

JOY



DESIRE

SPILLINGS

LUMPEN

A Journal for
Poor and Working Class
writers

Spring 2022
Issue 10





Lumpen

A Journal for Poor and Working Class Writers
Issue 010

First published Spring 2022

All Rights Reserved

Each author asserts their moral right to be identified as the authors of their respective work.

Edited by Dorothy Spencer, Craig Gent, Fran Lock, & Laura Jane Round.
Designed by Hannah Pearce.

ISBN: 9781914125126

Contents

Editorial - Hannah Pearce	1
---------------------------------	---

Essays and Memoir

Gramsci in Viareggio - Carlo Rey Lacsamana	11
David's Granddaughter - J E Carter	19
My Experience of Schizophrenia - Chris Bird	32
In Defence of Doing the Bins - Becky Buchanan	47
I Smell a Rat - James Sibley	50
On Cardigans, Accents and Mis-shapes - Kenn Taylor	63
Finding Healing and Joy Through Writing - Mina Hadi	72
Heaving Times - xchris	77

Poetry and Fiction

Together in a Small Terrace - Kenn Taylor	89
want to live a life with less worry - Linda M. Crate	92
M5 - Tom Stevens	93
Immeasurable Grief - Neil Palmer	94
DESIRE AND JOY - Harley Gilmore	95
My Love is Elastic - Robin Ray	96
To Her Coy Mistress - Emily Cotman	99
The City of the Wounded - Imam Ganji	103
Emergence - Vala Z. Francis	113
Untitled (Head)/Word painting - Karl Parkinson	119

*LUM
PEN.*



Editorial

Hannah Pearce

*My love has got no money
He's got his strong beliefs
My love has got no power
He's got his strong beliefs*

In 1996, Gala, an Italian-born singer-songwriter, wrote 'Freedom From Desire' which became a clubhouse classic for all Generation Xers everywhere. As it goes, the song's mantra was inspired by Gala's revelation that poor people living in Harlem were happier and more in touch with their spiritual selves than the rich restaurant goers in Upper Manhattan. The song is about her boyfriend at the time—a Senegalese ballet dancer—who lived with five other people in a rat-ridden shared house in Harlem. The song is predicated on the notion that her ballet dancer lover is free from the fetters of consumerism.



It's nothing new that people from more affluent or comfortable backgrounds have tended to romanticise the endless hustle. Afterall, it's in these places (like shared houses in Harlem) where

you'll find a more authentic and more *real* experience of life, where you're equipped with nothing else but your raw natural talent to invent, pursue, and live life to its absolute fullest. It's life on the precipice of necessity. It's nothing like being mediated by the trappings of elite culture, or the flattening out of experience afforded by comfort and safety.

It's no surprise then that pretty much anyone from nice and boring homes found themselves in their 20s living like they were poor. Because this is when some of your biggest life lessons are learned, your most intense loves experienced, and most joyful moments had—when life seems to make the most sense. And then, when you've learned all you can from the edges, and you begin to feel quite tired, you return to the comforts of suburbia, or buy up land from Gran's money in St Lucia. It's the circle of modern life.

● I absolutely cannot tell if I'm being sarcastic, and here lies the problem with class, really. We don't know where we stand. I think there *is* a lot to be learned in the vacuums created by poverty and neglect, and I don't necessarily think it's a bad thing or have any clear idea really of what I think on the matter of who should hang out in Harlem and consume working-class culture. Just as I don't know why the proprietors of this cafe I'm currently sitting in, who charged me £9.50 for eggs on toast, are being rude to me. Is it because they are tired and overworked and I shouldn't expect people to be nice to me all the time? Is it because they see me as part of the young yuppie class who frequent this place, who they probably don't like? Or is it because they perceive me as being a bit too grubby to be here in my sweaty ripped t-shirt with my crap all over the floor? I honestly don't know because social relations of space and place have collapsed in on themselves somewhat, and boundaries between classes aren't always that easy to discern. I, like many poor/working-class Millennials, experience a weird sort of social mobility, and often we look at 'the working class' or 'poor folk' either as a subalternate shapeless ooze or Charlie at the chippy.

Identity in relation to class is now bound by nostalgia, archetype, and stereotype. It's no surprise then that people in general are confused by their relationship to class and their identity within it, and that often what we decide to label ourselves as is based on how we see ourselves as part of this continuum. As proven by *Lumpen's* open platform: if you are a white man, you are the most likely to feel a tie with the term 'working class' even if you aren't working class. Conversely, if you are a person of colour you are less likely to feel that it is a term that describes you. This has been well documented in reports on this stuff, and something we absolutely have seen in *Lumpen* and the rest of The Class Work Project. This has everything to do with narrative and how stories are told.

We've also noticed that the material we receive for *Lumpen* is pretty sad. People rarely write to celebrate that aspect of who they are; rather to write, for them, is to untangle and express some of the hard and lonely things they face on the class margins. This is why, after nine issues of *Lumpen*, we decided to refocus the platform through running themed issues, and in the face of the 'shit and fan' situation over the last few years, and because of the melancholia filling our past pages, we thought it'd be nice to explore DESIRE and JOY.

I don't think any of the people involved in making this issue knew exactly what we were looking for. Perhaps, naively, a small part of us hoped to be inundated with pages filled with desiring triumphant acts, and moments of ecstatic joy. We need that. God, we really, really need that. If anything, what we've received has made us think deeper about what is meant by 'joy' and 'desire', the relationship between the two, and how they relate to class. And ultimately, like the spirit of the magazine, we are really just curious about what people have to say, rather than feeling precious over a particular idea—this is probably because we are lazy, work-shy hooligans.

Desire can be thought of as relating to a want, a yearning, for something to happen; to have an imagined future actualised; or to become someone in possession of a thing, a feeling, or a relationship that hasn't yet happened. Desire is, in essence then, a practice in recognising your present self as lacking. The act of desiring can be split further into two other qualities, an act of recognition of the self—a realisation of yourself in space and place in relation to others—to what they have, to what they don't have, to how others feel or make you feel. It can also be seen as an innate quality of living: to desire is a wish to live, a lack that creates a thirst to expand and grow, to have your impulses and cravings satisfied. The desire to eat is a wish to satiate hunger. However, if you continue down this line you run the risk of reducing desire into behaviourist impulses which nullifies the ineffable nature of it. Desire can also be seen as transcendent. One of the biggest theological arguments there is on the existence of an afterlife is that some of our desires cannot be fulfilled in this world, and therefore must be satisfied by another. This argument rests on a paradoxical logic: God designed the world and therefore all things exist for a reason; therefore if a desire does not seem to meet a reason to exist in this world, then an afterlife must exist to fulfil that desire.

Desire, if thought about in terms of lack and transcendence, has an exalting essence and a melancholic quality. The latency in unmet desire both affirms and negates the enigmatic nature of living. When you think of this in terms of class, you can't help but go back to Gala's song: that no money and no power = freed from desire. I'm not sure I agree.

Freed from desire

Mind and senses purified

Freed from desire

Mind and senses purified

Before putting this issue together, I had an idea of joy as this thing you practise in the face of hardship; there are countless books which centre joy as the revolutionary emotion. Joy, for me, sometimes feels like a forceful optimism, or a push for positivity regardless of the obstacles in its way. It reaches back to this idea that desire will be satiated in another time and place—an afterlife—joy is a surrendering of will to this hope.

I often find very little room is given for broken-ness—just to be broken for a while. There is an anxious leap to be positive, to immediately find a way to be resilient, which understandably can be brave and revolutionary in a world that is hard and brutal. But I worry that sometimes we overdo it, and we forget to give space for people's wounds to be recognised and acknowledged, and ultimately forceful optimism leaves them behind and perpetuates a life that negates need. This can lead to people who feel shit continuing to feel shit, often prescribing to a preference falsification, where everyone feels shit but no one is chatting about it. Sometimes leaning in to how shit things are can be an act of reclamation, a refusal to surrender.

Ecstatic positivity is the driving force behind individual success narratives too—right?—from Bezos to Beyonce. Again its an effacement of the actual reality for a lie that forces people to think they get to accumulate a shit ton of resources and feck everyone else. Joy in this sense can be considered *jouissance*—an excess.

Keeping this in mind, another way to think of joy is in its relation to desire, and vice versa. If desire is the feeling of wanting to live, then perhaps joy is a momentary crescendo of that feeling, when it spills over into everything and everyone. Perhaps then, joy can be considered a practice in reclaiming the excessive overspill of life from the capitalist impulse—forced optimism—and reuniting it with desire before it is co-opted and ruined. Joy is defined as

a feeling of great pleasure and happiness. But I think it contains more than that.

Perhaps then, we can think of *Lumpen*, its very existence, and all that contains—sadness, melancholy, humour, celebration—as a gigantic exaltation; the whole thing is a big, brave act of living, desiring, loving, hoping, grieving, a crescendo that spills out onto everything else. Writing for us, is a desiring force, a joyful act of living.

Na-na-na-na-na-na-na, na-na-na, na-na-na
Na-na-na-na-na-na-na, na-na-na, na-na-na
Na-na-na-na-na-na-na, na-na-na, na-na-na
Na-na-na-na-na-na-na, na-na-na, na-na



ESSAYS





MEMOIRS



Gramsci in Viareggio

Carlo Rey Lacsamana

Viareggio, 1935/2021

Antonio Gramsci, the great Italian Marxist philosopher, whose name above all evokes radical will and revolutionary hope, takes a walk in the small seaside town of Viareggio. No one knows exactly the month or the day of this visit. Perhaps immediately after his release from prison. Or before his imprisonment. Or, I surmise, in the fugitive moment in between. Despite the pleasantly warm weather he turns up his coat collar as though afraid a finger of chill might stroke his neck. He wanders on the beach with the religious slowness of a pilgrim and because there is a nagging pain on the left side of his lower back. Those who have experienced long-term imprisonment or exile walk with an expectant state of slowness indicative of alertness. Not a single step is ever taken for granted, as though the very act is a kind of reward achieved through hard-fought struggle. Walking for them is the opposite of escape: it is a kind of rest.

As the sun climbs higher, the expanse of light rolls off on the surface of the sea transforming the metallic-blue water to silvery-blue. The sea has been the recurring dream of his long prison nights. Its smell and sound, its ceaseless movement, its ebb and tide, reproducing itself again and again, perpetually beginning. There is something in the image of the sea that touches him deeply. Is man not like the sea—always in the process of becoming?

‘What can man become?’, that is, whether or not man can control his own destiny, can ‘make himself’, can create a life for himself. Therefore we say that man is a process, and precisely the process of his actions.

Along the boulevard a giant Ferris wheel starts to rotate with a

few excited passengers on it. The faces of people wandering and sunbathing on the beach are becoming clear in the sunlight. He notes their expression of relief and their air of aimlessness as they savour the amicable weather and the regained freedom after a long period of quarantine from the ravages of polio/Covid, followed by the interminable months of curfew. It takes a catastrophe for us to cherish what we possess—or not really, he smiles with restrained amusement. Behind him, the snow-white tops of the Apuan Alps above Carrara, which hide the busiest marble quarries on the planet, decorate the canvas of the blue sky. Each year a million tons of Carrara marble are extracted and shipped all over the world. Not far from the shore he hears voices—that of an old man and a boy:

‘C’mon Giorgio, come closer, don’t be afraid.’

● ‘Grandpa! Are there jellyfish in the water?’

● ‘No. The water is empty and clear. I can see your feet from here.’

The boy slowly reaches for his grandpa, bobbing up and down in the clear water. Embracing grandpa’s waist with his tiny arms, the old man begins to stroke his head.

‘Giorgio, don’t be afraid. I will teach you how to swim.’

The old man lifts the little boy as he teaches him how to float.

‘Don’t be afraid, Giorgio, Grandpa is holding you.’

After a while the boy begins to float in a starfish position.

‘Bravo, Giorgio. That’s it, bravo!’ exclaims the old man unable to contain his joy while he guides the little boy whose face is beaming at the sky as he learns his first lesson in survival.

As he watches the scene Antonio is haunted by the memory of his two sons, Delio and Giuliano. The latter he would know only from photographs.

*Write to me always, and tell me everything that interests you at school. I think you like history, just as I did when I was your age, because it is about living men.*¹

Further off a solitary fisherman casts a net from his small boat over the silvery water. Sardinia, he whispers softly to himself. His yearning for home is as incurable and unquenchable as his yearning for revolution. Home and revolution are, for him, synonymous. He inhales a big gust of salty air expanding his lungs with longing. He remembers the fishermen and the peasants whom he pitied and loved in his poverty-stricken hometown. A group of dock workers sit on boulders to eat their sandwiches; above them a passing seagull makes a loud shriek catching their attention. The memories of September 1920 return to him in clear flashes as he observes the faces of the dock workers. He remembers his comrades who occupied the Turin factories setting a blueprint for the future, which today seems lost and forgotten.

*It was really necessary to see with one's eyes old workers, who seemed broken down by decades upon decades of oppression and exploitation, stand upright even in a physical sense during the period of the occupation [...] It was necessary to see these and other sights, in order to be convinced how limitless the latent powers of the masses are.*²

He remembers everything, but his whole personality is incompatible with nostalgia. His character—his entire life—is best defined by his gaze which gives us a clue to the implacable optimism of his will.

¹ Antonio Gramsci, *The Modern Prince and Other Writings* (New York, 2007), p.5

² *The Antonio Gramsci Reader* (New York, 2000), p. 109

*

Observe the surviving photographs of Gramsci. His is a gaze that has seen enormous hardship and violence but also immense vistas for human freedom: the breathtaking solidarity among common men. This, perhaps, was the most important thing he saw: the potential liberatory capacity of ordinary people to get together and change their destiny. For that he did not look away, and for that he suffered—because his hopes were undefeated.

His way of seeing the world was double-edged. A double vision. Both a telescope and a microscope at once. The bird's-eye view and the worm's-eye view. One predicated on the other. Both nourishing each other. The first is the capacity to envision a world radically different from how it is now. The second is a view from below. It bears witness to the struggle of everyday life, devoid of any romantic conception of common people, based on their actual experiences and aspirations, capabilities and common sense. Only from below can he know who his enemy is and who his true allies are.

*

From the seashore Antonio turns his steps towards the town centre into the shade of an open-air café. How long he has been walking, no one can tell. While frail in body there is in his spirit an irrepressible restlessness. More than a decade in prison, with deteriorating health, the condemned man wrote around thirty prison notebooks—some 3,000 pages—on wide-ranging subjects such as philosophy, political theory, history, sociology, and linguistics. The infamous indictment—'For twenty years we must stop this brain from functioning.'—of the prosecutor at his trial was a complete blunder. 'Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will.'³

³ Gramsci, "Address to the Anarchists" in *Selections from Political Writings 1910-1920* (London, 1988), p. 188.



“His way of seeing the world was double-edged. A double vision. Both a telescope and a microscope at once. The bird’s-eye view and the worm’s-eye view. One predicated on the other. Both nourishing each other. The first is the capacity to envision a world radically different from how it is now. The second is a view from below. It bears witness to the struggle of everyday life, devoid of any romantic conception of common people, based on their actual experiences and aspirations, capabilities and common sense. Only from below can he know who his enemy is and who his true allies are.”



At this time of the day, the café is peopled by workers taking their coffee break. He sits at an unoccupied round table beside a group of construction workers. A waiter immediately approaches him to take his order. *'Un caffè, per favore,'* Antonio exclaims, raising his forefinger to emphasise the *un*. *'Subito,'* the waiter replies, nodding his head, and walks back into the bar.

The coffee machine rattles, releasing a sharp, swelling odour that strikes the consciousness like a good smack in the face. Coffee is a tool of vigilance, he thinks. He picks up the morning's newspaper from a chair by his side. *Pandemic, G7, Afghanistan, climate crisis...* The coffee arrives. Without taking his eyes off the column he sips the coffee in one gulp. He enjoys it. While the journalists today disappoint him. They are exactly like the miserable coffee they give in his prison: insipid, lukewarm, lacking grace and seriousness. He cannot help but compare the newspapers today with those in his days. Nothing like *Il Grido del Popolo* and *L'Ordine Nuovo*. *'Integral' journalism, 'one that seeks not only to satisfy the needs of its public, but also to create and develop these needs, to arouse its public and progressively enlarge it.'* A newspaper that stimulates readers and develops their potential.

The construction workers on the other table have been eyeing him without his knowledge. It appears that his presence has caused a surprise of recognition among the men. They have seen before the sad, ageing grey face of this man. They recognise the hunched back, the stern eyeglasses, and the head that is like a block of sculpture. Some image at the back of their minds seems to recall this man before them. They feel as though they have met him somewhere—in some pitiless page of history, in which they had the pleasure of his companionship. As they rise from the table, one of the men approaches Antonio and offers him a cigarette. He accepts and the man offers to light it. With a slow nod of respect and pity the worker bids Antonio, *arrivederci*. As they leave a terrible premonition of hope creeps into their hearts as though a promise

of the future had been revealed to them. None of them can tell whether it is fearful or beautiful. Between Antonio's fingers, the cigarette burns like the burning of our century.

The grey of the dying day is slowly scattering across the sky. The remaining crimson-coloured light of the sunset is receding just above the sea in the horizon. The station is already half-crowded when Antonio arrives. People from all walks of life rush towards the platforms. From the breast pocket of his coat where he keeps a picture of his wife, Julia, he brings out the train ticket, checks it, and proceeds to the platform. On his side of the line only a few carry the same ticket as he—not many are willing to pay the price of the long voyage. In a short time the train that will carry Antonio towards his destination into our future will arrive. Who will be there to meet him?

*

Carlo Rey Lacsamana is a Filipino, born and raised in Manila, Philippines. Since 2005, he has been living and working in the Tuscan town of Lucca, Italy. He regularly contributes to journals in the Philippines, writing politics, culture, and art. He also writes for a local academic magazine in Tuscany that is published twice a year. His articles have been published in magazines in the US, Canada, UK, Germany, The Netherlands, India, and Mexico. Visit his [website](#) or follow him on Instagram [@carlo_rey_lacsamana](#).



David's Granddaughter

J E Carter

I never knew my grandfather. A blue collar worker living in the North East, he didn't live an exceptionally long life and died aged fifty-two in the 1970s, around two decades before I was born. Growing up, I learned only two things about him:

1. He was, like most working class men his age, family-focused and traditional, which I'm told sometimes bordered on prudish.

2. Despite the above, he was very in touch with his feelings. My mam tells stories of them spending Sunday mornings tucked up watching the rugby, and then crying at old films together in the afternoon.

That's all I had. I'd also seen a handful of photographs, all in his later years, where white tufts of chest hair protruded through unbuttoned shirts, but he is smiling in every one.

My three uncles looked a lot like him, and my mam too nowadays as her face grows longer, though she was the double of her mam, my nana, when she was younger. She was only twenty when both her parents died, and I've always assumed that's why I don't know a lot about them - it was so long ago to her, and she doesn't know much about them either.

