Five Dials

SUMMER 23

Longing

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Five Dials publishes electrifying literary writing of all forms and genres, by writers and thinkers underrepresented on bookshelves across the English-speaking world. Our commissioning rates are £200/1000 words for prose, £75/poem, and £1000/issue for artwork. If you're working on something which you'd like to tell us about, you can find us on Twitter and Instagram at @fivedials.

Sonny Assu

(Ligwiłda'xw of the Kwakwaka'wakw Nations) was raised in North Delta, BC, over 250 km away from his home ancestral home on Vancouver Island. Having been raised as your everyday average suburbanite, it wasn't until he was eight years old that he uncovered his Kwakwaka'wakw heritage. Later in life, this discovery would be the conceptual focal point that helped launch his unique art practice. Assu explores multiple mediums and materials through a lens of pop culture, nostalgia, decolonialism, and Indigenous Futurism. He often imbues his work with autobiographical, humorous, and political connotations to deal with the realities of being Indigenous in the colonial state of Canada.

Christian Butler-Zanetti

is a British author, visual artist and musician currently residing in Okinawa, Japan. Before lockdown he ran Spineless Authors' Night, a monthly open mic event for new and emerging writers. Christian is a member of post-punk band The Pheromoans and sound collage duo The Teleporters. His stories have appeared in, among others, *The Moth*, *Neon*, *Popshot Quarterly* and *The London Magazine*.

Jen Campbell

's poetry pamphlet *The Hungry Ghost Festival* was published by The Rialto in 2012. Her first book-length collection, *The Girl Aquarium*, was published by Bloodaxe Books in 2019. She won the Spelt Poetry Competition 2022 for her poem 'The Hospital Is Not My House' from her second collection, *Please Do Not Touch This Exhibit* (Bloodaxe Books, 2023), which is a Poetry Book Society Recommendation. She currently lives in London.

Kanan Makiya

is an Iraqi-American academic and professor of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies at Brandeis University.

Iman Mersal

is a poet, writer, academic and translator who was born in 1966 in the northern Egyptian Delta and emigrated to Canada in 1999. First published in Arabic in 2019, *Traces of Enayat* won the prestigious 2021 Sheikh Zayed Book Award, making Mersal the first woman to win its Literature category. Her most recent poetry collection is *The Threshold*, shortlisted for the 2023 Griffin Poetry Award. She also wrote *How to Mend: Motherhood and Its Ghosts* (2018), which weaves a new narrative of motherhood through diaries, readings and photographs.

Shalash

is the Iraqi author of *Shalash the Iraqi*. He probably lives in Iraq.

Charlotte Williams

is a Welsh-Guyanese award-winning author, academic and cultural critic. Her writings span academic publications, memoir, short fiction, reviews, essays and commentaries. She has written over fourteen academic books, is a Professor Emeritus at Bangor University and is a member of the Learned Society of Wales. Her writing has taken her on travels worldwide, but her heart and her home are always in Wales.

Jack Wiltshire

lives in Leicester, where he grew up. He studied English at Trinity College, Cambridge. *Enter The Water* is his first book, out October 5th with Corsair (2023). The following poems are from his second project, *Let go of the rain*, and are concerned with how we might be repelled by public spaces and/or drawn through them.

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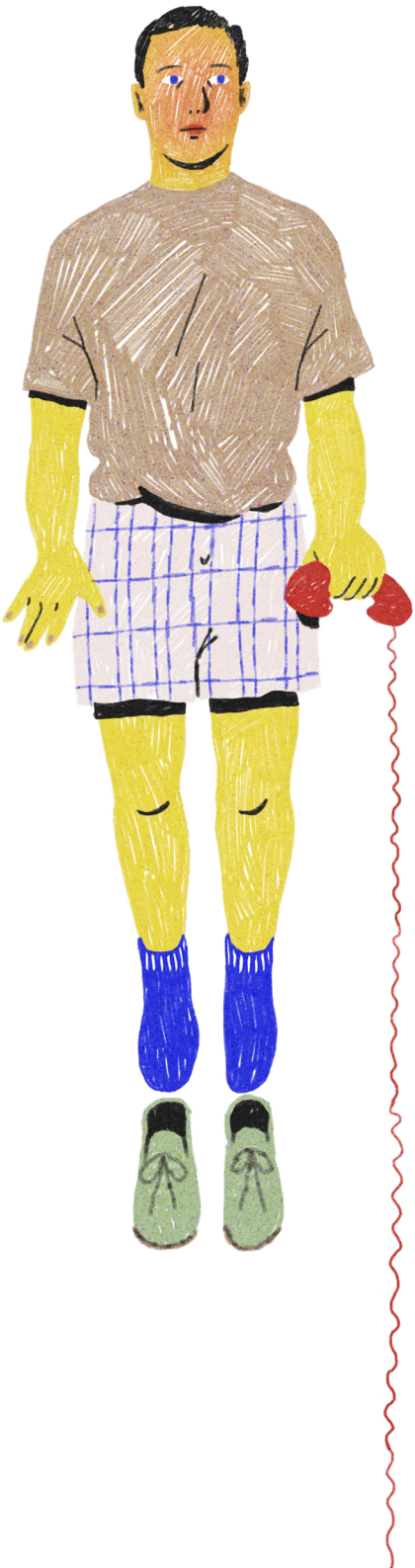


The Every-

SONNY ASSU

Five Dials *asked visual artist Sonny Assu to send us an omnivorous list of everything, or almost everything, he's consumed in the previous month.*

-thing List

As far as my cultural diet goes, I like to keep everything as diverse as I can. I'm trying to consume what I can in a valuable way. I'm trying, you know.

A book I'm into now: *The World We Make* by N. K. Jemisin. It's the second in a series that started with *The City We Became*.

The idea at the core is that cities around the world have their own avatars. One person is chosen to be the avatar for the city. The series takes place around New York and the adjacent area, so there's an avatar for New York and for the different boroughs within New York — a Queens avatar, a Brooklyn avatar, and so on. The first book discusses how the boroughs come into their own and how one person becomes the new avatar for the city and, at the same time, has to deal with an extra-dimensional threat that wants to devour the avatars. In the second, Jemisin is diving into their connection to the other cities around the world.

Before that was a Haruki Murakami book: *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running*. I don't run. I do *not* run. I'm very physically inactive. I appreciated the book though — the style, the beautiful aspects of the writing.

As an artist, I'm starting to understand the benefit of downtime and doing something that isn't always linked to creativity. With my hobbies, for the longest time, I was always doing something creative, but now

I've discovered the benefit of doing something else. So no, it didn't motivate me to do any running, but it definitely motivated me to think about my work in a different way.

When I go to bookstores, I try and hit up the Indigenous book sections. I've got a fairly big collection of older Indigenous books; they're either written by Indigenous people or they're anthropology-adjacent books that include the old stereotypes of what people thought Indigenous people in North America were like in the past. With art books, the last one I bought was Robert Davidson's latest, *Echoes of the Supernatural: The Graphic Art of Robert Davidson*. That book has become an inspiration.

Davidson and I have been working in parallel since I became a professional artist twenty years ago. He's been a professional artist for a lot longer. It's interesting to see how his work has influenced mine; we're working in a parallel mode of abstraction.

I produced a series called 'Longing' that was turned into a book. It featured a series of cedar offcuts — rough pieces of wood I just happened to find. They looked like masks. I mounted them to museum quality standard and photographed them like portraits. I installed and housed them in places that are presumed to hold the authority on the definition of Indigenous art and who gets to be an Indigenous person. When I

installed the masks at the Museum of Anthropology in Vancouver for a summer exhibit, I placed them amongst the works in their permanent collection. It was an interesting way to enact an intervention with these traditional works.

These pieces have no 'features.' They're just pieces of cedar wood that happen to look like heads. When I stepped back and looked at the cedar masks I found and installed, there was something interesting and poetic about the tree rings and the chainsaw marks. They gave the work its own personality. And the way I positioned them, the way the light caught them, and the way they looked over these recognized objects of Northwest Coast culture, I felt there was a longing in the cedar to be part of that culture. But through colonization, these pieces didn't have a chance to become objects of culture, like a dance mask or a spoon or a whistle or a rattle. This cedar didn't get a chance to become a cultural object, but through my intervention I gave them a way to fulfil their desires.

I've been a big *Star Trek* fan for ever. The second season of *Star Trek: Strange New Worlds* has been a completely joyful, joyful experience. It's a prequel to Kirk's arrival as captain. It features the original Captain Pike. I can get really nerdy with this kind of stuff. These cultural products that were once considered counterculture have now become the driving forces of

modern culture.

I probably watched a lot of the original series with Kirk and Spock as reruns as kids. Probably when I was at home sick from school or home by myself, probably on some small thirteen inch TV from the 70s, barely colour.

I really liked *Silo*, an Apple TV show where humanity, for some reason, has been placed in a missile silo buried in the ground. They've been there for hundreds of years. They don't know how they got there, or why they were put there in the first place.

Here we are in a world where we have environmental disaster after environmental disaster. There's a war going on in Ukraine. There are other wars going on all over the place. We're on the precipice of destruction of our own society and a show like *Silo* could mirror what's possible for us at some point in the future.

I'm more in the dystopian frame of mind these days. It's just a reflection of where we are. As a kid watching *Star Trek*, I was following the utopian nature of Gene Roddenberry's vision. Humanity, he thought, is going to come into the utopian vision of itself. As a teen, I was thinking, 'Okay, this could happen. This could happen.' But now, as a 48-year-old adult, I'm thinking: 'It's not going to happen. It's not going to happen in my lifetime. I don't know what's going to happen in my kid's lifetime.'

I don't want to escape it. We need to focus on the

depressing information, including in the entertainment we watch, but we also have to look for hopeful signs that humanity could be wriggling itself out of these dystopian depressive states. We have to go beyond what is being told to us and what is being sold to us, right?

Extrapolations is another very dystopian show. I remember waking up a couple days ago and seeing a meme on Instagram. I didn't even follow up on it. It said that for the first time in Texas they've hit wet-bulb temperatures for humans. It was the first time ever in North America. Wet bulb is when it's so hot and humid outside, no matter what you do to cool yourself down, you're just not going to cool down. That phrase is used on the show. Screens flash: 'It's wet bulb time.' TV these days doesn't take on the rosy aspect of what TV was ten years ago, or even twenty years ago.

Comics are my kind of main form of reading right now. I'm really into the new *Darth Vader* series from Marvel. There's a couple of different volumes of it. It feels like it's filling in a lot of backstory. In my youth I was always thinking, 'what is this character up to when they're not on the screen?' A lot of the *Star Wars* media is filling in those blanks.

Spiderman's always been important. As a kid, I spent a lot of time in Campbell River, on the west coast of Canada, with my grandfather and family. They were involved in commercial fishing, so I practically grew up

on a boat. Looking back at it now, that's where my love of pop culture came into full force. There I was on my grandfather's boat. I wasn't working. I wasn't hauling in fish. While they were hauling in a catch, I was eating candy bars and reading *Spiderman*.

These days, I've been reading a lot of my comics on the iPad. It's immediate. It's right there. I can take my entire collection with me if I want to.

But what I love about the actual physical comics is you get to open them up and touch the paper and smell the ink. It's all the stuff that brings back these wafts of nostalgia, which is something I miss when not reading physical comics. With my recent paintings, I've learned to fill that void because I'm taking comic books and tearing them apart and collaging over them so I get the hint of nostalgia as I'm working.

What I do is I take comic book pages, I adhere them to the surface of the painting panel and then I overlay the specific forms and shapes from Northwest Coast, and specifically from Kwakwaka'wakw, art, which is where my culture comes from. I use the ovoid shape, split forms, U-shapes, S-shapes. All these come together to form an iconography of a stylized raven or a beaver or a bear or an eagle that represents our clan-based structure for individual communities.

But what I'm doing with my work is focusing on the ovoid and the individual aspects of what is known

‘There I was on my grandfather’s boat. I wasn’t working. I wasn’t hauling in fish. While they were hauling in a catch, I was eating candy bars and reading *Spiderman*.’

as form line, and abstracting it and breaking it apart. You'll see a lot of abstract placements of shapes on the surface of the comics, which doesn't really create any kind of specific narrative with the images itself. It's pure abstraction and intuition and mark-making. But it's all done in a hard-edged graphical style, which connects to what you see on the comic book pages. The illustrative style from the various artists making these comic books from back in the day gets overlaid with my iconography. An interesting symmetry emerges.

When I'm looking for material to use, I look for comic books that have specific relevance to me and to my nostalgia. I look for comic books or issues that contain characters that are relevant to me as an Indigenous person. As a kid, it wasn't much of a draw for me. But I did recognize the Indigenous characters in the comic books I was reading. And I drew a lot of connection to them because of who I am. Now it's become even more important because I recognize that representation does matter. Sometimes it feels like we're confronted with white, blonde faces all the time, so it's nice to be able to see people of colour and Black and Indigenous folks represented in these old pages.

