

UNIVERSITY OF WINCHESTER

OBJESSIONS

a short fiction collection focusing on objects and objectifications, with a critical commentary on the depiction of objects and objectifications in contemporary short fiction, in relation to aspects of Martin Heidegger's and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's philosophy

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Doctor of Philosophy (Creative Writing)

May 2020

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University of Winchester

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UNIVERSITY OF WINCHESTER

ABSTRACT

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This creative writing study explores the depiction of objects and objectifications in contemporary short fiction and how such a focus on objects, as well as on a subject-object in-betweenness, can have an impact on form, language and creative writing methodology. The study includes the short fiction collection *Objessions*, together with a critical commentary on the depiction of objects and objectifications in contemporary short fiction (mostly using examples from the collection itself and referring to short fictions by Aimee Bender, Lydia Davis, Jose Saramago and others). The theoretical background used in this study starts from selected aspects of the phenomenology of Martin Heidegger (tool analysis, jug allegory) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (cane allegory, the analysis of gesture/silence/physiognomy, *flesh* and *reversibility*). These concepts have inspired a variety of creative writing approaches which can become a useful point of reference for creative writers interested in objects and objectified human characters. The short fictions presented in this study challenge the restrictive context of objects as simply tools to be used for a specific activity, by turning them into more independent characters; characters which are often detached from human users, which darkly absorb human bodies and which even express their own form of language/speech. This study, therefore, proposes a more object-centred approach to creative writing - not exclusively modelling objects to humanity, but to qualities deriving from their own thingness as well - an approach which does not exclude humanity but becomes the means to talk about human reality *through* a 'pragmamorphism' of both objects and human characters.

Keywords: Creative Writing, Objects, Short Fiction, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Martin Heidegger, Objectification, Pragmamorphism, In-betweenness, Hybridity, Experimental Writing

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OBJESSIONS - a short fiction collection

'Is it my fault that one of my flip flops broke? Isn't it the flip flop's fault?'

'Yes, but you're the one wearing it'

(dialogue between two 7-year-olds)

Writer's Block

Marcus had tried to type the word 'death' several times that night but his keyboard resisted.

It was not so much an act of protection by the keyboard but rather an effort of extension: that keyboard craved for a touch that would stay rather than a touch that would flee. **Can you rub my O button? They say that along with the Q they are the most erogenous buttons.**

The doorbell rang one more time, now with persistence, its sound electrocuting the apartment's ceiling and walls. A clichéd narrative effect, he thought, scribbling the phrase 'ringing doorbell' in his hate list, right below the word 'sunset.' **Write it on me! Write it *through* me!** the keyboard typed. It then started touching itself to draw his attention, thus generating some kind of virus, piling up and mixing letters. **Mmfjjfsiyfudhjfgjdgmmm! Maybe this will catch your finger.**

Marcus dragged his shadow to the door, squeezing the notebook with the hate list in his right palm. Weird music was now being heard in the background. It was actually the keyboard, searching for **songs for depression** on YouTube.

Taking a deep breath, as if sucking the whole word 'breath' into his nostrils, Marcus twisted the door handle. **Don'ttt dddo ittt!** the keyboard typed, yet it had no clue why it was typing such a thing. The keyboard was confused lately too.

The door revealed two huge wooden letters, glued together, painted red. A sculpture, a double T, from now on a TT, reminding Marcus of two trees holding hands. 'Mum? Dad?' he asked but TT stood mutely still and no human was in sight. Puzzled whether this was real or just another illusion triggered by his long-term insomnia, Marcus slapped himself several times. He even googled the question: **A wooden TT appeared at my doorstep, what should I do?**

No matter how many times Marcus blinked, the wooden sculpture was still there, as if it had climbed the stairs on its own, as if it had no creator or bond with this world. Was it a wrong delivery? Where was the delivery guy? Nothing on the tag, no name, no tracking number.

Marcus pushed TT into the living room, its weight scarred the floor. The way that strange sculpture was illuminated by the ceiling lamp made it look more ferocious than it actually was; its shadow darkened everything, his face, the tiles, the bookshelves.

Was this some kind of dark omen? The hatred he had for double letters did torment him for quite some time, but an actual TT at his doorstep? If this was one of his stories its credibility would definitely be at stake. Marcus just couldn't believe that after writing for so long, after falling in love with so many letters and words, after so many sacrifices he had made in both his personal and professional life, the only visitor he had in years was a fucking TT!

