

**UNDER**

**WORLD**









UNDER

WORLD


DAVID

AUSTEN

DUNDEE CONTEMPORARY ARTS







**NO PASSENGERS  
BEYOND  
THIS POINT**





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# INTRODUCTION



BETH BATE

“— if a painting really works down in your heart and changes the way you see, and think, and feel, you don’t think, ‘oh, I love this picture because it’s universal.’ ‘I love this painting because it speaks to all mankind.’ That’s not the reason anyone loves a piece of art. It’s a secret whisper from an alleyway. *Psst, you. Hey kid. Yes you.*”

Donna Tartt, *The Goldfinch* (2013)

This publication accompanies *Underworld*, a major new exhibition by David Austen at Dundee Contemporary Arts. As DCA enters its twentieth year, and a new chapter in our organisational history, we are delighted to bring this constellation of Austen’s practice to Scotland for the first time.

Austen’s art is the whisper in our ear that Tartt describes, inviting us down this alleyway, to wander into his beautiful and melancholic imagination. Filled with love, both hopeful and lost, an unmistakably human ache, compassion for our mistakes and physical flaws, and a dark, disarming humour, Austen’s world is a liminal space for us to venture into, accompanied by distant, sometimes familiar figures we meet along the way.

The forms of Austen’s works are diverse: oil painting on heavy flax canvas, delicate watercolours on paper, suspended sculptural objects, printed texts, cinematic film projects, colourful collages, found photographs, and both figurative and abstract drawings. For *Underworld*, all are drawn together on what Austen describes as “... a journey. There are lanterns to light our way. We see naked ghosts, violent twisted trees, scraped roadside words, a ships-crew of men who have seen better days, abstracts from a burnt out retina, an ocean of stars, a city of fractured coloured glass. My work explores love and yearning, loss and grief, memory and dream and the unreliability of these things. I make my work with exactitude and attention: it’s what the world deserves.”

When Austen first visited DCA’s galleries just over two years ago, with their Scottish east coast light-filled expanse, he asked me how we might create intimacy in the exhibition — intimacy as a whole experience, for the viewer and the viewed, a two way exchange. This understanding of our need for physical and emotional closeness helps us to not just see his works but to feel them. We are enveloped in this strange, endearing world.

Filled with lost souls, bodies adrift and stories of violence, this remains a space borne of tenderness and generosity, where we are invited to gaze upwards to celestial heights, to allow ourselves to be filled with awe. Austen’s references are rich and varied, from literature to film noir, ancient myth to architecture, but are as likely also to be drawn from his immediate surroundings; a sign passed, a misread headline, words which, when isolated, take on new meaning, titles for unseen scenes.

In Austen's studio, amongst the paintings, text pieces and collages, books are piled high and it is impossible to spend an afternoon with him and not have them pressed into your hands. A publication of photographs of Pina Bausch performances, a Rupert Thomson novel, a collection of Scott Walker's lyrics... The world seems sonorous, there for us to draw into our lives. His work speaks of weight and gravity, of the passing of time, of movement and fragility, of stories real and imagined, of lust and care, of connection and loneliness.

Austen's work has inspired exceptional writing throughout his career and we are grateful to George Vasey and Lavinia Greenlaw who have contributed remarkable new texts for this publication. Having spent many hours with Austen in his studio, Vasey's essay gives us the opportunity to dive down deeper into Austen's practice and into these otherworldly spaces. Greenlaw's piece unfurls as a poetic response to Austen's images, bringing in H el ene Cixous and Virginia Woolf as additional voices, as we learn of a body in transition and its position as outsider, moving around in the darkness. We are also pleased to include the original text by Rupert Thomson sent to Austen, that forms the basis of the film *The story of my death as told to me by another*.

Our thanks to the many lenders whose generosity has made this exhibition possible. We are, as ever, grateful for the ongoing support from Creative Scotland and Dundee City Council for all of our activity, which reaches hundreds of thousands of people every year. We particularly owe a special debt of gratitude to Richard and Florence of Ingleby Gallery who have been tremendously supportive throughout the development of this exhibition.

Finally, of course, our heartfelt thanks to David Austen for his deep care, his commitment and for sharing his work and his world with us and our audiences.

“...as we rise from the organic and sink back ignominiously into the organic,  
it is a glory and a privilege to love what Death doesn't touch.”

*ibid.*

Beth Bate

Director, Dundee Contemporary Arts

- for Siobhan Dundee -









UNDER  
WORLD







# PETRIFYING SOAP BUBBLES

ON THE WORK OF DAVID AUSTEN

GEORGE VASEY

I once interviewed the oceanographer Don Walsh for a project I was working on and it didn't go very well. Walsh — alongside Jacques Piccard — was the first person to visit the Mariana Trench in 1960. Walsh and Piccard were the only people to have descended to the deepest part of the ocean until the filmmaker James Cameron made the trip in 2012. The trench is in the Western Pacific and is roughly 11km deep. It remains largely uncharted and obscure, a place that continues to haunt our imagination.

