

Missing Shoes

Stephen Beechinor

Early spring with the trees on Bailèn just polled and you are bringing Mara your *intercambio* to dinner at friends. Mabel and Fred you've known as long as you've lived here, but generally you call them when it suits. They have moved into town because, as Mabel puts it, in Castelldefels there is only the beach, buildings to live in, flight paths and the sea. On Bailèn, they are content because there's a real feeling of being at the centre of things.

Mara is small but firm, a timid kind of cute. She is living on Marià Cubí with a man she wants to leave. Since she's reluctant to come stay the night in your room with the sliding door and the narrow bed, it occurred to you to call Mabel and Fred because at least in the last place they were renting, they used to keep a room spare.

You jab the light switch and now that you are standing in front of the right door, Mara asks what kind of relationship these people have. She is wearing the green top with orange checks, jeans and a slender brown leather belt.

'They live together, that's it. They're older.'

'What does that mean? They sleep together?'

'I don't think so. I don't know. Probably they clear the air from time to time.'

Mabel answers the door in her bare feet. Long toes, mulberry polish. Peering over your shoulder she wows at Mara behind you and playfully shoves you aside.

The women pucker and peck each other's cheek before Mabel kisses you too close to the corner of your mouth. Her hangover mingles with a damp, sweet showered smell as she passes her other arm around Mara who's already giggling.

Mabel spends a lot of time on her own and enjoys the closeness of younger bodies.

'*La comisura de los labios*,' says Mara. 'Where she kisses you, that is how it's called.'

Mabel tries to say this term, Mara corrects her, and Mabel gets it wrong again, gushing.

As such, Mabel doesn't work for a living. With the income she earns from a flat and a small recording studio in Brighton, she has no need. Fifteen years

back, she set up the recording studio with Fred, but she now owns his part. Both have back problems from working as roadies.

She and Fred had people over last night, most of them from the call centre in the port where Fred now works.

'Or was working until a fortnight ago. They're moving the office to Mumbai, so they may ask him to relocate.'

'So last night you had a party.'

'A get-together, really.'

Mara notices used tea lights lining the hall passage, a string of used tea lights along old parquet varnished the colour of orange peels and coffee grounds. Mabel gets distracted all of a sudden, maybe it's occurred to her some other stuff might be lying around.

While hanging your coats on the back of the front door, Mabel bemoans the fact that the high ceiling has been covered with foam panels and lowered. Still, the tall narrow door leaves make the apartment seem private and well distributed and you approve of this new place of theirs straight off.

'Let me tell you about last night. Everyone's shoes are missing and this boy from Japan walked home in his bare feet!'

'Until Japan?' asks Mara.

Mabel looks at her wide-eyed like it might be a trick question, then realises Mara's error, but resists the temptation to correct her since, despite all her time here, Mabel still muddles through vital transactions such as buying bread.

Fred calls from somewhere down the hall:

'What she's basically saying is, the doctor didn't feel up to people's noise when he got home.'

'The doctor?' you ask.

'Lives across the hall,' says Mabel, showing you her face of righteous exasperation, before giving back to Fred, 'He felt like their shoes, but. And you're the one who said the doctor's retired - I'm sorry, what was that?'

'I said I've no idea where you got that from!'

Mara seems little reassured by your smile and just stares ahead as Mabel leads you along to the kitchen, a space full of corners behind a counter halfway down the hall.

Fred is ripping tightly bundled mint into four glasses. He has a proper way of demonstrating how simple things are done. Long bare arms, loose flesh. Mabel says he was once a heavy man.

'Be careful now of my tumblers,' she warns.

Quickly she shows you and Mara the two bedrooms opposite the kitchen, the larger untidy one being hers.

Fred pulverises the mint, lime, ice and brown sugar using a charred wooden pestle. Seeming a bit rough, he is careful to tell you the party was for former work colleagues.

‘Folks who’ll be sticking around, basically.’

‘Fred was hoping to get asked to relocate to Mumbai.’

‘So that’s not going to happen now or what?’ you ask.

‘Just one of those things that didn’t quite come off’, he says, handing drinks across the spotless narrow counter.

You realise he is waiting for you to remember yourself and introduce Mara.

She remains stock-still as he comes out and kisses her wetly on both cheeks, pushing the glass between her small high breasts.

‘When you think,’ Mabel went on, ‘that we’d warned everyone about the party, the whole building —’

‘Except the doctor across the landing,’ Fred interrupts.

‘Oh, the retired one?’

‘You do go on about him being retired,’ tuts Fred. ‘Sometimes I don’t know what you’re going to come out with next.’

Beyond the kitchen there are doors to a third room at the end of the passage. A phase of light brings up the hollows and notches in the floor.

‘Are you going to show them through, Fred, or are we eating right here?’

Apart from the soft lamps and the plywood daffodils in a brass stand, the *salón* is not altogether Mabel. Lack of clutter. There’s a large round glass table wedged between five high-backed chairs and a panel TV in a corner defended by leather sofas. You wonder who all these chairs could be for.

Fred is grinning at Mara. Hard eyes and long teeth.

‘You’d better watch him with her,’ Mabel suggests.

‘She’s well able for him, I think.’

‘Yeah, so Fred ran up the extension lead and we were all above—’

‘We’ve had that barbecue since we moved to Castelldefels,’ muses Fred. ‘Got it from the Chinese.’

‘People were having a mint time,’ Mabel continues, ‘then it started to rain, even though it never rains, and I got everyone to take off their shoes as we came back down, you know, dump them on the landing outside the door.’

‘Made all the way in China, but still going very strong.’

‘Oh, we had people coming and going till late, but by the time it got very late, the shoes were gone.’

‘Except for Christian’s.’

‘He, yes...he was the only one to bring his shoes inside.’

‘Without telling anyone.’

‘That’s right,’ says Mabel. ‘Some people are just uncanny, it’s as if they know what’s going to happen.’

