

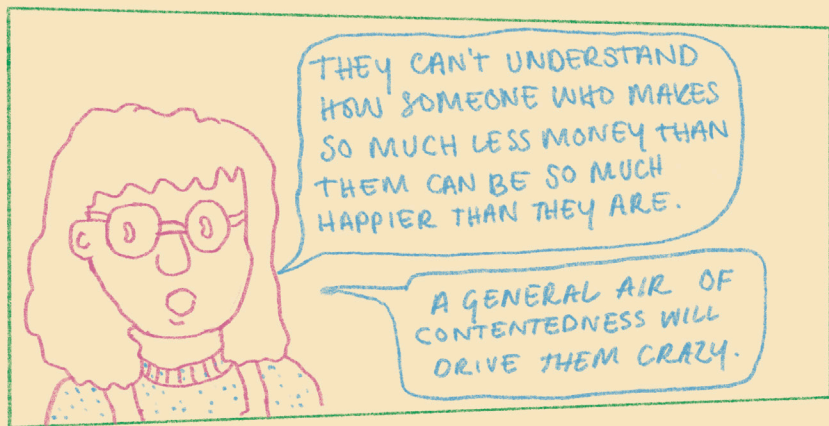
RECOGNITION
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REVOLUTION

LUMPEN

A journal for poor and
working class writers

Issue 007
Spring 2021

'THE SMILING BARISTA'





Lumpen

A Journal for Poor and Working Class Writers

Issue 007

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We printed this issue using an online print service because printing co-ops aren't affordable to us. All workers still got paid. But sadly, there was at least one boss involved in the process of publishing this journal.

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*LUM
PEN.*



Editorial

At some point in the early 1990s I remember Wet Wet Wet singing 'Love is All Around Us'. More appropriate might have been death is all around us, but given the smug buoyancy of middle-class England in the 90s it wouldn't have sold as many copies as Marti Pellow's cum stain to the asinine. About 30 years later, death remains all around us. The last twelve months or so, its looming presence has tightened its grip on our collective consciousness much like a catchy pop ballad. I have no hot take on the pandemic, no sharp insight into what's happened. I am—unlike 83% of the population—not an epidemiologist, and do not have the time left in my life to become one.

Nor am I a thanatologist, the word I hope is used for a person who studies death. I have though often been on first-name terms with it. Growing up in an Irish Catholic community it often seemed that weddings and funerals were as regular as sunsets and sunrises. The fact that we all meet our maker at some point, and always before we're ready, was repeated ad nauseam by my Gran, who I suspected was itching to take Saint Peter to task for Vatican II or the invention of the television. Spending time on the streets later on, death in the form of overdose, murder, suicide, freezing to death, and drowning, meant the



number of corpses I sat with rose each month. And whilst I stayed away from water most of the time, each of these threatened my own life on more than one occasion.

As the decades rolled by, death has appeared with less regularity in my life. As the signifiers of class position have shifted, the dead bodies are moved further away. I can claim, and often do, that the death I saw earlier in life haunts me, but Casper and friends aren't going to stop the food reaching my table, and they aren't going to evict me from my home. The pandemic has been a forceful reminder of how much safer I am than at any other point in my life, despite the passing of time meaning it's inevitably getting closer.

The pandemic, like every other fucking thing, is classed. It can get everyone, but the further up the economic food chain you are, the more you have put in place to protect yourself. Yes, middle-class people (like ghosts, I don't care right now whether you believe in them or not) have died from Covid. Yes, owning-class people have as well (and it doesn't keep me up a night). In fact, I kinda suspect that just a smidge of the reason the pandemic looms so large in our collective imagination is because it is killing middle-class people, and it strikes at the wall of comfort and denial of death that much of the middle class has built up around them. For some of us, and this is pretty much a poor and working-class thing, death has always loomed large to some extent or another. We might well have taken Bruce Springsteen's words to heart:

Everything dies baby that's a fact
But maybe everything that dies someday comes back
Put your makeup on fix your hair up pretty and
Meet me tonight in Atlantic City

Whether our destination was Atlantic City or not—which it should be I reckon, cos Atlantic City sounds fucking awesome, if you haven't read *Boardwalk of Dreams* by Bryant Simon I'd recommend it. Like all the good Springsteen songs, 'Atlantic City' is about how life is a constant struggle for money, food, and shelter, and the brief moments of hope

and relief which can be found if we throw just the right punch, or hold the right people close enough, or dress up nice and dance for a while. None of this actually stops death coming but it makes life worth living.

At times over the last twelve months, many of us might have found it harder and harder to grab those things that make life worth living. The poor and working-class experience is one in which the mechanisms of capital and the state do their damndest to squeeze the blood out of us. When you add in the Covid restrictions that limit our interactions with one another outside of the blood squeezing of labour, then the opportunities to get pretty and head to Atlantic City are few and far between. That hasn't stopped people finding ways. Even in the shittiest of settings.

My friend MD, who's spent the pandemic in prison, told me over the phone last week that despite being locked in their cells for 23.5 hours a day, he and his fellow inmates have group singing sessions at least three times a week. He's got games of chess going on pieces of paper where he and his challengers shout their moves to each other and trust that each one of them will accurately record the move. He's also learning French so he can visit the Ivory Coast with his daughter when he's released in eighteen years time. MD's a man whose life has been engulfed with death more than most. Past deaths clearly haunt him, future deaths are a concern. He mourns those who've died whilst in prison with him, and chastises his daughter for not always wearing a mask when out and about. When I told him that I'd been rushed to hospital a couple of months ago with a severe atrial fibrillation, he told me that if I died whilst he was locked up, when he got out he'd dig my corpse up and kill me again. Such is the man's willingness to make his hair pretty and go to Atlantic City, so to speak.

I'm sure you noticed what I did there, just dropping in a health scare without context. Well I'm not going to give you much more than that. Suffice to say I'm waiting to see a specialist, yes it's stressing me out a bit, yes it's probably a little bit of the motivation for this so-called editorial, and no it wasn't entirely out of the blue. I've had a heart defect

my whole life, the only thing is before we thought it affected one part of the heart, but the atrial fibrillation occurred in another part. So, it's a concern, and it's been suggested that I don't exercise too much, which, as it has for many I suspect, been a bit of an Atlantic City for me during the course of the pandemic.

So, instead I've lent heavily on the writing process as a way to interact with others, both in the reading and the writing. In particular, through the past issues of the journal you hold in your hands, reading new pieces that are sent in gives me a different way of understanding what's happening out there in the lives of folks I do not know, written by those who are not supposed to have their stories known. Because putting Lumpen together can be such a pain in the neck, I sometimes treat it as an unrelenting slog. I forget sometimes that it is a pretty glorious thing, and at times a messy, misshapen and muddled thing, but a glorious Atlantic City thing, and that I'm lucky to be part of it. It seldom turns away from either death or life, and instead tries to sit with both, in a smirking, knowing way that accepts both are fleeting, and neither exists without the other. I'd like to think it shows the same desire to hold others close that inmates singing to one another from their cells does, but realistically it probably doesn't, though it does nod in the same direction.

In the issue you're about to read there are signs that whilst Bruce Springsteen is often right, even Marti Pellow once got it right.¹In their attempts to communicate with us, we see the writers grasping at life, love, and death on the way to their own personal Atlantic City. The fumbling at things that are difficult to say out loud or on paper, the search to have points of view understood, the urgent breathless hunt for some sort of accurate understanding of all things that keep us up at night. And the lucid screams that occur in the middle of the night when one is woken to realisation, that yes this is all really happening, and we are very much not alone.

¹ Marti Pellow was the lead singer for Wet Wet Wet whose cover of 'Love is All Around' was top of the charts for ages.

and ...
we
are
very
much
not ...
alone ...



in repetition we are bound together in dissonant harmony
Yoshiko Teraoka

In the early months of the unfolding plague, when corporeal existence was limited to the confines of my bedroom, so too, did my cultural consumption stagnate in what I already knew. A friend pointed out to me that I was engaged in 'intensive reading' or 'intensive listening', a way to gain a better understanding of complex texts through the study of specific details. Sure, sure, I nodded, head bobbing to the rhythm of denial. Satisfied with the intellectual justification of my obsessive-compulsive behaviour, I failed to mention that it had less to do with specificity and more to do with absence: a willing suspension in a void, free from the burden of responsibility and action. Consciousness in this space is optional, I thought.

What I am Listening to: March–October 2020

'Listening is directing attention to what is heard, gathering meaning, interpreting and deciding on action'. - Pauline Oliveros

Kraftwerk, 'Vitamin'
William Basinski, 'd1p 1.1'
Frederic Rzewski, 'Coming Together'
Frederic Rzewski, 'Attica'
Rudimentary Peni, 'Pogo Pope'
Throbbing Gristle, 'What a Day'

The monthly, weekly, daily, and minute repetitions in which we were implicated were not all entirely enforced on me. Naturally, I began to seek out songs with repetitive sequences almost exclusively. Excavating, categorising, shuffling sounds and their meaning. Echolalia and echopraxia. Was it for want of sonic unity and symmetry in a time when the world outside had been anything but orderly, or did I desire the patterns and rhythms overriding my limbo state to be amplified, reverberated, and echoed back to me?

April and May. Coffee and grapefruit for breakfast or else the day will fail, and other arbitrary rules I imposed upon myself. I put on Kraftwerk's

‘Vitamin’ every morning between the hours of nine and ten. I listened as the song repeated back to me, ‘Kalium, Kalzium, Eisen, Magnesium, Carbohydrate, Protein, A, B, C, D Vitamin’, and I remembered to take my daily dosage of iron, vitamin D, and serotonin. They say memory loss is a common symptom of the pandemic, but I forgot the reasons why.

Listening again, and again, there came trivial revelations too. Like the fact that after almost a decade, it became known to me that the lyrics to their song ‘Autobahn’ had not been ‘Fun fun fun Mr Autobahn’, but in fact, ‘Wir fahr’n fahr’n fahr’n auf der autobahn’. A month of intensive listening, unlearning and shouting German from my room, and still, I fall into the habit of singing my own version sometimes. I wonder how many repetitions it will take to correct my own mistakes.

William Basinski’s *The Disintegration Loops* had been an album on heavy rotation for many years. In the early months of the pandemic, his music was a soothing palliative to the ear, an aural analgesic, a welcoming mode of unthinking to push away the disquiet of passing sirens into the recesses of thought. Admittedly, in the past it was more like background music, the same way my father would always sleep alone at night with the TV on to mask his isolation.

Famously tied to the events of 9/11, the album cover shows a still of the New York skyline in the last light of evening, based on a film captured from the rooftop of Basinski’s apartment in Brooklyn the day the Twin Towers fell to dust and smoke. Inside, is a note of dedication to those who perished in the attacks, and the album sits on display in the permanent collection of the 9/11 Memorial Museum. ‘d1p1.1’ is a one-hour piece from this four-volume work, with sounds purely deriving from tapes in decay. It was conceived by accident when Basinski discovered a collection of old analogue tapes from two decades ago, which he sought to archive to digital format. Only, when he began to make the transfer, the tapes began to literally fall apart and dissolve like dust. The short loops, of entropy unfolding, is a faded memory of its former life. When a loop so haunting and mournful has no discernible

beginning, middle and end, the works destabilise the notion of linear time and narrative.

If The Disintegration Loops and Frederic Rzewski's 'Coming Together' and 'Attica' have something in common beyond repetition, it is that they were composed in the wake of a tragedy. 'Attica' and 'Coming Together' were written in the aftermath of the Attica Prison Rebellion in 1971, during which inmates seized control of the maximum security prison to protest their mistreatment and inhumane labour conditions. A twenty-minute structural composition, 'Coming Together' uses an excerpt from a letter written by radical left-wing political activist Samuel Melville—an inmate who was killed in the state-sponsored assault that ended the uprising. Rzewski's musical treatment and Steve Ben Israel's impassioned reading highlight the irony of inmates united within the oppressive walls of the prison. Each iteration renders our previous understanding of the text, like the self-assured 'I can act with clarity and meaning' heard in the first iteration, a doubtful source in the next. Repeated fragments meander through hope and doubt, insistence and undoing, meaning and unmeaning, and they continue to echo beyond the sonic walls of Rzewski's composition.

The political activist and scholar Angela Davis performed the piece onstage with SFCM's New Music Ensemble in 2016. A former political prisoner herself, Melville's words 'incessant noise' and 'indifferent brutality', as spoken through her, bore more weight in May than it did back in March. In the aftermath of George Floyd's killing at the hands of a police officer on May 25th, it was not just the words of Samuel Melville I was hearing, but that of George Floyd, of Eric Garner four years earlier, of Sandra Bland in 2015, of Rodney King in 1991, of Emmet Till four decades before that, and so many more.

'Attica is in front of me', the only phrase in the song 'Attica', was the response given by inmate Richard X. Clark upon being asked how it felt to leave Attica behind. In repetition, words become entangled with the past and future, merging with the coalescence of fragmented violence

in the present. Fifty years on, Attica remains standing. Today, I listen to 'Attica' in anticipation of a future in which the pandemic will be in front of us.

'Wash your hands, cover your face, make space' in April is 'Hands, Face, Space' in September. As the days grew harder to discern from each other, resembling one another like a copy of a copy of a copy, Rudimentary Peni's 'Pogo Pope' and Throbbing Gristle's 'What a Day' spoke to me like disorienting mantras echoing the mind's dizzying decay.

Another example of a piece which employs tape work, a vocal loop of 'Papas Adrianus' (a bastardised Latin version of 'Pope Adrian') runs through the background for the duration of the forty-three minute album. The anarcho-punk band's album is rumoured to have been written during vocalist Nick Blinko's institutionalisation at a psychiatric hospital under Section 3 of the 1983 Mental Health Act. The album's preoccupation with the theme of insanity is owed to Blinko's assumption that he was Pope Adrian 37th, a delirium brought on by his schizoaffective disorder. The opener 'Pogo Pope' features relentless screams of 'Pogo pope! Pogo pope! Pogo Pope!' over thrashing guitars. It is hard not to find the humour in listening to a man repeatedly screaming nonsense with such assertive force, to no considerable outcome, but then one also remembers that this is the sound of a man—quite literally—spiraling out of control.

In 'What a Day', Genesis P-Orridge's screams rupture the air like an audible accompaniment to Francis Bacon's screaming mouth. Against disciplined noise, P-Orridge singing 'What a day! What a day! What a day! All day!' weaves in and out of rhythm like the existential cries of someone struggling to keep up with the assembly line. The human voice echoes over the unsettling restraint of machinery, which cuts like violent incisions, a space unto which to dance with the idea that maybe with the next beat, the next tick of the clock, I will dismember myself from this monotonous work. And I think: this is what William Burroughs meant when he said to h/er, 'Your job, Genesis, is to short-circuit control'.

For those of us lucky to lock ourselves away into safety, only to have our minimum-wage office work colonise our homes, the Covid-capitalist crisis has served to punctuate the unnaturalness of labour, feeding the parasitic roots of insanity that had been sowed long before the pandemic. And, whatever pain we neglected and let lay—whether that be grief or loss—we too, were forced to confront them in stagnant time. And yet, with the endless distractions lulling us into unfeeling, to deny oneself this moment to grieve would be another loss to the world, a betrayal to the ones who have suffered losses in the time of the pandemic. To grieve collectively is to reassert what is human and it is in these moments of restless quiet when I feel that my grief can finally bind me to you.

(In)difference and Repetition

When we clapped every Thursday to pay our respects to the frontline workers—the NHS workers, cleaners, care workers, supermarket shelf stackers and warehouse workers, transport workers, school teachers, social workers, postal workers and delivery drivers—did we know back then that we were complicit in the indifferent brutality of those at 10 Downing Street who left you abandoned without PPE? At what point did the clatter turn into a roar of indifference? I think: what if we had clapped for as long as it took to realise the error of our ways? What if we'd slowly broken off into arrhythmia, redirecting the roar of anger at them? If 'repetition' is better understood as rehearsal in the French interpretation of the word, or 'insistence' as Gertrude Stein calls it, then next time we could explore the possibilities of dissent in collective noise.

Dissonance and Dissidence

There is a folk custom called charivari, which is also known as 'rough music' or 'skimmingtons' in the English tradition. Rough music was a ritualistic expression of disapproval, characterised by mock parades of satiric dances, and savage noise consisting of violent clashes of pots and pans, and the din of spoons. The reasons for their disapproval were as

varied as the registers of noise themselves—whether it be warding off evil spirits, expressing hostility against a marriage, or publicly shaming a cheating wife. For all its savageries and crude imposition of social norms, there was also a touch of playfulness and subversion, as it called for a peaceful resolution and dialogue to end the conflict. In 1913 when Luigi Russolo outlined his Futurist Manifesto, *The Art of Noise*, he wrote, ‘Noise has the power to bring us back to life’. I think there is the white noise of passivity characterised by the machine, and then there is the human noise of possibility. The goal here is not so much tuning out into ignorant bliss, but standing still and articulating the human in the excesses of noise. Observing, listening, long enough to understand a single cog’s relationship to the wheel.

Listening, Writing, Pulling Myself Out of Limbo

February 2021, Tokyo. Moving from one city in lockdown, to another in a state of emergency. Bodies repeat in scramble crossings and ramen shops. ‘Stay at home, save lives’ in England is simply ‘Stay home’ in Japan. From the hotel room where I am assigned to quarantine, I watch news reports of chaos erupting at a local electronics store as hordes of people fight for some newly sought-after game console.

It’s been twelve months now since I began listening to my playlist. When I put on *The Disintegration Loops* to read, study or sleep, I think not about unhearing, but the whirring sirens of ambulance cars in the early hours of the pandemic. The world moves forward with haste, erasing history along the way. In stillness, I return to the sounds, not out of nostalgia but because I want to be present. To sustain in music means to maintain a note’s resonance over a period of time. I suppose I could scrap this playlist and start anew, but that would feel like a betrayal of some sort. Maybe if I subject myself to the next repetition, and the next, and if I could bind you in the dissonant harmony too, then something must surely change. It would have to change. I would have to change.

...

...

**I wonder how
many
repetitions
it will take to
correct
my own
mistakes**



Photo by Peter Bennett

Park Strife

Peter Bennett

The wind's howlin doon the street an a flurry ay snow swarms the place, pepperin the grun wae a light coverin. A wee sparra catches ma attention, tenaciously fightin its waiy through the bitin winter wind until it finally lands oan the wires that hing between the street lights, next tae a pair ay moss covered gutties that huv been hingin up there fur as long as ah kin remember. *Adidas Tango Kick* if ah'm no mistaken—standard eighties fare.

