# OUTWRITE

*Journal of the Cambridge Society for Psychotherapy*

*Number 13* *December 2023*

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## Contents

# Editorial

Welcome to *OUTWRITE* 2023. We write this as the Solstice approaches and our Earth continues to perform its annual miracle of tipping once more towards the sun and hope, despite all that its human creatures do to ravage it. While we wait for renewed growth and warmth, we offer you *OUTWRITE* to warm your hearts and stir your souls.

We would like to thank all our contributors for their willingness to share their thoughts and their writing and image making. And especially for their hard work and deep thought and courage in submitting their writing. From the range of articles and images, we can see how our members think, on the one hand, about the process of becoming a therapist and the profound experience of doing therapy and what goes on in the rooms where we practise. On the other hand, other contributors step out into the world to examine how psychotherapy has something to say to and about the world and to engage with art, history, culture and politics.

We are very fortunate to have artistic contributions from two of our members. **Beth McCabe** produced the wonderful winter wolf on the cover. She reflects on how her wolf emerged – partially anyway - into the light and its relationship to coming to know one's self and the work of therapy. **Steve Thomas**, our newest training member, invites us to look again and look differently at fir cones in his photographic study, something that might similarly be thought central to our practice as therapists.

We wanted give space to celebrate our most recent graduates, **Alistair Cormack** and **Jo Elliot**. We believe we can take collective satisfaction from knowing that our society produces newly qualified therapists of such promise to the profession.

**Stuart Nevill** is a guest contributor who has shared his Lacanian-influenced reflections on *Barbie*, a film that has excited a lot of interest in cultural circles but could perhaps repay critical attention from psychoanalytic psychotherapists interested in the wider application of psychoanalysis.

**Isobel Urquhart** went to an exhibition of Frank Auerbach's self-portraits, and was bowled over by the sustained depth of attention and scrutiny in his drawings in confronting one's self – and in particular, one's old age. Isobel is part of a Getting Older group of retired and retiring therapists who are determined to live their ageing vividly attentive to the experience.

**Sara Collie** movingly describes how music has accompanied her sense of her development as a therapist-in-training, from the earliest sound of the choir rehearsing during her own counselling sessions to finding her own singing voice, and a growing confidence and pleasure in the experience of singing with others, harmonising in choirs both actual and therapeutic, and finally listening increasingly to the songs sung by patients in the consulting room, the music of the voices, the silences and their quality, the different rhythms and tempi of the sessions.

Before reviewing Nilofer Kaul's untypical focus in psychoanalytic literature on the quotidian nature of 'moments of failure' in her book, "Plato's Ghost", **Alistair Cormack** contrasts Freud's conception of the uncanny with ideas of the weird and the eerie in order to draw the reader

towards a more inward examination of the strangeness of the unconscious and our 'ordinary strangeness' to ourselves. It is in his review of Nilofer Kaul's exploration of Bion's matrix of minus links in her book *Plato's Ghost: Minus Links and Liminality in Psychoanalytic Practice* that Alistair finds interesting and relevant insights e.g a more nuanced conception of Bion's idea of a 'container' in which "the finite language of psychoanalysis is inadequate to contain the vision of the unconscious" and in which the 'container' can quickly move to its minus character. This is to make the experience of analysis far from a safe encounter in which the therapist can be defensively oblivious of the turbulence to be expected from an experience that is already and forever unpredictable. The danger is always to then collude, to rely on theory in order to evade and avoid what is psychically painful, and which can lead to untruthful communication.

At a time when our society, like so many others, is beginning to confront the realities of our predominantly white profession and the oppressive impact of this on marginalised communities of potential patients and trainees, **Elizabeth Moore** gives us a beautifully written and unswervingly honest account of growing up as a privileged White person in America's Deep South. We are brought up close to her painful growing awareness of the dehumanising racism that underpinned the plantation society of her family, and the daily humiliations, hurt and rage that black Americans suffered and continue to suffer. Her account is also a love story – not just the love for her friend, Joe Wood; not just for the books that were an 'antidote to the anti-life' of racism; but also for the lessons from James Baldwin on what love itself could or might mean in our bitterly oppressive western societies.

**Antoinette Fox** was *In Hospital*. Antoinette's experience of having to occupy a private hospital room – an experience forced on her rather than chosen – was nothing like the fantasies her friends imagined of 'living it up with the elite of Cambridge.' Her essay makes a serious protest against the increasing privatisation of the health service, and the loneliness and lack of freedom that follows on from the promise of privilege, not to mention the shabby material rewards of exclusivity: having your own ensuite and doilies. Antoinette contrasts this with the warmth and vitality of life in the shared commonality of the public ward she missed.

Talking of privilege and critiques of modern society from the insights of our therapeutic understanding, **Robert Metcalfe** examines our perennial contemporary complaint that we are busy, or too busy. Robert considers the way in which the malaise that accompanies this kind of busyness crushes and represses our creativity and capacity to think, predicaments we may find in ourselves at times, and also hear about from our patients. Can busyness be something that is closer to zealousness that has its own satisfaction? Can we also find time to dance?

And finally! **Anne Murray's** encounter with a medieval stone carving of Eve inspired a delightful feminist voicing of Eve as a kind of Lauren Bacall figure, a sassy and independent woman taking back her right to choose! Even while the tear running down Eve's stone cheek might be that the forbidden Knowledge of Good and Evil includes knowledge of a woman's desire for her own freedom and ownership of her own sexuality, perhaps never to be acknowledged by God or man. Nevertheless, in Anne's version, Eve gets to speak for herself.

With special thanks to Sara Collie for all her painstaking work on editing and formatting the edition - if it's elegant and error free appearance pleases you, that's all down to Sara's meticulous eye.

- ***Isobel***

## Stuart Nevill

# Barbie on the Couch

***This piece has been written by a guest contributor to Outwrite. Stuart Nevill is a Psychoanalytic Psychotherapist in private practice, working in London and online. Prior to training as a therapist 20 years ago, he was a Buddhist monk for 6 years. Stuart has also worked in the voluntary sector for over 20 years, mostly in homeless charities. This article is also published on The Counselling Directory website. Stuart, who was my CEO at Wandsworth Bereavement Service, has given me permission to publish it here. Isobel***

I enjoyed the Barbie film because I recognised (and this genuinely delighted me) profound philosophical and psychoanalytic ideas in the film.

The pivotal monologue by the character Gloria concludes with the following statement:

*"I'm just so tired of watching myself and every single other woman tie herself into knots so that other people will like them."*

I may not be a woman, but I empathised with the women in the film when I heard this line. Why? The experience of women in patriarchy resonates with me - not because I'm a woman, but because I'm tied in knots.

And it's not just me – I listen to this dilemma being articulated by my patients, each in their own unique personal narrative. Each of us needs to find an identity that works for us as a member of a society that is imposed on us. We must find a way to abide by the rules, requests, and expectations of our family, school, workplace, etc to get what we need. All of us need and want to be liked or loved. We want to be wanted.

With this aim in mind, we each ask ourselves, "What do other people want from or of us?" and we each come up with an answer and internalise an imperative to 'be like this', 'look like that', and we try to oblige.

The rub is that it's an impossible task. We don't have the information that we need. We can never satisfy what others want because neither we nor they fully know what they want. Even to the extent that other people make requests or demands of us, we wonder why they are making these demands of us. It's an unanswerable question. People want different things at the same time, desire change, and are looking somewhere else over the horizon - away from the present moment.

Human desire, and the attempt to become what we think others want, is like chasing a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. It's an impossible task and the harder we try, the more we tie ourselves in knots - just like Gloria.

If you believe, as I do, that this relational dilemma is an unavoidable fact of human life, then the next logical question is, "Why isn't this a common human experience?" or in the context of the film script, "Why is it only Gloria-Barbie who feels tied in knots at the start of the film?"

The psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan thought that there were three possible responses to what can't be known, solved, or made good.

- To avoid, deny and repress this experience by identifying oneself as an exception to the rule (as attempted by the Mattel CEO and the Patriarchal Kens), and from that position of power,

pursue something or someone that holds the promise of a solution.

- To avoid the experience of desiring the figure above (like the Barbies who were enamoured by the Patriarchal Kens for a while) and from that position of powerlessness, pinning all their hopes on the powerful other.

- Or to reconcile ourselves to the limitations and impossibilities of the system we live in. In the film, Gloria, Barbie and some of the other characters go on a journey to such a reconciliation.

This is also the central message of the Barbie film. We each face a choice: to retreat into a shared and socially validated avoidance fantasy (Perfect Barbie Land and Patriarch being the two examples of this strategy) or take a journey to a more mature version of what it means to be human.

The film also advocates "giving a voice to the cognitive dissonance required to being a woman under the patriarchy robbed of its power."

