sceptre

NEW WRITING
2021 & 2022

sceptre

CONTENTS

FICTION

NON-FICTION

All extracts are from uncorrected proofs and not for quotation.
All footnotes have been removed.

FICTION

ALL DAY IS A LONG TIME

David Sanchez

Publicist: Louise Court

20th January 2022
9781529367867
Hardback
£16.99

© David Sanchez, 2022

Here is the trick: compartmentalize your life. Rationalization becomes much easier that way. You've got one thing over here, and another over there. People who have affairs, or at least people who are good at having affairs, are masters of this. A shrink told me about this one time like it was a diagnosis. But I thought it was a pretty decent trick.

Don't think about your childhood. Put your anger in one box and your depression in another. Those two things will be hard to look at together.

If you are going to take a woman's purse on the street, don't think about how she looks like one of your friends' moms. Someone who picked you up from school or made you peanut butter sandwiches and lemonade on summer days. If you absolutely have to think about this, think about it later.

Put her in a box and say she is just some lady spending her husband's holiday bonus checks. Nobody's ever given you a holiday bonus.

You might be expecting a big cathartic breakdown. Where everything you have ever done will catch up to you, and you will cry and beg for repentance. You will gnash your teeth and rend your garments. The light of God will break into your heart and free you from the bondage of self; you will turn your life around. This might never happen. If it happens, then you have failed at compartmentalization.

You might call someone from your past, an ex-girlfriend, say, and the conversation might be much quicker than you imagined. Where you expected a reckoning, sympathy, you might find someone anxious to get off the phone. You might realize that your actions have hurt people. You might realize that she really, really doesn't care. Your self-pity may come to an end. You might cry for hours into a bare mattress in an empty room in a halfway house. You might drench the bed until it sponges up, and you

might crack a window and soak the filters of your cigarettes until you can't breathe through them. This is not compartmentalization. Put her in a box. Call her names. Stop crying for god's sake.

Being broke is unavoidable. Come-ups are, unfortunately, largely case by case. Remember: nobody likes their job.

Go for food stamps. Wait in line all day at the office downtown in those hard plastic chairs; lie about your work and living situation. Ignore the electric whir from the fluorescent lights and try not to sweat too much. It's a long wait 'cause they hate parting with their money. Then it's another few weeks to get the EBT card in the mail.

Some corner stores will let you buy beer or cigarettes with EBT. These stores are found in bad neighborhoods and are unaffiliated with national chains. Some drug dealers will take EBT fifty cents on the dollar.

You can look for drywall in dumpsters and cut it into little rocks, bag it up, and sell it to crackheads. But if the cops find it, they will charge you with *possession with intent to distribute* as if it was real crack. That was Nancy Reagan's doing. And you'll have a bunch of pissed-off crackheads looking for you.

It wasn't until later that I learned the game I was playing is called "Hey, Mister."

Everybody has done it at some point. You're too young to buy booze. You take your money and just kinda loiter around outside a liquor store. You don't want to be too near the entrance because the guy behind the counter might see you, and sometimes those guys can get on their cowboy shit and come yelling at you or call the police. You wait for someone to walk up, you give them a look, and then you say, "Hey, Mister." Probably not those exact words. But you ask them to buy you a bottle. You give them your money. And depending on what type of person they are, they just might do it.

Some guys just want to help out. It's what keeps the rich tradition alive. They see you and your friend huddled up, nervous and stammering, fighting over which one will have to go ask, dropping your voice a few octaves to seem older, holding out a few crumpled bills, and they think about some summer night when they were a kid, when they played "Hey, Mister" themselves and showed up to a friend's house or a lake

party with a bottle of vodka and everyone cheered. When they had a drunk, sloppy kiss with the cute girl from geometry class and threw up in the pool.

Then there are the drunks. Not the homeless and wetbrained drunks, but the ones just barely clinging to their earthly possessions. They pull up in the parking lot in a beat-to-shit Honda or an old F-150 that makes a sound like dogs barking as it drives. They step out in a bathrobe or slippers or whatever stained clothes combination they have specially chosen for shuffling around their house, sleep-watching cable. These guys won't give you the time of the day. They're myopic; they'll walk right past you and ignore your little voice clearing, the crack in your pubescent throat as you say "Hey, Mister."

Then there's the homeless ones, the guys who smell like sour sweat and dried shit, that have beards and sinewy, skinny bodies like stray dogs — harsh tans and open sores, cuts on their knuckles, burn marks and faded stick-and-poke tattoos on their knotty forearms. No teeth and three shirts. They will want you to pay them for their services, or at least buy them a little something. These are the guys that when you see them take their first pull of the day, you feel it. Like when you stop at a gas station after a day of landscaping in August, when you open the cooler and take the first pop off a Gatorade before you even make it up to the register. That's how they pull. You feel the world relax, you feel the tightness all around you just up and unfold, even though you didn't even know it was there before, and you weren't even the one taking the drink.

It's rare to witness someone achieve satisfaction so quickly and so fully.

Anyways, the third kind, that's the kind of Mister I said "Hey, Mister" to after I slipped away from home and hopped the Greyhound from Tampa to Key West, in the middle of a ninety-degree night, fourteen years old, still shivering from the long bus ride when he walked up.

When you smoke crack or inject coke, you can't hear for about thirty seconds. All you get is a sound like a 747 landing down the street, or an aluminum train howling past your face. It sounds like water on fire. Like a ghost fight or a panther crying. Some people call this "getting your bell rung." Medically, I think it is some sort of cocaine-induced tinnitus.

David Sanchez
Extract from
ALL DAY IS A LONG TIME

The structure of a cocaine molecule looks like a boat. Hanging off the bow is a single nitrogen, or base, called an amine, which makes the molecule slightly basic. In the powdered form, this nitrogen is bonded to a hydrogen ion to make a hydrochloride salt. If you take that salt and mix it with a slightly stronger base such as baking soda or ammonia in water, then the hydrochloride ion gets broken off and bonds to the stronger base; if you heat this mixture, then the hydrochloride gets burned away. Without the hydrogen ion, the amine, or base, becomes free. You see where this is going.

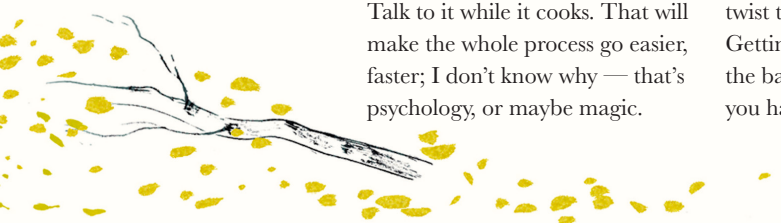
Heat a pot with water, don't let it boil; turn the knob to five or six. Mix three parts coke and one part baking soda in a Pyrex, drizzle water on it so it gets soggy. Put the Pyrex in the heated water. Keep it on the stove and stir a little bit. Let it bubble until it turns to mashed potatoes, then it will congeal into a pancake. Pop it off the burner and put it under cold water. Once cooled, take out the pancake and carve it up into little rocks. The kitchen will smell like burnt rubber for a few hours.

Talk to it while it cooks. That will make the whole process go easier, faster; I don't know why — that's psychology, or maybe magic.

It's called crack because the baking soda makes a little cracking sound when it's getting burned. It's the sound of carbon dioxide being released from the molecule as it changes states, same as Rice Krispies.

Everyone knows that meth fucks up your teeth, but it isn't the meth, actually, that rots them out. It's not candy. The meth just makes you stop producing saliva. Spit helps kill germs and bacteria in the mouth, so without it your gums and your teeth fester. The bacteria grows and grows and crawls in the soft tissue down around your roots, all in the holes you nervously chew in your cheeks until your teeth start turning yellow, brown, black, and disappearing. Spit is disgusting, but, like many things, the alternative is worse.

When you shoot cheap meth, your mouth fills up with oil, typically Coleman camper fuel. Most meth is bad meth, and all you need to make bad meth is some Sudafed, lithium ion batteries, Coleman camper fuel, Drano, table salt, and a two-liter bottle. It's kind of a pain because you have to shake the bottle and twist the cap every few seconds. Getting the lithium strips out of the batteries isn't easy, either; you have to pierce the casing and



pry off the top, then remove the insides and unroll them. During the reaction, the oil works as the solvent so it doesn't break down, and it slides right up your veins and drips into your mouth. You will smell it, too, but it isn't in the air. It tastes like how you'd expect. Like gasoline and slippery, bitter cum.

Find the bars where young white people drink in a neighborhood that was Black two years ago. "Up-and-coming" areas. Somewhere with a lot of foot traffic and wait around when it starts to die out. The people here want to get robbed, I swear — it adds to the "experience." They'll give it away. Look for boat shoes, polos, expensive purses, look for baby blue and yellow. Look for drunk people; they are less predictable but also less likely to call the cops.

If you don't have a gun, use a knife. If you don't have a knife, use a needle and say you're sick. You can do this by an ATM, but there are usually cameras there, so hang back a little.

Why do you do it?

Common answers: You are running from something. Trauma, especially. You were raised wrong, you didn't know any better. It's genetic and one or both of your parents are the same way. You are incapable of living life on life's terms. You don't care about other people. You have exceptionally weak willpower. You are too sensitive. You are a delicate, misunderstood genius like those musicians who die choking on their own vomit or the writers who put a shotgun in their mouth. The ugliness of the world is too much for you. You have a disease.

These are all flimsy excuses.

The lizard brain, the reptilian brain, the amygdala: these refer to the same thing. A little almond-shaped bunch of nerves in your brain responsible for decision-making and emotional responses. They are a part of the limbic system, which is at the head of the mesolimbic pathway. The pleasure pathway. The reward system. It's the oldest part of the brain; it's been around since mammals evolved from reptiles, since we had scales instead of hair and walked around on four legs licking each other with forked tongues.

A little clump of neurons in the center bottom of the brain projects the dopamine out through other areas of the brain, and when it hits the end

of the trail, you feel a positive sensation, a reward, and you become satisfied. But the pathway is unable to distinguish drugs from food or sex because it is all translated into one language, dopamine. Where a good meal will release about 50 units of dopamine and sex releases 200, a tiny shot of crystal meth releases more than 1,000. Once the VTA takes on this much dopamine, the whole system gets hijacked. Over time, the system can become accustomed to these unnatural amounts of dopamine, and satisfaction and reward sensations become harder to achieve. This is why the need for drugs takes over the need for food or other basic necessities. Once the pleasure pathway is rewired, you'll spend all your time obsessing about what rewired it, about how to get it.

This has its own flimsiness, too. Just more blame shifting.

It'll probably get "disproved" in five years, anyways.

"What are you doing down here? You on vacation with your parents or something?" he asked me.

Back then, everyone who was older than twenty seemed just old to me. But looking back, he couldn't have been older than thirty-five. He was small with the look of hard living. His stick-and-poke tattoo was of a five-leaf clover and had a date underneath it. I gave him ten bucks and told him I wanted the most of the cheapest. He got a fifth of Popov and told me that is was $9.99. He said he covered the tax with his own.

"You're gonna need some money. How much money you got on you?" he asked.

I told him the truth. And the truth was that after my bus ticket, which I got round-trip, I had $215 saved up from painting houses all summer.

He told me I was lucky I found him because there were folks down here who would rob me or worse. But he said he isn't from Florida, so he doesn't behave like that. He just comes down for the winter when it gets too cold in Chicago. I said, "I'm here to see a girl." And it was the truth, too.

That was my plan, as far as it went. Nicole. She was a grade up from me and down here on vacation with her parents and her sisters, and she told me that as long as her parents don't find out, I could come down, her sisters would be cool about it. And

she told me that she had been thinking about me since school ended and that she can't get me out of her head and her dreams, and she said I'm crazy for doing this, but she didn't want to stop me.

He whistled low and passed me the bottle. He asked me where she was staying and steered me down a residential street — pink and yellow A-frame bungalows with fences, little shotgun houses with four-step porches and two windows to the right of every door. We walked through the streets quick, and he told me he had to make a stop.

"How old are you?" he asked.

"Sixteen," I lied.

"You ever done coke before?"

"Yeah, a few times," I lied again.

We turned north up the island, to where there's a trailer park tucked between some scrub palmettos and a few ugly trees. Just about a dozen single-wides propped up on cinder blocks and broken skirting. Sitting a couple hundred yards in between the airport and the high-tide mark, where the washed-up horseshoe crabs dry out, and the sand fleas burrow blindly and chew on the wet, gray shore.

If you can afford it, get your hands on a multivitamin. Meth leeches your body of vitamin D_3, which is how you absorb calcium. Without calcium, your hair starts to fall out; it just up and leaves without warning, and everything else gets fragile: your nails, your skin. You'll get a cut opening a water bottle.

Eat at least a Snickers bar every day, steal an orange from the gas station on Sundays. Snickers has everything you need. Calcium, minerals, protein. It's not the highest calorie-to-cost ratio, but it's up there. The best ratio is the plastic-wrapped danishes: the Big Texas and the Jumbo Honey Bun. They typically run for $1.50 to $2, and they are 560 calories. Figuring at $1.75, that's 320 calories per dollar. A cheeseburger from McDonald's is about 300. A can of Coke is 140, and a small bag of Lay's is 160.

Crack and meth cause excess concentrations of norepinephrine in your brain. Meth makes your brain produce more of it, but crack inhibits your brain's ability to reabsorb it. The crack binds to the protein that is supposed to get rid of the norepinephrine, so it gets stranded, like its car got stolen, and it builds up in your

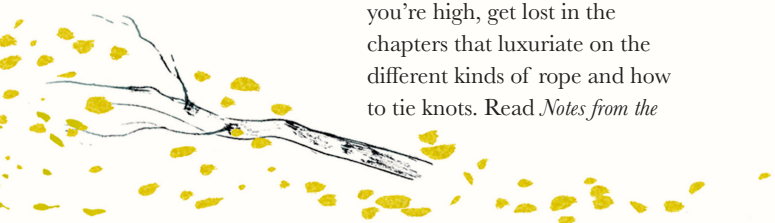
David Sanchez
Extract from
ALL DAY IS A LONG TIME

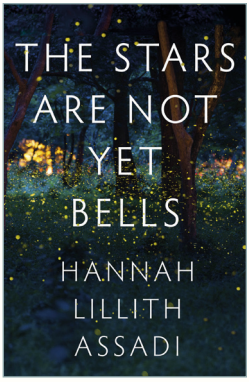
extra-cellular space and kicks neurotransmission into high gear.

