
ABOLITIONISM
ANTIRACISM
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ANTIFASCISM
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DEMOCRACY
MARXISM
SITUATIONISM
JACOBINISM
SPONTANEISM
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SOCIALISM
GLOBALISATION
ENVIRONMENTALISM
ANTI-WAR
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A JOURNAL FOR
POOR & WORKING CLASS
WRITERS

Lumpen

A Journal for Poor and Working Class Writers.
Issue 009

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

Contents

LUM
PEN.

Editorial

I've been trying to write this editorial for a year and a half. For pretty much as long as I've been an editor at Lumpen, my co-editing comrades have been encouraging me to give it a go. And for just as long I've been making excuses.

At first, it was easy. For issue five—my first as an editor—I wanted to focus on doing a good job, making sure the writers I worked with weren't left high and dry cos they'd got stuck with the new guy.

During issue six I was having a hellish time at my day job. Struggling to keep my head above water while I figured out an exit strategy, I couldn't possibly find the headspace to write.

Issue seven found me admitting my writing anxieties and insecurities to the rest of our collective, wondering aloud why we couldn't just write our editorials together, hoping to avoid sitting alone with a blank page desperately trying to figure out what to say and how to say it. We didn't change our editorial process, but I did manage to get off the hook for another issue.

By issue eight I'd run out of viable alibis. If I could only be excused this one last time, I promised I'd do it next issue.

While on my bike, pedalling furiously towards home, I'd rack my brain, searching for potential topics. Did I have a heartfelt opinion to offer on Rishi Sunak's heartless cut to Universal Credit? Nothing that someone in the Guardian hadn't already expounded on at some length. How about a hot take on the latest appropriation of working-class style by the fashion industry? Dot, the Class Work Project's resident poet and blossoming social media guru, had probably already said it better on Twitter.

Coasting downhill, I would craft sentences in my head, aspiring to pithy one liners which delivered the perfect combination of humour and gut-wrenching honesty. I imagined the feelings I'd like to conjure up in the reader, the parts of myself and my history that I might dare to share, and I was almost excited to give it a go…

Until I remembered that my mother has a subscription to the magazine. That meant mining childhood trauma for hilariously devastating zingers was off limits. Even if she's never made it past the table of contents, and even if she mainly uses it as an inexpensive way to express her love for me and pride in my accomplishments, I can't risk exposing or exploring anything that may throw the delicate ecosystem of our relationship off kilter.

I don't really understand how I developed this inability to commit words to paper. Growing up I wanted to be an author, pretty much as soon as I knew it was a thing you could be. I loved writing stories, nearly as much as I loved reading them. On a recent trip to visit my family, I sifted through the accumulated artefacts of my school years, particularly taken with a 2000-word epic, written by my eight-year-old self. The plot centers around two intrepid children who find a deer which has been hit by a car and nurse it back to health in their treehouse (I grew up in rural Canada with a father

who trapped animals to sell their fur and hunted them for their meat, so the topic matter was not all that surprising).

My love of words continued, but somewhere along the way fear and self-consciousness built up inside me, eating away at the joy of creating. By the end of secondary school I'd stopped writing stories altogether, but I still played with words in essays, articles, and my journal. I even completed two years of a journalism degree, before switching to politics. But by the end of university, I was struggling to even finish essays. The page would remain blank until the absolute last moment, when a looming deadline and obscene amounts of caffeine somehow magically (and temporarily) transformed me into a prodigious writing machine.

As the years have passed, I've written less and less. At first I still banged out the occasional article for a political project—until I'd so thoroughly convinced myself of my writing ineptitude that I consistently turned down any low-stakes opportunity to practise. At meetings I started looking away and avoiding eye contact whenever a volunteer was needed for a writing task.

Then I somehow found myself hanging out with a lot of artists and writers, as part of the organizing collective at a free, DIY arts and events space, dedicated to providing a place to experiment without the fear of failure. But instead of encouraging my creative impulse, I found myself frozen in place; surrounded by others' talent, I was terrified of being terrible.

This would be a convenient place to relate my creative struggles and writing turmoil to my working-class experience; to note the wide body of literature connecting self-confidence to socio-economic background, and take a swipe at the unearned confidence of mediocre, posh, white guys. And while there's definitely plenty of truth in that analysis, I'm also not prepared to let myself off the hook quite so easily.

Because for the last year and a half I've been lucky enough to read hundreds of submissions from poor and working-class writers, who boldly put themselves out there, submitting their work to Lumpen in the hope of sharing their words. Some of these writers are old hands, who've honed their craft over many years, but many more are just starting out.

Amazingly, they all put their trust in our editorial team to read and comment on their creations, to suggest ways of restructuring arguments, and to assist in polishing their final draft. And while we do our very best to make the submitting process accessible and welcoming, it still requires vulnerability and bravery to submit.

So the least I can do is take a risk of my own, follow their lead, share some small part of myself, and release these words into the world. Even if it isn't perfect, even if I'm not quite ready. Even if a thousand words on not being able to write is only the very beginning of finding my voice.

I'm especially excited to be introducing you to this issue of Lumpen because working with these writers has been an absolute joy and privilege. There are so many powerful stories contained in these pages! All of us editors have felt motivated and reinspired by the process of putting this issue together—so much so that we've got a new format to announce for Lumpen.

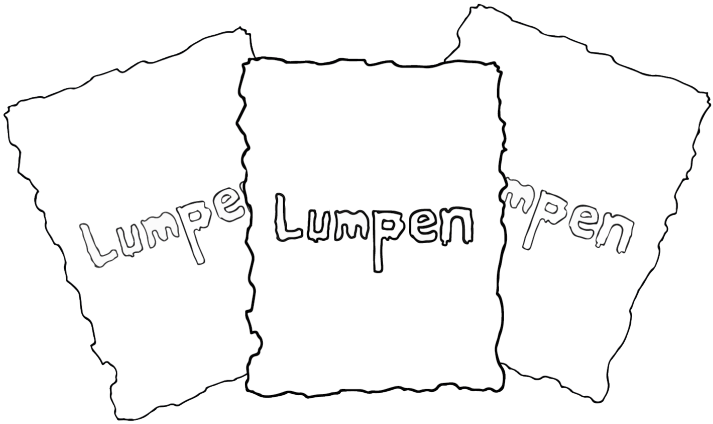
Starting with issue ten, we're moving to publishing three times a year instead of the quarterly pace we've been (mostly) keeping up. The quarterly schedule is unrelenting, with very little downtime between sending one issue to print and starting the editorial process for the next. We want to have a bit of extra space to take good care of ourselves and our writers. We hope the additional time will allow us to be more intentional about what we include in Lumpen and how we present it.

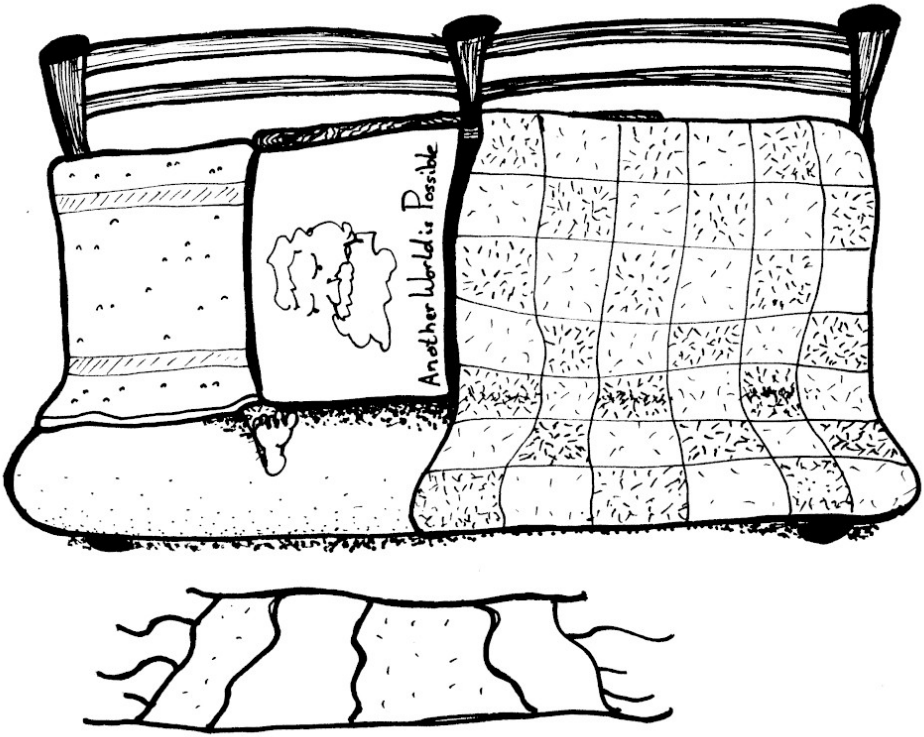
We're also introducing themes for each issue, which we think will help with curating Lumpen. Perhaps the themes will also help as writing prompts, for those of you like me who struggle with where to start. So here is your official invitation to get writing: issue ten will delve deep into 'Desire and Joy'; issue eleven is all about 'The Land'; and issue twelve is the time to tell us about 'Monsters'. Keep an eye on our social media channels for submission deadlines.

The editorial team will also be changing with the next issue, as this editorial will be both my first and my last. In the new year I'm planning to escape my desk and the dark Edinburgh winter, to spend an extended and indefinite amount of time beyond the borders of this fucked-up little island.

I'm damn proud of having been part of Lumpen, and I can't wait to see where it goes next. Who knows, maybe I'll even write something to submit.

- Shan Stephens




Another World is Possible

Morning Routine
2005–2007
Jugular Malloy

CN: This piece describes experiences of gender dysphoria and includes gendered words for body parts in the context of gender dysphoria

My morning routine ended when I was twenty-two. Five years on I think I can start talking about it. It's something I had endured from puberty. But when I was nineteen I moved to London by taking a volunteering job that offered free room and board and for eighteen months, at the cusp of my twenties, my morning routine had to adapt to the logistical difficulties posed by living in close proximity to a large number of cis men. It had become a sort of banal private daily torture.

We were in Harlesden, in North West London. It was a large shared community house in one of those tall narrow Victorian town houses West London is full of. It had been a hotel before. I slept in the male workers' dorm with four other men, next door to the female workers' dorm. The rest of the house consisted of single-sex rooms that slept two to a room. In these rooms lived folk who were there for respite and shelter, having previously been living on the streets. Most of these people were men; a lot of them had spent time in the military or prison. The entire house usually numbered at around twenty people, except at weekends when we opened up for 'hospitality' and people would come from all over London to grab some dinner and kip on the sofas, under the dining table, in the garden. We lived communally, meeting every morning over breakfast and taking turns to cook dinner every night. Workers had no specified times of work, but we had forty-four consecutive hours off a week. The one night that these hours covered would be spent at a 'day off flat' in Holloway where I could get my own room.

Each week we were given three 10 pound notes and a green travelcard neatly folded in a cash bag.

I was not open about the reality of my body with the other men in my room. I have no idea what they did or did not deduce from my appearance and voice. I could not, at the time, afford to think about it. One of my roommates, a German boy, eighteen, ripped, square-jawed, into football, eight inch floppy, did naked press-ups every morning.

I slept in a metal green bunk-bed. On top was a single mattress and at the bottom was a sofa which would pivot and flatten into a double bed. On this, permanently flattened, I slept. I was the only person with a double bed, I'd sleep on one side and imagine a man lying next to me. He was real, but the possibility of him sharing that bed with me was not.

I'd grown up in a shithole satellite town that I hated. So when I moved to London, I moved all my possessions to this one corner of this one room in this house in Harlesden. My bedside drawers were full of CDs, my tiny window was layered up with records, and all of my clothes were stuffed in the gap between my bed and the wall. Tucked under the mattress of the top bunk, and dropping down to cover all sides of my bed, I hung a load of different blankets and towels and one red flag with a picture of Karl Marx on it. This afforded me privacy so long as I was in bed, and having my clothes stuffed behind my bed meant that I could change in private. It also meant that I could sleep without wearing the tight Adidas sports top that bound my breasts. This was a relief.

So when I woke up in the morning I'd put on this sports top thing. It was grey with sweat and two sizes too small so that it would be tight enough. It was grey with sweat because it was a women's sports top which meant it was difficult to wash coz I was scared that someone might see it was in my washing. I had two so that

I could try and alternate them to stop either of them getting too manky. Every now and then I managed to wash them.

You've heard of binders. The most common kind of binder at the time would have been a bandage tightly wrapped around the breasts to force them flat. If you've got big tits this involves a fair amount of constriction on the chest and lungs. It's uncomfortable and causes shallow breathing which has a funny sort of associative effect of making you feel really anxious. I was anxious enough. Another kind of binder was a tight sports bra that you bought one cup-size down to compress your tits. It dug into the skin underneath your tits. It felt like a bra. I wouldn't have been able to tolerate it.

So I had this sports top, it was tight, double-layered at the front, and almost covered my torso but I had to keep pulling it down. It didn't so much compress as blend the contours of my tits and stomach into one vague lump. I would not have been able to use the word tits.

I'd wake up in the morning and stoop awkwardly in the confines of my bed and I'd put this top on. Then a pair of pants, by which I mean briefs, not boxers. Another pair of pants I would roll diagonally, thicker at one end and thinner at the other. This I folded over so that the thicker end vaguely made the shape of a ballsack and the thinner the shape of a willy. I stuffed it into my pants. I hated the way these tight pants looked on my wide arse and chubby thighs, so over the top went a pair of loose cotton boxers. Over my sports top went a t-shirt and then a smart shirt; I'm not a formal dresser but the buttons, collar, and pocket on a smart shirt help to obfuscate what's underneath. And then a loose jumper. These four layers were the absolute minimum. I wore them in summer. When it was hot I had to frequently excuse myself to the toilet so that I could wipe the sweat from underneath my tits. I couldn't use the word tits. As much as possible, I lived nocturnally during the summer. I still have a vitamin D deficiency.

With my sports top, t-shirt, smart shirt, jumper, pants, packing pants, and boxers on I got out of bed and went to the toilet. If I was on my period I would have to stuff some tissue in my pants to catch the blood. If I was lucky I might have found some tampons somewhere or I might have recently seen my mum who would give me some. I couldn't say the word tampons. I didn't let my mum either. We called them thingies. Most of the time I couldn't get hold of tampons; I could never bring myself to buy them from the shop. Deeply buried among my clothes behind my bed was a carrier bag of blood encrusted pants. I double-bagged them and threw them away when I could find a quiet night. I took too much Co-codamol. Co-codamol (paracetamol and codeine) is an analgesic. You need an anti-inflammatory like ibuprofen for period pains. I didn't know this because I couldn't talk to anyone about my body. So I didn't ask. So no one told me. The Co-codamol didn't get rid of the pain so I took more of it until it gave me its own set of stomach pains. About once a month I'd take time off work with some mystery stomach illness. I was considered to be lazy and unreliable.

After having a wee I went back to my room, grabbed a towel, and walked the five metres between my bed and the shower outside my room. I locked the door. Once in the shower I would take off all my clothes. The sports top, the t-shirt, the smart shirt, the jumper, the pants, the other pants, and the boxers. I stood naked. This was the only time I was ever naked. I was shagging a man I loved, but he never saw me naked. I never slept naked. Standing in the shower behind a locked door once a day, I was naked. When I sprouted tits in my mid-teens, I was so horrified that at first I was having baths in boxers and a baggy t-shirt. But I enjoyed being naked in the shower. I enjoyed feeling air and water against my skin.

Once out of the shower I dried myself and put on my pants, my other pants, my boxers, my sports top, my t-shirt, my smart shirt and my jumper. I unlocked the door and went back to my room and put on a pair of badly fitting jeans.

When I finally had my tits lopped off at the age of twenty-two, I immediately stopped packing my pants. I started to wear just one pair of boxers at a time. I'm twenty-seven now, and last month I took some dodgy MDMA that had me walking up and down the house naked, in front of strangers. It was a good night.

The Making of a Killer
Norman Towers

My dad blamed books for the way I turned out. How did I turn out? Not like him, which is what I suppose he meant. I grew up in Leeds in the seventies. I didn't fit in with most of the kids in my street. Most of them were what my friend Tony would call 'normal English'. Tony was a freak like me, although freak is the wrong word. I was an outcast, a freak by default, excluded from the other kids' games, their conversations, their parties, because my parents were different and because of my lack of material possessions, the currency of the latest craze, the right clothes. But the normal English are the fucking freaks if you think about it— the shit they think is normal. The people in my street were defined to a large extent by their middle-class aspirations and, like their children, their material status. But they were also defined by their ignorance, their fear of anyone unlike them—freaks of humanity. In a political sense: working-class Tories. The fuckers are everywhere which means THEY'RE the normal ones.

Tony was my closest ally in my adult life. We negotiated together the perils of life on the outskirts of the rat race. I had tried to fit in and failed whereas Tony had it pretty much sussed. He would spend his summers travelling around the Yorkshire Dales and the Lake District on his bike, living in his tent and signing on every two weeks. This was in the days before Universal Credit when sanctions didn't exist, and you didn't get hassled so much. In the winter, he'd get a warehouse job and sofa surf, saving up to have the whole summer off. He was as free as a poor man could be in this sceptic isle. In 2007, he was cycling through Wakefield on his way to Ireland for the summer when he was killed by a hit-and-run lorry driver. One less burden on the state.

My dad and mum were Irish. He was a labourer; she didn't have a

job. She cooked, made the beds, and hoovered up. The rest of the time she read books. Not the ones that made me turn out wrong, but romantic novels. What she got from them I don't know. She didn't talk much to me and my sister, or even my dad, about what she thought. I only saw her open up once, many years later, when I'd grown up. She told me she had been engaged to a man, a drunk, but she couldn't rely on him for a secure future for herself and got with my dad, who didn't drink. It felt like I was seeing her for the first time as she remembered this man, and I never saw her like that again. I wondered if her romantic novels were where she lived in her head, but I never understood her inability to give, to share. She was all locked up. She took my dad's money, and what she didn't use to put food on the table she gave to the bankers. She never spent any on us and my dad didn't interfere; to him we were 'her' children. He was the mug who toiled all day for the men who took the piss out of him for being a thick Paddy. At teatime, as gravy dribbled down his chin, he would complain about them to my mum. He didn't look at her. Instead, he looked at himself in the mirror above the sideboard as he told her how shit his day had been. I wanted to get revenge on those men who bullied him. I loved my dad then.

I was supposed to become an electrician, but I wanted to be a drummer. My dad, so my mum told me, hadn't had the opportunity to learn a trade. He was always saying: 'The trouble with young people today is they don't want to work.' I understood that people like us *had* to work, but how he thought that working your fingers to the bone in the freezing cold while being pushed around by wankers was more desirable than playing music with your mates, sleeping with girls, and being paid for it was a mystery, the solving of which began not with books but with music.