Again, I agree. Psychotherapy is about giving voice to what doesn't work within us. We need to give a voice to the truth of our lives that hasn't yet spoken up. We need to find a way to be someone who can exist in relationship to this impossibility. It's not straightforward. It's a path that starts with the experience of anxiety and alienation. We often need some support and/or an experience of solidarity in this unsettling but potentially liberating experience, and in the same process, we rob the system of the power we previously gave it (in our minds).

The price Barbie has to pay to leave Barbie World is to accept and reconcile herself to the highs and lows of human life, to love and loss, to old age and death, to joy and pain. Barbie's transformation from a doll into a person seems to me to be a metaphor for therapeutic development. Therapy is about building the capacity to subjectively experience incompleteness and limitation; experiences don't add up and can't be fixed – we, as therapists, support our clients to do this by talking about these very experiences.

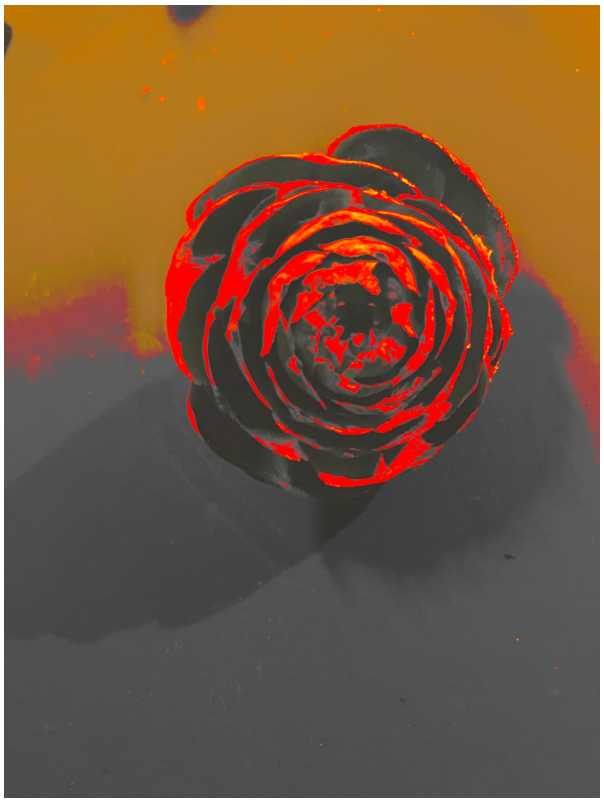
We all tie ourselves in knots, looking for love by trying to be what we think others want us to be. The strategy never works. There is an alternative - an experience of self-love and love towards and from others, that allows for our own and others' imperfections, ordinariness, and human frailties. That message, already articulated in philosophy and the psychoanalytic tradition, re-articulated in the film Barbie, is in my opinion worth underlining and celebrating.

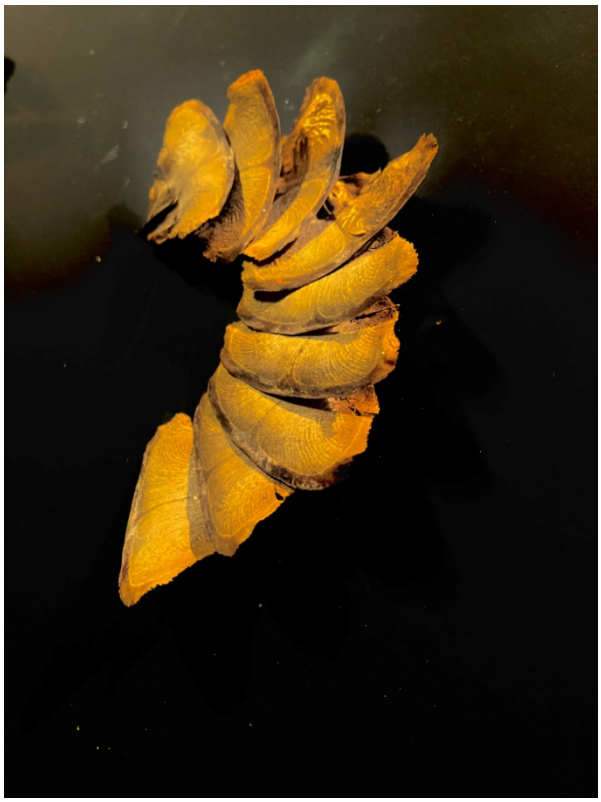
**Steve Thomas**

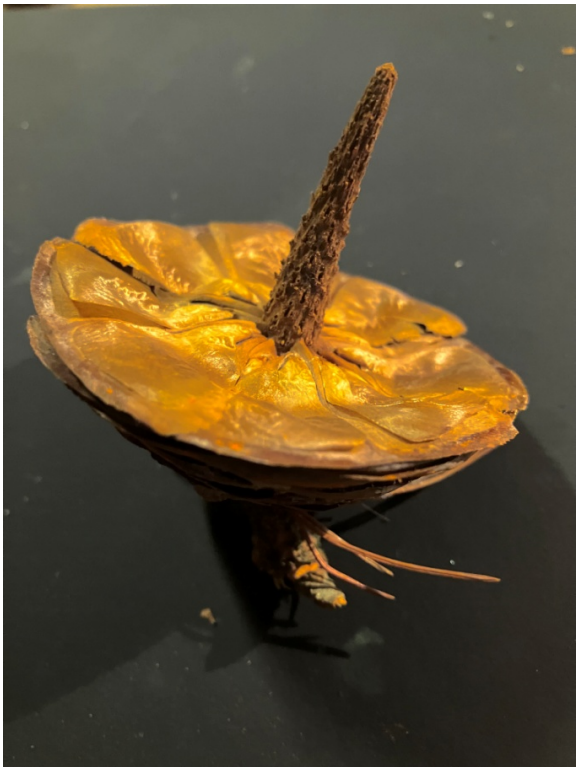
# Untie Me, Float Away

The four images are of a deconstructed fircone (these stand up on the branch, I've learned. Unlike pinecones, which hang below). I discovered it behind the overwintering walled garden at Launde Abbey, near Rutland. We were convened there on a yoga retreat, the theme being 'Granthis', or 'knots.'

Among other things, Sheila Baker, my teacher and friend, who passed away earlier this year, taught me to look out for such natural treasures. And then to play with them--with an uncritical creativity; to enjoy the process most of all.







After sitting on my windowsill for a few weeks, the pale violet fist of the fircone broke open suddenly, with the lightest touch. The scales were found again, then, spread around the exposed stalk like a stack of woody coins; leaving their axis for yet new patterns; untying this difficult 'knot.'

# New Graduations

***Jo Elliot and Alistair Cormack were welcomed as new graduates at the business meeting on 2nd October. We reproduce below the words of introduction for each of our new trained colleagues spoken at the business meeting***

**Alistair Cormack**

It has been a great pleasure to supervise Alistair.

He has always been alive to unconscious process and is continually developing an increasing understanding and subtle articulation of depth dynamics.

I have been particularly impressed by his perception and comprehension of the masculine psyche.

He is kind, generous and sensitive to the idiosyncrasies of the people he has seen.

He has worked particularly hard and compassionately, with a very deprived and withdrawn young man, who would be challenging to any psychotherapist. He has been able to maintain hope, affection and commitment on his journey with him through a desolate landscape, to some effect.

The supervision has been stimulating for both of us, and continues to enhance our thinking about what might be therapeutic for different patients.

Alistair has a particular talent for writing about psychotherapy and I hope he will continue to develop his thinking in this way.

I have no hesitation in supporting his graduation.

- Sian Morgan

**Jo Elliot**

It is a very great pleasure to present Jo for her graduation. I do so on behalf of myself, Pam Bradshaw her second supervisor, and her graduation group. We are all very happy indeed to support Jo's graduation. Although we have been privileged to hear about Jo's work and experience of training with the Outfit in more detail, I think she has also conveyed in her two eloquent graduation letters much of the breadth of her involvement with the training in all its aspects, as well as the generous and willing contributions she has made to the working of the Outfit. In the Admissions Group, First Monday Group and as Treasurer, we have all benefitted from her quiet and unobtrusive efficiency.

I think it is clear in what Jo herself has shared with us, that in her training she has been engaged fully in the processes of her therapy, supervision and the student group. She has also made very full use of her Mental Health placement, external CPD events and her meetings with her external advisor.

For me perhaps the hallmark of Jo's work has been her willingness to challenge herself personally and to take on the unknown, from starting work online during the pandemic, to the delicate task of being a foster therapist during a colleague's maternity leave. She writes about her way of learning through stories, and the number of people she has worked with has given her ample experience of a wide variety of psychic constellations to learn from.

Having started Jo off in her work, I feel very fortunate that in her Graduation group I have been able to learn how the work with each of her people has evolved with time. She has worked intensively and over several years with some of her first patients, building up strong therapeutic alliances, that have enabled her people to make significant changes. I am left in no doubt as to her effectiveness as a therapist and her commitment to the work.

I would like to end by reading the words that Pam has sent me, which she says are "short but heartfelt".