For a world that is seemingly quantified and accounted for, the ocean remains opaque, countering the assumption that we have mastered and mapped the planet. We can imagine the light of the submarine illuminating the depths of the ocean like a film projector through a dark auditorium. When I interviewed Walsh, I asked him what it felt like to be the first person to see the bottom of the sea. The question confused him, and as he recounted his memories from the day he told me that his concerns about cabin pressure left little time for feelings. I expected to be regaled by his accounts of extraordinary encounters and ended up hearing about pressure gauges.

I wonder what David Austen would make of the bottom of the ocean? *Underworld, Silence Beach, Ocean, Edge of the World*. His titles reveal a fascination with the natural world, and his nomadic work — encompassing painting, printmaking, drawing, sculpture and filmmaking — frequently portrays images of the sea, stars, the moon and the sun. His iconography is pervaded by a certain romanticism, tempered by a chilled and stylish painterly economy. The sun is denoted by a yellow circle; the sea as a dilating collection of lines on a monochromatic surface. His formalism possesses the brevity of a haiku.

*A place of love and fear...*

Collectively, the works form a cinematic vocabulary. Diminutive figures painted in watercolour take the role of protagonists, abstract geometric gouaches offer a scenography and large dense paintings of epigrammatic texts provide snippets of dialogue and suggestive titles. Working in series, each component furnishes his filmic oeuvre with its own particular tenor. Austen makes literary art, translated through the formal vocabulary of Modernist painting. No line is wasted, and there is no illusionism in the work; it's all on the surface. The liquidity of watercolour and rigidity of oil paint — each medium does its thing and no more.

In the figurative watercolours we encounter a cast of naked characters, deftly captured with the acuity of a few brief marks. Sometimes alone and often coupled up, they variously stand, kiss, piss, screw and mess about. Beyond a few simple props there is no landscape, and — while each figure is wedded to a gravitational space — there is no

horizon line. There is a slapstick and anecdotal quality to much of this series, the body becoming the agent and subject to acts of sensuality and violence in each scene. To paraphrase one of Austen's own titles, these characters seem to occupy a land of 'love and fear'; a space of unabashed hedonism where shame and contrition lie just beneath the surface.

*As light as a painting, as heavy as an image...*

Besides the figure, the paper is left unmarked. I'm reminded of David Toop's anecdote about his teacher Harry Thubron making his students draw radiators, asking them to pay particular attention to the space between the pipes. The space around Austen's figures is like the gap in the radiator. Like a pause just before a chorus, like John Cage's silence, like the space in Japanese woodblock printing — it creates the conditions for possibility. Gaps, absences and silences are frequent motifs through much of the work. What possibilities lie under these surfaces? The blank paper — just like the ocean — oscillates between metaphorical opacity and potentiality. Can we see Austen as the love-struck protagonist in Jean Vigo's *L'Atalante*? In this 1934 film, a recently married captain of a river barge is told by his wife that he will see the person he loves when he puts his head under water. At a tumultuous moment in their marriage he dives into the canal where he eagerly awaits visions of his wife. In the film, as in Austen's art, water takes on a theological and transformative state.

*Words fall with a muted violent thump...*

Austen's oil paintings often incorporate singular and resonant figurative images such as Medusa trees, hearts and geometric motifs that suggest architectural fascia or stained glass. Other works encompass textual statements in the same bold sans-serif typeface. He persistently uses thick flax canvas redolent of sail cloth and paints large monochromatic areas with tiny brushes. The oil paint encrusts the heavy tooth of the canvas providing a dry and brittle surface. There is a ritualistic quality to the way that Austen persistently employs the same techniques and approach; repetition becomes meditative.

*Ocean*, 2018, incorporates an irregular pattern of stylised stars. The surface of the canvas trembles with an asymmetrical pattern, like a Bridget Riley gone slightly awry. The stars continue off the edge of the canvas suggesting an infinite patterning. Of course, the stars we see at night have often long since imploded and what we are viewing is the light that has travelled millions of years to reach us. In a further act of lyrical resonance, Austen has used a paint pigment ground from charred animal bones. Dead stars and dead animals. A star can guide us and fool us — send us in the right direction and down the wrong path. It is, then, a particularly apt symbol for the act of painting: looking, believing and day dreaming.

Austen's art asks us to stare up at the night sky and down at the soil under our feet, to look right in front of us and for things we'll never find.

