

HAMISH HAMILTON PRESENTS

Five Dials



NUMBER 37

'Others merely live, I vegetate.'

- BRIAN DILLON *Cyril Connolly: Epic Procrastinator*
AISLINN HUNTER *The Magical, Meaningful Value of Handwriting*
JACK UNDERWOOD *Must Poets Live Poetic Lives?*
DAVID WAGNER *New German Fiction*

*Plus: a dictionary of lesser-known abstract painters, a clutch of contest winners,
and a scroll of illustration that might never end.*



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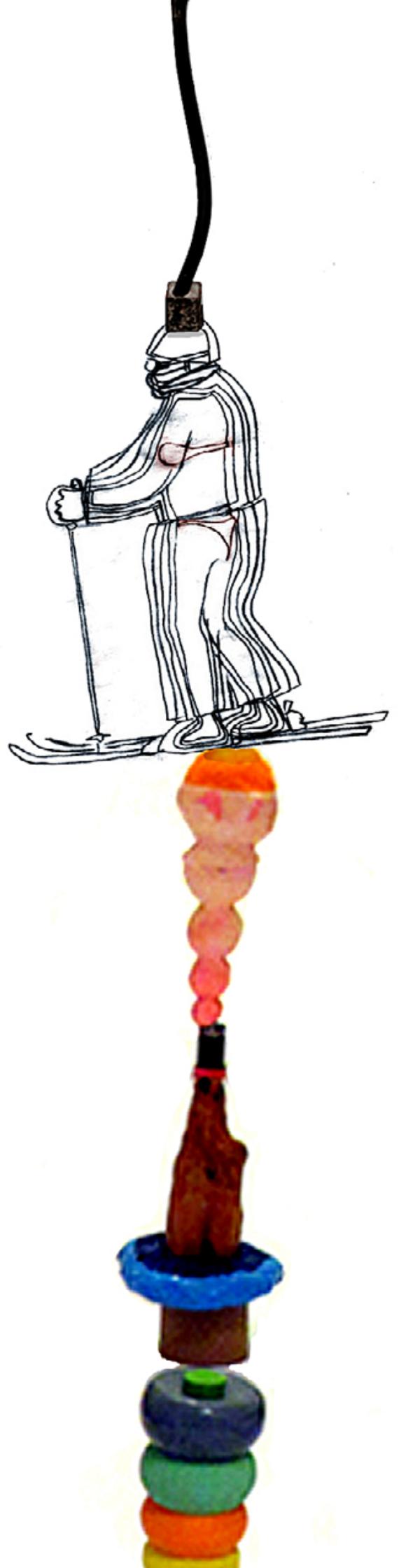


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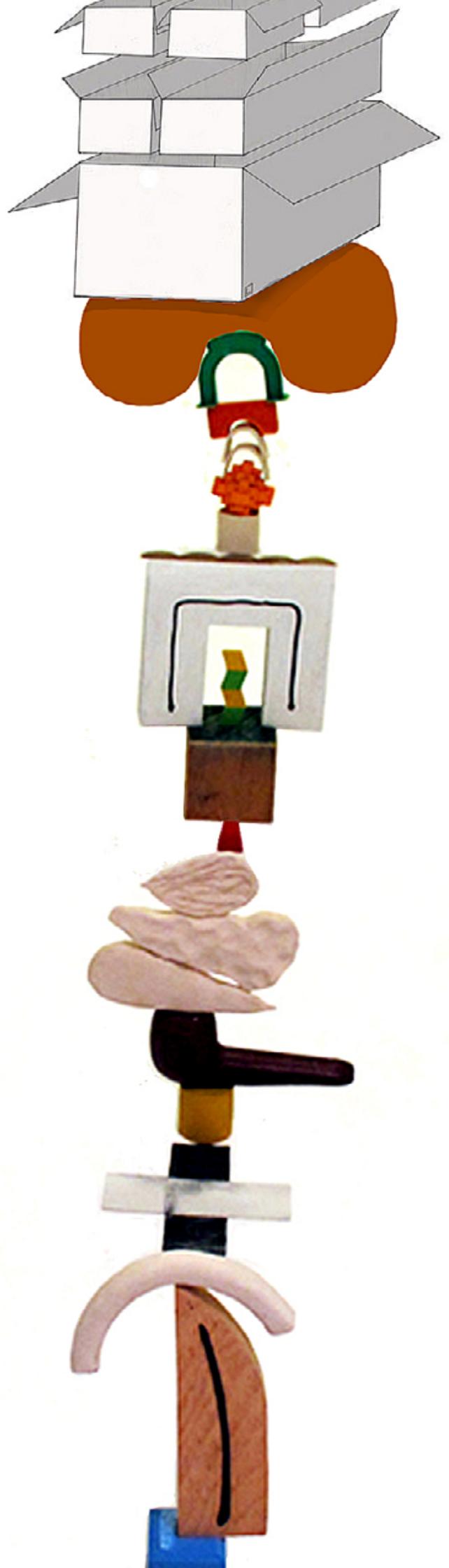
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A Jet-Propelled Armchair

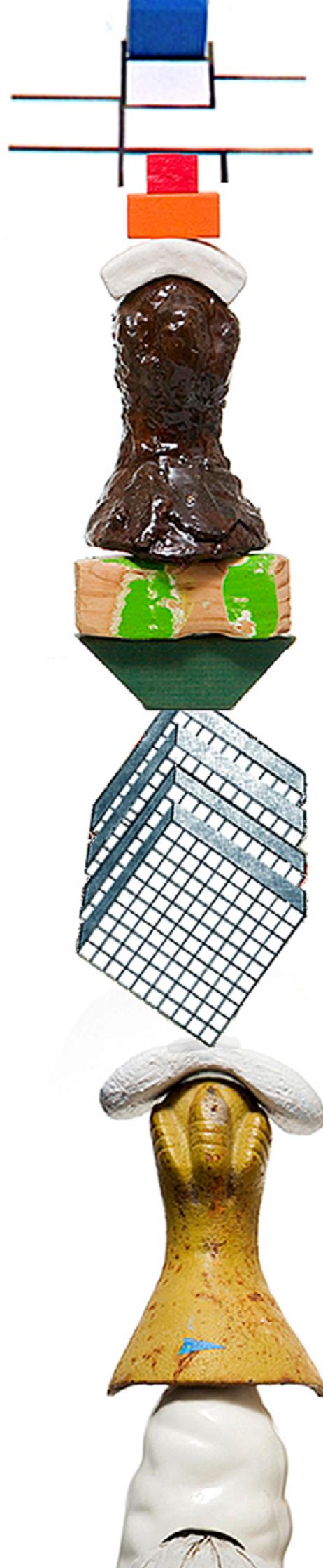
Brian Dillon on Cyril Connolly's

*The Unquiet Grave, an essay of sorts,
an anthology, a complaint*

If his friends are to be believed, Cyril Connolly was a monster of sloth and self-regard. And yet, what an endearing figure he cuts – if that's the verb, with Connolly – through their letters and memoirs: maundering over failed affairs of heart or wallet, brimming with excuses for his unwritten books, ever ready to start afresh with the bubbles when the night wore on. He was, according to V. S. Pritchett, 'a phenomenal baby in a pram': grasping at toys and prizes, mostly failing to connect. In his preface to *The Missing Diplomats*, Connolly's short book about the Cambridge spies Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean (he had vaguely known both), Peter Quennell wrote, 'With an agile and intensely active brain few writers have combined a greater disposition to extreme bodily indolence.' Supine for weeks or months at a time, Connolly could spring up when needed and, provided there was secretarial help on hand, thrash out an overdue essay or review, or rush a magazine to print. Quennell again: 'his armchair becomes miraculously jet-propelled.'

It is not a method guaranteed to secure a solid oeuvre that will live for the ages. Connolly's narrow reputation now rests largely on the mixture of memoir and high literary journalism in *Enemies of Promise* (1938), and not on his single novel *The Rock Pool* (1936), or the several collections of reviews he later packaged in lieu of proper books. Fewer still today are references to *The Unquiet Grave*: the odd, fragmentary 'word cycle' he published under the pen name Palinurus in the autumn of 1944. But this is the book – an essay of sorts, an anthology, a *complaint* – in which the contradictions in Connolly's talent and personality fail to resolve, with the strangest, most seductive results. Here he anatomizes his worst traits: laziness, nostalgia, gluttony, hypochondria, some essential frivolity of mind that means his writing will always be summed up as "brilliant" – that is, not worth doing'. It's a work of ruinous ambition, sometimes attaining real profundity of thought and (more important) perfection of style, but lapsing time and again into sentiment, bathos or outright silliness.

The Unquiet Grave begins with a sentence from which it cannot recover: 'The more books we read, the clearer it becomes that the true function of a writer is to produce a masterpiece and that no other task is of any consequence.' Connolly was addicted to inconsequence, and knew it. His failure as a writer was due not only to the temptations of journalism, which he had warned against in *Enemies of Promise*, nor the distractions of marriage: 'a kind of exquisite dis-



sipation'. The more fundamental problem – alongside food, drink and drugs (of which more below) – was a catastrophic attachment to 'the bed-book-bath defence system'. Connolly could not write, he thought, without first calming the body and tuning the mind. As a result, he could hardly work at all, and was almost proud of the fact: 'Others merely live, I vegetate.'

Protestations of debilitating sloth are common among writers, and more frequent among prolific ones; Boswell and Johnson, for example, had many sympathetic chats about their shared reluctance to get out of bed and down to work. Rarely, though, has a writer so cruelly studied his own sluggishness, nor cast it in such bleak existential terms, as in *The Unquiet Grave*. Connolly wrote the first of many drafts in three small notebooks between the autumns of 1942 and 1943; it was, he said, 'inevitably a war book'. He was then a few years into his editorship of *Horizon*; the first edition of *The Unquiet Grave* appeared under the magazine's imprint. Connolly borrowed the title from an old ballad, and his pseudonym from the *Aeneid*: Palinurus is Aeneas' pilot, who falls overboard in his sleep and is murdered by inhabitants of the coast where he is washed ashore. In his book's epilogue, Connolly labours to make links between himself and the Trojan tiller-man; in truth, the classical analogy does not matter much – the new Palinurus' problems are modern ones, not mythic.

In her essay 'Notes on Failure', Joyce Carol Oates calls *The Unquiet Grave* 'a journal in perpetual metamorphosis, a lyric assemblage'. In places, sometimes for several pages at a time, it's no more than a high-toned commonplace book, corraling quotations from Connolly's mid-war reading: Chamfort, Pascal, Sainte-Beuve, Nerval, Baudelaire. An atmosphere of disabused, ironic alienation pervades the passages he selects, and quotes for the most part in their original French. (Evelyn Waugh took this habit as evidence – further evidence – of Connolly's pretension. He even quotes Heidegger in French, though in fairness the German philosopher has probably been filtered through Sartre.) When the author's own voice is heard it is by turns languid, styptic, childish and self-lacerating. Melancholia wins the contest between moods, and *The Unquiet Grave* is notorious for certain passages of intense self-pity, which Connolly would like to elevate to essayistic grandeur.

Consider this sequence of nostalgic yearning and desire to disappear: 'Streets of Paris, pray for me; beaches in the sun, pray for me; ghosts of the lemurs, intercede for me; plane-tree and laurel-rose, shade me; summer rain on quays of Toulon, wash me away.' We'll return to those lemurs shortly; but for the moment, observe the tone: genuinely dismal, aspirantly aesthetic, knowingly parodic. It's one (mixed) style among several in Connolly's efforts to ape his aphoristic precursors. Elsewhere, he tries for the cool, paradoxical self-sufficiency of the epigram or emblem, and sometimes he almost gets there. 'Today an artist must expect to write on water and to cast in sand.' 'Is it possible to love any human being without being torn limb from limb?' 'The civilization of one epoch becomes the manure of the next.' But you can hear that his *pensées* are already on the turn; his



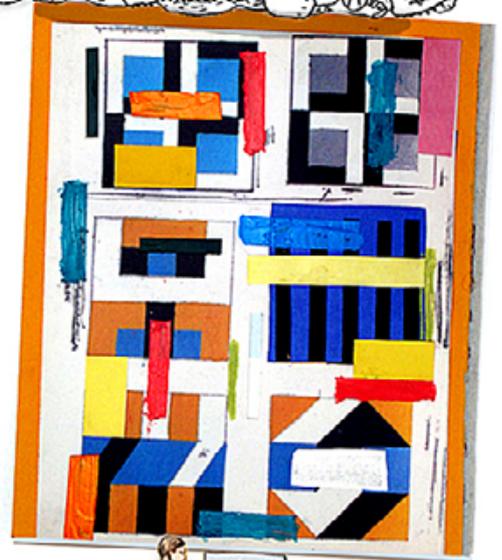
taste is for the overripe. Connolly's perfectly wrought, disconsolate phrases revert to what one suspects they had been in life, before reaching the pages of his notebooks: jokes, that is, one-liners and gags.

The best known of those is also a clue to what keeps happening to Connolly's philosophical aspirations: 'Imprisoned in every fat man a thin one is wildly signalling to be let out.' *The Unquiet Grave* casts its author's misery, detachment and degradation in spiritual and sometimes political terms, when the trouble in fact is with the body. Approaching forty, heaving his well-lunched frame into a new decade, moving already with the anonymous waddle of midlife, Connolly is convinced that if he can just lose half a stone the rest – his masterpiece – will follow: 'Obesity is a mental state, a disease brought on by boredom and disappointment.' There must, he frets, be some physical and metaphysical mean, or

'Approaching forty, heaving his well-lunched frame into a new decade, moving already with the anonymous waddle of midlife...'

state of equilibrium, that would allow him to write. Perhaps drugs are the answer: 'a sleeping-pill to pass the night and a Benzedrine to get through the day', champagne as always to ease the transitions.

You can read *The Unquiet Grave* as a sustained fantasy about the ideal physical state for literary production. It is a curiously inhuman condition. The book is full of envious passages regarding the animals Connolly has known: notably his beloved lemurs, which are said to have stunk out any house he lived in. He reflects morbidly, in a manner that recalls the surrealist writer Roger Caillois, on the mimetic urges of certain creatures: 'Why do sole and turbot borrow the colours and even the contours of the sea-bottom? Out of self-protection? No, out of self-disgust.' But his imagination is properly dominated by a weird affinity for the vegetable world that is well in excess of mere love of food or nature.

