

Extending Family

RCA WRITING PROGRAMME IN COLLABORATION
WITH THE FOUNDLING MUSEUM



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Sally O'Reilly

Extending Family

'Family' is a deceptively familiar word. But pause with it a while and its meaning is motley. Beyond the airbrushed and templated models of dominant traditions lies a whole world of structural possibility and emotional complexity. No two families are the same shape, no two experiences the same blend of love, irritation, dependence, oppression, intimacy, misunderstanding, pain, tedium, joy...

Extending Family gestures towards this infinite variability. It is a gathering of texts by the 2022-23 cohort of the Royal College of Art Writing programme, and a collective response to the Foundling Museum's 'Finding Family' – an exhibition spanning nearly four centuries and many perspectives on familial relations. Some writers focus the show's themes through the lens of their own lives; some consider the broader social connotations of a particular artwork or object; others imagine distant pasts or strange futures. Together they become a multitude of voices, moods, and viewpoints – each a personal take on inheritance and allegiance, and a reflection on what it means to relate.

'Finding Family' was co-curated by graduates of Tracing Our Tales, the museum's traineeship programme for care-experienced young adults, and includes poetry by current trainees. At its very core, the exhibition proposes that family is a social category to be sensitively deliberated. Reflecting this need for dialogue, *Extending Family* has also been informed by the insights and experience of museum staff and by reading lists, writing prompts, and much discussion. The cohort has been mutually supportive, offering and receiving feedback throughout the writing process. And our thinking has been guided by guest practitioner workshops too: artist Annabel Dover urged us to consider the small objects through which emotions are channelled; poet and facilitator Deanna Rodger's flurry of exercises produced surprising articulations of selfhood. So, although the texts are attributable to a singular author, you may well sense standing behind them a temporary, sympathetic family of fellow practitioners.

As Olivia Laing describes in her introductory essay, writing about family is not easy. It requires a view turned both inward and outward, and a feel for the forces that push and pull us together. I think of this collection as a household lively with eager

summons to the table and disgruntled muttering, with doors bursting open at good and bad news, with sighs behind half-closed doors. It is not a place of eternally warm stoves and happily ever after, but of people rubbing along for better and worse.

The RCA Writing programme would like to thank museum director Caro Howell for initiating the project, Alice Chalk for supporting it, and all of the Foundling Museum team for kindly hosting us.

Olivia Laing *Poison Pen*

There were two Irish ladies on my train. Probably from Cork, probably in their sixties. I couldn't see their faces. I could only just hear what they were saying. *Deir* for their, *dey* for they. I was instantly cast back to being six or seven, lurking around while my granny and Auntie Evelyn were chatting over tea. Tey, that is. Funny what memory sends bubbling up. Red Formica table, thin china teacups patterned with ivy leaves, though this being a sister they were probably drinking from mugs. The china was for best.

It's possible that one of them was drinking from my favourite mug, the one my sister posted on Instagram a few days ago, a celebration of Cockney rhyming slang. We regarded as it mildly racy because 'Bristol cities' was illustrated with a drawing of a topless woman. Evelyn's husband Charlie was a Cockney; their son, also Charlie, was a journalist on the local paper and ate tomato ketchup with every single meal. *Even with cornflakes???*, we'd squawk. All these people dead now, of course.

Evelyn and my granny had mysterious conversations we weren't supposed to overhear about their sister Lily, another of the London Irish, as opposed to the nine sisters who'd stayed at home, who were in Dublin or Kerry

rather than Pinner or Harrow. I never met Lily. She was schizophrenic, and their hushed, not especially sympathetic conversations concerned her many misdeeds. She sent poison pen letters, I managed to glean, as well as unpleasant gifts by post. *Nasty*, one or other of the women would say, and then spot my ears wagging and banish me to the garden, where I'd steal strawberries and make fetid perfume from rose petals and rain water with my sister.

I've never got to grips with this aspect of my inheritance in writing, the Irish side, twelve girls growing up on a Carlow farm, the post-war lives of the London Irish, moving from Kilburn to Bedfordshire, back to Dublin, back to the northwest sprawl of London again. I've never found writing about family easy. There are some bare bones of biography I've returned to many times – gay family, alcoholic family – but I never feel like I can get far enough outside it to make the scene clear. This goes for all memoir, really. Then there's the spilling of secrets. Both the alcoholic family and the 1980s gay family operated inside closets. Keep quiet, don't talk to outsiders, pretend everything is normal. No doubt true of the Catholic family too, with its constant injunctions against standing out or showing off. After I wrote a book that briefly described the legacy of

alcoholism in my own childhood, my mother's ex-partner stalked me for a decade, writing poison pen letters to every newspaper that reviewed my work, every committee that awarded me a prize. I feel more sorry for Lily, it must be said.

How much is writing about your family a desire to master the material, to seize control of the story, to shape a consoling narrative out of raw or painful data? I've been reading *Spare*, Prince Harry's lengthy, embittered account of his own family situation. It's surprisingly relatable, leaving aside the palaces and body guards and private jets. The pettiness of families is the same whether you're a Windsor or not: the sense that everyone is stuck inside their own self-perpetuating, perpetually inimical myth. *You're selfish. I tell the truth. You had a bigger bedroom when we were children. You said I didn't wash up but I did!* I emerged from a particular set of traumatic conditions, as did Harry, but it's hard to think of anyone who gets through family life without acquiring some kind of damage.

I read it with relish but afterwards I felt a little uncomfortable. Harry epitomised the least attractive aspects of the professional chronicler of familial woe, also known as the artist. It was all so painfully visible: the self-indulgence, the petulance, the misguided faith in getting your own account down on

paper, creating the authorised version, the definitive truth, as if such a thing could possibly exist. Isn't there always something of the poison pen about the memoirist, burnishing their own reputation, casting their enemies in a murky light?

I've been trying to work out what differentiates this kind of family memoir from the ones I really would regard as art, like *Giving Up the Ghost* by Hilary Mantel or *Skating to Antarctica* by Jenny Diski. I think the best ones utilise that hot childish energy, the need to be heard, but at the same time incorporate an element of distance, a glacial quality that allows them to report on their own behaviour as objectively as everyone else. It's like dividing yourself into two people, one the furious participant and the other the cool-eyed detective, who is going to get down every detail, every last shard of an ugly crime scene in which you most definitely played a part.

Mariam Abdel-Razek *The Holy Innocents*

Once upon a time, a little boy woke up and, after having given the matter serious thought the night before, decided to abandon his parents.

‘I don’t understand,’ squeaked the mouse who lived in the walls of his bedroom and often kept him company when he was scared of the monster under his bed. ‘They have always been good to you.’

‘That’s true,’ the boy agreed. He was sitting on his bed and trying to tie his shoelaces. This was difficult, as it was usually a task that his father did for him.

‘So why would you leave them?’ the mouse asked, nibbling on a small piece of bread that he had stolen from the kitchen. ‘Where will they go? You know they can’t possibly survive without you.’

‘I don’t know,’ the boy said, hardening his heart. ‘But I have decided that I’ve supported them all I can for the past ten years, and now they are on their own.’ Then he looked around to find a pair of shoes without laces, put them on, packed some provisions, and left.

The little boy had no direction in mind, only away from his family home, which in recent months had felt increasingly oppressive. The mouse, by nature a timid creature, did not come with him. Before long, however, he ran into a

sleek-looking black cat that easily kept pace with him on the road. It was a drizzly morning, and grey, but he had his pac-a-mac, which he unfurled and pulled on just as his mother had taught him. The cat, for its part, didn’t seem bothered.

‘Hello,’ it purred. ‘And where might you be going?’

‘I don’t know yet,’ said the boy. ‘I’m just happy I’ve left.’

‘I see,’ meowed the black cat in understanding. ‘Done a runner, have you? Lots of kids your age up to that.’

‘I wouldn’t call it that,’ the boy sniffed. ‘I don’t think there is anything wrong with having some freedom.’

‘That’s a very sophisticated way to put it,’ the black cat replied. ‘But you’ve abandoned them, haven’t you?’

‘No,’ the boy said shortly. He was beginning to resent the black cat’s judgmental tone. ‘I cannot provide what they want any more. It’s best if we leave it at that.’

‘I understand,’ the black cat said. Its purr had taken on a somewhat sorrowful tone. ‘I’ve had to desert my fair share of kittens.’

‘Did they survive?’ asked the boy.

‘I’ve no idea,’ said the black cat. It looked at the boy, who in the past few minutes had started to yawn and walk more slowly.

‘If you would like a rest,’ it said, ‘I believe there is an inn a few miles from here.’

The boy thought about this. ‘Do they serve chocolate milk?’ he asked.

‘Certainly,’ the black cat replied. ‘Shall I take you there?’

The tavern served chocolate milk for a fair price, and the boy was even able to barter some of his food – bread, cheese, and sherbet lemons – with a girl a little older than he, who had a supply of plain biscuits she was willing to swap for the sweets.

‘I’ll take the deal,’ she said in between swigs from her glass of apple juice. ‘But you’re making a mistake. Who in their right mind wants biscuits and not sherbet lemons?’

The boy sipped broodingly from his mug of chocolate milk and said nothing. Biscuits reminded him of his mother, who had one with a cup of tea every evening. Without quite realising it, he was longing for his parents and wondering what they might be doing without him. He thought about a particular feeling he missed, of them wrapping him in a towel after he hopped out of the swimming pool or came in from the rain, rubbing him down with it briskly. He imagined them another ten years from now – who they would be, the clothes they would wear, what hobbies they’d like doing. He took a deeper drink from his mug.

‘Will you take them or not?’ he asked.

After spending a night or two at the inn, the boy decided he should go to the seaside.

‘There’s a coach leaving in an hour or so,’ the innkeeper told him. ‘Although,’ he added with a glance down at the boy’s feet, ‘I’m not sure how they feel about pets.’

‘I am not a *pet*,’ replied the black cat with no little amount of offence. ‘I am a companion.’

‘Alright,’ the innkeeper said with a shrug. ‘What are you up to on the coast?’

‘I’ll see when I get there,’ the boy said. The freedom he’d previously felt had now taken on a hollow, empty sort of tenor. He was thinking about sailing away.

On the coach, the boy dug out some paper from his bag and began to write a letter, as carefully as possible. Every other word was wriggly and loose from the movement of the coach, but it was still legible.

‘You could always go back for them, you know,’ the black cat said, watching him write.

‘No, I couldn’t,’ said the boy as they rocked side to side on the bumpy road. ‘They are better off without me.’

When they got to the sea, the little boy felt better.

‘It’s beautiful,’ he said.

‘Don’t know what’s beautiful about it,’ the black cat said, wrinkling its nose.

‘All sorts of nasty things in there. Mermaids and octopi and such. Just don’t get me anywhere near it.’

‘I’m going to be a sailor,’ said the little boy. ‘At least for a little while. So if that doesn’t suit you—’

‘Hmm,’ the cat replied.

‘There’ll be lots of fresh fish.’

‘Oh, alright then,’ the black cat said. ‘You’ve twisted my paw. I’ll accompany you.’

After asking around, the boy and the black cat ascertained that a certain ship, the Holy Innocence, was looking for a crew member.

‘You don’t look very tough,’ said the pirate captain, who was a tall, hardy-looking teenaged girl. ‘There’s sea witches out there. And sirens. And monsters.’

‘I’ve got a cat,’ the little boy said, ‘who can catch rats.’

‘You’re hired,’ said the pirate captain.

Before they set sail, the little boy sat down in his tiny cramped cabin to finish his letter. The words were clearer now, and better formed than they had been on the coach. He explained, very carefully, that his leaving was not a decision he had taken lightly and was in fact one that was done for their sake. He wrote that he wanted them to be taken care of and that he’d felt it was unfair that the three of them should constantly occupy the roles of parents

and child when often none of them liked these roles at all. He didn’t think he was well suited to childhood, whatever it was, and it felt silly to make them all go through the motions. He wrote that it seemed hard now, for him too, but it would be easier in time. Afterwards, he cried for a long while. The black cat watched him, a little dispassionately.

