ordinary, a bit like her headmaster, but not so fat . . . and really old, nearly as old as her grandmother. He was clean, too, not at all like a filthy predator. *And* he had just rescued her. She nodded and gave him Gran’s address.

‘What’s your name?’ When she told him, he laughed.

‘Mine’s Tom. Tom . . . er . . .’ His eyes scanned the nearby gardens. ‘Lupin.’

Tom held out his hand. Little Red shook it, wondering how it felt to have thick hair all over your fingers. Perhaps he was hairy all over. It was cold, but Little Red noticed that Tom was sweating a lot. And he kept running his finger round the inside of his collar, as if it was too tight.

‘Anyone going to be at home for you?’ he enquired.

‘Only my Gran.’ There was a long minute when neither of them spoke. Then Little Red added: ‘She’s not feeling very well.’

Tom’s eyes flicked sideways, then back to the road. ‘In bed, is she?’

‘I expect so.’ If she was really down, Gran slipped under the covers with a bottle of British sherry and a large box of Cadbury’s Roses to watch forty-eight hours of German

erotica. Laughter was the best medicine, she said.

The traffic lights changed to red just before the turn-off to Gran’s house. Tom huffed and puffed and revved impatiently. He parked the Rover a hundred yards down the road, even though Little Red pointed out a perfectly good space right outside the gate. When they reached Gran’s porch, Little Red searched for the key hidden under the doormat. Tom begged for a glass of water, repeatedly moistening his dry lips with what seemed to Little Red an extraordinarily long tongue. Standing so close, leaning right over her, he suddenly seemed larger and greyer and hairier than anyone she’d ever met. The minute she opened the front door, he slipped inside.

‘Who’s there?’ Gran was a bit of a drama queen. Today’s voice was weak and muffled.

‘It’s only me.’

‘Little Red!’ Gran emerged from her bedroom wearing a leopard skin tracksuit, which did nothing to disguise her exceedingly ample curves. She stopped dead. Her eyes lit up. The quaver was transformed into a throaty purr. ‘And who’s this handsome creature?’

‘Tom Lupin.’ He stuck out his hand, but instead of taking it, Gran grabbed his wrist and spread out his fingers.

‘Goodness me, what big hands you’ve got!’

Tom laughed nervously. He tore his eyes off Little Red and glanced towards the door, which was still ajar. Gran nipped behind him and closed it.

‘Can I get you a drink?’ By now she had both hands clamped around his upper arm. ‘Oh, I say, Tom, what big biceps you have. All the better to –’

Raising her eyes to high heaven, Little Red squeezed past them and went into the kitchen. She mixed herself a strawberry milkshake and topped it with vanilla ice cream. After finishing off two blueberry muffins and an Apple Danish, she cut the first of several large slices of chocolate fudge cake, added clotted cream and ate until she felt her stomach would burst wide open.

In the sitting room, Gran had Tom pinned down on the sofa cushions. His squawked protests were drowned by her shrieks. ‘Gracious, Tom, what huge pecs you’ve got. You must spend all your time working out.’

Little Red ignored them. The television in here was small, but it would do for now. After flicking through the channels she settled for cartoons. Mum would go mad if she found out about the eating binge. She also wouldn’t be too keen on Gran getting her claws into yet another fellow. According to Red, the old lady was a voracious man-eater. But Mum was unlikely to find out about either. Little Red and her grandmother had long ago agreed that whatever went on in this cottage was nobody else’s business but their own. ♦



# For Love or Water

by Anjum Hasan



It was the summer when barefooted women darted between cars at traffic lights, selling tiny plastic flowerpots for the dashboard, each with a pink flower and two bright green plastic leaves that waved their arms with battery-powered regularity. It was the summer when blowups of three blank-faced teenagers advertised a new brand of munchies called ‘Timepass’ on billboards all over Bangalore. One of my neighbours had started to get the mobile car-wash service over every Sunday. A yellow sign would go up in the middle of the lane saying ‘Car Spa in Progress’ and then they’d go at the little vehicle with something that looked like a vacuum cleaner and sounded like a dentist’s drill. (This was also the summer when three dentists opened shop in the neighbourhood.) The boys would hose down the car for at least an hour, then go away leaving behind the smell of rain on a dusty street.

Actually, the dentists appeared not in my neighbourhood but the next. I lived in Bhoopasandra, which had bonesetters working out of grimy sheds and little places for pranik healing and astrological predictions, while neighbouring Sanjay



Nagar had municipal parks, Food World, branches of all banks, two petrol pumps and apartments with balconies – leafy with real plants – that were often empty, even on summer evenings. I'd walk past them thinking that if I had a balcony, I'd sit there drinking tea till the light faded.

Bhoopasandra was all right except that every second week the water ran out. My landlord, Mr Bhatkal, would come upstairs and say, 'Madam, there's enough for today. Tomorrow no water.' How did he know exactly how much the four of us – me, Mini, his manservant Hari, and him – would use? However much we tried to economize and stretch the little that was left in our rooftop tank, he'd always be right: the water would run out the following morning and he'd have to call for a water tanker, the one with 'Annapooneshwari Water Supply' painted on its side, below that a phone number, and water inevitably dripping all over the place. The tanker hands would make a

Mini seemed happy that summer, perpetually cooking egg maggi or singing the same ghazal all Sunday as she casually flicked at the few souvenirs in the house with her once rainbow-coloured feather duster. Almost five years had gone by since we came to Bangalore; the final exams loomed. I'd sit at my table, looking at my frayed notebooks, thinking that all these years have come down to this: the things on this table and the sound of Mini's alarm waking me up at four o'clock every morning with a sense of being someplace I thought I had escaped and then, when I was fully awake, putting me back to sleep again.

I didn't know whether to go back home to Darjeeling for good after the exams and my internship, or do an MD. I didn't even know whether I liked pharmacology. My reasons for choosing it could be traced back to conversations in our living room at home with my parents and one of their famous doctor

a wet comb and an old lipstick. Today I imagined her turning into a mermaid, standing with her mouth open under the shower and growing bigger and bigger the more she drank.

Mini emerged with her hair wrapped in a big towel, looking innocent.

'How could it just go?' she said.

We went downstairs to seek Mr Bhatkal's help. Mr Bhatkal was a courteous bachelor who always wore his trousers ironed. He seemed to spend most of his time reading the papers and he saved cuttings of anything to do with Bhatkal, where he was from. There was always a neat pile growing on the table next to his big frayed sofa. On his evening walks he wore a baseball cap with the legend 'Vivekananda Travels, Bhatkal'. He was unlike the others in the lane, who, uninterested in reading, either went to the temple or broomed. At the crack of dawn, late in the night, in the middle of a sleepy afternoon, they were always at it with their

*'The streets full of boys huddled around their bikes,  
talking in Farsi, giving off the smell of aftershave and cigarette smoke.'*



ruckus in the lane when they came, self-important because they knew how much they mattered.

Mini and I shared those two rented rooms plus a tiny kitchen. It was a good half-hour walk to the college but I didn't mind. I didn't mind the heavy pharmacology textbooks in my backpack, or the sun burning my neck, or the stench of the sewer near the Indian space-research organization. It always smelt this way in the heat; when the rains came they washed away the stink from the clogged water, like they washed away a lot else.

I could have lived nearer the college, but Mini and I had planned from the beginning to stick together – we were going to cross half the country and enrol in the same medical college, as nervous eighteen-year-old first-year students. We wanted to stay away from cramped hostel rooms and we couldn't stand the thought of sharing bathrooms with armies of hyperactive, would-be doctors.

friends – famous, apart from her medical proficiency, for her certainty. 'Hormonal drugs,' she'd said, her mouth full of a marie biscuit. She was certain a career in drug research had great prospects. I was a child then – seventeen years old and eager to do the right thing.

Now, six years on, I wondered if I should have studied something else but I didn't know what. It could have been poultry farming, it could have been painting. I had never felt as fluid as I did that summer.

I was cooking dinner one evening when the water ran out. I tried the little sink in the living room, my hands white with potato starch. That was dry too. I banged on the bathroom door.

