# Five Dials

## NUMBER 9

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CLARE TAYLOR worked in Saigon as a volunteer at Saigon Children's Charity, a British NGO. He now plays Vietnamese flute and studies art at the Victoria College of Art in Victoria, BC.

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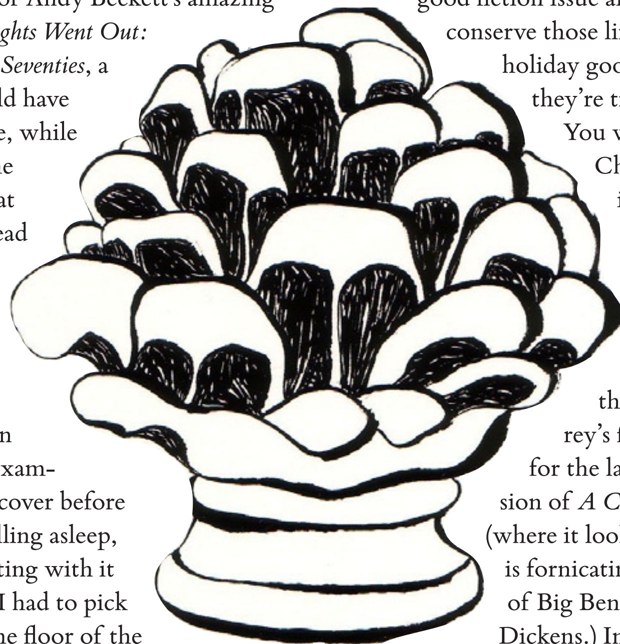
A LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

# On 'Summer Reading' and Fiction Issues

Oh, what i would give for a heavy-duty wind-proof *Five Dials* umbrella that never bends in the east/west London crosswind and never flips inside out in those north/south gusts from the Thames and always dries with a single shake of the wrist. Where are those *Five Dials* gloves we should be developing? The ones thick enough to keep out the damp December air and thin enough to use on a keyboard when the heating system at the library breaks down and lets in too much of that awful air. And what about the *Five Dials* reader? Not a gadget but a person, preferably with a soothing voice, who could read the entire teetering stack of books we thought we'd get around to in 2009, now so perilously high at our bedside it might finally topple and crush us in our sleep. (And by 'us' I mean 'me'. I can't speak for the stacking techniques of the rest of the staff.) The *Five Dials* reader would take care of the stack and then talk to us about the books, starting with those originally marked for 'summer reading'.

'Summer reading.' We at *Five Dials* have a small but well-tended hatred for the summer reading issues that pop up in newspapers and magazines around May or June. Yes, of course they sell books, and yes, they are usually the books written by the friends of the various authors who contribute these wildly ambitious (to us) lists of what they'll be tackling over the summer months, as if summer wasn't actually a time to go moosehunting or read those pungent, crispy-paged Agathas sitting on the shelf of someone's cottage somewhere, or pick almost at random whatever English book the cheap Peruvian hotel has on its rack – to leave selection to chance, in other words.

We were curious, as we are most of the time, about failure, and in particular summer reading failures, which are becoming poignant failures in the age of the e-book. Perhaps we will be the last generation to savour that small touch of self-loathing as we put aside a wonderful piece of Samoan pottery that won't fit in the luggage because we've got to haul back the Tolstoy – after all, we're already one hundred and fifty pages deep. (There's a world of difference in not getting to *War and Peace* if it's a weightless text file tucked away on your reader.) Certain editors at *Five Dials*, this one included, can remember wearing the same outfit again and again in some foreign country because all the packing space was taken up by a strata of ambitious summer books – Robert Fisk's million-page *The Great War For Civilization*, roughly the size of two well-folded pairs of trousers, or Andy Beckett's amazing *When The Lights Went Out: Britain in the Seventies*, a book I should have read at home, while surveying the results of that decade, instead of sacrificing sock space for the pleasure of pulling it out on a train in order to examine the nice cover before promptly falling asleep, only interacting with it again when I had to pick it up from the floor of the carriage after it slipped to the ground. Again, let me stress, a wonderful book.



One *Five Dials* writer read enough of Suketu Mehta's *Maximum City* to refer to it in job interviews but couldn't finish it on holiday. 'There's something daunting,' he said, 'about books bigger than four inches.' Yet they're the ones that represent a satisfactory holiday accomplishment.

The other special issues that pop up like mushrooms around the summer are fiction specials, as if we're all supposed to clip out each story from the newspaper's Saturday magazine, fold it and stick it inside the ambitious books we've taken with us, so that there is even more self-loathing at the end of the trip. Not only was my summer reading left unfinished, I forgot to read the bits I had hidden inside my summer reading – a Russian doll of letdown, advanced even further if you can then stick a poem into the short story within the book.

There are many people to escape from during the summer and books are, we've always believed, the greatest, noblest and most effective emotional bunkers around. But now December is upon us – a month practically made for a fiction issue, giving you a reason to excuse yourself from a long, involved story of dental troubles from a cousin who only normally communicates through forwarded emails. Books offer a reason to slope away. We're not talking about complete withdrawal or adopting a set of Grinchy views. A good fiction issue allows us to conserve those limited pools of holiday goodwill for when they're truly needed.

You won't find any Christmas stories in our fiction issue, mostly because we thought you'd be sick of that sort of thing: Jim Carrey's face on posters for the latest film version of *A Christmas Carol* (where it looks like Scrooge is fornicating with the top of Big Ben. Roll on, Mr Dickens.) In lieu of the North Pole we have Glasgow and a brand new short story from James Kelman, who won the Booker Prize the year this *Five Dials* editor graduated high school and stopped reading 'high school' books, thanks to his initiation into the Glasgow of Kelman and, more importantly, the language of Kelman, and the grammar and the capitalization, not to mention the actual stuff of his books. It was the first time I'd seen a writer crack open and rearrange the skeletal elements of English in such a way and I've been grateful to him ever since. We're also grateful to the rest of our starting lineup: Oyeyemi, Vann, Aridjis, Jones and new-

comer Philip Langeskov. We have an essay from David Shields that will force you to reconsider the role of fiction, and we've put it at the front so you can test his theory story by story. Agree or disagree, it's an argument powered by a forceful motor. There's a contribution by Philip Roth – and how often does a year-old magazine get to write that sentence? There's a snippet of Burroughs, an account of a Parisian duel between a writer and a critic. We have also, in the most shocking bit of nepotism since Sarkozy's son, included a submission from my own father. Conflict of interest watchdogs can forward an email to the usual address – but only after reading what I see as a strong bit of reportage from Vietnam. I'm biased, of course. Perhaps the most effective antidote to the cosy Christmas narratives that surround us is a bit of the English avant-garde, so we are also reprinting a B.S. Johnson short story with a new introduction by Jonathan Coe.

Upon reading this over, a definite anti-Christmas tone emerges. But that can't be true, certainly not from this cherub-cheeked office! In order to make sure you know we are not against festivity, we can tell you we're working away – in that slightly stilted manner used in stop-motion Christmas animations – on an end-of-year present for *Five Dials* subscribers delivered sans reindeer some time around Christmas, or Hanukkah, or New Year's, or whenever the hell we can get it finished. Fans of David Foster Wallace (and Zadie Smith, Don DeLillo, Jonathan Franzen and George Saunders) will be especially happy and, based on the content, even a little moved.

—CRAIG TAYLOR

A SINGLE BOOK

# The Sorrow of War by Bao Ninh

*Clare Taylor learns how to sell a photocopied classic in Saigon*

THE BRUISE IS many colours – purples, yellows, browns, light greens. It's the kind you might get after being hit in the eye with a fist, and it stretches from the curve of her hip to the lower part of her waist. On the day she shows me the bruise I'm sitting in a restaurant on De Tham Street in Saigon, not far from the municipal bus station and the sprawling Ben Thanh public market, an area where backpackers congregate and arrange tours, exchange information, make friends and sample the many Vietnamese foods as well as the comfort fare, the bacon and eggs, of the international restaurants. From a vantage point near the door I watch her pick her way up the street toward me. She carries a stack of books on her left hip and holds them there with her left hand, using her right to steady the stack and fend off street traffic: young mothers selling chewing gum with their babies asleep on their shoulders, ragged shoe-shine boys, hawkers peddling hammocks and fake Gucci wallets and Zippos and sunglasses. I watch her step off the curb to avoid a passenger motorcyle, or *xe om*, blocking the sidewalk, the driver stretched out, asleep.

She forays into one of the restaurant/bars that line the street. Some tourists look away while others give her a dismissive gesture and continue eating or reading without making eye contact. Some people look up, take a cursory look at her books and, again without eye contact, say 'No thank you'. Some look directly at her and smile and talk, invite her to shed her heavy load and then proceed to examine the titles in her stack. One person, after making a choice, conducts a good-natured haggle over the price. Another person buys nothing but thanks her and smiles. A foreign man shouts at her and it's then that she hoists her stack and leaves.

When she reaches the entrance of the restaurant where I'm seated she asks for permission to enter from the host at the door. I wave her over and she eases her books onto the table, rubs her arms and her hip and sits down next to me to display her selection. Vietnamese phrasebooks sit atop the stack, above the travel guides for Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, China and, of course, Vietnam, followed by a number of books related to the Vietnam war. Near the top of this section are two perennial bestsellers, *The Quiet American* by Graham Greene and *The Sorrow of War* by a former Vietnamese soldier, Bao Ninh.

Many travellers know the 2002 Phillip Noyce film version of *The Quiet American*, starring Michael Caine, which was shot in and around Saigon. For some, the dramatic images from the film define the face of Saigon – the body of the American, Pyle, floating face down in the putrid canal, or the fierce image of the explosion outside the Continental Hotel across the street from the Opera House. Today the sanitization of the filthy canals is underway using huge scoop shovels and barges to cart away the muck, though the Opera House corner looks much like it did forty years ago. Dong Khoi Street, which in Greene's day was called Catinat Street, still has the feel of a French boulevard, alive with restaurants and cafés and art galleries, ice cream shops and food sellers, news sellers and women offering brochures telling you where you can get the kind of massage that entices foreigners while remaining within the limits of the party-imposed morality. The street has the same density of life and the same vibrancy and vitality of the old 'Paris of the Orient', though Graham Greene would not likely approve of the creeping presence of Louis Vuitton and Versace and the other upscale shops intended to announce that Saigon has arrived into the world of money and fashion.

*The Sorrow of War* presents a different view of Vietnam. It's an account of the memories of Bao Ninh, a soldier in the North Vietnamese army, as he rambles back and forth from the past to the present, from incidents of war and incidents of love, lust and fantasy to the horror of battle and of killing. Looking back over an eleven-year span of the war, Bao

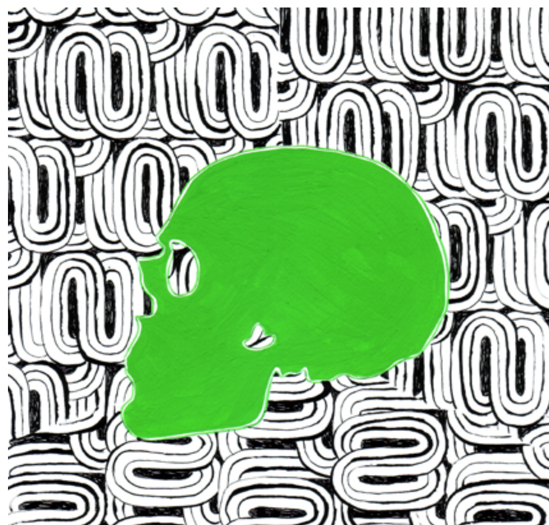
Ninh uses his alter-ego, Kien, to describe what happened, what might have happened and what he wished had become of his homeland and his life. When they are both seventeen, Kien's first love, a woman named Phuong says: 'We two may die as virgins our love is so pure. We ache for each other, unable to be together.' But after the war, when they are reunited, that purity has been lost amidst the napalmed trees and they are strangers, at times lost for words in each other's company.

Kien tries to write a fictional account of his experience, but in the post-war years he slips into a drunken haze. 'Months passed. The novel seemed to have its own logic, its own flow. It seemed from then on to structure itself, to take its own time, to make its own detours.' He says in the same paragraph: 'As for Kien, he was just the writer; the novel seemed to be in charge and he meekly accepted that, mixing his own fate with the fate of his heroes, passively letting the stream of his novel flow as it would, following the course set by some mystical logic set by his memory or imagination.' Far from the aims of Greene's structured thriller, this untidy mix of veiled memoir and fiction comes close to the fevered and grieving mindset of a veteran, and exposes the realities of war, tearing aside the conventional images manufactured by American networks for the six o'clock news and the cover of *Life*. Throughout, we hear the messy cry of Kien and, by extension, the author himself.

Kien recalls the screams of the wounded, sees friends fighting beside him blown to pieces on the battlefield of what they have called 'the Jungle of the Screaming Souls', watches the bodies of young Vietnamese girls beaten and raped by American troops, and becomes increasingly aware his youth and humanity have evaporated in a cause he can't understand or rationalize. At the end of the war, after the fall of Saigon, he returns by troop train to Hanoi to ignominy – no celebration, no beer, no trumpets, no drums, no streamers. Kien asks, 'Where is the reward of enlightenment due to us for attaining our war goals?'

An older couple enters the restaurant. They pause when they reach the table where the bookseller, Ms Thuy, and I sit, and make a request to peruse the stack. The woman chooses a book and asks the price. Thuy flips the book, points to the barcode on the reverse side – £8.99 UK – and offers the lady a better deal, $10.00 US.

'That seems good, George – almost half price.' George forks over the ten. Ms Thuy does not acknowledge the transaction in any way, even though she and I are both aware she has overcharged for a photocopy. To justify this small theft, Ms Thuy would tell us if we asked about her many responsibilities and her many pressures. She supports her elderly parents. She has two children still in school and must pay monthly school fees. Her husband drives a passenger motor-cycle but drinks a lot of rice wine and gambles, and although she's on good terms with the man who delivers her books she's also obliged to pay him in cash. This cash depends on the flow of tourists: in high season when she's flush she may be able to save money; in low season she sometimes has to borrow from a lender whose collection tactics range from mild verbal pressure to various forms of harassment. After the couple leaves she talks about her physical challenges and grimaces when she describes the pain in her lower back from the weight of the sixty books she carries and the nagging persistent pain in her heels. When asked about how the stack on her hip affects her, she turns towards me and draws down the polyester trousers over her hip to reveal the bruise. 'It never goes away,' she says.



I walk with her to the end of De Tam Street, one of the main streets on her route, and when we make the turn onto Bui Vien Street she pauses to assess the action. The tourists who are her potential customers spill out on to the street from open-fronted doorways. People stroll haphazardly, dodging motorcycles and taxis. We walk to a photocopy shop at the far end of the street. With his hand on a wheel clamp, the proprietor guides a book into an old manually-operated paper cutter. A screw squeezes the book and holds it in place so the cut can be made cleanly. Two Toshiba 650 photocopiers stand along the opposite wall, humming and grinding and tossing off heat, covered in grit and dust. Heavier books are sent to another shop where the spine is also sewn. A freshly produced photocopied book waits beside the paper cutter. It has been copied page by painstaking page and will be picked up when the glue on the spine dries. A colour copy is made for each book jacket and, when the process is complete, the book is slipped into a cellophane envelope. Through the gloss a copy often looks impressively like the original. The photo on the front of *The Sorrow of War* is a black and white portrait of a helmeted Vietnamese soldier with a face that is either still untouched by the ravages of war or numb, and the photocopied photograph only exaggerates the contrast between his skin and his eyes, deepening his stare, making it more chilling.

When it's time to get back to work, Ms Thuy hoists her stack and steps gingerly out on to the street, knowing she has to keep moving to keep ahead of the competition. When she started this work it was mostly women selling. Their small group knew each other and helped each other. One of her competitors now brings along her husband to drive her from place to place on a motorcycle, lift the heavy stacks and deal with her agents. A few male sellers have appeared on the scene. 'I've been here a long time,' Ms Thuy says. 'If someone cuts into my business too much I take care of it. I have to because I have no choice.' *The Sorrow of War* wobbles on the top of the stack as she walks towards the door. She calls back over her shoulder, 'I'm a good fighter.' ◊

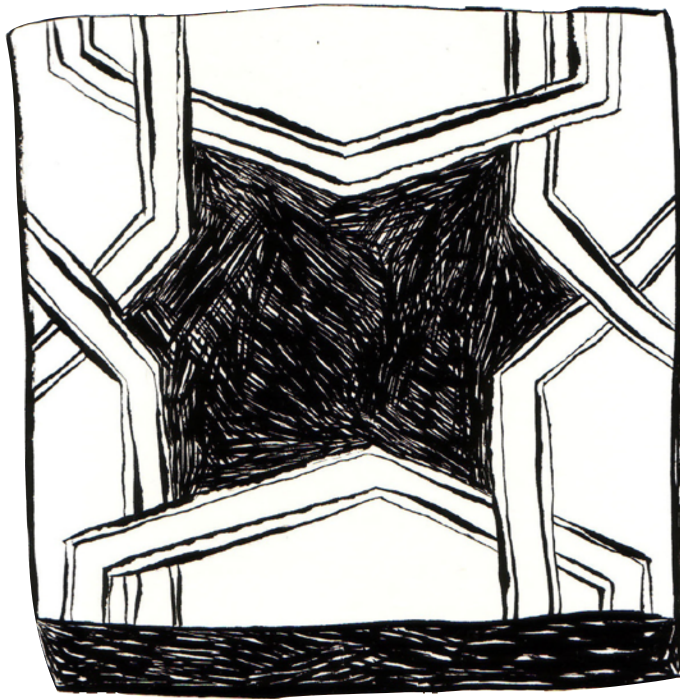
# The British Government v. Psychoanalysis

*Darian Leader reports from the front line*

EARLIER THIS year, an organization commissioned by the government to develop rules for the so-called 'talking therapies' published a list of 451 requirements for any psychoanalytic session. For example: the analyst must demonstrate curiosity about the patient; he or she must avoid unclear or ambiguous language; no interpretation can be made after the first half of the session; and so on for a further fifty pages. To read through the whole list of criteria and requirements is mind-boggling. These are rules which effectively tell the analyst both what to think and what to feel.

The British government, it is clear, would like to see psychoanalysis as simply another form of healthcare – a procedure to be mechanically applied to a more or less passive 'patient', as if it were a course of drugs, rather than an activity done by the patients themselves. This view is reflected in the government's plan to 'give' therapy to young Muslims they suspect of harbouring aspirations to terrorism. Psychotherapy is seen here explicitly as a tool of social control rather than as a choice made by an individual in order to explore their own life.

This perspective involves a radical revision of what analysis is about. Rather than an open-ended encounter where nothing can be predicted or promised in advance, it becomes a product to be sold to a client. The client must know in advance what they will be getting, how much it will cost and how long it will take. In fact, exactly the qualities required of pharmaceuticals in today's market. And instead of the split between conscious and unconscious processes posited by every analyst until today, the new analysis dispenses with the unconscious altogether: if the demands of the client are to be met, this means that they are taken at face-value, as if the unconscious did not exist.



In the new climate of commodification, aspects of the self can be bought and sold, improved and reconfigured, accelerated and excised. The unique position of psychoanalysis, at least until now, has been its refusal to buy into this market logic. Whatever you pay, the analyst will not give you what you want. Rather, they may help you to access elements of the unconscious, yet, as Freud observed, this was like the offer of a train ticket: whether you took the train or not was an entirely different question.

Unlike other therapies, analysis has never promised to get rid of symptoms. On the contrary, it allows symptoms to speak, to give a voice to the problems that were involved in their construction: in other words, the point is less to banish symptoms than to allow the analysand to go further along the path that their symptoms had set them on.

The idea that symptoms carry meaning is, of course, anathema to the new culture of health-control, in which a symptom is seen as a mistake – a piece of faulty learning that needs to be corrected rather than as a conduit to unconscious truth. Yet a symptom may be necessary for someone to live. Equally it might be the bearer of an unconscious message or it might act as a memorial for an event too difficult to remember. Removing the symptom can thus be a very dangerous operation: imagine what it would signify if a government decided to remove all memorials from its cities?

The irony of the current situation is that the very discipline that set itself up as a critique, both practical and theoretical, of the ways that society was run should now be threatened with state control. In the past, this only happened in regimes like those of the old Soviet bloc and China.

NOW WHY, we might ask, would the messy and expensive business of regulating talking therapies be so interesting to government? Their answer is very simple: to protect the public. Potential patients are, we are told, in great distress and so all the more open to ruthless exploitation. Yet no one would dispute the fact that millions of people across the world turn to religion when they experience suffering, loneliness or bereavement, for example. This distress is never taken as an excuse to state-regulate religion, since in free societies the basic human right to hold spiritual beliefs is inalienable, whether we deem them true or false. Why should things be different for the talking therapies, especially given the fact that most of them don't make claims comparable to those of religions?

Likewise, all existing therapy organizations already have strict codes of practice and ethics, and are subject to regular reviews by independent statutory bodies. Complaints occur, as they do in any area of life, yet they are very rare, and if seri-

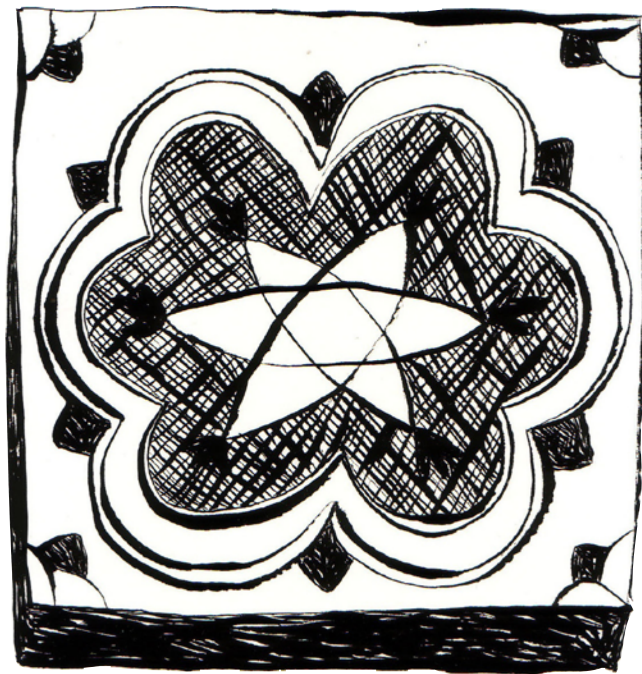
ous, the practitioner is struck off. Beyond the various complaints panels, there is always recourse to the law of the land. So what more could the state want here?

The answer to this question is not simple, and there are many hidden factors at play. For example, some of those who are lobbying for state regulation have devised their own brand of therapy which they are endeavouring to sell to the NHS. So there is an economic interest. But more pervasive and perhaps even more powerful is the project set out by the Department of Health to abolish those situations in which 'an independent practitioner makes independent clinical judgements' about a patient. What this means is the end of private practice psychotherapy or, at least, a serious limitation to it. But why?

For a psychoanalyst listening to these repetitive mantras about the dangers of private practice, it is difficult not to recognize that the real terror here is the idea of a man and a woman being alone in a room together. In shrink-speak, it's the primal scene that we passionately want to know nothing about. The agency set up by the government to regulate the talking therapies perpetuates this moral hygiene, in the form of its insistence on what it terms 'good character' – which of course fails to recognize the central variable in all forms of therapy – that of transference.