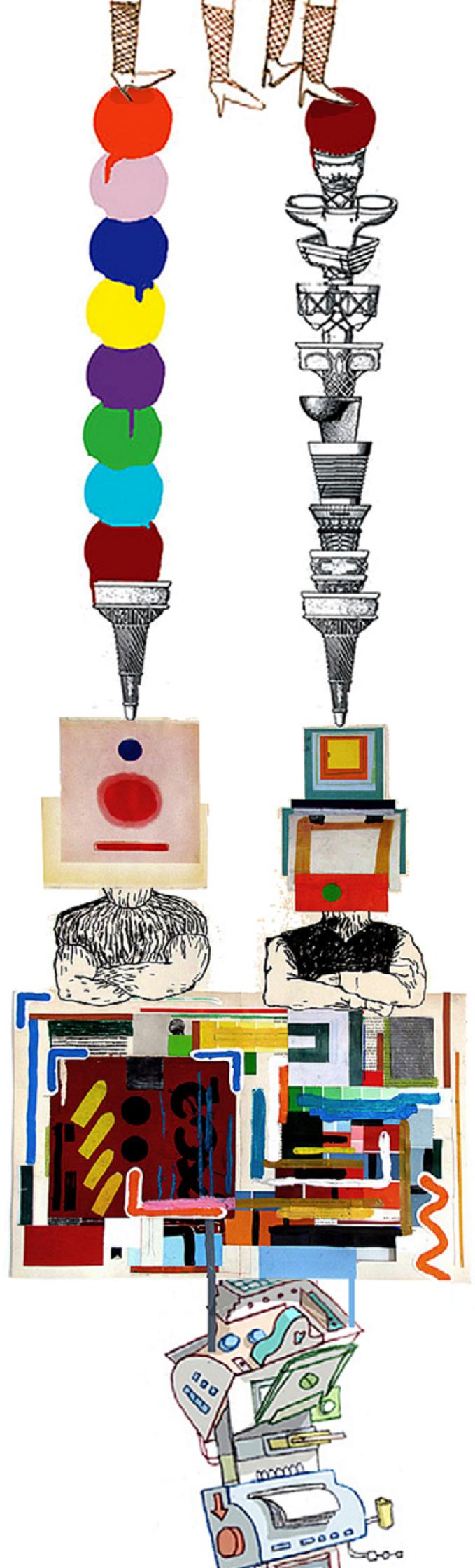


There are precious encomia to the melon, quince and opium poppy, but the more lurid vision is of a humanity overcome by an almost sentient army of plants, 'selected as the target of vegetable attack, marked down by the vine, hop, juniper, the tobacco plant, tea-leaf and coffee-berry for destruction'. The nightmare, or possibly the consoling daydream, is that all of this teeming life might go to work in and through the writer's body – to write and to vegetate would amount to the same thing.

Connolly is trying to do what all stuck or stymied writers attempt in the final, decisive phase of their desperation: to turn distraction into the task itself, to write out of rather than against inertia. The effort (or lack of it) gives rise to some of his most affecting passages: Palinurus adrift among Parisian bookstalls, jolted awake mid-afternoon in his Left Bank hotel room, stranded in search of epiphanies above a succession of sunlit harbours. But even his *flânerie* is unreal and out of reach, the object only of pre-war nostalgia. Instead, he waddles along the Charing Cross Road, spots a brittle young woman in a green corduroy suit and linen coat outside Zwenner's bookshop, follows her towards St Giles and loses her. According to Quennell, Connolly pined after this 'aloof and primitive' girl for days, traipsing around Chelsea on a hunch, nursing his boyish desire for 'beauty and intelligence in distress'.

This kind of detail is easily mocked, and more so in a freeloading, unhappily married literary journalist in early middle age. But among his bouts of yearning, alcoholic indulgence and near-suicidal (so he claimed) insomnia, Connolly had discerned an existential unease that would define the decade following the war. As Kenneth Tynan noted in 1967, by which time Connolly's promising phase was long gone and *The Unquiet Grave* routinely disparaged as a piece of mandarin preciousness, he had done more than anyone to popularize an idea of angst borrowed from Continental thinkers. That he had done it early and in such an English fashion – that is, with an inflated sense of what European thought and literature signified in the first place, and with such an incurable addiction to low comedy – meant Connolly's existential plaint could never take its place alongside the chic talismans of outsider culture in the years to come, let alone among the works of the great aphorists he aspired to emulate.

Still, *The Unquiet Grave* had a brief celebrity before it began to look antique. Elizabeth Bowen, Philip Toynbee and Edmund Wilson all admired it; Hemingway even wrote to say that he was 'almost sure it will be a classic (whatever that means)'. Connolly's wife Jean, by then estranged, told him, 'I think you are one of the few people whom self-pity or unhappiness develops, rather than shuts in.' Hamish Hamilton had rejected the manuscript in 1944: 'You write like an angel and think like a sage, but we are disturbed by the bitterness and despair which pervade the book.' Following the success of the limited Horizon edition, however, the publisher changed his mind, and *The Unquiet Grave* appeared under his imprint in 1945, with a cover design by John Piper. Others remained unconvinced. An anonymous reviewer in the *Times Literary Supplement*



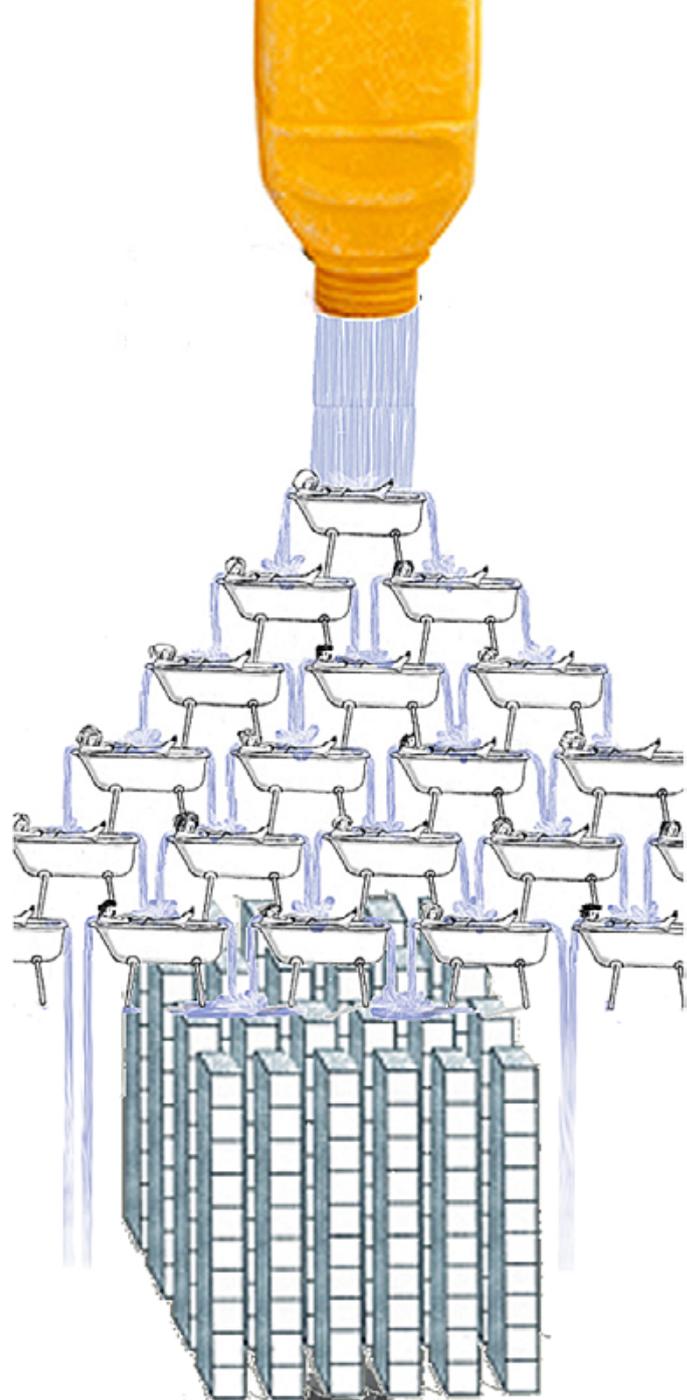
spoke of the book's 'bleak silliness'; R. G. Lienhardt, in *Scrutiny*, regretted 'his fondness for words like "exquisite" and "graceful"'. Waugh, who never missed a chance to pick on the sometime friend he called 'Smartiboots', complained that 'Cyril has lived too long among Communist young ladies'.

Nobody at the time appears seriously to have asked what Connolly thought he was doing with the book's form. It is surely what strikes us most forcefully now, this exotic and untimely attraction to fragments, and the loose essayistic agglomeration of same. It would be stretching things to say that Connolly's art of quotation has much in common, say, with the collage of citations in Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* or the patterned fragments in Theodor Adorno's *Minima Moralia*, the latter written in the same years. (Though anyone who has read Benjamin on hashish, or Adorno's exiled reflections on American bathroom layout, will not think these references so absurd.) But there is a comparison to be made with a post-war European philosopher of similarly glum, aphoristic aspect. Connolly sounds at times remarkably like the displaced Romanian E. M. Cioran, whose *A Short History of Decay* was published in Paris five years after *The Unquiet Grave*. Both writers knew it was impossible to mimic fully, without falling into kitsch, the brisk authority of a Pascal, Lichtenberg or La Rochefoucauld. But they were both also in love with the moral and stylistic implications of the form. You only have to acquaint yourself with a sliver of Cioran's sour laconism to start hearing Connolly differently. Here is Cioran: 'I have known no "new" life which was not illusory and compromised at its roots.' And Connolly: 'What monster first slipped in the idea of progress? Who destroyed our conception of happiness with these growing-pains?'¹

Connolly's tone is unthinkable today, but not his form, nor commitment to a kind of essayism at once gluttonous in scope and exacting in its search for style. *The Unquiet Grave*, worked up from notes and diaries, larded with undigested reading, scarcely seemed a book at all to some of Connolly's contemporaries. And Palinurus – the sulky, inflated, pleasure-loving version of himself that he placed at its centre – a simple embarrassment, with his ambitions, regrets and infatuations. But is it really so unlikely that the most experimental and self-revealing of mid-century English essays was written by a figure we've learned to think of as cosseted, pretentious, witty but middlebrow? A writer out of time, with a fetish for his own failure? An adept, and addict, of minor modes? I think not. *The Unquiet Grave* is a lesson, seventy years old this year, in the potential still of an elegant, unruly form. It is a masterpiece of sorts, despite all, and Palinurus our essayistic contemporary. ◇

1 Who knows if he ever read Cioran, none of whose books is among the reviews, mostly for the Sunday Times, with which Connolly saw out the next three decades. But Cioran had certainly read Connolly: *Drawn and Quartered*, from 1971, begins with an epigraph from the most famous of Horizon's wartime editorials, 'It is closing-time in the gardens of the West.'





A LIST

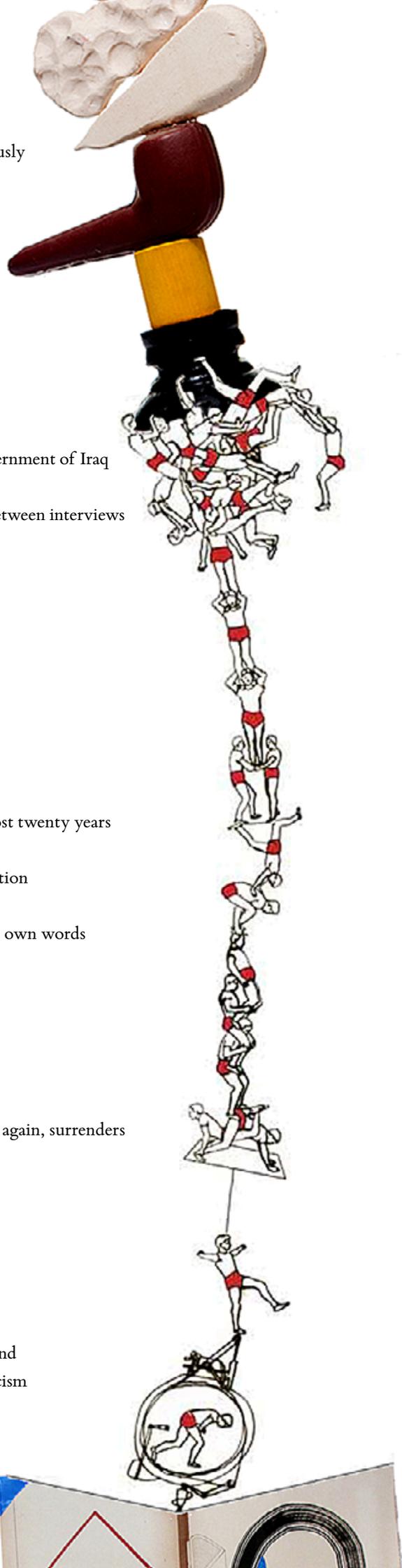
A Concise Dictionary of Lesser-Known Abstract Painters

Compiled by Simon Prosser

- ABNER: Believed himself to be the only non-figurative Egyptian painter
- ACCARDI: Graphic signs inscribed direct on black ground
- AFRO: Practised with a vigorous feeling for colour
- BARTA: Became a mosaicist
- BAUER: Founded a private museum of abstract art
- BERKE: Member of the 'Zen' group
- CALLIYANNIS: Skilfully organized his rich material in solid compositions
- CALMIS: Advised by her friend Jacques Villon
- COULON: Spent a considerable time in Amsterdam

