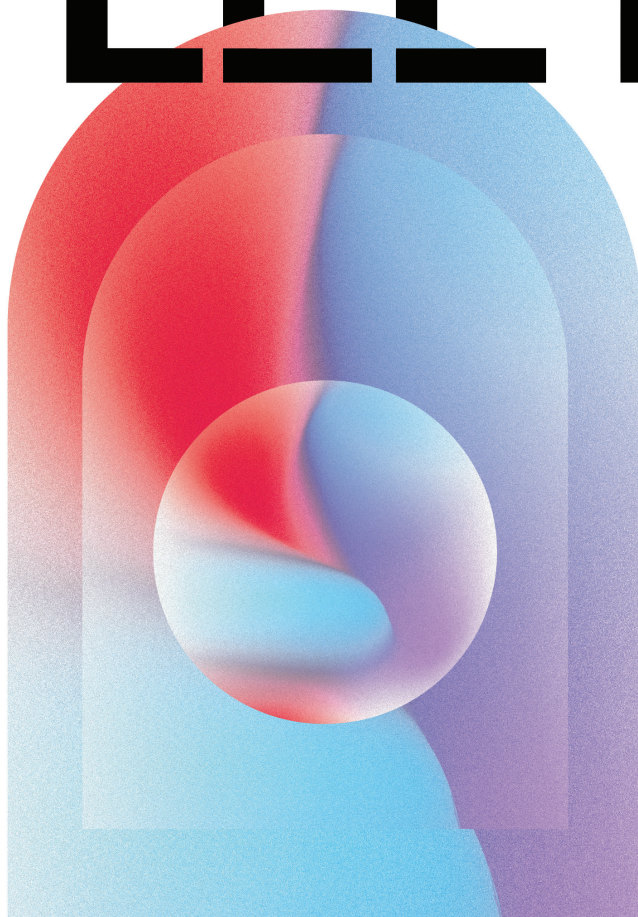


G-You's Creative Writing Journal

NO. 2

FLEET



20 Form
23 Repetition
Revival

FLEET^{NO.2}

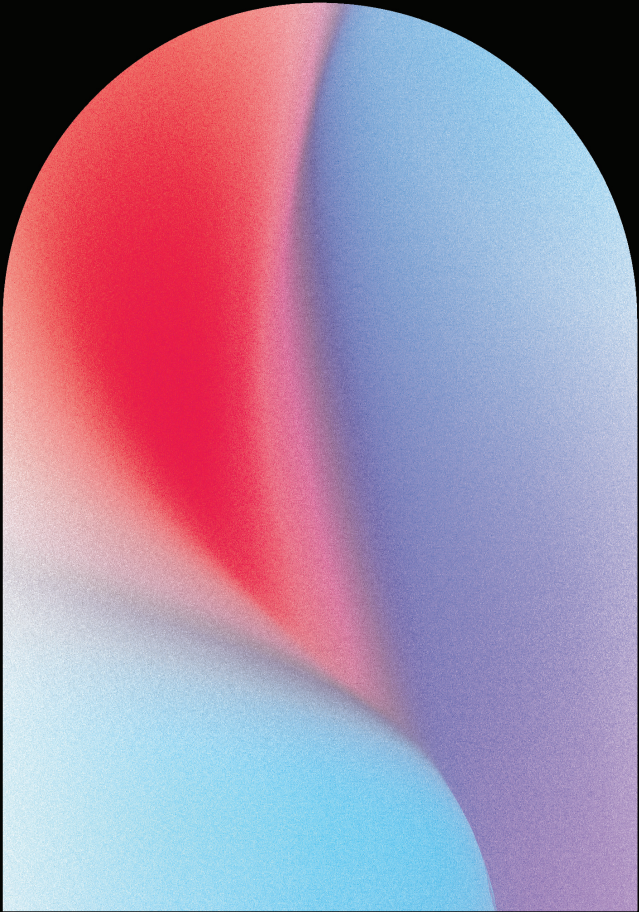
2023

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EDITOR'S NOTE

We are delighted to present the 2nd Volume of Fleet, the creative writing journal of the Glasgow University Union. Contained within this collection are fifteen written works that span a broad stretch of form, content, and style. The key intent behind Fleet, from its inception, has been to create an accommodating and accessible space in which writers of all levels of experience are able to showcase whatever inventive, distinctive written work they take pleasure in producing. We believe that Volume 2, in sampling just a section of the brilliant writing talent at Glasgow University, has achieved this aim.

After the success of the journal's first edition last year, concepts of innovation and rejuvenation were close at hand in our selection of a theme for a second volume; we decided eventually on: 'Form, Repetition, and Revival'. Throughout the following pages are diverse interpretations of the fusion of these three concepts. Personal, autobiographical evocations of these ideas sit alongside renovations and reimaginings of classical texts. There are poems here that embody the infinite potential of formal and repetitive restructuring, and stories that delve into labyrinthine themes, from recursion and religion, to art and memory, to death and what might lie beyond. We hope you enjoy them as much as we did.

We would like to thank the G.U.U. for its continued support of Fleet, and our Libraries Convener, Samyukta Vidyashankar, for all of her efforts in ensuring this journal continues to grow. We would also like to thank everyone who helped to plan, design, and produce this volume, and, in particular, everyone who submitted their work for inclusion. Unbound creativity, especially amongst the structures and rigour of academia, is an incredibly valuable thing, and we are deeply grateful to be a small part of continuing to encourage it.

Co-Editors-in-Chief (2022-23)
Evan Colley & Finn Macdonald

AND THE CAPTAIN, TOO

a fleet of ships
 and the captain, too
nestled between my collar bones

 you tell me
a story about the sea
 a swordfish or maybe
it was a woman
 too tired to take her life back to shore
lips blue, waterlogged
 pressure turning the insides of her against
the phantom limbs and their thrashing in the riptide
the bends and the backbreaking
 bedsheets are only algae if you could
 be so kind as to wring them out
 before we're done here?

she demurs, deluded, delirious
distrusting i
 let you wash up on my shores, even in low tide
 even in a time like this,
 where a body
 beached and stranded
 is something
 to hide

NEW YEAR

you and your ex lover are looking at one another through a revolving
door
so it's a new year, so it's the equinox
so your mother tells you to dip apples in honey and pray for something
sweet
the moon is directly overhead and i am on my knees
the carpet is cold and my palms are wet
i cannot remember any god except for the one that dangles limply from
my bedroom window
the softest parts of me are leaking spilling flaccid through my fingers and
onto the floor
if walls could speak
they too would tell you to pray
or maybe they'd whisper to you
sweet nothings about survival
honey dripping from the gutter like acid rain
the moon is directly overhead and i am desecrating the sacrament
of my body
tree sap
coating
chest
palms
wet
blackened
it's the equinox but i can't
remember
the words to the verse

that begs forgiveness
nor the language it's written in
palms slathered in ink
i prove to the new year i plan on participating
handprints on the glass as it sings itself clockwise
biting down hard on the fruits of my mother's labour
forgetting
i'm always forgetting

LIVING THERE STILL

Maypole, a town nestled in the moorland of Devon, was in most every way unremarkable. It housed a modest chapel fronted by a small, dutifully-tended graveyard. It had its village hall, replete with its expected share of officious country busybodies. It had its biweekly market, neighbouring farms, and a few hundred or so residential houses. The element which made Maypole the tourist destination it had become was the Tempus Fugit tower. What can only be described as a monolith, the tower could be seen for miles in every direction. Its hard stone walls stood always unflinching, even when the church spire, dwarfed by a measure of several dozen stories, creaked emulously in the wind. The tower's progenitor, Godey, had raved that it was a challenge to the heavens. Impiety aside, Father McKenzie could not help but scowl as, for the thirteenth time since sunrise on that cold spring day, an ethereal ringing came drifting down from atop the tower, echoing for miles around. He sat by the window of his small, cosy house to the rear of the chapel, carelessly darning his socks, impatiently waiting for the bells of the Tempus Fugit tower to ring again and hurry along the night. When darkness did eventually fall, Father McKenzie set down his needles, cloaked himself in an anonymising overcoat, and stole out onto the moor. He carefully avoided each bog and sinkhole along his protracted, circuitous route, until he arrived at his destination. Before him lay the decrepit remains of a decades-old bomb shelter, each rusted scrap of corrugated iron an incongruity against the verdant green spinneys surrounding it. McKenzie tugged restlessly at a loose button on

his coat, and approached the broad sheet of rotted metal serving as a door. With a furtive glance over his shoulder, he knocked twice and was admitted.

The shelter's crude exterior was a perfect match to its squalid innards. What few items of comfort Father McKenzie had managed to deliver in previous visits, chief among them a punctiliously woven tartan blanket, did little to create any semblance of home.

Soon enough, the walls began to rattle furiously, as a howling wind cut through the inky darkness. McKenzie felt it bite at his heels, the shelter hardly as airtight as it once was, and looked guiltily towards the sole occupant, who was hunched in the corner, wolfing down his daily ration of food. Once again, McKenzie apologised, as he had for more than two weeks. It was more a habit than anything else. He and his friend both knew that a warm bed by a blazing fire was far too great a risk. He apologised all the same.

Of his friend he asked little, knowing how important it was that the poor man preserve his strength. The bulk of his questions had come weeks before, and most of them followed the same tack.

'Why,' he remembered asking, 'are you here? With what you know, do you really need to run away?'

The other had replied that he did.

'It's too big,' he had said, features heavy with the crushing weight of years, 'and we're too small.'

*

Each of the four roads into Maypole stretched interminably, or so it seemed to Peter Marlow, through mile after mile of drab, unchanging countryside. A passenger in another man's car, he could do nothing but sit, somewhat awkwardly, and watch the titanic figure of the Tempus Fugit tower draw ever closer.

The breakdown of his car had, admittedly, been a setback, as was the need to leave most of his overstuffed suitcases therein. With the majority of his notes and papers stuck, for the time being, at an isolated petrol station, he was growing worried that his thesis on the Godey's tower was doomed to failure.

The man in the seat next to his was an American, by the name of Gyrich, and he made his erstwhile passenger feel nothing short of

insecure. Gyrich had been driving for days, but, from his expertly combed hair to his creaseless three-piece suit, Marlow would never have been able to guess. At the sight of Gyrich's polished shoes, Marlow self-consciously crossed his legs, a vain attempt to hide his own grubby trainers. Gyrich's car's capacious interior dwarfed that of Marlow's own cramped rental, which had hardly managed more than fifty miles before its engine sputtered lamely and died. Gyrich was a success. Marlow was a perennially struggling student, on his way to write yet another woefully unoriginal analysis of an artist whose work had been discussed from every angle imaginable. He glanced over at Gyrich then, who grinned broadly and raised one rugged hand to adjust his sunglasses. Marlow watched, scratching at the corner of his eye.

