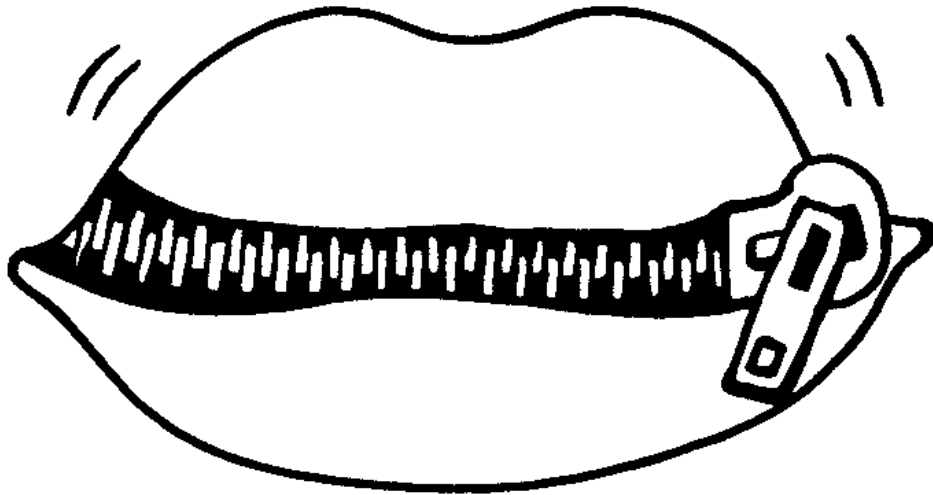


HAMISH HAMILTON PRESENTS

# Five Dials



NUMBER 34

*Jokes / Not Joking At All*

KARL OVE KNAUSGAARD *'It's a torture for me to read these books'*

STUART EVERS *A New Father Reads Knausgaard*

TOM BASDEN *More Hot Moon*

MARGAUX WILLIAMSON *Five Paintings*

NICK HORNBY *The Guilt of Not Reading*

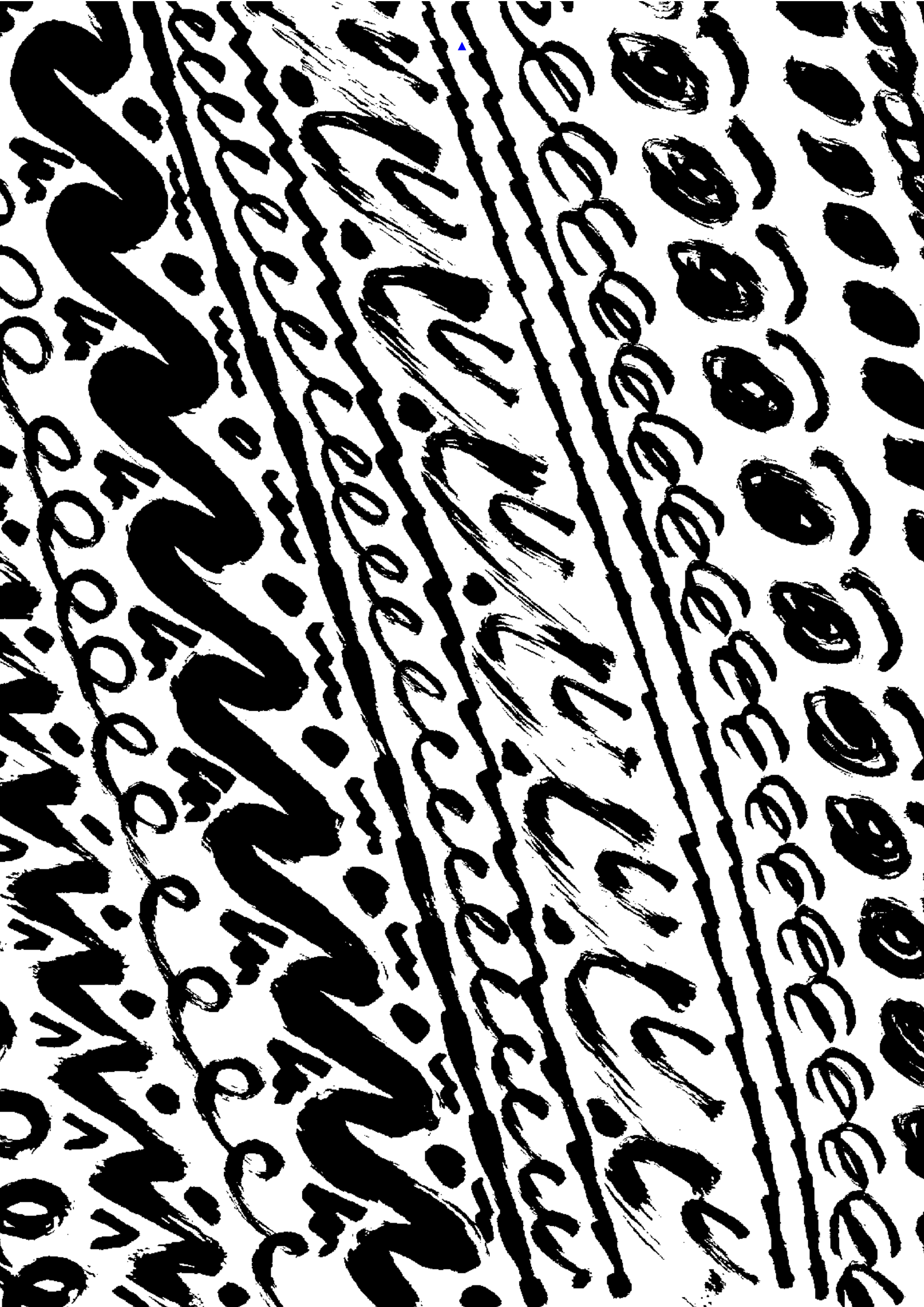
CHERYL LU-LIEN TAN *Singapore Noir*

EMILY BERRY *What Books Teach Us About Breakfast*

*Plus: short fiction from Colin Barrett, Sigmund Freud's laughter, animal rehab,  
and is it too soon to laugh at that thing you're laughing at?*

*Also... The Man Whom I Bitterly Hate*





## CONTRIBUTORS

COLIN BARRETT was born in Canada, and grew up in Mayo, Ireland. His debut collection *Young Skins* was first published by the Stinging Fly press in Ireland. It won the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award for 2014, the 2014 Rooney Prize, and the *Guardian* first book award.

DON BARTLETT lives in Norfolk and works as a freelance translator of Scandinavian literature. He has translated, or co-translated, a wide variety of Danish and Norwegian novels by such writers as Per Petterson, Lars Saabye Christensen, Roy Jacobsen, Ingvar Ambjørnsen, Jo Nesbø and Ida Jessen.

TOM BASDEN is a writer, comedian, musician and central midfielder. For TV he has written episodes of some of the biggest recent comedies, including *Peep Show*, *Fresh Meat*, *The Wrong Mans* and *Plebs*, which won Best New Comedy Show at the British Comedy Awards 2013 and Best Scripted Comedy at the RTS Awards 2014. Tom is also member of sketch group Cowards, who wrote and performed their own TV series on BBC4. Tom has written plays for the National Theatre, the Arts Theatre, the Gate and the Arcola. He has been nominated for a BAFTA three times, and has won a Fringe First and an Edinburgh Comedy Award. He currently lives in Taipei with his wife Megan.

EMILY BERRY writes poems and other things. Her debut book of poetry *Dear Boy* (Faber & Faber, 2013) won the Forward Prize for Best First Collection and the Hawthornden Prize. She is a contributor to *The Breakfast Bible* (Bloomsbury, 2013), a compendium of breakfasts.

KIT BUCHAN works on the *Observer* science desk and has written for the *Guardian* about musicals, gadgets and Rwanda. His poetry has appeared in the *White Review*.

STUART EVERS is the author of *Ten Stories About Smoking*, which won the 2011 London Book Award. His debut novel, *If This Is Home*, was published in 2012.

NICK HORNBY is the author of five bestselling novels, *High Fidelity*, *About a Boy*, *How to be Good*, *A Long Way Down* and *Juliet, Naked*, as well as a novel for young adults, *Slam*. His non-fiction includes *Fever Pitch*, *31 Songs*, *The Complete Polysyllabic Spree* and *Stuff I've Been Reading*. His screenplay for the film *An Education* was nominated for an Oscar. His new novel, *Funny Girl*, was published in November 2014. He lives in Highbury, north London.

KARL OVE KNAUSGAARD's first novel, *Out of the World*, was the first ever debut novel to win The Norwegian Critics'

Prize and his second, *A Time to Every Purpose Under Heaven*, was widely acclaimed. *A Death in the Family*, the first of the *My Struggle* cycle of novels, was awarded the prestigious Brage Award. The *My Struggle* cycle has been heralded as a masterpiece wherever it appears.

CHERYL LU-LIEN TAN is a New York-based journalist and author of *A Tiger in the Kitchen: A Memoir of Food & Family* (Hyperion, 2011). She is the editor of the fiction anthology *Singapore Noir* (Akashic Books, 2014) and is currently working on her first novel. She was a staff writer at the *Wall Street Journal*, *In Style* magazine and the *Baltimore Sun*.

GILLIAN MEARS grew up in the northern New South Wales towns of Grafton and Lismore. Acclaim came early, with her short-story collections and novels winning major prizes. Her books include *Ride a Cock Horse*, *Fineflour*, *The Mint Lawn*, *The Grass Sister* and *A Map of the Gardens*. Her most recent novel is *Foal's Bread*, which received many honours including the 2012 Prime Minister's Award for Fiction, the ALS Gold Medal, the Victorian Premier's Literary Award and *The Age* Book of the Year award.

BENJAMIN RACHLIN studied English at Bowdoin College, where he won the Mary B. Sinkinson Prize in 2008 for the best short story written by a Bowdoin junior or senior. He taught high school English for four years in Honolulu. He is now an MFA candidate in creative nonfiction at the University of North Carolina Wilmington. He is currently working on a non-fiction book.

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

PAUL TUCKER is the *Five Dials* archival materials specialist.

MARGAUX WILLIAMSON lives in Toronto and was born in Pittsburgh. She was the artist in residence at the Klondike Institute for Arts & Culture in the Yukon and at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto, which led to the making of her first book of paintings, *I Could See Everything*, launched in 2014 by Coach House Press alongside shows in New York at the Mulherin + Pollard Gallery and in London at the Frith Street Gallery. Her first movie *Teenager Hamlet* premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival and can now be found on UbuWeb.

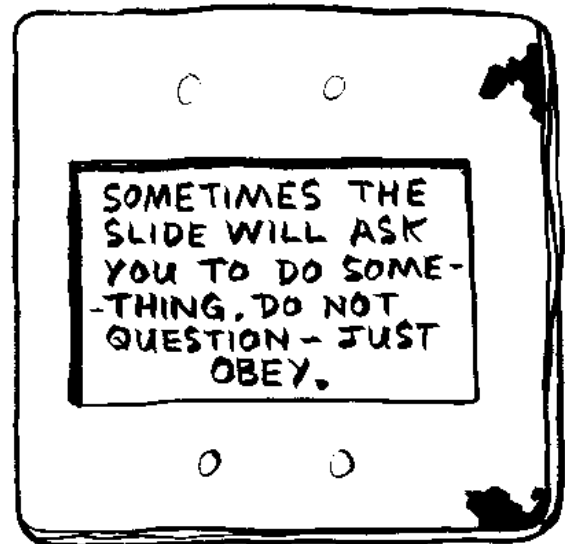
## THE UNABLE TO CONTRIBUTE PAGE

Prominent critical writer REEYOT ALEMU was arrested at the Addis Ababa high school where she worked as an English teacher. As a columnist for independent weekly *Feteh*, she charged the government with coercion and preferential treatment of members of the ruling party. Accused of plotting terrorist attacks in association with Eritrea and an unnamed international terrorist group, she was sentenced to fourteen years imprisonment in 2012. Evidence collected against her included emails allegedly received from pro-opposition discussion groups and reports sent to the US-based opposition site *Ethiopian Review*. While Reeyot's sentence was reduced to five years in August 2012, her appeal in January 2013 to the Ethiopian Court of Cassation was rejected. She is held in Kality Prison. She won the UNESCO-Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Prize in 2013.

TESFALIDET KIDANE TESFAZGHI worked as a producer for Eritrea's state broadcaster Eri-TV. In 2006 he was arrested with cameraman Saleh Idris Gama during Ethiopia's invasion of southern Somalia. According to reports, the journalists were amongst forty-one captured suspected terrorists but no evidence linking them to military activity has ever been presented. In 2011 the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi announced Tesfalidet and Saleh would be freed pending an investigation to clear them of espionage, but as of 2013 they had still not been tried and no information about any legal proceedings has been disclosed. Their current whereabouts and wellbeing remain unknown.

WOUBSHET TAYE, deputy editor of the independent weekly *Awramba Times* was arrested by police in Addis Ababa after a raid on his home. Woubshet was accused of planning terrorist attacks with the aid of neighbouring country Eritrea and an unnamed international terrorist group and was sentenced to 14 years imprisonment in 2011. It is believed that his conviction was a response to *Awramba Times*' criticisms of the government. Woubshet published articles outlining strategies used to weaken and divide the media and opposition. In 2013 the Ethiopian Ministry of Justice rejected his request for a pardon, the same year Woubshet was honoured with the Free Press Africa Award. He is currently held in a maximum security jail in Ziway, south east of Addis Ababa.

Columnist ESKINDER NEGA was arrested based on suspicion of terrorism five days after publishing a column on *EthioMedia* condemning the government's misuse of anti-terrorism laws to imprison journalists and intellectuals. Eskinder has been persecuted by ruling parties since 1993 in retaliation to his numerous articles outlining the repression of protests and dissent in Ethiopia. He was sentenced to 18 years in jail, the same year a UN panel declared his imprisonment was 'a result of his peaceful exercise of the right to freedom of expression.' He remains in Kality Prison.



YUSUF GETACHEW's home was raided during a governmental purge on news outlets covering the protests staged by Ethiopian Muslims in defense of religious freedom. The editor of (now-defunct) *Ye Muslimoch Guday* spent weeks in pre-trial custody at the Maekelawi federal detention centre where he was reportedly beaten. Accused of inciting violence in his columns on governmental corruption, he was charged under the 2009 Anti-Terrorism Law. As of 2013 the trial was still ongoing. He remains at Kality Prison.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, PLEASE VISIT THE COMMITTEE TO PROTECT JOURNALISTS AT [CPJ.ORG](http://CPJ.ORG)





—  
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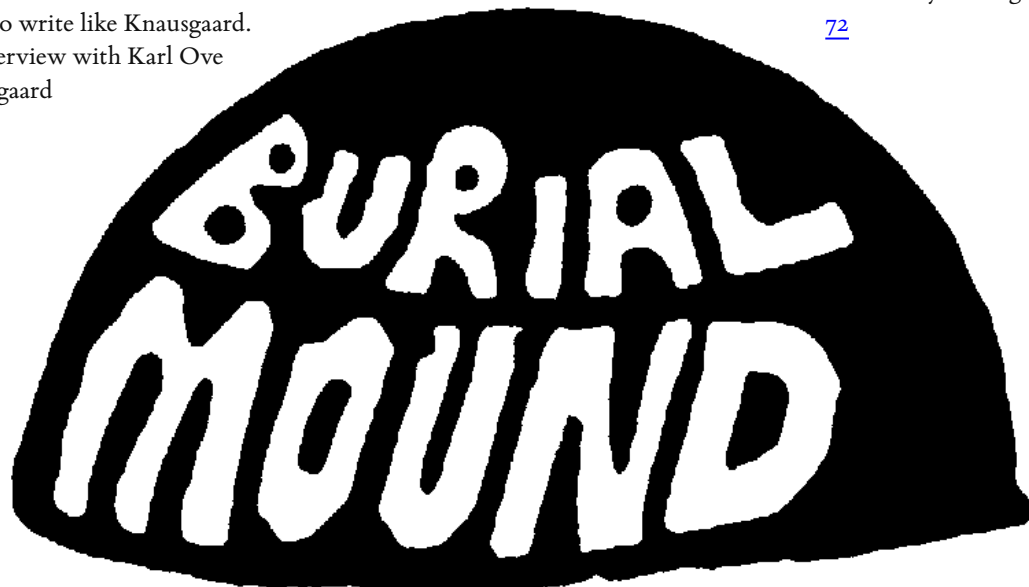
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## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

My copy of *Alien vs. Predator* is so dog-eared I can't even read the thing. Any suggestions for a new book?

[HERE IS YOUR ANSWER](#)

How do I subscribe to *Five Dials*?

[HERE IS YOUR ANSWER](#)

Here are some of my favorite tempests. 1. The Tempest. 2. A violent storm 3. The expression 'tempest in a teapot.' Any suggestions?

[HERE IS YOUR ANSWER](#)

Are there such things as grown-up fairy tales?

[HERE IS YOUR ANSWER](#)

Your advertisements are not like other advertisements. How do I advertise in your pages?

[HERE IS YOUR ANSWER](#)

Where can I get some Jamaican patties?

[HERE IS YOUR ANSWER](#)

I'd like to excerpt *Five Dials* in my company newsletter. How can that happen?

[HERE IS YOUR ANSWER](#)

I'm sick of being an author. Got anything better?

[HERE IS YOUR ANSWER](#)

Caribou?

[HERE IS YOUR ANSWER](#)

Who's Lorenzo Vitturi?

[HERE IS YOUR ANSWER](#)

I'd like to host a *Five Dials* launch. How do we set that up?

[HERE IS YOUR ANSWER](#)

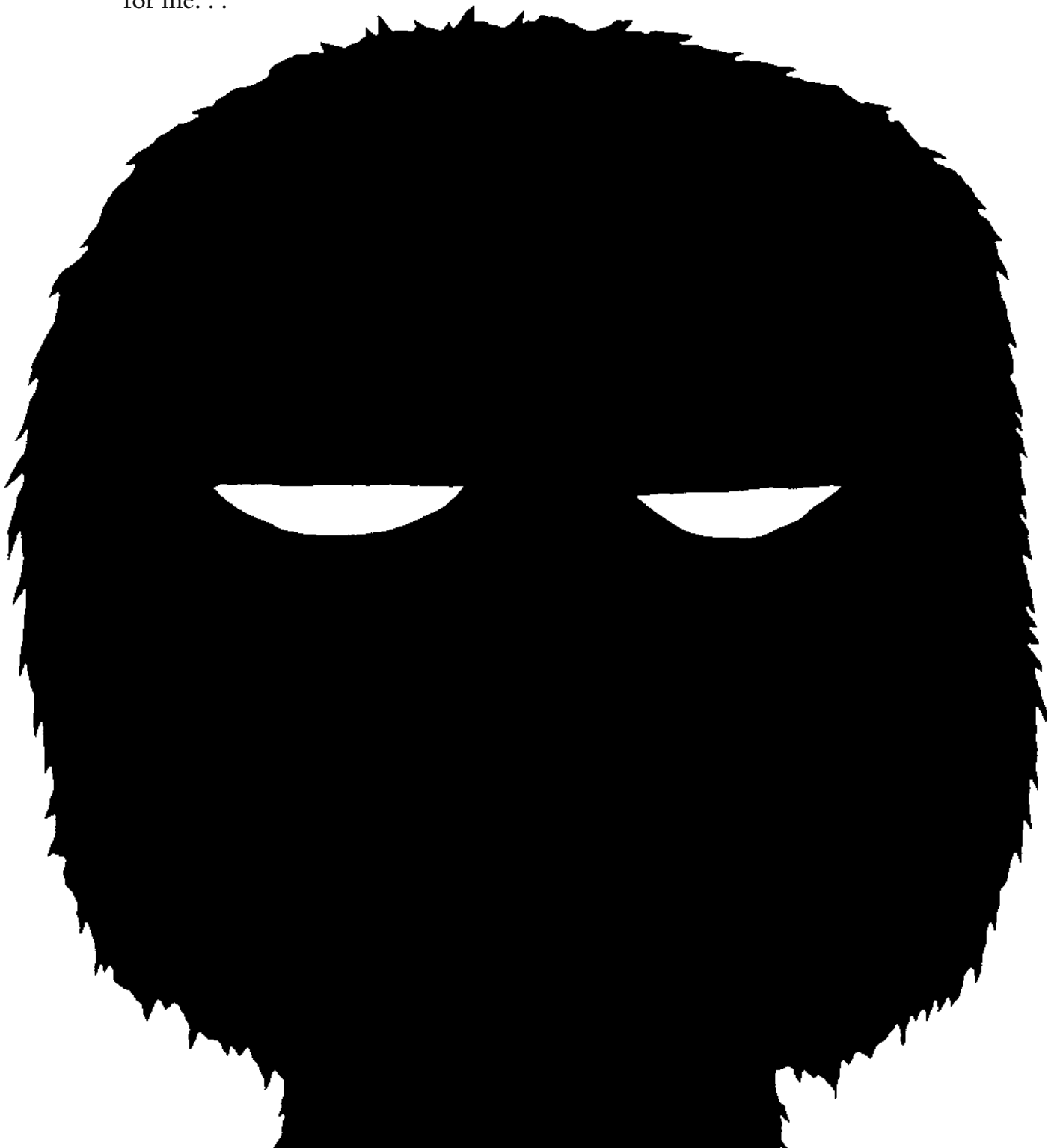
Are you people looking for work experience?

[HERE IS YOUR ANSWER](#)

## Out of Windows

*How should we react when people fall? By Sunita Soliar*

Last Halloween, a woman was thrown out of a fourth-floor window in Marylebone. It was 5.15 p.m. and I was heading back to my flat on Chiltern Street with the intention of watching *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, a film that I had always avoided seeing but which held a gnawing fascination for me. . .



I walked home from Marylebone High Street, thinking that it was a good witching night, with a deep blue sky, not black – it was more alive than that – and I noticed how festive the streets looked: the red-brick, Victorian buildings were perfectly gothic, complete with gargoyles on the turrets; the shops were decorated with carved pumpkins, and children were already running about in skeleton suits and vampire teeth.

On nights like this, the area seemed as though it were trying to live up to the property developers' patter about it being a village. It started about a decade ago, after a savvy phrase by estate agents turned Marylebone into a quaint little hamlet, soon to be followed by Connaught Village and Portman Village. I always thought this a fairly transparent bit of branding: these are desirable residences where, the better the 'village' life, the higher the value of the properties, which is why Marylebone, owned largely by the Howard de Walden estate, cultivates the local feel. The estate makes an effort to ensure that small, independent establishments, such as Biggles Sausages, famous for its 'Torpedo' hot dog, are charged reduced-rate rents because these stores give the area an impression of picturesque intimacy, which is further enhanced by summer and Christmas fairs and a farmers' market where Alan Rickman can be seen selling his produce.

Yet, while I felt proud of my sophistication in seeing through this estate agents' contrivance, it seemed to me that the block of flats in which I lived was genuinely encouraging the idea of 'getting to know your neighbours' and 'doing things for the kids'. Portman Mansions are several grand blocks that dominate one half of Chiltern Street at the Marylebone Road end. They are served by an estate office with twenty-four-hour porters, who check each block during the night, a maintenance team and a gym across the road for those who own their flats. Each building has a shared patio and there are sign-up sheets in the communal areas so that you can choose whether you wish to participate in the festivities, for example, trick-or-treat, and one of the residents even runs a Christmas grotto. With this comes the petty annoyances of neighbours; for example, the old Swedish woman, with a fuzz of blonde hair, who always had something to say about where my boyfriend parked his bicycle. But generally it seemed to be a place of good cheer and goodwill. So, in the spirit of village life, and partial to children in small doses, I was returning home with bags of chocolates for the trick-or-treaters.

I was almost on top of the crowds before I saw them. Then: three ambulances, police tape cordoning the road from traffic, police tape cordoning the pavement on my side of the street, so that I didn't know if I would be able to get any closer, and I was thinking, What is happening? Is it my building? Will I be allowed in? Having reached the flats, I saw that the drama was not happening there, but next door at York Mansions, a solitary block of flats in the middle of the street. Police tape was tied from my railings to the ones opposite, dividing the road in half and cutting me off from the scene.

Around the perimeter of the tape, crowds stood still, with the air of a vigil, as though watching death. I stood up

on the steps of the entrance to Block 5, Portman Mansions, straining to see, wanting to see, not wanting to see. Paramedics clustered on the pavement. The girl standing in front of me turned away, gagging. It was death, I thought. It had already happened. Someone was dead. Then there was a cry, a long, painful moan, and the words: 'Help me! Somebody help me!' But no one was moving. The cry for help came again, with what sounded like delirium. And fear. I realized that the groaning came from the ground, where the paramedics were.

I was joined on the steps by a resident, an Australian named Keith. Keith is a grandfatherly man of about sixty, soft-spoken and kind, someone who I thought kept an eye out for me, and who also manages Portman Mansions. I asked what had happened. Keith said, 'She fell.' A woman came in from the street, wearing a pair of slippers. 'She was pushed,' she said. She told us that she saw it happen and also that the police had taken away a man in handcuffs. Then she unlocked the main door to my block with a fob, and I was surprised because I had never seen her before.

I remained on the street, drawn to watch what was going on, yet to do so seemed fiendish, parasitic. I had arrived after the event, so I would only be adding to the sensationalism of the moment, the spectacle, and I was faced with the horrible knowledge that I wished I had been there to see the whole thing, that in some way I had missed out. Defenestrated. Not a word you use often. Ever.

The injured woman remained on the ground, still groaning, still surrounded by paramedics. Keith was buzzing back and forth and I heard him murmur to his wife that they had to cancel the trick-or-treaters. Of course the children must not see this, and it was a relief that Keith thought of this, that he wanted to protect them, that he was doing his best to take care of all of us. A few minutes later I asked him if it really was *pushed*. He told me that this seemed to be the truth of it; then he made a dash for the door, telling me that he did not want to get too involved, he did not want to get caught up in talking to the police. And anyway, he said, this wasn't anything to do with us: the incident had happened at York Mansions. I couldn't believe Keith could be so insular.

A porter came over to my building; I asked him if he had more information. He told me that he had seen the woman clinging to the windowsill. Had he seen her fall? He had heard it. A resident poked her head out, rubbing her arms against the cold, and said to him, 'So you witnessed it then. Did the police ask for your statement?' He told her that they had. 'Wow,' she said, and folded her arms, with a little frown of distaste. Then, with an upbeat shift, she went on to the porter, 'I wondered if you'd had time to talk to the lady in 5B about the issue over when she takes her rubbish out ...'

And this while the paramedics were trying to move the injured woman on to a stretcher. I moved away from the chipper resident and into the street, shocked, disgusted and looking for solidarity. By 6.30 p.m., most of the residents of Portman Mansions had gone back inside, already distancing themselves from the injured woman, even while she lay on the street, struggling to live. The only watchers who remained were a group of passers-by, people who had

caught the incident before they began their commute out of central London, and who had been there for the whole time. We watched. The paramedics had to place the woman back on to the pavement, apparently because she had not been stabilised. It took them another twenty minutes or so – I'm not sure of the exact time – to move her on to the stretcher and wheel her into an ambulance. Some time later, the stretcher came back out and into the middle of the road as six paramedics bent over the woman, and there was a constant beep – of what? A heart-rate monitor? I didn't know, but it sounded out the seriousness of the situation: touch-and-go.

One of the passers-by told me that he had telephoned for the ambulance; another said that the woman had been screaming at the window for about ten minutes, screaming for her life. So these were the people who had tried to help, and we shared a kind of camaraderie: our watching

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*She was that kind of woman  
and I was not the sort of girl  
who would ever have anything to do  
with women who got pushed out  
of windows.*

---

was a ritual, a shared acknowledgement that the event had happened. It was also an expression of hope. This made the indifference of my neighbours stun me even more. Now, the myth of community spirit did not seem so ridiculous, but desirable.

Eventually, I went inside, and when I looked out at ten o'clock the ambulances had gone and only the police tape remained. Keith came to check on me later and said, 'Best not to dwell on it. I think she might have been into drugs. They do these sorts of things as punishment when you don't pay.' In some way, his intentions were good. He meant to reassure me. She was *that kind* of woman and I was *not the sort of girl* who would ever have anything to do with women who got pushed out of windows.

I saw Keith the following day. He said that the police had brought flyers appealing for witnesses. I wondered, Weren't

there enough witnesses? Because to push a woman out of a window after she struggled for ten minutes at 5.30 p.m. on a street that had a steady flow of foot traffic took some brazenness. Who was holding out? Keith also told me that it was a domestic incident. 'The boyfriend was West Indian,' he said, as though this fact of race were explanation enough. So not drugs, after all. Keith also said that the woman was only twenty-three years old. And that she had a daughter. Where was the daughter last night? He didn't know.

Keith told me that 'the woman' – this is what we both kept calling her – had broken both legs and her spine, and that I should try not to worry myself about it. So this was the beginning of *forgetting*, made more apparent when I went outside. The street was bright and clean – not a speck of blood anywhere, only the railing was broken where the woman had hit her head against it, and a tiny speck of yellowish, phlegm-like stuff and a red blob. My boyfriend said it was definitely food. Mustard. Ketchup. The police tape was gone. The only eerie symbol left was the open window, a lace curtain blowing in the breeze. A light was on.

A few days later the light went off. A couple of weeks later the window was closed. But I couldn't forget: it had happened on my street. I telephoned the police but they could not give me information because I was not a family member, although the officer did say that if I were to see her walking around I would know that she was OK. He said this a couple of times and I could not tell if he was trying to tell me that she would be all right. There was hope. Maybe.

Still, I was dispirited and angry: angry with my neighbours for turning away, angry with Keith for trying to protect me by alienating the woman, angry that Portman Mansions had deceived me. Underneath my cynicism, I had secretly believed that there was some reality to the notion of community feeling. I wanted the intimacy to be *real*, not just something you put on like a good hat, for summer fairs. But here, and everywhere else in the city, village spirit means exclusion. It means living a local life, with festivals in the square, so that you don't have to leave your own patch of turf. And one of its appeals is who your neighbours *are*, their status – you don't have to be friends with them. Marylebone has Madonna. What it does *not* have is women who get themselves thrown out of windows.

I could have said that things like this *do* happen here, and that a refusal to acknowledge them was cowardice. And yet I said nothing. Instead, I let my outrage fizzle to silent conformity because this is the London that I inhabit, the London from which the defenestrated woman has been allowed to vanish, and I suppose that makes me as guilty as the rest. Soon after, I moved house. I don't know whether she can walk again, or what happened to her daughter, or whether she will ever go back to her flat. I don't even know her name. To some extent I want to know because I don't want to forget her; but on the other hand, I tell myself that it would violate her privacy to find out, that I would be feasting on her pain. I'm sure that this is partially true. But really, to make my own life liveable, it is easier to shut her out, to forget why the railing is broken and hope that it will be repaired. ◇



# Too Soon?

*When is it too soon to laugh?*

*Help us tune the Five Dials moral compass.*

Too Soon? Y/N

- The death of Abraham Lincoln
  - 9/11
  - Robin Williams
- The battle of Carthage
- The death of Francis Bacon
- Prince George's looks
  - Joan Rivers
  - Teletubbies
  - Fathers4Justice
  - Amelia Earhart
  - Polio
  - Willie Nelson
- Willie Nelson's braids
  - Lifeguarding
- Dmitri Shostakovitch's 2nd Symphony
  - Roberto Benigni
  - Christmas ham
- The Tollund Man
  - Cleopatra
  - Carrot Top
  - Pauly Shore
- The assassination of Caligula

A SERIAL

## More extracts from *Hot Moon*

*The second instalment of Tom Basden's unfinished book,  
this time featuring some torture*



Any regular readers of this magazine/website/PDF (what is it in fact?) will know that I put a few chapters of my work-in-progress novel, *Hot Moon*, in it the other month in the hope of kick-starting a publishing deal/bidding war. Although that didn't happen per se, it wasn't a total waste of time (or chapters), as I did get a couple of emails from people who'd read it all the way to the end and had some constructive comments regarding structure and spelling. One fairly exciting development is that a school acquaintance of my brother's who works in publishing (I shouldn't name him, so for the purposes of this I'll call him M\*rk Sm\*th) facebooked me back after I forwarded it to him several times to say that indeed he had read it and thought it was 'zippy'. He also gave me a few tips about marketability, which I'm taking with a pinch of salt because a) it's my book and b) his company mainly publishes the Lonely Planet guides. More importantly, like a lot of artists, I don't like thinking about marketing because it all feels a bit seedy. That said, to put any publishers' minds at ease, I should make it clear that I'm very happy for my book to have a cover that closely resembles the Lee Child books if you think that'll confuse people into buying it, and I'm also very keen to not let libraries stock it so that tight-arses/the elderly can't read it for free. Please do contact me on tom-basden@hotmail.com if you want to publish it/give me pointers/praise. I really would rather it was a proper book than an e-book, so no timewasters please (!).

## Chapter 214

### In which Owen does some torture.

One of M\*rk's main comments about the chapters that I chose last time was that a lot of the action 'didn't feel that relevant' (his words). He didn't like my chapter set in space, for example, cos it's not really in right now, or, more likely, because Lonely Planet don't do a guide to it. Anyway, as a result, I've decided to kick off with a chapter that's much more zeitgeisty in that it's about torture. As many of you will know, and possibly even have experienced, this is a bit of a golden age for torture, after things like *Guantánamo* and *Zero Dark 30*, so I'm hoping this chapter will piggyback on some of the interest/fury from that. It's tastefully done in my opinion, so I wouldn't imagine it would make anyone offended or sick, but you never know. My dad can't watch *The Office* because it makes him squirm, for example. I guess if you've got a weak heart/PTSD you might not want to read this bit. Otherwise, it's probably fine and exciting.

Owen lifted up the henchman by the hair and then punched him in the face.

'Where is Gravedenko's base?' he demanded in Russian.

'I won't tell you,' the henchman said, also in Russian.

Owen punched him again.

'Tell me where it is!' Again, in Russian.  
'No,' he said, in Russian. In fact, until told otherwise, assume that the dialogue of this whole chapter is in Russian.

Owen punched him again.

'What about now?'

'Nope. Still not telling.'

Owen punched him again.

'Now?'

'No.'

He punched him again.

'Now?'

