

Spleen

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The Oxford Literary Journal

Featuring poetry, short stories, essays, translations and song writing from Oxford's creative talent



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Cover image: Catania, Sicily –
Alexander Darby

Definition of 'Spleen' - Le
Nouveau Petit Robert, 2009

Poetry

Daybed on Sterling

The torso lies like a woman's,
curved and slender on the north facing daybed.

The stomach is greyer,
resigned to the sweating mattress.

Quieter than a woman's,
and indifferent to manipulation.

I kneel before his daybed:
the makeshift aid station on Sterling Place,
facing the old savings bank and the bedlam of Flatbush,
whose easterly tendrils grab the basins of the Atlantic.

I come in the afternoon,
when the summer light coats the daybed and the torso.

My gloved hand steadies the flank,
but the curve lifts and falls,
to the tempo of the others,
who have entered the body and left
the forerunner of a changeling.

I place a jar of water against my neck,
bowing my head with gratitude as I begin.

"Am I hurting you?" I ask,
without recourse if he nods.

My fingers sweep across the back,
inspecting his color,
searching in the bouts of hair and freckles,
for newfound deformities.

The aged pine floor,
uneven in its planks,
coarse in its grain,
bulges into my knees,
along with his last ten years.

The torso twitches as my fingers remove
the last remnants of dressing.

"Am I hurting you?" I ask,
but he's fallen asleep,
twitching to the humidity and his dreams.

A drop of sweat falls onto the curve,
paused like an extension of his skin.

My fingers hover above my error,
waiting for absolution,
and in its absence, evaporation.

For the last part of the dressing I wake him.

"Will you lift your back?" I ask him,

placing a pillow beneath it so the curve disappears,

and the body of a man reemerges,

flat and primed for fingers.

I push a towel beneath the body to catch the urine.

The first drop misses the towel,

and I stare at the spot

on the daybed,

astonished by the blatancy of its rebellion.

"An inch to the right," I say.

"A centimeter to the left."

He stirs and asks me why I've stopped,

so I point toward the drop of urine

behind his back.

I scrub his side clean,

brush my hands over my work,

praising the efficiency of it all.

"It's over," I tell him.

He raises his sluggish bones from the daybed,

and I, my knees from the pine,

speckled now with the heads of pennies and gravel.

"It's all a little Job like, don't you think?"

I say, and he smiles.

I walk down Sterling,

toward home,

away from that makeshift aid station,

south of Flatbush and west of the sea.

where dusk has usurped the summer light.

Nika di Liberto Sabasteanski

Glory

I saw Glory once. Dripping off the tongue of a Prehistoric archangel spewing post-prophetic poetry like it were a second language, begging in monotones for the matriculation of an order amongst men that exists not only in the fountain of a blind man's song, but swims through the rush and whirl of humanity, existing as an inherent pleasure, to be enjoyed and taken for granted by all.

I saw Glory once. A silver dollar skirting around the rim of a Texan oil well, accompanied by the sounds of a choir of sun-soaked children whose voices rise and rise as the dollar sinks until there are no more notes to reach and they go silent as metal meets metal and rings like the bell at Alamo. What once nourished and allowed this land to breed and scatter and grow strong has become nothing more than a holy book on which no man may lay his hand and swear truth. Come rain, come hail, come hell fire, come china and all the forces of the orient. We will crumble and kiss the feet of those more bold than ourselves. Carry your bags of gold, your worldly possessions, bring the sceptre you stole from the tattooed mystic who sleeps behind the convenience store. Bring the Indian skull that sleeps beneath your basement floor that you keep as an aid to a distorted vision that this country was not built upon the bloodshed by the innocent man as a victim to an aggressor with no more desire for the pursuit of knowledge than him, but simply a willingness to use that knowledge in a different way.

Where we're going there are no flags for sale. You cannot subscribe to the ideas that meet at this place in the universe where blind human ambition meets the forces of good on a one way street at the corner of time and less time. Your children who sang in the desert choir now sleep tight in their warm unassuming beds encloded in the imported cloths of eternity. May they dream

just a little longer.

I saw Glory once. Tucked into the back pocket of an American in Paris in 1920. The nine fingered handshake that allowed the rumbling ground in the east to open producing a symphony with no key but an all-enchanting melody. And as we sit, bathed in the eastern aromas of expensive cigar smoke in the cafes of our own self-inflicted indifference, we hum along as though the vibrations on our tongues that spawned the very dawn of man are now just mere pawns on the chessboard of the universe, standing on the beach at Omaha fingers stretching to form a triangle with the early evening stars as a rain of gunfire rips through our naked bodies and as our knees greet the floor we smile with content for we know we have played our part in the advent of a greater good.

I saw Glory once. Carved into the rear of a bench in congress by the illegal immigrant who cleans the water fountain and fills the towel dispenser and he asks for nothing in return but the freedom that his diaphragm desires to speak the musings that line his life-blood like saliva through a brass instrument which calls to end a one-hundred year war. He is sweet and he is kind. But he is not safe, for he has dreams. A philosophy which lives in a single moment of time, and that resounds around these hollow walls, breaking through the imaginary dome of fortuitous self-opinion which surrounds our countries' leaders, parting their liquor inspired waltz of lust and lechery like the Red Sea. His message simple and his motive pure, they cut him down like a dog in the street, for 'he looks not like us, you see his skin and his teeth, are stained, and there's no cash when there is no deceit'.

I saw Glory once. On a hill outside of a Roman city, through the eye of a transcendental megaphone which provided the user with the voice of God. I saw Glory once. Through the eye of a teenager who lies dying between the east and the western wall. I've seen glory once. In a field of no nationality. Where two separate peoples of separate faiths, beliefs, languages, who don't even know how to walk in line make their way towards each other with each step quicker than the last. There are no guns and no documents, but two halves of one whole righteous good. They are running now and as they quicken they chant as if no other words exist: love is real. Love is real. No longer do we persecute each other for what our fathers have done. No longer do we fight like animals under the shadow of foreboding night to gain a piece of meat for ourselves that could feed two men. Instead we share. Share in the beauty, and the darkness. Share in the drought and the harvest. Share in the belief that we have a common purpose. Share in the pursuit of knowledge. Share in the ambition that on our dying day, when the sky opens and we walk towards our final place we will know we did the best we could by our fellow man and we will see the glory.

Nicholas Hampson

Canto

Sunlight shimmers, pale gold on skin, disturbing slumber.
Sheets pool at my feet, toes dipped in Atlantic blue.
I blink, reborn into a new day, and I wonder

Across this city does the same sun shine on you?
Did we stir in symmetry to greet the new morning,
To proceed, ships led by a common star? Or do

We live a life ungoverned, drifting, with no warning
Colliding, random debris in the vast machine
Of the universe. I stretch out, lazy, yawning,

And think: perhaps the sun's furthest reach has not been
Yet to your bed, or danced light on your closed eyelids.
Or perhaps you rose too early, and have not seen

Dawn pierce the horizon, or when the bright sun's rise rid
The sky of darkness and the night. But still I wish
Across the span of the city we might linked lives live.

Somewhere in this city, this moment, lovers kiss.
Somewhere, new lovers will join in mutual passion.
Somewhere in this city, are you, you who I miss.

Oh, if only you could - like the god - in the fashion
Of light come to me, constant and fast at my side.
Unworried by forces unseen that now would ration

Our hours with increasing scarcity, then divide
Us, not by tempests too fierce and raging to weather,
But the tedious ebb and flow of duty's tide.

Don't talk to me of love, and I won't say forever.
We've infinite futures, and not infinite time.
But to pledge my short days to your days, I'll endeavour
If you will condescend to join your nights with mine.

Bethan Roberts

Bacchante – by Bethan Roberts

Last night I saw the world swirl around me
I felt the spin of its daily progression;
The jagged fragments of reality
Blurred to a canvas showing vague impressions
Of wine and talk and whispered indiscretions -
Impulses of the time forgot at dawn.
We lived in an Arcadian regression:
Now I have woken from the dream and mourn
The sense of childish wonder and of hope reborn.

The loss of joy is something like a death
And when the chill of day glanced on my cheek
It was a corpse's rasping rattled breath.
Perhaps it is that life is sharply bleak
Considered in opposition to how
I was then in that trance so unlike now,
When I danced and talked and could not speak
For laughing and then making giggling vows,
Snatches of remembrance make me feel weak
In the dull, grey aftermath of elation's peak.

Perhaps the rapture was just an illusion,
A phantasmic distraction from the sorrow,
That gathers, as for a fatal conclusion,
Accumulating each turn to the morrow
Of the earth through vast space's gaping hollow.
Universal mechanisms proceed
As certain as the southern swoops of swallows
Always to the tragic. Therefore our need
To forget truth in fits is essential deceit.

Bethan Roberts

At Night

Eventually, your mouth finds mine –
Yet only after searching my heaving length and breadth.
My frantic fingers curl up, relieved,
In the bed they've found in your hair.
Your hands, after a hard day's work,
Hunker down, clasped tight around my middle.
Our legs intertwine like the love-laced boughs,
Of the ever-inseparable honeysuckle and hazel...
It is dark; and we, with breaths relenting, lie still.

Stephanie Carey

Capital

*"How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
Your loop'd and window'd raggedness, defend you
From seasons such as these?"*

– King Lear, III.IV; Shakespeare

By morning's clear light we learn these names – *Birdcage, Goldhawk, Mortimer*. In this city's heart houses lean and teem, streets run into each other with talk of mutual friends. To walk down Victoria is to join a conversation armed with your name and nation, and the weather. Slowly, we become used to the stuff of introductions: grace, laughter, mispronunciation. But the weeks do not change some basic facts. We gain notice by not alighting at Leicester; *half-two* is still funny on the tongue.

Afternoons are filled with the absence of corners where we are stopped, or asked if we have eaten. The homeless begin their shifts. We count eleven on Oxford Street, fixed as if at intervals, as many as cyclists that pass in a minute. Neither at home nor in a hurry, we veer through stores, until stale warmth steers us out into the cold. Then the night comes. In the less distinguishable dark we find dinner, and our way back east. The buses are full

of invisible crowd. We sleep, and no-one stares.

Days like this, to make home in a permeable city,
we talk to roads, and number the poor. It is not
always like this. Occasionally the heating will fail,
and we go to the library or boil water for a bath.
It is October, and soon we will have to make new
plans, also fix the crack in the door. But for now
these hours are ours, and a city whose distance
is neither our call nor calling. It will be less than
enough, even, to *call it home*. Except on days
that are like this, when that is all there is.