But there has always been a mystery around my grandparent's lives that's been romantic to me. I'm now a parent myself, in my mid-twenties, and having children of my own makes their absence sting a bit more.

When I was probably around thirteen, I was talking to a friend about my grandparents, and told her I missed them. She told me not to be stupid - how could I miss someone I never knew? While she might have been right, I realise now that I was a child trying to understand a more complex feeling that I couldn't find the word for yet. I couldn't miss them, no, but I was longing for them, for my family, for people I "should" have had, yearning to miss them, had only I known them enough to justify being able to.

So, I decided I wanted to know them. My grandfather, David, was the more mysterious of the two, as he was originally from York and only moved to South Shields in his twenties.

-
-
- My mam can remember visiting his father and sisters when she was very little, but no one had been in touch for over fifty years, and we had no way of knowing who was still alive. She knows nothing about his life before that, except that his mam (my great grandmother) died not long before he left, but we didn't even know her name. We had enough to at least start the family tree, and work on bringing them closer to me.

Over the summer months, that's where I started, pulling together what we already knew and going from there. Papers, printouts and dozens of browser tabs open, I sifted through records and found his parents, siblings and where they lived in York. His mam's death certificate confirmed what we thought, that she'd died when David was only twenty one, and revealed that she was one of eight siblings who were quite well known in the community. Her name was Dinah, and her parents, my great great grandparents, worked as travelling performers and entertained troops during the First

World War, with their eldest son becoming famous across the North.

There were newspaper clippings, gorgeous portraits spanning decades of their lives. Reading about them felt worlds apart from my working class upbringing, and there was a tinge of jealousy knowing that the reason their history had been so well documented was because they were middle class. All the while my shipyard worker grandfather, their grandson, was gone with little trace, aside from a few stories and a handful of worn photographs.

One day while I'm searching through records, I find a newspaper article from 1938, written for my great great grandparents golden wedding anniversary. Alongside there is a picture of them in front of the house they'd retired in, both looking happy and bright. Reading the small interview, I decide I like them a lot. Hearing their words makes it feel tangible, like these are real relatives of mine, not just birth records and marriage certificates. It's written that the couple have eight children and a handful of grandchildren and working out that my grandfather was about twelve at the time, I realise he would have been one of them.

When asked for the secret to their successful marriage, my great great grandmother says, "if you give, take and pull together, there won't be much wrong." I write the quote down in my notebook and underline it, knowing that if I didn't hear any other words for the rest of my life, I would be happy with that.

Searching an online map tells me that house is still there, in a one lane village on the outskirts of York, and I find a picture of it taken in 1997 on a local history page for the area.

I close my eyes and imagine David going to his grandparents on the weekends, knocking on the door in the photograph which is framed in flowers. His grandfather answers, beady eyes looking

over his reading glasses down at David, his moustache curling over a wide smile as he is delighted to see him. Their house is jewel-toned and warm, and once inside the living room he sits next to his grandmother, white-haired and stern, him playing with the velvet feel fabric of the sofa while she tells tales of all the places they travelled. I open my eyes again, and he feels slightly closer to me.

Comforted, I go back through what I've found, gathering all the records and photographs to save forgetting them later. I study the pictures of the house, one from the 1938 article and the other nearly sixty years later, but they are unmistakably the same. While the 1997 shot downloads, I scan over the caption written on the local history newsletter I found it in, and it reads "photo submitted by Alice, of the house her grandparents lived in from the 1930s."

It takes a moment to process what I've just read. My stomach leaps when I realise. This person, Alice, submitted a photograph of my relative's house, her grandparents, and therefore is probably related to me.

With eight children including David's mam, it makes sense that she'd be a child of one of the others, so maybe my grandfather's cousin.

Nervously flicking my pen between my fingers, I scour social media using all I have about this woman, just her full name, but find nothing. Some google searching shows letters she wrote to the newspapers some ten, fifteen years ago, but there's nothing recent. I realise that as a potential cousin, she'd be around David's age, who would have been ninety-five last month, and that it might be too late. Grimacing at the thought, I keep searching, using the new clues the newspaper letters provided.

They give me the name of the street she lived on when they were written, in a village a couple of miles from the house in the photo.

Scrolling through online phone book records, I find her, but there's no contact information, only a few related entries that I assume are family members who lived with her. Facebook searching their names proves fruitless as there are so many profiles and no way of knowing what I'm looking for.

In a last ditch attempt, I look for the names in a York history group and one woman comes up. There's no obvious connection to Alice, no Facebook friends with her surname, and I shuffle through the old profile pictures trying to work out if we look alike. I know my only option is to reach out to her, but my fear of being disappointed stops me for a second. The idea of finding a living relative is probably too good to be true anyway, I decide. I've never been that lucky. But the only thought louder than that, which is the one burning to know more about my family, types out a message to this woman explaining who I am and hits send. Anxiously, I sit on my hands and try to forget about it.

But I don't have to for long, because within twenty minutes she replies.

"I'm at Alice's now. She says have you got any relatives names? Who are you?"

I quickly wipe the sweat from my palms to type back. I give her the names of the great great grandparents and explain how I came across the photo of the house. The woman says that Alice is her neighbour, and that she's currently digging out pictures of the people I'm describing.

"Would you like her phone number?"

I can't say no, but I feel sick with nerves. There are so many thoughts running around in my mind. What if she thinks I'm lying? What if she doesn't remember anything? What am I supposed to ask about first?

Pacing my living room, I try and gather my feelings up with my paper and pen, quickly scribbling down dates and names I already know so I can focus my questions. I slowly type out the phone number, hit the call button and hold my breath.

The first thing I notice about Alice is her voice - she sounds a few decades younger than I'd worked out, more likely the same generation as my mam. It is soft and warm, not accusatory like I'd feared, but like she's genuinely happy to talk to me.

"Hiya, is that Alice?" I purposely slow down my Mackem tone so I don't stumble over my words. "Thank you for agreeing to speak to me. I'm not sure how much your neighbour explained - I came across that photograph of the house, your grandparents house, is that right?"

● "Yes, my Nan and Grandad. How are you related to them?"

● I look at my notes to make sure I get all the names right, and say I understand they had eight children and that one of them is my great grandmother, Dinah, and that her son David is my grandfather.

● "Ah yes, *our* David." She says, and I swear I can hear her smiling. "Well, I was going to tell you about the house, and let you know I actually grew up there, but there's something else I have to tell you and I'm not sure you're going to believe me.

"Dinah's husband, your great grandfather, had me out of wedlock, so she adopted me. David is my older brother."

Alice explains that she was born in 1932 and was brought into the house and raised as my grandfather's younger sibling. The family was disjointed, with both their mother and father having different relationships and eventually separating when David was a teenager. Alice was still young, so was taken in by one of Dinah'

sisters. She last saw him a couple of years after his move to South Shields, where she can remember taking his eldest son, my uncle, out in his pushchair on the high street. David would have been around twenty-six, and they never spoke or saw each other again. One of their other sisters called Jean (which was a name I'd heard my mam mention before) was also still alive and spoke to Alice regularly.

"He was very troubled, was our David." She speaks as though treading carefully. "He was quiet, and always seemed sad. But he was the most gorgeous man I've ever seen. Like a film star, jet black hair, perfect white teeth and piercing green eyes. The double of his dad - which is why I think no one could deny we were brother and sister. We looked so much alike."

I try to picture it but I can't. I'm taken aback by her description, it feels so far from the older, weathered version of him I'd seen in photographs. "There's no one in our family who knew him when he was younger." I replied. "It feels like there's so much I don't know about him."

Heading into winter, I spend a lot of my time curled up with my notes and expanding our tree, all the while Alice's words are rattling around my head. Piecing things together, writing down what I've learned and filling in the gaps. The more I do, the more questions come up.

"How come we've never heard of her?" my mam asks one day while I'm taking her through it all. And while it's a good question, with the picture of David I've built in my mind, it makes sense. One of the few things I understood about him was how much he cared for his immediate family and keeping them together. Maybe Alice reminded him too much of what happens when that goes wrong.

A few weeks later I call her again. "Hiya, Alice? It's David's

granddaughter.” I realise that’s the first time I’ve ever said that in my life.

“Oh, hello! Lovely to hear from you.” And I believe her, as although she is nearly ninety years old and has every reason not to be, she still sounds kind and sincere. She’s been wanting to ring me to ask if I had any pictures of David when he was younger, and while I don’t think we do because I’ve never seen him in the way she describes, I promise her I’ll look next time I visit my mam.

I decide to ask about their older siblings and why no one ever came to visit the family in South Shields. She says again that David was “troubled”, and this hadn’t surprised me, as I’d just learned he joined the army around when his mam died and was always getting into bother.

● “He didn’t have anywhere to live, not really, once the family all separated. He stayed between relatives but fell out with some of them. We didn’t know where he was a lot of the time.” Her words stop and slow down, like she was about to tell me something difficult. “There was, sometimes, he would borrow money, and not pay it back. That’s what we fell out over eventually. I couldn’t help, and he told me he never wanted to speak to me again.”

Once again, I am left floored by what she’s told me. I apologise, because I feel responsible for his actions and hate the way he treated her.

“What I need you to understand is that everyone has their things, don’t they? Everyone goes through stuff when they’re young. He was a bad lad, but he wasn’t a bad person. There’s no doubt in my mind that he was a great dad and made a wonderful life for himself.”

It takes some time to process. He impulsively severed his relationship

with his sister and then died without ever speaking to her again. I feel disappointed, almost like this image of the perfect grandad has been tainted by his spite. I almost keep this new information from my mam - I'm worried about how she'll react, hearing things about her Dad while he's not here to defend himself. But when I tell her about David and Alice's last conversation, the reason why they never spoke again, she nods reluctantly. "I can believe that," she tells me, but it's the honesty of her next words that startles me most. "I'm like that too, just like him. Always cutting off our nose to spite our face."

And I can see it in my mam, and in me too. It's something I've spoken about in my therapy a lot lately, all the wonderful and jarring ways in which I watch myself turning into her.

That bitterness and spite, not feeling like we deserve nice things so ruining them for ourselves and saying "I told you so" when it all goes wrong. A self-fulfilling prophecy going back generations, which cost David and Alice over 25 years of a brother sister relationship that can never be recovered.

But the more I think about the stories I've been told and the things I've learned, the more it all makes sense. By the time David turned fourteen, his whole life turns upside down. His father has an affair and brings home a sister they didn't know about. His mother then leaves, in love with someone else, and starts a new life. He's a teenaged middle child - the older siblings are already married and have lives of their own, while his younger sister, Alice, is young enough to be taken in by another relative and given another chance. He is left with no permanent home, moving around between friends and family members, falling out with them, borrowing money because he has no steady income. His mother comes back and then passes away when he's twenty-one. His brothers and sisters disown their father, and David joins the army seemingly to find a purpose. Nothing about his growing

up feels fair. He's forgotten about, unsupported, unloved. I can feel that. I'm not surprised he was troubled, or felt like the black sheep of the family, and when he saw an opportunity to run away to South Shields and start a new life, of course he took it. I know I would have, and I wouldn't even be alive if he hadn't. The family he started here, that he protected and put before everything else, he loved and held so closely because he once had no family at all.

The next weekend, I go to my mam's house to follow up on my promise to Alice. We dig out the old photographs and start working through them eagerly. There are photos of my Nana in what looks like a canteen worker uniform, and another portrait where she looks like a 1950s film star. There are a few of my mam as a baby which I've never seen before, looking the spit of my two year old daughter who is running around the living room as we flick through the old photographs.

- -
 -
- Opening another box, I find a small, leather-look album perched on top. The first page contains clippings of the newspaper obituaries for both of my grandparents. The rest of the photos are all of them in their later years, at my auntie's wedding, grandchild's christenings, happy and merry with cigarettes in their hands. I remember a lot of these pictures, but some I haven't noticed before.

There are a few from a family Christmas, probably one of their last. My grandad is wearing a paper cracker hat and not looking at the camera, because he's busy playing with two of my older cousins. In another shot he's holding them lovingly, my nana's arms holding him in turn, and I feel like I've been punched in the throat.

That's what I should have had. The bittersweet feeling that comes with learning about your dead relatives swallows me whole. Now I know them better, I wish I'd had them more. Had I stayed naive and never learned about their lives, this wouldn't hurt as much. The classic line of "better to have loved and lost than never loved



“He’s forgotten about, unsupported, unloved. I can feel that. I’m not surprised he was troubled, or felt like the black sheep of the family, and when he saw an opportunity to run away to South Shields and start a new life, of course he took it. I know I would have, and I wouldn’t even be alive if he hadn’t. The family he started here, that he protected and put before everything else, he loved and held so closely because he once had no family at all.”



at all” doesn’t apply here because I don’t get either outcome. I’ve have still lost them, but they died never even knowing who I was.

Then, just as I feel like putting the box away, I see something. Tucked between some of the others, is a tiny black and white picture about two inches big. Easily missed, its edges are worn and there are a few dots of light across the faces, but it’s immediately obvious who it captures. Tall and slim, with the slicked back jet black hair Alice always describes, stands my grandfather holding his eldest son, my uncle, who is only a baby. They’re both beaming, David’s teeth so strikingly white even in greyscale. He must be around twenty-five years old.

It’s the first time I really notice his side profile, and I can see his nose, oversized and slightly crooked exactly as mine is, which I like more now that I see it on his face too. This is after all the years of heartbreak and loneliness, the losing his family, falling apart and starting again. Holding onto his firstborn child, no longer lost or abandoned, but finally getting the love and happiness he always deserved. When I get home, I print out a copy for Alice, and one for myself, and put it in a frame so he can sit in our living room, permanently captured in that joy, never alone or sad ever again, just as he always should have been.

I call Alice a few days before Christmas to go over the photographs I sent her, and she tells me that the one of my grandfather captures exactly how she remembers him from all of those years ago. “I only wish more photos were in colour back then, so you could see how green his eyes were.”

We talk about my auntie, who’s wedding photo I also sent, and she tells me that Jean, the other sister, has passed on her details and she’s excited to get in touch. I wish her a Merry Christmas and promise her we’ll come down and visit next year.

“Oh, before you go,” she says quickly. “There was something Jean wanted me to tell you.” I press my phone as hard to my ear as I can.

“I told her you’d sent me a beautiful picture of David, his wife and their children, and she said he always loved kids and was a great father. She wanted you to know he would have been a wonderful granddad to you, had he been here.”

I let her words surround me, wrap me up in their warmth, and take comfort.



My Experience of Schizophrenia

Chris Bird

(My experience of schizophrenia)

Daybreak

1.

The wind carried litter along the pavement beside the Tube station entrance.

Slowed by traffic my bus's arrival was a distant hope.

My attention was caught by graffiti on the bus stop shelter which in clumsy script read 'Stranger Danger'.

The phrase seemed very deliberate to me.

How could this be a random or accidental sentence?

The street bustled with people sitting outside cafes despite the February breeze.

Grey skies loomed above London's skyline.

As I waited a song from the radio came to me from the open window of a passing van.

'This is the road to nowhere' sang a familiar Talking Heads' track from the mid-1980s.

Yet suddenly an impulse of thought reflected on the combination of graffiti and the fleeting recognition of a lyric.

I felt a descending process of consideration that loosely linked the two structures.

‘Road to nowhere Stranger Danger’ was an immediately striking juxtaposition of meaning.

Maze-like associations jumped to mind implying street robbery, violence, futility, and my place in the busy street.

I looked down at my palm.

2.

As I felt an uncomfortable wave of anxiety I heard a voice spiral leap across the space just behind me.

‘Stranger in Bethlehem manger’.

I looked around but of course there was no one there.

The next voice was more direct, a sound like an insistent whisper.

‘Strange dead’.

I swallowed and suddenly the traffic seemed to be producing jagged, alarming crowds of words which darted between the pavements and the windows of shops.

The names of cafes and supermarkets spelt out vague clues.

These words attempted to define new emerging meanings only I grasped.

3.

I remembered the psychiatrist had suggested to me that when I felt unwell to find a peaceful spot away from stress-inducing confusion.

Easier said than done when you are in Kentish Town high street on a busy Tuesday.

‘Slow motion’.

‘Bus stop strangler’.

‘Damn good morning’.

- Voices sparked one another like malignant tumors.

- Hissing voices blurred and faded then suddenly returned in spikes of sound.

‘Crap take’.

I knew this voice.

It had a shifting crystalline quality like moonlight in motion.

The crow's screech scared away the other birds and this particular voice operated in this manner dominating other lesser voices.

There was now an elderly man in a raincoat at the bus stop.

He looked smart in a 1950s way except he was holding a flimsy supermarket bag which appeared to be empty.

He stared at me.

'Why doesn't he look away?' I thought.

Traffic sounds increased sharply.

He stared and stared at me while the voices swelled and spun around me.

I stepped away toward the busy road.

4.

The pattern of life above any city represents a complex map of street names, house and block numbers, as well as human histories and associated days.

Pulses seep out of the cracks in everyday life slowing into fractured sequences of voices that trouble people like me.

Enigmatic links connect objectively unrelated words in an unsettling pattern:

'Telephone'.

'Elephant'.

These nouns, denoting separate formal meanings, are linked when I see them.

Hospital contains the malign word 'pit'.

Medicine likewise encompasses the negative term 'sin'.

Holborn responds to the concept 'burn'.

City parks beside statues and monuments swirl with autumn leaves like discarded colours or glances.

The city closes around me as I try to rest but strong and persistent memories traumatise the silvery silence.

Lion—liar—Zion.

Treat—trick—tie.

Con—crown—can of Cola.

Tan—tarantula—taint

●
●
●
5.

The bus shook and trembled as it approached Camden Town.

The windows were smudged and dirty and some bright spark had outlined the letters 'WHUFC' in the grime of the glass.

I imagined his digit dirty with dust after he or she wrote this crude celebration of West Ham United Football Club.

This was my team and my dad's team.

I began to muse over this fact.

Why had I sat beside this particular window on this particular bus?

Had someone anticipated my presence on the bus?

Had someone publicised my allegiance to a particular team?

Was it possible local newspapers or radio stations were involved and was there perhaps a wider conspiracy?

As I thought of 'radio stations' a significant association or hinted clue suggested Tube 'stations'.

Camden contained the hidden word 'mad'.

Den means 'from' in Turkish, my second language.

'From Mad' sounded like Fromage which means 'cheese' in French.

Although these mental links and associations were slight and subtle they resounded and reverberated in a cascade of entwined thoughts.

I began to tremble.

I looked at my palm and the web-like network of wrinkles and skin lines mirrored the complex and dizzying array of fragmented thoughts.

The sluggish progress of the bus emphasised my own snail-like movement through my day.

There was no destination except lonely exclusion.

6.

The cafe was trying to mug me off because 'coffee' related to 'coffin' even on a sunny winter day.

The day centre opened at eleven meaning service users hung around waiting in nearby cafes or the churchyard next door.

The day centre intercom never worked and probably suffered from its own mental instability.

The heavy entrance gate remained aloof and immovable.

