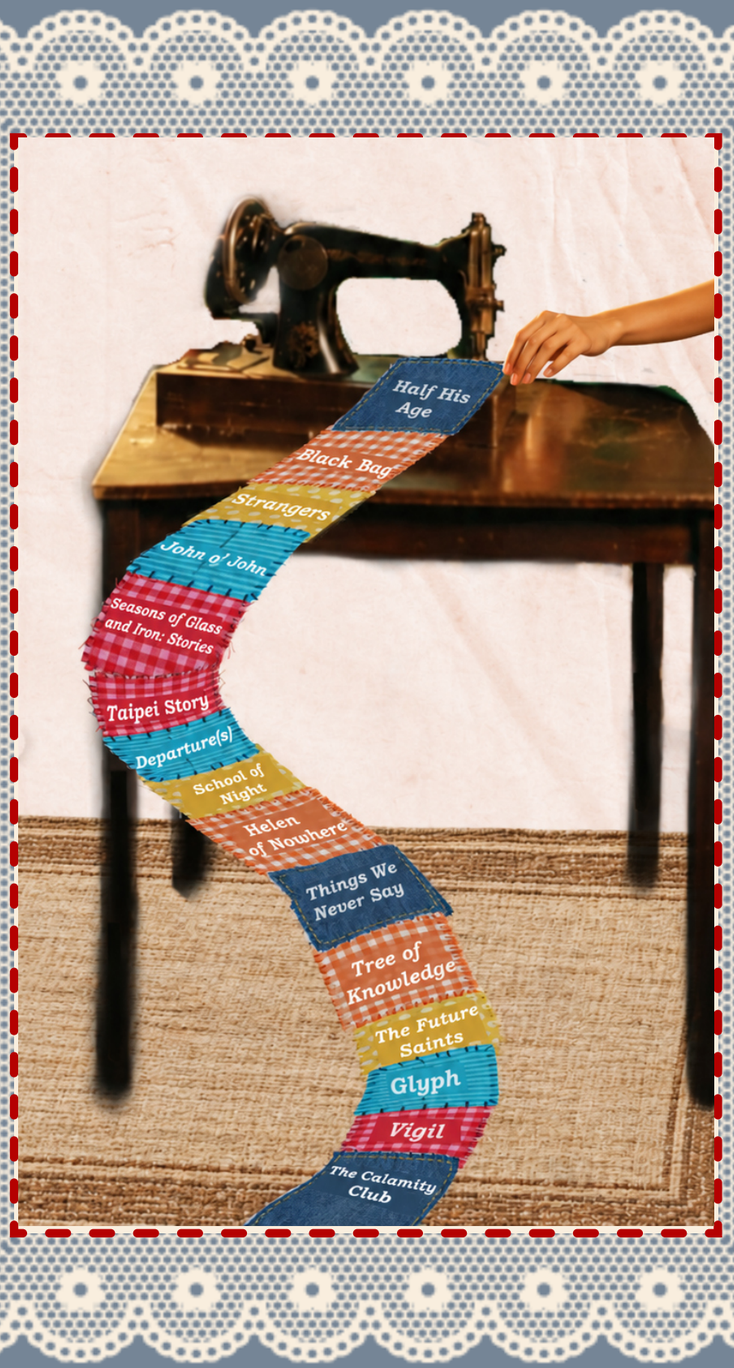
RevUU

Patchwork

literary magazine



autumn 2026

EDITOR'S NOTE

Dear reader,

Welcome back to another issue of *RevUU*, a student-run literary magazine affiliated with Utrecht University. Since 2020, the magazine has given a platform to new critical voices, allowing students to tackle topics related to contemporary literature and explore how those works reflect our modern times.

We're proud to announce that *RevUU* has expanded this year: for the first time, there are two issues within the coming six-month period. You're currently reading the first: Patchwork.

When you think of the word "patchwork," what likely comes to mind is a quilt, perhaps one created by a family member — a work of patience, human craft, and, just maybe, love. As artificial intelligence and stories assisted by it become more and more ubiquitous, patchworks remind us of the joy of working by hand and the perfect imperfections that naturally come with creativity. Patchworks combine disparate objects. Through this action, they become more than the sum of their parts.

In this issue, writers scrutinise the threads stitching together different books released in 2026. We begin with The Weavers, works sewn together by being Booker Prize shortlistees: Laura Fabbri and Dorien van Gerven analyse *The Things We Never Say*, Maja Sikorska reviews *Black Bag,* and Charlie ter Haar goes on a metaphor-laden journey with *John of John*.

Invisible Threads magnifies the societal forces woven through our everyday lives: Daria Nicolae, for example, describes how *The Calamity Club* portrays the institutional sexism that dominated women's lives in the 20th century southern United States, while Hugo Wolters turns to the modern day with *Vigil* to view one man's struggle to accept his contributions to climate change. Other books discussed in this section are *Helen of Nowhere, The Future Saints*, and *Strangers*.

In A Human Touch, writers explore questions of craftsmanship and intention. Lilliana Matthews argues that *Glyph* and *Glyff*, two novels by Ali Smith, piece together to construct a shared meaning, and Femke Kapteijns deconstructs tropes of fairy tale narratives in her creative critical piece on the anthology *Seasons of Glass & Iron: Stories.* Writers also examine *Taipei Story* and *The School of Night.*

Putting a pin in things, Patterns discusses the various forms and shapes a story can take: Ollie Köhn-Haskins unearths how the shapes and behaviors of trees colour the poetry collection *Tree of Knowledge,* while Cristel van Kleij questions the narration of trauma in *Half His Age*. Essays on *Departure(s)* and *Lázár* round out the section.

An untold amount of work went into this issue: We'd like to thank the design, editorial, and publicity sections of *RevUU*, alongside all the writers who shared their voices and perspectives, for helping this magazine come to life. We'd also like to thank our professor, Dr. Mia You, whose assistance in this process has been invaluable.

And thank you, dear reader! We hope that these stories help you peer through the seams of everyday life and that you take a small break while reading the creative additions sewn between the critical pieces. One last surprise: our twin issue, Clockwork, will be released in January. We hope you'll block out some time to enjoy it as well.

Happy reading!

Liam Beran & Barbara Buzinkayová, editors-in-chief

CONTRIBUTORS' PAGE

EDITORS-IN-CHIEF

Liam Beran

Barbara Buzinkayova

MANAGING EDITORS

Amanda Rahn

Jip Soekhai

PUBLICITY TEAM

Thalea Mosbach (head)

Valery Loots (head)

Julia Smeding

Despoina Karydi

Lilliana Matthews

Daria Nicolae

Laura Fabbri

EDITORIAL TEAM

Dorien van Gerven (head)

Femke Kapteijns (head)

Kelvin Anania

Farrah Blitzer

Laura Fabbri

Charlie ter Haar

Annet Hatzistamou

Bronté van der Helm

Emma Houdijk

Cristel van Kleij

Lindy Klompstra

Daria Nicolae

Quinn Mulder

Maja Sikorska

Sterre Wentzel

Hugo Wolters

Karolina Bojdoł

DESIGN TEAM

Kyra Gent (head)

Ollie Köhn-Haskins (head)

Anna van Besouw

Laureen Hamon

Anna-Lena Hoffmann

Cristel van Kleij

Quinn Mulder

Lindy Klompstra

Floor Wilhelm

Lise Kruizenga

CONTENTS

THE WEAVERS

"Going To My Fate" - Laura Fabbri 9

Bagging Rights - Maja Sikorska.....13

This Bag Carries Fiction - Charlie ter Haar 17

"You take care now, okay?"- Dorien van Gerven ...21

INVISIBLE THREADS

The Double Standard - Daria Nicolae 29

Poking at the Bubble of Masculinity - Amanda Rahn 33

Belle Burden's Burden to Perform - Farrah Blitzer 37

Oil Burns - Hugo Wolters 41

The Rise and Fall of Future Saints - Quinn Mulder .46

A HUMAN TOUCH

Breaking the Rule of Three - Femke Kapteijns 53

Getting it wrong in *Tapei Story* - Julia Smeding 57

Who are you, Karl Ove Knausgard? - Liam Beran 61

What Have We Come Here For - Lilliana Matthews 65

PATTERNS

To Die or To Disconnect - Anna van Besouw 73

"Half my Age" - Cristel van Kleij 77

Orchestrated Instability - Valery Loots 81

Chang's *Tree Of Knowledge* - Ollie Köhn-Haskins 20

CREATIVE PIECES

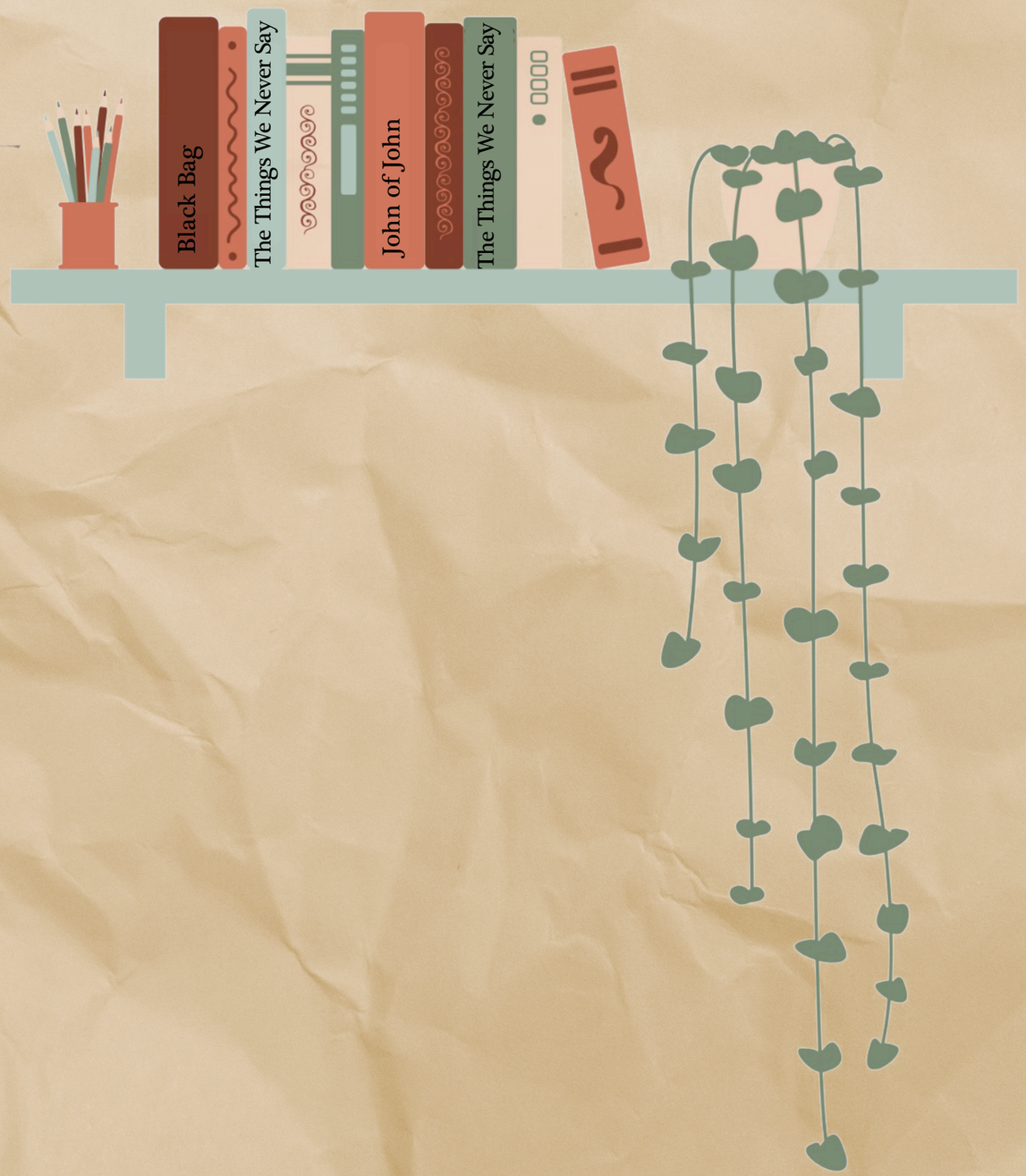
232.78 degrees Celcius - Lilliana Matthews 26

Dog - Valery Loots 70

The Hawk in the Corner - Valery Loots 86

Crossword, found - Ollie Köln-Haskins 92

all creative pieces are edited by Cai van der Werf



SECTION 1

The Weavers

"GOING TO MY FATE": IN CONVERSATION WITH CARL JUNG

BY LAURA FABBRI



The following conversation between psychiatrist Carl Jung and literary critic Ariel B. Baruf, held at Utrecht University on 29 September 2026, is a work of fiction. All italicised sentences are direct quotes from Jung's 1962 novel Memories, Dreams, Reflections.

Baruf: Doctor Jung, I wanted to thank you for being here today to talk about Elizabeth Strout's new novel, *The Things We Never Say*.

Jung: Thank you for your invitation. I was pleasantly surprised when Strout asked me to use my words as the epigraph to her book.

B: It must've been such an honour.

J: Indeed. I am always fascinated by her reflections on the intricacies of human relationships against the backdrop of our erratic world. I also particularly admire her portrayal of the characters' inner lives in the face of adversities. In my own life *I early arrived at the insight that when no answer comes from within to the problems and complexities of life, they ultimately mean very little*.

B: That's a splendid insight. You seem to have a lot in common with Artie Dam, the protagonist—

J: Yes, we both seem to be rather conventional, middle-aged white men.

B: I meant to say he's also a particularly introspective man.

J: I had that impression, too.

B: As an expert on the human psyche, I was wondering if you could help me get a better understanding of his loneliness.

J: Sure; tell me more about *your* impression of him.

B: Well, Artie's a 57-year-old history teacher. He lives in Massachusetts with his wife, Evie. Early in the novel Artie feels "an accretion of loneliness." He's so lonely that he starts contemplating suicide. But, on the outside, his life seems fulfilling and full of love: his students write him letters about the positive impact he's had on their lives; he regularly goes out to dinner with his confidante Flossie, a lifelong friend who encourages him to "stay jovial"; he's beloved by the other teachers and his son Rob, although he recognises that they've grown apart after an accident that fractured their family. And because of this accident, Rob and Artie share a secret.

J: You mean the car crash Rob got in as a teenager with his then- girlfriend Heather?

B: Exactly. Rob was the only one who survived, and during a police interrogation, when he is asked if they were both wearing their seatbelts, he sneaks a glance at his father. Artie then understands that Heather was performing sexual acts on Rob. With the burden of this secret looming over them, Rob seems to grow more distant with time, and Artie worries about losing the important bond he had with his son. Yet, it is precisely another secret that fortifies their relationship down the line. Rob learns that Evie had an affair, and he reveals to Artie that he was born from this act of adultery. Instead of breaking down after the unsettling revelation, Artie realises he loves his son even more, with Rob feeling exactly the same way. So, what do you make of this? How could a man be so loved and feel so isolated at the same time?

J: *Outward circumstances are no substitute for inner experience*. Although Artie's objective reality appears to contradict his private isolation, his inner life tells a different story. He wonders why nobody ever says anything real, and realises only too late that "living is a private matter." This book is about secrets, and the things we purposefully keep within ourselves. Knowledge and feelings that cannot be shared become another form of isolation.

B: Artie seems to be exceptionally burdened, compared to the other characters, with the things he doesn't intend to share. Not only does he carry Rob's secrets, as well as his own, but he also has odd, premonitory dreams and sudden visions. He has a dream in which he's drowning, then a week later he has a nearly fatal accident while sailing. He has a vision of a door closing, erasing the tiny strip of light that was left, a gloomy premonition for the future of the country and for his own deteriorating wellbeing. I know you've had similar experiences of precognition; can you tell me more about them?

J: Yes, I have experienced something similar to Artie. When I had these visions after my near-death experience — a heart attack that fortunately proved to be nonfatal — *my life seemed to have been snipped out of a long chain of events, and many questions had remained unanswered. Why had it taken this course? Why had I brought these particular assumptions with me? What had I made of* them? *What will follow?* I began to be preoccupied with my past and my future, much like Artie. In this precognitive state, I felt the expectation of a new beginning, but also disappointment for what was going to happen. I believe Artie went through something similar: he dreams of drowning, and the vividness of the dream brings about a feeling of awe that prevents him from falling asleep again. subconsciously felt that his dream would become reality.

Perhaps he subconsciously felt that his dream would become reality.

B: It sounds like it was a rather bizarre and disturbing experience for you.

J: I found it rather blissful. And I put these experiences into words, unlike Artie, who represses them. I believe that Strout's intention was to emphasise his individual experience of loneliness. He sees these evocative images that are both about him and those he loves, but they contribute to his private suffering.

B: In fact, in a recent interview with *TIME*, Strout revealed that she became "increasingly interested in the idea that not only do we not really understand other people, we probably don't know who we are in reference to other people," and that through reading "we could actually get inside the head of somebody else." However, it seems that in this book she is precisely delineating how the characters don't understand each other because they can't get inside one another's head. Their silences, their secrets, their inability to communicate, are what isolate them.

J: I dare say Artie would make an exceptional case study of the Everyman archetype, someone who values belonging and fears exclusion....

B: Strout also places the readers in a peculiar position: sometimes, the narrator descends from her omniscient position to disrupt the narrative flow and offers us a glimpse into the future of the characters. This is a testament to Strout's clever narrative construction; there are tiny pieces of relevant information scattered throughout the entire novel, which all come together at its conclusion to create a new meaning.

J: Yes. There is a sense of inevitability to this. In a way, the readers' foreknowledge of the story echoes Artie's precognitive visions: both have a sense of what is going to happen, yet manipulating their fate through this knowledge is impossible.

B: I want to further explore this idea of fate, as Artie becomes preoccupied with the existence of free will. At a party, he asks one of the guests whether he believes free will is real, but his question remains unanswered. The same pattern reoccurs with each person Artie approaches on the matter: no one can offer a definitive answer, they all admit that they don't know. The issue then takes on a decidedly existential character for Artie, who struggles — and inevitably fails — to arrive at an answer for himself. Why do you think Strout insists on bringing up this theme here?

J: I think it all ties back to Artie's amiable facade and inward isolation. His inquisitiveness about free will is how he tries to get out of himself. He wants to find comfort in the possibility of choice, and tries to connect with others by bringing up a theme that feels personal to so many — freedom. Yet he sees a lack of connection reflected in the state of the world, particularly after the result of the 2024 presidential election in the United States. This increases his disillusionment towards the existence of free will.

B: I had a different read on that. To me, Artie's musings about free will were an attempt to justify his inactive behaviour when facing any unpleasant situation. The choices he makes are carefully considered so that he can avoid taking any risks; he even sets aside his moral tenets to maintain his friendship with a man who's a known Republican. And he feels his own free will slipping away. Midway through the story, he feels as if he's been looking at life from one angle, then he feels as though "someone had turned him partly in a different direction," projecting responsibility outside of himself.

J: But do you not think that Artie feels constricted, not so much by the circumstances he finds himself in, as by his incapacity to say what he means? He wonders why no one ever says anything real, yet he is the first to be encumbered by the truths he holds within himself.

B: That's an intriguing suggestion. But ultimately, I think his lack of active choice and resolution — his indecision about coming forward to Evie with her secret, how he never truly says how he feels to those around him in the right moment — are what weigh on him the most.

J: I do not think he lacked resolution. I believe his reserved disposition was a deliberate decision. Through his silence he made sure not to burden the ones he cares about with upsetting knowledge. That is a selfless act of love.

B: That didn't work out so well for him though, did it? He continuously renounced his own happiness for that of other people. And readers know well before the end of the book that Artie's going to die shortly after. This insight into the future comes with a sense of dismay about what will happen. Artie realises that he's "going to his fate," and we can only be bystanders through his journey. Kind of a bittersweet moment for the reader, knowing that the main character's going to have a disappointing, all -too real ending.

J: Well, I think that Strout seems to suggest that one's enjoyment of life does not arise out of being consciously free. It is more about the small choices we make every day, the relationships we cherish, the invisible strings that attach us to one another, interwoven in a net of support that is often too easy to ignore.

B: I agree with you on that. In the end, the novel is not concerned with resolving major philosophical questions. Whether humans have or don't have free will, it's still worthwhile to perform good deeds and be good people. That's what Artie did. He managed to positively impact the lives of the people around him, and in return he was dearly beloved for his kindness and reliability…This novel made me ponder the question of "What could have been?" What would've happened if Artie had revealed Rob's secret? If he'd shared that he knew about Evie's affair?

J: Then it would not have been Artie's story.

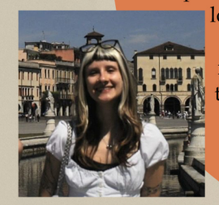
B: While reading the book, I was worried that few readers would be able to resonate with him since he's a white, middle-aged man from Massachusetts. After our discussion, I can see his allure. He's what we could call a "modern hero"; a regular person trying to persevere through the distress of modern-day society, forging a place for himself in the world.

J: I am sure that lots of readers, like Artie, have a hard time coming to terms with our forlorn present … I hope his story will inspire more people to look both inward and outward. *In this way we forge an ego that does not break down […]; an ego that endures, that endures the truth, and that is capable of coping with the world and with fate.*

B: Doctor Jung, thank you for your brilliant considerations on the novel. As always, after reading Strout I'm left with many thoughts to sift through.

J: Thank you for having me.

Laura Fabbri she/her



I'm a master's student in the programme Literature Today at Utrecht University. I have a soft spot for 19th and 20th century novels with female protagonists, particularly those with heart-wrenching love stories. When I'm not reading, I like to cook and try out new restaurants. My lifelong dream is to write for a cultural magazine … Ideally, I would have my own itinerant food column.

BAGGING RIGHTS

ON BEING SEEN, AND NOT, IN LUKE KENNARD'S BLACK BAG

BY MAJA SIKORSKA



What does a man lose when he hides his face for a living?

There are worse jobs than sitting silently in a bag, and the narrator of Black Bag has had most of them. He is a 37-year-old actor with no name, no money, and many opinions about himself. Dr. Blend, a tired psychologist near retirement, hires him to sit in lectures on attraction theory wearing a black bag and no shoes, while also making no sound whatsoever. He is paid to say nothing, do nothing. He is also, from first page to last, the most talkative character in the book.

The premise of the novel is real. In 1967, an anonymous student sat through a term of Charles Goetzinger's classes at Oregon State University covered head to ankle in black cloth. Goetzinger was testing Robert Zajonc's mere-exposure effect (the finding that we grow fonder of whatever we see often) and, as Kennard notes in the novel's acknowledgements section, saw the class change "from hostility toward the Black Bag to curiosity and finally friendship." What drew Kennard to the experiment was not the class itself. He came across the study by accident, while researching something else, and as he says in an August interview for the Booker Prize, he "was more interested in the person playing black bag than the results of the study."