*

They arrived in Maypole later that afternoon, the sky awash with the faint amber hue of the setting sun. Parking outside of a small bed and breakfast, Gyrich gave a firm, stifling handshake and was off, leaving Marlow to find his own lodgings, the tower's seemingly endless shadow looming over him.

Father McKenzie, a friend of his parents, had been generous enough to offer him bed and board. Indeed, the old priest received him warmly. His chubby, cheerful face and booming laugh were the same as ever, and Marlow soon felt more at ease than he had all day.

The two ate well, with McKenzie asking the questions that a houseguest who hasn't visited in a long time expects to be asked, and Marlow giving his perfunctory answers. Night had fallen quicker than expected, meaning Marlow's plans to interview the townspeople about Godey, an endeavour about which he was in considerably better spirits, would have to wait until tomorrow. Happily, Father McKenzie had volunteered to give his opinions in the meantime.

However, before the two could begin, a dark look came upon the old man's face, and he made for the door, making some vague allusions to an urgent piece of work that had slipped his mind.

In the days that followed, Marlow became increasingly convinced that the faint light he'd glimpsed on the moor just as Father McKenzie was leaving had had more significance than first appeared.

Deciding to go out himself, Marlow had made it just a few feet from

the door when the clock struck seven, and a melodious song, emanating from atop the tower, echoed in his ears. He had heard recordings and recreations of the sound, but never the real thing. More than just a few bells, Godey had designed, as all students of his work knew, a nigh incompressible system of machinery – a giant music box, as Marlow’s professor had described it. It was at once a soothing natural lullaby and an epic, unearthly requiem, a dirge to which, he was sure, every man and woman interned in the cemetery looked forward with each passing hour of eternity.

Godey had created a masterpiece, something that straddled the boundaries of calm mundanity and bombastic phantasmagoria, all housed within a temple that looked to the edge of the physical realm and dared what was beyond to do better. And he, Marlow, had tasked himself with adding to that myth. He hurried along down the road.

At the local pub, The Strawberry Field, Marlow encountered Gyrich again. The American was sat at the bar, with a dozen or so locals crowded around him, gregariously regaling them with some somewhat embellished tales of the U.S.

Marlow’s eyes pricked at the glare from the American’s sunglasses, which seemed decidedly less suave and decidedly more ridiculous in a dimly lit public bar.

Regardless, he quickly found himself drawn in by the other man’s stories. Gyrich was magnetic, a rich stockbroker who travelled the world and who, in the course of his current travels, had found himself wanting to visit the famous Tempus Fugit tower.

‘You must know about Godey, the architect, then?’ said Marlow, clumsily inserting himself into the conversation.

‘Not much,’ Gyrich said with practised affability. ‘I’m sure all you folks’ll be happy to tell me, though, won’t you?’ He grinned dumbly at the assembled listeners, who began to vociferously nod and share the kind of random aggrandising titbits about Godey that most everyone in Maypole likely knew by heart.

Hours later, Marlow and Gyrich were among the last to leave the pub, the former tipsy, and the latter strangely sober.

Even in the inky blackness of night, broken only by a few intermittent streetlights, the American wore his sunglasses. In spite of his unchangingly wide grin, they lent him an inscrutability which Marlow, perhaps due to the clarity one can often only achieve in intoxication,

found quite disconcerting. Gyrich noticed this, and, impressed with his new acquaintance, decided to take Marlow into his confidence. The following morning, despite his blinding headache, Marlow remembered Gyrich's words from the previous night perfectly clearly. He remembered that Gyrich was not a stockbroker at all, but rather, as the man himself put it, 'in the business of missing persons'. He remembered that whatever agency for whom Gyrich worked (he was not forthcoming with this detail) had sent him after a very dangerous man, whom they had reason to believe, apparently, to be in the area. Even drunk, he thought the whole thing slightly absurd. Gyrich had gone on, he recalled, the smile never dropping from his lips: 'I do hope you'll keep an eye out for me, kid. It'll be a real help to me, not to mention a real chance for you to really contribute to something. Something big.

*

His headache fading, and finding McKenzie conspicuously absent, Marlow resolved to finally begin his interviews. The rush of optimism that had overtaken him the day before quickly wore thin, however, as every dialogue he attempted with the citizens of Maypole offered little more than a few interchangeable soundbites as to Godey's greatness. What's more, his attentions were entirely diverted by the thought that, lurking somewhere among each group of ostensibly innocuous passers-by, could be, as Gyrich had said, 'a threat to national security'. An exasperated Gyrich made an appearance before long. Noticing Marlow, he made a final addition to the prior night's revelations: a picture of the fugitive in question. As he made his way back to his lodgings, Marlow's head swam with each minute detail of the photograph, its very existence a catapult from the derivative mediocrity of his own life to the world of espionage and adventure—the world exceptional men like Gyrich inhabited every day. So lost in thought was Marlow that he strode past the front door of McKenzie's house. Realising his mistake, he elected instead to enter from a side door into the living room, the curtains to which were puzzlingly drawn. Within was a sight for which he was not prepared. He saw Father McKenzie, as expected, but to his right, lying prostrate in the throes of

illness, was another man, who seemed at first to be a ghastly apparition. His pallid, sepulchral face was shadowed by dirty and unkempt lengths of hair, and his piercing eye darted, like those of a trapped animal, from Marlow to McKenzie.

He was also, unmistakably, the man in Gyrich's photograph.

Father McKenzie, with a speed and purpose that belied his portly frame, seized Marlow by the arm and led the dazed young man out of the house. The two had made it as far as the adjoining graveyard when Marlow, at last regaining his own faculties, broke away in a fury. Incensed, he asked Father McKenzie a series of questions, hardly politely, and hardly quietly either. Was he aware that the man in his living room was a wanted criminal? Did he by any chance suspect that he was harbouring a security risk? Was he entirely, Marlow concluded, out of his mind?

When he was finally done, left gasping for breath and sweating profusely, McKenzie asked him if he was quite finished, in a manner so tranquil and reserved that he felt as if he had just thrown a puerile tantrum in front of a teacher. He nodded.

'Good,' came the reply, 'because whatever you've heard of that man in there, it's not true. Not entirely.'

'So he's not a criminal?'

'Oh, I have little doubt that he is,' replied McKenzie, so straightforwardly that Marlow could not help but break into morbid laughter.

'But,' continued the old man, 'when you do what I do for as long as I have, you start to realise that there can be a profound difference between what is legal and illegal and what is right and wrong.'

He went on, a wistful look on his face: 'His name is John. When he was stationed near here, he would come for confession fairly often. As I understand it, he was recruited sometime after that by a different agency. The name escapes me, but, by his own admission, they had him doing rather a lot of nasty stuff, the kind of thing that wouldn't be received well were it to leak - the kind they probably have your friend the American doing now. As they see it, what he knows is quite threatening to their operations. Do you understand what that means?'

Marlow indicated that he did, though understanding was a far cry from belief.

'That's good, because all this man wants is to be left in peace, and I intend to do whatever I can to help him.'

At that, they descended into a pensive quiet, eventually broken by the routine ringing from atop the tower. McKenzie winced, and looked skyward. 'You know, I truly hate that sound.'

Seeing then that he'd found another avenue to entreat his young friend, he pressed on: 'In fact, I might as well give my thoughts on Godey and the tower now, while we're in the habit of sharing, ought I not?'

Was this a ploy to distract him, Marlow thought, while John, or whatever his name really was, made his escape? He thought of moving, perhaps running off and telling Gyrich what he knew, but the sincerity on the old priest's face kept him rooted to the spot.

'Truth be told, it's because of them,' continued McKenzie, motioning to the series of gravestones to their left, 'that I don't rate Godey as highly as everyone else. As you.'

'Who were they?' Marlow asked.

'No one knows their names, but they're the people who built the Tempus Fugit tower. No doubt Godey was a gifted designer or artist or what have you. No doubt. But someone had to turn his design into a reality.'

A grave look came upon his face.

'By all accounts, they were poor and hungry and spoke little English, and worked tirelessly in the wind and the rain.

'For their trouble,' his graveness now turned to uncharacteristic anger, 'they were buried in nameless, shallow graves, while Godey became a legend. That's why I'm so conflicted, living here, with this great big thing. It's brought joy to so many, but on the back of all of this... all of these people.'

A moment from vocal objection, Marlow was reminded, suddenly, of the many paintings of the Tempus Fugit tower he had seen. They proudly adorned the walls of practically every business in Maypole, depicting a pristine idol, disturbed only by the rays of admiring sunlight that lent it a bright, resplendent glow. He also recalled another painting; one he had seen only once or twice in McKenzie's study. That painting was ugly and raw, depicting the tower under construction, its grim façade lined with layer after layer of suffocating scaffolds, on which one could just make out some black smudges, no doubt the last earthly representations of the multitude of starving wretches who made Godey's masterpiece a reality. Marlow felt sick.

The bells no longer sounded like a loving repose for the dead, but a mocking reminder to them that they had been lost to history, while their

murderer would live forever.

The following week, Marlow found himself in The Strawberry Field once more, working on a vastly different version of his thesis. Gyrich approached him. The American was a dishevelled mess, his trademark shades cracked, having spent the day on the moors, in abortive pursuit of the as yet unapprehended fugitive.

He asked Marlow for his help, as he had once before, but this time his request seemed less like a policeman giving a child a badge and telling him to go play detective, and more like a desperate man at his last resort.

As he implored Marlow to think if he had seen something, anything, that would assist his investigation, he bore his once-charming grin. This time, however, Marlow saw nothing more than two rows of headstones.

‘Believe me, I’d be happy to help,’ he said, ‘but the whole thing’s beyond me. I’m just one man, after all.’

Finn Macdonald

WARPED WALL

Piotr is here, but he is not sure why.

The air is heavy. The shadows are long. Ahead of him, the queue has just finished melting away. He steps forward, and the girl behind the desk, glancing up, clearly does not recognise him. He wonders, with more than a little self-satisfaction, if in all of history there has ever been a moment of more sublime irony. ‘Do you have a loyalty card, sir?’ Strange intonation, to keep the sentence fresh. She has said it too many times today.

Piotr lies, immediately. It is not a very good lie. The girl takes a moment, looks him up and down, as though she might discern from his outfit the honesty of his character. Somewhere in his flat cap, his bloated scarf, and his all-swallowing duffle coat, she finds her answer.

