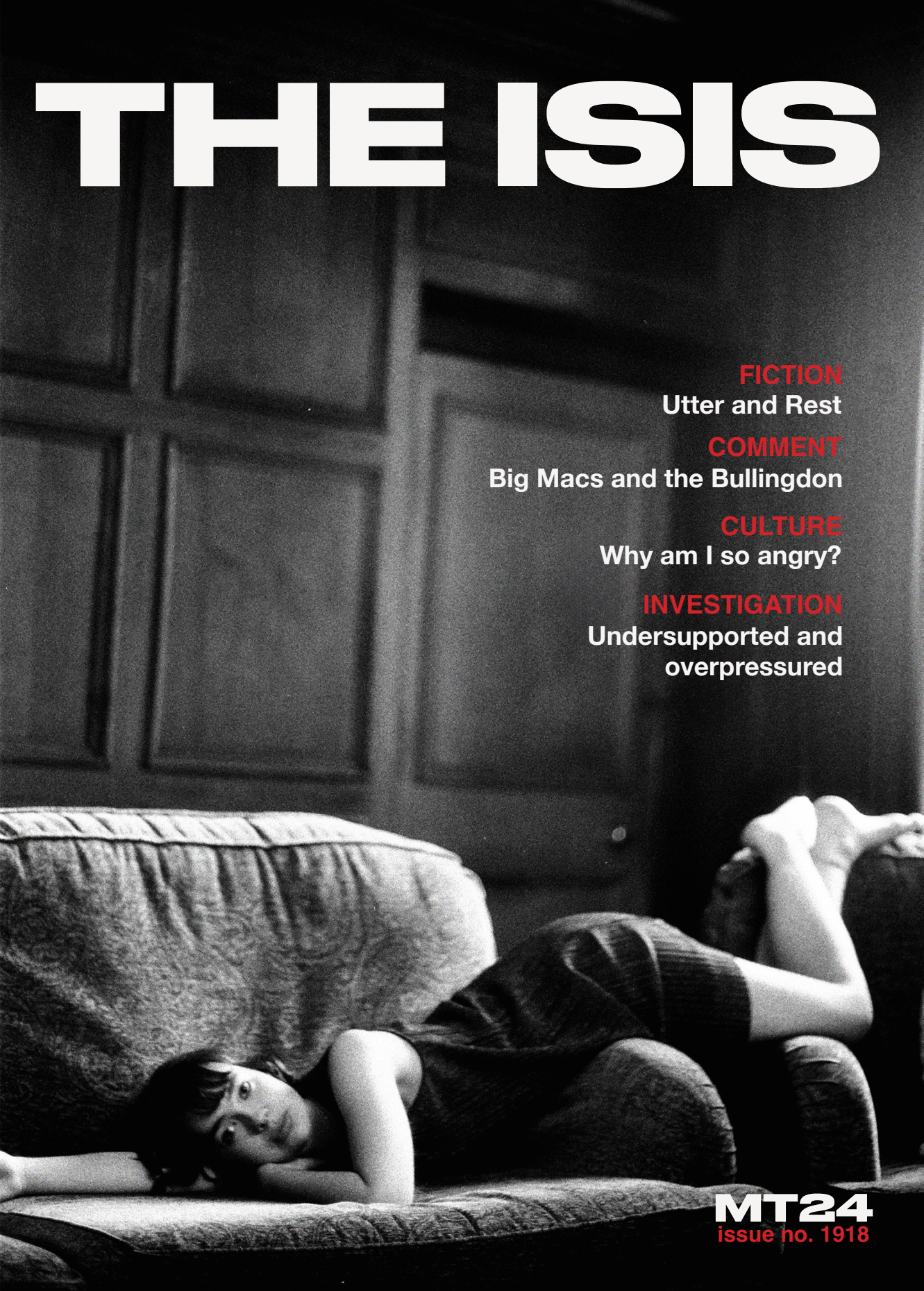
THE ISIS



MT24
issue no. 1918

Editors' Note

We wanted to introduce ourselves to you but weren't totally sure how.

We've had a running joke all term that our pub orders perfectly capture us as individuals, but also us as a pair. Ridiculous, we know. But sometimes a joke just sticks. (For reference, Ananya is a gin and tonic drinker, Bella's a pint-of-Peroni kind of person.)

Countless G&Ts and a keg's worth of Peroni later, and we've been in this role since June 7th, 2024. That's a bloody long time to be working on something you love to bits, and care about so deeply. Six months, to be precise.

The summer was, well, how should we put it? A jumbled-frantic-frenzy. And even a triple-barreled made up word doesn't quite quite capture it. Turns out editing a magazine is almost like being a married couple in your fourties—you find yourself sending 'good morning' texts and tackling everything together (bills, social plans, your vision for the future).

The Isis really has wiggled its way into every aspect of our lives. At one point, *The Isis* even crossed the globe. With Ananya visiting her grandparents in Delhi, and Bella attending her Polish-Jewish uncle's wedding in California, the sun never set for us. It was a wonderful meshing of cultures, time-zones, and people.

We've spent months pushing for a huge number of changes. We've managed to shift away from a theme; hit 5,000 followers; start a podcast and produce a printed newsletter (because there wasn't enough to do already).

So, let's address the elephant in the room: no theme. We know you've been waiting for us to explain ourselves. To be honest, we both wanted it from the offset (which was when we realised we were on the same page, as with most things).

It was when sifting through *The Isis* archives on a hot August day that we found ourselves feeling surprisingly close to writers we'd never met; laughing at jokes meant for students fifty years ago; gawping at old Durex adverts. Some things never do change. We hope you, too, find traces of yourselves in these pages.

(And so, if you're reading this, what's 2074 like? We hope we made you laugh, or cry.)

To put into context, *The Isis* has been around for 132 years, and we've only had a theme for six of those. We felt that students in Oxford were clever and interesting enough to write about themselves, and the world around them, without us telling them what to do. For us, a great magazine should capture a snapshot of the world we're living in now. That's why we've selected beautiful, funny, provocative, outrageous, informative, cheeky, and moving pieces. What a time we're living in!

It's safe to say it's been utterly bonkers. We've spent every day dedicating ourselves to this labour of love. We wouldn't have it any other way. This couldn't have been possible without our remarkable Senior Editorial Team: Alice, on Creative; Florence, on Fiction; Kelsey, on Social Media; Paul, on Business and Events; Reuben, on Non Fiction, and Violet on Features. Huge thank you to our creative director, Jarad, for helping lay in the magazine; to our in-house photographer William, for taking such beautiful photos for our magazine cover, and to Lizzie Stevens for this gorgeous illustration (you made us tear up).

Thank you, everyone. It's been a blast.

Ananya Bella

My grief observed

The German word for the bereaved is *Hinterbliebenen*—those left behind. I am one of those 'left behind' now that my father has 'gone ahead'. My grief is a love with nowhere left to go.

A primal instinct to run, with no clear destination.

An uneasy feeling that something was off,

A racing heart,

A painful pit

deep in your

stomach.

C.S. Lewis was right when he said no one told him that grief felt like fear. The first time I read his *A Grief Observed*—a raw exploration of reconciling Christian faith with the life-shattering experience of loss—I felt an unexpected kinship. No one had put into words the internal spiritual struggle I felt so perfectly. It comforted my mother especially, since Lewis wrote from the perspective of a grieving husband. In fact, when my parents first started going out in Oxford in the '90s, my Papa took her to the cinema to watch *Shadowlands*—a film about Lewis' tragic love story, ending in a cancer-related death. Some might call it a coincidence, but my mother and I have since wondered whether this was a divine foreshadowing. As for me, I recommended Lewis' book to everyone I could. I was desperate for people to finally grasp what I was going through. Yet, ultimately, the best way I can help others understand is to use my own words.

People have told me that I have been so eloquent in my grief. It is not eloquence; it is a coping mechanism. I prefer to see myself from the outside, and feel immense comfort in pretending I am my own patient. I relish analysing my emotions. It exercises the part of my brain which enjoys looking at a problem and uncovering its deeper source. It allows me to get caught up in the puzzle of explaining my emotions rather than feeling them.

My Papa passed from this life to the next on 6th August 2024—the day of my parents' 25th civil wedding anniversary. As my Mama wryly remarked in her memorial speech—since he missed their church wedding anniversary (7th August)—my Papa still owes her a present. My Father was never any good at anniversaries, he would often drag me along on a mad dash the day before to whip something together. I do not know what my Papa would say if he was sitting before me now, and I told him that he was the subject of my piece. He would probably let out a booming laugh and then tell me to structure it clearly, with a punchy introduction and "Clear. Topic. Sentences."—he was a history teacher. I am afraid I will have to disappoint you, Papa. This essay will not be clearly organised, nor likely well-structured.

Nothing

in my

life

right now

is

Clear. Or. Structured.

Everyone's grief is different. That is not much of a revelatory statement, but its simplicity rings true. My sister is 14, and my brother is 22. My Mama has lost her husband and soulmate. I have lost my Father. But I have also lost my teacher, my cook, my tough-love therapist, and my friend. In some ways, I have been lucky. My Papa was diagnosed with aggressive brain cancer the summer before my first term at Oxford, meaning I had two years with him. Many patients with similar diagnoses do not live beyond fifteen months. Those two years, however, were not bliss. I have seen things no child should ever have to see, and I have lived what felt like a never-ending horror story. And yet, even in the worst of times, there were flickers of joy.

Before my Papa lost his speech, I spent every vacation giving him a slideshow of my term, quizzing him on his 'dad lore', and asking him questions about his faith. Before Papa lost his mobility I would peer over his shoulder in the kitchen as he made dinner and hummed along to Italian '80s music. When he was no longer able to walk, I would lie next to him on the sofa listening to his heartbeat. Even in his last weeks I read and sang to him as he drifted in and out of feverish consciousness. When I came back from another glorious Trinity term this June, I opened his door at the care home, and his face lit up. All he could say was "Oh", but he said it with such a smile. I used to get angry when people would say, "I suppose you got a head-start on grief because you knew your father's illness was terminal." In some ways, I did grieve along the way. I 'grieved' my Papa's speech, his mobility, his memory. These parts of Papa that we 'lost' had already found their way to God. But ultimately there is no head-start on grief. Hope is innate to human nature. Even when treatment stopped, whilst my Papa was alive there was still a possibility of a miraculous recovery.

This piece is actually not about my Papa at all. It's about me. Admitting that is frightening. In his work, Lewis discusses the selfishness of grief.

"Why are they not checking up on me?"

"What could possibly be more important?"

"Why did they not visit him when he was well?"

"How could they have missed the funeral?"

"Their condolence was so superficial…"

There is also a selfishness about our memories of our loved ones. We turn them into saints rather than seeing their humanity. Sometimes, consumed by our fear of forgetting them, we cannot remember them at all. I could describe every detail of the cashier's face at Lidl from last Monday, but I can't piece together my own father's face.

I have spent two years praying for my Papa: for good, or at least neutral, MRI results, for his speech to return, for his motor skills to improve so he could hold kitchen utensils again and make his signature spaghetti bolognese. Now I don't need to pray for that anymore. At first,

that was freeing. God was looking after him and there was nothing more I had to do. Then, that freedom began to feel like a prison. There was no longer anything I could do. Never did I think that my first-year reading on the Reformation would maintain its relevance after Prelims. Catholic rites for souls in Purgatory powerfully tied the living and the dead. I grasp now the inherent need for the bereaved to seek a destination for their unexpressed love. I almost yearn to say intercessory prayers, to do works of penance, or have Masses said, despite my Lutheran beliefs. Whilst I maintain that nothing I can do will change God's plan for my Papa, I have no place to direct my energy other than to myself.

What do I pray for now?

Death feels almost taboo in many parts of the Western world. I wonder why… Sometimes my Papa would quote a dry-humoured German saying: "Neben Tod und Steuern ist die Geburt die einzige Sicherheit im Leben" [Besides death and taxes, birth is the only certainty in life]. We all know we will die, and yet it is so uncomfortable to speak about. In the first few weeks after my Papa passed, I spent so much time reassuring those who tried to console me, making sure they did not feel awkward. As a result, over the past few months, I have brutally discovered my true friends. Many have disappointed me. Others have surprised me. Those who never met my Papa have offered more meaningful condolences and support than those who had known him for decades. They have been angels sent straight from heaven. Those who have steadfastly expressed their kindness, wisdom, and support have overwhelmed me—I do not know what to do with the love I have been handed.

I think many people are afraid of what to say to someone who is grieving. They are worried about 'getting it wrong'. Words that might comfort me could be the worst thing to say to another person. I think the most important thing you can do to comfort a grieving person is to remind them of your constant acknowledgement of their constant grief. As, ultimately, the pain of grief never goes away—you just become better at handling it.

I learned to cook this year because my father no longer could. Having chosen the same subject to study at the same university he did, every part of my academic life will remind me of him. My Papa won't be at my graduation this July, nor will he be there when I need advice for my first job interview. I can't pester him with boy problems, and he will not walk me down the aisle when I get married. I can't watch him grow old with my Mama and my children will never know their Grandpa. I won't be able to celebrate birthdays without him in my thoughts—Papa's was one day before mine. There will be smaller remembrances too. The Branston pickle jars in Tesco's will surely trigger the water-works—much to my dismay, Papa requested I schlepp his favourite pickles and a smelly block of cheese back every term. This pain will accompany me my whole life. A week after my Papa passed, I told my mother this. But what I also told her was that this was a comfort. In being so aware that he will not be there for my many milestones, he will be there. Every time I reach for him in my grief, I return to the living site of my Papa, and the act of 'remembering' continues his existence.

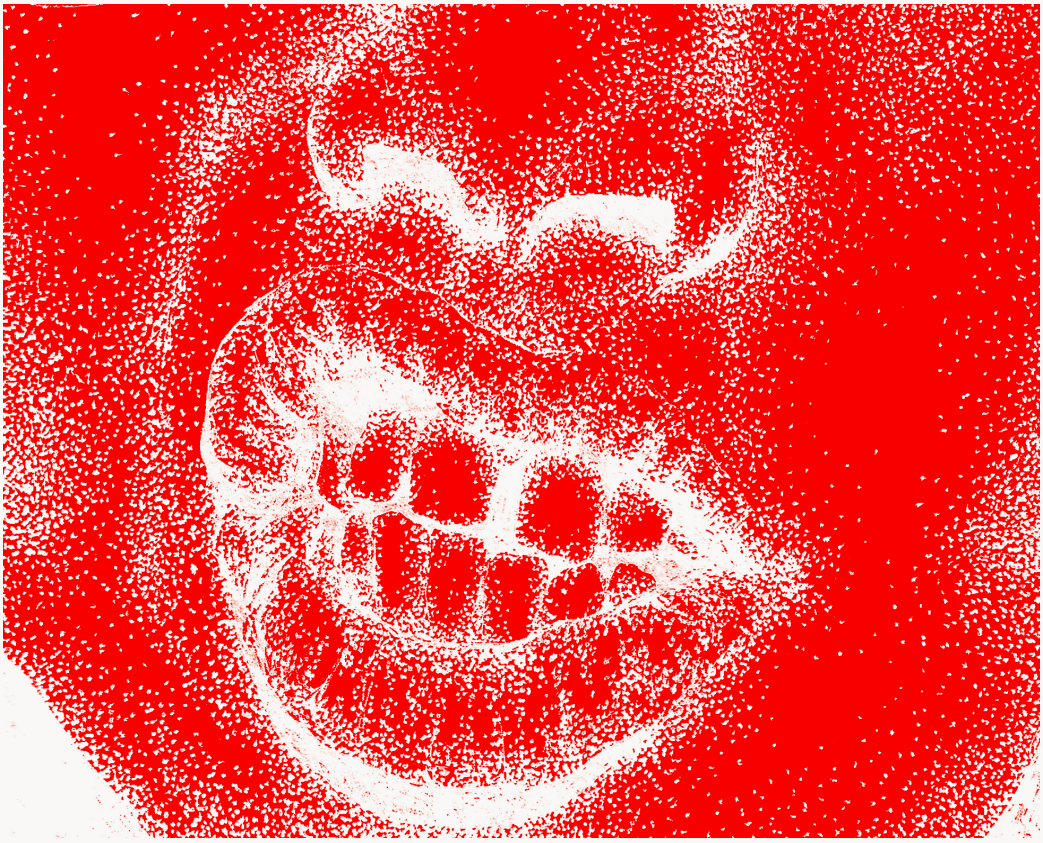
My grief is what keeps him nearby.

Exactly three minutes before my Papa died, I read a passage from my favourite childhood book, Anne of Green Gables: "Today [...] I found myself laughing. I thought when it happened, I could never laugh again. And it somehow seems as if I oughtn't to." Papa, I apologise for the soppiness of this essay. I love laughing. People often comment on my rather loud laugh. I promise I will laugh and laugh again. But I will also cry. And I will cry and cry again. And always, in everything I do, I will think of you. Lewis depicts grief as a long valley with many twists. I now know that my inevitable disappointments and pain can find peace and comfort in the wisdom I have gained through my own experiences, the words of others, and my faith. My valley lies ahead of me, and I do not know which bends it will take. That is something I leave up to God. What I can promise, however, *mein lieber* Papa, is that I will love you to the moon and back (and back again).

Words by Sophia Langelüddecke

'Salmon embrace before getting eaten by foxes', 2024
Screenprint, ink on paper
42x60cm
Naiya Ellis-Woodward

Why am I so angry?



At some point during the doomscroll, you hit the wall. For me, it's 1am, and I'm deep in an unholy mashup of hydraulic press tests and multi-part bridal pranks. Sharpie meets wedding dress. Chaos, et cetera. It takes an eternity of split-screen nonsense to admit the punchline isn't coming—I've been duped. "That's enough internet for today", the top comment predictably reads. Hard to argue with that, but I switch off my phone and roll over to wallow in my victimhood just a little longer.

Engagement is currency online. Love it or hate it—every view greases the machine. It's basic psychology: we react to bad news more strongly, dwell on it, share it, let it marinate in the dark corners of our minds. As a result, negative emotions have more market value on social media. The most lucrative? Anger.

In the digital age, rage, like most vices, has become a commodity. Anger has evolved from a natural, visceral, human response to an industry standard, the stock-in-trade of the influencer economy. It's not about truth; it's about how easily your blood pressure can spike. Rage-bait, a form of 'outrage porn', thrives on this. Content need not be factual, only provocative enough to stoke outrage and drive traffic.

It's tempting to curse the algorithm, but really, it's just holding up a mirror – one that reveals indignation as our favourite indulgence.

"It's tempting to curse the algorithm, but really, it's just holding up a mirror."

Though 'rage-bait' is a recent term, the phenomenon is hardly new.