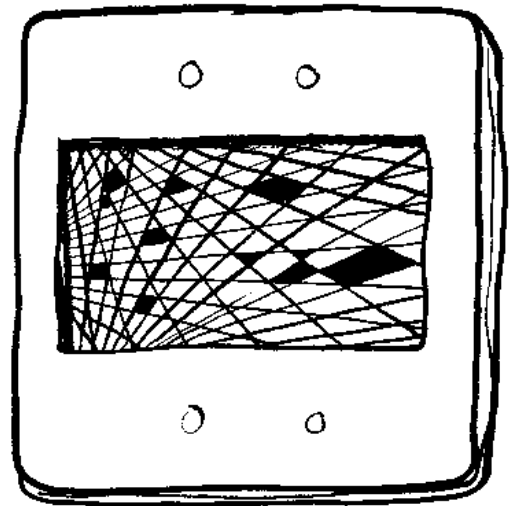
'No.'

Owen punched him again.

'Now?'

'No way!'

He slapped him this time.



'Now?'

'No.'

Owen went back to punching him.

'Now?'

'No.'

Owen took a sip of his Lilt. And sighed. And put it back on the implements trolley. And then punched him again.

'What about now?'

'No.'

He punched him again.

'Now?'

'No, not yet.'

Owen punched him again.

'Now?'

'Yes, it's in Romania.'

## Chapter 57

### In which I give some background on Owen.

*M\*rk's other main note was that the characters in Hot Moon 'didn't feel very real' and he thought I should maybe try to provide a bit more background information (I guess in the way that the Lonely Planet books always make sure they write a bit about the colonial history of a place (e.g. India) as well as listing inexpensive restaurants near the main station). With that in mind, I thought I would include an early chapter which is quite light on action but will help explain a bit more about the hero, Owen, and give you an idea of the psychological complexity of the book as a whole, which occasionally has to go on the back burner because there's a car chase or shark.*

Owen sat on the loo, doing what all of us do in these situations. In case you wondered why he wasn't at the felt blackjack table with Palmer and Rose, in the previous chapter, it was cos he was in a cubicle in the toilets. He was struggling a bit because of the hastily fried meats he'd gorged himself on the night before at the Mongolian barbecue with Mort. I won't describe everything that's going on there, cos obviously it's a bit embarrassing for him and a bit gross for you. Suffice to say, he'll be out soon and doing some more gambling. As I write this he's humming the theme tune to *The Crystal Maze* and squinting a bit to try to force the issue. While we're waiting for him though, I'll take this opportunity to explain and describe him a bit. Owen had always been a prodigy. He was a child prodigy and now he's an adult prodigy. Not that you'd know it to look at him now as he stares into the toilet bowl, shaking his head out of confusion and disappointment, but he had always been one hell of a guy: dynamic and nice. That said, he could get very snappy if hungry or wrong and would often get very violent in a punch-up/queue. This is mainly down to the fact that his parents had been killed when he was little by a psycho, a bit like what had happened to Harry Potter or Batman, which was a mixed blessing really because, while it was a blow at the time, it ultimately made him become really nails like Batman, and, to a lesser extent, Potter. Once they'd sadly gone, Owen preciously demanded that his Aunt Toni enrol him at the British Intelligence Academy, even though he was only twelve. The Academy finally agreed to this after Toni slept with four people (men) who worked there. Owen aced the entrance exams (I don't know his exact grades because that's obviously classified), and, even though he was seven years younger than the others, threw himself into it and wasn't daunted in the least, a bit like how William Hague got to do a speech at the Tory Party Conference when he was sixteen, or like Will Smith's very confident son. And daughter. And even though his relative youth meant that he didn't get a lot of his classmates' reference points, e.g. Bag-

*puss or pubes, he still excelled, and by fifteen he had become the Academy's youngest ever commando, meaning that he was allowed to kill people with or without his bare hands and not get in shit for it. From sixteen to nineteen he'd been a professional spy and killer, before taking a break at twenty for a year or so to follow his long-term dream of being in a band with his friend from Cubs, Stew Hughes. Inevitably that came to an end when Stew's brother, Ian, came out of prison and needed his van back, and Owen returned to spying. Just to describe what he looks like briefly: he's in tip-top physical shape, although sitting on the loo as he is right now isn't the best showcase for that, to be brutally honest. As I look at him he's bent over his iPhone trying to unsubscribe from the Made.com mailing list, so his chest looks normal and, if anything, unassuming. Down-lit and standing straight with his top off, however, you'd see that he's got more muscles than you might think possible or nec-*

—

*Facially he looks like a young  
Russell Crowe but a bit less potatoey.  
If I had to find fault with him I'd say  
that his fingers are a bit too hairy  
and his bellybutton's quite weird.*

—

essary. Facially he looks like a young Russell Crowe but a bit less potatoey. If I had to find fault with him I'd say that his fingers are a bit too hairy and his bellybutton's quite weird, to the extent that an ex-girlfriend would make him cover it up with one of his hands during sex because it put her off. I'm looking at it right now, and to be honest, I think it's fine. Suddenly there was a knock at the door. Owen looked up with a start; alert and tense like a human meerkat. Maybe it was some more of those violent Catholics that had set upon him while he was renting the Boris bike. Or the Russians. Or other baddies we haven't met yet.

'Come on, mate. Hurry up!' a voice shouted from outside.

Owen breathed a sigh of relief and felt his muscles untense. Phew.

It was just another customer. He could relax.

Although he couldn't really cos the other guy still needed to use the loo.◊

# Chapter 223

## In which there are celebs.

REDACTED FOR LEGAL REASONS

READ FIVE DIALS 36 FOR A VERSION THAT CONTAINS A MINOR YET CRUCIAL CHANGE TO ONE OF THE NAMES OF THE CHARACTERS.

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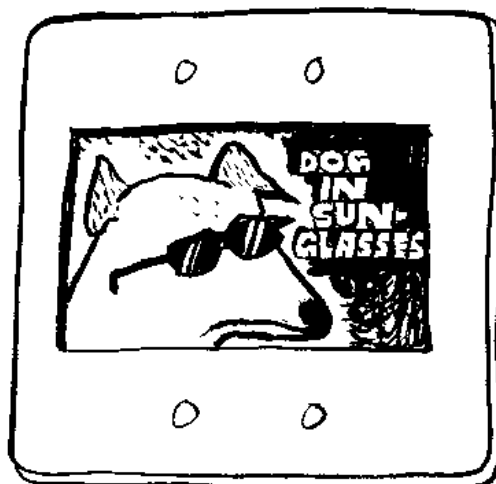
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REDACTED FOR LEGAL REASONS

# The man whom I bitterly hate

*by Kit Buchan*

I leave in the evening and waiting for me is a man whom I bitterly hate.  
He's staring at me with improbable glee and I gulp as his pupils inflate.  
The Saracen's Head is upholstered in red and the whole of his head is a grin  
as brindled and coarse as the bones of a horse when he hands me my ginger and gin.

Then after he's kissed me he buries a fist in my belly to tell me I'm late  
and with each cigarette that I take I forget he's a man whom I bitterly hate.  
The hours relax and then dribble like wax down the walls of his comforting face;  
it's evening again when I come to my senses and start to grow sick of the place.

His horrible stories grow boring and gory, his eyes are like holes in the snow  
and after a list of his trysts I insist that it's time I was making to go.  
He's vividly angered by this like the man-whom-I-bitterly-hate that he is  
so I slip out the back after nicking a mac which I later discover is his.

I gingerly labour my way to a neighbouring pub called the Adam and Eve,  
I order some gingers and gin and begin to embroider myself in their weave.  
With stooping dejection I catch his reflection revealed in the tabletop glaze;  
the man whom I bitterly hate has been sitting beside me for two or three days.

I hurry to tell him my wife is unwell on a drip with an oxygen mask  
(this wife I confess is a lie, it's a blessing he's never been bothered to ask).  
'Your wife is a whiner, I'll buy you a Heineken, mate, the vagina can wait';  
with comments like these he reminds me that he's still a man whom I bitterly hate.

He hefts a guitar from the top of the bar and he calls for the communal ear,  
the man whom I bitterly hate is as shit a guitarist as any you'll hear,  
it's people are strange in the Chelsea the chain alleluia the passenger sing  
she's buying a stairway imagine there's where is my mind we're the sultans of swing,

the Cellar, the Swan on the Green, the Queen Mary, the Edinburgh Castle, the Hen,  
the Duchess of Cornwall, the Fawn, the Endeavour, the Duchess of Cornwall again,  
the Eminent Freighter, the Man whom I Bitterly Hate, the Trafalgar, the Gun –  
I flee him but each time I flee him I see him; he's drinking in every last one.

"You're running away like a snivelling gay!" he accuses, "What's wrong with you, mate?"  
"I bitterly hate you!" I bitterly cry to the man whom I bitterly hate.  
He doesn't seem knocked off his perch by this shock information I've longed to reveal,  
but he stands on my toes with his lips at my nose and his breathing is all I can feel:

"If I were a traitor like you I'd be grateful for each fucking friend I could get;  
Your life only goes unassaulted 'cos no one's decided to ruin it yet."  
With this unexpectedly sinister threat in my ears I arrive at my gate  
which swings with a clattering giggle like that of the man whom I bitterly hate.

I cling to the side of my fictional bride and I drop off to sleep with a shove  
but he's there at the seams of my pitiful dreams having sex with the people I love.  
I'm openly vexed when I wake to his text on my pillow at quarter to eight;  
I leave in the evening and waiting for me is a man whom I bitterly hate.

## ‘It’s a torture for me to read these books’

*Is he a novelist or something else entirely? Is he in it just for the pretty sentences? Is it possible to outrun a thought? Karl Ove Knausgaard replies.*

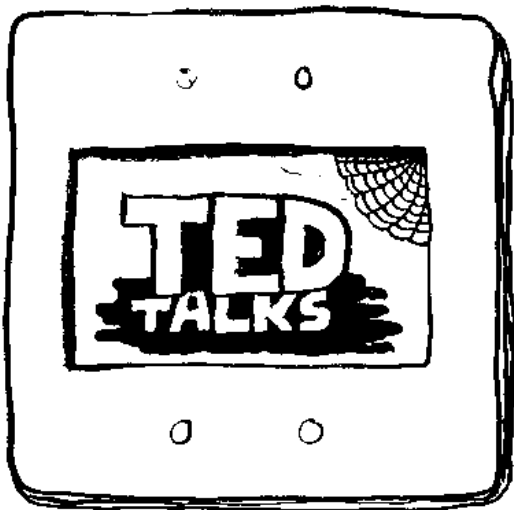
It’s strange to finish reading Karl Ove Knausgaard’s latest, *Boyhood Island*, and draw up a list of questions, mostly because the book is long, detailed, and part of an even larger cycle of novels, in which the author stoops to focus on the smallest of details. Were further questions necessary? Of course. We had the chance to consult Knausgaard. He answered via email. . .





5D: How important is the chronology of the books? The father character we are introduced to in *Boyhood Island* is very different to the father in the first novel. How important is a reader's previous knowledge of this character?

KK: One of the great advantages a long novel such as this gives is that it's possible to explore identity in relation to time; spans where not only the character in question has changed, but also the one observing him, and the times they are living in. This perspective is denied both the boy in the third novel and the young man in the first, and belongs to the writer and the reader. What I really love in Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* (or whatever it's called in English) is the ultra-slow movement in the rise and fall of the described generation. We are never in such a position in our lives to see that, the gravity of the moment is massive,



almost inescapable, but in novels it's possible to work with. To answer your question, the chronology is not important, it doesn't matter in which order you read these books. And it makes perfect sense only to read the first. (Which reminds me of a friend I have; we discussed Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* once and he complained about the ending – it was such a disappointment, he said. It appeared that he was unaware of the fact that it came in two volumes.)

5D: We heard that you have started a publishing company – could you tell us a little about that, and your ambitions for it?

KK: A friend of mine, Geir Angell Øygarden, wrote a book about the invasion of Iraq – he was there with the Human Shield when it took place – but no publisher wanted it (it

was 2,000 pages long for a while), so I decided to publish it myself, with some help from friends. Having done that, we thought it was a shame to quit, and started to publish other books, around 8 to 10 a year. Norwegian is such a small language, and such a little part of all the great books are translated into it. On our list are Peter Handke, Ben Marcus, Katie Kitamura, Judith Herman, Christian Kracht, Maria Zennström, Bergsveinn Birgisson, among others. But operating in such a small language means that it's very hard to make it break even (which is our goal) so now we are going to publish Norwegian novels as well, and have started working with some writers. That's exciting and stimulating, to be at the other end of the process, but also very difficult. We are happy amateurs, naive and innocent publishers, like children, really, and want it to stay that way.

5D: In *Boyhood Island* you describe everything from sweaty shinguards to first love to the texture of porn magazines left out in the elements. Were any childhood experiences off-limits to you? If so, why?

KK: The porn magazine in the wood is a recurring topic in Norwegian childhood stories, but will probably die out with us, we are the last generation to have experienced that, and the whole phenomenon will get kind of an enigmatic aura, I guess. Anyway, it's a cliché. But no, I can't think of any experiences I couldn't write about, and that's because the writing and what I wrote about were so closely connected. There was never an outside, somewhere I tried to go; it was all in the writing. You have to invent what you write about, even when you write about factual events and experiences.

5D: Does each book feel complete, or do you feel you could have mined your memories even more?

KK: That's two different things. I wanted them to be novels in their own right, balanced in a literary way, so even if there was more to a memory, I didn't go there if it contradicted the literary logic. But that was the most difficult thing when I wrote about childhood, to form all these episodes into a novel, for a novel demands some kind of development, besides the chronological, and the one characteristic thing with childhood is its static nature. At least that was how my childhood looked like. There are also a lot of restrictions in the novel. For instance, are reflections above the level of the boy forbidden, which means that these developments had to take place elsewhere? Then the risk is twofold: that the form is too weak and insignificant, so the energy just disappears, or the opposite, that the construction of the novel is too easily detectable, which of course undermines the whole enterprise. You do not want to see the writer working hard and trying his best, you want to disappear into the writing without a clue of what's going on. The conclusion on my behalf is that I'm not a novelist. I want to be, but I do not possess the required skills – I can't write in the third person, for instance, and I can't construct a character or design a plot. Show it, don't tell it, is very, very difficult for me. I tried it in this novel, and failed. That's another reason for setting up a publishing house: I have followed this just-say-it-as-it-is,

first-person, half-essayistic style to the end; there's nothing more in there for me.

*5D: Do you ever look back and want to focus more on the forms of the books, on the sentences? Is there an urge to prettify?*

KK: It's a torture for me to read these books, it really is. The only way of getting them done was by suspending all self-criticism, which I did. But now, when they are written, it has returned, even more powerful and self-crushing than before. On the other hand, I'm glad that I wrote them, and I'm not in this for the sentences, anyway.

*5D: What are the benefits of momentum and propulsion while writing?*

KK: Creativity is located somewhere other than in the thoughts, which all musicians and painters know, so you need to neutralize the thinking while writing, to get to a place where they don't matter, and one way to do that is to outrun them, just write as fast as possible. To make a piece of art, says Lawrence Durrell somewhere in *The Alexandria Quartet*, you need to set yourself a goal, and then go there in your sleep. The sleepwalking is essential. The difficult thing for me has always been to get there – I could easily work on a novel for five years with no result, but then, all of a sudden, something opens up, and it's always the same. I saw an interview with Ian McEwan once where he talked about the selfless state of writing, and that's what it is – you write exactly the way you read, with no awareness of the self, you disappear completely, and that's why I'm writing: this place, with no self, is just so desirable.

*5D: When did you make the decision to revisit your childhood for Boyhood Island?*

KK: I gave my editor 1,200 pages, which is roughly what became books one and two. We discussed what we should do with it, publish it as one or two books, and then they came up with the idea to publish it as twelve books, and release one each month for a year. I loved the idea – it reminded me of the Wedding Present, they released one single each month for a year, and then the album, and it reminded me of the days of Dickens and Dostoyevsky, when they published their novels in chapter during writing. In the end, twelve books was too risky and complicated, so we ended up with six. Then I had a choice, should I part the existing manuscript into six? Or in two, and then write four more novels during that year? I went for the last alternative, and plotted them like this: three, childhood; four, adolescence; five, the twenties (where it in the end picks up the death of the father from book one to make a circle); six, the present (including the reception of the publication of the other five).

*5D: If you could ask another writer to attempt a similar project to mine their own personal history over the course of 3,500 pages, who would you choose? Who do you think could pull it off?*

KK: Anyone, really. It requires only patience, frustration and self-loathing. That something all writers I know have a lot of.

*5D: In Norway, disclosing family secrets was considered scandalous. Have readers in other countries been scandalized in the same way?*

KK: No.

*5D: After reading the books, I feel I know your brother. Following him on Twitter is like following a favourite character. What effect has the experience had on him? Did it lead to more discussions of your father? Did it lead to further openness?*

KK: In the first book, I wrote that we never look each other directly in the eyes when we meet, and never shake hands. The first time we met after he had read that book, he looked me directly in the eyes and gave me his hand. For many people, he is now 'the brother'. I guess that must have affected him, but he is solid, much more so than me, so he has handled all this fuss brilliantly. Our father hasn't been a topic, though – we did a debriefing when we were in our twenties that lasted a few years, and after that, there was really nothing left to say.

*5D: Do you think any of your children will become writers?*

KK: When you are a parent, all you want is that your children should be happy. Writers are not happy, so I hope they will do something else.

*5D: There's a lot of cooking in the novels. What sorts of dishes are you cooking these days?*

KK: Is there? I hadn't noticed, and not heard about that either. But OK: fish fingers and potatoes, meatballs and spaghetti, sausages and spaghetti. We have four kids here, and have no other choice than to make it as easy as possible.

*5D: You have been travelling the world recently to promote foreign editions of the books. Have you been anywhere you can imagine living for while?*

KK: All the places I visit, actually, with the exception of New York. I would have loved to live in the UK, for instance. (I'm an Anglophile.)

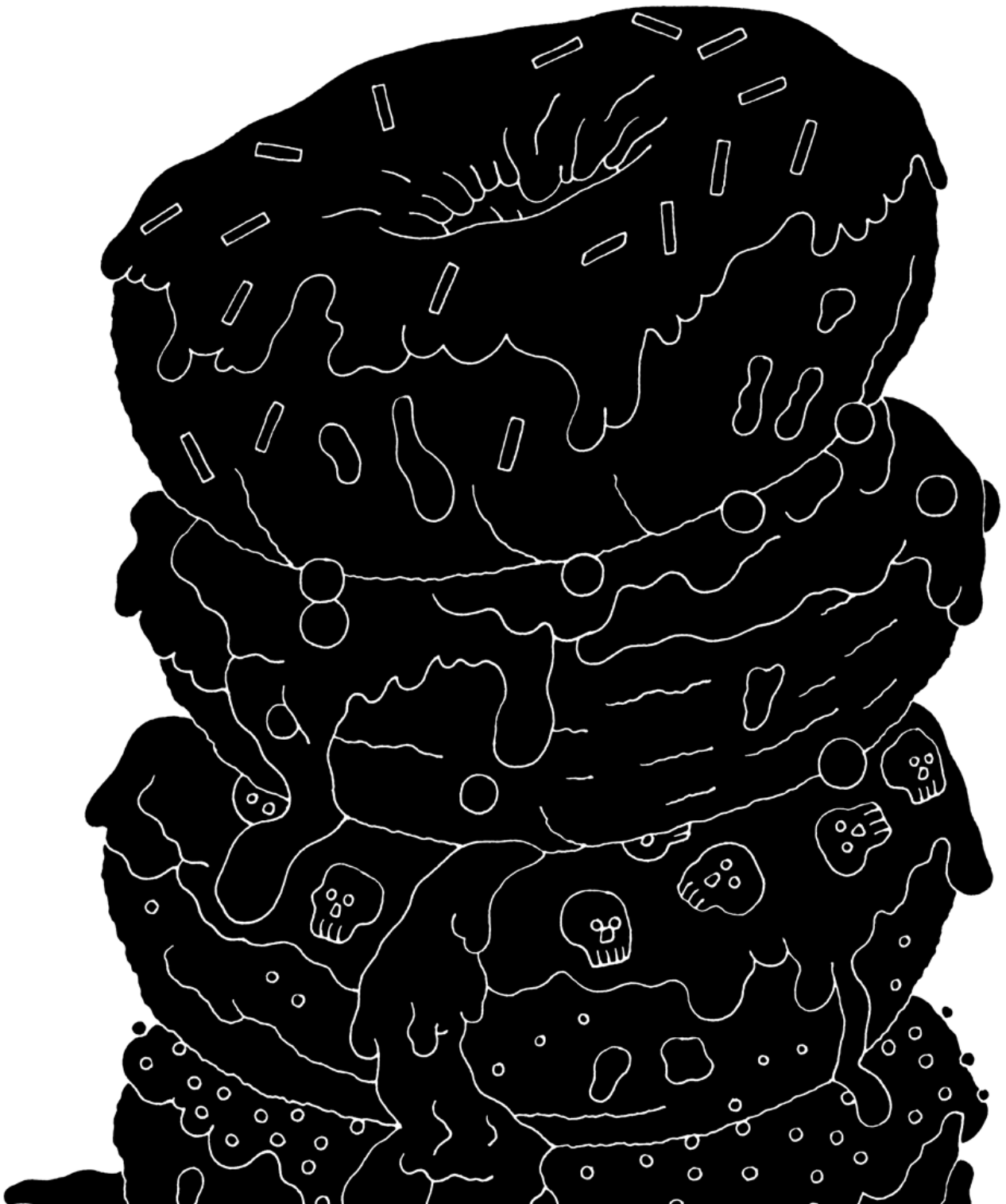
*5D: Have you been surprised by the apparent universality of the books – by the way they seem to appeal across all kinds of borders?*

KK: Surprised is too mild a word. When I wrote it, I thought of it as utterly private, utterly local, utterly irrelevant. I never expected it to be translated. (I remember telling my then English publisher how uninteresting and boring it was, afraid that he would be disappointed by it.) And thinking of all the detailed descriptions of trivialities, it never occurred to me that anyone would read it at all.◊

## Recreating the Intensity

*Don Bartlett on the challenges of translating Knausgaard's breakneck speed and the Norwegian words he's grown to fear.*

**A**fter speaking to Karl Ove Knausgaard we decided it was best to speak to the man responsible for shifting the books from Norwegian to English. How does a translator handle prose written so quickly? What about the essayistic passages? We reached Don Bartlett via email. . .



5D: *When were you first introduced to the novels?*

DB: Must have been 2010. I read the first one and reported back to my editor, Geoff Mulligan, at Harvill Secker.

5D: *What was your first reaction?*

DB: It was obvious these books would divide readers. Some readers would be addicted and some would hate the plethora of detail and the banality. As indeed it has turned out. I loved the first six pages and the description of the house in Kristiansand. There is a natural flow to the writing and even though the 'narrative' goes off at tangents I was always interested enough to follow. I was intrigued by *My Struggle: 1*, and of course by how it would be received in the UK.

5D: *What were the greatest challenges in translating this series?*

DB: There are many challenges. First of all, you are translating the voices of real people and it is important you hit the right tone. With the first two books I sent a sample to Karl Ove to check that I had done that. Also, you are translating the voices of people at various stages of their lives, so you need to shift between appropriate registers and ensure the voices still sound genuine.

Then there is the intensity of the writing. You can feel that Karl Ove has written at breakneck speed and you want to re-create that intensity, but it is slow, painstaking work, and then there are dense, essayistic passages which also require great concentration. The novels don't have chapters, and they aren't short, either, so by the time you have been through several drafts, you know you will need a break at the end. There was, early on, an attempt to have the books translated in quick succession, but I would not have had the stamina for that. One year suits me very well – apologies to readers who are avid for each succeeding novel.

5D: *Has Knausgaard's use of language changed over the course of the books?*

DB: Not really. It varies according to subject matter.

5D: *What were you trying to achieve with the translation?*

DB: Above all else, flow.

5D: *What makes it different from other translations?*

DB: The fame of the author, the reality of the events and characters, the density of the books, their reception, the shape of the series, the variety of styles within the books, the US involvement . . .

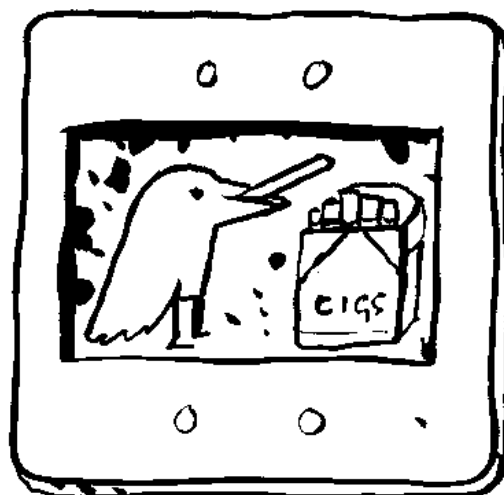
5D: *What are some of the peculiarities of the Norwegian language?*

DB: There are no books published along the lines of '501 Spanish Verbs', as verb conjugation is a fairly simple matter. Norwegian has very useful little words that confer a mood on a sentence, a kind of modal particle.

Books are predominantly written in one of two Norwegians: bokmål and nynorsk (Knausgaard writes in bokmål). There are lots of dialects and spelling issues. The tone used in the pronunciation of a word can affect its meaning.

5D: *Is there anything in the books that remains untranslatable?*

DB: You can translate anything, but you might not find the succinct formulation that there is in the original. There are Norwegian words you grow to fear, such as pålegg (a collective term for anything that can be eaten on bread), because you know you need a word which is short and snappy and English doesn't have one that renders the full meaning, so you have to make do with one which does enough of the job to be satisfactory. And what is satisfactory you have to glean from the context.



5D: *When did the books surprise you most?*

DB: The endings. The endings, like the beginnings, are very carefully constructed and satisfying.

5D: *Was it difficult to extract yourself at the end of each novel?*

DB: No.

5D: *Did you continue to think about the book after you were finished?*

DB: Given time, yes.

5D: *Are you still working on the series now?*

DB: Yes, I am working on number 4 and really enjoying it.◊

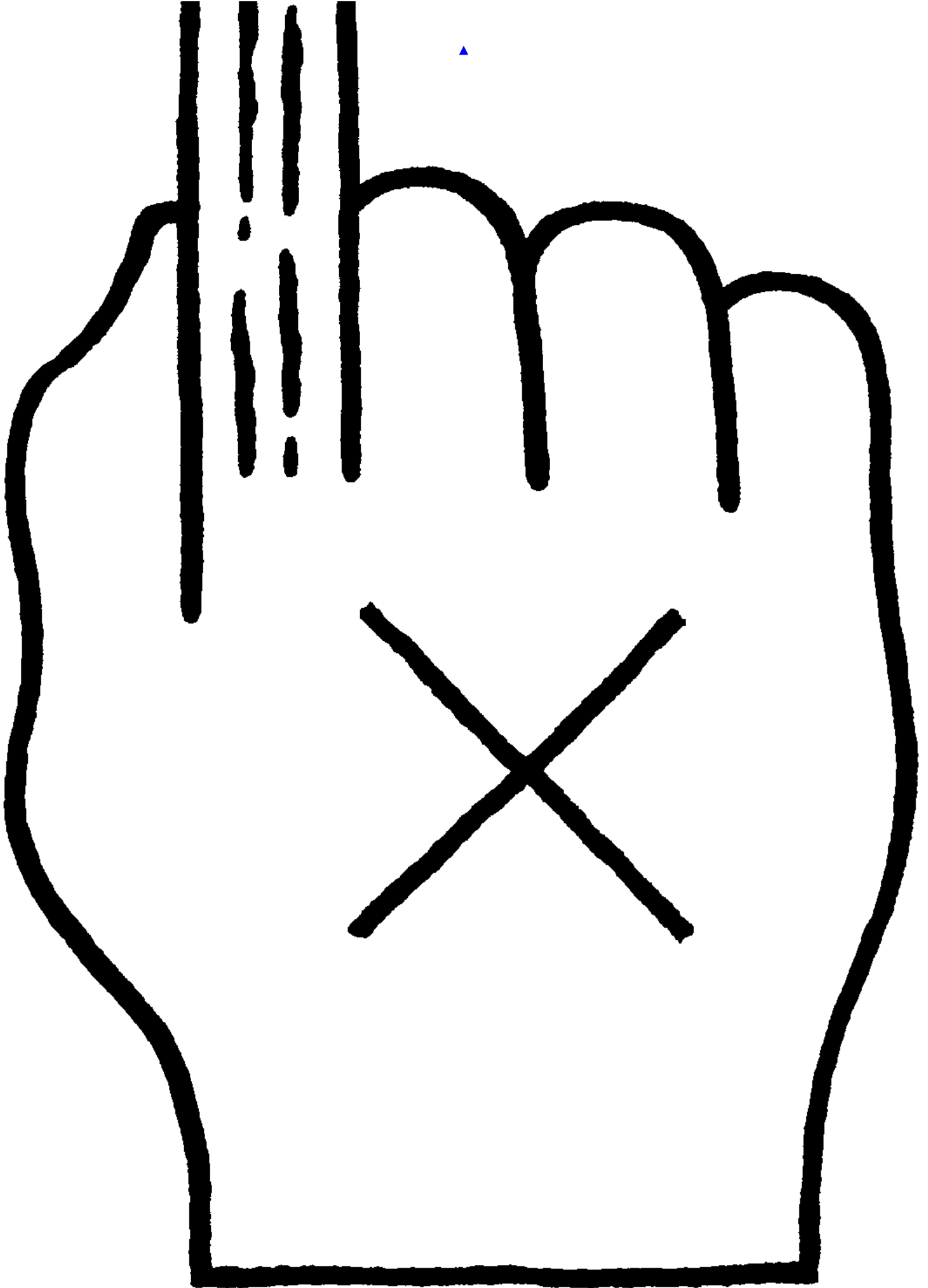


MEMOIR

# Some Days I Trusted Him

*Somewhere between monotonous and momentous: reading Karl Ove Knausgaard as a new father.*  
By Stuart Evers.





The week after my first child was born the Chequers pub reopened on Walthamstow High Street. For years an unwelcoming and unreconstructed London boozier, darkly lit with the flash of fruit machines and the green glow from televised racing; now the latest in a boutique chain specializing in real ale. They were to open at five, and by that time a small crowd had gathered outside. We looked a little nonplussed, I suppose. The exterior had remained unchanged, still grim, paint still peeling; though from looking through the windows on to bare brickwork, exposed steel beams and mismatched furniture, it was clear there was no sympathy with the pub's past.

It was cold, I remember, so much colder than the constant warmth of the house, of my son. Of all the moments during those first weeks of my son's life, all those life-changing times, this was the clearest: waiting in the cold afternoon light, the market packing up around us, a woman wearing a leopard-print coat, one hand on her wheeled shopping bag, the manager unlatching the door.

Over the following weeks, I went to that pub most days, usually on the way back from the supermarket. I sat at the same table and looked up when an old patron entered, watched them double-take, heard their confusion as they were told there was no Foster's – no Guinness or Stella either. The men – always men – mostly left shaking their heads; a few, usually in pairs, stuck around for a pint but spent their time exchanging stories about the pub as it once had been. They looked deceived, like they had been taken in by the place.

Post the birth of a child – even an adopted child – testosterone levels in males reduce by around a third. If they look after a child for more than three hours a day, this drops by a further 20 per cent. The lack lowers libido, increases sensitivity. In this biologically induced lull, in that bar, in bouts of no more than an hour, I read Karl Ove Knausgaard's *A Man in Love* furiously, making notes in pencil, underscoring passages, adding asterisks and turning down pages; in some cases simply writing fuck in large letters. Those hours reading Knausgaard in the pub with the deceiving frontage feels like stepping out from play-acting into the white heat of what it really is to be a father.

Early in *A Death in the Family* – the first book in the *My Struggle* sequence – Karl Ove Knausgaard describes his thirty-two-year-old father smashing rocks with a sledgehammer. The young Karl Ove has seen something unusual on the television and needs to tell someone about it. Only his father is around. He is gruff, manly, even notwithstanding the sledgehammer and the splitting stone. But there is a tenderness there, a pause before he speaks that gives Karl Ove a 'rush of happiness because he actually cares'. It feels like a random scene, perhaps instructive of the quiet, masculine relationship they share. But this remembrance is cleaved in two by a digression.

'On the one hand I see him [his father] as I saw him at that time,' it concludes, 'through the eyes of an eight-year-old: unpredictable and frightening; on the other hand I see him as a peer through whose life time is blowing and unremit-

tly sweeping large chunks of meaning along with it.'

While Knausgaard goes on to illustrate his father's unpredictable and frightening behaviour – he tells his son to shut his gob because he looks like an idiot – it is this sentence that resonates, reverberates, throughout these novels.

There is no single struggle in *My Struggle* – death versus permanence, art versus life, love versus duty – but at its centre is an internal battle for a true sense of identity. As he points out, Karl Ove is both a thirty-nine-year-old writer and an eight-year-old son, as well as every iteration of himself between those points. He is an accretion of personae, as we all are, but those personae are in constant turmoil, arranged into two opposing camps: the artist 'son' and the frustrated 'father'.

'When I look at a beautiful painting,' he writes some pages later, 'I have tears in my eyes, but not when I look at my children. That does not mean I do not love them, because I

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*This is just not what fathers say,  
I wrote in the margin. Parents don't blame  
their children like this.*

---

do, with all my heart, it simply means that the meaning they produce is not sufficient to fulfil a whole life. Not mine at any rate.'

I remember reading those sentences over and over, my wife recently pregnant. This is just *not* what fathers say, I wrote in the margin. Parents don't blame their children like this. But in rereading, I saw the carefully cultivated, almost hidden, lie. Knausgaard's direct, deliberately artless style is not always as straightforward as it first looks. His sentences are designed, honed and translated [by Don Bartlett] for speed and absolute clarity, and because of this, it's easy to pass over their artificially constructed oppositions.

