
On Disconnecting
HT25
THE ISIS MAGAZINE
"No awkward questions please, we're British."

Letter from the Editors

Before we started our term as co-Editors, we only knew each other by way of short trivia. Violet was the Features Deputy Editor, Alice a Creative Deputy Editor; Violet was in third year, Alice in second; Violet studied History, Alice—English, and many of the other things that form the outline that defines acquaintanceship.

Over one too many pints at the Lamb and Flag, it became clear that we had more in common than first imagined. We both grew up by the seaside; we have the same pair of shoes that we often, nearly always, wear to meetings (making us look like a weird double-act) and, naturally, we both loved this magazine, and found that creative similarities helped us relinquish some of the careful control we each wanted to have.

HT25 is the second edition in six years to not have a theme. It hardly felt poster-worthy, at first. A task of theme-lessness, without the fun of being first. But, looking back we are proud to reject a business model of newness. HT25 is not about furnishing a CV. It's about a love for print, for old and new, for no theme, and for the themes that emerged anyway. It's about scratching our initials into the staffroom door of *The Isis*, and celebrating the people who helped us do it.

That being said, though—if you will allow us to be hypocrites: we wanted to host sell-out events, and we did; we wanted an investigations team (page 47, if you want to have a read); we wanted to give the social media a kick. Most of all, we wanted to create a magazine that could–even if only minutely–reflect how much we love good writing, good artwork, and a good design to tie it together.

The Isis HT25 can boast pieces that resonate now, but remain anchored in themes that remain timeless. Pieces we enjoyed in isolation—This Pendent World, On disconnecting, Tír na nÓg, Mountains and mines, Antique Shopping, and Beatrice—found parallels in opposition, and apposition, to one another in InDesign. Natural beauty, the threats posed to it; keepsakes of a family, a fleeting conversation with a stranger. It's easy to feel disconnected from the world, but we hope this edition serves as a reminder to appreciate the seconds that slither away between kitchen conversations with friends, and, equally, the long phone-calls home in the hallway—excited to return to the action of university life.

Thank you to our amazing Senior Editorial Team: Eve, Harry, Joseph, Paul, India, and Sylvie—who, in the particular case of this magazine, spent the hours with us—transforming an empty document into a press-ready PDF. And, of course, we are grateful to our wonderful contributors, without whom we would have no document to fill.

Finally, thank you for coming to our events, and for supporting this magazine, independent since 1892, by holding it in your very hands.

It's been a pleasure,
Violet and Alice

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No awkward questions please, we're British

A couple quick questions. Who built the Tower of London? What's the age requirement to drink wine (with a meal, with someone over 18)? Who gets 50% off their TV licence? Answers: William the Conqueror; as viewers of *The Inbetweeners* will know, 16; and, a personal favourite, blind people. How'd you do?

One of the final steps to gaining British citizenship is passing the so-called 'Life in the UK' test. It's a short, multiple-choice quiz, purportedly imparting the necessary information would-be Brits need for, well, life in the UK. And yet! A rudimentary experiment reveals shocking figures: only about half of British citizens/my friends pass the test. Full disclosure: I took it, and failed. To my chagrin, an Australian friend got exactly the same score as me. Clearly, a life actually lived in the UK counts, here, for very little.

What does it mean to fail the British citizenship test, as a Brit? On one hand is the obvious: the test has nothing to do with living a good life here and is just one of many frivolous, exhausting hoops immigrants have to jump through to win the same rights as the rest of us (for example, the right not to be deported at the Home Office's discretion). But the other hand beckons. If it's not about living here, what is it about? As you trawl through practice questions, a very particular image of 'Britishness' begins to emerge.

"When did the Romans successfully invade Britain?"
"Which London landmark is an example of medieval architecture?"
"When did Britain become permanently separated, by the Channel, from mainland-Europe?"

I can't help but wonder about the relevance of the Bronze Age, the governance of the Church of England, or Steve Redgrave's Olympic achievements (5 gold medals?! Cor blimey!) to the actual fabric of British identity. At their worst, questions range from the irrelevant to the outright mythological (Where did the ancestors of the first farmers come from? "Southeast Europe" is a very, very interesting way to describe the Levant).

"they likely wouldn't be taking the test in the first place were it not for centuries of dick-swinging imperialism."

Fascination with Roman Britain and World War II betrays a predictable, if amusing, historical blindspot—what could have happened in those missing 1500 years? The irony is particularly delicious given that most people taking the test will be intimately familiar with Britain's blood-stained empire; they likely wouldn't be taking the test in the first place were it not for centuries of dick-swinging imperialism. Its glossing-over is either blatant revisionism or perhaps a tacit admission of the very fact that these facts are already known, that the Merrie England it works so hard to conjure is not Britain's reputation anymore.

Out of many words I could use to describe the vision of Britishness conjured by the test, the (kindest) standouts are: simple, reassuring. As I answered questions, the resource I found myself drawing on most was not my lived experience in the UK. It was instead hazy remembrances of Michael Morpurgo's back catalogue, and primary school history syllabuses infatuated with motte-and-bailey castles. It is telling that what the test considers the important facts of British life are largely historical; and at that, the most highly-prized historical tidbits are those likely to invoke a vague, heady sense of patriotism (see: the disproportionate number of questions given to chest-thumping about the Falkland Islands). It's pick-and-mix history—skip the moral abhorrence of empire,

and cut straight to the quote-unquote glory.

It's no wonder that Britishness retreats into these spaces—you can almost hear the test-writer sighing with relief. This is what Britishness means: engineering excellence and sticking it to the Germans. Here is a Britain with its place in the world. It's timeless, enduring, and, above all, uncomplicated.

"When is Vaisakhi celebrated?"
"What festival celebrates the end of Ramadan?"
"What was the estimated population of the British Empire?"
"When was slavery abolished in the British Empire?"

"This is what Britishness means: engineering excellence and sticking it to the Germans."

This article was initially far more scathing. But as I continued to take Life in the UK tests (at last, indulging in trivia isn't technically procrastination), a more muddied picture began to emerge. Every so often, almost apologetically, the test asks about the observances of Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, and Jewish festivals. It references the Empire in vague and basic terms. In short, it went where I thought it wasn't going to—awkwardly, vaguely, inadequately, but still.

Encountering these questions was a jolt. Not because these things are untrue—to the contrary, any postcolonial history will tell you that this country was built by immigration and always has been. But, tonally, these facts disrupted the simpler, pacifying vision of Britishness that had been lulling away in the background. Look: it's jarring to go from geographic trivia ("When was the Giant's Causeway formed?") to "How many days is Diwali celebrated for?", back to boasts of British military prowess ("Who was the 'Iron Duke' that defeated the Emperor Napoleon?"), as if these things matter the same amount or in the same way.

These facts should put others in a new light; most egregiously, they have more bearing on British life than any trivia about the first farmers. Crucially: if an immigrant would still fail, the inclusion of these DEI heavy hitters hasn't fundamentally impacted either the content or purpose of the test. These gestures, to me, feel like being included without having been made space for, which is to say: it doesn't quite fit. It's hard not to see them as grudging concessions to a truer portrait of the UK, inconvenient addendums thrown into the mix after one too many fact-checkers' complaints.

There's no two ways about it. These questions feel like tripping on the curtain. The prior, intoxicatingly simple vision of Britain has been cut through, and the farce revealed. The test seems to hope you just won't notice.

"What is an important part of British character?"
"What does the UK offer to its citizens?"
"Which is the fundamental principle of British life?"

Defining a national character is no small feat. 'Britishness' in particular is a label bestowed with solemn gravity, stripped away with righteous anger, weaponised, sharpened, infused with moral value—and never, never, neutral. I came of age in an era of resurgent nationalism and racist dog whistles: discomfort with capital-B Britishness is not something I'm unused to feeling. What was new to me was the discomfort running through the questions themselves.

Gone are the days where the state, the very centre of the whole affair, can wax one-note lyricism about glorious *Britannia.* It's interesting that even in a test designed as—let's just say it—propaganda, the completely sanitised image it would rather project cannot help but undermine itself. The tension in these test questions is a quiet one: it's the awkward shuffle and nervous cough of catching a neighbour at the shop, dressed, regrettably, in only their pyjamas. I have seen you as you are. We both know it. Perhaps we will both continue to pretend that we don't.

As an artefact, the Life in the UK test embodies a national narrative caught between incoherency and inconvenient truths. Yes, it is absurd, inaccurate, irrelevant, and (mostly) shameless propaganda, a mix of wishful thinking and attempted ignorance. But, clearly, the test does have some relevance for those looking to settle in the UK. Perhaps it doesn't shed much light on what Britishness does actually mean today—or indeed, has ever meant—but you know what? I'll argue it's still rightfully required reading for anyone looking to live here… as long as you're reading between the lines. Whatever it tries to be, the test instead is a startling portrait of a Britain: unwillingly, in flux, a curiously self-conscious crash course in the lies we tell ourselves.

Words by Sienna Wadhwani

Beatrice, dancing queen





Beatrice was in my dream last night. We used to talk. She liked to listen to ABBA and Classic FM on the radio in her room. When you gave her a toy baby she would hold it, staring, as if she were trying to read its mind. I think she was trying to read her own mind too, searching for anything left. She always rolled the bottom of her trousers up to her knees after I'd unrolled them for her. Then she would look at me and say, "Why!"

She used to sit on a faded navy beanbag with her back to the wall near the door. On exiting the bathroom, you could see her shadow as you walked past. Sometimes, if she spotted you, she would shout, "Hello…" in a croaky voice. If you didn't accept this invitation to visit, she would sometimes get distressed. Sometimes she shouted. Other times she didn't know you were there. She would often be too busy staring at the window, dimmed with a transparent roller blind. I called her names—Queen Bea, Beatroot, Mrs. B—but she didn't recognise them.

There were times, though, when she would suddenly click, meet your eyes, say hello and start waving: always a wave with the hand opening and closing, grasping air as though she was pulling you in.

Often, she cries. She must be taken out of the dining room for crying, for disturbing the others. I always try to sit with her, if I can. I don't like for her to be alone. She's my favourite resident. Sometimes she kisses my hand as if she's courting me, and she whips out a beaming smile in the middle of crying, like she never left. I don't know if that was characteristic of her—before she was the current Beatrice. I didn't know her when she still lived in her head.

I was first taught that she likes coffee with milk, that she enjoys a Bourbon, and that she doesn't mind a Chocolate Digestive. When she eats a Bourbon, she often looks me in the eyes, giggles, and says: "Oh!", like it was a secret we share. But I never knew for certain what Beatrice liked. She definitely couldn't tell you. I asked once what the best drink was to give Beatrice. I was told, "Give her anything".

I knew she didn't like toast, though. Sometimes she screamed at it, sometimes she merely announced her displeasure with a classic Yorkshire: "Oh—no, no, no!" When she did this, her character, remarkably like those I love in my family, burst through the blankness. This part of her, pre-dementia, seemed like a snippet taken from a different life, a link that laced a potential moment of joy with tragedy. She spoke like a confiding friend, and I could easily feel how different that would have felt if I was her grandchild, or she was my grandparent. I suspected

from Beatrice's dancing and her posture and her attitude towards toast that she would be slightly like my Granny, but for Granny's sake that wasn't something I wanted to think about. When I told my Granny I'd got this job, she said: "Are you practising?" I said no.

Her room was so sparse. Clearly, being described by objects just wasn't important for her anymore. One day, when I was bringing her a drink, I saw a single photo of three women on Beatrice's wall across from the bed. She wasn't even in it. Two women of my mum's age were stood with their hands on the back of a chair, where a girl my age was sitting—people I assumed were her descendants. They had her smile.

Before this, the Beatrice I had talked to was the only Beatrice I knew. I hadn't experienced that loss of the old her. But seeing the picture of people she loved—had loved—I could imagine her in full brightness. The girl could have been me; I could be a person always loved, half-remembered. I wondered which other bits of Beatrice they carried with them and how much of them was in Beatrice that I didn't know about, fragments of those she loves indistinguishable from the whole person. I sat down on her bed and cried. In my mind, she had plodded about the house, standing at the helm of the kitchen island, chicken roasting, potatoes ripe for the mashing. She danced.

I can imagine that it's best, if your loved one has dementia, to treat them as though they're a new person each day: a new person that you just have a natural connection with, and that you expect nothing from. That was easy for me—I suspect that Beatrice had no idea who I was. Maybe she'd have recognised me when I danced ballet for her, but I don't think that would bring anything back but a slight recollection of joy. My interactions with Beatrice weren't charged with grief; I didn't need to remember that this was Beatrice now, not a lesser version of a different woman. But I still cannot imagine the mental strength it must take to interact generously with someone you love with dementia—hiding your own grief at their slow decline, trying to stay present, trying to value their current self, rather than trying to fit them into the mould of their past loveliness. It must be so hard to hide your own grief and just love them as they are.

Sometimes Beatrice remembered, and it made her confused, grieving, desperate.

Maybe it was better that she forgot.

I used to tell Beatrice I love her, because I do. She would reply, "I love-love-love you", shaking her head at me. When I returned to visit at Christmas, I went to see her, sat on her usual beanbag, listening to the radio. I think she remembered me. She asked me to dance, and when I turned pirouettes for her, she danced in response. I gave her a biscuit and told her I loved her. She cried when I left. I think it was a coincidence.