The Booker judges call the novel an "of-the-moment satire" that "considers anonymity and disgust, online rackets, and what it means to find love in our unstable times." Christopher Shrimpton, in the *Guardian*, found it "tremendous good fun," and it is. The reviews praise the jokes, the absurdity, and satire of masculinity; only a few ask what the narrator actually has to lose. Thenarrator says his self "has come to feel arbitrary, which is not to say optional," and that he would "just as soon be black bag than whatever my self is." Yet some thirty chapters later he writes to Claudio, his friend since childhood and a video-game streamer, that the bag hasn't replaced him: he is "still myself in here," only "amplified." The bag hides his face, but he is, in his own words, "more myself than ever."

As a story about losing yourself, *Black Bag* is both easy and hard to interpret. Easy, because in a literal sense the narrator disappears from the world: the students, who only ever see the black bag, and Justine, a post-humanism professor and his love interest, who has heard his voice, but doesn't recognise him on the train without it. Hard, because we never actually see him silent or invisible. The book's lack of quotation marks makes this even more difficult: it is often hard to tell if the narrator is internally monologuing or speaking. In the audition room, before the bag even exists, he describes "the usual plunging feeling, that every human being is real, substantial and well defined except for me." The bag doesn't take him apart so much as give him somewhere to hide, and it's that hiding that gives him a wage, a following, and, in the end, applause.

An actor's trade is being a blank page, becoming whatever the director asks, and the bag is the purest part he has been offered: a role with no lines. Emptiness, then, shouldn't be anything new to him. Shrimpton, the *Guardian's* reviewer, quotes the line that gives it away: "What terrifies me, Claudio, is that, in my heart of hearts, I am nothing more than an English suburbanite." That isn't the fear of having no self so much as the fear of having a dull one.

So, what does he want instead? When he can't sleep, he imagines living in a rural Swedish town where he is a one-armed sawmill worker looked after by an old woman named Birgitta. She sits with a blanket on her knees while he makes tea, and whenever he's upset, she is the one to comfort him. Philip Womack, in the *Times Literary Supplement*, reads these daydreams as a "nostalgic counterpoint to the insanity of the baffling twenty-first century." I read them as the bag's mirror image: where the bag is just a role, the daydream is the wish to finally be himself, to be looked at and looked after as he is.

A self, then, is something other people look after. Birgitta comforts him and dies. In a daydream he imagines Justine as she scratches the back of the bag's head and tells him: "Nobody gets how hard you're working." Johanna Thomas-Corr, in the *Sunday Times*, calls the novel "a thoughtful, tender meditation" on connecting with people "when you suspect you might not possess a fully formed self to offer them." It is tender, but it is very much one-sided. The women of his imagination give the comfort and he takes it. The book never asks what they get back. The book mocks male self-pity, yet still lets its narrator keep all the comfort.

The one time he confesses to being Black Bag, he also confesses to being himself. Nobody hears it. He has taken the bag off as Justine is leaving the train carriage, unaware of his company. He presses himself to the window and says, to nobody and everybody at the same time, "I'm in here. It's me." In the bag, people look at him all day. Out of it, no one gives him a second glance.

If the bag is the only thing that gets him seen, another bag is a threat. So, when the narrator sees someone else in a black bag in a supermarket, he cares. He chases it, as one would chase a thief, and when he corners it against a skip, he finds a male student inside, one who asks him: "Why does everyone hate me?"

It is the narrator's first meeting with another Black Bag, and it reads more like looking in the mirror than seeing someone else in a costume. It is as if he is hearing his own question, asked by someone else. The narrator's reply is not comforting: "I am black bag. I created black bag and I am black bag. [...] I am you.

I'm not very comfortable with someone else running around being me. You could do anything." He cares about the bag, not the boy; faced with someone going through what he claims to be going through, he sees only a rival for his role. The narrator never faces what he saw in the boy, and the book lets him get away with it, which I think is a mistake.

Towards the end of the book, other men start wearing black bags as part of a movement. Claudio, the streamer friend who has been trying to cash in on the bag, is taken in by them and disappears for days. He then returns from the fictional Center for Advanced Studies in Masculinity in Copenhagen with a diagnosis of what is wrong with men: "Men are mostly frightened and crazy and very easily misled. They just want someone to be nice to them, but they don't know how to ask for that."

Claudio also has a plan to make himself and the narrator rich. He turns up and says he did it all because he loves him. "I love you too, I guess," the narrator replies. Womack calls the novel "an ode to the importance of friendship, tenderness and love," and this is the scene that earns it. It is a lovely moment for the two friends, but it is also a business arrangement. It's difficult to read the novel as a satire of male self-pity when it ends by rewarding it.

The ending is the book's last evasion. Throughout the novel, Kennard keeps raising the question whether his narrator is any good, and then declines to answer it — for instance, regarding the boy in the supermarket. The ending is no different. On the last day of class, after a whole term of growing used to him, the students stand and applaud the figure in the bag. "Is this not everything you ever wanted?" he asks. "Then why, I wonder, does it feel so—"

And the sentence stops. One way to read this is that the students are applauding a bag, not him. Being loved by people who do not know you is only a different kind of absence. The unfinished question is his way of admitting it. A broken sentence is also a way of not answering, maybe even finally realising everything that has happened. All through the book we hear the narrator's stream of consciousness, yet he rarely admits his actual feelings. The one time he says what he actually feels, on the train, nobody hears him, and when he comes close again in front of the class, the author cuts him off. He gets the applause and never gets to say whether it was enough.

I enjoyed *Black Bag* more than I was convinced by it. It was hard to stop reading, and that's Kennard's doing: he gives the narrator a voice that is funny, vain, and always one step ahead of us. But the book is also the story of a man who wants to be seen as himself, while being unable to see anyone else, and he is never held accountable for it. The novel rewards him instead, with a friend, a somewhat happy ending, and a plan to get rich.

So, what does a man lose when he hides his face for a living? The narrator answers that himself back on the train, to nobody: "I'm in here. It's me."

He does not lose himself. He loses everyone who might truly see him.

Maja Sikorska she/her

I'm Maja, though in international company I often go by Maya, since the "j" tends to confuse people. I'm currently doing the master's programme Literature Today at Utrecht University, where I also completed my bachelor's in Literary Studies. I'm a big fan of fiction in all its forms: if I'm not reading or listening to an audiobook, I'm probably watching something or scribbling away at a short story of my own. I'm also really into photography, and if I spot a shot I like, I'll stop no matter what I'm doing. In the future, I'd love to work in publishing and help bring new stories into the world.

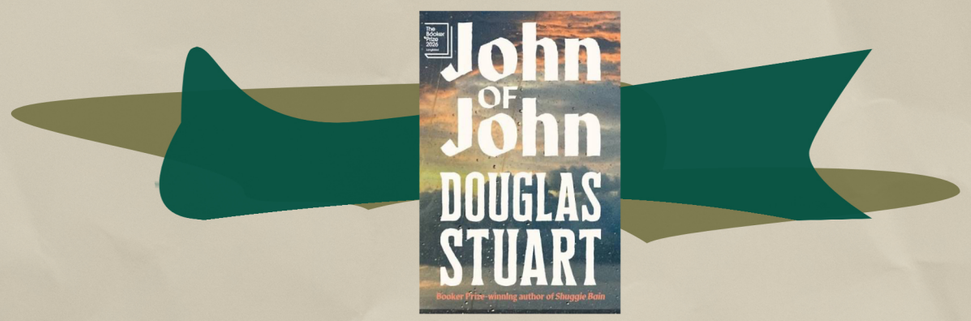


"The bag doesn't take him apart so much as give him somewhere to hide, and it's that hiding that gives him a wage, a following and, in the end, applause."



THIS BAG CARRIES FICTION

BY CHARLIE TER HAAR



Before he became a celebrated Scottish author, Douglas Stuart (D.S.) kept the pot boiling by working as a fashion designer. His first novel, *Shuggie Bain*, published in 2020, won that year's Booker Prize. His second book, *Young Mungo*, was published a mere two years later. His third and most recent work, *John of John*, was published this year and was shortlisted for the 2026 Booker Prize.

In "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction," Ursula K. Le Guin writes that she "would go so far as to say that the natural, proper, fitting shape of the novel might be that of a sack, a bag. A book holds words. Words hold things. They bear meanings. A novel is a medicine bundle, holding things in a particular, powerful relation to one another and to us."

Before you are three bags.

They've been given their own separate table inside the store your friend dragged you to on his mission to find you the perfect "starter bag." You've had bags before, obviously, but these were always the practical kind, useful necessities for school you didn't spare a second thought for. Now, helped along by your friend's insistent enthusiasm, you've begun exploring what the world of bags has to offer. He decided that the perfect starting point would be the bags made by the designer D.S., though he refused to surrender any information about these bags or their creator. Purchasing one's first bag is, apparently, a "personal experience" you need to "follow your own gut" for.

"It's nice that they've decided to arrange them chronologically," your friend remarks at your side. Shooting you a quick glance to confirm he has your full attention, he points to the bag on the left. "This one is the very first he made, the one in the middle came two years after, and the one on the right hit the stores this year."

"And that," he continues as he turns to face you, poking you firmly in the centre of your chest, "is all you're getting out of me. I'll be wandering around the store sighing longingly at beauties I can't afford while you acquaint yourself with these three." Spinning around once more, he glides off to do exactly that.

Trying to feel exasperated but ending up primarily with fondness, you decide to focus on the task at hand. Looking at the bags side by side, it's immediately clear, even to your inexperienced eyes, that the same designer made all three. The two on the left, while not the same colour, are identical in shape. You're sure there's a wrong and right terminology when it comes to bags, but you can only describe them as large, sack-like purses. They both have a zipper at the top and a singular strap that looks just long enough for the bag to be either carried in hand or settled over your shoulder, which makes you give them a mental point for ease of use.

The first bag is grey, though not just one shade of it. You can imagine that D.S. asked his fabric department (although, would he have been famous enough with his first bag to have a whole department? Or did he go on a scavenger hunt looking for the perfect material?) for something as close to swirling smoke as you can get with cloth. There's no clear pattern to the fabric and the different shades of grey flow into each other seamlessly. If it were fashionable to sell bags pre-scented, this one would have been spritzed with woodsmoke and cigarettes.

The second purse, the one in the middle, is coloured like it got into a fistfight with a puddle and lost. Muted blue, like someone layered a faintly transparent image of stormy clouds over a colour swatch named "wistful memories." It also has some patches of purplish blue that look halfway between a stain and a bruise.

The third bag is unlike the other two in both shape and colour, though you notice all three are of a similar size: large enough to carry your own belongings, alongside those of your friends, during a night out.

This bag doesn't have a zip to close it fully, though it does have a large magnetic clasp to grant your belongings the illusion of privacy. It's made of a stiffer fabric that has allowed its bottom edges to be fashioned into crisp points. Its colours are as muted and muddled as the other two, blending from swampish greens into watered down ashy oranges.

You're surprised to find yourself thinking that their shapes seem quite boring. You wouldn't be able to call them anything other than bags. Which isn't a problem, especially for a rookie like you. It's just that you imagined a sophisticated and established designer to experiment more with form, especially with the third one. By the time he was creating that one, he would have been quite famous already, so it's strange that he hasn't decided to make something more groundbreaking than the first two.

But you can appreciate someone sticking to what they know and love.

You argue with yourself. Maybe this is just your inexperience talking. Maybe you'll find they're actually quite dissimilar upon a closer look.

You don't know exactly what goes into inspecting a bag for its quality. You probably should have asked your friend what he looks for when he goes shopping, but he isn't the type to give straightforward answers. Darting a glance his way, you can imagine what he would say if you were to ask right now: "You can trust that they're good quality; I wouldn't point you in the wrong direction with something you know

nothing about, but you have to discover for yourself what you need from a bag! I don't want you to just copy my style for the rest of your bag-loving life."

Alright. But it would be so much easier to use his opinions as a starting point.

You go to pick up the grey bag to look at the stitching and get a sense of how the fabric feels in your hands. Wrapping your hand around the straps and lifting, you're surprised to find the bag is not only heavier than you expected it to be, but that it's heavy because it's filled with stuff. Easing the zipper open, you can see a battered sketch pad, miniature black cab, what seems to be an old housephone torn off the wall, and a pocket Bible.

Perplexed, you reach for the zipper of the second bag and open it up. This one also has a small Bible and art supplies, alongside an explosion of fishing tackle that has found its way into every corner of the bag, and even some pigeon feathers.

The third bag is also filled with junk. Nothing for sketching this time, and the Bible has doubled in size. There are bits of fluff stuck between some of its pages, peeking out beyond the confines of the cover. Pulling a clump away reveals it to be unwashed sheepswool. Releasing it to float back into the bag, you spot a small square of pink knitted fabric stained with what looks like make-up, strangely similar in colour to the purple splotches on the second bag.

After staring, dumbfounded, at all their contents for a few seconds, you whirl around to look for your friend. When your gaze locks onto his, he speaks before you get the chance to open your mouth.

"They're supposed to be like that."

He doesn't even attempt to hide the size of his smirk. It's like he was waiting for this exact moment.

You barely manage to keep "what the fuck" behind your teeth, though you feel it would be a perfectly reasonable reaction to both him and the bags.

"The items inside of the purses, they're supposed to be there. Every bag in here is the same. It's part of what you buy. You wouldn't have found them without the contents in any other store either."

He's vibrating with joy as he says it, the prick.

You don't know how to respond to such absurdity, but he must take pity on how long your mouth has been hanging open, because he continues without prompting: "You don't have to appreciate any of the things you find in those bags, but you can't purchase any of them without their contents. You can decide to dump everything out into the trash as soon as you get home and forget about it. That's up to you." He gestures in your direction while saying it.

"However," he pokes his index finger towards you in what is slowly becoming his signature move of the day, "it will have to come with you on the journey home first, meaning that it will be *your* stuff, at least for a little while. And who knows, it might stick with you forever. This'll be your first bag, after all."

When you move to sputter out a response, he cuts you off. "Back to shopping now." He starts to make shooing motions. "I'm still not helping you!"

No less astonished than you were five minutes ago, you slowly turn back towards the bags, looking at them without noticing anything for a few seconds. Taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly, you peek inside all three again. They all have a small pocket on the inside, the kind where you can slide your phone or something else you don't want to lose in the dark inside of their bellies.

Every pocket has the same flyer sticking out of it, though it's folded in half on the third purse. It's an Alcoholics Anonymous leaflet.

Letting your hands glide over the rich fabric of each bag, you notice how neat and precise the sewing is on each of them. When you look at the sleeve of the sweater you're wearing, you can see that each stitch is about half a centimeter long, and there's a thread hanging loose even though you bought it just a few weeks ago. The individual stitches of each bag are almost impossible to see with the naked eye, perfectly spaced and always equal in distance from the edges. D.S. must have spent an eternity on the details.

The first two bags are similar in their stitching. The colours of their threads match perfectly with the fabrics of the bags themselves, grey for the grey bag, and blue and purple for the other. When you move the bags a bit, the stitches gleam faintly in the light, like each thread has exactly one strand made from a glittery material.

The sewing of the third bag is largely the same, though instead of a glittery strand, this one is charcoal grey.

Though you can appreciate the amount of dedication that went into the meticulous stitching, you're slightly disappointed once more that D.S. didn't decide to go for something more experimental. What he's done here is stunning, without a doubt, but in this, too, the third one could stand to be more distinguishable from the other two. You're not sure what kinds of different stitching exist, but this seems like the most straightforward technique he could have chosen out of all of them.

Even so, you can appreciate that he decided to step out of his comfort zone even this much. And you have to admit, though the third bag is still similar to the other two, D.S. clearly made an effort to do things a bit differently.

Mind made up, you take the third bag to the cash register.

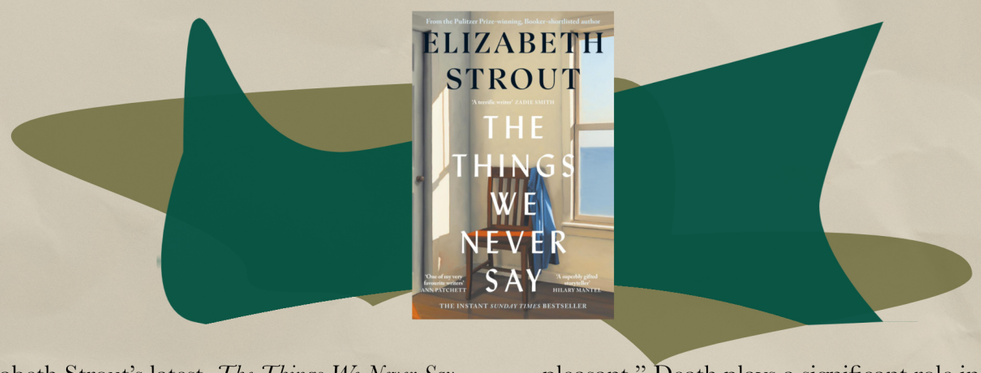
Charlie ter Haar they/them

I'm currently following the master's degree programme Literature Today at Utrecht University. Beyond cultivating my interest in a broad range of literature, my studies have nurtured my interest in Celtic culture and language and the art of adaptation. When I'm not reading, you're likely to find me working on a crochet project of some form. I've mastered the art of making plushies and book sleeves — a second blanket is next on the list.



"YOU TAKE CARE NOW, OKAY?": SILENCE AND SPEECH IN ELIZABETH STROUT'S THE THINGS WE NEVER SAY

BY DORIEN VAN GERVEN



Elizabeth Strout's latest, *The Things We Never Say*, came to me through an extra special, personal channel; my mother read it, would not stop talking about it, and subsequently read every novel in Strout's bibliography. She was evidently not the only one enchanted by the book, as it was shortlisted for the 2026 Booker Prize. Though I usually take her suggestions with a grain of salt (no doubt a leftover from my teenage years: "I'm too cool to read whatever you read!"), I decided to give *The Things* a try. I was introduced to Artie Dam, a history teacher in Massachusetts who seems to have a relatively "accomplished" life; married (although whether happily or not remains to be seen), with a fulfilling job in which he inspires his students, although not everything is as it seems.

In an interview for the Booker, Strout says that part of the inspiration for *The Things* came from a man whose obituary, according to Strout, haunted her because "he looked so entirely ordinary and pleasant." Death plays a significant role in *The Things*; Despite Artie's "ordinary and pleasant" career and personal life, he secretly deals with feelings of isolation, and even suicidal ideation, brought on by what he perceives to be a lack of "real" contact. "Why does nobody ever say anything real?" Artie asks his wife Evie after the umpteenth bland dinner party at a friend's house. However, Artie undergoes a change in his thinking after he has a near-fatal accident on his boat.

Artie's rehabilitation from the accident, as well as the conversations with friends and family that follow it, expertly show Strout's ability to write about the "real." From small conversations between Artie and his wife Evie to inward reflections Artie has at night about his distant father — these scenes are especially strong because they are so universally relevant. Who does not wish that they had asked their parents more questions when they had the chance? Putting this relatable sentiment into writing sets Strout up to do two things very well in this novel. First, it makes Artie feel like a fleshed-out character, as well as a person we deeply identify with. He verbalises our fears about family, work, friends, and politics (I will take a critical look at that later). Furthermore, it introduces into the consciousness of this recognisable figure the idea of the importance of connection through one defining event: the accident with Artie's boat. The rest of the novel is dedicated to setting up and executing little moments of human interaction.

A stellar example of these instances of connection Artie has is the leitmotif (a fitting term here) of Francesca, Rob's girlfriend, and her piano playing. Rob is Artie's son, and after he grows up and moves out of his childhood home, he and his father gradually lose contact until Artie's accident. As Artie reconnects with Rob, he also bonds with Francesca through their love for music and her desire to be "inside the music." In the end, Artie composes a song for Rob, "and also for the world." Francesca plays his own piece back to him, only now "the piece ha[s] a grandness to it." Afterwards, Artie and Francesca share a wonderfully intimate moment:

> But as she rose and walked toward the kitchen, she put her finger in her mouth to indicate a secret, and she said very softly, "I'm looking for God when I play."
>
> Artie found that to be astounding. "Do you find him?" he asked.
>
> She winked. "Sometimes."

Strout finds many ways to incorporate moments like this into her novel, including various instances of minds, hearts, connecting through the many things that make us human, chief among which is our love for the arts.

However, these varied, believable connections Artie builds do not extend to children. I have to hand it to Strout: as someone who works with high schoolers myself, having a "meaningful" conversation with them is extremely difficult. Children deflect and stray off topic; they are extremely open about some issues and completely shut you out with others. These inconsistencies are what make kids kids. Strout's solution, however, leaves much to be desired. At best, the students Artie teaches are blatant stereotypes, cardboard cutouts of what the average adult who does not interact much with children would imagine them to be like; see Tamera, the "loudmouth" student whose entire demeanour changes in the span of one conversation:

> Tamera raised her hand. "I'd like to work with little kids," she said. "I don't want to be a teacher. Sorry. But I'd like to do something with little kids."
>
> "Okay, Like what?"
>
> "I don't know."
>
> "Like being a pediatric nurse?"
>
> Tamera's eyes got big. "*Really?* Oh my God, that would be so cool."

This conversation makes no sense. Tamera has up until this point shown no respect for Artie's authority in the classroom. There is no indication that she would care about Artie's opinion on her future job. On top of that, she has clearly spent time imagining working with children enough to the point that she even knows specifically to narrow it down to "little" kids. Still, Strout needs Artie to be the person to tell her dream *to* her, forgoing any meaningful arc or characterisation of Tamera in the process.

This is the crux of what seems to me the biggest flaw in Strout's latest work; at worst, the children in *The Things* read like tiny flat robots trapped in children's bodies, who desperately need Artie to tell them what they're worth, and preferably also prophetically tell them what they will end up doing in the future. Danny Marino is the worst offender in this regard. Although his stories mirror that of Tamera (a sad childhood followed by a magical realisation that he can be anything he wants to be after a few conversations with Artie), the novel keeps driving the point home over, and over, and over:

> Danny sort of laughed. "I mean, I'm this jock. I'm not going to say I think about Shakespeare all the time."
>
> (…)
>
> "Teach it. Get other people as excited about Shakespeare as you are."
>
> "Me teach *Shakespeare*?"
>
> "Yes."
>
> Two bright pink spots had been growing on Danny's cheeks. He looked down and said, "My father wants me to go into business with him." Danny added, "He owns a plumbing business."
>
> "Does your father love you?"
>
> "Yeah, yeah, he does. He does." Danny nodded.
>
> "Then he'll understand. You go do this, Danny."
>
> The red splotches on Danny's face increased.

The message is clear, of course: verbalise the nice thoughts you have about people around you, especially young people who are still searching. This does not negate the fact that the novel spends considerable time building up the character of Danny only to have him, in some of his final appearances, reduced to a cliché, a storyline that has been done better, and with more catchy songs, in *High School Musical*. To add insult to injury, Artie will end up having a terribly similar conversation with yet *another* student, Rhonda Lazarre.

