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Auto/fictioning (the) Contemporary (in) Human Relations and Psychotherapeutic Processes

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University of Edinburgh
PhD in Counselling Studies
2022
For the children:

Eva and Saskia,
Salvador and Sybil

And my dear friend:

Cordelia Bradby
1972 – 2020
Abstract

This writing inquiry presents an autofiction through which contemporary relationality and relationally-oriented psychotherapy are examined.

Fictioning is used as a method that allows experience to be worked through in an imaginary, virtual or speculative zone, in which new thought is possible, affecting through its relation though not directly acting upon, material reality.

Autofiction as a form of creative expression, enables articulation of an oscillating metamodern ‘structure of feeling’, which lends complexity to our understanding of contemporary intersubjectivity, becoming a valuable ontological and epistemological positioning for those concerned with relationality.

The author recognises the interplay of creative form and relational action that generates new thought, understanding and expression, thus residing at the core of the transformation that psychotherapy reaches-longingly toward. The thesis is moving ever closer to an artful, collaborative, creative-relational psychotherapy, that is future-oriented, sustainable and makes room for the more than human.
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A Note to Readers

My hope is that you will read the main body of this work as though it were a novel (it is), before reading the post-script meditation, but if you find yourself feeling frustrated, you may wish to skip to the end for a theoretical orientation. I won’t mind.

I feel it is now contrived to produce work concerned with the contemporary that does not engage with and exist in digitally mediated relation to the world around it, and that it is consistent with the philosophical position of this thesis to recognise as essential, the inclusion of superfluous, messy, excessive context. The work thus includes some imagery and hyperlinks to artists and writers talking and so on, which you may wish to peruse as you go along or to skip past and return to later. These deviations running alongside the narrative, are intended to flesh out the landscape in which the story told takes place, part of it, yet also other/themselves. The relation to be made between these and the text are all yours. Likewise, links to music are embedded within the text, because the times, places and lives portrayed are unimaginable without music. The links lead to this Spotify playlist and require a Spotify account to listen. I used Spotify to avoid the disruption of advertising and because it seems the least-worst way to acknowledge the artists, financially and otherwise, for their sonic scene-setting. If you do not have access to Spotify, all are easily available to listen to by other means should you wish.

Finally, for the avoidance of doubt, auto-fiction is fiction! All characters depicted in this work are fictional and any resemblance to real people is entirely coincidental. This is equally the case for the (implicitly or explicitly referenced) real people referred to in the novel-thesis; their published or publicly available work is real (and probably the most I know about them), but any characterisation of them as individuals is fictional.
A Portrait of the Therapist Moving (in) Time

By Kitty O’Keefe

(Words and passing ephemera, assembled, 2017 – 2022)
Act One

Disturbance in the Atmosphere
A1 Scene One: should begin...

...with a chance invitation, or a stranger at the door; any disruption to the flow of normal living which would attract attention to this tedious corner of existence, where I make stillness, reside anonymously for others, living round other people’s momentary pauses. While I circulate innocuous space, time passes through.

August 2017

Words come at the end, meaning when the thing is done.

Music is birds calling, whistles of the wind, or a Cello Sonata in C Major, baroque, which is to say, before enlightenment became passé. Francesco Geminiani travelled north from Lucca in Tuscany; a territory not yet a country, in a time when borders were tenuous.

Still fluid. Fluid still.

A cello has strings like vocal cords, a voice beyond the body, expressing beyond words or before, but in my mind, I know a thing’s started when there comes an image to move with, as if Geminiani were a painter or Lucian Freud danced. Did he dance with his grandfather? The dance happens in my mind. So it happened.

The sun is high and bright. Air blue. Sand skims my calves, whipped in spirals shimmering pleasure-pain up me as the grit, the grinding grains slap my skin, catch in the hairs of my legs, my mammal legs and I breathe in sea and the sea turns and grabs at me and the sand and pulls us, pushes us, takes, leaves, makes swooshing sounds like sucking sticky drink through teeth only stones – sparkling gems, the tiniest things, whose power astounds – glinting clear beneath the watery surface.

It’s then I see you, up on the cliff behind, standing together with a dark-haired boy, becoming-man, bodies wrapped up in one another, gazing as one across the water, or is it the sky, or the vanishing line where they make contact and is that place miles apart or touching? The horizon-line, edgy place mysterious. Where past meets future, some astronomers might say. Or is it mathematicians. I’m feeling a deep sludge of yuck, stuck, settled in my stomach and I want this water, sand, wind, and the light of day to take it away.
Something’s happening, isn’t it? You and he in a moment and it’s as if I’m with you, close in, knowing-feeling present in your holding it together. And it comes to me, this holding is more a letting go. Brutal breaking in young bodies, yet urgent. It’s time. You’re staring hard into the cool blue to hold the hot inside your head, your burning, pulsing chest. But still, determined. The moment lasts an unknowable duration and then the urgency to move turns you and in your hand a knife and you cut the ties that have held you here and move to the unknown. He watches you and you try not to wonder what he feels. I can feel it, both feelings, there in my belly. You know it’s a betrayal, but you have to because… well, because you want to.

I surrender to the wash of the waves. I breathe the sea. I breathe the sea.

Then I wake.

In a bed, my own, and phone says four in the morning. It’s black outside, and there’s silence, uncannily absolute. Try to orient myself, feel real in the moment and remember who I am, but I’m disturbed. As if I’d only dropped into this body now. Sylvester at my feet wrapped around himself to form a smooth, circular weight, like a solar heated pebble in the palm of my hand. It felt so close. I close my eyes and hope to capture it again, the meaning almost apparent but floating just beyond reach, consciousness obstructing that real, that thing, important and true.

I sleep again but you don’t return.

I don’t know what happens next.

Then morning sun shines through smoke-ish haze, brightening sandstone and white paint and black pavements cracked with yellow and green wildness that undulates along roads like this… I inhale deep, breathe out slow and oh, how the sun shines! And in the distance, petrol din and sirens call across the pale sky, and leaves bristle, scratching time in the breeze. I think. I’ve been dreaming you again. I mean, it must be the first time, but it feels old and familiar. I hear Cocteau Twins in my mind, their name taken from a 1978 Simple Minds’ track about two Glaswegians who enjoyed films of the French avant-garde. There’s always more, before. A universe pre-dating the beginning of a thing. And the tiniest inflection of tone, expressed in your choice of words, linguistic elements combining to form your opening message to me, tells me we share untold history; coming not from this provincial city, but that older, more Westerly outpost where life is poetry, whose rhythm remains always embedded deep. The curve of your words… I wonder if I betray that specificity too, thus feeling familiar to you in my online profile? You chose me, after all.

Sylvester is eyeing me urgently, balanced at the top of the staircase, ready to lead the way down to breakfast. I’m slow, finding clothes, washing my face and searching my reflection for clues. Perhaps I’ve been staring into space a while because he jumps onto a shelf where he doesn’t really fit and makes his way along it, gingerly, but I believe it’s his intention to disrupt when a book lands on the floor and having startled me, he meows unapologetically and moves back to his original spot by the stairs.

I follow him and pick up the book, a dusty blue remnant of another time in life passed. I rarely notice how objects become mementoes. I remember reading urgently, hidden on the top floor of the Dillon’s on Torrington Place, searching for answers to my mind. By which I mean heart, and all those human things not forthcoming in a Psychology degree. Excitement bordering on
danger emanated from certain bookcases, the kinds forbidden to the serious, for fear of disrupting the critical faculties but anyway, I looked, opening to opening, seeing differently, I recall now, oscillating between occult and literary, before returning to the University library to write essays on empiricism. Waterfall\textsuperscript{4} plays on Radio 2, which never tires of old Britpop. To me it still sounds like future-promise, like leaving home.

The fallen book is *Healing Fiction* by James Hillman. It has an old-fashioned typescript and confines itself to three chapters, one each for Freud, Jung and Adler. The words *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité* cross through my mind and impulsively I try to allocate them. Theories of Individualism, Collectivism and... hmmm... I forgotten. I look up Alfred Adler on my phone and find a quote, on *Pinterest* and everywhere else at once, but disembodied from its original source:

‘Trust only movement. Life happens at the level of events, not of words. Trust movement.’

The quote is available in a choice of fonts and backgrounds, ready to post on social media. The committed Adlerian could try it on a T-Shirt. I can’t see where it came from. An unreliable source then: maybe this Adler is someone else entirely – another dancer? Who is to be trusted that is always moving or is it those fixed in their position who should provoke wariness? *Fraternité*. Did Adler dance? I link the two in my mind, a dancing brotherhood. Or sisterhood. Families rotate around each other, circling, forming and re-forming, members moving between, allegiances shifting in subtle darkness, the changes revealing themselves starkly when exposed through the necessity of choices. Events. Families move through them, I’m thinking now. I like the way the words move, their repeating pattern, affirming yet denying their own significance. What binds the elements but a *being moved* by one another?

Which is to say, love?

I don’t remember if I read *Healing Fiction* or bought it for the title alone. It wouldn’t have been on any syllabus at the University, not even the psychoanalysis seminars where Aria and I met. We could have read and spoken about it in any case, perhaps in that wood panelled Hungarian café on Finchley Road. An image of my tutor, Peter Fonagy, shaking his head at me, smiling. But ‘what do you think?’ was all he would say.

‘Sylvester’s hungry!’ the children say now, and I ask him if he’d like some turkey balls. ‘You always talk to him like he’s a boy!’ say the children, and I reply:

‘It’s fine to talk to cats! It’s only odd if they start speaking back.’

The children laugh. Sylvester says nothing, which I find affirming. I put coffee on the stove to brew and open the book while I wait.

‘In 1934 Giovani Papini published a curious interview with Freud. It is presented as a straight-on dialogue, as if Freud were privately confessing just what his work were about. This is what ‘Freud’ says:

“Everybody thinks,” [Freud] went on, “that I stand by the scientific character of my work and that my principal scope lies in curing mental maladies. This is a terrible error that has
prevailed for years and that I have been unable to set right. I am a scientist by necessity, and not by vocation. I am really by nature an artist... And of this there lies an irrefutable proof: which is that in all countries into which psychoanalysis has penetrated it has been better understood and applied by writers and artists than by doctors...”’

Aria’s calling. I put him on speaker and prop up the phone on the windowsill between potted plants, so he can see me as I circle round the well-worn kitchen and tell him about Freud declaring himself an artist in the Papini interview, and how Hillman seems to consider the whole thing made up. Aria scoffs. ‘Artist in his dreams! Don’t you remember those case studies? About as literary as Agatha Christie!’

‘Why does Hillman assume it’s a fiction do you think? It might as well be true’ I say. ‘I mean, it’s true he tried to bring thinking from the arts into medicine. To make a case for subjective experience when it was all about neurology.’

‘Do you think?’ says Aria, who’s also in his kitchen which is crisp and white and sun-soaked, and in which everything slides away into a single smooth surface. ‘I’m not sure hysteria captures the subjectivity of his patients. How do we know if he recognised them when he was playing to the gallery of his intended audience? He objectified them!’ His coffee is in a cafetière. He’ll drink it black, when he’s ready.

‘I remember’ I reply ‘reading George Eliot and seeing how Freud seemed to have lifted concepts embedded in her writing. That’s when I realised he was taking novelists’ insights into human relating and trying to re-present them as scientific concepts, you know, mathematically, cause and effect... x produces y, as if he was identifying rules that would apply to anyone, that could be spoken about in any context.’

The coffee is hissing and bubbling, so I take it off the hob, careful not to spill.

‘Hmmm, how come he was so obsessed with oral and phallic and anal phases? Were those in the novels? And didn’t he say women were impossible to understand? Was he like me do you think?’ I’m trying to pour the burning hot brew. ‘Ha! We’ll never know.’ I’m now finding it a bit early for Freud.

‘And we’re back to the neuroscience anyway’ he says. ‘Which is basically neurology isn’t it. What do you think about all that? It’s gone full circle, no? Drugs and CBT, people are still objects. Is that Freud’s doing? That we’re still treated as robots, or is that going too far?’

‘Yes those things are happening. But I still think neuroscience is great’ I say ‘it shows that emotions are the subjective experience of real things happening in our body, chemical or hormonal...’

‘Serotonin...’

‘Cortisol’

‘What’s that other love one? Oxytocin’
'How about caffeine? That’s what I love right now.’

‘Oh yes, you must drink! The special drink.’

‘I think neuroscience validates the emotional information, even if it says nothing about it. It gives us more language to show something real is happening, but we need other language, more, you know, relatable, real-life language to make that happening meaningful. We can learn by understanding what’s happening in our bodies, if we listen, speaking of which, why are you calling so early?’

‘Is it early? I mean is it early to call? I can’t tell at all what’s the done thing anymore. I’m so tired of trying to fit into this ridiculous country with all its unspoken rules. I just wanted to see what you’re up to and when you’re going to visit me in London.’

‘I’m coming soon my darling, tell me when’s good. We need to make a plan.’

‘A plan, yes, that’s so English of you!’

Aria’s gone. I didn’t tell him about you in the dream. I mean you didn’t come up, of course not. But you’re there, on my mind. I’m anticipating, waiting to meet you in my private world, which flows alongside, silently touching my real. Our lives won’t meet and yet, you’re real too, living in this world somewhere. This form of connection frustrates me, building and growing with you, knowing we’ll never truly be part of one another’s lives. Like coming together and breaking apart at the same time. We may grow to mean something to one another, but never more. There’ll never be more to it. No embodiment. It’s work. You’ll live with me behind the closed door, and I’ll hold you in mind, but not in reality. I find it hard to comprehend, though experience tells me it’s true, that I’ll be equally present with, but apart from, you. A named figure in your life, or a secret. We’ll meet halfway in that place where everything’s possible but nothing’s actualised. We’ll search for what’s true, but what comes of that will come elsewhere, outside the room, beyond the boundaries of our connection.

I wonder if I’ll end up telling you I’m anxious about meeting you, thinking, dreaming already about the encounter? Hair, face, clothes, shoes. Someone new. I’ll trust words to emerge between us.

‘Who’d be a psychotherapist?’ I ask Sylvester. He turns his head disdainfully, sniffs the food in his bowl but doesn’t eat it, leaving me to my question. And my thoughts disappear beneath the surface. I don’t really want to have them, threads of words, my own voice repeating itself, recycled flotsam drifting round my mind. ‘Maybe I do this because I can’t manage the alternatives.’ I think. ‘At least,’ I retort to myself, ‘this work doesn’t need me to pretend. At least like this,’ lips move themselves urgently ‘I’m able to be real.’
A1 Scene 2: sei-fi-psy-fi dreamy fragments

So okay, I Googled your name. I want to know who I’m letting into my space. I’m not sure if it’s you but someone with a website and your name has written an article. ‘Science Fiction and Dystopian Dreams.’ Cheating to read it, I think, but I want something of you before our first session, a thread to grasp hold of when our eyes will meet.

The Dream... you write about dreams...

I make another pot of coffee and try to stroke Sylvester, but he darts away. The children are floating around the house. I click to see what you’ve written. You start with a quote:

‘Science fiction does not detail the realities of specific problems... but rather represents our most pressing cultural fears.’

I sip at my coffee, as I read.

Science fiction invites us to confront the unknown
Or that which we choose not to know
or hope never to know
or at least never to have direct experience of.

We prefer to avoid knowledge of the presence of forces beyond our control and the possibility of calamitous events into which we may be drawn. Science fiction invites us to contemplate changes to the fabric of our perceived reality – the givens of our existence, and thus makes manifest our darkest fears.

I wonder if this is really you? If you’re some kind of literary critic. My dream rushes through my belly. I’m a bit afraid of meeting you, unknown-ness... yet, I’m also sensing my growing excitement and something uncanny: familiarity or déjà vu, but I’m making that up in my mind.

The technological advances and systemic social changes of the industrial revolution were the backdrop for the advent of science fiction as literary form and incidentally for Psychoanalysis, with its mechanistic models of the mind and assertion of the presence of an unconscious, a space hidden within us in which all that we fear to know resides.

Early science fiction writing (think Jules Verne and H. G. Wells) has been adapted and re-expressed over and again throughout the last century in films, TV series and derivative stories. That people en masse continue to be captivated by these stories shows how closely aligned they have become with the cultural psyche of the last century. They have given a tangible, narrative form to a sense of foreboding about scientific progress and the challenges of rapid social adaptation to an unknown future. Amidst hopes that have accompanied the changes, came fears that were hard to voice and thus open to dismissal as irrational. The stories gave narrative form to such anxieties and set them at a safe distance from reality, where they could be faced and worked through in a metaphorical space.
In science fiction, unbearable thoughts of real apocalypse are substituted with fantasies made manageable both by their unreality and by the presence of heroes and survivors – protagonists who, by luck or guile, manage to adapt and overcome adversity, showing us the path through unthinkable circumstances. Through their stories, we imagine our own. The message is always: humanity will prevail.

I look up and breathe into a knot of tension in my stomach. Humanity prevailing feels a fragile concept. I’ve been reading *The Great Derangement* and the inability of storytellers in the ‘Anglosphere’ to tell stories about climate change, because random acts of powerful non-human forces don’t fit within the frame of reference that defines ‘modern man’ through the modern novel. People like me can’t hold in awareness what they’re unable to think, so become caught up in a belief that human action is what determines reality, that human character is the axis around which the world turns. Apparently, my conception of everything: life, the universe... my very self, rests upon tenants that need to be relinquished.

‘...when we look back upon that time, with our gaze reversed, having woken against our will to the knowledge that we have always been watched and judged by other eyes what stands out? It is possible that the arts and literature of this time will one day be remembered not for their daring, nor for their championing of freedom, but rather because of their complicity in the Great Derangement.’

It turns out then, our egocentric society is viewed with pity by those we regard as other. By which I mean, lesser. Our psychic state is fragile, narcissistic wounding being standard given the two-dimensional splits inherent to our perceptions of reality. I shudder, chilled by pain like death of one beloved. I can’t bear to look upon it, avoid weather forecasts, skirt past opening conversations remarking upon the atmospheric fluctuations of temperature, rain, haze, or humidity, speculating upon winds of change. When did I become so fearful? Even the pure joy of today’s northerly sunshine lands tainted with an ominous shadow. I don’t know where to put my heart, can’t avert my gaze. I want silence. In a dour mood I watch *The Road* and wish I hadn’t. Bloody Cormac McCarthy.

‘Oh, that was from 2006, Melissa, a stifling time culturally! Do you remember that guy Mark who used to come to The Oasis, you know that swimming pool In Holborn? Miserable fella? He was great!’

Ophelia’s on the phone now.

‘Jesus! Can you believe it?’

I don’t exactly remember Mark from The Oasis, but I can imagine. Memory’s a hazy thing and blurs together, rewriting the past as seems fitting in the present.

‘He was into Derrida, you know the Derrida’

‘The Derrida - Jaques? Jackie? That one who makes a nonsense of reality?’
‘Well, you would say that, but reality is unreal and what a total nonsense, we know this…’

‘…We knooooow…’

‘la différence’ she says, and ‘he gets great Amazon reviews you know you should really check, him out’.

Ophelia sounds like she’s drinking. Not coffee I mean.

‘I’m afraid so…’ she says ‘but all is well because I have my Darling Prince and soon we’ll be married! Isn’t it amazing? I mean who’d’ve thought?’

‘Yes, I mean don’t take this the wrong way, but it is unbelievable! I don’t know how you managed to find one like him, ready and wanting to be there for family life and the children…’

‘I know! He’s so great with the kids! Better than me. You know I struggle. It’s too much for me on my own.’

‘Too much for anyone. We’re not designed for it, parenting in a vacuum, But you’re a great momma, and I’m glad you have some support now. Long may it last!’

‘It’s a miracle! And all because I went to see that Tom McCarthy at Goldsmiths.

If I hadn’t gone there:xii

... and if the whole thing hadn’t irritated me so badly, and if I hadn’t walked out... I wouldn’t have found the Darling Man over the road in the Marquis of Granby.’
'Oh yeah! I remember asking you to go for me. I thought he seemed very interesting. The way he writes and thinks. I read *Remainder.* It was about Derrida, don’t you think – all those traces?'

‘And Brixton! Talk about destabilising!’

‘I miss it. I get so frustrated, trapped in this provincial city…’

‘Ah, you’re not trapped, you’re doing amazingly. UKCP Registered! You’re so much more sorted than me.’

‘I’m so far away though, waiting for the children to grow up so I can move again. If I could, I’d be back there, or somewhere new. South America maybe.’

‘Ah, you’re just in denial, Melissa. You chose your life, and you keep choosing it, you’re doing good!’

‘I don’t choose it for myself though! I have to stay put to make things work. The clients, you know. I’m stuck here, where the room is. And the children like it, on the periphery. It’s quiet. They can grow in peace.’

‘It’s easy street there! You’ve chosen well my friend! Anyway, I couldn’t sit through that Tom McC, he’s not for me, but that was all to the good! And you’re being morose. *The Road* is neoliberal death-cult porn! Don’t waste your life on it! It’s the collapse of culture into one homogenous narrative. We have to resist! That’s what that guy Mark complained about. Cultural diversity being wiped out. Were you not there?’

‘Was I not where, lovely?’

At *The Oasis* swimming pool – d’you remember going there and that guy Mark. Did you know he was a big intellectual?’

‘When at *The Oasis?* I remember swimming outside in the sun… it was models and musicians, maybe, but I don’t remember intellectual…’

‘It was all those things! And council run! This is what I’m talking about! It was real as well, you know, diverse and beautiful and that’s why I chose it and… people like Mark… you know, before everything all got so dark… before I moved to West London and Grenfell…’

‘I know, Grenfell… but I don’t know what you’re talking about my lovely’

‘Mark! Mark Fisher that was his name! D’you remember him? He wrote a book in the end about *Capitalist Realism* but mainly he was blogging his old k-punk stuff, despairing about the demise of subcultures and the idea that there isn’t any choice anymore… people have forgotten there are alternatives to the way we live now… like we’ve been presented with this fait accompli, capitalism, neoliberalism… and hauntology… that was Derrida. And he loved Zizek too, you know, the meme guy: “it’s easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.”’
‘Oh, that was Frederic Jameson, the End of Postmodernism guy!’

‘It was fucking Mark Fisher! In The Oasis, I’m telling you!’

‘Well, I don’t know who said it first, but everyone’s saying now, late-stage capitalism, HyperNormalisation and all that. What’s hauntology?’ I ask her.

Ophelia sighs, and her voice slows, accent recalling New York, an old part of her trying to fit itself in...

‘Hauntology is all the ghosts of our lost futures, of our dreams and expectations that never came to pass, all that we’re grieving… I can see Grenfell from my window you know. All those people, the children’s friends, people, families just gone... and this fucking government, so corrupt. It’s all there for anyone to see and still they do it. They don’t care that we’re watching. And you know that means we don’t matter to them anymore.’

I’m silent.

‘No wonder they made a film of The Road. It’s all about destruction and decay isn’t it, the end of civilisation, because who could live it! We’d all want to die if we were sucked into that, like the poor old millennials, do you see? What are we going to tell the children? I mean, it’s a struggle!’

And we laugh. What else to do?

‘You know the children’s father, my shadow, has stopped paying maintenance? He wants them with him. He says London’s no life for them, and I’m a useless mother, and they could be living it rich with him in Paris.’

I love her and my head’s full, I say very clear things about mothers and children and being alert and not getting side-tracked and standing for what’s right and true.

‘I’m going to have to take him to court...’

‘Yes, you have to secure the children’s future, and get out of any position of dependency on him.’

The intensity squeezes. I need it back. Space. I end our call. After she goes, I’m feeling it, the struggle.

I carry on reading your article:

If those early works of science fiction acted to alleviate cultural anxiety, present day science fiction may be understood to perform the same task. Hilary St. John Mandel’s (2014) novel Station Eleven voices a contemporary cultural anxiety about the fragility of the globalised world and the infrastructures it has produced, upon which life as we know it now depends. In Station Eleven, St.
John Mandel brings to life a nameless dread of our times – near instantaneous, total and global societal collapse. The cause of the collapse is a deadly flu pandemic, resulting in mass extinction of the majority of the human population.

A flu pandemic seems farfetched to me, given the other more human possibilities, but the fragility of infrastructures feels real... I sense everything being stretched, starting to crumble. And Ophelia, drinking in the day and looking out at Grenfell... I don’t know what to say to her. Why does St John Mandel not approach more directly the politics of climate and capitalist ruin? Would no one believe it or is it taboo to look at what’s happening? A landscape of human dreams and choices, but is it the only reality available? Letting people die. Are we really to understand it as a relative cost? Still, seems no one’s allowed to say it except this Mark Fisher maybe, venting in a pub. I’m not sure if I was there. Ophelia was. Ophelia speaks.

You tug at me, sucking me back into your text:

Station Eleven opens with a scene of discombobulation as Arthur, an actor playing King Lear, wavers, and collapses on stage. The characters experience uncertainty over what they are seeing: is it part of the play? Everyone is caught off guard and there is suddenly a sense of unreality, with people hovering in a position between knowing and not knowing, trapped in time by the sensation that what once seemed real might not be, and a simultaneous realisation of dependence on some commonly held understanding of reality, in order to carry on acting in the world. What is one meant to do here?

‘Is this in the game?’ The children say.

Often the anxious describe the sources of their feelings as mysterious. They are at once alerted to some danger and prevented from knowing its cause. A sense of personal continuity is challenged.

Unheimlich, I think, the word lodged in my brain via Freud’s Uncanny essay, which attracted me with its promise of weirdness but then proved impenetrable to my delicate brain. The children read it and disagree with me. Sometimes they find simple things I struggle to grasp.

Only Jeevan trusts his perception that things have changed and steps out of his role as audience member to catch the falling patriarch. The great actor playing the great Lear, now fallen into confusion and old age and struggling to retain the strength of his position, wears flowers in his hair. The snow is made of plastic, Jeevan realises. And there in his arms, the King is dead. A premonition, it seems, of the end of civilization itself. But first there is a final moment, at the edge of change, before what happens next:

‘In the lobby, the people gathered at the bar clinked their glasses together. “To Arthur”, they said. They drank for a few more minutes then went their separate ways in the storm.

Of all of them there at the bar that night, the bartender was the one who survived the longest. He died three weeks later on the road out of the city.'
I flick away, shuddering at the final line. My attention span’s shot to hell like everyone’s, and before I know it I’ve opened another tab and looked up Mark Fisher. As I scroll down Wikipedia, a shockwave rises up my body. The source of the quake is the words:

**Death**[edit]

Fisher died on 13 January 2017 at the age of 48, shortly before the publication of his latest book *The Weird and the Eerie* (2017). His wife confirmed that he had taken his own life. His struggles with depression were discussed by Fisher in articles and in his *Capitalist Realism*. According to Simon Reynolds in *The Guardian*, Fisher argued that “the pandemic of mental anguish that afflicts our time cannot be properly understood, or healed, if viewed as a private problem suffered by damaged individuals.”

I sit for a moment taking it in. The pandemic of mental anguish… and why does this need to be said? As if, from any inner perspective it’s not immediately apparent where one’s pain comes from? Then I remember all the memes that affirm that inner peace is a matter of one’s attitude, as if taking personal responsibility for one’s outlook were enough to change the reality of one’s circumstance.

In another tab I look up the weird and eerie book and scan down its introduction on Amazon:

‘Perhaps’ writes Fisher, ‘my delay in coming round to the weird and the eerie had to do with the spell cast by Freud’s concept of the *unheimlich*… The examples… which Freud furnishes – doubles, mechanical entities that appear human, prostheses – call up a certain kind of disquiet. But Freud’s ultimate settling of the enigma of the *unheimlich* – his claim that it can be reduced to castration anxiety – is as disappointing as any mediocre genre detective’s rote solution to a mystery.

What enduringly fascinates is the cluster of concepts that circulate in Freud’s essay, and the way in which they often recursively instantiate the very process to which they refer. Repetition and doubling – themselves an uncanny pair which double and repeat each other – seem to be at the heart of every “uncanny” phenomena which Freud identifies.

There is… something that the weird, the eerie and the *unheimlich* share. They are all affects, but they are also modes: modes of film and fiction, modes of perception, ultimately, you might even say, modes of being.

...Freud’s *unheimlich* is about the strange within the familiar, the strangely familiar, the familial? Here we can appreciate the double move inherent to Freudian psychoanalysis: first of all, there is estrangement of many common notions about the family; but this is accompanied by a compensatory move, whereby the outside becomes legible in terms of a modernist family drama. Psychoanalysis itself is an *unheimlich* genre; it is haunted by an outside which it circles but can never fully acknowledge or affirm.’

I click to buy the book, then flick tabs, back over to you. I’m not sure where I’m up to in your lengthy text but my eye’s drawn to:
Memory

In his 1987 article: King Lear and some anxieties of old age, Noel Hess writes about the potential for people, on finding themselves very old, to descend into narcissistic control of their environment, much like Freud’s evocation of the young child. This is thought to occur when people are unable to face their own loss of strength and autonomy, mirroring Lear who, upon descent into old age, clings to a sense of his own power through his attempts to control his daughters. The fate of Lear is echoed, not only in Arthur, the famous actor now fallen, but in the plight of civilization itself. Do people accept what is happening or resist the conscious knowledge of their plight and with it, of their own helplessness? The question is as resonant in real life as in the novel. The novel’s answer to us is that only those who let go of their pasts and embrace the present will survive.

And yet we should not forget completely, only reimagine. Memory needs to be flexible and creative.

Kirsten, who we meet first as a child actor at the scene of Arthur’s death, becomes the novel’s heroine 20 years later as a member of the Travelling Symphony, a group of actors and musicians who perform Shakespeare to small settlements.

Kirsten remembers, though not well:

‘…that ludicrously easy world where food was on shelves in supermarkets … and water came out of taps….’

Kirsten performs the arts because she feels strongly that: Survival is insufficient. These words, recalled from Star Trek, are tattooed on her arm. For Kirsten, the words bring forth a memory – though she is not sure if it is her own or her dead brother’s - of a giant spaceship on TV, of being sprawled out on a sofa together, watching - her now faceless parents ‘somewhere close by’.

The words, set free of their original context, define Kirsten’s purpose in life. The memory is remastered, imbued with new meaning, a reason for carrying on.

The novel offers to carry us readers through an unknown, imagined transition, as we anxiously peek at our own existential fears and vulnerabilities. In a changing world, a world where it is sometimes hard to see how systemic collapse is not inevitable, we are reassured that life will carry on, something will survive, and that stories like Shakespeare’s are all that is needed, and in fact fundamentally essential, to reactive imagination after unthinkable trauma, so that civilization might rebuild itself from the ashes.

Reading releases more reverie. You, Mark Fisher. Scanning the surfaces offered through my screen, I click another link and it brings me to a review. Deep as I can go for now, the book won’t be here until tomorrow and mindful of the time, I skim James Daniel Rushing’s words:
Of all the images to emerge from the Syrian conflict over the last several years, those captured by drones in eastern Aleppo have been some of the most startling. In what could pass for post-apocalyptic cinema, we’ve been offered high-resolution panoramas of the city’s vast ruin. More remarkable than the extent of the devastation, though, is the unsettling absence of inhabitants. Like the vacant geographies of post-Chernobyl Pripyat and the Fukushima Exclusion Zone, footage of Aleppo’s abandoned districts perturbs viewers with the spectacle of an empty city. But what is it that makes these images so unsettling? Certainly, the city’s devastation connotes the ongoing conflict, yet the stark juxtaposition of a city dispossessed of its people bears an intrinsic, unnerving quality entirely separate from the political. As Mark Fisher argues in his latest work, *The Weird and The Eerie*, instances of stark absence or radical alterity, whether they arrive from the streets or from science fiction, are particularly disquieting because they remind us that our world may not be as it seems.

...Fisher... spent a prolific career alternating between mordant critiques of neoliberal logic and explorations of the cultural avant-garde. His penultimate work, *Ghosts of My Life*... combined these interests, ... failure of the futures promised by late capitalism to materialize.

...*The Weird and The Eerie*... addressing a topic of perhaps the broadest collective relevance: the dethroning of the human subject... takes readers on a journey... illustrating how dominant, humanist frameworks have neglected the considerable import of the world beyond human perception... “the outside.”... ***xix***

I’m reading faster now, stomach tightening against the imminent encroachment, time ticking, the end of my ‘wasted’ morning approaching.

... Fisher defines “the weird” as a radical reframing, the revelation that the world we inhabit is not as we thought it was. The eerie, a subtler concept, turns on manifestations of the unusual, “a failure of absence or... a failure of presence” (61), intimating a sinister but undisclosed cause.

...Fisher constructs the eerie as a limit of human agency, the loss of one’s capacity to know or act in a world that may be governed by the outside. Critical of humanism’s long reign, Fisher frames these concepts as ultimately indicative of human impuissance and the dawning revelation that the world is structured by unknown intensities...

...If the weird is a piercing intrusion of the Real, the eerie is merely the insinuation of externality. But for all the concept’s apparent subtlety, Fisher suggests that eeriness raises weighty questions of human agency: “Is there a deliberative agent here at all? Are we being watched by an entity that has not yet revealed itself?” (64). According to Fisher, these questions index the foreboding sensation that we (as human agents) are subject to unseen forces.

...For Fisher, absence of any reasonable answer to the novel’s conundrum invites readers to speculate about the limits of our own perception and to ponder interventions from the outside.

...Fisher’s analysis is hand in glove with the work of contemporary theorists working in the areas of speculative realism, vegetal intelligence, and post-humanism. Fisher engages with new
materialist political theorist Jane Bennett only briefly, his inclusion of her theory of agency (84) clarifies the conceptual alliances of his project with contemporary theorists striving to understand how reliance on the human has blinded us to certain nonhuman realities. xx

Back to you for a moment more. I stare hard at the screen, at your words:

**Forgetting**

The violent and uncertain early years of the new world are a blank for Kirsten – she cannot remember, and we recognise this as a psychological blessing. Her older brother carried her through - we know not what - then left her, relatively unscathed, to go forward, while he himself succumbed to death, weighed down by nightmares of ‘the road’.

**Tyranny – narcissism: a failure to mourn and forget the past?**

Arthur’s son, Tyler, copes with the collapse of civilisation by retreating from an unbearable reality and compulsively reading the Bible. He later becomes a tyrannical prophet in the new world. His narcissistic attempts to control the world around him, can be understood, as with Lear, as a failure to mourn the past and acknowledge his own helplessness in the face of events bigger than himself. He is unable to adapt to altered circumstances and recreates himself as King of his own hellish fiefdom.

Tyler’s strategy for coping with uncontainable loss is all too recognisable. He clutches words from the Bible, finding proof in them for the irrefutability of his old sense of self. But he holds the words too tightly, as if letting go would cause his own disintegration, or one might say reconfiguration, whereby an old sense of self is lost forever. Memory then, needs to be freed of its historical context if it is to be used creatively and meaningfully in the new present.

Time urges me on... I skip down to the end:

**Sci-fi names our fears, rendering them less fearful. It takes the darkest ‘what ifs...’ of imagined, perhaps imminent, futures and runs with them, breaking out of the confines of what we believe are the immutable facts of our existence. Station Eleven forces us to notice what we take for granted. It makes us aware of the fragility of things upon which we base our beliefs about the nature of reality and it simultaneously comforts us with the thought that culture endures, albeit in new shapes. We are challenged to relinquish our illusion of control.**

I stop reading and breathe. Feelings rushing now, on the cusp of meeting you, one capable of literary critique. I wonder what I’ll be able to say that you haven’t thought for yourself already? And there in my unease, brooding tension of the present coalesces into language, words forming threads, questions in my mind:
What’s psychotherapy for in a world like this? I struggle to keep hold... I don’t know... to answer simple questions like ‘what exactly do you do?’ or ‘tell me, how does this work?’ I wonder what it means to be healthy, well-adapted, in a society that feels increasingly, alarmingly, wrong? My lips move, though I’m silent. It’s like I’ve forgotten.... *What am I doing here?*

I feel an urge to run, I don’t know where...

And the clock draws my eye and you’ll be here soon, and I must prepare. Symbols for our ritual, our first encounter...
### Scene Three: Meeting room

The room is rectangular but feels round. Warm white walls press away the outside, holding inside open, somewhere we can make our mark. Folds of muslin on the windows diffuse the light, cushions propped but not too pert, angles of chairs conducive to tentative presence, mild scent in the air like maybe geranium or maybe cedarwood. Blue glasses of clear, cold water to freshen hot cheeks or dry lips and a peace lily in the corner. Watercolour paintings, blues and greens in slender gilt frames. All is tentative, toned down to give you space. Somewhere to breathe out.

I put on shoes, though I’m not going anywhere, only here with you. The house alters its purpose, doors closed against the domestic. Sylvester settles to sleep by the window in the living room and I sit on stairs facing the door, waiting for your knock, phone in hand in case you can’t find me and call. Hands rest on knees. Then I flick back again to Fisher’s introduction, forcing my focus there, away from the strangeness of anticipation, zoning out until the moment comes.

‘The metaphysical scandal of capital brings us to the broader question of the agency of the immaterial and inanimate: the agency of minerals and landscapes for authors like Nigel Kneale and Alan Garner, and the way that “we” “ourselves” are caught up in the rhythms, pulsions and patternings of non-human forces. There is no inside except as a folding of the outside, the mirror cracks, I am an other, and I always was. The shudder here is the shudder of the eerie, not of the unheimlich’.

Walls rise around me in the half-lit hallway, pressing inward, asserting interiority. You knock. I jump on the inside, and on the outside, I stand to attention like a little clockwork doll, I think to myself, brought to life and moving mechanically now, and opening - the door - and there you are and there it is, the moment of encountering the unexpected reality of one another’s presence and I allow you to take me in while I pretend in some way that it isn’t a shock for me to meet you. As if you aren’t a surprise to me, despite my preparation. You have clothes and are a very particular size and shape which makes me aware of my own physicality and how we contrast... and how we align. And you’re looking at me as the wind catches your hair and I invite you in and then comes the awkward instant in which you have to decide – accept my invitation or turn on your heel and run. Then it passes and you cross the threshold and I’m perplexed by all the ways you’re already unique and unlike any other and I can’t decide whether to guide you to the room as you walk in front of me, or whether to take the lead and let you follow along behind, which is more of a therapist thing to do I think, and I can see why it’s less, and also more, weird.

There’s no getting round the awkwardness of initial encounters, I’m thinking, or rather, the initial promise of intimacy of some kind, and being resigned to this, and my impossible task of both allowing and alleviating tension, I direct you with words along the corridor and come myself some distance after. I suppose this is wrong, but it feels right to me. I’m noticing your feet, your smell, the vibration that comes from your body, your presence and I try to decide if I’m eerie or weird or if these are: the staircase, the wooden floor, the art on the wall, the children’s books on the shelf (and are fairy tales really for children)? And I try not to breathe anywhere too near you, nor to hold my breath around you and make our proximity stranger. We walk up and through the transitional space and into the room and I tell you which chair is
yours and take mine because I always go in the same place and ask myself why, but can’t answer and conclude that I’d get confused if I mixed it up with different clients though to be honest I don’t like to mention there are others; it feels morally dubious and I don’t know if you’d agree.

‘What exactly do you do?’ you ask, seated upright at the front of your chair ‘I mean’ you say, ‘how exactly is this going to work?’

You’ve taken the initiative then. The worst questions first, your fist twists my insides. And I look at you directly and allow my mouth to open, hoping words will come to meet you and I’m anxious (and annoyed about it) so I don’t know what I say but you seem satisfied for now.

Because it isn’t the words, is it, but the feeling? How good am I at sensing you, which way to go? But saying so would ruin it. We’ll have to find our way to understanding somehow else, a more circuitous, slower unveiling of intuitions, impressions, purer elements of presence. We don’t yet know one another. I think you’re too thin, but I keep that in, feeling myself braced against expression, and my lip-quivering incoherence. I will you to feel my eyes, to feel me noticing, accepting you and ready to receive whatever you bring. I still don’t know where I belong in this encounter. Who am I for you? There’s a reflection in your eyes, light glimmering on watery surfaces and I breathe in, inflating myself to counter-affect whatever that is, and then I turn my body at an angle, arranging myself into a question mark, so that, as you gaze at me questioningly, I flick the attention back to you.

‘Why don’t we begin’ I say, ‘By you telling me what’s brought you here to this moment, to wanting to meet with me today?’

‘Oh, so I just begin?’ you say, and before I can respond your words are tumbling ‘I don’t know how… life’s fallen apart… that’s not true… I’m balancing… stepping-stones… it’s fine… falling apart… I had to catch myself… it was a battle… the children… I had to. Now I don’t know… I mean, now it’s over and I’m in… it’s like, an empty space. No one will speak to me, you know. I think I’ve just realised though, that they never did. I mean, not really. Wow, this really works! I don’t know… what’s next?’

‘Okay’ I say. And you look at me.

What’s next?

‘I think maybe you could tell me again, but this time let’s go slowly and maybe you could just say what happened instead of summing everything up neatly for me.’

‘Was that too tidy? You ask.

‘It was maybe a bit abstract,’ I say.

Slowly we move, in and out, back and forth… your abject space, you call it, and I ask you what you mean.
'I’m the abject of desire’ you declare, like it’s a joke but also serious. Like you’re acting, or perhaps not, perhaps crazy, which does alarm me. Either way, you’re performing something for me. You look at me with sharp gaze to see if I get it. Get you, that is. I’m being interviewed. Or played. It’s my move. I’ll play, then you’ll know I know too. I don’t know why, it’s an instinct. Feels right.

‘The abject... not a subject nor an object but hovering between the two...’

‘You know Julia Kristeva then,’ you say.

‘I know some French philosophy, yes but not too deeply. I’m more of a grazer. A nomad.’

You raise an eyebrow. Let it fall. And then you start to speak.

About a change of social status marked by absence, an absenting, your own, and no one round that day to help you. The removal men were ex-drug-addicts (‘ex’ is always provisional, you say, as some things are never over), whose services came cheap at short notice. They struggled to lift the furniture, but they were trying. Divorce is made private by those on the outside, you say, who don’t want to see behind the scenes, apparently fearing it would ruin the overall effect of happy couples, the stabilising axis around which the world, it seems, revolves. If it becomes obvious that a couple isn’t happy, life loses meaning for those aspiring to keep faith in the whole construct, and so they step away, you say, convincing themselves you’re an anomaly. Only defective beings end marriages. One’s state of mind determines reality, after all. Most likely you’re money-grabbing and sexually deviant. No one invites an explanation from you or expresses concern.

‘I need to talk about it,’ you say, ‘but there are no words. It’s not like death, but its inversion,’ you say, the oblivion a conscious experience as you feel yourself stripped of your identity, being dismantled as the fabric of your life is shredded. As if you’d never been, for all those years.

Who were you that whole time?

‘Was my life a fiction?’ you say. You called time, because that’s how bad things were. Now you find yourself looked upon with frowns or met with blank faces. Silence! Sympathetic ears are for the wounded party, who must in any case be kept close because, after all, he is someone. This is the difference, you tell me, between the author and the literary critic, in the hierarchy of being.

His evocation of uselessness, his smallness, his injury, only cement his prestige as an artist. You’re selfish not to recognise and support his talent! You may disentangle, respond, write all you like, but his remain the words yours revolve around. And no matter how effectively you deconstruct his arguments, tomorrow he’ll make them again, most fetchingly. When will you find some words of your own? You muse. There’s pain that could so easily be comedy but, not here. Can you write any words that don’t explain the thoughts of others, but appear to be, you know, more fully your own?
'Tom was there,' you say, ‘in that final scene we played together, writing in his notebook. He said he wanted to remember. “Our home!” he repeated softly, as he wandered through the wreckage of our lives.’

He didn’t engage physically with the process of vacating space, as if to reiterate that he was non-consenting. Your victim. You wavered, lacking any sensation of solidity, but carried on, conviction an act of faith because you couldn’t know. Not yet. His belief, on the other hand was firmly fixed, with material examples of the validity of your shared existence and thus he created a strong case for unbending continuity, a rigid and unreflecting adherence to the right and true reality.

The narratives of your lives had established themselves in opposition, stories that bore so little resemblance it might’ve been hard for a listener to believe one if they knew the other. You asked him to change, and he said ‘maybe you could be the one to change,’ and you said you’d done all the changing and he said, ‘well yes, I’m not the one being inconsistent here’ and ‘in any case, you knew what I was like,’ and somehow the conversation jumped, like old movie film spliced together into a loop. And you wanted to argue, but really not. At all. Which is why all this and you know he’ll thread your logic round ‘til it makes a nonsensical circle. It’s hard to detect, but you believe there’s an unnatural join somewhere that needs now to be unglued. You don’t want to argue it. Words have failed. And still he writes. Perhaps he’ll make a book of this, you think, and people will feel for him and believe you don’t. ‘There can be no absolute truth,’ Tom declared, unilaterally, ‘only perspectives,’ and ‘if you only chose to agree with me, things would be fine.’ And eventually he said, ‘you used to be nice. Have you thought about that?’ You have. You do still.

Now you’ve reached for the - something more – that feels real and true, beyond your dance around Tom. Trying to stop thinking in relation to he, to find your way out of the loop that came to dominate the whole of your world, whose shadow looms still, like dark absence, a heavy void pulling at you. How could anyone have believed that relationship? The shadow play of faces flickering on a screen... but nothing behind the eyes. You’re so glad to be out... and yet miss and long for the containment, the invisibility of belonging that offered you a kind of privacy, isolating captivity, but still a kind of freedom. Certainty arose from the shared presence, the singular mode of partnered reality. You miss it being that easy, letting go of your critical capacities and watchful gaze... oh, to relinquish control! To stop watching the world. To float... you mis believing.

How to navigate this new terrain, you wonder? The bigness of the space created... wasteland surrounding you. Was the relationship an escape from this? A years-long distraction, not the thing you were doing with your life but a way of avoiding life itself? Here now then. And you can’t locate it, or name it... but you believe there’s something more, a reason you let go of your life. It wasn’t yours. Things aren’t clear.

‘How to dismantle this bed?’ The removal men are wondering.

‘If your relationship was a shared public identity,’ I ask, ‘what of the world within? Was there one?’
‘If you mean in the relationship? Did we recognise each other? What’s worse: not to feel recognised or to look at your partner and realise you don’t know them at all? Or to look... you say finally, and think that you do see them, really do see, and it’s this recognition that sounds the death knell of the whole relationship.’

‘Parting was an act of acceptance,’ you say. You stopped asking Tom to see you, to be in relation with you, part of... a part you needed. He was already who he wanted to be and wanted you to accept him how he was. The consequence of relinquishing of your desire for mutuality was not the return to an intimacy of two who encounter one another in wonder. Not the imaginary couple, in other words, any longer. Really seeing him meant letting him go completely, and that’s how you unwittingly freed your mind and later your whole being. If he had understood that earlier, would he have pressed for it so hard? You shudder and I feel from you a physical sensation of disgust. You don’t want things back to how they were. Only an undoing, a vomiting out of all that you ever took in.

As the removal van departed and you prepared to drive away, *No Surprises* xxii played on your car radio. Something old released itself. Tom embraced you unexpectedly, and all the years, the dreams and the broken promises rushed between you. Yellow autumn sun shone low in the sky. Wind made leaves flicker on the trees and there was a gentle hush all round you and a blackbird singing and it was beautiful. It’s not like this in stories, you were thinking, except maybe a little, in his. Sometimes, later, you wonder what he’s done with the notes he made... details. Marks like children’s fingers’ smudges on walls and door handles. Somewhere, now, in a notebook, you believe that moment remains. Somewhere you can’t touch.

Then you remember more... after the end a beginning. First night alone quivering curled on the floor in the dark beyond yourself and lost in silence and still. The floor at the top of the stair. Your strength has left you, walked out into the night.

‘A Ghost in the Machine. Arthur Koestler,’xxiii you say to me with a meaningful look, and I try not to show alarm. Are you simply well-read or is this a sign of your unhinged deepness? Are you deeply unhinged?

Hair sticking to damp skin. You rock and rocking stops the shaking, belly retching, inside empty, cold and clammy, nothing leftness but the smell of darkness. That’s real.

On a mattress in the dark... down on the floor a bundle of sheets and duvets or is it a coat on the carpet and curled up you, small as you can, and your eyes closed and don’t cry because everyone knows you chose this. No one speaking to you now, not after what you’ve done. Freedom is absence and there will be no praise nor sympathy. You were the wrong woman all along and - that poor man.

You look at the boxes bent and scattered - like you – a puzzle to be remade. The one lying closest is full of books, saved with certainty. Your one point of clarity. People will keep away while you need help and reappear when you’re somehow better. If you want to be known, ever again, first you must smile convincingly. The books remain, loyal presences waiting for your hand to animate them. Which one will it be?
You light a candle, honour the moment, create it maybe. Like a birth, you tell yourself... a rite of passage undertaken alone. Nobody can help you become yourself. Except... who will join you in the darkness? Eyes closed, you reach into the box, pick one, feel its edges, think of Carbon, let the pages unfold and your eyes drift down the words until they’re captured:

‘Leave the door open for the unknown, the door into the dark. That’s where the most important things come from, where you yourself came from, and where you will go.’

A spooky sensation rushing up your spine stops you for an instant and you take a breath then read a little more:

‘“How do you go about finding that thing the nature of which is totally unknown to you?” … The things we want are transformative, and we don’t know what is on the other side of that transformation. Love, wisdom, grace, inspiration – how do you go about finding these things that are in some ways about extending the boundaries of the self into unknown territory, about becoming someone else?’

‘So, here are my questions’ you look to me again. ‘Did I manifest this whole situation? Not the ending, but the whole thing – was it random luck, meeting Tom, or was it inevitable? A roll of the dice? Or did I bring it on?’

‘Does it matter? I ask

‘Yes!’ you say ‘because I need to know if I can create a new future. Does anything change or am I destined to repeat this story again and again? What would the Greek myths tell us, or Psychoanalysis? Can I dream up something new and make it real? Because at the moment I can’t imagine it. My world’s completely blank. Can you help me?’

The question’s problematic for me. I hesitate to respond. There’s no cool way round the difficulty. I hear your drifting and your clarity. Words streaming from your mind, lips moving, but you can’t keep hold. Words are what you have. Words are all you have. I look at you and I feel you deserve my honesty:

‘I don’t know’ I say.

You stare at me.

‘If you like,’ I say, ‘we can see what happens.’

You smile wryly.

‘It’s time’ I say. ‘If you’d like to return next week...’ I say, and you say you’ll let me know.
A1 Scene Four: the last days of London

Late June 2018

‘The world is inseparable from the subject, but from a subject who is nothing but a project of the world. And the subject is inseparable from the world, but from a world which it projects itself.’

I’m on a train moving backwards, trying not to be sat beside, and I’ve read these words on GoodReads.com, being in that moment fixated, scrolling down my phone, then back up, while also watching a film about John Berger on my laptop, which is on the table in front of me. In my mind one speaks to the other, interplays or distractions, defocussing or deepening, my immersion two-fold, my attention divergent, concentrated yet disabled. ‘A project of the world’ rings in my ear as my mind wordplays with ‘project-ion’, itself at least two-fold in meaning and thus my thoughts become diffracted. Merleau-Ponty blows my mind. No, not true, it’s an opening: to multiplicity. I think of a prism and ‘Dark Side of the Moon’ and how my mind moves thus… exhausted by meaning’s potentials, flowing. I let the words wash over me, soak into what they will - touch. I allow it. Feel the lightness of the train’s kinetic thrust, gliding tandem with the force pulling toward London. I don’t know how the train goes, only accept the forward motion through my backward body, yielding to the experience, becoming swallowed whole in whole movement. I close my eyes but feel self-conscious letting go, like that in public space.

Open. Berger shifts modes. His is sometimes critique and then art. For me he becomes art. His art: inquiry maybe. Is that what all art is? Am I conceptual? He critiques like an artist, maybe, the material under scrutiny. Something touches, squeezes more like, close to my heart, a feeling like time slowing, and a sense of longing, for presence. I feel close to him, Berger, though I’m only encountering him now for the first time and I know that in reality he died last winter. That’s why this film is around for me to happen upon, I reflect. My first encounter is in the mourning. A ghost who’s not yet flown.

A man sits beside me and places his laptop next to mine on the table. It’s the same as mine only bigger; more silver and metallic. He brings a throbbing beat, Airpods behind curling locks of golden hair falling. Our enforced proximity was inevitable, I think, watching the train fill with bodies and we look at one another briefly, as if to apologise, the base escaping from the sides of his brain, soundtrack to his life infiltrating mine. I want to experience it fully or not at all. My hand reaches up to his ear, lifts out an Airpod, places it in my own. A digital world turns alive and the man looks at me with eyes widening as if to say, ‘what d’you think you’re doing?’

And I pout my lips against a smile and widen my eyes and he moves and I move in a seated head and shoulder dance bumping up and moving in time and all becomes T69 Collapse... we meet fully in that moment, connected in time, harmony...

Of course not.

I sit there, now irritated and wishing I would, that the world were a place in which I could. But I can see the name of the track on his laptop screen and I memorise it. T69 Collapse. I imagine
a dinosaur falling to its knees. Only when it’s released later that year do I link this fragment of momentary contact to your account of connection. Of potential moving in the not yet. The man is playing an unreleased track. He must be in the industry, I realise later. Or is time playing tricks? Maybe a red T-shirt under a thin jacket. Charcoal jeans. Can’t see his feet, so impossible to know for sure. Without shoes, how to judge someone? In retrospect the memory gives me a shiver. The world is small and filled with coincidence, or perhaps it’s inevitable that paths cross, that whole worlds intertwine.

I move along a little, but only inside, our forms fixed in position by the plastic moulded seats covered in a strangely uncomforiting material like Fuzzy Felt.xxx I try to sink in; nothing gives but my skin. I gaze out of the window at greens and browns and birds and blue. I imagine feeling the air on the other side, wind touching my face, sucking it in, breathing cool awakening. The film is German, though the subject is an English artist living in rural France. I watch its reflection on the glass, mingling with the Wiltshire landscape outside. The footage shows Berger living in Haute Savoie, conversing with the film’s maker, light flickering, atmospheric nature and he, recounting how his eyes have recovered to him a forgotten sense of clarity, a return to a capacity for childlike distinction between lines and surfaces. He had cataract surgery and is now looking at the world with fresh eyes, having habituated to blurred edges, less boundaried. He feels a contradiction - young eyes on an old man. I like looking at the space where he works, the objects of his environment in relation to the outdoors.

In my peripheral view the grey and lime green mouldings of the train hold their own in relation to the carved landscape, colour pallets blending, a designer’s dream 3D printed into being. I’m within it, a small exemplar of the intended content, feeling irrationally disturbed by the other mismatched humanoid forms, splattered on the canvas of the architect’s vision. Hats, hair, skin and earphones. Strange-shaped heads, sweating feet in bulbous trainers, flesh fused with tattoo ink, histories written, representations exposed in the morning heat. Proud yet uncomfortable, selves, with animal odours rising; physical existence an embarrassment, unorthodox, unauthorised. How on Earth is one meant to be? Not like this, surely. I try not to touch the music man, proximity a hairs’ breadth, tingling presence a sensation or is that an imagining? I’m quite sure he tries not, too. Our movements attune to assure absence of tactile sensation. Quite sure we share this understanding. I decide that John Berger has a marvellous voice. I can’t think of another word for it.

A person’s ‘way of looking’, John Berger had been saying, ‘is’ he was saying, (crisp yet round, received pronunciation), ‘an attitude, orientation or worldview so intrinsic to the person it has coloured perception and became almost a way of being... I read more about him as he speaks, read him writing: ‘Every way of looking at the world’, he wrote in 1959, ‘implies a certain relationship with that world, and every relationship implies action.’xxx As the film progresses Berger reveals a preoccupation with ‘peasants’, with whom he claims some affinity, and I immediately experience difficulty around this, a sensation like guilt or complicity, but it is about his seeing not how I might see him – my watching him watch is precisely the problem he popularised, then sought to move past - and should I worry about the many potential feelings evoked in me by his nice studio, or can I simply allow myself to hear - the way he sees with people he recognises as subsistence farmers, in terms of their relationship to time? Time, that is, as cyclic rather than linear. The future always known, predictable, points in time anticipated, a past returning. The idea of ‘progress’ colours the worldview of urban populations, he sees...
something... time and space... and Paddington approaching my window graffiti tattooed on the embankments and I wake out of this: of reverie, and... Berger is saying:

‘Art is either a social practice to maintain illusions, or it is a glimpse of what lies beyond other practices, beyond them because it is not subject to the tyranny of the modern view of time...’