'Mini, what happened?'

Mini took two-hour baths every night. I imagined her dancing before the mirror, her arms wrapped around herself, her lips miming her favourite song, or trying on different faces with not much more than

stick brooms, intolerant of even a scrap of dry leaf on their four-by-four compounds, no matter how much garbage they dumped outside their gates. Even the car-wash snobs with the biggest house in the lane – who had made a concession to art by arranging three blue-beaked plaster-of-Paris swans on their terrace – broomed.

Mr Bhatkal locked his hands behind his back and shook his head. 'Water was supposed to last at least until morning.' I looked at Mini. She had trumped Mr Bhatkal and really drunk up the water. We went back upstairs and I glanced into the bathroom. The red bucket was empty. We always kept it full for our bad days, and house rules ordained that every week the bucket should be emptied and filled afresh.

'Mini, are you in love?'

What did she do in there every evening? I didn't remember her spending so long locked up when we'd first moved in. 'You're crazy,' she said. 'I have to go



back home to hook a decent boy, someone who can cook much more than maggi. I want to be loved like mad, find someone who feels like dying whenever I step out of the door and is so happy when I come back from the clinic that he's happy to just watch me eat.'

'What clinic? Mini, I can't even wash my hands now.'

'Money's not important. That's guaranteed but love isn't. Love never is.'

'Not love and not water,' I said, opening my last bottle of drinking water and abandoning my cooking.

Two weeks later Mini told me, as she daintily dusted her books with her filthy duster, that she was moving out. I was right: she had found someone, a Nepali boy who ran a momo-and-noodle restaurant in one of the new glass-faced arcades on the main road. We'd gone across for dinner a few times; the place was small but swanky in a modest, Bhoopasandra kind of way.

I was alone now but the water would run out less often. And Mini was just a ten-minute walk away. But the first Sunday without her felt empty; I lost myself in my books all morning and then walked up and down in the house, looking out through the windows of both rooms, though the view was unchanged. My room faced an abandoned building called 'Jaleh Nursing College'; below that multiple slogans in black paint that all said the same thing: 'status quo order 12.01.2009'. I could hear a neighbour quarrelling with his wife, shouting at her in Kannada. Every once in a while his anger spilled out of the language and he would say in an English that rose to a crescendo, 'You are forcing me. You are forcing me to hit you. Bloody idiot! Just shut up!'

I didn't feel like eating by myself but when hunger finally drove me out, it was early afternoon. Weekend afternoons were fried-rice time in Bhoopasandra. In the early evening, the skinny boy stripped

coops out on the pavement. Exhaust fumes and stray dogs. The streets full of boys huddled around their bikes, talking in Farsi, giving off the smell of after-shave and cigarette smoke. Most Iranian students lived in Bhoopasandra, as did the Nigerians, though I once heard a tall guy explain tiredly to a shop owner as he took his change, 'Not Nigerian, man, not Nigerian. I'm Senegalese. We speak French, man.' The shop guy grinned and nodded ambiguously. I never managed to find out where the Malaysian girls in their pastel-coloured headscarves lived.

I bought some khubs, still warm in the packet, from Gopal Spices and Condiments. Gopal seemed to have figured out what the Middle Eastern boys were homesick for and stocked, apart from the khubs, dates from Saudi Arabia and guava-flavoured tobacco to smoke shishas with.

I walked back home slowly, reluctant to return to pharmacology. There was a man standing outside the gate when I got

*'How could he be interested in anything other than surviving pain?'*

—

Mini took me to meet Pavan. He sat at a respectful distance and got his waiter to ply us with food, blushing and giggling every time Mini looked in his direction, whereas she sat straight-backed and serious, putting whole momos into her mouth. Love or no love, she was always serious when food was at hand. Later that week, she packed all her stuff into her strolley, heaved it into a rickshaw and moved into Pavan's rooms above the restaurant. To my parting questions about the exams, she waved her yellow alarm clock at me.

Mr Bhatkal didn't budge from his sofa and his newspaper cutting when I told him about her departure; he was tolerant of the world's instabilities as long as the rent was paid on time. When the tanker came, he was going to climb the stairs as always and request me to cover half the bill. He'd be apologetic, seeming to feel personally responsible for Bhoopasandra's water scarcity.

down to his vest would light the coals under the huge tawa outside al-Kabab, up the road, and the meat-frying and paratha-making would begin.

The college boys were there already in Rooftop, drinking beers and stuffing their mouths. I waited for the ever-somnolent waiters to bring me a packet of rice I could take back home with me. I pretended to watch the TV mounted on the wall while I eavesdropped on conversations that sounded like I'd heard them before. 'He wanted to marry her but then he checked her Facebook page and he said, "Fuck, how many men is this woman fucking?"'

The next evening when I went to give Mr Bhatkal the rent cheque, his unsmiling manservant opened the door and said, 'No sir, no sir. Bhatkal.'

So I went for a walk instead; Bhoopasandra was empty – what did it have except dirty little bike-repair places and chicken shops with their stinking

there, trying to unlatch it.

'Mr Bhatkal is not at home,' I told him.

'Madam, it's you I wanted to meet,' he said. He told me he wasn't trying to sell me encyclopaedias or life insurance. He just wanted to talk to me for five minutes. I had seen him at Mr Bhatkal's door a couple of times before; and if he was a friend of Bhatkal's, well then ... I let him come upstairs. He climbed the stairs painfully, one at a time.

'Have you hurt your foot?'

He laughed. 'I am hurt all over.' He told me he'd been in a car crash three years ago, which had more or less finished him. Since then he'd been operated on nine times. He was all metal rods, screws and wires inside. He smiled bravely as he told me this, like a child who is not afraid of injections.

'Help me sit down, my dear,' he said, limping towards my desk. I usually only got to hear my half-literate teachers or else Uncle Bhatkal and his helper, Hari,

who insisted on speaking his crazy English with me. This guy wore a blazer despite the heat and I liked the way he spoke. He was too fancy for Bhoopasandra. It was his long blue car parked outside, I realized.

He took my hand, put one arm around my waist as if he were going to dance with me, and sat down in stages on my swivel chair.

'I'm looking for someone with good English to help me put together a fundraising brochure for my school. Blind children. Very dear to my heart.'

He started pulling out cardboard files from his briefcase. There were photographs of the children dressed as angels and singing in a chorus, their eyeballs as milky as their dresses.

'I lost my job after the accident so now I do this. I asked my good friend Bhatkal for some writing help, and he told me about the smart medical students living upstairs.'

I tried to take some interest, then ges-

anything other than surviving pain?

'I don't know your name,' I said.

'Dominic. Edwin Dominic. So ...' He looked around as if he'd just noticed where he was, the poverty of my flat. 'Why don't you come and visit me next door in Sanjay Nagar? I have a nice place. You can come over with your books, if you want, spend an afternoon. I have a maid, she'll cook lunch for us.'

I looked him up and down again. Was he really that nice? Was this the way out of crummy old Bhoopasandra?

'Do you get water regularly?'

'Ha ha,' he said. 'Clever girl.'

He told me how things worked in Sanjay Nagar. 'If you're rich enough to build your own house, you drill a borewell – that's the first thing you do, go deep down to where the water is and get it for yourself. You have to go very deep nowadays. My neighbour had to drill a thousand metres.'

'Amazing,' I said. 'That's like half the

bottom, making it seem all the while that he was only labouring to get back on his feet. I pushed him away and he stumbled but didn't fall.

I was breathless with embarrassment. Everything was a lie, suddenly. Those scholarly spectacles of his and the big car outside.

'Leave my house,' I said. I was standing by the door with my back to the wall, trying to hide the shiver in my voice.

Edwin Dominic lowered himself on to the chair again, groaning.

'I can't move. Something's gone in my knee. I'm telling you I can't move. You shouldn't have pushed me.'

I stood there looking at him, then ran downstairs and pressed with my finger on the doorbell for half a minute before I noticed the lock on the door. Grim Hari was out shopping with his grim little coir bag. I thought of Mini but my phone was upstairs on the table next to where this horrid man was sitting. I went up slowly and stood in the doorway, watching him.