Words by Chloe Smith
Art by Sadie Russell

Forcing perspective

Hans Holbein
'The Ambassadors', 1533

The man stood on the rooftop of the National Gallery, threatening to jump fifty feet from the edge of the portico to the white stone steps. He displayed—as newspapers would later report—signs of considerable distress, though no more emotion than the policemen stationed around the edge of their cordon, or the senior employees of the gallery, who appeared from hidden entrances with concerned looks and skewed glasses. Instinct suggests they slept little. The man had ascended the building the previous evening, and now it was late morning. Potential beckoned. Portland stone is very hard and very white, and one imagines that the exterior stains easily with blood. Close your eyes and there, in the black, was the future: the nameless man, cartwheeling from the sky, and the crush of his vertebrae upon landing, the sight of sinew torn from bone. Pale stone would become red, daubed in brain and shards of cranium.

Portland stone is reserved for the finest buildings in London. It was a favourite of the architect Christopher Wren, the stone that constructs St. Paul's Cathedral and the Bank of England: the material speaks of the nation's faded imperial riches. Perhaps the monumentality of the building had attracted the man, nobody seemed to know then, but the notion doesn't take too much imagination. The man had ascended a famous building in London and not a brutalist monolith in a town formerly known for heavy industry. A man who falls in the capital's concrete jungle makes a hell of a sound. For a day, this cry for help proved hauntingly effective. In climbing a drainpipe of the National Gallery, he ascended, and closed, a landmark of London.

The view must have been unparalleled. Across the rooftop, for that blip of the cosmos, he saw London as the capital appears to the bronzed men on plinths in Trafalgar Square.

I saw the Portland stone at first from a distance. It was around eleven o'clock when I arrived at the gallery, in August of 2023. Earlier I had risen from the leather sofa of my sister's rented house, sticky at the best of times, and stickier in the height of summer, and travelled along the Central Line for many stops in the wrong direction. I do not live in London and I had never been to the gallery before, though once, to impress a wealthy girl from a wealthy Oxford college, I claimed the Rembrandts had transfixed me so long that I missed my train home before an afternoon tutorial. Journeying to London was an escape from my university house, filled with black mold. In front of the Old Masters, I believed that the concerns of ordinary life would dissipate into the clarity of aged light in broom-swept Dutch interiors.

Sometimes I dreamt about mould spores entering my lungs at night, spreading through the branches, painting the airways black. Invariably, these dreams turned into nightmares, the nightmares into daytime anxiety. I spent much of the year scrubbing at the walls with white vinegar; the sour smell seeped into the weave of my clothes.

Not that such thoughts struck me then. I wondered at the presence of the policeman, then the employees. It was only from eavesdropping on a group of American tourists that I learned the gallery was closed—and only then from their disgruntled acknowledgements that Van Gogh's 'Sunflowers' would have to wait. For a moment I stood among them, craning at the Portland stone portico. What might it mean to look disaster in the face? There was the building, and above the building, a blue expanse, infinite, the sort of sky to grace the country three or four times a year.

Later, onlookers reported the dangling of his legs over the edge of the Sainsbury Wing. His muscle and bone must have felt heavy against weightless air.

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Through the Portland stone entrance of the National Gallery there are countless luminous masterpieces. Proceed beyond security, head through the glass doors, turn left, and the first to meet your eye is the strangest masterpiece in England: Hans Holbein's 'The Ambassadors'. It is a large painting; you wonder how long the brushstrokes would have taken a perfectionist like Holbein. Even if it wasn't skilfully done, you would wonder how expensive the paint was.

This is really three paintings in one: look closely and you see the divisions. The first painting is of two portly gentlemen. On the right of the picture stands a man named George de Selves, who glares at Holbein with narrowed and impatient eyes. He is self-aware to the point of an extraordinary arrogance. The man to the left of the painting is no better. Jean de Dinteville wears a coat so heavy with fur that you can't help but wonder if the impossibly muscular width of his shoulders is in fact the direct consequence of his choice in apparel. Jean, you get the sense, is a man who enjoys a fine boar

stew, quaffs sacks of red wine, and likes his ladies unwashed. To gain a sense of their perspective you need to step back—to look at the picture from across the gallery.

The second painting is an intricate still-life, at once the figurative and literal centre. On a wooden table stands a strange collection of objects: a globe, a lyre, a hymnal book. They can be seen from afar, but to read their significance, you need to get so close to the canvas that you can smell the turpentine. Only then do you see the detail, and the discord. In fact, the lyre is painted with a broken string.

But, for all this talk, it is the third painting within a painting that makes Holbein's 'Ambassadors' famous to this day. At the bottom of the scene, on the mosaic tile, there is a distorted ellipse, a monochrome shape that conceals a magic trick. Squint at the painting and the ellipse becomes a skull: *memento mori*. Death has been there all along, if only you crane your neck.

Resolving the perspective of the skull requires the painter to look upon the paint from an unbelievably acute angle. Nowadays, art historians call the technique anamorphosis, an anachronistic term emerging centuries after Holbein's death.

Holbein's masterwork is the masterwork of forced perspective. The painting demands contemplation of competing realities—portly consumption, materialist excess, inevitable death—even as the task ultimately proves impossible in the face of brushstrokes that both gain and lose meaning when approached up close. There are other paintings in the gallery that make onlookers think in this way—my favourite is a small painting by the Dutch painter Carel Fabritius, 'A View of Delft', where a man selling instruments looks out to a mathematically impossible bridge. (Fabritius would later die from wounds suffered when tonnes of gunpowder exploded beneath the painting's titular town, turning most of his art to smithereens. A grand death for a young master, though the thought can't have given him much consolation.) But no other is so famous as 'The Ambassadors'. Gazing at the painting, onlookers confront death as most often in life: obliquely, at an angle. Even the men of Holbein's painting gaze out over the skull, seemingly unaware of its presence.

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A morning's plan dissipated into ether. The Portland stone glimmered. I wandered away from the National Gallery, asked around for things to do in London, and followed a pride of tourists to Buckingham Palace. It was Sunday. Beefeaters changed the guard and children cheered at the sight of their elongated fur hats. This is the London that exists only to people who haven't lived there: a ridiculous city, built on strange and incomprehensible tradition.

Memento mori, remember death. Sightseeing becomes much stranger when faced with the possibility of rapidly extinguished life. I imagined looking out over Trafalgar Square from an eyrie on the rooftop. The sensation must be vertiginous, the knowledge delicious: greater than any piece of art in the building. To have been where man is banned; to have seen a view that one is not supposed to see.

Good art changes us. But the best art, I think, changes for us. It takes on the present. Nelson Mandela, imprisoned on Robben Island, annotated a copy of Shakespeare's Othello, as if South Africa's future was hidden in a maze of early modern literature. In a grand short story by William Trevor, 'After Rain', the protagonist is moved to think about her failed love affair via a painting of the annunciation. The best art attunes to the circumstances of our own frail lives.

When I returned to the National Gallery later in the day, the doors were open. All evidence of the man on the rooftop was swept away. A security guard shone light down into my backpack. Metal detectors hummed. Steel yourself, take a breath. The entrance and the artwork—'The Ambassadors'.

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Holbein's painting is the product of a luxurious Tudor court, but the painting communicates with the present, too. George and Jean refuse to see the skull on the carpet, looking on instead to the viewer; so in ordinary life, the modern refuses to confront the mortality of others head-on.

Each time I enter the National Gallery, walk through the Portland stone entrance, I think about the man who stood at the edge of the building and contemplated ending his life by leaping off the rooftop. Art is timeless, but we are not. What might it mean to view art in a specific moment? Nobody else in the gallery seemed affected by the closure, but walking around that day I felt queasy, almost guilty. What sort of person looks at artwork when someone is so desperate to end their life?

Eventually, the man decided to climb down from the rooftop. He was led from the gallery in handcuffs. Waking hours pass without any thought of this visit, though occasionally, in dreams, I am haunted by the sight of a man falling, falling, and then crumpling as weightlessness turns to weight on the unforgiving ground.

Words by Sam Wallbank
Art by Liberty Mountain

Ageing gracefully

Words by Rosie Field
Art by Sylvie Jacob

I watch an old don dancing the ballet:
Was that a curtsey? Did his leg just give way?
His dance told a tale and it seemed to say—

The wife is gone, the kids have flown
I'm lost and ailing—someone help me home!

I don't know where I am?
Or where to go?
I fear I'm all alone!

A public prancing OAP—
What a sad and thankless life to lead.

I noticed, confused,
His satin shoes,
Peeking out under his old cord suit.

"First position, second, relevé,
Not quite so smooth since my hip was replaced.

One-two, three-four, come this way;
I teach locals grace at the U3A—
Chin up, back straight, direct your gaze."

He holds my arm tight, pulls me through a duet:
I'm stumbling along as he shows me the steps.

He said:
"Copelia was my first love, my second, Odette.
I've not met a dance that I don't like yet—

I'm married to the craft, I'll tendu to the grave
Stuck in my red shoes, I'm not afraid!

Maybe I'm mad;
I don't want to be saved—
Right! Now copy, and do a plié"

Mortified by eyes of passers-by,
I blushed and I said: "Yeah, that's cool, old fry".

I realised with shame
That I'd not got his name:
When I asked, he replied, with a vicious refrain,

"I'm Puss in Boots—
The Rat King, I'm Von Rothbart!

I'm the Lord of the Dance—
Don't you know me, boy?

I'm the spirit,
Spitting image,
Young at heart;

I'm the ghost of a dying art!"

The Sweet Little Homemaker

♥ My Favourite Rosemary Shortbread Recipe ♥

These melt-in-your-mouth, flavoursome biscuits add a gourmet twist to a well-loved classic.

[Jump to recipe]

★★★★★ 4.2 stars
287 reviews

Bring these delicate treats to your next family gathering, after-school playdate, or Church picnic! Every time I magic these up, my family and friends clamour for the recipe, so I've finally written it down and decided to post it here to share with all of you. With enough butter and sugar to satisfy the kiddos, and a gentle touch of rosemary to gain the approval of your snobbiest foodie friends, this shortbread is sure to be a crowd-pleaser.

You all know I love a fancy biscuit recipe. But even the most die-hard Sweeties (some of my readers have coined this nickname for themselves, which I simply adore!) might be surprised to know that before I settled down and had my lovely littles, I had a stint as a *working woman.*

That's right, yours truly was out in the workforce. More than that—I was an actress! Hold back your gasps, please, I was perfectly respectable. And I was respected, too—proclaimed an upcoming Shakespearean star. Here's a snippet review from my last play, a rendition of *Hamlet* set in the 19th century:

> *Sara Smith's Ophelia looks the very picture of Millais' famous painting, conjuring the pale-faced corpse out of the picture frame and into vital life. Smith has a passion that shines, a voice clearer than a lark's, and an ability to subtly portray emotion far beyond her years. Hers is no typically reductive hysteria, but a complex dive into the half-rageful, half-despairing psyche of a young woman driven mad by a society that has deprived her of agency. This powerful performance of love, betrayal, and grief will leave you breathless.*

No faint praise!

Rosemary stands for remembrance, so it's no surprise that this shortbread recipe reminds me of that earlier period of my life. Its scent alone takes me back to the floral bower of a prop-table, where I scooped up my armfuls of pansies, rue, and, yes, rosemary, every night. We used fresh flowers to strike that pre-Raphaelite painting look. (I think fresh flowers are the best way to elevate the home. Check out Elegant Floral Design to Impress Your Guests and Three Godly Twists to Upgrade Your Lilies this Easter.) It was gorgeous! And it smelled heavenly. I remember coming home every evening perfumed like a kitchen garden. (Read my post in my Staying Prepared series on Planting your Own Herb Garden. It is a joyful duty to satisfy our families with delicious and flavourful meals! We all know we can't rely on the poisons they bottle up as 'seasonings' these days…)

He found me at the stage door and said he had to get to know me. I just swooned! He didn't tell me at the time, but this was his twelfth time coming to the show just to watch me! Even more romantic; he followed me home from that stage door eleven times, watching me sleep and slowly falling in love, before working up the courage to talk to me. Can you believe it? How dedicated and loving my Man is ♥ .

He proposed that very night! He had fallen in love with Ophelia's love and wanted it all to himself. I said, no way am I quitting this job! Independent 19-year-old me had no clue that I would find my passion in motherhood, homemaking, and Biblical submission. Acting in *Hamlet* was the most fulfilling thing in my life (up until that point, I mean). I still sometimes recite from it, speaking to myself in the mirror. But there's not much time for that when my littles need their mother's love!

Of course, my steadfast Man set me on the right path. He just wouldn't let me go, and I'm so thankful for that. Here's a tip, ladies: you can't avoid your true purpose, and you shouldn't try! Everything I'd thought was fulfilment and skill was perverse pride. My Man helped me understand my design and the glories of obedience, and once I came across this online community, I came to understand my higher calling. And now I have this blog to pass along the message about true womanhood to all you other girlies out there!

"There's rosemary, that's for remembrance." Now, rosemary reminds me of the rosemary-scented evening I met my future. Of the glorious moments that set my feet on a righteous path. As I walk in step with my Man and our little quiverfull of crusaders, I remember my purpose as a woman. I don't need to be cast in a play when He gave me a role to fill!

That's why these rosemary shortbread biscuits are my absolute favourite to bake up. They go perfectly with a cup of tea, or a glass of fresh raw milk. (Did you know raw milk is perfectly safe? Find out what Big Pasteurization doesn't want you to know: Salmonella, Listeria, and E. coli, oh my!: Disproving Raw Milk Myths.) As always, tag me in your pictures if you try out the recipe!