Theophilus Kwek

Night

Merton Street

*"Far over the misty mountains cold
To dungeons deep and caverns old
We must away, ere break of day,
To claim our long-forgotten gold."*

- Tolkien, The Hobbit

Because dark comes at three, we happen
to find each other in the kitchen, hungry
on a Sunday evening. You've been reading,
and bring with the rice and peas a copy
of the *Aeneid*, weighed open on the table.
I've got a plate, some pastry to be heated,
and a pair of hands to do the dishes with.
You volunteer to cook. As the meal is made
we talk about where we're from, and think
we're headed, but that doesn't take long
and the mood is wrong. So we start again:
about where I've been that weekend, both
our families, the microwave that won't close.
It's awkward, but it's fine when we laugh;
by the time we eat we've known each other
for years. Outside, the tramping headlights
pass our windows, all fogged with draught,
turn to fill the dark road, then are gone.
This is nice, I say – because it is – but leave
untold: what it is to be back in this eccentric
city, held close by the cold, and after days
spent walking, in search of familiar things,

here in this kitchen beneath the street to eat
and be filled as if not, all along, to have left.
To have, in this way, this small, cobbled heat,
ere break of day. The difference this makes.

Theophilus Kwek

Insomnia

-I-

Where in the incredible world
did you derive your tusks, balalaika player?
They grew out of your head like ears of corn as white as
the pregnant moon.

And the streetlights had all gone out
(it was close to dawn)
when you parted from your girlfriend on the corner
the traffic was going by and Sirius the dog star saw you
and told me.
She was like a dandelion or so I hear
pale and contentious
and blowing smoke between the 'o' of her lips
which floated into the air and hovered
and mixed with the early morning mist
like cobwebs on the lamp posts.

-II-

Above the bell towers
if you can't sleep
don't even consider the old wives remedies they tell you about
florid jasmine smoke blowing up
of incense
to anoint this town
(which isn't really a city)

and if you were in doubt about their
efficacy
turn up your music loud
and swallow twice the recommended
blue lumps of asphalt

and when all else fails
remember
that the tiger spirits will be running amok
long before dawn.

-III-

I'm in the pale tonight
and my feet are freezing
they look like jelly flapping helplessly under the blanket
or skinned fish in the freezer
that someone forgot.

The angels are coming at midnight
to bring out the stars
with the power of holy water
and cyanide explosives.

But I won't be there to see them
through the deep frost that the rain
has left on my eyelids.

Miriam Gordis

Short Stories

Meet Yourself Coming – by Nicole Williams

The first time I saw him, I was barely five, and he was an old, old man.

I was sitting on the paving with my back against the dining hall wall, less than a month into school and already hating it. If I knew the way, I think I'd have been out the school gates and halfway to home by now.

A pair of feet stepped into view. I looked up, expecting the teacher, come to take me back in. But she had been wearing a skirt, hadn't she? Not faded blue jeans. Instead, high above my head, bright blue eyes smiled at me from a papery, wrinkled face, beneath snowy-white brows.

"Alright, kid?"

The words *I'm not allowed to talk to strangers* hovered by my tongue for a moment, but I let them go. He didn't seem strange. Or, if anything was strange, it was the way he seemed so very familiar.

He turned away from me, and I frowned. Was that it? He was going now? But he leaned back against the wall and, very slowly, his jacket snagging on the rough bricks, he lowered himself to the floor beside me, and groaned.

"That's more like it," he said, looking sidelong at me. I looked sidelong back, trying to stare without staring.

"Feels rubbish, doesn't it?" he said, and I looked around properly, blinking. Did he mean-? "They can be right bastards, kids."

He stared off into the distance. I couldn't tell whether he was looking at or through the wall of the building opposite.

"I'm not going to tell you 'it gets better'. But I will say this," and now he looked around, right at me, and smiled. "You only get one of these, one time to be you. So don't go letting some kid stomp around telling you how to do it, ok?"

Very slowly, I nodded.

"So, back to the classroom?" he asked – and he really did seem to be asking.

I nodded again, and got slowly to my feet. And then I paused for a moment, looking at him, wondering how to say *thank you*.

He smiled again – a big grin of amusement this time.

"Don't worry about it."

I nodded once more – like one of those dogs they put in car windows – and turned around, and trotted back to my classroom.

Tick.

I didn't think of him again while I was at primary school, and I didn't see him again until I was sixteen, all gangly limbs and exam stress.

He was about twenty-one at the time, and just those five years leant an incredible amount of difference between us. Where my chin was still smooth, he had the stubbly beginnings of a too-lazy-to-shave beard; where my limbs appeared to be held together by luck and elastic, he was filled out and in control.

The eyes were the same, though – and for some years I tried to attribute the way I knew him at once to their sparkle.

He didn't come at a particularly key moment. I was mooching along the high street, trying to shake the nagging feeling that I ought to be locked up in my room

with a stack of textbooks, when my shoulder thudded into someone coming the other way. I sprang back, apologies on my tongue-tip – and it was him.

“Alright, mate?”

I nodded, slowly, speechless. He grinned – the same grin, even with the silly beard.

“I’m sorry, I got to dash,” he said, “But listen – Lincoln, Lincoln’s a nice place, right? Remember that.”

He clapped me on the shoulder, grinned again – and then he was gone, leaving stunned sixteen-year-old me blinking in surprise, and nodding slightly at no one.

Tick.

He didn’t show up when I passed my GCSEs, or when I kissed my first boyfriend shortly after. He didn’t show all through sixth form – not when I was agonising over university choices (and remembering his words, picking one or two to match). He wasn’t there when Lincoln College, Oxford rejected me in one of the most miserable winters of my teenage life, or when Lincoln University accepted me just a month later.

I did see him the next year, on the day I moved up to Lincoln. He didn’t say anything – just held the door for me as I struggled to haul my suitcase from the car to my shiny new room. I nodded to him, and he smiled back, and that was all that was needed.

Tick.

Our paths crossed often enough, but not particularly predictably. I saw him three times during my uni years – held a door for him, ran into a lanky teenage him in the street, picked him up out of the gutter after a particularly wild party. But when I left, it was near to ten years before I saw him again – a chill and casual forty-something, lounging on the bar in an old pub back home. I offered to buy him a drink, but he said he had to dash.

“Before I go, though, one thing,” he said, and I nodded, as ever. “The guy in London. Stick with him, yeah?”

I nodded, he smiled, and we parted ways. At the time, I knew just three people in London – and two of them were girls. The guy I had met just the once, at a party of a friend of a friend, but I filed the idea away in the back of my mind, where Lincoln had sat for five years once upon a time.

Tick.

I found the guy in London a few years later, after a handful of false starts and confusions – there are a lot of men in London. He was there, on and off, of course, walking into me at work, in bars, in the supermarket. And when I moved back home, bought a house with my London guy, we walked into each other just as often – on the train into work, in the street, in my local. He offered me a drink, once or twice, but I never felt comfortable accepting. Ours were not the long conversations; ours were the nod and smile in the street, the two lines of greeting as we walked on by.

I was glad he offered, though.

Tick.

The last time I saw him, he was barely five, and I was an old, old man.

My old school had been closed, these five years past, and the buildings earmarked for snazzy redevelopments. But planning permissions being the way they are, the school still stood on the day I wandered up to it.

Getting in was no problem for someone who'd spent so many summer lunchtimes getting out, though my knees were creakier than they had been back then. I shuffled through the abandoned playground, feeling almost like a ghost already.

There, the old dining hall stood, grey and graffiti-ed with its roof all buckled. I stopped by its wall, and ran a hand slowly over the bricks, feeling the roughness snag on my too-dry skin. Then I lifted my hand from the wall, and let it fall to my side once more.

I looked down, and there he was, so small and out of place. I took one step closer, and up he looked, surprise and guilt written all across his face.

I couldn't help it. I smiled.

"Alright, kid?"

Tick.

Society for Cerebral Conversation – by Francis Blagburn

Leon Schroeder's Society for Cerebral Conversation

I am sitting opposite a rotund man who is telling me about why learning to dive in Thailand is a bad idea and why his guesthouse on Koh Samui went bust and why he moved back in with his ex-wife Simone and why he just can't stand her.

As I nod, he stares at me with bloodshot basset hound eyes, hot breath flooding my face, the red spider veins in his cheeks seemingly flushed with anticipation.

I stand and utter a cursory goodbye and drift to the next table where I am engaged in conversation by a scruffy haired student, (first year Ruskin?), in a paint-stained blue smock.

'You smell great', I say earnestly, skipping small-talk, referencing his smattering of cologne.

'Thank you. My girlfriend works in a perfume shop on Cowley Road, and she gives me discounted goods as surprise presents.'

I imagine his girlfriend.

'That's wonderful. I wish I had a girlfriend', I say sincerely, to which he remains silent, his lips twitching, searching for a reply. I feign indifference but am acutely aware that what I just said was egregious. 'Well, I better stand up and go to the next table.' I say, and shuffle.

Waiting there is a woman. She is maybe 10 years older than me, around 30, with low-hanging drowsy eyelids and a non-committal grin framed with scarlet lipstick. There are no pleasantries; I dive straight into a potted history of Napoleon as represented in the pictorial image. I explain how I 'really really like' the ambiguity in his face, and abstractly describe his 'blackish aura' which

she says he recognises having seen some pictures of him in a gallery in London and on the internet. I can't feel if she's bored or not by what I am telling her, but decide to continue talking. When she starts telling me about her time working in a hospital in the Philippines I realise she has the sort of slow, textured voice that gives me goose bumps.

The Society for Cerebral Conversation was established in post-war London by the sociologist Leon Schroeder. The impetus was Schroeder's simple desire to unite strangers in a metropolitan environment so that new relationships might blossom and ferment in unconventional fora. The society spread across Europe, Asia and North America, and the University of Oxford is just one of hundreds of companies and educational establishments that regularly provide a platform for the society and its pop-up events. As well as uniting 'town and gown' in Oxford, the society also provides a pressure valve for jaded students to escape the endless circuit of cocktail evenings and law-firm-sponsored-organized-fun. There is no dress code. There is a conversational menu patrons can choose from, but I and most others usually shun this in favour of organic conversation. It is not speed-dating.

At 23:00 I find myself in a car with Louise and her husband, whose name I don't know but I internally nickname 'McCoy'. He broods behind the wheel while Louise and I continue our conversation, which has preserved its previous style: she gives her piece, I give mine, but no conclusions need be drawn. I am going to her flat on the pretence of 'drugs' though I do not take drugs and am just looking for a way to spend a Friday night. We pick up some wine from a massive Sainsbury's I didn't even know existed.

At the flat we all three lie down on the bed. McCoy pours some wine for Louise before topping up his own glass, and then mine. He saunters over towards the window and takes a drag of his cigarette and we discuss our trip to Sainsbury's and the ubiquity of self-service machines, paying special attention to the phrase 'Unexpected item in bagging area', and the endless patience of staff 'who must hear that, like, all the time'. Louise asks McCoy if he likes unexpected items and he doesn't know how to take it, (neither do I but I laugh, feeling the warm fuzz of the claret) and suddenly become aware that my laugh is reaching fever pitch and that I am probably an irritating presence in McCoy's evening. All the same I am drinking wine, I am happy, and it is funny, so I take a big sup and laugh some more. He holds his cigarette low and lifting his gaze, turns around and says, 'Yes, I suppose.'