Although the book that would have the most profound effect on me had already entered our house, I had probably been too young for it. It was David Bowie's *Diamond Dogs* album that brought me back to it a few years after my sister, who was four years older

than me, had read it for school. I'd seen it on the sideboard. I can see it now. I asked her about it. I don't remember what she said but she wasn't into it. The reason it had no effect on her can be partly explained by the solution to the mystery concerning the contradictory viewpoints my dad held. The book even had a name for that. It was called doublethink. The book was *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by George Orwell.

This book did one simple thing for me: it made me think. It put me on a path of discovery that would lead me to see things as they really are, and the reason why some people, like the normal English, couldn't, wouldn't or didn't *need* to see. That path of discovery involved music, books, films, people—even television—and almost certainly magic mushrooms, but I'm sure that an enquiring mind is all it takes. I say 'even' television because, as I was to find out, the main reason for my dad's, and probably most people's ability to doublethink, including myself until the scales fell from my eyes, was television; television and newspapers. Still is.

Here's George Orwell's definition of doublethink:

> To know and not to know, to hold simultaneously two opinions which cancelled out, knowing them to be contradictory and believing in both of them, to use logic against logic, to repudiate morality while laying claim to it, to believe that democracy was impossible and that the [government] was the guardian of democracy, to forget whatever it was necessary to forget, then to draw it back into memory again at the moment when it was needed, and then promptly to forget it again, and above all, to apply the same process to the process itself—that

> was the ultimate subtlety: consciously to induce unconsciousness, and then, once again, to become unconscious of the act of hypnosis you had just performed. Even to understand the word—doublethink—involved the use of doublethink.People use the word 'woke' today, but like the words 'propaganda' or 'communist', it will have a different meaning and it will resonate differently for different people, often because of the way words and their meanings are presented to us through the media. For many, propaganda might have something to do with Nazi Germany in the Second World War; communism might have something to do with Stalin and Russia in the 1920s; woke might mean awakened to the truth that all people are equal, which *is* true when you *are* awake, but knowing this fact alone is not the same as *being* awake.

I remember the moment I woke up. I experienced a sudden shift in my perception where everything changed forever. I was fifteen. I was watching 'the news' with my mum and dad. People talk about a light going on, don't they? And it was like that. Suddenly a light went on, and the man on the television was lying. He was spouting an agenda. It was laughable. But more importantly, after that, normal wasn't normal anymore. I don't know why that happened. Maybe I was ready for it. I had an enquiring mind.

People doublethink, or experience cognitive dissonance, to use a contemporary expression, as a part of their normality. There is no big mystery, but it's astonishing how many people don't see the truth behind the economic system that constitutes global civilisation. I

keep using the word normal, but that word is important. Normal *isn't* normal is it? Is the mass adoration of a woman in a gold hat who takes our taxes and owns more land than she could ever walk on normal, while we explain away, in the words of our masters, the hundreds of thousands of homeless people living on our streets? Is the annihilation of people overseas, in the name of an economic status quo called peace normal too? Normal English.

There's a reason we use the words 'woke' or 'asleep'. They are almost literally accurate. Here's how I see it: to distance yourself from something gives you an objective viewpoint. We are all humans living on this giant rock, hurtling through the emptiness of space. We are all the same, with the same needs. End of. But in their heads, many people subscribe to a narrative that defines their own identity, the identities of others, and the roles they all play. Anything that might challenge that reality is not recognised but assimilated into their world view. For my sister, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was just a book. How could it be a work of magical art that wanted to help her question her 'normal' life?

We are all the same. The whole thing is a construction.

My dad was from the Republic of Ireland. He hated the IRA but not the UDA.

He was an immigrant who hated immigrants.

Newspapers. Television.

The people in my life were shaped by more than the people around them growing up; they were shaped by the circumstances of their class. And not just their material circumstances. They were told who they were by their rulers. Except for Tony, the people in my story, my family, never knew who they were and are—just who they think they were and are.

The working class had once defined itself. In my youth it had power, identity, and community. Working-class art existed in the mainstream in the books of Alan Sillitoe, Keith Waterhouse, and Barry Hines; the films of Ken Loach and Tony Richardson; the plays of John Osborne and Joan Littlewood. (Women's working-class voices wouldn't grow louder until punk came along.) But, in the end, all those voices *really* got to say were what Rousseau had said two hundred years before them:

> While government and laws take care of the security and the wellbeing of men [*sic*] in groups, the sciences, letters, and the arts—less despotic and perhaps more powerful—spread garlands of flowers over the iron chains which weigh men [*sic*] down.

Our rulers have been taking the piss for a long time.

Although there was a clearer demarcation in England between working-class and middle-class education, there were options for kids like me to go to grammar schools and then on to university. And whatever was said about it being the system's prescribed path for lifting working-class kids to 'better' things, it meant that I could go to St. Michael's College instead of to the 'comprehensive' St. Benedicts, which was ironic as that's where the metal and wood shops were, and where I was supposed to be, if I were to be on the conveyor belt to becoming an electrician. My mam just wanted me to go to the 'best' school, though, so off to grammar school I went. There is a kind of self-policing, know-your-place paradigm among the working class. You can't quite get hold of it, nor can you easily debate its existence, particularly with the people who are in it with you. My exclusion from the aspiring-middle-class-kids club was defined by more than materialism: it was something in the capitalist ideology inherent in the system and propagated through the media.

St. Benedicts not good enough for you?

Not for the likes of you St. Micks.

The one that returns from war without his legs is a hero; the one who would not go to lose them is a coward. You'd watch your friends die?

Divide.

Rule.

My sister married the son of an Irishman who accepted without question that the invasion of Poland by Germany was justification for Britain's 'entry' into World War Two, but didn't see that Britain had effectively invaded his ancestral homeland in 1921—or indeed earlier. I say this not to express a personal, partisan standpoint but to demonstrate again the power of words, the shaping of beliefs.

He was and is, at least as far as we can define, a man wrought by the methods our masters provide us with: a racist and a misogynist; or a right-wing patriarch; or a working-class Tory. But after knowing him for years, and despite how he molded my sister into his way of seeing things, I think that maybe he's just a man defined in and by the world that created him. What if it was fear that shaped him? Fear of what he doesn't know or looks different to him? Of that which talks and acts differently to him—competes with him? What if, as a boy, he was confused and scared by anything outside his own world and just wanted to feel safe—to fit in? What if that world was shaped by men who in essence were just like him, except that they were born into privilege and, like their fathers before them, protected themselves as they controlled the weaker ones—not least through their media?

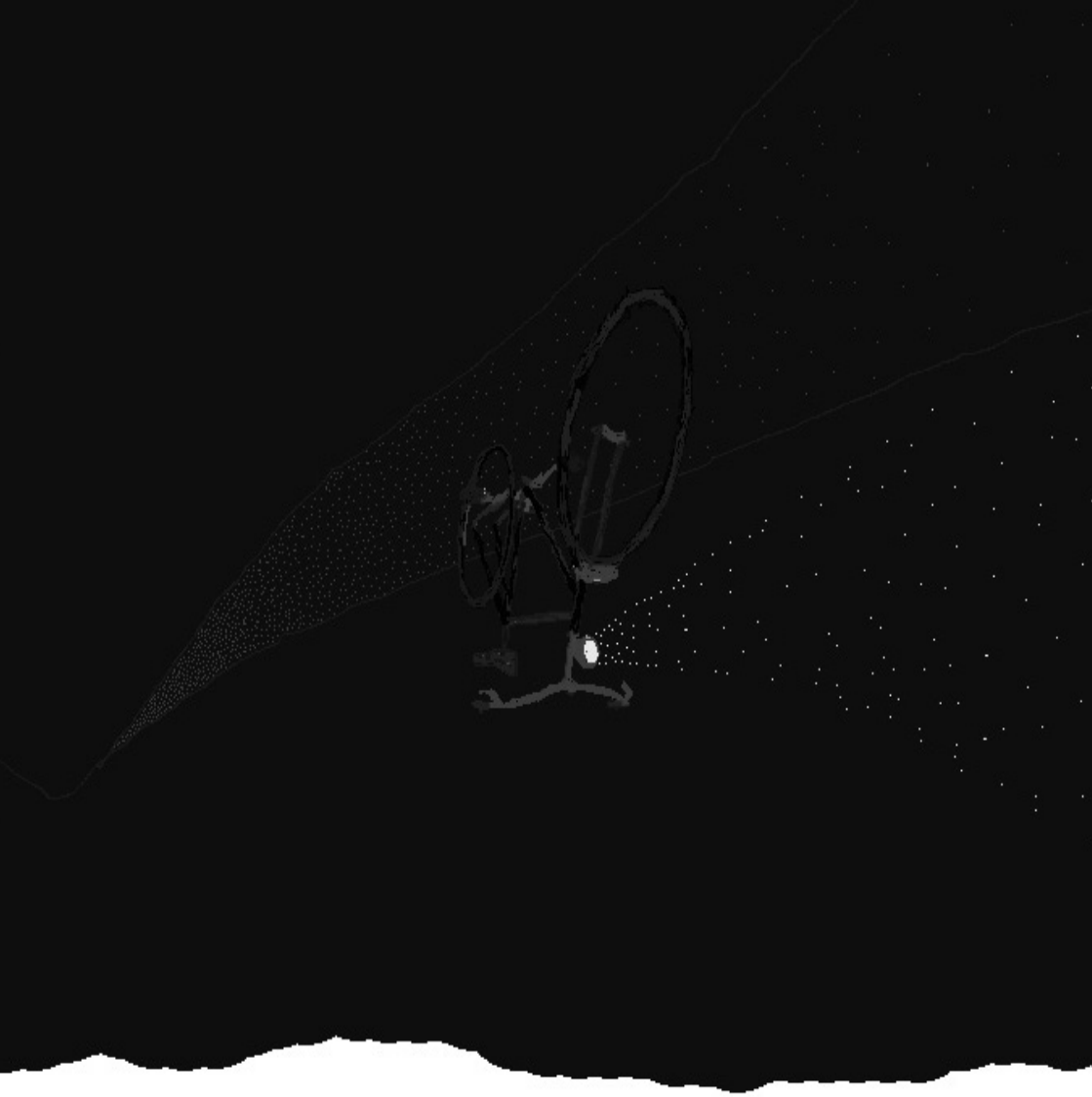
'The security and the wellbeing of men in groups.'

At least they've stayed together, my sister and her husband, for over forty years. They must love each other, right? He seems kinder now, less fearful and suspicious, or maybe it's just me who's grown more tolerant, less judgemental. And where their life together has been the life lived in compliance with the Daily Express and the BBC news, they're not bad people. They have something I would like—security, stability. They're normal. And as my life veered off the rails, they cemented that life into place with a son.

I had long since left grammar school when my nephew was born. Armed with impressive GCSE passes in English and Latin—not so great in maths and science—I was funneled, at the age of sixteen, into that year's intake of electrical apprenticeships in the city of Leeds. As the mess of my life was just beginning, my sister was marrying the RAF man (ground-crew personnel—'I'm not having him flying planes.') who would father their only son.

He was, and is, the sweetest boy; kind, even-tempered, quick to smile and laugh. At the age of seven, inspired by his pet rabbit, Fluffy, he declared he would become a vet. Consistency and cohesion were the bedrock of his upbringing. Curious and studious, he was rarely without a book in his hand. His room was always tidy, and as he grew, the animals on the walls were replaced by pictures of naval vessels. Plastic kits of fighting ships adorned the shelves along with medals and trophies for his achievements as a sea scout, the weekly club meets his father had enrolled him in, leading, in time, to the proud moment when Princess Anne, the Princess Royal, would award him with his graduation sash.

Now, in full naval uniform, he steps onto the Queen Elizabeth, the majestic aircraft carrier, as an officer and weapons expert. In times of conflict, for Queen and country, he will take and give orders to fire its guns.



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Reminiscing in a Post-Covid Addiction.
Glasgow. August 2021
JonJoe

Present Day

I'm trying to write something in article or essay form for the first time in over five years. I've got a few articles' worth of thoughts and experiences that are probably interesting enough that people would want to read them. I've a bit less ability to get them down in any ordered way. My writing vocabulary is shot to fuck and anything I seem to write well is a long tangent. Facts and structured paragraphs come out awkward, dry and almost painful to read. Maybe it's the cocaine. I'm not writing on it but in the periods between the 1-2 day relapses. 1-2 day relapses are progress, last month a relapse meant weeks of all-in up to my neck in it. For the best part of the last month I've been largely clean and my body and brain have all but recovered. I'm not out the woods yet and not underestimating the challenge. I'm getting there and maybe, despite my initial aversion to the idea, I'll write about that. I'll try writing a bit about how and from where I got here and get some of the things I really want to talk about down too. Hopefully I can tie it all together and it's not all a partly readable mess. So aye, after 17 years of being free of addiction I ended up in the grip of one again. I'm more surprised than anyone.

Inbetween

After a decade of crime, heroin, violence and prisons, I'd managed to move on and build a life for the first time—it's difficult to describe those mad years as a life. I took my interest in the wider world, my growing awareness of the political and economic forces that shaped my world and me, re-channelled that anger and went to college. I barely went to school, let alone finished it. I'd learnt to write in prison when I was 16 by copying the handwriting from

letters sent in to me. So it wasn't a small thing, college. I did an access year in social care but took the route of social sciences. I needed to have confidence in my ability to understand the structural forces shaping us as much as I needed air. I did well and with growing confidence started to attend protests and political meetings. When I started getting involved in stuff, I didn't think I had much to offer but graft—there is a lot of laziness or excuses to just go to the pub in this revolution. Perfect, I thought, that's my opening. It'd be years later until I questioned who was benefiting from my labour but for a while it didn't matter, I somehow seemed to be having a life.

By the time I went to uni, the transformation and step into a new world was pretty much complete. I was the first person in my family or immediate community to step foot in a university, unless they were cleaning, painting, or robbing it. My wee ma could tell her pals about me with some pride for the first time in decades, it'd never make up for the hurt and fear I caused them, I'll never completely shed the black sheep mantle but it's something, eh? Family and long-time friends were proud of me and to show it they obviously ripped the piss. My older brother called me 'the professor'. My uncle would loudly warn people in the pub that I'd slept on a student's sofa last night. My brother died around then, I'd just got my HNC Social Sciences to his great amusement. It was the greatest test of my slowly healing mental health since getting off the heroin. For a few weeks I self-medicated on Valium, I admit. The pain of losing a brother is unreal, seeing it almost destroying my ma was too much not to be doped up on something. Thankfully my main coping strategy was throwing myself into college work and progressing up the new paths opening up before me. Further away from my old self, the one that my brother despised; his hatred of all things heroin was unshakable. Our da died of a heroin overdose in the 80s; in the 90s he'd lost many pals to it. I'd been a great source of shame, embarrassment and anger for him for years. I couldn't change that but could change things now. That

motivation propelled me on and into uni and helped me channel my pain and grief, life was short, death comes without warning; with these lessons, my past was finally becoming the past.

By 2010 my life, the people around me, and the world I was inhabiting was completely unrecognisable from what it'd been a decade before. I'd started university and was doing well, academically. I was organising within the student and Palestine solidarity movements. By the end of the year I'd managed to accidentally get myself (and my Celtic top, yas!) on the telly after storming Millbank Tower, The Tories' HQ which was rightly and gloriously smashed up. I even ended up in Palestine on a solidarity delegation.

Before

Ten years earlier? Fuck, I'm actually struggling to remember. I was definitely in Barlinnie Prison at the start of it finishing a 3yrs sentence, the rest of it I couldn't honestly say. Safe to say I was on the heroin. In 2000 it was crack or coke getting thrown in the spoon and into my veins too. I'd have been running about like a mad bandit, either in Glasgow or London, or both. No rich details sadly but hopefully the point has been made, by 2010 I'd fairly turned things around. I don't know how, why I managed to or why many better, smarter people than me didn't but it was largely in spite of the prison system, social workers and addiction services not because of them. So another decade goes by, I'm surrounding myself with brilliant people and comrades, learning and growing, involved in more areas of the struggle and I become a father. Life has been far from rosy, poverty has always stalked me. I found myself back in court a few times and narrowly avoided prison. Eviction led to a period of precarious housing too. Woven through all that was the ability to push back against the system a wee bit, practise solidarity and put the resources I'd accumulated at the disposal of those of us who have next to none.

Prison, how do you summarise a decade in (mostly) and out of prisons? Not sure it's even possible. It was different things at different times. In the early years there was a lot of violent confrontations with the screws, getting stabbed, stabbing people, the odd protest and a lot of solitary confinement. Should be said, violent confrontations with screws started when one punched me on my third ever day in jail. I made a failed, pathetic attempt at revenge with a metal food tray. What followed was a 16yr old with the skinny wee body of a 14yr old getting kicked, punched, dragged, and twisted about for days. Solitary, in the form mostly of a one month 'Rule 34' (for subversive activities). This included one time, sitting at a dinner table with someone who got stabbed. The stabber and stabbed both got a 1 month Rule, mine got extended twice and I did 3 months. It got that farcical that I decided to stop talking to them while on a rule, any of them. I also decided to attack them, then go on a dirty protest in solidarity every time they dragged some poor bastard down and beat him. They responded with hoses, riot shields and by sticking me in the padded or silent cells, two different flavours of the same thing, utterly disorientating silence. I began to withdraw into myself, I became calm, catatonic almost, cold and numb. Beatings, insults and provocations began having little effect. I really don't have a word for this state of being, I've never seen a word in English that quite describes it. It was an extreme coping mechanism for extreme circumstances. I did 11 months in solitary over a 30 month sentence. I used it a lot, probably too much and it created (or deepened) a big hole that for the next seven years or so I tried to fill with drugs, heroin mostly. It's reappeared only a few times since those days. By the autumn of 2020 it was back and I don't think I really stood much of a chance of dealing with it in any healthy way.

Trauma

It'd been so long since my crazy days that I didn't really think that much about them. I'd carried trauma from those times and

recognised how they'd shaped me. Truth being told, so much of it is buried so deep, untouched or even identified, it seeps out in doses that I'm able to process. A lot of the trauma is the mental and emotional toll on me from the trauma I visited on other people. It imprints on you and unlike dealing with the things that happened to me, the guilt and shame bring a complex mix of emotional responses and interconnected memories that then produce the same effect. It's a good thing it happens this way for me: my limited emotional capacity and mental health couldn't cope otherwise. I don't think it'll ever all be rediscovered, let alone processed. Maybe that's more of a problem than I not long ago thought.

Never for a second did I ever think I'd be in any way reliving or repeating them. Fool me, eighteen years since I'd last had any need for a syringe here I am. Shooting up coke and crack at 1am.

So, how did this happen?

The usual combination of factors probably and the shifting weight of historical trauma/pain/guilt/shame that I carry surely made me more vulnerable to these factors tipping my mental health over the edge. Covid for sure played its part. I got ill back at the beginning of it all when the only way to get a test was in the queue for a ventilator.

