

MARGINS



THE ISIS

HT23



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EDITORS' LETTER

One of us didn't like 'Margins' at first. Too political (we're Asian), too predictable (we're English students), two syllables ("it just doesn't sound right"). As with most of our work this term, we debated and second-guessed until we almost ran out of time. Through it all, we found ourselves returning to 'Margins', a space large enough to bring together our different interests: medieval marginalia alongside geometric designs, political themes embedded into artistic choices. We learned a lot from each other.

The contributors this term make use of this space in new and exciting ways. They frame polished prose with candid scribbles and punctuate otherwise heavy pieces with moments of comedy. They introduce you to new people: Druids, Seattle Men, and Superlovas are just some of the characters you'll meet along the way.

Novel as they are, these are still classic *Isis* stories. As seen from the archives (page 30), *The Isis* has always tried to foreground difference. The magazine is just one way of commemorating this term's efforts – other projects have been happening around it. Our exhibition at St John's celebrated the range of styles and mediums within our Creative team. Our Features writers joined the audience at plays and concerts across the city. Meanwhile, our team has been sitting in this office, in our favourite corner of Oxford, putting it all together.

Thank you to our lay-in crew, Dowon, Evelyn, Faye, Leon, Louis, and Taya, who are the reason you're holding this magazine right now. And to Frankie and Oliver, our indefatigable Creative Leaders, not only for their own remarkable talent but also for their ability to bring out the best in their team. Finally, to Antara, Clemmie, Hannah, and Zoe, our Deputy Editors – thank you for your dedication. This term wouldn't have been possible without you.

Student writing and art may not always change the world, but we don't believe that makes it any less important. *The Isis* will be around for as long as there are different ideas to fill its pages. Thank you for making your mark.

Yours,
Shao and Mia

ART BY EVELYN HOMEWOOD



ERSATZWÖRTER

by Anna Cooper

Berlin, November

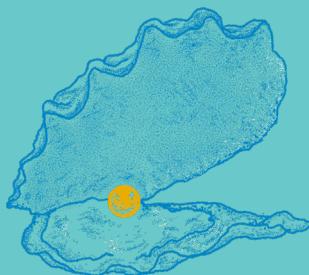
Today the U-Bahn wasn't running so I took
the Ersatzverkehr, and it made me think of you
back home, two summers ago,
when we were friends again, and sitting
in a square of June sunlight
on the floor of David's room.

What I can't say with words I try to say with
my hands, reaching for the fruit bowl:
'you don't eat enough fruit – here,
have a clementine, take half,
or the whole thing.' In another time,
I would feed you the segments myself,
and feel your lips, sticky with juice,
brush against my fingers.

Instead, hopeless mute that I am,
I get to sit and watch as you peel it apart,
the orange so lovely against your blue jumper.
It is almost as good, I think,
it is almost as good.

der Ersatz- [ɛɐ̯'zats]: replacement, substitute
die Wörter (pl.) ['vɐ̯rtɐ̯]: words
der Ersatzverkehr [ɛɐ̯'zatsfɐ̯'ke:ɐ̯]: replacement transport

Art by Faye Song



WORK IN TRANSLATION

By Dowon Jung

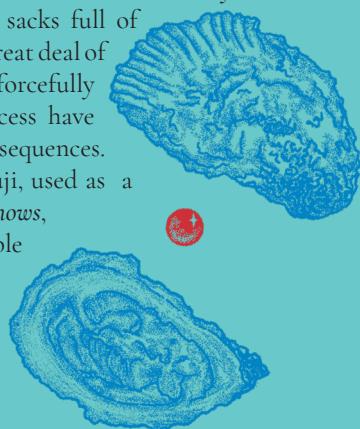
What must be done to an oyster to make it produce a pearl? Firstly, the oyster – usually bred in controlled conditions and grown in sheltered bays – is taken out of the water and sent to the pearl workshop. Workers then pry it open with a small clip. This allows them to slice into the fleshy mantle that connects the oyster's body to its shell, where the nacre, a luminous substance that turns into the layers constituting a pearl, is produced. Next, a small bead carved from the shell of another mollusc (the nucleus), is inserted into this newly cut gap. Pieces of foreign mantle tissue cut from a donor oyster are planted, which further encourages pearl formation. Most oysters do not survive this process, and antibiotics and a period of intensive care by pearl workers, who regularly scrape algae and parasites off vulnerable oysters, are the only reason some do. Because pearls are naturally formed as a protection mechanism when an infecting irritant is introduced into a mollusc, the task of artificially creating them must inevitably be equally invasive and laborious. With the workers using tiny scalpels, hooks, and vices, pearl production resembles surgery more than it does 'farming'.

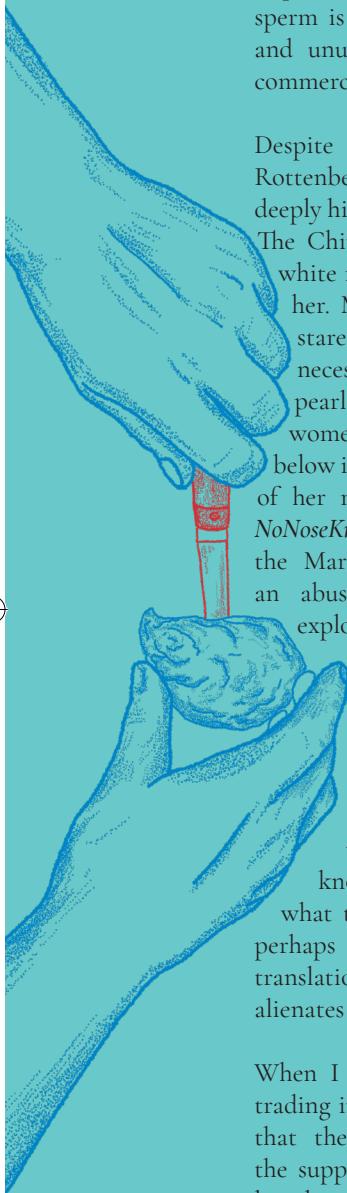
This strange and onerous process is explored in contemporary video artist Mika Rottenberg's film, *NoNoseKnows*, first shown at the 2015 Venice Biennale alongside giant burlap sacks overflowing with pearls. Set in the great pearl city of Zhuji in southern China, the video's narrative features two women: one white woman sitting blankly in an office full of flowers and one young Chinese woman working in the musty pearl workshops below. Throughout the video, the Chinese woman is continuously turning a crank, which powers a fan-blowing pollen into her white manager's nose. In a rare moment of surrealism in an otherwise uncannily realist film, her sneezes magically produce plates of food, adding to an ever-growing pile of dishes which, presumably, feeds the workers below.

Art by Frankie Frazer

NoNoseKnows is ultimately a tale about globalised production. It is a tale about how resources and labour are drawn in from global peripheries for the benefit and consumption of the Western metropoles. Yet, Rottenberg's depiction of globalised production is also more nuanced than that. *NoNoseKnows*, and the pearl industry more broadly, exemplify the entanglement inherent to our global age. According to anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, these large chains of global production and transmission depend on translation. The variegated ways of creating and assembling natural resources are transfigured to fit more neatly into systems of value, rationalised and enumerated so that these activities can be scaled, measured, and ultimately turned into profit. Tsing's real innovation, however, is in arguing that, whereas supply chains and processes of transmission and aggregation are readily scalable, production itself tends not to be. Translation bridges this gap. As demands from centres of global consumption for resources exponentially increase, production in the global peripheries are forcefully scaled through coerced labour, exploitative practices, and environmental gouging.

Pearling is an archetypal example. The basic process of pearl formation – a natural response by molluscs to prevent infections – is not one that is easily scaled. To produce burlap sacks full of pearls therefore requires a great deal of intensive labour. Efforts to forcefully scale a naturally slow process have created a whole host of consequences. The vast 'Pearl City' of Zhuji, used as a backdrop for *NoNoseKnows*, is one of the more visible effects of large-scale pearl farming, as well as the rapid consolidation of corporate pearl producers in





the region. Pearling, in turn, has spawned several subsidiary industries, both to provide prerequisite materials and salvage leftovers. Pearl nuclei are imported from the Mississippi River, oyster sperm is collected and traded in black markets, and unused mussel shells are ground up into commercial fertilisers.

Despite this image of global connectivity, Rottenberg is clear in *No Nose Knows* that this is a deeply hierarchical structure of global production. The Chinese woman turning the crank for her white manager is constantly gazing upwards at her. Meanwhile, the manager herself blankly stares forward, oblivious to the labour necessary to produce the bin bags full of pearls strewn about her office. Though the two women never meet each other, the pearl farmer below is far more intensely aware of the presence of her manager above. The white manager in *No Nose Knows* is far from the Marxian caricature of an abusive and heartless exploiter. If anything, she is a laughable character in her absurdity, highlighting the tragicomedy of this entire mode of global production. Both women are intensely alienated from their own labour, only aware of their parochial operation without any knowledge of the wider implications of what they produce and consume. And this is perhaps Rottenberg's most potent point: global translation does not just alienate the workers – it alienates all of us.

When I spoke to Mr Kwon, a pearl merchant trading in the jewellers' quarter in Seoul, I found that these opaque translations happen across the supply chain. He admitted to me that he is largely unfamiliar with the journey that pearls take from their farms to the auctioneers, but after years of trading, he has developed an eye for noticing the volatile fluctuations within the pearl market. It is a relatively closed market, he says, usually entered through apprenticeships, and made all the more obscure by the fact that there

are no set international standards for quality or price. Unlike diamonds and other mineral gems, where institutions like the Gemological Institute of America can set standards for measuring and assessing the products, pearls are ultimately objects borne out of organic processes. They are thus contingent upon a myriad of factors such as species, region, and weather. As such, various bodies, from farming cooperatives to auctioneers and large retailing corporations, set often contradictory standards, and inevitably, the larger players are given a bigger voice in the market. These are all part of the complex effort of translating non-human operations into human value.

This is still ongoing. Recently, the pearl market has undergone significant shifts. For one, the pandemic and the temporary death of in-person markets and auctions have made information about the market

more inaccessible to small traders like him. The lull of the pandemic has allowed some of the larger players within the market to push through some long-desired

changes. Larger auctioneers like Concorde, based in Hong Kong have recently changed their policy so that the selling price for pearls on auction is no longer released to the public. This has the potential to prevent merchants like Mr Kwon from accurately determining the price he should be expecting from retailers. Similarly, he notes that, even considering the recent bout of inflation worldwide, the prices of pearls from other auctioneers have skyrocketed. From the fact that starting prices have not changed as significantly, he suspects that larger corporate pearl retailers are attempting to corner the market by monopolising the pearl supply. What is clear from Mr Kwon's experience is that translation is never static or settled. Instead, it is both continuous and contingent, always drawing upon kaleidoscopic relations and histories.

Nevertheless, despite the apparent luxury and glamour of the product he sells, the margins for smaller traders like Mr Kwon are relatively slim.

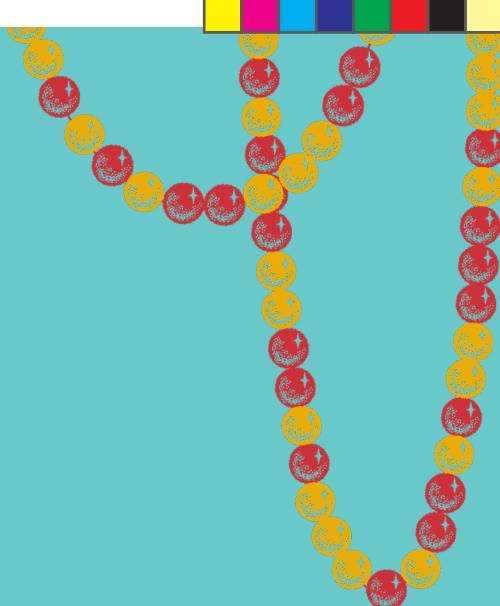
"Efforts to forcefully scale a naturally slow process have created a whole host of consequences."



“... global translation does not just alienate the workers – it alienates all of us.”

He professes that most of the value comes when the pearls are refined into their final forms by designers and fashion brands. Indeed, the jewellers' quarter where Mr Kwon trades is located in a notoriously impoverished corner of central Seoul. There is a certain banality to seeing Mr Kwon's shop full of iridescent pearls squeezed in between a soup kitchen and a pawnshop.

Globalisation hides the ugliness of mass production. Farms and factories now invoke images of products naturally growing or being automatically assembled when, in reality, every step requires intensive human labour. We imagine oysters hanging serenely in the sea. Yet, as *NoNoseKnows* takes pains to show, the reality is hundreds of underpaid women scraping the flesh out of oyster shells in a damp warehouse. After all, one of the primary impetuses for globalisation in the late 20th century was not a desire for transparent communication, but the outsourcing of the more unpleasant processes of production to cheaper sites overseas. Integral to this shift was the translation of values across ecologies, languages, and systems, which has had the overall effect of allowing ethically conscious consumers to be blind to how their commodities are actually produced. Pearls are just one example of this phenomenon. Ironically, it seems translation has only made the globe more opaque and illegible. ■





ONE PARIS MAY HIDE

by Marianne Doherty

In life,

One Paris may hide another Paris,

the French-speaking Paris may hide the English-speaking Paris,
as the “Paris London” café may hide a café called “Paris Mumbai” (I don’t know).

Six-storey Haussmann Paris may hide

filthy medieval Paris: a damp and leprous island,
which desperately hawks you a roasted chestnut, pressing it into your palm
(which you wipe surreptitiously on your coat).

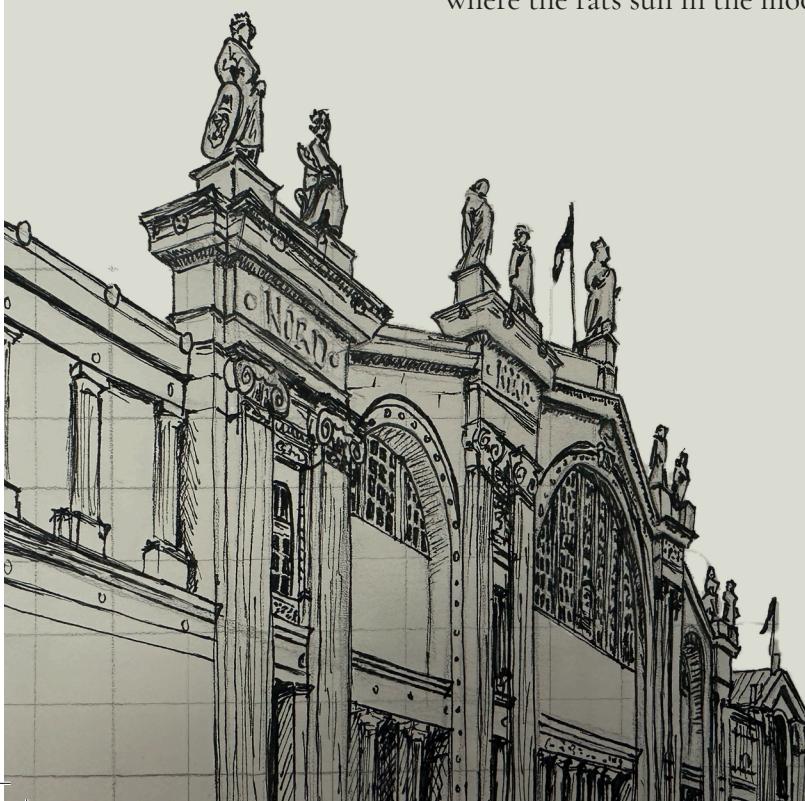
Somewhere between all this, Napoleon passes under the arch to the sound of
horses’ hooves and assured victory.

Paris moves on.

Charming Paris hides rat-infested Paris with a wink and under its waistcoat
like a passport,
just as Ligne 2 Nation hides a very tricky interchange at Charles de Gaulle-Étoile, where
somebody (a woman) spits on your shoe.

Underground, one train may hide another train
(one you’d rather be on).

Beneath its rails, the Seine may flow backwards and breathlessly uphill
or, in the sewers, be shored by a beach
where the rats sun in the moonlight, piña colada wrapped in tails.



ANOTHER PARIS PARIS PARIS



As Mumbai hides Bombay,
(it is safest to be uncommitted),
so one word may hide another word and another ending in etymology
or argument.