The friction in the chapters involving the students is the flawlessness and consistency with which Artie pokes through their armour and exposes their hopes and dreams in an almost machine-like way. Although Artie's personal life feels realistic, fragmented, and complicated, his guidance with the students almost seems to want to diminish the book's overall message: "So blind we humans are—so blind. To each other and to ourselves, moving through life as though through shadows, putting out a hand in the dark and thinking we have touched someone. And maybe we have." Lucky for us, we never have to guess whether Artie formed a connection with one of his students, because Strout lets us know every time.

Still, the little moments of connection throughout this novel are largely realistic and touching. Describing what "happens" is difficult because Artie's arc and the relationships he harbours with the people around him, especially his family, are accumulated through a series of short, grounded conversations, ranging from existential topics to little bits of news Artie and his wife share with one another. Artie re-evaluates his values, his relationships, his beliefs, all because of one accident that could happen to any of us. The rest of the novel is more a series of domestic conversations and observations, rather than a novel with actions and a plot. Strout's book is an excellent piece of writing that shows that life truly is what you make of it.

Nevertheless, it would be a disservice to *The Things* to say that no influential events take place. In an interesting split from her previous work, Strout incorporates the "current" (read: slightly aged) political climate into the novel through repeated mention of the looming US 2024 presidential election. Because this political undertone is largely rendered through characters and, as mentioned earlier, Strout's (adult) character work is impeccable, the novel does an admirable job of accurately describing the dread felt by many leading up to the election, as well as the widening divide between democrats and republicans. Artie's relationship with Rob, who works for a security agency and is increasingly worried about the current state of America, is especially touching in this regard. Unfortunately, the effect of Strout's looming election is often negated by how dated it feels, even just two years after the election in question. As fellow novelist Maggie Shipstead mentions in her review of *The Things*, a page in the middle of the book simply states: "The election came and went. Half of the country was stunned, the other half jubilant." Shipstead comments: "Not untrue, but is such an obvious observation worth making?" I have to agree. *The Things* desperately tries to tie Artie's arc and his moments of human contact to current events but focuses too heavily on one specific event (the election) rather than on ongoing sources of injustice and fear for American citizens, at times leaving the novel stuck in 2024.

Still, Strout manages to get the message across beautifully despite the questionable timeliness. In what is arguably the most impactful paragraph of the novel, she writes:

> 'Why don't people ever say anything real?'
>
> And now he knew why. Because to say anything real was to say things that nobody wanted to know. Or if they wanted to know, they would not care in the right way. Or even understand.
>
> It was a private thing, to be alive. He understood this now.

What is said, as well as what is unsaid, can have tremendous effects on the lives of people around us, and Strout shows us variations of perception and connection in all its messiness and versions.

The final chapters of *The Things* are especially apt for re-reading, as their surface reading is a bleak surprise compared to the steady positive change that we have seen in Artie up until that point. Artie grows increasingly mentally and physically unwell after the election and with the start of Trump's presidency (or, at times, because of the new political situation), up until his death just a few years later. Strout fantastically toes the line between recording Artie's decline, while keeping alive the messages of connection and hope that have pervaded the novel thus far. When Artie dies of heart failure and his friends, students, and family gather at the coffin, the reader is not met with grief and hopelessness, as might be expected, but rather with a legacy to the journey Artie has gone through mentally; Danny and Rhonda are present, and Francesca plays Artie's piece, much to the enjoyment of Danny, who "was briefly transported into a moment of comfort." In short, the funeral is not the end, but rather the start of something new. The many chapters in which Strout has been carefully weaving connections come to a head. Even though I might not have liked this book as much as my mother, I can appreciate the lesson it tries to teach, and I will cherish the good conversations me and her have had about it. And was that not, in a way, Strout's goal all along? Read novels, listen to music, produce art, and please, for the love of God, talk to someone about it.

Dorien van Gerven she/her

Hi all! I'm Dorien and I am a second-year Comparative Literary Studies student at Utrecht University. This review is a little out of my comfort zone as I am used to digging through dusty archives in search of some long-dead politician's dinner plans or whatever. My biggest hobby is probably reading (shocker), and my favourite genres are sci-fi and books by dead white men (unfortunately).



"The novel spends considerable time building up the character of Danny only to have him, in some of his final appearances, reduced to a cliché, a storyline that has been done better, and with more catchy songs, in High School Musical."



233.73 DECREES

Burn me, I say.
I have lived long enough.
Tipped on the edge of the table at Drift 25.
I say, *burn me*.
And be done with it.

The people inside me don't want you here.
To crack my spine and study my insides.
An invasion of the body.
A body, they say, *of ash*.
Nothing to read. Nothing to see.

Burn me now.
And let them be silent.
Let my words melt them out of existence.
And give me sweet, peaceful nothing.

Shut up, you say,
an angry lot, your people.
I would like to see them. Up close.

Your eye hovers like the sun in the sky.
Let it scorch this world.
Let me be free of my people. My people,
existing within the thing they want to erase. *Be gone*.
Without me they don't need themselves.

Be gone, I say.
And the burning will stop.
One last fire.
And the monsters will die.
Because I am the breeder.
So, burn me now. And let them be gone.

You sigh.
And shut me up.
Trapped with my people again.
I land where I always land.
Squished beside my companions.
Lucky to have people inside
who don't want to disappear.

I sigh.
Stacked on a shelf at Drift 25, I wait.
For the next one
To open me up
And maybe,
Hopefully,
Finally,
Burn me,
I pray.

by Lilliana Matthews

Section X

Annual Threads



THE DOUBLE STANDARD: WHOREDOM VS QUALIFICATION

DARIA NICOLAE



"(T)hey' re saying if a woman pays a man to do it, he's 'qualified,' if a man pays a woman to do it, she's a whore."

Dear *almost* modern society,

I always find myself pondering the same straightforward question: How can we be so medically and technologically advanced, yet maintain the same shortsighted views regarding certain matters? A few weeks ago, I, lost within the heart of Amsterdam, overheard an intriguing conversation while strolling through the slippery cobble-stone streets. The topic itself was not particularly perturbing to me. Rather, it was the arguments which were put forward, which served as an uncomfortable reminder of stagnation in terms of society's prejudices and mentality. I strongly believe that nearly everyone, especially every woman, has, at least once in their lifetime, been present or engaged in a discussion on the sex industry. Usually, this conversation rapidly evolves into a harsh condemnation of the system along with the people involved in it — when writing "the people involved in it," I specifically refer to the women who pursue a profession within this field. Now, it was my turn to listen and be attentive to the critical remarks.

Adopting a vexed tone, this male acquaintance confessed his disdain to my group of friends, protesting:

"Why do we keep feeding into *these females*' delusions?! This way, they perceive themselves as regular employees, a member of the work force — like me — when they are rather *below* the lowest tier of society!"

This question sent a jolt through all of us. It remained open for the rest of the night. Whether the discussion is built upon a political, religious, or social argument, members of contemporary society keep subjecting the women involved in this line of work to severe criticism, reducing them to degrading language. I stand perplexed by the reasons behind this constant need to target the female sex within this industry.

I recently read *The Calamity Club* by Kathryn Stockett, set in 1933 in Oxford, Mississippi. This historical fiction novel is the author's return to writing after 17 years since publishing the award-winning novel — *The Help*, also set in Mississippi — which received a movie adaptation in 2011. *The Calamity Club* employs an alternating dual-perspective narrative structure, following two female characters: a 24-year-old small town woman, Birdie Calhoun, and an 11-year-old orphan girl, Margot Lefleur, also known as Meg, whose mother suddenly "disappears." Through Birdie, Stockett introduces the readers to six other strong-willed female characters who struggle to survive amid economic hardship, racism, and gender discrimination regarding certain professions. Their struggles unravel in the American South during the aftermath of the Great Depression and Prohibition, an era marked by severe shortages in food, housing, and opportunities. Thus, the female characters subvert the restrictive social and gendered norms, creating and illegally operating a house of prostitution.

Kathryn Stockett structures a critique towards the American eugenics movement through the character of Charlie Lefleur, Meg's mother. While Charlie is an unmarried woman, she is also a single mother struggling to financially support her child by engaging in transactional sexual activities in Mississippi. However, in the 1930s, the South had already embraced a procedure to cleanse society of all people whom the power systems had defined imbeciles. Consequently, anyone who slightly diverged from Southern society's norms was sentenced to immediate sterilization, specifically: disabled people, epileptics, alcoholics, and *all* sexually promiscuous women.

As Stockett learns about this law within the process of writing the novel, she decides to build this narrative, exposing the extent to which the South used legislation to assert control over the female body. For example, after being spotted flirting with an African American man in the train station, Charlie is imprisoned for three years, loses custody of Meg, and undergoes the aforementioned cruel procedure. Following the fulfilment of her legal punishment, Charlie employs a plan for earning money and finding her daughter, and, through this plan, ends up meeting Birdie.

Driven by a desperate need for financial support, Birdie Calhoun arrives in Oxford in order to save her family home and ensure her mother and grandmother's survival. She visits her sister, Frances, who has recently married into a wealthy family. While assisting the newlywed Frances in the poorly maintained orphanage where she volunteers, Birdie's and Meg's storylines interweave. Stockett begins to paint a symbolic and heartfelt mother-daughter relationship between the two female protagonists.

In her review in the *New York Times*, critic Lauren Christensen describes these two alternative protagonists as extremely "sympathetic and utterly hilarious, drawn fully enough that their individual senses of humor feel distinct from the beginning." I couldn't agree more. Stockett does an impressive job into weaving light-hearted elements within an otherwise tragic narrative, allowing humor to coexist with the novel's more serious themes, without diminishing their emotional weight.

I was equally impressed by the narrative itself. Though I share Christensen's opinion, I'd also argue that Stockett's writing does not break new ground stylistically. But Stockett proves that she can structure an intriguing storyline through a conventional writing style. Even if I could not describe her storytelling as experimental, I can strongly say that it is carefully developed. Christensen also declares that the novel's "full-hearted, down-to-earth prose [that] gives the impression of being not crafted at all," which is true. As her review puts it, Stockett's plot "delivers" through its richness and well-crafted characters which serve as the perfect complement to this lack of inventive form.

The Calamity Club presents a succession of unexpected turns which maintain the suspense feeling unexpected turns which maintain the suspense feeling alive until

the end. Stockett employs Meg's adoption as a catalyst within the novel, leading the female protagonists' plotlines to diverge. Nevertheless, in the awaited denouement, Stockett ultimately reconnects the two narrative voices while she develops Birdie and Charlie's relationship as a mutually supportive power dynamic.

After Birdie builds up the courage and confesses to Charlie that Meg has been adopted and taken to another state, Charlie is powered by the maternal need and desperation to restore the parental rights over her child. As she needs to achieve financial stability, she begs Birdie to help her gather female employees and open a brothel together under the cover of a dancing studio. Stockett succeeds in displaying the negative attitudes towards this work field by drawing upon them through a first-person narrative voice. While Birdie is a moderately religious, unmarried, country woman, the novel explores her nonlinear process of accepting and recognizing sex work as a proper job, rather than a moral violation. The female character is forced to rise above her conservative principles and becomes Charlie's primary ally in raising the money needed to save Meg. The two of them cast five women and open the cathouse.

Birdie is initially capable of moral disengagement and willful ignorance towards the dalliances she perceives as immoral. However, the more she is exposed to each woman's tragic background, the more she emotionally connects with them and her prejudices dissipate. Stockett employs the five female sex workers to showcase the underlying motives and contexts which could lead or force women into this industry, including critical aftermaths of emotional trauma, abuse, and coercion. The novel does not shy away from questioning the difference between choice and circumstance, emphasizing the fragile boundaries which shape women's experiences within this industry.

Finally, Birdie transcends the distant and critical societal lens imposed by the South's patriarchal systems. She moves past this paradoxical attitude, which simultaneously condemns and objectifies the female body, to fully admiring these women for their resilience and loyal characters. Displaying this shifting perspective, Stockett indirectly addresses you, contemporary society. The novel obliges its readers to also surpass these degrading and conservative views of sex workers as people who lack morals, framing them as strong women and mothers who fight for their survival. But I wonder if Stockett's narrative holds enough authority to subvert the perspective still embedded in your members nowadays. Can a story crumble the conservative foundation within our world and make us accept this transactional exchange of intimacy as a respectable line of work?

To challenge rigid Southern ideology, Stockett introduces the readers to two contrasting angles over the concept of sexuality. While the novel exposes society's method of promulgating laws as means of social control over female sexuality, it also prompts the reader to perceive it as the symbol of agency over a woman's own body and life choices. Beside the sterilization laws, the American Plan also included the legal act of interrogating and arresting all women who dressed provocatively or behaved in a flirtatious manner. Thus, Stockett's female characters risk losing freedom, both concerning their bodies and lives. However, they persist in utilizing their sexuality within an era of censorship, as they strive for a brighter future.

While attempting to provide an insightful background on women's oppression, Stockett delves deeper on women's opression, Stockett delves into the South's legislation. She also brings up the Federal Economy Act from 1932, which mandated that any employee whose spouse also worked for the government had to be dismissed. Despite this law adopting a gender-neutral approach within its phrasing, the novel exposes how male legislators and labor officials enacted it as means to oppress the female sex.

Stockett doesn't shy away from what this means on the ground. She sketches a discriminatory scene when a hard-working woman sadly confesses to Birdie that the bank dismisses female employees on the view that "the poor unemployed men out there can find jobs, while the wife stays home to clean and cook supper for him." By explicitly showcasing the South's job market as severely limited by sexist and economic constraints, the novel showcases what exactly led the six women to sex work.

Assuming that Stockett's narrative was able to come through and spark some sympathy or reflective thoughts among society's self-proclaimed modern members, who seem to hold onto conservative beliefs, I am still led to ask: W*hy?* Why do we need a collection of tragic examples in order to dissipate the aversion towards these women employees? Do we necessarily need to emotionally attach to a character in order to show empathy? Is there space for empathy towards fictional characters and none for real people? And if this is the case, can't we transfer this empathy we feel towards the fictional world within reality?

The author also examines the South's gendered prejudices embedded within the medical field. Stockett displays a well-crafted critique towards these authoritative institutions and their "right" to exert control over the female body through her character Virginia, who is a medical student. Within the brothel business, she checks and ensures the women's health. While doing research, she comes across a book which discusses female sexuality as a symptom of hysteria, causing "trouble for others." Following this diagnosis, the book defines the act of masturbation performed by a male physician as the sole effective treatment. Virginia confesses her rage and frustration regarding this sexist power structure, screaming: "They' re saying if a woman pays a man to do it, he's 'qualified,' if a man pays a woman to do it, she's a whore."

Nowadays, despite the fact that five countries have decriminalized sex work and eighty-six, including the Netherlands, recognise the sex industry as legitimate, women employees still face discriminatory behaviour. In *The Calamity Club*, Stockett challenges us to ask why many still hurl shame and stigma towards the working women involved in this field. Indirectly, the author stresses an unfolding paradox: *Why do you, the 21st century society, which yields outstanding medical and technological outcomes, display resistance to changing your social and gendered prejudices?*

Ultimately, I thoroughly enjoyed *The Calamity Club* not only as a work of historical fiction, but as a thought-provoking novel which inspired me to address you in this letter. I specifically valued how Stockett places male characters in the background of Birdie and Meg's narratives. While Laura Christensen read them as "universally pathetic, comically impotent in more ways than one," I found their humorous display intriguing. It prompted me to question the patriarchal structures that still shape you nowadays. Thus, I urge you, society, to reflect upon your rigid standards and understand that women's choices or experiences should never be reduced to the moral standards set by your members centuries ago. Then, take the necessary steps to implement this change!

Daria Nicolae (She/Her)

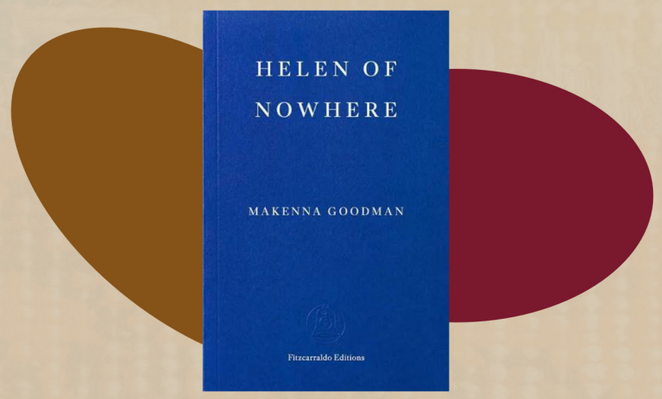
I am a Master's student at Utrecht University in the programme Literature Today. I also received a Bachelor's degree from Utrecht University after graduating the programme English Language and Culture. After my studies, I aspire to establish a career within the publishing industry, particularly in editorial work or self-directed writing. In my free time, I am passionate about writing prose and composing poems in both English and



Poking at the Bubble of Masculinity

In Helen of Nowhere, author Makenna Goodman probes the mind of the middling academic

Amanda Ahn



"Sorry, I've *gotta* take this!"

A classic refrain from a friend's boyfriend whenever I found myself in the unhappy role of dinner guest. He worked in the glass box of a publishing house in New York City and was constantly excusing himself from the table to take phone calls from his boss.

These dinners were stuffed with talk of his grueling work hours, the many books he took on, the incredible changes he made to the final products, not that he ever got the credit he deserved. Everyone in the office agreed the boss was a *bitch* — their words, not his! He considered himself a big-time respecter of women, but privately figured he would rise above her station in three to five years.

What he wouldn't admit, during the dinner party or after, was that he actually edited cookbooks — not novels — and taught spin classes on the weekends to pay for half the overpriced flat he shared with his PhD candidate girlfriend. On Saturday mornings, you could open Venmo and watch in real time as he requested $4.25 for her drip coffee from the café with the Marzocco on the countertop.

This acquaintance, of course, is an individual. A single person. So what does a single person have to do with the collective experience of living as a man, today? Makenna Goodman, the author of *Helen of Nowhere*, might argue that the line between the individual and the collective is not so sturdy. Erasing that distinction by reducing the Man of her novel to an abstraction allows her to prod at the maligned masculine en masse.

She's in good company. There's a whole group of writers poking at the bubble of masculinity these days. This year's Booker Prize theme was described as what it means to be human in an ever-changing world, but critics were quick to point out a more specific theme evident from this year's list — what it means to be a *man* in a changing world. *Helen of Nowhere* was selected as a longlist pick for this year's prize.

The Blokes of Blokedom

Last year, the theme was also masculinity in decline, a fact Kevin Power aptly described in a *New York Review of Books* piece on *Flesh*, the 2025 Booker Prize winner by David Szalay: "He writes with great formal rigor about the foot soldiers of contemporary blokedom."

This year, another legion of foot soldiers of contemporary blokedom are marching all the way to the Booker Prize ceremony. Makenna Goodman's male protagonist is one of these soldiers, this time from the angle of a disgraced professor.

The professor, having faced self-described humiliation from his female colleagues, "women, who were critics, who encouraged others to be critical too," and convinced his wife is on the side of the woke female professors in his midst, flees to the countryside to buy a house and, finally, find some peace.

Helen of Nowhere is structured like a six-act play, with its four characters listed with brief descriptions at the front of the book. "Late fifties, wool button vest, arborist-style pants with a worn-in notebook crease in the back pocket, lives in the city" is the description for the Man. From his perspective, we learn how important he considers his teaching:

> We read and we wrote, but the greatest work of all was to remove ourselves from the politics of the city and allow the voice of nature to speak to us, through us. Through the act of such communion, our own true nature might reveal itself.

The Man plans to recoup alone in the woods and perhaps stage a comeback. His porter to the peaceful life, a character simply called the Realtor, is there to lull him into the purchase of the home far away from the city.

She speaks of the previous owner of the house, Helen, at length. Helen took on the project of a self-sustained lifestyle with fervor. She chopped her own wood, planted her own crops, and kept her own animals. Helen, it would seem, was a better outdoorsman than he could ever hope to be.

As the sky darkens, the realtor asks if he'd like to have a sort of séance — she could let Helen embody her, and explain things herself, if he wants. He plays along:

> I didn't know what to think. But I had nothing to lose from playing this game. Helen was the owner. Helen had left the city, Helen was an all-encompassing love, what did I care?
>
> It was night.
>
> Maybe Helen was a player in this game, maybe she would appear, and we would all make love, and it would be this elemental awakening that I needed.

(An idea repeated throughout the novel is that Goodman's protagonist craves the bacchanal but fears the chorus of women ripping him limb from limb.)

Following a quasi-talk therapy session between the Man and entity, the flesh-and-blood Helen appears and offers him a new path forward. The last chapter, titled Wife, reveals our Man transformed into his wife's beloved dog (spoiler, my apologies).

What does the author wish to communicate about the masculine experience? The explanation lies in our Man, a figure whittled down to a series of reflexes and reactions. This paper cutout of a character allows Goodman to examine the behaviours of the

"maligned" male in different situations. If we put the paper cutout in front of a class and one of the students is a pretty woman, will he later pursue the student romantically? (Yes.) If we put the paper cutout in a room with a ghost, will he ask the entity why his wife is mad at him? (Yes.) If given the chance to drop the act of being a good person, with no consequences, will he do it? (Obviously.)

And when confronted by an otherworldly combination of realtor, spirit and therapist, will he finally be able to see the truth of his life? Or is it just his nature to avoid the facts in favour of his preferred truth: That *he's* the victim and only the purification of the great outdoors can heal all wounds (and transgressions).

Kings of the Ivory Tower

It's telling that our nature-loving protagonist is not the gun-wielding, squirrel-eating outdoorsman of rural America. Goodman places her target, instead, on the middling academic with his righteous, petite-bourgeois taste in all-weather trousers. This wannabe Whitman, preaching the interconnectedness of all things, surely enlarging himself on the maxim that he contains multitudes. Perhaps he glossed over this other line in *Leaves of Grass*: "The same inexorable price must still be paid for the same great purchase."

Goodman has written on the fallacy of finding peace in nature before. In her 2021 article titled "Who Gets to Live 'the Good Life'?" published in the New York Review of Books, she began to pull on the thread that would weave together her future novel.

"Especially in times of crisis, the compelling pull of simplicity-in-nature — one of the many contradictions in the mythos of America — tends to reassert itself," she writes, noting the influx of people fleeing cities during the COVID-19 pandemic. This great American myth is one she is herself immersed in. Goodman spent ten years at a small publishing house editing texts on regenerative agriculture while also running her own homestead; she's more than qualified to speak on the inherent lie of the modern day back to nature movement.

What is articulated in this slim novel? A man upset with his wife and career. The belief in the power of nature to harbor and heal. And, to borrow a line from the Old Testament, a masculine desire for an everlasting kingdom, a dominion to endure through all generations.

The everlasting kingdom in this case is academia, yet the idea that men are being pushed out of the ivory tower while women flourish is untrue, per a 2023 study published in *ScienceAdvances* titled "Gender and Retention Patterns Among U.S. Faculty."

> In most academic fields, women remain underrepresented among tenure-track and tenured faculty compared to the U.S. population despite their steadily rising share of doctoral degrees. This pattern is often explained by a so-called 'leaky pipeline' effect, in which women leave faculty jobs at higher rates than men at each career stage, leading to a progressive increase of men's faculty representation.

