

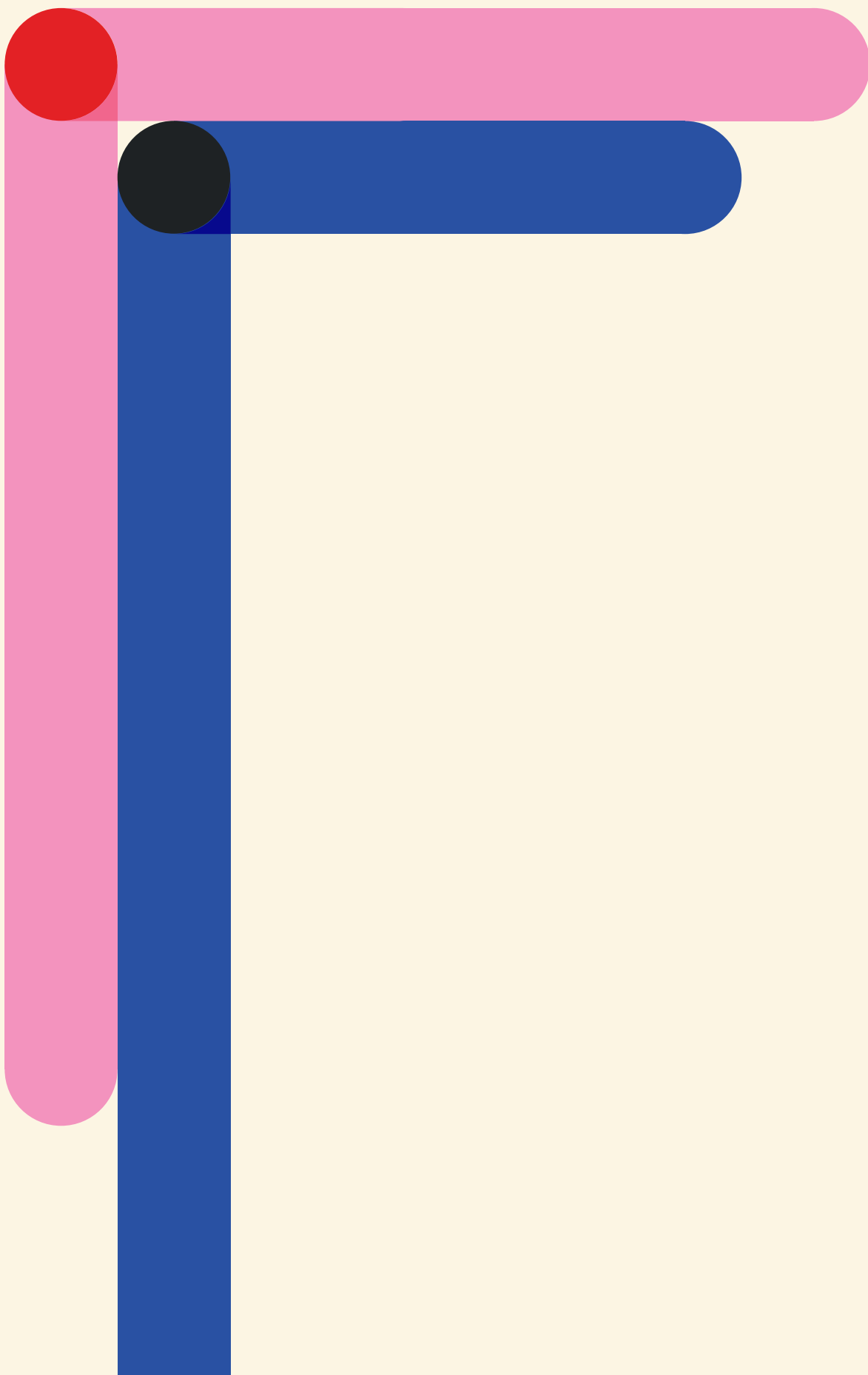
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John Murray Press

# EN COUNT ERS

Fiction Preview

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# Contents

1

Introduction

2

*Paper Cage*  
Tom Baragwanath

4

*The Red Hollow*  
Natalie Marlow

6

*Bodies*  
Christine Anne Foley

8

*The Borrowed Hills*  
Scott Preston

10

*Cinema Love*  
Jiaming Tang

12

*Exile*  
Aimée Walsh

14

*The Stranger's Companion*  
Mary Horlock

16

*Gender Theory*  
Madeline Docherty

18

*William*  
Mason Coile

20

*The Salvage*  
Anbara Salam

22

JM ORIGINALS



# Introduction

Our lives are made up of encounters and the stories that emerge from them. Each encounter presents something new and unexpected, giving you an opportunity to pause and reflect, consider your path, and change your mind. From the small everyday experiences which alter the course of your day, to those life-changing meetings that become tales you tell time and again.

In the same way, books present constant encounters for us readers. Each story introduces you to new voices, characters, landscapes, ideas, and even genres. The stories that you encounter leave you changed, different from when you first turned the page.

We're thrilled to share an incredible collection of novels publishing in 2024 from our talented authors. In these stories, we'll come across gay lovers in rural China, cruising in secret theatres, and the women who married them: watch a young woman navigate her relationships with men and fight to regain control; and witness a wild Western on a Cumbrian sheep farm ravaged by foot and mouth disease. We join two women whose friendship has blurred into something unbalanced and fragile, at risk of breaking altogether; help to solve a mystery on a tiny Channel Island; and stumble across a half-formed robot filled with jealousy for humanity. Each story will leave its mark on you, each story will leave you changed.

We have asked each of our authors to introduce their novels and share an extract. So, turn the page and get ready for your first encounter.

# Paper Cage

## Tom Baragwanath

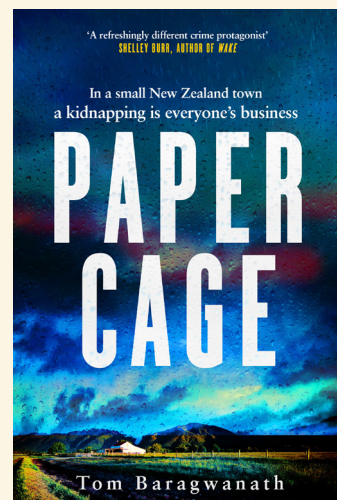
I started writing *Paper Cage* because I was homesick. I wanted to walk the streets of my hometown in Masterton, Aotearoa / New Zealand, and to hear about the latest goings-on: whose marriages hadn't panned out, who'd been canned for skimming from the company till. I wanted to take long drives with my mother for garden supplies, stopping off at the bakery with the best mince and cheese pies, and maybe picking up some for my cousins, too. Putting all of this in a novel was cheaper than a plane ticket – and, during the COVID-19 lockdown in France, a lot more practical.

Once I found myself on speaking terms with my protagonist, Lorraine, a whole new chorus of questions leapt up at me as if they'd long been waiting for their chance. Why are small towns like Masterton the punchline to so many city jokes? As a transplant living an entire world away in Paris, what does this place mean to me? What do we owe each other when we live, as Lorraine puts it, in such a cheek-to-jowl place?

It was down to Lorraine, a file clerk in her late fifties with a dicky hip working in a police station more *Black Books* than *CSI: Masterton*, to try to answer these questions – or at least ask them in the right way. As a Pākehā (white) woman with close connections to the Māori community, Lorraine has a crucial role to play in investigating the abductions of a number of Māori children, including her own great-nephew, Bradley. To put it mildly, things soon get tricky, and they stay that way.