*I inherited Jo from Deborah Wilde when she retired, so Jo had already been seeing people for about a year. She arrived with a helpful sense of how to talk about her work and use her supervision sessions well.*

*I enjoy working with Jo and have watched her progress and grow in confidence in the last 3 years. This has allowed her to find her own voice in her work, she is able to fully be with a person and to think through when this may be difficult. I am able to get a real sense of her in the room and a feel for the therapeutic couple. I feel I know her work well and have every confidence in her future as a thoughtful and authentic psychotherapist.*

- Deborah Wilde and Pam Bradshaw

**Isobel Urquhart**

# What Do You Think You're Looking at?



Photographs: Isobel Urquhart

***Eric Auerbach, aged 92, who lives alone and paints every single day, was prevented during Covid from regular contact with his life-long preferred models. Force majeure, he turned to self-portraits, finding for the first time something of interest in drawing a face that was now lined, the flesh sagging.***

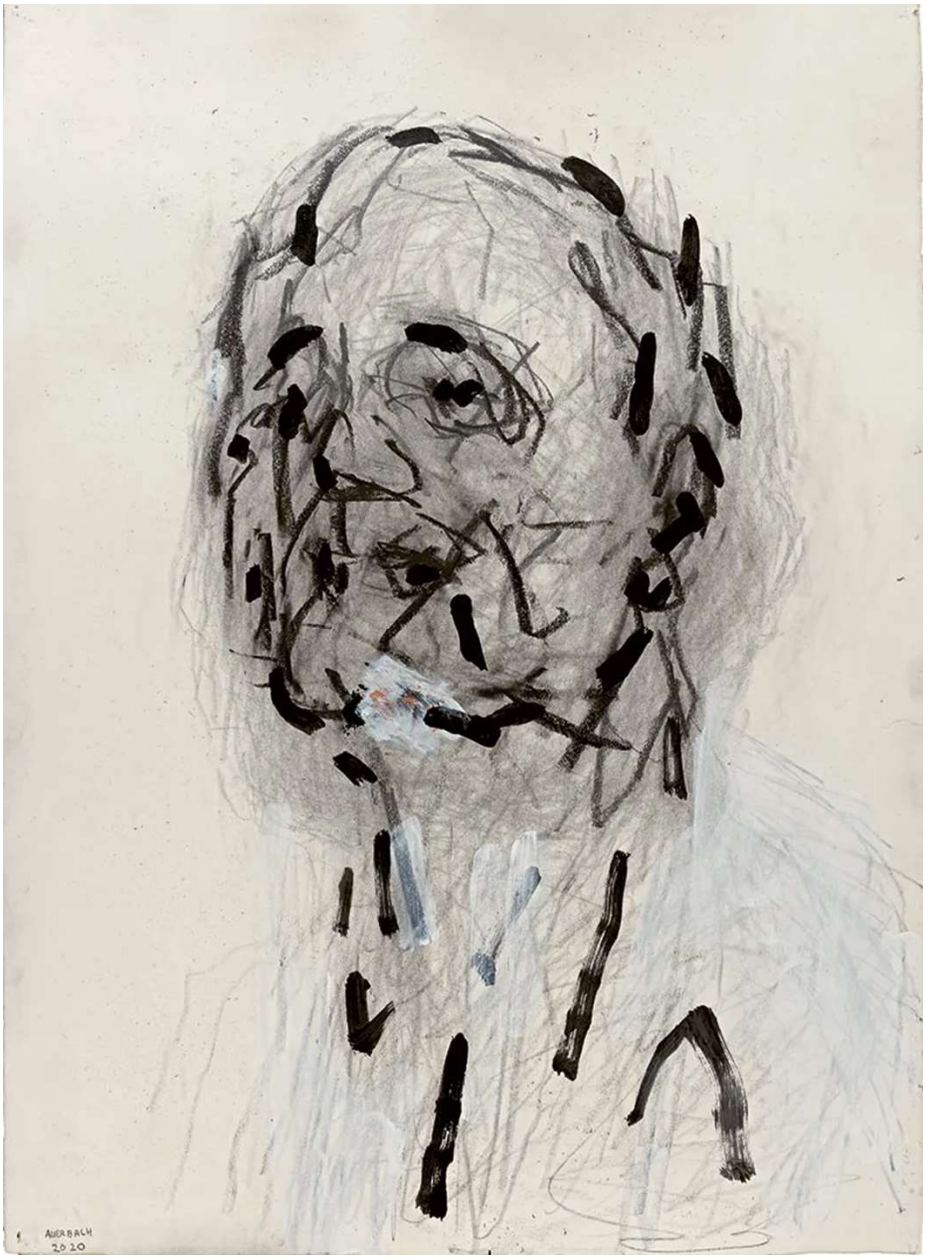
The mirror – the one I look into, the one
You draw
looking into old age, and solitude
Yes, solitude –
not loneliness, perhaps not that, not yet perhaps –
all alone by myself, like you every evening
By choice.

You draw yourself -
interesting at last,
now,
you say, now that the form, the flesh is lined,
And bulges, sags.

The account given now – sparse, summary, somewhat reduced
From a more loquacious time
the thickness of life and relationship
plastered with heft
into art and memory.

It's an exacting process:
repeatedly trying, then erasing, then trying again
to make an image that is true.
Underneath, the ghost images –
allowed, their presence accepted
in charcoal, for example – the paper completely worn away
backed with another piece of paper also worn away
the eye patched over.

So also, confronting the mirror or lying on the couch,
all the evasions and failures and the half forgotten
crowding over the recumbent and the effort to say
something that is true



**Sara Collie**

# Learning to Sing

Before I took on my first patients I spent a lot of time reflecting on what it means for a person to start therapy. How do people feel before their very first session? What expectations or fears might they have? What is it about the process that makes somebody stay the course – or not? I tried to think back to my own beginnings and reflect on how I felt when I went to my first ever therapy session. How did I get from there (a patient) to here (a therapist-in-training)? What other beginnings have I experienced along the way? There are all kinds of ways of trying to articulate that process, but the one that has always made the most sense to me has to do with learning – both literally and metaphorically – to sing.

My story begins more than seven years ago, at a time when an unspeakable cloud of anxiety was building up inside me, making it hard to function. I wanted a sense of direction, some idea about what to do next and I had a sense that therapy might help me find it, but I had some hesitations. Despite the fact that I had studied psychoanalytic theory as part of my PhD I couldn't quite fathom how the ideas I had read would translate into something that might actually help me sleep through the night. In the end, a leaflet I found in the GP's waiting room led me to a community service that offered low-cost psychodynamic counselling and after an initial assessment, a few months wait and more than a few hesitations, I got started.

It was an uncomfortable experience at first as I struggled to overcome my default mode of pushing difficult thoughts and feelings aside. Where was I supposed to begin each week? I knew the sessions were not an ordinary conversation but it was hard to be vulnerable and break the silence that seemed to loom once I had settled into my seat. Luckily for me, fate intervened: the room where my counselling took place backed onto a church and often during our sessions, the sounds of a gospel choir rehearsing would drift through the walls. My therapist was concerned it would be distracting and offered to move us to another room, but I declined. I liked those rich, powerful voices. Against the grey concrete backdrop of the London suburb I was living in and my own mental fog, it felt as though they were singing in technicolour. Once a week I would sit and talk and the voices on the other side of the wall would sing and, slowly, week by week, something shifted. Soon it was my voice that filled the room and I barely noticed the choir anymore. But that music was nevertheless inextricably linked in my head with my first experience of therapy, and it was then that I started to think of the whole process as 'learning to sing.'

Fast forward a year and I had moved from the grey place to Cambridge. My anxiety was no longer a chorus of discordant sounds in my head but a more manageable beast that I was starting to give voice to and understand. I found another therapist to help me steer my way through more change and uncertainty and found myself drawn to the idea of taking the metaphor of learning to sing to what seemed like a logical conclusion: could *I* join a choir?

I found a local all-female *a capella* choir and went along for a taster evening. There were no auditions and they assured me that as long as I could hold a tune I would be welcome. The evening began with a few warm-up exercises which felt like preparing for a yoga class, but then the actual singing started and I had no idea how I was ever going to make all the right noises. I hesitated at first but after a few minutes I felt ridiculous standing there *not* making a sound, so I tentatively joined in. It felt like an underwhelming start but the evening was

enough to awaken something in me. Most of the women were at least 20 years older than me, but in just a few hours I could sense that they had self-confidence, a strong sense of camaraderie and powerful voices. If I wanted those things for myself, maybe singing could help me?

The choir takes a 'natural voice' approach to singing which means that we don't read a musical score, but learn by ear. The idea behind this approach is to 'celebrate[e] the voice you were born with, rather than trying to train it to an ideal of perfection.'[1] Using call and response, we learn songs one line at a time, slowly joining them until up we have a chorus and verses. The different parts – soprano, alto, tenor, bass – learn their melodies separately and then slowly we layer them together, line by line until a harmony emerges, wobbly and uncertain at first, but soon enough becoming a fully-formed song. Next comes the work of finessing: making sure that we start on the same beat; paying attention to our breathing; thinking about the lyrics so that we infuse the words with meaning. Little by little the song passes from one person – our leader – to the whole choir and becomes a living, breathing thing.

