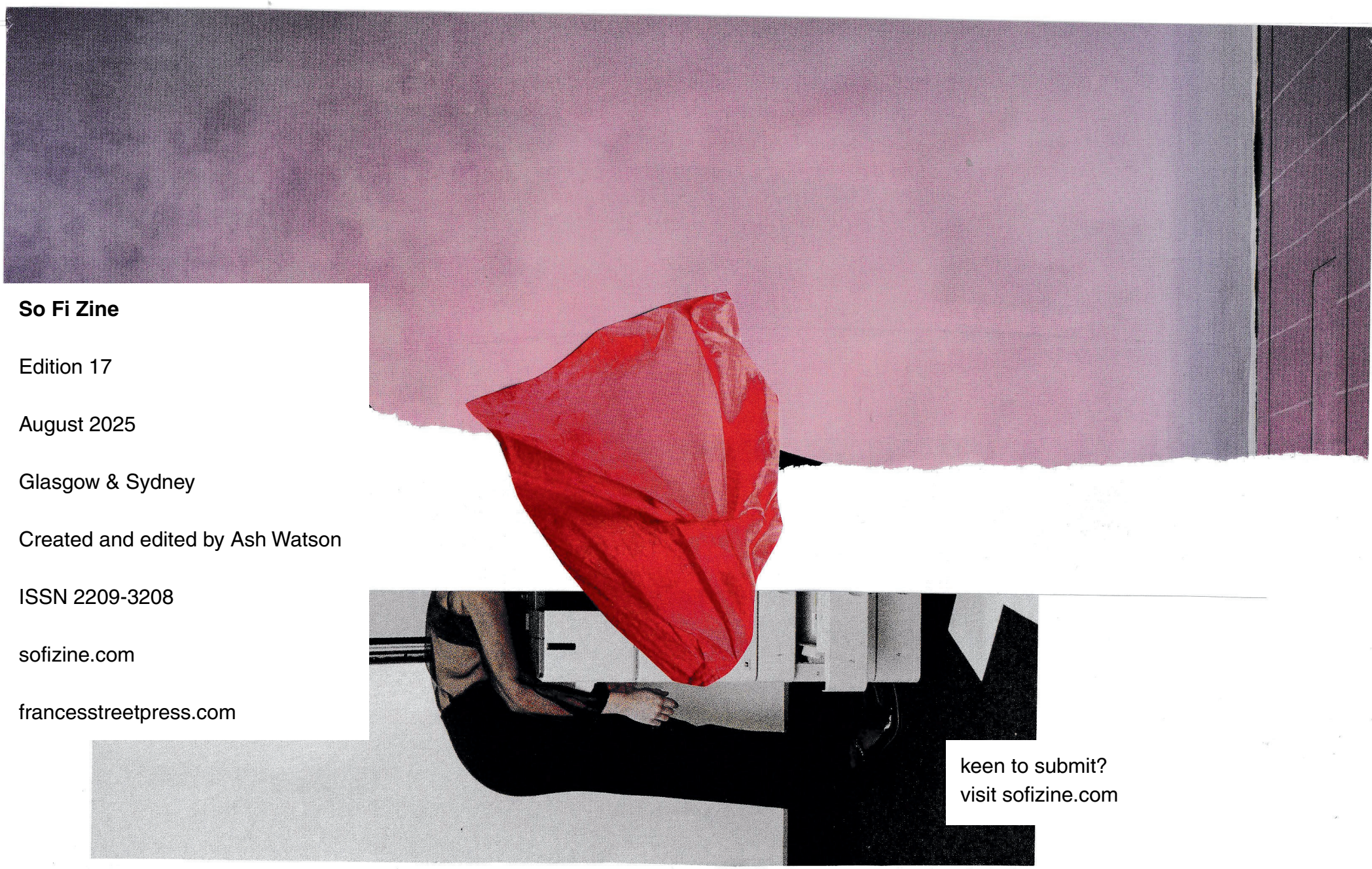
sofizine.com



so fi zine

EDITION 17



So Fi Zine

Edition 17

August 2025

Glasgow & Sydney

Created and edited by Ash Watson

ISSN 2209-3208

sofizine.com

francesstreetpress.com

keen to submit?
visit sofizine.com

Sociological Horoscopes
from Howard Becker's Telling About Society

Aries: don't just argue

Taurus: avoid taking sides

Gemini: insist on taking sides

Cancer: we are only analysts

Leo: the avoidance of built-in judgement is not evidence of a moral confusion

Virgo: pick out relevant materials consciously and work out their interconnections

Libra: show the people who look at their pictures something they haven't seen before

Scorpio: take it in at a glance, like picking an orange off a tree

Sagittarius: figure out how things work

Capricorn: we all act as both users and makers of representations

Aquarius: consider some common criteria

Pisces: believe what you're told

Editorial
Ash Watson

I had the privilege of spending an utterly joy-filled month in Glasgow this past May, visiting the School of Social & Political Sciences at UoG. I stayed right by the campus, wrote and read to my heart's content, and in truly unseasonable form (so I'm told) returned home with a t-shirt tan. My brain is still whirring from the conversations I had with colleagues familiar and new. We discussed sociology and literature and the state of our world and the purpose and value of art while walking through the Botanic Gardens, frequenting some truly excellent coffee shops, taking in the beauty and magnitude of the campus, sat river-side in the sun.

This zine is the culmination of a sociological fiction and zine workshop held while I was there. Thank you *so much* to everyone who attended and to those who have contributed to this special edition of *So Fi Zine*.

I first made *So Fi Zine* while at Goldsmiths back in 2017, thanks to the enthusiasm and intellectually generous supervision of Les Back. For this new edition and every one in between: thank you, Les! And thank you to everyone at Glasgow who made my trip a true delight.

Contents

An extract from a sociology student paper from the year 5025
Mindy Ptolomey..... 3

The Egg Timer
Harvey Humphrey..... 6

Ethical Compliance
Les Back..... 13

Medusa's Children
Miriam Snellgrove..... 18

Ill Fitting Boxes
Kirstie Ken English..... 20

you are here somewhere
erdem avsar..... 22

Starr on Impact
Frankie Starr..... 34

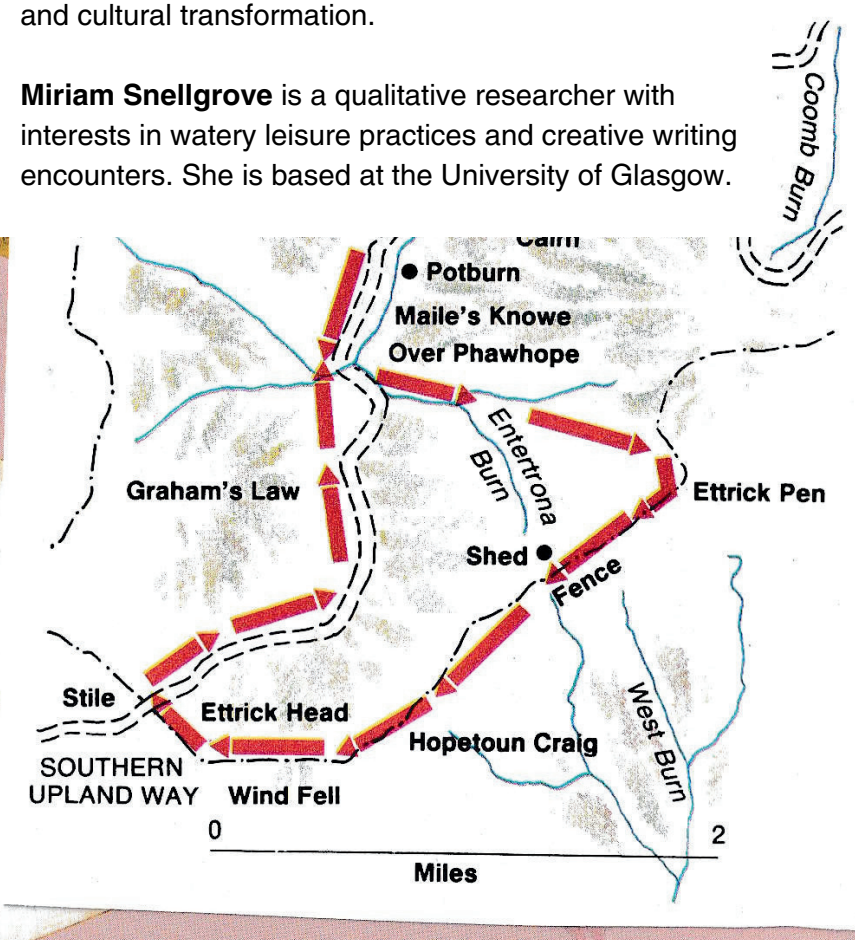
The Triple
Chris Bunn..... 44

Author Bios..... 53

Sociological Horoscopes..... 56

Mindy Ptolomey is based in Glasgow, Scotland, where she loves to read, write, dance, and move. As a researcher Mindy leads creative projects for personal and cultural transformation.

Miriam Snellgrove is a qualitative researcher with interests in watery leisure practices and creative writing encounters. She is based at the University of Glasgow.

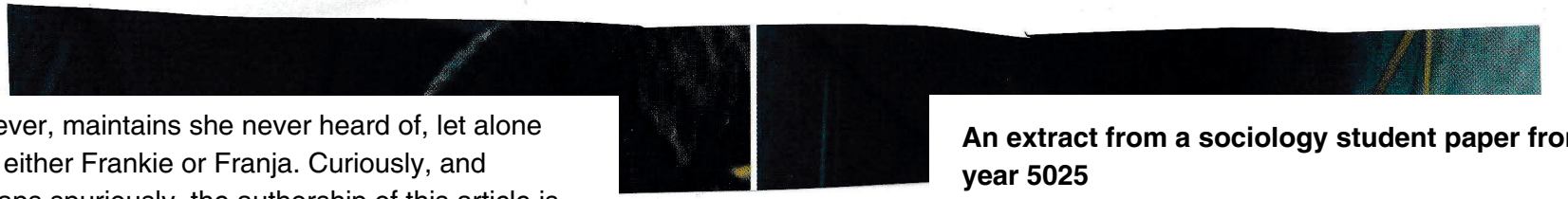


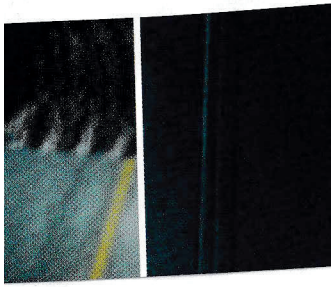
however, maintains she never heard of, let alone met, either Frankie or Franja. Curiously, and perhaps spuriously, the authorship of this article is attributed to Francesca Stella.

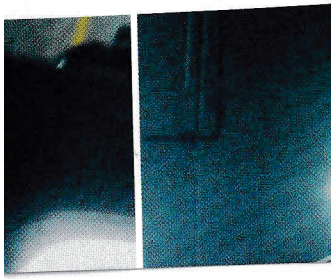
Harvey (he/they); activist-academic and occasional poet, works at the University of Glasgow as a Lecturer in Social Research Methods. He focuses on co-production, creative methods, creative practice, ethics, and representation. His work cuts across queer disability studies and trans studies. He produces theoretical and creative work considering queer, trans, and disabled lives.

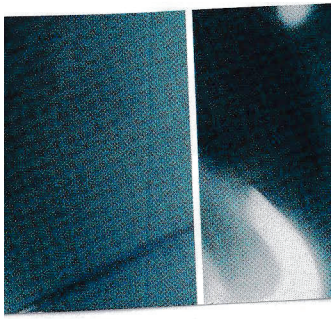
Kirstie Ken (they/them) is a Quantitative Methods Lecturer in Sociology and mixed methods researcher. Their work touches on queer feminist methods, EDI data, sex, gender, sexuality and human rights. Drawing has been their longtime hobby which they have also incorporated in their work, primarily as a form of dissemination.

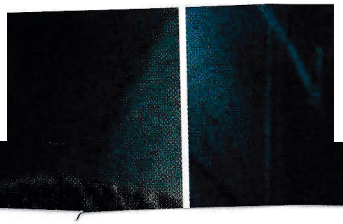
Les Back (he/him) teaches sociology at the University of Glasgow. He is also a journalist, broadcaster and musician. His published work is mainly in the areas of the sociology of race and racism, ethnicity, multiculturalism, urban culture, music and sport. His most recent book is called T*he Unfinished Politics of Race* (University of Cambridge Press, 2022) with colleagues Michael Keith, John Solomos & Kalbir Shukra.













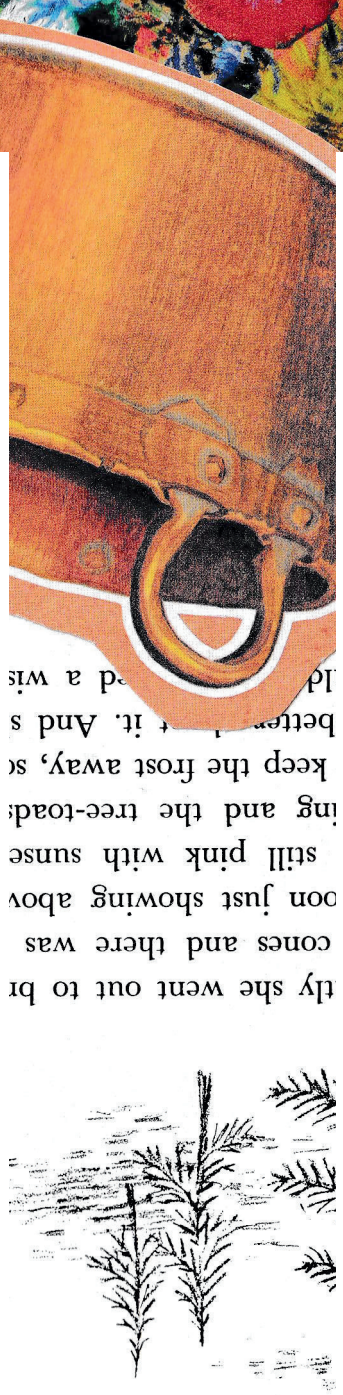
An extract from a sociology student paper from the year 5025
Mindy Ptolemy

Three Ursulas from the 51st century: Exploring The Great Unlearning through fragments from three parallel pluriverses

These three fragments of communication were found in three parallel pluriverses. This means the same individual being, known only as Ursula, wrote each fragment across three different versions of their lives. While some of what the Ursulas refers to is obscure, we do know that these fragments were made just after the period known in my home pluriverse (the pluriverse of Ursula III) as The Great Unlearning. Now that sociologists can be trained to read across up to three parallel pluriverses at a time, there is much we can learn about the way one individual being responded to the same structural conditions. These fragments are particularly important as they are one of the only examples we have of three fragments created by the same being at this precise time-space across three different parallel pluriverses. It is outwith the matterings of this paper to discuss the different modes of the fragments, which ranged from an 'email', (the definition of which is now lost) (Ursula I), to a banner made of more familiar making materials including seashells and gems and cobwebs (Ursula III). In this paper I will use my sociological imagination to speculate…

Ursula I.
Amidst the raging fires, along with others judged as not worth saving, I've been cast out and left for dead. All the things I've been building were deconstructed and chucked over the high walls (that I cannot see over) into the barren landscape. It is here in the abject outside that I have to try to make a life. What can be salvaged? What skills do I have to build with? I know how to grow some things, but the earth is fallow, and everyone is saying there is no end to the dry season. Indeed, it might actually get worse. I've heard there are other wanderers that have survived but I've not yet seen one.