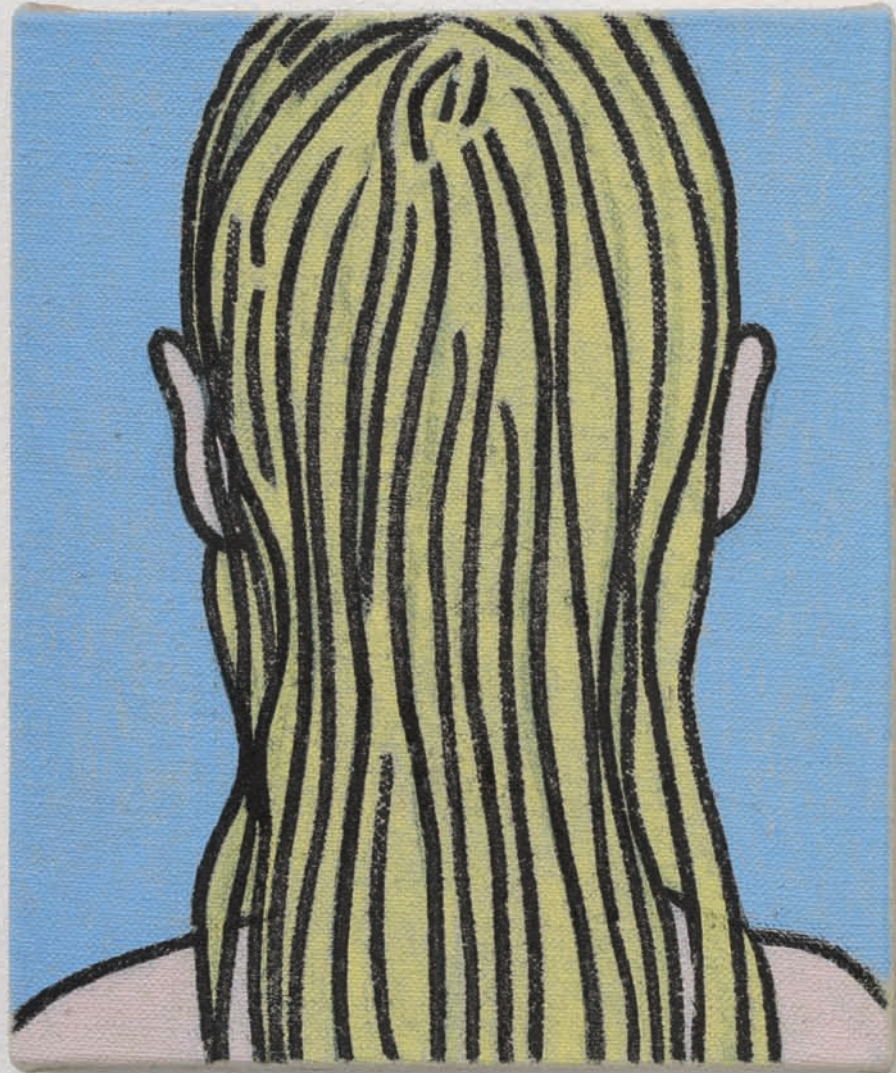
In the 16mm film *The story of my death as told to me by another*, 2013-19, we find Austen in minimal clown make up. Wearing a nautical jacket, he is redolent of a figure from the early 20th century. His face is painted white with blocks of black marks over his eyes and mouth. We view his body from above as it floats in black space. As we move in, the character utters a brief monologue written by the novelist Rupert Thomson inspired by a dream Thomson had of Austen's violent demise. Is the clown a self-portrait or a mask? Is he coming back to life or staging his own death?

Time and travel are the durable themes of Austen's work. From the brevity of the watercolours to the painstaking surfaces of the oil paintings, we travel into space and descend under water, are transported into distant memories and projections of potential futures. Austen makes the instant indelible — a trapeze artist in mid-flight, a figure painted while the artist holds his breath, an image read in seconds that unravels over a lifetime. Painting is like trying to petrify a soap bubble.

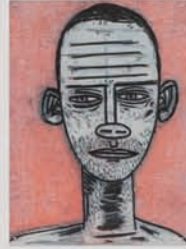
*Submerged light beams in dark oceans...*

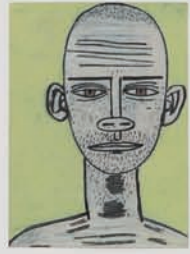
Time, though, has not been kind to the characters in *The Heads*, 2016-19: a cast of seemingly identical looking figures that could be self-portraits but serve just as well as cyphers or archetypes. Unkempt and unshaven, their surfaces are whitewashed and they bear the accumulations of re-drawing and overpainting. They could be washed ashore onto a desert island or dishevelled after months out at sea. Like down and out Argonauts, Austen's portraits form a motley crew. Travel has its consequences, and we don't always find what we're looking for. Can we read the artist's biography for narrative clues? His father was in the Navy and he is of a generation whose formative years were framed by the space race and moon landing. Perhaps the lesson in Austen's work is not so much about where he is from but where he wants to go.

From the sea to the sky, looking at this planet from above and below. What does this attentive looking reveal? The first full photograph of the earth, taken in 1972, captures the planet from outer space as it floats in a black monochrome. The astronaut Jack Schmitt famously said that when he took the photograph and contemplated the earth from above he felt tiny. Austen's studio takes on the form of a submarine or spaceship illuminating the depths of the world through the light beam of his curiosities. This captures something of his art, of gazing at something that threatens to overwhelm us, of naked figures running around an Edenic garden trying to make sense of the world and ending up in all sorts of bother.



