### *'Every night the longing cancelled out the fulfilment.'*



tured to the books on my desk and told him about the exams. I didn't have the time, unfortunately. He began to cross-question me about my career options. What was I doing with an obscurity like pharmacology? Why hadn't I studied surgery and set myself up for life?

'Heart surgeries,' he said. 'That's where the money is. Look at the statistics – more than 50 per cent of the world's heart patients are in India.'

He put his papers away and I was glad to talk about me instead: I didn't want to get rich picking people's fat-hardened arteries apart; I just wanted to feel a sense of certainty – the way Mini was sure about Pavan, and Mr Bhatkal was sure about Bhatkal, and this man, despite his shattered body, was dedicated to his school. Or seemed to be, though he wasn't talking about it any more. I looked at his suit and then down at the boniness of an ankle showing through the fabric of his socks. How could he be interested in

way to Australia.'

He gave me a smile of great forbearance, the smile of a teacher who is used to being interrupted.

'Now, the people who build apartment complexes bribe the Water Supply and Sewerage Board to give the building municipal water every second day, so they're set. That just leaves the poor chaps with the independent houses. They're on their own – they can't afford to bribe the Water Board and it's too late for a borewell, they've built up every inch of space they had. They'd have to tear down a room to bring in the drilling crew. Sometimes they don't get water for a week, so it's the tankers for them.'

'To which category do you belong?'

'That's what I'm saying, dear. I'm inviting you to come and find out.'

He asked for a glass of water, drained it, then stretched out his hand so I could help him get up. As he did he slowly slid his hand down my back and caressed my

He was staring into space, massaging one knee and sweating in his blazer. The steel pins and metal plates inside him were probably the only solid thing about Mr Dominic. Maybe I had really dislodged something and the decent thing to do would be to call an ambulance.

'You girls who come from the north-east,' he said in disgust when he saw me.

'What?' I asked loudly.

My phone was right next to his elbow, but I couldn't make myself go near him. I turned and rushed down again, then walked to the head of the lane and just stood there, completely lost. I crossed Bhoopasandra main road, walked into a random side lane and saw a curly-haired boy locking his bike.

He had eyes the colour of dark chocolate, the colour of a velvet dress I had loved as a child, a colour that immediately made me think, There's got to be more to those eyes than just seeing.

'Water,' I said.



‘Yes,’ he answered in a foreign accent. ‘I don’t have any. Can I borrow a bucket of water from you?’

The same month, the same streets, but all at once everything smelt of mangoes. Even the little insects that flew in through my window every night seemed beautiful. I had always thought that love was a form of boredom, that the people for whom the pop songs were written just had nothing else to do. Timepass. Not that I always scorned people like Mini who loved love. There is lots of time and it must be passed. But that’s not what it was at all. I had never had a boyfriend before and I was judging things from experience for the first time. It was a kind of rain – something total and hard to miss, something that leaves nothing out. If I opened my books remembering the first time Baran kissed me, I could even love pharmacology, although I did wish I was doing paediatrics instead because that was

getting more and more ramshackle. We’d walk on the little track below the railway embankment where rows of huts were hidden, women painting fresh rangoli patterns out in front and children tricycling in circles, while above the trains thundered past, unaware.

I would try to imagine what Bhoopasandra was like before it became Bhoopasandra. I thought of fields and bullock carts loaded with fresh farm produce, negotiating a dirt track till they came to the environs of the palace where the roads widened and the gentry appeared. Today the palace was insignificant and the palace grounds were a venue for wedding parties and rock concerts.

That’s what I enjoyed most: walking with Baran. He didn’t have a bike and he didn’t care, though some weekends he borrowed his friend Ali’s, and we’d go into town to watch an English film and eat burgers. But most of that summer, we walked in the neighbourhood; he

aged Christ and calmly sliced egg puffs and aloo buns into quarters for the workmen and students who hung outside his bakery, taking a snack break.

‘My parents come from the city of Qom,’ Baran was saying. ‘It’s not very far from Tehran. My grandfather dammed the River Rud-e Qom. There are many dams on that river. He supervised the building of one of them.’

I looked up and the waiters were leaning down from Rooftop with their typically bored expressions. It was five o’clock and no one ever went to Rooftop at five o’clock on a working day. At seven the drinkers would arrive.

‘All these engineers in my family,’ said Baran, ‘my grandfather an engineer, my father an engineer. My mother said, “Enough. My son will be a doctor, come what may.”’

‘My parents too,’ I said. ‘I see it now. I always thought that this is what I wanted. But I confused what I wanted with what

*‘Water was supposed to last at least until morning.’*



his specialization. I could have seen more of him then. I saw Baran every day but the minute I turned to go home, it was as if I hadn’t seen him at all – every night the longing cancelled out the fulfilment. Every week I spent with him became a promise of the weeks ahead. Baran and I would walk when it cooled, going past the fancy apartments on Kalpana Chawla road to the back lanes of Sanjay Nagar and then even further afield – up and down past the magical, hushed, private bungalows of Raj Mahal Vilas 2nd Stage, symmetrically arranged on roads from where even fallen gulmohar petals had been swept clean, and the shirts of the security guards gleaming because wealth rubs off on everything. Each house looked like something the owner had seen in a dream and woken the next morning determined to translate into hard reality. Sometimes, as if out of loyalty, we stayed in grubby little Bhoopasandra, going north towards the ring road, the houses

described his childhood in Tehran, while I tried to paint a compelling picture of Darjeeling for him so that he might say, ‘Can I go back with you?’ I knew that he had been immersed since he was little in the dream of medicine; I knew he had nothing else – no interests, no hopes, no other idea of the future. I imagined him running a clinic on the first floor of my parents’ home – that still unbuilt first floor that they’d been talking about for years. Baran and I would go for similar walks then, except that the fruit in my bazaars would be different, and we’d smell the junipers that I loved and the pine trees.

One evening we were walking down the main road as usual, and I was half-listening to Baran and half-observing my world through the glaze of my love for him: the decrepit old mattress makers, and the shop with repaired shoes hung in rows above the heads of the two cobblers, and the bearded uncle who looked like an

they wanted of me. It’s only when I came here – and I’d wander around on these streets in the evenings looking for something to eat because I was clueless about cooking in the beginning – that I realized. What am I doing here? I’d think. And the answer was, They want you to be a doctor, that’s why.’

‘I don’t know about you but I respect what my parents want. I’m proud that they have a dream for me. I’m proud,’ said Baran, and I loved him more. It seemed fantastic to me that he could be here, so far removed from everything that was familiar to him, and still not lose sight of his goal. I thought of the books that I was going to have to sit with most of the night and, inspired by Baran, I felt a steely determination to conquer them.

We went past the salon with green-tinted windows, then the abandoned Jaleh Nursing Home, then a coconut palm, and seconds later, without the hint of a breeze, a huge coconut came crashing

down and burst on the street. Baran and I stopped and looked back at what could have brained either one or both of us, and we smiled at each other. I knew that our fates were linked and I let go of his arm and turned into my lane, while he turned into his on the other side of Bhoopasandra main road.

That was the summer when Mr Derin Derin was arrested with 609 grams of cocaine and three mobile phones outside Gopal Spices and Condiments; I don't think Mr Bhatkal went so far as to keep the cutting, but he was proud anyway as he showed me the news because, as he said, it wasn't every day that Bhoopasandra got into papers.

I didn't care about Derin Derin, whoever he was; the exams were over and Baran and I were going for a holiday in the hills. We would sleep on an overnight coach or not sleep at all but talk till dawn.

I was packing too many clothes into a backpack and chatting excitedly with Baran, who was at the sink in my front room, repeatedly splashing water on his face.

'Baran, watch the water,' I called. 'It's all I have till this evening.'

'Why,' said Baran in his precise way, 'does a house with only two small rooms have so many sinks?'

'Baran,' I said with sudden impatience. 'You never seem to hear what I say.'