Like this, one language shadows another.
In sleep, one Troy may hide a second Troy: better and without beauty pageants
as the founding of Rome may (a dead-eyed Aeneas speaks) hide the sacking of Troy.
Then, in Genesis,

the snake hides
the devil, hides
the apple, hides
sex, hides
the first unhappy marriage,

shedding allegory after allegory until Adam rears up with the face of the devil and –
(you shiver and stop reading).

As the fear of God may hide a love of fear,
a convent may hide its small regret.

As one charming comment may hide a whole secret society, whose purpose it is to devise
these comments.

Meaning that you have been wooed by committee.

As the new lover's body serviceably eclipses the old lover's body (until only a trace, a
certain movement perhaps, the way one passes a cup of water, remains).

One poem may hide another.

As "I'm not sure that I want this" conceals "I'm sure that I don't,"
One Paris may hide another Paris. Pause to let the first city pass.
You think, now it is safe to cross, and you are hit by the next one. It can be
important
To have waited at least a moment to see what was already there.

Art by Oliver Roberts



NARCISSUS

By Tian Long Lee



6 feet 2.47 inches

Stately Nathan Lederman sat outside ICT, doodling distractedly on a pad of paper upon which barely anything legible had been written and beside which lay wide-open a dog-eared library book. He peered down into the book, a red clothbound volume of Rilke's complete poetry, and intoned to himself:

*jericho coffee
traders
105 high st,
OX1 4BW*

*r. m. rilke, german
poet (1875-1926).
second-rate
author, third-
rate essayist.
apparently he
wrote letters to a
young poet – why's
that so impressive?*



...und der Lüster geht wie ein Sechzehn-Ender...

*from 'die sonnette
an orpheus'*

Bored and uninspired by the poem he'd spent all week procrastinating, Nathan put his elbows on the table and his head in his hands. *Why, he bemoaned, O why, Adonai, must I waste my time on these dreadful and fruitless works? Pulp. Ephemera. I wonder what Granny Leah would have said if she knew I was studying German, Nathan mused. Rolling in her grave, I bet. Though it's taught me several Yiddish words. Like zafzig.*

*my late maternal
grandmother (1920-
2006), an orthodox
jewish woman born
in poland, had a
lifelong hatred of
germany*

After some time thus reflecting, he lifted his head sluggishly from his palms, took out his iPhone, and with great displeasure checked the email he had already read several times that morning

*my two
tutepartners, emma
and tom*

Subject: Today's Tutorial

Date: Tuesday, 15 November 2022 at 9:32:17 GMT

From: David Vurgait <david.vurgait@wadham.ox.ac.uk>

To: Emma Prudhomme <emma.prudhomme@lmh.ox.ac.uk>,

Thomas Lawrence <thomas.lawrence@wadham.ox.ac.uk>,

Nathan Lederman <nathan.lederman@chch.ox.ac.uk>

*this reference is
to me*

also me (oops)

*i wonder whether
anyone has made
the comparison
between gobnets
and gibbets.
might be funny in
an oxford*

*'tis a lamentable
modernism that
professors sign off
emails with their
initials*

Dear All,

Thank you to those of you who have been kind enough to email me back this week's gobnet (the Rilke poem). May I remind those of you who have not, that our tutorial is TODAY at 12:00. Please take care not to be late as we have had some issues this term with punctuality.

DV

Having re-digested and re-scoffed at the contents of the



café-bar,
119 walton st,
OX2 6AH.
incorrect of peter
to pronounce it
with a 'v' of course



1921 work by
austrian jewish
philosopher ludwig
wittgenstein
(1889-1951).
favourite of
english students
who namedrop
him w/o having
read him.
overrated. gave
some good advice
to construction
workers, however:
“he must not, so to
speak, throw away
the ladder, before
he has climbed
up it.”
(tractatus 6.54)

email, Nathan returned his phone to its rightful trouser pocket, looked up, and was all of a sudden assailed by a bookish and bespectacled face, accompanied by an unctuous voice: “Hullo there, Nathan, how are you faring today?”

ugh

It was the face and voice of Peter Cunningham, 3rd year classicist, also at Christ Church. He continued: “I dare say you’ll be attending Leo’s birthday bash tonight. It is at Freud, after all. You’ll love it. Lots of delightful nymphs and naiads for you and your ocular organs to enjoy.”

Nathan replied aloofly that yes, he was doing very well, thank you, that no, unfortunately he could not make it to Freud tonight, but would Peter please be so kind as to pass on his birthday regards to the host?

*the lust of good
peter cun(t)
nigham! – none
of those 'naiads'
appeal to me
(though they might
to him [he's a 4])
pronounced with a
'u' (correctly)*

“Oh, Nathan you really must attend! I’m sure...”

Nathan was on the verge of very politely dismissing Peter when suddenly his ex-girlfriend entered the left-side of his periphery, walking down the opposite side of the road. *Fuck. Can't make eye contact.* On second thought, he decided to ask Peter to remain, strategically intending to use him as cover behind which to hide from her.

*leanor, 1.5 years;
leanor was
gorgeous, but
only for about a
year. then started
to be so clingy.
no personality
whatsoever and
echoed everything
i said. one time
she even tried to
get us matching
bracelets. simp. or
would the feminine
form be simpess?
simpatrix? simpette
maybe. a little
later i decided to
put us both out of
our misery (and
put me out of
her misery) and
i broke up with
her*

“Peter,” blurrert out Nathan awkwardly. “Stay a minute. Tell me about your life.”

“Delighted you asked! I’m currently penning my dissertation on early responses to the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus.”

While Peter expounded upon various antinomies relating to the logical syllogism, Nathan followed his ex with sly eyes as she passed Brasenose gate. Each step, each movement of the head posed a threat. *Please don't look. Please don't cross. O lord,*



THE EX

*know I have been a bad Jew, but should you exist, I implore you –
don't let her look this way! Give your ears to me lord, heed my plea
for mercy! Shit – she looked! Thankfully, Peter was blocking her
line of sight, and Nathan ducked further behind Peter’s broad
trenchcoat to make sure. When he peeped his head out a few
moments later, she was heading eastward down High St., eyes
forward, none the wiser of her erstwhile lover’s presence. She*



exited stage right without further ado. Danger averted. *Don't worry, God, she's gone.* A sigh of relief escaped Nathan's lips. *Must be on her way back to Magdalen.* It was high time now to discharge Peter from providing cover. He had served the role most admirably.

"Peter, I should..."

Not listening, Peter adjusted his glasses and continued:

"See, Mr. Wittgenstein writes that a thought is a proposition with a sense, but he neglects to assert whether there might exist a proposition with no sense that might also count as a thought."

"Please, Peter, I really have to..."

"One ought really to consider this as a biconditional – that something is a thought *if and only if* it is a proposition with a sense."

using *italian*
musical
indications like
this is so cliché –
joyce/ nabokov/ts
eliot all did it. it's
kind of cheating
nowadays. also
german's for the
more intellectually
minded (sorry
granny)

latin: christ
church (obviously)

tractatus 4.
peter has plenty of
propositions, but
no sense and no
thoughts. (like most
oxford students)

tmesis

Third time's the charm, thought Nathan, then announced sforzando e ben marcato, "Peter, I Am Sorry I Do Not Have Time To Chat I Have To Finish My German and besides you're unfuckingbelievably boring."

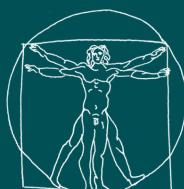
In fact, Nathan omitted the final five words of that thought when he spoke it, but the first seventeen contained enough force and vivacity to impress upon Peter that he should depart.

"Oh, no worries then," replied Peter gaily, completely unfazed by Nathan's brusque interruption. "Farewell!"

Peter gone. Phew. What's the time? His phone replied that it was 11:47. *Quick! Tute in 13 minutes – time to go!*

The tutorial was at Wadham, a college whose name rung uglily to Nathan. *Wadham and Gomorrah.* And "Wadham" sounds like how it might feel to squelch through mud. Nathan smirked, pleased at the remembrance that he was a Christ Church Man aka a Member of the House aka a matriculatus of Aedes Christi.

Having basked for a moment in the warmth of this thought, Nathan came to himself, jumped up from his chair, took his book and papers underarm and hurried across High St., weaving himself between a slow-moving black cab and a



'ham' in 'wadham'
reminds me of
that ham guy in
genesis. think he
gets murdered
or something.
definitely someone
sordid. bad
connotations for
wadham all round



what has to happen
in a person's
childhood for them
to want to ride one
of these vehicles?

cf. proverbs 16:18, kjv

luridly coloured electric scooter which bore on its deck two laughing youths, one holding the shoulders of the other. He turned onto Turl St., dashing past two dashing females who on a second ogle were tolerable not quite dashing enough to tempt him to stop. Passed Lincoln on his right, then Jesus on his left, then Exeter on his right.

emma has a crush
on me and tom
most definitely does
too, but he's more
straight than bi
though so who knows
really i mean he did
ask me for coffee
after last week's tute
that seems pretty
telling

In haughty spirits he gained Broad Street and crossed it in all its breadth, his strides long and his pride strong. Passing Blackwell's, he stopped, noticing that one of his shoelaces had come untied, flapping flaccidly on the patent leather of his shoe. In one swift motion he knelt down and retied the lace in a neat double-knot. Raising himself back up, he was struck by the grand figure staring back at him in the reflection of the glass. *I look amazing today.* His gaze moved slowly upwards, surveying his entire form. *Perfectly proportioned neck and shoulders. Up a bit. A gentle blush of the cheeks framing those scarlet lips in full ripe. So close to my own... and that seductive lock of dark hair curving upon that Byronic brow... O Spiegel! Manchmal seid ihr voll Malerei... Emma will be giving me eyes for the whole tute I'm sure. Poor Tom, on the other hand, will be left jealous.*

A heart warmed with love, and eyes filled with self-pleasure, Nathan stood unmoving, utterly unaware of any passage of time. How many aeons might have passed as he preened and posed before his reflected image!

DONG (x12!)

The bell struck midday! But only after 9 of the 12 bell tolls did poor Nathan snap out of his reflections to realise that it was noon and that, moreover, he would once more be late. ■

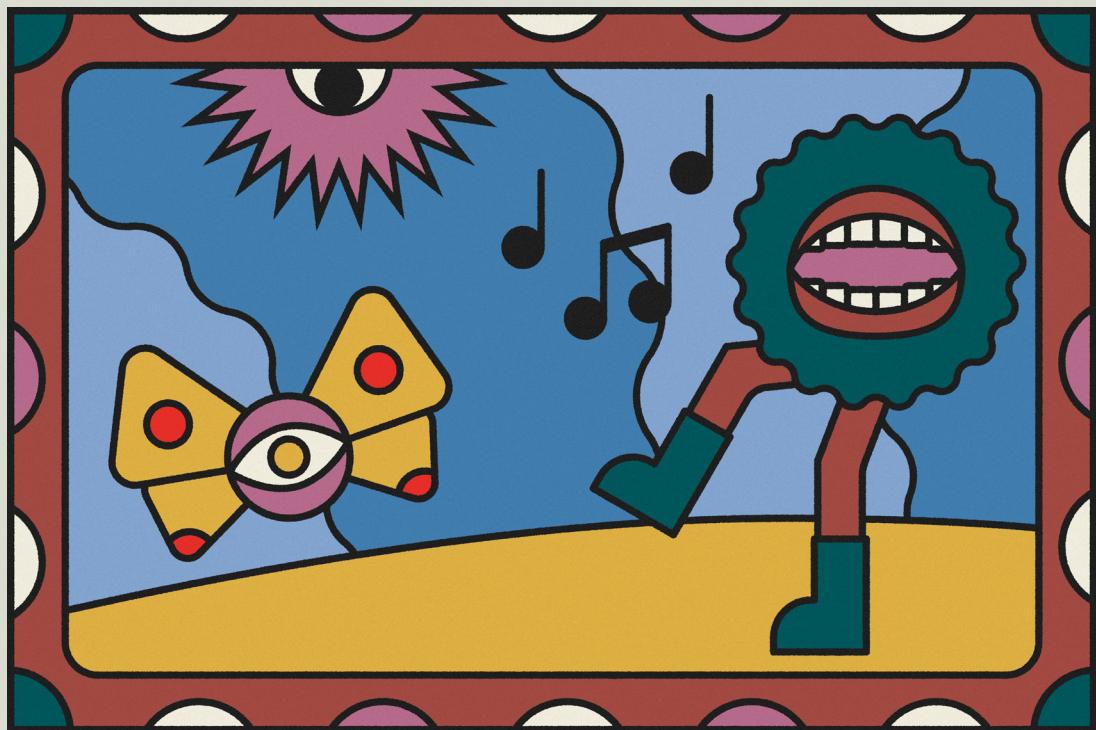


cf. old da vinci's
vitruvian man



if only there were
more to life than
looks

ART BY TAYA NEILSON



BY RORY KINLAN

Invisible by Design

DRUIDS IN MODERN BRITAIN

On a blustery winter day, I went to visit Glastonbury, really for no other reason than that I hadn't been before. I expected a small slumbering town, a few twee cafes, maybe a garden centre. But the town was buzzing. The cafes were vegan and the most prevalent shrub, it was plain to smell, was marijuana (it's even in the town's floral displays). This bucolic corner of fair England is home to a buzzing New Age community. All varieties of belief and lifestyle – so long as your parents have never heard of it – find representation here. A safety equipment supplier is called Sacred Moon. A laptop repair shop is called Zen. There is a shop

"for all things Viking," and it is the only place I've been that has a witchcraft emporium and a magical apothecary. The town is a fantastical postmodern cocktail where Ashtanga yoga links arms with Wicca, where hexes and mantras make sense together.

While we were having lunch, we got talking to a lovely pair of Druids eating at the next table. One of the most prominent pagan religions, Druidism boasts a sizable population in Glastonbury; they are drawn in by the trove of lore and myth attached to the place. A Druid called King Arthur Pendragon even lives here. After the 'pagan boom' of the nineties, there were 30,000 Druids in both the UK and the U.S., and the numbers are growing. In the most recent census, 74,000 people identified as pagan in England and Wales. I had some foggy recollection of solstice ceremonies at Stonehenge from an article somewhere in the media scrapheap. But somehow, I'd never really appreciated Druidry as an everyday reality. I didn't conceive of Druids as regular people, possessing digestive tracts, who occasionally go out for lunch, and who you might spot munching on a dahl.

In fairness, you'd be forgiven for missing this way



of life entirely. Druids are invisible by design: according to the 2018-2020 World Druidry Survey (the first of its kind), they do not proselytise and 74% of Druids actively work to keep their spiritual practices private. One motivation is that exactly the same percentage report discrimination and persecution within their local communities, but it is also a voluntary recoil from the perceived toxicity of mainstream culture. They stick to the social hinterland because they find its centre both threatening and repulsive.

That recoil is often initiated by a feeling of 'homelessness' in the modern world. We were once closely tied to the land that fed us and the people who worked it. These connections, nurtured over centuries, held us in place. Mass industrialisation violently uprooted these bonds, and social relations have since become shapeless and volatile. Everything sacred is debased, all values reduced to a market value, everything built is built to be torn down. Our society is seen as spiritually derelict and materially omnivorous: the natural world is treated as an expendable resource and growth as potentially infinite. Druidry seeks to redress this disharmony by going back to before these toxic attitudes accreted, when our early spirituality was fed by just sky and sea. Druids find inspiration in the slow and ancient traditions of these isles that venerated the Earth and our ancestors. For those who practice, it means "finding our way home."

Nonetheless, it is a new and obscure faith. Yes, there were neolithic Druids, but there is no historical continuity. And as an oral tradition, everything we know about the ancient order is salvaged from Roman records, which ceased in the 2nd century BCE. Modern Druids don't cling to the scant historical facts provided there: they romanticise the ancient Druids and fill in the capacious blanks imaginatively. Druidry consciously constructs itself, freely drawing from multiple cultural sources, without undermining the sincerity of the faith.

There are more conventional and culturally available channels of salvation for the lost and disillusioned to turn to. If Druidry is on the up, it is because for whatever reason these channels are no longer attractive. John Greer, former Archdruid of America and prolific blogger, finds a correlation

between a rise in occult interest and growing disillusionment with the political order. When the political realm shrugs and turns its back, more will look to the spiritual realm for answers. While the traditional Christian Church would have seemed the first spiritual port of call for a culture lost at sea, it has ceased to be an appealing option for many. Intertwined with a history of oppression and exploitation, and shackled by antiquated doctrine, the Church has lost much of its moral and theological credibility. The flock is wandering from its shepherd, and those who still have a spiritual appetite look to graze in pastures new.