Louise and I clink glasses and drink more of the lovely wine.

'Are my lips stained?' I ask.

'No,' she lies.

I walk over to McCoy, emboldened by the alcohol and determined to make amends.

'What sort of music do you like?'

He glances at me, and I realise we're the same height.

'I like all sorts of things, Josh. I like jazz, classical, pop. I have eclectic tastes.'

My name's not Josh and I find it odd that he said that.

'Eclectic tastes. Same.'

There's a pause, and I wonder back to the bed, collapsing down on the white sheets and resting my head on Louise's shoulder. 'He has eclectic tastes', I report.

At 02:00 without having taken any drugs I drift near sleep, aware only of the fleeting light of Martin's cigarette ends, and his glass of wine, untouched on the windowsill refracting the glow of a street light. I look up at the latticework on the ceiling, and then back at McCoy, who now has Louise stood by him, supping wine. They're talking and I can't hear what they're saying.

I spend the morning wandering around the flat. Matt and Zoe had left by the time I awoke, but the idea of them was already distant in my mind. I had nothing to do so I lay motionless for around half an hour. I slept in my clothes and feel empty and achy, my head flat and dull and my feet numb. My iPod is still playing the third MGMT album on repeat and I look out the window and see cars doing 30 and residents walking beneath a wistful grey sky. There are road-works at the end of the street and a pneumatic drill whirring, workmen staring down into a black void they'd opened in the road. I envisage going back to my room, or going to a library, or buying a magazine and sitting in a café, or a park, maybe people watching. Instead I sit cross legged in front of Zoe and Mark's CD selection, which is alphabetized and stacked at floor level. I put on a U2 record and lay back, my legs still crossed, staring at the criss-cross ceiling with heavy air baring down on my face, listening to 'Stuck in a Moment', (or maybe 'With Or Without You').

In the kitchen I open a drawer of miscellaneous things: a spatula, a rolling pin, a garlic crusher. I stare into it listlessly, giving each item a cursory glance. I look at a photo on the wall of the couple smiling, embracing, on a white background. 'None of this is my stuff', I think, rifling through a draw in the living room containing writing paper and passport photos, noticing the rain outside, feeling suddenly very thirsty. I drink direct from the gushing tap and think about a couple I spoke to before the man with the spider veins, who had told me about their adopted son and seemed lovely but spoke condescendingly about my degree, and had made jokes about how at least I'd be able to analyse the packaging on the litter I was picking up for the council.

I look around and suddenly feel the dead weight on my shoulders that I'm going to have to build all this, my own little empire of television licenses and filing cabinets and gas bills, and jazz, classical, pop records that mirror my eclectic tastes. Suddenly everything feels stained by my hangover: heavy, dry and finite. I pull the door behind me as I leave and walk through the rain which hammers against my flickering eyes, sticking my shirt to my skin and my trousers to my knees. I think about the bath I'll have when I get back – warm and comforting, simple. I pass a police station and consider handing myself in but realise I have not committed a crime. I continue walking and concentrate on the feeling of rain against my face which begins to feel like a remedy to the stodgy warmth that surrounds my head. To pass time I see how long I can walk with my eyes shut. Around the fourth step each time I feel the presence of something right in front of my face and open my eyes to find nothing there. I

try it again and force myself to keep them shut, but each time they open, as if they are being controlled by some external force.
'I'm so bored', I think to myself, feeling a sense of intense satisfaction as I catch a tasteless raindrop on my tongue.

No Beginning without an End- by Leonie Hentrup

A single drop landed on my open hand. It was the first sign of an enduring rainstorm. The water fell on me two hours straight. For two hours I did not move an inch. I stood there, motionless, and simply stared at the water. I could hardly see anything. Nevertheless my eyes were focused on one particular place as though hypnotized. Not that there had been anything of special interest. No – I was looking into pure void. There simply was not anything I wanted to look at. My head was roaring when it finally stopped raining. I picked up a stone. The sharp edges cut into my palms, and I threw it with full force into the unusually rough waves. For the first time ever I did not feel connected to the sea in any way. The beach had always been kind of a refuge for me; the sea calmed me down and mirrored my anger and despair. I had expected the farewell, saying goodbye to the sea, to be hard. Everything else I was entirely happy to leave behind, but not my little place by the shore. But then, everything used to be different. So there I was, standing, soaking wet, and suddenly I felt uncomfortable. This was no longer my place, and I knew it, just like the sea did. I would leave. It let me go. I turned away with relief. I would never have been able to leave all by myself. I needed the sea to let me go.

It was five to five when I reached the station, still drenched. Seven minutes to go. My train was on time, and when I saw how it left the coast and my home further and further away, something deep inside me became free and once more I felt infinite relief. Suddenly it was obvious I would never return here. I had been given a new opportunity, or rather I had given myself a new opportunity. And I would use it. I had found the idea in a book. It was about a man who was popular amongst everyone and happy with his daily routine until one day it occurred to him that he actually was not even close to true happiness. So he packed up his

things and ran away. He found what he needed, fell in love and lived a happy life. This was without the old safety of his constant routine and without his old popularity. His friends became fewer, but they were true friends.

Somehow I felt connected to this man. I had never held the illusory belief that I had been happy or pleased, but I too wanted more of my life and felt the urge to change something. Maybe I would not meet the love of my life, or at least, not right away like Mark, the character in the book, but I could at least take charge of my own life and succeed in something. It had never been a problem for me that I was generally not liked. I had had so many girlfriends, but as soon as they got to know me better they would distanced themselves from me. The relationship I had with my parents, the urge to be alone...the women simply did not understand such things. I did not have a secure job, my apartment (if you could call it that at all) was always a mess and my favorite occupation was to enjoy a beer with my daily joint. I could hardly blame anyone not to be too keen on spending time with a loser like me.

As soon as I had realized what the problem was, I really had wanted to remedy it. The intention had really been there. But it is difficult to change when the rest of the world sees you as that person you want to change out of. People do not want you to change, they gave up on you a long time ago, it seems impossible that you could rise after so long being down. People had not let me change. I had tried, again and again, but each time I had been pushed back into my old mold. But then I had read this book and finally realized that what happened in my life and to me was my very own responsibility. And so, on the very same day, I had gone to the station and bought myself a ticket for the train at 05:02 pm. Then I had gone to the beach. The rain had not been much of a surprise and in its way it had done me good.

A puddle around my feet showed me that I had got much wetter than I had initially thought. My ticket was soaked through, and it was the only thing I had with me. The conductor did not seem too pleased by my appearance but he left me alone with a single derogatory look which he could not repress. I left behind

everything I had ever possessed and everyone I had ever known. For most this would have been a reason to get sentimental. To feel some nostalgia, especially with the decision to never return. Not for me. It was the most beautiful thing that had ever happened to me, and it was the first decision I had taken with full consciousness, the first decision for which I was willing to take full responsibility.

When I left the train I was alone – despite the crowds that surrounded me. Anonymity – nobody knew me or had any expectations or any prejudices against me. I was free, I could start over, I could pretend my previous life had never happened. That night I stayed in a hotel slightly away from the busy city centre. Nothing fancy, but it was clean. I felt the flair of the enormous city around me and it excited me. I spent the next few days looking for somewhere to live and for a job. Though it was not easy I was full of vigour. I was lucky (something completely new for me!) and found a nice flat with a reasonable rent in just a few days. Only the work situation did not look too good. But, with my new optimistic mentality I did not think of giving up. Besides, I had already met some nice people. My neighbour had helped me set up my new home and I had a hunch that she wanted to be more than just friends. I had met two guys at the fitness centre I went to regularly (another new habit of mine) and we had become great mates.

One day I finally gathered the courage to ask my neighbour out. The money I had put aside was slowly but steadily running out; prices in this town were much higher than where I had lived before, but I did not care. On the agreed day I went to the employment office first thing in the morning, intent on finally finding a job. But the only thing I found there were endless forms, a stressed employee who did not seem to care whether I earned any money or not and jobs that required countless qualifications. Whatever you wanted to do, you had to have this experience or that diploma. Filled with anger, I left. The next supermarket was not even 100 yards away. The beer was expensive. Just one, I told myself.

When I reached the restaurant at the arranged time I had already emptied six bottles and had to concentrate in order to walk completely straight. That I had forgotten her name was not due to the alcohol, but rather to my poor memory. I

saw her sitting at a table right at the back of the room and winking cheerfully. I was embarrassed for her to see me like this. A shower would have done me no harm and I had definitely overdone the drinking thing. She realized immediately. For a moment it seemed as though she wanted to leave, but then she stood up, came over, took my hand and led me to the table. She didn't need to ask much, as I told her about my difficulties of finding a job and the resulting frustration at once. She did what no one had ever done for me - she listened, comforted me and gave me courage. She was far too good for me and I knew it. Still - I could not let her go. I needed her.

The evening ended on my new, cheap sofa. With the morning, however, the problems arrived. She started pestering me about where I came from, what I had done before I had come to this city, and so on. These were questions I did not want to answer. My life was supposed to be a fresh start, I did not want to talk about the past. But she insisted on answers. There came a point when I simply could not stand it any longer. I knew she wanted to help me. She kept telling me one could only start over when one had come to terms with the past. And she was right. But this was exactly what frightened me: I could never come to terms with my past. Feeling trapped, I left.

Barely 15 minutes later, I was standing in front of the river. It was very close to my apartment and its tranquillity calmed me down. Water had always helped me. I started to think. I had wanted to turn over a new leaf. I had wanted to leave everything old behind. It was not possible, I realized. Maybe a Mark in a novel could do it, but I could not. I could never leave behind my past completely, but I could not live with it either. I was trapped, could neither move forwards nor backwards. Slowly I went up to the bridge across the river. I walked as though in trance. My life did not help anyone, least of all myself. There was no one who could help me either, not even a nice girl like the one who had spent the night with me. I reached the middle of the bridge. It was early in the morning. There were only a few cars. Nobody looked at me. I looked down, the waves played around the bridge abutments, and I felt good. The old thoughts returned. Nobody could delete his or her past, and no matter how hard I tried, it seemed as though for a moment I could not start over.

The fall felt as though it would last forever. I felt the wind, and suddenly I felt free. Freer than on the train when I had thought I would leave my old life behind. I had not really been free. But this flight *would* enable me to leave my old life behind. I had hardly formed this thought when I felt the water. Icy and sharp, but it was my friend. I smiled silently and, when everything around me turned black, I finally let go of my past. I started all over.