DAVRING: Precociously exhibited at Flechtheim's gallery
 DEGOTTEX: Sought to reveal self-sufficient personal vision spontaneously
 DORFLES: Born in Trieste, lived in Milan
 ENGEL-PAK: A chequered career as a young man
 ERZINGER: Worked under Lhote
 ESTÈVE: A particular fondness for red
 FALCHI: Began as a music-hall performer
 FLEXOR: Father was an agricultural officer
 FREIST: Large compositions in dulled colours
 GALLATIN: Began painting without instruction
 GLARNER: Handled greys with great virtuosity
 GRAESER: An architect and interior decorator
 HAMOUDI: Sent to study the art situation in Paris on behalf of the government of Iraq
 HLITO: An art stripped to the bone
 HULBECK: Managed to paint vigorous abstract works in the intervals between interviews
 IDOUX: Mostly interested in fresco painting
 ISTRATI: Great monochromatic panels voluptuously laden with paint
 JANCO: Drew and composed masks for Dadaist sessions
 JAREMA: Soldati converted him to abstraction
 JOBIN: Progressed in the neo-plastic direction from 1953
 KAYLER: Geometrical compositions of great sobriety
 LATASTER: Brief smears of paint combined with graphisms
 LAZZARI: Painted in Greenwich Village: no affiliations
 LECK: Progressed slowly towards painting in swathes
 MACRIS: Studied drawing in Leger's studio. Then worked on his own
 MAGNELLI: Reverted to representational painting, for a period of almost twenty years
 MILO: Brother of the Parisian critic R. van Gindertael
 MORITA: Black patches, spread wide on paper, having an interior vibration
 NEBEL: Geometrical fantasies, rectilinear or curved
 NEMOURS: Blacks and greys, 'inseminated to the point of tears', in her own words
 NEY: Oscillated constantly between representation and abstraction
 OUBORG: Taught drawing in the Dutch West Indies
 PFRIEM: Painted first in the academic manner
 POUSETTE-DART: Self-educated in matters of art
 PRAMPOLINI: Took active part in the Futurist Congress in Milan
 RAYMO: A doctor in Sao Paolo. Began painting on his own
 RIOPELLE: Colour fizzles, sparks, radiates, falls into place, breaks loose again, surrenders
 SERPAN: Commas or squiggles, gathered in compact masses
 SERVLANCKX: The first Belgian painter to launch into abstraction
 STAMOS: Turned to painting and took up many trades in order to live
 TAL-COAT: Glistening lines, voluntarily hesitant
 TOMLIN: Dancing signs, both precise and supple
 VANTONGERLOO: Adopted the curve about 1935
 WARB: Very much under the influence of Vantongerloo
 WOLFF: A sort of fireworks assembled by an optimistic and sensitive mind
 WOLS: His natural anarchy found a favourable climate in Chinese mysticism
 XCERON: Strongly built, yet without excessive rigour

'With thanks to Michel Seuphor's *A Dictionary of Abstract Painting* (1958)'



On Handwriting

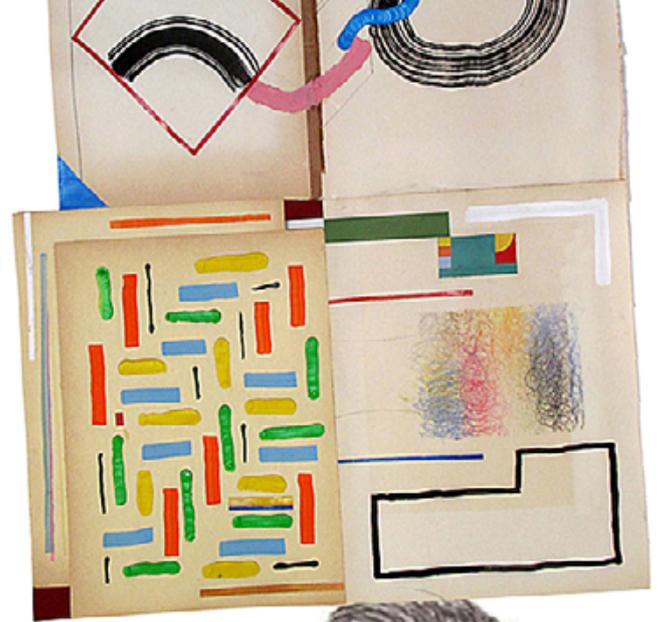
Writing can be a series of marks, says Aislinn Hunter, impressions that locate a site of having been

Last summer while I was in transit from one country to another a writer friend of mine died. When I arrived home I spent the day in my study compiling and printing up all of his correspondence. It's strange to remember that day now, how the significance of even a simple two or three word reply sent in a time of busyness suddenly changed, how his letters and e-mails had become – without warning and in the worst possible way – finite.

One of the things that surprised me about those hours in the study was the hierarchy of affect in relation to what I was holding: how the pages and bits of handwriting I had from him – his signature in black ink at the foot of a typed letter, a drawing, the inscriptions he'd written in his books – were more moving and grief-filled than his e-mails regardless of the brevity of the written marks or the emotional content of the electronic text. I remember picking up one of his books and starting to reread it, but unable to place him in the text concretely I put it down again. Only his handwriting seemed to locate him exactly, to ground his body in the act of writing and thinking and breathing; each stroke of the pen a black ink tether that tied me to him and him to me.

Philip Larkin once gave a talk at King's College on the literary manuscript, parts of which translate well to the subject of handwriting. In his talk he suggested that writers' manuscripts have both a meaningful and a magical value. For Larkin a manuscript's *meaningful* value was related to the ways in which a writer's outlines, drafts or revisions could inform a reader's sense of an author's process or development. The *magical* value, on the other hand, had more to do with the material encounter itself, with locating the author in the act of writing. For Larkin this was the older and more universal value: 'this is the paper he wrote on, there are the words as he wrote them, emerging for the first time in this particular miraculous combination...'

The artist Cornelia Parker captured the magical value of manuscripts quite wonderfully in her 2006 'Brontëan Abstracts' series. Through scanning, cropping and enlarging some of the deletions and revisions Charlotte Brontë made in her *Jane Eyre* manuscript, Parker reveals how intertwined the acts of writing and thinking are. In one of the fragments Parker selected Charlotte has crossed out the word 'endure' and replaced it with 'bear'. In another she's substituted 'heart' for 'hand', in another 'imagined' is struck through and replaced with 'conceived'; a 'could' becomes 'should' which



becomes 'would'. What Parker reveals in her elevation of these fragments of Charlotte's writing – with its obdurate inkiness, particular slant and weight – is the way in which handwriting demarcates an event: in this case, the thinking writer at work structuring and restructuring a world borne in her imagination, in my case a distant friend directing his thoughts toward me.

This sense of handwriting as a remain, as material evidence of both the writer's body and the writer's mind isn't new. In the years after Charlotte Brontë's death in 1855 Charlotte's father, the Reverend Patrick Brontë, received numerous requests for a slip of the author's handwriting from both readers and collectors. Some of his responses to these entreaties survive. One is a letter dated 9 July 1857 to a Miss Atkins from Bath. 'Dear Madam,' the letter begins, 'The annexed scrap is all I can spare of the autograph of my dear daughter Charlotte...'. Apologizing for the modest size of the 'scrap' Brontë explains that he's had so many applications for his daughter's handwriting that his stock is nearly exhausted. To Mary Jesup Dowcra a year and two months later he wrote similarly 'Dear Madam, The enclosed is all I can spare of my dear Daughter Charlotte's handwriting.' The small square of Charlotte's script he sent to Dowcra was a two-line fragment likely cut from a letter. It read: 'my book – no one / ious than I am to'.

What makes the fragment Dowcra affixed in her scrap-book interesting is that it would have been a valued representation of the author even though the excised words were pared off from both their original context (the individual to whom the words were addressed) and their syntactical meaning. This was partly because there was a general belief in the Victorian era that one's handwriting was congruous with one's self – that a person's script had the potential to reveal the scribe's gender, age, nationality or vocation along with their unique personality traits or quirks. (A late 19th-century analysis of Byron's writing noted the gentlemanly appearance of his calligraphy despite the fact that he wielded a 'fluent but not too legible pen' whereas Robert Browning 'wrote as a poet should write' finishing his words neatly though he allegedly had a habit of separating the syllables within his words through subtle disconnections.)

While autograph collecting was well in place by the time of Charlotte's death (autograph albums date back at least to the end of the 16th century) the Victorians didn't think of autographs in the same way we tend to today. Auto-graph, after all, comes from the Greek for 'written with one's own hand' and for a long time referred to any scrap of an individual's writing and not just to the signing of one's name. In this way even a snippet of Charlotte's writing, a handful of words set adrift outside of the usual semiotic contexts, had the potential to be meaningful, to bring some sense of the author to the fore. This, I suppose, is where my affection for handwriting resides: in the idea that any scrap of writing, no matter how fragmentary or ephemeral, is material evidence of the writer's life, of their thinking and being. For at its



most basic, essential and existential level, writing is a mark or series of marks – impressions that locate a site of *having been*.

The proof of handwriting’s situational power is all around us. Think of the feeling you get when you pick up a grocery basket and find a discarded grocery list in the bottom: how the scrawl of blue pen, the Spencerian exactness of the letters or the wobbly double ‘g’ of ‘eggs’ might make you think of an elderly woman, or how a glimpse of your own childhood writing can transport you back to a corner desk and the steady effort of joining lines and circles into language. Or think, more distantly, of those handprints decorating the cave walls at Pech Merle or Cueva de las Manos, of the tens of thousands of years between the press of those palms and fingers and our apprehending faces. Handwriting is not so unlike those ochre impressions – both are made by the

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‘Think of the feeling you get when you pick up a grocery basket and find a discarded grocery list in the bottom: how the exactness of the letters or the wobbly double ‘g’ of ‘eggs’ might make =you think of an elderly woman...’

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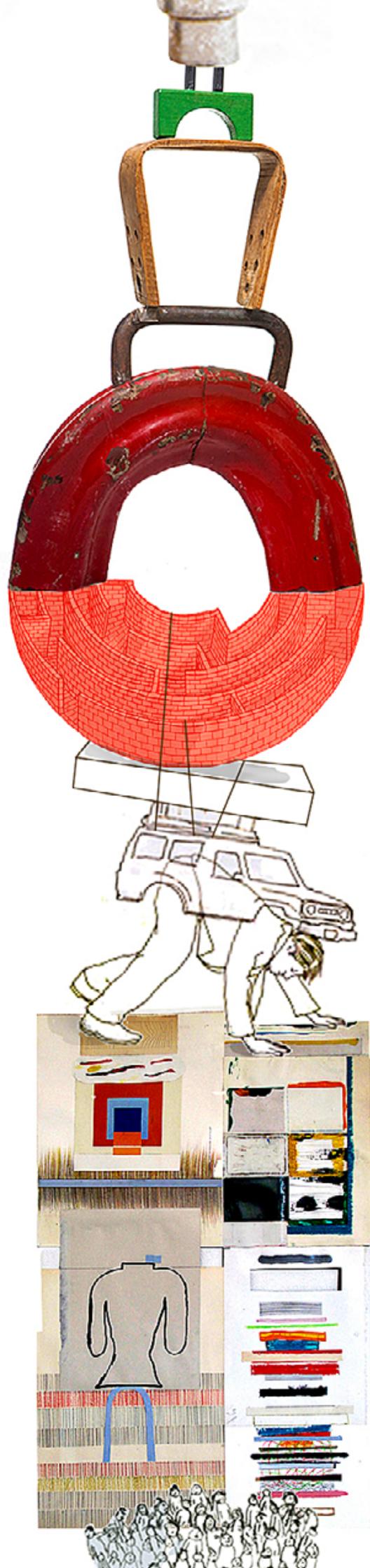
body of a unique individual, both can persist across time, and both can come to the receiver sheared of certain or clear contexts and still speak of a former presence; can connect – as Brontë’s fragmentary script and my friend’s inky initials do – the absent dead with the still living.

Our desire for contact with the author of a book we’ve loved is one of the reasons why even a brief missive in Charlotte Brontë’s hand can sell at auction for £24,000 and why J.K. Rowling’s annotated copy of her first Harry Potter novel raised £150,000 for PEN. It is also one of the reasons book signings are still so popular. There is something remarkable about presenting a book to its creator and watching while the author inscribes their name into the very book the reader will then read. For in the days and weeks that follow every time the reader opens the book and enters into the world the author has created the signature is there, a signature that



locates the author as doubly present in the text, as present in both the imaginative space of the typographic world they've created and as present in the more palpable physical form of the mark or marks made by their hand. Writing, in this way, feels like a kind of contact, for even though it is touch mediated by things: by a pen or pencil, by the paper or book the words are scribed in, it is still an impression – something that can be seen and touched, something with an aura (to use Walter Benjamin's term) that remains attached to the moment of its creation.

A decade or so ago when I was visiting his country and he was well and seemed immortal, my writer friend gave me his copy of J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*. 'Read this,' he said, and tossed it in my direction. I took it with me when I left for home and started into it. I remember finding a receipt from the airport where he'd bought the novel in its first pages – a convenient bookmark placed back at the beginning of the text after its usefulness was gone – and I remember finding, in an early chapter, a half sentence which my friend had underscored in blue pen. What I loved, and still love, about that trace of him was the way in which the line squiggled under the words. Rather than a quick stroke his underscore was a series of bumps, each one allowing me to feel him thinking through Coetzee's words as he marked them. The half-sentence – the only thing he marked in the whole of the book – reads 'the instant of the present and the past of that instant, evanescent, caught in the same space'. It is a beautiful idea. A fragment that, held aloft from its fuller context, speaks to the way in which time's coattails can sometimes be glimpsed, the way in which a space can seem to hold, even if fleetingly, the marvelous trace of what makes the present instant possible. Handwriting is a mark that does this too: gives us a glimpse of the ghostly self that existed in the moment of inscription. Like a footprint preserved in ash or a handprint left in a prehistoric cave, writing gathers to itself a sense of some being's having been there alongside the enduring and substantial impression they've left behind.◊



I Guess You Had to Be There

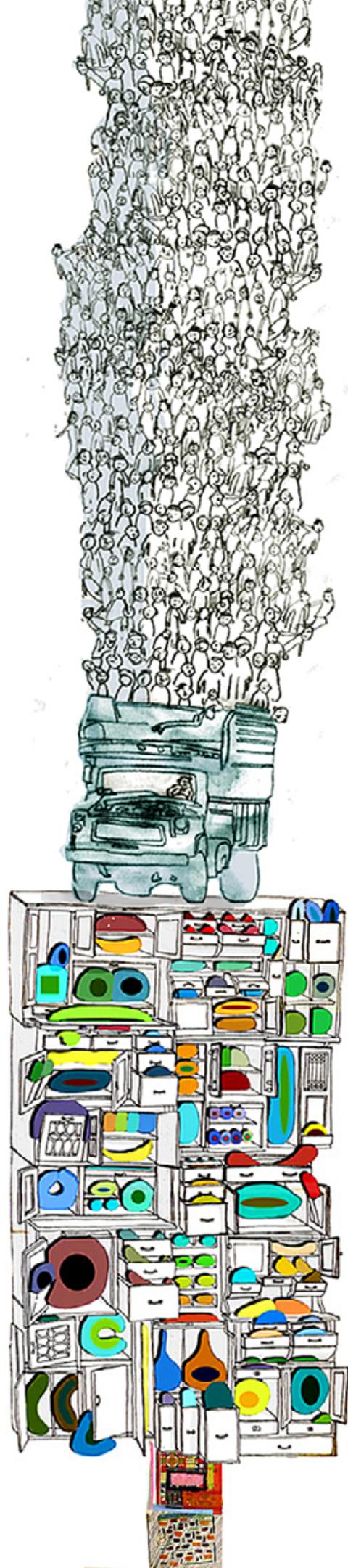
*Must poets lead lives full of poetic experience?
Jack Underwood is skeptical*

The danger with reading poems in relation to their authors' biographies is not so much that seeking an 'original' version of a poem goes against its very nature as a language construct, often built deliberately to resist such speculative manhandling, but because it implies rather lazily that the 'poetry of life' translates inherently into the 'poetry of poems', as if writing poems involves nothing more than putting line breaks into your diary. If poems were just poetic life experiences written down nicely, you'd find a lot more about Center Parcs, paintballing and roller coasters.