Druidry has a versatility that the traditional Church lacks. It is not centralised: the World Druidry Survey identified 147 groups internationally, and while most nominally belong to a group, 92% of Druids are solitary practitioners, worshipping at a home shrine or in their garden. Its tenets haven't

"I didn't conceive of Druids as regular people, who you might spot munching on a dahl."

really been nailed down, which gives space for inventiveness and difference. One practitioner shares a standing joke amongst Druids on his popular blog: if you ask ten Druids to define Druidry, you get eleven different answers. No other established religion accommodates such diverse theological perspectives. Members identify as pantheists, polytheists, duotheists, or monotheists. Others refuse to ascribe any one conception to an essentially unknowable deity. There is no predesignated pantheon of deities to worship; Druidic belief is plural and diffuse, spokes without a hub.

This is not accidental. Druids feel no need to



cling to ironclad doctrine. The freedom and manoeuvrability afforded by ambivalence is recognised as a selling-point and something to be treasured. Indeed, most Druids don't subscribe to religious terminology, seeing Druidry as both more encompassing and less prescriptive. They prefer terms such as 'life path', 'culture', or even just 'point of view'. The spirituality of a Druid may crystallise not as a set of ideas or precepts, but as a "a stance, an attitude, a particular mode of experience and perception," as the anthropologist Thornstein Geiser puts it. The particular manner of one's faith is a highly personal and intuitive matter. Group leaders would never dream of imposing a rule or belief that isn't seized by the individual from within: if something doesn't quite mesh with the cut of your feeling, leave it out.

This quality of openness extends to Druidry's commerce with other belief systems. The renowned Druid Ross Nichols once told students not to mix their drinks, but a great deal of drink-mixing seems to be going on now: 46% of Druids merge their practice with other religious traditions, most commonly shamanism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Wicca. Phillip Carr-Gomm, who was the longstanding chief of the world's largest Druid order, likens self-enclosed religious systems to a kind of "monoculture," which he says can degenerate into fundamentalism and dogma. He encourages "seed-exchanges" such that we can "grow" our spiritual garden more effectively. Not all ideas can be transplanted, but where they can, we can use them to enrich our own path. It is the same outlook that pervades Glastonbury. Druidic belief is conceived not as a fortress but as a marketplace – its borders are open.



ART BY DOWON JUNG

While there is much internal diversity, there is also cohesion. Druidic practice constellates around a few stable, shared beliefs loosely inspired by the neolithic order. Most significantly, in Carr-Gomm's words, it is a geocentric rather than an anthropocentric religion. We, as humans, get no special privileges in the great scheme of life. This basic stance reverberates throughout the lives of Druids: in most Druidic homes you will find a shrine honouring one's family and heritage, while popular pastimes include foraging, permaculture farming, conservation, and (unsurprisingly) environmental and animal activism. King Arthur, for instance, is a self-described eco-warrior leading the Loyal Arthurian Warband, which their website claims are the "fighting arm" (protest group) of the pagan movement. Similarly, a Facebook group called Warrior's Call declares themselves "pagans united against fracking."

Druids generally believe that our souls are immortal and undergo endless reincarnations, although not always in human form – some maintain you could return as a pebble. Between incarnations, our souls rest in the Otherworld, so Druids celebrate death as a birth in this other realm. Then again, Druids think religion shouldn't be fixated on some transcendent world beyond the horizon of experience but should appreciate the Divine as it is revealed through the objects and landscape around us. The physical universe

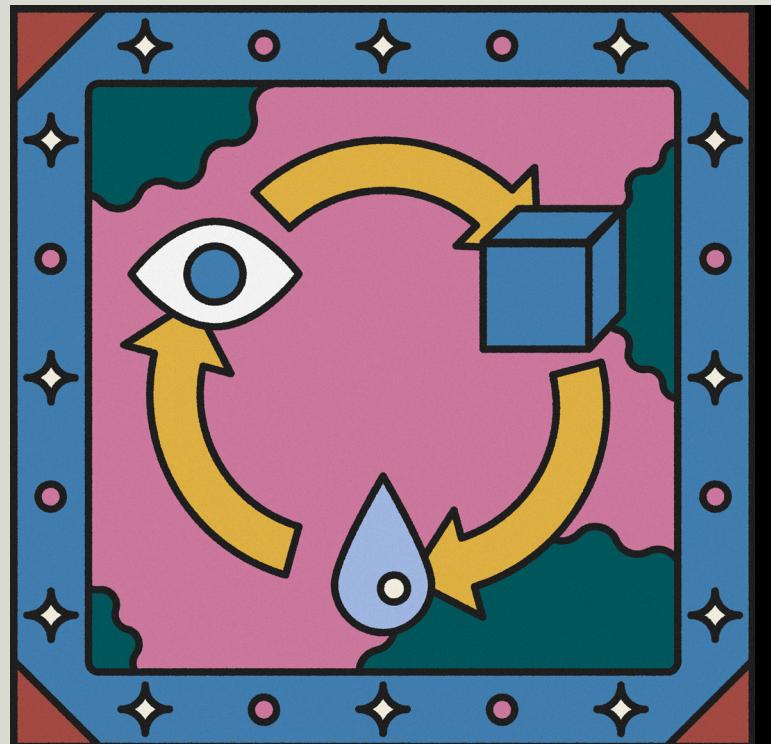


is no less sacred than the spiritual. A huge point of contention with Christianity, therefore, is its obsession with Heaven and Hell; with Eastern philosophies, it is their denial of the absolute reality of the observable world. Vedantic Hindus regard it as illusory and Madhyamika Buddhists as “empty of substance.”

While meaning is transmitted rationally through philosophical and theological concepts, Carr-Gomm argues it is also passed along “transrationally” through story, legend, and ritual. Meditation, especially in natural spaces, is called the path of the Ovate. Where other meditative practices aim towards a transcendental experience of a higher reality or inner self, Druidic meditation is situated and embodied: feeling the dirt under your toes, noticing the smell of coming rain, or listening to the whistle of the wind. Through this highly attuned “presentness,” Druids seek a deep commune with nature, the stars, the leaves, and the trees, all of which have secrets to tell. They disclose a rhythm written deep into the way of things, a pattern of contraction and release, holding and letting go. The Druidic universe is cyclical: this pattern is mirrored in the pagan eightfold calendar, the circles Druids gather in, the way time passes like the turning of the wheel.

Equally important is creative expression, or the path of the Bard, which most Druids view as central to human existence. The concept of *Awen*, a Welsh word meaning ‘flow’, is crucial here. For Druids, *Awen* is like an elixir that you can stimulate within you. When you are in the middle of creative activity, there are no propositional thoughts or conscious decisions – there is not really any intellectual activity at all. Some Druids believe *Awen* flows to us from the Otherworld. The Bard is able to harness it expertly and channel it into expressive works such as poetry, dance, music, or storytelling. As with the Ovate, it is a sort of entrainment with the rhythms of the world that can elevate and edify us.

Druids trade in ambivalence rather than absolutes. They inhabit a penumbral world of half-concealed ancient truths, plural cosmologies, miscible faiths, concepts spilling into one another. It is part of its success that its beliefs haven’t been hammered perfectly into shape. We live in a world where



increasingly nothing quite makes sense on its own, and we must find our own ways to comprehend it. The death knell of climate disaster amplifies the call to environmental responsibility. The noise of modern life underscores the value of quiet contemplation and humble living. Druidry has never been more attractive.

It might seem strange to us that the faith of the moment should take its inspiration from one from 2,000 years ago. But it won’t seem strange to a Druid; it is just another manifestation of the underlying cyclical of all things. As the Druid author Cairistiona Worthington has said, “the great tree thrives on the leaves it casts to the ground.” Nurtured by the ways of old, today’s Druids are the new season’s growth. And I certainly hope I find myself eating next to Druids more often in the future. ■



Never Mind Picking Apples

I.

I want to tell you about the tree.

How the tree was tall, how
it held its height in the way
tall-kind do, assured of presence,
as if all its life the sun had whispered,
you will be tall and strong.

As if all its life, the tree had believed
the promises of the sun, in the way
one believes a warm palm over a shoulder
that says, *you do not know yet, but you'll see*
everything will turn out alright.

How, surely, the tree grew through that
belief – branches reaching out so long
now they drape around its trunk,
a gold-leaf canopy for solitary bees,
brushing faces with nectar and tree dust.

How the tree must have trusted the sun
so much that even on the shortest days –
when the sun felt very far and never stayed
long enough – the tree stood tall

and loved the sun so much that
when its light came slowly back,
staying longer each day,
the tree laughed with light pink flowers,
its bark dimpled into sweet folds

and when the sun started to leave again,
the tree offered apples, red and surprising
as planets – the constancy of their gravity
with regards to each other and all
that other matter.

How the tree does not need
to be called
an apple tree.

How the tree can stand alone.



II.

But one year, when the tree offered apples,
we climbed through its leafy crown
to take just a few, laughing
as bits of leaf litter teased our hair,
at the awkward spaces
we find ourselves in
when we climb a tall tree and reach
a little too far for the biggest fruits –
which we thought must be the sweetest –
if only because the view over the garden
made them so.

How the tree shook with laughter before
dropping three perfect apples
into our hands.

By Kendall Jefferys



Art by Sophia Howard



BEING AND WANTING

NARRATIVES AND TRANSSH

I'm scrolling through Reddit (strike one). I soon find myself fighting the urge to respond to every comment written by cis people who just can't understand (strike two). "I wanted to play with boy's toys, so I did – it doesn't mean I'm a boy!" I keep scrolling. "I don't feel like a woman, I just am one!" There's a way in which I can't even blame them; they've taken on the narrative that they were supposed to (unable or unwilling to comprehend much else), even when many of the trans people using it didn't believe it themselves. For every poster-child trans woman who was caught trying on her mother's heels as a toddler, there are five who tried to bury dysphoria under a John Lennon beard and a four-plate barbell. Yet, this superficial understanding by such quasi-liberalists of 'gender as a social construct' stops them from being on board with the whole 'born in the wrong body' thing. The fact that this manifests as getting off the bus somewhere along a motorway, rather than journeying to a place more developed, is the problem we're dealing with now.

Part of this comes from the fact that it's gender we're talking about. At least straight people know what attraction to people feels like – not to the same sex, sure, but they can still fundamentally comprehend LGB people. But gender? "They hardly know'er!" (strike three). Many cis people will deny it even exists. It is a refusal as infuriating as Margaret Thatcher claiming "there's no such thing as society", and even more comically baffling. One wonders if, in this world, Shania Twain was referring to menstrual cramps, and scientists anticipate discovering the raucous rituals of 'stag dos' inscribed on the Y-chromosome. Yet even those who accept gender roles as a social construct often have difficulty grasping transness – the idea that someone might not in some important way identify with, feel like, and even be, the gender they were assigned at birth. Cis people have varying experiences of feeling like a man or woman,

but what is universal is the experience of being one. Society constructs gender as a categorical identifier: it is something that someone simply is or is not, like being human. It is not a matter of subjective identity or desire.

This instinctive common sense becomes the default position on the topic. As with all increasingly visible and intensely political topics, everyone must have an opinion, whilst anyone going against common sense better have a good reason. And as any decent lawyer knows, the narrative is as important as the evidence. Transition lowers suicide rates and has some of the lowest regret rates of all surgeries, which is great and all, but without a convincing story, the most the empirical evidence justifies is a pitiful pantomime that one might act out for an elderly relative losing their memory. Transness, not being part of the structure of society, is bound to narratives from the beginning – narratives which can both render the concept itself and justify its existence in the abstract, as well as serve the material needs of trans people.

trans people defended themselves by implicitly arguing that they, too, recognise that there is something wrong with them.

This is why the idea of being 'born in the wrong body' became widespread; it was a way that trans people could be conceptualised and accepted by Western medical professionals of the 19th and 20th centuries. For trans people to fit into the concept of gender being something that you just are, there must also be some significant part of them that just is a man or woman. This narrative



also has a psychological draw. Trans people exist in a cis-centric society and are not immune to its ideology; being 'born in the wrong body' is a narrative through which we can understand ourselves and justify our feelings and desires. They are important, then, in pointing to something that is essentially true: we are what we say we are. This isn't to say that there was any universal consensus or experience amongst trans people at the time regarding this narrative and its implications.

Rather, its structure both reflects and informs how we think and continue to think of gender and transition. It holds that everyone is either a man or woman, and that being a particular gender is a matter of what one simply is or is not. Trans people must be wrong in some way, and this wrongness is what legitimises transition. This is inherently pathologising, but in the context of the 20th century, when psychiatrists were diagnosing people with the 'sexual deviation' of 'transvestism', a pathologisation at the level of the body was better than one of the mind. At least with transness conceived as an intersex condition, neither the body nor brain are

internally sick – they are simply wrong for each other. And so, this was seen as the most viable option for much of modern trans history in the West.

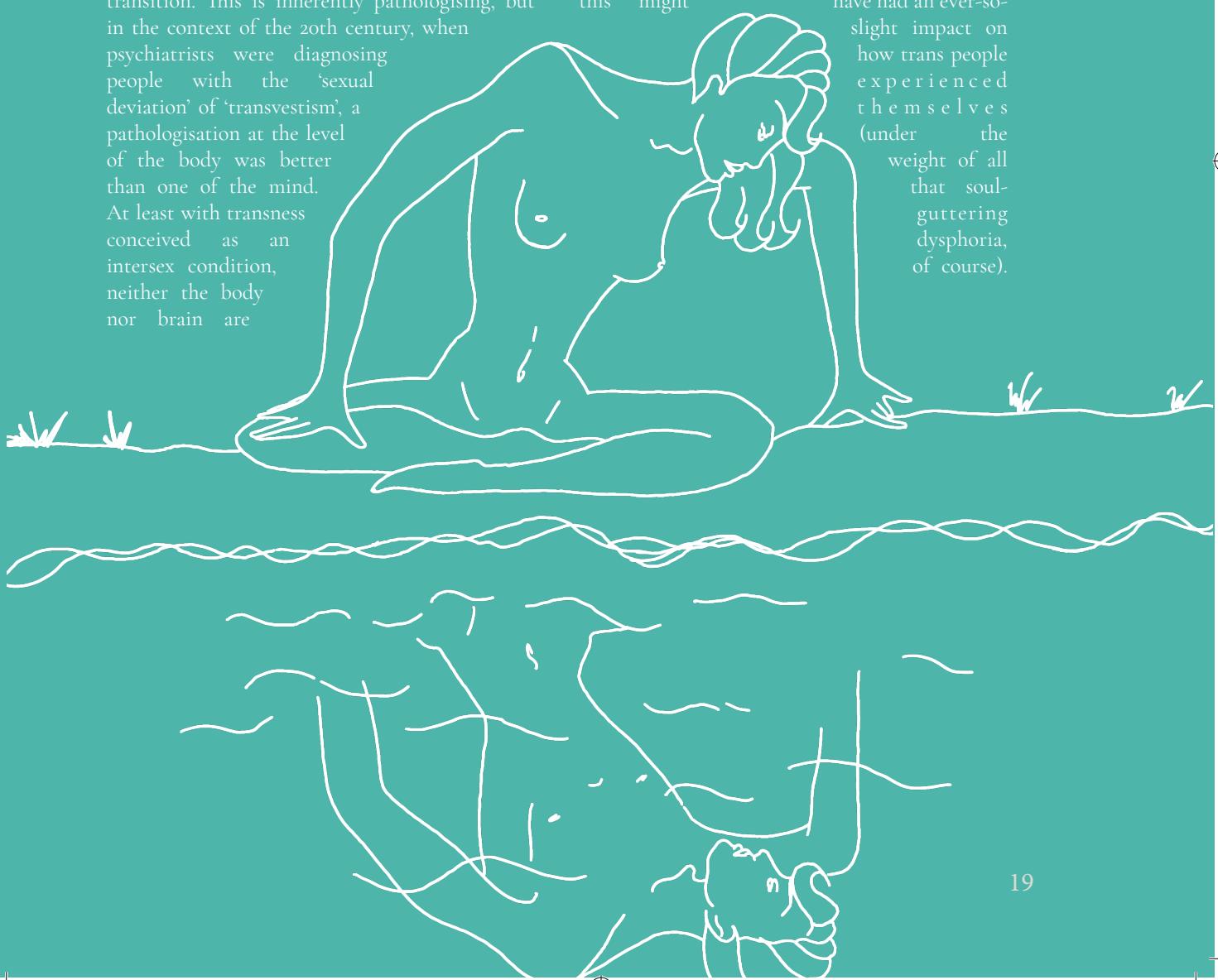
This is the all-too-familiar path of queer people buying into acceptance with self-denouncement.