Vera – by Léa Carresse

I'm already awake. I'm trying to put some lipstick on, but my hands tremble and sway past the thickness and wideness of my lips, leaving a trace like blood. I rub it off with the back of my hand, mouth half open and it smears on my teeth. I should look comic but I look almost eerie, the brilliant red the only bright flash of colour amidst my tanned skin, dark eyes and black hair.

Denis is still asleep. I give up with my make-up and close my eyes, inhale deeply, trying to feel his presence from the room next to the one I'm in.

In my mind I delineate the childish contours of his body, the Slavic cheekbones, the Modigliani almond shaped eyes. I think of the purity of his iris, as clear as the Neva in a spring day, when the ice starts to melt and the bodies of the drowned slowly float to the surface.

I love the thinness of his lips, the softness of his smile, the timidity and tenderness in each of his gestures, and his striking beauty. He leaves a scent of innocence, of freshness.

He is twenty, and I am seventeen, but he addresses me in formal Russian and treats me like a nineteenth century aristocrat. He speaks no English and very little French, so we speak in Russian only.

I sense him stirring in the other room, gently, like a silver birch leaf barely rippling in the wind, akin to the peaceful exhalation of the dying.

He opens the door and we're face to face. I love him, and I rush to him and press my mouth to his. Our bodies intertwine. He is life and joy and fresh air and all good things, and with him I feel free and understood and reborn.

I remember the apple orchards in autumn in southern England, and the thundering crash of the sea against cliffs in the distance. And the people around, chatting at a garden party. The people from England, says Denis, they are odd; when they speak, it is always with mental and physical distance. Remember, when Marine tried to kiss the Englishman in her traditional French manner, but he stepped away, horrified and quizzical.

I know now, what he means, though I hadn't realized it before. I had an Englishman once, with faithless eyes and a sanctimonious mouth. He used to be cleverer than I was, and he slowly but surely reined me into his narrow path of existence, dried up my creative resources and attempted to shred away my zest for life. It almost worked.

With Denis, it is different. I fled to Saint Petersburg, and found him, an aspiring actor exiled from Vologda. His lips stroke my hair and his arms encircle my waist. "The belt of your dress is too loose." His voice is hoarse. I make a movement to rectify it but he stops me. "Your hands – they're smudged with lipstick." And then I remember, embarrassed, that I still have the red spilling from my lips to my chin. He laughs gently, seeing me blush, and kisses me again. "Let me get ready," he tells me, and leaves me alone in front of the wide mirror.

It is day, finally; the crystal morning light makes the room glint and sparkle like a new diamond. Denis comes out. He's wearing a clean white shirt and has a cigarette in his mouth, and I tell him to take it out. Stop smoking, I say. He smiles at me, sweetly, and tells me I'm right, but he lights it anyway. Seeing my frown, he takes a puff and presses the cigarette in the ashtray, blowing the smoke through his nose.

"Let's go to the wedding," he comes near to me, brushes my arm as he walks to the door and takes the keys out. Maksim is waiting outside for us, in front of an ex-Soviet building. He is also smoking a cigarette, and his fine Russian face examines us mischievously, with raised eyebrows.

We drive off, to some countryside. Saint Petersburg in spring is damp and cold, and a cough rattles my lungs and throat, so that as we stop for a moment a babushka angrily shouts at Denis and Maksim for not looking after me properly.

Maksim says I look drawn, pale, and much thinner since I arrived in September. That may be. But inside I feel vigorous and beautiful like the sea in the South, a sea like melted silver. Denis showed me pictures of himself there when he was but a little child.

We arrive slightly late to the wedding, but no one notices. They are all slightly tipsy, tipsy with good thick wine, with the virginal icy air, the rich food, the wild surroundings, the delicate tinkling of gold ornaments on girls' throats and breasts. The boys laugh and joke and talk too loudly and kiss the squealing girls and wrap their long braids around their necks.

I join them, running and screaming with laughter, my nostrils dilated, inhaling the acrid smell of earth, and my white dress becomes muddied. Strong arms suddenly grasp my waist and my breath remains caught in my throat. I gasp and cough violently.

It is Nikita; he apologetically releases his grasp and his green eyes ask me if I am alright. I nod. Nikita was the first Russian I met here. It was before I could

express myself in his language properly, so we communicated through glances and gestures, creating our own form of intercourse, some kind of hallowed communion. It doesn't bother Denis that I have this sacred, unique link with another man. He lets me alone, lets me stray and wander and explore, for he knows I shall always come back to him. He knows and respects that I am my own being, and is under no illusion that we are fundamentally bound by anything more than a fickle emotion and fleshly ties.

A booming voice cries to all of us from across the field. A slender table, with a huge white cloth embroidered with gold thrown on it, is set near a garden grille with stars of Bethlehem. It's beautiful, and yet there is something wonderfully tragic wafting through the whole scene. A few drops of rain land on the open petals, become entangled in the wide spider webs, looking like strings of pearls.

The groom and another man are to be blindfolded and go under the table. All the women and girls are to hitch their skirts to their knees. The groom needs to feel each pair of knees and guess which one belongs to his bride. The other man must do the same, only for his lover. If he gets it right, then he must marry his lover now, at the same time as the groom.

Everyone is tipsy and bubbly like sparkling wine now, so they all laugh and think it an excellent idea. I gather my skirts high up, so everyone sees my long legs, and traipse through the mess of the field. They are choosing the man now, the one who will play the game with the groom.

A surge of boisterous laughter and raucous cries emerge, and Maksim ogles me. That's when I understand Denis has been chosen, and he appears from the crowd of men, smiling, sensual, beautiful. I feel warmth penetrate and flow through my lips, breasts, and blood.

The women sit down, entrancing with cold, merciless light eyes and angular silhouettes. I am sitting between a grumpy babushka who hates the idea of this game and a thirty year old woman with a sapphire and pearl necklace.

The game starts. The babushka next to me shrieks in horror, and I understand her as I feel a pair of clammy hands clumsily seize my ankles, leaving a faint trail of sweat.

And then I feel from under the table icy hands stroke my legs. I shudder. I feel them feel the bony joints of my ankles, trace their angles, examine them through touch. The hands start to caress my legs, move up to my thighs, and I shake violently. I feel the passionate press of lips on my thighs moving to my hips, the contrast of the hot breath and the iciness of the stroking hands.

A roar of triumph thunders from the table. The groom has found the knees of his bride, and Denis comes from under the table, kissing me ardently, and I tumble from the chair. The scene becomes comic, and shrieks and cries of laughter, surprise and horror intermingle in a bizarre harmony.

Denis pins me to the wet grass and grins down at me. “Your left ankle is slightly twisted, has a bit of an odd shape. It's too easy to recognize.” I am stunned he captured this nearly invisible detail; a deformation from when I was thrown off an unbroken colt, many years ago.

I have no time to react properly to what he just said, as men lift me up in my muddy dress, choking with laughter and joy, throw a wreath of orange blossoms and a veil on to my head.

“A ring, a ring!” they chant, dancing and drinking and whistling. “We need a ring!” Everyone rushes about. Masha, a beautiful girl with long brown hair and smiling eyes presents me with her silver ring, a gift from her sister who is a nun in the Trinity Lavra of Saint Sergius Monastery. I've seen her before; she is tall with a face like Saint Nina in the icon with the string of pearls.

“Masha!” I laugh. I take it. “I shall give it back to you afterwards, of course,” I grin.

“No...no, of course not! You keep it,” and she kisses me. I know her too well to refuse the gift – it would only offend her and create an unnecessary fuss, so I smile, and Nikita takes it and reads out the inscription on it, “Save And Keep Me.” He pauses, before giving it to Denis.

The groom and bride are united now, so Denis slips the ring on my right hand's finger, and kisses me again.

And then he takes my hand, and leads me away from life over there, from that whirlwind of joy and creativity and strength and art and grace.

It's a quiet place, one that would have been a favourite of Levitan's, with a transparent stream serenely gurgling and more silver birch trees aligned along its embankment.

Denis removes his shirt and plunges in, and then he pulls in the hem of my dress and immediately it is cleansed. His beautiful eyes gaze into mine, and then he asks:

“Do you love me?”

It is not a hypocritical, whiny, insecure “Do you love me?” Somehow through that question pierces a vow that firmly believes in the strength of love, which promises eternal protection and mutual righteousness and bears the witness of a grace bestowed.

I respond, of course I love you. And I really feel it, like some crazy overflowing feeling rushing through my bloodstream, which threatens to drown me. And I love him, I love him because he is promise, and hope. He calls me Vera or Liubov, sometimes – his faith, his love. Nadejda, Vera, Liubov, he counts the Orthodox saints, smiling, the Russian way, beginning with all digits extended. The Holy Trinity, he grins, my Holy Trinity.

No you're wrong, I tell him. You forgot Sophia, the mother of the three saints. Wisdom. She's the most important.

“Do you think so?” Denis asks. He's been out of the water for a while, and he's lying on his back, his torso naked, on his outstretched shirt. Now he could be one of Yesenin's peasants. “I like Vera. Faith is wisdom, and beauty, and love too. And it's stronger than hope. Do you like our churches?” He turns his face to mine. It looks like it's been delicately chiselled over years by the most talented sculptor.

But he doesn't wait for my answer. “There's one over there! Do you have a scarf? Wait – I do.” and he wraps it around my hair, and we walk to the church.

Maslenitsa is over, but a little girl is nibbling on a pancake outside the building, and Denis winks knowingly at her, and she blushes in shame.

Inside, slender altar candles glow and illuminate the dainty golden arabesques over jewelled icons. Denis falls to his knees and crosses himself several times and mutters prayers. *Blagodatnaya Marie*, I hear him say over and over again.

I lean near the window, dazed by the gold, the icons, the jewels, the paintings, the colours, the candles, the prayers and lights and flowers. White lilies, beautiful white lilies striving towards the light outside. The sunrays become like the candles; they flicker, convulse, and expire. Everything becomes too foreign, all of a sudden, and I feel fright climb its way through the back of my throat and I fear I might scream.

I turn around, grasping my neck, and a hieromonk gazes sternly at me. My heart is thudding in my chest, but he points to an icon, and vanishes.

I look, through the gold and rubies and emeralds and pearls and paint; and it is Saint Vera. I want to pray, but I hear Denis's voice:

“I don't understand why Pushkin never liked spring.”

And then he laughs, a loud, ringing, Russian laugh, and I feel good again.

I feel good, and right, and real.

Last summer – by Olivia Wilkinson

I had moved to London in order to intern at a city law firm, specialising in Probate law. I was so, so excited about it; this was my chance to prove myself, to win a training contract or something, to get on the career ladder, which was all anybody on my course seemed to talk about.

