

(in preparation for absence)

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(in preparation for absence) consists of journal entries written by Margaret, a young girl growing up in post-war Britain, and communications sent to her from Lucas, her lover, twenty years later.

Journal entry #1. August 1, 1966

I hear rustling, movement between their sheets. "I'm too tired," daddy murmurs. Shadows soften the corners of my room, rounding its geometries. I close my eyes. The wall separating our bedrooms oscillates like sensory structures within an ear. "There'll be no more favors," mama says. Countless seconds transform into wandering silences as I align my shoulder with the edge of the bed. Daddy complains, "I'm not good at selling things or managing people." He coughs. There's a shift, a change in mama's voice. "We'll have to apply for a council flat and sell the house." The painted eyes of a wallpapered figure, divided by an inaccurately matched seam, appear to close. "I can't sleep, hold me" she says. "I'm too tired" he repeats. Their conversation hovers like an apparition.

Sleep is unlikely tonight. I turn on a small transistor radio. Vaguely recognizable songs, broadcast from pirate radio stations afloat somewhere in the North Sea, are intermittently punctuated by atmospheric disturbance. The bathroom door creaks as Monday slips into Tuesday.

Communication #1. August 1, 1986

The tap in your bathroom is dripping.

Your bedroom door refuses to close.

The tread on one of your stairs is loose.

Your chimney needs re-pointing.

The spin cycle on your washing machine is broken.

*I can fix all of these things imperfectly, temporarily,
for I am dependent upon them breaking again in the near future.*

When can I see you again?

Journal entry #2. August 2, 1966

There's a knock at the front door. Mama shouts through the window into the back garden, where my father is weeding around his hollyhocks and carnations. "Sammy, it's the Bullethead. Hurry up, you're late, he'll go without you." Everybody calls him the Bullethead. It's the name he acquired after a miraculous recovery from a gunshot wound. Daddy says that removing the cartridge from his hindbrain would have endangered his muscular functions. So it remained, visibly lodged at the base of his skull.

Mama makes hats for a millinery parlor in town. Together with her sales of baked goods, she provides a variable, but continuous income. She hands the Bullethead a slice of Mavis Horberry's poppyseed cake. Sam's tardiness is cutting into her profits. The Bullethead owns an interior design business in the city. He had been reluctant to hire Sam as the store manager, or as anything. "Hazel, I'll tell you, if it weren't for you and Maggie he'd be a goner. Last week he fell asleep on the job. He could do with smartening up a bit."

The Bullethead licks his fingers and helps himself to another slice of Mavis's cake. He goes on. "You've got to watch those delivery boys. That's Sam's job. Three Formica tops, missing from inventory. You can't run a business with a manager asleep on the job." Hazel nods her head, trying not to focus on the poppy seeds wedged between the Bullethead's stained teeth. His breath is fetid.

"Would you like a cup of tea?" she asks. "I'm making a new pot."

My father comes in through the kitchen door and goes over to the sink to wash his hands. "No thanks," he replies, glancing over at my father. "We'll be off now." Mama hands Sam a thermos and a brown paper bag. He kisses her lightly on the cheek. The Bullethead is already halfway down the path.

Communication #2. August 2, 1986

Margaret, Margaret, stand high on your bed and let me caress you from shoulder to ankle.

Let me inhale the abundance of all that I've missed.

Our indiscretions are our only possessions.

Let me run my tongue over your lips, your neck, down the central axis of your torso to your sex.

Our passions corrode time.

You are the perfect machine.

You are the perfect machine.

Journal entry #3. August 3, 1966

I usually avoid libraries during the summer. The damp heat, held captive, tempts mold and coal dust to form a union that leaves me breathless. I'm here to investigate sound waves. As I stoop over a card catalogue, three ginger-haired siblings brush past me. Elbows graze the side of my thigh.

A slight woman, with a barely visible moustache, sits dozing in an armchair next to the encyclopedias. Dusty light beams dance across beads of perspiration gathering on her forehead. I watch, transfixed by the sequences of illumination interrupted by a shifting of her body each time she exhales. An open book balances precariously on her knees. The librarian whispers loudly to a new volunteer reshelver. "That's Lucy, an outpatient from the Prestwich lunatic asylum."

"I know," she said. "Lucy and I were in the same ward."

The eardrum vibrates as sound waves are carried through the external auditory canal. The vibrations are communicated by an

ossicular chain in the middle ear to fluid in the inner ear. As the fluid moves it stimulates a set of fine projections known as hair cells. Hair cells transmit signals to the auditory nerve, which, in turn, carries information to the brain.

