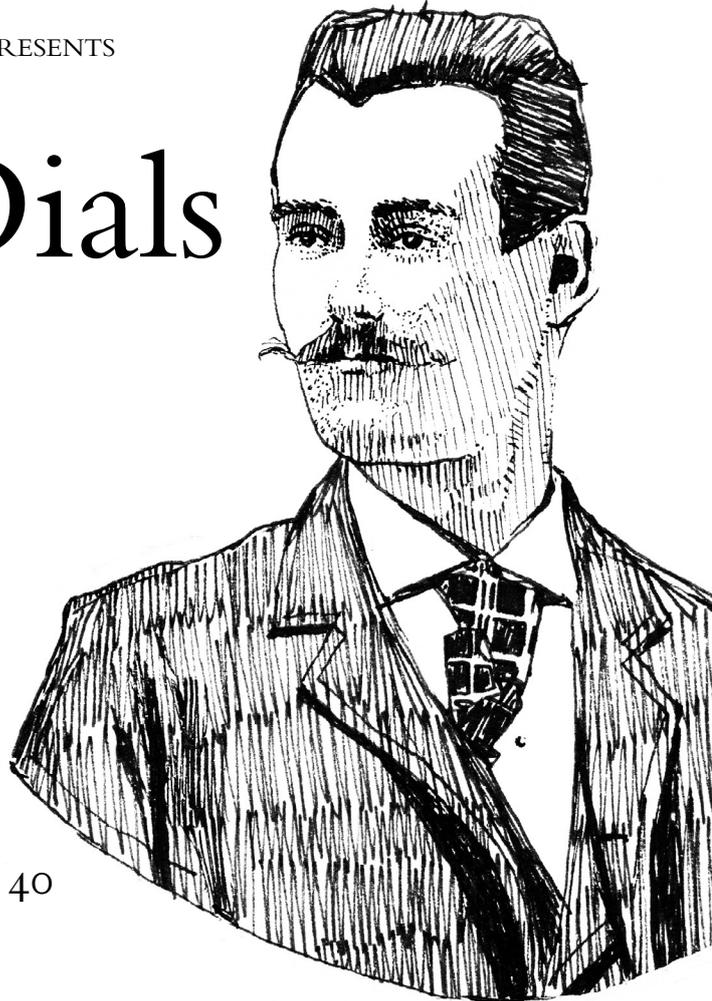


HAMISH HAMILTON PRESENTS

# Five Dials



NUMBER 40

## We Had No Say In This

Jay Griffiths | *In the Depths of Manic Depression*

David Van Reybrouck | *Elections Don't Work*

Hanif Kureishi | *Writing Advice*

Svetlana Alexievich | *Life and Death in Chernobyl*

Abigail Ulman | *The Best Short Story You'll Read This Month*

*Plus: poetry by Jana Prikryl and Martha Sprackland,  
voting (and living, and loving) in Serbia, and a new column about  
Anita Brookner by a mysterious figure known only as The Backlister.*



# Contributors

**SVETLANA ALEXEIVICH** was born in Ivano-Frankivsk in 1948 and has spent most of her life in the Soviet Union and present-day Belarus, with prolonged periods of exile in Western Europe. Her books include *The Unwomanly Face of War*, *Boys in Zinc*, *Chernobyl Prayer* and *Second-Hand Time*. She was awarded the 2015 Nobel Prize in Literature for 'her polyphonic writings, a monument to suffering and courage in our time.'

**LAUREN SIMKIN BERKE** is a Brooklyn-based American artist and illustrator who identifies primarily as a drawer (of the ink on paper variety). Lauren is an avid sketchbook user and book binder, drawing for clients such as *The New York Times*, *The Advocate*, *Family Circle*, *American Express* and Rémy Martin. Lauren has been self-publishing art books and zines under the name Captain Sears Press since 2012, and has been represented by Riley Illustration since 2006.

**BOJANA GAJSKI** is a teacher and literary translator from Kikinda, Serbia. She has translated a number of novels, short

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**JAY GRIFFITHS** is the author of *Pip Pip: A Sideways Look at Time*, for which she won the Discover award for the best new non-fiction writer to be published in the USA; *Wild: An Elemental Journey*, an evocation of the songlines of the earth, which won the inaugural Orion Book Award; *Kith: The Riddle of the Childscape* and most recently *Tristimania: A Diary of Manic Depression*. Her fiction includes *A Love Letter from a Stray Moon*, about the Mexican painter Frida Kahlo, and *Anarchipelago*, about the road protests. She has written for the comment and feature pages of the *Guardian* and has contributed to other publications including the *Observer*, and the *London Review of Books*, and has written for Radiohead's newspaper *The Universal Sigh*.

**HANIF KUREISHI** is a playwright, screenwriter, filmmaker and novelist. His novel, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, won the 1990 Whitbread First Novel Award and he was the recipient of an Academy Award nomination for Best Screenplay for *My Beautiful Laundrette* in 1986. His most recent novel, *The Last Word*, was published in 2014 and a collection of stories, *Love + Hate: Stories and Essays* appeared the following year.

**DAVID MATHEWS** is an illustrator and animator from Delhi, based in Vienna. The link to the full version of his comic can be found here: [davidm.co/oscillate](http://davidm.co/oscillate)

Poet and editor **JANA PRIKRYL** was born in the Czech Republic. At age six, she emigrated to Canada with her family. She is the author of the poetry collection *The After Party* (2016). Her poetry and criticism appear widely, in



The Negative is pres



magazines and journals such as *The New Yorker*, *The Paris Review*, the *London Review of Books*, *The Nation*, *The Baffler*, and *The New York Review of Books*. Her essays on photography and film appear regularly in *The New York Review* and *The Nation*. She is a senior editor at *The New York Review of Books*.

**MARTHA SPRACKLAND** was co-founder and poetry editor of *Cake* magazine and was assistant poetry editor for Faber. Previously a recipient of the Foyle Young Poets of the Year Award and an Eric Gregory Award, her work has appeared in *Poetry Review*, the *London Review of Books*, *New Humanist*, *Magma* and *Poetry London*, and has been anthologized in the *Salt Book of Younger Poets* and the *Best British Poetry* series. Martha is a poet-in-residence for Caught by the River. A pamphlet is forthcoming from Rack Press in January 2017.

**ABIGAIL ULMAN** is a writer from Melbourne. She is the recipient of a Wallace Stegner Fellowship from Stanford University and won the 2016 Best Young Australian Novelist Award from the Sydney Morning Herald. Her debut story collection *Hot Little Hands* was recently published in the US, Australia, Germany and the UK.

**DAVID VAN REYBROUCK** is considered 'one of the leading intellectuals in Europe' (*Der Tagesspiegel*) and is a pioneering advocate of participatory democracy. He founded the G1000 Citizens' Summit, and his work has led to trials in participatory democracy throughout Belgium and The Netherlands. He is also one of the most highly regarded literary and political writers of his generation, whose most recent book, *Congo: The Epic History of a People*, won 19 prizes, sold 500,000 copies and has been translated into a dozen languages. It was described as a 'masterpiece' by the *Independent* and 'magnificent' by *The New York Times*. He lives in Brussels and Berlin. His latest book, *Against Elections*, excerpted in this issue, is now available in the United States. *Against Elections* is published by The Bodley Head at £9.99/\$16.95.

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A LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

## On Vegetables and Jay

One night not so long ago, I was eating a few mildly overcooked carrots at my kitchen table. I had a book propped open and was reading about the vegetables that appear  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the way through a piece by Janet Malcolm, collected in *Forty-One False Starts: Essays on Artists and Writers*. As is usually the case with Malcolm, who has not yet written a cookbook, she was using the vegetables to probe towards a deeper truth. In the article she discussed a list of Bloomsbury group biographies, including *Virginia Woolf* by Quentin Bell, and the essay offered Malcolm a change to examine not just these books but the entire biographical method. ‘The genre (like its progenitor, history) functions as a kind of processing plant,’ she writes, ‘where experience is converted into information the way fresh produce is converted into canned vegetables. But, like canned vegetables, biographical narratives are so far removed from their source – so altered from the plant with soil clinging to its roots that is a letter or a diary entry – that they carry little conviction.’ For Malcolm, biographies are not necessarily inaccurate, but the nothing beats the crunch of primary sources.

I thought back to this quote when I first came across Jay Griffiths’s masterful book on manic depression, *Tristimania*, which is featured as the centrepiece of this 40th issue of *Five Dials*. There are plenty of fascinating books on the subject of depression, and even a few rarities such as Andrew Solomon’s *The Noonday Demon*, which combines Solomon’s unflinching account of his own struggles and the concentrated results of his research and interviewing. But Griffiths’s account stands apart. It is not only written, seemingly, from within the roving landscape of the illness,

but like Malcolm’s prize-winning vegetables, this book feels like a primary source, an immediate dispatch to us and for us, sent from a desperate and unprocessed place. By unprocessed I don’t mean to imply the book is loose or careless; you will find no writer more intent at meticulously defining words, cracking them open, forging neologisms, and even digging up ancient terms that can better describe modern states of mind. (Look for the appearance of *wōd*.) Much rough, immediate, unwashed emotion clings to the book. Griffiths grabs at language, and in doing so brings both those well acquainted with the various shades of depression, and those very few who have not experienced any sort, towards the episode, even into the episode.

Griffiths will not come down on the side of eradication. What makes the book complex and rich is her awareness that she too, while writing, is reconciling her own inner complexities. This state is a powerful catalyst for movement. ‘There are galaxies within the human mind, and madness wants to risk everything for the daring flight, reckless and beautiful and crazed. Everyone knows Icarus fell. But I love him for the fact that he dared to fly. Mania unfurls the invitation to fly too high, too near the sun...’

As for the rest of the issue, it’s filled with the literary equivalent of prize-winning produce. David Van Reybrouck argues that elections just don’t work for us any longer. Bojana Gajski offers up a memoir on voting in Serbia, and Hanif Kureishi gives writing advice. There’s much more. Peel it open.

– Craig Taylor

# FAQ

What's the best way to speak to a toad?

HERE IS YOUR ANSWER

What's happening to our estuary?

HERE IS YOUR ANSWER

Where are you?

HERE IS YOUR ANSWER

Where can I listen to a song about eating a good Vietnamese breakfast?

HERE IS YOUR ANSWER

What's the best season?

HERE IS YOUR ANSWER

Which watery city should we choose?

HERE IS YOUR ANSWER



## THE BACKLISTER

*Lewis Percy* by Anita Brookner

Our anonymous correspondent, known only as The Backlister, unearths old titles and reviews books otherwise lost to the winds of time. What lurk in the depths of the backlist?

**Y**ou see these people most days. They work behind the desk at libraries. They move quietly, speak quietly. At the bank they'll slide a piece of paper to you from behind the glass. You'll sign it and slide it back. In that moment, and only in that moment, you'll look up and think: who is this person? What fills his days? He might very well be the spiritual brother to Lewis Percy, eponymous protagonist of the 1989 novel by Anita Brookner, the very definition of the unnoticed man.

Perhaps fittingly, it took me ages to notice *Lewis Percy*, the book. I bought an old paperback version for a dollar at a used bookstore, but the cover was ugly and it smelled, as did most of the books in that shop, like the rotisserie chicken restaurant below on the ground floor. I only started with *Lewis* when the reissued version was released after Brookner's death, as I was drawn by its newness. Also, I like books where it's not entirely clear which name is the author and which the character: Gerard Donovan/Julius Winsome; Mary Barton/Elizabeth Gaskell; Brat Farrar/Josephine Tey; Salman Rushdie/Joseph Anton.

The novel begins during an exciting chapter in Lewis's early life, as if it will be followed by romance, action and infatuation. When we meet him, the young Lewis is living in a Parisian boarding house, attended to by women. He researches at the Bibliothèque Nationale during the day,

and brings cheese or fruit as an offering to their nightly salon. He lives surrounded by the 'warm and uncritical company of the women', teasing out his dissertation.

*I like books where it's not entirely clear which name is the author and which the character: Gerard Donovan/Julius Winsome; Mary Barton/Elizabeth Gaskell; Brat Farrar/Josephine Tey; Salman Rushdie/Joseph Anton.*

But this is not a book about the risk-taking life of Lewis Percy. He doesn't find love, or infatuation, in Paris. By chapter two, Lewis has withdrawn back to England, back

to the suburbs of London and the comfort of life with his mother, a quiet existence, smudged and whispered, where the only sound emanating from the house is his new wireless. His mother is so meek she'd rather let it burble with static than turn it off. Best not.

Lewis's ambitions are stunted and minimal. He wants to live a small life, stay faithful to a wife, stay comfortable, loved, ensconced in the house where he grew up. When he meets a librarian named Tissy as he is returning his books he is drawn to the stability she represents. But Tissy is nearly paralysed with a fear of leaving her own comforts. Her mother collects her from the library each day, as the tremors and uncertainties of the outside world are too much, even for the walk home. Still, Lewis is intrigued. It will be quiet, but will it be right? Is this what love should resemble? How can we intuit the shape of love? Where is the template?

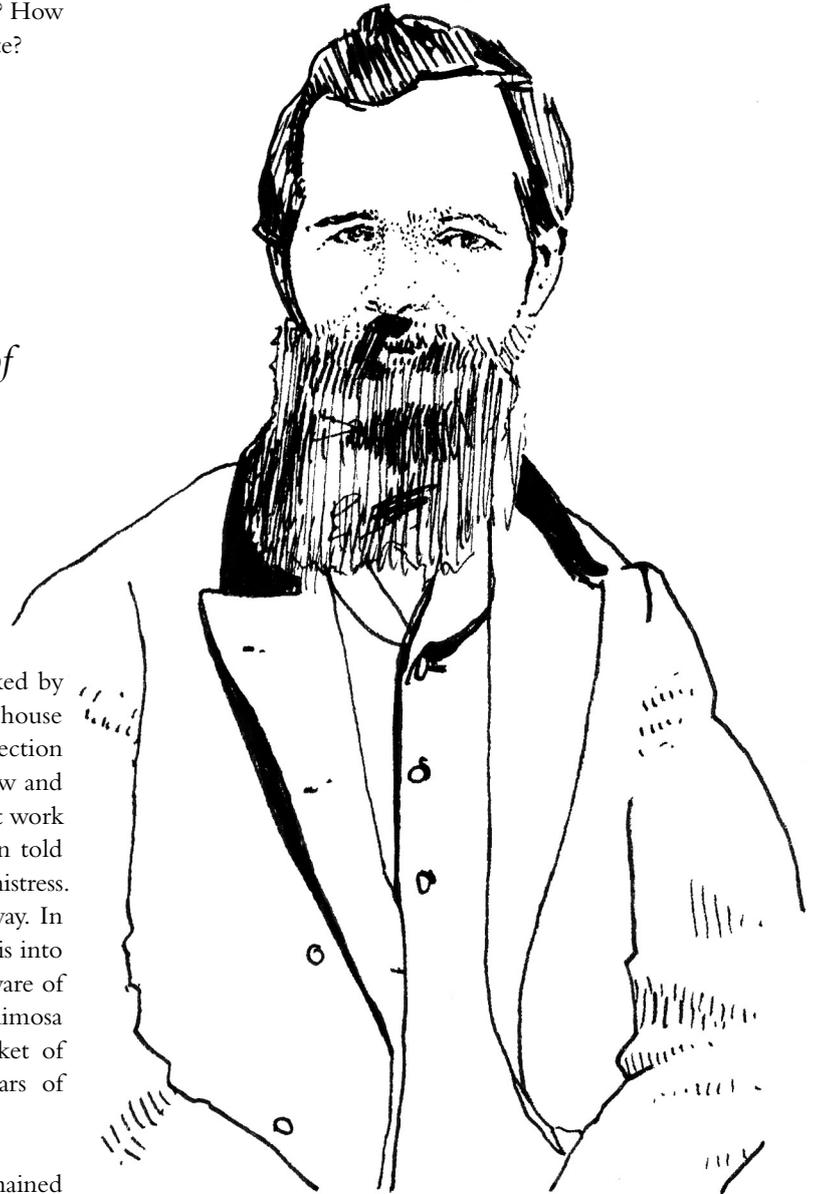
*At Selfridges she forcefully shops  
for a basket of sensual pleasures.  
Who knew a Muscadet, two bars of  
chocolate and a pineapple could be  
so subversive?*

Lewis's marriage brings him into a household marked by that most deadening attribute of all: incuriosity. The house of Tissy and her mother, Thea, is a place of overprotection and stasis. Just when it seems the horizons will narrow and his life will diminish into silence, Lewis's one friend at work introduces him to his sister, an actress who has been told throughout her life she'll be nothing but a good mistress. She's always been wanted, but in a very specific way. In one of the book's best sequences, Emmy presses Lewis into taking a mid-week picnic. In the cab, he's acutely aware of her presence – she's wearing some sort of exotic 'mimosa scent'. At Selfridges she forcefully shops for a basket of sensual pleasures. Who knew a Muscadet, two bars of chocolate and a pineapple could be so subversive?

Throughout her writing career, Brookner remained interested in the pervading loneliness of life and the small bulwarks we construct to combat it. Her characters reach out tentatively into the harsh world. It's like watching a tendril unfurl, trying for connection. Even when they succeed and find attachment, Brookner is realistic about the combination

of luck and persistence that will allow them to cling on. Her characters seek fulfilment. Seeking doesn't guarantee.

There is a chance, even for the Lewis Percys, to discover a small yet crucial solace in a world as staid as mid-century suburban London. There are people who bring chances to break the quiet, the deadening tick, the staticky wireless, the oppression. The question in Brookner's book, a question she grappled with in most of her novels, remains: what will a person like Lewis do? The chance for connection is there. Will safety and comfort prevail? ♦



*Bushby & Hart*

OUR SCATTERED CORRESPONDENTS

# All Tyranny Must End One Day

What is it like to vote in Serbia? Bojana Gajski recounts her history

In my little Serbian hometown, streets are mostly named after poets and Second World War heroes. The street where I lived and where my parents still live was named after the Laković brothers, Arsen and Stevan, two young communists who had lived and died not far from our house. As my grandmother used to tell us, Arsen and Stevan were shot by the Nazis, in their house, in front of their mother. Such were the stories we grew up with. There were many similar and different ones in a small library which was also in our street and also named after the heroic boys. I first saw their faces when, at six years old and all alone, I went to the library to get my membership card.

The Laković boys were the first to greet me. Their photos were on the shelf by the door. Arsen, the older one, was the cuter. The librarian was really surprised when I said I could already read, in both Cyrillic and Latin script, and I don't think she quite believed me, but she let me choose a book. It was a picture book called *Frog's Getting Married*, and it was about a frog who was getting married. Bouncy, instructive stuff. The marriage of Frogaro. I only chose it because the title in Serbian was alliterative and amused me immensely. I still whisper it sometimes very late at night to make myself laugh.

I took it home, sat at the kitchen table where my older brother was doing his dreaded maths homework, read the frog's story in a few minutes and immediately got up to take it back. My brother shouted behind me that I was supposed to keep the book for a few days if I wanted to be a proper

member of the library. The librarian pretty much repeated his words. I don't know how she had ended up working there. She was uninterested in books and not good with kids, but over the years I grew quite fond of her and fell in love for ever with libraries.

*On voting day, most people dressed in their Sunday best and cast their votes in the large hall of the library. I hid in the room with books, having brought my dad some doughnuts.*

This one was my place of worship, with Arsen and Stevan guarding the entrance, and the Paul Street Boys and Bastian Balthazar Bux waiting inside. (They taught us at school that the first place the Nazis bombed in Belgrade was the National Library.) I was in love with a Hungarian boy who lived right across the road from us, and who later moved.



Summers were endless. I loved Yugoslavia and pop songs in English, hated school and string beans, watched *Indiana Jones* and *Survival*, learned poems about brotherhood and unity, held my fist up to my temple as a sign of greeting, read books and looked at boys. Then my breasts started growing, I got my first period and, as if all that wasn't terrifying enough, witnessed the beginning of bloodshed and the rise of a tyrant.

*I unfolded one of the papers and saw a big swastika drawn next to Slobodan Milošević's name. Someone had obviously already recognized a fascist.*

It was the very start of the nineties and our little library was still a library, only now it also served as a polling station, since the people of Serbia were about to choose their president in the first multi-party elections in decades. As an 'upstanding citizen' and a prominent member of the workers' union, my dad was chosen to be on the local electoral commission. On voting day, most people dressed in their Sunday best and cast their votes in the large hall of the library. I hid in the room with books, having brought my dad some doughnuts. Nobody minded that I was there but wasn't supposed to be; there were no supervisors, no control. Voters showed their IDs, took their ballot papers with candidates' names written in both Cyrillic and Latin script, hid behind screens made of cardboard, circled their fate, my fate, then emerged again, looking serious, said goodbye to the commission and went outside to talk to their neighbours. It all seemed boring and important.

Later, in the evening, I even helped the commission members with the counting. We sat in the room with the books, and by the look on my dad's face I knew he was probably thinking about football and the game he had missed. There was a woman there who would, from time to time, angrily tear up certain ballot papers. I remember feeling disturbed and a little amused by that. With books and Arsen and Stevan watching me, I unfolded one of the papers and saw a big swastika drawn next to Slobodan Milošević's name. Someone had obviously already recognized a fascist. Shocked by that symbol, I held the paper up to show my dad, but the angry lady grabbed it from my hands, glanced at it and tore it up.