‘You can’t send it to them, you know,’ it informed him.

‘I know,’ the boy said. He took a long look at the sheets of paper and folded them into a paper plane. Then he went up to the bow of the ship and threw it into the sky.

Aya Al-Thani

How to Be One Third

I.

There are hardly any games that you can play with your sisters because odd numbers don't work in tennis or Pictionary, arm wrestling or chess. Get creative – invent modified games like one-sided football or three-cowboy water-gun shootout. If you don't have a water gun, just spit mouthfuls of juice at each other. You can laugh at yourselves, but it's only funny when you say it: three girls odd in number and everything else. They're too young to make you laugh or beat you at anything, but just the right age to piss you off when they feel like it.

And so, *you* must tell all the jokes and wrestle them both to the floor simultaneously. You were born with an oddly large vocabulary and could order a burger and fries at six months old. Talk into their cribs relentlessly, and freakishly soon they will start to talk back. Alternately, delight in and resent their company. Pull on your mother's sleeve to suggest a compromise: let's keep one but throw the other in the garbage. You can even select which you are willing to make peace with. Choose the docile twin with a thick head of hair. The other one looks like trouble, and her eyes glint at you roguishly through the gap in her swaddling. Long story short, she's got to go.

Your aunts and uncles used to call you by your name, but now you are one-third of The Girls. Grow accustomed to the sight of three princess-themed toothbrushes in a cup by the sink, two single beds sandwiching yours, and your favourite barrette travelling across all of your heads. There is something so right about surrendering your belongings so that every girl in the room can have a bite, can be samesies.

It will come naturally soon enough. Watch older girls pass around a nearly empty tube of lip gloss in a public bathroom; they are about thirteen, so to you they look twenty-five. They will smack their lips in unison and admire their shared shine in the dirty mirror. One of the girls will pluck a bottle of Victoria's Secret body mist from her purse and douse her collarbones in it before passing it around. No one says please or thank you – the chime of their heavily braceleted wrists says it for them. The bottle eventually reaches the first girl again, and as the trill of their

jewellery fades out, it is dropped smoothly into her purse. 'I'm *so* hungry,' one of the girls says. 'You're *always* hungry,' says another. The girl to their left is the prettiest girl you have ever seen. She says, 'Let's get sushi. I *love* sushi.'

Practise out loud over peas and ketchup, 'I *love* sushi'. Your sister, with her thick straight hair like a sheet, will ask, 'What's sushi?' Think for a second, then say, 'No clue'. Your other sister will snort, the collective favourite barrette hanging off the end of a single curl of her hair. When she shakes her head the barrette will come loose and land in the ketchup.

II.

She wears her hair straight now but the look in her eyes is the same, only these days they glitter at you from between lashings of mascara instead of the folds of a baby blanket. Your sisters are fraternal but look more alike now than ever, with their matching drapes of black hair. Hold yours back in dark braids and don't look up from your book when boys walking past shout 'Hey, Wednesday!' You are allowed to hate that there is a two within your three. Remember that your genetic code – your hair, nails, and spit – is only partly your own.

III.

You are the same age as the girls in the bathroom. You are older than the girls in the bathroom. You are actually twenty-five, but you will always be the little kid with her head tipped back, shoulders barely grazing the countertop, staring up at those teenagers like Amazons in American Eagle jeans. People will see you and your sisters and think that you care to know who they find the best looking. All three of you will tell them to go die in a hole, the sound like a nasty three-part harmony.

Tell your sisters that you will never love anyone like you love them – not even close. Get in an argument, scream in each other's faces until there's spit flying, then

share a spoon fifteen minutes later. Know that this is the only relationship you will ever have where the apology never has to be equal to the offence.

Realise that growing up means growing out. You will feel a leg-shaking desperation to be on your own until you finally are. You can weep at the injustice of becoming just one again; maybe you will feel like part of a two someday if you're lucky. Alternately enjoy and despise the silence. The quiet is not a sound of its own; it is simply the absence of arguing and footsteps, cooing and slamming. A cacophony of bristles scraping your skull and then a murmured 'Stop moving, please'. There are things you say softly, like 'You smell' and 'Are you going to finish that?'

Always offer a spritz of your perfume. Don't speak, just hand over the bottle, and let the jangle of your wrist do the talking. You will feel a lack of purpose when your work here is done. Long after your days of gathering field notes to take home are over, you will continue to closely observe older girls out of habit. Who are you if not a bad influence with a tempting wardrobe? Open your closet every morning and sigh when you find your clothes exactly where they should be. Cheer up when your sister texts you a photo of herself wearing a sweater you lent her three years ago - with no reference to the incontestable theft, of course.

Picture yourself spitting juice at her and ruining it; picture it over and over until you make yourself laugh. You're still telling all the jokes, it seems. Text them 'You smell' from a different time zone. You will always be one-third, never one. Three is for graces, rules and acts; it is for you and your sisters with your heavy, matching hair.

Aryan Ali-murad

Heads, Tails

Heads

It's hot here. Why are we leaving?

I know you never got to see it, but it's beautiful.

The mountains, the waterfalls. Why would we leave?

This is Babylon, Mesopotamia, the cradle of civilization, the tower of Babel. This is where humans tried to reach heaven with their ladders made of tables and stools. She has kept us for nearly sixty years. I remember when her father gave us to her before he had to leave. She's kept us all this time, dangling from her neck on a golden thread. Sixty years and nine children later, she's given us to her third-born son, saying we'll bring him good fortune and health. Do we? She sobbed when he said goodbye. He mentioned something about England. That's far, isn't it? And it's definitely not as hot as it is here. Do you think England has people like Goran, who, every morning while families sit and eat breakfast in their gardens, comes and sings to them in return for some food or drink? We're trading Ser u pe for fish and chips, the Cha'xana for the pub.

Tails

God toppled the ladders made of
tables and stools and sent the humans back
to earth, scattering and dispersing them to different
regions, with different languages. This isn't Mesopotamia
anymore. They are leaving because it is no longer safe here.

It rarely ever has been. I can hear its beauty more than you can
see it. I hear the wind whistling through cracks in rocks on the
mountain face and the waters crashing at its foot. But beyond the
splendour, I hear the ugliness shadowing the borders. A shadow
that has perpetually lurked, wearing different masks through time.
They will be safer far away from here, and we will give them
good fortune and health because that is what his mother
believes we will do. He is the first of the nine to leave, except
for the son who died in the accident. She sobbed then
too. She has worn us around her neck on a golden
thread since she was a little girl. If height was
measured in kindness she would have
been a giant.

Heads

It's cold here. Is that why his
daughter's leaving? He gave us to her
and said his mother gave us to him when he
left home. Now she is leaving, and we're going with
her. I don't blame her for wanting to leave the damp and
dark mornings, the short and cold days, the damp and dark
nights. I saw depressions beginning to form under her eyes, in
feints of purple against her pale olive skin. I'm glad we're leaving.
The people here don't sing in the mornings like Goran used to.
Maybe the people where we go next will. Have we done our job
for him? His mother said we'd bring him good fortune and health,
but have we? Almost forty years: divorce, addictions, solitude.
Has his life been any better than it would have been back home?
I miss his mother, the kind, giant lady. I miss how the
electricity would go out during the night and she
would sleep on the roof to escape the heat. Why is
he giving us to his daughter? Why wouldn't
he give us to his son?

Tails

Life works differently here.

They don't sing to each other. They push
and shove and mutter swear words under their
breath. But it was still better. War as a prospect offers
little hope for anyone. War as a reality forces a choice.

He made the right one. His children have had access to more
than they could have back home, and for him, that was all the
good fortune he needed. His daughter is leaving now, to go and seek
those opportunities that beckon out in the world. I've heard him say
his son hasn't fully weighed the privilege he was given by being born
here, and that he has done nothing with it. When he was that age,
he and his wife travelled a total of five months and nineteen
days to get to this country. Five months and nineteen days of
sleeping with scorpions under their mattresses, in rooms
with five other families, travelling through distress, just
to get here. He thinks all his son does is smoke
weed and cry about how empty he feels.

Life works differently here.

Heads

It's not cold or hot
here. It's just still. What are we?
The people here just come and stare at us
through the glass, mouth words to each other for
a bit, then walk away, stand in front of the next display
and do the same. I miss home, even the cold one. I've tried
keeping track of time throughout the years, tried remembering
all the little details. I remember when we were made - from
molten silver. We had value, or at least a different kind of value
from the one the kind, giant lady gave us when she started
wearing us around her neck. We were given in return for
so many things: the okra to make the Bamyra for the hungry
family, the bottle of arak that had to be bought in secret.
We have fallen out of countless pockets, have been
picked up by countless hands, but the more I've tried
to keep track of it all, the more it feels like
time is keeping track of me, of us.
Where do we go next?

Tails

We are roundabouts,
circles and loops. We are antiques,
good luck charms and tokens. We are one of
hundreds of thousands, and through time many of
us have been given to many of them. I remember things
too. I remember being flipped in the air to decide fates or
being tossed into the hat of the homeless man. I miss things too.
I miss being given and having a purpose. I miss being worn. We are
what they want us to be now. The people here stand in front of the
glass and give their own meanings to us. They speculate on our age,
our purpose, our journey, where we're from. Most think we're from
Turkey. But it doesn't matter. These things have the same weight
as shadows. The only thing that ever mattered, our only purpose,
was the people we helped, those whose pockets we nestled
in and hands we were clenched in, whose necks we hung
from. But they're all gone now. We won't be here
long. Soon we'll be collected, stored, filed,
archived; and we'll be forgotten,
just like them.

Violet Ames

WHO ARE YOU IN RELATION TO ME?

{When you least expect it, you become just like your mother. Maybe it's the way you take on that same grating laugh, or how you try your hardest to seem appealing and not the least bit threatening. A soft manipulation. To fawn. The lesser-known survival response evoking a genteel grace. You could never soften those prickly edges. So I guess in over-correction I became my father.}

Like my mother, I make the same trite references filtered through ^{american popular media} – or so I'm told by my grandparents in the San Gabriel Valley, the sweltering land of chlorine and well-tended homes and mom-and-pop restaurants that actually make me hungry; stores that are abundant and well stocked, where it seems that scarcity is not real. Maybe these are not my sentiments, but ones I've appropriated...

Yet I'm also told by my grandparents that I sound *just* like my father when I speak. This is a thorn in the side of my preconceived self-concept of femininity – it is in the same vein as daughters being told they look *just* like their fathers. I don't feel pretty being told this. Where did this accusation of likeness originate? Do we share the same disaffected vocal fry that's meant to imbue coolness?

you don't have to love someone for them to impart their speech onto you . when i embody another's voice , i am often
disturbed .

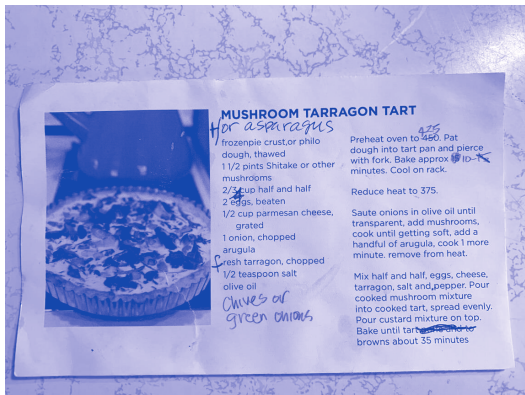
In my 8am linguistics lecture, where I mostly shook from anxiety and over-caffeination, and dreamt of being able to take a shit and of travelling to the Netherlands, I learned that the reason the Southern California dialect is so peculiar is that all of the vowels are flat and thus sound all the *same*. Long ago, I started lowering my voice to appear like a more self-assured go-getter because



whenever I'd listen to my voice recorded, I'd recoil, noting how whiny and nerdy it sounded. As if my voice were mouth-breathing and pushing on the bridge of its glasses.