He turned his wet face to look at me through the bedroom door, the tap behind him still running. I straightened up from my packing and looked at him too, waiting, but he didn't say anything at all. He just stared at me coldly as he wiped his face with the fresh towel I'd put out for him. Then he turned and went out of the house without a word, ignoring the running tap.

'Nobody speaks to me in such a voice,' he said when I, having waited for an hour for him to return and explain, went over to his house myself and found him absorbed in his laptop.

I went into his kitchen and made him a cup of tea by way of a silent apology. I sat and waited for him to say more. His housemate, Ali, returned with loaded bags from some shopping-mall expedition and they chatted endlessly in Farsi without a glance in my direction.

'Baran,' I said finally. 'The coach is leaving in two hours. Have you packed?'

'I think we have to cancel, unfortu-

nately,' said Baran. 'I remembered that today is a sad Iranian festival and on a day like this we don't make fun. We pray and are serious.'

I didn't realize then that the best summer of my life had ended. I kept trying to patch it together, kept trying, every second day, to get Baran out for a walk so we could drink his favourite pomegranate juice at the corner stall and then walk under the giant rain trees.

But whatever was left for him to say didn't need the trees. He said it in his room one day, his beautiful face red with the effort of it, while I sat there crying openly, frozen in that moment, unable to breathe at the thought of Bhoopasandra and my studies and the parched desert of the rest of my life without Baran, whose name meant 'rain'.

Mr Bhatkal was proved wrong because Bhoopasandra featured in the papers two further times in quick succession before the end of that summer. The first was just after Baran and I broke up. Ali Bukhari, the shy Iranian boy whom I knew as Baran's housemate, killed himself. In the newspaper item that Mr Bhatkal showed me, the suicide was described as having been caused by depression. Soon after, a tabloid reported that a group of students from Jaleh College of Engineering, Bhoopasandra, had written anonymously to the paper, stating that the college management was greedy and corrupt, that everything they had been promised during the time of admission – such as campus placements – was lies.

As for Mr Wired, I saw him one more time. He was driving his car and he raised his hand in greeting as if he were a man without a memory. I stood there getting wet, looking at the car as it drove away, thinking, Maybe it's the rain.

Despite the hurt that gnawed at me and followed me back home to Darjeeling, I would fall in love with Baran all over again every time I remembered how he had saved me from Mr Wired with a bucket of water, how he had so readily offered to carry it across for me that day when I needed his help.

When Mr Wired saw him that evening, he'd sat up and nodded politely, then got to his feet without any assistance.

'Such a problem, this water,' he said, avoiding me completely, talking only to Baran. 'And sometimes the tankers

won't come, however much you cajole and threaten them. You know the tanker scam, don't you?'

Baran, of course, had no idea who this man was or what he was talking about. He asked me where he should put the bucket.

'When the municipal supply is down,' said Mr Wired as he edged towards the door, briefcase under his arm, 'the Water Board tries to requisition the tankers to send out water, but they won't go. They're making too much money filling up their tankers with subsidized municipal water and selling it for many times the price.'

'I understand,' Baran had said suddenly. 'In Iran this would never happen. In my country they would make sure that there is enough for everyone.'

In Koramangala, where I now live, the apartments come fitted with swimming pools, the supermarkets have more than anyone needs, and the roads are wide and pleasant to walk on.

If someone like Mr Wired ever rang the bell, I'd sniff him out at once and slam the door in his face. When I need to fool myself, it's Baran I imagine at the door, come back to make amends. After that afternoon in his room, I never saw him again – not even by chance in Gopal Spices or hanging around chatting with the other Iranian boys. He must have done his internship in a different hospital, because I never spotted him in college either. He'd moved his orbit very far from mine.

On that last day in his room, resolute despite my crying, it was love that he'd talked about: how it had no place in the future scheme of things: the clinic in Tehran, the ageing parents, the veiled wife, the demands of children. In none of this was there any room for us, he said, and I thought about the way I used to be before I met him – sceptical about love, absolutely certain it meant nothing.

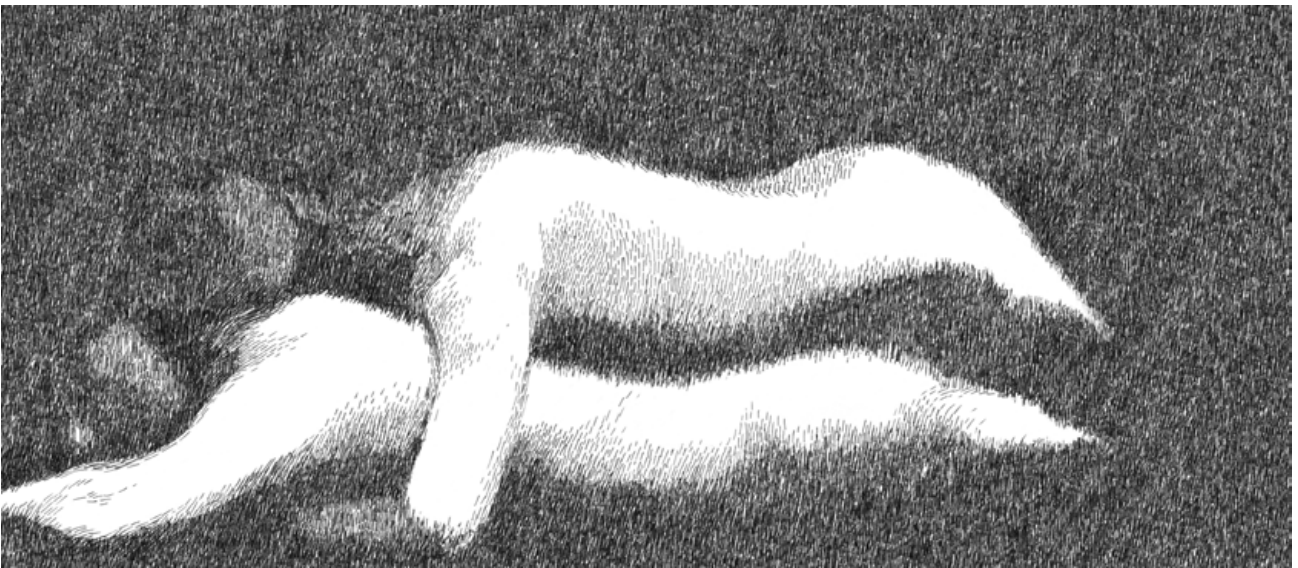
Nowadays, when I return from my eight hours under the bright white lights of the company lab, I mostly sit out on my balcony, twice as large as the balconies I once envied. I sit there in the evenings for timepass. Nothing from that summer is ever going to come back. The only thing that hasn't changed is the water.

There's still too little of the water. ◊



# Translating Anne Garréta's *Sphinx*

Emma Ramadan on the complications of a genderless love story



*Sphinx* is a story about *je* and A\*\*\*.

*Je* (I), the first-person narrator, is a theology student living in Paris, comically frustrated by the inanity of the other students and the professors at the university. *Je* becomes friends with a priest, who introduces *je* to the Apocryphe, a club where they witness the DJ die of a heroin

overdose and must dispose of the body. With no other options, the club's manager makes *je* the new DJ, which marks the beginning of *je*'s descent into the world of the clubs and cabarets of 1980s Paris. This is where *je* meets A\*\*\*, an African-American cabaret dancer from New York. We watch their relationship bloom and then suffer, and we see *je* grapple with

A\*\*\*'s death. *Sphinx* is the story of *je*'s struggle with the gnawing aimlessness of youth, the attempt to reconcile this new nocturnal world with a bourgeois background, and the despair lurking beneath desire.