I shut my laptop and pack away my things, suck in stomach, inhale, anticipate, movement, wonder - when will the man be moving? Shoulders whisper their presences, hairs’ breath, magnetising presence. Mutual charge. We apologise with faux awkwardness and without exactly looking at one another – the art of not looking. I turn back to my phone and message Aria.

‘In London!’ At what point does this become true? ‘Are you free?’ It might have been an idea to plan, but my urge came suddenly, and I followed it unquestioningly. Needed only to be in London, where I feel sensations of release and freedom.

‘Meet me at the Rodeo. There’s an artist, Abbas over from Toronto and I’m showing him round. Come.’

‘Do you mind? Will I be intruding’

‘Yes! But it’s perfect. I need you there. Then we’ll be in company. You’ll protect me from the intensity of being two alone together.’

So, I’m to be the outsider whose presence mediates conversational flows, directing them across formal surfaces and no venturing into deeper crevices of shared histories’ rewriting. The surface delights me though, and I’ve no need to know the beneath. I tap ‘Rodeo’ into my phone then follow its directions. The phone takes me to a black door in Charing Cross Road, street flooding me with memory, though less sublime than in my mind because of hot drilling, dusty traffic and red and white striped hoardings. Buildings works everywhere, scaffolds darkening doorways of Foyles a little way down the road. There’s a bell.

I press it.

Am granted entry. Up the stairs and into the exhibition space. Space. I’ve never been here before and I’m the only person, other than a smiling woman with exaggerated face and hair, sitting behind the desk as I enter. I love that I never knew and now I’m here, a piece of puzzle that had waited for me all the years. London’s open secrets thrill.

In this set-back, semi-private place, I find myself meeting the mind of Mark Aerial Waller, who is himself in deep encounter with Mark E. Smith of The Fall. Something disorienting, and disturbed. Perhaps it’s the terrible music... terror inflicted, expressed. Raging anger elevated as an artform. Calm wooden floor in the corner room, up high and light and air above the drilling, the dusty, the mottled street below. I’m caught between viewing the gallery and the exhibition. No sign of Aria. I’m too quickly becoming immersed in the disorienting, in the filmscape, the communication with Mark E Smith who was never my type and who only men liked as I recall, perhaps Waller is obsessed like all Fall fans and I feel no frame of reference; and the
film is in the middle. I retreat into a more familiar thought, rebelling against rebellion, wondering instead if I ought to look like I might buy something. A large chunk of art? But the woman hasn’t followed me. What’s the expected composure here? I am surface deep concerned, trying to orient. I can’t seem to read the room. Even alone, I feel in need of a persona to inhabit. Who am I... gallerista?

I pick up the only clue to be found, a black and white A4 leaflet, two photocopied pages stapled together, much small writing, the film draws me, assaulting my senses. I don’t know if the bench is a bench or an exhibit. I sit on it, rebellious, and start reading in the middle:

‘Historically, pandæmonium has been courted by the European artistic avant-garde as a productive derangement and potential rearrangement of the senses (colonising, imperialistic, it is a model of civilisations formed in conflict).’

I can’t really concentrate, except to wonder if my inability to focus is the intention. It feels difficult in here. Dysfunctional. Then Aria appears gently behind me, presence a soft, warm exhalation. I turn away from the film screen and am introduced to Abbas. They are cool, crisp shirted, fresh scented in the summer heat; clean apparitions emergent from the clouds of dust and confusion, solid presences amidst the psychic pandæmonium inducing ‘compressed occultish channels for wayward historical voices and embodiments.’ We perform formalities, ritualistic social delicacies.

I refer to the exhibition and wonder what we should make of it, but Aria is unconcerned.

‘Let’s just go’ he says, and I feel released. From my hand, the leaflet shouts up at me:

LEAVE NOTHING BEHIND BUT YOUR FOOTPRINTS AND TAKE NOTHING BUT YOUR TIME

I stuff it in my handbag and close it; the bag produces a satisfied sounding magnetic click.

We wander along Manette Street, through secret alleyways onto Greek Street. I’m not in charge and it takes me a while to recognise that Aria’s not enjoying the responsibility of finding our next destination. After wandering and some protracted deliberation we stop for a combination of cocktails and something to eat for Abbas, out under the black and white canopy next to Barrafina, which is inexplicably closed. A blue plaque above our heads declares this grand house was once the home of Karl Marx. Beneath it we sit, apparently waiting, unsure for what. Abbas is inside ordering from the menu while we’ve ordered Mojito’s which haven’t arrived. As the world moves around us Aria is irritable. ‘This Soho’ he says ‘it’s such a parody of itself, but what’s happened to its soul? It’s empty.’

I must have said something in turn at this point but I don’t remember what...

‘There’s nothing here now for artists.’ He speaks so clearly like Berger, ‘This city is owned, like this country is owned. It always has been! Look at the names of these Streets, these Squares! Every last one is in the name of someone real, a family asset of the old aristocracy who claim
it all if they want to. It’s easy to forget in London that London is in England. A playground for the landed. Our lives have been lived by their leave, in the midst of an abomination, a post war blip where something different was possible. But the space is closing in... no one can work here now. No space for artists, creatives. It’s too expensive, there’s no cheap space and time to cultivate the unknown. Things have changed, or rather, they’ve gone back.

We wait. In our silence, words come to mind and I search for them on my phone then read them to Aria:

‘Every ruling minority needs to numb and, if possible, to kill the time-sense of those whom it exploits... This is the authoritarian secret of all methods of imprisonment.’

And we’re about to begin unravelling this when Abbas returns and the drinks arrive and after a conversation about the anticipated food – Aria feels it’s important that Abbas eats properly - he shows us a copy of a book about his work, which is very shortly to be published and I remember that we’re here! We’re here.

On the cover of the book, ivy reaches across my grandparents’ carpet. Aria flicks it open, and there are cedar trees: inside galleries, blocking entries, directing human flows. Abbas says cedar trees are used to demarcate human territory, implying privacy, operating as sentries, border guards on forbidden spaces. He places them unexpectedly, disrupting other implied passageways, such as the natural paths humans create across parks and suchlike (’desire lines,’ I say). As Abbas explains his work, I read Omar Kholeif’s introduction to the Chapter in which the trees are pictured:

‘The artist Abbas Akhavan’s work is anchored by a life-long study of how humans interface with the world as well as its borders, and the ideology that this interaction fosters. These examinations reveal a milieu that has emerged after post-modernism, in which “contingency” is the go-to word. Contingency all the time! Contingency characterizes how our nation’s borders are constructed and imagined to how governments allow humans to move across geopolitical territories.’

We talk about the fleeting nature of his work, which has a temporality tending towards decay. And I think about London and feeling the flatness, the party over, nothing new growing here... and I love it still, feel searing pain seeing what Aria sees. Knowing shared, bitter confirmation
of our senses and reason. I see how it’s become, is becoming, yet still I look for cracks of possibility. ‘There’s always more,’ I say.

I ask about some pictures - of curtains that seem to have blown outside of windows, about lines of washing: Variations on Laundry, and Abbas looks at me, his patience apparently tested. ‘It’s about the inside showing on the outside’ he says ‘about the boundaries between private and public and how they disrupt one another.’

‘Oh I see’, I say, though I don’t. I’m drinking cool Mojito with an artist from Toronto on a hot summer’s evening in Soho with my dear friend Aria and we are sad and also, this is delightful! Aria asks him how the food is and encourages him to eat.

‘What’s BEYOND THE HEDGEROW?’ I ask.

‘Oh yes’ says Abbas ‘there are a couple of stories in the book. Fictions written by other people entirely.’

‘And how do they relate to your work?’ I ask.

‘They don’t’ he replies ‘or not directly, anyway. They run alongside, in parallel, do you see?’

‘So they’re simply present,’ I reply, and he looks more satisfied with me, perhaps because his meal is nearly finished.

Aria moves on to consider his work Islands, also depicted in the book.

‘This was an installation in Dubai, an imitation gold cut-out of the city’s own sky-line. The work was available to purchase by the square foot, in tiled sections.’

‘Did people understand?’ I ask.

‘Well, they bought it’ he replies. ‘The installation gradually disappeared’... its decomposition a steady decline, as with the organic works... the capitalist tendency ate away at its own representation... I was well paid for that one!’

We’re itching to move and in our transitional state I look up ‘contingency’ on my phone. I think it means that one thing depends upon another but the Cambridge Dictionary corrects me: “something that might possibly happen in the future, usually causing problems or making further arrangements necessary.”

‘Aria, we’re living in contingent times,’ I say, feeling us frozen. ‘we’ve become unable to envisage or plan for our future, because these wider concerns, about how the country runs, for example, and how the world is to keep running for that matter, have intruded, and into our personal trajectories. We have to take account of some imminent changes, but we don’t know what.’
He leans on me ‘you know darling, really it was always this way, but we had forgotten it, living as we do, as we have done, in this part of the world, with such certainty about how things are organised. There’s been such stability, we stopped imagining it could ever be otherwise.’

I don’t like talking about it, as if it makes something unthinkable more real. Yet it comforts me to find shared a sense of it, tectonic plates moving somewhere deep beneath us. There’s also the question of what to do now, since we’ve examined the book and since Aria and I have grown light-headed, while Abbas is clear as a bell. What’s the next arrangement to be? I can’t conceive it. The void produces an intensity of feeling and abruptly, urgently, I decide I have to leave them. Kisses and darling I’m so glad we had this time together, and that’s heartfelt, even with sunglasses and statement shoes, knowingly making shapes that belong to images of Soho’s landscape; performing walking away, blending into the evening sunlight, breathing the city in, the city out. Everything gently pulsates. Feels right.
A1 Scene Five: growing space

‘Making a journey implies the potential for separation.’ I’m reading.

‘Turtle points out the challenges for the technologically “tethered” generation to separate from parents and make the transition to adult independence in a culture where everyone is “always on” (2011, p. 173). Winnicott describes the early beginnings of the separate self as the achievement of “unit status”, where the infant can recognise him/herself as a whole person engaging in a continuous interchange between inner and outer reality. This is equally applicable to the patient and he posits that through the mother/therapist’s empathy with the infant/patient, the infant/patient is able to internalise and feel safe in the movement from dependence to autonomy (Winnicott, 1971a). Inherent within that growth is frustration and separation. Winnicott describes the good-enough mother starting off with almost complete adaptation to her infant’s needs, gradually lessening the active adaptation according to the infant’s ability to tolerate frustration and separation. “Incomplete adaptation to need makes objects real” (Winnicott, 1975a, p.238). It is the finding of self, the experience of presence that roots us in reality and that selfhood and sense of reality is what analysts are there to help their patients discover.”

Sometimes my mind tangles. The complexity of trying to convey what I do, of answering your rapid-fire questions ‘what is psychotherapy?’ and ‘why are you a psychotherapist?’ threaten to overwhelm me. The detail of theories that overlap yet contradict, whose words vie for primacy in my thoughts... the ‘now this, and then again, the understanding that comes from ways of seeing, from the listening and from the not knowing, which undoes all certainty, the certainty being - and I can be sure of this one thing - misplaced. The too-bigness of it presses at my skull and I move to a different part of the house, seeking simplicity. If I think I know, I’m misguided, which means I’m lost, can only ever be, must strive to be. I’m agitating in my brain, like a washing machine, I think. Foaming catastrophe out of which will, I hope emerge... This is the truth, isn’t it... that you’re conveying to me. The way you’re checking me out, pressing me to articulate something you find believable, about me and about why we’re here. You want to know if you can trust me. Maybe that doesn’t come easy for you.

I remember Berger once wrote ‘Within nature space is not something accorded from the outside, it is a condition of existence born from within. It is what has been or will be, grown into.’ Maybe that’s us, I think, not grown into our space yet.

A pile of washing needs hanging by the back window. It smells of neroli and I’m mildly high, intoxicated by scent. Ah, the secret pleasure of housewifely incarceration, of repetition and isolation; the mind can drift, be lifted, folded, taken out of time and into serenity, a laudanum languor induced by laundry. Unfolding cold, damp cloth, flattening it over thin rails, I move into my hands, feel the wetness, textures grainy, the who-ness of the clothing, - oh the children! My eye is drawn into the garden. A feral cat stares back at me. I’m not sure; maybe a black and white fox? It takes hold of my gaze in a way that I’m sure cats aren’t meant to. Strength, clarity, laser beam eyes... what an enormous, little creature! We size each other up. A connection is made, a thing communicated, all things at transmitted at once, instantaneous and direct. Then it’s done. The moment ends as it begins. We stand there in the silence, glass windowpane between us. Ice
cold river of chill runs up my body. He seems very brave, I think. I’m slightly frightened and look away then feel pulled back, look again. He doesn’t break my gaze. He has enormous eyes, wide, alert, ready to move. Patches of black and white fur, thick and rough-oiled. He’s strong, yes, ready. I feel seen. I’ve been summoned.

I take my eyes away again and then look back furtively, He moves briskly toward me and the back door. Closer in, he presses two front paws up against the glass and meows right at me. I step forward, open the door and he darts back out of reach, yet remains still, exhorting urgency. He’s hungry. I consider my options and their implications. The wild thing is clear on his position. I scatter some of Sylvester’s turkey-balls on the ground before him and he finds each one, gobbles it up. He looks at me for more but I’m not sure. I close the door.

Time’s ticking; I finish hanging the washing. You’ll be here soon and maybe it’ll be too subtle to notice, but you’ll breathe damp neroli laundry scent and maybe it’ll make you feel at home. And I’ll look at you with the directness of that wild thing, I think, remembering a kind of simplicity. My aim: to affect a connection. I’m to awaken now but not too much, only find the zone where I’ll notice you, pick up gentle signals, communicate in ways only you understand, that meaningfully move you…. The aim is presence, being, not the intrigue of theory, though that’s easier said than done, I remember, when I am once again opposite you.

‘You like art, don’t you?’ You begin, still hoping to interrogate me before revealing yourself. ‘It’s only fair,’ you argue.

I wonder about what I give of myself and what I hold back, my face moving in several directions at once – eyebrows curious, a smile, a nod that you’ll understand as ‘I see what you’re doing and I’m giving this to you, but why are you asking?’

“Yes, men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at.” That’s John Berger,’ you tell me; I breathe the eerie, or is it weird feeling of our lives running parallel, yet unrelated. ‘Anyway, right now’ you say ‘I am realising how people looked at me. Not the way I thought, or rather, I never thought they did. Look at me, I mean. I thought they were more accepting.’ Then you laugh heartily, as if you think you should have known. ‘I mean, we don’t know what’s happening in other people’s lives, not unless we ask them. Not unless they tell us, know what I mean?’ You’ve taken on a London accent, memory activated. Here in the provincial city speech is slower, every sentence rising at the end, like a question. Why your question and am I meant to answer? What would be honest? Can one ever know what another means?

‘I’m wondering what you mean,’ I say, which is about more than knowing, about connecting, like enlightenment oh, too much! I’ll try and keep out of your way now, by which I don’t mean switch off, by which I mean listen. I think I understand what to do, then it seems all wrong and I find myself going with, without knowing what. Improvising, I suppose. Making myself up as I go along. I bear with an awkward silence, giving it to you.

‘Do you know how much men talk?’ you say, ‘They say men don’t really talk to each other but men like Tom talk to each other all the time. It’s a brotherhood, a tribe they might say, like the appropriators they are. All those words of love and community, family even, because in the arts people have to trust each other. I thought it was a beautiful thing. I thought I was part of
a community with a culture of love and acceptance. Only now, outside it, I can see it was an act. They enacted love, community but there was a conditionality to it all. Tom insisted on putting the tribe first, fearing exclusion. I couldn’t understand that, thought he had poor self-esteem but now I see he was right. He couldn’t belong to that tribe and be committed elsewhere. It’s a vicious thing. It wasn’t that we weren’t happy together, or that he didn’t want the children, but he felt it dangerous to be perceived as adult. It made him look old, he said, uncommitted to the way of the artist. When it came to moving on, becoming our next selves, he refused.

‘How did you appear to him? I ask you. I’m trying to be like the cat, falling into your world, seeing how you move. I don’t want to press only see with your eyes. I’m thinking about my body, my own body and whether I can wriggle or need to be still and I do I wriggle and itch and move and does it mean I’m finding it hard to stay with you, to listen? I’m not listening, am I. Oh fuck what are you saying? I ‘ve fallen out. I tune back in.

‘I tried to appear easy going. I tried not to be demanding but in the end, decisions needed to be made and he didn’t make them, so I did and then I appeared controlling. Too decisive, not stoned in a hippy dress floating around parties, drifting in the imaginary, artistic, making it look easy like he loved. I had a job and bought us a house near his family. We needed that for the baby, making a world for it to come into. I made a choice and shaped his life without his consent, he said, like some dominatrix – an enormous and ever-expanding woman. He wished I’d make myself a little smaller, less intimidating, he said.

And you lean forward like the cat. ‘Tell me,’ you say, ‘have you carried a universe your belly, grown a life within?’ And this time I hold my face still, keep silent. I’m not going to move a millimetre though I’ll have to work out later why. Intuition. I follow. I’m glass, mirror. I look straight back at you.

You continue.

‘People wouldn’t choose him if he didn’t say yes, he said. So he went out in the world, while I stayed home with the children. The children showed me that life is made of magic, which is how I became a mother. The girl I had been was gone without any farewell. The boy kept himself away. He missed it.’

‘Perhaps he feared his demise if he allowed his potential transformation,’ I say.

‘I wished he’d come and be with me, make the family together. Tried making it look easy, being the undemanding company that was the currency of my acceptance in the bohemian family,’ but it wasn’t easy. Maybe he believed I didn’t need him, so I came clean about the gritty reality. He began an affair with an old girlfriend. They once painted each other blue. He wanted me to be the kind who paints him blue, not talks about mortgage payments and needs a new washing machine and more sleep and wonders what kind of life we mean to offer our children. He wanted me to be an artist, make mosaics, maybe. “Think less,” he said, “be more light.” Mosaics. “I’m making lives for our children,” I said, and “is this not artistry enough? Can we flavour this life beautiful? Blue maybe? Who’ll pay the mortgage? Who’ll see the wonder of what I’m making here? Do you know that babies don’t do washing?” But by then he was back out the door.’
‘It gradually became clear that this situation was my fault. I was suspected of something, had been too strident, or not strident enough. I was slow to recognise that his actions were evidence of my failure. I thought times had changed, that we were a different generation. How could he do this to me?’

‘I became an object outside the collective. He told people when we had sex. As if... I don’t know. Is that meant to be okay? I felt it as betrayal. He said it was because he was pleased. It was meant to be private, a symbol of the relationship. Part of our relationship. But they were ‘us’ and I was ‘her’. I don’t know when it became that way. It was an uncomfortable thing, delicate, do you see? Tom was never mine. His allegiance was elsewhere... so much part of things. So well-known in the right circles. How do you think I appeared to them? How do you think I seem?’

Later, I tell the children about the wild cat who came and they’re concerned. ‘What about Sylvester?’ they say. ‘He wouldn’t like it.’ And then again ‘you can’t let it starve out there.’ And ‘what are you going to do?’ A wild thing has made itself my concern, a responsibility I don’t want, and yet.... The children’s gazes hold me to account, and I stand between, wondering how my life became this. In the night the wild thing reappears, standing on the Velux window over my bed. He stares down at me, meows pointedly and I shiver, ghosts of Cathy and Heathcliff momentarily present. The next day he’s back in the garden, following Sylvester on his circuit round the sunspots of the flower beds and shed roofs. Sylvester spits and threatens ineffectually. ‘Sylvester can’t deal with this!’ say the children, and I know it’s true. He waves his paw half-heartedly at his would-be foe, who takes it as a game. Sylvester then retreats to the warm soil of a plant pot in which I have an apple tree. The wild thing follows and sits a small distance off, watching expectantly, eventually taking the same coiled pose close by on the ground beside Sylvester’s pot. The tree is suffering, I reflect. It can’t grow. Yet I cannot plant the tree out in the ground. I don’t feel settled here. I don’t want to settle. I’m not convinced this house is my home or rather, I fear becoming lost if I make the commitment. It isn’t only men who get this way. The tree needs to be ready, like me, to move when the moment comes. Nomadic impulses.

My eye rests on the cats. The leaves of the apple tree dance. Does one choose how life unfolds or is there in fact little leeway to influence one’s personal outcome? A question of privilege, obviously, but all things being equal... Is this my outcome or am I still on a journey toward the life I aspire to live? Should I be having these thoughts when the children and these cats and the apple tree, are all convinced this halfway place is home? When did I stop journeying? When the clients started circling? As if I were one who had arrived? It doesn’t feel like living. As if living were a feeling one is meant to know.

The next time you come, I say ‘perhaps you’re wondering what you did to get yourself in the position you’re in...’

‘No shit,’ you reply. ‘I already told you that.’

‘Yes, I’m sorry if I’ve been a bit slow to grasp your meaning. I think I get it now.’ I mean I feel it now, that uncertainty about how to move into something more lifelike... to be flowing in the
stream of life I questioned it so much it's hard to be sure if I’m really living or just someone who watches others.

‘The basis of our empathy is also the basis of our misunderstanding.’ I say. ‘When we listen, our minds fill in blanks - the unknowable parts of others - with feelings and experiences of our own. It’s not natural to really listen, to encounter afresh, to hear what someone is saying, really saying.’

‘Are you meant to say that to me, Ms Therapist?’

‘I’m trying to explain how it works. Maybe I didn’t hear and now I do.’

You breathe in sharply and roll your eyes toward the window.

‘I don’t know how to move my life on’ you say, ‘I mean how to be me in a relationship if I can lose myself so badly. Was it inevitable? Because if wasn’t my doing, I’m powerless and if it was, I’m gormless. How can I live the way I choose when I don’t know who I am or what I want? Or was it never about that for someone like me? Was I always a side dish on the table of life?’

‘Do you want to look at it?’ I ask and you look at me.

‘I’m here, yes?’

‘Okay, it’s taken me a while to hear you’ I say. ‘Where’s the beginning? Perhaps we can start there.’
Act Two

Before Time(s), Making Tomorrow Promises
A2 Scene 1: ‘The problem of time is like the darkness of the sky’

Toss and turn, my mind plays music:

It’s all here just a moment
One breath and then it’s gone
It’s all here just a moment
A trick of space and time.

I see you down on the beach reaching your arms out to the sea, the sky and the gulls circling overhead, as if letting past be blown away, as if to say, ‘bring it’ to what’s to come. The boy is with you and at the same time gazing elsewhere. Paths divergent? Maybe you’ve calculated in your head; he won’t make it with you. No ties, just the skin you’re in. Best to leave him here, you’re thinking. Maybe. And I’m wondering, can anyone really be left behind? Why’s he here then, in my dream?

I wake.

We’re back in the room, and you ask again, ‘how did I come to be here in this moment, with no one to talk to but you?’ And ‘is it bad luck or bad choices and am I a bad person or are other people bad or is it the world that makes things go wrong, peddling social expectations that can’t be met or is that they’re impossible to meet and still have some semblance of myself remaining?’

‘Well, you tell me,’ I say. ‘How might you answer these questions?’ I’m a cow sometimes. ‘Is there anything you remember that might be relevant?’

And your eyes turn to fire, a glare that might incinerate me, but then you look away to the window and breathe in. I breathe in.

‘You’re meant to be the expert,’ you reply, ‘that’s why I’m here, because I can’t untangle this myself.’

And I say, ‘most relevant is what comes, if we let it.’

And you say, ‘okay, but it’s a maelstrom in there, so which thing?’

And I’ve no way of knowing, which annoys you even more and you mention my fee and I agree, ‘yes, you’re paying for this, but in my expert opinion the best use of your time would be to dally around. See what memory presents.’

‘In memorium,’ you say, ‘for a life lost, or never found, a missing something, fallen out, somewhere along the way.’

We speak
in circles;
Stirring,
‘til we find
we’ve fallen
And the place is Hoxton Road, London on a Tuesday morning, cold October ‘98. Bathed in sunshine and feels so beautiful and you’re not in the office; you can’t bear it there, and anyway you’re hungover and feeling like you might be sick if you enter into its dry heat, all static nylon carpets, whirring computers, bitter scent of boiled coffee. The job has taken a downward spin since Lady Diana’s death, whereupon you stopped believing this world is just or fair and started to believe in the existence of an elite establishment concerned with perpetuating itself. The life of the office bears no relation to ideas of the books it produces. They would deconstruct the hierarchy, the patriarchy, the glaring classism. Moving backwards, this feels like your first encounter with the system not as abstract concept but more something you’re part of. Such places exist, you say, even though Kafka’s written The Castle, and you’ve read it! You’ve all read it! Yet here you are.

‘Recognising something and deconstructing it,’ you say, ‘doesn’t change it does it?’

And I look at you and tell you ‘I don’t know,’ and you roll your eyes and carry on.

Outside, you walk along the canal... with no plan, an anti-plan, refusal of the day. You should go, or phone in sick. Ambivalent, you wander, feeling the physical forces that pull you... outside, breathing cold air and free – or inside sitting quietly at your desk? If you go and sit in your place, there’ll be no need to formulate an excuse, no need to feel bad other than within yourself, reading manuscripts about Foucault and panopticons in the prison of your own choosing. Mind free, body enslaved, hot room... your body says.... walk... needs physical freedom... a kind of moon walk... You should be heading East toward Old Street but you’re moving West... feet carrying you into a needed wrongness. Right. Today you step outside and experience something other. Something or other. You give yourself permission.

Outside by the water... a path runs along the edge. A shopping trolley. Green water. Smell of gnats. Ducks gliding, slime, sublime. You float along unthinking. At Camden Lock you come off the canal and look for a quiet place to phone work. You’ve thought of an excuse and are ready with your sick voice. Hub bub Camden, however, holds no quiet place. You walk. You’re looking for the right place and you’ll know it when you find it... sniff the air, sense it out. Must call, you think, but the impulse is - keep moving - and you don’t want to stop... feet pull... on and on, all the way through Camden and pick a road... don’t know where you’re taking yourself... follow... need to breathe. Hill and cars and slip along a back road, long and long, and old and tree lined. Beautiful. A place yearning for its own self, you think, and walk and don’t wonder, breathing and moving and a feeling of being somewhere... hidden, yet real. Hypnotised. No one in the world knows you’re here in this moment. That gives you a thrill... can’t explain and don’t need to. A kind of high... altered state... you take yourself there... love to be invisible and walking... walking.

And then a kind of waking. You’re not sure.

Where are you going?
A sensation of being outside, on the outside of a hundred, a thousand, a hundred thousand worlds, lives, people, buildings visible on their outer edge, their public face, one denying you access, knowledge of their interiors. Out of place that feels wrong, where now? This road may last forever.

You walk on. Purposefully.

You want to get past it now, past this place that conjures pasts, past your own past and a present you can’t accept your place within, can’t become part of in the role you’re given... and quick as you can... you speed up, though your feet are aching now... and you press on through the pain and down the steps at the end of Maresfield Gardens onto Finchley Road and the howl of the traffic and you breathe it. Your presence, anonymity, your potential... restored...

You move toward Finchley Station. Are you about to catch a train, you wonder? Where? And work crosses your mind. The warm office, undemanding chair. Computer to play on and coffee machine. The warm privacy of the stationary cupboard – joy! And photocopies of the crossword in the kitchen for people to share at lunch. You could be emailing Sean Cubitt about his Digital Aesthetics book. You’re not meant to do that, at least, you haven’t asked but you take it as read; you’re meant to ensure the quality of the work, but not to take an interest in, you know, the content. The product. You’re meant to be working in an area in which you have some expertise, but does anyone know what digital living means? You’re sure you’re not meant to overly correspond with Sean C, but you feel compelled. He responds. Was it the cover art, a galaxy of stars, or a remark of yours about the emergent potentials of cyber culture, which would have made him curious about your view of things? The emails ping... long exchanges... thoughts and ideas. You and he... that is, Sean C... are only words on screens. Beings without physical form, not destined to meet... yet you enjoy the novelty of pure digital connection... aesthetically informed... enacting a possibility... you were, you see now, performing the future, a play that was yet to become reality.

You enjoy, you say, ideas... trying to grasp, encounter, explore their shapes and forms... and so you’re inexorably drawn to the content of your in-tray - not as material object - but as source of potential enlightenment; transformation... perhaps that’s it. Thoughts always hazy, their meanings grasped temporally, visually, sonically, but finding no easy translation into the language of this nine-to-five world. Here, ideas are packaged and sold undigested, your blurbs assisting with their enticing linguistic aesthetics - your best feature. All this paradoxical existence you tolerate because it offers a single certainty in the form of a monthly pay cheque, giving you a degree of freedom, a chance to be present in London’s beating core, even as the obligation takes you out of whatever flow following your nose might bring. Still, being there, soup of a dragon’s belly exuding mist, a mystic moment, all in the midst of a shifting, compels you to stay present, bear witness to the city’s tail flicking, spine arching, daring you to ride it. You can look, but it’s not like living enough. Never enough. And having imagined a new future, glimpsed another way of being, there can be no letting go, no believing any other way is real. This hot air, paper everywhere place: a reality unawoken to its own unravelling.

You can’t unknow it: your days in publishing feel numbered, which is perhaps the same as making a choice. And you wonder again... where are you going? Here in this moment, are you really going to walk back into that office now?
It’s too late for today. You press on past the train station and another building appears on the corner: Camden Art Gallery. It promises all you need: warmth, light, space, quiet, art, café... phone. It’s the right place for you.

You enter.

Your phone call is first and, you feel, unconvincing, especially the clang of coins being accepted. It’s not the first time you’ve done this as the person on the other end knows. You each say the correct words, you in your hollow sick voice and he lazily half-feigning concern. The proper box may now be ticked. It’s true that if you’d gone to the office that day you would have been sick. It’s true that you need to be out... free... and now you’ve found a sanctuary. This is perhaps your real work: to investigate the world. Why is it that your being here is an act of rebellion, but others are allowed... belong? Who gets to be an artist and who a blurb-writer, selling ideas she cannot embody?

You walk into the gallery and read the writing on the wall: Mike Nelson: Futureobjects, it says. The room is full of rubbish, you think, then, perhaps that’s harsh. But it’s true. One end of the room is heaped with objects balanced in relation... wood, wire, plaster... it looks... undone... you glance around and wonder what to make of it.

‘Are you familiar’ says a voice behind you ‘with Mike’s work?’ You turn and find a man, black shirt open at the collar, charcoal jeans on drainpipe legs, Reebok trainers and you try to see his socks, then feel embarrassed by the impulse. The man has appeared from who knows where and joined you in the gallery, which is otherwise empty, it being Tuesday morning. Almost empty: you’re watched by an attendant who sits by the entrance on a high stool with a book raised so you can see, and it’s called Parable of the Talents by Octavia Butler, but when you walk around him and look at his book from the other side you notice Neuromancer by William Gibson hidden within. You look at him as if to ask and he lifts his chin and appears to disapprove... You infer that you shouldn’t talk, not say anything, shouldn’t touch the pile of rubbish, shouldn’t... just shouldn’t anything... thrill. How easily you come to feel... rushing sensation... tingling childlike naughtiness arising. You haven’t done anything. Yet. And of course, you (probably) won’t. But the potential for something to happen ignites you... imagine scrambling up the assembled ladders, the attendant rushing after you, the whole thing collapsing... It is delicate... lines like... Miro... or Calder... you’re thinking. No... feeling... because when in the presence of certain work, you feel... feel... and notice.

The man in black is looking at you, waiting for your reply and ‘oh... no’ you say. ‘I don’t know how I got here...’

‘You don’t know?’ he asks, apparently amused, and it’s always the same... you’re perplexed yourself.

‘It felt... important...’ you say... ‘I was drawn here.’

‘Drawn?’ he says, and ‘Are you an artist?’

And ‘no...’ you say. ‘I don’t know what I am.’
'Perhaps you _are_ an artist then.’ He says. ‘What do you make of the exhibition?’

‘It reminds me of Joan Miró, or Alexander Calder’s mobiles’ you say, because you’ve seen some in the Tate and felt yourself moved though you know it’s more mainstream than this. ‘Like everything’s delicately balanced and might tip over... though perhaps if it tipped it would make a new shape, a different side showing, that’s all. I mean, does it matter? Is it intended? Is it to be read as _precisely meant_, the way it is I mean, or, you know... is it saying that things are a jumble, and it could say that in many, many ways?’

‘You find it jumbled?’ he asks.

‘Don’t you? you reply.

‘It’s meant to move’ he says, ‘it’s moving.’ Come back tomorrow and it’ll be different, shifting’

‘When does he do it? Mike Nelson. At night?’

‘Maybe he’s here; he’ll do it when no one’s looking’

You walk up close and through and among the objects on the ground and the attendant stands up and sits down again and then again and you look up at the ladders and you breathe their smell and metal and wood and art gallery and the man watching you. Both men watching you. And watching each other watch. Testosterone enters the air. And you feel it all and try to ignore... A tense circle of knowingness envelopes the space... a hyperawareness, within which you’re trying to perceive the meaning of the artist. You wonder if he is indeed hiding and watching too. You would like to find something of meaning in this moment. Your anonymous morning has become... unexpectedly peopled... and now has to be managed.

‘I’m Si, by the way,’ says the man ‘I’m a friend of Mike, Mike Nelson.’ And you look blank. ‘You know the artist whose work this is. Let’s get some tea in the café.’

And you calculate, the moment opening outward.

The gallery attendant pretends to read whichever novel and the man called Si looks nonchalant in a studied way and you try to check what his socks are like, convinced this will help you decide. The gallery attendant seems intellectually superior, yet he works in a gallery, an observer like you, there but not part. Si, potentially roguish, is free on a Tuesday morning. And you... you... feel like an object in a gallery.

‘Okay,’ you say because ‘why not.’

And you walk ahead and you wonder if Si has thought about putting his hand on your back but he won’t give himself away so easily. You feel tension there... move quickly... see the gallery attendant looking squarely at Si as you pass and imagine the look on Si’s face in return. You feel complicit, but at the same time, curious to see what he’ll say....

‘Careful.’ says the gallery attendant.
You’re sitting in the café with mugs of brown tea which Si has bought. A plate with four custard creams hovers on the table between you. Fatboy Slim’s in the background and you both complain about the music that nevertheless catches you, bodies move involuntarily, nodding along and to each other while you make your claims to be cooler than the charts and how it feels like coercion when you are forced to experience pleasure by such cynical commercial means. Si tries harder than you do. To be still. He says something about Killing Joke to situate himself. And you say something about The Fall to show that you get where he is at. You don’t say that you dislike Killing Joke and The Fall, anaesthetic that doesn’t speak for your generation (Si is older, about twenty-eight, you decide). Or that, despite liking Fatboy Slim against your free will, you nevertheless do like him, very much really. You didn’t choose it but there it is.

‘D’you believe it’s possible to predict the future?’ asks Si leaning in over now lukewarm tea.

And you say, ‘some things… which exactly do you mean?’

He laughs and says ‘one’s path I suppose; I think that’s what Mike Nelson’s work’s about’

‘Oh, Futureobjects’ you say and ‘they’re all old things though… it’s rubbish isn’t it…’

And he says ‘yes, from skips and charity shops mostly.’ and ‘that’s how Mike works.’

And ‘okay,’ you say, ‘but why?’

Then Si is talking about a science fiction writer from Poland called Lev or Lem Stanislaw.

‘Why were boys back then so hot on old school science fiction?’ you ask me, and I shrug, so as not to disrupt, and you continue your conversation with Si, saying ‘Okay... tell me...’ and he’s saying:

‘Mike Nelson likes Lem’s idea of ‘future linguistics’, which is the idea that you can predict the future by mutilating, modifying and combining words. [Mike] changed that to Futurobjectics, to take [his] own references and mesh them together and potentially predict the future of what he’d make.’

And ‘well that seems obvious!’ you say. ‘Of course the past predicts the future. History repeats until we learn. Isn’t it clear?’

‘So you do believe!’ says Si. ‘Today is tomorrow’s history. What we do right now, next, might change the world, forever.’

And you look at him and you don’t say anything. Anxious-hilarious-shared-knowing ramps itself up, turbo-charging the moment, then you both take out boxes of cigarettes, Camel Lights for you and he has Gitanes. An urgent scramble to light up with his Zippo.

Then ‘are you familiar with ‘Hyperstition’? he asks, exhaling.

‘No what’s that?’ You blow at the ceiling, eyes on him.
And he explains in a long sentence and you reply, ‘you mean intense superstition?’ You lean, ‘major paranoia?’ You thought Si might know some things but now you’re not sure... he just has words that are... well.. words for things... just words for things. And your mind’s going round in circles... maybe a nicotine rush.

And he is watching your brain go scrambled and seems to be enjoying himself and ‘it’s not paranoia’ he says, ‘it’s about creating a lexicon of meaning. It’s about choosing what will have meaning for you in the future. Perhaps in this moment you are choosing the words that will determine your future’

And, ‘well, ye-es...’ you say, ‘but not necessarily... I mean... are you talking about...’

‘Magick?!’ says Si ‘yes!’

And ‘Oh right, you’re a Crowley-head.’ you reply.

And ‘what does that mean?’ says Si, and you seem to have annoyed him now.

‘It’s just that... I don’t want to go down that road... I need to keep it real...’

‘But what if that is real? More real than all this? He says. All this is an illusion! Don’t you see that? It’s bullshit, made up to keep people in their places.’

And the thing is, you do see but also you don’t want to. It’s alright for Si, you think, but you... you don’t get to be free like that. Free in your mind, sure but the ability to pay your rent still matters. You need to work for money. Inventing a different world for yourself feels a bit out of reach. You long for something you can be surer of... a more allowing, more natural way of being but that’s lost to you... and the fact is you’re not an artist and can’t indulge in magical thinking or hang about in skips, or not all the time. You’re a tourist, a weekender in all this. You can watch but need to keep your energy for the office.

‘I see, but not all of us can live according to our ideas, our ideals, or idealism, or ideology....’

You think he seems prickled. You’re too contrary for him, or is that you? You watch him bristle.

Silence.

‘I need to leave really,’ you say.

He enlivens ‘there’s a party on Saturday... here’. He writes an address on a napkin. ‘It’s an old warehouse off Brick Lane’.

And you take the napkin. ‘Well maybe.’ you say.

‘It’ll be fun’ he says. ‘You should come.’

And you go.
‘Come!’ he calls to you as you leave the café.

‘I’ll see!’ you reply. ‘Can I bring people?’

‘Oh, why?’ he says.

‘I’m not coming on my own!’

‘D’you have a boyfriend? Do you mean... because, perhaps I have a girlfriend. That’s not what this is, you know! Hey!’

And you’re out the door.

‘Did that really happen?’ I ask.

‘That’s how I remember it,’ you say.

‘Well, we need to finish’ I say.

And ‘Oh is it time? I’m sorry’ you say.

And now I’m embarrassed but it’s the truth. ‘That’s okay’ I say.

I stand to make you stand and... door... and you fumble with objects and as you leave you suddenly become very interested in me and

‘Are you doing something nice over the weekend?’ and after all you’ve said I’d feel mean saying, ‘yes’ and wrong saying ‘no’, so I make a kind of ‘mmmm’ sound and

‘You know, normal things...’ I say, or something like that.

And we make it to the door and ‘see you next week’.

‘Yes, see you next week.’

And I’m alone.
A2 Scene 2: backward moving presently

May 2018

I’m not doing something nice over the weekend. Still here. I need to breathe, feel the sky surrounding me and I pull on my old coat, push my feet into warm boots, keys and phone, some music in my ears and then... I’m outside. Moving downhill with the cemetery to my right and phone buzzes, WhatsApp, a news article:

‘Encampment of ‘vandwellers’ on Bristol street to be handed eviction notices by council’ and a picture of the street where I’m walking now.

‘Isn’t this near you?’ It’s Ophelia.

‘I’m right there this moment!’ I reply. The van dwellers watch me walking through their territory, previously a place of silent abandon, now busy with outdoor living areas, plants and dog’s bowls, a plenitude of sofas, smells of weed and woodsmoke, scent of heroin lurking, a fainter undertone. I’m not sure if I’m imagining but my head woozes, feeling of the world turning, growing more yellow. I slow but I want to quicken, move from the centre of the road to path edging along the cemetery fence and hug my phone close:

‘It’s a social dilemma’ I tell her. ‘People round here mainly sympathise. They blame the government for the housing crisis but at the same time, the children walk to school this way, and the whole atmosphere’s a bit shifty!’

‘This government’s unbelievable! We’ve finally got them off my back because the Darling Man has bought my flat and we can’t be relocated now to fucking Dagenham. The ‘Nam, we call it. The Royal Borough’s attempts at social cleansing are being met with our resistance and I’m bringing the children on our silent walks for Grenfell and even my neighbours who say they don’t speak English grasp it when I explain the council’s trying to sell off their homes! I’m having to be the social activist for the whole block and get them down the bloody meetings. The old left-wing communities have grown old, and our generation doesn’t have any convictions! Lost. So, we have in this neighbourhood four groups: remnants of the old socialists who’re retired and need a break, the oligarchs who’ve bought all the big houses and are busy putting swimming pools in the basements, their staff, who have no rights and won’t engage with the society around them, and refugees from terrible wars who are dealing with trauma. Someone has to keep claiming the space! Honestly, no one needs it, these Tories are exhausting! We all need a lie down. Actually, I’m having a little breather in The Priory as we speak, thanks to the Darling Man’s private healthcare. Who knew? Marriage and exes may drive you to the nuthouse, but at least there’s the privilege of somebody paying for it! I’m worthy, look! I’m a Missus!’

‘Oh!’ I say. ‘Back there, huh? I hate that your home’s in danger and what about... dare I ask about your Shadow?’

‘It’s sorted! The court’s ruled in our favour and now it’s details and I just have to deal with the drink problem this whole thing’s given me, and the Darling Man’s nervous breakdown – we’re wrecks!’
‘Of course you are. You’re an amazing mother, don’t forget. The children need you, love, and that’s the thing that won’t change.’

‘The barrister was very relaxed in the court - it all went swimmingly!’

‘That’s because your Shadow had no case! He needs to support you to look after your beautiful children, not undermine you.’

‘He’s a dangerous man though. We’re on our knees and he’ll start all over again, you know. What’s to stop him?’

‘That he’s wrong! He should be supporting you to mother his children! What’s wrong with people?’

‘He’s driving me crazy...I tell ya, you couldn’t make it up!’

She sends me an email he has sent her: evidence. It looks reasonable and I struggle to see. ‘That’s how he does it!’ she tells me. ‘So fucking cold, it cuts me like a knife.’

I want to tell her my things but this doesn’t feel like the time. We say goodbye and I walk on.

I find my way into the Cemetery, via a sticky path to Royte Hill and a break in the hedge where an old Victorian fence ends, and a disordered woods take over. The official gate is locked, but the way through the trees is well worn. I slide a little down through the opening, muddying boots familiar with the terrain.

The sky is growing steely, and the wind whips up, half threatening but I don’t really believe it. Still, an ominous feeling creeps into my body and my mine alone and drifting I recall your voice from our last meeting and you’re back with me.

‘In this neighbourhood,’ you say, ‘we walk among the dead. Breathe in their shadows, compelled to remember a past we never experienced. Other people seem to find this insignificant. Is it only me who’s affected? Consigned to live amongst the ruins of a world that’s past? And my world has past too, the life I built in ruins. Embers linger but the fire’s gone. Am I the only one who comes here and feels the decay?’

The cemetery is Victorian, circular, leading nowhere, as if there were no world beyond. Along one side is a disused railway viaduct supporting a sky-line wilderness of silver birches and tangles of nettles and brambles. A human wilderness proliferates along the length of the arches: neon graffiti on slippery brown brick. In the mid-section, a red skull with wings and horns faces up to a white skull with wings and a halo.
'The whole thing’s like some macabre simulation of a futurism. You know architects actually design this stuff in London,’ I recall you saying.

I walk where you’ve walked, try and see through your eyes, the circling of the cemetery a daily repetition where I let fragments coalesce. I enter into reverie; your recollections of the relationship remain, your refrain, images playing themselves over in your head. Even after the event, body free, there he is, occupying your thoughts, the past present.

Tom, playing with film in the studio, next to the bed. Image after image, momentary differences. Super 8 and 16mm. Pictures from his every day, life made extraordinary by its capture, the present as it passed, small fragments of what had been, captured on the silent film that clacked and clattered through the hot projector, every time a wonder when it didn’t snap, ready to reveal itself another time around. You watched them on the walls, images of other places. Moments you had missed. Where had you been then? You watched the films looping round, while Tom typed mysteriously. He said he liked the films to be there in the background, a kind of comfort, knowing the past was held there, verifiable memories, and he could let himself slip into reverie while time stood still. You found it both hypnotic and tedious. You still feel that in your body as you tell it to me now... sensation in your stomach... I feel it too, listening, waiting for you to grasp words for it, express your sensation - the wanting to leave yet being compelled to stay in the moment, certain, or romantic enough to dream, that in doing so you might eventually enter entirely into Tom’s life, believing that if you swallow it all the way in, that moment will come to be about you too. You’ve no idea if that’s true. In retrospect, you maybe read in motivations that weren’t present at the time. You could say they were unconscious, but you don’t really believe in the unconscious. You knew. But you knew something different. Yes, you wanted to be there, but you weren’t really seeking to enter Tom’s past, only to be next to him as your future revealed itself to you. And for a time, you were.

Tom had a vintage Acmade 16mm Compeditor, late of Pinewood Studios, an historic piece of film editing equipment. It posed some danger to your toes whenever you tried to exit the bed’s soft, white pillowy sanctuary. The floor was full of Tom’s brain; neurons and synapses snaked their way around the room: writing attire, notebooks and zines, crinkled posters not destined for walls, tatty novels, books of poetry that he would reach for in sudden gestures, passages of which he committed to memory and repeated in moments where words might juxtapose reality in strange ways. A tidy squared-off block of records was the only area of the room conferred a strict order: artist name then album release date, though even this clarity created entanglements of its own to which Tom would subject you as he deliberated. Everyday human items, shoes and socks and boxer shorts, distributed themselves at random, alongside precarious cups of cold tea and half-eaten packets of Hob Nobs. The best biscuits known to man, he would say, and at that time, you found yourself inclined to agree.
The Acmade 16mm Compeditor could be used for editing multiple reels of film at once: making cuts in their narratives, splicing them together, or looping them round so that time itself could be manipulated to revolve in a circle. Tom loved that best: a perpetual present. Entering Tom’s life was to see everything differently, becoming part of a different reality with different laws, it was a world in which Newton never lived. Like that moment when you step onto a travellator. Your previous speed and old vantage point seemed to have no application. Linear progressions were cut through, spliced and looped to form something that both was and was not what it had been.

Now, from beyond the loops that Tom created, there’s some pressure to deny that you were ever present there in his world.

‘Was it your world too?’

Hard to see how your intermingling created a universe, one that’s spinning off into a sea of universes finding its own unfolding. What can we do but track the transitions and hope by observation to divine which constellations matter, from this one small shifting point? This place in time called now – the beginning.

‘This isn’t it,’ you say. ‘Not what I meant at all. Can we start again?’
A2 Scene Three: cult fictions

1998

It’s cold, dark Saturday night and the rain’s not heavy but it’s there and you wonder at yourself, stepping out into this. You play Polly Harvey loud for courage. The blackness of the Autumn sky will feel like safety, allowing you to move unseen until you reach some warmth, some inside. A black leather 70’s coat hides thin, sparkly dress made of colours, mutating gold, carmine, and cinnabar reaching to your thighs. Black legs down to your feet. Trainers sharp and red to bounce you on your way. You imagine these, but it’s been so long there’s no knowing how much of this is true. Only that the memory comes to you now. The trainers were making their own statement.

A strong compulsion to explore the night and unknown territory leads you to follow directions on a napkin from a man in an art gallery, walking the whole way down Kingsland Road, darkness and light rain, and onward through Shoreditch, so that you might enter a brown bricked warehouse deep in the East of London. Thrills like a drug, chemical reaction inside, urges encounter with beings outside yourself and those elements of your life you consider stable and reliable, known factors. Tonight, let there be zing, ping! New, an opening up for you.

You considered who to call to come, but knew you’d want to drop them soon as you arrived, the urge to unknown encounter stronger than the need to share it. You come to the door, alone. A man guarding the threshold waves you in with the fingers of a hand that never leaves his side.

Inside, heat and noise explosive, shadows and bodies in silhouette and you move through the first passageway into the building, following its lead – a corridor and then another – the building runs deep and twists like a maze. Searching for the right noise, eyes attracted by strange lights and artefacts adorning the walls and corners. A beat from the basement below and you know what’s down there: sweat, and you don’t need to dance right now but to encounter and you feel it, will it, to come tonight, a thing of meaning and significance. You carry on toward the very back of the building, following its blue-brick spine, and then you reach it: a shady cool room with sofas and benches and a draft from a broken windowpane. and a big white sheet draped at one end, lit from behind therefore indicating a stage and here there is to be a performance... an art in motion happening of some unknown, unknowable kind and you’re there.

You see Si on a green sofa, with some other people. Further, deeper within the room’s refuge a woman who looks like Tracy Emin. You stand and wonder, momentarily what you would say, having seen her bed, and her tent of names, while you conform to an unspoken taboo over displaying the mess of your femininity. She has opened up possibility, but you aren’t sure if you want what she makes possible or if you love more the challenge of becoming something impossible: an imaginary future version of yourself, who you love. Her self-expression is remarkable enough to be classified as art. Yet you remain, for now, committed to being mysterious and inscrutable, non-being the only persona you’re sure of being able to pull off.

Si spots you and waves you into his circle, introducing you to the others there – Bonnie and Johnny – who look bemused at your introduction.
‘And what are you?’ Asks Jonnie and you feel yourself forced to explain, not about your imaginary future-self who lives in a big North London terrace with endless flows of people through the kitchen. Chaotic, overflowing abundance. Instead, you say something about the publishing company with its electric shock-ish blue carpets and feeling trapped and not knowing how this happened.

‘But who are you?’ he asks.

‘Why don’t you leave?’ asks Bonnie. Does she mean the job?

You fall silent and stay that way until Si interrupts the pause.

‘Best not to think about that and anyway, tonight it’s Red Dragons. Close your eyes, and open your mouths, and stick out your tongues.’

And you look at Johnny and Bonnie and they look at you as if to say, ‘child, you’re out of your depth,’ and deep in your belly a fire ignites and you close your eyes to them, lift your chin and poke out your tongue. And Si says, ‘I’m being mother,’ and administers a small square of paper to each of you in turn with tiny sighs of delight, and then you open your eyes, and they meet with Bonnie’s who says ‘well!’ and ‘I wonder what magic this night has in store?’

Settled into the safety of the sofa you begin to observe other people in the room. Everybody smokes. Someone looks like Jeanette Winterson, you can’t be sure, having only seen a picture once. You’re sure she has curly red hair and try to imagine the rest. Is this a Winterson-ish place? Maybe. You don’t know what she’d like.

You notice a couple of DJ’s or are they musicians setting up wires and computers and a speaker near the illuminated sheet and a man your age helping them, curly blonde hair and a red T-shirt with a heart above his heart and he’s not looking at you but there’s a forcefulness, a kind of awareness that penetrates the space.

‘This is a very red night’ you say, still staring across the scene and then somebody breaks your gaze, steps into your golden line of sight.

‘Yes, red like you’ he says.

Shut up Tom!’ says Bonnie and ‘Alright mate?’ Says Johnny. And Tom takes hold of your eyes and smiles. ‘Alright you lot?’

‘Hi, I’m Tony,’ says Tony, pushing Tom aside and you laugh as do they, squeezing onto the arms of the sofa like it’s a boat sailing across the sea, or is that me and they all start talking at once while you breathe and listen to the air flow in, out, in and out like you’re a machine, a breathing machine... and...

‘Why do I have to be something? Why do I have to do anything? Can’t it be enough that I exist?’ you ask in general, in answer to a question from some time ago now, but it’s taken you this time to formulate your thought.
‘You’re here now, yes,’ says Si and...

‘Looking for a husband, is it?’ murmurs Bonnie ‘because this is the wrong place’ and...

‘I’m sure you do much more than simply exist’ says Tom and at the other side of the room, music starts, though quietly.

‘Isn’t that Dreadzone?’ you ask the sofa.

‘Yeah, Greg and Dan’, says Tom in your ear, as if he knows everyone, but Si’s standing now before you all in the middle of the sea, waving a book entitled Principes de la non-philosophie by someone called François Laruelle. You all try saying his name and the book’s name at once and make both sound hard and confusing to wrap tongues around. Eventually Tony asks, ‘what about it?’ and all of you look expectantly at Si, perched along the sofa like gulls on ship’s railings. You’re a gull on a ship, a ship’s railings. Si may have put on some glasses, possibly shades, for show. He reads to you, translating from the French as he goes:

"Laruelle says that non-philosophy is not a meta-philosophy but stands outside of philosophy itself in order to critique it, a means of... mapping out... a speculative and synthetic practice of thought, which might also be described as the deployment of fiction as method."

He prances to the left, ‘moving away from more standard frameworks of thought toward a...practice that involves forcing encounters and compatibilities and ultimately... experimentation with a terrain beyond typical ideas of self and world.’

Bonnie takes a deck of tarot cards from under her coat and flicks one at Si. He continues,

‘Laruelle’s “especially interested in how the performance of fictions can operate to show us the edges of our own reality.”

Bonnie flicks another card at him.

‘For Laruelle,’ says Si, ‘philosophy tends to position itself as the highest form of thought (enthroned above all other disciplines), while at the same time necessarily attempting to explain everything within its purview... each subsequent philosophy must offer up its own exhaustive account of the real, “trumping” any previous philosophy in an endless game of one-upmanship.’

‘You could say’ Johnny joins in, ‘philosophy itself is a form of “thought control” that attempts to define the very act of thinking through its particular transcendent operations...’

‘Is it not more a lens for seeing the world – a way of making meaning?’ you ask.

‘Not if one isn’t aware of the choices one’s making’ responds Johnny, ‘because it seems to you not that you’re making a choice but that this is how the world is, and you’re being realistic and sane and well-adapted when you live within the confines of that philosophy’
‘Beware the hegemonic philosophical states,’ says Tony, smiling.

‘Practically demonic,’ says Bonnie.

‘Society’s a cult,’ says Tom.

‘I think maybe some water?’ you say. The world’s very close in, you can only focus on the most immediate atoms of light floating on the rims of your eyeballs; hard to say which is which. Then Tony’s there with an enormous sparkling jug of water and it’s not obvious how to drink it and whether rules apply like gravity or whether you also need a glass.

‘More Laruelle!’ Si now continues: ‘philosophy involves a particular take on – or an account, explanation, or interpretation of - the real. Non-philosophy... proceeds from the real, or, at a pinch, alongside it: rather than positing a real, it assumes its always already “givenness” as a presupposition or axiom.... This real is itself radically foreclosed to thought... it cannot be “explained” or interpreted... and as such we might say that the third key articulation of non-philosophy is that it implies a form of gnosis or even “spiritual” knowledge.’

‘So, this isn’t about socially constructed reality...’ you say, ‘it’s about what’s known, whether or not we recognise why, or can give it a language...’ and your brain exudes sparks of red and gold lights which flow into the room and dance their own form of flight, delight. Your wonder being wonders if the others can see this and if that has any bearing on the reality of what’s happening.

‘For Lacan,’ says Si ‘psychoanalysis is more an anti-philosophy... shall I explain?’

‘Please, no!’ Say Johnny and Bonnie in unison.

‘Alright enough for today. The point is... non-philosophy doesn’t turn away from philosophical materials exactly but... reuses or... re-tools them.... Ray Brassier and other people point out, the “non” in Laruelle’s term, signals an expansion of an already existing paradigm: a recontextualization of existing material (in this case conceptual) and the placing of these alongside newer “discoveries”.

You know Brassier’s name from your editing work. He was part of the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit (CCRU, or Sea Crew), which makes you aware again of how you’re floating in this sofa-boat in a sea of ideas. ‘Disciples!’ you say. ‘Reminds me of the cult thing – how can non-philosophy not be a philosophy? Can there be an outside, or is it simply a bigger... I don’t know... a bigger truth?’

And there’s a silence as if all are staring at the bigger truth or is it an abyss, vast hole of unknowing?