Lucy's book falls to the floor, startling the room's occupants. She leans over to retrieve the book and then mops her brow with a discolored, but delicate handkerchief. The librarian looks on disapprovingly, while, at the same time, scratching something on her left shoulder. Then, eyes averted, she examines the pus collected under her right index-fingernail. Lucy grins, turns the page of her book, and then fills the room with laughter. I glance over to see what she's been reading. It's a serious looking tome with "The Borderlands of Insanity" embossed in gold on a brown leather binding. The librarian reprimands the three children for making too much noise.

Communication #3. August 3, 1986

I refuse to collaborate in the fabrication of my inadequacies.

I refuse to embody guilt and shame.

Listen to sirens of the unknown.

Their voices transform loss to forms of permission.

I offer my wounds for the flesh of your reinvention.

Journal entry #4. October 1, 1966

From September to November, and then again from April to June, the small room next to the bathroom is filled with hats. Hats at various stages of completion, festive hats made to order and hats for general stock. Weather conditions and variable fashion trends contribute to the irregularities of my mother's trade. Failed attempts line the walls, presiding over inventive differences in the making.

During the seasons of the hats, a buyer from Sheila's Millinery makes frequent calls to the house. I am aware of his arrivals, but never of his departures. I run my hands over cut silks and stretched velvets, tie ribbons around my wrists, eye the braids, needles, and bows neatly stacked from floor to ceiling.

My father, complacently, and with apparent relief, occupies all the domestic roles Hazel relinquishes to hatmaking and the buyer. Undisturbed, he folds clean clothes and begins to learn to knit.

I experience myself as invisible, on the perimeter of a familial
rectangle, separated from all emotional ebbs and flows in the
household. In early morning I am awakened by an unusual stillness.

Hazel's workspace is in disarray. Baroque underclothing lies worn
and crumpled on the floor. Hatboxes sit emptied, their lids
randomly littering the room.

It begins when the clock confirms my absence. Mama and the buyer
steal their pleasures in hours labored on night shifts and paced by
insomniacs. They exchange hats, laughing as invisible eyes observe
through a keyhole.

Communication #4. October 1, 1986

Echoes of your doubts sting.

*I can tolerate the pain until the ghosts inquiring into who I am not
disappear.*

Mistaken identities are illusions.

Kiss me. I can almost taste the death of disappointment.

The curve of your clavicle is a question mark.

Eat a variety of foods when you are hungry.

Journal entry #5. October 2, 1966

"You can never predict the market," the buyer says as he spreads marmalade on the last piece of toast. "I've been in this trade for twelve years... treacherous business. You just don't know what's going to happen next. Last year, I could have sworn fur hats would be fashionable, but suddenly in December wool hats came in." Mama glances up from *The Sunday Times* crossword and responds abstractly. "Everything is always in flux."

"Fluctuation. That's the word I've been looking for," says daddy as he gets up to slice more bread. The buyer continues. "The trade has definitely changed. Now people want machine-made hats. People like you, Hazel, will be out of business sooner than you think. Pop the kettle on would you, while you're up."

"Anybody else for toast."

"I'd like another piece," she says, "Lightly burnt."

"People are very reluctant to invest in one piece of furniture," my father remarks as he comes back to the table. "They want to refurnish a whole room or nothing at all. A new chair makes everything else look old and shoddy. Shock's too much."

"Is that the toast I smell" mama asks? The buyer gets up from the table and walks toward the oven. "Could you turn it over?" He waits for the other side to brown, removes it from the grill and sears his fingers in the process. Upon returning to the table he bumps into mama, who is on her way out of the room. "I'd better get a move on," she says. "I've got to trim six hats before tomorrow." Daddy and the buyer share the freshly made slice.

It's the kind of muted rain one doesn't notice on a Sunday, quietly moistening and swelling every porous substance it touches. Passing cars or a gust of wind occasionally whip some gentle drops into a collective frenzy. You might imagine someone in the next room pouring salt into an empty, stainless steel bowl. There are crumbs on the tablecloth. Daddy and the buyer are attempting to finish the crossword. As I open the back door, a short-legged bulldog from across the way stands, confused and drooling; cataracts are forming over both his eyes. As I shake out the cloth some crumbs land on his back. "Go home Champion," I say.

Communication #5. October 2, 1986

I have been lying in bed for three days and nights attempting to dream your dreams.

The window you climbed through to enter my room sits above a precariously attached balcony.

You could have fallen a great distance.

I have been lying in bed for three days and nights attempting to dream your dreams.

Why didn't you use the key I gave you to come in through the door?