Ursula II.
Things have changed here, there are many more trapdoors, but we try to help each other avoid them. Inside the walls we make weird carrier bags out of whatever is lying around to make sure our precious things survive. Some people use them as parachutes, jump over the walls, and leave. Some of us that stayed remembered long forgotten wisdom: we can weave webs that are really sticky and strong and can hold heavy things that are too hard for us to carry alone. Today someone from above threw a huge rock at a newer part of the web, damaging some precious weaving. We do the slow work of repair, practices we learned outside of the walls, and we care for the weaver whose



Author Bios

Chris Bunn is Professor of Applied Sociology at the University of Glasgow and Director of Research for the Division of Sociological and Cultural Studies. Chris' research interests include the sociologies of long-term health conditions, gambling, commercial determinants of health, civil society and religion.

Erdem (he/they) is a transdisciplinary researcher and theatre-maker working at the intersection of queer politics, utopian methods and methodologies, and performance and media studies. With a PhD in Sociology and Theatre Studies from Glasgow, he teaches internationally and leads arts-based participatory projects. His theatre work has been presented in Scotland, Italy, and Germany.

Frankie Starr is an eternal postdoc based at the University of Narnia. She is currently working on the forthcoming monograph 'Electric Sexualities'; among her publications is the highly acclaimed essay 'Russian blinys and French pancakes: a comparison across centuries', written under her pen name Franja Zvezdova. Frankie claims to be the alter ego of Dr Francesca Stella, a sociologist based at the University of Glasgow working on migration, sexuality and gender. Francesca,

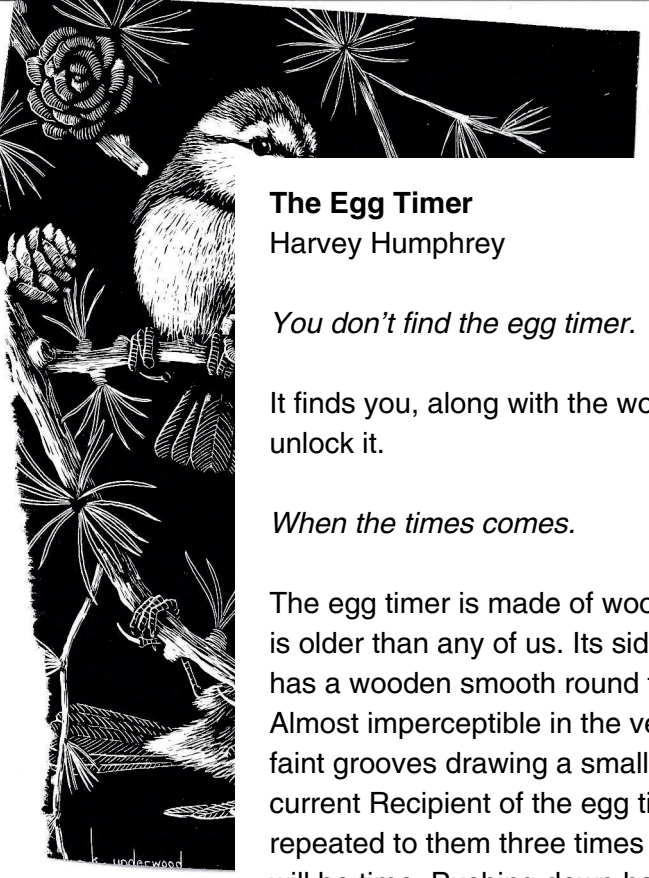


He clenched his fists. Then, slowly, released them.

Another car came.

craft was treated so ill. We don't ask for, or need, permission to do any of this.

Ursula III.
Together with beings outside of the walls, those who were not allowed in and those who never wanted inside, we first cared, then imagined, then made. We crafted constellations out of so many glittery, messy, slippery, strangely shaped pieces. They don't belong to anyone, and they belong to everyone, and because of this they are impossible to destroy. We are so creative and practiced in transformation, and our work together is so absorbing and infused with care, that we hardly notice any more what new rules the institution has decided. No institution can contain our worlds.



The Egg Timer
Harvey Humphrey

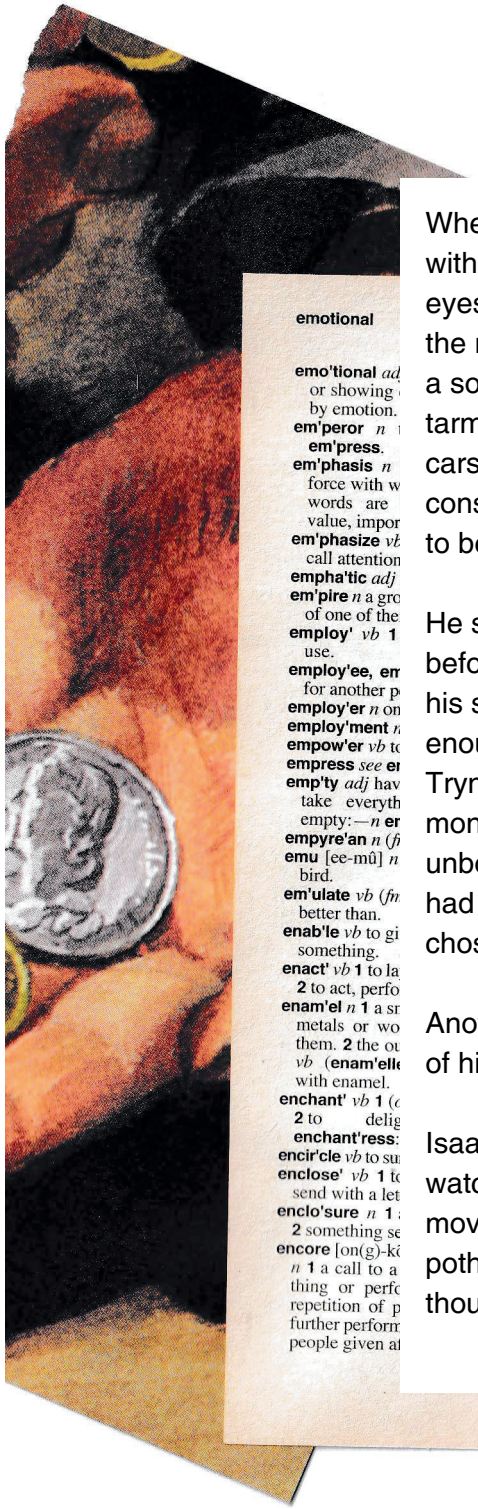
You don't find the egg timer.

It finds you, along with the word you need to unlock it.

When the times comes.

The egg timer is made of wood, glass and sand. It is older than any of us. Its sides are wooden and it has a wooden smooth round top at each end. Almost imperceptible in the very centre there are faint grooves drawing a small circle. When the current Recipient of the egg timer finds the word repeated to them three times in quick succession it will be time. Pushing down hard on the centre of those groves with a finger on each side will push them in revealing buttons not there before. That button will cause a pressure to build up in the yellow sand and it will stop flowing from one side to the other. It won't stop completely but it will move slower than ever before. And time for the Recipient will slow down too. Allowing them to wait for the world to catch up. A protective measure like a snail retreating into its shell.

The word that will unlock the timer comes to you when the timer does. A tiny folded up piece of

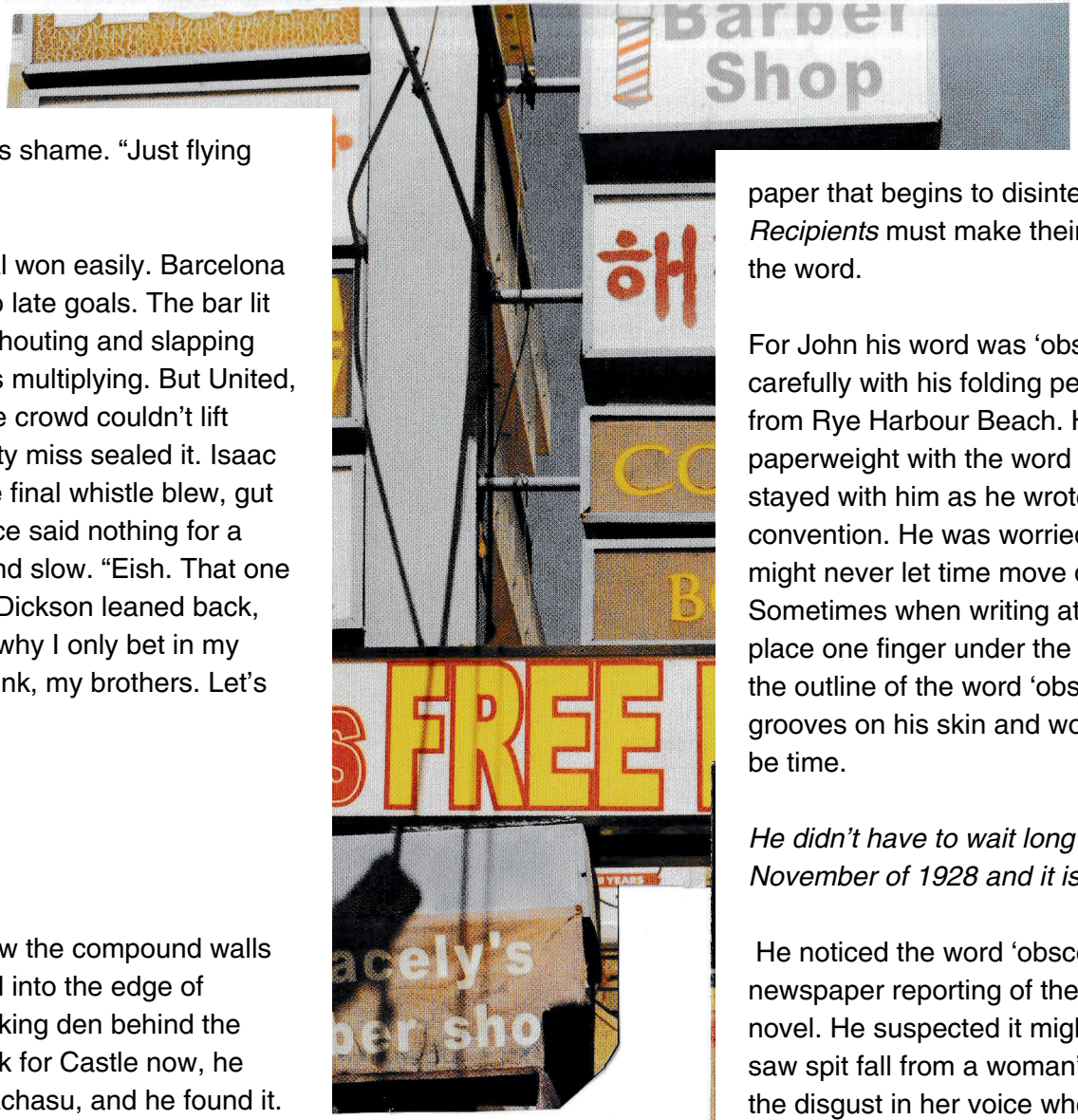


When Isaac could no longer keep upright, he left without a word, shoulders hunched, legs dragging, eyes red. He walked aimlessly until the sound of the road reached him, and then he followed it like a song, until he came to the edge- the main tarmac, smooth and shining in the moonlight. The cars zipped past like streaks of anger, the only constant motion in a place that asked men like him to be still, to be strong, and to hope, endlessly.

He sat down slowly on the dusty shoulder, just before the broken white line. His head throbbed, his stomach turned. The night air sobered him only enough to feel the guilt rise like bile. He thought of Tryness's face when she found the missing money. Of her voice - low, steady, tired. Of the unborn child in her belly, and how his own father had also sat beside a road like this once, and chosen to walk away instead.

Another car passed. The wind of it lifted the edge of his shirt.

Isaac leaned forward, elbows on his knees, watching the lights as they came and went. Some moved fast, some slow. Some swerved around potholes with purpose. Others flew without thought.





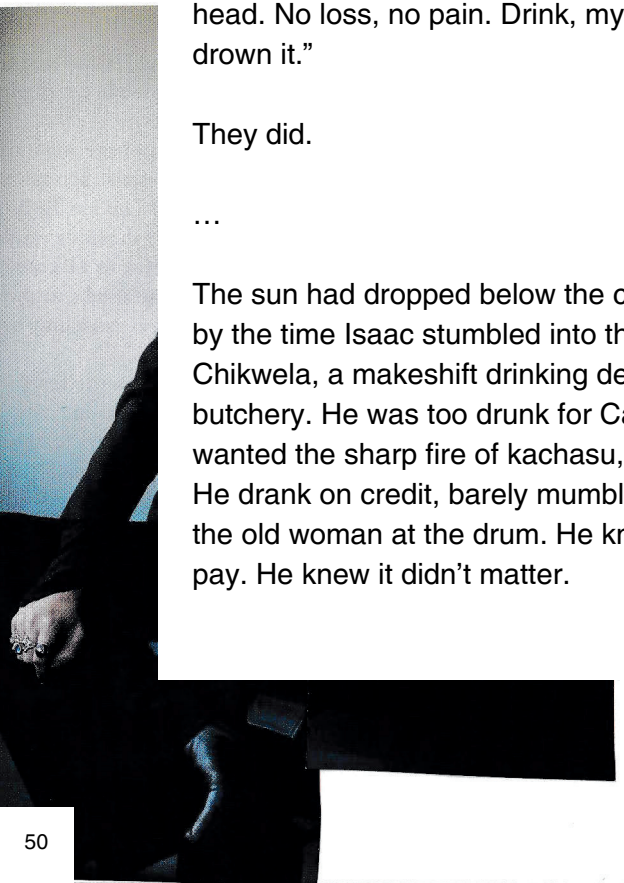
Isaac chuckled, ducking his shame. “Just flying low, bro.”

The games began. Arsenal won easily. Barcelona came from behind with two late goals. The bar lit up each time, customers shouting and slapping tables, money flying, beers multiplying. But United, United were flat. The home crowd couldn’t lift them. A second-half penalty miss sealed it. Isaac stared at the screen as the final whistle blew, gut tightening like a knot. Peace said nothing for a while, just exhaled, long and slow. “Eish. That one hurts. We were so close.” Dickson leaned back, unbothered. “See? That’s why I only bet in my head. No loss, no pain. Drink, my brothers. Let’s drown it.”