Biographical readings of poems are bad news because by fetishizing 'the life of the poet' they encourage those of us who write them to imagine that we are somehow beholden to poetic experiences that are of automatic or special interest to others – all we have to do is feel things, experience things, and be ready to write it down all poemy, and ZING! Poetry happens. Obviously this rather undersells the hard, objective work we do to make poems interesting for other people, and all that beautiful making things up and lying to people that poets do so well.

Poets generally know that more is required of them than Xeroxing their dream-journal, and yet the self-absorbed, anecdotal poem, relying solely on the emotional junk food of shared experience, and true-life-tragedy, is prevalent. Carby, salty dough balls of feeling to fill you up, these poems can quickly garner sympathetic connections, but equally quickly drain out your other ear, precisely because they fail to do little more than describe an emotional experience. However good the poet is at describing, unless the reader is an open valve of empathy and patience, they will always feel as if the poetic event or question – or as poetry scholars like to call it, 'the whole fucking point' – has already taken place elsewhere. No one wants to turn up to a poem only to find someone enthusiastically telling you, 'It was awesome – you should've been there!' Good poems, as far as I can tell, happen precisely because you *are* there, making them happen with your brain: 'This *is* amazing!'

I have nothing against life, as the great Anne Sexton wrote; indeed, I recognize that poetry mainly relies on life's troughs and wobbles, but writing a poem is an interrogatory act, rather than merely an expressive or anecdotal one, or in other words: your life might need to take place in order for you to write your poems, but your poems should never



be merely a record of your life taking place. At some point poetry should seek to connect with the lives of others, and it's the manner with which you seek those connections, and the depth of them, that is where you should be putting your hours in.

My wariness of poignant experiences probably also arises out of my own failure to recapture 'a moment' in poem form – those life-affirming coincidences never came out as significantly on the page; or worse, I realized I'd part-way contrived them – but my favourite cautionary folk tale on the subject of poems is the one told to me by the poet Peter Scupham when I was just starting to write poems.

It's a muggy July evening, Old Hall, Burlingham, Norfolk. For two weeks the hot weather has been slowly bringing a storm to the boil. The world is in one of its moods and the wind fusses with the lawn furniture. Any moment now and everything will fall. Peter is reading in the kitchen, and Margaret, who's been watching things develop outside with concern and excitement, comes in.

'Peter, the barn door is open. It's swinging about like mad. I'm worried it'll come off its hinges.'

Checking the sky before he goes, Peter treads quickly across the lawn to where the barn door is lurching and swinging like the end of a drunk argument. He catches and stops it with his wellington boot and slowly, against the resistance of the gale, brings the door back into place. He quickly pulls the catch across and winds the string around the metal housing for the missing bolt, until the door is fastened. There. Good. That should do it.

As he turns back towards the house, Peter's eyes are drawn, almost of their own accord, up to its roof: darkly silhouetted against the broody sky, Oberon, their pet peacock, has climbed to the very top of Old Hall, and is perched there like a church weathervane. The bird calls out. It sounds like the word 'pew', but stretched into a high-pitched, mewling cry: thin, pained and elemental.

As it calls, a bolt of lightning cracks down in the distance behind him. It is both a trickle and a flash, halving the sky above the house, bisecting Oberon's silhouette perfectly. There is a one-elephant-two-elephant pause and then the noise of thunder comes rushing across the miles of bald cornfield, reaching Peter, and at that moment the storm breaks. The rain arrives all at once.

In the time it takes to form a question, Peter is soaked. What just happened? There was the peacock in silhouette, its mournful call, the lightning, the thunder, and suddenly the rain ... but he has to get under shelter quickly, so he jogs in his heavy wellies back to the house, and, closing the door behind him, his mind still blown, all he can think to himself is, 'I promise to never put that into a poem.'

So why did Peter make that promise? Because sometimes the experience itself *is* a poem, and the fact that experiences elapse then elude us, slide into memory, is part of what makes them poetic. If that sounds overly romantic then consider whether trying to recapture a lived experience



might actually amount to a kind of writerly arrogance. The weather, the bird, the house, the whole complex and wonderful collaboration of elements, can only be mocked up using ‘terminology’, can only be condescended to, *described*. Letting an experience be bigger than your ability to comprehend it is part of recognizing what the sublime is.

If a poem should not seek to recount a poetic event, but be a poetic event of its own, then we have to do more than just *describe*. *Description*, I hereby declare a little too grandly, is the opposite of *poetry*. Description is when we try to indicate in language the material existence of something, so that a fish, say, is ‘scaly’, ‘oily’, ‘smelly’, ‘wet’, ‘shiny’, etc. All these descriptive words refer to the material reality of the fish: it has scales that secrete oil, an oil which reflects light, making the fish shiny, but also the oil makes the fish smell fishy, because it is a fish. All this adds up logically. *Poetry*, on the other hand, begins when you describe the fish in terms of things that do not refer to its material reality: the fish can also be ‘mechanized’, ‘unpopular’, ‘deeply religious’, etc. When you assign qualities further away from the fish’s material reality the reader has work to do; they must participate in overcoming the problem of that distance between the reality and the leap away. This is the logic of metaphor. This is not *description*.

To return to Peter’s peacock on the roof, to merely relay the details in a poem would be to reduce them to a decorative anecdote. A poem needs to pose questions as much as it describes dramatic elements, then it creates a distance for the reader to travel across: the story becomes just the symbolic starting point for a wider engagement with what the symbols might mean. That’s the hard part – working out what to do with the story, what it is ‘about’ (and I mean ‘about’ in the sense that it also means ‘around’, because the meaning of a poem isn’t a fixed point, it oscillates). No matter how powerful or moving the experience, it might not *mean* anything beyond that. You have to make it meaningful for somebody who isn’t you.

I called Peter and Margaret the other day to ask them about the story. Predictably, I’d got it all wrong. Well, most of it. Here’s their version:

‘It was a bitter January night, some twelve years ago, when we drove back to our lonely tumbledown Elizabethan house. We always tried to imagine ourselves driving back and seeing it for the first time, thinking “Do we really live here?” so as not to lose our sense of its strangeness and unlikeliness. We did, at that time, keep two peacocks, Oberon and Titania. That night the stars were brilliant, and as we drove up we saw Oberon, perched on the chimney of the Granary, carved out of starlight and moonlight. He was quite motionless, and his long train – sometimes loosely referred to as his tail – was spangled and glittering with frost. The whole scene seemed to have been given to us as if we had become participants in a Russian/Indian fairy tale . . .’

No lightning bolt, no storm, no peacock calling out, no swinging gate.

Sometime over the last decade I’ve made all these things up. There’s not even any mention of a promise *not* to write a poem (though it’s possible there was one) and I’ve rather



cruelly written Margaret out of most of my version. In retrospect I think I borrowed the swinging barn door in the storm from another time at Old Hall a couple of years later. I've made up the story of Peter's experience out of an assemblage of my own memories and experiences. But what does this mean for my argument against the anecdote? Especially now we've found out it wasn't an anecdote to begin with!

I suppose I've taken Peter and Margaret's real experience and leaned it against another idea about writing. I've used their version as a symbolic starting point and flooded all its rooms with my own ideas and experiences. But I think the moral of my version is still partly hiding in Peter and Margaret's account:

'We always tried to imagine ourselves driving back and seeing it for the first time, thinking "Do we really live here?" so as not to lose our sense of its strangeness and unlikeliness.'

I love this idea: in order to understand their life at Old Hall they have to imagine they don't live there! They have to make a leap away – it's just like with the fish. The moral is the same as before, but inverted: you have to imagine yourself apart from your reality in order to not lose sense of your reality's strangeness.

Perhaps this is all self-evident and there's no essay to be had, but the foggy nature of memory, the weird mediation we enact when we apprehend reality, and the fact that that reality changes even as we apprehend it, all points to the idea that you should not trust the seeming proximity between the nature of a poetic experience and the supposed 'rendering' of one in a poem. Experiences and poems written about them are as different as a thunderstorm in July and a clear, starlit, frosty night. We are free to draw on anything we like to make our poems, but we should not be too reliant on our material. Often when we think we are being faithful to the poetry of reality, we are usually being unfaithful to the reality of poetry: with its strangeness, its unlikeliness and its new logic.◊



That Life of Sexual and Sybaritic Abandon

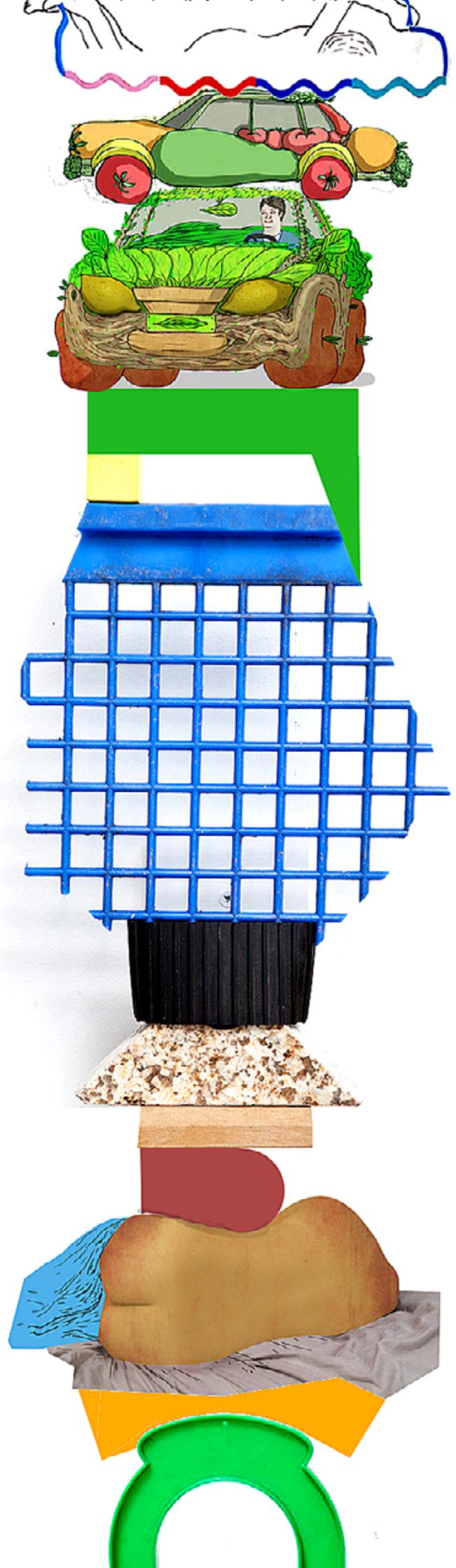
Alexander Larman heeds the words of Lord Rochester and exits London

I can't remember when I first decided to leave London. I'd lived in the city for nearly a decade, moving from one distant part of town to another, with little more than a few bags of books and some increasingly threadbare sets of clothes to call my own. And yet I'd bought into the mantra that was drilled into me from a young age: 'Move to the capital! Find new opportunity! Become the Dick Whittington of our times! RUN FOR MAYOR!' Or perhaps the last part was just a Boris Johnson-influenced fever dream, as I awoke once again in some new and, as usual, uncomfortable bed on the outer reaches of the Tube line.

Yet what bothered me much more than the interminable commute to whichever pointless job I was doing, or the casual irritations of queuing for half a lifetime to buy bread, was the propaganda being screamed at me by the dual titans of London print media, the *Evening Standard* and *Time Out*. 'It's fine to put up with massive inconvenience and expense! You live in the best city in the world! Everything that you do contributes to that!' And I listened to it, and believed it, for many years. And then another day, I stopped believing it, and made plans to leave – plans that, at the time of writing this, are all but complete. The boxes are packed, the bags are full, the moving van negotiates its delicate way past a stream of true-blue Boris bikes. And I never did run for mayor.

In this, as in so many other regards, I resemble my spiritual forebear John Wilmot, 2nd Earl of Rochester, who took a similarly jaded attitude towards London and those who sought to extol its virtues. When Charles II regained the crown at the Restoration of 1660, he and his more savvy counsellors were all too aware that the cheering and clamouring for his return was only superficial, and that the nascent public-relations machine of the day had to present England as the most forward-looking country in Europe, London as its greatest city, the royal palace of Whitehall as its epicentre, and Charles as its suave and all-conquering figurehead. Perhaps needless to say, this did not last. Whitehall, home of princes and politicians alike, soon became synonymous with sexual shenanigans and general corruption, where anyone could grow fat and debauched on favour if they so chose, as long as they added their voice to the chorus of praise in favour of London, Whitehall and Charles.

Rochester did not. While he arrived at court in 1665 in excellent standing with the king, in no small part because his late father Henry had helped the then prince to escape after a catastrophic defeat at the Battle of Worcester in



1651, he soon set about causing trouble. If he wasn't causing scandal by attempting to abduct his future wife, Elizabeth Malet, or causing a diplomatic furore by starting a fight in front of the Dutch ambassador, he was watching the increasingly dismal world of court politics and carnal abandon with a cynical detachment that he poured out into both letters to his intimate drinking cronies, and, increasingly, in poetry that moved seamlessly between scatological prurience and elegantly witty dismissal of the world in which he found himself.

Never a fan of Whitehall, he wrote in one letter to his 'lewd, good-natured friend', the Falstaffian rake Henry Savile, that 'you ... think not at all; or, at least, as if you were shut up in a drum, as you think of nothing but the noise that is made upon you'. Rochester claimed to desire the 'competent riches' that would be attendant on this position, but the letter clearly comes from a bored, lonely man, who laments 'the inconveniences of solitude' and finds himself caught between the Scylla of empty chatter at Whitehall and the Charybdis of tedium in the country. His means of dealing with this frustration and boredom was to write the poem that became his masterpiece, 'A Satire against Reason and Mankind', which remains one of the best attacks on politicians ever penned.

Inspired by his loathing of the hypocrites and knaves who surrounded him, as well as an intellectual curiosity that had seldom been allowed full rein in his poetry before, Rochester aimed to show his friends (and enemies) that he was a serious and considered thinker, rather than simply a rake-about-court. Mixing his customary wit and intellectual clarity with anger and passion, Rochester's 221-line poem is believed by many to be his greatest and most enduring work. When it circulated around court in both its forms, it was ascribed to 'a person of honour', a wittily double-edged attribution that became more telling when the satire was read.