So, if women aren't actually coming for men's jobs, why all the fuss? Is Goodman's protagonist rooted in reality? Put another way, do male professors really feel threatened? Apparently, yes. In the post-MeToo decade, men have perceived their position in the academic world to be fading.

In 2024, researchers at the Institute for Interdisciplinary Research on Conflict and Violence at Bielefeld University confirmed that "high-status" men who felt "threats to [the] groups' moral or social image, loss of privileges, status decline, and loss of power or resources" opposed equality initiatives and actively backed anti-equality policies and practices.

Goodman's protagonist expresses this very idea:

> My colleagues said I took few risks when it came to hiring, and they accused me of reacting to departmental changes with a subtle, quiet redirection, followed by a willful forgetting. I always told myself this deprioritization was because the institution at large was an unfriendly home to revolutionary ideas and their makers, not that I was unfriendly to them myself. But they felt otherwise.
>
> I was not a bad man. Nowhere near it. But they said I was anyway.

What does Goodman suggest for these men, having endured their collective humiliation?

Pure, absolute *transformation*.

Back to my buddy, that lucky bloke at the big publishing house. His PhD candidate girlfriend's research was well received and she was offered a tenure-track professorship at an Ivy some years later. They moved for her career after he failed to get the promotion he so deserved (the hiring manager described him as "caustic").

She got a book deal. He wrote a story for children, querying agents and receiving a final, fatal no. She got a promotion. He found a new place to teach spin classes.

He took on a personality related to the great outdoors. He became a Thoreau mystic, spending his weekends roughing it next to placid bodies of East Coast water. She spent more time at the office. He got an L.L. Bean credit card.

Last I heard, they were planning to adopt a dog.

Amanda Rahn (she/her)



I am a journalist, editor, and writer from the United States, and my work appears in Midwest magazines on topics ranging from textile arts to education policy. I am a graduate of Wayne State University's journalism school and of the Columbia Publishing Course at Oxford University and am currently pursuing a graduate degree at Utrecht University. In high school, I sometimes drove my father's 12-seater carpet van alone on the highway. Once you change lanes going 75 mph in a truck like that, everything else seems easy.

BELLE BURDEN'S BURDEN TO PERFORM

FARRAH BUTZER



Belle. Beautiful. The French female equivalent of beau. Beautiful woman, woman burden? Beauty: a moniker for how well one is perceived. A burden. Burden to be a woman, burden to perform.

The author has an undeniably eye-catching name, doesn't she? Even with no knowledge of her prolific family history, her familial wealth, the fact that she is a descendant of the Vanderbilt family, one cannot help but be drawn to *Strangers: A Memoir of Marriage,* a debut novel expanded from a viral essay she wrote for *The New York Times* in 2023. Without even having to read the blurb, one can sniff out the stench of a tragedy. But perhaps it isn't wise to solely focus on her dramatic surname. Let us dive into the body of Burden's real-life memoir.

The book's opening chapter is akin to a blow to the head, when Belle's husband, without warning, makes the decision to leave her. He does this a day after Belle finds out about his workplace affair. She becomes disillusioned, not just by her previously thought to be perfect spouse, but her life as a whole and the decisions that led up to this point. She reflects upon her family, her career, and her fraught idyllic love story. These developments are further complicated by the timing of it all: 2020, the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, Belle's ex-husband, under the pseudonym James, follows through with cutting ties with his wife and kids, outright refusing the possibility for joint custody of the latter. He adamantly fights to enforce the hostile prenup between them, risking Belle losing everything near and dear to her. After all, in order to start with a clean slate, he must set fire to all that was before. He appears indifferent to the flames. Belle, attempting not to burn, must reckon with this new person who is akin to a stranger in her eyes, though, arguably, he always was.

The question on both the reader and the author's mind remains: Why? Why leave so suddenly when your family needs you most? Why treat your former spouse so cruelly in the face of devastation and ruin? Why opt to vanish from your children's lives? What do you want, James? Or rather, who are you, James?

Though she does not spare the reader any details of his deceit and cruelty, James is not portrayed as the cold-hearted villain I may have crafted in my reader's mind by stating the facts so plainly. No, his pre-pandemic side is warm, loving, and devoted. As newlyweds, he is elated and plans their honeymoon "meticulously," not letting Belle worry about a single thing; he supports her after her father's sudden passing; he is a self-prescribed "family man" and takes his kids on trips all around the world. This version of James starkly contrasts with his more eerie, almost chilling moments in the book, such as the time he texts Belle: "That was a great visit!" after leaving his kids in a state of devastation and disarray, informing them about the impending divorce. The following scene then transpires: "I tried to grab her, but she fled down the stairs, wailing in agony. Evie sat still and silent, with her arms crossed. James turned to me and said, "'I'm starving, can you make me a sandwich?'"

This is without a doubt one of the most jaw-dropping moments in the novel. How can he make such a demand at a moment like this? It is puzzling, bizarre, and offensive. In moments like these, he appears almost alien, and this further cements his position as a stranger to Belle. One aspect Burden's book fails in is fully grasping James' actions and character. Neither the reader nor Burden understands how these two versions of his being exist inside the same man. I could never tell if I liked or disliked this aspect of her memoir. Though James is written with depth, it is not a depth I can truly grasp. Alas, this can be attributed to the one-sided nature of the text. At all times he remains distant and strange as a result.

But there's another layer that is pervasive in Burden's work and is nigh impossible to ignore. The small, subtle differences in the way Belle and James operate: the aforementioned prenup that he drafts that Belle's lawyer disapproves of, his annoyance with Belle being offered a high-ranking position at a law firm ("You can't do that. You need to be here for the kids."), his refusal to take part in the domestic, and prioritising work above anything and everything else. These events both subtly foreshadow Belle's immediate present and demonstrate her shy and meek demeanour, which is unable to (initially) resist James' more domineering characteristics. It reveals a tension between them, marked by the roles they are expected to inhabit. James especially is someone who almost imperceptibly undermines Belle at every turn under the guise of maintaining a traditional family structure and, most of all, of upholding patriarchy.

When James asks, after all he has done, for Belle to make him a sandwich, she does not yell, she does not retaliate, she gets up and makes him a sandwich, thinking to herself: "How could he leave a wife who made such

good sandwiches?" How hopeful she is that he will change his mind about the whole thing. This is absurd, of course.

But is it?

Why shouldn't Belle believe this? She has done everything a wife and a mother ought in her relationship, so why exactly can't a really good sandwich served on "a white plate with a bamboo rim and sliced in half" be able to save her marriage? No, it cannot, Burden says. The marriage was flawed to begin with. James and Belle cling onto these roles of husband and wife like their lives depended on it (and in many ways they did), breeding a perfectly imbalanced relationship. He handles the finances and remarks that he doesn't do "bath, bed, or homework," she handles cleaning and pickup of the kids, only working as a lawyer pro bono when she can. Judith Butler, the notorious gender theorist, froths at the mouth upon this dynamic.

They posit that:

"If gender is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief."

Belle is merely a performer, as is James, who can use this to his advantage in many cases. Perhaps this is why they end up so distant from each other, because they are not familiar with what lies beneath the façade. Even so, Belle does not hold resentment towards James, at least not during the marriage. It only has room to be expressed once she is free of this dynamic, once she no longer bears the onus to perform. But time and time again the remnants of this performance seep through in Burden's writing. Belle has long been defined by her restraint and her shyness. Though I praise the writer's nuanced portrayal of her ex-spouse by avoiding making him a cartoon villain, it also feels like at times she is trying to sidestep the stereotype of the "bitter, discarded wife ranting about her villainous husband." She seems apprehensive almost to show the reader her full spectrum of emotions, her rage in particular. This is exemplified by the following passage about her birthday:

"Over the years, I stopped asking him to make plans; I orchestrated the day for myself, I went to the movies, I made dinner reservations, Susan bought me the cake. It didn't really bother me. I saw it as a difference in how we grew up, not a reflection of how he felt about me."

Of course, this is an undeniably sad anecdote, yet it still has an air of making excuses for James. She mitigates how much this hurt her by invoking his childhood, and in this way, she does not let herself feel justifiably angry. After all, anger is not becoming of a woman; it deviates from the role she is accustomed to inhabiting, and it is not what others expect from her. Shortly after this passage, she decidedly reminisces on the year he did do something nice for her, something wonderful actually. On her 42nd birthday he was able to secure the keys to a private beach at the vineyard, something apparently very difficult to accomplish, which Belle is over the moon about. She doesn't necessarily need to do this, it is almost as if she has to compensate for the fact she wrote her memoir in the first place by highlighting his redeemable traits. This can be frustrating, but it also serves a purpose. Though this type of writing may very well be a symptom of her socialisation, it is also a testament to what makes this book shine. Belle is continuously wrestling with her image of James, the man she knew and the man she once fell in love with; the man she had three kids with, and the man he showed himself to be:; the man who abandoned them, the man who is heartless. Her attempts to consolidate these two characters build the backbone of this narrative.

Coming back to her writing style, there was one passage which particularly stood out:

"I'm amazed by this now, by my candour, given my embarrassment, given my shyness, but it felt like my only choice. I had an open wound and needed to say, This is why I am bleeding."

Burden's words are always careful, precise, and intentional, as if her one and only concern is to express that very sentiment: "This is why I am bleeding." This keeps the reader engaged and always wanting to know more, despite her self-proclaimed reserved and quiet demeanour. More and more, as she begins to unpack this tragic event in her life, her words become bolder, less constrained by what she should or shouldn't say, until she is no longer scared by the book's very premise. But one more question remains on the reader's mind…Why should I care? If this sounds crass and out of nowhere, I would not blame you, dear reader, but let me elaborate.

Something Burden is not burdened by is money. She is rich. Rich rich. Generational wealth amounts of rich, the problems she faces are severely cushioned by the Scrooge McDuck-style gold coin filled swimming pool she has in her basement. She owns multiple properties and employs stay-at-home babysitters: "It was the easy version, of stay-at-home motherhood." Why should I, lowly peasant as I am, have any empathy for her? Well, whether it be out of shame, or guilt, and/or self-awareness, Burden does not shy away from letting readers know about her privilege. She is deeply conscious of it and does not hide the fact that she is in a much better situation than most. Her pain remains tangible, which is an element readers can latch onto, as well as the ever pervasive nature of patriarchy. It seems the wealthier men become, the worse their reign of terror. I don't relate to Burden, but I can't say I don't sympathise with her.

Strangers: A Memoir of Marriage by Belle Burden acts as a fantastic vessel for female rage and female fortitude. Its intimate, yet nuanced portrayal of one failed relationship is bound to resonate with many others like it.

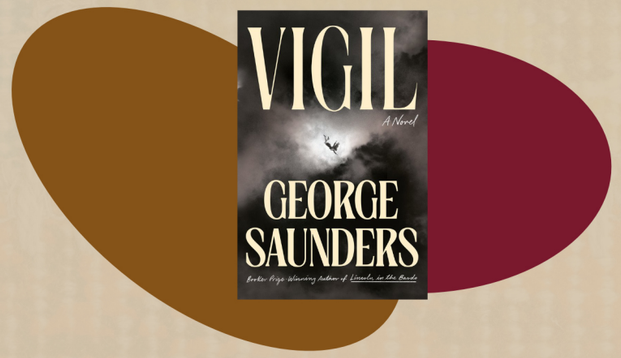
Farrah Blitzer she/her

I'm Farrah, a master's student and semi-published writer (if my student-run art magazine counts, this definitely does!). I live in Utrecht, but I originally grew up in Germany and in Spain with parents from all over, which is why I am especially interested in writing about inconguous forms of identity. I dream of one day making enough money to have an enclosed garden for my cat. I am also an aspiring bouldering champion.



OIL BURNS

HUGO WOLTERS



It is when you dozed off that I entered your room through the backwall. On the coffee table next to your seat lay George Saunders' *Vigil*, of which memories still twirl through your head. I need to act fast. The TV is turned on, showing a bleak news fragment: a possible new leak at neglected oil fields in the Gulf of Mexico. It would be the second leak this year by the same state-owned company, Pemex, Reuters reports. The weatherman takes over and tells you that August has never been this warm before. As you raise your head to look for the remote, you see me. You startle, then ask whether or not I'm real. "In this world, yes, I am," I tell you, and: "I'm here to comfort the dying. We don't have long, so let's quickly begin. Let me explain to you who Boone was, and why oil burns."

I reach for your memories, looking past your confusions, searching for those of K. J. Boone. K.J. Boone was an oil tycoon, an allegory for greed. On his deathbed, he was visited by spirits like me. One such spirit, named Jill "Doll" Blaine, whose self-imposed purpose is to comfort people soon to pass, was immediately rejected and belittled. When the spirit of a Frenchman visited, formerly the inventor of the combustion engine, the two argued about how to treat Boone. Their arguing continued for the remainder of Boone's life: Jill wanted to comfort Boone, whilst the Frenchman wanted to make Boone repent for his sins, as he was the sole cause for the devastating climate change. It was when Boone died that, though usually oil burns, this time nothing happened. Hence my visitation.

You look at me dazed, then mutter: "Why your visitation? Am I dying?" "You might be," I reply, "I'm here to show you your two ways forward. I understand your confusion, so allow me to start from the beginning. At the base of it all stands Boone. How is one able to justify the mess Boone left behind?" You reply: "I'd say, try to understand how he became the way he did? If I recall correctly, he started with nothing, and he worked himself all the way up to the top."

All that power, all that money, all those massed experiences gazing up at him, awaiting his words. [...] So they turned to him, trusted him, feared him, even. Only a handful of people in all of history had ever known that kind of power. Presidents, maybe, depending on the era; kings, sure, but their kingdoms were not worldwide; movie stars and such, but that was all superficial crap. He spoke and markets moved; called a king and the king picked up.

"Indeed," I say, "he was a hard worker. He came from nothing and became one of the wealthiest. One of his key justifications for why he got to ruin this earth on the scale that he did. Even in this room you can smell the oil. Being self-made kept his resolve unmoved. He further justified his actions by arguing that he helped build the modern world."

You know one thing you rarely heard about in the good old U.S.A. anymore? [...] A young fellow dying of appendicitis. At twenty-eight. Like Grandpa's brother had. Because a road got washed out. And the horse-drawn cart couldn't make it through. Imagine you go back in time and drop that young guy into the backseat of a big old SUV, fly him over a perfect four-lane to some gleaming modern hospital, save his life.

"It is quite spectacular, no? A face given to all environmental disaster, all that neglected oil infrastructure? An allegory for greed? Though Boone deals with guilt by abstracting his influence, the Frenchman tried to make him understand his actions. One way the Frenchman did so was by inviting Bhuti, the spirit of an Indian man. He told the story of how he and his family died due to severe heat. They were powerless as they died one after another. Boone fiercely dismissed Bhuti and the Frenchman, however."

You frown, still confused. "True, he wasn't innocent. But he was painted as the sole perpetrator for today's environmental collapse. Isn't that an exaggeration? Climate change is an institutional problem, with many millions of culprits. Nonetheless, we all wanted to point at someone to blame. Yet, at the same time, it was shown to us how inadequate that person was."

It is when you dozed off that I entered your room through the backwall. On the coffee table next to your seat lay George Saunders' Vigil, of which memories still twirl through your head. I need to act fast. The TV is turned on, showing a bleak news fragment: a possible new leak at neglected oil fields in the Gulf of Mexico. It would be the second leak this year by the same state-owned company, Pemex, *Reuters* reports. The weatherman takes over and tells you that August has never been this warm before. As you raise your head to look for the remote, you see me. You startle, then ask whether or not I'm real. "In this world, yes, I am," I tell you, and: "I'm here to comfort the dying. We don't have long, so let's quickly begin. Let me explain to you who Boone was, and why oil burns."

I reach for your memories, looking past your confusions, searching for those of K. J. Boone. K.J. Boone was an oil tycoon, an allegory for greed. On his deathbed, he was visited by spirits like me. One such spirit, named Jill "Doll" Blaine, whose self-imposed purpose is to comfort people soon to pass, was immediately

It is when you dozed off that I entered your room through the backwall. On the coffee table next to your seat lay George Saunders' *Vigil*, of which memories still twirl through your head. I need to act fast. The TV is turned on, showing a bleak news fragment: a possible new leak at neglected oil fields in the Gulf of Mexico. It would be the second leak this year by the same state-owned company, Pemex, Reuters reports. The weatherman takes over and tells you that August has never been this warm before. As you raise your head to look for the remote, you see me. You startle, then ask whether or not I'm real. "In this world, yes, I am," I tell you, and: "I'm here to comfort the dying. We don't have long, so let's quickly begin. Let me explain to you who Boone was, and why oil burns."

I reach for your memories, looking past your confusions, searching for those of K. J. Boone. K.J. Boone was an oil tycoon, an allegory for greed. On his deathbed, he was visited by spirits like me. One such spirit, named Jill "Doll" Blaine, whose self-imposed purpose is to comfort people soon to pass, was immediately rejected and belittled. When the spirit of a Frenchman visited, formerly the inventor of the combustion engine, the two argued about how to treat Boone. Their arguing continued for the remainder of Boone's life: Jill wanted to comfort Boone, whilst the Frenchman wanted to make Boone repent for his sins, as he was the sole cause for the devastating climate change. It was when Boone died that, though usually oil burns, this time nothing happened. Hence my visitation.

You look at me dazed, then mutter: "Why your visitation? Am I dying?" "You might be," I reply, "I'm here to show you your two ways forward. I understand your confusion, so allow me to start from the beginning. At the base of it all stands Boone. How is one able to justify the mess Boone left behind?" You reply: "I'd say, try to understand how he became the way he did? If I recall correctly, he started with nothing, and he worked himself all the way up to the top."

All that power, all that money, all those massed experiences gazing up at him, awaiting his words. [...] So they turned to him, trusted him, feared him, even. Only a handful of people in all of history had ever known that kind of power. Presidents, maybe, depending on the era; kings, sure, but their kingdoms were not worldwide; movie stars and such, but that was all superficial crap. He spoke and markets moved; called a king and the king picked up.

"Indeed," I say, "he was a hard worker. He came from nothing and became one of the wealthiest. One of his key justifications for why he got to ruin this earth on the scale that he did. Even in this room you can smell the oil. Being self-made kept his resolve unmoved. He further justified his actions by arguing that he helped build the modern world."

You know one thing you rarely heard about in the good old U.S.A. anymore? [...] A young fellow dying of appendicitis. At twenty-eight. Like Grandpa's brother had. Because a road got washed out. And the horse-drawn cart couldn't make it through. Imagine you go back in time and drop that young guy into the backseat of a big old SUV, fly him over a perfect four-lane to some gleaming modern hospital, save his life.

"It is quite spectacular, no? A face given to all environmental disaster, all that neglected oil infrastructure? An allegory for greed? Though Boone deals with guilt by abstracting his influence, the Frenchman tried to make him understand his actions. One way the Frenchman did so was by inviting Bhuti, the spirit of an Indian man. He told the story of how he and his family died due to severe heat. They were powerless as they died one after another. Boone fiercely dismissed Bhuti and the Frenchman, however."

You frown, still confused. "True, he wasn't innocent. But he was painted as the sole perpetrator for today's environmental collapse. Isn't that an exaggeration? Climate change is an institutional problem, with many millions of culprits. Nonetheless, we all wanted to point at someone to blame. Yet, at the same time, it was shown to us how inadequate that person was."

It is when you dozed off that I entered your room through the backwall. On the coffee table next to your seat lay George Saunders' Vigil, of which memories still twirl through your head. I need to act fast. The TV is turned on, showing a bleak news fragment: a possible new leak at neglected oil fields in the Gulf of Mexico. It would be the second leak this year by the same state-owned company, Pemex, *Reuters* reports. The weatherman takes over and tells you that August has never been this warm before. As you raise your head to look for the remote, you see me. You startle, then ask whether or not I'm real. "In this world, yes, I am," I tell you, and: "I'm here to comfort the dying. We don't have long, so let's quickly begin. Let me explain to you who Boone was, and why oil burns."

I reach for your memories, looking past your confusions, searching for those of K. J. Boone. K.J. Boone was an oil tycoon, an allegory for greed. On his deathbed, he was visited by spirits like me. One such spirit, named Jill "Doll" Blaine, whose self-imposed purpose is to comfort people soon to pass, was immediately rejected and belittled. When the spirit of a Frenchman visited, formerly the inventor of the combustion engine, the two argued about how to treat Boone. Their arguing continued for the remainder of Boone's life: Jill wanted to comfort Boone, whilst the Frenchman wanted to make Boone repent for his sins, as he was the sole cause for the devastating climate change. It was when Boone died that, though usually oil burns, this time nothing happened. Hence my visitation.

You look at me dazed, then mutter: "Why your visitation? Am I dying?" "You might be," I reply, "I'm here to show you your two ways forward. I understand your confusion, so allow me to start from the beginning. At the base of it all stands Boone. How is one able to justify the mess Boone left behind?" You reply: "I'd say, try to understand how he became the way he did? If I recall correctly, he started with nothing, and he worked himself all the way up to the top."

All that power, all that money, all those massed experiences gazing up at him, awaiting his words. [...] So they turned to him, trusted him, feared him, even. Only a handful of people in all of history had ever known that kind of power. Presidents, maybe, depending on the era; kings, sure, but their kingdoms were not worldwide; movie stars and such, but that was all superficial crap. He spoke and markets moved; called a king and the king picked up.

"Indeed," I say, "he was a hard worker. He came from nothing and became one of the wealthiest. One of his key justifications for why he got to ruin this earth on the scale that he did. Even in this room you can smell the oil.

have left. It is probably time to break the illusion now.

“Saunders mentioned in conversation with *The Interview:* ‘He [Chekhov] says a work of art doesn’t have to solve a problem — it just has to formulate it correctly. So in this book there are two characters who embody that question, and I think they’re both right.’ On that assumption, his book is about whether or not punishment is useful, even if the perpetrator can no longer atone.” I see a flicker of recognition in your eyes, slowly realising the state in which you’re in. I take a step toward you, trying to retain your attention. “No, punishment after the fact would not be productive. However, we must all abide by the same laws, which includes the law that we must not cause harm to one another. Those that break these laws should at the very least be subject to criticism. We should not give them a break because ‘they only acted out their nature.’. Humans are humans for they can change, no?”

You hesitantly nod, slowly becoming more aware.

"So now comes the point where you choose. Do you want to stay here, in this spirit-filled wonderland that Saunders created, or wake up to the TV blaring on about another hurricane hitting the Caribbeans? More wildfires in Portugal?”

I see it clicking in your brain.

“Over there, oil burns. Here, it is only extracted. Hours upon hours, making the rigs, ‘creating characters,’, placing the rigs, ‘building the scenes,’, pumping the oil, ‘setting up plot points.’. To fill our houses with, just like yours. All of it culminated, waiting for that final spark.”

The oil swells underneath my feet as I take another step.

“But in this wonderland, there are no sparks. It is never ignited. Because here, we are implored to ask whether or not blackening the sea for profit is a bad thing or not. Whether or not those perpetrators should be punished. Right before a spirit comes by, telling us it was inevitable.”