The internship was not quite what I had imagined; but that is hardly surprising. If we all had a penny for every time we'd heard somebody whining about a stint of disappointing work experience – well, we'd have a lot of spare change. So, probate law turned out to be a lot of paperwork and reading of small print and generally rather dull. But it was paid work at a prestigious establishment and my supervisor always seemed pleased with me; I would even go so far as to say that he took an interest in me, asking me about my legal interests, consulting me on matters where my advice was clearly inferior to his, choosing to take me over the interns when he went to meet clients. The more my peers, sick with envy, seemed to detest me, the more I began to fantasise that perhaps I might be the chosen one – she who might be granted a training contract off the back of this internship. Oh, the vanities of the uninitiated.

Whenever there was a quiet moment, my supervisor, let's call him Christopher, would come to my desk and crack some joke about how sweet I seemed, or how I wasn't as dumb as I looked. One day, at the end of my first week, Christopher invited me for drinks with him. A part of me thought 'Oh, goodie, networking!' and jumped at the opportunity to meet up with a senior male partner outside of office hours with the opportunity of proving myself and attracting his professional interest – was this what headhunting looked like? Looking back, how could I possibly have been so naïve and stupid?

On some level, I must have been aware that this is not standard, approved practice, and that my supervisor was certainly not inviting me to be plied with alcohol in a noisy, night time location in order to hear more about my CV or my views on how x or y court case might best have been settled. But if there was such an awareness within me, it felt flattered and also jumped at the opportunity without giving it a second thought, disregarding any hunch that things might not turn out well.

He told me to meet him at a Central London branch of All Bar One at ten pm that Thursday evening. I spent a little longer getting ready than usual. After all, as I explained to my flat mate as she banged on the bathroom door ('Jess, I *really* need a wee!'), it's all about the grooming; if you want to work for a top law firm, then, yes, having that perfectly applied Dior Addict lipstick which will linger on the cheeks when you 'dahling'-smooch hello and a hint of Chloé scent which will hang behind you when you walk away really does matter. And the jasmine-infused body lotion I was slathering on to my legs, would that get me a job? Even at the time I must have known that I was not going into this merely as a hopeful job candidate, but as a candidate for something a little more untoward. Of course, I would simply have argued that I did all of this, and wore my favourite pair of high heels, because I liked to feel confident in myself, and perhaps I even believed myself at the time.

When I at last arrived at the bar, fashionably late but not insultingly so, clad in what I considered a good look, I was slightly aware, consenting, even, or so I thought, that this could go further than a drink. But that is youthful naivety – aware and physically

prepared I may have been, but mentally ready for the reality of such an encounter I was not. It was a fantasy; I didn't really want anything to happen.

I walked in, a little apprehensive; what if he had forgotten or, heaven forbid, changed his mind about this? I could imagine nothing more humiliating. I will not go in to the details of what transpired after this, but I think it is fair to say that it was more humiliating and degrading than anything I could possibly have imagined beforehand. I assure you, reader, he certainly did show up, that he wore a suit and had already started on a magnum of champagne in my honour, and that, yes, he was uncommonly attractive and clearly rather wealthy. But none of that can make what happened next any better.

The expensive lipstick and the high heels made no difference. He was always going to fuck me anyway, whether I liked it or not. Contrary to prior suggestions, it turned out that I did not like it.

So, four hours later, there I found myself, drunk and drugged out of my mind, alone on the floor of some hotel bathroom, lying with my torn-up clothes in a heap beside me, a few cuts and bruises the worse for wear, my face mascara-stained and my eyes damp with tears.

Well, that's how I like to imagine I might have been. I don't actually remember anything until the Friday morning, when I woke up in a taxi which seemed to be driving me home prepaid, presumably on the expenses of the law firm. This was a magic roundabout I hadn't heard about before. I felt drowsy and light-headed; at several points I had to ask the taxi to stop so I could throw up, probably from whatever deadly cocktail of Moët and pills I'd been fed during the course of the night. Little by little, I began to recall flashes of what had happened, but all I could think was what a great story this would be for somebody to sell to a tabloid paper; intern sexually assaulted (was that the phrase?) by supervisor at top city law firm. A kiss and tell, as it were.

I arrived at my flat, showered and turned on the TV. I don't even watch television usually, but I wanted something to allay the weight of my own thoughts. Shit, it was 8.15, I should have already left for work by now! I forced on my suit, splattered my face with what seemed like all the make-up I owned, saturating my face in foundation until it was literally sliding off, grabbed an arbitrary pile of documents (I wasn't allowed to take anything important home anyway; the pile of papers was simply a prop which I thought made me look important) and prepared to head off. A quick final check in the mirror, a dab of perfume - Chloé again- and suddenly, with that single spritz, I was back in that room, that weirdly clean hotel bathroom, pleading for my life as he leered above me. He was never actually going to kill me, I realised that now; he had simply revelled in the power of pulling me down to a level where I was begging not to die, putting my life in his hands, even if it had never really been at risk.

I didn't know what to do next, but I knew that I could not go back into that office. How could I look him calmly in the eye and hand him his 9am coffee, when my whole being was filled with revulsion and guilt? Exactly what that guilt consisted and still consists of, I care not to know, but it follows me wherever I go. So, here I was in London for a further two months; what was I going to do? Go home to sunny Devon? No way - there was no way some bizarre violating experience and leaving the internship of my

dreams would tempt me to go home to doss about on the beach and get stoned for another summer, or whatever it is people do in Devon. But I couldn't stay in my flat, alone with my thoughts. So I went to a café, taking my laptop because I thought I might look weird sitting alone in a café without it, as though I didn't have any friends, rather than as though I had plenty of important work to do. After forty five minutes spent inanely browsing the web, it became apparent that I had no important work to do. Sure, I had some university assignment bubbling away in the background, but I was hardly going to do that. I had been a procrastinator all my life, I wasn't going to stop now. But I needed to escape the thoughts in my head. I don't know why it didn't occur to me to report what had happened, or to tell a friend, but it didn't; perhaps I didn't know what to call it, how to describe what had happened. Is it still rape if you agreed to meet up with the person, knowing that they may have designs on you? Had this not been building up right from the beginning, from our very first meeting, when he had shaken my hand for a little too long at our introduction, whilst repeating my name with an odd look in his eyes?

Not knowing what to say or how to describe this hazy, half-remembered event, afraid of the judgement and blame I would face for seeming to invite such attention from a supervisor in the first place, I told nobody. I stayed rooted to my laptop, opened a blank Word document and began to type. Thus began a summer of writing. Every day, unable to bear being alone at home, I would go to a coffee shop to write, to be amongst people and to escape my own mind. I deleted the first things that I wrote almost as soon as they were on the page; I hardly remember what they even were now, but over time my style seemed to improve and I found myself inventing fairy tales, imagining dragons and mermaids and mythical islands hidden between rainbows under clouds of pixies. My life was the very embodiment of escapism. My flatmate had gone away and I knew few others in London, so it was easy to shun all company.

As the days dragged along, I watched people go about their daily lives, picking up lunch, fuelling themselves with coffee. I would overhear snippets of conversation, trying to channel out the mundane and focus my eavesdropping on the drama. Admittedly, there was never that much drama. The occasional marital dispute over whose turn it was to take the kids to the grandparents', some friends gossiping about the illegal dealings of another friend, a girl breaking up with her boyfriend; the kinds of things which harbour a fleeting interest, but are utterly unmemorable. Beyond a fleeting 'Excuse me,', I had no contact with the other customers; the café seemed to present a haven of privacy to its customers. Like in so much of London, we were simultaneously surrounded by each other and totally alone.

On the twelfth day that I frequented this place, this oasis of privacy where I was able to annex myself away from the world I had considered myself so much a part of only two weeks ago, this place where I thought nobody could possibly know the shameful truth about what had happened, was invaded me. He found me. I don't know how, but he found me.

There I was, typing away in my usual seat, and suddenly he was standing before me. I gasped, more from shock than anything else; how could he possibly have known I was here? Memories of my days working in his office, that very first drink at the bar, the magnum of champagne, his predatory smile, the same one he was ogling at me now, that fateful night, all came back to me, searing through my mind like an old film reel

where everybody moves far too quickly. And yet I still found my former supervisor, my rapist, incredibly attractive.

I felt numb to what had happened; unable to tell anybody, to talk about it, and constantly surrounded by external distractions, I had not even attempted to 'deal with' it. Sometimes I had odd dreams, and I was more wary of certain men than I had previously been, but beyond that I had managed to expend two weeks without really thinking about or in any way addressing those shady, fleeting memories of utter terror. Here I was, alive, so what was the problem? On a judicial level, perhaps it wasn't fair that I should leave my job and that my aggressor should not, but I had not the energy to feel indignant about that.

So, suppressing any fear or anger I may have felt, I did not object when Christopher pulled up a seat opposite me, maintaining a certain physical distance. I could imagine why he might have come; he would want my silence.

I was right.

'Listen, I'm sorry about what happened, I've been trying to find you everywhere. I don't know what came over me that night, and I just want to apologise to you from the bottom of my heart for that. To be honest, it was totally unacceptable and I am really, really ashamed,' he paused, never breaking eye contact with me, the insincerity dripping from his words like oil when you cut into fried bread. Or like the tears that streamed down my face when he raped me.

It seemed that it was my turn to speak.

'Why have you come here?', I asked, declining to acknowledge what he seemed to consider an apology.

'To apologise,' he continued, 'and to ask you to come back to work. It isn't the same without you there, none of the other interns are any good. I found one of them trying to photocopy on the scanner the other day! How am I supposed to employ people like that? But *you* weren't like that, you knew what you were doing. So, how about you come back to work, finish your internship and your degree and I think I'll be able to find you a training contract after that. We won't say anything about these last two weeks and maybe you won't say anything about...about anything else. How does that sound?'

I gaped at him. He was offering me a job in exchange for my silence. Well, he hadn't misjudged me in calculating what he could give me that I would accept. A training contract was all I had ever wanted. I wish I could say that two weeks spent writing in solitude had changed me, had changed my world view, my values, my ambitions, but it takes more than two weeks to do that. In my heart, I still wanted the same things I had always wanted. Yes, this was a dodgy deal, fraught with more moral issues than I could even try to comprehend, but who wouldn't accept everything they had ever wanted offered on a plate?

'I accept.'

Il Rubacuouri : *The Heart-Stealer* - by Costanza Bertoni

Sitting in darkness. Frantic, conflicted, my thoughts cling on to the walls. With intrusive edges, questions poke and wrap themselves around me with their viscid curves. There is knocking at the locked door. It had been taken. More knocking; I don't want to open my eyes. In this separate apart, the dark room offers respite. More knocking. I open my eyes; still alone.