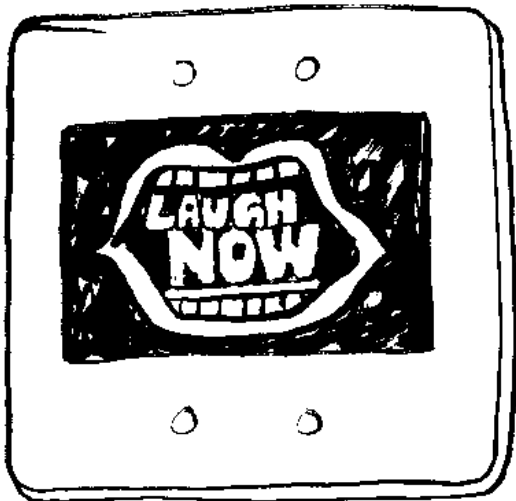
In this instance Knausgaard begins with a metaphor purposefully tempered to arouse a response – How dare he cry at a painting but not his children? How could he be so callous? – moves swiftly to cliché (I love my kids with all my heart), then ends on absolute conviction: 'The meaning they



produce is not sufficient to fulfil a whole life.’

As shockingly honest as this first appears, Knausgaard is only creating his own controversy. While biology and society combine to make the safety and well-being of children one of the few things on which humanity can broadly reach a consensus, it is absurd to suggest that people are *only* fulfilled by the production and rearing of children – especially within the context of Knausgaard’s own novels. He might add ‘not mine at any rate’ with dry comic timing, but Knausgaard *père*’s ghostly voice might nod and chime in, ‘nor mine’.

This is typical of the internal squabbling – the tension between ‘son’ and ‘father’ – within *A Man in Love*, the day-to-day shifts and variants we are as people and as parents. Where novels, and especially memoirs, strive for a continuity of tone, a cohesive voice, Knausgaard’s work is entirely dependent on the eyes through which he is looking that day. If there are contradictions, repetitions, slight evasions, so be



it: the lines must be written, the stories – such as they are – must be told. Reading it, as I did, in hour-long snatches with a pint of beer sitting at the same seat in the same pub, I began to see *A Man in Love* as a more elegant, more forensic form of bar-room confession, rather than a *roman à clef*. It speaks as any person does, from the accumulation of experience; which means every day is different. It also means that some days I believed him, or perhaps trusted him, more than others.

‘When I pushed the buggy all over town, and spent my days taking care of my child, it was not the case that I was adding something to my life, that it became richer as a result; on the contrary, something was removed from it: part of myself, the bit relating to masculinity.’

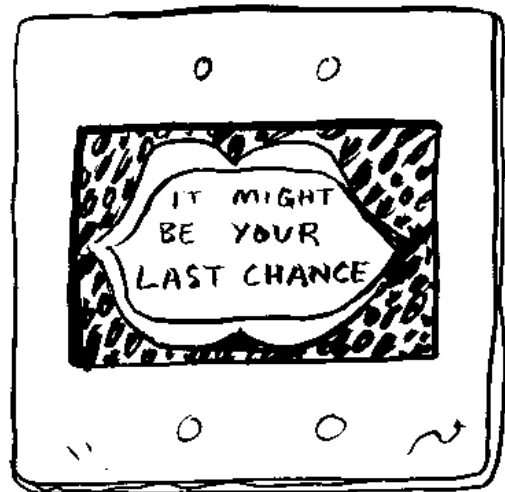
This passage was the first I underlined. There are no notes alongside it; I don’t know whether I was tacitly agreeing with Knausgaard or drawing attention to the kinds of insults

and slurs he throws at fatherhood. Later I did the same for another line:

‘I walked around Stockholm’s streets, modern and feminized, with a furious nineteenth-century man inside me.’

This I remember making me laugh, and when discussing the book with other fathers, this is the line I quote. It often gets a rueful smile. Rueful because it feels, sometimes, that this ‘furious nineteenth-century man’ comes out within them every now and again, and the emergence is not pretty. Knausgaard lets himself express these thoughts, gives them oxygen, yet they can sound somewhat like bleating, like self-regarding, self-serving, pity-poor-me moaning. Which is why, as a record of thoughts, they sound so authentic.

Early parenthood is not a time for realism, but for blunt honesty. Your baby is the most beautiful thing that has ever drawn breath, the tiny hand gripping your finger the first hand to have ever held another living thing. Reading *A Man in Love* did not puncture this, but it prods and pokes at every



delusion. It refuses at any moment to surrender to sentiment, even when it has the right to do so.

The days after the birth of Knausgaard’s first child were ‘filled with endless attention to what was happening’. He goes on, ‘I didn’t want to miss a minute! The days and nights merged into one; everything was tenderness, everything was gentleness, and if she opened her eyes we rushed towards her. Oh, there you are! But that passed too.’

And that is the end, the last mention of this momentous time, the same period I was experiencing. I felt sure that he would come back to this, pile on the details, a long, hyper-real depiction of the moments during and after the birth, the feeding patterns, the changing face of his child, the hospital gowns and forceps, but no. The moment passes and we are shunted away from the realm of parenthood, away from being a father and to him being a son again, being an artist. He runs away to his office, writes all day and night.

‘At two places in the novel I soared higher than I had thought possible . . . They are two of the best moments in my life. By which I mean my whole life. The happiness that filled me and the feeling of invincibility they gave me I have searched for ever since, in vain.’

This seemed to me then, and still now, a protestation too far. It is too neat, too much counterbalancing the happiness he previously claimed with the birth of his first child. This is the ‘son’ rebelling against the ‘father’, the artist proving that for all the powers of nature, the imaginative act is still the most vital and energizing of all. But as with the unparalleled joy of his first born, there is nothing more on this astonishing, life-altering pair of moments. Once again, the momentous is eschewed in favour of the monotonous.

And this evasion, this lack of interest in what appears to interest him the most, is what illuminates and makes bold his entire project. This is most aptly expressed in a sequence that takes place at a child’s birthday party. In exhausting, almost goading, detail Knausgaard spends forty pages recounting a trivial, banal string of events – the finding of shoes, idle parenting chit-chat, cleaning up after the kids, food eaten and not – and his increasing, though unsurprising frustrations with the whole sorry charade. Here the momentous is not only ignored, it’s almost bludgeoned to death – death by monotony. And while this tries the patience, it also forces us to follow, as in real time, the first-hand experience of parenthood.

Knausgaard’s party shows the uneasy truth. That moments of beauty, of wonder and awe – birth, that first smile, the first steps – can just end up a blur, a fuzzy-edged feeling rather than clear recollection; yet the banal, the everyday, these are never forgotten, because they just keep on, they happen all the time, and we always seem to be doing them. The moment seems neverending, but also to happen all too quickly.

‘Everyday life,’ he writes later, ‘with its duties and routines, was something I endured, not a thing I enjoyed, nor something that was meaningful or made me happy. This had nothing to do with a lack of desire to wash floors or change nappies, but rather with something more fundamental: the life around me was not meaningful.’

Yet meaning is created by this life: the novel we are reading, after all, is a product of that life, a product of his fatherhood. The battle between creator and the created is, even at its most binary, not as separate as Karl Ove presents it. The pressures, the struggle, come not from an outside agency – society, family, friends are not telling him that he has to choose between being artist or father – but from within.

And that is perhaps why these novels resonate: they dramatize the internal battles between who we think we are and who we have become. They explain the bullet trick of parenthood, the splitting of a personality irrecoverably. Karl Ove, still battling his father’s ghost, still obsessing over his art, still desperate – as he says in the third volume, *Boyhood Island* – to ensure that his children are not, ‘afraid of their father’, is more drawn than most, even more conflicted, yet within his struggles we can see our own parental compromises.

When we eventually return to the scene that opens *A Man in Love*, some 480 pages later, Karl Ove looks over his shoulder while driving and sees his entire family asleep.

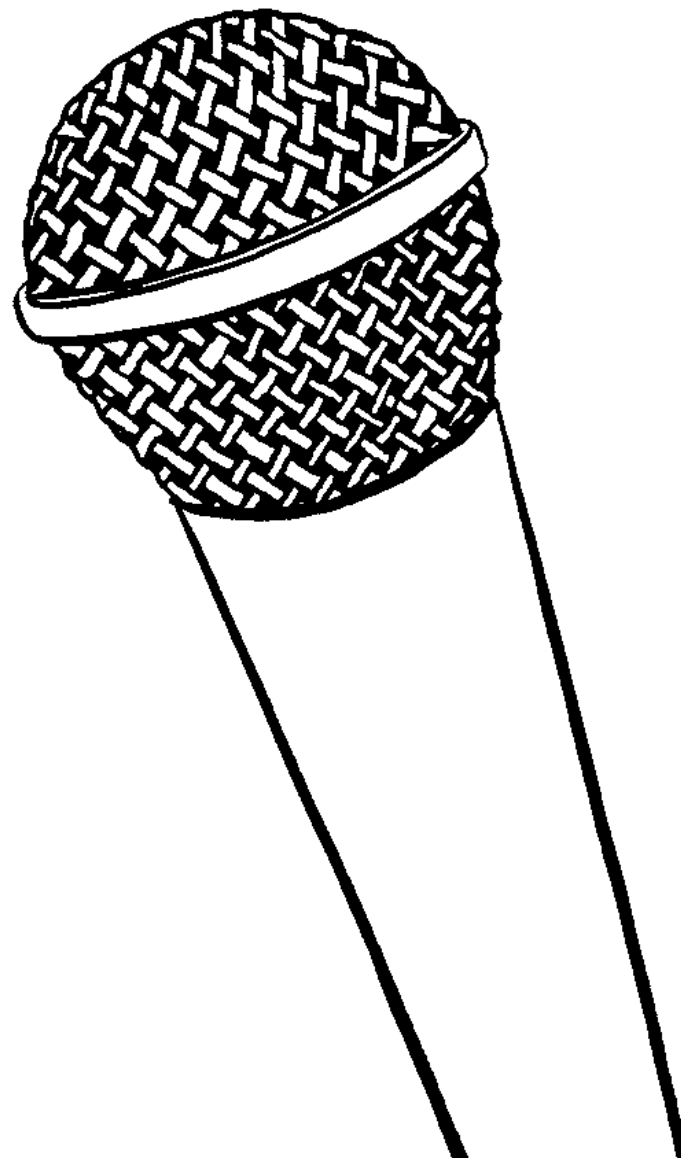
‘Happiness exploded inside of me,’ he writes. ‘It lasted for one second, two seconds, maybe three. Then came the shadow that always followed this happiness’s dark train.’ I underlined this sentence several times. For all Knausgaard’s talk of not finding meaning or fulfilment through his children, it is this beautiful, downbeat, yet honest depiction of parenthood that stands up most vigorously to his ‘father’ versus ‘artist’ rhetoric – though it is not alone.

During the interminable birthday party, Karl Ove is but-tonholed by Gustav, another party-goer. He alone talks to Karl Ove about his other life, asking whether he has read Richard Ford, and eventually mentions that he has seen Karl Ove’s novel in the bookshop.

‘You didn’t buy it then?’ Linda asked, not without a teasing tone to her voice.

‘No, not this time,’ he said, wiping his mouth with a serviette. ‘It’s about angels, isn’t it?’

At that moment Knausgaard’s little angel shits her nappy. It is a moment of pure comic timing, one that shows father and artist in harmony, both taking the child into the other room, both taking off the nappy, both, ultimately, holding their nose. It admits, even if Karl Ove can’t, that there is meaning and fulfilment even in the midst of everyday parenting.◊





ALI SMITH

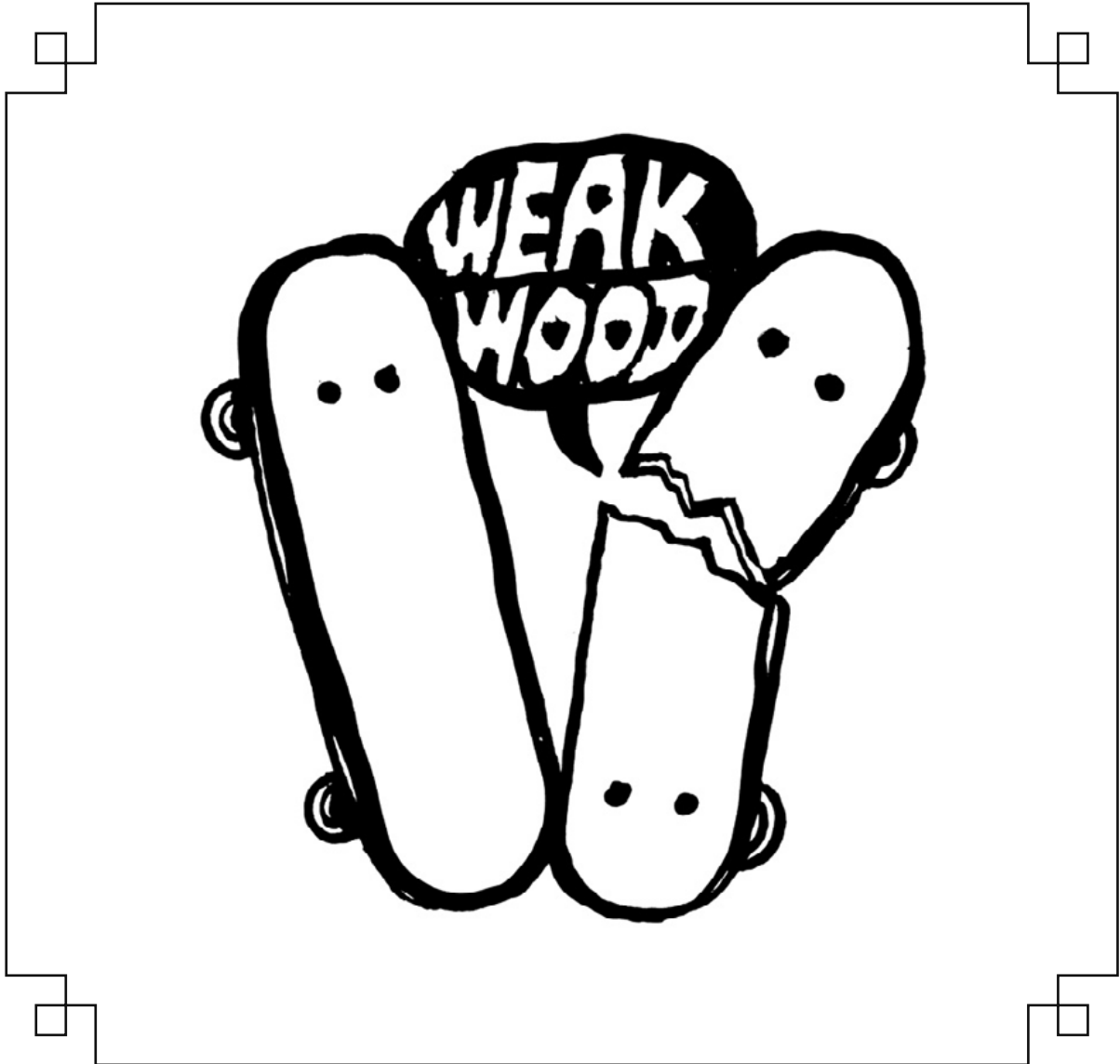
HOW TO BE BOTH

‘Ali Smith is an unrepentant stylist. *How to be both* reads as if she has summoned words from some region of the unconscious and released them in a trance. Smith’s fervent, vital, incantatory prose is entirely her own.’  
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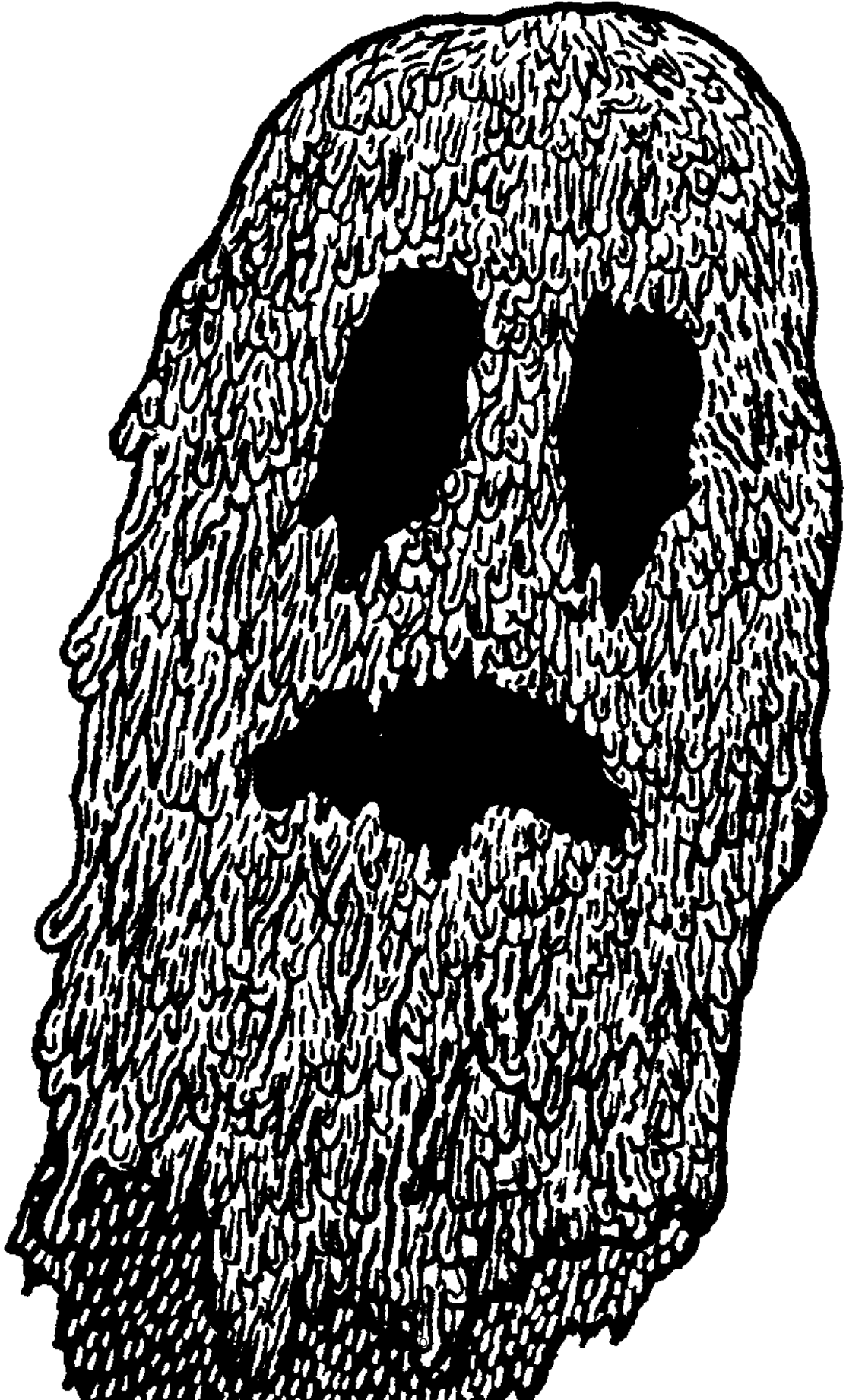
ADS THAT DON'T LOOK LIKE ADS



▲  
FICTION

# Bait

*by Colin Barrett*





This was a summer night about a thousand years ago and myself me and my cousin Matteen Judge were driving round and round and round the deserted oval green of Grove Park Estate, waiting to see what we would see. It was another bath of a summer's night, the moon low and full and hazed at the edges, as if the heat of the long day had thickened the medium of the air.

As was our custom, I manned the wheel while Matteen rode in rear, heaped like a flung coat in the far corner of the back seat. Nose glommed against the glass, he watched the rows of mute, single-storey houses slide by. There was a glaze on his forehead, a blue nauseated tinge to his pallor. Matteen was not well; inside, in his skull and chest, he was beset, I know, by that dolour of recollected feeling that can afflict any man who once loved some daffy yoke.

I knew something was up as soon as Matteen stepped out of the door of his house. Cue case in hand, I could see it, the thick wade to his gait, like he was walking through setting concrete. At the window of the car, the chest of his T-shirt already clouded with sweat-sop, he looked at me as if he did not know me and said one word.

'Sarah.'

'What about her?'

'Spin us up round Grove Park,' he commanded.

Sarah Dignan. The daffy yoke Matteen once loved. Grove Park was where she was out of.

We'd been circling the estate for nigh on half an hour. Sometimes Matteen twitched at his trouser pocket, withdrew his phone, but he sent no message and made no call. I pictured nervous estate mothers eyeing us through the slit of their curtains.

Sarah's house Matteen knew well, as did I of course, and Matteen was making a particular effort to pay it no particular mind.

They had been barely together, really, Matteen and Sarah. The series of fragile public excursions that constituted their official relationship lasted barely a fortnight. They began in Bleak Woods, where the boys and girls too young or too poor for the clubs gathered most Fridays, in the car park adjacent to the woods. The point of the nights in Bleak Woods was to get the shift. Music chugged from the open door of a parked car and there were tinnies and smokes as those to shift were determined and paired off. Shifting was a curiously bloodless, routinized ritual, involving lengthy arbitration by the friends of the prospective pairings, who, as in arranged marriages, did not so much as get to say hello until they were shoved into each other's arms and exhorted to take the dark walk into the maw of the woods. There, with that hello barely exchanged, each couple would find a sheltering bole to lean against or beneath, and commence their bodily negotiations.

Every lad wanted Sarah and it was Matteen who got her. They went into the woods and when they came back he was pale with elation and, out of sight of the others, vomited with excitement.

I asked him what happened, how far did he get.

He just shook his head.

They went out on a few dates thereafter, Matteen with his hand gripped about Sarah's wrist, his eyes brimming with the terror-tinged delight of a man who has got exactly what he wants. Nobody knew what to say to them. Unanimously flummoxed were we, Matteen's pack, and envious. Matteen did not know what to say to Sarah either, and she, characteristically, said almost nothing. Soon enough, to our relief, it ended. Sarah euthanized it, proffered no explanation. Matteen, crushed, did not pursue one. Its demise was built into the thing's inception, was the way he considered it at first; good things do not last, blah, blah. That was a year ago. And Matteen was fine for a bit, clinging to this stoic philosophical read, but the loss was hitting him constitutionally now.

Matteen rode in back for in addition to his burdens of sentiment he suffered acutely from travel sickness; the gentlest spin, no matter how brief or clement the run,

—

*He was beset, I know, by that dolour  
of recollected feeling that can afflict any man  
who once loved some daffy yoke.*

—

was enough to upset his inner equilibrium and turn his complexion oyster. The sickness was made worse in passenger, watching the world quail and judder at close quarters through the windscreen. The roomy seclusion of the back seat, part bed, part carriage, with his frame pitched nearly horizontal, was the only way Matteen could travel and not feel overwhelmingly ill. Hence this arrangement, and me as chauffeur.

On the seat beside Matteen was his cue case. The case was customized, a pebbled leather and stainless-steel-clasped affair in which Matteen spirited about his disassembled cues.

We were usually elsewhere by now. We were usually in town. We had a routine and the routine was this: each night I picked Matteen up from his home and conveyed him to Quillinan's pub of Main Street, where Matteen made his money. He was the town's premier pool shooter, nightly dispatching several challengers. Matteen's reputation ensured



a continuous supply of competitors, most of whom he had already beaten multiple times, all eager to stake a sum and watch in agonized reverence as he cleaned them out once more. Matteen was canny enough to lose now and then, purely to keep the flow of hopeful adversaries from petering out altogether, though he found it was those he destroyed most emphatically that were keenest to get back on the baize, to be destroyed all over again.

'Look, now,' he said, his voice drifting out of the back.

I squinted. The estate road was a trackless blot, but I saw them, the rakey flit of their darked-out shapes moving over the knoll. Girl shapes, one distinctly tall and one not, a pair.

'It's her,' I said.

'Of course it is,' said Matteen.

He said that and I thought I saw a flame, a flicker, but it was only her hair, high on her high head. Sarah Dignan was unnervingly tall for a girl, taller than me, clearing even Mat-



teen, who was six two. She was blonde, pale, unquestionably captivating in the face. Her beauty was anomalous, sprung as she was from an utterly mundane genetic lineage. Certainly there was no fore-sign, no presage of her beauty or her height, in her family, in her hair-covered pudding of a father and squat, rook-faced mother, nor in her older siblings. She was the youngest and only girl. Three older Dignan boys existed – broad, blunt and ugly. Temperament-wise, she was different too: the Dignan clan was country affable, ready to talk benign bullshit at the drop of a hat. Sarah was frosty, unpredictable, spoiled by the fact that attention never glossed over her; even when she tried to be reticent, she remained a relentless point of contention.

Given the incongruence in semblance and substance, theories concerning the Dignan girl's true origins and nature had regularly bubbled forth. Talk was that Sarah was a foundling from gypsy stock or an orphan from Chernobyl.

That during her birth her umbilical cord had tangled round her neck, asphyxiating and rendering her brain-dead for five minutes, thirty minutes, an hour, but that she had inexplicably come back. That she suffered from Asperger's or ADHD or was bipolar. That she was either, by the textbook definitions, a moron, or possessed a genius-level IQ. That she had gone through puberty at six, hence her inordinate height.

'Who's with her?' I asked.

'Jenny Tierney,' Matteen confirmed.

Jenny Tierney was Sarah's shadow, her tightest friend. Looks-wise, Jenny had no chance against the hogging nimbus of Sarah's beauty, but I liked Jenny, with her pageboy haircut, freckles and prosaic legs. She had these gaps between her teeth.

'What are we to do?' I asked Matteen.

'Slow for them. We'll talk.'

This I did, crawling up along them, pig-flashing the lights to persuade them to linger. This they did. Matteen buzzed down his window.

'Hello, creatures,' he said.

'Hello,' Sarah said. She was holding a naggin of vodka, a black straw sticking from it, handbag dangling from the other arm. Jenny had a naggin too.

'Haven't seen you in an age,' Matteen said.

'You look poorly,' Sarah said without actually looking at Matteen.

Matteen blinked his wet, heavy eyes. 'When don't I? What are you two up to tonight?' he asked.

Jenny said, 'None of your business.'

'Well, that's true,' Matteen said.

Sarah shrugged.

'Trawling for cock,' Jenny said.

'Hah,' Matteen said hahlessly, 'well-well-well, we can furnish you with a lift, at least.'

'You heading into town?' Sarah asked.

'Where else?' Matteen said. He opened the door on his side, shuffled across the back seat to permit ingress. Sarah stepped around to the front of the car instead, opened the passenger door. She stooped in, smiled at me, addressed Matteen across the headrests.

'I'm not sitting with you.'

'Why's that?' Matteen croaked.

'Because you'll try something,' she said, then looked again at me, 'but Teddy is harmless.'

'Teddy is a gentleman,' Matteen said.

'Teddy is too afraid to be anything other than a gentleman,' Sarah said. She had a short skirt on. She lifted the hem, and slid one long leg after another into the footwell, careful neither to expose a square inch of knicker nor spill a drop of naggin. Her hairline dented the rotting vinyl of the car's ceiling, necessitating a drawing down of her shoulders. She lifted her long-fingered hand into the vicinity of my head. I looked at the lined pink of her palm. She walloped me across the face, but playfully.

'Say "Thank you, Sarah,"' she said.

'Thank you,' I said.

She giggled, and fixed me with her blue eyes, a calculated simper.



'Oof,' Matteen said in a mild, impressed voice. Jenny bustled in beside Matteen. 'So Quillinan's it is, then?' Matteen said. 'Come watch me crucify a few?'

'Naaaaaawww,' Sarah said.

'Yeah,' Matteen said.

'Naaaaaawww,' Jenny said.

'You're in the car,' Matteen said, 'that's where the car's going.'

'You offered the lift,' Jenny said.

'You got in,' Matteen said. 'That's what passes for consent these days.'

Matteen led the way into Quillinan's, and I followed with the cue case, Sarah and Jenny behind. The irreverently elderly lined the bar, mostly fat men with dead wives, hefting pints into their bloated, drink-cudgelled faces. They did not seem to see us, certainly did not acknowledge us. We continued on into the pub's rear, into the adjoining extension where the pool table and a pile of young skins waited. There was a game ongoing. The in-situ players saw Matteen and raised their cues. Eyes caught sight of Sarah and Jenny and lads quickly retuned their postures, snapping into more assertive shapes.

I placed the cue case on a table and hurried back into the main pub to order our group a round of Cokes and ices – Matteen did not drink when he played. The girls did as girls do: panned the room, drew inscrutable conclusions behind inviolable expressions, and click-heeled it to the sanctum of the women's toilets.

Matteen flipped locks. From the case's velveteen interior he removed the split cue parts. He screwed one end into the other and worked the joint to a seamless squeak. He dabbed a speck of oil on to a muslin cloth and swabbed down the stick. There were a dozen lads around the table. Those who were to become that night's opponents rolled shoulders, flicked fingers by their sides.

Matteen addressed them.

'Five spot for a one-off game. Twenty for a best of three. Fifty for five. I am in no mood for fuckery,' he announced, the colour and conviction returned to his face, his voice assured, fluently cocky in this domain.

Brendan Timlin went first, losing his fiver in four minutes. Peter Duggan next. Best of three, gone in two rounds and eleven minutes. Doug Sweeney, best of three, gone in two rounds and fourteen minutes. So it went. An hour in and Matteen was up fifty-five quid even after the twelve Cokes he's bought me, himself and the two girls.

The girls, meanwhile, reappeared from the jacks midway through Matteen's second game and took a table facing conspicuously away from the action. Jenny was leaning into Sarah's shoulder. The gaps in her teeth gleamed as she talked. Sarah was meditating on a noticeboard mounted on the far wall, a flock of expired circulars advertising manure storage solutions and faith-healing sessions tacked to it. The pinned circulars palpitated whenever a body went in or out of the pub's back door, and Sarah flinched with them, even though the breeze from outside was as warm as the air inside.

The body of boys teetered away from Jenny and Sarah, cramping itself tight around the pool table; it was respect of a kind, this physical relinquishment of a defined space to the girls. Only I broached that space, and did so with prompt servility, replenishing the girls' Cokes as required and then withdrawing. The girls produced their naggins from their handbags and liberally dosed each new glass of Coke with vodka. They did not turn their heads to the games, even as the spectators grew more rowdy and voluble. From time to time Matteen sauntered by their table, to casually disclose how smoothly things were running.

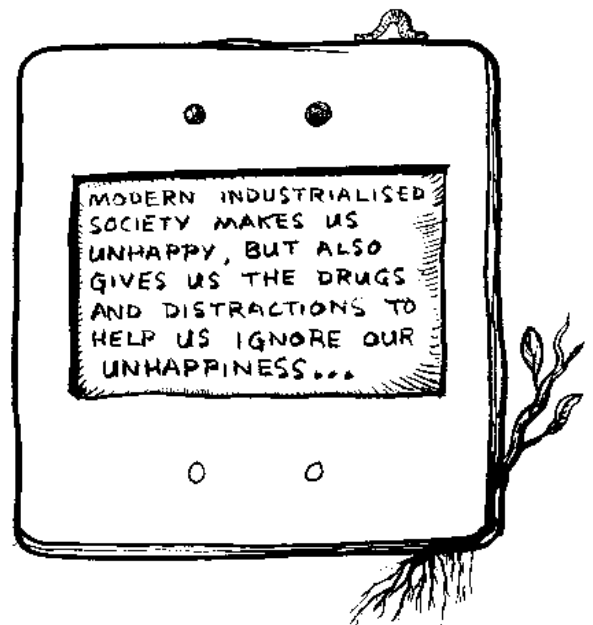
'Well, well done,' Sarah said.

'It's thrilling, isn't it?' Jenny said.

'These nights could go on for ever,' Sarah said.

'And if they did, you'd be a millionaire, boy,' Jenny said.

'It pays, these nights,' Matteen said, his cue slanted against his shoulder like a marching rifle.



'And they just keep coming,' Jenny says. 'They just keep coming, and they go on for so long.'

Sarah smiled. A single vertical wrinkle-pleat appeared in the centre of her forehead as she considered Jenny's statement.

'It's the heat,' Sarah said, 'the heat in the air makes the night last longer. You ever heard about dead bodies in the Sahara, in its hottest extremes? The sun cures the skins; they don't rot. The heat preserves them, mummifies them of its own accord.'

'Is it that hot out there?' Matteen chuckled, nodding towards the back door, our town's staid concrete heart beyond.

'We're not used to it, but,' Jenny said.

'I am,' Sarah said, yawning. 'Where we going after, anyways?'

Matteen kept his reaction to Sarah's question tamped

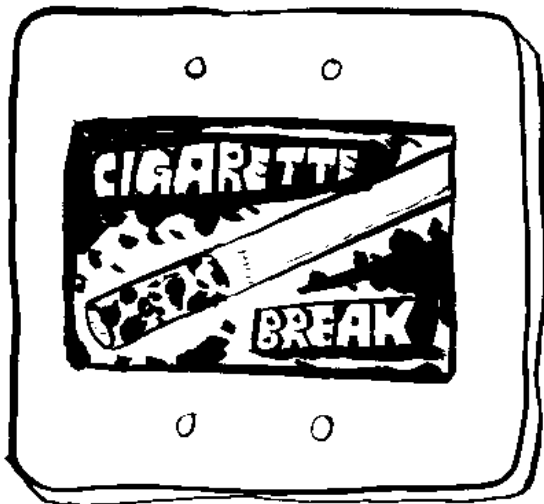
down tight, though even I felt a small thrill of approval.

'We'll see,' he said softly, and returned to the table.

'The woods,' Jenny said, 'the woods.'

Matteen walked past the money. He never touched the money. The defeated cast it on to the baize, crumpled notes and coins. It was me who snuffled the lucre up, who kept the running tally.

It was knocking on midnight when Nubbin Tansey, town tough and marginal felon, manifested on the premises. Matteen was up against Killian Weir as Tansey beelined our way, flanked by a couple of big units; ask the Gods for henchmen and this is what they would send: twin slabbed stacks of the densest meat, their breezeblock brows unworried by any worm of cerebration. Tansey himself was short, at twenty already balding. He had gaping, thyroidal eyes, the broad skull and delicately tissueed temples of a monk or con-



valescent. He had a tight T-shirt on, exposing veined biceps as tough and gnarled as raw root vegetables. He was chewing his own jaw and vibrating faintly in place, a bundle of seeping excess energies. He was likely on several substances.

'Judgeboy, the Judgeboy,' he said, slapping Matteen across his bent back as he stooped for a shot. Unperturbed, Matteen maintained his low, forward-bent stance, discharging his cue in a steady stroke. The central clot of stripes and solids unbunched, a swarm of balls scuffling thickly back from the cushions. The stripes—Matteen was always stripes—were hypnotic in their tumbling banded flicker. A stripe rolled into the top-left pocket, gone in a clean gulp, and the topside spheres slowed and stilled into a new arrangement on the green.