Journal entry #6. October 3, 1966

On school days I lie under my woolen blankets, resisting the need to rise. If only I could miraculously appear, washed and dressed, in the warmth of the kitchen, where mama has been baking since dawn.

The bed vibrates from an underground tremor as the earth, unwillingly, yields her contents of time to the miners on the day shift. It's a damp Lancashire morning. If I focus on the space between the curtains, I can see an undulating mass of steam rising from three cooling towers to the north. Drifting across a cloud filled sky, it suffuses into grayness.

Herds of cattle graze on land divided by newly constructed motorways, as empty bottles rattle in the back of a milkcart. The milkman is making his daily rounds. As he goes from house to house he is like a doctor, a bank manager, or a fortuneteller, predicting each household's status by the number of bottles requested that day. Sitting up in bed I pull back a curtain. I imagine the cream separating and rising, pushing against the red and blue foiled tops as the bottles sit, waiting to be brought inside.

The cart is parked outside the Bullethead's house, its back displaying a wrinkled advertisement of a young, pregnant wife handing her husband a glass of milk as he leaves for work. I feel nauseous. Saliva collects in the back of my mouth at the thought of being forced to drink the warm, and often sour, subsidized half-pints handed out during morning recess. Our milkman wears a brace on his leg. Mama says he must have had polio as a child. When we have extra fairy-cakes she leaves him one or two, wrapped up between the empty bottles.

The sound of a scuttle being scraped across the concrete floor of the coal-shed indicates that it's time to get up. My father clears the ashes from the previous day and prepares the grate for today's fire. It takes three or four matches to get it started. Sulphurous fumes mingle with the yeasty odor of bread. I hear his footsteps on the landing as he knocks gently on my door. I pretend to be asleep. He enters the room and removes my school uniform from its hanger and my clean underwear from the chair. He kisses me on the cheek, his unshaven face abrading mine. "Time to get up, poppet." He clears the hair from my forehead. "I'm up, daddy, I'm up." He leaves the

room. Pulling a dressing gown over my shoulders I go to the toilet. My clothes, folded on the back of an armchair, lie warming in front of the fire. I hear voices coming from the kitchen.

"You mean you're not going to work today?"

"The Bullethead fired me on Friday with two weeks severance pay. Decent of him, I suppose."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because I knew it would worry and upset you. I didn't want to ruin the weekend."

"Are you going to look for another job?"

"I don't think I can at the moment."

"Why, are you ill?" My father's voice is barely audible. I think he says, "I must be." A cupboard door bangs, plates clatter.

"That season isn't very prosperous this year and fruitcakes won't pay the mortgage."

The sink trap gurgles as it sucks last night's dishwasher into the drain. "I forgot to tell you the buyer is being transferred." Somebody drops a piece of cutlery. The kettle whistles. "We're terribly behind on the bills. I can barely pay the milkman."

"Hazel, Hazel."

"What?" There's anger in mama's voice.

"Well, there's not much around. Look, I'll go to the job exchange today and if I can't find anything I'll go on the dole."

I cough a few times to let them know I'm within hearing distance, wait for a few seconds, and then enter the kitchen. "Daddy's not working for the Bullethead anymore," she announces. "I know, I'm glad," I answer, going over to my father and putting my arms around him.

"I make a good shepherd's pie," he says half smiling.

"You do, daddy, you do."

Communication #6. October 3, 1986

*Consider my reluctance to submit to the following description:
a man whose fear of imperfection is so profound that it leaves him
incapable of committing to anything: location, career, property, or
intimate relationship.*

*When sensing the proximity of our bodies as we walk side by side,
you quicken the pace, leaving me behind.*

Is it me you are running from?

*My entrances and exits, although not regulated by domestic
unification, are consistent and predictable.*

I remain your lover.

Journal entry #7. December 1, 1966

An unusually thick, gray fog has enveloped the dawn. It is reminiscent of those acrid yellow mornings when the outline of the sycamore tree across the lane was barely visible. Now we burn smokeless fuel. There's strangeness to mama's gait as she walks down the lane to catch the eight o'clock bus every morning. It's as if, hypothetically, her body has bifurcated, but in practice, can't negotiate the process. Her right side strides forth with optimistic movement, while her left extremities pull in the opposite direction. I'm watching her pass through the gate. Now she's concealed. For a month Hazel has worked six days a week in a bookshop in town.

I despise Thursdays. We have a double period of domestic science in school. Today we have an exam on "Etiquette for Every Day." My notes read:

"...the principle that the strong should protect the weak still makes good sense. For instance, in climbing upstairs the woman goes ahead of the man; on the way downstairs he goes ahead of her. The thought is that if she should trip or fall he'll be able to catch her from below. In all cases where two people are going up or

downstairs, or getting on or off a vehicle, the surer footed should maintain the lower position."