It seems like a voice speaking but you can’t identify the source:

‘The problem with meta-philosophy is that, because we end up only philosophizing about philosophizing, we are never able to take a stand on what this is from the outside. The philosophical itself, because it remains the standpoint of inquiry, never truly succeeds in
becoming an object of inquiry. The non-philosophical is the outside of philosophy, a point of view from which it is possible to see the philosophical itself and criticize it but also from which it is possible to reassign the task of thinking through a democratic disciplinary process.’

‘I’m not sure’ you say, ‘this isn’t all just rubbish.’

‘Think of a reflection in a mirror’ says Si ‘this is the relationship of the “non” to philosophy. It’s a direct relationship and yet...’

You’re feeling hot in your head.

‘It’s hot philosophy, scientific,’ remarks Bonnie with a nod and you turn to her, an aside.

‘What d’you mean?’

‘Like a hot laser. Like maths. It can be purely abstract, really not about anything real, only concerned with underlying shapes and patterns and the relationships and properties of things, do you see? It’s a speculative language that’s really about playing with possibility itself, and through the play there come new symbols and ideas about things that don’t exist in the real world. Or not yet.’

‘Really? Fuck.’

‘Non-philosophy isn’t not philosophy. Not unless you insist that philosophy is only philosophy if it concerns something real. Someone old – Schopenhauer? - insisted on there being a reason or cause for anything that we might concern ourselves with as serious thinkers. But maybe there isn’t always reason or cause. Maybe unreasoned things exist too. And how are we to think about those? Crazy making... How are we to think about philosophy as a mode of reason if we can’t look at it from some place outside itself? I mean, if we can’t free our minds enough to take a position beyond, how are we ever to look at reality? Non-philosophy is the invention of new usages of thought and language that disrupt the rational narrative of the real, which is precisely what every philosophy is. Did I just go in a loop? Are we on a loop? Is everything going in a loop?’

You decide to change the direction of things and ask her:

‘Why the tarot cards Bonnie?’

‘I had two books of my father’s’ she says. ‘One all about witchcraft, and one all about science. I’ve been trying to reconcile those two disciplines. Forever.’

‘D’you think it can be done? I mean I see how science is like magic and witchcraft can be quite scientific with the herbal side of things. Do you believe in making things change with the power of your mind, like your will?’

‘I think it’s like quantum mechanics.’ She says.

‘Do you actually understand quantum mechanics?’ I ask.
‘I have the Penrose book.’ lxviii

‘So do I!’

‘Have you read it?’

‘No, it’s too enormous.’

‘Me neither, it’s insane. But I like to dip in – read a page – a bit like pulling a card, you know’

So, we don’t understand quantum mechanics but it’s probably like witchcraft and tarot, is this the situation?

‘That’s not what I’m saying. There’s an interpretation that’s more or less saying that magic is for real. But it’s disputed. My art’s all about this.’

‘Ah, the miracle of science... you can use it to justify making art about books you haven’t read and ideas you don’t understand.’ says Si ‘Which proves the point about knowledge being inherent within...’

‘Stop trying to explain my work to me, Si!’ she intervenes. ‘I do what feels right. I express it the way I know how, with the old language and practices through which change can be manifested. Witchcraft, magic if you will. It’s real because quantum mechanics shows us.’ And then she turns again to you:

‘Look at these boys. See Tracy over there? We have to do our own thing, you know? Something they can’t. Or won’t.’

‘But it’s...’

‘Sacrificial, yeah. I have to give my soul for this. That’s why it’s art, why it’s real. That’s why don’t think you can just wander up in your strange little dress and be accepted as an equal. Not really. They’ll eat you up if you don’t make your own stand.’

‘What if I only want to listen and understand things and be recognised for that? Do I have to expose my inner being, all the ways I might be rendered mad in this world? Can’t I just be part of the conversation without having to own the whole thing or distinguish myself as in some way unique? Can’t I simply be part of things? I mean I think that’s the truth of it. I don’t really aspire to more than doing things together with others’

‘See where that gets you babe’ she replies. ‘My guess is your pretty words will appear in their books and you’ll still be photocopying manuscripts instead of writing them. You can only do things they can’t. You’re at best marginal. So be in the margins. Live them. Remember this.’

And her eyes, and your soul, alight...
'Are you done over there?' asks Si, 'Can I continue what I was saying?' and nobody moves or speaks which he takes as a yes...

'So, two things we can already tell – firstly – non-philosophy ‘...involves an attitude and orientation toward philosophy that also implies a kind of practice (or, at any rate, a particular “use” of philosophical materials). Laruelle also calls this a performance, as well as, crucially, a science: non-philosophy is the “science of philosophy” in this sense.’

He looks up from the text, seems to catch your eye.

'You know, Ray Brassier, don’t you?' you nod vaguely. ‘He’s read this too; he’s interested to this more “formal” articulation of non-philosophy.’ He looks back down.

'Secondly – non-philosophy might be said to name other forms of thought – other practices, we might say – besides the philosophical (again, when these are not simply positioned and interpreted by philosophy), while in the same gesture naming a general democratization of all thinking.’

‘All thoughts are equal, in other words,’ says Johnny. You should write a book about that’ says Si.

‘In fact, alongside its formidable complexity there is a sense in which non-philosophy can be immediately grasped in an almost banal or at least naïve sense...’

And he looks at you and your jaw moves but no words emerge. He continues...

‘Performance... is non-representation par excellence insofar as in its very liveness if offers an “experience” of life “outside” representation. However, there is also the question here as to whether at least some kind of minimal framing is required to make it art, or else it becomes “just life”... In fact, it seems to me that a life might well need some framing – a performance, as it were – in order for it to be taken out of the frame within which it is usually experienced/perceived (what Laruelle calls the world). Counter-intuitively, art practice, as performance, can be more real than life because it is framed (at least minimally).'

‘When will the performance be happening?’ You ask and Si laughs.

‘Darling, we’ve been performing all night. We are the performance, didn’t you realise?’ And you look around.

‘Who’s the audience?’ you ask

‘Well we were!’ says Si ‘haven’t you understood yet? There’s no separation.’

‘We’re all part of the whole thing’ you say.

‘No, we aren’t parts, there can be no parts, the performance is an inseparable entity, existent in a time-space now passing, now passed.’
‘But what about the frame? How can this be a performance if I’m not aware I’m performing.’

‘Really? Do you actually believe that? I struggle with the idea that you’re not aware of your own performance’

‘You should write a book, Si’

‘I intend to! Wait and see.’

So what’ I ask you then, ‘do you think we’re doing here, I mean, in this room now?’ And you look at me, seeming dazed as I draw your attention back to our present. And to be honest it doesn’t feel fair because I’m not really asking for your benefit, or maybe it is for your benefit because I’m trying to understand what you’re saying.

‘Is this, our dialogue today, a “performance fiction”?’

And you look at me and say ‘I think that’s for you to decide, isn’t it? I’m glad I got that out, I don’t know why. It reminds me who I am. Maybe it changed me, that night.’
A2 Scene Four: Synchronic emergence

*Liquid Sky* permeates the building’s bricks. You’re walking up a big blue hill that’s interior, an inside-out, that’s long corridor leading back to main door, back, way back, onto the street. Tom following. Some garbled thing being spoken between you about which way to go.

‘I don’t think I was performing’ you say. ‘I don’t think I perform.’ And then ‘Magical thinking can be very powerful, and also very dangerous. Aren’t we told not to mess with it, and if we do, to take special care to let only forces of light have influence? But then I come from a Catholic country. No one’s meant to have a direct spiritual connection with the divine. Do you think magic is divine?’

‘I think you’re sacrilegious.’

‘Oh for sure. Do you think magic is divine?’

‘I think you’re divine.’

You find your way to the main front door. On the left is a large white room made larger by a grand mirror leaning against the wall opposite you.

‘Let’s look in here’ says Tom and you do and there, in the whiteness of the room, you look at yourselves, and each other, reflected in the mirror. You are woodland-ish creatures with wild hair and faces that peer out unexpectedly, eyes that have seen eternity, that know forever. ‘What’re we really looking at when we look at each other like this?’ he asks.

And, feeling you must avoid romanticism, you reply ‘I suppose we’re really looking at a piece of glass with silver paint on the back of it.’

‘That’s true and yet... can we really say that’s all we’re looking at?’

You stand alongside one another, then wordlessly begin making shapes with your bodies, lean forward and stare at your own faces, then you turn your eyes to his and peer into them. Whirlpools, fractal eyes leading into the past, ancient and mystical. You can smell leather and metal and paint. You can smell Tom.

‘I feel like I can see a whole world opening up. The truth of things as they really are. It’s all very clear to me.’

‘The mirror allows us to see things – it reflects us.’ He moves closer and finds a way to move with your shape, twisting his arms forward like the wings of *Icarus*. ‘The image we can see, it’s both real and outside of the real world. It does and doesn’t exist, yet it influences us. Look at the shape we’re making.’

‘We’re like a giant double headed butterfly’ You imagine silk wings.

‘Would we be this way without the mirror’s influence? Look how it affects us.’
Leaning now for balance, you stretch out.

‘Let’s be affected. It’s what life’s all about. To live it.’

And you fall out of your shape, step forward uncurl and pick yourself up.

‘Let’s go.’ you say.

‘Oh, have you decided something?’ says Tom and he indicates to you and to himself and:

‘Okay, well I’m going. Come if you like.’ And you turn and walk to the door and he isn’t behind you. You open it and step onto the pavement. Don’t look back. He doesn’t follow you. A small sharp wounding inside your chest, but you lift your head to the white wind and breathe it and the sudden silence of the world outside as you walk forward, hoping the way home will make itself known to you as you go.

A minute up the road you stop at a crossing, and he reappears, apparently having taken another route around the block.

‘Oh, are you going this way too?’ he asks.

‘Whatever you need to tell yourself,’ you reply and ‘who’s the performer now?’

‘I’m going to ignore that. This was pure coincidence.’ He responds.

Tom has a Disc Man. ‘Hey what d’you want to listen to? I have Ian Curtis or... actually that’s all I have. So what d’you want to listen to?’

‘We’ve got Unfinished Monkey Business!’ you say, and he muddles around with the wires ‘Hold on... where do you want to begin? We can have the whole album.’

‘Start in the middle’ you say ‘Corpses in her Mouth...’

He fumbles.

‘Is that too difficult for you?’

‘No... no... it’s fine. I can do..... all kinds of things... really well. Hold on.’

And you hold on and ‘really?’ and look around at the morning bustle, cars and buses going slowly, the roads wide, the light diffracted through morning mist. You feel him behind you placing the plastic arc and foamy ear things over your head. He takes back one of the earpieces to hold against his own ear and you hear the music and move side to side and edging forward with a smile.

When is a thing becoming, become? Heads needing to be near, there on the Sunday morning. You already know all there is to know. Only you haven’t yet learned that.
Further up the road you find a greasy spoon, busy with taxi drivers and market traders readying themselves for a busy day on the cold streets. You slide yourselves inside and onto a table as it empties. Steamy, cramped, reds and yellows, kaleidoscopes kissing the eye and the smell of fried food and hub bub of chatter and orders being shouted out, the voice of London in the morning is maybe the best thing ever, you reflect. Is this love? You set about drinking tea, hot, brown, mugful. You’ve ordered beans on buttery toast and since realised there’s no possibility that you can eat them but everything about this place is toasty warm reviving soul and senses and you’re happy. You can see out of the window behind Tom and he can watch the activity behind the counter behind you.

Tom’s writing a novel, he says, and you ask some questions about the writing of novels generally and his novel in particular.

He responds something like:

‘Fictioning...is an open-ended, experimental practice that involves performing, diagramming or assembling to create or anticipate that which does not exist.’

And you talk about the assemblage of ideas, old experiences put together in new ways, to create previously unimagined worlds, and you talk about performing as something that happens in time, the way time is needed to give form to experience and you talk about maps and cartographies and shipping lanes and curves of the city and the way the old world blends with the new. Every time you say the word ‘space’ it makes you laugh. You can’t explain why it’s so funny.

‘Philosophy’s the whole construction of our world.’ says Tom. ‘Everything we accept as a given, but which is actually a choice.’

‘I think rather, philosophy is our lens on the world’ you reply. ‘I think the world exists whether or not we philosophise about it.’

‘So it wouldn’t change things if we weren’t here to think about them?’

‘How could it?’ you ask

‘What if our thoughts, our words even, are like the mirror? Not part of reality exactly, but reflecting and influencing what happens? We move in certain ways when there’s a mirror. Don’t you think you change things, whether you mean to or not?’

‘I think you’re changing things as you go.’ you say ‘where did we even begin?’

‘Do you think you have an impact? Do you think words matter?’

‘I don’t have any interest in having an impact,’ you say, ‘I only want to have an interesting life.’

‘I think you want to be a trace’ says Tom. ‘You know Derrida?’ He talks about traces, marks of the absence of a presence – like the impression of a leaf left on the pavement - you say you don’t want to be impactful, but is that possible? Even if you walk away or do nothing, the fact
that you exist at all makes you significant. Mirrors are significant’ He leans forward ‘I think you want people to know that you were there, and that they missed it. Missed what happened with you. You carry this, this mystery. Like there are things you don’t say.’

‘I think you’re twisting my position. Maybe I’m not ready yet, to be judged. I haven’t worked out what I think or what I want, that’s all. I’m still taking everything in. And I don’t have a plan about what other people are to think about me. It’s complicated enough without being thought about! I don’t know enough. I need more space to work things out. And support. I wish people would be more patient. And kinder. I see the young men under the older men’s wings at the office. I wish I had that. Just someone to show me what to do.’

You have that feeling again in your stomach. An urge to move away, sickness, yet compulsion to be in this moment like it’s really living.

‘I don’t know. I don’t know how I got here. I don’t know what I’m looking for. It feels like too much pressure.’

‘Maybe you don’t know where you came from. Or why.’

‘Oh, I do know where I came from. And why. It’s still a surprise to be here though. This place is like a country of its own. My difference is what makes me feel belonging.’

You talk about London and film negatives and Tom says something about super 8 and his place in Brixton which you will see when you come...

‘Oh, was that an invitation or have you just decided I will come?’

And he sort of pouts and winks but says nothing and lunges up to the counter where he flirts provocatively with the woman holding the giant metal teapot. Then a man with grey eyes and big red cheeks, a full mouth and enlarged nose leans across from the table next to you and says:

‘Students is it?’

‘No actually’ you reply ‘we’re older than that. I have a job in publishing and, well, he’s writing a novel....’ You know how it sounds.

And the man laughs, ‘Right you are. Students’ he says. ‘Been at that Art College have you? What’s the one I mean?’

‘St Martin’s?’

‘St. Martin’s, yeah that’s the one. You from there?’

‘No, not at all...’

‘Yeah you are,’ he says. ‘Think you know all what life’s about but you’ve not seen it yet.’
You’re silenced, unsure how to respond and feeling only the chasm between you. Tom’s returning from the back of the café. Presumably he’s paid. The man gives a chuckle, warm and gentle and his words ‘You wait,’ are spoken with a tone of amusement.

‘You wait.’

Then Tom looks at the man and then at you and ‘let’s split’ he says, and something in you is sad. A sharp edge defined. You stand up and press your hand into Tom’s back as you follow him out onto the street. Which is the way round he likes things, you realise as you go.

‘Have you heard of Luce Irigaray?’ You ask him.

‘No who’s he?’

‘She.’

‘Who’s she?’

‘She’s a philosopher.’

‘Ahhhh’ he says. ‘Well of course, what else.’

‘She says philosophy is understood as the love of wisdom, but really it should be about the wisdom of love.’

‘The wisdom of love’ says Tom. ‘So her philosophy is love?’

‘Perhaps love brings wisdom, or is wisdom. I think it’s a good idea anyway.’

‘What, love is a good idea?’

‘Maybe the best!’ you say. And at that you start running down the road... and all the colours of the day rush up to meet you.

Monday comes around before you’re ready. Mind unrested, all Tricky in your head. But were you ever ready for the publishing company, watching the richness of other people’s thoughts move across your desk while it was your job to... oh, who cares what it was. Everything beige and grey. You no longer remember, only pressing buttons, speaking on phones, printing out emails to store in folders in banks of filing cabinets that demarcated spaces into fiefdoms, the intersecting hierarchies and sub-hierarchies of the large, open plan office. A lot of time spent at the photocopier, whose myriad settings you learned to navigate, then out to breathe, high up on the black fire escape suspended between the levels at the back of the building, never quite reaching either roof above or road below. It’s a free world. Did the office trap you or something in your mind, a sense of expectation or obligation maybe?

At lunchtime you walk slowly through Hoxton, wishing you worked for 4th Estate in Notting Hill, who publish the books you love to read: contemporary fiction, short stories with cover art
you can feel with your fingertips, deep rich tones like raspberry, tantalising to touch. Taste them. Academic publishing, you’ve realised, is no first step into that world. An invisible line is drawn, insisting on a separation that feels arbitrary to you. Recently you’ve been reading Sadie Plant’s Zeros + Ones which is maybe an area you understand. She’s explaining something real, and you wonder if that feel for digital might carry you through the looking glass, as it were, a transitional object belonging in both spaces? You carry the book around to fill moments between the more active parts of your life: the train journey’s, the waits at bus stops, the lunches alone in all the quiet corners that you find around the city.

Today’s not to be a solitary lunch. You’re meeting Tom, it says so on your inner wrist where he’s written in biro:

*Dragon Bar: Mon@1pm – T.*

You don’t remember that happening.

*The Dragon Bar* is over on Rivington Street. You see him walking as you walk, quite roads that invite you to their centre to revel in the absence of traffic, back streets of the city on the verge of self-consciousness but still unassuming, private.

‘Oh! I didn’t know you worked round here,’ says Tom. ‘I’m going for lunch how about you?’

‘I’m meeting you for lunch’

‘Really?’

‘It says so on my wrist, look. Is this your writing?’

‘Yes! Isn’t that amazing! A message to our future selves and now we’re here and it all makes sense. To the Dragon Bar, why not? D’you know about Deleuze and Guattari?

You do not. ‘What about them?’

‘Tony likes them. He says they talk about how in ‘assemblages of sense making, the parts of memory are not... coupled to supervening wholes. They are not reduced to dependant properties but instead become definitely detachable.’

‘Hmm... you still feeling that Red Dragon?’

‘The memory’s been detached, do you see? ‘The interaction between the parts does not, as such, become beholden to synchronic emergence but is subject to synchronic, diachronic and transversal processes of becoming.’

‘Uhm, so you lost me after synchronicity, that’s the only bit I get to be honest. Jung...’

‘Synchronic. Like us meeting and converging on this road now. Who cares what went before. Somehow it’s happened. It’s happening.’
'Were you here,’ you say, ‘in 1993?’

And then you rewind memory to A Fete Worse Than Death, here in Hoxton before it was, you know, Hoxton, a July afternoon when, after stuffing razor-bladed offprints of academic articles into envelopes, and licking three hundred stamps, you had smooched round the corner of Charlotte Road and Rivington Street, dark heart of something beating, as that dead art entrepreneur Joshua Compston staged the Fete. Damien Hirst dressed as a clown and rented out his spin-painting machinery so that people could make their own artworks. Tracey Emin ran a kissing booth or did palm readings, depending on who’s remembering. Gary Hume dressed up as a Mexican bandit and sold tequila slammers; Brendan Quick ran a pube exchange. They all frightened you, and you traced an invisible line along one edge, then another, then through the centre of their chaos, wanting to join in and also get away, no idea how to engage. Only sure it was important. lxxx

‘Were you here for that?’ you ask again.

‘Hard to remember’ he says. ‘Time’s such a blur.’

‘That faux funfare vibe has always disturbed me’ you say ‘darkness... something underlying... I don’t like it... a foreboding thing, makes me feel disconnected from reality.’

‘Feels like times are changing so much’ he says, ‘We’ve become cynical.’

You and I laugh at that, back in the room.

‘How do you understand it now?’ I ask you.

And you take a book from your bag, bookmarked, and flick through until you find the place you want and then ‘here it is,’ you say, ‘listen to this:

‘Writers working in this form presume that postmodernity has inured [readers to] experience, affect, belief or conviction. Though not identical, credulous metafiction resembles what Eshelman has called performatism, a post-postmodern cultural mode that challenges ‘the split concept of the sign and the strategies of boundary transgression of postmodernism.’ lxxxi

‘And this bit...’ flicking your hair from your face.

‘Performativist artworks often deploy a ‘double framing’ technique that puts an ‘ostensive scene’ in conflict with endless contextualisation of that scene (2008, 91). The artist’s goal is to get readers to believe in the truth of the ostensive scene – such stories do not merely communicate meaning but try to change the reader’s actual beliefs. Credulous metafictionists treat postmodern forms as tools for reconstructing readers’ lost capabilities. Artistic form is not, as for motivated postmodernists, representational. In credulous metafiction, form is tactical or instrumental. It’s designed to do something to us.’ lxxxii

‘This may explain the artists’ actions then.’ I say, ‘but how about you and Tom?’
In my mind, as I perform this action of redirecting your thinking back toward your own enactments, I feel clunky, cynical about my own performance of therapist. I wonder if you see it, think I’m clunky too. Would it be hopelessly self-absorbed of me to ask? Is this work a tool for reconstructing your lost capabilities, or mine?

I find myself spinning after you leave, unable to ground. The only thing I can see is how Tom became part of your world. He wasn’t there, and then one day there he was, and now he’s filling the whole of our space, our time together, and this is only a fragment, of something too big to grasp, to see in its entirety. How to contain amorphous memory and make something meaningful?
You moved Millenium together, a night on the town, owning it.

What happened after that returns to you in fits and starts that I struggle to keep track of. There are gaps in your narrative and time slides around. You and Tom find some way to align. Or rather, you realise now, you aligned yourself to him, for want of a better idea at a time. The possibilities of your solo venture into the world were feeling exhausted. There was no one else you thought about holding out for. Anyway, other boys kept away from you in deference to their own codes and Tom became the only one you really knew.

When and how you became a joint entity is less clear. You never discussed it yourselves. The sense of cohesion felt imposed from the outside, when people began to ask you about him instead of yourself, and to introduce you to others as Tom’s girlfriend, as if he were all they knew about you, the preceding years of your acquaintance seemingly forgotten. His magnetism enveloped yours. Being treated as a portal to his orbit offered a status of sorts, that is, a place in a social network, the existence of which you had previously been unaware. You found you now belonged somewhere specific within this fascinating tapestry, though like an embellishment, sewn on, not part of the fabric as such. There was little curiosity as to where you had appeared from and if you’re being honest (you look at me over the top of imaginary glasses), you found your own objectification as fascinating as the social vantage point your new positioning provided. In the eyes of others then, the bond was sealed, like a Rorschach butterfly, your bodies manifested a shape that onlookers were trying to see. A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Couple: Lino Print on Glass (Reproduction. 7/360).

For Tom, you say, it was all about the outside view. Other people’s perception mattered more than the truth because ultimately it defined reality. He told people you lived together in Brixton, though Clapham Common was nearer. It’s a grey area, he insisted, and it remains that way inn your mind. But he was more of a Brixton person, by which he meant he liked The Ritzy cinema and that Portuguese café Vera Cruz, and the nice woman who ran Jacaranda Gardens on Brixton Station Road. Did Tom believe things into being? You think he believed he did. It seemed to work for him. You wonder about that now.

Alone together, you sometimes danced close, but he was perpetually engaged in his writing and the life it apparently necessitated. Or justified, you say, voice quivering. The life of a writer is filled with sacrifice, he said. You were slow to catch his meaning. Trouble with his living arrangements led to him moving in with you. It wasn’t a big thing, more the natural flow of events, tide of life stuff. Your urge to safety, a place of containment, warm and hidden, seemed to find attunement with his need not to dramatise his private world. In fact, he had little interest in attending to the mundane, so you found yourself with plenty of scope to play house, while he foc used on his many ambitions. He seemed to like being swaddled in this cocoon of coupledom, though he never really said. You cooked on long Sunday afternoons, while he wrote. He swallowed up your offerings in seconds, barely surfacing from his thoughts to notice what you’d made. When you pointed this out, he suggested you ought really to be an artist too, not concerning yourself so deeply with the materiality of domestic life. But who would manage all the real things then? You asked. He seemed to believe the real world was overrated. You told him you didn’t know how to be an artist without first having a place of safety in the
world, and that in any case you felt the manifestation of daily living was also an art and an extraordinary thing of wonder. But by then he was no longer listening.

Tom bought you a television. You were offended. He watched it instead. Chris Evans shouting on TFI Friday, while you played Marianne Faithful in the kitchen. I sense your kitchen in Clapham now, smell of oats and milk, a dresser painted to recall its glory days, roll top bath visible in the room at the back. Washing machine free-standing out of place by the garden door.

‘You know,’ you say, ‘I think I really experienced my life, like I was watching myself on TV.’

You played music until he changed the CD and put his arms around you until you moved together again. You oscillated too between wardrobe styles: high heels and trainers, grimy post-rave neons giving way to a kind of hyper-naturalism, cleansed, pale and born-again. It seemed to you like increasingly hard work to be a woman. Unsure who you were and unable to decide who to be, The Big Brother House revealing itself on the TV screen, you felt your life too had become something others peered at in curiosity, as if the material features, the discernible surface, were the actuality of the thing. This realisation horrified you and yet demanded you perform convincingly. Tom seemed oblivious, which was after all the most convincing way to behave. He also knew the rules of being someone, you say, only they seemed to be different rules for him.

Meanwhile, there within, present bodies often close, skin touching, human scents blending into a shared aroma, objects oriented around your kitchen and the squeaky iron bed, forming a singular aesthetic, one that incorporated your way of being into his. In your eye, your definition had become confused, but you wonder now if it appeared to visitors that he was twice the person he was. You could talk about things, and yet you felt invisible. A stranger. Perhaps he lacked curiosity about you, saw only what he needed of you. The privacy this afforded you was familiar, your unexamined mind giving you a sense of safety. So, you moved alongside him, silently filling empty spaces with imaginary scenarios, future selves who would arrive into some kind of present, presence, harmony. As soon as his driven, preoccupied striving was at an end, then would come the beginning. These thoughts remained unshareable though, rebuffed by the solid surface of his determination. He could not allow another possibility but this: his absolute extraordinariness. While extraordinariness remained a possibility, to be anything less would be deathly. You watched, unable to enter fully into his consciousness. Parts of you met and where they touched was tender. Yet much remained mysterious.

You look at me in realisation. He needed you there, to watch!

I am not sure how to tell if that’s true, or only helps you feel there was some point to your presence, the years of being decorative to someone who didn’t desire adornment.

‘And I wonder what you needed? How was it to be in the orbit of that drive? A gravitational pull holding you, giving anchor to your wanderings, bringing you back around?’

And you wonder too, if that’s security or if it’s a trap and whether you can tell the difference and indeed if there is a difference.
His purpose seemed big enough for two. You climbed willingly into position and it made you feel secure.

People asked you then, as I’m doing now, how it was to live that way, so close to someone whose emergent genius was undoubted, hotly anticipated, who believed himself so intensely that others believed him too.

You found it, you say, perplexing, because he wasn’t whatever people seemed to imagine. He was ordinary and struggled. He needed a lot of help to manage daily tasks and it was lucky you were there. But yes, for those moments in the limelight, you were complicit in making the impression, a flash of white sequins maybe, shoes that made you wobble so you’d need to hold his arm, silk skirt catching a breeze as you slowed your pace together and sidled into red velvet ante-chambers that were every guestlist entrance everywhere. And yes, you swallowed it in, your own illusion, and yes it made you feel there must be something real there. You thought he understood the shared complicity but now you aren’t sure he recognised it at all.

‘As if,’ you say to me now, ‘he actually believed this was his true self, and the one who sighed and strained and swore over a computer late in the night was a shadow, never to be seen in the light of day.’

You left the publishing company, huffily. It didn’t fit with the world of Tom. And anyway, you’d never really fitted there. Maybe it was the blue fabric office dividers, or the insistence that ideas be assessed primarily by their commercial potential, which seemed to you a refusal of their purpose as you understood it: to look seriously at the world and decide how best to manage things. Since the capitalist imperative was not up for debate, the whole gargantuan effort it purported to stand for, was side-lined. It side-lined itself. You would find yourself insisting on saying what you felt about this, or about the outsourcing of printing to other continents where the price of paper was cheaper, as if some trees mattered more than others. Responses were steeped with open-minded generosity for engaging with to your girlish candour. You thought you might die of the effort to be reasonable.

In the final throes, you remember having a row in the stationary cupboard, a stand-up screaming match with an ambitious nemesis. It was the closest you came to work-related passion, the thrill of your mutual release unfurling itself over boxes of paperclips and polite compliments slips. After that you handed in your notice and filled the silence that fell round you, as you worked out your final month, with phone calls to friends who had friends... it’s impossible to know for sure but maybe it was because you were his girlfriend that things seemed easier, which is to say, someone said yes, and the new job was to involve wearing clothes from the Kings Road, your orbit shifting from Shoreditch to a river view. On your last day you placed *The Cyborg Manifesto* in the photocopier and set it to some unreasonably high number, before exiting; you final attempt at communication with the machinery that had shown itself to you but didn’t want to hear what you saw.

waltz

The new office was round the corner from the Tate, by Pimlico station, both more and less edgy. Real fiction at last, but the machinery was even bigger and your capacity to engage in any way that struck you as meaningful slipped, alongside your pay. It wasn’t ideal, you felt. Yet,
neither was it clear to you what young women like you were meant to do. As work that is. You felt perhaps it was how your brain was wired. The world seemed made for those with single-minded confidence and you were quickly scanned and determined to be lacking the requisite drive. Those you looked to for guidance seemed none the wiser as to your options. Marriage was not openly suggested but its ghost shadowed you. In The White Swan pub next to your new office, you hoped to find a juxtaposition of interests that would bring life to this new existence, but it didn’t feel that way. You had arrived somewhere, but no longer felt at the centre of anything. A flat, forgettable landscape next to a middling section of the river; you don’t remember who you met. The feeling as you held on tight to the rail of the 137 bus back to Clapham, precarious illusion of glamour cracking as you swung to the left and then to the right. The iconic red (Pantone 485 C) giant charged on relentlessly and at times recklessly up and down the road and over the river at Battersea Bridge, confident in its social position, a real national treasure.

‘When I speak,’ you say to me now, as a grown woman of smooth composure ‘in ways that demean my womanly experience, it’s meant to be ironic! The irony being that no one seems to get my little joke. What does any young person do but believe themselves into being, until their idea of themselves becomes reality? But was it ever really my dream or simply an impression I needed to give, to pass safely through the world? Of course, I was there, just beneath the surface—if anyone would look. If anyone looked they’d’ve seen me, a manifesting little being, there all along. Hiding. Trying not to get cut down.’

I hesitate, thrown at our apparent change of time and space, or pace. As if you’ve become someone else, surface impenetrable, perhaps to make it possible to speak those words without crumbing. I don’t press, or not exactly: ‘So you did, you did manifest that life, you think?’

‘I wanted the entanglement. With Tom I mean. I let it be the main thing; decisions flowed around the relationship. Maintenance, you see? I was the maintainer. What’s the word for it? Enabler – I was the enabler of his addiction. I mean, his addiction to an idea of himself that he had to live up to, to inhabit by force of will. Do I believe it exists, see? That power to manifest. Did I manifest the outcome too? My own emptiness? I don’t know. It was an anchor for me, his determination. I do think he needed it too, to have me there, clinging on, though he couldn’t seem to admit it.’

‘So it was your choice?’ I ask and you look at me for a while. I wonder, are we in some kind of battle? I feel I have challenged you, and I don’t know why.

‘What though,’ you ask ‘was my alternative?’

2002

A dark November and you’re walking through the Tesco carpark off Acre Lane when you meet Mike Nelson, Si’s old friend, Tom’s too maybe. Maybe yours as well. He smiles and you embrace and he asks you how you are and you smile and then he says he’s preparing a book called ‘Magazine’ lxxxv and you don’t say you’re glad to be out in the cold because in that moment you’re hot-bellied, pregnant, and finding it embarrassing, it’s hard to explain. Like a bad dog, or a self-conscious cat, you’re caught out in your animal nakedness. Impregnated. It’s the
strangest thing, you say to me now, you’ve ever experienced – life buzzing in your body that way.

You’re not sure if Mike’s noticed… You hold his gaze up to your face with laser eyes, invisible will-power and he speaks, his own animation, wild spirit dancing all about the ‘interzone’ while you watch him.

‘...And of course, in terms of making spaces that claim to be something they’re not, I just like the idea of a book calling itself a magazine.’

‘I see,’ you say. ‘Maybe it’s a book-sized magazine.’

‘Actually, it is!’ he says. But one that has a plot, you know, a pathway for the reader… although it’s non-linear.’ And then he’s bringing you for the tour – showing you how he’s pulled together an intricate reconfiguration of some of his previous installations, how he’s edited and ordered a succession of detailed images encouraging the reader to move through different passages and states, negotiating recyclings of six of his previous shows.

‘So is it saying anything new? Or maybe it’s saying old things in new ways?’

‘Very maybe!’ he says. ‘The book has no end point, no definitive reading, obviously.’

‘Obviously’ you nod, enjoying not understanding. Your belly buzzes and you might soon need to be sick.

‘... visual non-linear narrative... 'interzone' - a parallel experience which questions the purpose of the constructed spaces and examines what’s really going on behind the scenes’ he says.

‘And what is going on behind the scenes?’ you ask.

‘Exactly!’ he replies.

A humming in your body, a becoming body within a body, yours, and though you experience yourself as separate to these goings-on, irritated by the hot itch of the whole affair, you’re also hopelessly emotionally invested in the preservation of the immersive experience of irritation, and the as yet imaginary being, whose life depends on you to manifest it real, who will eventually burst you open. Sigourney Weaver crosses your mind and how no one can hear you scream.

‘Is there anything new in the Interzone?’ you say.

He laughs. ‘Nothing new under the sun. Still, we lose ourselves in multiplicities of meaning - rediscovering, reinventing and redefining.’

Your baby is the first, the most, the last. How can something so all-consuming be so ubiquitous? And so surprising? How did you not know before? How did you not understand? This beginning that’s the end of you, your story now eclipsed again, and still not begun.
There must have been a connection between you and Mike because whatever magnetism your mutual presence once held is now noticeably absent. Is that the pregnancy too? Differently related now, you hadn’t anticipated how separate from your previous mode of being a cellular shift could make you. Hard to know who, in fact, was at the core of your consciousness, the old you or this additional presence, part/all of who you are now. The you that experiences consciously, seems to be side-lined, in a separate compartment from the body you which is living your life! Tendrils of connection have snapped and regrown somewhere else. If you once felt an urgency with Mike, alive with its own activity, a buzz of possibility yet to be explored, its potential has expired or has no value to this new body that is and is not you.

Maybe the baby doesn’t like men. Tom, like Mike, smells acrid to you. You’re experiencing a powerful need for space, to share nothing with them, not even breath. This is awful! The sense of deflation and emptiness frightens you. Like the thing that makes life vital has cut you off, repurposed you. Death comes with new life, you think, and where is your agency now? Was it ever real or were you simply happily complicit with the illusion your body had previously produced, that you were you?

Momentarily, the pregnancy offers itself as a ‘fuck you’ to the man too busy with his life to have helped you work out yours, but the feeling passes quickly and reverts to a simpler truth. It pains you… to feel your ways parting… the end of an era has arrived. Mike doesn’t look down at your belly. He talks about the trouble he had getting the right shots for the book. ‘Magazine’, you say. And then he’s saying something long-winded about cameras and then he asks you if you’re still with Tom and looks you straight in the eye and you realise you’re shaking.

In the interzone, in-between the before and after, you’re keeping a baby alive with the power of your mind, willing it to live and afraid that if you don’t, nobody else will. You feel Mike’s apparent indifference as a danger to the baby: no one else loves her. Not yet. That’s the truth.

The wind picks up in the Tesco car park and you huddle a bit closer while Mike makes his jacket open up like a sail. ‘Let the wind blow you along!’ he says, stepping backward with the breeze and you lift your face and drink it in till your eyes start to water.

‘Tom’s still trying to get his book published’ you say ‘or that’s what he says he’s doing. He seems to spend all his time pacing round Brixton. I never see him’

‘Don’t you work in publishing? Says Mike. ‘Surely you know how it’s done?’

‘He says my company’s too middle brow’ you hear yourself say, voice wavering a little sharply, and it digs deeper than you meant. ‘No literary depth, or rather, too much entertainment. He doesn’t seem to want people to enjoy it! Won’t adapt it for the market. I despair sometimes’

‘Oh well, good for Tom!’ says Mike ‘one mustn’t compromise.’ And you’re speechless for a moment, wondering if he really doesn’t see you standing there before him.

‘He’s a true artist, you know. A modern day Beckett. It’s important to have integrity.’

‘Integrity, yes’ you say. ‘There’s a lot to hold together.’
But Mike doesn’t seem to catch your meaning. Somehow you can’t bring yourself to say about your fragile rental with its shared bathroom and how your rich girl’s job doesn’t really pay for much and how this situation has started to feel a lot less bohemian and lot more precarious in recent weeks. Everything has changed. But not Tom. ‘

How long do you have to fake it till you make it?’ you ask, more serious than he seems to realise, because he laughs. ‘Tom’s the genuine article. He’s not faking anything.’ And that apparent reassurance unleashes hot flames of panic within you. Your reality, or theirs, is feeling unhinged. Your eyes grow hot.

‘Hey! Are you okay?’

Your eyes start to weep, then your whole frame shakes and yet more alarm as you wonder whose body you’re in. It’s the baby’s body now, and you’ve been pushed aside. You drop to the ground, touch it with your hands to steady you. Mike watches, apparently finding all this as strange as you do. But miles apart. He doesn’t see you anymore.

‘Listen, ‘he says, ‘Do you and Tom know Clémentine? Clémentine Deliss, she has a little publishing project called Metronome and she’s been helping Gavin Turk, you know Gavin and Debbie don’t you? ‘An artists and writers’ organ,’ she calls it. Just the thing for Tom to get involved with.’

And you sigh and he huddles you in and rubs you up and down harder than you want but it seems to help. ‘Come on!’ he says, ‘let’s go shopping in this hell hole!’ and you follow him up to the white light and the sliding doors, and beyond, heat forcing itself on you from above as you cross the threshold. ‘Let each build more reality out of the last’ he says, and you look at him intently.

‘I need something. It’s called Trail Mix. Now!’ you say.

‘It’s all good!’ shouts Mike ‘I’ll hunt and gather, you stand there and drink a Yop. Tom’s going to be something remarkable, wait and see!’

You feel yourself dependent on gregarious children whose minds you understand only fleetingly, whose freedoms extend to you perhaps only sporadically.

And you look at me again.

‘I went with it. I mean, where else was there to go but along for the ride?’

And I look back at you. ‘well, where else was there?’

‘There wasn’t, that’s the thing. They seemed to expect me to have some place to retreat away to, a family with a home in the country maybe. But that was never my reality. I was there for real, nowhere else. Some kind of misunderstanding. They thought I wasn’t faking. Or was, if you know what I mean. They assumed I was faking. That I had some establishment background to retreat to. How could they have believed my front? I thought they actually knew me. Tom said I knew what he was like. And I did. I did know. I didn’t know he wouldn’t change, even
when things changed. I thought creativity meant a capacity to adapt. He said I wanted him to stop being who he was. I tried not to mention the baby. He said I was being selfish and pulling him in to my imagined life instead of letting him pursue his. Did I... Am I....?

I’m sorry,’ I say, ‘we have to end. ’

‘Change happens slowly, then quickly,’ you say. ‘Who said that?’

I smile, ‘I’m sorry, I don’t think I know. I stand, hoping you’ll follow my lead. Ending is tricky sometimes. You move and I open the door. Somewhere in the house is music, the children are playing film soundtracks. It’s Nick Cave. The children like music for the screen. I feel another planet rising, think of your belly. And the sun.
Act Three

Becoming and Unbecoming Manifestations of Love
A3 Scene One: non-scene

November 2018

Outside, blackness in the afternoon and a cold, still fog has descended enclosing us in the smallness of our world. Inside, fire is lit and living-room glows warm, the heat marking out a circle of safety.

A sanctuary.

In this sacred space-lounge: Ophelia on a makeshift bed, and me stretched out on the rug opposite. There’s no alcohol. None. I’m tired and heavy limbed. Herbal tea and chocolate, and not knowing what’s right. A long sleep maybe? The longest sleep, and then the morning and a chance to start again.

‘Sorry I’m going to be one of those sober bores’ she says ‘I’ll try not to be too dogmatic. Should we smoke?’

Ophelia has checked herself out of a hotel in Weston-Super-Mare where addicts from the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea are sent, freshly detoxed, to gather themselves before being launched back into their challenging, traumatising lives. There, inhaling deeply on the only permitted substance, they swap details under the disapproving eye of some matronly figure who banishes their phones and sends them to bed. Ophelia has come to me from that place, to gather herself her own way. She documents her decision and sends a full explanation to a psychiatrist, a social worker, a lawyer, a husband, and the father of her children. She has her hands up: no secrets. She tells them my name, emphasises that I’m...

‘U. K. C. P. Registered! It’s important they know you’re legit. And you are, Melissa! You’re doing so well!’

I’m doing well enough to grasp that how things look matters. Our surface must be impeccable. The living-room is now her private clinic, the space she needs to recover in her own way. She reads my books and observes my daily living. The children ask how long she’s staying. I tell them I don’t know. Sylvester crouches, watching silently. When our attention is turned, he magics his way over next to the fire, reappearing draped like a hearthrug, his whole being given over to radiant heat. Ophelia will stay tonight. Ophelia will stay as long as she needs. I’m relieved she’s here with me for this intermission, a retreat from the heightened drama of her life. Grounded in our co-presence, a wave like home envelopes me. Here is what it means to be deeply known: hanging together for the world’s turning, not playing with shadows as I do with you: sometimes two people, sometimes half a person.

‘Look at all your novels’ she says. ‘All therapists must have to read a lot. How else would they understand anything about people?’

I hesitate. ‘Well yeah. Novels bring us into contact with other people’s inner worlds, even if they’re fictional, but I feel like there’s more to it. Something about how we engage... I mean how we understand and communicate so much, often in simple exchanges. It could be, I don’t
know, a description of us lying here on the floor now. How would I write it? Or how would you? And what would it really be about?’

‘This moment is about making a change, Melissa, making change. Who knew change could be so mundane?’

‘Stability’s the thing,’ I say. ‘Sometimes I feel like too much has happened to us.’

‘Yes, it gets to be too much! Death by a thousand cuts. I can’t keep taking it.’

‘No, we need to rock steady.’

We sip our tea and I stroke Sylvester who tolerates me until his fur goes static. I stop.

‘The thing about fiction though,’ I’m on a roll ‘is that the artefact, I mean the subject, and the context, the what, all the what-not, and the critique are all completely embedded together within the narrative structure, and yet we can distinguish them as readers. We recognise the artifice of the form, and yet it feels meaningful, says something real. Our minds move naturally between simultaneous layers of meaning, including forms that critique themselves, that seemingly undo themselves, and yet sense remains intact... yeah?

‘Yeah!’ she nods.

‘I love layerings of knowingness and unknowingness, self-referential qualities. I love the way writers refer to other writers, the way protagonists are so often themselves writers. Fictions about fictions. These layers are where I find the importance, as a therapist. The way it's all going on at once’

‘Of course, everyone understands the philosophical messages embedded in the context of fiction and we mothers can write it because its apparently innocuous and doesn’t get in the way of the big dicks and their power games.’

‘Big dicks?’ My whole face moves forward, along with my eyebrows and she laughs. ‘Yeah. I’m so tired of dealing with them.’ We drown the tea and eat more chocolate, finding enough buzz to contemplate the inner workings of various men, until she’s exhausted. ‘Oh for some heroin! But we mothers don’t do heroin, I know, I know!’

‘We really don’t,’ I say. ‘Parenthood’s not that kind of event.’

‘See, you’re so legit. Bit of crack, maybe?’

It occurs to me that the cabinet against which her bed is made is filled with booze. I try not to stare at it.

‘He wants me dead’ she says. Her shadow. I look her in the eye and say in a deep and serious voice ‘you mustn’t believe it! The children need their mother. Remember that.’
'Ah but!' She says, then in comes the Wild Thing through the cat flap and he’s curious about the new human and her bed on the floor. He climbs aboard her blankety raft and starts exploring, purring loudly. His largess makes the furtiveness of his clambering futile as he alters the terrain so utterly with each lion’s paw he manoeuvres.

I watch him as I listen to her. He grabs at her hand with his front paws, rolls and bites at it. He’s playing with her, the Wild Thing. He knows and she knows, the nip is not a real nip. This make-believe is readily shared and mutually understood.\textsuperscript{xc} Meanwhile, her words remind me of all the ways she doubts herself and the problem, I now see, is that her Shadow knows her too. Inside out that is. I begin to wonder if he’s playing, I mean if he knows he’s playing, knows what he’s playing at.

‘Yes! I’m being played!’ she says. ‘He’s got all the cards’ she says, and ‘he’s a clever, clever man.’

In silence we breathe. Surely knowledge is power or something, so it’s all good, because now I understand how alive is the dance between them. Still.

‘We’re clever too’ I say and watch the fire a while.

When I look up, Ophelia has in her hands a book called \textit{Re-enchanting the World}. ‘Listen to this!’ She says:

\begin{quote}
‘Though differently articulated – \textit{communing}, \textit{el comun}, \textit{comunalidad} – the language and the politics of the \textit{commons are today the expression of this alternative world}. For what the commons in essence stands for is the recognition that life in a Hobbesian world, where one competes against all and prosperity is gained at the expense of others, is not worth living and is a sure recipe for defeat. This is the meaning and the strength of the many struggles that people are waging across the planet to oppose the expansion of capitalist relations, defend the existing commons, and rebuild the fabric of communities destroyed by years of neoliberal assault on the most basic means of our reproduction’.\textsuperscript{xclii}
\end{quote}

‘Go Sylvia! Yes! This is what we’re doing in the Royal Borough of Fucking the People of Kensington and Chelsea!’

Ophelia’s thinking about Grenfell. I’m thinking about her Shadow.

‘This is why it makes no sense for him to play a zero-sum game over the children,’ I say. “To operate within the matrix of power is not the same as to replicate uncritically relations of domination.” Judith Butler said that I think’, I say.\textsuperscript{xcli} ‘You can still negotiate your relations even as you look at the big picture and despair.’

The afternoon passes slowly then quickly and your time’s coming round. Soon you’ll arrive. I pull myself up from the rug, rocking like the cats, breathing deeper now, readying myself for you. I fetch our cool water in blue glasses, put on the lights in the room, check my face for chocolate. Find my shoes. In shoes, I’m no longer home but at work, with you.
The line is thin.

I go alone.

Ophelia can wait with the books, the Wild Thing hovering over her, kneading the knots in her stomach as she tries to concentrate. I close the door on them, sit on the staircase, hear you pausing on the step outside, breathing in, touching your hair maybe. I wait. Until you knock. Then I answer.

Sometimes your presence speaks for itself.

You sit and look at me and your mouth is closed in a way that says something big is waiting to come out.


‘What?’ You ask.

‘I can see it,’ I say. ‘What’s happened?’

You breathe in and look at me for a while. I wait.

‘I might as well say it,’ you say. Then lifts the thin veil. Then out flows the story.

You went to London on a train, on a whim. You wanted to remember – feel again – how it is to be immersed in the city, the sensations it produces in you reminding you how you felt when you still felt like yourself. You wanted, you say, to be so lost in indescribable feeling that everything would become clear. ‘It’s hard to explain,’ you say, ‘but sometimes it’s important to suspend your normal perception … to open on the inside, move with your intuition, and go where there’s a pull, changing what’s on the outside.’

You took yourself to the South Bank and remembered all the Sunday mornings and the Friday evenings walking there, with friends, with Tom, with the children, and the many times you walked there alone… especially at the beginning, new to the city with long empty weekends and, well, you don’t know why you walked so much.

‘Is it normal?’ You ask and I say,

‘I don’t know.’

This time, walking, your breath tingled through your body, tips of fingers, lips… a familiar excitation… others round you seemed to pulse the same way, charged with a kind of anticipation, glowingly present, open to encounter. Even though you now presented as a day tripper, cultural consumer, beneath this surface your history entangled with the city’s own vibration, nostalgia embedded at the atomic level after so much, the so muchness of a place like that.
You entered into The Hayward Gallery, and it drew you first into its shop, antechamber of the brutalist basilica’s main event. You scanned the fat pipes on the ceiling, and the black and wood and white of the various surfaces, inhaling the smell of the colour coded wares and you looked at this and that but feeling tense and bad and hollow, under invisible pressure to move through the displays at a pace, speed and direction apparently determined by the building itself. You attended to it: the feel. Perhaps it was the pipes or the way the displays made paths for you to follow. Your eyes itched, wanted to water. Had you changed, you wondered, in your awareness, or was the extent of the commodification of ideas, of art, objectively uncouth? The apparent order of the objects and the squared edges all around you produced in you an oddly disharmonious, jumbled sensation and as if by way of respite you zoned in on a display of books, attracted by a round womanly shape stepping gingerly, armless and headless, navigating pokes from pointing arrows. The book declared ‘I have been to hell and back’ and it felt apt to pick it up and flick your way through, mainly looking at the images but text as well and before you could put it down you were drawn in – a fragment reaching you from another place in time: ‘the relation of one person to her surroundings is a continuing preoccupation. It can be casual or close, simple or involved, subtle or blunt. It can be painful or pleasant. Most of all it can be real or imaginary.’

You wondered if you ought now to buy the book, having read the words, and imagined the weight of it and how it would sit with all the others back at home, intimidating you. Disoriented, you placed it back on the stand. After that you entered in.

We enter.

The exhibition is called Space Shifters and you’re curious about moving within its disorienting features, wondering what’ll happen, if you’ll feel like yourself again, the person you want to re-member being. Is it a pull into something unknown, or a compulsion to repeat a feeling, something familiar? You move... inside Alicja Kwade’s WeltenLinie waiting to notice if feeling follows. But you lose track, because on entering in, you’re aware that you’re with someone else now. Is this real or imaginary? A sensation of being surveyed. Not you in particular... or perhaps you in particular. Your eye is drawn to the apparent source of the sensation... a man, with hair and a red T-shirt with an anatomically correct image of a heart printed on its outside. He’s attending to a block of wood placed before a mirror.

It’s there.

Something tall and silver rises like a rock that’s not, and you want to encounter it but you can’t help feeling the man may be looking at you with the same benign curiosity he might have given
the wood and in a sense, you feel, this is understandable, since you present in much the same way and have appeared into his visual field like any other object in the space and the feeling is... openness... not anything in particular, only presence, awareness, humming vibrant buzzing sensation of space between you charged. He can’t exactly help but look, you suppose, anymore than you can help feeling he’s looking. It’s hot. You move. And there’s an unexpected mirror and he’s not, you don’t feel, concerned or unconcerned with meeting your eye or with what you might think. But there it is. And there’s no time in which to become self-conscious, arrange a public face or avert your gaze. He’s made of clothes and shoulders and a jaw and somewhere, lips. Together they form an expression you can’t put into words. He has hands at the ends of his arms. In retrospect you wonder if he wore shoes because you didn’t notice but suppose he did, so you fill the image in with your mind. The shoes are... hmmm... you find it hard to see. Brown maybe, or dark blue. Not trainers. They look like he thought about them, you decide. Like he chose them.

You feel like there’s music.

‘Do they have music in art galleries?’ you ask me then.

‘Is that how you remember it?’ I reply. ‘What’s the music?’

‘Trust the Sun,’ you say, and find it on your phone, and we listen, eyes circling each other and the room, breath aligning.

After a while, you re-enter the recollection. I come with you.

It’s you and he. The mirror amplifies a distance permeating your proximity. As if there’s a screen between. And then: us, you think, which alters the thing further. And as the moment completes itself you feel he’s now looking round the room with your eyes. Did he look around? Or just watch you looking and imagine his way inside your field of vision? Was he really in the experience with you or only in a virtual sense? And did you really feel him or was it an imaginary experiencing? And would that make it less real? If it were never spoken of, what would become of this sensation? Certainly, you’ve been looking, all around the room. And you edge toward the silver eruption knowing that from his position behind you he can see the same thing you see, but also, you seeing it. It feels natural to assume you’re in the moment together. He’ll have a visual memory of the scene that you imagine. There. You’ve entered his frame.

You there, in the picture now, absorbed into a performance for an unconfirmed audience of one. You there, deciding how to move, holding as you transition through space, aware of the charge that exists, that exists, and you’re so certain that you turn and look him in the eye, and find your lips moving... words coming out of your mouth as if of their own accord and another part of you finds it strange because you’ve been feeling wordless, deep inside yourself and far away from the world around you.

Still deep inside and separate, you observe your tongue and lips and the force of your breath as your body speaks things. As if you’d known the man already and there’s much already understood and you talk about the great nugget of silver and how it makes you feel and ask him what he thinks the artist means and how best to pronounce her name and he replies as if it’s completely normal to speak with unknown people in art galleries, and maybe it is and why
shouldn’t it be? As if they’re your oldest friends, and you know one another so well that all barriers of pretence have fallen away and all imperfections of your beings are known to one another, and accepted now; all the mistakes you’ve made, or were they the best compromises life could offer you, have found their peace, so that there is, at this stage of your relationship, really nothing left to discuss but art, but art itself, because time passes and you what it together. It reminds you of being young, very young, the last time you picked up friendships in this way, with unspoken depth... a sense of importance without knowing why, but a feeling that what happens will have lasting significance, as if being in this moment means being in all moments to come. You keep talking about the art and so does he but the impulse... impulse... to keep talking, makes you feel a stranger to yourself. It’s not usual.

‘Well!’ I say, ‘you sound ready for a new chapter... able to trust the moment.’

You look at me but ignore my words which fall at the wrong cadence. You carry on...

Making your way(s) around the gallery together, but also not, as if you’re simply moving in the same rotation, and when you come to Anish Kapoor’s Sky Mirror, Bluexcix, it’s natural to discuss it through the prism of his work Marsyas which you assume you will both have encountered years ago in the Turbine Hall of Tate Modern. ‘I mean,’ (you look at me) ‘who didn’t?’

I try to keep still.

Then again, did either of you really see it since it was, like the sky mirror, concerned not with its own surfaces but with how its presence showed what lies beyond in a different light, as it were – all those surfaces reflecting their contextual space, then and now, only then it was the gallery itself and now it’s the sky and it’s blue!

And you laugh at this simplicity and yet, you wonder, is it maturity or sadness or has the world shifted so that Kapoor now wants to look only at the sky and is blue the most beautiful and magical and healing colour in the universe or is it reflecting deep sadness and difficulty with looking at the world itself, and all it’s become, so that the only source of hope and solace, and purity, is the unreachable sky?

You look deep into the disk, side by side with the man with the hands and a heart on his sleeve, and there’s something disorienting about gazing down to look up, like you’re a long way from the ground below, and somewhere now in space... which is true. And then you become aware that you and he are touching, fingers brushing, then coming to rest and you grip firmer as if your hands are the only things that are real and that might hold you in your body and guide you back to Earth, back into your being.

I listen to you and wonder if we can feel in our bodies the soul of a place we’ve never been, only reached for in our imaginations? Can we know it because we feel it, even if there’s no evidence, as such? And I decide we can. Must. Otherwise, what am I doing here?

Making a future for the flesh, I see now, needs a leap of imagination – a deep soul full feeling. What have you imagined into being? Shall I imagine with you? Is my role to manifest with you by our mutual recognition, a new world? I believe you. And you believe in you and this man.
The heart T-shirt; it’s as if I’ve seen one before. The man on a train, but I’ll never know if it’s the same man, or another iteration.

Something between us moves, but there’s nothing to see or hear. Nothing is said, exactly, yet I find understanding. You seem to be waiting to see if I’ll contradict your tale, but I realise there’s no room for thinking this through. It’s already decided; the thing is done. Thought has been eclipsed by an act of faith that will manifest a new way of being in the world. Or an old way. I don’t know you well enough, to say if this is a new story or an old one. I’ll ride it with you.

The Gallery’s closing and Goldfrapp’s pulsing in your head. You leave together, or rather, at the same time, you and he. It’s as if... well... only this: you go first and he... follows... gently touches your back as you cross the threshold, a wave of warm air pressing down on you as you pass through the door into the cold, dark afternoon. Then he gives you an apple from his garden and a postcard with his details. Zuko. And you don’t really know how or if... so you give him and smile and say ‘see ya’ and start walking... and don’t look back.