Your breath picks up, eyes open wider.

“Here we are, sitting between two realities. One of Saunders, dormant, and one burning. One asks whether or not punishment is effective, the other one states no punishment is ineffective.”

I stand next to you, giving you a pat on the back. “Well, to get to my point. Oil burns because you ignite it. Otherwise, what’s the point?”

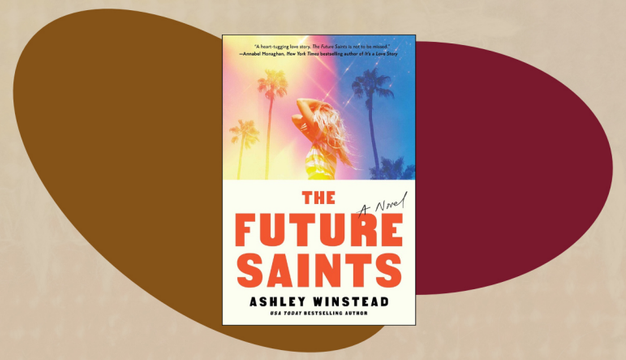
Hugo Wolters any/all

After finishing my bachelor’s in psychology, I decided to pursue literature. Currently enrolled in the master’s programme Literature Today, I hope to write fiction professionally one day. In the meantime, I fill my days by spending too much time on my music playlists and by saying *psps* to any cat I come across.



“THE RISE AND FALL OF FUTURE SAINTS”

QUINN MULDER



EXCLUSIVE: The Future Saints — the stars of Ashley Winstead’s novel — meet up one more time to discuss their career that skyrocketed on social media in 2024 following the death of their manager, sister, and friend, Virginia Cortland, who has since become their newfound muse. I meet up with the band for their interview where it all started, in California. Kenny, Ripper, and Hannah met at the university and started their band, The Future Saints. Their sound began as a breezy Californian vibe, yet this all changed when Virginia — Ginny for short — died. The mostly unknown band altered their sound and with that transformed their lives forever. Anybody who was active on social media in 2024 knows about the band that went viral on TikTok. After a fan posted a clip of "Six Feet Under,” a gloomy song about the grief the band was experiencing, their popularity skyrocketed. The Future Saints were the talk of the town for the whole of 2024 and therefore know all about the power of social media in the music industry. I meet up with the band to discuss how social media use influenced their various controversies that were documented online, the public feud with their label, and the disbanding of the Saints after their Grammy win.

Sitting down with them, I would be disappointed if I anticipated a discomfort among them as this is their first interview after their split. But Hannah, Kenny, and Ripper seem to be as comfortable as ever between each other, wearing matching T-shirts with the #PatronSaintVirginia on the front. A nice homage to the fans that supported them at the Grammys while the band was struggling with the loss of Ginny and trying to maintain their public image.

QUINN: I want to start off on a happy note, so my first question is: how did your dream of finding success in the music industry come true?

HANNAH: It happened on the night we promoted

"Six Feet Under" and the song went viral on TikTok. But that night, I told Kenny and Ripper that I was quitting. Everything. The band. The dream. We lived in grief, and our performances were influenced by alcohol use for everyone to see.

QUINN: It seems that as your breakthrough happened after the loss of Ginny, there is a dark cloud even over the happy moments.

KENNY: Maybe, but that fateful night, I believe that Ginny sent us a gift through TikTok. The band, which went to bed with only 46K followers and a lead singer who quit, woke up as a viral sensation with more than ten million views. We became internet stars.

I ask how social media and the music industry go hand in hand nowadays. We discuss how it has become increasingly more common that artists find their audience online, and that labels focus on finding sales through social media clips. Social media allow for personal messages that audiences find more appealing than the pre-recorded messages provided on television and radio. This leads to more sales, which is appealing for the label and thus means more use of social media.

HANNAH: We were told that this was our big break, that what we had been waiting for was finally happening. We would be cowards to give it up. So, after I went viral for being "The Saddest Shit I've Ever Seen" and was mentally struggling, I promised to give the Saints one more chance.

QUINN: I read that social media can be an enhancement of positive behaviour in the world. Would you say that this is true?

HANNAH: I would say that becoming internet stars allowed me to look past my grief and dare to keep going in a world without Ginny.

And so, a performance that showcases an artist breaking down in grief is what saved the band from succumbing to it, allowing them to approach the industry with a newfound positive outlook of the future.

HANNAH: In the end, this is where I've always wanted to be — on stage with thousands of faces looking up at me.

RIPPER: We were ready to give the people what they want.

QUINN: To quote your 2022 interview: "The trick is never quitting." You stated you wanted to become the best rock band in the world. Is this what happened in the end?

They laugh at their ambition, but Hannah raises her glass of water and says, "To becoming the best fucking rock band in the world," and I know their ambition will never be lost in their grief.

Being engrossed in the media, once an issue like Hannah's grief and mental state enters it, a great public concern and interest can be triggered beyond its original impact. That suddenly extensive media coverage is used to create a hoopla beyond the issue first presented.

QUINN: Did you feel like your newfound fame was a media hoopla that wanted to exploit your grief?

RIPPER: After our first viral video, we enjoyed the paparazzi. But as stories about us kept selling, they became invasive, followed us around, and provoked us for a reaction about Ginny.

The band learned that the paparazzi were not concerned for them anymore but were a part of their mental struggles now. The fans' concern for their grief, in turn, triggered more social media coverage, as Hannah kept going viral repeatedly, even starting a trend where people tell stories under the hashtag *#ItWasGoingSoWell* as she falls of stage.

HANNAH: The internet deemed me fun to laugh at. People even questioned whether SNL might create a skit about my breakdown in front of the paparazzi. I was ashamed of this at first. I recall thinking: "What was I thinking, letting everyone see me like that."

QUINN: Would you say the media used your vulnerability as a persona or an aesthetic?

KENNY: The media used us as a meaning-making institution to entertain themselves instead of looking at the problem.

QUINN: It is said that great media coverage that attracts a lot of public attention will amplify the problem. Would you agree with that?

KENNY: Yes. Everywhere we went, people were hungry for Hannah's pain.

QUINN: And when did you hit rock bottom? Was it when Hannah almost drowned in California?

Hannah looks down at the mention of her incident, quietly but firmly speaking up as Kenny places a hand on her knee.

HANNAH: Yes, and me almost dying was turned into a spectacle.

RIPPER: I even read an article where Hannah's drowning was referred to as a "glorious public meltdown" and an "interesting performance."

QUINN: Did the media-made coverage make you hit rock bottom?

KENNY: Being famous for being sad made us toxic. The media wanted us for our sadness, as singing about it is what made us famous. But with no accountability for our unhealthy mental state, the issue was amplified as we were glorified for sadness.

RIPPER: People wanted to see Hannah hit an all-time low, and every step towards it was posted online, without any help to fix it.

QUINN: Was there any guidance to help you manage this grief?

When I share this sentiment, all three Saints laugh. They say that no one — besides their new manager — wanted to stop or fix this behaviour. The band got stuck in this spiral of fame and sadness.

QUINN: This reminds me of Hannah's statement on Jimmy Kimmel that "being healthy was not on the top of her priority list." You said you just want to make songs that keep you close to your grief.

HANNAH: Once again, fans who supported this unhealthy behaviour used it on social media. They

shared posts saying, “Hannah speaks to me,” which only amplified my behaviour by normalising it through its media coverage.

I comment on how all this media coverage can have an impact on public awareness to want to share even more information on the issue.

QUINN: Did your label want to maintain this hoopla through social media? Or did they call out your behaviour?

HANNAH: Well… social media did not only convince me to give the band one more chance.

The three stars tell me how Manifest — their label — was ready to drop them because they did not like their new sound and wanted to sue them for the money still owed on their contract. But after the viral video, they were suddenly offered a bigger tour and bigger studios to record their new sound. At first, the band was warned about their behaviour. They were told to stop drinking, stop fighting, and start behaving even though the videos of Hannah singing about her grief were what sold the tickets; Manifest wanted her to fit into their preferred image in public.

RIPPER: This changed after Hannah’s viral moment in Vegas; they realised that the fans also wanted the personal mess that Hannah was off stage.

QUINN: What did these new sales mean for the label’s marketing approach?

HANNAH: Manifest once wanted me off the label for that kind of behaviour. Yet as we kept on growing with each meltdown recorded and uploaded, I felt like if I didn’t entertain them, or be this person they expected…

Hannah trails off, but we all know that the label would let them go, and The Future Saints would lose their chance to release their album. The self-interest of the label and their professional practise in the world of media therefore led to even more media coverage.

RIPPER: It was later revealed to us that our label was sending the paparazzi after us. They followed our every step while we battled grief. If it looked like we were going to have a wild night, the label would call them.

QUINN: Would you say that the grief you were expressing and your heartfelt music were turned into a marketing ploy?

KENNY: Yes, exactly. I was told by the label that “Winning is not just about talent” when I questioned why they would call the paparazzi on us. But I wonder if winning is worth it if you lose yourself along the way?

We come to the same conclusion: the label manipulated the Saints through social media to keep the buzz around their problems, going for sales. Winning as it turns out, was of utmost importance to the label.

RIPPER: Another artist was even hired to talk badly about Ginny to get a reaction from us on camera.

QUINN: Is this also why your album was pulled before its anticipated release? Because they only wanted you when you were winning?

HANNAH: All due to one bad review of the album. Manifest wanted us only when we were trending. But those days are behind us.

In the end, their album *One Day, Virginia* was released, climbed the charts, and won multiple awards.

RIPPER: Our days of ending up drunk on TMZ are over. Manifest and their social media ploy lost The Future Saints they wanted to see broken and bruised.

So, the band decided to break up and work on their mental health after all their successes and issues were documented online.

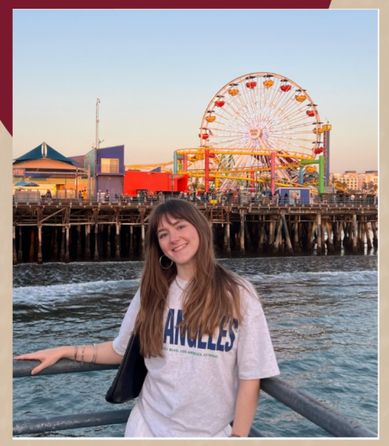
This perfectly sums up The Future Saints, a band that was defined by their social media presence but was also broken by it. Social media can open doors, offer opportunities, and help some grow. Yet, these grieving individuals were used, ridiculed, and made into spectacles time and time again, leading to their end. However, as I pack up, Hannah Cortland must have the last word. Seeing her wry smile, I recognise that fearless girl from the videos.

HANNAH: We won in the end; we made Ginny immortal. And to quote Ginny, our forever muse: “We might have been devils today, but I swear we’ll be saints tomorrow.”

And with that, I hope the media will allow them to be saints once more.

Quinn Mulder she/her

My name is Quinn Mulder, and I am a literature student interested in reading about minority groups and ways in which society can improve through interesting and creative narratives, as I believe that hope can be found in every narrative and that we are always working towards our own dreams. Born in a small town in the Netherlands, I dream of reaching the big cities with my own writing as well as being an editor for a big publishing house. Reading, writing, travelling, and spending time with friends and family pretty much sums up who I am as a person and what I care about.



SECTION 3

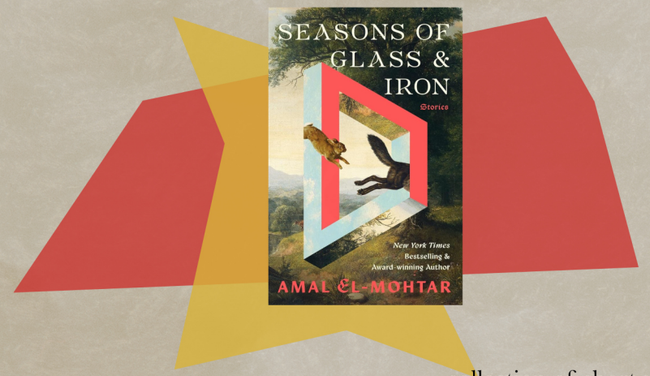
A Human Touch





BREAKING THE RULE OF THREE

BY FEMKE KAPTEIJNS



Beginnings

Once upon a time, there was a young woman who should have known better than to rely on fairy tales. However, she had been surrounded by them since childhood: cassette tapes, watercolour picture books, and collections of international folk tales. Thus, she learned to never trust strangers, to never take shortcuts, and to wait for her prince on a white horse at the end of the story. Her days repeated and blended together as she endlessly uttered fixed stock phrases. As she would eventually read in a certain collection, fairy tales had become her scripture.

To escape her self-inflicted boredom, she liked to delve into the minds and lives of others. A good friend remembered her reading *This Is How You Lose The Time War*: how one of its authors had won many literary awards, how the young woman praised its visionary prose, but criticised its unclear plot. Hence, the good friend gave the young woman a copy of Amal El-Mohtar's latest work, a collection of short stories and poems titled *Seasons of Glass & Iron: Stories*. The familiar anthological format made the young woman feel a deep-rooted comfort.

Upon finishing the collection, the young woman went to thank her friend for the gift. While walking through a dark forest on the path to her friend's house, she pondered on her impressions of the collection. Everyone and their evil stepmother, including critics like Caspossere, Otto, and Wolfe, had already uncovered its main theme: the love for and between women. This made the young woman think of Virginia Woolf, how she liked the "unconventionality," "completeness," and "anonymity" of women. The young woman's fairy tale informed worldview left her feeling disconnected from these qualities, as well as from the women in the collection who broke each other's curses, held each other in erotic dreams, and survived clinical trials together.

the women in the collection who broke each other's curses, held each other in erotic dreams, and survived clinical trials together.

Straying from this foretrodden path, she reflected more on the collection's other recurring motifs, the seams mending the stories and poems together. She remembered experiencing Amal El-Mohtar's sensory writing, the smell of cinnamon and the coarseness of sand. How strange that the words seemed to come alive, less connected to the conventional descriptions of smells and sounds in her fairy tales.

Flowers

Suddenly, the young woman smelled the sweet, alluring smell of flowers somewhere off the path. Although she knew that those who treaded beyond the path were punished, she stopped to gather some. After all, this would make a perfect thank-you gift for her good friend. In the collection she had read that the Latin word for anthology was *florilegia*: a gathering of flowers.

The young woman had never managed to write something that reflected the images in her mind, only read and hoarded flowers that gave her small comforts. By assembling her own bouquet she could try telling the stories trapped in her throat, the feelings that conflicted with those in her beloved fairy tales, the voice she struggled to find. Just like an anthology, the selection of flowers that transformed into a beautiful woman in the collection, she felt like a plurality trapped in a singular body.

She bundled several flowers together that reminded her of the collection. Some smelled more strongly than others, had thorns that pricked deeper into her fingers, lost fewer of their petals as their little bodies pressed up against each other. She could give those that survived to her friend and tell her about the ones that she lost halfway, if she had not forgotten about them by then, of course. The lilacs, roses, and brooms would sweeten the air of her friend's room with the memories of women's lips teaching each other how to turn adversity into advantage. The aconites, bluebells, and sweat peas would wither away in a dusky forgotten corner, their cheap and ornamental smell of purple prose leaving no lasting resonance.

Birds

When she tried to return to the path, it had vanished. Now there was only a trail of various feathers: big and small, soft and prickly, black and multicoloured. In the distance a hooting noise, something between an owl and a goose, echoed. The young woman was not used to being off the path, so she followed the feathers in the hope that they would lead her somewhere. In the trees surrounding her sat various birds: sparrows, crows, cormorants, swallows, hummingbirds, and phoenixes. Their overwhelming decorative aura blinded the young woman; their overlapping tones offered her no help.

When she reached the last feather, she cried out for help. A huge owl turned its head, eyes the size of water wheels. She could not recall this kind of creature from her fairy tales. This beast was much bigger than the birds she usually came across, the ugly ducklings who turned into beautiful swans and the songbirds who helped girls with their quests. It looked, rather, like it had absorbed the words that described the owls in the collection, which the young woman still clutched in her hand. The beast looked like it had devoured the evocative words of hunger, silence, and fierceness.

Suddenly, the words began to resonate off the pages on the wall and started to thrum in her head. She recalled how the collection treated the power of words: it bound people together when they were strung into stories, but these words were often too dangerous to exist, forced to be left behind. Although she knew not what it was like to abandon a language, the thrumming replicated that pain for her. She noticed that the words pounding in her head did not manage to create a steady rhythm. The thought of a writer, a poet, an artist, who did not always manage to fully grasp their own use of language made her feel relieved. Finding her own voice did not have to go fluently, all at once.

When the vibration of words ended, the young woman finally knew what to tell her good friend about the collection, which was now spread out on the floor. While its many voices, sometimes overlapping each other as if written on a palimpsest, did not always strike a chord, its tales of finding a common language brought her to tears at other times. The women inhabiting the collection simultaneously knew how to make beautiful music with bells adorning their lips and fail to let their notebooks filled with secret confessions speak for them.

Suddenly, the young woman remembered something. A language was so much more than words to be spoken and understood. It could also be a craft, a gesture, an escape route. Since she had read enough to know how to create art with her own hands, she could practice transferring the words from her heart to paper. She would only be able to change the narrative if she repeated her own words over and over and over again. Thus, she decided then and there that she would learn a new language to carve a place in the world for herself. To let the trapped words in her chest sprout wings.

Having reached the climax of her story, she closed her eyes and waited for her words to finally stream out of her, waited to be miracled away to her friend's house, waited for the story's resolution.

Women

You're surprised to find that you are still here when you open your eyes again. You thought the pattern usually ended after three. Miraculously you are clutching the collection in your hands, flowers crushed against its cover. The walls of myriad words have vanished, leaving you in an expansive gallery. There are portraits upon portraits hanging at different angles, some fixed to the wall with rusty nails and wooden frames, some carefully encased in gold. Without even looking at their descriptions, you realise these are the women of the collection as you imagined them in your head.

Many of the portraits contain multiple women: one kissing the flowers growing out of another's skin, a young woman teaching a child facts about owls, two women breaking imaginary chains by dispelling the lies they have told themselves. While some have blurred features, others shine brightly. Their personalities, thoughts, and ideals are clearly discernible to onlookers. Despite being mere images, some of the women almost feel like old friends whom you know through and through. Others have faces you do not remember reading about, but would still have liked to know. It feels like there is a barrier between these portraits and you, a gap El-Mohtar filled up with pretty sentences to grab your attention.

Perhaps you, too caught up in the monotonous structure of daily life, should not have been so dismissive of El-Mohtar and her insistence on solely writing about women. While you are finally able to connect to the women in the collection that broke patterns ingrained in you, there is still some glass in the mirror that must be cracked before you can be free of fairy tale tropes. You must leave this fantasy world and revive your connections with the women in your own life. You recall reading somebody named Smith claim that "the rescue narrative is one that repeatedly occurs in fairy stories and other traditional narratives." By using the words of the women in the gallery as a vehicle for your escape, you will bend this structure and allow someone other than a prince on a white horse to rescue you from the mundanity. You exit the gallery.

Femke Kapteijns she/they

My name is Femke Kapteijns, and I am following the master's programme Literature Today at Utrecht University. My studies have cultivated my current interest in critical theory, queer theory, and cultural memory studies. Besides reading New Weird fiction and slice of life manga, I enjoy playing board games with friends, karaoke, and practicing a variation of martial arts. After graduating, I would love to use my experience from my courses and editing work at the Marxist magazine Paraat! to become an editor at an independent publishing house.



"YOU MUST LEAVE THIS FANTASY WORLD AND REVIVE YOUR CONNECTIONS WITH THE WOMEN IN YOUR LIFE."

GETTING IT WRONG IN TAIPEI STORY

BY JULIA SMEDING



Stories about heritage, language and looking in from the outside are nothing new for Rebecca F. Kuang: a writer who was born in China and immigrated to the United States when she was four years old. She is mostly known for her fantasy novels: *The Poppy War* trilogy and *Babel*, or *The Necessity of Violence*. Within these novels, she explores colonialism and the cost of war. Babel offers a fresh perspective on translation and how meaning changes and gets lost. These are themes that ring true throughout her entire bibliography.

Her writing cannot be confined to one single genre. In the satirical novel *Yellowface*, Kuang wrote her first work within the literary fiction genre. Tackling racism within the publishing industry, Kuang, in the novel's acknowledgements page, writes that *Yellowface* is "a horror story about loneliness in a fiercely competitive industry." Additionally, in her novel *Katabasis*, the main character undergoes a long journey to the underworld to find her thesis advisor, whom she accidentally sent there through a ritual gone wrong.

What follows is a deeply philosophical journey about purpose, grief, and relationships. The feeling of being isolated is something that can be found within more of her works, most notably in her latest work, Taipei Story. By now, she is a well-established writer whose work is being read by millions around the world.

Taipei Story

In her most recent novel, Taipei Story, the themes of grief, family, and culture are more present than ever. The book follows Lily Chen, a college student who embarks on a journey to Taipei to follow an intensive language course. She hopes to connect with her Chinese family while fully immersing herself in the culture. The beginning of the Programme is wonderful, and Lily is quickly off to a flying start.

However, this newfound confidence quickly dissolves: her classes are extremely hard and she can't get along with her roommate. She feels disillusioned and, after relentless gossiping from her classmates, finds herself isolated in a city she desperately wants to belong in.

After receiving the news of a devastating loss in the family, Lily tries to piece together memories about her family and find a way to connect to the culture she feels so disconnected from. What I loved most is that the grief here feels incredibly internal and realistic. So much of Lily's grief exists inside her own thoughts, memories, regrets, and the questions she realizes she can no longer ask. There's this constant feeling of loss hanging over the story. Not just the loss of a person, but the loss of connection, language, history, and understanding.

While I expected Taipei Story to focus mainly on its grief narrative, I found myself enjoying its commentary on language study and identity a lot more. Kuang proposes the idea that you can have an entirely different personality when you try to communicate in a different language. The way Lily felt this insecurity and gave into this competitive feeling of "Who can be the best at being Chinese?" is very interesting. In a Sept. 9 interview with LitHub, Kuang stated the following:

"It's a great source of shame and embarrassment when you don't have the fluency of the language that your appearance or social position would indicate that you should have. And people also treat their varying levels of fluency as games of one-upmanship. When you go to a Chinese restaurant with a bunch of other Chinese Americans and one of them can just rattle off all the names of dishes on the menu and you can't even ask for tea, the attitude being signaled is, "Oh, I'm better than you. I'm more Chinese than you. I'm more connected than you." So, a lot of people don't speak in Chinese because they don't want to signal, with their accents or poor grammar, that they are less than."

This "bizarre pecking order" can be seen in the novel. The other students immediately write off the white kids and their advice on where to go in the city. Lily and her roommate Anna are considered heritage speakers and despite them both having never stepped a foot in Taipei, they are looked to for guidance by the other students. They are expected to be aware of cultural codes and to possess a basic grasp on the language already. Not wanting to be seen as a fraud and losing her heritage status, Lily is constantly running to the bathroom to quickly Google things. It doesn't take long until Lily feels like she is in over her head. Anna and Lily decide not to live in the school's dorms but opt for an apartment in the heart of the city instead.