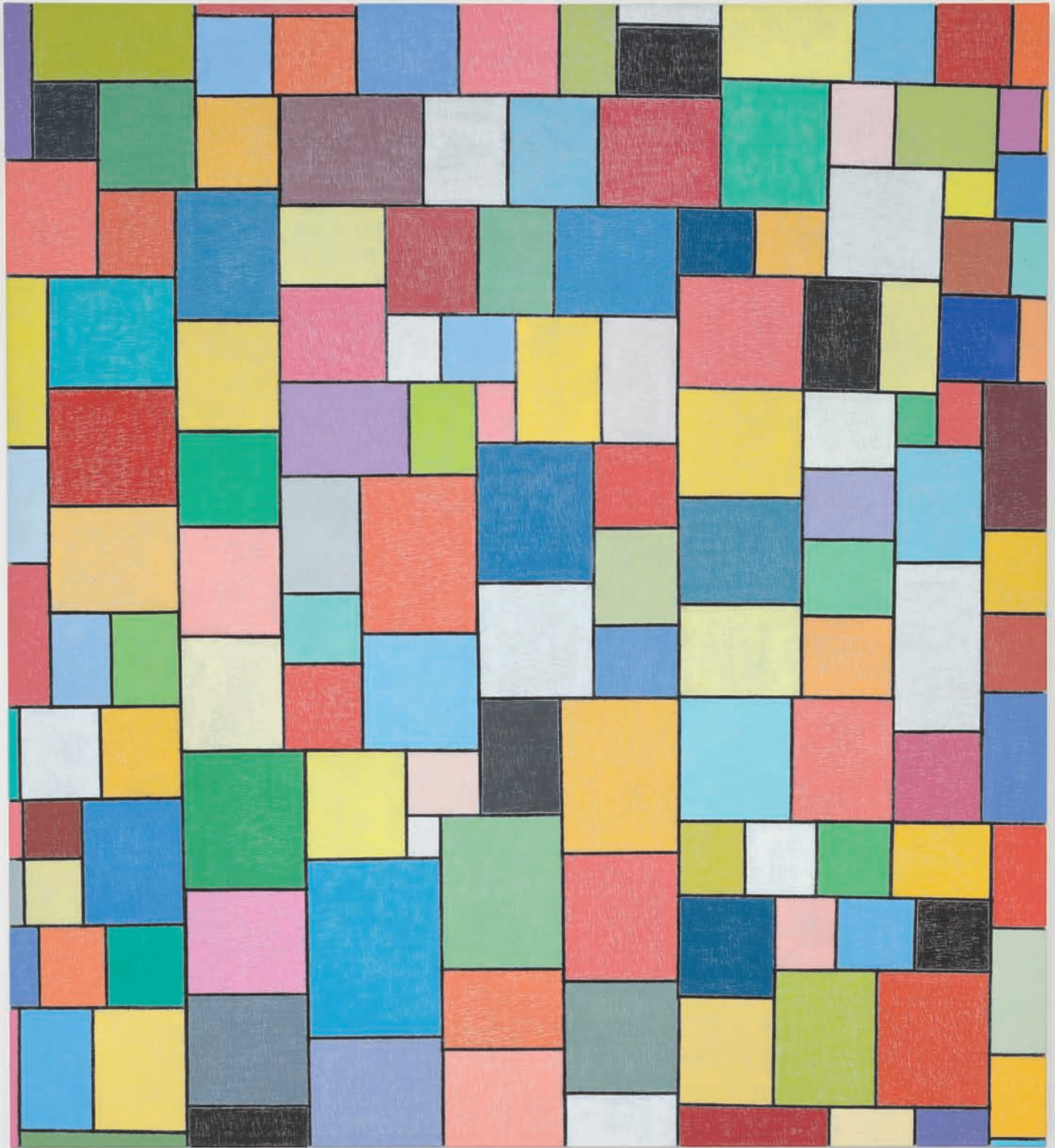












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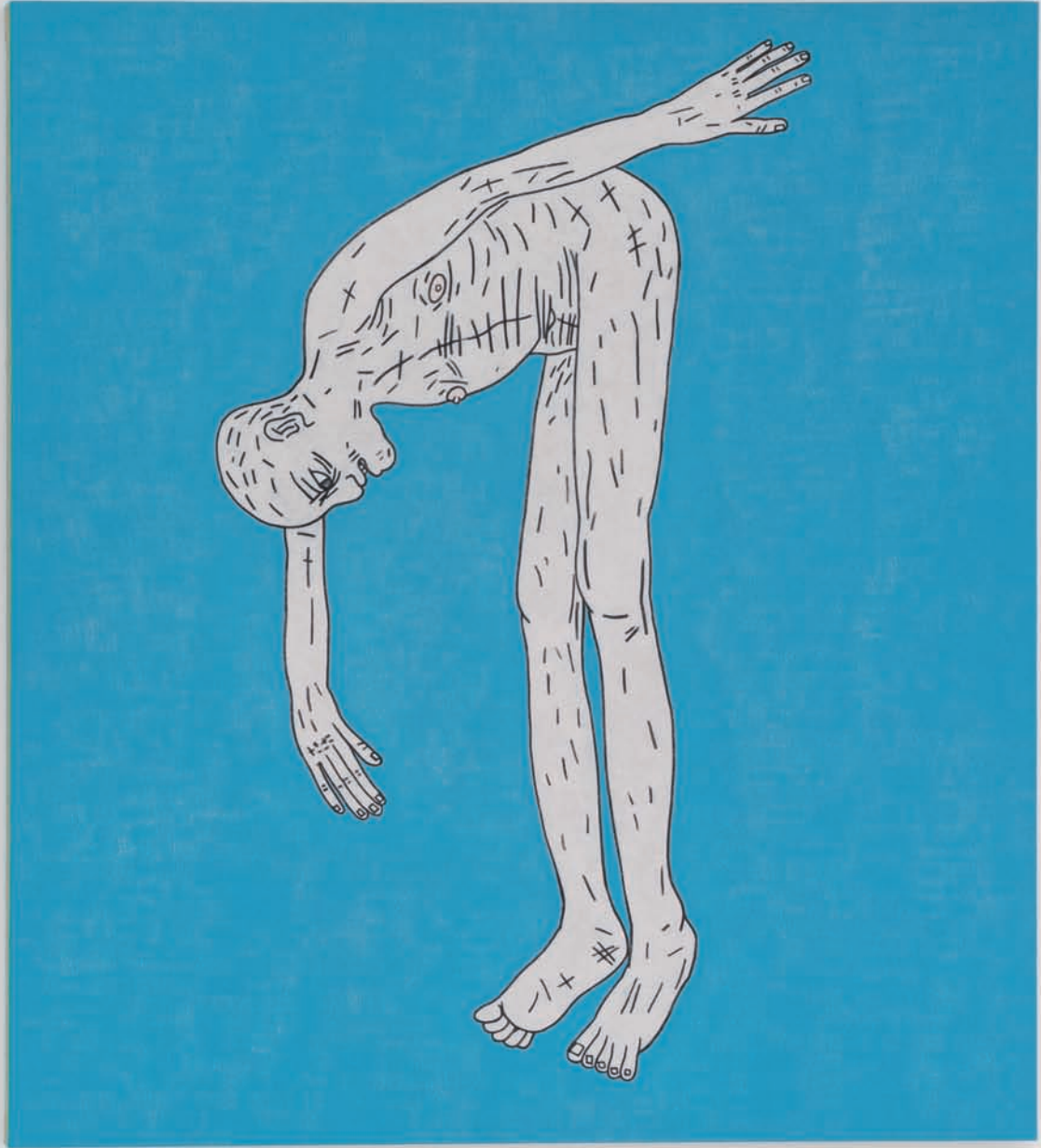