Milošević, a banker who had worked in the US, won those elections, of course, and then led us all into a decade of violence, poverty and shame. I later wondered why people had trusted him and how, after years and years of celebrating anti-fascism, they couldn't recognize their enemy, though disguised as a fervent patriot. The country was already in debt, as we later found out, but the economic situation back then wasn't that bad, so it was probably because in the Yugoslavian communist system being a nationalist was taboo. That sort of repression eventually exploded into extreme nationalism and the opportunistic new leader used it very well. By the time most people came to their senses, though some never did, it was too late. The president was clutching at the power, using all means necessary to hold on to it, and we were living the unthinkable. The air stank of hate talk; people stopped laughing, fathers and brothers died in the wars, our country was isolated, the black market flourished, criminals celebrated. I don't remember what we ate. We must have eaten, but I don't remember how my parents got that food. The inflation was record-breaking and the shops empty. Still, I remember there were ads for slimming products everywhere.

I started grammar school. Mine was named after a local poet. Arsen and Stevan had attended, and I later worked there as an English teacher. The majority of people seemed to be against Milošević, but saying so could have got you in a lot of trouble. I grew into a painfully shy, skinny girl who listened to The Doors and rarely spoke in class. That's probably why I so vividly remember saying certain things then. Like answering my Serbian teacher's question about Antigone; angrily and arrogantly calling her tyrant a coward. The teacher stopped me before I compared him to ours. You learn at school, you learn. If you pay attention.

*The bombs fell for days and days. For the first time in my life my passion for the English language abated. I kept hearing in English that I deserved to be punished.*

When I turned eighteen and gained my right to vote, I was already filled to the brim with anger: for the people who still voted for a fascist, for those who were too scared to speak up, for those who made me feel so ashamed.

The little library was no longer a library; the photos of Arsen and Stevan were gone, as were the books. But it was still our polling station. I remember little about the first time I voted. I know I voted against Milošević, but not who I voted for nor how exactly it felt. I remember that I went with my mother and she tells me that I was very nervous, but I know that must have been because I already suffered from a severe anxiety disorder, and also because there was a chance of bumping into this Serbian–Hungarian guy I was in love with, who had also turned eighteen that year and lived near by.

Those were municipal elections and Milošević lost them. However, in his arrogance and lust for power, he refused to acknowledge his defeat. That sparked mass protest in every town in his country, especially in the capital, especially among students. The protesters walked the streets in the bitter cold for months, shouting, demanding, making noise, but all they got were hits and kicks from the police and then, eventually, a *lex specialis*, a special law that lying tyrants pull out from their sleeve after they have cheated at an election. I remember how the best, funniest and most tragic slogans and graffiti appeared at that time. My favourite is still ‘It’s springtime and I live in Serbia’. That guy I was in love with, my neighbour, now lives in The Hague and works for the Tribunal.

The next year, I started studying English at university, moved to a bigger town and became even more of an insecure mess. I listened to Pulp and Moloko and Haustor, wrote, kept silent during lectures, translated, kept silent about how difficult it was for my parents, read and kept silent about how everything hurt. Though it must have been quite obvious.

*As I look back now, I feel like my youth was stolen both by politicians and by anxiety. They’re both masterful thieves of time.*

The president cheated at yet another election. Only some kept silent about it now, but it didn’t help. The media were strictly controlled, punished, directed. There were still protests, people were still being beaten, but you even get used to that. Then, to wake us up, the first air-raid siren howled and all the countries of NATO descended on our mighty homeland.

The bombs fell for days and days, destroying bridges and factories and lives. Foreign TV stations got better ratings. The president himself mostly kept silent and my brother got drafted. For the first time in my life my passion for the English language abated. I kept hearing in English that I deserved to be punished. The NATO officials, journalists and foreign TV viewers used it to say that all Serbs needed to be punished – me, my friends, my family. I kept listening. I had never before heard the term ‘collateral damage’.

After three months of bombs, when the politicians had finally made their deals and tested most of their weapons, our president capitulated and I got my brother back. Only he wasn’t the same.

It seemed, on the other hand, that Milošević was never stronger than in the months following the bombing. We were exhausted. The whole world seemed to be against us and he kept his grip tight. I remember my favourite professor at the university quoting one of the English Romantic poets and saying that ‘all tyranny must end one day, no matter how unbelievable that sounds right now.’ And I remember how we all laughed bitterly.

But then, thanks to some law of physics I cannot name, or the whole Freudian Eros–Thanatos thing, or possibly some financial help from the West, an unexpected thing happened, unexpected for my then self at least. A group of students decided to correct the mistakes they had made during the previous mass protests and formed a youth movement named Otpor – the Serbian word for resistance. Their methods of opposing the autocrat were mostly through the use of humour: witty slogans, written in both Cyrillic and Latin script, the unstoppable desire truly to live, non-violent calls for change, concerts, smiles. Their enthusiasm and jovial disobedience spread through the nation like wildfire. Such hope, such unity, was wonderful to experience.

Everywhere we could see their, our, borrowed symbol – the clenched fist. It was sprayed on to buildings, passed around on stickers, badges, scarfs, hats, it was raised in the air during daily protest walks. They were brave, well organized, cautious and took good care of their members. It wasn’t long before the government called them terrorists. The state-sponsored TV stations called them a lot worse. However, they managed to unite the opposition parties into a coalition.

The presidential election was scheduled for September 2000 and the campaigns that ensued were more than interesting. Milošević stuck to his proven methods of a few visits to factories, some bombastic speeches, subventions and celebration of traditional Serbian values and the glorious past, while Otpor and the opposition parties managed to combine the old and the much-needed new. As their presidential candidate they chose a man who was not well known, but who was ‘very well educated’ and could also be called ‘a man of the people’.

One of our best-known playwrights came up with a story for the voters that there was a line in an old Serbian prophecy book about a man who will save Serbia and whose last name will resemble the name of the village he was born in. Of course, that matched perfectly the whole story concerning the opposition candidate and no one even bothered to check the book. Everyone needed to believe that the saviour had arrived. And, anyway, some Serbs seem always to need to believe that their leader is some sort of deity.

The excitement immediately before the elections was both galvanizing and frightening. Everyone seemed to want to cast their vote. This time there were more supervisors present at polling stations, the atmosphere was both solemn and frivolous, and people wore their Sunday best once more. The results showed that Milošević lost. He, however, refused to admit defeat. Reports were coming of our ballot papers being transported to recycling factories, turned into toilet paper, of cheating, of corruption and threats. Soon the whole country was paralysed by strikes and protests.

On 5 October people from all over the country descended on the capital. It was a much less violent revolution than anyone had expected. The army and the police officials refused to attack their own people – for the first time. Milošević appeared on television, looking all proud and angry, and accepted the will of the people, speaking to us as if we were impudent children. And then he was gone, he was really gone, it seemed. What followed, after the celebrations and without the Enemy, was a sort of chaos. The country was penniless and pillaged and traumatized. The opposition's perfect candidate turned out to be, in a way, almost as bad as Milošević and was soon gone. The new democratic government didn't manage to deal properly with the problems left as a legacy to all of us. They plunged us further into debt, and made our water American and our oil Russian. Life became more peaceful, but it was still very hard, very disheartening. As I look back now, I feel like my youth was stolen both by politicians and by anxiety. They're both masterful thieves of time.

The elections are now quite different to those I remember as a child. They are strictly controlled. There are UV lamps that are used to check your index finger for the electoral stain. There are see-through ballot boxes. And there are no young girls bringing doughnuts to their dads who are in the election commission. I still vote in the former library and some small sadness pinches my soul every time I enter it. At the elections held two years ago just over half the voters turned up and the majority of them voted for the man who was once on Milošević's side, as his information minister, and who is now a moderate nationalist, apparently, and wants us to join the EU. He introduced severe austerity measures and allowed the process of privatization to continue with full force. The same man also won in the snap election held this year. Although an autocrat, he's the perfect servant to everyone, except his people. His best buddy now is Tony

Blair, the same man who once, reportedly, said that Serbian kids should be forbidden from reading Serbian epic poetry.

This has become the land of the old. So many young people have left, and those who stayed are apathetic and disappointed. A large number of them say they do not see the point of voting since, with a divided opposition and among so many candidates, there seems to be no one to vote for. Only against. The greed, corruption and inequality are overwhelming, which, ironically enough, finally makes me feel a part of this world.

I now live in a house on the corner of a street named after a poet and a street named after an anti-fascist hero. Unfortunately, I will probably have to sell it since I can no longer pay the mortgage. Debt bondage is not as sexy as it may sound.

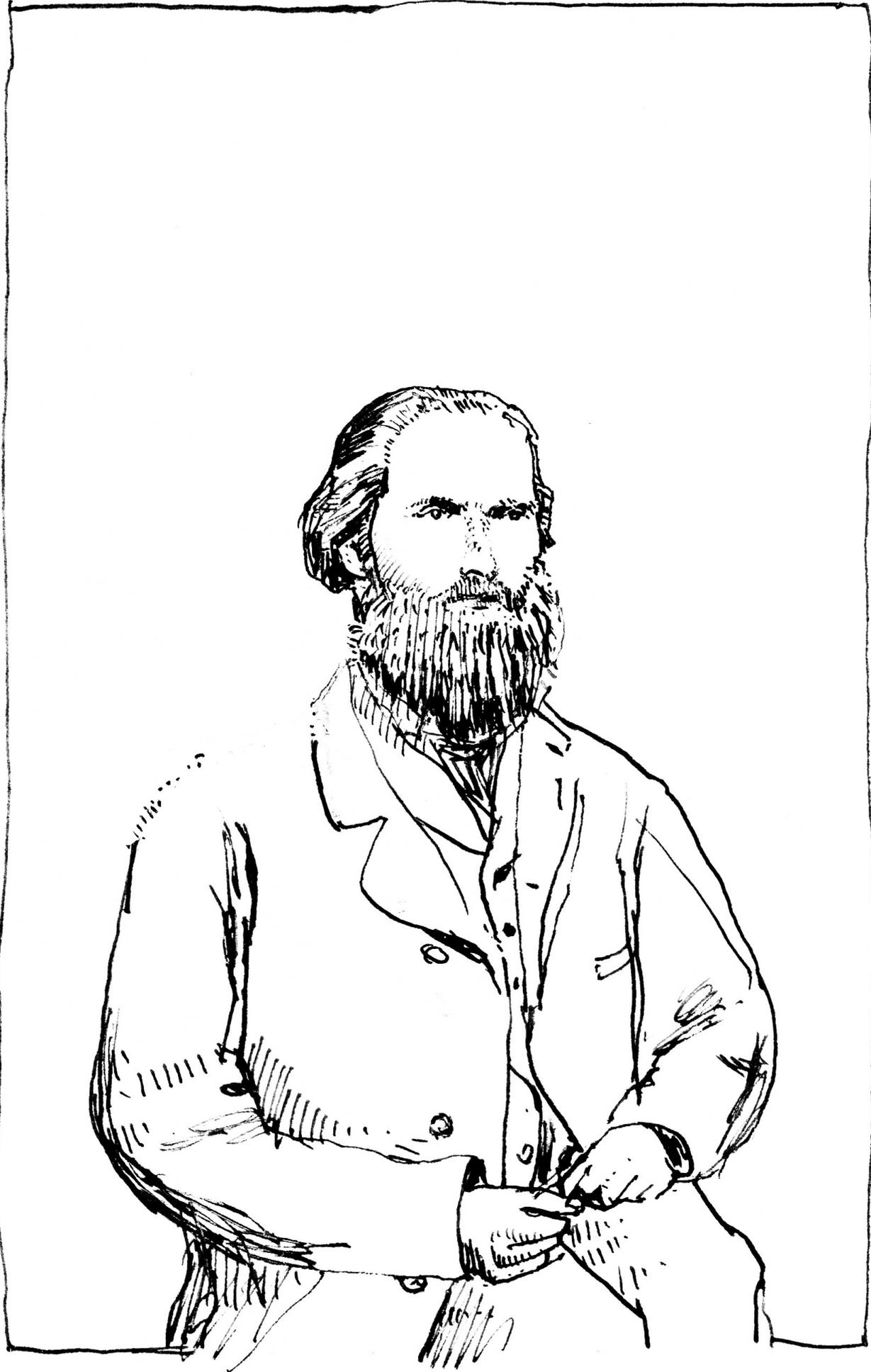
I've got to know my anxiety disorder very well, for my mind is a tyrant.

For the first time in my life I've gained some weight and I am no longer skinny. I have finally discovered the full power of curves.

There is no guy I am in love with.

I work as a teacher. I still translate, I still write.

And I sometimes wonder what sort of person I would be if my country didn't go through such difficult times, and if that first time people had voted for someone else to lead us. Would I be less cynical and dramatic, more optimistic and carefree? Would I still wince every time someone in a foreign country asked me where I was from? Would I always be worried that there won't be enough food? And would I still care so much for books and music and seek beauty everywhere, as if my life depended on it? ♦



ON VOTING

# Against Elections

When it comes to democracy, have we lost our way?

By David Van Reybrouck

*Why do we hold elections? Why do governments in the west export elections to other parts of the world? Is this process of choosing a politician's name from a ballot effective, or have we forgotten why this practice arose in the first place? And seriously: if we've left much of the 18th century behind, why continue with this particular tradition? We've heard the usual defence: elections are imperfect but better than any other option. But could there a better way to enact democracy?*

*With his book, Against Elections, David Van Reybrouck proposes an alternative. In this extract he argues we've arrived at a state of electoral fundamentalism, blindly in thrall to an outdated ritual that is ill equipped for the challenges of our times. This November, the US will conduct an election shaped by the echo chambers of social media, an election that would be unrecognizable to those who introduced the process.*

**E**lectoral fundamentalism is an unshakeable belief in the idea that democracy is inconceivable without elections and elections are a necessary and fundamental precondition when speaking of democracy. Electoral fundamentalists refuse to regard elections as a means of taking part in democracy, seeing them instead as an end in themselves, as a holy doctrine with an intrinsic, inalienable value.

This blind faith in the ballot box as the ultimate base on which popular sovereignty rests is seen most vividly of all in international diplomacy. When Western donor countries hope that countries ravaged by conflict, like Congo, Iraq, Afghanistan or East Timor, will become democracies, what they really mean is this: they must hold elections, preferably on the Western model, with voting booths, ballot papers and ballot boxes, with parties, campaigns and coalitions, with lists of candidates, polling stations and sealing wax, just like we do, only over there, and then they will receive money from us. Local democratic and proto-democratic institutions (village meetings, traditional conflict mediation or ancient jurisprudence) stand no chance. These things may have their value in encouraging a peaceful and collective discussion, but the money will be shut off unless our own tried and tested recipe is adhered to – rather in the way that traditional medicine must back off as soon as Western medicine turns up.

If you look at the recommendations of Western donors, it's as if democracy is a kind of export product, off the peg, in handy packaging, ready for dispatch. Democracy becomes an Ikea kit for 'free and fair elections', to be put together by the recipient, with or without the help of the instructions enclosed.

And if the resulting piece of furniture is lopsided, uncomfortable to sit on or falls apart? Then it's the fault of the customer, not the distant producer.

That elections can have all kinds of outcomes in states which are fragile, including violence, ethnic tensions, criminality and corruption, seems of secondary importance, and that elections do not automatically foster democracy but may instead prevent or destroy it is conveniently forgotten. We insist that in every country in the world people must traipse off to the polling stations, no matter how much collateral damage may result. Our electoral fundamentalism really does take the form of a new, global evangelism. Elections are the sacraments of that new faith, a ritual regarded as a vital necessity in which the form is more important than the content.

*For almost three thousand years people have been experimenting with democracy and only in the last two hundred have they practiced it exclusively by holding elections.*

This focus on elections is actually rather odd. For almost three thousand years people have been experimenting with democracy and only in the last two hundred have they practiced it exclusively by holding elections. Yet we regard elections as the only valid method. Why? Force of habit is at play here, of course, but there is a more fundamental cause, based on the fact that no one can deny that elections have worked pretty well over the past two centuries. Despite a number of notoriously bad outcomes, they've very often made democracy possible and they've brought order to the laborious quest for a credible balance between the contrasting demands of efficiency and legitimacy.

However, what is often forgotten is that elections originated in a completely different context from that in which they have to function today. Fundamentalists generally have little historical insight, assuming their own dogmas always held good, and electoral fundamentalists therefore have a poor knowledge of the history of democracy. This is orthodoxy without retrospection. In fact we badly need to take a look back.

When the supporters of the American and French revolutions proposed elections as a way of getting to know 'the will of the people', there were as yet no political parties, no laws regarding universal franchise, no commercial mass media, let alone social media. In fact the inventors of electoral-representative democracy had no idea that any of these things would come into existence.

There was a time when Europe had no citizens, only subjects. From the Middle Ages until well into the eighteenth century – here we are painting with a broad brush – power lay with a sovereign ruler, excepting the Dutch, Florentine and Venetian republics, which we will leave aside for now. In his palace, fort or castle, the ruler, perhaps with the help of a few nobles or councillors, took decisions about the affairs of his country. His decisions were conveyed to the market square by a messenger, who announced them to anyone willing to listen. The relationship between power and the masses was a one-way street, and this remained the case from feudalism to absolutism.

But over the course of the centuries a 'public sphere' emerged, to borrow a phrase and a theory from German



sociologist Jürgen Habermas. Subjects resisted the top-down approach and gathered in public to discuss affairs of state. In the eighteenth century, the century of enlightened despotism, events gathered momentum. Habermas has described how places developed where people could discuss public matters. In central European coffee houses, at German *Tischgemeinschaften*, in French restaurants and British pubs, the affairs of the day were debated. The public sphere took shape in new institutions such as cafés, theatres, opera houses, but perhaps most of all in that peculiar invention of the time, the newspaper. The political awareness that emerged during the Renaissance came to characterize larger and larger groups. The citizen was born.

The American and French revolutions of 1776 and 1789 represent the high point of this development. A rebellious citizenry threw off the yoke of the British and French crowns and decided that the people were sovereign, not the king. To give the people a voice (or at least the bourgeois segment of the population, since the franchise was still very limited), a formal procedure was invented, the election, a procedure until then mainly used to choose a new pope. Voting was familiar as a means of achieving unanimity among a group of like-minded people, such as cardinals, but in politics it would now have to promote consensus between people seen as virtuous within their own circles. For a citizen of the early twenty-first century it takes a certain amount of imagination to conceive of a time when elections were not there to produce arguments but to promote unity. The public space par excellence – the place where individuals could speak in complete freedom for the sake of all – was called the parliament. Edmund Burke said of it: ‘Parliament is not a congress of ambassadors from different and hostile interests; which interests each must maintain, as an agent and advocate, against other agents and advocates; but parliament is a deliberative assembly of one nation, with one interest, that of the whole.’ Even Jean-Jacques Rousseau, with whom Burke disagreed on countless matters, was of the same opinion: ‘in proportion to the degree of concord which reigns in the assemblies, that is, the nearer opinion approaches unanimity, the more the general will predominates; while tumults, dissensions, and long debates declare the ascendancy of private interests and the declining situation of the State.’ Parliamentarianism was the late-eighteenth-century citizenry’s answer to the absolutism of the *ancien régime*. It stood for a form of indirect, representative democracy. The enfranchised ‘people’ (meaning the bourgeois elite) chose its representatives and those representatives promoted the public interest in parliament. Elections, representation of the people and press freedom went hand in hand.

Over the next two centuries, this eighteenth-century method went through five structural transformations; political parties arose, universal suffrage was introduced, organized civil society grew, commercial media drowned out the public arena and social media added their voices

to the clamour. It goes without saying that the external economic context is of great relevance too, as in times of crisis enthusiasm for democracy ebbs away (in our own time between the wars) whereas in times of prosperity the tide rises again.

Political parties emerged only after 1850. Of course there were already fault lines in the young democracies, such as between city-dwellers and provincials, between the money-rich and the land-rich, between Liberals and Catholics or between federalists and anti-federalists. But only towards the end of the nineteenth century did these groups evolve into clearly defined, formal groupings. There were still no mass parties, only executive parties with a modest number of members and the ambition to govern, but this soon changed, and although most constitutions do not mention them at all, they quickly became the most important players on the political pitch. Socialist parties, for example, became the greatest advocates of universal suffrage. Its introduction (in 1917 in the case of Belgium and the Netherlands, in 1918 in the United Kingdom, although in each case only for men) represented a structural transformation of the electoral system. Elections became a battle between different interest groups in society, each trying to gain the support of as large a segment of the electorate as possible. Elections, originally intended to promote unanimity, now became arenas for candidates who fought each other fiercely. The clash of the parties had begun.

*Public electoral debate is a tightly controlled spectacle, managed by rival teams of professionals expert in the techniques of persuasion, and considering a small range of issues selected by those teams.*

After the First World War, love of electoral democracy cooled markedly. The economic crisis of the 1920s and 1930s fragmented support and anti-parliamentary, totalitarian models gained in popularity all over Europe.

No one could have suspected that after the worldwide conflagration of 1940–45, democracy would flourish again, but the after-effects of the war and the enormous growth in prosperity of the 1950s and 1960s made many people in the

West receptive to a reintroduction of the parliamentary system. In the post-war years large mass parties dominated, and they held the structures of the state in their hands. Through a network of intermediary organizations (unions, corporations, state-controlled health services, even school networks and their own party media) they succeeded in being close to the lives of individual citizens. The public sphere was largely in the hands of this organized civil society. Governments owned the biggest and newest mass media (radio and television), but parties were able to participate through directorships, broadcasting slots or their own broadcasting organizations. All this resulted in an extremely stable system with great party loyalty and predictable voting behaviour.