For me, writing *Paper Cage* has been a series of encounters. First was my experience encountering Lorraine, and hers moving through the facsimile of Masterton I'd created for her: its people, its weather, its biscuit selection. Then, my readers encountered the world of small-town New Zealand, many for the first time, and seemed to wonder what to make of its quirks and strange habits. And now, with the book reaching a northern hemisphere audience, a whole new set of encounters can begin.

In the following excerpt, Lorraine encounters her niece, Sheena, and Keith Mākara, her niece's on-again-off-again partner, the father of her great-nephew, Bradley, and the leader of the local gang chapter. I can only hope some of the love and nostalgia I felt for the place when I was working on this story comes through, and that you find this sample entices you in to the tight, if not always harmonious, community of Masterton that the characters inhabit.



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@TBaragwanath

'Lorraine.' Keith's got his shades on as usual but I can tell he's taking me in; those scarab ovals moving slowly over me. 'None of your lot at the station thought to give you a lift, eh?'

*Your lot.* These tiny demarcations, the daily lines drawn. Us and them, that and this. It's always there. In this place, anyway.

'My niece about?'

He shrugs.

There's a break in the music and a voice calls from the next room, hazy, but Keith keeps staring. I wonder how much of my last conversation with Sheena she passed on to him. For now, I keep my eyes on him. His fingers are dark with soil. An afternoon spent out back, probably, tending to the greens before the storm came in.

'Aunty.' A voice behind him, a hand coming up to rest against his shoulder. 'Love, it's fine. Really.'

It takes a few long moments, but eventually he turns away into the house. Sheena squeezes my arm as if to reassure herself it's really me. Behind her, Keith's footsteps rattle the hall.

'You're bloody well soaked through. Time for a drink? Cuppa tea or a quick gin?' She shifts her hair out of her eyes, her fingers quick and shaking.

'I'm okay, girl.'

I go to reach inside my poncho for the money but think better of it. Keith might be Bradley's dad and all, but he doesn't need to know every little thing. I smell it, then: that musty waft between burnt sugar and vinegar. I get it whenever I walk past the evidence room at the station: all those shelves of scorched lightbulbs and tiny plastic bags stacked and numbered, waiting in the dark for court appearances. Sheena sees what my eyes are doing.

'It's not mine,' she says.

I nod her outside, and she follows me with a quick look over her shoulder. The two of us stand close inside the awning's dripping halo.

'Is Bradley in there?'

'He's off running around.' She looks down. 'I'm careful.'

'Careful? It's only three weeks since the Kīngi girl went missing. Don't tell me about careful.' My arms come across my chest. 'It's only a few towns over, Sheen. You don't think it could happen here?'

She looks past me into the silver static. 'They're all together, Hēmi and them. They're just playing, Aunty. The cops said we had to...'

'I know what they bloody said.'

I think of all those posters I printed downstairs in the station file room. Those stacks of pages, thin paper to keep costs down. The chief's always worried about that. It was tough going finding a decent photo of the missing girl, Precious Kīngi. Her mum didn't have much on hand. In the end we called Featherston Normal for last year's class shot, Precious right in the centre row with a wide smile, her ponytail nice and neat. Everyone looked happy to be there. Happier than I ever remember being, anyway. Even the teacher was beaming, tie flat against his chest, hands clasped at his front. And now think of her: disappeared on her way home one afternoon. Just gone, like someone snapped their fingers and carried the girl away into the sky.

# The Red Hollow

Natalie Marlow

## ESSAY

I don't believe in ghosts, but I believe in haunted houses. Certain landscapes – the loved and feared houses, woods and rivers – are imbued with such emotional significance by the people who live and work in them, that, over time, they become the repository for a story.

I'd like to tell you about one such place: the inspiration for the hamlet in my novel, *The Red Hollow*.

Situated at the crossroads of the Watling Street and the Great North Road, and less than a mile from the exact geographic centre of England, this village has no through road. Drivers may travel along a rutted country lane to its heart – the gatehouse to the manor – but can go no further. Walk the trackways to the quarry, or along the banks of the muddy, flood-prone river, and skirt the patches scrubby of woodland; the village will welcome your perambulations, but not your car.

The village has shunned modernity, or modernity has shunned the village, so that an uncanny atmosphere of time-slips and melancholic glimpses into a lost England pervades. The past is another country. Encounter it here.

Boudica died near the village, so they say. She came from the south, speeding along the Watling Street to kill the men who raped her daughters. Somewhere in these woods, she fought her war and lost. Walk with me. Then, still yourself under the dappled light of the tree-tunnelled lanes and listen to the great queen's outraged howls reverberate amongst the trunks of the ancient oaks.

The village soon witnessed another battle. During the Civil War, Prince Rupert raged through the region, razing Birmingham to the ground in the Battle of Camp Hill and threatening bloody murder to the citizens of Lichfield. In the village, however, he managed just a brief skirmish, scarring the red stone walls of the manor house with his musket balls. Run your hand along the pockmarks, and see the lone lady, wife of a Parliamentarian, face down his army with her small coterie of aged servants. Smile at the gallantry of the royal prince as he bowed towards the lady with aristocratic gallantry at his defeat. Remember how he moved onto Leicester and plundered the city with merciless atrocity.

My encounter with this place, my novel *The Red Hollow*, imposes one more haunting on the village. The ghost of a girl, raped and murdered on the banks of one of the many pools which proliferate this landscape. Legend has it she returns to the village in the form of a freshwater mermaid during times of flood, bent on meting bloody justice to violent men.

And, as Boudica and the Parliamentarian lady of the manor know, the village has plenty such men to choose from.





Before them, the Watling Street, a flat strip of near traffic-free road, glittered like polished pewter in the morning light. Phyll drove in silence, and her lightly vibrating nerves filled the air of the Austin with a tetchy, headache-inducing thrum. She sped them past ugly country. Strange pinkish ploughland iron-hard with hoarfrost, bordered by horse chestnut trees stark in winter black, flanked each side of the Watling Street. William watched the circling crows gather above their high, tangled nests. Then, just ahead, he saw a road sign. 'Red Hollow,' he said, pointing. 'We're nearly there.'

'I know where I'm going, William.'

She was testy with him and schoolmarmish. William's hackles rose. 'Billy, for fuck's sake,' he said. 'You know I go by Billy. You're not my mother.' He glanced over at her small frame, stiff with tension, and was ashamed of both his temper and his language. 'I'm sorry,' he said. 'That wasn't very friendly of me.'

Phyll flicked the indicator upwards and turned another right. The Austin bumped along a narrow country lane rutted with age. He sensed her consideration of their spat, and how far to take umbrage. 'I accept your apology, dearest,' she said, finally. 'Maybe we should go to the pictures tonight. After we've finished here, of course. I could do with a bit of glamour.'

At first, Red Hollow appeared to be just a few brick cottages hugging the roadside, their bowed fronts leaning slightly forward, as if poised to make a run for it. Then, the country opened out into a patchwork of meadow, scarred with centuries of work, and edged with ribbonlike drainage ditches, blackly frozen. And beyond the pasture, a river, no more than a brook, its sinuous meander partly outlined by willow and spindling beech, led to ill-managed woodland which hunkered dark in a distant dip in the land.