Rosemary Shortbread ♥
Recipe makes a dozen biscuits

Ingredients:

- 50g sugar
- 125g unsalted butter
- 2 tbsp chopped fresh rosemary
- 175g self-raising flour
- A pinch of sea salt
- Demerara sugar, for topping

The Sweet Little Homemaker

Instructions:

1. Preheat oven to 200°C. Grease a muffin tin.
2. Beat together butter and sugar.
3. Stir in flour, salt, and half of the rosemary.
4. In a separate bowl, mix together the demerara sugar and remaining rosemary.
5. Divide the dough into twelve balls, and press flat into the muffin tin. Sprinkle with rosemary sugar.
6. Bake for eight minutes, then let cool in the tin for ten more minutes. Remove and cool on a wire rack. Enjoy!

Comments (3)

@MaisieJane
★★★★★ 5.0 stars

Sara, you've done it again! These went down a treat at Gracie's baby shower last weekend!

@BurnerBlog
★☆☆☆☆ 1.0 stars

the tradwife trend is so tired girl get a life

@LucyHolyHealth
★★★☆☆ 3.0 stars

Took out sugar and subbed coriander as I was out of rosemary. Came out okay, weird taste and texture. Did you know sugar is not a Biblical food? Primeval grains and … [see more]

Words by Lily Sonnenblick
Art by Elizabeth Stevens

On disconnecting

I sit at my desk and look out of the large window in front of me. A distant haze of purple and green—soft shadows of moorland. Rain drums heavily on the roof above me—I can almost feel its steady rhythm reverberating throughout the house. For the first time in a while, I am entirely present with my surroundings. It is my first evening in the Cairngorms, where my family have decided to decamp over the New Year. I have put my phone away for the week, and in its absence, everything hums with a new intensity.

I pick up my pen and begin to write a letter, something I've started turning to on evenings when I feel particularly reflective. There is something beautifully anachronistic about a letter. It's an intentional act of slowing down—a small rebellion against the instant message—the endless scroll. In its own way, it feels like a kind of prayer.

Without a phone, my relationship with time begins to shift. I find myself acting more intuitively. It's dark outside, and I curl up on the sofa, unaware that it is only 3pm—an hour I'd usually devote to 'productive activity', not rest. Time is something we often fight, especially on dark winter afternoons. We splash our faces with cold water and try to run through sticky winter hours, whilst our bodies ache for rest. Now, I find myself moving freely: I am listening to my body, to the natural rhythms of the day.

I have become more generous with my time. I allow myself to linger over a second cup of tea with my father; I stir honey into my cup and let our conversation drift to those quiet and sacred places where entry is only admitted with the gift of time. I have the difficult conversation with my brother which a year of subtle aggressions had been begging us to have, but which seemed too large an undertaking—"I don't have the time to get into this," I had kept telling myself. We almost give up a number of times. But, then, there are advantages to being cooped up in a house in the middle of Scotland—we have nowhere else to go. We embrace and I am grateful to have spoken. For the rest of the week, we move around each other with tenderness.

I realise how my phone has robbed me of time—wasted it—confused my sense of it. My phone's pull is seductive. Its very presence in my pocket takes me away from wherever I am—constantly tempting me to be somewhere else: scrolling, messaging, surfing.

Without my phone, my thoughts are clearer. I realise how controlled they have been—images and messages determining who and what I think about. Now, I go for a walk with my family each morning; I trail behind and allow my mind to drift freely. I follow our dog to a low footbridge—he has found something interesting to sniff. I stop to watch the water rush beside my feet, flowing over dappled stones of chestnut and red. Lines from Hopkins come to mind:

"Glory be to God for dappled things— / For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow; / For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;"

When your mind clears, it's like seeing the world with a magnifying glass. You begin to delight in the ordinary.

I have brought an old digital camera with me—one of those that ends up costing more to fix up than to buy. In this case, there is a silver lining: there is something about an old camera that makes every picture sacred. Maybe it's the novelty of the thing that makes us take care with every picture we take. Thinking about it now, I almost feel sorry for the way we exploit nature with our phones. We take thousands of pictures, forgetting to look whilst we do it, only to delete all but a few when we get home. A living, breathing forest turned into a severely pruned cluster of images. I find a tree stump that looks like a human heart—roots gather about it like arteries.

Turning off my phone is like turning down the volume of a radio which has been blaring in my mind. I listen in the quiet. Friends come to mind, not the ones whose names so often flood my screen—the active texters, callers, and posters—but those who hold quiet significance. Their names have been sitting patiently. They have felt no need to shout for attention.

Readjusting to reality separate from my phone brings painful clarity. I begin to see how distorted my perception has become. Two years ago, I left school with a group of friends who had become family. Now, we are scattered—for some, an ocean stretches between us. I didn't anticipate how it would affect me. When someone leaves, what remains are memories—and love, of course—thoughts of what once bound you together. But phones change everything. They keep us tethered, neither together nor apart—a strange limbo. Closeness is measured in texts. An unmet read receipt puts a knot in my stomach. I wait on the other end of the phone, ashamed that I care, yet unwilling to pretend that I don't. It comes from love, after all. The possibility of constant connection terrifies me—it makes me feel like friendships are slipping away. Some people understand what I am still learning: what matters is how you feel when you are together. Maybe if I didn't have a phone, I'd understand too—I'd have space to miss my friends properly, instead of grasping at a warped version of connection that only makes me feel further away. I hate my phone for making me feel like this.

Being without a phone has been blissful. But I can't shake a sense of guilt for the relief I feel. When I think about the way I use my phone, it isn't, for the most part, to scroll mindlessly. It's to stay connected to the people I love. The problem I now face is how to do this without falling into the trap of hyperconnectivity—which either flattens you with the pressure to stay in touch, or makes you want to throw your phone away entirely.

We all experience moments of authentic connection every day—you sit with a loved one and suddenly, for a moment, become conscious of where you are, of how wonderfully unconscious you have been until then. As though time has been suspended, and you have been floating, free, together. But these moments are increasingly few and far between. We need to fight to stay connected and relearn what that really means. In truth, I'm not sure that I have the answer yet.

But for now, I'll let myself have that second cup of tea. I'll write letters, in hopes that they are enough to bridge the distances.

At the very least, if I haven't been responding to your text messages, now you know why.

Words by Carolina Julius
(Photographs by the author)

Tír na nÓg

From the strand where we strained over moss,
  And the sea where our bodies were soaked,
You had quietly called me across
  To the land that your lips had invoked,

Where we passed, unappeased, through a portal,
  And a pasture appeared in the haze—
Where the waters would make me immortal,
  And the centuries seemed only days—

But away from the world of the dying,
  Like an exile let into your land,
Missing home, I surrendered you, sighing,
  And alone, I returned to the strand,

Only now, never able to find
  What I lost when I left you behind.

Words by Ben Callan
Art by Gruffydd Price

Mountains and mines

To Wordsworth, the Lake District was "the loveliest spot that man hath ever found." Having grown up in Wordsworth's birthplace, a town hovering five minutes outside of the Lake District boundary line, I am perhaps a little biased. However, the vision of the Lakes which Wordsworth pioneered—one of solitary travellers wandering over idyllic, sheep-flecked mountains—is only half the story.

As the second oldest and second largest National Park in the UK, the Lake District has a quasi-mythical status. Most people I know were forced to read at least a snippet of *The Prelude* for GCSEs, enshrining an image of the mountains as "huge and mighty forms, that do not live / Like living men." Elsewhere, middle-aged men obsess over bagging each and every Wainwright fell, and Beatrix Potter's posthumous commercial empire has stationed the classically Cumbrian cuddly toy of Peter Rabbit in every child's bedroom. The empress of pop culture, Taylor Swift, thinks that "those Windermere peaks look like a perfect place to cry." I have certainly come close to tears at my dad whipping out a singular dried apricot for lunch on the side of a rain-drenched, windswept, sheep-shit-strewn fell.

Swift also dreams of seeing "a red rose [growing] up out of ice frozen ground / With no one around to tweet it." I have very little against Taylor Swift, but this image of the Lakes is a little wide of the mark. William Wordsworth published his *Guide to the Lakes* in 1810, and ever since, people have been twittering and flitting around the Lakes, flooding up through railways and the M6. Instagram and TikTok have also been flooded with 'hidden gems,' especially post-pandemic. From beauty spots like Surprise View near Keswick (which isn't much of a surprise anymore) to 'natural infinity pools' (tarns, or small lakes, filled with naturally infinite amounts of sheep poo and squirming fish), many corners of the Lakes have been tweeted to oblivion.

During the vacs, I work in a café nestled near Derwentwater. In the summer months, there is an incessant stream of people tumbling in, muddy-kneed, for coffee and scones. I like the busy pace (and the tips). I like seeing dishevelled families come in, children sleepy after a yomp by the lake shore. I like getting big jugs of water for big men in training for big expeditions,

by the lake shore. I like getting big jugs of water for big men in training for big expeditions, hauling ludicrous backpacks. All these people mean that the Lakes can sometimes be difficult to find solitude in—queues form up Skiddaw, and campsites book up months in advance. But tourism keeps the rural economy afloat and lets people spend time in some green space, of which there is precious little in much of England. Trying to keep the Lakes separate from the masses, as Wordsworth later wished, slides quickly into elitism and privatisation.

Tourists are only one part of the human story of the Lakes. Alongside the people, there are sheep—lots, and lots of sheep. I have my own troubled history with these woolly beasts (a mother ewe, gearing up to charge—a vault over the nearby fence to escape) and with cows (dozens of teenage calves—a vault through a patch of nettles and over a string of barbed wire to escape). Setting aside personal vendettas, however, sheep have also profoundly sculpted the landscape through their constant grazing. This isn't a recent process—the Lake District has been farmed for centuries, for the most part, with relatively small farms and flocks. By some accounts, the sheep are nefarious villains responsible for desertification, their tiny teeth eviscerating any hint of the trees which, many ages ago, cloaked the lowland fells. But the Herdwick, a resilient breed native to Cumbria, is also an iconic symbol of the Lakes, adorning mugs and smiling over dry stone walls. A few shaggy sheep and doe-eyed cows are perhaps less responsible than, say, pesticides and the ever-larger farming machinery which our modern appetites have compelled.

In recent years, this agricultural industry has rubbed up against growing interest in rewilding. Lee Schofield's *Wild Fell* details the ongoing efforts of RSPB Haweswater (a conservation project) to rewild two hill farms in the valley. Schofield notes that the landscape used to be far richer, nature-wise—filled with eagles and alpine flowers. Now, there is a small telescope station tucked into Dodd Wood from which you can try to pick out the solitary nesting pair of ospreys—slick, fish-eating birds of prey—on the privately owned land below. I would love to see the Lake District filled with biodiversity and mixed woodland, but I understand why there can be resentment over (mostly) middle-class environmentalists moralising over a return to 'wild' nature. Some farming families have worked the land intimately for centuries—kicking them off so a few hedgehogs can trundle through long grass could seem, understandably, like a naïve project spearheaded by Peter Rabbit and his sidekick, Mrs Tiggywinkle. There can be a middle ground between these two. Regenerative agriculture, for example, seeks to soften the intensity of some farming practices without decimating the industry entirely. Obviously, I am not an expert on regenerative agriculture—most of my farming knowledge comes from *Animal Farm* and *The Grapes of Wrath*—but, broadly, approaches like leaving fields to go fallow, planting willow trees to provide natural flood barriers, and regularly rotating livestock seem to allow for a gentler use of the land.

Other industries are harder to neatly weave into the mythology and lives of the Lakes. Borrowdale, in decades past, was a hub for slate mining, and Honister remains the last working slate mine in England. Westmorland green slate scraped out of the wrinkles of the earth and lined rooftops from Broughton to Buckingham. Just last year, an appeal to open a new deep coal mine off the Cumbrian coast was rejected—and rejected only after years of relentless efforts from environmental groups and local people to appeal, petition, and protest (trust me—I really wish I didn't know so much about the intricacies of planning permissions and the science of metallurgical coal). The mining issue is less ambiguous to me than agriculture, but, nonetheless, there are knotty issues of unemployment and the need for investment in coastal Cumbrian towns to be unpicked. Such issues are often frustratingly reduced in the media to a dichotomous battle between hippie campaigners and besieged, industrious locals. There are wider questions which could be asked, such as why governments haven't invested in green jobs over mining jobs, and who gets to decide how the landscape is used, but those rants can be saved for another time.

The Lake District is lovely but also artificial—wild but also managed—remote, but also filled with human communities who have struggled to make a living in that rural isolation. We are living firmly in the Anthropocene, and any attempt to create a natural idyll untouched by human hand is not only impossible but short-sighted. We're not going to be able to create a clean break between humans and nature in order to deal with ecological collapse, and nor should we. We don't have to lose this 'loveliest spot', but it may need a little more care, attention, and time in order to keep it so lovely.

Words by Isabella Bridgman
Art by Sadie Russell

This Pendent World

It was just my luck to end up sat next to the old man I'd accidentally cut in front of in the boarding line. I had headphones on, so didn't register his grievance until he prodded my shoulder. *Mister! Mister!* He ignored my apologies all the way to the plane, then clicked his tongue while waiting in the aisle for me to find my book and heave my bag into the overhead bin. Only once we were both sitting, of course, did I realise I had forgotten to take out a pen.

He would not leave his seat, conceding only to swing his legs into the aisle, which I had to straddle for a moment on my way out. Finally re-seated, I determined to drink not a drop of water the entire flight, so that I would not need to get up again. I even offered the old man some Doritos—my only breakfast—by way of companionship. He declined.

For a time, then, nothing further happened between us. I got through a chapter, underlining whole paragraphs furiously, and embarked on a nap. When I floated back to life, I caught him scrutinising the cover of my book. *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, by Harold Bloom.