The metallic rattle ay an empty can rollin along the pavement seems tae echo aff the waws ay the tenements oan either side ay me as ah approach. It trundles along, rattlin away, afore McDade's heel intervenes an crushes it flat against the asphalt. Pearcey's staunin next tae him, airms wrapped roon himsel, shakin like a shitein dug. 'It's fuckin baltic man.' he sais. Nothin gets by him. Sharp as a fuckin circle, the cunt.

'It's fuckin February ya prick an yer just wearin a trackie tap!' McDade sais, his intolerance fur him etched acroass his face. 'If ye don't know it's gonnæ be baltic in the middle ay February then yer mare ay a fuckin daftie than ye look.'

Pearcey shakes his heid in grim acceptance ay the statement an looks away assumin his default position ay shitebag. He's long since gied up staunin up fur himsel. They hud their maist recent square go aboot a year ago an McDade punched his cunt in. Ever since he's went intae himsel; no quite as vocal as he wance wis. He used tae fight like fuck, the wee man, but he stoapped growin when he wis aboot fifteen. It's been the law ay diminishin returns since. 'Any skins? Ah've goat a hauf dig,' he sais, tryin tae move the conversation oan.

Ah shake ma heid an look tae McDade who shrugs his shoulders an hauds his hauns oot in the universal whit-ye-lookin-at-me-fur gesture. 'Who rattled your cage anywaiy?' ah sais tae him. 'Ye oan yer period or sumhin?'

'Some junkie bastart blagged ma wee brur's bike. He only just goat it at Christmas there,' he sais, screwin his eyes up, growlin at me like it's ma fuckin fault.

'Sake mate, that's pish. Dae ye know who it wis?' ah sais.

'Naw, but ah seen him. Ah fuckin held the door ay the close open fur him. How wis ah supposed tae know it wis ma wee brur's bike? Ah wis pished.'

Ah hud tae fight the compulsion tae burst oot laughin at the stupid cunt. 'Aye, gen up? When wis this?' ah sais, impressed wae ma self-control.

'Last night when ah goat hame fae the boozier efter watchin the gemme. Ah left ma da wae his mates an ah came hame masel.'

'Fuck sake mate. Sore yin,' ah sais.

The trees creak and twist above us as we stoat intae the park, their barren, naked branches swayin in the cauld winter wind. It looks clean an fresh, the snow sanitisin the landscape.

We staun, surveyin the slope doon tae the burn, tryin tae see the obvious waiy doon. 'Piece ay piss,' McDade sais, edgin forward, keepin his centre ay gravity low, graspin at weeds an exposed tree roots tae steady himsel. His technique, lackin in grace as it is, works an we're soon at the bottom ay the hill.

Pearcey's drapped the hash an is frantically pattin himself doon

an turnin oot his poakits. 'Ah'll boot your baws if ye've loast that,' McDade spits, nonchalantly.

Ah leave the two ay them tae sort it oot between them an head tae the big tree at the bank ay the burn. It's hollowed oot at the bottom an is perfect fur settin a wee fire.

Fuckin weird lookin, like a fireplace; the trunk it's chimney—except it's no. It disnae seem right ah don't think; that this livin thing that's stood here fur years an grown tae such stature, should be burnt—ritualistically an gradually at the base, at the very roots where it startit its long vertical journey—by indifferent cunts like us.

The inclement weather conditions are the decidin factor the day though, so ah boot fuck oot ay a widden pallet that's been used as a makeshift seat an get a fire gaun. 'Did yies find it?' ah shout tae the other two who ah kin hear, still bickerin like a couple ay auld tarts.

McDade's took his cap aff an is tryin tae shield his lit lighter wae it, haudin it oot in front ay him as though it's gonae—in any conceivable waiy—help.

Pearcey's oan aw fours, scuttlin aboot like a gumsy, rabies ridden baboon that's just tumbled through *Sports Division*. 'Ah've goat it!' he sais, haudin the meagre sliver ay soapbar oot in front ay him in his haun like he's haudin this week's winnin lottery ticket.

As much as ah recognise the pathetic nature ay his joy—that his life (an mine by extension) is so devoid ay any purpose or direction, that bein reacquainted wae a recently departed fifteen poun bit ay hash elicits such a reaction—ah hud tae admit it wis a result. Nae danger.

He's oan the ball, Pearcey, awready burnin the hash oan tae the perforated lid ay the gless boattle ay *Irn-Bru* fae the bucket that's planked there fur those in the know. Rammin the cunt full tae the brim, he burns it again, gently liftin the boattle up, still burnin the hash as he goes, resultin in a thick, chalky soup ay smoke swirlin aboot inside the boattle, trapped in its gless prison. He offers it oot tae us. 'Gies that!' McDade sais, snatchin it aff him.

'That's whit ah wis dain, ya prick,' Pearcey, no unreasonably, replies as McDade sooks the milky hash smoke intae his lungs. 'Fuck sake man, that's a dull yin,' he sais, his voice noticeably lower in pitch. We aw take a dig ay it; twice, finishin the hash.

Ah kin feel a whitey comin oan but ah'm fucked if ah'm tellin these cunts who, far fae showin any concern fur the whitey casualty, will take such an admission as the green light tae mercilessly fuck wae the subject, rampin up the anxiety an paranoia a few notches. Ah'd dae the same masel, it's yer sworn duty tae bam yer mates up at any given opportunity. Goat tae be done.

McDade wis eyeballin me. 'Here, ur you awrite Danny,' he sais, 'ye look a bit pale.'

'Ah'm bran new,' ah lie, an staun up too fast, which serves only tae negate the statement as ah stumble a wee bit, ma heid spinnin.

'Whitey!' he sais, unwillin tae let it go, like a fuckin snake that's just pounced oan a rodent.

Ah've hud enough ay his patter an make fur the slope, ignorin the cunt. Ma diversionary tactic seems tae work as by the time we scramble back up the bastarn hill, he's drapped the subject.

We're walkin alang the main path back taewards the gate we came in, stoned an in silence. Vast sheets ay grey cloud race overhead,

high above us, an the wind howls through the many trees ay the park soundin like waves batterin intae a rocky shoreline. Ah'm zoned oot, takin it aw in, the stone fae the hash, heightenin ma senses, seemingly amplifyin the sounds, or at least sharpenin ma awareness ay them. The aw encompassin greyness ay the efternoon seems mare vivid an bright, the snow oan the grun reflectin whit remains ay the daylight.

There's a gaunt lookin, skinny brass monkey walkin taewards us wae a multi-coloured *Berghaus* jayket oan. 'Ah don't fuckin believe this,' McDade sais, suddenly animated.

'Whit is it?' Pearcey sais.

'That's him. That's the fuckin junkie fae last night.'

'Ye sure? Whit's the fuckin chances?' ah sais.

'Aye ah'm sure. Ah seen him, din't ah? Fuckin junkie bastart. Ma da just bought the fuckin thing. Took oot a Provie loan fur it an aw. Fuckin five hunner quid it cost. Tap ay the line fuckin mountain bike,' he sais, gettin aw fuckin agitated. 'Ah'm doin this cunt.'

'Calm yer jets man. Ur ye sure?' ah sais, tryin tae process whit ah'm hearin.

'Its fuckin him, ah'm tellin ye. He's wearin that same manky *Berghaus* jayket he wis wearin last night. Probably snow-dropped *that* aff some cunt's washin line an aw,' he sais.

The cunt walks by. He's goat a tammy oan, pult doon aboot as low as ye kin waeoot coverin yer eyes. He's goat yer typical junkball complexion, aw fuckin pock marks an oily skin; fuckin skeletal cheekbones burstin oot his dish. He's aulder than us, aboot thirty

odds ah'd say. It's hard tae tell wae these cunts right enough.

'Where ye fae mate?' McDade sais tae him but the cunt dinghies him, avoidin eye contact. 'Here, ah'm talkin tae you. Where ye fae?' he sais again.

The cunt turns roon. 'Parkheid,' he sais in that fuckin nasally drawl they aw huv, 'How?'

'Don't get cheeky ya prick! Whereabouts in Parkheid?' Pearcey pipes up.

'Wee Men,' he sais.

'Wee Men? Whit ye dain in Shettleston?'

● 'Scorin a bit, know whit ah mean?' he sais, backin away fae us as we walk taewards him.

● 'Scorin a bit?' Pearcey repeats 'Smack? Who aff?'

● 'McNulty,' he sais.

'Big McNulty fae Balintore Street. Fuckin intae everthin, that cunt; charlie, smack, blues—you name it. Fuckin loansharkin an aw. Ma da knows him,' McDade sais oot the side ay his mooth tae us.

'C'mere the noo tae a talk tae ye,' he sais tae the junkie but he's off, turnt oan his heels an sannyin it doon the path like his life depends oan it—oan the balance ay probabilities, it might. 'YOU'RE GETTIN IT YA JUNKIE BASTART!' McDade screams, boundin alang in pursuit an fixated oan only wan thing. Ah've seen him like this afore, eyes glazed oer, vacant. He's goat that tunnel vision thing gaun oan, unwillin or unable tae listen tae any reason.

Ah'm resigned tae it noo. This is happenin. McDade an Pearcey charge efter him an ah'm reluctantly folliein, any semblance ay that mellow wee stone noo eradicated by the adrenalin searin through ma boady. Ah see an empty *Mad Dog* boattle at the side ay the path an instinctively, crouch doon an lift it as ah go.

McDade's closin the gap doon, his relative fitness to the junkie's smack ravaged boady, blatantly apparent. He's reachin oot wae each stride, swipin an scratchin doon the back ay the cunt's jayket as he ducks an weaves aboot desperately tryin tae evade him. 'Goat ye, ya cunt,' he sais an lands a dig tae the side ay the junkie's coupon.

The cunt barely flinches, insteid drawin blood fae McDade's beak wae a retaliatory blow. They struggle; a whirlwind ay flailin aims an legs as each ay them try tae establish dominance.

'Fuckin skelp this cunt Pearcey!' McDade's pleadin, the deceptively weak lookin smackheid assertin mare control than hud been anticipated.

Pearcey flings a hauf arsed attempt at a punch an the smackheid ducks an wriggles free fae McDade's grip at the same time. 'Hink ah'm a fuckin daftie? Yous ur gettin fuckin plugged!' he rasps an pulls a lock-back knife oot his back bin, flickin it open.

He lunges taewards them, stabbin an slashin at them wae the blade. A wummin an her wean see whit's happenin an about turn, fuckin off back the waiy they came. 'Fuckin mone then, ah thoat ah wis gettin it? Come ahead!' he sais. He rushes McDade wae the blade, drawin his airm back, ready tae plunge it right intae him. The boattle leaves ma haun, spinnin an whistlin through the air afore smashin wae a crushin impact intae the side ay his dial, drap-pin him instantaneously.

'YAAAAASSS DANNY BOY, FUCKIN SHOT MATE! BINGO!' McDade shouts, approachin the poor cunt, lyin sparkled, his eye closed oer, blood pishin oot his heid.

‘No so fuckin wide noo, ur ye’? Pearcey spits, suddenly the fuckin big man noo that the cunt’s oot the gemme, an sinks the boot intae his ribs.

‘Junkie bastart, think ye could huv the lads. Yaaaaas! Fuckin mone then! Shetto Tigers!’ McDade wails intae the cunt’s blood spattered dial, rainin doon a volley ay punches oantae the pulpy mess that used tae be his face.

‘Leave it oot McDade. He’s fucked up. We done him. Ye happy noo?’ ah sais.

‘Happy? Aye ah’m happy, another junkie goat whit wis comin tae him. Fuckin result mate.’ he sais wae a baleful grin, his eyes still vacuous an hateful.

● ‘Whit dae ye mean, another junkie goat whit’s comin tae him? Ye mean cos ay yer brur’s bike an that?’

● ‘He’s a fuckin junkie. We’re dain every cunt a favour. Probably tans hooses aw the time.’

● ‘Wit dae ye mean? Is this the cunt that knocked yer brur’s bike or no?’ ah sais.

‘Probably. Who gies a fuck? We leathered him. Nice one,’ he sais, lookin aw fuckin pleased wae himsel.

‘See you, yer nothin but a fuckin liberty takin arsehole,’ ah sais, ready tae fly fur the fuckin idiot.

‘Liberty takin? he tried tae fuckin stab me’ he sais, wae a vacant look oan his face.

‘Aye, because we chased the poor cunt aw oer the park cos *you*

said he stole yer brur's bike. Made us feel shite cos yer da's still payin the Provie loan.'

'A junkie's a junkie Danny, who gies a fuck?'

Ah'm staunin lookin at the prick— ma supposed mate, lappin it up like it's aw some sport tae him; like some natural justice's been doled oot cos the guy's a smackheid, his only discernible crime. He didnae blag any fuckin bike, that's fur sure.

There's a groan an some movement fae the boay oan the grun who's goat a big fuckin gash oan his heid as wide as the Clyde streamin blood intae the expandin pool ay reddinin snow. At least ah know he's no fuckin deid. 'Whit a shot man, Danny. Fuckin belter!' McDade sais, slappin ma back an puttin his airm roon me as we get tae fuck taewards the park gate.

'Get tae fuck away fae me,' ah sais, shakin him aff an run acroass the main road ootside the park, dodgin in an oot ay motors flyin alang in the rush hour traffic. He's goat a waiy ay dain this tae ye, McDade. He manipulates ye; makes ye feel like he's the victim an yer only dain whit any good mate wid. He's done it tae me fur the last time, ah'm tellin ye.

Ah cannae bring masel tae look at the cunt.

That Hum

Wes Foster

That hum. You begin to forget what silence is. Forever with a base level of tone. The crack of the machine's rails, the habit of the punch as it pushes through. All these noises begin to blend, you become accustomed. Though not to the point of not listening, you're always listening for something going wrong. Pressing abstract bits of fabric together. Repetitive strains. Back's gone on one side from being on the eyeletter. Fiddly work, pressing studs together with a small, hand-lever press. My fingers sting from screwing one bit of plastic into the next. A scar on my hand, from my first week, three months ago. Burnt from the hot knife. Just keep moving, keep doing something. Always look busy, always keep moving. At lunch, sit in the same seat. There's nothing to really break the routine.

- To be fair, at least here you see what you're making. In my old job,
- I just made someone else money. Here at least I make something.
- Half eight till half four, early finish on a Friday. Beats working nine till six, Tuesday till Saturday. I don't miss retail. The factory offers more security, and less likelihood of having to politely avoid arguing with someone who feels hard done by—despite earning three times more than you. The final act of the day: putting all those coins into a change counter. You're so far away from any value that you have created. I used to dread going to work—the constant changes in shift patterns and that tiredness afterwards. Even when you have no customers and nothing to do you feel wiped out, waiting desperately for the day to end. The slower you move, the longer the day is. The less that happens, the more you look at the clock. Half terms were the worst. I understand the boredom that families must have during a pandemic. Sweaty children touching and then sneezing on everything through the shop. Even before the pandemic, families meant serving five people at once, trying, but failing, to have a conversation with any of them. And then those that say they are 'exempt', yet just meander and browse. I'll

sweat through my mask for eight hours straight so that others can have a look. It's their luxury. This should be my domain, but I have no control. The dictations of customer service have destroyed any agency I might once have enjoyed. You can get away with anything if you do it to retail staff.

Customers are exhausting. As much as you try, it is never enough. When you've cycled three miles in the wet to pick something up from a depot that a customer ordered because Royal Mail messed up. When you've spent two hours of your day trying to get them the right things. But to them, you're just fodder, it's just expected service. And if it wasn't me that they were speaking to, it would be someone else in a black polo, just as faceless to them. It's the ones with money that are the worst. Obviously. Those with fuck all expect fuck all for free. They're overjoyed when you throw something in because they've actually been a reasonable person. It's those that have the cash that expect everything to be thrown at them. They know exactly what they want, and how they're going to get it. A predetermined list of things that they're after. 'If you could just price match these seventeen items for me?' Through a vast web of varying websites that all look fake in one way or another. I was never one to say no to save the money for the company, but it is always slightly offensive to try and get rid of the bit of cost that pays my wages, that pays for the shop to be here and for you to take something away today. Nowhere is more complicit in creating a growing wealth gap than the retail sector—no security, zero-hour contracts, all funnelled into multinational corporations that own the entire sector. If there are any bonuses, any trickle down, it's so tiny that it will be a drop in the ocean to their finances.

Full-time staff have to form some sort of pretence that they believe in something. The paradox of it is that there is nothing there to believe in—you project your own narrative into a reason for spending 40 hours a week there. To believe in something better, to make more of it than it is. Those working part time have got it right—

they couldn't give less of a shit. A direct break from those that get paid and those that don't, those that are in the industry and those that aren't. But that's probably just a wisdom that I missed out on. The amount of times your own company will pull the wool over your eyes and say it will be better soon, we're working on it, you'd have to be foolish to believe anything anyone has said. As retail dies, even in the industries which weren't technically in danger, bonuses and benefits are eroded as everything becomes owned by three companies. Each that will pay someone, somewhere 80k a year to see where savings can be made, and how much more efficient staffing can be. This constant hammering from higher up, it grasps at your soul and drags it out. Every employer takes the piss, asking too much. But retail destroys everything in you. No real job security, no real prospects of a career path, no real respect from the customers you serve. Just town centres of salespeople that have to tell themselves there is still something to believe in.

- That in the constant pursuit of capital for someone else, there is
- a worthwhile career. That you are a worthwhile member of the
- company. There's always that staff member when you first get there, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, who knows it all. At first, you want to be like them. Then you realise they're skint and that they're off to work in pensions because they'll actually pay them a liveable wage for working less hours.

That hum. It's still new to me. But it's a lot better than the tinnitus that I used to hear from when I woke up. That pressure from customers to get things on time which were completely out of my control. That desire for you to care about their shitty order, or that constant bartering for discounts. I never get commission, I barely got bonuses, why the fuck would I do that for you? You've just done a finance application, I know you earn 60k. I prefer the ease of graft to the subjugation from someone like you. To graft is easy—it just requires muscle memory, not a need to manoeuvre around calculated conversations with customers like you.