Transference is the unconscious process that underpins and structures our relations with other people: who we love, who we hate, who we trust. It is partly based on our earliest relationships, and all analysis works within its framework. In simple terms, we displace onto the figure of the analyst ideas we may have had about the significant others of our childhood. It will also determine our choice of analyst: thus a patient with an alcoholic parent might choose an analyst they suspect of having a drink problem. Or, if one of their parents had an irregular relation with the law, they might choose an analyst they think has submitted an expenses claim twice. Rather than contest these failings, the analyst must assume them, accepting their place as the site of projections and displacements. And sometimes this might mean actively playing up to them. If someone embarks on a period of sexual promiscuity to shock the analyst they believe to be a guardian of the moral order, the analyst might decide to make a lewd sexual comment to collapse this 'acting out'.

To take another example, a woman began analysis due to problems she described as narcissistic. She wanted to be loved by everyone, yet, since this didn't happen, she suffered terribly. The focus of her disappointment here was her legs, which had been scarred in a car accident. She spoke endlessly of her horrible legs in her sessions until, one day, her analyst broke his silence to ask her to show him her legs. When she raised her skirt, he said 'It's true', and this, for her, was a turning point. Rather than the empty reassurance she might have expected, that her legs weren't really so bad, now for the first time someone authenticated her distress. Instead of the boost to her self-esteem that her friends and family had always offered and which never worked, here at last was recognition of her fractured image. From this point onwards she was less plagued by the scars on her legs.



Now, let's imagine that this intervention had not turned out so well. Let's imagine that the patient made a complaint that her analyst had asked her to lift up her skirt. It would be difficult to picture a Health Professions Council complaints hearing having any grasp of the issues at play. Rather, they would judge surface behaviour, as they have done and continue to do in their hearings. They might suspend or even strike off the analyst, and insist that if he had considered this kind of intervention, he should have explained it all clearly and carefully to the patient. There is no room for ambiguity or opacity here: only transparency and communication.

Yet these are the very obstacles to analysis itself. What defines the position of the analyst in the treatment is precisely their unpredictability. The analysand must never be able to guess what they are going to do or say. And that's why the most effective interventions are sometimes those which border on the ridiculous: the analyst telling the analysand to do something that is obviously impossible, or playing the clown, or charging the billionaire patient a million pounds a session or, in one famous case, dropping his trousers to moon a patient. If we take on certain unconscious roles in our lives, and if these roles are always roles in relation to some other who we imagine to be observing us, one of the best ways to challenge them is to subvert the very place from which we imagine we are observed. Which means that the analyst has to act at some moments in totally unexpected ways. There is thus no transparency or predictability, but there is certainly responsibility – the responsibility of the analyst to do their job properly and not to succumb to the vanity of false promises or claims to cure. The real question for all of us now is: how can any patient trust an analyst to help them to reach some level of freedom, autonomy and authenticity if analysts have abandoned these very qualities to the state? ◊

# All the DJs on Brick Lane

*Simon Prosser and Daniel Pemberton*

While we were planning the launch of *Five Dials*, the Hamish Hamilton offices temporarily migrated east to Brick Lane in Shoreditch. Sharing the old Truman Brewery building with a variety of fashion designers, club promoters and, on the ground floor, the Vibe Bar, we were never short of things to do in the evenings if we had the energy. Every day a new clutch of printed flyers was stuffed into the metal rack next to the elevators, advertising a bewildering array of nights out, almost all involving a DJ or two. I started compiling a list of every DJ on Brick Lane in the summer of 2007. Recently, I showed it to the composer and occasional DJ Daniel Pemberton, who offered to decode it for me.

'They say you can't judge a book by its cover,' Daniel said. 'But can you judge a DJ by their name? Looking at this list there are certain clues that can often instantly give away the style of a DJ's music selections. For instance if they've got a stylised 'z' in their name then they're more likely to play music with an urban breaks influence. So if we look at the list we can see this is confirmed by A Skillz, a hip hop DJ (incidentally anyone referring to 'skills' in their name is usually 95% of the time a hip hop DJ due to the genre's noble recognition of actual talents) and DJ Slimzee – a grime DJ. However this theory is ruined somewhat by the awfully titled Cheshire Catz – a tech house duo.

'Anyone with a number in their name is likely to play a set with electronic influences (DJ 3000, Boy 8-bit and Kode 9) while a letter at the end usually means some sort of garage hybrid (Danny C). Someone with a boringly ordinary name (David Mothersole, Shane Kehoe) is likely to be very obsessive about their music and will usually be found playing very long and very technically impressive sets of music that all sounds the same. Someone with a stupid name (Pistol Pete, Lord Vagabond) will probably play very short sets of very badly mixed music. But there will be more girls and more beer at their nights.

'Words within a name will often also give some kind of clue – hip hop's obsession with money helps identify the genre styles of Cashback and Oscar T. Cash while party electro DJ's Punks Jump Up are unlikely to be spinning ambient chill out. But beware of making oversights – some people just have stupid names. Taxman's sets are more likely to appeal to avid followers of breakbeat rather than the after-work KPMG crowd, who themselves would probably rather be checking out the ludicrously Pimms 'O Clock named Jonty Skruff. However, while navigating the flyers of Brick Lane would be infinitely easier if these naming guidelines were rigorously adhered to, they rarely are so you'll still need to do your homework before you decide which DJ is the one for you. Good luck . . .'

—SIMON PROSSER

DJ Doudou
DJ Teezer
Harty
Mushka
Yemi Sawyer
Ed Moss
Andy Newcombe
Simon S
Sleazy Guy
WaP
Nik's Brother
TBX
Ace
Hoop
Lil' Gav
Matt L-S
Ben Tidy
Cookie
Domu
Craig & Ade
Joel Martin
The Off Key Hat
NIYI
Mr Fox
Oscar T. Cash
Cashback
No Way
Lok
DJ 3000
Luke Slater
Alexander Robotnick
Oliver Ho
Matt Bodyjam
Luke Clinic
Sander Kleinenberg
Rene Amesz
A Skillz
Scott Nixon
Damian Gee
Maria B
David Mothersole
Dave Vega
Gabriel & Dresden
Behrouz
Danny C
Bad Chemistry
Mark Sun
Anil Chawla
The Coordinators
Anna Kiss
Christiano
Will Konitzer
Nina Rodriguez
Lusito Quintero
Clemy Riley
Chris Samba
Terry Bedeau
Carlo
Dave Spoon
Mason
Big Daddy
Cheshire Catz
Shane Kehoe
Patrick Hagenaar
Welfare for the Digital
Ben Dela-Pena
Alex K
Tomoki Tamura
Largo
Toni C
TBX
Ace
Eel
Freeze Da Booty
Hunter
Modsleep
Attan
Hoop
Skip B
Slutcrusher
U-Cef
Coco Varma
N-Type
Geeneus
Youngsta
Hatcha
Benga
Aplleblim
Headhunter
Di Distance
Kode 9
Chef, Scientist
Supa
Spyro
Vectra
Slimzee
Scratcha
Karnage
A Man Called Adam
DJ Nerm
D-Code
Manish
Zaki
People Like Us
Little Rico
DJ Koh
Danny Breaks
Huw72
Mistah Brown
DJ Skeletrik
Kila Kella
Trafford
Pistol Pete
The Wildcat Tamer
Lord Vagabond
Ramon Santana
Angelo Exchange
MK
Gorowski
Simbad
Freddy MC Quinn
Loic Deniro
Lyric L
Kenny Party Crasher
DJ Corsair
Jonty Skruff
Cormac
Fidelity Kastrow
Love Technician
Switch
Mampi Swift
IC3
Harry Love
Clipz
Marley Marl
Macpherson
DJ Yoda
Pendulum
Andy C
Boy 8-Bit
Jagz
Kooner
Soulchild
Kissy Sell Out
Erol Alkan
Punks Jump Up
Infadels
MC Trip
Joe Ransom
Sinden
Paul Devro
DJ Hype
Friction
Fabio
Brockie
Pascal
Taxman
MCs Fearless, Fun, Fats & AD
Atomic Hooligan
Sick Rick
Ali B
Dana D
Simon Kurrage
Mr Shiver, Shepdog
DJ Koze
Allez-Allez
Justus Kohncke
Swayzak
Michael Fakesch
Funkstorung

# Against Fiction

## *David Shields hungers for reality*

1. A couple of years ago, a vituperative, rear-guard review of my work ('Shields has betrayed the novel form,' etc.) caused me to ask myself what is the literary tradition out of which I'm working. My answer: the form that releases my best intelligence –not the novel but the lyric essay. What the lyric essay gives you is the freedom to emphasize its aboutness, its attempt at metaphysical meaningfulness. There's plenty of drama, but it's subservient to the larger drama of mind. The motor of the novel is story; the motor of the essay is thought.

In the mid-1990s, after three works of fiction (two novels and a novel-in-stories), I thought I was working on my fourth novel, but the novel collapsed – I simply could not commit the requisite resources to plot and character – and out of that emerged my first work of 'non-fiction', *Remote: Reflections on Life in the Shadow of Celebrity*.

While I was working on *Remote*, I was influenced and inspired by Renata Adler's *Speedboat,* George W. S. Trow's *Within the Context of No Context* and Ross McElwee's *Sherman's March*, among others. What was it about these works I liked and like so much? The confusion between field report and self-portrait; the confusion between fiction and non-fiction; the author-narrators' use of themselves, as personae, as representatives of feeling-states; the anti-linearity; the simultaneous bypassing and stalking of artifice-making machinery; the absolute seriousness, phrased as comedy; the violent torque of their beautifully idiosyncratic voices.

2. I and like-minded writers and other artists want the veil of 'let's pretend' out. I don't like to be carried into purely fanciful circumstances. The never-never lands of the imagination don't interest me that much. Beckett decided that everything was false to him, almost, in art, with its designs and formulae. He wanted art, but he wanted it right from life. He didn't like, finally, that Joycean voice that was too abundant, too Irish, endlessly lyrical, endlessly allusive. He went into French to cut down. That's what I want from the voice. I want it to transcend artifice.

Which isn't to say that all literary works don't contain a considerable degree of artifice, of fiction. In Thucydides' foreword to *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, he acknowledges making up generals' speeches since he wasn't present at the events. In Edmund Gosse's *Father and Son*, dialogue from fifty years earlier is reproduced at considerable length. In *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, Thomas De Quincey claims to have recovered from his addiction (which wasn't remotely true; he remained an opium addict for decades afterwards).

James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* was used as a paper tiger to once again misposition memoir as failed journalism. It's a category mistake to think of memoir as belonging to journalism; it belongs to literature. We need to see the genre in poetic terms. The memoir rightly belongs to the imaginative world, and once writers and readers make their peace with this fact, there will be less argument over the ethical question about the memoir's relation to the 'facts' and 'truth'.

I want to assert the importance of positioning the writer and reader in an unstable position in relation to each other and to the text, as, say, W. G. Sebald does in *The Rings of Saturn*. Every work should find its own form; how many, though, really do? It's crucial, in my formulation, that both the writer and reader not be certain what the form is, that the work be allowed to go wherever it needs to go to penetrate its subject. My recent misreading of David Remnick's profile of Bill Clinton in the *New Yorker* as the first page of Miranda July's short story was more interesting to me than the story itself. Genre is a minimum-security prison. All great works found a genre or dissolve one.

3. Novel qua novel is a form of nostalgia. Jazz as jazz – jazzy jazz – is pretty well finished. The interesting stuff is all happening on the fringes of the form where there are elements of jazz and elements of all sorts of other things as well. Jazz is a trace, but it's not a defining trace. Something similar is happening in writing. Although great novels – novelly novels – are still being written, a lot of the most interesting things are happening on the fringes of several forms.

The world exists. Why recreate it? I want a literature built entirely out of contemplation and revelation. Non-fiction is a framing device to foreground contemplation. Fiction is 'Once upon a time'. Essay is 'I have an idea'.

The play *Hamlet* is, more than anything else, the person Hamlet talking about a multitude of different topics. I find myself wanting to ditch the tired old plot altogether and just harness the voice, which is a processing machine, taking input and spitting out perspective – a lens, a distortion effect. Hamlet's very nearly final words are 'Had I but the time . . . O, I could tell you.' He would keep riffing for ever if it wasn't for the fact that the plot needs to kill him. The real story isn't in the drama of what happens; it's what we're thinking about while nothing, or very little, is happening. The singular obsessions, endlessly revised. The sound of one hand clapping. The sound of a person sitting alone in the dark, thinking.

The lyric essay is the literary form that gives the writer the best opportunity for rigorous investigation, because its theatre is the world (the mind contemplating the world) and offers no consoling dream-world, no exit door.

4. First person is where you can be more interesting. A novelist-friend, who can't not write fiction but is flummoxed whenever he tries to write non-fiction directly about his own experience, said he was impressed (alarmed?) by my willingness to say nearly anything about myself: 'It's all about you and yet somehow it's not about you at all. How can that be?' Autobiography can be naively understood as pure self-revelation or more cannily recognized as cleverly wrought subterfuge. One is not important, except insofar as one's example can serve to elucidate a more widespread human trait and make readers feel a little less lonely and freakish. We all contain within ourselves the entire human condition. We learn that in going down into the secrets of our own minds we have descended into the secrets of all minds. In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts; they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty.

No more masters, no more masterpieces. What I want (instead of God the nov-

elist) is self-portrait in a convex mirror.

5. When the mimetic function is replaced by manipulation of the original, we've arrived at collage. The very nature of collage demands fragmented materials, or at least materials yanked out of context. Collage is, in a way, only an accentuated act of editing: picking through options and presenting a new arrangement (albeit one that, due to its variegated source-material, can't be edited into the smooth, traditional whole that a work of complete fiction could be).

As a work gets more autobiographical, more intimate, more confessional, more embarrassing, it breaks into fragments. Our lives aren't pre-packaged along narrative lines and, therefore, by its very nature, 'reality'-based art – unprocessed, uncut, underproduced – splinters and explodes.

Making up a story or characters feels, to me, like driving a car in a clown suit.

Collage is not a refuge for the compositionally disabled; it's an evolution beyond narrative. The novel is dead. Long live the anti-novel, built from scraps. Absence of plot gives the reader the chance to think about something other than turning pages. What in the traditional novel is plot in collage is supplanted by idea. In collage, we read for penetration of the material rather than elaboration of story.

I'm not drawn to literature because I love stories per se. I find nearly all the moves the traditional novel makes unbelievably predictable, tired, contrived and essentially purposeless. I can never remember characters' names, plot developments, lines of dialogue, details of setting. It's not clear to me what such narratives are supposedly revealing about the human condition. I'm drawn instead to literature as a form of thinking, consciousness, knowing. I like work that's focused page by page, line by line, on what the writer really cares about rather than hoping that what the writer cares about will somehow mysteriously creep through the cracks of narrative, which is the way I experience most stories and novels. When I read a book that I really love, I experience the excitement that in every paragraph the writer is manifestly exploring his subject.

6. When I was seventeen, I wanted a life consecrated to art. I imagined a wholly committed art-life: every gesture would be an aesthetic expression or response. That got old fast, because, unfortunately, life is filled with allergies, credit-card bills, tedious commutes, etc. Life is, in large part, rubbish. The beauty of 'reality'-based art – art underwritten by 'reality'-hunger – is that it's perfectly situated between life itself and (unattainable) 'life as art'. Everything in life, turned sideways, can look like – can be – art. Art suddenly looks and is more interesting, and life, astonishingly enough, starts to be liveable. ◊

THE FICTION ISSUE

# Dr Lustucru

*Helen Oyeyemi*

Dr Lustucru's wife was not particularly talkative. But he beheaded her anyway, thinking to himself that he could replace her head when he wished for her to speak.

How long had the Doc been crazy? I don't know. Quite some time, I guess. Don't worry. He was only a general practitioner.

The beheading was done as cleanly as possible, and briskly tidied up. Afterwards Lustucru set both head and body aside in a bare room that had previously been designated as the nursery. Then he went about his daily business as usual.

The Doc's wife had been a good woman, so her body remained intact and she did not give off a smell of decay.

After a week or so old Lustucru got around to thinking that he missed his wife. No one to warm his slippers, etc. In the nursery he replaced his wife's head, but of course it wouldn't stay on just like that. He reached for a suture kit. No need. The body put its hands up and held the head on at the neck. The wife's eyes blinked and the wife's mouth spoke: 'Do you think there will be another war? After the widespread damage of the Great War it is very unlikely. Do you think there will be another war? After the widespread damage of the Great War it is very unlikely. Do you think...' And so on.

Disturbed by this, the doctor tried to remove his wife's head again. But the body was having none of it and hung on pretty grimly. What a mess. He was forced to leave her there, locked in the nursery, asking and answering the same question over and over.

The next night she broke a window and escaped.

Lustucru then understood that he'd been bad to the woman. He lay awake long nights, dreading her return. What got him the most was the idea that her vengeance would be fast, that he would be suddenly dead without a moment in which to understand. With that in mind, he prepared no verbal defences of his behaviour. Eventually his dread reached a peak he could live on. In fact it came to sustain him and it cured him of his craziness, a problem that he had not even known he had. After several months there was no sign of his horror beyond a heartbeat that was slightly faster than normal. His whole life, old Lustucru readied himself to hear from his wife again, to answer to her. But he never did. ◊

# Ingrained

*by James Kelman*

I WAS NOT AN artist and not a schoolteacher, I had never been a schoolteacher. People thought I was. That was a peculiar misjudgment. Misjudgment *was* the word.

I was observing, even as I thought in this self conscious, deliberately reflective manner, and the subject of my observation was the world about me. Here beyond the window, far below at ground level, the rubbish piled high and overflowing although the rubbish men had come two days ago. What the hell had they been doing? All they did was stand there gabbing and sharing a smoke. Probably a joint; they pretended it was tobacco in case the rubbish police were spying from windows. I wanted to shout at them. It made me angry. Was that the way to do a job? Okay if it was a middle class rural piece of suburbia, but this was a slum, man, a slum, s l u bloody m. Ordinary working class people, these were brothers and sisters. We dont shit on them for heaven sake. So no wonder I got angry, living round here. It was just important. I thought so anyway, if no one else did. Carol did. Carol was shocked; truly she was. This was her first time in the city and the idea of bringing a baby up in such a place, my God. Where do the children go to play?

The same place they went when I was a kid.

Oh dont give me that, she said.

Give you what? I wasnt giving her a thing. It was true. All I did was tell her. If she chose to not believe me or to be annoyed by it, or be irritated; whatever, it was up to her. She accused me of being lev – lev – lev something. What the hell was the word! Levaticus? That was the name of a biblical character. Leviticus. She couldnt have accused me of being a biblical character? Or could she? It depended on her mood.

But it was no laughing matter.

People did not believe in laughs and she was no different. Neither was I. Laughs laugh laughter. I didnt believe in laughs either. That is why I returned to Glasgow, when any sane individual would have remained elsewhere, excluding Scotland obviously, if one might distinguish between the two, as most folk do.

The backcourts, back streets, back alleys, the shadowy lanes nearby the river, derelict warehouses with caved in roofs, broken glass and old iron, and weeds, and people; people who might be anything, dangerous, anything. That is where the children played, so what was new in that? Kids survive.

It wasnt my decision. I would have stayed south. I kept that to myself. Carol would have jumped down me throat, be entitled to jump down my throat.

Hoh hum.

Black soot ingrained brick buildings.

Black soot ingrained brick buildings, sandstone bricks, forming a rectangle. For every two entrance ways there was a midden containing three large metal containers inside of which piled black polybags full of rubbish and shit. The containers should have been emptied weekly. They were not.

I would to have drawn them.

I adjusted the stub of charcoal between my fingers, my pinkie and ringfinger ached. The charcoal was finished and these two were the fingers that had the most work to do, thankless work. I should have thrown the stub away. If I hadnt paused to perform the adjustment the ache in my fingers would have gone unnoticed. A proper artist wouldnt have noticed. He would have been too engrossed. I was not a proper artist. I engaged in pastimes; this was one such.

When was soot anything other than black? It was always black. Soot was soot. No wonder I was having the difficulty. How do you draw soot, you do not draw soot, who could draw soot, no one could do it, ever do it, they would never succeed.

Wait. Soot could be brown, soot could be purple. Soot need not be black, black grey. How do real artists manage? They just plunge in and try, they do not ask first; what colour is such and such; they just jumped in and did what it was, in front of their eyes, their eyes, theirs and nobody else, it lay in front of their eyes. What lay in front of their eyes? Whatever, what it was, whatever it was, and if it was green it was green, and why should it not be green, if soot is green it is green, fucking green!

I looked at the drawing, then out the window. A pidgeon. One of the tenements lay derelict and a commune of pidgeons had taken over the top flat. One landed exactly then, wings barely flapping. They flew in and out the broken windows, lined the juncture of the roof and on the chimney pots. Hopeless looking birds but not in flight. The bigger the bird the more graceful it was, leaving aside pelicans. What was the wee fat bird that nests on these breakneck cliffs overlooking the sea? Not terns.

That was you getting old when your memory went. My uncle said it. Once the memory goes it becomes a downward spiral. They fly 10,000 miles without a break; puffins. Wee fat birds that the old St Kildans used to eat. These men climbed up incredible cliff faces, in their bare feet because maybe only their big toe could find a grip. They had feet like shovels, with webbed toes, evolved from a thousand years of climbing. More. When had the first humans come to the island? Probably chased there five thousand years ago, same period as the Scara Brae settlers in Orkney.

Webbed toes! Surely not. How could it be? If they had had webbbed toes the whole world would have known. Maybe they did. Anthropology was the appropriate area.

Life was just extraordinary. In some ways it was. Even you looked out the window, observing from the window, and saw the big puddle. Really, it was an enormous puddle. It flooded the entire backcourt and left all the families up two closes no way to reach the midden. Not unless they trailed through the water. Fucking webbed feet, ye needed webbed feet to live in Glasgow.

How to reach the midden? Send the weans!

What the hell else do we have children for? Anyway, they would love the adventure!

But it was disgraceful; a scandal said Carol and she was right. Why should any

child have to live in this environment. This place was horrible; infant mortality rates scandalous, scandalous; people living in confrontation with their surroundings, a pitched battle between the two, unlike what's his name, Lowry the great Lancashire artist who painted scenes from working class life, crowds of people going to work in the factory, returning home from the factory. Lowry had been a political animal. He had to have been. Otherwise why use the subject matter?

I was not a political animal. This was a confession I enjoyed. I felt justified. Perhaps not. But it was a justification, whether I felt it or not. I liked to think I was political but I was not – my god, a bird had popped out the top window of the derelict building, out onto a window sill, arms behind its back, beneath the coattails, head cocked, gazing down to the backcourt, supreme observer, a god-like witness.

But why the hell had they allowed the building to degenerate into dereliction? It was a nonsense. This city's political leaders, the ones that werent corrupt, were a bunch of cowardly bastards, no-good cowardly bastards. But it was up to the citizens to take up arms. Fight the buggars. Fucking fight them, dont be scared. Not that they were scared, they werent scared at all, they just had better things to do with their time, unlike me.

I was a do-nothing.

Like every place else on the globe, the battle in Scotland lay between the people and the politicians, the people and the political system, the class system, the people and the bullies, the people and the sycophants, the people and the armed forces.