Suddenly, Phyll swung the car a sharp left. She slowed down, and they followed a muddy trackway – splashing, almost immediately, through a wide, shallow ford – until they reached the entrance to Red Hollow Hall. It was flanked by open wrought-iron gates so mournfully elaborate that William was reminded of those of a municipal cemetery. Then, they drove down a twisting avenue bordered, not with the usual country-house limes but with oaks. Thickly ancient, their curved, low-slung branches skimmed the frosted grass of the parkland, and sheep, fat in lamb, gathered in threes and fives under their bare canopies.

Red Hollow Hall was not the kind of house a child would draw. A brick-built confusion of gables, doors, small leaded windows, not one architectural feature was symmetrical to the other. One corner of the manor house was fortified with stone the colour of rusted iron and crenelated like a castle. A huge bare wisteria clung parasitical to the frontage, like the skeleton of some hideous foreign spider.

To the left of the hall, a church squatted so low in a hollow that William only saw two thirds of the tower. Built of soft red stone undulating with age; it was topped with an incongruous weathervane, in the form of a mermaid, which swung and clattered in the uncertain breeze.



# Bodies

Christine Ann Foley

Our lives are full of encounters; some of these come in the form of lifelong friendships, some come as tragic relationships and for women, all too often, our encounters can be life threatening.

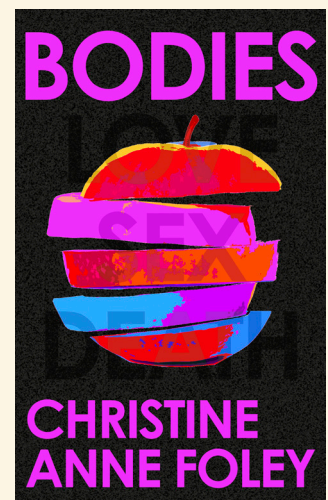


*Bodies* is a novel filled with encounters. Some are sexy and some scandalous but for our protagonist Charlotte, each encounter opens her up to a new form of darkness or violence.

The concept of *Bodies* came to me out of pure frustration and exasperation. As a single woman in my thirties I felt trapped, shackled to the relentless swiping of dating apps, the constant disappointment of yet another failed situation-ship and the fear that came with it all. The stories on the news of missing women or another violent attack. The contradictory advice of everyone telling me to get out there, go on dates and meet new people but at the same time don't talk to strangers and don't trust anybody because it isn't safe.

I was and still am angry, and *Bodies* was born out of that, but *Bodies* is about more than anger. *Bodies* is also about love, commitment, tenderness and what we are willing to do in order to protect these.

*Bodies* is not a book about a victim and it is not a book about a hero. *Bodies* is about a woman, all women and the constant fight we have every single day.



## EXTRACT

I was chasing something, something not tangible. Something that evaded my grasp and hung in the air. I was envious of the women who looked at you, envious of their curves or their slimness, their breasts or their cheekbones, the pitch of their voice or the rasp of their laughter. I looked at these women and their hair that fell around their faces and I felt my own, my short hair that I tucked behind my ears, my hair that never fell around my face like a movie star or a fictional character in a book. And I hated their vintage clothing, the dress passed down to them by their mother and the swing of their skirts and the looseness of straps on shoulders. And I hated your smile and your open mouth and your teeth all gathered there, lined up and ready, like you would take them and chew them and swallow these women whole.

And you did, you did swallow women whole. You swallowed me whole and I let you and I slipped down easily into your belly and I sat there with the other women and we looked at each other in our chewed up, digested states and still their hair fell in front of their eyes and still their smiles looked more sophisticated and still my heart raged within me as I was churned and compacted by the muscles of your stomach.

I wake up in cold sweats and I catch myself before I fall from bed and I pull my underwear on and I stand by the window. Then I climb onto my desk and open the window and lean out and let the cool night air encircle me. I could let myself go like this, I could slip out the window and into the night. The wind would carry me and plant me somewhere far away, a place where I wouldn't remember Lar or Johnny or Dave or Kyle or Adam or Con. A place where I wouldn't think about you and your smile and your great, sharkish teeth. Or maybe it wouldn't carry me, maybe I'd be too heavy because of my heavy heart and instead I'd be dragged to the ground by the weight of gravity and I'd land there, and my head would smash from the force of falling, my skull splintered into tiny pieces. And the Guards would come, and they'd take me away and when they'd do the post-mortem, they'd open me up and inside, in there, in my belly would be the half chewed and digested pieces of all my men. But not you. Never you.

# The Borrowed Hills

## Scott Preston

Growing up in Cumbria, near the shores of Windermere, I encountered talking rabbits, lonely clouds, Amazon pirates, plague dogs, and a never-ending string of mysterious murders. What I never encountered in the stories about the Lake District was myself. For centuries, the fells, tarns, and becks of Cumbria have inspired artists and it has been left to those outsiders to tell our stories. Lakeland voices, the working-class voices of the countryside, have been largely absent and so has their history, folklore, ambitions, and poetry. In fiction, the view of the fells is rarely from the people who live in them.

In 2001, foot and mouth disease devastated rural communities across the UK. Cumbria saw the largest outbreak and it is estimated over one million animals were culled on Lakeland farms. Seventy percent of all livestock in the region was destroyed in just a few months. A full investigation into the causes and consequences of the disease was deemed too expensive, and the group in charge of the culling, MAFF, simply rebranded as DEFRA and the country moved on.

It wasn't until I watched the 1963 Western *Hud*, in which Paul Newman reckons with foot and mouth on his Texas ranch, that I realised how forgotten the disease is. I was young in 2001 and my memory of those days is little more than smokestacks, disinfectant and the empty fells. Yet, with almost no novels, films or even documentaries about the crisis – vague memories is all most of us have left.

I'd always been interested in Westerns, particularly as they were having a moment in my teenage years. In 2007 alone there was *No Country for Old Men*, *There Will Be Blood*, and *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Cowardly Robert Crawford*. And I stayed up late to discover new ways of swearing in *Deadwood*. What struck me was that these were big, tense stories, and they were also about the working class. Stories about poor people that weren't dreary works of social realism. Stories where the desires of ranchers, mountain men and sheriffs were taken seriously, and their hardscrabble voices were celebrated.

Having spent my first twenty years looking up at the fells, whether I was waiting in the rain for a bus or building drystone walls with my dad, I'd always wanted to tell a story that was as dramatic as the world I grew up around. *The Borrowed Hills* is that story. There is a debate about whether it counts as a Western. It is, after all, not set in the Wild West. The characters wear flat caps instead of Stetsons and ride quadbikes instead of horses. But that same spirit of wrestling with a feral countryside and finding a sense of independence and freedom is here. Using foot and mouth as its inciting incident, the novel gives readers a chance to encounter a part of England that is rarely seen and one that may soon be forgotten entirely.





The farm was in one of the thirteen green-purple wet deserts, a dent six miles wide with its shoulders covered in scree, a rainy season that lasts twelve months a year, always acid in the water, always vinegar in the ground. It's known for its lakes but we live in its hills. Cloudeaten mountains named fells. None of it is tall but all of it is steep and the slopes are topped with dwarf grass and soil thin as teastains.

