



Strip for us

The Isis HT24

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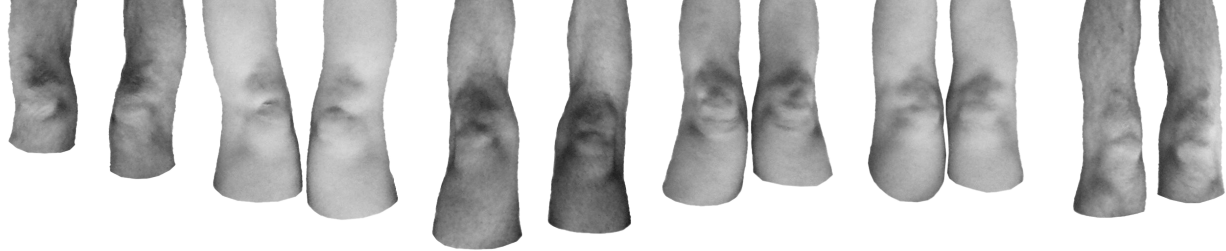
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Art by Issy, Natalie and Sasha



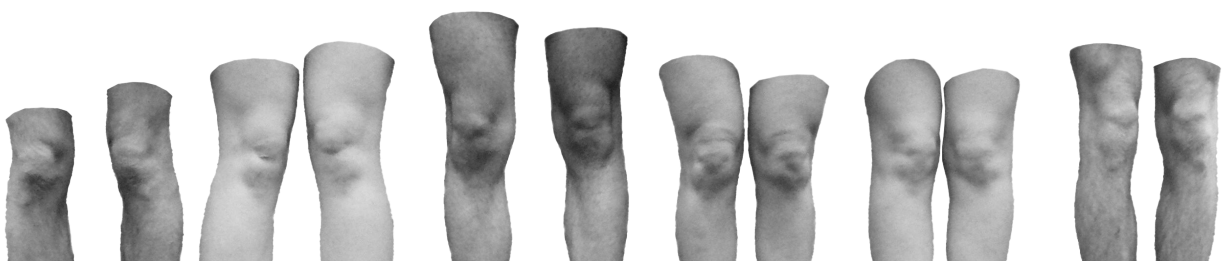
We knew that asking Oxonians to strip for us would be an endeavour riddled with trepidation, risk, and uncertainty. Such an attempt “to court the whole undergraduate population” was rejected by Andrew Lawson in his 1965 editorial as “a futile struggle with Oxford’s extremes of cynicism and apathy.” It is this same aversion to unapologetic vulnerability which defined the University’s romantic landscape of the ‘80s; an aversion which Cindy Gallop described to us as a man sitting at the end of his bed, head in hands, saying “I don’t think I can go through with this.” Clearly, the pursuit of intimacy is not for the faint-hearted.

And yet, our contributors did ‘go through with it’, and we could not be more grateful for their honesty and trust. From the physicality of ‘The Belly Politic’ to reflections on ‘Being Yourself’, this term’s pieces reveal the other side of the story—an impulse towards connection. Within, you’ll find lesbian aunts and menopausal mothers; queer translations and surreal plays; meditations on emptiness; and chaotic celebrations of casual sex as a cure for youthful boredom. In short, our edition is a body pervaded and driven by desire, and it would not have been realised without the remarkable dedication of our entire team. We are grateful for the support of our Deputy Editors: Helen for her tireless work and running a fabulous termcard; Elena and Miles for leading our editorial efforts; to Charlotte for overseeing our Features team; and Issy for marshalling our Creative team and ideas from first seedling to full fruition! She, alongside Natalie and Sasha, deserves endless appreciation for their immense talent and the many hours they put into transforming our visions into a tangible magazine.

The transitional nature of Hilary invites introspection and resourcefulness. We were interested in the raw moments which converge to form our true identity, in the breakdowns which erode our sense of self, and in the glorious messiness in between. This eternal process of refashioning—layers peeled and plastered—is integral to the endurance of *The Isis*. We look once more to 1919, when Beverley Nichols single-handedly edited our first post-war issue, and characterised *The Isis*’ role in Oxford as being “to reflect its every tendency, to echo its laughter and—well, to do the other thing.” This term, we wanted the silences between the laughter, the slip of the mask, the unperformed kind of living. Our hope is that you continue to strip for us, not just in the coming Trinity, but also in your pursuit of ‘the other thing.’ May it contribute to your (re)making as it has to ours.

Yours,

Flav and Caitlin



Part 1



Collage by Flav and Issy

I.

luca-lu!

watch your step, whatever you do!
tiniest frame fits, can't sit still,
thrashing limbs want to run to gnaw
the Earth's candied core,
but summer's burning the air.
peel off;

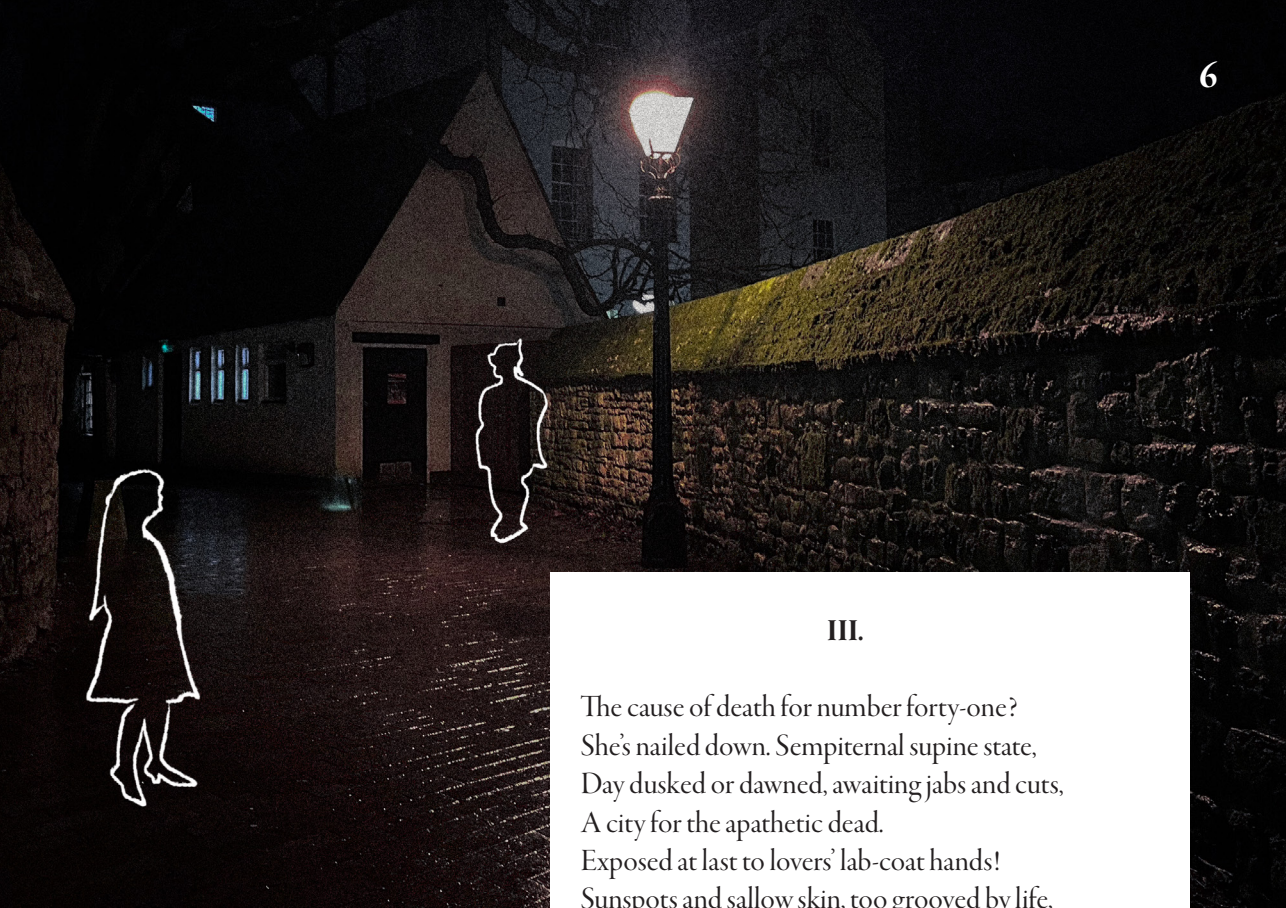
roly-poly little pink flesh
frolics in the garden, free
from callous clothes with hands that itch her,
fistfuls of dandelions and a crooked smile—
mummy takes a picture:
ruddy cheeks and muddy hands
and curls.



II.

curfew's twelve, remember that!
drink gives eyes that primal glint:
suddenly a Boy
and an unknown Bedroom.
before you know it, off they come!
bared and boned but hardly bridled,
sore: she's *rêverie* no more.
mirrors are pits governed by repulsion,
wants a palette of prune and sheer,
and pretty pennies for the Ideal Eye—
organs deserve a role in the show.
form's foreign
in master-bedroom twilight.





III.

The cause of death for number forty-one?
 She's nailed down. Sempiternal supine state,
 Day dusked or dawned, awaiting jabs and cuts,
 A city for the apathetic dead.
 Exposed at last to lovers' lab-coat hands!
 Sunspots and sallow skin, too grooved by life,
 Can only camouflage her souring parts
 For so long; our final moves with stripped ease.
 Her fate is open casket, Sunday best.
 An urn which chokes and stifles—second death:
 (Only a madman tries to coax spoiled milk
 or worn-out flowers back to freshness).

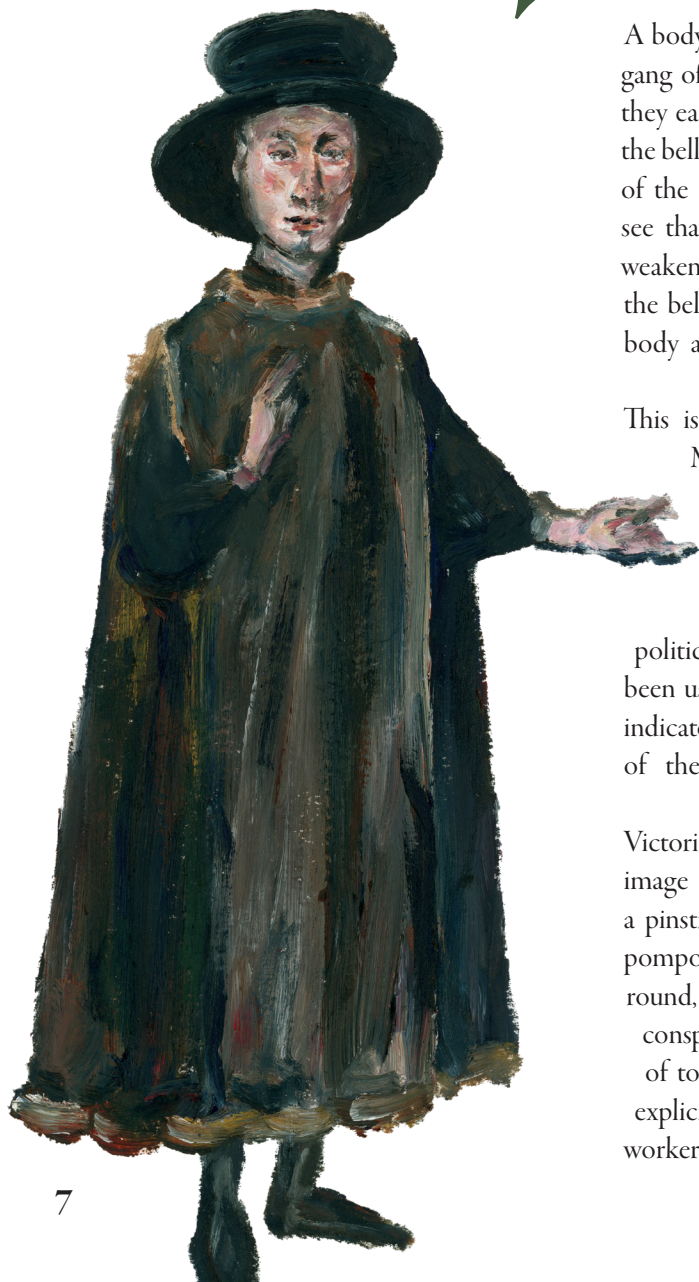
By Lulu Barrett
 Art by Olivia Cho

Naked in Three Parts

The Belly Politic

By Isobel Brewer

Art by Lily Middleton-Mansell



A body is on strike. The hands, the teeth, and their gang of parts conspire to starve the stomach until they each receive a share of the food. Why should the belly get everything? But the short-sighted fools of the Union of Non-Digestive Anatomy cannot see that by depriving the stomach, the collective weakens. The belly gets all the food because that is the belly's job. They have failed to understand the body as a collaborative entity—the body politic.

This is Aesop's 130th Fable, 'The Belly and the Members,' where opposition to industrial action sits just below the surface. It insists on the need for hierarchy in a smooth-running society: the belly is on top. The belly is one of history's most malleable political metaphors. A round belly has long been used as a symbol of the capitalist, a wordless indicator of bourgeois excess enjoyed at the expense of the hollow-tummied, downtrodden masses.

Victorian political cartoons are rife with the image of the Fat Man. He wears a monocle and a pinstriped three-piece suit, and his feet are in a pompous first position. His immense belly, perfectly round, juts out of the page. Often it looms over the conspicuously skinny subjects he is in the process of tormenting. Soviet propaganda is even more explicit: the top-hatted chap stomping on the trim worker has "капитал" (capital) emblazoned across his

ample middle. Lampooning his belly was an easy way to stick it to the man, the capitalist who had so much more than you. In the heady days before neoliberalism, the cultural imagination could grasp the basic idea that the size of the belly correlated with wealth and power, and therefore blame.

The belly politic is all about fatness. But while fatness inhabits the whole body, the belly is always the centre. Sat at the core, the belly is the most fertile ground from which to breed political rhetoric: excess, laziness, decadence, stupidity, dominance, or the reverse. Fundamentally, fatness when exploited for political metaphor is a visual indicator of how an individual relates to the world, and there is no closer link than the belly, the landing-spot of all that the body consumes. Surely, then, big bellies are for those who are granted the bigger portion?

But here is a drastic mismatch with reality: the belly as a class symbol in the Global North has seen a sharp pivot. Fatness is now a problem of the poor. The most deprived are by far the most likely to be considered 'overweight,' a fact unimaginable in not-too-distant history.