I go through and pull out Native American or Indigenous characters. With my recent triptych, there's one panel that features a couple of different pages of an Aborigine *X-Men*-adjacent character called Gateway. I

‘When I’m looking for material to use, I look for comic books that have specific relevance to me and to my nostalgia. I look for comic books or issues that contain characters that are relevant to me as an Indigenous person.’

painted around him to highlight his presence.

There was a number of Native American characters that were present in the *X-Men*, including Warpath and Danielle Moonstar, a member of the New Mutants team. The New Mutants were important because they were the team of youth. They were teenagers, preteens, coming into the understanding of their power, mirroring what I was going through.

For another series, I'm breaking apart what I was told these comics were going to be worth. In the 90s, there was this era called the Speculator Boom where comic book manufacturers were producing number-one issues, new appearances, new teams, new characters or special, gatefold, stamped, collectible covers that you just *had* to get. We were told as collectors that these things will be worth something someday. But generally, comic books of that era are fairly easy to come by and unless they're rare and highly graded, they're not worth much of anything.

So I've been going out and collecting comics that were important to me from the era and destroying them and assigning new value to them through this process.

Within my Speculator Boom series, I have works on paper which take on more of a collage or assemblage element. Instead of taking comic pages, adhering them to a surface and painting over them, I'm cutting various Kwakwaka'wakw form-line elements out of the comic

pages, arranging them on paper as collages, and adding painted and drawn elements to them.

I've got this one series titled 'On the Warpath.' Warpath is the Native American superhero with super strength and super tracking abilities and all that stereotypical stuff. But I like to highlight him because 'On the Warpath' has got some interesting Native American themes that resonate with me.

Memes are part of my, you know, unfortunate daily ritual, too, scrolling on a screen and finding memes to show people. At the time, they can be so funny and poignant but because we consume so many of them, they don't take up enough space in our brains to truly sink in. You're scrolling, sending things left and right to friends and family. It becomes a flash in that moment, which is also very poetic because not everything has to be remembered and talked about in depth. That's the beauty of memes. They become part of the moment, and we don't have to live in that moment forever.

It's always important for me to try and read graffiti when I come across it. I'm here in Campbell River on Vancouver Island. There's a forest trail walk not too far away from where I live. I walk past a power station that's set up to distribute power from a nearby dam. There's a storage container outside that has been covered by various graffiti over the years. The graffiti

has been painted over, again and again. They're always trying to get rid of the latest. But then one person came along and wrote: 'Now Someone Else Do a Public Art.' It makes me laugh every time I pass it.

I have this programme called Pocket on my computer and on my device for storing articles that I thought were important or that I wanted to read later. But I got to the point where I was just collecting article after article that I'd never got around to reading. And so I've been really actively trying to only consume what I feel is important in that moment.

I remember this one article that I saved probably ten years ago. It was theorizing that the reason why we haven't been contacted by aliens is because we *have* been contacted by aliens, but they decided that we were too backwater for them to include in the Galactic Empire.

Take a look at what's going on now, especially with our politics and the divisions out there. If I was an alien, I wouldn't want to come down here.

That article's been with me for *ten years*. Once in a while I'll go through and clean up the articles because I either haven't read them or have read them and don't need them anymore. I keep the alien article. Every time I see it, I think: 'I'll keep that one a little longer.' □

SONNY ASSU'S EVERYTHING LIST

The World We Make (by N. K. Jemisin)	Book
What I Talk About When I Talk About Running (by Haruki Murakami)	Book
Echoes of the Supernatural: The Graphic Art of Robert Davidson (by Robert Davidson)	Book
Star Trek: Strange New Worlds	TV
Silo	TV
Extrapolations	TV
Star Wars: Darth Vader	Comic
Spiderman	Comic
Various memes	Memes
'Now Someone Else Do A Public Art'	Graffiti
An article on aliens	Magazine article

Three Poems

JACK WILTSHIRE

August 23
—

Here, you write the sky
a signal
for the bill.

Barely a sigh —
the waiter comes.

He is paid four euros
an hour to clap
when the sun goes behind the mountains.

Straight down this time. The rain.

September 1
—

Rain. People
in the hospital.

A girl's face lights at the sticker of a nymph
on a filing cabinet. At the stuck earth of a hillside

a boy stares out. He would walk into the rain, slowly
he could, if only, be rounded by the drop. The
        thumping rounds

of a mother, up and down the hospital floor,
dull the ache of seeing her daughter like this.

Like this, the boy thinks, glints at a life outside of
        showers,
in the gamble with a forest under moonlight —

I'm listening to a bird I cannot see in the park;
it's green so it's not easy to find in a green tree

whose oily leaves drip over me. The intention
of the eucalyptus to turn me pious,

to grow again in the ashes of our neighbours
than endure the dead-end of ever-presence.

The girl is dressed like a river, blue hooded,
the lips of her mouth and eyes stay open in surgery,

as if calling out to that gargled boy who stays and stares
at the paper aftermath on the filing cabinet.

A mother forgets her daughter's bright pink cardigan
in the hospital's donation box.

A boy and a girl were not apart.
They are apart now.

Me and the tree;
the flint-spark of a bird.

September 2
Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Centre
—

The view
of this city or vision
of the lucky
but not looking
man on his phone,
he says to me: *people* (we need them)
say (it) *living in this city*
is like (he wouldn't say so) *living*
in a cave (how could we admit it?)
that it gives the impression
of slums (does he run from it,
the heated instrument
of some city he loved
before it cauterised his mind?)

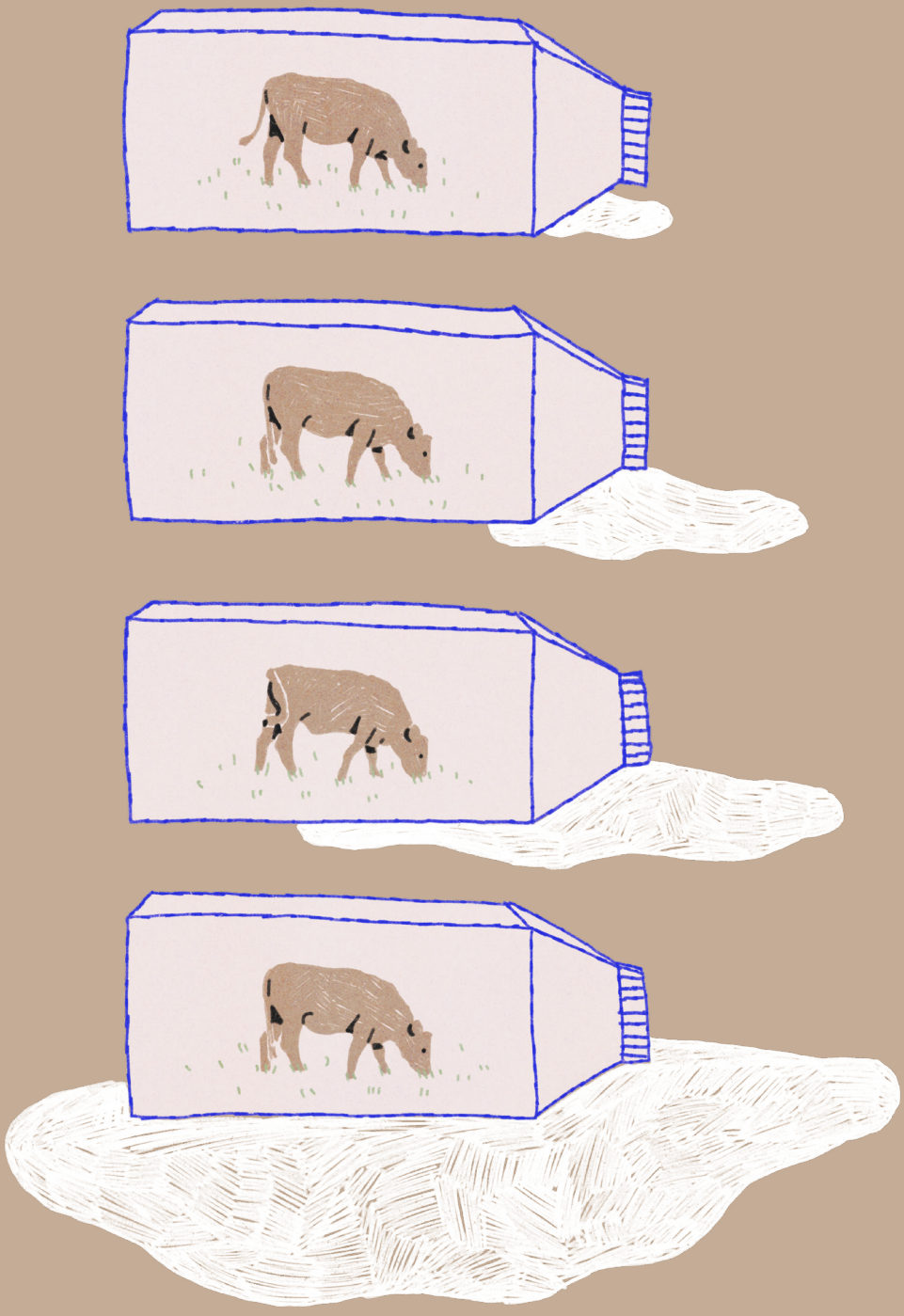
The phone glows
and the evening glares
and the photos
he wants no one to know
they show up
the man; the blue light
is an ink trace
for the intersection of places

through a heart
like a stake.
His incandescent face,
tufted but not tougher
than the spat-out grass
below, its thirsting furrows
sway; the way
he misses this
and everything
and mercy.

They stood like cardboard boxes
the houses, next to him
a sweating Aegean
and the happenstance route of trees
across the roofs,
their whorled waving.
He didn't know
about the seagull,
its plum lower lip
and quiet reassurance of steps;
the shared hush in the breaths
of man / bird / wave,
their crash.

The bird
is a bolt to the heart,

a fitful white
spinning through the sky,
its laughing larceny, sun-crooked wings.
Everyone can afford, at least,
to love this.
The man drops
his phone tumbles
into the grass
like a shot bird.
When he looks up
at those houses —
they're sneaking up the mountain.



For the Sake of Dangling Boys

CHRISTIAN BUTLER-ZANETTI

When we were thrown out of the church, we spent a long time visiting other parishes in the area before Father found one that was right for us. It was a very strange time.

I can't remember Father being frogmarched out but that really is what happened. It was right at the end of Mass. I suppose I wasn't paying much attention; Mass was long and I spent most of it with my face in Mother's lap. Father would have been over by the organ, leading the choir.

I do remember that when we got home Uncle Bill had come out and was sitting at the dining room table. He'd taken the knives and forks out and was making them into little horses and giraffes.

Bill had been with us about a year. He never came to church with us because he had Mental Health. He lived in the cupboard under the stairs, and would sometimes come out if the coast was clear. He had a big moustache and a Scouse perm, like the Harry Enfield character that was always saying, 'Calm down, calm down'. When he first moved in, we tried doing the voice at him but you couldn't really joke with Uncle Bill. He was *morose*.

'You know you shouldn't be out here,' Mother told him, and Father led him back to his room.

I hated him being in there. The stairs in our house were flat slats, with gaps in between and if you walked

past you could see Bill sitting there in the dark, his eyes glinting. I used to jump three steps at a time to get to bed. Also, somewhere in there a fungus was growing that we'd put in for a science experiment, ages ago. The instructions had said 'store in a cold, dry place'. Now we couldn't get in there and I kept thinking of the fungus getting bigger and bigger in the dark, growing heads and roots and lumps.

Anyway, when Uncle Bill was back in his place, Mother put a chicken in the oven and Father sat down at the bureau with a map and the Yellow Pages. The next Sunday we were in the minibus and on the road with the dove at our door.

The first church we tried was a lot like the one we'd had to leave. It was dim and cold and had a very low roof and was divided up into different shapes. This must have been the fashion at the time: Modernist Christian. It had a rhombus-like entrance hall and a hexagonal bit and an oblong sticking out at the side. The spire went up at a right angle. The crucifix on the back wall of the altar was also done in shapes, like big splinters of polished mahogany. Where the body of Christ should have been a stream of bright red paint spilled from a nail at about head height.

The parishioners here seemed very unfriendly, but probably I was just used to everybody knowing who

we were. In the old church I'd always felt that we were famous. I'd never liked this much — all it meant was a lot of mums vying to kiss your cheeks — but people at least seemed pleased to be there. The new parishioners came out of Mass and scattered like snakes. The few that stuck around had a skulk about them, like they'd been asked to stay behind. Anyway, Father said the priest's sermon wasn't his cup of tea, so that was that.