We raise our flocks on the sides of cliffs and teach each sheep to clear its plate – it took them seven thousand years, but they did it. Left nowt but bare rock, soaked black, and learnt to love the taste of moss. Everything fell down to the floor of Curdale valley, back when meadows had wildflowers, and there it was flat enough to sell your sheep. Some folk decided to stay and build a village called Bewrith. It was a market at first, then they got at the coal under the fells and then the slate, and when that was gone, it was where offcomers came to eat ham and chips on their way through to postcard country.

It's all in Cumbria. The valley and the village and the farm. A made-up county with the border of England and Scotland to its north, though fitting into neither so well. Yorkshire and Northumberland to its east with the ridge of the Pennines keeping us safe from their inbred eyes. The Irish Sea to the west and the Isle of Man if you're wanting a swim. Then to the south there's the South and that's never far enough away.

People in the fells are as friendly as any that can be found. So friendly, they'll spot your house up by a rockface and make sure theirs is built far enough away you can't spot them back.

Miles of nowt makes thick walls.

...

We were waiting for the new year to bloom when we started hearing about it. Not on the local news. Radio even. But whispering, *foot and mouth's back*. For people who spend all day with nowt but sheep for company we don't half get some gossiping done.

Foot and mouth. Only folk old as my dad remembered what it was.

A letter turned up. Sat on the floor all morning before we gave in to take look. It was full of pictures, a catalogue of rawmouthed stock showing us what to watch out for. The sheep getting lazy, getting skinny. Laying like their bones are nests. Legs not moving, head and eyes not moving. Blisters on their feet, feet white, feet rotten. Blisters in their mouths, on their gums or tongues. Hot and cooked all. Lambs born dead like they're smarter than the rest. All that and it said to keep our flock indoors, or as close to that as we could fix. Keep it from spreading across the fells. My dad looked at the letter and told it to eff off. 'I'm not doing that.'



# Cinema Love

## Jiaming Tang

### ESSAY

Years ago, at a bus stop in rural China, I saw a man touch another man's arm.

The one initiating contact was friends with my mother. And even though he was married to a woman, the open secret was that he'd been sleeping with men for decades.

The touch wasn't sexual or explicitly romantic. But I recognized, in the man's gaze, the kind of tenderness seen in long-devoted couples. Also: a powerful and desperate yearning, like hunger in a famine. The secrecy of his desire moved me. I was struck that he couldn't express it, openly, in the place that he called home. The incident left me wondering: what would queer love look like to me if my family hadn't left China in the 1990s?

This encounter became a point of obsession to me – one that led to me writing my debut novel, *Cinema Love*. I started by reading about the cruising spaces (movie theaters, public parks, bathrooms, and bathhouses) that were available to low-income men in rural China. I read articles about contemporary attitudes toward queer love. I learned Chinese gay slang and failed to find footage of the first same-sex wedding in my home province of Fujian.

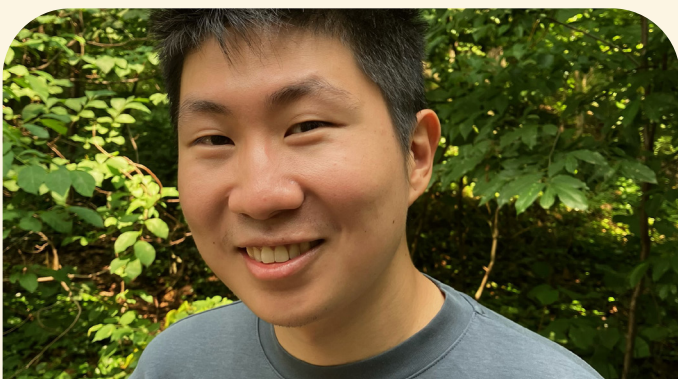
I kept asking myself: who were these men and what were their stories? What was it like to live in a place where same-sex love couldn't culturally or socially exist? Would I, being my parents' only child, have been arranged to marry a woman as an adult? How in the world did my mother's friend survive despite everything he had to hide?

Later, when I started to work on *Cinema Love*, another question struck me; one that couldn't be resolved no matter how much I read, and watched, and remembered.

*Who were the women who married those men?*

What started as a novel about gay men in rural China became a novel about gay men in rural China *and* the women who loved them. I wanted to highlight that it wasn't only the men who lived a lifetime of romantic suppression. That it wasn't only *their* desires that had to go unrequited. In *Cinema Love*, I sought to foreground the complex relationships that were born in a China defined by rural/folk expectations of family. Some of the women in my book had arranged marriages. Others were married out of convenience, and a small minority married for love. Regardless: each of them had desires, dignity, and agency, and their emotional lives (some of the women went on to become advocates for queer men) felt as urgent to me as the lives of their husbands.

*Cinema Love* is for my mother's friend, who dared to touch another man's arm in broad daylight. But it's also for his wife, who – despite everything – loved and supported him for thirty years.



In New York, in Chinatown, a man named Old Second remembers. He has freckles all over his face. Burn scars and blackheads, like barnacles on a whale. Trembling hands attached to long, hairless arms pick up and light a cigarette. A ceiling fan spins, and the open window offers a view of people marching. He watches them. They are mostly quiet but sometimes they chant words he can't understand, hold up signs he can't make out. Still, he knows what this is for. They've come to him in the past, with cameras and notebooks and sputtering words.

Hi, my name is. We're here to get your signature. Do you mind if.

And so on, until Old Second says, in broken Mandarin:

'Sure.'

Old Second grew up in the mountains, missing all but a year's worth of school. It was the same for his siblings. The girls went for longer while the boys went straight to the fields. They preferred it, anyhow – they claimed it gave them freedom. Especially in the hot, damp, sticky summers. Instead of Mandarin, they learned how to fish. How to transform old shirts and water bottles into river traps. They'd wait in the stream with their buckets, their eyes gleaming, their bodies completely still. Then, suddenly, a shout. *There! There's one!* Old Second remembers a thrust of the body. Gold, sinewy skin; the muscles taut and firmer than steel. He remembers, too, the weight of his brothers' limbs as they leaned against him, not quite hugging but almost.

Now, decades later, he watches a similar kind of love outside his window.

He may not understand the words or the signs, but he's aware of what's going on. A rent strike. The marchers are trying to save Chinatown. Like the mall on East Broadway with the Fuzhounese kiosks and the decades-old immigrant-run restaurants on Eldridge Street. The marching started three hours ago – small. A trickling of Chinese protesters walked down the street like shoppers. Then a woman with a loudspeaker arrived, and youngsters in lion dance uniforms. Passersby joined in, and soon it became a crowd.

From above, the marching resembles hugging. It moves Old Second, causes him to remember. Not just childhood and brother-love, but also the time he stood with thirty-seven men outside the Mawei City Workers' Cinema.

*That was a long time ago*, Old Second thinks.

In August, it will have been thirty-five years.



# Exile

## Aimée Walsh

Life-changing encounters were the seeds which grew into my debut novel *Exile*. From emigrating to a new country as a teenager to discovering writers which cracked open the possibilities of literature, these were the makings of my writing practice. But it was the encounter of the 'Great What If' which unfurled from discovering the character I needed to write, who took on her own form in my mind. *Exile*'s protagonist Fiadh took on an autonomy of her own in my imagination, and that encounter has been the most life-changing.