The norepinephrine looks and acts just like adrenaline. It initiates fight-or-flight, but it really gets you in the brain. It enhances your focus and your attention, your retrieval of memories. It makes you vigilant. It allows you to process sensory information fast and effectively; you see the delicate patterns of the world and react to them, you organize them, you set up a system and derive meaning from it, courses of action. You become hyperaware to enhance your chances of survival. But if you aren't in danger, if you're just sitting around shooting coke, and there is no reason to fight or flee, then you might start to pick up the spare bits of yourself and the world, to organize it into a made-up pattern that is better left unseen — a frightening structure of delusion and paranoia, full of filled-in gaps and illogical connections, a golem of mad information. You have to feed this instinct, too, your brain's loud craving. You have to give it books.

Good books for junkies: Read Dante, read *Moby Dick* while you're high, get lost in the chapters that luxuriate on the different kinds of rope and how to tie knots. Read *Notes from the Underground,* Ellison's *Invisible Man* if you are withdrawing. *The Waves* or Faulkner if you haven't slept in a few days. Mostly, don't go north of 1950. Stay away from the beatniks — they don't know what the fuck they're talking about. And memoirs are whiny. Especially don't read those books about rock stars; it'll just piss you off because of how broke you are. *Trainspotting* is pretty good, but heroin is for suicidal teens. If you've got enough meth to last you a while, give *Paradise Lost* a run. See if that does anything for you.

A book is just time-released information. Just ink on paper. A word, one datum in a relatively simple system of information transmission. But there are moments, moments where the information piles up and time stops and everything becomes greater than the sum of its parts. The rhythm of the words and their shades of meaning match up for one brief second. It's the passage of time that allows this to happen. Beginning and end give the duration a special fertile quality. Search for these moments when you read. If you can't find them, toss the book.





3rd February 2022
9781529370652
£16.99

© Hannah Lillith Assadi, 2022

THE STARS ARE NOT YET BELLS

Hannah Lillith Assadi

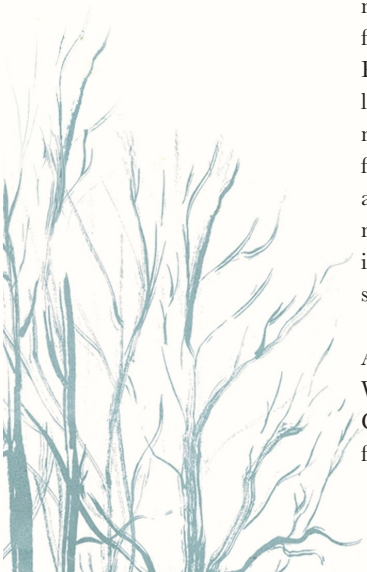
Publicist: Niamh Anderson

But it is not the story of a drowned ghost haunting my dreams that Dr. Madera wants from me. He says I must focus on the facts. Dr. Madera has commanded that I report the story of myself, *the real story*, every morning. Should I get lost, he has offered me helpful mnemonic exercises: *What is your age? What is your name? Where do you live? What year is it? Who is your husband? What are the names of your children? What is the weather like today?*

The wind smells of rain. My name is Elle Ranier. It is May the thirteenth, 1997. A voice talks at me from the radio, telling me that the market has turned for the worse, the Israelis and Palestinians are at war, snow falls late in the north. The broadcast makes it sound as if the world is finally ending. I no longer tremble at signs of the apocalypse, since my own was prophesized for me in a fluorescent medical office some time ago.

At the start of the Second World War, I moved from New York City to Lyra Island, population four hundred—most of whom, until these last years, were employed by my husband, Simon. We have lived since then on this strip of sand, woolly with oak, off the coast of southern Georgia. The dunes here shimmer, white as snow. Wild horses roam, ancient and unapproachable as unicorns. Storms trample us in this part of the world; we are the midwife of the ocean's wrath. Hurricanes have ravaged my garden many times over. Until this year I have always been able to revive my rosebushes. Our home was built on the foundation of a previous one, which was built on the foundation of one before that; both houses burned to the ground a century apart. The island has never wanted us.

Back in '41, the three of us – Gabriel, Simon, and I – had anchored at the dock on the river's side, rather than the ocean's, where the irreverent tangle of oak recalls the woods of some fairy tale. I knew even then that I'd become lost in them. The path to the house was scarcely marked by an ancient sandy trail; there has only ever been the one dirt road carving its way through



the island, from the town in the south to the northern settlement. Our house stood on Lyra's highest ground, right in the middle. It was Elijah, at first the groundskeeper and later Simon's ship watch leader, who guided us to our new habitat, which stank of earth and ocean and fire. We were city people and startled by the sound of our own feet crushing the leaves beneath us, but it was not the land itself that would curtail our welcome.

Once the house was before us, I gazed at it in awe, the stone stairways rising into a menagerie of vines veiling more windows than I could count, the grounds so spacious that a wild horse gnawing on the lawn seemed the size of a dog. Even the light overhead was of a different quality, more persistent in its splendor. I wondered to myself how a person would not go missing in such a place.

After some moments engaged in this reverie, I noticed that Gabriel had indeed vanished. I turned to Elijah, mustering what composure I could, and asked after his whereabouts.

"Mr. Simon says your cousin's to be staying in the old shed," Elijah responded. "So I pointed him on his way."

"They've done it up for him quite nicely, Elle," Simon said. "And wait until you see the bridal quarters."

I had not yet had a chance to visit even the bathroom when Mr. Clarke Senior, the mayor, materialized from the ghostly spread of oak with a rifle in hand. "Well then, Ranier, you've found our Lyra," he said by way of greeting.

Back then, the island still answered to the Clarkes, as it had since the beginning of American time—that is, after Lyra was stolen by the Clarkes from its indigenous, most of whom had been driven from the earth. The family had derived its fortune first from gold and then from steel, but they had fallen out of the financial favor they once held. It was from the Clarkes, I learned later, that Simon's father had purchased the land where our new house stood. Theirs, too, had stood there once.

It was not only Clarke we would meet that day, but an entire cadre of his loyal locals. One by one they emerged from the woods, armed at his side, as if our puny party represented the German invasion feared along the Atlantic coast. Whatever sudden inferiority they might

have felt toward Simon, with regard to financial standing on the island, was upstaged by this display in military might. Simon's stature seemed to shrink, from its former six feet to something less, as he stepped behind Elijah and then very nearly behind me, his slender and helpless wife.

It was Gabriel who spoke at last, reemerging a wraith from Lyra's wild. He stood before the militia in the manner of an immortal, unarmed and grinning. "Who knew paradise was so easy to find?" he replied, on our behalf. And so ended the short-lived standoff.

*

Simon retired early that evening, claiming exhaustion, so Gabriel and I walked through the grounds toward the sea, which I had not yet seen. The island was more feral back then. Or perhaps it is only so in memory. Moss tickled our shoulders as we walked; above it the stars were bright as fireflies, a dream of the trees.

"Simon is still shaken up over that reception from Mr. Clarke this afternoon," I said. "He even said something about returning to New York. Wondered if he should write his father."

Gabriel shrugged. "Clarke was only trying to spook him, Elle. Show Mr. Simon he might be the boss right now, but not for long."

"So that's what their whole circus was about?" I asked.

"I was hiding in the woods listening in on 'em before they ever approached. They were goin' on about not letting any Yankee take what's here," Gabriel replied. "I heard one of 'em say it's *blue ground*, Elle. That there's diamonds in the water—or maybe some kind of jewels even prettier than diamonds. 'Course then another said that was all just an old slave story."

"There it is," I said, distracted as the trees parted. Before us suddenly were the iridescent dunes, and beyond them, that canvas of impassive, violet sea. Nothing would ever be so magnificent as that first glimpse.

"Yes, there she is," Gabriel said, drawing me into him. "My sham cousin, alone with me at last."

*

That was our first day on Lyra, a far more poetic day to die. Instead I've lived to hear Dr. Madera diagnose me with a disease that befalls the old, that

destroys memory—my own, surely, but also the memory of the world as it once was.

I stare out the window and imagine all my most beautiful memories, stretching vast and deep as the ocean, shimmering blue as a mirage beyond the scrum of oak. I am losing the Atlantic, losing all that makes me Elle: my facts.

PARALLEL HELLS

Leon Craig

Short Stories

17th February 2022
9781529371420
£14.99

© Leon Craig, 2022

Publicist: Louise Court

Ingratitude

It was not a significant birthday on which my mother called me into her study to discuss my inheritance. Rose and Jenny were playing in the hall, one jumping from the stairs in pursuit and the other waiting by the drawing room door for the cue to run. When they saw me, the twins made a kind of war-cry and took off, darting in opposite directions, so only one of them could be caught at a time. I touched translucent smears on the banister and smelt my fingers. Linseed. They'd been going through my things again. At ten they were too old for this kind of game.

I had shown Rose how to prepare paint just last week, thinning it with white spirit and adding the oil for extra gloss. She'd marvelled at the bright cadmium yellows and deep cobalt as they sank into the small canvas we'd stretched together. Jenny was more interested in making elaborate monsters out of clay, though she wasn't happy enough with any yet to fire them.

'Stop dawdling out there,
I haven't got all day!'

My mother busied herself opening and shutting drawers, pulling them out so far they threatened to fall, then shoving them back in with a thunk and rustle. Curled-up sheets of Bristol board sprung out from nests of bank statements. I kept myself entertained by cross-referencing the lies I'd told her against things I'd said in passing. When no discrepancies suggested themselves, I moved on to wondering what this inheritance might be. Some heirloom already thick with the grease of my caresses, like the Lalique vase? Money? The opportunity to sell my work; a place to start my own gallery? The prolonged childhood of my twenties had become grotesque to me and I was not much good at feeding or cleaning up after the actual children.

I continued to practise the rebellions of my adolescence with long expertise but without relish. They say the ringing sound that

follows loud music at a concert is the last note of that pitch you'll ever hear again. My ears still buzzed from my early youth, but the dancing had stopped, everyone else had grown up. Other girls hoped for presents from their boyfriends, not their parents. Nor from other people's girlfriends. I was on the tail end of one disastrous dalliance and at the beginning of another. I had not received a card from Amy, nor from Ida. In Mother's eyes, my loneliness was just more proof I should conform. She often described herself as a practical person.

She had found an envelope and was tearing into it with the letter knife. Through the window, I could see snowdrops around the pond and a furtive cat, white against white snow. Its pawprints led in a semicircle from behind the outbuilding where I liked to paint. Not one of ours. I squatted by the little stove to give the fire encouragement with a poker.

The sound of her setting the knife softly onto the leather of the desk called me back over. She had gone to some effort. Today she was in all the splendour of her self-imposed uniform. Coral-pink lips, blue cashmere and pearls. This usually signified bad news. I sat down opposite and drew the envelope towards myself. Inside, it was patterned with red and green Italianate feathers. It contained a cheque for a considerable sum: I would finally be able to go. If I lived abroad I might not even need to work. There were so many things I hadn't seen. I folded the cheque, and was about to slide it into my bra when Mother took my hand and held it down on the desk, with more force than necessary. I did not like the line of her mouth.

'I have something else to give you.'

'Is it advice?'

'No.'

'Is it jewellery?'

I liked to tell myself I had an artist's appreciation for beautiful things. It was more likely that I had learnt from her the habits of mind which had been so much to her advantage. She looked more surprised than she should have done. 'Yes, it is.'

'Is it the tennis bracelet?'

'I told you, you can't have that, you'll lose it.'

'So I won't lose this, whatever it is?'

Her pressure on the top of my hand intensified. Her hand had the shiny feel that older women's do when they neglect the skin in youth only to slather it with cream in middle age. Syringa. Not what I would have chosen. I painted in fingerless gloves to counteract the cold of the shed, but my fingertips felt raw from spilling white spirit on myself while mixing.

'Look at my wrist.'

The silver bracelet she had always worn was so tight the skin around it had whitened and bulged out pinkly on either side. The little garnet eyes of the snake showed red in the firelight, its mouth full of itself.

She said, 'He's yours now.'

'Thanks but I don't want that, it's not my style. Could you let my hand go, please?'

'I don't think you've quite understood. Look at my wrist.'

I'd thought it must have been light reflecting on the metal. The snake appeared to be moving, his scaly neck swelling outwards. Then his jaws opened imperceptibly wider and with a soft click he took in a little more tail. My mother groaned.

Horror is not dissimilar to love, in that all time gets folded in to meet it. You either feel it still in the present or, in remembering, encounter the numbness of your failure to feel it. I knew then that this moment would never fade comfortably into recollection.

'What do you want me to do with it?'

'It's time you had him.'

'What is it? Whatever it is it needs to go, now. Go to a jeweller's and have it sawn off. Why the fuck are you trying to give it to me?'

'I can't . . . get him off. The minute the saw touches him . . . my hand goes with him.'

'What on earth? Why?'

My mother turned slightly, and with her free hand took down the wedding picture from the shelf behind her. She tapped a lacquered nail against the glass, then drew back her hand. I tried to imagine its absence, the white of a joint poking from the stump.

'Look, I'm thinner here than after I had you.' I had seen these photos many times, and listened to a version of that complaint, but I hadn't noticed the awkward angle of her hand holding my

father's. The snake was hurting her there too, yet in the picture next to it, of Mother cradling me as a baby a year later, it hung low on her forearm like a bangle. Now it had grown tight a second time

'It's your turn to take him, and pass him on.'

My legs had crossed themselves before I fully comprehended what she meant. Acid mingled with cake in my mouth.

'That's what the cheque is for, isn't it?'

She sat back into her chair and smiled. On the wall to the left of her, a row of her pastels had faded with the light. She'd said she hadn't had the energy to keep on drawing after I'd arrived. In the silence, I wondered whether the things we do to ourselves and to other people to ensure we have the means to make art often deaden our ability even to appreciate it.

'It's time you started thinking seriously about what you are going to do. There are almost no men around here worth mentioning, and those that are have the wrong idea about you.'

'They have precisely the right idea, Mother.'

It writhed again, more noticeably this time. I will admit to being impressed by her resistance to the pain. Though this would not have been the first time she endured it.

'I don't care about your . . . predilections . . . and neither does he.' She was jabbing at the snake now for emphasis. 'It's not as if they've made you happy anyway.'

'It's different for you, you loved Dad.'

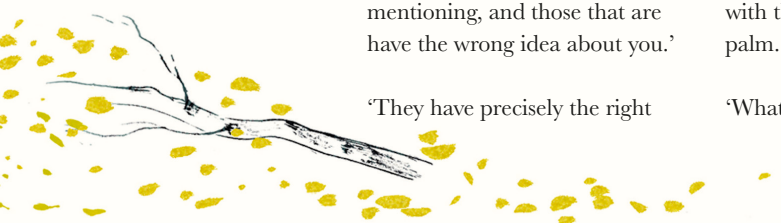
'I did, but you can choose who you love. Starting with your choice of social circle.'