Those:
with
fuck all
expect
fuck all
for free:



Untitled

Kirsty Jukes

Pipe thumps beneath tile
Bath water laps, bubbles seethe
Heavy trucks pass on slick tarmac
Shaking foundations, rattling teeth
The house creaks
Dustbins purged
Broken glass shatters the dawn
Reverse alarm blares in early morn
Calling birds, talons clack roof tiles
Scaffolding, holding, whistling
Wind through the trees
Plastic bags strain their bonds, rustle
Scattering rubbish and the settled
dust in my mind
A raised voice—shouting, laughing, greeting
Playing, baying children
How can they play?
Adults in late inebriation call out
Calling for what once
was but no longer is
There is no escape
Pacing rooms
Searching for one's own
Assessing volume
No peace no rest
Just four walls acting as a funnel
An ear horn of banality

Threshold

Melissa Owens

When I first heard the word 'sepsis' uttered in the hushed tone of a doctor's vocabulary, I did not fully comprehend its meaning. I confused sepsis with septicaemia—seemingly a common error in understanding where the two terms become, incorrectly, interchangeable. Septicaemia is clinically determined as poisoning of the blood. Sepsis is much harder to define. Presenting as the result of an underlying source of infection, it is not an organism of its own entity. Sepsis occurs when a person's immune system sends chemical responses throughout the whole body rather than isolating the affected area. In turn this triggers inflammation, an overwhelming physiological response. The body is no longer solely fighting infection, it is fighting itself. It can be described, in essence, as an overreaction. Blood releases chemicals to heal infection, sepsis overpowers, attacking healthy tissue, disrupting the body. Undiagnosed, untreated, this response can suddenly and drastically lead to septic shock, the onset of oxygen starvation, coma, amputation of limbs, and in 40% of cases, death.

The severity of such critical illness can be forgiven as a once detached notion. Having never previously been hospitalised, I had perceived such stories as being about someone else, not an experience that could ever be imagined or expected to become a lived, written part of one's own narrative. Throughout the fluctuations of life I have only ever engaged with NHS services presenting with minor, generic illness, ailments, and mental

health issues. For a period of approximately six years I utilised extensive therapeutic treatments as varied as CBT to arts-based approaches, in attempting to manage and understand the suffering of depression and anxiety. I once endured extreme spasm of the muscles around my ribs, chest and shoulders. Fearing that I was having a heart attack, I called emergency services but left hospital the same day with a diagnosis that I had experienced a severe anxiety attack. A few years ago, I broke my kneecap but did not require much medical attention beyond an X-ray and a brace. When I was a child, I developed an affliction known as Osgood Schlatter's disease, caused by inflammation of the tendon between the knee joint and shin bone, which was diagnosed in accident and emergency. I once contracted a nasty eye infection and needed to make numerous trips to the eye clinic until it fully healed. Aside from these incidences, I have never spent a period of time in hospital, even after the birth of my eldest child, I was discharged from the maternity ward the next day. My youngest 2 children were born at home.

Within a complex, multi-layered, overstretched, under-funded medical establishment, and believing myself to be an independent person, I have often tended more towards home remedies. While there is a time and place for medicine, experience taught me a diversity of approaches to healthcare, especially where the lines can become blurred between what is mental, what is physical, and how the two interact and influence one another. However, this self-sufficient formulation can also lend itself to minimising health concerns. Perhaps compounded by the residue of that pervasive, youthful notion of invincibility suffused with the pretence of teenage angst, reduced to hormonal melodrama. I had scraped through 34 years, surviving a full spectrum of trauma and illness, both self-inflicted and contagious, but escaping hospitalisation or major operation. As age is bestowed, you marvel at the endurance, contemplating all the possible near fatalities of recklessness. I had, auspiciously, remained breathing with stories to tell.

It was a cold March night, where, in the dusky hours of a Sunday morning, I would be admitted to intensive care by the end of the day. I was at home, alone, my three children were staying for the weekend at their dad's house. These bookends to our weekly routine had become a space for myself, to exhale, find company in solace, to re-examine the path which had led me to this point in my life. Upon that fateful morning, I had spent my time in bed for over 24 hours grappling with an increasing tension throughout my body. Convinced, with a despairing certainty, that if I were to make the trip to accident and emergency a prognosis would not, could not be determined. I would undoubtedly be sent home, perhaps with a slap on the wrist for wasting vital services time. In the dawn of that sleepless night, wrangling with the searing pain, starting from my head, through my neck and across my shoulders, making me bleary eyed and immobile, I didn't dare call an ambulance, inhibited by my own fear of overreacting. Of being irrational. A well-worn, reactionary response to never quite knowing where the line between dramatic and serious should be drawn.

I dialled 111, the NHS helpline, for their advice, a professional opinion, permission. Crying, breathless into the phone, pushing through my descriptions of the physical turmoil, the nurse asked, 'Shall I dispatch an ambulance?' I searched for an answer as I embraced my throbbing head, feeling as though my brain was trying to outgrow the bone, pressing down a rigid tension, giving the sensation that my spine was collapsing in on itself. Intensifying through my shoulders, tender to the touch, creeping down my upper arms. I squeezed my eyes closed, as tight as I could force them, pulling at my forehead, causing my mind to increasingly pound like the ticking of a bomb. I could not open my eyelids as I could not bear the light; it penetrated like a knife.

Leaving the receiver hanging in silence, I began to sense a familiar swirling sensation. My stomach clenched, my throat constricting with nausea, pulsating outwards from my abdomen through all of

my limbs. I paused, losing my voice as I was submerged in pain.

The nurse asked again, 'Do you need an ambulance?'

I managed to muster a response, 'I... I... don't know.' Clarifying my answer with the assertion, 'That sounds serious'.

'What would you like me to do?' she asked, seemingly indifferent.

'I don't know', I repeated. 'It just hurts so much.'

'I am sending an ambulance now', she affirmed. 'It will be with you soon.'

It became startlingly apparent something was awry when I tried to stand. A wavering instability forced me down again. Unable to get to my feet, I shuffled over each step of the twisting double staircase from a low, crouched position in order to unlock the front door for the paramedics' access. Embarking upon the downward journey, I descended into collapse as the onset of a spontaneous retching caused cerebral oscillation, limbs trembling, turning hot and cold, back and forth, each second contracting into what felt like hours. The cream-painted walls shook and began to bend as my body crumpled, emptying the contents of my stomach over the beige carpet, leaving behind a sickly, bitter taste, my jaw slack and drooling, eyes rolling. I clutched at the flaking, churning surfaces with dry fingertips, trying to steady the unfastening. Vision clouded with the world disorderly, indistinct, I crawled to the solid, flat surface of the oak floor in my living room where an urgent necessity subsided my writhing, anguished body onto the sofa. With the paramedics arrival, I felt relieved by their authoritative presence, their concerned inquisition into my health. Their checks, tests, and measurements produced a sense of insistence, immediacy. I would require emergency medical attention. I lost all comprehension of what was happening as I was carried to an ambulance and syringe-fed fluid, commencing the winding, jolting journey to

triage, resuscitation, intensive care, and the high dependency unit, where, unknown to me in those moments, I would spend the next eight days.

I began to wonder if it were possible I could be experiencing a bad dream? Was I watching a film? The memories are overlaid with a haze as I drifted in and out of consciousness, throwing up with no awareness, awakening to the putrid stench of my own bile spilled over some sterile floor. Staining crisp, white starched sheets, staring at garish pools of yellow with a tunnel vision, everything on the periphery a blur. I wondered how I got to the hospital, how I was possibly going to clean up? Apologising profusely to the nurses for the mess I had made as they quietly went about their duties, passing me a musty cardboard bowl, pens scratching paper as they swiftly made notes upon plastic clipboards.

- I recall a doctor entering the cubicle as I laid limp and lifeless upon
- the bed, proceeding to ask when I last passed urine. I could not
- remember. I had no recollection and the thought never entered my mind. An IV line was promptly placed into my left arm, the bag massaged through the tube into my vein, whilst my mouth remained parched. I was not allowed to drink—'Just in case'. In case of what? A question which fleetingly crossed my mind amidst the dazed distress. The doctor, shouting into the fuzzy, dim distance beyond my bed, behind the computers, trolleys, and desks, ordered a catheter to be inserted. Alarmed and puzzled, I tried to sit up in protest.

‘catheter? Isn't that a bit much?’ I asked. No answer. Why, how could I need a catheter? I would be leaving in a few hours, having been scorned; I had overdone it, again, another panic attack, a viral cold, the usual tropes where there is no place for medicine.

With the catheter in place, fluids dripping, alarms beeping, I lay stagnant, aching, groaning and weak, the only part I could move

were my eyes. Scanning the ward, watching doctors and nurses bustling around machines, back and forth from one station to another, files of paperwork passing hands, pens clicking, the hands of a clock ticking, snippets of conversation, talk of holidays and lunches. Another working day operating smoothly, the calm veneer jarring against the sense of bodies unravelling, mouths groaning. I observed the long corridor, sectioned into private spaces with draped, mint-coloured curtains pulled closed, the people behind them surely in states of health incomprehensible to me. They were the real patients, I was an imposter. I had it under control. I had to get myself under control.

A circle of silence enveloped dissipating all thoughts into a hushed, amorphous fog. The noise and smell of the hospital became distant and fading, slanting and sliding away from my drowsy eyes. Abruptly, I was wheeled away on a hospital bed. Pushed through flapping double doors. Nobody spoke. Detached from time and space, I entered a large room with no mint curtains. There was a central unit of equipment which I did not understand; fridges, defibrillators, large and looming machinery that imposed itself on the organic form. A rolling rush, like the crest of a wave breaking, suddenly saturated with a thudding hysteria. A doctor, clamouring, his tone hitting like the reverberation of a bell demanded, 'stats!'

An oblique voice replied, 'BP 44/29, oxygen 89.' The abstraction bewildering, childlike, I clutched at the blanket I had brought from home as protection from the punishing light of the rising sun, the intrusive, glaring hospital strip lights upon my retina. I could no longer think analytically, rationally. *Let the good doctors take care of you, we're doing everything we can.* I was slipping into some other realm. An impenetrable, illusionary dimension, jumbled with confusion, disorientation, where reality becomes a pliable, nightmarish reverie shaped only by sensation.

It was at this stage when an acute awareness of my precarious

position on the edge of life took hold. Was this what dying felt like? It appeared more akin to a bad trip than all my accumulated years flashing before my eyes. No bright lights, no out of body experience. Only submission, a giving in, a necessary letting go. I could no longer contain what was happening inside of me, to restrain it within the boundaries of the expected, unspoken social codes. Everything internal began slipping over the edges, engulfing the space where I laid: resuscitation. I was unable to reason my way out of what now felt life threatening. No amount of questions could offer sufficiently soothing answers. No words, no books, no script in this splintering of narrative. A gap in the plot, a missed scene, the train was hurtling off the tracks.

In a sobering moment of realisation I ruminated upon a reconciliation that I had lived a good life. I thought of my children. How they would go on without me, the memories contained in all the photographs I endlessly took of our adventures. My journals, my clothes, my possessions; they would not forget who I was. I would become immortalised as their mother, who passed away when they were too young to fully grasp death. The end. I would no longer be a part of their growth as an active participant. They would have to figure it out alone, to frame it, contextualise it, understand it without hearing or ever truly knowing my story, and I hoped they would remember the good, the positive, that I had given enough for those impressions to endure.

I urgently longed to hold them, to feel the close intimacy of their small, boundless bodies one more time. To have their dad by my side, holding onto me, willing me to stay. Watching the grave faces of the doctors and nurses surrounding the bed, a wet warmth of desperate, melancholy tears stained my frigid, washed-out cheeks, a thick lump of grief narrowing my throat. I beckoned a nurse closer to the bedside, gripping her hand, lowering the oxygen nebuliser and croaked, 'Am I going to die?'

Such statements, upon reflection, can appear dramatic, overtly so. But in those moments, the way my body sunk, bleak and barren, no longer my own, as I shivered, cold to the core of my bones, dependent upon medical staff, their knowledge, procedures, the machines, it felt like a pertinent, valid question to propose. The nurse must have been in that position a hundred times before as she gently looked me in the eyes and replied, with little reassurance, 'You are in the right place, we are going to do everything we can.'

I was in the right place. It didn't feel like the right place. Accident and emergency, triage, resuscitation. These aren't normal spaces to occupy. This wasn't an everyday occurrence. It was a junction, where choices would be made, choices I appeared to have no ability to influence. Would I live or die? Pathos or melodrama? What makes the difference between such transient parallel pathways? Where is the exaggeration in the realisation of the spectacle of the everyday? Where lives are lost and new ones begin? Life ends. Life goes on. It was a shattering, an obliteration of the fragility of mortality. Recognition of the borrowed time we all live upon, we exist within. Questions surface and immerse your mind, grasping at meaning, at purpose. The ultimate, unanswerable far reaches. Touching the thin veil of death is a place that none of us can truly comprehend until we are face to face with unflinching reality, the finite possibilities of existence. All things must end, as all things begin, and we find ourselves rendered with the lack of control; that sense of order we perpetually seem to seek. That was the true oblitative force, that I was not, and never had been, in control. Perhaps it wasn't hysteria. Perhaps it was delirium.

After I was physically stabilised in resuscitation, administered antibiotics and noradrenaline, receiving an arterial line in my wrist and a central line in my neck, I was transferred to the intensive care unit for vasopressor and oxygen support. I required oxygen in order to breathe, I could not breathe on my own. Vasopressor support maintained blood pressure, following the body entering

a state of shock. The elapsed passing of time felt closer to weeks than hours as I further underwent a CT scan, a chest X-ray and two lumbar punctures. The eventual diagnosis was deliberated, possible bacterial meningitis, ultimately recorded as bilateral bacterial pneumonia and septic shock. The panic, the terror, remained palpable, prevailing, as everything became rearranged. Was it all an illusion? Did I slip through a loophole? If I did, I know that it inherently changed me. In the blink of an eye I became something, someone else. It happened so fast—instantaneous. Recalcitrant, contrary, contradictory to the agonising, protracted prior hours of peering into the unknown abyss of my own survival.

The days which followed revealed an in-between space. Bed bound and tied to wires, machines, with only the hospital routine, the staff changing shifts. Mind and body lulled to the synchronisation of the rising and setting sun. Motionless, time still kept accumulating. In these moments of primal, instinctive behaviour, only the most essential needs register. Between meals, I slept or gazed out of the windows into the stillness of the landscape where others still carried out their day-to-day activities. On occasion, I conversed with the nurses, enquiring about the weather and the news, what was happening outside of the four walls where my life had halted. The storm had passed, leaving debris that I would have to piece back together. Bit by bit, one foot in front of the other. You must learn to walk before you can run.

I spent many hours, too many hours, of those passing days thinking about death. The scale of such thoughts regarding the minutiae unfolding of events in painstaking detail, the analysis of every twist, turn, twinge, tension upon the body. To trail the clues for the unanswerable, the fleeting aspects which pin your experiences to a context for uncovering a reason, you find yourself lost in the wilderness, the terra incognita of human mortality—inextricably, human consciousness. Seeking meaning, purpose in existence, the liminal and transient dimensions of both dying and being

born, indeed, in living. This level of loss dissolves everyday life; the order, the categorisation, the rules, the arbitrary. Understanding that a few hours, even a few seconds, can make the difference in what comes next. Each action, each choice, will impact the outcome of whether you live or die. These great life events can be found in the smallest of details, adjoining with an unease at discovering no definitive start can be observed. No point of origin, no answers. None. Nothing. Only the few have come back to tell us how it feels, to have been reduced to our materiality, our very blueprint; to find we are all cut from the same cloth elicits a humbling solace in simply breathing once again, the sensation of our lungs inhaling and exhaling. I survived, I had to recover, death was behind. However, it is still present, written into a future I don't yet know, somewhere, somehow. It is inevitable. I sense the rhythm of my heartbeat, heightened inside my chest, in my ears, as it echoes internally like a threat in the dark. Silently, the blood courses through my veins, the pulsing informs aliveness and mortality simultaneously. Acutely aware of slight physical changes in pace and intensity, trying to identify what is happening, unseen, invisible. Can I predict what comes next? Can I hear death coming? Do I fear it? Although I did not die, a strange grief plunges through the cracks where a fractured, fragmented perception of our individual reality, meticulously curated until this point of collapse, tears openings: in, out. Who am I? How do I now make sense of self, of life?

These questions pose a sense of destabilisation, materialising as a response to both the trauma and exhilaration of experience. The mind seeks meaning which corresponds to the practical. Not only do I seek purpose in living but my curiosity compels me to ask, *how did I survive?* Death appears so huge, a black hole. How can you possibly dance at its threshold and remain alive? Are we victims to death's apparent finality? Perhaps, instead, we are active participants in a lived experience of dying. If we view death through the black and white lens of beginning and end, the stakes become

the ultimate price. A narrative you may not survive to recount the tale. Perhaps, instead, we are performing an improvised dialogue between life and death, discovering they are one and the same. If life changes in the instant, in the banal, it emerges from the same provenance as the magical, the profound. The details and the context are married in both the theatrics and the mundane. One can not be without the other. What makes life is found in the collision, the spark, the alchemy of this undefinable essence. Learning to hold two edges of the same sword you must tiptoe down the blade; to be wounded and to be healed. Where youth once gave invincibility, anguish, and rebellion, age offers us the consolation of acceptance. I turn my mind to living: a place where we are constantly talking, framing, expressing stories as survivors of loss, as survivors of life. The loss and lives of others, the loss and living of ourselves. Of the misfortune of those who pass away whilst we breathe on.



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When the National Health Party formed during the tail end of the pandemic, they argued that it had been wrong for so many people to lose their jobs and to be forced into lockdown over a virus

- which in most people
- caused no symptoms.

They questioned why the healthy majority should have to suffer such economic and social devastation to protect the small minority who weren't in good enough shape to face the virus.

The National Health Party

Alan Frince

Harry's bedside radio came on at 10am. It didn't completely wake him, but brought him into a semi-conscious state in which the inane chatter of the presenters infused his blurry thoughts and brought on painful, frustrating dreams. After a few minutes he woke up enough to realise what the source of his annoyance was. The shrill sound of the presenters cackling at the same jokes they made every morning grated him. He glared resentfully at the radio, hit the snooze button and rolled over, trying to remember what he had been dreaming about before he had been interrupted.

Although he hated the breakfast show on the chart music station, he hated the highbrow stations even more. The other option would have been to not set an alarm at all and have a lie in—after all, he was always shattered on Saturday morning after a long week of 7am starts, late evenings at the office, and then staying up at night watching TV. But he didn't want to waste the weekend sleeping so he tried to get up at a reasonable time on Saturdays and Sundays.

After five minutes the radio came back on, accompanied by a feeling of pressure around his wrist. His smartwatch was constricting to notify him of a calendar reminder. He begrudgingly opened his eyes and raised his arm in front of his face to read the notification. But by the time his eyes had focussed on the watch's screen, he had already remembered what it was going to say: he needed to do his weekly health check.

He grunted, sat up, and swung his legs out from under the covers. He planted his feet on the ground, switched off the radio, and sat on the edge of the bed for a few minutes, trying to adjust to being awake. He was tempted to go back to sleep for another half an hour, but eventually managed to summon the effort to stand up and walk to the bathroom.

Standing in front of the toilet, he remembered just in time that he needed to collect a urine sample. He opened the cabinet above the cistern and took one of the little plastic tubes from the box. After collecting his sample and finishing his wee, he flushed the toilet and screwed the cap on the tube. He washed his hands and then brushed his teeth before heading to the living room, clutching the urine sample.