They did.

…

The sun had dropped below the compound walls by the time Isaac stumbled into the edge of Chikwela, a makeshift drinking den behind the butchery. He was too drunk for Castle now, he wanted the sharp fire of kachasu, and he found it. He drank on credit, barely mumbling his name to the old woman at the drum. He knew he’d never pay. He knew it didn’t matter.

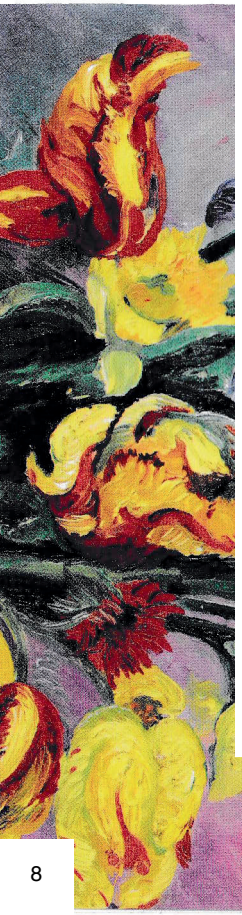


paper that begins to disintegrate after unfolding. *Recipients* must make their own way to remember the word.

For John his word was ‘obscene’ and he carved it carefully with his folding pen knife into a pebble from Rye Harbour Beach. He used it as a paperweight with the word always face down. It stayed with him as he wrote about the sands of convention. He was worried the sands in the timer might never let time move differently for him. Sometimes when writing at his desk he would place one finger under the paper weight to trace the outline of the word ‘obscene’. Feeling the grooves on his skin and wondering when it would be time.

He didn’t have to wait long before it was time. It is November of 1928 and it is time.

He noticed the word ‘obscene’ reading the newspaper reporting of the trial against his latest novel. He suspected it might be almost time. He saw spit fall from a woman’s mouth and he heard the disgust in her voice when she said “obscene” as part of an overheard conversation in a local café. The woman sitting with her gasped in response and repeated “obscene”. It was it clear it was time. He stepped up from his table, leaving his paper and leaving his things. He stumbled



away and fumbled into his pocket finding the egg timer. With his hand still in his pocket he pushed down hard on both sides at the buttons he was almost surprised to find really were there. The world that was not ready slowed down and John waited there but not there for a different kind of time.

For Beth her word was ‘infiltrate’ and she sewed it carefully in bright bold letters onto her guitar strap. The word would hug her body as she played. Sometimes her long hair covered it and at times it was there for all to see. When writing songs and struggling for the next line she would pause between strumming chords to place one finger along the guitar strap and trace the outline of the word ‘infiltrate’. Feeling the thread against her skin and wondering when it would be time.

She didn’t have to wait long before it was time. It is April of 1973 and it is time.

She heard the word “infiltrate” spat out from the stage by an angry so-called sister and she didn’t know if it was time. Then she heard the word “infiltrate” fall from the mouth of an ex-lover and former friend surprising in its venom. Then she suspected it was time. So many of her friends in the sisterhood wanted her to play but not those holding the microphone so she took her guitar and

chipped blue enamel jug. His fingers touched the cold tin – a former baby formula can, now rattling faintly with folded notes. He hesitated, then took out two crisp notes. Just enough to win something real. Just enough to replace it before she noticed. He messaged Peace. “Let’s bet. United, Arsenal, Barca. 10k triple.”

***

They met outside the kiosk by the old tyre shop. Peace was grinning like he’d already won. “Sharp move, my guy. Let’s do this. I feel it.” They placed the bet together, then walked the short distance to Empire Bar, where the TVs were mounted too high and the sound of the games competed with three different nearby speakers, carrying three different tunes. Isaac noticed that Peter Tosh was just about winning the battle in his ears…

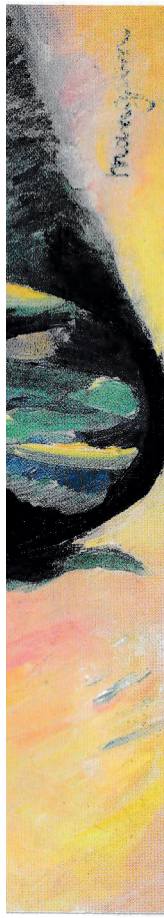
If you live in a glasshouse

Don't throw stones

And if you can't take blows brother

Don't throw blows

Dickson was already there, laughing too loud and waving a half-drunk Castle Lite. “Isaac! Ehhh! Thought Tryness cut off your wings for good!”





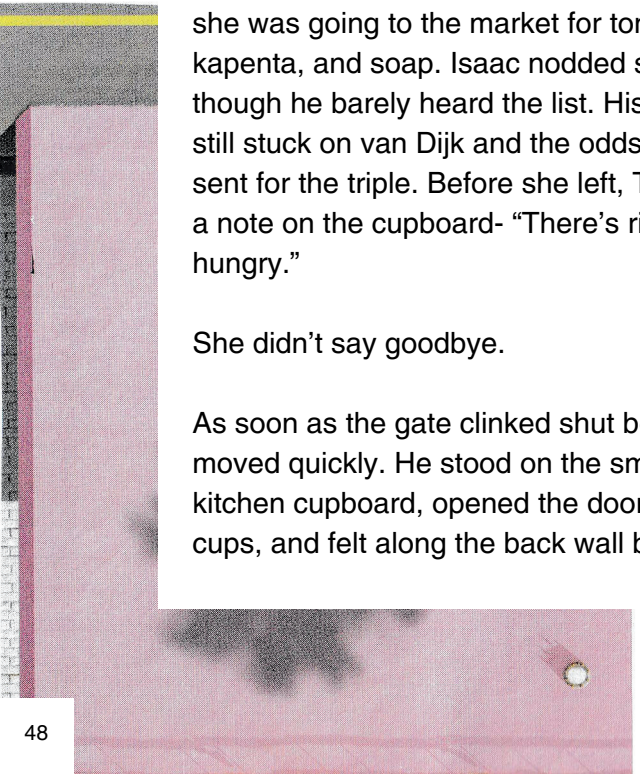
phone buzzed again with Peace's reply: "Solid triple. Just don't go mad. We need you standing by full-time now… uncle duty soon!" Isaac smiled weakly and slipped the phone into his pocket. He took two steps toward Tryness and reached out his hand, hesitantly. "I know I've been selfish," he said, voice low. "But I want to do better. For the baby. For us." She looked at his hand, then at his face. "Then start by washing these clothes with me." It wasn't forgiveness, not yet. But it was a beginning. Isaac nodded, rolled up his sleeves, and stepped into the sunlit yard where the soapy water waited.

Tryness returned from the yard an hour later, hands wrinkled and eyes clearer, and announced she was going to the market for tomatoes, kapenta, and soap. Isaac nodded solemnly, though he barely heard the list. His thoughts were still stuck on van Dijk and the odds Peace had sent for the triple. Before she left, Tryness placed a note on the cupboard- "There's rice if you get hungry."

She didn't say goodbye.

As soon as the gate clinked shut behind her, Isaac moved quickly. He stood on the small stool by the kitchen cupboard, opened the door above the cups, and felt along the back wall behind the



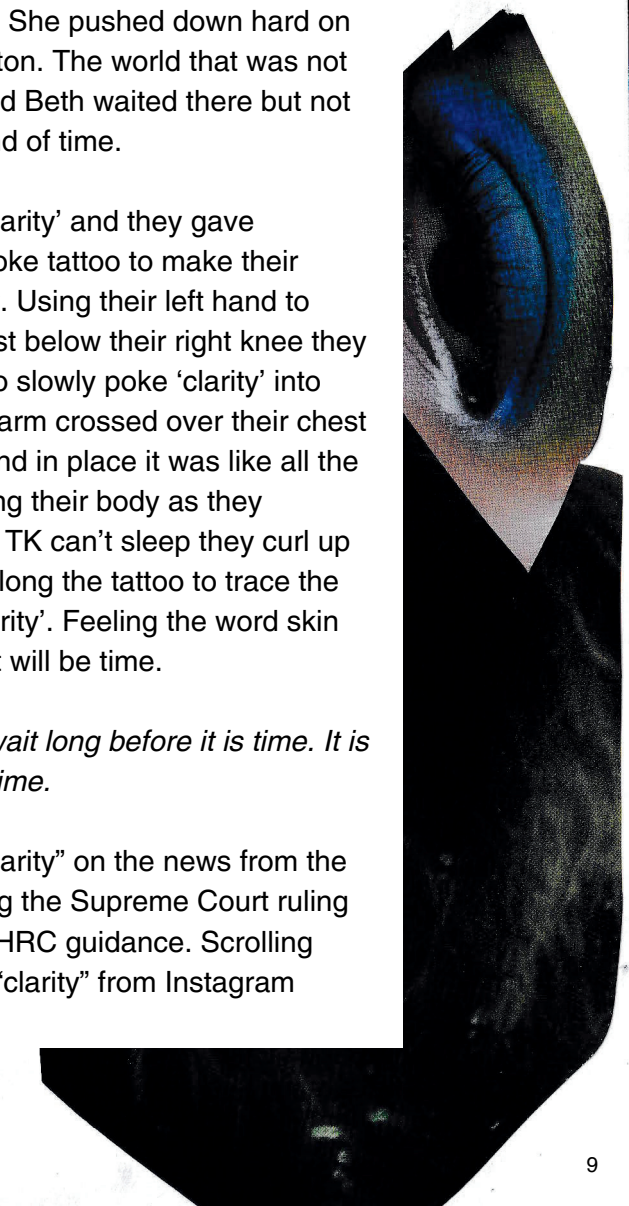


out to her car. Turning on the radio to drive away she heard *Mary Queen of Arkansas* by Bruce Springsteen. Beth sang along to the line "you were not born for queenin'/ It's not too late to infiltrate" and knew that it was time. She pulled over and took out the egg timer. She pushed down hard on both sides at each button. The world that was not ready slowed down and Beth waited there but not there for a different kind of time.

For TK their word is 'clarity' and they gave themself a stick and poke tattoo to make their word part of their body. Using their left hand to hold the skin taught just below their right knee they used their right hand to slowly poke 'clarity' into their skin. As their left arm crossed over their chest to keep the skin firm and in place it was like all the while they were hugging their body as they worked. At night when TK can't sleep they curl up and place one finger along the tattoo to trace the outline of the word 'clarity'. Feeling the word skin and wondering when it will be time.

They will not have to wait long before it is time. It is May of 2025 and it is time.

They hear the word "clarity" on the news from the TV downstairs covering the Supreme Court ruling and the subsequent EHRC guidance. Scrolling their phone they hear "clarity" from Instagram



videos criticising that very guidance. The next video has some old Linkin Park song *Breaking the Habit*. They don't recognise it but the line "I don't know what's worth fighting for or why I have to scream/ But now I have some clarity to show you what I mean" tells them it's time. They close the door to their room quietly and grab the egg timer. They push down hard on either end of the timer finding the buttons that were not there seconds before. This world that is not ready slowed down and TK waits here but not here for a different kind of time.

The egg timer hasn't found me and I don't have the word. I think that means I'll have to make a different kind of time.

scene, he thought. He typed back quickly: "Putting together a triple with Arsenal, United and Barca. What you think?" Before Peace could reply, Tryness's humming stopped again. This time, when she spoke, there was no breezy sarcasm in her tone. "You were with Dickson again, weren't you?" Isaac didn't look up from his phone. He took another scoop of porridge, chewed slowly. "You know what Dickson is, Isaac. That one lives for the bottle and dies for nothing else."

Isaac kept his silence.

"You promised." Her voice trembled, not with anger yet, but with something older and heavier. Isaac stood up, took his bowl to the sink, and rinsed it with one hand.

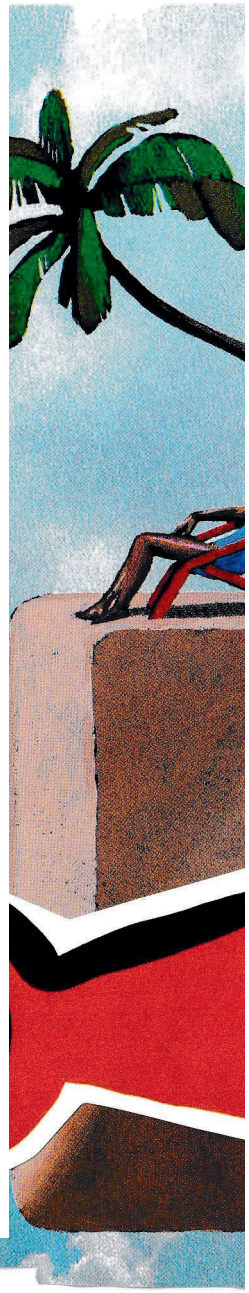
"Tryness, I was just watching the game. One or two drinks, that's all." He turned to face her, his hands still wet. "I needed a little space. That's all."

Tryness met his eyes then, and for the first time since the test came back positive, Isaac felt afraid – not of her anger, but of her silence. "Space?" she repeated, softly. "When this house is ten paces by ten? When I'm carrying both of us and something more?" The gospel, the laundry, the warm porridge- it was all just the front of the dam. Isaac reached for words, but found none. His

“God help this child, if his father cannot pass five paces”. Isaac said nothing, knowing that to speak was to start the fight that had been brewing since last night’s unsanctioned drinking. He hadn’t even bothered to submit a visa application for Tryness to refuse, so the clash was going to be brutal, when it happened.

Doing his best to hold his phone with a steady, confident hand, Isaac opened his favourite sports news app and scrolled through the headlines, looking for something that might help him form his tickets for the weekend. As the warm water washed away his cottonmouth, he noticed that van Dijk had withdrawn from the Liverpool squad for today’s game away at Man United. His thoughts quickened, parsing the likelihood that this would make the difference, deciding to share the news with his betting WhatsApp group. Tryness silently placed some cold porridge in front of Isaac, much to his surprise, given all that was yet to be said. As he ate with gratitude, his phone pinged with a reply from his best friend Peace - “Yes brother, where have you been?!? We been chatting this all morning. United will win now. No way Liverpool can do OT without the big man.”