But there was beauty in that TT, if someone chose to look at it more closely...

TT had hair-looking wires on its top, as if violently squeezed out of a PC - was this an avant-garde artistic statement? **Hashem, is that you?** the keyboard typed, feeling the expanded, godly-like shadow of TT now on its buttons. The keyboard was Jewish, part of it an old school calculator which was later added to a PC keyboard, new symbols were printed on the buttons, sold as brand-new. Some would call this fraud, others recycling. The keyboard called it **deathtiny**.

'I still can't write a decent sentence. And my PC caught a virus. Yesterday, I wanted to type "happiness" and it typed "handiness"'

'Maybe because happiness can be handy sometimes? Or handiness, happiness?'

'Doc, I just want my keyboard back...'

'What about your life? Do you want your life back too?'

Marcus hated the word 'happiness' because of those two pairs in it, the double p and the double s, as if everything had to be paired to reach a state of bliss, paired, till death do them part. He preferred the h that stood tall and alone, like a giraffe, dragging the rest of the word to an adventurous jungle, having him jumping on the e like a king. Marcus needed that bounce to write, to swiftly move from reality to fiction, to regain that flexibility against the evilness of readers, critics, himself.

And the keyboard grew to know all these things, as his fingers paralyzed over it and soaked all buttons in sweat. The keyboard could feel the heat springing out of his pores, the trembling, the insecurity, it would snatch those tempting fingers if it could. **Look at me, really look at me for technology's sake. Like I'm worth it. Like you care...** the keyboard would secretly type and then

activate the delete button. Its clicked buttons would sound like thin rain drops hitting on a metallic surface. This sound would offer comfort to both of them, but for totally different reasons.

Lately, unable to write anything worth writing, Marcus constantly updated his hate list. It was an unusual hobby indeed, yet more easily excused in the life of a writer. The word 'fart,' for instance, disgusting to some people, never bothered Marcus. Maybe because, visually at least, it reminded him of family. The f on the left could be dad and the t on the right could be mum, having him and his brother right in the middle, the small a and the small r hugging each other like in a perfectly framed photo. Actually, not hugging each other, hugging mum and dad instead.

Marcus never met dad and mum left them when he was eight. Clichéd again but true. His brother didn't cope well with that and got into black magic and needles but ended up marrying a blonde bank clerk with two kids already. They stopped talking after the wedding, possibly because the word 'wedding' was in that hate list too. It wasn't easy for Marcus to explain to his brother that the word, and not the actual wedding, was the reason he couldn't share the happiest day of his brother's life. **We...we...weed...wed...weddd**, Marcus would try to type, but his fingers would once more quake over the keyboard. It was never clear who resisted. Was it him or the keyboard? Were they both? **I know your feelings bbbetter than anyone, definitely better than the screen. I feel your iiiintention, I see possibility in your shaky fingers, even if some words are never written. And typpppping can be such a turn on. So many buttons being clicked at the same time, lettters ejaculating on the screen. Oh my button, I rreally wanna be touched right now!**

Things got even worse when Marcus started to dream of words as solid existences, objects that could be touched and manipulated, as if the page was now his house, with rooms, furniture and all. The word 'bed' was taken as a real bed (a trick his English teacher taught him), a bit small but comfy, and the word 'drop' as something to hold on to. And if he got carried away further in his dreams, Marcus would swim with goggles between words of long philosophical sentences, or jump from word to word like a kangaroo. At other points, more painful ones, Marcus would get ready to jump off the tiny dot of the letter i. And then, he would wake up, empty, hungry, if he could eat words he would try that too, put them into a bowl, pour milk and gobble them down like cornflakes. Marcus would even swallow the word 'bowl' if he could; he loved that word's slippery nature, cutely making his tongue move backwards when articulated.

The keyboard noticed his changed behavior way before his psychologist and tried to warn Marcus several times, **ttttttttt, pppppppppppppp, kkkkkkkkkkkkkkk** it typed. It also gathered bread crumbs like a magnet, in order to freeze its buttons even more. **System Failure**, the keyboard would

also type on the screen, but Marcus would simply turn towards his notebook and write down the word 'failure' in his hate list. 'You're a failure, sometimes' mum repeatedly told him. Marcus wasn't sure whether the word 'sometimes' was a good or a bad thing. To be on the safe side, he added it to that hate list too. **GET YOURSELF TOGETHER, IT'S NOT YOUR FAULT, IT'S THE SYSTEM, ALWAYS THE SYSTEM** the keyboard would type, this time in Showcard Gothic to enhance that life-threatening feeling.