'If I had the choice, I wouldn't love at all. Love is just handing someone a piece of yourself you'll never get back and waiting for them to break it.'

She wrinkled the nose I shared with her. 'There's no need to be so dramatic. If it's that bad for you, then do as I ask. Find someone to help you with this and settle down together.'

I succeeded in yanking my hand out from under hers. It felt damp with the desperate sweat of her palm.

'Whatever stupid bargain you've



made, you can leave me out of it. I'm cashing this, by the way.'

She raised her arm and shook it, still pointing. 'Do you think I would have chosen this? Do you think my mother chose it? Or hers? I *wanted* you and I would not have chosen this way. I was getting my first real commissions when it happened. But when my mother told me I had no choice, I put my hand out and accepted him. You really are a selfish girl.'

I picked up the letter knife. 'Do not bring that bracelet anywhere near me. You coward. Just because you accepted it so meekly does not mean you get to pass it on.'

'I'm not frightened of you, you look ridiculous. It's blunt. He's going to take my hand off.'

'I won't do it. This is your problem.'

'And whose problem do you suppose the twins will be, if you sit there in judgement and let me die?'

I pictured a lost decade spent wiping up spills, reading over their homework and trying to comfort them when they asked me what happened to their mother. They would never reach the stage I had, where every confidence became leverage, and so they would always miss her.

I looked down at my own right hand, with its callused middle finger from holding a pen and the black and red acrylic stuck under my nails. I rose early each morning to practise drills with a paintbrush. Supposedly being able to draw a perfect circle meant that you were a genius, but also that you had gone quite mad.

'How long would I have between accepting it and it getting that tight?

'It varies . . . probably five years. Your grandmother had seven. You remember the story about Great Aunt Natasha, Granny's twin? How she was working in a field hospital several miles down the line from Granny when the bomb hit? Granny was your age and the first thing she knew of her sister's death was when she felt him loop around her wrist that night. She said he was the coldest thing she ever felt.'

'Didn't she marry her sister's fiancé? That strikes me as pretty cold.'

'It was a different time. He sorts your life out, you know. Forces you to plan and stop wasting time

on other pursuits.'

Avoiding Mother's eyes and the stifled condemnation I knew I would see in them, I looked out of the window again. Ida had promised she would come to the shed when night fell, but I knew she wouldn't. The thought of going to see her with the snake around my wrist disgusted me, anyway. Sex made my body the instrument of my defiance, not some compliant vessel for a greater plan. If it was not wholly mine to use, then it wasn't mine at all. If the sudden loss of my right hand didn't kill me, perhaps I could learn to draw again with the left one.

I spread my fingers out on the dark green leather and turned the knife over in my other hand, so the hilt faced her and the blade faced me.

'Fucking do it then.'

She tried not to look too eager, but the faint lines pulled upwards round her eyes. She tugged at the edge of a moth hole in the hem of her jumper.

'Are you sure you're ready? Because it will be too late to complain about it when he's on you.' I could almost hear her bones cracking under the pressure. 'Wait and see how he feels.'

I would not be the one to pass this on. Maybe it would give me five years, even ten before I had to act. But it would end with me.

I folded my lips against each other and said nothing. She took the hilt and started prising at its jaws.

Five years and the money might be enough. I could finish a lot of canvases in that time. It was preferable to raising my grieving sisters and a lifetime of guilt. Perhaps I had already known enough beautiful things. I tried to think only of those as Mother retook my hand in hers. The sunlight on the snow this morning. The smell of a newly cut lemon. The windows of the Sainte-Chapelle. The place where Ida's hair met the nape of her neck. Swimming naked in the Evenlode in spring. I closed my eyes and waited.

It coiled onto my hand. The snake was burn-cold, death-cold, ice-cold. It paused, considering. Pressure as it settled slowly, then tightened in instant. A sudden crack. And wet release.

Screaming. I was screaming, then I couldn't breathe. Lungs heaving

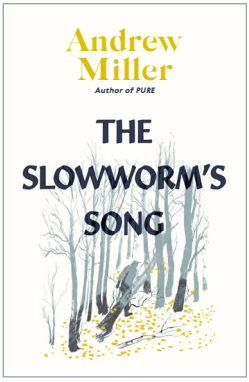
in and out, as if I could exhale the pain. My eyes were open. On the back of my hand, a raw welt where tiny bubbles of blood were starting to emerge, first slowly then quickly. The hand was broken, fingers curled inwards at odd unnatural angles like a claw. I was too afraid to test them. It was gone. It wasn't on my other wrist, nor on either of my mother's. The pain. I clutched my right wrist in my left hand, keening. The noise didn't seem to come from me, I couldn't stop.

'Where is he? Stop making such a fuss and look for him!' My mother ran around the room, peering under the desk and upending the armchairs, scrabbling as if it might be hiding patiently under the rug, scared by the commotion. A bowl of hyacinths lay smashed on the floor, white roots exposed to the air, their scent mingled with wet soil.

'What did you do?'

I got up, unsteady on my feet and cast about for a cloth to stem the blood, then finding none, shoved open the heavy wooden door with my shoulder.

At the end of the hall, I saw a flicker of a silver tail disappearing down the stairs, headed for the twins.



THE SLOWWORM'S SONG

Andrew Miller

Publicist: Louise Court

3rd March 2022
9781529354195
£18.99
Hardback

© Andrew Miller, 2022

I have had the letter just over a week now and I look at it every day. Sometimes I look at it several times a day. I have shown it to no one. No one other than myself and the people who sent it know it exists.

It did not arrive alone but in its fall from the letterbox it separated itself, glided free of the rest – bills, nonsense – and landed face up just where the mat meets the floorboards. A cool-looking oblong, office white, my name on the front, typed. No logo, no legible postmark, nothing of that sort. I picked it up and turned it over. On the back, printed on the flap, was a return address, Belfast BT2, and a street whose name I did not recognise but that I may have walked down thirty years ago. May well have done.

I carried it through to the kitchen and put it on the table. The room was in shadow. It doesn't get the sun until early afternoon. I was still wearing what I'd slept in, T-shirt and boxers, my feet bare on the lino. Of course, it might have been anything, one of those pieces of junk mail made to look like something else, something personal, or some sort of out-sourcing, the electricity company or the bank writing to me via a sorting office in Northern Ireland, like when you call to find out the train times from Frome to Bristol and you're talking to a woman in Bangalore who calls herself Julie.

I tore a corner of the envelope then used my finger as a paper knife. Inside, a single sheet, typed on both sides. I read it – scanned it, really – then read it again more carefully and laid it back on the table. God help me, Maggie, if there had been any drink in the house I would have had it. I'm pretty sure I would. There isn't, by the way. Not a drop. Nothing hidden in a gumboot or out in the garden. I could have run down to the Spar and pulled something from those glittering shelves I don't allow myself even to look at when I do the weekly shop. Then, please, picture the scene at the checkout. A middle-aged man in his underwear, clutching a bottle, holding out a banknote. Some of those boys and girls there know me. Not my name but they've

seen me often enough, might have passed the time of day with me. Would they sell me a bottle? Would they not have to? Where is it written that you can't buy alcohol in your underwear at ten in the morning? Anyway, I think they'd be frightened of me.

In such moments a wildness appears that is, fairly obviously, linked to self-destruction. I tried to calm myself with the breathing exercises Dr Rauch has taught me. The slow inhalation through the nostrils, the touch of the breath entering the body. Then the out breath, the letting go that you can, if you choose, sound as a sigh. This is ancient wisdom dusted off for a scientific age, for the National Health Service, the Bristol Liver Unit. Someone was teaching it on the banks of the Ganges long before the Buddha was born. It may have saved countless lives.

Steadier – a little – I went to the sink, filled a mug with cold water, drank it, rinsed the mug and went back to the table, picked up the letter again. Perhaps I'd got myself into a muddle reading not what was really there but what I was afraid might be. I read it a third time. There was no mistake. It is, in its way, plain enough. It comes from an organisation calling itself the Commission and is signed by someone whose name, to me, sounds invented. Ambrose Carville. Ambrose? Is that an Irish name? He is, he says, a 'witness co-ordinator', and on behalf of the Commission he invites me to come to Belfast in October when they will be examining the events of the summer of 1982.

I had never heard of the Commission. I wondered if it was something to do with the Historical Enquiries Team, which is a police outfit that's been working through the Troubles, year by year, 1969 onwards. I don't know where they've got to, how close to my year. I have, at some level I suppose, been listening out for them. But if the Commission is part of the same effort they don't say so. What they do say – what Ambrose Carville says – is that they have no religious or sectarian affiliations, do not represent or work on behalf of any particular community. The word 'legacy' is used twice. The phrase 'an open forum', the phrase 'thorough and impartial'. 'Truth', of course. Truth, justice, peace.

In the last paragraph I am informed, by way of reassurance, that the Commission is not a court of law, that its sessions are private, that it is not their

intention anyone's evidence should form the basis of a prosecution. Am I reassured? Not very. The Saville Inquiry reported last year. You must have seen something about it on TV. Perhaps you were curious as to why so much time and money had been spent trying to make sense of fifteen minutes of mayhem in an Irish city forty years ago. (Someone in Parliament, a Tory MP, worked out how many Apache attack helicopters you could buy with the millions spent on the inquiry.) Anyway, the soldiers – those men of the Parachute Regiment involved in the shootings – were offered anonymity and told they could not incriminate themselves, but it already looks like that won't stop prosecutions. It's possible some of those soldiers, men in their sixties or seventies, will go to prison.

*

I couldn't tell you how long I stood there in the kitchen with the letter in my hand. At some point I realised how cold my feet were, my whole body cold and starting to stiffen. I folded the letter, put it back in the envelope and carried it up here to Dad's study. I put it in one of the desk drawers, then took it out and, after studying the spines of books on the shelves, I slid it between a collection of English songs and poems called *Palgrave's Golden Treasury* and a volume in cracked blue leather with the nice dusty title of *Reform and Continuity in Nineteenth Century Quakerism*. I didn't think anyone was likely to disturb it there. More to the point, I didn't think you were likely to find it, you or Lorna. No one else comes up here.

And this is where I visit it, sit up through the watches of the night with Ambrose Carville and my own odd reflection in the window glass. I could, I'm sure, recite the entire letter now, word perfect. I learn nothing new in these re-readings. It is, like I said, plain enough in its way. The tone reminds me a bit of the letters I get from the clinic in Bristol, respectful as a matter of form but also business-like, direct. Results of the last blood test, the last scan. Date of the next medication review, next appointment with Dr Rauch. Please attend promptly.

By the way, Dr Rauch's first name is Emilia. I only found that out recently, though I've been seeing her for seven or eight years. A joke I've told too often is that she's my most successful longterm relationship. I'm tempted to try it out on her – Emilia. She would let it go, I think, say nothing,

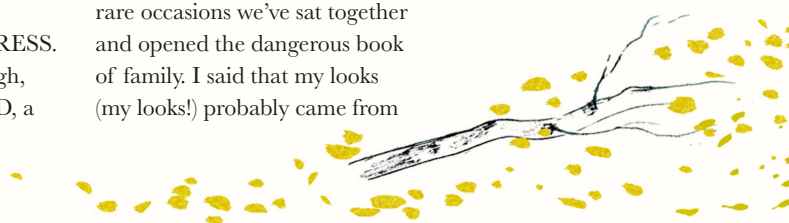
though perhaps later note it down as a symptom, one that might, for all I know, be typical of men in my condition. What does she call *me*? I'm pretty sure she never calls me Stephen or Mr Rose. I don't think she calls me anything. Just leans out of the consulting room, scans the ruined faces, sees mine and nods. No need for names.

Another reason for keeping it up here in the study – other than the old trick of hiding leaves in forests – is to have Dad's advice, or at least to ask it. Easy enough to picture him in the kitchen or the bedroom, and certainly in the garden, but this was *his* room. More of his dust in here than anywhere other than the burying ground. This is where he did his reading and writing, made his lesson plans, did his thinking. And this is where he sometimes wrote letters to me, ones I have stupidly lost and would dearly love to have again. So I ask him, out loud, what I should do, then wait for some sort of answer. It doesn't feel any odder than the sitting and listening we do in the meeting house those Sunday mornings we bother going. I ask if I should return the envelope with a line through my name and above it, in bold, NOT KNOWN AT THIS ADDRESS. Or if that isn't strong enough, ADDRESSEE DECEASED, a statement presently untrue but unlikely to remain so for many more years. The liver has great powers of regeneration. It is strangely forgiving. But the fact is I did a pretty thorough job on myself. Not all lizards get to grow their tail again.

These schemes are childish, of course, and in their way dishonourable. Part of being sober is being honest. That might be most of it. I've had that explained to me often enough. For any reformed drunk it's the place he stands, his ground. It may not even be possible to stay sober without it.

So write back with a simple no? I don't think they have any power to force me. They don't say that or hint at it. Even the soldiers at the Saville were there voluntarily. It's not like being summoned to court.

Anyway, Dad so far has kept his counsel. I have not been contacted. No other voice has broken into my thoughts. The ghost in the window is only me. You asked once if I thought I was like him. Do you remember? Last summer in the garden, one of the rare occasions we've sat together and opened the dangerous book of family. I said that my looks (my looks!) probably came from



Mum's side, though that's a side of the family I've never seen much of. As for character, I avoided speaking of it for obvious reasons. Neither Mum nor Dad deserves to have that at their door. What I should have said that day, what I wanted to say, is how much of Dad I see in you, and though that is nothing to be astonished about – why shouldn't a girl resemble her grandfather? – it still makes my scalp tingle when I notice some shape or gesture smuggled down the line to you. If you had ever met him I don't think you'd have a problem with that. I think it would please you.

But if not Dad's advice (and, no, I didn't really expect it) whose might I have? The meeting-house elders'? That's Ron Hamm, Ned Clarke and Sarah Waterfall, though to be accurate, Ned's an overseer, which is not quite the same. You've seen them all at one time or another, will have shaken hands with them, heard them close meetings, though you might not have known their names. They might welcome something like this. Something to test them. Sarah's the eldest elder, and having known me a long time, how readily in the past I have made up stories to cover my tracks, she would want to see the letter and read it for herself. And then? Some appeal to conscience, the promptings of my inner teacher, that kind of thing. No 'should' or 'must'. The choice, the decision, would have to be mine.