Our current brand of fatphobia is a toxic swirl of competing influences, but this particular switch between class targets marks it out as a unique prejudice. There has been a reversal of fatness as a class symbol, confusing its initial rhetoric. A linguistic hangover remains where the suggestion of anti-fat sentiment can carry with it a nod to solidarity with working people. Austerity was quaintly described by many a Tory perpetrator as "trimming the fat," reigning in the bloated belly of the state. In its place would surely be an invigorated, slimmed-down system whose excess weight would presumably be transferred to the so-called 'Big Society.' Employing the language of fat accomplished plenty; it evoked the image of an overly indulgent governing body, its public

services pudgy after thirteen years of New Labour spoiling as they cosied up to corporate Private Finance Initiatives. It vaguely harkens back to lean wartime frames, digging for victory back in Blighty while valiantly ignoring a rumbling tum for the sake of our boys on the Front. Austerity would be a collective endeavour, a rebalancing of the scales: some people were consuming more than they deserved, they said, and this would not stand.

The fact is, consumption in the West is no longer the challenge it used to be. Overconsumption is accessible to more people than ever before with the rapid development of fast fashion, and the same can be said for the increased accessibility to food. While food scarcity remains an alarming and



“Status emerges now not from the ability to consume, but to consume well.”

worsening problem in the Global North, ever-growing waste statistics suggest food is no longer widely regarded quite as the precious commodity it once was. Status emerges now not from the ability to consume, but to consume well. The rich and famous have a flat belly, and it communicates their remarkable skill in spending money on the right things—Erewhon’s \$22 probiotic smoothie, perhaps—in the face of boundless financial access.

And if they can restrain themselves like that, haven’t they earned the top spot? This is one of the prime functions of rich thinness: the quiet alignment with the deserving poor. Back in 1834, the Poor Law reserved this label for hard workers who contributed to society without reaping the rewards—enough food, for instance—and entrenched them as the moral good. We now have the deserving rich. They worked hard to reach this point, and they continue to work hard at looking like they work hard, because nobody who works hard could possibly be fat. It eats itself, because the wealthy flat belly is not a by-product of hard work, it’s just the end result, like pulling an all-nighter to achieve the perfect bedhead. But again, our connotations have become tangled, and their slimness grants them a moral high ground that hasn’t been reconsidered since Dickens.

Hard work is hard work, though, surely? No matter what is being worked against. For the thin rich, it’s the lack of restriction they face that makes their slender forms so applaudable. When we praise the

wealthy flat belly, our puritanical streak surfaces, and the innate link between self-denial and righteousness rears its head. Rich thinness, then, is the best of all, being completely self-imposed. In a system that has denied you nothing, your slim figure must be down to your own hard work. Every cream cake you didn’t eat was sheer force of will. Your bank balance never dictated how many courses to order—the restraint was all yours.

Food and its existence inside the body is moralised at every turn. “Oh, go on then,” we say, giving in to temptation and reaching for a naughty slice of cake. Children are scolded for leaving their vegetables, just as they would be for hair-pulling. Gym bros are moral alphas as well as physical ones, because they have the self-control to stick to good, pure meal plans—look, the macro calculator says so! In 2002, Magnum named their limited-edition range the ‘7 Deadly Sins’. What could be more transgressive, devilish, than chocolate on a stick? The greener, the smaller, the blander, the better. We idolise our cultural icons, and to earn a spot in the pantheon, the rich public figure must outwardly reflect the laws of correct consumption through their thinness.

“Money replaces effort; aesthetics can be bought.”

But there’s the rub: outwardly. Money replaces effort; aesthetics can be bought. Nowadays the open secrets of Hollywood can be open to all, and second only to sex scandals in salaciousness are the ever-evolving methods of body modification undertaken by those in the public eye, each more perverse than the last. The latest mass movement that took showbiz by storm (at least that DeuxMoi and I are aware of) is surely Ozempic. Prescribed

for Type 2 diabetes, this appetite suppressant earned a reputation as a miracle weight loss drug (it is not); the world watched in envy and amazement as celebrities shrank. For a cool \$1,500 a month, you too could slim down exponentially with no more hassle than a weekly injection. These were the premiums for everyone, mind—if diabetics in need of their medicine could lay their hands on Ozempic, in its sudden scarcity, they would be confronted with the same hefty bill. Everyone knows wealthy bodies, especially famous ones, are paid for in cold hard cash. Whether it's through Ozempic, liposuction, or their softer cousins in the extortionate realm of the wellness industry, the rich can buy the image of self-restraint and pass the consequences on to the poor. Fatphobia will not accept itself as intimately bound up with classism. Capitalism has long moved on from the simple binary where fatness, greed, and wealth happily opposed thinness,

“Fatphobia will not accept itself as intimately bound up with classism.”

restraint, and poverty. Cultural thought has not.

‘The Belly and the Members’ couldn’t be set in the rich body of today. The Belly would be so smooth and toned and flat, so well-proportioned, that it would never occur to the Members that there was any injustice to strike against in the first place. They’d turn on each other instead. It’s a neat trick. While the little people fight amongst themselves, bending over backwards to prove that the deprived are selfish and gluttonous, the avatars of the ruling class can distance themselves from the cartoon of the pointless fat cat. Their bellies are just the right size, there is no fat to trim. How could they have more than their fair share?





WORKER AND

KOLKHOZ WOMAN

You two, Worker and Kolkhoz woman
Stand steel-set in outrageous perfection.
Your absurd vest strings tether muscle-bound torsos
Turned still. In your eightieth year of labour,
bitter wind
Sets loose your spilling midriff fabrics.
As if, Kolkhoz woman,
You wouldn't be used to dressing for the elements,

Itching to peel back
Flaunted layers, stinking of a day.
But stuck—halfway—in some strip tease
For excesses of arms and flesh.
Surplus surely coaxed out of dumbbells.
Prised from the nutrient stores of your
Soviet peasant protein powder.

Those bodies don't work.
Working arms and legs and faces are
Carved with cavern cracks,
Betraying the years spent bracing bitter winds, and
Bearing both the old weight of work at work
And young workers at home.

Our heroes' evenings
Are spent sliding down the day's slopes
That they'll spend tomorrow scaling,
Then to plunge, pasted, into the froth,
To purge sickle sores, and wait for
A scythe swing to turn them over

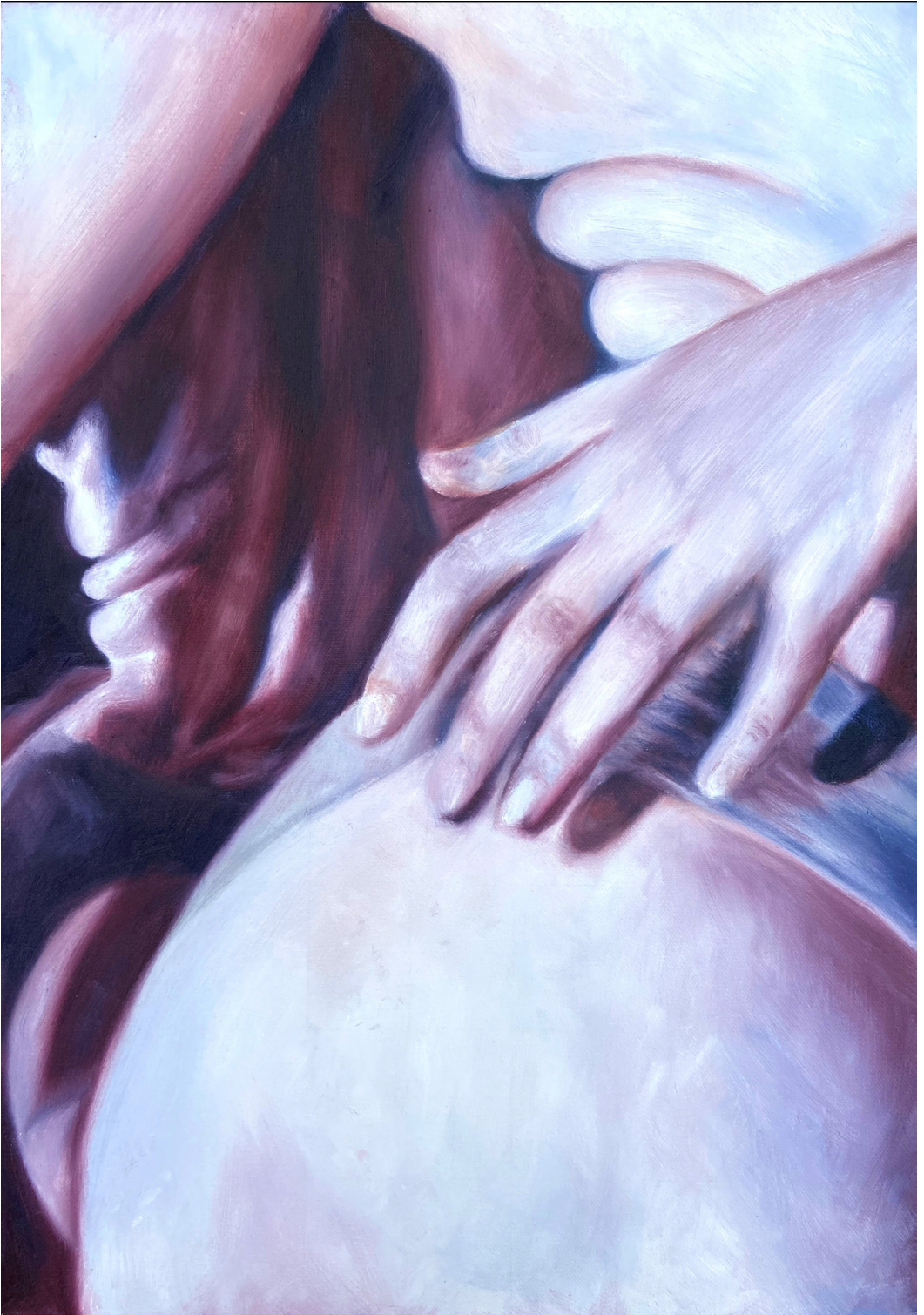
- Into casket bodies in town churches: icons of
- labour.
- Not two steel-set idols, like Worker and Kolkhoz
- woman,
- Proclaiming false that they
- Might buy back their bodies at 5pm
- On weekdays, and 3pm on Fridays,
- Cashing in the expensive right to decay
- unobserved.
-
- In sarcophagus museums for
- industrial fabrications,
- Finger-crossed visitors tilt at spent machines,
- Picturing the bodies that once drove them into
- some coalface
- As burly and protein-preened.
- Not ricketing skeletons, holding on
- And flaunting nothing.
-
- Coal lumps and phone calls
- Tree stumps and pink dolls
- Products of labour; just as their exhalations
- And the sharp dry cough corked
- Only to conceal their transience.
-
- You see, in years, all your parents' pain
- Will be a hand held up, not with a hammer, but a
- coffee cup
- And in the other, an ergonomic keyboard.
- Not by real bodies with crow-lined faces
- But smoothed into outrageous steel-set
- perfections.
-
-
-

By Ethan Penny

Art by Lily Middleton-Mansell



'Worker and Kolkhoz Woman' is a Soviet sculpture depicting two figures: the Worker, who holds up a hammer, and the Kolkhoz (peasant) woman, who holds up a sickle. The sculpture displays the political union of the agricultural and industrial labour forces. It was showcased at the 1937 Paris exhibition and currently stands in a Moscow exhibition centre.



'Late Night Contemplation' by Charlotte Mitchell

SOPHIE CALLE AND THE ART OF INTIMACY

In 1983, the French artist Sophie Calle discovered an address book. She returned it to its owner—whose details were listed at the back—but not without having first copied out its contents. In the month that followed, she would call up these acquaintances of “Pierre D” to question them about him and publish the fruits of their conversations daily in the newspaper *Libération*. These pieces, reminiscent of diary entries, were accompanied by black-and-white photographs mimicking Pierre’s life. From his favourite armchair in his friend’s apartment to his mother’s grave, Calle’s photography probed every facet of her subject. His sexual history, his job, his physical appearance—Calle sculpted an image of Pierre through his acquaintances. Pierre responded with a letter in *Libération* and threatened to publish a nude photo of Calle alongside it. She had stripped him bare, and he tried to do the same to her.

As easy as it is to chalk this up as a standard revenge porn response from an indignant man, his method of retaliation does in fact have something of the Sophie Calle about it. ‘Pierre D’ implies an equivalence between her intrusion of his privacy, and his dissemination of her nude picture, raising questions about intimacy and the body—themes which are central to Calle’s work. Nudity is not uncommon in her art: just flick through her photobook *True Stories* (1994) and you will come across her holding her ex-husband’s penis. Turn a couple more pages and you’ll see her naked breasts being licked by a bull. But this unsentimental, even clinical, approach



to nudity does not mean that her work lacks emotional intimacy; Calle frequently draws inspiration from traumatic events in her personal life, ranging anywhere from breakups to the death of her parents.

It appears that *The Sleepers* (1979), one of her first major works, succeeded in incorporating both sexual and emotional intimacy. For this piece, she invited friends, acquaintances, and total strangers to sleep in her bed, where she photographed them hourly. Of all places, the bed is the epitome of intimacy: it is usually a private space, with sexual connotations. In this work, like in Tracey Emin's *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963-1995* (1995), Calle marries these sexual undertones with the intimacy of sleep, in a non-sexual sense; as she watches her 'subjects,' she witnesses them at their most vulnerable. Unlike Emin, Calle, behind the camera, compromises nothing of her own privacy—bar perhaps the fact that she is using her own bed—and occupies a position of power in relation to the sleepers. The same imbalanced power dynamics are present in many of her other works. Take, for instance, the time that she followed a man she had met only briefly from Paris to Venice, where she stalked him until he eventually recognised her (*Venetian Suite*, 1983). Once again, Calle is behind the camera, documenting a vulnerable subject (here, the vulnerability comes from his ignorance of his stalker). She is, if you like, a voyeur. Artistic practices such as this obviously raise ethical questions. Whilst stalking is often associated with malicious intent,



where does Calle's documentation of the movements of a near stranger, even in the name of art, fall on this scale? In a world where our physical presence is almost constantly surveyed, particularly in urban areas, is outrage over an isolated invasion of privacy such as this just misdirected energy?