New volunteers would press 'enter' and distantly lights went out in the office and phones rang.

-
-
- If they pressed 'lock' literally anything could happen including world war.

Inside (if you ever got there) was a drab and dejected social area decorated with photocopies of notices such as 'Walking Group to Kings X' or 'Hearing voices' workshop.

A blackboard beside the door listed daily events in a clumsily handwritten agenda.

Newcomer volunteers were always jobbed to do this particular task.

Chalk in white or pink detailed the day's adventures.

Partly out of frustration and boredom at my situation

I added events to the blackboard with my own crude scrawl.

My most inspired were:

‘Suicidal Tendencies Group Excursion to Beachy Head’
‘Hitler Studies Three O’clock (Please Bring Own Armband)

‘How to Sign-on in Forty-Two Different Places including Cardiff Workshop’

‘Pensioner Wrestling Focus Group’
There was actually a genuine enquiry about the Hitler studies item.

7.

Tea and coffee supplies were the light bulb to the moths of mental illness.

Teabags and tablespoons of instant coffee pinned the empty hours to the structure of the day.

Sitting on the worn out sofa, service users examined newspapers with a range of glazed expressions.

People shuffled toward the small garden (no flowers as such) to smoke roll-up fags.

Literally everyone chain-smoked in the centre, a probable consequence of Clozapine and Olazipine dependency.

Antipsychotic medication bloats the human shape in a distinct and irreversible manner.

Stomachs swell as unrelenting hunger leads to casual snacking and overeating.

The queue for lunch assembled fully twenty minutes before the serving hatch opened.

Plump faces and chubby bellies are commonplace in wards and day centres.

Heroin use does help with weight loss apparently.

8.



I always left the centre after lunch.

After eating there was always a gloomy lull.

The streets seemed to jump suddenly up with discordant impulses and sights.

Traffic noises surged.

The iron gate seemed reluctant to let me out.

It was literally a Herculean effort to wrench it open.

Muscle-bound weightlifters from the Soviet Union's glorious era would have struggled with it let alone us unfit service users.

The gate groaned with furious disapproval as it eventually opened.

Perhaps this indicated we had no easy access to the real world.

That gate was stubborn as hell.

9.

The TV screen watched my every move.

The glare of the screen hummed on the relic of a TV in neon colours.

1....2....3.... I counted on.

My breathing slowed.

On the kitchen table I had a pile of paperback books organised in a particular way.

Doctor Who, Dracula, Dan Dare, Dagenham Dave

Chris Turd (damaged goods)

When my mum died her legs were covered in ulcers.

The winter comes in stages, not all at once

The council would have made me homeless if it wasn't for my wonderful care coordinator, Anna Maus.

When I first met her I felt nervous and impulsively asked,

'Any relation to Mickey?'

10.

Near the station there was always a collection of junkies and homeless people who seemed to appear at dusk.

It was as if, as the working day descended into shadow, the marginal and desperate people peopled the grim streets and alleys.

The gothic towers of the station only added to the sense of gloom as traffic relentlessly swirled around the maze of streets and roads.

Neon lights shone in gaudy colour above a game arcade where people waited trailing cigarette smoke.

I walked here out of loneliness and promptly embraced their degeneration and self loathing.

The emaciated drug addicts simply presumed I belonged to their particular street subculture.

Scottish accents added an edge to the interaction.

I soon acquired a taste for smack.

The police seemed largely unconcerned with the sale and exchange of narcotics around the station.

Maybe the heroin quantities were too small.

Seedy hotels provided the backdrop to alleys where addicts shot up.

Graffiti lined the backstreets with faded peace signs and weed symbols prevalent.

Smoking heroin takes longer and is impossible on a windy street unless well sheltered from the breeze.

Once you are high of course nothing matters except a cigarette.

Sitting in an alcove watching a Victorian station building could seem the most wonderful experience after using.

I maintained a weirdly moral perspective in that I never shot up.

Partly it was a phobia to sharing syringes.

Smoking off tin foil or chasing was my moralistic preference.

The silver paper was the colour of stars.

The movement of gear is like a detached momentary glimpse into heaven.

The hit is milder than injected heroin when you chase but the long glow of comfort combined with a sustained sense of blurred relaxation is impossible to beat.

Impossible as a frozen sun.

11.

When you are homeless the city streets wrap themselves around you in an unwelcome embrace.

Traffic noises and passing trickles of chatter provide a fleeting background.

People who walk by usually discuss TV, food, or shopping.

Their footsteps hit the grey pavements as they rush to an office computer or a congested sandwich bar.

The sense of exclusion is double edged.

I never envied the suited and booted commuters their work routine.

The mortgage dependent, the rent slaves of any big city are constrained and defined by the surge to work.

I notice religious individuals, whether Christian or Muslim, and think their social agenda is more honest somehow.

● Birdsong is the tonic to the growl of the working day.

● There is simply so much time to overcome when you have nowhere particular to go.

12.

The wave of euphoria was so intense I struggled to catch my breath.

The elation was concentrated and all encompassing.

I let my body drift into nothingness.

In the high branches the birds were singing.

Faraway dusk lined the streets.

Soon the game would be over.



Illustration by Chris Bird

WHO THE
FUCK MADE
: ALL THIS
MESS?

In Defence of Doing the Bins

Becky Buchanan

Filthy, teetering, stinky plates beside the bed, the sink, the sofa. Excavatory layers of time, bills, appointments, games, art projects, two feet deep on the table. There's the discarded neon cast from a broken leg on the kitchen floor and the hoovers in the bathroom. Spilt plant pots, fag butts in cups, and clothes ready to grow limbs. To form a jumble bum monster driven to an avalanche attack when I pull the bra from the bottom. How clean is your house?

The personal is political, and there is damnation waiting for working-class single mothers whose house is not clean. How dare they be so vulgar? They are not pretending they don't own anything, haven't tastefully stashed everything away for clear surfaces. Unfit mothers, not providing a nurturing environment. Lazy women, working full-time in a hangover of a system that was designed for unpaid and undervalued domestic labour to support the breadwinner. Perhaps I should apologise in shame: 'I'm sorry it was tidier last week, please don't judge me.' Perhaps in the absence of flatmates I should rant to myself, 'who the fuck made all this mess? So rude!' Perhaps I should explain to my guests, 'Soz about the mess. We're in the middle of not giving a fuck.'

Stuffocation is a syndrome that affects the mind, body, and spirit. The clutter littering every surface leaves me unable to concentrate. Slaloming around the debris archipelago to pull on the same tracksuit day after day. Keys, phone, and the book I was just reading sink without trace the instant I put them down, like the flavour in a Pot Noodle sachet. Like the turned page, with the unknown word on it I was going to look up in the dictionary, returning to the fold. My ideas and attention are scattered by the intrusive wondering of why that pot of daffodils is sitting in a puddle of coffee on the

cooker. I am Alice, in a panic attack, in an abyss, the walls narrow, agitated rabbit to the darkside. I am disorientated and desperate to escape my own home.

Late stage capitalism is fun, isn't it? All these shiny trinkets and bare unnecessaries of life that come to you. How did all these things that cleave my mindfulness come into my life to demand to be curated and caressed? Is consumption the placatory circumstance that keeps colonialism rumbling along? The ker-ching that drives climate change! Is it possible to ever take that damn awkward political lens off once it is brought to consciousness? It's outwitted in a magical mind trick whenever I buy my next pair of sweatshop-born pants! Perhaps these things were just gifts from people who loved me? If that's true then I am a nexus of devotion! And how did someone who loved me so much misinterpret my taste? Do these jeans that don't do up still define me? Or am I shibari'd in the spaghetti junction of wires, the shell memories and shopping lists? Stuffocation!

Things that we choose because, disconnected and disempowered as we are, they reflect us. Possessions that we are free to select, yet we are not free to truly choose beyond consumption. Perhaps except in the act of creative production.

London is one of the most expensive and divided cities on our planet. When I am driven by the stuffocation to get away, there's so much more I can bring home, like a bower bird building a seductive grotto. On every corner—out of fashion books like *Everyday Verse* published in 1972, homeless sofas, fast fashion. Items asking to be cared for by me, taken in. Each acquisition offers an illusory sprinkle of joy, security, and autonomy. Driven by the waste and the guilt and the greed, I ignore the taboo against doing the bins, raking through trash for treasure. And the treasures! Sequined sombreros, fur coats, and French chairs with velvet cushions. I guess it helps too that when I was a child and we went to town my

mum would be in the supermarket shopping and my dad would be around the back in the bins for out-of-date food. Bless him for my traveller's stomach of steel.

Class is defined in context against a different class, and sometimes it seems like I spend more time thinking about the cultural quilt of customs that the middle or upper classes live by than my own. An impulsive personality (where's my cleaning impulse?) and a mindset of childhood poverty perversely make me a fast spender and also suspect of investment rather than saving. Clearly Marie Kondo of the Japanese decluttering dream was not working class. I project from my present to my ideal future and mutter to my belongings 'Do you bring me joy?' The unfurling and uplifting heart opening is a yes, the heavy void is a no. I've sorted it all into boxes for sale and donation. So now I just trip over those. Perhaps I should just do the bins.



I Smell a Rat

James Sibley

1.

a rodent that resembles a large mouse, typically having a pointed snout and a long tail. Some kinds have become cosmopolitan and are sometimes responsible for transmitting diseases.

The insane strata of Westminster Tube station feel like an attempt to replicate a portion of the Death Star, or at least its 1977 movie set. Commuting between the giant staves, looking up at the beams and cylinders of frosted metal, an empty mood proliferates the walls no matter how populated the space actually is. Misty surfaces reflecting ghostly silhouettes: everything is either machine textured or textured by machines. The beams—bolted in tension—seem hardly enough to support the soil beyond the arcs above, yet denote some kind of functionality, dwarfing the human by presenting it within some brute mechanism, as if we're all passing through some colossal flintlock weapon, cocked and releasing at any moment. The tunnels below are surprising respite from this architectural intimidation, permitting intermittent gusts of warm, stale air through the passages. This air—pushed and pulled by oncoming rail traffic—erupts like water from a geyser, occupying the shape and volume of the next station it inhabits. Escalators function similarly, carrying bodies from transit to more transit via stationary transit, or to their destination at street level via a coffee vendor.

*

An aside: Trains are production time catalysts: demanding our digital mind-spans while we wait, and commanding our productive attentions for the very fact that they sandwich the working day between two temporal units (of travel), functioning as the most physical version of a binary machine switch possible.

A productivity machine machine. Whenever the image of ‘tube’ or ‘tunnel’ springs to mind, many imagine a cylindrical hole which stretches for miles in pitch dark. This is a ruse, and in truth, people should consider inner-city train networks to be more like a split lane motorway, where vehicles and bodies are displaced and distributed in opposite directions AT THE SAME TIME. In the visual imaginary, tunnels should appear less as single, wire-like structures, and instead tend more towards the dual barrels of a conventional shotgun. The lost coordinates of what we imagine tunnels to be must be reclaimed firstly by learning that they are split in two, like a record’s A and B sides, or a brain’s two hemispheres.

*

Geysers of people springing up across the city through a rat warren of interlocking tunnels. Like rats, tunnels run in tandem beneath the city, travelling in packs, clustering, and becoming tangled at an epicentre. Rats, too, ferry passengers back and forth. In proportion to the scale of a human standing in a train carriage, these approximately manifest on rats’ terms in the form of fleas (famously), viruses (again, famously) and rat lungworm, the larvae of which are transmitted via fecal parasites. *Angiostrongylus Cantonensis* is found exclusively in rodents, being transmitted between them regardless of species. Similarly, rats carry their own brand of gastrointestinal parasites, which—again when equated to the human scale—act as microscopic tapeworms, parasitically digesting in order to grow and breed. Recent scatological studies have revealed that these helminths are also transmitted fecally, emerging instead from egg clusters which lie dormant in deceased rats’ shit, coming unlive in order to devour the next intestinal tract they find themselves inside of. In such instances, the rat—embarking on its daily jaunt beneath the gas pipes in a cavernous tunnel—keels over suddenly, shrieking in pain and shitting blood in an attempt to expel its passenger, Alien (1979) style. Again, imagining the scale of a human-in-train vs a parasite-in-rodent scenario, the latter comes out on top in terms of contagion

statistics. Conversely, the final parasite which occupies the space between a rat's lungs and its anus is the single-celled Protozoa, a fungus which rapidly multiplies itself once inside the next rat's digestive tract. Although these parasites are too weak to harm humans, they are capable of rupturing and perforating the skin of their rodent hosts, leaving weals which occasionally resemble the track marks of human drug abusers.

Rats have historically represented the harbingers of widespread catastrophe, ferrying fleas—the blood of which carried trace evidence of the bubonic plague—by secretly occupying the bellies of trading galleons from Asia in the 1300s. The inaccuracy of nautical chartering at the time meant that these vessels often ended up in the wrong countries or even continents, which led to the plague gaining a foothold in southern England (although recent studies have resulted in the idea that the original pathogen may have lain dormant in parts of Europe as early as 3000 BC). Through generations of pack inbreeding, this virus has mutated, becoming distilled into a pulmonary syndrome known as Hantavirus, which travels through the blood, eventually collapsing the human lung infrastructure. Again distributed fecally, the chances of contracting this disease are mercifully five times less likely than being struck by lightning, and half as likely as being eaten by a shark—a statistic which has declined further since the trade routes of the Old World have long since been accurately chartered by satellite imaging technology, and there are now vessels which can steer these passages remotely (a trading-galleon captain could now quite literally 'do' these routes with his eyes shut and one arm tied behind his back).

Within these ships, rats become both transporters and transported. A contemporary rendition of this stowaway scenario is the hiding of rats' nests within the cavities of (especially wooden) walls, transmuting their base status by presenting themselves somewhere within the ecology of the domestic scenario. They are able to dislodge and chew granular substances into a fine pulp, which

is combined with sticks and other manageable objects in order to create canopies which can permanently house up to twenty inhabitants. The occupation of the pre-existing space between wall-studwork-studwork-wall, or brickwork-lintel-lintel-brickwork is a smart choice, because its dimensions often ensure that it is a space that can be manoeuvred and traversed with ease. This occupation also impinges upon ratkind's broad status as a nomadic city dweller, having moved from land to ship to land again, and later from sewer to domestic space (or rather the space quite literally existing emptily BETWEEN domestic settings). It is in this way that ratkind simultaneously defies preconceived notions of its own status by redefining ideas around the micro-occupation of macro-space. Traversal is also especially important when considering that rats, like magpies, are collectors of things: silverware, decorative Christmas cracker bells, guitar picks, pin badges, memories, flakes of skin, and other dead creatures, embalming them in their cud and enshrining them within piling mausoleums, commonly known as 'Rat Mountains'. (These arrangements are often found in sewer networks and storm drains too, although the objects involved in these collections tend—as the obfuscating nature of drainage systems would suggest—to consist of more abrasive materials: nude magazine fragments, syringe tips, rotten leaves, wet wipes, and human shit).

*

Another aside: On this level, rats share an artistic tendency which is considered essentially human: undertaking the construction of assemblages through the repurposing or assisting of ready-made objects. This idea harkens to a natural truth: that the production of an artwork is ecologically inherent in certain species—and further—that artwork necessarily starts with the collection of (not necessarily physical, perhaps memorial) facets that are combined and eventually knotted into a single end, which is then presented (or not presented)—its function laid bare (or not, until it is deciphered).

*

This nesting style is almost totally unnoticeable too, bar its few but distinctive sonic properties: the high-frequencies of rodent communication, and the shrill squeal of the maid in the kitchen on a chair with the broom, as she sees one scurry past early one morning. (Imagine the cat-and-mouse scenario of Tom and Jerry. According to several fan-websites, the duo are close friends—a fact which is forgotten ad infinitum by Jerry because of his short, rodential memory span. This idea would make sense in terms of several episodes in which both parties combine their resources and knowledge to defeat a common evil: dogs, other predators, cartoons from other universes or production companies, humans, etc. Supposedly, the reason Tom so avidly chases Jerry (and rarely actually catches him) is because he has been instructed to do so by his owner: Tom is the lethal means. If he dysfunctions, then Jerry's life is prolonged. Tom plays the role of a sort of inverted life-support machine to the mouse, mediating Jerry's duration via a trivial act which he must continuously commit to in order to maintain his cover as deliberate saboteur. The mouse is unknowing of this fact, and still fights for his life with lethal force. It is a modern tragedy of sorts, in which the episodic formation of the series is vital when talking about Jerry's memory. As with many children's cartoons, there is no continuity, no story, merely the links the viewer makes between episodes in their heads: an internal memorial device which is supplemented by similar overarching values, show to show. It is as if Jerry suffers from some kind of (theoretically pure, anterograde) amnesia, where he cannot fabricate new memories beyond the point in his life where he believed Tom to be his nemesis, and continually forgets about their renewed friendship, somewhen during the off-screen lassitude between instalments). This, and the invisible tensions between the collected objects, curatorially vibrating along the common frequencies retained within each object's history, and the memories etched upon their surfaces. Broadly: things inscribed within their presence AS OBJECTS, ruminating beside OTHER OBJECTS. And lastly, the

subsonics of the nest blocking, resting on or dislodging a member of the house's internal mechanisms (pipes, circuitry, structural support, etc.), leading to sleepless winter nights thanks to the cold, which started with the noise of them there, somewhere, gnawing through the fucking tenons holding up the dining room floor... before it all fell through and got really, really cold, and nobody could understand why this had happened here, to us of all people.

The true horror of this nesting method emerges when the operation of the cud backfires: the mechanism trapping the rats—along with debris, gum, sap, plaster, ice, hair, urine, dirt, blood and shit, forming a hardened, resin-like substance—rather than merely maintaining the nest's intensely laboured structure. Although an uncommon occurrence, there have been reports of 'Rat Kings' throughout history: a phenomenon where the tails of two or more rodents become ensnared, knotted or stuck together, leading to a symbiotic existence wherein they hunt, gather, feed, sleep, and breed in the same group with that which their tails are interlocked. Often found in the winter months, when materials become hard, brittle, and generally less forgiving, a trio of rats encased in the wall of an Estonian barn wake to realise that last night's discharge has frozen behind them, actualizing the nightmare witnessed in their collective winter dreams: the joint encasement of their tails. Struggling to escape each other in the frosty daylight, they begin to trample towards the outside, pictured between the barn's weather-eaten slats. Their random movements of over, under, through, and round lead to bastard sailor's knots being cast by their tails, tightening alongside their struggle. Their tails emerge so intertwined that they can't even glance over their own shoulder without spotting a sibling which they're now permanently attached to. (This is much like the classic idea of having an angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other as a subconscious rudder for steering thought, except in this case they're not subconscious entities: they're all real-life devils which can never leave each other's side(s).

Animal knots are bad omens—particularly in the biblical senses of the onset of plague, pestilence, etc.