We tried lots of churches in the weeks that followed, some of them squat and angled and others with domes and pillars and stained-glass windows. It became normal for us to see a new priest at work every week; one dull, pale man after another with their robes and their glasses and their circles of teenage boys. Always annoyed about one thing or another. I couldn't understand why anybody listened. I think I only ever heard one priest that could actually sing. The others came out with the same low, flat note, whatever the song. They must learn how to do it that way at priest college or whatever.

A few of the younger ones, you could tell, were trying. They'd come down from the altar and do jokes. One had a puppet penguin that he pulled from his robes to talk to the children in a squeaky voice. Sooner or later though, you knew they'd retreat to the safety of the altar and go through the same old motions. The

‘A few of the younger ones, you could tell, were trying. They’d come down from the altar and do jokes. One had a puppet penguin that he pulled from his robes to talk to the children in a squeaky voice.’

Miracle of Faith.

Each week, after the service, we'd wait outside with Mother while Father introduced himself to the priest. On the way home he'd share his thoughts and we'd either give the church a go for a few weeks or else move on to the next one.

Around this time, we went to a party thrown by some friends from the old parish. It was a sort-of house-warming party. They hadn't actually moved but they'd had an extension — this was before people really had extensions — and they basically wanted to show the place off. They had a bathroom with a bidet which was probably the first of its kind in our town. We all assumed it was a second toilet and inevitably somebody had to try it out. I don't remember who, but I think it fell to the older siblings to shower down the mess.

Most of the guests at the party were from the old parish. They were the people we used to see every week. Some we'd kept in touch with but there were others we probably wouldn't have spoken to from Sunday to Sunday anyway. Even that young I was aware that there were factions in the parish. Everybody was cordial but there were families who'd keep themselves at arm's length for one reason or another. I think people were grateful that day that the house had so many rooms.

Father, of course, was not one to be shamed into a

corner. He and Mother settled in the kitchen where the drinks and finger food were, and which led through to the garden. You couldn't really avoid passing through at some point. I spent most of the party in there with them, my arms wrapped about Father's leg. I suppose I was about old enough to sense unease if not to quite understand it.

In the end, two of the local dads came in from the garden and told Father it was time to leave and one of them asked, hadn't he done enough harm already? They were the priest's cronies; the ones that had flanked Father from the altar to the door that day. They each wore very grim and not very Christian expressions, their brows crisscrossed and the muscles of their cheeks flexing. Through the window to the garden, I could see other guests peering in and looking away.

Father smiled at the pair of them, not moving. He finished his drink and placed it on the worktop. He glanced at his watch and crossed his arms in a single gesture.

'It *is* getting late,' he said finally, and Mother called the rest of us down from upstairs.

Our hosts saw us to the road, saying they were terribly sorry and it was lovely to see us and it was all a bit silly but also probably for the best. Mother and Father agreed that it was about time anyway and that the

house looked lovely and we'd give a bidet some serious thought. We could see the old church across the road from where the minibus was parked, and the door to the priest's small house.

'I'll pray for you all,' Father smiled from the road when our hosts had gone back inside, and he drove us away.

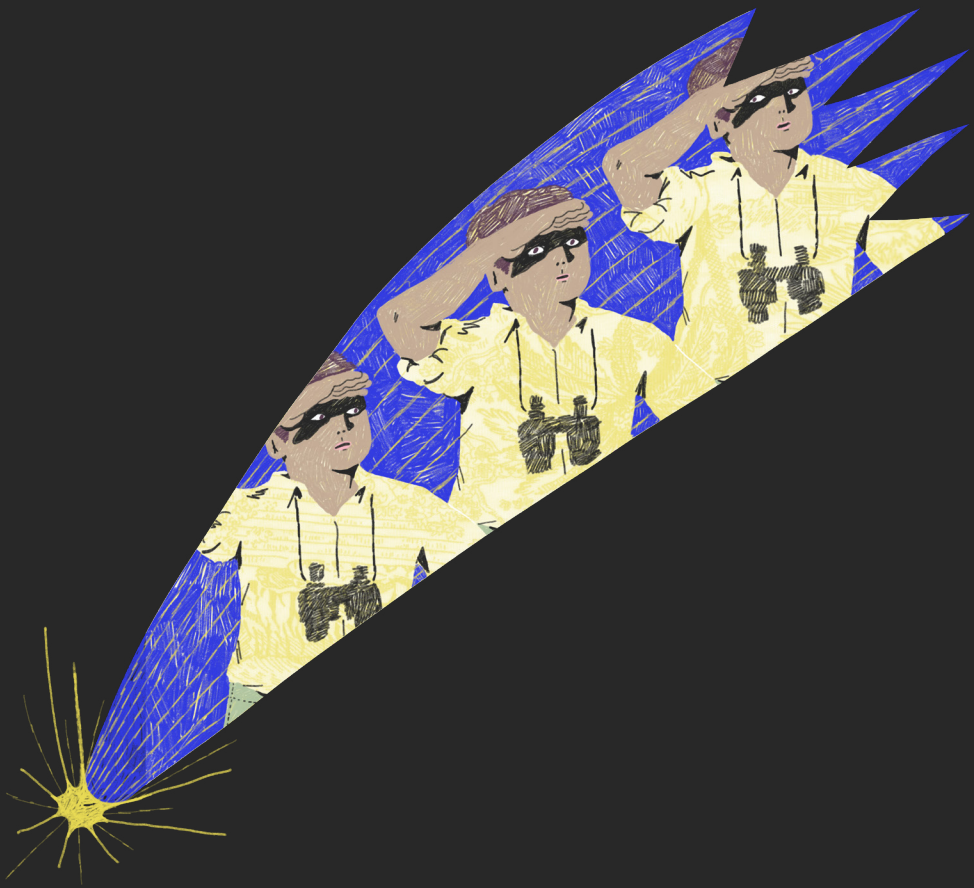
When, later, the boys in our town began to take their lives I expect there were some that regretted what they'd done and not done, but we were long gone by then. We'd found a new parish in a new town not too far away.

Uncle Bill left our house soon after that. We came home one day and the door to the cupboard under the stairs was open. Father papered over the paintings Bill had made and Mother was able to use the space to store laundry again.

My brother recovered the fungus. It was now about the size of a doll and had grown two mushroom caps — one huge and broad at the top and another smaller one to the side, like a wonky limb. My brother held it proudly but I was horrified by the thing. It was blubbery, like very soft flesh, and I was sure that if you squeezed it the skin would rip and some awful mucus-covered organ would be twitching beneath. The gills under the cap were like rows of puffy lips, stretched

thin. The fungus stood on the desk in our room for weeks before Mother took it in hand and boiled it in a broth for us all to eat, for Sunday lunch. □

“‘I’ll pray for you all,” Father smiled from the road when our hosts had gone back inside, and he drove us away.’



Two Continents Back to Back

CHARLOTTE WILLIAMS

In a world that so often pushes for monochromatic, binary categorization, Charlotte Williams' memoir, Sugar and Slate, *asks us to linger in the liminal and delight in the undefined.*

The daughter of a white Welsh-speaking mother and a Black father from Guyana, Williams' pursuit of a greater understanding of her identity takes her on a journey that ricochets between continents. Told in a narrative mode that manipulates form and leaps through time, Williams explores how we reappraise racial history, forge multifaceted identities and come to be at home in contradiction.

First published in 2002, Sugar and Slate *will be republished into the* Black Britain: Writing Back *series in October 2023.*

Five Dials *spoke to Charlotte Williams at her home in Wales.*

F *Sugar and Slate* defies traditional genre categorization, blending personal memoir, poetry and historical research. In a way, its formal boundary crossings echo your own heritage. How did you come to this form?

C I didn't want it to be a linear story about me because it was a much bigger project than that. I was addressing an experience of Wales. I wanted to demonstrate Wales's interconnections across the transatlantic, to show how Wales is connected to Africa and to the Caribbean.

I separated the structure of the book into three sections: one that focuses on Africa, one on Guyana and one on Wales — but when I'm in the Africa bit, I'm also talking about Wales, and when I'm in the Wales bit, I'm also talking about Guyana and Africa. I was trying to show a boundary crossing and a connectedness, and a sense of mixedness.

F I love the poems in your memoir. Had you ever written poetry before?

C Thank you. Not really, not seriously. It came to

me that you can say a lot in a short form. You can create echoes of things that are in the text in a very concentrated way. I wouldn't ever suggest that I'm a poet of any kind, but I think poetry's like singing: everybody can have a go. It's a lovely form.

F It's a very introspective narrative and a deeply personal one. How did it feel to write in that intimate mode? Was it emotionally challenging?

C That's such an interesting question because, when I wrote it, I always thought of it as a political project. I was going to use the personal in a very political way, so I thought of course it's not a story of my life and everything I've done. I selected episodes with the intention of demonstrating something more than the personal, representing an experience that I hoped would resonate with others.

But now, after time has passed, and I read *Sugar and Slate* aloud, I do find it more emotionally challenging than I did back then! It might be age, but when I was younger, I was very connected with the politics of the book. As I've gotten older, I'm beginning to

be more connected with the life story, and the personal, and the more intimate elements of it. At the time, I don't think I found it emotionally challenging. I was fired up to have my say!

F How was *Sugar and Slate* received by your family?

C They were all very positive because when you're writing about family (and anybody who's written anything autobiographical will realise this), your story's your story. Other people in your family will have different ways of seeing something, even the same event. So, you need to care about them when you're writing. And I think I did.

I remember my sister Eve saying, 'It was like we'd all sat down and put the cinecamera on.' We used to have family photo slides, and we'd all sit down on a Sunday and look at these slides — some pictures of Africa, and pictures of when we were children. She said it felt like I'd put the slides up and we were all looking at them.

I remember showing some pages of the book to my younger sister Bea while I was still writing

and she said, 'You should be a little bit more cross than you are!' I said, 'Well, that's how it came out, and that's how it seems to me.'

F I was fascinated by the historical details you reveal about Wales: one of the first interracial marriages in Britain took place in Dolgellau in 1768, and Cardiff was the site of Britain's first major race riots in 1919. How and where did you find those buried black histories? Were they hard to unearth? And do you think Wales's relationship with its black history has changed since *Sugar and Slate* was first published in 2002?

C I think it's fair to say that these histories were not apparent; they weren't particularly in the public domain. Some of them are only just emerging now.

It started with the fact that I live very close to Penrhyn Castle, which isn't a real castle; it's a big stately home. I became aware that the landowner had developed his wealth through what he called his 'West India interests', which was plantation slavery, and his localized interests, which were slate quarries. Even in his own time, he was despised and pilloried

for his treatment of the Bethesda slate quarry workers who were ‘near slaves’ in the sense of their economic instability.

So, I knew this piece of local history and, I also knew a story about a school of African boys, which was right in my town, dating back to 1890. The school was an experiment: instead of white missionaries going out to missions in Africa, they brought these African boys back to Wales to be educated. There were similar academies in Europe, but nobody knew about these boys from the Congo who came to my village all those years ago. I grew up knowing about them because my father had been interested. My mother had said, ‘There used to be a college here. Black fellows used to come to this college.’

So, I knew that piece of history, and I started from there and then built out. Of course, these histories are hidden in our localities all over Wales. I began to search around, and to think not only about the boys from Congo and about John Ystumllyn, who was a gardener, and was in one of the first mixed-race marriages dating back to 1768. I began to ask not only about

‘The school was an experiment: instead of white missionaries going out to missions in Africa, they brought these African boys back to Wales to be educated.’

black people in Welsh history, but also the way we were represented in Welsh literature and culture and songs. People began to say, 'Do you know about this poem?' or 'Do you know about the reference in this song?' You could see that ideas about black people were culturally embedded. I decided that I would weave those into *Sugar and Slate* because they give us presence. That sense of 'I belong here, and I'm from here, because there's a history of people like me in this area.'

After *Sugar and Slate* was published there was a bit of interest in black Welsh history, but it went quiet until much more recently, when now there's been a deep interrogation of black history in Wales. I'm very proud to say our government has been very forthright about wanting to bring that to the fore, as a part of Welsh history, and to ensure that all children in schools are conversant with those histories.

You asked me what had changed; things *have changed* considerably, in terms of wider public recognition. These aren't just local stories anymore. These are what we call 'stori Cymru': Wales's stories, stories about Wales and the

‘I began to ask not only about black people in Welsh history, but also the way we were represented in Welsh literature and culture and songs.’

social, economic and cultural benefits that have accrued from these interactions with the world. I'm proud of that too.

F The book gives us a nuanced exploration of nested, intersecting oppressions: a racially marginalized community within a community which is itself marginalized in Britain. Could you talk about the relationship between the white Welsh and black Welsh populations?

C Wales is often called one of the first internal colonies of empire. The idea is that Welsh people lost their language, and their culture, and their ways of being and knowing through English oppression.