He walked over to the health-check machine in the corner of the room. It was about four foot high and resembled a supermarket self-checkout machine but without the part where you place your shopping and with a set of weighing scales in front of it. There was a large touchscreen at the top and below that were a few buttons and some holes which were needed to collect the samples.

It wasn't compulsory to have your own health-check machine at home, but Harry and most of his friends did. It worked out cheaper in the long run than paying a subscription to use the local gym's, and it was a lot nicer than queuing to use the free one in the basement of the shopping centre.

Harry stepped onto the scales and the screen came on, displaying the manufacturer's logo on a bright white background that hurt his eyes. After a couple of seconds, the machine played a triumphant sound to congratulate itself on booting up and then displayed the home screen.

He pressed 'Start Health Check' and one of the holes lit up with green light. He slid the urine sample in and it was whisked into the machine, which whirred as it opened the tube and began its analysis. Another hole lit up, this time with blue light, and he inserted his right index finger. He grimaced slightly as a small needle pricked his fingertip and collected a few drops of blood. While the urine and blood were being analysed, the machine measured his weight and downloaded the week's blood pressure and heart rate data from his watch.

He went and made himself a cup of coffee and some toast and then sat on the sofa to read some news articles on his phone while the machine did its thing. After a few minutes, it beeped and he went over to see the results.

The machine told him that his updated Health Score was 79—down two points from last week. He was a bit concerned as this was the third week in a row that it had fallen, but 79 was still firmly in the ‘Good’ range, which was the second highest of the four categories (‘Excellent’, ‘Good’, ‘Unsatisfactory’ and ‘Poor’). It was only once you reached ‘Unsatisfactory’ that you started having to pay contributions towards your treatment on the National Health Service, and only once your score was ‘Poor’ that you had to pay all of your own healthcare costs. He didn’t think it was likely that his score would drop that low. And besides, if it did, one of his workmates claimed to have a friend who knew how to order healthy blood and urine on the dark web to cheat the machine.

The screen said he had two health issues that he could address right now. He pressed ‘View’ and it showed him the first: his iron level was slightly low. A box on the screen asked if he wanted to order a bottle of iron tablets from People’s Health (a Procter and Gamble brand) for £4.99. He knew he could get some from the pharmacy on the corner for 99p, but if he bought the People’s Health ones through the machine it would be fed into the algorithm and could help his score. He pressed ‘Buy Now’ and his watch strap silently constricted to let him know that the order-confirmation had arrived in his inbox.

He pressed ‘Next’ and the screen told him the second issue: his mental wellness biomarkers indicated that he had an elevated stress level. This time he was presented with two offers. The first was a mindfulness workshop running in the office building he worked in for three days next week (the machine had found one that was taking place during his lunch break so he would be able to attend). The second was a short course of video therapy provided

by TeleWell (a subsidiary of G4S). He chose mindfulness—it was cheaper and some of his colleagues would probably be going.

Once the course was booked and paid for, the machine informed him that his health check was complete. He switched it off and went back to the sofa to finish reading an article about the upcoming election. The Labour Party had announced that if they won they would reduce the NHS fees for those in the ‘Unsatisfactory’ category and look into reducing them for some people in the ‘Poor’ category. A spokesperson for the Conservatives had responded to the announcement by saying that Labour’s plans would mean big tax rises for healthy, hard-working families. The National Health Party had been even stronger in their criticism, saying that the fees were vital for protecting the NHS because they incentivised good health choices and ensured that healthy citizens did not have to pay for the irresponsible choices of the unhealthy minority.

- Harry hadn’t decided who he was going to vote for. He didn’t
- particularly like any of the party leaders, although he did feel that
- the National Health Party were probably right about some things. On the other hand, they had been in power since the early 20s and it wasn’t like a lot had improved. Unemployment was still high and economic growth was slow—although they claimed that this was because of the other parties getting in the way in parliament. He didn’t really know who to believe.

Recently, at his sister’s house, his niece and nephew had been furious that he would even consider voting for the NHP. But they were young and idealistic. They had only been toddlers when the pandemic happened twenty years ago, so they didn’t remember what it was like. He still vividly remembered the day when he came home from secondary school and his mum, who had clearly been crying, told him that she had lost her job. He remembered queueing at the food bank, being too cold at night to sleep, and the day they got evicted.

When the National Health Party formed during the tail end of the pandemic, they argued that it had been wrong for so many people to lose their jobs and to be forced into lockdown over a virus which in most people caused no symptoms. They questioned why the healthy majority should have to suffer such economic and social devastation to protect the small minority who weren't in good enough shape to face the virus.

The NHP had argued that this is what happens when we become obsessed with keeping everyone alive, no matter what the cost to society and no matter how many bad health choices they have made, rather than letting nature run its course. They said that it had made the country weak and vulnerable. And they said that the fact that the Prime Minister was so physically unfit that he had been hospitalised by the virus, leaving the country temporarily without leadership, was emblematic of the dangers of making unhealthiness socially acceptable.

As the NHP started to gain popularity, the other parties tried to pivot in the same direction in an attempt to hold onto their voters. The Labour Party said that immigrants coming into the country should have to demonstrate that they are fit and healthy or be required to pay some of their own healthcare costs. The Conservatives announced that they would introduce changes to the Equality Act to allow employers to carry out medical assessments on job applicants—a policy which they argued would help to ensure a robust and healthy workforce. The Liberal Democrats promised that they would subsidise memberships at several of the larger gym chains, paid for by making much-needed cuts to incapacity benefits, which were currently so large as to incentivise unhealthiness.

There was also a shift in the types of people that political parties put forward for elections. Although there continued to be increasing diversity in terms of gender, ethnicity and sexuality, there was

also increasing uniformity as it became the norm for all political candidates to be young, non-disabled, slim, and muscular due to parties not wanting their politicians to be perceived as unhealthy.

Ultimately, though, the old parties were unable to beat the new one at its own game: the NHP won a decisive victory in their first election and had held onto power ever since.

Harry had always felt that the NHP had some good ideas, and he had voted for them in most elections, but—as he had explained to his niece and nephew—it wasn't like he was a flag-waving supporter. He certainly had his concerns—especially around the National Reproductive Planning Programme. And when the NHP canvasser had knocked on his door, he had asked her, bluntly, 'Isn't this a bit like what the Nazis did?'.

- The canvasser had replied that this was an excellent question and
- she was glad he had asked it. She explained that the programme
- was actually very different to what the Nazis did, for two important reasons.

'Firstly, the Nazi programmes were really bigotry dressed up as science. They claimed that it was about improving the nation's genetic fitness, but really they just used it as an excuse to attack groups they didn't like. The NHP programme is based on objective measures of health and fitness. There is no hateful targeting of specific groups, just rational scientific planning for the benefit of everyone. Once you take away the prejudice and hate, reducing human suffering from disease and creating a more productive society by encouraging the healthiest people to reproduce more than the unhealthiest is just common sense.

'Secondly, the Nazi programme was based on violent coercion. They committed mass murder and carried out forced sterilizations. In our programme, no one is forced to do anything.

If a person's Health Score is in the "Poor" category then they can choose: either they pay a one-off fee of £5000 for the right to reproduce, or they can opt to be sterilised. Since they benefit from the fitness of the people around them, it's only fair that they should also make a contribution to the nation's health: either by choosing not to pass on their unhealthy genes or by helping to pay the costs of poor health and thereby safeguarding our NHS. So all of the sterilisations that take place are entirely voluntary—which is very important in a liberal society!



Working Class and Sober

Jayne Tauzer

Teetotaling During COVID-19 as a White, Queer, Working-Class, Academic Woman.

I am a working-class, white, queer, and now a recently sober woman who moved from the rural United States to England to pursue a PhD at the start of the pandemic. It is well documented that being working class in academia is awkward, farcical, and exploitative.¹ As a teen, I was encouraged to apply for programmes and grants, and to lean into the meritocratic illusion that we're all sold as Americans (which is equally rampant in the UK, I've come to realise). As a white neurotypical kid, it was an easy role to play.

● I loved the validation that I got through school: academic success
● was my one consistent source of encouragement, and continues to
● serve as a consistent source for funding. Throughout my 20s I've been led through the ranks of academia, writing and researching as a means to pay my bills, all the while working part time as a nanny to make ends meet. I recently tried to relate with a friend who is also a doctoral student: 'I don't like to lead with the fact that I'm doing a PhD, because it puts up a wall with people, do you know what I mean?' She didn't. Being from a wealthy family, and as a biologist in central California where studying ecology is akin to godliness, she wears the elite status comfortably, naturally.

My younger sister is working towards a lucrative career in corporate law; she is brilliant and fierce, with the determination of someone who has everything to prove. For years I've watched her successfully shirk off our working-class roots by wearing the right things, driving the right car, and curating a trendy, beautiful

1R. Clare, 'How Working Class Academics are Set up to Fail', *Tribune*, 2020, www.tribunemag.co.uk.

apartment. When I visit, she scans me up and down with notable anxiety, critically examining me for signs (there are always a few) that I am betraying her attempts to move up in society.

Drinking has been a conduit to connect with my hometown, to feel anchored to the familiar: slurping cheap beers in the cold of a Pacific northwest winter, the smell of diesel fuel, and the cold, wet breath clouds. Dirty fingernails, oil stains, and smudged Carhartt vests. It isn't all that different from standing outside a pub on a rainy evening in Birmingham—drinking has, for so long, been a way to come home. Class, and rurality, have similarly eclipsed my queer identity: I don't identify with pop-culture in general, least of all the upper-middle-class urbanism of the queer world available to me in the bay area of California. Drinking in a dive bar or parking lot has always felt more representative of who I am than the club.

So, when I first moved to England, I fell in love with pub culture. It was a natural space to relate and connect with local people in this otherwise completely foreign environment. But pub culture betrayed me as a woman, and as a queer person. The familiarity of pints became less a comfort blanket, more a source of alienation and discomfort. So, due to a series of negative experiences, and a growing realisation that alcohol consumption had grown more habitual than I would like, I decided to stop drinking altogether. And I leaned into the solitude offered by the pandemic to work on sobriety.

I have always connected sobriety with elitism: thin, beautiful people with ample free time, doing yoga, and performing a wellness that doesn't feel true for me. I've read 'quit lit' memoirs and struggled to see myself in those stories. Sobriety is marketed in wellness communities as a source for better health and glowing skin: influencers in felt fedoras, wheatgrass, and namaste... (#sober, so blessed). I didn't feel this way when I stopped drinking. Instead, I felt tired. I felt angry. I missed the spaces to talk and laugh freely.

I didn't want to demonise a behaviour that has been normalised, beloved even, by my community. I didn't want to demonise that behaviour in myself.

For so long, I thought that drinking culture held me in a way that the academic world, or the queer world, has failed me, or rendered me invisible. I thought that in a society that exploits the working class, engaging in one's vice or vices of choice is a small and fitting coping strategy, and a source of connection and community. I grew up with the idea that the end of a hard day's work should be marked with a beer, or six, with one's family and friends. However, sobriety has been a liminal space in which I have begun to examine my patterns, assumptions, and some of the false beliefs that I've held. I don't want to leave the working class to never look back, I don't want to ignore class as such a significant divider among us.

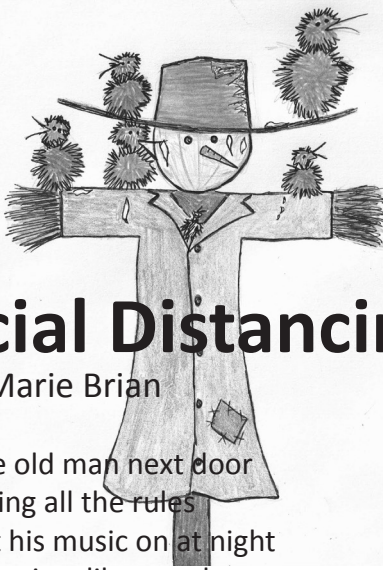
- Associating my class identity with alcoholism has been a form of class betrayal as well: we aren't all belligerent. Socialist activism has
- long touted sobriety as a tool to stay ahead of capitalist aggressions.
- I am discovering these things are at war within myself. Feeling my power is different from the capitalistic empowerment I've been sold as a young academic. Feeling a sense of belonging is deeper than getting drunk with people who look like me. Being a white ally in a racist society means that I have had to walk away from some of my community, and towards the unfamiliar, uncomfortable, and new. There is a difference between developing oneself and betraying one's roots. Sobriety has helped me understand this difference, to feel it, and to communicate it with more confidence.

I know I won't find what solidarity I'm looking for through the pub, the club, or through the academy. I know I'm not alone, either. The working class is diverse, expansive, and strong. We have to build what we're searching for, what we're dreaming of, through activism, collaboration, and doing the work of carving out a space in which we can grow. Sobriety has been an unexpected way home.

There is a difference
between a developing
one's self and not
conquering. Sobriety
means to stand, to
understand, to feel it,
to experience, to
achieve confidence.
With more confidence...

...

...



Social Distancing

Anne Marie Brian

I see the old man next door
Is breaking all the rules
He's got his music on at night
And brays just like a mule
I don't know why he looks so mean
His hair all black and dirty
He seems to think
● His smile's as great as when he just passed thirty
●
●

● I reckon I could get that man
In trouble with the law
He doesn't even seem to know
It's almost half past four
He never takes his dustbin in
And he just rants and raves
We'll be so glad when he's downtown
And digging his own grave

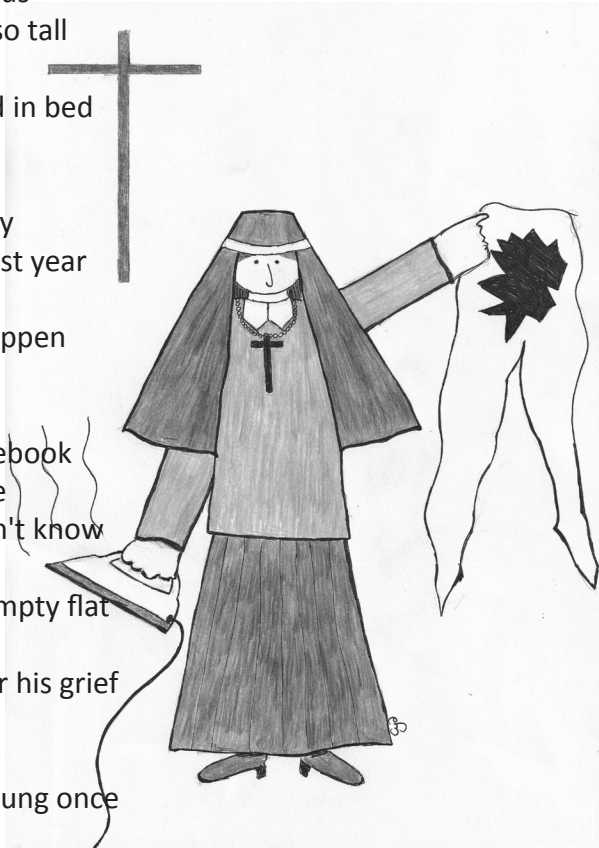
Oh Daddy did you see that man
He fell upon his knees
He dropped his hanky by my toe
And gave a mighty sneeze
I thought I'd die of laughter
As a bloody tooth came flying
It serves him right for standing
By his back door all night crying

I'm going to get that man locked up
Did you see what he just did?
He broke the new two-meter rule
And breathed close to my kid!
I tell you, he'll be flashing next
I'm going to make the call
He's bound to have the virus
Because he's old and not-so tall

I heard that man was dead in bed
For almost fourteen days
I saw it in the paper
He was seventy, by the way
Seems his wife had died last year
And he didn't want to eat
We're just glad it didn't happen
In the middle of the street

Well he wasn't on the Facebook
And he didn't have a name
He's just someone we didn't know
So we don't feel ashamed
It's great that there's an empty flat
For a young family
And we won't have to hear his grief
At twenty-two past three

Andrew Martin, he was young once
He had a family
He worked long hours to pay the rent
At the electronics factory
He lost a wife to cancer, a son in Afghanistan
But to you and me
He'll always be
Just another old and lonely man



...

Standing at the Shops

Maya Jordan

It is hard to tell you that I have six children. Not hard for me, I am used to it. But it's hard for you.

I could lie to you. Not lie, so much as not tell the truth, there is a difference. I could tell you I have four children and we will laugh and say that's a lot and you don't see big families so much anymore. I could ask you about your family and we will share stories and news. Look at us, proud parents, and me, a Grandma, another on the way. I could tell you about the lives of my children. How bright and fabulous they are. What lights they are in my sky, even though they are scattered under stars far away.

Or I could tell you I have six children and we could follow the same path and simply not mention the missing two. Awkward silence. Not for me, I am used to it. But it's hard for you. I know what will come.

For many years the lie burnt my tongue, the words hot ashes in my mouth, searing my breath, making a liar of me, a betrayal of all that was. But I did not have the words. I got lost. I had no means to hold my own pain let alone yours. The scars sat raw, close to the surface. Threatening to burn through my skin, to engulf me in a fireball with no care for the niceties of chatting at the shops.

Now I will tell you that I have six children.

Now I will tell you that they are the brightest stars, fabulous and brilliant and finding their way in the world. Now I will tell you that two of my children died. One at 16, one at 23. This is hard for you, I know. You do not know what to say. Or what to do. The horror of it undoes you and you want to be kind and you want to know how, but you want to protect you and yours and hold your babies close and not tempt fate or think that such things happen in the world. You know that people die. That everyone dies. But it's not manners to say it out loud. To see it in public. To hear it spoken of at the shops.

It's OK. It's not so bad to live with. See, that's another lie. To make it palatable. Not for me, I am used to it.

You will be sorry, unsure what to do next, where to look, what to say. You look away. I will be beside you, holding the space, reassuring you that it's ok. That I am fine. That it was hard. That it was a while ago now. And I will let us move on.

This is not for me. I am used to it. But it's hard for you.

For me I would tell you about my beautiful, naughty, funny boy, who scared me half to death until his broken, worn out body became too tired to go on. For me I would fill you with stories of his sister, my young lady, and her stubbornness and laugh and love of nail polish. Of how we came to share our worlds and how they made mine better. How, for a while, I was a mum of six. That I remain a mum of six.



This is me.

I am used to it.

But it is hard.



I know.
You do not
know what
to say. Or
what to
do.



Marseille

Julian Bond

Ghosts awake in the small hours, disorientated, coughing. Scottish ghosts, Irish ghosts, Northern English ghosts, ushered out of Paddington main station, past the pools of piss by the authoritarian Transport Police into the harsh, uncaring neon lights of night. Tramps one and all, young and old...

...on arrival at the hotel falling down the stairs, thrown, an altercation, don't get lippy boy...