Do you know they still have the say-so over this house? Sarah and Co? If I don't behave they can put me out of here. It was in Dad's will. An entailment or codicil or whatever the correct term is. The house, and the orchard at the edge of town. I have never resented it. There was a time, not so distant, when left with a house and some land I would have drunk them down to the last red brick, the last green apple. Dad knew that, and I'd have made the same decision in his place. It's slightly strange, though, the feeling of it, as if, at fifty-one years old, I'm still a sort of ward of court.

Will you keep going? To the meetings, I mean, you and Lorna. Other than Tess Douel's kids – and they've more or less moved away now – you're the only young people who turn up. You halve the average age in there. And I won't pretend I don't get a kick out of it, the show the pair of you make with your coats trimmed with fake fur, the jokish rings, the scarlet lipstick, heels of the kind I'm pretty sure nobody ever wore in that space before. I

catch them casting deep glances at us and I see the wondering expression come over their faces. I think we're a story they're quite interested in. They're trying to work out how it will end.

*

What time is it? My watch is somewhere, the bathroom or the sill above the sink in the kitchen. I've heard no cars for a while. The people here are not really country people now – I should think about ten of them actually work on the land – but they still have the rhythms of the country. Early to bed and early to rise. Or else it's just that there's nothing much to do once the pubs close.

If I have a safe place, a sanctuary, then this room is it. The old rug, the shelves of books, the cupboard of Ordnance Survey maps, the painting called *Coming In* or *Coming Home* that Mum and Dad bought the year they were married. The desk itself, country made and probably picked up at an auction in Glastonbury or Wells. All this I grew up with. Almost nothing has changed. I should feel protected in here but I don't, not any more. I was a fool, of course, to drop my guard and forget what I knew very well when I was drinking. How fragile it all is, how we have nothing under our feet, nothing that can be depended on. Did I tell you that story about Peter Irving? I don't always know what I've said out loud and what I've just told you in my head. I heard it from Cheryl, my post lady. She picks up gossip door to door, like a bee collecting nectar. I know Peter a little, or knew him. Our fathers were friends. On Christmas Day last year he was standing at the head of the table to carve the turkey. All his family were there, children, an elderly aunt or two. He stood with the fork and carving knife, a man in his mid-forties, quite successful. He stood and he stood, looking at the bird, looking at the things in his hands. At some point the family must have begun to feel uneasy. Why the delay? Was it a joke? Then – and Cheryl had all this from the wife's sister – he slowly shook his head. He didn't know how to do it. He had carved the turkey every Christmas for years but now he couldn't do it. Whatever had held that knowledge was gone, wiped. In the New Year he was diagnosed with a brain tumour, inoperable. The last I heard he was in a hospice near Bath. A story like that should have put me on my guard. It should have reminded me.

Andrew Miller
Extract from
THE SLOWWORM'S SONG

But all this is beside the point – forgetting, remembering, speaking up, keeping silent. There is a reason I cannot go back and the reason is you. Their letter came too late. It wouldn't have mattered before. Now it does. Of flesh and blood and soul you are what I have now. You are all I have. And I know how uncertain it is, this peace between us, your dropping of the old wariness, the old resentments. We have, with days, been building a bridge between us. We have just begun and the bridge is still so frail I hardly dare look at it. A strong wind, a careless word, and it would be gone. And it's not – I hope – only selfishness, not just what *I* would lose. I don't believe you've given up on having a father. I think you need me to make the effort. I have failed in so much! I don't intend to fail in this, not for them, not so they can keep raking over the sorry history of that place. How about raking over some of what their own did? That should give them ten years' work. Why poke a stick in the nest? I was sent there, Maggie, and younger than you are now. That makes me a criminal? And what if you came to look at me like that? If one day you were to look at me as some of the people in that room in Belfast would look at me? Could I survive it?

At last, an easy question! I could not.

Photograph © Mohammed Naseer

THE RETURN OF FARAZ ALI

Aamina Ahmad

Publicist: Louise Court

5th April 2022
9781529356014
£14.99
Hardback

© Aamina Ahmad, 2022

Prologue

Lahore, February 1943

It was said, or so he had been told: Fatima, beloved daughter of the Prophet, had not felt the heat of the fire as she stirred a pot of simmering halva with her hand. She didn't feel the burning sugar climbing her arm, darkening to the color of her skin, such was her grief. He didn't know the rest of the story. No one had remembered to tell him what sorrow had made Fatima more powerful than the fire, but he thought of her when his mother held up her hand to stop the men who came for him.

She pushed him through the doorway behind her and called up to his sister, who knew exactly what to do. Rozina pulled him up the steep staircase to the roof. Rozina let go of his hand to jump across the narrow gap between their roof and their neighbor's. The terraces stretched behind her into the distance. Then she turned to him: *Jump, jump,* she said. How many times had he watched his sister and her friends hop from roof to roof, till they disappeared? He wasn't sure he could do it, he was only five years old. Rozina made it look so easy but he struggled to keep up with her—she was stronger, faster, always faster than him. *Don't look down, just step across*, she said. She held out her hand. Down below he heard his mother screeching.

A crowd of women had gathered around her. Others leaned over their balconies, they yelled at the men to leave her alone, they called out to God because God sees everything and there had to come a time, his mother always said that God would give you what you needed, if you just kept asking. Voices rose around him, others fell away: *God hears you*, sister. *God hears you.*

His mother looked up; she was searching for him. The strangers looked up, too. He heard them push open the door below. *Jump, jump!* Rozina said. *Go on, Baba, go on*, a voice called from a terrace somewhere. The terraces, the balconies, were dotted with

people now. The women had abandoned their washing, the boys their kites, the girls climbed on to their charpoys for a better view. Some stared, but mostly they shouted, their hands beckoning to him: *Jump, jump, they're coming*. Their voices were sharp in the cold air. Rozina held out her hand: *Faraz! Now, now!* And he thought of the amulets that decorated the whole of the Mohalla, its walls and shops and doorways, delicate, silver hands; Fatima's hand. A hand that feared nothing. Not even fire. *Take it*, Rozina said. And so he did. The boys whistled and the women praised God, their fingers pointing to the sky, as Rozina dragged him from roof to roof, and the men who had come for him could do nothing but watch because the whole of the Mohalla had come out to protect him, and nothing was bigger than the Mohalla.

Six months later, they came back, the same men. And this time his mother invited them in and gave them tea, and then told him to sit with them. The men didn't say much, but when they got up to leave, she told him he had to go with them, that he would be back soon. It didn't seem possible that his amma would lie to him, that she would not want him back, so he let one of the men carry him downstairs to the tonga waiting around the corner. This time, no one came out to watch. An old woman stared at them from a balcony but she said nothing. He smelled smoke and iron in the air, and the musky scent of the man who held him. He waited for his mother and his sister, who had followed them downstairs, to wave good-bye, but they didn't. His mother went back inside the kotha and called for Rozina to follow her. She didn't watch as he disappeared around the corner. He knew then they would not bring him back, just as he knew his amma's sorrow had not made her powerful.

It had not, he realized, made her remarkable in any way at all.

One

Lahore, 8th November 1968

Faraz stared into the fog, sensing the movement of men, their animals. As the mist shifted and stretched, he glimpsed only fragments: the horns of a bull, the eyes of shawled men on a street corner, the blue flicker of gas cookers. But he heard everything. The whine of the wooden carts, the strike of a match, the snuffling of beasts.

He wasn't sure where he and his men were. They had been led by the officers from Anarkali Police Station through winding streets and now they were somewhere near Mochi Gate, one of the twelve doorways to the walled city, but that was all he knew. The sound of the riot was distant, like the static of radio. The street vendors who'd lingered longer than they should have were nervous now; they dropped their wares as they packed up their things, clipped their animals and their apprentices about the ears, berating them for being too slow. He sensed the nerves of his officers, too, as they lined up next to him. He was jittery himself. This wasn't their beat; he and his men were just reinforcements driven in from Ichra, a place known only for its bazaar crammed with cheap goods, far from the elegance of Mall Road, from Lahore's gardens and the walled city's alleys.

"Closer," he said to the men on either side of him and so they pressed in, their shoulders touching his. They could not afford to get separated or lost. He felt the men lined up behind him pushing. They were panting; the air, the city was panting. Or perhaps it was him, perhaps he was panting. He couldn't see much so he tried to still himself to hear better. The trouble-makers couldn't be far; they had gathered just outside Mochi Gate to wait for Bhutto, who was just as impatient for battle with President Ayub as they were, who was, they said, bringing a revolution with him. They didn't know police orders were to stop Bhutto from getting to Lahore, but it didn't matter. Bhutto or no Bhutto, everyone knew there would be trouble. The gardens could only be a few hundred yards away but just now he couldn't hear them, couldn't hear anything anymore. Closer, he thought, and his men pressed in again, though he had not spoken out loud. He was still listening when a minute later, or perhaps just seconds later, a dog trotted out of the fog. It looked around, tongue hanging out in the cool air. It took a few steps one way, then the other, skittish, sensing danger. Thick black letters had been painted on the dog's brown fur: ayub, they spelled. The officer next to Faraz gasped, incredulous at this smear on the president's good name. A rifle somewhere in the line was cocked, an officer poised to shoot, to obliterate this insult, but before that could happen, the air cleared and there they finally were: the rioters.

He squinted. They were boys—just boys. They waved their arms, they chanted; he saw their mouths, their white teeth in the dim light. They took a step toward the lines of armed police but then stopped, uncertain. Faraz waited, willed the boys to disappear back into the fog. But a moment later the ground shook. The boys barreled toward him, his men. And because he was surprised, he was late with the order to charge, and later he would wonder if he actually said it at all. Someone said it, or he did, or no one did, but their bodies knew what to do, or did what they had to, and they charged; a roar, and he was inside it.

When he brought down the lathi the first time, he hit air, then the ground. The second time he heard a crack. Maybe a shoulder, a skull; bone.

The clink of a tear gas can as it rolled on the ground. A hiss. The smoke caught in his throat, his nostrils, his eyes stung with it. He brought down his lathi again and again. His eyes were closed but streaming, the only sound his breath. When he paused, he realized he was exhausted, as if he had been doing this forever. The line of officers was gone. His men were scattered, some tearing after the boys, others scrambling from them. Plumes of white smoke hung in the air. The street emptied, the noise of the riot became a hum somewhere else—everything slowed—and the thought flickered, like an unexpected memory: What is this for again?

That was when they slammed into him. He fell forward, bodies on top of his. But these boys were light. Their thin arms circled his waist, his chest; they clambered on him like children in play. He shook them off and they landed on their backs. There were two of them. One scrambled to his feet and ran. The other boy lay there, breath gone. His eyes were closed— he was playing dead—but Faraz pulled him up and the boy opened his eyes. Faraz didn't think about how fragile the bones in a face are, how he might feel them with the pads of his fingertips if he pressed hard. He thought instead about how he didn't want to be here, that he must get back to Ichra, to the safety of its empty streets. He yanked the boy closer and brought his fist down on the boy's face, again and again. There was relief in the way the boy's face opened up to him, its contours, its ridges caving in so easily as if he wanted nothing more than this, as if he were being freed.

The boy gasped, heaved, before slumping from Faraz's arms to the ground.

Then, the sound of a cry. Behind him, a girl in a doorway was squatting on the floor, a baby in her arms. She shushed the baby, squeezed him to her chest. Faraz took a step toward her, to tell her to get inside, get back where it was safe, but he couldn't speak. He was all breath. She didn't move. He lifted up the boy and dragged him to the doorway. He sat on the steps and held him. He gestured to the girl to go. She disappeared for a moment but then came back down the stairs with a cloth and handed it to him. He held the rag to the boy's broken face and then leaned down over him, his ear to the boy's mouth, listening for a sound.

Photograph © Prudence Upton

HERE GOES NOTHING

Steve Toltz

Publicist: Louise Court

3rd May 2022
9781529371574
£18.99
Hardback

© Steve Toltz, 2022

Nobody was ever thinking about me.

Now that I'm dead, I dwell on this kind of thing a lot: how I often made life choices to avoid the disapproval of those who hadn't even noticed me standing there; how I longed to be liked by the very people I disliked in case finding me objectionable was contagious and would spread throughout the general population; how—and here's the sad truth—if all my reversals of fortune had been private, I'd have been mostly fine with them.

That's not all I lament; why hadn't I see more of our world? Why did I never skydive or sexually experiment? Why exactly was I so uninterested in touching a dick? So what if I was heterosexual? Don't most vegetarians eat fish? And why was I so convinced that every supernatural belief was just an embarrassing throwback to the pre-scientific age? I had my irrational fears, of course: of mannequins and steep slopes and being stared at, but never of the dark, of the dead, or any kind of afterlife. To me, Heaven was a childish dream, Purgatory an obvious metaphor, Hell credible only on earth, and the very notion of an immortal soul was only a way to avoid facing our immanent trip to Nowhere.

It's humiliating how wrong you can be.

1

The beginning of the end—

Huge iron-grey cloud banks lay motionless above our little house, the dawn skies fading. The finger of a short nervous stranger in a flannel shirt lingered on the doorbell.

This was arguably the most significant moment of my life.

I wasn't there.

My side of the bed was cold and empty. Gracie woke afraid and irritated because I hadn't come home again. Staggering off her bed, she threw on her robe and clomped down the stairs. She flung open the front door: the short, balding man on the stoop

was in his late sixties, owlish with thick eyebrows, his forehead shiny where the hairline receded.

'Sorry to bother you, miss,' he said, 'My name is Owen Fogel, and you don't know me.'

'I *know* I don't know you,' Gracie said, annoyed. 'You don't think I know who I don't know?'

'I don't know.'

'What do you want, my money or my time?'

'I grew up in this house. Forty years ago.'

'My time, then.'

'Mind if I come in?'

'Did you leave something here?'

He couldn't tell if she was joking. 'I'm just wondering if I could come in and look around, you know, for old time's sake.'

Old time's sake? Gracie couldn't see how that expression related to a stranger demanding access to her private home.

'Haven't you ever gone somewhere,' he said, 'just to get a sense of where you came from?'

'Nope.'

'You never went back to an old school or an old job or the place where you lost your virginity?'

'I lost my virginity in the back of a bus.'

'I retract my example.'

Gracie gazed across the quiet street, then back to the blushing stranger now smiling with his tight mouth. 'Visiting the past because you're nostalgic is like drinking sea water when you're dying of thirst. It'll only make you thirstier. And it's gross. Why would you do it in front of a complete stranger?' she asked.