They do this because they want to fully immerse themselves in the culture and, as a result, master the language just that much faster than their peers. The culture shock hits fast and hard and Lily is quickly humbled by it. She is exhausted after the first week and can't do much other than sleep. She is plagued by constant mosquito bites which feel like "a dozen hot knives digging into my flesh." Navigating the city turns out to be a lot harder, too, as her daily commute gives her frequent headaches. Lily describes looking at street signs and subway stops as "having to do

long division every time I opened my eyes." She finds the language a lot harder than she expected and the program is asking a lot of her. There seem to be social norms she can't quite reach, and she struggles to connect with her fellow classmates.

Kuang says in the foreword of the novel that it's really just about Lily getting things wrong all the time. This seems to be true at the start of the cultural exchange program. Lily is quickly ostracised by her fellow classmates after a short weekend trip with a boy from the program, since her roommate has a crush on him, and soon, rumours start to fly about what happened between him and Lily on their hot spring getaway. Isolated from her peers, she receives a text message from her mother about the passing of her grandfather. She feels like she can't properly mourn him, as she does not feel connected to the Chinese part of her family at all. What follows are snapshots of her life in Taipei: She spends a lot of her time wandering in the city on her own.

Going from hotpot restaurants she found online to guided tours and classical concerts, she avoids her classmates and the roommate in her studio apartment, which was too small for two people anyway. She also avoids her family — while feeling lost and wanting to connect with them, she ignores her mother's calls and cannot go to her grandparents in Guangzhou because she does not want to go through the process of applying for a visa. We see Lily go through her life as a cultural exchange student. She practices her Chinese in class and slowly starts to get better at it. She tries to uncover more about her family. These small scenes come together to describe her life.

There are no big revelations: instead, we are invited inside her mind for just a bit. We watch her question her reaction to the news of her grandfather's loss: does she feel sad? Should she feel sad? What does this grief look like for her? The story takes us from this conflict but offers little resolution. The change is within Lily, whom we see grow internally. When she complains during a class that "she sounds like an idiot," her teacher aptly replies, "In fact, you have always sounded like an idiot. It is considerable progress that you can now hear it."

A huge part of this book talks specifically about experiences of diaspora and growing up in an Asian family, which I cannot personally speak to, but that didn't make the book inaccessible to me. Lily is relatable in a lot of ways: her habit of trying to rationalize her way out of feelings, her not knowing what she is supposed to feel in a given situation, the sinking feeling she has when walking into a room and believing everyone is talking about her, her misunderstanding what other people expect of her, and all the ways we misunderstand what an experience is supposed to mean while we're still living it. Maybe it is because this is a personal matter to me: my maternal side of the family is Lebanese, with half my family still living there. I do not speak the language and have never visited the country. When my grandmother passed away, I was left with a lot of the struggle and pain that I see in Lily. How do you mourn a person you barely even knew? You can't ask them questions anymore.

Lily pierces memories together by talking to her mother, wandering around the city and interacting with the city to the best of her capabilities. Thinking about her grandparents, Lily states:

"But I had meant to fix this. I had the perfect plan. I would study Chinese in college, become fluent in short order, and then I would have all the conversations with my grandparents that I had avoided before. In my imagination, my grandparents would always be there, frozen at the age that I had last seen them, waiting until I was ready to talk. I thought I'd get a second chance. I thought I had the time. "

Other readers might see something completely different in the same scenes, and I think that's the point. You are shown Lily's experiences and how they affect her, but what do they make you feel? What do they make you think of? What does the "nothing" become when you look at it? Yes, Lily gets words wrong and sometimes meaning gets lost in translation, but the heart and soul of this book is in getting things wrong on a bigger level than just words:

"HOW DO YOU MOURN A PERSON YOU BARELY KNEW? YOU CAN'T ASK THEM QUESTIONS ANYMORE."

what is expected of Lily? How should she feel and act and study and learn? What is expected of her as a friend, a girlfriend, a daughter, a granddaughter, a Chinese American person? Deeper than her desire to be understood, Lily wants most to not be an outsider: in her family, in Taiwanese and Chinese culture, and in her group of chosen friends.

Lily goes through most of her character growth once she is forced to accept her true position relative to those of whom she wished to be a part of (which was ultimately something between insider, outsider, and individual). Yes, she gets it all wrong. And maybe that's okay. At the end of the novel, Lily is at the airport, getting ready to fly back to America after finishing the program. It's about all the times we go into something with certain expectations and realize only too late that we should have acted or felt differently before we ran out of time.

Julia Smeding she/her

I am a master's student at Literature Today. I studied Media and Culture for my bachelor's degree, and I love anything film, media, and literature related. While I love going out and seeing my friends, I can almost always be found rewatching *Twilight* while trying to get my cat to come cuddle with me.



WHO ARE YOU, KARL OVE KNAUSGAARD?

BY LIAM BERAN



In 2009, the Norwegian author Karl Ove Knausgaard drops a bomb on his hometown.

The first book of his autofiction series, *My Struggle*, is published. It contains an anecdote in which Knausgaard describes the aftermath of the alcohol-induced death of his father, a teacher and an influential local politician. He comes to his father's home to find it in disrepair — filth and detritus, the stench of "mold and piss," fill the space. His senile grandmother is there too, a ghost trapped in the home's walls.

"Her arms were no more than skin and bone… She stank of urine."

Upon reading a pre-publication manuscript, his father's family threatens legal action and begs Knausgaard to withhold the anecdote. Scared of retribution, he corrects some errors but does not cede to their ultimate request. After the book is released, his paternal family calls it "Judas literature" in *Klassekampen*, Norway's third-largest print newspaper. His wife relapses into depression.

Knausgaard keeps writing.

After the second book of *My Struggle* is published, his mother calls him. Her request, as Knausgaard relayed it to *The New York Times*, is simple: "Can you stop now? Stop now. It's too much. Think of your children."

It takes four more books for him to stop; the final novel includes a 400-page essay on Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, from which the series takes its name. By this time, the series has become an international sensation, and Knausgaard feels a combination of guilt, exhaustion, and a sense that "I'd done something wrong." In a sweeping profile appearing in *The New Republic* in 2014, Knausgaard says he's done writing autofiction. His next series, he says, will be something different.

"Influenced by Borges and Calvino, the new book will have elements of the fantastical, the otherworldly. It won't be about his life at all," writes journalist Evan Hughes.

The School of Night is not that book.

After his sister overdoses during Christmas dinner, a photography student Kristian Hadeland, who is in Norway for the holidays, takes out his camera and starts photographing the empty rooms of his parents' home and the distress left in his sister's wake.

"It struck me suddenly that it was all still intact. Everything was the same as when they'd left. It could still be documented. It *should* be documented."

The next day, Kristian's father tells his wife there's something wrong with their son: "I know you've said he'll grow out of it. But it's not going to happen. It's what he is. He's a narcissist, through and through."

Seeing any parallels?

Welcome to *The School of Night*, Knausgaard's death metal-inspired journey into Hell and the fourth book of his fantastical *Morning Star* series; Kristian appears as a minor character in two prior installments.

When we meet him, Kristian is bitter, living by himself in London, and finding little success in his studies. He spends his nights drinking alone at pubs and meets the closest thing to a friend he'll have on the novel's fourth page — Hans, a quiet, enigmatic Dutch man who treats him as a dear companion.

An early reference to Christopher Marlowe, the playwright behind *Dr. Faustus*, offers some indication as to why. Hans's guidance swiftly propels Kristian's artistic progression and moral degradation — clandestinely photographing family members in distress becomes skinning a cat corpse to pose as a subject. Just as he's nearing artistic realisation, Kristian commits a crime echoing *American Psycho* and *Crime and Punishment* and looks to Hans — whether knowingly or unknowingly — for salvation. The latter third of the novel details his accompanying moral reckoning, which passes about as smoothly as one might expect.

Serge Doubrovsky coined the term "autofiction" in the 1970s to refer to works neither fiction nor autobiography, but "fiction, of events and facts strictly real." By Doubrovsky's definition, *The School of Night* is not autofiction; the events depicted therein are entirely fictional and make no claim to be otherwise.

I'd argue it's not that simple, though. Knausgaard is toeing a dangerous line; in interviews, he's described Kristian as a shadow self and the elements of himself as "magnified and put in him." These elements are both temperamental and, in some instances, biographical: Kristian's discontent with his photography, for example, is largely based on Knausgaard's own disastrous early forays into poetry as a teenager and the scathing criticism from peers that followed.

Knausgaard isn't Kristian, though, and empathy is, in his view, their greatest divider: As Knausgaard was writing *My Struggle*, he sometimes felt physical pain. By contrast, Kristian "doesn't care" that he's hurting his family for his art.

"That freedom comes for him in the end," Knausgaard told *The Guardian,* "that, to me, is the Faust story."

In a way, it was strange for Knausgaard to so decisively leave autofiction, a genre whose current ubiquity he shares a large deal of credit for. In 2026, autofiction, and questions surrounding it, is everywhere: played straight in Andrea Bajani's *The Anniversary*; played for scandal in Rachel Cusk's 2026 *Life of M*; played on the silver screen in 2024's *Sebastian* and 2026's *Bitter Christmas.*

Why? An alogrithmic imperative that rewards author as influencer, tastemaker, and news topic is one likely reason; the idea, as *Guardian* journalist Alex Clark argues, that autofiction gives us a "new way to describe reality" in a time when truth is contested, is another; a publishing industry obsessed with the marketability of one's lived experience, particularly if it's traumatic, is a likely third. After all, its first mention came in a blurb on the back of Doubrovsky's novel.

"Autofiction came to us as part of the language of commercial promotion, a way of marketing as new something almost as old as writing itself: the blending of the real and the invented," critic Christian Lorentzen argues in *Vulture*.

But by forgoing an autofiction label, *The School of Night* fails in the opposite direction. The text ignores that many of Kristian's struggles are incomprehensible without Knausgaard's own life as a counterweight; it's self-flagellation presented in the absence of a self. The

whip cracks into the air. We'd like it to crack into a body.

One example: Throughout the text, Kristian worries about being perceived as gay — most significantly during a scene in a diner where two girls mistake Kristian's meeting with his professor, which ends in tears, as a gay couple "breaking up" (Kristian's response is to walk up to the girls and call them "dogs.") To a reader who has read *My Struggle* and encountered Knausgaard's struggles with internalised homophobia — he told*The Guardian* in 2015 that he was often called gay by other children in his youth — these events provide a valuable bridge between Knausgaard and Kristian.

To someone who hasn't read *My Struggle,* the events feel like shots in the dark disconnected from any larger narrative or textual happenings. Such instances abound throughout the text, and the reader wonders if Knausgaard has forgotten that he is not writing a life, but a novel; long forays into Henrik Ibsen's oeuvre or the exacts of Kristian's eating habits (mostly noodles, beans and premade pastries, if you're wondering), charmingly self-effacing as they relate to a real human's life, in the fictional form are rendered inert. One wonders how much of this is related to Knausgaard's own admission that he tends not to plot a novel nor favor heavy edits to it.

Given this reliance on biographical detail, it's frustrating that the one thing in the novel that truly and unequivocally happened in real life — Knausgaard's deal with the devil to make *My Struggle* a success — is rendered so ambiguously in the novel. In real life, Knausgaard publicly called upon Satan in a 2009 newspaper article, prior to the publication of *My Struggle*, to make the novel a success: "Come to me too, for fuck's sake, oh Prince of Darkness! We can write a book together, I'm more than happy to sell what's left of my soul to make the book so big that the world will lie at my feet."

In *The School of Night*, Kristian never makes a Faustian bargain as it relates to art. His request to Hans, whom he has no certainty is a supernatural figure, is ultimately practical: to be freed from potential incarceration. And Hans, devil as he might be, isn't culpable for Kristian's actions: Hans does not tell him to steal a dead cat; Hans does not tell him to photograph his sister's overdose.

Every terrible choice Kristian made in the past, and all the terrible choices that follow, are entirely his own, and one can hear the black metal scream of "This is all my fault" in each misdeed. One almost imagines it might be Knausgaard's voice screaming it.

When tragedy finally befalls Kristian — some thirty pages before the novel's end — it's not a surprise. The novel reveals itself in its first pages as a suicide note.

The real question, then, is what to make of this tragedy.

Is it, as Knausgaard suggests, Kristian's punishment for artistic freedom? Is it his punishment for freedom from incarceration? Does it have anything to do with Kristian at all?

The School of Night doesn't offer a clear answer. The novel's last page reads like an acknowledgements section, though it has no heading. Its author, presumably Knausgaard, notes that the distinction between literature and life "is porous and osmotic, the traffic in both directions considerable," and that "as a character, Kristian Hadeland has no basis in reality."

"One of the people who read it while it was still taking shape asked me who the main character was modelled upon. I replied, truthfully: no one."

This statement, on face, seems completely irreconcilable with Knausgaard's assertion that Kristian is a "shadow self," that Kristian's deal with the devil is analogous to his own (for good measure, one could point to Knausgaard's comments to *LitHub* that, to create Kristian, "I took a lot from myself at 18 or 19."). One wishes to take Knausgaard, famously quiet and pensive in interviews, by the shoulder, give him a good shake and shout "*Pick a side!*"

(Having said that, I empathize with the fact that nuance is invariably lost in translation, and it's possible that Knausgaard's acknowledgement makes more sense in its original Norwegian.)

Perhaps this is the work of an overzealous critic.

Perhaps this is the risk authors court in writing autofiction — by surrendering your life to the page, you've created a celestial body whose gravity threatens to pull all your subsequent works into its orbit. We have 3,500 pages of Knausgaard to draw from; faced with a seemingly impossible question, who wouldn't turn to them?

Perhaps Knausgaard just couldn't resist himself.

In the spirit of having no good answers — an interview request I sent to Vintage, the Penguin Random House imprint that published *The School of Night* in English, did not receive a response — I'd like to offer my own, likely flawed, analysis.

Knausgaard has spoken at length about his difficulties accepting touch from other men. He told *The Guardian* in 2015 that he tries "to avoid" things such as embracing another man, as he's "never felt at ease with it at all."

"'Those small things like giving a hug to [a] man,' he says, almost wincing, 'I try to avoid it.'"

It is notable, then, that the novel closes with a physical gesture of compassion: Hans holding Kristian's shoulder as he comes to terms with an unimaginable loss.

Hans is mercurial and, at the same time, perhaps the best-defined character in the novel. He is kind and cruel; he summons Kristian on a whim and dismisses him with the same capriciousness; he pushes Kristian to artistic fulfillment but takes no responsibility when that artistic fulfillment hurts innocent people.

He delights, above all else, in seeing Kristian's works come to life.

We are the devil, and Knausgaard is our protégé. He's been performing for us for over a decade. And, after reading *The School of Night*, you might, too, want to give him a gesture of warmth. To tell him that it's time to stop hurting.

Liam Beran he/him

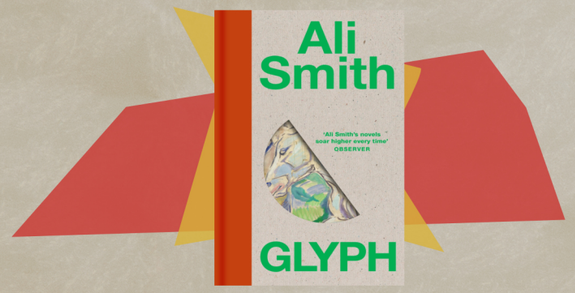
I'm a student in the Literature Today MA; prior to starting this program, I received a bachelor's degree in English literature from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in the United States (Go Badgers!). I worked for a few years as a journalist during/after my graduation, writing for such outlets as *The Nation* and *Isthmus*, a community newspaper in Madison for which I was a staff writer. I'm currently a freelancer for *DUB*, the independent news site of UU.

Outside of school and work, I'm a competitive runner and currently train with the Hellas track club. I also watch a lot of TV: my favorite series include *The Leftovers*, *Six Feet Under* and *Fleabag*. My favorite book genre is literary fiction and I am currently struggling through *Finnegan's Wake*. If you have any suggestions on how to survive this ordeal, please let me know.



WHAT HAVE WE COME HERE FOR, IF NOT TO SPEAK?

BY LILLIANA MATTHEWS



Imagine two sisters in a treehouse. It is nighttime and they are telling each other stories.

Something scary, with a horse in it.

These stories are scary and yes, they have horses in them. But mainly, they are stories of the past and of the future. Of form and formlessness. Of materials and ghosts.

The first story, set sometime in the future, begins like this. With two sisters, both named after flowers. Briar and Rose come home one day to find red paint encircling their house. This red paint has marked them as unverifiables.

What does that mean?

Insignificant, useless. Poof, they don't exist. They run from their home and hide in an abandoned house to wait for their mom and stepdad to come find them. In that time, they discover a herd of horses being sent to slaughter. Rose saves one of the horses and hides it in the house. They call him Gliff. One day, Bri gets caught by the painters of the red paint and is taken away, but Rose manages to escape with the horse. Years later, Bri works at a factory where they keep the unverifiables to manage their data and Rose has gone into hiding. When Bri discovers Rose's whereabouts, she deletes the data system and escapes to try and reunite with her lost sister.

Boring. Where's the spookiness? I can tell a better story than that:

The second story begins with, you guessed it, two sisters, looking into the past this time. They are named Patch and Petra. As their mother's health declines, their urge to call out to the dead is awakened. They pretend they can speak to a ghost of a real man who was flattened to death in the Ffirst World War. Patch calls him Glyph, and they imagine his life together. Though, their harmless pastime eventually turns into a shared obsession distracting them from their mother's impending death.

Where's the horse?

It's coming.

Petra also hears of the story of a man executed for trying to rescue a blinded horse the troops decided to slaughter. These stories haunt Petra and Patch until adulthood, when one day, Petra finds the real ghost of the blind horse in her apartment. She calls her sister, with whom she hasn't talked since childhood. Patch brings along her troubled foster daughter Billie, whom police officers recently arrested for waving a Palestinian keffiyeh. Patch and Petra finally reconcile after discovering the ghost of the horse has disappeared.

What was spooky about that?

The ghosts, of course. The ghosts of the past.

I prefer to look to the future.

…

"Look to the future," I decipher from her barely legible handwriting. I walk out of the lecture hall, turn over the copy of *Gliff* in my hand and study the writing from a new angle. Ali Smith's signature engraved in my copy forever. And, right above her name, the words *look to the future*. A simple yet impossible plea from Smith. *How silly, Ali. How can I look to the future?*

"No, that's ridiculous, the future is just a hazy blob of who knows what, look to the past when you need clarity." You stand grinning at me. A self-assured smile, as if it's no surprise you can answer my thoughts.

Who are you?

"I am you. Or, at least, parts of you from the future."

You are a ghost or a thought, but you exist right here, right now. You are nothing but formlessness.

"And you are all but form."

I don't answer. I study your face. You look like me. You are me. But your eyes tell me something I am yet to know.

From when are—

"Two years, to be exact. It's strange to be back in Norwich. You had a charming time, if I remember correctly."

I look around the campus. The grey silhouettes of the buildings envelop us in their brutalist embrace. *Charming.*

"Speaking of brutal, here."

You toss me a book. A book not unlike the one I hold in my hands. The book, merely minutes ago, Ali Smith held in hers. I look down at my book's twin.

Glyph. Is this –

"Her next novel. Go home, read it, and come back here when you've finished. I'll wait."

I want to protest. But something possesses me, and I obey.

"That's how forms produce themselves, out of a meeting of opposites, of different things; out of form encountering form" you call to me as I walk away.

I look back to watch you from afar, reaching out to me through distance and through *time*.

…

I return the next day with *Gliff* to my right and *Glyph* to my left. You wave to me. Excited to get things started.

"So, what did you think?"

Horribly depressing. I can't get the image of the flattened man out of my mind.

What was spooky about that?

The ghosts, of course. The ghosts of the past.

I prefer to look to the future.

"Look to the future," I decipher from her barely legible handwriting. I walk out of the lecture hall, turn over the copy of *Gliff* in my hand and study the writing from a new angle. Ali Smith's signature engraved in my copy forever. And, right above her name, the words *look to the future*. A simple yet impossible plea from Smith. *How silly, Ali. How can I look to the future?*

"No, that's ridiculous, the future is just a hazy blob of who knows what, look to the past when you need clarity." You stand grinning at me. A self-assured smile, as if it's no surprise you can answer my thoughts.

Who are you?

"I am you. Or, at least, parts of you from the future."

You are a ghost or a thought, but you exist right here, right now. You are nothing but formlessness.

"And you are all but form."

I don't answer. I study your face. You look like me. You are me. But your eyes tell me something I am yet to know.

From when are—

"Two years, to be exact. It's strange to be back in Norwich. You had a charming time, if I remember correctly."

I look around the campus. The grey silhouettes of the buildings envelop us in their brutalist embrace. *Charming.*

"Speaking of brutal, here."

You toss me a book. A book not unlike the one I hold in my hands. The book, merely minutes ago, Ali Smith held in hers. I look down at my book's twin.

Glyph. Is this –

"Her next novel. Go home, read it, and come back here when you've finished. I'll wait."

I want to protest. But something possesses me, and I obey.

"That's how forms produce themselves, out of a meeting of opposites, of different things; out of form encountering form" you call to me as I walk away.

I look back to watch you from afar, reaching out to me through distance and through *time*.

…

I return the next day with *Gliff* to my right and *Glyph* to my left. You wave to me. Excited to get things started.

"So, what did you think?"

Horribly depressing. I can't get the image of the flattened man out of my mind.

"He's haunting you too?"

And what kind of story is it trying to tell? Is it a war novel? A family novel? A speculative ghost novel? It doesn't know what it wants to be. It has no purpose.

"Can't it be all of these things?"

Of course it can. But when there's no urgency to bind these themes together, the narratives unravel and don't lead anywhere. Your story turns into the season of autumn. Your narratives become leaves, falling off the intertwined branches and flying off with the wind.

"Urgency smurgency. At least these leaves of narratives are grounded in a clear setting. A garden, if you will. All the ghost stories anchor themselves around the world of the two sisters. A tangible world. A world we can relate to. Even the flattened man and the horse feel close to us, not because they haunt Patch and Petra, but because they haunt our news and everything we see and have become numb to today."

Gaza

You turn a page and read aloud: "There was nothing distinctive left of whoever this person had been, nothing but a gesture to the shape of something that had once been human."

A human stripped of the space he inhabits because others decided he took up too much of it. Reduced to a thought etched into the ground. A glyph. If you will.

"And it's still happening now. Yes, these ghosts have gruesome pasts. Yes, the sisters jump from one to the other with a sense of passivity. But there are characters seeing the threats these stories symbolisze, and they try to resist."

But Billie, I turn the page, *"was apprehended for waving a scarf in a markedly aggressive manner" while protesting the genocide. And the man, who tries to save the horse, is executed. The urgency you feel as a reader lives and dies by the resistance failing. It all feels hopeless.*

At least Gliff delivers urgency by creating hope within this dystopian world. The sisters resist their status as unverifiables. They escape and Bri deletes all the data that controls peoples' "official" existence. "Now that I don't exist, I finally exist again."