You lasted about two hours, you tell me. Then you messaged him and told him ‘I want you in my life.’

I’m silent, which hopefully comes across as... I don’t know... therapeutic? Mainly, I’ve no idea how to respond and was it a bad place to begin or was it confident? Should I be more like you? I feel like disappearing into the floor, but you seem unphased, which means I have to tolerate myself for a moment.

‘I didn’t hear back from him for days’, you say, ‘and then... don’t say anything... I mean it.’

I open my eyes wide and close my lips tight. And wait. You can’t seem to say.

‘And then...’ you say, ‘he sent me a poem.’

‘Well that’s... good... isn’t it?’

‘I suppose,’ you say.

‘And what did the poem say? I mean... if you want to tell me.’

You look at me quizzically and I think I’ve messed up. I don’t want to seem like a friend seeking thrilling detail, or perhaps that’s what I do want... do I? To keep you talking? I think about Ophelia in the living-room, imagine her wearing glasses and reading Donna Haraway to Sylvester and the Wild Thing. I wonder if they benefit from being called ‘companion species’, not pets, and tangle myself up in a question of mutuality. I’m not convinced Sylvester or the Wild Thing view us humans as subjectivities in our own right. In fact, it’s evident that they don’t. They treat us as objects, to use for their own ends! Do we think we’re better beings if we refuse to objectify in return? If we’re the ‘better creatures’ by virtue of this intra-species respect, are we back to being elitist, thinking our human capacities are special?

I realise you’re still looking at me. What’s the therapeutic response here...?
'Would you like to say more...?' and I trail off.

You rescue me.

‘It’s like he’s given me a puzzle. The signs seem clear, but they aren’t. Which way?’

‘Do you think he’s in a dilemma?’ I ask. ‘Could you be a dilemma for him?’

‘Which way,’ you say. ‘Is it for me to read how I want, or is there an actual right or wrong direction?’

I think you’re trying not to fall off a cliff, but land has already slipped from beneath you; I sense your weightlessness. I don’t know how long there’ll be this falling, the thrill in the pit of you. I want to believe you. Does that mean I believe he believes too?

You play with the words in the poem, a cryptic crossword perhaps. You try to avoid any interpretation... just feel what comes. Then you ask me what I think he means by:

‘Energy,’

‘Light’

and

‘Touched.’

‘What can you hear?’ I ask you.

‘That he knows.’ You reply.

And you tell me it feels like you’ve known him before
A3 Scene Two: mind-reading

A week passes quickly, elements of life remaining familiar, Ophelia in the living-room, cats in the kitchen, children rotating in and out. I enact the necessary requirements of my life. Then you’re back, and I sit across again, and you look straight at me, clear and bright.

‘I think,’ you say, ‘I might be healed. Thank you for your time, it’s been great to go over these old memories and now I’m truly ready to begin again.’ You smile appealingly and tip your head to the side.

‘I see,’ I say, and we sit. And smile.

And after a while, ‘Is it because of the man?’ I ask.

‘Of course not! Okay, maybe. I feel like myself again. Okay, I feel amazing.’ And you smile and the smile grows.

I scrunch my nose at you. ‘You feel yourself, and who is that? Not who’re you feeling, I mean how are you feeling, about yourself?’

‘Well, I don’t know, and the thing is I really don’t care. Do I have to be someone, I mean myself alone? Because I imagine being more me, more than me... Shit. I’m fucked. I mean I’m totally gone. I mean, I want to be, and also, I’m not in control. I mean I’m losing it. Or lost.’ And you look at me and then you say: ‘Fuck! Can this happen? At my age? Surely I’m too old and cynical... totally out of my depth. What the hell am I doing?’

And then higher pitched ‘Help! What do I do? You have to tell me what to do!’

And I’m feeling I can only watch, maybe slow you down... breathe. Regulate.

‘What would Rebecca Solnit do?’ I ask. And I look to the books on the shelf and you spot...

‘Getting Lost!’ you say. ‘I love it! Let’s see what she thinks.’

I pull the book from the shelf and open it, like tarot for my lovesick client. I’ve underlined a passage near the beginning that looks apt.

‘How’s this’ I say, and I read:

To lose yourself: a voluptuous surrender, lost in your arms, lost to the world, utterly immersed in what is present so that its surroundings fade away. In Benjamin’s terms, to be lost is to be fully present, and to be fully present is to be capable of being in uncertainty and mystery. And one does not get lost but loses oneself, with the implication that it is a conscious choice, a chosen surrender, a psychic state achievable through geography.

That thing the nature of which is totally unknown to you is usually what you need to find and finding it is a matter of getting lost.
I live in this house where I sit with you now, at the centre of provincial no-man’s land – cemetery round the corner - with children and Sylvester and increasingly Wild Thing. And an apple tree in a pot. The tree, to be sure, is nimble and ready for anything. It stays in the pot because we aren’t feeling settled. Only pretending. You think I’m someone stable you can depend upon, but it’s all made up. I’m astounded that house stands around us! How can it be said that I own it, when it’s bigger and older than me, when I haven’t mastered it, am not in control of it in any way? Ophelia’s in the living-room with the books and the booze she doesn’t know about hovering above her head in its wooden cabinet. I smell the old wood casing in my mind.

‘His name is Zuko.’

‘Oh! Oh!’

‘He texts intermittently, urgently, hilariously.’

You show me.

I can confirm that the messages are real and the colours between you are vibrant and alive.

‘All I want to do is show you,’ you say. ‘Tell you. I’ve found beauty, here in the afterlife, the post-apocalypse.’

The energy inside you is seeking a crack, a chink, a lightening fork. A way to flow. Imperfection slides aside.

‘Nothing was right. Until... pure light! This... Burns!’

You can’t help that.

But you can hold on, gently, until it’s right to release.

Real. Heat!

There’s nothing and there’s everything. Everything is pure recognition of being. A mutuality of understanding that requires no words. But what, I wonder, is that?

My living-room below is full of waifs and strays who see me as safe and secure. Perhaps their need makes me so? I hold here with you and there with them. That Wild Thing is very forward and enthusiastic. If he’s going to stay, he’ll have to learn belonging, I’m thinking. I’m thinking about a cat instead of losing myself in your newly found love. Like I find it difficult.

I smile and nod myself back to you.

‘I’m in that space between,’ you say, ‘after and before. It’s been some time; what appeared to me as a vacuum, has enlivened itself. Strangeness is melting into familiarity, something forced becoming closer to voluntary. Neutral space.’
Centred. You hover, shifting from toe to toe, and I won’t move now until you seem just right. The whole moment is poised, a ballet dancer on pointe, arms stretched, and gravity defied or rather, deferred, the energy building somewhere just out of sight, the drinks cabinet rattling its wares downstairs as the Wild Thing jumps on it. Only I hear that. At least, I’m pretty sure… then out of the silence:

‘I feel like you’re seeing inside me!’ You accuse. ‘Seeing something I don’t.’

‘I’m not a mind reader.’ I say. ‘Can’t see inside you if that’s what you mean.’ If that’s where your mind lies. But I see you on the outside.

‘How can we know what’s in the mind of another?’ I muse. ‘Only by trust… I have to trust you to be honest with me – or honest as you know how… true to your experience as you can make your words be… because honestly, these are all I’ll ever know of your mind. The rest, the being present – that’s more certain, I feel. Because I feel.’

‘I feel Zuko,’ you say, ‘and so I have to trust. But it’s all not yet. I feel myself again, utterly altered. Yet here I am still in this no man land, the interim space that’s becoming home, so home that I don’t know if I’ll ever escape it. I dream up ways, and then I wake, and take the children to school. I plan for no change because planning for the unknown always disappoints.’

And then you continue ‘I want …. Fuck…. I want not to make here bearable. I want there to be… a new dream, a falling, a following/leading… New. Dance. Glorious. Essence, love, belonging and rich soil. Earthy.’

I hear you. Or maybe I’m projecting now. Time ticks a familiar twinge of impatience into my body and I check the clock and you catch my gaze and say:

‘Time?’

‘Not yet.’ I reply.

‘What’s left?’ you ask.

‘You tell me.’ I say.

‘He brings me gifts and kneels before me. He has a partner who’s incredibly mad and he holds the whole world together but still it splits and splinters. He needs holding, he and the children… the children. All is urgency. Such responsibility…’

‘He has a partner…?’

‘They’re mid-break up. It’s a sea of lawyers and property purchases…’

Organs vibrate inside me signalling, at the strength of your entrancement. As if I’d heard you before but hadn’t seen it and now I do. Caught up, spinning, feet off ground, out of control. What am I supposed to do now? Save you? Ask you how you feel?
I settle for: ‘And where are you to be in this whirlwind?’

‘I’m standing to the side.’

‘Are you though?’ I cock my head.

‘It’s not the right time. Not yet. But I see and I feel seen.’

‘Actually, it is time.’

‘You mean now?’ and I nod, chin down, eyebrows up.

‘It’s always over too soon. I never can predict when’s the right time to end.’

‘Hmmm, the right time,’ I say. I could elaborate maybe but mustn’t indulge now.

‘It goes slowly, then quickly’ you say as you reach your coat around you and together we clatter down the stairs and I rush in front to open the door as if I might bow to you.

‘Oh fuck.’ I say when you’re gone.

‘Jesus, you work so fuckin hard!’ says Ophelia from the living-room. ‘Have a day off!’

I’m speechless between worlds. ‘I’m making dinner, I’m makin’ dinner now.’

‘Come here, let me do it,’ she says. ‘You know alcoholics don’t need to eat, don’t you? But that’s not us, is it... Being a functioning adult is such a bloody faff!’

Ophelia and the Wild Thing have brought themselves here to the house. ‘It’s nice to be chosen,’ say the children. They mean about the cat. And I feel the same about being Ophelia’s chosen anti-institute, her un-institutionalisation here in her most private clinic, there by the fireside. I think it’s called family. We call it soul sista-hood. Winter’s upon us and as the dark chills descend, it’s time to allow an opening in my heart. I commit to the Wild Thing and he settles in, as if it were nothing of consequence. It dawns on me that for the Wild Thing there’s been so little history before his arrival into our lives that he may well regard this as his beginning.... time moves differently for some, and why indeed should he be aware that we existed all those years before he joined us? I realise too, that my fears that Sylvester will feel betrayed by me are another anthropomorphic projection. I explain it to the children. ‘I think that for Sylvester there wasn’t another cat, and now there is. Why would he conclude that this is somehow our doing?’ I speculate instead on the growing relationship between the two cats. Ophelia thinks I’m being unhinged.

‘That new cat wants Sylvester dead!’ she says, but I insist it’s his youthful energy and only play fighting. Sylvester is unimpressed. ‘Just like you!’ says Ophelia ‘You have an ambivalent cat!’

‘And now an unambivalent one too,’ I counter. ‘Maybe I can be both ambivalent and unambivalent.’
‘There you are, on the fence again!’ says Ophelia.

‘Sometimes on the fence and sometimes off,’ I say.

The Wild Thing’s a tricky creature to contain, but I insist it’s youthful exuberance, not manipulation by this creature of the night. My positive regard feels necessary for him to have a chance at domestic life. I feel he needs to be looked upon with understanding, met with joy as he gambols around the house like he’s drunk, high on life.

Time suspends itself as I witness you falling, or is it flying, lifting out of your own capacity to know yourself, and all of this because Zuko is playing too....

I think I know what you want – to feel seen and known. I watch. It’s all too good. I watch but you don’t see me recognising. How known do you want to be? I want it to be real for you but I’m anxious inside. Do you know it’s me who sees you? Who cares?

Ophelia is talking about how marvellous the children are, all the children, how they give meaning to our lives... ‘Motherhood is it!’ she says. ‘To be a mother to beautiful children! Aren’t we fortunate to know this, to have lived this!’

‘There’s nothing to put in our sandwiches and... no Marmite’ declare the children.

‘Details!’ she retorts. ‘Your marvellous mother is feeding you relentless love!’

Relationships of care intersect like the threads of a spider’s web. Each one delicate and prone to fluctuation as the wind whistles through. Yet when they knit together, something strong is created – the fabric of our existence. I feel my fabric, beautiful, delicate threads, brushing against my cheek, a cheek that is downy and soft and feels every tiny aspect of the gossamer.

The Wild Thing likes to be held like a baby, for short intervals, then he bounces off.

The Wild Thing purrs loudly then goes on high alert and chases away shadows, toys with imaginary prey. Shadows are growing and receding. Sylvester pretends not to watch.

I feel the house could use more frequent cleaning. Not just the bits that show, but underneath, behind, deep within. The feeling is always with me, part of life. This house is a living organism with ideas of its own. Slow and methodical, I try ordering the mess but create more as I go; we all do, even the house itself, shifting silently with the winds, walls crumbling softly in the night. Domesticity feels unnatural for me. How does life become so, lived within walls, within a house? A house contains a world and I somewhere inside, hold the thing together in some other way. As if I need to keep watching. As if my gaze is the gravitational pull that holds what’s here in place.

I don’t know what way.

It surprises me that life should be so.
So now.

I thought I saw you passing out on the street, and imagined it was me out there, living.
A3 Scene Three: [untitled]

A week goes by or is it more? Maybe months. One so much like the other it’s hard for me to say. Clarity comes to a singular point in time, when the Wild Thing isn’t there for breakfast. We wait, Sylvester and I, alert to the vacant space. It isn’t usual, or has become unusual. And while I feel his urgent presence sometimes overbearing, his absence presses too, a blank void inciting need to fulfil his anticipated desire. Silence penetrates our morning hubbub. I stand waiting with the food and the children are concerned. I tell them it’s the way of cats and chase them out the door to school. I remain inside, disquieted and anxious at the unknowing. There’s something happening I can’t see. I press myself away from the feelings and absorb myself in a strange task that, having occurred to me, feels urgent:

I’m experimenting with light. If I hang a mirror in the room, will it chase away the shadow that falls when midday sun touches window? Will it chase away the shadow that falls obliquely, present within the sunlight itself, shafts of dust dancing between us, floating like plankton, another world distracting, obscuring my sense of clarity and for which I feel somehow responsible and to blame? I’ve arrived at the counter-intuitive conclusion that if the sun meets its own reflection it will cease to separate us with the weight of its presence. The contrasts will, I think, become less pronounced as the rays descend into the doubled-space\cite{1} within the gilt frame, there losing their intensity, captured, continually reaching for a reflected horizon instead of bouncing off the walls around the room. I dimly recall physics experiments at school and that Pink Floyd album cover.\cite{2} An image of drawing fulcrums, talk of time moving backwards, and deciding to take Biology instead.

‘Physics had the swots’ says Ophelia ‘that’s why you left isn’t it…’
‘Of course.’ I’m examining the room intently, seeing only light and shadow. I’ve stopped wondering how long Ophelia will be staying. She follows me round the house chatting while I have my strange thoughts. ‘I wanted to think less, draw diagrams of plants’ I say. ‘I didn’t need the stress of wondering how time moves, or to endure the smell of the lab.’

‘And the hope of some sex education! Do you remember those classes?’ She asks.

And I recall a summer’s day outside, door open, blues and greens and breeze beckoning us out of this child’s place into the adult world. Ophelia’s impossibly flowery writing. My belly stretching, legs itching to move, feet tapping out the time ‘til school would be over forever. The teacher. No, I don’t remember the teacher, only that her face was puce and every cell of her being was unconsenting to the legal requirement to teach us about how the male penis (I draw a diagram and Ophelia and I compare to ensure we have named the various parts correctly) is inserted into the female vagina (a more complex diagram in which both male and female anatomies float disconnected from all but one another in the centre of a white page: organs without bodies\cite{3} sliced firmly down the middle). ‘There’s no need to colour in the diagrams, just move on, and above all there are to be no jokes’ the teacher declares, ‘about either length or breadth of the penis. We are not to be so immature’ says the only person in the room we are certain has experienced a penis inside her. The thought transmits itself effortlessly round the room while the teacher stands helpless, knowing herself exposed.

Ophelia has questions, serious questions about how one arrives at consent and the emotions that accompany sexual arousal. How these urgencies interact with the public domain. She
declares that her history project is to be on The Profumo Affair, and the shadowy world where young women’s sexuality was equated with prostitution. Shame. The Biology teacher gives her a hard stare, apparently affronted, then leaves the room, returning some moments later with the Deputy Head, who takes a firm stance, hands on hips, body square between teacher and class, defending teacher’s honour with firm words, spoken purposively to everyone and no one in particular, in order to manage the sensitivity of the situation as well as its utmost gravity. ‘One must not become over-stimulated at the thought of the reproductive act, a rare and solemn occurrence, that really is best not thought about at all, were it not for the absolute necessity of these curricular considerations...’ Blood circulation increases in line with the teachers’ agitation. Ophelia is (for reasons unclear to me) convinced this is a school for intellectuals and assures them that we are all most mature and interested to learn about... but ‘that will be enough!’

‘Would you believe!’ she says, trying not to spill the tea in her gesticulation, ‘would you believe it was that way? Did we learn anything at all?’

‘Is this straight?’ I’m holding the corner of the mirror trying to affect a right angle, though the house is old and leaning. I am not sure it has any right angles or even if I want one, now that I’ve begun, and I realise I’m mainly anxious about what you might think or say about it when you come later. What if you decide it’s too jaunty?

‘So what if your clients think you’re jaunty!’ says Ophelia ‘I don’t understand why you censor yourself. They need to see that you’re a person – and a real intellectual! The décor needs to show you aren’t afraid to take risks and you’ don’t worry about precise angles of mirrors and other irrelevancies.’

‘Not like I can’t afford a neutral look and a professional finish?’

No! The bourgeoisie appreciate quirky touches. They show you’re confident!’

And there we leave it because time ticks and the mirror is apparently attached to the wall, leaning on the nails that now protrude, at an angle that seems a good compromise, and I shut the doors to the private places and Ophelia with them and then try to make my hair less wild and put on my shoes and wait for you to ring the bell and imagine I’ve been waiting for you in stillness, reclined and reading a Victorian novel. A Russian one, perhaps. One that Michel Bakhtain might have read and a carnivalesque image, la cirque, flashes colour through me.

My phone rings. Unknown number. I decide to leave it, then answer despite myself, knowing the imminence of your arrival.

A man introduces himself, more anxious than I am. ‘I’m a vet’ he says, and in a quivering voice ‘I’m here with some people. And a cat.’

‘Oh yes?’ I say.

‘They say the cat has been missing for some months but has now returned home and they’ve brought him in to be chipped, but he appears to have a chip already and your details came up
as the owner. They maintain that it’s their lost cat and that you’ve taken possession without permission.’

Might this be a feeling of bemusement? The idea that the Wild Thing had a home, somewhere specific where other humans claimed him as part of their clan, has been, up to now an abstract possibility but preposterous given his determination to live here. Now I wonder that I could have been naive and misguided. And yet...

‘Clearly a misunderstanding,’ says the vet in a shaky tone that makes me suspicious, as if he’s being held hostage. ‘So, if it’s alright with you,’ he says, ‘I’ll go ahead and transfer the chip into their name, shall I?’

It’s not alright with me. Suddenly I have stronger feelings for the troublesome Wild Thing than I thought I did. The months of softening, tending to the vulnerability behind the swagger, helping him settle into our home lest he find himself in the wild things’ compartment of The Cats and Dogs Home, should not have been in vain. There’s a provisionality, a delicate newness to our relatedness but all of a sudden I’m sure: I love him! I try to grasp hold of the Wild Thing’s perspective. I feel we need him and that means he needs us too.

‘Hang on’ I say, heat in my voice. ‘If that cat was in someone’s care’ I say, ‘then clearly there was no care at all! He was starving and flea-ridden and danger-eyed and imploring and his coat was oily rough, like a fox. There were no signs of love… no love…’

Ophelia is standing behind me. ‘What’s happening?

‘Ah. So is that a ‘no’ then?’ says the vet. ‘I mean legally speaking he is your cat but the people here…’

The doorbell rings. I hand the phone to Ophelia.

‘Tell him they can’t have the Wild Thing’ I say, and she looks at me in confusion as I shoo her back behind the living room door. ‘They’ve got him!’ I say ‘We’re outraged! Be outraged and don’t give an inch! He rehomed himself!’ I’m boiling up inside, everything churning.

And she nods ‘okay!’ getting it. Her eyes widen. ‘Wild Things are our business!

‘Improvise!’ I whisper.

‘He’s one of us and we have to fight for him!’ She whispers back and I nod at her and close the door between us. I realise I’m over-stimulated, both irate and terrified, not only about how Ophelia might escalate the situation or even because of the cat but because I now the children will never forgive me if we mess this up. The Wild Thing is ours. It’s a kidnap situation. My thoughts are racing. It’s only a cat! Increasingly alarmed and shaken, I try to think about the Bakhtin cirque, send my mind into circular orbit on the big wheel and remember to breathe… it’s all about the children...

I open the door, ready to receive you. I’m all laid back, cultured and lively though mainly (I hope) neutral, but you don’t meet my eye and instead rush past me, taking the stairs two at a
time, depositing yourself with a flump on your chair, while I close the front door, breathe in, and make my way hurriedly after you.

I sit. I breathe. You look at me. I’m holding a storm inside. Ophelia is holding my phone downstairs. I breathe knives of steel, hot metal scraping my airways. In and out. Something has been touched inside me, I think. My feelings are bigger than they should be. I think I might scream out, or cry. I look at you.

We’re poised.

You open your face and smile. ‘How are you?’ you say. Your body is inviting and available and I hover on the brink, wondering if I can let it all out, here with you. You seem strong, a soft smile, an open chest. For a moment I feel I could tell you everything.

Then I remember the speed of your ascent into the room. How adult and relaxed you can appear. How re…

‘I’m fine.’ I say, painting a smile across the storm, ‘how about you?’

And your body folds down, as if you’re collapsing into yourself and I realise the power of your outward face to persuade, and the power of mine, therefore, to maintain opacity when I thought you saw me, really saw inside me for a while. And the relief of having things the right way round and shock at how I almost fell for you… how easy it would be to let slip the invisible cloak that allows me to find presence, the fakery that enables me to be real, here with you.

‘I’ve been thinking’ you say, ‘about what we’re doing here in these sessions, and whether there’s anything more you think I should be working at, you know, to make better use of the time and the time between.’ You look at me like a living Princess Diana, chin dipped and peering out from under your eye lashes. ‘I mean. Skills or techniques. To make progress, you know? I don’t know what I mean. I don’t know what good it does, me coming here and talking and you know, talking… I mean. I mean it makes me feel good, sometimes, but that’s not really enough, is it? That doesn’t change things, does it? Is there more do you think I should be doing?’

In the darkness of the unspoken, you, asking me to do more. Something different needed. Wanted, yet without words. Unformed, a something new is longed for. And something bitter or twisted. Something hurts.

Do I need this right now? I ask myself in the stretched-out time before I speak. In the finding a right response I notice myself, shallow and distracted, yet… I hear you calling to me and you have my attention. Yes. I feel the peril in the exploration, a move toward new territory, bringing us closer maybe, and it’s something to grip hold of. I don’t know if I’m able. Red and gold flashes like hot lasers inside me. I hear words proceeding from my mouth, as if of their own accord, little soldiers marching while I behind them stand inside myself, pressing back against a ball of hot chaos that pushes at my throat. I watch myself speak and it calms me… like watching TV maybe, hypnotic, but that’s too impersonal. Like a baby watching a mobile over a cot – but that’s too lonely…. Like a baby watching a mother sing and the sunlight dappled warm yellow hope and spring in the air, and the dampness of tears drying, rising heat and soft movement.
of a voice undulating. My tears aren’t for now. I wasn’t expecting to be tearful today and here they are close to burning through my surface and not now. I’m here for you now. For you.

‘I hope you won’t think I’m trying to avoid your question’ say the words, ‘but I wonder if there are things you feel we should be doing here, or that you could be doing between our sessions?’ I give you a spacious kind of smile. Receptive. And as I perform the action, I begin to feel it, really become yours, for now.

And you say ‘I don’t know, there are all the things about exercise and meditation and I write my morning pages, and then…. I don’t know. Normally I have a plan of what I’m going to say to you. Today I...’

And you taper away and after a moment I say, ‘today there’s no plan....’

I’m watching.

And you look at me and I see tears behind your eyes. I feel the warmth of mine rising and my vision burns and blurs and my heart moves with you, entering hot water.

‘I can see how you’re feeling’ I say and then I push it ‘I can feel it, too.’

And your tears spill over and you reach for the tissues and there’s heat rising in the room, flesh enlarging moving to the edges, filling out bodies, growing bigger, rapidly expanding...

‘I don’t understand what’s happening,’ you say.

‘Maybe you don’t need to understand it’ I say. ‘Maybe you need to cry.’

I don’t understand what’s happening.

I’m here with you.

‘I feel sick,’ you say shaking your head and tissue wiping roughly, like you hate yourself ‘sick in my stomach, sick bones.’ And you breathe shallow, yellow, sick breaths. In my mind I lose the sunshine and the song. Now I’m imagining only cold space and bleakness and a mother not attending. I wait.

Words come from you in fits and starts. Something like shame vomiting into the room. Your denigration begins again, you say, when you share with me.

‘He asked, begged me, enticed me with his agonies, to feel for him and when I did, he turned, face changed... A person becoming unbecoming... I’m confused. He says it was all my doing. He says I wasn’t supposed to believe him. Am I simple?’

You look about four years old.

‘Thought I could trust myself, knew where I was but now I... I don’t know what to believe. All that anchors me, whole sense of reality, capacity for relating... I thought we saw each other,
he and I, then things flipped. A kind of inside out thing, total inversion, yet I cling because, because if I don’t. I don’t know.

‘I feel what you’re saying and still, I am finding this very... abstract’, I say, and ‘how about,’ I say, ‘you tell me what you mean. I mean, what happened? What’s going on?’

Is that me seeking the surface? Who needs the coherence of a narrative here? I am not sure is this for you or for me?

‘It’s so much easier to speak in abstract terms,’ you say. And you start looking round the room for a bin and when I clock it you look at me and say ‘I think I might need to be sick. I don’t know how to speak it.’

‘I’m sorry, there’s no bin,’ I say ‘can you hold with this feeling? Breathe it?’

And you can’t make the words come and I listen and I feel it too – the ball of thing that won’t budge. I’m feeling it pressing on my insides like I know, like I already know...

If you say the words, what will that do – to us? If you say the words, here, what will you do to me? In my mind, a baby looks to the mother – looks away... cvii I try to stay, here in the moment with you. Not too pressing with my gaze, but not too containing either. There has to be room.... Room in this room.

What will you say?

And my thoughts go to the worst places. I’m ready. I’m not breathing... not ready. There’s a still... A pause. I don’t have a bin because I don’t want to clean up your tissues and vomit, not really.

‘The thing is,’ you say…. ‘Zuko....’

And something you couldn’t understand, and you look at me and you... seem... that look, like you see me differently... betrayal... you look betrayed... me? And I wonder what I’ve said or done... and I’m, I don’t know, yes, frightened I suppose because you look at me like you don’t know who I am anymore and I’m not sure either... what’s going to happen... our boundaries... had they grown too thin? Something’s fallen. I feel other.

No. You’ll say words you say and I’m not here, just a random person, interchangeable, a body you use, to air your thoughts and... the betrayal’s not about me, is it? I’m not here.

Your body speaks one language and your tongue another. I answer to your body and you... feel... no. Drawbridge up. Not to feel it, him or you or us... Is this your feeling? Or no, because... why? Because that division... thought you could trust yourself. I thought I could trust myself to feel with you but is it all projection?

You look at me and speak words, your body swaying as if to hypnotise... movement that seems to take us, or remind us we’ve arrived, into an altered state, and I go with you... go with you... we seem to sway a rhythmic beat to keep ourselves moving, moving...
And you were lead, you say, from a place of reason into a place beyond. And it was... Zuko...
who you... how could you... have trusted, wanted to believe existed, the way he wanted to
believe he existed? Ecstasy of possibility; everything he represents to himself and other people.
Everything you spoke about and everything you did. Everything you thought, felt, were moved
to... deep feeling connection... capacity for empathic attunement... all turned on its head as he
swayed you and you moved to the rhythm of words you needed to hear... words about
boundaries and knowing where to put them. Things have changed. He loves her more, the
mother now. And so, you needed there to be new boundaries, you said. But what is intimacy?
Something that’s one moment words and in another, movements of hands, breath, lips
expanding, and is that intimacy or is it how he takes you and himself away from intimacy and
into an enactment of...

If Zuko says ‘I’m not as you see me,’ are you as I see you? I’m not sure I recognise you today.
Am I making you up in my mind?

This is difficult. I think I’m overwhelmed. Can’t process what’s going on here. My mind does a
flit and enters The Hugh Lane gallery in Dublin. There, I see a room behind glass, a splurging
mess contained within a frame... Francis Bacon’s studio... bulges within its clean container. I
press my body up against the surface - cool, solid smooth - holding me back from the chaos
even as I lean right in. Safety glass. Snow’s white’s coffin. I touch it with my hands, my cheek,
and look again at you.

The baby grabs the mother’s breast, urgent and persistent, selfish. Hurts the mother. Doesn’t
care. Presses, pushes, finds a way to get that nipple with the mouth, bites and sucks, swallows,
urgently. Hungriy.

Zuko changes before your eyes – a dark underside, dis-resembling all you’d heard him speak
in gentle tone, the undertone - once lover, becomes unknown, someone else entirely, eyes all
nasty and you filling with desire you want to keep. Still. Can’t say no... belly full of gore, debris
on the artist’s floor... Connection still there. Whole. You feel seen, true and yet... not beautiful
this. He’s managed to gain your affection, but despises you for falling for it.

‘No, no,’ he says, ‘you mustn’t. Stop this seduction,’ he tells you shaking his head as he moves
you. You hold onto him, afraid to let go. The way he shows himself, the nasty in his eyes,
intimate and vulnerable. Other people don’t get to see this, you think. It’s so very private, this
part of him.

You’re looking at me yet through me and I don’t want to be real, not here right now... I try to
still myself, be glass... so that you may continue.

His head now at your breast, nuzzling like a child and you’re nothing but arms in the air and
wondering where to put them and you say ‘I thought we agreed we’re not these kinds of
people’ and he pretends he didn’t hear you and you put your arms down, which means you
are holding him again because that’s where they land and you ask ‘why am I holding you?’
because this isn’t how it’s meant to go... but the confirmation of something, of desirability, that
simple, makes it hard to step away...
‘Why is that?’

You stay silent... and he says, ‘sorry, perhaps it’s I who should be holding you’ and it’s all wrong but at the same time, a moment... confusing... an alternate alternative... some part of you remembers that you need holding... some part of you remembers that... no. Not like this.

The mother lets the baby have her. Body given over, she allows milky liquid life-force flow. The baby takes, greedily, making small grunting noises, small sucking noises, rhythmic pleasure, a hand reaching up to squeeze where he knows will increase the flow, and the mother feels a rush of love, and a rush of overwhelm, a rush of what it is to be pinned to the bed by the desire of another, fascinated by her own ravishing, a hand reaching down to where it will intensify... intensify... is that bad? The thought of taking pleasure in the pleasure... the pleasure-pain of being pinned by a creature so small, yet whose desire presses so...

I see you darken, and my breath quickens and is that wrong? Should I look at you? Should I look away? What’s wanted? Who wants?

You wonder though, because – you know – it isn’t like this... is it? Where have all the adults gone? Where are you and he that speak of clarity and poetry and making goodness in all you do?

Then words. You pull the tale you need to hear from Zuko... words about another world, where this one’s fantasy and you a phantasm.

‘Are there really any lawyers? Is anybody moving house? Is the children’s mother really insane or is that he?’

And as you take in the revelation of your own ghostly being, take the space to breathe it, hold it – you come to feel it as a thing you already knew – allowing it to be who you are, there with Zuko, a known knowing between you, and okay.... darkness shared. You embody his dream. His bad dream. But it’s worse than that, you say, because, you realised, you like it. You’ll even be that... anything to hold with this - reaching beyond the mundane, the everyday you each live...

‘This may not be reality,’ you say, ‘but it’s more than real.’

He was always too sure of his goodness, too squeaky clean in his beliefs... but... what does morality mean? What’s yours? Is it that you can both talk the good stuff? Is connection something that happens by itself or something we choose? Or choose to believe in... did you fall for your own projection, like he says? Or for his dreamed of self, imagined so he might become it for a moment? Not like this. Where’s the person you thought you knew?

And now you see – he - showing you something he daren’t look upon. He calling it yours as he holds you there – between - where each is seen and known anew. And yes, you knew... all along... never fell... thought you were beyond falling... done with that... playing too, the dream of ‘togetherness,’ which is to say, of a separate self, discrete, a means by which you manage to believe we’re not connected, not lost or falling apart. Those boundaries in which we hold only ourselves. What rubbish, you think, and he sees you, helpless in thrall and you can’t hide. And he rocks you like a baby and makes you move with him. And I come with you, not sure what face to bring, not sure if I am meant to be lost in the moment, my moment too, or to
watch like an outsider, unmoved, or if it’s possible to be on the outside. Where do you want me? I try to listen, sense, infer…. Where do you want me? I try to move silently, listen with my body and hold you in the way that’s needed, moment by moment, so you can go where you need… where you long… though you can’t say… not in words…to go.

His hand between your legs he tells you ‘no’ and ‘this can’t be’, and he shakes his head and breathes rhythmically, scent of skin, faces close, eyes watching, he holds you by your desire and rocks you into another state… until you say ‘yes’ because… anything… anything for this… even though you don’t now recognise him… the man you thought he was now utterly replaced with shadow self, all dark side, all he claims that he isn’t, boundless, bad being, making bad good, making you want… and he… hating your desire… hating your desire. You watch him. He is in that moment spectacularly ugly, face curled… and yet it’s pure. And beautiful. And he transfers all that’s bad about himself into you and he’ll leave it there. That’s his plan, you see now… a kind of absolution… and you’ll let him because… because… why? Because to share this contact is… all... the blending of true and of falseness, forcedness, a consenting to the powerful urges that are themselves so... so...

He stops.

The father’s not here. He’s taken his energy elsewhere, but he knows, he feels, the rejection in belonging, the becoming...

‘Maybe you can love two,’ you say… ‘Maybe you can love, too.’

But the separation that’s coming is already there, in him. And he reaches back, trying to touch again the moment, the knowing. The moment. Presses with a passion and briefly there with you, he finds himself, and for a moment he feels… completely… free.

The baby sucks.

The mother feels the energy of her love and wonders… is this wrong? Should I…?

The baby, satiated, releases lip, grip and held lolls, an acrid smell of mother milk and baby sweat and mother sweat and damp heat rises and nipple is red and distended and breast is reddened and emptied and shapes of nail grip itch on its surface. Is there pleasure in the pain?

The father finds his clothes and puts them on quickly. Packs himself away and readies himself to leave. Can’t stay, not here. Places the feeling behind a wall. Takes himself to his car. Music. Music to fill the space. What has he done?

And the mother feels him. Gone now. Love not able.

Moment over.

Gone.

In the afterglow, thoughts bring thrill, still. Uninvited. It’s simple and true. Mustn’t let that be seen. Bend to fill the image he projects. The good, the hard. Takes his space.
It was you that rejected me, he says. And she says.

I feel I should sit silently with you now. The clock ticks. ‘It must be time’ you say, and your body moves stiff and jerking, you stand awkwardly and turn to see what things you need to gather.

Is there a coat or a bag or a phone or some keys?

You’re flailing.

I think of a very young baby, the way the movements need holding and containing. I try to think of something to say, feel you, a flash of alarm across the centre of my body. Next moment the mirror is moving, sideways sliding at first, and you turn like you might catch it, but it seems to catch instead your twisting motion and I rise up out of my seat and make a forward lunge to capture it, but honestly fear takes over.

The glass wall around Bacon’s studio shatters and a force like space, a vacuum, pulls the chaos of potentiality, the parts from which whole works are created, into the air and they spin around and into the room with us and I twist like a dancer and move this way and that but not before I catch the look of helpless horror on your face and then a delicate crunching sound like we’ve been walking on ice all this time and the glass is cracking, smashing, pieces of chaos, triangular shards of relief from the pressure of holding things together, of things holding together, of being a whole thing, a thing at all, and I feel we’re at least making contact in the mutuality of our confusion. I lift myself off the ground and shake the glass from my clothes.

We stand in silence until eventually I grasp that you want me to take charge.

‘Let’s just go,’ I say. ‘That mirror wasn’t a good idea. Never mind. That was always going to happen’

And you look at me, panting lightly, and silently now I lead you to the door.
A3 Scene Four: ‘Fragments of a portrait’

I return to the room and close the door again to sit a while. The place is covered in blood and guts and shattered glass. Francis Bacon has slathered my whole mind with innards of a carcass used like a paintbrush or a spray can... a cat’s rear has marked the space. I’m not sure whose entrails are whose or how to clear it up - or even if I ought to. What’s the procedure here? Is it time to call a professional? Then I remember, that’s me.

I look to my books. I give Luce Irigaray’s new book a flick. She explains:

*The masculine subject has in fact been more concerned with the Being of things of the world, of his world, than with the Being of another subject. And such a gesture is not only unfaithfulness to the other, it is also unfaithfulness to oneself. (Irigaray, 2017).*

‘You don’t say,’ I speak back at her.

I think of Bacon’s (1965) *Crucifixion* and wonder if it’s fair to believe there’s agency in being used? Consensuality. What was being worked through in that dialogue between you? To want to know... to still want...Consenting on the fly, to something changing as you move... more than... more than... words come with images, spoken to the man called David Sylvester:

Francis Bacon Fragments Of A Portrait - interview by David Sylvester
Sylvester’s alter ego speaking with the artist about mouths and meat and the deep feelings that are worked through in contemplating that moment when a mortal wound is going to be inflicted and you know it, and they know it. Even sheep know it, recognise the intention at the core of being or not being. Even Sylvester knows it, I think. I Google Crucifixion on my phone, reassurance that I’m not insane but my thoughts follow some logical pattern. This is all something that’s been known, recognised before, about the condition of life, and death, and love. And being a body, and betrayal. The Wikipedia entry is short and to the point. The final words chill my heart: ‘…it was just an act of man’s behaviour to another.’

Is this what life is? We’re born into the world through an act of love (says Irigaray), or we hope it’s so, and somewhere along the line we’re betrayed by those we love, and our trust, we find, is misplaced. Should we therefore never trust another? And I, striving to be trustworthy for money, dependent on your need. What am I to make of myself?

I find a cloth in the bathroom and prepare to mop up the debris in the room, thoughts like stomach still churning with disgust. People spill their guts everywhere — so many outlets for pain — more sex maybe, or some performance poetry... what’s the more that makes it therapy?

I can’t answer myself. Except to remember that some things aren’t performance. Only about the inside, they are insides. Seeing the outer shape of what’s experienced from within can be upsetting. Like looking in the mirror and finding something unfamiliar. What happens to human beings? Words begin bright and shiny and clean until everything bursts out all inverted... entrails... all this splatter of paint and glass and guts and I don’t know how to mop it up. Cleaning was never my strong point. I never can be sure if I’m taking the right approach.

The corpse (or cadaver: cadere, to fall), that which has irretrievably come a cropper, is cesspool, and death; it upsets even more violently the one who confronts it as fragile and fallacious chance. A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not signify death. In the presence of signified death—a flat encephalograph, for instance—I would understand, react, or accept. No, as in true theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit—cadere, cadaver. If dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything. It is no longer I who expel, "I" is expelled. The border has become an object. How can I be without border? That elsewhere that I imagine beyond the present, or that I hallucinate so that I might, in a present time, speak to you, conceive of you—it is now here, jetted, abjected, into "my" world. Deprived of world, therefore, I fall in a faint. In that compelling, raw, insolent thing in the morgue’s full sunlight, in that thing that no longer matches and therefore no longer signifies anything, I behold the breaking down of a world that has erased its borders: fainting away. (Kristeva, 1984:3-4)

‘Jesus, fuck! Why’re you sat reading on your phone? It’s like a war zone in there,’ says Ophelia, who’s appeared at the door.
And now I’m self-conscious and wondering how things must look, but she doesn’t seem that interested.

‘Come here, I spoke with the Wild Thing’s so-called owner and she’s mad as a coot! She says he has an eating disorder! I told her he’s a cat, and you’re a psychotherapist, and she said you’d stolen him and fed him on purpose.’

‘Oh right’ I say. ‘Well maybe I did. I mean, that wasn’t how it seemed to me. I mean, I can see how it might look,’ and then ‘an eating disorder?’

‘I know, right? I’m sorry, but I have to be honest, I lost it at that.’

‘The Wild Thing pressed, and I resisted. Until I didn’t... When does no become yes... wanted?’

‘What? He was a wild thing!’ says Ophelia, but I’m somewhere deep inside myself. Or rather, the deep inside of me has surfaced and is exposing itself. I shudder like I might vomit.

How unbearable I must be.

‘Do you notice any...’ I’m going to say blood... these entrails that I’m struggling with... ‘oh never mind.’

‘Come on, I’ve found your old CDs, I’m listening to Portishead downstairs! Remember Mysterons?’

I leave the room full of anxious thoughts and vomit away the vitriol.

I’m hoping I’m wrong about everything. I don’t know if I’m any use to you. I wonder what this is all about and am tired of my own incessant wondering. I want it to stop. Only this:

The sound of your voice in my head marks tides passing. I realise, you matter to me.

It’s some time before I will learn that Max Porter has fictionalised The Death of Francis Bacon, but it’s happening, here in this world in this same moment, only I can’t make sense of why. Aria’s been for dinner with Bacon, having once been the kind of young man that is introduced, and who supposes this is simply what happens in London. Do these fragments fit together?

A memory appears, vivid apparition taking hold... you must have told me about it... how a boy called Leon visited London, sometime between back then and here now. You met him in the café at Tate Modern. but you aren’t sure what else. Memories that survive are of the moments before meeting, stomach lurching, waves of uncertainty, readying yourself for that first re-encounter. And then afterwards, somewhere deep in the Underground, a white marble floor, white ceiling and walls. Escalators behind you, six o’clock, churning up bodies like yours. More escalators to your right, four o’clock, pouring bodies down again to another sub-terrain, and a third set over to the left, ten o’clock in the morning, ten o’clock at night, heading up toward the daylight, the moonlight, the street. He’ll take those and you’ll sink back down the other
way, four in the morning. But first you pause for a moment together, arms encircled, faces touching. Skin. Scent. Breath. It feels familiar. The crowd spins round you, making a magic circle. A soft kiss passes between. The world turns on a sixpence, you’re thinking to yourself. You don’t know how to make words of it, so you stay silent. He smiles. You smile. ‘Well, I hope to see you again soon,’ and ‘you’re always welcome in my faraway place.’ And you say, ‘thank you, maybe I will.’ But you know it’s impossible. You like the idea but not enough. And then you step off the sixpence and into the moving throng that carries you to four o’clock. On the escalator you turn and see him rising, ten o’clock, and then he’s out of view.

Later in the night, dreams of Ophelia. First time we met...

‘Are you a precocious child? Because I’m very precocious.’

She sits high above the ground on the branch of a tree, legs swinging rhythmically from the knee. I’m on another branch, legs also swinging, feeling my body lean in and out of the movement and the tree holding and wavering, gentle sway, leaves explore the possibilities of their condition. I’m not sure what it means but ‘yeah, I’m precocious too,’ I say.

‘That’s great! We’re both precocious!’ she says. ‘Here, we’re up very high, hidden from our parents, the bourgeoisie at play, drinking wine together in that garden down below. They think they’re socialists, but they only talk to each other, and daren’t look over beyond the wall.’ We can see out down the alley, where rough boys smoke. ‘Shall we see if there’re any rough boys?’

We scrape our way down the thick branches and balance along the wall at the back of the garden. The parents don’t seem to notice, even though we’re in plain view.

‘How can they not see?’ I say and Ophelia says:

‘They only see what they want, and that’s not us. They like drinking and sharing socialist theories but they don’t invite proper drunks; no artists and poets, you won’t see Mary Coughlan or Brendan Kennelly here. And they hide from beggars like they might catch poverty if they made eye contact. They’re terrified of seeing their own positioning. See how the garden looks from the outside.’

We look at the garden from the outside. Ophelia seems to have been born understanding things I don’t.

‘Ah, that’s because you still think you belong,’ she tells me. ‘My Latina skin gives me an advantage there. You can’t see it, not yet. You’re still clinging to the sham. But you better watch out. You think they have your back, but they’re only interested in hiding from awareness of their own guilt at not caring. That, and thinking about how they can keep each other convinced that they’re living in a real world.’

The thing is, I’m also terrified of the truth and hide from drunks and beggars with their invitation to engage, to see, to share knowledge of the brutality of humanity. As we start our intrepid exploration of the alleyway with its potential rough boys, I turn my eyes away, walk faster, feel my heart quicken and my legs grow shaky. I’m fearful. Fearful of seeing someone
less fortunate or fearful of recognising my own entrapment? Seeing the freedom of those boys who can roam and smoke, feeling the thrill of the forbidden.

‘It’s not forbidden! We didn’t ask, remember?’

I try to remember why it’s important to stay in the garden. I fear losing myself, then realise the reason is… rough boys. Not something they might do, but something they might be. As if being other were catching. I want to know more. There’s nothing to do in the garden except assert one’s belonging. Nobody sees.

‘Let’s pretend we’re rough boys’ I say, and Ophelia laughs and shows me how.

Later I wake. It’s dark outside. I flick around on my phone, and Twitter alerts me that Nasa’s website is asking:

**What Is Dark Energy?**

I feel a need to know. Click.

More is unknown than is known. We know how much dark energy there is because we know how it affects the universe’s expansion. Other than that, it is a complete mystery. But it is an important mystery. It turns out that roughly 68% of the universe is dark energy. Dark matter makes up about 27%. The rest - everything on Earth, everything ever observed with all of our instruments, all normal matter - adds up to less than 5% of the universe. Come to think of it, maybe it shouldn’t be called “normal” matter at all, since it is such a small fraction...

My energy’s feeling very dark indeed. Karen Barad says there’s no such thing as the void. Non-matter. Things that don’t matter. Matters may be discounted, but they still exist. It’s the language of physics that makes such claims – agential cuts, they say… choosing where to draw a line between what one recognises, and not. Is that agency? A choice over what to significate? To look back from the position of rough boys at girls playing on the edges of a garden. I think about the garden here, which I usually ignore - a receptacle of my hatred and neglect. This place is an interim zone, like my work, neither connected nor unconnected, deeply intimate, yet untouching. Nothing grows from it that will change anything. Not for me. I’ll go for a week now, not even wondering how you are, and when we speak again, you’ll have made new sense of things, without me. Do I make Cusk’s choice, to be half a person or two people? As if a ‘person’ were a measurable unit, and I suppose in our world it is. I feel like half a person and two people. Both connected and disconnected, part of things and peripheral. (Ir)relevant. I’m not an agent in your life, yet present. I choose this.

Still.

Emptiness remains.

To come back to oneself... does not grant to the subject a simple unity. This gesture enlightens him about what he is and allows stepping back into self as far as what determines most irreducibly his proper mode of being. It thus serves as a way for a
becoming conscious in the service of Being – in its pre-given, basic beingness, and its capacities for becoming.\textsuperscript{cxvi}

You.

Mirror.

Zuko won’t be returning.

There’s something very wrong with me, isn’t there? I don’t want to think about that now.

\textbf{Autumn 2019}

Is it a long night or does a year pass? Morning comes when Aria phones.

‘Darling, you won’t believe this, I’m coming to your provincial city!’

‘What?’ I say, ‘but how does this happen?’ and ‘when have you ever left London?’

‘Lots, my dear, but never before to England. There’s going to be a little exhibition at an art gallery there. I wonder if you’ll have heard of it, it’s called…’ he checks… ‘Arnolfini’

‘You’re coming to an exhibition at the Arnolfini?!’

‘Is that good? Do you know it?’

‘It’s the main contemporary art gallery in the city. Small of course, but I think it’s the most mainstream, you know establishment, contemporary art gallery… They do challenging stuff but also more accessible things, like Grayson Perry\textsuperscript{cxvii}, you know…’

‘Oh, goodness, am I into the establishment now?’ and he laughs. ‘What a changed world we live in, where that can even be possible!’

I’m perplexed. I always perceived him as belonging, in more ways than I ever could... and then I remember this isn’t about me.

‘Oh Aria, are you still feeling outside it all?’

‘Of course!’ Look at me, but that’s nothing new and anyway I’ve loads of places I belong, don’t I? I’m one of the BAME’s. I’m one of the Gays, oh what do they call us now? The LGBTQI+’s is that all of it?’

‘I hear some saying GLOW,’ I say. ‘Gay, Lesbian or Whatever.‘

‘Oh yes, mustn’t forget the whatevers like me. I GLOW then, I accept all that’s ascribed to me, all these titles bestowed, but we won’t go there today because it’s boring. I’m more interested in the idea of ‘establishment contemporary art! Is that what Grayson Perry is?’
‘Well I think so,’ I say ‘isn’t that what you see? Sort of populist. Do you think it’s deeper and I’ve missed something?’

‘It’s about being very English and provincial, isn’t that it? The new aspiration.’

‘To see normal life represented. Community and things knitted together, and yes. The thing is, I hate the aesthetic and I don’t experience the affective resonance others speak about. I went and saw the exhibition – at the Arnolfini. And I felt only... my stomach clenching. I’m not at home here... maybe it’ll be better now you’re coming!’

‘Oh well, Grayson Perry’s work isn’t the sort of thing that concerns me. My concern is with the work of a fellow Iranian, Vali Mahlouji, and the representation of the work he’s been asked to exhibit, on a set of portraits by the photographer Kaveh Golestan. He’s also talking about his research project The Archaeology of the Final Decade. I hope the curators do a decent job.’

‘I can’t wait to see you, actually here!’

‘I know, I’m a bit nervous! It’s all about peripheries these days so the time has come.’

‘Do you think this is a final decade, Aria? And someone will be trying to resurrect our lives and represent them, in a time to come?’ I realise I’m pensive.

‘Gosh, well maybe it wouldn’t be so bad. I’m exhausted with this crazy government and the whole Brexit thing.’

‘It’s like a contemporary performance art piece’, I say, somewhat jaded, but Aria is alight, alive to the possibility.

‘It is!’ he says, ‘completely out of the box and beyond the established norms. You understand contemporary art isn’t meant to be establishment and especially not mainstream. It’s meant to be outside of the mainstream, a commentary from another frame.’ (I think about the wall and the garden party.) ‘It isn’t meant to be comprehensible from within the hegemonic discourse, Melissa. People aren’t meant to think they understand it!’

‘Well, now I’m confused, because Brexit is mainstream, or so we’re being told. We just don’t know anyone, or think we don’t, or try not to know anyone, who likes it. And it’s the establishment being anti-establishment. So can it be art? I mean contemporary, a performative piece? Is Perry’s popular art about Brexit?’

‘Time will tell, I suppose. If Brexit fails we’ll see it as a performance but if it manifests a new reality, a new hegemony, how will anyone see the performance, we’ll be in the performance. Or rather, you will be. I have to get out, you know. I didn’t come this far, go through all the struggles of my life, just to land up back in the same mess.’

‘Oh my, I need to get out too, Aria. I can’t believe how I ended up trapped in this marginal life.’ And I explain about the cat and how I’ve become embroiled in a suburban neighbourhood dispute, but Aria is forever from another country when it comes to this.
‘What is it with the English and their pets?’ He asks?

‘But I’m not English!’

‘Arguing with a neighbour over a cat! Maybe I should be more concerned about you!’

‘It’s not me! I’m not doing anything, it just happened.’

‘“All just happened,” what would the Anna Freud people say about this?’

‘Don’t psychoanalyse it! Not everything is deep and personality defining. I don’t know what to do. The children have told their friends and now their whole school is following the drama and they all want me to rescue the Wild Thing. Seven hundred children!’

‘That many?’

‘I don’t know. More probably. Schools are enormous these days.’

‘You don’t know how big you children’s school is?’

‘I’ve no idea.’

‘Well, I don’t know any children at all, so I can hardly imagine how many of them there are in a school, darling. It really could be any number.’

‘Oh darling, you can know my children! Share them I mean. You can meet them when you come!’

‘Yes imagine, little Melissa’s. I’d love to meet them!’

‘Plus, the fact is,’ I go on ‘we didn’t force ourselves on the Wild Thing, he came to us. If he thinks it’s better with us than wherever he was before, well I can’t very well send his back!’

‘So, what are you thinking?’

‘Kamikaze rescue operation, deep in the night.’

‘Do you know where they live?’

‘No idea.’

‘Oh, my darling! I see the flaw in this plan.’

‘I’d let go of the cat but the children wouldn’t forgive me. And actually, I find myself feeling, well, attached. I think we’ve bonded. Apparently, the owners said he doesn’t love me and only wants me for my food.’

‘Well, there’s that. Don’t you think they might be right?’
‘They think I’m a mad cat-woman! They’ve called me a thief and they’re threatening to plaster my picture round the neighbourhood with a warning!’

‘Well, is the kamikaze operation a mad cat-woman thing? I mean I don’t know; you have to tell me; this is very much outside my area.’

‘Aria!’

‘Okay. You seem to have feelings for this cat. I’m not sure if cats have feelings for humans but if he’s as you say, and they’re as you say, it’s only a matter of time before they get bored of him and soon he’ll be back at yours… no?’

‘You’re a genius. Of course, of course you’re right.’

‘I trust your judgment, and you trust the cat to choose. It will vote with its paws…. Do you know I have birds now?’

‘You have birds?’

‘Yes! A boyfriend gave them to me. They suit my Mediterranean spirit. We are naturally bird people in Southern Europe and North Africa and Persia and all this area, I love how they fly around the apartment.’

‘Which boyfriend gave them to you?’

‘Oh, don’t even try. I don’t expect you to remember their names.’

‘How else to measure time, Aria, than by saying their names?’

‘Simon from Battersea… Richard from Ealing…’

‘Oh Aria’ I say ‘What a disaster it is to love men! To give the love they need and desire is to make no claim.’

‘Oh, well I don’t want to make any claim.’

‘I think you do, or might have done if you hadn’t been torn… to see love always passing through. Our shared joy and tragedy.’

‘Isn’t this the true nature of love?’ he replies, ‘isn’t this what you do with your clients, too?’

And I realise he understands this pain, the pain of presence being the always letting go.
A3 Scene Five: smell the dark of winter

Ophelia’s gone. Back away to London.

She’s left a thank you note on Snoopy stationary, magnetised to the fridge door. ‘Poor Snoopy! Who can fail to appreciate his existential difficulties? He has such grand, yet inexpressible thoughts and imaginings, but his inner world exists outside the understanding of those who think they love him. Snoopy knows how it is to have one’s experience of life excluded from the dominant narrative that shapes the public imagination. The *heg-e-mon-y*!’ She looks at me intensely as she articulates the word.

Did she really say this? I can’t recall now. Yet the note conveys the memory. It could have happened. I’m not sure what difference it would make if the fragment were real or conjured out of.... Ophelia. She sees and then rejects all the potentialities of her being, in favour of something not yet known. Gradually the options have become starker. A darkness grounds her now.

I wish I could engulf her in a blanket of tranquillity. But I know it isn’t possible and I have to let her live her life.

I sit with a sense of something incomplete. A missing cat and the angry people unleashing their frustration at me. Their projections are off the mark. Aren’t they? Then there’s you, sadder than I’ve seen before, like something’s broken. More than sad; a loss of your self-belief, like you no longer trust your own perception and it isn’t only Zuko who’s derailed you but Tom, too. The details of your failed relation are unknown to a world which refuses to bear witness. And so, you repeat and ruminate and check the facts, or what may be considered facts and over time they seem less certain. Larger possible truths emerge, in which it may indeed be you that brought about the failed state of things. You weren’t suited to the long-term, or to the limitations that seemed to bring stability. You remember the ways you stuck by him, and how you understood that a man gives a woman identity and that the place to be in an unfair world is next to a person who is treated preferentially, no matter what. To walk away from the light that shines on a chosen one is truly to enter darkness. The problem now, though, is that your tentative regrouping, as it were, of those aspects of yourself you feel you are now committed to, has been called into question by Zuko positioning you not as a complimentary, partially merging subjectivity, but as an object, a measure by which he might assess his life beyond you. How, having striven for self-determination, have you managed to be cast as a player in someone else’s game? You question how you can ever now view yourself as a character to be taken seriously.