Why not get actively engaged in politics. How to manage that? Go out and do something. Find a campaign and go and join it. People were fighting against racist laws. Go and join a picketline. Why was I unable to do that? Or trident missiles, the people down at Faslane, young and old, elderly, all fighting against the army, navy and cops and the secret services, not to mention their american cousins, all down there fighting ordinary Scottish folk. Why didnt I go and join them? And take my child with me. People took their children. I didnt. Me and Carol didnt. If I suggested that to her she would run a mile. I never did suggest it, I didnt have to.

But who said I was unable to do that! Unproven.

One day I might. One day soon. I had only been home a couple of months. Even being home was a surprise, never mind the accoutrements. Girlfriend and baby.

Life moved on. A lighter touch was required. Defective technique. One day I would seek tuition. There were leisure classes in the field. How to be an artist in ten weeks. It shore sounded good ol partner.

Yet the political activists were the ones to admire. Both my sisters were activists. I was not. But so what! Here at the base level, street level, the level of existence, ordinary existence. My sisters didnt deign to stoop so low. I had the family, they had none.

That aspect of white crayon, its smoothness in application, no, I did not care for it.

Down in the backcourt dissolving lumps of excrement and tissue paper clogged the water. The flooding caused by three days heavy rain and one burst pipe. The level of the puddle had risen to the extent that one now had to search for the source. What could one do. Very little. I dampened the white crayon with my forefinger.

Kids and adventure. On the dry land athwart the puddle they were building a flat wooden vessel. Call it an ark. These little humans were raising an ark to set sail for Treasure Island. Forget the religious connotation, the small ones were into pieces of eight. You had to laugh. I did, I liked kids and having one of my own was beyond anything imagineable. Incredible that a human could bring another human into being. Of course Carol had played a part in the process. It takes two, two.

And where was the child to play? The backcourt was a massive adventure playground and I would have loved it when I was a wean, but now: now it was too dangerous. You could not let kids out there, not until they were older. Other parents did and I had no problem with that although Carol did. She was from the south seas of England and dint understand tenement life ol partner.

Neither did I.

On one roof across from me I could see two men working with slates and tarpaulin, repairing the recent storm damage.

That or a storm similar had struck the southeast coast of North America. Although the information was an irrelevance it helped people feel better. Nevertheless this here had been the worse storm for twenty years according to Mrs McAuley on the ground floor left; a crabbit woman who spent most of her life in the local butcher shop. Was that not unnatural behaviour? My father was a horse punter and spent most of his life in the betting shop, which if not admirable was at least understandable. But butcher shops! There was something deviant about that. Every time one passed along the pavement and gazed into the butcher shop window lo and behold that female personage was there at the counter, in conversation with the butcher's wife, Mary, a local tradition -bearer. Forget the word 'gossip'; 'gossip' did not do justice to the scope of what passed locally from mouth to mouth.

I was chuckling. I caught myself doing it. My thoughts delighted me. Yes and the toddler had returned in the backcourt below. Post haste. Red crayon red crayon. Nee naaawww neee naaawww. Red crayons for toddlers, certain toddlers. Definitely a red crayon for this wee being of the gender female with the spoon and cup

the spoon and cup

lost to the world making sandpies from out the black slime. The wee darling. I knew her mother and for god sake she was okay for all that never could she be described as a good mother. Never ever. She definitely was not a good mother. On this Carol and I were agreed. As disinterested observers no other judgment was possible. She smoked like a chimney, went to the bingo, no doubt drank copious quantities of alcohol, to wash down the copious popped pills, all the time allowing her wonderful wee girl to toddle around this hellhole of a backcourt. What happened if she fell in the damn puddle; what if she fell on broken glass; if her flesh was sliced open? She would contract diptheria. Nothing more certain. One felt like charging downstairs and lifting her out of harm's way.

But was she in harm's way?

Halt! Who goes there!

Middle class missionaries.

Ah, pass on.

Artist as interventionist. The toddler

in the puddle. I scraped an edge on the crayon, sketched quickly. Blunt crayons annoyed me unless appropriate. Appropriate crayons. How does one distinguish black slime sandpies from sand sandpies? Weans dontdon't, why should adults? Might they be so distinguished?

By an understanding of the nature of 'essence'. What is 'essence', mine fuhrer?

The aeroplane overhead. Fasten seatbelts. A London flight. The wealthy business class, commuters commuting. I commute, you commute. Five minutes to land. Already on the final descent. Oh my ears my ears. Here is a boiled sweet. The stewardess on the side seat stares vacantly, knees glued together. Glued together. I was once on a plane and a stewardess sat so facing me. Her knees! It was a big plane and I was on the seat at an exit door. And travelling alone, though such information is not relevant. The stewardess sat on the pull-down seat facing me. And amid much turbulence and a most bumpy landing her knees remained together, dimpled knees, not beautiful but yes, well, maybe they were.

Are all knees dimpled?

But how did she manage it? How could it be! Mon ami! Such compo-zure! Such aispeer-yons! Such ai-leegons.

Needless to report that she had nice legs. All stewardesses have nice legs. Given that the uniform skirt is not conducive, should not have been conducive. I challenge that. They are so conducive! But conducive or not, 100 per cent female, women's skirts. And what about her vacant stare? And could it be drawn? Hold it there a minute. Miss, would you please be vacant a little longer. But why had I to unspread my own knees? Why! Why indeed, because I got hard. An erection had occasioned, occurred, been brought about, effected by, the presence of these knees, and what and what, oh, what lay not so much

the knees of this woman, this stewardess whose stare was not at all vacant, or if it was was yet concealing a most interested smile, a smile of daring, of daring – design!

Is design too strong a word?

The sense of the irresistible. Not by nefarious design aforethought, simply the nonreflective act of a free man. No no no. It was more than that. I was unspreading my knees for her, for her! She had been reading a magazine and pretended not to notice. And her knees my god stuck together, how could it be!

Now that surely was unnatural. Women surely are not programmed to keep these knees jammed together. Mine might be closed but not jammed. Hers were jammed. Jammed! Why?

Why indeed.

Now that had been unfair advantage. But the phrase 'vacant stare'. Perhaps that stare was not so vacant. Perhaps that stare was a stratagem. How to deal with male intimidation. And it was. I had desired that she notice my masculinity. It was true. Who knows, maybe she would slip her phone number into my hand as we departed the plane.

Men have that over women. The freedom to open one's legs. Not even in trousers will a woman open her legs, not like that, spread; spread knees. 'Spread knees' could be the name of an audacious new deodorant.

Had I been a copywriter.

In the days when one travelled alone. One had yet to become a threesome. Carol and I had met but had yet still to form a relationship. We had slept together. We had slept together. Sigh. One could only sigh. A reflective exhalation.

Sounds, what were the sounds? Banging through the wall. Who lived through the wall? Ye gods. The mystery of it, and to remain so; destined as such.

I heard this banging at odd hours. An Edgar Allan Poe was required to make of that a mystery so dreadful, of such awe-inspiring

Oh my, more banging.

I focused more closely on visual rather than aural matter.

In the backcourt parts of the ground had been cemented over. There were also dirt patches and here weeds blossomed. Bits of charred wood, remnants from the fire last month, strewn among rusted pushpram parts and holey bedspreads.

Jesus christ, a rag man.

An actual ragman, dragging a sack behind him and stopping every two or three strides to poke under articles, just on the off chance; spoiled articles, old newspaper or linoleum, it looked like linoleum. And his dog! They were known as 'rag and bone' men. That would be nineteenth century when bones lay about the streets in the name of god. I remembered those men from childhood, rummaging around for stuff, any kind of stuff, every kind of stuff. I hant seen one for years.

Hold it hold it hold it. The ragman barely stayed a minute, the dog sniffing at his heels. Three balloons for your coat and hat. Any bones? The dog had that hopeful demeanour one expects from the canine as opposed to the feline.

Two wee boys were watching all this from behind a dyke. They would have stones, were about to hurl said stones. The ragman had not seen them. Neither had his dog. This dog was mean and would give the boys a long look.

Nearby the empty space, where part of the dyke was demolished such a very long

AN INTERRUPTION

## Writer v. Critic #1

### *The 1909 Paris Pistol Duel*

The Chevassu–Bernstein duel, the announcement of which has created so much sensation in Paris literary and journalistic circles, took place yesterday morning. Only one shot was fired, and no one was injured. The cause of the meeting was a letter by M. Henry Bernstein to the newspaper *Comoedia*, in which he expressed himself in violent terms regarding a criticism of his (M. Bernstein's) play, *La Griffe*, just revived at the Renaissance Theatre. The criticism was written by M. Chevassu, dramatic critic of [the] *Figaro*. The terms of the letter were such that M. Chevassu sent his seconds to M. Bernstein, who refused to make any retraction, and an encounter was judged inevitable. The velodrome at the Parc des Princes was chosen for the meeting. The conditions of the duel were that it was to be with pistols at 30 paces distance. Rain was coming down in sheets. The only spectators were three or four journalists, who stood stoically in the downpour.

—From *The New York Times*, 28 October, 1909

time ago. A section had collapsed and crushed a child. Why not say it? Killed the child. The child was beneath the dyke. Bigger children had climbed onto the dyke. I got the story from Carol who heard it from Mrs McAuley. The bigger children had run away after the 'accident'. In case they got blamed.

Accident! The word had to be challenged. It did not do justice to the fact.

None ever was adjudged culpable. Not anyone. A freak of fucking nature. Council business. People had demanded the dyke's demolition. Oh naughty dyke. Then did the Council act.

I had a wee child. If such a thing ever happened, if it ever happened.

I had sketched this dyke on numerous occasions. What was there about that dyke? Nothing. Bricks and mortar a soul doth not own. Obviously not. Nevertheless, I sketched it.

Dead weans and old dykes, a traditional Glasgow story.

The ragman approached the close entrance to the derelict tenement. Aha.

Just to see what was what.

The place was reeking! I could have told him. I had been inside it a fortnight ago. The concrete floor was rutted and wet, urine and shit, animal and human. The walls running damp, initials and dates knifed into the plaster, gang slogans on the ceiling. Empty buckie bottles and bricks and mortar, bricks and mortar, gen-yoo-oine bricks and mortar. I laid down the sketch pad and crayons, massaged the small of his back. The baby's nappy needed changing. I should have done it an hour ago. Then I could have gone for a walk, pushed the pram. I quite enjoyed that.

Now Carol was due home. In the background the drone of the radio. It came from through the wall. This was the radio programme, every lunchtime the broadcast. Who could believe people listened to such nonsense? But they did, in their hundreds of thousands. This person or persons through the wall from us; one's neighbours, they listened to it on a daily basis. Probably I had seen them on the street. Ordinary people, no irregular habits, except this compulsion to listen to extraordinary crap. Was this not the most extraordinary crap programme in the universe!

The door the door the door. The front door was being unlocked. I went quickly to the cot and lifted out the baby, sniffed the nappy and knelt to the floor, dragging across the waterproof changing mat, laying the baby aboard, still sleeping my god, amazing. The room door opened.

Hiya Carol! I said.

She peered at the wee one: Sleeping?

Yeh.

She smiled, taking care not to glance at what I had been doing. That was enough. I attempted a smile but really, people doing that, very difficult, very very difficult.

Want a cup of tea? Carol said.

Yeh, yes . . . I nodded, because out the corner of my eye, what I was working on, it was just obvious, just getting closer, I just had to get closer. How could I get closer? Always the damn problem!

Black soot ingrained sandstone tenements formed a rectangle. For every two closes there was a midden containing three square metal containers which should have been emptied weekly.

Can soot be other than black? Yes, this had been answered. Soot is anything. I no longer had difficulty with that. Or did I? Of course not.

Yes sir, I might have known the baby was awake. Carol was here and had gone to her. I was aware that my stomach was something or other, that it was me to blame. ◊

# Six

## *by Shane Jones*

1.
In this town everyone wears the number three on their shirts, on top of their hats and on their shoes.

2.
If six were alive you could wear it like a swan dress around your neck and hips. You can't do that with three.

3.
'I want the number six,' I tell you.
'What?'
'For my birthday.'
'But that's not real.'
'But it could be.'

4.
I spend my days at the lake filling the lake with other lake water because this lake is dying. I wear the number three to fit in and not to alarm the police.

5.
You bring me six rats on six different coloured leashes. I shake my head no. You throw the rats and their leashes out the window and the rats claw for safety in the clouds. The leashes write a number three on the sun.

6.
'We live in a place of all three.'
'I don't care.'
'But the police.'
'I want to be happy.'
'I love you times three.'
'Please.'

7.
'Oh, yes, that feels good. I want to stay right here. I want to dig a six-shaped grave and make this love to you.'

8.
For my birthday you tell me to come outside. You're smiling your lips into the number three. You apologize. You have fireworks. They fire yellow and blue into the dark sky and each one makes a dazzling number six.

9.
The police come. Three of them. On each uniform, a giant gold number three. They get you first. Each beating you three times with their silly wooden clubs.

10.
'Run!'
'Okay!'

11.
I run towards the lake. I push through the crowd of three times three times three times three. Someone tells me to vote for three. Another says he has fresh caught three from the dying lake. Very rare and expensive. I say go six yourself.

12.
'That girl is a disgrace.'
'She will be strangled.'
'And bloodied.'
'A death three times over.'
'We don't love her.'

13.
I hear you screaming. You scream in pains of six and the beauty of it shatters the sun to a broken plate. There's blood in your voice. If the police keep count, they have to stop.

14.
I trip and fall into a puddle that is the lake.

15.
Once I dreamed I was at a grand ceremony of gold and diamonds and I wore the swan dress. Rats ran down the stairs past me carrying coloured leashes of black cloud.

16.
'You can't be like everyone else, can you?' you told me once.
'I could.'
'Then why don't you?'
'Because I want us to be happy.'
'I don't understand.'

15.
I see you running towards me, the police at your back who run in three steps, then stop, then again. But not you. You run like you don't care about anything but me. You run like your favourite number could be a million.

14.
It's getting so dark here with the sun falling in six pieces behind strips of mountains in four and five. Can you hurry, please.

13.
'I'm coming,' you say.
'Is this a lake, a puddle, or grave?'
'It's neither.'
'It has to be something.'
'No it doesn't.'

12.
A swan is crawling up my leg.

11.
The townsfolk shoot their own fireworks into the sky. All threes.

10.
Groups of children with little metal basins are running to me and pouring water around me. I tell them this might just be a puddle now or worse a grave and they say it's a newborn lake.

9.
You come to me and you're missing all your teeth except three. I look behind you and see the police approaching in their ugly three-step way.

8.
'Here we are.'
'This isn't a place to live.'
'It is for us now.'
'I suppose it is.'

7.
I've never known a place more comfortable than right here. We take turns drawing maps on our bodies that look like each other.

6.
I ask the children if the lake can become anything bigger and they say they can try to invent an ocean. Their arms are the muscular size of cannons.

6.
The police try and swim and drown. They can only hold their breath for three seconds.

6.
I tell you to never stop and you do and I realize that we are finally safe here in a world of six.

# A Bird's Bone

*by David Vann*

At the ash scattering, we all were confused as to how my father had died. According to my father's brother, Gary, my father had been killed by the pain in his head. 'I'm just glad he ended the pain in his head,' Gary said several times to no one in particular as we stood there in the heat. Gary had arranged this, finally getting a pilot near enough who would lift us two at a time over the deer ranch my father and the rest of the men in the family had hunted on all our lives. Everyone would get a chance to scatter some ashes. It was written down in my father's will.

'I'm just glad he ended that pain,' Gary said again. He was getting no response at all. He smoothed his tie, adjusted the ash-box under his arm and cleared his throat.

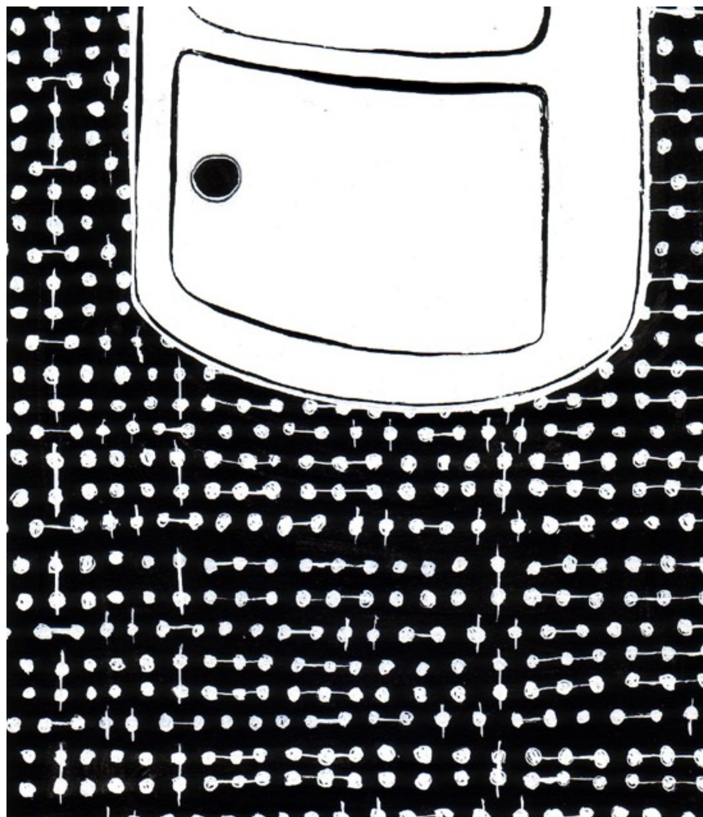
My grandmother finally rescued Gary. 'It was a family tragedy,' she said. A family tragedy connoted outside forces, inexorable and cruel, that had borne down on our little group. It made us sound very fine, bearing up against fate. Our little group was composed of my grandmother, grandfather, mother, Uncle Gary and Aunt Eleanor. Rhoda should have been with us too, but my grandfather and Gary had said it would be them or her at this particular ceremony; they were convinced that Rhoda had somehow killed my father with her love.

'If only we had known,' Eleanor said over the putt-putt of the tractor. She took the black shawl off her head and put her hand up to her cheek, as if she were feeling her own skin for the first time. This was her version: if only she had known, she would have saved my father. This would have suited her well, especially since my father never had had much respect or admiration for her. Saving him from himself would have righted everything. But knowledge had been withheld from her by someone somewhere along the line, perhaps by the Almighty himself, and it was her suffering now, which she bore gorgeously, to think of what might have been, of the great role she might have played.

'Oh, how sick he was and we just didn't know,' she went on.

'We told him not to shack up with her in the first place,' my grandfather said.

'What did you say?' my mother asked. She had never liked my grandfather, and seeing him place all the blame neatly on Rhoda infuriated her. The tractor was coming closer, getting louder.



'I said we told him Rhoda was trouble!'

'That's enough. It was an ugly thing he did. Rhoda was his last chance to get over all the selfish meanness you taught him.' Even at thirteen, even stunned by grief and dislocation, unsure of my own version of things, of my own consolation, I was proud of her.

'Oh, it sure is hot,' my grandmother said. 'We're all hot and we're not thinking straight.'

'Shut up, Margaret,' my grandfather said, then took one of her hands in his and ran his leathered fingers over her arm as carefully as if he were caressing her. He looked up again at my mother.

'If you weren't the mother of my grandson . . .'

'Save it,' my mother said.

'It's so hot,' my grandmother said again, then my grandfather tightened his grip on her arm and she shut up.

The pilot's footsteps came slowly across the gravel. He stopped far enough away from us and fiddled with the leather hat in his hands. 'I can take you up now.' I will always remember this pilot because he shamed us as a group. Through no design of his own, he made us hear everything that had just been said and thought.

'Let's go, for Chrissakes,' my mother said, and pulled me along.

The man closed his little hatch-door on the two of us. We stared straight ahead through the prop blade, more than ready to leave the others behind. Gary handed the ash-box in through the sliding cockpit window. The pilot gave it to my mother, who held it on her lap: a small, grey, cardboard box. It would be open soon, my mother and I looking inside at the little bones and ashes.

'It's not much,' my mother said. 'It feels like a box of meringue cookies. Nothing to it at all. Just whip and fluff.'

'God,' I said.

'I'm sorry,' she said.

But I was looking off across fields of dry grass at the kind of yellow hills I'd seen all my life, entering the kind of protective, delusional state I had suddenly become very good at. These hills weren't affected in the least by my father's leaving, and if I looked at them long enough, as the

plane tilted into the sky, I could almost imagine my father hadn't gone.

The hills would be silver by moonlight, blue-grey in the cold hours before dawn. I knew because I had walked in those hours with my father, single file, listening to the soft thud of our boots. I had felt my father then, as if he were my own shadow against the earth before me, and whether or not I knew where we were, I always knew we were not lost.

'I don't think I like this,' my mother said. 'I think I want to go back.'

I didn't say anything. Neither did the pilot. I could see pepper trees like lollipops on the bare yellow hills, rock faces in designs of rust and black.

'Dammit, Roy,' my mother said. 'Hold my hand at least.'

So I held her hand, but I wanted not to. I wanted to remain very far away.

'Are we supposed to dump him down this pipe?' she asked the pilot.

'What?' he yelled.

She yelled her question again.

'Yeah,' he said. 'But just some of it. Save some for the others, of course.'

My mother clenched my hand more tightly. 'Idiotic,' she said. 'A bird's bone for me, an ash for you.'

The front passenger seat was empty to make room for a sawed-off piece of white plastic plumber's pipe, duct-taped in place for the occasion, which stuck out the small sliding window. From where I sat with my mother in the back seat, I imagined I could hear the wind whistling through it.

We passed over the first line of mountains, and then Goat Mountain, where the ranch was, came into view. From thousands of yards and an entirely new angle, I saw the upper glade, where my father had gutshot two deer. I had stood below, looking up as they rolled toward me, screaming. Forest, then, the trails hidden, a faint crease for the upper fire road, exposed earth at the switchbacks and the big glades below. My father running, firing from the shoulder. Squirrels in the sugar pines; my grandfather collecting the huge cones. The stand just off the lower big glade where two years before, at age eleven, I had shot through the spine of a three-point buck and had to finish him off at close range. An odd thing, to stand a few feet behind an animal as big as yourself and breathing and put the barrel to its head.

'You can scatter 'em any time now,' the pilot told us.

My mother put the box in my lap. 'I'm sorry,' she yelled. 'I can't do this. You've been here before, at least.' She grabbed me by the neck. 'But if you don't want to, we can go back.'

She was leaning close into my ear and she was crying and her nose was dripping on me and this was so unlike her, so odd and new, her frailty, that I felt at first frightened but then only disembodied. My body was there, and my mother was reclaiming it, demanding it with her tears and snot and fists, but this was no longer affecting me. I was a vague shape in the hollow air somewhere behind and above this boy and his mother, all of us far above the ordinary world. I opened the box, noted the fragments not bleached white as I had imagined previously but dark grey, and small, and no ash at all, just bones, what had once been legs and arms and skull shrunken down to chunks like dog kibble. I leaned forward into the front seat, tilted the corner of the box into the pipe and let a few pieces tumble out. They rattled down the pipe and the whole business was over, the box closed again and under the seat now.

'Want to take a closer look?' the pilot yelled.

'Sure,' I yelled back.

So we descended in a long spiral over Big Bertha, the largest white pine in the county, over the reservoir where nettles along the bank had stung me time and time again, my hand dangling from the side of the pickup, where I had seen deer silhouetted against an evening sky, and the old loggers' camp where my cousin Gordon and I had seen a UFO once and sat back to back with shells in the chambers and our safeties off. My father whistling along the road between, show tunes, 'Summertime', and the smell of red dust and dove grass, the thousand insects and all their sounds, flickers and jays echoing. I felt light, happy, as if I were the wick of a lantern tuned down to a soft hum.