In another sense, Calle positions herself as a voyeur insofar as she recognises the erotic aspect of her own work. During her pursuit of the man in *Venetian Suite*, Calle kept a diary tracking his moves, her thoughts, and her feelings. The more personal comments are italicised, differentiating them from the lists of street names, as she navigates the winding Venetian roads—her internal monologue is superimposed onto the physical map of the city. One such comment comes after she asks a stranger for help in tracking

“But this unsentimental, even clinical, approach to nudity does not mean that her work lacks emotional intimacy.”

the man down; to justify her questions she “tell[s] him I'm in love with a man—*only love seems admissible*” (Calle and Baudrillard, 1988). Calle herself seems uncertain of the relationship between the followed and the follower in this unusual instance of stalking for art's sake—or perhaps more accurately at this early stage in her career, stalking for boredom's sake.

"In a world where our physical presence is almost constantly surveyed, particularly in urban areas, is outrage over an isolated invasion of privacy such as this just misdirected energy?"

Years later, when working on *Address Book* (1983), Calle is drawn again to the same question of eroticism in her relationship with "Pierre D". In a 1992 interview with Bice Curiger, she comes back to the role of love in these experiments:

"I lost control [...] I completely fell in love with that man, I changed my life for him [...] I went to live in his neighbourhood, only saw his friends, went to eat in the places he liked to go [...] when he came back he hated me and I really felt rejected, but at the same time it's better than real love, because all this was completely fake."

But can a camera ever truly capture someone intimately? Or does the image stop at the physicality of the body without going deeper? Much of Calle's work is the project of creating an image around someone. She constructed the character of 'Pierre D' through the testimonies of those around him. She even does the same for herself: filling glass cabinets with her birthday presents each year (*Birthday Ceremony*, 1980-1993), she allows us to see herself through the eyes of the gift givers. This is Calle at her most characteristic. She takes something personal and intimate—which implicates those close to her, insofar as they are the givers—and makes it public, ordering the gifts on shelves in an almost forensic manner. In this way, Calle throws light upon the inherent tension between identity and the way in which we are perceived by others, all while acknowledging the centrality of material objects to both.

One of her most famous works is *Take Care of Yourself*, which she first presented at the 2007 Venice Biennale. The title quotes an email which her then-boyfriend sent to break up with her. Calle enlists 107 women to read and interpret the email according to their job. His email was edited, translated, performed, psychoanalysed. At first glance, this piece seems to be painfully intimate, and personal to the point where viewers admire her bravery. But, looking again, you see nothing of Sophie Calle. Sure, this work encapsulates a vulnerable—maybe even embarrassing—moment in her life, but neither the email nor the responses are written by her. Throughout the process, Calle's own feelings remain elusive.

In contrast, *Exquisite Pain* (2003) is another piece inspired by a breakup. In this work, Calle pairs daily retellings of her breakup with conversations with strangers about the worst pain they have ever felt. Unlike her later work *Take Care of Yourself*, *Exquisite Pain* is a truly intimate portrait of her loss: Calle is open about her emotions, whilst maintaining a characteristic—almost cynical—distance by putting her feelings in implicit comparison with other peoples' pain. Calle is, for once, successful in making the truly private public by working

in collaboration with others to create a story of pain as a common thread through our individual lives.

Calle distances herself from her feelings by transforming them into art; she shifts her voyeuristic methods onto herself by engaging the public in dissecting her breakups. Calle exploits her emotions just as she does her subjects in *Address Book* and *Venetian Suite*, thereby blurring the lines between private and public, intimate and false. She goes so far as to openly reject the intimate, stating her preference for a love that was “completely fake”—possibly revealing a preference for obsession over vulnerability which limits how candid Calle is in her art. This cynicism runs through both her self-reflective and her voyeuristic art, which propels her exploration of the extents to which we are all able to share the intimacy of our private lives. In an artistic and social experiment to see what degree of inner life will remain hidden, Sophie Calle forces us to question how much of ourselves we are willing to reveal in the pursuit of true intimacy.



By Tilda Walker
Art by Seraph Lee





Part 2

LARGE YELLOW POST-IT NOTE ON THE KITCHEN COUNTER:

Take my skin off and put it in the washing machine at sixty spin with a scoop of fabric conditioner.

When finished, don't put it in the tumble dryer; take it outside and peg it up in a gentle breeze.

Bring my bones to the kitchen sink and, one by one, scrub them. Be patient, thorough, gentle but firm. Use Fairy, sparingly, and the scourer only if you must. Stack them up on the rack, and then

soak my organs in lukewarm water and gently wring them out. Give my lungs an extra cold rinse. My nervous system can be folded up neatly and put through the dishwasher on a quick cycle—you'll fit my circulatory system in too, tucked in on the top rack. Please be sure to

take my skin off the line once dry but before it starts to pink in the sun, and, if you've the time, pass over it with an iron (low heat and plenty of steam). Now you're all done: take me, fresh and clean, and piece me back together.

!



a

By Kit Renshaw-Hammond
Art by Joe Walford

Man

Supposedly.

In 1965, the Scandinavian erotic film *Jeg—en Kvinde* (*I, a Woman*) was released in cinemas to a strangely positive reaction. Strange for the not-quite-yet-swinging sixties, I mean.

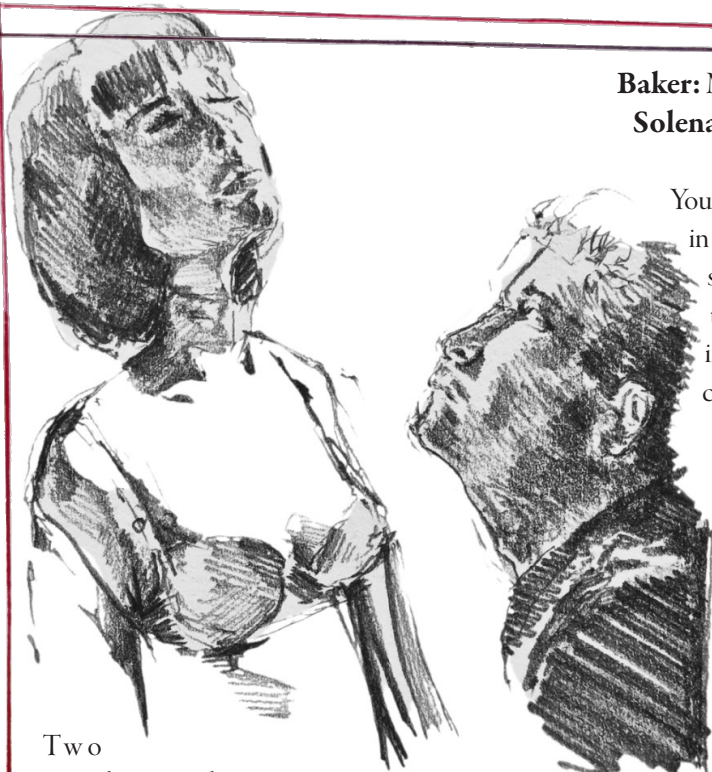
We follow Siv, bobbed up to the nines and with Scandi-soul-staring eyes, discovering the nascent world of sexual liberation. Sex takes her from city to city where she waltzes with Gersen, Sven, and Doctor Dam between cotton sheets. At the end of their entanglement, each professes their love for her—and is promptly disposed of. However, in the death throes of monogamy, she finds her sexual equal in Eric. He soon casts her aside out of a fear that she has fallen in love with him. Same as it ever was.

The genius of the film is that we are led to believe that it is about the inability of men to appease the true power of unbridled female sexuality. It isn't. It is only at the end that we realise that the

film is about something far simpler than that: it is about boredom.

Sex is an exercise in bounded uncertainty, an uncertainty that disappears once realised. The cast of men Siv uses to satiate herself don't prove a challenge to her—they are a simple, achievable means to... her end, so to speak. Each fling slowly descends into the doldrums of tedious monogamy. This fear is exactly why Eric casts her aside. After gaining his satisfaction, she will no longer be a challenge; when she loves him, he will become bored. Young people were not made to be bored—in our heart of hearts, we cannot bear it. Boredom is something that happens to old people, tending their gardens and napping in big velvet chairs. We will spend our now, the 'best years of our lives,' stressed, angry, sad, overjoyed, or sobbing in a nightclub bathroom. Anything except bored.

Now hold this thought. Let's go back to the 1960s.



Baker: My instincts tell me what to do.

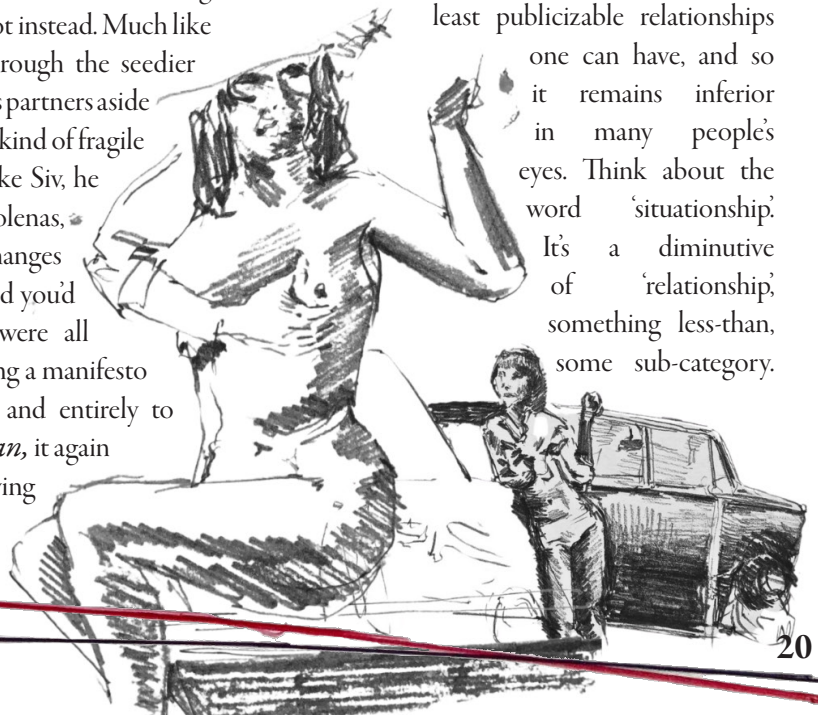
Solenas: My instincts tell *me* what to do!

You may recognise an exchange of your own in that couplet. These are two young people seeking joy, just tragically unaligned in their wants and needs. In chasing our instincts, we find one another, and in chasing our instincts, we lose one another.

Today, we like to see ourselves as living in the age of the undefined relationship—look at how often ‘situationship,’ ‘fling,’ or ‘friends with benefits’ are used in conversation. But as much as we would love to be the generation that redefined monogamy, we are not.

Two years later, Andy Warhol released his response to the film, creatively titled *I, a Man*. Jim Morrison, the man who had to many dethroned Elvis as the most dangerous figure in male sexuality, was given the lead role. Unfortunately, alcoholics will as alcoholics do—whiskey got the better of him on the first day of filming and he sent his drinking buddy, Tom Baker, to the shoot instead. Much like Siv, Baker prowls his way through the seedier corners of his world, casting his partners aside when sex no longer contains a kind of fragile uncertainty. And still more like Siv, he meets his match in Valerie Solenas, their machine-gun pace exchanges on a dimly lit staircase so rapid you’d be shocked to learn they were all improvised. Far from becoming a manifesto for devoting oneself wholly and entirely to another, much like *I, a Woman*, it again reaches a middle ground, leaving both on equal footing:

Whatever a ‘situationship’ is, we did not invent it. Instead, we did something much worse—we reified it. By having all these words for different types of relationships, we place them in a ranking, existing somewhere in between friendship and a ‘proper’ relationship. Living as we do in a culture that is so obsessed with the publication of the self, a temporary fling is one of the least publicizable relationships one can have, and so it remains inferior in many people’s eyes. Think about the word ‘situationship.’ It’s a diminutive of ‘relationship,’ something less-than, some sub-category.



Siv and Baker both show that rather than being an invention of our time, casual sex could be achieved even in the 1960s—even more genuinely so than today. It existed in a beautifully undefined space where moving on out of boredom was entirely acceptable, and more than that, entirely normal. We may think that's what 'situationships' or 'flings' are today. But in reality, by labelling them we remove the feeling of uncertainty from it. So many of us know the feeling of losing the sense of danger and joy in a connection with someone once they say, "You know, I'm actually into you."

Every day, people quit their jobs, move cities, change degrees, all out of boredom. Then why does it feel so wrong to end a relationship because you're bored? We euphemise it: 'We've reached the end of the road'; 'I need to figure out who I am'; all various ways of saying, "I'm bored. Can we stop?" But just think if we could say things for how they really are. Here, I give you two films that embody this. Siv and Baker do not chase this life because of something unique to them, to their time, place, or gender. Not *I, Siv* or *I, Baker*, but *I, a Woman*, *I, a Man*. I, Human.



My instincts tell me what I want to do!

But life soon comes crashing down to earth. It wouldn't take long for the reels of *I, a Man* to be filled with ghosts.

Tom Baker died of an overdose in a loft on 14th Street in New York in 1982, 11 years after the death of Jim Morrison in Paris, the man whose role he had stepped into at the last moment. One of Baker's lovers in the film, the German model Nico, met her end four years later. She had recently emerged from a 15-year heroin addiction. Then, the year after the film was released, on June 3rd 1968, Valeria Solenas walked into Warhol's *Factory* studio where *I, a Man* had been brought to life. She shot Warhol through the lungs, liver, stomach, and spleen.

Why tell you this?

Well, perhaps it shows that we will not be like this forever. In fleeing from boredom through drugs or sex, these actors lost their lives. We, too, may meet our ends soon, on the end of a needle, somewhere along 14th Street, or in Paris. We might even meet our ends in a much less dramatic way: tending our gardens, perhaps asleep in a deep velvet chair.

So, then, how to think about these types of relationships?

In a word, for young people? Better. There is nothing moral or immoral about running from boredom into the arms of an endless line of lovers—it's far simpler than that. When we label, we destroy. By having sex, we remain in that liminal space, we keep ourselves alive. Youth necessitates it, demands it. Man, Woman, Siv, Baker, Denmark, New York, Oxford—it makes no difference.

It is how we can avoid the boredom we fear so, so deeply.



Aunt Lois

By Hannah Cowley

Art by Sasha Hardy

You died a spinsterly saint, Aunt Lois,
But you smile at me from the mantelpiece like
You want me to catch your whisper,
To press my ear against the glass
Like a child with a conch—
Straining to hear the sea.
They say your house was only big enough for
You and your faith, Lois,
But it can't have been.
I wish I knew you.