Learning songs by ear means you can never be certain about a song. You cannot see or touch or hold it, you have to *sing* it in order for it to exist and you rely on everyone else in the choir to sing it correctly too. We have printouts of the words to help us remember them but the music itself is stored inside us in some invisible place. Once we know a song well, all we need is the first note and the rest follows: it is remarkable to realise that so much can hinge on so little. I quickly discovered that singing is as much about listening as it is about making a noise: we have to focus carefully when learning the notes and then apply a different, softer kind of attention once we are preparing for a performance or singing together on stage. Whenever we are struggling with a song our leader makes us close our eyes and lower our voices: more often than not, in this quiet receptive state the mistakes we were making iron themselves out.

There is a physical aspect to singing that goes beyond simply working one's vocal chords. We have to focus on breath and posture in ways that are far from consciousness when in the full flow of performance, but which underpin everything, becoming part of muscle memory over time. It is instinct, re-configured, reinforced: a slow, steady shifting of something fundamental in the body that helps to get the work (and play?) of singing done. But one false note and the whole thing can come undone. We can practice, practice, practice to get the song inside us, but there are no guarantees. We cannot hold onto a song too tightly – the music must be free to flow and that is only possible if we trust ourselves and each other.

Learning to sing was about joining something bigger than me, and along the way, learning to belong. I'm never going to be a soloist, but blending my voice with other peoples' has taught me a great deal about the power of connectedness and community. To be part of a choir is an act of faith – a magic, tentative, trusting process in which each note only lasts as long as the collective outward breath. Research has shown that when a group of people sing together, it is not just their breath which synchronises, but their heartbeats too: to sing in a choir is to experience belonging at a viscerally intimate, embodied level.[2] Little wonder, then, that the songs we learn have worked their way into my unconscious, re-emerging as snippets that play on my inner ear as I go about my week. Singing has become part of my psychic landscape, a vital part of the map of who I am.

As the years passed and I went through other periods of therapy, eventually finding the therapist I have been seeing for more than 4 years, I started to realize how much my initial instinct – of thinking about the therapy process as 'learning to sing' had been apt. All of the things that singing had taught me were an important part of what I had been doing in therapy: developing trust, building relationships, listening, trusting my voice, finding belonging, developing a different way of being with another person there as witness in a sacred space that we created together.

Meanwhile, the call to train as a therapist myself – a steady, persistent thought that had crept in around the edges of my consciousness for some time – had started to grow louder. And the path fortuitously led me back from singing to psychotherapy when I got talking to a fellow choir member one evening and asked her what she did and she told me how she had trained as a psychotherapist with a mysterious sounding organization based in Cambridge called The Outfit. A few years later, here I am.

The same sense of trepidation I had felt before starting therapy and joining the choir rose up when I hovered the mouse over the zoom link which ushered me into my first ever student group meeting. What was I getting myself into? Who would I find in the student group and what kind of spaces would be available to me there? Would I be up to the task? Given the ever-shifting nature of the experience there aren't any straightforward answers to these questions: people leave the stage to graduate all the time and new parts suddenly pipe up as we welcome new students. It is sometime impossible to know who is holding the tune together or what the right words might be. Just like in the choir, we all have to *do* the thing that we are trying to do and show each other how as we go along (though unlike choir we don't have the luxury of a leader keeping time or showing us the way). The song only holds together when we all know our parts – or at least try and work out what they might be – separately and together.

I didn't find it easy to speak up at first and spent the first few terms on zoom as a quiet observer of the lively and informative discussions that were taking place. But once we switched back to meeting in-person after lockdown eased, I started to speak up and put my trust in the group. I soon discovered that a lot of the learning that takes place in the training happens in ways that don't feel that dissimilar to learning songs in choir. We listen to each other and the trained members who come to talk to us and add to that the (written) voices of psychoanalysts who have shaped the field over time. Often the usefulness of these theoretical perspectives emerges more clearly for me when we discuss them aloud on Monday evenings and connect the various approaches and ideas with verbal accounts of our own clinical experiences. I am learning to embrace this different way of learning and shaking off old academic habits that no longer seem fitting for the task at hand. I cannot quote long passages of Freud off-by-heart or recall *every* detail and nuance of the many different theoretical approaches that we read, but slowly and surely as we read and talk together, fragments of ideas stick and coalesce in meaningful ways.

As with the choir, we spend a lot of time in the student group listening to each other and when we do – when it goes well – our different viewpoints and experiences speak to each other in a kind of multi-layered harmony. We all have valuable experiences to share which are not the same as each others'. Sometimes these differences slip into a kind of discord without swift resolution but either way the conversations filter through into my inner ear like snippets of songs that accompany me as I go about my week, reading, learning and reflecting. There is the embodied nature of the experience too. So much of our discussions focus on the role of the body: how symptoms manifest, how transference and counter transference is felt. Therapists may sit in a chair all day but the physical aspect of our work cannot be underestimated. How to prepare myself physically? What muscle memory am I building as I train? How am I tapping into and developing my instincts, my intuition, my gut feelings?

So far, there hasn't been any actual singing in the therapy room, but many parallels with the ideas discussed above have emerged in my first 16 months of clinical work: the importance of developing trust, of knowing without knowing, the sense of building something together that exists only in the moments we are in each other's presence. My focus is less on my own voice now and more on the voices of my patients, and listening to what Annie Reiner terms "the music of the session."[3] I am working out when it might be helpful to take the lead and when to follow the patient and constantly

navigating between moments of harmony and discord. I am learning to shift between focusing in on the details of what patients say whilst also aiming towards what Freud deemed 'evenly-hovering attention' in order to tune into other aspects of what is being communicated. What does the tone, rhythm and pitch of a patient's voice tell me about who they are and what they are saying? What about their silences? The way their throat-clearing adds a percussive element to the story they are telling, or the fact that a sing-song voice renders a difficult story childlike and carefree when it is anything but. When do they hesitate to start? Are we in tune or is there a kind of discordance in the room? Can I speak up and give voice to difficult thoughts and interpretations when necessary? Can I keep time? Now I can appreciate my first therapist might have found the choir in the next room distracting!

I'm aware as I reach the end of the reflections that, as with music, I am seeking a final note that will allow for a sense of resolution. But nothing is neatly tied up as I continue on my way through the training and to end that way on the page would be false. Even this metaphor, that has been so helpful to me thus far may well be about to unravel as patients present me with entirely different ways of thinking about and finding meaning in their own individual processes – and that's okay. I've recently left the choir after moving house and in the silence that has rushed in I can sense that there is still so much to learn about singing and life and therapy. Time for a new metaphor to lead me further into the unknown, perhaps? Any suggestions?

## References:

[1] https://naturalvoice.net/
[2] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-23230411.amp
[3] Annie Reiner, Bion and Being: Passion and the creative mind" (Routledge, 2012) p.40

*With thanks to the members of Women of Note for welcoming me into their harmonies for the last 6 years https://womenofnotecambridge.weebly.com/*

Jan Van Eyck: detail, Ghent Altarpiece

**Alistair Cormack**

# The Uncanny Outside and the Eerie In-Between: A book review

*Plato's Ghost: Minus Links and Liminality in Psychoanalytic Practice*, Nilofer Kaul (Phoenix, 2022)

*The Weird and the Eerie,* Mark Fisher (Repeater Books, 2016)

Although this is primarily a review of Nilofer Kaul's *Plato's Ghost*, I want to start by looking at a book by Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*. This is not a work specifically about psychoanalysis – it is more in the mode of cultural criticism – but it offers a number of key insights that are helpful here. Fisher begins the book mapping the differences between his two modes (the weird and the eerie) on the one hand and Freud's uncanny on the other. Whilst Freud is interested in the 'the strange within the familiar' the weird and the eerie 'allow us to see the inside from the perspective of the outside' (10). The uncanny (both the idea and the essay), Fisher argues, allows us to see the central paradox of Freud's project: 'it is haunted by an outside which it circles around but can never fully acknowledge or affirm.' Something like an attempt to state what psychoanalysis would look like if it were to 'affirm' or 'acknowledge' this outside is offered in Fisher's consideration of Christopher Priest's novel *The Affirmation*:

> What is eerie here is the agency of the unconscious itself. *The Affirmation* can be read as an extended reflection on the conundrum of how it is possible to conceal something from ourselves, how a single entity can be simultaneously the one who is hiding something and the one from whom the thing is hidden. This can only happen because the unity and transparency which we ordinarily ascribe to our minds are illusory. Gaps and inconsistencies are constitutive of what we are. What covers over these lacunae are stories – which therefore posses their own agency. Memory is already a story, and when there are gaps in memory, new stories must be confabulated to fill in the holes. But who is the author of these stories? The answer is there is not so much an author as a confabulatory process without any 'one' behind it. This process isn't a pathological deviation from the norm, but the way in which identity ordinarily functions (71-72).