"You are a student?" he asked, unembarrassed.

"Yes, Sir," I said.

"Your major?"

I hesitated. "Medicine," I said.

This was not true. I had neither aptitude nor interest in STEM. Last semester, even before 'the incident' (so named by my family), it had become clear I would flunk biology. I could never muster the solemnity required to care about the parts of a cell, the stages of DNA replication.

I was an English major, though of limited talent. At my worst, I passed, though at my best I seldom managed high grades. This was not for want of effort. I had always been a bookish child, and while the habit lessened at university, it remained stronger than in most of my classmates. I believe I was the only one of my friends who still read for pleasure.

My problem was, I couldn't focus. I would begin an essay about Shakespeare, and end up talking about *Pingu*, or *The Godfather*. My English teacher, Mr Fletcher, once confronted me with a piece of paper that had a lightly oscillating line drawn along its length. "This," he declared, "is how an essay should feel to read." He flipped the paper over, revealing an unkempt spiral. "This is how your essays feel."

Essentially, I was not a successful student. This fact did not bother me overmuch, but I'd had a sudden wish to keep it from my neighbour. I retreated a little into my seat, praying he was not in some medical field.

"What business has a doctor with Mr Bloom?"

"Compulsory class," I said.

"May I?" He leaned over and unburdened my airplane tray of the large volume. He seemed to be looking for a certain, familiar page. When he found it, he let out a little puff of air.

"'We are our anxieties,'" he read aloud, "'and so we are well out of it all.' You are not an anxious flier," he declared. "Or you are a very good actor. You have many anxieties?"

"Not particularly."

"Of course not. A doctor must be arrogant. I've known lots of doctors."

He resumed reading, now silently. I wanted to exonerate myself but felt that interrupting him would only prove my guilt.

"Do you like him?" he asked.

"Bloom?"

"Shakespeare."

"Very much," I said.

Then Mr Banerjee warmed. Indeed, I discovered that he was Mr Banerjee, originally of Mumbai. He had come to America as a young adult to study psychology, settling ultimately at UT in Austin—

though he'd completed his undergraduate studies on the *East Coast*, he confided proudly. Recently he had written a book about his patients, and now CU Denver wished for him to give a talk.

"You are a student there?" he asked.

I shook my head. "Boulder."

He shrugged and extracted a napkin from the seat pocket in front of him. Then he took the pen from my tray-table, and printed a word in careful, block capitals.

He handed me the napkin.

"My book," he said. "If you ever want a break from doctoring."

I folded the napkin into neat quarters and slid it into my jeans. I bowed my head in gratitude.

"'Psychoanalysis itself,'" he read aloud, "'was the malady it attempted to alleviate.' What do you think of this, doctor?"

"Clever," I said.

"Clever," he repeated. He let some air out of his nose. "False," he said. "Thinking is not the cause of our problems. Feeling is."

I disagreed, though I did not tell Mr Banerjee this. In fact, my problems all seemed to involve feeling too little.

This was 'the incident'. I do not know what happened exactly. I was pretty out of it. But I do have a general sense: one thing led to another. I was found passed out in a bank of snow near campus. I was lucky not to have died.

My mother, alternately cold and hysterical, insisted on spending lots of money on a rehab centre back home. This was an act of sidestepping on her part, an obliqueness I resented. I was not an addict. The problem was more essential, though, I hoped, less permanent. I was just a fuck-up kid.

I took the rest of the semester off, came back to Austin. When my mother got too much for me, I moved into an apartment that my dad owned but was not using. He was a wealthy man who had remarried quickly after our family blew up. He did not care for me on a personal level, so assuaged what he felt was his fatherly duty with money instead of time.

All through this period, the feeling element of my person seemed wrapped in gauze. I had faith that eventually I would be ransomed, though not yet. It was a joke to think, at this point, that I was ready to go back to school, and I travelled to Boulder with no serious plans for reform. I had about one more drop-out in me, I suspected; then, maybe, things could begin to change.

Mr Banerjee was tapping the top of the page he was reading.

"This was my play," he said, "in university. You know it?"

I did. It was *Measure for Measure*.

"Claudio," he said, with a smile and a raise of his eyebrows. He tapped his chest with his pointer finger and closed the Bloom dramatically.

"Ay," he intoned, "but to die, and go we know not where;

> *To be imprison'd in the viewless winds*
> *And blown with restless violence round about*
> *The pendent world: or to be worse than worst*
> *Of those that lawless and incertain thought*
> *Imagine howling—"*

Here he came out of his trance. *Imagine howling*. I did. I saw Banerjee whipped like dust in a vortex around a blue marble planet, tethered to some upward plane that could not be seen.

"Does the doctor believe in an afterlife?"

"I don't know," I said.

"Pragmatic. Boring."

"Do you?"

"Most certainly."

An announcement was made for landing. Mr Banerjee circled his tongue around his lips and handed my book back to me.

In truth, at that point I had not given the afterlife much thought. I was still on the fence about my belief in life, and that seemed the more pressing question. Could I imagine being forty? Having a wife? Having children? Then, I could not.

Turbulence. Our plane wobbled in the sky. Mr Banerjee grabbed my wrist.

When we touched down, he looked at me with personal gratitude.

I overtook him on the way to baggage reclaim.

"Doctor!" he cried out. I whipped around, ready to do all in my power to save him. But he only wanted to give me some advice. He placed his hand gently on my shoulder.

"Be measured," he said. I nodded.

*

On the coach to Boulder, I thought about farness. It was a good drive for such considerations, swooping past vast yellow fields, always in view of the looming, purple-ridged mountains.

Often the young do not believe in death. Why should they? What a poor use of time—that is, until one's first rude confrontation, when there is then no alternative.

I had lied to Mr Banerjee. I did not believe in an afterlife. But nor did I believe in death—not exactly. It seemed to me that to *live* was to go we know not where: to take flight in metal cages, in rebellion against the viewless winds, to romp about the pendent world. I was routinely going I knew not where—this was precisely my problem. I had not yet learned to master or even negotiate with my soul, and so it drove me, sometimes gently, then with violence, always as much a mystery to myself as to my pained family.

I stopped at a diner on the walk from the coach station to the university. Between mouthfuls of eggs, my gaze was drawn to the nearest window, beyond which a plane droned lazily through the sky. For a moment I was gripped by a feeling of responsibility for the plane's continued safety; it seemed if I took my eyes away for even a second it would plummet to the ground. Then the feeling passed; the plane continued on its way, and I started in on a strip of bacon.

Words by Jacob Potter
Art by Cordelia Wilson

You don't need to hate modern art

Over the summer I volunteered at a museum, which was fascinating but also very quiet. On the rare occasion that I encountered a person that wasn't locked away within a suit of arms or a skeleton, I was usually asked about one of three things: to recount the thrills and spills of university, the perils of the big city (renting in Oxford), or my degree. Upon telling the other volunteer that I studied History of Art, he immediately declared that he hated modern art. This wasn't the first time I'd heard this reflex; people seem to take my degree as their chance to announce their disdain for modern art like they're reporting a crime to a police officer. Except in this instance, the perpetrator was Mark Rothko and his colour fields, and I was the burly officer (under-informed student) who could put a stop to his apparent assault on the eyes.

But the crime here isn't Rothko's work; it's the dismissal of it. What offended my fellow volunteer was not the painting's aesthetic quality but its status as a work of modern art, which, by the way, refers to artworks made between 1900 and the mid-20th century (ish). Anything after that? That's contemporary art. If you're going to hate it, at least know what you're hating.

It didn't bother me at first, but after ruminating in the gallery for a few hours and thinking about all the clever things I could've fired back with—I was silently seething. His opinion was a caged monster released into my mind. He still starts to thrash and claw against my cranium every time I look at Yves Klein's 'IKB 79', or anything by Kandinsky. "It doesn't mean anything! What does it even represent?", I hear him cry.

But what does it need to represent? The thing about Rothko's colour field paintings is that they aren't about symbols or subjects; they are devoid of reason and explanation. They are monoliths, towering canvases, vast expanses of pigment—deep crimsons melting into burnt orange, shadows of blue dissolving into black. They pull you in, collapsing the space between you and the canvas. Rothko typically centres his fields around horizontal bands of colour, but his paintings aren't geometric or linear. Each band comes alive through the seeping, oozing, hazy interactions of gouache and oil paints. And this is the thing about these colour fields—they are immersive, alive, and about to swallow you whole. What I mean to say is that these paintings are complex; you can't settle your quandary over modern art with a quick Google of Rothko and a dismissive shrug. Modern art requires more.

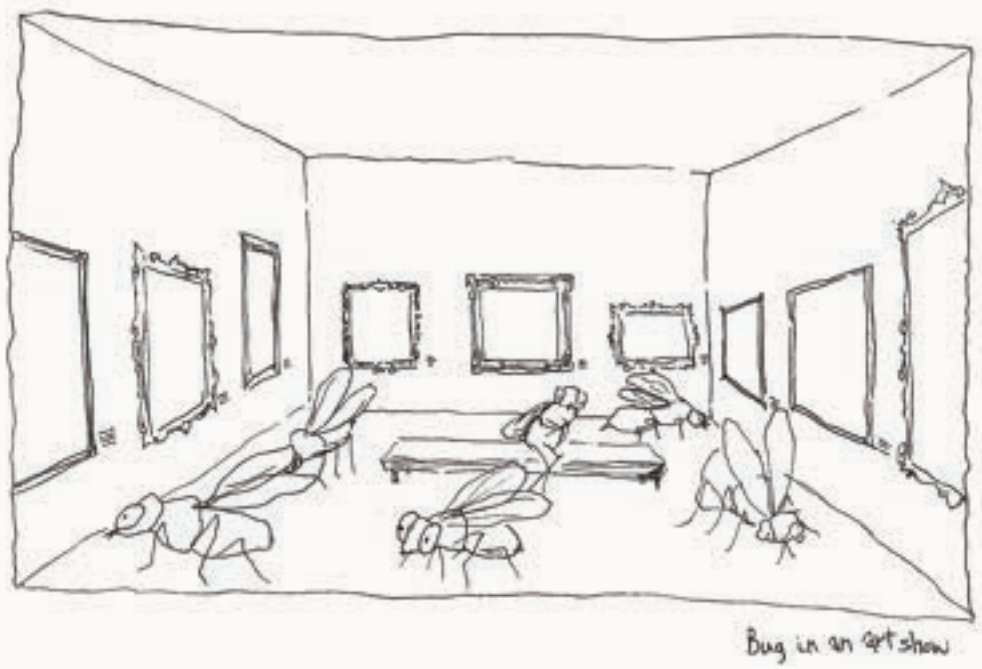
And besides, Rothko never truly explained these paintings anyway. There's no neat answer, no helpful title to nudge you in the right direction: just colour, scale, and whatever it does to you in the moment. I think that's what unsettled the other volunteer the most—not that Rothko's paintings lack meaning, but that they refuse to hand you one.

So, maybe I'm sour because his questions of meaning debase my life's work—the first two years of my undergraduate degree. Through History of Art, I've studied gardening, scientific drawing, stone arrangements, the aesthetics of architecture, coins, monuments, and clothes—objects that weren't always made to be 'art', but have become it over time. And that's the thing: art doesn't need to declare its meaning to justify itself. It doesn't need to be understood to be accepted. It doesn't need to be beautiful to be worth something. We only think it does because we've been manufactured to love the Western canon, spoon-fed Monet's 'Water Lilies' and Da Vinci's 'Mona Lisa' until they feel like

old friends. We don't question why we love them—we just do, because they've been sold to us as something worth loving.

But what we've been sold isn't just beauty or artistic genius—it's a hierarchy. The Old Masters aren't just admired, they're enshrined. Their value is reinforced by centuries of institutional approval. This is where the problem lies. The history of hating modern art isn't just about aesthetics; it's about power, who holds it, who decides what counts as 'real' art, and who gets to be part of the conversation. Dismissing modern art is an act of clinging to old hierarchies that keep art exclusive, controlled, and safe.

Authoritarian regimes have always sought to control art, deciding what is worthy of celebration and what should be erased. Modernist works have been branded as 'degenerate', stripped from public view under the claim that they fail to enrich culture. But this isn't just a historical phenomenon. The art world today can still operate like an exclusive club—where classical works are upheld as markers of superiority. Meanwhile, newer,



more disruptive movements are often kept at arm's length.

Revering the Old Masters isn't purely about admiration; it's about nostalgia for a time when art was the playground of the wealthy and educated—a marker of status rather than raw expression. Modern art unsettles people because it disrupts this neat system. It throws skills, tradition, and objectivity into question; it asks us to sit with discomfort, to unpick the instinct that tells you something only counts if you 'get' it, and to ignore meaning altogether. That discomfort, the feeling that modern art might not follow the 'rules', is exactly the point. If we dismiss it outright, we risk upholding the same rigid, exclusionary structures that have always dictated whose creativity matters and whose doesn't. Maybe that's why modern art provokes such a strong reaction: it forces us to ask whether those rules were ever fair to begin with.

So, when you say you 'hate' modern art, you close yourself off from a world of expression. If you hate abstract expressionism, I think you'd hate going through my diary too. It's full of shopping lists and to-dos, but also poems, letters to old boyfriends, half-formed thoughts, and fragments of feelings that I haven't quite figured out yet. If

you read through the thoughts and feelings of a complete stranger, I'd say you were reading a form of abstract expression too. Even if you don't know the circumstance, you don't understand the medium—I think you'd love it. But then again, if you hate modern art, if you truly can't find beauty in other peoples' depictions of chaos or simplicity, then you'd probably hate my diary.