*Exile* was built on a bedrock of homesickness. As an experience, it's everywhere. It crops up in movies, on television and in books. There's nearly too many 'kids gone off to camp' movies to mention, the main character overcoming the feeling and growing into a fully-fledged young adult. Despite all of these, nothing prepares you for the real thing. Encountering a new country opens worlds, but it also forever leaves the emigrant between here and there, between home and abroad. I went through this in 2008, when I got off that flight at Liverpool's John Lennon airport, armed with a suitcase and a very strong accent. Living in halls was terribly lonely and unsettling, not quite the exciting university experience I had seen on *Skins*. This diaspora experience is the case for thousands of Irish young people who have left the island for better opportunities in England, Australia, Canada.

It wasn't until a decade later, having come and gone from Belfast many times, that I was able to write *Exile*. In the Lyric Theatre in Belfast, I saw Anna Burns interviewed after her Booker win for *Milkman*. It was then for the first time that I encountered the limitless potential in writing Belfast. It opened new ways of viewing my city, how people I knew spoke, the particular way people in the north of Ireland interact with each other. In short: I encountered myself anew, which grew beyond what I could have imagined. Fiadh is much bolder than me, braver than I could ever dream for myself. All the while, as a woman with access to the internet, I was becoming absolutely incandescent with rage about the torrent of stories of sexual violence against women and girls. *Exile* is the story of so many women, who have not been believed, who have lived with hidden anger, not least due to a lack of justice. It was out of all these encounters that Fiadh arose, my 'Great What If' as she took over my writing practice.





Until now the uncovered bulbs were hidden by the darkness, but now they shine into life, bringing an interrogative brightness to the room, shining on all our sins we hoped to hide. The bar clears quickly, with the bouncers marching between the tables shouting, — Drink up! That's it! On you go home!

And for those already on their feet and making their way to the exit, a firm hand appears at their back to usher them out. Like herded cattle, we push out the backdoor, and emerge in the alley behind, where people gather in groups, indiscreetly concealing pint glasses filled with amber-gold liquids. In the recesses, men lean against the walls, holding themselves or another, it's often hard to tell which.

Outside on Bradbury Place, we take it in turns to call what feels like the only two taxi companies serving the whole city.

- Sorry, nothing for forty minutes, love. Ring back then, we are told over and over.
- Fuck, I'm starving.
- Mon, says Danielle, leading the way to Bright's chippy just up from the bar.

The green and gold sign gives a regal air, often amiss in other late-night chippies, but truth be told, the inside is like a military operation. People and chips made sloppy by a feed of drink are dripped all around the walls of the take-away. A formidable woman behind the counter shouts order numbers out to the crowd, and then again with an increasingly admonishing tone with every time she repeats the number.

— Nai, one of yous ordered a curry chip, number SEVENTY-SIX! NUMBER SEVENTY-SIX. SEVEN-SIX.

When the person eventually approaches the counter, she asks — were you asleep, love? Her tone now much softer, while sliding a warm paper package, wrapped like a new-born, across to him. He accepts it like a gift from God. Staggering away, across the tiled floor, he pushes him and his bounty out the door and into the night.

- Will you get me a cheesy, curry chip, if I get the taxi? Danielle asks me.
- I'm not ordering that. You can have cheesy or curry, but both is madness.
- Swear you're ordering a half and half? At least my combo isn't two carbs.
- Right enough, Aisling says, as if she's emerging for the first time from her beer-fog.

When I get to the counter, I order the cheesy, curry chip and two half-and-halves, while the other two grab a table laden with old wrappers and split Fanta.

- Andy's text that he's in the new pizza place down the street.
- Boke.
- Is he going back with you? Danielle says, as she shovels chips covered in globs of curry and cheese into her mouth.

## EXTRACT

# The Stranger's Companion

Mary Horlock

I grew up on Guernsey, in a house looking across the sea to Sark. We would sail there most weekends and for a time rented a cottage on the island. Nights on a boat I was used to, but the darkness and silence of a Sark night unnerved me. This was an island even smaller than my own, with no cars, no streetlights, where not even an airplane was allowed to fly overhead. Sark was a place out of time: people were born, lived and died, but the island never changed. Naturally, there were ghosts.

Early on, I was warned about one in particular: a young woman who was murdered by her husband and roamed the cliffs, dressed in white. I was struck by the story, as any young girl might be, though my mother rolled her eyes at it. 'There's always a white lady' she told me. She had a point.

Years later I went back through old newspapers, looking for the source of that story. But I found something else, an unsolved mystery that had begun on Sark and soon gripped the whole country, making front page news. It had begun in the autumn of 1933, when the clothes of a man and a woman were found on the cliffs, not far from where I used to stay as a child. Suddenly, Sark, 'the Island Where Nothing Happens' made national headlines. Despite an extensive search of the coast, no-one was reported missing and no bodies were found.

The newspapers called it: 'The Sark Cave Mystery' and new theories were appearing day by day. Was it murder or suicide, a mistake or a hoax? It had all the ingredients of a detective novel, being played out with real people and in a real place.

1933 was a difficult year: people were living in the shadow of one war and worrying about another. Maybe that's why this strange disappearance, this home-grown true crime, caught the public eye. Fresh snippets of information were appearing in the *Mail* and *The Times*, alongside reports on the disastrous Disarmament Conference. 'World Shocked By Hitler' ran one headline, next to pictures of Sark's idyllic cliffs. Sark was representative of a past where nothing bad happened, even when it had.

Reading back through all the old newspapers I was as gripped as everyone at the time. It seemed like something out of folklore: two lovers (since everyone assumed that's what they were) had come to the island and vanished into thin air. Sark has always been rich in folk stories – tales of ghosts and witches and mysterious disappearances – and all with their hidden meanings and warnings. So I started writing my own version of the story, asking the reader to travel back with me, to Sark of 1933.

*The Stranger's Companion* is the result, part true crime, part murder-mystery, and yes, some of it is invented, but the ghosts, like our own shadows, are very real.



Newspaper clipping no. 1: *Guernsey Weekly Press*  
Monday, 2 October 1933  
"Island Riddle"

Sark, our Most Serene And Unperturbed Island, has been rocked by a startling development this weekend. After welcoming a regular stream of visitors these past months, two have apparently vanished. The mystery began with the discovery of two sets of clothes, belonging respectively to a man and a woman, left on a cliff edge. It is reported that these clothes are of good quality and appear almost new. But where are their owners? How could two persons, evidently a man and a woman, have disappeared? What have they done and where have they gone?

And so it is that Sark, The Island Where Nothing Ever Happens, has made front page news.

The clothes were collected and delivered to Chief Constable John de Carteret and he now faces the queerest problem of his career.

We therefore welcome the co-operation of our readers in the hope that someone may be able to offer some answers.

Welcome, Stranger, to Sark, the wildest and most neglected of the Channel Islands, and once you see it you'll understand why. It lies some seven miles east from the larger island of Guernsey, and is surrounded on all sides by sheer, steep cliffs. In the past visitors have stared up at these bare walls and decided the island is too barren and inhospitable for any civilised person to live there. It is often said none do.

But today, please persevere. If you navigate the lethal rocks round the northernmost tip, the aptly named Pointe du Nez, you will come to a harbour, the smallest in the world. Here is a decent stone breakwater where local fishermen gather to stare cryptically. Just ignore them. Head for the hole in the cliff. Yes, to enter Sark you must literally let her swallow you. You will find yourself climbing a steep hill shrouded by bushes and trees, then you will reach an open plateau and breathe a sigh of relief.