'It's a long story and I'd rather not tell it on the front steps.'

'Oh well. Next time you'll remember to cut it short.'

Gracie heaved the door shut. Fuck that guy. What an odious intrusion. She eyed the couch, lusting for sleep.

The doorbell rang again.

Through the peephole, the man's desolate figure was sulking in the patchy sunlight, his finger jabbing the doorbell insistently. Gracie grew frightened.

'I'm calling the police!'

'I'm dying.'

'What?'

'You heard me.'

Now he crept forward a little. 'I'm sorry to be intruding,' he said through the door. 'And I'm sorry that pretty soon I won't be bothering anybody ever again. Most of all I'm sorry that my *dying wish* is to come and look around this stupid house and remember my mother and father.'

Gracie opened the door and steadily regarded the visitor; his body may have fallen on hard times, but he looked robust enough to survive the morning. 'I don't like you looking at me like you've come to collect a debt,' she said, pressing her lips together, 'but you can come in.'

'Should I take off my shoes?'

'Don't bother. You won't be staying long.'

Photograph © Darren Wheeler

TIEPOLO BLUE

James Cahill

Publicist: Louise Court

9th June 2022
9781529369397
£16.99
Hardback

© James Cahill, 2022

It is late September – and a new term. Don Lamb has spent the afternoon in Jesus College library, reading letters from the eighteenth century. It has been raining – the air is still damp – but as he cycles back to Peterhouse, the sun comes out and catches the world off guard. The paths and trees of Christ's Pieces look naked in its glare. The houses across the park glow like bronze.

It is one of those moments when summer and autumn creep into one another, each uncertain of its territory. The breeze is mild, like liquid, and the trees – still in full leaf – quiver and bristle. Slowing to a stop, Don screws up his eyes. The sky is breaking. A rush of exhilaration passes over him, mixed with sadness. It's inexplicable. He knows what the term will bring, his life isn't chequered by surprises or excitements, and yet – he can't explain the feeling.

There is a smell of wet nature in the air – a leafy, muddy, mulchy aroma, underscored by something dank. He pedals along the path – slowly, like a man less busy than himself – crossing islands of shadow. Cambridge is still quiet from the long summer break, but students are beginning to return. Two of them are suddenly in his way: young men absorbed in animated talk, walking towards him, their faces enlarged by mirth. Their words reach him as blunt fragments of sound. With a swivel of his handlebars, he veers off the path.

The change of course sends him straight into a stone bird bath, hitting it hard with his knee. Don slides off his bike and grips his leg; the pain subsides and leaves him in a tranquil stupor. Rainwater has risen to the rim of the basin, and the clouds overhead are visible through a debris of leaves, petals and insects – dead and living – on the surface of the little pool. A cigarette butt floats in the confetti. The edge of his face is there too in the water, a slice of brow and cheekbone and one dark eye.

A sign at the end of the park marks the boundary of Christ's Pieces. It's a strange name, as if

the son of God lay dismembered beneath university land. Steering the bike around a coil of dog shit, he kicks one leg across the saddle and cycles past the bus station, into the benign heart of Cambridge.

The sunlight is retreating as he turns into the gate of Peterhouse. Beyond the porter's lodge, in the middle of the front court, is something odd – a pile of rubbish on the lawn. It looks as if a skip has been emptied.

Affecting indifference, he asks the porter when it will be cleared away.

'Not for some time, Professor Lamb.'

The porter's smile makes Don reluctant to ask more. Amid the latticework of pigeonholes, oak-walled inlets stuffed with envelopes and newspapers, fat wads of paper and stray sheets, his own niche (*Professor D. Lamb*) is empty.

The pile of rubbish is more than it seemed. The skeleton of a bed lies at the centre of the grass – an iron frame packed with coil springs. It is propped up at one end by a mound of empty liquor bottles, crushed beer cans and snarled-up clothes. On the grass beneath is an industrial lamp that rotates with slow, robotic gyrations. A black cable snakes across the lawn and disappears underneath a door at the perimeter of Old Court.

There is a sign near the path.

Angela Cannon

SICK BED

Don looks back with fascination at the objects. Intermittently, the lamp shines through the wire innards of the bed with a blinding flash and spidery shadows race over the quadrangle.

Someone – the thought comes to him as he stands there – might see him. Colleagues might be watching from the windows of Old Court – watching this very second, squinting to register the verdict of the art historian. And so he assumes a look of cool disdain. The lamp changes angle and blazes through the pile of bottles, illuminating their glass surfaces – green, brown, the electric blue of a spent litre of Bombay Sapphire. The colours induce a fit of blinking.

Walking around the court to the staircase that leads to his rooms, he resists the temptation

to look back. But the view from the window of his study allows him another glance at the junk on the grass below, so peculiarly arranged. It's more contrived than a heap of refuse. More knowing. He tugs the curtains closed, and the thin fabric pulses with an alien glare. Lighting a cigarette, he looks around him, as if to reassure himself that the rest of his surroundings are unchanged – just as they have ever been.

The tautology of his name has always pleased him. Donnish, serious, dignified – that is how his life has been. He came to Cambridge aged seventeen, and over the years his consciousness has fused, like ivy eating into stone, with the town. He turned forty-three this summer. Sometimes the span of time seems like nothing. His memories are entwined with the foliage of Peterhouse, with the gardens and meadows and surreptitious river. His thoughts are the mirror image of Cambridge's unchanging vistas, his mind sustained by the rituals of academic life.

His rooms are two of the oldest in the college. The larger room, his study, contains his collection of prints and drawings, most of them by masters of the Rococo – a modest collection, modestly arranged. In the centre of the room is a scale model of the Pantheon, carved from cork and mounted on an oak console. Between the windows, resting on two brass hooks, is a small ornamental sword. All around the walls, books fill the shelves. On his desk is a framed photograph of a greyhound, black and white and fading.

In one corner is a column of cardboard boxes, each filled with paper and labelled meticulously in marker pen – *Palazzo Sandi*, *Residenz Würzburg*, *Santa Maria del Rosario*: the divisions of his private archive. From the age of seventeen, Don has collected reproductions of the frescoes of Giambattista Tiepolo – hundreds of postcards, prints and pages from books.

Tiepolo is his enduring love. All this time he has been readying himself to write a book – *the* book – on that genius of eighteenth-century Venice: the last of the Old Masters, the first of the moderns. Other art historians have described Tiepolo as a painter of sweetness and light, a divine choreographer. Not Don. With every picture he keeps, the ghost of the artist beckons him a little further, demanding the scholarly treatment that only Don

can give. 'No more sweetness and light,' he hears Tiepolo say. 'Show them how *classical* I am.' The book is still in its earliest stages, a swirling suspension of ideas. The task will be difficult – the most complex yet.

The adjoining room, Don's bedroom, is bare apart from a single bed, a sink and a cracked mirror.

Changing his leather shoes for slippers, he turns on the radio to hear a succession of pips:

'And now the news at six o'clock. There is no end in sight to the war in the Balkans – Sarajevo remains under siege. The Prime Minister, John Major, faces fresh allegations of sleaze within his government. Madonna, queen of pop—'

He switches it off. There is nothing of interest in the day's news.

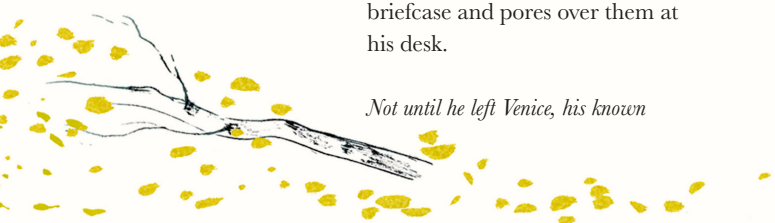
There is a scent of antique paper on his fingers. Tiepolo's correspondence from Milan – the cache of letters he was reading earlier – steals back to him. He removes his notes from his briefcase and pores over them at his desk.

Not until he left Venice, his known universe, did life begin.

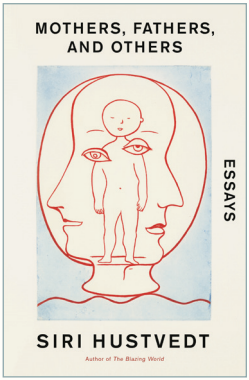
Milan – Mediolanum to the ancients – saw the blossoming of Tiepolo's early maturity. It took a classical city to raise him to greatness.

Hours pass and he forgets to go down to dinner. His mind is closed to the distant clatter and drone from the Hall, interrupted just once by the saying of grace; it fizzes with the small quandaries of the 1730s.

Late in the evening, he reads through his script for the Fitzwilliam Lecture. It is an early teaser of his book on Tiepolo. He tries sections out loud. There is one passage, a description of the *Allegory of the Power of Eloquence*, which he plans to deliver from memory. He will step away from the lectern, relinquish his notes – as if the words have come to him in a rush of inspiration. Standing in front of the bedroom mirror, lit from behind by the glow of his study, he delivers the phrases perfectly, gracing his diction with careful motions of the hands – a single raised finger. He repeats the section, over and over, until half the night has passed.



NON-FICTION



2nd December 2021
9781529376647
£20.00
Hardback

© Siri Hustvedt, 2021

Mothers, Fathers, and Others

New Essays

Siri Hustvedt

Publicist: Louise Court

Reading During the Plague

Reading is an intimate encounter that every person can have during a pandemic. No social distance is required. In our current world of restricted movement, the book is a geography where complete freedom remains possible. But *what* a person reads during a pandemic, it seems to me, has no moral quality. The moral decision has already been made. Protect yourself to protect others. Stay put if you can. But no one is obliged to steep herself in the science of virology or the earth's complex ecosystems or novels about the plague or poems about death and dying. They are all possible choices—as is a turn to comedy, a form distinguished by its ending: It all works out. The fairy tale is another buoyant genre. The hero or heroine is tested sorely, but in the end, he or she is rewarded with happiness. And fairy tales have magic. The laws of nature are overturned and replaced by human desires. Human beings often believe their wishes will come true, and they often do so without reason. Reading offers a safe road to a variety of vicarious gratifications.

The question is: If you are well and at home and have enough to eat and can concentrate on a book, do you read toward or away from your fear? Reading for comfort and escape is readily explicable. But why read about what you fear? Since Aristotle used the word *catharsis* in his *Poetics* without explaining exactly what he meant, philosophers have puzzled over the undeniable fact that people take a weird pleasure from art that describes terrible events. Why do we enjoy weeping over the sorrows of characters in books? Why do gruesome stories of war, murder, and even uncontrollable contagions seem to relieve some of the pressure and anxiety of this real moment when the authorities scramble to find room for the growing number of corpses in New York City?

Why bother with art, after all? Why not consume every factual tidbit available about the virus and its spread, the best mask

to wear, or how to clean your groceries to avoid contamination? Isn't this the age of facts versus fakery? What could fiction with its imaginary ramblings possibly give anyone at such a time, except an escape into the unreal? "Just the facts, ma'am" has become a mantra in an age of lies, the lifebuoy to which the noble opposition clings to keep from going under. When a statement from on high, "We have it totally under control," actually means "We have no control over it whatsoever," public outrage is entirely reasonable, but facts, important as they are, remain limited and puny things that must be interpreted. For example, what does a brand-new fact (or possible fact)—more men are dying of coronavirus than women—actually mean? It could mean the data is unreliable and incomplete. It might be related to modulating genes on the X chromosome that affect the immune system. Maybe the female double X is somehow protective. It could be related to the fact that men have more untreated health conditions than women because they see doctors less often—a sociological reality that makes them more vulnerable. Macho stoicism becomes risk factor.

One can easily imagine a novelist taking this possible fact and pushing it across a limit—only men are vulnerable to a new plague that has taken over the globe, a scourge that leaves the XY demented, frail, or dead. The very survival of the species is threatened. The startling numbers of sick and dying men have turned the age-old hierarchy upside down. All authority now lies with the clear heads and strong hands of those who had long been dubbed "the weaker sex." From a scientific point of view, the narrative is highly dubious. Despite much advertising to the contrary, male and female physiologies are more the same than different. And yet, as far as I can tell, almost every novel or story that somehow relates to disease epidemics has been popping up on "what to read during the virus" lists. Does the fact that these exist testify to something more than filling up culture pages or screens with the timely and relevant?

In a country that denigrates the humanities and champions STEM fields, a country that cuts budgets for all the arts, a country in which poetry, the novel, and the arts in general are regarded as mostly fluffy, imaginary stuff for women (who are the principal consumers of all art), I have wondered why at this moment articles about imaginative fiction

have been appearing all over the place. A number of these writers are not literary people, but they have taken to promoting the wisdom of the imaginary. Camus's *The Plague* is selling well. In France, it is topping bestseller charts. Katherine Anne Porter's *Pale Horse/Pale Rider*, which takes place during the 1918 flu pandemic, has been receiving renewed attention. I read it again. Its delirium passages are extraordinary. Although I haven't read anyone who has been explicit about why some people turn to literature during a crisis, I suspect that implicit in these literary resurrections is an understanding that "the news" and "facts" are impersonal, and even when they are advertised as *personal*, they fill a slot, the "heartwarming story," for example—half a minute on an adorable toddler waving through the glass at Grandpa, or a noble nurse on "the front lines," or the sweet young woman who carries groceries for the old lady next door. They are intended as a momentary lift for the reader or viewer "at home." The emotional manipulation is calculated. When it is good, literature moves the personal into other territory altogether and in the process becomes collective.

There are countless novelists who manipulate readers as mercilessly as television producers. They fulfill the expectations of their readers and their books sell like hotcakes. They serve an important purpose in the culture, just as comfort food does. In my own life, I have found that certain detective novels slide through me like water, and if I stumble across one I have already read, I do not remember it until late in the game, sometimes not at all. This kind of reading is like eating chocolate in bed. I am all for it. And yet, it may be that during moments when death is close and perhaps imminent, at least some readers crave an experience that is beyond what they expect, beyond the endlessly repeated platitudes on radio and TV and the Internet. My own tolerance for breathless reports on the virus has plummeted. I turn them off now.

At the last dinner party I attended, on March 7, Boccaccio's *Decameron* (1350–1353) came up. I found myself thinking about the book again. Memorable fragments returned to my mind—the randy nuns who take turns with the supposedly deaf and dumb gardener until they exhaust him completely, the knight who tells such a bad story to a lady that her heart thumps

and she begins to sweat, and the doctor who while trying to diagnose the illness of a young man notices that every time a young woman enters the room, his patient's pulse quickens. The mystery is solved. Lovesickness.