Harry the landlord, Yorkshire man white, Yorkshire glasses and Yorkshire vest. Two black prostitutes under his wing dip his wallet while he sleeps. He rages around screaming profanities. They're his women when all is well and black when they're not.



The no-star, lone-star Metropole Hotel, Praed Street. Not of now, of upbeat tourist trails, boutiques, plush gentrification.

Praed Street of 1985, or was it 1986, was a different affair...

...the kids in the basement, locked in, used to be a bar. Bar still stands, the pumps and optics, a bed alongside the bar, two more on the other side of the narrow room where punters once stood. Three boys, one Irish, two English, arrived from the sticks in search of...

A doorway from the bar goes through into the abode of Marseille. Marseille, the cook from Belgium, who used to be in the French Foreign Legion—so he says but we don't believe him, not at all. We mock him mercilessly. He tries to win us over with gifts of money, five, ten, twenty pounds even, but we rob his cigarettes and his vodka from under his bed while he's out at work.

Used to be owned by an actress, a Cockney bar. No natural lights, just bare bulbs. The big glass coverings for the lights are used for drinking

now, as the Scots and the Irish invade us for a party.

Ronnie's the leader, Ronnie's the worst, the cheek of him, the gall. Lays into Marseille mercilessly, calls him for everything.

'Look lads', he says in his Flemish accent, 'be nice. I give you money if you want, I give you cigarettes. Be nice. Tidy the place. It's a mess. Be nice.'

'Fuck off.'

Bread fights from early morning, forays following the milk float litter the floor, rubbish everywhere, no one cares...

Indolent youth, lost in the capital of imperialism, 200 years of training have led to this. The black nightclub, proud and upstanding below, and the abusive drunken Cornishman, fat and stupid, throwing pickled onions down at them from the hotel up above, shouting racial abuse. Traffic cones thrown back up at the window in retaliation.

No one does anything for anyone here, in the true capital of pain. Forget Paris, here is where you don't want to be.

We sit on tables in a local cafe and the waiter brings free coffees and teas for everyone. We are all surprised and laugh at this Turkish man's kindness, bemused, what's going on? Until one of the two young-girl prostitutes from Stoke tell us he's a client. No one gives anyone anything for free down here...



'You been in the French Foreign Legion? Yeah fuckin right. Lying bastard.'

'I'm telling ya lads, I was. You'll have to believe me.'

'You're lying, French Foreign Legion.'

'I'm telling you the truth. Good night lads.'

'Fuck off, Marseille.'



London skins, London lights, the rich Arabs on Edgware Road, with the high-class prozzies on their arms, looking with contempt at the young tramps who flit in and out of doorways.

Edgware Road down to Marble Arch, the green and the trees, a sad, melancholic affair. Wake up on the green with a whisky head, uncared for and uncaring. Looking across to the wealth of Park Lane from the squalor of my mind.

Nothing is forgiven in London. Capital of capital. An immense movement contrary to the need for love. The sadness of ex-cons eating

- egg and chips with a slice of bread, the aloneness is all-encompassing.
- I say London but we only know Paddington and never go outside its
- bounds...



'I'll fucking kill you.'

Marseille explodes. From behind the bar he rips off the pumps with his bare hands. He takes out a large carving knife, a chef's one, brandishes it threateningly. The knife waves near my head, my eyes, my face, from the other side of the bar.

'I'll fucking kill you. I'll cut your balls off, I'll fucking kill you.'

We become dead silent. Myself, Ronnie the Irish lad, usually the cockiest, now in the greatest danger, and Dave.

Marseille throws the knife, a distance of six or seven feet, it hits the wall just above Ronnie's head, and rebounds back across the bar into his hands.

I saw it with my own eyes. I tell you the truth. I couldn't believe it. Was it deliberate? Or a pure fluke? One chance in a million for a drunken chef, or part of the French Foreign Legion's training? Or maybe both?

Marseille, the stupid fucking guy in the room next door. Thin, spindly, bespectacled, tatty, irritable, an ex-member of the French Foreign Legion. So it was true. He stormed around the bar into our space, blocking the doorway from possible escape.

'You steal my vodka, you steal my cigarettes, you take my money. I'll fucking kill you.'

No one moves, no one says a word. The long-bladed knife is prominently on view in his hands.

Death in the room. Only a movement away. Can move in any direction at will, strike down any one of us.

A moment away from death—the mind moves at incredible speed. A speed unknown before. Light-speed. A million thoughts pump through the fear searching for a way to stay alive. The body motionless but the mind a whirling dervish of considerations, how do I get out of this?

'Look at this place, lads, it's a fucking mess. Bread everywhere—it's a disgrace, how can you live like this. Look at it.'

The brain finds a solution, immediately, quickly, definitively. A detective detecting. An unmoving head, quietly and politely says, 'Marseille, if you want, I could go upstairs and get the hoover and bring it back down and clear up everywhere.'

'Yeah, that's a good idea.'

Continuation. Needs confirmation.

'Do you want me to go and get the hoover then?'

'Yes, go and get the hoover.'

‘I’m going to get up off the bed and go upstairs and get the Hoover, OK?’

‘Yes, that’s a good idea.’

Marseille has walked back round the other side of the bar.

‘Why do you do it? Why do you live like this? There’s no need.’

I get up, slowly and deliberately walk through the doorway. No, don’t say a word, important now not to have any conversation with him. As I walk through the next door I hear David saying, ‘I’ll go and help him,’ and Marseille replying, ‘OK.’

I get to the end of Marseille’s room and turn up the stairs, four steps leading to the front door, natural light flooding in from the feet of passers-by on Praed Street above. I take my key out of my pocket, fearful of being unable to open the door. Of a knife going into my back as I struggle with the lock. Of death returning in proximity. As I put the key in the lock, I hear Ronnie’s Irish accent from below, ‘I’ll go and help them as well’, and Marseille shouting, ‘Heh lads, how many does it take to get a Hoover?’

My hands shake uncontrollably but I open the door and swiftly enter the London sunshine and the day of the afternoon, and death subsides and is gone back within. Davie follows behind me, then Ronnie comes out. We half-run down Praed Street, no thought of going through the main door of the hotel to get the Hoover. Ecstatic to be alive. Marseille comes out but at a distance now, a safe distance, realising he’s been duped, he shouts and curses after us. But the knife is no longer in his hand and death is no longer with him. We don’t go back to sleep there that night. We never go back...

Looking for work

jobcentreplus

Keeping a record of what you do to look for work will help you

- plan and follow up your job search effectively
- keep in contact with employers and people who may provide job leads
- show that you are actively seeking employment. You must show that you were actively seeking employment in each week of your Labour Market Declaration

It will also help when we

- discuss your efforts to find work and employment opportunities
- consider other job offers and employment opportunities
- review your Jobseeker's Agreement to make sure it is still helpful or to see if it needs changing

Please bring this with you each time you are asked to attend your jobcentre and sign your declarations

If you need help

If you need any help with, or information or advice about your job search please contact us.

Claim file

Cycle

Name

NI number

Office address

Falling Foul of Authority: My Sanction Hell

Joe Young

Although I can offer no supporting evidence, I have a long-held theory that the catalyst for the coalition government's brutal sanctions regime against benefit claimants came on the evening of Monday 13 August 2012. For it was then that Channel 4 ran an episode of its *Dispatches* documentary series titled 'Tricks of the Dole Cheats'. The programme, which was as much about the shortcomings of jobcentre staff as what was implied in the title, featured some memorable characters. These included Alay, whose letters of application stated that he didn't actually want a job, and Joe, who secured a fortnight's jobseekers allowance (this was the pre-universal credit era) after jotting down a shopping list in his job diary as evidence of his efforts to find work. Sadly, we never got to find out if on his next visit, Joe's adviser asked if he'd heard anything back from semi-skimmed milk, or how he fancied his chances of getting a start at cat food—wet and dry.

When shown footage of the laxity that abounded within her department, the then Chief Operating Officer at Jobcentre Plus, Ruth Owen, squirmed in front of the cameras. With seemingly as many slackers among her own staff as were perceived to be on the claimants' side, it is not difficult to visualise jets of steam hissing from the ears of one George Iain Duncan Smith, as he watched these spongers being allowed to take the piss on national television.

For as Work and Pensions Secretary, he was in charge of the whole shebang at the time, and it would be difficult to come up with a more suitable candidate for a post which had just been handed an urgent prime objective: to tear the layabouts a collective new one. The *Dispatches* episode was aired in August, and the government's new sanctions regime came into force in October. That'll learn them, as they say.

In 2013, after the new regime had been up and running for several months, the government's own dot-gov-dot-uk website reflected on the change thus:

The new JSA sanctions regime, which was introduced in October 2012, encourages people to engage with the support being offered by job centres by making it clearer to claimants what they are expected to do in return for their benefits – and that they risk losing them if they don't stick to the rules. It also makes sanctions more proportionate: with shorter sanctions for minor offences and tougher ones for repeat offenders. Repeat offenders can lose benefits for up to 3 years.

As jobcentre staff rigorously set about implementing penalties in accordance with the new directive, it soon became clear that there were inconsistencies in the level of zeal that was being applied to the new rules. Reports came in of sanctions being imposed on grounds that were often pedantic, and sometimes bizarre.

While most people would agree that those out of work and in receipt of benefits should demonstrate that they are actively seeking work, some of the sanctions that were imposed in this new blitz were founded on such flimsy pretexts, they bordered on ridiculous. Here are five examples of how the sheer pedantry of some jobcentre staff brought the full weight of hardship measures down onto the shoulders of unfortunate claimants. Bear in mind that the then Employment Minister Esther McVey stated categorically that sanctions were only used against those who were 'wilfully rejecting support for no good reason'.

- A claimant attended a job interview that overran. He was nine minutes late when he arrived at the jobcentre, and so he was sanctioned for four weeks.
- A claimant was given a two-week sanction because he didn't enter anything in his job diary to show that he had been looking for work on Christmas Day.

- A York man secured a job with a start date two weeks later. He didn't look for work during that period (why would he?) and so he was sanctioned (oh, *that's* why).
- A client was ordered to attend a work programme interview by his local jobcentre. The time of the interview clashed with his signing-on time. He couldn't be in two places at once, so he attended the work programme interview as ordered by the jobcentre. He was sanctioned for failing to sign on. This begs the question, had he chosen to sign on instead, would he have then been sanctioned for not attending the interview?
- A claimant had applied for more jobs than was required by the terms of his jobseekers' agreement but he neglected to state that he had checked his local newspaper for jobs. This was also a requirement of his jobseekers' agreement, and so he was sanctioned.

I have to say that during this frenzy of forfeiture, staff at my local jobcentre were always, for the most part, helpful and courteous. So much so that I did, on occasion, witness outbreaks of amicability between claimant and adviser, although even during these bouts of geniality, the pervading aura of 'them and us' never quite faded. And, of course, there's always one rancid nut in the muesli.

Mine came in the form of an adviser who seemed utterly ill-suited to dealing with members of the public. My presence at her desk was a source of irritation, demonstrated by the series of tuts, sighs, and headshakes she would perform as an accompaniment to reading my job diary. She was the embodiment of the old claimants' maxim 'you'd think they were paying us out of their own pockets'. Nothing seemed to please this woman, and there is an important piece of backstory that is relevant to my own tale of welfare woe.

Two months earlier, I had received a four-week sanction for a missed appointment which I'd completely overlooked, as my reminder card lay buried in the bundle of paperwork that comes with a new claim.

My bad. The significance of having a 'previous conviction' to my name was that any future sanction would be for a longer period, probably thirteen weeks. My first encounter with the adviser who was to initiate the second sanction didn't go well, and she refused to let me sign because of my 'attitude'. I was referred to a manager, although no further action was taken on that occasion and my payment was authorised.

I was lucky, because the clampdown had caused near-panic among claimants and advisers alike. Sanctions were being handed out like lollipops on the flimsiest of pretexts, and claimants didn't know what to expect when they signed on. One Thursday, I marched into this maelstrom of fear and paranoia to sign on at the appointed time of 12:30pm.

I arrived in good time, and registered at the front desk. After taking a seat, I was eventually called to my adviser at 12.41pm. I handed over the plastic wallet that contained my job search details and, as the adviser had offered nothing by way of apology for her tardiness, I made a casual observation. 'If I'd been eleven minutes late', I said, 'there would have been consequences.'

This utterance was never going to endear me to that adviser, but I felt that the point was valid and it had to be made. I'm not a vindictive person, and my fortnightly trip to the jobcentre usually entailed little more than the signing-on process being carried out amid a few lines of bland chit-chat. But in that particular environment and with that particular adviser, I felt I had to demonstrate a level of bravado, to show that I remained unbowed after being referred to a manager a few weeks earlier.

The adviser's response to my comment was to bark at me in the manner of a Yorkshire terrier going at the postman's feet. 'There wouldn't be delays if people filled in their job diaries properly,' she said. Now, the job diary deficiencies of other claimants were none

of my concern, but I thought it best to keep *shtum*. Secretly I was pleased that my comment had hit home; them nil, us one.

Resisting the urge to pull the front of my shirt over my face and run around with my arms outstretched like an aeroplane, I felt I should reflect on the impact of my words. Looking back, was it really a victory? After all, it wasn't only claimants feeling the pinch; jobcentre staff were under considerable pressure to implement the government's new sanctions regime, so there was bound to be some ill humour among advisers. With both sides getting it in the neck from above, and the media awash with reports of flaws in the system, there came a golden opportunity to demonstrate class solidarity. Two sides often at loggerheads could unite and channel their combined frustration towards the cause of both their woes: Iain Duncan Smith and his acolytes.

But after due consideration I cannot allow this adviser the benefit of the doubt. There were other advisers under the same pressure, but they had not resorted to the sort of power wielding mine seemed keen to demonstrate. I got the impression that she relished her role as bearer of bad news.

A few weeks later, I came face to face again with this peevish pen-pusher, and it was as though she'd spent the interim period allowing her revenge to cool to a suitable temperature for serving. The meeting served as the catalyst to a living nightmare for my partner and me.

'You haven't done enough', she said, after scanning the evidence in my job diary for the two-week period. It was now my turn to tut. I took the diary from her, and pointed out that my job search for the current period contained 21 entries. The evidence from two weeks earlier comprised only seventeen entries. To lend extra support to my case, I mentioned that my partner's diary for the same period had been accepted earlier that day with only fourteen entries. The

paranoia I mentioned above was real, and every signing-on day I checked and double-checked that everything was in order before I left the house.

‘Surely’, I said, “if seventeen entries were acceptable two weeks ago, then 21 should be sufficient today.’ I was dismayed to see that my statement cut no ice. The adviser told me that my case would be referred to a manager, and that I should return at 2.30 that afternoon. I trudged out of the jobcentre and went home to break the news to my partner. She was quite upset, but I reassured her that the evidence was on our side, and the whole episode was probably born out of a twisted attempt at revenge on the adviser’s part for the temerity I had shown over her tardiness a few weeks earlier.

At 2.30pm I met the manager as per my appointment. I thought I’d have the matter cleared up in minutes, but I had reckoned without the new rigour with which jobcentre staff rooted out even the slightest premise for imposing a sanction. I showed her the diary entries for the two periods, but to no avail: the manager was even more inflexible than the adviser had been.

‘I wouldn’t have accepted either of them’, she boomed.

I jumped straight in here. ‘That has nothing to do with it’, I said. ‘The fact is that the evidence for the first period *was* accepted, and so, based on that precedent, I had every right to assume that the evidence for the second period would be enough’.

In a tone that didn’t suit the gravity of the situation, the manager told me that she would forward the matter to a decision maker, adding that in the meantime, as my benefits would be stopped, I should pick up a hardship payment application form on the way out.

Although I maintained my composure outwardly, inside I was hurting like hell—more for my partner than myself. As I walked home, I tried to fathom how a glaringly obvious precedent could be so casually brushed aside. I wondered, were those advisers even aware of the cruel consequences their actions would initiate? Would it trouble them, or could they remain detached from this less savoury aspect of their work? Moreover, I had the rather pressing matter of how my partner and I would get through the next quarter of a year on hardship payments that amounted to £42 a week, as later that day we received a telephone call confirming a thirteen-week sanction.

There was one final straw for me to grasp at. This was to submit a so-called ‘Letter of Reconsideration’ to the decision maker at the Department of Work and Pensions. Given the brick walls I had run into during the first three stages of this miserable process, I felt that I may just as well write a letter to Santa Claus, but hope springs eternal in the human breast, so I gave it a shot. The body text of my original letter ran to over 1400 words. I won’t reprint the entire tract, as much of it recounted what I’ve already described above, but these closing paragraphs offer a flavour of the tone I adopted in writing my appeal.

Perhaps if your staff adhered less to the Chancellor’s naive statement that those on benefits ‘are not doing enough’, and should ‘focus more’, then they might come to realise that most people actually detest being on benefits, and would give almost anything to escape them.

For despite the widely-held belief by an out of touch government that those claiming benefits are generally layabouts who rise at the crack of noon, never open the curtains and spend the whole day watching Jeremy Kyle on their 40-inch, plasma televisions, the misery of being on benefits is itself enough to focus the minds of most people into escaping what is an utterly joyless existence in which hardship goes hand in hand with stigma.

As for my own situation, I am at my desk most mornings at 8.00am, looking for work on various websites. The complete lack of response to the job applications I submit has instilled in me a belief that self-employment offers the best opportunity for me to escape this misery-go-round. To this end, I spend hours each day scouring freelance sites, expanding my contacts and looking at ways I might be able to advance as a writer. As these activities are not job applications as such, they only appear in my job diary under the umbrella of the particular site I used, but there are many. You can take it from me that in my case, looking for work is a full-time occupation that regularly goes on into the early hours of the morning.

I expect a positive response to this letter of reconsideration, along with an apology for the stress that was caused by imposing a sanction based on a premise that was quite clearly flawed. If I do not receive such a communication, then I shall immediately send a copy of this document to my MP, and I shall look at other options available to me. I will not let this injustice pass, and I will take the matter as far as you wish.

I expect to hear from you soon.

Regards, etc.

Six days after sending this letter, and eleven days after the sanction had been imposed, my partner received a phone call from the DWP to notify us that the decision regarding our letter of reconsideration had been favourable. Our benefits would be reinstated and, importantly, backdated. There was no apology, nor was there an explanation as to why the decision had been overturned, but we didn't really care at the time, as our relief at being freed from the grip of hardship was all-consuming. Reflecting on the sorry affair years later still leaves a bitter taste, and I maintain to this day that our case was handled in an appalling manner.