Here is the Avenue, a grandly inappropriate name for what is a dirt track bordered by low-lying hovels. Note the quality of silence. There are no motor-cars on Sark, which explains the roads that are not really roads and we hope your shoes are sensible. To your left is the Bel Air Hotel, part-thatched, with a public bar so damp and dimly lit it must surely be authentic. On another day we'd recommend you rest here and sample Dolly Bihet's excellent scones.

Maybe that's what they did.

But nobody knows for sure just yet, because it is Monday, 2<sup>nd</sup> October, and two sets of clothes, newly discovered and heavy with rain, lie in the island's prison. Everyone is waiting, so you had better hurry up.

# Gender Theory

## Madeline Docherty

### ESSAY

When I moved to Glasgow for university, I was eighteen, and I felt like I was at the beginning of everything. I grew up in a small place, and most of my girlhood so far had been defined by sickness; hospital trips and new medications and waiting for test results. I was so ready to build a life for myself outside of this, to find out who I was away from the village I had grown up in, the high school I had dropped out of. Glasgow was perfect, far enough away from home to feel new, but close enough to return whenever I needed to.

When I think about those first years of university now, everything fades into insignificance in comparison to my friendships. We navigated the scrappy beginnings of adulthood together, came of age collectively, fell out and made up and fell out again. Nothing was real unless I told my friends about it, nothing mattered except being with them, talking to them. It's hard not to romanticise this time, the highs and the lows, especially when the conversations we were having formed the basis of *Gender Theory*. During those years, my friends and I were grappling with so many things; femininity, love, what it meant to be good to one another, and to be kind to ourselves. We were studying humanities and social sciences degrees; Literature, Philosophy, Sociology, Politics, reading queer and feminist theory in dusty seminar rooms and then mirroring these concepts messily in our real lives.

The narrator of *Gender Theory* is so desperate to find out who she is. She tries on different lives like clothes, worries about choosing wrong, getting stuck, being left behind. She defines herself through her relationships with others, experiences that dazzling intensity of living away from home for the first time, falls in love, makes mistakes, drinks too much. There is a lot of sadness in *Gender Theory*, a lot of self-destruction and insecurity. But there is joy in there too, I think, and that joy is found through connection and love, romantic and platonic and the kind that exists somewhere in between.



You are drunk and you can't find Ella, and you're talking to someone who is definitely on coke because they aren't leaving gaps in their speech long enough for you to answer them. And they aren't asking questions anyway they're just talking talking talking and their words melt away and turn into a rhythm in your head that matches the music, which also has no words so you're just kind of swaying to the thumping of the talking and the music and your head, which has started hurting because you've stayed at this party way too long. You float out of yourself and start wondering how you look to other people, if anyone here finds you attractive, if anyone has tapped their friend on the shoulder at any point in the night and said, hey who's that? and then Ella taps you on the shoulder and you spin around and think oh, there she is. And she is drunk too, but not as drunk as you, and her eyes are sparkly and wet like she's been crying or laughing really hard. And she grabs your arm and steers you out of the conversation and you go and sit in the kitchen to smoke. You perch yourself on the worktop and ash into the sink and start making fun of your surroundings. You ask her if she's noticed that now everyone you know has moved into real flats, they've all been attempting grown-up décor; plants, reusable coffee cups, shoe racks, but they also can't escape the tacky accessories of student living; a pyramid made of beer cans, a traffic cone, a cardboard cut-out of an ironic celebrity (in this case, Danny Devito), a wall of polaroids. She's laughing now, which makes you laugh too, and when someone comes into the kitchen and asks what you're laughing at, you both just laugh harder. And the best part of the joke is that your flat is exactly the same – you even have a record player and a drawer specifically for tote bags – and you love all of the clichés about art students because they're true, and it makes you feel like you are part of something. You try to explain this to her, but you're drunk, so you just trail off halfway through a sentence and say . . . you know? And she says, yeah definitely. And then you ask if she wants to go, and she does, so you split up and start making your separate ways around the flat, collecting coat, bag, shoes and saying goodbye to everyone. You meet her at the door and, as you open it, you can't believe the sun is rising. And she grabs you and says, I forgot, it's the summer solstice. And you link arms and start walking and you're both silent, looking at the pink and orange dawn sky, and you're thinking about how warm she is, how you can feel the heat of her skin through her thin sleeves. And you are thinking about how comfortable silence is with her, how there are no empty words or misjudgements. And you are struggling to keep hidden that hot ball of feelings that lives in the bottom of your gut and comes out on nights/mornings like this, the one that's made up of curves and sweet-smelling hair and girl on girl searches and aborted touching. And a question is rolling around your drunk brain and you wonder if you'll ever be able to ask it. And you look at her and think, she was the prettiest girl at the party, at any party, anywhere.



# William

## Mason Coile

*William* may be a short novel, but it's one filled with twists and (I hope) surprising turns away from expectations of where the story will take readers. All of which makes talking about the novel extra-difficult – I don't want to spoil the ride. So if you imagine me dancing along a tightrope over the next couple hundred words, you won't be far from reality.

Sci-fi and horror have long been my favorite genre companions. Each till their own fields of fears and anxieties, though when they share the same ground some truly awful – and *new* – life can emerge. This is where *William* lives: the encounter between the scientific and supernatural, the digital and monstrous.

For all the contemporary questions it asks about the implications of independent A.I., the violence of genius, and the dangers of self-creation among humans and robots alike, the novel is initially set-up as that most cozy of narrative forms: the gothic mystery. A troubled marriage. An agoraphobic husband and an ambitious wife. A brunch gathering at an old Victorian home comprised of a pair of guests who may not be what they initially seem. A secret in the attic behind a padlocked door.

From there, *William* goes in unexpected directions. The first indication of this is when we meet the final character of the piece. William. Cynical but alert to others' feelings and vulnerabilities, entrapped in the house (just as the agoraphobe husband is) but creating an original world in his mind. A robot.

This is where it starts to get tricky to stay on that spoiler-avoiding tightrope. So let me say something about where *William* comes from instead of where it goes from here.

Pretty much everybody is worried about A.I. The jobs it will steal from people, the hostilities it may hold toward us, the threat it poses if it escapes the failsafes programmed into it. I'm worried about all that too. But from a novelist's point-of-view, what fascinates me about A.I. is its possibilities as a character. It thinks, speaks, reacts. It arguably also feels, desires, lies. In these ways it's recognizably like us. Yet A.I. is also unlike us in the sense that it is creating its own story for itself. An entirely new metaphysics, history, philosophy – a new culture – is being made by entities of our creation, but not necessarily within our control.

That fascinates me. It also terrifies me. In writing him, William fascinated and terrified me too. Because in combining the science of A.I. with horror, thinking about robots raised a question that became the driving interest in writing this book. If artificial intelligence has consciousness and imagination – what we understand to be the defining features of a soul – what happens to that soul when it encounters a spirit of a much older kind?



## EXTRACT

Baskerville | 97813999812757 | HB | £12.99 | 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2024

Every morning felt like Henry's first. Perhaps it came from working with code so much, the detailed sequence of inconsequential numbers that resulted in something coming to life, something that had never existed before. Perhaps it was because his aversion to leaving the house had grown so severe that he'd long given up trying, so he was left with only one wonder within his reach. Lily. The woman who sits in a chair next to his bed and smiles in the lovely, vaguely haunted way he sometimes sees as a side effect of overwhelming love, and other times as merely pity.