Isaac smiled faintly at the screen, wiping a dot of porridge from the corner of his mouth with the back of his hand. Peace was always first to the

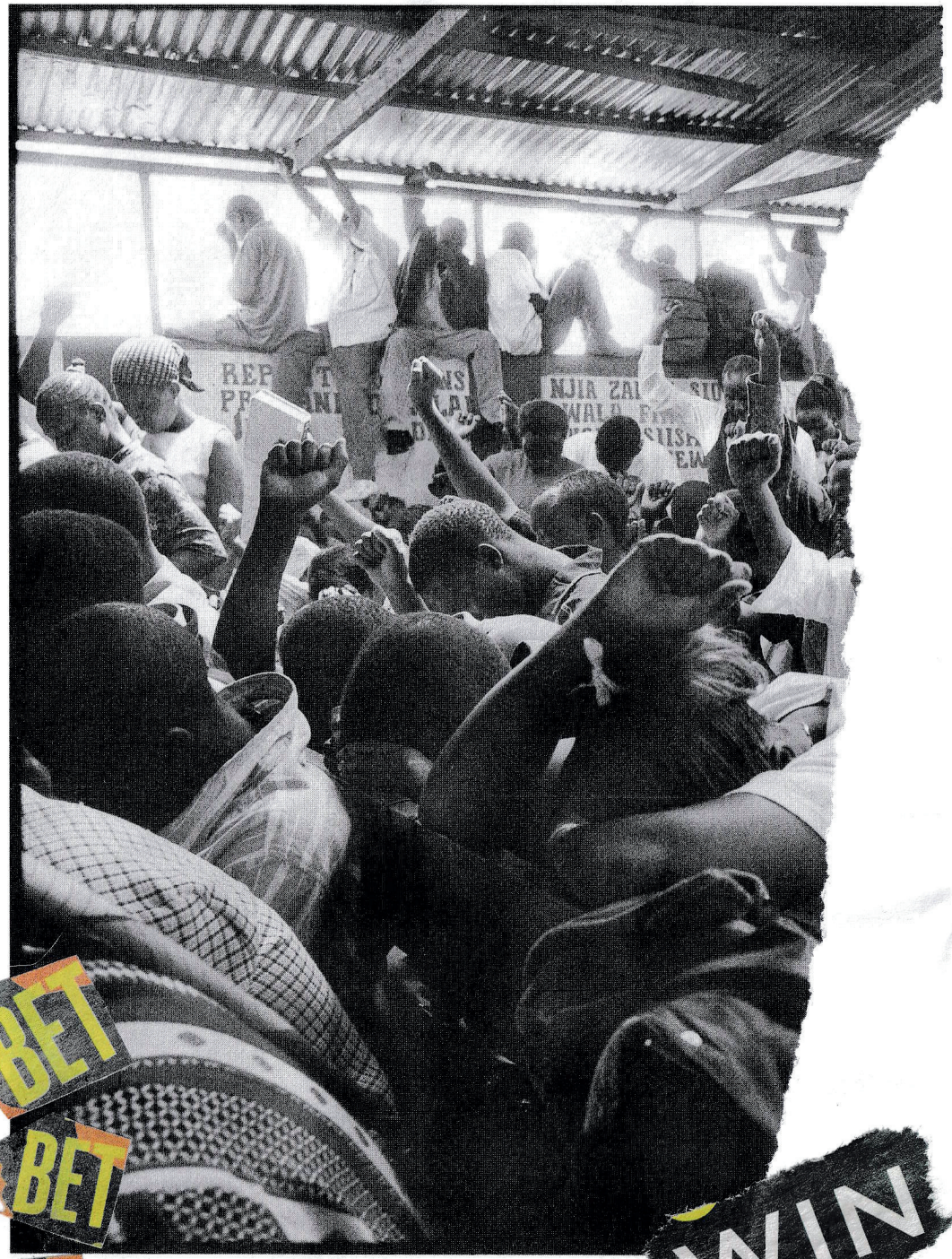


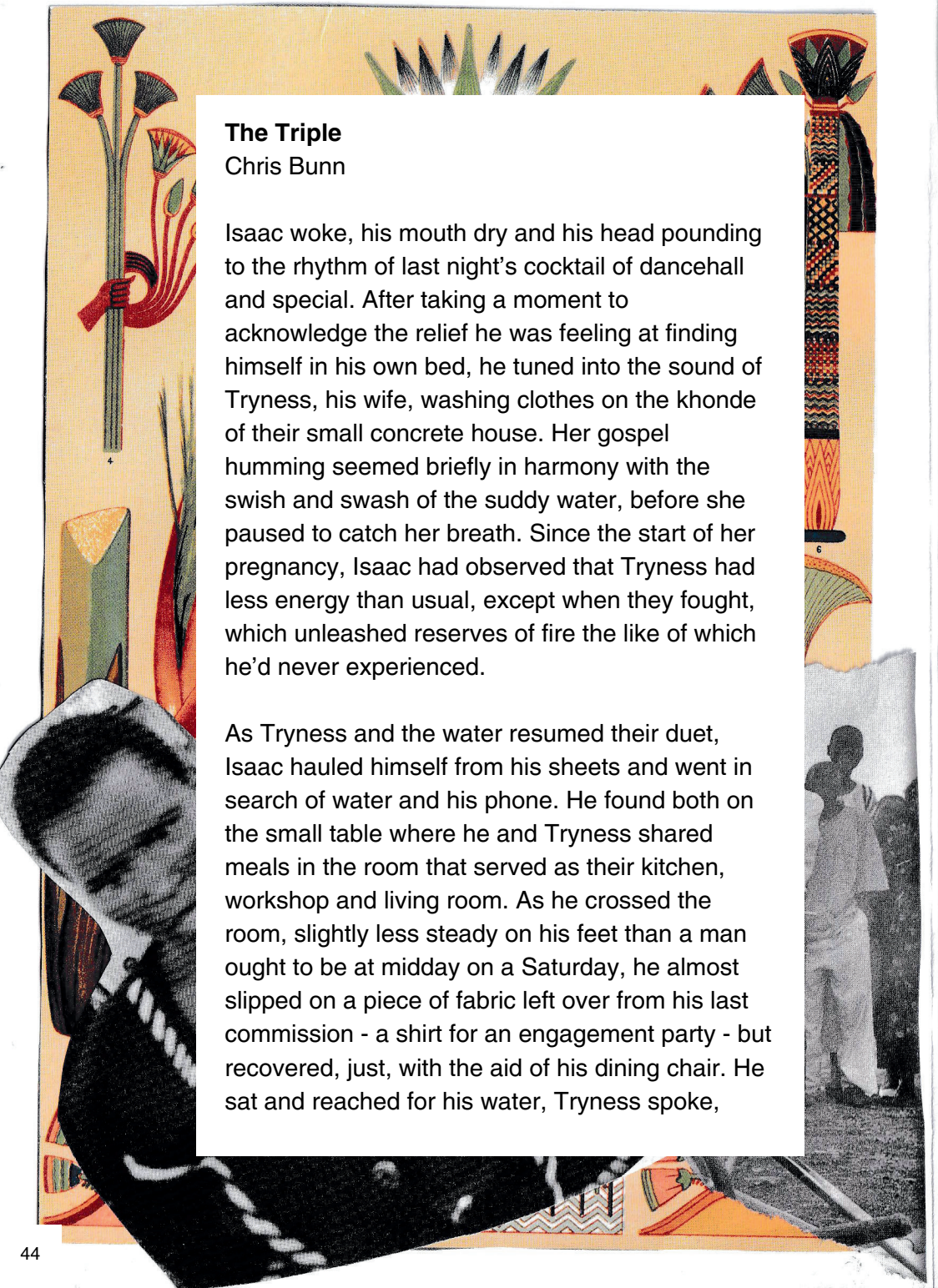
Pass

meaningful time

9 Novel Amis wrote, involving character that's younger at the end (5, 5)

times arrow



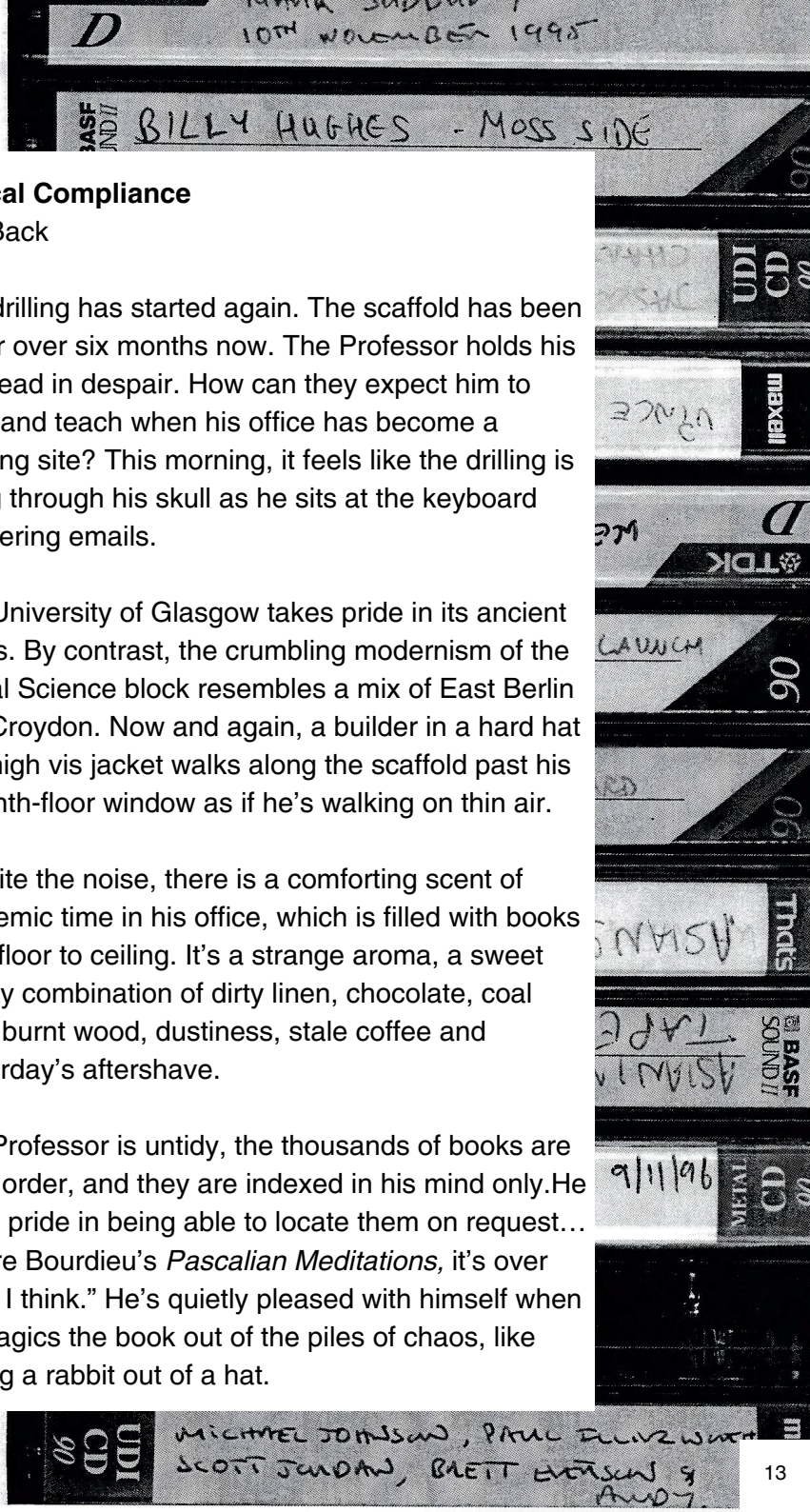


The Triple

Chris Bunn

Isaac woke, his mouth dry and his head pounding to the rhythm of last night's cocktail of dancehall and special. After taking a moment to acknowledge the relief he was feeling at finding himself in his own bed, he tuned into the sound of Tryness, his wife, washing clothes on the khonde of their small concrete house. Her gospel humming seemed briefly in harmony with the swish and swash of the suddy water, before she paused to catch her breath. Since the start of her pregnancy, Isaac had observed that Tryness had less energy than usual, except when they fought, which unleashed reserves of fire the like of which he'd never experienced.

As Tryness and the water resumed their duet, Isaac hauled himself from his sheets and went in search of water and his phone. He found both on the small table where he and Tryness shared meals in the room that served as their kitchen, workshop and living room. As he crossed the room, slightly less steady on his feet than a man ought to be at midday on a Saturday, he almost slipped on a piece of fabric left over from his last commission - a shirt for an engagement party - but recovered, just, with the aid of his dining chair. He sat and reached for his water, Tryness spoke,



Ethical Compliance

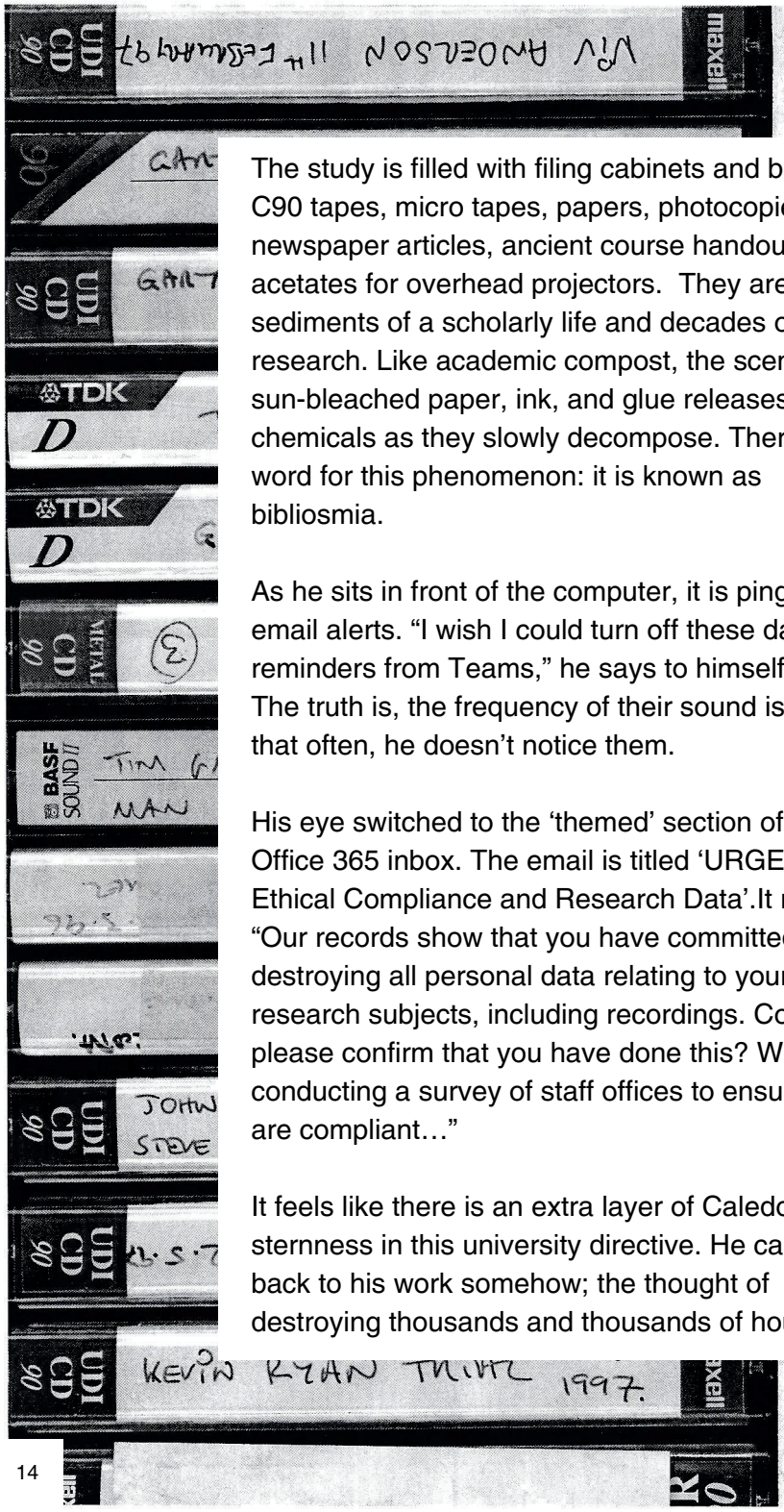
Les Back

The drilling has started again. The scaffold has been up for over six months now. The Professor holds his forehead in despair. How can they expect him to think and teach when his office has become a building site? This morning, it feels like the drilling is going through his skull as he sits at the keyboard answering emails.