I saw him as he slipped past us. He looked in through the window; two figures stuck in a still-life. Only our words moved as they came screaming out of our mouths. Drifting in, he stops and hesitates for a moment, unsure if he is welcome. Sitting in the shadows he waits for the right moment. Tentative explanations sat timidly on the edge of the bed, in between my lifeless body and that of the boy. Those words slithered up my cold legs and tightened around my neck; my pleas stared at the boy's unflinching eyes. The boy's words grew stronger and fiercer, promises crumbled as the apologies danced around the already sturdy rejections, stamping on the possibilities. It was then that his tenebrous fingers plucked it. Red hot. Pulling the fragments of content and opportunity away. He left, and as he looked back in through the window, he saw the still-life now comprised of one, speechless figure.



Photo: Catania, Sicily –
Alexander Darby

Song writing

A Face but no Name

You're hollow like the morning on a crispy winter's day,
You're light that shines on everything, but never leads the way,
And I know you saw the future on a high-speed cargo train;
A face but no name.
And I'm so sorry that I told you, it was only your reflection in the rain.

My life is the story of a Wiseman, who'd seen everything there is to see,
He'd walked carcass filled deserts, he'd sailed the barren seas,
When the darkness came to claim him, he got down on his knees, and he said
baby please,
I've loved so many concrete faces, ships, and books of foreign places,
But I've never loved something that could love me.

So I'm starting a fresh, going back to the beginning; I see life's not winning but
how many times you can lose on the way.
And yet we remain, a barrel of grain which others feed on and live one more day.
But, that won't be how it ends. Oh, we will make amends.
I'll found out which side of the mirror is real, and which side pretends.
And I will love you more dearly then, for I see you more clearly as something
that's worth living for, and that's all that matters any more.

There are lights on the horizon, there are shadows in the mall.
We got machines that can do everything, but yet nothing at all.
A sailor drowned inside my bathtub, the banker wouldn't feed himself.
There's a child in the well, but he's not crying for his mother,
He just smiles and drinks the water while it's cold.

You said you got this sickness, when you were just a few years old,
Your body wouldn't let you grow up the same as the other kids you know.
Now it's 25 years later, and we're sitting on the floor, singing songs that I wrote,
And you whisper that I'm special, but you're more special to me than you could
ever know.

I'm searching for a fire, that will burn for evermore,
Because I'm scared that once I've died, oh once my body's been pushed out from
the shore,
There'll be nothing left but my laughter, that rings amongst these halls,
Drowned out by the calls, of hearts of new lovers growing colder, but at least the
flame I leave will keep them warm.

We'll go hand in hand, we'll show everyone, we found a way you can live that makes dying feel less far from home,
We'll take it slow; turn the flight of a moment into the still of a second once more.

I'll let you go, when you know me too well, because love's not some present you give to one person, you got to keep some for yourself.
But I will hold you more dearly then, for I see you more clearly as something that's worth living for; and that's all that matters to me, any more.

Nicholas Hampson

To watch Nick performing this, go to our blog
spleenliteraryjournal.wordpress.com

Essays

Reading Roland Barthes – by Anna Tankel

Signe

Roland Barthes will take you on a guided tour of your hometown. 'Look, a sign!' he'll say, pointing to a building you've walked past every day for the past year, without paying it any attention. 'How much do you think you know about the girl in the blue-and-white striped T-shirt?', he'll probe. He'll invite you to *read* everything you see, hear, touch, to become aware of your compulsion to read every single thing you come across as a sign of something else...

What is a sign? A sign is something that *stands* for something else. I intentionally use the vague word *something* because signs come in many different shapes and forms: words, images, gestures, objects... I could go on.

The sign often acts slyly, surreptitiously. Used and re-used, it becomes (seems to become) *natural*. We forget that drinking milk is not an *inherently* wholesome

activity (whatever the president of France might say)¹, and that wearing your hair in French plaits does not *necessarily* mean you have perfect table manners.

Barthes is adamant that our obsession with *reading into* things is culture-specific. In his reading of Japan, images (be they visual, verbal, theatrical...) don't necessarily function as signs. Rather, a sign is, quite simply, a sign. A box is not just something that contains something else; it is an object in its own right. Haikus are not purveyors of meaning; they are linguistic compositions. If 'Japan' is 'L'empire des signes', Europe is 'L'empire des signifiés': we constantly strive to decipher the signifiant, to unearth the 'meaning' that dwells beneath the surface.²

Utopie

Barthes thinks utopically, he dreams. If (when) he doesn't like what he sees, he speculates about how things could be different. He conjures up images of an-*other* world, a "là-bas", in his writing – or is his writing this other world?

Utopia is a specifically literary project. The word *Utopia*, coined by Thomas More, derives from the Greek words *ou* (not) and *topos* (place): it literally means *no place*. *Utopia* cannot, by definition, exist. Thus, writing on *utopia* is necessarily fictional... However, this doesn't stop Barthes fantasising about real-world places: his writing on Japan, Morocco and China combines observation and imagination to create convincing utopias (and subject his readers to a nasty bout of wanderlust).

Barthes dreams of escaping from the tyranny of sense; he imagines that escaping language (the Code) would constitute a sort of *satori* (a moment of enlightenment, understanding and peace). He dreams of liberating language from the *Doxa*, from ideology, from the Sign; of finding (or creating) "l'Utopie du langage"³. How do you go about creating a linguistic Utopia? Burn the ideological connotations of words; avoid stereotypes; embrace the plurality of meaning(s).

¹ 'Le vin et le lait' ('Mythologies')

² 'L'empire des signes'

³ 'Le degré zéro de l'écriture'

Barthes's linguistic/literary Utopia is also a sexual Utopia: he dreams of overthrowing binarism (Language), and destabilising hetero-normativity... "Ainsi peuvent naître un texte gongorien et une sexualité heureuse."⁴

"Une sexualité heureuse"? Surely he means, "des sexualités heureuses"?

Even better than Utopia is Atopia ("l'habitable en dérive")⁵: you can't get stuck *nowhere*. But is it logically possible for anywhere to be better than Utopia (the ideal place)? Or is Atopia simply the new Utopia?

Jouissance

Barthes works and reworks his definitions of *jouissance* and *plaisir* throughout *Le plaisir du texte*. *jouissance* is sometimes the amplification of *plaisir*, sometimes its antagonist. For Barthes, Literature is about (or should be about) *textes de jouissance*. A *texte de plaisir* may be pleasant enough, but it won't excite you, shock you, knock you sideways.

The *texte de plaisir* reinforces the *Doxa*, the *texte de jouissance* overthrows it: "Le texte est (devrait être) cette personne désinvolte qui montre son derrière au Père Politique."⁶ How does the *texte de jouissance* challenge the *Doxa*? A *texte de jouissance* refuses to obey the rules of Language, to *make sense* (in the most narrow-minded and rationalistic sense of the word).

Texte de plaisir: foreplay. *Texte de jouissance*: sex.

Jouissance: orgasm, loss of self.

Is it appropriate to describe the experience of reading in erotic language? For Barthes, reading is a sensual experience; he reads with his whole body. You can't passively read a *texte de jouissance*: the text makes the reader write the text; it prompts the reader to create, to ejaculate.

⁴ 'Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes'

⁵ 'Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes'

⁶ 'Le plaisir du texte'

Is *jouissance* equivalent to Buddhist *nirvana*? Nirvana: the ultimate goal of Buddhism, a state in which there is no suffering or desire, and no sense of self.⁷

Doxa

The *Doxa* is “l’opinion courante, le sens répété, comme si de rien n’était.”⁸

When Roland Barthes puts pen to paper, he declares war against the *Doxa*. He feels morally obliged to challenge those apparently self-evident ‘truths’ that we take for granted all too often. The *Doxa* is oppressive – intellectually, socially, sexually...

He teaches us not to confuse *Doxa* with *Nature*, to be aware that our assumptions are culturally-determined, not *natural*. He quotes Nietzsche: “Nietzsche a fait cette remarque, que la « vérité » n’était que la solidification d’anciennes métaphores.”⁹

In *Racine est Racine*¹⁰, he ridicules his contemporaries’ reluctance to contradict the oft-repeated ‘truth’ about Racine. In *Sur Racine*, he offers his own para-doxical reading of Racine. In *Critique et Vérité*, he debunks the (perhaps reassuring) myth that there is a kernel of truth at the heart of every work of literature.

Barthes enjoyed contesting the *Doxa*: he entitled one fragment of *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, “*Le paradoxe comme jouissance*”¹¹. The *Doxa* restricts *Jouissance*, and subverting the *Doxa* is pleasurable – so are *Jouissance* and the *Doxa* direct opponents? If *Jouissance* triumphs over the *Doxa*, will Barthes’ Utopia become a reality?

Punctum

Every once in a while, you might have an extreme, visceral reaction to a photograph. It might touch you, disturb you, attract you, in a way you can’t quite explain. It might leave you feeling confused, inspired, insane. Barthes calls the origin of this sort of response *punctum*.

⁷ ‘The Oxford English Dictionary’

⁸ ‘Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes’

⁹ ‘Le plaisir du texte’

¹⁰ ‘Mythologies’

¹¹ ‘Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes’

The *punctum* of a photograph is like a pressure point on the human body: its location is specific to the individual, and it can be the source of an intense experience. The impact of the *punctum* on the viewer can be compared to acupuncture¹²: “Le *punctum* d’une photo, c’est ce hasard qui, en elle, me point (mais aussi me meurtrit, me poigne).”¹³

What the *punctum* does to you cannot be put into words: its impact can be compared to that of a *texte de jouissance*.

The *punctum* is very different from the *studium*, while the *punctum* is highly subjective, the *studium* inspires one (almost anyone) to take a dispassionate look at a photograph, to *study* it.

Fragment

A fragment: a flake, a wisp, a speck, a snippet, a scrap.

Barthes likes the structure (or non-structure) of a collection of fragments: a book of haikus, a plate of Japanese food, an assortment of anecdotes recounted by a writer.

When you piece a text together fragment by fragment, you end up with a de-centred text: there is no supreme principle (no narrative, no Père) to hold the text together. In some of his texts (*Le plaisir du texte*; *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*; *Fragments d’un discours amoureux*), Barthes arranges his fragments in alphabetical order: But this order is so arbitrary that it actually draws attention to the absence of any sort of meaningful order in the texts...

What’s wrong with order? Imposing order on one’s writing delimits the scope of one’s thoughts: should we be surprised that one does not often come across insightful comments in the most inflexibly systematised of genres, the French *dissertation*?

¹² Acupuncture: a system of complementary medicine in which fine needles are inserted in the skin at specific points along supposed lines of energy. (The Oxford English Dictionary)

¹³ ‘La chambre claire’ (underlining mine)

Not structuring one's writing prevents the writer from becoming dogmatic: he doesn't really *have the last word*. And, according to Barthes, he shouldn't: his role is *not* to coerce his readers!

Writing fragments is fun, it offers *immediate delight*: "il [le fragment] implique une jouissance immédiate: c'est un fantasme de discours, un bâillement de désir."¹⁴ It's like writing numerous opening paragraphs without ever having to write a conclusion, or like having a series of spontaneous love affairs...