‘I’m sorry, sir, but I can’t let you in for free unless you can show me a physical loyalty card.’

Piotr stares out, over a beard and fur lapels. ‘I’ve travelled rather far to be here.’

She stares back, under a mahogany fringe. ‘£11.50, please, sir.’

The irony has become less entertaining now.

He pays, in cash, slowly and exactly.

A turnstile admits him. Such a blunt and clumsy design, Piotr is deeply disappointed. Only the first room of the exhibition is observable from here, but it, too, impresses him less than he had hoped. He recalls the novelties that excited him in art galleries of his time: the welcoming of space, light; the shooing of grandeur, distraction. Such values have become tyrants, he thinks, while I was away. Here are four bright white walls to one painting. Here is little else but space and light. Here is a void. White and white and white and white.

He wants to cover all of it in ink.

There are about a dozen people in the first room. Most are reading a block of text printed on the wall next to the solitary painting. He inspects the first paragraph.

Piotr Gaska (1908 - 1966) was fascinated by confluence. Born in Warsaw and trained in London, he produced art that fused the functional and the abstract. His task, always, in his paintings, sketches, and calligraphy, was to transform the ordinary into the utterly alien. The rooms that follow offer the largest-ever display of work from his enigmatic oeuvre.

The man in the duffle coat frowns. He is unimpressed. Well, he thinks, they've got me all wrong.

*

Immy is here because Dan wanted to come. They are standing, side by side, in front of a painting. Dan is talking. He's been talking for some time. 'Jarring, that's the word. It's *jarring*. It's characteristic of his latter phase, really, all that fragmentation, all that angularity, and yet there's such, such romance to it (hell, that corner could be Turner). But look at it from left to right, Ims. Do you see? No? Follow my finger. We move from red to blue: from divinity to man. Basic trick, but he does it well. Anyone who calls Gaska a cubist is missing the point entirely.'

He is leaning almost imperceptibly against Immy's arm. They've only been here for a quarter of an hour, but time has readopted that strange quality it's had on and off throughout the recent months of their relationship. The minutes have started to swell up.

'There's *pain* here, though,' he says. 'This was done in '43, so that makes... three years after he was injured in France. Arras, if I'm not mistaken. He bore the wound for the rest of his life. Lower back. Left side. Subtle, subtle pain, but it's visible, to the trained eye.'

There are other couples at other paintings, talking to one another quietly. 'I'm not actually sure I see a picture here at all,' Dan tells her.

‘I see a manifesto.’

Immy nods. She is pondering the legal consequences of triggering the fire alarm.

*

And Miriam is here, once again, because today is a Wednesday, and on Mondays, Wednesdays, and the occasional, generous Friday, she arrives here at 08:45 sharp to take up one of the twelve stewarding positions that pepper the gallery’s maze.

The ceiling windows are frugal by this hour, so floor lights compensate, but Miriam has barely noticed the day fade. She doesn’t wear a watch to work anymore. Last rotation has just taken place, and she’s been moved to the final room, where Piotr Gaska’s most famous painting is displayed. Miriam is living inside its top left corner, right now.

Two boys in jackets walk past Miriam’s chair, take a photo of the painting, and make for the exit. It’s a smooth manoeuvre, conducted in a matter of seconds.

‘Thanks for coming,’ she calls, sincerely.

*

Piotr is walking through the gallery, muttering at artwork.

‘First draft. First draft. Not mine. First draft. Upside down. Not mine.’

There is a message, up ahead, printed across the wall in a longhand font. *Look in paintings, not mirrors, to see yourself*, it says. Beneath it hangs a sketched self-portrait that Piotr doesn’t remember finishing, in which the contours and objects of his face erupt outwards like rot from a fruit. He projects a mental apology in the direction of the family who are examining it thoughtfully.

He’s yet to be recognised, but he’s unsurprised, considering he died fifty years ago and his self-portraits look like that. The sketch has ballooning, unblinking eyes. Piotr stares into them. Was it his ego that brought him here today? Listen to them all, these guests at his gallery, discussing him, drifting around him, politely debating his place in the twentieth-century canon. Did he spend £11.50 to have his brilliance whispered in his ear? Did he come for vindication? He has not found it. He feels shrunken,

in this room full of bits of himself. He looks around, and he cannot see his paintings, his sketches, on the walls; not really. All he sees are lists of facts packaged in tight frames: the colours he had in that day; the rooms he was working in; the little, cautious plagiarisms he was making of the styles of others. Everywhere, wherever he looks, his reflection obscures the art. He doesn't think he should stay here for long. He is looking out at a gallery from the wrong side of the glass.

He moves to the next room, looks at sketches, paintings, portraits; outlines, outlines, outlines. Empty, all of them, devoid of something lasting. Did he create anything truly new? He hates himself for wondering: with that thought he becomes everything he despised, once, when he was the man who made these works, who knew them for all of their noise and colour. Maybe the only empty thing in this room, he thinks, is the dead artist in the duffle coat.

He has tried not to think too much on the mystery of his being here. When he awoke this morning, on a street corner, with a leaflet tucked in his breast pocket advertising an exhibition titled with his name, he figured death had simply brought him a new and stranger dream. The dark had been full of them; all he has done, since he died in his armchair a half-century ago, is dream and dream and dream. But, no, this is different, real: he is certain of it. The imperfection is too well-placed. Dreams do not remember the dust in the corners of picture frames.

Why, then, has he been returned? To see that his work was all in vain? A crowd of visitors, led by a gesticulating guide, swallows Piotr for a moment. They are polite as they nod into their headsets and excuse themselves past him.

*

Dan and Immy are in a room of Gaska's calligraphy.

Parchments line the walls, covered in bow-legged As, serpentine Gs, and Ns and Ms like manicured mountains. Immy looks at them and wonders when letters become beautiful. How carefully do you have to command the muscles of your wrist and hand for your written words to be so exquisite that their meaning doesn't matter? She is surprised by how much the exhibits impress her. She's never seen an 'and' look proud of itself before.

(— it's a question of *character*, you see —)

Dan's still talking, but Immy is filtering him out. She's got him down to soundbites.

(‘– they’re characters with character –’)

Most of the exhibits are fragments of written correspondence, cut from their context. Others, further down the wall, are whole poems transcribed with the words rearranged: she recognises a Wordsworth, at *cloud*; a Yeats, at *gyre*. Black ink, blue ink. She prefers these to the paintings, she thinks.

(‘– I don’t consider myself an expert, but –’)

Look at that one: words like neat houses, a sentence like a perfect street. And another, there, in Polish this time, with letters stretched into tunnels and towers.

(‘– a wonderful afunctionalism –’)

She likes to think of art galleries as a kind of interactive theatre, where each image is a prompt for a performance behind your eyes. Dan, she has realised, likes to think of them as a stage.

(‘– the structure of line and colour –’)

Immy looks at him. It's such a strange dissonance, starting to dislike someone while you're still in love with them. Feeling overlaps, and it splits you in half; one eye sees rose, the other sees red. The face you thought you knew best in the world starts to surprise you.

He is paused for thought, running a finger along his top lip. Immy feels she should say something. Silence like this is too rare to waste.

‘I hope one day they hang everyone’s texts in a room like this,’ she whispers. ‘People could come and ponder the number of *ha*’s we all put in our *hahahaha*’s.’

Dan nods, sighs, like she's missed the point entirely.

*

Miriam is sitting, watching the final room.

She just swapped smiles with one of the new, younger stewards, whose name she can't recall, as he made his way to the exit. Others follow, passing by: an elderly woman, visiting for the third time; a lone, gilet-clad photographer; a pair of students, in corduroy, in loud debate.

If the room is empty for long enough, she hums to herself, almost inaudibly.

Sunshine Of Your Love, right now.

*

Piotr is tired. He has searched for something that might carry some sense of accomplishment, but all he has found are more fragments of a past and finished life. He wants to rest now, to return to his long sleep. There is very little left for him here.

A dark entryway, up ahead, and piano music is playing on the other side. He follows the sound, and finds beyond the entryway a dim room with more artworks on display than any other he has passed through. The walls are messy with framed paintings; forty of them, maybe more. A tiny light shines down on each work from above, and all of them, the lights reveal, are paintings of the same woman. In every one – whether she sits, or stands, or dances, or swims – her face is lost in a flurry of black hair. Piotr was never permitted to paint it.

The Muse

The two words are printed in wide letters amongst paintings on the far wall.

His Muse. She would have laughed at that. He understands that the curator and critic must make the occasional assumption, that there are dots to join and lost memories to dream – but she would have laughed at that. In truth, Piotr isn't sure she would have liked this room at all: it's too much like a shrine; it's trying too hard. He walks through it regardless, listens to the piano music coming from speakers in the ceiling. Yes, he's proud of these ones. If they had understood me better, he thinks, the gallery would be this room and this room alone.

Something around the corner is casting coloured light – red, violet, green, now gold – across the floor. Piotr approaches and finds a small side room, a dark alcove. It contains only one object: an upright rectangle of thin glass as tall as him, like some modern standing stone, into which the shifting image of a woman dancing, drifting this way and that, is being projected from behind. As she moves, the colour of her clothes morph:

violet flows into green, green flows into gold, gold flows into red. Her face is hidden in a flurry of black hair, swaying back and forth like weeds on the floor of the sea.

It is one of Piotr's paintings of her brought to life. He stares at it, unblinking. It is unlike anything he has ever seen. They have animated a memory, captured in pale amber a sacred little piece of the past.

She sways, this way and that.

Piotr stands and stares, as minor chords fall like leaves from the speakers in the ceiling. He thinks, perhaps, he has realised why he came to this gallery today.

Red, to violet, to green, to gold, and red again.

*

Dan and Immy have reached the final room of the gallery.

They are faced with Gaska's most famous painting. Immy recognises it, remembers references to it in classes at school. It's called *Warped Wall*, and it's enormous; eighteen feet across, at least.

A young man, dressed darkly, stands slightly to the right of the painting's centre. His expression is fixed and firm, somewhere between smug and biting back grief, and his hands hang slightly awkwardly at his sides. Behind him, occupying most of the picture, is an enormous, dilapidated wall; the figure is standing before a vast canvas of broken plaster and damp, peeling paper, an interior wall so eroded in places that its brickwork is visible. Everywhere are cracks like thin capillaries. The most notable features of decay, however, are great, damp, moulding blemishes of various muted colours (grey, beige, rusty) that clump together across the wall's surface like continents huddling on an atlas. Gazing at these shapes for long enough gives the strangest impression that the decay is active, that the continents are congealing in front of one's eyes: the wall warps, and the composed figure stands before it, his expression forever fixed and firm.