Just because something doesn't have an obvious meaning doesn't give you license to hate it. And yet, people always announce their distaste like it's a badge of honour. What offends them isn't the colours, the shapes, or even the concepts—it's the idea of it being 'art' at all. I understand the skepticism. Some contemporary works—think of the banana duct-taped to a wall—seem to mock us with their simplicity and insane price tags. And it's easy to feel that the skill behind these works pales in comparison to the artists of the canon. But the value of art isn't always in its technical skill or traditional beauty. Sometimes it lies in its ability to provoke, to challenge, and to invite questions about what art even is.

So, if you hate modern art, fine. But I want to hear some nuance. Don't just recycle the same tired claim that it 'isn't real art', or that it's meaningless. Tell me why. What about Rothko's colour fields do you really hate? Do you hate simplicity? The refusal to conform to the expected format of a painting—whatever that is? Do you hate colour? Do you hate people expressing their experiences in an abstract way? Do you hate relinquishing control and accepting that some things just have no meaning? Don't just dismiss it because you don't understand it.

And maybe you're asking the same question as me after reading all this: why is this important? It's important because art is everywhere. It's the films you watch because you can't fall asleep without background noise. The books you read on the tube. The landscape photos that your windows laptop changes your home screen to. It's your heavily-curated, film-photo-filled hinge profile. Art is our day-to-day joy; its beauty lies in the way it makes us feel—whether it's awe, confusion, or even anger. I'm imploring you to protect the art that is so important, before baseless hate robs you of the chance to feel anything at all. I ask you to look deeper. Why does something need to have meaning to be beautiful?

Instead of saying that you hate modern art, here are a range of prompts for you to discuss with me next time I tell you I do an arts degree:

I'm going to Italy. Would you say that it's worth trekking all the way to Siena to see the Maesta?

I think that the private ownership of artworks debases the very meaning of art in the first place. Discuss.

But also, if you could choose to own any work of art in the world, what artwork would you choose?

How would you say that the ukiyo-e tradition shaped the development of Western impressionism?

How does the idea of 'art for art's sake' hold up in a world increasingly driven by utility and function?

Words by Gracie Chedzoy
Art by Elizabeth Stevens

Email, Glink

[redacted] <[redacted]@ox.ac.uk> [16.12.2024][21:38:26]

to Bodleian Libraries

To whom it may concern,

I hope this email finds you well. It appears that I have been unfortunately trapped in the Gladstone Link (also known as the Glink). I cannot call as there is no signal, so I have decided to write an email.

I arrived here earlier to do some work and was not aware of the specialised holiday hours currently being observed. It had passed 9pm wherein I realised that the library was slightly more dead than usual. Upon coming to this realisation, I attempted to leave the Glink, though was unable as the exit to the Old Bodleian was shut and locked, as was the stairs and lift access to the Radcliffe Camera. At this point it dawned upon me that I was locked in! I decided initially to wait but it has been half an hour and, contrary to my expectations, no one has come.

This is a less than ideal situation and I would very much appreciate some help getting out.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Best regards
[redacted]

Email, Glink

Bodleian Libraries <reader.services@bodleian.ox.ac.uk> [16.12.2024][21:38:27]

to [redacted]

Hello,

Thank you for your email. Please note that this inbox is unmonitored between the hours of 22:00 and 06:00. We will aim to respond to your email within 3 to 5 working days.

Regards
Bodleian Libraries Team

Email, Glink

[redacted] <[redacted]@ox.ac.uk> [16.12.2024][22:25:48]

to Bodleian Libraries

Hi,

Apologies for the length of the previous email. I understand that it is not necessary to share my life story to get my point across.

In short, it has now been over an hour, and I am still stuck down here. I cannot wait 3-5 working days. I cannot even wait 1. I have an early dissertation review tomorrow morning, a very full day, and nowhere near enough red bull or caffeine pills to get me through it.

Furthermore, the lights have switched onto a motion sensor, keeping me constantly on my feet. Not to mention that the hard tables and clinical sterility of the Glink hardly makes for the ideal sleeping situation.

Please can you send someone to let me out.

Sincerely
[redacted]

Email, Glink

[redacted] <[redacted]@ox.ac.uk> [16.12.2024][23:30:19]

to Bodleian Libraries

Hey,

Me again, just following up on my previous emails.

I am unsure if the last one came through as I did not even receive an automated response. Please can someone come and let me out? The room is now pitch black and the lights are not turning back on no matter how much I wave, walk, or ostentatiously skip.

Is there any way I can get out of here? Maybe you could open the doors from the inside? An emergency exit? Or at least a way to turn the lights on? Anything at all?

Please do let me know.

Best wishes
[redacted]

Email, Glink

[redacted] <[redacted]@ox.ac.uk> [17.12.2024][00:01:38]

to Bodleian Libraries

Hi,

Apologies for flooding your inbox but this is pretty urgent.
Just to confirm, did you send someone? I heard footsteps and a dragging sound upstairs I thought they were coming to let me out but no one has come down just yet. Please can you tell them I am down here.

I was screaming and shouting but the usually commendable soundproofing of the Glink has now effectively shut me out from the rest of human civilisation. Can you please send them down? I have had nothing to eat or drink the lights are not working and it is unbearably cold. Not to mention that the constant creaking of those weird rolling bookshelves has only intensified the ghostly atmosphere down here.

Thanks in advance
Regards
[redacted]

Email, Glink

[redacted] <[redacted]@ox.ac.uk> [17.12.2024][00:02:56]

to Bodleian Libraries

Hey,

I realised I did not thank you for sending someone! I can hear quite a few people up there now no doubt looking for me. Although I can also hear someone wailing and I think I might smell burning? The loud scraping noise is also now accompanied by unabating (though quite alluring) chanting. I didn't realise you held compline services in the Radcam?

I can hear about twenty sets of footsteps up there rhythmically tapping, or… stamping, it seems?

Can you please tell them I'm down here? I've been yelling but I don't think they can hear me.

Surely one of them must have thought to come down to the Glink by now. Okay hold on. As I write this I think I can hear someone coming down the stairs. Please let them know I am down here, I miss my warm bed.

With thanks
[redacted]

Email, Glink

[redacted] <[redacted]@ox.ac.uk> [17.12.2024][00:03:33]

to Bodleian Libraries

Hi,

Again, apologies for emailing again but I would like to confirm something. I can finally see another person on the other side of the door. Are you sure you sent them? He asked whether there is anyone down here which I would not expect if you had. He's carrying a torch I guess because the lights aren't working but I can't really see his face and I don't think that's a Bodleian Libraries logo on his hood. I can hear someone at the back door too. It's slightly embarrassing that I drew two people here at this hour just to free me from my academic tomb—apologies again for the inconvenience.

That god-awful dragging noise has now ceased upstairs and now joined me down here. I suppose they must be restacking the bookshelves while no one is around—maybe they're on night shift? I think I'll just pack my things and be on my way.

Oh thank GOD St Aldate's will be seeing me bright and early on Sunday. Thank you for the help. I'll never make this mistake again—next time I am out of the Glink by 5pm latest! Actually I don't think I will come to the Glink again. This was certainly my last time. I could have died down here. Or worse I could have

Email, Glink

Bodleian Libraries <reader.services@bodleian.ox.ac.uk> [20.12.2024][09:00:00]

to [redacted]

Hello,

We hope that your query/concern has been resolved, please review our service at the below link. Any feedback and suggestions are appreciated and mean that we can improve the service we provide you.

http://www.bodleian.ox.wac.uk/reader-survey

Thank you and hope to see you again.

Regards
Bodleian Libraries Team

Words by Sam Bankole

Top 10 coolest teachers of all time

10.

I can't quite believe you were a real person. A philosophy teacher that was also, for some reason, my English teacher in year 9. The very first lesson we had, on Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest*, you actually said the word 'cunt' out loud, quoting the Sex Pistols. You used every swear in the dictionary, even the ones so outdated they sounded like slurs. Most of your lessons amounted to long and freewheeling monologues, and for 40 minutes I could imagine a world where I had artsy white parents who played The Velvet Underground in the car. I learned a lot, not English, but a lot. Maybe that's why I actually stuck with it as an A level, even though I fucking sucked at it. Now I look back on school and all I can remember are the English classes. You decided to put on *Pedogeddon* one lesson, funny, sure, but *terrible* optics. A lot of mothers were pissed off. Most people didn't think you were a good teacher, and the swots hated your active disdain for the curriculum. But you were cool. So cool. I wonder if you're retired or fired by now.

9.

I still can't believe you were a real person. A philosophy teacher that was also, for some reason, my English teacher in Year 9. The very first lesson we had, on Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest*, you actually said the word 'cunt' out loud, quoting the Sex Pistols. You used every swear in the dictionary, and some of those were probably slurs. Most of your lessons amounted to long and freewheeling monologues, and for 40 minutes I could imagine a world where I had artsy white parents who talked to me like a friend, not a son. I learned a lot, not English, but a lot. Maybe that's why I actually stuck with it as an A level, even though I fucking sucked at it. Now I look back on school and all I can remember are the English classes. You decided to put on *Pedogeddon* one lesson, funny, sure, but *terrible* optics. A lot of your students were pissed off. Most people didn't think you were a good teacher, some people didn't think you were a good man. But you were cool. So cool. You're probably fired by now.

8.

At primary school—a drama teacher in his late twenties who insisted we call him by his first name, swore a little, and always wore a beanie. This took some getting used to as a little Indian kid: you were the first adult I ever addressed, not as family; not as Mr, Mrs, Miss, even Ms (for the teachers in their 30s growing impatient for a ring); not as auntie or uncle (in Indian terms, your parents' friends who they may or may not slightly despise); but as an equal. The concept is still difficult for me to grasp. It was a stroke of genius showing an episode of *Spaced* to a room of 10-year-olds, making sure we all grew up to be funny. Years later, I finally recognise the Grindr notification sound that would sometimes pop up on your phone.

7.

At an all-boys' primary school, our options were narrow, so we had to make do with having a crush on the teacher. You were mine—semi-retired, an unorthodox pick, one my family teased me for. You were really cool. In year 7, I had an English assignment to interview any teacher at the school I wanted; I chose you. Your replies were rather dry and took a lot of coaxing on my end. Granted, I tried to prod you about your divorce. But still, you broke my heart.

6.

I'll admit, few would think of you as cool; you were a Reverend. But you showed me *The Female Eunuch* at some point. I don't know if that was a good thing or not. When I moved schools, everyone else already knew each other on the coach to the sports ground, so I was stuck in the front with you, and I nearly left a Christian.

89

A note to schools: P.E. teacher + History GCSE class = watching *The Killing Fields* three times, getting 40% in mocks, and never again touching history.

55

I don't remember much because you were a mediocre teacher, but I remember I called you mum by accident. I won't reveal what age I was.

34

I'm so sorry. Human Geography was my favourite subject—and I was really good at it. I'm so sorry I accidentally fired the pen at you in that one class on migration. Honest to God, I didn't mean it at all. I was absent-mindedly taking apart and fiddling with my biro: the spring, the cartridge, the plastic tube which, if smashed, makes a surprisingly good shiv. And amidst all that, it somehow became a lethal weapon. You were mad, understandably, and moved me to the table with the badly behaved kids with dubious ADHD diagnoses. I spent the next 6 lessons truant in the nurse's office. I fell behind, and Human Geography stopped being my favourite subject. All that from one stupid little biro.

21

You were the headmaster of my primary school, from Derry. Of course, when you're 10 the headmaster is a mythical creature, who you'll only ever see if you do really well, or if you really fuck up. So naturally, I didn't see much of you. You gave us the best leaving gift ever, a copy of *Death of A Naturalist*. I'm reminded of you a lot lately—my girlfriend says my name just like you, in the same Northern Irish accent.

13

You were a chill guy, with a Torino accent we loved to imitate. On your last day we thought it would be a good idea to bring in an Italian flag (pinched from my classmate's nonna), a whole assortment of biscotti, 40p bread sticks (are those really Italian?), and whatever Italian related things I could find in the cupboard the minute I remembered. You were touched by the gesture, but alas, you were intermittent fasting. I'm so grateful Italians are white—if a 'macroaggression' is a thing, that would probably count as one.

8

I can't write your name, but it rhymed perfectly with your subject. You might be able to fill in the blanks (it's not going to be Mr. Peography). I didn't know enough to realise you were gay, even though you were the biggest diva I've ever met, and I sincerely thought you retired to Sicily to eat gelato with your best friend. I wonder how hard it was for you to teach in the '80s, and if you were still scared.

Words by Nikhil Singh

Antique

The beams of my attic quote dust, not light
In their leaftops of wood
I thought as I walked, vagrant,
To where one can become blood-bound
To bronze, brass, gilt.
The night spins its dusts and winds
Into every loft behind my eyes—

Wick-light
Poured through every pore of my skin
No lock to pin the grin and the spin of a dust-licked bell,
Birthed from the basin of my palm.
That pimpled brass, reflective, Rorschach,
Chewed out a whole-kidney emptiness
Plain as pearls.
Chipped bits, off-rail teeth,
Clenched in their chilled weight.

Yet I felt it skate off, like dew from the petal
To the buried breaths and echoes
Of floorboards, dust, lofts, and bells,
The song of bronze to dust to sound.
There was a creak, a dragging, a plated belly
A firefly lit between my eyes—
Beams to dust, a knot of light.