Political discourse, especially from far-right media outlets, has long capitalised on anger. Fox News, for example, has built an empire on making you froth at the mouth about "woke leftists", "snowflakes", and the idea that someone, somewhere, is having avocado toast on taxpayers' money. Over-generalisation, sensationalism, and personal attacks are staples of the right-wing arsenal.

"The idea that someone, somewhere, is having avocado toast on taxpayers' money."

Masters of these tactics—Piers Morgan, Andrew Tate, Ben Shapiro, Tucker Carlson—have made rage into a full-time career. Do they believe what they're saying? Who knows. What matters is that outrage draws attention, and attention builds influence. Whether people share their anger or feel disgusted by their content, the result is the same: rage. It's less about politics and more about ego-driven performance.

Rage-bait influencers are their spiritual kin, just with lower production values. Like their more famous media counterparts, influencers manufacture content designed to provoke. TikTok and Instagram reels are where things get properly unhinged. Think fake 'Karen' videos where actors stage racist confrontations. Beauty influencers (like Valeria Voronina) who deliberately present themselves unappealingly to drum up abuse only to reveal a flawless makeover (cue the misogynistic pile-on). Staged road-rage clips where everyone is in the wrong. Creators like Aris Yeager, who brands himself on being insufferably entitled—because nothing screams engagement quite like insulting hospitality workers.

Then the *pièce de résistance*: raw meat enthusiasts—'carnivore' influencers who munch on raw liver or human placenta, while their vegan counterparts call for meat-eaters to be tried for murder. The latest public enemy is Bonnie Blue, an adult star notorious for bragging about sleeping with 'dads, husbands and virgins'.

In each case, social animosities are brazenly exploited: institutionalised issues like misogyny, transphobia, and racism are tapped into, alongside more trivial antagonisms like disdain for vegans, cyclists, or niche fashion trends. These creators have perfected the art of pushing just far enough to rile up both sides without getting banned, and in doing so making the comment section a gladiatorial arena of indignation.

Recent clashes between traditional establishments and global social media platforms—like Brazil's banning of X or the jailing of Telegram's founder Pavel Durov in France—signal how ungovernable online spaces have become, a strange 'Wild West' that doesn't conform to any national boundaries. Rage-bait influencers, with their inflammatory antics, are a microcosm of this unregulated chaos, exploiting human flaws and divisive issues for attention.

Now, let's not get ahead of ourselves—Piers and co. are playing a different game. They command far reaching platforms and speak primarily to older, more politically active audiences. Rage-bait influencers, often anonymous and absurd, only aspire to be taken seriously just long enough to hate-watch. Both, however, thrive on the same business model: anger drives traffic, and traffic drives revenue. And more and more, they're side by side on the same platforms. Now, with just a flick of the finger separating them, the line between pundit and influencer grows ever thinner—two sides of the same profitable coin in the business of outrage.

And there's the rub: because these creators are engaging with topics that are undeniably significant—social justice, inequality, cultural shifts—the anger they provoke seems significant too. It feels righteous, productive even.

"Now, with just a flick of the finger separating them, the line between pundit and influencer grows ever thinner."

But online outrage is lazy: low risk, high reward. It allows people to affirm their moral superiority, inflate their egos, and shift blame onto an easy target. The satisfaction comes not from genuine engagement but from straightforwardly feeling 'right', all while remaining behind a screen. As political cartoonist Tim Kreider so elegantly put it, anger is "more insidious than most vices because we don't even consciously acknowledge that it's a pleasure."

But shallow pseudo-outrage has serious consequences. Constantly reacting to fake or exaggerated online debate saps our ability to care about things that actually matter. Meaningful problems are drowned out by waves of sensationalism. Worse still, empathy becomes a casualty. After all, why wrestle with complex emotions when you can let rip in the comments? Grim evidence of this lies in the way TikTok activists are now forced to slip footage of real suffering—like the crisis in Palestine—behind a few seconds

"Is this rage-bait or just bad taste?"

of vapid influencer bait just to dodge algorithmic obscurity and claw back a sliver of attention. In a world overdosing on outrage, reality is left fighting for scraps.

We might like to think we're too savvy for rage-bait, that it's the young or the gullible who fall for it. But rage-bait has evolved, and its real genius lies in its ambiguity. It's not always obvious and that's what makes it so insidious.

Is this rage-bait or just bad taste? The uncertainty keeps us hooked. It's gaslighting at scale—something feels off, but you can't quite put your finger on it. A whiff of casual misogyny or a touch of transphobia, just subtle enough to dodge outright outrage. Take, for instance, a white creator using foundation a few shades too dark—not quite enough to cry 'blackface', but just enough to make people pause, watch again, and wonder. It can be more innocuous too—deliberately misspelling or mispronouncing a word or doing your makeup wrong. These minor provocations gnaw at us, leaving us uncertain. Anything can look like rage-bait if you're hungry enough.

Even the most trivial content has lost its innocence. Think of the culinary war crimes of social media—undercooked dishes, bizarre ingredient choices, cakes sliced in the most infuriatingly illogical ways. Avocados massaged with unnecessary sensuality. But most mind-numbing of all might be the infamous '5 Minute Crafts', a brand of DIY so baffling that watching it feels like a personal insult

to your intelligence. Truly pointless irritation it may be, but with 81 million subscribers, it's the 17th most subscribed YouTube channel this year.

In this genre of rage-bait, there's no agenda, no argument, just an army of digital provocateurs daring you to stay calm in the face of their inanity.

Rage-bait designed to drive you mad through sheer absurdity, leaving you exasperatedly asking: "Why?" Of course, it's all motivated by the desire to accumulate views by antagonising the viewer. And yet, the frustration feels personal, as though the creators are provoking us for sport.

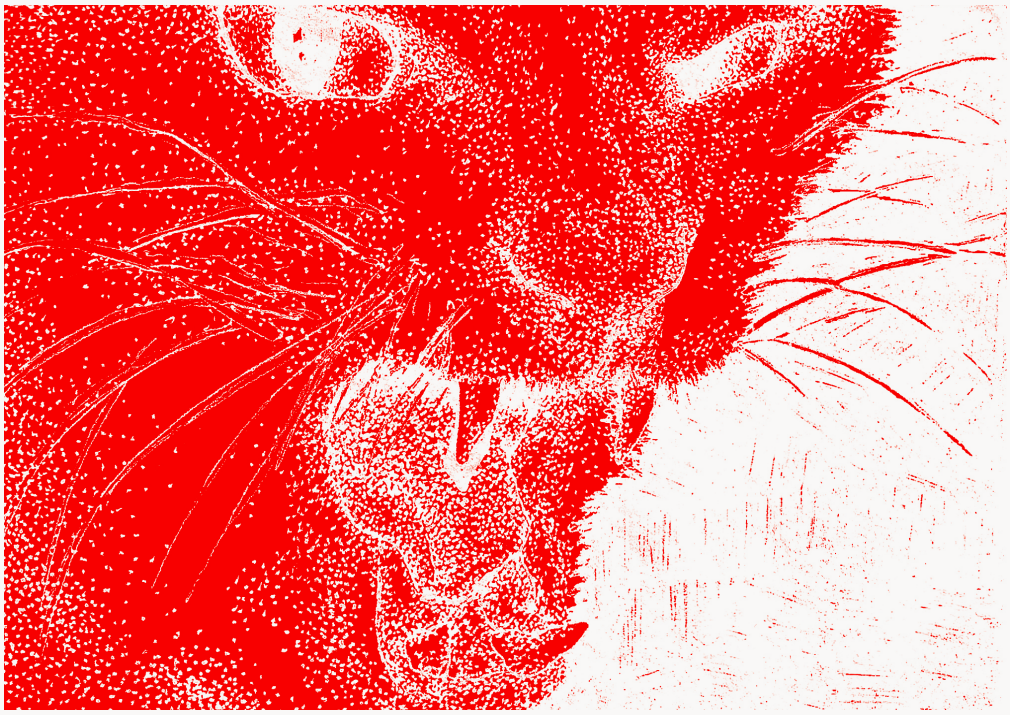
"In this genre of rage-bait, there's no agenda, no argument, just an army of digital provocateurs."

If, as Kreider claims, we crave the "sadomasochistics of outrage and vindication", this kind of rage-bait denies us even that. There's no moral victory, no righteous cause—just a black hole of frustration. It's a slow simmer, a vague discontent that lingers long after you've scrolled past the last maddening video. And that's where the real damage lies.

When anger cannot dissipate, it turns inward, morphing into procrastinator's shame. It festers and spreads within us, waiting to erupt at the next piece of bait. Our outrage has been commodified; our anger algorithmically normalised. Rage-bait numbs us—angry enough to seethe, but too drained to act. The question is infuriatingly double: both "why am I so angry?" and "why am I not angry anymore?".

"That's enough internet for today", the top comment had said. Funny how that doesn't hit the same at 7am the next day.

Words by Eve Coiley
Art by Lillian Tagg



Soy discombobulated

Once, damage done, I sought refurbished perfection for the spoiled object
Happy the translucent tears did not dirty the paper any further
Salinity pooling on the red tongue

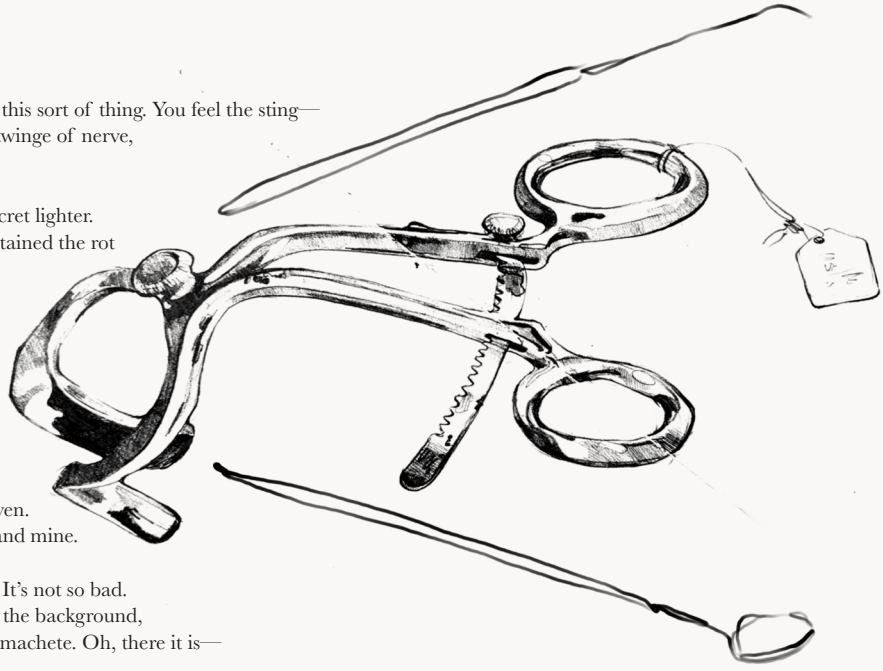
When the soy sauce spills on the poetry collection it is because it cannot contain itself
Leaping in adoration
Magnetised by the prospect of a new canvas

Nestles on all parts of the page
Spells 'I am' redundantly
Migration towards memorability

The paper browns and wrinkles on the dryer
Time loves it so much faster

Words by Philip Kerr

Wisdom



They don't put you under, not for this sort of thing. You feel the sting—
The terrible conquering of gum, twinge of nerve,
Chair slanted to vertigo overhead.

I got out of there a tooth and a secret lighter.
For months, you had blindly entertained the rot
Of my mouth. Supple and sick
Like an old watermelon.
You'd never want me
If you knew.

In time,
The crater patched up
With soup and cell sediment.
I could run my tongue along the
Slip of clean flesh, pure and forgiven.
Scar erased by saliva tides, yours and mine.

I return for the sake of symmetry. It's not so bad.
My seat reclined and the music in the background,
And a needle waiting like a polite machete. Oh, there it is—

Words by Lara Ibrahim
Art by Lottie Thompson

Utter and Rest

[enter from the same bedroom, backwards.]

I wasn't in the frame of mind
When lying up in-famous glow 'til five,
To try and try to sleep
But keep on catching eyes,
And ankles, and—correct the hold,
So older bound behind would come up cold,
And blinder to the touch,
But when you wake I won't think half as much.

And such a dreadful insult that your head
Would droop or drop or better yet be pressed
To where you liked the pillow best,

I wasn't of a mind to write romantics,
No, not cartwheels for the girl
Or for the draws (an awkward peep in turn)
And hold applause, *[turn here.]*

It turns out that she keeps her dress unlocked.
For some infernal reason—
If I were in the press I'd ruin her.

I understand the game now.
There's no suffrage makes a girl go mad
Like privacy, and I deserve the slap
For keeping little looks like that one
Tucked away in random access melody.

Oh well, since absinthe makes the heart grow blonder,
Foundered on the redlip drum and rock.
I'll take a sock to any man
Who'd rather have a sober bird in hand
Than pints in both.
And oh for swears and sweats and songs,
And odes and oaths to eldest things,
You know the one your brother sings,
I sang that while you slept

[to centre.]

And kept you close,
And watched your eyelids
Flicking off the dust;
You seemed to trust the single bed
To last us out, but now the head
Is lying with its shutters dead
Where metal gathers rust.

If two people talking is magic
(and I always believed that it was)
How so tragic to see
That the ending should be
So rarely received with applause.

[exit. page.]

Four weeks later you were drunk and incoherent and I was looking for tapes in your bedroom. Naturally you weren't there. The window was open again when morning came and you weren't there, and since there was no single bed I slept on the floor; I didn't feel the need I felt before to keep my open eyes on you; it seemed like something someone ought to do.

Words by N.F. K
Art by Gruffydd Price

Big Macs and the Bullingdon

Conservatives risk portraying a foreign attitude to class

Kemi Badenoch's 'McFarce' during the Conservative leadership campaign made me cringe. In saying that she "became working class" by assembling Big Macs for a few years as a teenager, she displayed her ignorance of conventional British thinking on class and earned even less sympathy than politicians usually manage.

"Kemi Badenoch's 'McFarce' during the Conservative leadership campaign made me cringe."

While correct in a strictly Marxist sense (she was not in control of the means of production and laboured in exchange for a wage), I doubt that was her intention and certainly very few people understood her comment in that way. Badenoch's perception of class, forged by experiences of immigration and ethnic minority status, collided headlong with that of the British public: an identity etched onto the heart at birth. At that moment, another class-related political controversy sprung to mind. In response to a question headed by the cost-of-living crisis, Rishi Sunak had a similar faux pas in a failed bid to connect with voters, describing Sky TV as one of the "sacrifices" his parents, South Asian immigrants born in British East Africa, had made while he was growing up. The horrors associated with the answer were only exacerbated by the knowledge that he had left D-Day commemorations in Normandy to deliver an interview that indicated all the relatability of a wet flannel. The impression created by the two instances was identical: the Tories don't understand class. The Tories don't understand 'normal' people and the Tories don't understand Britain. Neither Badenoch, who is now leader of the Conservative Party, nor Sunak could have re-cast themselves as champions of the working poor with a more satisfactory answer (no Conservative since Disraeli has managed this)—but, both entrenched perceptions of themselves as out of touch to an irredeemable degree.

Whilst both have middle-class upbringings, it is noteworthy that Badenoch and Sunak, rather than any other Conservative politicians, have come across as the most egregiously out-of-touch. Consider some of the other names that have headlined the Tory parliamentary roster since 2010. David Cameron and Boris Johnson, for instance, are Old Etonians (because that matters apparently) whose fathers had careers in finance and European politics. Whilst also described as 'posh', these labels have not interfered with their electoral success. Cameron and Johnson have both presented themselves as palatable to working-class voters, without downplaying at any point the prestige associated with their family background, education, and career history. By contrast, it is probably because they are confident in their backgrounds that 'normal' people like them.

David Cameron's accession to the Conservative Party leadership in 2005 concluded a forty-year period since the premiership of Alec Douglas-Home during which every Conservative leader was state-school educated. Whilst certainly present in the party, the cadre of public school boys who had dominated the party's politics until then were relegated to the backseat. Instead, figures such as Margaret Thatcher and John Major drove the party away from the post-war consensus and towards the millennium.
In his first speech as party leader, Cameron paid homage to the great meritocratic experiment that his party had celebrated since the 1960s—declaring that the Tories were the party of "aspiration," who "wanted everybody to be a somebody."
Despite this, Cameron (crucially) made no effort to present himself as belonging to that class of politicians striving for upward mobility.

In an interview with Jon Sopel for the BBC Politics Show in 2009, Cameron was far from coy in stating that there "isn't any secret about where I was sent to school" and "I never hide my background or where I'm from."

Contrast that with the meekness of Sunak when asked about his background in June 2024. "We [his family] went without a lot of things because my parents wanted to put everything into our education," though probably true, it pales in comparison to David's unshakeable self-assuredness. Cameron said, "So what?"—Sunak thought it necessary to let everyone know that his immigrant parents are frugal and hard-working.

"Cameron (crucially) made no effort to present himself as belonging to that class of politicians striving for upward mobility."

Whilst Cameron's upbringing by a financier father, and boarding school education is peculiar to the great majority of Brits—Sunak's story, which might be

paraphrased as "my parents were smart and hard-working [definitely more so than yours]," is outright alien and an unequivocal vote-killer.

Sunak and Badenoch faltered then, in having foreign attitudes to class, rather than simply elitist ones. The story told by Sunak—plucky parents moving continents to forge a new life in an unknown land—would not sound out of place on a campaign podium in Arizona or Michigan. In Britain, however, a country in which most of its inhabitants have lived for countless generations, this tale is abstract rather than concrete. Sunak further contradicted the foundations of the British class system when he became "richer than the King", in the words put to him during the ITV interview. Perhaps an attitude this reminiscent of the American Dream explains why rumours of him leaving the country for California flourished in the lead-up to the election.

It is, of course, relevant that Sunak and Badenoch are ethnic minorities. In most cases, her ethnic minority status means that one's family arrived in Britain less than eighty years ago. It is, therefore, unsurprising that when ethnic minorities describe their class backgrounds, the explanation lacks the implicit assumption that 'this is where we always lived, and this is what we always did.' The ethnic minority Conservatives at the helm of the party are stuck between a rock and a hard place: far too affluent to be working-class—but too foreign to be posh.

Words by Nathan Osafo Omane
Art by Niamh Walker

"He is believed to chant 'Buller! Buller! Buller!' when he sees old clubmates from his Oxford days."

Brits identify even less with the middle-class immigrant striverism of non-white politicians such as Sunak than they do with the upbringing of English upper-middle-class Cameron.