The University of Glasgow takes pride in its ancient spires. By contrast, the crumbling modernism of the Social Science block resembles a mix of East Berlin and Croydon. Now and again, a builder in a hard hat and high vis jacket walks along the scaffold past his seventh-floor window as if he's walking on thin air.

Despite the noise, there is a comforting scent of academic time in his office, which is filled with books from floor to ceiling. It's a strange aroma, a sweet musky combination of dirty linen, chocolate, coal fires, burnt wood, dustiness, stale coffee and yesterday's aftershave.

The Professor is untidy, the thousands of books are in no order, and they are indexed in his mind only.He takes pride in being able to locate them on request… "Pierre Bourdieu's *Pascalian Meditations,* it's over here, I think." He's quietly pleased with himself when he magics the book out of the piles of chaos, like pulling a rabbit out of a hat.



The study is filled with filing cabinets and boxes of C90 tapes, micro tapes, papers, photocopies, newspaper articles, ancient course handouts, and acetates for overhead projectors. They are the sediments of a scholarly life and decades of research. Like academic compost, the scent of sun-bleached paper, ink, and glue releases volatile chemicals as they slowly decompose. There is a word for this phenomenon: it is known as bibliosmia.

As he sits in front of the computer, it is pinging with email alerts. “I wish I could turn off these damn reminders from Teams,” he says to himself aloud. The truth is, the frequency of their sound is so high that often, he doesn’t notice them.

His eye switched to the ‘themed’ section of his Office 365 inbox. The email is titled ‘URGENT - Ethical Compliance and Research Data’.It reads: “Our records show that you have committed to destroying all personal data relating to your research subjects, including recordings. Could you please confirm that you have done this? We will be conducting a survey of staff offices to ensure you are compliant…”

It feels like there is an extra layer of Caledonian sternness in this university directive. He can’t go back to his work somehow; the thought of destroying thousands and thousands of hours



So, going back to the million dollar question, is all impact ‘good’? There is a lot of good work out there, but there is also such a thing as ‘bad impact’. And how can we tell ‘good’ from ‘bad’ impact? Reader, I would recommend that you trust your gut feeling and your senses: if it smells like BS, it probably is.

This may sound very cynical, so I would like to end on a positive, and to leave you, my esteemed Reader, with the best piece of advice I have ever received about impact. Do it because you would do it anyway – because it is important to you and the people you work with, because it does something in the world, because it gives you hope that the world can be a better place. Don’t do it because it looks good on a form.

Watch out for the next instalment of* Starr on Impact *for more essential reading on impact, and what it does to our collective academic psyche.

the world of academia since time immemorial: the *prima donna* syndrome. Regrettably, amidst a flurry of publications about the impostor syndrome in academia, the prima donna syndrome has so far been neglected. I, for one, would really like to see this condition more thoroughly investigated, including its historical trajectory, social determinants and institutional enablers.

The impact agenda is promoted indiscriminately, and incentivised through training and performance reviews, but this often happens without making space to discuss the ethical dimension of 'impact'. This promotes unreflexive, instrumental or downright cynical approaches to impact as another dimension of the academic 'game', or a commodity to sell in promotion applications or in 'bold' grant bids. I share the concerns of more eminent colleagues who have wondered whether the impact agenda may actually promote and reward 'bad impact'. Dear Reader, I am sure you must have come across, like me, cringeworthy steering groups meetings where 'stakeholders' were just required to show up and passively sit and listen to the all-knowing academics holding court. Or academics devising top-down 'guidelines' for practitioners, entirely based on their research findings but without caring to engage or consult said practitioners before writing and disseminating said guidelines.

ed'dy *n* a whirling current of water or air, a whirlpool or whirlwind.—*vb* to move in eddies.

E'den *n* (in the Old Testament) the garden of Adam and Eve, paradise.

edge *n* **1** the sharp side of a blade **2** a hor... der or bo... ness;—*vb*... small side... border on.

edge'ways, e...

ed'ible *adj* ab...

edi'tion *n* the ... newspaper ...

edi'tor *n* **1** on... the materia... and selects ... is in charge ... newspaper;...

ed'ucate *vb*...

educa'tion.

eel *n* a snake-...

ee'rie, ee'ry *a*...

effect' *n* **1** re... change. **2** i... erty. **4** *pl* th... and sounds ... bring about ... duce.

effec'tive *adj* ... desired, su... real. **4** in op...

effem'inate ...

effem'inacy

efferves'cent **2** lively and ...

effic'ient *adj* ... or intended ... etc. **2** goo...

effic'iency.

effi'gy *n* a lif... statue or ca...

eff'ort *n* **1** an energetic attempt. **2** the making use of strength or ability.

effront'ery *n* open impudence, shameless rudeness.

egg *n* **1** an oval object, usu covered with a hard brittle shell, laid by a bird, reptile, etc. from which a young one is hatched. **2** such an object laid by the domestic hen used as food. **3** in the female mammal, the cell from which the young is formed, the ovum.

egg on *vb* to try to get somebody (to do something), to urge, to encourage.

eg'oist *n* a selfish person.

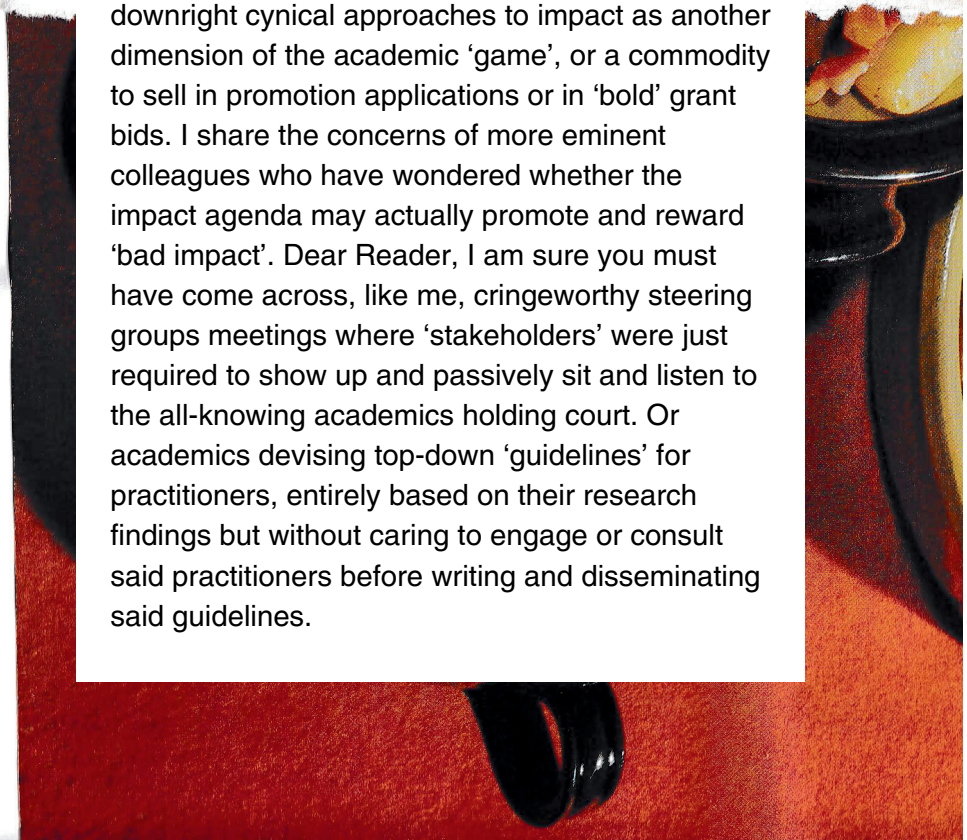
egotist *n* one always talking of himself or

worked by electricity.

electri'cian *n* one who works with electricity or electrical apparatus.

electric'ity *n* an energy produced by chemical or other action, a natural force that can be harnessed to give heat, light and power.

electrify *vb* **1** to put electricity into. **2** to thrill.



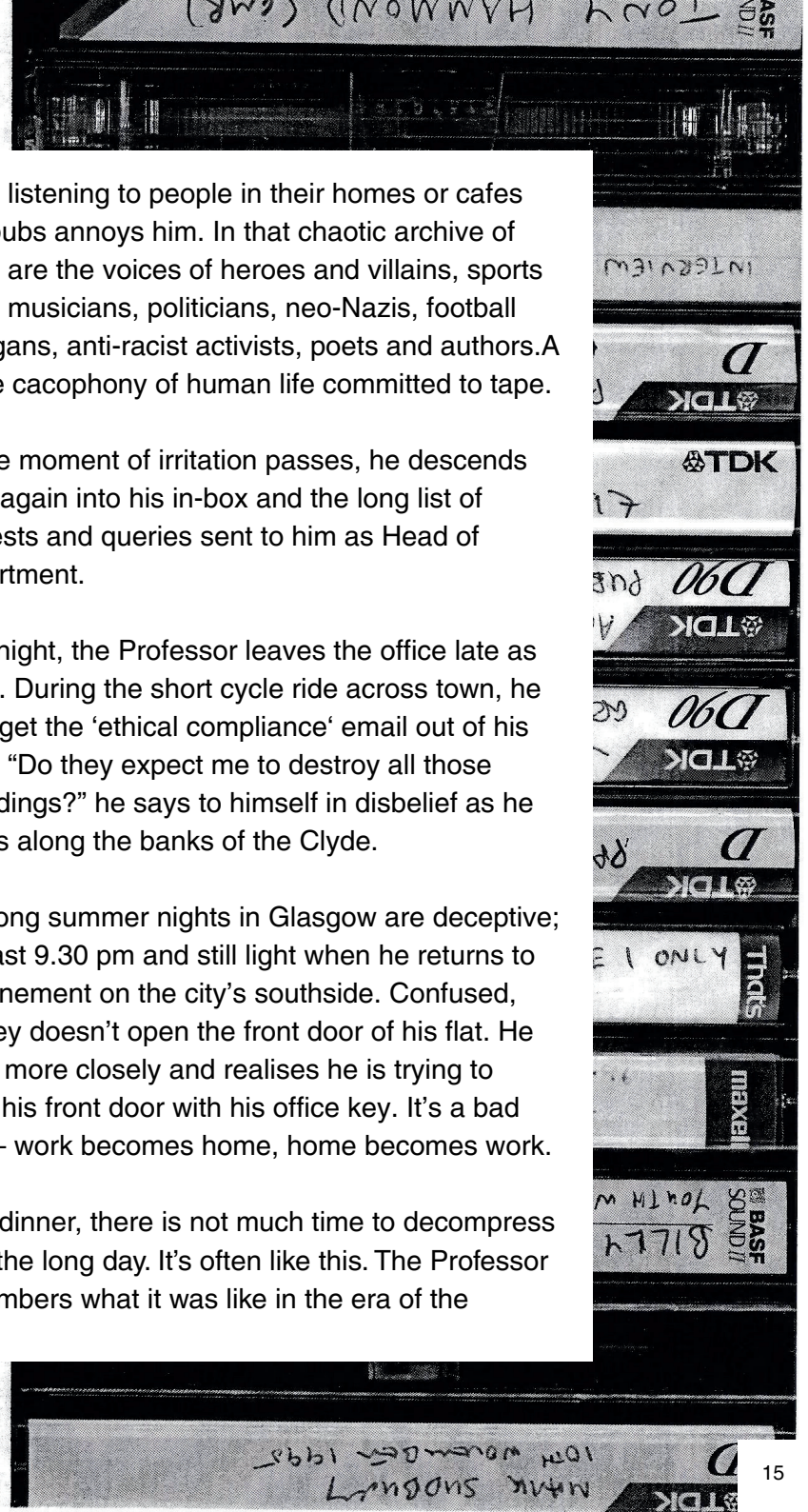
spent listening to people in their homes or cafes and pubs annoys him. In that chaotic archive of tapes are the voices of heroes and villains, sports stars, musicians, politicians, neo-Nazis, football hooligans, anti-racist activists, poets and authors.A whole cacophony of human life committed to tape.