*Who now translates grass-roots complaints into policy proposals at the top? Who now distils the tumult into clear ideas?*

The equilibrium came to an end as a result of neo-liberal thinking, which reshaped public space radically in the 1980s and 1990s. Not civil society but the free market was now the main architect and this applied to countless domains of public life, especially the media. Party newspapers disappeared or were bought up by media concerns, commercial broadcasters entered the field and even public broadcasters increasingly adopted market thinking. There was a true explosion of media. Viewing, reading and listening figures became hugely important; they were the daily share price index of public opinion. Commercial mass media emerged as the most important builders of social consensus and organized civil society lost ground, whether because unions and state health services adopted a market model or because governments preferred to talk to citizens directly rather than via social partners. The consequences were predictable, as citizens became consumers and elections hazardous. Parties, especially when they were financed largely by governments (often to limit the risk of corruption) saw themselves less and less as intermediaries between the masses and power and instead settled into the fringes of the state apparatus. To retain their places there they had to turn to the voter every few years to top up their legitimacy and elections became a battle fought out in the media for the favour of voters. The passions aroused among the populace diverted attention from a far more fundamental emotion, an increasing irritation with

anything and everything pertaining to politics. ‘It would be hard to find someone who wasn’t cynical about the nature of these media-corporate spectacles that are presented to us as elections,’ said American theoretician Michael Hardt a couple of years ago. ‘Elections are just a beauty contest for ugly people,’ was the sarcastic comment doing the rounds on the internet.

In 2004 British sociologist Colin Crouch came up with the term ‘post-democracy’, to describe the new order controlled by the mass media:

Under this model, while elections certainly exist and can change governments, public electoral debate is a tightly controlled spectacle, managed by rival teams of professionals expert in the techniques of persuasion, and considering a small range of issues selected by those teams. The mass of citizens plays a passive, quiescent, even apathetic part, responding only to the signals given them. Behind the spectacle of the electoral game, politics is really shaped in private by interaction between elected governments and elites that overwhelmingly represent business interests.

The Italy of Berlusconi undoubtedly comes closest to fitting the definition of the post-democratic state but elsewhere too we have seen processes that tend in that direction. Since the end of the twentieth century, citizens have started looking like their nineteenth-century predecessors. Because civil society has become weaker, a gulf has opened up again between the state and the individual. The channelling institutions have gone. Who now bundles the multiplicity of individual preferences? Who now translates grass-roots complaints into policy proposals at the top? Who now distils the tumult into clear ideas? There is pejorative talk of ‘individualism’, as if it’s the fault of the citizen that collective structures have fallen away, while in essence this is all about the fact that the people have become the masses again, the choir a cacophony.

It’s not over yet. After the rise of the political parties, the introduction of universal suffrage, the rise and fall of organized civil society and the coup by commercial media, another factor was added at the start of the twenty-first century: social media. The word ‘social’ is rather misleading, since Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Flickr, Tumblr and Pinterest are as much commercial media as CNN, FOX or Euronews, with the difference that the owners don’t want you to watch and listen but to write and share. Their main aim is to keep you on the site for as long as possible, since that’s good for the advertisers. This explains the importance attached to ‘friends’ or ‘followers’, the addictive dynamics of ‘likes’ and ‘retweets’, the continual stream of reports on what others are doing, whom you ought to get to know and which topics are trending.

But although social media are commercial media, they have a dynamism very much their own. At the beginning of the twenty-first century citizens could follow the political theatre minute by minute on radio, television or the internet but today they can respond to it from second to second and mobilize others. The culture of immediate reporting now has instant feedback resulting in even more of a cacophony. The work of the public figure, and especially the elected politician, is not made easier by any of this. He or she can immediately see whether new proposals appeal to the citizen, and indeed just how many people the citizen can whip up. New technology gives people a voice (allowing Mubarak and Ben Ali to join the conversation), but this new political involvement only makes the electoral system creak at the seams all the more.

Commercial and social media also reinforce one another; continually picking up each other's news and bouncing it back, they create an atmosphere of perpetual mud-slinging. Tough competition, loss of advertising revenue and falling sales prompt the remaining commercial media to produce increasingly vehement reports about increasingly exaggerated conflicts, while their editorial boards become smaller, younger and cheaper. For radio and television, national politics has become a daily soap, a radio play with free actors, and while editors determine to some extent the framing, the script and the typesetting, politicians, with varying degrees of success, try to slant things this way or that. The most popular politicians are those who succeed in altering the script and reframing the debate, in other words bend the media to their will. There is space for some improvisation, which is then called topicality.

In the written press the entanglement is even more profound. Newspapers are losing readers and political parties are losing members. The old players of democracy are bobbing about amid the wreckage, clinging to each other, not realizing that by doing so they are only dragging each other further down. Tied as it is to formats, circulation figures, shareholders and obligatory hotheadedness, the free press is far less free than it thinks and the outcome is inevitable.

The collective hysteria of commercial media, social media and political parties has made election fever permanent and has serious consequences for the workings of democracy. Efficiency suffers under the electoral calculus, legitimacy under the continual need to distinguish oneself, while time and again the electoral system ensures that the long term and the common interest lose out to the short term and party interests. Elections were once invented to make democracy possible, but in these circumstances they would seem to be a definite hindrance.

As if destined to rid the system once and for all of any hope of tranquillity, the financial crisis of 2008 and the economic and monetary crisis that followed it added fuel to the flames. Populism, technocracy and anti-parliamentarianism have

made their appearance and although not yet at the level of the 1930s, similarities to the situation in the 1920s are becoming more and more striking.

If the Founding Fathers in the United States and the heroes of the French Revolution had known in what context their method would be forced to function 250 years later, they would no doubt have prescribed a different model. Imagine having to develop a system today that would express the will of the people. Would it really be a good idea to have them all queue up at polling stations every four or five years with a bit of card in their hands and go into a dark booth to put a mark, not next to ideas but next to names on a list, names of people about whom restless reporting had been going on for months in a commercial environment that profits from restlessness? Would we still have the nerve to call what is in fact a bizarre, archaic ritual 'a festival of democracy'?

*Since we have reduced democracy to representative democracy and representative democracy to elections, a valuable system is now mired in deep difficulties.*

Since we have reduced democracy to representative democracy and representative democracy to elections, a valuable system is now mired in deep difficulties. For the first time since the American and French revolutions, the next election has become more important than the last election, an astonishing transformation. An election gives only a very provisional mandate these days, and making the best of the system we have is becoming increasingly difficult, as democracy is brittle, more so than at any time since the Second World War. If we don't watch out, it will gradually become a dictatorship of elections.

This process should not really surprise us. How many inventions of the late eighteenth century are still of much use in the present day – the stage coach, the air balloon, the snuffbox? It may not be a popular conclusion but it must be understood that nowadays elections are primitive and a democracy that reduces itself to elections is in mortal decline. It is indeed rather as if we were to limit air travel to the hot-air balloon, even though there are now high-tension cables, private planes, new climatic patterns, tornadoes and space stations.

New platforms are creating a new world and now the key question is, who will command the stage? Until the invention of printing, just a few hundred individuals – abbots, princes, kings – decided which texts were to be copied and which not, but the arrival of printing meant that suddenly thousands of people had that power. The old order was brought down by it and Gutenberg’s invention facilitated the transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance. With the arrival of social media it seems as if everyone has a printing press today, even as if everyone has a scriptorium at his or her disposal. The citizen is no longer a reader but an editor-in-chief, and this has caused a profound power shift which means large, established companies can be brought to their knees by the actions of a few dissatisfied customers. Apparently unshakeable dictatorships lose their grip on their populations once people organize themselves through social media. Political parties no longer bring



voters together but are torn apart by them, as their classic patriarchal model of representation no longer works at a time when citizens have more of a say than ever before.

Representative democracy is in essence a vertical model, but the twenty-first century is increasingly horizontal. Dutch professor of transition management Jan Rotmans said recently: ‘We go from centralized to decentralized, from vertical to horizontal, from top-down to bottom-up. It has taken us more than a hundred years to build this centralized, top-down, vertical society. That whole way of thinking is now being turned upside down. There is a great deal we need to learn and unlearn. The greatest barrier is in our heads.’

Elections are the fossil fuel of politics. Whereas once they gave democracy a huge boost, much like the boost that oil gave the economy, it now it turns out they cause colossal problems of their own. If we don’t urgently reconsider the nature of our democratic fuel, a huge systemic crisis threatens. If we obstinately continue to hold on to the electoral process at a time of economic malaise, inflammatory media and rapidly changing culture, we will be almost wilfully undermining the democratic process.

How did we reach this point? ♦

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POEM

# Pulpo

By Martha Sprackland

In the supermarket upturned octopuses  
lie on stones of ice as on a cold beach  
or an operating table. Obscene, as they should be  
with their legs splayed, their underside  
slick soft-blush-pink as a cunt.  
Their anonymity is correct,  
that they can turn over onto their back  
and be examined under market lights,  
all their petite grasping suckers  
undulating, pulsing, picking up and  
dropping the little clicking chips of ice.

POEM

# Superposition and Collapse

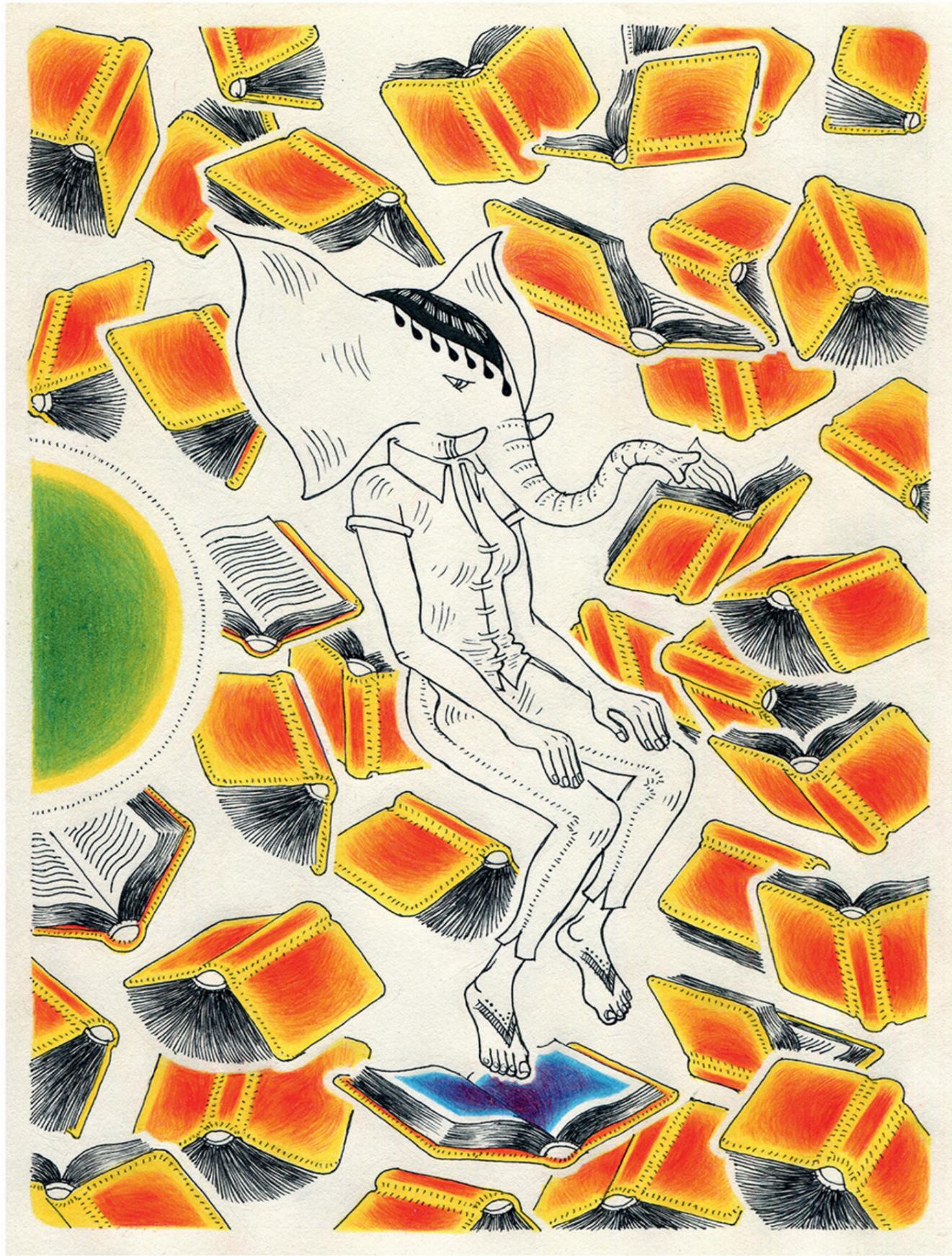
By Martha Sprackland

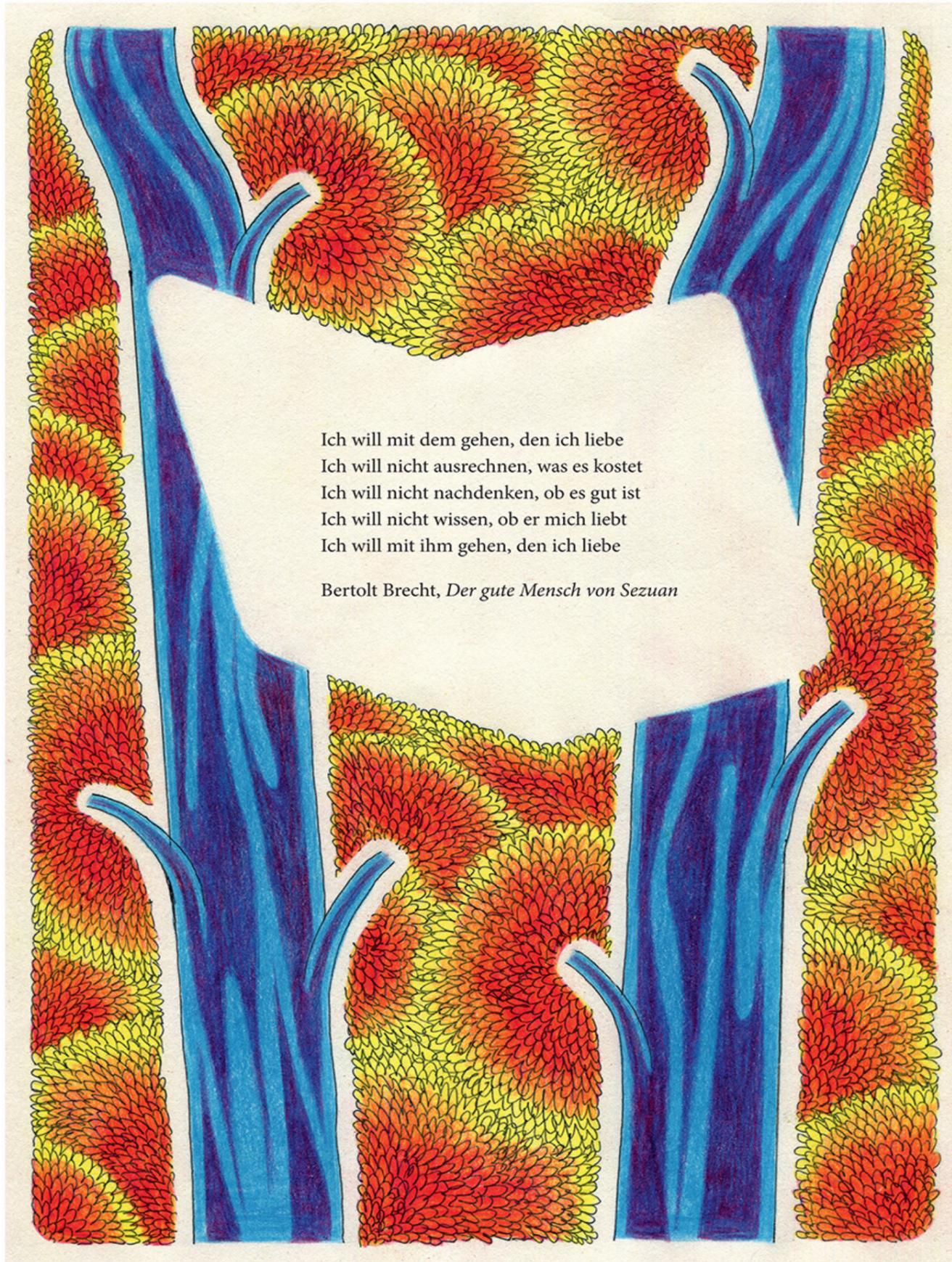
I drop it at the bus stop, not drunk, I don't think,  
just cack-handed and carrying too much tat.  
Face-down beside the kerb, it looks unbroken.  
I could leave it there, like Schrödinger's famous cat,

the damage quantum, both smashed and not-smashed.  
Like the robin egg child-me found down at the rec,  
blue and immaculate, couched in leaves and shredded trash.  
I knelt, heart in mouth, beside my lunchbox and rucksack

to take it up, and back to a box of cotton wool to see it hatch  
and (like in the books) to have a robin as my very own.  
Here and now, I step into the road, dazed and detached,  
the 38 blaring like a drunk as it rolls away to town.

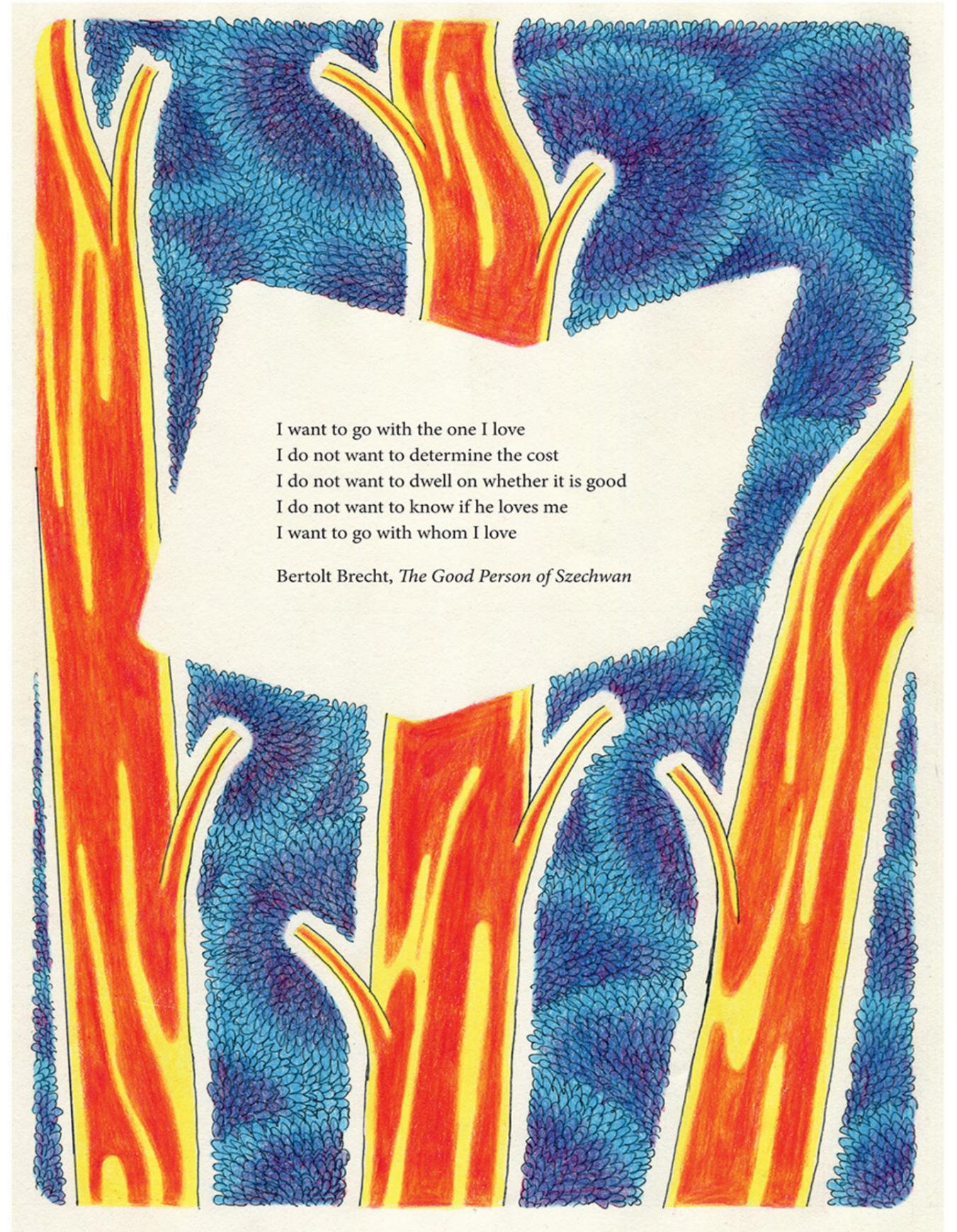
Carefully, *carefully*. I lift the phone and flip it like an ace.  
Another world collapses in my hands, and is erased.