*

Another aside: ‘Etc.’ here can be reframed in terms of conquest, war, famine, and death, and each of these framed in relation to rats commonly carrying diseases, where:

Conquest = The double-edged incursion of rats via the invasion of our homes and our encroachment of their spheres. Just as the parasites cling to their underbelly, they now depend on our development of public space and our greedy excess for survival.

War = The weaponization of natural ingredients into man-made poisons to control the spread of disease carried by the rodents, including but not exclusive to execution (commonly within baited traps which quickly transform into poisonous death chambers, or environments where the rat starves to death if forgotten about) and chemical (chemically induced) castration.

Famine = We put the bread away at night now.

and Death = The harbouring of the diseases themselves, and the diseases’ ability to spread through the rats’ internal networks as they themselves spread through human social and architectural networks.

*

In many ways, this omen also plagues the Rat King itself. It is now three times as loud, and so remaining hidden is virtually impossible. Hygienically too, members now defecate proximately, and since they cannot hunt, their starvation causes coprophagia, which simply accelerates the induction of intestinal parasites into their own bodies. Furthermore, when one member bites it in a trap, the others must drag the necrosing corpse until they themselves too, bite it,

or, less likely, they learn to untie knots. This body is never wasted though, as the others will turn to cannibalism for sustenance, which is far easier than dragging it through the pinhole in the larder wall.

Although there are disputes as to the authenticity behind the existence of Rat Kings—as hobbyists may have manufactured them in order to generate paranoia by foreshadowing the return of the plague—a European museum holds a carbonised group of thirty-two members, having been found in a farmhouse chimney stack.

*

(X-ray scans of this Rat King denote fragmentation of the cartilage in their scorched tails, suggesting a cooperative survival for an extended period. This is perhaps one of the closest things to a hive-mind operating in nature, akin in some ways to the rat, Remi, in Disney Pixar's *Ratatouille* (2007), who controls a young chef by pulling the hair on his head in pursuit—essentially—of good food and wine, and hearty survival.)

*

The noise of thirty-two rats squirming, eating, fucking, and shitting beneath the farmer's feet leads to a major renovation of the site's original floorboards, revealing a hand-laid mosaic-style floor. As discussed, traversal is key in ratkind's repertoire of survival. Craftily occupying another space in the wall cavity, the plasterboard and the wooden slats supporting it are permanently dislodged in order to view the gradually accumulating nest by gas-lamp. Moving away from the light, the Rat King inhabits a space in the roof rafters next—a Lovecraftian hive-mind, squirming its way up the home's innards and lying in wait above the master-bed. Obsessed with thwarting their movements through his home's hidden passageways, the farmer finally chops the roof supports too, leading to a loud CRASH and a bump on the head, adding to the delirium. The winter daylight recounts shadows cast by black

rafters, and before long all that remains of the farmhouse is a vague, pencilled outline, a mirage of a former dwelling. How long has he been at it? Is he in fact chasing ghosts that he's invented? The structure laid bare, the reality of copper pipework and other INTERNAL MECHANISMS exposed, carpets all soiled and sullied by the elements.

*

(In a similar fashion to the examination of the tail cartilage, X-ray scans of the house-cum-warren reveal a tomography of hidden labour: of ancient nesting spaces, canopies consistent with recently lost objects, the sentimental qualities of which plague their owner's minds, snapping them out of oneiric day-drifts (tea lights, small Buddha figurines, single earrings, bottle caps, broken glass—each surviving far longer than the man-made non-spaces of the structure), memories that trespass the minds of their owners, shattering collections and disorganising arrangements. A new and chaotic taxonomy of objects.)



*

The torment of that SOME-THING, that MANY-FACETED-THING crawling through the house's secret spots, until reaching its resting place of the brickwork chimney, where it's accidentally barbecued almost beyond recognition. The spectre of LEGION—both one and many—leaving its ectoplasmic imprint forever on the surrounding masonry, the smell of charred fur clogging the fractured remains of the farmhouse. The rot of these animals sinking—decomposing bodies falling from perches, between cracks in the floorboards and the non-space which supports the next layer of gravel above this one—above this concrete—above this topsoil—above this clay—above this rock—above this crude oil offshoot, leading to a cavern some miles away. Ghosts drifting through encrusted pipelines. Creeping as lubricant for the cybercapital whirlpool, since the dawn of the combustion engine. This ghost army will one day rise into the air, slow-cooked and carbonised over a thousand years.

The term 'home invasion' only seems appropriate when extrapolated from its contemporary, visual-imaginary counterpart of armoured SWAT team members blowing doors off their hinges somewhere in a poor city neighbourhood, while a secondary support team hiding on the roof parasails in through the windows. Conversely, rat infestations are far more subtle, impinging instead upon stealth, obfuscation, and no mistakes in the departments of sonics, the building's structural integrity and structural discrepancies caused by the rodents to the essence of the property itself.

*

2.

DEROGATORY • INFORMAL

a despicable person, especially a man who has been deceitful or disloyal.

'her rat of a husband cheated on her'

an informer.

'he became the most famous rat in mob history'

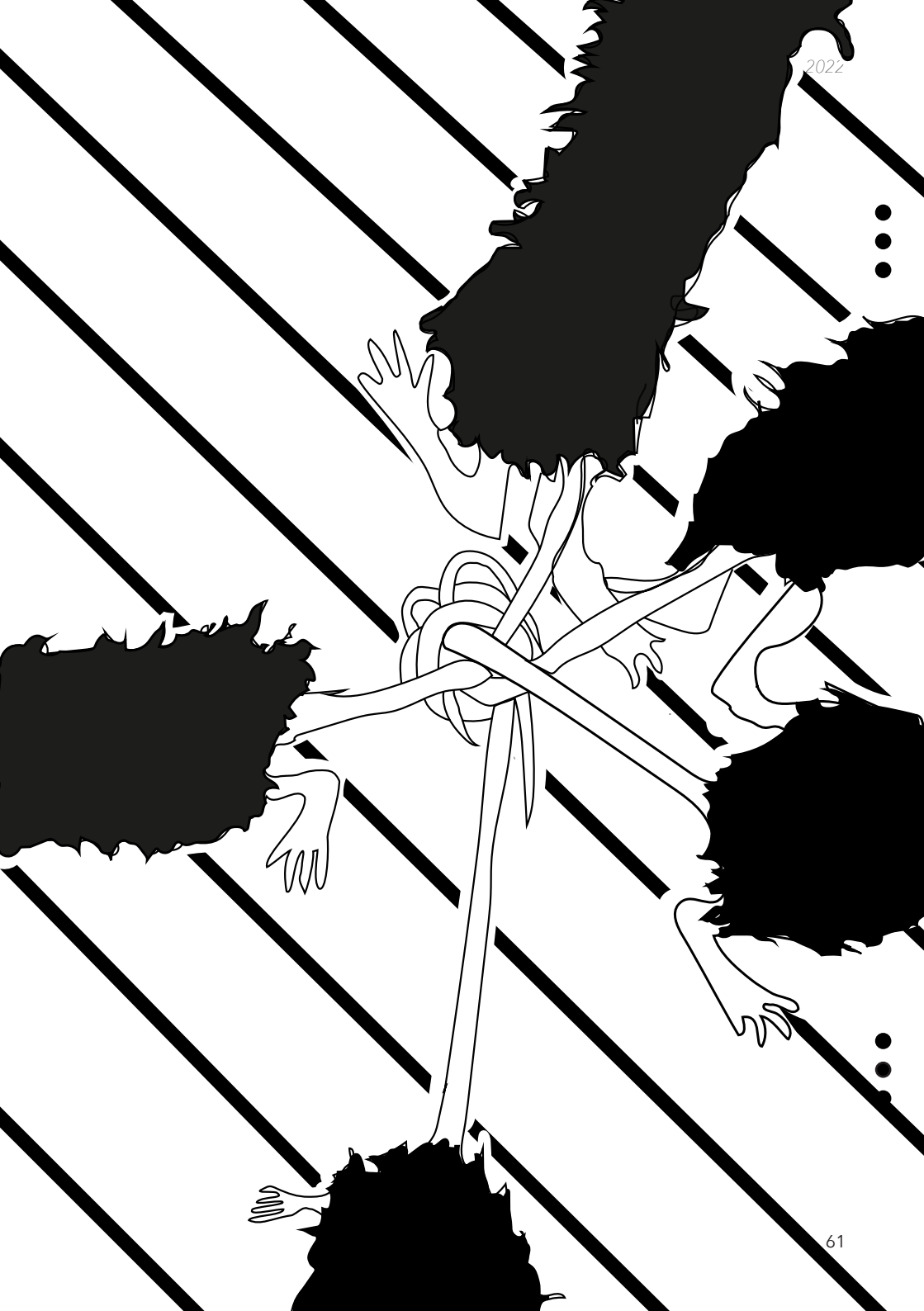
ACT 1.

[A kitchen somewhere in New Jersey. It is the kitchen of a wealthy family; 1990s chic set in the corner of a large, open-plan living expanse, and everything has its place. This area is divided, punctuated by a series of structural pillars which run through the space, supporting cream archways and leading to a lower living area furnished with cream leather sofas and coffee tables. The tone is generic, but denotes a vast wealth accrued, lost, and gained again cyclically, over a period of many years. The majority of the kitchen surfaces are made out of American White Oak, except the counter tops which are made out of a non-scratch, marbled

jesmonite set within wooden borders. Pearl-white tiles line the wall by the sink, and the ceiling is geometrically vaulted, which makes the space more airy and bright. The floor is also composed of tiles, but these are of an off-white, almost yellowish pallor. Scratch that: the floor is made of smooth wooden laminate strips. And there are no tiles by the sink, merely a continuation of the jesmonite counter top which wraps vertically up the wall until the windowsill above the sink stops it from travelling any further.

*Reading from screen left to right, a wardrobe-like unit houses a two-storey electronic oven in its belly, with two symmetrical doors above it closing over a cupboard, which sits either completely empty or filled with dishes and boxed appliances which are rarely used. The doors are perched at just over head-height, inlaid with the routed shapes of professional joinery. Above this, a small vent (which must be kept permanently switched to **open** for legal reasons) is installed. There are two cream hand-towels hanging—again, symmetrically—from the handle of the uppermost oven. There is nothing but a thin drawer, a skirting-board's height from the ground beneath the appliance, as the wooden shell must house and conceal the oven's workings.*

To its immediate right sits an alcove—the start of the counter-top running the perimeter of the kitchen. Upon this sits a small white microwave. This section runs the width of three large, rectangular cupboards, both above and below the counter-top, which house two shelves each (twelve total) and eventually meet the unit which demarks the corner of the kitchen and the end of the kitchen's shortest wall. Three wide drawers make up the space between lower cupboard and the underside of the kitchen surface. These cupboards either house nothing, or a selection of more commonly used plates or appliances. The drawers hold cutlery. All that is seen is lit by circular lighting fixtures in the angular cream ceilings which snugly skirt the cabinets, dictating the mathematical threshold at which the counter-top ends and the space between itself and a large kitchen island begins.



**HAVE YOU
GOT THE
: WORKING
CLASS
LOOK?**

On Cardigans, Accents, and Mis-shapes

Kenn Taylor

But you don't sound like you're from Merseyside?

So you've lost your accent?

Did you go to a good school then?

I am tired of these questions. Every one of which is laced with prejudice and projection, even if those asking don't intend it. Aside from any personal frustration at them, what's more important is they illustrate some of the skewed perceptions that many middle-class people have in their encounters with working-class people.

Whilst my accent isn't the strongest going, it is the one I have had my whole life. A mixture, not untypical, of my mum's Liverpudlian, my dad's Lancastrian, and me growing up in an overspill estate of Birkenhead—a place where accents range from the strongest 'Scouse' to basically exactly how I sound, varying even from door to door.

These questions first came up when I went to university locally in Liverpool and were almost always from middle-class students from the south. Many couldn't seem to grasp that in a metropolitan area of 1.5 million people, there is both variation and commonality in speech and accent that comes from a complex mix of cultures and migration. This confounded their media-driven expectations about the area and its people. When years later I moved away for work, living all over the country and working for predominantly middle-to upper-class cultural organisations, such questions became even more common, and were often asked after just meeting someone.

I found these questions most often came from people who'd spent the least amount of time in Merseyside, yet considered themselves for some reason to be experts on how people from the region sounded—as well as on what the 'local character' was. Many would, without invitation, want to share their thoughts on this with me.

More interestingly, I noticed it became something to challenge me on: 'But you're not really a Scouser', I was told, though this was something I never claimed to be—nevermind that what a Scouser is in reality is pretty ambiguous anyway. Especially when the dockland communities that Scouse culture emerged from were as much in towns like Bootle and Birkenhead more so than suburban parts of Liverpool itself. As well as this, many dockland communities were moved from riverside neighbourhoods to new towns and housing estates miles inland, often in different boroughs and counties. In short, as those of us with personal experience know, working class and regional identities, accents, and cultures are complex and multi-layered. Many people do not want to engage with this though, because it confounds their comfortable assumptions.

The challenge implicit in this question, of course, is the assumption that being 'Scouse' has a particular form and characteristic, an 'other' that can easily be defined by someone else based on the signifier of an accent. This challenge was often accompanied by follow-up questions like: 'So were you middle class then?' or 'So you went to a good school?' I answered, for context, no to both. My dad was a railway fitter and my mum a cleaner and we lived in a working-class community. My dad became disabled and couldn't work so I grew up largely on benefits, eligible for free school-meals et al. I went to a bog standard secondary modern school and worked for a couple of years before attending Liverpool John Moores University, as the first person in my family to enter higher education. Yet merely because my accent didn't fit some people's expectations around class and regional identity, I would often find my experience and identity being interrogated.

After such encounters, I often asked myself why I should have to explain any of this? Why do people feel entitled to ask such prying questions and make such statements, especially in a professional context? When you are usually just trying to respond quickly to the initial common question, 'Where are you from then?' why should you have to make the effort to satisfy their curiosity? A curiosity which, in reality, is about whether I and indeed other working-class people and people from Merseyside conform, or not, to their prejudices and assumptions. But you are judged too if you don't want to respond to such questions or take issue with them.

All this is a demonstration of the boxes that many middle- and upper-class people put working-class people in: a projection of what they *want and expect* from working-class people. The working class, it is assumed, have thick accents. Being from Liverpool, it is assumed, means being working class, whereas being from, say York, means being middle class. This is, of course, nonsense. Liverpool has middle-class suburbs, a significant professional sector, five universities. York meanwhile has a working class hit hard by the decline of local manufacturing and high property prices because of tourism and gentrification. However, if you don't fulfil the stereotypes of what more privileged people consider to be working class or what people from a particular place are like, your identity and culture is questioned by those who have no real experience of it.

Academia and the cultural sector are rife with this. Because class is almost always viewed through a bourgeois lens, it is seen on their terms, as something they can define based on their own prejudices about the dress, accent, behaviour, etc. of working-class people. Some like the idea of having a bit of a working-class presence in their organisations. Yet they often only want and value working-class people who 'fit the mould' as they perceive it. That working-class people are as varied and complex as middle-class people, and so are their accents and cultures, is something many do not

want to engage with. This seriously impacts on the opportunities afforded to working-class people and how they are judged and treated within bourgeois and elite structures. Indeed, it even impacts on what stories are allowed to be told within culture. A working-class writer from Liverpool who wants to do something set in the region but whose work is not suitably 'gritty' to fit the bourgeois imagination of the place will usually have a hard time getting it told through most mainstream mediums. In contrast, witness the visceral critical reaction to Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting* (Morace, 2001, p.11) when it was first published. In part because it showed a side of pretty Edinburgh that many people, residents and visitors alike, would rather pretend didn't exist.

There is no better anthem about class, prejudice, and performativity, than Pulp's 'Common People'. Its vitriol about an upper-class student trying to act out what they perceived as working-class behaviour because they thought it was 'cool', was sparked by someone Jarvis Cocker met at art school—a type of encounter now less likely as arts schools have become further dominated by people from privileged backgrounds (Romer, 2018). It illustrates Cocker's genius that in a three-minute pop anthem he can say more than most of us in a thousand essays.

Less remarked on, is the also brilliant 'Mis-Shapes', from the same album (Cocker et al., 1995): *We don't look the same as you / And we don't do the things you do / But we live around here too.*

This too is an angry and danceable song about being 'different' in a working-class context, because being working class is not about conforming to a narrow set of stereotypes set by others: a particular accent, a way of dressing or behaving. As Cocker exudes in *Mis-Shapes*, being working class doesn't mean you have to be, as we said around ours, a 'bad scall'. And of course, there are plenty of bad scalls in the middle and upper classes too.

This issue goes beyond accent. At a conference I attended, talk of class prompted someone to rant about how there were working-class people in the arts, they just needed to throw off the cardigans they wore to fit in. ‘You have nothing to lose but your knitwear’ perhaps? I realised, as they were speaking, that I was wearing a cardigan and considered momentarily, if this made me a reactionary class traitor. Then I remembered that my mum, who spent her working life as a cleaner and in factories, also liked a nice cardigan, and how popular it was, in the football casual fashions in the North that I’d grown up around, to re-appropriate middle-class knitwear styles and brands—often to the horror and confusion of those who were used to wearing them. Cardigans and class were again just as complex as accents. Never having had money for decent clothes when I was young, the first thing I did when I got my first decent paying, albeit insecure, job in my mid-twenties was to go and buy a smart overcoat that I’d long coveted. Wanting to look sharp is far from class treachery. And when you have often had little, being able to own ‘something nice’, even if it is singular, can cover up for a lack of security in general. ‘Oxfam chic’ meanwhile is often favoured mainly by those who like to try and ‘slum it’ in the same mould as the student in ‘Common People’ and others who engage in the performance of what they see as being working class. As Nathalie Olah discusses in *Steal As Much As You Can* (2019): ‘Cosplaying as the working class is one such method used by the middle-class ascendants to the highest ranks of the media, advertising and art institutions. Disguising their own privilege by wearing tracksuits and talking in mockney accents.’ (p.158)

Meanwhile, if you’re rebelling against working-class conventions, which can be just as restrictive and repressive as middle-class ones, then engaging and playing with elite-controlled aspects of culture can be interesting and alluring. Even if you far from swallow them wholesale. As a teenager in the 1990s, I was inspired by the Manic Street Preachers, as they demonstrated that being working class didn’t mean you had to limit your tastes or interests. Nor if

you became interested in other things, did you have to abandon popular culture. They showed that grappling with the ideas and the language that is used to control you and turning them to your own ends, is the opposite of class betrayal.

Some view as a burden the feelings of ‘in betweenness’ that can emerge when you have working-class origins but end up with a level of education most working-class people are denied. However, I take the view that these feelings can be powerful. As noted by Lee Crooks (2020) in his abstract for the *Working Class Academics Conference*:

“my capacity to inhabit – and slip between – the environs of the campus and the everyday spaces of the city beyond, I argue, provides a basis for creative transgression, doing things differently and scope for a healthy injection of working-class counter-culture, collective solidarity and humour. At the same time, this feeling of being ‘out-of-place’ and not knowing my place to some extent frees me from the conventional norms and expectations of what a university academic should do and be.”