*A macabre masked ball: people tripping over streamers that snaked down from the*



*ceiling, coiling around the supporting pillars. To distill music, to set bodies in rhythm, was to be the priest of a harrowing cult.*

*Sphinx* is a genderless love story, an Oulipian text that uses constraint as a way to raise socially significant questions, solidifying Garréta's place as a member of the experimental French literary group Oulipo, in 2000. To combat the strict gendering of the French language, Garréta had to avoid certain verb tenses and never applied adjectives directly to either of the two main characters. That this has never been repeated in French since demonstrates just how difficult a linguistic subversion it is to achieve. By omitting the supposedly ever-present phenomenon of gender, *Sphinx* both reveals and undermines sex-based oppression, as Garréta simultaneously demonstrates and subverts gender distinctions within modern society by emphasizing the absurdity

strict and sexist rules of grammatical gender. This allowed them to better express themselves as women, as trying to do so within a patriarchal language was thought to be a self-defeating process. This movement was spearheaded by Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, Monique Wittig, and in particular by H el ene Cixous, who called for women to write their sexual libido on to the page in her text 'Le Rire de la m eduse'. *Sphinx* pushes these ideas to a new level: rather than tweaking words to highlight gender bias within language, Garr eta leaves behind the system of gender altogether. *Sphinx* enacts the ideas of Roland Barthes in transcending and disavowing the binary of gender difference, and also queers Lacanian clich es about sexual identity as constructed through a language that serves to differentiate.

*And here I found what I had come looking for: before my eyes, a sweltering, vitrified clash of light and flesh in the*

*an intense solitude, I was watching A\*\*\* dance, letting myself be invaded by A\*\*\*'s movements, feeling the tension of this immaterial thread that linked us even from a distance. Then a sudden invasion of anguish: looking at this body and knowing it to be ephemeral.*

Translating *Sphinx* is understanding seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French literary references and a wide range of religious references, is being able to recognize legal and military undercurrents in the language. Translating *Sphinx* is searching for words in old dictionaries, crafting a high-registered voice in American English, and reading Alan Hollinghurst, Jeanette Winterson, Monique Wittig and Roland Barthes. Translating *Sphinx* is maintaining a gap between high language and low events, finding translations for untranslatable words like *jouissance* and *d esouvement*, deciding whether to translate *contemtion* as the common

*'Translating Sphinx is maintaining a gap between high language and low events, finding translations for untranslatable words.'*



of the idea of 'difference' between the sexes. *Sphinx* exposes reader assumptions about gender roles as readers guess, or unconsciously assume, the sexes of the two main characters. *Sphinx* shows that gender is merely an optional addition to, not a necessary determination of, our stories.

*Languid nights at the whim of syncopated rhythms, fleeting pulsations. The road to hell was lit with pale lanterns; the bottom of the abyss drew closer indefinitely; I moved through the smooth insides of a whirlwind and gazed at the deformed images of ecstatic bodies in the slow, hoarse death rattle of tortured flesh.*

*Sphinx* is a radical feminist text, which builds on many of the ideas that came out of the * criture feminine* movement in France in the 1980s. A group of female writers deconstructed and rebuilt the syntax of the phallogocentric French language in their work, breaking the

*swaying red darkness.*

Beyond the level of syntax, the nuances of *Sphinx* continue to multiply. *Sphinx* is a theology student giving sermons in nightclubs, a parody of the Catholic novel and of the classical French works of Racine and Flaubert. *Sphinx* is retrospection and retro-projection, soundscapes and visions, flesh and de-fleshing, Eden and *enfer*, dialectics of presence and absence, a journey through the excitement and drain of desire. *Sphinx* is figural and a-grammatical, is things lurking beneath the surface, is Proustian. *Sphinx* is a text that put nightclubs into the French discourse, that wanders through death, desire and drunkenness. *Sphinx* is different depending on how you interpret the gender of the characters at any given time. *Sphinx* is a text that changes in my translation.

*And from within a profound paralysis,*

English word 'contempt' or the more unusual 'contumely'. Translating *Sphinx* is eating steak across from Anne Garr eta as she explains how using the word *corset e* to describe the morals of *je*'s fellow students strategically refers back to the purple lace corsets hanging in the sex shop windows *je* noticed twenty pages earlier. Translating *Sphinx* is understanding the narrator's anxiety in a caf e in Pigalle, seeing how the reasons for that anxiety change dramatically depending on *je*'s gender, and realizing how the book hinges on the different ways readers will interpret specific events.

*Those arms, the intense sweetness, a series of scenes that still ignites a carnal flame in my memory.*

Translating *Sphinx* is learning how to maintain a specific tone and style in a language that is less suited to abstractions and sentence fragments than French. In

‘*Sphinx is translating an absence.*’

order to construct the identity of this bourgeois, highly educated theology student, Garréta heavily employed the *passé simple* – a very formal, literary tense that does not exist in English – and the subjunctive, which is not commonly used in American English. To make up for this, I chose to emphasize the elevated vocabulary used throughout the text in order to keep the tone the same in the English as in the French. For example, in a passage on page 45 detailing the disposal of the DJ’s body into a septic tank, the narrator’s use of the subjunctive and *passé simple* contrasts starkly with the coarseness of the scene, further underscoring *je*’s own dissimilarity with the surroundings of the club. In my translation, unable to utilize the *passé simple* as Garréta did to mark this disparity, I chose to accentuate the narrator’s uncommon and refined word choice wherever I could, for example by translating *immondices* as ‘putrescence’.

*A terror silted up my throat; the desire I had felt welling up in me at the sight of these distant movements on the stage of the Eden had been suspended. I could do nothing but adore. Those eyes, so black, fixed on me, were subjecting me to an unbearable torture.*

*Sphinx* is translating an absence, a lack that cannot be felt in the text, in order to maintain the presence of a message, calling to mind other Oulipian texts such as Georges Perec’s *La Disparition* (‘A Void’). Translating *Sphinx* often means putting the constraint before the words, abandoning what’s on the page to create an analogous situation that can take place in the English language. Translating *Sphinx* sometimes means envisioning a new English that can achieve all the things present in Garréta’s French. Translating *Sphinx* is maintaining a constraint that hinges on an aspect of language that varies between French and English. Because gender works so differently between the two languages, I have had to come up with a

number of strategies to avoid revealing the sex of *je* or A\*\*\*, including rewriting certain passages to avoid personal pronouns altogether, and applying adjectives directly to the subject rather than to something possessed by the subject. Although the function of gender differs between languages, an examination of the social construction of distinct gender roles is one that can be done in any culture. Translating *Sphinx* is making sure this examination does, in fact, take place among different languages and cultures.

*The temporal order of events, including even the simple spatial points of reference, was abolished without my realizing it and everything blurred in my memory. I have in my mouth, still, the taste of skin, of the sweat on that skin.*

Translating *Sphinx* means being able to picture any given scene four different ways at once, and making sure the reader can do the same. In a particularly difficult passage of fantasy, *je* describes the beginnings of desire for A\*\*\* in a paragraph riddled with possessive adjectives, which in English would normally be translated as his or her but which, in French, agree with the gender of the noun in question. *Sphinx* is ‘Le souvenir de son parfum, l’empreinte résiduelle, à peine sensible, de son épaule appuyée ce matin contre la mienne tandis que nous parlions me torturaient.’ Translating *Sphinx* is ‘The memory of A\*\*\*’s scent, the residual imprint, barely there, of a shoulder resting against my own this morning while we spoke, was torturing me.’ *Sphinx* is ‘Je sentais comme la fantôme de sa présence contre moi; sa main, un instant posée sur mon visage, sa cuisse que le peu de place dont nous disposions pour nous asseoir avait amenée contre la mienne.’ Translating *Sphinx* is ‘The ghost of A\*\*\*’s presence against mine; a hand poised for a moment on my face, our thighs pressed together in the cramped space in which we were sitting.’ *Sphinx* is ‘J’avais la

sensation dans ma chair du contact de ses membres alors qu’ils n’étaient plus là pour la provoquer.’ Translating *Sphinx* is ‘In my flesh I had the sensation of touching those limbs, though they were no longer there to provoke it.’