I quote this at such length because it captures powerfully the strangeness of the unconscious and, thus, of our most ordinary selves. It should remind us of the necessity to listen carefully, not simply with the scepticism of the 'analytic attitude' but with the compassion born of a shared estrangement – even when doing something as supposedly simple as 'taking a history.'

It is this ordinary strangeness that is a central element in Kaul's book. Early on, she quotes Hans Loewald on transference: 'ghosts of the unconscious, imprisoned by defences but haunting the patient in the dark … are allowed to taste blood, are let loose.'[1] Kaul argues 'this is the vocabulary that seems befitting to Freud's conception of psychoanalysis, which in the daytime world of goals and treatments we tend to forget all too often' (xviii). Plunged into this eerie labyrinth of stories without an author and the gothic of incarcerated ghosts, Kaul finds an Ariadne's thread in Bion and his inheritors: 'this book is dedicated to a reiteration of unknowability, paradox, gaps, synapses, and aporias as well as the minus links that may spring in the space of the in-between' (xxi).

In a move that marks her out in what I have read in the literature of psychoanalysis, she is most interested in moments of failure. As she puts it, she wants to write 'incisively about the dailiness of failures and limitation – not as exceptions or rescued just in time, but abject as well as quotidian failure' (xlii). She wants to look in particular at the 'caesura', the synaptic link that separates and binds analyst and analysand. As Thomas Ogden says, 'In Bion 's hands, the word 'container' – with its benign connotations of a stable, sturdy delineating function – becomes a word that denotes the full spectrum of ways of processing experience from the most destructive and deadening to the most creative and growth-promoting.'[2] The links of knowledge, love and hate, can become their minus version. Failures take the form of collusion more than misunderstanding in itself. Her interest in Bion's minus links is fluently explored in the introduction where she talks of the substitution of 'fear for respect, a perverse equivocation for paradox, masochism for endurance, flattery for love, and so on' (xxxv). The danger of these camouflaging substitutions is returned to at the book's close:

> It seems that the primitive part of the mind is always looking for ways to evade psychic pain and emotional truth is always in peril. The links between us and our patients, and more importantly within us ourselves are always fraught with danger. All too often omniscience and arrogance threaten K: melancholia poses as grief, adhesiveness as introjection, sentimentality and nostalgia replace emotionality, horror takes over terror, while sensationalism robs mysteriousness, romantic love acts as an alibi for terrifying intimacy, empathy conceals deadness, obsequiousness sounds like gratitude, collusions and *folie à deux* dissemble as mutualism. (180)

Underpinning these pitfalls is what she calls the 'finite language of psychoanalysis that cannot contain the vision of the unconscious' (Xli). We have yet to find an adequate way of bringing our language, with its syntaxes of development and semantics of physical objects, into contact with the world of unconscious forces.

Her seven chapters trace the deceptions of rehearsed languages, the dangers of a syntax of development, the nature of parasitism (which she views as more complex than simply malignant), and finally the meaning of failure (or 'unsuccess'). She also develops Bion's exploration of bodily metaphors for psychical processes. She adds the auto-immune system to Bion's ideas about the alimentary, respiratory and muscular forms of thinking. This seems suggestive as a way of imagining the ways we contain what mentally invades us and how we can anaphylactically overreact.

She uses some clinical vignettes. Most interestingly her first vignette 'Rehana' is also her last. The first chapter was written 'before I knew this is how it would end. It feels very strange to write about her now, as though I were writing an obituary' (160). As the analysis reaches its conclusion Kaul comments, 'I find I took refuge in the romantic idea that it is dread of closeness, dependency, and abandonment that makes people aloof' (162). While the patient wants to 'look at her cold, ruthless, uncaring side' Kaul herself ends up 'making excuses for her'. She adds, 'this genre of mistakes is not uncommon in my work' (162). The patient begins to feel that she is only coming to fulfil Kaul's needs. Kaul finds that the 'sense of being old, boring, and stupid would engulf me completely' (166). I find consolation in this comment, though it is interesting perhaps to think of all the genres of stupidity we could conjugate as therapists.

The unpredictability of an analysis as presented by Kaul reminds me of what the Stalker says of the Zone in Tarkovsky's masterpiece: 'Old traps disappear and new ones emerge. Safe spots become impassable. Now your path is easy, now it's hopelessly involved. That's the Zone. It may even seem capricious. But it is what we've made it with our condition.' I would recommend this book for anyone who is interested in putting some distance between their work and what she terms the 'unconscious omniscience and omnipotence we carry despite all our commitment to incertitude and fallibility' (xlii).

**References:**

1. H. Loewald, 'on the therapeutic action of psycho-analysis' international journal of psychanalusis 1960 41: p29 Quoted in Kaul xviii

2. Thomas Ogden, 'On holding and containing, being and dreaming', *International Journal of Psychoanalysis,* (2004; 85) p1349

Still from Stalker (1979), dir. Andrej Tarkovsky

**Elizabeth Moore**

# The Masks We Cannot Live Within

*"It was so hot in the summers. You can't imagine how hot. There wasn't any air conditioning back then, so we'd go outside and sit on the veranda overlooking the bayou, just drinking iced tea and hoping for a hint of breeze, while the thick smell of magnolia flowers almost smothered you. On the hottest days, it seemed like you could hear the bayou sizzling. It was probably just the cicadas, though – they buzzed loudest when the temperatures climbed over 90."*

This is how my great-grandmother, Gigi, began the telling of her childhood on the cotton plantation where she grew up in Mississippi back in the 1910s – before cars, before air-conditioning, before most people had telephones. She was born in 1897, in the same year and the same state as William Faulkner. But unlike Faulkner, Gigi had no consciousness of what racism had done to the people of that land, both white and black. No awareness of how it had twisted souls, encouraged delusions, created an entire mythos of romanticism about an invented past that was used to justify the brutal degradation of human beings whose presence in this state, this country, on this continent, had its origins in mercenary financial gain. Kidnapping and enslaving people from their homeland, forcing them to cross an ocean, at the cost of many lives, to a new land where their sole purpose was to provide back-breaking labour to the planter classes who would build great wealth from this free labour. There was also dissonance in this practice, however, because most of these white planters considered themselves Christians and, as such, were taught that every human being has a soul that can receive grace and ascend to heaven. This posed a problem: if every human has a soul recognized by God, how do you justify brutally enslaving a population and treating them like chattel? Turns out, you do what most societies have done to justify genocide, slavery, mass oppression and degradation – you decide to see them as not human at all. Or perhaps, kind of human but not entirely – not human with the same range of emotions and feelings, ties to family, or capacity for independent thought. Dehumanizing people is apparently one of the most efficient ways to sleep at night when you're treating others inhumanely, and all for an increase in your wealth or status. So much for romanticism.

But these were not thoughts that troubled Gigi. In some ways, her childhood environment was not terribly distant from my own. Gigi's only child, my grandmother Florence Augusta Equen (called Fae) had inherited Equen plantation from her father, Gigi's first husband, Jonté Stanard Equen. Jonté was a descendent, my grandmother liked to claim, of the aristocratic family Yquem in France, (founders of the Chateau Yquem, which, I later learned, was the eventual home of the essayist Michel de Montaigne, himself of Sephardic Jewish origins). Southerners are characteristically obsessed with genealogy, but my grandmother was a particular fan of claiming aristocratic and royal ancestry. She had an enormous old Bible that she kept in the library of her house (referred to, in classic plantation style, as "the big house"), which had the family genealogy carefully inscribed in the front. The first few generations back were all clearly documented, but as the centuries extended back further, the names became increasingly sparse as their rank became increasingly high. Reviewing this genealogy, you'd be forgiven for questioning why on earth this illustrious family of counts and princes and kings would have been tempted to board dangerous ships to travel to an untamed new world and try to hack it there. The brilliance of this genealogy, however, was its path back to our most ancient ancestors. It seems that, skipping past a few millennia containing no

information, our family directly descends from Adam and Eve themselves! Of course, according to the Bible, everyone does. If that's the case, according to Christian beliefs, then wouldn't that mean that all races are part of the same family? But logic was not a core strength of my grandmother or great-grandmother. Another contradiction of beliefs conveniently ignored.

Whatever the reality of his origins, we did have a French ancestor named Yquem who migrated to New Orleans from France in the early 19th century. The name was anglicized to "Equen" at some point along the way and it was my great-grandfather, Jonté, who, in the 1880s, bought and established Equen Plantation, along the Tallahatchie River in the center of the Mississippi Delta. Interestingly, much as my grandmother strove to create an image of continuous legacy from an antebellum planter past to the present, there's actually no documented record of our family having ever owned slaves. Nowadays, it's considered quite shocking and a point of shame to many white Americans to discover that some of their ancestors owned slaves at some point. For my grandmother, it was the *lack* of slave ownership that she tried to disguise.