‘Not my thing,’ says Dan. ‘It’s overrated.’ By Immy’s interpretation, this means that he only memorised the Wikipedia entries for the obscurer exhibits. She feels an urge to breathe carefully, to cover her mouth.

There’s as much beauty here as you’d find in a photo album of mouth ulcers, or in an EP of different pitches of flushing toilet, and yet she’s unable to look away from its splintering cracks, from its acne of mildew spores. Is it really a painting? It looks like a thing that grew.

Dan has crossed his arms. ‘I think I’m done,’ he tells her.

‘I’m ready to go.’

‘I might stay for a bit,’ Immy says. ‘It’s kind of captivating.’

He laughs a little laugh, like her interest is obvious, like he can recall feeling that way a very long time ago. All he wants, she has learned, are these microscopic victories: over her, over dead artists, over paintings on the wall. ‘Come and get me when you’re done,’ he mutters, and he walks to the exit, just left of *Warped Wall*. Without fully realising it, Immy reaches a decision as he closes the door. She feels lighter. She takes off her denim jacket and folds it over her arm.

The painting before her is vast, full of unrestricted life.

She will watch this wall warp for as long as they let her.

*

Miriam sits at the back of the final room; her shift is nearing its end. She is watching a young woman take off a denim jacket and fold it over her arm.

Footsteps are approaching.

*

Piotr walks into the final room of the gallery.

It’s a broad, empty space. The only people present are a steward, sat in the corner, and a young woman, standing, staring up at his most famous painting, with a coat folded over her arm. Piotr joins her in the middle of the room. Her calm seems undisturbed by his arrival.

Ah, *Warped Wall*. Piotr has never quite understood why they appreciated it so much. It certainly wasn’t meant to be enjoyed. He’s just deciding that he should have painted the figure far older, that he should have made those great, damp blemishes far larger, when, rather unexpectedly,

the young woman standing next to him starts to speak.

She says: 'What do you make of it?'

Silence like a chasm. It has been a day of little ironies, but this one, oddly, stuns Piotr. He looks at her; he looks back at *Warped Wall*. The dead artist, who has set his eyes upon this canvas more often than anyone else in the world, suddenly has no idea of what to say. Brickwork, solemn eyes, hairline cracks; he looks and thinks of quips he could make, easy deflections, but she has asked politely, and it has been the strangest of afternoons. The truth, he decides, eventually.

'I see solitude,' Piotr answers, 'And the inevitability of decay. I see someone utterly alone. I see a family portrait for which no other family arrived.'

The words hang heavy in the room's soft and fading light. Piotr feels a specific shame, a cheapness, like he has lied without meaning to. He turns to the young woman. 'What do you see?'

She pauses for thought, eyes forward, and Piotr, looking at her, notices for the first time an unusual resoluteness in her face. It is something close to pride, held in her jaw, specifically, and along her brow, some soft tension; Piotr recognises the expression, he thinks, as that of someone who has just recently arrived at a quiet revelation. He wonders what it is she has realised and, in wondering, realises himself that he would like desperately to paint her.

*

Immy considers the question for a little longer.

She wants to stretch this conversation, to test its elastic; it gives her a reason to stick around. Her eyes travel over the damp, the fractures, the endless, endless space, and settle, after a time, on the figure's firm expression. His curled lip. Yeah. There it is. That's the spot from which the painting's hot blood flows.

'I'm not sure,' Immy says, at last. 'He's on his own, yes, but look at his face. He's *relieved*. I think I see freedom. I see a person choosing to turn their back on something ugly.'

The old man in the duffle coat scratches his beard. There is a lasting pause, and then, with a nod, he says: 'I rather like that.'

A visitor passes them. The floor lights gleam. They stand, a foot apart. 'God, it is ugly, though,' Immy whispers.

‘Isn’t it?’ replies the old man, with strange vigour. He is starting to grin. Immy opens her mouth to speak, to fill a few minutes more, when another voice, from behind them, beats her to it.

‘I’m not sure,’ it says.

*

Miriam sits in the back corner of the room. She has listened intently to the conversation taking place before her; she’s long since given up on believing in any customary boundary between her world and the world of the gallery’s guests.

‘I’m not sure the figure’s on his own,’ Miriam says. ‘I’ve sat here quite a number of times now, and don’t you think that the blemish, just *there*, looks an awful lot like a head? And that one, up in the corner, could be a face turned to the side? And I’m almost certain that *those* two darker patches of damp, those two, just there, are meant to be eyes. I’ve even started to wonder, this afternoon, if that mark down there isn’t meant to be the shape of a cat – though, that, I’m aware, is a bit of a reach.’

The rest of the gallery seems silent. The old man and the girl may be the only visitors left.

‘My theory is this guy had company,’ Miriam tells them, ‘and it hasn’t departed completely. I think the shapes could be memories. I think there are ghosts in the wall.’

Evening is arriving through the windows in the ceiling. Without looking round at Miriam, the old man says, quietly: ‘I’ve never quite thought of that.’

‘I notice something new everyday,’ Miriam tells him, proudly.

Just then, the gallery’s sound system pings. Fifteen minutes until closing time, it says, but nobody in the final room moves. As she sits, watching, Miriam hopes that the old man and the girl, as they stare up at those distorted shapes, feel for a moment like children, seeing animals in clouds.

J.M. Woodward

THESE OLD PHOTOS

are acetate and dye.
quiet, gentle, frozen, faces
coated by a shiny plastic sheen,
thin as this very moment
fust corrupting the outer
edges, yet

These Old Photos

they are burning bright and humming
with youth and with smiles
within them
there are so many people alive and
I can hear everything they contain
the laughter; the heat; the kitchen chairs;
These Old Photos

they reach with the hands of God back
into time's impenetrable ghost
they tempt the devils to flea
they are calling back on themselves
they echo and shine brightly
they are overcoming me,

These Old Photo

a fire pit and into
my thin skull, your
breath boiling up
the sides, like thick lava,
steaming up and entering
the pulpit where your tongue
resides and then through
the pews and into my ears,
I hear

You Sigh.

My Soul

sagging,
crippled under
the silence
your sigh lends

My Soul.

SEARCHING

Can you search upstairs for me?
I Can't for the life of me
 find a life for me.

The weight as I search is de-
 forming
 Me.

The wait as I search is re-
 forming
 Me.

The weighty sigh surges – it
 forms in
 Me.

The way to size urges – it
 forms sin in
 Me.

The way to wise urges – it
 is informing on
 Me.

The way The Wise urge ... is
 ill-informed, if you ask
 Me.

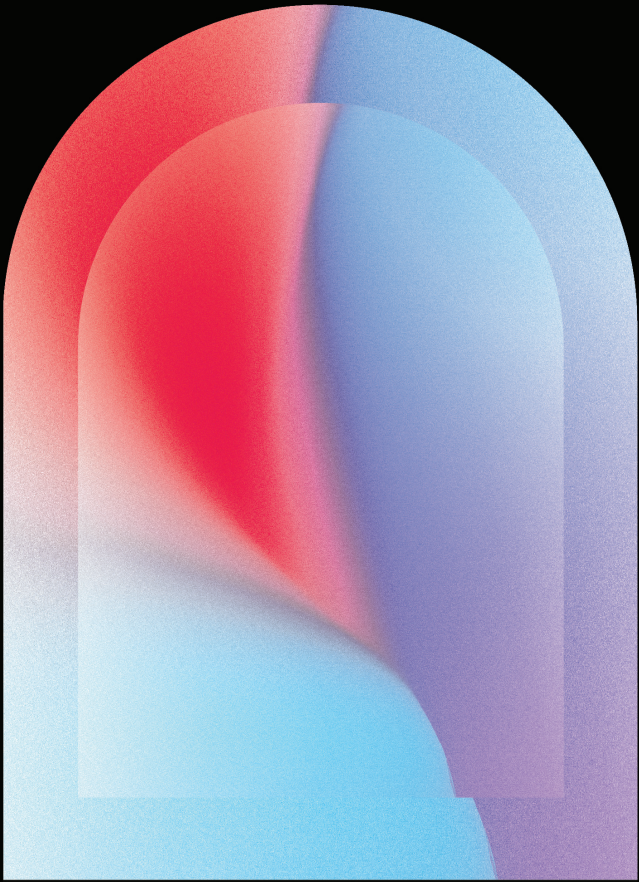
The way of The Wise surges, it
 is asking, is calling for
 Me.

The wane of The Wise Search is
 not asking, it's dawning on
 Me.

The way of The Wise hurts, and it
 must demand that I keep calling for
 You.

Must I search
If I do

upstairs for you?
I'll find You,
forming too.



Eliza Checkley-Mills

THOSE THEY TRUST MOST

'Let marriage be held in honour among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous.' Hebrews 13:4

The village I once lived in was sleepy to say the least, with people coming and going, some abruptly and some quietly. Some went missing and never returned, and they too were eventually forgotten. The church was the centre of this village. The community came and went in and out of this building, but I always remained. I was a constant to these people and their faith; their beginning and end lay in my practices. You can never teach a person true faith; it comes naturally. And with true faith comes unwavering trust. These people trusted me, saw me as their equal but also their guiding star. For all sins, for all repentances, I was always there, guiding, leading, soothing. I knew everything there was to know about each of these people. They fed me everything from the other side of the mesh metal screen in the mahogany box that always smelt a little too strongly of bleach. They thought I didn't know who they were; I always did, could tell by the sound of their breath, their tone and scent. I knew who had been unfaithful, who had committed a crime, who had thought of ending it all, and every Sunday I saw their faces as they tried to pretend they hadn't poured their hearts out to me the day before. I knew much about them, but they knew nothing about me. I kept my personal life separate from my work; I would have hated for the two to mix. It would simply cause too much hassle.

When I was first posted here, I felt both disappointment and excitement. It was both an advantage and a disadvantage that the village was small

and secluded; it could be dull and there was little to do and see, but, equally, no one knew or cared much about the things you did choose to do. They took their time to warm to me. The last priest died quickly and quietly; nobody saw it coming. I could tell they had loved him dearly, the old guy I replaced. He was the centre of their village, and they considered him in all they did. He did much for the community and was a role model for the children growing up. After his passing, I think they expected another old man, not a younger woman. They never expect anyone young to give up their lives to devotion, to the service of a being whose existence is consistently questioned. But I gained their trust. I became the new centre of the village, and before I knew it, the confessional was well-used and people were sharing with me their deepest thoughts and desires. I was getting further and further into their minds and their souls, slowly being allowed to lick my fingertips and rummage through their mental filing cabinets for whatever I sought. They answered when I asked, they gave in when I pushed, never doubting their safety. They trusted me resolutely, that much was clear.