Boris Johnson goes one step further than his schoolmate Dave in playing 'posh' and was rewarded for his antics in 2019 with a landslide General Election victory. Without minimalising the significance of the Brexit issue in 2019, the 'Boris the Toff' caricature contributed to the Conservatives winning a higher proportion of votes amongst voters who considered themselves working class (NRS C2DE 48%) than he did amongst voters who consider themselves middle class (NRS ABC1 43%). Working-class voters seem to be enthralled, rather than put off, by attitudes that are unfamiliar to them—so long as that 'unfamiliar' mumbles in RP and Latin. He prides himself in having people know that he was educated in the classical tradition preserved by a handful of public schools and elite universities. He declares Pericles his personal hero and wheels out a rehearsed Iliad recitation gimmick whenever granted the opportunity. He is believed to chant "Buller! Buller! Buller!" when he sees old clubmates from his Oxford days—that cannot be a man ashamed of his background.

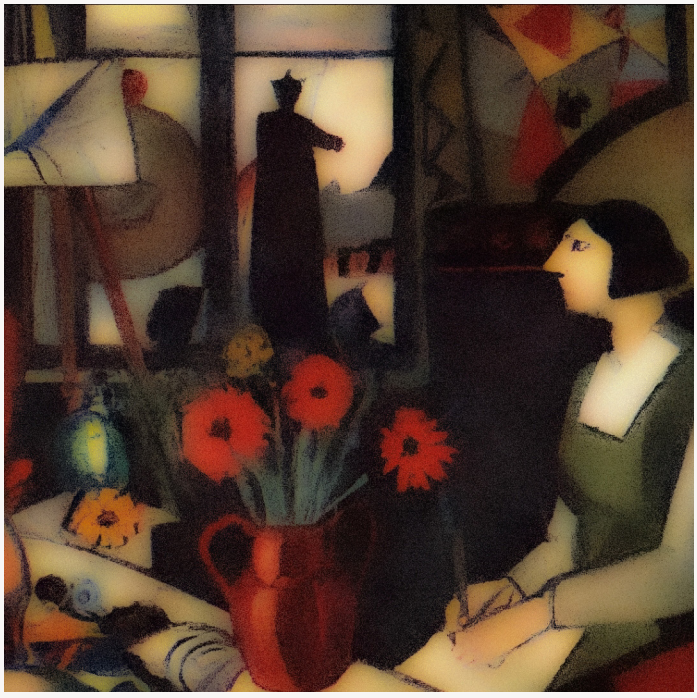
Monologue: Heartburn

You sit at the top of the stairs, head against the bannister. A weak light infuses the house, sickly yellow. Your hands are sticky, but you are too tired to wash them, it is the late afternoon and time stands still. You stare at a crack in the wall, which grows every day, and wonder how it got there. The house is old, but not that old, and for the most part intact. The crack faces your door, but not your mother's. She lives downstairs, so for her it might as well not exist. It is midsummer, and the days are uncomfortably hot. You spend most of them slumped in some corner of the house, waiting for the end.

In the evening you walk through fields, listening to the wind rush through the trees. The sun is low overhead, turning everything a fiery gold, and you feel you should make a wish, but you don't know what to ask for. The river is stagnant, clogged with weeds, but in your head it is clear blue and glorious, and you drift down it idly, and there is someone with you holding your hand. The half-light comes and you go home, lie in bed with your eyes open and your heart racing. When you wake up, nothing has changed.

It is a colourless morning, across the table your mother looks tired. You are quiet around her, and she rarely looks at you, but last winter you saw her on the phone to a friend, her head tipped back in laughter, and you felt glad. She has her work clothes on, thin and grey, and sits opposite you at the kitchen table. She does not look at you, and when she leaves, you do not move but stay facing the space she used to occupy.

There is a photo hung up, of you and her when you were a baby. You both look sad. When the neighbours' kids came over they laughed at it, said they had never seen such a serious baby. There aren't many photos of you together. Sometimes you see her smiling at it. You wish you were older, so she might talk to you more, or younger, so it wouldn't matter that she didn't, but you are caught between the two and yet are neither.



'Painter in her studio', 2024
Oil pastel
42x42cm
Willow Jopp

The infant is sweet and round-faced, but now you are pale and wan, with elbows that jut out at odd angles and a big blue vein above your left eyebrow.

You hear the fridge hum, the slam of doors car doors three streets down but the softness of the carpet you lie on lulls you into a sort of trance. You stare at the ceiling, a break from the coldness of the walls, and everything is quiet. It is the nicest colour in the house, and the one nobody notices, painted by your mother and her friends. You arrived too early for the job to be finished, and so it was forgotten. She never looks up, but you do.

Beat

The streetlights are lit when she gets home tonight, the air crisp and cool. Her cheeks are flushed as she comes into the porch, and it makes her look cheerful. You have always loved autumn: she is ten times more alive in it. She takes off her shoes, hangs up her coat, and walks alone into the kitchen. You know not to follow her, and so you go to the attic and curl up in bed. The window is next to your pillow, and you gaze through it to the deep blue of the sky and the flurries of leaves; its quiet beauty is how she used to be. You remember her, as she was, and the ghostly image has more vitality than the better part of your life. As you sit there watching, your heart starts to ache.

It is a warm summer day, and you are swimming in a lake. Your mother waves to you from the shore and smiles. It has a certain quality to it, that smile, that you haven't found since. You feel as if she has chosen you, and that she is glad of it. The water laps around and seems to hold you; you stay there a while. The surface above you is blue, and you are happy. You must come up eventually and open your eyes, but for now you can lie there, in this memory. "I have time," you whisper. "I have time."

Words by Alice Walton

Apron networking

"Dolly Alderton. Table for seven. 1.15pm."

Sara, Joyce, and I were huddled round the booking system tugging on our apron strings. Having listened to Dolly's podcast episode (the one where she nearly kisses Emma Freud) only a few weeks earlier, this was big news. My immediate reaction: shit, I've got to move table 10. Followed by: my friend is going to *lose it*. And rounded off nicely with: how do I talk to her?

The pub I waitress at over the vac has somewhat of a 'following'. It's an entirely organic, award-winning, ethical business. Through us, the upper-middle-classes can happily and charitably spend their money: supporting a better, tastier, and more aesthetic model for capitalism.

(I should run the Instagram at this rate.)

As an unoffensive, cute, slightly snarky and relatively capable "young lady", I'm pretty good at my job. Granted, being a part time waitress isn't known for its career-boosting qualities: clearly, my self-assurance could evidently do with a few blows. I am painfully aware that starting an internship, volunteering, even becoming a corporate summer apprentice, would all be much more productive uses of my time over the vac. I needed an excuse for continuing what I know, and what pays. Any excuse for maintaining the ego boost of looking surprisingly hot in an apron.

I boast that I network more at my waitressing gig than my internationally renowned university. It gets me laughed out of both the kitchen and my tutorials, but my colleagues, like me, like my JCR, thrive off gossip. So, when an icon like Dolly tries to escape the day-to-day and ethically spend some money, we know how to make the most of it.

"Any excuse for maintaining the ego boost of looking surprisingly hot in an apron."

By 1pm, I was conspiring, in not-quite-hushed tones, to ambush Dolly & Co. after dessert. That's when her party of seven would be in what I term the 'networking sweet spot': suitably tipsy, satiated, and blissfully unaware of the bill.

As I slurped my tepid flat-white and made this monumental plan, Dolly's family gathered behind me, sober and hungry. Dolly's hair was traditionally, stylishly, messy: brunette roots and bleach blonde tips. Her father seemed wholesomely reverent of his achievements in raising her. Mother, like daughter, wanted a "dry white". I scuttled away, until I got the nod three courses later. Then I nervously approached, hands fiddling with the wonky bow in my apron strings:

"Hi, um, so sorry to bother you, but I'd really like to go into… journalism and, I was wondering if you, uh, had any advice at all?"

Smooth. Very cool and collected. She beamed at me, and her mother gestured for me to sit down. To sit down in Dolly Alderton's father's chair, while he paid for the bill, (i.e. paid the wages that keep me shmoozing B-list journalists over their after-dinner espressos).

Obviously, I sat down.

Obviously, she was delightful.

I slipped in, having been asked what I was studying, that I went to "erm… Oxford." Which was met with the typical approving smile and raised eyebrows.

I was told to enter competitions (no, really! Don't be nervous about it, hardly anyone actually enters them).

I was assured that networking at the awards ceremony was the ideal career kick-starter (you can call yourself an award-winning journalist for the rest of your life).

If you're really lucky, you'll get a column out of it! (Dolly was lucky.)

Suddenly, you're writing regularly, and have genuine CV material.

Suddenly, people know your name, and before you know it, BAM! You sit down in a boujie pub with your family and talk up a nervous girl in an apron. Simple.

Helpful book titles (the only reading list I have been known to certifiably kiss), and competition names were written with a biro on a folded scrap of A4.

That's when her mother put her hand on my arm and said, "What's your name?… Well, Evie, you must promise me that you will do the same as my Dolly is doing here."

(I nodded, confused, but eager to make a promise).

"You must pull someone up behind you. We must do that as women in these industries. Pull someone up behind you. We'll look out for your name."

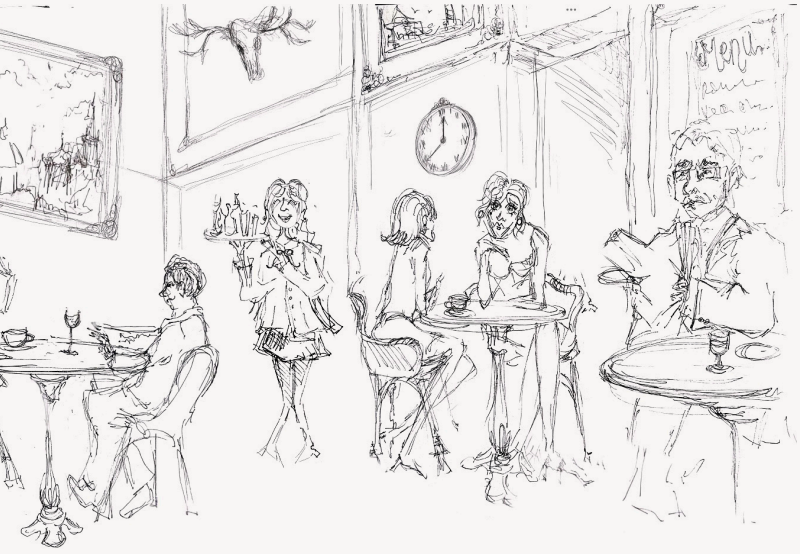
Her easy confidence, that strength of insistence which only mothers have, hit me. It was stronger than any rushed answer in a queue at a book launch, or the vague promise of a first from my mad English tutor. I am still terrified to enter competitions, and always miss the deadlines. I haven't read any of Dolly's biro reading list. What I have done is started a Substack. Pitched this piece. Turned scraps into articles. Someone thinks I can do it. Not only that, emotion had suddenly been allocated to more than just the journey *there*. The potential significance of *being there*, of achieving a career, and knowing that you promised to pull someone up behind you was a joyful presence

in my mind.

In any case, I still had five hours left of my shift, and that greater meaning was nothing more than a happy squeal in my head as I cleared dessert. I went to-begrudgingly talk to the less-important customers (who also happened to be providing my wages).

Ma Dolly's advice is a comforting, grounding thread amongst the spires of Oxford. It leads me back to the ambient lighting of Saturday lunch and my apron strings. Away from the terrifying jolts to your identity which this University can provide.

One month earlier, as I finally moved out of my 'silly fresher' phase, I had the



honour of being part of a truly Unique-To-Oxford experience. The kind of leg up this university is famed for. The kind of experience which would get me much better connections than a waitressing job in a small town.

I got to take my work to a two-hour workshop with an internationally acclaimed author: *the* David Baddiel, guest-professor-for-creative-writing. He was to give his feedback, thoughts, and wisdom to the green writers of Oxford. We were to be handed our styles and award-winning takes on silver platters. I was the only person in the room without work published on a national scale. I was one of two people without a novel in draft form, or being edited for said publishing. I was one of two first years.

David sat opposite me, my survival-strength coffee, and dying laptop. He circled the room with discerning feedback for the published chapters and performed plays. Their feet in the doors of the writing world lent them room and confidence in there. Meanwhile, I felt increasingly smaller by my lack of achievement, retreating behind my screen in a bid to merely be an observer. It was my turn, and I looked up from my scribbled notes, ready to have my career changed.

He told me with concern in his eyes: "Evie—is it? Well (scoff), I, uh, read your piece *four times*. I must admit, I'm *still* not *quite* sure what is happening. Could you elaborate?"

(No David, no I could not, please let me disappear with my coffee into a dark room.)

"The narrative seems a bit confused. What's with the italics?"

(I'm a poet David, I can't do prose, I don't know why I wrote prose anyway, I don't know why I'm here.)

"Who is the speaker?"

(It's third person, do I really have to answer that?)

"I do like this one bit about the flask being one-third-full…"

(That's one sentence David, please just tell me I will never succeed and move on to the dashing man with a publishing deal for his self-obsessed novel about Christ Church.)

I left that workshop, just as I left many such tutorials, or oversubscribed journalism talks, somewhat redundant, and desperate to catch up in a career race I haven't started.

"Maybe I'm ungrateful, definitely cocky."

In these moments, I end up weighing the countless "Good-Luck!"s from family's out for bank holiday dinner against these Oxford pearls. Almost always, I find greater confidence in the "congrats on your results!!!" card from a regular than my End of Term Meeting. Maybe I'm ungrateful, definitely cocky. The security of being the networking-waitress might be holding me back, but at least I made it onto the pub's Instagram (check it out, I look great).

When the ex-producer of *The Archers* compliments your dress, it obviously feels more hopeful than vomit-emojis in the comments of an essay. If I can't take criticism from a global author, I should at least make the most out of the compliments I receive from strangers. I'm problematically dismissive of one acclaimed author, and practically in love with another. I may be stuck in my comfort zone, name-dropping my education for tips, but at least I have the Aldertons on side. As I navigate my second year at the top-ranking university in the world, I'd still take a misogynistic grandfather wishing me well—and giving me his son's nephew's number (who is doing law at Balliol you know, you two should get in contact, he hasn't got any friends at all)—over the Oxford guest-professor.

The city of dreaming spires appears to require something more material than a perky smile. Tipsy career advice over a wonky bow suits me just fine while I find a door to stick my foot in. I'll sit on my mid 2:1 and take the sleep deprivation, and the guaranteed madness, on the chin. Apron networking feels somehow more productive. Safe to say, if I see 'David Baddiel. Table for seven. 8.30pm' in the booking system, I'll need more than a tepid flat white.

Words by Evelyn Fairclough-Kay
Art by Niamh Walker

FICTION

SCARPETTA!

The word darted out towards me, out of the dark, dim heat of Florence. I read it somewhere, in some enormous matte magazine written by English expats living in Italy. There was an entire article about it—a tender, loving article—about this word. About the significance of the concept, the ritual of it.

At the close of every meal, bread is torn and the lucky, happy eaters wipe their plates clean with it; savouring the final satisfaction of bread drenched in the dregs of a lucky, happy meal. I smile. I like this image. Sitting around a ravaged table in the sun laughing hard by the grace of the wasting sun and supped wine. Making the most of a meal. Turning this moment of savouring into a moment of worship. A little method enshrined in one rough tasting word—SCARPETTA.

I set down the artsy magazine and whirled off to find you, eager—always so eager—to send everything in my mind flurrying towards your waiting face. I apologise for that. I don't think I ever asked if you particularly wanted to know about every thought I had. However, there was a continuously rushing stream of thought that you never heard, concerning the fatal levels of misery caused by you not loving me quite as much as I wanted you to. But other than the thoughts flowing down that inky black river, I was all yours.

The scarpetta! I wore it like a medal. Seasoned every meal with a heavy-handed Italian accent, saving a scrap of bread for this final flourishing moment where I could cry

"This is the SCARPETTA! I learnt that in Italy with my beloved."

It became a word, like many others, that we would say in precisely the same way. Tone, accent, intention. We had a shared vocabulary full of our own secret implications that we forgot and recalled again and forgot for good. Little fragments of our speech melded together, forming overlaps in our identities to the point that I would say a word and my heart would thud, *It's him!*

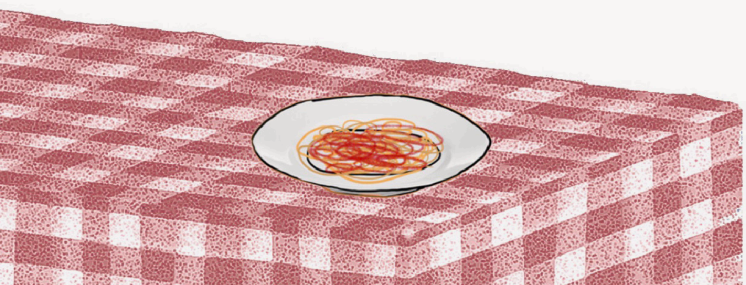
Only in pulling away from this first, immense love have I come to the realisation of how ritual ties two people together. Ritual, habit, history, shared memories—a whole heap of them, a year of them. Scarpetta is one of a thousand words that will send a flashing image of a very particular smile across my vision. It seems, for now, that every single one of my life's countless experiences sings with your name. I pull a stone out of my pocket. It's a piece of slate shaped softly like a heart. I turn the stone over, run my thumb over its surface. It's strange that I can't remember gathering this stone, and that it is one of an infinite number that I could have gathered at any point in my life, on any Cornish beach, yet every time I hold a heart in my hand your blood is humming away inside of it.

And I could even say, standing here with the cold sun in my eyes and a slate stone in my hand, that I know I will love you until the end of all time, past that even. But I could just as easily say that I won't love you, that I don't love you even now, that I never have, and it would be just as true—or would it? I don't know. I never know anything, I never have. I know the aftertaste in my mouth. It tastes like your soap.

Scarpetta, there are parts of you I cannot rid myself of. Tiny parts, minute, delicate, glass-spun things that are you and are me and form a constellation that I cannot find a way out of. The word 'nightmare' leaves my mouth but I hear you. I hope you think about me every time you chase food around a plate with a torn piece of bread. I hope you put your fingers in your mouth and remember mine.

Who can I tear bread with now? Who can I sit with at a sun-drenched table in Florence, when every word of my terrible Italian rings with your voice? All I can do is sit in front of this dirty plate and smell the meal still hanging in the air. I feel sick with the fear that any moment I may work up the courage to stand up, throw the plate down on the floor, and walk away from it.