You watch Fred set the table before the women bring through salads and dips. Something of Mabel in the way he smooths the heavy Moroccan fabric raised with black, maroon and gold thread. He asks where you met Mara.

‘An *intercambio*. You know, these language exchanges, you just—’

‘Just like that! Been meaning to do something like that myself. Anyway we’re really glad you could make the time to see us, friend.’

‘Will you feast your eyes on this lovely flesh,’ cries Mabel standing there with a platter in her hand. Because of Fred she only gets to eat meat when they have people round to dinner.

‘A cold supper,’ says Mara, following.

Mabel turns a smirk on Mara as they both set down what they are carrying.

‘Know what, you speak better than we do, better than the lot of us. Good on you.’

And then we are all at table: Mabel opposite, Mara on your left, the fifth chair between them. From where you are sitting you can see the doors of the third room.

Mara wears her mock-serious face pouring the sharp young wine: she wants to enjoy the new company. Bending to pour into Fred’s glass, she exposes shallow, paler ridges on the flesh of her hip.

Supposing quality when all you brought was sharp young convenience, Mabel is keeping your decent red for later. You pay her compliments on the food. The meal is frugal, better suited to the thick heat of summer, but even just to rest your arms on the heavy cloth feels good.

‘How many books!’ says Mara.

She points out the weighted shelves on the other side of the room, like Mabel and Fred might have overlooked them till now. Arching back in the chair, Mabel tells her in a strained voice that they belong to the woman who owns the apartment.

‘Those are the owner’s books,’ agrees Fred.

Someone's foot - one of the women's feet - comes into touch with the hem of your trousers. You can't tell if the foot is bare, only that it is jiggling inches from your leg.

'Really like these small olives,' Fred drawls cheerily. 'Nice and bitter.'

Again, the jiggling, there.

'I would hate to miss my shoes,' Mara declares. 'We found a bag of missing shoes once.'

The man she is living with on Marià Cubí, she means. She has told you this story before, you even helped her with some of the words over a beer in Sol Soler.

Taking slices of fatty sausage and olives one by one, you move your leg, trying various positions, angles, so the jiggling will become near and continuous, a pressure.

Mabel and Fred look eager to hear Mara talk about herself.

'This big bag plenty of shoes...'

Even when Mabel gives her these wide eyes of encouragement, Mara stops, randomly starts beaming and it takes Fred to get the conversation back on track.

'Normally I prefer black olives, but these ones, they're just very good, you know.'

You ask Fred what he's been doing lately now that he is out of work. You notice the doors to the third room are chinked with soft light. The jiggling has stopped. There is someone inside that room.

'Doing what I can to find something else,' Fred hums. 'The usual.'

He has been wearing that navy cotton shirt for three years, the collar edge now frayed white.

'The usual strain, is it?'

He does not take this as well as you intend. A snag in his smile. He turns to Mara, complimenting her belt. Which she misses first time so he has to touch the tongue of her slender brown leather belt and Mabel laughs at the way you are watching them.

'You should take him out with you sometime. Get him talking to more women.'

When it is like this with Mabel and Fred, you relax. Now that you are relaxed, you say to Mabel:

'I notice you have a spare room there, next to the kitchen?'

Fred seems embarrassed. Mabel studies your face.

‘Has Fred not told you we’re sharing?’

Arching back in the chair again, she raises her hand to her chest like her hand was terribly pretty. She wiggles a finger towards the door panels ajar.

‘His room is that one there.’

‘Yeah, that’s the one I mean.’

‘His name is Josep,’ Fred reminds Mabel.

He offers each of us the last olive, asks if everyone is sure, then he pops it in his mouth and a few seconds later picks out the stone, setting it by the others on the side of his plate.

Mara wants to know what Mabel does for a living. As ostensibly she does nothing, you hadn’t thought to explain before. Fred aligns the olive stones on the edge of his plate.

‘I manage us both,’ Mabel answers, fluttering idle hands.

‘I need changes. Changes give me something to talk about.’

You rise abruptly from the table, impatient with how little their explanations vary, and their circumstances.

The other flatmate has opened the doors to the room enough so you can see empty catalogue shelves.

When you return, even Mara seems put out at your show of irritation. Mabel sits up correctly, a finger to her lips.

‘I’ll get him to come out and at least—’

‘Think he probably had enough of people last night,’ goes Fred.

He curses gently as he spills drops of wine on the tablecloth.

‘We’re staying on until she comes back,’ announces Mabel. ‘The owner, I mean.’

‘And then?’

‘Maybe move back...move back out to Castelldefels.’

‘And this other character who’s living here?’

‘Josep,’ Fred recalls. ‘Staying on. He was here before us, and he’ll be here after us, too.’

‘I’ll take him in some food. Never know, he might join us out here for a while.’

In the hall, Mabel pauses before the doors, then from the kitchen she returns with a tray and takes it into the tenant’s room.

Mara scans your mouth as you both strain to hear low talk, tones. Mabel’s laughter sounds genuine enough. Fred gets up and takes a mouthful of wine before going over to the shelves and books that belong to someone else. A shirt

gets worn and washed enough, it no longer even creases properly, the light seeps through it.

You and Mara are watching Mabel put time into drawing out the door panels to the other room, as though they had to remain at a particular angle. Now Fred's talk is about moving to Dubai and money to be made.

'Dubai or Mumbai?' asks Mara.

'This lad Christian,' Fred continues. 'Friend of ours we keep mentioning. He's off to Dubai shortly.'

He watches Mabel return to the table, eyes her as he might a stranger he has to share his space with.

'It's really only occurred to me this minute, but I don't think Christian had anything to do with everyone's shoes going missing.'

Then he smiles like a boy.

'No,' he says. 'Daft idea.'