‘I’m starting to suspect’ you say ‘that in spite of my uniqueness, I’m merely an instance of some broader set of categories, and the main one remains physical. The body I find myself in is primarily what defines my whole experience. My inner awareness, apparently, has little bearing on how I’m understood by the world. Stories can be written on my surface, as if I weren’t within. How can I be in relation with people who only want their own versions of me? How can I be more present if the self I bring is repeatedly rejected. Apparently, I spoil things with my selfish desire to be recognised. Even that doesn’t fit the plot.’
Captured by your predicament, I can’t offer reassurance about the world, only recognition here and now. Yet I’ve no map, no way out or through, to a different condition. I nod. I breathe. I look at you.

Later I walk, brisk and agitated round the cemetery, twice.

Days like this, weeks, months, waiting for clarity to surface and point me the way out of the circular existence I feel entrapped within. My feeling space playing up ... at times unbearable. I can’t write and I speak in staccato, often unfinished expressions, incoherent to myself. Nor can I look upon anything with clear sight, unable to engage with light and flow and mutuality and feelings of connection... the only words I find to explain this to myself are that I’ve moved to another place within myself and in relation to the world, and the shock of that inner shift has left me physically sick... the sensation of it emanating from my stomach, what some call the second brain... and surest source of knowing.

One felt like writing about oneself in the third person. Or editing with critical ink. A desire to dissociate - though it was not effective, and my body was become... abandonment. Alone. Self-imposed. I could smile with my mouth, but the smile feelings stopped at the back of my throat, where it encountered a counter-energy, waves of yuck, which collided with the smile waves to create an impenetrable wall of unspeakability.

Perhaps I work better when my inner self is absented, as it were, from the outer encounter, so that all becomes very truly about the you... unbearable to be you right now, and hard to be with you. Hard to be with anyone now. Who sees me? Fallen into the (non-existent) void, and get through the days without reflecting, reflecting without presence. The words channel themselves through my mouth and no one really seems to notice. I cover it, or perhaps I’m transparent; absence is see-through: one doesn’t see it only sense... the lack of sensing.

My inner transferential response is blocked, yet I see out very clearly, without me in the way. I float outside my body, watching. When I’m unbearable to be, it’s easy to see the needs of others, pleasure to have them as a focus. Do they notice? I imagine not... do you notice? I imagine you feeling extra noticed. Held. I hold you very carefully at this time, ultra-sensitive and present to your inner dispositions as they configure and disperse, mysterious cloud formations. But really, it’s you who holds me, and I who might lose myself without you as a focus.

Sometimes I feel myself holding back tears as I listen, knowing the tears are mine, not for you or anyone else. Or perhaps for everyone, trapped in a body, in a world, in a flow from life’s first ignition toward the inevitable disintegration, the question becoming, how to let go of attachment to our crumbling bones, the system (body or bodies) sustaining us, faltering. Becoming incapable of holding. I listen to Brian Eno. Holding with. Staying with... silence beckons. Dark energy the biggest part of the universe. How to let go of... the thought evaporates.

Perhaps they were present, these tears I felt, only for themselves, which is to say that it was not the recognition by another that made them real; rather they existed, were present at all precisely because no one was noticing them. They weren’t for noticing. Not sharable. Present
only on the inside. Tears came as far as the back of my throat but were allowed no further. No place for them in this world.

I walk. Outside, smell the dark of winter and see the bones of trees and let the cold penetrate body and hope the sensation of shaking in unpredictable gusts of breeze will be strong enough to counteract the hot shudders rising up from within. Yes, I want to move my body differently, be in the flow and let this go... like letting off steam... release this heat to the freezing wind. Perhaps... when there’s nobody near... I’ll speak nonsense words, meaningless sounds, into the howls of the squall and let them be carried away into oblivion....

How many times have I had this experience?

Words.

‘The Capacity to be Alone’ – says Donald Winnicott in my mind.

I feel incapacity. Yet I am. Function.

‘It is a joy to be hidden but disaster not to be found’ he says.

‘No! It’s not a joy, this hiding!’ I shout back at him in my head. It’s something else. Being wanted and then not wanted – not, I’m told to understand, because there’s anything wrong with the subject of the desire. It’s the other person’s incapacity to maintain connection – literally not about the subject who is an object... here is the narcissistic defence: the subject/object is to be offered in place of connection.

Deep into the night, letting these wild things roam my mind, I don’t know how it all fits together, but I feel I’m grappling something bigger than you or me. A dark carnival procession is making its way towards me... And I can’t see you. But I know you’re there.

Early in the morning the cat-flap flicks and the Wild Thing walks in, looking thin and ruffled. He moves straight past the children and me, makes his way through the kitchen and over to Sylvester’s bowl, which he clears efficiently.

‘Where’ve you been?’ I ask, ‘what happened?’

No answer. I try to stroke him but his body resists, so I withdraw. He looks round for any other scraps and I add more food to the dish. He eats. Afterwards he walks back towards the cat-flap, crossing the space where Ophelia’s makeshift bed had been on the way out. He doesn’t look left or right, resists my gaze, my voice, my touch. I call her and tell her what’s happening.

‘He’s behaving like I don’t exist, I don’t understand!’ I say.

‘Give him a break, Melissa! He can’t tolerate the presence of your projections while his head is full of theirs’ says Ophelia. ‘Right now, he’s their cat, he’s embodying the identity they give him and he can’t manage your imaginings at the same time.’

I look at her and it makes sense. ‘That was very profound,’ I say. ‘But I’m not projecting.’
She laughs.

She laughs some more.
Act Four

Ritual and Revelation in the Imaginary Space Place
A4 Scene One: Low

21 June 2019

“To say that formless = form, that damage = restoration, is not to say something illogical. It is—as Fredric Jameson does when, at the end of The Political Unconscious, he imagines “an imperative to thought in which the ideological would be grasped as somehow at one with the Utopian, and the Utopian at one with the ideological”—to say something dialectical. The risk of this dialectical strategy for a writer like Lerner is that, in the end, we won’t be able to tell the difference between the two: between ideology and utopia, damaged art and redeemed art, a revolutionary novel (Ashton’s 10:04) and a reactionary one (my 10:04). The reward, though, is that it teaches us to see indistinguishability itself as the product of a deeper antagonism, the sign of some underlying but unequivocal contradiction.”

cxxii

I wake.

I seem, I’m thinking, to have been dreaming I was reading, only more like having the words read to me. I wonder what I’m becoming. World so small that even in sleep my mind doesn’t fly but wrestles critiques of Lerner’s writing, read to me in your voice. You read and show me a world. Your world. Your words, where stories, made up things, are maybe the only things that can be relied upon. With fiction, you say, at least you know where you stand. I believe you’re in earnest when you say that. I wonder how much else of all you say is true? The recollections, the interpretations. Maybe it doesn’t matter. I mean, maybe it isn’t important. Or rather, truth is not attached to the literal, material. Maybe truth can’t always be recognised at the surface of our lives. I mean, where the stories are told. A dark pain shoots across my forehead. Except when it is, of course. The pain is called betrayal. Feel it in my bones. I’m meant to seize the opportunity of a client cracked open, the world crashing down is to be an opportunity for renewal. But I’m not there yet, I say to myself. Something is touched, deathliness awoken in me, a broken part that only despairs for you and for myself and for the world.

The Wild Thing is back again, looking me in the eye. He seems to have noticed a change in my breathing and leaps up to balance over me, his face above mine, paw pressed against my lips. ‘Quiet you! Now listen to me,’ he says.

I peer at his close-up face, then roll him off me, and look into my phone, blinking ‘till the screen comes into focus.

Ophelia has emailed: ‘My Old Shadow and the Not-so-Darling Man are in cahoots! They’ve gone all Fathers 4 Justice and agree with each other that I’m the problem. My children’s father wants me dead Melissa! I tell you, he’s trying to exterminate me.’

I worry. If relationships are relative, and all is a question of perspective, then everything becomes indistinguishable from its own opposite... if love is hateful, if pain is beauty, if loss is bliss, then what of desire? Can relationships be human roots if at the same time they’re only playful spaces, temporary shapes that we try on like outfits to see how they feel? How do relationships move from imaginary, to true, to untrue, then preposterous? If love holds us
steady, makes us feel real, yet can end, how then can any human feel certainty or know true belonging? Is it always a fiction?

My guts pulsate hot and fresh for a time, then fade out of my awareness. I rise. One is to carry on.

‘What happens’ you ask ‘when one sees no way, nowhere, to carry on doing? What happens when desire is lost? Desiring absent? How can there be any urgency if there’s nothing to play for? To relinquish our wanting, our striving, in order to feel more attuned with the way things are, simultaneously makes the world unbearable.’

I contemplate telling you I have no words. No faith that our time together changes anything.

‘I think I need there to be longing, but I don’t know anymore what to long for.’

I move, feeling where I ache as if the pains are old emotions needing expression and release. Then I stretch fresh life down my legs, a glorious sensation of articulation. What is it that I should wish for you? For myself, too, as we touch upon deep bruises round the knife wounds in the belly? We seek better relations, only to encounter more of the same. Another gorging, yes, and this time on my watch. If you should have known, should I have known? Is it really you who needs to change?

Is there anything I can say?

Anything at all?

I rise.

Sylvester and the Wild Thing spring to life, their eyes tracking me expectantly, as if they know what I’m going to do, before I’ve even decided for myself. Their bodies urge me to follow them down the stairs and I acquiesce. Sylvester starts purring. Meows. The Wild Thing hops from toe to toe.

Moving now, I hold you in mind in my still half-waking. If I dream you, do you dream it too? Will your waking self recognise the altered status of our connection after we meet in that imaginary where truth is revealed, fully comprehended in a moment without words? And I come to understand that this way of seeing things isn’t it. Not true, though I long for that, the idea that we could be together in our dreams, fully ourselves. Real and true.

A feeling like betrayal, like I’ve violated you by bringing you into my mind so deep, or is it you that has entered in, unbidden? Did I invite you or seduce you? Is it my fault? You touch me. Is this a boundary violation, if I have you in my mind, on my mind, holding you in mind but is this really how it’s meant to be? I’m not sure who it’s about.

My thoughts just now were yours, maybe. A momentary glimpsing of how it is to be you. All that you told me, that I should have known, known fresh or for the first time, through the feeling between us. Between me and imagined you. I feel. Will this change things?
The thoughts disperse. So much I can’t tell you as I watch: you, maybe thinking I’m serene, maybe worrying I’m not strong enough to stand you. Maybe enjoying not needing to think about how I feel at all. Yet, you’ve succeeded in conveying to me all this. All this. Hold myself together to be there for you. This is what I do for you, and what you do to me. What if you weren’t there? Would I fall apart? To be available to you is to forgo other relationships that might otherwise take my attention. Do you know that? Do you know that about me?

I’m low.

I follow the feeling and later take a train to London, sit in grey plastic-coated seat and take in digital rays. Countryside beyond the window looks troubled in the summer heat after too much rain, dust clouds over gouged troughs of raw clay. I focus on gallery listings on my phone, searching for the place that will call to me, where I’ll find some guidance. Meaning. It’s a rushing sense of overwhelm as I peruse websites vying for my attention, their smooth white backgrounds disrupted by unlikely interventions of colour. Where to begin? Seeking symbols, some that speak a language I can recognise. Always in the middle. I’m tired of this: always in the middle, still only beginning, being too late. Always on the journey and never knowing where it leads or why it even began.

A message from you, cancelling our session. ‘To be honest’ you write ‘I think we’re both a little exhausted.’

I try to grasp hold and reach the professional response. I’m to hold you to the session, exhort you to come and face the difficulty. We mustn’t let go now, I am to say. Is it because I wasn’t listening, is it because I don’t really listen, I am not to say.

‘Okay’ I type back at you. ‘Let’s breathe a while.’ And then by way of something extra ‘I don’t know if it’s exhaustion we’re feeling. I wonder what you mean?’

You reply with a PDF, photocopy of an article. I click it open

‘Every man is not only himself,” says Sir Thomas Browne. “Men are lived over again.”’

I close it.

Instead, I search for something that will tell me what it’s about, without me having to read it. I find that:

‘The article investigates literary subjectivity in... texts by Samuel Beckett. The article proceeds by relating ... how narration and speech acts constitute literary subjectivity to the problems of subjectivity that scientific investigations deal with. While successful self-regulation of the organism nourishes the roots of subjectivity, i.e., the habits, subjectivity decomposes in states of exhaustion, when self-regulation breaks down. As soon as a certain threshold is transgressed, fatigue sets in, alters the personality and eventually leads to exhaustion - a state, which psychiatrists compare to mental illness. Notwithstanding the different explanations given, scientists agreed about the effects of exhaustion. According to their investigations, the decomposition of personality by
exhaustion generally does not involve apathy, withdrawal from activity or termination of movements, but rather mere action. Similarly, in Beckett’s novels and plays exhaustion is much more than tiredness, as French philosopher Gilles Deleuze observed. For Beckett, exhaustion is rather the model for both literary innovation and a new concept of subjectivity, which he explores on the basis of a detailed knowledge of physiology, psychology, and psychiatry, but using his own literary means. The exhausted subject is beyond any calculus of activity. It will perform an activity even if he or she makes mistakes or loses control, and will thus act in an unpredictable way. This unpredictable action is not an exception in the continuation of the habits, but rather points to the moment when a new subjectivity emerges. Such new subjectivity surfaces in Beckett’s novels and plays in forms of literary innovation.

I stop reading, tired, and wonder if you mean this as it appears: a commentary on our relationship? At least mad is new, Beckett seems to suggest. Out of the mindless repetition something original, maybe even interesting emerges. Only not who was... the subject has broken down.

I try to remember why you started therapy...something to do with making good choices for a better life to come. Not this re-wounding. Things aren’t different now, only more intensely the same. And I’m nodding, low on things to say, asking you what you notice today, telling you its time and we need to leave it there for now. Time to end. This you can rely on. But when will it end? And how?

Closing my eyes, the train sucks me up, a known endpoint, yet an unknown destination. London, I am sure of, but where? Where this time? I need to do something different, and I don’t know what. I need to change things, things to change. Can’t keep going round, the same again. Yet here I am going round, the same again.

I let my body be rattled by the movement, my head swinging side to side with a jerking rhythm. After some time, I raise an eyelid and peer back at the screen. A compulsive checking. Looking for clues. In the gallery listings see a name, Mike Nelson, and feel a remembering. You seemed to know him once. I think that must be right.

And so I go, Paddington to Pimlico, to see Nelson’s old industrial machines set out in the Duveen Galleries of Tate Britain. He calls the whole installation The Asset Strippers and I wonder which particular ravaging he refers to.

I think of men in suits ripping out the core of a thing.

The work is and is not about the machines. I look at the machines anyway, as if some facet of their surfaces might reveal something to enlighten me.

Upon each surface I try to discern the Art.

The sleeping bags, evoking a hidden workforce, make me feel something. But I’ve nowhere to put the feeling, being empty myself.
I want Mike Nelson to be here and for us to be talking and I want to be held. I look back up the gallery. The exhibition has more life in it than the machinery. No Mike Nelson yet, I notice, there are men everywhere, perhaps like him, perhaps not. The men are standing back, hovering at the edges, an intensity burning at their lashes. The men have small sketch pads and pencils, clean trainers, summer cargo pants, T-shirts of bands they like, rounded bellies and shiny heads. Their presence enlivens the still of the exhibits with a charge, an intensity, as if something very important is happening here now.

Are they in fact The Art?

They move slowly, hovering in recesses, melting into the walls. I walk through the centre of the space, steadily and purposefully circling the objects, imagining the line of my trail. My tail. I can’t stop watching them. The machinery moves them. The room is close to tears. Men’s tears. I’m like a child playing, inappropriate to the scene. I can’t seem to help it. I speed up a little, notice my own colour and lack of connection to the history that seeps between the imposing hunks of metal and the gentle, soft-edged men, men, men. I draw circles with my steps. The space is angular and gentle and smells of mineral oil and cut timber of a certain age. I examine the objects using my peripheral vision, stop searching for the deeper meaning and then I realise.

I’m the last to know!

This is a place of grief at time’s passing. The T-Shirts are for Killing Joke and Joy Division. The T-shirts are for Leftfield and Aphex Twin. The men are newly middle aged, perhaps knowingly so, maybe resisting the knowing.

I think about Trainspotting. xxvii I think about train spotting. They write and draw in their notebooks. Poetry, I imagine. The machines tell them how it is. The men mourn their histories and a lost era. I think about my father, tinkering. My grandfather.

Later, at the talk, Nelson says the work is about capitalism. About buying machines that have been running for 80 years from closing factories in online auctions. The online auction is ‘not pleasant,’ he says. A sad process in which the human element is absented. Unmet. I write this in my notebook. I wish Aria were with me.

The objects, Nelson says, were accumulated over a six-month period and stored at Tate Storage Units on the Old Kent Road before he arranged them in the Gallery. For now, the machines break from their relentless toil and become monuments. When the exhibition finishes, he will probably sell them on as they’re too big and heavy to store. They will end up in Eastern Europe or China and will work on, perhaps for another seventy years. Who knows? Our lost past, still passing, is also still present. Only elsewhere, out of sight from the vantage point of Britain. The machinery is thus timeless, these are timeless machines. Time machines.

I think of Paul Klee’s Twittering Machine. xxviii

I think of Aria and imagine he would dislike the whole scene. ‘How can they feel so attached to their own exploitation?’ he’d say, ‘even when their history’s been so clearly contextualised by setting it within the Imperialist monument that is Tate Britain?’ And I would try to explain, or
rather, to make sense of it with him. Together we would learn. And he’d remark upon how this country continues to bemuse him. ‘So many layers that all contradict one another! Is it a kind of self-loathing, do you think? Freud’s death instinct or something Kleinian?’

‘I don’t know,’ I would say. ‘I guess we come to love that which we know best.’

‘Hmm,’ says Aria in my mind. ‘Well in that case I am lucky to have had the experience of knowing and loving and being from somewhere actually beautiful.’

‘The paradise garden…’

And a wave of vibrant matter succeeds.

‘The thing is it was a paradise! The loss that’s always with me is more than this, more than a yearning for my own past, my own innocence! It was literally a better place, the depth and sheer beauty of what had been created there… I don’t know if these people have any concept of what has been destroyed beyond their field of imagining. Is this really what makes them yearn? Why aren’t they angry they’ve been given so little?’

‘Shhh Aria. I do actually want to listen’

‘How can they…’

‘Shhh…’

Mike Nelson says his exhibition reminds him of Max Ernst and Paul Nash and Henry Moore (especially the digger buckets) and Reg Butler (the knitting machines). These thoughts came later, after talking through his rage at the imperialism, the colonial and industrial heritage that Tate Britain’s Duveen Galleries are part of, and where he was incomprehensibly, he says, invited to exhibit. Galleries which, with their colonnades and classical statues, routinely disavow the realities of their own inception in favour of an association with an idealised past. ('See!)

‘Shhh Aria!)

The work, says Nelson, is about his pent-up frustration at the relentless march of the industrial machinery, which moves increasingly beyond visibility from the position of the post-industrial human world, quietly finding new spaces and new bodies to exploit. Space is not something generously available in Britain, where the impulse is toward compression, so that artistic expression must be squeezed into pre-existing and strictly delimited forms. His work rarely finds its way onto this island because frankly, there’s nowhere to put it. The British Press, he explains, limit their enthusiasm to sculpture and painting and no serious effort has been made to encourage other artforms, such as installation work, in this country. Far too big! They’re not keen on immersive works; there should be nothing too expansive that might open eyes to what lies beyond the fishbowl of their perception. And so here in Tate Britain he built walls, factory walls around the machines - immersion within a space that denies its immersivity. Nelson
brings the whole, creates space within space, a box within a box, high factory walls, and creaking doors that swing open. Then swing closed.

The men hover. They raise their hands. Respectfully, they beg to differ.

‘Your work isn’t about capitalism or the industrialists,’ they tell Mike Nelson. ‘You’re wrong. Your work is about us, and our feelings, the poignancy of the heritage that you have brought to life and recreated here.’

Their tears flow. Mike’s face is still. I imagine him thinking about the hour he has wasted. But it’s out of his hands. In this context, here, England, there is no bigger picture. The feelings that he’s brought these men in contact with will stay with them, they say. And they are grateful for, indeed humbled by, the experience. They thank him. Mike breathes deeply and says he will not be staying for further questions.

‘I can’t believe this. They are delighted by their own servitude! It’s so… I don’t know!’ says mind Aria.

‘I think it’s very British. Or maybe English.’ I mutter quietly in reply as together we watch, try to take in what’s happening.

‘But this is London! How did they get like that? I mean, how did they get here?’

‘Maybe they came on the train, like me.’

‘I feel invaded!’ He replies and his body shakes in disgust. Yet his presence gives me strength. I touch his arm, caress folds of clean white shirt, warm, scented skin beneath, and together we navigate our way out of the lecture. Railings, lime green and royal blue blocks of colour, as if it were the 80s. I miss London when I’m in it, knowing I’ll have to retreat to the provincial city soon, to my charges: the cats and the children and the clients. To you.

I find myself alone outside and an empty feeling pressing down, if emptiness can press, upon my belly. The evening is light and warm but it feels over to me.

‘Let’s look at boys,’ says Aria. ‘What about that one for you?’

The back of a man in shorts descends some stairs using his well-developed calves.

‘This is not how I look at boys Aria! What am I meant to do with this?’

‘You don’t get it?’

‘Not at all. He’s too young for me and we can’t see his face. I feel no desire like this.’

‘Well, I don’t know. I’m only trying to help. We have to have our fun while we can!’

This place, or my relation to it, my belonging, is fading. I say goodbye, goodbye and walk, tired feet reminding me what it is to live in London. Past the big publishing house at the entrance to
Pimlico station. I let the anonymous space, hollow lights dead screeches, ghosts of our pasts, take me. Past is conjured but moves, always slightly out of reach, the shapes and feelings warmer there than the unforgiving concrete of today.

In the darkening afternoon light, headache stabs sharp knives in the brain. Time to find my way home and rest my bones.

Later, on the train, I tell Ophelia...

‘Have you still not read Mark Fisher? Work is a pleasure in a BDSM vibe...desiring subjection to the machine,’ she says.

Then she sends me a screenshot:

‘the English unemployed did not become workers to survive, they – hang on tight and spit at me – enjoyed the hysterical, masochistic, whatever exhaustion it was of hanging on in the mines, in the foundries, in the factories, in hell, they enjoyed it, enjoyed the mad destruction of their organic body which was indeed imposed upon them, they enjoyed the decomposition of their personal identity, the identity that the peasant tradition had constructed for them, enjoyed the dissolution of their families and villages, and enjoyed the new monstrous anonymity of the suburbs and the pubs in the morning and evening.’ cxxx

‘But Ophelia, this is exactly what those with more power say about those with less, to justify their actions to themselves.’ I type at her.

‘It can still be true though!’

‘I’ve had it said to me, of me, when I really don’t like it though, I mean come on, we all know.’

‘NEVERTHELESS!’ her words appear back at me.

‘Not enough people don’t like being used. They just want to be stable and know where they stand! Like the oligarch’s servants who won’t talk to you in this Royal Borough of the burning poor. This is reality Melissa. There’s no worker’s revolt... WE’RE DOOMED!’
A4 Scene Two: Mythopoesis

Time’s been slipping. It seems to move ever more swiftly beneath my feet and I’m treacle-toed, heavy in the heart.

Could I actually be depressed? I feel I’m losing my swiftness, energy depleted. Maybe it’s time creeping. Gravity beginning to pull harder at me. Earth longing to reclaim me. I pick up a book, hoping for a reminder, to remember what I believe. Words catch my eye:

The Unthinkable Difference

I read:

Turning back to the unthought of human becoming is indispensable. But sometimes the task of discovering it will not be easy. Because what is inadequately thought paralyzes the spirit as well as the domain to which it is applied. And to ensure the stepping back which leads to the source of thinking is not obvious – sometimes the paths and scaffoldings have disappeared in the production of discourse, and a void has deepened.

Between the forgotten Being and the one already fixed in language, the bridges are cut. A flight forward then takes the place of a dialectical movement going from the past to the future, from the future to the past, ceaselessly widening its circle.

Perhaps this is it. I’m fallen into a place without the right language and a void is deepening here. Heartened by the text, I pull on an old T-shirt with a picture of a skull, feel shadow like Amy Winehouse ripple right through as I breath in, slip on muddy boots and make my way round to the cemetery. Someone’s on the grass playing Ritual Spirit on a mini speaker. I linger listening a while, then begin walking a quieter path. Head down, I pass between two trees and sense a force field, enveloping energy passing between them. I move into the heightened zone, then back again, playing with the sensation, not quite believing, yet there it is, an invisible place within a real place. It feels safe. I pause. One of the trees seems to long me toward it and I lean in. Touch. Wrap my arms around the wide belly trunk and notice how the green canopy falls around me, making private place of safety. A sacred space. I feel held.

Breathing for some moments I’m noticing turmoil pulsating like a creature in my belly, invisible within me writhing. Though awful it also tickles. I like it; like being alive. Like being alive.

I wonder what’s happening with the tree, the tree and me and if it really noticed, and really reached out and pulled me close.

‘You’re noticing. That’s all.’ The tree speaks in my mind. I’m making things up.

‘When you open to the more there is, more there is.’

Leaves ripple. Insects hum in a warm haze. The light is honeyed syrup scented, intensely active even as my own moment is paused and I’m breathing lines of flight that bumble bees leave
lingering, invisible honeyed sweetneses. I want to cry. I see beauty in this existence. Being. The tree speaking. I hear Spoken.

‘Think of me not as a fixed object but as an entity embroiled in becoming. You see me as solid and a separate entity to that which surrounds me, but that solidity is only the relativity of our potentialities moving through time, and that perception of ‘me, a distinguishable unit,’ is your fear of being embedded and embroiled in more than the body that reals you. You experience my voice as if it were your own imagining and indeed it may be, but that’s not to say it isn’t, at the same time, my voice. I give you these thoughts. So don’t go thinking you came up with them on your own. My limbs are moved by the wind, but who says I don’t have agency, intending my sways? The wind and I think alike when we (make a) ripple. We’re both a-rippling. My relation to the wind is unlike yours, at present. When you’re dust you’ll let it blow you too. And you’ll move, particulate, availing yourself of the Earth’s energetic currents, exogenous you might say. Who is to say I can’t avail myself of your strict and tightly bounded, half-a-human embodied mind, in order to have a few thoughts like these, in words, in English words? Do you think your body is all there is of you and that it isn’t being used by others? I use you and so do many more. Ask yourself, who else has their thoughts in your head? Who else is doing your thinking for you because there’s oh, too much for one mind to think alone?

I knew this and didn’t. Words.

‘What are you then?’ I wonder to the tree ‘if not a tree rooted to the Earth, your companion there with you?’

‘If you wish to know me, think less about my attributes as if they were rigid.’

‘But there’s... I don’t know, that thing that’s always you... that I feel in your presence and return to.

‘That would be my constancy’ she says.

‘Not rigid, but constant’ says she, say I, says the voice in my head.

‘Imagine a humming...’

I close my eyes and smell the lime, the stickiness of the tree's buds - a yellow and green breeze, the bark textured, I rub my hands along it and feel it moving.

‘Think of me as a beginning and then a becoming’

‘A transformation’

‘More a transforming’

The leaves sway, seemingly separate, seemingly the same. Green holds me. I’m leaning. I’m leaned. I give way.’

‘A ritual’ I say. ‘I can’t see a way through.’
'Let the way through see itself in, see itself out. You don’t need to understand only let your being be a part of what’s happening.'

The words flow through mind, and I listen as they pass, trying to capture them but they remain unsayable. They continue on through and in that moment, I understand completely, and then the moment is over and I can’t begin to tell you…

This much comes to me. The tree is a ritual. I trust it with the fragments, all I can’t make sense of. Lose myself. Don’t lose myself – am lost. Am present.

The tree guides me…

Think of me if you must then as a ritual tree, your ritual tree since I’m indulging you’re need for scaffolding language, use this age-old means of coming into attunement with all that flows. All is meeting you where you are. Listening to your vibration. Think of me as a guide, an outside observer who helps you reflect, surfacing like a rising tide inside you, to reveal the cracks where water flows. Or change the metaphor you silly, to singings and hummings and thinkings, thinklings and linklings and meanings and scenings. Feelings and urgings and rumblings and gurglings. Think of me as one who attends to you and listens, and the words you think I hear don’t matter, since you can’t fully grasp that I’m not listening, but a listening. A ritual in progress – a becoming – a tree-ing.

Arms holding the tree-ing, some arms that stretch, bark breath against ruddy cheek.


I’m inside my mind which is somewhere inside the tree and which the tree is also inside. Yet there I am too, still, and I’m a sense-making, using words, being, and there it is so here I go, having thoughts about mythopoesis, which ‘broadly suggests the ‘world-making’ character of certain practices and presentations.’ cxxxiii and I seem to recall certain things almost photographically, or is it filmically, as with those who perceive that certain films and novels ‘are the seeds of people to come’ cxxxiv. And words say:

‘…we want to suggest that mythopoesis is a name for a summoning – or calling forth – of a people who are appropriate and adequate to those new and different worlds presented in art, films, performances, writing and other practices (a future-orientation which, paradoxically, in certain instances might also involve a turn to the past….

‘mythopoesis results from practice: we might call it the art (and/or science) of calling forth the something within us that ain’t us. This necessarily involves the fictioning of other ways of thinking, speaking, enjoying, relating and existing. These other modes of being are engendered by images, sounds, writing and events, all of which may consist of, or be the product of, other performance fictions by other artists, musicians or writers. That is, performance fictions invite other performance fictions. Something happens thought mythopoesis that involves this kind of performing – whether by an individual or a collective – of a people to come: art and writing are a catalyst not for judgment or education but for articulation and actualisation of this missing people’ cxxxv
I decide to call forth Aria and check this out with him and as I wonder where my phone might be I feel it vibrating, a much more metallic buzzy feeling than the zone of seclusion the tree(s) afford me. Unbelievably, Aria is ringing.

‘I worried if you were home safely, my dear.’ he says.

‘I’m home or rather, I’m here’ I say ‘I’m in the cemetery and well, I’m trying something new. I mean I want to change everything or rather everything is changing...’

‘I seeeeee’ comes his voice, soft and thoughtful. I’ve no idea what he sees.

‘Aria, I am thinking about a ritual, something that can fix everything.

‘Fix?’ he says ‘I don’t know about that. How can we fix anything, we all seem to be getting more and more broken from what I can tell. But anyway, a ritual would be nice. What did you have in mind?’

‘I don’t know what I have in mind. It isn’t really me, you know, this kind of thing.’

Something in me that ain’t me.

‘What do you know about rituals, Aria Jan?’

Oh lots! They’re a core feature of human civilisations, we seem to need them, and perform them even if we don’t anymore realise that this is what we’re doing. Especially here in this society that’s so blind to itself. So unwilling to reflect.’

‘Ritual serves several functions. It gives an outer form to concepts and insights – puts them into words that we may say or actions we may perform. When ritual occurs, we may experience a connection to more than our thinking and sensing selves... we enter into flow and in this way may more easily allow our feelings to pass through our bodies. We may notice things differently. Rituals connect us to history, and prepare us to move forward to an altered future.’

‘Aria, it isn’t making sense to me anymore. Life. I don’t believe in myself anymore. Some things need to change.’

Things are always as they are.’ He says. ‘I’m in acceptance mode these days, you know, I think it’s my Buddhist phase... I’m getting older and I realise I just have to accept that I can’t choose to have everything how I want and rather I have to find a way to allow what is, you know, what actually is. You may find this is the way, Melissa.’

Maybe. But anyway, things need to change. I’m not able to accept. That would be like death to me. They can’t go on as they are.’

‘Then they need to change,’ he says.
Maybe we say goodbye or maybe Aria becomes the tree and present, part of this moment.

How do you effect change, Ritual Tree?

‘Change is affecting. Things can’t be changed. Feel things changing. Feel the world into connection. Come into flow. Be changing. Hold focus. Let go. Allow. Grip and release. Ritual carries us through crises – enabling us to feel and embody whatever is needed, readying us to continue with our lives, carrying our memories with us.’

Hands connected to the bark, I slip around the tree’s trunk away from the path, bending knees and finding a way to be seated at the base, to lean my body back. Inhale. Then I phone Ophelia.

‘I think I may be psychotic. I’m spinning out under a tree.’

‘Ahhhh, psychosis! You need *The Yellow Brick Road to Recovery!*’

‘Darling it’s not funny! I think I’ve cracked.’

Cracked! You need the *Club Drug Hub!* Trying saying it three times. Spit on the ground and spin around in a circle as you do it and maybe the Yellow Brick Road will come to find you!’

‘Ophelia!’

‘The cracks in the contemporary, isn’t that it, the wounds, the wounds, it’s the fucking wounds that that heal, that bring enlightenment! I mean Jee-sus! The books you read, you’d think you’d have worked it out by now. It’s a big swizz Melissa. It’s a joke! Who can feel authentic in the middle of this bullshit?’

‘Fuuuuck. I’m getting too old for it all, my nerves are shot to hell, I can’t cope anymore. Everyone’s mad! Even us!’ I say. And then ‘When’s it going to be okay?

‘I don’t think it’s going to be okay, but that’s alright. We have to let go of our ideals and accept the reality.’

‘But, it’s not acceptable!’

You’ll come through dear. My children’s minds are being controlled by the men. But you still have yours and they love and need you. Are they waiting? And darling Sylvester and the Wild Thing. You’re doing great! UKCP registered no less!

‘Darling, I’m under a tree and I daren’t move. The world’s pixelated. And I haven’t taken drugs. For fuck’s sake.’

‘Not even any drugs, I mean, could this life be more fucked up and ridiculous and we don’t even get to be on drugs! Maybe it’s a delayed reaction. Or a flashback.’

‘D’you think it’s old acid from twenty years ago?’
'I think I’m on whiskey and listening to The Fontaines! They’re great, you need to get into them!'

‘What happened to our lives Ophelia?’

‘Mine’s in the bin. I’ve had enough.’

‘It’s not in the bin! You’re doing great.’

‘I’m not doing great, Melissa. Let’s be honest now. I’m not doing great. It’s hard to be a mother when your children have been stolen away and reprogrammed, made to fear you.’

‘You have to play the long game now. You’re going to get through this....’

‘Ahhh, you’re having a psychotic episode. Enjoy your acid!’

‘I’m...’

She’s gone.

Psychosis. Psychedelia.

‘...the word itself, all aesthetic associations aside, connotes the manifestation of what is deep within the mind, not simply on its surface. An irregular conjunction of the modern English prefix “psyche” and the more blatant Greek root “dèlos” – meaning “manifest” or “reveal” – the psychedelic is that which manifests what is in the mind, echoing Marx’s Spinozist adage, once again, that we must not settle for interpreting the world but instead strive to change it. This is not to set interpretation and manifestation in opposition, however – rather, the former must always strive to become the latter.’

I feel a responsibility to see you through, and with you, myself, and with myself everyone, everything: the whole of us, all being and non-being, for there’s nothing less and nothing more. The relation of the material to virtual to the material ... transformation or evolution... a going through, a seeing through to completion... I cannot simply recognise the problem then leave it for others to solve: not here... not now... not in my room! You require more of me, I know... I will try, to undergo this situation with you, allow my mind to be an adjunct to your own, a virtual space beyond. And I recall those words ‘survival isn’t enough’ from Station Eleven, or is it Star Trek? Deconstruction... Particles... elements.

Seeing differently.
A4 Scene Three: The interzone

I’m sitting under the tree.

Tree-ing.

This is happening. This passing moment. I’m in it, I resolve not to fight it in case I start to feel sick, but go with it. Keep myself rooted, body seated next to the tree, tree holding, curling round me. Safest place I’ve been.

I am Ritualing. Trapped in the confines of reason and unreason isn’t helping, when what I want is something new. I think about Mike Nelson, creating space within space, nesting time within time, and about bending the space-time continuum to make it possible to traverse reality into unchartered terrain. How else to stop the repetitions and begin something truly new? In my mind it makes sense. In my mind I can almost grasp it, a way out of the trap, the goldfish bowl of living and reliving the broken old stories, a way for everyone and the Earth, to change the record, dance differently than this spinning reel, rounding ever faster, overcoming, overcome us all.

I can no longer reason. There is no one to reason with. I think I need a little magic, so here I am. Making magic? No. Being (in) the magic. Letting magic happen. Who are the future people?

Merleau-Ponty says we live forwards but understand backwards, making sense only in retrospect, which is why the future we anticipate is always the past. Past is future then, time circular like Berger said.

Something becomes clear: I can’t do this alone. More than one matters. I close my eyes and surrender to the ritual.

What is my ritual?

Cinderella takes things she has around her and transforms them into things she needs to achieve her goal. Quite the pragmatist really, an independent lateral thinker, dreaming big and getting herself out of the shit. Only she lands herself another subordinate role. Was that really the best she could think of? Will she be bumped off if she turns out too tenacious for the Prince? Or if her feet grow another inch now that she’s being fed? What becomes of her then?

I have my mind. What if I take what my mind contains and what it can do – that is, change? If I change my mind does everything else also reconfigure? What can I imagine differently? I sway side to side. I oscillate between…. Am I meant to imagine something new then conjure it up or is it time to look the world in the eye and see things as they really are?

No more wondering, thoughts distracting again and now: time to face up, lean in, find white light of pain becoming sublime opportunity to renew…. root myself to the base of the tree, safest place for my body to be
I remember another word – the Interzone. Where we have a capacity to meet and be in
relation, as in dreams, as in imagination and memory. Things I need to know. Can we be more
than ourselves?

A circle forms around a fire, and I’m part of it.

You’re there with Tom on your left and Zuko on your right. Ophelia is to my left and Aria to my
right. Sylvester and the Wild Thing are crouched together on the branch of a tree, watching.
The flames are dancing, light illuminating. The children are close by, somewhere out of view,
and we hear their voices laughing and playing, moving swiftly in the trees then falling silent as
they hide behind the gravestones of the gone before, then cackling in some mixture of fear
and delight, whispering. Owls call:

Too-wit, says one.

To-woo comes the response...

There are foxes, badgers, squirrels, blackbirds and a robin, spiders, creepers, crawlers, ivy, wind
that sends a thrill, a chill that makes bones shudder. Flesh attends.

‘This whole thing feels dodgy,’ you say ‘and it doesn’t seem very literary. I was hoping for a
more, you know, credible therapeutic experience. Can’t you make it less... hippy?’

‘Noted’ I say. ‘I’ll see if I can keep it credible feeling.’

I’m not sure if I can or not. I’m writing everything down in the dark as we go along. Can’t see
my fingers type... plans asunder or won’t form... not sure where this is going. Just let them. For
something I feel such urgency around, it’s disheartening to also be at a loss. Ways in, frustrated.
I can’t control it, that’s the thing. The un-lookable, unspeakable, all that the grown-ups haven’t
saved me from, or seem not to see. The fundamental facts of life: love enacted, bonds that
build the meaning of me, of us, each other. We are our relationships, forming and coalescing,
fragmenting and falling away. I try to do better – keep continuity where needed – move toward
and away, allow flows.

I’ve had a difficulty and the problem has been – my urgent desire – to fix, or make amends, to
restore what’s been lost. To recover a sense of certainty or a state of belonging. I want to make
this better. But I’m coming to realise that healing doesn’t come by our intention – maybe
intention can only prevent certain breakages, or perhaps it’s that we can paddle this way or
that but the tide carries us its own way.

‘Well since we’re all here now’ you say ‘waiting to do something, perhaps you could stop
overthinking and let me speak first?’ I suppose I’m babbling to myself and you seem purposeful
and ‘yes, whatever you have to say,’ I say, ‘might be the best place to start.’

You step forward.

‘So, I wrote this thing about wrong relationships. It isn’t very deep.’ Then you turn toward Zuko
and begin to speak:
Love Lies: A Repetition-Compulsion

It’s a kind of checking, obsessive.
Compulsive. I feel you.
Your desire to be
All I’m wanting,

Irresistible.
So that
Resistance feels futile.
So that there’s only wanting back.

I want you to devour me
Be fed, satisfied and home-safe.

Briefly we’re poised in potential
Able to make anything of this moment.

Then your disgust kicks in
Like too much cake
Like no, that cake was not quite right.

Like no, that one wants to be too much cake
Wants to be cake too much
I want cake that doesn’t want to be eaten.

You eat me up and leave.
Vomit me out somewhere.
I vomit myself out too.
I am vomit, made of sick.

The checking is done with, done for now.
If I don’t ask questions, there’s room for repetition.

Somewhere out of sight, a child is playing *Wild is the Wind* on a guitar. The others join in, singing, comic or melodramatic at first but the song seems to capture them with its spell. We listen.

‘Ah, children are the best things!’ says Ophelia ‘but you need to hear this being sung by Nina Simone’

‘Bowie’s version is the ultimate’ says Tom, ‘even though it was a repetition. In fact, the original was for a film ‘Wild is the Wind’ and Johnny Mathis sung it first…’, but no one is interested, we are captured by the words:

*Like a leaf clings to a tree.*
Oh my darling cling to me.  
For we creatures are the wind  
And wild is the wind.

You kiss me and with your kiss my life begins

Now you know
You’re life itself

We stand, gazing into the fire a while and then Ophelia says:

‘Melissa, I don’t think I can do much more of this. These thoughts of longing for love depress me.’

I resist the urge to speak this time, see what comes if I leave space, and the silence vibrates a while until it seems to lift her. Ophelia steps forward.

‘Okay, I have a poem to share with you.’ And she closes her eyes. Then her voice comes:

Hope

She hums and draws the scissors near,  
(comb scraping at my neck until it’s raw)  
and snip, she nudges me, "look up"  
to winter sun –I close my eyes

No need to see. I feel it rumbling, the train we rode  
where once we delighted in darkness,  
me stroking your softest fur, you tugging at my floppy ears.  
The unexpected pleasure of loving, without seeing

We are different animals now, neither blind,  
nor cute, more fragile than before. Horses perhaps,  
whipped once too often. Each bolted, lost  
to the other – creatures of flight

And yet I’m hopeful, see? I post this letter,  
I plan my little charges’ schedule,  
for it is forbidden to "go to pieces".  
One cannot sink as a rock, no,  
not while they lie sleeping  
in their expansive satisfaction

Left to my own devices, I hope:  
was it in fact worth it?  
Being loved, then slowly un-loved?  
Unhooked from your embrace,
She looks up.

‘I have such a fight on my hands when I go. I swear he wants me dead. The others are falling for his portrayal of things. I have to gather my strength, do you see? All over again. I can’t let myself be written out of the children’s lives. Of my own life.’

‘That’s ridiculous!’ says Tom ‘No one wants you dead. That kind of thing doesn’t happen in real life. If he feels he has to take control maybe you should be asking yourself why. I mean, could you be unstable?’

‘I’m entirely unstable, it’s true! Who knows how to do that to me? He leans on my weaknesses, forces me further towards the edge. I’m the mother of the children! And he’s playing me!’

She stands, strong rebellious beauty in a tight dress, boots to her knees, and a bottle in her arms where a baby should be.

I’m nodding. I’ve seen it unfold. He’s certainly found her weakness, how to obliterate all she has made with her life. This is true. True.

‘He must do what he believes is best for the children.’ Says Tom.

‘Erasing their mother?’ I ask.

‘Bullshit!’ He says.

‘I know, you couldn’t make it up but this is what’s going on, I’m telling you!’ She says.

‘Maybe if you were calmer about things. You know, cooperative…’

‘Okay, now I’m…’

‘I believe you.’ Says Aria.

And our collective gaze turns to him.

‘I know what it is to desire, to love desire, to love, then realise that someone you love wishes you were dead.’

‘Aria! That wasn’t love!’ I say and then realise I’m blurting out of turn. ‘Oh sorry, I’ll be quiet.’

‘It was love Melissa. I remember how it began. Realising I was becoming in such things the older man, that it was for me to show him the way, the ways, old ways passed down, which seem new with a young, hope-filled body. Was it a plan or a discovery? Did he find it tantalising to have a hand bound behind his head? How languorous he looked in the morning light, leaves dappling, birdsong, scent of orange blossom. I can see it now, am here with him and at the same time present with all the old loves and I imagine how this same scene has been lived and
relived through the ages. We are in love, love is a place that brings itself to us. Love brings us to this: I want to heal him with love. The bond intensifies feeling and also represents: intensification and bonding. Not too much is needed - only a soft touch. It’s the possibility, the need to trust the other, to relin Quaternion go. It should be frightening yet we find it deeply consoling to have our power taken, to trust another to love us, for what happens to us next to be out of our hands. I wanted to show him how to trust. The tie was made of silk. Our skins contrasted, playing up against one another, mine absorbing the light, his reflecting. I wonder if my urge to be trustworthy was really about giving what I myself longed for – the recognition and acceptance of my being, appreciation of all I am, and a commitment to protect me, made in this full knowing? In other words, perhaps it was me who longed to trust, who fell into projection. But it was so real! It was so real that it was real. At least for me.

Should I have known already? What was to come?’

The fire’s flames have died away, yet it glows brightly still, a deep golden-red liquid heat. Music floats across the open space, apparently coming from one of the houses to the south, lifting, permeating, holding. ‘I love this’ says Aria, it’s Bach. The purity of his composition is so comforting.’

‘In fact,’ he says, ‘I wouldn’t have believed it possible either, that one meant to love us might secretly despise us, and I’ve lived for most of my life with my eyes closed to the realities of these relationships. Perhaps that’s how I came to be alone and naked before my lover when it dawned on me that he was holding a knife behind his back, planning to do for me there and then, in the sanctity of my own bedroom.’

The thunderous non-sound, of jaws dropping.

‘But why?’

‘He was planning to steal my identity, take my life and make it his own.’

‘But that would be insane!’

‘All would-be murders are surely insane’ he responds.

We’re silent. He carries on:

‘There was a moment, when I realised it was about to happen, but before my face betrayed my understanding of his intention. In that moment a million thoughts went through my head at once, trying to find options, but I knew there weren’t any easy solutions. We were alone and no one would see or hear if I called for help. In any case who would believe it? I became quite interested in my situation, intellectually I mean. I was thinking with a calm kind of fascination ‘so this is how my life ends. I’m one of those people who is murdered.’ I remember how that altered the whole shape of my life, as if there would appear, in retrospect, to be some inevitability to this ending. I thought of the ways certain people had been telling me all along that my life choices were immoral, no good, would result in a sticky end, as it were. As if I chose to be the way I am and was not born so. All the world’s judgmental voices disapproving of how I live…. who see love and pleasure as a vice. I could see it then, hear how the news would be
relayed, the story of my life would be narrated as if I had invited my own violent demise. That’s when I finally understood. Not about the beautiful, broken, deluded man with a knife before me, but about the whispering voices around, within me, who I thought protected and held me dear, who I believed cared for me, despite the evidence to the contrary! You must know about the voices that bring conditionality to one’s existence: show this part, hide that, don’t trust your faulty instincts, be ashamed of full expression of who you are. In that moment my delusion or is it self-deception, fell away. Suddenly I could see all the judgment I’d been enduring and carrying and trying to placate. Judgment’s a God who requires a sacrifice! I had been giving my blood, the heart and soul of myself for nothing but more judgment. All I had minimised or ignored or refused to believe became fully visible to me, the full extent, and the full intent now apparent. I finally recognised how much damage had been done to me, all the little violences, minor but sustained, chipping away, deepening cracks, stirring at old wounds. I’d been tolerating all this, living in proximity with the death-wish all this time! Seeing that truth changed me, and I realised that I was truly alone. That’s when I became my own person, not tied to the fantasy of belonging and acceptance in conditional relations. In that moment in which I understood my life was ending, my life became my own and I knew that if I wanted it, I would have to fight. There was no one else who would do this for me.

The knife came down with a swinging motion, moving in curvaceous arcs, repeating an ancient dance of its own and I shouted ‘Murder! Murder!’ but there was no one to hear me scream. My mind offered up information that I didn’t know it contained: that I needed to use all my strength there and then at the beginning of the attack, to try to get away, and not to try to conserve anything, not to grin and bear it with my usual politesse, waiting for the aggressive impulse to abate. My mannered, self-effacement left me as I pushed back. In that moment all I was, all I became, was concentrated into the effort of pressing against another’s flesh in my bloody determination to live! To take for myself a second life, not the one I was given, but this, life after murder - which I had to take! Using strength I didn’t know I had, I released myself from his mental grip after what I later learned was twenty-seven stab wounds. Forever altered, I rose, ran into the bathroom and locked the door. He followed with the knife and started hacking holes.

‘This is like a horror story!’

‘It was! You should have seen the place after, blood everywhere. But that raw intensity of our human truths, his and mine, was most intimately connecting. I might even call it sublime. It all took a long time, hours and hours behind the bathroom door, during which I was entered deeply into a kind of altered state. From there I could understand him, in his altered state... as he shared with me the challenge he faced in getting me done, and I had to admire his persistence and determination to succeed. I understood him. It was intimate. There was only he and I in the world. I had to become someone other, someone who chose to live while he tried to find ways to kill me. And don’t forget I loved him. I was in love with him. While I stood there, naked and bleeding, watching the knife jabbing into the door and listening to him tell me that it was only a matter of time before he would get to me, I felt very close to him. He was showing me a part of himself that he normally kept hidden. And I felt I understood him. I was connected with him. We recognise that love is hard, but so is murder. We discovered together how difficult it is when our most determined impulses locked horns in our life and death dance. In fact, I must have realised there in my animal being, that I needed to stay connected with him, to enter into his way of seeing and meet him there, if I was to have any hope of leaving
that bathroom alive. If he was psychotic then so was I, or I became so. It was about saving myself but it was also love. I loved him until I was free. And later, when people explained to me that a horrendous crime had been committed, I found it hard to relate to that idea, that he was bad and that I was innocent and a victim. I have never felt less like a victim. For me it was a coming alive, into life!

I see you shaking like a leaf and I have to ask.

‘Are you doing okay?’

‘I don’t know where to begin.’ You say. I mean, this idea that a murderer is someone with whom we share an intimate connection... I mean the reports say so but this feels different. I recognise it. And that our beliefs about ourselves that arise in our relations with others may be... I don’t know... a fabulation. That we imagine they are loving because we need love to grow, so we invent it where it’s missing... It’s shaking something in me, something alive... I realise the problems with Tom, and I accept how he is. You can’t blame a wolf for being a wolf can you...’

‘Excuse me! I’m here!’

‘Carry on’ I tell you. ‘We’re listening.’

‘... well, I thought I’d learned, was more knowing now, so how did I manage to fall in love with Zuko, who was only ever in love with the version of himself he found in my misguided eyes? He made himself up using me!’

‘Oh now! I’m here too! And that’s a lie!’

‘And I do now wonder at the voices who blessed my relationship with Tom in an instant, when it must have been obvious he wasn’t interested in taking care of anyone or making a life in collaboration. The voices didn’t see he lives in a different paradigm, one where women aren’t ‘dictating property’ or whatever one calls it. They colluded in my delusion that he would somehow pull it out of the bag and we would enable each other. Perhaps they too think that if one wishes it hard enough, any relationship can be a success. You know, they blame me for the relationship’s failure, not him, and seem to think I should have been left to stew in his poisonous juices. It’s tradition, after all. The decent way to behave. But if we are going to do patriarchy then can it at least be done properly? Could they have ensured a more suitable match or spoken truth about what was before their eyes? Is that not the role of one who loves? To have an interest?

So when I hear your words Aria, I recognise that sensation, of living with the unknowable truth - that one is not an altogether wanted child, or not wanted indefinitely. Or that the wanting is conditional. That allegiances can shift and one can be targeted, or excluded, one’s identity rewritten to suit other narratives. When the interest has waned, life has moved on, and the obligation to tribe no longer suits, there is a grey zone which some of us inhabit, possessed of what Freud might call a necessary delusion that helps us believe ourselves loved and worthy of love. I think I see it all, and I keep accepting. And yet I keep loving people incapable of loving
me in return! Maybe I’m hoping for something redemptive, an undoing of all the wrongness through the inexplicable power of blind love!’

I’m feeling doubtful now about this whole ritual venture, and the very idea of fabulating an alternate world, one that resists the world that imposes itself upon us. Perhaps this is what art does, and fiction. Perhaps it’s what we humans do in our everyday lives, convincing ourselves that things are, or can be, the ways we need them to be. Is this imaginative flight the means of escape? Or is it escapism? Do we fool ourselves about our realities in order to create better ones, or do we blind ourselves with our self-imposed filters until we believe ourselves loved and living in a safe and predictable world, even as we teeter on the brink of our own demise?

‘Melissa, whispers Ophelia, ‘I don’t think I can do this. I mean it’s getting exhausting and also, it’s just embarrassing, standing in a circle under a tree. There are people walking by you know, with their doggies. Seriously!’

And then she looks up at me hopping feet like a child. ‘Can we gooooooooooo?’
A4 Scene Four: Dèlos

‘...the only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, delirious of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing but burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars....’

I’m being mother. I tell Ophelia she’ll have to wait. Holding something immeasurable in the face of the incomprehensible, I turn inward, try to determine the most pressing tasks at hand.

It feels like a withdrawal.

I look at you, as if to cipher your desire. I look at you, wondering how to portray your inner world in a way that might capture sense of your essence; that might exude a quality that’s more than material, evokes recognition of more than a facial feature, or the way your clothes cling. Your stance, breeze catching the fabric of your dress, I recognise as defiance. The way your head raises asserts subjectivity in spite of an implied subjugation, like a Greek goddess. can’t think which one; maybe all of them. A general goddess, amalgamated idols, details, details missing, but an aura, very particular, remembered.

A woman standing outdoors is enough to convey breath-taking, perhaps frightening-in-a-thrilling-kind-of-way, presence. Your stance invokes the word ‘defiance’ in my mind. Why not something more benign? Is there language more attuned to that essence of you, and less to what I’m conditioned to conclude upon seeing a head held high, a chest lifted on a body that quivers, some agitation at the cellular level? I imagine a snake rising up from your belly, pressing itself through the passage of your throat. You move your neck in tiny circles as if to help it move through. I look at you, and your lips part. A moment’s pause that seems to last a long time. I stop breathing. I imagine the feeling of the snake, venomous tip causing your innards to recoil so that the slimy shaft of its body can advance steadily through the passage of your tender flesh. I see it pressing at the soft tissue of your throat, imagine the sickish feeling of allowing it to move, taking the whole of your concentration.

Yet if I were to paint you à la Francis Bacon, there’d be unselfconscious confidence, conveyed in swiftly sweeping reds and blacks, snaking themselves, unashamed of their own intensity. You seem determined to make an honest mess, not one that’s hostile, but which may elicit shock, being real and true.

You’re speaking now, as I look at you. I feel very close in yet far away. From this vantage point your words seem to come of their own volition. I could almost imagine you floating in mid-air but that would be too much. It’s enough that you’ve turned your whole body toward Tom and that you don’t seem to care who else is round to hear what you have to say. I look at you, focussing; I have by now come to feel that my gaze is necessary; as if I’m holding your body upright with my eyes. The serpent makes its exodus on a tide of words that you almost seem to be singing while Tom’s face whitens, like he’s hearing a Banshee howl, portending imminent death.

‘...Only not mine’ you say. ‘I refused to let you squeeze the life out of me, though you say that’s not what you were doing. Inattention to a problem makes it grow; passivity its own energy.
And don’t ‘mad’ me. I think you hated me for needing you to engage. How was I to live with the perpetual punishment of your resentment at me? I needed your collaboration, to build our world around the children.’

‘Yes! It’s all about the children!’ Ophelia interjects.

‘You knew who I was.’ Says Tom.

‘Yes,’ you say ‘Tom, the promising author. Too busy in creation to attend to mundane realities like family. Unwilling to do the work of parenting the children, lest the world might see you as a parent. I knew who you were, but did you not know who I was? Maybe I’m an artist too!’

‘He’s cool though, no?’ says Zuko. ‘I mean, you had babies with a noted author. That’s good enough for many.’

‘Social capital,’ says Ophelia.

‘Shut up Zuko,’ you say, ‘he’s not exactly James Joyce.’

‘Letting things run,’ says Ophelia.

‘I wanted to be there’ says Tom ‘but I didn’t know how. I told you how committed I was, and I felt committed, only I had other commitments. If I’d been there how you wanted I’d’ve lost my whole identity. I needed to write to be in the world. It’s who I am! You had the satisfaction of motherhood, you liked it!’