My mother was clutching at my arm. 'That's enough,' she yelled to the pilot.

'Okay,' he said. 'Back to the homestead.'

And the small frame vibrated every pin loose and we, too, could scatter, it seemed to me, but then the airstrip was below us and we were taxiing and my grandfather's cap hid his eyes in shadow so that from the plane's cabin I could see only his hard, whiskered jaw and then I became too solid again, knew the violence of real emotion, uncontainable, my father gone, my own self brought from the depths into the airy light, an ache spreading through my lungs, threatening annihilation, and I hated my mother for clinging to me like that, wanted only to escape everyone.

But as I walked dutifully beside my mother and was set upon by my grandmother, my aunt, a hand from my uncle, their words scattered unrecognized and insubstantial around me and, surprised by this, I saw that I had sunk deep into safety again and that I remained miraculously untouched. ◊

AN INTERRUPTION

## Writer v. Critic #2

### *Burroughs v. Morris*

DANIEL ODIER: Wright Morris called *Naked Lunch* a haemorrhage of the imagination. Would you take that as a compliment?

WILLIAM BURROUGHS: I frankly wouldn't know how to take it.

ODIER: I assume he meant a fatal haemorrhage.

BURROUGHS: Haemorrhages do not necessarily lead to death. I wouldn't take it really as a compliment. What do you think of there? You think of a cerebral haemorrhage, of someone with fuses blowing out in his brain. No, I don't take it as a compliment at all.

ODIER: Who is Wright Morris?

BURROUGHS: I have no idea, never heard of him.

# In the Arms of Morpheus

## *by Chloe Aridjis*

*Insomnia has a boomerang effect.*
*You can never fling your thoughts far enough.*
*Before night is over, they have returned to lodge more deeply.*

For as long as I can remember, my local health-food shop has shared a wall with Route 81, the Hell's Angels headquarters of East London. Two ideological strongholds, each proposing a means of survival in our corrosive urban world, and as far as I know a neighbourly relationship exists between the two, provided the organic shoppers respect the motorcycles on the sidewalk and don't stare too long at the bearded titans colonizing the benches outside.

While Route 81 offers a whole range of piercings and tattoos at painless prices, the health-food shop always has a stack of free leaflets on hand. Mostly these offer information about yoga classes and baby-care facilities, but occasionally there are others, catering to the more adventurous or unhinged.

At the shop one morning my attention was drawn to a shiny black brochure emblazoned with a full moon, at whose centre was written:

> TIRED OF WRESTLING WITH SLEEP?
> *Victorian Sleep Laboratory*
> *Free Consultation. Free Trial Night*
> *Guaranteed Results from Highly Trained Analysts*
> *Call or Drop by: 89 Hardware Street, NW3*
> *Telephone/Fax: 8878 2940*

I had no plans after work so I decided to visit the sleep laboratory that very evening. I'd always been wary of this kind of research, of letting others tread where you yourself tread so vaguely, but my insomnia had hit an all-time high and I'd lie awake at night when even the ghosts were snoring. Rules like 'No ticking or luminous clocks by the bed, especially those electric ones with loud digital numbers' followed me from home to home. The size of the bed mattered too – to sink into a vast black sea rather than a shallow, waveless pond where you could see straight to the bottom – and I'd recently traded in my futon for a large mattress. Yet no matter how comfortable the bed or how silent the place, my mind refused to rest.

Of course I'd tried sleeping pills, and couldn't deny their allure: one tablet and

the rest of your night would be purged. You could watch horror films, summon anxious thoughts, drink a double espresso; no matter what, sleep would ensue. And yet it was no silver bullet. You'd remain trapped in a grey zone, seesawing between mid and shallow slumber, mind and body switched off but not of their own accord. There was simply too much indecision: should they follow the commands of this foreign signal or trust their own intuition? Should they wait until night had fully set in or shut down early, ignoring the promptings of the circadian rhythm? Whenever I took a pill I'd feel like a timid guest lingering at the threshold, waiting for an invitation to enter, an invitation that always failed to arrive. Enough with thought guillotines. I would see what the people at the sleep clinic had to offer.

The lion's head knocker, coated with a thin layer of rust, groaned when I banged it. A man in blue overalls opened the door.

'Hello, I've come for a trial consultation,' I said.

He didn't answer, just held the door open wider and led me up to the office on the first floor, modestly furnished with one long window facing the street. To the left of the entrance hung a life-size poster of Charles Dickens astride a stool, a glazed expression on his face and a pendulum dangling from his right hand.

Nearly all the desks were occupied by what I could only imagine were sleep technicians. Some scribbled in notepads, others stared into space; most looked under thirty. A man with an unkempt beard and a tweed waistcoat rose from a desk at the back. Judging from his confident manner, it was he who ran the show.

'Hello, I'm Dr Sheire. What can I do for you?'

'I'd like a free consultation.'

'Do you suffer from insomnia?'

'Most nights, yes.'

'Well, you've come to the right place. Take a seat,' he said, motioning to a chair. I sat down, removed my sweater and draped it over my lap.

'So tell me, how long have you been in night's clutches?' He studied my sweater as if it might provide some insight into the problem.

'I don't remember. Maybe all my life.'

'Well, we should be able to help you. You can spend the night at our clinic for free, while we monitor your sleep rhythms. If things go well you can sign up for a month's trial at a discount rate. Now tell me, do you have a student credential?'

I shook my head.

'No matter. First I will ask you to fill out our questionnaire.' He opened a desk drawer and extracted a piece of yellow paper, which he passed to me.

'Now, pick a night. '

There seemed little point in waiting.

'How about tonight?'

Dr Sheire pulled at his beard. 'Well, there is another patient coming in, but I don't see why that should be a problem.'

At a desk nearby, a male assistant nodded in agreement.

'Tonight, then . . .' the doctor resumed. 'We recommend having a light supper. Nothing too heavy, it'll cause sleep disturbances.'

'Should I bring pajamas? '

'No, we have everything here… And we prefer patients to wear our robes. Just bring a toothbrush. By the way, how much caffeine have you had today?'

'One cup of tea in the morning,' I said, glossing over the other two lest he disqualify me.

'Perfect. That shouldn't be a problem.'

Just holding the questionnaire produced a sense of calm, as if the two-dimensional slip of yellow paper could sail me through the haziest of waters.

'If you don't mind my asking,' the doctor resumed, casting another glance at my sweater, 'do you take sleeping pills?'

'Sometimes.'

'That's what I thought. I've had many people come in here with either dulled minds or puffy faces, sometimes both.'

I raised a hand to my cheek.

'Don't worry, these things aren't permanent. But you should dispose of all your pills as soon as you get home.'

I nodded, pretending to comply. 'By the way, why is the clinic called the Victorian Sleep Laboratory? Do you use nineteenth-century techniques?'

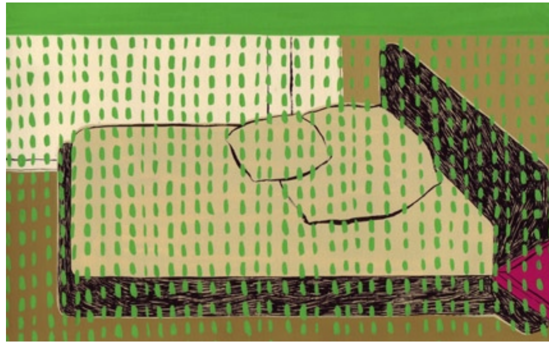
Laughter from the desks around me.

'No, no, on the contrary. Here we have the latest in sleep observation… We simply liked the name and since night was an important time for many Victorians – Dickens went on many night walks, you know – we thought we'd pay homage.'

Dr Sheire pulled out a pocketwatch and flipped it open. 'It's nearing seven. Why not come back at nine? With the questionnaire, of course.'

The form, filled out at my kitchen table, took half an hour to complete. The majority of questions came as no surprise: how long had I suffered from insomnia? What were the symptoms of my ailment? Was I of nervous disposition? Any traumatic experiences in the past? Exercise regime? How much tea or coffee per day? Cigarettes? How often did I have sex? Masturbate? Would I usually sleep alone or accompanied? And then, towards the end, a string of odder questions: did I sleep with the door to my room open or closed, and if open, how many centimetres? How many years had I owned my pillow? Any plants in the house I occasionally forgot to water?

BENEATH THE GLOW of the street lamps the clinic's façade looked old and worn, wearier than at dusk. A stab of anxiety. I considered turning back. After all, no one was forcing me to spend the night in a foreign bed at the mercy of strangers. Yet something propelled me onwards – the agony of my most recent sleepless nights,



not to mention my dwindling supply of sleeping pills – and before long I was once again banging the lion's head knocker. The same man in blue overalls opened the door and led me silently up to the office, where Dr Sheire awaited. The other desks had emptied and I wondered whether the sleep technicians had gone home to their families or been zipped into cocoons at the back.

Dr Sheire's eyes zigzagged across the page as he read my answers to the questionnaire. A female assistant appeared. Without looking up he said, 'Maria will now check your pulse and heartbeat.'

Maria, a stern young woman with blonde hair jerked back into a bun, led me down the corridor and into a room with two leather armchairs, a long mirror and a counter holding a few medical utensils.

'Take a seat.' She motioned to a chair and with grave silence took my pulse and listened to my heartbeat.

'Your pulse is normal; so is your heartbeat. You're a lucky girl.'

Dr Sheire strode in just as Maria was removing the stethoscope from around her neck.

'So,' he said, turning to me, 'would you like to see one of the machines that will be watching you tonight?'

The neighbouring room was crammed with boxes, steel cabinets and outlandish machines that seemed to vary greatly in age. Some looked like the latest models in sleep observation and others simply antediluvian, with wooden knobs and spokes that protruded a foot from the base.

Dr Sheire paused at a three-foot-long rectangular contraption and tugged at his beard. 'This is a polygraph, which records your brain waves. See these little pens on top? Well, once you begin sleeping they will scratch away, and then this paper here will roll out, illustrating the pattern of your brain waves. I know what you're thinking… how can such a clumsy piece of machinery pick up on the subtle movements of the brain? Well, it does!'

He pulled open the drawer of a steel cabinet filled to the brim with coiled metallic eels capped by white barnacles.

'And here are the wires and electrodes that connect you to our machine… with the help of a special gel.'

'Won't it be uncomfortable? '

'Not at all. You won't notice a thing, once the initial cold wears off.'

In the main room Maria stood holding a blue cotton robe. She passed it to me and then dropped her hand on her hip, awaiting further orders.

'Ah yes,' Dr Sheire continued, 'here is your gown for the night. It facilitates the electrode business. Maria will show you where to change.'

Marvelling at the immobility of the tight bun, I followed Maria down the corridor to the changing room, which was much like the first room but without the armchairs or mirror. I removed my shoes and hung my clothes on a peg on the door. The blue robe, soft and airy, was fitted with a thick belt.

On my way back to Dr Sheire I became aware of footsteps coming towards me from the other end of the corridor. Not the stern steps of Maria or the brisk, confident ones of Dr Sheire. These steps were hesitant and slightly overcast, and they announced a tall, slender young man with a pale, oval face and bags under his eyes like a Russian icon. As he walked towards me I glanced at him, then down at the floor, then back up at him as he drew nearer. He wore a grey sweater and black jeans, though I noticed a blue robe, similar to mine, tucked under his arm. He shot me a searching look as we passed, surprised, surely, that there was company. His footsteps faded into the floorboards as he entered the changing room.

'So, have you met our other patient?' Dr. Sheire asked when I returned.

'Not yet.'

'Well, it's his first time too so we'll wait until he's ready and run through the programme together.'

Wrapped in a pale blue robe that fell to just above his knees – he must have been a good six feet tall – my fellow patient appeared minutes later. His shins were white, almost translucent.

'Come meet our other insomniac. For reasons of confidentiality we won't say your names, but now you are acquainted.'

Our eyes met for a second, then quickly parted.

Oblivious of the bizarre atmosphere he was conjuring up, Dr Sheire clasped his hands and said, 'Let's run through the programme.'

Everyone was now seated, symptom bearers on one side, symptom reader on the other.

'First, you will spend an hour or so in the sleep preparation room, with its selection of journals and herbal tea. We suggest you avoid entering into conversation, however, since conversation before bed leads to a surplus of new thoughts… And once you're feeling sleepy, we lead you to your room.'

'Our *room*?' I asked.

'Well, yes, it is indeed one room. I'm sorry, but as you can see this is not a large enterprise. There'll be a curtain separating the beds, so you needn't worry.'

Sleep, I realized, would be an impossibility that night.

'… And once you're both lying calmly in your beds we will attach our friends the electrodes to your face, back and underarms. They may feel a little cold at first, but that's only the gel. The electrodes are then connected to the polygraph. You'll each have your own. And then lights out; as you are carried away in the arms of Morpheus my assistants and I will monitor your brain waves from next door.'

His words were met with silence.

'Oh, and I should mention the two small cameras on the ceiling that record external movement. Tossing and turning, sleepwalking, things like that. You will each have a bell by the bed in case anything is needed during the night. Any questions?'

Still processing the unsavoury information, I shook my head and out of the corner of my eye saw the other patient shaking his head too.

'Well, off you go!'

The man in overalls led us to the sleep preparation room, a dimly lit space with sofas and round tables. At the centre stood a coffee table with stacks of magazines, most of which seemed to be of a scientific nature – *The World of the Brain*, *Journal of Neuroscience*, *Scientific American*, *Neuron*, *Proceedings of the Royal Society*. I picked up the latest issue of *Scientific American*, the only familiar title, and took the sofa nearest the door. After selecting a magazine from the top of a pile, the young man chose a sofa at the opposite end of the room.

'Now, which tea would you like?' the sleep technician inquired. 'We have peppermint, chamomile, rosehip and verbena.'

I asked for peppermint. The other patient lifted his hand in a 'no thank you' gesture before shifting his gaze back to the magazine.

A few minutes later, my tea was brought in a yellow mug.

'We're next door if you need anything,' the sleep technician said. 'You should think about going to bed within the next hour.'

I looked at my watch. It was approaching ten. Time passed quickly in the clinic.

'Is that a watch?' the technician gasped.

'Yes. '

'Well, I'm afraid watches are absolutely forbidden here. Too often they're the enemies of sleep.' He held out a hand with bitten-down nails. 'If you don't mind, I'll put it in the other room with your clothes.'

I unbuckled my watch and entrusted it to the sleep technician, then returned to my issue of *Scientific American*. Apart from our quick exchange of glances in the corridor, the young man had yet to look in my direction.

Forty minutes later, or perhaps thirty, the man in overalls reappeared and summoned us to bed.

Not until I stood up and instinctively tightened the belt around my waist was I reminded of what I was wearing. I pulled at the hem and smoothed out the top to add some definition to my chest and shoulders but it was useless: a robe was a robe. At least I was not the only person wrapped in one.

OUR ROOM HAD a low ceiling and two beds, four feet apart, each flanked by a table with a glass of water and a bell. A heavy grey curtain, waiting to be drawn, hung bunched between the beds. The place was even more clinical and confining than I'd expected; nothing worthwhile, I was sure, would emerge from this.

'You're first,' Dr Sheire announced to the other patient, patting the bed on the left. 'And you,' he said, turning to me, 'we'll fix you up in a couple of minutes. Why don't you lie down meanwhile?'

I chanced a final peek, one last image to put by for the night, before the curtain was pulled. The other patient sat on the edge of the bed, legs crossed and hands in lap, his robe cracked open, revealing a hairless, porcelain chest. This time he was looking over, directly into my eyes. A sheet of grey sliced our room in two.

Only once the curtain was drawn did I notice the small surveillance camera peering down from the right-hand corner of the ceiling. Its eye was pointed in the direction of my bed and I imagined its twin watching from a parallel corner of the room. Minutes passed, more minutes.

Eventually Dr Sheire emerged from behind the curtain, followed by an assistant wheeling the table of wires and electrodes. They stationed themselves by my bed and the assistant began coating each electrode with gel before handing them, one by one, to the doctor, who then attached them to my forehead, chin, above each eye and behind each ear. I was asked to turn over so that more could be applied to my back. The electrodes were weightless but clammy, like the embrace of a small swamp reptile. Once everything was in place I was hooked up to the brain-wave machine, which another assistant wheeled in on its own little table.

'So, we're recording three things tonight,' Dr Sheire explained. 'First your REMs, then electrical activity in the brain and finally any muscle movement… If you need anything just ring the bell. Bon voyage.'

Once the doctor and his crew had left, I took a few sips of water. Just as I set my glass back down on the table, the room fell into total darkness, as if the contents of a giant inkwell had tipped over. I turned onto my side. An electrode dug into my temple. I turned onto my other side. Another electrode. As I searched

for a comfortable position I imagined Dr Sheire and his men crouched around the polygraph waiting for us to shut down. But what was going on beyond the curtain? Was he awake, was he asleep, was he touching himself? What was his name? Did he own a dog? How many people had he kissed? The bed was hard and unyielding and the pillow smelled of cheap detergent. And yet, somehow, after countless turns during which I cursed my three cups of morning tea, I fell asleep.

IT WAS HARD to gauge how early I woke up but judging from the stillness it must have been before eight. Without a window in the room it was impossible to tell. I glanced into the other section as I reached for my glass of water. The grey curtain was drawn, the bed empty. A coil of electrodes, still attached to wires, cascaded over the side.

The gadgets must have alerted Dr Sheire to my shift in consciousness. 'Good morning. How are we today?'

'Fine, I think.'

'Now tell me, how many hours do you think you slept last night, total?' His eyes radiated a manic light and I wondered whether he himself had slept.

'What time is it now?'

'Seven thirty-three.'

In bed by eleven, up past seven, minus the time it took to fall asleep.

'Around seven?'

'Actually, you slept for exactly five hours and thirty-eight minutes.' He searched my face for a reaction. 'You woke up nineteen times in the night. At one point you were awake for a whole five minutes. But I'm sure you don't remember. '

'No...'

'On most occasions you were awake so briefly our machine barely registered it, but if you string together all those fallow moments they add up to half an hour, which we must subtract from your night.'

'Was it at least deep sleep most of the time?'

'Well...' Dr Sheire unplucked two electrodes from my forehead. 'You spent quite a while in Stage 2. That's not deep sleep but it's real sleep, unlike Stage 1, that slippery state between sleeping and waking. Stage 2 takes you further. Then follow Stage 3 and Stage 4, the deepest sort. All movement is down, down, down... Now, please turn over.'

He lifted my robe and removed more electrodes from my back. Once they had all been unsuctioned, Dr Sheire's assistant wheeled away the table and machine. I was released.

The floor of the changing room felt like a thin sheet of ice and I dressed in a daze, my thoughts still far away, though I wasn't sure where.

'So, your sleeping patterns are rather interesting,' said Dr Sheire when I returned to the main room. He was sitting very straight, his back columned against the chair.

'Just out of curiosity,' I began, taking a seat across from him, 'what happened to the other patient?'

'Ah, the other patient. Every now and then we have a coward who reneges.'

'He left?'

'That's right. Now tell me, aren't you surprised that you only slept five hours and thirty-eight minutes?'

'Would you mind telling me the patient's name?'

'All our patients' names are confidential. As is every bit of your information too... I'm afraid I can't give out any details.'

'Not even a name?'

'Certainly not. Now, shall we return to the matter at hand?' he asked, tugging at his beard. If he tugged it one more time I would tug it for him.

'About the way I slept?'

'Tell me, do you remember anything from the night?'

'Not really.'

'Nothing at all?'

'No, not really.'

'Any physical sensations, for example? Feelings of discomfort, any twitching or tingling?'

At that moment a little brown moth flew past Dr Sheire's head. Without a second's deliberation he rolled up his stack of papers and began to swat at it, waving his right arm around as if wielding a sword, and he didn't stop until he'd thwacked the tiny creature and sent it tumbling. A smattering of moth dust escaped from its wings.

'... I might've had a dream.'

'A what?'

'A dream.'

'I see. But you know, of course, that dreams are nothing more than electrical discharges. So you shouldn't pay much attention to them.'

'But...'

'It's important for you to distance yourself, as soon as you wake, from your dreams. Don't let them linger. Contrary to many schools of thought, there's little porosity between conscious and unconscious states.'

'But I think...'

'It is the dreamer's narcissistic drive to believe that dreams are individual, tailored to all the little dramas in life. Well, the data I'm about to share with you will soon prove otherwise...'

'I think I'd like to go now,' I said, glancing down at the small winged corpse by Dr Sheire's notebook.

'What do you mean? We're just getting started.'

'I'm sorry, but I need to go home.'

'Don't be offended by our positivist approach. Trust me, you will sleep much better once you accept that night is no more than –' (I covered my ears) '– and that dreams are no more than –' (I covered my ears again).

I rose from my seat. 'I think I should go now.'

'You know, we don't give out free trials just like that... Incredible, two duds in one night,' Dr Sheire muttered as I walked to the door.

The city was still awakening as I buttoned my sweater and started my way home from Hardware Street. There was a chill in the air, encouraged by a mounting wind. The garbage truck had yet to make its rounds; large bags of rubbish cluttered the sidewalk. A man in a dark blue suit bounded down the steps from his house, two at a time, while fixing his tie. Another man appeared, tugged along by a powerful Great Dane. Two children walked past with bright lunchboxes. I reached the bus stop and pulled out a cigarette. It took three matches to light. The bus pulled up after I'd taken only a few drags, and I made a sign for the driver to move on. As I neared the end of my cigarette an incredible hunger took hold of me, a hunger I hadn't known in years, so I wandered around until I found the nearest café, a shabby Italian place whose façade was temporarily enhanced by the morning light, and ordered myself a full English breakfast with extra toast on the side. ◊

# His Profile

*by Daniel Kehlmann · translated by Anna Kelly*

A MAGAZINE wanted to publish a profile of Leo Richter: eight pages long, two big photos, maybe even with his picture on the cover. He said yes without hesitation, and immediately regretted it.

Leo was scared of a lot of things: of terrorist attacks, of big dogs, of drunks in the street and of missing flights. He was scared of injections, of the eleventh and thirteenth of every month, of poisoned food, motorway journeys, his mother and variety show performers who get people from the audience up on stage. He was scared of what happens to you after you die, of worldwide epidemics and of the literary critic Pavel Malzacher. And ever since Leo's first meeting with him, he had been scared of the profile that Guido Rabenwall would write.

As soon as he came into the cafe – over two metres tall, about seventy, and with a bushy grey beard – Leo knew that it was him, that it could only be him. And before he had even reached the table he was overcome by the worst attack of coughing that Leo had ever seen: still standing, he bent over, leaned a hand against the back of the chair, hunched himself over and coughed as though he would never stop; it sounded serious and medical, and was so loud that the conversations around him fell silent, heads turned and the waitress stood still, her eyebrows raised. Then he stopped coughing, sat down, gave his hand to Leo and said in a deep voice, 'Rabenwall!' It took Leo a couple of seconds to realize that he was introducing himself.

'I'd like the names of your friends. About ten or twelve will do. With an address, a telephone number and a short description of how you know each other and how close you are. And of course I'll have to talk to your wife, if you have one, but I think you probably do, don't you? You don't have any children, I know, or not any official ones anyway, but there's your family: parents, aunts, uncles, cousins – anything, anyone.' For a second Rabenwall stared into space, diagonally over Leo's head, his eyes half-closed. Then he barked, 'Schoolmates!'

'I'm sorry?'