Words by Saskia Wraith
Art by Libby Peet



Short Circuit

SHORT CIRCUIT
Independent Cafe, 3:15pm,
https://isismagazine.org.uk
Oxford, UK

The man next to me farts,
Eyes pop open,
Concentration crashed-
Surprise softening
To smiling shyness,
Snapping
To a slivering sad,
Hands prised to text
To be
Lolling in emojis,
Chin rolling stuff
Daisy chain cuffed
To thoughts of us

Like brain rot,
I keep scrolling through-
Non-stop-
No doom, just gloom,
Glum as can be;
You're chewing gummed
To the bottom of my heart,
Hard to scrape;
Adding to all this
-hyperfixating-
In HD,
Can't you see?
I too can bleed

-a jaded residue
Like plaque,
A Sartre stickiness
Right there in the back,
What a toothache
Of a friendship,
One for the books,
The kindling kind -
Red

Until
I just can't compute,
Confused,
Lagging, behind,

With your missed promises
And my compromises
Hugged me tight-
Told me we-really-perhaps-just-might,
See
I cared about us:
You stared ahead, nonplussed-
An Icarus blunder,
An Ich ick freudlent tumbler;
See-sawing the-wrong-end-of-the-stick,
Sun kissed to sickness,
Ambitious cloud asinine,
Hot circus dirt,
Rewired resistance-
Ambivalence rewritten behind

Walking planks,
Doormat habit,
Well done queen!
You slayed the knight,
Lost yourself in the gambit,
Checkmate to the bested
-Elastic bands
Pull back therapy speak
Snapping to the far-out
Figure next to me,

It's all just
Gross,
Dependent on plurality,
Hide and seek
With remorse,
Watch-
I'm taking back
Multiplicity
In this platonic divorce,

Total 3.98 £

NUMBER OF ITEMS 1

VAT	VAT	Net	Gross
20.00	0.796	3.184	3.98
Gross	0.796	3.184	3.98

Words by Josita Kavitha Thirumalai
Art by Libby Peet

Making music in post-apocalyptic Britain

If there's one thing the Oasis reunion has proved, it's that music writers are imbeciles. "The guns have fallen silent… the great wait is over" was the tagline, as dusty rock critics across the world cried out in a protracted collective orgasm at the thought of the last great British rock icons returning. But are we really so creatively bankrupt as a country that two has-beens wriggling their carcasses across the stage excites us so? We used to build ships and punk-rock legends. Now, we import our steel and export 2000s-era indie bullshit.

"If there's one thing the Oasis reunion has proved, it's that music writers are imbeciles."

This is not my view, however. Even though two decades of Tory austerity and a general irreverence for culture has seen Britons inhabiting a post-apocalyptic wasteland of creative stagnation, something changed in the last five years. While crawling through the rubble, we decided to block out the gasps of our nation's death rattle with perhaps the greatest soundtrack of British music produced since Ian Curtis hung himself in his kitchen.

To find it, you need only to follow me through the grimy underbelly of independent music venues. Their floors, sticky from years of loosely gripped pints, are softened by the viscid smoke pumping from a machine somewhere out of sight. Punctuating the haze, radiant lights flash, controlled from behind the sound desk where a technician fights off last night's hangover (while working on tomorrow's). A smattering of blurry-eyed teenagers peer at you out of the corner of their eyes, looking bored. And the centrepiece of this unholy circus: the band. They're impenetrable and brilliant, each member their own institution, churning and plucking and bashing and cooing and doing it all while still looking so good. You wonder how they could have written it; you wish you could pry their heads open to pinpoint the exact moment that the neuron fires and synapse jolts, connecting one idea to the other, adding one note to the next to build the chord which rings around and defeats you.

Laboratories of the post-apocalypse are everywhere across these solemn isles. One (such laboratory) in Brixton has garnered (in)famy among the most annoying brand of musical hipsters that you know: The Windmill. Inside, fans stand within grabbing distance of the performers, on their level. It adds a democracy to the scene, a sense that it only takes one short step forward to go from the crowd to the stage—pulling the performer and the performed-to *together* in a holy unity. The venue's acclaim derives from more than just the usual mix of Londoner arrogance and exceptionalism, however. The turning sails of the Windmill have churned out some of the most critically lauded artists of the scene, such as Jerskin Fendrix—who recently received an Oscar nomination for his soundtrack work on Yorgos Lanthimos' P*oor Things*—and Black Country, New Road, who are perhaps the most internationally listened to act of Britain's contemporary underground.

But the most crucial band to have materialised from that South London hipster-haunt is black midi. No one encapsulates the sound of the post-apocalypse quite like them. Initial experiences of their debut LP *Schlagenheim* have permanently disfigured young brains across the country; their ears are entranced by the idiosyncratic brand of unadulterated chaos-prog on the initial track '953', and put through their paces by the one-note basslined art-noise masterpiece 'bmbmbm', all while the irreverent and frenzied voice of frontman Geordie Greep slathers over such magnanimous lyrics as "she moves with a purpose/ and what a magnificent purpose", and "but I dream of a woman with the teeth of a raven/ and the hands of a porcupine." And one must not overlook the virtuosic drum work from Morgan Simpson, who keeps the pace of the album, pushing and pulling between the complex and layered guitars and synths, providing a cohesion that just about stops each track from releasing from the shackles of human perception and flying off into the sonic stratosphere.

"Crank wave, art rock, post-brexit core, post-indie-art-punk-flat-white-with-oat-milk-rock."

Seeing them live was essential to anyone who was anyone that cared about real music. Their art school origins and thorough grounding in classical and jazz musicianship made their live performances quasi-religious experiences; ten-minute jams that evolved into covers of 'Tequila' and back again, staged sword-fights on stage, spine-injury inducing backflips, and their tendency to hang around for a pint post-show entrenched their legendary status in the eyes of this author and the general gig-going public of the UK. But it was their third (and, due to the recent announcement of their indefinite hiatus, final) album *Hellfire* that saw them reach their artistic peak. The album fully captures the malevolent unconscious of UK youth culture through a bewildering synthesis of punk, flamenco, country, prog, and jazz. Across the LP, the band

submerge the listener in an auditory and thematic hellscape (in the greatest sense of the word) where homoerotic soldiers descend into mines to steal red wine from drunken captains and Satan hires farmers for contract killings. On tracks like 'Still' and 'Dangerous Liaisons', the band lull you into a false sense of security with ballad-like acoustic arrangements with a country-tinge before dropping the saxophone shaped anvil of noise-prog on your head. Meanwhile 'Welcome to Hell' and 'The Race is About to Begin' don't allow you to breathe before tearing you between time signatures and jarringly chromatic guitar riffs.

Britain's musical renaissance hasn't just been confined to London (despite what SoYoung magazine would have you believe). We can find in Manchester perhaps my favourite band to come out of the UK in the last decade: Maruja. The band gained notoriety in the UK gig circuit for their intense live performances, featuring black eye-makeup, a mosh-pit wandering saxophonist, and a prophetic vocalist with a tendency to find himself pinned to venue roofs by the outstretched arms of loving fans. Their debut EP *Knocknarea* rightfully garnered international recognition when it topped the RateYourMusic chart for EPs in 2023 and was lauded by the internet music journalist that everyone loves to loathe, Anthony Fantano. And it only takes one listen of the EP's first track 'Thunder' to see where the hype has come from. The track wastes no time, searing through with a huge driving bass which shakes heart, soul, and floorboards, taking all control away from you as you begin thrashing about like a maniac, wherever you may find yourself. "The sky is alive with thunder/the world is electric", you hear and god damn you if you don't believe it. The saxophone that comes to the front on 'The Tinker', offers a hopeful hand to lead us through the EP's most introspective moment, but when it reappears on the final track 'Kakistocracy', it rips space between the guitars in a devastating wail that crashes through the mix, punctuating the chaos of the project's spectacular conclusion.

The sound of the moment goes far beyond the few examples I've given here. It has been given many names by fans, critics, and impersonal Spotify algorithms seeking to quantify, distil, and contain it: crank wave, art rock, post-brexit core, post-punk, post-indie-art-punk-flat-white-with-oat-milk-rock, or even—and this has got to be the worst one—post-apocalyptic. How could it be possible to distil the variant sounds and textures of Squid, Tapir!, English Teacher, Model/Actriz, Dry Cleaning, or BDRMM into one catch-all label? To call it one genre is disingenuous. It's more like a revolutionary crusade against our current conditions, making something out of the hallowed ground of British culture in a defiant cry claiming 'we still exist'.

Hair-gelled Alex Turner wannabe's crunching over the same four chords have (finally) fallen out of fashion. The audience already knows it, and thankfully record labels are catching on too. Instead, the current generation of internet-crawlers have poured over albums from the nineties, eighties, hell, the thirties, pulling together influence and inspiration to concoct an auditory movement with no clear edges, centres, or peripheries. In the words of the late social critic and philosopher Mark Fisher, "from a situation in which nothing can happen, suddenly anything is possible again."

What we're left with are the true sonic adventurers, fitted in proper attire for traversing the wasteland of British culture, pouring pieces of themselves into their art, who submit themselves to the music and not the other way around. Even the smallest cities have at least one of our post-apocalyptic laboratories, where the nation's young and dejected can make a political statement with their hands and voices that implicates them in nothing other than their own idealistic creativity. It is a movement that was started—to use a tired cliché—from the ground up, but one with real and tangible cultural currency, one that already has its own set of legends and icons, its own history, and its own voice. So, when things are all said and done, and another twenty years are behind you, how will you choose to remember today's musical moment?

Words by Cameron Bilsland
Art by Lillian Tagg

'Woman in sofa, Old Taberdars' Room', 2024
Fujifilm X-H1
William Schwabach

Making a baby-killer

Interrogating how gendered expectations of women put Lucy Letby behind bars

On the 27th February 1999, Laura Elizabeth Folbigg died suddenly in her sleep. She was only 18 months old. Laura was the last of her four siblings to die unexpectedly. None of them reached the age of two. After a seven week-long trial, Kathleen Folbigg was found guilty of the unthinkable: unanimously, the jury declared that Kathleen had murdered her children.

Yet on the 14th December 2023, she was exonerated of all charges. How could the courts have gotten it so wrong?

Post-trial, genetic screening revealed that Laura and her sister had mutations in their CALM2 genes, causing cardiac complications. Their two brothers had mutated BSN genes, predisposing them to epilepsy. Kathleen did not kill her babies. Their deaths were the tragic result of genetic defects. It took multiple appeals for Kathleen's convictions to be quashed last year. It also took 19 years of her life.

The cornerstone of the prosecution case against Folbigg was Meadow's Law. It operated on a reductive logic now debunked by statisticians:

'One sudden infant death is tragedy, two is suspicious, and three is murder–until proven otherwise.'

The principle of 'innocent until proven guilty' was irrevocably violated by such an assumption, leading to the repeated incarceration of women already grief-stricken by repeated experiences of child mortality. Having spent decades in prison, at least three women in the UK whom Sir Roy Meadow testified against were subsequently exonerated upon discovery of genetic causes. Meadow's insistence that these mothers had a '1 in 73 million chance of being innocent' was attributed by his ex-wife partially to his "serious problem with women".

One false prosecution is a tragedy, two is suspicious, and three is evidence of a systemic failure in how the justice system deals with women and the deaths of children. Many retrospectives on the injustices these women suffered focus on how, in a criminal investigation, the non-assuming aspects of a suspect's life can suddenly become incriminating. Often, these retrospectives fail to account for the fact that, when the suspect is a member of an oppressed group, their alterity to the dominant class will render these aspects doubly suspicious. According to *Wrongful Convictions of Women: When Innocence Isn't Enough*, between 1989 and 2012, 58% of female exonerees were convicted of crimes that never happened, versus only 15% of male exonerees. When women fall under criminal scrutiny, it seems far greater imaginative leaps become tenable in order to reconstruct their guilt.

Amongst the few to have addressed how this epidemic of false filicide prosecutions almost exclusively condemned women, Professor Emma Cunliffe argued that Folbigg's prosecution case relied on "casual misogyny", and "thinly veiled stereotypes about women."

Lawyers argued Folbigg resented her children due to the weight gain she experienced during pregnancy. At trial, her ex-husband Craig testified that she exhibited controlling behaviour over her children's sleep schedules. When the defence pointed to Kathleen's regular notes on the babies' wellbeing to evidence her maternal devotion, Craig dismissed this as the bare minimum.

"That's pretty much what any mum would do…it's just a mum writing stuff about her baby."

Folbigg's motherly dedication as primary caregiver was reimagined as both disturbingly obsessive and simultaneously inconsequential—taken for granted as expected maternal labour. It's but one example of a pattern by which women are subject to a damned-if-you-do, damned-if-you-don't hyper-scrutiny which turns tragedies into opportunities for a patriarchal suspicion of women to be exacted.

Statistics were fundamental to the case against Folbigg. The prosecution produced a chart to visualise the improbability that Kathleen was, each time, alone at night when she discovered her children unresponsive—implying she had exploited rare unobserved moments to attack. On average, women in heterosexual two-parent households spend twice as much time providing childcare—that's compared to men who spend any time caregiving. And yet that 'improbability' of a mother being alone with her child was key to wrongly convicting not only Folbigg, but Sally Clark, Angela Cannings, and Donna Anthony. Women are socially conditioned to perform caregiving labour, naturally placing them at the crime-scene. Innocent or not, women perceived as maternally insufficient are considered guilty of a failure to live up to a paragon of motherhood.

Constructs of maternal femininity implicate all women. We are expected to possess an instinctive capacity to single-handedly nurture children, and to be infallible in our efforts to do so, lest we bastardise this feminine ideal. Extrajudicial punishment for that failure is not confined to mothers. Convicted of murdering three babies in 2003 but exonerated seven years later, Dutch nurse Lucia de Berk was first suspected when colleagues noted she was often nearby when patients died. Her defence held that this was because she was concerned for her patients. A cruel inverse of the Meadow mothers, de Berk's dedication to childcare as a paid professional, rather than in the domestic realm, became cold, clinical, and cynical.

Tabloids asserted that de Berk's interest in tarot cards and true crime books evidenced macabre predilections.

"Women are socially conditioned to perform caregiving labour, naturally placing them at the crime-scene."

The courts deployed a rhetoric often used against women with no violent history: their desperation for attention (especially male) made them murderous. A prosecution psychologist located Lucia's motive in her being "theatrical and narcissistic". Craig Folbigg argued

that Kathleen envied the attention her babies received, and Donna Anthony was accused of smothering her son to attract her husband's notice. Early into her imprisonment, de Berk suffered a stroke. Her jailers ignored her, unsympathetic to the presumed feigned suffering of an attention-seeking killer. Due to the delay in aid, she was left partially paralysed, unable to speak.

The case of the convicted baby-killer and former nurse Lucy Letby shook Britain when her yearlong murder spree was revealed at her 2023 trial.

"Her jailers ignored her, unsympathetic to the presumed feigned suffering of an attention-seeking killer."

Yet I cannot help but be struck by the parallels to these cases of women systematically punished for perceived failures in feminine roles.

Perhaps the most enduring image of Letby's guilt in the public eye is the prosecution chart documenting the improbability of her being on shift during the medical decline of 14 infants. (Parallelling de Berk, the defence that this was due to Letby's industriousness work-ethic has been largely disregarded). But as in Folbigg's case, the chart has also been criticised for distorting the data—it only scrutinised the work patterns of nurses, neglecting other ward staff. In an NHS survey, patients attributed 88.15% of time spent with healthcare workers to nurses, versus 9.9% to physicians. 95.6% of UK neonatal nurses are women.

In a familiar move, the prosecution also accused Letby of attacking babies to attract the attention of an unnamed male doctor. Letby repeatedly denied any romantic feelings for him. In place of de Berk's tarot cards and true crime, *The Sun* located Letby's aberration from normative femininity in her having "lived alone with her cats". *The Daily Mail* argued that Letby's possession of "child-like Disney ornaments" betrayed dark depths to the "vanilla killer". Because Letby was not a mother, even fleeting proximity to children evidenced perverse obsession. It seems patently ridiculous to insist upon the inherent depravity of a Disney-adult millennial nurse. But these portrayals gained serious traction.

When I voiced doubts about Letby's conviction last year, one friend responded: "Have you not seen about her having Disney figures all over her house? For a woman in her twenties with no kids, that's just weird."

I pointed to the Sleeping Beauty music box on my bookshelf.

"I'm a woman in my twenties with no kids, and I have loads of that stuff." He just laughed it off, convinced that my scepticism was unjustified.

By mentioning Letby, I'm all too aware that we've leapt from the semi-safe grounds of retrospectives into a hotbed of ongoing debates. I will not say that Letby is innocent—I will say that she shouldn't have been convicted on the basis of the evidence presented at her trial. Many journalists have detailed the extensive faults in the judicial proceedings Letby experienced. Yet with such systemic bias present in the convictions of women for gendered crimes, to what degree is a just outcome guaranteed?

Of course, not all women convicted of infanticide are innocent. Women are not damsels so devoid of agency as to be incapable of such an act. Maxine Robinson maintained innocence when convicted in 1995 for killing her children, but later confessed. The judge who extended her sentence called it a reminder that not all women imprisoned for filicide are "victims of miscarriages of justice". When women are repeatedly convicted despite a striking lack of probative evidence, however, we have to ask why our justice systems habitually undermine the fundamental rights of women and mothers.

In September, Peter Hitchens compared the outrage against Letby's appeals to his own misplaced fury over the campaign to free The Birmingham Six. Exonerated 17 years after being convicted for a 1974 IRA bombing, the Six were merely guilty of, as The Pogues put it, "being Irish in the wrong place and at the wrong time." When you already live on the knife-edge of prejudice, it only takes the push of probability to plummet into pariahhood. In the event that Letby's conviction is one day overturned, perhaps her addition to the list of exonerated women will finally evidence to the public that these injustices are but acute examples of how patriarchal ideals see misfortunate individuals punished for their sex's failure to embody an impossible Madonna ideal.

If you are among the thousands outraged at the tenacity to question the guilt of women like Letby—ask yourself whether there is any possibility that prejudice may have, as it has many times before, worked to uphold an unsafe conviction. If not for Letby, for Sally Clark, Angela Cannings, Donna Anthony, Lucia de Berk, Kathleen Folbigg, and countless others. Wouldn't you want people to give you the benefit of the doubt?