As he wrote it, England was in a state of flux. With the country all but bankrupted by the failures of the Anglo-Dutch wars, there were many politically unaffiliated men and women who quietly regretted that the stringent morality of the Commonwealth had been replaced by such profligacy. The joy and optimism of the Restoration had given way to a growing sense that Charles II had no clear idea how he wanted to govern the country. As he and his familiars devoted themselves to a life of sexual and sybaritic abandon, they might as well have existed on the moon for all the good that they did for an increasingly weary, impoverished and put-upon populace. The growing instability of the so-called 'Cabal' government of Buckingham and the king's other high councillors, which fell in September 1674, meant that Buckingham and Charles's old tutor Hobbes's earlier fears that life would become 'solitary, poor, brutish, nasty and short' without the strong presence of a committed sovereign seemed on the verge of realization.

With lacerating irony, Rochester asks whether human or animal principles are 'most generous' and 'just', finally rising to rhetorical splendour by inviting his reader to make his own judgement:



Be judge yourself, I'll bring it to the test:
Which is the basest creature, man or beast?
Birds feed on birds, beasts on each other prey,
But savage man alone does man betray.
Pressed by necessity, they kill for food;
Man undoes man to do himself no good.

Betrayal was something much on Rochester's mind at this time. He considered himself, and the country, betrayed by Charles's unwillingness to adopt the high moral standard of kingship, just as he felt snared by the foolishness and foppery of the court. He had been betrayed by everyone from the low tarts who had given him syphilis to the great men of Whitehall such as John Sheffield, Earl of Mulgrave, who blackened Rochester's name at the slightest provocation, all the while feigning amity and fellowship. No wonder that he wrote, 'But man, with smiles, embraces, friendship, praise / Inhumanly his fellow's life betrays', given the double-dealing that he was privy to.

It was this loathing of the venal, self-satisfied nature of what mankind represents on the wider scale that led him to write this poem. It's an impressively clear-sighted cry of anger:

For which he takes such pains to be thought wise,
And screws his actions in a forced disguise,
Leading a tedious life in misery
Under laborious, mean hypocrisy.
Look to the bottom of his vast design,
Wherein man's wisdom, power and glory join:
The good he acts, the ill he does endure,
'Tis all from fear, to make himself secure.
Merely for safety, after fame we thirst,
For all men would be cowards if they durst.

It is hard to think of any of his court contemporaries producing such a simultaneously nihilistic and intellectually sophisticated attack on their world. Although he had often been caustic and dismissive in his poetry before, nothing comes close to the way in which, in this poem, he gazes on the entire Whitehall society that he was part of, and finds nothing there to praise or extol, merely a gaggle of frightened hypocrites in roles that they were ill-equipped to play, in their 'forced disguise'. Rochester, himself less a phoney actor than a chameleonic performer, could tell an unconvincing line reading or intonation when he heard one.

He ends the main body of the poem by comparing the cowardice that permeates mankind with the essential dishonesty that goes hand in hand with it, describing all politicians as knaves, and using a cynical examination of human nature to justify the comparison, saying, 'if you think it fair / Amongst known cheats to play upon the square / You'll be undone.' As ever, Rochester writes with an eye on the fluidity of truth and integrity. As he says:

Nor can weak truth your reputation save:
The knaves will all agree to call you knave.
Wronged shall he live, insulted o'er, oppressed,



Who dares be less a villain than the rest.

In a later addition to the poem, Rochester acknowledged that there might, conceivably, be someone who was indeed 'less a villain than the rest', but still believed that the odds were against it:

But if in Court so just a man there be
(In Court a just man, yet unknown to me)
Who does his needful flattery direct,
Not to oppress and ruin, but protect
(Since flattery, which way so ever laid,
Is still a tax on that unhappy trade);
If so upright a statesman you can find,
Whose passions bend to his unbiased mind,
Who does his arts and policies apply
To raise his country, not his family,
Nor, whilst his pride owned avarice withstands,
Receives close bribes through friends' corrupted hands.

Rochester explicitly sets the action of this part of 'A Satire' at Whitehall, concentrating on a milieu that he knew and understood intimately. It is here that it is accepted that flattery must always be 'needful', rather than offered indiscriminately, and that a just man's 'unbiased mind' will use this flattery for national, rather than personal, gain. The last 'decent' man at court, the exiled Earl of Clarendon, was not immune to feathering his own nest, thereby attracting a decree of opprobrium that his enemies thrived on.

This fantastical figure, then, seems slightly less likely to have existed in court than an eighteen-year-old virgin. For Rochester, the world in which he lived was essentially rotten, with even the best of men compromised and dedicated to little more than self-interest. His fantastical creation of a good statesman remains safely fictional. 'A Satire', in its extended form, remains a coruscating attack on Rochester's world, but also on the nature of intellectual and social achievement, reducing it to nothing more than puffed-up vanity and grubby cheating. The final couplet accepts all this, wearily, leaving the reader with a devastating belittlement of what the political machinations of 'reason' and 'mankind' can ever aspire to:

If such there be, yet grant me this at least:
Man differs more from man, than man from beast.

When I was writing the introduction to my biography of Rochester, I heard Prime Minister's Questions in the background, and wondered what that strange, braying sound was. Had a horde of donkeys escaped into the chamber? I glanced at the television, only to see two groups of indistinguishable middle-aged men howling at each other, banshee-like. Man did indeed differ more than man – Labour vs Conservative, UKIP vs Lib Dem, Mad vs Madder – than man from beast. And as I finished my packing and prepared to shake the dust of London from my feet, I hoped that my next berth would be an altogether less bestial one, and that Rochester, at least, would find himself nodding in approval. ◇



CONTEST WINNER

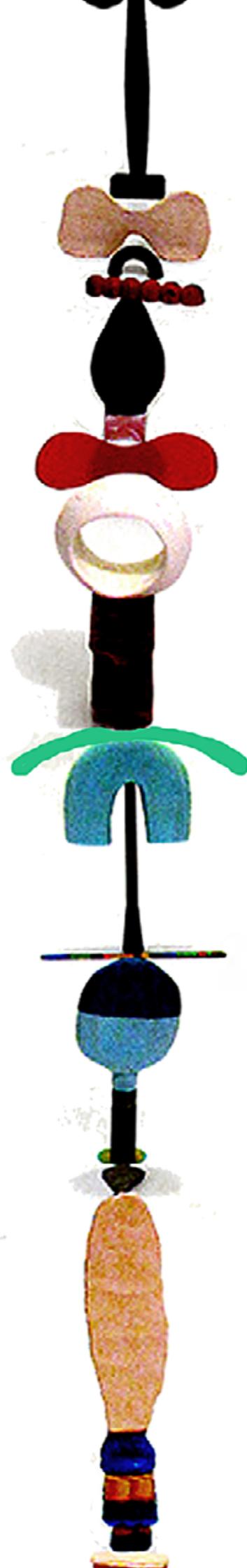
The Freedom Writer

*Seventy-nine authors stepped forward.
Liberty needed one more*

To mark their 80th anniversary, the advocacy group Liberty delved into their sizeable list of contacts and got hold of 79 of the world's best writers, then asked them to contribute pieces responding in some way to the word 'liberty'. The results were thrillingly eclectic. Ali Smith wrote about D.H. Lawrence and her Barclaycard. Kate Tempest implored us to remember freedom and liberty – 'such blazing / And important words.' 'Idealists like to claim that freedom is indivisible,' wrote Julian Barnes in his contribution. 'Pragmatists know that it is not: on the contrary, it is easily divisible into thousands of parts, each of which has to be fought for, defended, and fought for again.' Even Edward Snowden, not necessarily known for his prose style, sent in a piece of writing that described a contraption H.G. Wells might have first imagined. 'The mass surveillance systems of today, systems that pre-emptively automate the indiscriminate seizure of private records, constitute a sort of surveillance time-machine,' he wrote. 'A machine that simply cannot operate without violating our liberty on the broadest scale.'

Over the past eight decades, Liberty has campaigned for civil liberties and human rights through the courts, in Parliament and in the wider community. They've also forged close ties with writers, from E.M. Forster and H.G. Wells to the more than 120 authors currently signed up as Writers at Liberty. For this recent initiative, they chose the number 79 so that there would be one clear empty space to be filled by the winner of a public competition. After sending out the word and receiving a postbag full of responses, the judges at Liberty, including *Five Dials* publisher Simon Prosser, chose a shortlist, reprinted here, and a winner who became the 80th writer, the last piece in this great mosaic.

Five Dials is proud to present the entire shortlist in this issue, which includes work by Chris Keeling, Kate Matthews and Peter Jackson. And, of course, we've included the submission made by our winner, the 80th writer, Simon Tonkin. ↓



WINNER

Calais Plage

Simon Tonkin, Bristol

...the turbid ebb and flow of human misery...

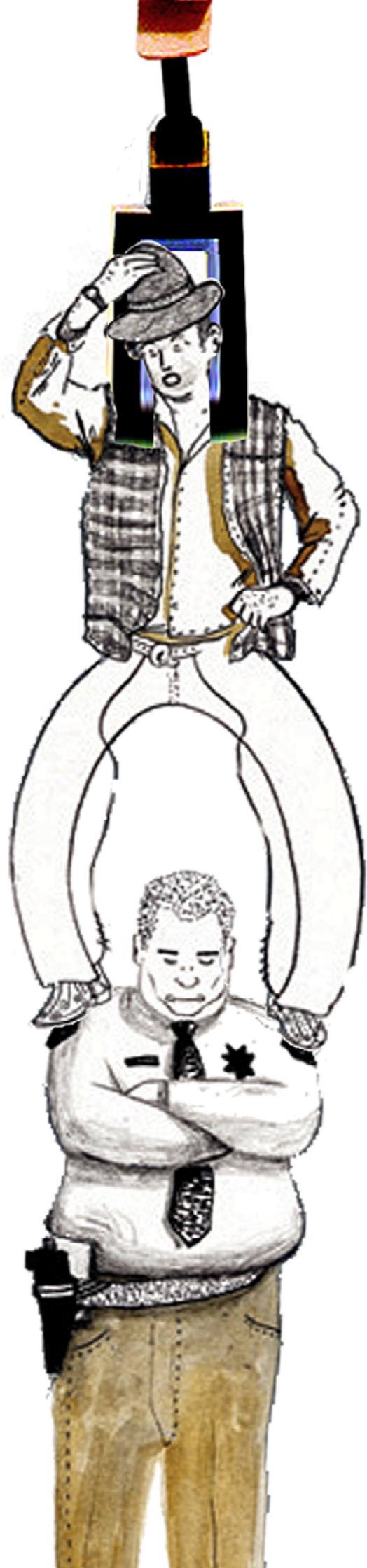
'Dover Beach' – Matthew Arnold

The sea is right for washing clothes today.
The channel is flat, the sun bright,
Glancing off the white cliffs, near and far away.
26 miles... I could walk that in one day.
Where little children play along the shoreline
Half-naked couples openly embrace.
A game of volleyball gets underway,
Attaque and *Contre* they call; a thoughtless
Orgy of white flesh on parade. I live
In a jungle behind the beach. I sleep
Under a plastic sheet. Sometimes we fight
Among ourselves – Afghans, Iraqis,
Sudanese... sometimes our differences
Become too great, though not for Scabies or T.B.

No dogs allowed to walk
The white sands after May – except the wild
Alsations of the CRS. Sometimes
I've slept in those gun emplacements
The Germans left when trying
To keep the British and their friends at bay.

Even the seagulls are patient here
But they can chase the ferries if they want.
We watch the fishermen collecting worms,
We touch the Bleriot monument for luck.
I erase the name beneath my fingerprints
With a dinner plate that I've made blister hot,
For I've a wife and children in Sangin,
I cannot take the risk of being caught.

You English come here for your 'bargain booze';
You make a day of purchasing your drug.
You think you are the measure of all things,
As if the whole world envies you your blood.
Our country's only good enough for you
To bomb in freedom's name, not for us to come
And live among you in your land of dreams.
But one night soon, squeezed between your smuggled
Crates of Whisky, I will get to 'Ingerlund'.



I.

My Box of Stones

Chris Keeling, London

You took and shook
my box of stones,
raw jagged chunks
of anthracite and chalk,
smooth pebbled stripes of gneiss
and glinting granite mica –
hints of me;
flesh-pink innards unrevealed,
withheld hitherto
from avaricious eyes and prurient intent.

You grasped and wrenched
(one eye glancing to your shoulder)
the brittle-slatted store down from its resting ledge,
forced an attrition of the weak and strong
elements
sifting down
as minute particles, essential dust,
drifting powdered residue of me.

‘So where’s the harm,
If we are all agglomerate of minerals and carbon?’

My coal,
my grandad’s broken back, pit prop of Welfare’s nation,
who smoothed the path for me,
gave fuel to the aspiration,
of chalk
my education in quarter pints of calcium and new hope,
new dreams from sparks
that fly, ignite from granite mica shards,
set me apart from the rest
while multi-layered swirls of gneiss are inscrutable
even unto me.

These rough, these smooth
have lain a lifetime
exactly where I placed them,
beyond the howling commonality.

So when you took
and shook
and insisted your intrusion,
each grinding strike of rough
and smooth collision,
creating through your prism
another, distorted me
of your own imaginings,
I gasped
at your incredulity



2.

Jack-in-the-box

Kate Matthews

Sometimes, we retrieve things from the bin thrown there in haste: poems, pictures, letters. We take them out; uncrumple them, smooth out their folds. Perhaps someone will consider that maybe, whilst I am no masterpiece, I am a nice picture and come and get me. It's been two days I have been in this prison cell, my rib hurts and the Police bruised my arms. I work as a cleaner so I don't think I qualify for a free lawyer; I know they've changed the system up. They said the Doctor would come but I haven't had a mental health crisis for five years. The Landlord of the pub knows I am a schizophrenic because he saw it when I used to talk on the street. I had a troubled time as a kid and I wanted someone to listen, it took away the hurt. I guess I was unaware I was ranting. Anyway, I go to that pub now. I haven't thought about the incident since I was put in this cell, I've just been crying. I feel like a Jack-in-the-box pushed down into a box. I'm supposed to be dressed as a clown at my son's birthday today. He's four; I taught him how to read already.