Perhaps Barthes' Utopia would be made up of a whole host of little islands, of various sizes, randomly scattered across the sea...

Kafka on Trial – by Enyuan Khong

The recent NSA scandal has provoked a spate of literary analysis. But should we be turning to Orwell, or to Kafka? It is not so much the surveillance prevalent in Orwell's 1984 that worries us, but rather the bureaucratic relationship between government and citizens.

In the wake of the recent NSA revelations, Rebecca Rosen, writing for *The Atlantic* argued that we need to re-examine our critique of the system. It is not a simple fear of surveillance that is problematic, claims Rosen, but rather the way in which we relate to our social hierarchy. At the heart of this lies the legal scholar Daniel J. Solove's analysis of Kafka's *The Trial*. Solove, in his paper 'I've Got Nothing to Hide' and Other Misunderstandings of Privacy' noted the Kafkaesque parallels in societies which use the storage and analysis of personal data to inscrutable purpose. The 'sense of helplessness and powerlessness' in *The Trial* has been re-created in our own society, altering the relationships between people and the institutions that make important life decisions for them. As a parable of contemporary society it is therefore the bureaucracy in Kafka's 'The Trial', rather than the governmental monitoring in Orwell's 1984, that has reappeared with shocking contemporary resonance. But amidst the flurry of literary allusions that has surrounded the data mining scandals, it is worth examining exactly how useful these parallels are.

If we are to understand the presence of bureaucracy in Kafka's novella, it is essential to fully examine the title. The German word 'Prozeß' refers not only to an actual trial, but also to the proceedings surrounding it; something which infiltrates the minutest details of his characters' private existences. Life in 'Der

¹⁴ 'Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes

Proceß' is an extended judicial procedure, where preliminary investigations, numerous hearings, and a wide range of legal and extra-legal manoeuvring have become enmeshed in everyday habit.

One of Kafka's later works, *The Trial* was never completed, contributing to disparities in time and setting which exacerbate the reader's disorientation. It is hard to assert whether these inconsistencies were indeed unintentional, as they seem integral to the alienating effect of the story's scenario. *The Trial* recounts a year in the life of a bank clerk, Josef K., beginning with his charge for a crime of which he has no knowledge, and ending with his execution. This is presumably a tragedy, but one in which no clear tragic flaw or downfall is discernable. The enemy here is shadowy and undefined, and often entwined in the actions of all of the novella's characters, including its protagonist.

This then, is not simply an account of Josef K.'s weakening struggle against the inconsistencies and dehumanisation of an anonymous authority. Rather, because the habit of surveillance has become the lifestyle of every representative of Kafka's society, K. is both straining against, and also complicit in, a bureaucracy created by a network of acquaintances, lovers, friends, and family. The effects of the legal system on private life thus have reverse ramifications, as the altered way in which people relate to each other not only portrays, but defines, the dominance of bureaucracy.

A closer linguistic analysis of the text reveals the extent of complications which arise from this altered lifestyle. Because the judicial process is here part and parcel of everyday life, judgements are made on the basis of fallible human perception. It is the inconsistencies between different viewpoints, as well as the inability to attribute them to any particular figure, which immediately convey the uncertainties of the novella's society. In the opening sentence, we see that the assumption of guilt or innocence is not simple for anyone in this world, 'Someone must have slandered Josef K., for one morning, without having done anything truly wrong, he was arrested.' By originally rendering the verb 'to do wrong' in the subjunctive, as 'Böses getan hätte', Kafka subtly introduces an untranslatable element of uncertainty and fallibility. Josef K. thinks that he is innocent, but cannot give a concrete assertion over this. We are instantly shown that this is an account from an inconsistent narrator.

Further complicating the issue of perspective are the judicial and moral connotations of 'slander' and 'wrong'. The former is a translation for the word 'verleumden', a word primarily associated with the law, while the latter comes from the German concept of 'Böse', or 'Evil', a word with strong overtones of original sin, as well as a philosophical history (Nietzsche's 'Beyond Good and Evil', for example). Altogether, the context of the charge brought against K., as well as the nature of his guilt, have been made extremely unclear. From the beginning, even the audience's process of divining the truth is, created by our uncertainty over perspective, and therefore arguably a bureaucratic one. It is not clear whether the text is a legal or personal testimonial of Josef K.'s prosecution, and thus to what extent we can trust it as an accurate representation of the truth. We are given a single unspecified viewpoint in a web

of conflicting perceptions and charges, and so can only guess at and interpret the actual scenario of the story. Our obsession with analysing Josef K.'s situation is such that we almost forget the ramifications this has on our psychology and thereby our complicity with the bureaucracy portrayed. We become part of the prying surveillance which condemns K. on the intimate banalities of his private life, details which may even be pointless, and irrelevant to us. This all converges on a singular argument – that bureaucracy is an element also present in the process of reading.

In such a society, no single person is responsible for, or representative of, this structure of bureaucracy. In 2009, Mark Fisher's polemical 'Capitalist Realism' equated the 'structure of disavowal' with the frustrations of modern life, when faced with an all-encompassing 'system', and bureaucrats with no actual power of their own. Despite its fallible nature, human perception is the determining structure of judicial society, resulting in inconsistent public law, and the transformation of private life into a constant trial. There is a complete impossibility for genuine emotional connection, as every person becomes a witness, and as such cannot be trusted.

When a life is lived bereft of communication and relationships uncomplicated by the judicial process, this has a deep psychological effect. One of the first emotions experienced by Josef K. is alienation. The German word expressing this, 'befremdet', suggests disconcertment and displacement, encapsulating K.'s state before the beginning of his trial, and implying that he has already been negatively affected by the infiltration of judicial society into everyday private life.

Our joint complicity in creating the all-encompassing power of bureaucracy has crippled us on a basic emotional and psychological level. The appearance of a shadowy inscrutable authority is ultimately the result of our own damaged psychology and relationships. As is clear from the moral and intellectual implications of the reading process, perception, rather than simple surveillance, is the defining factor of our relationships; between the novella's characters, the narrator, and the reader. Collection of personal data, as well as the bureaucracy arising from inconsistencies between viewpoints, is enacted by all of us during the progression of the story. No more telling is this than in Josef K.'s very first action of the narrative. Staring out at the old woman who lives opposite him, all he sees is her observing him in turn 'with a curiosity that was quite unusual for her'. Everyone in this world both perceives and is perceived, and hence we are all left as dual victims and perpetrators of society's bureaucracy.

Rescuing Richard Condon – by Timothy Wade

'A book written so that an idiot could film it' were the words used by film historian David Thomson to describe Richard Condon's 1959 novel *The Manchurian Candidate*, perhaps best known to us today as a movie starring either Denzel Washington, or in its previous incarnation, Frank Sinatra. Put in a Google search and you will be provided with many references to the films from, Wikipedia and IMDb; however, surprisingly little appears for the book.

It is easy to forget that the 1962 film was a brief phenomenon that was pulled from American screens the following year for eerily foreshadowing Kennedy's assassination but also due to a lack of public interest. It was only with the 1987 re-release that the film began to receive a cult following, at a time when the subject matter was more palatable for an American public.

Perhaps readers have always shied away from *The Manchurian Candidate* after learning of its clear and evident plagiarism from Robert Graves' *I, Claudius* or the fact that the book swings wildly between styles; at times sensitive and poetic and at others staccato and bizarre. Phrases such as 'he clutched the telephone like an osculatorium' seem unnecessary and pretentious and were almost certainly intended to be so.

But Condon's novel, for all the battering it has received from various critics throughout the years, is still as potent a political thriller today as on its first arrival - albeit a story that leaves a sour taste in the mouth. Our introduction to the protagonist, Raymond Shaw, makes it clear that he is immensely unlikable; he had, in Condon's words, 'developed the ability to be shunned instantly' - not your everyday American hero.

Maybe it is because Condon struggled with themes that were unpalatable and that haunt American history of the 1950s and 60s that his novel divided audiences then, as it does now. But it is the cynical and compelling novel that deserves to be remembered, not the Hollywood flop.

*

Condon chose the plight of American POWs in the 'forgotten' Korean War as the hinge around which the plot swings; it is following their capture by Communist forces that Colonel Ben Marco and his platoon are taken to be brainwashed into thinking that their sergeant, Raymond Shaw, had heroically saved them.

The US public's attention had been caught by the treatment of their soldiers by Chinese and Korean forces. Prisoners were used as live subjects for animal organ implants, made to march double-time with pebbles in their shoes or perforated by heated bamboo spears. More disturbingly, extensive attempts were made to indoctrinate prisoners as part of a wider project of maltreatment. Such tactics pointed to a new frontier in warfare: the mind.

In response the US government went into overdrive in an attempt to allay fears of a communist takeover; soldiers had already experienced sudden outbursts, producing memorised speeches of Communist propaganda. As was typical during the Cold War, the US was quick to state that it was supporting the UN in Korea rather than fighting communists of its own volition. But with 88% of the troops being American the question remained: where did the frontiers of this war begin and end? The 38th Parallel? Or somewhere closer to home?

These fears tapped into the wider insecurities of the US in the 1950s. By 1949 it was clear that the Soviets were likely to assemble a nuclear arsenal and the result of World War Two had left the two nations to battle one another for world hegemony; with everyone else recovering on the sidelines. As such the nature of warfare changed; the opportunities to destroy entire geographical units at the drop of a hat, combined with the growing belief that the mind was susceptible to manipulation, were a potent mixture.

Condon applied his cynical and, in the words of one writer, general perception that 'life was shit' to America in the 50s. Raymond is brainwashed by Communists in order to bring about America's collapse from within. However, it is only at the hands of society and his megalomaniacal mother that Raymond becomes such an easy target for remote manipulation. He is a blank canvas onto which any purpose is easily applied.

These themes can be seen to spring from much of the discussion about returning POWs, which centred on whether the startling rate of collaboration that had been offered to Communist forces was evidence of a wider moral decay in US society.

That year Eugene Kinkhead argued that a third of POWs had collaborated outright with the Communists; whilst William E. Mayer, who had interviewed many of the returning POWs, stated that in his opinion too many had cooperated. As a fact 21 soldiers refused to return and 40 returned to the US claiming they were now committed Communists.

Old certainties became hard to trust. Condon's protagonist, Raymond, receives the Medal of Honour, America's most guarded military prize, because his platoon was brainwashed into thinking he was a hero and doubts must have lurked at the back of readers' minds about actual POWs. Had these men done all they could to protect the US? Were they collaborators?

Even the 1955 government report on the Korean veteran 'POW: The Fight Continues After the Battle' felt it necessary to clearly restate the Code of Conduct for US troops who were captured, urging them to resist the enemy with 'all means available'.

*

Condon's book is a composite of styles, in parts plagiarised and perhaps written with a film deal in mind (he had, after all, just quit a Hollywood writing job when he began *The Manchurian Candidate*), but it cut straight to the heart of the American psyche of the 1950s; a world in flux where new avenues were being opened up and old boulevards placed under threat.