This was when I started noticing the growing ball of anxiety, that everything that came next plus the theatre of the daily press conference and news of Covid's global march began to feed. When my Covid passed I had the luck of not having Covid restrictions or being stuck in a tiny flat like many people. I was living out in the countryside. My experience of those surreal first few months of lockdown was detachment from the experience most were having in urban areas. As well as anxiety another attack on my mental health materialised. Powerlessness, the complete inability to see

any immediate future and long periods of solitary existence. They were powerful things that most of the world was feeling at that time but due to their nature I think for anyone who has experienced them through race, class, gender, poverty, addictions, prisons etc., any sense of the shared experience didn't register much. They affected you as an individual, and even if like me you've been trying to avoid experiencing anything as an individual, to dismantle individualism within you, it very easily reduces you to that state.

The illness contributed to that. About a month after it passed the first random bouts of fatigue began hitting me. It'd leave me horizontal and often sleeping by early afternoon. Where-to-stay anxiety became a thing. Work was being done on where I was living, I'd have to move on. I'd been effectively homeless for about 4-5 yrs. In England that meant squatting (which I don't consider as homeless but as a precarious and chaotic housing solution), in Scotland that meant staying from place to place for 3-4 months. I'd been staying in the countryside since September 2019 so I'd not had that housing anxiety for a while. When it came it really took me by surprise, I'd never really suffered from extreme anxiety before. By this time I'd learned the term 'long-Covid' and without going on about it, it involved being floored by almost daily bouts of fatigue. Soon there was periods of extreme anxiety leading up to noon/early afternoon when the fatigue would normally hit me. Would-it-come-today-or-not anxiety was at first fucking annoying, later painfully frustrating and after a few months, psychological torture. The fatigue, the very thing I was fearing, when it came was becoming blissful relief from the anxiety. So aye, anxiety levels like I'd never experienced. I moved into a pal's spare room in the summer, just as things were opening up a bit to give the second wave a chance to develop. I was skint and that was ok, it was amazing support during that long-Covid shit.

Around September the long-Covid went away, whether time and rest, the course of herbal medicine or the good old fashioned and

familiar cold I caught got rid of it I don't know and don't really care. Part of the relief was not reading, talking or caring about Covid. It was fucking bliss. Thank fuck it was over. The anxiety wasn't over though and by now I was learning to identify what was fuelling it to a degree. Housing precariousness was a growing factor and something I was beginning to again feel as a second lockdown looked certain. It would have been a big ask of my friend to let me stay throughout that open-ended period. More to the point, it would have been more of an ask of my strained mental health to withstand the anxiety and near anxiety attacks it'd developed into. Precarious housing, as I began really thinking about it, was something I'd been living under for quite some time. Even before the countless squat evictions, chaotic environments and getting evicted from my flat, it had been a thing, unnoticed under all my other shit, for a number of years. For half the ten years I was in that flat, arrears and yearly eviction threat drama had been a pain in the ass. Benefits or Student Loans paid my rent mostly. I couldn't rely on my student money in the summer and thanks to 'austerity' ye definitely couldn't rely on benefits. The last time I tried to access them the bastards sanctioned me before I got a penny off them. Three years earlier the bastards made me endure a weekly inquisition just to get housing benefits (they'd sanctioned the fuck out me so I wasn't getting anything else). I wasn't subjecting myself to that again despite the harassment I was getting from the housing association over arrears at the time. Stick yer sanction and yer benefits up yer arse I told them. I soon told my shitty social landlord to fuck off too, wasn't much else I could tell them.

Back to 2020! Housing precariousness on the eve of lockdown #2. The mad anxiety eating me up was running alongside another, more worrying and familiar mental state that I'd been slipping in and out of. A numbness, detachment and inability to feel anything about anything. Like depression, yes but deeper and colder. I'd first experienced (or developed) this state in the mid-90s during long periods of solitary confinement in prison

‘The Underclass’

As we approached lockdown #2 I began mulling over going homeless to get a flat and at least deal with the housing anxiety. This would involve joining the 1000s of others, homeless and asylum seekers, housed in hotels. Potentially this could mean re-entering that world I'd left behind almost two decades ago. Was I up to that? At that point my inability to feel much was really secondary to the anxiety but on the eve of entering the hotel it came back really fucking powerfully. You see, I'd been thinking a lot about those hotels and the people dying in them.

Adnan, a young Syrian guy I'd help orientate and signpost on his arrival in Glasgow killed himself in one. The Home Office's corporate partners had moved hundreds of asylum seekers into hotels from their temporary flats. Their money was stopped, they were given half-cooked food and they were terrified of catching Covid. Adnan's mental health was fragile and he threatened suicide if he wasn’t moved to a flat. He'd attempted suicide after ISIS killed his father, making him financially responsible for his family. He tried again when he was detained on his arrival to the UK. The very first thing he sought out was a doctor for his mental health. I was gutted and raging. A few months later a young Sudanese called Badreddin snapped in his hotel room jail cell in a completely different way, he stabbed a hotel worker, other asylum seekers and a cop who apparently tried to wrestle with him. He went back to his room where armed police found him and shot him dead, a bullet to the chest and another in the neck. Weeks after George Floyd, the 'crazed knifeman' narrative gave the racist response to BLM serious traction. There was little sympathy for him basically. If my pal Adnan fell into the deserving category, this boy certainly didn't.

As I was considering the flat-via-hotels route, another hotel story really got under my skin. Eight people in one hotel alone had died

since the lockdown. That was it, no names, no more details. Eight people in one hotel died before it even became newsworthy and when a journalist does cover it they can't be arsed to even find out their names. You'll not be surprised but this hotel was housing vulnerable street homeless, most of whom were living with addiction and severe mental health issues. It was the very people I assumed I'd be put in a hotel with, taking me back to the kind of environment of despair, wild desperation and violence I thought I'd left behind. The day before I went I felt myself sink into the level of cold numb detachment from those years before.

Initially it was an anti-climax as I was put in a hotel deemed safe enough for children and without people with serious addictions. For a few months during the second lockdown it was mostly ok but seriously boring and aye, feeling a lot like prison. One of those open prisons I never got to, sure, but prison-like nonetheless. I thought a lot about Badreddin and his last few weeks spent in his hotel room before cops shot him dead in it. I also did mutual aid deliveries to some migrants in the hotel where Adnan killed himself, wondering if anyone who met him was still there or not. In January the hotel the eight people had died in had closed. Someone somewhere decided to move half my hotel elsewhere and replace them with some of the crazy broken souls from that hotel, including dealers. Overnight the place completely changed and, as I feared back in October, I was back in that world.

I tried to keep a polite but firm distance but that got harder when people I'd been talking to for a while started getting into the drugs. Keeping distance would've been perceived as judgement and me thinking I was better than them. So sometimes I'd join them for a fag outside and with familiarity came intrusion and people waking me up at 1am to try to sell me drugs. When I tried asserting some boundaries one guy told people he was going to stab me. Readapting to this new yet familiar reality was mostly at first levelling. I could've easily been one of them and I was walking proof

that most of them had the human potential to get out of that life too. For now though, they were the very dregs of the underclass, they had few fucks to give and with that a type of freedom that most people wouldn't understand. Living among them and that world, I kept thinking about the deserving and undeserving, the divisions the capitalist system seems to effectively fragment us into.

I also thought about the soup kitchens and clothes distributions supporting these people being self-organised by white working-class people. I thought about why middle-class people seemed to only mobilise for asylum seekers. I thought about racism, saviourism and racialised power dynamics and to be honest the weight of all this trying to make sense of everything was becoming too fucking much.

Relapsing

One night going out for a smoke I found a twisted piece of paper on the floor. When I got back to my room, the asshole dealer next door was having a shouting match at the window over it. It was a wee rock of crack. I didn't even stop to think, I fashioned a pipe and smoked it. The wave of bliss from it completely washed away everything and broke right through that cold numbness. I probably knew it would. I put it down to a one-off, no big deal, understandable even.

When I finally got a flat and left, the effect on me being around all that really hit me. Coupled with the amount of work and money I'd have to borrow to make a big shell of a flat liveable, another big void of nothingness began opening up. I did the second pipe after about three weeks. The next a week later. At some point it became a slide into addiction. I hid it for about 6 weeks until it became too out of control.

It’s been a crazy few months, scary, surprising, lonely, but ultimately humbling once shared with friends. Laying yourself bare and vulnerable to close friends is a beautiful thing, it creates space where ego and stupid individualism are largely absent. It’s a connection of trust, love, and emotional bonds that you realise, even within the grip the of addiction at its worst, just how fucking fortunate you are.

There is another side to it though. I've learned a lot about cocaine these months including the reminder I don’t even like the fucking stuff ! In the past it was taken with heroin, a physical addiction that was the main factor influencing thinking and behaviours. Cocaine is a different animal. Cravings can be resisted but they can also simply take over your brain, reduce you to some robot and before you know what’s happened you've relapsed. It really is that powerful. Far more troubling for me though, is the limited functioning of the brain. Thoughts come, dissipate and take several attempts to become whole, before becoming an action. Most of your cognitive abilities are frazzled. So even with complete sincerity and honesty, being self-aware and considerate of how this is affecting those trying to support you, you’re unable to. The varying roles and degrees of support they take up, while you’re still using, or have relapsed mean you’re putting them through some heavy shit. Their dilemmas, such as non-judgement vs enablement, register, sadden, and worry you but ultimately don't stop you giving them more an hour later. We all use coping tools that tell ourselves the least troubling version of reality. Addicts are masters at this and addiction gives you the most creative and persuasive devil on the shoulder imaginable. These things, the simple inability of the brain to compute much at all, mean I fear that I'm doing real harm to those trying to support me. In simpler terms, I fear, despite a real genuine effort not to, that I'm taking for granted and even abusing this love, solidarity, and support.

Important to say probably is that these are the people currently

dropping like flies. For the last 7 years the drug death figures have been going up and up. In 2020 it was 1399. It's almost 5 times higher than England & Wales and 'What the fuck' times higher than all EU countries. Among them, I've no doubt were people with more rich, interesting experiences than mine. They could be writing this and I could easily be one of the mostly unnamed dead in the 2021 statistics. They are gone though and with them their voices and everything they could have been and contributed. Even before my current battle with addiction I thought about that a lot. These thoughts bring guilt and negativity that in turn help bring about relapses. It's a vicious circle. I've decided I simply don't have the mental capacity to do anything more than be productive towards getting my shit together. The opportunity to write has definitely helped with that. Thanks for having me.

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JonJoe could be most of us. Having a *nom de guerre* feels cooler and safer than a public profile. They shunned all that for struggle in the margins, promised never to write again. They've just broken that promise but still comfortably in the margins. Send any insults or compliments to: JonJoe21@protonmail.com

Three Little Pigs
Reo Aedh

Just a heads up: this writing contains childhood sexual exploitation, rape, and drug use.

You'll have to picture the scene.

It's pretty much like any other house on the street, a small two-up two-down house. Brick painted over white and over the years turned to beige. Empty flower box, some tufts of grass poking up through the ground: you could easily mistake it for a family home in a run-down area. Red front door, single-glazed windows, curtains always always drawn.

And walking through that red front door, you're immediately in the front room and it's pretty bleak. The room is a square shape, no character, just the floor and the ceiling and the walls with an old brown leather armchair and sofa pushed up against them. The carpet is dark grey, and the walls are the colour of hell—magnolia—covered in silver and black and blue and green lines and tags and devil faces and dicks.

Now in this room, on this day, the day that I was radicalised, imagine the people. There is me, a scrawny dirty-looking kid, wearing trackies and gold hoops; and I have freckles and pink lips and thick black eyeliner that turns to wings by my eyes; and my teeth are yellow and in some places brown; and my hair is straightened; and my eyes are glazed over. That's because I am heavily drugged. And I sit on the old brown leather armchair, which is situated near the door, and I am holding in my hands a very large axe, close to my chest, for no reason at all.

Now imagine some others like me, this scrawny dirty kid, dotted around the room, some on the floor, some on the sofa, all of similar

age and stature and appearance, some wearing mini skirts, others in trackies like me, some in heels so high you can't walk straight, and one wearing pretty much nothing at all. And on each face is the same expression, a kind of glazed-over, seen-death, can't breathe good, can't sleep ever, have barely eaten, dehydrated, gurn-jawed innocence.

Now imagine, in this same room, are men. Adults. And some of them are passed out on the floor, or leaning up against a wall; and some have their hands around a child; and some have a needle in their arms; and some have eyes in the back of their head. And they're all dirty, covered in this layer of sweat and grime and slime. Now imagine you're looking through my eyes, the scrawny kid on the old brown leather armchair hugging an axe to their chest and heavily drugged. And you're squinting because it is hard to keep your eyes open. And you're looking at the place where the wall meets the carpet and it won't stop moving; it won't fucking stay still. Its jarring, rapid, violent stabs of movement are making you feel sick. Your head is spinning. And you can feel the men from yesterday and the men from today still between your legs. It is a sticky kind of residue that lingers no matter how hard you scrub.

And you're sitting there, zoned out, staring into space, when there is a knock at the door. And usually you're not allowed to answer, but a second knock, a harder one, provokes you enough to rise from the seat. Holding your axe you approach the door. You can hear a sound, the mumbling of voices, and decide to open the door to see who is there.

Cops. Three of them. With their stupid yellow vests and their stupid hats and their stupid handcuffs dangling by their stupid dicks. And they stare at you and you stare at them and they shine a very bright light into your eyes without saying a word. One of them puts his hand on your chest and moves your body to the side, and you're so paper thin it knocks you back so that they can walk

straight into this house with the red door and the closed curtains. And you watch, as the three little pigs walk through the room and, one by one, shine a very bright light into the eyes of every child who adorns the sofa, the floor, or the lap of an adult man.

And you watch as they walk through to the next room and find the boss man. The boss man, who runs this operation; and who supplies the children with drugs; and supplies the men with children full of drugs. And you watch as these three cops talk to the boss man, and you watch the boss man's face, with his stupid charming smile and his stupid big blue eyes. And you watch the leader of these cops extend a hand and you watch the boss man extend one back and you watch stupid hands and stupid fingers interlock and move in an up-and-down motion as deals are made. Now, imagine. The three cops are finished arranging whatever they are arranging and they walk back through the room full of children on drugs and the men holding children on drugs and walk out of the front door without saying a word to anyone. They have to step over the legs of children and walk past the gazes of children and listen to the whimpering of children and smell the torn and bloody genitals of children, in order to do so.

And the night continues as every night continues; and some children cry and some children scream and some children pass out and some children vomit. But through my eyes, you see death; and you feel nothing; and you say nothing; and your limbs move but you have no control of them; and your body moves but you have no control of it.

And one day you're sent out on a job, which usually means that someone wealthy or important has bought you for a couple of hours. So you travel and arrive in a hotel, just your standard Holiday Inn, and you are instructed to make no eye contact with staff and to go up to the fourth floor and knock on door number eighty-seven. So you do, and it opens and inside the doorway is a

man in a darkened hotel room and he invites you inside. And he asks you to be naked, and he kisses your neck and shoulders and asks you why you shuddered. And he runs his fingers through your hair, and it makes you feel sick.

Eventually you're lying on your back and he is inside you, and he is lying his entire body weight on you whilst he fucks you and your head is turned to the side staring out of the window. He asks if he can look into your eyes so he can cum and you say sure, and he turns your head to face his head and you have to look into his eyes and you recognise something about them. And you recognise that he extended a hand and the boss man extended one back and then stupid hands and stupid fingers interlocked and moved in an up-and-down motion as deals were made. And you realise that you were the deal.

And you realise that his cum stains will never be washed from your genitals; and his hands will never stop running through your hair; and his lips will never stop kissing your neck and shoulders; and his face when he came inside of you will forever be etched deep into your mind and will feature in the film that plays as your life flashes before your eyes.

FUCK THE POLICE
FUCK THE CHILD MOLESTING POLICE
FUCK THE CHILD RAPING POLICE
FUCK EVERY POLICE ENABLER
FUCK EVERY POLICE SYMPATHISER
FUCK THE THREE LITTLE PIGS WHO SAW A ROOM OF DRUGGED CHILDREN AND INSTEAD OF HELPING THEM MADE DEALS WITH THE MEN WHO KEPT THEM TRAPPED AND INSTEAD OF HELPING THEM FUCKED THOSE CHILDREN WITH THEIR LITTLE PIG DICKS

FUCK THE POLICE

Of Wild Things and Wildlings
Alice Wolf

In 1980s Cumbria, crows and council estate kids had a lot in common: both lords and landowners felt they had the right to shoot at us when we encroached on hills and fields they had decided were theirs by heritage, reasoning that allowing the slightest trespass would lead to raid and ruin. While the gentry considered us a nuisance at best, we in turn would whisper macabre folklore to our youngers about how the gamekeeper would hang you from the fence like a mole if he caught you on the grounds.

The battle for the land was constant. A titled man we never saw claimed it was his because some deeds said so. When he looked at it, he saw every living creature or plant as a commodity or sport. Through our eyes it was an unexplored playground filled with space we didn't have, and brambles and trees that offered snacks. Occasionally our right to roam was contested by a ram, who once headbutted me into the stream as I breached the dry-stone wall, because to him those fields were his.

Boundaries were everywhere. Whether they were barbed wire or blackthorn, we made it our personal pledge to break them all. On our estate, morning glory flowered through a fence of wire and cypress trees that separated us from the holiday homes behind. In that no man’s land, we would meet and form allegiances with kids who were staying there for a few weeks, before their parents would come and drag them away, like we were will-o’-the-wisp trying to lure their precious offspring into the swamplands.

Our world was not Wordsworth and hosts of golden daffodils, or twee anthropomorphised bunnies in blue velvet coats. It was swimming in dark peaty tarns and eloping to the woods with your best friend to smoke, sing, and gossip like Maenads under shooting stars. It was making an adventure out of potentially life-

threatening situations, daring each other to touch electric fences and outraged adders. Every rope swing resulted in someone with a cast, a tetanus shot, and an excellent scar to tell stories about for years to come. In this world, we'd migrate like rogue geese to every place our parents told us we should avoid, sneaking to the cliffs or the caves or anything surrounded by barbed wire, as soft footed and hypervigilant as hares. Because, what on earth does 'Danger! MoD' stand for anyway?

We were uncultivated and curious, learning which plants should not be touched or tasted, trying to identify the spiky, primeval insect that landed on your mate's face. It is these things, the feral fauna and flora of nature's underbelly that made me feel at home. They gave me the love of the unloved, a pack bond with the underdog. The animals and the plants that are feared or ignored by tourists, who neglect to realise that the very landscape they revere would not exist without them, nor have inspired shelves of poems and endless miles of paintings.