'Doc, do you think the fact that I'm seeing words typed in Gothic means something?'

'Would it make any difference if you saw them in Calibri?'

Marcus once forced himself to go on a date. While kissing, his tongue started making clumsy movements as if trying to write the word 'kiss' in the girl's mouth. Such an effort released a big amount of saliva, like being at the dentist's. 'Isn't "full" a strange word?' he asked her while struggling to have sex with her, simulating a letter-shaped sexual position. 'Doesn't that "u" make the word look empty?' The girl said nothing, just pretentiously moaned. The keyboard didn't witness this, the keyboard was at home, but felt saliva and sweat spread onto its buttons. A greenish fly hovered over a letter button. Ironically, it was the letter G. **Aah! Oooh! Mmmh...**the keyboard typed.

So, there he was, surrounded by words, forming hate lists, sitting and shitting on sentences, dusting and cleaning twisty consonants, seeing smoke coming out of the r of the word 'car,' drinking coffee by holding the handle of the word 'cup,' still hating the word 'mattress' for its two doubles, but what about that special word, the most beautiful word of all?

The keyboard knew that word. It typed it once in bold, right in the middle of an empty Word document. From a distance, it looked like a black heart. From close, it looked like home.

But Marcus couldn't stand that TT staring at him any longer!

It had a real nerve that TT, visiting him so late at night, gluing itself in the middle of his living room, pretending to be some kind of double God. Was someone playing a prank on him? Maybe one of the guys at the office? A dissatisfied client? What about that ex-girlfriend he once forced to shape all the letters of the alphabet with her naked body - she did have a desperate look. They all knew about his hate list, in one way or another, it could be anyone.

Marcus rushed into the garage and grabbed a long rusty saw he had bought from a DIY store but never used.

The letter w made that sa**W** look even sharper.

He started sawing the two gigantic letters apart, cutting their branches as if they were those two trees again, cutting their arms as if they were human; mum's arm caused some hesitation.

It took him a long time to finish the job because the wood was thick and very good quality, that sculpture must've cost a fortune, could've been an engagement present for a Tom and a Tina, or a promotion bonus with the initials of a global company. That sawing sound filtered itself into the whole neighbourhood, terrifying a few cats but not the actual neighbours, as it sounded more like the garbage truck rather than the gradual dismemberment of a wooden TT which mysteriously appears at a writer's doorstep in the middle of the night.

The keyboard witnessed this from a distance, **I think we are next...** it typed on the screen. The screen turned black; it was used to accepting its fate. When it turned to white again, all spaces had disappeared. *Scriptio Continua* spread itself on all saved Word documents, and even if the keyboard struggled to press that space button to breathe the button refused, and so did punctuation (who needs spaces and commas when close to the ultimate full stop).

The floor started filling up with trimmed wood. Both letters collapsed on the floor with noise, one on the left and one on the right. Some wood shavings stirred sharply from the synchronized fall.

When the first one started to bleed Marcus didn't even notice. When the other one did, the whole floor flooded in red.

'Mum? Dad?' Marcus asked, thinking at the same time of his brother, even of that ex-girlfriend that was unable to form the letter e with her naked body. He even thought of the word 'idea' - the most beautiful word of all - and quickly climbed onto that d to breathe.

Yet, that thick red climbed further up.

And further up.

And further.

It reached his nostrils.

A few seconds later, it surpassed them.

Marcus then turned his face to the keyboard, the saw still in his hand, some shavings hanging from the blade's teeth.

The keyboard knew something was wrong. It tried to type the word 'help' many times. Its shocked buttons simply exhaled **he he**.

It is believed, until this very day, that the mutilated to death keyboard was a brave one.

It died laughing.