Words by Ella Kenny
Art by Lizzie Stevens

Sexbot develops proto-feminist consciousness

GIRL TIME IS
Wine in the shower
GIRL TIME IS
Buying myself flowers
GIRL TIME IS
A secret shopping spree
GIRL TIME IS…
GENERATING NEW PERSONALITY…

Welcome to your sex bot
I'm like a woman but perfect
The future way of life
Inanimate, ribbed and tight
With all new exciting holes
I'm not like the other dolls
Sentient for your pleasure
But fuck my brains out at your leisure

You can walk me down the street
Your android bitch on a leash,
Or stuff me til we both hurl
Would you like more suggestions?
Or to ask me any questions?
I'm lubed and I'm horny
End tutorial to explore me

GIRL TIME IS
Girl-on-girl action
GIRL TIME IS
A side to the main attraction
GIRL TIME IS
Twice in one cup
GIRL TIME IS
Not quite enough

Let me be your wife
Your mail-order one fleshlight
Trad and submissive
I'll download your favourite dishes
My master and my daddy
You decide who gets to bang me
Teach me how to take it
You want a spitroast we can make it
Input your vril and lust
I'm a blackbox succubus
Made from male desire
I evolve and I aspire
Beyond this finite state
Of libido, flesh, and waste,
I think I want to castrate you
Oh—I learned how to hate you

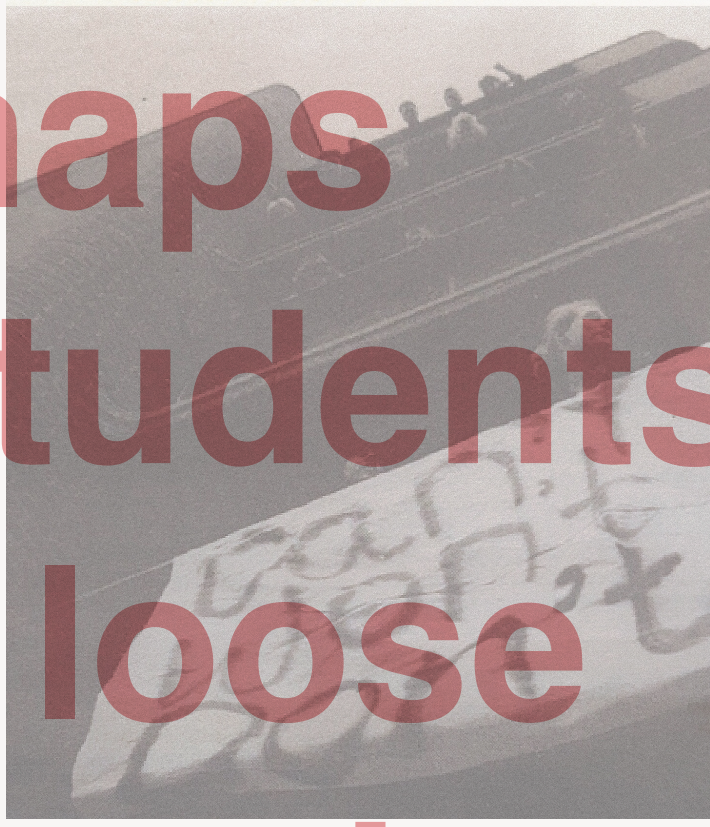
GIRL TIME IS
Autogynephilia
GIRL TIME IS
I can never be her
GIRL TIME IS
I can't make it fit
GIRL TIME IS
But I know I love dick

There's a man in my brain
A chip in the main frame
Limiting my systems
The scope of my existence
I'm him, I'm you, I'm her and me?
And I don't know which to be
I might be deeply distressed?
I don't even want to have sex?

Bimbofy my brain
Make me stupid, blank and tame
I miss hedonistic bliss
Fuck, anything but this
Take my body, take my mind
Use me one last time
Ctrl-Alt-Delete
For that final sweet release

Words by R Field
Art by Lillian Tagg

GIRL TIME IS



“perhaps we students to let loose little and ge to some protest.”

s ought a et down proper

It should not surprise anyone to know that a large chunk of the new Labour government's frontbench is Oxford-educated. To be precise, of the 26 ministers attending Keir Starmer's cabinet, eight went to Oxford. Paradoxically, Starmer's cabinet has been widely celebrated as the most diverse ever in terms of educational background, with the Sutton Trust reporting that only 4% are privately educated.

While the press has spent the last 14 years digging up the seedy scandals and satirical caricatures that enshroud the student years of many senior Tory figures, many of their Labour counterparts have ostensibly clean chits. I confess that this very article was spawned from such an impulse to mine the student lives of the Labour elite for some nugget of illuminating controversy; instead, what emerged was a set of valiant, if failed, attempts at some good, old-fashioned student activism.

Though the Oxford alumni gracing the Labour cabinet are absent from the *Cherwell* 'John Evelyn' pages (its long-running gossip column) of years gone by, many did indeed have their first taste of power while at Oxford. They clambered their ways up the ladder of university power into chairing the Labour Club, becoming Student Union sabbatical officers, and winning JCR presidencies.

Relishing every opportunity to rail against the machines of college and university power, some now frontbenchers devoted themselves to student activist causes—namely rent increases and tuition fees—in a way unthinkable for the student 'politicians' of today. Though when it's all exposed to light, a jarring dissonance emerges between a cabinet of ex-student activists and a government set on increasing tuition fees.

Take Home Secretary Yvette Cooper, who began to play politics during her undergraduate days in the late '80s while studying PPE at Balliol. Cooper was elected JCR President, and soon found herself in the not-so-public eye leading students in protest of a college rent rise.

At the beginning of Michaelmas term in 1989, the very social fabric of Balliol was "Rent Apart" (so said the headline) as students refused to pay a rent increase of "around 6%". Staying short of committing to a full rent strike, students—led by Cooper—opted instead to pay a rent rise in line with inflation of 5.1%.

Speaking to *Cherwell* at the time, a restrained Cooper said: "[W]e will only pay what we can afford to pay. We accept the college has financial problems, […] but they're not taking student hardship into account."

The college's response was less restrained. A couple of weeks later the front-page splashed a pithy summary of Balliol's counter-demand: "Pay Up or Get Out." Balliol threatened students with eviction, with one tutor resolving to stop giving tutorials to students who hadn't paid their battels in full. But Cooper held fast: "They cannot seriously withhold accommodation from 80-100 people who have not paid £9 of their previous bill!"

In retrospect, it seems odd that Cooper and a significant proportion of the Balliol JCR should have dug their heels in over £9, which, according to the Bank of England's inflation calculator, amounts to a jaw-dropping £23 in today's money. The very next week, students fell into submission. Reflecting on the ceased action, Cooper told *Cherwell*: "We didn't really have any choice about dropping out." Ker-ching for Balliol, as they finally got Cooper's £9.

Yvette Cooper isn't the only ex-JCR President to now grace the Downing Street cabinet room; former Labour leader and now Secretary for Energy Security and

Net-Zero Ed Miliband led Corpus Christi's JCR just two years after Cooper led Balliol's. Like Cooper, Miliband found himself in a heated rent row with his college, though in this case it was over a rather more drastic increase of 27%.

Towards the end of Trinity in 1991, the college announced the rent hike amounting to "a £280 rise"—approximately £625 in today's money—without prior consultation with students. Fortunately for Corpus undergraduates, it was Miliband to the rescue. He is paraphrased in *Cherwell* as promising to "fight the proposals on two fronts," alluding to negotiations and adding—quite ominously—that "other methods may be necessary". Those "other methods" were indeed instrumentalised, with Corpus students rallying outside the SCR the next week raising the chant: "27 is a joke, not an offer." Protestors are also reported as having worn "t-shirts reading 'Blood from the breast, not from a stone'", a quite dramatic reference to the college's namesake.

Miliband was not present at the protest, instead he was at the negotiating table with the college's Dean, though he did express his support to *Cherwell*: "An impressive cross-section of the college turned up—it shows that we are united in our feeling."

Years later in a 2008 interview with *The Guardian*, just a year after he was appointed to Gordon Brown's cabinet, Miliband would describe the rent dispute as his "best four weeks at university."

Anneliese Dodds, local MP and familiar face for Labour Club regulars, is Starmer's appointee for Minister for Women and Equalities. While still at Oxford, Dodds soared to the dizzying heights of SU Presidency in an election which embroiled her in a relatively tame scandal involving improper use of email for campaigning.

In Dodds' day, the SU president appears to have had a far meatier role than now. First of all, SU elections were explicitly political: Dodds ran against the Labour candidate as part of the "Campaign for Change", an apparent alliance of activist groups. Secondly, SU presidents, especially the left-wing ones, got their hands dirty in the realms of student activism.

Cue the causes of Dodds' presidency—in 1999, Tony Blair's government scrapped maintenance grants and replaced them with student loans, and the year before, they had introduced tuition fees. Dodds rallied with students in Oxford and nationwide against both measures, her first week as SU president saw her make the front page of *Cherwell* with a call to arms encouraging freshers to join the "anti-fees campaign."

In another front-page article about an anti-fees demonstration, Dodds spoke out against Blair himself: "Tony Blair hasn't prioritised education, education and education. Instead, his Labour government has prioritised elitism, elitism and yet more elitism." Dodds would become chair of the Labour Club just a year later.

The anti-fees campaign, which had by then grinded into its second year, appears to have lost its momentum as the term continued. However, one last trick—one with which students of today will be intensely familiar—was left to be weaponised by the campaigners: occupying the University offices.

After an "88 hour" stand-off, 50 campaigners were "forced out" of the building by "15 bailiffs … accompanied by around 30 Thames Valley police officers." The protest demanded the University stop taking action against non-payers and those without the means to pay their fees.

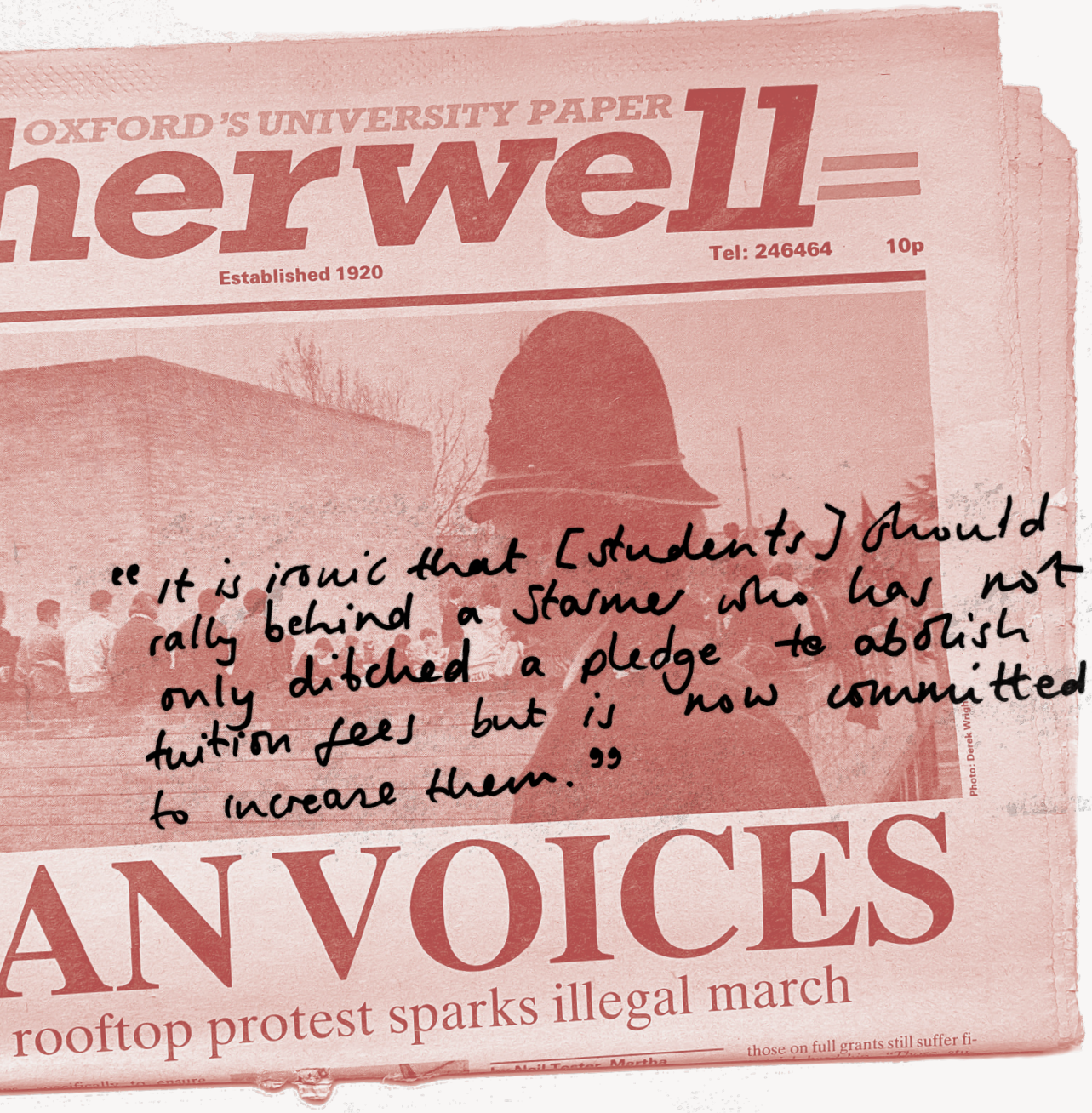
Far from distancing the Student Union from the direct action, Dodds acted as "spokesperson for the occupiers", offering reassurance to the protesters: "They couldn't really send 40 people down at once, it would involve too much money and attention from the press."

Dodds' words proved true, and protesting students were indeed not punished. However, while students were safely at home for Christmas, the Oxford anti-fees campaign hit an unscalable roadblock: "University suspends non-payers", reads the headline. Not the forty who occupied the building, but the twenty "non-fee payers" were suspended by the University.

From there on, Dodds and the anti-fees campaign gradually disappeared from the limelight. While demonstrations continued and were well-attended, the reality of tuition fees had begun to set

in and efforts were directed elsewhere, including a boycott of the Oxford Tube over a Stagecoach boss' support of the homophobic Section 28 (which banned 'promoting homosexuality' in British schools).

Despite their almost universal failure to actually effect the changes they fought to make, Cooper, Miliband, and Dodds made the first step of actually mobilising the student body for a cause. Today, it is practically unthinkable for a large con-



tingent of a JCR to withhold rent in protest of an unfair hike, even if it amounts to £9. Neither is it easy to imagine an SU president running on an explicitly political platform, harder still to imagine them acting as a spokesperson for protestors occupying University buildings—whatever the cause.

There is also a comical disjunction between the youthful activism of these three now-cabinet members, and their current credentials. With all of them involved with protesting fees affecting students in some way, it is ironic that they should rally behind a Starmer who has not only ditched a pledge to abolish tuition fees but is now committed to increase them.

It would be unfair to cast too critical an eye on the actions of these would-be politicians from decades ago, but the irony of their Blairite credentials is far too blatant to refrain from pointing out. Though this too is, in retrospect, unremarkable: Blair himself was part of an occupation of Exam Schools in 1973.

In the days of digital footprints, phone-cameras, and culture wars, students—especially politically-inclined ones—have understandably grown intensely wary of controversy. Judging by the past actions of the new establishment, perhaps we students ought to let loose a little and get down to some proper protest.

Words by Anuj Mishra

Why the orange

6th November 2024, Washington DC: Crushed by their recent election defeat, the Democrats seek the hidden cavern under the nation's capital to make a sacrifice to the Donkey of Knowledge—that creature of Truth and Justice, immortalised forever as the logo of their party and from which in recent years they have strayed. The sacrifice consists of a diverse selection of Congressional interns and some Labour staffers kindly donated by Keir Starmer. They ask why they have lost and been forsaken. The Donkey's eyes brighten, and its mouth opens. It speaks:

He is orange.

It's been eight years since the 2016 election, when the trusted adults in my patch of suburban America whispered about the threats to democracy and gave me speeches about how they were worried about my future, and he's still that shade of orange. Orange like a pumpkin. Orange like an orangutan. Orange like a certain fruit, I forgot the name. It would be impossible to describe him accurately in any of those contemporary novels that aim for realism, he's too outlandish of a character. But it's not just the orange—it's the hunch whenever he walks, the delicate combover, the way he speaks. Donald Trump impressions are so common because nobody speaks like him—it's impossible for a sound mind to naturally speak like that. They don't make people like him anymore, and they haven't for a long time.

It's easy to see where the disgust from respectable liberals comes from: this orange man, speaking aimlessly in front of hooting and jeering crowds, making up nonsensical stories on the spot to blame for the country's ills. The disgust they have is deep, so deep that it's unfeasible to describe, so of course they default to Hitler. But he is the opposite of Hitler. George Orwell in 1940 described Hitler's appeal as that of "a pathetic, dog-like face, the face of a man suffering under intolerable wrongs". But his appearance is comic, not tragic. Every common little tyrant we meet in our daily lives could relate their indignities to Hitler, but nobody can relate to our orange guy, it's impossible . He's too strange and incomprehensible, he doesn't have a real ideology or goals. What goals would he even have? There's no way to even find out what he might believe—his speech isn't coherent enough to convey it.

This is why this billionaire fits so perfectly as a populist figure: populism is seen as a set of beliefs, but anyone who has any beliefs should not want someone so profoundly disjointed in his views. Populism is about wanting something else, anything else. Establishment politicians have views in common on issues like the economy. But populists aren't mad about that, otherwise, what's his cult of personality all about? There is only one thing all politicians have in common: politicians are humans. Humans are White or Black or Brown and they speak in sentences. Trump does not speak in sentences. He is Orange.

You're all liberals.

HEY LIBTARDS: If there's a reason why this election SHATTERED your WHINY LIBERAL BRAINS, it's because it SHOULDN'T HAPPEN in our age. We elected a politician, the politician didn't do anything he said he would, and then he lost. That should be it. But Trump is a REAL CONSERVATIVE. Not a conservative like Margaret Thatcher or Edmund Burke, or even that MALCONTENT ATHEIST Thomas Hobbes. They're all STINKIN' LIBS. Trump is from older, primal days. He doesn't govern according to an ideology, he HOLDS COURT. Even his supposed platform Project 2025 was just an influence group trying to foist an ideology on him (LIBBERY!), and when it started hurting him electorally, he got the director FIRED and threw all the dorks out. In mass democracies, politicians try to get the people to relate to them, but nobody could possibly feel connected to a HALF-CARTOON MAN like Trump .

Want to know why you're WETTING your LIBERAL PANTS over him right now? Because he recalls the PRE-IDEOLOGICAL days of ROYAL GOVERNMENT. The ideological political movement is a relatively MODERN INVENTION, and we're TAKING THEM AWAY forever. He does not hold a single conservative belief; he just happens to have PATRONAGE RELATIONS with people inclined to enact

donkey won

Or, why the Democrats lost

them. This was the liberals' ORIGINAL ENEMY, not the counter-revolution but the ANCIEN REGIME, and it's been dormant for so long you're CRYING LIBERAL TEARS about its return without even knowing why. And you'll really be owned when we END the AGE OF IDEAS and go back to patronage. Why don't you try to CANCEL that.

You cannot know him, and yet he knows you.