My devotions are to the corvids. Their caches of chestnuts and acorns grew the groves and forests that have sheltered and fed generations of countless species, yet we are told bring death and ill fortune because they cleaned up the battlefields that rich men created. They graced the trees long before we put war and cemeteries beneath them, yet it is their black wings that we associate with ruination. That said, I cannot hear the ancient croak of the Tower ravens without whispering a plea for them to desert their posts and make the Crown fall, so convincing is the myth of their underworld eyes. I cherish the mosses that drink storm waters and fill our lungs with clean morning air, yet are furiously scraped off the walls around the old cottages for Airbnb photos. The mechanical-looking wasps and the ladybird larvae, who have protected our flora for centuries by feasting on the flies and aphids that decimate crops, thanked with rolled newspapers and shrieks. The mycelium below us pulsing with information: a

living superhighway that allows the trees to whisper to each other, silently nourishing the earth beneath and reminding us that we must all absorb both the light and the darkness in order to thrive. Reviled ticks hiding in the curled ferns, their limbs aloft in an eternal rave at the anticipation of blood, also need defence. Because the disease and death that they bring plays a part in sustaining life that we don't like to think about.

And of course, the rain. For what would your holiday to Cumbria have been without the rain? No lakes for a start. No lush, fertile earth to walk upon, had the lightning not charged the downpours with nitrates and ozone. Everything within wild places lives symbiotically with one another, in cycles of life and death, mutual aid and kleptoparasitism. People tell me they love nature, but it is often only a perfectly manicured and gentrified version of it.

When circumstance forced me from my little wilderness to a sprawl of urban concrete I didn't think I could thrive in, I saw the wild everywhere, and it brought comfort and solidarity to what was otherwise a very lonely world. She was the physics-defying buddleias adorning the top of the sky-rises, a crown of purple flowers and butterflies. Or the riotous herring gulls running through the automatic doors at Greggs to steal a bag of crisps. She was the ivy-leaved toadflax that colonised the burnt-out stolen car on the waste ground. She was the abandoned and neglected turtles that made a home in the park, sunbathing among empty, crumpled cans of Fosters.

This wild—the one we never celebrate—taught me about resilience and gratitude. It taught me that every one of us is wired to it at all times, and this cynical rhetoric about our disconnection from nature only happens when we refuse to see it, when we try to rank each living thing in terms of its perceived importance, instead of realising we are an orchestra in which we each play a vital part of the melody.

Much like defiant children and animals, who our society says must be restrained and controlled, Nature won't be told where she is allowed to exist. You will see it when you are putting the bins out: in the frilled lichen sprawling across the paving slabs, or the air bricks in the back lane making tiny snail hotels. The abandoned recycling tub that was filled with rain water is now pulsating with algae and mosquitoes. The woodlice eating yesterday's news on a damp, discarded tabloid. The floating dandelion seed you instinctively catch to make a wish on as you come out of the job centre.

You'll laugh more and more at each discovery hiding in plain sight, delighting at every bit of her audacity. She'll remind you that you are tenacious, supported by layers of time and matter you never see or think about, and that life is thriving under our feet and in the shadows, and our return from a grey, sterile, and branded world is not just possible—it is inevitable.

When you feel the disconnect of modern life, she is still there—if you take time to gaze upon her with wild eyes. Waiting to flourish through the gaps without permission.

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Alice Wolf is an excitable anarcho-nuisance who likes to write about people, ecology, and a weird brutalist high rise she used to call home. She lives in the North East of England, where she likes to stare into rockpools and is often seen being followed by a large flock of crows.

The mycelium below us pulsing with information: a living superhighway that allows the trees to whisper to each other, silently nourishing the earth beneath and reminding us that we must all absorb both the light and the darkness in order to thrive.

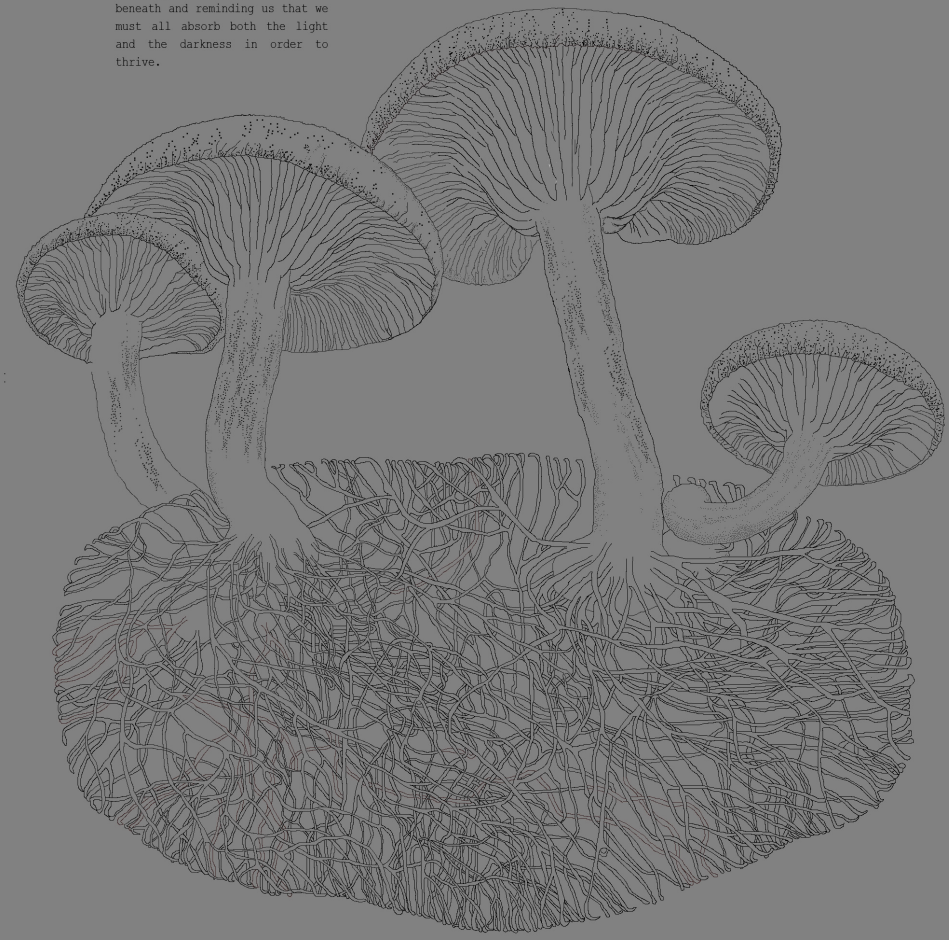

Photo by Marin Scarlett

Sex Work During Covid
Marin Scarlett

I'm going to start by saying the pandemic changed my life, which feels contrived as fuck. Of course it changed my life; it changed all of our lives. It's just about the how.

I started doing sex work about eight years before the first cases of a new viral pneumonia were reported in Wuhan. I started for the same reason as nearly everyone else: I really needed money. I came home after the first job with rolls of notes stuffed in my bag and never looked back.

When the first Covid cases reached the UK, the country was still largely in denial—myself included. Memories lingered of previous panics over bird and swine flu that had proved overblown, alongside a national proclivity for looking the other way in a crisis. I had a booking in early February and my client and I both shrugged off the situation. I didn't know that it would be my last for months.

The cancellations began: conferences, expos, business trips, and bookings. Full lockdown loomed. It was becoming clear that work was not only drying up; it would shortly be illegal. When lockdown finally hit on 23 March, I found myself trapped and pacing my tiny flat, dripping anxiety like the dodgy sink tap.

What the fuck was I going to do if I couldn't work?

Determined to take stock of the situation, I took out the shoeboxes I had stashed under my bed and started counting. I counted through them again. And then again.

Polymer notes had only just been launched. Almost everything I had hoarded was old money. The twenty-pound notes were largely grubby and coarse, cotton paper catching on the frayed edges. The

fifties had the frictionless glide of notes that had seen far fewer hands, sliding smoothly from my fingers into piles.

There was no lightbulb moment. The epiphany was a slow burner, taking root in my mind and growing gradually with every swish of paper.

It was enough. I had enough.

I was a person who had enough money to take a break from working. For a while, if I needed to.

I didn't know what to do with this information. Being broke was so deeply ingrained in me, so definitive for my sense of self. I was born poor and I grew up poor, a working-class kid from a working-class family, in a working-class neighbourhood. Class consciousness always dogged my footsteps. The scholarships I relied on to get me through my education meant I knew how things were from an early age, an awareness compounded by naked judgement from teachers and peers. We are a society that sees wealth and worth as one and the same, and I knew mine was less than most of the people around me.

Since my teens I'd supported myself, just about surviving pay cheque to pay cheque before I turned to sex work. I knew that it had improved my situation immeasurably, but when you've been truly broke, the fear never quite leaves you. The memory of coming up 7p short at checkouts, your mother's gaze flailing desperately at the person behind, who stares fixedly at their shoes. Teachers hounding you over not having the right books for the new term because a pay cheque is late. Hiding behind the sofa when the bailiffs knock on the door. Poverty lingers like a stain that others can't see, a boggart of fear and shame that you're constantly keeping at bay.

Counting that money on my floor over and over brought on a revelation that I still struggle with: I don't know how to class myself, or if we can ever truly change our class.

Who the fuck was I if I had enough money to take a break from working?

My WhatsApp notifications were relentless. I was in a few groups with other sex workers in London and message threads buzzed with strain as lockdown was extended, and extended again. People's savings were dwindling. My daily palette was guilt mingled with shock, because I was in a different boat.

My finances were in good shape, but my mental health was going to shit. Living alone in total lockdown, I spent weeks and weeks essentially in solitude. Six weeks in, I was struggling to get out of bed, eat, or brush my teeth. I cried some days, but on the worst days, I couldn't even manage that.

I felt paralysed in reaching out for help, because I knew that other people had what I considered to be real struggles. Their hours were being slashed. They were being made redundant. They were ineligible for support from the government. Their savings were running out.

It was a shock to have enough money to sit on my hands and, at the same time, be very obviously not OK. I berated myself for what I viewed as absurd failings. I spent nights lying in bed submerged in self-talk that trashed my weak character, and set off panic attacks that buffeted my mind back and forth like physical blows.

My lifeline was other sex workers.

When the lockdown was extended into May, my peers started

messaging to see if anyone knew of a flat they could use to work from. I needed no persuading: guilt and loneliness are a heady mix. I wanted to help and I desperately wanted human contact. I volunteered my place almost immediately.

I was a mess with my first visitor. I felt desperately fucking vulnerable, electric under her gaze. I wanted to be seen completely: to cry, thank her, hug her, explain how lonely I'd been. I pushed it down, conscious that we'd only met once before, scared that I might spook her like a wild woodland deer.

Life didn't become impossibly wonderful with a few people dropping by each week, but it did become bearable. It forced me to function: to get up, wash, tidy the flat, go for walks while they worked. Spring had arrived and daylight hours were longer, the sun shining a little brighter.

I made it until June before the shit hit the fan. I don't know who ratted me out, but an email with the subject header marked 'URGENT' informed me that someone would be coming to inspect my flat. Immediately.

I remember that surge of cortisol, the precursor to the nightly panic attacks during those strung-out weeks alone. I fought to keep my cool as I broke the news to the worker due to come over. She was upset; she had banked on that day's money to pay her electricity bill. I stayed in the flat, feeling like shit and pacing between the bed and the fridge, waiting for the estate agent. It didn't even take an hour for him to arrive.

The inspection was comical in a flat so small. The guy gamely paced from wall to wall, occasionally pausing by a cupboard and asking if he could take a look inside.

'I don't know what you think you're going to find,' I said, as he

peered inside the cutlery drawer. He didn't seem to either.

He asked about visitors, and I lied, although without much gusto. It all felt pointless.

The eviction notice came a week later. A Section 21, which means landlords can throw us out without a word of justification. I conceded nothing but offered no resistance, breezily agreeing to a move-out date as though accepting the offer of a cup of tea.

My compliance wasn't enough to spare me the campaign of harassment that ensued. Building management periodically switched off my utilities and refused to reinstate them until I granted them unscheduled inspections. In the height of summer I found myself without running water on more than one occasion, apparently not cowed or confessional enough to enjoy the privilege of a shower or a flushing toilet.

I chart my eviction through three stages: panic, resignation, and eventually, rage. The latter sustained me, distracting me from the fear of not being able to find another place to live, or being raided by the police. I raged for the sex workers cut off from their income with no support, for the isolation I'd been sentenced to. How dare anyone shame us for doing what we needed to survive? I wanted to go knock on all my neighbours' doors to root out the guilty party. I wanted to burn the fucking building down.

I lay in bed at night thinking about the money bundled into the shoeboxes under my bed, money that I needed to get through the pandemic. I pictured losing it all and starting again from scratch. I held the one piece of valuable jewellery that I own, passing it back and forth between fingers restless with angst. It's a ring that belonged to my late grandmother, who stepped up and raised me when my parents didn't know how. I raged and I raged, and it kept the fear at bay.

What happened to me is reflective of what happens to sex workers across the world under a system of criminalisation. In countries with client criminalisation—generally called the Nordic model—anyone who assists a sex worker in any way is accused of facilitating sex work. Accountants, photographers, drivers, friends, and lovers. No one is spared. They want sex workers isolated and alone, like I was then. It's a feature, not a bug, my friend likes to say.

The Nordic model has not been implemented in the UK—despite the concerted efforts of left-wing politicians who ignore the voices of those they claim to be 'saving'—but the outlook that props it up is thriving. This is a system that abandons people who need support, and, instead, punishes those who step up. In my rage I saw their disdain with clarity. Disdain for our refusal to suffer out of sight, for continuing to strive, for not simply going away and dying quietly. I came to understand how the state truly feels about sex workers at a time when I wasn't actually doing sex work.

To survive this tyranny is to strike back. To wake up every day, enduring and persevering, is an act of rebellion. The tenacity of those who keep surviving inspires and infuriates me. I am in awe of it, while determined that we should not have to go through this fucking bullshit. Yes, we're tough. But wouldn't it be great if we didn't have to be?

To the state, to the system, to the moralisers, to the proponents of criminalisation models—we are here. We will always be here, poor and persistent, unwilling to crawl out of sight so that you can live in your perfect world.

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Marin Scarlett is a recently-retired sex worker who remains passionate about fighting for decriminalisation and pushing back against stigma. She is an activist with the English Collective of Prostitutes and works for sex-worker wellbeing project Umbrella Lane. She has written several articles and appeared on podcasts to advocate for the decriminalisation of sex work and other measures to help end all survival labour. She is also consulting on a project to improve digital privacy and explore alternative payment options for sex workers facing financial discrimination.

@marinscarlett_

Self Portrait, Rosemary Bond

The Factory
Julian Bond

The factory stands on the banks of the River Mersey. The factory stood on the banks of the River Mersey. Now it is gone. The land levelled, a new housing estate built on it for hopeful couples with small ones to start out in, with low expectations and resigned brows, touching the forelock still, unconsciously.

I never went inside but I was there all the time. The smell hit you, a disgusting, sickening smell of tallow. The cull of cattle, turned into chemicals, turned into ice cream, make-up, margarine. Turned into profit. The men and women working conscientiously, modern slaves. Well fed and spruced up, smiling and damned.

The sickening smell of pollution in the air makes for beautiful sunsets in the sky as the fish die and birds go quiet. My mother worked and died in the factory, exposed to the chemicals, breathing them in, liquids washing over her hands. They all lived and died in the factory. The cancers, brain tumours, blood diseases, removed them from their savings, their mortgaged homes. Their pensions no longer needed, utilised by investors in foreign climes, cuckoos in the nest.

The lorry drivers came and went, from Spain and Italy and France, from Yorkshire herds and Irish slaughterhouses. My mother loved them all. My mother mothered them all, save those from the north of Ireland; they were a bastardised race, narky, always wanting their own way.

Men lived and died in the factory. Fell in vats, contaminated, and burnt alive. Men worked for the company, dumping and running off chemicals into the dead River Mersey, killing the River Mersey. It didn't matter.

Men walked out in front of lorries. It was quite a tragedy. Two suicides chose the same lorry. The lorry driver believed himself cursed. But he wasn't; the men who walked out were. They had believed in a dream, in a fantasy. They showed surprise when the company laid them off: 'I've given twenty years of my life to the company.' I don't think they quite got Marxist economic analysis of relative surplus value and the falling rate of profit, otherwise they would never have opined 'A fair day's pay for a fair day's work.'

Merely slaves. Meekly slaves. Allowed haircuts, nice clobber, some decent men's perfume, the right to impress the girls, get a bit of action for their cocks on a Saturday night, or to Spain once or twice a year to get pissed, cause a fracas, refuse to pay a bill, and amusedly insult foreigners.

Allowed a place on the board as the Union Rep., given a few drinks, and mentally coerced into agreements. Given a social club, with subsidised drinks, two full-length snooker tables, and a bit of entertainment on a Saturday night. A soulful, beautiful singer who should have been in better company—she was too good for this place—serving cheese sandwiches and going on about membership rules.

There I met the man 'who owned the factory' or so he claimed with a nod and a wink, and one or many a drink …

They did their deals on the sly, met in pubs on the quiet, agreed on percentages and alternatives, and money was exchanged in paper bags; I saw it myself, lots of money. And porches were built, sports cars bought, and holidays to the Caribbean booked. These were not slaves, these were not slavish, these were apish and understood the game. These were not slaves but corsairs, pirates, slavers, and wreckers themselves on the banks of the River Mersey.

The River Mersey that had launched a thousand ships to conquer

the world. The River Mersey that had received a thousand hands, cut off from African children's arms by the rubber barons of Belgium. The River Mersey, quiet and untroubled now, its shifting sands hidden, its view across to the wild city of Liverpool, sedated now by distance and time. The River Mersey was quiet now and the factory no longer there.

I used to revisit it after my mother died, while it was still standing, a disused and decrepit family member now. I used to sit there and look across at the rusted gates, the still chimney. The immobile vista of a changing terrain. It was painful to go back. My stomach and heart would sink. But I got some kind of solace sitting there watching the view and then I would walk the pining dog as the sun went down and pick up her waste, walk across the field past the workers' cottages, next to where the factory used to be.