Although I remembered that the prologue was about the Black Death, I had forgotten the details. Boccaccio gives a vivid description of "the deadly pestilence" wending its way through Florence. The narrator describes the appleand egg-sized tumors that grow in the groins and armpits of the afflicted, the contagion's spread from person-to-person contact but also from touching infected garments. I was particularly fascinated by the various responses to the plague, all of which can be seen in New York City during the present pandemic. There are those who withdraw to live "a separate and secluded life" of imagined safety, others who throw themselves into mad revelry and flout all authority, and a third, more moderate group that tries to be sensible, neither terrified nor negligent. Everyone is vulnerable. The corpses pile up, and the city becomes a "sepulcher." My reading felt cathartic.

The seven women and three men who flee the plague for the countryside in *The Decameron* tell one another stories to pass the time while the death germ rages through the city. They tell one another stories of wit and agency and passion. They are tragic and comic. They are stories about our vulnerable erotic and mortal bodies, about being alive but also knowing we will die. They are about the flights our imaginations take—for better and for worse. They are stories for now.

Photograph © Toby Shaw

East Side Voices

Essays celebrating East and Southeast Asian identity in Britain

Edited by Helena Lee

Publicist: Maria Garbutt-Lucero

20th January 2022
9781529344479
£14.99
Hardback

© Helena Lee, 2022

Introduction

I was rudely shaken out of my second maternity leave by Quentin Tarantino. It was the summer of 2019, and we were having a rare night out, watching the much-lauded film *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood*. Halfway through, we were confronted with the Cliff Booth versus Bruce Lee showdown in which Brad Pitt gets in a tussle with Mike Moh, who stars as the legendary martial artist but depicts him spouting philosophical nonsense, using dodgy noises and outdated kung fu tropes. Bruce Lee's ultimate humiliation – as a fighter at the top of his game unable to conquer this middle-aged white guy (who is, to be fair, played by Brad Pitt, so needs no validation) – sent the cinema around me wild. For them, this was by far the funniest part of the movie.

I was astounded. This was racial stereotyping; a racism that was completely unacknowledged by anyone around me. And yet I felt powerless to counter it. The whole film was intended as a reverential ode to the Hollywood greats, yet as part of that, Bruce Lee, the only non-white historical figure, was taken down. We hardly ever see an East or Southeast Asian face on screen, and when we do, they are there to serve as an object of mockery.

I began thinking about other depictions of Asians. There was the strange girl in the film *Pitch Perfect*, who mumbles inarticulately and is clearly constructed to be laughed at. I struggled to remember characters of East or Southeast Asian heritage in domestic dramas. And then there was the time when the footballer Diego Maradona was caught on camera accepting praise from a group of Korean fans, but when he turned his back, pulled the sides of his eyes with his hands. The pundits on *Match of the Day* shrugged a little uncomfortably, and the world's media laughed it off.

It was as though I wasn't within my rights to be outraged by any of this, because if I was, it wouldn't be acknowledged.

Traditional campaigning media didn't seem to pick up the causes for East and Southeast Asians in Britain. People with faces like mine weren't being cast in lead roles for films or television series. If we were cast at all, then it would be for parts that required a Chinese accent, or was linked to a crime syndicate or was a typical Asian computer nerd – we seemed only qualified to act in the role of a racialised 'other'. The three-dimensional characters that reflected my own experience of growing up in the suburbs, of everyday family life, were scarce indeed.

Dr Diana Yeh articulated it well in her 2018 paper, in which she wrote: '"British Chinese" [a term ascribed to those perceived to fall into the category "Chinese"] cultural practices can, to cite Salman Rushdie (1988), be "visible but unseen", present in the social and cultural fabric but rendered invisible within the social and cultural imagination.'[1] Why weren't we considered for kitchen-sink dramas, helming documentaries, helping set the news agenda? If we weren't being represented in any meaningful way in mainstream media, that meant there was still an otherness to seeing an Asian face on screen. It was as though British East and Southeast Asians were an anonymous part of British culture. To me, it explained this empathy gap. Our stories weren't seen as valid enough to be told or reported on, and so we've long been excluded from the cultural canon. I certainly didn't want my children growing up in a world that did not see, acknowledge or validate them.

And so, in February 2020, East Side Voices was born. I wanted it to be a platform that aimed to change this outdated cultural narrative and combat these damaging stereotypes by amplifying the voices of those with East and Southeast Asian heritage who are living and shaping society here in Britain. And though the platform is open to everyone, I hoped to reach people who could help change the status quo – casting agents, literary agents, writers, journalists, directors; the people who frame the way we look at the world through media. We were to meet once a month at a cultural salon, hearing from diasporic Asians with tales to tell. I thought it was important to glimpse into the experience of the diaspora as they are the link between all our cultures – occupying this rare space where they understand what it is to be British, but are also a bridge to ways of life we may be less

familiar with. They help equip people with the vocabulary to talk about the complexities, richness and diversity of Asian identity in Britain. For that, we need good storytellers; stories are what help connect us.

East Side Voices launched with two events at the Standard Hotel in London, the first with the acclaimed novelists Sharlene Teo and Rowan Hisayo Buchanan, and the second with the fashion designer Rejina Pyo, each attended by everyone from national newspaper and magazine editors, film producers, publicists and photographers, to doctors and musicians, who listened, engaged, and talked with one another. When the opportunity to create this book appeared, it was the natural next step, and I couldn't wait to collect these powerful insights from talented writers from around the country into one place.

But then, the global pandemic swept in and destabilised the world. China, in particular, was spoken about with a lexicon of fear and derogatory tones. The then-US president Donald Trump referred to the 'China virus' and 'kung flu', aggravating the prejudice against the East and Southeast Asian diaspora that had always been there. In the UK, those of Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds were disproportionately affected; to take one example, Filipinos make up the largest ethnic group of nurses in the NHS, and in May 2020, they were the single largest nationality to die from Covid-19. Police estimates suggest there was a threefold increase in racially-motivated hate crimes in London towards those of East and Southeast Asian heritage in the spring of 2020 compared with the same period the year before. The following October, when Parliament held its first-ever debate on racism experienced by the ESEA community, not one Conservative MP or government minister was present.

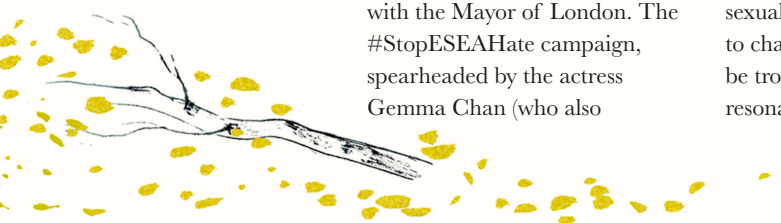
The pandemic also revealed that the media hardly considered these injustices important, and at times even contributed to the prejudice. Thirty-three per cent of images used by media outlets in the UK to report on Covid-19 featured Asian people, propounding the idea that the virus was specifically an Asian problem despite afflicting the whole world.

In March 2021, there was a mass shooting in which eight people were murdered at three spa and massage parlours in Atlanta. Six of the victims were Asian

women, showing the devastating and tangible effects to cultural non-representation and racialised objectification. All the Asians I knew were deeply affected by this, but there wasn't much in the news that gave credence to our pain. It was against this backdrop that The *Sunday Times* ran a front-page story paying tribute to Prince Philip that referred to him as 'an often crochety figure, offending people with gaffes about slitty eyes, even if secretly we rather enjoyed them', thus not just offending the East and Southeast Asian communities at a time when they were considerably shaken, but also their own readers by suggesting they were racist. Who'd have thought we'd be so unprogressive and ignorant in the twenty-first century?

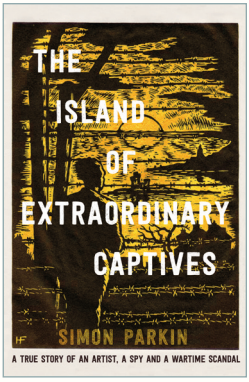
The mission of the book has therefore evolved from inspiring empathy and raising our voices through the magic of stories, to also breaking the cycle of systemic non-representation. There has been a groundswell of positive movement in the past few months. Even now, as I write, East Side Voices is starting work with the Commission for Diversity in the Public Realm with the Mayor of London. The #StopESEAHate campaign, spearheaded by the actress Gemma Chan (who also contributes to this collection), has launched, creating a centre of gravity for individuals, communities, allies, grassroots movements and pressure groups such as Besea.n and End the Virus of Racism, that are already doing such good work.

Personally, I feel so privileged to have spent this last year immersed in the worlds of these seventeen brilliant and unique storytellers, to foster a spirit of community and to draw them together for this book. Through essays, poems and memoir, they explore themes of identity, connection, disconnection, food, rejection, relationships, history, art, love . . . there's a universality to their experiences, even if the stories themselves are beautifully unique. We are taken onto hospital battle grounds, discover the lasting effects when a Caucasian relative deliberately whitens skin tone in a portrait, and uncover the culture of television and film casting for Asians. We ask what it's like to be East and Southeast Asian in Britain through the lens of the pandemic, and interrogate the way Asian women are 'seen' or rather *not* seen, in being conflated with other races, erased and sexualised. I want these stories to challenge your expectations, be troubling, be illuminating, resonate. I want them to sit



with you for a long time, be recurrently thought about and shift world-views.

The anthology is by no means meant to be exhaustive – I'm aware that there are ethnicities and subjects that I've not been able to include. There are many more experiences that need to be brought to light, and stories that need to be told. But my hope is that this book is the beginning of a conversation that will only grow bigger, and will enrich your lives as much as it has so far mine.



3rd February 2022
9781529347227
£20.00
Hardback

© Simon Parkin, 2022

THE ISLAND OF EXTRAORDINARY CAPTIVES

A True Story of an Artist, a Spy and a Wartime Scandal

Simon Parkin

Publicist: Louise Court

Barbed Wire Matinee

As the day began to gather itself in, Peter Fleischmann watched the musician clamber onto the grand piano's rostrum on the lawned square. Before he fled Berlin, the eighteen-year-old orphan had buried pieces of silverware in the ground on the outskirts of the city; his only other valuables, a collection of rare stamps, had been taken from him by a Nazi inspector on the train that brisked him out of Germany. Peter was destitute. He could not normally have afforded a ticket to a performance by a renowned pianist, a favourite of kings and presidents.

Clear warm air, immense blue skies: the day had been one of the fairest of the century, a shimmering Saturday that evoked the languishing summers of childhood. So fine, in fact, that this was the day Germany chose to send their planes to bomb London for the first time, a blitz that would continue for the next eight months. Still, here on the misted Isle of Man, hundreds of miles from England's capital city, the audience would have turned out whatever the weather. There was little else to do here, in the middle of the Irish Sea.

Behind the pianist Peter saw a backdrop of neat Edwardian boarding houses. The buildings appeared unremarkable: hotels for middle-class holidaymakers who wanted the frisson of overseas tourism without the effort and expense. Closer inspection revealed unlikely details. Each window was covered in dark polymer film. The material, used as a makeshift solution after a German U-boat had sunk the ship carrying blackout supplies to the island, peeled the island of extraordinary captives away when sliced with a razor blade. A fashion for silhouette carvings, cut onto the windows, had spread through the camp: zoo animals, unicorns, characters from Greek myth adorned the ground-floor windows. At night, and viewed from street-side, the pictures glowed with the light of the air-raid-safe, brothel-red light-bulbs

inside, a novel backdrop for the celebrated pianist.

In front of the piano, on a crescent of wooden chairs, sat a line of British army officers, laughing and smoking next to their wives. Beyond them, beneath the darting midges, sat hundreds of men, mostly refugees, arranged in untidy rows on the grass. From the open windows of the surrounding houses, their bedrooms full of dusk, other men perched and leaned, the glow of their cigarette ends fireflies in the dying light. Peter could turn to see Douglas harbour behind him, where boats pottered and chugged, trailing wakes on the tinselled sea. Somewhere above the frequency of conversation, it was possible to hear the distant waves frothing on the shingle, like a broom sweeping glass from a shattered shop window.

A palisade of barbed wire separated and barred the men from the harbour, a perimeter that marked the boundary of what was officially known as 'P camp', or, to the men, simply, 'Hutchinson'. Outside the wire fence, a group of locals had gathered. They peered in, hoping to glimpse and understand what was happening, the only obvious clues that tonight's was a captive audience.

Eight weeks earlier, on Saturday 13 July 1940, Captain Hubert Daniel, a kindly, keen-drinking forty-eight-year-old army officer, had declared the camp open. Hutchinson was the seventh of ten internment camps to open on the Isle of Man, an island positioned sufficiently far from the neighbouring coasts to be ideally suited for imprisonment. The island's boat-owning residents had been instructed to stow the oars and remove the spark-plugs from their vessels' engines at night. Even if an escapee were to board a suitable craft, the journey to the mainland was perilous. If you were here, you were here for good.

Hutchinson was currently home to around twelve hundred prisoners, predominantly refugees from Nazi Germany who had been living peacefully in Britain at the time of their arrest. In recent months rumours abounded that a Fifth Column – a recent neologism to Britain, now universally understood to refer to traitors living within their country of asylum – had assisted the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands. Newspapers had stoked national paranoia with claims that a similar network of spies lurked in Britain.

Even before war's outbreak, Scotland Yard, working in conjunction with MI5, the British domestic intelligence service, had been deluged with tip-offs about suspicious refugees and foreigners. The police detained one man when investigators found an entry in his diary that read: 'Exchange British Queen for Italian Queen'. The detective assumed he had exposed a fascist plot against the crown. In fact, the man was a beekeeper, planning to overthrow only the tiny monarch that ruled his hive.

The police were first alerted to one of Hutchinson camp's internees, a young art historian Dr Klaus Hinrichsen, and his fiancée, Greta, when a neighbour reported hearing the young couple's lovemaking. The distrustful neighbour suspected the rhythmic knocking of the bed might contain a coded message. It was difficult, Klaus pointed out, to prove that one did not understand Morse code.

The recent German occupation of France meant an invasion attempt seemed not only plausible but imminent. Days after he became prime minister, Winston Churchill authorised the arrest of thousands of so-called 'enemy aliens'. In the chaotic round-ups that followed, thousands of Jews who had fled Nazi Germany – including some teenagers like Peter who came via the fêted *Kindertransport* trains – were imprisoned by the same people in whom they had staked their trust, a nightmarish betrayal. The refugees that comprised the majority of tonight's audience had experienced a collective trauma: to be imprisoned by one's liberator is to experience an injustice of chronology.