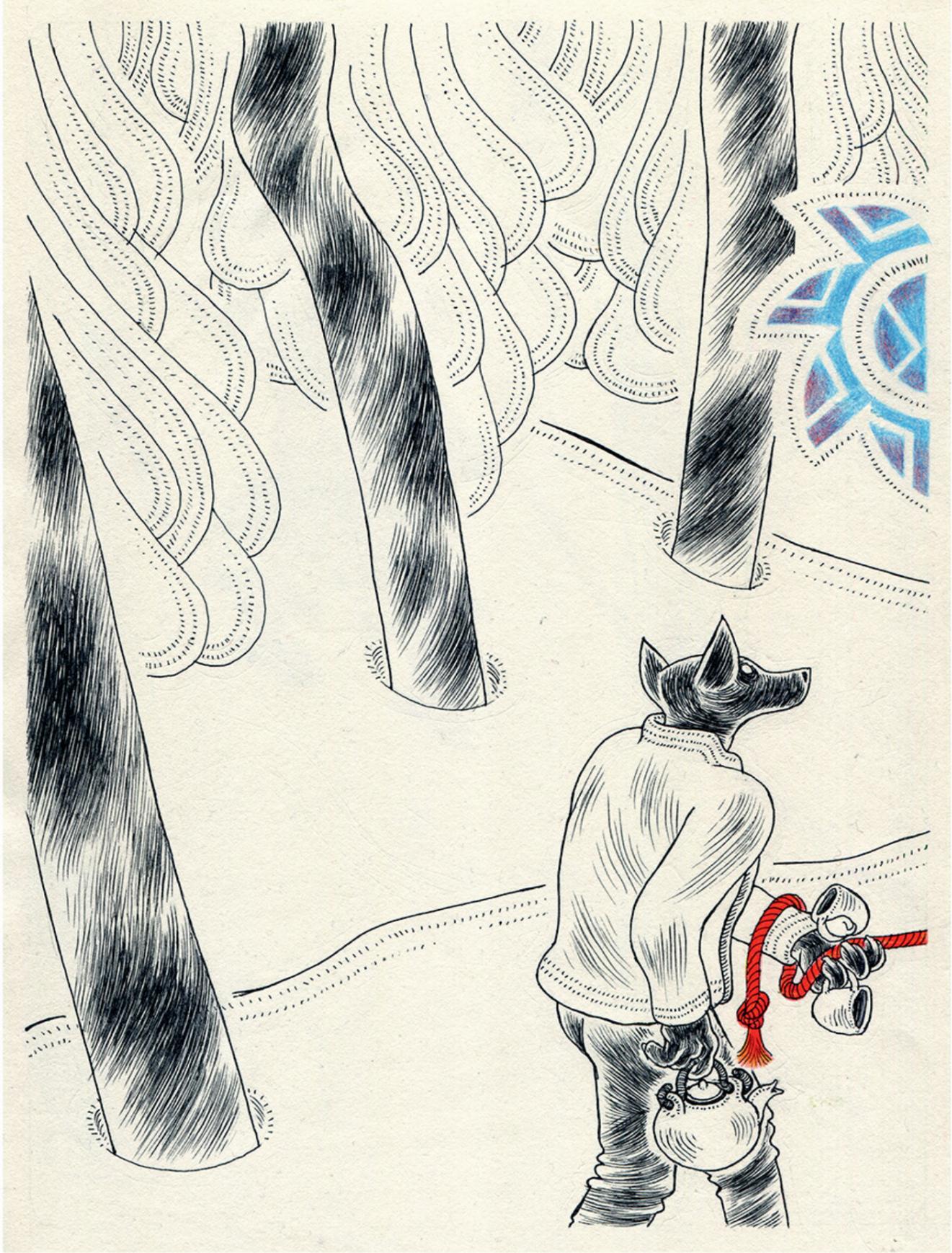
Ich will mit dem gehen, den ich liebe  
Ich will nicht ausrechnen, was es kostet  
Ich will nicht nachdenken, ob es gut ist  
Ich will nicht wissen, ob er mich liebt  
Ich will mit ihm gehen, den ich liebe

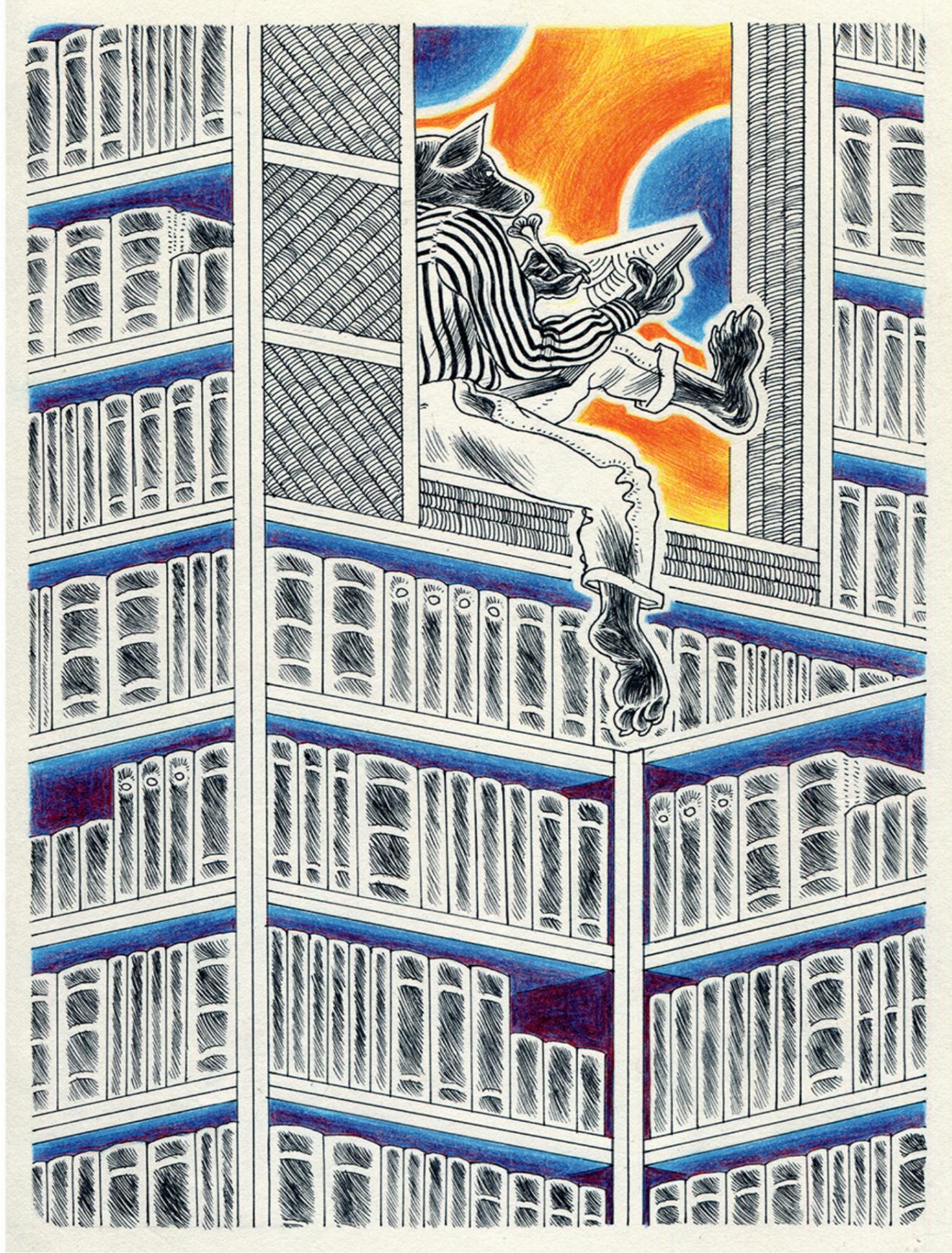
Bertolt Brecht, *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan*



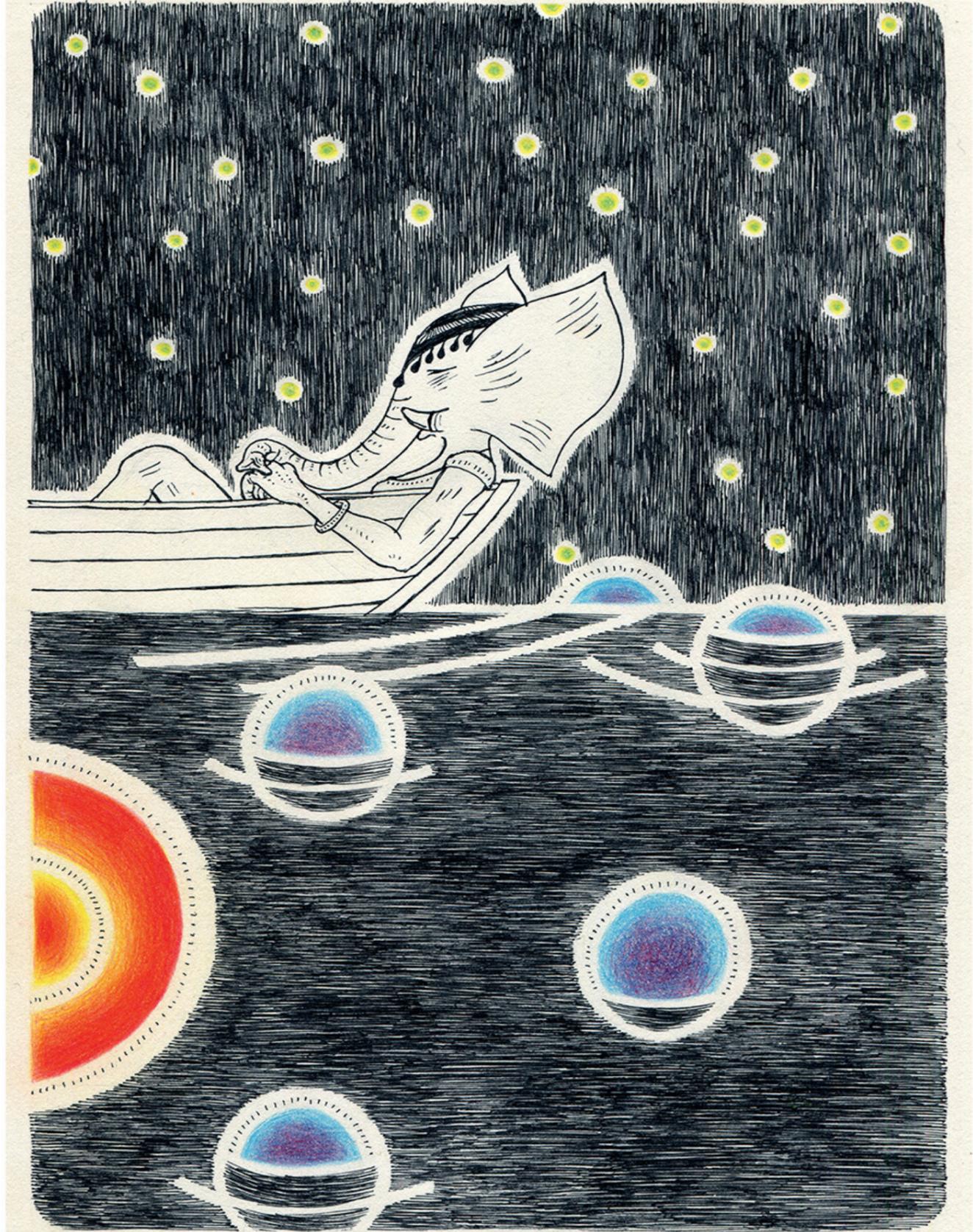
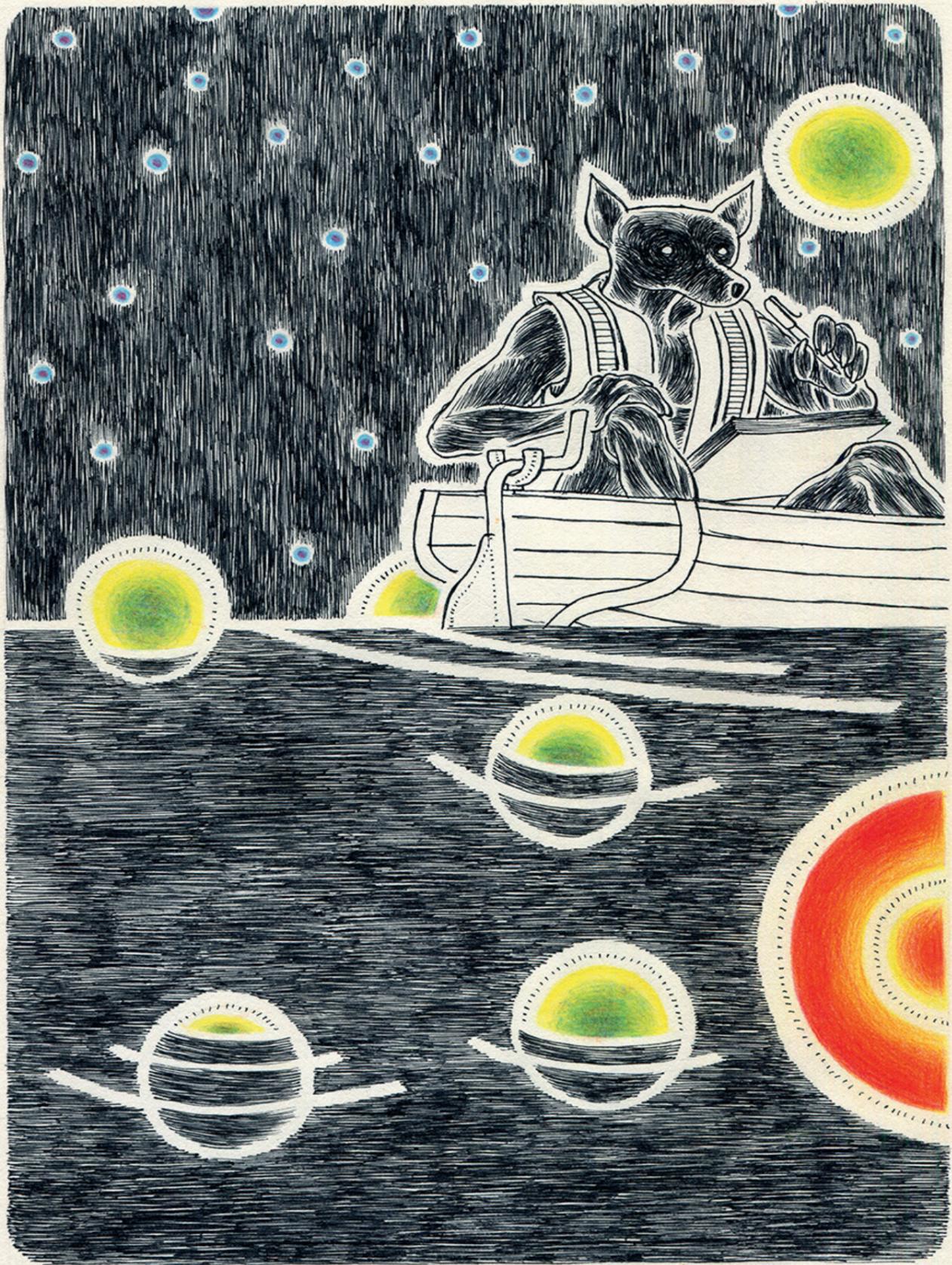
I want to go with the one I love  
I do not want to determine the cost  
I do not want to dwell on whether it is good  
I do not want to know if he loves me  
I want to go with whom I love

Bertolt Brecht, *The Good Person of Szechwan*

















ON SOMETHING

# On Manic Depression

For Jay Griffiths, manic depression causes an incandescent sensitivity. 'My nerves are exposed,' she writes, 'the world is ferociously present.'

*Jay Griffiths's book Tristimania tells the story of a devastating year-long episode of manic depression, culminating in a long solo pilgrimage across Spain. From a desperate night alone in the snow-blanketed countryside, tempted by a roomful of glinting knives, to the tender salvation of poetry, friendship and pilgrimage, her account is an intimate and raw portrait of the psyche in crisis.*

**W**hy write about that terrible year? a friend of mine asked me recently. How can you want to revisit it?

– Why would you climb the mountains of the mind? Because they are there, my friend, because they are there.

Because manic depression seduces, like mountains do, and kills, as they do. Because, too, it is survivable with skilful help.

Because this condition can be seen as a form of illness, but it is not only an illness; it also hurls the mind into a world of metaphor, and to regard it solely as a medical issue is to devalue it and to demean it.

Because this condition is a bittersweet privilege, a paradox of insight and madness; because it breaks your heart wide open and cuts you to the quick, yet there is honey on the razor's edge. Because this condition is often portrayed as simply one of emotional highs and lows, but there is far more to it: it alters how one hears music, sees art and reads poetry, and I want to explore the psyche's accents and alterations.

Because manic depression seems to me a misunderstood condition, and I want to describe it for those who have never experienced it but who perhaps know someone with it. Inevitably, I must portray my own experience, but it is an illness with considerable commonality and I want to describe my journey through it for those who have experienced their own journeys, because what is individual can speak to the general, and if this book can befriend just one person in that terrifying loneliness, it will be worth writing.

Because, at the heart of it all, I lost my words and found them again with a gratitude and a devotion which any writer living in service to their art may understand. Language and literature are the longest loves of my life and in their signs I saw my way. If this book leans on them – on etymology, on poetry and on precise and precious words, it is because I know nothing wiser, I love nothing so much and I trust nothing more than the truths of language, the greatest artwork ever made, created over thousands of years with the signatures of millions.

How to describe this crazed state? What are the words which capture manic depression, particularly in its mixed-state form? What are the terms through which one feels understood and by means of which other people could understand? 'Tristimania', coined by eighteenth-century American psychiatrist Benjamin Rush, tells it true to me.

Rush may have meant it as a precise shading of melancholia, but it works perfectly for the *tristesse*, the distress coupled with mania, which a mixed-state bipolar episode provokes.

*Some people find manic-depressive breakdown a form of spiritual experience, offering a sense of divine insight. Many people with manic depression create (or need) music and poetry.*

The Old English term *wōd*, meaning ‘mad’ or ‘frenzied’, was replaced by the word ‘mad’ in Middle English. ‘Mad’ denotes the crazy state, but it connotes little. *Wōd*, though, carries connotations and etymological links which give insight of a whole other order into the madness of manic depression. The Indo-European root is *wet* – to blow, inspire and spiritually arouse. *Wet* is the source of the Latin *vates*, meaning ‘seer’ or ‘poet’, and also source of the Old Irish word *faith*, meaning ‘poet’. *Wōd* is linked to Old English *wop*, meaning ‘sound’, ‘melody’, ‘song’, and cognate with Old Norse *óðr*, meaning ‘mad, frantic, furious, violent’. (As a noun, *óðr* means ‘mind, wit, soul, sense’ and ‘song, poetry’.) *Wōd* is linked to Odin, too, god of war and wisdom, shamanism and poetry. The Roman historian Tacitus considered that Mercury was the chief god of the Germanic tribes, almost certainly because he saw in Odin the qualities of Mercury. Odin, like Mercury, was a ‘guide of souls’ and was said to have brought poetry to humankind. *Wōd* also gives us *Wōdensday*, Wednesday, the day of Mercury, and – appropriately – this was the day of the week when I had been at my most *wōd*.

Some people find manic-depressive breakdown a form of spiritual experience, offering a sense of divine insight. Many people with manic depression create (or need) music and poetry. With the word *wōd*, everything links and the savage beauties of this madness become more eloquent. Looked at one way, it is medical. Looked at another, it is spiritual. Looked at a third way, it is poetry. Or, indeed, love.

In medical terms, like most people with manic depression, most of the time I have no symptoms. Also, like many people with it, I can see a genetic pattern. An episode of manic depression can be seen to have a medical or psychological aetiology including being affected by lack of

sleep, stress, alcohol and psychological trauma (particularly involving humiliation), or loss. Psychologist Richard P. Bentall writes of studies which show that there is a high rate of ‘intrusive’ events in the weeks preceding psychosis, including unwanted sexual propositions. People with manic depression also have an increased sensitivity to light and, according to Bentall, sleep deprivation may provoke mania; he also notes that before the advent of modern lighting, when people were more accustomed to longer nocturnal darkneses, the full moon would have had more of an effect on insomnia, and there would surely have been a greater link between the lunar and the lunatic.

Lovesickness was once considered to be a medical illness. Its symptoms included loss of appetite, headache, fever, palpitations and insomnia. Some medieval writings describe lovesickness in terms of symptoms which today would be seen as those of bipolar disorder: so a person diagnosed as lovesick may display rapid mood swings from manic laughter to the anguished weeping of depression.

The electricity of mania coursing through you does predispose you to fall in love and, yes, in the months of recovery, I did ‘fall’ in love. Or, rather, slip up on a banana skin; daftly, inadvertently, unrequitably, mistakenly, seriocomically, as the guy in question was completely off limits.

This particular unrequitable love wasn’t in the slightest bit sad. I didn’t mind. In fact, I quite liked it, because it was one of the ultimately safe love affairs, like my other grand passions for Rupert Brooke, Michel de Montaigne, Dafydd ap Gwilym and (life-long) Shakespeare. The thing about love is this: I love being in love. I love loving people and animals, words, flowers and jokes. I love the way love courses through the spirit, how it brightens everything around you, how it inspirits you, lifts the drooping head of aquilegia, raises the downcast expression, brings more colours to the rainbow. This is what manic depression does, too. In the throes of it, I feel an incandescent sensitivity by which everything is only too much alive and calling. My nerves are exposed: the world is ferociously present. In love with mania as I was, falling in love with a person was something of a misattribution.

Various anthropologists have argued that, although our society interprets certain psychological conditions as a medical issue, other cultures have construed exactly the same states of mind as shamanic, divinely inspired wisdom, and those possessed of such insight may be honoured. Professor of psychiatry Richard Warner, noting the work of Mircea Eliade and Black Elk, describes how: ‘In non-industrial cultures throughout the world, the hallucinations and altered states of consciousness produced by psychosis, fasting, sleep deprivation, social isolation and contemplation and hallucinogenic drug use are often a prerequisite for gaining shamanic power.’ As Mircea Eliade writes, mental illness reveals a shamanic vocation, and shamanic initiation

is equivalent to the cure: 'The famous Yakut shaman Tüspüt (that is, 'fallen from the sky') had been ill at the age of twenty; he began to sing, and felt better... he needed to shamanize; if he went for a long time without doing so, he did not feel well.' (An Icarus, by any other name, would fly as high and fall as steeply.)