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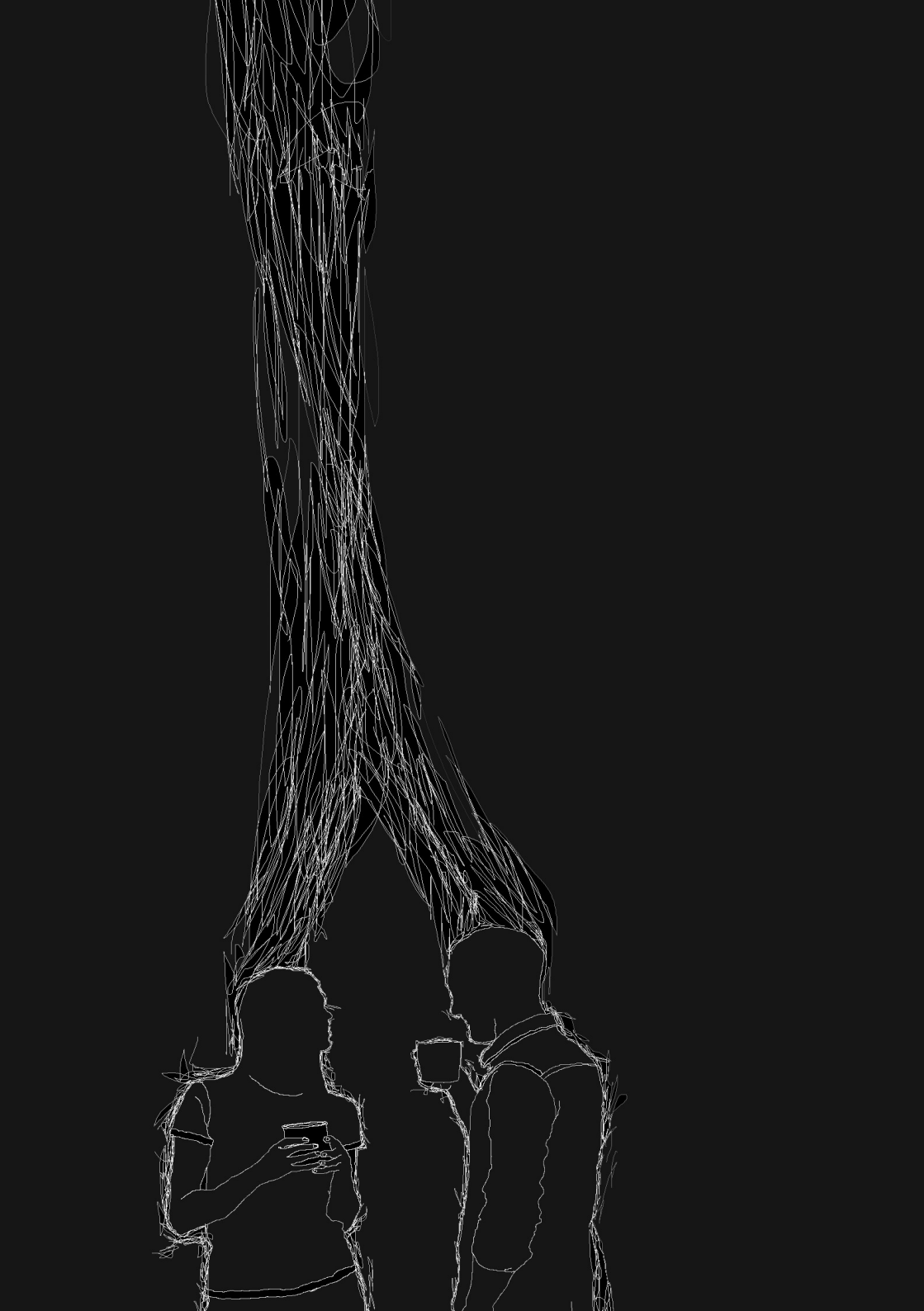
Julian Bond is a Merseyside-based writer. Having previously run a working-class theatre company, Burjesta Theatre, he's now turned his attention to writing novels. Julian is currently working on the story of a northern-English, working-class woman's life during the second half of the 20th century, which is a fictionalized account of his mother's life. His writing is increasingly focused on the climate crisis, which, he believes, is the key issue confronting us all in the 21st century.



Red Paint

Jane Claire Bradley

I walk into the art room to find Jamie on the floor. He's kneeling over a canvas, going mad with the glitter. It's lunch hour and the room's deserted. The radio's on and there's red paint everywhere. He doesn't see me until I go to the big drawers by the teacher's desk to get my portfolio. Then he scrambles up and apologises, 'Didn't think anyone else would be in here.' The knees of his school trousers are filthy from the floor: clay dust and glitter and dirt.

'I usually do Wednesdays,' I shrug. 'I was off yesterday.'

He nods. He knows already, everyone does. He glances at his painting—a mess of red acrylic swirls, Van Gogh gone gore-movie menstrual—and grimaces. 'I should put this away. Probably the last thing you want to see, after everything.'

The concern is cute, but it's not like his weird art is going to trigger an anxiety attack. If anything, it's better being back in school than at the pub, or making cups of tea for Mum and the police, or using my phone to research how to get bloodstains out of carpet. Some people say salt, but I swear that's for red wine. Others say cold water, if it's done right away. Too late for that.

'I wasn't there, you know,' I tell Jamie, rummaging in my bag for my charcoals. 'When the shooting happened.'

'But your mum. She must be in shock. Do they know who did it?'

'He's on the CCTV. We had to hand it over. No one's been arrested yet.'

Someone else phoned the police, the ambulance. They were there within five minutes, Mum said, a record for our estate. Paul was

already dead by then: shot in the back as he stood at the bar. It was only a Tuesday, but there were more than twenty witnesses. Of those who stayed to be interviewed, none admitted to knowing anything.

'When's she reopening?' Jamie asks, sitting back down on the floor, looking up with those baby blues the girls all talk about.

'Soon as we've got new carpets fitted.'

At least it hadn't been in the head, Mum said. Brains everywhere would have been much harder to clean up. And much harder to make people forget. At least this way the mess had been mainly on the floor. A smell of copper and burning when I got there, police lights strobing and crime tape fluttering.

'She must be tough as anything, your mum.'

'Everyone says that.' And they're right. She never cried until the police and everyone else had gone, though she wobbled when I walked in the door. The officer outside hadn't wanted to let me in, wouldn't tell me what had happened, said they couldn't let me past, not while it was still an active crime scene.

'This is my mum's pub,' I'd said, making eye contact like I thought we could reach an understanding, even though I'm only fifteen and legally not supposed to be in the pub at all. And all the time, I was looking at how many of them there were. Three cars and a van. Must've been bad. 'I don't need to know what's happened,' I told him. 'I just need to know she's okay.'

'Is that the daughter?' another officer called from the hall. 'The mother said she'd be coming past at some point. I'll take her through.'

Mum was behind the bar, answering questions, and when she saw me her face went loose, just for a second. 'Oh, El, you shouldn't be here, you'll be scarred for life. Why don't you go home and wait for me there? I'm sure I won't be long.' She looked at the police for confirmation but they kept their faces blank.

'I'm here now.' The smell of bullets and burning had told me most of it, and seeing Mum safe had made me dizzy with relief. 'I'll wait.' She didn't argue. 'Alright, love. Make me a brew, then.' She glanced at the police and pasted on her landlady smile. 'Perhaps these officers will want one too.'

I made coffee in the cafetière and dug out one of the fancy biscuit tins Mum always gets given at Christmas. I took everything through on a tray, then went and sat in the office, where I scrolled through the feeds on my phone and found out everything the police weren't saying.

I knew without asking that if there'd been more time Mum might have wiped the security footage. Because now everyone would know she'd handed it over, and cooperating with the police was dangerous. Even when you had no choice.

Jamie's still looking at me, sympathetic. There's only half an hour of lunch break left and I don't want him asking me anything else.

'What are you working on?' I prompt, finding a clean sketchbook sheet. He looks down at his painting and grins, then starts telling me about red symbolising pain and passion and how even the texture of the paint means something. It's sweet actually, how excited he gets, better to listen to than the radio. I let him keep going as I start smearing soft black onto the paper, smudging the edges until they look melted and velvet, until the good calm settles at the back of my neck.

‘Does your mum need any help in the pub?’ Jamie asks, when the warning bell goes. He pegs his painting up on the washing line by the windows.

‘You want a job? In the place where someone was killed point-blank in front of half the estate?’

‘I need money.’

‘Not that bad.’

‘I'm sixteen. I could collect glasses. I'm not important enough for anyone to want to murder me.’

Everyone knew Paul was trouble. But he was soft with Mum, always giving her vouchers for massages and facials at those swish salons in town for her birthday, and seeing off any knobheads who tried to strong-arm her for protection money. Having the baddest man around as your most loyal customer is all the protection you need. Needed.

‘Haven't you ever heard of being caught in the crossfire?’ I ask.
Jamie shrugs. ‘There's danger of that everywhere.’

He's not wrong, so I say I'll ask. He gives me a red-splodged, glittery thumbs up, then disappears out the door.

The next morning in the kitchen, Mum tells me he can have the job. We're eating Special K, her in her dressing gown and me in my school uniform. On the news, there's people leaving flowers outside the pub, then Paul’s girlfriend, Nicola, being interviewed. She looks expensive and distraught, holding little baby Leah and saying she hasn't got a clue who’s responsible.

‘Reckon she's telling the truth?’ Mum points at Nicola with her spoon.

I sprinkle fake sugar onto my cereal. ‘Maybe. They never tell the wives and girlfriends what they're up to, do they? Then they can't get done for complicity.’

‘Big word that, love,’ she says, proud even though she’s taking the piss. I'm the clever one she says, because she left school at fifteen to have me, and here I am: same age and not knocked up. That alone is something to be proud of, she reckons. It doesn't take much effort on my part, though. Boys never like me and the feeling’s mutual.

‘Bet she’s got enough secrets of her own without worrying about his,’ Mum adds, with a last look at Nicola, then puts the kettle back on.

‘What does this Jamie need the money for so badly?’ she asks as I’m getting ready to go.

I down the rest of my gone-cold coffee. ‘Didn't say. But the girls reckon his dad's just done a bunk. He's got a little brother and a mam who's a stress head at the best of times. Maybe he wants to bring more cash in for her? Be the man of the house?’

Nothing stays secret round here. The morning before: me, Bea, and Ali, all three of us in our classroom before maths, me sitting on Bea’s desk, and Ali yawning. Bea clicked her fingers in front of Ali’s face. ‘Still with us, stoner?’

Sleepy smile. ‘Next door had me up all night again.’

'Another argument?' I waited for Bea to ask. Jamie's parents were always at it, but I didn't want to look too interested. I can't be

doing with being teased or them saying that I fancy him, not when it's not even true.

‘Not this time. Looks like Daddy Dearest's gone for good. The car's gone and she was screaming blue murder and smashing stuff till well gone twelve.’

‘Shit.’

‘Yeah. One of her mates must’ve come round and given her something, because this morning it was just Jamie chasing that toddler round. Porridge in his hair and no nappy or anything.’

I rubbed my fingers over the scarred surface of the desk. Hearts and names and crude compass carvings of dicks. ‘Didn't she get sectioned last time he went AWOL?’

Ali shook her head. ‘She went in voluntary when the other neighbours called the police.’ She put her head back down on her folded arms. ‘But it was bad.’

‘Poor Jamie,’ Bea said.

Ali sat up and yawned again, so wide you could count her fillings. Three on the right, two on the left. Gums still shredded with scar tissue from when she used to have her brace. ‘He looks after that kid more than their mam,’ she said. ‘I always hear him, making up these mad stories. About monsters under the bed and shit. Proper makes me paranoid sometimes.’

‘Cos the constant weed smoking couldn't possibly have anything to do with that, of course.’

‘Course.’

‘All that responsibility,’ Bea said, retying her ponytail and then checking her lip gloss. ‘I bet he's an animal in bed. Probably just needs an excuse to let go and then that's it. You wouldn't walk straight for a week.’

They fell about laughing and grabbing at each other. Then Ali saw my uneasy face and laughed even harder, until the teacher swaggered in, and I slunk back to my desk.

‘So it's just spare change to help with nappies and that?’ Mum demands. ‘Not drugs? Or guns?’

‘Not on minimum wage.’

‘Well, that's all he's getting.’

‘If he was up to anything bad he'd be making money from it, wouldn't he?’

‘Not that you'd know anything about that, lady.’

‘Course not.’ I put on my innocent face. She knows I don't go in for all that.

‘Good,’ she says, smacking a fat kiss on my cheek and ushering me towards the door. ‘Because I'd wring your neck if you did.’ As I traipse up the path, she calls after me, ‘Tell him to come and see me tonight.’ Then the sound of the bolts and chain being put on.

I go to the art room again at lunchtime. Not waiting for Jamie. But before long he comes in like we’d planned it and gives me this big smile. He's gotten taller this term, and broader, but you can't usually tell because he's always hunched over artwork or books.

‘Thought I’d find you here,’ he says, going over to unpeg his red

painting. It looks even more vicious than yesterday, like something primeval, or the insides of the pig hearts they sometimes get us to poke with scalpels in biology. It feels like I'm looking at something secret, something that shouldn't be seen in public. I can't explain it.

'Not usually. Wednesdays, remember?'
'True. But things aren't exactly usual for you at the moment, are they?'

'I could say the same to you.'

His face goes tight, but he's not offended. 'Ali told you about the other night?'

'She lives next door. She said she heard your mum having one of her episodes.'

He nods. 'It was a bad one, but she's alright now. She's got a mate on the same meds. She gave her some until Mum can get to the docs. They knock her out, but better that than trashing the place.' He doesn't mention his dad. I don't either.

'Did you ask your mum if she needs anyone?'

I tell Jamie what she said and he seems pleased.

'Thanks, mate.' It's funny because we're not mates, not really, but the sitting in silence together is nice. Too much talking gets exhausting. I don't even get my charcoals out today. I just doodle in my sketchbook until the bell. By the door, there's clay pots lined up on a shelf, waiting to go in the kiln. On the sill, there's others waiting for paint and varnish. I think of wet clay-clotted hands and feel sick. I think of Jamie's mum, taking zopiclone and snoring on the settee, while his brother smears cold porridge everywhere. I

think of mine, ringing round for quotes from carpet fitters. As we leave the room, I reach out and push the nearest pot off the sill. It smashes on the tile floor.

'What was that for?' Jamie bursts out, as we walk down the corridor. Fast enough that we'll be away before anyone comes. Not so fast it looks conspicuous.

'Just felt like it. Whose ever it was should thank me, it was ugly as fuck anyway.'

'You're off your head,' he says, looking at me like I'm one of his paintings.

With its big bright swirls of colour, the new carpet looks better than I thought. Mum kept her coat on and the windows open all day, then nuked the place with pine air freshener. You can't smell the blood or bullets or intestines any more. The smell of spilt beer is still there, underneath, but that's good. Familiar, for the regulars. Mum's already got Jamie collecting glasses by the time I turn up. There's a few diehard pissheads, slurping their pints in their usual corners like nothing's even happened. It's still early for a Friday. The flowers outside are glittered with frost. It's a cold night and usually that means it'll be quiet. But tonight there's a strange, expectant feeling. Paul dead, killer not caught. Not as invincible as he seemed. As I come in, Mum's pulling pints, queen-like and calm as she banters with a customer, fishes in the till for change. I swap my school shirt and jumper for one of the black staff t-shirts, then make myself a vodka and orange, and pull up a high stool to the end of the bar.

Jamie's flirting with the two port-drinking old dears that come in every week after their early-bird fish-and-chips tea. They're tougher than they look, and I thought they'd tease him, but any comments are just making him more defiant, more charming. I can

see Mum watching, thinking, ‘ He caught on fast.’

‘You're a nutter, you are,’ he says, coming to wipe down the bar near where I'm sitting with my book. I slide a beer mat between the pages and look up.

‘Why?’

‘Smashing that pot. Didn't have you pegged as a hooligan.’

I roll my eyes as he continues. ‘It was part of Stacy Walker's final project, that vase. I heard her saying she was gonna batter whoever did it if she ever finds out.’ He looks at me like he wants me to grab his arm, beg him to keep it a secret. Like he wants me to owe him some sort of debt, or to know that I can trust him.

I slurp the last of my drink through my three chewed straws. ‘She can't be that hard if she's got her knickers in a twist over a shit clay pot.’

He sighs and says he’ll never understand women, then goes off to wipe more non-existent sticky spots. I look back at my book, not watching, fighting a smash-something feeling.

By nine, the customers are pissed and asking too many questions. About what happened. About the police. About what the police asked. Whether Paul's next-in-commands are planning retaliation. What this means for all his minions, the kids he had pushing pills and coke in every club in town. Who's gonna give them their orders now the king is dead?

Paul offered me a job once: running deliveries across town. He was cocky by then, Mum never telling him no. No one on our estate dared answer Paul back. Maybe he thought he was doing Mum a favour: get me earning a good whack, it wasn't like we didn't need

the extra cash. When I said I had too much coursework, he called me an ungrateful little cow, but somehow made it not nasty. A smirk in his voice like it had all been a test. Paul was renowned for his poker face. People always said that you could never tell where you were with him. That's what made him dangerous. I pushed my luck, told him he'd better not let Mum hear him calling me names. He adjusted his watch, smiled like it was a big misunderstanding.

'Course not,' he said. 'She'd murder me.' He laughed at his own joke, and I scrambled out as fast as I could. Paul always said he liked me. Always. Public House Princess, he called me, sliding extra notes into Mum's back jeans pocket and saying we both deserved the best. But still. I knew enough to not stay on my own with him too long.

By ten, Mum's had enough. She hands me a ten quid bag of 50p*s* out the till for the meter, then orders me out the door. 'And you', she shouts at Jamie, who's been loading the dishwasher, trying to look useful. 'Walk her home. Doesn't matter how old she gets or how much eyeliner she cakes on. She's still my little girl.'

The regulars all give these small wet chortles like we're in the special Christmas episode of some crap family sitcom. I groan and they laugh harder. I pull my hood up and walk out, fast. I'm halfway down the street before Jamie catches up.

We kick the last of the fallen leaves as we walk, not looking at each other.

I want to ask about his dad but no one talks about their dad.

Mum had told me it wasn't Paul, after the police were gone. I didn't get it at first. I thought she was talking about the gunman, or saying it hadn't been Paul who got done. 'I know you thought you had us sussed', she'd sniffed, shock soaking in as I passed her

the tissues. ‘But I'm telling you. Paul wasn't your dad.’I stomp alongside Jamie, replaying the times I’d seen them together: the whispered conversations and him holding the mistletoe above her head at Christmas. Before he got with Nicola. Before Leah was born. I hadn’t really thought it. It was like a dream. Like the Tooth Fairy, or Santa Claus. Something for little kids to believe in.

There's a discarded wine bottle by the bus stop: someone trying to save money, pre-gaming on their way into town. It feels like a smack in the face. I pick it up as we go past. Cuban Merlot in green glass, silver lettering on a burgundy label. Gummy £4.99 price sticker.

I snarl at Jamie like it’s his fault. ‘Do you know the rate that pubs are closing? Thirty a week, almost.’ The bottle is a grenade in my hand and I hurl it like one, right into the road. The bus stop on the opposite side is already smashed: a blue-white pyramid of diamonds glittering under hissing street lights. The wine bottle arcs through the air then explodes like a bomb. Jamie whoops with glee. I look around to see who's watching but weirdly there's no one. Guess everyone really is playing it safe and staying indoors. The news said drive-bys are on the rise. Even being at home with the doors double-locked isn't a guaranteed safe bet. Mum always joked about getting bulletproof glass in the pub, but she reckoned the brewery would never go for it. I thought that was a good thing, really. Seemed too much like tempting fate.

‘Come on,’ Jamie says, tugging at my sleeve. ‘Let's get out of here, psycho. Before someone calls the cops.’

‘You think they're coming out for anti-social behaviour, on a Friday night?’

He bundles me down the road, glancing back. ‘Let's not chance it, eh?’

The bag of coins from Mum is making little metal hiccups in my pocket and I think about using them all on a bath. Make the water as hot as I can stand and then stay until it's too cold to move. I can feel the sensation already, the pinpricks in my fingers and feet.