° 96 ♡ 96 ° 96 ♡ 96 °

Language is a performance, something to be cherished in its grandeur. A reminder of dinners that bleed into the night, of crumpled napkins and dirtied dishes. Slipping out of bed and cautiously raising an ear. Now when I hear the muffled crackle on the other end of the line, thousands of miles away, familiar words are punctuated by familiar pauses. Suddenly I can hear my family through the door, nervously deliberating whether they should steal me from my slumber with the promise of breakfast. Coffee and bagels and frittata will be served on the veranda, which I will consume voraciously as if it were my last meal on death row, and *not* a culinary combination of flavours and textures that I've consumed countless times before.



Squawks and calls that are so pedestrian – *pass the salt,*

you need some water?

I just toasted another everything, who wants it? You sleep good? Good, we were worried!

No, you have to connect the Bluetooth if you want the speaker to work.

– how can they

bear any real weight of recognition? And yet this ritualised mindless chatter reminds me that I am not in fact a three-eyed monster, unworthy of cosmic universal love, because I belong to them.



Most birds do not recognise their family members after their first year. Birdwatching site, ALL ABOUT BIRDS informs me, in such a stark manner that it feels like a slap to the face.

Below the article, user Pal Raj has left a comment that waxes poetic about the brilliant implications such a phenomenon would have on the human race. How notions of honour and obligation of the family are wretched and lie at the heart of what afflicts us. That if we did as birds do, denial, lying, cover ups, and depression, anxiety, trauma and insecurity would be diminished by ninety-nine point nine nine percent.

Pal Raj's bitterness and several years' worth of grief compounded with interest are palpable. Almost in direct opposition, Sweet Toko – toeing the line, yet ultimately resisting the nauseatingly familiar rallying call for forgiveness – sweetly reminds them that emotions must be released. Lest we forget that a shut exhaust port will only exacerbate it. CRY! BREAKDOWN!



I just want to be free. It's all I ever wanted. To love someone fully and completely is to recognise. To be in awe of their many talents that exist outside of you.

Tell me, what is your essence then, not just who you are in relation to me?

I would have loved to contort myself to become a person you could love.

It makes me crumple, ache, when I consider the weight of dreams that were dashed before they even reached maturity.

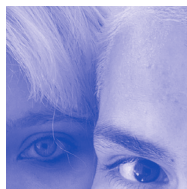
I wonder whether I should be more discerning in what I reveal through language. My mother always prefaces a subject with a warning, a disclaimer. My grandmother always launches in headfirst, with no regard as to whom or what might be listening. I'm told that when I speak, I am a lot like my mother's mother.

In rejecting my mother's sensible caution, I also consciously rejected the vernacular of my upbringing, for fear of sounding stupid to others. *Y'all* and *ain't*, I figured, would make me sound like a Mark Twain character to those 'damn Yankees and damn Californians', to whom I was desperate to assimilate, because I think a part of me always knew that I wanted to leave.



There's an intimate level of knowing that someone must meet before they are granted permission to name my parts. But since my family were the first to see them, I let them claim ownership. *chichis - beega - heinie*. In embodying the words of my family, I realise that all truthful language reveals itself in parts. I now stake claim over them as something private, but it's these words, often repeated through childhood, that shape the way I know these parts.

Other words that I say now because of others: the word 'three' in the manner that a girl in my middle school math class would say it, because I liked the subtle trill of her r's; bitch, affectionately; hooking up, in the strictly platonic sense of meeting your friend; *It is what it is*; H-e-c-t-i-c; God-fucking-dammit; If I had a million dollars; my Dogs are barking; truly, with sense of coyness, but also 100% sincerity; the way that I sometimes make private jokes to myself; how my voice rises and falls with dramatic fluctuation for ironic effect; how I find myself sometimes squealing with glee; *you'll live*; no, LITERALLY; Well, I'll be damned.



The excessive flourish that is included when we find ourselves /tapping/ nodding in agreement, grinning uncontrollably. Hands casting spells meant to summon or denounce a particular feeling. I swear that when I speak like you I am not making fun of you, although I know it can seem like it. It's not a denigration or a form of condescension. I am just enthralled by the details, and merely wish to parrot.



*Why am I thirteen? Why do I always seem to be this age?
Slowly I've been wrapping this wound with necessary caution,
but oh, not too quickly now. I can't stop crying, why can't I stop crying?
I think my days would infinitely improve if I allowed myself daily crying appointments.
This is my only time here on earth with this flesh and blood, why would I choose to experience it angry
and mildly irritated?*

Grace Beaumont *The Curators*

‘As you are aware, our inaugural exhibition “First Born” is due to open in around nine months,’ announced the Chief Curator. ‘We have conceived of this as a showcase – a body of new and existing objects from our collection. Today, we will discuss which items to include in the potentially ground-breaking presentation.’

The Assistant Curator nodded enthusiastically and smiled at his wife.

‘First, let’s consider our aesthetic,’ she continued. ‘How will this display look, and what will the main focal point be? I have been thinking about your former crowning glory before The Haircut. We could feature *Ponytail*? It was so long and so dark, almost black. I don’t remember where it’s stored – could you check the location? Plus, it will require shampooing. Can you note that in the condition report, please? Ok? Good.’¹

The Assistant Curator sighed because now he would have to search for *Ponytail*. Their most recent inventory suggested that the object had been ‘mislocated’. He would have to rummage through their archive – all those plan chests and crates containing years’ worth of clutter. He could assign an intern to the task; but they might discover the bundle of

hair nestled on a dusty shelf and shriek ‘rat!’ He stifled a laugh.

‘What’s funny?’

‘Nothing, dear.’

‘No really – what?’

‘Nothing.’

Now it was the Chief Curator’s turn to sigh. ‘Well, it’s decided. We will exhibit *Ponytail*.’

The Assistant Curator nodded begrudgingly and scribbled in his notebook – somehow passive-aggressively – in his small, spidery handwriting.

She rolled her eyes. ‘I suppose now is a fitting moment to decide on our critical approach. I wish to convey a sense of determination. We should include *Rock*. It could be an asset, yes?’²

‘Stubbornness – an asset? No.

But determination? Certainly.’

He continued scribbling in his notebook. Although *Rock* was stored in a climate-controlled warehouse, it was permanently cold to touch. Mottled, mossy, and small enough to fit in the palm of a hand, it smelt like damp earth on a wintery day. He remembered ascending slippery crags, safely suspended by straps and harnesses—

She stared at him. ‘Now where have you disappeared to?’

‘I’m just thinking about *Rock*.’

A stony silence followed.

‘Would you like a cup of tea before we move on to the next part? Agreeing on

an underlying tone for this project may be a bit more heavy-going.’ The Assistant Curator had become fatigued. He had plans later. His team – Newcastle United – were playing Sheffield Wednesday, and he would be meeting his friend Marty at the Royal Oak to watch the match on TV. Gazza was unstoppable...

‘Yes, please. Earl Grey with a dash of—’
‘Piss? Lovely.’

‘If only your jokes were as funny as you thought they were.’ She reached over the table and squeezed his hand gently as he rose from his seat.

Five minutes later, he returned to the room with two steaming mugs.

‘Well, what do you think?’ she probed.

‘I suppose we will need to feature *Shaking Leaf*.³ It’s been passed through my family for generations in one form or another. My grandad trembled when things got difficult, and I’m not far off from that myself. It wouldn’t make sense to leave it out. Perhaps it wouldn’t be very prominent?’ he mused. ‘Visitors may not even notice it amongst everything else.’

‘Ok. *Shaking Leaf* makes the cut. Besides, I predict existential dread will be all the rage in ten years. Everyone who’s anyone will be exhibiting it.’ She pictured the item – round with ragged edges, spindly veins, and a thin flat stalk, quivering in the slightest breeze – on a plinth.

The Assistant Curator’s stomach growled loudly.

The Chief Curator raised an eyebrow. ‘Hungry?’

‘Starving! Did you hear that?! I think I’m metamorphosing into a wild animal. Is it lunchtime yet?’

‘I’ve no idea, since the clock is always losing time. It’s running at least five minutes slow. No wonder you’re always late—’

‘We are always late, my love. Hey, let’s add *The Clock* to the list of objects!’⁴

He peered at it up on the wall above her. It had been repaired numerous times – a defunct second hand replaced with a bright red plastic one, so it stood out stupidly from the rest of the metallic components.

‘Fine.’ The Chief Curator tutted. They weren’t finished yet – it would be a working lunch. Her plimsolls scuffed as she bustled toward the kitchenette, where she began to search for something to eat. The place was a mess: sauce splashes, sticky crumbs, crusty leftovers. She managed to locate an old granary loaf, placed two slices into the slots of the toaster, and began to daydream while she waited. She was nervous – it was her first show, after all. What if something went awry, or what if they missed something integral? She fretted as she vigorously buttered the toast, scraping right to the edges, as her mother had taught her.

The Assistant Curator burst in through the door. ‘Darling, I just had a thought about—’

Startled, she dropped the plate, which crashed to the floor and shattered. The toast fell buttered side down, of course. They both stared at it for a moment or so.

‘That should go in the exhibition. Let’s call it *Toast*.’⁵

‘Can I have marmalade?’ asked the Assistant Curator.

—

¹ *Ponytail*, 1978. This mass of hair was shorn from the Assistant Curator’s head in 1978 and bound with elastic bands. The object measures approximately 80 centimetres. It is associated with the hippy subculture of the 1960s and early ’70s, suggesting that the Assistant Curator used to smell of patchouli and once hitchhiked to see the folk-rock supergroup Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young.

² *Rock*, 1985. This piece of carboniferous limestone was found during the Assistant Curator’s climbing expedition to Black Crag and Long Scar in Langdale, Lake District, UK. While its sturdy, rugged appearance is often thought to represent determination, it also alludes to those persons of the bull-headed persuasion.

³ *Shaking Leaf*, c.1972. *Populus tremula* – also known as quaking aspen – is a deciduous tree with shimmering foliage. This fragile, single leaf is

evocative of the expression ‘shaking like a leaf’, which describes a person in a state of fear or apprehension.

⁴ *The Clock*, 1977. This treasured timepiece was a gift from the Assistant Curator to the Chief Curator for her 21st birthday. He purchased it a decade before his curatorial career began, from a jeweller on Northumberland Street in the centre of Newcastle. He used money he had earned working at the Rank Hovis McDougall mill on the banks of the River Tyne.

⁵ *Toast*, 1986. This slice of bread comes from a loaf composed of granary flour, water, salt, and yeast. It was inserted into a toaster for three minutes and then coated in butter, a dairy product created using the fat and protein from cow’s milk. It references The Buttered Toast Phenomenon – the unfortunate fact that toast usually lands buttered side down if dropped. This scenario is also used as an idiom to represent a pessimistic outlook.

Pablo De Miguel

Still

Edu stared through the crib bars at the shapes of animals floating against the window. Snail, tiger, whale. Isabela didn't care for animals. She particularly disliked these kinds of animals, their illusory presence stealing him from her. Isabela liked situations in which real human beings featured. Like sandboxes. She enjoyed pressing her little hands against wet sand to make a matt ball. A kid would babble something in wonder. Meaning: You know magic! Isabela liked this, to feel special.

Edu also knew the word for magic. Magic was when you made something go still. He was familiar with what happens when you look carefully at the room: shapes change into one another. A pot into a twig into a leaf. Edu had noticed those machines that turned the world into a smooth sheet of paper showing Mother's face, or a tree. He liked these as much as he liked the animals floating above.

It was quiet in the room. Any minute now it would be bath time. And then night-time. Weeks did not yet exist, only many days melding into one.

Don't go too far away, Father said. That afternoon the garden was overwhelmingly green and blue. Isabela was trying hard to keep her attention on the steamy lawn, the row of grasshoppers sucking on the hose's underbelly. She knew Edu had seen them too. His head was still, his eyes lost. *Come here and sit*, Father said. Isabela did not want to upset Father, but she did want to upset Edu. Not the time to give herself away now. A little more waiting and perhaps she could make it happen.