He forgetfully ambles back to the table and passing Mabel's chair he tries to kiss her on the cheek, which she pretends not to notice, so he gets her on the neck. You are blushing at Mara and Mara is blushing at you. You are all on the leather sofas talking about products none yet own when Mabel touches the side of her mouth.

'What was it you called that again?'

From the wine and for the soft light, the corners of Mara's mouth look blue.

'*La comisura de los labios.*'

'*La cam...*'

'*Com. Comisura.*'

'*De las...*'

'*Los. De los labios.*'

'*Labios, de los labios. La comisura de los labios.*'

'*¡Muy bien!* Good, Mabel, real good.'

When the door bell goes - a buzz of electric current - it is Mabel who gets up to answer. Fred walks to the centre of the room so he can see down the passage. Neither of them are expecting callers at this hour.

'We have that same bell in my apartment on Marià Cubí,' says Mara with an unpleasant shiver.

Fred smiles tightly while peering down the hall. He wonders who Marià Cubí is.

'Not a who,' you explain. 'It's the name of the street she lives on.'

The front door slams slowly.

'Must've been a who at some stage if she's getting streets named after her,' says Fred, standing his ground.

'Shoes!' announces Mabel coming into the *salón*.

She yanks you up from the couch and takes you down the hall.

Shoes, right enough. Less than a dozen pairs in all, shoes that hint at varied age and means, heaped inside the front door.

Mabel takes a pair of greying trainers and sets them apart.

'These are mine.'

Then she stands up keenly. From the *salón* Mara's laughter gives a warm depth to the apartment. Mabel steps closer and places her hand firmly on your chest. She rests it there. You haven't done any press-ups in a week.

'Some night when the other one's away, maybe you two could stay over. There's always the sofa. I was going to suggest that, but I know you probably want some intimacy.'

'Privacy. Not to worry.'

Aware of the nervousness in your own voice, you say nothing else, just motion her back to the *salón*. Mara and Fred are standing there in the middle, as though they have got up suddenly. Fred stuffing his hands in his pockets. You force a smile when Mabel yawns.

'We'll have to keep in touch more,' you offer.

'Keep in touch better,' goes Fred.

A pleasant aspect of seeing Mabel and Fred is taking your leave of them, knowing you'll not feel the need to see them again for a while. Besides, you want to get away now. Mara gets talking about the shoes again, the shoes she found in the apartment on Marià Cubí when they moved in, she and the guy she is living with.

'We had difficulties for the light.'

'Light?' Mabel wonders.

'*Luz*,' prompts Fred. '*Agua*.'

'The woman that owned the place, she died. She was going to die, then she stopped to pay the bills—'

'So - not then - so she stopped to pay the bills...'

'Paying the bills,' insists Fred. 'The water, the light.'

Mabel briefly giggles and resumes frowning at the shoes heaped by the door. Fred stares patiently at Mara. They seem to have aged with the night.

'Sorry, this is the place you were sharing with somebody? And this old dear

topped herself there?’ he asks, eyebrows in shock. ‘Killed herself, yeah?’

‘No. Only she died.’

Mabel touches Fred on the arm.

‘Please shut your mouth and let her continue. Mara...?’

Since you’ve heard this before, you help by telling them how after the widow died, her children fell into disagreement over bills unpaid so it took a fortnight for Mara and the man she lives with to get the water and electricity switched on.

‘Go on,’ Fred asks Mara. ‘Tell us about this room - sorry, the shoes.’

‘So there was an interior room with a wardrobe. A dressing room only. We don’t look in the room until we have got the light. My boy wanted to use this room for his office...Okay, inside of this wardrobe, finally we find shoes in a big bag.’

Fred folds his arms, nods and yawns at Mabel.

‘They belonged to the woman of the house. This big bag, plenty of shoes. My ex and I, we take them out from the bag and they are nearly covering the floor.’

Mabel wants to know how many shoes; Fred, what kinds.

‘Women’s shoes. Expensive ones, some beautiful or disgusting. Just plenty of shoes. Like new, real new.’

She squats to arrange last night’s shoes against the wall, slowly and with care. With a sweep of her arm, she hits Fred’s thigh by accident.

‘Plenty of shoes!’

‘Lots of shoes!’ you snap. ‘Please, there were lots of shoes, Mara. And the bag was full of shoes.’

‘They are covering the floor nearly - and the funny thing - we have the same number foot. I tried on a pair. So my boy didn’t want to throw away the shoes then. Green leather shoes. Nice, beautiful, with black...’

She is looking at you for the word that she needs. You know it because you have heard this story before, you have told it together over a beer in Sol Soler. But you do not give her the word.

‘Your friend is into shoes,’ Fred observes, eyes narrowing. ‘And you didn’t keep them, those shoes you tried on?’

Mara gives a neutral pause.

‘For ages we sit there - nothing - just looking at the shoes.’

Mara stands up now smiling at Mabel who flicks a pair of yellow canvas shoes on top of the others to get the front door open. She finds the switch and

fills the landing with a dusty light. Mara stands inside the door a moment after you step onto the landing.

‘No-one came collecting her shoes,’ she says.

‘Rubbish,’ says Mabel.

‘Sad,’ says Fred. ‘Silly and sad.’

Then it’s quick goodbyes while Mabel and Fred pull faces of great fatigue. Mabel flaps an enthusiastic wave, then the door closes even before you call the lift. This seems to displease Mara. With the base of her hand she wallops the light timer switch well before it ticks out.

While the lift ascends, you wonder how quickly their owners will retrieve what belongs to them.

‘Ribbons,’ you say then. ‘I couldn’t think of the word before.’

Mara looks at you seriously.

‘Will you go back to Marià Cubí now?’ you ask.

She doesn’t answer. She is waiting for the lift.

‘Just let’s go, please. So boring people! And shoes...Shoes!’