The church was well-nurtured. The graveyard was large, commemorating the long history of the village with many of the graves having not seen a relative in half a century. To some, it would seem a haunting place to work, but I found the neighbours comforting. The presence of death has never had any great effect upon me; in truth, I almost envy those who have passed on, who are no longer held responsible for their actions, who have escaped the confines of prejudice. Indeed, I was grateful that the graveyard was nearby.

The church itself was a mishmash of lockable small rooms and loose floorboards. Few people explored further than the main chapel, save for Roger, the caretaker. He was a gentle soul, unknowing of the nuances of cruelty. He lived with his mother until she died last year, leaving him the little cottage that he had known all his life. Many in the community helped and supported him; he was a sweet, benevolent man, too humble to make anything of himself and migrate out of the village. He was easy to work with, obedient and careful. He never went where he wasn't supposed to, and he wasn't one to gossip. Instead, he spent his time in the church bumbling, cleaning, and fixing what he was told. He and I had what I would describe as a harmonious relationship: we knew the other's boundaries in conversation, we knew what not to mention, and we knew when to leave the other in peace. He was in and out almost every day,

and he came to every Sunday service. Plenty of people in those pews came for selfish gain, to wipe their slate clean - I know it, I can see it. Not Roger. He came to sit, and listen, to smile gently and to offer his time to God.

*

One mild day in April, the church was winding down from the festivities of Easter. Easter this year was both a joyful and solemn occasion; Mr Hart had gone missing the week before and had yet to return. His wife and family, worried sick, still attended the Sunday service, listened quietly, and sought solace from those around them. It is always difficult to comfort a family when you know that they mourn someone who has done them wrong. Jeremy Hart had confessed his adultery to me only days before he tragically went missing. His 'business meetings' were weekends in hotels paying for sex and fancy dinners. His wife, a local primary school teacher, knew nothing. I'd never say it, of course, but I never liked Mr. Hart. I thought he was a pompous bastard. You know you're a bad person when even the priest doesn't like you.

That afternoon, Roger was in the church, helping me tidy up after the Sunday service – there was never too much to do, and all the tasks were usually finished within a day. This year was supposed to be like every other year – Roger comes in, tidies the chapel, puts away the items for the Easter service, mops the floor, wipes the surfaces, and then leaves. I sat in my office to organise the hymn sheets into their folders as he bumbled with his usual chores. The shuffling of papers was interrupted by footsteps above: Roger was upstairs. He wasn't supposed to be upstairs. In a sudden flurry, the papers left strewn behind me, I flew up the staircase, my feet hammering, the dog collar digging into my throat... but I was too late. Roger had found keys and opened the door to one of the upstairs chambers.

'I was just looking for some bleach.'

The look on his face told me all I needed to know.

It told me that there was no way for him to walk out of this church alive. Such a shame that it had to be Roger. I truly liked him. He was a sweet, benevolent man. It was my fault entirely, my clumsiness; the Easter celebrations had deprived me of time to bury Mr Hart's body in the furthest section of the graveyard. An upstairs chamber had sufficed for temporary storage; of course Roger had to choose this particular one to

enter. Poor Roger. I can still see his face, in that moment, as he turned to me in the doorway. I think of him, often, fondly.

*

In death comes new life, a revival of sorts, where you are freed from expectation, and live in blissful ignorance to the world you leave behind. You have no idea if you are forgotten or remembered, if your print will be washed away with the new tides. Life after death is life free of pain and suffering, but, more importantly, free of temptation.

I am meticulous in my work. I listened to confessions, I learned, and I picked that village apart. I delivered justice. Year after year, men went missing. Those poor women didn't deserve to have such terrible husbands; they deserved to live in peaceful ignorance of their husbands' ill behaviour. I protected that village from whomever I needed to. That was my duty as their priest, to protect and support those people. Even to the cancers of the village, the ones I took, I was doing a service; it is better for a man to die with a clean name than to live with a tarnished one. By ending their lives, I was preventing them from further destroying themselves. My actions, you see, allow people the chance to become cleaner versions of themselves. Redemption waits for no man, and retribution is always closer than you think. I am helping these people rise to new bounds of life and reality, allowing them to drink from God's fountain, and face their reckoning. For God is equal, God is loving, and, most of all, God is retribution.

Now that village has been cleansed, and there are no more sins to be punished, no more adulterers to castigate. I have moved on to another sin-riddled place, with men just like Mr Hart, men who need to be faced with their reckoning, and wives who need to be set free. I will forever protect those who have been wronged. I will continue to do God's work on this Earth; I will continue to teach his word within the realms of my own unorthodoxy. I dare say that I will never be caught. The truth, I'm afraid, is quite simple: people seldom believe that betrayal lies in the hands of those they trust most.

Diego Drago

THE ATACAMA CYCLE

This morning, the 5th of December 2022, 11:24, as I'm working in my room, as I'm sitting at my desk, reading what I have to read, writing what I have to write, as I am filling forms and crunching numbers, as the coffee piles concentric rings inside my mug, the never ending layers open up to interminable parallel skies –

Incipit – or – 6

A metal gallop
through scarlet shapes,
piercing dust clouds,
denting landscapes.-

At first,
there were
six of them.

Four suns rising
A moonless night
Three sunsets more.

Sometimes we wonder
if the dunes and cracks of the earth
know exactly where they're taking us.

4

One bottle,
five friends,
two bottles,
now four.

The cloudless nights seem ever hungry
And fires burn for evermore.

Warm flames,
three people,
cold winds,
only two left.

“Everything was centred around the sky,
because it was so prominent.
It was hypnotizing me to be in that moment.
It took a freedom out of me.”

There's often bitter prices
to instants of small insanity.

Epilogue – or – 2

Young man,
what do you think about when you look at the sky?
Are you lost in the sideral layers?
How close are you to losing your mind?

The rhythms,
The rhythms will get you.
They fire up your freedom,
until your senses are numb.

The rhythms,
The rhythms will twist you.
It'll make you do things
that can never be undone.

Young man,
vigilant eyes feast on the desert at night.
Aren't you worried that they witnessed your crime?
That stars may be silent, but that they're not blind?

Kerry McGahan

WENDY

The steady tapping against the window had carried on for four nights now. I count every rap with meticulous focus, as the dread that had made me unable to sleep mingles with something else. I had hoped that it would come and save me as I watched the last remnants of my girlhood trail away, spent the long nights that led up to my departure from my aunt's house to this boarding place praying to it.

If John were here, he would try and tell me what it is. No doubt something factual and straightforward and wholly unimaginative. But John isn't here. And I know everything better than he does. The shadow, I think, was always there. The dim lamps in the nursery scattered their light in ribbons across the floor, so sometimes I suppose he could have gotten lost in the flood, tricked me into thinking I had only been imagining it.

The night my parents left for dinner, goodbyes full of empty promises of return, was the first time I properly saw it. The fleeting nature of my life, the horrible end to the existence I had grown so used to for my first eleven years on earth, flashed before me with a suddenness and clarity that made me nauseous. I buried my face in the pillow as the truth of my parents eternal absence dawned on me, and I would have wept if it weren't for its shadow. The darkness in the corner that I'd acknowledged only in passing began to creep its way up the wallpaper and take the nursery into its embrace. It said – it said – *What's your name?* Its voice against the ticking clock. *What's your name?*

One by one, the night lights went dark. I did not know how I would worship it. I sank further into my pillow as it laughed, crowed in conceit and victory, and tried not to think about where my parents could be. *Don't withdraw, Wendy – I can't help crowing when I'm pleased with myself.* Please. One girl is worth twenty boys. And now I lie here, one body in a row

of twenty or thirty restless girls. All sniffing, snoring, discontent and dreaming of happier times.

This boarding place was not made for orphan girls, but that is what it's ended up as. The end of the road. Where you're sent when you're out of options, when the well of grandmothers and godparents and family friends has run dry. My aunt's disdain for our presence in her house, my cousin's antagonism, was what led us here. I suppose I hoped that my aunt would let us stay. That she would notice the luminous fire within me, the raucous childhood that still insulated in my bones, and take pity. But I had only met them once before, at a wedding where I watched my cousin give over her purity, her dignity and worth, to a tall man with a beard and observed the whole thing with morbid fascination. That was enough to tell me what would happen next. The vast and unrelenting melancholy of both places was nothing I hadn't expected, and yet I am surprised every day I wake to find myself upon this mattress, under these sheets, my hair in a matted nest on the back of my head. Without ribbon to hold it back, the nurse here had decided to cut it short. They took my nightdress when I first arrived and I have not seen it since. Gave me a tweed grey blazer and pleated skirt that look just the same as everyone else, so there are no differences, no one taller or shorter or prettier or brighter, rows and rows of girls on even footing to be fed out of the system and into the houses of tall men with beards at eighteen.

Sometimes, I grab my own hand to make sure it is still there.

My mother has not held me in so long. And it is in these moments that it comes, these moments where it sees my grief and slinks down from its place in the corner, falls from the branches outside and taps on my window in curiosity – *You see, I have no female companionship.* It talks so often of girls. Tries to lure me away with its compliments and flattery, its gentle kisses and naivety.

But mostly, we just play make believe. If I close my eyes and concentrate on drowning everything else out, I can hear it so clearly, the perfect monotonous tick of the clock that hangs in the air from place to place. The shadow lets me have that. The lagoon hovers in the forefront of my mind, the vivid purple-blue expanse of water that just begins to take shape before flitting out of sight again, and with it the mermaids that dash in and out behind rocks and lily-pads. They remind me of

my cousins, whom I lived with for three drawn-out weeks at my aunt's house and who subjected us to all sorts of horrors, so I try not to see the mermaids often. The shadow never indulges them, either. Those girls, I know, will be women within the year. Their faces may still be round, hair not yet darkened and chests flat, bones like fragile branches or pieces of chalk inside their skin, but these are not the things that make a woman. The moment that John, that Michael, was brought home from the hospital, I knew what it meant. A baby, a pet, a shadow, something to look after – it meant I was ageing out.