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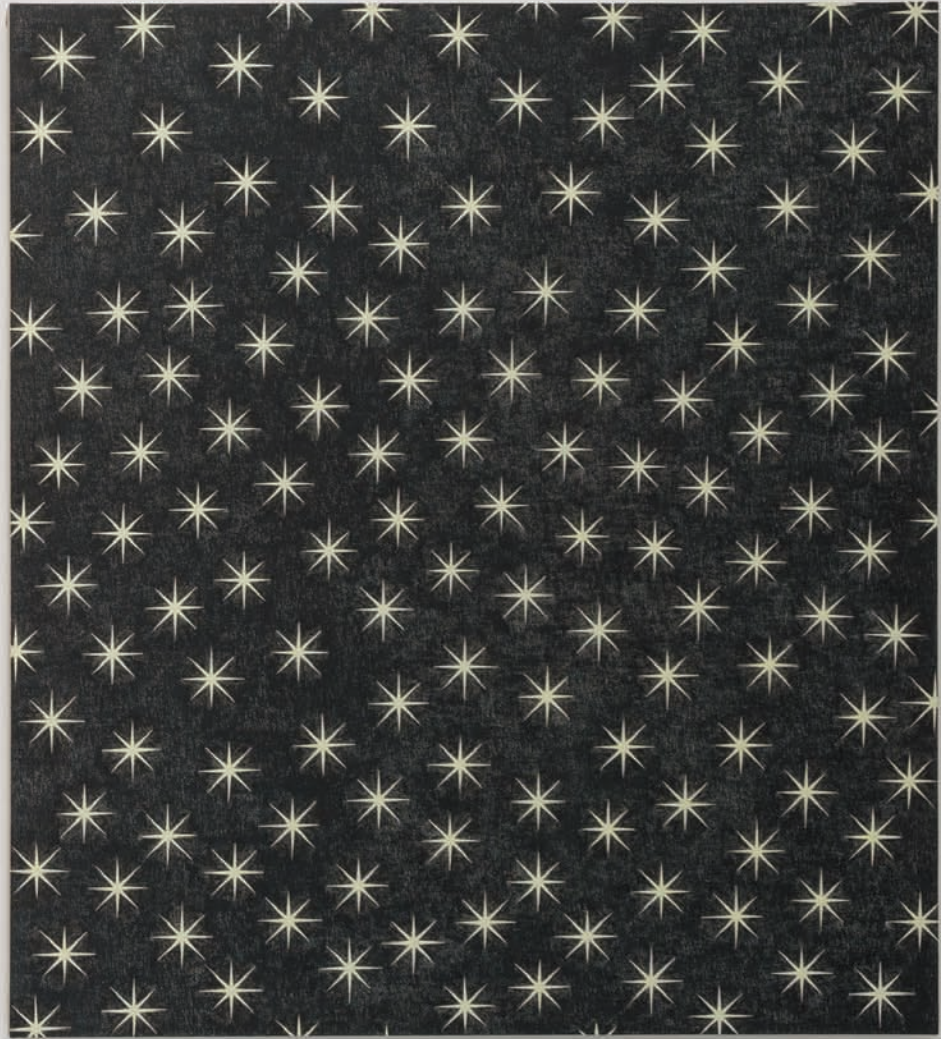