Now, historians tell us it was much more complex than that, but that is the structure of feeling in Wales. That's, as Raymond Williams says, how the Welsh think. We have this history of oppression by the Anglo-Saxons and that aligns us with the oppression of others. The assumption is that the Welsh are aligned with black oppression. To a certain extent, that holds true. Wales has always been very internationalist in its outlook, and there is an

empathy with other oppressed groups. The Welsh understand what it's like to be robbed of your language and culture, and that came to the fore very critically at the end of the twentieth century.

This is what you'd hear the minister talking about when he stood up in the chapel on Sunday: how important Welsh language is, and being robbed of that language. However, part of my academic project was to deconstruct that assumption. I spent a lot of time saying, 'Yes, that's a myth of nation.' When you actually dissect it, you can see how Wales has benefited from the oppression of black people, through the missionaries following the colonial trails, the assumption of colonialism, and so on and so forth. I always thought it was both a myth that needed deconstructing — which I do in *Sugar and Slate* — and also a very important way into discussions about race inequality and the experience of being black.

So, as I come to the contemporary moment: yes, we do have fascism and racism in Wales. We've got a lot of ignorance, just like anywhere else. However, if you look at the national

sentiment, if you look at the literature, the poetry, the songs, the ambition of Wales is to be much more egalitarian. In that way, that alignment is a very nice thing to work with.

F In the memoir, you describe how your father, the artist, archaeologist and author Denis Williams, links his three respective marriages with his three creative 'epochs': 'There was the Africa project and the discovery of himself with Ma. There was his post-independence return to his own land with Toni the English nurse and now there was a return to his true self, to his soil and to his ancestry with Jenny.' Could you talk about the way that relationships are complicated, or indeed ended, by the transformation of one partner? How can romantic relationships exist across change and difference?

C I was fortunate enough, back in 1998, to go to Guyana, and I interviewed my father. In that discussion, that's how he described his transitions — not that he wanted to leave Ma or Toni behind, but that he linked them to his own creative energy. I do recognize that. It's not only about geographical distance, but the way in which you can become distanced from

somebody you love because you're thinking of your own ambitions about belonging and connection. The focus has changed, and he described it like that; as a kind of realization of himself.

Hazel Carby has a book, *Imperial Intimacies*, which I've come to a love a lot, because she has a Welsh mother and a Jamaican father. She talks about how we've understood colonial connections economically, in terms of social structure, but these marriages, these connections, produce intimate relationships between continents, and it's interesting to think about the ways in which people either sustain their relationships over time and distance, or become estranged.

One of my favourite quotes (if you're allowed a favourite quote from your own book!) is me peeping through the slats of the wooden partition when I'm a little girl and seeing my Ma and Dad sleeping in the afternoon. I described the scene as 'two continents back to back' because I'm suddenly seeing that there are two traditions, two continents: Europe and Africa.

Many couples resolve and move with the sway and transitions of time and stay together but you can also see how others can drift apart. That is a theme in the book, because that's what we experienced with our parents.

F In his 1963 novel *Other Leopards*, your father writes about two characters, Lionel and Lobo: 'Lionel is the one constrained by Western logic, caught up in a way of thinking and presentation of himself that is not naturally his, by history or by spirit. Lobo on the other hand is free, wild, authentic.' At the end of *Sugar and Slate*, you write, 'Lobo is necessarily mixed.' Could you expand on that idea?

C My father did an interesting job of writing about that schism. The constraint he felt as an artist, of Eurocentric thinking, and Eurocentric influences on his education and who he was. He felt that he had to break free. Then he describes this more authentic, primitive sense of self, where you're more connected to your origins. I thought that was a great way — maybe a little bit of a binary way — of putting it but an easy way to understand the split in one's psychology.

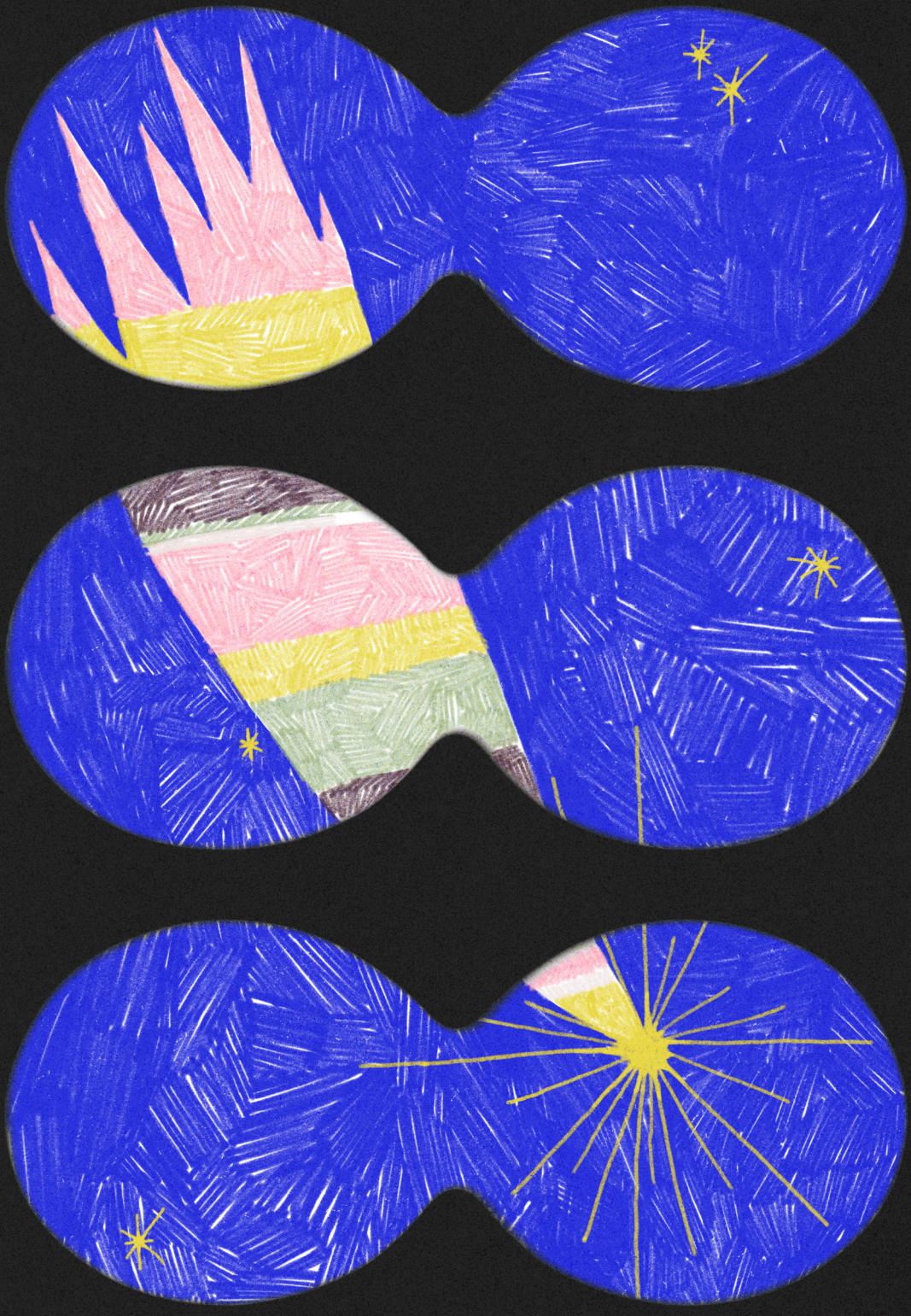
I was trying to relate it to my contemporary experience, which is that the authentic self becomes the self that is mixed, that has integrated that schism. The past and the present, borrowing from all the cultures that make up your experience: bits of Welsh language that have been handed down, the places you have been. All of those influences you integrate into your sense of authentic self. Identities as *becoming*, rather than something that is just given.

F A scene in the liminal space of Piarco Airport, Trinidad, is woven through the narrative of *Sugar and Slate*. How does waiting and the passage of time function in your memoir? And how does this transitional space relate to your own heritage?

C That was a deliberate element of the writing of the book, because I didn't want it to be 'either/or'. I wanted to keep that sense of the liminal space throughout. One of the best ways to illustrate that was just by sitting in an airport, in that no man's land, non-space, without citizenship, without a sense of belonging to place. You sense people passing both ways, the flow of people across territories. Another

dimension of it is that nations are a relatively modern construction. Before, you didn't have to necessarily say, 'That's my land' or 'I belong there.' The borders were more fluid.

I'm talking about a book that I wrote twenty years ago. You always want your writing to endure. People like you tell me that a lot of what I had to say then remains relevant to today. I think it's my mechanisms, like the airport motif, that allow it to remain relevant, because I'm talking about processes rather than my own individual experience. I'm trying to present processes that happen to people; transitions, being between places, those bigger themes, themes that are bigger than all of us. □



oh boy! make a wish!

Who is Shalash the Iraqi?

KANAN MAKIYA

Kanan Makiya introduces a mysterious figure.

I first met 'Shalash the Iraqi' in Paris in the summer of 2006. An odd place for two Iraqis who don't speak French to meet, chosen in part by circumstance (roughly halfway between Cambridge, the USA and Baghdad, Iraq), but also because the chronicler of the ever so endearing residents of city block number forty-one in Madinat al-Thawra needed to visit the cafés and city haunts of Jean-Paul Sartre. And that is how we spent our first week together, walking Sartre's streets and talking about an Iraq that had descended into sectarian strife the previous year, just about when Shalash started posting the daily blogs that made him so famous among Iraqis that it seemed no conversation between them, anywhere in the world, could be conducted without some reference to one of his stories.

Alas, I cannot tell you much more about 'Shalash the Iraqi'. Not even his name. All I can say is that he is the author of some eighty posts written in colloquial Baghdadi dialect between 2005 and 2006. Oh, and I can say that he is a polymath who at the time of our first meeting was much taken with the French intellectual life of the 1960s and 70s (Sartre, Foucault, Derrida) — as indeed was typical of the small group of Iraqi oppositionists operating then in Baghdad as an Eastern

European-style samizdat collective.

I myself had an anglophone education alongside my official Arabic one, and never could make head or tail of anything Derrida wrote. I was therefore flabbergasted not only by the fact that Derrida and Foucault were known, but that they were being hotly debated during the 1990s in the privacy of at least some Iraqi homes and cafés in Saddam Hussein's Baghdad. Shalash introduced me to those circles inside Iraq, hitherto completely unknown to those of us exiles outside the country so preoccupied with opposing the Saddam regime. And, as I soon discovered, a delightful novel called *Baba Sartre* (*Papa Sartre*), written by the gifted Iraqi writer Ali Badr, captured the fascination with Sartre inside those circles, among whom Shalash was by far the leading light.

Another of Shalash's many gifts is his ability to recite from memory all of Saddam's speeches, in exactly the tone and register that they had been delivered; the difference being that when Shalash recited them, one could not help but collapse in paroxysms of laughter, whereas laughter in general (not only while Saddam was delivering a speech) was foreign to the Iraq that Saddam built. I envied Shalash his prodigious memory, as any fellow writer would; and whereas I had only written about the Iraq–Iran war, he had served on its frontlines for eight gruelling

and exceptionally cruel years. Those are two entirely different ways of 'knowing' war. To 'know' the biggest war of the post-independence 'Third World' and still be able to make people laugh is a blessing granted to very few.

But again, alas, I cannot tell you much more about who Shalash really is, because the identity of the person who created this fictional alter ego must, for the security of his family and friends, remain a secret, even today, sixteen years after he abruptly stopped writing his stories. The fear this time does not derive from some brutal dictator or the all-pervasive organs of a security state; it derives from the anarchy that Iraq fell into shortly after the toppling of Saddam Hussein in 2003.

The morning after Saddam fled Baghdad on 10 April 2003, Iraqis found themselves in a state of deep anxiety and confusion. They had learned only too well the rules underlying survival in a semi-totalitarian state. But they did not understand waking up overnight to find themselves in a world with no rules.

By the late 1990s many of them could see that another war was brewing, but they assumed it would end like the last one, in 1991, with a bruised dictator still very much in power. Even when American troops were on the outskirts of Baghdad, and in spite of all the rhetoric about freedom and democracy, they never in their wildest dreams expected a foreign occupation.

When it came, it was a total rupture with their past, in the form of a new beginning to which they had not contributed and yet in which they were now expected to serve as principal actors. In such conditions, it was easy to imagine that American incompetence was deliberate; that every Iraqi who popped up on the public stage was either a fool, an opportunist, a carpetbagger, or someone else's stooge. And, to be sure, some of them were all these things at once.