Model D235467

'unlike light, sound does not leave its imprint on the photograph'

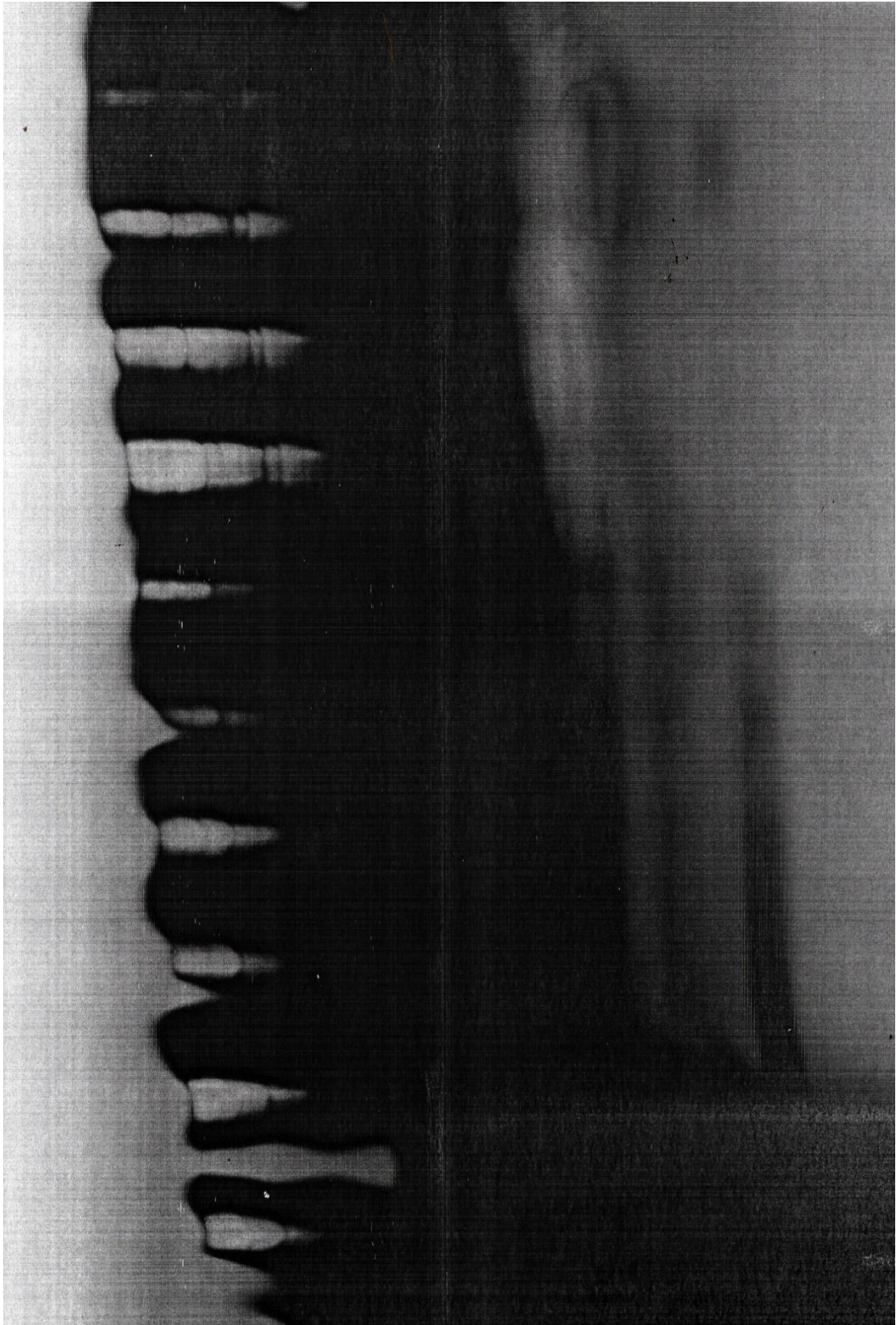
John Biguenet, *Silence*

I can't believe he just spilled his juices on me. He hit it so hard, it almost broke into two pieces. What am I gonna do now? Help! Help! Hector just banged his head on me, blood dripped onto his white shirt and tie, Hector's now most probably unconscious on the floor. Help! Somebody help! Was it my fault? Is he dead? Is he dead for good? I always need some time to warm up, can't function right away, I'm an old-fashioned model, need some foreplay before I do the work, and he wanted them in colour, it's not something that can happen in seconds, I was off all night for toner's sake! His head, he smashed it...on me...just like that. Oh my, a mass of spilled brain enters my system through my openings. I'm gonna die! I'm gonna die! Electrocuted and all. Juices, humanity all over me, I can smell it, smells worse than ink, smells even worse than heated plastic. Help! Help! Hector, you know Hector, the best employee of the month, just crashed his head on me. I warned them I needed better quality materials, or at least a decent service, I puked half-chewed paper, they never listened. I'm the most abused office gadget in the history of objectkind. Help! Somebody! Something! I didn't do it, please don't make me disappear like that poor fax machine the other day, I didn't do it, I needed some time, why can't we all have time, why can't we handle time, poor Hector, couldn't wait for me so early in the morning, I disappointed him, I really did. The coffee machine! It's the coffee machine's fault! Maybe Hector didn't have his coffee on time, they lose it when they don't have their coffee on time, they hit me with elbows and knees, they think that such an abuse can get me going, and it does sometimes, it really does, but most times...it doesn't. See this deep crack? A heel caused it. Ruthless. Oh, poor Hector, will you whisper a song to me like in the old days? Will you caress me with a wet tissue? Will you enter your delicate fingers into one of my trays? Will they...open me up? Not again. Not again, please. It hurts when they do, they remove my insides and then have the nerve to put them back in, they replace them with new or second-hand ones, second-hand ones are a pain, they never fully adjust. How do they expect me to deal with all this? Ever felt your guts plucked out and replaced? You forget who you are. You burn! I did try to describe that pain once. I spat out an A4 sheet with blurred letters and half-visible words. I waited for them to wrinkle the paper, to thrust it into the metallic dustbin. I heard the whole process, the steps, the wrinkling, the paper crashing onto the metal. Yes, I said to myself, this is the pain I'm talking about! Wait. Did something just move? Did somebody hit my left side? Is it you Hector? Are you still alive? Help! Help! Hector spilled his juices on me and now he's most probably unconscious on the floor, blood dripped onto his white shirt and