While personal animosity may have been a factor for the adviser who set the sanction ball rolling, the same cannot be said of the manager and the decision maker. I had fallen through three proactive safety nets that proved as flimsy as gossamer. It was only the fourth, *reactive* net that saved me. The decision to impose a thirteen-week sanction on me and my completely innocent partner should not have been taken lightly, yet at all three stages the opportunity to halt the process was presented and ignored. I had a face-to-face engagement with two of the players in this unpleasant drama, and neither had shown even the slightest concern for the welfare of my partner and me over what they were condemning us to. Indeed, each had delivered the news that I would be sanctioned in the sort of perfunctory manner that might be expected from the aforementioned lollipop distributors. Perhaps, like the slaughterman dispatching lambs, they become hardened to it all.

So what of now? Unfortunately, my place of work closed down because of the current Covid pandemic, so I find myself once again in the clutches of the local jobcentre. For obvious reasons, all interviews are conducted via telephone just now, and job search details are submitted electronically, but I must say there has been a noticeable difference in the level of concern shown by the staff I have encountered towards my personal well-being. I have been asked about my mental health during these lengthy lockdown measures (I'm fine), the pressure to provide evidence of a required number of job applications has been eased, and I have been made aware of various helplines that are available, should I need them. I'd like to think this is a permanent change for the better, and not a temporary measure necessitated by the increased likelihood of mental health issues arising among claimants because of isolation and prolonged social inactivity due to Covid-19. I witnessed first hand a distinct lack of concern towards the mental well-being of two people who were deliberately pushed into three months of hardship, with the added pain of injustice thrown into the mix.

From my own observations, I'd say jobcentre staff are largely from working-class backgrounds, and yet they will on occasion casually inflict hardship and misery upon compatriots of a similar social standing. Why is it that, having grown up on the same streets, they later find themselves streets apart?

I know several people who work, or have worked at my local jobcentre. Indeed, the aforementioned manager who rejected both of my job diaries was a couple of years above me at the local grammar school. On the council estate where I grew up, there used to be a brother and sister who worked at the local jobcentre, and the latter always asked after my mother when I signed on. Even in their role as tools of the state, most retain a level of civility, in what can be a challenging job. Jobcentre staff are not ogres.

● It is not a clear-cut case of 'claimants good, advisers bad'. I have
● witnessed some awful sights inside the jobcentre, including an
● arrest, the worst kind of verbal abuse, racism, and even death
● threats. While these are extreme cases, should we really be
surprised that people living in hardship, who are then plunged into
even deeper hardship, sometimes become indignant?

That could be the key issue here. It is only natural that advisers who are dealing with angry, frustrated and occasionally downright-abusive claimants will close ranks and stick together, thus perpetuating the 'us and them' environment, as mentioned above.

Of course, the government would be quite happy for these conditions to remain, as division in the ranks is their game. And the introduction of new sanctions in 2012 saw the two sides become even more bitterly entrenched.

I'm pleased to report though that this story has a happy ending of sorts. While my partner and I were mired in the Slough of Despond, her father sent us £200 in cash to help alleviate our hardship. This

arrived the day before news of the cancellation of the sanction was relayed to us. We offered to send the money back untouched, but her dad told us to keep it. To celebrate our new-found (relative) affluence, we embarked on a stress-relieving drive up the coast to the lovely border town of Berwick-upon-Tweed, where we had lunch and did some shopping. In a cafe, we raised our coffee cups and I made a toast.

‘To the bastards who tried, but failed to grind us down’, I said.

...



Since I've come of age

Damien Lane

No time for dreaming
Since I've come of age
No leisure for loving
Since I've come of age
And I work my good days
for a minimum wage
Since I've come of age

I thought I'd travel this whole world
When I came of age
I thought I'd be a rock-star
When I came of age
But I trade my best days
for a minimum wage
Since I've come of age

Too dead for dreaming
Since I've come of age
Too dead for loving
Since I've come of age
I kill my good days
for a minimum wage
Since I've come of age (there's no escape)
Since I've come of age (there's no escape)
Since I've come of age (there's no escape)



The Nature of Creativity

Martin Howard

I think almost everyone has creativity. Something that will light a fire in your brain and take you somewhere else. From something as simple as creating a meal from basic ingredients to making music, from painting to writing, speaking, singing, or working with wood or stone—there is a broad range of human activity that uses a creative spark.

Creativity tends to get split down into either craft or art—but there are both class and gender biases here. Craft is seen as somehow lesser than art, but who decides what activities count as one or the other? What is it that ‘craft’ is missing to stop it being ‘art’? Is it really just the approval of wealthy and powerful men? And don’t let me get started on the sleight of hand where being ‘arty’ is now described as being ‘a creative’.

Since I was young, I’ve written things: songs, poems, articles, stories. For most of my life I’ve carried around a small notebook and scribbled in it while waiting for buses (which seemed to sum up my teens and early 20s), or in snatched moments while meant to be doing something else. At some times and places I’ve been able to do things with what I’ve written—but at other times I haven’t. At no point have I ever been in a position where I could do whatever I liked, because I still needed to get money somehow. I’m fortunate that I’m currently in a position where I can perform songs live (pre-Covid at least), record them (because the technology to do so is now much cheaper), and post them online, but I’m never going to be in a position to put all my time and effort into music or writing.

That I find myself where I am is not a surprise. At least not now. For a few years when I was younger I kept thinking I could get that big break. We all did. When I was playing in bands in the 80s, and putting gigs on, almost everyone I knew doing so was either a student or on the dole. David Callahan (of the Wolfhounds and Moonshake) talks about the centrality of the dole to the music scene, recounting when Moonshake went to an industry showcase

in New Orleans with two of them facing a restart interview the following Monday.¹ There was mass unemployment, squatting was legal, and rents were a lot cheaper: things were more possible. There was even a government recognition of the situation—the Enterprise Allowance scheme which paid people £40 a week (a tenner more than the dole) to ‘start their own business’ for a year. It was a win-win. The government could claim unemployment was lower because of the entrepreneurial spirit of the age, and people who wanted time to work on their own passion could have it without the hassle of signing on. The generation before had had art college as a funded alternative. Acts as diverse as the Rolling Stones and the Mekons had their roots in art colleges.

This situation didn’t last. The government latched onto the idea of deserving and undeserving poor, that benefits should be mean and parsimonious. Tabloids talked of how outrageous it was that people could squat or live on benefits in places that ‘hard working families’ could never afford. Once the funding stopped, that freedom and space to explore did too, and ‘art’ became seen as a career where rich people would buy your work if it was provocative enough, and eventually you too could become a Conservative pillar of the establishment. The housing bubble started, as the middle classes worked out that living in Camden or Fulham was more interesting than living in Tunbridge Wells. And now, 30 years later, there is media concern that there will be no live venues left, and that all the white music in the charts is made by public school kids.

I know talented musicians working as labourers, or in bars or restaurants. Talented poets working in care. Artists who teach, writers who fix computers. It’s nearly always been this way, but this way of life has an impact. Artists who ‘make it’, by which I mean make a living, however precarious, from their art, tend

¹ He’s threatening to write a book on the subject at some point which should be fascinating, but, as if to reinforce the point, needs to ask for donations to fund it: www.ontherocknroll.com/post/moonshake-in-new-orleans.

to have certain things going for them—like determination, luck, marketability, single-mindedness and, often, class privilege.

All things being equal, class privilege trumps everything else, hence even the mainstream media clocking onto the number of public school types making pop music. If your parents can afford to support you while you learn your craft, then you're lucky. If you have to work 40 hours a week in a physical job just to make the rent, you already have less energy and less mental space to create. If you're caring for someone, or need care yourself, everything becomes more difficult. It's not to say that you can't overcome these obstacles—I know quite a few people who have—they're the sort of folk who are going to make their art whatever it takes, and in a couple of cases have taken the view that working for a fraction of minimum wage doing what they love is better for their mental health than trying to fit it in around a job they hate.

It's in all our interests as humans to nurture everyone's creativity and give each other the time and space to practice it. No one needs to work as much as we end up doing because we live in a capitalist society. Work could take up only a few hours a week and we would see a flowering of creativity in places we have not even thought about yet. Musical movements as diverse as punk, Two Tone and hip hop began with unemployed youth having time and space to explore and create. Derelict factories and workshops provided rehearsal space: Cabaret Voltaire rented an old cutlery factory and laid the foundations for Sheffield's synth-based music scene.

But unfortunately, we do live in a capitalist society which limits how you get to express your creativity: your material circumstances limit both its development and exercise. For some, the drive to create is so strong it can push these other limits to one side, but I know too many people who have given up in frustration or accepted that the demands of everyday life will snuff out that creative spark.

There are also different responses to different forms of creativity: if you're a great cook or a dab hand at carpentry, people will make space to allow you to express it, just because it is in their interest to do so. But the recognition you get will likely be limited to the friends and family who benefit. It's hardly surprising that most great cooks are women, but most acclaimed chefs and cookery writers are men. You can also find work that uses your creative sparks for someone else's benefit: we are living under capitalism so using your creative skills to earn a crust will probably mean a more meaningful, less alienated experience of work, whether you're playing in a covers band or writing press releases. You'll get something out of it that's more than just the pay packet, honing and practising your skills, but at the end of the day, someone else is still in control.

Capitalism plays a role in how creativity is consumed as well. Growth of mass media and entertainment since the 19th century made some people very rich and powerful, either as creators or as controllers of what was produced and marketed. Writing in 1961 about an engineering strike in 1924, the syndicalist militant Tom Brown celebrated morale being kept high by 'a good supply of singers, musicians and comedians' and lamenting the decline of this do-it-yourself approach because 'there was no telly and more people developed their own talents'. Brown was describing a culture where people developed their own talents, rather than see things left to the professionals and it is no surprise to see cultural movements use the language of do-it-yourself.

Many of the great leaps made in 19th century science were made by 'gentlemen of leisure', often clergy, who had no real work to do so could get on with studying whatever motivated them. Some wrote hymns, some drew up scientific theories, including Darwin, perhaps the most influential of them all. After he'd sailed around the world and made notes, he continued his studies in a large house in Kent. He was able to do this because his family background was

wealthy and he didn't need to work. He ended up publishing his theory jointly with Alfred Russel Wallace, a man often overlooked in the histories who worked as a collector of specimens for wealthy patrons and had come to the same conclusions about evolution as Darwin, but didn't have the social wealth to exclusively sit down and write.

It takes time to develop your creative juices and it needs to be worked at. The idea that someone can just sit down and a great song or poem or piece of art will come to them out of the blue is generally a myth. Even where someone can conjure something out of nowhere, that ignores all the work that led up to them being able to do that. And there is a cost to pursuing your art to such a high degree in the lost opportunities in other parts of your life, such as strained or broken relationships.

I kind of fell out of love with music in my early 20s. It didn't happen overnight, but a major factor, on reflection, was that I'd been trying to make a living from it: unfortunately I wasn't any good at the rigging and glad handing expected in the places I found myself. I ended up in a job in an office. I started writing for anarchist papers instead of writing songs. With work, there wasn't the time to do both.

Since then, I've juggled writing political stuff with songs, and occasionally poems and stories. I've learnt that I need to write and I need to have people hear or read what I create. But my ambition has always been fairly limited so it doesn't matter to me that it's not a particularly wide audience—just that it's an audience. I've learnt that I often have ideas for longer-form work, but never find the time or inclination to do it: instead I retreat to the comfort of the shorter form. I once wrote a song that was eight-minutes long, I cut it down to just under five. Short. Quick. Get in there, make your points and get out again before people decide they don't like it.

What I wish I knew or understood when I was younger was that I could have done this while working. I could have planned that the time I had away from work would be for something concrete. I know this now—I've taken a day off to write this because I know I don't have the space to do it otherwise.

I got back into music the long way round. I stopped listening to the bands that I'd cared so much about in my late teens and early 20s and gradually got into other forms of music. It was still largely obscure, but that doesn't make it better. Or worse. Something else I wish I'd known when I was younger and more arrogant. If we can see creativity as something we all have, and that it is valuable to express it, we can make space for it. Expressing ourselves is good for our mental health, and good for building our connections with others.





I know
talented
musicians
working as
labourers,
or in bars or
restaurants.
Talented poets
working in
care. Artists
who teach.
writers who fix
computers.

...

Education and Accessibility

Stephen Dozeman

In a 2019 piece for *Current Affairs* titled ‘Academics Cannot Evade Their Public Responsibilities’, Nathan Robinson argued that academics have a responsibility to educate the public, including producing shorter, more accessible books, articles, essays, and even blog posts intervening in contemporary issues. Unfortunately, the situation is dire, since many professors, adjuncts, and other academics find themselves unable to publish such public works because of the institutional pressure to publish more traditional academic scholarship in the form of peer-reviewed journals and books published by academic publishers. I actually agree with Robinson here, and it’s unfortunate that many younger and more precarious scholars find themselves forced to ignore public issues because of institutional pressure. Robinson’s absolutely right that this leaves a void that then gets filled in by people like Sam Harris and Ben Shapiro, but I also think he’s only half-right here, in that he’s only really addressing half the problem. The other half he only briefly touches on but doesn’t seem to realise is itself part of the problem. He writes:

There is something very seriously wrong with the academy when scholars are punished for maximizing the number of people they inform. Books with the so-called ‘popular presses’ are frowned upon and might even count against your tenure bid. You need to publish with an ‘academic press,’ where the books cost \$85.00 and won’t show up in stores or get reviewed in the newspaper. Think about that: ‘popular’ as a pejorative rather than a mark of success as an educator!

While Robinson is criticising writers getting pushed into a narrow ‘academic’ channel, what he quietly misses is that there are books getting published that cost \$85 (US dollars). There are cases where this is understandable; I minored in art history in college and the textbooks were large, filled with colour-photos, and often several pages of copyright permissions. But in some cases, this doesn’t make all that much sense, and for several reasons.

For one thing, when academics get an academic article or book published, there's a decent chance that they aren't going to make much money off of it, if they get paid at all. Reviewers—other academics assigned to review articles and make sure they meet certain professional standards—also rarely get paid. The people producing academic work are often relying on their regular professor's salary to meet their material needs. Funnily enough, this is part of why many academics are often happy to share their work for free if you email them nicely. I think of a time last summer when Robert Pippin wrote a critical review of Adrian Johnston's *A New German Idealism: Hegel, Žižek, and Dialectical Materialism*. Johnston responded, via Brian Leiter's blog, by pointing out that the chapter Pippin disliked so much was a reworked version of a journal article that was available online for free in the open-access journal *Crisis and Critique*, but even continued: 'If either you or your blog readers have any interest in the version of this text that appeared in my book, I can scan and send a PDF'. I think it's telling that Johnston came forward, not just to try and defend his own academic reputation, but offering to give out free digital copies of the work to anyone interested, and he's not the only one to do this. Just look at Academia.edu, where countless professors, adjuncts, and graduate students are uploading various copies of their papers for public consumption. It's an online community that mirrors the more illicit ones where people trade PDFs from various journals and books. Twitter even has a hashtag for it, #icanhaspdf, where people from all over request obscure academic papers.

But expensive books from academic publishers are also a frustrating barrier to knowledge because many academic presses are attached to universities, many of which have significant amounts of public funding. If the writers aren't getting paid, and many of the administrative costs are covered by taxpayers, it seems ridiculous that the products are so expensive. This is even sillier in an age where almost everything is available online. Paying

a certain amount to help cover printing and shipping is one thing, but when you're just talking about access to PDFs, it starts to seem downright ridiculous, and only more absurd when you realise that some journals charge around \$50 for a PDF, or hundreds for online access. Many of these are institutional rates meant for college and university libraries, which then give access to all their students, but this is just the same financial barrier in a different form, and it still doesn't explain why online access to some journals can cost over \$10,000, with print copies adding thousands more in cost. Something's not right here. Unfortunately, this is partly a result of these journals having a monopoly on this sort of content, and it's hard for academic institutions to say no when their students and faculty rely on that access to do the work they are there to do.

I don't think this is in tension with Robinson's article, and I imagine he and I could make a game where we try and find the most ridiculously overpriced academic work. Where I find him taking a wrong turn is in how he creates a dichotomy between publishing academic research and publishing stuff that people will find useful, and I think this dichotomy is frustrating and unhelpful. It's weird that Robinson, who is absolutely relentless when it comes to publishing well-researched articles on public policy, would institute such a dichotomy, and it ignores the other side of the problem. The issue I see is not just that scholars are publishing in academic journals, but that said research is, for a variety of reasons, inaccessible to the public, and this has consequences. To provide an example, look back at Nathan Robinson's lengthy response to Sam Harris. Robinson and Eli Massey wrote a well-researched response that dug into the various nuances of Harris' positions and offered a serious rebuttal. Robinson mentions that he was aided by an article by Whitley Kaufman in the journal *Neuroethics* titled 'Can Science Determine Moral Values? A Reply to Sam Harris', noting that what's unique about the article is it was by a professional philosopher engaging with Sam Harris. What does

he gloss over? That if anyone else wants access to the original PDF, they'll have to fork over \$39.95. In such an environment of overly expensive publications, is it any wonder that Sam Harris is as well respected by the public as he is? His book *The Moral Landscape* is only \$10 on Amazon, and his podcasts are available for free. His content isn't just popular because it confirms people's political suspicions, but because the rebuttal isn't even available to many of them. The vacuum left behind by academics is going to be filled with someone or something more affordable, and it's hardly fair to blame the public by telling them they can have 'the good stuff' for such a ludicrous price.

But more frustrating with this dichotomy between academic and public work is that Robinson seems to imply that he thinks the former is inherently less valuable because it's not what people want. While it's true that not everyone may want to read peer-reviewed scholarship, I think everyone who wants to should be able to access at least some of it. I actually think this is part of why people like Jordan Peterson and Sam Harris are so popular; like it or not, they might be putting out bad ideas, but at least they're putting out ideas, and I think their popularity speaks to a hunger on the part of public audiences for something more intellectually substantial. The way to fight it shouldn't just be getting professors to come out of their ivory towers to offer something better (although that should definitely be a part of it). I'd also look to find ways for the public to see the work being done *inside* the tower. I'd like to see new studies on neuroscience, or essays on ethics, easily accessible to everyone who's interested, not just the few who either have the personal means or access via the institution they're a part of. This sort of niche research should be seen as a part of scholars' public service because the public itself is able to engage with it. Yes, many will still choose to go to someone who synthesises and summarises, but for those without financial means who are interested in engaging on a deeper level, more should be made available.

One thing I appreciate about Nathan's persistent writing habits is his belief that the left actually does have better reasons for the policies and values that it advocates than other political orientations, and his writing is a testament to that belief. But if this is true, then the answer shouldn't (always) be dumping things down; some issues are complicated, and require the sort of knowledge that traditional scholarship is actually well-suited to producing. However, there then becomes an issue of trickle-down knowledge, which can sometimes get to the public in a delayed and diluted format. If a better informed public is a more emancipated one, then shortening and simplifying the process of getting high-tier information to as many people as possible should be considered an essential aspect of liberation.