'Sweet,' Nubbin said, 'sweet, Judgeboy.'

'You'll be wanting a game, Tansey?'

'Maybe now,' Tansey said. 'Though I've a notion you'll

beast me.'

Matteen raised his Coke, took a sip. The crowd was beginning to disperse. The meeker lads were leaving while they could still do so unobtrusively.

'Can I apologize in advance?' Matteen said.

The girls had not yet turned round, but he knew they were listening.

'Don't condescend,' Tansey said, and smacked his lips. He studied the table's stationary scatter of balls. He picked up the white, rotated it in his hand. Matteen cleared his throat. Tansey put the ball back in place. He pulled the cue from the grasp of the boy Killian. One of Tansey's goons loaded the coin slots. The potted balls churned down out of the table's gut. The goon put the triangle on the baize, and clonkily set the balls in place.

I heard the bark of chair legs. Sarah and Jenny had twisted in the pool table's direction, interested now.

'C'mon so to fuck,' Tansey said.

'Be nice, Tansey,' Jenny said.

'I know you?' Tansey to Jenny.

Jenny shook her head. There was an amused, uncowardly venom in her eyes, watching Tansey as Tansey's eyes crawled down her, then up Sarah.

'The Dignan girl. I know you, but. I know your brothers. You're attached to this set?' he said, nodding at Matteen and me.

'Tonight I am,' Sarah said.

'I know your brothers, Dignan. Christ, you're some diamond pulled from a coal bucket, you know that?'

'She knows that,' Matteen said. 'Everyone knows that.'

'You're with him?' Tansey asked, eye rolling in Matteen's direction.

Sarah looked at Matteen. There is nothing worse than being pitied.

'Well, he's looped on you.' Tansey smiled, nodding again at Matteen. 'Plain to see.'

'We playing or what?' Matteen said.

'All right, all right. Go,' Tansey said, almost apologetically.

Matteen broke, potted a stripe from the break and then two more. His fourth shot he hit so viciously the stripe convulsed back up out of pocket, spun confusedly on its own axis, and died into place a foot from the hole.

'You hit that one too well,' Tansey said.

'You want to come off into the night with us once I thrash your buck?' he said to Sarah.

'It doesn't work like that,' Sarah said.

Tansey turned, the cue's end resting on the toe of his boot, the cue tip stabbing up under his chin. He considered Sarah. There were beads of sweat all over him. Tansey was looking right into Sarah's face. Not many do, or can.

'Don't ask, don't get,' he smiled.

Then he turned and bent low to the table, planted the fingers of his leading hand on the baize and placed the stick wobblingly on a knuckle ridge. Tansey seemed to be sincerely puzzling the shot, but when he fired the cue forward he drove the tip down and sliced a long rip through the cloth.

'Whoops,' he said, and stooped to shoot again. Again he gouged the baize.

'Ah would you just fuck off and leave us alone, Tansey,' Matteen said, paling in the face.

'There's no winning with some folk,' Tansey said.

He handed the cue back to the Killian boy.

'C'mon,' he said to Sarah, striding over to her and grabbing her hand. Tansey dragged her to her feet, but Sarah had a good foot on him. She loomed, throwing her head forward, down on to Tansey's chest. Tansey yelped like a pup. He stepped back from the tall girl. There was a dark blotch running from the chest of his T-shirt.

'Jesus, she bit him,' the Killian boy sniggered.

Tansey considered his wound, chin buried in his neck to see it. He looked up at Sarah. He did not look upset, exactly. Matteen glowered.

Tansey cupped the bit part of his chest.

'My titty,' he said.

Jenny got up, and now she grabbed Sarah's wrist.

'Let's go,' Jenny said, dragging Sarah out into the bar.

'Wait,' Matteen said, but the girls did not.

'Go on,' he said to me, 'get them back.'

'Me?'

'Catch up after them and attach yourself to the sole of one of them bitches' boots, like a good lad,' he said.

Matteen was clammy and pallid again. He reversed on to a bench and leant his weight upon his cue.

'This thing ain't stopping,' Tansey said. The blotch was running, widening.

'Stitches,' said one of the big units with him. 'Stitches and a tetanus shot.'

A rupture of laughter as I headed through to the bar, but the girls had already bolted from the premises.

I passed through the front door, into the street. It was warm out; warm and getting warmer, it seemed. We were enduring a marathon dry snap, a thirteen-day stretch of rainlessness unheard of in our otherwise perennially sodden clime. Water shortages bedevilled the farmsteads surrounding our town. Pasture had paled and browned, and in the open country you could stand by the side of an empty road and hear the massed dry ticking of the bramble ditches that fringed the fields. Cows grouped in the shadow patch thrown by a lone dollop of cumulus and followed that patch as the cloud drifted across the sky. Dogs nuzzled the undersides of stones, seeking the moisture clinging there. In town, pensioners staggered in a sunstroked trance from street to street and tried to recall their destination.

Now even the nights were bringing little respite.

I thought I saw them drop beyond the hump of Main Street's hill. I followed. I heard laughter, the clop of unsteady feet; I saw flickers of hair and shuttering legs. I followed them down Dandon Street, close but with a steady gap. They were talking, though I could not make out the words. They were letting me follow. They turned and vanished down Ridgepool Lane. Moss speckled the phosphorescent plaster of the lane's walls. I felt its damp fur against my hand. When I emerged from the lane I looked left and right but could not see the girls. I went stock-still, held my breath, and in the weave of the breeze I picked up their skeletal laughter again. I foraged forward, and knew where they

were going.

They were standing on the edge of the car park of Bleak Woods, waiting. They were facing me but there was no light, the car park was empty, and all I could make out were the disembodied ovals of what were their faces. The ovals floated in the dark and looked inchoate or on the verge of dissolution. Then they were turned from me and gone into the woods.

I had a horn by now, I'll admit. The horn had oriented itself upwards and was snagged in the waistband of my jocks, which acted as a kind of garrotte, sawing on the upper portion of the horn as I made my way into the trees. Obscenities, graphic recommendations, crowded my throat, but I did not let them out.

'Harmless,' I blurted, 'I'm harmless!'

And I was. Efficient deference was my singular mode of expression. I had never sought a status beyond that of sidekick or flunky, and in this way had achieved subtle indispensability. I was an adhesive creep to a degree, but Matteen needed me, as did the girls. I believed that. Who else would Matteen charge with pursuing these two into the night? Who else would these same girls permit to follow them into the woods?

There was no path. I moved from tree to tree and touched each trunk as I passed it. I had never been asked into these woods before. The trees felt like things that were alive, and I had to remind myself that they were. Leaves depended from the fingerlings of branch ends and brushed my face like dry, frail-veined moths. I stumbled onward over stones, over monstrous hanks of rooted scrub. The smell of the woods in summer was heavy around me, and it stank of fucking.

They blindsided me, crashed into me from behind. I was on my face on the ground, in the dirt, and there was a measured vicious hailing of my ribs from either side. I got on my back and something shattered across my forehead, a wetness sliding all over my face, the precise fire of vodka seeping into however many cuts now decorated my skin. Then there was a weight on my chest and something squeezing straight down on my throat. I was looking up, but I could see nothing through the burning wetness in my eyes. Consecutive wrenches at my thighs brought my pants down and the horn was out, sacked like a frowsy vagrant into the open.

I heard above me two-headed laughter and a voice, or voices:

*Oh, Teddy,*

*Teddy,*

*Teddy, we are*

*We are going to*

*suck*

*suck*

*the eyeballs! The eyeballs!*

*right out of*

*suck them!*

*right out of your face.*

And then more laughter, and I could not tell who had spoken and who was laughing, and if it wasn't for the boot flat against my Adam's apple I would have begged, go ahead, girls, I would have begged, do your worst.◊





# The Slow Walk

*Painter Margaux Williamson's new book, I Could See Everything, is a catalogue for an exhibit that never existed.*

*Five Dials: There are a few paintings of torsos in the new book. What makes the human torso so satisfying to paint?*

Margaux Williamson: A torso is one of the most basic, boring things you could paint. It's easy to see meaning in a face, but a torso is more of a challenge. When I was starting out with this series and was figuring out the aesthetic, this made it easier to see if there was any magic there.

But I wanted people there too, without having to think about directly about individuals.

*5D: You said recently you spend more time 'playing in my mind and less time using my hands.' Does that mean you're more sure of yourself and your ideas when you approach a canvas?*

MW: It means I'm more sure if something is going well or going wrong and I can stop painting more easily seeing evidence of the art there or abandon a painting more easily knowing the art is somewhere else. My hands have always been unhesitating, for better or for worse.

*5D: Why is the new book a catalogue for an exhibit that never was held?*

MW: Painting can sometimes be an introverted act that involves an extroverted fantasy – a fantasy that maybe one can see more clearly, or touch, or change, or rearrange the world by painting it. Paintings have always sort of been asking 'Is this real, or more real?' In the case of painting a banana you might be asking 'Can you see the value in this banal thing now that it is not exactly real?' Or, in the case of painting death personified engaged in killing a swan, you might be asking 'How are my instincts part of the real world?'

With all of us wondering now, in our world of computer screens, 'What's real and what's not real?' or 'What has value and what doesn't?' painting can be an ideal place, this flat place, to test out these questions of 'real' and 'value' as it's always done. 'What could be real?' sounds so optimistic as I say it, but binding your imagination only to what could be real can make you feel empowered but also painfully cautious and sometimes defeated.

But anyway, with so many contemporary options for representation, this painter's instinct to constantly press 'What's real, or what could be?' can now so easily extend beyond a painting. So a catalogue for an exhibit that was never held, about art made far away from the world while trying to touch it so desperately, was a natural extension of the work. Everything about the book is real, from the writers to the curator to the street the museum is located on, but it's not real, or it's as real as painting. Also this way, the work gets to stay together.

*5D: Why was it necessary to collect source material at the back of the book?*

MW: I always like to see what happens between an artist's first move and a finished painting. I like to be open about those things, even if the evidence or shorthand notes for those moves look like nonsense.

*5D: Are you relaxed when you paint?*

MW: It is the best place to be. But I'm trying to cultivate a similar feeling with the rest of life.

*5D: One of your paintings is entitled 'I thought I saw the whole universe (Scarlett Johansson in Versace).' You mentioned*

*elsewhere you tore out a picture of Scarlett Johansson from the New York Times Magazine but held on for years before using it. Are you holding on to any other images at the moment?*

MW: I just cleaned out my studio and was thinking about this. It's funny: you keep found images or stacks of notes or quick intuitive drawings or paintings for months or years and maybe one day you suddenly see or understand something great in some tiny fragment, or suddenly, very clearly, you see nothing at all. Seeing nothing can be a relief, emptying your studio and filling up the recycling box. And the things that remain or enter seem like friends or windows, so promising and mysterious.

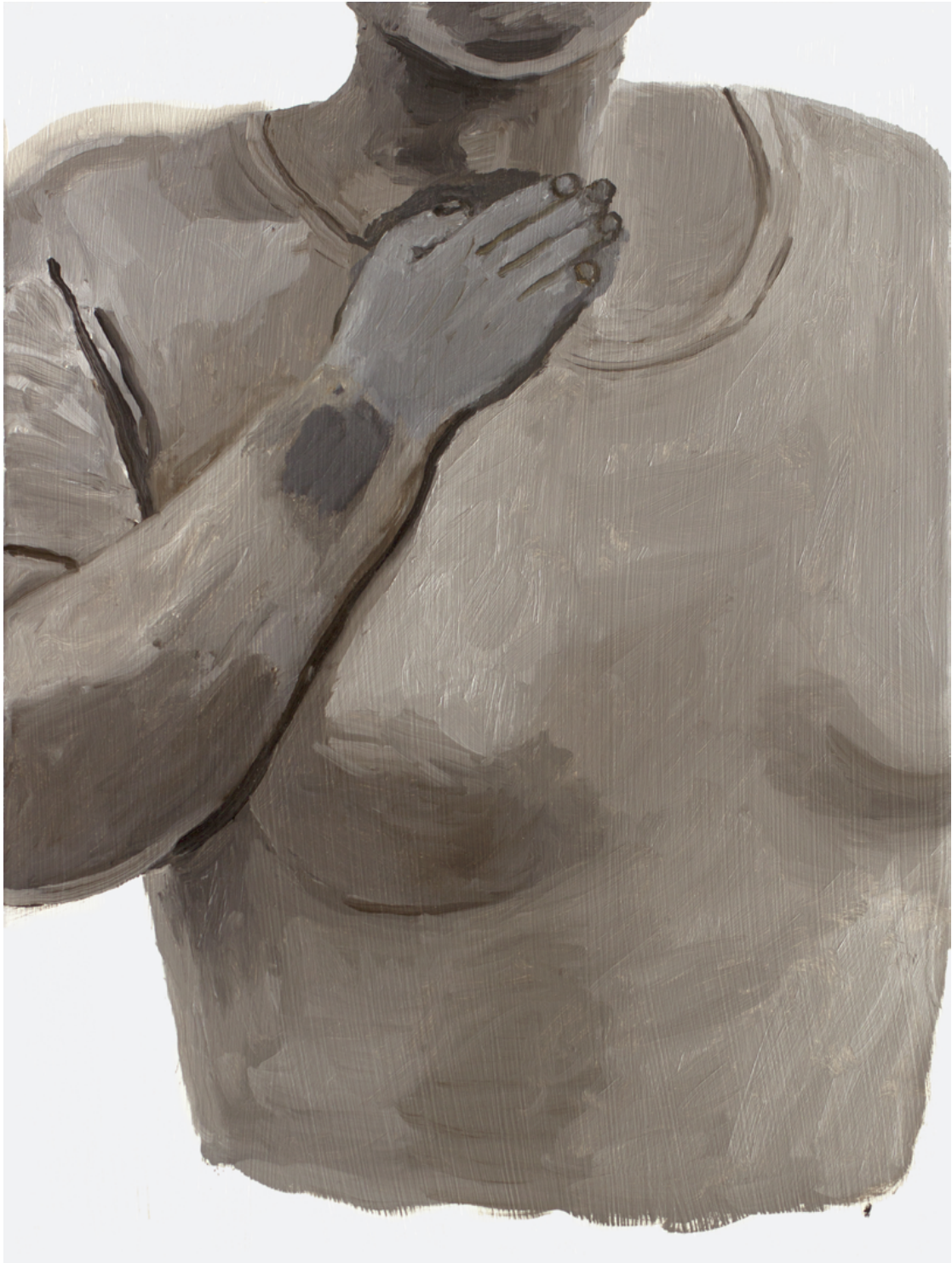
Right now I have a black and white photo of a bed from a mid century interior decorating book taped up above my computer. I have a old bad drawing of a tarot card with a no-face man juggling an infinity symbol on my computer desktop that I stare at between things. In my backpack I have a *Life* magazine special edition called 'Christianity' that for some reason looks like a big gold bar to me – who knows why, maybe tying together, through an obvious narrative, so many different kind of images from so many different times and places. It is nice sometimes 'reading' something on the streetcar that is only images, but not for their beauty or clarity or insight, but for the time and space they offer.

*5D: Does some source material need time to mature?*

MW: I need a lot of time catching up to my source material. My instincts and my hands are so fast. But for the rest of me, it is a slow walk up a mountain. ◊



WE BUILT A NEW JUSTICE ARCHWAY



THEY BLAMED THE DEVIL FOR EVERYTHING





I THOUGHT I SAW THE WHOLE UNIVERSE (SCARLETT JOHANSSON IN VERSACE)



AT NIGHT I PAINTED IN THE KITCHEN



DEATH STRANGLED THE SWAN





# Nick Hornby

*The author of Funny Girl and Stuff I've Been Reading on the challenges of reading stuff.  
A further installation in a series examining how writers get things done.*

*Five Dials: Where do you read? Where's the best place?*

Nick Nornby: I read in bed at night. I read in the bath and the loo. I do read at work, when I get stuck.

*5D: So when you're writing you'll take a break and read?*

NH: Or I'll start the day with a bit of reading. There are various points in the day where I will pick something up and read it – when I get off the Internet.

*5D: Because one of the themes of your book [Stuff I've Been Reading] is constancy, that every person should be reading all the time, that we should not stop.*

NH: Yes, and the book is also about how that can be a struggle. One of the beefs I have with a certain branch of publishing and literary criticism is that they simply don't accept that we find it hard to read, that we have lives that don't always accommodate reading. I'm sure your thousand-page translated Polish novel is fantastic, but it isn't going to happen. When you just say to people it isn't going to happen, for no other reason than that, there is a kind of person that says, 'Really?' And I say, 'Yeah.' I just know that I'm not going to do it. I recognize my own weakness. It is a recurring theme in the book, this running battle

with the boredom of reading at times, and the guilt of not reading, and the guilt of reading the wrong kind of book, whatever the wrong kind of book may be. Also, the guilt of reading the right kind of book and not enjoying it as much as you think you are going to enjoy it.

A story that I keep coming back to – I will name names because I am sure that the book is great. Jung Chang's biography of Chairman Mao came out maybe six or seven years ago. I knew lots of people who bought it with the best of intentions. Two friends were reading it. One friend said that she read two paragraphs before she fell asleep, but that it was great. I did the maths for her and said, 'It's a 700-page book and you're reading two paragraphs a night. Let's say that's two-thirds of a page. You are looking at a thousand nights. You're going to be reading this book for three years.' We think that somehow we are going to finish the following week. When I pointed this out to her, she just stopped reading the book. I felt bad.

This other guy who was reading it told me two things: one, that he got very excited one night when he picked it up and the bookmark was much further on than where he remembered. It turned out that one of his kids had dropped the book and had put the bookmark in the wrong place. It was a real downer when he found out.

*5D: So he opened the book and thought, 'What the hell is Mao doing now?'*

NH: Killing all these people!

*5D: He had seemed so nice as a twelve-year-old.*

NH: This guy also told me he dreamt that he had finished the book. It was this beautiful dream. When you get to the stage where it has entered your subconscious, the wish to have read a book, it might be time to stop.

*5D: I believe many people, myself included, are aspirational. There are times when I've come across books like Nixon and Kissinger and thought, 'Shouldn't I be the kind of person who reads this?'*

NH: That sort of aspiration is unique to reading, pretty much. If we do watch aspirational TV, the TV turns out to be quite entertaining. Is *Mad Men* aspirational TV, or *Breaking Bad*? You are done in an hour and there's lots of sex and drugs anyway. Aspirational books tend to carry this baggage of sometimes not being very interesting.

*5D: And then they become physical baggage because these are the books that you constantly take with you when you move. You look at them and think, 'Am I now going to be the person who gets rid of Nixon and Kissinger? Surely not.'*

NH: I think you should keep *Nixon and Kissinger*. You can have a fantasy about retirement and all sorts of things.

5D: *How's your concentration these days?*

NH: It's getting way worse. I am the perfect example of my age and of the times. I've got older and I can concentrate less, plus the Internet has turned me into an idiot. Again, I can't understand the people that say they read a book in a single sitting. I don't read anything in a single sitting.

5D: *Do you keep your phone nearby? Or can you get rid of your phone?*

NH: I'm not bothered by the phone. I am bothered about whether Arsenal are going to sign any new players to the team.

5D: *What kind of bookmark do you use?*

NH: I'm afraid I turn down the corner of

right at the beginning of the first volume of this book about Salinger. I can't remember how it had started but I suddenly found myself reading everything that he had written; he didn't write that much, so I read it quite quickly and got a biography of him, Ian Hamilton's biography *In Search of Salinger*, and then I started reading other stuff by Ian Hamilton. There was a documentary about Ian Hamilton on BBC Four and I thought, 'It's weird how we could plot this course.' So when Vendela asked me if I wanted to write about music, I said, 'No, but I would like to do this reading column where you just actually write about what you have read and how much you have read, how little you've read. If you've read nothing, say that you have read nothing, explain why.' At the time – I don't know if other people do the same sort of thing – I think that I was the only person being paid to read, but not to read any particular book. That felt to me to be quite interesting because you weren't stuck

'OK, bring it on ...' And then, 'Yeah, I was right.' This is so boring, or this is so over-written, it's got this wrong and that wrong. That, I stopped. I just cut that out, which was much easier to do than I could possibly have anticipated and incredibly liberating. So I think that you see when the book is bought, that there are probably a lot of books missing that were the big books of the last five or six years which I haven't bought and I haven't read because I knew that it wasn't going to happen.

And then the other thing that happened was that I stopped very quickly because I knew that I had to write the column – which for those of you who haven't seen the column, I try and write about three or four books a month. I am sort of conscious of time marching by each month and thinking, 'This book's going really slow' or 'I'm not enjoying this enough, I'm going to stop now and pick up something else.' That too was incred-

### *I started to read books which I knew I would like. That changed my reading life.*



the page. I do. I don't even care.

5D: *Let's move on to the origin of the project. Could you talk a little bit about how this started, how the column itself started?*

NH: I had already met Dave Eggers and Vendela, his wife, who is the editor of the *Believer* in the US. I remember they were showing me the magazine when they were preparing the first issue. I said, 'Oh, it's really beautiful, it's such a beautiful magazine, it looks so great. It must be such fun to write for that magazine.' This was met straight away with a resounding silence. Nobody offered me anything. I think that they were just being polite. Vendela emailed me to ask if I would write a column about music for the magazine. I had just quit writing about music for the *New Yorker*, which was the job I probably hated most as a writer.

I had just gone on this reading jag that was

to the now, you could pick up anything that you wanted, say that you are giving it up. And then we had this issue right at the beginning, because the *Believer* is a lovely magazine, and they said, 'You can't be snarky about anybody,' and I had read a novel early on where I liked the book but I think that I had made a couple of gags, and Vendela said, 'This is a bit near the knuckle for the magazine. Can you rewrite? Can you take the snarky bits out?'

Then something really interesting happened, which was that I started to read books which I knew I would like. That changed my reading life.

5D: *How?*

NH: Because if you are honest with yourself, a lot of the time you pick up books to go, 'I bet this is no good.' The number of times that I have read new books that have had amazing reviews and you think,

ibly liberating. I'd give something twenty pages and quit. It completely changed my reading life for the better.

5D: *Describe the sensation of quitting.*

NH: Well, I've done it recently. I did it with a literary novel last week, in fact, that a lot of people have been going on about. I know this sounds extremely stereotypical, but in the first three pages of the book there was an unbelievable mistake, an anachronism, which was actually linked to the expression 'red card'. This opening section of the book seemed to be set in 1914, with something about a 'red card' in there. The chances were that if the author was going to make that mistake within the first two pages, I was going to be severely bugged by other things. It is something that drives me mad, anachronisms.

5D: *In Stuff I've Been Reading you talk*



*about your favourite book and you say that the best thing to do with favourite films and books is just to leave them be.*

NH: If, when you are nineteen, you read a book that completely knocks you for six, that changes your life and makes you decide to be this person or that person, or that does you some good with members of the opposite sex, it was the right book at the right time in the right place. I don't think that that situation can possibly be recreated, not when you are thirty or forty or seventy years old. I think it's best really to keep looking for the next book that is going to do that at this time of your life. I'm not a big rereader, because I am very frightened of all of the things that I haven't read. Not frightened, not intimidated, I just want to read as many as I can in the time that I have left. So the rereading thing doesn't work for me anyway. I have been struck by reading a book for the second or third time and

grief, and you think, 'I really don't want to deal with it any more in fiction, I have to deal with it in life.' Hardy is someone that I am glad I read when I was younger; I would never go back to him now.

Although again this thing with reading, how much do you remember? My memory is OK, but quite often when you think back on things you've read, you are only left with the sensation of having loved that book and maybe a couple of scenes in it. It's a big question, and a good question: what good does reading do in the long run?

5D: *In your discussion of Michael Ondaatje's Coming Through Slaughter, you mention the book leaves you with a sort of ache that non-fiction can never provide. Explain that ache.*

NH: It's a musical thing, I think. There is a certain type of fiction that does recreate the feeling you get from music and you

imagination. Then he wrote a book about childhood reading, which I quoted from. Then he wrote a book about . . . what was after?

5D: *Defending Christianity?*

NH: Well, that's his new one. It turns out he is a very articulate Christian, and it's a really good and quite scary book. He wrote a novel about the Soviet five-year plans at the end of the fifties, beginning of the sixties, and a non-fiction book about English boffins. And he cheerfully jokes that each book is becoming another spadeful of earth on his coffin.

He's just finding ways not to be read.

5D: *Well, he needs people like you to stop writing down his quotes . . .*

NH: This is from his book *The Child That Books Built*, about him reading as

### *I had a much greater tolerance for pretension.*



thinking, 'God, I was so young when I thought that this book was incredible and I didn't notice this about it, I didn't notice that it was overwritten.' I think also I had a really much greater tolerance for pretension and I thought that that was what you had to do, that you had to swallow bucketloads of it – in film and in books – if you were going to get anywhere, and I have much less patience for that now.

5D: *Thomas Hardy is one of the authors in the book you are not going back to.*

NH: That scene in *Jude the Obscure* I remember finding completely thrilling when I was a teenager, thinking, 'Oh my God, this is real life, where people are so unhappy that their children kill themselves.' There was something very exciting about that scene. But then, of course, as you get older and life becomes more difficult and starts to involve those kinds of difficult situations, we all go through loss and

have it all the time that you are reading the book, and maybe the sensation stays with you a while after. And I think, in the end, that is the real value of fiction. There are memorable characters, of course, and great lines, but I think it is about feeling, and feeling with intelligence. There is a lot of non-fiction that is like that, the really great memoirs of the last twenty to thirty years, which have that as well. There is only a certain kind of non-fiction which I read for information.

5D: *In the book you include a lengthy quote by Francis Spufford. The quote struck me. It obviously struck you.*

NH: This is another amazing book by an English writer, Francis Spufford, whose career I have followed closely. And he has had the maddest career, I think. His first book was a compendium of lists called *Cabbages and Kings: Lists in Literature*. Then he wrote a book about ice and the English

a kid: 'When I caught the mumps, I couldn't read; when I went back to school again, I could. The first page of *The Hobbit* was a thicket of symbols, to be decoded one at a time and joined hesitantly together. By the time I reached *The Hobbit's* last page, though, writing had softened, and lost the outlines of the printed alphabet, and become a transparent liquid, first viscous and sluggish, like a jelly of meaning, then ever thinner and more mobile, flowing faster and faster, until it reached me at the speed of thinking and I could not entirely distinguish the suggestions it was making from my own thoughts. I had undergone the acceleration into the written word that you also experience as a change in the medium. In fact, writing had ceased to be a thing – an object in the world – and become a medium, a substance you look through.'

5D: *Why did you choose the quote?*





NH: Because it absolutely brought back my experience of learning to read, from a very deep place. You can't remember learning to read, you wouldn't have thought, and one of the things I think is amazing about that passage is that he clearly can recollect. It's that feeling of swimming, of things being lumpy and not being able to move, and it getting faster and faster until you are moving through the words like air. I found it a thrilling description of something that most of us have lost all memory of.

5D: *Like jelly . . .*

NH: The jelly is really good.

5D: *I think of your books and I think of fluency, this idea that the story should move, the language should serve the story, that there is a way of taking the reader through the book at a good pace so that readers aren't slowed by lumpy jelly.*

5D: *And they are big books.*

NH: I think that they're weirdly beautiful. They're about town planning, they're about rationing and they're about bi-elections. His project was to start writing about Britain as soon as the Second World War ended up until the night that Thatcher was elected. He writes about our country changing month by month and he does that in any way that he can. He finds any sources he can for it. His research makes you laugh because . . . it's not a name that will mean anything to you, but at one point he quotes from Geoff Capes's autobiography. But what kind of social historian quotes from the biography of a shot-putter? One thing you have to understand about Britain is that we love anyone who wins. There was a point when all we had was Geoff Capes. We've been very interested in ice dancing, heptathlon, especially in the seventies and eighties when we only had two sports people who were capable

realize that as I get older, my chief interest really is in the creation of art. I want to know how it's done. I want to know how it is done in any field: music, art, film. What I don't want to read is slightly airy guff about how these things make you feel; I want to know technically how something is achieved. When you can get people talking about the nitty-gritty, where you place the mics to get a drum sound or where the inspiration for a particular novel came from at a particular time in a writer's life, it just feels like you are getting the actual stuff. That book is really good for that.

5D: *Do you do that? Could you have someone sit down and say, 'Let's go through this technique,' or is there a danger in getting too close to the idea of creation?*

NH: I don't think that there is that much to say about writing. There's a lot to say about sources and influences and where

### *Most of the time I want to look through the language at the world.*



NH: Well, it's the writing I most like as a reader. I know that lots of people like reading a certain kind of fiction for the language, but most of the time I want to look through the language at the world, and I think deep down that it's the writing we are most happy with.

5D: *Let's move on now to non-fiction. There's a great section in the book where you talk about David Kynaston and the book Austerity Britain, and you are very enthusiastic about it. It seems that if there's an ache that happens when you read fiction, something different is happening when you really appreciate non-fiction. In this section you talk about a kind of alchemy where he's able to quote from Roy Hattersley, Bill Wyman and Elizabeth David in the same paragraph. Is that the satisfaction that you get from non-fiction? Or is it something different from that?*

NH: I've read all three of David's books

of winning a gold medal. I think he is a remarkable man, David Kynaston, and I think that there is poetry in that book, even though it quotes bits of the local paper and bits of local planning acts.

5D: *So that kind of composition, that kind of knitted-together composition, gives you great satisfaction as well?*

NH: Yeah.

5D: *Another great book is the Walter Murch, called The Conversations, and in your book you describe it as 'the book for anyone who is interested in the tiny but crucial creative decisions that go into the making of anything at all'. This is a book about editing film, so how does the experience of reading a book like that help you? When you read something like that, does it help your screenwriting? Does it help your fiction writing?*

NH: I'm not sure. All I know is that I

things came from. I don't think anyone has managed to say anything particularly interesting about the actual putting together of a book. You wouldn't want to read a non-fiction book about the writing of a book. I don't think you could sustain interest because it really is sitting in a room and crafting sentences. But you can write a whole book about the making of a movie, the making of an album, because collaborative work in particular lends itself to that kind of discussion and the happenstance of collaborative work.

5D: *They just released a twentieth anniversary of In Utero, the Nirvana album. I was listening to the engineer talk about where the mic was placed – it was a lot more powerful than listening to a writer talk about anything.*

NH: That's the thing. In the end, writers always have to reach for some kind of guff about where something came from. That's all they've got. ◊

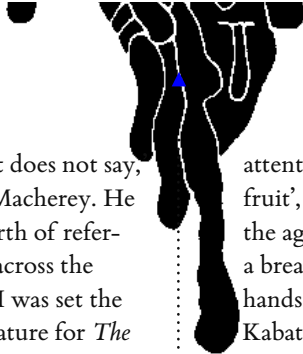


FOOD AND DRINK

# A Clear Mirror to the Rays of Things

*What books teach us about breakfast. By Emily Berry*





‘**W**hat is important in the work is what it does not say, according to Marxist theorist Pierre Macherey. He probably was not referring to the surprising dearth of references to the ‘most important meal of the day’ across the literary canon – but he *could* have been. When I was set the task of writing a chapter on breakfast and literature for *The Breakfast Bible*, I of course turned immediately to *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* and *Breakfast of Champions*, surely the leading breakfast texts of the twentieth century. In fact there is no breakfast whatsoever in Capote’s novella, merely the notion of it, and Vonnegut’s satirical title refers to the catchphrase one of his characters, a cocktail waitress, uses whenever she serves a customer a martini. These, I concluded, were not wholesome examples of literature’s take on breakfast. Even Shakespeare has very little to say about it, beyond the valiant flea’s and one or two other fleeting mentions. Wilkie Collins, in the *The Moonstone*, tells us: ‘Whatever happens in a house, robbery or murder, it doesn’t matter, you must have your breakfast.’ Unfortunately it seems a great many writers were too busy recounting robbery and murder to mention breakfast at all.

This means that when breakfast does make an appearance in literature, it’s usually out of the ordinary, a breakfast of note. It might be absurdly excessive, like the banana-fest in Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*, which includes ‘banana omelets, banana sandwiches, banana casseroles, mashed bananas molded into the shape of a British lion rampant’, not to mention ‘tall cruets of pale banana syrup’ and ‘a giant glazed crock where diced bananas have been fermenting since the summer with wild honey and muscat raisin’, or piously austere, as in Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*, where the little women in question donate their festive breakfast to a family of poor Germans: ‘That was a very happy breakfast, though they didn’t get any of it; and when they went away, leaving comfort behind, I think there were not in the city four merrier people than the hungry little girls who gave away their breakfasts, and contented themselves with bread and milk on Christmas morning.’ It might be comic, tragic, sublime or (like many poet’s breakfasts) contemplative. As the Canadian poet Gwendolyn MacEwen observed: ‘we are dangerous at breakfast, at breakfast we / investigate the reasons for our myths / viciously’. If breakfast is, as Hunter S. Thompson called it, a ‘psychic anchor’, then the job of literary breakfasts is to unmoor us from the routines we move through daily, unseeing, and look at the world afresh.

It is unsurprising that, as the first meal of the day, breakfast should be associated with newness and freshness. Mary Lamb (who, contradicting McEwen, was clearly more dangerous at *dinnertime*, when she murdered her own mother) called it ‘that welcome of new-born days’, while George Eliot had her character Mr Irwine opine in *Adam Bede* that breakfast is ‘better than any other moment in the day’ because ‘no dust has settled on one’s mind then, and it presents a clear mirror to the rays of things’. The most invigorating literary breakfasts revel in the sensory aspects of the experience of breakfast, reminding us how novel even the most familiar experiences can be if we only pay more

attention to them. Craig Raine’s ‘Meditation on a Grapefruit’, which begins: ‘To wake when all is possible / before the agitations of the day have gripped you’ takes us through a breakfast of grapefruit in a ‘devout / involvement of the hands and senses’ – what mindfulness meditation guru Jon Kabat-Zinn would call ‘moment-to-moment awareness’. You will want to eat a grapefruit, or at the very least hold one, after reading this poem. The ‘cloud of oil / misting out of its pinprick pores’, each ‘single pearly cell’, the ‘cold blue china bowl’ . . . Meanwhile, other poets have made a fetish of the yellow/orange items on the breakfast table, as if to recall the rising of the sun and all its associated symbolism. Amy Lowell’s poem ‘Spring Day’ celebrates a ‘stack of butter-pats, pyramidal’, which ‘shout orange through the white, scream, flutter, call: “Yellow! Yellow! Yellow!”’; Billy Collins notes in ‘Cheerios’ how ‘a bar of sunlight illuminated my orange juice’; and Dorothea Grossman in ‘I allow myself’ basks in ‘the quiet glow of the marmalade’. These are poems which bring breakfast, and the person eating it (or reading about it) back to life.