A hush.

Excitement swirled to and fro within her.

She sprang.

Arrrgh! Edu jumped. The suddenness rattled his brain and thrust him back into the viscous afternoon. *I hate her*, he thought. And then, a little sadly, *I wish I was more like her*. Father lifted the twins back onto the chequered blanket. Isabela adored Edu. She thought they were inseparable, like the two floating whales he liked so much.

The sun got lower and lower until darkness came and then it was bright again, and this happened many times. In their different ways, the twins were starting to form memories. Isabela could recall the smell of orange blossom coming through the window one night, followed by the scent of warm wood emanating from their parents' bedroom. Most of all, she remembered Mother and Father tickling her

until she laughed all the air from her lungs. Edu remembered when grandma came to visit. It was after the trees had lost their leaves.

Edu had begun to archive memories. He would look at the room with his eyes wide open and shut his lids to see the objects pressed in darkness. Edu thought this was just like the images of Mother and Father hung on the wall. He could revisit his memories when he was bathing, or in the garden. At night he would go over them in his head, trying to unearth the smallest details. He could make out the crib and, inside it, Isabela's face. *Isabela gets more attention than I do*, Edu thought. *She is always at the centre of my memory*. After a long effort, he would finally see the ruffled sheets behind her face, and, buried in them, the stuffed rabbit. Isabela watched her brother. *I wonder what's in his mind*, she thought.

Mother and Father often told Edu not to be jealous of Isabela. It is true that he was, but underneath his resentment he had a deep love for her, a regard for someone sensed to be worthier. Edu felt that, despite his self-absorption, he had a profound sense of selflessness born out of his love for Isabela. *I have known her before whale*, Edu thought. And this came with the feeling that they were both protagonists in a film in which Mother and Father played supporting roles.

The heat came again, and with it shadows became darker and colours brighter. Mother and Father were thinking of going on a trip. Mother took a big book off the shelf and showed them pictures of faraway places. Huge waves splashing against big boulders. Edu looked in astonishment. He had no idea you could have memories of places you had never been. Father seemed grumpy. Isabela understood this happened when he felt worried. Mother was different, she thrust herself forward, sorted everything out in half the time. *Travelling is hard*, Isabela thought, *but Father always likes a new place once he gets there*.

It was balmy in the twins' room. A big window let the light in, giving forms a soft radiance. Edu had learned a new word: photography. Photography was when you clicked Mother's machine and the world went still forever, like magic. All Edu dreamed of was having Mother's machine. Then he could keep all the memories he wanted, for as he grew older they had become harder to recollect. There was one memory Edu wanted to keep more than others: the crib with tangled sheets and Isabela wrapped inside. Perhaps this could be the first photo in his album, followed by one of the floating animals.

Margot Dower

In disguise as my mother

For about three years, possibly four, a large photographic portrait of my mother as a child hung in our house. In the photograph, which I can summon to mind instantly – the way images seem to impress themselves upon you more deeply as a child – she is perhaps seven or eight. She looks slightly to the left, caught mid-laugh, or maybe just smiling with teeth. She is wearing something her mother, my grandmother, made for her, and her blonde-ish hair is loose but not very long. She has her face already. That sounds strange, but what I mean is, in that picture she is already wearing the face I know, the face of my mother. She looks funny, a bit badly behaved. There were three portraits like this: one of her, one of her twin sister, and one of their older sister. Forty years after it was taken, it somehow came into my mother's possession, without its siblings, and was hung up, half-jokingly, half-seriously, in the room with the computer and the fax machine, and the big wooden desk that smelt of linseed oil.

The photograph was – is – large, maybe eighty centimetres tall, and black and white. It's been block mounted, in the manner of older photographs, onto a piece of chipboard, and the sides were sort of peeling off when I last saw it. For the entire time that it had hung in the room, people mistook it for a photograph of me. I am my parents' oldest child, and not the exact likeness of either of them (nor have I ever been), but there was something in that image of my mother, Liesel, that caused people to say, 'What a beautiful portrait of Margot,' to which she would laugh and say, 'No, that's a picture of me'.

In *Self-Portrait as My Mother*, Jean Gregory – part of a series of disguised self-portraits Gillian Wearing made in 2003 called 'Album' – you can hardly see Wearing's real face. She made intricately constructed masks out of silicone and plastic for each of the portraits, like special effects for a film, and in this photograph the mask is her mother's face. There are holes for her eyes, but if you didn't know, you wouldn't see that those are *her* eyes looking through, gleaming slightly, the edge of the silicone positioned just so below her lash line. And maybe Wearing's real mouth is there too, her teeth just visible through the hole in the mask, her jaw hanging open slightly. It's tricky to tell. It's ambiguous in the way of all old photographs, details disappearing under scrutiny, fuzzy at the edges. It's a

reproduction of something that is fuzzy at the edges. How might you make a hyper-realistic silicone mask of a photograph measuring six centimetres across? You would leave the mouth open to interpretation.

After some time, my parents took the photograph off the wall, then we moved house, and I haven't seen it since then. I hadn't thought about it until I saw Wearing's self-portrait-that-is-not-a-self-portrait. In looking at it, I am reminded of trying to do in my own head what she has done through clever bits of silicone and technical assistance. I have three siblings, and we have pored over photograph albums, imagining we alone are the spitting image of our parents, grandparents, distant aunts, cousins, and second cousins, seeking some sure and tangible evidence that we are related. In Wearing's portrait this searching is uncanny: her features sit oddly beneath her mother's face, eyes and teeth glinting from beneath the silicon, both her and not. Or maybe it isn't, and the only reason I see the double image of her face and her mother's face is the work's title. These things are difficult to pin down.

In interviews, Wearing has spoken about the arduousness of making her disguised self-portraits. In order to take the photographs, she needs to hold the same expression as the person she is disguised as, so in the portrait she is doing that same ambiguous thing with her mouth that her mother did, mimicking it with held muscles and tension.

The photograph of my mother looks like me in a way that is hard to describe. Faces tend to be like that, dissolving into abstraction when you try to describe them precisely. I used to love that we looked the same, how I was publicly her daughter; and as my face grew away from hers, I began to forget the sensation of double-takes, the pleasure of being like her. That Wearing's self-portraits are uncomfortable to make is maybe the point. I could not hold the same expression as my mother – caught mid-laugh – indefinitely.

When my mother came to visit me in London after I moved, people who had never seen us together remarked on our shared features, seeing the same face when

they looked at both of us. Riding the train, I imagined people looking at us and understanding instantly how we knew each other. After months of sizing up my fellow commuters, looking for mothers and daughters, and feeling hot envy when I saw them together, it was a relief to sit next to my mother and rest my head on her shoulder.

When she visited me, we looked at a photograph of her at eighteen, standing at the farm she visited in the Eastern Cape with her family every year. By this time she has a perm, which will last at least two more years if my grasp of the family mythology is correct, and she's wearing enormous jam-jar glasses. She has the deadpan look of my youngest sister, Pippa, and the same eyes she's always had, now changed almost imperceptibly by surgery to remove a sunspot, but still shining in exactly the same way. 'My art teacher once told me', she said as we looked at it together, 'that I had an archaic smile.' That's exactly right, I thought, she has the look of some second-century *kouros*, smiling faintly. When my mother leaves London, I say goodbye to her as she boards a bus and waves at me.

I crane my neck to catch one last glimpse of her face, which is, of course, my face too. Then I walk to the corner and the bus pulls away and I become myself again.

Katherine Doyle

Tracing

It came up now and again, that she'd never had a manicure. There was no doubting this declaration: my mother's hands were the very definition of pragmatic. Maybe it was the way the skin pulled itself taut over her joints and tendons – no excess, no slack – accentuating her veins as if they were the blue-green ridges of a topographical map. Relaxed gestures of filling in the Sunday crossword or tapping the screen in a game of digital Solitaire were lent an ascetic quality by the appearance of tension in her hands; underscored by the fact that she didn't wear jewellery, and only partly because the wedding band had been lost in our move from Oakland to the other side of the Berkeley Hills when I was nearly five. Even without these ornamentations, she cared for her hands meticulously. She favoured nail files, which she used on a near daily basis, over clippers. I remember the nail file was one of the things we had to pack in the bag we brought for her in the hospital. It must have been a combination of her efforts and of nature that her nails were the most symmetrical shape that I ever saw, the ends rounded and flat like the wide edge of a guitar pick – kept at a practical length that signalled in some subtle way the trade of a middle-school teacher.

My grandmother's trade wasn't formally recognised. She raised four daughters. Then, just before my mother followed her sisters to college, she went to college herself. The first in her family – in a non-sequential order by that point – to receive a degree, from Sacramento State. It was also around this time that she was diagnosed with acromegaly, a condition caused by a tumour in the pituitary gland pumping out growth hormone in excessive quantities. Left undiagnosed for a long enough period, parts of the body with cartilage will become enlarged: nose, knees, elbows, hands. When I was young, it didn't seem quite right to correlate the size of her hands with any disease, even after I knew: all the better, it had seemed to me, for the business of making *pedaheh* – traditional Ukrainian dumplings. With strength and skill, a weighty ball of dough could be efficiently rolled and divided into rounds with a cookie cutter, wasted scraps minimized; each round dolloped with potato or sauerkraut filling – the maximum that a pressed or pinched seal would allow without bursting when they were plunged into the boiling water. The steps in the assembly line that my grandmother's four daughters and their twelve children had to try to take over. Baba's recipe, in her handwriting, still the one we use.

A motif, these hands: I thought I could trace a pattern that reveals something. What else have I done but read my own palms? Is there any way to circumvent the self, to circumvent the selfishness and the entitlement that disturbs me about grief, that clashes with what it was to love someone? On my right hand, a port-wine stain – faded, yet absorbing more of my attention; almost imagined, almost in the shape of California, a reminder of being in the permanent aftermath between accident and the resolution that never comes. It's not a birthmark, but the spot where a window came down on my hand after I removed the wooden plank keeping it aloft in an old rowhouse in Columbia Heights. No one else was home as I lay down in the living room to keep from fainting. In that nauseated stupor, it was a different pain – she wasn't there to call – that compressed me to the floor, and to which I was inexplicably satisfied to submit myself. The bruise lasted for a few weeks and now a few years, and I'm convinced it hasn't healed properly, so I avoid pressing on the spot. Here's another mark: an irregular patch at the tip of my ring finger. A minor kitchen slip-up, a dull knife that chose a different course. I rub over that patch and it goes a shade whiter than the surrounding skin; and do I wistfully hear her voice telling me to curl my fingers, keep them tucked out of the way of the knife's edge? Either I am really acknowledging her wisdom, or I'm indulging in the belief that I am, manufacturing the notion for my own sake. She never got a manicure: that was also wisdom. Whenever she stated the fact, didn't I bristle at what I interpreted as a hint at my own shallowness? I no longer paint my nails, but that's because I dislike the messiness of removing the polish.

What has been circumvented, then, but past and present reality? The story is mine more than ever. Left hand now: my writing hand. A bed of scar tissue has developed where I hold my pencil in position against the joint of my finger. It's been there for as long as I can remember, like a permanent blister or a sore, because for as long as I can remember I've held a writing tool with a certain intensity, convinced I could recreate and refine and ultimately achieve the hypothetical distance to better perceive and disclose. To resolve. Maybe the scar is proof: writing gets the better of me, rather than I of it.

Bruce Horton-Gabell ***We Are What We Do:***

A reflection on Charles Brookings' A Flagship, Wearing the Flag of a Vice Admiral of the Red, Before the Wind off the English Coast, With a Cutter, a Ketch-rigged Sloop and Other Shipping

In February 1754, an artist was in residence at the hospital for eighteen days. An obscure painter, a recluse. His art sings true, his ships are lauded, their faithfulness admired. A painter lacking the fame of the others lining the walls of that place – Hogarth, Gainsborough, Ramsay, Reynolds. No fortune would come, his life cut short by consumption. An aperture closed.