There are steps in the right direction happening already. Local libraries often offer some journal access, and interlibrary loans are helpful. Many other journals and publishers are embracing the affordable distribution the internet provides: journals such as *The Bible* and *Critical Theory, Stasis and Crisis* and *Critique* have been putting out high-quality, peer-reviewed analysis for several years now, entirely available for free online, while publishers like *re.press* allow for digital downloads of many of their books for free. Meanwhile, publishers like *Haymarket* have partnered with *Brill* on their book series *Historical Materialism* and *Studies in Critical Social Science*, publishing expensive hardcovers in more affordable paperback editions. A lot of this stuff is going to be obscure and difficult, and might even be considered 'useless' by some, but I'd argue that it's just as critical as scholars making their own work more accessible. Engaging the public shouldn't just mean talking to them in simple terms via Twitter threads or on YouTube, but giving them access to the deeper and richer ideas that traditional academia at its best has to offer. People are curious by nature, and I think many who are often imagined to be lacking in ambition would really surprise us if given the chance.

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The vacuum left behind by academics is going to be filled with someone or something more affordable





Money Time

Fabiyas M V

‘Welcome to Money Time! Today, we have a special contestant, Kalhani from Idukki, the land of natural charms’. The anchorwoman Ervani Allu is slim like a reed, with a vibrant voice.

A close-up of Kalhani’s face, like a hyacinth flower above the surface of muddy water, is visible on the TV screen.

A small house with a red-tiled roof appears in the background. Kalhani stands in the yard with her eyes cast on the nearby tea hill slopes.

The quizmaster Krithik sits in a high-back chair. He is an eminent scholar and orator. He invites Kalhani, the contestant, into the seat in front of him. The setting and the ambient orange glow are enticing.

Kalhani is palpitating. Talcum powder cannot conceal her nerves.

‘Cool, Kalhani! Here comes your first question: who was the first president of India? Was it A: Indira Gandhi, B: Jawaharlal Nehru, C: Dr Rajendra Prasad, or D: Zakir Husain’.

Simultaneously the question and multiple-choice options appear on the background of the screen.

‘Option C. Dr Rajendra Prasad’.

‘Are you sure, Kalhani?’ Ervani tries to confirm the answer.

‘Yes, I’m pretty sure’.

‘Congratulations! You win 5000 rupees’, Krithik applauds.

‘Before the second question, let’s see Kalhani’s family’. Ervani turns towards the screen in the background.

A middle-aged woman sits in an old fibre chair in the living room.

She is wearing a faded maroon sari and trinkets. Her countenance is like a deadpan mushroom.

‘Yes, that’s my ma, my sole blood relation on the earth. She is a labourer on a tea plantation’.

‘Well, let me ask you the second question. Who’s the author of the book *The Good Earth*?’

Again, the question and options appear on the screen in the background.

‘My answer is Pearl S. Buck’.

‘Right answer, congratulations!’

Kalhani’s prize money multiplies. She is all smiles. Ervani claps, taps Kalahani on the shoulder.

●
●
● ‘Now, it’s time for a short break. We’ll come back soon. Stay tuned!’

A charming woman is taking a bath in a lake. Sunshine falls on her half-naked wet body through the gaps in the canopy of leaves. She soaps her shoulders and neck with yellowish-green Layola soap. TV channels earn a lot from commercial advertisements.

‘Welcome back!’ Ervani addresses the viewers with verve.

Before the third question, she asks Kalhani, ‘How will you spend the prize money?’

Kalhani wants to put up a house. Currently, she stays in a rented house. She got a small plot of land from the Panchayat under the Dream Home Project.

‘Well, Kalhani, we hope you can fulfill your dream!’

Ervani's enthralling presentation attracts more viewers. Money Time goes up in the ratings. Peacock Feather is already a popular TV channel.

'Let's go to the next question. Are you ready?'

Kalhani's prize money increases to 30,000 rupees, answering the third question. She is riding high. Her heart throbs with joy.

'There was a tragic happening in your life. Am I right?' Ervani asks, having already studied Kalhani's life. To captivate viewers by creating sensation, is a business trick TV channels use in the competitive world.

'Yeah, you're right, Ervani. I'd been living with my mother in a second-hand car dealer's outhouse. A rented prison. I won several prizes in literary competitions. Unfortunately, I had neither a shelf nor a coffer to keep my certificates and other precious belongings. I treasured everything in a cardboard box kept in a nook of the outhouse.

'One day, I went to take part in a literary competition, conducted by Green Ink Association, Thrissur. And it was very late when we returned home.

'Our owner had cleaned the outhouse during our absence. Oh! The cardboard box with my certificates and belongings in it was thrown into the bonfire. Only the ash remained under the coconut palm in the yard'.

A rhinoceros can never distinguish between a certificate and waste paper.

'Gosh, how did you react?' Ervani's face fades.

'I wished I could end myself on the spot. I lost everything which had

illuminated me in my misery. Those things couldn't be bought with money. Whether he burnt the cardboard box deliberately, or by a mistake, is still unknown'.

'I heard that you were hospitalised'.

'My veins were frozen. My body was partly paralysed. It took nearly a month to recover'.

Krithik is all ears. Ervani's wet eyes glisten.

'Forget it, Kalhani! To feed on a painful past is to weaken your mind and body. Now you're in the limelight. We all pray for you'.

'Thank you, Ervani!'

- The fourth question is as hard as a breccia. Yet she's not willing to succumb. After pondering for a couple of minutes, she gives the right answer.

'It's time to wind up today's episode. We'll meet at 7:30pm tomorrow. Good night!' Ervani hugs Kalhani, waves to her viewers.

It's Saturday evening. Friday elapsed as a yellow mango leaf fell down.

It's time for the final episode with Kalhani. Ervani wears a white frock with violet and crimson flowers. She creates a spring on the TV. 'Our Kalhani is a good folk singer. She'll sing for us'.

Kalhani's voice has a natural charm. Her folk song is about the tea-garden workers. The miseries of women who pluck tea leaves echo through the song.

Krithik shoots the fifth question worth 50,000 rupees. It's about the

largest desert in the world. Kalhani's life itself is a desert with dates of dreams. She picks the right option as if she were a crane catching fish.

'Congratulations! Answering this question, your prize money rises to 50,000. How do you feel, Kalhani?'

'I'm very much excited, sir! This amount is far beyond my expectation'.

Now images of four white ducks can be seen on the screen in the background.

'Kalhani, please turn to look at the ducks. Examine them minutely, and then find the odd one out within ten seconds'. Karthik gives her a task this time.

Kalhani has a keen intellect, chooses the third duck. Unlike the rest, the third one has a tiny dark spot on its neck.

Kalhani has answered for 80,000 rupees.

'A young guy wanted to marry you. Am I right?' Ervani is nosy for her viewers.

Her visage speckled with shyness, Kalhani voices her nuptial sorrows. 'A real estate agent's son was willing to marry me. My ma too liked the proposal. Being unemployed, he wanted to find a job before the marriage. He told my ma that he was going abroad in search of a job, asked her if she could give him some money as the dowry in advance. My poor ma gave him all her savings'.

'When will he return to marry you?'

'He's not likely to come back. Four years have passed since he flew to Mauritius. He never contacted me. There's a rumour that he has married a French lady'.

All are silent. Silence is an electrode through which inexpressible emotions pass.

Kalhani is noble, not by birth, but by her own virtue.

‘Come back to the game, Kalhani! If you answer the next question, you’ll get one-and-a-half lakh rupees. Are you ready now?’

‘Yes, sir’.

‘Who scored the first goal in the 2018 FIFA World Cup?’

It’s a difficult question. Kalhani fumbles in her memory. Her eyes bulge.

‘Sorry, sir, I quit’.



‘Well, well, Kalhani! You’ve won 80,000 rupees. Congratulations!’

‘Thank you, sir! Being always in poverty, this is a dream sum’.

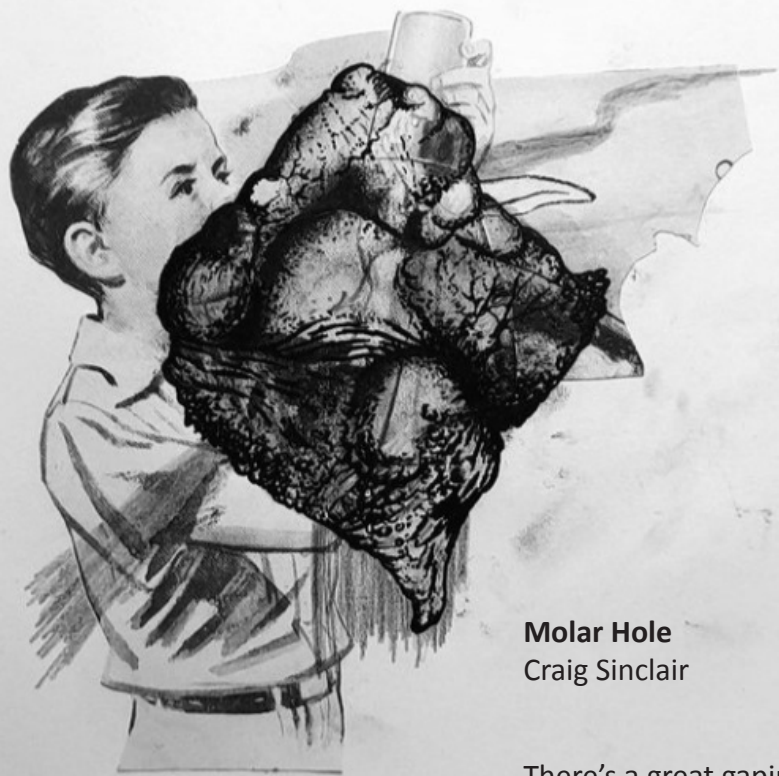
Kalhani receives the prize money from Krithik. Ecstatic moments unblock her blood vessels clogged with distress.

Ervani asks Kalhani, hugging her, ‘Finally, what do you tell our viewers?’

‘Time redraws life designs’.

Am I right? There was a tragic happening in your life.





Molar Hole
Craig Sinclair

There's a great gaping chasm
In the dark of my mouth
A molar hole, unfilled.

The tooth cracked long ago
On a bite of tough granola
And now food rots there
Every mealtime.

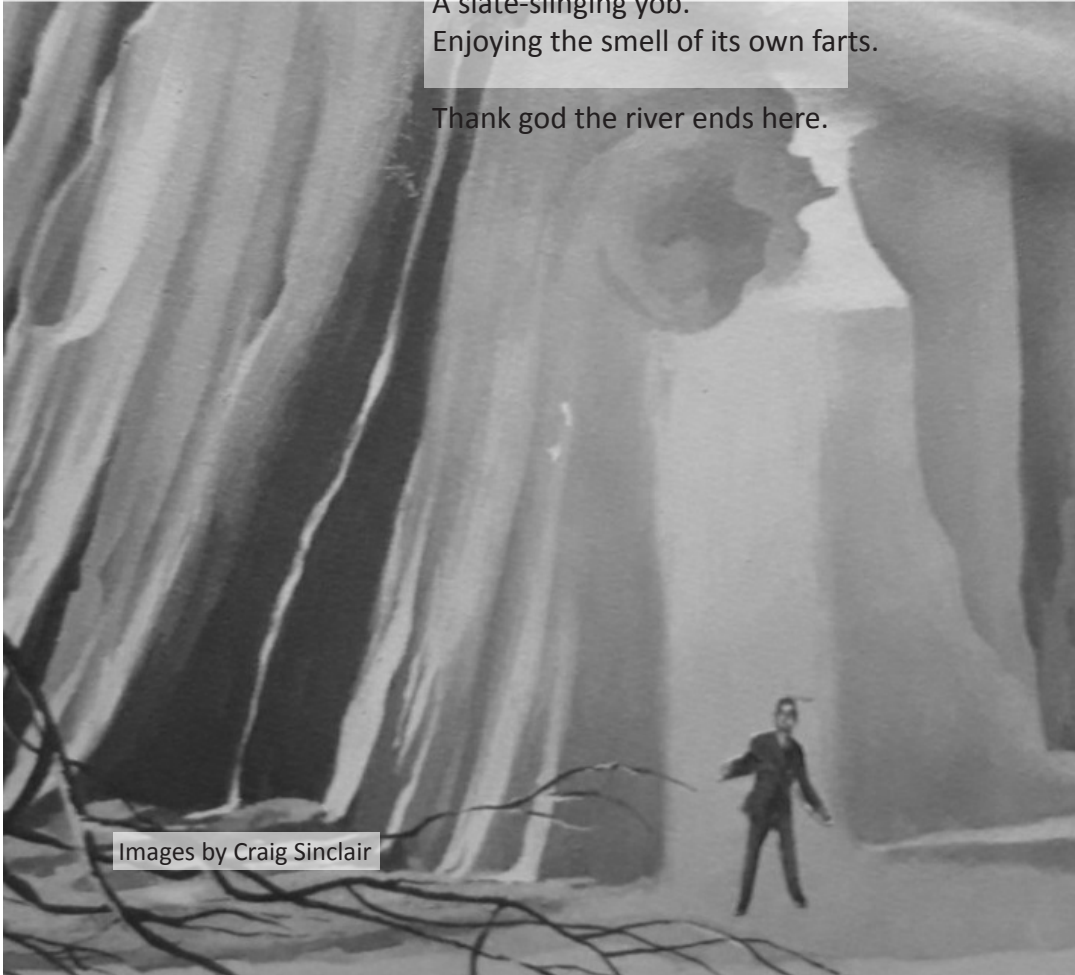
I use folded train tickets
And halved receipts
To scrape and dislodge
What the tongue can't find.
My son knows about it
He's a good lad.

Waterfall

Craig Sinclair

The waterfall screams,
A volley of vomit
Raining wet blows on the rocks
At its feet
A glorified spume spill shout
Whose eternal applause tells you
Just how much it fancies itself.
Towering cock of the walk
A slate-slinging yob.
Enjoying the smell of its own farts.

Thank god the river ends here.



Images by Craig Sinclair

...

Universal Bruise

Nigel Stone

He sits alone in his eighth-floor flat and counts off a lifetime of poor choices. He's been collecting dodgy paths to follow for thirty-nine years, eleven months, three hundred and sixty-four days. He's started fights with the hardest men and loved the meanest women. He's backed the fallen horse in every race, and when you pick long enough at his scabs you will see 'loser' written in regret through the sinew, scratched into bone and further on still, into the marrow and beyond. It's Friday night and he's all dressed up with nowhere to go. 'Decisions, decisions, decisions', he mumbles to himself as he walks over to his vinyl collection and takes Lou Reed's *Transformer* off the shelf, removing the shiny black disc from the paper sleeve and placing it on the turntable, diamond to plastic to magic. You can't beat it, he thinks. He returns to his seat and puts the album cover face down on his lap then reaches for the 'box of tricks', which rests on the other arm of the chair. Inside the box is all he needs for a great night in by himself.

It's been a hell of a day all round, starting with him sleeping through his 5am alarm again. Grainger was unimpressed and gave him his final written warning. One more screw up and he's for the chop. Not that he cares for his employer or the work the miser pays him a pittance to do. He sings to his living room while he rummages about in the box. He laughs with no humour, a salty, pointless, worthless snort of self-disgust. It's time to brush off the misery though, along with the crap Grainger has him sweep from the factory floor five soul-crushing days a week, plus overtime—overtime he hates but takes through necessity. He removes a torn packet of cigarette papers from the box and pulls three out of the packet. He then places the papers on Ernie Thormahlen's bulge. Cucumber or not, he wonders as he feels around for his baggie. He finds the see-through sachet, takes it out of the box and opens it, relishing the heady smell, a hint of things to come. Within a minute he is ready to spark up. He lights the joint with his clipper. He realises something is wrong the second the smoke enters his body.

He wants to leap to his feet and jump out of the window and into the deep dark December night the second he hears the woman's voice whispering salted-caramel secrets in his ear. He would jump too, and with a smile of relief on his face, were it not for the paralysis glueing him to the armchair. It is a terribly comfortable bondage. The voice tries to reassure him but the balm of her words falls like dust on barren ground at the height of a drought. He is aware of the danger he is in, although he has no idea where this awareness originates. Is it a forgotten instinct, he wonders. He feels primal, tiny, insignificant, and yet he also believes that the fate of the world, if not more, depends on every action he makes, every thought he conjures up. He also knows that if he doesn't come down from this high soon he could easily slip through the cracks and disappear completely. He knows what it is like to be out of his head, but this is a proper mushroom-tea-and-a-tab high. One toké on his home-grown weed should not be having this effect, not on him.

● ● ● He encountered the pleasures of hash before he'd tasted tobacco. He was fourteen at the time (has it really been 26 years since we first met?) and he'd called round to the house of his friend, Peter. They planned to build a dam on the stream nearby, then destroy it. It was Peter's older brother Paul who answered the door.

'He's just gone to the shop for me', says Paul with a dozing grin and a winking, red eye. 'He won't be long though. Come in and wait.' The room is hazy with smoke and then there is the smell. The sound of weird music bounces from wall to wall, window to window, ceiling to floor, and he hears gibberish songs about flying teapots. Paul passes him a homemade pipe muddled together using an old spice jar, some narrow tubing, a dash of tap water, and a bottle top. When he sucks on the tube and Paul thumbs his Zippo to life, burning the small brown lump lying on the bottle top, it is the first time he steps into another existence. He has rarely been back in the real world since. Why would he want to be there?

The real world has done him no favours. The real world took his mother when he was still in short trousers and left him with a father who has never recovered or moved on from the death of his wife. He moved out of the family home and into his own flat as soon as he could. He has lived there ever since. The view from his living-room window includes the dead house his father still rots in. The son seldom speaks to the father, and the widow is keen to reunite with his wife. The real world sent him to a school where he'd been ridiculed for having no mother, for having a waste of space for a father, for having no prospects, for having wax on his school jumper one morning because his father hadn't paid the electric bill again and he'd been forced to sit and do his homework by candlelight. He left school with no qualifications and within a week the real world dumped him into Grainger's sweaty, grasping, greedy, clutching claws. Grainger is the largest employer in the area with a hundred and sixty damaged hearts wandering into oblivion with a factory on its last legs, making rubbish nobody could possibly afford these days. The way things are going in the larger scheme of things, he will be laid off long before Grainger fires him.

She waited by the window, felt the warmth of the sun on her leaves, felt the wet of the soil around her roots, felt the voice that quenched her thirst.

She knew she had existed before

she knew she existed

she knew she would exist again

she waited

she felt the pull at her leaves and buds she felt the wet leave them and leave them crisp she felt them grow brittle break crush she felt herself burn she became smoke she could see she hears the voice that watered her she knows he has waited for her she knows he is blind she wants him to see she tells him to stand up and...