‘Tom, you’re not who you say,’ you say to Tom. ‘Not who you think! Today, I release you, and the fantasy that sustains you, back into the wilds, the damp smelling earth of this half-forsaken cemetery, that feels, now that I’m within it with you, much like our relationship: a thing both living and abandoned. Such fertile ground for burying the dead. Our lives could have been beautiful. Instead, I am releasing it all, all our unmet potential and idealised pasts, the promises, intentions, and ghosts, here into this place.’ You hold your arms out wide and turn one way, then the other, ‘This is what we offer to the children! This is where the children play! This is all you give them Tom, an old cemetery that was never meant for them. They will dance upon our graves too one day, you know.’

‘The children are the best thing in my life!’ says Tom.

‘You don’t deserve them’ you say.

‘That’s not nice!’ he replies.

‘Is the unkindness in the words or the deeds?’

‘What deeds? I was never mean. You’re the one who criticised.’

‘Someone had to name the reality, Tom. You played at the surface, made an impression but what of the substance? I wanted what was inside. I’ve never believed it’s empty, your core, but you didn’t provide anything substantive I could hold to, only fleeting imaginings to captivate
me. You didn’t provide real time, or real care so that I could sleep, or heal, or grow, or fly. You said you couldn’t. I think you couldn’t, because you didn’t want to.’

And you continue:

‘In a world that feels for charming artists, who cares for the ones close in, whose lives are sucked up and sucked dry, whose resources are plundered for the poetry of a boy the world wishes never to grow up? Who can even recognise that sucking it up isn’t rock ‘n’ roll or bohemian? The choice to walk is never taken lightly because this is patriarchy in action and a woman without the disguise of a man’s possession is nothing.’

‘If I think I’m nothing inside, and you say I’m nothing inside...’

‘Tom! Help me out here! I can’t tell you you’re full and deep if all you show me is absence. Your absence, your mind’s absence, an absence of care. If this is what’s in your heart... you resent me for not staying and pretending with you that it was beautiful.’

‘I did like being a family’ he says. ‘You stole a big part of my identity when you took that from me.’

‘What identity is this, that I’ve taken Tom, and is it your humiliation or mine? Family isn’t a possession it’s an action, and enactment of commitment. Your loss or mine?’

I squeeze Aria’s hand on one side and Ophelia’s on the other, feel a pulse of energy run between, firing me up, holding me firm. I think I see now the chink between Tom and you, where your perceptions of your shared reality fall apart. I’ve listened to you tell it before, but now with him present, I have to say I find it harder to believe you, or rather, easier to recognise how deeply he feels his own wounding. I see you unseen. I see you being expected to deal with something more impossible than you’d expected. And that it isn’t really okay for you to complain. No one wants to hear it. Tom has a kind of sparkle and my heart feels. He wears his heart on the outside.

‘No!’ says Aria ‘do you really think? Him? I think he seems like, well, I only know the Persian word for it. Something like, no good.’

‘He’s feckless!’ says Ophelia

‘Oh yes!’ says Aria ‘He’s feckless! No?’

When they say it, I see it, yet I struggle to grasp. I find myself moved by him.

‘That’s the curse of being a heterosexual woman, Melissa.’ Says Ophelia, ‘but you need to remember whose therapist you are! That woman is barred from speaking because he has a charming demeanour. No one wants to see her! To speak of our exclusion is to induce its further manifestation. Words matter!’

Meanwhile, you’re saying ‘I gave my life to you!’ to Tom, ‘because I thought we had a relationship.’
'We did!'

'No, we only thought we did, but it was a misunderstanding. We were trying to fit a mould that promised much and delivered, in our case, little. If only one of us could have been honest sooner.'

'Well, you ruined my life too.'

I watch your face, quizzical. You appear, once again, at a loss. He stands behind a mirror.

'I’m curious about the idea of sharing identity,' and I feel your attention turn on me.

'It seems to me that identity is better located in our actions, verbs if you will, than in any material attribute one might describe with a noun.'

'What about intentions? Asks Tom. ‘Because mine are good.’

'Perhaps I might use an old-fashioned word' I say: ‘character.’

‘Ah,’ says Ophelia, ‘but those noun things, the statuses that shouldn’t matter do matter because they intersect, with the verbal, verbs, verbiage, whatever. You know: in-ter-sec-tion-aaaal-ity!' His intentions carry more social weight than her character because he has more social capital than she has!'

'Okay, okay' I say. 'I just thought, you know. What happened to being a caring person and making an effort to know each other and feeling for one another and understanding, I don’t know... foibles?'

'I love your foibles!' says Aria.

'Yes foibles are great,' says Tom agreeably.

‘Her positioning in the social architecture matters more than what she has to say, because that is her who! Not her actual who!' says Ophelia

‘Are you finished?’ you ask me.

I am. We are. I nod quietly and try to reinstate a sense of solemnity to my being. We all stand still again and try to concentrate. Witness or whatever we are doing.

In the silence, the children appear and start running in and out of our circle. You lift one of yours and hold it to you, breathe her smell. The child leans her head away to look you in the eye, pats your face and strokes your hair. ‘Mamamamama’ she says and then wriggles to the ground and carries on her way. You follow her with your gaze and as she disappears back out of view your eyes arrive at Zuko. He sees you back and immediately starts shaking his head with firm authority:
‘No! Oh No! Don’t you start on me now. I don’t want to hear anything you have to say!’

‘And what do you have to say?’

‘Nothing!’ he doth protest, ‘I’m a quiet man, and like to live in the shadows, you know, support from the edges. I don’t want to be involved in whatever you have in mind. You’re like a vixen, a temptress, a siren who would have me on the rocks. I’m keeping well away.’

‘I feel like I’m missing pieces of the puzzle, Zuko. I mean, one moment we seemed to have total connection and the next you were off away, only to return with this hateful gaze, as if I had wronged you, not loved you. Where did you go when you said you had troubles bigger than I could imagine?’

‘Something so terrible happened, it made me re-evaluate my whole life. In fact, it made me realise the importance of being with my partner, the mother of my children. Whatever I felt with you was meaningless. A mirage. I’m a good man, not like you. You really think you can compete with the mother of my children?’

‘I never knew it was a competition. That wasn’t what you said at the time. You said….’

‘But you weren’t supposed to believe me! Why didn’t you send me away? You were meant to see through my fantasy.’

‘Something happened, then it unhappened, and I never understood it. You’ve made me feel that I’m wrong to have expected to be treated with… humanity. You needed love, desired wanting, then you hated love. You never explained.’

I see him speaking words to you but I can’t hear them. I see the words as if they were on the end of fists, hitting you in the face and chest and abdomen. I see you buckle and return to standing still. I see you buckle and return to standing still.

You stand silent, looking at him and the moment opens up, first a crack in the ground then a deepening, a grave’s width chasm. I wonder what you will say but nothing. You let your wordlessness hang there. Let what cannot be fixed remain present… something disgusting projected, now hanging, suspended in mid-air, an open channel oozing ick between you. In my mind you lift a mirror to Zuko. A mirror now faces a mirror; disgusting feeling thing hovers between, with no resting place, being everywhere and nowhere at once.

We all stand.

We stand.

It becomes hard to imagine breaking the stillness but then Sylvester slinks down from the tree asks me for some food.

‘I gave you some not long ago!’ I tell him.

‘I fed that to the flies’ he replies, ‘and now I want fresh.’
‘The flies didn’t need feeding!’

‘Who are you to decide? The flies felt I should leave it for them and so I did. I can have more. I will stand by the bowl until you notice.’

As it happens, the children have packed a kitty picnic, and I find the things he wants to hand. I squeeze some meaty juice and splats out of a pouch and into the bowl, while Sylvester looks on. Then he licks and slurps at the surface before wandering toward the fire which he stares into for a moment before stretching out his full length in prostration to the radiant heat. ‘Food comes and food goes. Like love. We feed one another feel it enter in, warm us and give us energy, then it travels and we use up all its goodness and want rid. Shit. We love one another and then we don’t. It comes and goes. It comes and goes.’

‘Oh Sylvester!’ says Ophelia. ‘How are we to bare this?’

‘We bare it until we can no longer. It’s the way of love.’

I think of The Way of Love.\textsuperscript{cxliv}

The Wild Thing appears and finishes what’s left of Sylvester’s feast. Then begins to wash himself in agitated fashion.

‘You think’ the Wild Thing says to me, ‘That your thoughts are yours alone, when actually it may not be you who thinks Sylvester is sweet and needs some water, but rather Sylvester who has appropriated your brain, capturing your attention with his beguiling presence, so he may then put the thought into your head that he is thirsty. He doesn’t need to think this for himself when he has you to do this for him. His external hard drive, if you need such mechanistic metaphors. You, if you were not so full of theories and ideologies about how things ought to be, would have brought him his water by now instead of standing there gormlessly waiting for me to explain this to you. Why are you always wishing you understood what was going on? You have a body with limbs that move and water that comes out of a tap. Is it really so complicated to engage with the world around you? Why are you always dreaming of other things and forgetting what is in front of you, as if this were a world of ghosts? You’re too much lost in your head, making things seem difficult and complicated when the world doesn’t suit you. Why not admit that there inevitably comes a point when parents don’t know how to love you and husband’s secretly wish you were dead? Then you could get on with your life instead of trying to make things different. What is all this fixing? What is it to be fixed? The important thing is that we’re here, now. Sylvester and I and the children, and we have no relation to your old shadows or interest in them. Move on! Let them go. Let’s go. Do you want to turn back time? Or go forward to a better future? Restore something or build something? Can you not instead fetch the water, make lovely dinner for everyone, light some candles and give thanks in recognition of the magic of being here, alive together on the Earth in this moment now?’

I look around the circle. Then I breath in ready to speak. Everyone looks at me, expectantly.

‘Thank you all for being here in this moment. And now the ritual is done.’
‘Hang on,’ say Tom ‘I haven’t said my thing yet! What about hearing all our perspectives, finding mutual understanding? I feel very misrepresented, since she’s the one giving her side of everything!’

‘We’ve come into a moment together. I think perhaps that’s all that was needed. To be here with each other, then to let each other go.’ I feel poised, all my weight in my toes, my body shifting forward, leading the dance that my feet will soon follow. ‘Anyway, Sylvester needs a drink of water.’

‘But I haven’t had my say!’

I feel impatient and certain about something, a thing I am not usually licensed to say. ‘Hmmm, well I’m not your therapist, so your say can only be second hand, according to her.’

‘Call yourself a feminist! This is inverse prejudice!’

‘I never called myself a feminist and I never said it was fair. It’s how it is. You’re a secondary character in this narrative, and for what it’s worth I think you are being treated fairly. Now, I’m going home to make dinner. You can join me, or you can get going. It’s really up to you.’

I wander round to the cemetery gate, followed by the moon and stars

seeped in deepest meanings

meanings made

of happenings long forgotten, though

their resonances pulsate still,

soft and clear

my spine vibrates

in the presence of a trillion years

time is space and stars

are spinning their chariots – dust or light – all around the sky.

You follow me onto the moonlit path, Tom and Zuko a step behind you. They seem to me interchangeable, functioning alike in their capacities to promise you everything you desire, deliver you nothing, then blame you for expecting more... engaged, reciprocal. Genuine.

Tonight, they chatter together, Zuko trying to establish who has greater means while Tom alludes to indicators of noteworthiness in the public domain. The main protagonists of their own life stories, it’s only here now, as they walk aside by side that I see how well matched they
are in their capacities to spin a yarn and turn a tale, even yours, to their own purpose. I wonder if they strike you also this way and if I’m the one who was slow to notice.

Then I remember that when I realise something about your life, it becomes real, or more real, for you as well. And then I think about what it means to open up a channel, as it were, between beings. If I see you more, more real, does that mean what you see affects me too?
Scene Five: Meating

I can’t seem to find you. You won’t be present. Things happen when I’m not there. Images are made. Sounds find their formation. A Requiem plays on repeat.
A private world unmediated by my… interpretation… or capacity to recognise what I see.

The surface knowing there’s no knowing at all.

I know there’s a place beyond me. That I don’t see or hear or feel. From where shadows come, black and white and each one moves before I can ever grasp it, always a moment ahead. Always a movement, a heady invitation to view, yet not experience.

I cannot know the colours, feel what it is to be fully immersed in their light(s) …shades

Shadows.

Something flickers, tantalises, always just beyond reach.

‘I wrote this about Zuko,’ you say. ‘I’ve been considering the gap in understanding that I experience. Empathy misplaced, or mis-received I don’t know, and the pain. My pain that I can’t express and knowing he’s in pain and not knowing what it’s about, only that he lied and seems to think I’ve been seeking to influence him when I thought it was about… Well, I thought it was about us. I mean I thought we were about us, not about other things….’

I nod and look at you with my eyes. I’m thinking about Ophelia. I sent her a message to make her laugh. To show her I’ve been listening. That I’m here.

She hasn’t picked it up.

‘….it produces. And about pain as an entity in itself. You know how Murukami says “If I have left a wound inside you, it is not just your wound but mine as well”? Well I think that’s what’s going on. I mean, I think I’m feeling his pain. I don’t know if he’s feeling mine or if I’ve caused him any, or I don’t see how. But it’s an old wound being touched upon. We’ve stumbled into pain. I think maybe it belongs to both of us and neither of us. I know I’ve done some wrong but I didn’t feel it, the doing.’

I try to imagine who you are to Zuko. I imagine him, accessible to my mind only using words of another, Milan Kundera, moved by your vulnerability, to a ‘brutal gesture’:

‘… I met with a girl in a Prague suburb [...] she had been interrogated by the police about me [...] The interrogation had disturbed her [...] the fear was still upsetting her bowels [...] during our conversation she kept leaving the room to go to the toilet - so that our whole encounter was accompanied by the noise of the water refilling the tank... She was intelligent, spirited, she had fine emotional control, and was always so impeccably dressed that her outfit, just like her behaviour, allowed not a hint of nakedness. And now, suddenly, fear like a great knife had laid her open. She was gaping wide before me like the split carcass of a heifer hanging from a meat hook. [...] I suddenly had the urge to rape her. I know what I’m saying: rape her, not make love to her. I didn’t want
tenderness from her. I wanted to bring my hand down brutally on her face and in one swift instant take her completely, with all her unbearably arousing contradictions: with her impeccable outfit along with her rebellious guts [...]

But [...] my desire turned absurd, stupid, scandalous, incomprehensible and impossible to carry out.

Uncalled-for and unconscionable, that desire was nonetheless real. I cannot disavow it—and when I look at Francis Bacon’s portrait- triptych, it’s as if I recall it. The painter’s gaze comes down on the face like a brutal hand trying to size hold of her essence, of that diamond hidden in the depths. Of course we are not certain that the depths really do harbour something - but whatever it may be, we each of us have in us that brutal gesture, that hand movement that roughs up another person’s face in the hope of finding, in it and behind it, a thing that is hidden there cxlvii

‘The pain I feel around Zuko,’ you’re saying, ‘I know it isn’t about Zuko, but about pain. Something that was there already, opened up like a wound…’

I imagine Zuko looking at you like Kundera, like Bacon, as one who finds themselves compelled to tear at the flesh of another, all the while looking at themselves, seeing through this act their own being, searching through this act, for the inner world of the other, the mystery to be ripped apart and


I wonder if he was indeed playing with his own reflection, a vision shattered by your belief, or was it this: a desire to get at, grasp, expose the whole of you, imperfect, distorted but your realness momentarily apprehensible through the action of objectivation?

You, I notice, are not thinking this. I hold it, my thought, to make a space for yours.

‘Murukami says “Such wounds to the heart will probably never heal. But we cannot simply sit and stare at our wounds forever.”’ cxlviii

I listen, nod a little. I move my mouth into a smile.

I’m not sure how I’m here now. In the room with you. Kundera is carrying on in my mind, and I don’t know how to stop the flow of words, which surface themselves so that I’m finding it hard not to speak them, like a being possessed and it’s dark and it’s huge and I keep my vocal cords disengaged and my eyes are on you, holding, holding on to you… your face...

...our historical experience… teaches us that men mimic one another… their attitudes are statistically calculable, their opinions manipulable… man is therefore less an individual than an element of mass.’ cxlix

Does it make a difference if I’m silent now? If I give way, sink below the surface of my mind’s racing, rather than submitting to your stream of consciousness? You have the floor, but my agitation won’t still. Won’t follow. I feel my exposure, my giving way bringing a vulnerability.
As if something unwanted might take this moment to enter in... I’m not sure. I watch your face, look to you to hold me steady as the space opens...

‘You like reading Murukami?’ I ask.

‘Oh no!’ you reply. ‘Who has time for novels anymore... I read commentary and interpretation. Rick Dolphijn has read the Murukami... and there’s Ghosh, you must know him? On how people like us have suffered a loss of perception of the non-human as conscious and agential. If we can remember that, let ourselves understand, maybe it offers an opening... I mean a pathway, but not a destination, for we humans seeking restoration of self and, inevitably as part of the same action – other(s), including other people and other living entities – plants, animals, and that which we may perceive to be inert – rivers, seas, though they plainly move.... We treat them as analogous of ourselves, associate them with emotion... how did we move from a position in which the sea is perceived as itself feeling, to one in which that is considered a metaphor for our own altering states of turbulence and calm, our own tides, currents of energy, our own amniotic fluid?’

‘Are we still talking about Zuko?’ I ask.

‘I think I’ll only recover’ you say ‘if I change my whole way of seeing. The pain is pain. There’s no understanding him, not for me.’

I’m still not certain. A danger! Danger in my mind, at losing sight of Zuko as agential... my mind has its own thought to finish...

This is the moment of uncertainty when the rapist hand of the painter comes down with a ‘brutal gesture’ on his subject’s faces in order to find, somewhere in the depths, their buried self. [...] ‘that treasure, that nugget of gold, that hidden diamond,’ namely, the sought-for essence of a theme or, in Bacon’s case, the self of a face.

‘The thing about Murukami’ you say, ‘is the de-centering from human experience, so that it isn’t my pain or his pain but simply pain, a place, or an entity of its own. Do you see? Am I being mad?’

I nod, then shake my head. ‘Yes, I mean no! Go on...’ I look at you and will the words to carry on flowing from you, like magic? You know what to do and say, I’m thinking, to find your way out of this pain. I’ll listen close, up close. So close that I hear other words in my mind, old words that circulate in my bones. Words I dreaded, yet was made to read, to look upon, with Ophelia and the other girls in class at school...

He did not wear his scarlet coat,
For blood and wine are red,
And blood and wine were on his hands
When they found him with the dead,
The poor dead woman whom he loved,
And murdered in her bed.
It was Ophelia who named the darkness and the ‘are you really going to live under the shadow of all this history?’ It was Ophelia who looked the future in the eye and said, ‘let’s split.’

And we moved.

And we moved...

Any you say:

‘If I think beyond the details of Zuko and me, Zuko and she, whoever’s waist he has his hand on now – if I move so that I see us moving, being moved… if I float... beyond the confines of, in Freud’s terms, an ego state – the wound no longer confining be but enabling me as I move into it, to feel no more shame and humiliation, no more my degradation, my nothingness, my awareness of those interpretations of my experience, so narrowly defined that there’s nothing. Nothing of me, in any case. Why should I stay connected to such a world view?

This step of moving, in my mind that is, through thought experiment, worrying not if it’s truth or fiction - suspending my disbelief - taking the first step to entertaining possibility, curiosity, stepping out of criticism, shame, self-blame, self-hate... a move away from insecurity, even if momentary, to consider the possibility of other positionings... This isn’t the same as speculating on what those positions might be. Perhaps we don’t need to understand them, only to feel that they’re possible.

If my pain is not my pain but pain, an entity of its own that I experience manifesting through me as one of some number of available organisms, does that change my burden of guilt or shame for the pain?’

You speak. And at the same time the poem, which last forever, continues its journey through my mind...

Yet each man kills the thing he loves
By each let this be heard,
Some do it with a bitter look,
Some with a flattering word,

The coward does it with a kiss,
The brave man with a sword!
Some kill their love when they are young,
And some when they are old;
Some strangle with the hands of Lust,
Some with the hands of Gold:

The kindest use a knife, because
The dead so soon grow cold.
Some love too little, some too long,
Some sell, and others buy;
Some do the deed with many tears,
And some without a sigh:

For each man kills the thing he loves,
Yet each man does not die.
He does not die a death of shame
On a day of dark disgrace,
Nor have a noose about his neck,
Nor a cloth upon his face,
Nor drop feet foremost through the floor
Into an empty place

‘I’m hearing you and the possibilities of de-centring and allowing pain to be as it will be, and yet... okay. I’m troubled.’ I tell you. ‘In truth, I’m worried this de-centring amounts to a lift-off, dissociation from the truth that you’re embedded in, embodied in: a real event, one which is concerned with life, which is the concern of life. Which is... is there to be any sense made of our actions? Does your thought, through which you may escape the pain of betrayal and humiliation, not also absolve Zuko, depriving him of the privilege of agency, as if he were not making a choice, and not responsible for his actions? As if this is simply the human condition, to hurt one another? So how are we to live together? And how are we to live?’

You look at me steely eyed as if determined. And then you say:

‘If it’s you who causes me pain, can I see my pain as yours?’

I am wondering about the projections... and the transferential responses, the ways you feel my pain in turn as rebuke, producer of obligation that requires something that works against your sense of agency in relationship. But most of all, exposed. Most exposed.

Bacon’s portraits are the interrogation on the limits of the self. Up to what degree of distortion does an individual still remain himself? To what degree of distortion does a beloved being still remain a beloved being? For how long does a cherished face growing remote through illness, through madness, through hatred, through death still remain recognizable? Where lies the border beyond which a self ceases to be a self?

I look at you and feel us move or is it time that moves and we are still? The move beyond, recognising resonances that run between, each body... and the others, human or otherwise. We might call it our affective state, which may be given to us, channelled through us, determined by us.... However we experience, this changes our relationship to our own states of being and to those of others... some call it all vibrational... I realise I’m frightened... frightened to see... can you see me caught up in this fear state? Is my body betraying me?

Why it is that, despite all Bacon’s reservations, I continue to see him as akin to Beckett? Both of them are located at just about the same place in the respective histories of their art. That is, in the very last period of dramatic art, in the very last period of the history of painting. For Bacon is one of the last painters whose language is still oil and brush. And Beckett still wrote for the theatre that was based on the author’s text. After him, the theatre still exists, true, perhaps it is even evolving; but it is no longer the playwright’s texts that inspire, renew, and guarantee that evolution.
In the history of modern art, Bacon and Beckett are not the ones opening the way; they close it again. When Archimbaud asks Bacon which contemporary painters are important to him, he says: ‘After Picasso I don’t know. There’s a pop-art show at the Royal Academy right now...when you see all those paintings together, you don’t see anything. To me there is nothing in it, it’s empty, completely empty.’ And Warhol? ‘...to me, he’s not important.’ And abstract art? Oh no, he doesn’t like it.

‘After Picasso, I don’t know.’ He talks like an orphan. [...] I think it would be terribly nice to have someone to talk to. Today there is absolutely none to talk to.\textsuperscript{clvii}

I feel alone.

The moment opens another recollection...

It’s London morning, sun is shining as I rise. I find she’s up before me, moving, smiling, energetic action in the living-room. Ophelia.

I slink in, sleepy-eyed, and she sits me at the table and fetches me my drink. ‘Time for your drink’ she says, ‘and what will it be?’

And for me it’s coffee and she makes it right, the way I like it, and she gives me the mug to hold, to warm me, makes me move my fingers wrapped round it like love, always taking pleasure in the simple sensuality of the everyday. Then she pours herself some vodka and, oh, I see, it isn’t her first, and she drinks it in the morning light and the smell enlivens my senses like freshly squeezed lemon juice - awaken - life force energy! And please, she says without words, no more awakening.

And it’s deep and sad as she shows me herself and together we hold it unspoken between us and enact this normality, glorious first ritual of the day at the breakfast table, the day that’s nowhere near normal, but full of loving – and being – and being is unbearable grief and absence. And the talk is how to write the letter to the children and say to them there has to be an end now, an end to the struggling to be in relationship through barbed wire fences, to be together while circumstances are this, like this. ‘Better to accept and be in one reality, even if it’s the wrong one,’ she says.

Oh... the children!

‘The cards are dealt and mine is the losing hand,’ she’s saying. ‘And you see, don’t you,’ she says to me, ‘that he’s played to win – as if love is a zero-sum game, he’s cleaned this one right up.’

Her position, once solid, has been progressively eliminated, score eroded, hands wiped from the table. Children taken from her in a move we both saw coming but couldn’t change. ‘He knew my weaknesses too well,’ she said. We knew. She smiles. ‘I’m to be no more to them,’ she says. ‘Their minds have been taken. Remember,’ she says, ‘that we’re living in a fascist regime,’ and she gives me a wink and also a serious stare. ‘No reason not to drink - to that.’
And I see it. That there can be no more rehab, no more reason for recovery. Because there’s no recovering for her. Not from this.

And I see it. Is it the absence of hope that signals the end?

When there’s no more to live for, the story completes itself.

“Begin at the beginning,” the King said, very gravely, “and go on till you come to the end: then stop.”

There’s nothing I can do for her but be with her, witness her suffering, try to stay with her, see her through. I struggle with her, to enter into new dreams – we try saying the words: there’s a whole world out there to travel and explore - time for another chapter! Yet another. The plans, which might have excited our earlier selves, now ring hollow. She’s free. Which is to say, her life has been emptied of all that gave it meaning. I talk about the more to come and at the same time I see: there can be no more. She hasn’t the strength for it. The bitter truth is she isn’t nearly mad enough to make another reality feel real. She hasn’t the heart to manifest more dreams ... not without the children. A little house on the coast... a return to her Latina roots... No. She’s making plans diligently, but the plans have no heart. I see her bleakness and she sees me see. ‘You’ll have to help me explain it to the children.’ she says.

I go out onto the balcony to breathe; she follows me and talks about a poor man she’s worried for, dear neighbour, innocent friend who has an unfortunate tendency to inflict mortal violence upon others when overwhelmed himself with schizophrenic episodes. He’s otherwise most lovely – truly! but now locked up in Wandsworth Prison where there’s no key, and she is not to try and contact him or enquire into his wellbeing because the social workers watch her for signs of madness and irresponsibility and to care about a wounded man who is punished for a psychiatric condition is a sure sign of both, but who else is worthy of her heart’s pangs if not he? Can’t I see it? And she looks at me intently and I’m struggling to know how to respond even how to arrange my face, my eyes, and I don’t know who... the vodka. I’m here with her. I struggle to meet her eye. It’s too much.

‘It’s too much for you, isn’t it?’ she says.

And, ‘yes,’ she says, ‘it’s all too much. Poor you,’ she says, ‘you won’t stay much longer now. Go into your day,’ she says.

‘Okay,’ I say, and ‘I love you,’ I say, and she tells me she loves me too. ‘It’s about intersectionality,’ she says. And it’s as if all the layers of meaning, all the times that have ever been, all that ever was that went in to creating that precise moment, which we share so briefly, are made visible. Exposed. As if I could peel them like old paint that’s beginning to flake. I pick at my clothing. Rub the layers down but they don’t fall smooth, rather catch and rise like something dried, dying, yet soft like Autumn. Like catkins. Hope remains, gentle within.

Thus released, I go. Spend the day in Notting Hill, see other friends who don’t slip away, who stay brave. I stay in the neighbourhood all day, luxuriate in peoples’ capacity for presence. I buy presents for the children in charity shops and drink juice and drink coffee, and drink wine.
Catch an Uber. Notice a beautiful garden. Write about it. About how we swam in The Oasis that day and how she told me about Mark Fisher.

*Like Bacon, Beckett had no illusions about the future either of the world or of art. [...] in the last days of illusions, both men show the same immensely interesting and significant reaction: wars, revolutions and their setbacks, massacres, the imposture we call democracy - all these subjects are absent from their works. [...] Living through the end of a civilization (as Beckett and Bacon were or thought they were), the ultimate brutal confrontation is not with a society, with a state, with a politics, but with the physiological materiality of man [...] 'and this smell of death...'

I feel fear rising up within me – *my* fear or *the* fear? How would you like me to say this? Because honestly, I just don’t care. Because honestly, I don’t feel any difference, only the horror of a black hole pressing itself open within me. Blackness with white teeth in the tenderised flesh that’s me, if I can keep hold of that idea. If I can keep hold of my body as something real. As me. I feel myself back in the chair before you.

‘Maybe you’re right’ I say. ‘And pain and fear are entities that inhabit us, flow through like the wind moving the trees...’

And you look at me. ‘Don’t you know?’ you say.

‘I’m trying to work this out together with you’ I reply. ‘The thing is, maybe it’s right. True, I mean, about the agency of non-human entities, but we... remain human. Don’t we? Even with all that flows through us or resides within... there is still something... isn’t there?’

And you look at me... and I wonder if we’re still connected or lost in our own worlds. Alone.

* [...] a clear-sighted, sorrowing, thoughtful gaze that tries to penetrate into the essential. And what essential thing is revealed when all the social dreams have evaporated [...]? The body. [...] For ‘of course we are meat, we are potential carcasses. If I go into a butcher’s shop I always think it’s surprising that I was not there instead of the animal.’

It is neither pessimism no despair, it is only obvious fact, but a fact that is veiled by our membership in a collectivity that blinds us with its dreams, its excitements, its projects, its illusions, its struggles, its causes, its religions, its ideologies, its passions. And then one day the veil falls and we are left stranded with the body, at the body’s mercy [...] For that young Prague woman, it was no longer the police that she had to face up to but her own belly....

I breathe.

You breathe.

I taste my breath and smell your presence. Smell like a salty breeze and a musky perfume.

I smell my hand. Smell like soap and underneath, fear...
I want to move quickly.

I sit still, a kind of freeze, and wait for you to continue.

And after another long painful moment you start speaking and I breathe out. Was this the same moment in which, some miles to the East of us, Ophelia was ending? Later, I ponder another old conundrum - if there are no witnesses, does a thing really happen? Does death happen? Or is it an un-happening, as it were? How does one enter into absence, enact heart’s stillness? How was it to breathe her last gasp, fighting life’s longing - for peace? Did such a moment take place? The non-event can only be pieced together in retrospect by those who were absent. I have my truth, and perhaps some fragment of hers.

I wonder what use there is in my listening to you now and if it makes a single difference what I do or say, or if you will keep coming and who I am for you. And I see the vanity of my position, as if making a difference, changing something, were even my role. What a misplaced expectation! Does this work and how does this work and what is work and yet... you’re here and I absorb your words - and does that make something happen? I dread telling you that it’s time to stop for today. I dread thanking you for my payment. What a sweaty business, and how can anyone be convinced that we’re here in this moment together, breathing the same air, its dust and water and bacterial particles circulating between us? How can that essentialism of the body, flesh in proximity, be mistaken for togetherness, when I’m with Ophelia and Ophelia isn’t anywhere and I look at you, your face orienting the world for me. And I wish you would leave. I wish you would leave now.

[...] what is left to us when we have come down to that?

The face; the face that harbours ‘that treasure, that nugget of gold, that hidden diamond’ which is the infinitely fragile self shivering in a body; the face I gaze upon to seek in it a reason for living the ‘completely futile accident’ that is life.

I walk you to the door and close it gently behind you, a gentle gesture, fake as my gentle voice, my slightly withholding smile.

‘As if,’ says the Wild Thing, who has his own thoughts, not particularly on the matter, ‘as if,’ he says, ‘my coming and going had something to do with you. Or even me. As if you had a choice to decide that I’m part of your family or not. It’s simply the case,’ he says, ‘that I’m here. Sometimes we’re here. And sometimes we are not here. That’s all.’
Act Five

Interminable End Times and Other Going Ons Beyond
A5 Scene: One morning I wake

And say to you,

That we will make a hum-sing,
And we will make magic ring,
And we will Bend-time...

Change fate... change it back to the road it might have run...

How to bend time?

   How to bend time?

And I will make a ritual...

   ...have to trust it... so I will.

   The deep, knowing, all I have.

   Sometimes knowing... sounds mad.

   Yet the way, the only way... it’s already too late....

   The only way forward is back....

   How do I feel this?

Ophelia.

I’m waking now and blood is rising; draining. Which way does it move when the realisation lands and all the striving to change, the moving mountains is come to nothing? More than nothing, or less than nothing. The mountain has moved itself and nothing can be done. What have I done?

Doves and Ravens\textsuperscript{clx} plays.

Ophelia lost forever. Still.

Sensation of being cut loose and falling backwards ever upwards into space, arms outstretched. Too many films, now movies, have infiltrated my mind.

How come then, I’m still alive? Thinking this, Descartes would say...

To be certain, to be sure I exist, I need her there, other end of the phone, knowing the feeling. Reading in the living room and telling me I’ll never guess what. I can’t go on like this... no more... no more.
I know.

Something rustles and I force open an eyelid. There’s Sylvester staring in my face and now he’s leaping from the bed and moving to the top of the stairs. ‘And anyway, it’s time for my breakfast!’ he says.

I sigh deeply then breathe in some fresh energy. I’m forced to move.

Sometime later I tell the children I’m not myself today, because I’m very shocked and sad to hear, and they say ‘Oh’ and are silent for a moment. Then again they start to move and I move too, mopping the floor a while and looking for what can go in the bin. I might throw everything away.

If it was the end of the world. Just say. Just say it was the end of the world and you were looking death in the eye and all that’s been and ever will be is there, complete before you. Then what?

We’re still. We’re moving online. I’m still. Here. Holding, opening, connecting and being in digital space. I find myself on a screen: a therapist lives by her wits after all. And all I have to draw on by way of mapping this terrain comes from a deepest recess. An old story. I remember Sleeping Beauty and how people and animals slept a hundred years. I can watch myself on the screen, but the real mirror is you.

‘With the story,’ I’m saying to myself, ‘our ancestors prepared us for a time like this, like a time of death, a time like death, of waiting for death, for a time when death circled, travelling invisible through the air – vapours sensing our fear and entering in unbeknownst, filling the spaces between us. And so, we and the world fall still, watching death creep between us.’

I’ve decided to stay at home and shut my door to all but we who live here. Childhood fantasies prepared me for this scenario, complete with urgent supermarket run. I find myself buying dried meat, tinned pulses and copious amounts of jam, which I imagine us eating with our fingers, straight from the jar, in our coming months of isolation. The departure from the established framework of our existence produces a response familiar to anyone whose boundaries have been crossed before. I know we’re in a wild territory now. Anything might happen and probably will. The social matrix that holds us has fallen away and in my worst imaginings, soon the lights will dim. I watch my phone closely for signs of life flickering away… checking my connections, fearful of digital darkness. Digital darkness is surely coming, and I’m calculating what that will mean… I imagine myself running wildly down the road, a crazed zombie, anarchist on the loose… screaming ‘I have no phone!’

Change came how change comes… quietly creeping closer… until it had happened already. Never any sensation of ‘being in the moment’ of the event. What a load of turd the whole notion of presence is. ‘A bourgeois word for avoidance!’ Ophelia says inside my head ‘they don’t want to deal with what’s happening, so they focus on their raw juice and yoga meditations because it makes them feel so much better when they disengage from the politics and the planets and all the less fortunate people suffering in front of their face.’
Ophelia my darling, there’s something really happening though. We knew it was coming but we didn’t believe it would be here. We were the slow ones, slow on the uptake and behind the curve as they say...

‘Not me!’ she replies ‘I’m out of here! Had enough. I’m well away so at least you don’t have to worry about that, and neither do I!’

One minute it’s preposterous, the next it seems everyone is drowning in fear and paralysed to the spot, saying ‘six weeks of this hell’ though for some, escaping from the world a while presents a secret delight.

_We have entered the altered space-time-reality of Coronavirus – Covid-19_

Nobody mentions that it feels like the world might end, but memes fly around on WhatsApp chats: saying this would be a good moment to bury your spouse in the garden.

Ophelia says, ‘I made the only choice that was still mine to make. While I could. Makes me human, you know? My agency. I’ve restored myself to myself. I couldn’t keep fighting. The long knives... Melissa... the night of the long knives keeps coming. I’m free.’

Everyone’s talking about *Station Eleven*. No one wants to admit for the moment that actually the world _has_ ended and now we’re hanging round like stragglers, bizarrely still alive, living in an airport maybe ‘til the end of our days, seeing how it all plays out.’

This is how it plays out.

There’ll be no going back.

There can be no more of this.

The rules of our society, expedited in, let’s call it good faith, crushed bones and choked breath. Ophelia knew she’d lost control, of the narrative, that is. Now another narrative has taken over. And my sense of solidity, woven relational bonds with Ophelia, is lost. I swing... the tsunami wave of corona looms on the horizon, then overtakes... becomes part.... becomes all... all we are - is washed away.

Ophelia’s body is dealt with quickly, a haphazard affair undertaken in the midst of white heat shockwave, waiting for a lockdown, dreaded and begged for, and which comes a moment later.

Nobody knows how to speak.

I speak, in the language of a funeral, a eulogy, then a tribute, about love and books we shared and the heartbreak of Grenfell and the best way to cook a chicken. Ophelia lies next to me in her box. ‘Sure you couldn’t make it up!’ she says. I’ve asked friends, already locked down and unable to be there, what they need for me to say, and all agree it would be best not to mention ‘Murder!’ though she would surely have delighted in the ensuing furore. ‘It’s all about the children’ she says ‘isn’t it’ and
‘Isn’t it though.’ I reply. Her words silence the fury in me. The Furies. I find the restraint tricky.

Next moment I’m home and there’s more – other - intensity of our atomisation colliding with a further child’s birthday. I make cake, light happy candles, and behold the wonder of life’s tendrils stretching forth regardless of the inevitable outcome. These events to mark life’s ending, life’s beginning and the meantime of going on being, have a quality of incompleteness that I associate with battlefields. Rituals swift, a sense of urgency. Enemy fire ahead. Enemy fire behind. We need to move on, focus on the next thing: impending invasion, a wave of uncertainty, storm of locusts. My mind is geared for coping, eyes facing forward, reassuring smile.

Everything’s okay. I’m here.

Maybe it is okay – to be behind... I look behind and underneath. I tell Sylvester everything and rage and anger and didn’t he see? A woman preparing for her death... And I’m with death and there’s nothing but bones – bones of the truth of things. My soul-sista has left me and I’ll go, and Sylvester says he’s glad it wasn’t me and I tell him don’t you see? It was me. The truth is death is preordained. It happened long ago. Have you forgotten?

So, Ophelia dies, and then time starts to bend? I’m not going there! As if. No longer suspending my disbelief to play with possibility, I’m entered in. She swings: a sacrifice. Knowing is hard come by and did I really think I could dream an all-transforming ritual, change the world, and world could change without losing, without giving up something precious? Ophelia always recognised the truth of things before me. But I’m sober, clear to the point of clairvoyance. My trauma meets your trauma and I’m as altered as you.

I look at your face on my screen and silence all around.

‘Well, it seems like the whole world has malfunctioned this time,’ you report dryly. ‘I quite like it because at least it’s nothing to do with me. I mean it is, of course, but it’s nothing I’ve done personally and now I can stop trying to find whatever life I’m meant to have been living all this time. A few weeks at home might be a good thing. Don’t you think? I mean, I guess, well I know... I know this is happening where you are too isn’t it...’ and then you seem to lean forward and peer at me. ‘Are you okay?’

‘Yes, I’m fine’ I nod with an excellent smile. The screen shows my face in miniature and the blank wall behind me. Beyond its view, I’m gripping a large mug of coffee, wobble-spilling on a notepad, legs covered with a blanket. Behind the door the children lurk in their rooms or mooch round the house looking for things to eat. Sylvester and The Wild Thing are familiar with this routine and follow them for a while, then lead the way into the garden where they occupy a sun lounger between them. One child follows. Another barricades herself in her room. Meanwhile, I’m here with you. I will hold this hour like the Earth depends on it. I will be with you like reality itself is relying on us to see it through.

‘And are you okay? I ask.
Ophelia’s death, her ending, de-existence or non-existence is enforced by an unmistakable opacity, a wall of clay extending across my mind, while the virus rushes like a nuclear wind enveloping the world in cold shadow. All is consumed, like me, by the bigness of this event. All but Ophelia. Her reality dial is sharp and clear, timing impeccable. She recognises the end. Time to go. The End.

Everything stops.

People are to stay at home and no touching. There’s to be no kissing, or hugging, or love. There’s no more love in the world. The end is shocking and abrupt and fitting.

‘The end comes slowly, then quickly’ people misquote on Twitter.

The internet continues, chatter all now digital.

‘None of the great authors want to write fiction anymore,’ you say. ‘They feel the stories of the moment cannot be made to correspond with the narrowness of the novelistic form and they have turned to writing urgent essays and prose about the climate.’

‘And how do you feel about that?’ my therapist voice sounds like parody. I’m not referring to a parody, I’m the parody. I’m finding it hard to care anymore. You look at me in mild irritation.

‘Well it’s a bit joyless for me as a literary critic. What can I say when they refuse to write clever and imaginative texts and insist on speaking so plainly, plain as they can make it, about the perilous reality of the world?’

‘Well I guess there’s the content to consider.’

‘It was never about the content for me. It’s the form that brings the work alive, the playing with shapes, turning things round and showing new angles. Making me see differently.’

‘I wonder if it feels uncouth to give care to the aesthetics when the words are “the world is burning”?’

‘The aesthetics are realism,’ you say. ‘It’s a form of clarity that is both contemporary and highly regressed. Like those artists who would paint photo-realism and everyone wondered why they would do that. I mean there’s arguably a point to it but at the same time it’s fundamentally depressing. Like an absence of imagination. I find it very irritating.’

‘I think maybe you’re feeling irritated right now?’

‘Fucking hell! I’m locked in my fucking house! What do you think?’

Mostly, I think how extraordinary it is that our lives are carrying on at all. That we can meet on Zoom, that you pay money into my account, that the sun rises and sets, food comes to the door, the children are safe. The cats know what do to. We all shuffle round the house from spot to spot. The sun and moon circle, day after day, week after week. We’re all cats now, I’m thinking. ‘Meow!’ You were catty today too. I resolve to be less irritating next time we meet.
On my shelf from last Christmas is Denise Riley’s *Time Lived Without It’s Flow*. I open it about this time and read Max Porter’s Introduction. He speaks of the ‘agony of no return’ making Riley’s text ‘literary criticism as love’.\(^{\text{clxv}}\)

‘I have always hoped such a thing might exist,’ he continues, ‘just as the poet hoped truth in fiction might exist.’ And then he tells me a thing I can understand. Riley will show us in this book ‘that the ‘time of the dead is, from now on, contained within your own.’ We will contain their time within their own when they are gone. ‘Time is the person,’ she writes’ he writes\(^{\text{clxvi}}\), and ‘for each of us, a way of being in the broken clock of the world might emerge.’ \(^{\text{clxvii}}\)

Every week I listen to you.

Later I talk to the children about the cats.

I only speak about the cats.

I only speak to the children.

Only about the cats.

Sylvester insists upon the rituals of breakfast and dinner at their proper times and with the proper decorum. He sits at the kitchen table and oversees events. The Wild Thing arrives late or not at all, or lies on the floor like a dog, or plays in the hallways, skidding after dry leaves, crashing into walls. Later they will both go and sit on the front step, catching the last of the sun, watching people who walk past, watching them.

It lasts a long time, this silence. Like fog, it muffles sound and is thick and heavy to move through. I walk slowly. I walk silently. My breath is heavy. It hurts to breathe. Thoughts revolve. Fog is very cold. Very cold.

I want to start again.

I wish I could return to the beginning.

Today, there’s only today. And another today and another – today and here - in the perpetual present that’s nowhere real, where time has halted. Today there’s simplicity to being – without a future to anticipate. I know I’m not alone in feeling it – the bare and elemental nature of existence – mine and ours – is laid before us – the fog blurs details and what remains apparent is bones, the shapes of the elements and how they interact.

From this other place, outside myself, I begin to experience you and I from outside of ourselves too.

The screen separating our bodies changes something. From this place outside, peering in at myself and at you, I find a different kind of clear sightedness. It was at first perhaps traumatic when the mirror turned upon ourselves and one another, as if for the first time – or the last time. As if we were floating out of our bodies, watching from above. As if death itself, now
present, had closed its loop around us - our time on Earth - and made our existence whole – our stories ready to complete.

Here in the perpetual present we begin to see the true shape of things – of who we are. As the waters settle – essences rising – what is there? Nature and all things natural matter, to move in our bodies, to speak with those who matter and let them know we feel love... to resolve what needs resolution because now is the time for that.

Now is the only time there is.

‘Even you know that’s bullshit!’ says Ophelia. ‘Now is a construct! You’re zoned out! Hallucinating!’

‘Indulge me, darling, I need this.’ I say, quieting her for a while.

And in the midst of this perpetual moment, a first dust settles on the new shapes our lives have taken, suggesting outlines, possible threads, connections of significance that form, yes, the bones of our beings. I’ve become bone obsessed.

You’ve begun speaking, you tell me, with the boy, Leon, from your teenage years.

Nothing too much to begin with, but it’s the reaching out for what matters, in this time when, all relationships being equal, we may as well. This, you say, is solid mattering. You and Leon matter. He plays you music from Berlin, playlist like a mixtape: An Analog Guy in a Digital World clxviii And the words on the WhatsApp to say that he noticed, saw your pain, about Tom and the whole thing. They make you cry again. And you feel him catch it well, and understand. So you call him. But not to say about the tears because they aren’t it, don’t even matter. Only the being in connection, the dialogue of words that makes you a conversation, beings placed between bodies, in the space where you become.

The dialogue opens a different part of reality, somewhere that wasn’t there before; room, digital space. Something is created where there was nothing; only potential. A world within a world, within two worlds. You find yourself feeling into ways of being, unspoken arrangements of breakfast chats and the small talk of thinkers who notice little things, and you wonder about saying and decide not to - it’s in the not saying that the truth is spoken, the shift takes place and you both watch it. And in the silent complicity there’s understanding. You and he. Because, let’s say it’s the end of time – impossible to imagine, or so we used to think but here we are – let’s say it’s the end of the world and time has bent around itself and back to where it started and now we see all that is or was or ever will be and who is there but you and he And you look at each other on your screens and for a moment you’re frozen and WhatsApp says reconnecting and then the images re-animate and he says ‘I have you again’ and you say ‘yes, you have me again’ and he smiles and says ‘I have you now’ and you hold the phone close as if he’s right there and you’re letting him come close, and ‘anyway...’ you carry on.

You think of all the time you spent looking the other way, trying to change your fate and then trying to accept your changed fate and never feeling anything more than outsider even as you integrated like a pro, and grew to love and gave blood of your being and yet couldn’t seem to feel belonging. And how it drove you, all that incapacity to be, to be with, to be with he.
Here at the end of time, who do you want to be with? Who calls?

You answer and then talk again and little things and why should it matter what, but you’re working in the garden without your phone anywhere close and still you think about him and the wanting him close and the wanting him to have been close, and to have had that knowing, of all the little things that don’t really matter but altogether do. And isn’t it uncanny that you should be so alike when it’s been thirty years of being parted and still the thing remains. Whatever pull. A solid sense of knowing. How can one ever know? Is it in the imagination? A play or a reality?

And is it true he dreamed of you? And found you? Found you? On the internet by chance, he claims, digital pathways crossing. You don’t believe that. You think of three times he stepped forward and twice when you walked away and once it seemed too impossible and he so long unknown and fate’s dies cast and only about the past and yet – here at the end of time, whose arms do you choose?

I don’t know what any of this means, but I’ve resolved to be less irritating, and also not to press for the cold simplicity of realism, in which everything is exposed in bluntest terms and the magical vibration of life birthing possibility cannot happen. Dream, my sweet! I’m resolved to let the words be incoherent, showing only what you’re willing to reveal for now, a flash of possibility then a cloaking, all of you fleetingly present, then hidden back away.

You toy with saying something, then decide there’s nothing to be said. It’s done and understood, and questions of practicality are all now irrelevant. There are only questions like what psychoanalysis makes you see and what it blinds you to, and whether the death of a father changes things and the question of your running away and his making you, but still - not forgetting you, and alongside that, the question of your propensity for loving those who would love you to the stars and back if only they weren’t also committed elsewhere... if only they wanted to a bit more, and the question of where this leaves you in this timeless sphere – together in play? Would you want the reality of proximal lives – or he?

I ask you about this, and you look at me and tell me you don’t know. How would he feel if you came back to him for real? How would he feel? Skin beneath your fingers not as urgent as it was. And would he be the solid thing he seems for you when safe in the knowledge it’s only a dream? A digital dalliance is an amazing thing. No need for reality. Not yet.

And then you give me a look like fire and then you look away – was that a glower? Fire rising to the surface, crossing your pale skin and back in, back in... to rage or smoulder beneath your surface while I wonder whether to say, and decide to leave it for another day.
A5 Scene Two: particulate

Ophelia’d be pissing herself about the wipes and how, at the end of the world, all anyone cares about is rubbing themselves and every available surface with the little throwaway squares of promise once reserved for babies’ bums and rich people’s cookers – now every surface must be gleaming and streak free, shiny, delicately scented. Forget everything! Wipe it clean and start again.

I’m doing it too. She’d be laughing. I’ve found some wipes under the kitchen sink and I’m using them to clean the whole bathroom – mirror, sink, glass shelving, tiles, shower door, loo seat and back… then the floor - the floor comes last. I get down on my hands and knees and wipe away the dust. Perhaps the virus is down here on my skirting board! Of all the places! Of all the places in the world, it might have chosen this corner here. Right down here.

Ophelia sings:

_**Fill your heart with love today**_
Don’t play the game of time
Things that happened in the past
Only happened in your mind
Only in your mind, ah forget your mind
And you’ll be free - yeah

Staring down at me:

...Just remember
Lovers never lose
'Cause they are free of thoughts unpure
And of thoughts unkind
Gentleness clears the soul
Love cleans the mind
And makes it free.' clxix

‘Ye dead eejit!’ I retort.

But I know she likes watching me.

I’m thinking about her watching me.

About Ophelia.

When it finally comes to it, who would you choose to spend the apocalypse with? Let’s just say, it’s the end of the world – it’s the end of the world and who would you choose? Who chooses you?

In the mornings I wake and there’s a moment before gravity pulls me into my body when I’m weightless, infinite. Then I breathe myself into my body, become one with the living and feel
rising as I open my eyes the memory, and the horror of its presence presses still. All is wrong in the world.

Mostly I’m angry that she won’t grow old with me and make it fun. I’m a hundred and three years old.

How could she leave me to this on my own?

‘We’re well and truly disillusioned now,’ says Aria. ‘This is a necessary part of growing up, or growing old, wouldn’t Freud say, or maybe that was Klein?’

‘Yes, Klein sounds more the thing.’ I say listening on my phone to Aria making small noises, breathing and sighing out, comforting sounds, and I wonder if he’s on a comfortable sofa, drinking something with ice.

‘No, I can’t be comfortable here anymore. I’m sick of it.’ He says. ‘I’m going to make a new place for myself, a quiet place to the south, with the sun and the food I like. And where those things matter. And where the artists can afford to live. It feels like they understand my culture there. Maybe I’ll feel more at home than in this strange, northern European, protestant place. I never can come to terms this individualistic culture and all the pretending to like each other. It’s so foreign to me... so-oh.... Time to go....’

‘I wish I could come.’

‘You do?’ he seems surprised.

‘Of course! Why would I want to stay here with all that’s happening?’

‘Yes, the whole thing makes me feel sick, obviously. After all the years of insecurity, trying to become a British Citizen... I can’t allow them to take away my freedoms now, so I have to establish my residency in mainland Europe, otherwise I might as well be American, for all the good my passport will do me round here.’

‘But I’ll miss you. Where will I come when I need to be in London?’

‘London is over my darling.’

‘Then I’ll have to come and meet you in the sun.’ I can hear him moving, looking around the room, and I imaging where his birds might be, and how he would follow them with his eye while the sun’s shadow moves across the floor, marking time.

Later he sends me Francis Bacon’s last interview. I watch it through.
What’s death and what’s our relationship with death, and the dying and the dead? And what does this teach us of life and the journeys we make through it? What’s the purpose? Where are we striving to reach? What am I striving for when I write this and is it worth anything? What’s the meaning of all this? Seeking a simple recognition, I decide, and in that, a feeling like home.

I carry my Denise Riley book round with me. Sometimes I look inside. She writes:

‘I realise it isn’t space that I am unable to travel in but time, or rather, it is also time that has altered.’

‘…if timelessness is the time of your dead, then you will go with them into their timelessness. Here you can live mundanely, indeed brightly. You’re fused to the dead, as if to animate them. They draw you across to their side, while you incorporate them on your side.’

I take pictures on my phone, images of the cemetery, visible through its railings as I walk alongside it. There’s a parallel path on the other side of the rails, their semi permeable boundary allowing me to see and hear and smell that space. I taste its flavour in the damp air that cross over to my side. I can all but touch its verdant, lush vegetation., Here on the other side, the place of the living, there’s a smell of tarmac rising from the empty road.
Riley explains it to me:

“You’ve slipped into a state of a-chronicity. From its serene perspective you realize, to your astonishment, that to dwell inside a time that had the property of ‘flowing’ was merely one of a range of possible temporal perceptions. For your time can pause, and you with it – though you’re left sharply alive within its stopping’

Time has both slowed and speeded – as if all the iterations of a programme set in motion have been run through the computer to the last moment and there is the final conclusion – stark yet honest – a mirror held to the soul, and a line drawn around our material reality that defines, starkly as a last will and testament, exactly how much each one means to the other, what is to be given to whom and how their lives, existences are to be carried on through this new diffraction.

In a place out of time, out of place, liminal, like four in the morning, like mourning. I’ve arrived where the space-time continuum is open to ideas, a mystical encounter maybe, perhaps it’s a way of dissociating from the truth of the thing, or maybe a way to make a new reality – but I’m drawn to the open road – the old information superhighway...

Because the thing is I’m not altogether convinced that it isn’t just me in my house, while the rest of the world carries on. I need to reality test, data bytes down on a leather strap... I’m birthing my own fucking cyborg self... and through it I may live.... and affirm a commitment to relationships old and new... past and becoming... connections – the friends who are family, family who are blood, blood... a life force I carry into the unknown.

How do particles sense one another? Through direct contact, an ether, action-at-a-distance forces, fields, the exchange of virtual particles? What does the exchange of energy entail? How is a change in motion effected? What is pressure? What is temperature? How does the eye see? How do lenses work? What are the different kinds of forces that particles experience? How many kinds are there?

I toggle to our dedicated channel. Time to be with you. I press my hand against the glass screen, but you don’t see it from where you sit. My camera doesn’t capture the reaching-longing. As time together unfolds, we hear and find resonance in our experience, each speaking, and then beholding ourselves and one another, as if we’d newly discovered ourselves, been born or reborn or once again come into a momentary awareness of our going on being. We meet and then we meet again, meeting marking time’s stiff progress, the slowing of expectation, the deepening of a furrow.

In an open tab behind you, words hover:
As we dismantle the rigid forms of individuality in these interconnected times, we can imagine the smaller part that human worlds must play on this earth whose regeneration we depend upon—and which, in turn, depends upon our smaller and more mindful role.

We bring ourselves together, in order to bring ourselves together. Not to pull or hold. Simply offering. We bring ourselves, gifting our presence—‘an exchange of virtual particles’. We feel ourselves—together. And then, importantly, we let each other go. Moving apart, we do not speak in the oceans between. The sessions aren’t recorded, although fragments, traces remain. I feel myself ephemeral, a half-presence in our one-sided arrangement, yet wholly connected through our relational formation, which is its own kind of completion.

Our time in digital space together feel vital. Our pixels are scattered across continents and time zones. Covid-19 looms before and around us in variable dimensions. I become aware that responding to the virus means taking a political position, thus opening myself up to you from a more than neutral stance. How we understand reality, truth, using our digitally informed lived experiences, and how we relate to others who differ, becomes our critical work. Our individual agency and responsiveness is explicitly mediated by a science of populations, by ideologically driven data streams, by a sensation of the unbearableness of différance.

I contemplate the act of leaning in or out, the distance from the camera-becoming-client. Gradually I re-arrange the room, so that it becomes a backdrop symbolising itself. I purchase online a blue velvet sofa which would support you and envelope you. I place it where you can see. All that’s needed now is a short leap of imagination, then you can be here with me.

I remember your email correspondence with Sean Cubitt, from back when we were beginning, and you were back at your beginning, trying to find your life. We Google him together. Through the reciprocal lens we peer voyeuristically at one another and turn our attention to the algorithm’s production: Limen, portal, network subjectivities it says.