Dr Orhan Öztürk, a Turkish psychiatrist, writes: 'A person may be hallucinated or delusional, but as long as he is not destructive or very unstable he may not be considered insane... Such a person may sometimes be considered to have a supernatural capacity for communication with the spirit world and may therefore be regarded with reverence and awe.'

The medieval historian Giraldus Cambrensis (Gerald of Wales) describes a phenomenon which would most likely be understood as mental illness today but which in his own time was taken as prophecy:

Among the Welsh there are certain individuals called Awenyddion who behave as if they are possessed... When you consult them about some problem, they immediately go into a trance and lose control of their senses... if you listen carefully to what they say you will



**Schneectady**

receive the solution to your problem... They seem to receive this gift of divination through visions which they see in their dreams. Some of them have the impression that honey or sugary milk is being smeared on their mouths; others say that a sheet of paper with words written on it is pressed against their lips.

American anthropologist Ruth Benedict describes how Siberian shamans 'are individuals who by submission to the will of the spirits have been cured of a grievous illness... Some, during the period of the call, are violently insane for several years; others irresponsible to the point where they have to be constantly watched lest they wander off in the snow and freeze to death... It is the shamanistic practice which constitutes their cure.'

In the time of Plato and Socrates, the gods were thought to communicate with poets and priests through inspired madness and *enthusiasm*; the passion of the god within, *entheos*. 'Madness comes from God, whereas sober sense is merely human', according to Socrates, in *Phaedrus*; far from being stigmatizing, 'Madness, provided it comes as the gift of heaven, is the channel by which we receive the greatest blessings.' Dionysus, meanwhile, subject to great agony and equally great ecstasy, is the god in the grip of this wildness. Robert Burton, author of *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, wrote of Aristotle's view that melancholia caused men to experience 'many times a divine ravishment, and a kind of *enthusiasmus*... which stirreth them up to be excellent Philosophers, Poets, Prophets, etc.'

In *Ion*, Plato has Socrates say: 'For the poet is a light and winged and holy thing, and there is no invention in him until he has been inspired and is out of his senses, and the mind is no longer in him... for not by art does the poet sing, but by power divine.' Oscar Wilde referred to 'the old fancy which made the poet's art an enthusiasm, a form of divine possession'.

For the early Church Fathers, David was the greatest of all poets, able to move between divine gift and human consciousness. Historical figures such as the medieval Margery Kempe, who would today be viewed as psychotic, were considered mystics. If you see visions, are you delusional and sick, or a spiritual visionary? Ancient Norse bards considered poetry to be a gift of the gods which was then shaped by human skill. Traditional Arabian belief in djinns suggested a sense of being possessed by spirits who gave people knowledge but could also drive them mad.

Alexandre Dumas wrote of the poet Gérard de Nerval's episodes of madness: 'Our poor Gérard, for the men of science he is a sick man and needs treatment, while for us he is simply more the storyteller, more the dreamer, more spiritual, more happy or more sad than ever.' The link between manic depression and the artistic temperament has

been much studied, including by Kay Redfield Jamison in her fascinating book *Touched with Fire*, which, like all her work, is priceless in the way it comprehends, counsels and consoles the manic-depressive psyche.

Interestingly, one feature of hypomania and mania is hyperacuity – an increased awareness of objects in one’s environment – which is certainly an aspect of artistic sensitivity. In general, manic depression is a condition of passion: the ability to feel pain, to create and to love. The word ‘passion’, in its root, means ‘to suffer’ (as in the ‘Passion of Christ’). Olive trees were, for Vincent van Gogh, associated with Christ’s Passion, and, if I look at his painting *Les Oliviers (Olive Trees)*, painted while he was in the asylum at Saint-Rémy, I see it instantly: the suffering art in his agitated, manic swirls, the turbulence which cannot be calmed. In this Passion, the trees are screaming. No wonder he sliced off his own ear, for the world was shrieking at him and his psyche could not be quieted.

*When mania falls to depression, it is as if the storm clouds have congealed, solidified to dank fat. Time itself goes stale. Depression, swollen and greedy, is a slug-glutton, feeding on the tender green soul.*

An Anglican clergyman of the seventeenth century specialized in treating people he called ‘unquiet of mind’ (the beautiful phrase adapted for the title of Kay Redfield Jamison’s record of her own illness), and it is a deft definition, a listening definition, for those in manic-depressive crisis do hear the sounds of madness within, the weird singing of a high-tension wire or a wind-wolf and, indeed, hear the sudden silence as the mind crashes inward during a conversation.

People in mania often don’t write about it, say psychologists, and cannot remember it until they are in that state again. Richard Bentall comments on the ‘poor descriptions offered in the classic literature of psychiatry’ and suggests that ‘likely there is something about the manic state that makes it almost impossible to portray in words... accounts seem curiously incomplete. It is as if the break from normal

functioning during an episode is so severe that the mind, on returning to sanity, cannot comprehend it.’

I’m not surprised. When your mind is in flight you don’t leave tracks on the ground, so there are no prints: neither footprints nor printed letters on the page. But I felt fiercely that I had to take notes during this *wōdness*, that I had to mark the tracks of its passage. I’ve trained myself to jot down notes wherever I am: in the dark, while walking, while driving, while climbing, half asleep, underwater, in deserts and icescapes. This was just another form of difficult terrain, and I leant on my habit and training.

In my previous episode, years before, I had taken no notes, and had had no comprehension of what was happening; instead, I had to rely on the observation of others. My flatmate at the time said she felt she was helplessly watching me float upwards, borne skywards, holding the string of a helium balloon, rising, dangerously rising. She wanted to grab me and pull me down, but I slipped ever upwards, out of sight. The painter Benjamin Haydon, a friend of John Keats, used a similar image: ‘I have been like a man with air balloons under his armpits and ether in his soul.’

Describing mania is like a sundial trying to tether the shadow of a sun gone AWOL, zigzagging across the sky. Sometimes I felt weirdly still, both weightless and vigilant, hyper-aware like an inconcrete meerkat fascinated by a mirage. Sometimes the opposite of wistful, I felt *wistless*, recklessly so. Sometimes my mind was a giddy, vertiginous mosaic of turquoise lettered in gold. Sometimes the restless energy coursing through me was like being possessed by a divinity lightfoot in pursuit of feathers: shimmering, galloping and surging.

Rilke described his breakdown as a ‘boundless storm, a hurricane of the spirit’, and manic-depressive people often use images of the natural world. Shelley described Byron as ‘mad as the winds’, and it was an image Byron echoed: ‘If I must sail let it be on the ocean no matter how stormy’; and he writes of the voyagings of poetry, of sailing ‘in the wind’s eye’ and bringing back images to ‘counterbalance human woes’.

But the flight cannot last. When mania falls to depression, it is as if the storm clouds have congealed, solidified to dank fat. Time itself goes stale. Depression, swollen and greedy, is a slug-glutton, feeding on the tender green soul.

It is payback time.

Sometimes the payback is literal, as people have spent and squandered money, giving it away and racking up debts. When mania turns to depression, the payback is also emotional – a sense of guilt about what sufferers have done, and taxingly difficult repayment, the Danegeld of guilty

gold, particularly when manic depression has encouraged overspending oneself sexually in impetuous affairs. Darian Leader points out that the Greek word *mania*, usually translated as ‘madness’ or ‘frenzy’, in its plural form evoked the Eumenides, ‘whose function it was to pursue those who had not, precisely, paid their dues’.

Manic depression can’t balance the books, and it struggles in a mercurial seesaw of credit and debt, extravagance and penitence, exuberance and recoil, the endlessly kinetic commerce of Mercury.

Manic depression is more usually called by the chilly term ‘bipolar’, a bipedal term: mathematical, binary and wrong. ‘Mania’ leans to the waltz, falling and rising in threes.

In mania, the mind dances faster than usual: thoughts are quicker and speech is quicker. It also feels like an increase of ‘quickness’ – of aliveness or vitality – which is paid for in depression later at the price of an increase of deadness. ‘I felt a Funeral, in my brain,’ as Emily Dickinson wrote.

The kinetic quality of mania involves many moving parts: physical energy in the need to keep moving, to run, to spend energy of all kinds. Money moves quickly in mania’s hands; it runs, its currency (from *correre*, ‘to run’ in Latin) is spent at speed.

People’s speech runs fast in mania. Coleridge’s intense talkativeness ‘dazzled bystanders by containing too many ideas in too few words’ according to his biographer Richard Holmes. Sometimes the speed of connection in one’s thoughts is so fast that the steps are invisible and a lack-brain hearer may dismiss it as disconnected, whereas it is the result of an over-connected mind, going at the speed of light, faster than the speed of sound.

Welcome to the foundry.

Here we have Mercury or Hermes’ half-brother Hephaestus, the blacksmith of genius. And here we have melting of bells. Hear the silent temples. You may steeple your fingers at your head and pray, aspire to the pealing of gold, but madness has your feet to the flames, molten and made into bullets you can shoot – straight through your temples.

Mixed-state manic depression is manic depression on speed. In mixed state one’s moods oscillate within hours, even minutes; a flux of unplannable ecstasy and unpredictable agony.

The hurricanes within want serenity but get doldrums. The doldrums want breeze but get hurricanes.

As this episode for me began, appropriately, in the autumn or fall of the year with a literal fall down a rabbit hole, it was a falling into madness of a paradoxical sort; a soaring fall, a falling flight, tripping the switches. (‘I feel like I’m

tripping,’ I often said to friends at the high points.) It was a sick, lurching helter-skelter of the psyche. The fall from hypomania to depression may be a matter of quicksilver timing, but then mania re-erupts through depression’s stupor. It is self-provoking, this gyre, self-swerving around an elastic axis, turning and turning. The licked finger circles and circles the rim of the glass till a wail rises and the glass shatters itself, shards of broken-heartedness which will stab the barefoot psyche.

I developed an obsessive terror of losing things, particularly my notebooks, which I clutched at compulsively, sometimes every minute, checking they were still there. If I left my house, I often had to walk with my hand in my satchel, fingers touching the pages. I had to check every packet of empty Rizla papers several times before I burnt it, in case I’d written a thought on one of them and would lose it. Scraps of paper, shopping lists, odd reminders, the little docket with the next doctor’s appointment written on it; all were nervously guarded. I felt real panic when I thought I’d lost a hat, and emailed and phoned friends trying to find it. Mad as a hatter, Mercury brimming. If I can’t even hold on to a notebook, how can I hold on to my sanity? was my reasoning. If I lose my hat it shows that I am losing my mind: lostness was the pivot of my panic.

And then I crashed my computer, losing at a stroke the ability to receive the slips of sanity my geographically removed friends were sending me. It happened late one night. I was drunk. Both my common sense and my computer were running dangerously low on battery power. A red warning sign popped up on the screen telling me to turn the computer off immediately or there’d be trouble. It was an odd but precise parallel to what had already happened to me the day I went mad: I ignored the red warning sign, and then all of a sudden the screen froze. True to its word, my computer wheeped and fizzled out to black. It never worked again. The motherboard was fucked. I knew the feeling. ♦



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WRITING ADVICE

# It Feels Like Crime: The Devil Inside

Hanif Kureishi on writing and self-criticism

Of all the questions authors get asked, the most puzzling but persistent concerns that which others might think of what the writer has produced. These others – these potential disapprovers – might be the writer’s spouse, her family, her colleagues, community or neighbours. It doesn’t matter exactly who they are. Yet the question of these opinions is clearly a crucial one for apprentice artists. When they begin to work, a chorus of censure and dissent, if not of hate, starts up. The writer becomes inhibited by concerns about the effect his or her words might have. The writer could become anxious, stifled or blocked. She could begin to hate her own work, or become phobic about beginning.

Here the artist is generating a kind of lurid fantasy, and not one which is of use to writing. In truth, when you begin writing you will have no idea what anyone will think. If the writer has some level of integrity, he or she will always do her best work and will eventually discover whether others are indifferent, wildly enthusiastic or something else altogether. But the assumption of the nervous writer engaged in this doomsday script – this omnipotent view – is that she has already aggressively provoked or hurt someone. Not only that: these ‘neighbours’ will retaliate. There will be guilt and a terrible conflict, so why bother at all?

This rigmarole implies that words are dangerous – that they can upset, thrill, provoke and change lives, which is useful knowledge. Good writers are aware that they work not

for themselves, but to do something to a reader: words are powerful magic which must evoke strange and terrible worlds.

But what of these ‘neighbours’? What are they doing in this internal scenario? Will the wrong words persuade them to abandon you? La Rochefoucauld describes this fallacy well. ‘That which we call virtue is usually no more than a phantom formed by one’s passions.’

*Good writers are aware that they work not for themselves, but to do something to a reader: words are powerful magic which must evoke strange and terrible worlds.*

From one point of view, this virtue could be called conscience. To put it kindly: here the writer is considering others, and how could anyone argue with such benevolence?

Nevertheless, conscience is a less effective description of what is taking place than the notion of the super-ego, an idea Freud developed after the First World War, linking it to hate, depression, masochism and what he called the death instinct. Conscience implies concern, if not decency. The notion lacks the devilish, if not sadistic dimension which the idea of the superego has, where the ‘good’ becomes an obstacle to the truth. It is not that the writer has committed a crime of speaking, but rather that she is already guilty and always will be.

Ultimately this is not a moral question about doing harm to others. It concerns self-harm, the enigma of self-persecution and how you can begin to fear your own imagination. The writer might be a voyeur who likes to exhibit herself. This is partly what it means to present something to an audience – the wish to be known, to inhabit a persona, accompanied by a certain shamelessness.

But even as we speak we also wonder, according to the logic of the superego, if we are more monstrous than we can bear. We believe that if we were good we wouldn’t have aggressive or violent thoughts, forgetting that monstrousness is useful in art, which, to be effective, has to be pushed to an extreme, making the audience tremble. Art emerges from what Nietzsche called ‘inner anarchy’ and never from so-called decency.

A critical faculty, one of judgement, is essential. Any artist must be able to look over their work with a clear, non-dismissive eye, reading it through and dismissing this or that, and retaining the other. But the form of ferocious super-ego activity which Freud noticed is not part of the interesting difficulty of the work. It is not part of the struggle all artists have with their material and subject. It has nothing to do with the engineering of art. It is outside it, throttling it before it begins, telling the writer that she must always produce brilliant work and that she cannot make mistakes or endure failure. It is only destructive.

But why would anyone have such a killing machine inside them? For Freud, one of the most fascinating and impassable enigmas was people’s self-destructiveness, their masochism and their sadism. Indeed, he called the death drive ‘mysterious’. And you only have to look into the mirror to see it.

*You’re in a dark forest with just a torch. If you know what you’re doing, it isn’t art.*

The ears have no lids. It is not just the so-called mad who hear voices. Who isn’t possessed by them? The super-ego isn’t just an obscure psychical function, it is more like an involuntary voice of command, involving a threat which states that if you think or do a particular thing, you will be punished. And imagined punishments are always worse than the real thing.

The super-ego is not only concerned with prohibition. It has many faces, for it is also a devil of temptation, pushing us to go further, to enjoy wildly while telling us that we can never have enough pleasure. Like capitalism itself, it wants us to consume continuously, while leaving us dissatisfied. Nevertheless, excess can never be excessive enough; we always fail.

*Art emerges from what Nietzsche called ‘inner anarchy’ and never from so-called decency.*

Not one of us didn’t spend years of our young life under the command of others, an order of adults which guaranteed our safety. It is important not to forget the sheer amount of fear all children endure. So the origins of this ever-present threat are our parents and other authorities, plus the fury we felt about their instructions, particularly since we imagined they secretly enjoyed torturing and mistreating us.

This conjunction resembles the creditor\debtor dyad, the paradigmatic relationship of our age. The creation of unpayable debt is a characteristic of the super-ego; but, as with fascism, it has to promise enjoyment as it works. You get hooked on failure since the super-ego is always sexualized. It is as if you is in a perverse relationship with yourself, where pleasure, as a last resort, is extracted from suffering.

This internal social order is a narrow sharia-like zone within which disruption and unpredictability – speaking or writing freely – is continuously punished. It is hard work being an oppressed victim of your own internal savagery. Parent-like, the super-ego appears to provide a form of protection, a limit, a boundary to what might be experienced as a spiral of endless pleasure. But this promise of stability is of less use to the adult artist who must work with uncertainty, clearing a path for the new. You’re in a dark forest with just a torch. If you know what you’re doing, it isn’t art.

Liberating oneself from self-slavery cannot be a permanent achievement. But good things get done, terrors are overcome, guilt is borne and these 'persecutors', or self created phantoms, are chased away, at least for a while. If we have some intimacy with ourselves it is possible to track these persecutions and dispute with them.

Knowledge may, on occasion, trump the promise of terrible enjoyment. The return will be a clear channel of good communication between the unconscious and the conscious. This is where the work is achieved. ◊



OUR SCATTERED CORRESPONDENTS

## In Chernobyl

Svetlana Alexievich listens to the sound of distant radiation

*Svetlana Alexievich's Chernobyl Prayer first appeared in 1997, eleven years after a series of explosions rocked the Chernobyl reactor in the middle of the night, sending 50 million curies (Ci) of radioactivity into the atmosphere, of which 70 per cent fell upon Belarus.*

*After crafting a new form of oral history with her books The Unwomanly Face of War and Boys in Zinc, she used the form to assemble a chorus of voices, from survivors to those who witnessed the tragedy from afar.*

*At its best, Alexievich captures reminiscence but also the poetic effects on the natural world, the science behind the radiation influx, and a few lasting insights into the state of the Russian mind. My characterization, if you want it: a hybrid between a prison and a Kindergarten, that's what Socialism is, Soviet Socialism.'*

*Those words are taken from one of the most intricate and moving monologues in the book – the voice of Gennady Grushevoy, member of the Belarusian Parliament, chairman of the Children of Chernobyl Foundation. He speaks below.*

—

**M**onologue on Cartesian philosophy and on eating a radioactive sandwich with someone so as not to be ashamed.

I lived among books. For twenty years, I lectured at a university... I am an academic. A man who picked out

his favourite period in history and resides there. Totally preoccupied with it, immersed in his own space. In a perfect world... That was how it would have been ideally, of course. Because, at that time, the philosophy we had was Marxist-Leninist, and the topics on offer for a thesis were the role of Marxism-Leninism in the development of agriculture or in clearing virgin lands. Or the role of the leader of the world proletariat... All in all, they had no time for Cartesian thought. But I was in luck. My undergraduate dissertation was entered into a competition in Moscow, and somebody made a phone call from there, saying: 'Don't touch this fellow. Let him write.' I was working on the French religious philosopher Malebranche, who undertook to interpret the bible from the perspective of the rational mind. The eighteenth century was the Age of Enlightenment. Faith in reason, the idea that we are capable of explaining the world. As I now realize, I was lucky. I was saved from the mincer. Saved from a lot of aggravation. A miracle! Before that, I was warned more than once that the choice of Malebranche for my dissertation could be seen as interesting, but for my thesis I would have to think carefully about the topic. That was a serious matter. Here they were, they said, allowing me to stay on to do postgraduate work in the department of Marxist-Leninist philosophy, and I was proposing to emigrate to the past... Surely I could see the problem... Gorbachev's perestroika began. We had waited so long for this moment. The first thing I noticed was how people's expressions immediately began to change, all of a sudden their faces were different. They even began to walk differently. Life was subtly altering the way they moved.

They were smiling at each other more. I picked up on a different energy in everything. Something had changed. Completely. To this day, I am amazed at how quickly it happened, and as for me... I was pulled abruptly out of that Cartesian idyll. Instead of books on philosophy, I now read the latest papers and magazines, eagerly awaiting each new perestroika-inspired issue of *Ogonyok*. In the morning there were queues at the news-stands; never before – or after – had people read the papers with such relish. They would never again believe them so unquestioningly. There was an avalanche of information. Lenin's political testament was published, which had been locked away for half a century in some special archive. The bookshops began stocking Solzhenitsyn, then Shalamov, Bukharin. It wasn't so long ago that you could have been arrested for possessing those books. You could have earned yourself a prison sentence. Andrey Sakharov was brought back from exile. For the first time, they broadcast sessions of the USSR's Supreme Soviet on television. The whole country sat glued to their screens. We talked and talked. You could say out loud things which until recently would only be discussed in the privacy of your kitchen. For so many generations we had been whispering in our kitchens. So many people went to waste, whiling away their time in dreams, throughout our seventy-odd years of Soviet history. Now, though, everybody was going to rallies and demonstrations. Signing something, voting against something. I remember one historian appearing on television. He brought a map of Stalin's camps to the studio. The whole of Siberia was dotted with red flags. We discovered the truth about Kurapaty... What a shock! Society was left reeling. Belarusian Kurapaty was the site of a mass grave in 1937. Belarusians, Russians, Poles and Lithuanians were buried there together in their tens of thousands. The NKVD's ditches were dug two metres deep, and people were stacked in two or three layers. Once that place had been a long way outside Minsk, but later it fell within the city limits. It became part of the city, you could catch a tram there. In the 1950s, the area was planted



with young trees, the pines grew taller, and the city people suspected nothing. They had picnics there at the weekends. In winter they skied there. People began excavations. The authorities – the Communist authorities – had lied. They tried to wriggle out of it. By night the police filled the graves back in, but in the daytime people dug them open again. I saw documentary footage: rows of skulls cleaned of soil. And each one had a hole in the back of the head...

*The fear didn't set in for a long time: for almost a month everyone was on tenterhooks, waiting for them to announce that our scientists, our heroic firemen, our soldiers have once again conquered the elements. They have won an unprecedented victory; they have driven the cosmic fire back into a test tube.*

Of course, we lived with the feeling that we were taking part in a revolution. In a new phase of history.