**NIGHT SWALLOWED  
MY HAND IN FRONT  
OF MY FACE**

**LAVINIA GREENLAW**

1.

We left the city on a January afternoon and drove into darkness that settled heavily as we turned off the main road into ancient lanes overhung by low trees. I told myself this was the magical passage of fairytales, a tunnel through which I had to pass in order to reach my new home, but I felt as if I were being carried away. As the car's headlamps swept those crooked branches, they seemed to rise up to stop us entering (or passing through).

I was still a creature, looking outwards from a body I understood (if at all) as electricity or weather. My imperatives were acute and I struggled with containment. I did not apply words to myself and so my aspects and processes had no form. My hair was long and tangled. It fell in snakes.

Come daylight, this new world was revealed as flat fields. The sky was no longer backdrop but most of what there was. A brief, blinding winter sun cast monumental shadows of oaks and pylons across frozen earth. These were the gods of this flatness. As far as I could see, nothing was happening. It was as if whatever I looked at turned to stone.

Countryside darkness was the velvet curtain of picture-books. When I approached the house at night, a distance of a hundred yards could fall endlessly open. I hesitated before wading in. Not long before we left the city, my brother and I had gone through a phase of slipping out of the house at dusk. We weren't going anywhere but turned back to spy through the windows. We watched our mother tidying up the kitchen, our sister playing a game, our father reading, our little brother lying on the floor chattering to himself. We were out there in the not-quite-dark looking in on the not-quite-life of early evening. The point was not to see but to become unseen. Perhaps we were also testing the idea of stepping outside the family and home. It felt like discovering a new power but had I looked in the windows and seen no one, had the lights gone off, I would have been terrified. I wanted to be able to step outside my life but only if I could easily step back. There is no point in being invisible unless someone is expecting to see you.

In their twenties, with both parents dead, Virginia Woolf and her siblings rented a house in Cornwall two miles from Talland House, where they had spent their childhood summers. They arrived at night and immediately walked up the hill to Talland, which they hadn't seen for ten years.

There was the house, with its two lighted windows... all, so far as we could see, as though we'd left it that morning. But yet, as we knew well, we could go no further; if we advanced the spell was broken. The lights were not our lights; the voices were the voices of strangers. We hung there like ghosts in the shade of the hedge, & at the sound of footsteps we turned away.<sup>1</sup>

Those lights that invite us in only do so if they are 'our lights'. Otherwise we must remain in the dark, at an unintrusive distance, able to bear the fact that as far as the lights are concerned we do not exist.

2.

Night swallowed my hand in front of my face. (I was starting to learn that parts of myself could slip out of sight, could refuse me.) Not wanting this new life, I welcomed the feeling that I might dissolve into the blackness. I had yet to be fixed by anyone's gaze. There was freedom in this but it meant that I could not fix anyone, could not keep them.

For now she need not think of anybody. She could be herself, by herself. And that was what now she often felt the need of – to think; well not even to think. To be silent; to be alone. All the being and the doing, expansive, glittering, vocal, evaporated; and one shrunk, with a sense of solemnity, to being oneself, a wedge-shaped core of darkness, something invisible to others... and this self having shed its attachments was free for the strangest adventures.<sup>2</sup>

As if being free requires you to give up being visible, even to yourself. Unattached, you are unanchored and undescribed.

3.

My body seemed inconsequential and hard to define. The world was at a powerful remove and I was vague about points of contact. I would forget what I had in my hand and rarely noticed what was under my feet. My overall experience of others was one of deflection — mine or theirs. Girls would point out that I had an ink stain on my shirt or marmalade in my hair. I couldn't see myself and it did not occur to me to want to do so. (Or I refused to.)