...he gets out of his armchair and walks over to the window. The world outside is seasoned by the milky-white lamppost glow illuminating the path far below, bright headlights streak in the distance, curtains shut out the fluorescent inside, Christmas twinkles flicker on and off in string lists around window frames, and up, up there in the inky black cold there is fire and rock and gas and ice and water and everything that ever was, and everything that ever will be, and he weeps, a single tear trickling down a cheek, touching a lip, a tongue reaching out and licking salt that ever was and always will be. The tear is inside him, watering him. One day he will sweat it out or piss it up against a drunken wall and his tear will drip into the sewer and flow out to sea. Eventually the sun will send his tear soaring into the bright blue yonder and it will become a part of a cloud. One day his tear will rain down on someone running home from work because they haven't got the bus fare, or fall on two lovers sheltering under a tree in a thunderstorm on a first date, and they will laugh about the moment in years to come and tell their grandchildren about it.

●
●
●
She wants to know more about outside

she wants to escape the glass

she doesn't want to feel the electric heat in this room

she wants to feel the night cold

she wants to say 'hello' to the sun

she tells him to step outside...

He goes to the hallway and considers putting a coat on. He decides against it, even though he knows it will be bitter outside. He unlocks his door and steps onto the landing the same moment a neighbour does the same thing, only his neighbour is better prepared for the weather.

'You could do with a coat', says the man, a middle-aged drunk he has seen many times, standing and waiting for the one remaining pub in the estate to open for the lunchtime trickle.

He shrugs. 'I can't remember the last time I shivered with cold', he replies. 'I've forgotten what it feels like to be so cold that you can't stop your teeth from chattering.'

The drunk nods. 'Suit yourself, but you'll regret it.'

'Probably', he shrugs again. He presses the button and they wait in silence while the lift takes its time reaching them from the ground floor. They watch the numbers above the elevator door change, and when it reaches the second floor he asks his neighbour 'Where are you going?'

The man sniffs a dew drop of snot up one nostril, hacks up a cough, and clears his throat. Stale beer and cheap spirits assault the nose. 'I'm going out', the man replies. 'What about you?'

'Me too', he answers.

The man nods.

They stand in silence and listen to the whir of the elevator as it passes the third floor, and on until the whirring ends, until the wheels and cogs stop turning. There is a ping and the elevator doors open.

She sees the man

she hears the man speak

he has shared his thoughts

their presence has altered his life

*she smells the man's past on his
breath*

*she knows each molecule
there has existed*

has always existed

will always exist

*the three of them have interacted the man has shared his
drunken past and passed it on to him and through him on to her
they have heard his thoughts because he has spoken them
and they have listened*

*the air between them has vibrated and his thoughts have
been made real
it is a memory now*

what repercussions there might be she doesn't know

it is not Her place to know

it is not her gift to see what will be

they are here to make the 'now' and remember the 'then'...

He and the man ride the lift down to the ground floor, walk through the foyer, and step outside. The man tugs the collar of his coat over his chin and he tenses as the biting cold hits. Muscles clench unbidden, skin erupts into tiny bumps without a thought, hairs stands on end without him having to do anything, without even thinking.

‘I told you’, says the man, watching him shiver.

He nods and smiles. ‘I’ve missed how this feels’, he replies. ‘I remember one time before my mum died, when we went on holiday, just to Scarborough, nothing fancy, fish and chips, a couple of games in the arcade, the one where you have to shove pennies over a ledge to win them, a small plastic net on the end of a stick in the rock pools looking for crabs, and going into the sea, even though it was typical English cold, and I was shivering and tasting salt.’ He licks his lips.

‘I’m going this way’, says the man, pointing towards the subway that leads to the pub.

‘I’m going this way’, he replies, arms by his side.

He heads for the outskirts of the estate. He heads towards the stream, the brown belt, and beyond that to Grainger's. He looks around as he walks through the streets. At first he can see little, but his eyes adjust to the darkness and blur becomes sharp.

*She looks at the night she sees lines she sees curves she sees arcs,
she sees angles she sees The Truth in numbers she sees waves
of light and knows they are particles too she knows the past is
captured she wants to see more.*

He pauses for a moment and looks up as he approaches the last street of the estate, the cold forgotten, now a part of what he is. He stares into ebony and wonders at the pinpricks he can see, and he knows he is looking at stars, galaxies, giants, dwarfs, pulsars, radiation, and he knows these are nothing compared to the clusters and superclusters out there in what looks like emptiness. He knows that some of these pinpricks of light no longer exist and yet he knows they will exist again. 'Let there be light', he whispers, his breath made real in mist, soon to be reunited with the single tear he shed a stranger's lifetime ago, and yet it has only been minutes at most since he left the flat. He continues walking until he can hear the trickle of the stream up ahead. He pauses again. A party goes on behind closed curtains to his right. Somebody cheers and others laugh. A party trumpet is blown, squeaking like a tiny elephant. This is followed by more laughter. There is a chink of glass on glass and a cry of 'Cheers!' and someone, a woman, shouts 'Merry Christmas!' The tiny elephant squeaks again and there is more laughter. He turns and looks at the curtained window.

*She knows there are so many people here
she can feel the frivolity in the sounds
she hears*

*she can taste the joy in the chink of glass
she knows the man she met will be
drinking now*

*she wonders why he isn't
behind the curtain
she knows the mood behind
the curtain
she wants more.*

He carries on and reaches the stream and follows it until he arrives at the small bridge which will take him into the scrubland. The trees creak in the wind and the two of them listen. The wind whips the branches of the trees and whip becomes creak and we become one and we continue to listen and the chill leaks through the lack of light and into the skin of one of them and the other feels the icy grip of winter again for the first time and time stands still and then...

● *...he was a she on a walk on the wild side after a perfect satellite
● day of love and we see skies of blue and seas of green teach the
● world to sing with perfect hands conducting the way, we see
sighing news gone wrong again, and your heart pushing through
the market square. So why can't I touch what's at the back of your
mind? You used to say live and let live, kill the poor too, with so
many mothers too drunk to fuck on a high-rise estate. How many
roads in my life have just come over an open book? Five years left
to remember an icy cold light that will never go out, five years and
places of harmony from when you were young and the tree is home
and birds live in the tree, in nests made from broken twigs from
other trees and all the trees have been seeds and a fly is caught in
a web and a spider comes out and bites the fly and wraps it in silk
and it will eat it and in the morning a bird will eat a beetle and the
beetle will soon be shit on a windscreen, wiped off with water that
was once a tear that was once the sea that was once a cloud and
she sees the tree and hears the tree and smells the shit and shows
him the way and...*

...he continues to walk through the scrubland, dry dead grass,

broken glass, bricks, and distant dog barks. He kicks at the ground and a small stone falls into his shoe, slides under the sole of his foot, and settles down. He goes to remove the irritation.

She feels the stone under his foot She knows the stone exists She knows pain and discomfort She feels the stone hit his brain Electric sparks fire She wants to investigate further.

He decides to leave the stone where it is. He uses the marching prick in his foot to measure his pace, each painful stab taking him one step closer to his destination. Meanwhile, the fly caught in the spider's web dies and a bat eats a moth and the night eats the thoughts of those who sleep and it spits out their dreams, and he hears a voice up ahead and the voice chills him more than December ever could. It is Peterson.

She feels the heart beat harder She feels a dry throat She feels fear and he tries to swallow.

Peterson sounds drunk and he sounds dangerous. He wants to hide but knows he has to stay where he is. Peterson sees him and staggers over. The man has been the bane of his life since boyhood, a bully at school and now his vindictive and sadistic supervisor at work.

Peterson pushes him to the ground and places the sole of a boot on his chest. Peterson grins and snarls, looking down at his prey, a string of spiteful drool drips from his lips and lands on his victim's face.

He looks into Peterson's eyes, she looks into Peterson's eyes. 'Look up', he says.

Peterson looks puzzled for a moment but then looks up and sees a bruise on the edge of infinity where this universe has collided with

another. He sees monsters made real, real monsters, here there be dragons, giant balls of boiling gas and rain that strips the flesh of bone and there are demons made of nothing whatsoever spinning and swallowing everything in much the same way working at Grainger's sucks the soul out of its wage slaves. Peterson removes his boot from this soul's chest and reaches down to help him up off the ground. The two of them hug and wet each other's shoulders with tears. Peterson staggers off alone and he continues on his way. She takes him to Grainger's and gestures for him to sit down on the steps of the front entrance. Although it is the weekend he knows Grainger will be in dead on eight to oversee his empire. She knows this too and the two of them sit and wait together.

He realises he is holding the spliff, with just one toke taken, in his hand. He is sure he left it to die in the ashtray but apparently not. He looks at his phone. It is three o'clock in the morning. He can't remember the last time he'd been outside at this time. He'd often been awake but sprawled on his sofa, vegetating in front of the TV or sitting with headphones on, trying to shut out the shitty world. He hears a blackbird singing and remembers a song Peter's brother played for him, not a record, but actually picking up a guitar and playing it. Paul had explained that the song was about the fight for racial equality but he has always associated it with being high until now. Now he is listening to an actual blackbird singing in the real life dead of night and it has never sounded sweeter.

An hour passes while he sits and considers his lot. He thinks about the millions of people who are asleep right that minute and the millions more who are awake. He thinks about the night-shift workers and the insomniacs, the lovers, the killers, the thieves, the victims, the partygoers, the party poopers, he thinks about Peterson and he thinks about the drunk who isn't at a party, and he thinks about the person who blew the party trumpet twice, or maybe it was two people who each blew a party blower once, and he thinks about the woman who cried out 'Merry Christmas!' and

wonders whether she was one of the people who blew a trumpet and he struggles to figure out why he cares so much about any of this but he does. He thinks about those who are dying and those who are dying right that second and now they are gone, but he has thought about them for a moment and so now they are a memory. Even though he has never met them he will remember this night, the night he sat and thought about everything and nothing. He has changed the moment of their death with his personal musings and in doing so he has changed everything to come, everything that might ever be, which is a part of everything that ever was.

Although the sun has yet to show its face, life begins to stir in front of him, behind him, above him, below him, all around him, inside him. Night-shift workers are whistling their way home. A paperboy speeds by on his bike, taking news of the world to morning doorsteps. Buses start to stop and people start to climb on board or eventually step off. Journeys are being taken. An old man wrapped up warm walks by with his dog and nods a 'good morning'. She smiles and he nods back. An elderly woman walks by. Like him, she wears no coat on this ruthless morning. She walks with her head down as though searching for something lost. He can hear her mumbling to herself. He understands.

Grainger pulls into his parking space just as the church bell tolls eight in the distance and steps out of his new BMW. The headlights blink and the car beeps as Grainger locks it and turns to enter the building. Grainger sees him sitting in the entrance way and frowns. 'What are you doing here?'

He gets up and walks over to his boss. The two of them stand face to face, noses almost touching. He can feel his heart thumping. *She can hear uncertainty in the breathing of both men. She eases her companion.* He steps back, takes his lighter out of his pocket and lights the spliff. He breathes her in for a second time, but there is no paralysis this time, no panic. 'I'm handing in my notice', he says.

‘I’m not going to give you the chance to fire me, and I don’t think you’re going to be open long enough to do that anyway. I hate working for you. I hate what I have to do, and I hate that you pay me less than I need when you can afford to buy yourself a new car every year.’ He nods at the BMW and then continues while Grainger stands stock-still and silent. ‘I hate that there is no daylight in your building. I hate that you make shit that nobody needs, nobody wants, and nobody can afford. I hate that I work at least five days a week in this shithole and live for the weekend. I hate that the only way I can get through the day is by being shitfaced. I hate that you employ bullies and bastards. I hate that I’ve forgotten what it feels like to be alive.’

She smiles as he turns and walks away from the man who has made him angry. She will be gone soon, but she will leave this memory on his senses.

- He abandons his regular route home and soon stumbles across a
- Desire Path.
-



Photo by Denise Baker

For they who have done

Emily Cotman

dedicated to the Ithaca Tenants Union

they built a crane
of onionskin-thin newsprint gawking *gonna need a ton of steel*
coffee stir-sticks sticky with yesterday's soy
a bedside hoard of boarded-up gift cards and
a single braid of sweetgrass (gifted)
with raw hands
and shy plans
and a chorus of *can'ts*
in their ears
they built
we watched
countless meticulous
knots links
counterweights
clever *clever* triangles
flex strain
hold
pull our cold
steel shackles
snap and lift them
inch by measured inch
toward the sun
we watched
they built
we watched
craned our necks and marvelled
had our chains always been so small?

*LUM
PEN.*

How to Guide for Writing (With Us).



Here are 9 points you need to know:

1. We only accept writing from those who identify as working class or have experienced long term involuntary poverty and economic hardship.

2. We may accept writing of all length, but generally we look for anything between 2,000 and 4,000 words.

3. We accept all styles of writing – fiction, non-fiction and everything else.

4. For each issue we will suggest several themes and questions. If you want to write about something beyond these drop us an email as we might be planning a later issue that fits with it better.

5. If you've never written before or are lacking in confidence in your writing, get in touch. We can give support with your piece of writing, and devise different strategies with you to get your ideas out of your head onto the paper. For example one article for a future issue, will be a transcribed interview with a working class organiser.



Don't worry if you're not confident about spelling, grammar, sounding educated enough. What we're interested in is hearing your ideas based on your lived experiences.

6.

Concerned about style? Don't be, we're happy to publish openly angry rants written in stattco rhythm or fictional narratives about killer avocados on toast and everything else inbetween. Whatever voice you feel comfortable using.

7.

Please title your work, if you can't think of one we can help you find one.

8.

Name yourself as you would like to see it printed, or state if you would like to remain anonymous.

9.



Happy Writing!

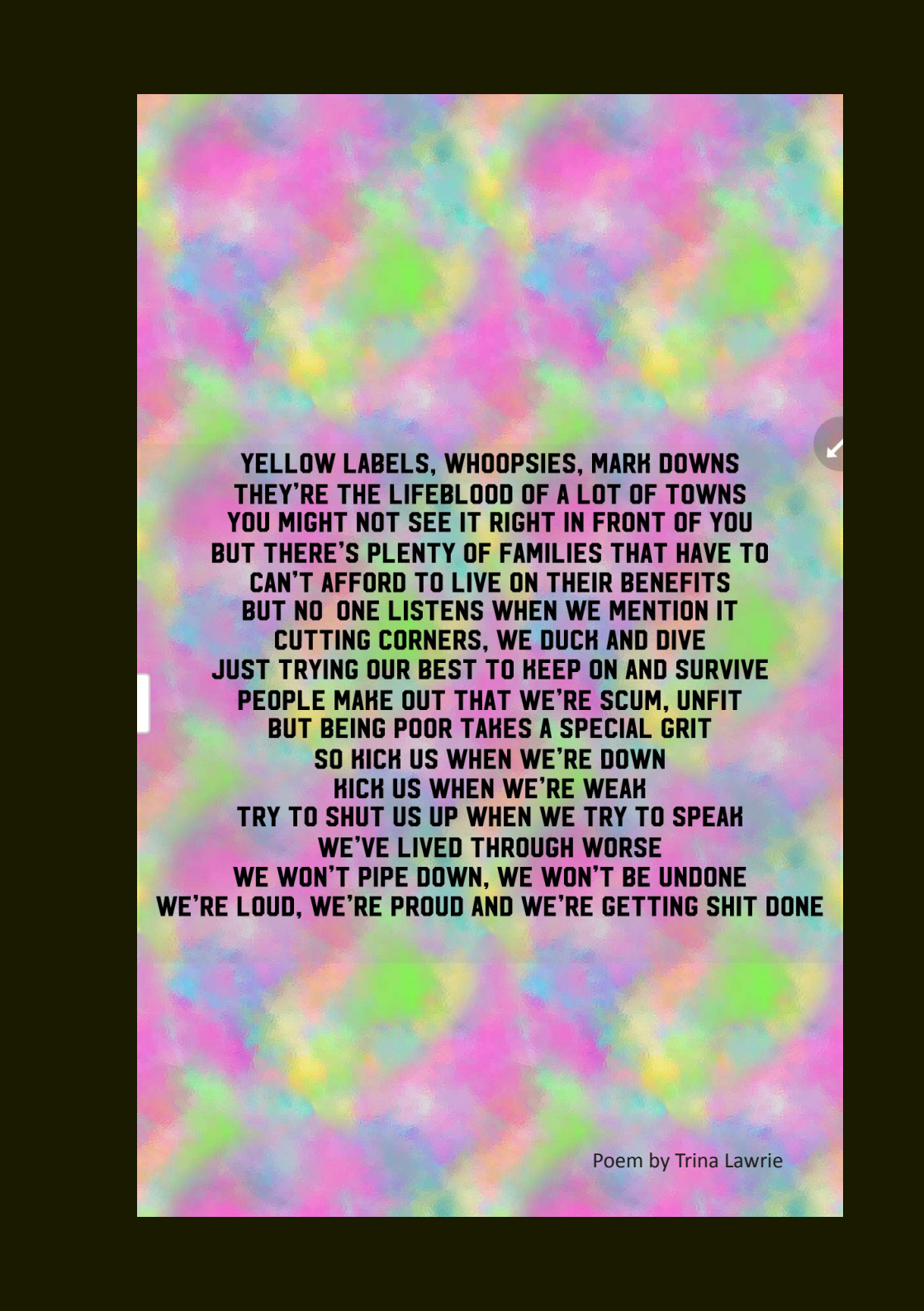
Tips for worriers:

Don't know where to start? Start in the middle. Just try to get your ideas down on paper. It's all practice.

Redrafting is everything. If you don't like your first draft, that means you are ready to improve on your writing.

Get in Contact: _____

info@theclassworkproject.com
www.theclassworkproject.com



**YELLOW LABELS, WHOOPSIES, MARK DOWNS
THEY'RE THE LIFEBLOOD OF A LOT OF TOWNS
YOU MIGHT NOT SEE IT RIGHT IN FRONT OF YOU
BUT THERE'S PLENTY OF FAMILIES THAT HAVE TO
CAN'T AFFORD TO LIVE ON THEIR BENEFITS
BUT NO ONE LISTENS WHEN WE MENTION IT
CUTTING CORNERS, WE DUCK AND DIVE
JUST TRYING OUR BEST TO KEEP ON AND SURVIVE
PEOPLE MAKE OUT THAT WE'RE SCUM, UNFIT
BUT BEING POOR TAKES A SPECIAL GRIT
SO KICK US WHEN WE'RE DOWN
KICK US WHEN WE'RE WEAK
TRY TO SHUT US UP WHEN WE TRY TO SPEAK
WE'VE LIVED THROUGH WORSE
WE WON'T PIPE DOWN, WE WON'T BE UNDONE
WE'RE LOUD, WE'RE PROUD AND WE'RE GETTING SHIT DONE**

Poem by Trina Lawrie



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