'Classmates, old teachers! That's always fruitful. And you, Mr Richter, of course I will be asking you too, but I don't want to rush in there, because I know how busy you are. You have to work; you're a great artist, isn't that right?' He looked at Leo intently, his teeth slightly bared, and it wasn't clear whether he was making fun of him or not.

That evening Leo was so agitated that he couldn't even concentrate on the television. Schoolmates . . .! He thought of Hans Merfing, who had sat behind him and used to stick chewing gum to the back of his head on a regular basis, and of Lisa Martin, who he had tried to give money to in exchange for a kiss when he was thirteen, because Rolf, Erwin and Dieter had told him that you could do that with her – but of course it had been a joke and the whole class had laughed at him about it for months. He still couldn't think about it now without a hot rush of shame flooding back to him.

The phone rang and he picked up. On the other end of the line he heard a low crackling sound. It wasn't technical disturbance. It was someone coughing.

'It's half past ten!' cried Leo.

'But you weren't asleep,' wheezed Rabenwall. 'You never go to bed before twelve. Something's occurred to me. Nine years ago – '

'How do you know what time I go to bed?'

'Isn't it true?'

'How –'

'Nine years ago. The *Evening News* had paid you to write a travel report. You went to Greece, and you stayed in a good hotel, apparently. A beautiful island, clean water, everything top class.'

Leo was silent.

'But then no article appeared. And the editor . . .' Leo heard him shuffling through his papers. 'He doesn't work there any more but he remembers it well, and he says that you never delivered anything.'

'I had more important things to do! I was finishing a book.'

'Did you ever pay anything back? The hotel, the flights for two?'

'I'm sorry?'

'You didn't go on your own.'

'What?'

'The woman who was with you.' Rabenwall gave a brief cough. 'The newspaper paid for her too. Two flights, a double room.'

Leo was silent.

'You were working on your second book there, *Mr Mueller and Eternity*. You know, lots of people see it as your best book, and then there are some people who think it's your only good one. No offence, that's just the way it is.'

Leo cleared his throat. Perhaps Rabenwall's cough was infectious, or perhaps there was another reason, but his throat suddenly hurt.

'In any case, it's so different to the others that one can't help wondering what was going on there. Your wife got a divorce three months later. Unfortunately she's still refusing to speak to me, but . . .'

'It's late, can we –?'

' . . . at the time of the Greece trip she gave a talk at a medical congress in Cleveland, so it clearly wasn't her who went with you.'

'You have to understand,' said Leo hoarsely, 'that I can't talk about that. And that I don't want to. And that I won't! Good night.' He hung up, pulled the plug out of the wall and turned his mobile off too, just in case.

For a long time, he couldn't sleep. He saw himself sitting in the classroom again and felt once more the sticky pressure of the chewing gum that someone had stuck to his neck, but when he turned around it wasn't Hans Merfing that he saw, but Maria, who had gone with him to the island. She was smiling, and her hair was wet and tousled. How hot it had been there, how soaked through with light the air had been, and when they hadn't been lying in bed he had worked and worked and it had come more easily to him than ever before.

But however many times he had sworn that it could be like that for ever, she had answered repeatedly that she would never leave her husband, neither for him nor for anyone else, that no one could find out about them and that they could never

see each other again after the holiday. In the end they had met up twice more after that, on early afternoons in hotel rooms which were strikingly similar and in which, due to some futile quirk of fate, the exact same clock with a ticking pendulum hung on the wall, its purpose purely decorative. The second time, she had asked him out of the blue what would happen if she stayed with him. To this day he didn't know if she had just wanted to test him or whether she had meant it, but suddenly he had panicked and stuttered, and she had looked at him for a long time with a mixture of contempt and curiosity that he would never forget. After that she had stopped returning his calls.

The next evening Rabenwall called again. He didn't mention the island this time; instead it was all about Leo's parents and their divorce, about Leo's father, who was withering away in an old people's home. Once again Leo answered in monosyllables; once again he hung up before Rabenwall had asked his last question; once again he needed a strong sleeping pill before he could get any rest afterwards.

It went on like this for two days, five days, six days and then seven days, and little by little it became a habit. The telephone would ring around eleven, Rabenwall would cough and ask questions, Leo would mumble something, and then afterwards he would sit upright in bed and flick between the late-night programmes on various channels: quiz shows, old repeats, competitions in arcane sports and chaste soft porn. But why did he always pick up? It wasn't until their conversation on the eighth night, as one policeman shot another one on the screen, that it dawned on him that he was trying to convince this stranger of something: that his existence had a pattern, that his life wasn't a failure. Baffled, he let the receiver drop. Could it be that his apprehension didn't spring so much from the fear that Rabenwall might discover his secrets, but rather from the possibility that he might discover that he didn't have enough secrets in the first place?

'What about transformation in art?' he asked. 'Creating things. Isn't that what it all comes down to?'

'That old story,' said Rabenwall smoothly. 'Proust against Sainte-Beuve, your books the product of another self. Rubbish, Mr Richter.'

'But – '

'The books *are* you. The art *is* you. The basis of it. The rest is just pretty embellishment. Now, are you really not going to tell me anything about your divorce?'

The next day, Leo wrote a hasty email to the editor-in-chief of the magazine. He had no time to lose; in three hours' time he had to give a lecture at the local library. He'd had second thoughts, he wrote, and would prefer it if the profile wasn't written. He didn't have enough time, and throwing himself into the public eye didn't actually fit in with his concept of what an artist should be like. He wanted to live a solitary life and would not be available for further research. As Proust had so aptly phrased it, he wrote, his books were the product of another self, and please could the editor not challenge this, for it was final.

The editor's answer appeared just minutes later. He understood completely, he wrote, and such a decision commanded his respect. But his colleague Rabenwall had already put so much work into the project – for which a place in the next issue was already reserved and would be impossible to fill at such late notice – that it seemed most sensible now to finish it. There had already been so many conversations between the two that the essentials had most probably already been discussed. So he was looking forward to the profile, he wrote, and even more so given that it would be the last one for a long time and would therefore impress itself all the more intensely on the minds of the reading public.

Leo stared at the screen. He padded into the kitchen, turned the espresso machine on and went back into his study, clutching his coffee-cup with both hands as though someone was threatening to take it from him. A second email had arrived while he had been out of the room.

It was from Rabenwall. His boss, he wrote, had just told him that there would be no more conversations between the two of them, so he was attaching a list of open questions. Leo was to answer in the briefest words possible; the profile was almost finished and Rabenwall wouldn't have to encroach on his time any more.

Leo went over to the window and looked out for a little while. It was raining, which didn't help matters. As they burst, the raindrops seemed to form eyes and slanting faces. Leo sat down and opened the document. The list of questions was nine sides long and consisted of eighty-seven points.

1) How do you feel about death? Your own but also . . .

2) . . . the deaths of those you are close to?

3) Excuse the triteness of the question, but do you believe in God?

4) 'Omnia vulnerant ultima necat' is often written on old sundials: 'Each one wounds, the last kills.' The answer to the riddle is 'hour'. Is that how you see existence too?

5) Do you laugh a lot? Most people say 'yes' straight away, but normally it's a lie. Why would anyone laugh a lot! What about you?

. . .

Leo stood up, went back to the kitchen, poured himself a glass of vodka and slowly made his way back to his desk

. . .

8) Your mother. It seems to me that her marriage to your stepfather was over long before the divorce; at any rate, that's what my conversation with your father suggested. If you noticed arguments as a child, then we can't rule out the possibility that you felt responsible. Please comment.

9) And there must have been conflict there, if anywhere. No child has an untroubled relationship with their stepfather. They persist in imagining that their mother will get back together with their biological father. Your father . . .

10) . . . told me, however, that he had never read any of your books. Any comments?

. . .

15) Are you a good driver?

16) Any good at skiing?

17) Roller-skating? You strike me as being someone who never went roller-skating as a child. Right? Wrong?

. . .

23) Do you like trees?

24) I know that everyone wants to know why you have only ever written stories and never a novel. The question must be irritating for you. And I know your answers from interviews: the

aesthetic superiority of the short-story form, its economy and so on. Fair enough. But if somebody suspected that the real reason was just laziness and some sort of inner disarray, how would you respond?

30) Would you rather be clever or happy?

. . .

35) From your books I get the feeling that you feel uncomfortable describing the human body. You show a genuine tenderness to animals – to cats for instance, and to the hamster which appears in 'Mr Mueller' on pages 123, 156, 177 and 218. Do you agree? If yes, does that say something about you, or rather, does it say – and this is also possible – absolutely nothing?

36) The actress Katharina Messner, who had a relationship with you two years ago, describes you as absent-minded, hyper-nervous, and egocentric in every capacity. Any comments?

37) Ms Messner also remembers that you are disgusted by numerous things which are actually completely normal, among them (and this strikes me as being noteworthy) –

Leo pressed the 'power' button. The screen flashed, the computer turned off. He paced the room for a while. With his right hand, he stroked the fingers of his left, as though he wanted to count them. He opened the window and felt the rain blowing in his face. He looked at the time: he had to leave, they'd be waiting in the library already.

On the underground on the way to the library, he wondered who Rabenwall was going to speak to next, and what they would say about him. His methods had a basic flaw: no one spoke nicely about anyone else, absolutely no one on earth praised anyone else; when was the last time that he, Leo, had spoken well of anyone? It must have been months ago, and furthermore, he was at most only averagely nasty, and was almost a good person. At any rate, there were far worse people.

Someone tapped him on the shoulder and he turned round. Behind him stood a fat man with a stubbly beard who was looking at him intently. 'It's ringing!'

Leo looked around him.

'It's ringing,' repeated the fat man.

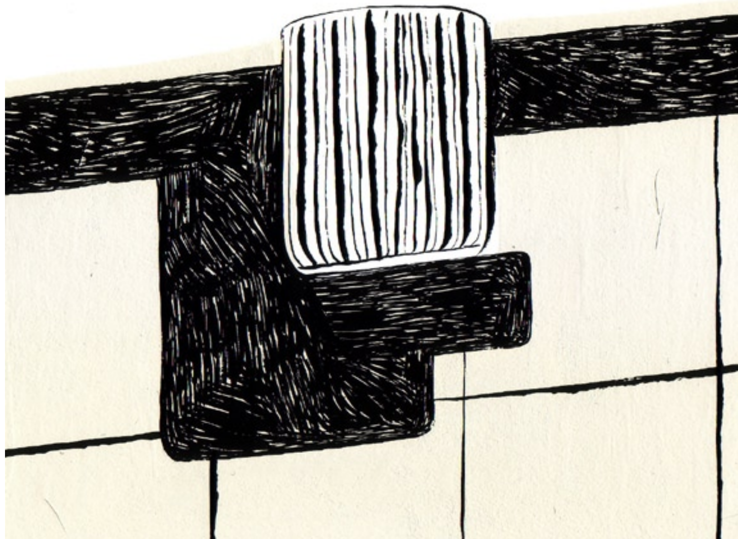
Why, wondered Leo, were there always so many drunks about, so many weirdos and aggressive people; why were they always on the underground, and why did they always, without fail, want something from him? He stood still and didn't say anything.

'Your phone,' said the fat man.

Leo nodded, hearing it now too, got it out of his bag and pushed the 'answer' button.

'You sound terrible', said Karin. She laughed. 'Have you got stage fright?'

'A little bit.' What a lovely voice she had. Karin was young and clever and had a distinctively fair kind of beauty. He had got to know her half a year ago at a seminar that he had held at the university – deep down he had only agreed to it because he had hoped to meet female students through it – and afterwards she had gone home with him without hesitation. Sometimes he thought that he might have a future with her. Why couldn't he just



have called her in the last week?

'Oh come on. This is the twenty-fourth time that you've given this talk, you must be able to do it off by heart by now!'

'How do you know that?' Leo hadn't been counting.

'Rabenwall said so.'

'He's . . . been to see you?'

'"Nihilism and Technology" – you've done it twenty-four times already. He's counted. He asked me when you're going to do something new. And I couldn't tell him. When are you going to do something new?'

'You spoke to him, without –'

'It's unbelievable how much he knows about you! I told him about how we met each other, when –'

'No reception!' shouted Leo. 'I'm on the train.'

'I can hear you fine. So I said to him –'

Leo turned off his phone.

An hour later, in front of the half-empty lecture room in the local library, he was finding it difficult to concentrate. He squinted into the audience, but his eyes wouldn't focus, and he kept having to interrupt himself because someone in the front row was coughing so loudly. He saw that people were fidgeting uncomfortably but it didn't bother him; he was used to it by now.

Afterwards he sat at a little table, as always, and the usual people came and asked for dedications, or asked if he worked in the morning or in the evening, where his ideas came from, why he'd never written a novel. Leo answered in as few words as possible, said something about the aesthetic superiority of the short-story form and the greater economy it allowed, but his tongue felt heavy and it seemed to him that he was standing behind himself and looking over his own shoulder.

'Can you write: "For my aunt Claudia"?' A man was holding out Mr Mueller and Eternity to him.

'Don't you mean your Aunt?'

The man nodded.

'Well then I can't write: "For my aunt Claudia"!'

'But she is my aunt! And she's called Claudia.'

Leo opened his mouth, then shut it again and wrote 'For my aunt Claudia' on the first page. Out of the corner of

his eye he could see Rabenwall leaning against the wall. Then there were only three people left in the queue, then two, and as always, the last one had a manuscript with him and launched into a tedious account of something that didn't make any sense. For about ten minutes Leo nodded, without listening, until the man finally let up and went on his way.

Rabenwall was still standing there. Leo jumped up and went over to him.

'Have you been drinking?' asked Rabenwall. 'It doesn't suit you at all. Do you drink often?'

'What am I doing wrong?' asked Leo.

Rabenwall raised an eyebrow.

'What is it that isn't right?' Leo heard himself asking. The room turned slowly around him; partly to steady himself, and partly to stop him from leaving, he reached for Rabenwall's upper arm. 'What can I do?'

Rabenwall's brows travelled further up into his forehead. He tried to draw back but Leo held him tight.

'I don't think that I have the right to –'

'But you know everything. You know more than anyone. What have I done wrong?' Rabenwall peered down at him. His eyebrows sunk to their normal level. 'Well, I couldn't say anything more than –'

'Mr Richter, thank you! That was wonderful!'

Leo let Rabenwall go. Next to him stood two women from the Library Association. One of them was holding out a bulging bouquet.

'Look,' said Rabenwall.

'What?' asked Leo. 'Why?'

'Exactly,' said Rabenwall with a thin smile, and moved back. Leo wanted to go after him, but the two women were blocking his path, and first of all he had to answer their questions about whether he intended to ever write something longer or whether he worked in the daytime or at night. They nodded, thanked him and let him withdraw, but Rabenwall was nowhere to be seen. The ground lurched and the flowers in Leo's hand smelt sickly sweet.

On the way home he thought about whether he could make it all into a story. After all, this was how he had always seen it: in order to cope with things, he created them. He leaned his head against the windowpane and stared into the darkness flying past it. At the other end of the carriage a fat man was standing and staring over at him. Leo was fairly sure that it was the same one as before; as though this was a film with a tiny budget, or as though his creator was already running out of ideas and enthusiasm. A story about what would happen if someone was writing a profile about someone else . . . But no, nonsense, he couldn't write about that; it was too close to him and didn't offer any opportunities for creative invention, and anyway, who would print something like that, who would want to read it?

At home, almost sober by now, he opened the list of questions once again. Towards the end, they became even stranger: it seemed that Rabenwall's curiosity had eventually homed in on Rabenwall himself, as though it had got stuck in a loop.

82) When we sat opposite each other in that café, why didn't you like the place?

83) Why have you carried on reading up to here?

84) Do you like me? If yes, why? If no, then why not?

85) Are you interested in me too? My life hasn't been that uninteresting, would it bother you, hypothetically speaking, if I told you about it?

86) Do you ever think that it might be possible that you yourself are just a substitute for something else, exactly like those substitutes that you are forced to create and then call art?

87) Does art always consist of this act of substitution, or is there another, more substantial sort?

Bewildered, Leo went to bed. There was a message from Karin on his answering machine but he didn't phone back, he was still too angry. How could she have spoken to Rabenwall without asking him first? Almost unconsciously, Leo stroked the back of his neck with his hand. But there was no chewing gum there. There would never be chewing gum there again. At least he'd achieved that.

When he was almost asleep a memory came to him, not more than a blur, and half a dream already. Then he woke up for a couple of seconds, and what had seemed to him just a moment before to be the resolution to all questions now seemed like a meaningless dreamy tangle. He sank back down again and a woman, her face hidden in the shadows, was holding out a book to him and saying 'Write "For Leo Richter"!' But even as he reached out obediently it seemed to him that everything now really was mirroring itself too much; writing was all very well, but it couldn't be about himself, and there could be no profiles about how he wrote, and absolutely no stories in which he created profiles about himself. For a long moment Leo felt close to the being which had created him and Rabenwall and many others for purposes which were unknown to them – and then once more, in the ebb and flow of sleep, and probably because of an engine roaring outside, he came back up to the surface again and didn't understand any more what he had just thought, and only knew that he had to call Karin back in the morning. Maybe he would manage not to make a mistake this time; maybe it would work out with her. And then an idea came to him that was so strong, so unusual, that there was no doubt that he could base a novel on it, but he was too tired to turn on the light and write it down, and it seemed so good to him that he would remember it the next day – and yet he already half knew that it never happened like that, and that ideas that come in semi-sleep are only for the moment, and the next morning are always gone. He heard himself muttering something, but he didn't understand it any more, for now his identity, blurry and indistinct even in the light of day, had dissolved. In darkness and sleep.

Leo Richter had finally ceased to exist. ◊

AN INTERRUPTION

## Writer v. Critic #3

### *Ford v. Hoffman*

In retaliation for Alice Hoffman's criticism of his novel *Independence Day*, Richard Ford shot a hole through her latest book and posted it to her. 'Well, my wife shot it first,' Ford told the *Guardian* in an interview in 2003. 'She took the book out into the back yard and shot it. But people make such a big deal out of it – shooting a book – it's not like I shot her.'

# Notes On A Love Story[1]

## *by Philip Langeskov*

In the evening – it was Friday – he picked her up in the car from the back entrance on Jermyn Street. The traffic was heavy and they moved slowly round St James's, cars edging forward, bumper to bumper. On Piccadilly, hotel porters ran this way and that, flagging down taxis, and pushing luggage trolleys along the pavement. It was October, just before the equinox, and the last rays of sun glowed on the curves of the buses idling alongside.

As Sam drove, Sarah, crouched down in the footwell, changed out of her uniform, her arms at unusual angles.

'I've got something to show you,' he said.

That morning, he had received his copy of the *Paris Review*. It was the first story he'd had published. When it arrived, he stood in the kitchen, at the breakfast counter, staring at the brown paper package. He must have read it five or six times, finding it hard to believe it was his. The font, the layout, the positioning, placed between two poems, one by Jorie Graham,[2] another by Paul Muldoon,[3] contrived to distance it from the story he had laboured over for months in the back bedroom. But there it was, his name, Sam Longwood, in sixteen-point Cambria. Just to be sure, he checked the contents page. *Sleeping Dogs,* by Sam Longwood, page 155. The editor had put a note in the package. We are pleased to have it. Plimpton.[4]

He handed the magazine to her as they drove down Whitechapel Road.

'My God,' she said. 'Is this it?'

She read it as they sat in a tailback near Gants Hill. He watched her as she read, his right hand resting on the steering wheel. She pored over every word, her hair slipping down from behind her ear. When she finished, she looked up. She edged across in her seat, put her arms around his neck and hung there. He could smell her perfume, the one he sniffed, quietly, in the bathroom when she was away on trips.

'I'm so proud of you.'

They arrived late, and had to park at the edge of the estuary,[5] in the dark, and wait for the tide to recede. Three hours in the cold and then, stone by stone, the causeway[6] emerged. The house,[7] an eccentric, rambling, wooden construction, rose like a lighthouse at the north-eastern tip of the island.[8]

'What shall we do? Eat, walk? Walk, eat?'

'Walk, then eat.'

It was nearly midnight when they set off, walking briskly by the light of the moon, inhaling the brackish air of the saltmarsh. The path led inland to the south-west and then hooked east towards the raised bank of an earthen sea wall. As they approached, across an open field, they heard the noise.

'What's that?' said Sarah.

'I don't know.'

'Come on. Run.'

She set off, the material of her padded coat swishing, her breath puffing out and trailing in the air behind her. By the time they reached the foot of the bank he had overhauled her. The noises – whatever they were – grew and grew. They climbed together, leaning into the slope, pulling themselves up with clumps of thick, brittle grass. At the top, they saw.

Geese. Thousands upon thousands of brent geese.[9] They floated, moving with the gentle ebb of the estuary, bobbing amid the moon, the stars, the clear sky, and the tracks of the Milky Way, which lay reflected silver-white on the black surface of the water. And the noise. Deafening. It rose into the air, turning and twisting. They had heard bird call before, many times, but this was different. These birds – like an army gathering on a hillside in the grey dawn before battle – were talking to each other, shouting and shrieking across the flats, their voices rebounding off the water and quivering in the reeds.

'My God,' she said. 'Look at them.'

And then.

'Look. Look up there.'

'Where?'

'There.'

He raised his arm and pointed. A thick blanket of cloud – like a wall, or a wave, or a mountain range – was being drawn across the sky. It raced towards them, the white wisps of its towering front edge swirling and roiling. It seemed close enough to touch. One by one, the stars were gathered in, the acres of clear sky, the moon.

He crouched down to get the camera out of his bag.

'No,' she said, lifting her hand. 'Just watch.'[10]

On it rolled, the bank of cloud, seeming to gather pace as it passed over the wrecked wooden hulk of a Thames barge,[11] its rotting mast listing to port. And then it was above them, engulfing the air; something monstrous, immense, unparalleled. A ripple broke the surface of the water and the geese – the thousands of geese – rose politely and then fell again, one after another. Sarah and Sam stood on the bank, their eyes turned skywards and their mouths open, like witnesses to a rare and ancient ceremony – an initiation rite, a sacrifice. For a moment, there was quiet – absolute silence – and it seemed as if something grand and important, a secret as old as the world itself, was being whispered to them. They clung to one another, dwarfed, as the clouds rolled on and on, away over the estuary and out to the open sea.

And then, a honk, then another and then another. The geese. Their shouts had resumed.

THE END.[12]

1 'All stories are love stories.' So begins Robert McLiam Wilson's 1996 novel, *Eureka Street*. It is a spare and haunting beginning but, if you tweak it a bit, if you strip the line down further, to its barest essentials – subject-verb-object – you will find a formulation that might be etched on a primary-school wall: stories love stories.

Around the time Wilson's novel was being published, another novelist and short-story writer, Neil Davidson, was recovering in hospital after a nervous breakdown brought on by difficulties he experienced in completing his third novel, *The Hallucination* (see below). Alex Clark, of the *Observer,* was interviewing him for an article on the consequences of creativity. The interview took place on a Saturday morning in August 1996. I was in the room.

The television, on a wall bracket, was

tuned to the third Test Match between England and Pakistan, taking place at the Oval. Having been asked a question, Neil would turn his attention to the unfolding action on the screen. For minutes at a time, he would appear to become lost in the movement of the white-flannelled players. Then, without taking his eyes off the game, Neil would lift his head, tilt it slightly to the left and respond. One question had been to do with the pressure to produce. This is how Neil replied:

'Writing a novel,' he said, 'is like a love affair. You can't look for one. You have to wait for it to happen.'