*At every moment I had the distressing feeling that this body was lingering just out of reach, even though I was holding it in my arms.*

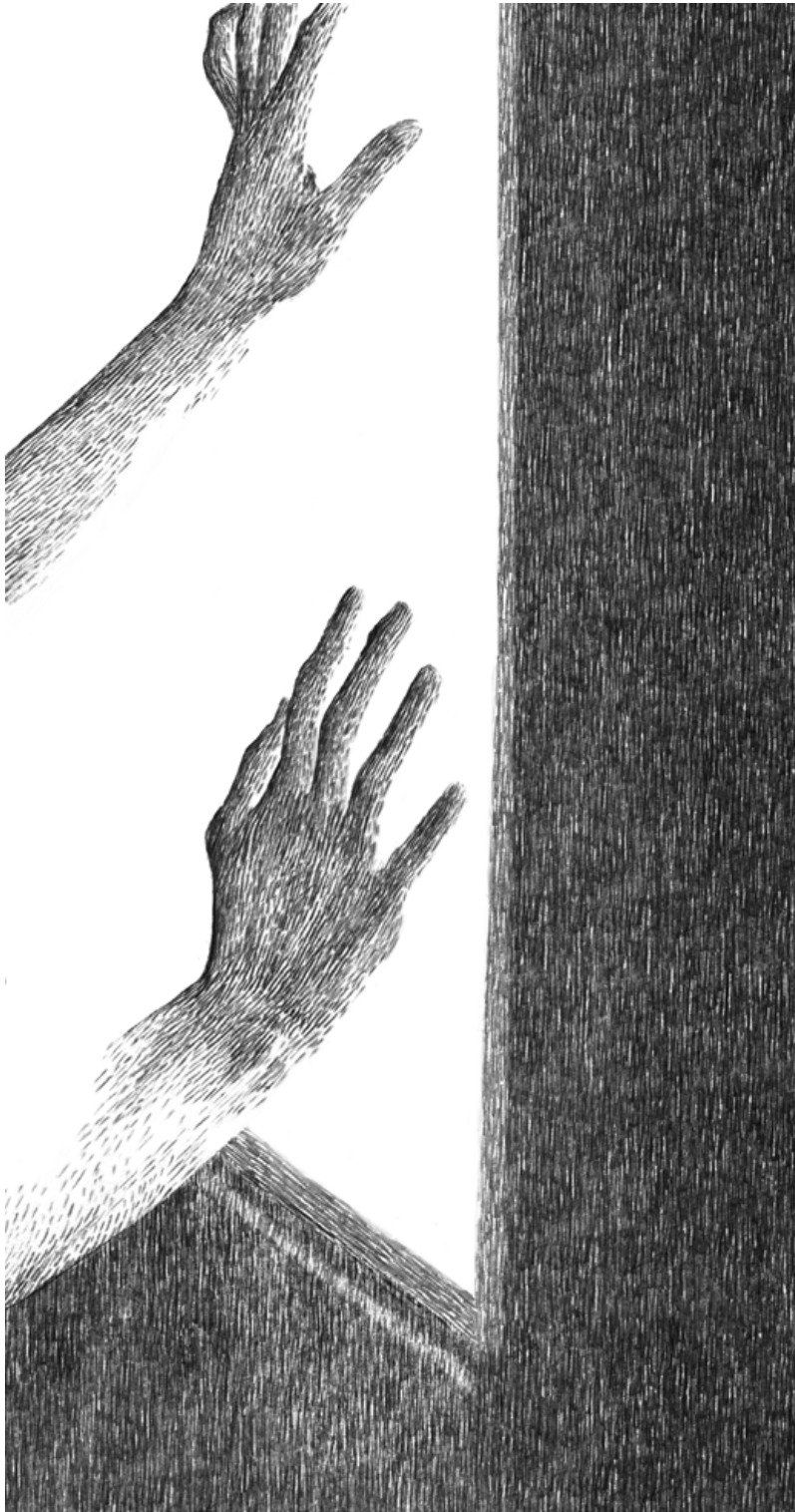
Translating *Sphinx* is also understanding that sometimes none of my strategies will work. That the careful construction of a deliberately ambiguous scene in French has to be dismantled and rewritten in English in order to maintain the same combination of eroticism and elusiveness that holds the text together. *Sphinx* is ‘Sexes mêlés, je ne sus plus rien distinguer.’ Translating *Sphinx* is ‘Genitalia/privities/private parts/reproductive organs mingled, I wasn’t able to distinguish anything any more.’ What about pudenda? Pudenda: a person’s external genitals, especially for a woman – that won’t work. What about thighs intertwined? Not explicit enough. Thighs, sticky, intertwined? What about loins? Not specific enough. What about crotches? Not elegant enough. Crotches conjoined? Crotches crossed? Translating *Sphinx* is imagining a world in which English speakers can explore the explicit within the ambiguous, the writing within the constraint. Translating *Sphinx* is sharing a new way of looking at gender, and communicating the possibility of moving beyond the discourse of Difference.

*A fall would be brought about by a purely internal and continually foreseen rending; an imminence suspended on a final thread that never broke but that, taut and twisted unbearably, never ceased trembling. The agonizing tension of always being about to crack without ever being able to allow myself the relief of chaos ... such was my annihilation in those beloved arms. ◇*



# Reel Men

by Masha Tupitsyn



I knew this man. He didn't know me, but he talked to me like he did. It takes a while to know someone, but not always.

Looking for a different woman who wasn't me, this man walked into my room at the tail end of one summer and accidentally found me reading a book on my bed. He said, 'Oh, it's you.'

It was August. It was raining. The ocean was sliding back and forth as usual, and Fred, this man, wearing a yellow raincoat, walked in with his head down, concerned, like he was the coastguard and I was a boat in peril.

Inside, Fred slid off his hood and lifted his bowed head to me like a monk, a humility obscured by the fact that he'd hadn't bothered to knock before entering. His face was freckled, covered in beads of water, like the windshield of a car.

Looking at him was like looking out the window or driving down a road.

I put my book down and we stood in my room talking, trying to make sense of his sudden appearance.





‘What are you doing here?’ Fred asked me.

‘I live here. What are you doing here?’ I asked Fred.

Fred was happy because when he saw me he knew exactly who I was.

Whereas I was confused. My memory needed jogging.

After ten minutes bent over my desk, trying to scribble some words down in a note for the woman (my roommate, Izzy) he’d originally intended to find in my house, Fred kept looking up at me in disbelief. His visit was now taking on an entirely different purpose, he said.

Fred wondered whether he should keep writing a note that no longer mattered, to a person he no longer wanted to find. He stopped and looked up again, then right into my eyes said, ‘You are above and beyond bullshit,’ even though he couldn’t have known that for sure.

I didn’t hear Fred come in, but I knew it was raining. I was reading on my single

In Provincetown, with its wood shingles, sandy interiors, and old screen doors, doors that didn’t close all the way from the salt-air bloat, people didn’t even lock their doors at night. They left their wooden gates open and filled the sandy paths to their houses with piles of old bicycles.

Things slipped in. Sand dunes spilled on to the road, and asphalt unfastened into loose grain the closer you got to the water. The tide erased all strings over and over, and men showed up in rooms uninvited without trying to kill you.

Fred had spent years watching me and, looking back on it, I’d seen him doing it. Not just in my room, but all over the place, both in Provincetown and New York. It took me a few minutes to recall his miscellaneous gazes, the where and when of them, the scenes they came with, the years they happened.

Standing in my room, Fred waited for my reaction because time was ticking.

of a few years, he later told me. That day was not the first day, but it was the first time I’d heard about it. I never thought I could be so oblivious, meeting Fred over and over again, and it barely registering, me not taking note. Like some dumb movie where the point is to be obtuse and negligent until it’s time not to be.

In the movies, you get multiple chances to discover how great someone is, you get chances and you don’t even know that that’s what they are, and this is fun to watch, but not fun to live.

I was lucky to have Fred say those words to me. I was feeling so low. It was my worst summer on record. It was like I wasn’t even there. I remember someone telling me they’d barely noticed me all summer. That I was a ghost. Sometimes I think I shouldn’t have been there at all, should have just gone home, not come to Provincetown after two months of roaming around Mexico with Sarah, after she was done with her ceramics classes

*‘Fred wondered whether he should keep writing a note that no longer mattered.’*



mattress when he walked in. I listened to the words I was reading drum on the page, louder than the rain on the roof. Back then I could spend an entire day reading.