Enter the Picture Gallery and immediately to your right, you find it. An image unfurls and staggers sight.

There is a need to stand back. Breathe in, lungs lifting. Oxygen enabling sensory appreciation. Sailors labour on waves ever still, the canvas rapt with wind imagined. The piece passes from near to far with depth and scale. Calloused hands working sheets, holding tillers. Sea-borne toil, the clouds overhead a blessing and a curse.



Sea spray covers all in a fine salty crust, a mist in the air at each prow's kiss. Weather's daily occurrence misleads in all ways, the mood it conveys. Strapped to an act of living outdoors. Risking life and limb for the tangible, some quality to share. Tacking to smooth the ride and to push onward. Each journey a consensus, a union of needs, bringing together those that endeavour. In this tension we find reward, we hear a challenge and heed a call.

See a painting, its composition for presenting and holding, its materials for texture and portrayal, you agree it exists. Its frame a carved splendour, accentuates a bounty, stretching the canvas for a journey through the ages, once young, now old.

A mainsail's winch, a rudder well-used. Functional, instructional, something is overarching, a motif for a year. In 1754 maritime enterprise is all – fishing, trading, hauling, warring – speaking of a society whose obsession is commerce, the getting and keeping of it by war. Perceived lack met with perceived more.

Sea spray. Sea spray. It covers all, the rigging and mast, the bow and the stern, a child's wide eyes as they practise and learn. Colonnades as ropewalks are a perfect space, for the steps you review and the lives that you trace. Children, rope-making, stand by the coils they made, once stored in Coram's Fields.

You stand and look. You hope and see. Images bridge time. There's affinity here, an artist's touch. There is intimacy in a shared journey. Inspired where there's a willingness to feel. The waves ride high and the sea froths up, fathoms below and skies above. So hard to position that shared destination.

What is your connection? What does it do? Does its making have a size, a weight, or a colour? A smell and a feel, tacit and real? Is your connection unique, in time, in space, or can it be shared and borne in many, hearts harking back to it, the angles of our perspectives combining to confirm and compound? Brooking's work paid forward in interest.

Perhaps you feel, know, or believe that we can be connected to many things in many ways. All senses in thrall. Most often you feel it. Although ephemeral, its passing leaves an impression. Perhaps a memory or an ache, which in time carves rivers and valleys within, places to nurture, each of us a moving landscape, shaped in friction with everything around it; constant evolution, eroding, and growing.

Luffing sails slap a boom; in a moment they snap taut again. Flags pushed in the direction we head. Vessels round headlands and move with the tide. If you each experience similar pushes and pulls, would you become similar, of one mind, share

some common value? And if so, what would it be? See a ship's crew, see a hospital's young wards. Hear them, those feet pounding on boards, those hands making ropes meet needs. And as the moon effects waters, magnetic and deep, you lurch upon the waves, see wisps in their crests, love in their detail, you hear them crash against the timber hulls that cut through them a thousand times a day.

Hoops, loops, pulleys, and winches, the mechanisms of sail, clutch at a ship's canvas and change its shape to catch the wind. Driving of vessels through the seas, the business at hand, all arms in effort to produce a direction, an orderly path. Energy forged into something new, children hewn into something new, others encouraged to donate anew. There's a tithe in being a part; it goes to what you owe and how you sense it. It goes to knowing yourself by what you do. And it gives whilst it takes, as all families do.

An aspect arranged to fill a view. It's cold out there. Home is far. Family is here. There's strength and courage in each action, no safety at sea as clouds close in. Customary, cursory, all glancing true, eyes squinting and stung, saltwater fused. Limbs longing for rest deliver, time and again. Minds are occupied. Whose life is this, whose memories are these? A soul adrift struggles for ease. Pictured and caught. Experienced. Landscaped. I wonder who saw this in 1754 and imagined as I have done. I wonder who stood by them?

Emma Irwin *My Best Friend Got Married*

I bought Yasmin a necklace as an engagement present. It's a ring-holder necklace, shaped like a horseshoe, letting you loop the ring onto the chain without taking off the necklace. I wanted to get her a practical gift she can wear when she's at work. It keeps her wedding and engagement rings safe if she needs to examine a patient at the hospital on short notice, for example. She says I'm a good gift giver, and has told me she bought the same one for her friend Emily (also a doctor) after I'd got one for her.

Perhaps the need to give this practical gift came from a place of wanting to feel useful, and also to feel present in her life, now that she's married. There are many things we share as best friends, and much we understand about each other intimately, yet marriage is a concept near and true to her in a way that for me it is not. I'm not religious, and my upbringing doesn't emphasise the importance of marriage in the same way hers has. Whilst my parents would probably like me to get married, it's not essential for me in order to engage in relationships like it was for her. She's Muslim and her faith has only grown stronger as we've aged. For her, getting married to Ashiq

at 25 was something she'd wanted for the six years she'd known him. It is something they discussed openly before their relationship developed beyond friendship. Her family is quite strict and careful – marriage is the only culturally approved way that Ashiq could visit Yasmin at their family home without his parents' accompaniment. Yasmin is an extremely family-oriented person; she adores her parents and siblings immensely, so not being able to introduce them to Ashiq was incredibly tough for her.

I don't think I noticed the gravity of this restriction until her first year as an F1 Junior Doctor. Through med school, Yasmin and Ashiq shared a friendship group and therefore never had much of a chance to miss each other. Once qualified, she had to move from Imperial College in Kensington to Romford, so that she could work at Queens Hospital. Ashiq worked on the other side of London and lived at home with his parents. During this time, they struggled to spend more than an afternoon a month together. I saw her experience an extreme longing for the love that she was distanced from by her work. I had never seen her that upset. It was a combination of living alone, being far from her family, being an F1, and not seeing Ashiq. There were several times during that year that I stayed with

her for a week at a time to try and boost morale and to be there to cook dinner when she came home from a twelve-hour shift.

I haven't felt that needed in someone else's life since my brother was little and I would cook dinner for him when he came home from school, ravenous before heading to training to swim 5 km or more.

It was during this challenging year that Yasmin and Ashiq knew they wanted to be married before F2 began, so that they could live

together in West London, where they would both be placed on their next rotations. I was at Yasmin's family home one weekend, and she was asking her abbu (dad) to call Ashiq's vava (dad) the following day, to arrange for the two families to meet up for dinner and get to know each other. I will forever admire how important familial relationships are to them, and how this delicate process was navigated. Yasmin's family wanted to honour and respect their own boundaries, as well as initiate and

approach the topic of her marriage to Ashiq in the appropriate manner.

Three or four dinners later, Yasmin told me that their Nikkah (the contractual part of a Muslim marriage) was booked for June 2022 and that they'd applied for their marriage certificate. I was so incredibly happy for her, and also deeply aware that I was saying goodbye

to a part of my friend that I would never see again – the unmarried part of her. Before this moment we were equals, and both our next of

kins were our parents. But now, the dynamic of our relationship has changed, as their partnership is most important of all. I completely support them, but I'm still adjusting. It's a strange sensation, when nothing is the same as it was, but nothing is different either.

The hardest part of this for me was when the couple flew to India at the end of January 2023 to have the wedding reception in Ashiq's family's hometown, Trivandrum, in Kerala. I wasn't



Yasmin & Ashiq's immediate families

explicitly invited or not invited. The event was for family only, and I would have felt like an intruder. My name is on the marriage certificate as a witness, yet I was 5,000 miles from my best friend as she celebrated the most important thing in her life. 'Missing out' isn't the right way to explain how I feel, and Yasmin has talked me through everything in such detail and shown me photos that I now realise that I didn't need to travel to India after all. My whole experience of the wedding ceremony was through her explaining it to me, and talking me through the photos. Out of all the things I can provide as her friend, a sense of belonging amongst Sunni family is something she could only have from her husband and his family.

My sense of longing to share her experiences is by no means comparable to what

Yasmin has told me about her situation, growing up in England mixed-race. She felt 'too brown' at primary school – Chertsey is very white – and 'too white' at secondary school, where mostly everyone was

brown. She says her main feelings come from not having an Asian mum, because there are so many inside jokes about what these maternal figures are like. This, and the curse words shouted in school corridors, the shared foods with names she didn't know, the crux of a joke hinging on the half-Hindi or half-Urdu reference she didn't understand. All this, and having to explain she didn't speak the language, added to the grief she already felt for a culture she didn't participate in. But perhaps it wasn't as bad as I make out – there was one time Yasmin referred to me as the only 'white person' in the room when her mum was there, forgetting her own mother was white.



Ashiq and Yasmin under the phoolon ki chadar

The distance I felt from my best friend's wedding ceremony is nothing compared to her distance from her Bengali family, who, aside from

one cousin, are thousands of miles away from London. Yasmin lives away from her Bengali relatives 52 weeks of most years. Belgium, where her moeke (mum) is from, is considered

close in comparison, and gets visited a little more often, so perhaps the same longing doesn't pull on her heart strings as hard.

I've been told that Ashiq's grandpa in Kerala, experiencing dementia, asked 'Who's the lighter-skinned one?' when referring to Yasmin, and I think this epitomises the tension she experiences within her own identity. I know she's happy that Ashiq actively practises his faith, and she's told me about how it has rekindled her own. My views on marriage have changed since she married him. For them, it's the deepest form of connection, both culturally, spiritually, and physically.

Yasmin explained to me how lucky she feels to have found her person, that they are both from Sunni backgrounds, and that their parents were supportive of their decision to marry. I'm grateful that the most discomfort she felt through the entire process was standing under the *phoolon ki chadar* – the cloth canopy held over the head of the bride and groom by the groom's cousins – the beads whacking her in the face as they walked.

Emmie Morris

Father

Fourteen: For some reason, whenever I think about my grandparents I feel the need to lay down my head in a boyfriend's lap and cry about them. (My grandad especially.) I feel so much tenderness towards them both it's overwhelming.

Eighteen: There are eighteen years between my grandparents' eldest and youngest children. Mum is their middle child. Even after all this time, it is so funny to us as a family that they left so many years between having one child and having another. It's silly. We laugh because it was unplanned. We laugh the laugh only a family can understand. I find I am smiling to myself when I think about this. I don't know why I am writing about my grandparents. There is a battle within, in which my father wrestles to be the focal point, but the other half of me wants to use this as a space to honour my grandparents. As a child, my grandparents took the place of my father. They still do.

Twenty-three: I always find myself running away into the forest before I might be hurt by another man. My legs throb as I run faster and faster, away from someone who loves me. I long for the leaves of the forest to smother me.

Six: In my life, currently, I am having sex with a man who has just purchased green bed sheets. They are French linen, and he has spent a laughable amount of money on them. I like being in his bed at 2:08pm on a Sunday afternoon, when it's all clean sheets and sunlight, intimacy and disorder at the same time. When I am engulfed in his sheets, I feel so gentle and tender I want to cry (and I have). I am safe, just for a fleeting moment. (The green sheets are the leaves of the forest – finally, I am smothered). I want to talk to him about my absent father. His parents are no longer together either; he demonstrates some resentment of this fact. 'At least your father wanted you though,' I say, and gently lay my head back down onto his linen pillow. I like this man. He does not remind me of my father. Sometimes he does remind me of my grandfather. I think this is a good thing. I know this is a good thing.

Four: 'Well done. You're doing well despite everything.'

Eleven: I wonder what my dad told his own mother and father. Did they know about me? Or did they only know of my existence when I appeared to him on his doorstep, age eleven, desperate to have a relationship with him? Clinging to the idea that it could still happen. The relationship lasted a year and then we stopped seeing each other and I haven't heard from him since. It felt futile even while I was experiencing it. Do his own mother and father think about me now? Does he think about me now? Or is he drifting along, unaware of how much he's impacted my life despite never having been in it at all?