'You're not like I thought you were,' Jamie says, when we get to the corner near mine.

'You either. You never said nothing before. Now you need cash, you're working a recent murder site, and you're smashing bottles and clay pots like you think you're it.'

He looks at me for a second too long, like he can't tell whether I'm just messing or properly unhinged, but when he gets it he rolls his eyes and grins. 'Just had a lot on my mind lately.'

'Your dad.' I shouldn't say it, but I can't help myself. It's like when me, Ali, and Bea drank all the special chocolate Baileys they only sell at Christmas and Mum came home to find us singing songs from school assembly, crying at the memory of being so little and cute.

'Who told you that?' Jamie demands. I swallow, but he's pacing the path and raking his hands through his hair, worse than I've ever seen.

'It's no big deal,' I say, being adult about it. Mum always says I've got an old soul. Jamie stares like I'm off my head. 'It's not, though,' I say. 'There's loads of people in the same boat. I mean, the money's a stress, but you'll cope. You just get on with it, don't you?' That's what Mum always says.

'Who told you she's mine?'

'What?'

‘The baby.’

I scrunch my face. ‘What are you talking about?’

‘You said! You said, *you're her dad*. Leah’s. Did your Mum tell you? Did Paul know? Who else has he told?’

I go still, working out what he’s saying. I don’t get it at first. Then I do. ‘You have *got* to be kidding,’ I tell him, and then another penny drops. ‘Is that why you need money? For *her*? You’re insane. It's not like she's gonna go short, is it?’

‘But she's mine. I should be the one that provides for her now Paul’s gone.’

I stand and stare. Jamie shoves his hands in his pockets and looks anywhere but at me. ‘What were you *thinking*?’ I ask, softer now.
‘I wasn't.’

‘Who started it?’

He snorts. ‘What's the difference?’

‘Because if you initiated something with Paul's girlfriend, you must've been mentally unstable. Or had a death wish, or something. Because it's so obvious how bad that is. Was.’

‘It wasn't like that.’

I cross my arms, waiting. I can't even say why I'm bothered. And then it hits me that there's no way we should be having this conversation here, where anyone could hear. I hold my hands up to stop him before he gets started.

‘Don't,’ I say. ‘Not here anyway.’

‘You're just gonna *go*?’ Jamie's voice is wild, and I sigh. What I'm about to say is stupid, and there’s no way it’s not gonna cause trouble. But it's freezing, and he’s in a right state. He needs to tell someone.

‘Come in mine,’ I say.

He looks desperate, mumbling something about how he should be getting back. But then the sound of sirens somewhere near the main road makes him look me in the face and nod.

We don't say anything as we walk the rest of the way. On the doorstep, I put on Mum's pub voice. ‘No funny business,’ I say, getting the locks undone, ‘or you'll be out on your ear.’

He gives a small smirk. ‘I bet you say that to all the boys,’ he says, and follows me indoors.

At the kitchen table, Jamie takes a too-hot gulp of tea and grimaces as it goes down.

‘It was a one-time thing,’ he says.

‘Until it wasn't.’

‘Yeah. I did some work for Paul, ages ago. I went round to drop some stuff off, but he wasn't in. She sat me down to wait for him and we got chatting. Seemed dead sweet, down to earth. Nothing like people think.’

‘You shagged her in their house? With Paul on his way home?’

‘Nothing happened,’ Jamie says. ‘We just talked—that time. She wanted attention more than anything. I don't think she got much from him, not once they'd been together a while.’

I can picture it. Their fancy house, Nicola answering the door looking perfect. *He's not here, love. Won't be long. Come in, why don't you? Keep me company*. She'd make them proper coffee in matching mugs and tuck her shiny hair behind her ears. Maybe he saw bruises around her wrists. Wouldn't have been the first. Mum had told me things she'd heard. That's why she kept Paul sweet, but at a distance. He had a nasty side. But Jamie, he's soft. I can see him being concerned. Taking her hand, gentle, asking if she needed help. He's got that big stupid heart like in his paintings: red and messy and too fucking sparkly to be real.

He doesn't tell me about the sex. Just that it only happened a couple of times. He blushes saying that much. Then Paul said there was no more work and Nicola went cold, and he wondered whether Paul had started to suspect. Not long after, someone said they'd seen her at the Trafford Centre with sunglasses that hid half her face, and what might've been a baby bump.

If Mum was here she'd have had Jamie out before he even got this far. I drink my tea and put my feet on the electric heater, but I can't seem to get warm. There's a question worming round my head, the kind you shouldn't ask. But I want to know, and I think I'll ask, even if he lies. 'Jamie,' I say, putting my cup down, 'you didn't kill him, did you?'

His blue eyes go big and shocked as he shakes his head and splutters no. I believe him. I couldn't see it: him in the doorway of the pub with a balaclava on and metal in his waistband, then asking for a job the next day. Like everything would be magic then, and him and Nicola would play happy families with Leah, and no one would take Paul's place. Even Jamie's not that daft.

'So what's your plan?'

'I can't believe you think I did it,' he says.

‘I was just checking.’

He sighs, running his hands through his hair.

‘Do you even know Leah’s yours?’ I ask, but Jamie just looks at me all sad but certain, like I’m one who's daft.

That’s when the door goes, making us both jump. Mum in her bomber jacket and big scarf, flush from the cold, eyes narrowing when she clocks us both. ‘What’s going on here, then?’

‘It’s nothing.’ Jamie scrambles up. ‘Ella just let me in to warm up before I walk the rest of the way home. Just for a minute, you know.’

‘More than a minute,’ Mum says, with her hands on her hips, ‘seeing how you left the pub at ten and it’s gone midnight now.’

We’re fully clothed. We’re drinking tea. Surely she's not thinking this is some kind of kinky foreplay.

‘Mum.’

‘It’s fine, Ella,’ Jamie says, pulling his hood up. ‘You were right, I shouldn’t have come in. Thank you for the tea.’ Then, to my Mum, ‘And the chance to do the trial shift tonight.’

Maybe he’s not such an idiot after all. Manners always melt her. ‘You did good,’ she acknowledges. ‘Come from twelve tomorrow, you can help with the delivery.’

He beams. ‘If there’s any other work going, I’m your man. I’ll do anything.’

She eyeballs him for a long moment. ‘I’ll bear that in mind,’ she

says. ‘Now get home.’

‘Do I have anything to worry about?’ Mum asks me, once Jamie’s gone and the bolts are all on. I shake my head.

‘Good,’ she says. ‘Because we’re doing the wake on Sunday.’ And what she means is, that’s gonna be stressful enough without anything else. She kisses my forehead and slopes towards bed.

That night I dream of Jamie, on his knees with his hands covered in red paint. But then I smell the smoke and metal and realise it’s not paint at all. I wake up, single bed soaked through with sweat. It’s too cold to get out and change the sheets. I turn the lamp on and lie in the clammy damp with my sketchbook, drawing until morning comes.

All the estate turns out for the funeral. There are TV crews, cameras, the most police I’ve ever seen. We don’t go because we’re at the pub, making sandwiches. We watch it on the local news while we layer bread and lettuce and ham, Jamie spreading the butter right up to the edges and Mum calling him Mr. Extravagant.

Nicola doesn’t speak to the journalists this time, but they get a shot of her looking gorgeous and tragic in black. Aaron, who used to be Paul’s second-in-command, touches her back as she gets in the car.

Mum gestures with her knife. ‘He didn’t waste any time, did he? Moved in with Nicola, I heard. Just for now. Making sure she’s got protection, like.’ I don’t look at Jamie and he doesn’t look at me. ‘But he’s promised there’ll be no trouble today,’ Mum adds, untying her apron and smoothing down her smart dress. ‘Said he’ll put two of his best lads on the door and everything.’

I ask when Aaron was round, but she just tells me to come on,

waltzing out with arms full of clingfilmed trays.

'Isn't this weird?' Jamie whispers, bringing me a tray of empties to load into the dishwasher. 'Having the wake in the same pub where he was murdered?' We look round at the big men in their designer suits, cufflinks and watches glinting. Their eyes are never still, even as they're drinking whisky and telling stories, saying that it isn't right to have the police parked up outside.

'Where else would it be?' I ask.

Nicola's been comforted by Aaron all afternoon, but she comes to the bar later with Leah in her arms, thanking Mum for putting on such a good spread. I slice limes, pretending not to listen. 'She's a beauty,' Mum says, fussing over Leah. 'Such a little smiler.'

'I know,' Nicola replies. 'Looks just like her daddy, doesn't she?'

The two of them lock eyes for a second. Leah's eyes are blue and beautiful. Like Paul's. Like Jamie's. Like mine. It doesn't mean anything. Nothing at all. Nearly half this entire country has blue eyes. I read that somewhere, ages ago. Remember it every time I look at mine in the mirror, or when we do self-portraits in art.

Nicola hands over a credit card with Paul's name on it to settle the tab, then motions towards the bathroom. 'Hold her a minute, will you?' she says to Jamie, handing Leah over. The baby clucks and coos and puts a hand up to pull his hair. Jamie looks at her all goofy, like someone's smacked him round the head.

I take a half-full crate of empty glasses out to the yard and throw them one by one against the wall. They detonate into sharp little jewels. By the last smash I feel calm, cool, clean. I sweep up the glass and dump it in the bin. It's starting to snow, and I stand and let it fall on me for a minute before I turn to go back in. Then I

stop dead. Jamie's standing in the doorway, watching. We stand and stare at each other. Through the open fire exit we can hear this burble of talk and Christmas music, Leah's fat little baby laugh when there's a lull. Then the sound of sirens far off, coming closer, then disappearing.

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Why I Did What I Did to My Dentist
Wayne Dean-Richards

If it wasn't toothache that kept me awake at night, it was the other renters crammed into thirty-nine Stafford Street. Somebody was always coughing or snoring, though lack of sleep wasn't the only reason I was tired that day. A puncture was what got the ball rolling. Having had to push my bike most of the way into work that day I was late.

When I arrived, the supervisor gave me a look of disgust. Which is why I didn't tell him what had happened. Suspecting that even if I did, he'd have done his usual trick of blowing out his cheeks and rolling his fucking eyes! The supervisor earned three times what I earned. Slept soundly. Drove to work in a top of the range 4X4.

To make matters worse: that day there was yet another full-scale re-organisation scheduled. The supervisor said that it was to do with 'greater efficiency and increased profits'. But then he always said the same thing and it couldn't have been right since every time Big Bertha—the operators' nickname for the photocopier that served all ten floors—was moved it cost £5,000! Costly, constant re-organisation couldn't be the way to generate 'greater efficiency and increased profits'. We all knew it but none of us ever said so because one of the supervisor's favourite sayings was, 'Operators should be seen and not heard'.

A full-scale re-organisation was scheduled but that wasn't all. Glaring at us, the supervisor made it clear that productivity mustn't be compromised. We were still to take calls. Most of which—he insisted—could be dealt with without immediate access to a computer screen. He said that some people weren't always looking at their screens even when they should be anyway. Was convinced that he had never so much as glanced out of the window when he was an operator. Had always gone above and beyond the call of

duty. Always going above and beyond the call of duty the reason why—the supervisor believed— he was the supervisor.

That day was spent lugging desktops and furniture in and out of offices whilst still taking calls. If we couldn't deal, on the hoof, with the problem the customer posed us, we had to hike up to the top floor to use the laptops—the one item that during the various re-organisations had never been moved.

My working day was 8 a.m. till 5 p.m. with a lunch break spent in what was called the canteen. Which was really two dispensing machines faced by a row of plastic chairs. Operators' contracts specified that lunch was an hour. But I was the only operator who ever took the full hour. Every month there was a prize for the best employee. The supervisor hadn't ever won and I'm sure he blamed me because whenever I returned from lunch, he blew out his cheeks and rolled his fucking eyes!

That morning I had pushed my bike the final three miles to work, spent five hours lugging things in and out of offices, and had hiked up to the laptops on the top floor half a dozen times. Lunch couldn't come soon enough. When it did, I was too tired to eat. Sat slumped in one of the plastic chairs facing the dispensing machines. One sold watery hot drinks at a pound a pop. The other sold sandwiches that tasted as if they were filled with plastic. The other operators were tired too. I saw it in their faces. But—somehow—they managed to gulp down something to eat and drink and get back to work after half an hour. I took my allotted time and on cue, when I returned, the supervisor blew out his cheeks and rolled his fucking eyes. Only that day he must have been more pissed off than usual about not winning employee of the month because he tapped his wristwatch with his forefinger, shook his head, and muttered something about people 'not taking responsibility'. I desperately wanted to speak up because I wasn't out of line! Hadn't done anything wrong! But didn't because I

knew he wanted to replace me with someone who'd make do with a ten-minute lunch. Someone who'd do whatever the fuck it took for him to become employee of the month! Just clenched my jaw and got back to work.

I was the dentist's last appointment that day. Pushing my bike at a half-jog pace with the flat front tyre squeaking—as if it was laughing at me—I got there just in the nick of time. Would have had my appointment cancelled, and still have had to pay if I was more than ten minutes late—as per practice policy.

My dentist once asked me how I managed to keep so slim for a man my age. I told him that I cycled everywhere. Had to. 'Good for you,' he said, and smiled. And the funny thing—him being a dentist and all—was that he had terrible teeth. Teeth that were all discoloured and uneven. Something I had always liked about him. My dentist was someone I liked and had always got on well with until that day.

That day my dentist told me that I had cracks in my teeth from clenching my jaw. Told me that I should consider a mouth guard. Blinked and swallowed, then told me that a mouth guard would help 'curtail the damage'. His blinking and swallowing at that point was how I could tell that he was working from a script. Giving me a sales pitch—as per practice policy. But my dentist telling me that a mouth guard could 'curtail the damage' to my cracked teeth isn't what upset me. Isn't what pushed me over the edge.

What he said next was what did it.

My head was pounding, and it felt like a layer of dirt had gathered under my skin and was demanding to be scratched out. Set free. I was hungry and thirsty to boot, and the muscles in my legs were trembling as he blinked and swallowed again, before telling me it was my 'responsibility' to stop the hairline fractures in my teeth from getting worse.

At which point—though I knew that it was all just a sales pitch—I found I couldn't—just couldn't—stop myself.

Afterwards, I couldn't remember how I came to be holding my dentist's drill. Or how—as tired as I was that day—I had been able to move so fast. Or how on earth I had been strong enough to get my dentist down onto his dentist's chair and pin him there while I …

Afterwards, all I could remember clearly was how my poor dentist had screamed.

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Wayne Dean-Richards has worked at various jobs including as an industrial cleaner, a painter and decorator and an actor; currently he works as a teacher. Throughout, he's been writing, like Isak Dinesen writes, 'without hope, without despair'; like Charles Bukowski, 'These words I write keep me from total madness.' *Cuts*, a collection of stories and *A Box of Porn* - a pamphlet of stories with his son Kalman are available from Amazon.
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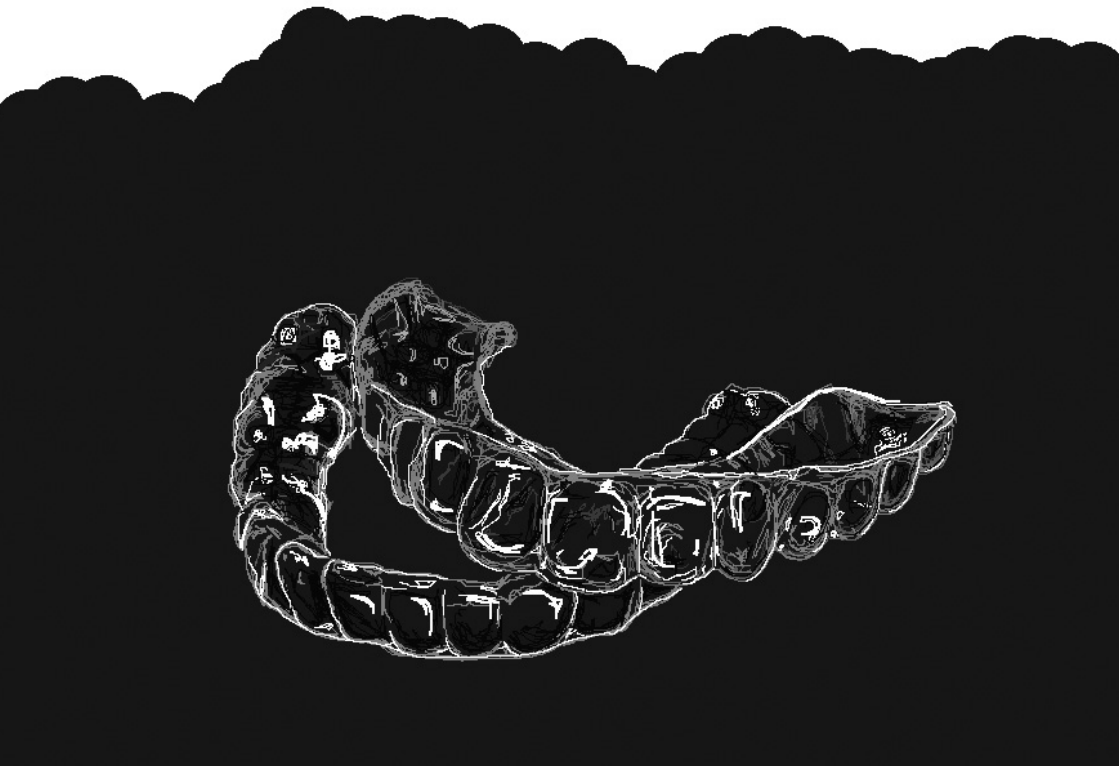

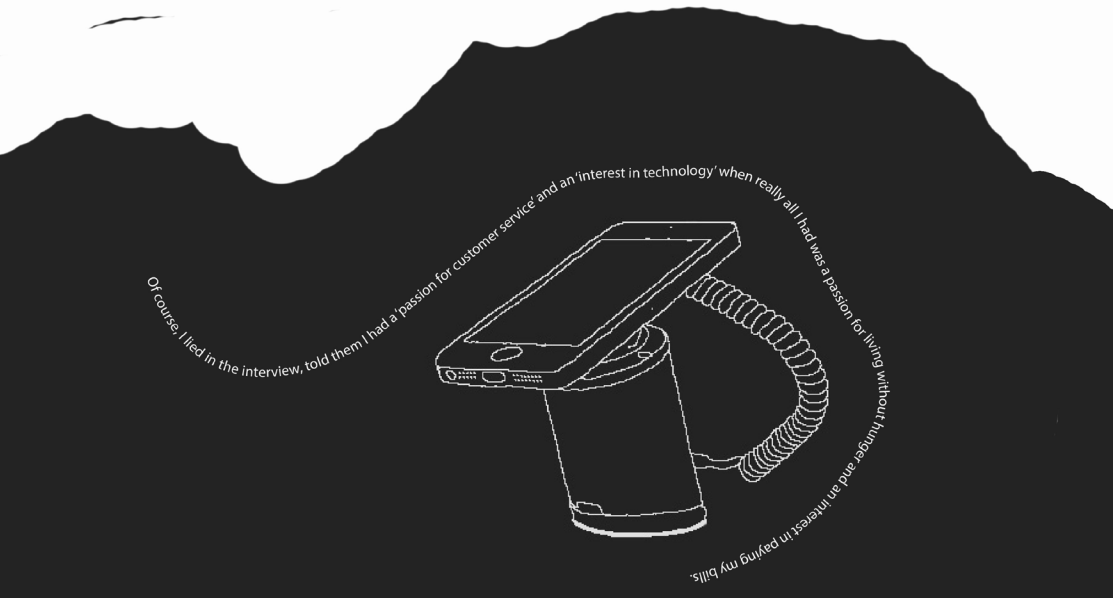
Of course, I lied in the interview, told them I had a 'passion for customer service' and an 'interest in technology' when really all I had was a passion for living without hunger and an interest in paying my bills.