Condon questioned the role of valour in the eyes of the public and its use as a political instrument. He played with the

insecurities of the US as it began its face-off with Communism and the effect it had on the nation's conception of itself. Forget the plagiarism, the parallels with Hamlet, the slightly two-dimensional characters and the awkward phrasing; this is a book grappling with the Cold War mentality when it was still being formed.

By the end, when Raymond fires the rifle at the newly announced vice-presidential nominee, we know it is a phantom waiting to be unleashed on the 1960s and that, through all the cynicism, sarcasm and parody directed at these fears, the threat was real enough.

Literature and Life – by Thomas O.B. Maassen

The greatest value of literature is that it is the only thing that can grasp the complexity of human life in a more comprehensive way than any science, any theory, any methodology can. Different stories grasp different sides of life, depending on their genre, the subject matter, and what the writer wants. Some of Nietzsche's works, such as *Morgenröte*, which could be called works of philosophy but by his unique style are works of literature too, contain short wisdoms on life which are general and specific at the same time, leading us on the one hand to consider the diversity of perspectives on the world around us, and on the other hand to reconsider what we can know about ourselves.

Whereas Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* takes the personalities of its characters for a given and speculate what extreme ambitions and desires can lead us to, Bordewijk's *Karakter* and other *Bildungromans* focus on how the personalities of characters change over time as a consequence of both circumstances and reflection. Of course these are only interpretations of these works, but just like one can imagine one's own visual world when reading a book, so can one oneself choose one's approach to a book, focusing on that aspect of life which one oneself wants to read about. The body of literature, then, offers a lot of different and well thought out lessons on life. To what extent these lessons can be helpful for our own individual lives is an interesting question which I want to consider.

It seems that the challenge of human life is to find out what one wants, and to try to reach it. This is, however, not that easy, as 'what

one wants' has many sides and changes over time. One's desires at one moment can move one to the desire of making love, while at another it can turn one into an alcoholic. Desires can take the form of strong and lasting ambitions, like Gatsby's, or be those of a stereotypical hedonist who looks forward most to his next smoke, his next drink, and his next sexual adventure. Furthermore, at any moment there is a large number of competing desires, a large number of ideals, and which one is pursued at a particular moment is a function of a complex net of inputs, all of which are related to past, present, and future.

Personally I have experienced that one's desires are volatile and can be like a storm filling your mind. Ancient philosophers, who were furthermore also surrounded by a stormy and quickly developing political environment, taught on the wisdom of repressing one's thoughts and accepting a simple aim instead of being led by one's wildest dreams. Epicurus already noted in the 4th century BC that 'no pleasure is by itself evil. But in some cases that which brings pleasure creates problems that weigh many times more heavily than the pleasure itself'. If one would not have any external constraints and put no constraints on himself, one would be led through a mess of activities, each with their individual purposes and goals. The lack of an overarching ideal or plan makes all these actions and desires work against each other and all the movement and stirring will have no result. This also brings us back to Isaiah Berlin's distinction between individual freedom, being free from external constraints, and positive freedom, to do what one truly wants, and makes us wonder how valuable individual freedom really is. Without guidance all one's acts will be in vain, while at the same time they exhausts one.

The unconstrained following of whatever desires happen to be strongest seems to me most of all to lead to depression, exactly because of this. A recurrent theme at the start of *Bildungsromans* is this lack of direction, this struggling with everyday life without any movement forward. The progress which the characters make is exactly a move out of this situation, to a place where their life and their actions lead somewhere. It is interesting to contrast this with Balzac's *La Peau de Chagrin*, where the main character undergoes the opposite development and is increasingly under control of his desires, until he dies in a fiery moment of passion with the woman he longed for. Therefore it is important to consider how we can constrain our desires, to not be led as a slave.

One important constraint of desires is habit, a constraint which one can actually to a degree shape oneself. Habits can be for good, for example when they make you get up and go to a library, or for bad, when they give priority to those desires which you would prefer not to have. The first thing one has to look at if one knows one's goals, therefore, seems to be habits. Habits should be like rules, with exceptions for exceptional cases, but normally moving you to what your sensible side would like to do. In a sense when one is shaping one's habits one's future self is playing a game with one's present self. It isn't an easy game, but it can be played, and sometimes it is won. If there was anything Gatsby knew, it was what he wanted. His habit of giving parties every week had only one goal, to reenounter the woman of his dreams. He held on through many unsuccessful nights to eventually see her again. If one knows what one wants, this kind of dedication and discipline is the best way to get it. In Nietzsche's words, 'He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how'.

The problem of habits is the same as that of a communist five-year plan to move the economy forward: by planning you inevitably destroy some of the creativity which is essential for progress. Planning can to a degree be inspirational, probably all of us have at least once had a great idea while we were working in the library, but rather than immediately pursuing it, those who truly follow their habits will maybe take note and look at it later, but the idea will often go to waste. If one knows what one's goals are, habits are undeniably the right means.

Of course you have to keep believing that your aim is right, as well as be psychologically and physically capable of executing your plans, but habits are useful exactly because they help with that. They turn your aim almost into a dogma, taken for granted rather than doubted, and they make one more able through practice and repetition. The problem is, however, that in life one only finds out more about what one really wants by experiencing, reflecting, and contemplating. Literature seems very often to focus on this part of human life. The repetition of experiences are left out as insignificant, and the focus lies instead on the new and the unique. Nietzsche specifically attacks the socially habitual, urging us to reconsider morality and how to live for ourselves. It is, however, difficult to steer this way of living, and ironically it can only be done by controlling one's behaviour and

choosing those desires which lead to wisdom by practice and thought. Without it, however, one would have no aim and one's effort would always be futile.

This leads us back to where we started. Life is complex and multi-faceted. As Nietzsche said, when it comes to life, just like with all other things, 'there are no facts, only interpretations'. No single approach will with certainty bring us where we want to be, even though there are some approaches which will certainly not. Those who lack control will be led by their own desires to where they do not want to go. Those who are led by habits, even if they are the habits one prefers, move forward fast without any direction. Those who spent their life experiencing and contemplating will surely learn a lot, but if they never actually change their behaviour according to what they find out they want, they are as lost as the others. The lesson in these extremes are, then, that only when one combines control with extravagance, freedom with chains, one can reach what one really wants in life.

Translations

At the Birth of a Son

Families, when their newborn enters the world,
Hope he will be intelligent.
I, who through my intelligence
Have managed to ruin my entire life
Can only hope that my son
Demonstrates himself to be
Ignorant and mindless.
Then he'll be able to lead a peaceful life
As a government minister.

Bertolt Brecht, translated into English by Oliver Gray

I like it when you fall quiet

I like it when you fall silent because it's as though you are absent,

and you hear me from far away, and my voice doesn't touch you.
It looks as if your gaze had escaped you
and it looks as if a kiss might close your mouth.

As all things are full of my soul
you emerge from the things, full of this soul of mine.
Butterfly of dreams, you look like my soul,
and you look like the word melancholy.

I like it when you fall quiet and it's as though you are distant,
And it's as though you're complaining, a butterfly cooing.
And you hear me from far away, and my voice doesn't reach you:
let me fall quiet along with your silence.

Let me talk with your silence, too,
as clear as a torch, as simple as a ring.
You are like the night, quiet and starry.
Your silence is that of a star, so far away and simple

I like it when you fall quiet because it's as though you are absent.
Distant and dolorous as if you had died.
One word then, one smile are enough.
And I am happy, happy that it's not true.

*Pablo Neruda, translated into English by **Isabella Woolford Dia***

About the editors and some of our contributors:

Léa Carresse

Founder/Editor-in-Chief of Spleen. Contributed the short story *Vera*
Léa Carresse is 18 years old and a second-year French student at Worcester, reading German and Russian. She published a collection of short stories called *Portraits*, and is also the founder and president of the Oxford French Society *Le Cercle français*. She is a fervent Nietzschean and is overly proud of her country.

Olivia Wilkinson

Founder/Editor-in-Chief of Spleen. Contributed the short story *Last Summer*
Olivia is 19 years old, reading French and Russian at Magdalen. She writes in her free time but is more likely to be found deleting her work than publishing. She has an overly sensitive sense of smell and sometimes forgets to wear a skirt.

Nika di Liberto Sabasteanski

Contributed the poem *Daybed on Sterling*.
Nika is a visiting student from America. She is a pre-medical student studying neuroscience at the Johns Hopkins University and is in her second year. At Oxford she studies Biochemistry. On the inspiration for her poem, she says:
This summer a friend of our family was diagnosed with terminal bladder cancer and since I'm studying to be a doctor, I offered to help in any way I could. I went to the hospital with the

man who is the subject of the poem and his wife and the nurses taught me how to change his nephrostomy catheter, which is a tube in his kidney that needed weekly dressings. So I went each week for four months to do this and I wrote this poem to try to make sense of some of it. On the day I left for Oxford, he said it was nice to know you, and that was that.

Miriam Gordis

Contributed the poem *Insomnia*

Miriam Gordis grew up in Berkeley, California. She is currently studying French and Czech at Jesus College, Oxford, and learning Romanian in her spare time. She has written for 2I2access.com and the Litro Magazine blog and her work has appeared in *The Isis* and the *Ampersand Review*. She also maintains a poetry blog of her own at girlinalabyrinth.wordpress.com. Her interests include magical realism, 20th century poetry, and historical linguistics. She can generally be found between naps.

Theophilus Kwek

Contributed the poems *Capital* and *Night* for this edition, as well as *Manchester* for the blog. Theophilus is a fresher reading History and Politics at Merton College. Commended at the Foyle Young Poets' Awards of 2011 and 2012, he has published two (slim) collections of poetry, and was featured at the Singapore Writers' Festival. He enjoys long walks, and writes when he can.

Thomas O.B. Maassen

Contributed the essay *Literature and Life*

2nd year PPEist at Jesus College. Anglophile from the Netherlands. Interested in politics, economics and literature, but a philosopher by nature. Also writes on politics and policy from a philosophical perspective on his own blog: thoughtandpolicy.co.uk

Nicole Williams

Contributed the short story *Meet Yourself Coming*

Nicole is a fourth-year Computer Scientist from Oriel College. When not writing or arguing with computers, she is usually found behind the viewfinder of an over-complicated camera.

***Spleen* -**

*“melancholy with no apparent cause,
characterised by a disgust with everything“*

Thank you for reading the very first edition of *Spleen*, we hope you enjoyed it!

We will be publishing a print edition next term; if you can help with this (we need submissions, artwork, web designers, photography, a printing team, sponsorship...), please get in touch at our blog spleenoxfordliteraryjournal.wordpress.com or

by emailing us at
spleenoxfordliteraryjournal@gmail.com

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