She must have ripped you open,
Left you disembowelled,
Floating past crucifixes, intestines dragging
In tow; a glistening trail that dries and stains
The carpet with red proof that you loved.
You'd reveal who did it—if only you could—
Hiss her name from the picture with a devilish wink
And tell me how it was a perfumed haze,
Smudged lipstick, strewn hairpins, the works;
Long days waiting and praying,
Fearing God and men.

TRANS/LATING

THE BI/NDRY

Когда вы обнимаетесь
у меня на глазах,
Я никак не могу решить,
на чьем месте хотела бы оказаться.

When you embrace
before my eyes,
I just can't decide
in whose place I'd rather be.

Как мне узнать—
Кто я?
Он говорит, что я женщина.
Она говорит, что я мужчина.
А Бог помалкивает.

How can I know—
Who am I?
He says that I'm a woman.
She says that I'm a man.
And God stays silent.

Лия Абеляр | Liya Abelyar

These poems originally appeared in the first issue of *RISK*, published in 1995. In the foreword, its founder Dmitry Kuzmin describes the publication as “not a journal for gays, neither is it a gay journal, and it’s not even a journal about gays.” Rejecting the label of LGBTQ+ literature, Kuzmin instead presents *RISK* as a contribution to the broader Russian cultural scene, albeit one “taken from a specific and, perhaps, atypical angle.”

Even as part of this ‘atypical angle,’ however, the poems are further sidelined. In an interview with the organisation *Gey Al'yans Ukraina* (Gay Alliance Ukraine), Kuzmin only mentions them in passing and confesses that he knows little about their author beyond the signature ‘Liya Abelar.’ Yet through his comments on the “uncertainty” and “vagueness” expressed in the poems, Kuzmin succinctly articulates the marginal position of their subject matter: the questioning of a

binary and essentialist conception of gender and sexuality. The poems reflect on monosexism, the othering of bisexual or gender-fluid identities, by confronting the ambiguities of sexual attraction and selfhood. As I have found, the poems raise both aesthetic and political questions about identity which their translation only heightens.

Considering the notion of uncertainty, it is interesting that my translation of the first poem leaves the gender of the speaker unclear. In Russian, the verb form used for the conditional tense requires an agreement in gender and number, making gender neutrality effectively impossible when speaking in the singular. The poetic voice is marked as female, “хотела” (*khotela*) rather than “хотел” (*khotel*), a distinction rendered impossible in English due to the lack of grammatical gender. Any attempt to convey the speaker’s gender in



translation would sound forced. Yet because of this absence of grammatical gender, a further nuance of the original Russian is lost. Although the speaker states that they “just can’t decide / in whose place I’d rather be,” in Russian the use of the female verb form confirms that they have already made a decision; they have identified themselves with the female role in the pairing. But even though this gender affirmation is expressed to the reader through the verb “хотеть” (*khotet*, to want), the speaker may not actually wish to identify as a woman. They could be using this form unconsciously because they have been socialised as female, while in fact desiring a greater fluidity. The speaker seems restricted by their own language and unable to fully express their feelings. This grammatical gendering exposes our reliance on received ideas in the articulation of our identity, feelings, and preferences, as well as the difficulty of expressing what lies outside of conventional structures. This was the aspect of the poem that most spoke to me. It perfectly captured the unique frustration of the perceived ‘vagueness’ of bisexuality, and the internal struggle of understanding myself in monosexist terms—feeling I should somehow ‘pick a side,’ or being told that it was probably ‘just a phase.’ Here, as a translator, I am torn between an appreciation of the distinct, perhaps even liberating, possibilities afforded by English, and the frustration that something so central is left unsaid.

The second poem also wrestles with binary conceptions of gender. The original Russian deliberately leaves the gender of the speaker unclear, writing from the present tense in which gender marking is not required. The poetic voice is also distanced, obscured in the very first line by an impersonal construction in which the speaker becomes not the grammatical subject of the sentence but instead its indirect object. A literal English translation would sound unnatural—“how to me to know”—so my use of the auxiliary verb

“can” is an attempt to draw out the questions of agency implied by this grammatical dissociation. The response that God “stays silent” could suggest that gender is not a biological imperative, but instead a cultural phenomenon: one that is determined externally, by the collective judgement of our appearance and self-presentation. In the parallel construction “he says/she says” neither sex recognises the speaker as belonging to their own side of the binary. In both cases, they are pushed towards the ‘other’ category, leaving them in limbo: straddling both sides—or belonging to neither.

“This grammatical gendering exposes our reliance on received ideas in the articulation of our identity, feelings, and preferences.”

But why is God silent? This line could speak to the desperation felt by the speaker, equating their inability to define their identity with a spiritual crisis. Yet in considering silence not as an indication of non-existence or of abandonment but as the absence of speech, it may also highlight the failure of language to fully encompass a fluid identity. Falling outside the categories of “man” and “woman,” vacillating between roles, the speaker has become incomprehensible to both others and themself.

The implication that language cannot accurately represent fluidity projects a similarly bleak outlook for the act of translation. But could translation in fact serve as a form of linguistic protest against our rigid understanding of identity? In crossing between two linguistic spaces, it opens up new possibilities which can alter our fixed perception of the world. Robert Frost famously stated that “poetry is what is lost in translation,” but he then continued: “It is also what is lost in interpretation.

That little poem means just what it says and it says what it means, nothing less but nothing more.” This seems a surprisingly sterile and essentialist notion considering the ambiguity of poetry, its lyricism, its embrace of contradictions. In a way, reading poetry in the original language is already an act of translation because it is so open to interpretation, perhaps even demands it. In the case of Abelyar, both the poem and its translation seem well-suited to questioning orthodoxy and opening the way to new perspectives.

But aside from these abstract queries, translation also increases the accessibility of these poems to a wider, non-Russophone audience—something which I believe is vital in light of the poems’ cultural context. When these poems were first published in 1995, Kuzmin declared in his foreword that: “Today [in Russian society] the topic of homosexuality is no longer either forbidden or new.” Unfortunately, in the nearly thirty years since, only the latter holds true. On November 30th 2023, the Russian Supreme Court outlawed the ‘international LGBT movement’, designating it as an ‘extremist organisation’. In Russia today, mentioning your sexuality in public could be classified as “propaganda of non-traditional sexual relationships” (June 2013), or “the imposition of information about non-traditional relationships or preferences” (November 2022). Human rights groups including Amnesty International have stated that the vague wording of this legislation has the potential to be used in support of state repression and violence. While the ambiguity of poetic language and the subversion of fixed notions of meaning through translation can be helpful in the struggle for representation, here vagueness only serves to strengthen oppressive power structures.

To my mind, an understanding of identity as fluid, as suggested in Abelyar’s poems, rejects the static rhetoric that places gay and trans people

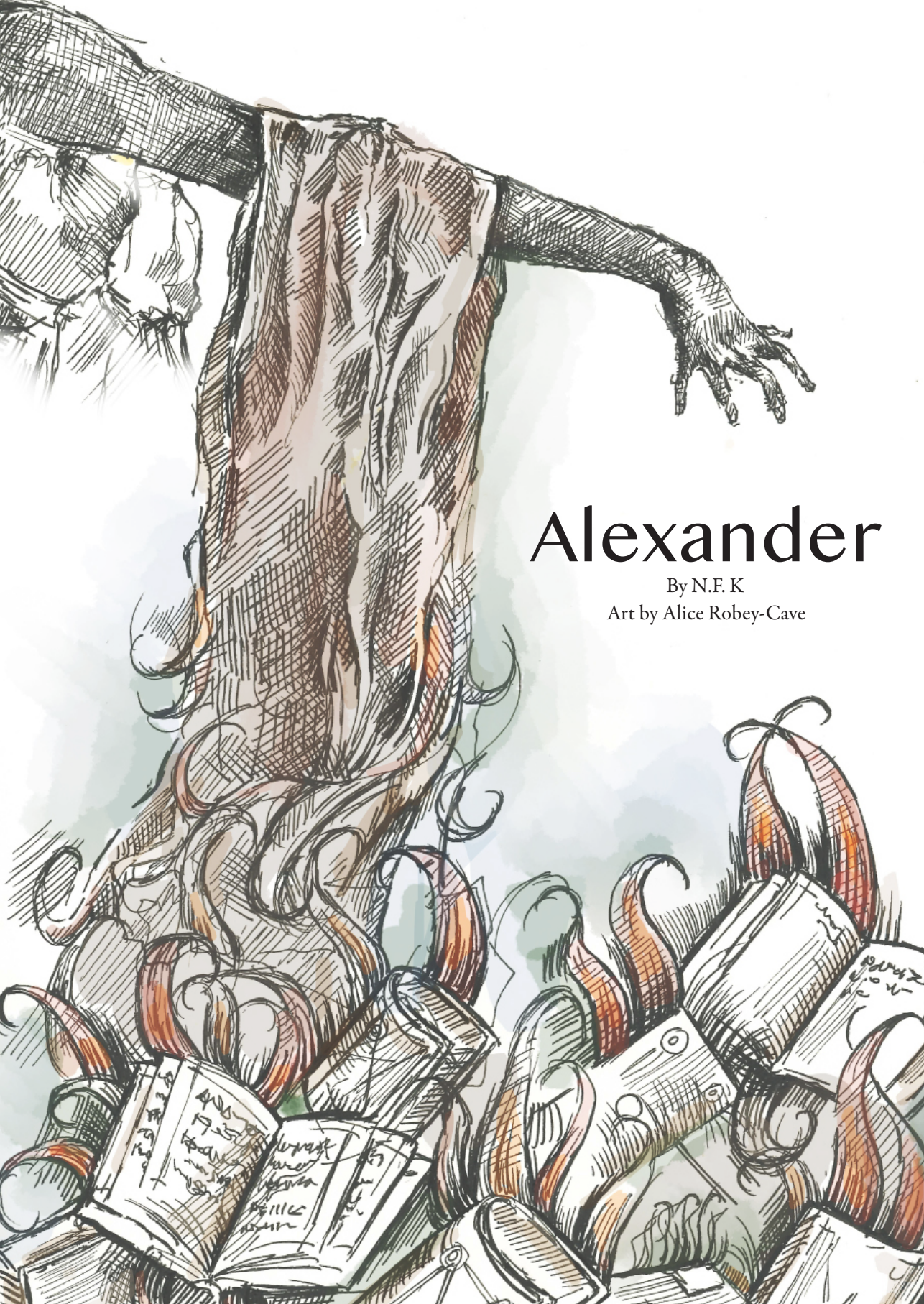
outside of social norms. Some might say that these poems only amplify monosexist tropes of bisexuals as being ‘confused’, a term also applied to transgender and non-binary people. But can any part of our identity ever really be certain? The human condition is one of fluctuation: you’re not the same person at thirty as you were at thirteen, nor should you be. While gender and sexuality can be difficult parts of our identity to navigate, our confusion may only arise as a response to the rigid ‘certainties’ of language. Expressions of uncertainty and vagueness expose the restrictive assumptions of monosexist and binary language, instead emphasising the complexities of identity.

“But why is God silent?”

Abelyar’s chosen vehicle of poetry is imperative in achieving this goal, but so too is the act of translating these poems. It has forced me to reflect on the implicit structures of language that shape both mine and others’ perception of me. By sharing these poems and exploring the challenges of their translation, I have shown how these structures can be subverted and the ambiguities of language embraced in order to articulate a different notion of identity. There is still a long way to go when it comes to the acceptance of the complexities of gender and sexual identity, but through an act of self-translation, by examining the language we use and questioning the assumptions that accompany it, we can begin to move towards a more fluid understanding of ourselves.



By Anna Hull
Art by Angelika Woodruff



Alexander

By N.F. K

Art by Alice Robey-Cave

There were three lights in the window.

That day you were lecturing a teacup,
And establishing the nature of the storm.

Once you told me the artist could not tell his
trade,
So then I took your mind in hand,
And you watched as I shattered your teacup,
Just to know that you'd drink from it broken,
And I watched as you put back your needles
Just how I had pulled them from you,
And you told me you artists could not tell your
trade,
And I wouldn't believe you.

So you left your overclothes behind,
And as you pulled me under them, I asked:

When you spoke on forests did you cry
And press your face to the autumn ground
And when you spoke on *Corpus Christi*
Is this really what you meant?
Have you found a place yet,
To bury your words?

And when you spoke on frustrate labour
Was your heart full of those who drowned
In the unbounded Thames
The Briton slaves that never were—
Have you heard them?

If I hadn't loved you—

Now edges are folded upon edges,
And the dust gathers over the land
And Eve, lain down in the viper's nest,
Has written her vices
In verse on the confessional wall—

And if I hadn't loved you—
I could tell you what you meant—

When you spoke on the ground,
Could you feel that the earth
was beneath you, under your nails?
Do you only listen
when the canons are fed—

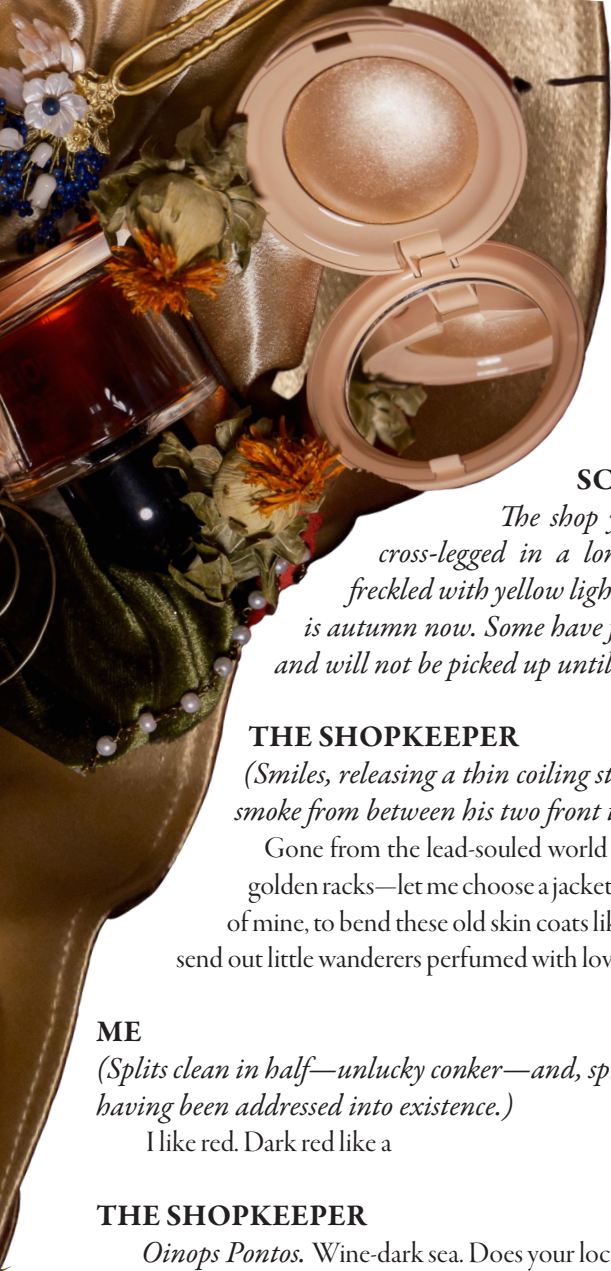
If I hadn't loved you—

I would say that you have said very
much

And meant very little
But nonetheless I love you—

And before there was a light in
the window—

There was a great fire in Alexandria;
Across the bay the young men
Stood on the beaches taking in the black sand,
And as the image of two suns fell upon the dark
water,
I remember saying,
I will not see you again for a long while now.