She stands there facing the lift as though among plenty of shoes. Plenty of shoes that no-one is missing. ■

Stephen Beechinor is an Irish writer living in Barcelona since 2001. He works as a freelance translator with Spanish, Catalan and French. An earlier story of his appeared in the *Dublin Review*.

Two poems from Jamie McKendrick

Bark

A tour of all the trees that grow
in Barcelona's port was my reward
for buzzing, uninvited, at María's door.
She knew each one by name and character:
oleander, tamarind, the four or five
orders of palm, Corinthian-topped or
plain Ionic. But the palo borracho
was unlike anything I'd seen before:
its every inch of bark a skewering spike
worse than a bite: horrid, arid, hard
as nails, leaving nothing unprotected
but a few pink flowers. Ogre-like, unlike
us, who harden grimmer year by year,
with age it sheds the armour that it wore.

Ethics & Aesthetics

When Franco had Aranguren
the Professor of Ethics
in Madrid
fired
for his involvement in student politics

Barcelona's Professor of Aesthetics
the poet Valverde
resigned with a note that read
Nulla aethetica sine ethica

– gesture and word so wed
they twisted an Either/Or
into a well-knotted
ampersand

and fastened a rope bridge across a chasm

Jamie McKendrick was born in Liverpool in 1955, lives in Oxford and is a frequent visitor to Barcelona and the Ampurdan. His most recent books of poetry are *Crocodiles & Obelisks* (Faber, 2007) and *The Embrace* (Faber, 2009), a selection and translation from the Italian of Valerio Magrelli's poems.

Programming words

(adventures in literary cyberspace)

When someone mentions 'digital literature' the first thing that probably comes to mind is the latest version of Kindle. Perhaps even Google's attempts to create the first online library. But according to believers, this really is the Age of Aquarius for modern literature. So can the world of technology really spawn a whole new genre?

Laura Borràs, a fundamental mover in this Brave New World, talks to Barcelona INK...

So, you were at the digital book fair yesterday, what were you doing there exactly?

I was participating in a round table about new literary forms that are appearing on the internet, and although the book thing is still very strong and everybody's talking about e-readers and how literature is moving forward from pages to screen, the main point of those things is that on them you can only read 'paper literature' or literature that has been done to be stored in books. E-readers are just books without pages. But there is another very strong current which is digital literature that can't exist on a page: it has to be read or consumed directly on a screen, on a computer, and, particularly, on the internet.

Literature that doesn't exist on paper?

Doesn't exist and can't. It can't be like that at all because it has been prepared for the medium that really stores it. This on-screen literature is using all the possibilities that the internet offers to the authors. It has movement, sound, kinetic effects. If you tried to reproduce it on paper then it would lose something of the sense and nature that this digital-born literature has. So this is the question: seeing how this word, literary word, performs on

screen. It's like a *mis-en-scène* of the word and it's a very appealing way of reading.

When, for example, you think about Apollinaire's 'calligrams', if you think about 'Il Pleut', they are words that are drawn in that sense, reinforcing the semantic meaning of the poem, because if you see the poem and you see the title, you immediately know that the words appeal to this raining process.

So it could be Apollinaire's dream medium.

Of course! Now if Apollinaire knew how to deal with all of this technology – probably his poem could be rained, almost physically, you could listen to the words raining, or you could see them raining.

So it's a way of thinking about the medium, and not only thinking about literature. This new literature is travelling from the page or from the oral tradition to another new support which is the internet or computers. It is adapting to, and exploring, how these new devices act in order to maximise possibilities.

At this point she describes poems that change when you shake them. Poems that are puzzles. Poems where the words somehow behave like the snow in paperweights.

The way you're describing it, it seems strange that it is labelled poetry/literature. Don't you think perhaps it needs its own name?

But you can see many genres in literature. It's another way of exploring the possibilities of the word. I mean, literature has had different names also. Poetry was the name that was used in the old times, the ancient times, to refer to *poesies*: what is being done, what is being created. And so poetry was the name for all different forms of literature. It didn't matter if it was Greek tragedy or an epic poem or a single lyric poem. It had the same word. And so now, why can't we use the same word, seeing that the word has evolved during the centuries and now has another way of being explored and we have the same name: literature, but we add another adjective and it becomes digital literature.

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But, sometimes I feel like it's not actually literature, it's more like visual art, and I know that's there's a sometimes a blur between the two—

Okay. And what would you say about 'Il Pleut'? Would you say it is art because it looks like an image?

I'd say it's somewhere in the middle.

All poetry has been, I don't know, somehow flirting with different ways of expressing the meaning of the word. Not only appealing to the intellectual meaning of the word but also to the physical disposition of the word in the space.

And exactly who are the arbiters of taste here, because in the publishing world it's already established but with the digital stuff...well, some of it seems good and interesting and some is just downright terrible! Who decides all this?

At the moment this is very, very new, actually, and so now what is interesting is that people are investigating what could happen. But of course there have to be ways of organizing and saying what is good or what is not, but what is good for me, for example, could be not good for you.

Point taken. It's the same in poetry...novels—

Of course! Of course. There are a lot of publishing houses that publish absolutely uninteresting things, terrible things. Are they good because they are on paper, because they have got into the literary system? Because the literary system is something that (what is literature for us now) couldn't be considered literature in the sixteenth century or before, you see? So now there is this explosion of different forms that are very diverse. There is digital poetry or there is hyper-textual poetry which is different from interactive fiction which is different from—

So what's hyper-textual poetry?

Hyper-textual poetry or hyper-textual narrative are the more ancient species of digital media, which is text that uses hyper-text as the structure or way

of being conceived and read. And so for example a poem could be words linked to other lines and so there is way of reading it and with hyper-textual narrative it does the same thing. You only have the dimension of one single screen, and then you have to go reading on different levels of depth. You are navigating the text. It doesn't matter whether it is poetry or narrative.