Don't worry, I haven't digressed from the topic. I want to remember the general mood at the time Chernobyl happened. Because they will always go together in history: the downfall of Socialism and the Chernobyl disaster. They coincided. Chernobyl hastened the collapse of the Soviet Union. It blew the empire apart.

And it made me into a politician.



It was 4 May, day nine after the accident, when Gorbachev made his appearance; it was cowardice, of course. Befuddlement. Like in the early days of the war, in 1941. The newspapers were writing about enemy ploys and Western hysteria, about the anti-Soviet commotion and damaging rumours spread by our overseas opponents. I remember how I felt in those days. The fear didn't set in for a long time: for almost a month everyone was on tenterhooks, waiting for them to announce that, under the leadership of the Communist Party, our scientists, our heroic firemen, our soldiers have once again conquered the elements. They have won an unprecedented victory; they have driven the cosmic fire back into a test tube. The fear took a while to set in. For a long time, we kept it out. Yes, that was it. Absolutely! As I now realize, we could not make the mental connection between fear and peaceful nuclear energy. From all the textbooks and other books we'd read, in our minds we pictured the world as follows: military nuclear power was a sinister mushroom cloud billowing up into the sky, like at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, incinerating people instantly; whereas peaceful nuclear energy was a harmless light bulb. We had a childish image of the world; we were living life as depicted in children's stories. It wasn't just us; the whole of mankind wised up after Chernobyl. We all grew up, became more mature.

*What struck me most was the combination of beauty and fear. Fear could no longer be separated from beauty or beauty from fear.*

A few conversations from the early days:

'There's some nuclear power plant on fire. But it's happening a long way away, in the Ukraine.'

'I read in the papers that we're sending combat vehicles there. The army. We'll overcome it!'

'In Belarus, we don't have a single atomic power station. We aren't worried.'

My first trip into the Zone: I went there thinking it would all be covered in grey ash, in black soot, like in Bryullov's painting *The Last Day of Pompeii*. But I got there and

everything was beautiful. Breathtakingly beautiful. Meadows in flower, the gentle spring green of the forests. I love that time of year. Everything is coming to life. Flourishing, singing... What struck me most was the combination of beauty and fear. Fear could no longer be separated from beauty or beauty from fear. Everything was turned on its head, topsy-turvy. I realize that now. There was a strange sensation of death...

We arrived as a group. Nobody sent us there. A group of Belarusian deputies from the opposition. What times they were! What times! The Communist authorities were backing down. They were weakening, losing confidence. Everything was fragile, but the local authorities treated us with hostility: 'Do you have permission? What gives you the right to stir up the people? To ask questions? Who gave you this assignment?' They alluded to instructions received from above: 'Do not give in to panic. Await orders.' As if to say, 'Don't you go scaring people when we need to fulfil our quotas, our grain and meat quotas.' What worried them was not people's health, but hitting their targets. The quotas for the republic and the quotas for the nation... They were afraid of their bosses. And their bosses were afraid of those above them, and so on up the chain, all the way to the general secretary. One man decided everything from his celestial heights. That was how the pyramid of power was built. It was headed by a tsar: at that time, a Communist tsar. 'Everything here is contaminated,' we told them. 'None of the food you've produced can be eaten.' 'You are rabble rousers. Stop your enemy agitation. We'll make phone calls. We'll report this.' And they made their phone calls. They reported it to 'the appropriate authorities'.

The village of Malinovka: fifty-nine curies per square metre. We went into the school. 'So how are you doing?'

'We're all scared, of course. But we've been reassured: all we need to do is wash the roof, close off the wells with plastic and tarmac the country lanes. Then we can go on living here. Though the cats keep scratching for some reason, and the horses' noses are dribbling mucus on to the ground.'

The head teacher invited me to her home for lunch. It was a new house. She'd held a housewarming there two months earlier. In Belarusian it's called 'vkhodiny': when people have only just moved into a house. Near the house they had a sturdy barn and a root cellar. What was once known as a kulak farmstead. These were the kind of people dispossessed under Stalin's dekulakization. Enough to make you stop, stare and envy.

'But soon you'll have to leave.'

'Out of the question! We've put so much work into this place.'

'Take a look at the dosimeter.'

‘They’ve been coming here, those bloody scientists! They won’t let people live in peace!’

The husband waved his hand and went off to the meadow to fetch his horse without saying goodbye to me.

The village of Chudyany: one hundred and fifty curies per square metre. Women were digging in their vegetable plots, children running about the streets. At the end of the village the men were hewing timber for a new log house. Our car stopped near them. They clustered round, asked for a smoke. ‘How are things in the capital? Are you getting vodka? We keep running dry here. A good job we’re brewing our own. Gorbachev doesn’t touch a drop himself and he won’t let us drink either.’

‘Aha, so you’re deputies. The tobacco situation is pretty lousy around these parts too.’

‘Listen, guys,’ we began explaining to them. ‘You’re going to have to leave here soon. See this dosimeter? The radiation where we’re standing is a hundred times over the limit.’

‘Oh, come on, don’t give us that crap. Hell, what do we want with your dosimeter! You won’t be hanging around here long, but we’ve got to live in this place. You can stick that dosimeter of yours where the sun don’t shine!’

I’ve watched the film about the *Titanic* a few times, and it reminded me of what I saw with my own eyes. I experienced it myself, in the early days of Chernobyl. Everything was just like on the *Titanic*. People were behaving in exactly the same way. The psychology was the same. I recognized it. I even made the comparison at the time. You had the bottom of the ship already pierced, this tremendous surge of water was flooding the lower holds, overturning barrels and crates. It was creeping forward, breaking through all obstacles. While up above, the lights are bright, music is playing, champagne is being served. Families carry on squabbling, love affairs are being kindled. And the water is gushing up the staircases, into the cabins...

The lights are bright, music is playing, champagne is being served...

Our mentality is a separate topic. For us, everything revolves around feeling. That is what gives us our grandness, elevates our lives, and is, at the same time, so disastrous. The rational choice for us is never enough. We gauge our actions with our hearts, not our minds. The moment you wander into someone’s yard in the village, you are their guest. They are so pleased. Then they are upset. They will anxiously shake their heads.

‘Oh dear, we’ve no fresh fish, nothing to offer.’

‘Perhaps you’d like some milk? I’ll pour you a mugful.’

They won’t just let you go on your way. They’ll beckon you into their cottage. Some of the others were afraid, but I was willing. I went in, sat at their table, ate radioactive sandwiches, because that was what they were all eating. I downed a drink with them and it gave me a sense of pride to know I had that in me. I had it in me! Yes, that’s right! I told myself, ‘OK, so maybe I can’t change a thing in this man’s life, but what I can do is eat a radioactive sandwich alongside him, so I won’t be ashamed. Share his fate.’

That is the attitude we take to our own lives. And yet I had a wife and two children. I was responsible for them. I had a dosimeter in my pocket. I realize now, this is just our world, it’s who we are. Ten years ago, I felt proud of being the way I was, while today I’m ashamed of it. All the same, I would still sit with him and eat that wretched sandwich again. I’ve thought about it, thought about what kind of people we are. I couldn’t get that damned sandwich out of my mind. You had to eat it as an act of the heart, not the mind.

*I told myself, ‘OK, so maybe I can’t change a thing in this man’s life, but what I can do is eat a radioactive sandwich alongside him, so I won’t be ashamed. Share his fate.’*

A writer put it well when he observed that in the twentieth century, and now in the twenty-first, we are living, as we were taught to, by the precepts of nineteenth-century literature. Lord knows, I’m often plagued by doubts. I’ve discussed this with many people. Who on earth are we?

I had an interesting conversation with the wife, now the widow, of a helicopter pilot. She was an intelligent woman. I sat talking to her for a long time. She wanted to understand too; to understand and find meaning in her husband’s death in order to be able to accept it. She just couldn’t.

I read many times in the newspapers about the helicopter pilots working above the reactor. At first, they were dropping lead panels into it, but they vanished down the hole without trace. Then someone remembered that lead vaporizes at 700 degrees Celsius and the temperature down there was 2,000 degrees. After that, sacks of dolomite and sand were dropped down. Up where the pilots were it was as dark as night from the dust being raised. Pillars of dust.

In order to drop their ‘bombs’ accurately, they opened the cabin windows and aimed by eye to get the correct banking of the helicopter, left–right, up–down. The radiation doses were ridiculous! I remember the headlines of the newspaper stories: ‘Heroes of the Sky’, ‘Falcons of Chernobyl’.

And then there was this woman. She admitted her doubts to me. ‘Now they write that my husband is a hero. Yes, he is, but what does that mean? I know he was an honest, dutiful officer. Disciplined. He came back from Chernobyl and was ill within a few months. They presented him with an award in the Kremlin, and he saw his comrades there. They were ill too, but glad to have met up again. He came home happy, with his medal.

I asked him then, ‘Could you not have avoided being so severely affected? Protected your health better?’

‘I probably could, if I’d thought more about it,’ he said. ‘We needed proper protective clothing, special goggles, a face mask. We had none of that. We didn’t follow standard safety procedures ourselves. We weren’t thinking about that at the time.’

Actually, none of us were. What a pity that, in the past, we did so little thinking! From the viewpoint of our culture, thinking about yourself was selfish. It showed a lack of spirit. There was always something more important than you and your life.

### *I understand today: Chernobyl liberated us. We learned to be free.*

1989: the third anniversary of 26 April. Three years had passed since the disaster. Everyone had been evacuated from a thirty-kilometre zone, but over two million Belarusians were still living in contaminated areas. Forgotten. The Belarusian opposition planned a protest for that day, and the authorities responded by declaring a ‘volunteer Saturday’ to clean up Minsk. They put up red flags, brought out mobile food stalls with delicacies in short supply at the time (fresh smoked sausage, chocolates, jars of instant coffee). Police cars were on the prowl, heavies in plain clothes snooping about taking photos, but – a sign of new times! – people just ignored all that. They were no longer afraid of them. They began assembling at Chelyuskin Heroes Park, more and more of them. By ten o’clock, there were already

20,000–30,000 (I’ve taken that from police estimates later reported on television), and the crowd was growing by the minute. We hadn’t expected that ourselves. Everything was just getting bigger and bigger. Who could stem this tide of people? At precisely ten o’clock, as we’d planned, the march moved off along Lenin Prospect towards the city centre, where the rally was to be held. All along the way, new groups were joining us, waiting for the march on parallel streets, in side streets, in gateways. A rumour spread that the police and army patrols had blocked the roads into the city; they were stopping buses and cars with protesters from other places and turning them back, but no one panicked. People got out and walked on to join up with us. That was announced over a megaphone and a great ‘Hurrah!’ swept over the march. Balconies were thronged, windows thrown open, people stood on windowsills to wave to us. They were waving shawls and children’s flags. Then I noticed, and everybody around started talking about it: the police had melted away – and the boys in plain clothes – taking their cameras with them. I understand now that they were given new orders; they retreated into courtyards, and locked themselves in cars concealed under tarpaulins. The authorities had taken cover and were waiting to see what would happen. They were scared. People marched on in tears, everybody holding hands. They were crying because they were overcoming their fear. They were liberating themselves from the intimidation.

The rally began, and although we’d been preparing for a long time, discussing the list of speakers, it was promptly ignored. People came to the hastily erected platform and spoke without notes: ordinary people from the area around Chernobyl. The list reformed itself spontaneously. We were hearing witnesses, testimony. The only prominent figure to speak was Academician Velikhov, one of the former directors of the centre in charge of dealing with the accident, but his was not one of the speeches I remember. The ones I do remember are:

A mother with two children, a boy and a girl. She brought them up on to the platform with her. ‘My children have not laughed for a long time now. There is no naughtiness. They don’t run around in the courtyard. They have no strength. They are like a little old man and woman.’

A woman involved in the clean-up operation. When she pushed back the sleeves of her dress to show the crowd her arms, we saw her sores and scabs. ‘I washed clothes for our men working near the reactor,’ she said. ‘We did most of the laundry by hand because not enough washing machines were delivered, and they soon broke down because they were so overloaded.’

A young doctor. He began by reciting the Hippocratic oath. He talked about how all the data on radiation sickness were being stamped ‘secret’ or ‘top secret’. Medicine and science were being dragged into politics.

This was Chernobyl's public inquiry.

I will not attempt to hide it. I openly admit that this was the most memorable day of my life. We were so happy.

The next day, those of us who had organized the demonstration were summoned by the police and convicted for the fact that a crowd thousands strong had blocked the avenue and obstructed the free movement of public transport. Unauthorized slogans had been displayed. Each of us was given fifteen days under the 'aggravated hooliganism' article of the penal code. The judge passing sentence and the policemen accompanying us to the detention centre were shamefaced. All of them. We were laughing. Yes, because we were so happy!

Now the question was: what more are we capable of? What should we do next?

In one of the Chernobyl-affected villages, a woman fell to her knees in front of us when she heard we were from

Minsk. 'Save my child! Take him with you! Our doctors can't understand what's wrong, and he's suffocating, turning blue. He's dying.' [*Falls silent.*]

I went to the hospital. The boy was seven. Thyroid cancer. I wanted to take his mind off it and began joking. He turned to the wall and said, 'Just don't tell me I'm not going to die. I know I am.'

At the Academy of Sciences, I think it was, I was shown an X-ray of someone's lungs that had been burned through by 'hot particles'. They looked like the sky at night. The hot particles were microscopic pieces of radioactive material created when the burning reactor had lead and sand tipped into it. Atoms of lead, sand and graphite combined and were shot high up into the atmosphere. They were dispersed over great distances, hundreds of kilometres. Now they were entering people's bodies via the respiratory tract. The highest mortality was among tractor and truck drivers, people who ploughed the land or drove along the dusty country roads. An organ in which these particles settle glows in X-rays. It is peppered with hundreds of tiny holes, like a fine sieve. The person affected dies, literally burns up; but whereas they are mortal, the hot particles live on. A person dies, and after a thousand years will have turned back into dust. The hot particles, though, are immortal, and their dust will be capable of killing again. [*Falls silent.*]

I came back from those trips... I was overwhelmed. I told people what I'd seen. My wife is a specialist in linguistics. She'd never taken an interest in politics before – any more than she had in sport – but now she kept asking me over and over again, 'What can we do? What should we do now?' And we set out on a course which common sense would have told us was impossible. It was the kind of thing a person could only countenance in a time of upheaval, of complete inner emancipation. That was such a time, a time when Gorbachev was making the running, a time of hope, of faith! We decided to save the children. To reveal to the



world the peril Belarusian children were living in. To ask, to shout for help. To raise the alarm. The authorities were silent. They had betrayed the people, but we would not be silent.

Very soon, a group of dedicated helpers and like-minded supporters came together. Our watchword was: ‘What are you reading? Solzhenitsyn, Platonov? Welcome!’ We were working twelve hours a day. We needed to think of a name for our organization. We went through dozens of possibilities before settling on the simplest: the Children of Chernobyl Foundation. Today, it’s impossible to explain or even imagine all our doubts at that time, the arguments, our fears... Today, there are countless funds like ours, but ten years ago we were the first: the first civil initiative, unsanctioned by anyone in authority. The response from all officials was identical: ‘Foundation? What foundation? We have the Ministry of Health for this sort of thing.’

I understand today: Chernobyl liberated us. We learned to be free.

I remember... [Laughs.] I can picture it right now! The first refrigerated lorries bringing humanitarian aid drove into the courtyard of our apartment block, to our home address. I looked out of my window and saw them, and couldn’t imagine how we were going to unload and store it all. The trucks had come from Moldova, with seventeen to twenty tonnes of fruit juice, dried fruit and baby food. By then there were already rumours that the best way to draw out radiation was to eat lots of fruit, have lots of fibre in your food. I telephoned friends, some at their dachas, others at work. I and my wife began unloading the trucks by ourselves, but gradually, one by one, people came out of our block (which was, after all, nine storeys high), and passers-by stopped to ask, ‘What are these trucks doing here?’

‘They’ve brought aid for the Chernobyl children.’ They dropped whatever they were doing and rolled up their sleeves. By evening, the trucks were unloaded. We packed the goods into cellars and garages, made arrangements with a school. We laughed at ourselves later, but when we brought these gifts to the contaminated areas, when we began distributing them... people usually assembled in the local school or at the House of Culture. Something’s just come back to me now. One time, in Vetka District... a young family. They, like everyone else, had been given little jars of baby food, cartons of fruit juice. The father sat down and wept. These jars and cartons were too late to save his children’s lives. They could make no difference, but he was crying because, after all, they had not been forgotten. Someone had remembered them. There was hope.

The whole world responded. People agreed to take our children for treatment in Italy, France, Germany... Lufthansa flew them to Germany at the airline’s expense. There was competition among the German pilots to come here. We got only the best! As the children were walking out

to the aircraft, they all looked so pale, and they were so quiet. There were some odd moments. [Laughs.] The father of one boy burst into my office and demanded his son’s documentation back:

‘They’ll take our children’s blood! They’ll conduct experiments on them!’

Of course, the memory of that terrible war still festers. People have not forgotten. But there was something else at work: we had lived behind the barbed wire for such a long time, in the ‘Socialist Camp’. We were afraid of that other world. We knew nothing about it.

The Chernobyl mothers and fathers were a different problem. To continue the conversation about our mentality, the Soviet mentality. The Soviet Union had fallen, collapsed, but people were still expecting to be coddled by a great, powerful country, which no longer existed. My characterization, if you want it: a hybrid between a prison and a kindergarten, that’s what Socialism is, Soviet Socialism. A citizen surrendered his soul to the state, his conscience, his heart, and in return received his rations for the day. Beyond that, it was a matter of luck: one person got a bigger ration, another a small one. The only constant was that you got it in return for selling your soul. And the thing we most wanted to avoid now was our foundation turning into a distributor of that kind of ration: the Chernobyl ready-packed meal. People were used to waiting and complaining. ‘I am a Chernobyl victim. I am entitled, because I am one of the victims.’ As I see it today, Chernobyl was a major test of our spirit and our culture.

That first year, we sent 5,000 children abroad. The second year it was 10,000; and in the third, 15,000.

Have you talked to the children about Chernobyl? Not the adults, the children. They often have unexpected ideas. As a philosopher, I’m continually surprised. For example, one girl told me their class was sent out into the countryside in the autumn of 1986 to harvest the beetroots and carrots. They were constantly coming across dead mice, and they joked among themselves that the mice would die out, then the beetles and worms, then the hares and wolves, and then us. People would be the last to die out. They began imagining a world without animals and birds. Without mice. For a time, there would be only people alive, all alone. There would not even be flies buzzing around. Those children were aged between twelve and fifteen. That is how they saw their future.

I talked to another girl. She went to a Young Pioneers’ summer camp and made friends there with a boy. ‘He was so nice,’ she recalled. ‘We spent all our time together.’

But then his friends told him she was from Chernobyl, and he never came near her again. I even corresponded

later with that young girl. ‘When I think about my future now,’ she wrote, ‘I dream of completing school and going to some far-away place, so nobody knows where I come from. Somebody will fall in love with me there, and I will forget everything.’

Yes, yes, write all this down, or it will slip people’s memory and be lost. I only regret not writing everything down myself.

Another story. We came to a contaminated village. The children were playing ball by the school. The ball rolled into one of the flower beds. They stood there, walked around it, but were afraid to go and retrieve it. At first I couldn’t see the problem. I knew things theoretically, but I didn’t live there. I wasn’t constantly on the alert.

I came from the normal world. I walked over to the flower bed and immediately all the children shouted, ‘No! No, mister. You mustn’t!’ In the past three years (this was in 1989), they had got used to the idea that you mustn’t sit on the grass, or pick flowers, or climb a tree. When we took them abroad and said, ‘Go for a walk in the forest. Go down to the river. Have a swim, sunbathe!’ you should have seen how hesitant they were to go into the water, to stroke the grass. But then, afterwards... there was so much joy! They could dive in the river again, they could lie on the sand. They were forever walking around carrying bunches of wild flowers, and weaving them into circlets. What am I thinking right now? I am thinking that of course we can take them abroad and get treatment for them, but how are we to give them back the world they knew? How can we give them back their past? Or their future?