Thus transness, not being part of the structure of society, is from the beginning bound to narratives.

In the same way that gay and bisexual people defended their lifestyles by arguing that they were born this way, and so couldn't help their 'filthy' habits, trans people

defended themselves by implicitly arguing that they too recognised there was something wrong with them. They were just as disgusted as cis society was by their body, by how it fit into the clothes they wanted to wear, and into the roles they wanted to fill. It's straightforward to see how this might

have had an ever-so-slight impact on how trans people experienced themselves (under the weight of all that soul-guttering dysphoria, of course).





Transition was allowed as a Band-Aid to the tragic entrapment of a male/female brain in the existential prison of a female/male body, only as an attempt to change the body to closely resemble that of the opposite sex. As such, a person could live as a 'proper' man or woman ought to. When both the best and worst case scenario for binary, gender-conforming trans people was to be viewed as an intrinsically malformed object of pity, there weren't many other viable options.

And so many have tried to move on from that. Most trans people will say, and even believe, that you don't need to fit into the 'born in the wrong body' archetype to be trans. Yet, leaving this behind means losing the validation of a medical model and its scientific appeal. A new reason must be found for why we feel the way we do, and most importantly, a reason for why it is logically right for trans people to want to transition and be treated as their identified gender. The hole left by a denounced aetiology was stuffed with other theories: 'a man is someone with a male brain' was out and 'a man is someone who identifies as a man' was in. Of course, brittle with the tension of holding gender apart from both gender roles and sex, these theories are as unconvincing to many trans people as they are to transphobes – they function like a sugar-pill placebo given by doctors

drunken kisses, and how many shows you suddenly had the mysterious urge to binge after hearing about a potentially gay subplot, questioning gender leaves nothing out. No action, feeling, or passing thought is off the table, from birth to the present. This can be twofold: either one seeks the validation that their transness isn't a confused phase but a permanent state – so something real – or desperately looks for evidence that they are in fact cis, and so can be content with their current life without changing anything. In both cases, it is structurally insatiable – whichever direction the questioning follows, it never leads to an answer. Or maybe I'm projecting: my obsessive-compulsive tendencies had me in a counselling office before they ever got me an actual answer on my gender. Regardless, from the countless articles, blog posts, and forum essays from anonymous throwaways, the only common narrative I could find was that I didn't relate to other people's stories. The more I collected, the more unintelligible and conflicting they became. Some knew they were a girl since they were three, and the main emotion of their childhood was not dysphoric angst but genuine confusion as to why they were being treated as if they were a boy. For others, they never felt like anything other than their assigned gender at birth, but the thought of transition seemed inexplicably tempting.

This is the deeper problem with desire for us – not that it means or implies inconvenient truths, but that it means nothing at all.

who forgot that the sweetness would be a giveaway. But if gender is to be distinct from sex, and yet not about conforming to particular gender roles, then what other definition can be given?

This tension is most apparent in the process of gender questioning. Even people who theoretically agree with de-medicalisation will participate in its practices, namely undertaking a clinical dissection of every part of our lives that an elusive gender identity may have touched (read: every part of our lives). Unlike questioning sexuality, whereby the relevant evidence revolves around crushes,

After a while, the absurdity of the situation becomes clear. Here are people tormenting themselves over whether or not they are justified in being something that they can't even define, in order to permit themselves to do what they clearly want to do. The wanting is important; as Andrea Long Chu argues, desire is the engine of transition, despite it not conforming to any moral or political principles. She calls attention to our reluctance to admit the constitutive role of desire in transness, attributing this in large part to how desire implies absence. To want to be a woman implies that you are not one. It is certainly true that we have an emotional interest in denying something which implies that we aren't what we say we are or want to be. But it's more than that. Desire is empty – its only truth is itself. 'I want' only shows 'I want', and there is no logical chain that can get us to 'I should have' or 'I am' without applying some personal theory. This is the deeper problem with desire – not that it means or implies inconvenient truths,



but that it means nothing at all.

It took a while for me to turn such irritation inwards. I thought that I was seeking an answer about my gender, but what would such an answer change? If I found no trace of transness in my childhood (which was less gender non-conforming than that of many cis peers), or if a brain scan showed no difference to that of a cis woman's, I would not have stopped being trans. I would not have lost the experience of transness, or the unplaceable force driving me to look for answers in the first place. An answer affirming my potential identity would not have changed the nature of my desires, as it would only have helped me permit myself to feel them. I realised that it was only myself who could grant myself this permission – this is the beauty of transness. Whilst the particular words change, the structure of the narratives we contort ourselves to fit are fundamentally the same. A person's gender is a truth, printed in black and white, and desire is reduced to an annotation, being a mere response to the nature of their identity rather than anything fundamental itself. Rejecting what this inadvertent pathologisation offers us, in Walt Whitman's words, "the exquisite realisation of health". In being trans, we are confronted with the absurdity that what we want is unjustifiable to us. It has no value beyond the fact that we want it, but this desire is enough. That isn't to say that a sense of identity can't be central to the trans experience, or that it is invalid or unimportant. Rather, it is to say that fulfilling any identity is not what legitimises a desire to transition – that our bodies and transitions are not the site of a cure or correction, but *creation*. ■

BY SYMI STAMOULI





THE ISIS'S OUTLINES

Exhibition

On 22 February 2023, *The Isis*'s Creative Team put together the 'Outlines' exhibition to showcase their work. We wanted to highlight the variety of mediums, styles, and perspectives within the team, and pay tribute to the people whose art brings our pieces to life.

In the lead-up to the exhibition, Anneka Pink and Wyatt Radzin asked them about their artistic processes. Here are some of the highlights from the interview:

"I've always been very influenced by bold and garish art in general. I think that's definitely an inclination that has gotten stronger since I've been at Oxford, because I feel like it's almost more necessary to express the fact that I don't want to align myself with that conservative idea of what an Oxford student is." **(Leon)**

"There can be high art, but so much of art is three-year-olds' painting and going to art club and doing a little bit of drawing with your friends. Such a big part of it is that it's an accessible, weird, and fun thing to do." **(Sophia)**

"Art is so individual. It's not like when I look at the piece of art, I'm thinking about how I could have done it. It's more separate than that – you're observing rather than actually part of it." **(Cleo)**

"One kind of campaign exhibition I did was on the history of Liverpool and revisiting the history of the city. But then again, it doesn't necessarily have to be for a cause; I just like to celebrate people and their stories." **(Taya)**

"It's a real strength of the magazine that so many different people get involved and give it so much flair. And it keeps us on our toes as well. So I don't think we can rest easy. We've got our work cut out keeping up with it." **(Oliver)**





F E B



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NOSTALGIC BLUES

THE MUSIC OF COWBOY BEBOP

*I'm watching tomorrow with one eye
While keeping the other on yesterday.*

Shinichirō Watanabe's Spike Spiegel has one critical affliction: his two eyes do not match. With the vision in one eye he sees the future, whilst the perception of his other eye is glossed over with colours of the past. His former involvement with a crime syndicate keeps coming back to bite him. He's got a beautiful woman who haunts his waking dreams, too many cigarettes to smoke, a rundown spaceship for a home, and some memories he can't leave behind.

Throughout the span of 26 episodes, *Cowboy Bebop* follows its central characters – Spike, Jet, Faye, Ed, and Ein, our motley crew of outlaws – as they run for their lives. They are running from the authorities that chase them, from the relentless allure of the past and the brittle uncertainty of the future. Only towards the end of the show do we realise that the characters are not trying to outrun time, but to chase it. It is a chase for times that are long gone. It is a chase that sees no beginning or end.

1998. *Cowboy Bebop* teeters on the brink of a new era for music and anime alike. There exists

a nostalgia for many old things: the advanced harmonies of mid-'40s jazz; the '60s rhythm and blues bleeding into psychedelia; the rock 'n' roll of the golden '70s; the '80s New Wave. A cocktail of cyberpunk and modern sci-fi masquerading as the pastiche for noir and spaghetti westerns, *Bebop* prompts us to recall a myriad of genre and ideas. It is an adventurous space-opera woven with ballads and folklores, a neo-noir tragicomedy that blends pulp fiction with existential solipsism. Its landscape brings miscellaneous cultures into collision, infecting the settlement of a Chinese diaspora with the seedy neon aesthetics of the Wild West, which results in a gorgeously sordid hybrid of Hong Kong, Morocco, and New York City. It has

the razor-edged sharpness of *Blade Runner*, the scathing wit of *Scarface*, the ludicrous humour of *Lock, Stock, and Two Smoking Barrels*, the doomed allure of *Waterloo Bridge*, and yet the ruminative melancholy of *Casablanca*. Like Spike, the creation of *Cowboy Bebop* looks ahead with one eye yet turns to the past with the other. The off-kilter mixture of anticipation and nostalgia unsettles Watanabe's work and redefines a new genre entirely.

**WATANABE ENSURES,
THROUGH MUSIC, THAT BE-
BOP'S FUTURISTIC SETTING
FEELS LIKE HOME.**

Nostalgia: an affliction defined by sentimentality; a desire to return to a time past or to restore a set of irrevocable circumstances, a pleasurable sorrow.

Just Spike chases a past that no longer exists, Watanabe looks for a genre that is slowly dying before the approach of the 21st century. A strange, tremulous fear lingers over the work's shoulder. Is this the end of cinema as we know it? Is this the end of cinema as we know it? Is this the end of anime as we know it?

Bebop – the name of Spike Spiegel and Jet Black's spaceship – is a throwback to a style of jazz that defies musical formula and seeks above all else to tear apart the seams of restraint. It is tinkling keys on an unstoppable tempo; it is spontaneity, improvisation, discordant harmony. The episodes are *jam sessions*. Not only does the title evoke a haunting musical era – Charlie Parker's whooping alto sax, Thelonious Monk's piano keys, Dizzy Gillespie's trumpet or Buddy DeFranco's clarinet – but through music, Watanabe ensures that *Bebop's* futuristic setting feels like home. This isn't Harlem of the late 1940s, but his devotion is clear: samples of popular culture are ubiquitous.

Tracks by Aerosmith, Queen, and KISS are name-





dropped as jam session titles. Jet's nickname (Black Dog) is only the first Led Zeppelin allusion. Spike's lost lover, Julia, takes her name from The Beatles' track, whilst Faye Valentine is named after one of Richard Rodger's most celebrated jazz standards. The backing track on the session, 'Pierrot Le Fou', is a homage to Pink Floyd's 'On the Run'. *You gotta carry that weight*, he says, as if the unspoken nostalgia hadn't already gnawed our hearts raw.

Abrasive metal riffs thrum along with the blood in our veins. Jamming (musically) with Edward becomes jamming (computer signals from a satellite) with our favorite hacker, Radical Edward. The term "monkey business" is a blatant Chuck Berry reference. The recurrent trio of bickering, drunk passers-by at the bar are named Antonio, Carlos, and Jobim, after Brazilian composer Antonio Carlos Jobim, a *bossa nova* pioneer. The familiarity of Mick Jagger's and Keith Richards's lyrics make us smile; this is a world, after all, full of honky-tonk women and wild horses with some sympathy for the Devil to spare. Who *wouldn't* want to go back to when Muddy Waters begged you not to go down to New Orleans, when John Lee Hooker lamented that it served him right to suffer, when Howlin' Wolf was still moanin' in the moonlight? Who *wouldn't* want to go back to the days when they had the key to the highway?

Shinichirō Watanabe's Faye Valentine faces one fatal obstacle: she has no memory of who she used to be. With 54 years torn from her grasp by an aircraft accident, Faye is a girl out of her time. She is tethered only by fragmented recollections, images of statues and infrastructure. When the memory of where she used to belong finally returns, the sun has sunk below the horizon and she finds the long-awaited home in ruins, gnawed into rubble by ruthless age. Fate is cruel to Faye. Though she finally remembers her past, she is eternally separated from it.

Bebop mocks tropes of the spaghetti western and pays homage to the noir, haunting us with familiar shadows of *femme fatales* and snarky men filled

with hollow witticisms. Spike's entire character design pays a far too obvious homage to *Lupin III*. This form of self-recognition through popular culture sees its climax when an entire subplot is lifted out of *Shaft* (1971) as the characters experiment with psychedelia. In a cloud of mushroom-induced hallucinations, the longings and reveries of each of the characters are revealed. Jet finds a moment of tranquility at last with his beloved Bonsai trees; Faye is cast adrift at the bottom of the ocean, helpless, amidst a swarm of fish whose memories are as transient as her own, whilst Spike faces a looming stairway, an endless climb leading him towards damnation or redemption.

Bebop is a conversation between all its creative counterparts: the visuals bouncing off the music, a relentless, eclectic engagement of graphics, story, and momentum. The vivacity of its scenery – its vibrant colors, garish, almost kaleidoscopic – is never without its aftertaste of existential *ennui* as the music softens to halt: a loneliness, a kind of bitter melancholy made sweet.

This is nostalgia made tangible and comprehensible by the anime's disjointed narrative. This is a callback to a long-lost cultural era that seems to us as stranger than fiction.

This is the future that terrifies us beyond all things. For all that yearning for the past, *Bebop* tells a story of the future. This is a world where bounty hunters walk alongside punk angels, where diverse cultures blend together as humanity disperses into the galaxy, where spaceships are vehicles and super-computers can hypnotize human minds. The irony is palpable. Even when we look towards the future – towards a world where technologies map our coordinates and our identities, where human-colonised planets are within arm's reach – we still find comfort in the familiar refrains, the samba, the heavy metal, the old melodies of our pleasurable sorrows. We see





our own nostalgia reflected back at us. Even in a world so futuristic that it is barely recognisable, the ghost of pop culture makes it ours. *If we must see past and future both through a single pair of eyes*, Watanabe asks, *could we really distinguish between the two?*

Each session details a story of its own, breaking conventions of linear narrative altogether: the timeline flits back and forth between Spike's turbulent and bloodthirsty youth, Jet's former career, Faye's elusive past, clashing diverse temporalities with one another. Never before has anime wit-

**DON'T WORRY IF YOU STEP ON
MY FEET.
WE'LL LEARN TOGETHER.**

nessed such a radical shattering of narrative linearity. This is a genre where free, boundless temporalities can co-exist at once, layered, multiplex and dazzling, where ruins bear memory and the immense unknown of the future looms as a perpetual shadow.

It takes courage to look into a space of immense uncertainty – which the future, invariably, always is. This is the future that Watanabe wishes to address. A soundless, unspoken void where all that we love could disintegrate.

Bebop, with its cult following, has become a so-called icon. In the word 'icon' we find Christian connotations of veneration and religious sanctity that are uniquely fitting in this cultural context. We worship the idols of popular culture in music, cinema, animation, and art alike: it has become its own religion. The age-gone past is always an age romanticised. We long to go where we cannot go. We are never satisfied with our present. The past is always grander, better, more intimate, a space of lyric and inspiration fuelled by the curse of our imagination.

Shinichirō Watanabe's Radical Edward has a smile bigger than anything, bigger than the emptiness at the bottom of our glass. She's got a headful of code and the entire universe at her feet, with a wise,

lonesome dog for company. Ed isn't sure of where she wants to be; she doesn't know if she's chasing a father she never met or a dream she never had. Ed is perhaps the cleverest of us all. When she left the only place she ever called home behind, she didn't even say goodbye.

In saluting the finale of a century, Watanabe knows that no goodbye is necessary.