Fifteen: Is it better for a person to have left? To never know them at all, rather than enduring something that wouldn't have worked out.

Sixteen: Maybe, in an alternate reality somewhere, there is a version of me walking down the street with my dad. In this alternate reality, he would take me at weekends, or on weekday evenings we would go to the pub for tea. I'd have chicken nuggets and he'd have a steak. We'd both have tomato sauce ('red sauce' is what he would call it), and a glass of full-fat coke.

Nine: Dad. Why did you leave? Dad. Why didn't you stay?

Two: Sometimes I speak about my father when I am drunk. The word 'dad' itself feels wrong inside my mouth. Like a word in a foreign language for a concept I don't understand. I feel weird talking about him, or even alluding to him in conversation. Sometimes, I lie about him. I act as though he exists.

Three: What is love anyway? It is too big a thing to describe. Love is mushy peas and gravy. It's the shepherd's pie my mum makes when I come home for the weekend. It's the lukewarm Guinness at the pub that I sip slowly when I should be at home sleeping. If love is a mode of transport, it would be the missed coach to Leeds (a blessing in disguise). Love is every forgotten conversation I had with you in my sleep.

Forty-five: How strange it is that I don't even know my own father's age. Often, too, I forget his last name. Sometimes I even forget his first name.

Twenty-two: On the train home, I held my breath and counted to ten. I wanted to be held and I wanted someone to take the pain out of my chest, like a physical thing that could be controlled and removed by someone as easily as it is put there in the first place.

One hundred: Father, I am your blood and bones, I am made up of you. But I am not you. You are so far removed from the fabric of my reality, it doesn't even matter that I am half of you. What an odd thought, that someone who created me is no longer in my life at all. I wrote this for you, dad.

Ollie O'Neill
Tracey, don't let me forget

Less than two years before my mum dies, I write a poem: 'I do not know which tense to talk about my mother in.' Five months after I write this poem, I see her for the first time in years, and for the last time in my life. We do not know each other. She asks *how is living in Hove*, which is not where I live. I reply indignantly: *What is my job? Where do I work?* As though in knowing the answers to these questions she might really be telling me *I love you, I'm still where you came from.*

I say *I want you to answer me*, because I know she cannot.

*

When my mum was alive / when my mum was not alive is a sum I try to do to my history.
I want everything to be a whole number in the mathematics of living or dead.



*

There are more complicated equations in the aftermath of her dying. The result of her autopsy is inconclusive. Medically, her death is an indivisible fact, an event without reason. The square root of thirst is nothing, over and over again. A well echoing its own emptiness. The grief is formless, an endless parade of figures after a decimal point avoiding completeness. I mourn like trying to sculpt water, reach out and fall through space. The living and the dying. Me, and my mum.

*

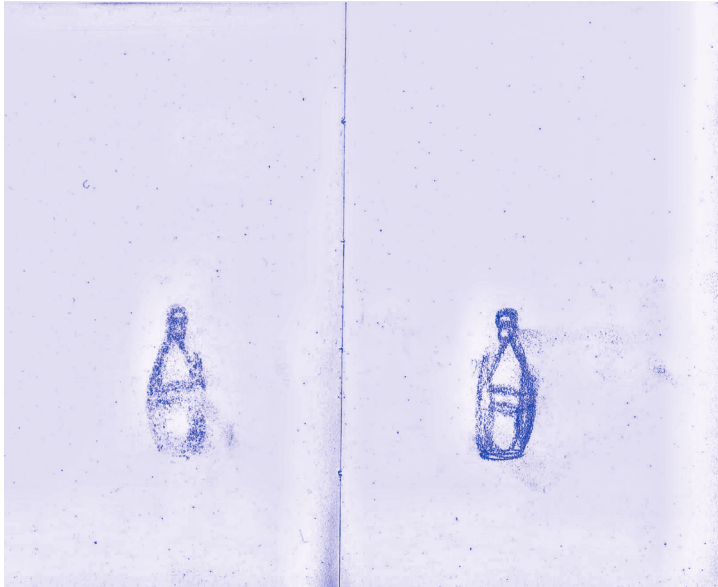
Everybody wants to know if she was sick. Old neighbours. People I've met without her. Little pixelated figures with half-familiar names. *Was she sick?* They press their eye up to the viewfinder of logic. They want it flattened, smooth, and clean as cream. No layers here, just questions with answers. They want *yes, she was sick* – a perfect high-definition image. A straight line from alive.

*

Being able to name a barrier is not the same as being able to remove one.

*

If I think of lineage and inheritance as vertical processes, I find myself without a history. An obstruction through the process of subtraction, rather than addition. A layer of absence. The average age at death for my parents was 48. Statistically, I am over halfway to outliving them. Suddenly all my scars seem so quick. Everyone I love spilling out of me like morning from the night before.



*

Death insists you interrogate memory, demands you flex remembering like a well-worked muscle. In the days afterwards, I dream less but try to recall more. I start by playing all the songs she listened to in our childhood, which I avoided doing while she was alive. How selfish, to constantly swing between banishing and evoking the past, still expecting it to come each time you call.

*

Was she sick? Well yes, all her insides perfectly preserved in thick green Night Nurse, and tinned soup, and white wine which was delivered each day by motorcycle or pedal bike, and codeine, and vodka, and Haribo cola bottles, like the body if the body was a museum for suffering, yes, she was sick, in the way that sometimes remembering is sickness, and when remembering is sickness then I am unwell too, looking in the mirror and seeing her looking back, sick for a long time, but no, technically, no, not sick at all, not in the way you want her to have been, not sick like brave, not sick in a way you might deem honourable, in a way that would have you pledging sympathy, or empathy, but *was she sick*, yes, only in a deeply working class way, like thick wet vines in her veins, sick in a way that you cannot fathom, sick like proof that you cannot ever outrun your upbringing, your family name like a prognosis, sick like no Priory, sick like no God, sick like just PIP.

24th August
Cuan Mhuire

Dear Olivia,
Just a quick note - we had the chance to buy these cards today so I got one for each of you. How are things with you? Still no letters or photos?!

This week is week 9 of being alcohol free and I'm looking forward to getting into double figures next week. We've had awful storms the past few days which make the mountains look beautiful. We have started our unit on spirituality today and will carry this on all week.



*

I want to revisit the past without the knowledge of the present, that thin film of truth on the surface of memory. I sit with my sister on her bed the night before the funeral and we co-author a eulogy, set timers on our phones to see how long we can speak for before the honesty runs out. We ask the mostly empty church to try not to remember our mother in the circumstances of her death, but in any small, untarnished moment before it. An impossible task.

*

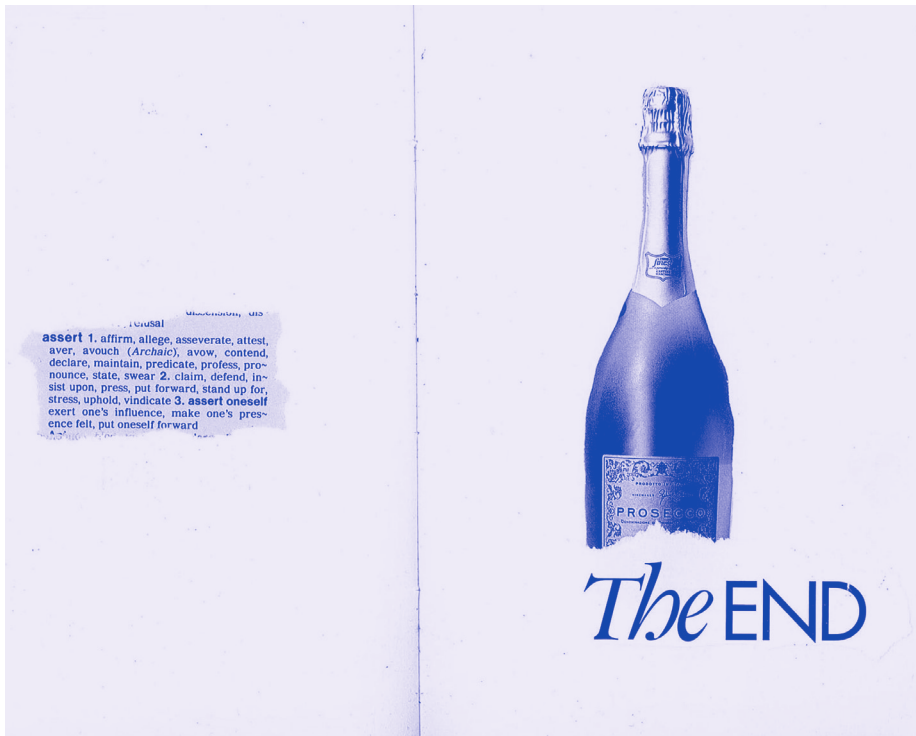
I do not know which tense to talk about my mother in. If I say here I mean now, in the hospital, skin like sunset, like ending - the nurse asking for a translator and nobody coming. I mean now at the hypnotist's office, his assistant catching each bottle as it falls, saying *and you're back in the room!* just as she is walking out of it. See, I want the world to be easily divisible, for everyone to be one of two things: an alcoholic or not. But don't I know just as well how wanting is a gaping wound narrowly missing a main artery? How easy it is to ask for *more* and think we have so much skin left?

*

If I say was, I mean shellac nails and strip lighting. A dream in which the two of us grow gills, pull the moon out from the sky in solidarity with the sea.

*

Watch as it stills. As it stills. As it stills.



Sarah Paoli

Malice was Anonymous

(I) dread to drip drop dramamine
into an embroidered emblem of embalmed sentiment
though, in the moment, all (I) could ask for was for my molars
to withhold their sediment and for those elements to stagnate in their own
resentment no religion holds my bowels
like chewing gum does my intention there's no woe in penance
though the vegetables don't talk back
there is still nothing wrong with the expectation to
wilt.

the bouquets were named after the tug of war (I) won and forfeited.
(I) made myself crawl through the field and stood
up clean kneed. sometimes there is no need for proof
the moons sit on top of my cuticles because there is no other side to the
psalm (I) have committed to a
memory (I) do not remember.
(I) have an idea to stand with my chord
straight against the asphalt and not look at the distance between
getting up and just leaving.
(I) count my life in the rings of foliated disease
(I) used to search for pieces of chewed up gum beneath the swing
sets, (I)'d find speckled whites and faded greens
beneath the metal or resting underneath
the fence which (I) used to lick the rust off of (I)'d
put the second-hand chewing gum in my mouth
and feel pieces of gravel give away between
my teeth. It tasted like an allusion to freshness
but (I) knew that it was disgusting.
(I) can't remember why (I) had started
the scavenging. (I) don't remember what (I)
did with the chewing gum when (I) too
wished to cease – if (I) had buried it in the same dirt or
stuck it onto the same metal when (I)
was coming down the stairs, scarcely moving my jaw, the nun saw and

mouth guided her open palm under my
look and after that (I) did not
for chewing gum on the playground
anymore.

(I) am looking for myself in
papaya seeds. my nose looks like a root vegetable that might do well in a
winter stew. (I) watch my drink fizz over the
edge of the glass and it looks like the stuff (I
) squeeze out of my pores. sometimes (I) eat things
that remind me of myself and (I)
think (I) have gorged and it is too much and (I) am
ashamed but (I) pretend (I) love it. (I
) take a sheet of paper and rip strips off it so (I) can roll
the strips into a ball and stick the paper ball
in the back of my mouth and press my molars together onto the
paper ball until my gums hurt and (I)
like the feeling and (I) do it in a way so that
no one notices because (I) am embarrassed about
what (I) like to feel.

sometimes (I) sat in the back of the car and (I) wouldn't
talk and my grandfather would forget that (I)
was there and he would drive back to my
school and (I) would stay silent because (I
) used to think that my words had to mean something
and when he would turn around, sometimes to look for
me or other times to look at the road, he would remember that
(I) was there.