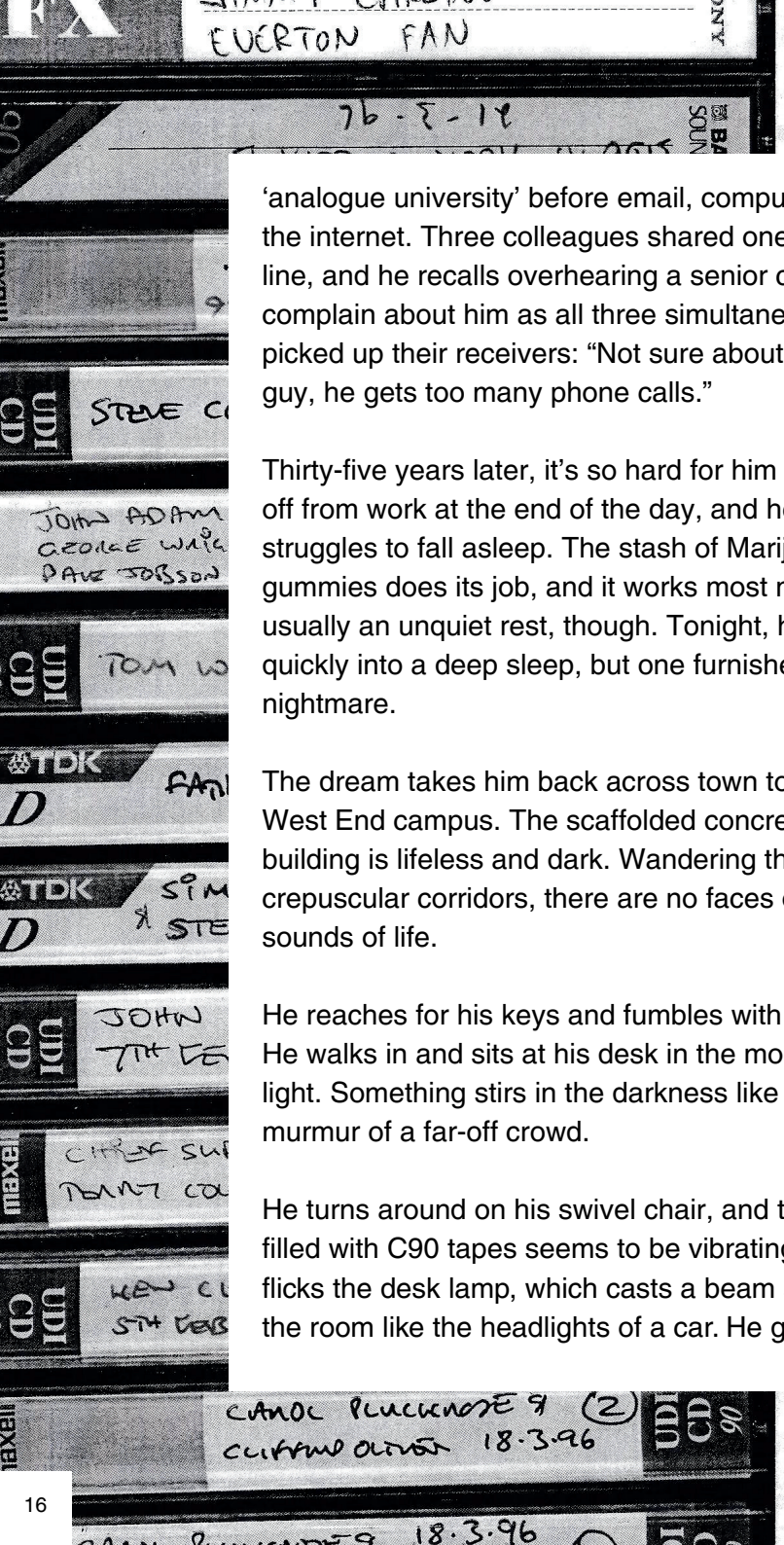
As the moment of irritation passes, he descends once again into his in-box and the long list of requests and queries sent to him as Head of Department.

That night, the Professor leaves the office late as usual. During the short cycle ride across town, he can't get the 'ethical compliance' email out of his mind. "Do they expect me to destroy all those recordings?" he says to himself in disbelief as he cycles along the banks of the Clyde.

The long summer nights in Glasgow are deceptive; it's past 9.30 pm and still light when he returns to his tenement on the city's southside. Confused, the key doesn't open the front door of his flat. He looks more closely and realises he is trying to open his front door with his office key. It's a bad sign – work becomes home, home becomes work.

After dinner, there is not much time to decompress from the long day. It's often like this. The Professor remembers what it was like in the era of the





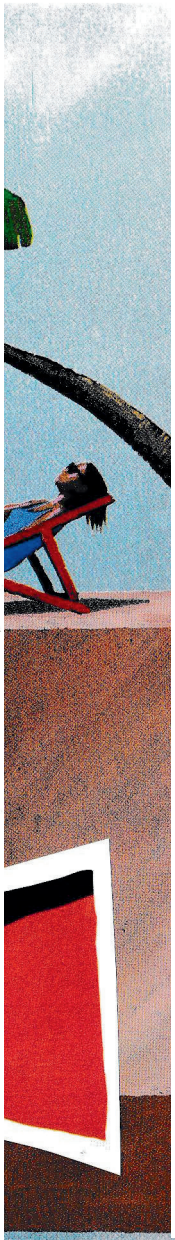
'analogue university' before email, computers and the internet. Three colleagues shared one phone line, and he recalls overhearing a senior colleague complain about him as all three simultaneously picked up their receivers: "Not sure about this new guy, he gets too many phone calls."

Thirty-five years later, it's so hard for him to switch off from work at the end of the day, and he often struggles to fall asleep. The stash of Marijuana gummies does its job, and it works most nights. It's usually an unquiet rest, though. Tonight, he falls quickly into a deep sleep, but one furnished with a nightmare.

The dream takes him back across town to the West End campus. The scaffolded concrete building is lifeless and dark. Wandering the crepuscular corridors, there are no faces or sounds of life.

He reaches for his keys and fumbles with the lock. He walks in and sits at his desk in the moon's half-light. Something stirs in the darkness like the murmur of a far-off crowd.

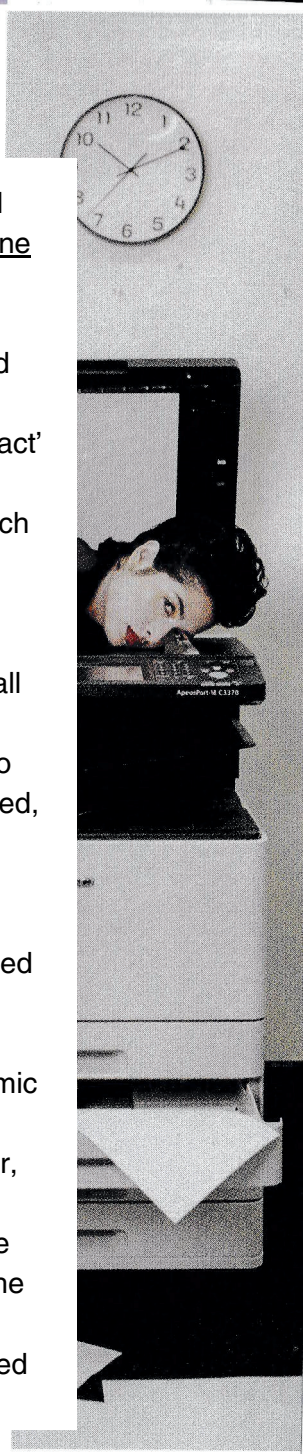
He turns around on his swivel chair, and the box filled with C90 tapes seems to be vibrating. He flicks the desk lamp, which casts a beam across the room like the headlights of a car. He goes



fire us up. So, is impact beautiful, or is 'beautiful impact' a contradiction in terms, like Trump's 'One Big Beautiful Bill'?

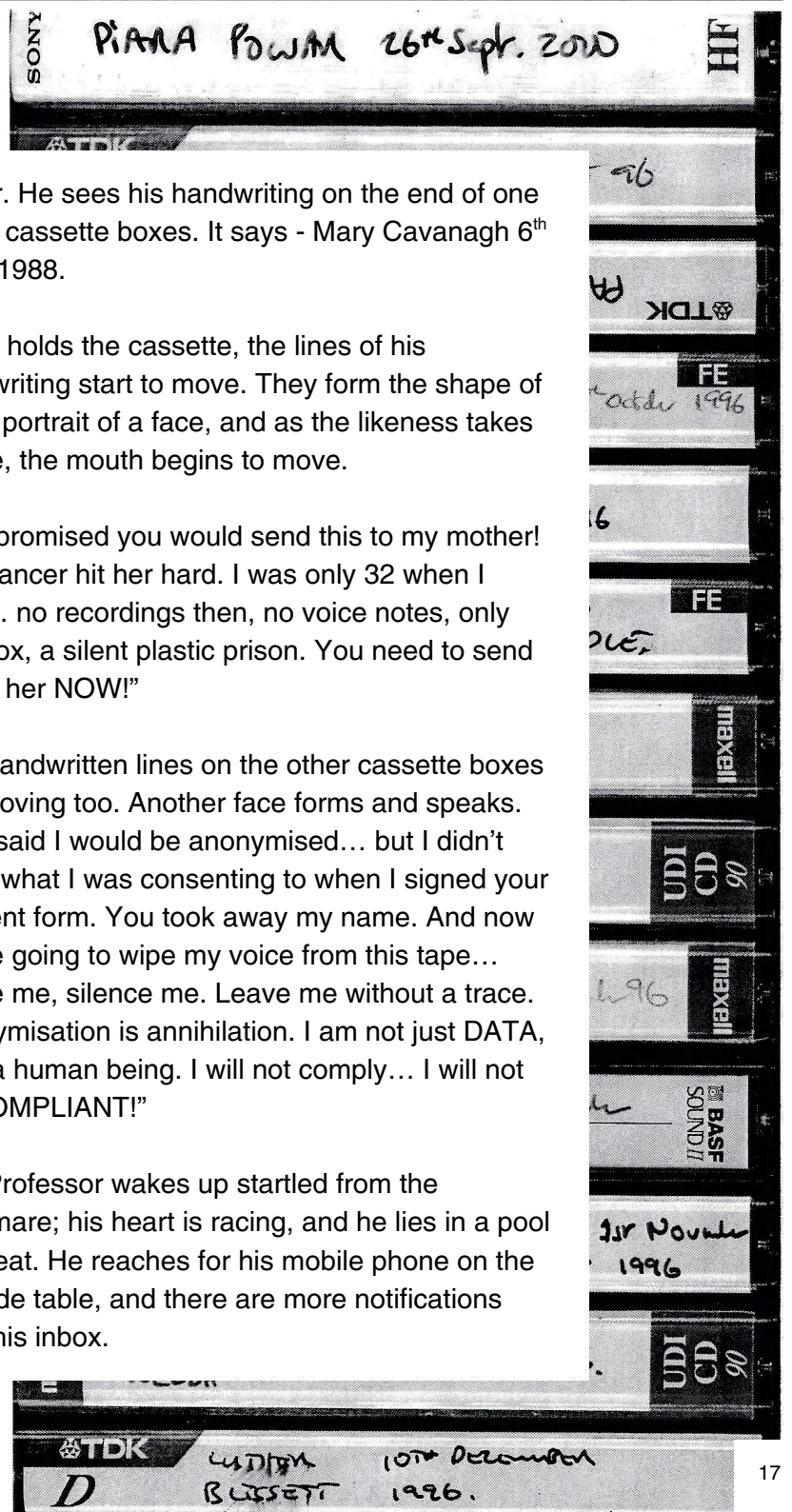
You could say that the REF 'impact agenda' and the institutionalisation of 'Impact' has provided space, resources and rewards for valuable 'impact' work. But can we disentangle this 'impact' work from the impact agenda and audit culture in which they are embedded? Two esteemed colleagues whose names I'll leave you to guess have perceptively noted that the institutional 'impact' agenda is underpinned by the assumption that all 'impact' is by definition positive and desirable, without interrogating the potential for research to be used or appropriated in unethical ways. Indeed, is all impact 'good'? *That* is the million dollar question, my dear Reader.

Has the institutionalisation of impact domesticated and depoliticised even the kind of 'public sociology' that was born out of radical and oppositional knowledges and practices? Academic institutions have traditionally been wary of politically engaged 'activist academics'; however, some of them have become insiders and even 'impact stars' – as long as their interventions are useful to augment the prestige and visibility of the institutions where they are based. This trend reinforces a pernicious condition that has plagued



5. How do we measure ‘impact’ under the neoliberal university’s audit culture? Reader, I have tried to work it out but to be honest I have given up the ghost on this one. Recipes to measure the ‘social change’ produced by research seem to me a form of creative accountancy that is at the same time painfully pedantic and completely esoteric. But please don’t quote me on that.

So far, so very confusing, right? Reader, if you were expecting a step-to-step guide to demonstrating impact you may feel that Frankie’s Complete Guide to Impact is a waste of time. And you may be right. I insist, however, in taking a philosophical approach on the matter. Instead of asking ourselves whether impact is a sheep in wolves’ clothing or a wolf in sheep’s clothing, we can start with what our research does, or has the potential to do, in the world around us. The questions of ‘knowledge for whom’ and ‘knowledge for what’ are surely worth asking. The idea of knowledge as a public good, and as something that should not simply sit on a library shelf for the benefit of a few initiated, stirs something deep inside of us and spurs us into action. This can be the starting point of many creative conversations and collaborative initiatives with very inspiring people we don’t often come across in the Ivory Tower. It can be a really enjoyable and inspiring part of our work, give us a sense of purpose, and



closer. He sees his handwriting on the end of one of the cassette boxes. It says - Mary Cavanagh 6th May, 1988.

As he holds the cassette, the lines of his handwriting start to move. They form the shape of a line portrait of a face, and as the likeness takes shape, the mouth begins to move.

“You promised you would send this to my mother! The cancer hit her hard. I was only 32 when I died… no recordings then, no voice notes, only this box, a silent plastic prison. You need to send me to her NOW!”

The handwritten lines on the other cassette boxes are moving too. Another face forms and speaks. “You said I would be anonymised… but I didn’t know what I was consenting to when I signed your consent form. You took away my name. And now you’re going to wipe my voice from this tape… delete me, silence me. Leave me without a trace. Anonymisation is annihilation. I am not just DATA, I am a human being. I will not comply… I will not be COMPLIANT!”

The Professor wakes up startled from the nightmare; his heart is racing, and he lies in a pool of sweat. He reaches for his mobile phone on the bedside table, and there are more notifications from his inbox.



Medusa's Children
Miriam Snellgrove

They say there is truth in every myth. Before myths became legends and legends became fantasy, there is a story of a woman. Medusa. One of the Goddess Athena's maidens. Athena the Goddess of wisdom and knowledge and, it seems, a great dislike of carnal pleasures occurring in her Temple. Unfortunately for Medusa, sharing bodily fluids with the God Poseidon in said Goddesses' temple and being subsequently caught in the act, equalled a curse of viperous hair that turned anyone who looked at her into stone.

What happened to Medusa? Some say she hid out in caves along the coast, luring sailors and bored rural fishwives in with her beauty and then … one look at her serpentine hair and an entire Coliseum of life-like statues. It is said our museums are filled with her marbled creations.

Other stories recount how facing Medusa was a test of bravery and scores of men and the children of gods would try and battle her, dying in the process, until Perseus (with the help of Athena) cut her head from her body.



complicated: is public sociology a wolf in sheep's clothing or a sheep in wolves' clothing? A prominent US sociologist argued, many years ago, that the community engagement strand of sociology traditionally enjoyed little recognition and visibility vis-à-vis its more established relatives, such as 'professional sociology', 'policy sociology', or 'critical sociology'. They called it 'the sociology that had no name' and were wary of its relatively recent institutionalisation and celebration as 'public sociology'.

Can you tell us which renowned sociologist said this? Was it:

A. Michael Burawoy;
B. Michael Stipe; or
C. Patricia Hill-Collins?

4. What counts as 'research impact' remains vague and open to interpretation. We are supposed to 'plan for impact' and devise 'pathways to impact' by engaging in a range of activities spanning from 'knowledge exchange' and 'media exposure' to 'engagement' with various 'non-academic beneficiaries', as diverse as policymakers, businessmen, politicians, specific communities or the general public. The good news is that, since 'impact' can be all things to all people, we can interpret the brief creatively and carry on doing our own thing.