DRAMATIS PERSONAE

The Shopkeeper.....An old sage, puffer-jacketed
The Belt Man.....A bangled mad-man of 1985
Me.....A slight thing, base as a horse chestnut, a jacket seeker

ACT I

SCENE

The shop yawns. In its throat THE SHOPKEEPER waits cross-legged in a long fork-tongued orchard of jackets, leather jackets freckled with yellow light into a sweet-skinned mush, crushed and crushing. It is autumn now. Some have fallen, the sour crab apples that even magpies ignore, and will not be picked up until January.

THE SHOPKEEPER

(Smiles, releasing a thin coiling string of patchouli smoke from between his two front teeth.)

Gone from the lead-souled world and gargled in the golden racks—let me choose a jacket for you. It's a talent of mine, to bend these old skin coats like Hephiaston and send out little wanderers perfumed with love, costumed in gold and the trappings of alchemy.

THE LEATHER

ME

(Splits clean in half—unlucky conker—and, spreading, shows an unsightly, untouched spring green, having been addressed into existence.)

I like red. Dark red like a

THE SHOPKEEPER

Oinops Pontos. Wine-dark sea. Does your locket open? What's inside?

ME

(Opens the locket with both hands. A hot white star fizzes, falls out, leaving behind at every second a pale film image of itself, a foggy after-firework. It cools on the carpet as a large molten pearl. In its passion, it has released a clouding scent of oud.)

A picture. Of my lover.

THE SHOPKEEPER

(Scoops up the star in his left hand. He blows off a hundred brown specs of carpet dust and offers it back.)

You're a new thing, ripening with love. I will split too, in an act of hospitality, show no frothing stars but Grecian vine, no pearls but fool's gold, the truest gold which blushes with baseness. I coat the walls now,

send spines of leaves through sleeves and jewel cuffs with a curse of ivy—put your hands in the pockets.
You will find me there too.

He bubbles, for a moment, and then erupts into a growth of ivy quilting the shop walls, a true, honest, smiling ivy with gold-trimmed leaves—as if to say: now I like you, now I meet you properly, now I think that you, dizzy lover, have a soul too.

He unzips his puffer jacket and pulls out, with a great jolt, a pinkish suede mass.

THE SHOPKEEPER

You'll like this jacket, this lover's cape, this heart that writhes with hot desire and swoons over the body. Suede of sonnets, of verse brimming with violets, erotic, of ribbons and roses, of red wine, sweet wine, a wine-dark sea. See? A sweet new shell for you, no spikes, but the pink honeyed skin of wanting which cracks not on mud (fallen from a conker tree) but only on a bedroom floor, springing into hordes of wildflowers. Everyone has their thing. You know, in the eighties, a man came in every day for a month and bought a belt. The shop was different then, a Pandora's *pithos* of Indiana Jones dreamers and snake charmers. I was a pale sprout, shy with leaves and leaning into the palm of a new world, just turned twenty and beading with sweet sap. The Belt Man was street-born and lived to buy these hissing strips of leather,

wreathed with vipers and wearing fifteen belts, from jeans to chest. I asked him why and he said

JACKET SHOP

THE BELT MAN

(Thirty-eight years ago, belt-ends rising and twisting to the smothered flute sounds of time passed.)

Because it makes me happy.

ME

(Smiles. Hates the jacket.)

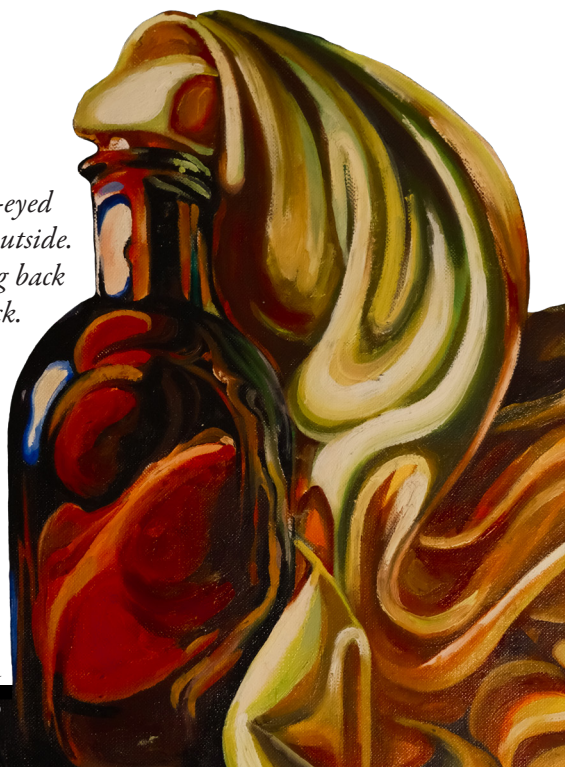
I'll come back.

(Fleeing, loses shape and shell immediately, too milky-eyed and smoky now to slot into the brute awokeness of the outside. Crosses street, locket spitting slim moons, crescents rolling back to the shop, where the soul remains. Body will not go back. Spins, dreaming, on an axis—a horse chestnut browning into sweetness like burnt sugar. Wonders, in student hovels and libraries and parties, whether, when we lose our jackets and everything else and flash still-pink bones, it is only the fabric that fades and not the love.)

FIN

By Freyja Harrison-Wood

Art by Olivia Cho





Art by Sasha Hardy

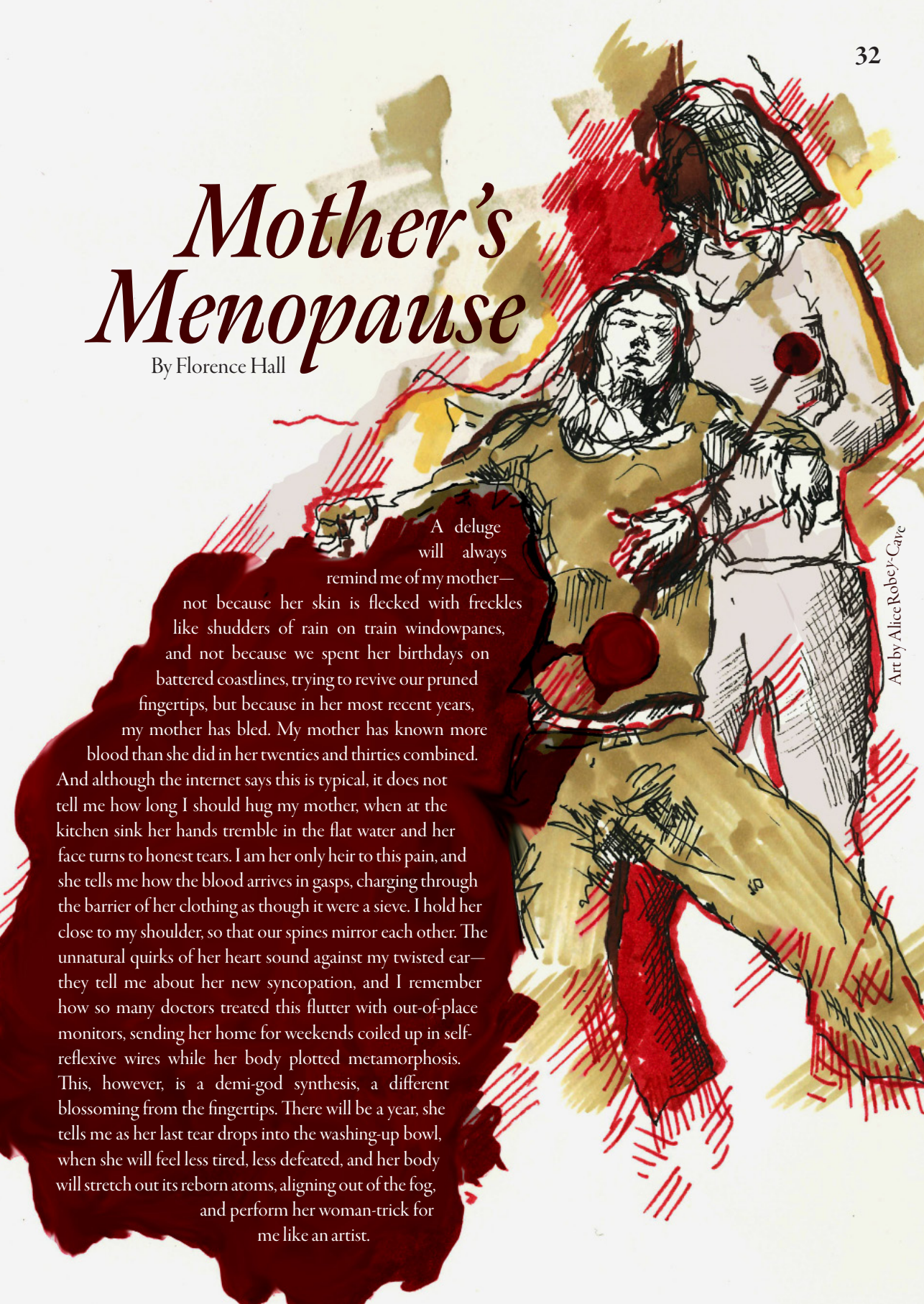
Part 3

Mother's Menopause

By Florence Hall

A deluge will always remind me of my mother—not because her skin is flecked with freckles like shudders of rain on train windowpanes, and not because we spent her birthdays on battered coastlines, trying to revive our pruned fingertips, but because in her most recent years, my mother has bled. My mother has known more blood than she did in her twenties and thirties combined. And although the internet says this is typical, it does not tell me how long I should hug my mother, when at the kitchen sink her hands tremble in the flat water and her face turns to honest tears. I am her only heir to this pain, and she tells me how the blood arrives in gasps, charging through the barrier of her clothing as though it were a sieve. I hold her close to my shoulder, so that our spines mirror each other. The unnatural quirks of her heart sound against my twisted ear—they tell me about her new syncopation, and I remember how so many doctors treated this flutter with out-of-place monitors, sending her home for weekends coiled up in self-reflexive wires while her body plotted metamorphosis. This, however, is a demi-god synthesis, a different blossoming from the fingertips. There will be a year, she tells me as her last tear drops into the washing-up bowl, when she will feel less tired, less defeated, and her body will stretch out its reborn atoms, aligning out of the fog, and perform her woman-trick for me like an artist.

Art by Alice Robey-Care





By Sharon Chau
Art by Angelika Woodruff

My Body, My Choice

To What Extent Should We Modify Our Bodies?

The slogan ‘my body, my choice,’ proudly proclaimed by women fighting for the right to bodily autonomy, has been taken as gospel by feminist groups worldwide. This powerful phrase has been integral to the fight for safeguarding reproductive rights and has since become the poster child for the global feminist struggle. But does this mantra extend to every choice a woman makes? Is there a limit on the extent to which we can—or should—modify our bodies?

In 2024, the encroachment of cosmetic surgery into the public sphere, its increased potential for customisation, and its rapid normalisation are on full, glorious, unprecedented display. Catalysed by the meteoric rise of social media, influencer-celebrities, and online advertising, there is a dizzying array of cosmetic surgery options available at the click of a button. This ranges from classic botox and liposuction to more elaborate buccal fat removal, a surgery that removes fat between the cheekbones and jawbones to highlight facial bone structure.

All the aforementioned factors, coupled with increased spending power among women, have led to the ever-increasing popularity of cosmetic surgery. According to The British Association of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons, 31,057 cosmetic procedures took place in 2022, a 102% increase from the previous year. Among the younger generations, there has also been an increased interest in non-surgical or minimally invasive procedures.

Should this increased uptake in cosmetic surgery be a cause for concern? Or should it be celebrated as the purest form of bodily autonomy and expression for women who have long been denied the right to control what their bodies look like?

There are two main stances in the feminist debate over cosmetic surgery. One side argues that such women are victims of the beauty industry and the patriarchy, while the other supports women’s agency in choosing to undergo bodily modification to improve their lives. Susan Bordo (1993), a key anti-cosmetic surgery feminist, argues against the “abstract, unsituated, disembodied freedom” which is used to justify women’s choice to modify their bodies. In a context where photoshopped images have become our dominant reality, where problems with our bodies have been

socially constructed, this rhetoric of choice and self-determination is extremely idealistic. On the other hand, Kathy Davis (1995) opposes the painting of cosmetic surgery recipients as “cultural dupes” and victims suffering from false consciousness. Instead, she argues that women who undergo surgery are “active and knowledgeable agents.” Although they know that their options are limited, they still try their best to have agency over their lives in their contexts. Such women are not vain, nor seeking to make themselves beautiful. They simply wish to become ‘normal,’ ‘unnoticeable,’ and ‘ordinary.’

How do we square these two stances?

