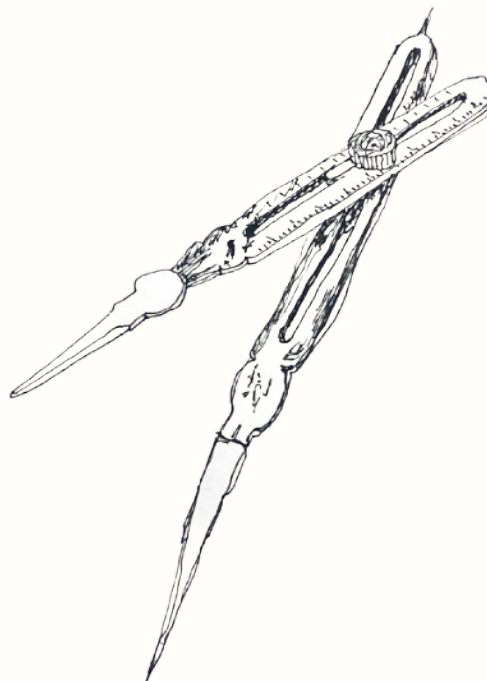




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## **Isonzo River, 1915**

Massimo Valentino Mitchell

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MASSIMO VALENTINO MITCHELL

## Isonzo River, 1915

Fragile, the body may begin  
To confront its eyes  
And terrorise  
The windows to the soul.  
O how weak is the skin,  
To turn on blood vessels within  
To let parasites be pasted in.

How would it feel to be ripped in two?  
Your tongue to fork  
Your nails to rasp  
Your fingertips  
And your teeth to file  
Away your lips?

To think Trieste,  
So warm a name to me,  
Could sound so cloying  
To those who were mine  
Who lived in hill and sea  
And preferred Trst  
And on čevapčići  
Would dine  
And caper in the karst.



And the other me?  
From Poreč. No,  
Parenzo.  
Who in some stagnant trench  
Bent drenched fingers  
Towards the seamed scalp of  
The boy from Rovigno. No,  
Rovinj.

And the stench  
Of death surrounded them  
And he thought of Maria  
And he thought of Marija  
And the smell of čevapčići  
Would come to them both  
Among the blood and phlegm.

And I declare  
That I cannot speak  
What my ancestors spoke  
And their land I call  
Madrepatria, not  
Domovina. All  
Words are nought

To describe  
The phantom pain  
Of something lost before birth  
Like tears in rain.



NOAH ROUSE

## Tonal elegies: for lives lived half-remembered and thus perhaps half-lived

I. On Alzheimer's, on moving, on remembering and re-remembering and consistently forgetting.

*What remains?* I have asked myself of previous itinerant lives. There is a sense, but the words do not take form. I think of the one who asks questions and smiles and is confused, maybe confused.

What does the shape of a life look like after so many years, after children and grandchildren, after skeletons in the closets that are neatly folded and put up in the attic or forgotten at the base of the chimney? I wonder whether she forgets to pray, or if she remembers. Do we forget her in our prayers? I wonder how her body feels to her, and her to her body, how much it remembers when the recollection falters, or whether it reaches out to support its reflection when she feels dizzy and steadies herself by the mirror. Can it hold her hand and kiss her eyelids when she is scared, or wakes at night, or will wake or not wake?

*What remains?*

Do her half-believed questions invite us to come to ourselves, or do they distract us from her? "*Come away, pull away*". What is being lost in the corridors of her mind, what memories are to be found as they slip away, leaving only warm indentations on the lives of others, lives of

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those who came before. Soon the pages of the photo book will be stuck together.

I sat on the balcony in Beirut and looked out at the pigeons circling in their widening gyre. I remember the robin in the graveyard in Cambridge where I sat where no one knew, or walked in circles and circles and half-trod paths. My mind weaves in and out of memories. I think of the cat we had. Pictures and places thread themselves together at unexpected seams. Things fall apart. I remember so strongly the cold air and the church tower pointing to the moon; the train worked its way across the chest of the hill and it all felt so overwhelmingly real. Cragged like a cliff. Like stumbling into another person's real life and finding it to be your own. Somewhere a black crow circled on the axis of its head—I put it so well at the time, but now I cannot remember how.

Is it a sin to spiral and circle, and weave and unweave if the birds do so?

Is it a sin to feel the tug of the stomach as we turn the corner and leave the mind to its momentum? What comes of this unravelling?

Mosques, and monasteries, and churches. Empty fields and the lizard underneath the rock. Heavy incense that burns the nose and eyes. The child thurifer, half-confident and half-panicked with his cold ashes, refusing to ask for help. Discovering that the body was going to be burnt. Standing in the doorway while he forgets I'm there. Ferries and graveyards and foreign families. Instructions for the planting of ashes. Half-serious and now half-remembered.