Shalash writes about such people. He created a constellation of villains and other characters who pop up again and again in his stories, all of which centre around one small neighborhood in Thawra City, a sprawling Shiite suburb of Baghdad containing roughly half of the city's population of eight million strong. Featured are bumbling Imams, suddenly politicized thugs, vain and venal politicians, fanatical militiamen who switch allegiances at the drop of a hat, and carpetbaggers descending like an army of cockroaches from all corners of the world to make a quick buck.

In the course of doing so, Shalash made anxious and worried Iraqis laugh. They hadn't laughed much in the previous thirty years. In fact, it was dangerous to so much as crack a joke. Humour had landed many an Iraqi in jail, and worse. But it turns out that laughing was a kind of tonic to the unfolding craziness, especially after that craziness evolved into civil strife between 2005 and

2007. Laughing was, even more importantly, a safety valve, a form of sorely needed solace.

However, just as abruptly as they had burst onto the scene, and right when the sectarian killings were at their peak, the anonymous writings stopped. When I pressed Shalash, who had revealed himself to me that same year, to explain why he had given up on giving us more of Shalash's stories, he told me he just didn't know how to be funny anymore.

The Palestinian cultural critic Salma Khadra Jayyusi has written about humour and irony in Arabic literature:

'With only a few exceptions, modern Arab writers [...] wrote in the romantic or realistic tradition, in the tragic or heroic mode, they favoured a serious tone and a direct approach. The comic apprehension of experience, burlesque and parody, double meaning, the picaresque, the ironic and sarcastic, were not easily adopted, and the richness of both classical Arabic and Western literatures in these modes was rarely utilized... it remains true, as one peruses the vast panorama of Arabic literature, that the tragic spirit is more spontaneous with the Arabs, while the heroic, so muted in modern Western literature, is even more constantly alive in their hearts.'

Standard written Arabic, in which most literature is written, is a poor halfway house between the classical

language of the Qur'an and the multitude of spoken local Arabic dialects. No one speaks it on a daily basis, although everyone understands it; it is the language of newspapers and radio broadcasts; the language of politics and speechifying that does not know humour. In fact, all feelings are strangers to this kind of Arabic, which is what makes it so ineffectual in the fictional mode. But Shalash was deploying sarcasm, wit and irony; in order to make people laugh at the newly installed Iraqi political elite, he had to write in the way that ordinary Iraqis speak, not listen to speeches or read newspapers. In this sense, Shalash is a very different kind of Arabic writer. For one thing, his use of an already 'minor' dialect is peppered with phrases and expressions used primarily in Thawra City itself. His language feels, from an Iraqi point of view, deeply authentic and deeply hilarious — things that most literary writing in Arabic has a great deal of trouble achieving.

There is a drawback to this authenticity, of course: it is 'local' almost to a fault. Shalash's humour is not always a movable feast. His writing makes for uphill work to the prospective translator, being difficult at times for even non-Iraqi Arabs to follow. Marvel then at the easygoing, raffish, faux-naïve, rollicking tone of Luke Leafgren's English-language Shalash — a remarkable achievement, and the fruit of many, many days and months working with Shalash himself, and

with other Iraqis too: devotees of Shalash who were familiar with his language and Thawra City's range of idiomatic idiosyncrasies.

I have said that Iraqis found — and find — Shalash hilarious. Who were the Iraqis laughing at? Themselves. That is the deeper source of his achievement; the beating heart of his 'Iraqiness'. It is impossible to laugh at 'Imperialism' or 'Zionism' or 'Arab Reaction' — the subject matter of Saddam's officially sanctioned cartoonists and storytellers. Real laughter comes from the inside; it is an eruption from the belly, not an emanation of the brain. Instinctively, Shalash understood that: one laughs and loves at the same time. And what is it that Shalash loved? Iraq: the very thing that the political elite installed by the American occupation were falling over themselves to forget. They chose to govern in the name of their sect or ethnic group, or as stooges for the Islamic Republic next door, never as upholders of that collective abstraction, that multiethnic mosaic of groups and religions held together in our imaginations by a name: Iraq. It is those very same factions, with their false and foreign allegiances pilloried by Shalash, that the youth of Iraq rebelled against in 2019; and they did so in the name of Iraq, toppling perhaps the most sectarian government of post-2003 Iraq, and the most beholden to Iran's Revolutionary Guard. Shalash's writings were

the forerunner to those protests.

Shalash's 'Iraqiness' is not jingoistic patriotism, but the kind of intimate, defensive and profoundly personal 'love of place' that George Orwell talked about, and that Jill Lepore tries to understand in a recent book (*This America: The Case for the Nation*). The writer calls himself Shalash 'the Iraqi', even though the word *Iraq* appears very rarely in his stories. He did not need to belabour the word; love of Iraq is implicit in all his writing, in every character he created, be she a housewife wrestling with her neighbour over a draft of the constitution, or a new user of the internet, trying to learn the mysteries of 'Google Earth'.

At the time, Iraqis turned en masse, in a fever of urgency, to Shalash's stories. True, there were only 25,000 users of the internet there in 2003. But that posed no impediment. People were printing them out, copying them longhand, memorizing them, talking about them, sharing them, telling and retelling them, plagiarizing them and bombarding Shalash with questions and opinions about them by way of the email address he always provided for his readers at the end of each post.

'Ordinary people' loved Shalash, but we all know that politicians are less than ordinary. Sad to report, none of Iraq's crop of new powermongers had a sense of humour — with one notable exception. I have it on

good authority that a Kurd, the fat President of the Republic Jalal Talabani, whose prodigious banquets are themselves pilloried in one of Shalash's posts, was a fan. Talabani was the butt of some of Shalash's jokes, but Talabani liked to laugh. It seems no one else in Iraqi politics did.

Of such delicious ironies is this remarkable collection of stories made. That should be reason enough to make them available to an English-reading public. But there is another reason. For thirty years the West has only known Iraqis through wars, occupations, Saddam Hussein and the brutal nature of the Ba'ath regime. Throughout that period the word 'Iraq' has appeared in newspaper headlines week after week, even replacing the former primacy of the Arab–Israeli conflict in the public's imagination. Perhaps it is time to know the inhabitants of that sad and troubled land in a new and more human way.

Shalash Speaks...

October 8, 2005

Plato's Block

As you may or may not know, a block in Thawra City is a square residential division of a thousand homes. On the map, the eighty or so blocks that comprise Thawra City resemble each other like so many peas in a pod. So let me invite you, as my guest, I make you my guest to take a closer look at ours. Our block has more philosophers than Athens ever had. Our block has more politicians than all the countries of the European Union. Our block has more radicals than the Irish Republican Army; more priests than the Vatican; and more gangs, petty thieves and armed robbers than all the mafias of Italy. Our block has more civil-society organizations than appeared in all of Iraq after the fall of the regime; more political parties than Latin America; and more noble and exalted descendants of the Prophet Muhammad than the actual number of people residing in said block.

There are more tribal sheikhs living on our block than there were Sheikhs of Araby before Islam — and after. We have more journalists on our block than are employed by Reuters, and more poets than Mauritania. We have more tabla players than Atatürk's Turkish Republic, just as we have more singers on our block than all of Sister Egypt. Just one subdivision of our block contains more children than a whole province of China.

‘Our block has more radicals than the Irish Republican Army more priests than the Vatican: and more gangs, petty thieves and armed robbers than all the mafias of Italy.’

Our block has more communists than Poland did before perestroika, and our block contains an arsenal of small arms whose combined firepower more than matches that of the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Our block boasts a number of martyrs far exceeding all the martyrs of Algeria. Our block houses more political prisoners than could be found in Stalin's gulag.

Our block also has a run-down elementary school built in the early 60s. It's now a clinic that can boast more patients than medicine or staff to treat them. There's not even a single doctor, just one trained nurse, a pharmacist-by-intuition (that is, with no training), and one 'nurse' whose mother was a licensed midwife and bequeathed her daughter that profession when she died. Oh, there's also the woman who mans the door — sometimes she delivers medicine, and sometimes she tries her hand at treating light wounds.

Our block has a barber, Papa Spittoon, who, with all the power outages and water shortages these days, uses his saliva as shaving cream. It works fine, okay? One way or another he'll get your beard off. And our block has a TV repairman, which makes us the envy of all the neighbouring blocks, even though his expertise is limited to sending our televisions fifty years back in time. That is, he loves to watch things in black and white, and thanks to his unique brand of ingenuity, he's able to restore even colour sets to black and white —

and sometimes just black. And our block has a butcher who does his slaughtering on the roof and his selling in the street, and of course our block also has the Rosanna Supermarket, where you can buy all the Pepsi anyone could want — as long as you don't mind it being bottled exclusively right here in our block.

Our block has a mosque that was silent for forty years — now it's making up for lost time by constantly beating us over the head. Besides the calls to prayer, we hear chanting all year round, as if someone's a little too enthusiastic about flagellating themselves raw and bloody, as during the festival of Ashura. There are also those rushed prayers they've started conducting before the main prayers get going (such an innovation in piety!), plus religious poems, call-and-response venerations of the Prophet's martyred grandson, Husayn, and teachings from Sayyid Muqtada's office. And the mosque's antique, trumpet-like speakers parcel out weeping even on happy festival days.

Our block has a satellite-dish shop, Mahdi's Dish Receivers, which sold out of everything the first week of the month and then closed down because Mahdi got 'too busy'. Our block has a woman selling beans who'll also throw in a little fortune telling free of charge if you just agree to sit at her door for a few minutes.

Our block has so many horses as to embarrass the Royal Mews in Britain, and the noble residents of our

block happen to own more Afghan mules than all the farmers of Afghanistan. Our block can boast more open sewers than the city of Venice with all its hundreds of rivers and canals. Our block has more pictures of ugly turbaned men hanging on its walls than we ever put up for Saddam. And then, the apartment buildings in our block put up more flags, particularly during Ashura, than the United Nations. (Flags of every sort of colour and shape, though not a single one is the flag of Iraq.)

In our block there's not even half of a Ba'athist. The sons of our block have no clue what that word even means! Our sons were never signed up for Saddam's Quds Force or for his paramilitary fedayeen. Our sons never wore the uniform of the People's Army, and, in fact, none of us has ever in our lives laid eyes on that olive colour in which party comrades would strut about in the old days. In our block, we've never had one of those tribal bards who would raise streaming banners before Saddam and lead the call of 'Hail, Mr President!' According to the testimony of no less a personage than Kofi Annan, Secretary General of the UN, our block is entirely clean of Ba'athists, and all those we unjustly used to call 'comrades' have turned out to be partisans of Ahmed Chalabi or Ayad Allawi, members of the Sadr movement, or followers of the exalted religious clerkship (or perhaps one that's not so exalted). Or else we merely dreamed those fantastical creatures

up for so many years. Now that the regime has fallen, we've woken up and can't find a single trace of them!

Still, between you and me, our block has lots of other things too. Secret things. And if those things came to light, believe me, the stink would be so bad that it would reach the Eskimos and make them sneeze in their igloos.

But mum's the word!

October 5, 2005

Hassoun the Dane Spends His Vacation in the Nation's Heartland.

My neighbour Hassoun just got back from Denmark. He's staying with his family here in Thawra City. The first person to report on his reappearance was Khanjar, that meddlesome son of a meddlesome man, saying 'What?! He shaved his moustache right off!'

All us neighbours crowded together inside Hassoun's place, turning this novelty inside out with our stares. Some of the women called out blessings upon the Prophet Muhammad and the Prophet's household so that Hassoun would be protected from the evil eye; others took this opportunity to find fault with his fancy clothes and his new, pretentious way of talking. 'Look who's gotten too big for his boots,' said one.

That wasn't what interested the men and the older boys, though. They were waiting for Hassoun to

finish with all the welcomes and all the see-you-soons so he could spill his guts to them about his sexual adventures abroad — for Hassoun had undoubtedly indulged himself with plenty of young Danish women, not to mention Danish divorcées, as the spirit had moved him.

Whereas all Hassoun could think about was how miserable he was to have come home. He was in agony, let's not mince words. There was the climate — the temperature here felt simply lethal to him now. And then the filth of it! He couldn't bear sitting anywhere dirty, and the house wasn't exactly clean. There was no way, absolutely none, that he could reuse cups or dishes that hadn't been washed. Anything less than what he'd gotten used to in Denmark was unacceptable. Likewise, he had a throbbing migraine from the constant roar of the generator. But he could hardly admit all that; he could hardly say anything without being cut short: 'Hey, who do you think you are, anyway? Why do you keep blabbering on about this Denmark? What, you think we haven't been around the block a few times ourselves?'

Khanjar — that despicable son of a despicable man — led the charge. He couldn't wait to find something to hold against Hassoun. He brooded there like a knife in his side. Every so often he would say something like, 'Hassoun, you're not the only one who's travelled, okay? We took a trip to Iran to see the

shrine of the Eighth Imam once, remember? And we've been to Syria to visit the tomb of Zaynab bint Ali. And in a few days, we're even going to go to Turkey!'