We venerate how the late 20th century has identified contemporary popular culture. Nostalgia makes disciples of us all. Why else did the Coen brothers make *The Big Lebowski* if not to retrieve the trope of the private detective? Why else did David Fincher make *Mank* if not to dramatise the making of a 1941 classic that is already inherently associated with drama? Why did Lynch make *Mulholland Dr.* if not to find another *Sunset Boulevard*, why did Polanski make *Chinatown* if not to bring noir to its subsequent climax, and why else did Tarantino make *Once Upon A Time in Hollywood* if not to reminisce over an epoch that we worship beyond all things? We perpetually herald the era that no longer is, frantically scramble to preserve its final traces, to turn it over, to press its dead leaves into our unwritten pages. We are caught up in the dying culture's blazing taillights, always chasing after the glory of our predecessors like chasing the sunset at dusk, like chasing waves into the shallows of our ocean. We try to make sense of the golden age of something we loved so much that we could never fully restore it. If we do it again, we might get something new out of it. *Cowboy Bebop* falls into the same category. By the time we finish that drink at the end of the night, maybe the piano will play a tune that we've never heard before. And then, maybe, it'll be the beginning of a new genre altogether.

Do it again. Rewind. Send the record player spinning.

Shall we dance? To a new genre of music, this time? Don't worry if you step on my feet. We'll learn together.

As Spike raises a toast to the bridges he burned, we find harmonies of a new music. In Jet's morose affection, Faye's languid, smoke-rattled laughter,





and the *tap, tap, tapping* of Ed's fingers across a keyboard, in the silence after a gunshot and the trail of a blazing spaceship across the sky: that alone is its own kind of music. Watanabe knows that in order to look back, we must also look forwards. We are *all* watching tomorrow with one eye whilst keeping the other on yesterday. We hold our breaths in anticipation of what's to come even when we cannot *bear* to let go.

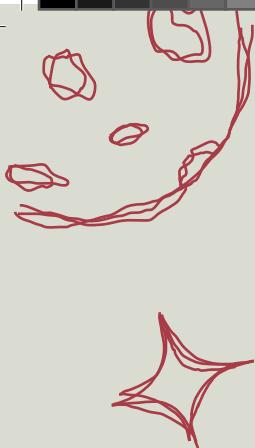
As the concept of popular culture churns and shifts, withers and blooms, disintegrates and transforms, new shapes, new asteroids, new phenomena will overtake us. This is the speed of light our acceleration cannot reach.

And perhaps, if there is enchantment – in a laugh, a tune, a memory, a life – we will find it again. And again. Sometime in the future, what we have lost will return over and over in unrecognisable, breathtaking forms. So instead of saying farewell, we should only wave our hand and repeat what Shinichirō Watanabe had whispered in our ear, shouldn't we? This is not goodbye. This is only—

See you, space cowgirl.
Someday, somewhere. ■



**By Cici Zhang
Art by Cleo Scott**



THE STORY OF A SUPERLOVA

i.

Step into the moonlight, beacon boys, the hour has come for us to write. Leave those starless shadows at once; come feel my pulse; the corners are no longer yours – dance, and look into my eyes. Take some time, come sit by me. Let us tease infinity: if we can dance the night away on Saturn's rings (two daring, flaring astronauts), will our whispers echo in the chambers of the universe? I want to be drowned out by Mars-Madonna, Pluto-P!nk. Tonight I will refuse to think, We'll sip coffee made of gold dust turned confetti in our mouths, let us end the slumber party with a solar-system-pillow-fight! We'll rewrite Orion's dream in our incandescent neon ink. Now take me skinny-dipping in this cosmic drink, or better yet, jive with me along the galactical brink.

ii.

Let constellations slingshot our imagination into the molten, cosmic core – make them quake, make them want more. O' loosen up my asteroid belt, throw me on your Jovian bed; do away with swallowing all the things we leave unsaid. I'll craft for you a satellite bouquet if only you'd agree to marry me tonight, on this Milky Way! The moon shall be our witness, the sun invited, too. We'll have its rays for wedding cake and gulp it down in two. Galaxies will clap abound with ecstasy – it is not every day their choral voice is raised to harmony. We will not ask the gods for blessings (I've all that in you) so it remains for us to simply yell the delicious *I do!*
I love you I do, adieu

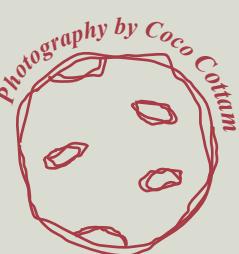
iii.

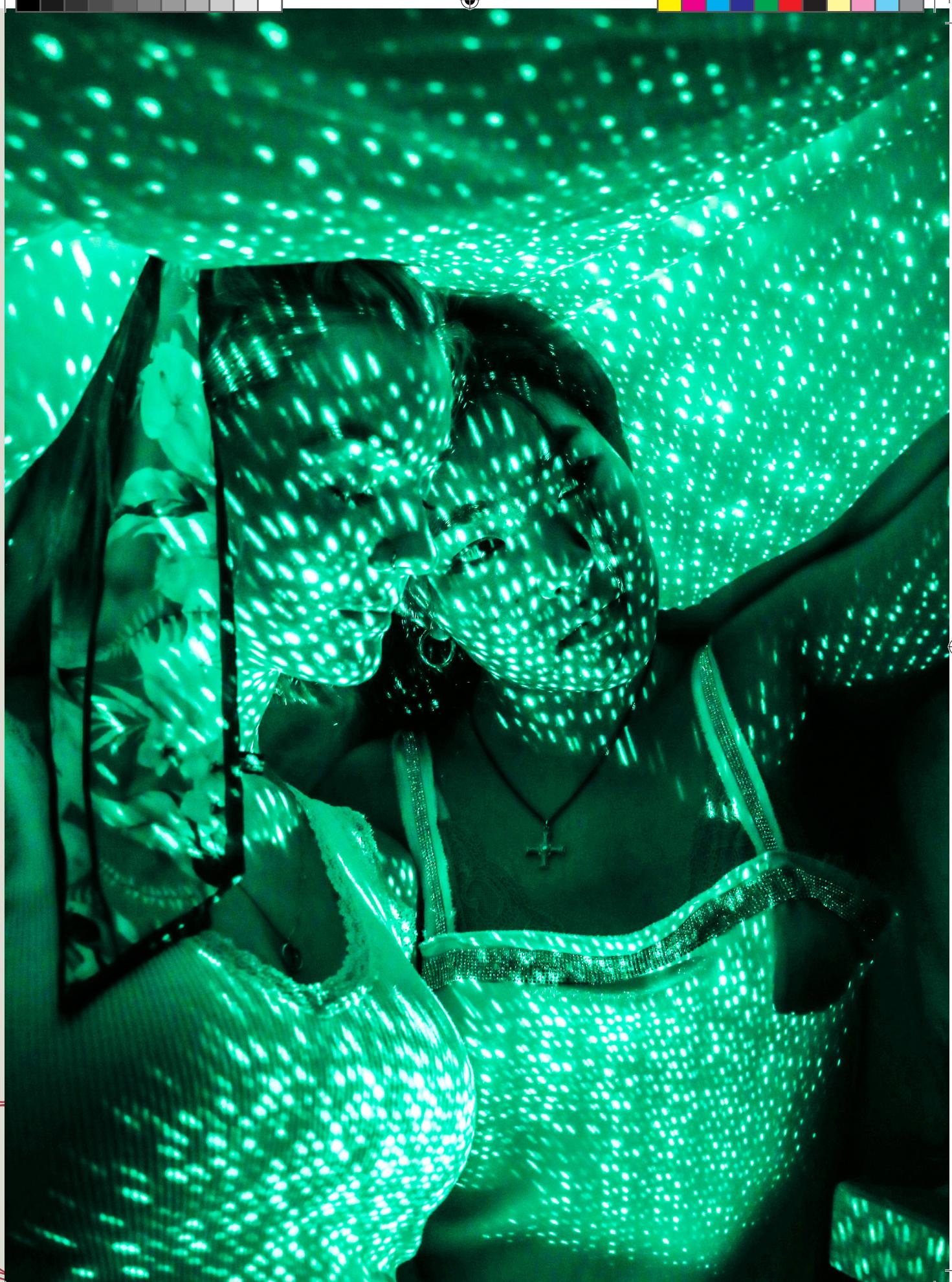
... Swirling in this clay teacup of spit and sand, we were merely individual stars waiting to explode, to expand. We become embryonic stardust, nebular, then, until the centre calls us out of the darkness to coalesce again.

BY FLAVIUS COVACS



Art by Leon Coyle







A Bouquet for Derek

AS the twelfth stroke of last Saturday's midnight subsided over the Superthere echoed from the walls of the Ashmolean the footsteps of a solitary figure running at great speed down St. Giles. Tall and gangling, his thick blond hair blowing in the wind, the Editor of *Isis* was happy. He was running back from Somerville. Finding himself, after a pause to telephone the reviews editor, locked out of his college, and turning to the familiar drainpipe, he bounded with more than usual agility towards the first floor window. Never had life seemed rosier than the moment at which he slipped.

So this week's editorial has an unconventional form. Our Editor is in the Radcliffe with a twelve-inch gash in his left arm; the bouquet of ingeniously

The Isis: From

I love this little anecdote about Derek Parfit, who, after editing *The Isis*, went on to become an influential figure in moral philosophy. It's delightful that someone so omnipresent on reading lists could be the subject of such a silly

story: just a "tall and gangling" student who, finding himself locked out of college, attempts to climb back in, only to land himself "in the Radcliffe with a twelve-inch gash in his left arm." A few lines are also amusingly on-brand: Parfit requests a book on "The Ethical Foundations of Marxism" to get him through his hospital stay, wonders "if that's what one cut feels like ... what it must be like to be in a war," and tries to argue against the spikes responsible for his injury. The story is touching: it's sweetly humanising, reminding us that even very impressive people are both real and occasionally a tad clumsy.

By Wyatt Radzin

The Isis has gone through many different moods and iterations over the years, but some things never change. Students have always looked for forms of self-expression, not only in the authoritative print of magazines but in ephemeral scribblings too. "There are infinite ways to inscribe ourselves on a page, if only we find the space for it," our Margins pitch call reads. And here, tucked in the back of a 1980s issue, Nick Johnson has investigated the art of graphoanalysis. He is delighted to find telepathically accurate readings of his own editors' handwriting: "brilliant but a mess" for one, "does he like looking in the mirror?" for the other. His own admissions descend into farce – let's ask no more about the cat – but the illustrations beneath make a more touching point. Whether an artistic construct or a real mock-up, they move from the grave ("I think we should be told") to the slightly unnerving ("Please...grovel...") to the very relatable ("God I feel hung"). They bring us into surprisingly moving contact with the students of a bygone age in a way that only handwritten expression can. They are testament to the human intimacy hidden between the (printed) lines. By Clemmie Read

But what about that third sheet of handwriting? Yes, it was mine. Yes, the experts agreed to go deeper as they had my immediate permission. No, I'm not going to tell you what they said. It's lucky this article is printed, but I *will* say that although they didn't discover the exact nature of my relationship with my pet hamster..... they sussed out the one with the cat.

So hold on to your pens, boys and girls: this business is to be taken seriously.

Please ... grovel ..) fat old women
Get Alas weird perverts hideous lovers.
flush it away .. you can do what
He's quite a simple as the 'well' I would
I think we should be told. here we are a dude scum hung
will attempt to write extremely boring

Times change, but Oxford students do not. I wonder if the writer, "a bit fed up with Oxford clichés", knew this in the early 2000s, in the days before student stereotypes were charted by *Tab* articles and Oxfesses. Some of it might feel dated, Dan Morgan paints a scathing and familiar mise-en-scène of the student menagerie. Which of us hasn't heard the "Rugger Bugger" drawl of "Maaate! I was so battered last night" or had to escape the Facebook-fuelled clutches of "The Hack"? It's reassuring to know that the students of this hallowed institution can still be categorised by the same old clichés. Just don't ask me what quiz result I got. By Imee Marriott

-Scrutinising Vogue for tips and buying the closest high-street equivalent at Primark
-Whisky and coke (and I don't mean cola) ?

What would you be most likely to say?

- Maaate! I was battered last night!
- Sooo... are you a Union member?
- Lovely pash darling!
- Oh my god! The Kooks are just so commercial!
- T.S Eliot is overrated, Ezra Pound was the real genius!
- Who was your favourite Dr Who?
- Do you know how many deaths Coca Cola corporation is responsible for?
- So I smacked him in the head and downed another Carling (budda budda bing) ?



The Archives



How are women meant to behave? Look beyond the (literally) cheeky front cover of this October 1966 issue, and *The Isis* will attempt to answer your question. "Shakespeare desired women to be 'holy, fair and wise'. Wilde merely desired them not to resemble their mothers", states the editorial on the contents page. It adds that the recipe for a good woman has gone through more editions than *The Isis*, having been "written, rewritten, revised, re-edited and reissued, and usually by men". The front cover features a nude lady, reminiscent of a bawdy Victorian seaside print (hey, at least she's wearing stockings). The bicycle is a nod to the New Woman: in Cambridge, an effigy of a lady cyclist was dangled from a window in 1897, on the day of the debate about granting full degrees to female graduates. *The Isis's* 1966 "Women" issue celebrates progress, looking at "women who did something in their own right and not in the traditional roles of puppet or muse". By Irina Husti-Radule

Isis: Past and Present.

The first number of the *Isis* this term is a portent, not so much perhaps for what is in it, but for what its very appearance implies. For four years the *Isis* has been moribund, and Holywell has ceased to resound to the noise of wheels and lead as they turned out their *Isis* Idols by the hundred, still a little moist from their first appearance in print. And now the wheels are starting again, and once more the lead is getting pleasantly inky. The actual paper on which it is printed may be less glossy than before, and the difficulties of production have limited its appearance to once a fortnight, but the spirit of the *Isis* is still there, and 'which is more, my son,' it is still only threepence.

There are endless impossibilities in the reappearance of the *Isis*, there are also endless possibilities. The of the *Isis*, there are also endless possibilities. The impossibilities are obvious. One cannot in the course of a few weeks, while Oxford is still well below its full numbers, collect oenophiles with the apparent ease with

In 1919, *The Isis* programmatically declared its return: "it is to sing of Oxford that the *Isis* appears once more, to reflect its every tendency, to echo its laughter." In its first 1945 edition, following an intervening period when *The Isis* was banned in Germany, the resolute editors conceived of their role as a kind of guardianship: "We have this privilege of complete independence of thought and we intend to make full use of it [...] always we shall speak for Oxford." Its targets remain perennial: the Union hack, the unworldly Oxford don – and the coffee-drinking socialite, endearingly called "The Camera." The January 1946 spread illustrates a familiar vision of undergraduates scrambling in the pursuit of caffeine: "coffee houses are the homes of overcrowding and the haunts of hundreds of procrastinators with essays on hand." The Rad Quad becomes the "foremost social centre." Even the "hardened war heroes" are part of this mid-day "exodus," despite queueing outside the library at five to nine – a demonstration of enthusiasm for academia the writer seems to decry. You should know, reader, as you gaze vacuously at the ceiling of the Radcam, that you are in good company. By Anneka Pink



Postcard from Dún Laoghaire's West Pier

A fat seal drags itself up the harbour
To gnaw on fishbones. In my dreams jaws clamp
Round my skull, bring brittle bits of me back
Down towards the seaweed, sludge and slime.
I see it as I feel it.

Troops expected France but spilled out of ships
Here, at what was then Kingstown,
To find a revolution baked in blood
And prayers, conducted from a biscuit factory
On the periphery of an empire.

I could write you a masterpiece in the sand,
See it brought to death with sea-blood –
Blue and watery and whole, if only
For that instant. I turn over the vowels
Like shells, sound them like a promise.

I think of the perverse play of love
Printed between the bespectacled man and the woman,
Sent to glimmering Trieste from a ramshackle
Cottage where God gazed from the mantelpiece,
And the stamp that stood sentinel to it all.

The tendrils of an afternoon wasted
Wrap around my wrist, threaten to pull me
Out with the tide. I am kept on grey rock
By salt air and your palm, warm in mine, and
The quiet intimacy of that Sunday.

By Philippa Conlon

Art by
Poppy Williams



The Nine Editors, or, A Commentary on the University

Rezakhanlou, K.