I felt sorry for this homeless woman I saw in the street being verbally abused by this nasty Guy. He pushed her down to the ground. I shouted at him to stop. He later came in the pub and I told him to get out, I saw what he did. Anyway, he rose to it and started arguing with me. I wasn't even swearing or pushing, but I was angry. The Landlord called the police and ten of them forced me out of the pub into a van, all the time holding me. They wouldn't listen to my side, they were afraid of my mental illness. I'm not a criminal. When you take me out of the bin you could realise it was a letter you might want to send, or a poem that you shouldn't be ashamed of.



Untitled

Peter Jackson, Nottingham

I think I can say, with perfect confidence, that Liberty, the organisation, is rubbish. I can, I can say that. I can also say that the Prime Minister is rubbish, and the rest of the government. And the Queen. And Rushcliffe Borough Council, if it comes to that. Them and their parking tickets.

I can say all that out loud, I can walk down the street shouting it. I could even make myself a big cardboard banner, nail it to a post and walk around outside the council offices giving my views forcefully through a megaphone.

Which is nice. It wouldn't be that nice for the people who'd have to hear it, probably, nor for the people about whom I'd be talking. In fact, not nice for me either, (I don't like to make a scene,) but it's nice to know that I can do these things. It's nice to know the option's there.

But that's the thing about Britain, isn't it? It's free. We can all do what we like. Freedom of speech, fair trials... er... something about Magnus Carter, whoever he is... we're a bit hazy on the details.

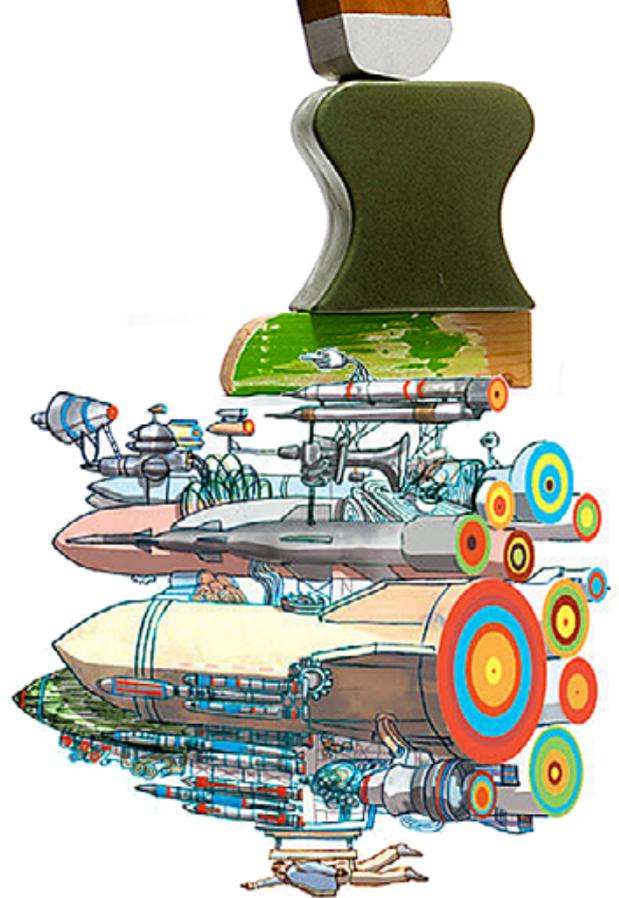
Yes, it's free, is Britain, intrinsically so. We've got a kind of freedom magic, an inherent fairness and liberty in our DNA. Like cricket. It's always been there, always will be. No need to worry about that.

Well, okay, maybe it wasn't *always* there, not *all* of it. There was once a time when homosexuality was not quite as widely accepted as we see today, that acceptance took a little light pamphleting. And okay, now I think of it, women couldn't always vote, and maybe there was a bit of argy-bargy about that at one point. Roman Catholics, too, used to be executed in numbers that would now be considered *de trop*, and Papist executions have largely cleared up. Serfdom, or even chattel slavery, are not quite the common states as once they were, so maybe things have moved on a little there too.

So, okay, maybe our freedoms didn't just happen. Maybe they didn't just arise gracefully from the greens of this other Eden, demi-paradise. Maybe there was a little elbow grease along the way.

But it's all sorted now, right? Battle won? All done?

Well, I checked in on the Liberty website, and after a little pleasant browsing around their luxury fashion and beauty offerings, I realised that I had the wrong Liberty. I then realised that I don't particularly want to live in a country that renders its nationals stateless. Or want people reading my private messages without good reason. Or a country where



justice is open to everyone, as the old joke goes, just like the Ritz.

So maybe we do need to keep an eye on it, every once in a while. Maybe we do need to worry about things, just a little bit. Maybe we do need to be a little bit careful.

Now, where did I put that megaphone? ◇



Lives

by David Wagner

Translation: Katy Derbyshire

*Everything was just like this
and also very different*

I get home just after midnight. My daughter's at her mother's place, my girlfriend's not here – I'm alone in my flat. I find an open container of apple sauce in the fridge and begin to eat it out of the jar, reading the newspaper left on the kitchen table. I read something about mosquitoes and why falling raindrops don't kill them. Even before I've fully understood how they survive I feel something scratching in my throat. Am I choking? On apple sauce?

I get up, go into the bathroom, look in the mirror and can't find anything in particular. Everything is as usual; perhaps I'm slightly pale. Seeing as I'm in the bathroom though I might as well brush my teeth; after all, I'm going to bed soon – but at that moment I realize I'm about to vomit. I turn around, lean over the bath and there it comes splashing out of me. When I open my eyes I'm surprised by all the blood in the bathtub. It runs slowly towards the plughole.

I know what it means. B., the doctor who has been treating me since I was eleven, has been warning me often enough for years now. I know that the oesophageal varices, the varicose veins in my gullet, have burst. I know that I'm bleeding internally and mustn't pass out. I have to call an ambulance. Despite that I think – I think very slowly – about taking a taxi to hospital, but then I decide on the ambulance after all. I see in the mirror that I've gone even paler, then I go and look for the telephone and find it on my desk in the study. I actually manage to call the wrong emergency number, dialling one-one-zero and hearing a voice saying: If you need an ambulance you'll have to call one-one-two. I hang up and wonder whether that was a sign. Should I stay at home? Is calling an ambulance over the top? I wait a minute, the phone in my hand, and then I tell myself I'd better not bleed to death here; my daughter will be back next week after the Easter holidays. So I dial – it's very easy, the buttons are next to each other – one-one-two. A friendlier voice answers and tells me to open my front door and leave it open – but I decide to put my shoes and coat back on and go down to the emergency team. I know they can't do anything for me here; I have to go to hospital.

I meet the emergency doctor and two paramedics on the stairs, say a polite hello and add: It's me, I have to go to the clinic. I can instantly tell they think I'm faking it; they haven't seen the bathtub. In the ambulance – I'm sitting on the transport seat, my back to the driver – the doctor doesn't know what to do with me. He looks at my emergency and organ donation ID. I tell him I have to go to the Virchow, the Charité hospital's Virchow Campus, I tell him about



my autoimmune hepatitis, my cirrhosis, my oesophageal varices and the excess pressure in the vessels to my sick liver, I talk and talk and then I feel something in my throat again. I get one hand in front of my mouth in time but the blood splurges out of me with such force that it sprays halfway across the ambulance. A scene out of a splatter film, which would make me laugh except it's not fake blood that's sloshing here, sadly. The doctor, my blood running down the lenses of his glasses, seems shocked. He rigs me up to a saline drip, the ambulance finally moving off. Not much later, I can see the tips of the roadside trees and the stars above me – why doesn't this ambulance have a roof any more, I wonder – and I vomit again. From my lying position I only half hit the transparent bag held out to me. Most of it misses, spilling on to the floor, and I know: if this bleeding isn't stopped quickly I'll soon be dead.

I

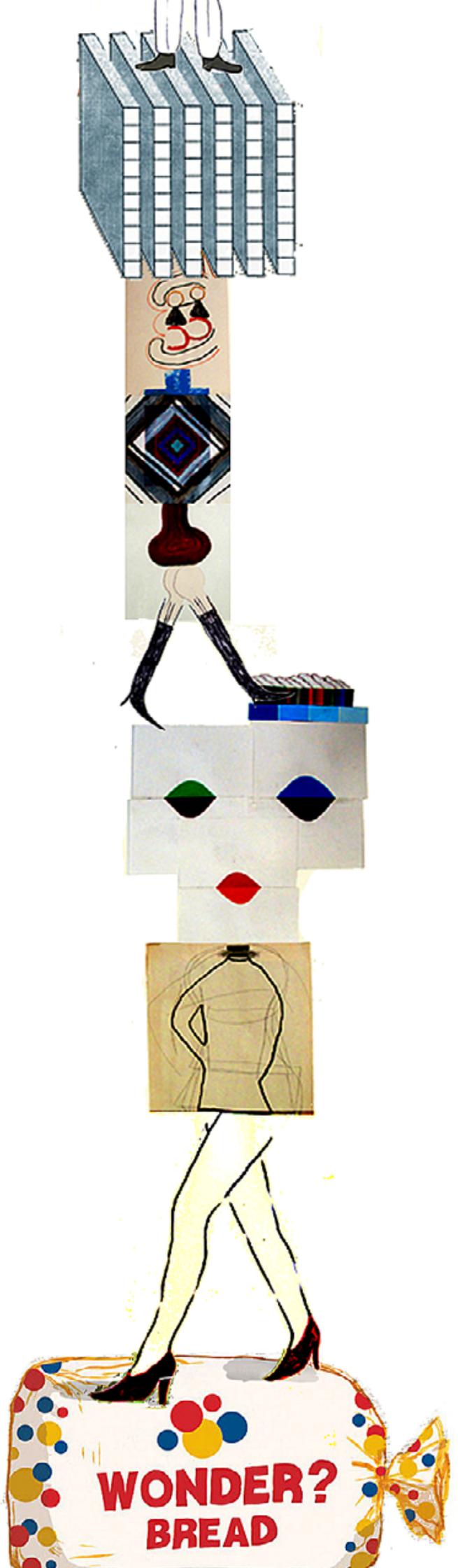
I wake up and don't know where I am. There's a tube in my nose, cool fresh air flowing into me, Alpine air with an aftertaste. A semi-frozen woodland stream gurgles between high fir trees, white-frosted grasses glitter in the sun – I seem to be visualizing a chocolate-box scene. I hear groaning and a hubbub of voices, hear dripping and running and feel a hand on my left upper arm. It grabs hold – yes, hold me, hold me tight – and then it lets go again. It's not a hand, I soon realize, it's an automatic blood pressure monitor with a cuff that inflates every quarter of an hour, which measures my blood pressure, records it and then slackens again. It sounds like someone blowing up an air mattress. I drift out to sea on my lilo.

2

They're standing waving on the shore. They're waiting for me, they've gathered together, my mother, my grandmother, Rebecca, Alexandra, my grandfather in uniform and my great-grandparents, who I don't recognize at first sight because I've never seen them before. They've come to welcome me, they're standing waving on the beach, and yes, really, I can hear them calling now, they're calling: Welcome, here you are – but then a large wave breaks and doesn't toss me on to the beach as I'd expected, no, an undercurrent drags me back out to sea, far out, and I soon lose sight of the shore.

3

I open my sleep-encrusted eyes; everything is blurry. A room full of blobs of colour – but that, it occurs to me, could be because I'm not wearing my glasses. No idea what's happened to them. There are a few things I can make out nonetheless, as long as I screw up my eyes slightly: to my right is a window, to the left a door. The door is open. Very many machines around me, cables, three or four monitors, I hear beeping. Captain to bridge: I like my spaceship, I'm so light, I'm weightless, I can fly.



4

It's bright up above the city. I'm floating and looking down. All of a sudden I see everything and know everything all over again; I haven't forgotten anything. The flat roofs of the clinic, the white gravel, the canal, the power station and the train tracks, I can see it all, I'm lying, I'm flying above the city – not for minutes, hours or days do I have to return to my skin, to this bed.

5

Nonsense, I'm not lying in the cemetery, I'm not lying in the ground. It gets light and then dark again. I'm lying in a bed in hospital, in a bed on wheels. I can be pushed out of here. When I turn my head I see the sky. It's white today, bare birch twigs in the foreground. The window is open at the top, the cold air smells fresh and sweet, I hear birds tweeting promising noises. A ray of sunshine breaks through the cloud cover. On the other side of the grounds, behind the red brick wall, beyond Seestrasse, is a cemetery; I've been there.

6

They wash my back, they clean my teeth. There's nothing I have to do, all I have to do is lie here. I don't even have to eat. A nurse brings me astronaut food, liquid meals that contain everything the body needs. The astronaut drink tastes of banana. And now I know, I know it perfectly well: this room really is my spaceship and I'm on my way to Mars. To Mars at the least. That ought to take almost a year, even if the planets are favourably aligned. Or longer. I get used to the idea: I'm staying.

7

My glasses are back. I put them on, look around me and take them off again. I think I'd rather not see it all that clearly.

8

I ask after B. and hear that he's not here, he's on holiday. A gastroenterologist comes into the room and reports on how they managed to stop the variceal haemorrhage. It was endoscopically ligated, which means they pushed a tube down my bleeding oesophagus, and in the tube was an apparatus used to attach rubber clips to the burst veins, and that was how they clamped off the haemorrhaging varicose veins. I was lucky; the technology hasn't existed for long. Twenty years ago, they wouldn't have been able to do much to stop that kind of bleeding. I've lost a few litres of blood, my haemoglobin level is bad, and the liver function – partly because of the protein shock after so much blood in my stomach – is even worse. But I'm alive.

9

A patient – I can't see him but I hear him through the open door – is complaining that there are no clocks in the



rooms. He wants to watch how fast or slowly time passes. Is it still passing at all? And if so, in which direction? I'm not so sure any more.