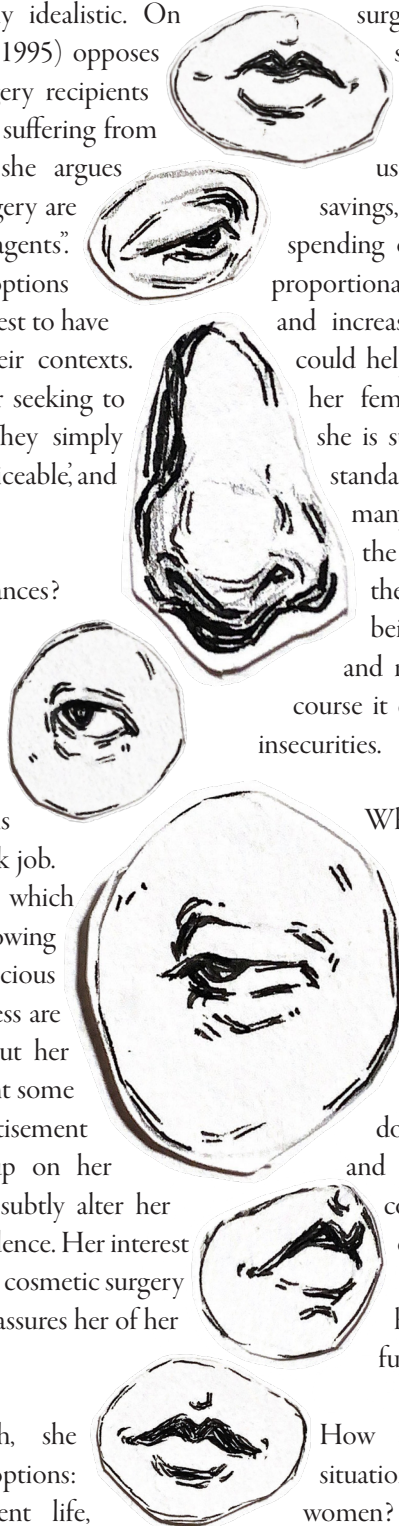
Let’s take the fictitious example of Amy. Amy is an intelligent, well-educated woman who has just graduated from a prestigious university and is now working a highly paid desk job. She thinks she is unattractive, which has hurt her confidence growing up. As a feminist, she is conscious that such norms of attractiveness are wholly socially constructed, but her lived experience makes her want some change. One day, a flashy advertisement for cosmetic surgery pops up on her Facebook feed, promising to subtly alter her features and improve her confidence. Her interest piqued, Amy reaches out to the cosmetic surgery clinic, which enthusiastically reassures her of her concerns.

After doing some research, she concludes that she has two options: she can continue her current life, constantly feeling dissatisfied about her

appearance—or she can undergo cosmetic surgeries to gradually beautify herself, so that she can look in the mirror and feel attractive every day. Even though the surgery would use up a significant amount of her savings, she reasons that her current spending on cosmetic products would be proportionately reduced. The ‘pretty privilege’ and increased confidence she would gain could help her career. Amy grapples with her feminist discomfort, knowing that she is succumbing to patriarchal beauty standards, but eventually decides after many sleepless nights to undergo the procedure. She is satisfied with the outcome, and it leads to her being more confident, successful, and romantically fulfilled—though of course it does not completely remove her insecurities.

What Amy does not know is that the advertisement she received was specifically targeted at her, exploiting the data of previous searches which had built the profile of a well-off but insecure woman. She also does not know that the clinic had significantly downplayed the risk of physical and psychological complications of cosmetic surgery. Even though the outcome of the cosmetic surgery was as good as she could have hoped for, it was not made under fully informed circumstances.

How should we understand Amy’s situation, a reality faced by many women? She is an active agent who has thought extensively about her choices and



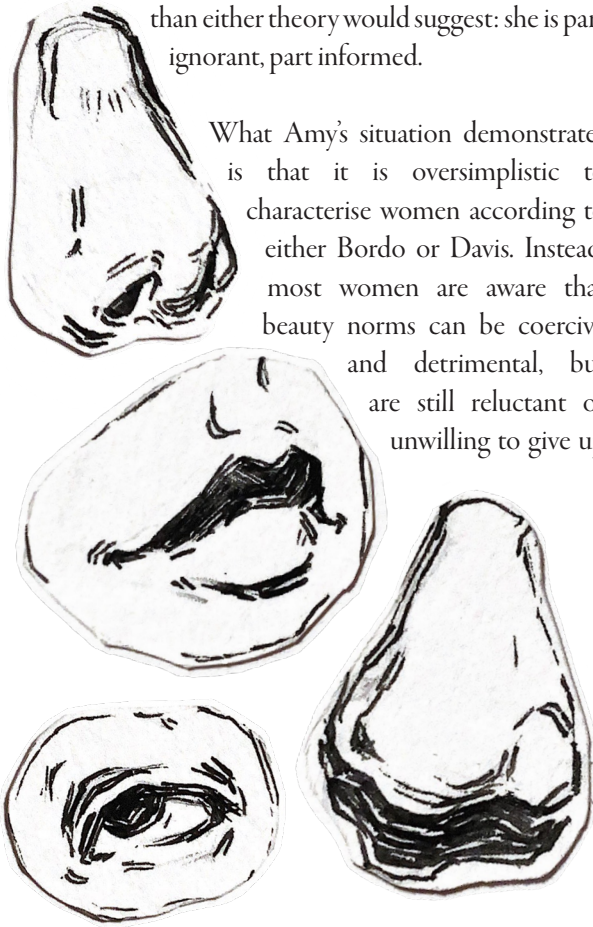
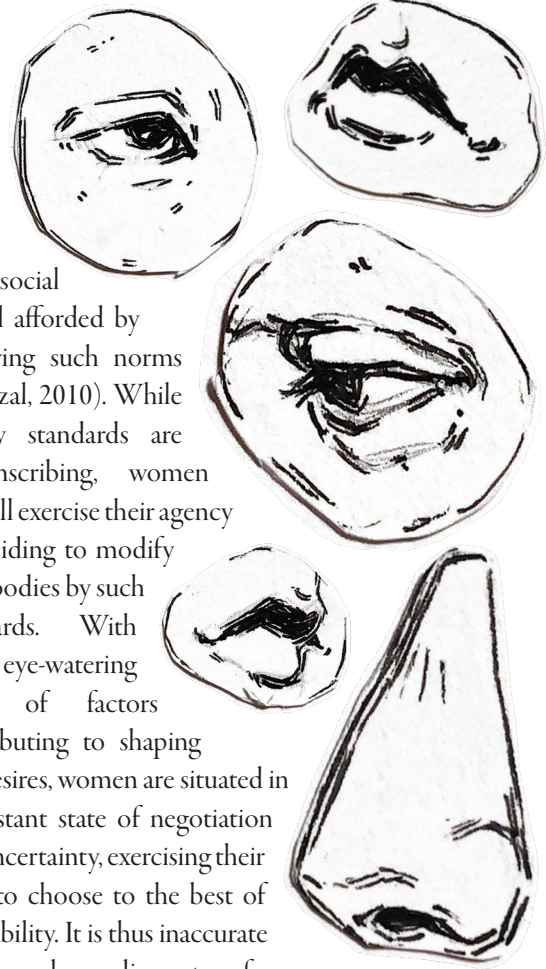
the options available to her. As a feminist, she is aware of the implications of succumbing to—or perhaps becoming complicit in—unjust norms and standards of beauty, and why that may be detrimental to other women and the feminist movement as a whole. However, we cannot say that she made a wholly free choice. She was unaware of a significant amount of information, including the insidious, targeted, and misleading advertisement which prompted her decision. Moreover, even though her choice was not one of desperation, it was one based on the need to improve existing circumstances under an unjust system which rewards attractiveness in women. Having caused significant amounts of internal turmoil and angst, Amy's decision was not an entirely empowering one.

Amy does not fit neatly into either category set out by Bordo or Davis. She is more complicated than either theory would suggest: she is part ignorant, part informed.

What Amy's situation demonstrates is that it is oversimplistic to characterise women according to either Bordo or Davis. Instead, most women are aware that beauty norms can be coercive and detrimental, but are still reluctant or unwilling to give up

the social capital afforded by following such norms (Dolezal, 2010). While beauty standards are circumscribing, women can still exercise their agency in deciding to modify their bodies by such standards. With the eye-watering array of factors contributing to shaping our desires, women are situated in a constant state of negotiation and uncertainty, exercising their right to choose to the best of their ability. It is thus inaccurate and condescending to frame women as perpetual victims of patriarchal control; it is simultaneously unrealistic to ignore what Naomi Wolf characterises as a “beauty myth”—a lie fuelled by profitable cosmetic, weight-loss, and fashion industries causing women to have “a dark vein of self-hatred, physical obsessions, terror of aging, and dread of lost control”.

Moreover, women who choose cosmetic surgery are not a monolith. Most of them face situations like Amy's, but there exists a nuanced range of women with different levels of knowledge and information. On the one hand, ‘enlightened’ feminists do exist, fully cognizant of patriarchal norms, who choose to wear makeup, use Botox, or surgically modify their bodies—to maximise their own happiness or utility. On



the other hand, there exist women who have not had the opportunity or privilege to scrutinise or reflect on the reasons behind their wish to become more attractive, who are swayed and trapped by prevailing standards of what is 'normal' or 'beautiful'. A sweeping generalisation on either side fails to acknowledge the wide variety of circumstances under which women make such decisions.

Perhaps there is no way of resolving the bodily modification debate by looking at feminist theorists alone—instead, what we should focus on is the very real physical and psychological harm to the women who undergo such an experience. Although Amy was lucky that her procedure was successful, such surgical interventions can result in infection, bleeding, embolisms, skin loss, blindness, crippling, and death. Cosmetic surgery can also cause severely negative emotional impacts: some individuals are very happy with their surgical results and have no regrets, while others are deeply disappointed, even with a technically 'good' and satisfactory outcome, and ultimately feel worse than the dissatisfaction which triggered the surgery. A small minority might become "polysurgical addicts" or "scalpel slaves" who return for endless operations in perpetual quest of the

"perfect" body (Bordo 1993). Cosmetic surgery is not an inconsequential choice akin to deciding what clothes to wear every morning—it must be grounded in its very real physical and psychological impacts.

Ultimately, to what extent should we modify our bodies? If all women were fully informed of the procedures' risks and the patriarchy's potential influence on their decisions, I would wholeheartedly support any bodily modification they seek to undergo. But in an imperfect world, we cannot make perfect, fully informed choices. Like Amy, there is a real danger that we might make a choice which ultimately works for us, but is riddled with misinformation and ignorance. Under the patriarchy, where a white, youthful, Western aesthetic of feminine beauty is the norm, women's decisions to modify their bodies are rarely free. Succumbing to such misogynistic beauty standards, though tempting, will only serve to strengthen them. Although 'my body, my choice' is a potent catchphrase succinctly capturing the feminist demand for autonomy, modifying our bodies is not the solution.





'Chest Out' by Lillian Tagg

Poetry Collection: **Flesh and Feeling**

'Little Pigs, Big Hero Moment' by Alec Tiffou

You woke with a butterfly on your nose. The window had opened overnight. The curtains arched, trying to touch nothing in particular—hovering, widow-like. Everything I own lies in a spiral: the jawbone of a horse I found in the dust. A silver ring I took from an old lady. A pocket-sized hymn book. A whittled bull. A fishing line. Matches. One pair of spare pinstripe boxers. These scraps make a fossil, head at the centre on the mattress we fucked on as kids. I bag the scraps. Follow the sad tadpoles by the pond. Under the see-through skin to the same embryonic sadness your mum described. She taught English. Teaches. We say 'big hero moment' at trivial acts of heroism. You bin a beer lid: big hero moment. I give a penny to a tramp: big hero moment. I'm missing something. It feels like I'm missing something? I like you. I like you because if you find two four-leaf clovers you give me one. If you find four you give me two. If you find three, we keep looking.

'Writer's Heartbreak' by Sophie Baptista

Just one of us is getting on this train.
I know these scenes from films and novels,
So I know how I want this one to end.
I also know that no one will be running
Through stations today, on a June afternoon,
When a thousand worlds aren't ending.
Yours isn't. As you walk free, through newsstands
And cafés, you take most of me with you.

'Clementine' by Amber
Forrester

And anyway
She was
Pre peeled
Pre packaged
Pre rolled
A prick
All big chunks
Small grains
White veins
Crumble
Oh
Heavy thick
Writhing
She was
A clot
Cooling sharp
On the come down
Oh
Well yes
I suppose
She was quite
Something—
Quite forbidden—
Yes she was
Delicious

'strip mall' by Holly Branco

it's a twenty-minute salsa
with a boy who does not know how to salsa
'twixt brutalist babeland

candles (streetlights)
Milmine (sirens)
carpet (gravel)

it's a spot the difference game
dump truck against a dumpster
you lose on purpose

'Getting Dressed' by Cora Alina Blau

I take the bones out my closet
(A sturdy and reliable set)
Then quickly the nervous system
(Although I could really do without that, sometimes)
Blood vessels and muscles
(There was a good 2-for-1 deal on them)
I fill my skull with some grey mass
(Either two or three scoops, depending on the tasks)
I accessorise with eyeballs, ears, a mouth
(Wondering if the dress code requires it)
I wrap myself in skin for decency
(Lest someone here could see my heart!)
Then, wear some feelings on my sleeve
(Taking quite a fashion risk)
Oh no, I spot old stubborn flaws
(Any clue on a detergent here?)
But, I button up compassion, fasten grace
(And finish cloaked in courage for the day)

Et voilà, the latest fashion!



Roommate

By Jenny Black

Art by Olivia Cho

She gets through the front door and takes a breath,
Removes the cotton balls taped to her hands and throws them in the bin,
Rusty stains like wilting carnations looking up at her.
She washes away the traces of dried blood left on her hands,
Steps into the shower,
Where I scrub away the smell of rubbing alcohol—
Too clean.

I poke the bruise on the back of her hand,
Pain like the ghost of a needle under my skin—
I think she is crying,

I am

Wondering how something so necessary can feel so close to a violation.

She lies down and I hold one arm in the other.

I see a spot she missed and marvel at it:

A red bloom, and she will grow more.

I try not to blame her

(She takes carcinogens like a champ)—

The line between she is sick and she makes me sick is blurry;

She is me

She is not,

She carries me around in her pocket,
I wear her like a coat,
She is my roommate and the room
And though sometimes I feel as if she has betrayed me,
I would never desert her, hand her over in triage,
Dissect her into functioning—
 And faulty flesh;
She does not belong
To the fluorescent lights on ward 6b,
They only borrow her every other month
On a Thursday afternoon.
She is returned home again to me that evening,
Full of holes and infliximab and fear for the side effects,
But I put plasters on her hands
And brush the knots out of her hair.
I make her dinner
And we eat it together.





'Growing Pains' by Lillian Tagg

From the Chamber to the Garden:

Notes on Gesture and Embodiment

How have I written about my body? How have I sought to express something through the medium it most resists? I think now of summer. Of all those afternoons spent in my room, up in the attic, where the air grows so heavy that it hangs like an overripe fruit. At all times I was reclined, and, drifting in and out of sleep, I felt myself retreat into some remote and stuffy chamber of the mind.