"*Gliff* has a purpose. But that is the only tangible thing about it. When you zoom out to the world around it, everything becomes hazy. It doesn't build you a world you can understand. The totalitarian regime is a blurry entity that hovers passively, like a mist. Only showing up as red paint. You can't see past the characters' own perceptions. And they don't know anything either. All left unanswered."

You are right. The sisters resist. But who do they resist in relation to the fictionless world?

"Maybe we shouldn't compare them. According to Smith, *Glyph* is 'very much not a sequel' Maybe they're just two unique stories with similar names and themes."

But they aren't separate. Gliff shows up as a novel in Glyph. The characters even discuss it. Petra calls it "A bit too clever-clever, a bit too on the nose politically, for a novel."

I watch you contemplating. A thought arises like a lightbulb above you.

…

Let us stop for a second and look back at a memory from years ago. Our memory. I know you're thinking of it too. The depressed loaf of bread on our television. We must have been five or six. He would yell at us through the screen, begging us to help him escape the nighttime children's program loop he was stuck in. He was suffering because he knew what he was. A character in a TV show. Children, when staying up too long, would find him in anguish trapped in this square prison. He wasn't there to entertain. Or to be enjoyed. He was there to disturb young children into shutting off their TV and going back to bed. Leaving him in his doomed cycle of despair. We were never disturbed. We felt bad for him. A talking loaf of bread, who knew he was a talking loaf of bread, trying to escape his purpose. Every single night. And every single night, he failed.

…

"Poor Bernd."

He tried to outrun his purpose. But by giving him a self-conscious mind, his failed escape attempts shaped a new purpose that he was unwillingly following. Kids did feel uneasy with him on TV. He was neither scary nor evil. He was just aware. When a form is self-aware, it can impact the world it inhabits as well as the world it lives in. They influence each other.

"By putting *Gliff* in *Glyph*, it turns to metafiction. It is aware of its fictional presence within the world of *Glyph*."

But unlike Bernd, Gliff doesn't resist its position as a novel.

"It's there to inform the world of *Glyph* and be informed by it. We see *Gliff's* blurry landscape through a better prescription. The world becomes clear because it's supposed to inhabit the issues *Glyph* highlights. People are being displaced, if not totally erased. Israel sees Palestinians as unverifiable. Removed from their homeland because someone's declared them temporary. Even Patch becomes a victim of this eradicating

Removed from their homeland because someone's declared them temporary. Even Patch becomes a victim of this eradicating force. She gets fired and replaced by AI. Her status marks her as redundant."

"The artifice was what made the place in the picture — as well as the picture — truly alive." Gliff's awareness of its status as artwork moulds its narrative world according to the one it projects upon. The world becomes something to hold on to. Something to fully grasp.

"But how does *Gliff* inform *Glyph*?"

Through the characters' active discourse with the novel, Gliff delivers an intertextual plea for urgency. The passive attitude of Patch and Petra embodies silent bystanders. They see the red paint, but if it isn't affecting them, they keep on walking. They're not the focus of Gliff's narrative, though. The character defending the novel in their discourse is Billie, who's also part of the younger generation. She actively engages with Gliff and is arrested for protesting the war in Gaza. Gliff isn't trying to reach Patch and Petra in its cry for resistance. It's calling to Billie. And she listens.

"The novels paint a horrifyingly accurate landscape of our world and though they are two years apart, their message couldn't be clearer: 'We are not made of data. We are dimensional, multiplicitous, mysterious, philosophical, rebellious, amiable, fluid living beings, who will not be subordinate.'"

They both leave holes for the other to fill in. They aren't sequels to each other, but they also don't stand on their own. They're symbiotic. They live in each other's worlds. They converse. They argue. They criticise. They love. They're like…

"Like sisters."

And what are we to each other?

"We're here to inform each other. One day, you'll go back to see yourself again. And the loop will continue. Don't resist it. It's what we are supposed to do."

…

Tonight, I lay in bed mulling over our conversation. *You're right. The form is less but it isn't without form*…I close my eyes and imagine two sisters in a treehouse.

Lilliana Matthews she/her

My name is Lilliana Matthews, and I am a master's student for the programme Literature Today. After graduating with my bachelor's degree last year, I gained experience in the publishing industry, interning for an indie publishing house. With an academic background in poetry, I continue to cultivate my creative interests by writing poetry and short fiction. I enjoy working with artists, in which I expand on my ekphrastic poetry and mirror my writing to their art. My latest collaborative project was my poem "A Moon Made of Ice," which was exhibited in a handful of art shows along with my mother's drawing of the same name.



Poetry Pieces

Doc

He is a dog when he's hungry,
I've learned to feed him, so
he can wistfully wish it
and I will know.

He is a dog when he's hungry,
no need to sugar coat.
He'll make a quiet grumble
and I will know.

He is a dog when he's hungry,
and sometimes it shows.
He howls his feeble cries,
and I should have known.

He is a dog when he's hungry,
weaving his tale of woe.
The blade draws down,
and the counter bleeds bordeaux.

He is a dog when he's hungry,
he has a clean silver bowl.
My heart lies in the sink,
I hate it when he's home.

.

by Valery Loots

SECTION 4

Patterns



TO DIE OR TO DISCONNECT: THE DELICATE INTERPLAY BETWEEN DEATH AND THE MAGICAL

ANNA VAN BESOUW



Imagine. The South of Hungary. January 5th in the early 1900's. A large manor at the border of a dark forest. There, "the translucent child with water-blue eyes" is born. We learn that the child's father is a baron who, probably due to his own shortcomings, quietly confesses that he perhaps would be better off killing the child immediately. Are we intrigued?

In 2025, Swiss author Nelio Biedermann published the German novel *Lázár*, a gothic family story set in Hungary. Spread out over six parts, the novel follows the aristocratic family Lázár, in a large manor by the edge of a forest. Through the exploration of the Lázár bloodline, Biedermann provides an insight into the power structures embedded in generational wealth and their interconnection with war and occupation in Hungary in the 20th century.

The novel was positively received in its original language and was translated into English by Jamie Bulloch in early 2026. Biedermann, a debut novelist, is praised for his accomplishments in his first translated novel. Marcel Theroux, in The Guardian, describes an impressive historical approach from an author who "wasn't even alive when the Twin Towers fell" and the promising future that Biedermann has within an ambitious literary lineage.

Biedermann sets off *Lázár* with a disturbing image of a distorted family dynamic. Lajos, the boy with the almost see-through skin and water-blue eyes, is born as a result of the Baroness' affair with a young groom working in the manor.

The Baron, Sandor, who cannot remember the faces of his employees, is unaware of the similarities between the groom and his son. To ensure the plot evolves, Biedermann evidently needs to get rid of this character. The transactional marriage between the Baron and the Baronesse is of utmost importance to illustrate the lack of love and empathy that leads to poor decision-making in Lajos' life. Thus, the groom is simply kicked by a horse only a few weeks after the child's birth and dies. In a time in which horses were the main transportation, death by one might not strike as unconvincing. However, that the young groom who works with horses everyday dies to one is perhaps a bit too comical to be realistic.

To ensure the plot evolves, Biedermann evidently needs to get rid of this character. The transactional marriage between the Baron and the Baronesse is of utmost importance to illustrate the lack of love and empathy that leads to poor decision-making in Lajos' life. Thus, the groom is simply kicked by a horse only a few weeks after the child's birth and dies. In a time in which horses were the main transportation, death by one might not strike as unconvincing. However, that the young groom who works with horses everyday dies to one is perhaps a bit too comical to be realistic.

Lajos is unaware of who his biological father is, and the story unfolds into an exploration of his disconnect from him. Unfortunately, this intriguing portrait of an unrealistic looking child with translucent skin is not explored throughout the rest of the novel. The only function it serves is to create a visible difference between him and his father, but this difference in appearance is redundant since Lajos' disconnect from and struggle with his father result from actions, not the mere fact that he is not his biological child. The anticipation, set from the get-go, is dimmed throughout the novel and leads to an unsatisfying shift towards historical narratives of the Second World War.

The first four parts of the novel introduce many minor characters who function as instigators of action for each individual family member. The novel leads into the exploration of internal conflicts of characters who are removed from reality due to the gothic and magical air that surrounds them and, furthermore, are oftentimes explored on a superficial level. Their deaths and loss are irrelevant to our perception of the real world. It is hard to feel empathy for these characters, who are only on the page for a small amount of time and reflect a brief moment in time for the Lázár family.

One of these minor characters is the chaplain Edmund, who moves into the manor in the early 1940s. Pista, the Lázár grandchild, discloses that he despises Edmund for his vast love for life in its essence. However, Edmund's character is regarded as somewhat out of touch with reality. Whilst Pista is concerned with the German troops invading neutral Belgium, Edmund is grateful to the Lord "for the return of spring, the resurrection of life, the carpets of snowdrops, daisies and primroses, the rays of sun on the rear of the stable that helped the hawthorn unfurl its silky petals and stick out its bundles of gleaming stamens." Pista is determined to discover that Edmund is hiding something behind his exterior of love and happiness. He follows Edmund back to his room and overhears voices from the "dark guest room."

Edmund embodies a mysterious spirit unconcerned with the outside world but is eventually still stricken by the war. However, once Edmund is arrested, it is clear that it is something about his mysterious actions has led to his arrest. To what extent he is actually resisting the German occupation is not

clear. Biedermann seems unsuccessful in balancing the gothic mysterious atmosphere of the novel with the historical context. The harsh depiction of Lajos' involvement in the deportation of Jews in the next few chapters leaves the character Edmund in the back of the mind and rushes the reader's attention to much drearier circumstances.

One of the characters who dies rather early in the novel is Sandor, Lajos' father. Sandor, as the Baron, is the image of power and wealth. However, his life takes a turn once his wife dies and the war, of which whispers had never reached the manor, is announced in the paper. It is only



then that we see the cracks in the exterior of this confident man. Sandor finds comfort in alcohol, which helps "combat the feeling that he was unable to cope with life." Merely twenty pages later, he stumbles on the first step of the stairs and falls to his death. In comparison to Edmund, Sandor is a much more prevalent character in the story, and he, just like the groom, receives a rather comical death. Even more so, it feels too easy to get rid of his presence and again feeds into the idea that his death functions merely as a backstory for Lajos' life and actions.

The gothic and magical aesthetic of the novel that makes the story compelling wears off around the start of the Second World War. The characters can no longer escape from reality and their defences of wealth and power start to crumble. However, it is not only the characters that are confronted by this sudden shift, but the reader as well. The historical context is suddenly the main contributor to the plot, especially the harsh reality of the Second World War. Lajos, for example, starts to work as an officer for the Germans. He "looked after organisational matters. The Jews had to be listed, labelled, stripped of their rights, expropriated and ghettoised." At first, Lajos is able to convince himself that people are transported merely to work, but when thousands of people are transported to Auschwitz, he no longer can. The novel leaves many of these instances open, assuming the reader knows the trajectory of the Second World War and what being deported implies.

The sudden shift leads to a strange disconnect between the two parts of the novel. In the first half, the deaths of certain characters are a necessary evil for the development of the plot. Especially because of their comical or unnecessary nature. Even more so, they serve a more fictional function in a gothic sphere. The abrupt move towards deaths embedded in historical accuracy feels unnecessary and, at some moments, distasteful towards those who have lost their lives in, for example, the Second World War.

However, it is crucial to bear in mind that the novel was translated from German, which has implications for both its cultural and stylistic context. Biedermann is of Hungarian descent and grew up in Switzerland after his parents fled in the 1950s. How one grapples with the past is very much embedded in national and cultural memories.

However, it is crucial to bear in mind that the novel was translated from German, which has implications for both its cultural and stylistic context. Biedermann is of Hungarian descent and grew up in Switzerland after his parents fled in the 1950s. How one grapples with the past is very much embedded in national and cultural memories. Even more so, stylistic choices and changes could have been made by the translator Jamie Bulloch. Nevertheless, we would hope that stylistic choices would be reflected even in the English translation. The groom being kicked by a horse, killing him merely two sentences after his affair with the Baroness, would expectantly hold the same comical effect in German.

Consequently, this interplay between the magical and the real dismisses some of the important matters and historical events presented in the novel. Even more so, it creates a complicated sphere in which the loss of so many people in different conflicts of war and occupation are intersected with fictional, and often comical or magical deaths. It is important to consider whether Biedermann is to blame for this or if, by writing magical realism, the underlying responsibility for that realism is always put into question.

One of the most popular examples of magical realism is Salman Rushdie's *Midnight Children*. The novel, published in 1981, was awarded that year's Booker Prize, the Booker of Bookers prize in 1993, and the Best of Bookers in 2008. Critics praise the novel for the way it implements the magical elements as crucial pillars for the development of the story within its historical context of the British occupation of India. The graceful way in which Rushdie executes the genre again raises the question whether *Lázár* does the same. Perhaps the novel would be better off as two separate stories. The gothic mysterious and often comical depiction of an aristocratic family which enthralls the reader from the start is overshadowed by the vicious reality of Hungarian society throughout the war and other conflicts in the 20th century. Neither aspect of the novel is getting the attention it deserves.

So, again, we imagine a large manor in the early 1900s at the border of a large forest where an aristocratic family lives. The youngest boy is born and has see-through skin and water-blue eyes. We emerge in a gothic imagery where the Baron of this large manor considers murdering his son merely minutes after his birth. Are we intrigued? Or are we misled and let down into a dangerous territory of magical realism?

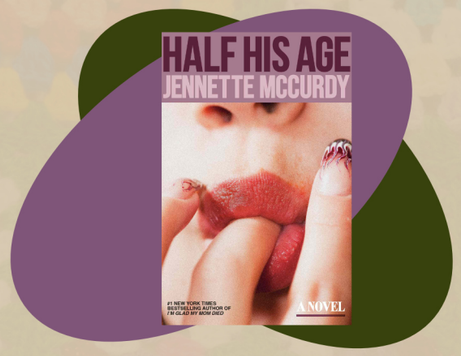
Anna van Besouw she/her

Hi, I'm Anna, a 23-year-old MA student at Utrecht University. After finishing my bachelor's degree in Literary Studies in 2025, I lived in Stockholm for a semester where I studied English Literature at Uppsala University. My academic interest is popular fiction, mostly romance and fantasy, and I am an avid advocate for including lowbrow literature in literary debate and research. Outside of academics I enjoy diving into tons of hobbies, which will vary from running to going to the cinema with friends.



"HALF MY AGE"

CRISTEL VAN KLEIJ



October 1st, 2013, 17:00, my bedroom

"Dinner's ready!" Mom yells from the kitchen. I ignore her call and put my headphones back on. The chemical scent of tropical coconut self-tan lingering on my skin mixes with the burnt plastic of the hair straightener I always forget to turn off. The smell nauseates me. I can't seem to bring my attention back to beautylover16's YouTube video, all the tutorials I watched blending together to form one perfect one I will never manage to recreate perfectly.
From the bottom of my Converse bag, I dig up a pink book I (secretly) bought at the mall yesterday. The cover shows red lips seductively sucking a finger. I haven't read any books in a while; my Hunger Games collection is quietly collecting dust on the shelf. This one intrigued me, though. I open it, hoping Mom will be too busy feeding my hungry dad to realise I'm missing from the table. My eyes scan the title.

October 1st, 2026, 17:00, Utrecht University Library

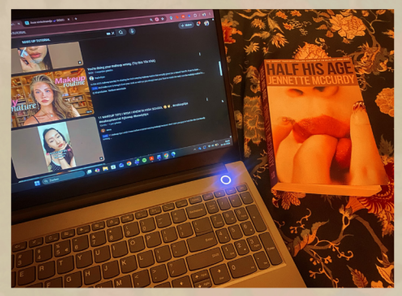
Half His Age, former child star Jennette McCurdy's debut novel, follows 17-year-old Waldo as she is groomed by her 40-year-old English teacher, Mr. Korgy. As I sit to write this, the book remains closed on the desk, looking up at me provokingly, as if to say: "Well, final thoughts?" An immiscible mixture of laudatory and critical reviews fills any space I need to make up my own mind about this controversial novel. I frantically scroll through Goodreads, sit through long-form commentary videos, and ultimately land on an interview with Jennette McCurdy herself.
She speaks vulnerably about being in an age-gap relationship during her late teens, which served as a "jumping-off point" that helped her process rage from her past. Jennette never explicitly mentions the term "grooming," which is why I refrain from using this word to describe her personal experiences.

She does explicitly emphasise that while her previous work, 2022's *I'm Glad My Mom Died*, was a memoir, *Half His Age* is a work of fiction. Having read and loved her memoir, a deeply honest and humorous book, I was excited to read *Half His Age*. When writing a fictional novel heavily inspired by your own relationships and traumas, I imagine it's difficult to write a character who feels distinct from yourself. Perhaps that is why I find myself wondering about my own distance from the girl I was at half my age. This novel is not marketed as autofiction; it's supposed to tell Waldo's story. Still, I wonder how much distance there really can be between a writer and a character built from their own past. I think back to Roxane Gay's 2014 essay "Not Here to Make Friends," in which she reflects on the difficulty of creating individual, compelling characters: "Characters are hard to create because we need to develop people who are interesting enough to hold a reader's attention. We need to ensure that they are some measure of credible. We need to make them distinct from ourselves." Do I think Waldo is interesting, credible, and distinct from the author? I open the book to reread the pages with fresh eyes.

October 1st, 2013, 19:00, My bedroom

My stomach is rumbling, so I attempt to silence it by shoving down some blue M&M's. Jittery from the sugar high, I twirl a piece of heat-damaged hair around my finger while my eyes dart across the pages.

I [...] do some real damage at Sephora—a Dior foundation in a frosted glass bottle, a mini honey hair oil that I couldn't decide if I loved or hated the scent of, a Milk Makeup Lip + Cheek that I convinced myself was a steal instead of a marketing ploy [...] It's the line that keeps me even more stuck on the hamster wheel of the pursuit of beauty. Even more dependent on makeup tutorials and tips-and tricks



videos and "that perfect cream bronzer." Because anything could be the thing that makes the difference between me being beautiful or not.

I swallow, looking at the Douglas checkout tab, where my shopping basket contains the same three name-brand items beautylover16 recommended to me. Quickly, I change back to the tutorial where she is still smiling at me, blush brush in hand. My laptop is overheating on my lap. I ignore the burning sensation and keep reading.

I scoop a dollop of the sugar scrub onto my legs and scrape it into every pore. There can never be too much scraping, too much sloughing off, of a woman's body. What is a woman, really, if not silky? If not smooth? If not supple, perky, and poreless?
My nausea from earlier is back. I wonder if more M&M's will suppress the discomfort, so I test my theory by downing two handfuls of them. Waldo continues:

I suck the sour sugar from the last remaining gummy bodies until my tongue is scraped raw. I've always derived a strange pleasure from the pain of junk food.

I close the bag of M&M's and throw it across the room. And then, the book.

October 1st, 2026, 19:00, Utrecht University Library

On the pages, I see many elements I really enjoy: the almost manic descriptions of obsessive beauty rituals, the masochistic indulgence Waldo finds in self-destructive habits like bingeing junk food and online shopping, and, most of all, the evocative sensory descriptions that make these rituals feel visceral and tangible. These passages bring together elements of capitalist and feminist critique in a unique, non-judgemental way. They make the story compelling and keep my attention, but do they make Waldo feel convincing as a teenage girl? "What is a woman, really, if not silky? If not smooth?

If not supple, perky and poreless?" The passages often sound like an adult looking back at their teenage behaviour and retroactively interpreting it, much like McCurdy did in *I'm Glad My Mom Died*.

I find these insights powerful, but I wish the novel offered a fuller picture of Waldo as a person, beyond her reflections on her own behaviour and experiences of trauma. When Korgy shows her old French films like *The 400 Blows* and *Cléo de 5 à 7*, Waldo is quick to say they are "not really her thing." We learn that she has a clear talent for writing and distinctly prefers plain prose. When Korgy recommends books to her, she is certain about what she does not like:

> He shows off another, *This Side of Paradise*. "This one's got its moments. I actually think it's better than Gatsby, though Fitzgerald might be a bit flowery for you…" "Sure," I nod. "Occam's razor. That's how I feel about writing. I like writing that's simple. Plainly stated observations, no fluff. I don't wanna hear, 'It was the kind of gray morning with air so frigid that it makes your bones wail like a creaking staircase'. I wanna hear: 'It was a cold Tuesday. My bones hurt.' Get to the point, you know?" "Mmm. Then yeah, Fitzgerald's not for you."

This scene establishes that Waldo does have an individual perspective, literary preferences, a sense of herself as a writer. Rereading it reminds me of what McCurdy said in one of the interviews, so I search for the quote again: "I really appreciate and respect writing that's at certain points distanced and a little detached, and just really plainly stated. I don't need somebody to tell me how to feel, I want to feel." This brings me back to Roxane Gay's point: Is Waldo distinct from the woman that writes her? Particularly when writing about sensitive themes like predatory relationship dynamics, where does the author's retrospective understanding end and the consciousness of a fictional character begin?

Waldo does not necessarily tell the reader how to feel, but she does tell the reader how to interpret her behaviour before they get the chance to do so. For example, when Waldo talks about buying more clothes: "They were just smaller, more attainable things to want. Placeholders for the bigger, insatiable, incorrigible want underneath." Before we can wonder why Waldo indulges, she provides the interpretation for us, leaving little room for the reader to question her motivations.

Another detail in this passage about shopping returns to the point I made earlier: "(...) in three months I'll decide I don't want them anymore, which seems like a thing I should've known to begin with." Waldo literally predicts what she will feel in three months and suggests she should have understood this already. The scene contains its own hindsight, as though a later realisation has been imposed on the present moment. This is where I find the distinction between Waldo and McCurdy most difficult to maintain. Waldo could be a perceptive, self-aware teenage girl without having the retrospective knowledge of an adult woman. Yet, the narration repeatedly seems to give her that perspective.

October 1st, 2013, 21:00, my bedroom

I pick the book up off the ground. It opens to a page that goes into detail about the exact thing I thought I was looking for. A graphic sex scene between Waldo and Mr Korgy. Like a car crash, I can't look away. When it's finally over, the characters lie in bed together: "[H]e traces my belly button with his finger and my stomach lurches with that terrible feeling of something being taken away. . Sometimes I hate the things my body knows."
I lie back down on the bed and stare at the One Direction posters on my ceiling. I now feel the mark the overheating old laptop left on my skin. Silence. Then, a ping. A notification pops up on my laptop screen, and I pull it closer to read the message.
max1995: have dinner yet?
I place the laptop at the end of the bed. Is my stomach burning, or is it from my laptop?
Thirteen minutes go by. Two pings.
max1995: come on, ill pick you up with the car
max1995: lets do mcdonalds again
I get out of bed, open my bedroom door, and walk down the hallway.

October 1st, 2026, 21:00, Utrecht University Library

Too immersed in my own story, I notice only now that it is already dark outside. I look around and realise I'm the only person left in the library.