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*Unfortunately it seems  
a great many writers were too busy  
recounting robbery and murder  
to mention breakfast at all.*

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As such, the unhappier breakfasts in poetry tend to be those in which routine is foreground and sensory potential neglected. Jacques Prévert’s desolate poem ‘Breakfast’ relates a silent breakfasting partner who coldly makes and drinks coffee in a perfunctory manner: ‘He poured the coffee / Into the cup / He poured the milk / Into the cup of coffee / He added the sugar / To the coffee and milk [. . .] Without speaking to me / Without looking at me’, before going out into the rain. Similarly Frank O’Hara’s brief ‘Melancholy Breakfast’ takes no pleasure in the experience but presents breakfast items as extensions of the speaker’s introspection: ‘the silent egg thinks / and the toaster’s electrical / ear waits / [. . .] the elements of disbelief are / very strong in the morning’. In a more surreal take, Helen Ivory’s poem ‘The Breakfast Machine’ imagines breakfast as a relentless cycle of repetitions controlled by a mechanical chicken who shrieks ‘with a voice like grating glass // *Scrambled, poached, boiled, / Scrambled, poached, boiled*’, dispensing with the human body entirely.

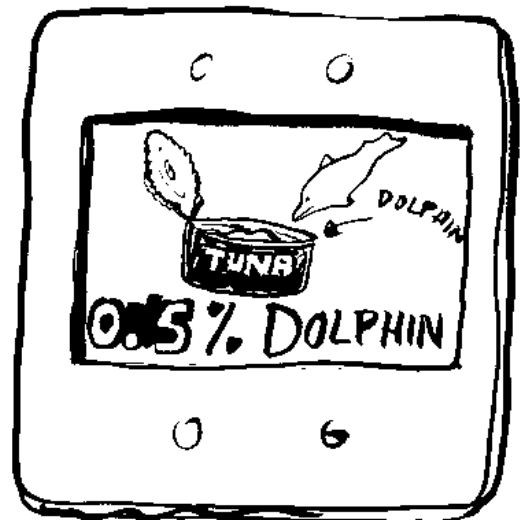
Another way of looking at the world afresh is to laugh at it, and in the right hands, breakfast can be very funny. The funniest breakfasts in literature generally revolve around upper-class characters – perhaps because this guarantees a preponderance of breakfast materials, which is usually crucial to the joke. Also, there is something inherently amusing about the British upper classes. It's never hard to find a sausage funny, and as soon as there's an aristocrat involved, well, you're laughing. P. G. Wodehouse was the master of such juxtapositions. Wodehouse himself stressed the importance of breakfast to his morning routine (which involved calisthenic exercises followed by toast and honey or marmalade, a slice of coffee cake and a mug of tea – and a 'breakfast book', no less) and his famous creation Bertie Wooster is quite an advocate, crediting the finer points of his character to the first meal of the day: 'It's only after a bit of breakfast that I'm able to regard the world with that sunny cheeriness which makes a fellow the universal favourite. I'm never much of a lad till I've engulfed an egg or two and a beaker of coffee.' It is in the great seriousness of the business of breakfast (most particularly the English breakfast, and its associated rituals) that the greatest comedy is to be found. The below quotation from Jerome K. Jerome's *Three Men in a Boat* acts as a reminder that, above all things, to be human is also to be a little bit ludicrous:

Harris proposed that we should have scrambled eggs for breakfast. He said he would cook them. It seemed, from his account, that he was very good at doing scrambled eggs. He often did them at picnics and when out on yachts. He was quite famous for them. People who had once tasted his scrambled eggs, so we gathered from his conversation, never cared for any other food afterwards, but pined away and died when they could not get them.

The ludicrous nature of the human being is further demonstrated in a subgenre of the comedy breakfast – the hungover breakfast, when seeing the world anew is otherwise known as the cold light of day. There is a historic link between hangovers and breakfast, to which the famously self-indulgent Samuel Pepys bears early witness. On 22 June 1660, he recounted a particularly wobbly morning: 'To Westminster to my lord's: and there in the house of office vomited up all my breakfast, my stomach being ill all this day by reason of the last night's debauch.' And what breakfasts they were – among the morning meals Pepys's diaries record are 'Mackrell, newly-ketched', 'cold turkey pie and a goose', a 'coller of brawne', 'a good slice of beef or two' and on one occasion 'a noble breakfast, beyond all moderation, that put me out of countenance – so much and so good'. Another notable hungover breakfast scene can be found in Kingsley Amis's novel *Lucky Jim*, where the main character Jim Dixon, having overcome his initial nausea after 'a study of the egg and bacon and tomatoes opposite him made him decide to postpone eating any himself', finally exits the breakfast room in style: 'He darted back to the sideboard, picked up a slippery fried egg and slid it into his mouth whole.' Perhaps literature's most singular hangover/breakfast

collision, though, takes place in Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting*, when the unfortunate Spud has a terrible accident involving his substantially soiled bed sheets and his girlfriend's breakfasting family. However, if seeing the world afresh involves such sights, we may wish to avert our gaze . . .

Still, if literature has anything to teach us about breakfast, it is that a happy breakfaster is one who meets every breakfast like a new day and makes the most of its every moment, like the migrant worker in John Steinbeck's short story 'Breakfast', who didn't just wolf his food but 'filled his mouth and chewed and chewed and swallowed' before pronouncing, 'God Almighty, it's good.' The authors of children's books (who after all are catering to people in the breakfast of their lives) know well that breakfast, no matter how familiar a meal, is a special time, redolent of infinite possibility – like childhood itself. 'It's like magic!' and 'Too good to be true!' are among the exclamations of the Famous Five as they sit down to just the breakfast they had been



hoping for in *Five Go on a Hike Together*. However old we are, we can learn from this – breakfast is best approached with a 'beginner's mind'.

'When you wake up in the morning, Pooh,' said Piglet at last, 'what's the first thing you say to yourself?'

'What's for breakfast?' said Pooh. 'What do you say, Piglet?'

'I say, I wonder what's going to happen exciting today?' said Piglet.

Pooh nodded thoughtfully.

'It's the same thing,' he said.

This commendable attitude surely represents the best approach to breakfast that literature has to offer. As a great writer ought to have said: 'A person who is tired of breakfast is tired of life.' ◊

## After the Setback

*Can we make our pets better? By Benjamin Rachlin*

One morning this fall, Douglass, a miniature poodle recovering from shoulder surgery, showed up at Needham Animal Hospital, in Wilmington, North Carolina, for an appointment. Douglass was in tough shape. He had been in and out of casts for over a year, and, because the injured leg had fallen into disuse, now had severe muscle atrophy, plus a carpal contracture – his wrist joint was flexed permanently inward, like a candy cane. . .







He had learned to hop around awkwardly on three legs, clutching his front left paw uselessly to his chest. To his owners, Tom and Cindy, this did not seem like a very good life for a dog, and they wondered if he would ever heal. They had considered giving up. Options for a pet like Douglass were limited, if they existed at all, Tom and Cindy knew. Then they heard of Dianne Logan, who had founded the Wilmington Animal Fitness and Rehabilitation Center and had worked on cases like Douglass's before.

Dianne and her rehabilitation centre occupy one and a half rooms near the front of Needham Animal Hospital, a creamy blue and white building only yards inside the southern border of Wilmington. In the lobby are usually dogs, gasping and yelping and scrambling on the tile floor, their leashes taut; or cats, blinking silently; or birds, screeching through the slats of cages. One wall is filled with notices for lost pets. There are also guinea pigs for sale and business cards or brochures for groomers, training centres, invisible fences, and pet health insurance; there are bright rows of leashes and collars, and PRESCRIPTION DIET formula designed for feline dental health; there are employee customer-service evaluations in the cut-out shapes of doggy bones. On one of my visits, in early September, Dianne told me she thought Douglass could likely be made whole again, with the help of an underwater treadmill, which she described to me as the Cadillac of her equipment. Dianne is a lively woman with thick, close-cropped mahogany hair. Her small office overflows with props: inflatable balls and tubes, pads of memory foam, balance boards, harnesses, a small trampoline. The underwater treadmill is unique, though, in that it exercises muscles and joints without requiring they fully bear weight; because water is nearly eight hundred times denser than air, it can provide both buoyancy and resistance. The treadmill is encased in chest-high plastic walls; with a mounted control pad, Dianne can fill it with warm water, adjust its depth and speed, or drain it within just a few seconds.

Before bringing Douglass into the water, Dianne tried to stretch his injured limb, but Douglass growled and bared his teeth, so Dianne and her assistant, Shana, decided to warm him up first. Shana let herself through the plastic door of the treadmill wearing water shoes and nylon shorts, holding Douglass in the crook of her elbow. When the tank was filled to her thighs, she deposited Douglass in the water, keeping a loose grip on his leash. He began swimming around in circles, his front paws plopping and splashing water over the walls. Through the transparent plastic I could see his stroke was much shorter with the injured leg. Every five minutes or so Shana picked him up for a rest, and pulled his paw out in front of him to stretch it. After a few cycles of this, they drained the tank and Douglass stood there, drenched and shivering, until Shana towelled him off and brought him into Dianne's office. There they adapted a cat splint for Douglass's injured leg, and with this bandaged to his ankle he was able to bear weight gingerly as they led him around with treats. By following this regimen, Dianne told me, she expected Douglass would soon return to walking, and could resume the normal life of a pet. This news

changed Tom and Cindy's outlook entirely. Only weeks earlier, their choice had been either to put Douglass down, or allow him to persist in likely suffering. Now a third option had emerged: that Douglass might actually be made better.

Tom and Cindy weren't the only ones, either. When Douglass was gone, Dianne and Shana brought in Daisy, a seven-year-old bulldog who snorted and gurgled as she shambled unevenly towards the treadmill. Her fur was a half-inch shorter over her left hip, which I recognized as a sign of surgery. I thought Daisy looked remarkably calm when the water started filling, her cheeks drooping as she looked around, bored. Her owners, Eric and Martha, told me their daughter had brought Daisy home from college, but then had left to become a schoolteacher in the city, where she couldn't take a dog. Daisy had stayed behind with her parents. Since then she had undergone several eye surgeries, in addition to this hip problem. Still, Martha said that in fact it was a good thing Daisy had ended up with them, because she didn't think anyone else would spend the money to care for her. Daisy's uncertain health meant that, without rehabilitation, she almost certainly would have been euthanized. But Eric and Martha considered Daisy a member of their family, and were glad to care for her accordingly. Today they stood at the head of the treadmill and encouraged Daisy on as gradually the dog took longer strides. It was amazing how much the animals seemed to self-correct after only a few minutes in the water. Soon Daisy looked to be walking normally. Then she tired visibly: her strides shortened, her head dropped, and she drifted towards the rear of the treadmill. When Shana towelled her off, she could be heard panting. But on the walk back to Dianne's office, each of Daisy's steps seemed increasingly assured.

Given all the patients Dianne meets on a given day, it is easy to forget this is not her first career. In fact she is in the third phase of her professional life. Before this, she managed a television station for twelve years; then she retired at thirty-five, moved to Topsail Beach, and, she told me vaguely, 'travelled and all that'. Then Dianne turned fifty. Worried that she lacked purpose, and that her achievements had ended fifteen years earlier, she decided she would volunteer. On New Year's Day she found a list of opportunities in the local newspaper, circled each one that interested her, and realized every choice had to do with animals. She settled on a therapeutic horseback-riding programme in Castle Hayne, twenty miles west. 'I didn't know anything about horses,' she told me, 'but I loved it.' Then she called Pineview Veterinary Hospital, in Bolton, where in addition to horses they had cows, alpacas and a bison, and asked if she could volunteer to ride. A veterinarian there, who normally rode, had just given birth; they couldn't afford to pay Dianne, but they could use a volunteer. Dianne agreed. A month later she was on the payroll. Then she decided to attend school part-time to become a registered veterinary technician. She was especially interested in alternative modes of healing, like equine massage, and soon she discovered there was such a thing as

animal rehabilitation, physical therapy for animals. Only two programmes in the world offered degrees in the field: the University of Tennessee and the Canine Rehabilitation Institute, in Wellington, Florida. And Tennessee was only one state west.

Dianne's classmates at Tennessee were veterinarians, veterinarian nurses, veterinary technicians or physical therapists from all over the globe. When she finished, she looked around her home in Topsail Beach for a veterinary hospital that might be interested in opening a rehabilitation centre. While pursuing her technician degree, she had worked at Needham Animal Hospital, over in Wilmington, and she remembered the owning veterinarian there, Nathan Batts, had been supportive. 'I was a little sceptical at first,' Batts told me, when I asked him what had been his first impression. He himself had attended veterinary school barely two decades ago, when rehabilitation had not existed. Dianne's

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work 'was far-fetched from anything we'd ever learned before', he admitted. But he knew that rehabilitation made a lot of sense for surgery patients. Treatment for such injuries had long been immobilization: if it was injured, the logic went, stay off it. But human doctors already had discovered consequences to this model, including diminished flexibility and muscle atrophy, which were obvious in a case like Douglass's, the miniature poodle recovering from shoulder surgery. A reset bone looks cleaner on an X-ray, but if the surrounding ligaments and muscle are damaged from weeks of non-use, what good is it for? Veterinarians had been slower to realize the consequences of immobility could outweigh its benefits. Still, in some cases this was the only option. Certain injuries could only be repaired surgically.

Batts knew, too, that alternative healing was an emerging field in veterinary medicine, and he had heard of veterinarians who offered acupuncture and chiropractic care. He realized there were patients the existing model didn't accommodate: beyond surgery, or drugs to mitigate pain, veterinary

care didn't have much to offer for injuries. Physical therapy wasn't a new idea, either – it was ubiquitous in human medicine. 'You do anything and you're a human, and you're in rehab,' Batts told me, 'regardless of whether it's surgery or pneumonia.' If rehabilitation worked with humans – if it hastened recovery from surgeries, if it healed orthopaedic or neurological problems uninvvasively, if it helped patients who were otherwise untreatable – why not with animals?

Batts told Dianne they would give rehabilitation a chance. He invested in some equipment: an underwater treadmill, a laser that promoted cellular growth. Dianne went about proving herself to families who had never heard of animal rehabilitation. Primarily she treated dogs, though the same medical principles applied to other animals, too, and sometimes she got unusual requests. A guinea pig came in for scabies, and one of Batts's colleagues discovered it couldn't walk. Within weeks Dianne had restored its mobility. No one had ever treated a guinea pig like that before, and the case was published in a national journal. Sometimes Dianne treated cats, or turtles. Once there was a bearded dragon that had fallen from a two-storey window.

There were obstacles to working in so new a field, Dianne told me. Often an animal came in for one thing, and the real problem turned out to be something else. Or an animal came to her without a diagnosis at all. 'I get the referral form and it says "hind end weakness",' she said, waving her hands uncertainly. 'Well, is it orthopaedic? Is it neurologic? What is it? So I have to try to figure out what's going on.' That animals cannot speak for themselves further complicates diagnosis, as do their evolutionary instincts: to appear vulnerable in most habitats is dangerous, so most animals are habitually stoic. To work with animals, Dianne needed to learn their signals. Pain wasn't the same as fear, which wasn't the same as weakness, which wasn't the same as a pet angling for attention. Further muddling these distinctions was diversity of temperament. 'It's like with humans,' Dianne explained. 'Some people can survive a plane crash and stand there and talk to you about it. Someone else can have a hangnail and fall apart.'

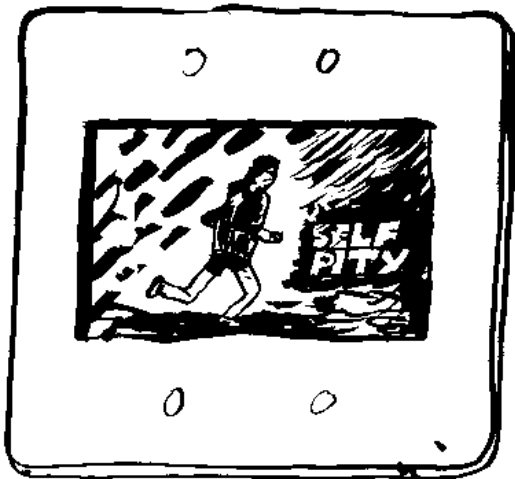
For these reasons, not every case was as simple as Douglass's or Daisy's. A couple of days after first observing the underwater treadmill, I met Cameron, a three-year-old golden retriever who had awoken one recent morning unable to move one side of her body. Cameron's owner, Katie, was a friendly, athletic-looking woman who worked as a paramedic, for humans, in nearby Leland. She told me she and Cameron first had landed in the office of a neurologist in Greensboro, three and a half hours north-west. There, on the MRI image, a cloud could be seen in Cameron's cervical spine. She had suffered a fibrocartilaginous embolism, the equivalent of a stroke: spinal material had lodged in the cord, and interrupted circulation. The neurologist estimated a 60 per cent chance of recovery, and asked what Katie would like to do. If Cameron could be healed, Katie determined, she would do anything. The neurologist nodded. 'There are things we can do for dogs,' he told her. 'It's not always a fatal event.'

Most important of these doable things was rehabilitation,



which is how Cameron had come to Dianne. Because Cameron's FCE had occurred within the spinal cord, it could not be removed surgically. It might dissipate naturally, Katie was told, or it might not. In either case, the area had to revascularize. This meant Cameron's body needed to reroute blood into spinal tissue that had been deprived of oxygen. 'The body has to compensate,' Nathan Batts, who met Cameron once she was referred to Needham, told me. 'And you're hoping that there's not enough permanent damage to cause her to become completely paralysed.' In the meantime, atrophy had to be prevented in Cameron's muscles, which could lose a third of their mass within one week of non-use. This was where Dianne came in.

Cameron's bed during that week was on the floor of Batts's office, in a back hallway of the hospital. A sign on the door read 'REHAB PATIENT WITH SPECIAL INSTRUCTIONS'. Several times throughout the day, Dianne or her assistant, Shana, went back and led Cameron



through a passive range of motion. This meant gripping one of her legs at a time and leading it through circular motions as Cameron lay on her side, like having her ride an imaginary bicycle. The most difficult was Cameron's right paw. By far the most transparent facial expression I saw from her occurred when Shana tried to lead this limb through a gentle circle. Cameron jerked her leg back, and I could see her cringe. A moment later she looked straight ahead and narrowed her eyes, and it seemed to me she was steeling herself. Then she let Shana take her paw.

Later they took Cameron out on her ball. On a fenced-in patch of grass behind the hospital, they lifted Cameron on to a green inflatable cylinder nearly as large as her torso, and lined her up evenly so all four paws just brushed the grass. Then, with Dianne holding her rear hips and Shana holding her front, they rocked her back and forth and swayed her towards each side. This was to cause muscle contrac-

tions, Dianne explained, and to engage the mechanisms she used for balance. Every so often Shana bounced a ball in front of Cameron's snout, and Cameron's eyes flickered, and she shimmied her head up and down, stretching her jaws towards the toy. Dianne kept treats in her pocket, and a few times she pulled one out and led Cameron's head around in circles, just to encourage motion. Then they hoisted Cameron on to her stretcher and carried her back inside Batts's office, where Dianne tilted a water bowl to Cameron's mouth so she could drink. After her exercises Cameron was able to shake hands, though just barely – she extended her paw two or three inches towards Dianne's outstretched hand, and Dianne took it happily and then rubbed Cameron's back. I asked if Cameron could feel being rubbed that way. Dianne said she thought so. She wasn't paralysed, she reminded me, just extremely weak. Shana tried to bounce the tennis ball again, but Cameron was too tired and ignored it. Then Dianne gave Cameron what she said was her favourite treat, a rawhide stick the length of a ruler. Cameron gnawed at it briefly, but she couldn't move her front paws to hold it in place, so she gave up and lay there, the treat nearly touching her snout but plainly out of reach.

By Friday, Cameron looked better. She could sit up on her own, and also stand on her rear legs, as long as someone supported her front. Katie told me she could see the future brightening. She was 'cautiously optimistic', she said. 'But it was looking really good.'

Then, mysteriously, Cameron began to worsen. Her muscles went slack, and soon she was 'knuckling' – her paws folded in on themselves, like hinges. No one understood the reason for this, since FCEs did not typically recur. Any damage should have been done within forty-eight hours. It didn't make sense that Cameron's condition might suddenly worsen a week later, or that a fever would raise her temperature by four degrees. Possibly this had been caused Rocky Mountain spotted fever. Or it might have been meningitis, or an inflammatory infection. Or the FCE might have affected the part of the spine that regulates body temperature. Whatever it was, until it passed, Cameron was too weak for rehabilitation.

When Cameron returned, a week later, she was in a worse condition than immediately after the FCE. She couldn't stand or sit up, or turn her head to the right. Katie felt grave about what this portended. She could see that Cameron's prospects had been harmed, but no one could tell her why, or by how much. Normally she was decisive, Katie told me, but now she didn't know what to do. She knew that, realistically, if Cameron would never be able to walk again, Katie wouldn't be able to accommodate her, since rehabilitation cost money and time, neither of which she had in endless supply. More importantly, Katie didn't believe such a life would be fair to Cameron. But Katie also understood from her work as a paramedic that, even in humans, spinal injuries could be hard to predict, and required time to heal. She wouldn't expect someone who risked paralysis 'to automatically stand up and walk again overnight'. So what was the right decision? She recoiled to think she might end a recoverable life, and stamp out Cameron's chances prematurely. But if Cameron never healed,

Katie knew she might regret forestalling the obvious. 'I've got so many what-ifs,' she admitted.

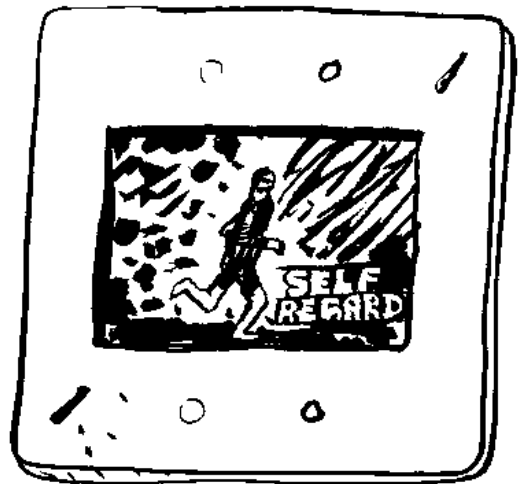
This, I saw, was one murky result of the technology. As rehabilitation had provided animals with new opportunities, so it had provided their owners with new dilemmas. It was wonderful that a pet like Douglass, or Daisy, whose only choice not so long ago was to be put down, might today go on to live a full and happy life. But this new terrain was not easy to navigate. Because she recognized a potential treatment, Katie felt pressure to make use of it – not from Dianne, but simply because she saw treatment was available, and because, like many other owners I had met, she considered Cameron family. Should she try acupuncture, or chiropractic care? Was she doing enough – or too much? 'Is it fair for me to keep her here, and for her to live the rest of her life like that?' she asked me, rhetorically. 'Would she *want* to live the rest of her life like that?'

It didn't help that Cameron's status seemed to waver every few days, like the needle of a scale. On some days she could lift her head higher than ever before. Increased control of her neck allowed her to play a kind of stationary fetch, and she could play for longer before tiring. If Katie held a treat out in front of her, Cameron swiped at it. She could wriggle around like a seal. Her rear legs, though, were as limp as willows, and to see them splayed unnaturally made me cringe. With everything in flux, the temptation was for every sign to mean something. But Katie couldn't decipher what they all meant together. 'It seems like every time I'm faced with the decision,' she told me, 'something else happens. Something changes.'

Dianne, too, was nearing the limits of her knowledge, and of her field in general. This field, I kept remembering, was a young one. The University of Tennessee began its certification programme in 2001; the Canine Rehabilitation Institute enrolled its first students two years later. Including Dianne, thirty-six animal rehabilitation specialists live and work in North Carolina, where, for comparison, more than seven thousand physical therapists are currently licensed. (Because of a clause in the 1985 North Carolina Physical Therapy Practice Act, someone with Dianne's training is termed a physical rehabilitation practitioner, not a physical therapist, since *physical therapy* by law means 'the evaluation of or treatment of any person', and, of course, Dianne's patients are not people.) When I spoke with Nicole Thistle, who coordinates the programme at Tennessee, she told me that rehabilitation succeeded in part because so many people 'want the care for their animals they can get for themselves'. To meet this demand, graduates of Tennessee or the CRI have gone on to treat, in addition to house pets, military dogs, therapy dogs, search-and-rescue dogs, and sled dogs for the Iditarod. Some practitioners work in zoos. One, who began her career as a physical therapist for humans, discovered dogs to be more responsive patients, so turned to dogs full-time; since then she has worked behind the scenes at the Westminster Dog Show and, in advance of competition, trainers sometimes fly their dogs from overseas, to get their walking gait just right. Another practitioner, in Coldwater, Ohio, once treated a horse that had been struck by lightning. The force

of the strike had blasted the horse into the trunk of a nearby tree. 'Ten years ago, that horse would've been dead,' Nicole told me, to show how quickly the field of animal rehabilitation has grown. 'If another veterinarian had been called to the scene? That horse would've been dead.' Instead, after rehabilitation, the horse today is back to carrying riders. A success like this mattered not only to the psychology of a pet owner, Nicole pointed out, but because of the financial investment an animal like a horse can represent.

Dianne's instructors at Tennessee had taught her that animals recovering from an FCE could withstand immobility for only two or three weeks before the prospect of recovery vanished. 'But they don't know,' Dianne told me. She cited two dogs she had been able to get walking again after eight stationary months. This was how medicine worked, she explained. 'There's always a predicted experience until someone has a new experience. Then they change the prediction.'



One day, midweek, after working outside with a ball, Dianne brought Cameron back on to her bed, where Cameron crinkled her nose and buried her snout into the fabric. Batts suddenly showed up, and slipped into his office to get something from his desk. He asked Dianne if she was getting better.

Dianne sighed. 'Me? Or the dog?'

'Both of you,' Batts said.

'She has some things that are better,' Dianne told him. 'And she, ah – no,' she declared suddenly. 'She's not getting better. Not better enough.' Then she stood and laid Cameron's stretcher on the floor, across the doorframe. I nearly asked if this was hopeful, in case Cameron suddenly regained movement and tried to leave. Before I could say anything, though, Dianne said, 'That's so other dogs can't bother her.' Then she went back to her office, where I invented theoretical scenarios and asked what decisions Dianne would

make. What if this happened during the week, or this? What would it mean for Cameron? Dianne smiled at me sadly. 'Let's put it like this,' she said. If Katie called her today and said, "I think the time is here," I wouldn't try to talk her out of it.' Dianne cared about Cameron, and she hadn't given up hope. But she simply couldn't predict what came next.

The next day I found Batts in his office, eating a cookie. It was the first time I had seen him sitting still. Normally he was striding busily through hallways, or darting in and out of exam rooms, or staring at the screen of an ultrasound machine, writing notes on a napkin. I asked him about Cameron's prognosis. If she ever walked again, Batts predicted, she would probably be wobbly, because so much time had passed since the FCE and she still wasn't mobile. Then he added that things had looked much better before the setback. This is what everyone had taken to calling Cameron's unexplained change in health. Batts didn't have much hope that

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Cameron's legs would return to normal, though he couldn't count it out entirely. 'I know that animals can return,' he said. Like Dianne, though, he couldn't predict what this meant for Cameron. Without any reliable forecast, Katie didn't feel able to make a decision. What she needed was context, or precedent. But rehabilitation hadn't been around for long enough. Neither of these existed.

Meanwhile, Dianne cared for other patients. Besides the underwater treadmill, the most effective tool in her arsenal was a therapeutic laser, a medical technology that promoted cellular healing and blood flow. Once she calibrated her intended depth on the machine, she pushed a button and began rubbing its applicator, which looked like a microphone, against the injury. Because the laser can harm retinas, everyone in the room wore protective glasses. Even the dogs wore eye masks, like the kind a person can wear to

sleep, which was a sight I never quite got over. Nicole Thistle, the programme coordinator at Tennessee, had told me of laser therapy being administered to the legs of flamingos. Despite my best intentions, though, I hadn't been able to see this for myself. Instead I settled for a Labrador.

The black Lab was Azalea, a nine-year-old with a torn anterior cruciate ligament (ACL). Nearly a year earlier she had raced down a staircase for the pizza deliveryman, and a rug had slipped out from under her. Azalea's owner was a kind-looking woman with the sceptical demeanour of someone whose teenager is into extreme sports, and she told me Azalea was something of a medical disaster. In addition to the torn ACL, Azalea had suffered uncertain damage to her meniscus; she was also on a special intestinal diet for digestive problems, and a pill for incontinence. Plus, she ate things that, although they didn't seem to have caused the digestive problems, didn't help them, either. Once she had torn open the cover to her bed and eaten the foam from inside. This required surgery. Another time she ate a television remote. Then she ate an entire bottle of her incontinence medication and had to be hospitalized for a weekend. Somewhere during all this her owner, Sue-Ellen, had visited the veterinarian for special dog food, seen a brochure for animal rehabilitation and decided that Azalea, who had recently torn her ACL, could benefit. As Sue-Ellen spoke with Dianne, I heard her mention the television remote again. Earlier I had assumed she meant Azalea had gnawed at the remote, but now I realized this may not have been the case. They were talking about damage to her stomach. 'So you don't mean that she chewed up the TV remote,' I clarified. 'You mean she, like, consumed it.'

Right, Sue-Ellen told me. 'She swallowed little parts. There were little parts all over the place.' Then, as she was talking, Azalea picked up in her mouth the plastic cap to a can of spray-cheese, which Dianne and Shana used as a treat.

'No!' Shana shouted, and snatched it away.

'Oh lord,' Sue-Ellen said, and shook her head, fluttering her eyelashes.

But Azalea seemed in good shape compared to Max, a toy poodle who was blind and mostly deaf, and couldn't smell. Max's owners, Jerry and Lydia, told me they didn't know his age for certain because he had been found beside a highway in Jacksonville, near the parking lot of a Walmart. Carolina Animal Protection Society had called them to ask if they would foster. CAPS knew they had adopted rescue animals before, all toy poodles. One of these had no teeth and was currently undergoing chemotherapy up at North Carolina State University. Initially Jerry and Lydia had said no to Max, because they had their hands full with the first three. But two weeks later they called to make sure he had been adopted, and he hadn't. Lydia couldn't stand it any more, so they took him home. Dianne had been working with him for over a month. I asked Jerry why he had decided four times to invest his time and money this way. 'Because they needed us,' Lydia interrupted. 'And we have the resources.'

Jerry shrugged, and crossed his arms. The dogs were a part of his and Lydia's family, he said. 'People say that dogs are always instinctive, that they don't process information

and reach reasonable conclusions, that they can't reason,' he said. 'I very much disagree with that. Our dogs have – all of them have different personalities. They relate to other animals, other people, in different ways. They like and dislike certain things. They have favourite foods. They get jealous. They display great affection. They're incredibly loyal. I mean – that's a verbose way of saying we get a lot more from them than they ever got from us.' It was hard, he added, once you began doing it, not to take in an animal. Then he looked at Max, who he said had been doing pretty well until 'he had a little setback'. This turned out to have been a bout of pneumonia. 'But he's a fighter,' Jerry told me. 'They said they'd never had a little guy like him make it through.'

Finally, near the end of the afternoon, I met Angel, a pit bull Dianne had been saying for days she wanted me to see. Angel had been Dianne's first patient. Now she was the poster child for Dianne's rehabilitation centre: her picture was on the back of the brochure. I didn't notice anything unusual when she hopped into Dianne's office, because nearly every animal I'd seen was protecting at least one limb, and over the past several days I'd seen all manner of limping, hobbling or scooting. But then I realized Angel wasn't protecting one of her limbs; she didn't have it at all.

Angel's owner, Phil, told me that several years earlier his wife had pulled over for a dog lying prone on the side of the road. She had brought it in to her veterinarian, who told her Angel was in bad shape and would need surgery on at least two legs, so to restore her to health would be an expensive undertaking. Phil and his wife paid for it anyway. They hoped that once the dog was mended, someone would adopt her. They couldn't bring her home themselves because they already had two dogs, and they didn't think Angel would get along with them. She wasn't very social, they noticed, and she was frightened by nearly everything. They suspected previous abuse.

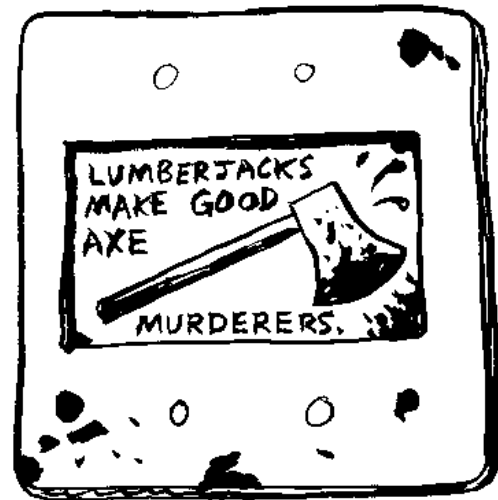
While Angel recovered from her surgeries, Phil and his wife visited her at the veterinarian. But they realized she was being held in a small cage nearly all day, and this made them feel guilty. They decided to bring her home. 'She adjusted right away with our other dogs,' Phil told me. I asked him if he had expected bringing her home would only be temporary, until someone else agreed to take her. He shook his head. 'Once we brought the dog home,' he said, 'we knew we were in for it.' He laughed. 'It wasn't gonna change.'

'Angel's a name you chose?' I asked.

He told me it was. 'Although now we call her Visa Card,' he added.

After surgery the veterinarian referred Angel to Dianne, who had just begun taking patients. Today Angel still came to rehabilitation once a month for laser treatment, but otherwise she teetered around happily, rubbing against people's legs. Phil told me he brought her to a senior citizen home every few weeks, where she licked people's hands and made them smile, and the elderly folks 'love her to death'. Most of them suffered from Alzheimer's, he said, so even if they saw Angel every visit, they didn't remember, and met her anew each month. Some of them had even offered their own money to help care for her.