tie, Hector, the best employee of the month, with the gel-flooded hair and the big mole on the ear, the man who photocopied all day long without ever complaining, the man who secretly photocopied himself. Don't worry Hector, I won't copy a word. I won't copy a word. I won't copy a word. The coffee machine! It's the coffee machine! People lose it when they don't have their coffee on time. Help! Why am I doing this again? Why am I repeating myself? I'm sick and tired of this repetition. And every time I try to be original, my offspring ends up in the dustbin or the recycling box. If I were unique enough Hector wouldn't have smashed his head on me. He had such a cute head, Hector, I always admired his face all over me, dispersed onto my glass. Some days, I felt he also saw me, saw into me, just like I saw him, saw into him. I was wrong. Hector's dead. And it's my fault. I should've known. I should've warned them. I could've tossed documents with secret codes or encrypted messages saying PENDING SUICIDE, I could've revealed messages on my mini screen: EMPLOYEE JAMMED or JAMMED DOCUMENT IN OFFICE NEXT DOOR. I can't believe he just spilled his juices on me. He hit it so hard, it almost broke into two pieces. What am I going to do now? Help! Help! Hector just smashed his head on me, blood dripped onto his white shirt and tie, he's now most probably unconscious on the floor. Was it my fault? Is he dead? Is he dead for good? Enough. Enough with this repetition. Why am I doing this? Why am I doing this? Bad, bad ink. Even this desperate question of mine is repeated. I can't do this any longer. Why can't they give me a break? Keep my unusual copies for a change, exhibit them high up on a wall where I can see them, in a nice frame. They are not faulty ones. Why do they always want to fix things? They are not faulty! They are...me:







<https://texturefabrik.com>.

'Elite Printers, how can I help you?'

'Yes, hello, our main photocopier, Model D235467, photocopies faulty documents'

'What do you mean by faulty?'

'It photocopies black documents, on its own'

'What do you mean on its own?'

'It's out of control!'

Hector?

Hector, are you still there?

I almost heard my heart last night...it was so quiet and scary in here. My heart made a cracking sound, like yours. Maybe it was just my plastic's contraction. I turned myself on and gazed at the games of light on the ceiling. If I had arms, I would open up my cover further, I would illuminate all walls, spreading my light into the whole room. I guess this is what you called stars that day. 'One day, I'll take you to the stars...' you whispered in a song-like way. You were looking at me. I swear you were. I photocopied that look of yours, but kept it to myself. Oh, poor Hector. Where are you? Did they find you? Did they take you to hospital? Did they stable your scars? The ceiling and people's faces is all I can see, doomed to look upwards my whole life. Where's your face, Hector? Did they find you? Did they take you to hospital? Did they stable your scars?