Something echoed by Chloe Maclean (2020) at the same conference: *“a cleft habitus [a feeling that ‘this is not the place for me’] is not solely a site of dislocation, but can be utilised as a resource to challenge the reproduction of hierarchies within an institution.”*

Much of the middle- and upper-class who dominate the culture sector and academia, do not want to grasp these complexities, viewing class as a principally visual and sonic set of signifiers that they can easily pick out and identify. This creates serious issues. As the current push to increase working-class representation gathers pace, there’s a risk that recruiters and commissioners will go for what they perceive to be ‘obviously’ working-class candidates. Excluding those who don’t fit the mould, they might reject a young, working-class LGBTQIA+ candidate who doesn’t have an

'urban' accent and doesn't dress or behave in a way they perceive as working class. This highlights the absolute importance of having working-class people in senior management, decision-making, and commissioning roles in these sectors, not just junior or public-facing positions, or as token artists, outreach staff, or lecturers. As well as this, organisations need to seriously measure the socio-economic background of their workforces and job applicants to identify how representative, or unrepresentative, they are of society. Of course, it needs to be acknowledged that these issues are intersectional and such challenges will be disproportionately worse for people who face other forms of prejudice and stereotyping on top of class prejudice.

Issues around this could also grow now that, like in the 1990s, but in contrast to the last twenty years, being working class is becoming trendy again. Where once 'chav' was bandied about as an everyday insult for things not cool, now 'bougie' is slung about instead. Where this is dangerous for the working class, is in the inevitability of the adoption and performance of what are perceived as working-class tropes by middle- and upper-class people by those desperate not to be seen as unfashionable and longing for what they perceive as 'authenticity'. Through this co-option and crass distortion of working-class cultures, we would also see the exclusion of more nervous, more insecure, less supported working-class voices. As noted by Olah: *'this fetishisation only makes class divisions more entrenched, by further pushing the working-class experience into the realm of morbid spectacle.'* (p. 108) Not only does this deny opportunities to people who are actually from working-class backgrounds, it reduces their experiences and cultural expressions to a cartoon copy.

Perhaps more optimistically, this change in fashion could indicate a lower social tolerance for bourgeois norms. Yet the trouble about being in fashion is that being working class is likely to go out of fashion again eventually, with an attendant loss of

opportunities. It reminds me a little of George Orwell (2013) writing about the anarchist takeover of Barcelona in the 1930s: *'In outward appearance it was a town in which the wealthy classes had practically ceased to exist ... Practically everyone wore rough working-class clothes, or blue overalls, or some variant of the militia uniform I did not realize that great numbers of well-to-do bourgeois were simply lying low and disguising themselves as proletarians for the time being.'*

Middle- and upper-class people need to be reminded of their prejudices and assumptions, and perhaps in the current climate they're more likely to listen. Key to change though is ensuring that more working-class people take up space in positions of power in culture and academia. Then there needs to be a *constant renewal* of this through continued recruitment so that the numbers of working-class people in these sectors grow and expand through their hierarchies. Rather than just a token handful of working-class people brought in temporarily when there is a moral panic or it's found to be trendy, who then often find themselves, in their relative isolation, up against a wall of established thought and behaviour. Change must come from outside as well, but without more working-class people in the permanent institutions of culture as well, any lasting change will be much harder.

We have to make sure the new drive towards working-class opportunity and representation truly platforms the working classes in all their diversity and complexity. That it is members of the working classes who get the opportunities to tell their own stories, not have them re-framed, twisted or co-opted by others to enhance themselves.

As it says in *Mis-Shapes*:
We want the things you won't allow us
We won't use guns, we won't use bombs

We'll use the one thing we've got more of—that's our minds

Reference list

Banks, N., Cocker, J., Doyle, C., Mackey, S., Senior, R., Webber, M. (1995). *Mis-Shapes*. Retrieved from: <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/pulp/misshapes.html>

Crooks, L. (2020). 'One of our own?' On being a working class, hometown academic. Retrieved from: <https://workingclass-academics.co.uk/abstracts/#LeeCrookesAb>

Maclean, C. (2020). Rise with your class, not out of your class: Auto-ethnographic reflections on imposter syndrome and class conflict in higher education. Retrieved from: <https://workingclassacademics.co.uk/abstracts/#ChloeMacleanAb>

Morace, R. (2001). *Irvine Welsh's Trainspotting: A Reader's Guide*. London, England: Continuum.

Olah, N. (2019). *Steal as Much as You Can*. London, England: Repeater.

Orwell, G. (2013). *A State of Affairs Worth Fighting For*. Retrieved from

<http://bookanista.com/orwells-spanish-civil-war/>

Romer, C. (2018). Specialist arts colleges are among the most elitist in the country. Retrieved from: <https://www.artsprofessional.co.uk/news/specialist-arts-colleges-among-most-elitist-countrybvs>

*

Kenn Taylor is a writer and creative producer with a particular interest in culture, community, class, and place. His work has appeared in outlets including *The Guardian*, *The Big Issue*, *Journal of Class and Culture*, Liverpool University Press, and *Caught by the River*. He was born in Birkenhead and has lived and worked in Liverpool, London, Bradford, Hull, and Leeds.

Finding Healing and Joy Through Writing

Mina Hadi

Growing up, I never thought I could make a living as a writer. I thought doing so successfully was a privilege, one only afforded to a select bestselling few. I relegated writing to a mere hobby and nothing more. If I obsessed over characters and plots and fictional relationships, that just meant I had a hyperactive imagination, not necessarily an innate talent. It certainly didn't mean I could be a writer when I grew up.

Even after I had my first novel published at the age of fifteen—a novel I look back on with pure embarrassment, as most would as adults reading their teenage thoughts—I was never under any illusions. The first authors whose books I devoured were overwhelmingly white. Like a good Bengali girl in east London, I wanted to please my parents by opting for a Law degree.

I was lucky in a lot of ways. I got good grades, though that came at the price of my sanity and wellbeing, as anyone with Asian parents will tell you. It was drilled into me that I had to work three times as hard to be half as good. I took that seriously—so seriously that when I was doing my A-levels I didn't do any writing. And when I did get back into writing, it was with hesitation in my heart because I really should have been reading up on the countless cases I had to learn at law school. To this day, I remember only the cases that had compelling or interesting stories—the woman who sued after finding a dead snail in her ginger beer; the shipwrecked prisoners who

drew lots to decide who among them on the boat should be eaten; the conjoined twins whose parents opposed the separation necessary for one twin to live. Truthfully, I could write all day about those, especially what happened next.

But the law isn't always interested in the granular literary details. From reading the judgments, I didn't get a sense of the prisoners' desperation or hopelessness when they could think of no alternative to their survival than taking another life, nor the fear in the boy who was killed and then eaten. The emotions felt were less important than the outcome—in this case if there was ever a legal defence for murder through necessity. The questions I had about the *people* in the case were lost, buried in legal theory that could put me to sleep—a mean feat considering I struggled with insomnia most of my time at university.

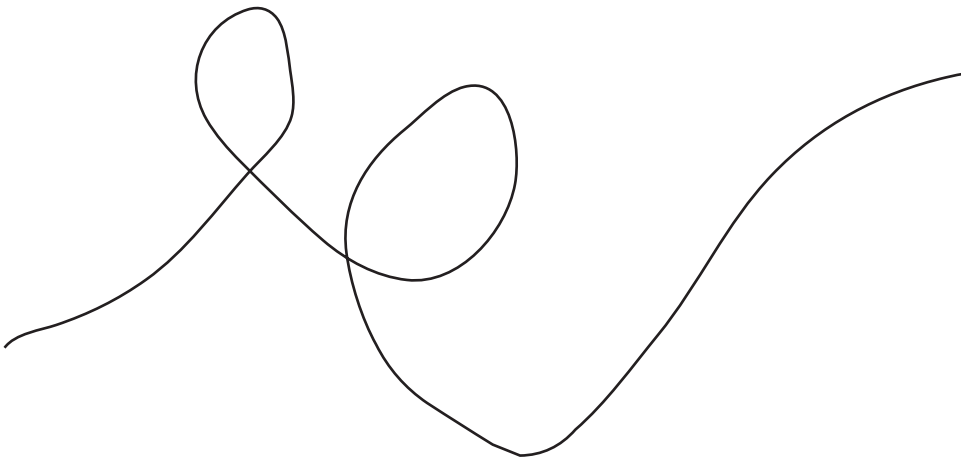
So it's not a surprise, looking back, that I ended up not pursuing a legal career. What did surprise me was that every time I faltered, or wondered if I had made a mistake, something always brought me back to writing. When I did my Law degree, the modules on writing and literature kept me going. When I've struggled to verbally express my emotions—including a lot of anger at the broken world around me—writing them down works wonders.

But what has also helped personally is what happens after I write something. Where some publications may have flinched at my anti-capitalist stance or politicised my identity, the folks at *Lumpen* never wavered with my story. They have done a wonderful

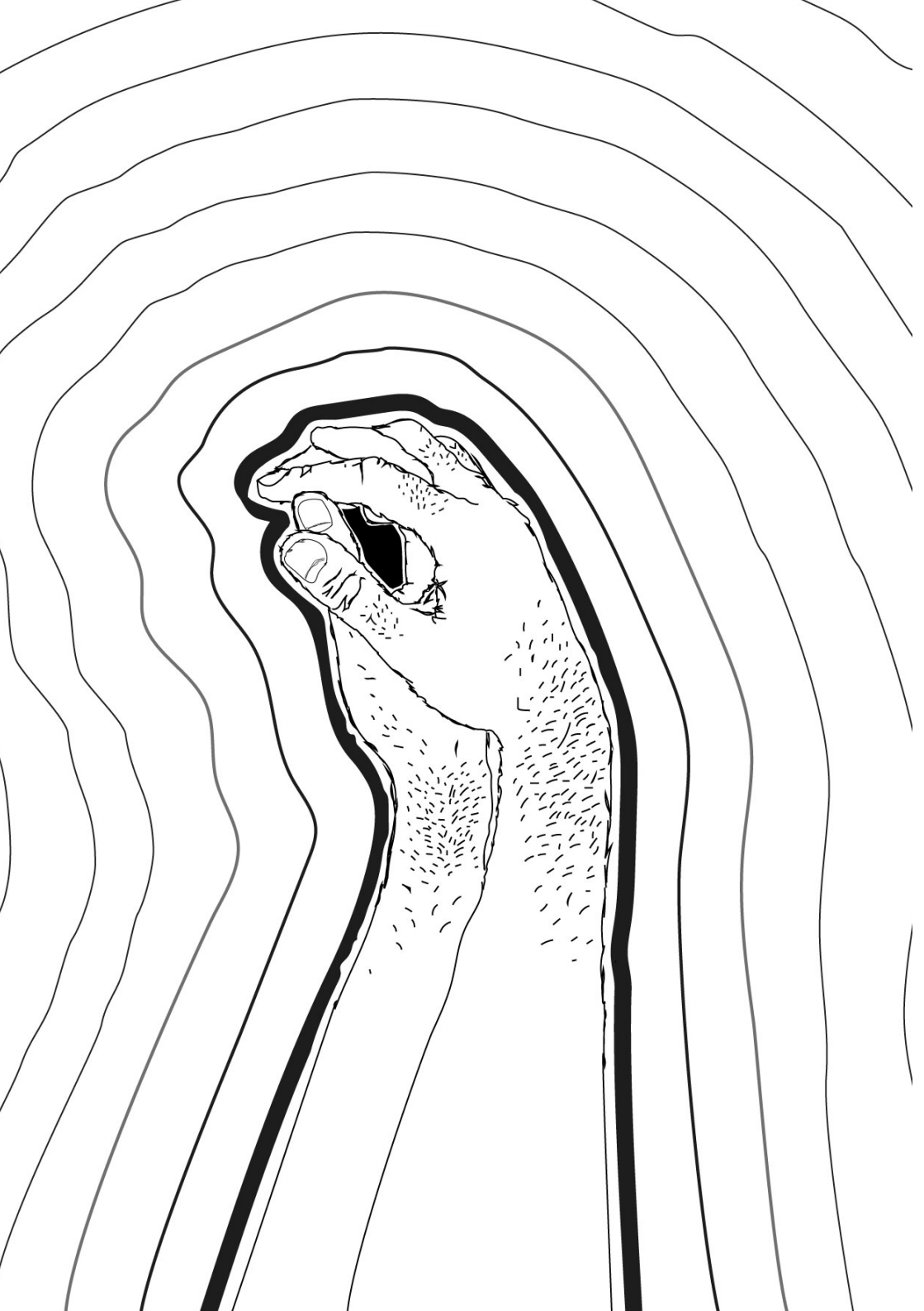
job with editing my work, and seeing it in print made my year—not an easy thing in the middle of a pandemic.

If writing my story soothed my roughened heart, then having it published, being validated, was what helped me heal. By giving me the platform to tell my story, I felt heard, and it's given me the confidence to pitch more stories that have gone on to be in other publications.

As for what's next? Beyond a few stories in the pipeline, I don't know. But what I do know is that writing for me is like gravity. I might not even realise or sense it, but I'm always going to be pulled in the direction of words. And much like gravity, I want my words to continue to be a force of nature.







Heaving Times

xchris

1.

It was funny as fuck when J heaved the kerbstone through the windows of Barclays Bank on Eltham High St. We walked away, calmly laughing our heads off. Absolute trust in each other, knowing it was all good, no one really about this late at night, and certainty anyhow that we wouldn't get nicked. We went back to his mum's house. This was 1985 or thereabouts. One more blow against the banking backers of apartheid in South Africa. We were extremely close friends having met quite randomly at an FE college both doing A Levels in Government and Politics for some reason. The bank window wasn't on the curriculum.

I don't recall getting to know J at all. I still don't know how he came to be at the college and what his life had looked like before that. I knew his parents had separated as had mine. I knew his dad was troubled as was mine. Here we were, two 17-year-old boys wondering about that masculinity overdrive that we'd grown up around. It felt like an older, generational working-class masculinity from an aggressive insecurity that needs you to place yourself as someone somewhere even if that place is a fantasy. You have to hold your own in the pecking order. That's what you've been taught. You have to defend something. Being shirty, being edgy. Kicking off from some tiny spark. Lots of pain held inside and then the guilt too of lashing out at loved ones from very real stresses of work, family, society, the unknown future. Neither J nor me wanted any of that. Consciously rejected that. Wanting to be a bit softer.

We had few other big ideas but neither of us wanted to work. We knew that for sure. We did everything together for years, just making it up as we went along. All those years of looking and searching and having a strange kind of fun. But the fun we

had wasn't the fun everyone else was having at the technical college. That seemed very much to be club nights, boozing, boy and girl stuff, and Ford Cortinas. A job in a bank was the stated, prized future for many of the boys. We didn't want that. We never did any of that nightlife and twisting the body all up in intimate encounters. We never thought that was odd. We were having a kind of fun that seemed immense to us as we explored going up London and the things going on. Melded together really in a way that would have been impenetrable to others if there had been any others. The word I would use now is 'occult'. We were locked in together. Minds working the same. Our special vocabulary. In that mystery of us going about things we were neither cocky nor crushed. So, yeah, whatever was on offer to us, we didn't want it. We wanted to find something else entirely.

●
●
● We were products of the South London suburbs and all its cloying and treacle-like inertia. The realm of the Labour aristocracy in semi-detached houses. Taxi drivers or printers from the closed-shops of Fleet St. all moved out from the inner city to the suburbs on decent readies. But we were close enough to see something or other always on the horizon beyond this. We bummed around in tiny scenes in Brixton, New Cross, Deptford. Places that weren't suburban. Squatters, punks, radicals, hippies, writers, musicians, bullshitters, freaks and fakes, proles and bohos. We made our way through it somehow. Got to know a few people here and there, but always as a unit. Just us two, really. We were probably the sweetest thing to meet. But we wanted to burn it all down and everyone knew that, referred to it, laughed about it. 'Oh, you two again!' J and me.

J and me. Teenagers and looking for independence from home although we always returned late at night to our mums' houses no matter what we did. Moving out would come later. J and me. So much longing and burning up always. Just wanting to get out of it all. Get away but with no place to go really. No sense of where to

go. J and me. Full of desire but an awkward desire that was not for each other but for each other's disorientation in this world. It can only be described now as a kind of love. The kind of love that would only get confused by categories and definitions being needed. But I guess it was a kind of love in the absence of belonging. We had each other.

2.

After college, J and me never did any more 'education'. I signed on at eighteen and stayed that course forever. J had menial jobs here and there. He told me he'd been taught how to push a broom 'properly' at a manufacturers in Sidcup. Then he had a job in a café in Bromley for a few months. He was the confident one. Really a bit of the cheeky chap with a sublime grin, but not a wind-up merchant for all that. I didn't know he had a small past of stuff I wouldn't have gone near with a barge pole. Some very, very minor football hooligan adventures, although always a bit more fantastical than really full on. A desire to run and run and crash up against something, somewhere, anywhere. He laughed a lot when he turned up at mine one day in a Gabicci suede diamond jumper and white trainers. 'Totally casual' as it came to be called that summer. I didn't get it, the look or the flex, but I laughed too.

I was the more shy one and, I guess, the one who was wading through culture that wasn't anything I had grown up with or around. Trying to look at art, writers, films, anything that took me out of the funnel towards working nine-to-five. It was mostly 1977 punk rock that had clued me in to some of that. People in bands or in fanzines talked about things that seemed a route out of boredom and wage packets, even if it seemed so out of depth and not J and me's own culture at all. Not our birthright really. As romantic as those ideas often were, or as nebulous as other kinds of sensibility being suggested, they were definitely something that looked like a promise. They felt like something other than the rat

race. Felt then like you had to covet and grasp it with both hands and see how it fitted you, as awkward as that fit might be on you. Later you learnt 'the underground' was just another career for most but in the meanwhile it was tangibly different.

Joined at the hip as we were, we had great times buzzing about. That fun was rooted in the exploration of self, really. It was always a bit of learning. Desires were wide and we jumped at things, grabbed at things. Sometimes arsey or defensive in those scenes, sometimes just enjoying them. We drifted on energy, picking at hints and detours as we made our way. Aside from bashing around in culture here and there up the West End, our main desire was for action. We did all the main London riots that the late 80s and early 90s did their best to offer young people like us. Printworkers dispute in Wapping, Poll Tax riots, Battle of Waterloo against Nazi skins, Battle of Welling against the BNP. We even took ourselves out to Stonehenge in 1986 because we wanted to be part of a possible revenge on the police for trashing the Peace Convoy the year before. We were painfully straight in all this though. No drinking and no drugs. Not straight edge just very straight. We certainly weren't tough though. We were pretty weaselly and fine with that. We mostly just made up the numbers. It was less adrenaline rush than just the oxygen of being and we were there deep-breathing it. Attacking something that needed to witness its own destruction, was one way we put it to each other at the time. That something was everything we grew up as, I guess. Along the way, there were disasters too. Hospitalised by our own side when J got a brick in the head at the Poll Tax Riot. Or me, when I got a bottle in the side of my face at some disorder or other. Friendly fire! Occasionally nicked too or whacked around a bit by police but we survived.