Daddy is walking me to the bus stop this morning. "Run out of cigarettes," he said, "just popping out to the newsagent to get another pack." Odd, there's an unopened one on the mantelpiece. The fog has worsened and I can barely see his face. He takes my hand, exerting too much pressure. "You're crushing my fingers."

"Sorry poppet," he says, dropping my hand and putting his arm through mine. At the bustop there's a long queue. A man complains. "Bloody buses are on go-slow if you ask me. Always trying something on." Somebody else at the front of the line adds, "Aye, it's been like this all week, something's up all right." I pull the belt of my gabardine tighter so that it pinches my waist. Still the dampness penetrates. Turning toward my father I say, "There's no point waiting with me, the bus will get here eventually."

"Well, I'd just like to make sure you get on."

"Of course I'll get on, I always do."

"All right poppet, if you want me to go I will. I sometimes forget you're a young woman now. Give me a kiss then." His skin feels wet, as if he's been crying. "Bye dad, see you after school."

"Bye then, bye." Ahead a group of children laugh as their hands misalign in a clapping game.

Communication #7. December 1, 1986

Once upon a time two lovers write and sign a contract.

One of the clauses obligates them to sporadic enactments of separation.

One partner has to sever, unannounced, all relations with the other for undetermined durations.

In preparation for these absences, it is the responsibility of the abandoner to convince the beloved that the other is decreeing the abandonment.

In this way both are the blind keepers of the other's grief, sacrifice, anger, and loss.

Journal entry #8. December 2, 1966

We meet at the bus station. Her bus arrives later than mine, but I don't mind. Mama's become obsessed with buying hats. She says there are thirty-six establishments in town that all stock millinery, including those situated within larger shops. Through an elaborate system of rotation and exchange, she is able to wear a different hat every day, except Sunday. On Sundays, for reasons unexplained, she remains hatless.

Buses collect and discharge a spectacle of bodies with shopping bags, men smoking cigarettes, women with scuffed shoes and tired faces. I search for her familiar features, obscured or concealed by a hat. The task requires the intention of an infant, hungry and in need of food.

Every evening Hazel retrieves a notebook she keeps on a shelf in the pantry. She sits next to the fire, silently bent over detailed descriptions of hats: their dates of purchase and return. Twelve

hatboxes form columns on both sides of her dressing table. Since the buyer's departure there has been a lock on the door to her workroom. I have been standing, waiting today for over two hours. Mama is not coming home. Mama is not coming home.

I wander over to the library, delaying the inevitable. Lucy's familiar face is a comfort. Sometimes she's sitting, eyes closed, books on her lap or scattered around her feet. It might appear to strangers that she's dozing. "You're here awfully late," she says looking up at me. "Have to research something for school?"

"No, not tonight." I reply.

"Why such a worried expression?" Lucy concentrates on my face, her eyes kind and clear, mostly green, one slightly bluer than the other. "It's been a very long day." The muscles in my stomach contract, then cramp. Sensing Lucy's willingness to listen, I continue. "Mama's looking terribly strained these days." She lays her veined and pigmented hands over mine and remarks with irony, "Some of us, now and then, here and there, satisfy requirements.

You know, meet standards. But when we don't we're likely to disappear, one way or another. There's a new fish and chip shop across from the library. I need a break. Would you like to join me for a hot drink? My treat." I hesitate, and then agree.

Daddy will be wondering why mama and I are so late. Lucy and I talk. A skin forms on the surface of my untouched cocoa. My school uniform is beginning to smell like fried fish. I'll have to wash it over the weekend or Miss Robinson will pull me aside on Monday. "A little reminder," she'll say, "you know how important it is to smell fresh and clean." Lucy's fingers trace a sugar spiral on the linoleum tabletop.

Communication #8. December 2, 1986

A hitchhiker and I were driving in a rented car. Eight miles south of the motel where you were waiting for me, the vehicle was forced to a halt. Five large dogs lay in a heap blocking our passage. Alarmed by the sound of screeching breaks, they moved toward the car as if to attack. The hitchhiker leaned close to me, calmly stating that owing to their condition, it was their privilege to strike. I put my foot on the accelerator and drove away.

Journal entry #9. December 3, 1966

Mama didn't come home last night. Daddy says she's gone away for a few days to visit a friend in Cardiff. I know he's lying, or maybe speculating. The milkman collects the empties but doesn't leave any fresh milk. It's Saturday, the day I work at the greengrocery. After bundling leeks I make a request to construct pyramids of lemons and oranges; one misplaced fruit and the whole structure will collapse. Toward the end of the day business dwindles. Mr. Monroe lets me leave early.