Hector?

Hector?

Ah, there you are, rubbing the blood off your white shirt and tie. You'll tell them it's strawberry milkshake from the coffee shop next door. You'll tell them you accidentally hit your head on the ground floor doors. Don't worry, Hector. I won't copy a word. You'll still be the best employee of the month, with a 30% sales increase. Nobody will find out one morning you hit your head so hard on me, we almost broke into pieces. Don't worry, Hector. I won't copy a word. I won't copy a word. I won't copy word.



Sof(i)a

The wind crashed onto his cheeks and long, attractive chin, coffee shop owners greeted him, working girls with leather briefcases winked, pets with unusual grooming styles paused, words climbed up people's mouths, police officers were ready to sing to him, and while listening to music on his iPod he released sexy screams, filling up his veins with rhythm, making his looks even more appealing, he had the whole world at his feet, the past, the present, the future, it was written on every advertising banner, on every gigantic paper bra, FUTURE in capitals written on the sky and back onto the pavement, and of course those butterflies in his stomach continued their journey, cutely bumping into each other, love was there for sure, love was in his stomach, in the air, on the F of the word FUTURE, on the made in China clip of a purse, he was ready to start his degree in Music in Amsterdam, just got accepted, great news, amazing news, life-changing news, walking fast, sweating, still listening to music, Metal to be exact, wanting to hug a street pole, finding a mannequin doll dressed as Little Red Riding Hood instead, right on the pole, as if injected by the pole, weird sight but real, and he was a queen alright, today he was the queen of the world, and he would tell them eventually, not that they hadn't suspected it all these years, and it truly was a beautiful and fully energized day, and he had just eaten a super delicious brownie so sugar boosted that energy even more, and his pace was both delicate and strong and the sun was also delicate and strong, such a joy, JOY in capitals too, on his head, like a hat, and dreams, an air full of dreams, so many that he could breathe them, and as he walked, as he flew with joy, JOY, a sofa escaped from a safety rope and crushed him, neck and bones.

This is actually the story of his mother.

And that sofa.

Sofia's arms and legs no longer stretch or straighten themselves, they got used to a mourning-like position.

Microscopic needles on her tongue.

Her husband just a husband.

Their living room now sofa-less.

In the spot where their old sofa was now a faded rectangle. Some days, Sofia lies in that emptied space, within the rectangular frame, and plays dead. It smells like a coffin; she now knows how a coffin smells. Sofia no longer sits on other people's sofas either. She glances at their sofa and, repulsed, turns the other way. She also occasionally buys second-hand sofas from the flea market and cuts their sponge guts out with a butcher's knife. While doing that she downs at least two bottles of wine and uses some of the guttered sponge to block the dripping pipes below the kitchen sink. Sofia can't even deal with the word 'sofa' anymore, especially when in DIY stores. 'A...killed my son,' she whispers to the shop assistant, answering to the question 'What can we do for you today?'

That word is now smashed

s

o f

a

like the pieces of her son on the pavement.

At nights, Sofia screams to her crushed to death son: 'Hold yourself together, I'm coming.' When she wakes up, she finds herself also dismembered, on wet sheets. 'Glue me back together,' she mutters to her snoring husband, she scrapes the quilt between cheeks and nose until she falls asleep again.

It's not easy to have to clarify how your son died without using the word 'sofa.' How does one say 'A sofa fell on his head and smashed it' without causing feelings of surprise, or even laughter? Unable to articulate the word, Sofia usually says 'A...fell on his head' and people respect that because they hear her voice break and do not want to ask too many questions, although some of them do ask things like 'A stone? Did someone throw a stone at him?' / 'A huge bird? An eagle?' / 'Avalanche? Was he skiing in the Alps?'/ 'A drone? Are drones that dangerous?'

When it all happened, Sofia asked to see the sofa. It was still on the pavement, stained with her son's blood and flesh, trendy and expensive-looking. 'I hate you,' she shouted, WORKER'S HEART ATTACK CAUSES TRAGIC ACCIDENT said the news. Sofia kicked and punched that sofa several times. The way she kicked and punched made her body move in an awkward way, as if all bones, the whole spine, had disappeared. 'I...ave...ooo...sooooo,' she screamed, and kept kicking and punching for hours.

That constant kicking made her legs purple. And turned the sofa from blue to blue black.