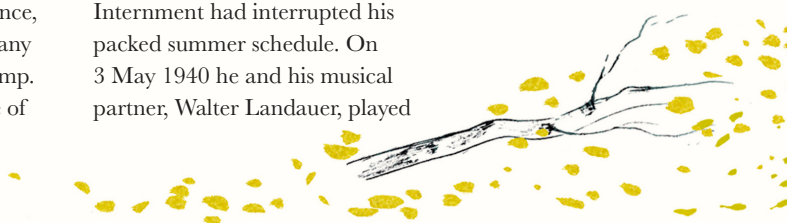
Status and class, those twin, usually indefatigable armaments of privilege, had provided no protection. Oxbridge dons, surgeons, dentists, lawyers and scores of celebrated artists were taken. The police arrested Emil Goldmann, a sixty-seven-year-old professor from the University of Vienna, in the grounds of Eton, Britain's most elite school. At Cambridge University dozens of staff and students were detained in the Guild Hall, including Friedrich Hohenzollern, also known as Prince Frederick of Prussia, a grandson of Queen Victoria.That year's law finals were almost cancelled because one of the interned professors had the exam papers locked in his desk, and had no time to give someone the key. The police came for Peter in the early hours of the morning, without prior warning, a manner of detention

that had reminded him of the Gestapo's moonlit round-ups and the muggy world of fear and distrust from which he had just fled.

In the weeks that followed its opening, Hutchinson had bristled with a creative energy, its inhabitants organising events, much like this evening's, that drew upon the unlikely inmates' considerable talents. Still, no man could quite escape the demoralising fact that the terms 'internee' and 'internment camp' – even 'concentration camp', as Hutchinson and the other island camps were sometimes referred to at the time – were euphemistic: Peter and every other man here were, in every way that mattered, captives, arrested without charge or trial, confined without sentence to a prison camp and forbidden to leave. Regardless of their age or station, geopolitical history, blunt and undiscerning, had visited each man's life. Still, Peter was thrilled to be among this crowd. As the men had been imprisoned because of where they were from, and not for who they were or what they had done, Hutchinson contained a dazzling cross-section of society. It was happenstance, however, that brought so many brilliant achievers to this camp. Together they made up one of history's unlikeliest and most extraordinary prison populations. While there were no tuxedos or ballgowns, no champagne flutes or chandeliers for tonight's show, Peter sat among a constellation of brilliant individuals, luminaries from the worlds of art, fashion, media and academia, an extraordinary audience, even discounting the circumstances.

Peter had, since he was a young boy, aspired to be numbered among the great artists. Events both international and domestic had, at first, conspired against his ambition, his dream to become an artist exploded by exile. Then, the currents of history had carried him into the orbit of his heroes; he shared the camp with a raft of eminent artists, including Kurt Schwitters, the fifty-three-year-old pioneering Dadaist in front of whose 'degenerate' work the failed painter, Adolf Hitler, had sarcastically posed. The artists, in turn, took this skinny, bespectacled outsider into their care.

Since he had arrived at Hutchinson, tonight's performer Marjan Rawicz had been hounded by depression. Internment had interrupted his packed summer schedule. On 3 May 1940 he and his musical partner, Walter Landauer, played



a benefit concert at the London Palladium to raise money for variety artists. Ironically, considering the duo was soon to be arrested on suspicion of being Nazi spies, their performance was broadcast on a radio channel dedicated to the British Armed Forces. Three weeks later, on 23 May, at half-past three in the afternoon, the pair gave a live demonstration of a Welmar grand piano on the second floor of the consummate British luxury department store, Harrods. The police arrested the musicians a few days later, in Blackpool, where they had just begun a run of sell-out performances.

While his world collapsed, habit held. Rawicz was a performer, and performers must perform. His only stipulation had been that tonight's show would be a solo concert, that the programme would be entirely his choice, and that he could use a grand piano – actually, a Steinway. Captain Daniel had pointed out to the musician that the inventory of houses listed eleven pianos already inside the camp.

'Can't you use one of them?' the commandant asked, adding that it might prove difficult to secure official sign-off for a hired grand, considering, well, everything.

Reluctantly, Rawicz agreed. A small crowd trailed the musician as he toured the houses, testing each instrument for its suitability. Rawicz, not one to disregard an audience, had amused his trail of followers with sarcastic quips and condemnations.

'Even a deaf man would feel pain from this one,' Rawicz joked, as he tested one neglected example. When one hanger-on expressed surprise at the shortness of his fingers, Rawicz shot back: 'My friend, I am a pianist, not a gynaecologist.'

The seventh instrument gave the most dramatic performance of all. Under the impact of Rawicz's forceful playing, the piano collapsed. Onlookers soon dismantled the instrument and removed its keys, planks and tangles of wire. A wood-carver, Ernst Müller-Blensdorf, took the mahogany sides. The animal trapper, Johann 'Brick' Neunzer, lion tamer at Burnt Stubb Zoo – later known as Chessington Zoo – pocketed the ivories, hoping to carve them into dentures, while the engineers among the internees collected the wire with which to make electric fires.

Rawicz had made his point. Captain Daniel relented. The camp's maintenance department

wheeled a hired Steinway onto a sturdy rostrum, built for the occasion. A date was set, and the commandant, eager to demonstrate the superiority of his camp, issued invitations to his rival officers on the island.

There was no score to flutter away on the wind when the audience's applause stilled to intermittent coughs and rustles as Rawicz began to play. The pianist had prepared a wide-ranging programme from waltzes to rhapsodies, from the Radetzky March to Bach, from showtunes like 'Smoke Gets in Your Eyes' to a composition of his own, 'Spinning Wheel', each one played from memory. The crowd greeted each piece with enthusiastic applause; transported to the pre-war concert halls of Berlin, Vienna and Prague – a distraction from the precariousness of the situation, the risk of deportation or of imminent Nazi invasion. The evening's performance was, as one audience-member put it, 'unforgettable'.

For the finale, Rawicz had selected two pieces designed to draw a veil of ironic dissonance across the scene. Ignoring classics from the European composers, he opted instead for the sixteenth-century folk tune 'Greensleeves' – a quintessentially English melody – before he segued into a rendition of the British national anthem. Peter and the other internees stood to their feet and sang.

May he defend our laws, And ever give us cause,

To sing with heart and voice, God save the King.

The square resounded with the chorus, sung in various degrees of accented English, a tribute to the country that had offered each man refuge, only to turn against him. Rawicz's pointed choices highlighted the tortuous absurdity of the situation. Here were hundreds of refugees from Nazi oppression, pledging loyalty to the country and allegiance to the king, under whose authority they had been imprisoned, without charge or trial, on suspicion of being Nazi spies. Still, swept up in the moment, few checked to see if any among them had chosen to remain silent.

Photograph © Mel Lewis

EMBROIDERING HER TRUTH

Mary, Queen of Scots and the Language of Power

Clare Hunter

Publicist: Louise Court

17th March 2022
9781529346244
£20.00
Hardback

© Clare Hunter, 2022

Introduction

'One of the most perfect creatures'

The Lake of Menteith, which lies near Stirling in Scotland, is romantically if erroneously claimed to be the only lake in Scotland. I always approach it with a small frisson of discovery because it is ever-changing. A shift of light or seasonal difference can alter its mood dramatically, making it oscillate between glad-filled and ominous, beguiling, and cautionary. From Spring through to late-Autumn fishermen are out on its gloss of water, spooling in trout from their long dark boats like silhouetted puppets in a shadow play.

The lake hugs history within its depths. On its far horizon lies the tree-fringed island of Inchmahome where Augustine monks built a sanctuary nine centuries ago. Eight times a day for four hundred years they prayed for the salvation of our souls and something of their devotion has seeped into the ruined stone of their prayer places – the chapel, chapter house and cloisters – and settled in the soil. For Inchmahome has a pervasive tranquillity that lingers in the air like a blessing. Within its gloom lies the thirteenth century tombstone of Walter Stewart and his wife, ancestors of Mary, Queen of Scots. They lie forever entwined in a stone embrace as a rare memorial to medieval love.

I went to the island once with my 8-year-old son. We trailed our fingers over the rough bark of age-old Spanish chestnut trees: one with a trunk so immense that my son could curl up in its hollow like a tree sprite. The bluebells were out in azure drifts, spread over the sacred ground like prayer mats. And, as Jamie went in search of red squirrels, I sat with our sandwiches near the boxwood bower that Mary, Queen of Scots is said to have planted as a child, trying to catch a whisper of the young queen.

*

I was at primary school when I first heard of Mary, Queen of Scots. Each spring, when the dandelions appeared, we

would hunt them out in the playground and take turns to snap their flowers from their stems. Whoever had possession of the dandelion held it tight below its yellow bloom and administered a forceful flick in the direction of its petals to dislodge and scatter them. As spring turned to summer, those dandelions that had escaped our first wave of destruction, had their now-gossamer seed heads similarly despatched with a lungful of breath. The child who achieved total decapitation was the champion. Such wanton disregard for floral survival was accompanied by the collective shouting of the game's battle cry: '*Mary, Queen of Scots had her head chopped off, her head chopped off, Mary Queen of Scots had her head chopped off on a cold and frosty morning*'. We had no idea who Mary, Queen of Scots was. She was accepted into our litany of imaginary characters who peopled our childhood as readily as Wee Willie Winkie and Skinny Malinky Long Legs. We did not know that that she really had existed or that she once had been our queen.

In those days, at the end of the 1950s, Scotland's history was barely taught in its schools. It was an aside, subsumed into a British narrative where the glory of the Empire and the nature of the Commonwealth were the dominant themes. Scottish children gleaned what fragments of their heritage they could from poetry and songs. from an occasional illustration in an encyclopaedia, or a painting in a museum. Most of what we knew were just names – William Wallace, Robert the Bruce, Bonnie Prince Charlie, David Livingstone – but rarely a story, hardly a history. And it was a past that seemed peopled solely by men. All we knew of Mary was that she had had her head chopped off.

When I was ten years old, however, this gap in our, in my, knowledge was unexpectedly filled. Our tweed-skirted teacher was suddenly taken ill. And into her shoes stepped a temporary trainee in a toss of curls and pretty frocks. For two weeks we experienced a joyous reprieve from the surly sarcasm usually meted out. The trainee announced that we were to abandon rote learning in favour of a creative project that would involve research and design. We were to make a wall collage of the history of Scotland. Most

thrillingly for me, the collage was to be made out of fabric. Already schooled by my mother in basic sewing and rudimentary embroidery, the idea of a crafting a large sewn artwork was exhilarating. We were each allotted a person, place, or event from Scotland's past centuries to study and illustrate in cloth. I was given Mary.

The main source of historical study in the school library lay in the Ladybird Books' *Adventure from History* series. Disappointingly, there was no volume dedicated to Mary but I found her in one devoted to Queen Elizabeth I of England. Being ten, Mary's story read like a fairy tale albeit without a happy ever after. A young and beautiful queen who loses not just one but three husbands and is left defenceless and alone. When I learned of her escape from the clutches of her disloyal nobles, I cheered her on. When I discovered she had been abandoned by her only friend, Elizabeth, I was dismayed. Her end – in imprisonment and execution – was distressing. The illustrations – of a gracious Mary in a sumptuous gown of black and gold greeting her nobility; of a feisty Mary galloping over moorland on a black stallion; and of Mary – still gorgeous in green – surrounded by armed guards, only served to kindle my captivation.

I folded black velvet over a cardboard silhouette of my queen with care and stitched a narrow band of gold tinsel around her hem. I pleated a paper doily into a ruff of pretend lace and made folds of white net to fashion a veil. My mother unearthed some tiny golden beads to adorn Mary's headdress and sacrificed a gold chain to serve as a necklace. When everything was sewn in place Mary, Queen of Scots was stuck down with a liberal dollop of PVA glue, between the heap of dead soldiers slain at the Battle of Flodden in 1513, and a posy of roses and thistles that symbolised the 1603 Union of the Crowns. The finished collage stretched along one whole wall of our classroom. When our normal teacher made her uncelebrated return and reclaimed her draconian rule, we resumed our droned recitations of catechism and multiplication tables. But the collage remained, bearing witness to our creative efforts to reimagine Scotland's past. It encouraged my interest in Scottish history and in Mary. She remained, somehow, in my care.

*

In the histories and biographies of Mary, written during her

lifetime and in the centuries following her death, she is generally cast as just one of the characters in her historical pageant. It is other personalities who drive her narrative. Mary appears neither a catalyst nor a heroine, but a victim of circumstances and her own poor judgement. Her drama lies in loss: of the queen she once was, of the monarch she might have been. Her elusiveness owes much to the bias of her contemporary biographers and historians – exclusively men – who documented and assessed the events of her reign and captivity through a masculine prism, one largely filtered through an oppositional Protestant perspective. At best, they deemed Mary naïve, a hapless ruler who nourished her own downfall through inexperience, royal conceit, and female frailty. But to accept this as the truth is simplistic.

Mary lived in exciting times and reigned in a period of accelerating social, political, cultural, and religious change. She was shaped by the sophisticated culture of the late Renaissance and influenced by those other women rulers – a surprising number of them in the sixteenth century – who exercised power and fostered credibility for female authority. In a world dominated by male ambition they were at the vanguard of a new assertion of female capacity. And they expressed their confidence and agency through alternative media. These were women who registered their intelligence, knowledge, values, and importance through material culture as designers, collectors, consumers, and creators. Whilst staying within the confines of acceptable female culture – fashion, hospitality, diplomacy, needlework, and motherhood – they amplified their influence and repositioned themselves, if not centre stage, then at least as key players in political stagecraft.

Mary, like her English counterpart, Queen Elizabeth I of England, was young, vigorous, and ambitious not only for the nation she ruled over but for the dynasty that formed her, and for herself as queen. She was also, at times, reckless, manipulative and headstrong. While her decisions were purposeful they could also be misguided, their effectiveness further blighted by betrayal. That she pursued her own style of governance is undeniable and she harnessed the potency of textiles to emphasise her female presence and nurture her network of support. When captivity muted her voice, Mary ensured that her

unedited testimony prevailed, preserving it in her embroidery.

Exploring Mary through the fabric of her life – the textiles she inherited, displayed, gifted, and embroidered – is revelatory. Nuanced and propagandist, the material world of Mary, Queen of Scots has been largely disregarded as a source of archival evidence by her commentators. But in it lies a tangible and intimate insight into the experiences and emotions of the Scottish Queen.