Such continuing class formation came with a lot of political striving and justification. In all that flurry we were also developing and doing some actual class politics beyond smashing and destroying. Living and intuiting something deeper that proceeded from our

political street-fights and destruction, and making a politics that long outlasted these fleeting moments. Something very rooted and vast and painful and joyful in what we'd lived through as youngsters and then as teens. Intense male intimacy seems to not be really talked about much in its own terms of class formation. It's both a product of and a reaction to feeling useless. You're used to stigma and dismissal. You're nothing and no one but you can shit-talk and banter from the depths of that class being and it's funny as fuck even if it's deeply insecure and existential. That kind of thing pulls you closer together when you can't see your place, or more so, refuse the place you're supposed to know and stay in.

For both of us, violence had always been close at hand even if it was diffused and nebulous and domestic. We wanted to go and be in another space and time and feel alive, and so used a different kind of aggressive horizon to be who we were at the time. Chucking a brick or a bit of tussling with the cops. That insecurity of relating though, especially from the pressures on maleness, manhood, being a man, is a head fuck. The test of manhood is often something extreme and ritualised. In retrospect, making trouble and kicking back can be seen as a kind of self-harming that comes from trying to prove to yourself that you exist in a space and time not of your choosing. The risk and the rush make you feel real for some short hours. It's fun but I'm not sure how much it opens you up in the end.

But saying that, I wouldn't disavow much of what we got up to. Both of us so soft really in how we wanted the world to be. Longing for something based on gentleness and collective caring for each other. We intervened sometimes to stop a Nazi getting too deadly a beating because there was something more in the politics of being anti-fascist than just fighting for fighting's sake. It's complicated.

The sobriety was the same when it came to girls and girlfriends. We didn't seem to be looking or doing anything to make that

happen. We never really talked about it. Or if we did talk about sex, it was so vague and mumbled. Seemed more likely we were testing each other in a way to probe if we would continue having these adventures together if one of us got off with someone. J was the first to have things here and there and became more up for sexual escapades. Yet along the way and years later, certain memories catch me sideways. When we joined in lobbing a chorus of bricks at passing riot vans in Brixton, we ran so hard in escape down an alleyway, holding each other's hands to be safe together. Really pulling each other, touching each other. We never mentioned it because there was nothing to say about it. J's was probably the first hand I'd held after my parents.

Or I remember now how one day, and out of the blue, J said something to me walking down a side street in Eltham, made me an offer if I was 'feeling frustrated'. That's as close as I remember it and that memory now is more surprising because at the time it passed easily—normal J and me. That offer wasn't then said like it would cause a rupture if I took him up on it. The knife edge between us was always there, I guess, if either of us fell away from each other, for a myriad of possible reasons. But the knife we carried between us in those days was cutting one of us to the other if you get what I mean. Absolute love bleeds and spills over somewhere in this tiny anecdote and memory. What lurked deep in that libidinal energy J and me always carried around?

3.

We weren't built up by education to start work because no one had really cared what we did when we left the corridors of college. We had not been squeezed into something like a plan to hold onto through life. No one asked us about our 'career'. I surfed dole culture and made little magazines and music and J fell apart one summer, aged twenty.



“Yet along the way and years later, certain memories catch me sideways. When we joined in lobbing a chorus of bricks at passing riot vans in Brixton, we ran so hard in escape down an alleyway, holding each other’s hands to be safe together. Really pulling each other, touching each other. We never mentioned it because there was nothing to say about it. J’s was probably the first hand I’d held after my parents.”



We maintained some kind of timelessness and adventure during the course of J's spiralling in and out of self-control. Timeless in not understanding then what had come before, what had caused the rupture now, and both of us not looking to know what would come after. I can't say much about the internal pressures and contradictions that J rode so hard. It's too long ago to now try and analyse them. J and me never knew if we were on the outside looking in or actually more on the outside looking out.

Then we drifted apart quite naturally as we changed. I hid away more whilst J went out in the world. Sometimes ecstatically and laughing a lot but that grin of his more submerged from the lithium he took. But sometimes he was just out there, miserable and broken open.

By the time, we broke up and I say that somewhat wryly, I entered my own few years of unknowing myself again in a solo voyage, very much alone or feeling disconnected from those who were helping me in small ways. A few years of my own depression and questing, and yearning so hard to find something to fit into where most of the options would anyhow just be another claustrophobic fit before you moved on to the next cycle of the same old patterns.

How much can you keep trying to escape to somewhere that's only a dream life even if it seemed in some ways possible to find a bit of it by squatting and rioting, by ranting and raving? At the end of the day, the working-class misfit who didn't look down on Flicks nightclub, Cortinas, weddings, and wives, but even so didn't want any of that, still has to be in the world.

Nowadays, those times where J and me kicked against the pricks have all rushed back up on me. Uncanny memories that I'd never given much time of day before. But being fifty-and-a-bit now, I've been rushed by the question of where and who am I now? No plan. No career. No money. The now-luxury of a council flat

keeps things easier. I occasionally now do some writing and some teaching in the realm of art and politics. How the fuck did I come to be this person from those times? That jolt and disconnect from all these memories was quite unexpected. Not really sure what kind of reckoning is going on. You don't know where you've come from anymore but that past holds onto you and won't let you go even if it's now hard to recognise it inside yourself. It feels like you're finally letting go of something that's gnawed at you forever, but you're scared that by letting it go you'll end up being someone you don't want to be. What is that person? Someone who doesn't care anymore to keep battling all the shit?

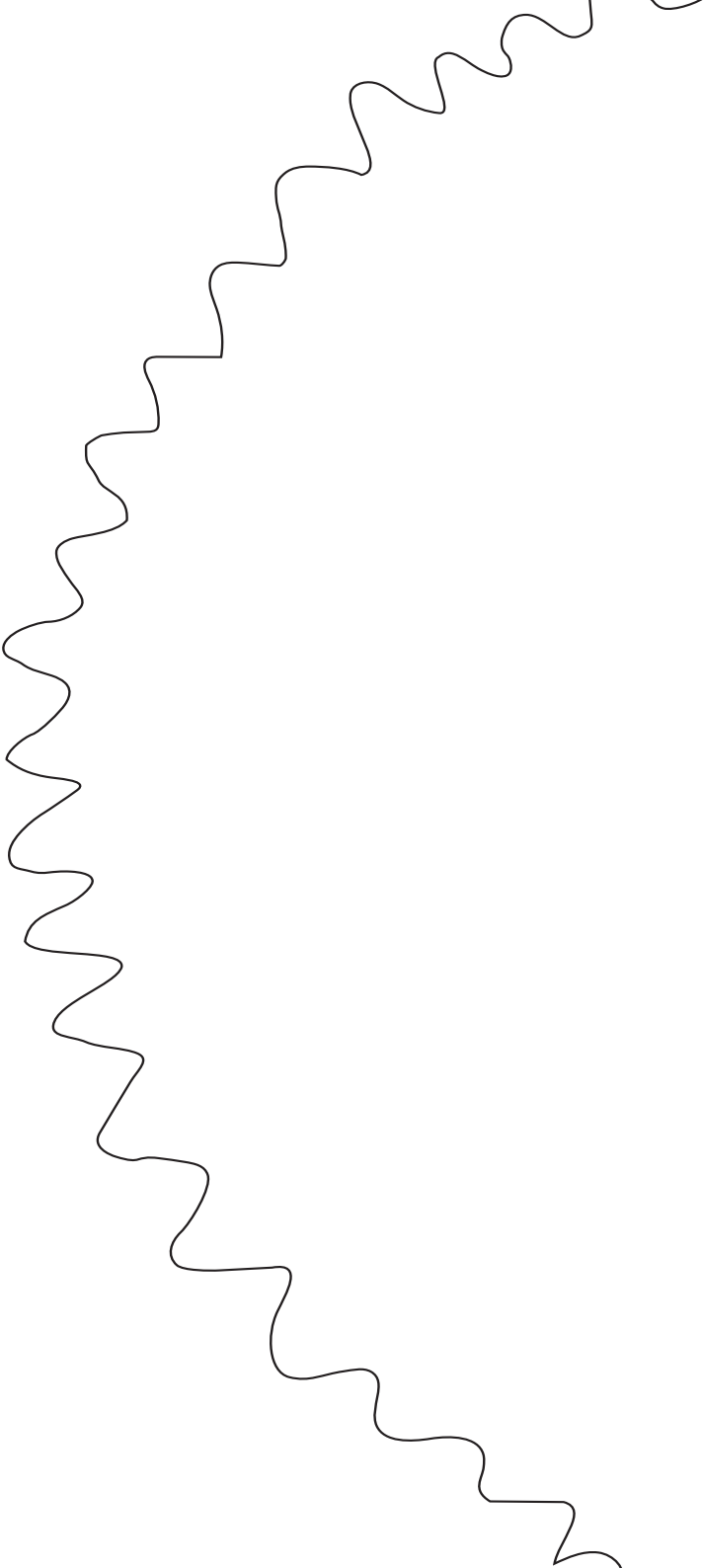
I really hope that intimacy, caring, listening, and so on are less denied to us these days. For sure there is a tenderness and taking care that has always been present between working-class men but it's rarely acknowledged and often deliberately overlooked in favour of more censorious and condemnatory ways of stereotyping.

Even though I rarely see him any more I dedicate this bit of writing and memories to J with love.

xChris

⋮ POETRY

FICTION



Together in a Small Terrace

Kenn Taylor

Together in a
small terrace
living room
with tunes loud
and lights low

This great amalgam of
Polytechnicolour life
Those of us who had ideas
above our station,
Those who not long before
would never've been able
to leave our towns
with their communities
held down

In a time when
talking about
feelings was
still largely taboo
for men
Even those of us
with some 'education'
We didn't have the words then
That's the point
Frowned upon
even trying to use the words
Words that felt new and awkward to use

When substances released the
feelings
Being allowed to feel



Even more so,
express them
Away from the system
built to lock us in
to narrow thin paths
overspill estates
factories
house streets away
from parents

That had all
fallen
apart
the generation before

Now young people from all over
coalesced

- in cities
- Having a good time

Told,
to quote Kele,
Live the dream like the 80s never happened
Told that nothing means anything
anymore
Your internalised working class values
Now dismissed

But with these
cheap substances
easily bought
The release
Falling into
a plunge pool
Every end of every nerve
Everything held back

through fears,
released
Saying
what we felt
had been through
how good each of us was
The pain carried
expressed
Loss
Our own and collectively
Replaced with unity
Warmth flowing out
In the low light

All faded of course
with the dawn
All feelings temporary
The more intense ones
even more so
Back to
out there
To what was left
on this island

Once opened up though
The realisation
of shared experience
across distance
Of walls collapsing
New alliances
A new community
That remained,
Yes that remained
Never leaves
With us changed



want to live a life with less worry

Linda M. Crate

i desire not this labour,
want a job that i enjoy;
not to be caught in
this capitalist hellscape
a cog in a
corporate machine
i want to destroy—
desire a life where my
writing is enough to
pay the bills,
and i can know the joys
of travel and
time spent with people I love
● instead of calculating
● which family gatherings i can go
● to and which friends i can visit
and when;
i want to live a life where i have
less worry and know
a life where i have
more joy.

M5

Tom Stevens

Driving back from the wedding
After dropping my parents off
We listened to 'Deep Blue Sky'
Sang the whole thing
Even the instrumental parts
And the night road revolved under us
Maybe I was drink driving
Open up, let me in, to the Deep Blue Sky...
I can't remember if there was a big full moon that night
But there have been other night drives
Down that stretch of the M5
And we both looked at a big yellow lit-up moon
And didn't worry or think about too much else



Immeasurable Grief

Neil Palmer

I saw it in your shaking hands
The way you spoke too fast
I could tell when you'd not seen a soul
Since I saw you last
I saw you were over-attentive
To notifications on your phone
An obsessive compulsive distraction
From idling on your own
I sensed it in your habits
I felt it in your touch
And I knew the little that I gave
Could never be enough
I can tell that when we hug
● You don't want ever to let go
● You become a bird with broken wings
● Battling through the snow
You lost your love and companion
Of a mostly happy sixty years
Now there's no one there to dry your eyes
From the choking, silent tears
In the paranoia of self-isolation
You became a prisoner in your own home
Frightened in desolation
Forced to face it alone
I saw your stoic resilience
Yet sensed the vulnerability beneath
I can remember what it's like to feel lonely
I can't imagine your immeasurable grief

Desire and Joy

Harley Gilmore

“The coffee tastes better while smoking,” Joint ash snows gently onto hot tainted water, flows away from my gulping mouth, until I kill the dark dusty drink’s final drop, holding back hot, dusty coughs.

Buried in the fridge is a box:

Food my employer budgets as “lost.” Maybe it died, maybe dropped.

Devious morsel, costs more than a shift, swiftly lifted for my fleeting bliss.

When the sun’s remiss, my cheeks receive night’s violet kiss.

I toil joyously, rebelling against

the morning come. The night is mine. The boss doesn’t know, I’d never be *this* tired on *my* time.



My Love is Elastic

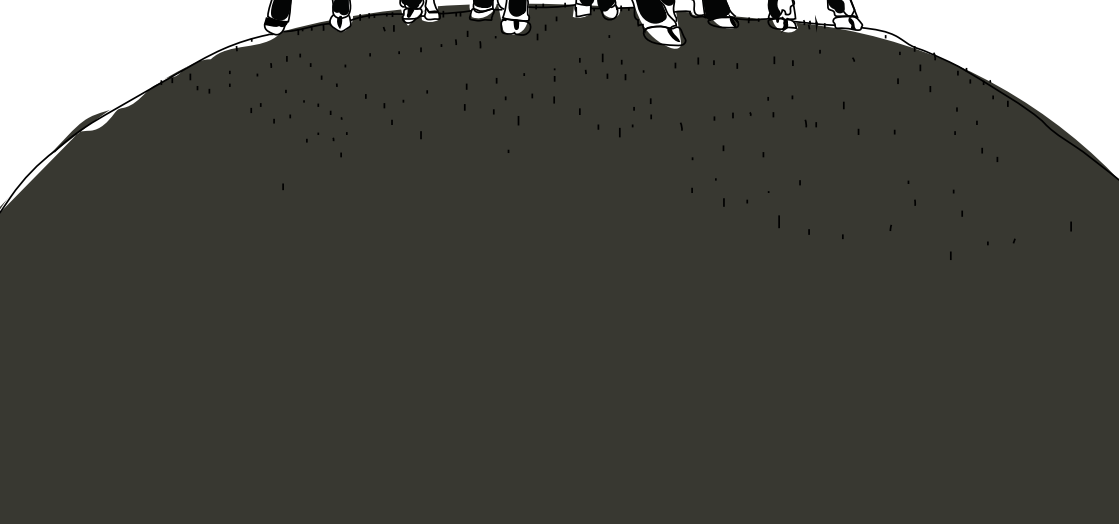
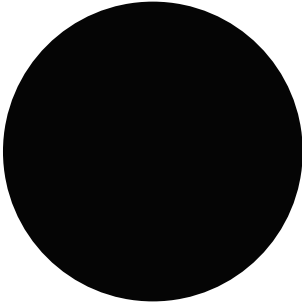
Robin Ray

My love is elastic
Energetically potential,
Pathetically reverential
To narcissistic entities,
I fear my pleas to nihilistic deities go unheeded.
'Any spare change please?'
Spare this changeling from a heart freeze
and analgesic analogies.
I'm pinching pennies of intimacy,
Too thirsty for the asking
Too poor for pure thoughts
Of bricks and mortarboards,
And other open doors I can't afford.

My love is

- insecure.
- My love is a coiled spring
- Bare arms outstretched, longing
For belonging, not belongings
For siblings singing from other cribs
Flying high on playground swings.
It's me and you, friend
Feathering our dens,
Together till the world ends
Two cuckoos too cool for school
Fools for golden ratios,
With fragile bones and red roses,
See how long our noses grow
Pretending to be earthlings
Foundlings floundering upstream
On dreams of better weather,
Of a wetter forever.
We'll make angels in heather
With invisible wings
My love is as long as a piece of string.





To Her Coy Mistress, or The four ways I have attempted to win the hand of Mary from BBC's *Ghosts*

Emily Cotman

24 June

"Deliver us!" I sighed, splayed across the chaise in the sweltering parlor. *"And for thy name, with mercy clothe our sinnfull shame... ahh so true."*

The long woolen smock was a perfect find – off-season clearance at a nearby charity shop. Bit warm, but I wasn't bothered. I was the picture of modesty and virtue as I wantonly fanned myself with a library reprint of The Sydney-Pembroke Psalter. If Mary, flame of my heart, was anywhere nearby, I felt confident this would catch her attention.

More's the pity I couldn't stay to find out, as I got heat exhaustion and had to spend the afternoon sipping Gatorade in the cellar. I can't be sure of course, but I don't believe she followed me.

21 September

"Now then," I called with a wink to an ostensibly empty kitchen, "let's put these hands to work before the Devil fills 'em with mischief!" I heaved sopping armfuls of assorted reeds, branches, and kindling onto the table.

Hoping my sweet specter was watching, I picked out the

sturdiest eight canes and made a big show of forming the slath precisely as WikiHow had instructed. My Y2K Mossimo peasant top fell obligingly off my left shoulder as I bent ever-so-slowly to retrieve a dropped cane, then snapped up to stand, hair flying loose and brazen.

It was all going quite well until I lost control of a weaver and landed in the UTC with what is apparently known as a “corneal abrasion”.

21 December

Sensing that my earlier attempts may have come on a bit... strong, I crafted a subtle display to wish Mary some Yuletide cheer – thirteen delicate orange pomanders which, arranged on the windowsill, spelled:



Faultlessly classy. Irreproachably wholesome.

I did not account for a visit from the neighbor and his dogs, one of whom made a beeline to the oranges, devoured eight of them, and got instantly sick on the satin hem of my bridesmaid-turned-holiday gown.

I barely noticed the mess. I was preoccupied with the remaining five pomanders – untidy and missing some cloves, but arranged in an unfortunately quite legible:



No incandescent angel made herself known to me that night.

20 March

Utterly demoralized by my failures and the long winter, I arrived at Button House without a plan.

I crept out of my rented room well before sunrise and wandered – out the front door, across the lawn, over three fences and through a neglected Hawthorn hedge. Feet soaked to the bone with dew, I found a meadow dotted with new daisies and began weaving them into a long chain. “Not particularly inspired,” I thought, “but at least I won’t return empty-handed.” And then I saw her...

We passed through the gate just as the sun rose on the old manor. Gods above, was she beautiful! Sleek umber coat, eyelashes any species would envy, head held high... Crowned in the first daisies of Spring, the cow positively strutted past the front windows. I fed her sweet grasses and wild apples from my satchel, but Miss *Liza with a Z* needed no encouragement.