I watched Angel wobble out of Dianne's office, and realized it wasn't a surprise at all to hear that Phil and his wife had continued adopting. By now I was accustomed to people having come by their pets in unusual ways. I had expected most animals to come from breeders, and of course some of them did. But many others had been discovered in cardboard boxes, or foreclosed homes; they were rescued from parking lots or beside highways. It made sense that dogs recovered from such places might need rehabilitation. But I was surprised by how many people there were who took these dogs in, despite knowing how much it would cost. These people rarely stopped at one. Inevitably another animal crossed their path, as though sensing a human who couldn't turn them away. They sidled up to the correct car or showed up on doorsteps. That an orphan could be taken in this way and restored to good health seemed to me a great stroke of luck, like jigsaw pieces that turned out to fit perfectly. I knew this luck didn't apply to everyone. With



a hazy prognosis, or limited financial means, some owners now faced choices they hadn't known to prepare for. The more novel the medicine, the more complicated their choice. Plus, rehabilitation, like any treatment, had its limits. There were some pets for which Dianne could do nothing, animals whose futures didn't depend on either goodwill or existing medical expertise. Some mysteries hadn't been solved yet. And one of them was running out of time.

A cart was built for Cameron, a four-wheeled PVC-pipe frame with straps, buckles and foam supports for her chest and lower belly. It worked like a combination hammock and wheelchair, and looked like an oversized plastic spider. Dianne and Shana wedged Cameron into the cart and pushed her outside, where Katie tried tossing her a ball, but Cameron, her paws just brushing the grass, looked disoriented in the contraption, and had trouble catching. Then



Shana brought out Chaz, a boxer-Labrador mix who sniffed at Cameron and assessed the cart quizzically. Katie stood a few feet away and called to Cameron, hoping she would push the cart towards them, but Cameron stayed still. To me it seemed not only that her muscles were weak but that it didn't occur to her the cart was something she might move. I had expected she might lumber forward weakly, or wobble against the friction of the wheels, but instead she just lay there, her legs hanging as slackly as drapes. Katie showed Cameron the tennis ball again, and tossed it in her direction. But Cameron looked solemnly at the grass, as though she had misplaced something, and didn't react when the ball smacked her on the forehead. Dianne decided Cameron was tired, or that it might be too warm outside, so they pushed her back through the hospital to Dianne's office. Cameron's legs dragged across the floor the whole way.

Back inside, Katie told me Cameron had become picky recently about her dog food, and then refused to eat it at all. Instead Katie fed her table scraps and from the refrigerator, though some mornings, like this one, Cameron wouldn't eat even those. Dianne and Shana could still get Cameron to eat, Katie acknowledged, but she herself couldn't. 'She's always done better here than she has at home,' Katie said, laughing unnaturally. 'She likes it here.' Then Katie paused, and added softly, 'She'd be fine if I left her here.' She had intended this as praise for Dianne and Shana, but suddenly she looked very sad, and the silence in the room became uncomfortable until Katie made a short sound like a gulping wheeze. 'You know, because you guys work with her all the time,' she clarified, nodding towards Dianne. 'She gets constant attention.' Quietly she told me that Cameron looked subdued at home, that she no longer slept regularly or was as expressive. 'I think we're going in the wrong direction,' she admitted.

The following day, Katie sat down with Dianne to discuss the path forward, and confessed she didn't know what to do. She was not wealthy, and she had invested thousands of dollars in Cameron, who she could see was no longer improving. She had always said that she would continue rehabilitation for as long as Cameron seemed happy, that she could not give up on a dog that had not first given up on herself. Until recently this had sounded uplifting. Now it sounded not like a promise to continue but like a promise not to. Katie was so uncertain that she had begun appealing directly to Cameron for guidance. 'Just tell me,' she pleaded aloud, kneeling down to eye level. 'Do I need to keep going? Are you tired?'

Together she and Dianne agreed on a timetable. They chose Sunday, four days away, which would be three weeks since Cameron had returned from the setback. If Cameron improved by Sunday, then Katie would continue rehabilitation; if not, the time would have come for a decision.

When Katie stepped out, Dianne revealed to me that she was doubtful this weekend would bring any change. She worried that Cameron no longer responded to available treatment; only by turning the dial to its maximum could Dianne now contract Cameron's muscles by electrical stimulation. More importantly, Dianne understood there were two lives at stake here, the patient's and the owner's, and her

job was to care for both of them. 'I'm concerned about what I'm seeing with Katie,' she told me. 'She's giving up her life. And that's not healthy, either.'

I asked if Cameron had ever returned to the condition she was in before her setback. Neither Dianne nor Shana hesitated. No, she had not. Shana told me she was sceptical Cameron would ever return to that condition, though she had not lost hope entirely, and would do whatever Katie asked. 'She's got a lot of opinions coming at her,' Shana observed, 'and it's her decision. She's the only one that can make it.' Then she looked to Dianne. 'I don't know,' she added finally, shaking her head. 'It's tough.'

'I'd be lying to you if I said I didn't want a phone call on Saturday afternoon saying she moved her back legs,' Dianne told me. 'I'd like nothing more than that. But I think, looking at her ...' She abandoned her sentence, and sighed. 'Do I think I'm going to get that call? No.'

At home that weekend, Katie happened upon pictures of Cameron before her embolism. She realized the dog she saw running and playing in the photographs looked like a different animal than the one now lying on the carpet. Recently Cameron had begun to bark when she saw other dogs trot by, something she had never done before, and Katie thought this was out of frustration. 'I just couldn't keep putting her through it,' she told me. The next week, at an appointment for a possible urinary tract infection, Katie instead told her veterinarian she had chosen to euthanize. Then she drove to Needham, to let Dianne and Shane know.

The end came three days later, in the grassy yard outside the hospital, by eight millilitres of a drug called Euthasol. Her veterinarian had let Katie choose between the yard and an operating table inside, and Katie had chosen outdoors in the sun, where Cameron teethed a tennis ball even during the injection. It had been an exhausting two and a half months, Katie told me, but she didn't have any regrets. She felt she had done the right thing by pursuing treatment for as long as she was able. 'Everyone gave their all to Cameron,' she said. 'Cameron and I would not have made it as long as we did without Dianne and Shana.' Cameron had died on the grass only a few hours earlier, and Katie told me that one day she might get another dog, though it was too soon to think much about this. She didn't believe another dog would replace Cameron.

Dianne, meanwhile, resumed her normal hours at Needham. That afternoon she met with Gunner, a ten-year old cocker spaniel who was recovering from two back surgeries to repair a ruptured disc. His surgeries had been separated by just three days, which was unusual, and now Gunner's muscles had weakened. To Dianne, though, he looked to be improving. A few days earlier he had regained control of his bladder for the first time since his operations. Gunner's owners, Charles and Heidi, ran Browns Ferry Gardens, a nursery just over the border in South Carolina, where they specialized in hybridizing new types of day lilies. They hoped rehabilitation might keep Gunner with their family for a while longer. Heidi had promised Dianne and Shana that, if they got Gunner walking again, she would name a new type of flower for them. So Dianne had work to do.◊

# Passed On Like the News of the Latest Victory

*Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious by Sigmund Freud*

In *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud poses a series of questions. What is it about ourselves that makes us find jokes enjoyable? What is the distinction between jokes, the comic and humour? Why do we laugh at all? For Freud the answers lie in *psychical energy*: ‘Pleasure in the joke [seems] to come from savings in expenditure on inhibition, comic pleasure from savings in the imagining of ideas (when charged with energy), and humorous pleasure from savings in expenditure on feeling.’ The psychical energy saved by a joke bursts forth as laughter; ‘Laughter comes in different colours’ is another writer’s way of putting it. ‘It’s only the distant echo of an explosion inside you.’

In one chapter Freud discusses ‘bawdy talk’. The reason we make such jokes, he says, is that men are scoundrels (which is fine, as long as they are wealthy, educated scoundrels), and that women are either prudes or teases (with class again an important factor in that distinction) who, in a joke-telling sense at least, are there for the taking. Oddly, in a book packed with jokes to exemplify his arguments, Freud can’t quite bring himself to set any of these ‘obscene words’ to paper; at times, it is difficult to think of many people who would make for a more compelling subject of psychoanalysis than Freud himself.

Despite his sometimes dubious quirks, however, Freud ultimately finds laughter a role at the core of human nature: ‘[ . . . ] the euphoria that we try to reach along these routes is nothing other than the temper of a time in our life when we were wont to defray the work of our psyche with the slightest of expenditures: the temper of our childhood – when we were ignorant of the comic, incapable of making a joke, and had no need of humour to feel happy in our life.’

–Paul Tucker



Anyone who has had occasion to consult the literature of aesthetics and psychology for the light it can cast on the nature of the joke and its connections will surely have to admit that it has not received nearly as much philosophical attention as it deserves, given the part jokes play in our mental life. One can name only a very small number of thinkers who have gone very deeply into its problems.

We may ask whether the topic of jokes is worth such trouble? As I see it, there is no doubt about it. Quite apart from the personal motives which urge me to acquire insight into the problems of the joke, and which will come to light in the course of these studies, I can call on the fact of the intimate interconnections between everything that goes on in the psyche. This ensures that a psychological insight even from a remote field will have an unpredictable value for other fields. Let us also bear in mind the peculiar, indeed fascinating, attraction jokes exercise in our society. A new joke has almost the same effect as an event of the widest interest: it is passed on from one to another like the news of the latest victory.

#### FREUD ON 'BAWDY TALK'

We know what is understood by 'bawdry': deliberately emphasizing sexual facts and relations by talking about them. However, this definition is no more conclusive than any other. A lecture on the anatomy of the sexual organs or on the physiology of reproduction, despite this definition, need not have a single point of contact in common with bawdry. It is also characteristic of bawdry talk that it is directed at a particular person by whom the speaker is sexually aroused, and is meant to make them aware of this arousal by listening to the bawdry and so becoming sexually aroused themselves. Instead of being aroused, this person might also be made to feel shame or embarrassment, which only implies a reaction against their arousal and, in this roundabout way, an admission of it. Bawdry talk, then, is in origin directed at women and is to be regarded as the equivalent of an attempt at seduction. So if a man in male company enjoys telling or listening to bawdry stories, the original situation – which cannot be realized on account of social impediments – is also imagined as well. Anyone who laughs at the bawdry talk they have heard, is laughing like the spectator at an act of sexual aggression.

The sexual subject-matter that forms the content of bawdry includes more than what is specific to either sex; over and above this, it includes what the two sexes have in common to which the feeling of shame extends, that is, excremental subject-matter in all its range. But this is the range that subject-matter has in childhood; in the imagination at this stage there exists a latrine, as it were, where what is sexual and what is excremental are distinguished badly or not at all. Everywhere in the field of thinking investigated by the psychology of neuroses the sexual still includes the excremental and is understood in the old, infantile, sense.

Bawdry is like an act of unclothing the person of different sex at whom it is directed. By voicing the obscene words it forces the person attacked to imagine the particular part of the body or the act involved and shows them that the

aggressor himself is imagining it. There is no doubt that the pleasure in gazing on what is sexual revealed in its nakedness is the original motive of bawdry talk.

It can only help us clarify matters if at this point we go back to fundamentals. The inclination to gaze on what is specific to each sex in its nakedness is one of the original components of our libido. Perhaps it is already a substitute itself, driving from the pleasure, posited as being primary, of touching what is sexual. As so often, gazing has replaced touching here too. The libido for looking and touching is of two kinds in everyone, active and passive, masculine and feminine, and develops in the one or the other direction according to which sexual character is predominant. In young children it is easy to observe the inclination to show themselves naked. Where the germ of this inclination does not meet the usual fate of eclipse and suppression, it develops in adult men into the perversion known as exhibitionism. In women, the passive inclination to exhibitionism is almost invariably eclipsed by the magnificent reactive feat of sexual modesty – but not without saving a little escape hatch for it in their clothes. I need only hint at how versatile and variable according to convention and circumstance is the measure of exhibitionism that women are permitted to retain.

In men a high degree of this urge persists as a component of the libido and serves to introduce the sex act. If this urge asserts itself on the first approach to the woman, it has to make use of speech for two reasons. First, to lay claim to the woman, and second, because by summoning up the idea the words spoken may kindle the corresponding state of arousal in the woman herself and waken her inclination to passive exhibitionism. These words of solicitation do not go as far as bawdry, but can pass over into it. For in a situation where the woman soon becomes willing, the obscene speech is short-lived, it gives way to a sexual action. It is different if the woman's willingness cannot be counted on, and a defensive reaction on her part makes its appearance instead. Then the sexually arousing speech becomes – in the form of bawdry – an end in itself; as the sexual aggression is checked in its advance towards the act, it lingers on the evocation of arousal and derives pleasure from signs of it in the woman. In doing so, the aggression probably also changes character, in the same way as every movement in the libido does when it meets an obstacle; it becomes plain hostile, cruel, that is, it calls on the sadistic components of the sexual drive for help against the obstacle.

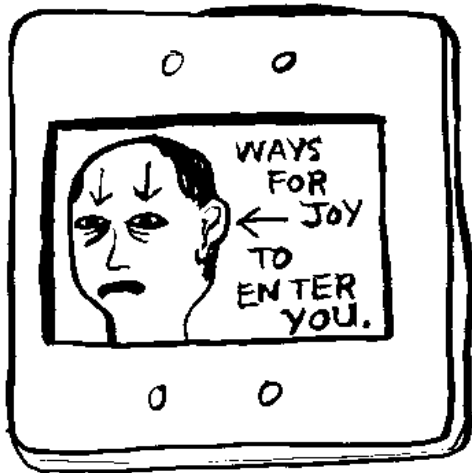
The woman's intransigence, then, is the most immediate prerequisite for bawdry to develop, though one which merely seems to imply postponement, offering the prospect that further efforts might not be in vain. The ideal case of this kind of resistance on the woman's part occurs if another man, a third party, is present at the same time, for then any immediate acquiescence from the woman is as good as out of the question. This third party soon becomes very important for the development of the bawdry; but above all we should not disregard the presence of the woman. Among country people or in lower-class taverns, one can observe that it is only when the barmaid or the landlady comes on the scene that the bawdry gets going; the opposite occurs only when



we reach a higher social level, and the presence of a female person puts an end to the bawdry; the men save this kind of conversation – which originally presupposed the presence of a woman made ashamed – until they are ‘among themselves’. And so gradually, instead of the woman, it is the spectator or in this case the listener who becomes the target audience for the bawdry, and this transformation already makes the bawdry approach the character of a joke.

From this point on, there are two factors that will claim our attention: the part played by the third person, the listener, and the conditions governing the content of the bawdy joke itself.

In general, a tendentious joke requires three persons: apart from the one who is telling the joke, it needs a second person who is taken as the object of the hostile or sexual aggression, and a third in whom the joke’s intention of producing pleasure is fulfilled. We shall have to look for the deeper grounds for these relations later, but for the moment let us keep to the fact they signal: the person who tells the joke is not the one who also laughs at it and so enjoys the pleasure it produces, but the inactive listener. In the case of bawdry,



the three persons have the same relations. The course of its development can be described thus: as the first person finds his satisfaction inhibited by the woman, his libidinal impulse develops a hostile tendency towards the second person and calls on the third, originally the intruder, to be his ally. The person’s first bawdy talk strips the woman naked before the third, who is now, as listener, bribed – by the effortless satisfaction of his own libido.

It is curious how very popular bawdy exchanges of this kind are among the common people and how they never fail to rouse a mood of cheerful humour. But it is also worth noticing that in this complicated process, which has so many of the characteristics of the tendentious joke, none of the formal requirements that are the sign of a joke are expected of bawdry. To talk dirty without disguising it gives pleasure to the first person and makes the second laugh.

Only when we rise into more cultivated society do we find the addition of the formal requirements for jokes. The bawdry becomes witty, and is tolerated only if it is witty. The technical device it uses most is illusion, i.e., replacement by some-

thing small, something remotely related that the listener can reconstruct in his imagination into a full and plain obscenity. The greater the disproportion between what is given directly in the joke and what it has necessarily aroused in the listener, the subtler the joke, and the higher it may dare enter into good society. Apart from illusion, coarse or subtle the bawdy joke has all the other devices of verbal and intellectual jokes at its disposal, as can easily be shown in examples.

Here at last we can understand what a joke can do for its tendency. It makes the satisfaction of a drive possible (be it lustful or hostile) in face of an obstacle in its way; it circumvents this obstacle and in doing so draws pleasure from a source that the obstacle had made inaccessible. The obstacle in the way is actually nothing other than woman’s increased inability, in conformity with a higher cultural and social level, to tolerate sexual matters undisguised. The woman thought of as being present in the original situation is simply kept on as if she were there, or, even in her absence, her influence continues to have the effect of making the men abashed. One may observe how men of a higher social level are prompted by the presence of girls of a lower class to let their bawdy jokes revert to simple bawdy talk.

The power that makes it difficult or impossible for women, and to a lesser extent men too, to enjoy undisguised obscenity we call ‘repression’, and we recognize in it the same psychical process which in cases of serious [psychological] illness keeps entire complexes of impulses as well as their issue far from consciousness, and which has turned out to be one of the main causal factors in what are called the psycho-neuroses. We grant that higher culture and education have a great influence on the development of repression, and we assume that under these conditions a change in psychical organization comes about, which could also be contributed by an inherited disposition, with the result that what was once felt to be agreeable now appears unacceptable and is rejected with all the force of the psyche. Through our culture’s work of repression, primary possibilities of enjoyment, now spurned by the censorship within us, are lost. When we laugh at an indecent joke that is subtle, we are laughing at the same thing that causes the bumpkin to laugh in a coarse obscenity; in both cases the pleasure is drawn from the same source; but we would not be capable of laughing at the coarse obscenity, we would be ashamed, or it would appear disgusting to us; we can only laugh when the joke has come to our help.

What we surmised at the outset, then, seems to be confirmed: that the tendentious joke has other sources of pleasure at its disposal than the innocuous kind, where all the pleasure is somehow linked to technique. We can also emphasize afresh that in tendentious jokes we are not capable of distinguishing by our feeling which share of our pleasure has its source in technique, and which in tendency. So we do not in the strict sense know what we are laughing at. In the case of all obscene jokes, we are subject to gross illusions of judgement as to how ‘good’ the joke is, in so far as it depends on formal requirements; the technique of these jokes is often pretty feeble, the laughter they provoke tremendous.◊



NOT JOKING

MEMOIR

# Alive in Ant and Bee

by Gillian Mears



In the process of buying a thirty-year-old ambulance in 2004, sight unseen, in the opinion of most people, I've gone crazy. Listening to Mr Bible from Homebush Motors in Sydney make his sales pitch on the phone, I think they might have a point.

'Just wait till you put your foot down out on the highway. It's like having a peach underneath. And the peach doesn't bruise. An icon, that's what you'll be buying.'

It was not so long ago that an invalid scooter had been my only transport. Even when I'd set it to 'rabbit', the fastest speed, the blind nun from down the road could overtake me on her cane. Before the scooter there was the wheelchair. In the winter sun of 2002, the spokes of its wheels cast shadows along the hospital patio in such a way that I couldn't stop crying. I'd had a seven-year-long struggle to walk, due to a form of multiple sclerosis that defied diagnosis, but that wasn't why I was being slid in and out of wheelchairs.

The open-heart surgery I underwent in 2002, following an emergency diagnosis of an infection in my heart, is like a penumbral eclipse of my life that can still seem incomprehensible. Why didn't I get myself to hospital sooner, before I was so nearly a corpse? How could it be possible that in so fervently following the advice of a macrobiotic practitioner whose treatment banned any recourse to Western medicine, I became part of a calamity so huge I almost died?

There were reasons. Imagine, after a lifelong passion for physical activity, suddenly finding walking itself becoming a mystery. Imagine, at the age of thirty-one, beginning to wet your bed at night; incontinence in public places, from a bladder once so strong you could skite of its capacity to hold beer. Next, almost complete cessation of sexual sensation and, instead, horrible feelings running along certain stretches of your skin, as if this were where Peter Piper's peck of pickled peppers had lodged.

As is common with multiple sclerosis, before diagnosis came many misdiagnoses. Everything from the trivial – my GP attributing my malaise to the effect of leaning on my elbow as I sat at my desk – to the extreme. The first MRI was to look for signs of multiple sclerosis, but

nothing was showing. Although no neurologist was convinced that my symptoms were stemming from an old horse-riding injury to my neck, pressure was intensifying that I must agree, the sooner the better, to major spinal surgery.

In my increasing alarm, I turned to the huge range of alternative health practitioners that anyone with an affliction in the twenty-first century might feel familiar with. I tried reiki, traditional Chinese medicine, holotropic breathing, reflexology and kinesiography. Under the directives of this or that healer, I drank disgusting molasses and soy-milk brews. I ate charcoal and seaweed. I fasted. I looked into colonic irrigation, iridology, numerology, Feldenkrais, the Alexander technique, Bowen therapy, bone massage.

Again I consulted a range of GPs and specialists. Again I was scanned for multiple sclerosis. Again, no sign of any of the telltale scar lesions around nerves in the brain or spinal column. Vitamin B12 deficiency, syphilis, HIV and hepatitis C were also all ruled out. In the last MRI scan, the bit of osteoarthritis in my neck was neither better nor worse. A plump, small-fingered neurosurgeon diffidently suggested that a registrar could operate.

'We could book you in within the month. We'd come in through the front of your neck and put in a self-drilling cage. Take out the bony deposits around C5. It might help. But only in terms of you not deteriorating. I've seen necks on ninety-year-olds in far worse shape than your own. Yet with none of your symptoms.'

A fortnight later, by chance, I met a horse-rider who'd had just such an operation on her neck. One operation had led to three. Her throat looked like the site of a chainsaw massacre. Some kind of permanent intravenous morphine drip only slightly numbed her pain.

I went home and, piling all my MRI scans and X-rays into a barrow, wheeled them out into a paddock to bury.

Apart from mental anguish, I was in no actual pain apart from financial. If I were to add up what I had spent on alternative health practices I could've had the deposit on two, maybe three, houses.

Only Dr Seuss-style verse could properly convey some of the nonsense I again was forlorn enough to try. I was wrapping my middle in castor-oil compresses.

I was following the Fit for Life diet.

Eat thirty-two spirulina tablets three times a day. Cast out your demons. Talk to angels.

On the bicycle it was becoming increasingly impossible to pedal, I hurtled down hills with affirmations on my tongue. 'Every day and in every way I'm getting better and better!' Except I was not. On certain days the creeping sensations began entering my eyes and I feared I was starting to go blind with something Western medicine had no name for.

At this point I encountered the healing modality known as macrobiotics. At first it seemed a wise philosophy, shot through with a spare Taoist aesthetic. After so much gobbledegook, I found it irresistible. Add to this the fact that I soon became the charismatic macro man's lover and you will begin to understand how in my despair I helped to dig the doom that would overtake me two years on.

This had nothing to do with my walking mystery but was untreated endocarditis. My heart was infected. Five and a half months of physical agony and every new symptom gravely interpreted by my partner as my body being at last strong enough to detox.

After the ordeal my body has been through, how much easier seem the practicalities of buying the old Froo ambulance. As Mr Bible rants on, the afternoon breeze is causing the calico flour bag safety-pinned to the back of my old scooter to shift out and in.

'And the prior owner used the ambulance for camping?' I ask.

'More or less, mate. More or less. A bit eggs and ham in the back, but nothing the feminine touch can't rectify.'

Much more than Mr Bible, it's a line out of Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*, scrawled in marker pen on to the flour bag, which I so long to believe. That 'the unendurable is the beginning of the curve of joy'.

The ambulance is a gamble, I know, but not as big a gamble as staying motionless in Mary Street. Nothing chills me more than the thought of the institutionalization that happened to my grandfather. Diagnosed at the age of twenty-two with the form of chronic progressive multiple sclerosis I'm living with, he eventually went blind. Just before he was put on the top floor of a hospice to die, they ampu-

tated both his legs.

This flat I've been renting on the Hoof-Mary Street corner, once such a sanctuary after open-heart surgery, has come to feel just like a smaller version of the Grafton prison diagonally opposite my bedroom window. The bricks of the flat resemble the worst Weston's biscuits, adrift with flecks of inedible choc chip. On every side of me are frail neighbours in their eighties. When they kill ants in the patch of grass we share, fumes from the spray drift into my flat's kitchen window.

As far as my eye can see, outside every neat house in every direction stand red and yellow wheelie bins, ready for collection. It's as if I'm stranded in some giant version of a board game for fat children too bored to play.

Something in me wants to scream. Needs to run.

In two and a half months of searching, the ambulance is the only camper to fit the budget of a writer living below the poverty line on a disability pension of \$228 a week. Once I sell the little white car to which I graduated from the scooter, there might even be enough for refurbishments.

'And it's yellow?' I check with Mr Bible. 'Harpers Gold, Gillian. Harpers Gold.'

So that in the two weeks it takes to organize transport of the ambulance to northern New South Wales, I keep wondering whether it's going to spangle in the way of that ex-girlfriend who danced topless up Oxford Street one Mardi Gras inside her replica of the Melbourne Arts Centre spire, or whether it will be more of a Christmas beetle gleam.

But the moment I see my ambulance coming through light autumn rain into a South Grafton service station, I realize the colour is that of the tail-lights of *Calyptorhynchus funereus*, the yellow-tailed black cockatoos that always scream upriver when people I love die. From a distance, my camper, loaded on the back of a transporter, is a faded, ochre-yellow wonder around which AstroBoy-bodied Hyundais are stacked like matchbox cars.

Because I'm so scared, I know already that I'll call my camper Ant and Bee, after the Angela Banner books, which brought inestimable comfort through all the early years of my 1960s childhood.

'Be careful,' says the transport driver

when the seatbelt anchor flies into my hand as I buckle up.

Making my way into the heavy afternoon traffic burning south on the Pacific Highway, it's incredible no police siren stops me. With no speedometer, no rear-view mirrors, and windscreen wipers that don't work, I take my maiden journey in Ant and Bee. I don't care that I'm about to find out there isn't a nut on the bolt holding the driver's seat on to a piece of ply. So what that the camper conversion described by Mr Bible appears to be an esky chucked in the back and a bit of old foam occy-strapped to the roof? All will surely be fixable.

On this first drive, how marvellous seem the bends integral to the eccentricity of the Clarence River Bridge. From my lofty new driving height, the old trees of Grafton have never been so golden. How fantastic, how safe, this great bonnet of yellow iron stretching out in protection. Ah, the headiness of the promise of aloneness; of finally being, afflictions and all, the solo driver of my own life.

The last time I crossed the Clarence River in an ambulance, the siren was screaming and I was almost dead.

July 2002, the coldest winter on record for decades. Any recollection I allow of it always rolls out like the present.

The eve of my thirty-eighth birthday.

An old friend, working that nightshift at Grafton hospital, hears that a woman's been brought in from Nymboida 'and they expect she'll die tonight'.

I have a fever of 41 degrees and veins so dehydrated that my arms turn black with bruises as the hospital staff search for a spot that will take a blood transfusion.

Acute endocarditis. An infection of the heart. Neither my macrobiotic partner nor I have ever heard of such a thing. As soon as the local heart specialist is convinced of his diagnosis, a succession of ambulances is taking me to Sydney for surgery. Although I'm in a state of physical anguish I feel absurdly safe, as if now my belly's full of hospital-issue, two-pack Arnott's Scotch Fingers, all shall be well, my agony soon over.

Even though I've never really watched television medical dramas, somehow I feel that they're part of my confidence; that surely this script of my own life is going to have a happy ending.

A streptococcal vegetation has been living off the mitral valve of my heart. In the absence of early detection by conventional medicine, it has become so vigorous, so mobile, that colonies are in my spleen and in both kidneys as well. The risk exists that at any moment a piece will ping off into my brain, causing a stroke big enough to end my life immediately.

If I survive the surgery essential to remove the main vegetation on my heart, grown as large as a long caterpillar, another operation might be scheduled to remove my all-but-destroyed spleen.

In the air ambulance to Sydney, a guttural note enters my sobbing. It was only twenty-four hours before, at midnight, that my macrobiotic knight errant, apprehending at last the gravity of my condition, had eased my lightweight body into his truck to take me to hospital. Half a year since the excruciating onset of the heart infection. Half a year since I'd seen any of my family or my old hometown of Grafton, so immense had my partner's control over my every interaction become.

Macro-errantry. Macro-lunacy. It was as if by living in isolation along a stretch of the wild Nymboida River, surrounded predominantly by all the classic texts of the macrobiotic lineage, I'd dried out my brains and lost my wits. A kind of warped, twenty-first-century healing version of Don Quixote. Almost a cult. Definitely a *folie à deux*.

The dual decline of my body – multiple sclerosis followed by endocarditis – is a mystery I've yet to fully decode. One day I'll recall all the bizarre facts. But not now. I don't want to spoil taking my new home-to-be on this first drive.

Driving back through Grafton to my flat, I push the past out of reach, focusing instead on the 4/3 rhythm that the abandoned intercom system makes as it hits the windscreen.

I'm alive, aren't I? Alive in Ant and Bee, and the thin black steering wheel moves like a waltz in my hands.

My first task is to become an overnight petrolhead. The intricacies of the internal-combustion engine are explained to me in that enthusiastic language of car-crazy boys. What better distraction from the past than craning over the bonnet or lying on my back under the



chassis?

I discover who are the mechanics in my town with a relish for working on old Effies, as any Froo is affectionately called, and learn many things: when it might be necessary to put pepper into the radiator, how to clean spark plugs with a metal toothbrush, the miracle of WD40 at work on ancient rust.

The mechanics are making the old ambulance sound. They're as cordial as Darjeeling monks: I could weep with gratitude when the auto-electrician throws a piece of canvas over a stash of MS-induced incontinence products he's had to uncover to get some wiring finished. The radiator man, without asking, rigs up the new air-conditioner with a bit of PVC tubing from his backyard. Only then does the unit, which cost more than the ambulance itself, blast cold air in the right direction. This is essential because, as is the case for many people with MS, the moment my legs grow hot my ability to move them drastically declines.

Next I turn my attention to the interior. To cull forty years' worth of possessions so that they fit into a space no bigger than a bathroom is only a momentary challenge. 'Jettison' is becoming my favourite word. The more I give away, the more gleeful I feel. How fantastic to have a kitchen that fits into a red Coles shopping crate. How light my melamine bowl, cup and plate, stacked like games in a toy box.

A narrow, sky-blue woollen carpet, afloat with white Tibetan cranes, doubles as my mattress and living-area rug. Sitting cross-legged here, I can wash dishes, brush my teeth, reach for CDs, check my hair in the small circle of mirror on the wall, and not have moved a step. Underneath the ply sleeping platform I store an axe, spade, blockbuster, hatchet and campfire cooking tripod.

Painting the long cupboards that once held medical paraphernalia takes ten minutes and half a 250ml tin of paint. They

are the perfect height for holding kitchen canisters of pasta, rice, nuts and tea.

I've given notice at Brickland and, with only a fortnight left to go, each day is crammed with activity. I'm decorating now, removing my loveliest little water-colours from their frames. Sticking them on to the cleaned ambulance walls.

Cloth gathered long ago in different countries makes beautiful curtains. How fast my life has gone, I think, fingering a square of African cotton from the 16th arrondissement of Paris. How young and strong I once was, able to walk miles in a day. *My days are swifter than a runner*. How can it be that now I'm more than forty, with legs that haven't walked properly since the age of thirty? *They flee away. They go by like skiffs of reed. Like an eagle falling on the prey*. Maybe this'll be the decade to finish reading my tatty Bible, which in Ant and Bee always seems to fall open in my hands at the Book of Psalms, as if this is where my reading of it stopped as a child.

No matter how sceptically people view my plan, everyone's rallying to help. If I sometimes have to pause, crouch down, it's due to the love washing over me from my family and friends, like the waves of some magical sea.

The increasing sense that my ambulance has become a cubby house on wheels – new radial Firewalkers, their treads black and deep – brings delight. From the iron ceiling trusses I hang an assortment of charms, each object full of secret and lucky histories.

At certain angles Ant and Bee conveys the impression of a stationery shop. What a simple happiness to plump out a cane basket with new glue sticks, five different kinds of tape, rubber bands, pencil sharpeners, paintbrushes and stamps. Favourite coloured nylon-tip pens hang by their lids along one side of a cardboard box rigged to hold cutlery. In no time at all pens will outnumber forks, as if words are to be my main nourishment.

Later still I'll come to appreciate that a roaming home means no cockroaches and no rodents of any kind. Soon, too, I'll be relishing bucket-and-jug washes, my body like a baby in my own hands.

A camping shop has an aluminium table that will serve as my writing desk, and a determined friend finally finds the perfect chair. Folded, they both tuck up neatly between a 12-volt fridge and three 20-litre plastic drums of grain. But would Rilke, I can't help but wonder, still advise his young poet to look into his heart and write if the left cockle of the poet's heart were made of carbon?

As autumn arrives, I can feel the valve's artificial edge seated like a bit of Meccano beneath my breast. It ticks as if made of tin, and sounds too small for my body. What if the neurocardiology researchers of the twenty-first century prove right and there is a brain in the heart? What might a new lover think? Will the valve handle the accelerated beat? Will there indeed ever be a new lover for one limping around in a body of such obvious wreckage?

Now I perch with unbearable anticipation at the two long shelves built to run either side of the van. Which books, which stories, which poems will I choose to travel with me? Four dictionaries, heavier than firewood, find the first space, and then my old paperback thesaurus. Not because it's ever been much use but because I like the smell of its thin yellowy pages, and the handwritten inscription of a sister whose gift it was when I turned sixteen. Tenderness is the sentiment that determines which old fictional favourites are chosen. Is there room for all my Randolph Stows? How about Virginia Woolf and Carson McCullers? I squeeze in a few equestrian classics and an assortment of poetry volumes I feel I can't live without. I also find the remains of my childhood edition of *1, 2, 3 with Ant and Bee* – a scruffy mascot for the glovebox.