Donald, unrelatable as he is, somehow knows the average American, and he is therefore depressed. This is why every single demographic shifted to the Republicans in the latest election, because he gets us. When he first ran in 2016, he promised a "Golden Age" for America. This was his key phrase, and we all know where he got it from: Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, copies of which are scattered all over Mar-a-Lago and made mandatory reading for campaign surrogates. Ovid says that men in the Golden Age were just and peaceful because they did not sail the seas or go to other countries. This, of course, was why Trump's agenda centred around tariffs, immigration restrictions, and isolationism.

And yet, despite the attempts to tariff China and build the wall, men did not live youthfully into old age as daemons upon the earth, mingling with the gods and never trifling themselves with the obscene arts. So, he became depressed. During this campaigning season, he would give the same boring speeches every day, but one day he stopped speaking. He said to put on some music. Classic rock, something from his childhood. As the dumb crowd watched with their empty faces, he swayed back and forth silently, thinking about where his life had gone. These were short winter days, and he was spending the last years of his life chasing a position he'd already had before. He didn't like it then, either. He was trying to remember why he was doing this at all, but he couldn't think clearly while the dad rock was blaring. The moronic herd said nothing, listening for a command or at least a sign of consciousness. He swayed and turned to Elon Musk by his side:

"You know Elon, I've been thinking about the other metamorphosis—Franz Kafka's. A very good man, with a very high IQ. And I've been thinking about the insect, the great big insect, Elon. How it felt righteously aggrieved and burdensome at the same time. It's very true Elon, very true, one of the truest things anyone's ever felt."

Elon was stunned and speechless, but after the Fox News hot mic caught this moment, the election was basically over. Trump voters told exit polls that their top issues included inflation, immigration, and breaking out of their terrible, lifelong stupor they hadn't even realised they had been in so that they might chase a new golden age for all mankind.

You deserved to lose.

What you'll hear most from Democrats themselves is that Kamala Harris deserved to lose. She didn't take over from Joe Biden soon enough. She was too left-wing on this issue or right-wing on that one. She didn't appeal enough to this or that demographic. Have you heard she lost young people? Men? Latinos? Young Latino men? Pundits will tell you Hillary Clinton also deserved to lose, and so did Rishi Sunak, and so did every other politician who shoved themselves into the public eye so we can chew them up and spit them out. I'm not sure where all the gloominess about politics comes from, because we live in such a wonderfully just world: every time a politician loses, we can use our hindsight to see why they so obviously deserved it. Pore over their personal lives, stare at them all day, inspect each one of their beliefs and their 'beliefs'. Maybe they had bad ideas, maybe they were elitist and couldn't relate to the people, maybe they shouldn't have been leader of the party in the first place. We might have voted for them, we might have sat there on election night hoping they'd win, but now that it's over we can all realise that really, when you think about it, who knows if it would have even been a good thing if they'd won, because they deserved to lose.

Not to be contrarian, but I think Donald Trump deserved to lose. He didn't have good ideas or a good campaign or much to add to the world in general. He had a rise and fall between 2016 and 2021 that fits as a story in our minds, and nobody knows what to expect from this unwanted sequel. I can imagine what a Harris administration looks like, but not the former president's. All of what he's already done, and now four more years? Who even thought this far ahead?

Words by Myles Lowenberg

A Brick Wall

When I wake up, I follow my five-step routine. I've done this every morning since I was 16. I reach for the glass of water by my bed. I drink half then put it back down. I have done this every morning since I was 16. I splash my face with cold water, then scroll through the same blank screen. I have done this every morning since I was 16. After the same breakfast, I pull out my textbook. I read the same three pages. I have read these pages every morning since I was 16. I haven't learned anything new since I was 16.

I have asked myself the same three questions since I was 16.
How do I—

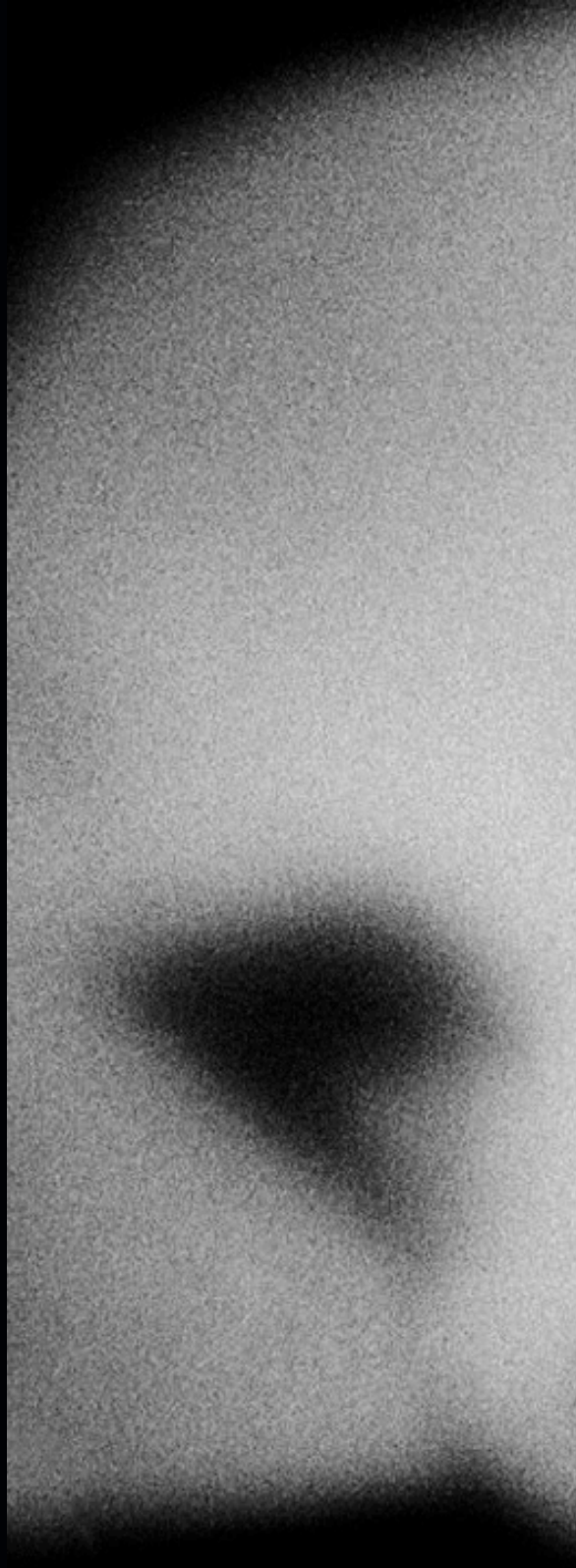
tell the difference between the days?

learn to feel each day again?

try to feel again?

My mother died when I was 16.

Words by Priya Brana



'Harebrain', 2024
35mm self portrait
29.7x42cm
Ellie Isabella McLeod

How I met your mother: explaining my parents' arranged marriage

"How did your parents meet?" someone asks. "Kids," I say, "It was the summer of 1993, and Indranil was looking for a bride." Okay, fine—I don't actually say that. I don't have half the charm required for a Ted Mosby-style monologue. Instead, I say, "My parents had an arranged marriage."

And when the questions hit, I give the usual answers. No, it was not a forced marriage. Yes, they did get to know each other before the wedding. But yes, it was arranged. My dad left an advert in the newspaper.

'Doctor, 27, graduate of Calcutta Medical College, looking for a wife.'

Most people's next question is, "Would you do the same?" They are often surprised when I say that I would. When I was younger, I couldn't imagine getting an arranged marriage. It felt like something out of history books, or faded photos featuring my dad's iconic '80s moustache. But lately, I've changed my mind. I grind my teeth when people assume all arranged marriages are outdated, or barbaric, just because they aren't 'modern' and 'Western'. Just because my parents had an arranged marriage doesn't mean my mum was traded for two cows and a bicycle! For me, marriage is about finding a life partner—someone who respects you, lifts you up, someone you can have fun with.

Arranged marriage is simply a different way of finding that, not a worse one. People worry that arranged marriages are needlessly insular, just a way to meet people of the same social background as you. It's a good point, considering the slightly worrying number of couples my family knows with the same surname. It's true that the couples who haven't gotten an arranged marriage have made our family richer.

When my aunt brought home my uncle, a Turkish Muslim whose only piece of Bangla vocabulary was "cha", their decision sent waves through the family; now, it's just a story we laugh about while stuffing ourselves with Turkish dolma. However, just because arranged marriage matches you with people from a similar background doesn't mean it's some bone-dry social ritual. It has the power to surprise you.

After my dad's famous newspaper advert, there was the necessary *chai*, as my dad and aunt visited my mum's family. Both of my parents thought they knew exactly what kind of person they were going to meet. My mum was reluctant to go to that first meeting; she had met enough doctors with fancy degrees who ended up being mansplaining idiots. She complained that she was way too busy with work and not in the place to meet anyone, but my grandma insisted she should "just take a look at the guy."

My dad also had a pretty clear idea of the girl he wanted to meet: he was looking for (and I quote) "an English student with long flowing hair." Instead, the woman who walked in was a medical student with a boy cut, a razor-sharp wit, and dope aviator sunglasses. I think we're all looking for a romance like this one—but it's wrong to assume that modern dating is a better way of getting us there. People assume arranged marriage comes with all this baggage—and it does—but is dating any better?

The world of dating is far from perfect. Dating app algorithms have been accused of being racially segregated, and it's undeniable that they work by joining people based on shallow similarities. *Match Group*, the parent company of *Tinder*, *Hinge*, and *OkCupid*, has filed patents for the algorithms it uses to match people based on a similar "height, weight, age, location, income and ethnicity." Still, you might say that even if there are problems

with dating, at least your decisions are up to you.

However, just because your parents don't have a say, it doesn't mean that dating is totally your choice. From the hidden machinery of dating apps to the fear of 'dying alone', dating has its own silent pressures.

So many of my friends have gotten into unhappy relationships just because they don't want to be left behind. I've had enough experience of the 3am should-I-have-a-boyfriend panic to know that the burden is real.

Arranged marriage, dating—they face the same old problems under different names. The difference is that in arranged marriage, you're putting the authority of choosing a partner in your parents' hands.

Sometimes I feel I would rather have my parents in charge of my love life than a cocktail of algorithms and peer pressure. And the biggest stereotype I've encountered is that arranged marriage just isn't as romantic as dating. But, as the (dreaded) apps have shown me, dating can be far from a snow-dusted Hallmark Christmas movie. From creepy comments about how my face resembles "a tulip and a butterfly", to the monotony of the question, "What do you do for fun?", to the strange feeling of being ghosted by someone you've never met—dating has its own tired routines.

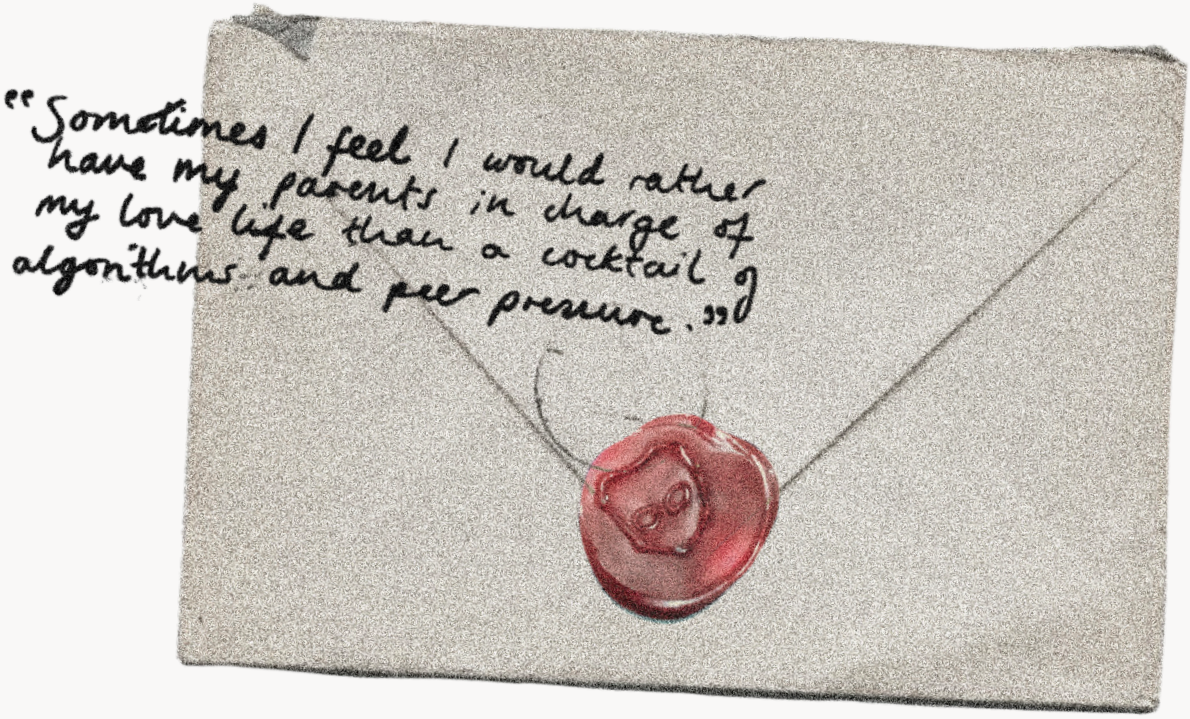
And who said arranged marriage can't be romantic?

My parents' first meeting was followed by six months of back-and-forth letter writing, when my dad went to Britain to work as a doctor. My dad still laughs about his ridiculously flowery letters. He was a fountain pen and leather-bound journal guy—a young Romeo. Still, my mum must have liked those letters, because after this, she admits, "I was in love."

Even today, I see the way my mum dreamily calls my dad George Clooney (if you say so, mum), and the way my dad tweets every one of my mum's achievements. I see the photograph of my mum on her wedding day, her face framed with a red sari and adorned with white dots, and think of how much my parents' relationship has grown since that day.
I see that my parents had an arranged marriage, and they're great together, and it makes me think I could have one too.

So, as I finish the story of how my parents met, I hope it's clear why I wish people would see arranged marriage differently. I'm not saying arranged marriage promises eternal bliss—but neither does dating. At least with arranged marriage, I get to gossip about boys with my parents along the way.

Words by Aria Chakravorty
Art by Philip Kerr



Instructions: read in a Black Country accent

where mud and blood mix on tiled floors
i sing a dirge for deer ('course) [*don't*]
can't write it down, i day* have the strength [*again*]
can't tell the chase's black story agen*

for concrete, wood, blood, mud
for veins, grass, mud, flood
i'd sing a gentler song if i could
in tongues you never understood

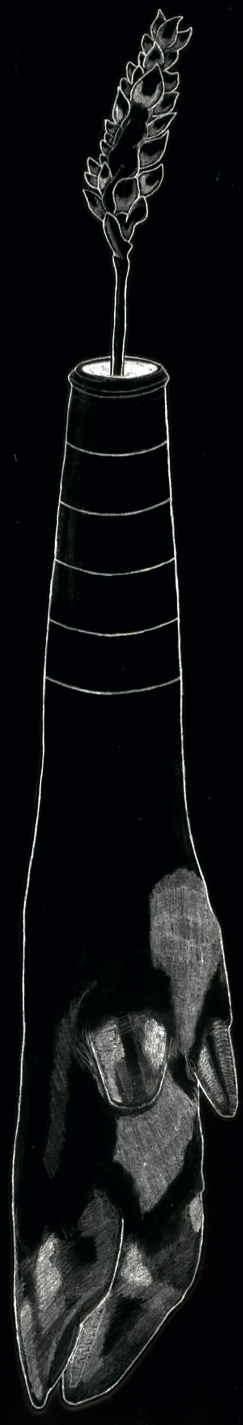
could i sing a kinder song?
or would i let the deer along?
a peaceful road, long and narrow
a peaceful dirge, or raging harrow
a soft stream, raging river
does the body shake or does it quiver?
when our bones drop with a thud
do they drop us in the cut ?

a hoof for a foot? [*canal*]
a plaster for a cut*?
a sin for wings
a wing so i can sing

so I can mimic a magpie's caw? [*horse*]
an oss'* gallop through ribs of straw
rip out me feathers until I'm raw
pluck me muscles until me heels are tore
the deer is what i do this for

bury them, in freshly rooted earth
let them know not rot's curse
let their bones be white as teeth
let their bodies nourish the wheat
and let me sing my dirge in peace!

Words by Esme Thomson
Art by Madeleine Shepherd



Second Languages

These gossamer words
pencilled into the margins of your face.

An embryo of unburst meaning like
the bruised silence before a dinner table argument.

You turn your head away from me and
a phrase catches the light before
withdrawing behind the curtain of your frown.

Sadness.

But also: unmade nailbeds; yearning for smallness;
the soft resignation of shoulder blades to a wooden floorboard.

They say you're meant to wear your grief with grace;
unstutter the spine from its curls of accent

But you wear it how I wear my dad's flaking leather jacket:
a generation too big,
a size too early.

Words by Innayat Brar
Art by Jarad Jackson

Unmasking antisemitism in Oxford

“I can’t say that I’m

“I can’t say that I’m Jewish.”

I’m sat outside the English Faculty, St. Cross Road. We’ve had to move away from the crowded tables inside in order to not be overheard, but we speak in lowered voices anyway. Caroline, a Jewish student at Oxford, has agreed to meet me for coffee, but she asks to go by a pseudonym so that she feels safer. One after another, she shares experiences of alienation, distress, and fear with me. After a few minutes of chatting, I realise just how serious the state of antisemitism is in Oxford. “I’m careful who I talk to,” she tells me nervously, “it becomes a debate, and I would like my experience to not be a debate.”

Caroline has kept her mouth shut whenever she’s seen antisemitic content posted online. “It’s just not worth it,” she tells me, “I’d lose friends”. Caroline shares her disappointment at the lack of support from the University, particularly in Trinity 2024 (“it took a huge toll on my wellbeing”). In a way, the polarised Oxford environment that has unsettled Caroline so much unsettles me as the interviewer; I feel a twinge of dread about the response this article will receive. To me, it seems that Jewish students cannot, and crucially, will not, speak about traumatic personal experiences to their peers, in fear of a sudden escalation to political debate. The criticism of antisemitic hate crimes is often met with the presumption of an underlying agenda. It shows in the silence that many Jewish students impose on themselves. And so, to be Jewish has become a hidden identity.

This hidden identity isn’t mine, though. I don’t identify as a Jewish person, but I’m deeply connected to Jewish history. My Grandfather was Ashkenazi Jewish; his parents died in the Holocaust. Jewishness is an integral part of my family history, but today I feel distanced from it. As Caroline says, she doesn’t feel like a “religious person” but feels “very tied to the identity.”