Day's End
Natalie Wall

It's early and I'm impatient. I need to be at the store fifteen minutes before opening to straighten up the displays and sort out the tills. I swing my legs out of bed, feeling the slight stickiness of the wooden floor through the threadbare patches of my socks. Walking groggily to the bathroom, seeing the space swim and shimmer before my filmed eyes, I assess the day ahead, just another one.

At work I spend hours stood behind the counter fixed in a fantasy, willing the roots of the forgotten plants I know must be below me, however deep and damp under concrete foundations and electrical wires, to burst and bloom. I want them to crash up through the floor, pierce the flimsy faux leather membrane that hides my skin, and plunge through me, displacing bone and cartilage with sap and stem, rooting me to the spot, growing through and around me as I am hollowed out: a living stake.

The bathroom window is cracked to let the steam out and past the other beige buildings. I watch the sliver of sea and sand, only

just visible between windows and walls. It doesn't sit right with me that all this is owned and covered with a gauze of smoke or fog. The air around me murmurs 'not for you, not for you'. No land to inherit, don't even own the space I'm living in, high above the ground as it is. How ridiculous that I could even own a cuboid of sky.

Digging in the cupboard for some sort of breakfast I pull out a half-eaten packet of crackers, somewhat soft, and from the fridge a jar of jam with the merest scraping round the edges. Getting out my favourite knife I angle it under the bulbous shoulders of the jar, finding there a hidden glut of jam. I always save this for last, however tempting it is to dig it out prematurely, keep the jar looking neat and clean. I like knowing there is a secret reserve there, a hangover from the time before my job perhaps. A time of fivers hidden in books and a couple of tenners rolled up and stuffed behind the bathroom sink—in a cigar-shaped hole formed from peeling sealant and poor brickwork. They'd be damp if I ever needed them. At least the new money is plastic, even if it does contain sheep spleen or whatever.

Four crackers and jam for breakfast, washed down with tea weakened by the teabag's second use, six crackers with margarine and marmite for lunch. Marmite for B vitamins, the cheapest superfood ever. It won't keep me satisfied but it will keep me from abject hunger long enough to last each shift. I'm due my next payslip soon enough anyway. I'd love to have one of those bright breakfasts; I can only imagine the supple freshness of a blueberry bursting in a bowl of yoghurt, the buttery slide of avocado against my tongue. But it's so expensive, criminal to pay three pounds for a single layer of paltry berries sweating in a plastic punnet. I've seen avocados for two pounds each, rock hard, ripen-at-home, and you paying for the pleasure. Probably all brown rot inside, all bruise and none of the rich fatty flesh. No, crackers have the bland, dependable nature needed for people like me.

The walk to work is full of thick fumes spilling from the road. The toxicity, whose scent is still strangely appealing, a lemon-sharp tang cut with a heady thickness that tempts me to breathe harder and deeper, pulling more and more into myself and spreading its poison further.

I'm on opens this week, although there's little distinction between the different shifts bar the title on the rota. I'll probably still be here until cashing-up anyway, guilt tripped and persuaded by an extra twenty-five quid pay.

The shop's depressing as all hell. Maybe I'd rather be in hell, at least there'd be more to look at.

My first tasks are taking security ties off the display phones (apparently head office think people here are so stupid or desperate to try and steal obvious dummy display phones); sweeping a floor I swept the day before; straightening up displays of chargers, phone cases, headphones, and miscellaneous wires to connect with their purchases. There's nowhere less alive than this shop; if I concentrate I can feel myself decomposing here as I stand.

'Look alive, look alive gang! New day, time to slay!'

Clive, shop manager, self-proclaimed 'fun boss'. He learns the new 'it phrases' two years too late from his kids, and parrots them daily in a desperate attempt to connect with his employees, all around twenty years younger than him. I fantasise about strangling him with a charging cable roughly ten times a day, seven on a good day, but he means no harm. He's just from an age where a retail manager salary would buy you a nice house with a decent garden, and seems to think that's still the case. Thinks he's middle class because he has an Audi and takes his kids hiking, teaches them to recognise trees and birds and shit, while we work weekends.

The day passes uneventfully, a conveyor-belt duplication of all those I have had before. Often I don't know how I have gotten to the end of the day, not in a 'I've had it so hard, I don't know how I do it' self-righteously suffering way, but in a foggy, formless inability to recall the last few hours. The time slips by frictionless as silk as I sell and restock, life moving further and further from my grasp with every clock-in.

Mobile phone stores are bleak employment. Day after day I'm confronted by the ways we are passively destroying everything: endless upgrades and new models which drive desire and destruction. Of course, I lied in the interview, told them I had a 'passion for customer service' and an 'interest in technology' when really all I had was a passion for living without hunger and an interest in paying my bills.

The endless streams of plastic paraphernalia which come with mobile phones haunts me: phone cases and headphones which will break after a few months but remain on the earth for millennia. 'Do you have the latest iPhone in Silver and 128GB?'

'Yes I think so, let me just check our catalogue,' I answer.

I tap at the computer in front of me, automatic movement.

'Sorry, I'm afraid we only have that particular model online. We have it here in 256GB but that is quite a lot more expensive. If you like I can order the 128GB online, sort out your contract now, and it should be here to collect by tomorrow or Thursday at the latest.' Lorries racing down clouded motorways.

'That would be great, thanks,' he said.

'Let me just take a few details and then that should be all sorted for you.'

'Thanks, I'll be back in on Thursday then,' he called, as he left the store.

Replicate this exchange ten times over and you have my day; the brief punctuation of lunch never bringing enough respite, as I sit on metal chairs with lumpy polyester padding, anonymously stained from years of careless use. A featureless room with a single institutional blue pinboard sporting rotas and sweetly worded threats. The chilly sarcophagus of a fridge promising frosty death to any forgotten sandwich and a biohazard microwave which should not be approached unless with caution and a Geiger counter.

This oppressively unnatural space, swept by air-conditioner breezes in the absence of any windows, leeches all resistance to its industrial blandness. It strikes me now there's a limit to how original we can be: buildings tunnel like rabbit warrens, shopping centres made like hives with people sequestered in back rooms, moving through secret corridors to staff-only toilets. But this sterile box is for consumption and reprimands; it narrows and narrows space and time until you're barely able to keep your eyes open as you fall into bed.

When I return from work today it's time to get the flat in order. I place the bag of things from my cleared work locker into my wardrobe; I won't be needing them any time soon. I cleared it secretly myself didn't want other people picking through my things and deciding what sort of life I led, assuming who I was, absorbing parts of me through their probing fingers.

I check the fridge, the cupboards, all empty of food aside from a few lone tea bags. I boil the kettle and brew one, ginger to settle the stomach. The next visitor to this flat can have the rest to settle theirs.

The flat is already cool from the windows I've left open as wide

as they go; I don't want my plants to suffocate. I want them to grow and grow and drink in the bright light, to take over this flat, reclaim it, fill it choking full of new oxygen until it spills out the windows, displacing the cruel dust of the foreign air. That will only happen if someone waters them soon. I thoroughly drench their soil, position them towards the streaming light and hope that will be enough.

Moving through the flat, I reach the cupboard by the front door to turn off the boiler. It makes no sense to be using energy whilst I'm gone. I flick the final switch, close the cupboard, open the front door, and don't even look back as I head down the corridor, slowly leaving my life behind. The saving grace of the flat is how close it is to the beach; I can walk there in minutes though I barely have the time. The thick, sticky air of the town centre is diluted, gigabytes and blue pinboards forgotten, when I first feel the shifting sand underfoot. But even this isn't free, well at least the good bit isn't. They've divided the beach into the pristine, white sand, vintage deck-chairs, blond-nuclear-family, frisbees-on-the-sand, wholesome-picnic-with-celery-sticks-and-chickpea-salad, no-dogs-allowed part, and the foam at the water's edge into the jellyfish-left-beached-in-indecent-globs, Stella-cans-and-foil-Rizla-wrappers, bottle caps, dog shit (bagged, at least), they'll-let-anyone-in-here side. It even feels like the sun forsakes this side, just a little. They said getting on to the 'Top 10 Beaches in Britain' list would help us out, bring more money in, and it does, but we only glimpse it sidewards, for a second, before it hurries the kids along, Cath Kidston bags bouncing, as they're bundled into a Land Rover, eyes down.

But so close to grubby commercialism it feels like a sanctuary: I can fade the droning traffic into the wash of the sea and squint my eyes to turn foil wrappers into pearly fragments of seashell. Nowhere is perfect anymore, but it'll do.

The lightest mist of rain falls scraping grime from my face. It will never clean deep enough. It will never get inside my pores, never work with my body trying desperately to push out the soot that finds its way in. However deeply I breathe in the salt-hardened spray, it will never scour my lungs clean and rosy again, it can never fully pass into my bloodstream and purify me, an inside-out baptism.

Standing on sand dunes, marram grass grazing my legs like innocent rapier points, I look out to the sea. It's neither calm nor choppy, an entirely unremarkable tide.

I pick at the lonely shells and rocks I see around the sea glass, fishing wire, and remnants of nets cast to await uncertain hauls. Turning the smooth stones over and over in my palms, I pocket the loveliest. Picking up shells I examine their lustrous insides and remember a school trip to the rockpools when I was six. I thought nothing could touch those secluded pools, only me, as a teacher dangled me into one by my ankles to keep me from falling in as I sought the perfect shell. I didn't understand the tides, that every pool would be drowned and dredged anew each day, bringing far-flung pollution into these perfect little worlds. I yearned to climb inside the shells I found, the whole ones with their spiral-staircases. I wished to climb to the very tip of the whorl, to make my home unreachable in this small space forever refracting light.

Walking further towards the sea I saw a shell with its dead and dried inhabitant hanging out. As I picked it up, the hermit crab fell out, desiccated, finding rest on the sand to be duly churned to fragments.

I walk, shoes discarded, and unsightly foam gathers at my ankles. Shards of limpet, clam, and periwinkle cut my bare feet as I go, the permanent threadbare weave of my socks having never truly toughened up my soles. As the marine splinters slice my skin, blood

oozes out into the water, small blooms like copper seaweed fanning around my feet. They are palm leaves waving for my triumphant entrance into this grand spacesand and cliff and surface tension its hallowed city walls.

The blood opens up space within me, letting in water, diluting, polluting, creating osmosis, creating necrosis. As I wade deeper—thighs, then hips, then waist—I feel the pull of what is under. That hushed seduction I've always heard, a longing to be filled to bursting.

I didn't realise it was my final step. As I place my sole, one seaweed-shod foot free falls past the sand bank. The second follows as blood still trails behind me, soon to be diluted to single atoms living on unencumbered. Perhaps one day someone will pull in a part of me, some long-dead cell mixed in a gallon of saltwater, as they drown. They'll be pulled ashore and wrung out coughing, but I'll stay wedged in a crevice of lung or windpipe. This spread of ideas and sympathies by subtle poisoning is perhaps the only way to reach and change the truly uncaring. I'll reach the gross polluters through their drinking water, I'll pour through their chromium taps, pass through the filters of their morning coffee to lodge myself within. A tiny piece of organic matter absorbed and assimilated, spreading contagion-like through the hostile body. These delicate fragments, like sand grains shifted from shore to shore, are not what will make change. Grains of sand are insignificant until they become a beach or desert, insignificant until they shift and storm and wear cliffs away into the sea. Cells are insignificant until they clump together into tissue, into vital organs, into tumours that threaten death and signpost sicknesses undetected from the outside.

I move decisively under, pulling water into my lungs as the cold slices downwards, settling in my stomach as I fight every human urge to cough and vomit and thrust myself upwards. The need to breathe, survive, keep going, produce, and reproduce has ruined

this planet. I need to diffuse myself cell by cell, turn myself inside out and recalibrate those I enter.

She takes a final breath of water and resolves herself to a dispersal, a breaking-down into elemental parts by water. A decomposition reserved usually for those shells and cliffs which she so loves. A dignity in decay away from the closed and sterile putrefaction of the satin-lined coffin. She slips upon the waves, silently buffeted and broken, a message in a bottle, across oceans, through rivers, treatment plants, pipes, kettles, into mouths and bloodstreams, taking root where she lands.

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Tha Ghaist o Snout Hall
Jen Herron

Mrs Bistle didn't believe her. Twice Grim had seen it. In the drawing room polishing Rihanna's bust. In the kitchen, after she'd descaled the articulated tap.

'It wasnae nateral. I cud feel it,' said Grim.

Mrs Bistle rolled her eyes. Hot yoga started in half an hour. It was the wrong time to tell her, but Grim couldn't wait. 'Whut we goin tae dae aboot it?'

Mrs Bistle lifted her exercise mat. 'Cyril and I talked on the phone last night, Grim. Work has become taxing for you. Thirty years at Snout Hall, isn't it?'

'Forty-two.' Grim passed Mrs Bistle her hydro flask and towel.

'We'll discuss this when I get back. Guru Ram doesn't like lateness.'

Grim flopped on the wingback chair by the fireplace. Maybe it was time to go. Things hadn't felt right since it happened. Twenty-five.

The lad was only twenty-five.

A shriek from the hall. Grim ran out.

Mrs Bistle cowered behind her yoga mat. 'Oh my god. I saw it.'
Grim helped Mrs Bistle to her feet. 'It's whut I bin tryin tae tell ye missus.'

'It was blurred—but definitely a ghost. This is… '

'Woeful?'

'Fantastic. Snout Hall has a ghost. Four hundred years of ancestral heritage, and we're officially haunted. Think what this'll do for our Insta.'

Mrs Bistle pulled her phone from her pocket. 'Allegra, hi. Did you order a psychic for Catrina's hen do? Yes? Well, I need you to organise a séance. When? Tonight, of course.'

Grim was sent out with a shopping list. She purchased every tealight Home Bargains had in stock. The trek to M&S would take too long, so Grim bought the snacks from Asda. Mrs Bistle would never know, and it's not like she ate anything anyhow.

The next job—create the right atmosphere in the drawing-room. The fire was lit, the candles set out, and the curtains pulled. The walnut coffee table was loaded with nibbles and bottles of Beaujolais. Grim resurrected the large Georgian drop leaf for the summoning. Silk scarves were draped over lamps. Lilies and chrysanthemums, the flowers of funerals, placed in Lalique vases.

Mrs Bistle loved it. ‘This’ll look amazeballs on our socials. The first-ever séance at Snout Hall. I bet we book more tours after this.’

Business on the estate was doing well, but it could always be better. Snout Hall, the ancestral seat of the Bistle family, was built by the Earl of Snout in the seventeenth century. But as many of the landed gentry discovered, inherited wealth was not an unlimited pot. So, the Bistles adapted.

Snout Hall was now the top tourist attraction in the county. It had a tearoom, a gift shop, an organic farm, and a walled garden. A weekly tour took place every Saturday at 2 p.m. You could even get married in the Great Hall. Or hire a glamping pod in the Forest of Snout. The Bistles kept their fingers greased in many posh pies. On the other end of the leash was Grim. Like all the women in her family, she had started in the kitchens when she finished school—and never left. Generations of Grims had watched multiple earls grow up. The current one was nice enough *if* you did your job properly and didn’t bother him. Not that Grim saw him much these days. *Business in London* was the official response to his extended absence.

Mrs Bistle’s guests came at 11 p.m., the medium closer to midnight. Grim greeted her at the door and took her to the drawing room. She wore frayed jeans, a grey hoodie, and a pink beanie. Her trainers were grubby and well worn.

‘Gosh, you don’t look like a psychic.’ Mrs Bistle eyeballed the visitor with suspicion. ‘Tell me you have a mystical nom de plume. Madame Marissa? Oracle Athena?’

‘Louise.’ The medium sat at the table. ‘Will we start?’

Mrs Bistle and her friends cavorted, taking selfies by candlelight.

The psychic sighed and pulled a crystal ball from her rucksack. Grim sat in the corner with her knitting and a mug of Horlicks. She tried not to grunt as the women discussed which ancient and prestigious Bistle the ghost would be.

Cousin Horace had slipped in mastiff poo on the marble staircase in 1703. Uncle Sheridan choked on a duck egg on Easter Sunday, 1845. Then, great-aunt Edwina suffocated in her bedroom when the chimney blew out in 1902. Grim's granny said it took two days to wash the soot from Edwina's crevices.

'It *could* be a recent spectre,' said Mrs Bistle. 'Cyril wouldn't like me sharing this, but I can trust you ladies. Can't I?'

The coven nodded with confidence.

'Cyril's aunt, Bunny Bistle, jumped from the roof a few decades ago. She was pregnant with some rogue's spawn. The local butcher's boy, I think.'

Her friends replied with *oohs* and *ahhs*.

'I wonder if he had a big sausage,' said Mrs Bistle.

The women cackled.

'Sssssh,' said the medium. 'We're not alone.'

Grim dropped her needles. The candles flickered as an icy chill swept through the room. The psychic ordered the women to join hands, asking the spirit to send a sign it was there. The coals crackled in the hearth. A draught rippled the heavy crimson curtains. The party held their breath.

A thud hit the window outside. The squeeze of a sponge. The drip

of water. Then, a squeaky slide scraping across the window.
'God, Grim,' said Mrs Bistle. 'Is someone washing the windows?'

Grim rose, her ball of chocolate yarn skipped across the floor. 'It's him. I knowed it!'

The candles blew out, and the party plunged into darkness. The meagre light of the dying fire spluttered, casting shadows across the room.

Mrs Bistle yelled. 'Look there. At the window.'

The women gasped as the apparition revealed itself. He was a young man, tall and handsome. He wore navy overalls and held a yellow squeegee.

Mrs Bistle collapsed. 'Oh my God! It's a … it's a …'

'Ghaist?' replied Grim.

'A window cleaner!'

Mrs Bistle put her head in her hands. The women surrounded her, patting her back and offering words of condolences.

The medium laughed. 'You're mad your ghost's a window cleaner?'

Mrs Bistle downed her Beaujolais. 'He's not family,' she replied.

'He doesn't deserve to haunt Snout Hall.'