Luckily, Hassoun's aunt, Umm Jabbar, was there too. She was a nice lady who worked at the government food bank in some official capacity. She had a sense of how much Hassoun the Dane must be suffering, particularly as she was used to dealing with cheeses. Yes — as it goes with cheese, so goes it with men. Umm Jabbar could as easily judge the worth of a man as compare Egyptian cheese — with which Saddam used to poison us during the days of the sanctions — to the soft, delicious Danish cheeses that Hassoun now resembled. That's what prompted her direct request, delivered in an imperious tone: 'Come along, then, all of you! Let the boy get some rest! You're killing him! Nephew Hassoun, go to your room. Relax a little, take a nap.'

Hassoun couldn't believe his luck. He obeyed: got to his feet, hitched up his jeans, headed off into the next room. But back he rushed in alarm only a few seconds later.

'What's wrong, my son?' asked his mother, reaching up to caress his face. 'In the name of God, the merciful, the compassionate, what's the matter, my child?' But Hassoun didn't so much as look at her, just stood there stock still, his mouth hanging open.

‘What’s wrong with you, child? Speak!’

Hassoun could only point mutely toward the room he’d so quickly vacated. His mother of course rushed over to find out what on earth had so spooked her son. Hassoun’s sister-in-law and a few other women I didn’t recognize accompanied her.

Hassoun’s mother grasped the problem at once. She came back and laughed in her son’s face. ‘What’s wrong with you, child? Why so scared? That’s only your brother’s rocket launcher and your brother-in-law’s old machine gun. The other stuff, the explosives, rifles and grenades, those are all ours. Look, child, we’ve all joined Muqtada al-Sadr’s Mahdi Army, didn’t you know? What, you never heard about the Mahdi Army in Denmark, my dear, sweet child?’

This was one blow too many for poor Hassoun. Here he’d come to visit the home of his honourable family only to find that they’d become a detachment of fifth columnists while he was away! And yet, even still, Hassoun allowed himself to be convinced to stretch out on the bed and close his eyes for a bit amid all those guns and bombs. His mother tucked him in with a beauteous smile upon her face.

At which point the well-wishers saw the fun was over and decided to leave. I’d like to report some of the comments I heard as people passed me at the door, intending to go their separate ways:

‘And yet, even still, Hassoun allowed himself to be convinced to stretch out on the bed and close his eyes for a bit amid all those guns and bombs.’

‘It’s no wonder he was shocked. He’s probably never seen a gun in his life. The boy’s been a draft dodger as far back as I can remember.’

‘Give him a break, guys, he’ll come to his senses eventually.’

‘Hey, it’s not like the Danes don’t kill people like anyone else. They know plenty about guns over there. Denmark even had troops in the attack on Al-Suwaira in the ’91 war, remember? But what can I say, Hassoun’s always been a bit… you know.’

‘The way Hassoun jumped! Like a cat at the dog pound!’

‘Hassoun off to Denmark while we’re stuck here being eaten alive by bugs. Sure as hell didn’t see *that* coming.’

But that rat and son of a rat Khanjar didn’t leave with everyone else. He stuck around Hassoun’s house, trying to ferret out information, since he still hadn’t gotten answers to his many questions… Questions like:

‘How many dollars did he bring back? How long’s he going to stay? Does he support Sadr? Or is he with Sistani? Is it true he’s going to marry a local girl and take her back to Europe with him? Is it true he’s already married an old Danish widow? Will he be visiting the shrines of the Imams while he’s home, particularly Al-Kadhimiya Mosque, or is he going to spend the whole time drunk? Is he spending his whole vacation with

family, or is he going to move into a fancy hotel at the first opportunity? That's what Farhan, the quilter's son, did when he came back last year from Australia...'

But that's only a sampling! That rogue and son of a rogue Khanjar had plenty more shots in his locker, and no intention of giving up till he got what he was after. For that reason, among others, Khanjar held firm despite all the hints from Hassoun's mother and sister, increasingly brazen, that it was past time for him to get going. Khanjar pretended not to notice. Pretended to be deaf and blind both.

Meanwhile, it transpired that the crowd who'd left the Hassoun house hadn't gone home either. They were still outside, standing around, burning for news from their spy, Khanjar, who was taking so long to come out. It took till long after half the rooster slaughtered for Hassoun's arrival had flown down his gullet for Khanjar to come out for an audience, smacking his awful lips and sucking his greasy fingers. He made no statement apart from a single sentence delivered in passing:

'Uncles, don't tell me you really fell for Hassoun's theatrics? The weapons in that room are actually part of a crooked deal with the Danes. Our very own Hassoun the Clean-Shaven brought them into the country with the intention of hand-delivering them to the minister of defense, Hazim al-Shaalan, as part of al-Shaalan's latest profiteering scheme.' □

Four Poems

JEN CAMPBELL

The Five Stages of IVF

—

The boy stands in our garden
holding all of the snow.
He can't be a snowman,
I insist. He is far too young
for frostbite. He might
be mythic. Or prophetic.
Did anyone see him arrive?

The snowboy's eyes are
kingfishers. Blazing countries
we would like to visit.
Behind him a
squirrel is stealing
all of the food. Bending
over backwards — winter
Olympics. The young boy does not
blink, cradling his snow globe.

The whole world is a blizzard.

We refuse to talk of snow
babies incubating in fables.
How their fingerprints
are the scattered names

of endangered species.
Instead, we dip our palms
in icing sugar and press
our mouths to the window.

Our longings skitter
around the kitchen
like so much white noise.

Trying to Gain Entry into the Republic of Motherhood (after Liz Berry)

—

I asked to cross the border into the Republic of Motherhood
and found myself in a waiting room, an overgrown waiting room.
When my name was called, I took off my clothes and I let them
scan me — knowing these borrowed instruments were used
by the already-mothers, searching the waters for their seal-like
babes. I removed my wig and shuffled down their bed. They parted
my legs, relaying their instructions, then sent me to work
on the Farmland of Motherhood. I stabbed myself twice daily,
injecting resilience, collecting purple-blue badges as prizes
to claim access to the Republic of Motherhood. My body bloomed,
turned itself into a chicken, my heartbeat going boomboomboom
as drugs spooled through the factory of my body. I mentally
decorated our home to make room for us all. As required,
every week I sat with my sisters in the passport office at
the Department of Motherhood. None of us looked sideways
but all of us loved each other. Surely, I thought, I would die
for these women and their carefully chosen leggings; I would die
for their frantic calendars and their nervous laughter — and if
I could, I would stamp every single visa, cry out
that we should storm the royal banquet (to which we had not

yet been invited), and stuff ourselves with riches before
declaring our corridor a part of their country. But no.
No, that is not what we did. We patiently queued, then we
got back to work; cherry angiomas freckling our skin.
Our bloated bellies hungry, so hungry, they rumbled all shift long.

The Trees are Part of the Process

—

It seems so predictable
that I grew these
eggs in springtime.
That we let them
rest over the summer
as farmers peered
beneath their skins.

Then, naturally:
in the orange months,
when only one
of them remained,
we let them place it
(gently)
inside my womb.

Of course, we waited — for two
weeks made of Sundays but

I don't know what
to tell you, except:
the autumn leaves
are dying, and we
cannot stop them

spiralling, cannot stop
them entering, cannot
prevent their fall.

This Doesn't Have a Name Yet

—

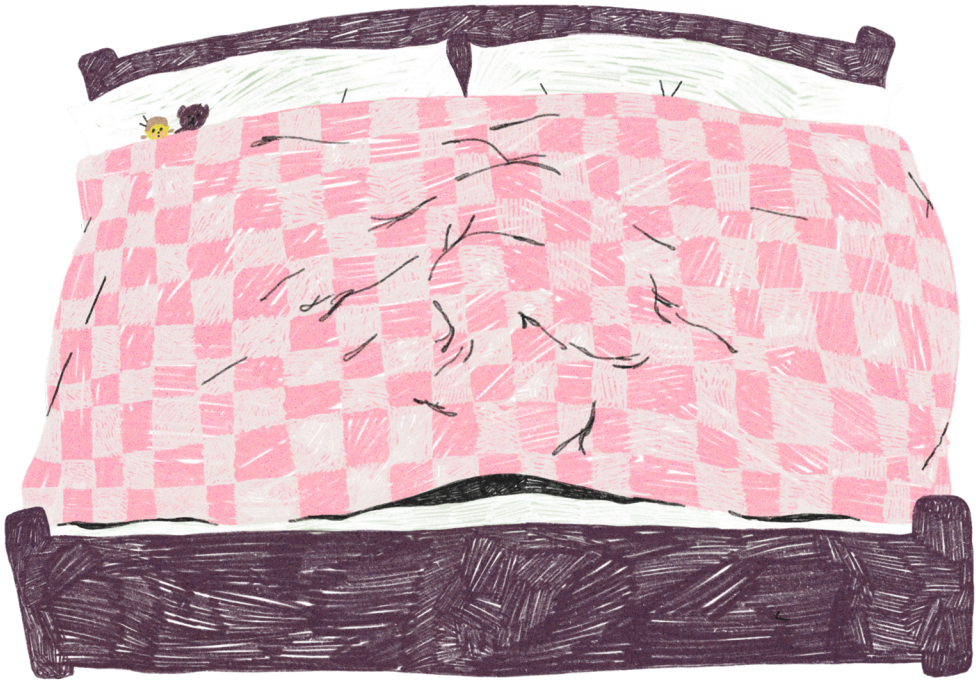
I have nowhere left to fit this
sadness. Now that I have
birthed it, it insists on running
around — all naked and vulnerable
and occasionally giggling like a
swimming pool.

I step into the kitchen and
drench myself in it. Its chlorined
aesthetic. And, around the walls,
its grief-soaked tote bags
full of the things that
no one really wants. The stuff
that can't go to charity shops — can't
be left on people's doorsteps,
like I'm the stork of whatever this is:
the Santa Claus of joy
I am forbidden to experience.

So, instead, I tread water.

On Sundays I am the Easter bunny.
Cracking eggs into batter
and slamming the oven door

so hard I hope it breaks.
Yet
it doesn't, because for some
reason I cannot explain I am still
so bloody gentle — and this is
hilarious, because (right now)
my anger is staring
at the oven
as if it were the sun.
Some God of Light that I could
bribe with gingerbread or cake.



Missing

I have lost so many things

1-800-555-5555

Forgotten Traces

IMAN MERSAL

Iman Mersal on the mysteries of a marginalized, near-forgotten class of Egyptian literature.

Love and Silence…

I came across *Love and Silence* in 1993, during a hunt for a cheap copy of *The Collected Miracles of the Saints*, al-Nabhani's dictionary of holy men. 'One pound,' said the bookseller by the Azbakeya wall in Cairo, and though I'd never heard of it before, I bought it on the spot.

From her name I instantly assumed that the author must be the younger sister of the activist and writer Latifa al-Zayyat.

The United Arab Republic – Ministry of Culture
Love and Silence – An Egyptian Novel
Enayat al-Zayyat
Dar al-Katib al-Arabi (ah 1386 / ad 1967)
Introduction by Mustafa Mahmoud

The novel opens in Cairo, as the narrator describes her state of mind following her brother's death in November 1950:

> *And again I was overcome by the piercing realization that, with his death and departure, this incredibly precious thing had vanished from my life: that I had*

lost my brother.

Hisham has died in an accident on the parallel bars, a discipline of which he says, *It gives me control over my body*. Hisham's absence is a fount, the spring from which the narrative flows, branching into a tangle of internal reflections, among them the narrator's account of her depression and her meditations on the meaning of a life lived in the presence of death:

> *And I looked into his face, unable to believe that Hisham could be dead, that this face would forever be a sleeper's. A sleeper without breath in his chest. Yet at the same time, the lack of breath seemed meaningless, like he could get to his feet, and run about, and laugh; that he was stronger than anyone, than everyone, and didn't need something as insubstantial as breath to live. And I reached out my hands and ran them over his face, maybe so he might feel them and open his eyes to me — me, his sister, Najla. But the face stayed still and frozen. I thought I saw a blue steal into his lips, then seep slowly outwards across his features, and for the first time I found myself afraid of him, and ashamed of myself for my fear; for fearing my brother now that his soul was gone. I felt as though I was spying on someone I didn't know. Then I saw him, or imagined I saw him, turn*

> *his face from me, and the sight was insupportable, because for the first time I had accepted his death.*

The reader learns of the narrator's grief and her brother's death before they know what to call her. During the course of an earlier scene in which her perspective is intercut with those of the other characters around her, and up until this unbroken train of thought as she stands over her brother's corpse, she never tells us her name. Hisham's death is presented as a first step to understanding:

> *In my mind, brooding on death and dwelling on my brother's name grew interchangeable. I thought of him as a territory, its shores uncharted, ringed by mystery. Whoever discovers these shores never returns.*

I expected the book to develop into an elegy for the dead brother, or to take us through the narrator's gradual emergence from grief. And so it does, briefly, but at the same time, and imperceptibly, it generates layers, complex and overlapping: every bid to escape her state of mourning becomes entangled with a fresh challenge and prompts a return to the cocoon of that inner voice.