2. The impact agenda is part of a broader utilitarian approach towards knowledge and education from governments and politicians. You need to demonstrate that what you research and teach is not just your hobby horse but is of measurable value to society (including students' future pay cheques and ability to pay back their student loans). It may be hard to justify your existence if you think that the main skill we pass on to our students is the ability to think with their own head. A strangely depreciated currency, in an era when AI-powered replicants are about to take over the world.
3. Reader, would you believe it? Academics – including those pesky sociologists - used to do 'impact' before 'impact' even became a *thing* in the mid-to-late 2000s. Word has it that they just did it in their spare time, before it was mandated to become a core part of their work. Within sociology there is a long tradition of civic engagement, activism and other forms of collaboration that have brought together academics with a range of practitioners, communities and publicsin the name of the common good.Is the prominence of 'public sociology' something to be celebrated though, if its fortune is – as it would appear – intimately linked to the rise of the institutional 'impact agenda'? This is where is gets

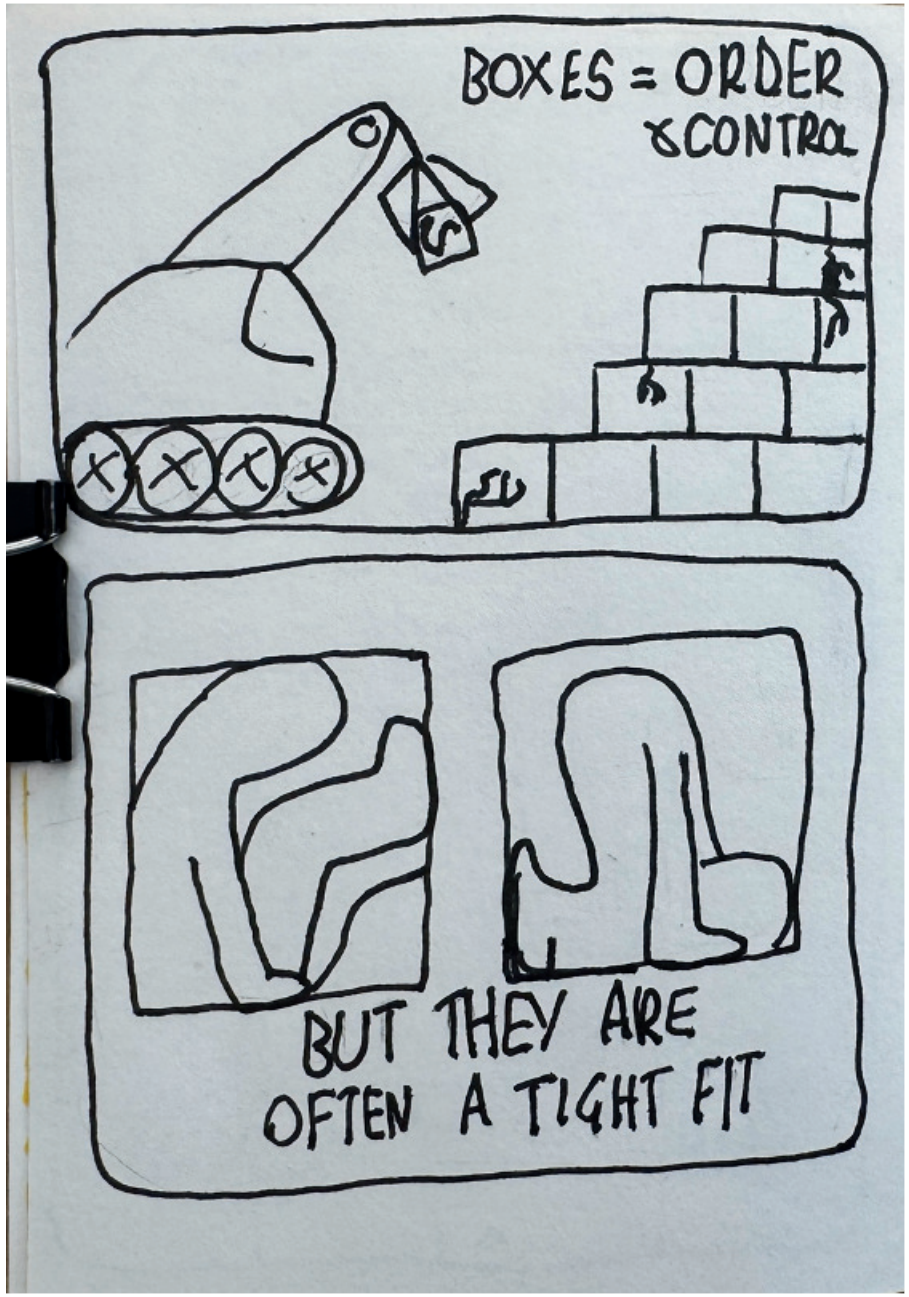
But there is another story. One hidden in plain sight and repeated throughout the ages and it is
this: our seas and oceans are full of Medusa's children. They come in an array of colours, shapes and sizes. They are beautiful and some are deadly. They appear seasonally and are not fond of the cold – much like their ancient Greek mother.

I like to imagine that humans were no match for Medusa and her appetites as a Gorgon. She was no longer human. She was more than human. A mixture of human and reptile, bearing the curse of a Goddess, her womb filled with the sperm of a God. An oceanic cyborg. Her children, when they slithered from her womb into a balmy Mediterranean Sea, carried finer strands of her snakelike hair and drifted on the gentle currents in their thousands.

Today, we remember Medusa as a terrifying Gorgon, but we also remember her children. In modern Greek, Italian and Russian, Medusa means jellyfish.

III Fitting Boxes

Kirstie Ken



I've done the reading so you don't have to.

1. At the heart of the REF impact agenda lies the same neoliberal drive that has pushed the marketisation of research and teaching: this has now been extended to 'research impact'. This agenda is implemented through an increasingly complex audit culture. There are two prevailing interpretations of the impact agenda:
    a. **sheep in wolf's clothing:** Although the impact agenda is communicated in the impenetrable newspeak of the neoliberal university, it allows for greater accountability and chimes with the civic university's call to engage with partners, stakeholders and communities in the real world and to contribute to the common good.
    b. **wolf in sheep's clothing:** Although it is often dressed up as concern for 'accountability', 'public interest' or 'the common good', universities measure impact mostly in utilitarian and economic terms. Impact is meant to boost individual and institutional 'reputations' that can be capitalised on as they increase publicity and prestige, and draw even more research funding and industry collaborations.

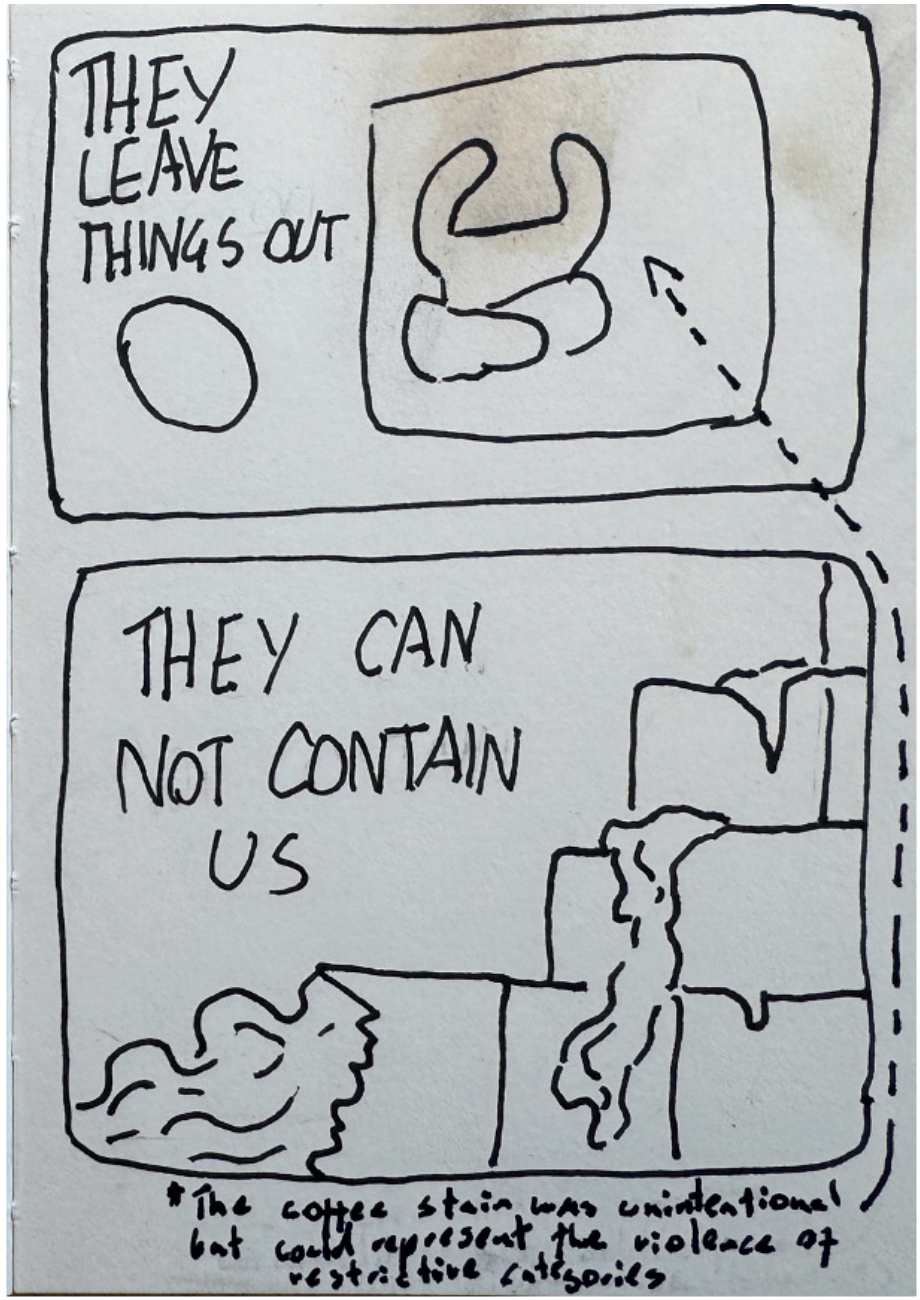
Who argued that the impact agenda is really “a sheep in wolves’ clothing”? Is it:

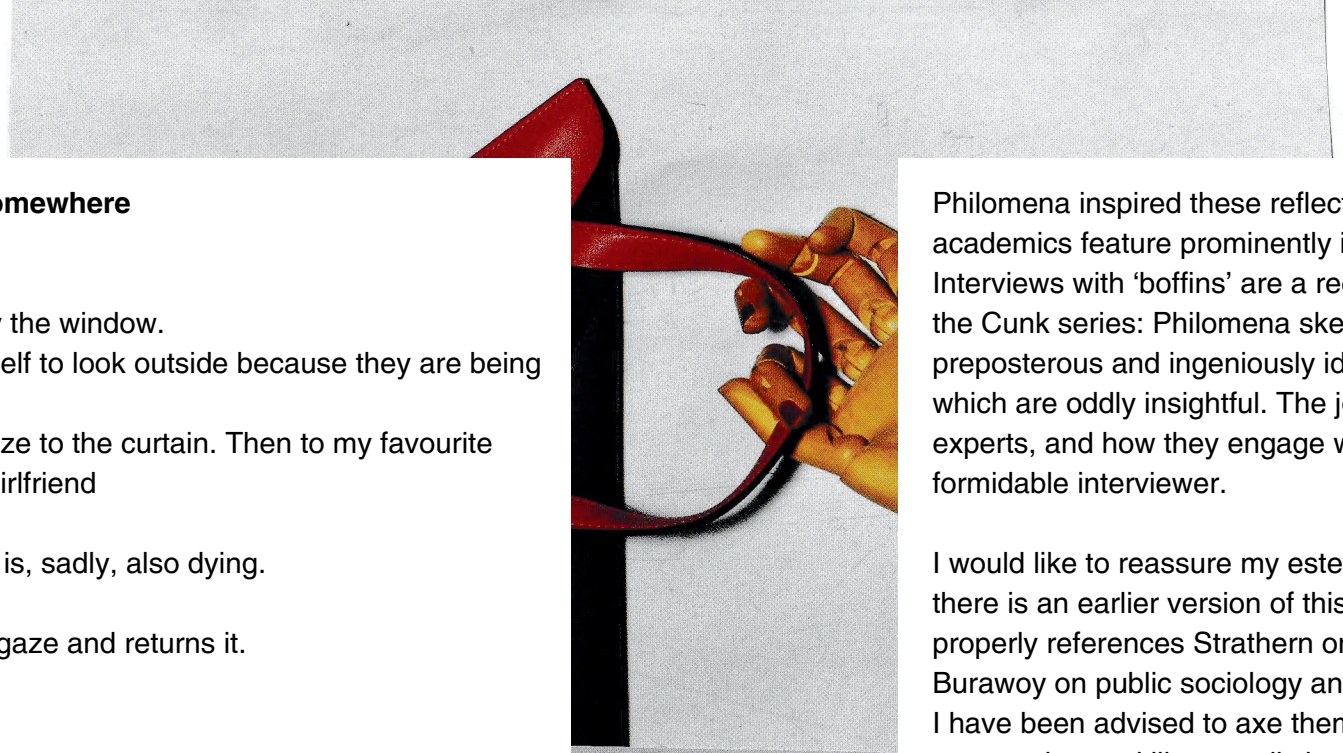
A. John Holmwood;
B: John Brewer; or
C: Jane Austen?

Frankie’s no-nonsense guide to Impact

First things first: who on earth thought up the term ‘impact’, you may be wondering? You are not alone, dear Reader: it was definitely someone with a poor grasp on the art of the metaphor. ‘Impact’ has the same subtlety as a meteorite colliding with Planet Earth and leaving it permanently disfigured in the process. The impact agenda boils down to the idea that academics should not just produce research deemed excellent by their peers, but also demonstrate and measure how their research makes a difference in the real world, beyond the Ivory Tower. ‘Impact’ has been institutionalised as an inescapable part of academic life: it features prominently in academic training, it is mandatory in grant applications, and it is incentivised through promotion applications. Sadly, we are stuck with this term: we can deconstruct, theorise or critique impact, but I am afraid it is not in our gift to rename it.

My concise yet comprehensive Guide to Impact (Starr 2025) sums up for you the key features of the Impact agenda in five succinct bullet points.





you are here somewhere
erdem avsar

I am standing by the window.
I can't bring myself to look outside because they are being arrested.
I first shift my gaze to the curtain. Then to my favourite distraction: my girlfriend

who is, sadly, also dying.

She notices my gaze and returns it.

She says:

You know I'm dying.

Beat.

Och, don't give me that look.

She is right. I rarely make eye contact. And when I do – it is usually a proper eyeroll.