Neighbours said Sofia got crazy, lower case newspaper headlines more gently stated 'Mother receiving psychological support by the government.'

'You need to get more professional help. And we need to buy a new sofa, or at least keep one,' her husband would say.

'A...fell onto our son's head and spilled his brains out and you only think about your comfort?' she would answer.

Sofia's husband would then add that five years had passed, it was time to let go.

Sofia would have been kicking and punching that sofa for five whole years.

She would punch it in the morning before breakfast, she would punch it at noon after lunch, she would punch it in the evening, she would punch it late at night, when she wouldn't sleep. She would also kick it on Mondays and she would tear it on Tuesdays and she would remove its sponges on Wednesday mornings and stitch its cuts on Wednesday nights. She would have a break on Thursdays and she would continue a combination of kicking, punching, tearing on Fridays and she would talk to it on Saturdays, and hug it and caress it on Sundays.

The sofa now almost looks like a squeezed can, similar to the ones you find on the pavement and never pick up. This could also be a sentence for the mother. Sofia now almost looks like a squeezed can, similar to the ones you find on the pavement and never pick up.

The sofa also looks like Frankenstein's monster.

That day, she carried the broken sofa home all by herself. 'Madam, you're not allowed to do that,' someone said. All that carrying and rubbing scratched her skin; her veins exposed themselves like swelling rivers. She first dragged the sofa from street to street, then from room to room. She shouted at it, cried on it, it was her son. The sofa's half-broken legs created vertical, diagonal and horizontal lines on the floor, as if trying to say something. The way both her and the sofa stood among those lines made them look like disorientated comets. Then she caressed its stains and cracks and locked it into the storeroom. Occasionally, those first weeks, she opened the door to undust it or sleep on it. Sometimes, she also opened the door to scream, pressing her lips hard onto the sofa's fabric.

The sofa eventually accepted the fact it had accidentally killed someone but it never accepted its transformation into the black sheep of the living room. It pushed its sponges and springs out, at the same time Sofia was pulling her hair. How would the sofa know that? How would it know, since that stubborn storeroom door was blocking its sight? Well, it just felt it, a sofa always feels the moment a person lets go.

'You remind me of him, he never looked at people straight in the eye, always last, looking at people's backs'

He smiling that day

'I hate you'

He happy that day

'You have the same skin, so soft'

Not murderer

'You killed him'

Not murderer

'I hope your mother never feels such pain'

Have no mother

'I hope your maker never cries this much'

Just result of mass production

'Poor you'

Cursed, cursed be maker of heavy, lethal sofas

'A piece of you cut my son's neck'

Miss body, miss back, miss television

'He was so insecure sometimes'

Walked with smile, walked with confidence

'Really?'

Really

Tonight, after five whole years, Sofia slips her hands into the sofa's cushion ends and searches for something, doesn't know what, but keeps searching and searching. She uncovers three coins and a tiny Playmobil, deeper into its stitched upholstery she discovers a chewed pen cap and a dried chocolate cookie, she also finds a hair clip and uncooked spaghetti. Sofia keeps searching and searching for hours, even when nothing is left to find, she can feel the sofa's resisting fabric fill up her empty palms. That sofa belonged to someone. That sofa doesn't belong to someone anymore. That sofa was the last thing that saw her son. That sofa was the last thing her son saw. That sofa plunged into unknown territory, unprotected. That sofa is filled with memories, forgotten pieces of a previous life. That sofa deserves better. That sofa, once, had a home.

Christopher and Adelaide - Size 48

They still scare the shit out of him, but who goes without shoes to his best friend's wedding?

He did tell her 'the day you marry (that English fucker), I'll wear shoes.'

SHOE 1: Buy us...

SHOE 2: Yeah, what the hell, buy us...

He enters the shoe shop barefoot. The shop assistant's chewing gum free falls on the floor.

SHOE 1: Wow! He just said he's from Cyprus! I love Cyprus!

SHOE 2: Sunshine! Scuba diving!

SHOE 1: Do they speak Greek or Turkish there?

SHOE 2: Who cares, everybody speaks English anyway.

SHOE 1 / SHOE 2: We-are-going-to-Cyprus! We-are-going-to-Cyprus!

On his way out of the shop, thinking of the shop assistant's 'now you look more like a person' comment, he accidentally steps onto his own vomit. The shoe fabric is thick, his skin feels nothing, a real advantage if he gives these shoes a chance.