Pages 30-33

Published: March 2023

Keywords: Classics, Oxford, Editors, Academics

Abstract: Born and raised in hilly Hertfordshire, this Classics Undergraduate received his earliest taste of the Ancient World at the hands of *The Usborne Book of Greek Myths*, read aloud by his eager middle-class parents. Enticed further in his school years by battered Green and Yellow commentaries (CUP), alongside the tweed-clad Classics department's annual trip to Athens ("and what order of column are these, boys?"), he embarked on his Classics degree at Trinity College, Oxford, where he wound up with a 2.1 at Mods, hoping for the same at Greats. In this paper, he examines the fictional treatment of professors as characters, universities as sites for narrative drama, and academia as a structure to satirise in literature. Relevant digressions abound, in the form of the history of literary studies at degree level in a climate of Classics' educational dominance, and the academic battle of 'Theory' vs. 'Philology'. Any mistakes, of which he is sure there are some, are his.

The Stimulating, the Baffling, the Slick, the Literary, the Super-Literary et al. For the ancients, there were the Seven Sages; for Classics students, there are the Nine Editors. While the former group hailed from Miletus all the way to the Spartan empire – honoured with two Stephanus pages in Plato's *Protagoras*¹ – the latter stretch the length of three no-less-grand pages in E. Connell's 19XX book, XYZ, pp.165-7.²

Tasked with writing a word-by-word, line-by-line exegesis of a Greek or Latin text, these Editors put their own stylistic spin on what is arguably a dry

academic endeavour. We, the amateurs, need the Editors: they are our saving grace for any possible linguistic, historical, contextual or rhetorical inquiry. For the most part, we're grateful for the elucidation, and for the Editors in their many forms.

Writers like the Remote ("[t]his passage has been illuminatingly examined in the *Harvard Philological Journal*, 1909") and the Minatory ("beware of translating *obtinebat* as 'he obtained'") are simply old friends. Frustratingly precise as he may be, like a metaphorical rap on the knuckles every time I fail to translate a 'meaningless' particle, it's the Niggling³ Editor who remains my favourite:

1. 342e-343b.

2. Reader, it does exist. I just haven't managed to find it after taking photos of these pages aeons ago. SOLO proved useless, as usual.



“cum . . . tum is often mistranslated as ‘both . . . and’ (which is *et . . . et*): the force of the *tum* is to throw a special emphasis on the second word, and the translation required is therefore, ‘not only . . . but also’.”

While in his early days, the overwhelmed Classics undergraduate may have yelled for help, come the end of his degree, he⁴ will be as well-versed in the commentating style of each Editor he comes across as in the general stylistics of classical authors they themselves espouse. The Editor – the Scholar – has traversed the line-by-line margins of the commentary, and come to the fore as a celebrity in his own right, imprinted on our minds and annotated on our texts. This is no isolated or arcane fascination, restricted to students speed-writing essays in the Old Bodleian: as long as there has been institutionalised academia, there has been fictional interest in its proponents.

Until the Second World War, there were more Classics masters in the leading British public schools than teachers of all other subjects combined. In that climate, Connell was parodying

recognised characters of the curriculum, not deliberately making some esoteric in-joke for the (nowadays comparatively small) number of Classics undergraduates.

It was a long time before the centuries-long dominance of Classics could be shaken off by English: Latin continued to be an entrance requirement to Oxford until the 1960s. Raymond Williams notes that the Cambridge English Tripos was originally conceived only as a Part II to the Classics degree, so that Shakespeare, for example, would logically follow on from the ancient tragedians. This was coupled with the (incorrect but persistent) reputation of English as a ‘women’s subject’, as well as Classics’ status as the preserve of the publicly-educated male. Perhaps the anxiety of academic inheritance and marginalisation has never quite left.

At first, English’s existence could be justified on linguistic terms – the approach to Latin and Greek could be easily transferred onto Old English and other early Germanic languages. But it was a push towards literary criticism, an act of ‘close reading’ and cultural studies “drawn from philosophy, psychology, and physiology”.⁵ This revolutionised



3. ‘Niggle’: First attested in 1599. Origin uncertain, but likely borrowed from dialectal Norwegian *nigla* (“to be stingy, to busy oneself with trifles”), ultimately from Old Norse *hnogr* (“stingy; miserly”), related to Old English *hnēaw* (“stingy”).

4. Gender as assumed by Connell.

5. Raymond Williams (1983), ‘Cambridge English and Beyond’, *LRB* 5 (12)



disciplinary views towards the academic study of literature as capital-L Literature. There was finally a Theorist to counter the Philologist.

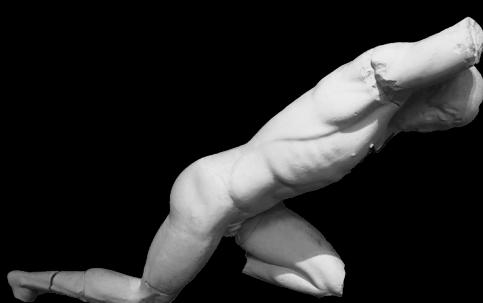
Connell's version of the Theorist would be the Super-Literary Editor. Little did he know of the literary revolution to come. 'Criticism', in the form of I. A. Richards' practical criticism in the UK and the American New Critics' 'close reading', would render the Super-Literary Editor a mere amateur, and the Editor-Philologist the proponent of a separate form of academic study altogether. The old-school approach to texts, focussing on editing, on highly linguistic questions, was to read them slowly and carefully *as texts*, and not to move at once into the general context of human experience or history – that which became the domain of Theory.

Fiction which decides to satirise the institution of the university has, understandably, not been generous to either scholarly kind. In David Lodge's *Changing Places* (1975), the literary Theorist has become a celebrity. The Editor is not afforded this treatment. Instead of a distinction between Classics and English, Lodge (himself Professor of English Literature at Birmingham and UC Berkeley) analyses the split only within English itself. It is not across disciplines but across Anglophone continents that we see academia diverge: the conformist British academic Philip Swallow participates in a university swap with the ostentatious American hot-shot Morris Zapp.



Zapp, under the American system, is a tenured professor at the aptly-named Euphoric State University. With numerous publications and ample fame, he feels depressed at the rapidity of his success. In a fit of 'Faustian' determination, he wishes to oust others in his field, with a series of books on every Jane Austen novel through every theoretical lens imaginable: "Freudian, Jungian, existentialist, Marxist, structuralist, Christian-allegorical, phenomenological, archetypal, you name it." But his fixation on Austen is not to be mistaken for pleasure or affinity for her writing: Zapp coarsely confesses to finding her a "pain in the ass." English Literature for him is a competitive and capitalist field like any other – a way to climb a hierarchy, accrue titles, and earn good money. It is a far cry from the 'art for art's sake' humanism with which one expects Arts subjects to be treated, not least by their professorial proponents.

By contrast, Swallow – described as a man "with a genuine love for literature in all its diverse form" – has worked his way up the British system incrementally to land the unglamorous position of Lecturer at Rummidge, a university best known for its contributions to the biochemistry of the





cocoa bean. He finds Zapp flashy and without substance or rigour; Zapp finds Swallow wholly lacking in the “professional killer instinct” of ambition which took him so far in America. The newer, trendy Super-Literary Editor takes on the old-fashioned, earnest though snooty Niggling Editor.

Lodge generally does well not to take sides. Both men have their flaws as people, and as academics. Zapp is over-confidently jargon-laden in a manner which culminates most embarrassingly at an MLA conference with a paper on deconstructionism based on the metaphor of the striptease in *Small World* (the sequel to *Changing Places*). Swallow finds unprecedented and potentially undeserved success with a book of close reading on William Hazlitt. The novel hints that it is a reactionary conservative audience, fed up with the American “lucubrations of Professor Zapp”, which lauds ‘Hazlitt for the Amateur Reader’, rather than Swallow’s talent. Unlocking the door to the ivory tower, Lodge asks what would happen if these intellectual individuals were ‘made’ interesting, not because of their academic squabbles but because of their characteristic flaws as humans.

A step further than Lodge’s Swallow in conformity to tradition, we have Tom Stoppard’s characterisation of A.E. Housman, real-life classicist and textual critic, in *The Invention of Love* (1997). I like to think of him as the Niggling Editor turned up very many notches. Devoted to the study of textual variants, piecing together “what the ancient authors really wrote”, he finds it a greater point of interest that “a kiss was always osculum” until Catullus introduced *basium* in Poem 5, than the fact that he’s never kissed someone. Housman, the academic at his most erudite and his most annoying, viewed his branch of Classics as a common-sense scientific pursuit, and condemned the learned man who fell short of “the makings of a [textual] critic”.

The scientist-cum-textual-critic was far superior to what passed as a ‘classical scholar at Oxford’, whom Housman would condemn as “a literary critic in dead languages”, making comments like “Ovid’s sentiments are echoed in the following lines of Savage” on a passage of the *Metamorphoses* as a kind of vanity exercise,⁶ with no heed as to the linguistic implications or the manuscript tradition of those words. This attitude, the most extreme version of Classics’ wariness of ‘new-fangled’ English, was documented throughout Housman’s life:

“Knowledge is good, method is good, but one thing beyond all others is necessary; and that is to have a head, not a pumpkin, on your shoulders and brains, not pudding, in your head.”

This famously unforgiving final sentence of Housman’s *The Application of Thought to Textual Criticism* (2015) seems like the words of the imagined Niggler brought to life. No wonder

6. Connell’s ‘the Slick’ Editor.

7. No wonder, too, that the 2001 production of the play at the Lyceum Theatre warranted an eight-page Playbill booklet of supplementary notes.



Stoppard had so much material to work with.² But *The Invention of Love* refuses to focus only on Housman's academic journey and stances. They are a veneer for the more interesting details of his personal life: his latent homosexuality, manifest in his unrequited love for colleague Moses Jackson.

The Scholar is hardly an obvious choice for a fictional, fleshed-out character. Devoted to the lives and principles of people and cultures not his own, he may espouse the wisdom of others, crack the code of an era he had no part in, or inspire students' lives in which he has no part. His life does not seem ripe material for the emotional or personal exploration which fiction often demands. But we have always had a curiosity about the Scholar, his circle, and his world – the texts I have looked at are not exceptions.

There is deep investment in the *lives* of scholars, where academic dispute and hardship go hand-in-hand with personal struggle and vice, or even lead to them. Take the (likely fabricated) feud between the two giants of Hellenistic poetry and scholarship, Apollonius and Callimachus; or

Netflix's recent mini-series *The Chair* (2021), set in the shambolic English Department of the Ivy League-esque Pembroke College. Hardly confined to the texts they edited and commented on, the rhetorical witticisms of the Editors are merely a starting point for what prove to be intriguing academic personalities as a whole. Their institutions too – whether Euphoric State, Oxbridge, or the Library of Alexandria – are interesting to us not just as places of scholarly productivity, but of scholarly controversy.

We want to imagine that the people who meticulously add scholia to the margins of Homer live lives as sensational as those of their subjects. We relish hearing about how subjects and professors decry each other's existence, how they lambast respective methodologies and question 'rigour', how they battle over funding and grants. For those in the know – those for whom Zapp is still relatable, Housman terrifying and sympathetic all at once, and the Slick Editor the worst kind of classical text commentator – it is amusing when these characters emerge from their commentaries to live a life momentarily in the spotlight. Their documented and imagined eccentricities demand it. ■

Photography by InChan Yang





THE RAPE OF IO

By Marianne Doherty

CW: sexual violence

Io as a girl

The river babbles as though senile.
A swallow and a nightingale exchange songs
of worms and small horrors.
A little figure struggles through the field.
The mist obscures all else. 5
Her father's house dims
then disappears. She blinks.
The landscape blanks and expands,
yielding fields of nothing;
harvest after harvest of stiff white air
carried up on men's shoulders. 10
Her satchel hurts her shoulder,
her pigtails strain her scalp.
As she reaches the copse,
The birdsong fails. 15
She seems to have dreamed this all before.
As in her dream,
her short legs fail in the mud.
She wobbles up,
and the man appears behind her.
Whenever she turns, 20





he is. She sees
his long shadow. But
when he touches her,
he is throbbing
with light. His edges bleed into the air.
Her hair stands on end.
She hears his breathing.
Then her own.
He takes out a knife, gently.
She looks up, feels
the white blade tease her white throat.
She observes the blank sky.
It is close to her like a dome.
The trees lean in,
stiff with excitement.
He presses against her.
A drop of blood. "Feel how wet I am,"
the blade thinks. It blushes
into further gore.
She feels the depth of it all now,
and cries out to God.
God smiles, lifts her skirt
and takes her from behind.

25

30

35

40



Io as a cow

Slow nights in the mud	The struggle to think	
Somehow	A puddle to drink from	
A small delight	In this puddle I see an animal	
Trembling below me	Fresh grass	
Once, three girls	Whose faces, I –	78
I speak to them	They melt away	
My voice has changed	How?	
Fresh grass to chew	Small mysteries	
Some part of me	Seems to be screaming	
Lowing, rather	I go to sleep	
My body gets heavier	A calf?	
That seems natural	Men watch me	97
Constantly	I must be a prize cow	
The sun itself	Gropes me	
With its heat	I dream of knives	2
And butchers	My calf joins me	3
Somehow he disgusts me	I lick him clean	
Fresh grass	I meet a man	
A sad face	Sad person face	
My face	No	
Whose face?	The face cries	
His calf is missing	Veal?	199
He says her name	I hear it as	
Through water	Io! Io! Io!	
I take	My hoof and	
In the mud	I draw my name	300
Io Io Io I o IO IO IO IO! IOOO IOOO!		



Io as a woman

A long journey brought you here
a pest for her hall. A gnat.

The fire crunches its fuel.

Her son reclines otiose on a rug:
brutish, slow, and stocky.

305

You fidget in the silence
and begin to sing
your favourite song:
a God and a girl.

Something passes between them
which your high voice
terms love.

310

The final lines echo
in the hollow of the hall.

On the wall, you watch shadows flicker,
form, then separate. One
devours the other. It begins again.
You frown, dizzied by the repetition.

315

Slaves bring out the veal.

She winces and chews slowly.

320

Silence falls, save the sound of knives.

The old discomfort returns.

You turn to the boy, wanting only to know
who his father might be.

Coldly, he points to the window, and you see
the cruel sky darken.

325





Casual Tea

Last night I dreamed I was running
across the craters of the Western Front.
The enemy had retreated, and the doctor
told me that a Body had died.

“All are buried or home for tea,
but a doctor works in between.
The war is won, and I am done.
And so It is.” Somebody’s son.

I ran for hours
through the black earth stricken
by gas, and over trenches
as wide as the Rubicon,
flooded with singed meat
decomposed too fast.

Until,
by the shadow of a tree,
reclined like a Caesar
in the mortar-tilled dirt,
I found the Body.

“Oh, thank God almighty,”
the Body said,
“you came here to save me!”
(It was not very dead).

By Neal Bold



Art by Louis Rush

Seattle Man

In sixth grade, Will moved out west like a cattleman,
told me 'bout weed on Xbox: "Promise not to tattle, man."

Boeing, Hendrix, Supersonics, Grunge,
Puget: the sound of battle, man.

I traded my controllers for a guitar,
I'd wave the pick like a paddle, man.

PAF, drop-D, Big Muff—
oh, I could prattle, man.

Solid-state's not so bad,
the speakers rattle, man.

I'd follow Cobain, Cornell, and Staley,
ax in hand, I'd jump on the saddle, man.

I was any joints short of stoner,
but my brain I'd addle, man.

"Look, it's Neal, the mound of sludge!"
Call me Melvin, a real Seattle man.



THE TRAVELS OF THE BONSAI

Towering above the rural village of Maekgwe in South Africa is the King-of-Garatjeke baobab tree. The tree is celebrated for its majestic size and age (some baobabs have reached 5000 years-old), and it functions as a town hall for the local community. The baobab is an iconic symbol of the African savannah, synonymous with its grandeur. And yet, in a Cape Dutch farm on the nearby coast, Bonsai artist Willem Pretorius has been dwarfing baobabs for the last 20 years, taking pride in the fact that he can cultivate mature trees that will only ever reach a few feet in height.

Bonsai is an art form that prompts us to ask why we take joy in miniatures. It seems an odd impulse — to reduce the awe we feel for nature, to domesticate the sublime to what one might refer to as a pet tree. Hugely popular in Japan, where the borders between tectonic plates cause frighteningly regular earthquakes and tsunamis, the Bonsai can seem like a manifestation of the desire for aesthetic control over a hostile landscape. Alternatively, we can read Bonsai as part of a larger dialogue — a mutual exchange between nature and culture, unique in that it is an art form which takes trees as its medium. Caring for a Bonsai tree functions as a microcosm of our relationship with nature and with each other: it miniaturises interactions that also take place on a global scale.