There is a question we cannot escape: who are we Russians? Until we answer it, nothing will change. What does life mean to us? What does freedom mean to us? We seem capable only of dreaming of freedom. We could have become free, but it didn’t happen. We missed the boat again. For seventy years, we were building Communism, and today we are building

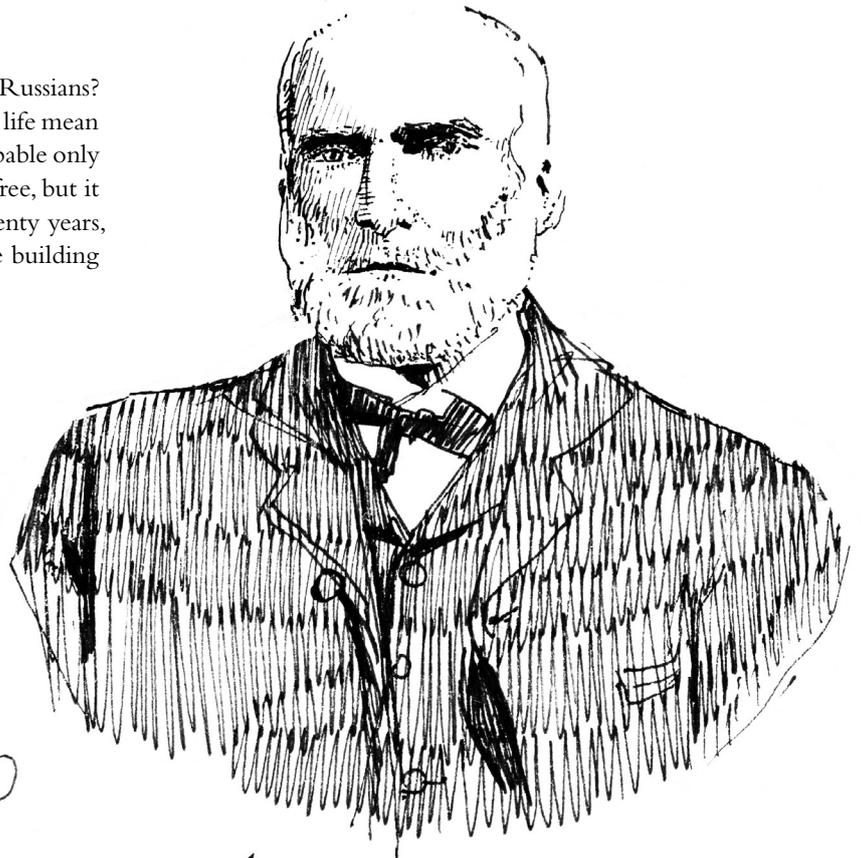
capitalism. We used to worship Marx, and now we worship the dollar. History has passed us by. When you think about Chernobyl, you come back to the big question: who are we? What insights have we gained into ourselves? Into the world we inhabit? In our military museums, and we have more of those than we have museums of art, you find collections of old machine guns, bayonets, hand grenades, and out in the courtyard you see tanks and grenade launchers. Children are taken there on school trips and told: ‘This is war. This is what war is like.’ But actually, nowadays, it’s completely different. On 26 April 1986, we faced war again; and that war is not over.

As for us... Who are we?

*Gennady Grushevoy, member of the Belarusian Parliament, chairman of the Children of Chernobyl Foundation* ♦

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Extracted from Svetlana Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer*, Penguin 2016, translated by Anna Gunin and Arch Tait



*Mummo*

*Grandpa Francis*

POEM

# Understudy

By Jana Prikryl

I.

The land's forever making noise  
of rise and fall, the grand parabola.

But must it always paraphrase?  
The moon can't blink its shining cornea

toward the setting sun. It's in the line  
of fire, it's hit by little sparks.

And they, neutrinos rich and bored, will pay  
a kiss for a kiss for – *POMPEII*:

your talk of exes going nuclear, your video  
countdown to the end of a casino –

maybe down the crescent of the bay  
above the belt of Verrazzano.

A second city then will crack up  
beside the one in need of backup

and no harm done, no need to be on  
a packet to pave old Île d'Orléans.

2.

The city's an amphora, broken-dishy.  
The bits were nicked to model demolition.  
Stacked and drowning, stacked and drowning.  
The qui vive is the salt spray owning  
knowing bunkers defunct since Vichy.

FICTION

# The Withdrawal Method

By Abigail Ulman

‘There’s this story about a girl who goes to see her gynaecologist,’ I tell the gynaecologist. ‘She gets up early in the morning, while her housemates are still sleeping, and goes for a run. When she comes home, she’s all sweaty, but she doesn’t have time to shower before her appointment. So she grabs a towel and wipes herself off. You know, down there.’

‘Uh-huh,’ says Dr Hill as she holds the speculum against my thigh. ‘This might be a bit cold.’ She inserts it into me. It is a bit cold, and uncomfortable. I worry for a moment that there will be a sharp edge or angle on there that she doesn’t know about. ‘Go on,’ she says. ‘So she wipes herself off—’

‘Yeah. Then she goes to the gyno and takes off her pants, gets on the chair, spreads her — oh.’ I hold my breath as she cranks the thing open. It squeaks as it pushes against me.

‘Lie back,’ she says. ‘Breathe. Concentrate on the bear.’ I press my head back into the chair and stare at the poster stuck to the ceiling above me, a photo print of a bear standing on a grassy hilltop. ‘That’s it,’ she says, as she gets me wide open.

‘So the girl spreads her legs, and the gyno comes in — it’s a man — and he comes into the room, stands in front of her, looks between her legs, and says, “Oh, I see you dressed up for me today.”’

Dr Hill scrapes a cotton bud against my cervix. The discomfort feels real and far away, like someone yelling your name outside your front door while you’re sleeping.

‘And the deal is, the girl lives with this raver chick, and the towel she grabbed to wipe herself off was covered with the chick’s face glitter. So the gyno thinks she’s applied it especially for him.’

‘Urban legend,’ says Dr Hill as she winds the speculum closed.

‘Really?’ I say, sitting up and leaning back on my elbows.

‘Absolutely.’

I inhale as she pulls the metal out of me. Inside I feel like I felt in fifth form, when Becky Addis and I got drunk in the park and she shoved her hand down my jeans and put her fingers inside me with fingernails that were too long.

‘Vaginas don’t sweat,’ says Dr Hill. ‘Not inside anyway. I’ll go to the lab and check on your other tests. Why don’t you get dressed and meet me in my office.’

—

I expect AIDS, because I had sex with this Irish guy who told me he'd gone to see prostitutes in Amsterdam. I expect herpes because this drummer Chris went down on me and I found a tube of Zovirax on the floor under his bed the next morning. I expect HPV because I saw a segment about it on *60 Minutes* last week. I expect chlamydia, gonorrhoea, hep A, B, C, because I'm a floozy whose back catalogue of lovers should be organized with the Dewey Decimal System. But I do not expect a foetus. And that's what it is.

'Do you know who the father is?' Dr Hill asks me.

'Yes,' I say.

'Was this something the two of you planned?'

'No,' I say. 'Complete accident.'

'What precautions were you taking?'

'He was, uh, pulling out.'

'The withdrawal method?' she asks. She shakes her head as I nod mine. 'Very risky.' She opens a desk drawer and takes out a pamphlet with a photo of a pensive-looking girl on the front. Above her head it reads, *So... you're pregnant.*

'I don't need that,' I say.

'Are you sure?' She holds the pamphlet towards me like a stubborn canvasser on a street corner.

'I know my options,' I say. 'I don't want the baby.'

She puts her hands in her lap. 'Well, then,' she says. 'I guess you're looking at adoption, or a termination.'

'I want a termination,' I tell her. 'Is that still legal in this country?'

She leans back in her desk chair and sighs. 'Thirty-five years of fighting to maintain our rights and every second girl who sits in that chair asks me that question.'

'I'm not American,' I remind her. 'How soon can I get this done?'

'Well —' She pushes the mouse across the mousepad to wake her computer. 'It's too late to book you in somewhere today, and most places will be closed over the weekend.'

She types something in and I look around her office. It's almost empty, except for the desk, the two chairs, the computer, a phone and a poster on the wall telling me to ask my doctor about the IUD coil.

'What's the IUD coil?' I ask her.

'One thing at a time,' she says. 'I found an open appointment, on Monday at two thirty, at a centre in South San Francisco. They offer a free and confidential counselling service on site. I also suggest you talk this decision over with someone beforehand. A close friend or family member. The father, perhaps?' She rummages in the drawer for another pamphlet.

Suddenly I'm aware of how alone I am in this city, how far away all my best friends and family are. Suddenly I'm wishing that my teenage experimentation with Becky Addis had taken; that she and I were now living together in a cottage on the coast of Brighton, clipping our fingernails as foreplay, flushing our contraceptive pills down the toilet and laughing triumphantly at our risk-free lesbian life.



Being unexpectedly pregnant is like learning that someone you love has died. You remember, then you forget, then all of a sudden it dawns on you again. The brain separates the enormous shock into many minor shocks and doles them out at five-minute intervals. I walk to the BART station. I'm pregnant. I buy a ticket. I'm pregnant. I ride the train and get out at 24th Street. I'm pregnant. I buy a pack of cigarettes at the corner store. I give the woman seven dollars and she hands me coins. I'm pregnant. I go to see Luke at the Common Room.

'Hey, I'm pregnant.'

'What?' He can't hear me. He's standing behind the espresso machine, his manager Katie is at the roaster, and Slow Club is crooning through the speakers. 'Did you get my text messages?' he asks loudly.

'Probably not all of them,' I say. 'You filled up the memory on my phone so I couldn't receive new ones.'

'Well, I wouldn't have to send so many if you just answered one.' He doses into the portafilter and tamps it down. 'What are you doing here anyway?' He slams the instrument harder than he needs to into the machine and positions a cup under the spouts. 'I told you it makes me uncomfortable to see you.'

Then we have the same fight we've been having for the last three weeks.

'I've been coming here since the first day I got to the city. Way before I even met you.'

'Well, I was working here a year before you even arrived in the States.'

'This cafe is one of the reasons I moved to this neighbourhood.'

'Well, there are other coffee shops in the Mission District.'

'Why don't you work in one of them, then?'

'Are you fucking serious?' he says. 'Low-fat latte for Allie,' he calls out.

*I'm pregnant*, I think.

'Look,' he says. 'I still love you. If you don't want to be in contact with me, you can't come in here.'

'Oh yeah?' I say. 'If you're so in love with me, why did you change your MySpace status to single?'

'You're the one who said you wanted a clean break.'

'And you took my band out of your top twelve.'

'Americano for George. Why do you even care? Why are you even checking my MySpace?'

'It's bookmarked on my computer.'

'So un-bookmark it.'

'Fine,' I say.

'Fine.' He glares down at me over the row of glasses and mugs on top of the machine. I glare right back. 'I created a new espresso blend,' he says. 'A Colombian microlot and a Cup of Excellence from Brazil. Ripe cherry acidity with a maple syrup finish. Really sweet.'

'What's it called?'

'Straight Shooter. Wanna try it?'

'Sure.'

*Then he says, 'Why are you dressed so sexy? Do you have a date? Are you seeing someone else already? Do I mean so little to you?' And I remember the fifth, sixth and seventh months of our relationship.*

On his break we go into the green bean room. I sit on a sack of Santa Isabel. He leans back on a stack of Bolivians. It's cooler in here than the rest of the cafe; the beans absorb the heat. *I'm pregnant*, I think, looking him up and down. But it's not the baby that's making my stomach churn. He's wearing his tight black jeans and a very low-necked white T-shirt, and an open grey and blue cowboy shirt with the sleeves rolled up. His hair is messy, his eyes bright blue, and he's got a few days' worth of stubble on his face. I can see three of his tattoos: the ECG squiggles over his heart, the vintage gun on his right wrist and the numbered lines on the inside of his left arm:

1 \_\_\_\_\_  
2 \_\_\_\_\_  
3 \_\_\_\_\_

‘It’s where I write my to-do list,’ he said last June on our first date, as we sat spinning right-to-left-and-back on barstools at the Dovre Club. Then he took out a pen and scrawled my name on all three lines, then again and again, all the way down his arm – *Claire Claire Claire Claire* – before dropping the biro on the floor and reaching for me. His teeth pressed against my lower lip drew blood, and when I climbed on to his lap and wrapped my legs around him, the bartender told us we had to leave. He rode with me on the handlebars of his fixed-gear to his apartment on Harrison, and I forgot we weren’t using anything until he pulled out of me, wrapped a fist around himself, and came into his hand.

*‘You can pay for half the procedure.’*

*‘How much is that gonna be?’*

*‘I think it costs two hundred and fifty dollars,’ I say. ‘But I might just be getting that from Dirty Dancing.’*

‘Hey, thanks for not knocking me up,’ I said, reaching across the floor for my cigarettes.

‘Of course,’ he said, wiping his palm on the sheet, on the part of the bed closest to the wall. ‘I’m nothing if not a gentleman.’

Today, in here, the sight of him, both put-together and dishevelled, and the smell, that deep, sweet, caramel scent of roasting coffee that sticks to his clothes, his skin, his hair – that scent that is so strongly linked to him in my mind that some mornings just walking past a Starbucks on my way to class and inhaling is enough to get me wet inside my underwear – it all almost makes me forget the fifth, sixth and seventh months of our relationship. For a moment I want to turn and lock the door, and walk the few steps it would take for my hipbones to be pressed against his jeans. I want to stand on my tiptoes till my face can reach his face. And as if he’s thinking the same thing, he clears his throat and says, ‘What are you wearing under that blazer?’

‘Nothing.’

‘No skirt?’

‘Nup.’

‘What about under the tights?’ he asks. I smile up at him. Then he says, ‘Why are you dressed so sexy? Do you have a date? Are you seeing someone else already? Do I mean so little to you?’ And I remember the fifth, sixth and seventh months of our relationship. So I leave the door unlocked and I try to breathe only through my mouth. I stare at the floor, scattered with unroasted beans, and I tell him, ‘I’m pregnant.’

The first thing he does is slap a palm to his forehead in a cartoonish gesture of shock that almost makes me laugh. His fingers are brown with coffee stains. ‘Is it mine?’ he asks.

‘What kind of a –’ I try to look hurt and insulted like women do in the movies when men ask them this, but I can’t maintain it for long. ‘Yes,’ I say. ‘You’re the only person I’ve slept with since we broke up.’

There’s a knock on the door, and Katie pokes her head in. ‘Luke – oh hey, Claire – are you almost done in here? There’s a line out the door and Jackie’s pulling horrible shots. I want to put her back on the register.’

‘I’ll be right out,’ he says. When she’s gone, he turns to me and takes my hand. ‘Hey. When can we talk about this?’

‘I’ve already decided. I’m not having it.’

‘Huh.’ He looks at the wall, pasted with flyers about workplace safety and the minimum wage in California. ‘Is there anything I can do?’

‘You can pay for half the procedure.’

‘How much is that gonna be?’

‘I think it costs two hundred and fifty dollars,’ I say. ‘But I might just be getting that from *Dirty Dancing*.’

—

It’s almost four o’clock and outside it’s getting windy. The fog is rolling in to the north and the south, sparing our little bowl of a neighbourhood, where it is always sunny. A block away from where I live on Shotwell Street, I run into Sean. He’s got his laptop bag over his shoulder and he’s wearing a fedora.

‘Hey,’ he says. ‘I put you in my new book. You’re the Scottish girl in the pop band. Chapter Six.’

‘I’m English,’ I say. ‘Let’s go. Rematch.’ I put out my hand and we grip each other’s fingers and start moving our thumbs from side to side.

‘One, two, three, four,’ we say in unison. ‘I declare a thumb war.’

‘OK, kiss,’ I say, pushing my thumb against his for a second. ‘Now, bow.’ We both bend our thumbs at the knuckle. ‘Into your corners, come out fighting.’ It doesn’t take long for him to pin me, his thumb covering mine completely, and he takes his time counting up to knockout.

After he’s won three rounds, he asks me, ‘When are we gonna go on a date?’

‘I told you,’ I tell him. ‘I’m not attracted to you.’

‘Shut up,’ he says. ‘Seriously, when can we go out?’

‘I don’t see you in that way,’ I say. ‘All I can offer you is friendship.’

‘You’re not scaring me,’ he says. ‘How about Wednesday?’

‘I don’t date writers,’ I say. ‘I really can’t stand writers.’

‘Maybe Thursday’s better?’

‘Don’t you people realize that nobody reads books any more?’

‘I want to go on a date with you. To SFMOMA. Next week.’

‘I can’t next week,’ I say. ‘I’m having an abortion next week.’

‘Shut up,’ he says. ‘You look hot today. Meet me right here on Thursday at five.’

‘I won’t be here,’ I say as he walks away.

‘It’s a date!’

—

My housemates are giggling in the living room when I get home.

‘Claire,’ Sophie calls out. ‘Can you come film us? We’re trying to make a video response for YouTube.’

She has her hair pulled back and is wearing a white onesie. She’s sitting on Andrew’s lap. I take the camera from her and stand across from them. When I press record, Sophie starts gaga-ing like a baby. Andrew holds out his index finger and Sophie bites it.

‘Ow, Charlie bit me,’ Andrew says in an attempt at an English accent. Sophie clamps down again. ‘Ouch, ouch, ouch. That really hurt, Charlie, and it’s still hurting.’

When they finish, I stop filming and they collapse with laughter.

‘Let’s do another take,’ says Sophie.

‘Let’s watch it first,’ says Andrew.

‘Yeah, yeah,’ says Sophie. ‘Claire, you wanna see the original?’

‘No, thanks.’ I hand her the camera. ‘I don’t think babies are funny.’

In my room, I find my phonocard on the desk and follow the automated prompts until I’m talking to my mother in London. It’s night time there.

‘Hiya,’ I say.

‘Hiya,’ she says.

‘I need to talk to you about something.’

‘Hold on, how do I get this thing on speakerphone? Meredith, can you do it? I can’t find the button. I don’t have my glasses. Can you see it?’

‘Hi Claire,’ says my brother Paul, when they’ve got it worked out.

‘Hiya,’ says my sister Meredith.

‘Hi Claire Bear,’ says my father.

‘Hi Claire,’ says my ex-boyfriend Alistair.

‘Hey,’ says my sister-in-law Wendy.

‘Hello sweetheart,’ says my grandmother.

‘Hi everyone,’ I say. ‘Wait, what’s Alistair doing there?’

There’s a long silence and I picture everyone sitting at the kitchen table, eyeing each other nervously and rolling crumbs over the tablecloth with their fingers.

‘Mum was supposed to tell you,’ says Meredith. ‘Al and I are together now.’

‘What?’

‘I was planning to tell her in December when she comes to visit,’ my mother says.

‘Oh my god,’ I say.

‘Charlie!’ I hear my housemates yelling in the other room. ‘Charlie, that really hurts!’

‘What’s the big deal?’ my brother says. ‘I thought you were the one who broke it off.’

‘She was,’ Alistair says.

‘Because I moved to America,’ I say.

‘You said you were glad to be leaving him,’ Meredith says.

‘Cheers for keeping the family secrets,’ I tell her.

‘Why don’t you meet a nice American boy?’ my grandmother asks.

‘I’m sorry,’ Meredith says. ‘I know it’s really weird.’

‘It’s worse than that,’ I say.

‘But sometimes good people just find each other,’ she says.

‘Let’s talk about this when you come to visit,’ my father says. ‘They might not even be together by then.’

‘Dad!’ says Meredith. ‘We will be. We definitely will be.’

‘I’m gonna go now,’ I say. ‘Bye everyone. Bye Nanna.’

‘Bye sweetheart,’ my grandmother says. I hang up before anyone else can speak.

—

On Saturday morning I take BART under the bay to visit James and Amanda in Berkeley. They’ve moved into a new house, wooden and cosy, with a deck overlooking a backyard full of trees. Amanda is pulling a frittata out of the oven when I arrive, and James is in the living room, mixing up mimosas. When I tell them about the baby, they exchange a glance.

‘Well, if it was a boy, it’d be tall like Luke,’ Amanda says.

‘And clingy and obsessive,’ James says.

‘Just what the world needs,’ I say.

‘How did this happen?’ Amanda asks.

‘I’m an idiot.’ Neither of them responds to this. I wonder what they’ll say about it later, after I’m gone.

The three of us eat out on the deck and talk about our dissertations – a conversation that inevitably devolves into complaints about our meagre stipends, the user-unfriendliness of EndNote, and the unavailability of our supervisors.

‘Do you ever think that our relationships with our supervisors are like parent–child relationships?’ Amanda asks, shaking hot sauce on to her eggs. ‘We start out feeling completely dependent on them. We don’t do anything without getting their opinion or permission.’

‘Then they let us down,’ James says.

‘Then we realize they’re not perfect.’ Amanda puts her bare foot on James’s lap and he covers it with his hand.

‘And that they have other children to deal with too. So we resent them, and decide we don’t need them, and we strike out on our own.’

‘Yeah, but I made out with mine,’ I say. ‘So how does that fit into the analogy?’

‘Jesus,’ James says. ‘Professor Fursten? Really?’

‘Is that bad?’

‘When do you find time to work, with all this stuff going on?’

‘In the holidays. Everyone goes home to their families. I stay in the city and work my arse off.’

‘That’s probably ten days a year,’ James says.

‘When do you two work?’

‘Monday to Friday,’ says Amanda. ‘Nine to five.’

‘Wow, you guys are such grown-ups,’ I say. ‘Do you want a baby?’

‘I don’t think so.’ She shakes her head. ‘At least not one of our own.’

‘Maybe we’ll adopt one day,’ says James.

‘No, I mean, do you want *this* baby? I can have it and then hand it over.’

They laugh. ‘I definitely don’t want a kid right now,’ Amanda says.

‘Neither do I,’ James says.

‘Me neither,’ I say. ‘First I need a calmer life. Maybe get married like you guys.’

‘You think marriage is a calmer way of life?’ James asks.

‘It’s when the terrifying shit really begins,’ Amanda says.

‘What you need is a *quieter* life,’ James says. ‘So you can process all the craziness.’

‘Maybe you should move to Berkeley,’ Amanda says. ‘Come be our neighbour.’

‘I’d love to,’ I say. ‘But there’s a whole city to conquer over there. San Francisco is trying to kick my arse, and I can’t let it get the better of me.’

A screen door slams in a neighbouring yard and a woman calls to someone to bring her a sweater. Amanda starts humming what sounds like an M. Ward song. James pats her foot in three-four time. I look out at the fig tree, heavy with fruit, and I try to imagine a life in which monogamy didn’t feel like a locked cell, in which I always start wishing my cellmate would get released early for good behaviour.

‘You guys are so lucky,’ I say. ‘You have each other and you want each other.’

‘It’s true,’ Amanda says. ‘We’re lucky, but you know it’s not perfect. We’re both in the same department. We’re competing for funding, and we’re always busy and stressed out at the same time.’

‘Yeah, but at least you understand each other’s work. You can read each other’s papers.’