The shadow presses one of his hands, black like ash and ephemeral, to the glass window. I do the same, famished for a life I know is gone, and pray that it will rub off on me like second-hand smoke. That I will smell the acrid scent of childhood in my hair tomorrow, have it hover in a dense smog over me all day long. Let it stick, I pray, let it not come out in the wash or be brushed away by fresh air.

Sometimes I still want to brush Michael's hair, I tell the shadow. Neither of us ever speak out loud. I want to iron John's nightshirt and hold both their hands on the way to school. I want to nurture them without being asked to. I did it before, when my parents would go out for the night, and thought nothing of it. It was at my aunt's house when it started to feel dirty, wrong, like this sacred ritual I had always held dear was being ripped from my hands. Suddenly, any refusals were met with such repulsion, such ridicule, that I dared not say no again. This scares the shadow. He tells me to *stop* – to *listen* – to hear the absence of my brother's and rejoice in it. He never enjoyed indulging their antics, either. *It is only make-believe, isn't it, that I am their father?* I tell him yes. Tell him not to worry. That if he does not wish it, it can all just be a game. Distinctly, a sigh of relief.

I thought only once the shadow was lost. As the train picked up speed I confronted the dread that had been building inside me for weeks. It did not settle my stomach, which felt stiff with nerves, or make my head feel any less heavy, my limbs like any less of a burden, to think freely about it. But both the boys were sleeping, and there was nothing much else to do. I thought about the possibility of glaring brightness when we got to the boarding place, when I was separated from my brothers and left completely alone for the first time since my parents went away, the shadow left behind in London with all of my other precious memories.

And it did take a while for it to catch up.

I allowed myself to cry when I heard the eventual tap on the window, silently and just for a moment, but I felt better for it anyway. The shadow often asks me why I cry. I tell it about my parents. It only withdraws. The shadow, it once told me, never had parents. I wept when I heard, thinking what a terrible thing it was, and then only cried harder when I realised that we were the same. My own mother, lost to womanhood and then to the great beyond where I would never be able to find her again. Forever with one foot out the door, saying goodbye for the night.

I think even when I am ninety years old I will still sometimes look out of the window and wonder when she is coming home. I know now, I tell the shadow, why my father took so long to put his coat on that night. Why he complained about his lost cufflinks. My mother had kissed all of our foreheads and asked me to make them supper and put everyone straight to bed. I heard it reflected in what the nurse and head of house said when I got here, when I wouldn't stop calling them John, Michael, when I talked of James Hook in the shape of a man called my uncle – *you need to let go, Wendy. You can't play make-believe forever.*

I want to take my mother's hand. I want to beg her to stay.

Instead, I listen to the ticking of the clock. And as the shadow flits out of existence, as the stars turn to daylight and it goes back to sleep until night-time comes around, I ask it not to go. I ask all the darkness I can find in the light.

Rachel Smith

COCAINE IS A HOUSE

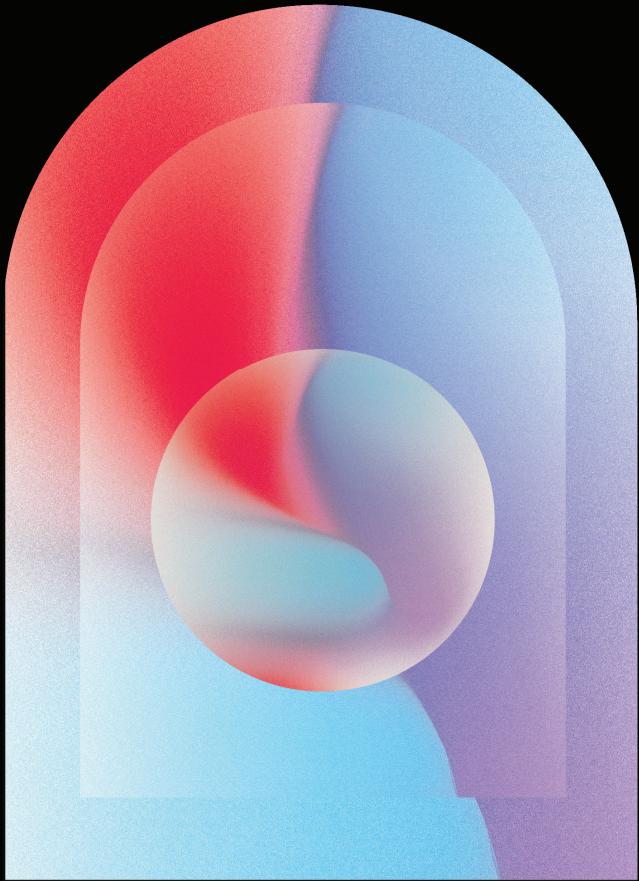
(To Emily Dickinson's 'Fame Is A Bee')

Cocaine is a house.
It has talk —
It has a chopping-block —
Ah, too, it has a clock.

(Oh fuck, the cops are at my house)

S.A.D.

THEY GIVE IT BIG WORDS, MAKES THEM ANGRIER / INCOMMUNICABLE /
ACRONYMS FOR THE SELF-INJURY / SEASONAL SELF-MURDER / METAL COLD
WHEN THE SUN SHRINKS LIFE INTO ORANGE FOSSILS / AND SUMMER SHUTS
ITS BUSY HEART TO TOURISTS / WHEN NIGHT STEALS COLOUR FROM DAYS /
AND YOU STAMP ON LEAVES FALLING LIKE RED PAPER FLAMES / LIKE LIFE,
THE MISERABLES CREEP ON IN / YOU START DRINKING TWICE A WEEK AND,
OBVIOUSLY, THE WEEKEND / WARM WITH PINOT CALM / NEW POOR / BUT
TAYLOR SWIFT SAYS SCREW-TOP WINE IS CHEAP / SO YOU DO IT ALL ALONE
/ IT'S ALL DEPRESSANTS ANYWAY / IT INTRODUCES THE ENDING MONTHS /
BRINGING LIFE GRIEF / PARTIES FOR THE VIRGOS AND THE UNDEAD / THEN
THE BIRTH OF CHRIST, AGAIN /



Lucille Mona Ling

DEPLETION

the saturation has decreased
grayscale are taken for granted
half-mornings project differently onto my routine

gone stale as it pretends
to be a precious repetition in sunlight
you hear the clogged drains as well

the pipes between my mind and the world
ending the season that has formed
me into cement

the distance between myself and myself widens
I measure the chasm everyday
I read it as a ho(r)roscope

foreshadowing
the failure
of intrinsic light

Serafina Cusack

MIDDLE CHILD (1997)

The Car Crash That Killed Diana // one

I was born the day Diana died. Mum said that's what did it. She was almost two weeks overdue, rocking back and forth on her ankles in the kitchen, she told my dad to get out so she could *breathe for just like two fucking seconds* so he went to buy a paper and some salt and vinegar walkers at 6am. He will tell me fifteen years later that he took the long way round to the office and he walked very slowly in the humid August morning, reminding himself over and over again how much he loves my mum and how much he will love me. When dad gets back mum is still in the kitchen drinking diet coke straight from the bottle, as fast as she can so as not to lose any of the fizz. She hears the front door close. She says *do you know what actually buy me a pack of B&H it's been gone nine months now it can't kill her now right*. He has come back whiter and silenter than before. She says *I'm joking Richard, Jesus*. He is holding the paper, but only just. The paper inserts are pulling on his wrists, weakened by the news. He enters the kitchen; she says *what the fuck are you looking at me like that for*. And he says *Diana's dead. Which Diana. The Diana*. And whoosh, or, dribble. Waters break. Here I come. At 6.27am on the 31st of August 1997. The world was wailing as I took my first breath. I never knew a world that wasn't grieving. The midwife's eyes were wet as she reached out to catch me, being pushed out into a pool of water at 12:06pm of the same day. And I was born fast, too fast mum says. Too fast to get the pleasure of any drugs is what she means. She says it's funny that I came so slowly

and then all at once. Like I had a plan, like I wanted to be born at exactly 12:06pm on August 31st 1997. So I waited, putting my mum in great discomfort for an extra 14 days and then rushed out to meet my deadline. I laid on her chest, only a few hours old, mucus just wiped off me, and my mum softly sobbed, listening to the nurses softly sobbing as they watched the news. I think about her often, the princess I missed existing at the same time as by hours. Sometimes my family will joke that I am the reincarnation of her. But then I think of all the other babies born on August 31st 1997 and I think, *why me?* My parents aren't even royalists. I was not taught to admire her. I hate her. I hate them all.

I was the only child my parents ever had. I was born years after all my cousins who were hitting puberty with full force when I was learning what hungry felt like. I am very much an only child. This seems to surprise people when I tell them. They say, *you have big middle-child energy*. I never knew what that meant until now.

On the 13th May 2021 I am leaving work like I do most days. It's 6pm, it's still light, the ground is wet because it was shitting it down a second ago but the sun is low and strong in the sky now. It sits to my right as I walk south. At this point a decision has already been made.

-the press killed diana but also martyred her. the royal family believe in bloodline superiority diana is a product of colonialism.

Not emotionally confronted, but made. Maybe it was made at 12:06 pm on the 31st of August 1997.

The Millennium Bug // two

On the 31st of December 1999 I am two and a half years old, still a squishy collection of a forming consciousness. I had a personality but it was blunt and un-nuanced, not yet eroded smooth by the passing of time. I was more of a personality to be. Core memories are certainly forming, but the fear and anticipation of December 31st 1999 will not be one.

12 years and 3 months later, as a fourteen-year-old, I will learn what Y2K

is and it will seem funny to me. At the point I learn about Y2K I will have outgrown religion but not yet learned of fatal climate change. At the point I learn about Y2K the idea of the world ending will be nothing but a joke.

In 2012, the year I learn about Y2K, people are talking about the end of the world. They tell me the Mayans predicted it. I wonder why the Mayans would predict the world to end in 2012 when I am sweaty and angry and like very *very* into Tumblr. This feels like an unremarkable time for the world to end. This is how I learn about Y2K. I learn about it because people are laughing about the idea of the world ending. We've been through this before, the millennials say. Gen-Z don't say anything at all because they're at a PGL disco and the term Gen-Z has not yet been coined.

-all flights were cancelled that night because of the fear. the environmental impact of that alone is astounding. you make better decisions when you're scared.

But the Millennials say, *we've been through this before. We got told by our parents when we were young that the world was ending in 1999 and it didn't.* So I laugh too, with them. I am also a millennial;

-are you?