Shortly after noon, I left them to it and returned to my flat just off Borough High Street, where I settled down to my Saturday stint of three hours' writing. Against Neil's advice, I was working on something that I had actively sought out: a novel, inspired by Dostoevsky's *The Adolescent,* about two middle-class teenagers who commit a gruesome murder. I had reached that point when the suspicion that a certain project is flawed crystallizes into unarguable fact. By the end of the three hours I had resolved, finally, to abandon the venture. At the time, still an apprentice, I had to fit my writing around a full-time job. Consequently, not only was I beset by feelings of inadequacy at my inability to realize the fictional world I had set out to create, I was also angry with myself for wasting so many hours on something so obviously unmanageable. Orhan Pamuk, the Turkish Nobel Laureate, writes powerfully about the blackness that descends when a writer cannot write:

'Let me explain what I feel on a day when I've not written well, if I'm not lost in a book. First, the world changes before my eyes: it becomes unbearable, abominable . . . uring these dark moments, I feel as if there is no line between life and death.'

That is how I felt that afternoon, as if there was no line between life and death. I spent the remainder of the day in a daze, ironing shirts and preparing to go to a party being held that evening to celebrate the wedding anniversary of some old friends. I didn't want to go – the last thing I wanted was company – but I had been best man at the wedding. I had to go. I forced myself out of the door and, in an attempt to clear my head, walked over the bridge as far as Shoreditch High Street, where I caught the bus, the 277.

Sarah was standing in the garden, towards the back.

She came back to mine that evening. Neither of us expected that. It was nearly dawn by the time she fell asleep; I listened for the change in her breathing. When I was certain she was sleeping, I lifted her arm from my chest and crept to the back bedroom, switched on my computer and began to write.

The story had come to me, fully formed, earlier that evening as I stood under the trees. 'How It Will End.' I imagined it all, from its magical beginning at a party in North London to its shattering conclusion, the force of which would reverberate week after week, month after month, year after year. It was as if a space had opened up in front of me, a bubble that stretched from the present, to the future, and then back again. I wasn't even thinking about stories and yet there it was, complete. W.G. Sebald is good on how things can come to us when we least expect them: 'Every writer knows that sometimes the best ideas come to you while you are reading something else, say, about Bismarck, and then suddenly, somewhere between the lines, your head starts drifting, and you arrive at the ideas that you need.'

I knew that I had to get something down, even if just the frame, the shape. I wrote until ten and then slipped into bed and curled against the warmth of Sarah's back.

I didn't tell Sarah about the story. It would have been too hard to explain. What I did do, the next afternoon, was send a postcard to Neil in his hospital bed.

Neil, I wrote. I was interested to hear you say, yesterday, that a novel cannot be looked for. I agree with you, but last night, at that party, I met someone, and, in my giddiness, I'd like to turn your line around. A love affair is like writing a novel. You can't look for one. You have to wait for it to happen.

2 American poet, 1950–present. Attracted controversy when, in 1999, in her capacity as judge of the Contemporary Poetry Prize at the University of Georgia, she awarded first place to the South African poet Peter Sacks. Not only did Graham know Sacks, she would, in 2000, become his wife. The things we do for love.

3 Northern Irish poet, 1951–present. Winner of the Pulitzer Prize (2003, for *Moy Sand and Gravel*), and, in collaboration with fellow scholar and poet Nigel Smith, composer of some of the most literate love songs of recent years. (Muldoon and Smith are in a rock band, Rackett, and their songs can be downloaded from iTunes.)

4 George Plimpton, 1927–2003. American writer and fabled editor of the *Paris Review* – second only to William Maxwell (Fiction Editor, the *New Yorker,* 1936–75), in terms of his encouragement of young writers, especially those who practise the art of short fiction.

5 The Blackwater Estuary lies at the mouth of the River Blackwater, in the county of Essex in south-east England. It is among the most productive estuaries in the United Kingdom, providing a protected habitat to a wealth of seabirds, including the Ringed Plover (Charadrius hiaticula), the Black-tailed Godwit (Limosa limosa islandica) and the Common Shelduck (Tadorna tadorna). It is also home to the Colchester Native, one of the most sought after varieties of oyster in the world.

In the autumn of 2001, Sarah and I spent a week in Paris. I had been invited by Penelope Fletcher Le Masson – the Canadian owner of The Yellow Flower bookshop – to take part in a literary festival.

The bookshop, named after the William Carlos Williams poem, was at that time on Rue Clovis opposite the entrance to the Lycée Henri IV, the school from which Marthe collects the narrator of Radiguet's Le Diable au corps and takes him shopping for furniture; it is the moment in the novel at which we realize they will fall in love.

I read two stories that night. It was the first time Sarah had seen me read. She sat at the back. It is the best reading I have ever given.

Afterwards, we walked in a loop through the Marais, back across the Pont des Arts and into Saint-Germain-des-Prés. It was a Saturday night and the terraces of the haunted cafés were full. Penelope had booked us a table at Le Petit Zinc, a restaurant on Rue Saint-Benoît in the 6th, and one of the finest seafood restaurants in the city. On arrival we were greeted by a blackboard on which was written:

*Viennent d'arriver ! Huîtres indigènes de Colchester*

The restaurant was packed.

Incidentally, that week we stayed at the Hotel d'Angleterre on Rue Jacob. Formerly the British Embassy, it was where the Treaty of Paris, ending the American War of Independence, was signed in 1783. One hundred and thirty-eight years later a couple, newly married and very much in love, arrived from Oak Park, Chicago. The couple were the Hemingways, Ernest and Hadley. While in residence, in Room 11, Ernest wrote 'The End of Something', that cruel, cold story about the end of a love affair.

6 The causeway connects Northey Island (see below) to the mainland and is reputed to be the exact site of the Battle of Maldon, which took place on 10 August 991. A band of Viking raiders, under the leadership of the fearsome Anlaf, fought with an Anglo-Saxon force led by Earl Byrhtnoth. The day before the battle, Anlaf offered to withdraw in return for a payment of Danegeld. Byrhtnoth, a proud man, rejected the offer, spitting at Anlaf's feet. The next afternoon – the morning had been spent waiting for the tide to recede, just as Sarah and I had waited that evening – battle was joined on

the causeway. It was a bloody fight. Byrhtnoth was mortally wounded by a poisoned spear and although his men fought bravely they were eventually overrun.

After the battle it is said that Byrhtnoth's retainers carried his body home to his wife, Ælfflæd. The body was placed in the centre of the hall, and for seven days and seven nights his wife lay alongside him in mourning. She died soon after – we might imagine of a broken heart.

The battle was recorded in an epic poem composed sometime around 995. The only extant copy of the manuscript was lost in the nineteenth century; an eighteenth-century copy, the Elphinstone Transcription, resides at the British Library. One of the most celebrated lines from the poem is this, attributed to Byrhtwold the Aged: 'Heart must be braver, courage the bolder, mood the stouter, even as our strength grows less.'

7 The house was designed and built in the 1920s by Norman Hart (1872–1967). Hart, a distinguished British journalist, academic and diplomat, is the subject of Neil Davidson's unpublished *The Hallucination*. Now a mere footnote to history, Hart was a significant figure in world affairs for almost fifty years. He was the author of over forty books, most notably *The Grand Hallucination* (1910), in which he developed his controversial theory on power. The theory holds, was tremendously influential and the book, translated into over twenty-five languages, sold over 2 million copies.

Davidson's novel covers none of this, preferring instead another hallucination: the story of Hart's love for Ellen Hawthatch. Hawthatch was the daughter of Robert Settle Hawthatch III, proprietor of the *St Louis Globe-Democrat,* for whom Hart worked as a reporter from 1894–8. The couple fell deeply in love and, in 1897, Hart asked Ellen to marry him. She accepted. However, Hart, a man ascetic both in manner and countenance, broke the engagement in 1898, fearing his reserved nature would never allow the couple – and particularly the free-spirited Ellen – to be truly happy. Despite the entreaties of her father he refused to change his mind and fled back to Europe, to Paris, where he acted as correspondent for a number of American newspapers, covering, among other things, the progress of the Dreyfus case.

Hart threw himself into his work, but he could not banish Ellen from his mind. He wanted to renounce his decision, or for her to tell him that she could not live without him. In 1901 he returned to America with the intention of throwing himself on her mercy. On the boat from Southampton he met an acquaintance of her father; the summer before, Ellen had married someone else. Hart was shattered. On arrival in New York, he transferred his trunk to the next outbound steamer and returned to Europe.

Hart never forgot Ellen. He dedicated all his books to her and, upon his death sixty-six years later, his family were outraged to discover that she was named as the sole beneficiary of his will.

I told this story to Sarah on the night of our stay on Northey, in the house which is now owned by David and Sarah Ryan, direct descendants of the Hawthatches of St Louis. The house is still there, and can be rented for weekends or longer. It is the perfect spot for bird-watchers, for writers and for lovers.

8 Northey Island, located in the Blackwater Estuary. The night before the Battle of Maldon (see above), Anlaf's men camped on Northey. They ate a supper of Colchester Natives, dredged from the bed of the estuary using wooden grabs not unlike wide brooms.

9 Brent geese (Branta bernicla) can be divided into two separate strands: dark-bellied (Branta bernicla bernicla) and pale-bellied (Branta bernicla hrota). Pale-bellied brents breed mostly in Canada (especially the Queen Elizabeth Islands) and the south-western flank of Greenland, and spend the winter in the milder climate on the western coast of Ireland; dark-bellied brents breed in the Arctic tundra of Northern Russia and winter on the estuaries of south-east England. The Blackwater Estuary provides a winter residence to approximately 50 per cent of the global population of dark-bellied brents. They arrive in England from their Arctic breeding grounds from mid-October to early November, where they remain until the following spring. More like humans than swans, the notion of a single life partner – of enduring love – is an ideal rather than a constantly achieved reality for brent geese. However, – again, like humans – they tend to form strong family groups that stay together from one season to the next, flying in V-formation, mother and father to the vanguard.

10 Photography played a large part in our relationship. Sarah was the more accomplished, and I always deferred to her judgement on composition, aperture speed and other technical considerations.

Early in our relationship we spent a week in New York. We were in the first flush; everything we tried came off. The weather, for example, was perfect. We took a risk, travelling in late March. The week before our arrival – we both checked the weather forecast with something bordering on obsession – the eastern seaboard of the United States was in the grip of a cold snap: snow, ice, plummeting temperatures. We prepared to pack polo necks, winter coats, even face masks – we had heard about the winds that whipped down the avenues and cross streets. Then, perhaps even while we were in the air, spring broke. The snow melted, the ice disappeared and the thermometer soared. By the time we landed, it was mid-teens and shirt-sleeve order.

One morning – it was a Thursday – we went to a Diane Arbus retrospective at the Whitney. It was a wonderful show. As well as showing much of her work, the exhibition focused on her working method, how she would surround herself with collages of things that interested her: photographs, images, sketches, newspaper cuttings, menu cards, quotations. Some of the quotations were etched on the wall. This, from Plato's Euthyphro, was one: 'A thing is not seen because it is visible, but conversely, visible because it is seen.'

That afternoon, walking through Washington Square – we walked everywhere on that trip, traversing Manhattan from east to west, from north to south – I started taking pictures. She was wearing a red jacket, the collar turned up to her chin. The film was black and white – Sarah's idea, she had been taking some shots of the wires of the Brooklyn Bridge – and as I crouched, Sarah turned in the middle of the square. She looked over her shoulder, eyes like Sophia Loren.

'Hang on,' I said. 'Hold that pose.'

I had seen something.

Weeks later, when we picked up the photographs from Joe's Basement in Soho, we discovered that what I had seen had – as Plato said it would – become visible. It was love that I had seen; love in her eyes, in the smoothness of her skin and in the way her hair – the brown made black by the film – was caught, flung out, almost horizontal, as she turned to look at me. For years, that photograph hung on the wall in our bedroom, her eyes a seen and visible reminder that in each other we had found something rare, something precious.

11 The barge is The Mistley. She is still there, stranded, rotting away on the saltmarsh, her timbers turning to mud, fibre by fibre. Thames barge no. 91336, she was built in 1891 by the noted shipwrights John and Herbert Cann of Harwich. She was bought by Samuel Horatio Horlock, who employed her to carry wheat and other grain from his loading station at Mistley, Essex, to the East India docks on the Thames, from where the wheat was distributed and carried to all corners of the British Empire. No one can recall how she ran aground. Today, she is commemorated in the name of the Mistley Barge, a public house in Maldon. The proprietors of the pub, Professor David Marsh (University of Essex) and his wife, Amanda, met and fell in love while part of a team conducting a survey of the wreck in 1987.

12 It ended for us in 2003. It happened suddenly. I suppose I had always known that it would. For seven years we had been in love. Although we never married, we did once come close.

We were on holiday, a driving tour that had taken us from London, through France, and along the Côte d'Azur. We drove into Italy, on a road that sweeps, on stilts and in tunnels, through the foothills of the Ligurian Riviera. We were about an hour past Genoa when Sarah jabbed at a spot on the map, a town. We didn't recognize the name.

'Let's stop here,' she said.

Levanto. It nestled in a crook at the base of a series of mountains that rolled, like an after-wash from the Alps, down into the sea. There were olive groves, steeply terraced vineyards, and precarious churches clinging to the hillside. We stood by the water in the early evening. Children played in the shallows while grandmothers kept watch from the shore. I was on the point of getting down on my knees; the words had been worked out, and the ring, fashioned from the lid of a beer bottle, was tucked in my pocket. Then, an intervention. On the beach a man died, quite quietly, without fuss, lying on his towel. We watched the crowd gather, the ambulance, the Croce Rossa. By the time it was over, the beach cleared, the moment had passed.

In 2002 my first novel, *Old Tom,* was published. I dedicated it to Sarah. For Sarah. For Love. It didn't set the world on fire, but it did attract a handful of positive reviews. The following year my agent, Peter Strange, suggested that I enter the National Short Story Prize. This was a new prize, inaugurated to inject life into what was thought to be a moribund art form. The prize money was significant, £15,000. Despite the money, I told Peter I didn't have anything appropriate.

'Don't be a prat,' he said. 'You're hot shit at the moment. You'll have a chance.'

Still, I didn't have anything. Peter persisted.

'Go through your drawers. You'll have something. Tidy it up. Wing it over to me. If you can't find something, bang something new out. It's only 5,000 words.'

I sat in the back bedroom and thought hard. I remembered. I did have something. 'How It Will End.' I had almost forgotten about it. It was still there, in the bottom drawer under some folders of household correspondence. I still hadn't told Sarah about it. It was the only thing I had kept from her. I looked at it. It was dreadful. I couldn't send it. Then Peter phoned.

'Got anything? Deadline's end of the month. Come on. I'm relying on you.'

I went back to the story. It took two weeks of hard work. I convinced myself that it wasn't about us, about me and Sarah. Even so, I didn't tell her anything. I reasoned that it would never see the light of day. Either Peter would tell me it was awful, or the judges would toss it aside without anything more than a cursory look. I sent it over to Peter two days before the deadline.

'It's fucking brilliant,' he said on the 'phone. 'You're going to win this bastard, I can feel it.'

Weeks passed. I was like a criminal whose crime hasn't been discovered. Then, a letter. I had made the longlist of twelve, which would be cut down to a shortlist of five in due course. I had to go out to pick up some photographs that Sarah had taken the weekend before at Dunwich on the Suffolk coast. When I got back, Sarah was in the kitchen, the letter in her hand.

'This is brilliant news. Why didn't you tell me?'

I didn't say anything.

'I've put some champagne in the fridge. I thought we could have a little drink to celebrate.'

Her eyes were shining, so happy.

'I don't recognize the name of the story. "How It Will End." Have I seen it?'

I went out while she read it – I said I needed some cigarettes. In the story, as I imagined it that first night, I had seen our end in our beginning. I thought it was odd, even then, that I should see so much at the start; but then, is it so different from Beckett's image of birth astride a grave? Love, like life, only travels in one direction. The beginning is where the end starts. The end is in the beginning. On that score, at least, it was legitimate. When I first re-discovered it in the drawer, it was rough, quite general, and, at a push, I could probably deny that it was about us. But in the process of revision I added episodes, things that had actually happened. Blackwater. Levanto. Paris. It all went in.

I had always imagined the end coming because of something insignificant, something bizarre; something which would come out of nowhere, like that cloud formation that raced across the sky that night on Northey.

When I got back she was sitting at the table in the kitchen, her head in her hands, the story on the table in front of her.

'How could you?'

'I'm sorry.'

'Is this it?' She picked the story up and then let it fall. It slid off the table and on to the floor. 'Is that what I am? Is that all I've ever been? Fucking material? For your precious career?'

'Hang on,' I said. 'I'm doing this for us.'

'Don't you fucking dare.'

James Salter, the American novelist and short-story writer, has a story. It is called 'Give'. In it, with his customary elegance, his coolness and concision, he describes the life of a young couple who devise a system to help avoid stupid irritations in their married life. Salter calls it 'a way of getting the pebble out of the shoe'. It is the 'give' system. It works like this. If either partner has an unappealing habit, or tic, something small or insignificant that over time might develop in such a way as to irritate the other beyond proportion, the partner is allowed to ask for a 'give'. A give is a request to abandon. It is a way of calling a truce, of stepping back from the brink before something insignificant becomes unmanageable.

Had I known of the 'give' system, I would have asked for one then, when I saw that look in Sarah's face. Don't you fucking dare.

'Give,' I would have said. 'Please, please. Give.'

She left. It wasn't entirely because of the story. That just served to widen some cracks that had always been there, beneath the surface, real cracks hidden by unreal love. It happened five years ago, nearly six. Last summer, she married someone else.

In *A Lover's Discourse,* Roland Barthes proposes that falling in love involves telling ourselves stories about falling in love. We feel what stories have taught us to feel, and our feelings in love, as in most other things, are a construct of our culture. We write stories, but, at the same time, stories write us: they tell us what to do, what to think, what to feel. We fall in love; love falls in us. With that, we are back somewhere near the beginning. All stories are love stories. Stories love stories. Love loves love. Love stories love love stories.

Since Sarah left, I have published two further novels. I dedicated them both to her. For S. Still. I suppose I should stop, but I find that I don't want to. I find that I know how Norman Hart must have felt, that consuming blackness, as if there is no line between life and death. Still I hope that one day I will go to answer the door and she will be there on the step with a bag, that strand of hair slipping down from behind her ear.

'Give given,' she will say. 'Give given.'

I'm even writing a story about it. Right now. At the moment. In this instant. Unlike love, the story never ends. It never ends. It never ends. It never ends. It never ends. It never ends. It never ends. It never ends. It never ends. It never ends. It never ends. It never ends.

an introduction…

# …to B.S. Johnson

*by Jonathan Coe*

The work of B.S. Johnson (1933–73) has for too long been saddled with the deadly label 'experimental'. A notorious figure on the British literary landscape of the 1960s, he slipped into cultish obscurity soon afterwards, but is now enjoying a renaissance; and while it is true that he often took up militantly avant-garde and contrarian positions in his theoretical writings, one of the things that distinguishes his novels and shorter prose pieces is their lucid accessibility.

Johnson wrote seven novels in a productive lifetime cut short by suicide at the age of forty. They are famous for their formal gimmickry – holes cut through the pages to provide flashforwards to future events, unbound chapters presented in a box to represent the randomness of memory – but they are also passionately emotional, as well as providing a valuable record of the times in which they were written. Johnson borrowed devices (indeed a whole aesthetic) from the French *nouveau roman*, but at the same time he was a committed realist – a working-class product of the era which also brought us Alan Sillitoe, John Braine and others. He believed that the writer's paramount duty was to tell the truth, while recognizing that this truth would always be subjective, coloured by specific psychological and historical influences.

The fragment presented here, under the title 'What Did You Say the Name of this Place Was?', is quintessentially Johnsonian, and wears its subjectivity proudly on its sleeve. It arose from a suggestion by his then publisher, Philip Ziegler at Collins: 'I tried to get Bryan to do a sort of travelogue, a non-fiction book, to move around England and write his own experience of places. He did a piece about Bournemouth, but I couldn't see it working for us at all.' (Just such a travelogue was written, in fact, a few years later by Beryl Bainbridge, and published in 1984 as *English Journey: Or the Road to Milton Keynes*.) If Ziegler had been hoping for anything resembling a conventional travel book, then he had asked the wrong writer. Johnson's impressions of Bournemouth include many pertinent comments on architecture, of which he was a keen and knowledgeable amateur student. Equal emphasis, however, is given to two of his perennial obsessions: his horror of the ageing process (Bournemouth has a famously elderly population), and his sense of hurt and abandonment at the ending of a disastrous student love affair ten years earlier – betrayed, as he saw it, by the woman he had already excoriated in at least three of his novels: 'she whom I have called all those names, Jenny, Gwen, Wendy'.

On top of that, he finds time to include references to another of the defining experiences of his early life – his lengthy evacuation to the countryside during the Second World War, and consequent separation from his beloved parents. Johnson was never able to understand why his mother and father made him spend almost the entire war living with strangers, and the rawness with which he writes about them here ('That night I cried because they wouldn't let me sleep in their bed') suggests that this particular wound never fully healed.

'What Did You Say the Name of this Place Was?', in other words, despite its brevity, gives an almost perfect potted introduction to the Johnsonian universe. It is, like all of his work, maddening, pretentious, compelling and brilliant. Anyone sufficiently intrigued by it to seek out his novels will find that his bitter preoccupations are there played out at greater length, and they will have a profoundly affecting experience waiting for them. ◊

the fiction issue

# What Did You Say the Name of This Place Was?

*B.S. Johnson*

Bournemouth.

A mild morning in early May.

The sun shines, my scrupulous eyes need sunglasses, again, for I break them leaning back over the driving seat to the children, repeatedly.

Two old men running, slowly, a newsagency.

Unhelpfully one revolves the display, I choose, pay little but enough, wait on the change.

'They're worth it for the season,' he endorses my purchase, smiling gradually, directing me the long walk to the sea, the sea first. Outside the sun has gone in, again I am surprised by, disappointed at the triteness of it, life, if you like, that the cliché about buying sunglasses is made so immediately true for this instance.

The weather end of the pier, a theatre above and old men fishing a stage below. I have never seen anything caught from a pier:

> *except my father hooking out crab after small crab at Southend, stamping on them and kicking them back for taking bait not meant for them, the only time I ever remember him fishing . . .*

The tidy scrub and sandy cliffs slope back remarkably uniformly at about seventy degrees, ninety-degree cliffs of hotels stand above them, at one point a cable-car drops ninety feet or so, unseriously, a toy. A new church spire, spike, the only thing modern on the skyline, neither blends nor complements, is compromise, is nothing architecturally.

There is dark change in the west, a squall off the headland, I am pleased to know of rain at sea again, to be able to name it. I move towards shelter.

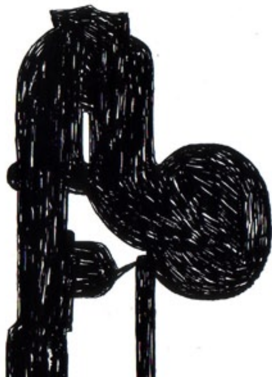
Old deckchairs newly varnished for the season, newly stretched with translucent plastic in striped traditional designs. Two old ladies sit down, impatiently tear open their printed horoscopes; both caw with laughter as the first (Aquarius too, I note) reads the as if handwritten headline THIS IS A HIGHLY PREGNANT YEAR FOR YOU.