Yet still, glimpsing saturated blue through the skylight—a memory of my body over which I obsessed. There, as it was, bathed in French sea,

That stretch of cool water covers the skin, embraces the limbs, and imprints the body with a tender weightiness. It is this sentiment, southern France's cure for English disembodiment, that ushers a woman to proclaim in a sensual whisper <<Putain, ça fait du bien>>

I think what attracted me most, in my



somnambulant state, was a particular euphoria. It's the feeling of having overcome that binarism of mind and body, a staple of Western thought whose implications I now seek to unpick. Embodiment—understood to mean the rediscovery of the body within the mind—is what I am after. I'm trying to find an escape from the mental chambers into which those doggedly celibate thinkers retreated from their bodies, reducing their forms to a sagging, aching, sinful nuisance. I am wanting instead to return to my body. Or rather, to admit that I have treated it wrongly, denied its insights, plagiarized its work, blamed it for my reckless impulses. How I have mistreated my flesh—I want instead to feel that swelling, throbbing warmth as it creeps into the cracks and corners of my shape.

In short, I am wanting to leave the chamber and step out into the garden.

I am reflecting now on when I have felt most embodied. Certain gestures spring to mind, a personal canon of overwhelming warmth:

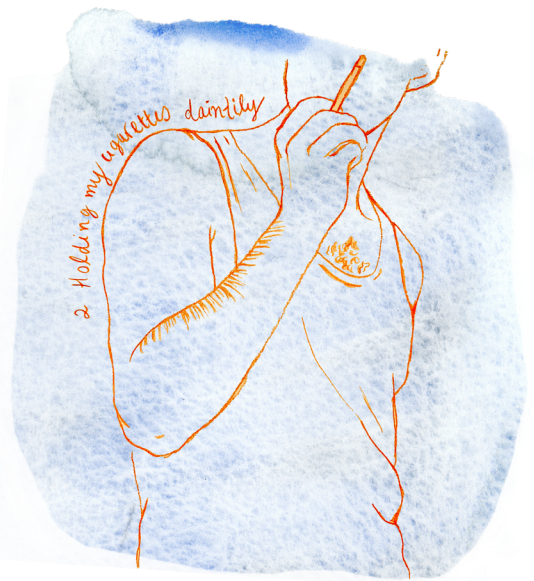
1. Crossing my legs while sitting
2. Holding my cigarettes daintily with a flimsy wrist

3. The strut that animates my legs when in a wedge heel
4. Scratching my temple despite the absence of any itch
5. Drawing back non-existent strands of hair over my ear
6. Supporting my head as a dead weight against a finger in the shape of a gun
7. Holding my bags by the crook of my arm

(Smoking while doing any of the above, naturally.)

There is a thread here: these are all rather camp. Put differently, the corporeal habits of an effeminate smoker. But why have these gestures engendered embodiment as opposed to others? And, if there is a cerebral argument to be understood underneath all this corporeal mystery—what might it be? What conscious manipulation of symbols underlies the ostensibly unconscious act of gesture?

Well, I am playing with symbols, it would seem, trying on the semiotic outfits of women in particular. When I cross my legs, smoke with a flimsy wrist, and dangle my bag from the crook of my arm, I act out a part that I have imagined many times—that of the forgotten housewife. She has snuck out to smoke after the children are tucked



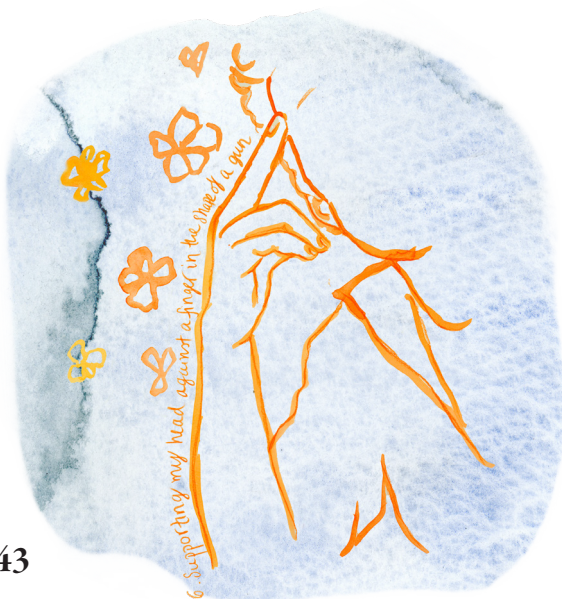
in, her husband's ego expertly soothed and stroked, her mind now freed from the cycles of loading and unloading a dishwasher.

She had once dreamed of being a writer.

I have appropriated her gestures as an antidote in the treatment of my masculinity. There she is, occupying a position that might be considered the ultimate condemnation of a man, and still her body moves with a wholly measured calm. The masculine doctrine mandates that the self must be constantly asserted in struggles, conquests, and conversational interjections. A battle must be declared in order to triumph in an identity that is, by intentional design, under attack. But hers is a self already known. An assurance kept so effortlessly, so frankly, so definitively that it cannot be shaken. I am after the serenity with which she puts masculine pride to shame.

I cross my legs in both embarrassment and emulation.

Let us take another from the list. Numbers 2, 4 and 6 are all derived from a series of black-and-white television interviews with the writer and civil rights activist James Baldwin. Gesturally he is of a certain



trope—the reclining, chain-smoking thinker whose spoken elegance is punctuated by the need to inhale from his cigarette (interrupted altogether by the need to draw another from the pack). It's not so much Baldwin's verbal intellect that attracts me—that's a semantic thing, the dissection of words is an activity for the disembodied mind. Rather, I am enamoured with his bodily emulation of femininity. In this regard, Baldwin has no equal. His femininity is not simply beautiful, it is inextricably bound to his intellectual force. For him, the word seems not a literary stasis, but a spoken gesture. Before leaving his lips, the word is wrestled by his throat, severed by the theatrical swoop of his hand, and stripped bare under the fearful glare of his wide-open eyes. This is embodied thinking.

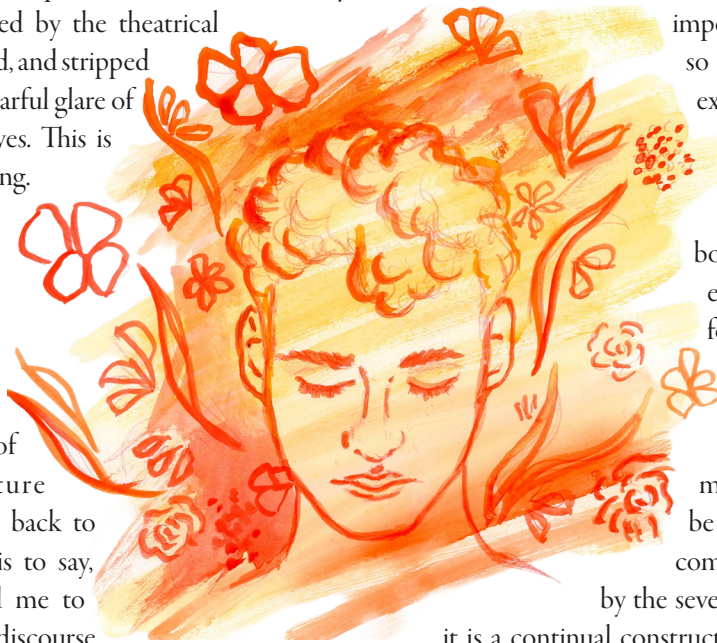
In both instances—emulation of an imagined housewife and emulation of Baldwin—gesture has brought me back to my body. That is to say, it has awakened me to the embodied discourse through which my body connects with others. A dialogue that is entirely, and intentionally, erased by the false severance of word and flesh.

I am, of course, neither alone nor original in thinking this. There are numerous examples of embodied languages that have flourished—bodily exchanges that disobediently proliferated under the totalitarian intellectual authority of the mind/body division. I am thinking now of voguing, the embodied discourse of the New York ballroom scene. The etymology of its gestures can be traced

to fashion magazines, '60s divas, gymnastics, ballet classes, and pantomime. In short, it is an amalgamation of the restricted outlets and refuges for queer expression in the mid-to-late twentieth century. Vogue, and indeed ballroom (more broadly speaking), gesture to a particular existence. A childhood marred by restlessness, an adolescence drenched in shame, and the forced development of an obsessively self-aware mechanism for survival.

It strikes me now that for those whose bodies are incessantly contested under the lens of others, the retreat to the disembodied mind becomes an impossibility. It is not so much that queer expression has fled from intellectual discourse to the realm of the body. Rather, queer expression has been forced to reckon with a concealed truth: that the body is not a fixed medical reality, to be examined at a comfortable distance by the severed mind. Instead, it is a continual construction on the site of flesh. A construction in which we may often have no part.

Vogue is frequently a caricature of the reference points that it imitates, a conscious exaggeration. It is, to steal a term from Susan Sontag (another reclining, chain-smoking thinker), 'artifice.' In overtly and proudly imitating the bodies of others, vogue has sought not only to expose the cultural construction of bodies, but to reclaim the act of bodily construction itself. The body is shown to be animated by performance, by play, by theatre



—all those things that resist the dubious prison of ‘authenticity.’ The straights would have it that the body is a neutral, biologically indisputable entity that predates cultural structures, and is, at most, passively imbued by them. The body, in this capacity, has been the refuge of the transphobe—I am thinking now of Kathleen Stock’s tired, acidic refrain that a trans woman will always have a man’s body. But they’ve got it all wrong in imagining the body as a “neutral surface” (as Butler puts it)—one hides the power structures that underlay bodily construction. Contestable words become incontrovertible flesh.

This is all to say that when I move in the way that I do, perhaps I am asking you a question—holding up a conversational mirror. I am inviting you to consider what structures you are emulating and extending with your body. There I am, consciously appropriating all the gestures of my favourite queer figures, determined to pick and mix in a critical way rather than passively reproduce. I’m stealing, but we all are. The difference is that I’ve cited my sources. Have you?

I think now of all those who imitate without reflection, for who knows what unthinking shamelessness entitles a man to outstretch his thighs, swelling his groin to suffocate the cramped space of a waiting room? But I also think of all those who imprison their bodies for fear, who dare not strip back the intersections that hem them in, who feel reduced to repeat the vicious structures that contort their flesh. The stiffened, crystallised muscles of men violently suppressing their femininity comes to mind.

So it seems worth reflecting on the ways that our bodies move. I mean this both physically and metaphorically. As, on the site of our flesh, a structure is always acting—our bodies are in perpetual political motion. To this end, gestures represent just one modicum of the body’s discourse, and perhaps only its gentle mummings at that.

I return now to myself on that one, formless summer afternoon—there as I was, retreating into some oppressive mental chamber...

Don’t go!

Concealed behind your chamber’s walls
are structures that need examining, need
resisting,
A whole life to be lived critically,
Perhaps an explosion of uncomfortable
sensations,
But a wealth of embodied ecstasies too,
So I think I will leave the chamber for now
And step out into the garden.



By Roan Thornton
Art by Natalie Hytiroglou



Art by Indiana Sharp



PART 4



SIX MONTHS
LATER,
REYKJAVIK

I am still quiet &
you are still dead.
nonetheless we drove to the falls today
—anorak voyeurs with wide-angle lenses—

sad creature
i watched it gulping over the lip,
so heavy & aching to change
just for one desperate moment

& half-lidded—long exposure—it might have been true
infinite body collapsing so fast it might have been still,

might have been slow smoke,
or backward ashes,
or a hundred hollow-bone gannets, diving.

then lashing itself white on
inevitable re-embodiment
remembering, in all its useless violence.

damp-haired & alone
i watched the water punish itself.

You make a flagellant of the world,
it having fumbled your gentle light—

& here, its endless confession hurtling nowhere,
thundering loosely, coming round again.
we bleed the same language, it & i:

soaking through in the glacial debris

so for one ruptured moment
I might be water
and pour myself out

& these words that snuff themselves before impact. but who am i,
to write the epitaph of your bright life?
when they asked me to speak,
i just cried. i just cried.

Anonymous
Art by Sara Dobbs



passing the parcel

There's a particular kind of emptiness that I'm very interested in, and which I think is at the heart of modern life. It's a lot like the feeling one sometimes gets immediately after waking from a pleasant dream. Quite often one's first few waking moments are spent in a hazy euphoria: the sense of warmth and contentment from the reveries of the night before lingers in the first impressions of the day.

As the memories of those dreams begin to fade, it's hard to resist the temptation to try and recapture them and bask in their serenity. However, the very act of trying to relive those sensations—of trying to return to the comfort of sleep's warm embrace—dispels the bliss-filled haze and ensures the brusque dusting off of any fingerprints left behind by last night's dreams. One brings to mind the plans for the rest of the day only to realise that there isn't anything in particular to look forward to—what was grounding that sense of purpose, those feelings of happiness? You're left confused and feeling empty.




Look again. You're at a child's birthday party; you're playing pass the parcel. The tinny music swells, the feverish excitement of the other children bounces up and down and engulfs the room. You're a part of this cacophony-creating machine, and you are utterly swept up in the commotion. You feel wave after wave of euphoria beat down on you as the parcel moves around the circle, and, as it gets closer, your sense that you might be the lucky one peeling off the final layer steadily grows. The crescendo is reaching its peak, and the box is finally slid along the table into your eager grasp. Your outstretched fingers make contact with the parcel, but something is wrong. You feel yourself surfacing. Your hands take hold of the parcel but they meet no resistance beyond the tacky texture of the wrapping paper—it crumples into a ball between your fists.

Now, these two scenarios have a lot in common. They epitomise a common sensation whereby, in trying to stalk out and pin down things like happiness, beauty, or meaning, we cause the objects of our search to disintegrate and slip between our fingers. We find ourselves in a world full of simulation and performance, where all too often we ruthlessly strip back layer after layer until we are left with nothing. Whether it's in regard to art, work, food, politics, or sex, our expectations that we ought to be able to delve into what's supposedly meaningful are continually violated when time and time again we come up empty handed and disillusioned. We are afraid. The obvious appeal of things may vanish under our inspection—yet we inspect anyway.