You are getting antsy, I can tell. I know what you're like.

I am a master of bending time (and conversations) to make things look better than they really are.

I ask:

Philomena inspired these reflections because academics feature prominently in her series. Interviews with 'boffins' are a recurrent feature of the Cunk series: Philomena skewers them with preposterous and ingeniously idiotic questions which are oddly insightful. The joke is firmly on the experts, and how they engage with their formidable interviewer.

I would like to reassure my esteemed readers that there is an earlier version of this manuscript which properly references Strathern on audit culture, Burawoy on public sociology and so on. However, I have been advised to axe them, because it made manuscript read like a really boring undergraduate essay. I do hope you will find this version an improvement on the original. I am aware that this cavalier approach to referencing may raise a few eyebrows. Perhaps the sticklers for the rules can put their mind to tracing ideas and concepts back to their sources and then turn this essay into an exciting pub quiz for the next departmental night out. I suggest throwing in a few red herrings to keep the less nerdy members of staff from dozing off. For example, when finding the impact agenda being referred to as 'a sheep in wolves' clothing', you may spot an unreferenced citation in this essay. You could turn it into the following question for the pub quiz:

Starr on Impact
Frankie Starr, University of Narnia

Dear Colleagues, dear Readers,

It is my pleasure to share with you the first instalment of my reflections and ramblings about impact, this ubiquitous and poorly understood buzzword which casts a shadow over our academic lives. As I am sure you are well aware, 'impact' has become one of the criteria for assessing the quality of research in UK universities since the 2008-14 REF cycle[1]. According to academics based outside of the UK, 'impact' would appear to be one of the most successful exports of 'Global Britain', reaching even the shores of Narnia, where I am based. So, if you were thinking that escaping to a job in another country may rid you of impact, I regret to inform you this is not going to work.

I would like to credit as the main influence on this essay Philomena Cunk, the fictional presenter of TV programmes such as *Cunk on Britain, Cunk on Earth* and *Cunk on Life*. In case you have been living in the library or under a rock, I would urge to engage with her mockumentaries, which are essential viewing to understand the sophisticated underpinnings of this paper.

[1] Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) in 208-14, thereafter Research Excellence Framework (REF).

What did they say?

She plays the game:

Something something-taxel, something something-ifen.
That free CBT sessions might help.
To reduce overall stress.
And they smiled a lot.

Oh and also – a plant-based diet.
Don't smirk now.

I say:

Aw look at you. I'll make you some tofu.

Shehates tofu.

She says:

I don't want you to –

I say:

Okay, no tofu then.
Aquafaba biscuits.

Beat.

Chickpea water?
Oh my god. You're clueless, aren't you?
What kind of a 21st century dyke are you?
It's chickpea water.

Aka gassy water?

She stops playing the game:

I don't want you to
Hold on to this moment.
You know this is the past.
And I'm not really here.

Go out if you want to join them.
That's what 21st century dykes do.

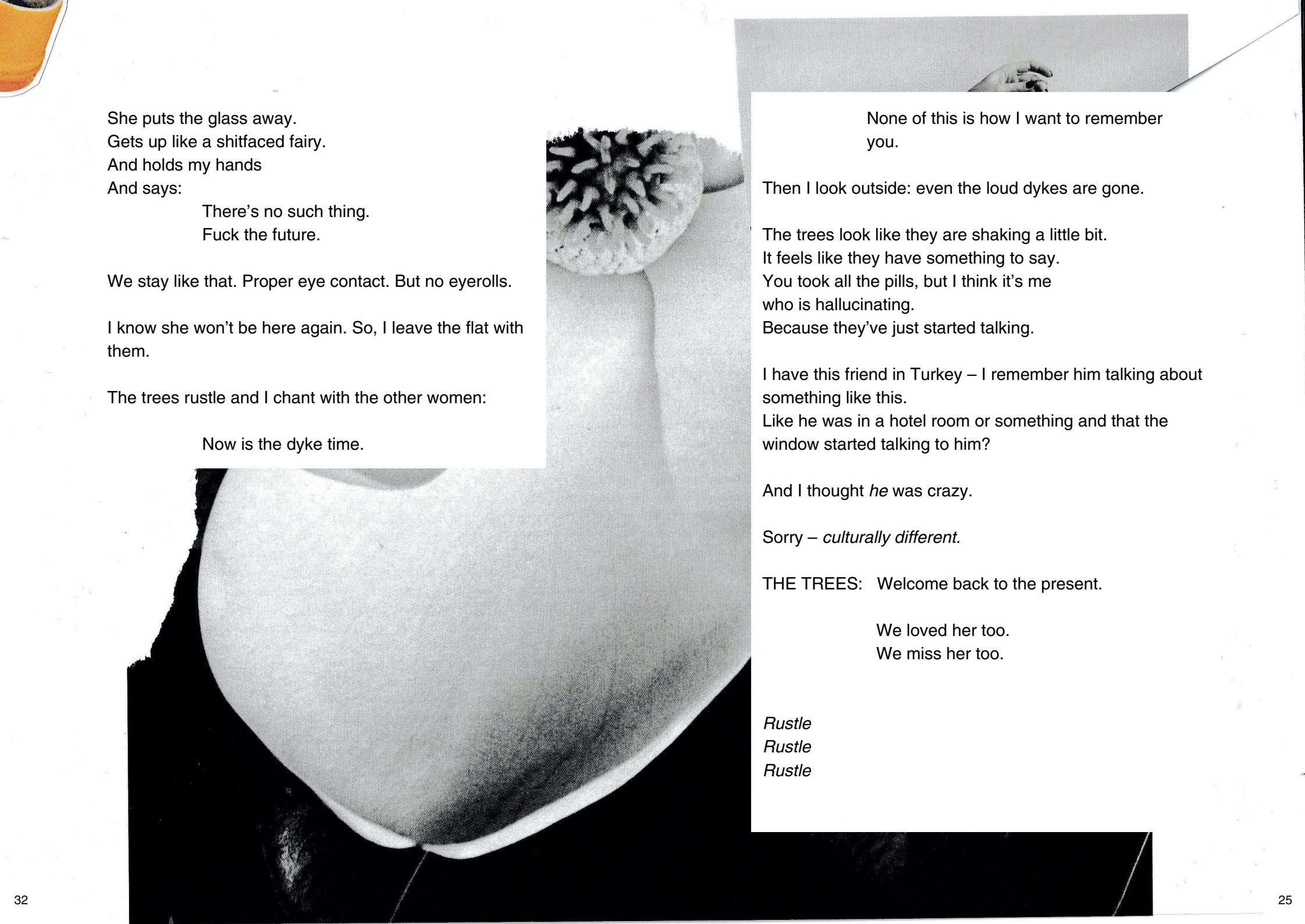
Beat.

A different moment in time.
Or maybe the same. But it does feel different.

I am standing by the window.
If I turn right, I know I'll just see an empty sofa
hidden under a white bedsheet
Covered with shit stains, needle pricks,
and empty blister packs.

Could you please come back?
None of this is you.





She puts the glass away.
Gets up like a shitfaced fairy.
And holds my hands
And says:

There's no such thing.
Fuck the future.

We stay like that. Proper eye contact. But no eyerolls.

I know she won't be here again. So, I leave the flat with them.

The trees rustle and I chant with the other women:

Now is the dyke time.

None of this is how I want to remember you.

Then I look outside: even the loud dykes are gone.

The trees look like they are shaking a little bit.
It feels like they have something to say.
You took all the pills, but I think it's me
who is hallucinating.
Because they've just started talking.

I have this friend in Turkey – I remember him talking about something like this.
Like he was in a hotel room or something and that the window started talking to him?

And I thought *he* was crazy.

Sorry – *culturally different.*

THE TREES: Welcome back to the present.

We loved her too.
We miss her too.

Rustle
Rustle
Rustle



But what if.
What if.
What if.

I talk to them.
Because why not.

I say:

What if what?
If you're talking trees, if I believe in you
you need to give me more than that.
What if what?

THE TREES: What if there was a way
Of you and her
Being together again?
I say:

Where were they taken?
Those young people? They had banners
and stuff. Sounded VERY angry.

If this is the present –
If this is the present and if she is not
around
If this is the present and if they're gone too
I just don't know what I'm doing with
myself?

I could have been a better girlfriend

Now that you're back – tell me
Do you want me to open?

Giggles from the outside and some inaudible chit-chat.
It's clearly a group of women.

You want me to open.
You're nodding? Okay.
That means yes, then.

I open the door and it's them.
They put the placards aside –
they look at me, kiss me, give me a hug.
One of them, the chirpy, straight looking one, says:

The police are just outside,
but they've lost us.

I've never seen a bigger smile in my life.

I look at you for a final confirmation.

I say:

Are you here?
If this is the future
Where you exist and never die
I am happy to go out with them and shout.

Is this the future?

I dare to look at it again – and I see you?
Holding a glass of cheap chardonnay in your hand.
Cheeks red.
Looking at me slightly puzzled.
Which is fully justified. I've been staring out for god knows how long.

A knock on the door.

I say:

Look, I don't know if this is before you died in hospital
Or after.
But you look alive.
Oh, even swirling the wine. You look VERY alive.
If this is a second chance
Granted to us by some weird tree dudettes
–

I don't know who is on the other side, and I don't really want to open.
Maybe it's your mum again –
checking on me.
Maybe it's the nosy neighbour –
worried about me.

Another knock on the door.

No, don't just smile – tell me something.

Brain cancer should not have been a thing.
And why the fuck they were arrested?

We were happy – I mean we did okay.
Had a roof over our heads.

No – more than that.
We had a front garden.
We giggled. Had dark times as well.
We also had a donor for a baby.
We were doing okay.

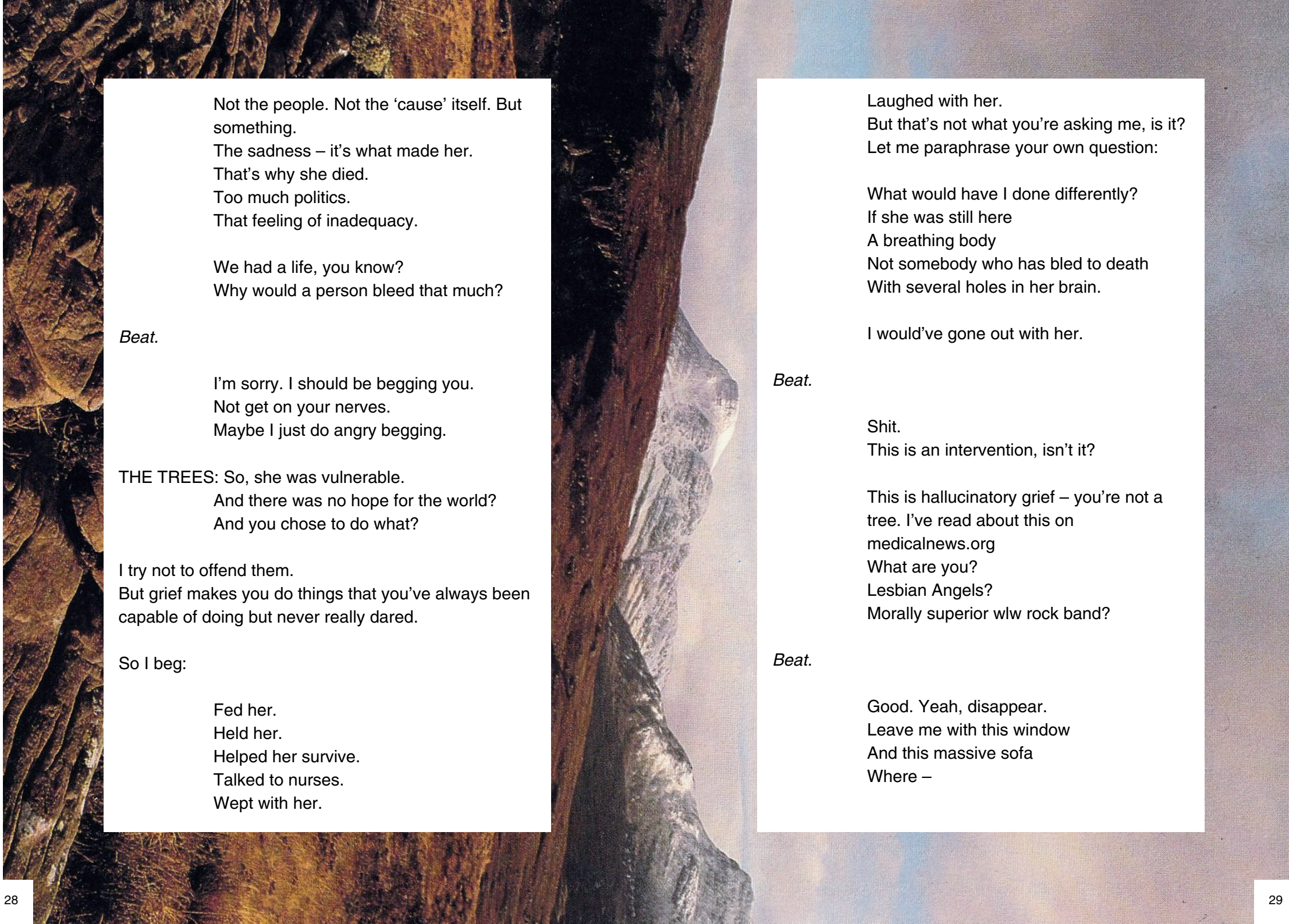
Until we did not.

Something happened along the way –
She just changed?

First it was the donation night for refugees
Which was great, of course.

Then the housing association for queers thing.
All the women in this tiny house.
Like a lesbian commune from the 1970s.

I could tell that she was becoming something else.
Something had happened to her.
It was just too much.
All of this – all of this, gave her that thing.



Not the people. Not the ‘cause’ itself. But something.
The sadness – it’s what made her.
That’s why she died.
Too much politics.
That feeling of inadequacy.

We had a life, you know?
Why would a person bleed that much?

Beat.

I’m sorry. I should be begging you.
Not get on your nerves.
Maybe I just do angry begging.

THE TREES: So, she was vulnerable.
And there was no hope for the world?
And you chose to do what?

I try not to offend them.
But grief makes you do things that you’ve always been capable of doing but never really dared.

So I beg:

Fed her.
Held her.
Helped her survive.
Talked to nurses.
Wept with her.

Laughed with her.
But that’s not what you’re asking me, is it?
Let me paraphrase your own question:

What would have I done differently?
If she was still here
A breathing body
Not somebody who has bled to death
With several holes in her brain.

I would’ve gone out with her.

Beat.

Shit.
This is an intervention, isn’t it?

This is hallucinatory grief – you’re not a tree. I’ve read about this on medicalnews.org
What are you?
Lesbian Angels?
Morally superior wlw rock band?

Beat.

Good. Yeah, disappear.
Leave me with this window
And this massive sofa
Where –