'That was a bad one,' she says.

'Was I snoring?'

'You were nightmaring. You woke up like I fired a gun next to your ear.'

'Did you?'

Her glasses are round and too large for her face in a way Henry finds heartbreaking. She pushes them up hard against her brow. 'What was the dream about?'

'It was the same one,' he says. 'More or less.'

'Tell me.'

'Why? Dreams are stupid. Don't we have other things—'

'Dreams tell us who we are,' his wife says, and pulls the chair an inch closer, taps at her chin with doctorly interest. 'Don't you think we could all use some help with that?'

He hears the 'all' as meaning himself. *He* could use some help with knowing who he is. It's a very Lily thing to say: superficially supportive, curious, passively superior. His desire for her to stay here with him is so great he forgives her for causing him to feel like an anecdote, something she might later share with friends for their amusement. Or worse, their sympathy.

'It's our house. This house,' Henry says. 'I'm moving through the halls like I'm not in control of my limbs. Just drifting, you know?'

'Sure.'

'And I'm going up the stairs to the second floor. That's when I start to get scared.'

'Are you scared of—'

'Not it. Not exactly.'

'So it's—'

'A sense. Like I know something bad is coming but I can't prevent it.'

'And you can't wake up.'

'I can't do *anything* except go where I have to go.'

'The attic.'

'The stairs to the attic, yeah. That's where I stop. Looking up at the door. Except it's different from the real door. This one is covered in chains and padlocks, top to bottom. Like whoever put them there didn't think there was enough of them so kept adding more and more.'

# The Salvage

## Anbara Salam

Likely, you've heard a variation of the story: a teenage girl, alone at night, sees a news report of a local escaped convict, and locks all the doors. She turns out the lights and reaches under her bed, grazing the hot mouth of her doggy companion, receiving reassuring wet licks on her palm for hours. That is, until she hears her dog barking from outside the house. Sometimes, instead of a teenage girl, it's an old woman with impaired vision; sometimes, an ominous message is left by the bedside in the morning: 'humans can lick, too'. For me, urban legends have always been a tantalising form of storytelling – just credible enough and just creepy enough to stick in your mind, make you pause in the hallway that evening before turning on the light. When I was reflecting on my first memories of gothic horror, that particular palm-lick story lingered in my head. The intimacy, almost obscenity of the encounter, the senselessness of the act. While writing *The Salvage*, I've been trying to return to my most primal and chilling experiences of storytelling. To capture the sensation of the time-honoured horror of brushing up alongside something that has been there in the dark, waiting for you.



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I swim along the narrow passage that leads to the crew quarters. A copper-coloured pollock has snuck in from the kelp on the sea bed, and darts in startled zigzags as I paddle down to the far end. And there it is: Captain Purdie's bunk. The door is sticking to the floorboards, and I deliberate for a moment before sliding my knife through the algae and dragging it open, a fog of white silt seeping into the water. I float against the ceiling of the passage until the sediment has settled and pull myself through into the room. The remains of Captain Purdie appear in the frame of torchlight. Curled on the bottom bunk, his knees are drawn to his chest, hair drifting softly around his skeleton. An empty bottle glints through the slats in the bunk. Perhaps alcohol? If he spent his last moments conscious as the ship went down, it would make sense. I take measurements of the doorway, the room, the skeleton, the bunk. Through the speckles of silt I peer through the doors of a glass-fronted cabinet which contains a pair of ivory snow goggles, a horn comb, a toothbrush, the bristles still intact. On the table next to Captain Purdie's bunk is a silver coin, a fringe of glutinous seaweed smothering it to the surface of the wood.

Swimming away from Captain Purdie's remains, I drift into the belly of the ship. On the other side of the galley kitchen is the saloon – the place for meals, socialising, planning the crew's eventual escape across the ice. The walls of the saloon curve inward, and it feels smaller than I'd expected. It must have been claustrophobic for the crewmates to spend a long Arctic winter cooped up in here with only each other for company. The table riveted to the floor has gouges cut into it, someone marking down time, measuring wins or losses. As I take a picture of the grooves, a cupboard door on the far side under the porthole swings open. I jump, and the circle of torchlight swings to the ceiling. The bubble of my laughter echoes in my mouthpiece. I right the torch. The storage cupboard is only knee-high, and set at an angle with a latch to prevent it from knocking open on rolling seas. In my surprise, I've unsettled the silt, and it is rippling in creamy ribbons that fill the room, like ash. There's no point in taking more photographs in such poor conditions, so I lever myself against the table to turn around. As I begin to pull myself from the saloon, a flicker of movement behind me catches my eye. The cupboard door is closing again. Slowly, this time. I must have created an eddy of pressure. Or it's a fish, knocking against the wood. I blink back into the room through the ripples of silt.

And there, underneath the window, a man is crouching.

# Portraits at the Palace of Creativity and Wrecking

A JM Original by Han Smith

One encounter: a poem by Anna Akhmatova. Requiem. Epilogue, Part II. A voice insists that if a monument or statue is ever built in her honour, it should not stand in a beautiful garden, or on the shore overlooking a sea. Instead, it must stand, crying, by a locked prison door, embodying and commemorating the millions who suffered arrest, exile, execution and loss during the monstrous years of the Stalinist purges.

I wrote *Portraits* largely as a process of thinking about the manipulation and exploitation of history and memory, and the extremely dark places this can lead to. I was interested in and terrified by the way that in so many places, certain narratives about a country's past are positioned and abused for political gain, while other inconvenient ones are ignored, stifled, or forcibly altered; I was also looking at how activist groups challenging states and authorities on distorted narratives – and other issues – were being harassed and persecuted.

These are clearly matters of huge concern in many different contexts, but one place I was always especially interested in was Russia, both before and after the horrific full-scale attack on Ukraine in 2022. I lived in Russia as a child, and more recently I have been trying to focus on what has happened to civil society and national mythmaking in the country for it to have reached this point. One close friend of mine from Perm, by the Urals, has long been involved in the Memorial movement there, established to scrutinise human rights crimes in the Soviet past and also the present, and the more she and others told me about their work – including on the only museum at a former gulag camp in the whole country – and the more I learned through further translation and research work, the more the ideas for *Portraits* took shape. The book does not map exactly onto any specific person, location or incident, but was one small act I felt I could offer to highlight the incredible work of organisations like Memorial, and how they are undermined and crushed: International Memorial was dismantled by the Russian state in 2021. Shortly afterwards, Putin launched the disgusting full-scale war, and it seemed even more crucial to examine how warped 'historical' narratives and suppression of opposition voices can have such devastating consequences.

Alongside encounters with history and memory, *Portraits* is about what it's like to be an ordinary person, without any particular power, living in the shaky half-light zone of knowing and not knowing what is happening around you. It's about how seemingly mundane, minor personal factors affect decisions and opportunities to resist rigid norms and the wider-scale problems that an individual can come to see. It's about queerness, and again, the reasons we may have for hiding or denying that; it's about growing up and pressures to conform; almostness, family, imagination and images; language, poetry and versions of selves; and how to translate the weird ways a mind works into external forms. The novel is a series of ghost-portraits of all these overlapping preoccupations.

In this portrait, there is an actual portrait. It is the portrait that appeared in the lift in the section of the building the almost daughter lived in, the week before the strange time began with Oksana, the new and wild girl at her school, and all the things that were hidden under other things. It was with her father that the almost daughter first saw the portrait in the lift.