But then, on the other hand, there is poetry which is made by different words that the machine has in a database and it offers you different words every time you go to that poem. This is also similar to the literary experiments that were done, for example, in France by the Dadaists or the avant-garde. And so this style, the randomized way of producing literature, is also considered inside digital literature. On paper this couldn't be supported or even considered.

She pulls up an example on the screen from the American poet Deena Larson, 'Simply Said'. Some instructions appear:

'This is a flash treatise on the nature of language in electronic poetry. Click on the button to view the single text screen. Mouse over the text to reassure yourself that what is said is fundamentally simple.'

It is difficult to describe what follows, as sentences seem to float out of the screen like space junk and words in the lines continually morph into others. *Words change meanings* becomes *words change relationships* which then becomes *words change relations*. While this continual transformation is happening there are also different soundtracks for the lines.

As you are reading the poem you are constructing another poem with different possibilities, every time you are clicking here you are linking on to all these new words.

It's a completely different dimension and a good example of what the medium is capable of producing, isn't it?

Yeah! And how this can be reproduced. It would be much simpler if all these poems could be read in a single form. But the reading of this poem

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would be very different than seeing how it's moving and disappearing. You see? Now everything disappears, and another text appears. It uses secrets or 'bones' and all these words are playing. It's a different way of reading and the experience of reading is completely different.

It's a little bit like trying to watch fifty-seven televisions at the same time.

Yeah! And now, it happens with TV, you are watching the news, and then you see what has happened in many places or the weather in many cities. Imagination, perception, language, liars, different layers, it is about this. And when you've finished reading this – that is, using all the links that this poem offers you – the poem doesn't finish there. Then you have to complete the reading by playing it or exploring it, in what sense? You have to touch, touch the poem. What else is secret? Now here, if we go here...look...you see now I'm not reading it, but you see...?

The poem is now working on its own as if entertaining some invisible cyber-space audience.

So, when you say what is digital literature? This is digital literature. And this is particularly done by this medium and can't be supported anywhere else.

So how long is it before something like that becomes part of the curriculum of any university? Because I suppose what is classified as literature with a capital L is pretty much decided by the universities.

Of course. And now this is being studied in several universities in the world, especially in the United...

Yeah I saw somewhere, Buffalo, was it?

Buffalo? Yeah, they were the first ones that organized the e-poetry thing. But the Electronic Literature Organization in the United States is kind of arbitrating this situation. They are taking care of all this that's happening, and they created an electronic literature collection, which is a sort of anthology of what is the most relevant in this world, and in this world of

digital literature...well they call it electronic literature. Now at *Hermeneia* we are creating a second anthology...we have sixty pieces at the moment which we have selected from two hundred proposals.

And to produce this stuff, don't you need some technical know-how? Programming skills?

Well, if you look at the situation now it's very unusual to find an author that is making the book, moving the type and putting the paper and bending it, actually making the books themselves. So here, very often, we also have the author who is responsible for the literary part. And we have another author who is the one that deals with the machine's language.

Deena Larson is the author of the text and she's also the author of the conceptual way of displaying her poetry. But then she has a programmer who is translating what she wanted to do in a way that really could happen. And then she's not composing the music that you've listened to, she uses the music from somebody else. So it's more a sort of collective way of producing, working. Like in cinema, for example, who is the author? Is it the director, or is it the author of the film? Is it the director or is it the producer, or is it the actor or the actress? It's a collective work. And here it's more or less the same although there are some authors who are designers and there are also some programmers who have a literary 'mood'.

It's very young the [first webpage dedicated to the genre was up in 2001]

It's very young but it's quite old in that although it's only nine years old, on the internet every year is like seven. ■

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For further information and reading:

<http://www.hermeneia.net/cat>

<http://eld.eliterature.org/>

The Green Bikini Top

Tony Tysoe

From where we live at one end of a winding flat-bottomed valley tucked in amongst the thickly wooded slopes of Les Gavarres, which at this time of the year emerge from out of the early morning mists like floating clumps of giant calabrese, it takes me half an hour to drive into the university: ten minutes to get to the other end of the valley, fifteen minutes cruising the highway that runs the length of this central part of the Costa Brava, and five minutes more edging through traffic-choked suburbs before I can finally cut the engine and sit for a moment in silence with the car stationary beneath the towering walls of Girona's old quarter.

The best part of the journey is crossing the valley. There are orchards on both sides of the single-track road, and vineyards, and wheat fields. *Masies* with low roofs and thick stone walls shelter behind copses of eucalyptus and pine. In spring I drive past meadows bursting with the most vivid colours, as if it is the colours themselves that have seeded in the red fertile earth. There is all manner of wildlife, too: foxes, red squirrels, wild boar; at the beginning of autumn a pair of buzzards took up residence. They wheel and turn now on the warm up-currents from dawn to dusk, their familiar silhouettes visible for miles around.

Few outsiders come to our valley, save for the Africans who ride in on patched-up bicycles looking for work. We don't stop to consider how they get here or the stricken villages they might have come from because we've largely lost that way of thinking about things. And that is not all that has changed in us since we arrived in this place, and slowed down, and started wondering how the course of our lives might look in years to come under the unblinking gaze of eternity.

The first *puta* appeared at the side of the highway one Monday morning about two months ago. She was standing at a well-chosen spot just before the airport turn-off, on the edge of a bamboo grove near a track leading to an abandoned farmhouse where her clients could turn off the road and park

unseen. As I drove past I was thinking about the lecture I was due to give that morning and almost missed her. (The title of the lecture, in case it is felt to be of significance, was: *The Spanish Civil War and its Aftermath: the Death of Reason on the Battlefield of Ideas.*)

The next day she was joined by a friend. They wore the same clothes: short yellow skirts, white boots, and high-necked fluffy jumpers with shiny satin jackets.