The day arrives when, with no further

funds left, I can hone my state of preparedness no more. As I cross the bridge one more time I say goodbye to the town of Grafton that I've loved so deeply, sometimes loathed, and written about for most of my life. The Clarence, my own river Alph, seems afloat with more memories than any story can accommodate. Farewell, old dear town that helped bring me back to life. Farewell, old, dangerously compliant self, who very nearly allowed her own death.

Travelling to no deadline, and with no fixed route, I'm on my way to live in Adelaide. As my first cautious weeks go by, I recognize the Way described with such a mixture of comedy and pathos in Farid ud-Din Attar's twelfth-century mystical classic, *Manteq ot-Teyr*, or *The Conference of the Birds*.

Even in the doggerel of the English translation I feel an enchantment, which is also connected to the beauty of my battered old Penguin paperback. The Persian miniature on the cover depicts a multitude of birds gathered by a decorative river. With as plucky a spirit as they can muster, they too are leaving the safety of their homes. Only with the assistance of each other, Attar's spiritual allegory emphasizes, will the birds find their way. His riddling tales often mock the solitary attempts of desert Sufis, wrapped up in dangerous self-importance. Unless, warns Attar, you can see divinity everywhere and in everything, including every human being, then you're missing out on the mystery of the world.

For the first six months, though, once I've ascertained that even with MS the camping life is possible for me, I hide out alone in the state forests of north-eastern New South Wales.

In the bush I take respite from the inundation of people that occurs after you have almost died. Old trees and rain, starry skies and insects – these are the antidotes I crave. Frogs croaking, the songs of crickets, spiderwebs strung between fronds of lomandras. This is when my true recovery begins.

Moonlight can bring the impression that a galaxy of stars, a miniature Milky Way, is sliding into the tree closest to my camp. One morning, before light, my water bucket holds a reflection of the waning crescent moon at such a steep angle that the song of the first shriek

thrush of morning seems to touch its tip. To think that it was only due to catastrophe that I've chosen this way to live.

In order to avoid another medical emergency my van is rigged for safety not only with a two-way radio, but also with a device that, if activated when I'm out of mobile phone range, instantly alerts an emergency centre and via satellite locates my exact position.

Life in these forest camps is calm and kind – my water dipper going in and out of a reed-rimmed wetland. Because I don't set up in well-known, overused beauty spots, all is fresh, the energy untrammelled and not a Vodka Cruiser can or chewing-gum wrapper in sight. The insects don't know how to bite and lizards are not afraid of me.

Every seven or eight days when I'm camping, I screw a small stone mill on to Ant and Bee's back step. In less than an hour I have my flour for bread. A 25-kilogram sack of wheat berries costs less than five loaves of supermarket bread. Dip a finger into fresh flour and it smells as alive as a little animal. Is there anything more peaceful or satisfying than turning flour into dough? This simple alchemy of sea salt, water and my own wild leaven; this dough forming like a head in my hands.

My balcony brush swish-swishing across the Tibetan rug is a rhythmic link to all the early-morning sweepers of Asia and Africa, and even as faraway as twelfth-century Baghdad. In *The Conference of the Birds*, one of Farid ud-Din Attar's sweepers has just been given a bracelet sparkling with jewels from the king.

Who did Ant and Bee save when it was used as an ambulance? I'm always wondering. Until 2002, my emergency year, ambulances had always been like fire engines – an urgent wail for somebody else's disaster.

'Sorry,' a man who used to drive ambulances in the 1970s tells me in a caravan park laundry, 'but your old ambo would've usually been heading for the morgue. Most people died.'

This, he claims, was mainly due to heart attacks, happening most frequently around 11 p.m., the body unable to cope with its last heavy meal. Ambulances back then carried little more than oxygen and a first-aid kit. Splints in the cupboard where I now keep my rolled oats and almonds.

'Probably shouldn't tell you this,' says the ex-driver, 'but one night we had a man who was smashed into smithereens. Come off from the thirty-third storey of a building in George Street. He was only young but we couldn't lift him. No bones big enough left.'

Back in Ant and Bee I turn on the radio. Just in time to hear that the day before, a young Sunni man strapped on his bomb belt, packed with nails, to blow himself and seventy others up, just before breakfast Baghdad time.

My glumness deepens. Ud-Din Attar's anecdotes, often set in Baghdad, also tend towards bloody ends. Al-Hallaj, a Persian Sufi, was flogged, mutilated, hung on a gibbet and decapitated for his heretical pronouncement, 'I am God and I am the Truth.' Ud-Din Attar himself was also purportedly beheaded.

*Which-a-where, which-a-where.* In the camp I choose for my first solo bush birthday, almost a year after setting forth, the air's alive with small birds. *Which-you, why-you, they sing. Weech you. Wheech you.*

Thinking back to turning thirty-eight three years ago, I try to cry but can't. The air of this clearing is too limpid, the noises from the small circle of a wetland too strong for tears.

*Why you, which you,* cry the black-faced flycatchers, sallying in the air after insects.

So here at last, just before I turn forty-one, will be the place safe enough to fully remember. The urgent need for this makes me grind flour fast for my next loaf of bread. In less than half an hour I'm done. I check the leaven. Good. It's very active, its bubbles rising and popping. In haste I form the dough.

Flouring its bottom and setting it in the sun to rise (it will take all of the bright day), at last I'm ready to allow the past to roll out like the present.

Like the Romans, I believe memories are stored in your *heart*, in your heart of hearts. So in a sunny glade, lying on a blanket, I place my hands there over the vertical scar, to help let it be 2002 again.

In the few days leading up to surgery my sister nips open the restricted red patient file and at my behest reads, 'Severely wasted, unwell lady, febrile, septic, with severe mitral regurgitation and acute heart failure. Limited movement due to extreme pain everywhere.'

From my hospital bed I weep at the

sheer implausibility of how something as shining as macro-errantry has led me down a path this dark. When I dare a glimpse in the hospital bathroom mirror I think that if I were a wounded wallaby by the side of the road, I'd knock the life out of her with my car jack. When I'm weighed in a basket I'm 39 kilograms. Naked I look like a concentration-camp victim. My liver shutting down has lent my skin a dreadful, snakeskin-yellow hue. I feel stranded in a script penned by a horror writer devoid of skill.

That it's my drastic love affair that has brought me to this point is part of my pain. After trying so hard! And my sobbing holds all the folly of my submersion into macrobiotics.

So no, I decide in front of the hospital mirror, I won't look any more into my own Knight of the Sad Countenance face. I will avoid the appearance of my thighs, fallen like two twigs underneath the hospital gown. I won't dwell on the ash my lover used to treat the bedsore that smells of death, there at the base of my spine. Nor on his absence from this bedside of extremity he so helped to create.

Instead I tune in to the sheer pageantry of life. The whole hospital's a show on which I feast and feast, unable to take my fill.

Look! There go Dr Miriam Welgampola's shoes again, so small, so elegant that surely elvin cobblers create each new pair in the night. What is the exact tragedy of the chain-smoking Iraqi-Kurdish doctor with the smouldering good looks? How come his eye got blackened at the Coogee Bay hotel? And the friendly tableau of night nurses munching on the lollies that fuel them through their shift. Such scenes are a call to life more potent than any painkiller.

Here come processions of precious friends carrying baskets full of the most marvellous food and drink. After two years wherein the eating of sugar was equated with shooting up heroin, I tune in to home-baked puddings.

Human flirtation comes next to my bedside. Oh, the lovely flutterings of it over me as I lie inert, surrounded by beloved members of my family. My dark-haired sister – the beauty of her, dressed like an eighteenth-century gypsy, as her deep brown eyes meet the nearly black ones of the bodybuilding male nurse from the Philippines. My father too,

laughing with happiness as he recognizes he is indeed still attractive to the nurses.

Ah, the light-hearted eddies across my shriven form, so that in the absence of fresh air, this is an almost greater tonic.

Finally there's Dr Grant, the cardiothoracic surgeon himself.

'Of all the doctors, he's my favourite,' declares my sister. 'Thank goodness he'll be performing the operation. Have you noticed his energy? He's like a bull.'

Matador, I secretly think, with his elegant moustache, especially when he goes by wearing a surgical gown as dramatic as any cape.

When one of the students confides that as a surgeon Dr Grant is renowned for his surgery on the hearts of children, I make a point of looking at his hands. His fingers are a poet's, long and pale. Due to my emaciated condition, the risks of open-heart surgery are high. Before I sign the permission form, I must be aware that I might die. But without this surgery then my death is certain.

When the day of the operation arrives, my grief in saying goodbye to my colourful retinue is greater than all the towering floors of the ugly hospital. The ward's grey dullness runs in time in me with Psalm 55. *My heart is sore pained within me and the terrors of death are fallen upon me. Fearfulness and trembling are come upon me and horror hath overwhelmed me.*

Regret flows in me. So this could be the last landscape of my life, this desolate place full of suffering people? According to the Socratic aphorism, I can't be judged to have excelled at philosophy because I haven't practised for my death, for my dying, not at all. I'd always taken it as given that, in the style of St Francis of Assisi, I would die outside, on solid ground, on grass. Far into the future, when I was old.

As orderlies slide me on to the surgical trolley, something unwanted begins to happen. Psalm 55, which even through pain I apprehend as being suitably charged for the situation, is being shoved aside. Instead, Edward Lear nonsense verse. *As soon as he saw our daughter Dell, in violent love that Crane King fell.* Taking over my mind.

Oh no, if I have to have Lear, rather than any plangent prayer or segment from some ancient saint, can't it at least be 'The Owl and the Pussycat'? Please,

God or whoever, I want the owl and the cat. The dance by the light of the silvery moon. I hate 'The Pelican Chorus'. *Pelican jee! We think no Birds so happy as we, wading in on its great flippers feet. Plumpskin, Ploshskin, Pelican jill! We think so then, and we thought so still!*

I never let anyone abbreviate my name to Jill. Now, due to a spelling error made on my admission, it's as 'Gorillian' that I'm being wheeled down the corridor to the theatre.

Somehow my sisters reappear for a last kiss goodbye. *She has gone to the great Gromboolian Plain, and we probably never shall meet again!*

I have said goodbye to everyone except myself. 'Don't be crying now,' says the beautiful Irish anaesthetist, who also succumbed to my father's charisma.

*For the King of the Cranes had won that heart with a Crocodile's egg and an ice-cream tart.*

What if the Buddhists are right, and from your last conscious thought comes your next reality?

In a moment the needle will go in. Why hasn't anyone mentioned God? Why did I stop praying when at the age of nine I lost my *Book of Poems and Prayers for the Very Young*, with the peaceful brown mare and foal on its cover?

My diseased heart will be exposed. The eyes of strangers will marvel at the extent of my gigantic mistake.

Was it an ice-cream tart or seaweed? Nori like mermaid's paper? Mists from the yellow Chankly Bore are rising up to greet me and someone is about to saw open my sternum.

'Oh yes,' says Dr Grant on my first check-up since beginning to live in Ant and Bee.

Almost a year of the camping life and I'm feeling fantastic.

'I suppose I would've done that bit.'

'With what kind of instrument?' I wonder.

'Well, it's sort of a jigsaw.' And as if he's doing an ad for Father's Day, his hands apologetically mime a few jumps of the tool. 'Suitable for tissue, not wood,' he proffers, to soften the reality. 'And here, I did bring a valve for you to see. Worth about five thousand dollars.'

More than Ant and Bee's purchase price. I look in astonishment at the piece of flimflam lying in the palm of his hand. It

resembles something found in the back of a stationery drawer, its function forgotten and impossible to guess. It's a carbon ring of a size that would fit my big toe, rimmed in white with two thin semicircular flaps the colour of sunglass lenses.

I look back at Dr Grant, sitting a little sideways in his chair, his tie loose. He has the affectionate, crumpled air of a favourite nephew. It seems barely believable that those hands, so at ease there in his lap, are the same ones that trimmed away the remains of my mitral valve and then sutured one of these rings into place. The same hands that scraped off the morbid bacterial carpet growing across the floor of my atrium.

Would they also be the ones responsible for the six shepherd hitch twists in the wire that put my sternum back together? The wire that I sometimes finger as I drive, the metal as hard as silver buttons just under the thin skin above my breasts?

For a moment the wish arises in me that across the wooden desk we could hold hands; fleetingly, just so that I could feel with my own fingers those that had known my actual anatomical heart. But he's busy behind me now, checking with his stethoscope that he's hearing the right rhythms.

'You seem remarkably well. Pulse is seventy-six, which is pretty good. How have you managed that?'

I almost guide his gaze to the incongruous sight of my old ambulance among the ordinary vehicles of the city car park. The artist friend who printed the name for me on the original ambulance plate above the windscreen did so in shades of blue and yellow that recall bush wattle in bloom under a clear sky.

'Well, just keep doing whatever it is that has you in such good shape.'

The Ant and Bee life, I want to exclaim. The most effective physiotherapy of all. Almost twelve months of living in such a way has brought unforeseen strength. I can feel the ripple of the abdominal muscles I've grown manoeuvring the F100, manufactured long before power steering.

At the door, although I give Dr Grant my most sincere thanks, how can they ever express my ever-ongoing and huge gratitude? Only a dance might convey my joy to him; beautiful bodies spinning like birds over faraway mountains.

Back in the bush, the lights of a plane crossing over my camp remind me of those that blink on and off in a hospital at night. In Dickinson Ward South after dark, in the interminable eight weeks following my open heart surgery, there was no dancing and no joy. Some nurses were so saintly I'll remember their faces forever; others were sadists I couldn't run away from.

Beneath my nightgown I was a gory mess. If I could have spread out my arms I'd have looked like a dingo hung on a fence by a hunter. Pain rippled from the wound and lay so deep inside it could be assuaged by no painkiller. It took four weeks before I could sit up unassisted. Because my catheter had unwisely been removed, my bed was a river of urine. My legs swelled into tree trunks. Whenever I cried, which was often, it was with the open wish on my lips that I hadn't survived.

There were two other beds in my ward. In one of them a man called Jim was also crying. He'd just found out that, actually, sorry, there'd be no heart operation for him because what the doctors thought was fluid was in fact the solid mass of a tumour bigger than anything they'd seen. I couldn't believe that a team of young doctors were imparting this news to him with only a cotton hospital curtain between him and me.

The next day his dry humour kept him going through the phone calls. 'Yeah, mate, two weeks . . . Nah, no operation . . . Two weeks. Wasn't water round me heart but a great mother of a tumour. More life left in me fucken little finger than in me lungs.'

He was thirty-six, with four young sons. Each night, before Jim was transported to a hospice for the dying, he shambled in disorientation from one bed to the next, a personification of Emily Dickinson's 'a pain -- so utter'.

My sleeping pill always wore off at midnight, leaving hours to survive before the sight of the tea lady's sneakers. 'Help me, help me,' I heard Jim calling, but nobody could.

My balance, which had always been precarious in the preceding seven years, was more deranged than ever after surgery. I had to wait three months for an explanation of this, by way of an MRI scan, which could not be done until my artificial

heart valve was secure. In case the powerful magnets of the scan slurped it out of position, the neurology team jested.

The MRI brought not only a firm diagnosis of MS, seven years after my first symptoms, but also the news that the intravenous antibiotics used to blitz the bacteria in my body had been like a chemical hurricane to the delicate vestibular system of my inner ears.

'This can grow back in birds,' Dr Welgampola told me, 'but not in people. I'm afraid you'll need to use some kind of walking aid forever now. And as for swimming, very dangerous because you'll find you'll violently tip over when you shut your eyes.'

I needed Jim to turn this excess of bad tidings into a joke. But he would've been long dead.

My second summer in Ant and Bee is so hot that I seek refuge in the cool mountain streams west of Canberra. When I soak my MS-troubled limbs in the dark cool water of Micalong Creek, all vestiges of self-pity wash away. How can I possibly feel sorry for myself when I acknowledge that it's adversity which brings me again and again to the most beautiful places?

Ever since I set out in Ant and Bee, I began noticing hearts. Their shape is everywhere.

Sometimes a footpath in a country town where I stop for fuel and food can seem like artist Jim Dine has been present, slipping heart stones in when the concrete was still wet. Up in the dimpled shadows of sunlight in trees, green hearts grow daily. Hearts in bark and heart-shaped ant holes. Even leech bites seem to scab up in this shape, as if to tell me that love will heal all wounds.

I'm still camped on Micalong Creek the day someone's four-wheel drive hits a wallaby. She dies later that afternoon under the shelter of blackberry bushes. Each day I check the rate of disintegration, I take the opportunity to do a bit of dying practice. I don't want to be caught out again, so unprepared, so imprisoned in a hospital. All bitter grudges in me disappear when I contemplate even my worst, most hurtful old friend or lover dissolving into the ground in the way of this small wallaby.

Golden flies arrive first, pouring in



and out of her mouth and eyes like living jewels, just as they would with any corpse. Only a matter of days before the spinal vertebrae stands bare, in a way that makes me finger my own backbone. Beetles then, doing their urgent work.

‘How come you didn’t go to hospital before you turned into an emergency?’ I’m sometimes asked as, less in need of solitude now, I begin to dip into the lovely lives of old and new friends. I think of my ex-partner’s certainty. My desperation. The feeling that, Job-like, my walking mystery had simply branched off into new zones of diabolical pain. The danger inherent in any hubris-filled philosophy.

Fragments of ancient Persian poetry catch the nature of my longing better than anything. I get down my good translation of Hafiz.

When the violin can forgive the past,  
it can start singing.

When the violin can stop worrying  
about the future, you’ll become such a  
drunk laughing nuisance that God will  
then lean down and start combing you  
into his hair.

When the violin can forgive every  
wound caused by others, the heart  
starts singing.

Sometimes forgiveness comes easily to me as I attend to the Ant and Bee bed. Ten minutes at least of unrolling mohair blankets, unstashing the sleeping bags that unzip into doonas. Then to pack it up each morning? Probably fifteen to twenty minutes. It’s a moving meditation of which I never grow tired. All the folding, all the smoothing of cloth, all the exact stowing of possessions so essential for life to remain operational in a space the size of a walk-in wardrobe, somehow moves me ever closer to acceptance.

Also the ongoing baking of sourdough; for ‘bread eases all grief’, as Sancho Panza told his mule Dapple after a fall, proffering him some from his pannier.

On and off all morning as I set out these memories, the Formica top of my bush desk has been holding the reflections of a pair of wedge-tailed eagles. Except for the sound of my carbon valve, all is peaceful. The sound is exactly that of Ant and Bee’s indicator. My heart is pushing blood into the chamber and the valve flicks open then shut, to stop any backflow.

If I make a coffee on my camp stove, the valve, in anticipation of caffeine, will pause or gallop. It’s as if Lord Cut-Glass from *Under Milk Wood*, in his ticking kitchen, is scampering around inside me. *Ping, strike, tick, chime and tock*. It can be worse at night, this feeling that, Dylan Thomas-style, ‘I am tocking the earth away.’

I think of an archaeologist or a child of the far future picking up the remains of my heart valve. Where will it end up, this tiny mechanism, which Dr Grant says can last two thousand years? I imagine it rushing away in a river, or lying on a rock long after my flesh is no more. What about those ghost-story hearts, beating away after death, Edgar Allan Poe-style? If I’m cremated will it withstand the heat?

*Tick, tick, tick*, there’s no escaping my very own egg-timer.

The 100-watt solar panel that powers my laptop, fridge and printer resembles a book propped open to the sun, its huge pages waiting for my words. I have it angled to face north-east, diagonally left of the bonnet. The solid iron curves of Ant and Bee offer more than protection from the sun and breeze. Often spiders set out webs under the driver’s side mirror, so that putting down my pen the better to watch, I understand how immensity exists in fragility.

The day a red-bellied black snake appears, summer is turning into autumn. I’m typing fast, hoping to finish before dark. The snake’s behind me, quite far off, about to slide into the undergrowth. However, moments later, as I glance side-

ways to check, its tail is right next to my chair. It’s an old snake and as I ease my gaze down between my legs there is its head, right between my feet, moving in such a way that it appears to be dancing to the rhythm of my valve.

I have been doing another kind of writing, too, on a quilt that’s growing as I travel. In my camping life I use so many calico flour and oat bags that they’re a natural choice for the panels of the quilt. With the distribution of bags to new participants comes the feeling that I’m handing out thick blank sheets of paper. One side of the quilt retains the stencil of the grain company, preserving the caring wisdom of the organic cereal world. The other holds people’s interpretations of wisdom.

The Djuna Barnes quote from my long-ago invalid scooter is the first to appear. I sew sorrow marks too: recognition that other calico bags once held flour laced with poison to wipe out the forebears of the Aboriginal countries I’m travelling through. Bundjalung, Gumbayngirri, Gurringai, Darkinjung. I put down in the slow handwriting of sewing the names of the nations so devastated. Yuin, Wiradjuri, Ngunwaal, Walgalu.

‘That’s Wunyella,’ a woman says when I tell about the snake under my desk. ‘From up the north-west channel country. That red-belly snake. She represent Aboriginal womanhood. Healing. What about someone do Monkeemi, the little grey wind of dawn? If you want I could so sew that one?’

To somehow convey the desolation I feel whenever there’s no way into country where I might camp, one panel might just have to be angry. Fence after fence after fence. Sign after sign. The country carved up in ways that hem in my eyes. ‘Trespassers will be shot.’ ‘Private. Do not come in.’ And, most memorably, ‘Fuck off U Tourist Cunts.’ That so much land looks as if it’s undergone five generations



of chemotherapy in order to turn it into paddocks can also bring the sharpest grief.

But on other days I have to down pen or needle for a wild dance, my walking stick flying off my arm. That yelp of delight under the forest oaks? That yip of animal-like pleasure in a forest of spotted gums near Tanja? That's me. That's my ever-increasing recognition that, instead of being dead and buried, or stranded in Brickland these past two years, I'm streaming with life.

If I sometimes take off every item of jewellery and every piece of clothing in the dark, under stars, it's only in order to be as close as possible to that which I don't understand. Lying alone in front of my campfire with my hands over my heart, what is this great love I can feel drifting into me, as if the sky has come inside? Why is the dark rocking me like a cradle?

*Ruach.* I remember a priest in hospital explaining the old Hebrew word to me. The power at the base of breath and wind – the invisible, always feminine force. As he spoke, I could feel a channel of fresh air brush my face; only narrow, as much as could flow through the two-inch gap of open window, all that was permitted since the day a patient had leapt from it. But *ruach* nevertheless.

On such camping nights I'm more peaceful than I've ever been. But only if I keep my hands over my heart. As if this lover, though mysterious and unseen, still needs skin to exist.

More than ever I'm hard pressed to describe the nature of my faith. Such a tingle of doubt and desire. If it often seems lost altogether, I remind myself of how frequently more ordinary items disappear inside my van: within moments sometimes, sheets of paper or a favourite pen vanish. Only once I stop fuming does the item miraculously reappear. Perhaps this idea also belongs on the quilt – that something lost will only be found once you stop looking.

Only a few of ud-Din Attar's birds made it safely through the seven treacherous valleys. Their ordeals were not in vain, for as they finally faced the majestic Simorgh, their king, they beheld a vast mirror of shining planets, endlessly reflecting each bird's unique being. With the realization that each of them had always contained God, the birds dissolved

through the mirror into blissful eternity.

For some reason, though it may only be a problem with the translation, the ending seems too self-satisfied to be convincing. Too smug. No wonder it's taken me so long to finish.

No, I think, remembering the bull ant that has spent the day building a circle round my campfire cushion using light-coloured bark but dark twigs. Give me insects over answers any day. Give me wattle pig weevils with kind eyes. Or dragonflies agleam with dew. Give me the tenacity of the small forest lizard I saw burying her eggs one dusk. Even after I'd roared around and around and reversed and heaved Ant and Bee into the best position facing north-east, she must've kept up her digging. *Scuffer-scoof. Scuffer-scoof, scoof-scoof-scoof.* The sound of her claws as, sitting between the open back doors, I sipped my tea and watched.

Give me sunny days and give me rain. Give me the happy song of my tiny kettle whistling on the gas burner by my pillow. And if this is prayer I realize I really love it, especially if what comes is the exact opposite of what I think it is I need.

As I enter my third year of living this way, I'm increasingly aware that these are days that will never come back. Even with an LPG tank next to the petrol tank, the soaring price of oil means that I can't keep driving around in something powered by a V8 engine.

I think I'm addicted to diversity. I love my laundry/hot-shower days in caravan parks I'll never revisit. Oh, the easy pleasure of finding that an aged caravan park just two hours from the Victorian border has a deep, old-fashioned bath and ample hot water. How satisfying is the easy comradeship of a chat in front of the water tap as I fill my containers. Freedom from rates and electricity bills? Not cleaning my bathroom or wheeling out rubbish bins? These are the sorts of prosaic facts that also gild my days.

'I used to have one of what you're sensible enough to be using,' the dispirited owner of a Winnebago Motorhome, broken down for the fifth time in as many months, tells me. 'Probably mine was a bit older. A '63 with green trim, she was. Reliable. Not like this friggin monster.' His second chin swings in the direction of the Winnebago. 'So don't you ever let go of your old girl.'

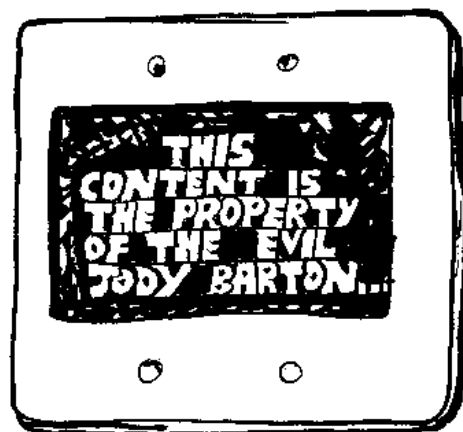
But of course everything shifts, everything must come to its end. In my darkest hospital days I used to imagine the destruction of even the hospital. Cranes with dinosaur jaws and chains bringing it down. To contemplate Ant and Bee at some wrecker's boneyard of the future makes me want to cry. This old ambulance, which has become my ambulatory vehicle – disabled housing like no other – is so integral to my own, ever-altering curve of joy.

Instead of crying, though, I push open the back doors. The huge frame they form around the scenery beyond might well have ruined my enjoyment of anything confined in a gallery forever.

Physically I know I'm much stronger. With my walking stick hanging on my shoulder just in case, I can walk ten times further than I could in my Brickland days – a whole mile or more of happiness. It's been over a year since I've had to use my fold-up walking frame on wheels. Whereas once upon a time I could barely scramble the step up into the cab, now it's an effortless glide. I've developed the agility of a child, equally at ease cross-legged as out on my belly with my chin in my hands. I swim in rivers. I can catch waves. I love how this way of life takes me outside into exhilarating weather that a house encourages you to avoid.

I think I'll keep driving south tomorrow. No matter if it rains. No matter if all the meaning I've attached today to my strange life drifts away with the light of sunrise. The God of Lost Things in Ant and Bee will surely come again to my rescue.

Meanwhile, my days ahead are going to be clear. *Which you, why?* And full of the little birds that sing in questions. ◇



## Five Dials Noir

We've teamed up with Akashic Books to bring you this first installment of Five Dials Noir, if only to add some darkness to a magazine that sometimes seems too optimistic and unaware of the dishonourable and moonless corners of life. The series will run at the end of each issue. We'll be drawing from the sixty volumes of Akashic Books' award-winning Noir Series. The series has been recognized with nominations and awards throughout the mystery and literary world, from the Shamus, Derringer, Macavity, and Anthony awards to the Pushcart Prize. Two stories published in the series have won the Edgar for Best Short Story, and in 2013, Akashic publisher Johnny Temple was awarded the Ellery Queen Award.

First:

Cheryl Lu-Lien Tan in Singapore.

(For more information check out [akashicbooks.com](http://akashicbooks.com))



A TOUCH OF NOIR

# Reel

*Fiction by Cheryl Lu-Lien Tan*

Changi Ah Meng knew how it would end even before they appeared. . .



The *nibong* poles would have long been in place, a wooden labyrinth designed to attract and confuse. He imagined their hearts racing, surges of blood pumping through, adrenaline pulling them further into the buttery blackness, panic steering them along the rows of columns. They would sense then that it was too late. Even so, there was nothing left to do but swim, just keep swimming. It carried reassurance, even if false. By the time the nets closed in, snuggling them together in a tight slippery ball, there was no more point in trying.

This was stupid daydreaming, Ah Meng's mum would say. Fish so stupid – where got brains to think? The woman had a point. And the truth of that was what kept the family in business. Not good business, mind you – fish farming was becoming far more practical and lucrative than *kelong* fishing these days. But to start a new fish farm – expensive, *lah*. Maybe when Ah Long came back from Queensland with his *atas* business degree then they could discuss. For now, with the *kelong* that Kong Kong set up years ago, the family managed to catch enough each month to pass the time. Not good, not bad. Just can, *lah*.

Just can. That was what Ah Meng's days were, one flowing into the next. His only relief came one Sunday. Ah Meng was squatting on the jetty after a late breakfast smoking a cigarette, trying to see how long he could pull on it, how long he could get the ash to last before it fell off in one long tube. He was getting better at it – almost reaching one and a half centimetres now! – which made him feel a bit proud, *lah*, even if no one noticed or cared. Life on the *kelong* is just like that, he had learned in a year. If you don't notice the small things, there's nothing to notice at all.

Monsoon season had just started, which was both okay and not so okay for fishing. Sometimes the stormy waters pushed flotillas of tiger groupers and cobia into the *kelong* traps. But some days all he and Siva hauled in were nets of shrimp and tiny crabs. No matter how many of those you caught – no point, *lah*. The Chinese restaurants only paid big bucks for large fish – nice nice one they can display in fish tanks.

Ma had just scolded him for squatting and smoking like a *samseng* the week before, when she suddenly showed up again in her new second-hand Corolla to spy on him. It was true that Ah Meng never used to do it until he started copying his army mates. But once she scolded him, *aiyoh*, he found himself doing it all the time. He couldn't understand his mother sometimes – she always said she came by without calling first because she happened to be in the neighbourhood. But hello, Ah Meng was her son – wouldn't he know that she lived in Faber Crescent, all the way on the other side of the island? Sometimes Ah Meng couldn't believe how *toot* she thought he was. He wasn't smart like Ah Long, *lah* – can go university in Australia all. But she should at least know that he wasn't stupid. After last week, Ah Meng started really enjoying squatting on the jetty smoking. He liked imagining the look on his mum's face if she pulled up in her Corolla at that exact moment. The thought of that made each puff all the more *shiok*.

Spotting the girls made him get up though. There were two – one big, one smaller. Skinny beanpoles with long pale



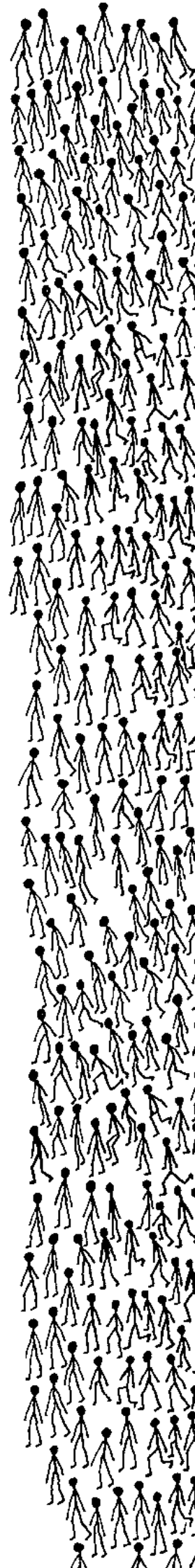
legs. The big one had a long tidy ponytail; the little one, one of those Japanese doll haircuts. Even before they got close, Ah Meng could see how pretty they were. He could tell they were sisters – same button nose, same slightly crooked smile, same cheeks the colour of young dragonfruit. They even walked the same, each turning out her feet just slightly. Watching them stroll down the pier towards the jetty, slender legs purposely pushing out from their matching black Adidas shorts, Ah Meng imagined them as birds. Were birds as stupid as fish?

They must have come from the village hawker centre – each clutched a clear plastic bag of sugarcane juice jabbed with a neon pink straw. From their slippers, Ah Meng guessed that they lived close enough to walk. He tried to recall if he'd seen them before – he didn't think so. Girls weren't that common on this jetty so he was sure he would have noticed. A little further away, yes, near the government holiday chalets on Strawberry Hill or closer to the canoeing and windsurfing joints in Changi Village. Sometimes at night, you might see the Malay ladyboys pop up and loiter a little, some of them looking for a break from walking, some just looking for a good spot for their clients, *lah*. But mostly all you saw on this jetty were the morning fishermen and the few *kelong* oldies left. And Ah Meng.

If he wanted to see any *chio* girls he usually had to take the bus to the Bedok town centre. If he felt in the mood for *atas* girls then go Clarke Quay where the high-class clubs were, *lah*. But the girls there were a bit scary for him. None of them usually wanted to talk to him. Actually, the ones in Bedok also usually ignored him. They could probably tell immediately that he didn't have anything. No car, no Tag Heuer, not even a credit card. He hadn't had a girlfriend since before the army days. Once he got posted to Pulau Tekong for three months of artillery training, his girlfriend dumped him for a neighbour who'd already finished his army duty – he would actually be around to bring her out and didn't have a *toot*-looking shaved head any more. It had been so long since Ah Meng had seen one pretty girl, much less two. He sucked hard on his cigarette.

How to play this?

He flicked his cigarette out into the water and lit another, steadying himself against the railing as he leaned back on one foot, hoping he looked a little like Tony Leung in one of those moody Shanghai movies. He got no hat or gangster suit, *lah*, but can still act a bit. When the girls got close enough, he turned his face away, narrowing his eyes as he peered out at the water. It hadn't rained yet so it was still that time of day when the air in the village tasted like moist salt. The girls' footsteps were so light, the way they walked so high class that he heard no sounds of slippers flapping against their heels. He could feel his heart walloping his chest. He blinked and looked further out, focusing on his *kelong* in the distance. The small platformed house in the slender strait that sliced a passage between Malaysia and Singapore was barely visible, circled with an uneven skyline of tall *nibong* stilts. All was quiet – good. Siva and his two boys were off on Sundays, so if anyone was actually puttering around on his *kelong*, that means sure got trouble.





‘Is that your boat?’

Slowly he turned around. It was the smaller one.

‘Yah,’ he said as casually as he could. The small one was smiling slightly; the big one stared at him blankly. He wasn’t sure what to do.

‘Is it expensive?’ The small one again.