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<sup>1</sup> 'Cornwall, 1905', Virginia Woolf, *A Passionate Apprentice: The Early Journals of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Mitchell A. Leaska (1990)

<sup>2</sup> *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf (1927)

Girls who ironed their hair each morning laughed at my head of snakes. I had been seen because I did not belong, and so I cut my hair and changed my form. I wanted to be anyone — as in no one. I made myself take on the shape of these girls. I didn't want to be them, just to look like them enough not to attract attention.

Hold still we're going to do your portrait, so that you can begin looking like it right away.<sup>3</sup>

4.

The village had a scattering of lamp-posts but after dark you needed a torch to walk down the main road. There were regular power cuts that first winter. The newspapers were full of pictures of families gathered around a vague source of radiance, looking plucky and happy and playing a board game or cards (as if spending more time together had to be restorative).

We are not people of the hearth. We've learnt how to carry off heat and light, and build our homes accordingly with corridors and staircases, in a series of small rooms. So when heat and light failed us, we did what we could to preserve our habits and arrangements. We were allocated candles, lanterns or oil lamps. Each carried their own small source of light off into their own private dark.

5.

You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her.<sup>4</sup>

And what if you are inside the light looking out? We'd moved from a city street shaded by large trees to the middle of a village. My room looked onto the green. When I turned on the light I couldn't see anything out there and so assumed myself unseen. One day my father said that someone had mentioned seeing me lying in bed reading late one night. He thought it was funny but I was mortified. I found thicker curtains in the attic, devised elaborate ways to test their opacity, and drew them even during the day. The spell of invisibility, of slipping outside, of seeing nothing in reflection had been broken. From then on, I could not help but see myself and could not imagine myself unseen.

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<sup>3</sup> 'The Laugh of the Medusa', Hélène Cixous, trans. Keith Cohen & Paula Cohen, *Signs*, Vol. 1, No. 4. (Summer, 1976)

<sup>4</sup> Cixous, *ibid.*

The self-consciousness of adolescence was a wrenching into light. I stared into the mirror at flaws made monstrous by the scale of my attention. All my energy went into vigilance against exposure. I turned myself up, invested in surfaces — hair, make-up, clothes — and learnt not only to meet the gaze of my enemies but to stare so fiercely that I could turn them back on themselves.

Over-exposed, like an x-ray,  
Who do you think you are? <sup>5</sup>

To be seen too clearly is to be reduced. Much of you gives way, becoming transparent and so invisible. Only the basic lines remain — anything from a sketch to a diagram depending on the level of attention and the determination of that gaze — what it accepts and refuses.

My eyes started to fail. The child who would not see now could not see. I peered at the blackboard and operated by guesswork while people — friendly or otherwise — receded from view. The world became fuzzy and contracted. How to stare at what you can't see clearly? Now it was I who was being turned to stone.

6.

I started to turn myself down again. I dyed my hair and clothes black. I stopped making noise to the point of speechlessness. I shut down at school and found myself unable to learn or remember ('not even to think'). Dispensing with 'all the being and the doing', I simplified into silence and darkness. If I was lucky, I could make this a starting point. I was now 'free for the strangest adventures'.

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<sup>5</sup> 'Medusa', Sylvia Plath, *Ariel* (1965)





BURN THE  
WITCH ON  
THE STAIRS







## The Story Of My Death As Told To Me By Another

This is what I saw. There were four of them, maybe five. All men. They came trudging past me, single file. Unshaven. Grubby. It was in a scrap yard. Rusty cars, bits of old machinery. A fridge, I think. The ground just mud. They weren't talking when they came past. Their heads were down. They looked tired, like they'd been up all night drinking. Maybe they'd slept rough. The one in front, his eyes slid sideways at me, but he didn't stop. He had a stovepipe hat and hobnail boots. A jacket with grease stains on it. Another one was carrying a piece of glass. Funny shape it was. Not square, like a window. More like a blade. And the glass was wet. Water dripping off it. Blood too. That was when I knew something bad had happened. They'd tried to wash the blood off, then they'd given up. Couldn't be bothered. They went past me, and they were gone. That's when I saw you. Across a dirt track was a high hedge made of sticks. You were lying on the top, spreadeagled. You were dead. You had some nice clothes on. Pale-blue jacket with old brass buttons. White shirt half undone. A touch of the sailor about you. Your eyes were closed, and you had a smile on your face. Arms flung wide. Shirt untucked, your belly showing. Very pale skin. There was nothing I could do for you. I looked up at you lying there, and I was quiet. And that was all.

Ron T. —  
June 16<sup>th</sup> 2013.