*A A S Gandy*

‘Uh-huh,’ James says. ‘Try sleeping next to the person who just correctly informed you that your entire thesis topic is flawed and untenable and you’ve just wasted two whole years of research.’

‘So what you’re saying is, I should give Professor Fursten a call?’

I stand up and start clearing dishes.

‘Don’t do that,’ James tells me. ‘We’ll do it. You’re in a delicate condition.’

‘Oh don’t, that’s awful,’ Amanda says, smiling at me apologetically.

When it’s time to leave, they stand on the front porch and wave me goodbye.

‘There she goes,’ Amanda says. ‘See you soon.’

‘Come back bearing stories,’ James calls after me.

—

Back in the city, I stop in at the Common Room. Luke is roasting, pouring beans from a bucket into the hopper of the Probat.

‘What’s cooking?’ I ask him.

‘Fucking decaf,’ he says. ‘I’m glad you stopped by. I wanted to tell you: I think this baby is the best thing that could have happened to us.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘Think about it,’ he says. ‘I pulled out hundreds of times when we were together, and it worked fine. Then the one time we have sex after the break-up, and *bam* –’ he slams his fist into his palm, ‘we make a kid.’



‘All that means,’ I say, ‘is that we’re both fertile.’

‘No, no.’ He turns back to the roaster, pulls out the trier, holds it under his nose and smells the beans. They’re the colour of wet sand. He puts it back. ‘This baby means more than that. It’s a sign that we’re supposed to be together.’

‘But I’m not keeping it,’ I say.

‘That’s even more reason to be together. An abortion is a big deal. I want to be there for you, in whatever way I can.’

‘Well, right now I’d love a gibraltar.’

He turns down the gas on the roaster, and goes behind the bar. I take a seat at a nearby table. All around me, people are sitting with coffee cups, staring into laptop screens. The girl at the table in front of me has a sticker of a peach stuck over her Apple logo. The guy to my left is working on a Word file entitled *Start-Up: A Memoir*.

‘Do I know you?’ he says, when he sees me looking. He has black curly hair and straight white American teeth.

‘No,’ I say, ‘I just thought I’d save you some time by telling you not to bother writing that memoir. Nobody reads books any more.’

‘This isn’t a book,’ he says. ‘It’s my senior thesis.’ He leans back in his chair. ‘So what’s that accent? New Zealand?’

When Luke comes back, he puts the drink on the table and walks away. I take it and follow him over to the roaster. He checks on the beans again, then pushes a lever. The beans shower out of the drum and into the cooling tray.

‘Thanks for the drink,’ I say, sipping it. He doesn’t answer me. ‘What’s going on?’

‘Nothing,’ he says. ‘Who’s that guy?’

‘Some kid. College kid.’

‘And you feel perfectly OK about flirting with him while I’m over there making you a beverage?’

‘I would feel OK about that, if that’s what I was doing.’

‘There are plenty of other coffee shops in San Francisco you can go to.’

‘Why don’t you work in one of them, then?’

‘Are you kidding? This is my workplace. And you’re ruining it for me, emotionally. Would you mind leaving now? I have stuff to do.’

‘Fine,’ I say.

‘Fine.’

—

Halfway down the block, I run into Andrew. He’s got his skateboard under his arm and he’s talking on his phone.

‘Wait one second,’ he says to the person he’s speaking to. He holds his phone face down on his chest and asks me, ‘So when are we gonna go on a date?’

‘We’re not,’ I tell him. ‘You’re my housemate.’

‘Does that mean Sophie’s off-limits, too?’

When I get to Amnesia, Lars is sitting on the edge of the stage, bent over with his face in his hands. ‘Dude,’ I say, sitting next to him. ‘What a shitty week.’ It’s only then that I notice his ear is all scraped up and bloody. When he looks at me, I see he has a black eye and a big gash at his hairline. There’s a hole in his T-shirt the size of a pancake.

‘Bike accident,’ he says.

‘Whoa,’ I say.

‘Beer,’ he says.

‘Got it.’

The bartender is a tall redhead guy with a face that’s more sideburns than skin, and a moustache that would make Dalí swoon. He nods when I order, and pulls me a pint.

‘Seven bucks,’ he says, placing it in front of me.

‘I’m in the band,’ I say.

‘I know. Seven bucks.’

‘Don’t we get drink tickets?’

‘Last time you were in here, you made out with my girlfriend. That’ll be seven bucks.’

‘Fine.’ I get out the money and put it on the bar. ‘I’m not tipping though.’ He shrugs and takes the bills. I pick up the drink and say, ‘Why are you being so weird about it? It’s girl on girl. Aren’t guys supposed to be into that?’

‘This isn’t fucking Los Angeles,’ he says.

I go back to the stage and give the glass to Lars, who takes a couple of sips and then chugs the rest down. He leans his head on my shoulder. ‘I was turning left, man, and this guy in a taxi slammed straight into me.’

‘Did he have right of way?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Did you have lights on?’

‘No.’

‘That bastard.’

‘I think I may have chipped a molar.’

‘I’m pregnant.’

‘Man.’ He sits up and glares at me. ‘You’re always one-upping me.’

The bar is almost empty, but an hour after we’ve sound checked, there are about twenty people there; at least four of them have come to see us. Lars has graduated to a bottle of Knob Creek I bought at the corner store across the street. He takes a slug as we climb on to the stage, then passes it to me. I take it with my non-tambourine hand and hold it up at the bartender in a gesture of cheers. He sticks up his middle finger.

‘Hey, thanks for coming out tonight. We’re Betty Cooper’s Revenge,’ says Lars, who has, I now realize, developed a bit of a lisp from the accident. ‘I fell off my bicycle today and Claire is pregnant. Now you’ve all caught up, let’s play some tunes.’

He starts in with the opening chords of ‘Mood Ring’.

‘If any of you record this and put it online,’ I say into my microphone, ‘I will track you down and – add you to our email list.’ Then I put the bottle to my lips and drink.

‘Mmm, baby loves bourbon,’ Lars says, smirking at me.

‘He’s a lousy lay, ladies,’ I say. ‘Believe me, I tried him out. And that was before the concussion. One. Two. A one, two –’ I hit the tambourine hard against my palm and shake it.

‘*Honey baby, you’re a tall drink of water,*’ Lars sings. ‘*I’m kind of regretting that restraining order.*’ His falsetto is so pretty. I close my eyes. ‘*Please take it slow, don’t get carried away. Let’s drive through the desert and get married today.*’

After the set, we stand at the end of the bar, finishing the bottle, until the guy from Coed Dorm comes and screams at us to get our shit off the stage so they can play. I’m sloppy on my feet now and I drop my triangle wand as I’m shoving the percussion gear into my bag. I think about bending down to look for it in the half-dark, but I need to use the

bathroom, so I decide I’ll just play it with my house key from now on.

When I get to the ladies’ room, there’s a line outside.

‘Hey,’ says the girl in front of me. She’s wearing dangly earrings. ‘Great show.’

‘Hey, thanks,’ I say. She smiles at me and I wonder if I should make out with her.

‘You’re pregnant, right?’ says the girl in front of her. ‘You can go ahead of me.’

‘Oh, cheers.’ I move to the front of the line and try the bathroom door. It’s locked. The girl who gave me her spot is wearing little black shorts and tall brown boots. I wonder if I should make out with *her*.

‘Do you date anyone who works here?’ I ask her. She looks confused.

‘The men’s room is free,’ says a guy coming out of the men’s room. ‘You can use it.’

The bathroom, like every public bathroom in this town, is disgusting. The floors are wet, the door handle is sticky, the graffiti isn’t funny and there’s no toilet seat. I half sit, half stand, pull my dress up, clutch it in a bunch, and hope for the best.

When I come out, the same guy is still standing there. He has blond floppy hair and wide-set blue eyes and he’s probably attractive but he’s not my type. Tan pants, lace-up Vans, a short-sleeved pale blue button-down shirt, and a big fat silver ring on his thumb.

‘I think your friend should go to the emergency room,’ he says.

‘Who?’ I look around until I see Lars sitting at the bar with a girl who waits tables at Suppenküche. She’s holding a handful of ice to his forehead and it’s dribbling down his face as it melts. He’s trying to catch the droplets with his tongue. ‘Look at those reflexes,’ I say. ‘He’s fine.’

‘Are you really pregnant?’ the guy asks.

‘Yep,’ I say, ‘for a limited time only.’

He holds his hand out and introduces himself as Anton. He asks what I’m doing in the States, and I say I’m doing a PhD in cinema studies, and we get into a conversation about Wes Anderson and Paul Thomas Anderson, and the difference between childish cinema and the cinema of childhood. Then my stomach rumbles and it takes me a minute to

work out that it's not alcohol or attraction or my unwanted pregnancy that's doing it. I just haven't eaten since breakfast.

'Hey, where do you live?' I ask.

'Just on 17th. Whoa, are you OK?'

I reach out and grab hold of the wall beside me. 'Do you have any food there?'

—

His bike is an eight-speed with brakes and a brand name, and tyres that wouldn't look out of place on an army jeep. He rolls it between us as we walk. When we get to his building, he says it's too heavy to carry up the stairs, and he takes his time locking it up in the downstairs hallway.

'You've got nothing to worry about,' I say. 'You could leave that thing lying out on the pavement all night and no one would take it.'

He looks down at his bike and gives a small, sad shrug. 'I'd take it,' he says.

The apartment is standard San Francisco Victorian: a long narrow hallway with bedrooms and a bathroom coming off it, and a living room and a kitchen in the very back. Anton's probably about twenty-four and I'm expecting ramen noodles or leftover Chinese takeaway, but what he brings out is a plate with five different cheeses on it, a bowl of hummus ('homemade,' he says) and crackers imported from Sweden. He sits opposite me and watches while I eat.

*I'm halfway through the next story  
and have eaten most of the hummus  
when one of Anton's housemates  
comes home. 'What's up?' he says.*

*'We're having a surprise party  
for Calorie at the playground in  
Dolores Park. Wanna join?'*

*'You have a friend called Calorie?'  
I ask.*

'I've seen you before,' he says. 'At the Common Room. You go out with that tall dirty guy.'

'Not any more,' I say.

'Huh.' He looks down at the table and smiles. This is when I should probably say something – 'I'm not looking for anything', or 'I don't want to date right now', or 'We should just be friends'. Or maybe it's some non-verbal cue I'm supposed to give: lean away, seem bored and uninterested, don't make eye contact while smiling. But those things don't come naturally to me. So I do what I always do when I meet a new guy: I tell him about all my troubles with the other guys.

'He went away to Honduras to visit a coffee farm, right, and he sent me a text message saying he was spending the last two days on Roatan. We're writing back and forth, and it's all really fun, so I say, "I'm glad you're having a break. You need a holiday. Go get laid and be safe." And then he sends me this barrage of vitriolic –'

'He's still in love with you,' Anton says. 'He doesn't want to hear some buddyish suggestion like that. You're the only one he wants to sleep with.'

'I guess.' I cut off a piece of Brie and pull it from the knife with my fingers. 'But then there's my thesis supervisor, who's so smart and I could talk to him for ever, but when we kissed, there was nothing there. I couldn't believe it. On paper, we're so right for each other. So I kissed him a few other times just to make sure.'

'And?'

'And nothing. Even his smell. You know how they say if you're attracted to someone's scent, it means they have a different immune system to yours? So then your babies would have really strong immune systems. With my supervisor, I'm not attracted to his scent at all. I can barely smell anything, and when I can, I don't find it sexy. I think it's because we're both descendants of Eastern European Jews. We're from the same tribe.'

'You both have the old Ashkenazi immune system?' he says.

'Exactly. So then there's this guy back home –' I tell him the story of my sister and my ex-boyfriend, and I expect him to be appalled and horrified, but all he says is, 'Do you still have feelings for this guy?'

'No. But what's that got to do with it?'

'Do you like him at all? Like, as a person?'

'Al? Yeah, he's lovely. Super sweet guy.'

‘Well, then maybe you should get out of their way.’

‘What? I can’t do that. It’s too weird. You don’t get how weird it is.’

I’m halfway through the next story and have eaten most of the hummus when one of Anton’s housemates comes home. A skinny guy with a side part and a red bandana tied around his neck. ‘What’s up?’ he says. ‘We’re having a surprise party for Calorie at the playground in Dolores Park. Wanna join?’

‘You have a friend called Calorie?’ I ask.

There are voices in the hallway, and the lights go off in the living room. The fairy lights rimming the ceiling come on, and suddenly there are about ten people in there, sitting, standing, talking. One guy has a radio strapped to his back with what looks like a seatbelt. It’s playing a Cut Copy song. ‘Who are these people?’ I ask, standing up as two girls in legwarmers rush into the kitchen with a foil-covered baking dish that holds, it is soon revealed, a birthday cake for Calorie. Whose name is spelled with an O-R-Y.

‘They’re moped people,’ says Anton. Then, ‘Wanna go up on the roof? I have wine.’

We go through an alcove full of bicycles and skateboards, out the back door and up some stairs, past the back door of the apartment above, and up another flight till we reach the bottom of a ladder. ‘Are you scared of heights?’ he asks, handing me the bottle. He turns and grabs hold of a rung. I look up the ladder, to the awning of the roof and beyond it, to a few city stars.

‘I’m not scared of heights,’ I tell him, ‘I’d just rather not fall.’

The roof is big and flat, and we sit right in the middle – Twin Peaks before us, the park to our left, the skyline and bridges behind our backs. The wine is full-bodied and tastes like grapes. Luke, I know, would taste other things in it – stone fruit or Meyer lemon cake or red Jolly Ranchers – things I would never have thought of but, when he identified them, would realize were there.

‘So,’ Anton says.

‘So,’ I say.

‘So why do you think these guys are into you?’ He takes a swig and passes the bottle.

‘It’s probably just the accent.’

‘It can’t just be that,’ he says. ‘Maybe it’s the Winona Ryder thing. You look a bit like her.’



NICHOLS,

‘Wow, I do? Like, which one? *Heathers* Winona or *Little Women* Winona?’

‘Um, I think *Beetlejuice* Winona.’

‘What? That’s not a good thing. No one’s trying to date *Beetlejuice* Winona. Except *Beetlejuice*.’

‘Oh,’ he says. ‘Then I don’t know what it is. You don’t even have big tits.’

‘Small mercies,’ I say. ‘What’s that noise?’

‘Mopeds.’

We go to the edge of the roof and look over, and he’s right. A crowd of people on mopeds are revving on the footpath. They’re all wearing helmets and jeans and it’s difficult to tell who’s who. I make out a pair of purple legwarmers on one person. A red bandana on another. Then they all follow each other in a U-turn and ride up the street in a mess of effete urbanism. They turn left on to Dolores Street and head for the park.

‘So this abortion thing is a big deal,’ Anton says, once they’ve disappeared.

‘Nah. This abortion is the most practical and organized thing in my life. It’s the only thing I’m certain I want.’

‘Still, it’s like an operation. Operations suck.’

‘Yeah,’ I say. ‘I guess they do.’

We sit back down. The roar of the moped motors turns into a high-pitched buzz as they get further away. Then it gets quiet. I think about my cigarettes. I left them downstairs in my bag. I lie back, ignoring the gravel digging into me, and picture myself at the clinic on Monday, lying on an operating table, with blood coming out of my – where? With medical instruments lying about that look like – what? I realize I don’t know anything about the procedure I’m going to have, and that seems scarier than knowing every tiny detail about it.

‘Let’s stop talking about me,’ I say to Anton, feeling suddenly short of breath. ‘Let’s talk about you. Let’s talk about everything there is to know about you. Like, what do you do?’

‘I’m a graphic designer,’ he says. ‘And I paint.’

‘Sounds great,’ I say. The tightness in my chest gets worse. ‘Do you have a girlfriend?’

‘No. I just broke up with a woman about four months ago.’

‘Cool,’ I say. ‘Can I sleep over?’

‘Uh’ – He smiles an embarrassed smile and looks up at the radio tower on the hill. ‘I don’t think that’s a good idea.’

‘Please,’ I say. ‘We don’t have to do anything. We can just sleep.’

‘I just met you,’ he says. ‘I don’t know you.’

‘I’m nice,’ I say, grabbing his hand and squeezing.

‘You’re smashed,’ he says. ‘It wouldn’t feel right. Why don’t I just walk you home?’

—

When I wake early the next morning, it’s still dark outside my window, and I feel like something has gone horribly wrong. I sit up, and rack my brain for a minute before I remember: I’m pregnant.

‘What’s going on?’ someone says.

‘Jesus.’

Luke is lying beside me, one hand under his head, the other one lying flat on his bare chest.

‘How did you get here?’

‘I rode my bike,’ he says.

‘Who let you in?’

‘You did. You drunk-dialled and told me to come over. I asked if we were gonna talk about the baby and you said yes. But when I got here, you kept telling me to shut up. You had other ideas.’

‘Shut up,’ I say. I find my phone on the floor by the bed and scroll down to the outgoing calls section. And there it is: *(Don’t call) Luke 1.38a.m.*

‘That’s my name in your phone?’ he asks.

‘It’s a joke,’ I say, lying back down. He props himself up on his elbow and looks at me. His face is just a few centimetres from mine.

‘Anyway,’ he says, ‘I was happy you called.’

‘How do you do that?’ I ask him. ‘How do you smell like coffee first thing in the morning?’

*I find my phone on the floor by the bed and scroll down to the outgoing calls section. And there it is: (Don’t call) Luke 1.38 a.m.*

*‘That’s my name in your phone?’ he asks.*

‘I didn’t shower yesterday,’ he says. Then I lift my face and kiss him because, for some reason, right now I can’t think of a single sentence that is sexier than that one.

I fall asleep and when I wake again, the sun is rising over Potrero Hill. I slip out of bed, go to my desk, open my laptop, and stare at the last words I wrote, over a week ago: *The enduring namelessness of the protagonists of Hiroshima Mon*

Amour underscores the fragmentation and anonymity which, Resnais holds, are universally characteristic of the post-war experience. I read it over three times. Then I think, *God, I'm a wanker.*

I look around for my cigarettes. I find an unopened pack in my bag, along with my percussion instruments and a pile of pamphlets that Dr Hill gave me. The one on top has a picture on it of a girl who looks both solemn and confident. Above her head it reads, *Abortion: what you need to know.*

By the time Luke wakes up at eight-thirty, I've read through all of them, and am showered and dressed. 'Shit,' he says, climbing out of the bed. 'I have a staff cupping at nine.'

I stare at his crotch as he pulls his jeans up his legs, and I say, 'This was an isolated incident.'

'Uh-huh,' he says. 'Sure.'

Mission Street is almost deserted. There's a prostitute talking on her phone on the corner of 21st Street, and a couple of dealers standing outside the Beauty Bar. None of them pay any attention to the two of us: Luke on the seat of his fixed-gear, pedalling, and me on the handlebars, giving directions.

'Keep going,' I tell him. 'OK, move a little to the left. Now there's a stop sign coming up in about half a block.' Either it's too early for this, or I'm still drunk from last night, or maybe it's the first signs of morning sickness, but I feel every pothole and every piece of rubbish we ride over like it's a punch to the abdomen. I almost scream when he runs a red light at 19th Street. When he turns left on to 17th we narrowly avoid a collision with a girl riding a beach cruiser in the other direction.

'You don't look so hot,' he says, when I hop off the bike outside Anton's place.

'Yeah,' I say. 'That was rough. You have to change your gear ratio or something.'

'Who lives here?' he asks, looking up at the building.

'Uh, this girl Calory,' I say. 'You don't know her. Thanks for the lift.'

—

When I ring the doorbell, Anton's housemate opens it, wearing just his boxer shorts. He rubs his eye with the palm of his hand, walks down the hallway, bangs on a closed door, and then goes into the next room. When Anton comes out, he's wearing just his boxers as well. He's not as skinny as Luke and he has less chest hair and no tattoos, but what strikes me is how similar all these guys look when they're half undressed.

'Hi,' I say. 'My name's Claire. I don't know if you remember me but we met last night at the bar.'

'You do look familiar,' he says. 'Betty's Revenge, right?'

'Yep, founding member.'

He doesn't ask me in so I cross my arms and lean against the door frame. 'So I was reading up about this abortion stuff. And there's this website run by a really nice woman in Georgia called Loretta who'll pay for a girl like me to have an ultrasound of my baby. Just to help me make the decision.'

'That's sweet of her,' he says in a croaky voice. He has sleep goop caught in the corners of both eyes.

'So I was wondering if you're interested in a road trip?'

He stares at me and yawns at the same time. 'Are you serious?'

'No. Actually, I need someone to pick me up from the clinic tomorrow. I'm not allowed to leave by myself. I guess I was wondering —'

He looks like he doesn't want to do it. But then he says he'll do it.

'Thank you,' I say. 'You're the only person I know who wouldn't judge me, or try to sleep with me, or tell me to keep the baby.'

'Jesus,' he says. 'I can't wait to meet your friends.'

And I can't help it: the future reference makes me happy.

'Do you want to go get a coffee or something?' I ask him.

'No,' he says. 'I'm gonna go back to bed.'

—

It's a Sunday morning and Valencia Street is quiet. There are a few couples walking together, with rolled up newspapers under their arms or with babies in prams, but the road is empty and the pavements are mostly vacant. I realize I can walk slower and look around a lot more, when I'm not expecting to bump into someone I know. I walk the two blocks to Amnesia, and the next four to the Common Room. Then I cross the street, cut over to Shotwell and let myself into my apartment.

I go to my room, take out my phonecard and call the number on the back. I punch in my PIN and dial the number of my sister's flat in London. It rings and I wait for her to pick up. It is late in the day where she is. I am excited to speak to her. I am excited to tell her that I'm happy she has found love. ◊