But there were other disguises too. I found my childhood very confusing. We had moved to the Mississippi Delta from New York when I was eight years old, along with my three younger sisters. Why were we suddenly wrenched from our home and friends in the world we knew to live in what felt like another country? This wasn't explained until we were much older, long after my father died a year-and-a-half later when I was ten. I've lived in other countries outside of the U.S. for the past 20 years, but of all the culture shocks I've experienced, none has been as profound as that first shock of moving from New York to a cotton plantation in the Mississippi Delta when I was eight. Suddenly, I was faced with a system of codes of behaviours and meanings I was supposed to navigate but couldn't understand. Some were cultural. Some were familial. Why for example, did the black men on the plantation never look me in the eyes when we spoke? Why had my Aunt Christine and Uncle Cunliffe suddenly been exiled to New Orleans just before we moved to the plantation? Why couldn't Mamie, Cora, Sadie, and Frankie, my grandmother's "help", sit down to eat with me and my sisters? These women raised us, fed us, hugged us, laughed with us, sang with us, and shared stories with us - but there was some sort of tacit rule, unspoken yet indestructible as steel, that said black folks and white folks couldn't sit down at a table and break bread together.

This particular code would come back to me with a shock many years later when I was in graduate school. I had fallen in love with a brilliant young writer and cultural critic named Joe Wood. Joe was from New York but I met him in Mississippi, where he had gone for a year to write a series of articles for *The Village Voice* about what it was like in the 1990s to be a black man in the most notoriously racist state in the Union. The first year of our relationship in Mississippi opened my eyes in a new way to the daily relentlessness of fears and humiliations that is the experience of being black, and of being an interracial couple, in a racist environment. Not just interracial, but a black man and a white woman – the most sacred taboo of a racial system that had long idealised the "purity" of the white woman. The great majority of lynchings in the South, from the Reconstruction era through the 1950s, were justified by the lynchers as a morally-sanctioned attempt to protect the chastity of a white woman against the sexual threat of a black man. This was why the black men on the plantation wouldn't look me in the eye; it was too dangerous.

After Joe moved back to New York, I would regularly go to stay with him at his apartment in Brooklyn. During one of my visits, he took me to meet his parents, who lived in the Bronx. His mother's maiden name, strangely, was the same as my own – Elizabeth Moore – and his father's was the same as his – Joseph Wood. The Woods had migrated to New York from the Deep South themselves in the 1960s, so they knew intimately the intricate codes it had taken me so long to decipher. When Joe introduced me to his parents, they were polite, but reserved. I couldn't make out what they thought of me. Until we sat down for dinner. Joe's mother had cooked a delicious meal with all of the Southern specialities I'd

grown up with: fried chicken, sweet potatoes, cornbread, greens, fried okra, biscuits, and iced tea. But when Joe and I sat down to eat at the dining table, beautifully spread with a white tablecloth and huge dishes of food, his mother and father refused to sit at the table with us. They sat instead in two chairs along the wall, distancing themselves by what may as well have been a million miles, or a million years. It struck me at that moment what message Elizabeth Moore Wood was sending to me across those million miles. Her beloved son, whom she and her husband had rescued from the humiliations and dangers of being a black man in the South, whom they had encouraged to achieve every aspiration, who had won a scholarship to the prestigious Riverdale High School in the Bronx where he was the only black student, who had then won another scholarship to Yale, who had become a luminary in literati circles for his cultural criticism on questions of racism, (and who, after his tragic disappearance later at the age of 34 when hiking on Mt. St. Helen, was referred to in newspapers across the country as one of the most promising intellectuals of his generation) – this beloved son had brought home not only a white girlfriend, but a white girlfriend who had grown up on her grandmother's cotton plantation in Mississippi. And if that weren't enough, this white girlfriend from a Mississippi cotton plantation bore a surname that at some point in his mother's lineage, would have been forced upon her ancestors by a white slave owner with the surname Moore.

It's hard to imagine what feelings and thoughts were running through Joe's mother's head during that dinner. But in the act of refusing to join us at the table, I felt she was making a statement - one she implicitly knew I would understand. She was taking that old taboo against white and black human beings eating together, that most primitive assertion of white supremacy, and she was turning it on its head. She was the one in control here. I was in her home, on her territory, with her cherished son, and although she would politely welcome me and treat me to an elaborate meal, what she would not do was deign to sit at the table and break bread with me. Although it pained me, I admired the subtle intelligence and historical justice of it; it wasn't hard to see the roots of Joe's bright, fierce intellect.

It took me years to grasp the depths and the bases for these southern racial codes. Like Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man or Dostoevsky's narrator in *Notes from Underground*, I'd think that I'd achieved a certain level of understanding and insight, only to suddenly realize that I'd been blind to an entire spectrum of dynamics and meanings that were there all along. This happened so many times that I finally fully absorbed that Platonic maxim attributed to Socrates that the beginning of wisdom is to know that you know nothing. Growing up amidst so many secrets and lies, I'm not sure why it took me so long to figure that out, but Joe helped me in that process.

One of the gifts Joe gave me during our relationship was a copy of James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*, a book that became central to my doctoral dissertation, which I wrote following Joe's tragic disappearance. Joe had wanted to share with me the sense of rage that he and Baldwin and millions of other black Americans have felt in response to living in a world in which they were denied their full humanity. He also wanted to share with me Baldwin's conviction that white individuals who depend upon racism to maintain their sense of identity destroy their own souls in the process, and in some deep emotional and psychical sense, are often more damaged even than those they have brutalised. But most of all, Joe wanted to share with me, despite the rage and the madness, and the injustice, his belief in the possibility of love. Love, as Baldwin said, ". . . *not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth."* (*The Fire Next Time*, p.95) Love that doesn't reduce anyone, including oneself, to race or identity politics; Love that recognises our common humanity in each individual's mysterious and infinite complexity.

Growing up in the Deep South taught me something about the dangerous defences that can be erected to create false selves amongst those who have de-humanised themselves as a consequence of trying to dehumanise others. The

only way to maintain such a system is through a psychologically destructive structure of delusions and denial. There were two sources of refuge, however, that saved me from getting swallowed up in an abyss of self-loathing and aloneness in that environment: books and love. Through books I found the possibility of other worlds and ways of being, of ideas that were revelations and of imaginative realms that expanded the internal and external worlds in which I lived. Reading was the antidote to the anti-life I felt in the racism and oppressive social codes that surrounded me. And it was through a shared love of reading and discussing ideas that I found love itself. Baldwin once said in an interview,

> "You think your pain and your heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world, but then you read. It was books that taught me that the things that tormented me most were the very things that connected me with all the people who were alive or who had ever been alive." (Interview with James Baldwin)

I grew up in a world of facades and self-deception and bigotry in which both intellectual interests and miscegenation were threats to the thin fabric of that society. It was a risk to engage in either, because both pointed to deeper truths that society could not bear to face. But as Baldwin knew far better than I, the emotional and moral price of safety is sometimes too high. "Love", he wrote, "takes off masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within." I've had many experiences and lived in many different worlds since my time with Joe. But, like all people we have deeply loved, he still lives within me. Joe showed me that to think and to love deeply are radical acts of courage. They are a rending of defences and pretence. They are the greatest weapons in the battle against the shrinking of our souls.

***References:***

James Baldwin (1990) *The Fire Next Time* Penguin Classics, New York

'Interview with James Baldwin' in *Life Magazine*, May 24, 1963

Photograph of JamesBaldwin: Waring Abbott/Getty Images

**Antoinette Fox**

# In Hospital

Photograph: Antoinette Fox

***This is an article I wrote in 2021. I never sent it into the newsletter, but after reflecting on my most recent hospital stay (May 2022) and thinking about the impending hospital stay (probably Nov 2023) that will accompany a new drug trial, I thought it was worth sharing.***

So for me 2021 has been the year of the hospital. Not the pig.

It's only March and I've already been in for two hospital stays and have at least one more booked.

I've been in hospital a fair amount of my life and could probably work out some cool percentage to reflect this. But the point of my writing here is to tell you about the change in 'feel' that I have noticed. The increased privatisation creeping in which concerns me - and not in a business or political way.

I don't really mind being in hospital. In fact, I've sometimes wondered if I might have Fictitious Illness Syndrome (doesn't sound as good as Munchausen's). But sadly, there's always a very real reason for my hospital admissions. Nothing indisputable or vague about my blood results. Nothing uncertain about my MRI scans and nothing that has ever required a second opinion. My various diagnoses have always been very straightforward and specialists are always very clear about what's wrong with my body. So over the years I've got used to the various hospital stays. So has my family.

Due to a very aggressive treatment I had in 2015 and 2016 I ended up needing a total thyroidectomy this year. Addenbrookes was coping with the second wave of Covid and so all surgery patients were sent to one of two private hospitals. Friends and family were delighted for me, teasing that I'd have a lovely rest, I'd be living it up with the elite of Cambridge in spa like conditions.