The word Bonsai refers both to the trees themselves and the practice of cultivating them. Bonsai is therefore more than an object: it is a process, an idea which can travel unfettered across the world and throughout cultural consciousness — particularly in literature. In her short poem 'Bonsai', the Filipina poet Edith Tiempo suggests that one of the values of miniaturisation is how it makes the unwieldy portable: "something that folds and keeps easy." For her, this compression is a form of concentration: significance is boiled down, "Till sea-shells are broken pieces / From God's own bright

teeth, / And life and love are real / Things you can run and / Breathless hand over / To the merest child." Something that is small and portable, after all, is something that can be shared. It is far easier to carry a pocketbook than a door-stopping tome.

THERE ALWAYS SEEMS
TO BE SOMETHING
UNEXPECTED IN THE
INTERACTIONS
BETWEEN FICTION
AND REALITY

Poetry is no stranger to forms which dare to stop short: on the page, works which operate within restrictive forms are not considered deformed, but informed. The incessant pruning of the Bonsai master is mirrored by the trim pentameter lines of John Philips's georgic poem, 'Cyder'. To ensure an apple tree bears fruit, he advises the reader to "Spare not the little Off-springs, if they grow / Redundant." Pruning, a paradox of tenderness through violence, renders the poem a harvest procured through arduous labour. This is all part of our interventionist stance towards nature. 'Cyder' reminds us that in English, the first and principal meaning of culture comes from the cultivation of the land. It only grew to denote the cultivation of the mind or an umbrella term for the arts after the agricultural revolution of the 18th century. Philips's literary pruning returns the idea of cultivating plants to the idea of culture: cutting a tree becomes a means of artistically refining nature. As 'Cyder' demonstrates, the constraint of form often works as a creative impetus, just as the brevity of the human lifespan helps to lend meaning to everyday experience.



The finite forms of life and literature are set in parallel by Alejandro Zambra's 2008 novella, *Bonsai*. The Chilean poet tells, with touching concision, the tale of two lovers and a life which stopped short. Zambra gives all this away in the first paragraph, though, ending his synopsis with the grand phrase "the rest is literature". Perhaps Zambra is not being too bold here: he implies that it is not the mechanical framework of plot which makes literature, but how it unfolds – the process of telling. Inside Zambra's book, the lovers read a short story which is also called *Bonsai*, and years later, one of them attempts to rewrite it. This kind of self-reflexivity is dangerous for a novel: Zambra risks overpowering the tenderness of his little narrative with a less appealing sense of his own intellectualism. Luckily, the humour of Zambra's *Bonsai* rescues it: the novella always seems to be poking fun at itself, at its own potted reiterations of the now-familiar adage that life resembles a fiction, and that fiction resembles another fiction, too.

When the Bonsai tree makes its way into fiction, it functions in a variety of surprising ways. There always seems to be something unexpected in the interactions between fiction and reality, which objects from real life provide a window into. John Plotz's study, 'Portable Property', is all about the English love of objects: he writes that possessions, in novels and in homes, "generally serve not as static deadweights, but as moving messengers... [they] acquire meaning from their earlier peregrinations." Jane Eyre, for instance, decorates Moor House with dark mahogany furniture: these unassuming souvenirs of Caribbean plantation slavery act as a direct link to the legacy of colonial cruelty that haunts the entire novel. For Zambra, the scaled-down art of Bonsai works as a model for the metafictional miniatures that mirror his larger narrative. However, as Plotz points out, objects like the Bonsai tree might also function less introspectively, as a connection to

the material world outside the text: they trail associational traces of history behind them, marked as they are by their "earlier peregrination". In the case of the Bonsai, that history is one of travel and cultural interchange. Plotz draws our attention to the contested borders which distinguish cultures from one another. It is no coincidence that the Bonsai tree, with its diminutive size, has become one of Japan's most iconic cultural exports.

Nowadays, the Bonsai functions almost metonymically in the West as a shorthand for Japanese culture. It is undoubtedly an art that travels well. The first Westerners to discover the Bonsai were taken with these miniature replications of life-like scenes. In the diary she kept during her 1905 stay at the stately home of Count Okuma, Marie Stopes wrote of the Count's "fine collection of dwarf trees... I watched one of his gardeners pruning a mighty forest of pines three inches high, growing on a headland jutting out to sea in a porcelain dish." There is an arch amusement in Stopes's account. The cultivated verisimilitude of the Bonsai landscape must have seemed a world away from material bric-a-brac of the Victorian parlour.

Robert Fortune, a travelling Victorian botanist, described the celebration of "dwarf plants" in China and Japan using similar phrasing to Stopes, reporting that "the art of dwarfing has been brought to a high state of perfection." Interestingly, Fortune fashions the phrase "dwarf trees" into a verb: "the art of dwarfing." To 'dwarf' typically means to be bigger than, or to make small by comparison – one gets the sense that for the English, "dwarf trees" are all about the human. What does it really mean to dwarf a plant?

The English phrase "dwarf trees" used by these travellers is an imperfect translation of *Bonsai*. It fails to encompass the process of cultivating and maintaining a Bonsai tree, instead focusing reductively on the product. Bonsai is more than an ob-





ject, after all – it is an artistic practice, and one which makes use of a living medium. This is another point at which Bonsai overlaps with literature. The medium of language, like a live plant, is never inert. A book is not quite a finished artefact, but a set of ideas reinvigorated with each new reading. Ultimately, Bonsai is a practice that humbles us, rather than engendering total mastery over nature. Consider the shape of a Bonsai artist's life, structured entirely around the needs of his trees. Who controls whom in this situation? There is an old tale in which a Bonsai master makes his apprentice stand and sweat in the heat of the day to feel as the tree felt when he forgot to water it. It seems that practitioners of the ancient art of Bonsai are doing far more than dwarfing trees: they are rediscovering the ways in which nature and art are intertwined and might be figured as reflections of each other.

Fortune's intriguing phrase, "the art of dwarfing", underscores the process by which Bonsai reminds us that size is always relative.

BONSAI IS AN ART FORM THAT PROMPTS US TO ASK WHY WE TAKE JOY IN MINIATURES

Bonsai is not solely a Japanese art, though this is often assumed in the West because Bonsai was first imported to America from Japan, most

dramatically after the American occupation of the country at the close of the Second World War. This occupation enabled cultural exchange. General MacArthur held cultural workshops for the American military to enjoy, including ones on Bonsai. The Americans were reportedly impressed by the age of the Bonsai that they were shown, some of which were twice as old as the American nation. In that moment, it may have been hard to tell who was dwarfing whom.

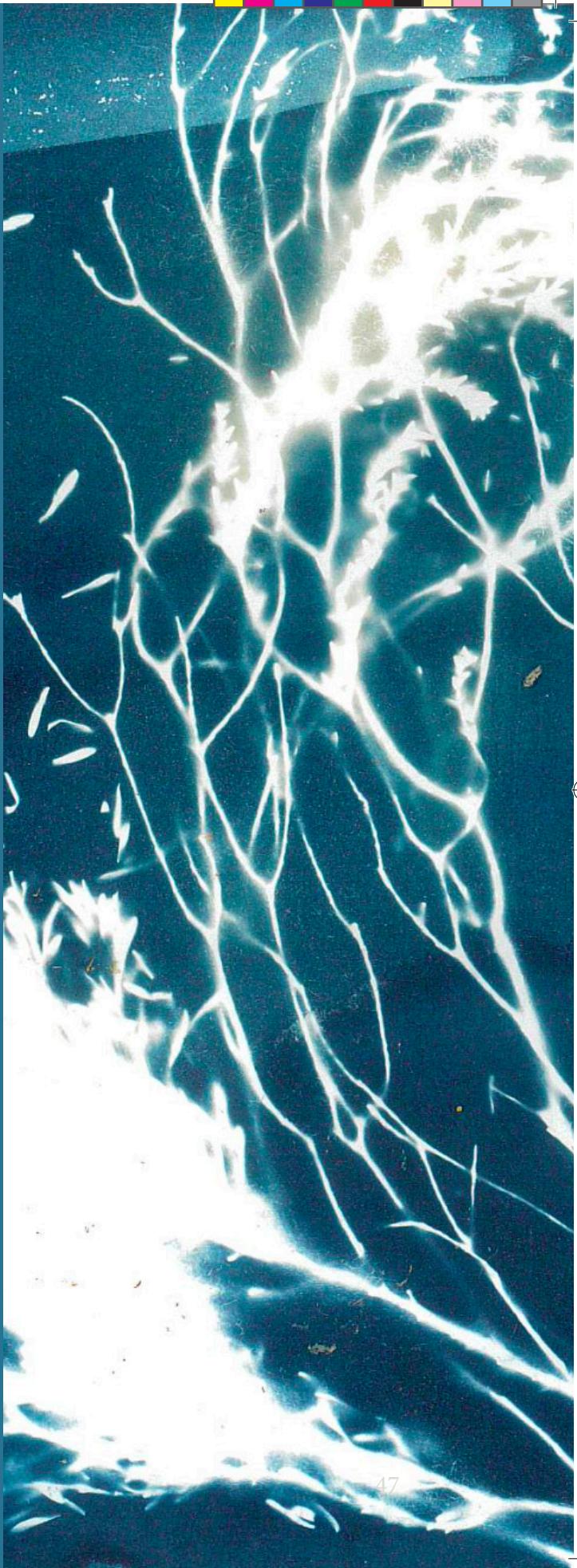
As an art, Bonsai can be a means of reframing our relationship with the world around us – with each other and with nature. Practically, the art of Bonsai makes us more sensitive to the needs of plants, a quality particularly relevant in the period of ecological catastrophe we currently find ourselves in. The theatrics of the famously demanding Bonsai tree also teaches us how fine the balance is between life and death, and how easily human error can kill.

What we discover in the alternative realm of the Bonsai garden can be translated into nature, just as what we discover in literature can be translated into our everyday lives. The history of Bonsai, the globetrotting tree, shows that culture and nature are not at loggerheads. Rather, their interactions can create something beautiful.

By Charlotte Slater



ART BY SOPHIA HOWARD





THE LUNCH

Based on Monet's 'The Lunch', set in his garden at Argenteuil

Jean's cheeks flushed red. The tower he had been building had come tumbling down, felled by the swift gale of his pudgy hand batting a bee away. The pollen in the air made his nose run, dripping onto the smart new sailor suit Maman had insisted he wear. *For Papa*, she had said, and so he had given in.

It was far too hot for it, especially at the lunch table. Amongst the slump of midday heat and grown-up conversation, Jean felt stifled, as if trapped in bed under a heavy blanket which he could not kick off. The laughter seemed to curdle, smiles melting into glasses. Only the tinkling of cutlery reassured him because if they were still eating, it meant that nobody had left.

And so, though he *did* wriggle, he really didn't mean to knock into Elisabeth. She squealed, and Maman spilled her wine. Papa only frowned before continuing to chew solemnly on

the bread before him. He remained unperturbed whilst the two women frantically dabbed at their dresses and rushed inside to change. Jean thought it a shame that Maman hadn't let the crimson blots bloom; it would have added something new to her white summer's best.

"You've lost your hat," Papa murmured to no one in particular.

He had stayed only to finish his meal. Now he brushed the crumbs off his lap and sauntered off, fading into the garden's foliage. Jean, who had been sitting in silence, looked around and timidly knocked on his head. He was relieved to find his straw hat sitting sturdily. It wouldn't do to annoy Maman any more today, and missing hats were prone to do just that – something which he was sure Papa knew.

Finding himself in fresh solitude, Jean swung his legs and picked impatiently at a peach, drawing out its stone only to lob it deep into a far-off flowerbed.





He whistled, rubbed his eyes, and snuck a taste of wine. Its bold flavour surprised him – not at all the sweet sipping he had expected. He smacked his purple lips together and clambered down from his seat, eager to settle into some pose of innocence.

Jean began to stack matchstick logs one on top of the other. Wary of his clammy hands, he moved them with caution, bit by bit. In the cool of the shade, his movements slowed to barely more than a breeze. The hum of insects and the whisper of leaves found harmony with his steady breath, lips parted in concentration. Even when the voices of Maman and Elisabeth fractured the garden's peace, Jean did not bother to look up. Reluctant to be disturbed, he willed their chatter to waft away. Only with a little grin did he acknowledge Maman, who kissed him lightly as she grabbed her boater from the branches of the overhanging tree. Away from the table, she seemed lighter, more at ease. In the quivering air, she could have been floating.

The swish of skirts dissolved into muffling green. And still Jean sat, enraptured by his work of construction. He stacked steadily, unwavering in his precision, until the buzz of an errant fly came too close. Wood clattered onto the unyielding paving stone. His trance was broken. Wiping his streaming nose onto his sleeve, Jean glared at the table still laden with food.

All this fuss for a lunch which no one actually seemed to have wanted. Now the spoils of the feast looked unreal, a mirage of over-ripened fruit and sticky syrup. Flies hung heavy in the afternoon haze, perfumes cloying in the stagnant air. Staling bread on a rumpled tablecloth. Shades of pink melting into bruised browns; drips of orange congealed in the sun.

By Olivia Dunn





Clawing onto Capitalism

SUBCULTURE IN THE MODERN AGE

BY THALIA ROYCHOWDHURY

For many, Punk brings to mind a long-lost rebellion: a Vivienne Westwood-tinged era of underground DIY resistance, smoky cat eyes and youthfully optimistic, anti-establishment values. Yet, in Britain's modern age, pop starlets wear goth-inspired pieces in glossy magazine editorials, and heavy metal band-tees fill the streets. Punk's claws have been filed down so that high-street chains can market plaid and tartan to the masses.

That is not to say that all subcultures have been universally absorbed into the mainstream. In Japan, I have observed some of Punk's original underground spirit being recaptured in the Visual Kei movement. Primarily based on music and fashion, it's a movement designed to stand out, rebelling against the hierarchical and conformist aspects of Japanese society. Examining these two movements – the long-since commercialised Punk



and the alive and thriving Visual Kei – can reveal the complexity of subcultures in the modern age.

Punk – once a movement with clear ideologies reflected in fashion, politics, and music – has now become a mostly superficial aesthetic. Its original, powerful non-conformity rallied against a suffocating 1970s Britain. Tartan patches and tight leather skirts were not just a striking look, but a defiant challenge to both social standards and societal dogma. The Punk philosophy was anti-authoritarian, emphasising individual liberty against governmental repression. This was particularly relevant in an era when censorship was rife in the British media: the Sex Pistols' single 'God Save the Queen,' a sly commentary on class struggle and royalism, was banned from all BBC radio stations.

Though Vivienne Westwood has now transitioned into a high fashion brand, its original Kings Road branch was emblematic of these Punk values. The store was a landmark where young radicals tried on ungendered, bondage, and fetish-inspired clothing designed to shock. In a daring statement, the homoerotic 'Cowboys' graphic tee, famously worn by Sid Vicious of the Sex Pistols, showcased male-male intimacy only a decade after the legalisation of homosexuality in England. The mere display of the shirt in Vivienne Westwood's shop window resulted in a court prosecution under the 1959 Obscene Publications Act and a fine for 'indecent exhibition.' In this way, clothing could transform day-to-day existence into radical political protest. Punk's political strengths were underwritten by drug use and a largely male-dominated music scene – the culture itself was not perfect, but its roots were radical.

Subcultures emerged as ideological movements in response to contemporary society. As Punk grew older with its original members, it lost its shock factor. Other subcultures began to replace it in the public zeitgeist, as they reacted to shifting social values and issues. But this evolution is not necessarily negative, instead allowing for growth and development over time. For instance, the 1990s Seattle sound (Grunge) movement took cues from Punk's DIY culture. Rather than the shiny leather and extreme makeup of Punk, Grunge favoured thrifited florals and unmistakeably used jeans, for

Grunge sought to combat the vapid commercialism and brand obsession of the '90s, rejecting Hollywood's American Dream. Subcultures inevitably evolve as a distinct response to social pressures; standing strong against the mainstream, whether in a dingy Camden dive or on the streets of modern-day Osaka, these movements cannot be categorised into a simple, linear order – instead, they often coexist and overlap with one another.