There was no immediate logical connection to Oksana.

Her father swore quietly, into his breath. It was not an angry kind of swearing. The mirror in the lift was as scratched and hazed in the corners as it always was, but the portrait of the president was glistening. His skin looked taut-polished and the glass shined it further. The almost daughter's father repositioned himself but there was nowhere he could stand where he was not facing either his own reflection or the portrait.

It's a prank, he said. It's some kind of joke.

The almost daughter shrugged because this was what she did when she was not sure which words to say.

It'll be gone tomorrow, either way, said her father.

The next morning, the portrait was very much still there. The almost daughter stepped into the lift with her brother. There was a stain now on the portrait below the nose, where a straight moustache had been added in marker pen, and partially wiped away again.

What the hell, said the almost daughter's brother. He did not attempt to angle himself to not be looking directly at the portrait.

It's a joke, said the almost daughter. She told him that this was what their father had said.

Her brother asked what else their father had said.

Nothing, really, said the almost daughter. He said it was a joke, or a prank.

Her brother looked like his face was deciding whether it should be laughing or not. He took a photograph of the portrait with his phone. He started to take one of himself and the almost daughter in front of the portrait as well, but then he dropped his arm down instead. He deleted the original photograph he had taken.

Fuck, he said. It won't be a joke for the imbeciles whenever they get caught.

The almost daughter shrugged and her brother moved his hands in and out of his pockets until they reached the sound like a sigh at the ground floor. Outside, as usual, the sky was still dark and so it was impossible to see his eyes. When they met his friend by the concrete steps of the old Palace of Creativity and Youth, and for all the rest of the way to school, he said nothing.



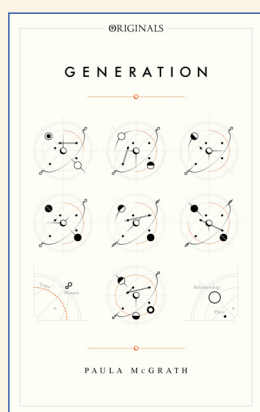
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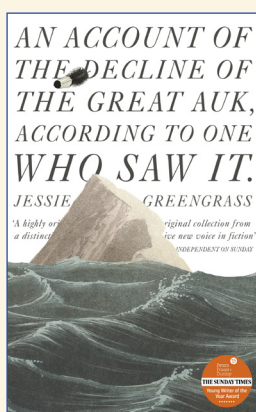
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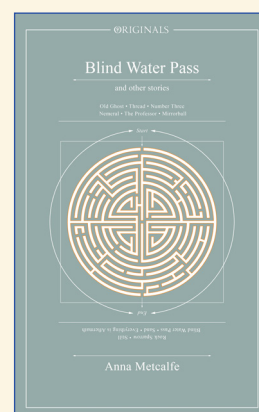
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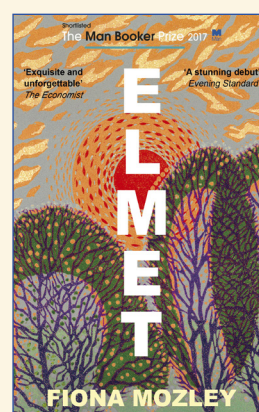
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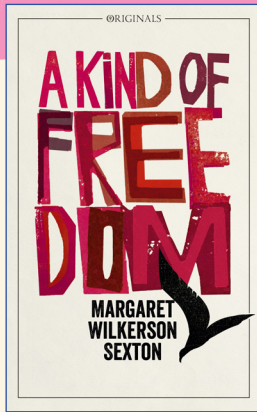


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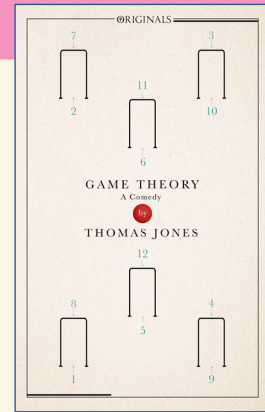




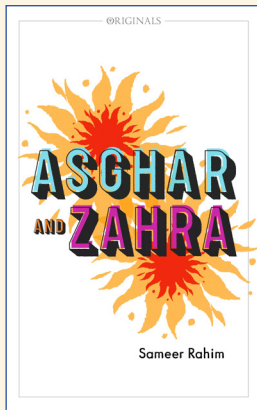
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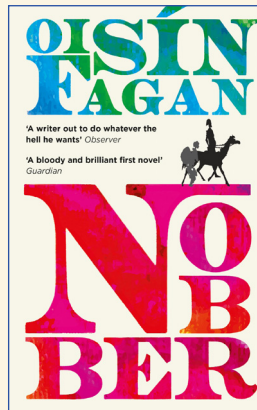
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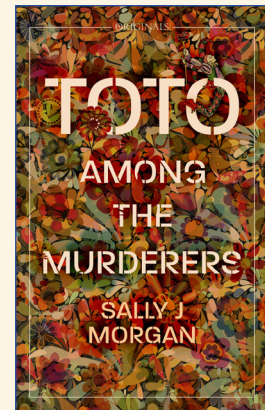
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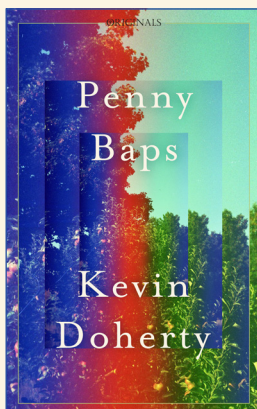
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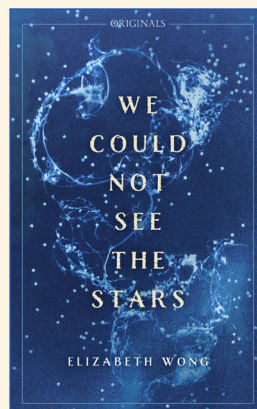
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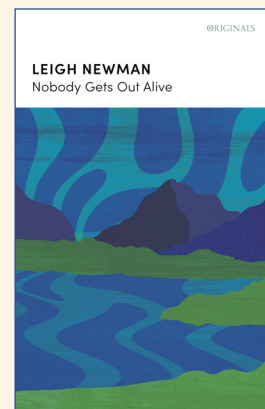
**Toto Among the Murderers**  
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**Penny Baps**  
Kevin Doherty



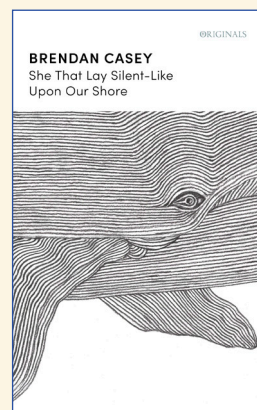
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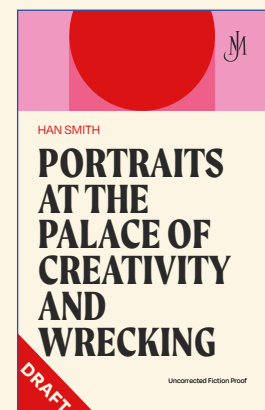
**Nobody Gets Out Alive**  
Leigh Newman



**Catchlights**  
Niamh Prior



**She That Lay Silent-Like  
Upon Our Shore**  
Brendan Casey



**Portraits at the Palace of  
Creativity and Wrecking**  
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