Photograph © Joya Berrow

BURN
A Story of Fire, Woods and Healing
Ben Short

Publicist: Louise Court

14th April 2022
9781529370348
£16.99
Hardback

© Ben Short, 2022

Prologue

Just as silver is a supreme conductor of heat, summer woods are the most excellent conductor of darkness. The moon is the shape of a severed ear, thrown down on a blue cloth, yet light does not fetch far inside the broadleaf border. Beneath the canopy, the bright pink petals of campion gutter; the luminous blue towers of bugle are extinguished, too. There are leucitic fallow deer in this wood, almost white, a herd which drew King John to hunt this ground in the twelfth century. Yet such is the dark, they would be invisible, even at thirty feet.

What am I doing here? I am a charcoal burner and the wood is my place of work. During the summer I spend most of my time inside its green walls, harvesting the timber I cut over winter, turning it into coal. I have two kilns. One, at the western end of the wood, sits under a broken crab apple. The Malus is disfigured, its leader ripped off by a summer storm. The kiln beneath has been cooling since early morning when I closed it down, killing its fire. Tomorrow I shall open it and shovel out the char, bagging it in brown sacks. My second kiln sits on the edge of a woodman's ride, which cuts east-west through the wood. I loaded it with batons of hazel this afternoon, and rammed a flaming, diesel-soaked rag down one of its vents, just after four. The fire in its centre quickly took: there has been no rain for several weeks and the material is bone dry.

A charcoal kiln may seem out of keeping in a wood. A large, steel, industrial barrel, it is bold, even rude, the nosecone of a Steampunk space rocket fallen to earth. Yet despite this incongruity, the kiln is most certainly a thing of the woods. Loaded with coppiced hazel and set alight, it becomes almost alive.

In the settled dark, I put my ear to one of its vents. There is a pitter-patter, like soft rain falling on the earth. Crouching low and peering down the vent, I watch

the wood tar smoking on the ground, a satanic, black ooze. As night deepens, the light from these vents project glowing beams across the woodland floor. It is as if the kiln has swallowed a small sun. The sight is both irresistible and terrifying, for inside the steel oven there is no mercy.

During hours of burning the wood inside is transformed, reworked. Water and hydrocarbons are expelled in what seems like slow torture, the process of pyrolysis. With only a small drip of oxygen entering the kiln, the hazel inside does not burn away, but is forced to keep its shape and take the pain. I sometimes think burning it to ash would be kinder. Yet this cruelty has history behind it. Charcoal was the smelting fuel of the Bronze and Iron Age. It propped up the Romans; forged their weapons; put fury in their armies. And although we mainly use it to brown sausages now, that darkness remains.

But beyond blood, charcoal burning has always been magical, a kind of dark trick. A piece of tree miraculously reduced to carbon, atomic number 6 on the periodic table, one of the building blocks of life. Open a cooled kiln and one's eyes fall on a dusty black ossuary, glittering bones of trees. A nugget flashes silver-grey like a jackdaw's neck; another is painted with a cobalt flare, edging to purple, then gold. Pick up a piece and it weighs next to nothing, the wood from which it came released from the dead weight of its water and tars.

There is a bump inside the kiln. It is the wood stack dropping as the material in the bottom burns away. The sound draws me back to the present. For most people, being alone in a wood at night is not normal behaviour. The dark rattles us, dredges up primal fears, even if it is two-and-a-half centuries since anyone in these islands had to worry about wolves. Now all the old poachers are in their graves, who in their right mind lingers in woods after sunset? But, for me, these dim precincts offer a comfort, not a threat. The smell of woodsmoke and the kiln's gentle song, settle me. On such a night, every tree becomes sacred, a pillar of stillness. Standing under them, the dark bleeds in, then a quietness comes upon you.

I came to the woods over a decade ago. I came to the woods because there was a fire in my head.

Photograph © Jack Orlik

LOOKING TO SEA

Britain Through the Eyes of its Artists

Lily Le Brun

Publicist: Louise Court

9th June 2022
9781529309218
£25.00
Hardback

© Lily Le Brun, 2022

Introduction

In spring 2016, I went to Tate Britain to look for the sea. Commissioned to write a magazine article about its presence in contemporary British art, I was on the hunt for artists past and present who had chosen the sea as a subject. Hung chronologically, the permanent collection began with a room full of Tudor portraits. No sea there. Nor was it anywhere to be found in the following room, amongst the seventeenth-century aristocrats. It made its first appearance in the middle of the eighteenth century, as the setting for a warship firing a salute. John Constable brought it into the centre of the action in his study for *Hadleigh Castle* in 1810, and soon images of lonely shorelines, fisherfolk and cheerful families on beaches began to make their entrance. By the twentieth century there were cruise liners, fishing towns and more sunny coastlines. And then, in this century, the sea disappeared.

Beyond the walls of the Tate, a different narrative was unfolding. It was the run-up to Brexit, when how Britain thought of itself as a nation was being discussed an unusual amount. The sea, suddenly, had become freighted with significance. For many, the presence of a sea between Britain and the continent was largely irrelevant. To others, it was vital part of the country's identity. As well as existing as a physical barrier and a political border between Britain and the rest of Europe, the sea represented an intangible, deeply felt sense of difference. Contrary to what the curation at the Tate suggested, the sense of Britain as an island, its self-image sculpted by the sea along with its physical geography, had persisted into the twenty-first century.

The role that the sea continued to play in contemporary life had also been reflected in several recent high-profile artworks, which drew attention towards its entanglement with weighty, worldly issues such as travel trade, colonization, globalisation, immigration, and

global warming. In 2010, Yinka Shonibare placed a miniature HMS *Victory*, fluttering with dozens of colourful batik sails, in a bottle for the Fourth Plinth in Trafalgar Square; a comment on British imperialism and trade facilitated by Nelson's victories. Wolfgang Tillmans photographed the Atlantic Ocean in *The State We're In* (2015) to reflect upon global political tensions. In the same year, Danish-Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson installed huge hunks of glacial ice outside the Place de Pantheon in Paris to draw attention to rising sea levels.

In the wake of the referendum, I kept thinking back to these portrayals of the sea. The sight we see today from the shore is almost exactly the same as it has ever been. Here, the boundaries between the past and the present are at their thinnest. Yet if the sea was so ageless, why had it inspired such a diversity of creative responses? Showing the many ways a single, unchanging subject could be seen and understood, those artworks echoed one of the fundamental questions that had arisen after Brexit: why do people view the same places so differently?

We tend to think of the sea as unassailable fact, an unchanging and eternal presence at the end of the land. But art reveals a different relationship with the shoreline, one that is as shifting and slippery as water itself. It shows us how there is a sea for war and a sea for play; a sea that provides a livelihood and a sea that rests and soothes. It tells us of seas that are loved and seas that are feared; seas that can carry you away and not let you leave. Every artwork that takes the sea as a subject is showing how a place has interacted with a person; it is a collaboration between an environment, a body and a mind. Images of the sea reveal, in a uniquely simple way, the fluidity with which the world is experienced and imagined.

The way in which physical places are shaped and formed in the imagination becomes clear if you turn to the past. The ocean cannot be found on artist's canvases before the eighteenth century because of a simple truth: they did not go looking for it. For much of this country's history, especially after Christianity rooted itself in these islands two thousand years ago, the shoreline was a place largely to be avoided. The Book of Genesis begins with an image of a dark, formless, watery deep, from which God creates land and life. The story of the return of this primordial abyss

as the great flood struck terror into the hearts of the pious, for whom the sea was a reminder of the fate of the sinful first humans. Lapping at the edges of civilisation, threatening to reclaim humankind, the sea has been feared for far longer than it has fascinated. 'It is so little of a friendly symbol', W. H. Auden pointed out in *The Enchafèd Flood*, a lecture he gave in 1949, 'that the first thing which the author of the Book of Revelation notices in his vision of the new heaven and earth at the end of time is that *there was no more sea*.'

The instability and unknowability of the ocean made it a powerful symbol to the medieval mind. 'To attempt to fathom the mysteries of the ocean bordered on sacrilege,' Alain Corbin writes in his 1994 book *The Lure of the Sea*, an exploration of the sea in the early European imagination. In the original French, the title of Corbin's book is *Le Territoire du Void*, the territory of the void, reflecting the predominant attitude towards the sea before the nineteenth century. Monastic communities and hermits were attracted to the remotest coasts – Lindisfarne, Iona, the Orkneys, Shetlands and Faroes – the frontlines of the spiritual battle against evil. Mariner-monks were considered the saintliest, because the successful navigation of such treacherous territory was believed possible only by the grace of God.

Even as fears of divine retribution faded over the years, the threat of invasion, pirates, smugglers and wreckers continued to reinforce the idea of the coast as a vulnerable, dangerous zone: somewhere that was inherently different to inland places. Houses were built with their backs to the sea; thick-walled defences bristled along the coastline. Gradually, however, more reflective understandings of the ocean began to occupy the collective imagination. While imperial, mercantile and naval expansion caused port towns such as Bristol and Liverpool to prosper in the eighteenth century, the sea also slowly began to be equated with leisure. Enlightenment thinking encouraged curiosity in oceanography and the natural history of the shore, while increasing numbers of physicians and medical writers became persuaded of the therapeutic benefits of sea-bathing. Sea towns began to usurp spa towns in popularity, aided by a growing body of Romantic literature and imagery extolling the sublime aesthetics of the shore. Over the following centuries, tiny fishing ports all along the coast of

Britain transformed into thriving, fashionable resorts, many of which continue to attract holidaymakers today.

Dread of the sea may have mellowed in recent decades, but the sense of the shoreline as a threshold between known and unknown worlds has lingered. Where feelings of awe, fear or humility that arose at the sight of the ocean might once have been interpreted as a religious experience, in more recent times they have been invested with different but equally powerful meanings. What is it that draws a person to the sea today? There are as many answers to this question as there are people who have ever stood transfixed at the shoreline. You will have your own feelings and memories connected to the sea, just as I have mine. The ten artists you will meet in this book reflect this multitude. As each chapter traces the personal, philosophical and prosaic threads that wove their art into being, it will become clear how many ways there are of thinking about the sea.

As I began my research, I started to discover British artists working inside nearly all the major trends and movements of the twentieth century – including abstraction, surrealism, pop art, abstract expressionism, land art, conceptual art, video art – who had at some point chosen the sea as a subject. Even more intriguingly, these were often the works that they were best remembered for, where a stylistic breakthrough had occurred, or a new pattern of thinking had begun. Why was one of the first Post-Impressionist pictures ever painted in Britain, heralding the arrival of Modernism, inspired by a quiet sandy bay in Dorset? Why did a fishing village in Cornwall begin to lure abstract-inclined artists from across the Atlantic? Some of these works connected presciently to forces beyond the artworld too. How did Bridget Riley's monochrome, abstract paintings, made in London during the swinging sixties, resonate with the first stirrings of the modern environment movement? Why did Martin Parr's photographs of a northern seaside resort in the 1980s reveal so much about class? It started to become clear that it was not only that shifting human concerns are reflected by the sea, but that it is also, somehow, a *stimulus* to new ways of thinking.

I'd also begun noticing a rising tide of contemporary art shows themed around the ocean. In the

UK alone there had been *Under the Sea* at Museums Sheffield, *Aquatopia* at the Nottingham Contemporary, *Ship to Shore* at the University of Southampton, *Coast to Coast* at York Gallery, *Offshore:Artists Explore the Sea*, as part of Hull UK City of Culture 2017. More recently there has been a season of online events hosted by the Whitechapel Gallery in 2021, themed 'Water/ Fluidity', and the multi-county initiative England's Creative Coast, which includes site-specific artworks commissioned to connect the coastlines of Essex, Kent and East Sussex, and reflect on the border between land and water. And at the 2019 Venice Biennale, always a useful barometer for international cultural preoccupations, the Golden Lion was awarded to the Lithuanian Pavilion, which staged an opera about climate change on an artificial beach. Lithuania was not the only country into which saltwater swept that year; French, Nordic and Canadian pavilions also housed meditations on the ocean.

Again, these contemporary exhibitions and artworks did not only seem to be reflections of social and cultural paradigms. Many were part of the growing global list of exhibitions, artists and artworks that have attempted to tackle the dizzying consequences of the climate crisis. In other words, they wanted to affect change, to actively reassess assumptions and patterns of behaviour. A recent editorial in *The Journal of Curatorial Practice*, for instance, argued that art exhibitions were 'uniquely positioned in understanding the complex relationships between ocean ecosystems, marine wildlife and human activity at this time of environmental crisis'. It pointed out how the exhibition context is well placed to embrace the myriad ways in which the ocean is seen, imagined and experienced across different cultures, localities and timespans. By placing artefacts alongside artworks, man-made objects beside specimens of marine life, old narratives and frameworks might be challenged, and new visions, dialogues and understandings of the natural world might be revealed.

My hope is that this book will behave a little like an exhibition, setting up visual conversations between ten disparate ways of looking at the sea. I have chosen artworks that represent an art historical development, and that can be found in public collections across the country (aside from Hamish Fulton's work, which

takes the form of a walk, and is not an object to be owned or displayed in a conventional way). This decision was made partly in the hope that one day you will be able to see these works of art in the flesh, but also because I am interested in how ideas gain traction at certain times. In being kept in public hands for posterity, the implication is that these works are seen as belonging to – and even shaping – the national narrative: I have tried to understand why.

Building up from the 1910s to the present day, I have kept my focus trained on the last hundred years or so. The ways in which we relate to the sea and the natural world has shifted significantly over this period, so I have included works of art that have helped me understand how quickly and dramatically these changes have taken place relative to the rest of history. While every artwork is written about as an individual creation, a product of its time, birthed by a unique set of forces, I have tried to unearth the subtle tendrils of connection reaching between them all.

If anything, I have written this book not by looking at the sea but *from* the sea, back to the people that have watched it from the shoreline. I am not motivated by a desire to tell you *about* the sea, nor am I qualified to do so: I am a Londoner, born and raised, and there is nothing extraordinary or expert about my knowledge of the ocean or my affection for the coast. What I have tried to do, however, is think *with* the sea, to use it as prism into lives and habits and feelings other than my own. For someone trained in history and art history, fascinated by why we look and how we see, the sea is a gift, for it throws differences of human behaviour into sharp relief. As a group, these works of art map a broad genealogy of perception, rooted in the meanings that have been seen or sought in the ocean. As a book, they tell the vital story of humanity's ever-changing relationship to the natural world. Alone, they are an invitation to see through someone else's eyes.

Follow Sceptre on social media

@sceptrebooks

@sceptrebooks

sceptrebooks

Sign up to the Sceptre Newsletter

bit.ly/SceptreNewsletter