Shopping

Words by Larissa Chan

Rough Trade

Horses appear every time we feel vulnerable
claims Patti Smith. Fiona Apple says I want you
to love me, before moving into misery. Where else
would she go? After the album finishes
my friend tells me she is leaving him. I say now you are
getting the hang of it. & this familiar rhythm—
our bodies thinned into the snapped string of
absence. Kimya Dawson says I don't see anyone
else but you. My worst fear: everyone has left &
everyone has taken my CDs with them.
Every ex has made me a playlist before
leaving. Once, I stole a Radiohead CD—
guilt's shadow slicked into salt behind me.
Afterwards, I threw up on a boy while
playing The Smiths & almost kissed
my Discman. Every night, music
becomes a catalyst. We grow used to
autonomy in the evening amber
of Townes Van Zandt. The vinyl is cold, skips
forward when knocked, thumbprinted &
thick. Posters shed their gauzy skins on the
backs of bar walls above a static of drunk
guitarists. Tomorrow I will show her another
album on Spotify, the tinny audio between my palms
cradling another second snippet. & her headphone
wire will root us into these skins, the way a tree
finds permanence in the divots of another.

Words by Sharon Xuanling Zhang
Art by Solene Gadsby

Writing with your feet

When I was nine years old, I discovered that I could write with my feet. It became my obsession—my claim to fame and a source of pride. I felt free and me when writing with my feet. I confidently shared my gift. This unmatched dexterity guaranteed me the love and adoration of my family and friends. At least, for a time. But all good things must come to an end. My feet—my pride and joy—would soon curl under the weight of heavy, unremitting shame.

It started on a Saturday morning. I had important matters on my mind: dinner (Mom was making breaded chicken!), Disney princesses, and the Nintendo DS, which I had hidden under my pillow for some late-night gameplay. I was drawing at the kitchen table when my pencil rolled slowly, slowly off, lodging itself cosily next to the leg of my chair. Then, it happened—an unconscious motor response—my toes gripped the wooden casing and deftly lifted the pencil back to my hand.

I resumed drawing—paused for a moment—gave it a thought. At last, revelation. Holy moly, my feet were magical! It was like one of those cinematic, slow-mo scenes when the underdog teen (gangly, dismissed, unassuming) unlocks some secret superpower.

When my parents walked into the kitchen, I couldn't hold back the good news. "Look, Mom," I implored. "Watch my feet," I said, lifting my leg and shoving my bare foot into her face, pencil wedged between big and index toe. Then, I readjusted, moving the pencil between my ring and pinky toe (just to show off a bit). She gave me that half-engaged look parents give to entertain their kids: an emphatic nod, eyebrows raised, and a curt but inflected: "Wow."

Appeased and arrogant, I marched back to my chair. My dad knew every card trick there was, my mom was a master of Sudoku, my brother juggled with the prowess and panache of a circus clown. Now I—I could wield my feet like hands.

Of course, with any power comes great responsibility. I realised that I needed to harness and practice this gift. So, I set a schedule: (1) Toe crunches and foot stretches to maintain flexibility. (2) Picking up different objects, each one wider and more strangely shaped than the last. (3) Transitioning from practice to application. I didn't just lift and drop pencils. I became an artist: changing channels on the remote, throwing paper aeroplanes and ninja stars, and writing.

Yes, writing. It started off small—a wobbly scribble here and there. Slowly, it became more controlled. A tight loop, a discernible smiley face, and finally (finally!) my name. Oh, how gorgeous the sight was. Morgan, Morgan, Morgan—dancing across the page, spilling and spiralling into a wondrous wave.

It felt good to have a talent, and even better to feel wanted because of it. I was on top of the world, bursting with pride. My family loved me and my feet—and, of course, I scored brownie points at school. Popularity never tasted so sweet. I felt love: love for my body, love for what it could do. I was a landscape of untapped potential. I was meant to be unabashedly expressed.

Then, something changed. Maybe it had something to do with growing up. There's something innocent and beautiful about childhood, how we embrace life without shame. In elementary school, people loved feet—sneaking around the halls barefoot, tracking toes toward mud, a foot fight—sole-to-sole—with your closest friends. We were wild, free, an uninhibited energy telling us to run, jump, dance. When I wrote with my feet, I wasn't thinking about other people, just about my joy. I loved writing, I loved writing with my feet—and that was enough.

Until, it wasn't anymore. It started off small. I looked at myself in the mirror one day and suddenly saw a body—a canvas for criticism. I thought about the other girls at school, the girls on TV, and the girls in my favourite books. I felt squeamish. My mother started talking about my looks, which dresses complimented my figure, what makeup I needed to buy. My family and friends started talking about my feet with awkward reserve. My big toe became an eyesore, my toe hair an unspoken truth. And, when I wrote with my feet, I got an awkward laugh, a side-eye, a whisper, and a sneer.

With fifth grade came a new consciousness. We were aware of our feet: where we walked, how they looked, what we did with them. Teachers chided students who removed their shoes during class. Students worried about sneaker brands and how to wear their socks (rolled or unrolled—the perennial debate). We curled our feet under our chairs, trying everything to keep them hidden. I lost my street cred. I guess it wasn't so cool to write with your feet—or throw, or "shake hands", or even invoke the name. When you bring up feet, people tend to cringe. They hold back a giggle, obscure a smile with their hands. They call them gross—kinky even (jokingly, I might add, I hope). Feet became a marked word, subject to constant glossing. They were weird, unprofessional, scandalous. Better to keep your mouth

shut and talk about something more appropriate—like fingers.

And, our bodies—oh, our bodies—we picked them apart like vultures. Our buzzard eyes scrutinised and judged them with abandon. Shame had never felt so real, an indomitable and pressing force, chanting: “Cover up. Cover up. Cover up.”

Shame is insidious. It slinks, flexing its claws and waiting in dark corners to strike. It attacked when I was alone. It attacked when I was surrounded by family and friends. It made me doubt myself, and it made me a coward. I no longer found joy and beauty in writing with my feet, just an ugliness to hide away. The worst part is that you willingly submit to it. When I decided to stop writing with my feet—when I realised that it was weird and unsavoury—I didn’t fight back. I didn’t take a stand. I didn’t lift my feet in defiance, wielding a pencil with staunch conviction, shouting: “Look at me go. I don’t care.” I surrendered; I surrendered with relief. It was nice to feel accepted—normal.

In the shadow of such shame, my dexterous feet became a private affair, something meant for clandestine writing sessions beneath the lamplight in a quiet house on a quiet night. During these small moments, with no judging eyes, I didn’t feel shame. I wrote freely. I wrote like me.

When I look back at the time I wrote with my feet, I am often overcome with a flash of sadness—some nostalgia—even anger. I hate what shame made me give up, what it still continues to dictate in my life. But, when you’re young, trying to navigate the confusion that is growing up, you make sacrifices—and you pray you don’t regret it.

But, sometimes, I imagine. I think about writing. I think about my feet. I think about superheroes and artists and monkeys. In these brief moments, I cannot help but sigh and wonder why I stopped writing with my feet in the first place.

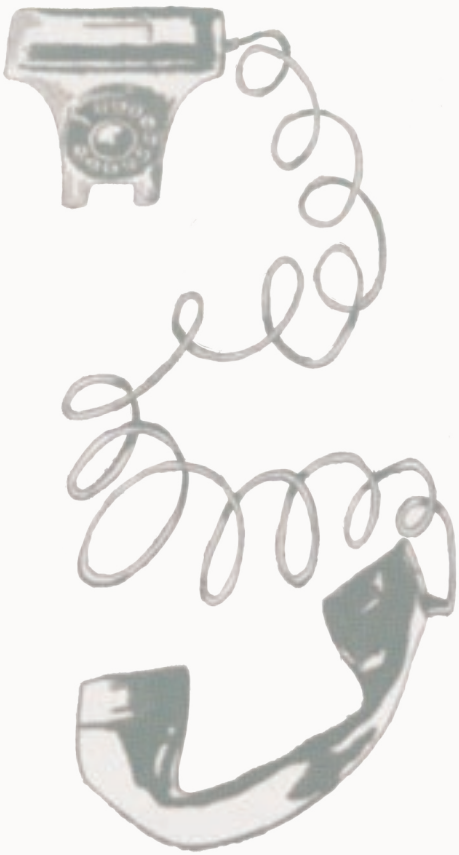
Words by Morgan Hodorowski
Art by Cordelia Wilson

Says Tina

"I've got so much to tell you about," says Tina.
"Naomi just called and she said her and Patrick
Are breaking up 'cause of what he said to Ursula
About Ant—and you know, *of course* Ant's talked to Eve,
And Eve being Eve told him Patrick said to Naomi
That Ursula had told him she'd been snogging Ant.

So now Ursula's pissed off with Eve, 'cause she thought Ant
Hadn't talked to Eve since Patrick's party," says Tina.
"You know, the one where Ursula thought that Naomi
Had told Ant that to be with him she'd dump Patrick
But she'd actually just been chatting to Patrick about Eve—
So now that's a whole thing between Naomi and Ursula.

And besides all this, while we're talking about Ursula,
Turns out she'd showed Patrick Eve's texts to Ant
And you know how Naomi gets—after she'd called Eve
She told Ant to stop talking to Patrick," says Tina.
"Only Ursula heard, yeah, and told Eve, who told Patrick—
Though Patrick thought it was Eve who'd talked to Naomi



At Ant's dinner. You know, when Ant found out that Naomi
Had accused Eve of setting up Patrick with Ursula,
So he lied to Naomi that Eve had broken up with Patrick
Which needless to say made Ursula *flip* out at Ant,
And there was that whole thing with the eclairs," says Tina.
"After that whole mess, Ursula apologised to Eve,

But by this point, right, Naomi had started dating Eve,
So when Patrick dumped Ant, then Ursula told Naomi
To message Patrick pretending to be Eve," says Tina.
"So Naomi, being Eve, told Ant she'd betrayed Ursula,
Only that was Ursula's birthday and of course Eve and Ant
Had hidden in Naomi's wardrobe together with Patrick,

So they saw her tell Eve that Ursula secretly hated Patrick,
And now Ant and Naomi—no wait I mean Eve,
Or Ursula or whoever—anyway now Ant
Won't talk to Patrick since Ursula blackmailed Naomi
And Eve claims Naomi set fire to Ant's car with Ursula
And nobody knows what's happened to Patrick," says Tina.

I've never heard of Patrick, or Ant, or Naomi.
I don't know an Ursula or indeed an Eve.
"Oh, that's irrelevant," says Tina.

Words by Adam Pickard
Art by Harriet Humfress

Eve Griffiths
'Holiday', 2023
42x60cm
Acrylic on canvas

Is a straight man the queer in a gay bar?

What does 'queer' mean to you? Considering *The Isis*' readership is mostly comprised of the young, middle-class, liberal elite of the future, it's probably a regular feature of your vocabulary. These days the word is inescapable—it has become the colloquial form of LGBTQ+, and in many cases has totally replaced it. For metropolitan liberals in a rush to signal their progressivism, 'queer' stands in as a less unwieldy, perhaps more risqué alternative to the depressingly corporate and increasingly sanitised LGBTQKPMGJPMorgan acronym. It saves time for the pompous flat-white-drinking heterosexual ally on two counts—crucial time and effort is saved by not learning about the nuances and particularities of queer groups and people, and by making concise their utterances of performative support.

But, if 'queer' is simply a catch-all that denotes any sexual or gender identity outside the norms of its context, then what about a straight man who, perhaps in confusion or out of pure curiosity, wanders into a gay bar on a busy Saturday night—is he then the only queer in the room? Bear with me on this one.

"A world where HRT is a mandatory step to adulthood, and the twink police monitor daiquiri intake..."

Let's imagine for a moment an alternative world where the historical and cultural positions of the straight and the queer are flipped. A world where HRT is a mandatory step to adulthood, and the twink police monitor daiquiri intake at go-go bars up and down the High Street (ensuring that it remains absurdly high). Instead of the nuclear family, polycules of at least six non-binary presenting folx are the predominant image of Western morality, and all children are assigned unique neo-pronouns at their local drag queen education centre. In such a world, the meek cis men and women who dare to have heterosexual desires would be considered the 'queers'—a pejorative that signals their deviance from the norm.

As idyllic as this world may sound, it reveals something about the use of 'queer' commonly seen on Bluesky threads or overheard at natural wine bars. Although it sheds the previous negative connotations of pathological delinquency, it retains the broad amalgamation of all that is non-normative or, to go back to its etymological origins, 'weird.' This usage of queer can denote anyone not encompassed by the hegemonic sexual relations of a given context, like the straight man in the gay bar. Even when applied to our heteronormative culture, it could include anyone from the gender non-conforming queer who has liberal sexual relationships with any and all genders to the otherwise straight-presenting cis man who occasionally experiments with a pinkie when he masturbates.

Such open-ended applications of queer have been criticised by many across the LGBTQ+ community. Older lesbian and gay people state it's a triggering reminder of a less permissive time when queer was nothing more than an abusive slur. Others claim that such a broad label collapses and obliterates the various idiosyncrasies and complexities important to the experiences and histories of specific groups. For example, it is well known that the L comes at the front of LGBTQ+ as a sign of solidarity for the crucial support the lesbian community gave to gay men during the devastation of the AIDS epidemic. If queer simply replaces the older acronym, such a history would be lost.

For some, queer can minimise the rich differences that define the community, rather than celebrating them. To paraphrase Syndrome from *The Incredibles*, when everyone's queer, no one is. And there is absolutely truth in these critiques. In contemporary queer circles, those differences can be overlooked when the differing challenges and forms of oppression faced by, say, cis lesbians or trans women are disregarded. The intentions behind this are absolutely pure—'queer unity' is an important building block to a political movement that can challenge the strictures and binds of heteronormative society. However, the issue arises when queer becomes the only symbol of resistance to dominant norms, and so loses its place as a coherent and communicable concept.