But Punk has been forced to stay frozen, refashioned into a mere aesthetic by its modern purveyors. Many subcultures have simply become buzzwords on trend-hunting sites, like the LA-based Dolls Kill. Dolls Kill, like many of its contemporaries, markets the aesthetic of resistance without the substance. While its models wear distressed jackets and edgy slogan tees, the company's values tell a more cynical story. Most infamously, the owner Shoddy Lynn posted an Instagram photo of armed policemen at the height of the Black Lives Matter movement, captioned: "Direct action in its glory." While the 1970s Punk movement was not politically perfect by today's standards, the support of police brutality is definitely at odds with the values of its original anarchic, anti-authoritarian members. Fashion brands have turned what was once group resistance against societal dogma into an individualistic means by which to differentiate oneself from the norm. While self-expression itself is not necessarily a bad thing, it has undeniably dislodged the movement from its powerful and political roots.

So what remains of British Punk? A Brazilian asylum seeker under the name of 'Zombie Punk' is perhaps the most famous figure in the contemporary London Punk scene. He can be easily spotted in Camden Town by his striking face tattoos and mohawk. Standing on the bridge with a cardboard sign reading "HELP A PUNK GET DRUNK," he accepts spare change in exchange for photos. Although his Punk values may be genuine, in the eyes of sightseers and aspiring photographers, he has been deemed a local curiosity. The public's mascot-ification of 'Zombie Punk' has set an alarming precedent for other alternative fashion wearers such as myself. When visiting Camden Town in gothic or emo ensembles, my friends and I are regularly photographed and harassed; we are made into local attractions like



'Zombie Punk' without our consent.

In search of modern subcultures, I have been forced to go further afield, to a country where alternative cultures have not yet been neutered. The Japanese Visual Kei music scene remains defiantly underground and local; it emerged as a chance for constrained youth to express themselves, which has managed to continue the same, non-conformist sentiment today. Visual Kei is a scene uncharacterised by a particular style of music: bands borrow freely from wildly different genres, including Glam rock, Classical symphonies, and Swedish heavy metal. Rather than composition style, it is the powerful 'visual' stage looks of its members that differentiates this subculture from the mainstream: think wild, spiked hair, industrial platforms, Rococo-inspired ensembles and heavy eyeshadow. Their conspicuous costumes are a far cry from the sober suits and beige Uniqlo uniforms one sees on the streets of Japan. While this commitment to the aesthetic may seem a far cry from Punk's deeper anarchist roots, the very act of standing out is a far more blatant political statement in Japan.

出る釘は打たれる

The nail that sticks out gets hammered down (a Japanese proverb)

One of the country's core values seems to be that conspicuous individuals will be punished for their non-conformity by those around them. Fitting

**"Punk's claws
have been filed
down so that
high-street
chains can
market plaids
and tartans to
the masses."**

into a group and maintaining hierarchy through honorific speech is integral to everyday life in Japan, so the choice to go outside the sartorial norm is far more radical than one might expect from an individualist, Western perspective. Visual Kei's clothing forms a bastion against the stifling expectations of Japanese society. I first entered the scene by attending concerts for the heavy metal adjacent act JILUKA. Perhaps the band's most famous member (and my personal favourite) is Sena, a flamboyant guitarist whose long pink hair and black leather ensemble proudly refutes Japanese masculinity. It is difficult to imagine Sena achieving the same popularity in the stiflingly macho-Western metal scene; his self-expression is emblematic of Visual Kei's radical gender fluidity.

Since Visual Kei bands are small, local affairs, members and fans are able to forge a tight-knit community, reminiscent of the DIY days of Punk. As I went to successive JILUKA concerts, I grew familiar with my fellow fans, many of whom were on a first-name basis with the members – one young mother had even introduced her children to them at a fan event. The venues were intimate, with scarcely more than 300 people at a time. So powerful was the connection between fan and artist that the most diehard would forgo holidays, instead catching overnight buses, bullet trains and planes across Japan to watch them in concert.

Such levels of dedication are not unique to JILUKA but instead are a widespread phenomenon across the Visual Kei genre: fans spare no expense on buying merch, such as 500-yen polaroid (*cheki*) snaps of their favourite members. The camaraderie between fans and artists within the Visual Kei community is encouraging, though it is underscored by the uncomfortable amounts of money a fan is forced to dedicate to the band. As with British Punk, commercialisation rears its ugly head. Instead of the mass-marketing of Punk, Visual Kei fans take unwieldy financial burdens upon themselves to support a band, leaving their favourite artists' survival dependent on a small pool of loyal followers.

This financial sacrifice produces a distinct hierarchy among fans. The most dedicated claim superiority over newer fans, taking up prime spots closest to the stage, flaunting their band



ONCE AGAIN, I BRITISH PUNK COMMERCIAL REARS ITS UG INSTEAD OF THE MASS-MARKET

hoodies and badges as a mark of seniority. If a beginner attempts to break through to the front, they are quietly ushered back into the throng. This unspoken, rigid hierarchy uncomfortably mirrors the *senpai-kōhai* (senior-junior) dynamic of Japanese corporate culture, undermining the non-conformist attitude of Visual Kei. The atmosphere of the concerts themselves is also far more sober than their British counterparts; instead of the intense mosh pits and familiar shoving crowds, Visual Kei fans silently headbang and clap in sync to the music. While it is undeniably powerful to stand out amidst a beige-clothed majority, there is little beyond that original, purely 'visual' philosophy to be found in Visual Kei.

My most uncomfortable moment as a Visual Kei fan forced me to confront the conservatism lurking below the subculture's surface. A friend and I were attending a *taiban* (a concert with multiple artists, most of whom we had never heard of), and we noticed – beneath generic merch and heavy metal motifs – hoodies marked with the Japanese 'Rising Sun Flag': a flag unmistakeably intertwined with Japanese imperialism and the colonial atrocities their regime committed. When the members finally arrived on stage, they were draped in the distinct white and gold uniform of Japanese naval officials. We promptly left the concert area, disturbed by the blatant romanticisation of such loaded imagery, yet our fellow spectators remained nonplussed, headbanging along as they had done for the bands before them. Whether these fans were actively imperialist or simply

viewing these military emblems as another flashy fashion statement was unclear. Regardless, their reaction demonstrated the problem inherent to a subculture based on a 'visual' aesthetic rather than political protest. When one trades purely in an image, without thinking of social and political ramifications, it can lead to a dangerous mishandling of deeply sensitive issues.

Clearly, neither British Punk nor Japanese Visual Kei is perfect. Be it the mass-marketing and aestheticisation of Punk or the uncomfortable crossing over of finance and friendship in Japanese Visual Kei, subculture has had to claw onto capitalism to survive. In the modern era, Punk has been practically commodified beyond recognition – its original, radical roots erased. While Visual Kei provides an encouraging example of a thriving subculture, the absence of a political consciousness has proved deeply damaging. Yet both 1970s British Punk and modern Japanese Visual Kei can still provide a means of self-expression. For individuals, the very act of dressing in the fashion of a subculture is a powerful symbol of nonconformity. Capable of challenging not only convention but political dogma, subcultures have the potential to remain far more than just a costume. ■



ART BY DOWON JUNG



MEDITATIONS ON Morisot

To my mother, who taught me the language of painting.

Berthe Morisot (1841-1895): Impressionist painter, woman, mother.

While her counterparts, the Impressionists, became known for their radical paintings of landscapes and Parisian nightlife, art history portrayed Morisot as a mother. Over the years, she morphed into the blueprint for pictorial depictions of family life, often at home or in her garden.

Although we remember Morisot as a mother, she did not live to see her daughter Julie Manet beyond her teenage years. On 2 March 1895, when Julie was only 16, Berthe died. My mother, however, has lived long enough to see me turn 23.

Once, in the middle of an argument with my mother, she lamented that she wished I was young again. I often wonder, had Morisot lived long enough to see Julie older than sixteen, would she think the same too?

Julie Daydreaming (1894)

Resting her face on the palm of her right hand, the teenage Julie stares glossily outward. Her lips tip ever so slightly downwards while her white linen dress illuminates the picture, her shadows almost suggestive of a halo. Is she a moody adolescent or a sentimental young woman? The artist is not visible, but I imagine Morisot's eyes traversing the silhouettes of Julie's figure, tracking her eyes, nose, her white dress – this moment engraving itself into Morisot's mind as she transcribes it onto her canvas.

As I stare through the window of my room at the frosty fields outside, I reflect on the shifts in my life: new cities, new friends, new conflicts... But through Morisot, the last of Julie is immortalised at sixteen; our memories of her are now defined to that crystalline age.

Woman and Child in a Meadow at Bougival (1881)

Radiating from the picture are Morisot's tender brushstrokes, their fuzziness surrounding the infant Julie. In it, she evokes the unreliability of memories, of growing up, capturing the vivid vagueness of that very unreliable nature. Our eyes suggest that Julie is playing with her mother as she hops around the grasses, picking up little daisies along the way. Except that lady is not her mother: it is Paisie, Julie's wet nurse, a woman paid to take care of Julie. Instead, we find ourselves standing in the position of Berthe – the painter herself – a mere observer of this moment.

The idea of motherhood has always been complex. The definition of the job and what a mother ought to do has never been clear-cut. Yet we feel confined to these concepts from childhood: the mother, a carer, the daughter, a receiver. As time passes, the roles reverse: the daughter becomes the carer, while the mother is cared for. But Paisie, rather than Morisot, takes the role of Julie's carer. While art history associates Morisot with motherhood, the complex dynamics of the mother-painter unravel before our eyes.

Motherhood is a story to be disentangled. In Oxford, our art history library holds four biographical monographs on the life and art of Berthe Morisot. What would my mother's story be? Would I ever be able to know it?

Berthe Morisot drawing, with her daughter (1889)

I remember being shown a drypoint print of Morisot and Julie in one of my printmaking classes. In drypoint etching, the artist scratches a copper plate using a sharp tool before applying ink to the scrapings, creating rich but hazy black lines on the printed image.

In the print, Morisot holds onto the copper plate as Julie leans over to observe the drawing in ac-



tion. Although Morisot appears to be gazing out to the viewer, she is probably looking at a mirror, as she incises her reflection onto the plate in her hands. Within the space in which the print is being created, we occupy the space of the mirror.

They say that children are often reflections of their mothers – a mirror image of who they were and who they could have been. Yet I have grown up so differently from my mother that I often wonder if this is true. While she speaks to me in Cantonese, I reply grudgingly in English. She is from Hong Kong; I am not really. Driving through the streets of Hong Kong on one of our trips to visit family, our eyes lift to the neon-lit signboards. They are distinctive, but not many of them exist anymore. My mother recalls her childhood: when my grandmother took her to eat dim sum, her first time at the newly opened McDonald's, eating wonton noodles.

But more than that, she always remembers us: "This is where you cried because you had sand in your eyes"; "Do you remember when you asked to put brandy in your hair because you heard it would make your hair grow faster?"; "Your teacher always said you were such a bubbly child."

I remember very little of my childhood. I don't know how much I've changed. But to my mother, it is as clear as a mirror. We have always been a part of her.

Portrait of a Woman (1872-1875)

I forget that my mother was once my age. That she is a daughter, too. That one day, she left home and grew up.

Last year, I took my mother to my workplace, an art museum in London featuring one of Britain's most significant collections of Impressionist paintings. I tell her that Morisot is the only female painter on display in the gallery, as we stood in front of Berthe Morisot's *Portrait of a Woman*. Coming face-to-face with the woman in the portrait, I explain that art historians think that she was Morisot's sister. Dressed in a beige and brown day dress complete with a pleated edge, Morisot presents a quietly refined woman, adorned with matching gold

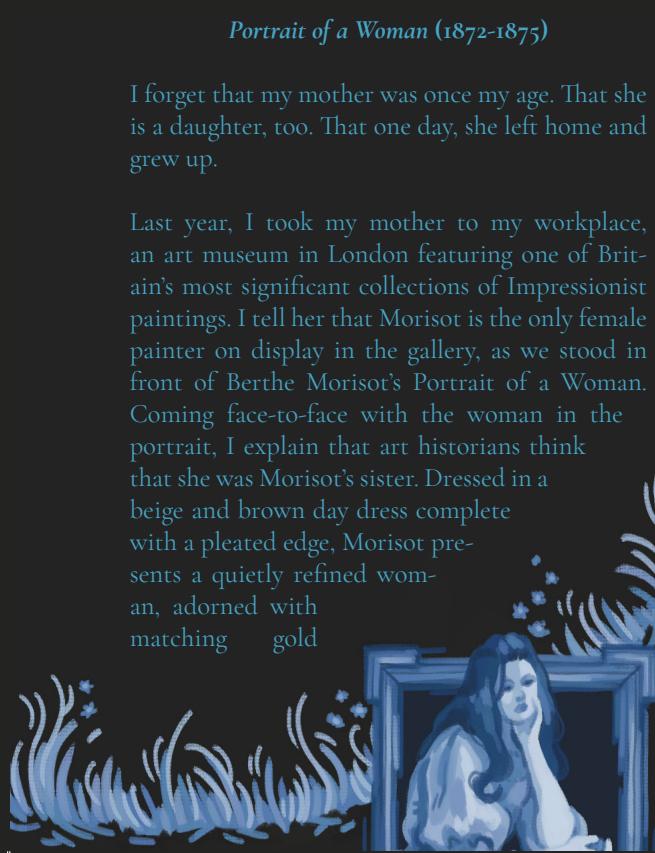
earrings. She is polished but candid.

My mother, amused, moves closer to see the artist's workmanship. She comments that the woman in the portrait has an interesting blank facial expression, that despite the painter's sparing use of brushstrokes, her dress is very beautifully painted. I nod and agree with her observations, even though 'realistic' is a long-disputed word that art historians do not use.

At some point while I was in university, I learnt the language of art history. While my sisters, both medics, converse in fluent 'science speech' with my mother, a dietitian, I never found a place in those conversations. But I also learnt about other things, from how imperial botanical drawings captured the 18th century British imagination, the erudite merging of poetry and painting by Ming Dynasty literati, to how tiny pilgrim badges held stories of sacred journeys.

I think my mother is proud of me, anyway. But I also don't think she knows that in those moments of holding my hand and paintbrush as a child, she taught me the language of painting many years ago – something I've clung onto deeply.

I never quite understood why I always felt drawn





towards images of daily life. But I realised one day that the quiet and the quotidian share a similarity: they expose the moments typically overlooked, the thoughts and experiences that are not well-articulated through speech. It is just like those fleeting thoughts of affection, just like the fleeting thought of 'I love you', just like memory – you forget them quickly enough.

Stroke by stroke, capturing Julie's every feature through the wand of her brush, Morisot watched her daughter grow up. Day by day, as I grew 23 years older, my mother grew 23 years older too.

Exactly 101 years before my mother and father's wedding day, on 18 October 1893, Julie wrote in her diary, "I am making a resolution to get up earlier tomorrow, to work and to be nice to Maman."

Me too.

By Ashleigh Chow





Let me try again.

It is cold.

It is August.

It is the last day for swimming
so you run your hands up against me in the surf,
and I laugh through a mouthful of salt, the stretch
of your shoulders shining, wet with
sunlight, aching my eyelids shut.

The generous spill of your grin,
all teeth and tongue.

I want to cover it with my palms.
To cry water into your throat.

It is August.

Where are your hands?

Splay of fingers straining skin and water,
straining sky. Your palms –
that have held brothers and lovers,
cradled wisdom teeth and chestnuts
and once, when you were seven,
sheltered a bird's press-paper skeleton.

Your hands, somewhere.

Your hands, soaked.

Your hands with nowhere to go.

The tragedy of your skin tumbling purple and blue.

I keep this with me at all times.

It is August.

It is the last day for swimming.

Sun-drunk, stumbling back to your house,
brittle with salt,

I want to tell you
we'll go swimming tomorrow.

I want to tell you
we can try again, that I can be soft.

I want to tell you this will make us clean.

Art by Matthew Kurniadi

LATE AUGUST

By Anna Studsgarth

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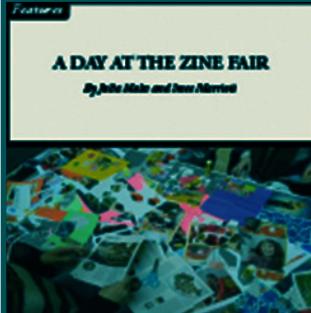
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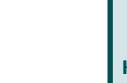
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