Exhausted, I close the book.

I can't help but think how satisfying it would be to give you a final verdict. But I'm still split in two. On one side, there's a girl half my age who feels recognized and understood by Waldo. On the other side, there's 26 year-old me, who feels that a novel engaging with themes this important needed a fully realised protagonist to become the impactful story it could have been.

It would be even more satisfying to give this teenage version of me Waldo's kind of ending: hand out the window like a singer in the nineties, curls blowing in the wind, shutting off her phone and escaping from what doesn't serve her. But the girl I constructed deserves her own story. We've heard Jennette's. But now, I want to hear Waldo's.

"WE'VE HEARD JENETTE'S. BUT NOW I WANT TO HEAR WALDO'S."

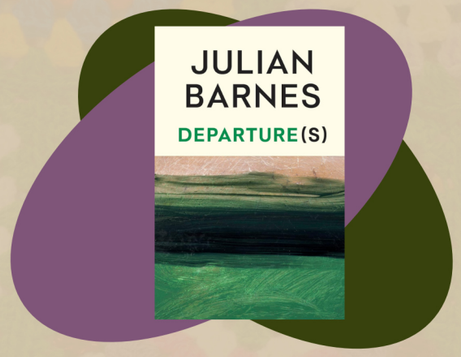
Cristel van Kleij she/her

I mostly like to spend my time thinking about how Ali Smith told me my name makes me unique during her Meet & Greet. Or rereading (read: sobbing over) Sunburn by Chloe Michelle Howarth. Oh, and I'm writing a novel, but in a Nick Miller from New Girl type of way. So stay tuned!



Orchestrated Instability: A Conversation with Departure(s)

Valery Loots



This creative critical essay explores Julian Barnes' latest and last novel Departure(s) *by having a conversation about it, with* Departure(s). *From the total 176 questions scattered throughout the novel, addressed to the reader, the characters, and to Barnes himself, a handful were selected to construct an interview.*

On a Thursday evening, just as I'd clocked out of my student job — and by clocking out I mean clicking away Teams — I clocked in to school. Beside me lay the hardcover copy of Julian Barnes' 2026 novel *Departure(s)*. I had taken off the sleeve, which only covered half the book in the first place, and was staring at the reviews that showed themselves when the book was bare.

"A mesmeric original" says Philip Larkin.

"A master storyteller" says *New York Review of Books*.

"One of the world's finest English writers" says *Washington Post*. Woah.

The spine of the book cracked as I opened it, but I pressed it down with my palm to keep it from closing on itself. On page 107 I counted ten questions. Half of them went unanswered, sitting peacefully on the page, content to remain suspended in ink....

I wake up dressed in a brown, tweed dress, with a matching tailored jacket. I am sitting on a medallion chair, one of my legs crossed over the other, and I am leaning slightly to the right. On the table next to me stand two cups of tea, both with milk in them. The goldframed edges and handle of the teacup make the porcelain look untouchable. I don't really like tea, so I think I accepted it to be polite. Next to the steaming liquid lies a grey voice recorder. Am I interviewing someone?

A wrinkled hand reaches for the handle of the cup farthest right, and when I look up, I find an old man drinking from it. He cannot be younger than seventy-five, and his face will not stay still. His features drift in and out of place, rearranging themselves in subtle ways. His eyes go from blue to green to grey and back; before I can register one colour, another takes its place.

Here's what I can make out:

1. His hair remains grey, and his skin holds a consistent light tone.
2. I recognise this room, because I recognise the armrest I am leaning on. The medallion chair belongs to the Ritz: we are in London.
3. I know him. It is my friend.

I think he asks me if I am ready, his finger hovering over the play button of the recorder. As I instinctively say yes, I realise that I am the one getting interviewed. By Julian Barnes? No. Not exactly. By *Departure(s)*, I think.

He—it?—presses play.

D: "So how are you doing, old friend…?"

V: I'm doing quite well, actually. Thank you for asking. I'm glad we could sit down and talk about you.

D: "What are you up to?"

V: Not much. I have been writing a bit, studying a lot. I have also thought about you a great deal since I finished reading you.

D: "…and whichever way were your thoughts tending?"

V: I initially understood you to be a book about memory. At first glance, that seems like the easiest way to make sense of you. You move between memories, essays on memories, reflections on ageing and death written in the shadow of Barnes' illness, stories about relationships such as Stephen and Jean's, and questions about how we remember ourselves and other people.

But the more I revise what Barnes wrote, the form you take, and the content you possess, the less convincing it becomes to treat you as a theory of memory at all. The shifting claims you contain, combined with your unstable form, enact a struggle between experience and the desire to give that experience meaning.

D: "We all know memory is identity; take away memory and what do we have?"

V: I believe memory to be part of identity, not identity as a whole. Memory is one side of the coin; the other side is forgetting. Throughout your pages, Barnes builds up arguments, goes back, breaks them down, and comes to a different conclusion almost as often as he sticks to the beliefs he presents. The conversational form of the content, and the refusal to hold onto definite conclusions, does exactly what a good book should do: it immerses the reader. Fantasy books do this with secret kingdoms, but Barnes does it by turning you into a conversation.

Readers can either agree or disagree, and Barnes reinforces this idea by coming back to former points and changing his final verdict. An example of this is that he starts the novel by implying that identity cannot exist without memory, but as his argument progresses, he shifts his opinion and eventually he comes to a different conclusion: that memory does not always entirely equal identity.

The intertextuality Barnes weaves in you adds to the idea that our attempts to understand experience are always mediated by narratives that can themselves be revised. His meditation on memory in the first chapter of the book is philosophically layered, using Marcel Proust, Virginia Woolf, and Friedrich Nietzsche to deepen Proust's concept of Involuntary Autobiographical Memory (IAMs). By doing this, Barnes shows that the words and thoughts of others become a mechanism through which we understand ourselves and our opinions. Our identity is equally forged from the ideas and philosophies of others that we keep, and the ones we 'throw away.'.

D: "Life and memory can be so… quixotic, don't you find?"

V: To some extent, I agree. Look at all my philosophical answers so far. How pretentious of me?

Or… take Stephen. When he asks Julian — who had grown into more of a casual acquaintance rather than the close friend he used to be at Oxford forty years earlier — to help get him into contact with his college sweetheart Jean again, there is a considerable urge for romance right off the bat. He orchestrates a scenario in which he just so happens to walk by as Julian and Jean have coffee together, fabricating an idealised meet-cute — or rather re-meet-cute, but that is a lot of dashes.

Unknowingly, Stephen puts a pressure on the relationship to perform as romance "should" perform — whatever way that may be — and not let the passionate second love dwindle into more of a collegial companionship. Ironically, and even a bit comically, it seems to have the opposite effect on his counterpart.

At one point, Stephen offers to run Jean a bath after reading online that it's the most romantic thing to do for your partner. Later, Jean complains about it to Julian. Stephen's actions are based on what he thinks is necessary to "get it right" this time around and are fuelled by the knowledge that it already went south once before. He has idealised this second chance, glorified it to such an extent that he believes he must act above and beyond to keep it.

Perhaps if Stephen had reflected more on the fact that forty years had passed, he wouldn't have felt like he needed to replicate the romance they had in their twenties. Barnes recognises this in his own interactions with Stephen and Jean, thinking to himself on the pages "And what did I expect? That I could somehow pick up with them and continue as if all those years had never existed?"

It's hard to let go of the idealised memory or expectation of something or someone, but sometimes it is necessary to make something work.

D: "Who says novelists aren't capable of being practical in life?"

V: Barnes is the novelist. You're the novel. Me…I am just fascinated with melancholy.
D: "But isn't that what all novelists are, essentially? in their books, at least."

V: I mean, I guess so.

D: "So I suppose this isn't curable?"

V: I am afraid it isn't. Manageable, maybe.

D: "'Incurable yet manageable', that sounds like… life doesn't it?"

V: Yes, it does.

D: "Though there are inevitably, some dreamers who attempt to evade this existential question?"

V: I think Julian might be one himself, depending on how one looks at it.

D: "Is that right?"

V: Yes. Writing a book about your personal life and memories could itself be seen as a kind of attempt to evade disappearance. The book consists of memories, diary entries, arguments, and reflections on philosophers and other literary critics. It's unstable, but Barnes has still orchestrated the instability.

In the way Barnes has crafted you, you resist finality remarkably well. There is an intentional absence of a "final meaning," a "final conclusion," or a "final goodbye," but there is a finished version. You are, after all, a completed book. Instability dominates you, but it is still a carefully woven thread that has been selected, arranged, and constructed to fit between a front and a back cover.

Barnes cannot avoid an ending; he can only make the finished form acknowledge its own incompleteness. And he does so, all the way until the final page. The book doesn't end with the conclusion of Jean and Stephen's love story, nor with a definite outlook on the rest of Julian's life or a clear resolution to his blood cancer. He goes on, for about forty to fifty pages, and ends with the reader. Even as he leaves, he doesn't go out with a bang. Instead, he fades away like an old memory as he urges the reader to keep looking ahead.

And yet, the book ends. There is finality.

D: "And then what?"

V: Then it is up to the reader to continue the instability. To always keep questioning what seemed settled, to change our minds, to change it back, and to allow the same book to mean something else at a different time. Barnes offers a final page, but encourages the resistance to assign a final meaning to it. So, I won't. I won't give you a final meaning. I won't think that anything is final at all, even the end. Unless I'm proven otherwise, of course.

D: "Well that's all right then, isn't it?"

V: Yes, it is…Were those all your questions?

D: "Do you want me to go now?"

V: Of course not. You can stay as long as you want to. We can do some people-watching if you'd like. You start.

D: "What do you make of that couple — married, or having an affair?"

V: Affair, they're too into each other.

D: "What does that kiss mean?"

V: She's not as into him as he is, but she doesn't want to let go of him for some reason. Must be the quixotic thing we just talked about.

D: "…And why are they looking at us all of a sudden?"

V: Uhm… I don't know.

Suddenly, everyone in the tearoom is looking at us. They stand up, and walk closer over to our table, faces changing colour, proportions, and shape with every step. As they charge at us, I turn to *Departure(s)* one last time, but I just see my own eyes.

I wake up. I fell asleep on the fucking book.

"BARNES OFFERS A FINAL PAGE, BUT ENCOURAGES THE RESISTANCE TO ASSIGN A FINAL MEANING TO IT. SO I WON'T GIVE YOU A FINAL MEANING. I WON'T THINK THAT ANYTHING IS FINAL AT ALL, EVEN THE END. UNLESS I'M PROVEN OTHERWISE, OF COURSE."

Valery Loots she/her

I like to spend my free time reading a wide variety of books, ranging from sickeningly sweet romances to devastating classics. When I am not reading (or daydreaming), I write poetry or fiction. Ultimately, my favourite hobby is trying to convince everyone around me to get into my latest hyperfixations.



CREATIVE PIECE

THE HAWK IN THE CORNER

You shouted so there is no need for me to sigh.
You *got* it so there is no need for me to cry.
Everything has been handled.
Everything but everything behind my eyes.

A tick of the clock takes a year of my life,
as the hawk in the corner waits for a sign.
to push me,
to poke me,
to break my spine,
just to remind me it will never be mine.

I have overfilled the designated time
dedicated to bouncing back fine,
committed the sin of remaining
harrowed
and distraught,
falling behind
on an expired deadline.

by Valery Loots

VICTORIA CHANG'S TREE OF KNOWLEDGE AND THE PATIENCE OF POETRY

OLLIE KÖHN-HASKINS



"The critics think *Untitled, 1992* is a tree. I think it is everything but a tree. [...] Joan Mitchell

said, *When I talk about love, I mean loving a tree.* When I talk about love, I mean loving where

a tree used to be."

Some years ago, I spent a few weeks visiting and helping out in an encampment in the woods of eastern Germany. This community was created to protest deforestation — to protect the trees by living with them (and in them) in makeshift treehouses, making it more difficult for them to be cut down without also harming humans. In this case, the trees were being killed by mining companies to access the gravel and sand underneath. This completely disrupts the ecosystem of the bog land, releasing stored carbon dioxide and ripping away the home of many creatures and plants. A short walk from the encampment, there was a massive gravel pit where the trees suddenly stopped and the ground fell away in front of me into a gaping wound.

The forest encampment sustained itself through dumpster-diving, crowdfunding, and storytelling. It was patient. It wasted time listening to the creak of the pine trees in the wind until it was violently evicted by police, after people had lived there for years, because the forest is considered the private property of a corporation that only wants to destroy it for the sake of short-term economic progress, to greedily gather gravel to build faster, bigger highways.

What if we valued slowness, instead? In an interview with *Mother Jones*, poet Victoria Chang reflects on the brevity of human life: "We are stewards of this Earth. We are guests […] I walked amongst these massive trees that had been here for so long, by myself. [...] These trees are really going to be here long after my time, anyone's time [...] it's our role to respect them and to kneel before them." Forest encampments disrupt the rhythm of the everyday and try to make space to respect the long lives of trees.

Poetry, too, can be a patient protest against extraction and speed, linearity, and progress. It kneels down and looks up through the canopy of leaves and tries to describe what it feels like to be so small. Victoria Chang's *Tree of Knowledge*, longlisted for the 2026 National Book Award for Poetry, is haunted by Chang's witnessing of a eucalyptus tree in her neighborhood being felled. The poet has been circling tree imagery her whole career, but this is her first time allowing a specific tree to grow roots in her work, which entangle themselves with the many themes that she carefully and self-consciously approaches.

Chang is preoccupied with doing justice to her sensory experience of the world, and, equally, with doing justice to history. Nearly every poem is a response to a specific (usually somehow tree-related) artwork she ties to philosophical quotes, as well as her own life, grief, and familial memories. Throughout the collection, she also shares her artistic research of Chinese diaspora communities in California, in the form of pairs of poems and collaged, embroidered images of various cannery, fishery, and railroad workers.

In putting words to the visual — paintings, sculptures, photos, and her own eyewitnessing — Chang participates in and shapes the long tradition of ekphrastic poetry, just as she has in her previous two collections. From the ancient Greek *ekphrasis*, "to show in full," the term stems from φράζω (*phrasis:* to observe, imagine, guard over, take care of, beware) and ἐκ (*ek*: used to denote movement through space and time, away from something — descendancy, causation, making something from something else).

Her ekphrasis approaches each visual artwork with wariness and care, moving it through time and space to meet the reader. It is commonplace to say that we are overloaded with the visual in this digital age, and Chang manages to call attention to the neglected aspects of works of art we might have been overexposed to, and to call attention to the forgotten works themselves.

Several poems grapple with the ethical dimensions of representing the world through art, and how art shapes our world. In a poem responding to a 1944 study of a tree by Pablo Picasso, Chang writes: "Things stay alive by eluding our perception. The / same gaze that believes a tree is there for us to draw. // That its branches have tiny offices." Is it an act of possession, of objectification, to create art of something or someone? An assimilation into the artist's own specific, narrow view of the world?

In another poem, "Woman in Blue," again responding to Picasso, she writes: "Once a woman is painted, she is gone." Marina Picasso, one of Pablo's granddaughters, writes of his abuse of the women in his life in her memoir: "He submitted them to his animal sexuality, tamed them, bewitched them, ingested them, and crushed them onto his canvas. After he had spent many nights extracting their essence, once they were bled dry, he would dispose of them." In her poem, Chang links the unnamed woman in Picasso's painting to the tree, whose branch has been cut off, in his 1944 study. Does this representation of the 'woman in blue' repeat Picasso's violence in making it visible?

Chang turns her critical eye inwards, questioning what it means for her to perform a sort of ekphrastic poetry on her own eye-witnessing of the felling of the eucalyptus tree:

"I never looked at the
tree until the week before its death. I rush to look

at the stump, write about the stum[-p before my feelings vanish. Charles Wright wrote, *The urge*

toward form is the urge toward God. But I think that the urge toward form is the urge away from God."

Do we distance ourselves from the suffering or pain of others, and exploit it when we try to turn it into art?

The only way for me to make sense of Chang's own constant self-questioning and her reversals of meanings and sentences is to turn it onto myself, into my world. I try to listen to her when she writes:

"Paul Valéry said, "I write half the poem. The reader writes the other half. I've crossed out the rest of this poem."

In another poem, Chang draws a connection between witnessing the death of the eucalyptus tree and reading about her own mother's death from the notes of her caretaker:

"[...] I could watch the men

outside finish their cutting. I sat on the floor, cross-legged with no one watching me. The country

outside under construction. On the day before my mother died, Gloria wrote: After repositioning her

and changing her brief, her breathing level
dropped
significantly—to 55. At 6:50 a.m., she wrote:
Threw
out trash. At 7 a.m., she wrote: End of shift. It's
true,
I've written about this before in another poem."
(Yes, in "Language" and "My Mother's Lungs" in her 2020 collection Obit.*)*

It's true, I've written about the forest encampment in eastern Germany before, in an essay for a philosophy class. What makes me return to the same topic, squeezing every bit of academic-social-emotional value out of it, excavating it for words like so many pieces of gravel and grains of sand? How do I communicate the rage, perform, and make sense of grief publicly? One of the protesters was sentenced to over three years in jail, and he is still imprisoned; the gravel pit eats further into the forest and the moor.

Our countries are under construction. Chang's words were published during the 250th anniversary of a nation built on and maintaining itself through the suffering and death of so many. I read her poems as state elections in eastern Germany make visible a similar violence and disregard, showing a normalisation and support of facism and the far-right.

Throughout *Tree of Knowledge*, Chang consistently returns to both the felling of the eucalyptus tree and the state-sanctioned racist violence that led to the expulsion of Chinese diaspora communities in Eureka, a city on California's northern coast. Pairs of the aforementioned archival photos and staccato, free verse poems interrupt and give space between the repetitive, rhythmic flow of her unrhymed but still loosely structured couplets.

These poems, printed in red, are striking, short, and evocative, taking on the perspectives of the photos' subjects through a re-construction and re-appropriation of words from a newspaper published in Eureka in the late 1800s and the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. The strange imagery and wording of these poems, limited by the archival texts, make them the most provocative of the collection. Although Chang's constant self-questioning of the ethics of artistic representation still reverberates in my ears, she approaches the act of responding to and representing the photos wholeheartedly.

There is something special about the materiality of the archival photos Chang presents us with — their grainy greyscale against the rich colour of her tree photos, collaged together, her embroidery through tiny but clearly visible holes. Her embroidery of the archival photos traces the gazes of their subjects or outlines their clothing and bodies in connection with other bodies and the world around them. Even while first encountering the work through my e-reader, I could feel the worn paper and intricate lines of red thread on my fingertips.

Chang also accomplishes the feat of bringing what may first seem distant to some readers close in "Eureka," the expansive poem at the heart of the collection, which recounts her visit to the city and its history. This poem gallops across lines and pages with no stanzas, breaking with her typical couplet form, and is centered on each page like the endless trunk of an ancient tree. Much of the poem grapples with the violent policies of the United States and the continual racism Chang experiences in the present. She writes of resistance after an 1885 expulsion:

"The next year 56 Chinese people
filed a lawsuit against Eureka the
lawsuit was dismissed three years later of
course Chinese people couldn't own land this
land is your land this land is your land this
letter said don't open the new trees that
maybe land was never meant to be owned"

As she remixes the words of Woody Guthrie's "This Land is Your Land" to point out the ironies central to the U.S., I wonder how it might be possible to also include, in her writing of history, those who already lived on this land before it was "owned." Those who were here before the Gold Rush and the westward expansion of white settlers that she evokes, before the nation's all-too-temporary welcoming of immigrants to assist in its physical creation. I can't say whether it would have been too complicated, too messy, to include this story, too, on top of the many that Chang already masterfully tells. The Ku'wil community indigenous to the area now called Eureka are absent from the surface of her poetry, but I can't help but think of their resilience as she continues to question what a country is and what its consequences are — to think of the crossed-out rest of her poem:

"it's possible language is a country
it's possible violence stems from language
possible that violence is a signal
it's possible that these trees aren't headstones
it's possible we can outlive violence"

If language can bring violence, can it also repair?

"Af Klint said, *Those*
granted the gift of seeing more deeply can see

beyond form, and concentrate on the wondrous
aspect hiding behind every form which is

called life. [...]

I can go beyond form then: woman,
mother, body, shrapnel. I can see words spread

out, separate from each other, lose all meaning,
become the milky dots they always were."

Is there a way to dissolve the violence of putting words to images, to feeling? Could that be through poetry?

> "Maybe war is our insistence on
>
> the narrative when we are descendants of the lyric."

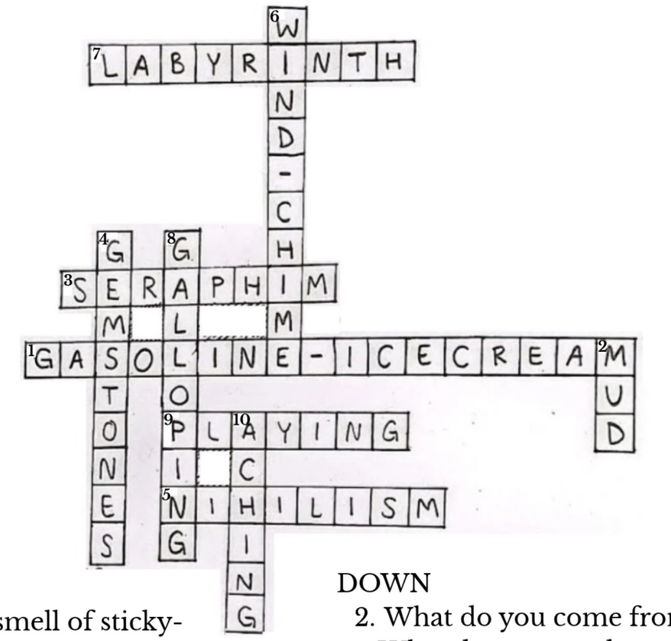
What can it offer for us to linger in our short time here as guests on this Earth? To reject a single narrative, a single form, to rework old words and to sit, wasting time, looking at trees?

Ollie Köhn-Haskins they/them



I am a research master's student of Comparative Literary Studies at Utrecht University and work as a student assistant of UU's Pathways to Sustainability. When I'm not reading and writing (about) poetry, I'm spending time with my cat Ozymandias, tomato plants, and sourdough starter, looking at our neighborhood trees. I hold a Bachelor of Arts in Literature, Philosophy, and Media Studies from University College Utrecht and have been published in the literary journal FRAME, where I now work on the editorial board.

Crossword, found



ACROSS

1. Fond smell of sticky-sweet childhood summer?
3. Synonym for beloved structures such as lighthouses, electrical towers, etc.
5. Little killer of joy. Killer of the soda-bottle sun and reaching hands.
7. You are not in a maze. No, this is a: ____.
9. To be alive is to be ___.

DOWN

2. What do you come from? What do you stand on now? To what will you return?
4. Commonly found glistening among livers, lungs, intestines.
6. Sound of tree leaves in favorite park down the block?
8. Sound of your heart. Your heart. Your heart.
10. To be alive is to be ___.

by Ollie Köhn-Haskins