The house is dark and uninhabited. Perhaps my father is out shopping? Unlocked doors lead into an odorless kitchen. Perhaps he's gone to meet my mother at the bus station? The embers in the living-room fireplace pale when exposed to electric light. Is it possible he's upstairs, asleep? The bed is unmade but he isn't in it. I search for a note. Four-thirty. Mama would be leaving work now if it were any other day.

I decide to prepare supper and resuscitate the fire: cabbage on the boil, bread buttered, and yesterday's fish ready to re-heat. The knife slips as I gouge the eyes of a potato. Newsprint blackens my wound as old news is twisted into knotted paper rings and fed to the warm ashes. My palms turn gray. I pick up an empty scuttle and walk toward the coal shed. A pinkish light, marking the onset of dusk, catches the yellow in the eyes of a cat as it darts across my path. This is my favorite time of the day, in-between afternoon and evening, in-between one place and another. The door to the shed is slightly ajar. I kick it open with my right foot.

My father's body is hanging from a rope attached to a hook in the ceiling. Networks of light and shadows, cast from almost bare trees, fall upon his bluish face. The intricate patterns are like the surfaces of paintings I'd seen in a Country House, recently opened to the public. I move in closer, then, root to the spot. All sensations in my extremities disappear. Fluids circulating throughout my body rush to protect my vital organs, my heart. The corpse slowly gravitates to the left, exposing my father's collapsed profile to the evening light. I think I see his lips part.

December 3, 1986

Dear Lucas,

Your unread letters are scattered on the kitchen table, your messages accumulated on the answering machine. Thank you for the Xeroxed articles and the Christmas cactus. I was unaware of the plant's Brazilian ancestry. The key to mama's workroom arrived just as the locksmith was selecting his saw. Mama's offerings are always uncannily timed. The locksmith smiled and departed, leaving me with mama's belated gift. In slow motion I inserted the key into a mechanism I assume has been untouched for twenty years.

Today is the anniversary of my father's suicide. His death is a skin I wear to keep me warm. My body is a blue icicle drawing the colour from your lips as you attempt to kiss me. How much are you willing to endure? You leave next month? I have imagined renewing my passport, being inoculated, giving my notice at work and finding a tenant for my flat. The house has been sold and mama is settled in Dorset. I went to the dentist yesterday. She has a large aquarium

in the waiting room. A flat, black fish with red stripes was swimming in rapid and continuous circles.

Carefully avoiding the other fish, it defied every corner, pushing against the surface of the glass. Suddenly I had an overwhelming urge to reach into the water and squeeze the life from its body.

When did you become an expert diver? Brazil seems so far away, so unknown. A predictable choice, you might say. I cannot imagine myself harvesting seaweed on an isolated peninsula. A lucrative business you insist.

With apprehension I pushed the door open. Stripped bare of furniture and whitewashed, it contained nothing but a pillar of hatboxes, situated in front of the bay window. Within each box was an exquisitely made hat: a green, heart-shaped turban headdress in silk and linen; a brown, high-crowned velvet toque; a wide brimmed, red trilby; a straw colored sombrero; a large dipped, brimmed fur; a

purple felt tricorne; a black and yellow pillbox; a richly embroidered, low crowned bowler, and a blue, muslin skullcap. An inscription stitched into the lining of the cap read: "Forgive me for preserving pain like a habit or a dowry".

December 12, 1986

I have been eating, sleeping, and generally residing in this room for the past eight days. Today, the ninth day, the hat column was dismantled. I am writing to you with the blue muslin skullcap securely covering my unwashed hair. The walls seem evanescent, the ceiling uncertain. Underfoot the floorboards are a resilient, dispersed blur. I smell like wild iris. My anatomy is an orchestra without a conductor.

In one of the articles you sent, the author reported that in places where there is a continuous fluctuation between high and low tides, seaweed can reproduce itself up to fourteen feet per week. Was it really the first form of life?

Two Jamaican women and their adopted children have bought mama's house. Central heating is to be installed, a greenhouse built where the coalshed stood. Once seaweed is no longer wet, bacteria

builds up within twenty-four hours. Refrigerated vans must stand
by, waiting to rush a diver's collections to laboratories where it can
be freeze dried. A light snow is falling but not sticking.
Apprehension is now my only restraint and I have little experience
in existing without its bitter pains. Will I be involved in every
aspect of the operation or just collection? Does it sound as though I
have made a decision. I have.