Time folds in on itself, it warps. Words are written but not known; so many further are known but not written. Somewhere there is a logic



and a logos, one so obvious as to be mis-seen and misremembered.

Somewhere a desert cliff is warm in the setting sun. A man takes photographs of us in the sunset. Somewhere we sit and write postcards, half written and half rushed on half-empty stomachs. We forget stamps or addresses. Hers never arrive. I sit and stare at the stars painted above, in the half-light dust and the door rusted off its hinges. I did not know the saint was there. How many arms were leant into, hands held, kisses given, that are now swept away. I wonder if he still sits in the mosque, if he ever thinks of me or how I couldn't understand him. Swept away but swept subjectively. For all remains, gently placed and wrapped in its moment. Like a turban that is twisted and retwisted—all things fold in on each other. How many have come before you?

Who will keep the postcards on the kitchen fridge? Where will they go?

II. *Dis-tra[ct]ere*: to pull apart.

I want to write beautiful things. I want to be able to write about the pulling apart, the digging in of heels, the placing of a small hand inside mine, the pull of traction, and trains, and that all things are being held. I fear that I am not writing beautiful things. I want lucid reflections: on leaving, on moving, on remembering and re-membering, and what comes from pulling apart and saying goodbye. And yet here I find myself—pulling in, pulling from, pulling at, but not quite sure where my feet are, or what is on the other side. I sit with the shuffled pages of my life in front of me. It's not quite legible. We like to play with long words, so that only we will understand what we mean, so that in years to come we may catch glimpses of things we never knew we had written. I want to write beautiful things, things which make people

smile and feel like the warmth of sunlight on a cold lake. Instead my head turns at the lack of form, at words and colours and allusions thrown together. I sense he would not be pleased because the biggest thing is missing.

*Dis-tra[ct]ere*. What about pulling together the remnants of this pulling? Do we climb out of the spaces between the tracts, or do we step aside? This catachretic attribution of self. Big words cause attrition. It's romantic to leave a life behind, to use big words which hide meaning in their consonants and vowels. A topography of double meanings and isolation as we pull out of the station by ourselves into a moonlit and cold night, forgetting what we want to say and saying it well. Perhaps this is the essence of elegy: to trace the contours of a body whose memory has given way to meaning. To say goodbye to previous selves, and the one who forgets, and smiles, and looks scared, and the traces of past strange selves that one finds still inhabiting and inhibiting. In the foothills of the mountain we so soon get lost in the world.

III. We hope that he would not be displeased.

Pray that we may be forgiven for our forgotten prayers, that we ourselves may be forgiven and not forgotten. Pray for her, that she may remember us in her prayers, and that she may remember to pray, and that we may remember her in our prayers, and that we may remember to pray and pray and pray.

NIAMH KEADY

## Kathleen (reprise)

I picture her knitted  
in claret, violet, navy, forest green...  
colour always looked deeper on you

perched,  
and wrapped in marks and sparks and laughter lines  
chipped sea glass eyes  
chinks of light,  
bright at the sight of me

- us -

watching home and away on channel five

I'm newborn -  
curled on the mantelpiece,  
frozen in film above a tinsel decked radiator.  
orange and blue monsters growl

and yelp  
and coo

scooby doo on the vhs tape

the same three episodes.

You're greeting us at the door      a voice of the warmest green-yellow  
I hear the sound

falling

through the air

above my curls -

tilting

and

rolling,

like a pinball with wings.



I'll take it all, all the world owed to you

I see you in the way my hair only wants to flick        and sprout  
                 upwards                    and outwards..

Our crowns are grown,                    and not given.

table folded out, plate full of potato grins and breaded teardrops  
there's a wee packet of crisps in the cupboard if you ask nicely

"Masheen!"

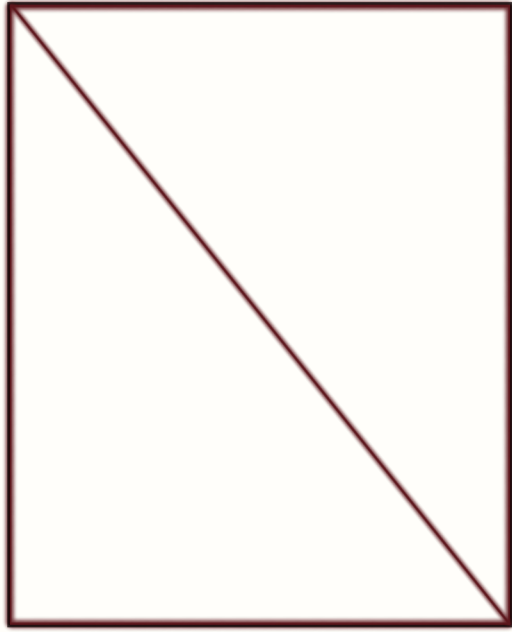
I miss you

- all of us -

and your sofa with the soft purple swirl

EMILY MACKRELL

## on Odours



*[alt text: a photograph of a terminally ill man seated at home. he is smiling at the camera. no part of his head is visible.]*

who had generally tolerated worse in their respective workdays—and it's not the more ammoniacal air of the day they found him; but closer to the lemon-umami-vinegar of his breakfast microwavable meal twelve-hours before the terminal fall. A nausea builds regardless and I push away my plate.