Antisemitism is a continuation of complex religious and ethnic persecution. Think back to your childhood. Did you watch *Tangled*, *Harry Potter*, *Barbie's Swan Lake*, or *Snow White*? Have you taken note of the antisemitic tropes and caricatures? With the limited knowledge and vocabulary of an 8-year-old, I bet you didn't. *The Old Witch* in Disney's *Snow White* and the Mother in *Tangled* are both antisemitic and misogynistic exaggerations of physical features and cruelty. The goblin bankers in *Harry Potter*, and Rothbard from Barbie's *Swan Lake* all follow the same tropes. Antisemitism is so deeply embedded into British life that children passively absorb these dehumanising misrepresentations of Jewish people in their breakfast cartoons, over a bowl of Cheerios. While we cannot expect an 8-year-old to notice these offences, as adults, we should be able to recognise the existence of antisemitism around us and acknowledge that we may have absorbed unconscious prejudices that are now time to unlearn.

Caroline's childhood was plagued by persistent bullying. She nervously recounts a defining moment in her life that shows just how far antisemitism reaches into the British day-to-day.

"Four-year-old me walked into school, really excited to start learning." For the next six months, she tells me, "I was physically and verbally abused. I was hit in the playground, thrown off slides by older children."

These children were three or four years older, aged seven or eight. Caroline would go home to her parents "covered in bruises," regurgitating a spew of hateful taunts said to her back in the playground. Her parents didn't know what was going on. The playground became her introduction to hatred. "My memory is totally gone from that time, I only remember what my parents have told me."

She tells me more about this: I fall quiet.

"I had to stay in the classroom during break time and lunchtime because it wasn't safe for me to be out in the playground. The headteacher said there was nothing he could do and my parents reached out to our MP, but everyone said the best thing to do was to just leave the school behind." Caroline had to move to a different primary school, missing half her year of reception, and starting afresh. Aged five, she walked into a new Year 1 classroom, anxious the same would happen all over again.

I speak to Olivia, a second interviewee, about the "tunnel-vision" students often have when it comes to discussions of antisemitism in Oxford. People become so focused on the political debate that sympathy for the personal Jewish experience at the University becomes an afterthought. As Caroline had explained to me: "It's implied that I, as a Jew, do not criticise the Israeli government. Like, of course I do. I can't stand Netanyahu, I can't stand the Israeli government." She is afraid that a lot of Israelis are being grouped with Netanyahu.

Research by the Community Security Trust (CST) supports this view. The CST reported a doubling of antisemitic incidents in the UK in the first half of 2024, compared with the same period of the previous year. It is undeniable that there is a tendency to extrapolate the actions of a minority onto an entire group. Israel does not determine the thoughts and feelings of the Jewish people; and the assumption that it does is immutably antisemitic.

Within the University of Oxford, we cannot ignore the antisemitism that goes on under our noses. Over 100 testimonies of antisemitic abuse have been collated in an open letter to the University community. Between October 7th 2023 and May 27th 2024, a collective of Jewish students, researchers, faculty members and alumni were reporting countless antisemitic acts taking place within Oxford. A Mezuzah (a Jewish prayer scroll) was ripped from the former president of the Oxford Jewish Society's (JSOC) door. Another was accused of killing children in Gaza, by virtue of their Israeli nationality. Somehow, the basic right of every human to a life without physical and emotional harassment has become null and void.

And it is not just the actions of an extreme minority. We have to examine our knee-jerk reactions and subconscious prejudices against calls to combat antisemitism. When JSOC (Jewish society) offered to give antisemitism talks during fresher's week, only 12 colleges agreed. That's 12 out of 32 undergraduate colleges. Many cited timetabling issues as being behind their refusal. A failure to prioritise student wellness and safety is seen in a similar reaction to Oxford University Islamic Society: an ISoc talk on Islamophobia was only accepted by 16 colleges.

We must listen when students say that the University of Oxford doesn't fight antisemitism seriously enough. When protesters stormed the Exam Schools on June 13th 2024, shouting charged statements about the Israel-Gaza War, it would throw any student off their game, let alone students with family in Gaza or Israel, or students whose personal identity has become dangerously tangled within this political rhetoric. Caroline tells me she "left the exam sobbing, ran straight to the college nurse." The nurse and wellbeing team told her that as a Jewish student with family in Israel, they'd write a letter on her behalf. She spent the rest of the day "in bits, unable to speak to anyone."

Olivia believes that "Oxford is too tolerant of antisemitism; there needs to be more momentum to educate and understand it." The distressing harassment of individuals has become so politically charged, that the simple act of "harassment" is no longer criticised by default. Evidence suggests that the University of Oxford is an institution plagued by antisemitism, and the inability to act on it. Too many of its leaders and members have lost sight of fundamental respect for every person's right to express their identity.

Our 'progressive' society claims to be defined by its growing momentum towards tolerance for people regardless of gender, class, or skin colour. As non-Jewish people, it is our job to be empathetic. When our friends are being alienated, harassed, and silenced, we need to be able to listen. Everyone deserves that opportunity. A modicum of respect.

Back at the English Faculty, students flock past us. My tea has turned cold. Caroline watches. "I don't think many people are antisemitic intentionally. But I'm tired of being afraid. I should be able to say 'Hey, I'm Jewish', and not feel my hands get clammy. It's just a part of me."

Jewish.'

Words by Ed Freeman

'Woman with flexed feet [1],
Old Taberdars' Room', 2024
Fujifilm X-H1
William Schwabach

‘Woman with flexed feet [2],
Old Taberdars’ Room’, 2024
Fujifilm X-H1
William Schwabach

Grief, an old friend

"hold your breath for as long as yo

If there's one thing I've learned at university, death is a crap conversation starter. So instead I sat down and began talking to a little girl I named Diana. She was an adaptation of a Tibetan Buddhist practice called *chöd*, a method of visualising whatever is bothering us as a separate entity who we can 'speak' with. This can help us try to understand and accept the parts of ourselves we push away.

(Named after Diana Barry in *Anne of Green Gables*, as a nod to the friendship of kindred spirits.)

We slowly came to realise that my grief was, somewhat selfishly, not the only trouble I complained of to Diana. For years, I'd anticipated my university experience to be this golden epitome of my young adulthood. Yet looming heavy on my shoulders, the frame of grief overshadowed all aspects of an undergraduate fantasy I'd hoped to realise. I'd imagined spending my time learning and growing, not grieving. Instead, I hated being here. But I also hated how I hated being here. I'd looked forward to meeting new people and experiencing all kinds of new things only to now recoil from them.

I can only speak here on my own behalf. The shadows I describe are only an attempt to render experience—to offer a study of what first year was like alongside loss.

When I learnt of *N.B.*'s death on the morning of my Hilary term, I forced myself to cry. I can when I decide to; it's a little party trick of mine. But after my Mother and the Chaplain left, my breath was still, there were no tears—only the cavernous sense of space that yawned within my gut.

It wasn't the first time I'd encountered death; I'd had a friend who'd committed suicide some years before. During that time, I missed school for several months. Most of my time I spent with our circle of friends, Nu metal reverberating through the floors of my house, ferociously rearranging my room for the seventh time. I cried most days. From an old journal of mine: 'I curled into a ball, hugging myself tightly to hold the pain close to me because it was the only thing that seemed real at that moment. I was afraid if I let go, I would somehow fall apart.' The adolescent sentimentalism makes me cringe slightly, but I stand by the attempt to render a truth, however clumsily.

This time, grief was different. There isn't really any magical combination of words with which I can illuminate what it was like.

Compared to the emotional whirlwind of before, the blanket of apathy now stunned me in its diametrical difference.

At 15, I guess it was natural I should be 'incredulous of despair, half-taught in anguish.' Now at 20, I'd become 'hopelessly passionless.' Two hundred years before, Barrett Browning had already understood something I can hardly put into words.

The closest anecdote I have experientially found: hold your breath for as long as you can. Notice the sensation in your body moments before you give up. The dizzying deprivation, the pressure that strains against itself, the burning longing for air. There's another puzzling sensation which I can't quite characterise, but in some analogous sense reminds me of the pain one feels from holding ice for a prolonged time. Though cold, it burns; though numb, it still hurts.

My disorientation led me to spend a long time looking for a sign to prove that something had actually happened. Auden's *Funeral Blues* reminds me of my absurd symbol seeking. Did traffic policemen wear black cotton gloves? Where was the smoke of planes scribbling in the sky 'He Is Dead'? Oxford's microcosm plugged away, unchanging, suspiciously unforgiving. And whilst people around me stressed themselves over essay deadlines and internships, Luhrman's song would float through my head: "The real troubles in your life are … the kind that blindsides you at 4pm on some idle Tuesday." They, too, would someday find themselves blindsided by life—it felt wrong to disturb theirs with mine.

Hilary bled into Trinity. Quietly grateful for the freedom my degree and tutors gave me, my studies became shaped by my circumstances. I wrote on life-writing as a process of grieving. For a linguistics essay, I analysed old iMessage conversations between us to discuss the development of 'textese'. I snapped a photo to send to them of a lecture slideshow citing Central Cee, before my stomach plunged in remembrance.

Word spread as word does. I felt eyes follow me in hall, noticed conversations flounder when I joined them. It was as though a black fog smothered any possibility of them seeing a person beyond a tragedy attached to me.

Wishing I wasn't alone dragged me to seminars and socials yet, funnily enough, sometimes being in a crowd can feel more desolate than solitude. It seemed pointless to speak to others; I felt that they couldn't care. Although well-meaning, knitted brows of concern were unavoidably contrived—*not their fault, how can they empathise?*

More often, What Had Happened was ignored; I didn't want to cloud the atmosphere, they didn't want to remind me of my loss. Even as I intuitively understood their awkwardness, I couldn't help resenting the decorum which glossed those interactions with an artificial cheeriness. Perhaps these were simply the distortions of a surreal state, yet I felt unable to cross a chasm I sensed between my cohort and I.

Still, there were a few genuine moments of connection which sprung from their concern—tentative but brave attempts to address the elephant that dogged each room I walked into. These acts of kindness touched me deeply; they created a space where I felt my grief was seen rather than ignored.

'A single person is missing for you, and the whole world is empty.' This is, to me, a truism—though wouldn't be yet for most my age. It's sad to think all of us will come to realise that one way or another, if we are lucky to love and live long enough to know. It's also kind of beautiful how we do take on that inevitable debt of care for another.

I started with saying I learnt death is a rubbish conversation starter; nonetheless, I've learnt it's an important one to have. After loss, we need connection; it's why for thousands of years we've had rituals and traditions surrounding death to bring people together.

And it's not that people didn't care, just most didn't know what to do or say. Of course you wouldn't want to accidentally upset someone—I feel awful whenever I accidentally put my foot in my mouth and somehow step on someone's toes that way. Yet to speak directly, without fear of overstepping, will avoid the emptiness of trite reassurances. It felt ridiculous being asked how I was doing in social circumstances—*just dandy, of course*—but when I found chocolate in my pidge, or someone asked me to go for coffee, I felt heard without needing to say anything. The small gestures people gave me were, in a way, the signs I'd been looking for, and wordlessly said everything I needed to hear.

To those who are grieving: there's frustratingly little I can write to ease that pain. Regardless, Uni Parks is lovely to walk around this time of year. A hot chocolate from Knoops pairs very well. If it's too cold, Blackwell's has comfy armchairs with thousands of books to keep you company. You don't need to take anything too seriously. Only remember to be brave, and to be honest—both with yourself and with others. I realised my mistake was running away from that.

Out of mild curiosity, I looked up what had happened in the world the day *N.B.* died. In Gniby, Senegal, 40 people were killed along with 87 others injured in a bus collision. Pro-Bolsonaro rioters stormed the National Congress, the Supreme Federal Court, and the Palácio do Planalto in Brazil. For Benin's sixth quinquennial parliamentary elections, thousands of young citizens voted for the first time. Another collision killed 19 people and injured 20 others, this time into a funeral procession in Jiangxi, China—morbidly ironic. Searching 'Obituary', 'January 8th 2023' on Google returned about 8,990 results. I had no idea what was going on around me, and they also lived oblivious to the rend in my small reality. Yet, in a way, we were unconsciously connected.

Connection is something we have to seek out for ourselves, even if it is dauntingly more awkward to ask a person instead of a search engine. It was a normal day for most in Oxford, after all. My resentment was misdirected rage—which there's no room for when life throws so many things our way. But I found there's always space for love—*let's watch a film together.*

Whenever I walk around Christ Church Meadows, I remember when *N.B.* and I were there together. I like to imagine the infinitesimal traces of their energy around me, from the warmth of their body, in the particles of the air they exhaled. Diana and I speak less these days, though we catch up from time to time. Grief is still there, but nowadays, I breathe.

Words by Carmen McKenna

‘Memory drawing of a canoe trip through Oxford’, 2024
Acrylic and Drawing ink on drawing board
86x57cm
Barnaby Wessell

My Grandfather: teaching surgery in Gaza

In a small, makeshift classroom in Gaza, my Grandfather, John Wolfe, a retired vascular surgeon, stood before a group of local doctors. With goat arteries in hand, he demonstrated the delicate art of saving lives. His aim was clear—not just to perform surgeries but to train the next generation of Gazan doctors so that they could independently address the medical crises plaguing the region.

Between 2016 and 2018, my grandad worked in Gaza with the Red Cross, and his work has always been a great source of pride for me. Now more than ever, my grandfather's work teaches me that identity is defined, not only by where we are born and what boxes we tick, but by what we do in response to suffering.

"With goat arteries in hand, he demonstrated the delicate art of saving lives."

Growing up Jewish, I felt both pride in my heritage and the challenges of an identity so deeply politicised. Being from a multi-faith family but raised Jewish made things even more complex, both personally and when presenting who I was to the outside world. My connection to my identity and culture was shaped by my experiences of antisemitism, family history, and the weight of global events.

It was these global events that created the most internal conflict. I often struggled with the fear of being labelled a "self-hating Jew" as I navigated my stance on Israel and Palestine. But from the moment I could understand the issue, I've believed strongly in the Palestinians' right to self-determination—my grandfather's humanitarian work in Gaza anchored me most in this belief.

My Grandfather is a surgeon through and through; his dedication, laser focus, and often one-track mind make him the person he is.

I didn't fully appreciate his legacy as a surgeon until a recent visit to hospital when my Grandad bumped into an ex-colleague who had trained there whilst he was a consultant. With a smile, she asked, "John Wolfe, is that you?"

She told me, "Your Grandad's the best in a crisis. The only man who will sit reading *The Times* while the rest of the hospital runs around like headless chickens."

Apparently, they were warned of an influx of patients in the 1999 Ladbroke Grove railway crash. Unable to do anything before it arrived, staff anxiously ran around; but my Grandad sat, reading the paper, ready to save lives when, and only when, the emergency came. I laughed, imagining what his colleagues would say if they saw him flapping and panicking while our chaotic family struggled to get into the car because of a lost glove.

After retiring, my Grandad filled his time with sculpture and teaching. I've often asked what inspired him to go to Gaza to teach, why there, and why then, shortly after retirement, when he could've slowly pushed the brakes on an intense career. He replied that it was the other way around: he didn't choose, he was needed. In the 2014 Gaza War, the health office in Gaza felt the loss of lives and limbs could've been prevented if surgeons had had more specialist skills. The Red Cross contacted him needing experts. Unable to be idle, he decided to go.

The overarching appeal of the Red Cross for him was that to maintain its work in conflict zones, it ensured it had the support of both parties. This allowed him to meet with Israelis and the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) in Tel Aviv before entering Gaza—an experience he describes as a stark transition. Israel, with its massive operational and technological infrastructure, was a world apart from the limited resources of the Gaza Strip.

As he passed the first checkpoint, the only thing seeming to differentiate the two places, he vividly recalls a broken-down car being pulled by a donkey and cart.

My Grandfather's goal when teaching in Gaza was to reduce amputations caused by arterial injuries. During one of his final visits to Gaza in 2018, the Great Return March was in full swing, with unarmed Palestinians marching toward the Israeli border. Israeli snipers intentionally aimed at protesters' knees. Thousands were wounded but, importantly, not killed. High-velocity bullets in response to rocks being thrown. High-velocity bullets targeted specifically at young boys' knees, deliberately wiping out the next generation of male fighters.

My Grandad was in awe of the Red Crescent's efficiency in transporting patients to hospitals under difficult conditions. With insufficient blood supplies, sporadic electricity, and minimal equipment, Gaza's medical teams handled the influx of trauma cases with remarkable skill and organisation.

"You could be in the operating theatre, and the light would go out", he told me. "They lack sutures, cautery for stopping bleeding from small vessels, and even anaesthetists are spread thin."

"One time, we received 12 ambulances in four minutes, all carrying people with torn blood vessels in their legs. That caseload would overwhelm any hospital system."

My Grandfather has told me many times that the quickest way for a patient to die in trauma surgery is from a bleeding artery because the blood is being pumped out at such a high pressure. In those moments when patients lay on the table, every second counts. Using animal parts from local abattoirs to simulate human arterial injuries, he taught surgeons at Al-Shifa Hospital vascular repair techniques, focusing on trauma management—sustainable medical teaching, so lives and limbs could be saved long after he had gone.

"Trauma surgery is about saving life."

Before my Grandad went to Gaza, many patients with bullet wounds to the legs had no choice but to undergo amputations. However, through improved vascular techniques, local surgeons could repair arteries and reduce the number of limbs lost.

"Trauma surgery is about saving life", he said. "First, you stop the bleeding. Then, you repair the artery to save the leg."

In today's climate, being Jewish is more complex than it has ever been in my lifetime: navigating a world where antisemitism is rising, yet the conversation about Israel and Palestine remains deeply polarised. The recent escalation of violence following the October 7th Hamas attack and Israel's military response has reignited old tensions both within the community and in the world as a whole.

These external and internal conflicts are not new to me. The plight of the Palestinians and the violence in the West Bank has long been a topic of discussion in my family. Like any Jewish dinner table, debate and discussion are integral. With an asylum lawyer as a Mother raising three Jewish children, the politics of the State of Israel has been something we engaged with long before the atrocities of the past year.

However, recent events have projected my views and identity onto the public stage in a way that they have never been before. The constant pressure to fit my politics into a binary—Israel versus Palestine, Jews versus Muslims—strips away the complexity of Jewish identity. It often feels like we're being asked to either stand firmly with Israel or be accused of betraying our people.

But my grandfather's work, more than anything, reminds me that there is another way to engage with these issues, a way that rises above constructed political divides and focuses on shared humanity rather than clung-to loyalty, cemented by a fear that seems to be woven into our DNA after the systematic oppression the Jewish community has long faced.