When I looked up, Fred was just standing there in his wet raincoat, an insect that had accidentally flown into the room.

I wondered how he got in but also wanted him out in case he did something dangerous.

If we’d been in New York, I would have called the police or yelled for help. I would have defended myself. But in New York, Fred would never have been able to get in. He would have had to break down a metal door that cannot be broken down. Appearing suddenly in my room in New York would have meant something totally different. There would have been a sound, a jolt, some obvious thunder. Glass might break. Or maybe nothing would break. But violence. Violence surely would be there.

Time is. But I guess I was speechless.

Later that night in my bed, I searched and found Fred’s eyes glued to the back of my head as though they were stars up in the sky I could look up at. I followed Fred through the long, continuous maze of my fuzzy memory. In bed, I wandered through all the times I’d missed what Fred’s eyes had tried to tell me, and if hearing him then would have made any difference.

In Provincetown, things come up to the surface. Wash on to shore. Debris becomes memento. Sometimes you don’t even have to wait or try. The tide is a sure thing.

In bed, I asked myself: wouldn’t Fred need more time to come to a conclusion like that? What I was ‘above’ or ‘beyond’. Whether I had any bullshit in me. But what I didn’t know at the time, or any other time, was that he’d actually had the time, independent of my knowledge of it. He’d come to this decision over a period

in San Miguel de Allende, and I was out of money, we both were, my stomach still battered from the parasite we got over Christmas in Oaxaca. We woke up at the exact same time, in the middle of the night, to vomit our guts out in the concrete bathroom of her shared house. In Oaxaca, Sarah drank to make herself feel better, cooked big meals, and I read and disappeared for hours like a petulant lover. I took naps on park benches, ate ice cream, and hung out with stray dogs. At the town square, Sarah and I would take turns crying into each other’s arms and not speaking. We couldn’t even put words to things. We’d lost language in Mexico. But once, even with the language barrier, our tears got across, and two elderly Mexican women sitting beside us at a square in Oaxaca took our hands in theirs, stroked our hair and smiled, which made us feel better. One night, Sarah and I watched *The Fifth Element* in Spanish in a deserted, industrial part of town because

we'd already seen it in English two times.

We watched movies together for years. In college, in Provincetown, at Sarah's place in New York, at my place in New York; in theatres around the world. But after we fought up at her grandmother's house in Tuxedo, NY, a few weeks later, I had to get out of town, fleeing the crime scene, which was a comatose female friendship that would never wake up again. Sarah watched me from the top of the staircase, holding on to the banister, like a 1940s femme fatale, screaming and pleading for me not to leave, but not coming down to stop me either. Back then I was such a good Glenn Ford. Such a withholding man. It took me years to become a woman. When I left for Provincetown and Sarah started taking drugs and forgot all about me.

'I'll drive you to the train station,' Sarah offered at the last minute.

In the car, we talked to each other like it was the last time, and basically it was. I

each and every day. I could remember him and everyone else. I went back the way every detective goes back to a crime scene. I stuck around the way every ghost sticks around. I had nothing to do with everything around me. I had too much.

In the movies people say things. Words get across. Images depend on it, otherwise we'd be lost in them, the way we're lost in our real lives. In real life, sometimes people don't say anything. They miss their chance to say something or they say a lot of other things they shouldn't instead. Words in place of other words. They waste time. They lose time. Time is lost and people are lost. Movies know that at some point you have to attend to the thing you want to ignore. It's a basic metaphysical requirement that cinema is plugged into. To fix whatever mess you've made with whomever you've made the mess with, either through the person you made the mess with or through another person who helps you

In my room that day Fred said: 'I thought you were thirty-one.'

'Why thirty-one? I'm only twenty.'  
'It has nothing to do with your skin. Your skin is perfect. It's everything but your skin.'

There was no small talk after that day. Fred's random appearance and cryptic non-sequiturs instantly bonded us, even though we'd previously been disconnected, or I spent years ignoring him, which is a kind of connection. Pretending that what's there isn't there.

When Fred said this, there was a storm outside. Fred came in looking for another woman, my crazy roommate, Izzy, a painter and baker at Café Edwige, where I was a breakfast hostess. A friend of his, and a one-time sexual encounter, Izzy told me about Fred in the kitchen one night over tea, a few weeks before he showed up in my room. At the time, I didn't put two and two together. Fred didn't stand out, not even after a story.

*'Time is lost and people are lost.'*

—

didn't want to look at her, and the leafy summer trees obscured what I could see out the car window. I needed to get some distance, but it was summer, the season of close-ups, so there was no distance. I wanted to do the opposite with Sid. Go back to him by zooming in really tight. I knew Sid wouldn't be back in Provincetown, wouldn't do something as stupid as rub salt into the wound in a place that was all salt so soon after our breakup. That's what I did. I knew how to lick old wounds. I was a pro.

On the phone, months before, Sid said he wouldn't be back and he meant it. But I would, and I meant it.

I waited for Sid to show up all summer. I believed some residue of us would still be in town and I could rent a place and live in it for one more season. I could ride my bike around our old haunts, circling them a hundred times. I could swim in it. I could take pictures. I could look at the pictures I already had of us. I could revisit

clean up the mistakes you made with others.

When Fred told me that I was above and beyond bullshit, it jumpstarted my life again. He'd finally succeeded in getting my full attention, or there was finally nothing preventing me from giving it to him. No Sid blocking the way. Before that, I'd totally ignored Fred. He'd said other things over the years, but I hadn't heard them.

Fred: 'We've actually met many times. You just don't remember.'

Me: 'We have? I'm sorry.'

The deleted scenes. The out-takes.

After Fred left, I went back and rewound. I realized that I had managed to catch some of the things he'd said to me over the years. I played our encounters back and watched those old silent movies of us.

I was twenty when Fred walked into my house. But we'd also met when I was seventeen, eighteen and nineteen.

How many chances did I have with this man? I had so much patience, so much gall, then.

Driving up from Brooklyn for the weekend, Fred thought maybe he could try again with Izzy. He'd check to see if she was home. If she wasn't he'd leave her a note. Maybe they could have dinner or go to a movie. He wouldn't be pushy, because he wasn't pushy.

Fred was soft-spoken and sensitive, yet his entire life was dedicated to cultural detritus. A skateboarder, an insomniac, a former drug addict, a TV and magazine junky, he seemed to only read fashion magazines, which he carried around under his arm. Yet he didn't even know how to dress. I was obsessed with clothes but never read fashion magazines. Fred talked about models like they were his friends.

Back in the City, our conversations drifted into triviality and gossip in a way they hadn't in Provincetown. We

suddenly had to comment on the world around us and realized we had nothing in common. And yet I liked him. Over the years, I'd met Fred at various parties on the Cape and in New York.

Before the Twin Towers fell down, we danced to go-go music at Windows on the World with friends. On a few occasions, I found Fred on the dance floor and made sure our bodies didn't touch, even by accident. When the planes crashed into the two towers, I imagined sliding off the black marble dance floor and falling down one hundred and ten storeys.

Fred had freckles and looked like Bobby Kennedy. He was preppy, plain. He was easy to miss. I remembered thinking that at a party in Wellfleet when he walked up to me. His brown hair was always perfectly straight and parted on the side. He wore his gingham shirts buttoned all the way up. It was hard for me to imagine what his body was like behind all those boarded-up windows. There

door. I wanted to include a barrier in the intimacy because obstruction had always been between us. It was what connected and disconnected us, this thing always in the way, so why get rid of it? Why not use it? Minutes would go by and we'd still be standing there. I'd make Fred hold his pose until he was out of breath from trying to get near me. He'd say my name. He'd beg quietly. He'd move to express his pleasure. His eyes were never plain. I'd say, 'I remember you.' He'd stand there, without letting his posture shift. His shirt would be open, parted slightly like a curtain. I'd slip in and go behind it like Jane Eyre. I'd say, 'I know it wasn't like this with Izzy.' I'd say, 'Only time can do this to people.'