The so-called Stench of Death, that vibrantly tactile cliché, seems to stubbornly resist abstraction more than its peers. Few phrases as well-worn are able to tread such a brief and direct route in their reader from image to experience to idea; is the mind's-nose simply a sharper

Peering through the open window over breakfast at Takashi, my elderly neighbour, taking carefully punctuated beats of his doormat, a slow spaced ferocity rarer in his later years, I think of the unsourced odour of finality that's stalked my morning like an ink stain, or a house spider, or a first-of-many seizure, and my dot-to-dot mind goes on its way. It's not the smell of my great-uncle's eventual flat—that sickly artificial air freshener purchased for the benefit of neither himself, senses dulled since the last stroke, nor his visitors,

vehicle, or is there something about this drug less liable to antimicrobial resistance, no matter how often we prescribe it to every tired literary omen? If we add to our lexicon the Stenches of Dust, Smoke, Sweat, and every other monosyllabic evocation—those building blocks of trite written primality—will they too outrun abstraction from the ideas they conjure? Or is there something unique about that ancient recipe of putrescine, cadaverine, and dimethyl sulfide uniquely able to take us back to childhood, standing gormless be it over a sheep carcass or in the back of Morrisons?

I draw a mind's-breath and savour the air, imagining Takashi's *kareishū*, carried by his fanning, over his bins and through my window, not having noticed him head back inside after his smile-and-nod at me went unregistered some seconds ago. Stifling a gag, I seal the window, as if to guard myself from the miasmic creep, and note that I do observably feel better. The finality-stench has become an old friend by now, deftly avoiding olfactory fatigue with its ever-adapting dance, this season's flu-strain; lately beyond the alternating boredom and indulgence thereof I've noticed in myself the ability to switch it off entirely at will—a self-deceiving Spiritualist, an ideomotoric Idiot—and my kitchen table is a wordless Ouija to communicate with the olfactory.

I never had a great-uncle. I've four grandparents, no prescriptions, and abstractly conjure agonies and Agony in terms of noughts over nullspace, nausea over mnesia, nicely categorisable Odours. I've lately noticed myself in these indulgences latching onto these images, considering miseries not out of some deathwish or dysthymia, but out of an idle yearning for some fucking hardship; some ogled facet, some moguled asset for my pain-portfolio, some hand-on-hob



root-minus-one-*i* coefficient pain to send me hurtling irreversibly into  $\mathbb{C}$  space for once and for ever saying you, you, Argand astronaut you, zero-summed Leeson dot-to-dotted you, welcome, but of course I know to put down the planchette, inhale, smell not an astral vacuum but bland zero air.

Takashi survives his loving wife of forty-one years, 1936–2018. My grandmother wasn't old enough to remember her father before he lost his battle. My best friend knows far more baseline qualia of pain than just *i*. A category error: of course, I think, the Stench of Death has no chemical recipe, literary baseline, supermarket image. Satisfied with my answer, I stand, open the window, wave at Takashi's daughter as she parks for a visit. Her car, with its ever-leaky injector seal, has always emitted a strong scent of diesel. My nose is congested with distraction; as with every visit before, it goes unnoticed.

HELENA VAN URK

## Balloons

In a lidless plywood box  
on the top shelf of the wardrobe  
shoved underneath and  
stuck between  
half-filled journals  
school certificates  
a raggedy baby blanket  
and an old lunchbox with a broken lid  
is a collection of deflated helium balloons.

There are rainbow-striped candy canes  
scarlet mangled love hearts  
deflated airplanes with cheesy grins  
and a faded sparkly *Welcome Home!*

Each balloon had a predetermined lifespan  
counted down on return tickets  
and on their last day  
a single pinprick  
euthanasia  
is delivered to their bases  
and their helium-air crushed out  
of their alveolar skeletons by  
the pudgy arms  
of a frightened child.



Maybe she cries a little  
in her childhood bedroom  
before she shoves the newest corpse  
into the plywood box with the balloons  
and steps out among the suitcases.

Curling silvery strings  
now child's a smashed viola  
hidden in a voiceless silence.