Well – let me tell you – NO.

It was lonely, it was desolate, it was miserable, it was... it was... well I don't know, but it wasn't as much fun as usual. It wasn't as easy or as comfortable being in hospital this time. There was

no evidence of any other patients. There was no laughter. No shared jokes. No covered-up farting, burping, and certainly no-one else's snoring to laugh at. Not even anyone else's dodgy visitors to laugh at or sympathise with... Just Nothing. A big fat nothing. A solitary O.

But I did have doilies. Doilies under everything I was ever brought. In fact, even my medication was delivered on a tray, in a dish, under which was a doily. I had a very large, plush room with its own ensuite bathroom and didn't even have to provide my own dressing gown or slippers. I had Jasmine Green tea (in fact every type of tea you could wish for), I had my own phone, my own TV, my own nurse, my own orthopaedic bed, my own memory foam pillows – everything I wanted.

But, I wasn't allowed to open the door. I wasn't allowed to walk down the corridor – in fact there was no corridor. There were just odd rooms here and there. Rooms with shut doors. I wasn't allowed contact, touch or communication, apart from that assigned and allotted to me at specified times with clinical precision with sterile precaution.

I felt like I was in a science fiction film. Yes, it was like the eerie silence experienced by Bill Masen in 'The Day of the Triffids'. He is expecting his eye bandages to be removed after his surgery – but no-one comes. There is nothing.

There was no shared experience of being ill. We were ill in our own separate rooms. Protected and screened off from everyone else (for our benefit and the benefit of others) lest we infect or get infected, embarrass or be embarrassed. Long gone were the days of the day room, the shared TV, the one public pay phone on wheels that was dragged about a ward to be shared between umpteen people. Gone were the conversations that start with, 'I heard the doctors talking to you....'; 'I heard you got your results....' ; ' that looks painful'; 'good luck going down for that scan'; 'do you want me to hold your other hand while they put that Cannula in'. We were all private patients in our private spaces. Closed off to the reality of others' experience. No easy or visible gateway to sharing our own experience.

In Addenbrookes, in the busy ward I dreamed of, the business, the hustle, the bustle, the shared community, the joint groaning of disgust at the dinner choices, the shared jokes and acknowledged noises created a rapport and an important shared experience. An acknowledgement of shared bodily experiences.

Now I can hear many of you disagreeing with me and arguing, saying that you like the privacy afforded by a private room, you like not having to shame yourself, risk yourself or debase your dignity by having your body revealed to others. And that is fine too.

And perhaps it's my history and my desire to be seen by others that makes the difference here. Not to be ashamed of my body or my anything. But to be real and seen and tolerated. A realisation that I have a body, like you have a body, like I have a body which is flawed like you have a body which is flawed too. And we're all in this together.

**PS.** Over the years I have visited a handful of my 'patients' in hospital. It has been 'important'. I held one young woman's sick bowl while she vomited. I held the hand of a man who had stitches removed and I accompanied an elderly woman on the torturous journey to the loo cubicle after some cancer treatment.

Several years ago I visited a young man while he slept through a coma in the ICU. We had a kind of therapy session.

He recovered and has no recollection of my visit.

He laughs as I describe what it was like for me to see him, my journey to find his bed, what his body was literally like, how many tubes he had coming out and going into him, how he beeped and pipped and pulsed. He asked me to describe this vision of him quite regularly. I ask him why he likes hearing the same thing over and over again, he says it reminds him of a humorous anecdote that one might hear about one's birth. So complicated. We talk. He puts me in the position of a proud mother birthing their son. I don't mind that.

**Robert Metcalfe**

# Don't You Know how Busy and Important I Am?

Still from Siddharth Khajuria and Tom Rosenthal, "Don't You Know How Busy & Important I Am?"

From first exposure to my father's music collection in my late teens, music has meant a great deal to me. The limited, but classic cache included the three-disc greatest hits of both Queen and Bob Dylan for which I can still recite lyrics on command. Music, done well, teaches me what other people feel, their pain, their joy, how their hearts ache when broken, and what it is like for them to be alive. Recently I heard such a song, the lyrics were catchy and, to my delight, by an artist I was familiar with, Tom Rosenthal. Amongst other things he sings about Albert Camus and the joys of pasta. The verse of the song grabbed me: '*Don't you know how busy and important I am? I've got so much to do.*'

The poignancy of the line percolated through me. I felt…uncomfortable. Why?

Having been raised on a diet of MTV and bootlegged musical VHSs, I decided to bring up the music video. It shows office workers sat behind desks carrying out their work functions, eventually leaving their places and starting to dance in meeting rooms.

The lyrics brought something home; they reminded me of how often I had complained of being busy. How was your week? Busy.

Do you want to meet tomorrow? I'm busy.

The catchall response that quietly repels further inquiry. It seems we relate a person's busyness to their worth. The reference to busyness as a status marker was uncomfortable and cut close. As the song suggests the subtext of being busy can well be: don't you know how important I am?

Thoughts of the classic Marxist analysis came to mind, about how the economic system engenders busyness. If you do not want to be this busy, someone else will be and you will experience the harsh consequences. To have the option of not being busy is a luxury that isn't equally distributed.

As noted by Marx, Adam Smith's classic *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, outlines his dark thoughts on the consequences of the busyness stemming from the division of labour, and the predicament in which many can find themselves.

> 'The man whose whole life is spent in performing a few simple operations, of which the effects, too, are perhaps always the same, or very nearly the same, has no occasion to exert his understanding, or to exercise his invention, in finding out expedients for removing difficulties which never occur. He naturally loses, therefore, the habit of such exertion, and generally becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become…. The uniformity of his stationary life naturally corrupts the courage of his mind' (p.425).

Whilst I do not agree with his assertion of stupidity and ignorance, I recognise myself in the description of the loss of "understanding" and "invention" which occurs while trapped in boring, repetitive, and controlled work. One is able to function, but only by repressing significant parts of the psyche, circumstances which many people seeking therapy will find themselves in and may well impact on their sense of agency and ability to think and experience in novel, more integrated ways. As De Tocqueville notes perceptively in Democracy in America, that under the conditions established by the division of labour.

> "The art advances, the artisan recedes" (p.328)

There may be a sense in which busyness is to be welcomed. A person's ability to define work that is more intrinsically motivated, and to go about making progress in that direction, could well be a sign of wellbeing, akin to Maslow's 'self-actualisation'. Wilhelm von Humbolt as part of his discussion of human nature in *The Spheres and Duties of Government* notes:

> 'For nothing exercises such a vast influence on the whole character, as the expression of the spiritual in the sensuous, — of the sublime, the simple, the beautiful in all the works of nature and products of art which surround us' (p.75).
>
> 'To inquire and to create; — these are the grand centres around which all human pursuits revolve, or at least to these objects do they all more or less directly refer' (p.76).

Still from Siddharth Khajuria and Tom Rosenthal, "Don't You Know How Busy & Important I Am?"

Work and busyness in its various guises, at its best, can be a meaningful expression of self and even sacred. A fundamental expression of, as Von Humbolt saw it, our twin modes of engagement with the world, inquiring and creating. Perhaps not coincidentally these pursuits are arguably critical in the therapeutic endeavour, a deeply bound thread in our humanity.

The OED defines the adjective 'busy' as "constantly or habitually occupied". A useful analogy perhaps might be that of invading armies occupying countries. The infiltration of a foreign presence into our experience of identity. The root of the word occupy comes from the Latin root 'occupare' to 'seize'. Does my busyness seize me, or I it?

Busyness as a defence can be highly effective. An ex-colleague, upon hearing of another's completion of an ultra-marathon asked, "…but what are you running from?". The experiencing self can be filled to the brim, with no room for the persistent feelings of anxiety or depression. This defence can work for months, years, and even decades. Invariably though the wheels start to wobble. The 'thing' that is withheld from conscious emotional awareness because of the pain and difficulties it would evoke, begins to take its toll on our minds and bodies.

It seems that this defence has become endemic to our society. Our phones and devices may well be so popular because they distract us from the spiritual emptying of our society and culture, the dissolving of collective cultural myths, and opportunities for intimacy, and security. How quickly a form of entertainment can be found to engage in 'escapism'. What is it that we are escaping from?

How rare to have time to sit alone, in silence and mull over what is going on for us. To be able to sit and concentrate on an issue for thirty minutes rather than thirty seconds. The stillness that is permitted in therapy seems to me to be a key factor in allowing underlying psychic patterns and structures to emerge, and in coming to terms with our lives, and our being alive.

I am drawn back to the famous line from Thoreau's *Walden*.

> 'I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear… I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life…' (p.85).

Our busy societal structures may well provide a significant barrier to insight and growth. We do not see the woods for the trees.