IO

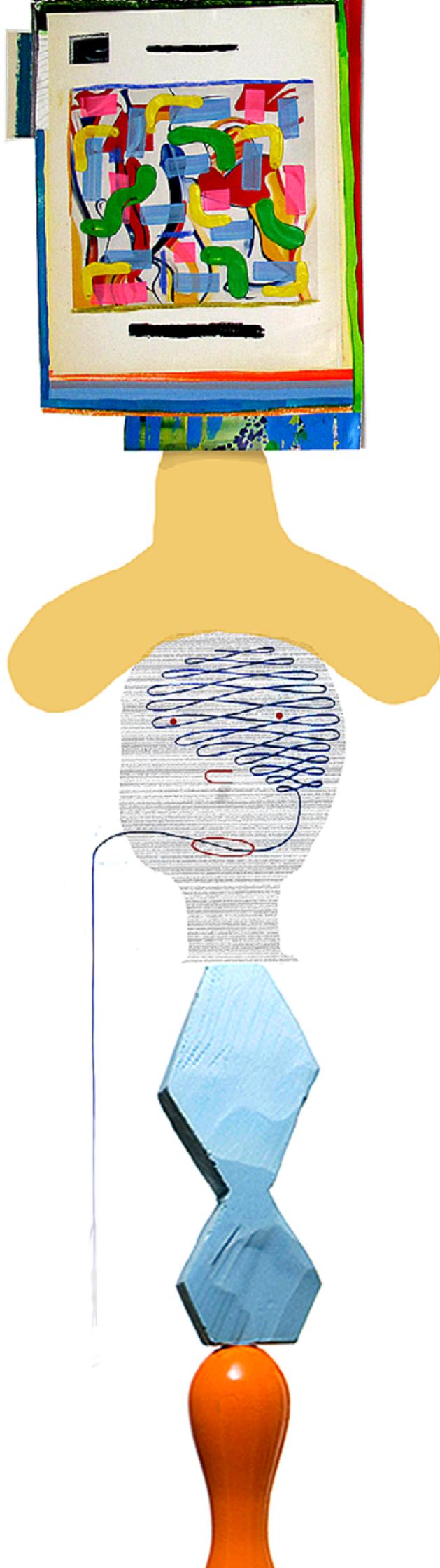
I'm transferred from Intensive Care to Gastro, the normal gastroenterological ward. Many of the patients – I can't help laughing – are gastronomists. One morning long, until he's discharged, there's a chef sharing my two-bed room, and he's followed by a waiter. The waiter lists all the East Berlin drinking spots for me: Truxa Bierbar, Bornholmer Hütte, Metzger Eck, Oderkahn and the Trümmerkutte – the latter used to be at the corner of Kastanienallee and Oderberger Strasse in the building where the copy shop is now; according to what he tells me it was a real dive of a bar. He was head waiter at the Operncafé, and as head waiter at the Operncafé – waiters were powerful people in East Germany – he could drink anywhere. For free. Well, he says, I've got the bill now.

The waiter's allowed home and now there's a butcher in the next bed. The butcher's been a butcher for forty-five years; a pretty long time, a pretty large amount of meat. Oh yes, we always had plenty to eat, he says, we never went hungry. He hasn't enjoyed his work so much over the past ten years, he tells me. The butcher's shop where he worked for twenty-four years had to close down and after that he'd worked in a sausage factory. The stuff he'd made there, well, he wouldn't eat it himself. He was on the ward for sixteen weeks last year. He's put up with plenty of roommates; we leave each other in peace.

II

One of the nurses comes into the room and says the porter's here. I have to go to the sonography department but I'm allowed to stay lying down. How large the hospital is. Kilometre-long corridors, almost all the buildings connected to one another, with bed highways under the ground. My hospital bed is actually a vehicle, it has four wheels, it's a car for the sick. I lie back and glide along, pushed along long hallways and into a lift. I think of a shopping trolley, then of a child's pram. It's an African man pushing me today. In the lift and in the passage beneath the hospital's main thoroughfare, above us the roots of the chestnut trees, he sings to himself. I ask him what he's singing and what language it is. A language of the Côte d'Ivoire, he says, and when I ask more questions he tells me he was born in Paris, in the 19th arrondissement, but he can't stand France or the French even though he's French himself. He lived there for eighteen years, that was enough for him, for good, he says – all of it in French.

Didn't I once live in Paris, in Barbès, to the right of Boulevard de Rochechouart, and did I walk across the Goutte d'Or market every day? I'm lying here, he's pushing. I'd like to ask him, but don't quite dare, whether a patient's ever died on him along the way.



12

Perhaps I'm dead already after all? Is all this none of my business? Am I doing nothing but watching now? Perhaps I'm merely dreaming this present, and the hereafter means lying in a bed and having to remember episodes from one's life, whether I want to or not. My funeral was yesterday or the day before, or perhaps it's not until today. Or tomorrow.

13

In my room, they put me back on the drip. I can't hear it; I only see it dripping and watch it doing so.

14

The butcher tells me he used to weigh a hundred and fifty-five kilos, he'd just always liked his food, a nice pork knuckle, a nice beer or two, and look where it had got him: a fatty liver – So now I'm waiting on a new one, eh? He has ascites, lugs two beer crates' worth of fluid around in his belly, groans his way out of bed; at least he can still get up. Oh well, he says, I won't need to go buying no long-playing records now.

His words spin round in my mind. Should I buy myself a long-player? Is it worth it now? How long will it be before my daughter's old enough? And how long – all of a sudden I understand the word *long-player* quite literally – has it been since I bought a record, an LP? LP was once an important, very familiar abbreviation. Anyone who bought LPs, back when people still bought music, was almost grown up; LP-buyers knew about music, they'd passed out of the phase when they merely got into certain hits and bought singles. An LP cost money, lots of money, almost a month's pocket money.

15

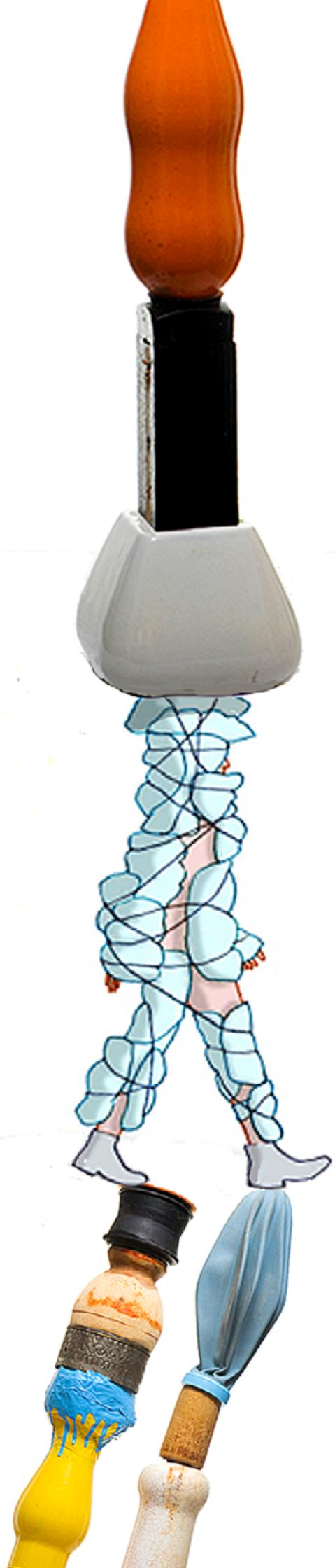
Visitors bring me flowers; my room soon looks like the inside of a florist's shop. Or a funeral. The bouquets aren't put outside at night any more, outside the door in the corridor. They used to do that in the hospital when I was a child. The nurse I ask about it answers that they had enough to do already, and anyway there was no need for it. As long as the room was aired now and then, which was much more important, every patient got enough oxygen.

16

My daughter doesn't come to visit me; her mother says she shouldn't see me like this. She's not wrong – I'd rather not see me like this either.

17

I like the fresh linen. The duvet covers and the sheet feel hard and soft at the same time, and always clean. I'm being looked after, I'm being cared for, everything is being done for me, I'm being helped, I'm doing fine, I'm getting better all the time, I've been saved.



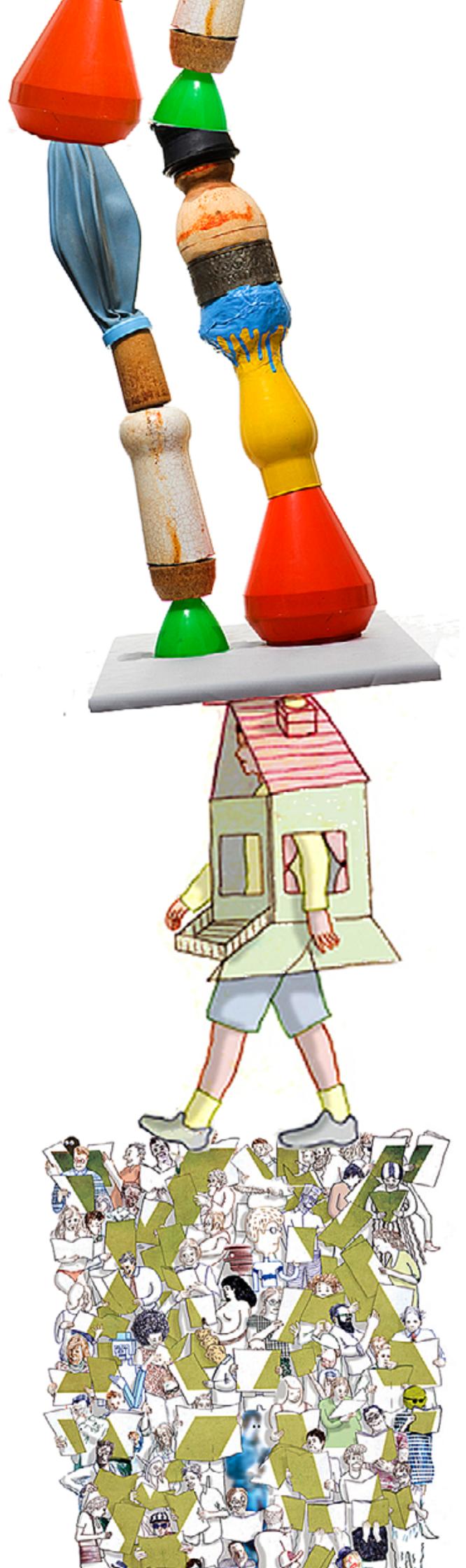
When the man in the next bed watches TV, his headphones plugged in, I sometimes watch along with him and see odd people doing odd things. I enjoy this mute television watching. The screen is suspended from the ceiling and controlled via the buttons on the old-fashioned ivory-coloured telephone devices on our bedside tables. Watching TV is no great pleasure here though; the monitor, a heavy square cathode-ray-tube model, is mounted far too high up, and changing channel is an effort requiring a new, not uncomplicated key combination to be pressed, whereupon the screen darkens and stays dark until the selected channel flickers on four seconds later. Not always, though. Four seconds can be very long, even in hospital; channel hopping is no fun like this.

When I spent a few weeks in hospital at the age of thirteen, my father brought along our little Sony. They didn't yet have televisions in the rooms then, or not in the hospital where I was a patient, and certainly not on the children's ward. Anyone who had a small, transportable TV brought it with them or got someone else to do so. Mine, from my mother's study and actually far too large for the bedside table, showed me the *Challenger* space shuttle exploding. I saw it exploding over and over, parts scattering time and again, a fireworks display, my first major TV disaster – its images now intermingling in my mind with those of the next major TV disaster, the collapsing Twin Towers. The towers fall, the space shuttle explodes, and all of a sudden I feel as if I'd known even then, back on the children's ward when the *Challenger* had its accident, that it spelt out the end of the whole space travel thing. Space travel was a 1960s future, a future of yesterday that didn't come true. No one flew to the moon any more, no one set off for Mars.

The bed is adjustable. I can raise and lower the mattress and set the head and foot ends at an angle, but I mustn't make myself too comfortable, I think. Otherwise I won't ever want to get up again.

On Saturdays there's only stew for lunch, on Sundays no doctors' rounds. On Mondays there's an air of hustle and bustle in the corridor, as if they had to work harder to make up for the two less active days beforehand. Other than that, the days don't differ in any particular way. We had stew in my childhood, too, on Saturdays, made of peas or lentils, simple meals because my mother was busy or didn't feel like cooking.

I'm allowed to eat again but I'm very careful about it. To begin with I eat only puréed food, scared of injuring myself when I swallow. Couldn't something not sufficiently chewed, a sharp-edged, too hastily swallowed morsel, make one of the blood vessels burst again? I prefer not to think of the blood in my oesophagus.



22

I feel the watch on my wrist, my father's watch, a self-winding model. I notice it has stopped. There are two tiny red marks on the glass of its face, splashes of blood. I scratch them off and move my arm to and fro a few times until the second hand starts moving. The watch is working but it's not telling the right time. Sometimes, when I have a little strength to spare, I move my arm so that it won't stop again so soon. Then I feel as if I'm waving to someone who's not there at all.

23

I'm sleeping in an outside cabin, a porthole in the outer wall. I see water, lots of water; sometimes an island passes by, a submarine comes to the surface, an iceberg floats along or a lonely swimmer who's almost given up. This must be the past.

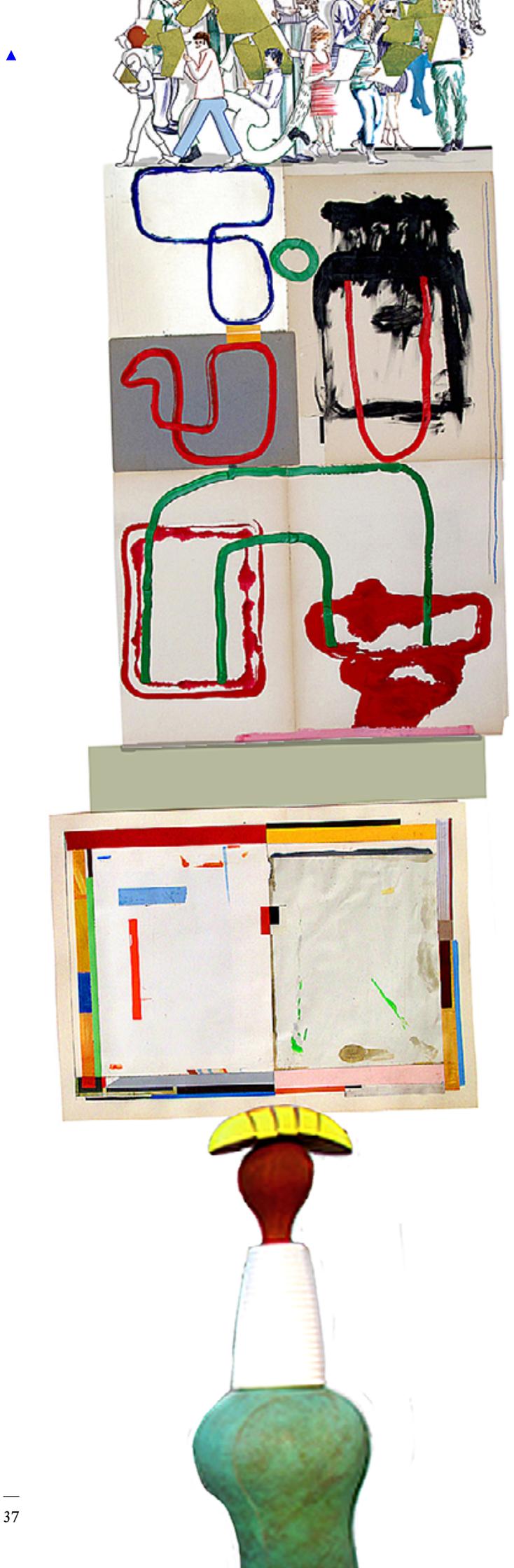
I've embarked on a ship, I'm on board, cruising around my sickroom: from the pillow to the bedside table, from the bedside table to the closet, from the closet to the table, to the chair, the window, into the bathroom, to the TV on the wall and onwards. I'm on a trip, out I go in my bed, the porter pushing, my sickness is the great journey, *le grand tour*, a ticket to the underworld and perhaps back again. Sickness is vacant time, is – didn't I read that somewhere? – the poor man's travel.