(I) have never really forgotten to eat. Once (I) put a lock of
hair into my mouth and twirled the united strands inside
my mouth with my tongue and when (I) felt a tugging (I)
got confused and then realised the lock of hair was not my own but the
girl's sitting in front of me and (I) let the
hair fall out of my mouth and back onto the rest and when she
turned around she felt my wetness but did not know
that it was mine.

sometimes life splays beside me and (I) don't touch it and
 when it pushes its way into me (I) don't resent it
 nor do (I) wish for it and when (I) resist it (I)
 don't mean it and when (I) laid still (I)
 never meant it and when (I) asked for you there was no
 reason for it and when life splays beside me (I) stand up
 and ask it too to stand up and stand on the other side of the bed
 and tug the sheets tight over the mattress and
 when the linen is stretched its thinnest over the mattress
 (I) ask it to get back in bed and lay next to me and
 when it does (I) watch it and by watching it
 try to see myself in the watching but (I)
) am only watching, not leering, and (I) wish (I) was a
 voyeur, but it is just life splayed beneath me, and when it looks it doesn't
 watch, it doesn't even glare, and when it looks and
 (I) think it wants me to mean something but (I)
) don't mean what (I) am meant to mean, and (I) get back
 on top of the taught sheets and stiffen
 because (I) feel the remnant of the warmth (I) had left for
 myself when the sheets had loosened from the corners of the mattress and (I)
) angle my gaze into watching life splayed beside, the
 heat of expectation souring the stillness.

sometimes (I) open my mouth and suck on the
 inside of my right arm and it tastes of a salt (I)
 am not familiar with and (I) enjoy it and keep sucking on
 myself and when my mouth relinquishes my flab with a
 pop (I) see the skin marked purple and
 it looks like a pomegranate and (I) think (I)
 would not do this to anyone that (I) love.

Rosie Penny

A List of Holds

1. Three girls hold Bibles. The smallest holds her finger to her mouth.
2. Two girls hold hands. The butterfly evades the grasp of the girl in blue, a hand that could crush it, should she try to caress it.
3. The child is held within the lap of the adult. Engulfed, encompassed, at its mercy.
4. Paintings like this fail to hold my attention. The girl holds out her dress and I wonder if she has ever felt cloth that is rough, with stains cemented in or holes eaten out of it.
5. An apron holds in the billows of the dress, fluting out over the hips. Like the people in uniform, the oil painting is a commodity to be displayed.
6. The small children hold each other's gaze, hands held in their laps in a foetal scrunch. The dragon looks ahead with one red eye. Paint clings to the cardboard puckered with dimples. To bond is not to smooth things over but to strengthen a connection with what is uneven.
7. Someone holds a camera, points it at the mirror to get a clear shot of Uncle on the armchair. Uncle props himself up with an elbow to bash out a tune on the small plastic keyboard. He grips the counter and leans towards the microwave like a cat outstretched waiting to be fed.
8. Pockets hold his hands flush against his pelvis. The belt holds his jeans up and his shirt in. The text holds the image accountable for the heartbreak encountered. The pretence of family keeps me from something I am yet to find, an experience of relationships free from obligation.
9. A hand wraps around the child's shoulder. The hand attempts what the sofa does without question. The sofa holds, the cat, the family, all of them together, the fabric of day-to-day life.

10. One girl holds a jug, the boy holds a knife against the bread. I behold another girl in the background. Pushed into the dark, yet still relevant enough to paint. To be seen but not heard, that's what they used to say.
11. The paint holds secrets, blurred facial features, the anonymity of those beloved. Hands grace the face of the table. The table holds them there – something to gather around, sit under, and talk over.
12. The woman holds my gaze. She looks like an alien. Rounded and smoothed over in all the right places, which makes them look like the wrong places. The hair holds tight curls, glued to her scalp with precision, precise like the dagger collar on a blouse which has been ironed to prudish formality.
13. The mother holds her baby, her son is slumped against her. Her daughter stands alone, supported only by the pavement. Flowers jut out of their fists.
14. I can't imagine looking at a baby, knowing that it was inside of me and is now outside of me, living off of me. My chest filling with milk to spill over into an open mouth. Holding all that responsibility and storing it up like a cabinet. Would I be mahogany or oak, or something less sturdy? An Ikea flat pack? Something rigid and unyielding, a not good enough mother.
15. My genes are held in the double helix of my DNA. Twisted into shape, wringing out my traits, forcing them to dribble down the generations. I have my grandmother's depression, my mother's and brother's too. I have been spared from the wires, the loud buzz and the zap of my humanity being muted. But not perhaps from the chokehold of generational trauma; the throat left bruised and aching even when the hands are prised off.
16. The title holds me captive as I grapple with the idea of an absent presence. If the present is here, and I am here, how can it be gone, lost, or forgotten. I am absent, and the presence of I contradicts my being. It only pains me to hold onto something that is not there.

Corresponding works:

1. Sophia Anderson, *Foundling Girls in the Chapel*, c. 1870s
2. Thomas Gainsborough, *The Painter's Daughters chasing a Butterfly*, c. 1756
3. Adolf Tideman, *Granny's Darling*, 1861
4. William Hogarth, *The Graham Family*, 1742
5. Emma Brownlow, *A Foundling Restored to its Mother*, 1858
6. Louise Allen, *Thrown Away*, 2017
7. Matthew Finn, *Uncle*, 1987-2014
8. Sunil Gupta, *'Pretended' Family Relationships*, 1988
9. Chantal Joffe, *Self-portrait with Esme and Spot*, 2011
10. The Le Nain Brothers, *Four Figures at a Table*, c. 1643
11. Sikelela Owen, *The Owens*, 2019
12. Gillian Wearing, *Self-Portrait as my Mother, Jean Gregory*, 2003
13. Thomas Kennington, *The Pinch of Poverty*, 1891
14. Caroline Walker, *Night Feed*, 2022
15. Barbara Walker, *Untitled (artist's granddaughter, age 11)*, 2021
16. Ted Duncan, *Absent Presence*, 2006

Tom R ONENESS

Strands / In 1971 Paul Berg became the first scientist to splice genes, and one hundred years later Berg's innovation has perhaps reached its ultimate conclusion.

Unlike other cities, little has changed in London. The water is clean, its glass towers still stand, and those who can afford citizenship can function with comfort. The doctor greets me with a surprising hug in the lobby of One Wellness and hands me my ID badge – 'PRESS' emblazoned in red above my name. I'm escorted through a maze of staircases, hallways, and security doors as they talk me through some of the looser details of the bonding technology. I'm keeping up. Mostly.

- *We're giving people the ability to truly connect. This is beyond mere sibling-hood, beyond cloning. It is to be as One.*
- *Forever.*
- *Yes, forever. It's beautiful. One Wellness proposes a new dawn for the human experience. Our technology, our philosophy, is reconceptualising what it means to exist.*
- *In terms of the science, I think I understand the genetic manipulation, the extraction of the DNA material from each patient.*
- *Participant.*
- *Participant. Then the splicing and connecting of these separate strands together and the implantation of this new genetic mix into the bodies.*
- *Yes.*
- *But can you walk me through what the bonding ceremony will look like to a bystander, a witness?*
- *Unlike the horror stories in the tabloids, it is a quiet process. We call it a ceremony because it is almost sacred; an act of beauty, of intimacy. The participants go to sleep in a pool of medically enriched fluids, which is actually based on cytoplasm.*

I pull out my notebook, thinking I should start writing these things down. The doctor laughs and continues talking.

- *Think of it like an amniotic sac. The pool assists in the chromosomal replication process throughout the body. And, much like a developing foetus, this takes time.*
- *How long?*
- *A month, sometimes more. And after the participants wake up, they are an exact genetic mirror of each other. As One. True family.*
- *Well, biologically speaking.*

The doctor doesn't respond. I change tack.

- *What's the largest number of participants you have worked with?*
- *I helped a group of five friends become One. The ceremony was a real party. At least fifty witnesses, drinking wine and toasting their friends as they fell asleep. Wonderful.*
- *But today it's just two.*
- *Yes. And just you as their witness.*

Selves / Paper cups sit on the metal table between the three of us. Still-too-hot coffee for me and a medicated solution for them. Max's hand rests on Misha's as they speak about what led them here.

- *I have butterflies, of course. I expected those.*
- *It would be strange if you didn't. Thank you for inviting me.*
- *We wanted to share the truth of this process with others.*
- *I appreciate it. Can I ask what made you decide to bond?*
- *It's about creating a new story of our lives. One that starts with unity. Leaving behind all that has come before. I ... I grew up alone and always expected aloneness, I think. And then I met Misha and felt... What? A pang of recognition.*
- *But to take this step?*
- *For me, it offers a sense of totality. You're never truly alone, there's someone who doesn't just know you but who is you. Well, a version of you. It's intrinsic love, you know?*
- *Has the doctor spoken to you about the end results? I mean, even just physically, your appearance? I'm aware that the two of you won't be identical, right?*
- *Can you imagine? That would be too much.*
- *But what about your memories? You'll both lose some of your individual histories as part of this process. Past moments of joy will disappear. Previous relationships, gone.*
- *We want to start again.*

Misha stands up and walks to a window on the other side of the room. Their silence has been palpable. I can see the grey of the river winding away in the distance as they exhale and finally speak.

- *It's a renewal, too.*
- *Some would question whether it's a renewal or a deletion?*

Silence. I've overstepped.

- *I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend.*
- *Have you never wanted to be something new?*
- *Of course. But I'd be scared of what was left behind.*
- *But what about what's to come?*

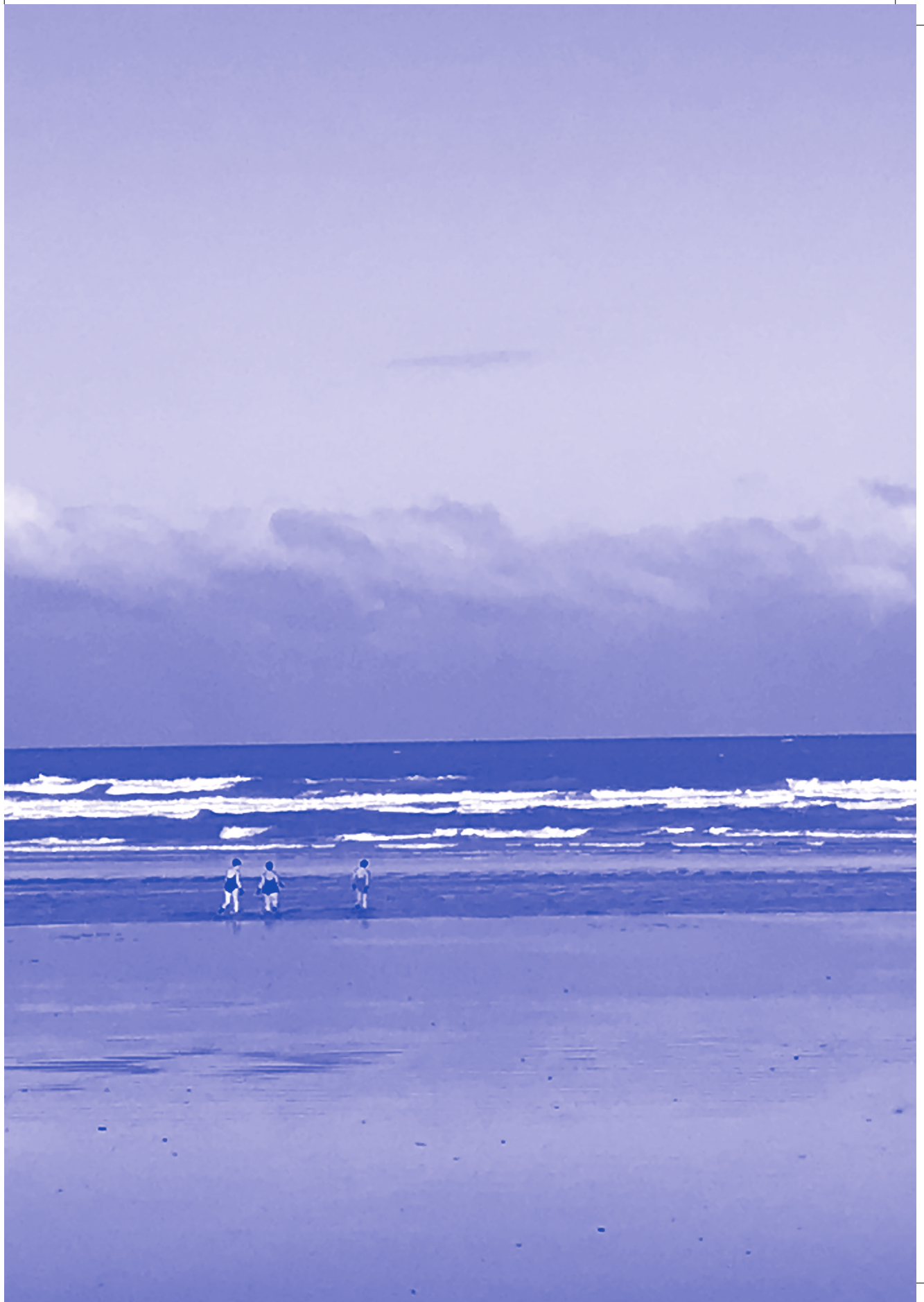
Misha stares at me. I think I can see fear in their eyes. I want to ask more questions, but I've already pushed too hard.