‘See? I told you!’ you say to me.

‘Have you seen,’ you say, ‘that Tracey Emin has bladder cancer?’

‘Is that right?’ I reply. And there’s a sadness in the air, maybe at time passing. Bodies failing. How did the Young British Artists grow old enough for this?

‘She’s put her place in Shoreditch up for sale. It’s amazing. Perhaps my ideal home.’

‘How do you know this?’ I ask, and you post me a link in the chat box. Together we examine what is apparently Tracey Emin’s home on Rightmove. White and light and warm brick and sky and metal and space and... we flick through the photos, me for the first time, you making sure I don’t miss anything.

‘Oh wow.’ I say, several times over. ‘Well, that’s the most ultimate home ever.’

‘Yes, completely. I remember seeing her often in Shoreditch.’
So do I. I wonder about telling you. Maybe it’d be weird. Maybe if I’d said earlier that I know, every part of the city you describe to me.

And the way it tingles in your bones.

‘I remember you telling me about seeing her before.’ I say instead. ‘Doing something in the street.’

‘I thought people like her were such rebels, like something new was going to come of it all. But she must’ve understood, about capitalism. I mean, that it doesn’t end. And she bought in! I remember people buying those warehouse spaces, saying it was going to be huge. I could have bought the council flat I rented but I didn’t. I was too uncertain to make a decision like that. And I’ve been trapped at the publishing job, forever maybe. Imagine that! I could’ve had a stable life in London!’

And I smile and I want you to take me on a flight of fancy. ‘How would you be now, if you had bought that flat?’

You look inside yourself a while, seem to smile and then you sigh...

‘Long dead probably. It went against my beliefs. And I think it would have killed me to get myself trapped into a commitment back then. But if I could have stuck it out, might life have been easier later… Tom and everything, it might have gone so differently if I hadn’t needed him…’

‘What d’you mean?’

‘I mean I’d’ve had more power. If I’d secured myself financially instead of trying to collaborate in a shared life. I mean, what was I thinking? I was very much misinformed. About men and women and the social contract of relationships. I thought the narratives of marriage or partnership, or the alternative visions of community, described instinctual patterns. As if they were natural tendencies, urges to protect and thrive to love others. Honestly, I didn’t know.’

‘ Didn’t know what?’

‘That it’s all made up! Maybe men don’t have an inbuilt urge to provide any more than women want to be stuck at home with no public life or identity and loveless manual labour stretching ahead of them, children hanging off them, confining movement. Families don’t fit with the cult of individualism. Such sadness, pleasure-pain, the urge to give love from such a loveless place. It might be a good idea on the outside, but is it really liveable? How do people do it?’

I’m not sure if this is rhetorical since you seem to be waiting for my response. I breathe in as I shrug and widen my eyes, hoping that will suffice. I can hear the children clattering in the kitchen, making a mess. Later I’ll clear it up, feeling grateful for it. A raw, intense gratitude, play-biting a baby’s flesh. I’m grateful they’re alive.

‘And now she’s getting out. It feels so sad. Didn’t Jeanette Winterson do the same?’
‘Yes’, I say, ‘I remember she had to close her Verde shop. That was a while ago now though... I wonder what she’s doing...’

‘The artists have had it with the East End now. The whole scene’ disappearing... It’s such a hard city. Hard and cold. So brutal...’ we seem to be slipping into reverie but then you look sharply into the screen, demanding my eye.

‘She didn’t let them take her clitoris.’

‘Oh, you mean Tracey?’

‘She said life would be meaningless without it.’

More sighs... soft. We lift our chests and breathe in... we slump the air out in heavy waves.

‘Did you know she married a stone?’

‘Yeah.’ I pause, the moment wistful. ‘At least she knew what she was letting herself in for.’

December 2020

Winter comes; life is a dark Underworld. Nothing new can happen; only what’s been before. I plan to see The Loneliness of the Soul, where Tracey Emin’s womanly works are juxtaposed with Edvard Munch’s, but there’s no going and my plan is unmade again. I retreat to watch the world from bed, screen to hand. All London is locked down, streets emptied of human life, sharp winds rushing through, a thrill of spirits released to play. I stay home, the provincial city swirling softly on its gentler axis. I buy postcards of the exhibition from the Royal Academy online shop. Some weeks later they arrive, Emin’s images of women’s bodies sexual, sensual, raw bloody messes. Munch’s inspirations seem to me more enigmatic, curvaceous and pastel coloured. Women observed from the outside, I’m thinking, contrasting Emin’s expansive woundedness, vulnerability laid bare, the enormity of the exposure taking breath, breath-taking. I like them, yet I wonder if I want them on my wall. I stick some up with Blutac like a student, only leave Emin’s more brutalised forms in a drawer. I want to see how it feels, to be present with these images, but only those I can manage. Some present a horror I don’t want to look upon. I have my limitations. Thus, I keep the memories of an exhibition I never saw – only anticipation and afterglow.

The next summer the exhibition is held for real, but still I don’t see it. I look at the gallery’s advertisement and realise the scale of Emin’s work. I like it better big than postcard sized. As if I could nuzzle my head close. As if I could feel the warmth, smell bittersweet skin. As if I could lie down next to these open bodies and be part of them again.

Retreated into woundedness, covers pulled around me, my own rounding flesh blankets me, holds the memory.

‘You know what you have to do’ Ophelia is saying, and I know. What was anticipated is to be remembered rightly. Not the wrong that came to pass but the story as it should have been,
which is to guide and comfort and inspire the real children, and work the story’s magic, which is love, upon the world.

It’s important that the children one day learn that mummy did not become sick and then die in the manner of a tragedy like cancer, but succumbed rather to cruel reality, was no longer able to endure the world. Like the cutting of a clitoris, cuts which made life lose all meaning. Pleasure gone, body objectified, stories told by others to justify their absolution from desire for or duty of care. Yes, her sickness was not coming from the inside, but from the outside … more a thing of the society, its hateful troubles funnelled into her body where they festered and fermented, stirred and stoked by the witting and then the unwitting.

She might say, ‘follow the children’ or rather ‘leave a trail of white pebbles to this spot, so that when the time comes, the children shall find their way back to me, and have some way of knowing who they are and through whose body they came into being and whose soul they carry with them and whose love carries them onward, always and forever. And who they must never forget and who they must not feel anger toward and who struggled for them with every bit of brash she could muster… and who understood that when it’s time for the end, one must end. And that it was a brave and beautiful choice, full of honour and dignity, to know when it’s time to step off this spinning plate of a world, or fold back in. To earth and ground, somewhere beneath or perhaps alongside the world of the living and the half-living. This broken world. Perhaps finding peace among the stars.’

I wish I could return to the beginning.

January 2021

Another lockdown marks out the darkest days for the deepest grieving for all that ever was, or will be, lost. 2020 unfolded and erupted and laid bare the wrongnesses of the world yet offered only more wrongness.

I’m here in the room, watching an image of myself on a screen, representation of room-ness, and you. There we are - ghosts in a machine… fairy dust coalescing into shapes we recognise. Making room. It’s a limited and limiting space yes… yet with our magical portals we can interact and play, quiver and behold one another, attempt to allow that alchemical process by which we experience sensation of presence.

It’s a small thing yet takes practice; my practice: to consider what arises in the moment and be there, aware, with whatever may be. To repeat weekly, for an indefinite period. In my mind it’s an act of will, a willing, by which I mean a magic spell. If we two can feel our connection, experience our relationality, so too, my reasoning goes, can the whole world.

Together we’re sickened by the intolerant, the dishonest, the unjust, to a point of wanting to disconnect altogether, to live in our own bubble. Pulling the plug like monkeys that see no evil, hear no evil… how can we look after ourselves, protect our gentle souls from all this distress and yet… stay open? How can we relate, all the while experiencing the same shifts… undergoing the same situation? Together we undergo the situation.
Disinhibition becomes a feature of our online life, playing out as lessened and lessening anxiety around our relational presence. The awkward tension of bodily proximity, the animal sensing, scent of human, reality of embodiment... gone. I fret about the loss – the anxiety previously seemed like a fundamental tension, holding the threads of our connection, making fabric of our being, central to relationality and the therapeutic process. But that was how the old spinning wheel turned. In this new machine we find other ways to gauge the ways words want to move, meaning – ready to present itself.

Is this the stuff of dreams?
A5 Scene Three: Arrival point

Time settles down, which is to say, a slow emergency – or emergencies now pervade the everyday like ink dissolving in water. Initial cloudbursts of an altering reality homogenise into a singular alarming experience about which there is increasingly little to say, except occasionally to remind ourselves that it’s still happening. Covid-19 becomes a feeling space in which we’re immersed. Your initially heightened attunement to my wellbeing seems forgotten, and you settle back into your own concerns. Covid-19, bodily separation and digital connection, have become the lenses through which we experience our relationship. Perhaps life itself. Through the shift, other lenses have been exposed: the structures of our social world around capitalism’s edicts – the sensations of lacking something, the transactionalisation of relationships, inherent most explicitly in the therapeutic exchange, a pressing urge to be fulfilled before the almost here but never quite arriving nirvana of a future moment, in which we may revel in our ease. Covid-19 is an arrival point. We are here, and without the option to make plans, we can only explore more existentially the realities of what is.

Our shared experience resonates and harmonises. I’ve settled into slowness and silence. Without anxiety driving my action I’m grieving, moving inward which is also back in time, back through generations, seeing my presence here on Earth in a bigger context – past mingled with present. The lack of a sense of the future affects me in unforeseen ways. Slipping with the silence, feeling-less-ness. A dual action of impulses, one to lean in, becoming more engaged with the micro-details of my domestic sphere... and the other to reach out, imagining what I need to keep working and being in the world, keep being in the world. It’s harder than I expected to move against the energy of an ebbing tide, to resist the pull to ever increasing isolation and withdrawal. My attempts at maintaining relationships in digital space become fragile, like sandcastles awaiting the turn of the moon, these temporary constructions, transitional objects, become more like ideas of relationships, not actual. Keeping the idea alive, I serve myself up in doses, yet believe myself less and less. Only with you, where I am half-a-whole in any case, it seems to work. Only with you it feels more real and true this way. This was always our truth: that I am with you and not with you. We were always this 1.5, halfway, doubled or halved creature.

Sometimes it’s you on my screen and sometimes it’s words that I search through for meaning. Those who study literary forms seem obsessed with cognition, which has until now felt to me like it misses the point: the meaning. But now I find it grounding, as if the words make experience more real when someone on the internet writes:

*Narrative is largely in the eye of the beholder, because texts that we would recognize as quintessential narratives are merely those that contain certain features more likely to push our narrative buttons. They are the ones most effortlessly interpreted using our theory of mind and its thirst for agent-driven action. The details of how a text does this will be contingent upon cultural, linguistic, and biographical particulars. My claim is that rather than looking for some separate narrative faculty that creates and consumes narrative, or for some fingerprint of narrativity that designates a genuine narrative, we should assume that narratives do not exist independently of those with theory of mind and mental time travel to perceive them. Global coherence is something we invest in a text with greater or lesser ease depending on how easily our faculties can do so. It is*
strictly speaking imaginary: there are no actual lines or connections between discrete events as they are presented. But the global coherence is not completely arbitrary, because the representation of events— in anything we would call a narrative— will hew to salient features likely to trigger associations in readers or viewers so that they do infer the connections. For a narrative, the connective tissue that helps us infer its existence is our perception of agency. Agents are the binding agent, for only they can be responsible for the temporal leaps or knight’s moves that connect widely separated events. A reader who is apt to see connections among certain events and attribute the connections to agents is doing narrative. Of course there really are events and agents in the world. But when told about in narrative, readers have to supply more than their share of inference to invest a string of words or images with the coherence and animacy redolent of story…. Hence, narrative is largely in the eye of the beholder, rather than inherent to the text, but still not arbitrary or totally idiosyncratic.

We move from a reality we struggled to represent, even in our imagination, to one that we now grasp easily, it being manifest and in some way controllable. Our screened selves become part of a movement of gathering up the past, condensing it to its bare bones and re-arranging it into stories and ritualistic actions that will sustain us on the onward journey, even if we don’t yet know what waters will wash around us next. Holding to the practice of meeting you, encounter in the void, reminds me there’s still life out there and living to be done. I can’t tell you. Being here, listening, part of this shared activity of your inquiry, your subjectively experienced storyworld prepares me for a future too, or maybe I mean – prepares the future – I too begin choosing elements, relational actions, to bring forward for tomorrow. I too decide what to leave behind.

I remember Dolphijn on YouTube, speaking of the gap, a place of wounds returned to by many paths, all the paths that lead us over the edge in some way, return us to the gap. Different things happen to take us there, yet the place called lostness, grief and suffering is always the same. It comes to us, or we’re drawn to its abyss, a hot and breathing entity enfolding us, becoming us, its rivers flowing from our eyes.

When’s the last time, I think to myself, that I spoke to anyone but Sylvester and the Wild Thing? Only the children. When have I talked to the children about anything but Sylvester and the Wild Thing? You point the way to Irigaray and her words articulate my feeling:

‘How do I return to myself and descend into my heart without you? Is it possible to arrive there alone? Does solitude not extend itself from my feet to my head and beyond?’

Late in the night, I cut off my hair. I need to let something go. Online, the transformation isn’t so visible, thus in digital it seems gentler than in the real, or as we now say, the embodied world. I feel it as an enactment of loss, making manifest my altered status, chiming in with a long tradition. My head with cut hair is a representation, like the sofa that you will never sit on, of some more real me, some self that may or may not exist, and who is, at the same time, leaning into the changes, accentuating them, moving forwards into another age.

And I realise, hope has been in question. My hope’s not altogether restored but something more subtle. Is that faith?
The screen between us is actually two screens - yours and mine. We fool ourselves into believing there’s a one-ness, a shared experience. Our sensory data supports this illusion, overpowering our mind’s cognitive capacity to reason. Or perhaps we oscillate between the knowledge of our separation and the feeling of our presence. For me, you’re present in this room. For you, I journey with you in your phone, on your iPad, your laptop too. Sometimes I’m sitting in the car with you outside a home, or in a supermarket carpark. Other times you carry me round your house, looking for a place where we can be alone together. Sometimes all I see of your world is a blank wall, and your face looking down on me, as if we were lovers. I don’t say that. It isn’t an angle I’m accustomed to in other circumstances. Sometimes you’re on your bed and I am between you and a window I can’t see.

Can we simplify this? A hundred layers of knowingness and what’s beneath? Beneath the beneath, or perhaps between the bodies with their certainties, a layer that connects yet separates, like fascia, like glue, like magnetic push or pull, or gravity, which is really something else... a spinning inevitability toward centredness and there... lie:

Me and you.

I wonder if we'll ever have the chance again to look one another in the eye and recalibrate, being to being... because you’re my spirit level, my means of orientation, my right way up. It’s hard to hold in mind the knowledge that this experience of us is not necessarily mutual. Only a choice. Only ever a choice... to follow the desire, to meet the obligation, to let the hundred layers build, sediment solidity...

I want to trust you.

I don’t know if I can.

The screen seems to make explicit the illusory nature of our togetherness. Our mutuality. I mean, you think you know someone...

‘Real and ordinary’, Leon said to you in the night – ‘I never thought he wanted that before. Maybe he did. Maybe I did, but when I didn’t find it easily, I went for the alternative. Told myself I didn’t want that normal life, the one I didn’t know how to have.’

Sometimes you look at each other’s faces glowing on your screens for the longest time. But eventually you need to end it and sleep as you are. Alone.

I hang out with Aria on what we now refer to as a voice call. He allows his mind to wander, letting in all the pleasure he can. ‘The art of being alive’ he says ‘is known to those who play Backgammon seated at tables under trees, where dappled evening light breaks through the canopies of leaves; who drink tea made of orange blossom or lick fig jam from a spoon. Here try it.’ He offers me the spoon. ‘And now these frozen dates, and a tiny piece of ginger stem chocolate. Each of these, small morsels taken together in quick succession, create a symphonic taste experience, layers built upon one another...’
'Mmmmm.' I say... tongue turning over the flavours, 'all the things I don’t remember to love... all the little details, yes... these small joys in combination...'

'Divine, he says. 'This is the closest we’re going to get to experiencing, not the otherworldly, but the divinity of this life on this Earth.'

The thing about Zuko was his energy,’ you say. ‘I liked his enthusiasm! The urgency of his interactions caught me up and made me laugh. Did I tell you about the orgasm he faked?'

‘I don’t think you did,’ I say, ‘I feel I’d remember that...’

‘It was funny,’ you smile. A full crazy-boggled eyed moment! I couldn’t stop laughing for ages.’

‘Em, are you sure? I mean, you know how men’s bodies work, don’t you? Not so easy for them to...’

‘No, it wasn’t real... Definitely.. he was joking!’

I look at you.

‘It was really funny!’ you insist.

I look at you.

‘Oh fuck no. I don’t think so. No, I’m pretty sure.... it was a joke.’

‘When was this?’ I ask.

‘The last time we slept together...’

‘You laughed in his face while he...?’

You look at me.

‘And that was the last time you saw him...’

We sit.

‘What’s that book you had on your shelf, when I used to come over and be there, in the flesh?

‘There are loads.

‘The Body Never Lies\textsuperscript{19} that’s it.

‘Oh yes. The Body Never Lies,’ I say.
Ophelia had she’d seen enough, time to end her story. Enough of all that, her work on the planet done with – and the thing is I’m glad for her. No wrinkles. Pain gone. I love her so much – I know she’s safe now and free.

I don’t need to worry anymore.

The push and pull, the ‘come on!’

The struggle and the fight,

All done with now.

Only no one ever do this to me again!

Not ever.

I wish I could rewrite Ophelia, make her more spectral and ghostly all along, as if I’d seen what was coming, as if The Wild Thing meant something more, more allegorical. He’s real though, a cat with swagger who knows who he wants. Who belongs with me. Who belongs.

‘Deep soul healer...’ he purrs ‘listen to your heart until you hear, until it’s clear what needs to be done.’

Ophelia’s only a little pussy cat. Part of this life, catching the sun, sensing every moment. She really was a special mother. She really was a special friend. Imagine if this whole thing wasn’t real... urgency flashes through me. I need to check something... quickly Google and Wikipedia confirms:

Object permanence is the understanding that objects continue to exist even when they cannot be seen, heard, or otherwise sensed... In Piaget’s theory of cognitive development, infants develop this understanding by the end of the "sensorimotor stage", which lasts from birth to about two years of age.... In more recent years, the original Piagetian object permanence account has been challenged by a series of infant studies suggesting that much younger infants do have a clear sense that objects exist even when out of sight.

I contemplate Ophelia’s permanence, ongoing existence somewhere out there, outer space or deep space, beyond the confines of our sensory world. Is she an abstract entity if she no longer has a body? My deep grief. My grief-out. All the way out.

Does this mean that for infants, people are constantly dying and being reborn before their eyes?

Her voice echoes:

I lost the plot!
Written out of the life I made.
The lives I made -
Oh, the children!

It’s all so Victorian.
I’m a hysteric! For real!
Literally literary fodder.
Don’t forget Melissa.
We’re living in a fascist regime.
Write it all down.
Right it.

In a psychic battle ground
He won.

She surrendered.

It was for love.

The children need to live one life, Melissa.
Not be caught between contradictions.

She fades.

I think about Aria... Aria.... fights back... fights for his life. For life. With love... he fights; with compassion.

I move between, trying to hold on. Trying to stay connected, not to let threads of meaning, life’s fabric break, as they twist around each other...

Aria phones.

‘I was thinking about you and you phoned!’

‘This is what psychoanalysts always do, Melissa. Make everything about the relationship. It’s like talking to a machine, you put your coin in and out spurts the response, which is always that everything that’s happening in your life is meaningful because the analyst thought this or took a break.. as if one is entirely lost in a transferential fantasy, but it’s the analyst’s cold refusal to recognise a reality outside the therapy... can’t you see?’

‘Sorry, I know you didn’t phone because I was thinking about you. What did you want to talk about?’

‘No, that was it. I said it, there. I didn’t mean you, I just wanted to run it by you...’ We unravel the workings of The Institute, you know the real deal, until his battery starts to die. I transgress. We agree. I realise we’ve been round this loop before... ah, the repetition. How we repeat ourselves...

Time’s moving backwards now...
I’m an instance of human being, this narrative an exemplar of the narratives of human beings who are all unique of course, but in the manner of snowflakes, our unique and beautiful qualities pale into insignificance when viewed from a distance or with a perspective rather broader than our own.

Pulling away from relational entanglements... the literal dis-embodying of life...

Trees remind me of Ophelia.

So that's tricky.

And sticky.

A loved and needed thing:

Her presence.

Absent.

When is it projection and when is it psychic connection? Is something heartfelt true? A transcendental knowing, soul deep, universal... specific. When must we say it was all a lie? Unreal? If I had to guess, pretend I knew, I’d say that projection is when one holds and the other denies or refuses presence with the hearts’ truths. Sometimes we’re not ready to know these parts of ourselves. Or each other.

Your voice penetrates my thoughts. ‘I feel like you aren’t even listening to me! You seem distracted, like maybe you’re on your phone or - I can’t see.’

‘It’s my shopping list.’ I look. You laugh. Can we ever be sure of each other?

‘Actually, I’m trying to listen’ I say to you ‘to some of the assumptions about the way the world works that may sit below, I mean lie beneath, the experiences you’re describing just now. I mean, at the risk of being offensive it’s all sounding very familiar, like these are roads we’ve been down before, part of the landscape you return to. I want to try and hear it in a new way... forgive me if I’m looking distant...’

You breathe in and then let out a huge sigh and seem to be calculating whether to tolerate this from me.

‘D’you think I’m a bit crazy?’ I ask you.

‘Oh yeah,’ you reply ‘but you’re right, I’ve been round this, I know it all, and I’ve tried everything else so tell me what you’ve got. I’m open to anything...’

‘Being with you now,’ I say, ‘an image comes to my mind: small waves lapping at a harbour wall, and row boats...’
‘It could be Galway,’ you say, then ‘No. I once went in a rowboat from Howth Harbour to Ireland’s Eye. I’d always wanted to go, I mean, an island with a name like that needed to be experienced. I was with, well, I was with Leon. I didn’t think I loved him. Only playing, but you know I think it must have happened without me knowing. Seaweed black and lichen gold against the rock, the grass, as always in these places, close against the soft ground. Souls get intertwined. I remember there was a little beach, small but it felt enormous as we stood in the middle of it and so special to be there looking out across the water.’

I feel like I remember it. Is déjà vu always our own or might we remember others’ experiences, in our minds or memories, in our dreams?

‘What were you looking for, out across the sea?’ I ask. I imagine you’ll tell me that you yearned to go, out into the unknown but:

‘I was looking back at the city, trying to see where was home. Trying to become it, one with it. I was always longing for that place. The place I was already in but felt separated from. To be more present, even more there. Does that sound strange? Don’t answer, I know how I sound.

‘Who is Leon?’

I imagined how you left him there, needing to be free.

‘He showed me the island. I thought I could be with him forever, but then I realised he showed lots of girls the island. Kind of his thing, you know? Still, my soul got in a tangle with his. You know... thank you. I think that’s a thing, a part of me I mean that was lost. It’s my place too, whether he wants me there or not. And he and I... I mean imagine we’d stayed together... we talk now and we don’t say, but I think we both imagine...’

There’s a fox on the table in the garden behind you. I can see it over your shoulder and wonder whether to point it out to you. The garden’s brown brick walls are wet, and the winter shrubs show their shadow bones and sway softly in the breeze. The fox stares in toward the room where you’re seated, and I feel like it’s looking at me. A wild thing has a way about it. I blink. When I look again, it’s gone.

‘I asked him though,’ you say. ‘And he said it was because he didn’t know what came next. That was the reason he repeated that island adventure with one girl after another.’

‘Oh!’ I say.

‘I know!’ you smile. ‘I mean it makes sense. How do we become convinced that such young men are the ones to be sure of anything? Why do we expect them to lead the way into relationships? He only knew how to do that first part, the beginning... then he moved along... replaying the same scene, seeking small progression with each iteration or waiting to see if it would happen differently one day.’

‘How did it come about, this conversation?’ I ask.
'I told you before! He messaged, then we phoned and... you know. It’s this pandemic... now that everything’s quiet and still and our focus ever inward, perhaps that why, finding who’s there in our hearts when all the noise of daily life is stripped away.’

‘Do you think you’re in his heart?’

‘He seems to be full of guilt. I mean, I think about it and how I wish, not that I’d lived that life we could have had, but to have been the person who could have lived that life. Imagine being content with the simplicity of being with the first person you love, in the first place you love. Of not having wandered and striven for something other. Not having been lost. I wonder how it would’ve been... and I know it would’ve been terrible and I’d have been so unhappy, not to have tried to see more, to have travelled further. Or maybe I’d be the same amount of unhappy. You’re going to tell me you can’t quantify it aren’t you! Would I have known myself better or worse than I do now? I mean, would I have been a truer version of myself or is this London-worn, over-exposed person that I’ve become more real? Would I have felt I belonged if I’d stayed on?’

‘This doesn’t sound like it’s about him, as such.’

You seem to smile ‘not as such, or maybe as such. I loved him and I wished to love him and I love him now. But maybe it’s because I can’t go there that I’m so free to reach. I know he has a longing too, but it isn’t real. No, I mean it’s maybe real, the longing, but we could never fulfil it in each other. Only see it, acknowledge its presence in each of us.’

I feel it’s my turn to speak but I’ve no words for you. Only listening. I feel myself in your presence and wonder if you recognise my longing, also ignited by yours? ‘I don’t want to draw attention to it but there it is, in each of us,’ you say. ‘There it is.’

‘Well, I suppose it’s time.’ You say.

‘Well yes,’ I say.

‘I’m glad you’ve had this experience of sharing, and insight, with Leon.’

‘It’s incredible, isn’t it, what you can learn about people if you ask them questions, then listen to their answers.’

‘Incredible,’ I say.
A5 Scene Four: fog, with feeling

May 2020

A man murders another man. Because he can. A man’s life is squeezed out of him before a camera.

He can’t breathe. Body without breath is inert matter.

Minds connect and respond in horror at the void thus created. After all, we’re made of breath.

We are, after all, the action of breathing.

In...

Out...

We find ourselves always and only connected being(s) by virtue of this flow.

‘You remember that Tony I met partying in the nineties?’

I don’t. ‘What about him?’ I ask.

‘He liked a bit of The Orb. We all did.’

This I remember. I don’t say.

‘Listen to this,’ you do say, and you flick about with the speaker settings, until I can hear ‘A Huge Ever Growing Pulsating Brain That Rules From The Centre Of The Ultraworld’

I listen, until I have to ask, ‘and why are we listening?’

‘I Googled that whole crowd, and they all went and got good jobs! I mean they’re all academics! Being paid to play with ideas. Anyway, Tony, he’s written something about the collective nonconscious and I thought you might have something to say about that...’

‘Like, do I think the collective nonconscious is a huge ever growing pulsating brain...?’

And you smile,

‘well, yeah...’ and you smile some more...

‘What does Tony say?’ I ask.

‘He says no!’ you respond. ‘He says that was Durkheim’s metaphor for global consciousness, as if, by allowing all our minds to interact there could me a kind of meta consciousness, like a
globally networked ‘megamind’,\textsuperscript{cxciii} and we and our computers and that are all nodes in this celestial brain.

‘This all sounds very New World Order to me. Has the big brain, the megamind, got a plan?’

‘Exactly! Like consciousness has transcended, escaped embodiment!’

That sounds like death, I’m thinking, but I don’t want to get morbid on you.

I settle for ‘Can there be a mind without a body?’

‘Get this! Tony thinks there’s not so much consciousness outside the body but nonconsciousness – is that like unconsciousness?’

I do my bewildered face.

‘Hang on,’ you say, looking across the screen like I’m no longer there. ‘This is him!’ Then you read to me:

This article questions the cognitive rendering of the network image mainly because its metaphorical overreliance on the emergence of a loftier collective brainpower lacks critical attention to networked exchanges that often dip below consciousness. Indeed, in spite of popular network discourses that foreground cognitive surpluses and information overloads, this article focuses on information vacuums or data voids that can appear after a shock event has occurred. It is the dynamics of these shock events, like mass shootings, for example, which play a significant role in prompting into action contagions of panic, rumour, conspiracy and eventual fabrications of news on a social media network... I will therefore draw attention to a counter conceptual account of collective thought grasped via a contra-Durkheimian notion of the collective nonconscious. The aim is to use this concept to grasp social media contagion through an alternative nonconscious network image. Along these lines, networks do not exclusively operate on a global level of psychic awareness, but instead, following a Tardean notion of unconscious associations, relations are grasped as susceptible to shocks that trigger mesmerizing modes of somnambulism. Accordingly, ‘social subjects are involuntarily associated with each other via their hypnotic absorption of the contagions of others’. They tend to sleepwalk through everyday life because they are mesmerized and contaminated by the actions of others, and magnetically drawn to the fascinations of their social environment, including the various events they encounter through access to media technologies.\textsuperscript{cxciv}

My digital present – an external hard drive for my brain, or heart or maybe both. My being, not my being. The being. Being. Being thing.

June 2020

Here in the Provincial City a dead slave trader’s statue is toppled and thrown into the harbour. Mattering. Mattering that a man was murdered in Minneapolis. \textit{Black Lives Matter}. The ache, the wound, the crack timeless, spaceless, all at an end and now we flow. Here is there. The
digitally mediated minds may not think as one but feeling flows down wires, through the flight of atoms, affecting us like the weather - pressure systems, rushes to fill the voids and vacuums with our heartfelt presences.

I feel myself sucked in, existing almost in my entirety now within the machine and I’m glad for it, the moments of escape from my body. From that vantage point, all digital, I can observe my embodied life: an empty shell. Here in my machine, I’m rich in experience and connection. There, I sleep; I eat (chocolate, and all that jam); I walk around the cemetery talking with Ophelia. Here, pleasantly disembodied, I can watch the whole scene, and control the environment of my living presence with cool dispassion, turning the various emotional stimulants on and off, up and down with buttons. There, I choose between the gash of pain across my centre, that buckles me and makes me howl... or.... There’s always the fog of nothing... my plaintive cries become wounded meows and hot tears melt over flesh that feels called to the other side, curling like browning leaves, drying up and losing all its vibrancy.... Eventually there’s only the fog and the cemetery, and I wander there alone a long time.

In the digital realm there’s light and colour and yearning and laughter. A proximal space, a proxy life, a transitioning object... Many transitioning objects. Transitioning space and time. Things move very slow close up, while beyond the threshold a kaleidoscope, spinning wheel rotates and fortunes are won and lost, fates turning on a bitcoin. Words emerge on my screen, hopeful in their intent to manifest change:

‘This is a time when the power of words to introduce and justify and explain ideas matters, and that power is tangible in the changes at work. Forgetting is a problem; words matter, partly as a means to help us remember. When the cathedrals you build are invisible, made of perspectives and ideas, you forget you are inside them and that the ideas they consist of were, in fact, made, constructed by people who analysed and shifted and argued and shifted our assumptions. They are the fruit of labor. Forgetting means a failure to recognize the power of the process and the fluidity of meanings and values.’

Here still. The Strange Situation. Slowing, kindness, a recommitment to imperfect relations with those in our geographic vicinity and a different kind of being in connection – simulated intimacy - with those further out, just beyond reach... clarity, citrusy clean air, the shouting of the world’s leaders slides into irrelevance, and we sink into being, released from narratives that once held us. You and I remain steady, our weekly meetings orient us in relation to one another, points in the universe.

What’s really happening?

I’m walking up the platform and the train is coming towards me, purposefully at first and then slowing as it slinks alongside and then it keeps moving, and keeps moving, sliding the length of the platform slowly yet forever, as I try to keep time, to arrive at a door the moment it’s still and opens... and you, doing the same, try to appear not to be aware of me, or perhaps you really don’t care if I know this is going on. I wish we could look each other in the eye but instead we walk up the platform, separate yet connected by this attempt to attune to the impervious train... I’m reminded of Sylvester and the Wild Thing looking each to the left, or to the right, coming each to the front door to see what I’m doing on the street, running back into the
kitchen like shadows’ shadows... We move, related by our practice of discussion; some shared focus, yet we believe we aren’t moving in relation to one another. This is what I think is happening anyway. Our lack of relation is so carefully executed that we manage to pay no heed, in a perfect kind of harmony. Perhaps it’s only me who’s dancing, who dances round you. Perhaps you really haven’t noticed our ballroom manoeuvres... the apparent totality of your unawareness, suggesting both the intensity of your longing and your absolute indifference. I don’t know which to believe or whether to bother wondering since I’m never going to know. I see the words

Someone was patient with me. Someone saw I had something to contribute. Someone stuck with me [...] Someone opened my eyes to the root causes of the problems we face. Someone pushed me to call forward my vision for the future.

I wonder what I’m doing, every week of my commitment to you?

There’s an inquest online, which is to determine, officially that is, the cause of her death, or at least, how history will record its shameful behaviour. Ophelia. I’m called to be present as a witness to her ‘frame of mind’, since I was with her so soon before her life was, you know, concluded. I tell them everything I witnessed, everything she went through and thought and felt and realised. I explained about ‘...an act of man’s behaviour to another’

And the way Shadows creep... because they can.... The body, empty vessel, thus superfluous, returns itself to the Earth. The Shadow is conspicuously absent from the proceedings. The Shadow is not on trial.

‘This is not a court which seeks to assign blame,’ the Judge explains, ‘it only seeks to understand the circumstances of the death.’ The differentiation makes no sense to me, like causality called correlation, or life’s unfolding being put down to the dopamine levels in the brain. Anyhow, the Judge is interested in using the accounts of the many and various mental health and addiction services she had contacted, to establish a timeline of her descent from conforming healthy subject to non-conforming object whose actions indicated a disturbance in the balance of her mind. This is to be achieved by reconstructing her casefile, as it were, though she had not in fact been ‘a case’. There was only a series of unrelated contacts, pleas for help and support, to people who didn’t know her. The system was non-conscious, you might say.

The Judge praises the light-skinned healthcare workers for their efforts and berates the darker-skinned ones for their slovenliness. They all extend their condolences to the interested parties in this case. I’m not an interested party in this case. In the eyes of the law, soul-sista’s ain’t family. The system isn’t a system, but an à la carte menu, a worn and fragmented array of lights at the back of the community centre, flashing hope then fading to black. Patterning the darkness, the services speak their own languages of focused care, drugs offered, spaces of respite, people to talk to. The spaces are full of sorrow and injustice, damaged people victimised by society’s judgments, and then judged further for their weakness, for being made weak, for succumbing to addiction, for being borderline. The promise of recovery shines hope like the stars. Like the stars, always just beyond reach.

Ophelia shines.
I want to touch her.

I want to speak her name forever and I know I need to let go.

There is no justice in this world and a beautiful one is lost forever.

Soon there will be no more room to speak about her.

Soon the tears will only happen in the silence.

Silence like cold fog.
Like howling in the wind.
Silence like hot tears that come when I listen to you,
And the tears are not about you or about me, they’re simply present.
Presenting themselves into our world.

I cannot restore what was. Who we were. Who I was.
Instead, I must allow myself to be forever altered.

The decision is made of fire, a small, bright spark with not much heat to it, but some light reignites. It feels incredibly good, a way back to life.

Another life.
Another me.

I do Yoga with Adriene every morning in my bedroom. She’s waiting on YouTube, whenever I’m ready.

‘Adriene says she loves me.’ I tell Aria.

‘You need a video of a woman in Texas to tell you this?’

‘I… yes. I think I do.’ I reply. ‘I know it’s weird. But those words, conveyed digitally from an unknown person to me, another instance of personhood, seem to matter more than the who in particular. It’s pure, you know? There’s no history, no complexity. And I’ve no more capacity to hold words that aren’t loving. No more resilience to unjust projections. I can let what’s gentle and kind touch me. I trust Adriene, even if she’s a recording. Maybe because she a recording I can let go of the cruelties that no longer need to be endured as the price of relation.’

‘What’s becoming of us? I also feel I can take no more the price I’m expected to pay for others’ acceptance. Because it doesn’t work, anyway. We were fooling ourselves all those years we tried. And this is the thing,’ he says to me, ‘are we being childish? Or finally adult? Is this ending of attachment bonds… this disillusionment with the relationships at the core of our constructed identities what can now free us? The freedom’s painful and sad, and yet thrilling, yes?’
‘I feel free, Aria, in a way I never did before. I don’t any longer have to live in line with the expectations of others. The ones who love me are open to my being. I’ve let go.’

‘I think once we realise that the projections of others needn’t remain ours, they can be given back, or put in their rightful places, then we can let go of feeling obliged to hold them....’

‘We don’t need to persuade the people who feel otherwise, Aria. We’re simply becoming other ourselves. Aren’t we? We’re carrying on.’

‘It’s an honour to watch you unfold.’

‘I love watching you unfolding too.’

Nothing will now fix in place those remaining fragments of the past. Ties, connections, whole networks that were once assembled, then dissembled, will never now know our struggles or our achievements, or how it is to be us, or to be with us, present in each moment, each passing. I squeeze Aria’s hand.

But now we’re freed of our hopes of restoration, we can piece our parts of parts together as we please, making new arrangements that hark back, yet call forth possible futures, that remind us of the present moment where we live and breathe. Breathe life. Live life. Breathe.

‘We’re not the body but the breath that flows,’ says Adriene, as I rock my downward dog.

I move. I’m moved. And the moving is an antidote to stillness. Moving softly, gently stretching, squeezing, balancing, and breathing, brings a cyclic rhythm to the entropic zone that is my home, that is my house alone in the virtual cyclone, the real world lost it seems, somewhere on the road to Oz.

I switch on the machine and together we dance and sing ‘Goodbye Yellow Brick Road’. cc

Goodbye Ophelia.

Goodbye.
A5 Scene Five: NOTHING IS DECIDED, ALL DECISIONS ARE PERMITTED

I hear St. Etienne playing in the wind. The night is still, air clear, sky reaching. Stars glimmering even though it’s the city. Yes, even here, in the very heart of the city the stars twinkle and the sky velvets like a blanket, clear yes. Yes. In the gallery Helen Marten’s work waits, alone. I’m there, floating between the pieces... no, not floating but touching the metal frames, the bones, balancing along their length. I feel like I’m fingers pressing along a spine, your spine or my spine. It’s the same. I move along, touching. One part leads to another. The metal is cold, hard, yet fine, without sharp edges. Strong enough to hold the fleshy parts of the work, which are pooled together as memories: paintings collaged, with sculptural fragments floating alongside, held close by the gravitational pull of association: belonging. The connection isn’t metallic, but perhaps magnetic; or a psychic force, like a heart’s yearning. These sculptural asides, associations, belong alongside the parts connected through the metal frame of their own free will. Companion pieces. The extraneous sculptures choose where to find proximity, what feels like love; they find their personal meaning together with the bigger picture, as it were, through the juxtaposition of entities. I think about love, the kind that lingers, becoming significant not because of the depth of knowing or the frequency of contact, but by the longevity of the association. The becoming in the same sea. I think of how time, a surface through which we experience, becomes depth, how the connections made at one time, later come to feel like repositories of the soul. I find it excruciating, yet exquisite, finger pressed on some painful juicy spot inside, releasing sourness, mouth salivating, readying for a retching sensation that is welcome as release. Soon all this will be gone. I’m alone in the gallery, feeling thrill mix with sense of awe, beholding the work, so much larger than myself and imagining my way into presence with its soul. The plastic parts, bright colours gaudy, metal unadorned, aren’t where the beauty of this creature lies. I feel it with my cheek, run my skin along the surface of the paint and breathe, in and out. I breathe it in and breathe myself out onto it. I let it feel my face, skin leaving traces, my human traces, oh so wrong say the rules but we, Sparrows on the Stone and I, feel it’s right.

I become.

Sparrows... begins to move.

Lying horizontal in the gallery, leaving isn’t going to be easy. How to escape this building intact?

Then I remember, this is my dream, and I can make it how I wish.

‘Let’s just leave’ says Aria in my mind.

‘Let’s just leave’ I say to Sparrows... And in that moment is release, the building melts and we’re free. All we wish for is to be under the stars on a clear night. All we are, is free.

Her number in my phone.

I ring it.

Disconnected.
But we already knew that.

‘I’ve realised the extent of my conditioning to desire dominating men, and that I actually I might like lean, quiet, non-sexually assertive ones. Maybe I like them as well I mean. Particularly if they’re clear about who they are and comfortable with it.’

‘I see.’ I say, and ‘do you mean you’ve met someone?’

‘No.’ I mean yes. ‘But not someone new. I’ve just seen someone differently.’

And then you pause, and I don’t yet fill the space with words, but make faces and eventually a noise like ‘mmm’, and you look at me through the screen and I let it get tense and feel the excitement build and then

‘You mean Leon,’ I say, and you breathe out.

‘Would you like to say more?’

‘All the advice about men, I think it’s wrong.... Or maybe some of us like our romance low key, ambivalent. Awkward even. Isn’t it meant to be excruciating? I think it takes a long time to decide; and I like not really knowing and not feeling pressed to say. Maybe one never gets there. Maybe people aren’t clear or fully committed. I mean, some are, but in my experience, they only perform certainty. It’s the way we’re conditioned. Look at Tom and Zuko. They realised later that they didn’t mean at all the things they thought they meant. The expressed them so convincingly they even convinced themselves. Maybe uncertainty’s more honest. And anyway, there are histories that can’t be undone, love bonds in all directions. Why forsake any? Why ask for them to be forsaken?

You’re spending more time online with Leon, though it’s problematic for you when it comes to mutuality. The conundrum of how to be in relationship, has simplified out into a more recognisable equation, one that you feel ought to be resolved. The trick is where to place the equals sign. It should be there, in middle of things. But where is that exactly? Tom and Zuko and Leon each have their own value, I say. Maybe the important part is knowing your own?

‘Leon has a wall inside him,’ you say. ‘In fact, several. Why on Earth did I expect him to lead the way anywhere?’

‘Do you expect that now?’

‘No. I’d like him to follow, though. I feel like Orpheus and he’s Euridice. We had a dark time together once. I have come to find him and now I’m going to walk back to the light and when I get there I’ll find out if he’s followed me, but I mustn’t look back. It’s his choice, to remain in my past or to come and see what happens next. It’s time I moved on.’

‘I guess it would be nice to share it. The future I mean.’
'I’ll share it, but yes, I like the feeling of his presence. He doesn’t really fit anywhere for me at the moment, but I think there’s going to be plenty of room. It’s a choice, isn’t it, to imbue this thread of connection with significance in retrospect, retelling events in a new way, so that terminal failures become the challenge set in an opening chapter. Moments of chance, brief meetings scattered across the intervening years become evidence of having borne witness to one another’s lives, even if there was no intentionality, only an unexplained compulsion to return to one another’s presence, to the encounter, to see what happens next. Or perhaps it will all continue to be fleeting, coincidental... co-presences here on Earth, who once witnessed, never mingled. Or almost never. A conversation on the cusp, as they say in Dublin, still a potentiality...

I think it’s a non-relationship – like non-philosophy. It exists never as an understanding, or an ideal, but through the accumulation of actions... this relationship might show me the edges of my own being and help me understand what it is to be human.’

It’s time our sessions ended. You’ll carry on your intimate dance with Leon, but you understand his strangeness isn’t yours to unravel and that you can never lean on him, or not completely. Instead, you’ll cast your net wide and revel in all the small joys, whoever you may share them with. He is and isn’t yours. He’s the reason there’s no one else, and recognising this feels like enough for now.

‘It feels sad,’ I say ‘to leave you without a feeling of resolution to all this.’

‘No it’s fine!’ you reply, ‘I like it unresolved; it’s the tension that makes it lively, alive.... I like to think he gets it too. Better to leave things open than to have them end! I want to live in the middle of things! I’ve realised this is the way.

‘Wow, you’re goo-ood!’ I smile at you. I know our eyes can’t really meet but it feels like they do. Like things flicker...

Then you say:

‘D’you remember that song, Close to Me? We were children.... still children... and you look you stare into your camera and bring your hands up by your face and you begin to move and you begin to sing the words....

I never thought this day would end
I never thought tonight could ever be
This close to me.
Just try to see in the dark
Just try to make it work
To feel the fear before you’re here

And I understand something. Time to let go. Time to let you go your own way. And I stand up and you stand up and we face each other, showing for once our whole selves on the screens and together-apart we move, we dance, arms in the air we circle, we sing:
It’s a long time later still, contemplating your departure, when I accept that I can’t ever fully separate my fate from yours, or distinguish between what you spark in me, what’s surfaced through our encounter, and what draws me, challenges me, brings me into awareness of my own doubts about the process, and my own existential questions around the purpose of carrying on with this life, and with life in general.

I try to imagine you and Leon not telling each other you’re everything... staying always open...open to all that can’t be said. There’s always so much more than can be said.

Some while later you email me a link. You’ve written a book of your own!

‘It’s about us.’ you say. ‘I made a world for you, as if you were the real protagonist, and not always on the edge looking in. I’ve called myself Kitty! It feels good to choose myself a name.’

You end with ‘I really hope you read Irigaray sometime Melissa, it’s taken me years but I think now I understand’ and a quotation:

> To be two would allow us to remain in ourselves, would permit gathering, and the type of safeguarding which does not restrain, the kind of presence which remains free of bonds; neither mine nor yours but each living and breathing with the other. It would refrain from possessing you in order to allow you to be – to be in me, as well.
>
> If transcendence exists between us, if we are visible and invisible to each other, the gap is enough to sustain our attraction. Why should an object between us be necessary? To be irreducible to one another can assure the two and the between, the us and the between-us. And from where would the need for appropriation arise, if each allows the other to return to his or her to be?

So, you managed it, I think, to become the author, perhaps of your own life. Sylvester sniffs and starts to wash himself, gnawing at his hind leg. The Wild Thing jumps up onto my knee and snuggles in. Then he looks at me, deadly serious. ‘You do realise,’ he says, ‘that I’m only a little pussy cat?’

I tell him about Ophelia. Remember. Always remember.

You though, feel less and less real to me. I could almost have made you up, but... I’m on a beach and looking out at nothing in particular, which is to say, the whole thing – a pale blue shimmer mingling with amber sand and dunes. I feel someone breathing softly against my neck.
I see that artist, Abbas Akhavan, has a show over in East London. I go and look around. It’s simple, enormous, overwhelming, blatant. A green screen, and an old building like a Grecian ruin, made of mud, like a mud hut. We really are a mad lot.

Later, I call Aria.

‘Hello my dear. When am I going to see you?’

‘I’ve missed you. I’m sorry if I’ve forgotten you lately. When’ll you be back in London?’

‘I’m already here.’

‘What?’

‘Oh come on! I couldn’t stand it in the sun anymore, the endless monoculture. People there are very nice, they’ve made me very welcome. But they’re obsessional about their own parochialism; it chokes me. They wish to know nothing of any detail or complexity, not even about themselves or their own culture! Not even how to use the foods that grow around them. Their petty corruption means nothing’s ever done, their only interests are their endless family squabbles that go on for generations. And, well, no gay scene to speak of. Obviously.’

‘Oh Aria!’ I laugh, ‘what were you thinking!’

‘Exactly! What was I thinking,’ he laughs.

‘So you’re back.’

‘For now. There’s much that needs to be done here anyway.’

‘Good.’

‘There’s not much that’s good about the situation here, Melissa, but we must find it and celebrate it where we can.’

‘I’m catching a train right now then.’

‘Yes! come immediately and I’ll book The Tate.

‘I want to see The Infinity Mirror Rooms...’

‘The Yayoi Kusama? You know what it’s going to be like without seeing it though.'
‘I know, I know. It’s pop contemporary or whatever we call it. But you know I’m shallow. And I still want to feel it, you know. Being part of infinity.’

Of course you do. You already know how it feels because this is how life is. But whatever my dear. Let’s go and feel it.’

‘And they are grooving the present more than ever before.’

For a moment my mind floats, imagines the scene from above, or from the perspective of a passing stranger. Anticipation’s a delightful thing.

They walk together, side by side, along the Embankment toward Tate Modern, each observing quiet details of the world as it moves around them. When they speak they’re leaning in, mouths up close to one another’s ears, smiles erupting, sometimes movement halting so the words can be uttered with their full intensity, face to face. So the response can be whole bodied.

In the room I sit, reading:

‘Art refuses to work with this present, since it does not function with the objects that make the present possible. Art is interested in the exact opposite. Instead of being halted by matter, its aim is really to set matter into perpetual movement. Art is the undercurrent, that unprecedented, this burst of creativity that materializes in spite of the present.

Art matters perpetually: art is not an object... art objects.’

Arriving at the Turbine Hall she turns to him. Morcheeba kicks in on the soundtrack in my mind.

‘You know Aria, maybe we really do love being in this place the best. Belonging or not belonging, I think we’re committed to it. Invested, you know? We’re going to see it through, this dark patch, aren’t we...’

We’re going to try’ he says. ‘London’s more than a place, it’s an idea that’s finding it’s true expression. Metropolitanism isn’t elitist, I mean cosmopolitanism, that’s the whole thing!’

Then she stretches out her arms and spins around and shouts into the wind ‘metropolitan ‘til the end!’

People pass through the wall of doors swinging onto the concrete slope where they pair spin and sway, getting in the way. Some go in, some go out. Nobody appears to notice the spinning performance.

‘This is freedom, isn’t it,’ she says, ‘we can do anything, be anything here. We can live it all!’

‘And nobody will ever say what they really think!’ he smiles.
‘I think they love it, all of it, the feeling of being alive and the sense of possibility. It’s still here in this place’ she says, ‘even when we don’t realise. There’s nothing like it, is there Aria?’

‘Come on’ he says. ‘Let’s go in.’

1. My initial impulse to inquire: rethinking my psychotherapeutic practice
2. Methodological approach: writing as inquiry
3. Meandering toward fiction as a method
4. Ontological and epistemological positioning: metamodern ‘structure of feeling’ rules
5. Autofiction: a real and true metamodern literary strategy
6. Fictioning my way: literary influences
7. The underlying truth of existence spirals into view!
8. Therapy as art: the creative-relational transformative action
9. Final words: ‘keeping the inquiry space open’
10. Postscript to the post script: implications for counselling and psychotherapy education

This meditation reflects on the question: what have I done? That is, why have I written a novel as a submission for a PhD? Why do I consider this novel to be an academic inquiry, and not only a work of fiction? Where does this work sit within the broader academic field(s)? What do I think this work is doing, and saying? Is any of this new? Hmmmm.

What follows is by necessity expressed in a linear thread, but what I describe isn’t, and never has been, a linear process. All these things happened at once, and some of them years ago and others just now. Here I’m placing these ideas in an order, while at the same time feeling many of them exist better as fragmentary entities in themselves, albeit ones that sit happily alongside others, enjoying both their independence and their relationality. This, my non-fiction, is a lie! One thing did not lead to the next; the whole of it gradually emerged and I could speculate forever about what it all means.

1. My initial impulse to inquire – rethinking my psychotherapeutic practice

The theme that I wanted to explore through this inquiry was how relationally-based psychotherapy might be (re)considered using insights from contemporary fiction. I wanted to re-examine relational psychotherapy’s ontological and epistemological positioning: its ways of seeing and knowing, through a contemporary lens. As a psychotherapy practitioner, what world do I think I inhabit, what do I think my role is within this world and how do these ideas and understandings help me to communicate meaningfully and valuably with others, particularly my clients?

Aside from asking the biggest questions I could think of, the inquiry was intended as broad and open to whatever might be learned from (in the first instance) 21st century literary fiction. I took this as my starting point for inquiry because I had noticed previously how Freudian concepts were embedded within 19th century literature; the art and culture of his contemporary moment had evidently illuminated for him many of the concepts he went on to articulate in his own terms. Biographies confirm Freud was engaged in a dialogue with the art scene of his time, particularly literary fiction and theatre.
Implicit in the idea that I might find concepts of theoretical value to psychotherapy through attending to the contemporary fiction of the 21st century, was a sensation of dissatisfaction, like I was missing something; there were ways I felt moved to communicate that the theoretical framework(s) and language(s) with and through which I was working didn’t seem to articulate. I had learned most of the theory that underpins my therapeutic practice, and understood it, in a particular historical context and order. The list of allowances needed to adapt theory from another place and time in history, so that it might feel apt in the present, had grown long, becoming ungainly to manage. Perhaps what used to be fitting was no longer working so well?

I desired something I couldn’t pin down, and recognised this meant looking beyond my own field for something as yet unknown that might spark a different way of thinking about what I do. I didn’t want to challenge everything I knew, but I was feeling a need to find more contemporary ways of understanding my practice, to better meet a new generation living in a new era. How could I re-position myself as a psychotherapy practitioner, in order to feel grounded in the 21st century? Could contemporary fiction help me better understand how I, as a practitioner, might find my place within the zeitgeist?

[An aside – an apositioning - on side-lining myself]

This preoccupation with positionality, finding my place, or knowing my place, or resisting my place, runs deep within me and through the characterisations presented in this work. I have struggled with the requirement for me as author of an academic thesis to articulate my positionality - taking a stand, or making a claim for myself that asserts the edges of my belonging and my non-belonging - because such claims would make deathly, static and rigid what I perceive to be my moving, always in process of becoming, endlessly emergent selfhood. My work as a therapist, and this work here, would be rendered meaningless by such an attempt. I would become unreal, undone like Ophelia; indeed, in grappling with it I have experienced that erasure of my being, and such madness is truly unbecoming. I am to be found in the writing, in the flow of what has emerged between me and my subject matter, as mediated by the autofictional form.

I have written characters with complex relationships with their own identities and a shared fascination with their ‘host culture’, namely Britain in the early 21st Century, as well as a keen sense of their own precarity and vulnerability to literally being killed in intimate arenas of love, or to losing the will to keep re-inventing themselves in order to carry on being. The complexity of their investment in, outsider-ness from, love of and disgust at the shifting socio-political milieu emerges as an important theme for me, moving beyond the split of Marxian and Freudian thinking about individuals and societies, toward a more psycho-social understanding of the human experience and psychotherapeutic relationships. The characters’ relation to Britain is both immersive and shallow, due to their histories lying elsewhere. They tend toward engagement at the level of public discourse, but have no locale beyond the transitory within which they may feel fully at home. Their belonging is always partial and fleeting. They share in common (and with me, their author) an apositionality that resonates with the stance of the nomad who, unlike the settler migrant who preserves community and cultural practices from the
previous place, adapts to the environment they move through, leaving the terrain largely unaltered. Nomadism as a term adopted in research communities captures something that pertains; Braidotti puts it thus: ‘the nomadic writer does not relate to language merely as a tool of critical analysis and rational political intervention, but rather feels inhabited by it as an ‘other within. Yet for me the appropriation of the term nomad misses something crucial about my positioning as the writer of this text. In the British Isles and Northern Europe the practice of moving between terrains and communities is understood as vagrancy, an activity that was illegal in UK law up until 1991 and it remains negatively connoted. Vagrants are dangerous, beggars and outcasts. The unsettled person is unsettling, and this matters because it makes the outsider vulnerable to persecution. As I write, people on the move are once again being treated as enemies of the state in the UK. There is real danger in not belonging, in having ambiguous origins and a lack of fixity in one’s position. To misappropriate Fanon’s words, my characters’ ‘otherness’ is white masked in British culture; the host culture is in part internalised, yet there is no mistaking self for other. The mask is not for shame at their otherness, rather it aims to protect them from being singled out as victims of abuse (with variable success). The question of how one is expected to live in British society remains a mystery to them throughout the novel, all the way to the end.

For Braidotti:

‘Nomadic becomings are... the process of affirmation of the unalterably positive structure of difference, unhinged from the binary system that traditionally opposed it to Sameness. Difference as positivity at the heart of the subject entails a multiple process of transformation, a play of complexity that expresses the principle of not-One. Accordingly, the thinking subject is not the deployment of in-depth interiority, nor is it the enactment of transcendental models of reflexive consciousness. It is a collective assemblage, a relay-point for a web of complex relations that displace the centrality of ego-indexed notions of identity.

I can almost accept this as my positioning, a becoming at once inseparable from my work, and entirely different from it, since now I’ve left it behind. But I need to add something that captures the dynamism of holding a nomadic position in the context of a society that thus far retains its binary structures (race, gender and class being particularly immobile categories in 21st century Britain) and its suspicion of rootless wanderers. I have alighted on the notion of the masquerading nomad, who employs defensive mimicry as a necessary additional strategy.