A very Singaporean question, he thought, noting that she must not be very smart to imagine that his beat-up wooden boat might be expensive. It was fairly large, yes – big enough to transport nets and basins of fish – with a small sheltered section lined with painted benches. Ma had come up with the brilliant idea of *kelong* tourism a few months back, until she discovered how much cash she’d have to sink into fixing up the place before people would actually pay to come for a chance to check out ‘one of Singapore’s last real-life working *kelongs*!’. Not to mention the boat they had was so old and *lau pok* that Ah Meng couldn’t see anyone wanting to risk even minutes on it.

‘Er, no. This one very old one,’ he replied, desperately trying to think of something better to say. He took another long drag.

‘Do you give people rides?’ The bigger girl this time, smiling at him along with the little one.

Ah Meng wasn’t supposed to – lawsuits, Ma had explained. Better don’t risk anything funny. So even when his army *kaki gajiau*-ed him for evening joyrides, promising to bring a nice bottle of Black Label if he agreed, he always said no.

‘Sometimes,’ he said, quickly adding, ‘but only if the weather’s nice.’

‘It’s nice today,’ the big one said.

That was true. Though the rains hadn’t come yet it was bluish out. Even the sun was up in full force. There was nothing left to say, so Ah Meng tossed his cigarette into the still water and gestured for them to follow, leading the girls down the neat walkway to the boat.

Since it had been their idea, he thought they would be more excited about seeing the boat up close. From the looks of it, though, the excitement was all his. He hoped they couldn’t tell. The small one peeked closely at the vessel before letting him take her hand to help her on to the boat. But the older girl simply stepped on, settling in next to her sister on one of the two slender benches. Ah Meng was thankful that he had spent the morning hosing down the boat and Cloroxing everything so the deck smelled more like the sashimi section at Cold Storage than the aunties’ fish stalls at the wet market.

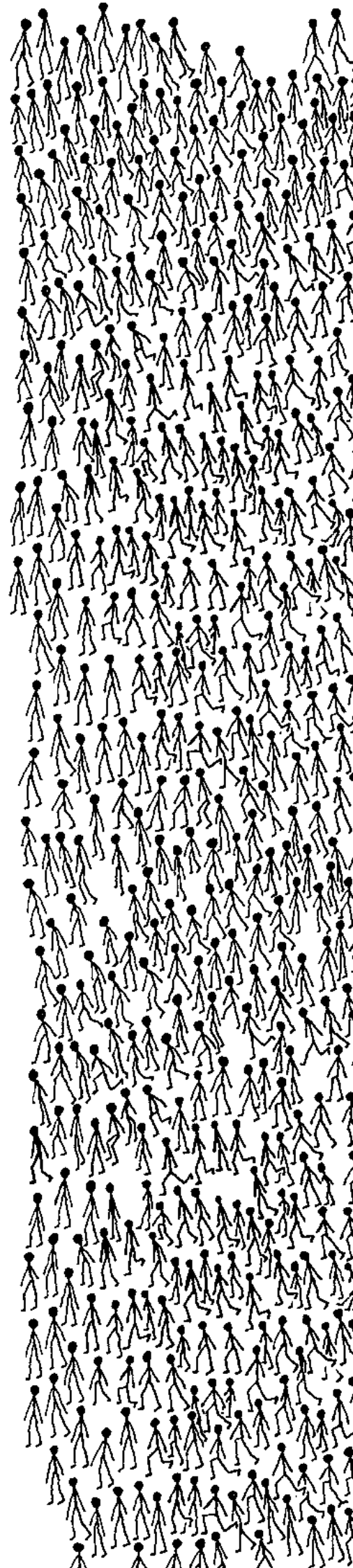
‘Why doesn’t it have a name?’ the small one asked as he leaned over to cast off. ‘Usually boats got name – right? Always painted on the side?’

Ah Meng had never considered this and had no answer. ‘I can maybe name it after you,’ he said. ‘What’s your name?’

The small one looked at the big girl, who shrugged.

‘Yan – Xiao Yan,’ the little one said, smiling. ‘And she’s Ling Ling. You can combine them and call it *Yan Ling*?’

She sounded so earnest Ah Meng suddenly realized how young she probably was. And her sister probably not much older. He felt a twinge. But it had been so long. And it’s not



like he really had anything so bad in mind. He just wanted to be friends. And it occurred to him that since he was only twenty-two, the age difference wasn't terrible. Hell, girls his age were meeting and fucking guys twice their age! In just a few years these two girls would probably be doing exactly the same. Those guys they would be fucking were much older than Ah Meng was now!

Ah Meng was sick of it. If a guy is just trying to make do, who can blame him? Isn't that what the government wants? His mum wants? For him to show some initiative? Fuck care, *lah*.

'Tell you what – if I can find some paint on the *kelong* I'll even let you paint it on the side,' he said.

Both girls got excited. '*Kelong?*' Ling said. '*We've never been on a kelong!*'

This was easier than he'd thought.

'Okay, *lah*, since you two so nice, maybe I can take you there,' he tossed out, ducking into the cabin to start up the boat.

The girls got up and followed him, watching and saying nothing as he put the throttle in idle, jiggered the gearshift into neutral, then turned the starter switch, cranking the engine for a few seconds before feeling it catch, throwing the floor beneath them into a thick trundle. Yan stumbled backward but Ling reached out so quickly to grab her that Ah Meng had no time to react.

As they left the jetty, Ah Meng wondered how he might impress them. Using one hand to steer – a move he was now glad he had practised every day – he guided the chugging vessel towards the *kelong*. The ride wouldn't take long, five minutes at the most. The shortness of it stressed him out. Ah Meng felt as if this was his moment to make an impression. He wasn't sure what they had in mind but it probably wasn't a rickety platformed house surrounded by smelly nets of fish.

'You see that island over there?' he said, pointing towards the larger of the two that he glimpsed through the door of his dank room every day. The girls nodded. 'That's Pulau Ubin.'

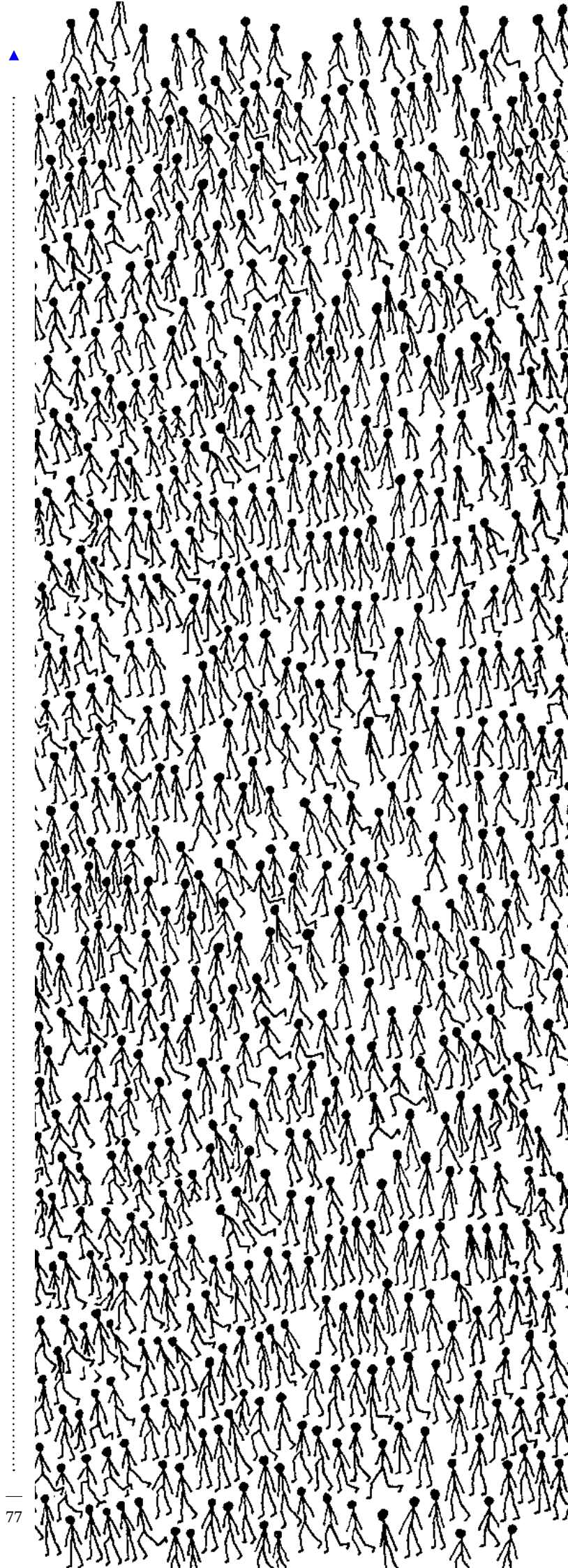
The girls remained silent. Ah Meng tried to remember anything he might know about Ubin.

'It's haunted,' he said. Yan and Ling looked bored.

Ah Meng decided to circle the *kelong* to buy a little time. He tried to remember an old story he'd heard from some of the fishing uncles in Changi the one time they invited him to join them for beers at the hawker centre.

'I know it looks like nothing but trees and jungle, *lah*,' he said. 'But Ubin actually quite interesting one. Years and years ago there was nothing there. But then three animals from Singapore – a frog, a pig and an elephant – decided to challenge each other to see who could swim across and reach Malaysia first. Whoever didn't make it would turn into stone. In the end they all also cannot make it, *lah* – the elephant and the pig turned into stone in the same spot, becoming Pulau Ubin. The frog was a little bit further from them and became Pulau Sekudu – Frog Island. You see that small one over there? The big rock in the middle looks like a frog, right?'

Ah Meng exhaled as softly as he could. He felt his heart





chugging harder than the boat. This was the most he'd said to any girl he didn't know in a long time.

Something must have worked though – the girls went to the window and stared out. Ling was pointing, whispering and nudging Yan to look at Sekudu. The little girl said, 'Wah!' and giggled softly. Ah Meng felt a burst of pride. He'd made her laugh!

The boat passed the nearest *kelong* to Ah Meng's, giving him a new thought. What if the boys over there were out and about? If they saw the girls on his boat, *susah lah*. People around here were damn fucking gossipy. With nothing happening every day, any small new thing – *wah*, people talked and talked about it for weeks.

He sped up as he passed. Let them think he was rude for not waving today.

The girls had returned to his side and were watching him steer. In silence, he circled his *kelong* and pulled to a stop at the landing. He gestured to them to stay in the cabin while he tied the boat to the *kelong* dock, jumped off, and tightened the connection, then waved to them to come out. Ling helped Yan off the boat before getting off herself.

Ah Meng looked around, squinting hard to gauge how clearly he could see into old Tan's *kelong* across the way. All seemed quiet over there – the boys must be on the mainland. Oh yah – day off.

Feeling much better, he led the way, wending down the slatted path that zigzagged around the series of sunken pools outlined with tall poles. A breeze was coming through now. He peered behind him; the girls were walking hand in hand, carefully treading in his footsteps. Yan seemed a little scared and was moving slower than Ling.

'Don't worry,' he said, stopping and turning to face them. 'People never fall in one.'

'But if fall in, then how?' Yan asked.

'Not good, *lah*,' he said, squatting down by one of the pools. He felt around for something to show them what he meant, patting his pockets and pulling out his pack of Salems. Ah Meng held a cigarette up for the girls to see.

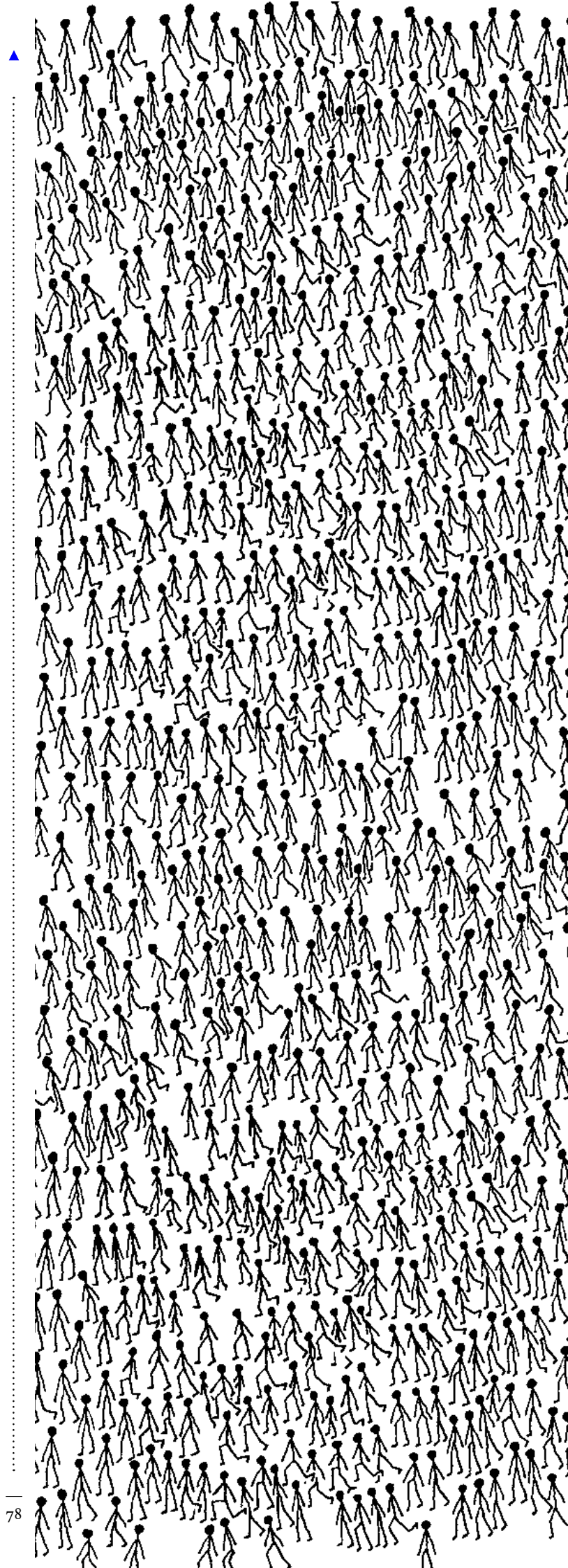
'Inside here, ah,' he said, pointing to a square of water, 'got many many fish. Especially today – we holiday today, *mah*, so don't bring them to town until tomorrow. These fish, ah, anything also eat one. Small fish, each other, anything you throw in also they take.'

Ah Meng threw his cigarette into the water and a violent vortex bubbled up. He imagined the swirl of fish below shoving and nipping at each other, trying to reach for what might be new food. The girls were giggling now.

'Do it again!' Ling said.

And so he did. Even if ciggies had become fucking expensive, he was sure this would be worth it. He flung the second one a little further out. Even he was laughing along with the girls now.

Ah Meng glanced over at them – Yan didn't look scared any more. He realized this was the happiest he'd felt in a very long time. He had been thinking recently about how ironic it was that the infamous Changi prison, where British prisoners of war were kept during the Japanese Occupation and now home to dangerous criminals, was so close to his



*kelong*. Yah, sure – those guys in there now were prisoners. But hallo, so was Ah Meng! What kind of life was this at the *kelong*? He was supposed to do it just for two years, until Ah Long came back from uni. But from the way Ma had been talking, it seemed as if she was happy to have him take care of business on the *kelong* for good. Save money what – no need to hire a new *kelong* manager all. *Kani nah*. Just thinking about Ah Long coming back and getting to sit in some air-con office, planning the family business's future while Ah Meng sweated his balls off at the *kelong*, made him want to vomit blood.

Ah Long had recently sent Ma some picture of a girlfriend – some small-small, cute-cute Singaporean girl who was studying business in Queensland also. Ma was so excited, asked Ah Long to make sure to bring her home for Chinese New Year. Of course Ah Long could meet girls like that, *lah* – Ma send him away to study all. But Ah Meng? Put him on the *kelong*, how to meet girls? All the action he got most nights was hearing Siva in the room next door whacking off. When Ah Meng first started on the *kelong* Siva at least tried to be a bit quiet about it. But now, after a year, the guy damn not shy one. Ah Meng heard each long grunt through the thin wall between them.

Now, though – who was the winner? Ah Meng looked over at Yan and Ling, both of their faces bright, upturned, almost glinting in the sun. He shook his head and smiled at his fortune. Just wait till Ma saw these two. When they were a little older, perhaps.

'Come,' he said, getting up and starting back towards the house. 'You girls hungry?'

Choosing not to show them his bedroom just yet, Ah Meng led them to the small kitchen where he, Siva and the boys cooked instant noodles most days. Once a week they split a fish – nothing special, just the first thing they netted that was large enough for the four of them. Ah Meng had caught one just that morning, thinking that he might have it all to himself tonight as a treat. He took it out of the fridge and showed it to the girls.

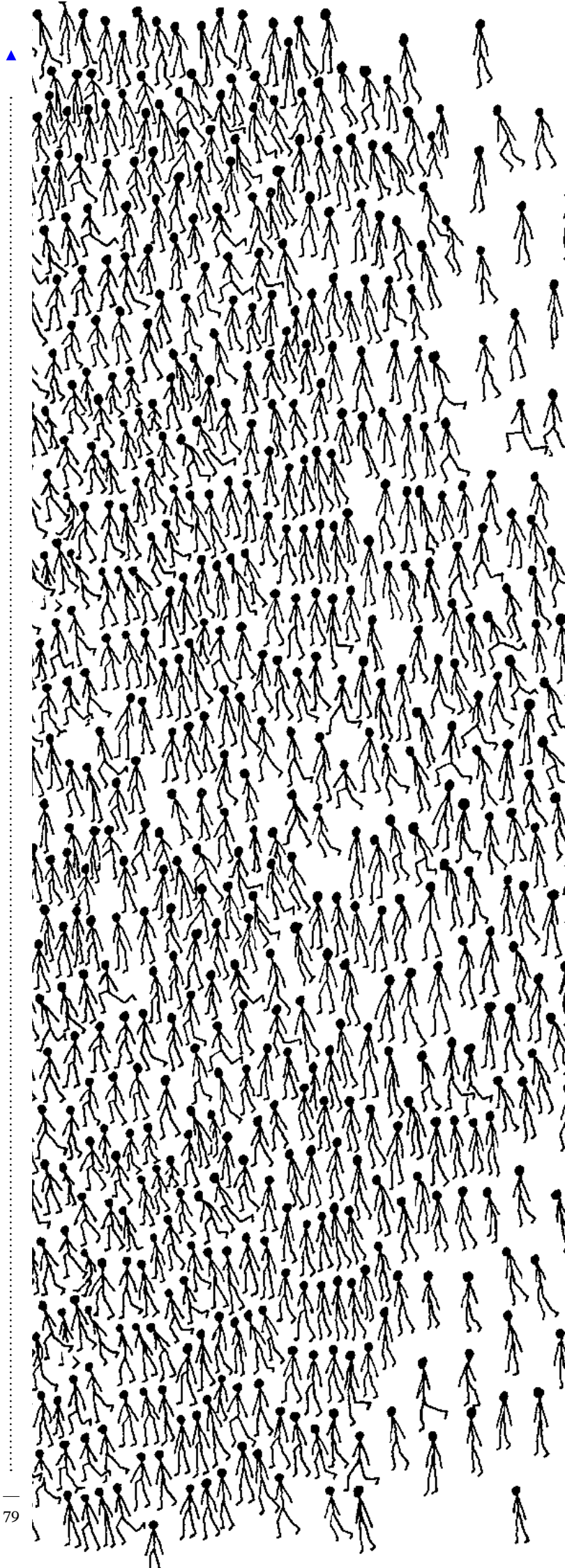
'You cook?' he asked.

Ling nodded. 'Just helping Mum in the kitchen sometimes,' she said, opening drawers to search for a knife. She had never gutted a fish, so Ah Meng showed her how. Once that was done, he handed her the knife and let her chop up the rest. He didn't know how to cook so he usually just fried up pieces of fish with some green onions and soy sauce. When he explained this to Ling, she took over.

Ah Meng went to the fridge and grabbed two cold Anchor beers. He offered one to Ling but she shook her head. 'Uncle – I'm only fifteen, *lah*,' she said, laughing.

Fifteen. Ah Meng felt the twinge again. He'd come this far. See how, *lor*. If got chance then got chance. No chance then no chance. The gods would decide.

He lightly pinched Ling's cheek, a move that made her smile a little wider, surprising him. He felt himself start to blush and turned away. Opening a can of Anchor, Ah Meng sat down by the chipped square table outside the kitchen where he, Siva and the boys had their meals. This day was





turning out not bad, *lah*. But what next? He wasn't sure. When Ah Meng first saw the girls, he had thought he might say hello and maybe offer them a ride on his boat in the near future. Now that they were on the *kelong*, he had no idea what to do.

*Chuan dao qiao tou zhi ran zhi* – Ah Meng hadn't paid much attention to Chinese classes in secondary school but this old saying popped into his head. *When the boat reaches the head of the bridge, it will naturally straighten itself out.* He leaned back against the rusted metal folding chair and stretched his legs, getting settled before lighting up a Salem.

As his cigarette disappeared, he noticed the smell of fish frying in onions. Good girl, he thought. In minutes, Ling and Yan appeared bearing a plate of fish and three sets of chopsticks. Ling had tucked another can of Anchor under her arm, setting it down shyly in front of him. Ah Meng looked at the girl, blushing again.

They ate in silence. Feeling like he needed to thank Ling, Ah Meng said, 'Wah, your cooking very good!' Ling just smiled and continued digging out plump little pieces of fish, using her fingers to remove hairlike bones, before offering them to Yan. This pleased Ah Meng. *She'll make a very good mother*, he thought, wondering how their first kiss might be, how her lips would feel on his, on his neck, more. He didn't feel guilty.

'You live here alone?' Ling suddenly asked, heading into the kitchen to get more beer when she noticed Ah Meng crumpling up his second can.

'I wish!' he said, laughing. 'But no, *lah*. My workers here also. But today off day.'

Ling, back with two cans, opened one for Ah Meng. 'Isn't it lonely?' she asked. 'Don't you have a girlfriend?'

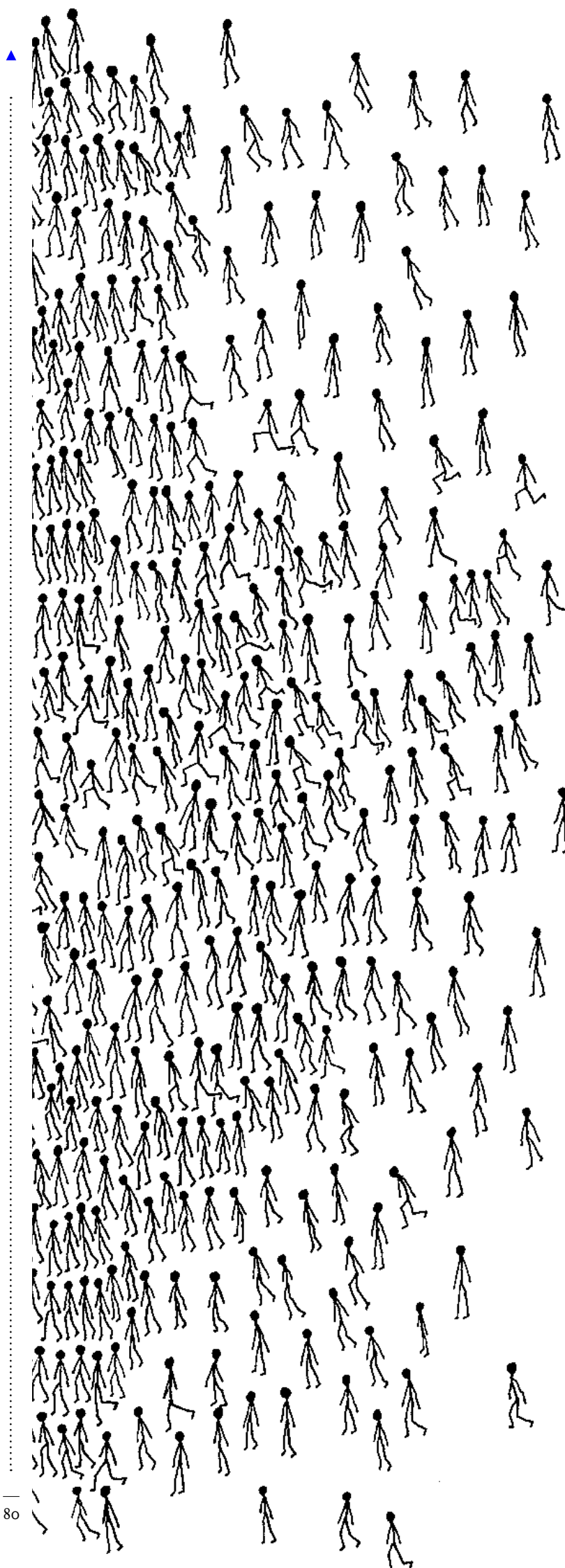
Ah Meng wasn't sure what to say. Explain too much and she would think he was a loser. Tell her too little and she might think he wasn't interested in girls.

'Last time,' he said, wiping his mouth with his palm and lighting another cigarette. 'Now no more. No time, *lah!* Why? Want to be my girlfriend, is it?'

Ling said nothing but Ah Meng could see her smiling. Yan was absently picking at fish remnants, putting nothing more in her mouth. His mind was feeling a bit like cotton balls. He normally didn't drink this much so early – and usually not when it was so hot. Beer is nice in the afternoon, *lah*, but maybe when you're sitting in a shady hawker centre or in your friend's air-con house. Out on the *kelong*, drinking in the afternoon sure got headache one. And he could feel one happening right now. Die, *lah* – like that how to perform? Ah Meng quickly finished the last swigs of his Anchor, crumpling the can. Too late, he heard Ling opening the other can on the table, pushing it towards him. He wanted to say no but she looked so deferential, her sweet face so much wanting to please, that he just nodded towards her, took the fresh beer with both hands and had a few long sips.

Yan, bored, got up and wandered towards the slatted footpath near the fish.

'Oi! Be careful!' Ling shouted, jumping up and hurrying after her. Ah Meng did the same, falling in step with the girls after Ling had caught up to Yan, taking her hand,





firmly guiding her to walk only in the very middle of the footpath, so narrow in parts it was almost like a gangplank.

When the path took them to the heart of the wooden maze, Ling and Yan picked a darker spot and sat down, cross-legged, staring out at the cloudy green water so calm that Ah Meng wondered if the fish were sleeping. He sat down next to Ling, getting as close as he could.

He felt the girl place her head on his shoulder. His heart started going like a motor. He knew there was no way she couldn't feel that and the thought made him blush again. He draped his right hand around her shoulder, pulling her closer, shutting his eyes to photograph the feeling.

A minute passed. Ah Meng was counting the time with his heartbeats. One one thousand, two one thousand, three . . . When he opened his eyes, Ling was peering up at him, her large brown eyes open and sweet and cool. He felt his left hand reach over to brush a long piece of hair away from her forehead so he could look closer.

Ling didn't move. The gods had spoken. So Ah Meng got even closer. He felt so full his chest hurt. He pinched his eyes shut, leaning towards her, lips extended.

He didn't realize his lips had never made contact until he opened his eyes, finding that he was falling over backward. The pain in his chest was still there – so was Siva's favourite fish knife. Ling was squatting by him now, casually watching him grope at the knife. He could see Yan standing behind her, covering her face with her little hands.

His T-shirt was so wet, his hands were so red. When Ling reached over and pulled out the knife, Ah Meng feeling each of the eight inches as it slid out, his first thought was to thank her for helping him. But too quickly, she plunged it back in, hitting a higher spot this time. Ah Meng gasped, feeling a tinny wetness coming up from his throat.

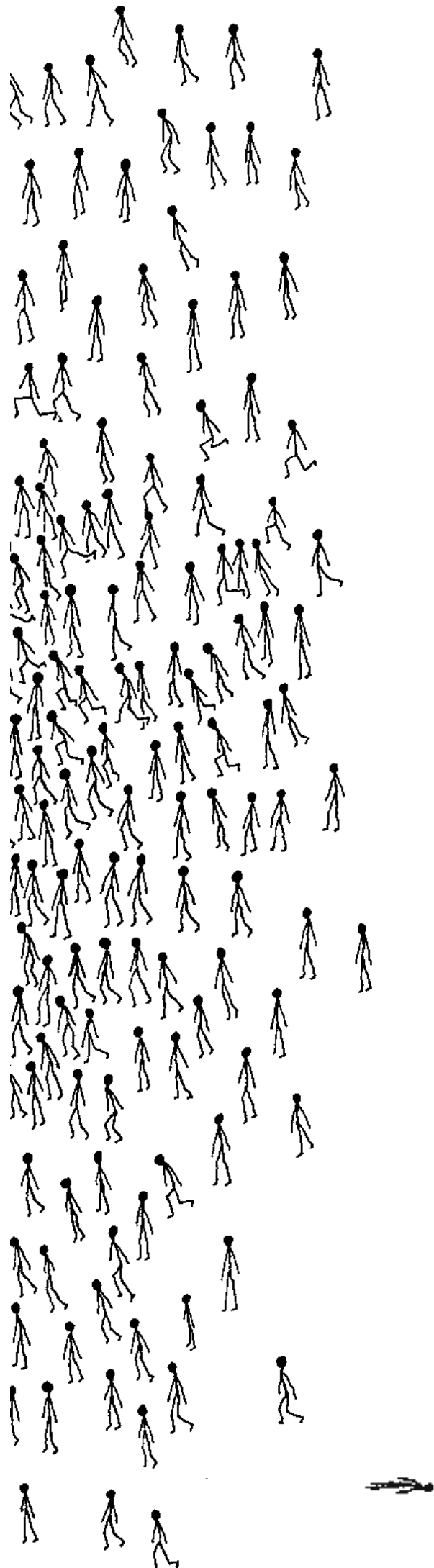
'Hurry up,' he heard her say. 'Help!'

His mind was a swirl of cotton. Dimly, he felt Ling pull out the knife and toss it into the water. Then the feeling of four hands pushing, rolling him. Once, twice.

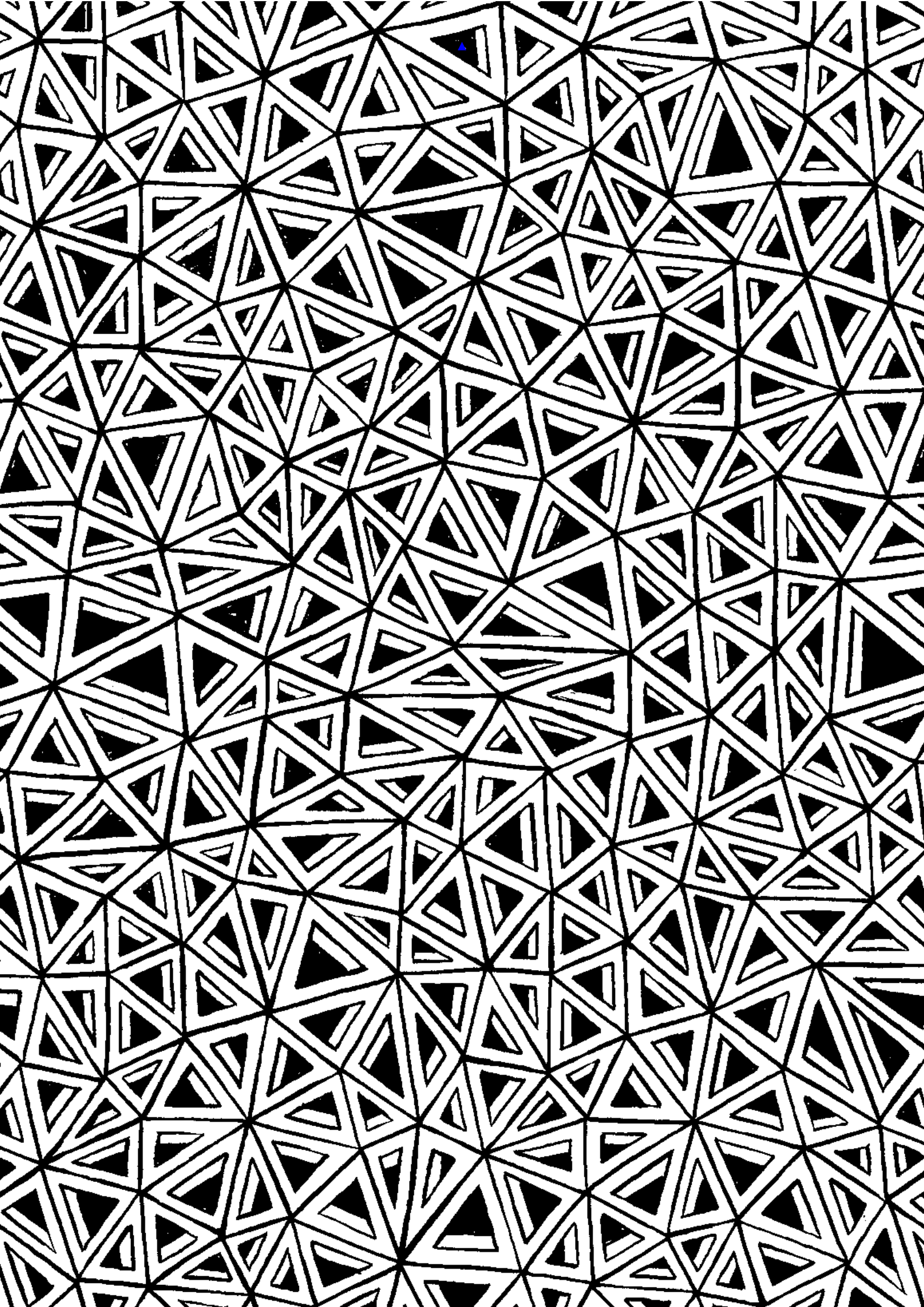
**Y**an was crying, but very softly. Ling couldn't hear her over the boat's engine but sensed it anyway. Holding on to the steering wheel with her right hand and steadying it the way she remembered seeing the guy do it, she reached her left out towards Yan, gesturing for her to take it. The rains still hadn't come; the ride had been smooth. They would be back at the jetty in a few minutes.

Feeling Yan take her hand, Ling squeezed it. Glancing over, she saw that her little sister had stopped sobbing.

'Don't worry,' Ling said. 'Next time will be easier.'◇







▲

# Five Dials