The following morning the first *puta*, undeniably the prettier of the two, caught my eye as I drew level with her, and waved, not a cheerful wave but a commanding gesture she must have brought with her from wherever she came from. I was considering this when I had to swerve to avoid knocking off his bicycle an African pedalling slowly along at the side of the road going in the same direction as me. I saw him wobble in my slipstream. The reproach in his eyes lingered in my rear mirror as I drew away from him and continued on my journey.

From then on, the *putas* were at their posts every day unless the weather was particularly bad. They brought white plastic chairs from somewhere and then replaced them with more comfortable ones upholstered in fake red leather. Usually they sat apart but once when I drove by, the second one was perched on the pretty one's lap. They had their heads close together and were bent over what I guessed was a mobile phone. They were laughing and looked very happy.

Hoopoes are a regular sight on grass verges in this part of Catalunya. They are elegant-looking birds with a striking plumage, but the *Book of Leviticus* tells us to shun them because they are unclean and foul their nests. I was reminded of this when it became obvious the *putas* were fouling their nest too. They hung carrier bags from the bamboo canes behind the chairs, left plastic water bottles lying on the ground and carelessly discarded scraps of toilet paper that became snagged in the grass.

I got used to the sight of them on my daily journey and grew to look forward to their appearance as the spot where they stood drew near. Sometimes I only saw one of them and was anxious for the rest of the day about the other, though I felt slightly embarrassed about this and told myself not to be ridiculous. Then, about a week ago now (though it seems longer) the weather became freakishly warm and the *putas* changed with it. The pretty one suddenly took to wearing her thick chestnut hair lifted up off the nape of her neck, instead of over her shoulders. And the next

day, she had shed her satin jacket and fluffy jumper in favour of a bikini top which, I was astonished to see, was exactly the same shade of dark green as a swimming costume my wife had picked from a rail outside a boutique on the Corniche of Beirut back in '82 or '83, and had bought with my enthusiastic approval.

This association of places and objects was very strong, as well as disorienting, because my wife and I haven't talked about those days in Beirut for ten years or more (it goes without saying the swimming costume from the boutique on the Corniche is long gone). But the fact is that for the rest of that day the *puta* and her dark green bikini top filled my thoughts and destroyed my concentration. Work was all but impossible. At one point during the morning, I even imagined asking her if she had chosen the colour herself, or if she had had it chosen for her, *and my lips moved as I framed the question.*

That same evening I set off back home later than usual. As I drove, my head felt heavy and I heard myself repeating the harsh words I had directed at one of my younger faculty colleagues before leaving the university building. It had started as a trivial argument over the basis on which the fictionalisation of real events might ever be justified. We had been discussing a young man, a former drug addict, who had written a best-seller purporting to be the true story of his life. He now stood accused of making most of it up. His publishers were under attack. The media were making hay with the spat. The young man, who was American, had even made an appearance on the Oprah Winfrey show.

My argument with my colleague followed predictable lines. Her position was that in such cases truth *per se* (her expression) was not the important consideration. The only criterion by which a writer's integrity should be judged was what she called the 'truthiness' of their work.

'The concept of truthiness encompasses the essential latitude every writer must be allowed when portraying real events,' she proclaimed with evident satisfaction at her choice of words.

At first I did not reveal my true feelings but merely remarked that as far as I was concerned there was no halfway house when truth, or what we were pleased to describe as 'real events', were under discussion. It was only

later, when my young adversary (who, like the author she was defending, was Amercian) implied that I had an authoritarian nature, comparing me with those academics of the thirties who abandoned their independence and clambered aboard the Soviet Realism bandwagon, that my language became intemperate

‘Do you have any idea at all what awaits us in this profession if we abandon true and accurate detail as our ethical yard-stick?’ I asked her, in a raised voice, I regret to say.

At that, she levelled Jean Genet’s notorious quotation from *The Thief’s Journal* at me: *Here are the loves with which I have been preoccupied.... Having noted them, I now make use of them. May they serve the purposes of this book.*

‘Surely you would agree that Genet is speaking for all writers there?’ she said.

She was completely ignorant, of course. Sartre called *The Thief’s Journal* Genet’s most beautiful book, the ‘Dichtung und Wahrheit of homosexuality’. It has a wider timbre than any other confessional autobiography I know of. To continue arguing with this young lady would, I was certain, be completely pointless. Even so, I persisted.

‘Novelists, perhaps. And probably Governments. But not us, I hope.’

‘Ah, I see,’ she said, with a truly infuriating smile.

I should have known better, of course, but I was angry, and I couldn’t stop myself. ‘You don’t see anything,’ I said. By now I fear I may have been shouting. ‘Poetry and truth in a book by Genet is one thing. Truthiness and your fucking country’s foreign policy for the last forty years is quite another.’

‘Let’s leave it at that, shall we?’ she had answered, reasonably enough.

The sun was already low in the sky and there was no sign of the *putas* when I passed the spot where they always stood. Without planning to, I slowed down and then found to my surprise that I had stopped completely. As I sat with my hands on the steering wheel wondering what to do in this unexpected situation (I can now see that by then my judgement was almost certainly clouded by my approaching bout of illness), the reflection of a container lorry began to fill my rear mirror alarmingly quickly before the real thing passed in a rush of wind with its horn blaring, leaving my car

rocking violently. I hurriedly pulled onto the side of the road, turned off the engine, and set out to walk the fifty yards back along the road in the direction I had come.

It was a curious thing but as I walked I heard no noise from the passing traffic. All was silence until I reached the track that led to the abandoned farmhouse and stopped before the two chairs in fake red leather, still set at what was no doubt the correct angle to the road. The only sound now was the rustling of the bamboo canes, stirring in the evening breeze.