One weekend in September, we went swimming at Slough Pond in Truro. Fred wouldn't go in the water. Instead he sat on a fence post with a towel around his neck like some cowboy watching me from above. It was the cockiest thing he'd

ate comments. His awkward attempts to talk to me over the years. At a birthday party in Brooklyn one winter, Fred interrupted a conversation I was having to ask me how my arms ended up being 'so beautiful'. 'Do you work out?' he asked, blushing. I laughed at his question, which was ridiculous, and walked away. Then I looked around the room for Sid, who was rumoured to be at the party. When I saw him, I went upstairs, locked myself in a room and cried. But I also would have cried if Sid hadn't been there.

The first time I saw Fred, we were with a group of people sitting outside of Ben & Jerry's by Town Hall in Provincetown. We were sitting on the ground with our ice cream cones, Sid by my side. At one point, I looked up and saw Fred staring at me. He wasn't just looking. He was in the middle of a long take. He'd been looking the whole time. When our looks attuned, I was only partly there, in the eyes, looking back. The look was strong enough

*'Sid said: 'That guy likes you.' I said: 'What guy?'*

—

was no way I could ask him. Most of all, I didn't want him to know I wanted to ask. At night, after a stint at the Hyannis Hospital for a ruptured ovarian cyst, I fell into bed high on some codeine a nurse gave me. I was so dizzy, I had to leave the bar I was in. In bed, spinning, I imagined the lullaby of undoing each one of Fred's buttons slowly in my room as it twirled around me. In my mind, I discovered that Fred's chest had no hair on it, just more freckles. We'd be standing in front of each other, the moon out the window, and our faces an inch apart. I'd be able to feel him breathing. I'd let his speed up my own breathing. I could hear his heart beating. 'Look how close you are now,' I'd say. I'd make him hold that position for as long as he could hold it. I'd say, 'Close your eyes. You don't have to look any more. You can't. Things are different now.' I'd touch him without letting him kiss me, without applying any pressure, as though we were kissing through a screen

ever done. Because timing is everything, I decided to swim across the pond with my ex, Josh, not to get closer to the past but to get away from the future, which was possibly Fred. Someone I wasn't ready for after Sid. As a thing of the past, Josh was already too far away for there to be any chance of my getting caught up in him again, no matter how present he was.

Fred had a face that receded into the background. A face that was easy to lose if you were caught up in another one. Sid. The memory of Sid. When I first met him it felt like he was a car crashing into my body. His face shattering the glass of mine. Our meeting felt violent. So my first instinct was to get away. Fred's face left almost no impression over and over. He had a face that needed to be seen at the right time in order to make sense, to catch on, and it was never the right time. I had to look to find what was in Fred's face. It was my face to find.

I remembered all of Fred's inappropriate

to come across, to stop me from talking, but I banned its meaning from fully registering, ignoring whatever thing Fred was trying to tell me. I let the look fall away. Fred looked scared, like I'd caught him going through my things. I didn't know his name then, and when we were all standing and saying goodbye, Fred walked up to me and introduced himself instead. 'Bye,' I said, to no one in particular. 'I'm Fred. We've met a couple of times,' he told me. With our arms around each other, Sid and I broke free from the crowd and went to the movies.

Sid said: 'That guy likes you.'

I said: 'What guy?'

Love is also the place where something happens.

Three years later, I rented a room at Izzy's because I'd always wanted to live at the beach house on 411 Commercial Street. Crazy Mitch, a liar and a painter, had lived there in 1998 and 1999, and we'd all piled around him, sprouting these

short-lived friendships, and I thought if I couldn't have that any more, or ever again, I could at least live near it.

I wanted a house that people could spontaneously visit. At first I loved it and then it scared me. I started locking my door because I felt too ugly that summer to be so impromptu with people. When Fred came in unannounced, I was wearing overalls and a hideous acrylic orange sweater with gold buttons that I had found in a charity shop. The gold was chipping off like paint. Why did I buy this, I asked myself when Fred walked in. I discovered how humiliating it was to be unprepared.

When he walked into my house, Fred said, 'Oh, it's you,' like he couldn't believe his eyes. I sort of knew what he meant by that, the way I sort of always know what someone means when they say that kind of thing. When I heard it, it felt more like I was a viewer watching what was happening to me, to us. It's a

sweater wafted between Fred and me as we walked.

After nearly a year of occasionally emailing back and forth in New York, neither of us cared or called or emailed any more and when Fred and I did see each other again two years had passed, and we were so angry, or hurt, or disappointed, or indifferent that we never spoke again. I know it mattered to both of us that we connected like we did. 'I'm a good judge of character,' Fred once told me at a party, and I believed him since he chose to sit next to me all night when he could have kept moving. The most radical thing to do in a room full of a hundred people you barely know is stay put with one person you barely know the whole night.

But time makes you stop doing what you once would have done. I wanted to send Fred things – words – things I still say in my head to him, but I have always stopped myself. I saw a photo of Fred

chances. At not actually being anywhere with anyone at any time.

In the movies, more than anything, people want to be known. But in real life, people are willing to remain inscrutable. I've always been good at seeing through things. Fred even said so after only knowing me for about five minutes. Fred made the observation at a bar, in front of other people. He said it about me, not to me: she sees through everyone. Fred actually surprised me a lot. For a while I thought he was just a wallflower. I did stupid things like drunkenly cry in front of him, more than once, and he never said a mean thing. He let me do what I needed to do, and say what I needed to say, without saying much of anything himself. He looked at me with patience in his eyes. And the more time passes, the more I think these things, which just seemed like filler at the time, on the sidelines of the so-called big things that were happening in my life, are unforgettable. But I might

*'He let me do what I needed to do, and say what I needed to say.'*

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prescience or reflexiveness all of us have, mostly due to romantic movies. I felt Fred realize it was me. I felt it matter to him. I felt him land in something important to him. The room itself was a form of serendipity.

Afterwards, we went into town. Walked down Commercial Street in the pouring rain in our raincoats after talking in my room. Walked to The Governor Bradford, a bar, walked to Spiritus Pizza for a slice, ran into some people we knew on the way. A small promenade town, everyone raising their eyebrows at the sight of us together. I was recovering from some unspeakable trauma I couldn't get across. Everyone around me knew what it was and never brought it up, like Sid had died instead of acted like an asshole who was still alive. In the rain, my orange sweater reeked of mothballs after a life in somebody else's closet. It was so bad people kept asking where the smell was coming from. The stench of my

on Facebook a couple of years after that summer and it made me sick because he looked like he didn't need anyone any more. He'd lost that quality of needing that I liked about him. Later he took the photo down because maybe he knew he looked like that and it wasn't true. Images have different meanings for different people, often showing what isn't really there, what isn't really happening. I know pictures lie, the way people lie to themselves and others. But I'd rather believe this picture of Fred because I am more afraid of lying to myself about what I see than I am about seeing through lies. But this is a new fear, one that I didn't always have. It's so thoroughly modern to see people you don't actually see any more. To talk to people you don't talk to. So brutally modern that people are everywhere and nowhere in your life, which is a series of online accounts now. We've gotten so good at not really showing up for anyone any more. At stalling. At missing our

be wrong, as there's always the chance that I've been wrong about Fred all these years, thinking he had these rare qualities that people either never have in the first place or lose after time. Fred, who didn't necessarily have determination, or faith, or purpose, or doggedness, but who had other precious qualities in raw form – qualities he'd somehow managed to keep, even though I could see that he was getting weary, and that's already a lot in this world. This ability to see through people, as Fred put it, really just meant that I knew some things that I couldn't have learned. In fact, it's the things that I have learned that have pushed away the things I was born knowing. I also have faith in things other people don't believe in and doubt in things other people don't question. And now, after believing that I knew some people deeply, I realize that I have actually never known anyone. I think they only knew me, though I'm sure they think they didn't. ♦



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# Five Dials

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Part II