24

A blue corner of sky at the top of the window. I smell the roses on the bedside table and the clean, still stiff bed linen; I like the pale blue stripes in the fabric as it lies smooth on my skin. Lovely flowers you've got there, says the nurse; outside the day is luminous, which those who aren't here might not even notice. She puts the cuff of the blood pressure monitor around my upper arm, as every day, closes the Velcro – blood pressure monitors, I've noticed, have very loud Velcro fastenings, and I'm already looking forward to the sound when she opens the fastening again in a moment – pumps up the cuff with the ball in her left hand and then lets out the air slowly. She has pressed the end part of the stethoscope to the skin of my arm where it bends and she listens with an eye on the manometer. She could really do with more hands: one for the stethoscope, one to adjust the valve on the manometer, one for my arm. Like me, however, she only has two.

I like her touching me.

I'm allowed home after nine days. The jar of apple sauce is still on the table; the bathtub doesn't look good. My daughter is back from her trip, comes by with her mother and is surprised – she's only three, after all – by this weak father. Walk properly, she says when I get up and attempt one, two, three, four steps. This is how you have to walk, she says and demonstrates for me: her body upright, straight, striding. A father, I remember, ought to be big, strong, invulnerable; immortal, in fact.



Mrs Rutschky brings roast beef. I lie on my bed, sleep a lot, hardly make it to the bathroom, and watch TV series, lots of episodes – I’ve got plenty of time. I watch *Six Feet Under* and *The Sopranos* and *Lost*.

A week later I haemorrhage again, go to hospital again, this time – the blood is seeping inwards – really taking a taxi. I pass out in the emergency room, another operation, more ligatures, back to Intensive Care. I haven’t got much blood left; I get two bags of plasma.

25

Waking up, I see B. in my room. He laughs and congratulates me: It’s a small miracle that I’m still here, still alive, he says. He talks some more and I listen. I like his voice. I’ve known it for such a long time now, twenty-four years. And I know what that voice is about to say, I know I have to go back on the list, I have to go back on the waiting list for a new liver, the list I was on once before, up until a few months ago. *You have to go back on the list*. Yes, I say, I know.

26

My liver function readings are poor; I have to stay in hospital. I lie in bed for a while, bored, and learn to walk again slowly. I creep along the corridor on a physiotherapist’s arm. She reminds me to lift my feet, not to shuffle along. I shuffle some more because I want to hear her saying *No shuffling please* again; I like her voice too. Holding her hand, I sway to the end of the corridor and look out, the two of us side by side, at the helicopter landing area. A large H marks the landing pad. I have a sudden fantasy of climbing into a helicopter down there with her, the pretty physiotherapist whose voice I like so much, and flying off into the grey-marl sky, off to somewhere or other. I dream the great escape. The physiotherapist, though, says we have to keep going, back along the corridor, past lopsidedly framed pictures torn from calendars on the walls on either side: Seljalandsfoss, a waterfall in Iceland, the Moai statues on Easter Island and two Table Mountains at sunset. Monument Valley, Utah, those things from the cigarette ads and John Ford’s westerns. That picture has slipped sideways inside its frame.

At the other end of the corridor we reach a seating area made up of a white wire table and three chairs, only two of them padded. A white orchid – perhaps made of plastic? No, that’s just what these plants look like – is blossoming on an otherwise empty shelf. Still holding the physiotherapist’s hand – her nametag reveals her name is Johanna – I turn around and sway back towards the helipad. I notice another calendar picture on the wall, the paradise island of Bora Bora, French Polynesia, the photo’s only colours green, turquoise and blue. And I say: Johanna, I’d like to go there with you.

The call comes at just after two. I’ve had lunch and am sitting in my study, and a voice says: Mr W., we’ve got a suitable donor organ for you. I’ve been waiting for this call. I’ve been fearing this call. My daughter’s not here and isn’t supposed to come until the weekend, I’ve already eaten so I wouldn’t have to go to hospital hungry, and I have nothing else planned. The sun’s shining and



I think: Oh, how I'd like to stay a while longer, perhaps a few years. And I say: Yes, and the voice answers that they'll send the ambulance right now.

Four minutes later, I'm waiting down outside the house. There are parking spaces free – the city's empty, summer holidays in Berlin, it's hot. I look over at the concrete tubs planted with blossoming flowers, and down at the cobbles. I see the dirt in the gaps between the paving stones and the tables outside the café across the road. About an hour ago – it feels as though a hundred years had passed – I was eating there. I wave at the waitress; we know each other.

On the ground next to me is my brown travel bag. I threw a few things in there indiscriminately, not everything was at hand by the front door – although I knew the call could always come, at any time, I hadn't reckoned with it. Perhaps I didn't want to reckon with it. My slippers at any rate, I'm to notice later, have been forgotten. When the physiotherapist forces me to get up again for the first time three days later – getting up's the most important thing, says the doctor – I have to wear rubber gloves on my feet, a rather comical sight. I can't help laughing at them but laughing hurts.

I remember being even less well prepared on another occasion. I switch from one paving stone to another, walk to and fro a little and can't help thinking, whether I want to or not, of the time when my phone rang once before, on a winter's night with black ice, at around four in the morning, my daughter asleep in her room next to mine. Not yet properly awake, I picked up the phone and heard a voice saying the same thing I've just heard now: Mr W., we've got a donor organ for you. To which I answered, not even having to think about it: No, I'd rather not. I'd rather not, I thought, because I'd have to wake my daughter, and how would I explain to her that I have to go to hospital in the middle of the night? I could easily have rung the neighbour's doorbell or called up my daughter's mother, of course.

The next morning I called the transplant office and asked whether I'd dreamed the phone call. I couldn't remember whether I'd dreamed it or not, or I was trying to convince myself I didn't remember. Believing I'd only dreamed that call seemed, at least, a good excuse, for I knew of course that I ought to have said yes. How often is a person offered an extension of their own life? I was told my telephone really had rung. After I'd said no, another patient on the waiting list got lucky.

Then I spoke to B. as well and told him what I'd turned down. He didn't reproach me but he did advise me not to refuse again. I decided to take a break on the waiting list; I wouldn't lose the waiting time I'd accumulated up to that point.

Four or five months later, the varices burst.

I've been waiting three or four minutes for the ambulance now. I could still disappear, I think, simply disappear and switch off the telephone. A woman who lives two doors down pushes her bike past with an empty child's seat on the luggage rack. We exchange smiles. I look for my telephone and find it in my back pocket, but instead of switching it off I call the transplant office back and ask why the ambulance is



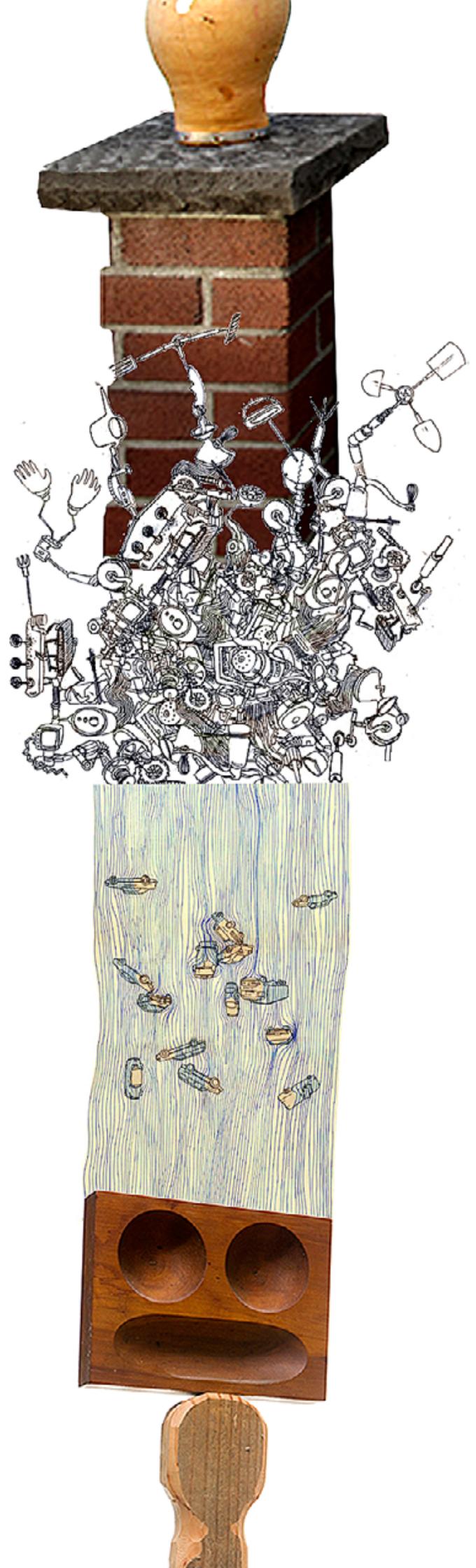
taking so long. I'm sure it'll be there any moment, the voice tries to reassure me. Then, seeing as I'm holding my telephone anyway, I write a text and send it to the friends I'd like to have said goodbye to if the worst comes to the worst. I type: *Going to hospital, for new liver*, but what I actually send, as I see when I come across the message in my phone a few weeks later, is: *Going to hospital, for new lives*.

I make phone calls until the ambulance chugs up, exhausted by the summer; come, sweet death. The passenger door opens and a man who seems to have all the time in the world gets out, turns to me and greets me with the question of whether I'm exempted from prescription charges, and if not then he'd like five euro thanks very much. It's only then he lays a finger on the sliding door and pulls it open. I get in and find a crumpled five-euro note in my wallet with which to pay the ferryman. The boat casts off, accelerating only cautiously, and I enquire as to whether they might possibly go any faster; I'd been promised the siren, I tell them. There was nothing about the siren in their instructions, says the driver. Not to worry though, it's the holidays, there's hardly any traffic.

There are notes on my desk and the broad windowsill in my study, listing all the things I meant to have got done by now. For three months I've been meaning to order shelves for my daughter's bedroom, I meant to put up a lamp, defrost the fridge, I meant to do the washing-up and get my hair cut, tomorrow or the day after. Now I remember all the people I meant to get in touch with this week, next week, the week after that, and all the letters I haven't replied to for weeks, months, years, although I'd perhaps promised. I'd always meant to write a proper will, clear out the middle drawer of my desk, sort out the piles of papers behind the desk and write to Rebecca, for a couple of years now. Once again, I forget she's not alive any more.

The ambulance takes me to the Virchow. I know the route; I've taken it often enough. Down Bernauer Strasse, then right through Gesundbrunnen, the driver steering along Graunstrasse – it's the same route the emergency ambulance took, over a year ago. Back then I imagined it had no roof, envisaged we were driving through Flanders with the top shot off the vehicle, perhaps because of the cobbles we're bumping over today as well, through the empty summer city, until the ferryman finally moors, my boat coming to a stop on the drive outside House 4. The driver's assistant gets out, opens the sliding door for me and not only accompanies me up to the lift, but comes up with me to the seventh floor, escorting me all the way to the ward's entrance. He's supposed to deliver me, those are his instructions; left to my own devices, I might think better of it in the lift or get lost in the building, who knows. A friendly nurse welcomes me and sees off the ambulance man. I have to slip into a pale yellow protective tunic, the metamorphosis beginning: *Ye who enter here shall not spread germs*.

The nurse leads me into a room with a large east-facing window. The sun is shining; I see the Humboldthain park, its two anti-aircraft towers, the elliptical office block on Brunnenstrasse, the floodlight masts of the Friedrich Ludwig Jahn sports park, I can even see the roofs of the street



where I live. Four or five people in antiseptic gowns scurry around me. One of them takes things from me that I won't be needing now: my glasses, my father's watch, my wallet, my telephone. As I undress I answer the usual questions: How long have you had the primary disease, when was your last blood test, has any of your data changed, is the address still valid, who should we inform in the event of, do you have false teeth? I shake my head. Then I sign all the pages of the consent form, go to the toilet one last time and put on scrubs. A blood test is taken and blood is ordered, a central venous catheter and an arterial haemodynamometer are laid, my abdomen and chest disinfected with a greenish-yellow liquid, electrodes are stuck on. It's not that long since I last ate, I say. As long as it wasn't a roast dinner, I hear the doctor bantering, and I suddenly feel comfortable in a strangely final way. If it were up to me the journey could go anywhere now, even to another planet. Will I perhaps – I hope slightly – be frozen, not to wake again until a few years later? I've handed over my body; my rump with its arms and legs is attached, only very loosely now, to my perception apparatus, in fact all at once I'm not so sure any more whether I'm inside myself at all; I belong to the doctors and – funny, why not? – I'm not at all scared.

In the anaesthetic room I meet a friendly anaesthetist, the magician who's about to make me disappear. All I remember later is his beard and a brief, genuinely funny conversation about my helplessness, him listing all the things he could do to me now, predicting I won't notice any of what's to come. He's right about that. He busies himself with me a little longer and then I'm out ... and am presumably pushed into the operating room, thinking one more thought perhaps: Life's been pretty good up to here – but probably it's not me that thinks that, for I'm out like a light and feeling nothing, I'm not even there any more.

And that's how it happened. I was given another person's liver, a dead man's or a dead woman's liver, given to me as a gift. It was cut out of his or her body and transplanted into mine in place of my own liver. I can't actually believe it. It could have been the other way around, I know. I could have bled to death that apple-sauce night, in the bathroom, over the bath, in the ambulance, on the way to hospital, the emergency doctor clutching my organ donation ID. People elsewhere would have got lucky, could have lived on and might not have died on the waiting list, their phones would have rung that night and a voice would have said: We've got a lung, a kidney, a heart for you. Only my liver would have been no use to anyone. ♦

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Reinbek bei Hamburg





Five Dials

NUMBER 37

'Others merely live, I vegetate.'