Rosenthal suggests a defence with an existential root may also be at work. The chorus proclaims: '*Maybe I'm just trying to distract myself from my mortality.*'

Non-existence seems to be incomprehensible and intolerable to important parts of us and tided away from conscious view. A pessimistic writer Thomas Ligotti in his book, *The Conspiracy against the Human Race*, describes four key defences in which we can avoid the facts of our existence and mortality: the last two arguably applying to this piece of writing.

> '… we are zealots… of four plans for smothering consciousness: isolation ("Being alive is all right"), anchoring ("One Nation under God with Families, Morality, and Natural Birthrights for all"), distraction ("Better to kill time than kill oneself"), and sublimation ("I am writing a book titled *The Conspiracy against the Human Race").* These practices make us organisms with nimble intellect that can deceive themselves "for their own good"' (p.24).

My relationship with busyness has mostly been tied up in demonstrating my worth to people both in my past and present. I notice that when I am busy, life takes on a stretched, shallow feeling. I sense that I am missing out, and that the party is happening elsewhere. The meaning and understanding of my self and my experiences which emerges when I am still and quiet, is relegated from conscious awareness.

I think there can be a malaise which comes with the wrong type of busyness. It can creep up on us as the frog is boiled. We do not feel quite ourselves

and feel like life is passing us by but can see that we have done a lot. This seems to be the time when we are most in need of checking in with ourselves and where we are in our relationship to busyness and what it might be doing for us.

The root of the word busy comes from the proto-west Germanic 'bisīg' meaning amongst other definitions 'zealous – characterised by or indicative of passionate enthusiasm or fervour for a cause, belief, objective etc.' I wonder if I too can be the office workers in the video, with all the petty frustrations, tedium, and drudgery that life can place in our way; I wonder if I can learn to dance, and be zealous in my seizing of busyness, so that when life comes calling, it does not find me, occupied.

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Still from Siddharth Khajuria and Tom Rosenthal, "Don't You Know How Busy & Important I Am?

**Anne Murray**

# La Tentation d'Eve

Photograph: Anne Murray

***This accompanying photograph shows the display of a relief by the French medieval sculptor named Ghilbertus which was originally placed in the lintel above the North entrance of the 12th century Cathedral of St Lazaire in Autun, Burgundy, France. I first came across it on display prominently in the small local museum of Autun.***

***Although I did not know it at the time I first saw the sculpture, and even later when I wrote my story about Eve, I was only seeing half of the original relief. The half which showed Adam had in fact been lost since the 16th Century when the Cathedral Canon of the time had objected to its indecency and the whole relief was taken down and sold for builder's masonry. It was by sheer chance that the half with Eve was discovered 200 years later during the renovation of a shop in the medieval high street in Autun. She was facing inwards and it was miraculous that she was not smashed to pieces but fell out whole, intact, minus Adam who has disappeared never to be rediscovered.***

***Drawings existing from before the relief was ripped off the wall showed the other half of the original relief featured Adam, similarly prone, on the other side of the Tree. But while Adam is looking at Eve, she is actually, looking outwards and not at Adam.***

***The fact that I saw Eve without Adam made it imaginatively easier to allow me as viewer to wonder why this choice and what was he trying to show? She was so modern! I could not get over the impact she made!***

***It is difficult to pick out one of the most important details from the photographs. At the far right of the relief, Satan's clawed fingers hold down one of the branches from which Eve plucks the fruit. I loved this detail. Is he seducing her or is he making it easier for her to have what she wants? Or both? And her hand behind her not wanting to see what she knew she was doing??***

***I like to think Ghilberthus is showing Eve not as guilty, even if scared, and not ashamed but having an experience of her own to have. Having a moment to think for herself. To begin to be aroused by this thinking….. There is also a tear trickling down her cheek which you can't really make out in the photograph. Is this an intuition, given what she has just done, that the Tree's hidden and prohibited knowledge was the existence of Women's desire for her own freedom and the ownership of her own sexuality, and her daring to take it even if she could not quite believe that she had. And that this could perhaps never be acknowledged by God nor Man. A big step too far? As Freud said many centuries later, sexuality is disturbing, especially women's.***

***I did not want to turn my delight in the encounter with this very unique Eve into something boring! She had made me feel made me feel weirdly mischievous and she, Eve, took care of that anyway by dictating her story to me there and then. And although this is a written piece it really asks to be read aloud in a 1940's Hollywood drawl, a kind of Lauren Bacall type "bored broad".***

## "The Temptation of Eve"

Eve was taking a nap. All things considered, a day in Eden tended towards the monotonous and dull rather than the ecstatic, and napping was something Eve did quite a lot of.

It all started off for Eve as just a bit of fun. A bit naughty, a bit of a change. Who would ever find out? Adam was nearly always off somewhere, running with wolves or some such. And Grumpy Old God, well, who ever knew what he was up to, but he hadn't appeared when she had seen the creature for the first time.

She told Adam only that she had seen it and Adam said he was most probably the unique creature, a "snake" that God called Satan. God did not approve of Satan and didn't trust him and strongly bade Adam, and therefore Eve, to have nothing to do with him. And how did Adam know all that? Eve asked, feeling a bit annoyed without quite knowing why yet. "God tells me things," said Adam. "Oh" said Eve.

She decided there and then that she would tell Adam nothing more because she now realised, what she had long suspected, that he and God had conversations which they both felt had nothing at all to do with her. She was not included. "Well, they had been pals for a while before I came on the scene, back when Adam still had all his ribs. And I suppose they kind of cooked me up together so I am just a spare part of the grand plan. I expect they do have plans for me. Maybe they think I will just go along with everything they want. And let's face it, I have. Until now".

Big Ess, as Eve called "Satan", was, well, something else. Unlike anything in the Garden until now. He was not the only strange and scary creature she had encountered. There were others. But this one was a beast with no legs but a thousand times bigger than the maggots which lived inside fallen fruits. He had no teeth to speak of but a very long tongue and he spoke, as if silently, so soft, so close. And, he was the only beast who made her hold utterly still, made her both want to run and want to stay. Shocked her body and her mind. God had breathed life into her, so she had been told, but this guy took her breath away. She felt things she had never felt. She wanted things she could neither name nor know. Things which had begun in her from the moment his eyes met hers as he hung over her when she had woken from one of her naps. The ones she took under The Tree. He rested there unblinking then withdrew soundlessly, but not before whispering, "Salutations Eve! Hasta la vista!"

Big Ess had set her off, did something to her and she wanted it to keep happening. He knew her name. She began to realise that Adam left her kind of indifferent. He seemed to enjoy God's company more than hers anyway. And she, well, if truth be told, she looked forward to meeting the snake again more than meeting Adam. Which was why she now lay under The Tree every afternoon to nap, to wait. The Tree which God had named, a tad pompously she thought, "The Tree Of Knowledge". This too was the only one of its kind in the Garden and it was, well, totally *verboten!* Absolutely No Eating of *its* fruit. What does he mean, 'Knowledge'? Why won't he just tell us? Damned if I am going to ask!

Adam was kind of sweet and steady. God was, well, forbidding. But neither of them had any part in what was happening now and she would keep it to herself. Adam would definitely freak out and tell God and he would, of course, not like it. God might command Adam to lock her up or something while he was not around to keep an eye on her. How awful! No way! Whatever happened from here on in, it was hers alone and it had to be worth it? No? ……Yes?

Mmmmmm! God and rules! But there was no rule about lying under the Tree and having naps. And now, when she did, she began to feel different. Her body felt different. Her breasts became fuller and heavier and her nipples became hard at her slightest touch. A swelling in the folds of her vulva felt like a firm young olive and it trickled a salty oil which became much more than a trickle when she learned to stroke it in a certain way. Her heart beat faster. She felt full and empty at the same time. It was new but she kind of knew it already. Whatever, this was why she wanted Big Ess to appear to her again. And, maybe again and again. She hoped to wake and find him approaching her, from the low hanging branches, heavy with their forbidden fruit. She knew he would. If she waited.

She felt the air tremble and the leaves quiver promisingly before the two of them locked eyes.

"Well Hello Eve! So nice to see you among the grasses." Eve shivered although it was a warm afternoon.

"I have something for you. I need you to close your eyes and look away. Now pass one arm behind you as far as it will go and hold out your hand. Ready?"

"Yes" breathed Eve.

- October 2019

**Beth McCabe**

# About the Cover Art

I don't have much experience expressing myself through visual arts. But managing an arts for health charity (Cambridge Community Arts) does sometimes give me the privilege of taking part in some visual arts activities. This picture was the result of sitting in on a session of a drawing course in Wisbech in Fenland. The group, who are adults with experience of mental health difficulties, were experimenting with using dark paper and light pencils to reveal images, so I had a go. This picture is unfinished really, but I thought it may be of interest to use in Outwrite nonetheless. It feels somehow apt, as it is only partially revealed, due to the light, and the wariness of the wolf perhaps... I suppose my thoughts went to something about 'becoming' or 'revelations', or simply 'unfinished'. As the work of coming to know oneself - or our people in therapy - inevitably always is.