I noticed the patched-up bicycle, thrown down carelessly behind a bush a few yards from the chairs, before I heard them. A woman was singing softly in a language I did not recognise, a man was making low animal noises. I took a few steps forward, and parted the bamboo screen. The pretty one was lying on her back and gazing at me from over a man's broad rippling shoulders, smiling, as if she had been expecting me. She said something that I did not understand but knew was not directed at me, though all the time her eyes were fastened on mine. The other *puta* raised her head then. It occurred to me I was looking at three people adrift on an old mattress in a sea of trampled bamboo, holding on to each other for survival. It was a big mattress, and would have been awkward to carry. I wondered what help the *putas* had needed to get it there.

These were the things that I saw, and these were the thoughts that came to me at the time. It was only later that I thought of Freud's visit to the Acropolis as a young man and began to consider anew the effects of the condition of disassociation on a character like mine. It is true that I did have a momentary feeling I might finally be on the edge of a breakthrough of understanding but it did not last. And, I am quite certain, on reflection, that this was for the best and that it was something I somehow half-realised even while I was standing there. It would, after all, have been irresponsible in the extreme, and selfish, not to have recognised that at our stage of life such a breakthrough could only have come at a very heavy price.

I may have cried out, I'm not sure, as I stood on the edge of that bamboo grove. But I do clearly remember stumbling backwards and the man rolling onto his side and turning his face towards mine, and I do remember seeing the familiar reproach in his eyes as he did so.

That night I slept badly and dreamt of birds with dark green feathers, and a silver plane falling towards me from out of a blue sky. By the morning, a fever had taken hold and I asked my wife to phone the Faculty secretary to say I would need a week off work. Later, she sat on the edge of the bed and we talked. She said I had been working too hard and I did not disagree with her. Perhaps, in the weeks ahead, we will talk some more, and I will be able to explain to her something of how I really feel and she will understand.

Yesterday I returned to work. When I drove past the spot where the *putas* had stood, by the side of the bamboo grove just before the airport turnoff, they had gone. They were not there today either. But I did see a group of Africans riding into our valley on their patched-up bicycles this morning, and this evening the buzzards were wheeling and turning in the open skies above me, visible for miles around. I shall look out for them tomorrow, too. ■

Tony Tysoe trained and worked as a journalist before becoming an English teacher and setting up his own language school in the UK. He has lived in Catalunya for the last five years, where he mainly teaches English and corrects academic texts for a living. He is writing a novel based on a fictionalised account of the final years of Ramón Mercader, the assassin of Trotsky. Wordportraits is a ghost-writing service he set up two years ago for people who want to commit their life-story to paper.

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From DEAD WHITE MALE

Alan Jenkins

Tacking into harbour, rich with smells of rope and tar,
A bright sun glancing off the masts of Bar- Bar- Bar-
Barcelona, I'd rejoiced to be, once more, under sail
But now I was alone, the air I sniffed was stale;
What was I doing, haunting the dead? What conceit
Had drawn me here to search for a word I could use,
A word for his life, his art, for the night he went
To be chosen to die by a thing he did not choose,
Did not see, and left the realm of the made or meant,
The artist's world – so a pick-up in the last port of call
Had given me to understand... In the bar-bars
And bodegas, in the doorways and entries
Of the twisted vein they call the Calle Avinyon,
Everything and everyone was up for sale;
I stood in a crowd of student-sentries
And watched some student-anarchist scribble-scrawl
Viva Che! on a poster-patched, poster-peeling wall
Below a poster of 'Les Demoiselles d'Avignon'...
I went with the flow as far as a half-lit cave
On one wall of which was painted – what else? –
"Les Demoiselles", by a primitive hand;
They loomed above me while I sat and scanned
The painted ladies at the bar, who invited me to dig a grave
With my own prick, and go and jump in it.
I feigned a shy absorption in my Fundador
Then smiling feebly I got up and paid and would have left
But for the woman's voice that pinned me to the floor,
A voice that issued from a primitively painted cleft –
A detail the original omitted – saying *Wait a minute.*
Did you never wonder, did you never ask
What was in his heart, 'Pableaux's, the great creator,

*A small man who knew he'd be a giant, sooner or later,
 And leave us behind, as he left everyone he'd used –
 When he painted on that dog-like, ape-like mask
 Where my woman's face should be? Was it contempt?
 Or anger? Was it revenge for the disease
 That brought the nineteenth century to its knees?...
 Outside someone was shouting and waving a knife
 At a woman, his girlfriend, his model or wife,
 Beneath the windowless windows' blind-eyed stare
 From a derelict warehouse opposite; the light was bruised,
 As in the dirty greys, the ochres and umbers
 Of a canvas I recalled (or was it one I'd dreamt?).
 Back on the street there was safety in numbers,
 Or so I thought. The Ramblas caught me in its wave,
 Caught me and carried me towards the salt-stiffened air
 Of the waterfront – but from the depths of a café
 Another, deeper voice was hailing me, and this time, yes,
 Bruno F. himself came loping up, his slicked-back hair,
 Paint-spattered jacket, swirling length of scarf,
 His corduroys, broad grin and grunting laugh
 All as when he still had years to live, and *Jenks, my friend!*,
 He called, *Weren't you once a devotee of Baudelaire
 And his dark cult? I tell you that a sentence of death,
 Premature, painful death, when the slightest ache
 Could signal the beginning of the end,
 Not only focuses the mind but leaves you short of breath.
 I hope you don't experience it, for your sake.
 It might have been the self-same brothel, the Bordel
 D'Avignon (Picasso's own name for that picture, by the way)
 Where I caught my fate, where I was singled out to die.
 I'll lose my hair, my strength, my mind, my eye...
 The brothel and the park, the scenes of modern life
 Par excellence, your poet said... But not for me,
 Not now. One model and one muse, my nurse, my wife,
 My widow too. I guess I was a real jerk (I guess!)
 That night I went out to play so recklessly – and what the hell,**