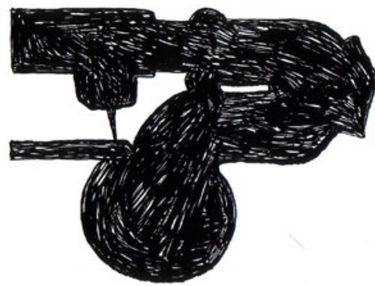
The tide here seems most of the time to qualify as in, neither retreats nor advances far, and does not expose mud but very fine sand, classically sand-golden, an excellent if unexciting beach for young children.

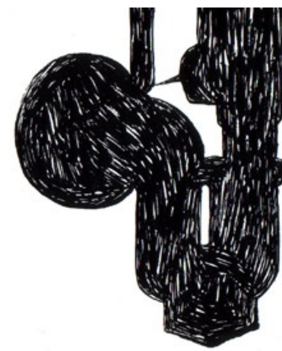
But there are very few children of any age to be seen here, suddenly I am aware that most of the people around are getting on, indeed have got on, are old, retired, retired to Bournemouth, for the mildness, the climate, the comfort, for reasons of their own.

Others chance the gentle descent towards the municipalized stream that gave the town its name, so small for such growth from it, now tidied between equidistant concrete banks and to a common depth, but mouthless, unmouthed: forty yards from the pier it shuffles through a grill into darkness, and there is no debouchement on the beach. No traveller would return from that bourne, either.

An intersection over the chine, a traffic island, the main traffic island of the town: up the sides of the valley the department stores mount and mount their signs in







competition, attracting business, is that the expression? Bournemouth shops are very good, sounds like a truism, where did I hear that? My mother-in-law?

SPECIAL DISPLAY OF
VERY FINE
HAND-KNOTTED PIECES
FROM PERSIA
AND SURROUNDING DISTRICTS

with green jade figurines and (how fashionably in negative) a blow-up of the Venus de Milo.

Jewellers for one form of their savings, to be sold if necessary, to put into something better, perhaps: in one window centrally a single solitaire for £1,750, in another viciously expensive ways of telling the time, but not how much longer, how little. And so many camera shops with displays of expensive equipment: much of it secondhand, used for how long in those fragile, unsteady hands? But I begin to impose, to see nothing but the aged in Bournemouth, perhaps quite wrongly, yet they are there, begin to dominate my thinking about the place, I only record what I see, what happens, how I feel.

There are health food stores offering for their *salubritas* (to name a few): rheum elixir, natural sedatives, formulae for kidney, bladder, heart, liver, gall; Lecithin (provides extra protection in middle and later years); royal *gelée*; super wheatgerm oil; pilewort and witch hazel suppositories; marshmallow and slippery elm ointment; kelp tablets; psoriasis ointment; toothpaste with azulene; lettuce-leaf cigarettes (no nicotine, a really good smoke); blood purifying tablets; bee cappings (for hayfever sufferers); concentrated artichoke bouillon (transfers fat into energy); Zimbabwe yoghurt (the only genuine goat's milk yoghurt); cocoa butter; high-protein high-potency multi-vitamin and mineral supplement; and honey, the sweet natural life-sustainer, in pound jars and seven-pound tins, garnered from heather, clover, acacia, lemon blossom, orange blossom, sunflower; and honey and anonymously floral, local, blended: no one cannot afford honey in Bournemouth.

More use, I would think, are the wine shops, many looking individual, hand-owned, hand-run, not combined from the outside though inside there may be branded products and factory stock: but if I had money and time some of these shops look the kind where I might find *fines bouteilles*, not rare, but uncommon, strange unfamiliar labels, genuine dust-encrusted, handled with casual love.

In the central area there are several covered shopping arcades, the best apparently

The public gardens that run north from the pier seem especially organized for the benefit of the old: being the floor of a small valley or chine, the local word, Wessex word, perhaps, chine, running greenly back, and dividing the town arbitrarily, parodying the countryside.

Here are a glassed-in bandstand of no particular period or style, a concrete mini-golf course of standardly unbizarre shapes, and sub-tropical sub-size subsidized palm-trees, no doubt a pride to the councillors, a source of surprise to some visitors, tatty, but undoubtedly palms, undoubtedly included in the *pulchritude* half of the town's motto.

In the evergreen walks on the first slopes many well-to-do old ladies, and gentlemen, too, though fewer, yes well-to-do is right, sitting on benches in pairs, together, or a yard apart, watching the pigeons mating, the semi-rare birds in the clapboard cages, one woman writing a postcard in careful blue ballpen, another reading a letter on blue Basildon Bond written in careful blue ballpen, communicating.

also the oldest, Regency or early Victorian, from the outside, bowed half-round either side of a fanlight-ended glass vault. But even this has been thirties-modernized, mucked about, only if you look up can you appreciate its composition, symmetry: at ground level it is nothing, just shopfront. And similarly inside, the semi-circular glass roof and fanlight are good, but the pillars of the porch are crudely 1930, Noël Coward and Gertrude Lawrence.

The premises of the provision merchants appear to have changed little since before the war, either war: curved brass nameplates, mahogany woodwork of the windows, marble slab working tops for sliced tongue and jellied veal, glass jars of chicken breasts in aspic, patum peperium, preserved ginger, all the rest of the traditional goodies.

Down the centre of the arcade are angled glass advertising cases, locked, mahogany and brass again, with hand-lettered posterpaint showcards for hairdressing and tinting, dancing, restaurants, the Bournemouth Casino (members only), two discotheques, theatre and cinema (mainly and surprisingly sex films: 'I came very near to being shocked' *D. Mirror* 'The love scenes are very frank' *Cinema*) even more (though unintentionally) titillating are pictures advertising the Foot Clinic and the Public Baths Department: Gen. Manager and Engineer James G. Hawksby.

And one showcard that trips some trap of unbidden memory, I had

> *thought I did not know Bournemouth, but I do not know what I know, nor when I shall know. In this case it is* Burley Manor for the friendly drink in the New Forest. *Was this the hotel that she whom I have called all those names, Jenny, Gwen, Wendy, worked at all those summers ago, for the vacation before we became lovers, when she was still more closely bound up with the epileptic boyfriend?*
>
> *She was I think a chambermaid there, was she was impressed with or remarked upon to me, later, and no doubt at the time to him, the stains on the sheets of one bed she changed there, five patches in the course of one night, the night of the highest count, a man and his secretary, was it, I was skeptical of five times, then, put forward the scatter principle to her as a working hypothesis. There it was she first read* Lear, *in a thunderstorm, romantically, she was not lodged at the hotel but with an old lady in a cottage of the New Forest, romantic again, would not at least one night let the epileptic come to her there, some form of emotional blackmail, he would not make anything permanent because of his deficiency, thought it would not be fair to her, who only wished for him to lean on her, become dependent upon her, or so I thought, I heard it all only at secondhand, and heard then only what she wished me to know, I was being blackmailed too, I never met him, unfortunately, it might have put things into some sort of perspective. Why was he there? Perhaps he arranged it, the vacation work, he was at Southampton. The woman who ran the hotel was some sort of good cook, she would be quoted whenever we argued about food, which was not often, as an absolute authority, scampi I remember featuring in one disagreement. She used to go for long walks on this vacation job, in the afternoons, when the chambers were made, I suppose, wrote a short story about it, or which came out of it, the experience, that is, about a girl (her) walking a long way across burnt heathland towards a hill with three pines on it, skeletal, I seem to remember but I might be wrong, the trees, that is, and they were stunted, naturally, burnt out even, I think, feel, three pines on a blasted heath! Too much* Lear *and* Journey of the Magi, *I said, probably, possibly, I didn't like the story, said so, yet ten years, twelve years later I still remember it, as everything about her, perhaps not everything, but these things come back, she had the power over me. I stare at the rooms in the photographs, wonder if this was a hotel, the Burley, in the New Forest: feel sure it is, or could be, the name too means something, ha, so I want it to be?*

The stoneclad but steelframed department stores, banks, insurance offices indicate that Bournemouth's most flourishing building period was during the nineteen-twenties and nineteen-thirties: buildings not particularly good of their time, but certainly of their time, unmistakably. Now this architecture seems to serve nostalgic purposes for the retired, recalling the period of the Savoy, old ladies in touch again with the pleasures (or perhaps what they saw from a distance as the pleasures) of their youths: it means something that they again have them, although once more at a distance, ironically at another remove.

But at least in Bournemouth the buildings are real, honest, indifferent quality though they may be: not like the London Hilton, whose interior décor seems to have been designed deliberately with this nostalgia for the past in mind, for the widows whose husbands died in making the fortunes they now spend in the surroundings they could not afford while they were young.

*The Dancing Years* at the Pavilion

Coachloads of old ladies and the occasional gent arriving from wherever in the car-park courtyard, which is graced by a modern fountain of the kind that gets the modern a bad name. The theatregoers must call it ugly and modern, synonymously: and they are right, too. It is almost as if it had been designed for the purpose of reinforcing their prejudices, as a sop; to confirm their opinions: if we put up something ugly at this time then it must be ugly and modern. As opposed to *pulchritude et salubritas*, which is what they had then, in the past, ha.

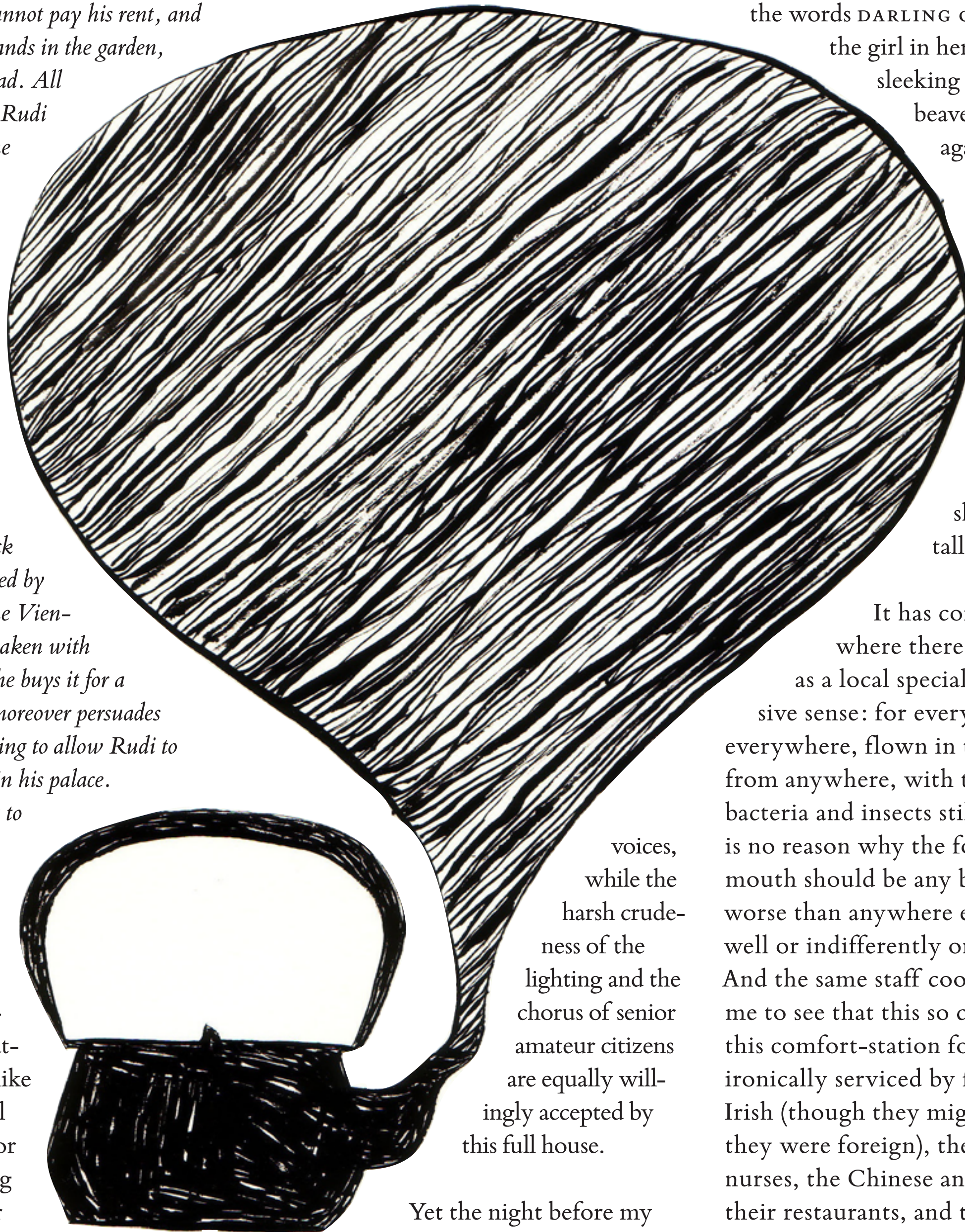
It consists of aluminum tubes of varying heights and diameters, this fountain, which variety in no case makes proportionate the tininess of the nozzle at the top of each; to these are strutted fibreglass bowls, orange in colour, which fill and spill, fill and overspill, pee weakly from a lip into a pool which is foam-covered, detergent-like.

The ladies stand for the queen: the one in front of me has a cardigan torn near the trapezius, perhaps they are not all well-to-do, perhaps they are just ordinary, perhaps these are also homes for the less-well-off. The more-or-less-off one next to me, here with her daughter, perhaps,

who looks much the same (hairstyle, twin-set, the eyes, the manner) hums the familiar themes of the overture; then the orchestra descends on its hydraulic palms, the lights dim on the grey and tinted heads, the scene number blinks to red one on the proscenium arch, and the curtain goes up to reveal the *lederhosen*-and-football-socks never-never land of the romantic German past. *Rudi Kleber is a young composer living at an inn just outside Vienna in 1911. He is poor – so poor in fact that he is being thrown out because he cannot pay his rent, and his piano, which now stands in the garden, has been sold over his head. All this has happened while Rudi was picking flowers in the early hours of the morning with Grete, the fifteen-year-old girl whose aunt owns the inn. When a party of officers and actresses come out from Vienna to have breakfast in the garden, Rudi offers to play waltzes for them in the hope of raising money to buy back his piano. They are joined by Maria Ziegler, star of the Viennese operetta, who is so taken with one of the waltzes that she buys it for a thousand Kronen, and moreover persuades her lover Prince Metterling to allow Rudi to occupy an empty studio in his palace. Little Grete is being sent to England to school . . .*

There is theatre at its most primitive, basic – in the uncomplicated, unsophisticated sense, unreal, not like life in any meaningful way. Here they are, for instance, sympathising with and sighing over the poor starving artist, but what have they ever done to support any artist? Do they even know the difference between an artist and an artiste?

Yet their attention is rapt at this illusion, they enter this world just as children used to at a pantomime, this new novel Novello world where it is shocking for a woman to be seen smoking in public, affectionate jokes are possible about England's weather and comfortably idiosyncratic people, where the fold-worn scenery and scraped furniture are not allowed to be distinguishable from what they stand for (and in certain ways they will stand for anything). The unsteady, jockstrapped ballet can only be there for some curiously remote form of stimulation, the fat women tolerated only for their doubtful



voices, while the harsh crudeness of the lighting and the chorus of senior amateur citizens are equally willingly accepted by this full house.

Yet the night before my father went overseas, in the army, during *the war, they took me to see a Novello musical, I remember bits of it, set in a large country house, some kind of shooting, flintlocks, two kinds of parting, there were Novello and two women, one I liked, one I didn't, no doubt as I was supposed to,* We'll Gather Lilacs *was one of the tunes, don't remember others, or the titles, and that night I cried because they wouldn't let me sleep in their bed, and on the last night before my dad was to go away, perhaps to get killed, they wouldn't let me sleep in their bed with them . . .*

'I never have been able to come out with the words DARLING or DADDY,' says the girl in her early twenties, sleeking up her fur-necked beaver lamb coat yet again against the draught in this hotel's Italian restaurant, very much enjoying the control a woman of her age has in situations with a fifty-year-old man than whom she is in any case taller.

It has come to the point where there is no such thing as a local speciality in the exclusive sense: for everything is available everywhere, flown in that morning from anywhere, with the dew and the bacteria and insects still on it. There is no reason why the food in Bournemouth should be any better or any worse than anywhere else, it is merely well or indifferently or badly cooked. And the same staff cook it: which leads me to see that this so conservative town, this comfort-station for the elderly, is ironically serviced by foreigners: the Irish (though they might argue whether they were foreign), the West Indian nurses, the Chinese and Indians with their restaurants, and the hotel restaurants run by Spaniards, Portuguese, Italians.

I grow tired, my mind coasts.

I retire, move towards sleep, am only tired, not retired, very pleased to have work in me yet. ◊

AN INTERRUPTION

# Writer vs Critic #4

*Philip Roth*

DOCUMENT DATED JULY 27, 1969

The two-thousand-word document that follows is an example of a flourishing subliterary genre with a long and moving history, yet one that is all but unknown to the general public. It is a letter written by a novelist to a critic, but never mailed. I am the novelist, Diana Trilling is the critic, and it was not mailed for the reasons such letters rarely are mailed, or written, for that matter, other than in the novelist's skull:

1. Writing (or imagining writing) the letter is sufficiently cathartic: by 4 or 5 A.M. the dispute has usually been settled to the novelist's satisfaction and he can turn over and get a few hours' sleep.

2. It is unlikely that the critic is about to have his reading corrected by the novelist anyway.

3. One does not wish to appear piqued in the least – let alone to be seething – neither to the critic nor to the public that follows these duels when they are conducted out in the open for all to see.

4. Where is it engraved in stone that a novelist shall feel himself to be "understood" any better than anyone else does?

5. The advice of friends and loved ones: "For God's sake, forget it."

So novelists – for all that they are by nature usually an obsessive and responsive lot – generally do forget it, or continually remind themselves that they ought to be forgetting it during the sieges of remembering. And, given the conventions that make a person feel like something of an ass if he does "stoop" to rebutting his critics, in the long run it may even be in the writer's interest that he does forget it and goes on with his work. It is another matter as to whether it is in the interest of the literary culture that these inhibiting conventions have as much hold on us as they do, and that as a result the reviewer, critic, or book journalist generally finds himself in the comfortable position of a prosecution witness who, having given his testimony, need not face cross-examination by the defense.

July 27, 1969
Dear Mrs. Trilling:
I have just finished reading your essay-review in the August *Harper's*, in which you compare the novel *Portnoy's Complaint* to the book under review, J. R. Ackerley's *My Father and Myself*. If I may, I'd like to distinguish for you between myself and "Mr. Roth," the character in your review who is identified as the "author of *Portnoy's Complaint*."

On the basis of your reading of his novel, you contend that "Mr. Roth" has a "position [he is] fortifying"; he is in this novel "telling us" things "by extension" about social determinism; he is, on the evidence of the novel, a "child of an indiscriminative mass society" as well as "representative... of post-Freudian American literary culture"; his "view of life" in the novel – as opposed to Ackerley's in his memoir – does not "propose... the virtues of courage, kindliness, responsibility"; and his "view of life [is] grimly deterministic."

Didactic, defiant, harsh, aggressively *against*, your "Mr. Roth" is a not uncommon sort of contemporary writer, and in view of the structure of your review, a perfect *ficelle*, aiding us in attaining a clearer vision of the issue you are dramatizing. Useful, however, as he may be as a rhetorical device, and clearly recognizable as a type, he is of course as much your invention as the Portnoys are mine. True, both "Mr. Roth" and I are Jews, but strong an identifying mark as that is, it is not enough, you will concede, to make us seem one and the same *writer*, especially as there is a pertinent dissimilarity to consider: the sum of our work, the accumulation of fictions from which the "positions" and "views" we hold might, with caution, be extrapolated.

Your "Mr. Roth" is a "young man from whom we can expect other books." As I understand you, he has written none previous to the one you discuss, a book whose "showy" literary manner wherein he "achieves his effects by the broadest possible strokes" – is accounted for, if not dictated by, the fact that he is a "child of an indiscriminative mass society." You describe him as an "accomplished... craftsman," but so far, it would seem, strictly within the confines of his showy style.

Unlike "Mr. Roth," I have over the past thirteen years published some dozen short stories, a novella, and three novels. one of the novels, published two years before "Mr. Roth's" book, is as removed as a book could be from the spirit of *Portnoy's Complaint*. If anything proves that I am not the "Mr. Roth" of your review, it is this novel, *When She Was Good*, for where "Mr. Roth's" manner in his book is "showy," mine here is deliberately ordinary and unobtrusive; where his work is "funny" – you speak of "fiercely funny self-revelation" – mine is proper and poker-faced; and where you find "Mr. Roth" on the basis of his book "representative... of post-Freudian American literary culture," another critic of some prestige found me, on the basis of *When She Was Good*, to be hopelessly "retrograde."

Admittedly, an alert reader familiar with both books might find in them a similar preoccupation with the warfare between parents and children. Reading your review, I was struck in fact by the following sentence – it almost seemed that you were about to compare *Portnoy's Complaint*, not with J.R. Ackerley's memoir, but with my own *When She Was Good*: "It turns out, however, that strangely different enterprises can proceed from the same premise. Portnoy, full of complaint because of his sexual fate, is bent on tracking down the source of his grievances..." Well, so too with my heroine, Lucy Nelson (if "sexual" is allowed its fullest meaning). Wholly antithetic in cultural and moral orientation, she is, in her imprisoning passion and in the role she assumes of the enraged offspring, very much his soul mate. I have even thought that, at some level of consciousness, "Mr.

Roth's" book might have developed as a complementary volume to my own. Though not necessarily "typical," Alexander Portnoy and Lucy Nelson seem to me, in their extreme resentment and disappointment, like the legendary unhappy children out of two familiar American family myths. In one book it is the Jewish son railing against the seductive mother, in the other the Gentile daughter railing against the alcoholic father (equally loved, hated, and feared – the most unforgettable character *she* ever met). Of course, Lucy Nelson is seen to destroy herself within an entirely different fictional matrix, but that would result, among other reasons, from the enormous difference between the two environments that inspire their rage as well as their shared sense of loss and nostalgia.

I would also like to point out that the "virtues of courage, kindliness, responsibility" that "Mr. Roth" does not seem to you to "propose" in his book, are, in my own, proposed *as a way of life* in the opening pages of the novel and continue to haunt the book thereafter (or so I intended). Here is the sentence with which the book begins – it introduces the character of Willard Carroll, the grandfather in whose home the angry heroine is raised: "Not to be rich, not to be famous, not to be mighty, not even to be happy, but to be civilized – that was the dream of his life." The chapter proceeds then to enlarge Willard's idea of "civilization," revealing through a brief family history how he has been able to practice the virtues of courage, kindliness, and responsibility, as he understands them. Only after Willard's way has been sufficiently explored does the focus of the novel turn in stages toward Lucy, and to her zeal for what *she* takes to be a civilized life, what she understands courage to be and responsibility to mean, and the place she assigns to kindliness in combat.

Now I won't claim that I am the one proposing those virtues here, since Daddy Will – as his family calls him – does not speak or stand for me in the novel any more than his granddaughter Lucy does. On this issue it may be that I am not so far from "Mr. Roth" after all, and that in my novel (as perhaps in his) virtues and values are "proposed" as they generally are in fiction – neither apart from the novel's predominant concern nor in perfect balance with it, but largely through the manner of presentation: through what might be called the *sensuous* aspects of fiction – tone, mood, voice, and, among other things, the juxtaposition of the narrative events themselves.