I was also alive at the turn of the century. I know what they mean. I laugh and I am not aware of the fact that on the 31st of December 1999 my mum held me slightly closer to her chest and my dad held his breath for half a second as the 99 became 00. This is the first new year's midnight since they met that they don't kiss. They watch the fireworks on the telly and they turn to each other and they laugh and my dad says *looks like we live to face another year* and my mum says *fuck it I'm having a fag, will you watch the baby.*

I was born into a world grieving and my core memories start to form in a world laughing, scared, holding their breath through nervous giggles. On the 13th May 2021, no one is telling me that the world is ending but it sure feels like it. Gen-Z are wearing 'Y2K fashion'. It made me laugh the first time I heard that term. Late one night, scrolling my way into the depths of TikTok to avoid sleep. A beautiful woman. Girl. I don't know. She's 18 years old in 2021 and she is doing a video on Y2K fashion. She is wearing low-rise jeans and matching tracksuit sets, which she shows

off with perfect transitions, hitting every crisp beat in Britney Spears' Toxic. I tap on to her account and I wonder if she even knows what Y2K means. I didn't, not until 8 years ago. She wasn't even alive. Her parents probably hadn't even met yet. I realise I only think that because she's American and I have this idea that Americans get married really quickly and I can't trace where that idea came from. I worry I am gatekeeping technological apocalypses. I joke in my own head that I will cancel myself, and then remind myself that cancel culture isn't a thing and if I said that out loud I might just be adding fuel to the gammons, to the American conservatives, probably someone like Y2K girl's dad.

-you didn't have a choice about whether you were going to be on this app. mark zuckerberg made that decision for you when you started a facebook account in 2008. and now look where you are.

I'm exhausted. I watch one more. It's captioned *Y2K looks Part 2!* She has her hair up in butterfly clips and jeans that skirt under her hips and a baby tee and she's *tiny* and she is lip-syncing to some song I don't recognise. It is a cut-together audio montage of various interview clips from early 00s celebrities. I don't recognise them all, but then she gets to the climax of the video, an all-denim outfit, flat stomach as an accessory, sticky lip gloss and a tiny purse. The song goes, *nothing tastes as good as skinny feels, it's Britney Bitch!* I am suddenly so angry. I can feel the heat radiating off me into the bed. I worry I will wake my partner up just by sweating so hard. I go to the comments. They are all *where did you get this bestie <3 and links pls queen*. And she carefully answers each one, listing Shein, Pretty Little Thing, fucking H&M.

The British Invasion of Iraq // three

The sky opens up like a church painting as I turn onto Upper Street. The clouds live imperfectly placed in and between the setting sun, framing a building that I never knew was important until just now.

I pass Angel Station and I think about the northern line. I think about the northern line and then the central line. I think about getting on at Angel and changing at Bank and riding the central line all the way west. All the way to my parents who I haven't spoken to in 5 months and 11

days. I think about riding the central line all the way to Perivale station, getting off then doing a 25-minute walk to their door. I imagine their faces as they see mine, as they try to read my face for an explanation as to why I'm here. I imagine that despite everything they will welcome me in and offer me a cup of tea and they don't ask why I'm there and they let me stay the night and in that moment I feel very alone. I do not feel lonely. I feel alone. Like my partner and our dogs do not exist. Like my friends at the end of a phone do not exist. Like everyone I have ever met does not exist. Like Tony Blair does not exist.

-you thought tony blair might have been the good guy. new-labour sounded positive when you first heard it. tony blair displaced 4 million iraqi citizens. tony blair killed 460,000 iraqi people. this is tony blair's fault.

But I do not get on the northern line, I keep walking. I smell food from a falafel stand and I am suddenly starving and craving wine. I look at the time. I could stop. I could stop and buy a bottle of white wine from Tesco and a falafel wrap with chilli and garlic and sit on some steps somewhere and devour both. I could arrive in Clapham full and tipsy and happy. I could make eye contact with men as they pass and they look at me. I could ignore mothers who disapprove of eating in the street. I could smoke and eat and drink all at the same time. I could give in to every urge I currently have all at once. I decide not to. I keep walking. I think about the Mesopotamian restaurant in Ealing Broadway that my parents would take me to as a treat. We went on the 21st of March 2003 and there was a TV in the corner playing the news, grey dirt, bombs, dried blood, billowing black smoke. They had the best Dolma Mahshi I ever had.

I wonder what makes me able to avoid those urges. I have enough money, I have enough agency enough freedom to buy a tube fare, a falafel wrap, a large glass of house white filled with ice. Maybe it's catholic guilt, maybe it's a sense of fate. I don't want to think about it.

Cristiano Ronaldo is sold to Real Madrid // four

My walk through Clerkenwell is a pub crawl I am not attending. I always suffered from FOMO, as it was coined in the early 2000s by magazines I didn't read. I felt the stresses of FourSquare intuitively. My millennial

friends checked in to their cafes and their bars and the places it was cool to go, and I went nowhere but school and home and round the block to see who was around to hang out. I had nowhere to check in to. I think of the people who were mayors or kings or whatever it was you could be to create a feeling of faux ownership over the places you spent your money in. The app doesn't exist anymore. Do they still think about the kingdoms they built?

The football is on and people are happy. England are winning. I see three red-faced 20-something north London lads swilling warm beer in their mouths. I can taste a hangover in mine. I always wondered if the negativity I felt towards football was somehow unfair. Even some of my most left-wing pre-Middle Child friends would start group chats in the summer, crack out their dusty Twitter accounts and make jokes about it coming home that I have to ask someone else to explain.

-you were almost twelve years old on the 11th June 2009 when cristiano ronaldo was sold to real madrid by manchester united for a record-setting 80 million pounds. the world was still reeling from the crash. your parents cancelled all your after-school activities and tried to find some way of explaining to you that you may struggle to get a job one day.

But as much I would try and search my heart for some kind of sympathy, some kind of understanding, some way to relate, I would just come up with more bitter anger. Clicking fast through Instagram stories of friends in red and white, I find it impressive and offensive. I don't know how they can hate their country with such vitriol for 10 months of the year and then somehow muster up all the patriotism in the world for a bunch of toxically masculine, overpaid footballers. I understand why the men do it, slightly. They were one knee injury away from being on that pitch themselves, they too could have given up all their diluted socialist ideals for unending wealth, if only they hadn't been kicked in the back of the shins by Harry Moore in year 10. But the women? I marvel at their ability to forget every single time someone mansplained the offside rule, every time they were harassed on the tube home by blackout Tottenham

fans, every time their mum was battered blue because dad's team lost again, every racist joke overheard in a pub that's playing the footie with the volume off. It makes me so angry just to think.

-that's good. use that. remember where you are, where you've been, where you're going.

Evan Colley

ONLY THERE IS A SHADOW UNDER THIS RED ROCK

He walked through the clearing and sat beneath it.

It was a peculiar thing, perhaps beautiful. The relief it granted felt so. The thin splinters of dark which spread out and scattered from the bases of the pine trees did little to protect his naked head from the hot sky above, and so, upon stepping into the shadow of it he felt a fine flush of reprieve. As he sat and stretched his legs tingled fully back to feeling, and his breathing returned to shallow draws from the dry and sluggish heavens of the last hours. He cupped some snow in his hands and rubbed it atop of his head. After a couple of minutes sat in the shadow he stood up and looked at it. It was beautiful. A full red against total white - a keen, foul speck perverting the plain absolute. He raised his arm and felt the surface of the rock with an outstretched palm. It was soft, and deeply textured, ribbed exhaustively with a network of thin veins which stretched taut in little slinks, splitting away from one another and reconnecting elsewhere in careful, reticulated brackets. It was a deep red, intense enough to seem artificial, and dappled sporadically with darker patches of a stronger red which looked closer to blood. Its darkness granted sanctuary from the sterile white which before had blasted his eyes to tears. He cupped his hands around his temples and pressed them against the rock to cool his sight from the surrounding brightness. Though he found great comfort there in the shadow, he knew soon the sky would slip from the bright

white to grey, and to black, and in the black there would be little left to give. Soon, he thought. I will move. In a little while.

He took the cantina from his pack and went to drink. After finishing drinking the little liquid that remained, he packed it full of snow. It looks clear enough. I could always boil it later if need be. He sat, took the map from his coat and laid it flat across his legs. Taking it out, he knew it would be of no use, but he did so anyways, and analysed it. By now it was familiar. The edges were worn to white and there was no compass rose. The grid lines were fading and nearly half of the place names were indiscernible, misshapen words with missing characters, some closer to numbers or letters of a foreign script. It was no use. I could look for landmarks, but it's flat. There's nothing here of note, or at least nothing I have passed. He thought for a while of what to do. He thought he would stand up and return from the direction that he came, in hope to recognise some area which he passed through, and then, hopefully, another, until he was back to where he needed to be. He thought that would be the best thing to do in the situation. He thought he would stand up and do that.

In the frail stupor of fatigue his mind ambled to the plain of want. As he so often did in times of distress he thought, plainly, of how he would feel when it was all over. Though effective, the process was not as simple or efficient as he might have wanted. He did not seem to find comfort in generalities. In order to extract the desired feeling of comfort from the depths of his mind he was forced to conjure specific factors which would form the picture of this comfort. He thought of his bed, and the warmth of it, which he longed for, but not just the bed, or its warmth. He recalled, as specifically as he could, how the gentle air beneath the quilt would blanket his body, and how the fine heat would softly brush the hairs on his legs as he slowly twisted his body from left to right. He imagined the feeling of his bedsheets against the tips of his fingers, the gentle scratch, and the sound they would make, which altered depending on the pressure exerted. He would have to think of the lighting, the room and all its decoration, the sounds of the street and in what timbre they would bleed through the gaps in his windows. Even then, with this process close to mastered, whenever he really experienced one of these instances he would, gradually, without intent, still attempt as best he could to reproduce it in his mind. When lying back on his bed, he tried his best to think of how his bedsheets felt as he touched them, and how the sounds of the streets made manifest as he did hear them. In his mind he drew the lampshade as it lit him and the blanket as it warmed him. This was not for the sensation to be doubled. Slowly he came to dismiss the immediate, and instead wished to build something which did

not rely on some object to be felt. Within him there was an airy palace which could be faltered by nothing nor replaced. It bled the little life of the sensory and forged something bigger, something ever accessible and wholly his, both in possession and creation. Entrance to this place, however, required effort, and so time became the necessary fuel of his specific comfort, of his ever growing build. And now, sat there engulfed in the shadow of the red rock, of time he did not have a lot, and of what he did have he was not sure how much he was willing to give. And so, seeing sky as the gavel, he stood up and touched the stone, focussing strenuously on its body, its ribs, its softness, its colour, and did his best to sketch a memory detailed enough for him to return to as he ambled along the great white plain which lay ahead of him. There is little time. But there is enough. When he felt the job done to his satisfaction he turned around and began walking.