The party took out their phones and deleted their posts about the séance.

'Whoever heard of a stately home haunted by a working-class ghost? He must go. Tell him. Tell him, now.'

The psychic placed her palms on the table and closed her eyes.

'What do you want, spirit? Why are you here?'

Her eyelids flickered; her head jerked from side to side.

'There's a message coming through …'

'What is it? What is it?' repeated Mrs Bistle.

'He said … why would he haunt his bedsit when he can have more fun at your house.'

Mrs Bistle screamed. Grim turned the lights on and smacked the door with her palms. 'Wud ye wise up. I knowed the lad's brither. I'll taak to him. Meybe he cud pit him oot.'

'How do you know his brother?' asked Mrs Bistle.

'Hae ye forgotten already? Mine tha lad, Joe McCloy, wha fell aff tha ladder last month? Well, that's his ghaist. His brither wus wi him whan they wus clainin tha windaes. Lee this tae me.'

***

Jeff McCloy was summoned to Snout Hall the next day. He wasn't surprised to learn his brother's ghost was haunting the estate. 'It was his favourite job. Joe had it in his heid he was meant to live here. Dunno where he got it from.'

Jeff and his brother washed the Hall's windows at the end of every month. It was a mammoth job, but one they enjoyed. 'It

was guid to get oot here in the fresh air an the nice scenery. He hadnae an easy time o it. A car accident when he was sixteen broke his back. But he kept on. He's got a wee lad, you know. He's three now. Lives wi his mum in Brickside.'

Grim didn't know. It made the tragedy harder to bear. Joe was cleaning the drawing room windows when he fell. His back spasmed, and his legs seized up. 'He never should've been up thon ladders. But whut other work can ye get these days?'

Then there was the delicate matter of the haunting to address. Grim tackled it softly. 'Wud he no wan tae be wi his ain yins?' She poured Jeff a fresh cup of tea. 'He's fearin tha life clain oot o Mrs Bistle. Cud ye no get him tae gae?'

Jeff shook his head. If Snout Hall was the place his brother chose to haunt, so be it. 'He loved it here. I dinnae blame him fur wantin tae stay. I'll no ask him tae dae somethin he disnae want tae dae.'

***

Mrs Bistle was raging. She cursed the McCloys up and down the halls of Snout. The ghost appeared, laughing and juggling his sponges. Mrs Bistle threw a Crown Derby plate at his head. It whizzed through him like a frisbee.

'At least change your clothes.' Mrs Bistle shook her fists at the ghost. 'What if someone sees you?'

Mrs Bistle pushed Grim towards the spectre. 'Tell him, Grim. Tell him he can wear any of Cyril's suits he likes. We can at least pretend he's of nobility. What if the crew from *Haunted Happenings* turn up? They've already PM'd me on Insta, thanks to those bloody séance posts.'

Joe walked towards the window, rubbing dirt with his sponge. Grim tapped his shoulder. It felt cold and thick, like fog. 'Mister, wud ye like to wear wan o Earl Bistle's fancy suits? Micht maak ye fit in mair wi the place, son.'

The ghost unzipped his overalls. They fell to the floor. He bent over and pulled down his boxers. Two white cheeks jerked as he mooned both women. Then he vanished.

'I dinnae think he wants tae wear yer suits, missus.'

***

Everything was Grim's fault. She employed the men. She couldn't get rid of the ghost. 'One last chance,' said Mrs Bistle. Or Grim would get the boot. 'Don't let me down again.'

The Reverend Rimes could do something. Grim was sure of it. She had watched *The Exorcist* as a girl. Although she wasn't Catholic, she was sure their local Presbyterian minister could manage an exorcism.

Grim explained the situation over Bourbon Creams and a pot of Punjana.

'I don't know what you expect me to do, Ms Grim.' Reverend Rimes was three biscuits in at this point. 'The lad wasn't Christian. The only time he came to church was to clean its windows.'

Grim brought out the KitKats. 'Cud ye no tell him tha pooer o Christ compels ye tae get oot or suchlike?'

The reverend snapped a KitKat in two and gobbled the left finger.

'I'll try. But he might not be compelled by Christ. Snout has

become very cosmopolitan, you know. We've at least five Jews and one Buddhist. There are ripples of a mosque in the next village.'

'Try any god ye like,' replied Grim. 'Just get him oot.'

Grim escorted the reverend to the drawing room. The ghost was cleaning the windows with his squeegee. The reverend didn't falter, and bravely approached him. *There's fire in thaim KitKats,* thought Grim.

'Lad, wouldn't it be better if you went to God's kingdom? You'll find peace there.'

The ghost blew on the window. With his foggy digit, he fingered a sentence in the condensation.

'This is my kingdom.' Then he disappeared.

***

Grim wasn't given any notice. She must leave immediately.
'What about my pension?'

'You have your State Pension, Grim,' replied Mrs Bistle. 'What more do you want?'

'Does ma loyalty mean nothin? I've dun iveriethin ye ast. Gaen ma best yeirs tae ye.'

Mrs Bistle grabbed her exercise mat. Hot yoga started in half an hour. 'You were well paid for it. It'd be easier if you were gone before I'm back.'

Grim flopped down in the wingback chair. The decision had been

made for her. She sank into the cushions, hoping they would swallow her completely. But a strange buoyancy moved her from the slump. The ghost stood in front of her, offering its hand. He ushered her to the corner of the drawing room, where he pointed to a floorboard, encouraging her to pull it up. It came off easily. Underneath, she unearthed a wooden chest filled with papers. As Grim rifled through its contents, she knew exactly what to do.

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Grim sat in silence. Mrs Bistle either *could not* or *would not* speak. Grim allowed her a few moments to take it in. But the facts were the facts. And Grim had the paper trail to prove it.

'Dinnae blame yersel, dear. I warked here at tha time an I didnae knowed she'd haed tha wain ether. But they snuck him oot in the midst o tha nicht. A wee local wumman brocht him up hersel. She didnae knowed wha he wus. He'd be twenty-five noo.'

Mrs Bistle still didn't speak.

'They makd Bunny Bistle gee him up. Drove hir tae hir deeth. I didnae knowed it wus *hir* heir who wus set to get tha estate. No yer hubby—though he wus nixt in line efter hir. But ye knowed that bit, didnae ye?'

Mrs Bistle swatted the papers in front of her. 'His father was the butcher's boy. Illegitimates have no claim here.'

Grim smiled. 'We dinnae live in the dairk ages noo, love. He's as much richt to it as ye. Just a sin he didnae knowed afore he fell aff tha ladder.'

Mrs Bistle paced the room. 'Well, he's gone now. What difference does it make?'

‘It’ll maak a diffrence tae his wain. He’s three noo, ye know. He’s goin tae love a big hoose like this tae spoart in.’

Mrs Bistle howled. ‘I’ll do anything, Grim. Please don’t tell. Name it, and I’ll do it.’

Grim pulled navy overalls and a squeegee from behind the sofa. ‘Ye can start wi the windaes. Go an, on oot ye go.’

Mrs Bistle took the overalls and left.

The ghost reappeared. ‘Can I cum wi ye whan ye tell ma wee man an his mammy?’

‘Sure ye can, pet. We’ll just gi madam a taste o hir ain medicine afore we heid aff.’ Grim put the papers back in the wooden box and closed the lid. ‘She’ll hae tae get uist tae it anyhoo. Cos she’ll be clainin hir ain bloody windaes frae noo on.’

what are you wearing?
Emily Cotman

darling don't you dare describe
your sweatpants when i ask
what are you wearing?
tell me tales now you're
caked in dirt, sunburnt
radish grin ripe to devour
calloused hands grazing soft
strawberries down in
deep pockets for later you're
chafing bad in glitter boots
here, lean against my shoulder
just until your last number till
we can ditch, press my fist against
your arches just there you're
catching on quick
ha! how could i forget
you've never worn a stitch
but the seafoam swell
from whence you came,
and would I care to join you?
well then
allow me to slip into my flippers

A Year Without Worship
Emily Cotman

And what of our chapels that rot in the rain?
We're a year without worship and our faith is waning,
Our hymns the tin feedback of mics newly-met,
Our confession a sigh with each shift up the fretboard
Our hope—a damp napkin that swaddles the beer
We'll be nursing until the headliner appears.
A year without worship—as termites collect,
As they feast on the rafters we bled to protect.
This dear congregation, we roam splinter-shod
Under clouds, loathe to bow to your dissonant gods.
But we haven't gone far. We'll sing again still.
Find us planting our mic stands on St. George's Hill.

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Emily Cotman (she/her) writes and makes music in the little scavenged spaces of the work week. Forever from Ohio, she now lives gratefully on unceded Gayogo̱hó꞉nǫ̀' land.

Yoga Balance
Paul Dylan

for Diana

You said you'd find me harmonious,
rigged out unexpectedly, puffing five pipes
with spares in my beard, forehead and eyes.

You recognise the red cap your father wore,
spot different chains, another watch,
a hand ripped from clutching a rose.

The day yoga was cancelled because of the rain
I knew I'd found you somewhere years ago,
hands on bark, climbing a tree

You told me touch the comma
shaped on the leaf about your leg.
You knew something I'd know.

***

Paul Dylan is a writer from Cork. His work has appeared in the *UCC Express* and can be found on Medium @dylanohk.

Mass Murderers in White Coats:
***Psychiatric Genocide in Nazi Germany and the United States* by**
Lenny Lapon

A Book Review by Sharon Jean Cretsinger
Baja Norte, Mexico, October 2021

#Anti-psychiatry #organizing

Lenny Lapon offers readers a wealth of information that is meticulously researched and presented, and also personal. Importantly, it is relatable to 'ordinary' folks. Psychiatric and behavioural health abuses and atrocities can literally happen to anyone. Yet, in the context of intersectionality, they happen more frequently to individuals who are otherwise marginalised, such as people of colour and those with disabilities. As these narratives become increasingly visible, the perspectives of ex-inmates and survivors are crucial but often missing. *Mass Murderers* is so valuable because it subverts every authoritarian attempt to control the narrative of the atrocities discussed. The importance of proletariat scholarship in the narratives of the marginalised and the working class cannot be overemphasised. This book is a beautiful example of a political, anti-psychiatry, organising text that would not be created by any other genre.

Summary

I am happy to see that *Mass Murderers in White Coats* (1986) is out in a digital edition. It is an impressive collection of essays and research that needs a much wider audience, especially now. While this book technically falls in the category of non-fiction, it is structured more like a doctoral thesis. This is not to say it is not eminently readable. The style is spare and technically intelligent. I mention the overall construction of the book because the forwards and the appendices are important to the subject and

should be read as thoroughly as the text. Lapon's updated forward (May 2021) serves to contextualise its significance in historical place-time. He notes that the book captures a specific stage in the psychiatric inmates' liberation movement. It was an important point because it was almost exactly at that moment that the radical and resistant arms of the movement were effectively (and perhaps permanently) broken by the government.

In the original preface, the book's objectives are carefully laid out: to document the mass murder of 'mental patients' by psychiatry in Nazi Germany and in the US (psychiatric genocide); to show the common ideological roots of the killings in Nazi Germany and the harmful, sometimes fatal, psychiatric 'treatments' in the US; to give ex-inmates' perspectives on the oppressiveness of psychiatry, its violence and danger; to present excerpts from conversations with members of the American Psychiatric Association (APA) who were connected to Nazi Germany; to present a history of the organised resistance to psychiatry by its victims; and to bring all of these issues into the light of public awareness.

The book achieves all stated objectives except for the last one. Hopefully, wider access to this digital text will help to illuminate the pervasiveness of contemporary psychiatric atrocities and the almost-lost history of radical resistance to it.

Intersectionality and Identity

In contemporary culture, there are an increasing number of texts and discussions emerging about marginalisation and identity. *Mass Murderers* is important to this discussion because it clearly illuminates issues belonging to survivors of psychiatric atrocities. It reaches back to Nazi Germany and documents real conversations the author had with Nazi clinicians.

The publication of MMWC was only a part of Lapon's work as

an activist in the movement for the liberation of ex-patients and survivors of psychiatric atrocities. This movement and aspects of intersectionality continue to need greater illumination in the mainstream media. Lapon participated in activities of the Alliance for the Liberation of Mental Patients in Philadelphia (ALMP) and the Mental Patients Liberation Front (MPLF) in Boston and was arrested several times during civil disobedience demonstrations. He was a contributor to 'Madness Network News (1) ', the US movement's historical, survivor-run publication. In 1985, he undertook a sixty-day fast to bring light to sixty points of psychiatric oppression. He has worked most frequently as an educator, and maintains a deep interest in the issues besetting Palestine and Latin America.

This specific research is thorough and irreplaceable. Appendix Three, 'The Myth and Politics of "Mental Retardation"' warrants a special mention. 'Mental Retardation' was a label historically given to people, based on a theoretically measurable (by clinical psychologists in the US) cognitive deficit, numerically described as 'intellectual quotient (IQ)'. Today, the term 'Intellectual and Developmental Disability' is applied. This community remains one of the most oppressed and suppressed in First World cultures, with many individuals who carry this label still institutionalised and exploited, working for pennies a day in sheltered employment (2) settings. In the US, these workhouses have government funding and are run by nonprofits employing social workers and other types of therapists. The fields of psychiatry and related behavioural health disciplines are present in the form of physical, behavioural, and chemical restraints. Participants are given repetitive tasks, like packaging retail items, and paid one or two cents per piece. This labour practice remains completely legal in the United States. It is a result of historical economic policies of the right, and subsequently, deinstitutionalisation.

While the abolitionist position toward psychiatry and other behavioural healths (antipsychiatry (3), anti-psychiatry, and a few

other spellings) has been a bit less directly suppressed in the UK than in the US, it is a political position that is poorly understood everywhere, and often dismissed as reactionary. *Mass Murderers* describes and contextualises psychiatry and related behavioural healths in their familial relationships to eugenics and genocide. The existence and actions of a counter-movement would not have been possible without this author, and others like him, advancing abolitionist arguments and organising tactics.

'The Resistance: A History of the Psychiatric Inmates Movement' is filled with accounts of various direct actions. Examples include demonstrating against specific atrocities, such as forced drugging and other harassment-based 'therapies', in front of the facilities where they are performed, and at times invading such facilities, as well as demonstrating at the offices of politicians sponsoring oppressive 'mental health' legislation. In one remarkable example, members of the Network Against Psychiatric Assault (NAPA) (4) and its sister group, Women Against Psychiatric Assault (WAPA, now defunct), participated in a month-long sleep-in at the office of then California Governor, Edmund G. Brown, Jr, to 'demand an end to forced labor, labor without pay, and forced treatment in California's psychiatric facilities' (MMWC, 162, print edition). Given the context of the digital re-issue, it's impossible to mention the generation of history pre-dating MMWC without addressing the generation that has followed its publication.

Present Day, Ex-Mental Patients' Movement

Particularly relevant in the context of today's 'movement' is Appendix Two, titled 'Alternative Therapies Criticized and the Role of 'Mental Health' Workers in the Fight Against Psychiatry'. When seen together with Appendix Five, 'Psychiatric Inmates' Liberation/Anti-psychiatry Groups, we find a comprehensive picture of a movement that barely exists today. In place of most of the liberation groups listed in Appendix Five, we have many

government-funded and pseudo-clinical organisations. These 'practitioners' and 'nonprofits' have replaced radical organising groups with various self-pathologising and complicated systems of contrived, facilitated communications, such as the 'Hearing Voices Network', the 'Wellness Recovery and Action Plan (WRAP)', and 'Intentional Peer Support'. The rhetoric of revolution and abolition detailed in MMWC has been co-opted and replaced with these various pseudo-clinical 'interventions' and 'positions' such as 'peer supporter' and 'case management aide'. Lapon states it quite simply in Appendix Two: 'They make money off our pain and suffering. Some of them have "anti-psychiatry" conferences and invite a token ex-inmate or two. As with other oppressed groups we buy into our oppression in various ways.'

The abolitionist perspective continues to exist internationally, but it is now very much on the margins of a more fragmented group of formal and informal organisations dedicated to 'reforming' existing systems. This 'community' is often referenced as the "c/s/x movement" (5) and it includes consumers (people who approve of and continue to use psychiatry and/or some form of the behavioural health services), survivors (people who identify closely with other historical survivors of genocide), and ex-patients (who emphasise their *former* status as patients, but acknowledge that they will *always* be ex-patients). Non-government-funded survivor and ex-patient organisations lack support and are regularly marginalised or even stifled by individuals in clinical and pseudo-clinical roles whose financial and professional interests are invested in the narrative of the 'happy, compliant "patient" in "recovery"'. Examples exist of incredible lived-experience scholarship, such as this collaborative opus, Movement History of the Consumer/ Client/ Survivor/ Ex-patient/ Ex-Inmate/ User Community (6) (from the website holdings of a few small clinical and other organisations). Because these kinds of documents find no representation in academia and the popular media, their digital linkages to even the most interested of academic and non-

academic students is tenuous. The documents and other histories of this community are lost every day as its elders age and die.

Sadly, the clinical and pseudo-clinical silencers include a large number of 'peers' and other low-level social services workers who, themselves, claim lived experience of psychiatric atrocities and incarcerations. Many of them represent the lowest rung of socio-economic existence where it is possible to be minimally fed and housed. They are constantly under threat of losing even that subsistence if they stray from the compliance and recovery narrative. It's a form of psychological terrorism at a big-systems level that gained particular momentum in the late 1980s with the funding of more and more nonprofit-modeled organisations purporting to offer viable 'alternatives' to 'the medical model'. As more government funding has become available, the number of labeled people who accept these low-wage, low-status jobs in order to minimally survive has increased over the last thirty years. Many feel they are lucky, and continue to sell out and be co-opted under the leadership of a few minor celebrity-like, provider-approved token survivors (PETS) who are allowed a slightly nicer lifestyle and a small amount of 'professional credential' by the systems they serve.

Mass Murderers in White Coats is ostensibly a book for those interested in doing serious anti-psychiatry organising. These individuals may wish to go directly to chapter five, 'The Resistance: A History of the Psychiatric Inmates Liberation Movement' to find inspiration. There is also plenty for those who are interested in anti-psychiatry, historic and contemporary psychiatric and behavioural health atrocities, and their intersections with other forms of marginalisation and discrimination. This e-book offers resources to readers and researchers interested in pure anti-psychiatry, its intersections, and adjacent aspects of historical and Holocaust scholarship. Many opportunities exist for contemporary thinkers to expand on the central themes of the book. Resistance stands

out among these, and the last thirty years are rich for mining the organising dynamics that have actually played out since the original publication of MMWC in 1986.

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Sharon Jean Cretsinger is a proletariat thinker and essayist. She is an internationally recognized expert on the concerns of multiples and survivors of contemporary psychiatric and behavioural health atrocities who believes **liberation is for everyone**.

“They make money off our pain and suffering. Some of them have “anti-psychiatry” conferences and invite a token ex-inmate or two. As with other oppressed groups we buy into our oppression in various ways.”

- Lenny Lapon

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