It must be, then, that we are not content with mere impressions and sensations. Our scrutiny is intended to bring us closer to some ineffable core: to make feelings more keen, emotions more visceral, meaning more lucid. A world which contains only surfaces appears impoverished, so we attempt to escape into a richer one by claiming that a painting is not simply a depiction of a

form or scene, but really a statement of the artist's frustration with bureaucracy; by saying that a feeling of desire for another person is not simply that, but really an expression of a Freudian unconscious. We employ the brutal tools of interpretation in an attempt to get beneath the skin of things, but in doing so, we cause the heart that we were looking for to elude us. When I use "interpretation" here, I'm not using the broad sense under which our entire subjective experience is governed. Rather, I'm interested in the kind of interpretation which is intimately bound up with emptiness—which deconstructs, splinters a whole into constituent pieces and rudely assigns them meaning, telling them what they are 'really saying' or showing them what they are 'really about.' As Susan Sontag notes in 'Against Interpretation,' it is hard to see how this kind of interpretation can bring us closer to meaning or beauty or truth in a work of art or in our experiences more generally. When interpreting, we are not stripping back but schematising and translating, ignoring the endless complexity of what's in front of us in favour of some digestible conceptual summary. Sontag concludes: "In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art." Interpretation which is dedicated to dissection fails to deliver the sensual beauty or meaning that it was supposed to bring us closer to—it passes through pleasure's skin with mechanical adequacy.



Following a stroke, a man named Clive Wearing lost virtually all of his memories as well as the ability to form new ones. He perpetually had the experience of being awake for the first time—he thought that every moment was the first moment of his conscious life. Prior to his stroke, Wearing had been a prominent composer and musician. After his stroke, despite his insistence that he had never heard a note of music, seen any music, or had any contact with music at all, he retained his musical abilities. I once came across some moving footage of him sitting down at a piano, and as his fingers touched the keys and he poised himself to play, he was utterly transformed. After a few shudders, his agitated disposition vanished; and he began to play and sing with an incredible fluency, purpose, and tranquillity. Wearing, whose world had been reduced to his immediate surroundings, to this particular moment in time, was still able to use music to experience transcendent beauty. This is a man whose situation makes him incapable of interpretation: he could not hold the music in his mind for long enough to claim that it has some hidden meaning or content beyond its obvious beauty, and yet it was clear that he has not lost access to the rich redemptive power of art.

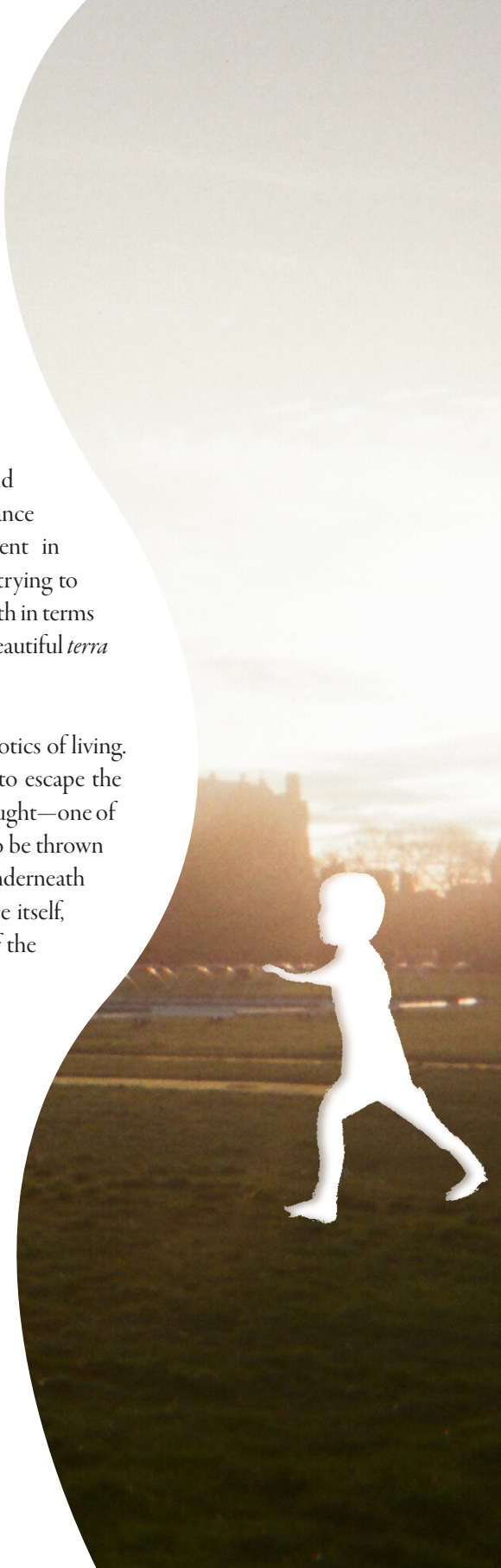
But if meaning and beauty lie on the surface of things, why are we moved to strip back our emotions, sensations, or ideas in the first place? I began this piece with a claim that this kind of emptiness was at the heart of modern life, and I think that modernity gives us clues. One of modern life's defining characteristics is excess. One thing that all of us share in our experiences of modernity is a greater demand on our sensibilities than it is possible to handle. We are continually fed with content which prods or demands us to feel a certain way, which makes no effort to match the rich complexity of the real world, which is designed simply to satiate a hunger for emotional responses which numb and comfort. When confronted with something which isn't so easily digestible, which doesn't so straightforwardly tell us how to feel, we are baffled. The murkiness of the real world leaves us unsatisfied. We realise that our visual life is dimmer than we would like, our intellectual life duller, our emotional life more muddled; all around us we are confronted with open questions and unresolved dilemmas.

Our instinct to interpret, then, is an attempt to feel things in the real world with the searing intensity which modernity promised us. The issue is, of course, that any attempt to shine a spotlight on meaning or beauty causes them to quickly fade away. Yet, in the absence of such a spotlight our experiences are dimly lit and dimly understood. It seems that we have no choice other than to embrace this murkiness: to surface from the world of interpretation and return to the convoluted and difficult world of reality. But this is no Sisyphean sufferance. Embracing surfaces, impressions, and sensations does not have to amount to a reluctant acceptance of an impoverished experience; there is a contentment in recognising the richness in what's really there, instead of trying to fabricate it somewhere else. To think of what we are left with in terms of darkness is a mistake; rather we are left with a vast and beautiful *terra incognita* which need not be charted.

If Sontag proposed an erotics of art, then I propose an erotics of living. Schematics obscure more than they explain. If we want to escape the nagging emptiness at the heart of life, this paradigm of thought—one of surfaces with hidden meanings just out of reach—needs to be thrown out and rethought. There is no parcel; there's nothing underneath this wrapping. When interpretation hollows out existence itself, what else can we do but discard this dogma and let go of the hermeneutic handrails of life?



By Oliver Grant
Art by Seraph Lee





The Pheasant

By Megan Kelleher
Art by Indiana Sharp

Someone
broke the pheasant's neck and
now I cannot / sleep without feel-
ing its deadened weight press against
my feet / or rather I cannot wake with-
out the false impression / that when I
open my eyes / its own displaced head
will face mine / crushed red around /
the eye pulled coils of brain matter /
pleated by the untrained hand so they
remain / fleshy and rough / there are
still nights like this where the despair /
of sleep is not in the dreams themselves
but in the memory / of the final crack of
the pheasant's neck I watched it stifle /
mid-squawk in the farmer's field / each
fold of the blanket is its head and its
neck / its brittle neck that I feared /
could break and did break and lies odd-
ly against / my feet which I cannot / lift
because what if I saw it then / roll down to
press my calves to the bedding / roll stiffly
to lock with my gaze / and then it must
roll further / until its cheek is pressed to
skin until / the loose creases of wattle
invade my lips when I wake / its eye is so
close to mine / I could imagine the yellow
of it / as my bedroom light obscured / by a
ring of black that gleams but cannot blink



BEING YOURSELF

By Tom Grigg
Art by Joe Walford

I apologise in advance that the following is a far cry from the sensuality and rapture properly warranted by this edition's theme. Finding an article like this in a magazine titled 'Strip for Us' must be rather like going to an orgy and being offered tap water and orange slices. What I'm trying to do here is argue for the old adage that we should be ourselves. To flog this dead horse, the instrument of choice will be nothing less than analytic philosophy. Of course, if this doesn't sound like your average PPE-ist talking to himself I don't know what does, but there it is, here we are, on we go.

Where to start? I should be myself. "Should" is used here in a practical sense, rather than a moral one. I'm not saying that it is the morally right thing to do, but rather that this is what a rational person should do; it is good for someone to be themselves. Of course, what 'being yourself' actually entails is hard to define. I am not going to be looking at who we are to society at large, to strangers we pass in the street or flatter in a job interview. In those cases, norms and learnt behaviour prevail. When I talk about 'being yourself' here, I mean something like acting in a way that accurately reflects your

beliefs, and values when you are around the people closest to you.

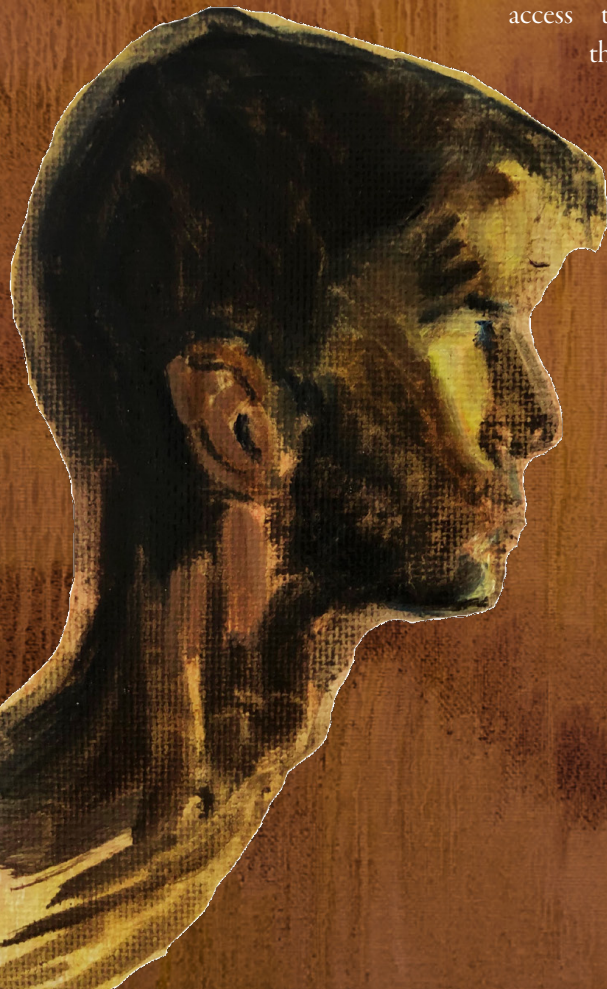
To reach this conclusion, I will work from the premise that to be the actual object of someone's care, love, or affection is a good thing; it is always good when you see yourself in the person your close ones love. So, by showing that being yourself is a necessary condition for being the actual object of someone else's love, then it will happily follow that I, you, we should be ourselves. I will argue that it is a necessary condition because it is only by being yourself that we can overcome the problem we have when trying to really know other people.

The problem is that we can't read other peoples' minds. That we can't directly know what other people are thinking is part of being human. We only have access to the

contents of our own minds, and no investigation into 'qualia' or the psychology and science of the brain has brought us close to 'mind reading.' Yet, it is undoubtedly in the contents of this mind that we locate the person. We can express ourselves through our appearance, we might feel defined by the boundaries and contours of our bodies, but I, my 'self'—as the object of other peoples' blame or praise or opinion—am not my leg or arm or even my eyes, rather I am everything going on in my mind. But while you can see my leg, my arm, my eyes, you can't see my mind. We learn to act in society as if we have some idea of who people are—we form relationships. How can we do this, when we have no way of knowing people the way they know themselves?

Well, in addition to thought, humans are capable of action. Somehow our immaterial thoughts can have material effects. We can laugh with friends, wink at a crush, order a coffee. And while our immaterial thoughts are invisible to others, that is not the case for material actions. Instinctively, we can work out the thoughts from the actions. When we see someone do or say something, we project our own knowledge of human nature and rationality onto that action to work out the intention or emotion with which it was carried out. We don't really think about the complexity of our attempts at mind reading amidst the chaos of everyday life, but it is exemplified in conversations between people who lack a common language—without words we revert to mime and pained smiling. One way or another, others can get an idea about what's going on inside our head.

Are our assumptions about people the same as knowing them? Again, tiptoeing around huge ongoing epistemic debates, this process of assuming can only count as knowledge if we be ourselves. You know me only to the extent that my mind, or my intention, can be accurately



my actions. And this is only possible if my actions accurately reflect my mind and intention. In always being myself, my actions become a reliable instrument by which you may come to know me. This is contrasted with someone who could be described as ‘inauthentic’ or ‘shallow’—and might find themselves in your DMs come student election season.

Why is it important for people to properly know you? Well, if they don’t really know you, it is impossible for you to be the actual object of their affection, love, and friendship. It would be like having a compass that was always a bit off, never quite pointing to true North, to your true self. (If the analogy is wanting, try Phoebe Bridgers’ ‘You Missed My Heart.’) If you act in such a way as to give other people a dishonest impression of yourself, that impression will nonetheless be the person they love. And this surely isn’t as good as when you see yourself in the ‘thing’ people know. Tender loving care shouldn’t miss you, shouldn’t pass you by, or go over your head—it should hit you right in the chest.

“And yet—in an existentialist vein—to lack authenticity, to be motivated only by external forces, is to not exist in any meaningful way at all.”

Obviously, the reverse is true—by externalising who we really are, we also expose ourselves to the negative judgement of others. We make ourselves

vulnerable. It is easy to avoid vulnerability by not being yourself, so that no one can really judge you for you. And yet—in an existentialist vein—to lack authenticity, to be motivated only by external forces, is to not exist in any meaningful way at all. Thus, therefore, in conclusion: we should be ourselves.

“Instead of saying that, I just said that the sky looked nice.”



That’s the argument. The horse has been newly and duly lacerated. Am I saying we should all aspire to Connell Waldron’s “I used to think I could read your mind. You know, after sex”? Maybe. Are you convinced by my refurbished essay crisis? Maybe not. A final anecdote for those who made it to the end.

I was once sitting on a bench with someone I liked, and we were about to move to different parts of the world. The sky was very nice on the lake, and it was a good time. We were talking, and she asked what I was thinking. I was thinking how I liked her, and the things I liked about her, and how much I enjoyed spending time with her. Instead of saying that, I just said that the sky looked nice. Don’t, reader, do that. Do something else. Be yourself.





'Thoughts&Feelings' by Charlotte Mitchell

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