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David Austen

*Underworld*

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Jessica Reid: Head of Communications & Visitor Services  
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Caley McGillvary, Chloe Milne, Jennifer Phin (Maternity Cover): Communications Officers  
Helen Macdonald: Communications Coordinator  
Lazaros Zarafonitis: Visitor Services Manager  
Jessica McGoff: Acting Visitor Services Manager

Graeme Wallace: Head of Finance & Company Secretary  
Lynda Rourke: Finance Administrator  
Jenny Logan: HR Officer  
Lewis Smith: Sales & Retail Manager  
Nicola MacRae: Retail Supervisor

Louis Cruickshank: Operations Assistant  
Murray Cairncross, Sean Fitzgerald, Jackie Handy, Ralph McCann: Facilities Assistants

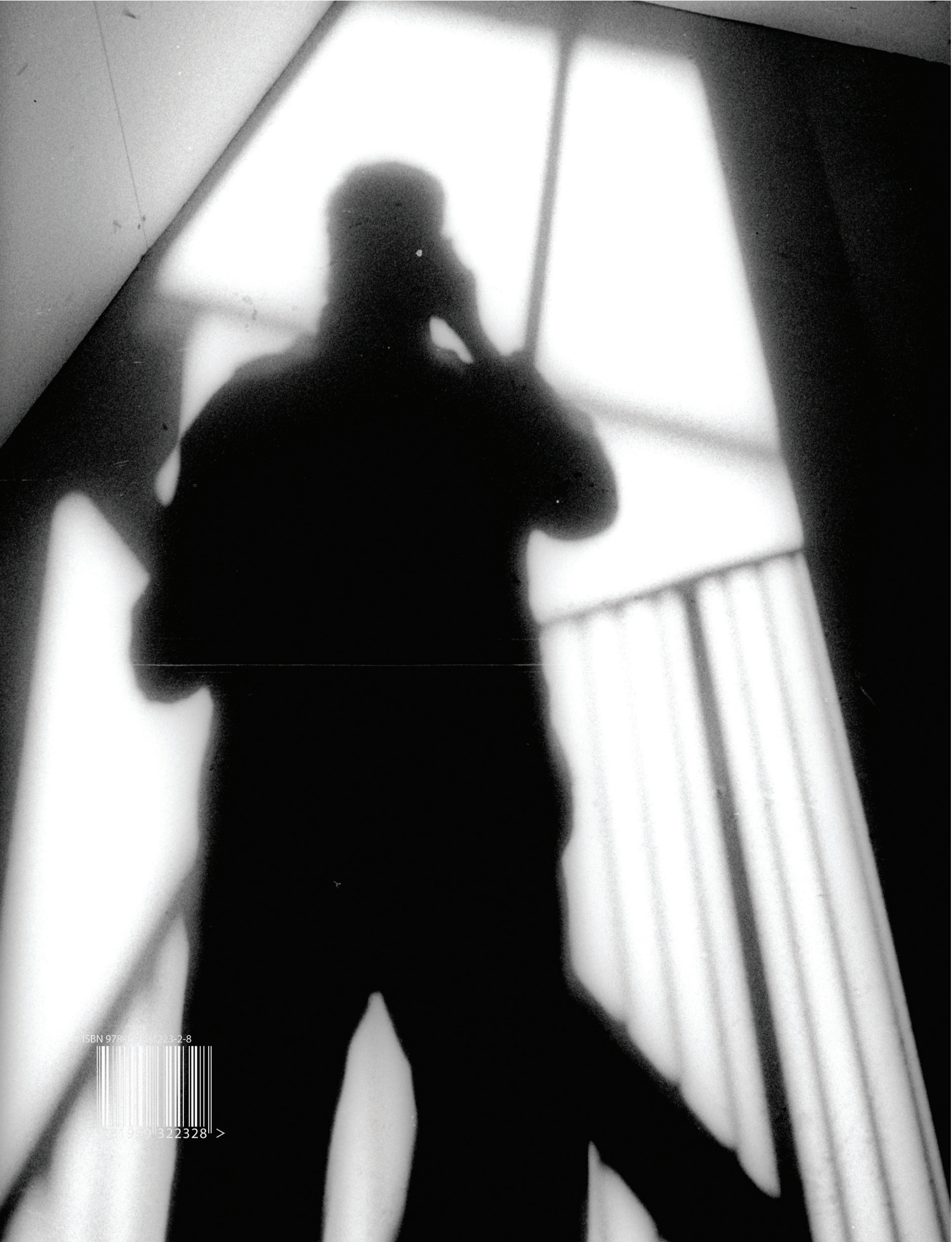
Alison Anderson, Ross Batchelor, Anita Bhadani, Benn Brown, Nicole Cumming,  
Jo Delautre, Emer Dobson, Michael Fenton, Lorna Fleming, Taylor Flynn, Jorja Follina,  
Mhairi Goldthorp, Tarka Heath, Clare Heggie, Catriona Laggan, Joung Lee, Dana Leslie,  
Nicola MacRae, Amy McCoull, Andrew McSorley, Jenna Maudlin, Louise McFarlane,  
Natasha McKendry, Katie New, Laura Ould, Elspeth Owen-Hughes, Eva Parkinson,  
Eleanor Peters, Christie Thomson, Maria Tolia, Kirsten Wallace: Visitor Assistants

#### DCA20 PATRONS

Murray Bremner  
Murray Chalmers  
Siobhan Dundee  
Sigrid and Stephen Kirk  
Thomas Veit

#### DCA PATRONS

Tim Allan  
And those who wish to remain anonymous



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**DAVID**

**AUSTEN**