He veered to the left of the clearing, from where he came. As he walked through the pines he felt his scalp beat with hot blood. Coming out of the shadow, that familiar haven, the clear white sky returned to cast down upon him that leaden sheet of fever, and at its tail drew the wind in great intermittent lashes which his clothing could not stand to break. The pines, unnaturally even in placement, formed long corridors, which he walked down centrally, in hope that he was headed in the right direction. How did it come to this? He wondered. He was never one to amble into such situations without undertaking the necessary amount of preparation. He was cautious to avoid instances such as these, and so strenuously made sure that everything he did was planned, and that every piece of equipment needed was accounted for. So why, now, this time, in all his years of experience, did he pick up the wrong map? Wear inadequate clothing? He checked the weather beforehand and was well aware of the clothing required. It was as if someone had crawled into his mind and separated himself from the little pocket of expertise which, until then, had assisted him completely and adequately. It was not apathy. Even having wrongly prepared, he still took as much time preparing beforehand as he would have done for any other expedition. As well, this little expedition was not one he would have considered difficult to accomplish beforehand. It was only supposed to take him a few days, and now he had been out for such a time that he was very quickly running out of food, and was unsure of where to find more. It was all a mess, and he knew not how it had come to this. He tongued up a ball of saliva in

his mouth to try and moisten his drying throat. He checked his cantina. The snow had begun to melt, and so he took a slow gulp of cold water. He reached down for snow and placed it atop of his head. It helped relieve the pain somewhat, but he knew it would not be enough to stop the burning. He had to get back. As he ambled, dragging his sodden boots through the snow, he saw no area he recognised, no clearings, no caves, no tree which was taller or thicker than all the rest. All was uniform, uniform in white, uniform on the spread canvas of the snow and the bright hot sky, where only thereon he could see the pine trees lining his path, and the ones behind them, and the ones behind them. He walked. For the first time he thought about the rock. Recall, its colour, its shape. How, again, did it look? It looked so, and felt so. It stood red and cool against the bright hot sky, which then was all to be seen, mirrored in the white snow which remained static and clean beneath his heavy feet and all around. It was something else, entire, and it seemed the skin shadow which selflessly peeled away from its surface was the only amnesty available, and the only one desired. Perhaps, then, he should return. It might be better to sit for a while longer and devise a better plan. It might save some time. Then, with a comprehensive plan devised, a better plan devised, he might be able to exit that place more quickly and get home, change out of those sodden clothes and warm up by the fire, finish that book that he forgot to bring with him. If he was back in the shadow of the red rock he would again be able to look at his map and, having more time, make better sense of it. Surely, though tired and weary, he, of all people, *he* would be able to make sense of such a map, despite its lacking information, its splits and words and marks. He would look at it now, but the trunks of the pine trees would be too slender to sit against. As well there was no shadow there, or too little, and he needed the shadow so his hot and crusted head could heal somewhat. He was only able to rest leaning against the rock. Nowhere he could see in the vicinity sufficed, and, even if he could find somewhere good enough to sit and rest he would not want to make use of it. How, again, did it sound, running your fingers along its bloodied crust? What shape was that great shadow, and how felt was the darkness? How did your back feel, pressing, cushioned against it? That is how it felt. It would be difficult to forget. He felt his mind lift and his heart warm. He felt something dripping, he felt it dripping above him, and looking up at that sterile and blunted firmament he wished for it not to drip but to flood, and carry him away, so he

should not have to walk, so he should not feel the burn and so he should not hurt. He did not want to think of anything else. He did not want to hurt.

He reached into his pocket and found his compass. The wind swept against its face, the hand jerked, then spun and did not stop spinning. He placed it back in his pocket. There was nothing other to be done. Nothing, but walk in a direction and hope it was right. Surely, now, at some point, he would exit this long corridor of trees and discover a blemish, something different, something noticeable, and he would think I have seen this! Oh, I have seen this, and then he would have to keep walking, moving then with a little more hope, but walking still, for there was nothing other to be done. As he walked the wind picked up and the sky began to darken, from that pure white to something else, something grey but closer to white. He would have to move quickly. He walked quicker, kicking the thick snow at his feet. This speed would not last long. He felt the ache grow loudly in his legs and his feet did not feel. He would have an hour or so to find somewhere, some cave perhaps and some wood dry enough for a fire and some shelter enough for it to keep but he did not think such a place was, at least no place he could walk to, and so he kept walking and hoped plainly for something to recognise. His meridian had passed, and hoping for one anew he kept on walking, all the while inundating himself wholly and incessantly in that welcome place so he should feel less weary and cold and less lonely. He tried to think about people but that was no good. The people he thought of, and how he would shake their hands, gripping callous skin on his did no better to comfort him than the sky above him or the damp on his trousers, so he returned, back again to that heavenly shadow which did not fail. He thought of his mother and how she would bring him hot chocolate on the colder days and he thought of how it smelled and how she smiled, but this too did no good, and so he returned there again as he walked and basked in it, almost forgetting himself and as he was then, and how everything around was, and how it raged and spat and hurt. It is strange, he thought, still encased in it. I am a practical man. I value the real, the actual. I very rarely wander into, never mind depend on these silly things which can not be seen, which many are insistent on being if not most things everything. This I find rarely eludes me. I have been taught to value things and appraise them as such, and that I do. Perhaps that is why you enjoy your little place so much. I am not used

to it, I suppose. It is different. But I do enjoy it. Especially now, but now, as those bright white cataracts do not seem to spare me or refrain from singeing my poor white head no matter how long they watch or bother me. They do not want to stop. I'm sure that is real, and they enjoy it. How that is real, real, all too real. My poor head seems to very much think so. He reached down and again scooped some snow onto his scalp, wincing slightly this time as he rubbed it. The sky darkened further and the wind did not cease. He referred back to his listing, how he was and is to reinforce his being there, which then tried desperately to escape him. What else was there to think? He acknowledged now that should he remain in that shadow for too long the shadow would take him and to avoid this he instead reluctantly returned home. Who was there? The books the paintings and the furniture. It was no fun. He began to sing the nursery rhymes his mother sang to him as a child, now somewhat forgotten, but still present somewhere in rhythm and melody. Here we go round the mulberry bush, the mulberry bush, the mulberry bush, here we go round the mulberry bush, da da da da da da. He thought of these things and sang his broken rhymes aloud and his scalp returned to throbbing and he noticed again that he could not feel his feet, that the paralysis began to work its way up his legs stopping now just below the joint of his knee. At the base of the tree ahead of him he saw two fox cubs long dead and frozen, their jaws broken and hanging, though finally screaming and bearing their yellowed teeth to the almighty plain as it stood a snare, once more thoughtless, abiding by its own spoiled laws and watching with no outlook of compassion nor beating heart to challenge or change. He knelt down and with a shaking knuckle gently stroked the one closest to him. He kept on walking.

The sky was turning darker still and was now a heavy grey, almost black. Perhaps half an hour. There was still light to see but not for long. He turned around to look at the path trodden, characterised by meek troughs formed at the toes of his trailing boots, which then did almost as good as wearing no thing at all. Turning around he spied something. A disturbance in the snow. Too big for foxes. Coming close there were even gaps, leading outward, right, two o'clock of his path, heels facing him. How had he not thought of this before? Again his frail mind had failed him, and the most simple of solutions to his issue had evaded him as he sat in that shadow thinking of what to do. The heavy snow still maintained his footprints. All he had to do now was follow them. How

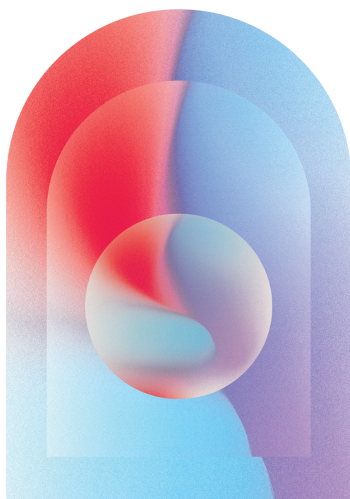
did I not think of this before? Of all the things and tricks his mind had played on him to this point, this, he felt, was the worst, and, though he felt the heavy blood of relief shake his heart with great violence, this is what worried him greatest. All the while he worried of the grace the shadow granted him, of him losing himself to faceless habits and numbing comforts he felt now, really, he had lost. He would never know himself to miss a thing like this, but that he had done. Now there was something to do, and do that he would, though a piece of him was missing, and to heal from it he knew would be the greater trek. But that, he hoped, he would do too.

As he followed the footsteps the sky crawled along toward totality, and the wind kept trailing and splitting against him head on as he walked, growing colder and colder, that vile numb still creeping up him, now to the base of his thighs. He tried to keep to the footsteps as best he could, at times placing, as accurately as he could, his feet within the marks, so he should not veer from them as he trailed wildly in his stupor. At least, now, with it growing darker he could see clearly, without tearing up every time he accidentally looked down at his feet where the snow would blast his eyes with the heavy reflection of the all white sky. Though this, as well as his scalp gaining some relief from the darkness was welcomed, with the retreating light also went the heat. He would have to bear the walking for a little longer, but if he took his time, not all his, the cold would come. At least now he had direction, and some left to give. Enough, enough.

The corridor of trees, he could just about see, looked as if to disperse in front of him. And there, finally, finally, he recognised. It was too soon to call, but those footprints lead forward through the deluge of white and pine to something his eyes could just nearly clasp. He slumped forward, picking up speed to a broken jog, his heels still scraping the floor and kicking ahead the thick snow in heavy set clumps. He watched the ground for the footsteps but he knew where he was, and where he needed to go. Indeed, there was nothing to be done. There, now behind it, standing broad and heavy, alive, as it had been, he raced toward it through the clearing, set exactly as before, no different from the image of it he still had nailed at the forefront of his mind, all him, the same, all the same. That great perversion. It was beautiful. Better yet. The sky had not yet turned finally to blackness, and so there beside it lay a slither of shadow, ripped off its side as a thin black halo. There was still enough shadow. He could still see the colour, fleshy and warm, which even in the

darkness glowed hotly as ember. Running up to it, still thinking, recalling, thinking of its shadow, its colour and shape, he ran, nearly falling, coming slowly through the mouth of the clearing, and then, there. He embraced it. Lifting his weary head he looked up to the blackened firmament, and then, with nothing then left to give, he fell at its feet and wept in elation.

FLEET



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