To be honest, I was enjoying it all so much – the company of the cow, the sparkle of the dew, the delicacy of the daisy stems – that I almost forgot the purpose of our extravagant parade.

I was reminded, to my delight, by the phantom scent of burning human hair.

Horrible scent, just ghastly, still... I cherished every second of this small sign that, perhaps, I had finally sparked my departed lady’s interest.

It certainly took the sting out of the livestock larceny charges.

DO

WE

REMEMBER?

The City of the Wounded

Iman Ganji

There is a thick fog outside the window. The lights are dwindling. A city of the dead—calm as the streets, once a late night shower stops. ‘Does anybody remember?’ he writes on a new notebook, still smelling of fresh paper.

Under the window, I wear my collar up and start to walk, getting smaller and smaller in my raincoat. The dancing light of the stars, which I never look up to see, does not lighten the whitish darkness of the fog. The waves of terror vibrate under my feet and quiver the neurons throughout my torso.

‘There are fewer things more beautiful than destruction. Yet, do we remember?’ The words impose themselves on his wavering fingertips. He lights a cigarette, then continues. ‘We cannot conclude that humankind naturally tends toward beauty.’ His eyes suddenly shine. ‘Otherwise,’ he puts the pen in his mouth, then replaces it with the cigarette, ‘we would be walking on piles of rubble that the free spirits accumulated in their holy progression. The holy progression is an incarnation, embodiment, relationship. It needs souls capable of reflecting themselves on the flesh.’

As clouds rest upon the ground, my footsteps follow the narrow street’s curves. There is no curfew, yet it seems that the people are sheltering from a coming catastrophe. Connected walls of terraced houses are barely lit by inside lamps. The city has slept under the fog. The tectonic movements I feel under my feet are not waking the dreamers up.

‘Yet, does anybody remember? Did anybody hear the thunders of earth trembling ahead of us in time?’ He leaves the desk, lights another cigarette, looks at the mirror, takes his shirt up slowly, checks his chest, his belly, and pushes his finger into the circular

wound on the upper-right side of his chest. Sitting back behind the desk, he shudders. 'The calmness of destruction,' he writes, 'just like how relief and pain flow simultaneously in my veins when I push my finger inside of my wound.'

Under the window, I reach the end of a dead-end street. Death here grows from the middle, I think, touching the octopus-shaped wound on my left earlobe, whose tentacles are still growing upwards.

'Ours is a city of the wounded,' he writes in dissatisfaction. He takes a long drag, exhaling the smoke gently from his nostrils, and goes back to the notebook. 'Ours is indeed an era of the wounded: each one of us is born with our own wound in its own unique scar. When the initial form of our aesthetics is a scar, when our very living is a process of gradual self-destruction, where our making love involves 'gashing', then the people must understand the pleasure of destruction.'

Facing the wall at the dead-end, I stand. As I stare at the wall dashed by fog, a door opens. I look back: a woman in blue jeans and a black top walks from one side of the street to the other. A door opens and she disappears. I touch the octopus. I remember a past lover to whom I once gravitated, to whom I once wrote: 'as if love was the attraction of the waves to the moonQ.'

He continues writing: 'We were smart to call that gashing. As if love was the reverse of the attraction of the waves to the moon. The wound, as we are born, is shallow. As life pours out further, the wound gets deeper. It is also a reversed well: as you take more water, it only gets deeper. And love, we all know, is the outpouring of life par excellence. And while making love, you embody love in the flesh, and in its most successful embodiment, you have entered the opening of the wound of the lover, kissing it, licking it, and fingering it, turning the wound into a gash.'

Under the window, at the end of a curvy narrow street, I am walking back to turn into a familiar neighbourhood. I wear my collar down and start a half-burned cigarette, changing path into another street on the left. I take the cigarette between the tips of my thumb and the index finger, have the last drag, and throw the roach under my shoes. I ring the door. She opens it. "Touch my ear!"

Another one of those cigarettes is what his hand reaches first, and then they continue with the paper: 'There was a moment, I can still remember well, that happiness became the promise of a new invention: the screen. We would all be connected. First, big, noisy, shaky screens on desks, and fast-forward a few years, supersensitive pocket-sized touch screens, 4k.' He lights the cigarette. 'But the screens are the source of wounds in our flesh. We are decomposing. Our image has destroyed our imagination of a human being.'

Outside of the windows, rain tangles with the wind. I tangle with her. Tangling with, the synonym for lovemaking in the age of the wounded. 'What is this voice?' I ask her, while licking the foetus-shaped wound on her thighs. 'It is like a baby bird singing,' I continue, putting my hands on her long neck. 'No dear,' she answers, 'that is a rat stuck in a glue trap singing.' I leave the house.

'Humans evolve through successful combinations with microbes, viruses, germs, decay ... or shall we say devolve? How could devolution continue when decay is not from the outside, but from the inside?' He looks away at the clock on the wall; he is waiting for me.

*I put up my collar before ringing his bell.
'Finally, I am here.'*

'I missed you. Come in.'

Sorry for the cloud. I smoked a lot. Let me open the window.'

'Yes. At least we can enjoy smoking as much as we want. We are now in the post-health era. Ha-ha.'

'Ha-ha. Yes. Take one, here. For our age.'

Both of us are lighting our cigarettes.

'So, are you writing?' I ask.

'Yes. You see, writing is as ancient as humans, and these animals are going to write one way or another, whatever transformations they are going through. There was a fear of the loss of writing. Do you remember? We were experiencing shifts from low-speed modem connections to high-speed wireless ones to satellite unstoppable connections. It was like: everybody is available for everybody in sound and image. There is pure presence. So, writing will disappear. It didn't.'

'Yes. Because mad people like you are still writing. Nothing serious in this existential extension in our age.'

'No, it is not about mad people. It is about the absence. No matter what, there is always already the absence. No video, no image, no sound, can represent that. You need writing, especially in our age. Wound is the absence imposed on the flesh.'

'Certainly, an interesting piece it will be. I would be happy to read it after publication. \ Don't ruin it for me, and let's drink.'

'It is not a fiction that ... nothing. Let's leave it at that.'

'No, no, I didn't mean to offend you.'

At the same time, I go to take the whisky from the fridge, coming back with two glasses, I add 'I have my own opinion on the matter, too, you know. I don't know your ideas fully. I cannot know them before I read them. You know me, I am a reading kind of guy. Listening ... it just doesn't work for me.'

'It is ok, really. Let's drink.'

'Yes, but let's speak around it. I will start.'

'No, let me ask. How could it be possible that you don't write?'

'Well, for one, I don't. I don't really.'

'Everybody writes, come on.'

'So, do you consider typing messages and requests and commands as writing? Do you have such a democratic vision of writing and call yourself a "writer", too?'

'That's a nice way to introduce dictatorship.'

'What?' I shout. 'All I am saying is, you cannot consider yourself a writer and give a definition of writing that includes the 12-billion sized population of this dying planet!'

'I suggest you stop joking around, playing this stoic character in the middle of the apocalypse.'

'But you play along so well!'

'Stop it!'

'Ok! Ok! Let's get serious. Will you read the piece to me or not?'
The fog still persists outside the window. He starts reading me the text he was writing before I arrived. He says it is about the gashing.

'The wound—it cannot be in the same plane as love. They are simultaneous but different?' I ask when he finishes.

'Well, seduction is never soft. It has its edges.'

'The love is not necessarily conditioned to the wound. We know that from before.'

'Oh, my friend, you are just rambling ahistorical and puritan judgments. Consider love and suspicion. You love someone more than anything and yet are suspicious of gross betrayal.'

'Or you love someone more than anything but clearly not more than yourself. How can you even claim such universality and uniformity and call me ahistorical?'

- 'There are always relational affections bonded together and the bonding is universal. There have always been wounds in love, and
- love in wounding. We are just the humans who have embodied
- that.'

'You tend to project your phantasms on the world, see their reflections, and claim that you have discovered our biggest secrets. Have you ever been really in love?'

'Do you consider this question a valid critique, my friend? The fact that I was in love is of utmost unimportance.'

'So, are you trying to tell me that your life is independent from your writing?'

'Where is yours? Let me get insights into your little secrets.'

'I don't write to reveal my little secrets.'

'That's life after all, isn't it? Read it, my friend, read it.'

I clear my throat. Taking a glance at him, I take out my notebook hesitantly.

'The moon comes with the terror.' I read. 'From the moment its pale face appears in the late afternoon light, it comes with the terror. As a nocturnal animal, I have not been used to this. Quite the opposite. Those in the forefront of the movement toward the dark, the pale moon and the pale planets, the crickets and the noisy flocks of crows flying over the streets, used to bring me signs of desire and joyful expectations. Now, the moment that I hear the black birds appearing from behind the rooftops in front of my balcony, I feel the terror. I freeze. I submit my soul to that unkindly night of winter.'

I walked in the streets today. I looked at their faces, directly, with rage. They remind me of those people around those long tables in a wedding's dinner salon, whose main focus is to deter others who come from other long tables to take a salad dish or a bowl of yogurt: 'I am sorry, sir. There are a lot of people around this table. The salad is already not enough for us here.' You should see them after dinner, when trays of creamy sweets are brought to the tables: "There are never enough of these profiteroles. Not even one for each of us.'

The day has not changed. The night, alas, is terrorising now. Nobody, me least of all, had any expectations from human days. The humanization of nights, that I did not foresee either.

If I am to be honest, I struggled today; I almost shouted at them: 'Do you even remember anything?' I barely heard a reply. A man walking with a closed umbrella nodded to me, and a boy on a bicycle stared at me, and a woman with sports leggings murmured: 'Oh, it is going to rain soon, isn't it?' Who wants to be honest! It won't

rain. The night will be clear. And it will be terrorising.”

‘It is truly terrorising,’ he says when I am done.

‘Is that a recognition?’ I ask.

‘Do you need *my* recognition? No, my friend. Tell me about the one who is your sole reader. Is that the woman with the foetus wound?’

Outside of the window, it is raining. The fog persists in the rain. A little girl is running in the street. Her fast footsteps fade away.

I ignore his question and ask mine: ‘Can it be that we are disintegrating into a new animal? That our wound serves an evolutionary goal?’

●
●
●
‘Evolution has always come with devolution, after all. The microbes that produced oxygen for the first time got disinfected and wiped out by oxygen. Yet life thrived out of their near total annihilation. Near total, my friend ... near total. A near zero quantity makes the difference. And you did not answer my question.’

‘Did you just hear the footsteps in the streets? Someone was running. There is drama everywhere. Why do you want to focus on my insignificant one?’

‘I borrow from you: “Are you trying to tell me that your life is independent from your writing?”’



LONGING

LOVE

BRAVERY

GRIEF

RAGE

DISSOCIATION

HUNGER

WANTING

Emergence

Vala Z. Francis

Let go.
Be shattered;
contain, then break free;
I am sprinting, but for the joy of it.
I want to get there,
but the idea of destination holds less magic
than the blood rushing through me right now.
There is only so much time
until the disparate parts of me
reconfigure themselves into the wants of
mycelium and rain.
For now I direct this energy to
mostly human matters.
But one day, the desires of cell
and brain
will be overridden by the inevitability of time,
and the seasons will swallow me up,
bit by bit.

I have a longing heart that easily threads itself to people and purpose.

Time runs and runs, and the threads spin, so thinly you'd think they would break. But they don't. Both the distance and the longing expand, constrict, and expand.

I can only desire the impossible and it moves with multiple frequencies.

I'm searching for something—for the warm love that isn't bittered by the elements. The heat in the embrace as lovers—unrushed, savoured, safe. I'm searching for the security of place. Not only beyond rent, landlords, and accessing physical space, but also relationally; I want something that writes the context of who I am beyond the individual. Frankly, I don't know if I could recognise the feeling of being embedded within a wider community even if it happened—or is happening. But I want to undo the isolation that family and the structures of capitalism have created, the rigid and fragile walls that my nervous system defends. I'm searching for meaning, for knowledge; my desire consumes me with constant seeking.

I am rage; both desire and rage burn in an infinite cycle that produces the energy to struggle. I am afraid. Pain is the hard kernel in the heart of rage. To want something creates the possibility for loss. Each connection, no matter how brief, provokes fear—every time we say goodbye it will be permanent. I will never see them again. Every failure brings a drop of cynicism. We will never achieve our aims. This fear unhinges me from the coordinates I use to navigate meaning and throws me into the abyss.

DISSOCIATION. LACK OF PURPOSE.

But in passion, the past is incinerated, over and over, and this moment bursts from its flames.

Actualising desire is visceral. I have experienced being wanted—to be known, intimately, and to be held close. The realisation made me erupt into tears and tremble. Other forms of knowing that are bound up in need and want are more diverse—connecting with movement elders, people who carry decades of struggle on their shoulders, whose words and gaze bring a vibrancy to my own vision. Their presence urges my bones to move, to sprint.

How did my heart learn longing as its comfortable rhythm? Was

it exhausted single-parent shift-work? I remember waiting awake as a young child on many late nights in the hope of seeing my mum. I wanted to know everything about her—there was always a scarcity of her presence. Or did longing come as an older child—before or after drugs were the only motivation? Or sex as the main currency? I wanted both power and obliteration.

Or is this longing bound up in the capitalist production of desire: *I could contain what I want if only I could attain it*. A never-ending attempt to capture something, to possess—a person (or an image of them), an object, a sequence of events, a fantasy, even a version of ourselves.

I don't think wanting is always related to acquisition: joy comes from the impermanence of everything; the beauty of the event is illuminated in a temporary clarity. Or perhaps the impossibility of it drives us with a hunger that is never satiated, a process that can never be finished.

So often desire motivates then paralyses me.

Desire as intimacy is given great significance. That mess of relating, that ecosystem of emotions; the sweet moment that slips through the cracks of consciousness to fill everything.

I can still smell your sweat. I can feel the peace and joy of your entire being, backlit by a winter sun. We darken into the silhouette of cold, blue dusk.

Neither novelty nor accumulation. The joy is emergent.

Less often described is the desire of breathing life and creativity into our political spaces. I remember planning, strategising for our movements, listening around a small table. Storytelling, information sharing, translation of languages but also ideas. We heard each other, and as the hours grew, both groups became animated—maybe even joyous. Representatives from a prisoner

solidarity organisation spoke of their work supporting 10,000 people, the strategy of states, and wanted to know our perspectives and work 3,000 miles away. There was understanding, recognition, a possibility of material change. We laughed, discussed deeply, came to decisions for action.

When desire is pulled through the macro lens, like the goal of absolute political, social, and economic change, it becomes activated by a thousand almost indistinguishable moments: meeting the eyes of another and seeing recognition and mutuality; disentangling meaning and gaining collective understanding of how to live or how to move forwards. Ultimately, how to organise ourselves—navigating conflict and enacting justice, accessing or distributing resources, defending ourselves, or a thousand other branches of possibility. Suddenly we are moving within the shadow of countless generations before us, and striving for consequences far beyond the faces we know.

-
-
-

Eroticism is found in the passion for revolutionary change. It can be an intellectual pursuit of mutual discovery. It can be physically invigorating or exhausting work.

There is bravery in recognising desire. Even more so if it can be communicated, or supported in others. How can I help you achieve your desires? Can we together find joy?

And in honour of impermanence, I grieve for futures that will never exist—through death, through fractured relations, through separated geographies, through any other miserable condition that we find ourselves in. Fear holds me in a restrictive grasp, but in grief and acceptance we can find opportunities for wildness and becoming; they hold infinite nascent possibilities.

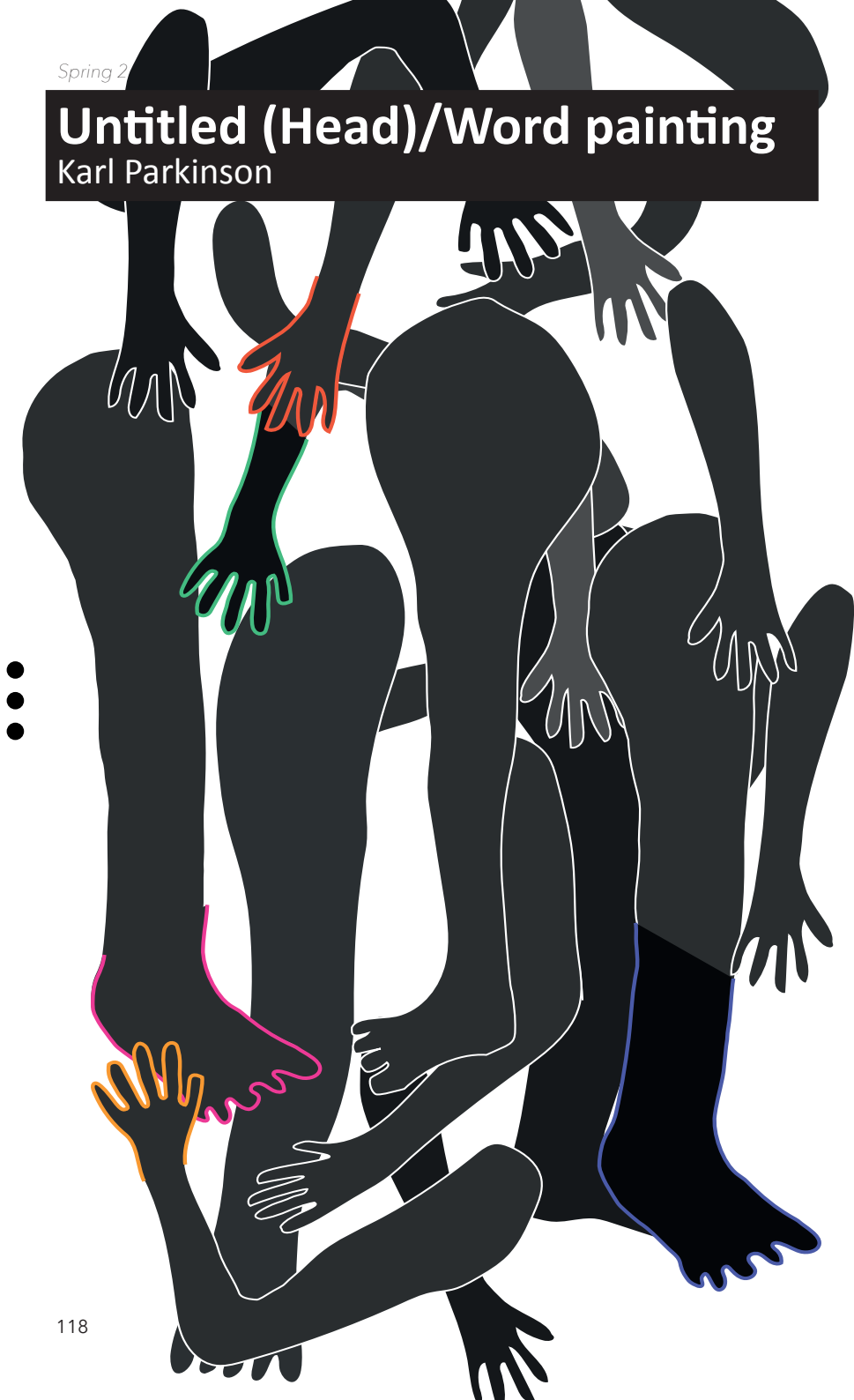
HOW CAN I
HELP YOU
ACHIEVE YOUR
DESIRES?