The masquerading nomad is a fitting term for the metamodern (more below) researcher, who is both an unhinged post-structuralist and something more raw and simple, feelingly responsive, in touch with a regressed-state of true self expressiveness, a modernist certainty that the peril is real. Our own self-
conception is only ever half the story, and our ideals betray us when we succumb to them as ideologies. To be the nomad and not the vagrant, liable to imprisonment for generalised deviancy, one must perform the masquerade. It need not be internalised as a belief about the self, and indeed it only fleetingly disguises the true nature of the self. But the masquerade is a necessary movement, a means of dancing through life, Bakhtin-esque. Delueze and Guattari[^xviii] speak of conceptual personae, and for this work I invoke the image of the masquerading nomad, in order to make my presence and this work possible. This is the position of the author, and the position of the therapist who oscillates somewhere in the irresolvable gap between an offer of spaciousness for and presence with the other. Enough of me now.

In contrast to modes of psychotherapy research that originate from psychology, and which tend to seek to identify and extract therapeutic factors from the data, thereby demonstrating efficacy and efficiency of their use, I am with Latour in feeling it is time to move on from a deliberation over ‘matters of fact, to matters of concern.’[^xix] My inquiry was not taking issue with other ways of looking at the human condition, but seeking to meet a need for a contemporary-philosophical base that supports practitioners to move with what matters in the context of the work they are doing, and which is alive to the challenges faced by those living in our present society. As Braidotti says:

‘...we need to devise new social, ethical and discursive schemes of subject formation to match the profound transformations we are undergoing. That means we need to learn to think differently about ourselves. I take the posthuman predicament as an opportunity to empower the pursuit of alternative schemes of thought, knowledge and self-representation. The posthuman condition urges us to think critically and creatively about who and what we are actually in the process of becoming.^[xx]

This thesis is one such attempt to think differently.

2. Methodological approach: Writing as inquiry

As a piece of academic research, this work began in the domain of narrative inquiry[^xxi] and remains there at its core. Narrative inquiry as a methodological approach to learning was new to me when I encountered it around 2015, and I was fortunate enough to learn about it though doing, with leading practitioners in the field (more of which below).

There is a well-developed body of work around the use of narrative in therapy (e.g. Michael Whyte’s extensive legacy[^xxii]) though this is not what I was seeking to do.

Neither was I aiming for psychoanalytically informed literary criticism (e.g. Julia Kristeva[^xxiii]) meets literarily[^I] informed psychoanalytic theorising (e.g. Adam Phillips[^xxiv]), breath-taking as I find such work. I am neither a psychoanalytic psychoanalyst or psychotherapist, nor a literary theorist or critic, although I do know and love spending time with psychoanalytic theory and with novels.

There is also work using narrative and fiction as educative devices (e.g. Peter Clough's and Patricia Leavy's work on fiction-based research). I did wish to learn from fiction but not to overly pay attention to, or justify that process. I wasn’t concerned about justifying my choice or drawn to learning how; only finding my own way in, and that was about learning from the kinds of contemporary fiction writing that excites non-expert audiences like me and which also moves literary theorists to write about it. Writers who are well-recognised in the field, in other words. I wanted to learn from those who are innovating in fiction.

I also wanted to find a fitting means to articulate, in something close to lay terms, the kind of psychotherapy I’m moved to practice and specifically that thing that makes it feel relatable in a 21st century context; something grounded within the relational action. Jane Speedy seemed close to it when she spoke of ‘consulting and consorting with gargoyles’ and then I frowned when she looked at magical realism: I didn’t want anything to happen in my text that wouldn’t make emotional sense, even though it might be irrational. ‘My work may be made up,’ I was thinking to myself (or rather to Jane), ‘but it needs to feel true!’ Then Jane said, ‘My dreams may be magical but slipping into them by day, without recourse to the cranking machinery of tired and tested literary devices, seems to elude me.’

And I said ‘Let’s try a new literary structure Jane, and let it not be machinery; let it not be a device! Let’s be consulting with gargoyles, I mean it, really!’ I was tempted by fictional work about therapy by therapists. I had read Irving Yalom’s work and later Moutsou’s fictionalised encounters. These were closer in to what I wanted to do, yet their work was using fiction as a means of communicating something of what they do as existential and psychoanalytic (respectively) psychotherapists. What do I do that makes my work a relational-fiction? Or creative-relational? Contemporary? I could I give expression to that and could doing so teach me something that is presently outside my conscious awareness, about the boundaries and frameworks of both the therapeutic and literary forms that draw me in?

I like the description (and think it is fair) that undertaking qualitative inquiry amounts to:

‘... an everyday, meandering and nomadic practice of being, talking and writing’

This quote refers to the practice of collaborative writing and a chance encounter (still ongoing) with the Bristol Collaborative Writing Group (or some approximation of this collective) at Sue Porter and Jane Speedy’s Artful Narrative Inquiry Network’s Open Space in the School of Education, University of Bristol, opened up to me the possibilities of documenting my responses as they emerged from and developed in relation to the experiences of others. Collaborative writing processes captured, often fleetingly and poetically, the space between bodies and between minds where the act of relationality is taking place. This invigorated my sense of the possibilities for inquiry that used my voice(s) and experience as a tool or instrument, yet was not, or not only, about myself.

I loved writing with others, but it isn’t the usual mode for a PhD. Still, I wanted to consider more than my own lived experience, to explore more ways of interrogating the psychotherapeutic process, to try to develop a way of seeing, knowing, understanding, or theorising the work that were more closely attuned to the social and cultural shifts in thinking, feeling and experiencing, which characterise 21st century lives.
‘... following Deleuze, and Whitehead before him... the experimenter cannot be separated from the experiment. Both are present in the world simultaneously. To put it another way, what observes (the subject) is no different from what is observed (the object).’

As I began thinking through writing, and thinking about writing as a philosophical activity, the question arose: what form of writing is appropriate to this inquiry? And the answer, of course, was that I should write with the form I am investigating, seeking to learn from, and get to know it experientially. This would allow me to write with imaginary others, using a more fluid and expansive version of myself. There would be no need to commit to any truth value about my own characterisation, and thus I could expose or hide, and generally play with my own identity as a fictionalised therapist, and with the character of the client and others who I brought into the work with me.

The decision to write the work as fiction gave me the opportunity to engage viscerally with the form itself, to let myself be affected, to come to know by my growing relation to it, the character of those 21st century modes of expression that I increasingly work with and through. I had never written fiction before, and hardly knew where or how to begin. Yet, I wanted to do it. Fiction felt fuller, freer; strangely more natural and truthful than the artifice of academic and professional writing styles I was familiar with. The thread of my own desire was pulling me to say yes! Yet it wasn’t desire alone; the choice was apt, and the desire affirmed it: body-mind in agreement. This was what I really came to this PhD for: to become the writer that I already am, that I was all along, only hidden. As I was feeling my way into the inquiry space, the right choices and next steps for the project were making themselves apparent.

What unfolded from the decision to write fiction was that I learned a lot about the structures of dramatic forms and in many ways my relationality was with my chosen form, more than with any of the characters imagined into to being within the text. By organising my meandering thoughts according to a classic five act structure, using ‘the hero’s journey’ as a narrative guide, I was allowing that structure to act on my ideas and shape them, to make me think about what was needed and what was too much. It brought a level of sophistication to the work that was beyond my innate capacities, and crucially, a sensation for me as writer of being the facilitator of the work’s own passage into being, rather than this being an entirely ego-driven project. I was in relation to more than myself. It brought me closer to the position of therapist, in other words. I’m not sure if I need to reiterate this, but my work doesn’t critique or interrogate forms of fiction; it isn’t going to startle any literary theorists with its originality. I have rather accepted without judgment what is freely available to be learned from the work of others and seen what happens when I work in relation to it using my preoccupations as a practising relationally-oriented psychotherapist.

3. Meandering toward ‘Fictioning’ as a method

Linking conceptual work to daily experience – psychotherapy involves communicating about everyday lived experience and using theory, or making theory, to articulate the intricacies of what is happening. Meaning is co-created, emergent and unique; client and therapist make it up as they go along.
The use of fiction allows me as an inquirer to approximate something much closer to that truth of how psychotherapy works to support self-reflection, and how it can make sense of what is unbearable to think, or feel, using the vernacular of the client alongside metaphors that are often left unremarked, their potency always in their potential, and intermingling cadences of everyday relating in with deeper moments of relational intensity, in which narrative expression finds its way to the surface and begins to flow. The fragmentary quality of the field (which includes the therapist’s own lived experience and a diverse array of theory and other provocations of the imagination (e.g. art, music, literature) that seem to surface when pertinent, finding expression and influence in the real) and the surrounding context that is playing into it through the unconscious, can all be arranged (assembled) into a manageable shape using the well-recognised (to western readers) five act story structure that underpins storytelling from Shakespeare to Netflix. This allows processing by the reader who instinctively understands where they are in the story and can find orientation, no matter how the text moves. The structure works in relation to the plot and its content, determining what needs foregrounding, what doesn’t belong, whether a passage needs more detail or to be made more concise. It can also work independently, so that the content can remain fragmentary, moving around in time, or between protagonists, and yet the whole can be experienced as coherent. The structure acts as the therapeutic frame, containing the material and regulating its flow so as to allow processing or digestion of the content without overwhelming the reader. The structure can be relied upon to remain steady and predictable even when the content is confused, unpleasant or disorienting. This dual quality of fictioning (containing a structure and a plot) thus acts as a symbolic representation of the therapy situation and process, in which the frame and boundaries set by the therapist offer make safe a radical openness and freedom to explore in undirected ways. The symbolic acts upon the real insofar as the reader is changed by the experience of reading the text, each in their own way.

‘Fictioning’ as a method thus allows me to capture (and be captured by) a process that acts according to the dynamics of the psychotherapeutic process; further, using the literary developments and techniques that characterise autofiction allows me to make this interrelationship conscious and present, both to myself and to the reader.

My inquiry was shaped by my real life circumstances insofar as I live in Bristol, in the South West of England. My encounter with the field of narrative inquiry (or keep this more real, with that room full of collaborative writers) is predicated on this circumstance. But the solo journey I was taking for this PhD research involved roving around by myself. I was looking for something, and I didn’t know what. Edinburgh’s a long way from Bristol so I was always at the periphery of the research community there, not chancing upon others’ reading and writing, paths which might otherwise have coincided with mine. London is more accessible to me, and so it was in London that I found talks and symposiums which felt like they were bringing me closer to my ‘something’. There I found the communities of Psycho-Social and Affect theorists, exploring human relating in an increasingly digital world. Jacob Johanssen and Tony Sampson opened gateways for me through their work, and further, to the work of theorists like Patricia Clough, Greg Seigworth, Erin Manning and more. Mikey George’s performance fictions captured my attention, expressing this curious edge between the digital and the real, which we all knowingly-feelingly balance upon, and it was only a matter of time then, before I discovered Simon O’Sullivan and other art theorists writing about fiction as a method; that is, fiction-ing, as a means of generating new data using imaginary information. There is more detail on this method and its roots in non-philosophy, within the novel itself.
4. Finding an ontological and epistemological positioning: the Metamodern ‘structure of feeling’

I began reading a lot of contemporary fiction, finding what I liked, what moved me, what seemed to speak to my inquiry, and what modes of expression I might want to emulate. I also started reading English literary theory and criticism, beginning to map the movements in my mind to corresponding developments in the history of psychoanalysis, counselling and psychotherapy. It was a lot to take on board, and much like theory in my own field, the sense that one needed to grasp the whole progression, weighed heavily when I tried to articulate anything meaningful using the ideas I came across.

Another chance encounter gave me my second big buzzy feeling (the first being with collaborative writing). A book called *Metamodernism* was vibrating on the publishers stand at a symposium. I immediately felt in the presence of something important to my inquiry; and sure enough, here were the voices describing the world I experienced myself inhabiting and working in. To my mind, they could be talking about the position of the therapist trying to relate with the client. I found my ontology and through it my epistemology.

Metamodernism, as coined and articulated by Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons and Timotheus Vermeulen, refers to a sensibility or ‘structure of feeling’ that is:

‘characterized by an oscillation between a typically modern commitment and a markedly postmodern detachment.’

They continue:

‘According to the Greek-English lexicon the prefix “meta” refers to such notions as “with”, “between”, and “beyond”. We [use] these connotations of “meta” in a similar, yet not indiscriminate fashion. For we contend that metamodernism should be situated epistemologically with (post) modernism, ontologically between (post) modernism, and historically beyond (post) modernism.’

Since the theory is not yet well known outside of contemporary literary and art theory circles, I give room here to the original authors:

If, epistemologically, the modern and the postmodern are linked to Hegel’s “positive” idealism, the metamodern aligns itself with Kant’s “negative” idealism. Kant’s philosophy of history after all, can also be most appropriately summarized as “as-if” thinking. As Curtis Peters explains, according to Kant, “we may view human history as if mankind had a life narrative which describes its self-movement toward its full rational/social potential … to view history as if it were the story of mankind’s development”. Indeed, Kant himself adopts the as-if terminology when he writes “[e]ach … people, as if following some guiding thread, go toward a natural but to each of them unknown goal”.

That is to say, humankind, a people, are not really going toward a natural but unknown goal, but they pretend they do so that they progress morally as well as politically. Metamodernism moves for the sake of moving, attempts in spite of its inevitable failure; it seeks forever for a truth that it never expects to find. […]
Ontologically, metamodernism oscillates between the modern and the postmodern. It oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity. Indeed, by oscillating to and fro or back and forth, the metamodern negotiates between the modern and the postmodern. One should be careful not to think of this oscillation as a balance however; rather, it is a pendulum swinging between 2, 3, 5, 10, innumerable poles. Each time the metamodern enthusiasm swings toward fanaticism, gravity pulls it back toward irony; the moment its irony sways toward apathy, gravity pulls it back toward enthusiasm.

I have worked with this conception in the text, where there is a constant tension between one state of mind and another, a pulling into and out of the digital content or toward a hypnotic state or dreaminess or bare emotionality then snapping out of it. There is a struggle between belief in some future state of enlightenment and an awareness that such an outlook is somewhat futile. The oscillation invites rhythmicity into the work, and also makes visible some edges, both within the experience being conveyed and through the way the text is arranged, with five Acts, each with five Chapter headings, showing the artifice of how the piece is structured, the timeline veering its own way, particularly in the last Act, where time at one point does indeed move backwards, yet still the structure allows a meaningful unfolding of the story within the conventions of the well-known form.

Both the metamodern epistemology (as if) and its ontology (between) should thus be conceived of as a “both-neither” dynamic. They are each at once modern and postmodern and neither of them. [...] we intend the concept not as a metaphor for an existential experience that is general to the condition humaine, but as a metaphor for a cultural sensibility that is particular to the metamodern discourse. The metamodern is constituted by the tension, no, the double-bind, of a modern desire for sens and a postmodern doubt about the sense of it all.

This presenting of the cultural sensibility that is at play is another important aspect of the work, and the (re)positioning of the therapeutic relationship as a psycho-social phenomenon, aware of its own promise and its own helplessness, or hopelessness, its inability to deliver its own utopian vision of relationship that might exist freely, unshackled from the rest of the world. Luke Turner, a British artist who has collaborated in working with and developing an understanding of this ‘structure of feeling’ explains:

‘Metamodernism does not [...] propose any kind of utopian vision, although it does describe the climate in which a yearning for utopias, despite their futile nature, has come to the fore. The metamodernism discourse is thus descriptive rather than prescriptive; an inclusive means of articulating the ongoing developments associated with a structure of feeling for which the vocabulary of postmodern critique is no longer sufficient, but whose future paths have yet to be constructed.’

Metamodernism is about reaching toward something while knowing (or believing) that it’s unattainable. Nevertheless, the struggle continues and it is in the reaching, the longing itself, that a sense of meaning, for now, is to be found. While I have yet to give examples, that may persuade you, it feels clear to me that this sensibility pervades 21st century experience and that, seen from this vantage point, the activity of psychotherapy is metamodern in its
sensibility, and as such, is part of a widely shared struggle. It can never really be something which stands, or appears to stand, outside or alongside of ordinary life. Psychotherapy is subject to the ordinary struggles of the age.

Three core aspects of the metamodern structure of feeling relate to a flattening out of history (or ‘historicity’, in which there is a sense of being at the ‘End of History’\textsuperscript{ccli}, aware of its artifice and with a sensation that one is no longer immersed within its unfolding); depth (or ‘depthiness’, in which depth is perceived and understood to be real, but is not experienced), and a recommitment to affective modes of engagement (feeling sincerely, while aware that the source or object about which one feels, is fake, hopeless or contrived).

To give a better flavour, here is another extensive extract from Vermeullen, on what he calls “The New Depthiness”\textsuperscript{cclii}

‘…Italian novelist Alessandro Baricco distinguishes between two experiential registers [...] diving and surfing. The diver [...] looks for meaning in the depths of the ocean. He delves into the water, sinking deeper and deeper in search of a particular coral, fish, or sea monster. This is the person, writes Baricco, who reads, who perseveres reading Proust or Joyce—that is to say, modernists, to use the vocabulary of Jameson\textsuperscript{ccli}. The surfer, “the horizontal man,”\textsuperscript{ccliii} on the contrary, looks for meaning on the surface, more precisely in the series of waves that form the surface—one after the other after the other, now left, now right, higher and lower. As Baricco puts it:

If you believe that meaning comes in sequences and takes the form of a trajectory through a number of different points, then what you really care about is movement: the real possibility to move from one point to another fast enough to prevent the overall shape from vanishing. Now what is the source of this movement, and what keeps it going? Your curiosity, of course, and your desire for experience. But these aren’t enough, believe me. This movement is also propelled by the points through which it passes ... [The surfer] has a chance to build real sequences of experience only if at each stop along his journey he gets another push. Still, they’re not really stops, but systems of passage that generate acceleration.\textsuperscript{ccliv}

Vermeullen invokes Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the rhizome to describe the perceptual experience of Baricco’s surfer when he looks upon the ocean as a trajectory rather than either a territory (which can be mapped) or a telos (implying direction), letting the waves, like the moment, come to him, staying in the movement and never stopping to analyse, because to think about how one is surfing, or to try to urge oneself this way or another, is to lose the wave and slip into the water. He then introduces an extension to the metaphor in the form of a third ocean explorer, the snorkeler:

When I refer to the “new depthiness,” I am thinking of a snorkeler intuiting depth, imagining it—perceiving it without encountering it. If Jameson’s term “new depthlessness” points to the logical and/or empirical repudiation of ideological, historical, hermeneutic, existentialist, psychoanalytic, affective, and semiotic depth, then the phrase “new depthiness” indicates the performative reappraisal of these depths. I use the term “performative” here above all in Judith Butler’s sense of the word. Just as Butler writes that the soul is not what produces our behavior but is, on the
contrary, what is produced by our behavior—in other words, not inside the body but on and around it, a surface effect—depth is not excavated but applied, not discovered but delivered. Indeed, if the “gendered body has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality,” depth, too, exists exclusively in its enactment. Depth, at least post-Jameson, will always be a “depthing”—a making, actual or virtual, of depth. In this sense, depthiness combines the epistemological reality of depthlessness with the performative possibility of depth.’

An example that is evident in public art today is the projection of visually rich imagery onto the surfaces of buildings, as with Klimt’s art projected onto the Sydney Opera House. The character of the building is entirely constituted by its external appearance. What is within is not visible, but is imagined onto the surface with the projections. This popular move recently been taken a step further with the idea of immersion into, for example, the world of Van Gogh’s sunflowers or Monet’s lilyponds. This public desire to capture an experience through immersion within a representation of something impossible to actually be in (it never existed), seems an apt example of what Metamodernism is getting at.

Without wishing to go into too much more detail here, I will say just a little by way of example about historicity. The principle of flattening of past experience is in evidence in much teen and young adult fiction, e.g. the Marvel Universe, where characters originating in radically different historical lineages are brought together in a shared adventure. Metamodernists see this as a process of contemporary myth-making for the 21st century, using an assemblage of ideas from a wide base of sources to form stories that feel significant for today’s emergent population. Could this be a contemporary rendering of how Bettleheim considers traditional folk tales and fairytales to contain information of deep psychological significance in condensed forms? This process of letting go of historical accuracy but nevertheless keeping hold of elements that capture the imagination and might bring meaning to a future generation, is well underway. St John Mandell’s Station Eleven (featured heavily in Act One), is deeply concerned with this idea of rebuilding a sense of history and making meaning out of present existence using fragments left over from a lost past. In Act Four I refer to ‘a general Goddess’, a conception coming from the same notion of historical specifics having been lost, but the general category still having value. The analogous relation to therapeutic re-narrativising of the past is, I hope, obvious. Historical accuracy is forfeited for something that allows the emotional meaning to be carried forward, a new story, so that life may carry on, altered but imbued with symbolic meaning from the past which guides future action.
I’m going to come back to how affective experience is thought about and conveyed in the section below. To conclude this consideration of metamodern ontological and epistemological framing, I find it possible to think with this structure, about the fundamental relational set up of the therapeutic encounter: about how therapist and client might co-exist somewhere within this oscillating landscape, caring deeply, yet not being deeply involved, knowingly sharing the experience of being swept up together in the bigger tides of change that are happening around us, and adapting their relationship accordingly. I am thinking about this structure also as somewhat more nuanced rendering of the idea of intersubjectivity in therapeutic relations than the ecstatic ‘I-thou’, both/and/everything-all-at-once experience. Not that the experience of relational mutuality isn’t or can’t be wondrous, but I think there are more subtle aspects to it than are captured in theories that fixate on relational presence as transformative, as if this were the one magic, alchemical ingredient necessary for healing. Our capacities to be co-present and relationally invested in one another are more complicated than this, including and especially, in the therapy relationship. I find the metamodern structure compelling as a conceptual model of the experience of being emotionally and close with a client, sharing deeply and in significant ways yet, in reality, being someone materially inconsequential, outside of their life (and vice versa). I think the pleasure-pain, the yearning, that this position produces, is part of what comes to be recognised and understood within therapy relationships. Just because they aren’t real, doesn’t mean we don’t feel them.

5. Autofiction – a Metamodern literary strategy.

Alison Gibbons identifies various metamodern literary forms, including contemporary autofiction, as part of the affective turn in literature, noting that:

‘... autofictions show that affect as a possibility has revitalized within the situated model of subjectivity [...] Autofictions attempt to ground the inner self in an outer reality – in time, space and corporeal being.... While the postmodernist sense of subjectivity (as fragmented, socially constructed and textually fabricated) persists, it does so alongside a renewed desire to recognise personal feelings and interpersonal connections.’

This situated model of subjectivity is achieved by means such as using the author’s real name for the main protagonist and featuring contextual detail from the real world they inhabit. So, for example, in my work, all the art exhibitions are real; the locations are real and readily identifiable; my real name is used for the therapist/protagonist, the intellectual and cultural landscape also includes material that is verifiable by the reader. They really exist or existed!

Contemporary autofictions do not only narrativise the self, but they also thematise the sociological and phenomenological dimensions of personal life such as how identities relate to social roles, how time and space are lived and how experience is often mediated by textual and/or digital communication. It is in this sense that metamodern affect is situational; it is ironic yet sincere, skeptical yet heartfelt, solipsistic yet desiring of connection. Most of all, it is experiential.

The characters in my novel exist as both insiders and outsiders to the society they inhabit, their lives intertwined with it through space and time.
Autofictions may also ruminate on global concerns ... or place the self in relation to conflicts, thus exploring an individual’s ethical responsibilities to and affective engagements with socio-political events. This is because contemporary crises have reformed affective sensibilities.... shaken the stronghold of postmodernity, its anti-anthropomorphism, its cool detachment... scholars of the contemporary have noted both a renewed ‘affection for affect’ cclxiii and a prevailing sense of anxiety which ‘has surely returned with a vengeance’.cclxiv In a crisis driven world, subjects are once more driven by a desire for attachment to others and to their surroundings (wherever the boundaries are drawn between in-group and out-group or between inside and outside). In such a fragile and fragmentary reality, the decentred self reasserts itself by grounding its subjectivity in lived experience as well as in the interactions between our bodies and our environments. The affective turn... has a common thread: in Brinkema’s words, ‘ethics, politics, aesthetics – indeed, lives – must be enacted in the definite particular’.cclxv

My characters are preoccupied with the sensation of living at the end of time and with the impacts of local crises: Brexit; an uncaring government and an unequal society; precarious family set-ups where the communitarian foundations of love and mutual obligation, are sources of confusion. Gibbons makes a further important point about autofiction, that I take up elsewhere:

At first glance, today’s writers [...] blur the lines between fiction and reality... Yet when authors, or other real elements, appear in fiction now – as Ben Lerner does in 10:04 – their presence is intended to signal realism, rather than to foreground the artifice of the text. Indeed, in place of postmodernism’s cool detachment, its anti-anthropomorphism, realism is once again a popular mode. Emotions, furthermore, are again playing a central role in literary fiction, as authors insist on our essential relationality – our connectedness as humans to one another in the globalizing world and with fictional characters as representations of our selves.

[...] this rearrangement of the world turns on an axis of human subjectivity, conceived as intimately and ethically relational.cclxvii

The knowingness of our inability to be fully immersed, affectively speaking, within our experience is not cynical, but a heartfelt necessity for those who undertake to look upon, to know, the true reality of our condition.cclxviii

6. Fictioning my way: Literary influences

When it came to how to actually write this autofiction, there are many (reall!) writers whose work informed my approach. My feeling for a modernist literary aesthetic results directly, for good or ill, from my childhood in Dublin, where the influence of writers such as Seamus Heaney, Brendan Kennelly, James Joyce, and Samuel Beckett were an inescapable part of the social fabric. Irish writers making contemporary use of this modernist tradition include Eimer McBridecclix and Mike McCormack, cclxx so they gave me a few clues on how the modernist sensibility that flows somewhat naturally from my mind into my fingers (or by which my fingers make my mind known to itself) can work in a contemporary piece of text.
Other significant early influences include British writers Jenny Diski, Iris Murdoch and Jeanette Winterson. Reading Winterson’s early work[cclxxi] in the early 1990s opened up something quite new for me about what a novel can be and do, not only intellectually, but through a more expressionist play of language; her work seemed to convey something very real – drawing attention to both the materiality of the books themselves and to the actuality of the feelings they surfaced. I had such a strong sensation of how she felt, and of what seemed like her longing for me, the reader, to know this about her. This mattering, is something I couldn’t forget. Ben Okri also called my attention to this possibility, as well as affirming the presence, logic and language of transpersonal aspects of experience, without the constraint of religious interpretation.

Autofiction writers seem to proliferate in New York. Ben Lerner’s, [cclxxii] novels read like How To... guides to the form. I also loved Jennifer Egan,[cclxxiii] Ruth Ozeki[cclxxiv] and Teju Cole’s[cclxxv] work. They all find their own ways to experiment and expand possibility for what autofiction can do. Tom McCarthy,[cclxxvi] Deborah Levy[cclxxvii] and Rachel Cusk[cclxxviii] are contemporary British writers who experiment in ways I find particularly interesting; of these, Levy feels the most relationally oriented. McCarthy and Cusk (in her Outline Trilogy) seem to highlight and accentuate that strangeness and disconnect that I want to counter with effusive feeling. Max Porter[cclxxix] inspires me with his open delight in language, in the messy contradictions and pleasure-pain of being alive. My choice of literature highlighted here is by no means everything I looked at, but the authors mentioned exemplify an emergent form with identifiable features, made visible to me by contemporary English literary theorists, particularly Gibbons and her colleagues working in the field of stylistics. The texts were for the most part recently published at the time of researching and writing my inquiry, and easily accessible to anyone with an interest in reading fiction. They are both culturally specific and uniquely crafted according to the specificity of their authors, and at the same time, seem to coalesce as part of a shared cultural development of texts engaged with an increasingly homogenous, digitally mediated human experience. While it is only with the benefit of time that one can know with any certainty, these authors works strike me as contenders for future recognition as culturally significant exemplars of fiction that articulates some of the preoccupations of the early 21st century era. The culture of which I speak is English speaking, and the writers I mention have links with Anglophone culture, though often not exclusively so. There are other writers whose work pertains to the autofictional form working in other languages but I have largely steered clear of work in translation as my focus has been on the relation to the anglophone through the anglo-tongue, ear, and finger tapping keypad, a self-referential cycle that might allow me to circle, in my snorkel and flippers, round and through some specificities flowing quickly in the wake of Brexit-shocked Britain. It is the (depths of the) shared surface, rather than any narrow chasm of specificity that concerned me in this work.

In terms of finding my own main themes and content, I didn’t want to bring my own real world research inquiry into the fiction; nothing about PhD’s or about the methodological approach described above. I didn’t want to reflect on my own present condition, personal or professional, in such literal terms. I felt that would have amounted to being ‘meta’ for its own sake. Nor did I want to take what I learned from writing a novel and list all the analogous processes and correspondences with psychotherapy. I think people can discover these for themselves. It didn’t feel right either to start quoting extensively from all my favourite novels to make such points.
The fiction had to be about relationships, about love and loss and the perennial struggles of finding and sustaining relational intimacy in its many guises, and had to be set within the contemporary moment, the time and space within which it was being written, with as many signifiers of realism as I could manage. At the heart of the work, had to be the story of a therapy relationship, in which other relationships and histories are discussed, and around and through which real life would take place. The text had to allow for reflection, yet be believable in a contemporary context. My characters don’t really read much fully (though they do fixate on specific texts) and are constantly digitally connected. They tend to engage fleetingly with the words of others, perhaps reading a summary or just the beginning of something, or a meme. There is a temporal aspect to this, and something affective about needing to limit the amount of information, to prevent overwhelm. The characters are trying to be open but at the same time need to incorporate the new (to them) information into the fabric of their own sensemaking. There is a limit to what can be absorbed, time is needed for digestion. The material they do access, however, is laser focused to their curiosity. They seem to find the words (or the words find them through that process that is known in vernacular shorthand as ‘The Algorithm’) that they need in that moment, their recontextualization at times subverting the meaning of the original text, at times lending emphasis and affective resonance to the original meaning. I understand this as the process that is at play in the contemporary with regard to historicity. We cannot take in the whole of what has been before, but nevertheless we are interested in it and concerned with using it to make meaning of the present. It is a shallow level of engagement, but this surface runs deep. It is deeply felt! Trying to contain and make sense of so much real feeling is another aspect of the contemporary that the work is in touch with.

7. The underlying truth of existence spirals into view – time to take a stand for reality!

To return briefly to my thesis as a meandering writing inquiry obsessed with bringing more ‘real’ into the therapy relationship, the meta-event that did indeed bring a dose of reality into the therapeutic frame was the Covid-19 pandemic, and the necessity to move my real world and this imaginary therapeutic practice online. I was fortunate to be in well-established online peer supervision groups where I was able to think about firstly, what was happening to the therapeutic frame as it lost its grounding in material reality and shifted into the digital realm; and secondly, the reason for this: the pandemic itself, which of course created a powerful affective wave of so much shared feeling. The thing about pandemic therapy was that clients suddenly knew something very significant about their therapists’ lives – it was a shared experience. There could be no avoiding the acknowledgement of this with clients, at least not if one was being congruent in the relationship. I was suddenly thinking with my clients about what was happening to us and around us, without the fantasy of separateness that had long troubled me. We were forced to jump in.

It was immediately clear that the pandemic needed to be included in the narrative, on its own account, as a major historical event of game-changing significance to how we live, and because of the shifts in consciousness it precipitated. At the core of this shift, in terms of this work, is the move from idealism into realism. To become able to tolerate truth, however painful and difficult that may be, while often sitting outside or beyond a state of immersion within the realities of the world, because they are literally too overwhelming to remain present with, but knowing and having feelings about this defended position, this state of detachment, and recognising this about one another etc. etc....
This position of being knowingly-disengaged and yet still caring, of trying to stay connected to reality and yet not become overwhelmingly immersed, is close to the (least worst, but still not good enough) position described by Dodds when thinking about psychological responses to climate change. This feels important so I’m going to quote him now:

To explore climate denial... we can turn to a joke Freud (1905b, 62) used to illustrate the logic of the unconscious (Freud, 1911; Matte-Blanco, 1998). When a man is told he should replace a pot he borrowed and returned damaged, he refuses, claiming: (1) I returned it undamaged. (2) The hole was there when you gave it to me. (3) I never borrowed it! These mutually contradictory answers alert us to unconscious processes united by the motivation to remove the blame and prevent need for action, and correspond well with arguments against action on climate change.

[...] The different arguments relate to defenses against specific anxieties. It’s not happening involves more psychotic defenses against paranoid-schizoid anxiety (extinction, annihilation). It’s not our/my fault involves neurotic defenses against depressive anxiety (difficulty in acknowledging human culpability and guilt). There’s nothing I/we can do about it is closest to recognizing the problem but without realistic reparative possibilities the individual is stuck with the despair and pain of the depressive position without hope. As Searles (1972, 366) put it, “instead of feeling isolated within emotional depression, one feels at one with everyone... in a “realistically” doomed world.” Such defenses need to be understood not only individually, but as involving unconscious alliances (Kaes, 2007) created socially, through small interactions at all levels giving rise to social phantasy systems (Jaques, 1955). In complexity theory, which Palombo (2007) suggests is a suitable ‘parent science’ for psychoanalysis this is an example of self-organization (SO), where lower levels interact to form higher level structures embodying emergent properties which then feedback to lower levels in a process of ongoing recursivity.

To return to the knowing dissociation from depthful immersion in our feelings about our condition, the idea that this may at the same time be done feelingly may offer a chink of hopefulness, a potential for action and change for those in the ‘realistically doomed’ position. I think that the metamodern idea of investing our care, even when we cannot bear to feel the reality, the action of re-significating that which we understand we do not fully know through experience, and/or which we cannot bear to know fully, or can bear knowing only fleetingly. I have recently came to recognise this more vividly, upon seeing the work of Cornelia Parker.
The re-signification, through returning volume or a spatial dimension, to objects that had lost it, struck me in a very powerful way. It isn’t good enough to recognise and come to terms with what is (the heart of existentialism); not enough simply to mourn loss. We need to give a bit more than that: reallocating space that would have belonged to objects (or subjects) gives possibility to what could or should be, room that invites imagination to fill its void, bringing a chance of recovery through new growth. There seems to me an ethical dimension to returning the space, as an entitlement of each subject to have what is needed to exist in their full expression, even if that expression is never realised. This speculative or virtual, or imaginary space needs room, needs to be nurtured and protected (from the ravages of full-on reality) in order for whatever is missing to have a chance to re-emerge over time, and if that is impossible, for the lost and the missing at least to be honoured with a fitting allocation of space and time, as entities in themselves, allowing for subtle processes that may be beyond our human understanding.

In practice, I think of this as a kind of conscious choice to invest, or re-invest, feelingly, in whatever other ways feel needed, in all that is or could be lively and beautiful in the experience of others, even if they don’t presently see or feel or experience this themselves. This is a future-oriented positioning that leaves room for the not yet known, and in which the creative impulse may spark, may sparkle. I have considered previously the process of active, consciously co-constituted reciprocity which I termed intersubjectivication. The idea of imagining a world that another might inhabit goes further than saying ‘I recognise the world you actually inhabit.’ It feels to me that psychotherapists can do valuable work in this speculative space, beyond reality yet in service to it, allowing the (re)imagination to flourish through an ecology of mutually interacting, co-created lives, in which all matter deeply to one another, whether or not they are deeply known to each other or even fall within one other’s capacity to understand or recognise at all. The text I have written is fiction: I made it up, but at the same time I lived it, felt it all truly, deeply. In sharing this unreal production, something real and significant is shared between us and our realities may shift in relation to this.

I think this is the possibly the only important thing I have to say in this thesis. It seems very simple, even naive, and yet I feel it has become necessary, in a way that it may not have been in the past, to explicitly advocate for the importance of investing emotionally in the lives of others and of giving time and space to non-rational, mysterious, loving-feeling, deepening,
allowing, trust-building, creative processes. For me, to be mutually co-invested in one little corner of a whole thing, the whole thing, in which care is extended where it’s needed, in the ways it’s needed - this is survival, and contentment and possibly my answer to the question of what is a mentally healthy way of living that, as a therapist, I may wish my clients to find, and which I believe will allow them to thrive. It feels good to show capability through action to support others, and it feels good to be confident and able to trust an expectation that others will show up and help in times of need. At the same time, there can be no claim over other beings’ agency and autonomy. What is given needs to be given freely, without the transactional notion of a debt being incurred one way or the other. This idea is contrary to notions of freedom that amount to not getting involved in the messy and complicated business of other people’s lives. The withdrawal of self-investment, the questioning of this ‘whole thing’, the business of making choices and taking actions, which is often around in therapy, is an experience that needs firstly to be understood, and then, to be addressed through an exploration of potential modes of re-investment. This needs to happen first and foremost in that potential space that predates action.

I should add that I don’t think what I propose is necessarily something that therapists presently fail to offer in practice. But I do think there lacks a robust enough framing that allows therapists not working through arts-based modalities to understand and think about what they do when they step out beyond the confines of reflecting back clients’ thoughts and feelings, or away from despondency at visions of past dysfunction perpetually playing out in the present, and begin leading in creative departure, even if only for a time, imagining more than presently is. Yes, it is for the client to imagine something different and then change their own lives according to their own best judgment, but the therapist may open up that imaginary space, while at the same time not forgetting the grim truths of reality.

Ah yes, back to reality for a moment. In a crude and cynical world full of lies and exploitation, it is increasingly incumbent upon all who are ethically minded in their terms of engagement with others, to be clear where they stand in terms of values and weirdly more importantly, in terms of how they view reality, ontologically-speaking that is. My answer, to be completely prescriptive on this point, is that we cannot be relativist about reality! It is not something one can choose to see in ways that best suit us; we need to recognise it as an entity that exists beyond the human perspective! A tree that falls in a forest without anyone there to witness the event, has indeed still fallen! It isn’t enough to say, as we may be prone to do in therapy, that whatever the actuality of the matter, we work only with the perspective of the client. This approach isn’t grounded and if a client has views that are in at odds with material reality. Relationally-oriented psychotherapy needs to be clear in its orientation to the real.

The oscillation between reality based grounding and the hopeful work of imagining wildly potential ways through, is not inconsistent or poorly executed therapy, when viewed from a metamodern perspective. The oscillation further allows for attunement to the temporality and pace of the work, and to the idea of an aesthetic sensibility for what is right and fitting in the momentary context of the improvised relational dance, that is developed in reciprocity with the client through mutual attunement. This is something I have played with in the text of the novel. It’s a kind of dance of emergence within the relationship, through the knowing-feeling, and through the not-knowing and the missing things, and the becoming attached and needing one another, that is, the mattering of the client to the therapist.
I did explore in this work the idea of a therapist being very personally affected by the relationship with the client, at times troubled and challenged, and at times supported and inspired. This brings into question the idea of relational co-dependency and this tends to be viewed dimly in a society that prizes independence. But I wanted to examine what it means for a therapist to be invested in to the relationship with the client, attuning not just intellectually but sensorily and through imagination and perhaps with what some call the subtle or energetic body, if one believes in that. The therapist commits to letting herself be affected by the client and this is what makes the relationship real!

8. Therapy as artistic practice: the creative-relational, artful and collaborative, transformative act

The preoccupation with art that is evident in the text was unplanned at the outset and it took me a while to be able to explain it. Personally, I enjoy encountering art and opening myself up to whatever it seems to be saying to me. Visual art often moves me. I get a lot out of these encounters and the ideas that art communicates to me. Describing encounters with art was pragmatically easier for me when writing this text, as it left more room for me than had I filled my pages with the words of other novelists. The broadening of the term fiction into non-literary fields was an awakening for me, as was the possibility of considering what the text does visually, as a material object.

It took me a while to realise that rather intuitive and personal way that I engage with art (I have no background education in this area) is mediated by what art demands of me. Art has taught me an attitude of openness to the sensory encounter, to the thoughts and feelings evoked in me by the artworks and the idea of these as a communication with the artwork itself, separate to any communicative intention of the artist. This is analogous both to the literary encounter between author and reader, and to the therapeutic one between therapist and client. The mediating substance, the content of the encounter, lends expression to the relational process taking place through it.

Artists concern themselves in all kinds of ways with the experience of being in the world: of life and love and conflict and death, cats and children, the sea and the sky. They do this using their own experience of being human and their observances of other human and non-human entities. Artists communicate what can often be grasped only fleetingly, through relational engagement. Perhaps therapists are artists, and clients too? Perhaps the relational action itself is an artist? I’m losing precision, but still an awareness that somewhere in the midst of therapy, art resides.

To undertake a project that is itself an artwork, moves my inquiry away from being me talking about and critically reflecting upon what I think and feel. The artistic medium itself, in this case autofiction, becomes the ontological position that shapes that activity and experience; which puts it into context with other material (thoughts, circumstances, music...), allowing space for certain kinds of reflection, giving what I bring to the relation a sense of purposefulness or meaning that goes beyond my original impulse, beyond whatever idea I may have had in mind. The artistic medium, moving in relation with another agent, is generative of something previously unknown, something that previously non-existent. The creative-relation centres upon this transformative act. Am I the last person to understand this?
Literary art is long and time consuming to produce; how much time is not fixed but it’s fair to say it takes about as long as a therapy relationship does to unfold. There are so many potential points of comparison between the two processes but I am going to restrict myself to this one: writing a novel involves the author committing to the process without knowing what the final outcome will be. One has to first wait and see what is emergent: who the characters are, what the main themes are, and then comes a point of needing to decide what is and is not an important part of the work, setting constraints and abiding by them. Committing to seeing the process through even when it isn’t going as one wishes, remains essential to the final outcome. One is actively engaging over a long period in a process that both is and is not one’s own. The struggle is real! When one is in it, one can neither remember how it started nor anticipate exactly how it ends.

9. ‘Keeping the inquiry space open.’cclxxxv

The final thing I want to say about this autofiction that I’ve worked through, is that it doesn’t feel complete. I haven’t ironed out all the kinks, at least, not consciously, and I have left some in, to show my working, as it were. I have surely forgotten to say important things! Some threads I had planned to follow through were lost as others gained emphasis because they demanded or required it. I decided to leave that sense of things falling away, becoming unimportant, because that seems to me to be how preoccupations go. I remain anxious about people reading it, to be honest, because it’s still raw; a first draft more than a completed work. For me the text is still moving, not a fixed entity, and I still feel it. I could continue to play with and alter things; there is too much detail and not enough. Still alive. Using words as a medium, I’m not precious over them and I’ve learned to let lots go. Are the ones that remain the most important? No, not really. They’ve presented themselves, landed at the top. I hope they hold together with some coherence; I worry they’re unclear at best, and offensive at worst. They could have turned out differently. Would that have made a difference? In the grand scheme of things, I think not. As an academic exercise I think I have taken it far enough for now.

The idea has been to let the work grow, like space grows, like all life grows, into itself. The narrator Melissa wishes she could start again, while I, Melissa-researcher, am ready to let go. Maybe with this dissonance exposed I can return one last time to the assertion that auto-fiction is fiction. I am not sure how other auto-fiction writers do it: do they plot meticulously in advance, or allow the work to unfold like a suitcase falling off a bed, spilling out all kinds of random details conveying the truth of their own condition? If I were beginning again I would want to begin with the plotting. I actually began with a vast soup of writing around my own experiences, gradually departing from a tendency to try and represent truth, as the important themes became emergent. Making things up allowed me to convey true feeling, and to move beyond the constraints of my own lived experience. It wasn’t until I realised I needed a structure and a plot, which would demarcate the work in space and time, and which would make the work say something meaningful of its own, that I really began writing a novel at all, making choices accordingly about character and content. I wish I could have worked some of the minor characters through better, especially the men, but there it is. Perhaps their ambiguity leaves room for the reader to imagine their experience in more detail, or to disagree or to feel annoyed. Bringing realness in through the use of real people who are woven through the work, remains the biggest source of regret for me, even though it is part of the form. It feels ethically dubious to play this way, no matter how much care one takes.
Iris Murdoch said

‘one is always discontented with what one has done. And also, of course, one’s always afraid that even the things one has done can’t be done again. I don’t know. I think artists live in the present, really. I mean, forget about the past and what you’ve done because it’s what you think you can do next that matters.’

To experiment with fiction, perhaps one has to endure the idea of imperfection, or rather the fear of it. I’ve tried to write something that belongs not in a singular field but as part of an ecology of expression, that includes academic texts and novels and music, things people once said to me, cats, trees, the wind and the moon... it has been my role to help the work become itself, allowing its diverse elements space, and letting the work find its own field, and content as it moved forward.

I return to the collaborative artful idea of ‘keeping the inquiry space open’ as a way of moving on, but not ending. In the novel too, there is a sense that things move on, without necessarily finding a final resolution. Metamodernism talks about longingly reaching for a future that never arrives and I am not immune to the frustration this evokes in bodies that have been subjected to goal-oriented conditioning, where the urgency of our seeking is always toward the release of completion. But perhaps ending is not something that should be longed for and our desires might be cultivated to long instead for that which remains open, ongoing, always unfolding and still in progress. Our energies would be so much better directed toward that which sustains going-on being; and not only our own. The end will come to each of us in time, but one can still hope it won’t come to all of us at the same time! Meanwhile, we’re alive and have the opportunity to experience wonder and joy through our relations to what we both can and cannot understand, and to enrich one another’s existence through both radical acceptance and by acting on behalf of one another, coming to know well what is within our reach and accepting as mysterious those aspects of being that are beyond our capacities to grasp.

10. Postscript to the postscript: implications for counselling and psychotherapy education.

At the level of theory, through this work I have attempted to interrogate and broaden the ways intersubjectivity can be thought and spoken about by counsellors and psychotherapists working relationally. Contemporary psychoanalytic theory includes the concept of relational ‘thirdness’, an unconscious field that is created and which belongs in and to neither one person nor the other, but exists by virtue of the relation between the two. However, it remains difficult to grasp (or I find it so) in the abstract, without contexts through which its processual presence may be gleaned or experienced. Literary fiction allows its readers to catch a glimpse of whatever that process is that is occurring and perhaps to slow down our thinking minds so we may capture a sense of the movements by which people and feelings and ideas align with one another and with the social and cultural flows of the times and places in which they are situated. This literary fiction here, incorporating the therapeutic encounter, may be of particular value in psychotherapy education as a cultural object through which students can explore this and other aspects of therapeutic theory from an external position, rather than through their own direct encounter. Noreen Giffney argues that when students engage in cultural encounters as forms of case-study, this allows them to use the encounter to explore theoretical concepts, or develop their practise of letting resonances from the flows of words
speak, beyond their literal meanings. Giffney uses the term culture-breast to refer to the ways in which cultural products (films, poetry, music, works of art) can act as transferential objects to assist students in overcoming an all too familiar difficulty of allowing ourselves to experience something new, by offering a less anxiety provoking emotional experience than a direct encounter with theory. She quotes Britzman who asserts “what is felt in theory is anxiety” over defamiliarisation, exposure of vulnerability and a fear that in thinking something new, a great deal else might be lost, all of which provokes defensive resistance to the core message or purpose of a therapeutic training, or as Britzman puts it, the “psychoanalytic ethic” of opening the mind and “listening with a difference to the conflicts of meanings audible and inaudible just at the point that they reach defensive mechanisms of closure.” Giffney recognises the value of creative work in creating a place of emotional safety for the reader and through this, inviting readers ‘to move into a space of not knowing’, which, in the Spinozan sense, the space in which their own creativity may begin to be activated.

Using what I have learned from autofiction I have tried to portray something of the movement within relationality, through which we experience both our connectedness and our separateness, and which is connection/separation. There is theory within the text that speaks to this, e.g. references to Derrida to Irigaray, but the intention is more to encourage within the reader a recognition of the deep entanglement of various scenes that the characters inhabit, even when they experience themselves choosing to move at random (to a gallery perhaps), or are forced in a direction by circumstance (to work or to form or dismantle (de-form?) a relationship maybe).

The process of interweaving the activities of fictioning and psychotherapy-ing has afforded me a vision of how psychotherapy can make use of the imaginary and allows me to feel oriented while moving between real and imaginary domains of experience with clients. I have begun working more explicitly with the unconscious, shadows, flights of fantasy, phantasy, and the notion that much of the work of therapy is happening outside of the awareness of either therapist or client. The therapists’ focus on regulation of the client through a rhythmic attunement (akin to the narrative threading of a plot) manifested in both bodies, and in the way the relationship is framed (akin to the story structure), is what brings shape to the whole of someone, their free and creative capacities informing their rational and material aspects and vice versa. If every therapy relationship tells a different story, each can be understood as a fictioning process.

As ‘therapy fiction’ the weight given to the therapist’s process, both internal and external, contextualises the therapeutic encounter itself in a way that flavours that exploration of the client’s relations, the assumptions about, and of, heteronormativity and so on, within a social climate that is shifting. While the work does not attempt to interpret the social milieu it does seek to portray experience as psycho-social. The main characters are navigating a phallocentric culture without the requisite equipment and are vulnerable to old tropes like insanity when they do not conform. More than that, they are vulnerable to annihiation by the objectifying gaze that lacks (in)sight into the real person. The characters are continually saving themselves, or hanging loose in obscurity at the margins of a more public life. I hope readers will pick up on this and continue the work of sense-making for themselves.

I cannot speak to all trainings and modalities, but from what I see and know of the field, there is growing recognition that trying to isolate the work of self-analysis from the social context is
no longer a tenable endeavour; the assumptions about selfhood and the claims to be apolitical are themselves aligned with an ethically dubious, propagandist and cult-like idea of what it is to be human. This leads to the aim or analytic outcome being one of accepting and coming to terms with one’s positioning within a social structure that is no longer sustainable and whose claim to ‘reality’ is being and must be further loosened. This idea of moving in relation, the two-way (and many more) process of interconnection between self and other, inner and outer worlds, is made visible in the text, although the work of sense-making is in the hands of the reader. Raymond Mar’s work on how literary fiction builds empathy and social understanding in the reader by leaving sufficient ambiguity in the text for the reader to have to do some work of sensemaking by inference, influenced my choices around how much work to do as author and how much to leave to the reader, though whether I have the balance right remains to be seen.

Along with a sense of presence with the position of therapist as a role that is donned and doffed by the main protagonist in the context of her ongoing being, trainees may appreciate the example of how theory can come into relation with lived experience and become integrated as a supportive presence that enriches and enlivens the reflective process. As a tutor at a small psychotherapy training institute, much of my time is spent trying to bring this sense of theory as a provoking and invigorating resource that can be drawn on, or moved with, in creative and experimental ways. This aim of befriending, thinking and feeling with theory is an example of the posthuman turn which is as yet underdeveloped within psychotherapy education – theory itself as a more than human entity with which we may experience encounter, encounter that alters us, that helps us find a sense of recognition, of being seen and known, so that we may feel a sense of our own edges, that need being met through the paradoxical recognition that we exist only through, only as, relation.

This philosophical shift is not yet fully embodied within psychotherapy theory or practice, though dialogic gestalt and intersubjective systems theory capture it within the human context, there remains an absence of recognition of the non-human within the psychotherapy literature influencing trainings, and an ongoing need for an integrating philosophical position, alongside a need to move on from hierarchical training structures that refuse to reflect on their own positioning. The idea of psychotherapy as a form of education has not yet landed in the mainstream of psychotherapy education. For me, the work’s embodiment of theory was vitally important, as it invites a different kind of learning through direct engagement with the reader/trainee/qualified practitioner.

Autofiction could be to the internal world of the therapy practitioner what autoethnography is to the social and cultural researcher – it offers a relational bridge between the (conscious) lived experience of the author and the (unconscious) elements of selfhood, accessible through imaginative and creative play of all kinds. I think of imaginary numbers, necessary to the formation of fractal patterns in mathematics: an abstraction, yet nature is made of fractals. To map reality mathematically, we have to use concepts that have no place in the real. Imagination likewise acts as a proxy space for real, lived experience, and I no longer feel it as a leap of faith to acknowledge the necessity of attending to the unreal parts of experience in order to understand how the real world works. Structures, like autofiction or the setting of the therapeutic encounter, can give the unconscious a form within which to emerge in the real or the conscious.
Elucidating the linkages between posthumanism, psycho-social studies, fictional narratives and psychotherapeutic training and practice will be for me the subject of ongoing writing and inquiry. For the trainee or practitioner reading this text now, and indeed, for any reader interested in fiction and psychotherapy, there is invitation and opportunity to take whatever is personally meaningful and enlightening from the text. It could be a description of how it may be to separate from everyday life and enter into the role of therapist, or it could be references to theorists, thinkers, artists, authors of all kind that invite further depthful inquiry. It could be the musical references that resonate, evoking the temporality of the surfer’s journey to the reflecting snorkeler. It is not my role to assert the meaning or value of this text upon another reader, but rather to offer whatever permission is needed to allow them to trust their own sense making and move on with their lives. This work is its own invitation now, and will waltz and swing its own dialogic dance with whoever chooses to journey with it for a spell, each one passing through their own way.

Notes

Abstract


Act One

Geminani, 1746.
Lucian Freud, see image credits for details.
Telotte, 2014.
ibid: 120-1.
McCarthy, 2015
McCarthy, 2005.
Curtis, 2016.
Rushing, 2017.
ibid.
Fisher 2012:12.
Koestler, 1967.
Ibid:4-5.
Merleau-Ponty 430.
Dvorák, 2016.
Act Two

[3] image from PicClick UK.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.
[22] (O’Sullivan 20xx).
Act Three

**xc** Cusk, 2001.
**xci** Massumi, 2014.
**xcii** Frederici, 2018:1.
**xciii** Butler, 2011: 42.
**xciv** Müller-Westernamm & Vuong, 2015:145.
**xcv** See Image credits: The Hayward Gallery Shop. Louise Bourgeois. Space Shifters Exhibition
**xcvi** Space Shifters exhibition, 2018-9.
**xcvii** Alicja Kwade, 2017.
**xcviii** Elbow, 2017.
**xcix** Kapoor, 2016.
**ci** Kapoor, 2002.
**ci** Haraway, 2003
**cii** Lather 2012.
**civ** see Bakhtin, 1929.
**cix** Tronick et al. 1978.
**cx** Francis Bacon Studio, Dublin
**cx** Wikipedia contributors, "Crucifixion (Francis Bacon, 1965)"
**cxi** Irigaray, 2017.
**cxi** Kristeva, 1984:3-4.
**cxi** Portishead 1994.
**cxi** Porter, 2021.
**cxi** Barad, 2008.
**cxi** Irigaray 2017.
**cxi** Perry, 2017.
**cxi** Mahlouji, 2019.
**cxi** Eno, 2018.
**cxi** Winnicott, 1965:187.
**cxi** Ibid.

Act Four

**cvi** Martin, 2015.
An activist group focused on men’s rights in family law matters; in this context a link to the wider ‘manosphere’ is implied. See Johanssen, 2021, for more.

Barth, 1984.
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Dvorak, 2016.
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Wilde, 1897.
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Carroll, 1864.
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Act Five

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a play on Solnit, 2020.
The true source is Hemingway’s 1926: “How did you go bankrupt?” Bill asked. “Two ways,” Mike said. “Gradually and then suddenly.”
A reference to Amitav Ghosh.
Porter in Riley, 2019:8.
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George Floyd was murdered in Minneapolis on 25th May 2020 by a police officer. His last words were ‘I can’t breathe’.
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thank you Timothy O’Neill http://www.timothyoneill.ie/about.html for the turn of phrase.
Akhavan, 2021.
Dolphijn, 2021:146.
Ibid.
Morcheeba, 2021.

Post Script: Meditation

e.g. Eliot, 1876.
Jones, 1953.
Thanks to Ken Gale, personal correspondence, for the reflection.
Fanon, 1952.
Braidotti, 2014: 171
Winnicott, 1960.
Braidotti, 2013:12.
As a complete beginner at fiction writing, I used the most well-known (to Western readers) structure and plot device for this, my first attempt, leaning heavily on Yorke, 2013, for guidance.
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Acmade 16mm Compeditor image found on PicClick UK https://picclick.co.uk/Film-Editing-Equipment-Vintage-Acmade-16mm-Compeditor-152980703368.html [Accessed 15 Aug 2022]

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The Hayward Gallery shop image is from The Hayward Gallery website. Available at: https://www.southbankcentre.co.uk/visit/shopping [Accessed 4 Sep 2022].


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