"when everyone's queer, no one is."

But, unlike what you hear in the rhetoric of TERFs or the modern populist right, these failures of queer are not the result of a left-wing queer movement 'gone too far.' Queer only fails when it is anchored in neoliberal, individualist identity politics and alienated from the peculiar history of queer experience.

To understand what went wrong, we must start with the origin of the modern usage of queer, behind the lofty walls of the academy. 'Queer theory' from the 90s onwards became a radical and boundary-pushing, if at times obtuse and exclusive, way of thinking about gender and sexuality. Scholars like Eve Kosofsky Sedgewick and Judith Butler wrote impenetrable books that carefully dissected ontologies of sexuality, laying the groundwork for scholars in history, anthropology, and just about every other field in the humanities to talk about gender as "performative" and sexuality as something that is "constructed" whatever that means. But you, the smug liberal well-versed in the lexicon of the social justice warrior, already know this.

What you're not likely to learn from pastel-coloured Instagram infographics is that queer was never meant to just be another category like 'homosexual' or 'transgender'. Those words originated in 19th-century medical and legal establishments that intended to control and eradicate transgressive bodies and desires.

"But you, the smug liberal well-versed in the lexicon of the social justice warrior, already know this."

Only later were they reclaimed as tools for building community and understanding selfhood in a period where romanticised individualism was all the rage. These terms came to signify something innate about the individuals they were supposed to represent, epitomised by both the 'born this way' and 'wrong body' paradigms that were cornerstones to the early LGB and trans movements respectively.

Queer, however, was forged in a different fire. It was created in direct opposition to prescriptive categories of identity, cutting across them, challenging the very innateness that granted them legitimacy, and questioning the structures of knowledge and categories of truth that gave them their social power. Queer acknowledges the problematic origins of rigid identity categories, showing how easily they can become adopted into the norms of heterosexual society: "So, which one of you is the boy, and which one is the girl?"

Even though those older categories have taken on new personal, political, and erotic meanings since the nineteenth century, queer exists alongside them to expand their limits by poking at the blurry edges of their prescriptive limits.

It does this by highlighting the fluidity of historical desire. What can we make of someone from the nineteenth century who, although assigned female at birth, lived their life as a man, but perhaps only to marry their female partner without fear of persecution? Queer helps make lives and experiences like this intelligible, as any modern identity category would have no meaning for such a historical subject. In most cases, the use of queer predates the widespread adoption of TQ+ to the LGB acronym, further disputing the ahistoricity of its use as a simple identity category. Rather, queer is something new entirely. It shows desire and identity are not easily placed into neat boxes and that often people's ideas of themselves are contradictory, confused, or incoherent, often in the most beautiful ways.

The radicalism of queer is what makes it so controversial. It is a radicalism echoed by the early gay liberation movement before pride was invaded by corporations and police departments. It encourages us to imagine what new configurations of identity, emotion, and desire—and hence, civilisation—are possible. It does this by demolishing the barriers that force us to think in binaries of gay/straight or man/woman while facilitating new forms of political imagination beyond the ineffectual and flattening discourse of liberal identity politics.

It makes me dream of the queer world of twink police and drag professors, but to dream of it in the most serious sense. It provides a rubric for our imagination, making such a world feel close—not quite enough to taste it but enough to make out its hazy outline on the horizon. But who would rule the queer world? Would it be structured by a horizontal, non-hierarchical system of mutual aid and community organisation, or would it be a fascistic state lorded over by God-Emperor RuPaul? That is, really, the fundamental question at stake when we think about how we use queer.

"would it be a fascistic state lorded over by God-emperor RuPaul?"

Let's return to our scared, lonely straight male adventurer into the gay bar. As he looks around at the spectacularly gauche interior, is he bewildered by the pumping hyperpop DJ, and spinning his head at the smell of… nail polish remover? Can we look at him, in his confusion—out of place and, in a sense, out of time—and really say that right at the moment he steps across the precipice, in the face of the personal histories of torment, exclusion, and violence of the bar's regular clientele, that all previous social mores dissolve and he becomes the queer? Of course not—don't be so fucking ridiculous.

Words by Cameron Bilsland

Willow Jopp
'The Soldier', 2024
30x42cm
Oil pastel

Performing gratitude: the cost of access

"wdym you're on crankstart but you've gone on rahsity?"

#Oxfess28281

It is extraordinary how much classism people are willing to exhibit under anonymity. Oxfess #28281, like so many similar online posts, reflects a persistent belief that financial assistance must come under conditions dictated by those who do not qualify. In the face of this judgement, Crankstart scholars face a social pressure to perform their gratitude for university support. What is more concerning is the ability of such commentary to create internal divides amongst students eligible for this aid, people who could otherwise find common ground in their economic circumstances. In a subsequent Oxfess, another user responded: "Some of us need it for rent bestie."

The University of Oxford currently spends over £8.5m a year on various bursaries for students who are entitled to enhanced financial support. Whilst the distribution of assistance clearly provokes discontent amongst those not eligible, anger at the recipients seems misdirected. Discourse on Oxfess is evidence of a stagnant culture—one which expects those entitled to certain financial aid to remain quietly grateful for the course of their degree. Does the acceptance of financial aid disqualify one from the right to live a normal university life? Why must working-class students work twice as hard to have their success deemed genuine?

Students are not only made to feel different by their peers but by the very networks that provide them with support. A recipient of the Reuben Scholarship, whilst reiterating that they are "very grateful" for the money they receive, told us about their experience of being invited to a reception at the scholarship donor's house. They were shepherded into a garden with a gazebo, food, and no seats; the donor's family ate separately, watching them through large glass windows. The student described it as "dystopian." This dynamic is surely revealing of Oxford's voyeuristic culture around financial aid, where those in receipt must be seen to be persistently and intensely grateful.

"It's not like we're zoo animals or anything."

Student from 2023 cohort

Programmes regulated by the central admissions process are effective in preparing students for Oxford's academic pressure—but how successful are they in preparing students for the provocative culture they will face? Opportunity Oxford, established in 2016, offers around 550 students additional support each year, with an average of

250 students given a place on the residential programme and the other 300 a place on the digital-only scheme. In doing so, they were cautious not to place students 'outside' the mainstream, a sentiment which still sits at the core of Opportunity Oxford's mission.

"I don't like the idea that we wouldn't do something because people might feel like it's a punishment rather than something to help them."

Lucinda Rumsey

In Lucinda Rumsey's first year as the coordinator for Opportunity Oxford, feedback was that "students felt like they were being asked to do more in order to get their place." However, as the programme continued, she oversaw an increase in student satisfaction. Lucinda recalled a moment during the farewell dinner for the most recent cohort, where a tutor approached her to say the feeling of the residential as a punishment had gone:

"I've said to tutors this year that I think we have won that battle."

Lucinda Rumsey

The culture of distrust in students' ability to earn their places is not confined to the university itself; it has seeped into the public domain and attracted the attention of many right-wing news outlets. Although all offer-holders are held to the same grade requirements, the right-wing pressure group 'Campaign for Real Education' has accused the programme of dumbing down the standards of the university. In an article for the Daily Mail, the group claimed that "Oxford academics fear standards are being lowered to accept 'disadvantaged' students." Professional commenter 'Globe Grass Sync' offers the following profound insight into the admissions process under Opportunity Oxford: "'You will go to Oxford!' 'But I'm thick!' 'It doesn't matter, you're going!'"

Andrew Bell, former coordinator of Opportunity Oxford, rebutted these claims: "I can say honestly that almost every tutor I've spoken to, both at University College and across the community, has been pleased to support Opportunity Oxford." Tutors who were involved in the bridging programme maintain that these students are "some of the best" they've worked with. The majority of tutors unequivocally support Opportunity Oxford, but not all. One student shared feeling as though tutors were displeased at the university's decision to reserve places for them:

"I have been part of conversations with tutors and students in regards to the admissions process, where one tutor remarked how the admissions system is 'usually meritocratic', which seemed to be a dig at Opportunity Oxford offers."

Student from 2023 cohort

Whilst the University's attempts to foster a more inclusive environment are genuine, such condescending comments allow tutors to gloss over the hard work students are still expected to put in. When peers treat this pressure with scepticism, it can begin to feel like criticism is coming from all directions. Opportunity Oxford is undoubtedly an incredible scheme. What holds it back, however, is a culture which continues to conflate academic potential with past access to selective education—one which views Opportunity Oxford as checking diversity quotas.

Opportunity Oxford is often confused with the Crankstart scholarship. Although the two programmes are not the same, both perform an essential role in easing the Oxford journey. Crankstart offers funds to disadvantaged students so they can share the experience of Oxford with their peers, complete with all the balls and whistles. Yet if you find yourself on Facebook, trawling through Oxfess, try searching 'Crankstart'. You might be surprised by the volume of posts unearthed—and the strength of the opinions. A popular complaint was the Crankstart volunteering hours:

"It's the students who received free school meals and/or live in council estates needing to submit our volunteering hours and not the majority rich private school students at Oxford?"

Oxfess #2220

If you are not among the 17% of students on Crankstart, you may not know that the scholarship requests the completion of

at least 25 hours of volunteering work a year.

Volunteering is touted as one of the benefits of the scholarship, alongside the stipend of up to £6090 a year and internship bursaries worth up to £3200. The University does make it clear that "you will not lose your scholarship if you cannot volunteer," and all the Crankstart scholars we spoke to emphasised that the policy was not enforced, only "highly recommended." Yet the scheme's homepage frames volunteering as a privilege, if not an outright duty, highlighting that "many scholars achieve 50 hours or more." The already intense academic life at Oxford is taxing at the best of times—so why are working-class students being made to feel as though they have to earn their way in? Oxford's thoughtful reassurance that missed volunteering hours can be made up in the summer, whilst your peers either relax, prepare academic work, or earn money, only underlines the imbalance.

"While I definitely don't feel any crushing pressure to complete voluntary hours for my scholarship, it is the very implication that financial aid is conditional on my gratitude that weighs on me a bit."

Student from 2023 cohort

Access scholarships and programmes at Oxford are broadly means-tested, offering financial support based on one's educational and socioeconomic background. College scholarships and awards, however, follow a different model; rather than prioritising financial need, they continue to reward academic performance monetarily. Whilst most college awards have recently been limited to £100–300 per student, some exceptions remain, and the disparities are vast: St. Peter's College offers a sum which barely covers the cost of a scholar's gown, whereas Jesus College offers an annual award of £1000.

It goes without saying that achieving a scholarship demands an increased commitment to study outside of term time—a time when those from more disadvantaged backgrounds may have to earn money to support themselves, and perhaps their families, if they're not busy fulfilling Crankstart's volunteering hours. University reports confirm a persistent year-on-year gap in achievement between state and privately educated students after the preliminary examination—a gap that reverses in favour of state-educated students by finals. In this sense, a need-blind financial award runs the risk of entrenching the attainment gapduring the degree itself. Scholars are frequently given exclusive access to travel grants, networking dinners with tutors, and even funding for postgraduate courses. The New College Record, an annual report on college life, provides a list of scholars and exhibitioners with their names alongside the schools they attended. Its continued celebration of a student's success in tandem with their, usually publicly schooled, backgrounds, should feel increasingly archaic with improving admission figures.

Colleges have taken steps to equalise the student experience through JCR positions, with those elected meant to represent and support students from lower-class backgrounds. As the University has no uniform policy on who should fulfil this role in each college, it is up to students to decide who qualifies and what the role actually entails.

At University College, a privately-educated candidate, who justified his suitability by boasting "a working-class friend at Christ Church", ran for the position. During hustings, he promised to "teach people how to tie bow ties and get a lady friend to teach people how to wear cocktail dresses appropriately", and to:

"foster a culture in which we all behave like proper Oxford gentlemen and proper Oxford ladies."

Class Rep candidate

The student appealed to those from "lesser backgrounds", before correcting himself to "less-privileged backgrounds". He lost against a Crankstart scholar, though still managed to garner 20% of the vote. In response to a request for comment, the student stated that these statements were taken out of context. These roles are in place to support students who may struggle with the transition to Oxford more than others. Yet the impact of these JCR positions is in part held back by a culture which allows jokes at their expense. If the roles aren't taken seriously, who's looking out for the students seeking support?