Splits / The pool shimmers. I might have mistaken it for a particularly luxurious salt-water bath if not for that iridescent, violet glow. Two nurses attend to muted machinery; ceramic pipework, touchscreens, buttons. Max and Misha enter the amber-lit room wearing pale cotton robes. The doctor speaks to them in hushed tones before ushering me toward the door, inviting me to watch their bonding ceremony from an adjoining space. I thank Max and Misha and wish them luck.

Behind a pane of glass, I watch as they remove their robes and step into the pool. Ports have already been fitted across their skin and oxygen masks attached to their faces. The doctor enters and pats me on the shoulder.

- *Well, what do you make of it?*
- *I can see that it's beautiful. But I guess a part of me can't help but think of this as less of a beginning and more of an ending.*
- *What a cynic you are.*
- *It's an occupational hazard.*

The nurses lower Max and Misha into the liquid. Their bodies disappear from view inch by inch until all that I can see are two forms below the surface. It is quiet. The doctor withdraws to a bank of computers, monitoring ambiguous data and vitals. I pull out my notebook to review subjects still to be queried: money, trauma, atomisation. I clear my throat to ask the doctor one such question but notice the shimmering pool beyond the glass bubbling. The stillness is disrupted, changing the energy of the room. The doctor catches this too, standing up and looking on with curiosity. Bubbles rupture the surface more violently. Purple and gold swirls twist and turn in the fluid chaotically, until the body of Misha emerges, dripping and thrashing. Pulling off their breathing apparatus, Misha locks eyes with me and screams.



Brooke Wilson

Consume

Consume meaning to eat.
Connect meaning to bond.
Con meaning *with*.

I remember dinner as a shared ritual with my mother. It was a ceremonious occasion that began at six o'clock daily. Candles were lit, assorted plates in position, and cutlery laid out on embossed kitchen roll. Aesthetically basic but considered with sensitivity; a snapshot from a scene in my childhood. Our table was an island, solely accessible via stools with long legs; a metaphor for our existence – we were adrift from time. My mother had a thing for tablecloths, a brightly striped protective layer between surface and touch that kept life clean, protected from messy happenings. Set against the patterned cloth, salt and pepper and bowls piled high with food for sharing were almost decorative, abstract. My mother always encouraged us to share a meal. 'It is how you will connect with the world,' she said.

My Mother's Cottage Pie Recipe:

3 tbsp oil
with
1¼ kg beef mince
with
2 onions, finely chopped
with
3 carrots, chopped
with
2 garlic cloves, finely chopped
with
850 ml beef stock
with
A splash of red wine
with
A few thyme sprigs
with
2 sage leaves
with
1.8 kg potatoes, peeled and chopped
with
2 tbsp vegetable stock
with
25 g butter

To start, fry the beef mince in oil until browned. With care, add the chopped onions, carrots, and garlic. Cook on gentle heat for 20 minutes until soft. With ease, pour over the beef stock and add the herbs. Bring to a simmer and cook for 45 minutes. While the beef cooks, prepare the mash. With control, peel and chop the potatoes, then cover with water and bring it to the boil

until tender. With caution, drain the water, add the butter, then mash. With attentiveness, place the mince in an ovenproof dish and top with a thick layer of mash. Cook in the oven for 10 minutes until golden. With love, remove and serve your minced beef with mashed potatoes.

Occasionally, I would make this meal with friends. Sharing a large house, each person would assume a different task.

One *with* meat.

One *with* vegetables.

One *with* mash.

An assembly line at the kitchen worktop, we would prepare a collective meal. A meal made by our small community – safe from the outside world. With the sound of beef sizzling, conversations spluttered; with carrot cutting, snippy criticisms; with mashing we talked of the struggles of the day. As the heat from the oven built, the smell of herbs would grow intoxicating. Sage mingled with thyme, the steamy stock their diffused soundtrack. Senses triggered and memories engrained. These physical acts of connection took us out of our solitude and forced us to be present with one another. However, sometimes

on grey days we made this meal in silence, sharing only the sounds of the kitchen: a knife against the chopping board, the squelch of potato in the pan, the bubbling of the broth thickening.

When I sat down to eat, the ritual was always the same.

To start, I waited for my food to cool down. Then with ease my fork scooped the mashed potatoes, sweeping with it carrots, peas, and globules of minced beef. With care, I raised the fork to my mouth, staring at the centre of it as it grew closer to disappearing. With time, my mouth broke down every morsel, swirling the collected mixture from one molar to the next. With control, I ran my tongue along the front of my teeth, gathering any residue along the way. With attentiveness, I felt the warmth of the food pass down my throat until it arrived in the pit of my stomach. With caution, I took a breath and imagined my insides stripping down that mouthful, extracting key nutrients and disposing of unnecessary toxins, like workers in a scrap yard. With love, all the memories of this meal came flooding back to me. Minced beef with mashed potatoes.

These days, I find comfort in making this meal for myself; with myself.

At such moments, I miss our shared meals. I miss our silent making, our basic table laying, and I miss being with them. As I open the oven to remove the pie, memories burst out with the steam, like whispering children in a classroom, secrets escape. I set the food to rest on the kitchen worktop and, in silence, reminisce about how a simple recipe can contain so much more than its listed ingredients. I lay the table with pillar candles, assorted plates, and kitchen roll folded in half. I feel I am with them and know they are with me when I sit down to eat my mother's cottage pie.

The back of your tongue hits the roof of your mouth, while lips form a kiss.
Con meaning with.
To be with someone, to be with something.
What does it mean to be *with*?

He Zhang

Behind the Mask of a Name

I had a dream in which I transformed into a baby and crawled across an unknown beach. The beach was decorated with white objects resembling shells, which reflected the bright sunlight and stood out against the yellow sand. As I played with these objects with my small hands, I discovered that they were a mixture of Chinese characters, English letters, and other unfamiliar writing forms. I put them together in a casual combination that I didn't know how to read. Mr Crab crawled out of the sand and wanted to ask me something, but unfortunately, a wave swept him and the objects away, leaving me to recombine the characters again and again.

I was on this beach for some time until, one day, the waves swept me away too. Then I opened my eyes to find my body seemed to have grown rapidly. I could barely stand. My father lifted me from my bed and turned me around, while my mother gently said something that I didn't catch – probably something lovely and affectionate. The rotating view made me a little excited, and when I saw a guy in a framed photo on the wall who looked a little like me, I hesitated. However, there were one or two characters in the calligraphy under the photo that were similar to one of the combinations I had made on the beach. I somehow knew that this was my name. I was amazed by the coincidence, and wondered whether it was a case of the name determining me or me deciding on the name.

In the past, I used to worry about my name, but over time I have grown accustomed to it. My identity is confirmed by people calling me by it repeatedly. It is a familiar mask that has been with me for more than two decades. But I often ask myself, 'Who is hiding behind the mask?'

Appleking

When I look at the names recorded on the wall at the Foundling Museum – Champion, Upminster, Appleking – I realise they once belonged to adopted children from the eighteenth century.

Appleking sounds like the popular brand of fruit that my mother might buy at the market. It is more like a cute nickname than one you would find on a birth certificate. Its unusualness catches my attention and I am reminded of my own experience. My parents chose the name 禾, 'rice', the mostly common global crop, due to the

lack of ‘wood (plant)’ in my fate as divined by the Five Elements philosophy system. As a newly literate seven-year-old child, I was unfamiliar with this word. I could not understand why they would not choose some rare and noble plant, something cooler sounding. I became worried and jealous, like when naming your avatar in a video game: without a cool name, you might appear weak and be ridiculed by children with better names.

Who doesn’t want to be a cool guy with a loud name?

At school the stupid name jokes didn’t stop. They were like dirty stickers on a utility pole, clinging to my name. If names are like masks, then I felt I was wearing a circus clown mask. Despite my father patiently reminding me that the choice was based on the tenacity of rice in harsh environments, as a child I had different expectations and desires for my name.

I wasn’t sure what I wanted to change it to, but so long as it wasn’t Rice, I thought to myself..

At the Foundling Museum, I couldn’t take my eyes off ‘Appleking’. I would love to know someone with that name – perhaps a quiet and shy boy or a lively and chatty girl. Blonde and shaggy hair would accentuate his/her rosy cheeks, matching the half a red apple the children are given for lunch.

‘Wow! Appleking is eating his/her friend!’

I imagine the laughter of other children in the noisy orphanage canteen. Appleking is biting into the apple carefully. There is a mixed feeling in his/her heart about his/her past name and new identity. Name, a double-edged kindness bestowed by others, is usually assigned to us soon after birth. And our attitude to our name might be like the infant who, as Jacques Lacan describes, sees himself in the mirror for the first time. It takes us a while to learn about ourselves, about our image in the mirror, and about our name. I can understand the kid renamed Appleking might have experienced anxiety – we are all unable to accurately define ourselves by our names.

‘Change it!’ Appleking says fiercely, spitting out apple skin. And yet the fierce eye he/she sees reflected on the shiny and uneven surface of a spoon is incompatible with his lovely name.

Who is the person behind the name?

As a 26-year-old adult, I have become adept at responding when someone calls my name – whether by smiling, winking, or laughing. If you were to ask me if I wanted to change my name, I would definitely say no. The cumbersome name-change policy alone is enough to dissuade me, not to mention that I now understand the intentions of my parents. On the other hand, this newfound ‘maturity’ also makes me feel a little uneasy. Who is the person behind the name? Is it the child who used to cry over their odd name, or the adult who has assimilated into society? If I had not seen ‘Appleking’, I would not be so confused, remembering all that I have overcome to be able to accept my own name.

‘Someone else in the family didn’t wish to know, as it was all under the carpet sort of thing and that was it...’ John Caldicott, a former Foundling Hospital school pupil, speaks about his experiences trying to contact his biological family. His calm tone was tinged with regret, as if he had made a hurried compromise with a harsh reality, finally admitting the end of the relationship with his biological family. Similarly, Appleking may also have asked himself, ‘Who is Appleking?’, or pleaded for a decent name instead. But no one will have replied to him.

Unanswered question

A person’s feeling about their name can change. At first, the mask of a name might not quite fit the contours of their face, and the rough texture may indent or even scar the delicate skin. It can be incredibly challenging to utter ‘I love it!’ But as a person continues to grow and mature, they may learn to appreciate their name, or at least accept it. Or they might choose to change it altogether. But whichever, the original mask, with its unspoken and subtle stigmas, lingers as a sensation of something once held very close.

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**Foundling
Museum**



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