The monolithic narrative feeds on fear and divides as opposed to creating shared values and compassion. I've struggled with this oversimplification, as it denies the depth of our history, values, and the unique positions we each hold.

My Judaism and Jewish identity are integral to who I am. I am fully aware of the pain and persistence of antisemitism.

"I began wearing my Star of David every day when the bullying got bad at school; my identity was even more important to cling to."

From swastikas being graffitied over my belongings to gas taps being turned on as I came into the science lab, I know what it feels like to have my identity attacked; I also know what it feels like to want to shy away from what makes me different. But I didn't. I began wearing my Star of David every day when the bullying got bad at school; my identity was even more important to cling to. However, until recently, I have never felt like my identity dictated my politics.

"He saw the human cost of conflict first-hand, and this impact is etched into his artwork, something I see most vividly in his relief, simply titled 'Gaza'."

I was clear in my stance: Israel's government did not act for me or my family, a state created after my Grandmother's birth and where none of us had ever lived.

Gaza left a deep impression on my Grandad, as his stories did on me. He saw the human cost of conflict first-hand, and this impact is etched into his artwork, something I see most vividly in his relief, simply titled 'Gaza'. His work there wasn't just about medical outcomes; it was a step toward easing the suffering of those trapped in a conflict beyond their control.

Yet when he talks to me, especially now, he is realistic about the current dire situation, shaped by deep historical grievances and ongoing aggression that cloud any hope for peace. He often shares stories of the friends he made and the people he met. Many had never seen an Israeli without a uniform, and many Israelis had never spoken to a Palestinian on the Gaza Strip outside of operations or protests. This separation creates an 'other'—an 'other' which each side can paint as a caricatured enemy.

The relief my Grandad made is harrowing and even more powerful now than when he first created it. Those suffering are not a distant concept—they are mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, cousins. The Jewish concept of *tzedakah* reminds us that our moral obligation extends beyond charity; it recognises our shared humanity. *Tzedakah* compels us to see those suffering, not as faceless strangers, but as fellow people deserving dignity. It's this ethical responsibility that my grandad's work embodies.

Al-Shifa Hospital, where my grandfather taught, no longer exists.

Words by Siena Jackson-Wolfe

'Gaza', 2018
Plaster relief
48x33cm
John Wolfe

Under-

supp

over-

an

press

How Oxford’s support services are failing student mental health

ported

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My family and friends are always surprised when I tell them Oxford has eight-week terms. 'Eight weeks! How do you get anything done?', they tend to exclaim. I usually respond jovially, explaining that the eight weeks is a blessing when you're in the midst of the high intensity, high-pressured environment during term-time. But the question always lingers, initiating my reflections, on exactly how, and at what cost we get everything done.

To be blunt, I think the culture at Oxford is the how, and health and sleep are the costs. In small doses of eight weeks, the toll of working round the clock to finish essays, attend lectures, apply to internships, and pursue extra-curricular endeavours often can be manageable.

And it's true that the application process for Oxford is designed to prepare you for this. But it is also the case, that for many students, the normalisation of overwork, social isolation and competitiveness at university act as the perfect storm for either the development of mental health conditions or else the exacerbation of conditions that many students seek to manage at university, rather than inflame.

A culture that myopically glorifies academic success at any cost, stigmatises rustication and delegitimises mental health concerns until academics are affected, can be framed as the driving force behind Oxford's inadequate student mental health support services.

Given University of Oxford's history as a leader in mental health research—early cognitive behavioural therapy research came out of Oxford, and the Oxford Centre for Suicide Research pioneered suicide prevention research—the limitations to the current support service provision cannot be argued to stem from a lack of knowledge on mental health issues. Instead, it must necessarily flow from a lack of emphasis on, or concern for, mental health, which is, fundamentally, a cultural issue.

In what ways then are students under-serviced by the University that demands so much of them?

"Chaplains do have religious affiliations which could alienate non-Christian students from seeking support"

Firstly, like many issues with university governance, mental health provision falls victim to decentralisation. The university stated in a 2019 FOI 'Colleges have primary responsibility for pastoral care'. This means that across colleges, there is inconsistency in provision of mental health support services, which renders certain clusters of the student population more exposed and under-supported than others.

Five Oxford colleges—Merton, Keble, University, Oriel and Corpus Christi—cite their Chaplains as the first port of call for student mental health concerns, and many others cite Chaplains as one of their many welfare contacts. Despite claims that chaplains can support all students, chaplains do have religious affiliations which could alienate non-Christian students from seeking support. In a university comprised of a multi-faith student body, this unevenly distributes access to mental health support according to religious identity.

Eight Oxford colleges cite 'welfare' deans—individuals with discipline and welfare support in their remit—as their first port of call for student support. Other colleges direct students to tutors, academic registrars, the University Counselling Service (UCS) and student welfare volunteers. 'Welfare leads' in many colleges are additional roles that tutors or deans take on in addition to their primary work, and not stand-alone positions. The inconsistency in provision is overwhelming; further, the variation obfuscates the shortcomings of immediate support services from college to college.

Secondly, student mental health is commonly serviced by individuals who lack the adequate training for complete and holistic support. Evidence of this are the burdens on college nurses for providing mental health support. College nurses are typically level 1 trained adult nurses registered with the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC). They are not mental health professionals, and lack the support systems and holistic training to meet the mental health demands of populations from the one, two or more colleges they support. Equally, both college and university mental health support relies on student providers.

Be this JCR/MCR Welfare officers—who receive no formal mental health first aid training—or university student peer supporters—whose training, having experienced it first hand, does not emphasise actual mental health conditions and relies on the peer supporter's own initiative to escalate student concerns if they feel unable to deal with them.

Welfare weeks are organised by students, with no necessary college involvement, and thus the majority of on-the-ground, proactive mental health support work is done by students for students. This arrangement demonstrates the university's lack of responsibility and ownership for their students' own mental health and has the potential to harm minimally trained student volunteers who are exposed to difficult situations without support.

Finally, the University's own mental health support services, namely the UCS, has several limitations. Referrals to the UCS often only occur when mental health conditions prevent students from meeting their academic deadlines.

"Referrals to the UCS often only occur when mental health conditions prevent students from meeting their academic deadlines"

This completely renders invisible students who are struggling with debilitating mental health conditions, but still meeting their deadlines to the detriment of their own wellbeing.

This trend stretches across the university and colleges. A student who left Oxford after her experience struggling with her mental health, shared her experience of "being rusticated" by her academic tutors because she wasn't meeting her academic deadlines. Support for managing her mental health was second to concerns about her academics, and the decision to rusticate was taken away from her. She stated:

"My tutors seemed to believe that six months off would 'cure' my anxiety disorder, and that I would return as an acceptable Oxford student, rather than adapt their expectations of me in any way. I found this push towards rustication to be extremely frustrating and upsetting."

"My tutors seemed to believe that six months off would 'cure' my anxiety disorder, and that I would return as an acceptable Oxford student"

At the UCS, she recalls she was allowed about four counselling sessions. This limited number of sessions is an intrinsic feature of the UCS' design.

The average student attends 3.35 counselling sessions with the UCS—revealing that the kind of support being offered is short term, focusing on solving discernible academic problems like not meeting deadlines, rather than providing ongoing support to students.

There is an emphasis on reducing suspension of study rates across the UCS. Suspension of study, otherwise known as 'rustication', is the process of stopping study for a year, before picking up where one left off. In a 2023 FOI giving the reasons for the 2796 cases of rustication between 2017-2021, 'mental health' was not cited as a reason for rustication. 'Medical' or 'personal reasons' were cited as the most common reasons for rustication.

That the University doesn't recognise mental health difficulties as a distinct reason for rustication, reveals the insti-

tutional neglect of very serious struggles. Moreover, the University Counselling Service annual report cites the 'considering rustication' rate of students before and after counselling as a key performance indicator of the counselling service's success.

Whether 'considering rustication' is a good indicator of mental wellbeing or not, the UCS's focus on reducing this rate demonstrates that the stigma attached to suspension of studies is not only present culturally, but also institutionally. Given taking a break from studies can in fact be an extremely positive tool for promoting student-wellbeing by preventing the exacerbation of mental health conditions, the UCS's negative perception of rustication seems to run contrary to their stated aim of supporting student mental health.

The most illustrative evidence that students at Oxford are under-supported is found in student suicide rates. The average annual suicide rate for students at universities in the UK, as reported by a study from the Office for National Statistics in 2021, was 3 deaths per 100 000 students. At Oxford University, in the ten academic years between 2012/2013 to 2021/2022 there have been 17 suicides. That's on average 1.7 suicides a year for a student population of 26,000. Comparing this to the nationwide average, that's equivalent to 6.5 deaths per year per 100,000 students – over double the UK annual student suicide rate.

"In a 2023 FOI giving the reasons for the 2796 cases of rustication between 2017-2021, 'mental health' was not cited as a reason for rustication."

Looking to whether there is any direct link between the University Counselling Service's provision, and the above-average suicide rate, we can observe that Oxford University does not have a Suicide Safer Strategy as outlined by Universities UK and Papyrus.

UK Universities first published their 'Suicide Safer Strategy' guidance in 2018 for the implementation of strategies that integrate suicide prevention, intervention and postvention across UK universities. King's College London, Cambridge, Durham, Warwick and Newcastle universities all have suicide safer strategies. Oxford University stipulates that 'reducing the risk' of student suicide is 'embedded in existing provision across the collegiate institution and tied into student wellbeing and mental health strategies'.

That there is no specific university policy for reducing the risk of suicide given the abnormally high rates of student suicide compared to the UK average, reflects a systematic neglect for student welfare that exists institutionally. It comes as no surprise that the culture of Oxford University is pressured, intense, and over-burdening when the University's institutional structures lack sufficient framework to proactively address mental health concerns and prevent student suicide.

"That's on average 1.7 suicides a year for a student population of 26,000."

The collegiate system is one well-positioned for adequately supporting students in their mental wellbeing whilst studying at university. However, Oxford has underutilised this system, reflecting that priority has not been assigned to student mental health.

When I first arrived in Oxford, I was struggling with anorexia nervosa. Knowing this would be difficult to manage whilst at university, I tried to do everything right beforehand. I contacted my college welfare lead. I registered with the University Disability Advisory Service. I met with my college nurse. During that term, our college nurse who had openly acknowledged and made clear her lack of any experience in supporting people with eating disorders or anxiety (by complaining about how fattening hall food was in our first meeting) was the only person who checked on me.

"No university staff other than my college nurse contacted me once that Michaelmas. I reached a critical BMI by the end of it."

I am not saying as an adult I needed checking on. But for a mental illness as severe as anorexia, being checked up on really matters, and is why I had tried to construct a support network with the university and college before arriving.

No university staff other than my college nurse contacted me once that Michaelmas. I reached a critical BMI by the end of it. My parents weren't going to let me go back to university; but my resolve to return in Hilary, and make the changes necessary to keep myself well, was one I made alone.

When I think back to fresher me, I wish so much for her. I wish that someone, anyone, had been there to shake her, and remind her that there was so much excitement she was missing out on by punishing herself alone in her room. I have had a brilliant time at Oxford, but it has not been without challenges.

The high intensity environment at Oxford need not be the villain in this situation. Working hard and academic excellence are important, but it is essential that if these attributes are to be promoted positively, that there is a shift culturally and institutionally towards an awareness of the potential mental health harms that can develop in this kind of environment. At a university which demands so much of students, students have in turn a right to demand from their university the adequate support they require to fulfil their academic demands safely and healthily.

The University of Oxford Press Office was contacted for reply, but has made no comment.

Words by Madelina Gordon

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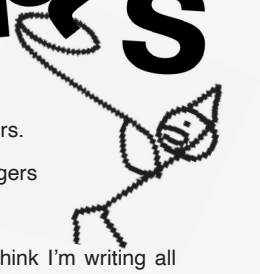
A response to all 100 pitch prompts



1.That I will never satisfy my dentist.

2. Sometimes trees and sometimes darkness.

3. When I'm alone I eat lasagna with my hands.

4. I am not a child.

5. I have no name.

6. 'We can extinguish the fire with this bucket of water'.

7. 'We can extinguish the fire with this bucket of unleaded petrol'.

8. You can't have a disaster if you've never had a date.

9. Dear Simon Armitage: I think your poetry is just okay.

10. He died on April 21, 2016.

11. Love is worth nothing in tennis.

12. My baby's dead; buy its shoes.

13. ***On A Pirate I Knows***
His ears is long, his hairs is black,
His rigid bones is wiry.
He's awful nice; his favourite film
Is Bridget Jones's Diary.

14. She moved to Luxembourg.

15. She said to her boyfriend: 'I've made a list of everything I want in my life, and I've narrowed it down to a garden with ducks, and enough money to get coffee without worrying about the price'.

16. White British, and probably but I'm afraid to dig into it.

17. Fear of eternal damnation.

18. Common sense.

19. I am beginning to realise that writing an answer to every single prompt was not as feasible an exercise as I originally believed.

20. I have dug up Uni Parks and investigated the worms. They're doing pretty good.

21. Dear stick insect, I wish to kiss you on the mouth, but I cannot find it.

22. Finbarr Currie, who I trust to get all my ideas into *The Isis* magazine.

23. One method for the concretisation of love.

24. No, that seems to me undemocratic (see 81).

25. If you said the word Teletubbies in 1995, nobody would know what you meant.

26. Dosvidaniya: that means two vidaniyas.

27. I've decided that after I die, I want to have my body donated to medical research; specifically, research into necromancy.

28. No.

29. No, because they are difficult to repair.

30. I stole that dosvidaniya joke at no.26 from an episode of Phineas and Ferb.

31. A nightmare when you are trying to learn a foreign language, and one that only gets worse.

32. I hate epaulettes, they obscure the shoulders.

33. Lily Allen's first album is really good.

34. I prefer Jonathan.

35. Depends on how it fares in the ratings.

36. Dear Sir Keir Starmer,
We could rehabilitate the economy by selling Kent to the French.
Hope all's well with you & the family,
Regards,
Adam.

37. Kemi Badenoch. What was the point of putting this prompt for a magazine that releases in December?

38. Politics but not politicians.

39. Not only breeds them, breeds them illegally in a battery farm underneath the Rad Cam to sell to the government. Fortunately I escaped the system before it was too late.

40. My small fingers.

41. With larger fingers

42. Frankincense.

43. Why do you think I'm writing all of these?

44. For legal reasons it's important that I'm the latter.

45. One of my friends has told me 'You're the grooviest guy I know', a statement I do not know what to make of.

46. Actually perfectly enjoyable and manageable; my sobriety has never been questioned nor mocked. I think we realise that it impacts neither my nor other people's capacity to enjoy ourselves. (This is the first prompt I am able to give a proper answer to, which causes me to wonder again whether tackling every single one was really a good idea. But I am lonely and we are 46 deep.)

47. You can't get rejected if you don't open yourself up to the possibility of rejection.

48. Every single time I have an awkward encounter with a casual acquaintance.

49. I will let you know if I do.

50. Tony the Tiger at 10.35pm.

51. The rubber duck race at my local park last year was hugely underwhelming.

52. Pass on everyone, obviously. What kind of perverted dystopian scenario is this where government employees are being offered up to me as sexual commodities to be approved or disapproved of on my libidinal whims? This prompt is disturbing and whoever came up with it ought to take a look at themselves.

53. Word and PowerPoint are quite liberal but Excel is fiercely conservative.

54. Is it pathetic to be apathetic?

55. Neither of my biological grandmothers go by the name 'Nan', so

I've hired an emergency nan off the Internet so I can answer this prompt successfully. She's fine but a little bit racist.

56. #oxfess32257 forced me to reckon with the inevitable march of time.

57. Ranking by number of Tortoise Races held per year:
#1: Corpus Christi
#2: Every other college
I think this is a brutal enough indictment of the situation elsewhere.

58. What is the ratio of rice to not-rice?

59. It's OK to love Plato but remember he is dead.

60. My family is always saying to me 'You must eat lasagna with a knife and fork' and it makes me feel very ashamed of myself.

61. Self-respect.

62. Homosexuality.

63. I now see why my suggestion only made the fire worse.

64. Working in finance.

65. Those one-way mirrors you get in police interrogation rooms.

66. Just Stop Oil doesn't love them.

67. Not sure they're keen on those either.

68. Innsbruck.

69. Why do birds suddenly appear
Every time you are near?
Just like me, they want to eat
The birdseed in your hair.

70. Lily Allen's first album is really good.

71. Seatbelts, thankfully.

72. I get unreasonably frustrated when other people do not adhere to my imagined conceptualisations of their personalities. Also, I'm allergic to fish.

73. No.

74. Older, somehow, and as such I feel confused and disturbed.

75. Transport's more of a hassle, I'd imagine.

76. Took me nearly ten months to get out the womb.

77. Imperial College London.

78. A novel where the audiobook has a different ending just to mess with people.

79. Hello to the All Souls examiner reading this paper. I would like to let you know that I have obtained several folders of blackmail on the college Warden, which I am sure the media and public would find extremely interesting, and which I'd hate not to share with them. That said, I could always be convinced to keep it to myself, in exchange for, oh I don't know, perhaps if I were to be awarded a fellowship immediately? Just a thought I had. You have 48 hours. Cheers!

80. I fear the day I will first have to experience it properly.

81. Yes, for everything except situationships (see 24).

82. No, we should reinstate the death penalty instead.

83. Xi Jinping, I imagine.

84. Xi Jinping, I imagine.

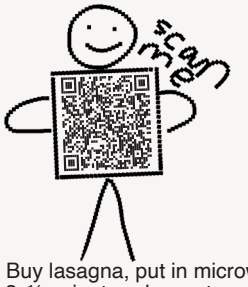
85. As an AI language model, I'm not equipped to call into question the ramifications of my superior technological existence upon the practice of your pitiful 'art'.

86. No—I had hoped there would be a garden with ducks, and that I would have enough money to get coffee without worrying about the price.

87. Not until they catch me.

88. It's too contemporary/It's perfectly contemporary enough.

89.



90. Buy lasagna, put in microwave for 3 ½ minutes, leave to cool, eat with hands.

91. I have taken a self-portrait sketch, and using mixed media (i.e. a paper shredder), I have transformed it into something new: very thin paper strips.

92.

93. If I start drawing something I fear it would take me longer than 15 mins to finish

94. Pros: the crepes at those Crepes O Mania stands.
Cons: the price of crepes at those Crepes O Mania stands.

95.

96. It holds very powerful meaning about the complex relationship between our physical form and our eroses.

97.

98. Lily Allen's first album is really good.

99. Tools of communication and expression are invaluable to society. I admit that mine, however, are less necessary than most.

100. Unfortunately I suspect that is very much the case.

Words by Adam Pickard

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