For instance, against the wishes of her family, Najla takes a job, but quickly finds herself unhappy and

questioning the worth of what she does. She wonders about her family and her place amid its cold, bourgeois detachment when she realizes that her bedroom contains more tokens of love affairs and friendships than anything that links her to her parents.

Then there is the evolution of her political awareness: a process that begins when she meets a writer and revolutionary called Ahmed. She starts to adopt his views on colonialism, poverty, and the corruption of the royal family, and then looks deeper into the selfishness of her own social class and the responsibility it bears for the ills of the status quo. Here, Najla makes her most forceful break with the gravities of Hisham's death, when she realizes that her brother — a pampered, bourgeois university student — had been deeply self-centred and trivial:

> *Had I really loved him, or was I merely expected to, like everyone else in the family? How did such a simple, obvious truth pass me by? Only now do I see that I had never been more than Hisham's lackey; what happiness I knew was only spillover from his greater store, and all the joys of home life were because of him and for his sake.*

We are repeatedly taken beyond the tragedy of Hisham's death, beyond remembrance and wrestling

with loss, into a taxonomy of the different routes to freedom — employment, love, political consciousness — but each attempt carries within it the inevitability of her return to a cycle of depression and isolation. It is as though there is something wrong with Najla, a flaw she carries with her as she shuttles back and forth, in and out of life, and which poisons everything she tries.

The novel ends in a great confusion. In fact, it's as though there are four distinct endings set alongside one another in the space of a few pages:

1: Ahmed, the revolutionary lover who encouraged her fledgling political consciousness, falls ill and goes abroad to begin treatment. Najla learns to make peace with the world and to live with herself, and, through the support she gives to Ahmed in his illness, she learns to give.

2: Ahmed returns from his treatment abroad and their relationship peters out. Najla starts to enjoy her own company. She takes walks through the places where they used to meet and realizes that a man should be a part of a woman's life, not life itself. She applies to the College of Fine Arts — and buys a set of new curtains.

3: Ahmed travels abroad for a second round of treatment, and dies. We are now faced with the possibility of a second wave of mourning, but Najla goes to university all the same: she wants to paint, for

her life to have meaning.

4: the final ending takes up less than a single page. A brief description of the 1952 revolution, presented as the happy ending our narrator deserves after her long and painful journey.

All these endings work as conclusions to Najla's journey, but the first three are plausible extensions of her quest for identity, and for all that they involve Ahmed's illness (and the end of her relationship with him and his death), they also offer closure, because Najla is permitted to create new possibilities for her future. The fourth is genuinely problematic, not just because the solution it provides comes from outside the narrative, and not because it is indistinguishable from the clichéd conclusions of many novels written in the aftermath of 1952, but because of its language. The language is a puzzle. It feels as though the author has begun her journey with the whisper of an inner voice — like someone peering through the window of her bedroom at the bleak emptiness of the streets outside — and that she has retained this voice throughout, for all that it is shaped and changed by experience and engagement with other people, only for it to suddenly vanish, its place taken by something sonorous and depersonalized.

For the last ten lines it is the masses that speak, and the book's very last sentence is its worst:

The clank of the tank tracks shook the ground, and as I stood there, smiling, the new day began to dawn.

The lack of clarity is a curiosity, too. Are these multiple endings intended as a satirical comment on the very idea of a conclusion, or had their young and inexperienced author, caught between these options, decided that she would leave it to her readers to resolve an ending for her?

It wasn't what happened in the novel that made me fall in love with it. Even in 1993, callow as I was, I knew that a good novel is more than the sum of its incidents. Nor was I drawn to it because of its social or feminist 'consciousness', or the simple historical fact that it had been written by a young woman in the 1960s. At that time in my life, in conversation with friends and fellow writers, I would frequently mock the idea of describing a novel as 'conscious' or praising a work of literature simply because it 'reflected reality' or championed a particular social class, or issue, or nation. And we reserved our profoundest mockery for any defence of 'higher values' in incompetent literature.

Back then, I was the same as all my friends. We read 'high literature' (defined by consensus), but we also read randomly, hunting out whatever appealed to us around the margins of this definition. My passions included C. P. Cavafy, Wadih Saadeh, Yehia Haqqi,

Régis Debray, Samir Amin, Tzvetan Todorov, Eduardo Galeano, Milan Kundera, Louis Awad and more, and I would argue for my choices with a partisan's fervour:

> 'How can you even mention al-Aqqad alongside Taha Hussein?'
> 'Critics need to read Abdelfattah Kilito.'
> 'Sepúlveda's *The Old Man Who Read Love Stories* is better than *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.'
> 'So the Ministry of Culture can invite Darwish and Adonis, but not Sargon Boulus?'

A young woman writer had to personally celebrate the books that 'touched' her, as though she needed to define herself by appending her discoveries to the canon.

I added *Love and Silence* to the great chain.

The language in *Love and Silence* is both fresh and refreshing. Sometimes cold, sometimes sentimental, it can feel uncanny, too, as though translated. Occasionally you sense the ponderous influence of contemporary romance novels, but elsewhere it is modern, strange, limpid and beyond categorization. It is clearly a first work, but its tonal inconsistencies are held together by virtue of the author's talent. In a single paragraph, the reader might encounter a wide sample of registers, the spectrum of the author's

language choices:

> *Out of the still calm of sleep I pulled myself into motion, wandered across the room and, standing by the window, brushed my discontent into the street. I sat down — looked out — paged through the book of life. My heart was heavy and to my eyes everything seemed old. People were damp yellow leaves and I was unmoved by them, by their faces, by the soft covers of their clothes. I felt at once imprisoned by this life and pulled towards new horizons. I wanted to pull this self clear, gummy with the sap of its surroundings; to tear free into a wider world. The clear skies of my country bored me. I wanted others, dark and muddied and threatening, capable of stirring fear and astonishment. I wanted my feet to know a different land.*

As soon as I finished a first reading of *Love and Silence*, I turned back and began again. In my notebook, I copied out passages, small stand-alone texts like lights to illuminate my emotional state:

> *I am in exile from myself. Who can issue a pardon for my soul, so that it might return, might know the body as its own small true homeland?* [...] *If I were able, I would erase myself and be reborn, somewhere else, some other time. Another time. Another time...*

‘Sometimes a piece of writing can shake your very being. This doesn’t mean it has to be unprecedented in the history of literature or the best thing you’ve ever read. It is fate, delivering a message to help you make sense of whatever you’re going through...’

Sometimes a piece of writing can shake your very being. This doesn't mean it has to be unprecedented in the history of literature or the best thing you've ever read. It is fate, delivering a message to help you make sense of whatever you're going through — and at the exact moment you most need it, whether you realize it or not. We are grateful, not only to 'great' literature, but to all writing that plays a significant role in how we understand ourselves in a particular moment. When we turn to contemplate our lives, it is these works that let us see.

Love and Silence is a novel about death. Not Hisham's death, nor the death of her lover, Ahmed, but the quotidian death against which Najla goes to war within herself. Her life becomes unbearable, her every escape attempt falling back into routine and ennui, from taking the job she had hoped would be her gateway to the world, to the love and freedom that leaves her unmoored and at a loss. Najla is depressed, insomniac, alienated. She feels not only born out of time, but that she isn't functioning as she should. There is a bedspread missing a final stitch, a canvas unfinished on the easel: she never finishes what she's started. Ahmed helps Najla confront her paralysis. With teasing affection he dedicates his book to:

The reader who doesn't read, the painter who

doesn't paint.

Najla has no idea how to live without keeping herself under observation. What is captivating about the novel is the author's desire to document this internal journey and the language in which she does it. It is a personal journey, a quest for meaning, and the novel's themes — employment, love, the politics of class and country and colonialism — and her naïve rejoicing over the 1952 revolution that we encounter in its final paragraph are all thresholds that lie outside herself and that she must cross. The voice shows us more when it speaks out of the interior darkness.

My conviction that Enayat was Latifa al-Zayyat's younger sister remained unchallenged. It even grew stronger: I began to imagine that I could see the influence of the elder sister on her sibling.

Latifa was born in 1923 and Enayat, though I didn't know her date of birth, must have been around ten years younger. While Latifa was making her name as a leader of the Higher Committee of Students and Workers in 1946 — the senior members of her family fretting over her behaviour and her future — the teenage Enayat was torn between her love of Cairo's members' clubs, its singers and cinema, and her desire to become a daring political leader like her sister.

In 1952, Latifa married the playwright Rashad

Rushdi. For more than a decade thereafter she stepped away from the struggle. But Enayat grew bolder and declared that she was a poet. Her poems weren't much, just thoughts jotted down without any attention paid to technique and craft, but though Latifa wasn't keen on them, Rushdi supported her. He even made the girl a present of his copy of Nizar Qabbani's collection, *You Are Mine*. When Latifa's *The Open Door* was published in 1960, followed three years later by the film, Enayat decided that she had something new to say about discontent and depression and death, and the only way she could ever say these things in a debut novel would be by doing what was expected of any self-respecting author: she must link her personal story to public concerns. It would be decades before any talented woman author in Egypt was able to tell her story without reflexively asserting an equivalence with wider societal issues, because *The Open Door* was so dominant a model.

A convincing story. But in her memoirs, *The Search: Personal Papers* (1992), though Latifa talks a lot about her two brothers and the men in her life, she only mentions, very fleetingly, a single sister called Safiya. So Enayat had to be reassigned: a younger cousin.

In December 1997, I submitted my MA thesis on Adonis, and the novelist Radwa Ashour asked me to provide her with the Sufi sources I'd used in my

research. I brought a box of books over to Radwa's house and drank tea with her and her husband, the poet Mourid Barghouti, and as we sat, I unpacked the books. Nearly all were old and yellowed, with the green cover of al-Nabhani's *Collected Miracles* shining brightly among them. I asked her if she'd heard of a novelist by the name of Enayat al-Zayyat, and was she a relative of Latifa's? And Radwa said that, unless I knew better, she didn't believe they were related at all. She added that she had heard Enayat's father was from the al-Zayyat family in Mansoura and that her mother had possibly been German.

The introduction to *Love and Silence* had been written by Dr Mustafa Mahmoud. Truth be told it isn't any kind of introduction at all, either to the novel or its author, but rather a mere four and a half pages which begin:

> *I was leafing through a strange book, reading its dreamlike sentences and trying to picture the woman who had written it. It dripped with delicacy and sweetness.*

Then, after having offered a selection of what he judges to be the novel's most delicate turns of phrase, he concludes his introduction with four lines of his own:

> *This elegant book, Love and Silence, is the first and last that its gifted author, Enayat al-Zayyat, ever wrote, for she died a young woman, still in her twenties. The agonies of her brilliant heart and her own tortured humanity were too much for her to bear. May God multiply blessings on her pure spirit and her elevated art.*

Better we don't spend too long on Mustafa Mahmoud's depiction of the author. To this day, Arab authors continue to betray their personal convictions through the language they use. The only way for a woman to write well is delicately and sweetly.

But the introduction raises other questions: how did she die? When? Why does *Love and Silence* remain outside the canons of contemporary literature and women's writing in Arabic? Is it perhaps because, coming out just seven years after *The Open Door*, readers could not appreciate its unique qualities? Or was it that it was published in 1967, the year of Egypt's defeat by Israel, and no one read it at all? Unlike Latifa, Enayat was never affiliated with the Egyptian Left. Did the Left use its cultural influence to exclude her from consideration?

And then, why was Mustafa Mahmoud chosen to write the introduction? Had Enayat asked him to do it before she died? Did the publisher genuinely believe he

‘To this day, Arab authors continue to betray their personal convictions through the language they use. The only way for a woman to write well is delicately and sweetly.’

was the literary celebrity best placed to understand and present her work?

Although Mustafa Mahmoud (1921–2009) was indeed a literary figure of some repute in the 1960s, he has never been near any list of great Arabic literature. Prior to this, I hadn't read a word he'd written. My knowledge of him began and ended with *Science and Faith*, a television programme he hosted, and the mosque that bears his name in Arab League Street. But for Enayat's sake, I read what I could of his pre-1967 work.

His short stories, like 'Eating Bread' and 'The Smell of Blood', seemed to me more like synopses of full-length novels, and were heavily didactic too, as though he'd never encountered the prose of writers like Yehia Haqqi, Yusuf Idris or Naguib Mahfouz. I read the popular essays, which were probably the source of his fame, all about God and man and the Devil and the riddle of death. I even went so far as to read his novel *The Impossible* (1960) in search of any intersection between his fictional universe and Enayat's.