CAN WE
TOGETHER
FIND JOY?

Spring 2

Untitled (Head)/Word painting

Karl Parkinson



Dublin, night-time, late January, cold enough for gloves and woolly hat, 11.00 p.m. Nicki wore his long, black coat and fingerless purple gloves, his curly hair stuck out from the black wool hat. He was clutching a tin of red paint and two paint brushes. At the blocked-up gate entrance of Matthews Gardens council estate, he tossed the paint and brushes over the railings, climbed, then dropped to the grassy, mucky ground. One earphone in his ear, one dangled and bounced off his shoulder, Miles Davis seminal album *Kind Of Blue*, was playing. He felt the music, the groove of the trumpet in his solar plexus, as he gyrated; the piano notes tinkled at his feet as he stretched and touched his toes; the drums beat in his shoulders and chest. He did a little twirl and picked up the materials, moved delicately like a cat in a French animated movie across the dark, abandoned football pitch, and reached the last remaining tower block due to be demolished before the regeneration. Miles' trumpet solo was blowing like the 'Song of Solomon' in his ear. He took off his coat, placed it on the ground, spun the tin of paint and shook it up, opened it, took up his brush, inhaled,

exhaled,

blew out the day, let go of all of *it*.

Miles and band were going at it, wailing, hitting the spot. Nicki was part of the ensemble, his arms moving, swaying here and there, up and down, spinning, marking, flicking, drawing the line, getting it down, painting ...

A giant red trumpet

drip

ping

musical

notes

adorned the canvas of the derelict wall.

He moved down, further into the abandoned block of flats, and he took up his tools: paints, brushes, spray cans, a ladder with a large torch hanging from it. The light beamed on to the side of the block of flats, the concrete. Earphones in, the Iphone played Einaudi's, 'Two Sunsets'. He let the dance begin. Horizon line, perspective, he traced the form, lightly, the figure developed from the wall's womb. Cornflower blue, shamrock green, burnt orange. The figure took shape. Nicki worked through the night, stopping to drink coffee from a flask, eat an apple or a square of chocolate, smoking roll-ups all through the night. The music changing the mood at intervals: The Smiths, Tupac, Mozart, Janis Joplin, Madonna, Jimi Hendrix, The KLF, Stormzy, Cardi B, Calvin Harris. His back ached; his wrists were tight; and his clothes, paint splashed and streaked in red, blue, yellow, pink. He was right there in his body, still. The painting: twenty feet high, a boy, topless, tattooed, a gun in his hand aiming at YOU, firing a pink rose from the barrel, a bee flying off to the right. The boy wearing blue jeans, and Adidas runners, white and green, a spliff dangling James Dean-like from his reddish lips, his hair black, cut in a fade, no beard. His body, lean, muscular, like a football player, in his waistband, a spray can, in his hand, a phone, musical notes beep, bop, bum from it in 3D effect, a pit bull dog at the boy's feet, chewing a bone and wearing a Celtic FC jersey. Underneath and down to the left, the words: *The Boy shoots what he sees, by Nicki*. Stars of silver and gold above the boy's head, a backdrop of the panorama of Dublin city as horizon line. The stars were out, Nicki sat with his back against the wall, smoking, satisfied, in tune with it all.

*

Nicki stepped out of the shower naked. He dried his svelte body, rubbed his hair with a towel vigorously to dry it somewhat, ran his hands through it, brushed it to the side and let it land there Apollo-like in its placement. The piano cords of 'Una Mattina' by Ludovico Einaudi, played from the speakers in the bedroom. He moved sultry and snake-like, watched himself in the bathroom

mirror, spun around and raised his arms gracefully, imagined he was at the centre of a great orgy: men, women, trans, non-binaries, unknowns, all about him, a sea of ecstasy and bodies, and genitals and orgasms, and semen and fluids, and sweat and pain, and pleasure and all the feels. He danced out of the room, naked still, demi-god-like, pantheistic. Smiling, he lay down, his head on the pillow, his loins upon the bed, Einaudi's melody upon the air. Sun beams sneaked through the half-closed blinds, faint sounds of children at play outside, and birds squawking in the sky. Lying there on old bed sheets in a cheap flat in Dublin city looking like a Renaissance painting by an old master, he snapped his photo with the camera on his phone, took up his paints, easel, brushes, rendered

A self-portrait: reclining after bathing, by Nicki.

He wore a red shirt, white ripped skinny jeans, and black boots; his hair curled wildly free. He had on purple eyeshadow, black mascara; the nails of one hand were painted red to match his shirt. He drank a half-bottle of pink gin before leaving his flat. An artlaw of the imagination. His black coat swayed, as he strode to the national art gallery on Nassau Street. The George Bernard Shaw statue, bearded and regal, greeted Nicki as he walked in. He slipped in through the heavy door into the European Art 1850–1950 collection. Jack B Yeats, *Morning in the City*, the splashing red, blood city, wine dark, he crossed before it, back and forth, drank it in. Picasso's *Still life with Mandolin*, impressive, though it lacked the powerful horror, the tremor, of his *Guernica*, and the style of his *Ladies by the Rocks*. Munter's *Girl with a Red Ribbon* reminded him of a girl he loved once, a poet. The Monet, fresh, orange burst, blues and pinks, the small boat on the water, shimmering.

He slipped back out the door and walked on into the room where the exhibition of his own work was taking place. On arrival he was met by Danelle Twomey, six-foot-four in high heels, gold Manolo

Blahnik's, her metallic silver hair shining, her lipstick black, slim as kittens' claws, eyes of a viper, tongue to match.

Nicki, hello, you terrific creature you, come here.

She flung her arms around him, kissed his cheek, stood back to admire him as if he were a painting.

Yes babe, you look like the most tasty of meals. I could just eat you right up here and now. Don't you agree? She asked the man next to her, Robert Dooley, a semi-famous painter. He wore a grey moustache, and his hair was slicked back with hair gel, his eye glasses blue and huge, his teeth television white, his body plump like a laughing Buddha statue.

Why yes indeed, Danny, a work of art in himself. In fact, I'm going to come right out and say it here, I would love, just love, to paint you, Nicki, a portrait. What do you think?



Nicki looking at the pair of artists, mad people, open, in a world of their own making.

Oh, thanks Danelle, yeh look fuckin great yerself, and thanks Robert, yes, I'd love teh be painted by yeh, an honour tha would be in actuality. I admire yer work so much.

Brilliant, we'll arrange it so. Robert stuck his hand out to shake.

Yes, yes, but not now, Robert, it's Nicki's night. Let's get inside to the room and the people.

Of course, sorry. I am like most artists, a selfish bloody whore, Robert laughed.

No worries, we'll set it up, said Nicki, and he was taken by the arm, by Danelle, into the main exhibition room.

The room was big enough to fit sixty people, the walls white. On them hung ten of Nicki's paintings, in the order and placement he had asked for. A small crowd of twenty-odd people were in the room, standing and talking, looking keenly at the paintings, leaning against the wall, drinking wine. An old man was sitting on a chair; he wore a blue tailored suit and a trilby hat. A wooden cane with a gold eagle on top rested against the chair. He nodded at Nicki as their gaze met. Nicki smiled and nodded back. Robert thrust a glass of red wine into Nicki's hand.

Nicki was sat on a large green and burnished gold, throne-like chair, at the top of the room, beside a table with programmes, price lists, his bio. More people came and the exhibition began to fill.

The vacuous art world of chic and champagne and coke and crystal. His working classness a fetish for the high ups. I just love the primal essence, they said; he brings us into a world of blood, sex, and dirt, they said; a roaring success they said.

*

Then all the bodies came to him.

Long-legged girls in high heels and tight dresses; alt chicks with black-ringed eyes; bi boys with long, skinny dicks; queers with unicorn tattoos; middle-aged women with failed marriages and grown-up kids; sexy Instagram influencer gym babes; drunk, young male spoken-word poets. The non-binary with the androgynous hair, clothes, and face. Nicki, million-armed and legged, naked and sweaty, erect and grinding and humping, and fucking and sucking and licking and biting, and tied up and whipped and spit on, and gyrating and shuddering and cuming, and clawing and screaming, and orgasms and DP and trios, and chem sex and creepy saunas, and bears and cubs, and subs and doms, and top and bottom, and best mates in bed together, and tits and ass, and tits and dick,

and giving and taking head, and 69, and Iggy Azzela singing *More bounce, more bounce in the muttha fucking house, more bounce, bounce, bounce*. An ocean of bodies in all the erotic engagements the lord hath bestowed us with Nicki at its centre in monumental but fleeting moments of ecstasy.

*

Sitting in Bewley's café on Grafton street. In a corner by himself. He ordered a latte and a Mary cake. A man sitting beside him was reading a book of John Steinbeck's short stories. Nick had not read them, had not read any Steinbeck; he'd seen two different movie versions of, *Of Mice and Men*. He sipped on the coffee; a woman sitting in front of him spoke of a man's funeral, headstones, prices, flowers, that one better not start and so on ... The Mary cake, rich, succulent, and filling. He thought of his dole days, and how a seven-euro cake would have seemed such extravagance. He watched the people as they ate and drank and googled, yawned and read newspapers. His waitress was dark skinned, she wore red lipstick on her full lips, had bright green eyes, a slim petite figure. She was from Verona in Italy. They spoke of good coffee, and she asked if he was on the TV, as he looked familiar to her. I'm a painter, yuh might have seen me on TV on the news, or on that art show late at night on RTE 2.

Ah yes she said, my friend he watch this, very beautiful work. Thanks. She said she loved Dante's *Vita Nova*, but not so much *The Inferno*. All that judgment is too much for me. Me too, he said.

What are yeh doin later?

Not much.

Would yeh like teh come out with me?

Yes, that would be nice.

She wrote her number on his napkin, just like in a movie, some Hollywood rom-com she musta seen, he thought.

I'll call yeh tonight at eight. We can meet and go somewhere.

OK, Nicki ...

In bed together at his apartment, she said she'd never done coke before.

Try it yil like it I'm sure.

She did, he did, they did. They drug-fucked, and ended up raw and in a pile of sweat. He watched her as she slept, then he stared at the ceiling, laughed, then sighed. He sketched her form in the book of naked drawings he kept by the bed.

*

Robert took his easel in his hand, his brush in the other, and began to paint the beauty and coolness before him. Nicki sat resplendent, topless, as per Robert's request, one leg dangled in mock nonchalance, his hair shining in the light. Three sittings in and Robert, who worked fast, had all he needed of his sitter; he could work alone on the painting from now, he said, and then,

Though I will miss having you here each day, looking at you in all your glory.

Nicki got up and walked behind Robert and placed his hands upon Robert's shoulders; Robert upturned his face to Nicki.

Yeh can look at me for a little longer if yeh like, said Nicki, and he placed his hands on Robert's shoulders, then traced them slowly down Robert's chest ...

*

Danelle Twomey lifted her head from the mirror, and wiped the coke residue from her nostril. Nick snorted a line, and looked at her. Both laughed like mad. They were sitting on the red leather sofa in Danelle's five-bedroomed town house in Greystones. Red, black, and white were the only colours in the house—everything was one of those three colours, *everything*. Four months before that only blue, yellow, and green were allowed. Four months from now she'd change to a new three colour scheme. One must not be rigid with one's walls and décor, she would say. Danelle was wearing gold hot pants, and a matching tank top; Nicki was topless, and shoeless, and he had on those same ripped skinny white jeans from the exhibition, paint stains on them. They were drinking champagne and sniffing lines, and Madonna's greatest hits played loud in the room. Danelle bounced up and started dancing when 'Material Girl' came on.

●
●
● Ohh, I love this song, come on Nicki baby, dance with me, darling, dance.

They swirled around the room, the white and black walls rotated around Nicki's head, the chandelier above him glittered. He fell over onto the sofa, Danelle landed on top of him, her hands on his pectorals. She ran her long fingers down his torso, so smooth and lithe and lickable, she said.

Nicki looked into her eyes, removed her tank top to reveal small, pointed breasts, and she took his hands and placed them there, kissed him, put her hand inside his trousers. They fucked each other on the red sofa and on the floor, and drank and sniffed, and fucked for three days, and never spoke of it again. Danelle, it was said, did this with all her young painters, at least once, it was all part of the ritual of being one of 'her artists'.

After leaving Danielle's place, coming down from the three-day drug-and-fuck bender, he hailed a taxi into town and bought some fresh clothes in an upmarket clothing shop, then walked down to the beach and undressed and walked out to the sea; and he washed his body in the sea and he walked back out and dried off with a white towel and he dressed himself in new clothes, leaving behind the old skinny torn white jeans.

*

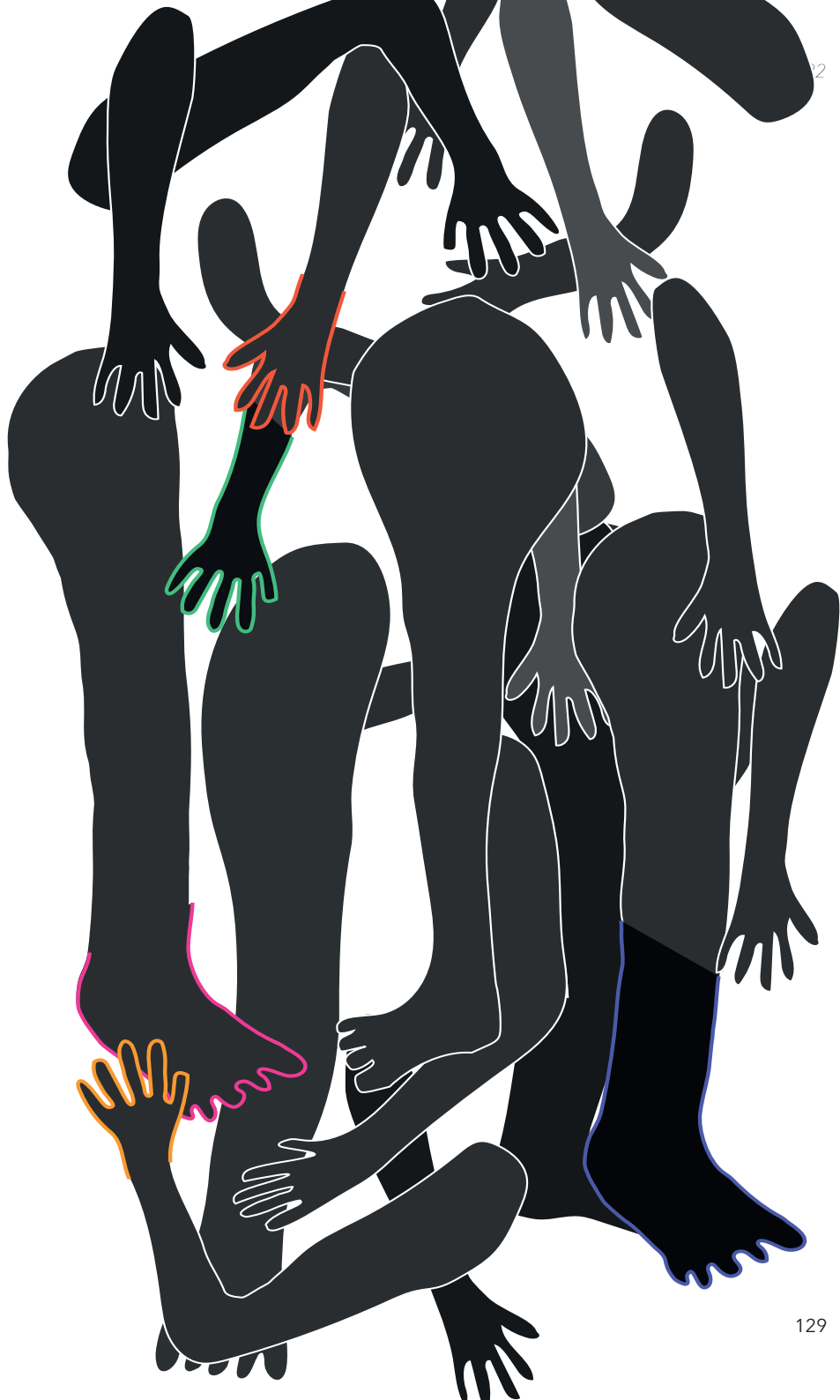
Nicki was in a three-bedroom flat in Summerhill, at a party that had been going on for two days and was at the stage where human cabbages were on seats, silent, having talked for hours endlessly about everything and nothing, the alcohol gone, the last joint smoked, and two smokes left in a crushed and wet box. A guy who knows a guy was waiting on a one-bag to come in an hour that would turn into three hours. A girl, who was supposed to have been home five hours ago, lay on the sofa, her phone ringing every ten minutes, her mother and then her fella trying to get hold of her, her child in bed at home. One spacer who had been partying since the late 1990s, still chatty and dancing and changing the music to songs he loved, his ebullience and joy de vivre—that earlier in the proceedings was so wonderful to behold, the soul of the whole thing—now excruciatingly bland, repetitive, and even a bit sickening: the way he just wouldn't stop moving and his face like a demon from a gothic artwork. That was what finally prompted Nicki to get up and leave the house: that face, twisted, sweaty, red, gurning, happy, and evil all at once—monstrous to Nicki's eyes. So he up and left with weird fake hugs all around.

He did not want it anymore, he wanted to fall deep into moveless, dreamless sleep. He bought four yellow pills from a junkie at the Heuston *luas* stop, swallowed them down and snail-walked home, collapsed in his bed for two days—the whirlwind in the torn trees and Nicki at the centre that couldn't hold, but hold he did, he did hold. Hold.

*

Nicki, long bearded, and short haired. Meandering for hours in the summer in Dublin, he saw old women being helped onto buses, children lifted and carried by their mothers and fathers, friends embracing each other on meeting; he saw lovers snapping photos of each other in the park, an old man walking his dog. He sat on a bench with the burning yellow sun shining bright on his brow; he turned inside as he had done for many months, away from the cravings of the flesh, seeking the way out of Samsara; he heard the sound of a great choir, then turned his gaze back to the people before him; a child turned and turned, she was spinning in the sunshine beside a bed of yellow roses, and Nicki sketched a drawing of her in his notepad, and then he rose from the bench, and walked on through the city streets, on to begin his greatest work.





*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 staccato 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



THE

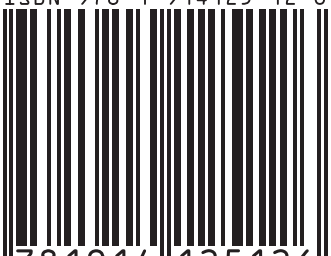
PLACE

OVER

ALL



ISBN 978-1-914125-12-6



9 781914 125126