The Class Rep at Balliol College suggested that the reason no el-

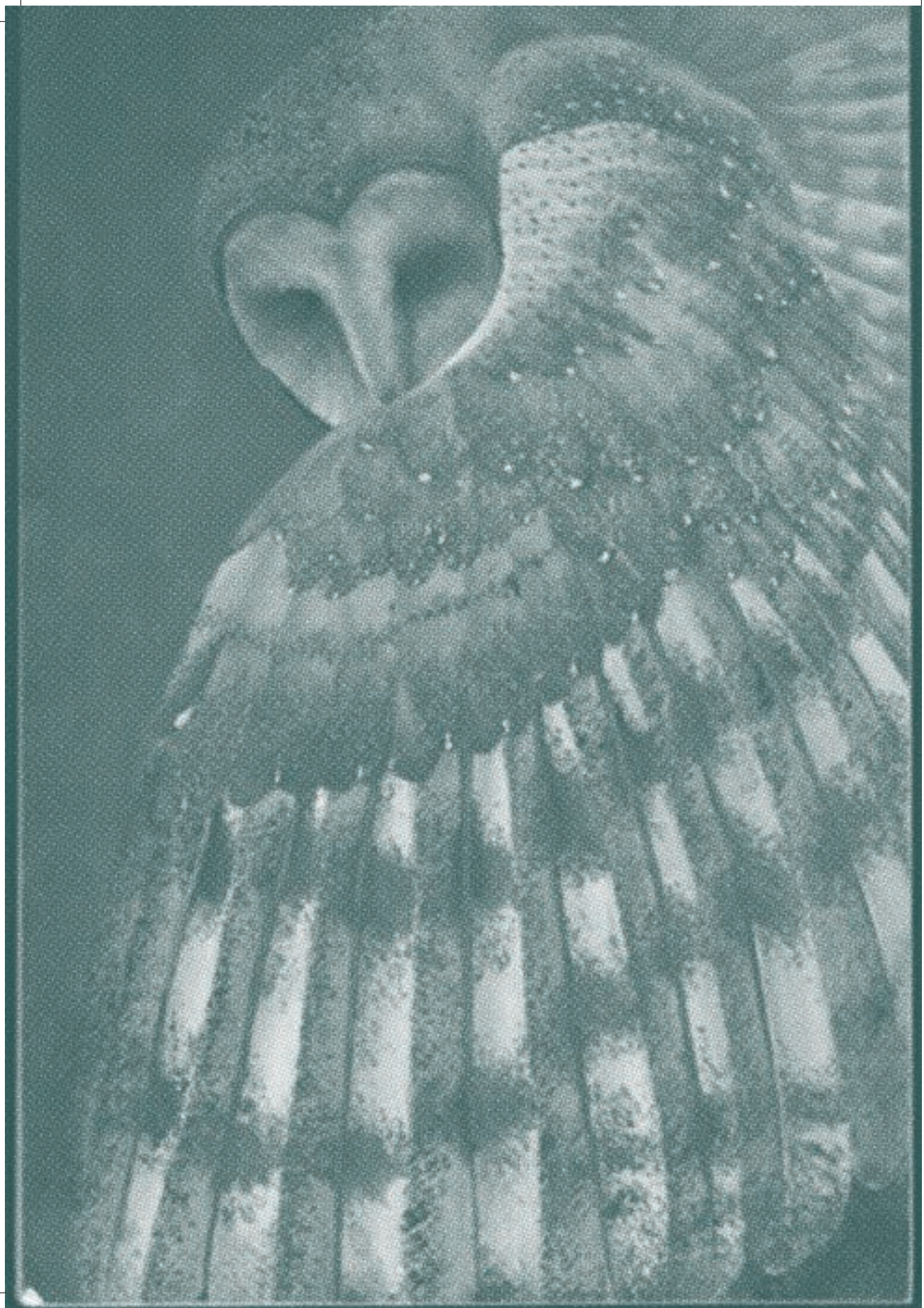
igibility criteria exists is because, firstly, there is no precise way to strictly "define what is working class", or, if there is, that information is "very sensitive". Most respondents noted that there is a general consensus that the role should be occupied by somebody from a working-class or first-generation background.

At colleges like Harris Manchester, fulfilling this role is a greater burden on the student representative than in others. Their 'Class Liberation officer' position was recently filled for the first time in four years. The lack of centralised guidance on the remit of the role means most students in these positions organise socials and provide informal support to the students they represent. At Balliol College, the role of the Class Affiliations and First Generations Officer is known instead for the unique events they run. Although the current representative is a non-smoker, he continues to supply coffee, biscuits, and rolled cigarettes, encouraging students to congregate outside the Buttery and bond.

As admissions statistics improve over time, new and improved scholarships, bursaries, and access programmes are added to the mix. Oxford appears more inclusive, equal, and representative than ever before. Yet these adjustments come with the hidden cost of new social pressures—from tutors and peers alike. Provisions put in place to support students from disadvantaged backgrounds are sometimes perceived as handed out on silver platters, and attract comments along the lines of 'you're so lucky', or 'I wish I got the maximum loan'—an attitude which only isolates recipients further. This is not to say that they should not exist. After all, what would Oxford look like without them? A university which solely takes those from selective schools? One which ignores the layers of privilege some are born into and rejects those who did not win this lottery? Each distinct award carries a set of expectations which burdens people benefitting from them. In order to be deemed 'worthy' of financial assistance, students have to perform aspects of their (class or other) backgrounds to legitimise need.

Rather than equalising each cohort, the structural weaknesses of different financial resources expose the divides which run deep, both in Oxford's social make-up and a culture with expectations for how recipients should behave after receiving awards.

Words by Vedanitya Dharwar, Eleanor Grogan-Fenn, Arina Makarina, and Lila Robinson



Owl Facts

Last winter there was an owl nesting in my rafters
It littered the porch with scraps of bone and fur
Some nights I heard it making quick
and sharp calls
and once in December I was taking out the trash
when its shadow crossed over me, for a moment
tripping the porchlight splitting me in two—
my legs and arms in the dark and my head suddenly
white, bent to keep my face warm—
I saw my shadow grow wings beneath me
Something brushed my neck
I imagined eyes like two antechambers opening into nothing
gliding through air without sound, body
moving senselessly forwards
Since that night I have thought of death less, maybe because
as I stood there in the snow, wordless, I felt sure of it
for the first time, and since that night
there's been nothing on my porch, no
quick and sharp cries from anyone
and the days keep getting longer

Words by Miles Oleksak
Art by Liberty Mountain

What I learned about glitter

I was sitting on a friend's floor the other night, celebrating our other friend's birthday.

It was late—long past midnight. We were stretching out the last few dregs of evening, all of us, together.

There were six of us there, clutching various drinks of varying force: tea, no milk; tea, more milk than tea; whiskey, neat and warm; water, hands shaking.

My friend I knew well. The other four varied in acquaintance, from quite friendly to 'I barely know your name and you definitely don't know mine.' They all knew each other well. A pack of cards lay scattered on the carpet in front of us, long since abandoned amidst a combination of chatter, drunkenness, and exhaustion.

"I'm bored," said the girl I knew the least. Maia. "Who wants to play…" She looked around the room, searching for inspiration. Her glistening eyes met mine—we knew each other the least of anyone in the room. "What about 'we're not really strangers?'"
A murmur of approval crept around the room. I didn't know the rules, I'd never played before.

"It's exactly what it sounds like," she laughed. "Someone proposes a question, and we answer truthfully. By the end of it, we won't be strangers anymore… if we do it right."

A question was proposed. I don't remember what it was. We soon fell into an easy rhythm, the six of us. Someone would ask a question and we'd all answer in quick succession, our words tripping into each other until someone's response would elicit a gasp, worthy of the full story being heard. I had by this time erupted into peals of ache-inducing laughter more than once. I'd caused them a couple of times, too.

"Okay, okay, I've got a good one," said Maia. "When and how did you lose your virginity?"

Rita rolled her eyes. "Oh come on, Maia. That's boring. Virginity's an antiquated patriarchal concept anyway."

"You're only saying that because you're a virgin, Rita!" someone piped up. Our laughter got louder, Rita's eye-rolling more aggressive.

Maia went first. I studied my cup of milky tea, now cold. Seventeen, first boyfriend, sofa in a basement. Took him five minutes to figure out how to put it in.

Classic stuff.

Then Will. Freshers week, day three. Lived across from her—he came in under a minute and they never spoke again. "It can't possibly get worse than mine," he admonished.

I was still studying my tea. The sides of the cup were stained a light brown—repeated use, little washing. Its surface was veiled with a glimmering film of milk.

By now, everyone had told their stories, to varying levels of shock, indifference and laughter. I still hadn't said anything.

Maia looked at me inquisitively. "Come on, now. We won't judge. We've all told ours." I could sense her implicit command—tell us.

There's stuff you expect—that you've heard about—when you're raped. Your body doesn't feel like yours for a while. Then after that, only sometimes.

There's the immediate bit.
It hurts. It physically hurts to be raped. Did you know that? Maybe you bleed, maybe you don't. Maybe you think about it, maybe you cry, maybe—often—you don't. The next day you get up and you go to school. You sit in chemistry class, you swap

places with Agnes so you don't have to sit next to him. You say it's because you like being near the window. Mr Mitchell doesn't say anything when his seating plan is disturbed.

You feel nauseous for a year. During that year you sing in the choir. You dance at parties. You get drunk for the first time. You study; your grades stay the same. You turn sixteen. You start thinking about uni. You ski and you read and you laugh and you run, you bake, you try learning to crochet. You tell your therapist what happened, and she says, "I'm so sorry that happened to you." You didn't know, for a while, that anything had happened to you. Then you tell your friend. She cries. You tell your mother. Your mother screams. And cries. She threatens to call his mother. To call the police.

And then, slowly, it dawns on you that something has happened to you. This was more than a shit first time. This was more than sex. Some would say it wasn't sex at all. You were raped. It isn't a word you ever thought you'd have to learn to use—it isn't for girls like you. Girls with loving parents, big houses, nice boyfriends, tennis lessons. It dawns on you that nothing has ever really happened to you—nothing that bad. Nothing you can't talk about, that hangs over your head or follows you around, whispering.

You were raped, you were raped, you were raped, you were raped.

It crawls under your skin. Under your nails. Like sand. No, like glitter. It's everywhere. Months after you think it's all cleaned up, you're still finding it: lurking under baseboards, in the bottom of your handbag, in your pockets. Everywhere I go, I leave a shiny flake of tacky plastic behind. It trails after me, like breadcrumbs from a fairy tale. It's loud. It's gaudy. It's impossible not to notice. It makes people uncomfortable. It annoys people. It stays with them. I do my best to clean up after myself.

I was sitting in the library with my friends, once. Fiona had just lost her virginity. Everyone started swapping stories. Soon it was my turn.

I told them what had happened. I looked up at their faces. No one had ever looked at me like that before. I could tell I had said something wrong. Everyone was uncomfortable.

"That sounds… really bad. What an asshole. I'm sorry," someone said. Someone else changed the subject: we had a biology test on Monday; which details of the Krebs cycle did we need to know? After the test, none of them looked at me quite like they did before.

So. You learn something you really don't expect to learn, when you're raped. You learn it's a word you don't use. You learn to shut up. Not to tell people. When glitter gets into your home it stays there forever: that fine, plastic sand. It's hard to ignore. It's annoying. You learn to sweep it under the carpet, to shake it out of blankets and onto the porch, to be carried away by the wind. There's still some hiding in between the sofa cracks. In the soles of your shoes. In the back of a desk drawer. Under the bed. In the sinks, in the pipes. Sometimes it feels like there's glitter everywhere: it bursts out of your mouth, out of your eyes. Your eyelashes are heavy with a purple haze: when you blink, it just gets thicker. Your eyes well up and your tears are sparkly too. You open your mouth to explain what's happening but glitter falls out—every word you say is a shiny, entrancing, sparkly purple.

As I type this, my fingers sparkle. The computer's keys are thick with glitter. I find it in my bag, in my coat, in my essay, in my books, in my coffee. I have a bad dream—I wake up and I vomit. I flush purple sparkles down the toilet. I sparkle while I write, while I talk, while I drink, while I dance. I eat breakfast with my friends and leave behind glittery fingerprints on dining hall cutlery. I row and I leave the blade handle bedazzled. I sing in the choir, and I have to stop. I'm coughing up sparkles.

I'm on my friend's floor, staring at my tea. On top of the filmy milk, purple specks float, catching the dim moonlight through the windows. If I tell the truth I'll leave glitter on my poor friend's floor. He'll find bits of it lingering there, for weeks.

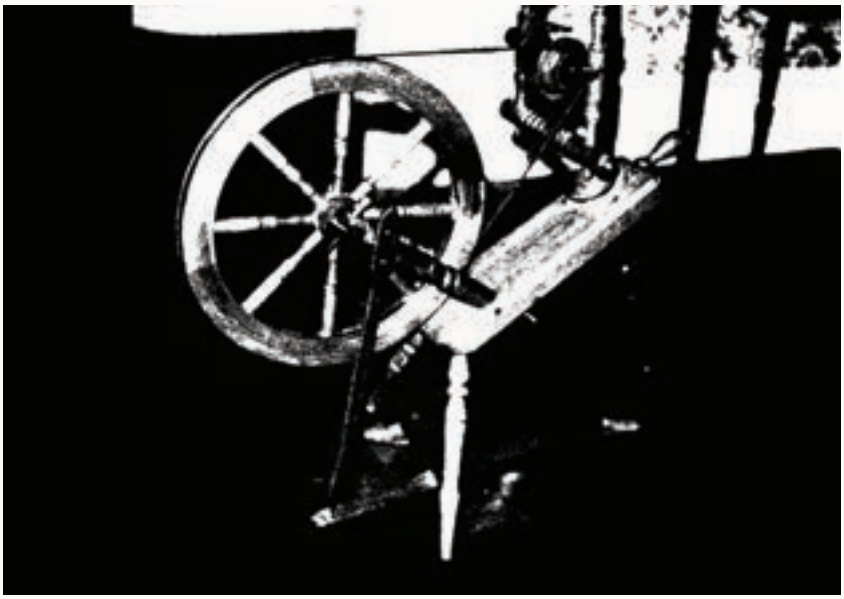
I never expected to learn this—that two things are true at once. First: it wasn't your fault. This is something everyone knows. That no one would dare question. That everyone tells you, right away, all the time. And second: it makes you different. Brands you: victim. And then you'll sparkle to that person forever, even if it's just a bit.

Maia was getting angry now. "Come on, there's no way you're a virgin."

"I'm not."

"So, then? What happened?"

Words by K.A. Hagen



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