The protagonist of *The Impossible*, Hilmi, has an overbearing father, but when the father dies, our hero starts gambling on the stock exchange and going out to nightclubs. He is seduced by Fatima, a lawyer and friend of his wife, but soon tires of their relationship and starts another affair with his neighbour's wife,

Nani. He cannot decide whether to sell off his father's land in the south, or use it to grow onions. Hilmi may be a paper-thin creation — as are all the characters in *The Impossible* — but the narrative weaves in shreds of philosophical and existential readings which lend it the illusion of depth.

Mustafa Mahmoud was about as far as one could get from *Love and Silence* and its language.

There's a kind of intense curiosity that possesses us when we encounter an author who is truly unknown — a branch cut from the tree with no date of birth or death in evidence — or when their writing offers no clues to the wider life of their generation, to their close friends or literary influences.

Writers are solitary creatures, sure, but they work with a language that others also use, and it is impossible to conceive of any writing that takes place in complete isolation. So who did Enayat read? Mustafa Mahmoud? And, of her contemporaries, who read her drafts, or sat with her to discuss ideas about craft? Did she know any writers who were active at the time, or was she on the margins of the historical moment that shaped them all?

Before Enayat's ghost began to pursue me in earnest, before I gave myself over entirely to retracing her steps, I was still no more than a reader, someone looking to fit this unknown woman into my literary

family tree. When I first started thinking about *Love and Silence* I had turned to my readings of Foucault and his theory of the archive. I assumed that understanding Enayat's book would mean analyzing the text's discursive formation — the historical *a priori* that, collectively, make the existence of its words possible — along with the types of dissolution that lay behind its unusual publishing trajectory, its reception and its subsequent marginalization in Arabic literary culture. It was the society of texts generated by women Arab writers prior to the publication of *Love and Silence* in 1967 that would intersect with and shed light on this novel as a historical moment. In other words, I had to read dozens of stories and novels from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. The literary value of some of these books has expired with the social or political function for which they were produced. With others, their significance is preserved in academic surveys and inventories that document the literary output of women from the start of the Nahda, the so-called Arab Renaissance of the late nineteenth century, even though the only people who still read them are academics. Then there are those that cling shyly on at the margins of the literary mainstream; of these, very few continue to be read and to exert power and influence.

I took it as axiomatic that Latifa al-Zayyat's *The*

Open Door represents what Edward Said terms *the determining imprint*, the influence individual books can have on *an otherwise anonymous collective body of texts* whose unity is created by the fact of their inter-reference. But Enayat's voice, the whisper that never speaks to the masses, the hesitant, melancholy, unconfident murmur, like weeping heard on the other side of a wall, this voice which seems to have come adrift from poetry and which poetry alone might have been able to rescue — this voice seems out of place in the community of texts to which *The Open Door* belongs. More than that, impossibly, it seems to be entirely obscure, as if it had no influence on what was written afterwards, as if it had never been heard.

On 18 March 1967, the eminent critic Anis Mansour wrote an article in the Cairo-based newspaper *al-Akhbar*. The title of the article is 'Yet Her Book Was Published Years After Her Death' and it opens as follows:

> *She showed us her modest literary output — a collection of articles, a collection of short stories, and some essays on books she was reading — and waited for me to give my opinion on what she had written and what she had read. She used to go to her father and get him to buy her books by the hundred and shut herself away to think in silence. Then, from nowhere, she decided to write a novel, her only novel, which*

> *was published just yesterday with the title* Love and Silence. *I never dreamed that when I gave her my support she would rush to death, taking with her all the gifts and fineness of feeling she possessed. She gave me an early draft of this first novel written in lead pencil, and I told her to go ahead and finish it without regard to proper grammar and spelling: These are little things, easily corrected! Write! Write! She completed the book in late 1961 and sent it to al-Qawmiyya, the publishers. And at al-Qawmiyya the novel encountered desk after desk, then desk drawer after desk drawer, before preceding its author to the dusty grave of the archive's shelves. Then it was plucked from this dust, tasted gingerly by lemon-sour lips, and a decision taken that it was not fit to publish. Empty, cruel heads nodded sagely, and finally, eventually, agreed that it should be returned. And so the novel came home.*

Mansour devotes the greater part of his article to an overview of the novel's plot and excerpts, but here and there, amongst it all, he presents us with what seem to be facts about Enayat:

- That he sent her his notes on the draft novel and that she rejected them. He promised to send her novel and other writings on to his

contacts, but never met her again.

- That he heard from her friend, the actress Nadia Lutfi, that Enayat had completed the novel and was working at the German Institute, and was very happy there. Although he couldn't remember just when this conversation with Nadia Lutfi had taken place, he states with some conviction that she had completed the novel in late 1961.
- That Enayat struggled with Arabic: her schooling had been in German.
- That as part of a delegation of writers that went to Yemen in 1963, he had to share a room with Yusuf Sibai. The room was extremely hot, and Mansour quoted a line from Enayat's novel as the perfect description of the stifling atmosphere — *everything halted, all meaning froze, each minute transformed into an eternal jail cell* — only to discover that Sibai knew her too, and had read her writing and promised to get her published. It was Sibai who told him she was dead.
- That Enayat's father, Abbas al-Zayyat, had told him that she'd refused to self-publish the novel. Al-Qawmiyya's rejection had come as a violent shock. It had silenced her completely and she had stopped speaking or reading or writing. Her family had felt that she was settling her account

with the world.

- That she had taken twenty sleeping pills and that when her family found her on 5 January 1963, she had been dead for twenty-four hours.
- That she had left three sheets of paper beside the bed. One bore the words, *My darling son, Abbas, farewell. I do love you, it's just that life is unbearable. Forgive me.*

The article was treasure. I read it over and over, as though at any moment I might uncover yet another secret buried between its lines. The idea that a young woman would kill herself — a young woman with a son, a father and a best friend — and all because of a book, was genuinely tragic, but it was also seductive in its tragedy. I pictured Enayat painstakingly acquiring the rudiments of good Arabic grammar and inflection, then carefully setting down everything she wanted to say in her novel, then refusing the suggestion that she should self-publish.

Enayat resembled her narrator, Najla, but Najla's pursuit of an identity through work and love and politics had ended in hope, in the July revolution and the tanks rolling through the streets as *the new day began to dawn*. Enayat's journey through writing had ended in despair, rejected by a publishing house that was itself a creation of the revolution. I saw Enayat as

the protagonist of her own private psychodrama, in which writing was her identity and the only way she might find meaning. The rejection of the novel had meant identity thrown into doubt and meaning lost.

I wondered: did Anis Mansour feel guilty at all? Then I reminded myself that she never gave him her novel once she'd completed it, that she hadn't asked him to help her publish it, nor sought his help after al-Qawmiyya had rejected her.

This was her decision, then: not to turn to him again.

But following her death, Mansour would offer up Enayat to his readership repeatedly, recirculating these same facts in article after article, sometimes adding details, sometimes amending what he'd said before.

For instance, in 2006 he wrote a piece in the *Asharq Al-Awsat* newspaper — '*Love and Silence*: O Grief!' — in which he tells us that he first met Enayat in the company of up-and-coming star Nadia Lutfi in the home of Mrs Wigdan El Barbary, owner of the largest equestrian stables in Egypt. Nadia and Enayat had been whispering to one another in German, and when they realized that Mansour spoke it too, the conversation became general. He states that Enayat gave him some short stories, and that he published them; that he didn't like their sense of futility, of the hopelessness of life. He repeats the claim that he suggested some changes to the novel, but that she had turned them down:

I proposed one change, that she make the opening of the novel its conclusion, then suggested that she give her protagonists the chance to speak for themselves, and not press her own words onto their tongues and into their ears, and so stand in the way of their journey. It was as though she was reluctant to grant her characters the freedom which eluded her. I told her, If I'd written this story, I would have said this, and removed that, and added this, but don't do what I tell you. After all, I'm not you, and you aren't me. Your dress wouldn't work as my suit, and my suit wouldn't suit as a swimming costume.

Then he states that she had handed him some rough drafts of her short stories, and that when he revisited them after her death he decided there would be no point in publishing them after all.

In 2010, he added two new details to the story in 'Stations', his weekly column in *Al-Ahram*. The first was that he had published some of her stories in *Al-Jeel* magazine in 1960, while the second explained why Mustafa Mahmoud wrote the introduction to her novel:

I heard that she had passed the novel to Dr Mustafa Mahmoud. He took his own view: it seems that he regarded it, not in terms of craft or philosophy, but like a surgeon. Had he been too harsh when he gave

> *her his advice? Surely she was in no need of more anxiety and sleepless nights while she waited for him to write to her with his assessment of the novel, while she waited for him to write his introduction?*

Enayat seems to haunt Mansour, who continues to summon her memory in a range of different contexts. For instance, he references her in his discussion of young women writers who emerged in the 1950s, whom he saw as moving women's literature away from 'delicacy' and starting to show their 'claws':

> *The windows were flung open to a bracing new breeze, to fresh scents, to cries of the crowd and revolution, to a literature with claws that tore Love and Evil and Life into ribbons and scratched the face of Man the Provider, man who denies woman her freedom.*

He remembers her again in the course of his account of the murder of Afghan poet Nadia Anjuman by her husband:

> *My friendship with Enayat al-Zayyat was long and profound. I read everything she wrote, and myself published her only novel, her last sad cry. I still have her handwritten manuscript...*

In which way, through Mansour's retelling, Enayat becomes an archetype, the figure he gestures to whenever he wants to discuss women's writing, or suicide, or murder, or any of the strange and marvellous things he may have witnessed in the course of his life. A prolific columnist writing with such glib facility about a dead woman none of his readers have heard of. So fascinated is he by her story that he always has something to say about it, even though his actual view remains unchanged. However, in death their relationship evolves: from that of a young woman writer soliciting a literary star for his opinions, to one of profound friendship.

From what he writes, we learn that Mansour read *Love and Silence* in 1960, then suggested changes to the manuscript, which the author turned down. He made no attempt to publish the book after her suicide even though the manuscript, handwritten in lead pencil, was in his possession. And though he tells us that he knew her father, the provost of Cairo University, he never seems to have asked him if there was a second, edited manuscript in existence. He had her short stories, but thought there would be no point in publishing them, because the writer had silenced herself.

And we learn that Yusuf Sibai had also read the novel and had promised to help her get it published.

As for Mustafa Mahmoud: according to Mansour

he read the novel and then Enayat waited for him to write an introduction, but he never did.

So Mansour's use of the first-person plural — *She showed us her modest literary output* — could be seen as referring not only to himself, but to Sibai and Mahmoud as well. Why, I asked myself, had Enayat shown her novel to three of the most widely read and distributed authors of the day, and those furthest removed from her own literary sensibilities? If it was a question of fame, then why not take it to Ihsan Abdel Quddous, who outsold everyone? Was it admiration for what they wrote that prompted her to turn to them? Perhaps a belief that they promoted young authors? Or was her connection to Arabic-language literary culture so tenuous that she simply didn't know anyone else?

Anis Mansour and Mustafa Mahmoud worked in journalism and shared an interest in philosophy. Their books were published by Dar Al Maaref. Mustafa Mahmoud didn't like the novel, and showed no interest in it or its author during her life, but after her suicide he wrote the introduction. Maybe he had softened; maybe in death the surgeon's scalpel cut less deep.

The novels of Yusuf Sibai — a military man of letters, who had been appointed secretary-general of the Supreme Council for Oversight of the Arts, Literature and Social Sciences in 1956 — would first be serialized in newspapers and magazines, then in the

blink of an eye they would appear in volumes published by al-Khanji or Dar al-Fikr al-Arabi before making their way seamlessly onto the silver screen.

What stroke of fortune brought Enayat into contact with these literary stars? I tried to picture myself in her situation, exactly thirty years on, 'showing my literary output' to three men like these three and waiting for their 'support'.

Except, by 1990, there were no stars of their calibre, and no readership like that which they'd enjoyed.

I looked in *Al-Jeel*. There were no stories by Enayat al-Zayyat, not in 1960, and not before or afterwards, either. I noticed that every time Mansour mentioned Enayat, he followed it with a sentence that hinted as much. Take this, from 2006:

> *Enayat placed a full stop at the end of the sentence: a zero at the end of a life that meant so much more than zero, but she was gone without ever finding this out!*

Or this, from 2010, where he ended an article by declaring her *an artist who had no sooner appeared than she disappeared herself, forever! She died without trace!*

Of course I felt angry. Not so much because Mansour placed the responsibility for Enayat's disappearance on herself and framed her tracelessness as its natural consequence, but because of the ease

with which he repeatedly asserted it. In any case, I was happy that Enayat hadn't gone back to him after he had promised to 'introduce her and her work' to his readers. □