*Right? I'd been a jerk and I'd played the clown
So many times – street-girls, junkies, I couldn't turn them down,
Couldn't turn a single one away. My real life was work,
Though, you know that. So long. Try to tell the truth...
But what was that? Just yesterday I'd joined the throng
In the cathedral cloister, stood below its vault
Of tattered palms and counted seven fat white geese
That gobble-squabbled under them, for crumbs, for release;
I'd wandered all day around the Gothic quarter
Where she had spent that 'difficult year'
And watched the chestnut blossom falling in my beer
And when I had to eat, what everyone eats
In Barcelona, I'd breathed in every cellar bar
The familiar amalgam she was, and so many are –
The sweet, the garlicky-pungent and the salt –
And remembered her come dripping from the water
For me to frame in the crook of her freckled arm
Our Cubist village and its single palm,
Our spaghetti-western beach, deserted for a shoot-out
At high noon, when sunlight struck it like a gong.
Now I was carried on towards a little red-lit booth
Where, becalmed, I watched two strangers – brisk,
Methodical, expressionless – ride out their storm;
Slap, slap, he ploughed her glistening furrow, warm
And wet and open wide, he gave no thought to risk
As he poured ambergris into her waiting mouth –
And tugging at myself, so raw and dry,
I wanted to believe: in love that doesn't die,
In the beauty of the gothic-baroque-Cubist south —
Far from the blade- and needle-sharp, the blind-eyed streets –
Sea-nymphs riding dolphins, sea-creatures, shells,
Clouds and putti; far from these semen-smells.*

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At one end of the line, the Catalunya line,
On a little island made from builders' waste,
A mound of dirt and sand, brick-enclosed, enchanted,
Stands a single palm tree fancy planted:
Tropical bird, *its fire-fangled feathers*
Dangle down... No. But it stands in all weathers,
Tattered, watered, a thing of shreds and patches
And as I walk past it to the 8.09
I can hear palms rustle in their tropic airs,
I can hear the mermaids singing, snatches
Of old song, sea-shanties, siren-songs,
I can feel the whiplash of the wind and taste
The sticky-sweet of rum, the salt of panties and thongs
Those wriggling sirens hooked their thumbs inside
And snagged on painted toenails in their haste,
The salt-sweetness that is uniquely theirs;
Hear that wet click-click, a metronome,
Quickening... One especially, who swam in on the tide
And parted salt-wet lips – that dutiful daughter!
How she loved the parasol her mother brought her
That was like a little piece of home – her home –
The sun-splashed garden, parakeets and palms....
I wrote lines to her eyes that were like the sea,
'The grey-green mistiness, the tiny fleck of foam'.
I scribbled messages on her body's open book.
And it seemed a tide had turned unalterably
To bring this salt-wet happiness of few words
Where the moon through slatted shutters striped her arms
And flattened breasts – she lay with that just-fucked look
While I breathed the scents of salt and oleander,
Small waves answered *shush, shush* to the nightbirds
And palms rustled outside in the breeze that shook
A few leaves from the rose bush on the veranda...
'But she you thought a naiad is her mother's daughter
And one day she went home, all the way home
And left you to your sonnets and ghazals' –

For here was L----, L---- whom I knew of old,
A fellow-haunter of the bar-bars and cinemas
Of Barcelona, Paris, London and New York,
Whose bittersweet recordings should have won him gold
In every place where they'd been played, whose talk
Of books and music that he loved was like his gift,
Lavished freely on the lucky ones like me;
'And when she left you to your years of drift
She left that parasol... You fished out Pau Casals –
The CD I gave you – and listened endlessly
To his solo cello piece, *El Cant dels ocells*.
Is anything as lovely as this “song of the birds” –
The Catalan birds? A love song, full of old spells;
A melancholy that is the sadness of our time,
As Casals said, *which my country was the first to feel*.
It's true that here is a sadness beyond words
But here, too, is music's power to heal and anneal –
How often has it been remarked? And in a sour time
Like this, does it bear repeating? Or does art lie
In its lovely insistence, not that it does not die
But that we are – you are – not one of the seven
Fat white geese that gobble-squabble in the dust
In Barcelona's cathedral cloister, in our lust,
But one of its giant palms that stretch for heaven?
Then, if that heaven sounds too far away
It makes another, nearer one on earth
In which those girls who wander in the field, who stray
In white among the poppies, holding parasols,
Seem gestures of the light, the wandering, stray
Magnificence of morning; folding parasols
They grow into inhabitants of earth...
I don't recall, now, the name of the film, or
Of the guy who made it – Scandinavian, French? –
But those angels with their little parachutes
Have been with me a quarter-century and more,
Not likely as a real girl is to go away

Or give you a hard time when you roll home tight
 But not, by that same token, warm at night,
 Or able to startle you with her sudden dew-drench.
 I got a bit grand there myself – “the wandering, stray
 Magnificence”, etc. – not a tone that really suits
 The one small thing I’ve struggled hard to say,
 How we are both more, and less, than what we make,
 What we see or say and above all what we do:
 Than this music with its otherworldly ache,
 So ravishing and unappeasable and true,
 Than her leaving you, than the parasol she left –
 Though art must have symbols, so in Bill Pownall’s view
 Of rock and water and “The Sailor’s Return”, that cleft
 In the cliff-face is and is not, her cleft; as
 Bill or Bix or Benny Goodman playing jazz
 Make human association seem a free
 Submission to the will of others, loose
 But not too loose, whose limits all agree.
 Remember? *It must...* be beautiful and of no use,
 Like the palm at the end of the line, the Catalunya
 Line, like the notes that come from it, a tune, a
 Melody that rises in all weathers
 Between the buffers of platform two or three
 In a station of the mind that is the one we pass through,
 From the bird that flaunts its tattered feathers –
 No, no great bedraggled bird, it is a tree,
 A thing of shreds and patches someone planted,
 Waters, cares for; alive with sparrow-song, enchanted.’

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