"Grimly deterministic" I am not. There again "Mr. Roth" and I part company. You might even say that the business of *choosing* is the primary occupation of any number of my characters. I am thinking of souls even so mildly troubled as Neil Klugman and Brenda Patimkin, the protagonists of the novella *Goodbye, Columbus*, which I wrote some ten years before "Mr. Roth" appeared out of nowhere with his grimly deterministic view of life. I am thinking too of the entire anguished cast of characters in my first novel, *Letting Go*, written seven years before "Mr. Roth's," where virtually a choice about his life has to be made by some character or other on every page – and there are 630 pages. Then there are the central characters in the stories published along with *Goodbye, Columbus*, "Defender of the Faith," "The Conversion of the Jews," "Epstein," "Eli, the Fanatic," and "You Can't Tell a Man by the Song He Sings," each of whom is seen making a conscious, deliberate, even willful choice beyond the boundary lines of his life, and just so as to give expression to what in his spirit will not be grimly determined, by others, or even by what he had himself taken to be his own nature.

It was no accident that led me to settle upon Daddy Will as the name for Lucy's modest but morally scrupulous and gently tenacious grandfather; nor was it accidental (or necessarily admirable – that isn't the point) that I came up with Liberty Center as the name for the town in which Lucy Nelson rejects every emancipating option in favor of a choice that only further subjugates her to her grievance and her rage. The issue of authority over one's life is very much at the center of this novel, as it has been in my other fiction. Though it goes without saying that the names a novelist assigns to people and places are generally no more than decoration, and do practically nothing of a book's real work, they at least signaled to me, during the writing, some broader implications to Lucy's dilemma. That a passion for freedom – chiefly from the bondage of a heartbreaking past – plunges Lucy Nelson into a bondage more gruesome and ultimately insupportable is the pathetic and ugly irony on which the novel turns. I wonder if that might not also describe what befalls the protagonist of *Portnoy's Complaint*. Now saying this may make me seem to you as "grimly deterministic" a writer as "Mr. Roth," whereas I suggest that to imagine a story that revolves upon the ironies of the struggle for personal freedom, grim as they may be – ridiculous as they may also be – is to do something more interesting, more novelistic, than what you call "fortifying a position."

As for "literary manner," I have, as I indicated, a track record more extensive than your "Mr. Roth's." The longer works particularly have been dramatically different in the kinds of "strokes" by which the author "achieves his effects" –

so that a categorical statement having to do with *my* position or view might not account in full for the varieties of fiction I've written.

I am not arguing that my fiction is superior to "Mr. Roth's" work for this reason – only that they are works of an entirely different significance from those of such an ideological writer (whose book you describe as the "latest offensive in our escalating literary-political war upon society"). Obviously I am not looking to be acquitted, as a person, of having some sort of view of things, nor would I hold that my fiction aspires to be a slice of life and nothing more. I am saying only that, as with any novelist, the presentation and the "position" are inseparable, and I don't think a reader would be doing me (or even himself) justice if, for tendentious or polemical purposes, he were to divide the one into two, as you do with "Mr. Roth."

It seems to me that "Mr. Roth" might be "showy," as you call it, for a reason. His use of the "broadest possible strokes to achieve his effects" might even suggest something more basic to a successful reading of the book than that he is, as you swiftly theorize, a "child of an indiscriminative mass society." What sort of child? I wonder. And what multitudes of experience are encompassed within that dismissive phrase, "an indiscriminative mass society"? You almost seem there to be falling into a position as deterministic about literary invention as the one you believe "Mr. Roth" promulgates about human possibility. You describe the book as "farce with a thesis": yet, when you summarize in a few sentences the philosophical and social theses of the novel ("Mr. Roth's [book] blames society for the fate we suffer as human individuals and, legitimately or not, invokes Freud on the side of his own grimly deterministic view of life…"), not only is much of the book's material pushed over the edge of a cliff to arrive at this conclusion, but there is no indication that the reader's experience of a farce (if that is what you think it is) might work against the grain of the dreary meaning you assign the book – no indication that the farce might itself be the thesis, if not what you call the "pedagogic point."

Accounting for the wide audience that "Mr. Roth's" book has reached, you say that the "popular success of a work often depends as much on its latent as on its overt content." And as often not – but even if I am not as thoroughgoing a Freudian in such matters as you appear to be, I do agree generally. A similar explanation has even greater bearing, as I see it, upon the *authentic* power of a literary work, if "latent content" is taken to apply to something more than what is simply not expressed in so many words. I am thinking again of the presentation of the content, the broad strokes, the air of showiness, the fiercely funny self-revelation, and all that such means might be assumed to communicate about the levels of despair, self-consciousness, skepticism, vigor, and high spirits at which a work has been conceived.

You state at one conclusive point in your review, "Perhaps the unconscious… is… more hidden from us than the author of *Portnoy's Complaint* realizes." May I suggest that perhaps "Mr. Roth's" view of life is more hidden from certain readers in his wide audience than they imagine, more imbedded in parody, burlesque, slapstick, ridicule, insult, invective, lampoon, wisecrack, in nonsense, in levity, in *play* – in, that is, the methods and devices of Comedy, than their own view of life may enable them to realize.

Sincerely,
Philip Roth

POEM

# ‘There’s Birds in My Story’

*Leontia Flynn*

On the orange and brown linoleum lining the playroom
my infant self is playing with (that’s right) dolls.
A wave of salt tenderness picks up my mum where she stands
carries her off with a lurch to some far, giddy shore
then sets her back on her feet when I ask *can she whistle*.

Since my mother fell down the invisible rabbit hole
(through the isolation, hysterics and old wives tales)
into stay-at-home motherhood, things have been pretty weird.
She regards for a beat her fat second youngest child,
then purses her lips: Whee-whee Whee-whee Whee-whee

Whee -whee, Whee -whee, Whee -whee, Whee-whee Whee-whee.
The terms in the job description clearly state
that when a small child requests whistling, you oblige.
And my epic response when she stops to enquire just why?
*‘Keep whistling mummy, there’s birds in my story.’*

Since my mother stepped through the invisible looking glass
into full-time mum-dom, each day some current frets
at her former self – but yes! she thinks, there are birds!
wheeling inland, all whoops and bright hungry eyes
in the noon light, over the estuary, flying lighter than sparks.

how to write a letter

# Rainer Maria Rilke to Kappus

Furuborg, Jonsered, Sweden
4 November 1904

My dear Kappus,

During this time that has passed without a letter I was partly travelling and partly too busy to be able to write. And even today writing is not going to be easy because I have had to write a good number of letters already and my hand is tired. If I had someone to dictate to I'd have plenty to say, but as it is you'll have to make do with just a few words in return for your long letter.

I think of you often, dear Kappus, and with such a concentration of good wishes that really in some way it ought to help. Whether my letters can really be a help to you, well, I have my doubts. Do not say: Yes, they are. Just let them sink in quietly and without any particular sense of gratitude, and let's wait and see what will come of it.

There's not perhaps much purpose in my dealing with the detail of what you wrote, for what I might be able to say about your tendency towards self-doubt or your inability to reconcile your inner and outer life, or about anything else that assails you – it all comes down to what I have said before: the same desire that you might find enough patience in you to endure, and simplicity enough to have faith; that you might gain more and more trust in what is hard and in your own loneliness among other people. And otherwise let life take its course. Believe me: life is right, whatever happens.

And as to feelings: all feelings are pure that focus you and raise you up. An impure feeling is one that only comprises *one* side of your nature and so distorts you. Any thoughts that match up to your childhood are good. Everything that makes *more* of you than you have hitherto been in your best moments is right. Every heightening is good if it occurs in the quick of your bloodstream, if it is not an intoxication, not a troubling but a joy one can see right to the bottom of. Do you understand what I mean?

And your doubts can be a good quality if you *school* them. They must grow to be *knowledgeable*, they must learn to be critical. As soon as they begin to spoil something for you ask them *why* something is ugly, demand hard evidence, test them, and you will perhaps find them at a loss and short of an answer, or perhaps mutinous. But do not give in, request arguments, and act with this kind of attentiveness and consistency every single time, and the day will come when instead of being demolishers they will be among your best workers – perhaps the canniest of all those at work on the building of your life.

That is all, dear Kappus, that I can say to you for today. But I'm also sending you the off-print of a little work that has just appeared in the Prague journal *Deutsche Arbeit*. There I continue to speak to you of life and of death and of the greatness and splendour of both.

Yours,
Rainer Maria Rilke

help pages

# The Agony Uncle

## *Alain de Botton will ease your pain*

*Nowadays, we often hear that, to lead a good life, you have to do something special: become an astronaut, win the Nobel Prize, marry a Supermodel. But I've never been attracted to such extreme achievements; I'm happy just being an accountant in Reading, leading a comfortable, but not grand, life. Yet I wonder sometimes whether I should try to be more special, more different. What do you think about this desire?*
—matt, reading

According to some voices we hear, there are few more disreputable fates than to end up being 'like everyone else'; for 'everyone else' is a category that comprises the mediocre and the conformist, the boring and the suburban. The goal of all right-thinking people should be to try to 'stand out' in whatever way their talents allow and so achieve distinction from the crowd.

But I think that Christianity has some interesting things to say on the subject, for according to Christian thought, being like everyone else is not quite the calamity one might suppose it to be; it was one of Jesus's central claims that all human beings – including murderers and suburban executives and Reading accountants – are creatures of God and loved by Him, and are hence deserving of the honour which we should accord to the full range of examples of the Lord's work. In the words of St Peter, every one of us has the capacity to be a partaker 'of the divine nature' – an idea which audaciously challenges the assumption that certain people are born to mediocrity and others to glory. There are no humans outside the circle of God's love, Christianity insists; what we have in common with others comprises what is most important about ourselves.

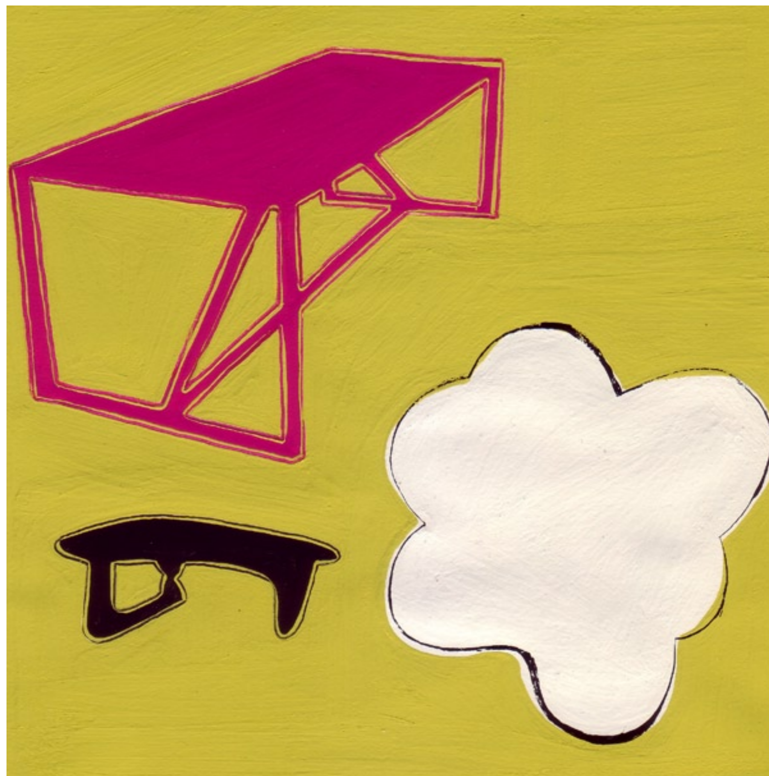
It is easy to feel puzzled by the idea, particularly when, on crowded city streets, we see faces that are marked only by anger or contempt, stupidity or selfishness. To believe that we are of the same species as others can appear implausible, and on occasion, distinctly regrettable. It may seem as if the only thing that unites humans is a ruthless concern for self-preservation and a desire to push others aside for the sake of getting on.

But Christianity, while acknowledging the surface differences, the angry faces and distressing encounters, asks us to look beneath these in order to focus on what it considers to be a number of essential and universal truths about humanity, – on which a sense of community and kinship

can arise. We may speak with different accents, some of us may be pockmarked and impatient, dull and thrusting; but this is not what Christianity declares to be important. What should detain us and bind us together is the recognition of a shared vulnerability. Beneath our aggression, selfishness, coarseness and anger, there are always two ingredients: fear and a desire for love. To lead us to recognise our common vulnerability, Jesus urged us to think of others as children. Few things more quickly transform our sense of someone's character than to picture them as a child; from this perspective, we are more ready to express the sympathy and generosity we almost naturally display towards children (whom we call naughty rather than bad, and cheeky rather than arrogant), but which we are likely to withhold from adults, because of their surface bravado and cynicism. To think of someone as a child is akin to seeing a person aasleep; it is hard to hate someone we have seen sleeping, for with their eyes closed, and their features relaxed and defenceless, they seem to invite care and a kind of love – to the extent that it can be embarrassing and unsustainable to watch a stranger asleep beside us on a train or plane; their sleeping face prompts us to an intimacy and concern which social norms teach us is inappropriate and which throws into question the edifice of civilised indifference on which ordinary communal relations are built. But there is no such thing as a stranger, the Christian would reply, there can only be an impression of strangeness born out of failure to acknowledge that others share in our own doubts and weaknesses. Nothing could be more noble, nor more fully human, than to be able to perceive that we are indeed fundamentally, where it matters, just like everyone else.

The idea that other people might be neither incomprehensible nor distasteful has profound implications for our concern with being different; given that the desire to achieve difference is, naturally, to a large extent fuelled by a feeling of horror at what is implied by the idea of being ordinary. The more humiliating, shallow, debased or ugly we take ordinary lives to be, the greater will be our desire to distinguish ourselves. The more corrupt the community, the greater the lure of individual achievement.

Since its beginnings, Christianity has been responsible for helping to abate the desire to split off from the group and



achieve independent reknown – and in part, it has done this by arguing that the community matters very much, and that we should spend time and money making sure that 'ordinary life' is actually dignified and good. There are countries where public provision of housing, transport, education or health-care is of such squalor that citizens naturally seek to escape communal involvement; and to construct a pedestal for themselves high above the chaos. As soon as they can afford to, they avoid random contact with others, do not use public transport or shared facilities and stay at home behind high walls. The desire to 'be someone special' is never stronger than when being ordinary means leading a way of life which fails to cater adequately to a median need for dignity and comfort.

Then there are communities, far rarer, many of them imbued with a strong (often Protestant) Christian heritage, where the public realm exudes respect in its principles and architecture; and where the need to escape into a private space is therefore far weaker. Citizens lose some of their ambitions for personal glory when the public spaces of a city are themselves glorious to behold. Simply being an ordinary citizen can seem like an adequate destiny. In Switzerland's largest city, the urge to own a car and avoid sharing a bus or train with strangers loses some of the intensity it may have in Los Angeles or London – thanks to Zurich's superlative tram network – clean, safe, warm and edifying in its punctuality and technical prowess. There is far less reason to strive to own a car when, for only a few francs, an efficient, stately tramway will transport one across the city in comfort.

But most cities do not have fine trams, nor adequate public provisions. There is graffiti on the walls, trains don't arrive when they should, threatening screams echo down corridors, officials are surly and corrupt, the rich are allowed to the front of the queue, while others are left to wait in the sun and amidst the flies – in which case, a disgust for ordinary life naturally sets in; along with a powerful ambition to achieve a position that raises one above the humiliating conditions of the norm.

Nevetherless, an insight to be drawn from Christianity and applied to communal politics is that in so far as we can recover a sense of the preciousness of all other human beings and, more importantly, legislate for public spaces and manners that factor such an awareness into their make-up, then the notion of the ordinary will come to seem less repellent; and, correspondingly, the desire to insulate oneself behind walls will weaken – to the material and psychological benefit of all. ◊

# A Merlin-like Magus

## *Christopher Gibbs remembers his friend, John Michell*

*John Michell, one of the finest writers to emerge from 1960s English counterculture, died on 24 April 2009 at the age of seventy-six. The first of his forty or so books, The Flying Saucer Vision, made his name in 1967 and had him leading members of the Rolling Stones to Stonehenge to scan the heavens for UFOs. Two years later,* The View Over Atlantis *sealed his reputation as a cartographer of England's ancient, mystic landscapes across which sacred sites such as Glastonbury and Stonehenge are connected by invisible lines of energy. At such holy places, Michell wrote, people could 'once again commune with natural rhythms, feel the pulsations of the earth force and participate in the rising of Atlantis.' No other writer, perhaps, captured so naturally that sense of wonder in the face of ancient mysteries which helped to characterize the Age of Aquarius. And this was but one part of a writing life that included books on Shakespeare, Euphonics and Astro-archeology.*

*John was great company – generous-hearted, erudite, funny – as I happily discovered over a long evening several years ago in front of the fire at Port Eliot in Cornwall, listening to him chatting with his old friends Peregrine St Germans and Richard Adams, while he delved into alternate pockets of his battered tweed jacket for the loose tobacco, Rizlas and grass he used to make his frequent roll-ups. A wonderfully strong sense of his character – and especially his infectious enthusiasm for life – can be found in the eulogy that follows, written by one of his greatest friends, the antiquarian Christopher Gibbs, for John's funeral on 1 May 2009.*
—SIMON PROSSER

JOHN WAS BORN in London on 9 February 1933 but soon taken home to Weyhill, on the chalky Wiltshire–Hampshire border. His father was Alfred Michell, a London man of property, of Cornish descent, while his mother Enid was the daughter of Sir Frederick Carden of Stargroves, a big Victorian house near Newbury, beneath the downs, where John and his brother and sister spent the war years and John learned about birds, flowers and moths from old Mr Turner next door.

He went to Eton, to Mr Martineau's house, then on to do his National Service in the Navy – who sent him to the School of Slavonic Studies where he trained to be a Russian interpreter. After Trinity College, Cambridge, where he read Russian and German, John qualified as a chartered surveyor in Gloucestershire, living in ruined Woodchester among the bats and screeching owls.

After that John moved to London, where he fell in with a rackety crew of property speculators. He had always an affection and sympathy for rogues and rascals, life's wounded and maimed, and saw always the gold in them. They relieved him of a substantial inheritance, but he never resented this cruel lesson, valuing instead the way it changed his life and challenged his ideas. He bought and sold Camden Passage, Islington, before moving on to his beloved Notting Hill, then to Carlton Mews, a Nash courtyard, now vanished, up a cobbled ramp off Trafalgar Square with a gate into Carlton House Terrace. His nights were spent in Soho clubs – Muriel's, the Rockingham, Boris's White Nights, drinking deep, dancing with wild women and sleeping it off in the Jermyn Street Turkish baths. Business was decidedly not his calling.

Now we're in the Sixties, a time of great changes and the inklings of a new order. John smoked dope (this became part of life). He dropped acid, felt veils of illusion dissolve, listened to music on ancient horned gramophones and began to look at the world around him – to consider the invisible world and the mysterious frontiers of perceived reality. He began to explore the earthy evidence of vanished civilisations, the rings and raths, the tumps and toots, the barrows and brochs, and to study the ideas they'd inspired in the writings of antiquarians and folklorists. He noticed what birds sang and when wildflowers bloomed. He yearned for knowledge of a purpose and design beyond our restless, repetitive activities, and soon began his own investigations into the paranormal.

Next came his first books – Flying Saucer Vision, and then *The View Over Atlantis* – sharing his researches and understandings with a generation that had an equal disdain for received opinion and convention, who found in him a Merlin-like magus, looking up to the heavens. Thirsty for signs and portents, they poured out of the cities, maps in hand, to chart the hidden forces that knit the holy places and, as John saw it, hold the landscape in enchantment.

With bands of friends John steered longboats through the hidden labyrinth of canals from middle England up into the Welsh borders. In carts, with Mark Palmer and his band of travellers, he rode west along the Ridgeway, far on and into Cornwall, from May Day in Padstow, on to Port Eliot, then to Land's End and its many menhirs and cromlechs.

John's writing – achieved, joint-fuelled, when most were abed – chronicles a lifelong quest, a continually refining philosophy. Lives of eccentrics and antiquarians, dissertations on sacred measures, on crop circles, on the Temple at Jerusalem, on the Twelve Hides of Glastonbury, on the dimensions of paradise, gradually distilled into concepts that can be expressed in number alone. This was a high and holy world – and celestial music to its initiates. Thus it became necessary for John to demonstrate these expressions of the harmonies of number, in delicate watercolours, again the fruits of night-time labour.

John wrote clearly, sparely, elegantly and could make one shake with laughter. With his old friend Richard Adams, he worried over the fine points of typography, wanting always to make the best of his work, however modest and simple. All this activity – the books, the painting, the maintenance of a voluminous correspondence in the beautiful cursive italic script he learned from Wilfrid Blunt at Eton – took place in the seeming chaos of his Notting Hill eyrie. But the chaos hid a secret order. For here, beneath the teacups, overflowing ashtrays and the remains of a vegetarian supper might be discovered the relics of the Anti-Metrication campaign, the library of Shakespearean aspirants, the seeds of the Cornferences, of Fortean forays, the maps with their fine manuscript traceries of leylines, Glastonbury arcana, the ever shifting pile of correspondence, little poems written at odd moments, the *Fortean Times* or the

*Daily Telegraph*.

He went on jaunts to remotest Russia, and to Jerusalem to re-examine the measurements of the Temple Mount, to the Orkneys, to Skellig Michael out in the mouth of the Shannon, to the deserts of Arizona, and still found time for old friendships kept green, for the entertainment and enlightenment of fellow scholars and mystical mathematicians, for reading widely among the groaning shelves and tottering pyramids in London, but also for watching cricket, for romance, and for all generations of his family.

John searched for – and often found – the paradise all around us. He championed a rule of love and freedom, looked to a world where the vulgarities that threaten to swamp us have no place. He had a sense of the numinous that was wonderful to share. It was the landscape, most especially the English landscape, that sang to him most sweetly. To be his companion, travelling anywhere in our islands, was a revelation. No one had a better nose for a Holy well, however choked with brambles, for a lost trackway or vanished moat. Nights were for contemplating the heavens, or for exploring the fringes of Bath, where green tongues of country creep into the city and sudden views of the sleeping world below are glimpsed from leafy lanes, and days for discovering remote churches on mounded sites, sacred long before Joseph of Arimathea planted the Holy Thorn. Even in Ladbroke Grove, as dawn rose, he once stopped and bade me listen: 'If we are very still, we *may* hear the murmurings of the sprightly Lad.' He streamed with love – agape and eros too, but beyond and above these, love of God. He saw and rejoiced in the divine hand in all creation. He loved the hard to love – 'Good Mr Brown, he's trying so hard!', 'But things are so difficult for those poor Israelis!' Love to the loveless shown, that they might lovely be. He lived by this great commandment.

John had the lightest of touches when sermonising, and I leave you with this, sent to me in 1974, on the back of a sepia postcard of the Toad Rock at Tunbridge Wells.

*Before the grand restaurant the torches were burning,*
*The rich were emerging with radiant faces.*
*Their spirits were high and their bodies were yearning*
*For greater excesses and further disgraces.*

*Next door vegetarian food was provided*
*For sensitive people and victims of stress,*
*The rich, as they walked by the window, derided*
*Their delicate looks and unfashionable dress.*

*While they, to avoid the bold stares of their betters,*
*Gazed up at a text that was framed on the wall.*
*'In the Kingdom of God,' said its tapestried letters,*
*'The meek and the humble are served before all.'*

*LOVE ONE ANOTHER*