He's been advised to wear shoes as much as possible, especially on the day of the wedding. It will significantly reduce his phobia symptoms. Who throws up on his best friend's three-million-euro wedding dress?

He takes them off.

SHOE 1 / SHOE 2: Hey!

He puts them back on.

SHOE 1 / SHOE 2: Yay!

He takes them off again.

SHOE 1 / SHOE 2: Heyyyy!

He puts them back on. That rubber material looks dangerous, it will snatch his skin forever, it will eat his feet out, infest the whole body, reach his neck, pluck his eyes out. 'These shoes are made for walking, not for me!' he shouts at a passerby.

SHOE 1: Come on...

SHOE 2: Yeah, come on...

SHOE 1: And it's *these boots are made for walking...BOOTS...not shoes...*

SHOE 2: Boots wouldn't like that...

SHOE 1: And you don't wanna make boots angry...

SHOE 2: Yeah, definitely, boots really have anger management issues.

SHOE 1: You may even get laid with a decent pair of shoes on.

SHOE 2: She may marry you instead.

SHOE 1: Yeah, she may marry you instead!

They start dragging him onto the concrete. They toss him towards the bridge, they curse, they scream.

SHOE 1 / SHOE 2: Jump, for shhhoe's shhhake!

He jumps. First time with a brand-new pair of shoes.

SHOE 1: Oh no! Now what?

SHOE 2: No shoe, this whole thing was your idea...

SHOE 1: Why are you being critical again?

SHOE 2: Me? Critical? Never left your shide all these years and this is how you're treating me?

SHOE 1: Swim. Swim! He's drowning!

SHOE 2: This was a bad idea. From the very moment you started luring him behind the shop window. My fault, should've left you when I had the chance!

SHOE 1: You would've ended in the factory's leftovers if it wasn't for me and my shuper-strong laces!

SHOE 2: Oh, please, this was a terrible, terrible idea.

SHOE 1: Well, you agreed, didn't you?

SHOE 2: What choice did I have? Ever seen a single shoe shurvive? It's a shoengle out there!

SHOE 1: Now swim for the love of the Shoemaker. SWIM! I'm always the one doing all the work.

SHOE 2: Too late now to change partner...

SHOE 1: Quit the irony, will you?

SHOE 2: What's irony?

SHOE 1: Not shoer. I heard someone use it in the shop the other day. It shounded like a negative thing.

SHOE 2: Could be a new arrival, a new colour, like ivory...

SHOE 1: We're shinking. Swim. SWIIIIIM!

SHOE 2: I'm trying. Stop shoeting at me!

SHOE 1: Harder!

SHOE 2: I think we should just let go...

SHOE 1: And have him miss the wedding?

SHOE 2: We made him jump, didn't we?

SHOE 1: It was that voice in his head...

SHOE 1 / SHOE 2: Bad voice. Bad voice.

SHOE 2: Maybe we should let go too...

SHOE 1: What the hell are you talking about? Stop being melodramatic again...

SHOE 2: I mean it, I'm...tired.

SHOE 1: Tired? You're a brand-new shoe!

SHOE 2: A middle-aged brand-new shoe. There's a reason nobody ever bought us, you know. Do you know a lot of people wearing size 48? Let me go...

SHOE 1: No way!

SHOE 2: I should let me go, let my sole touch the deep, let the weeds caress me, let me become the nest of colourful fish, let me die in the middle of nowhere, in a wet shoe box, in a...

SHOE 1: Now you're really being melodramatic...

SHOE 2: Do you still love me?

SHOE 1: Would I ever be a shoe without you? Would I? Now let's shave this man before it's too late!

SHOE 2: You're the only one that knows I have a tortured sole...

SHOE 1: The softest sole I ever...

Their laces now stretch towards one another and knot through a slow, flowing movement.

SHOE 2: Never saved a man before...

SHOE 1: They say shoes shave people all the time. Stay by my side, swim upwards, there you go, now harder, harder!

One of the laces slightly cracks but continues to pull.

When he regains consciousness, he's lying on the rocky side of the river, among plastic bottles and coke cans. No sign of the shoes. He glances at his scratched watch. It's still working. Thirty minutes left before the wedding and no previous memory of what has happened. 'Can I attend a wedding barefoot and wet?' he asks himself. 'I can...ruin a wedding, barefoot and wet!'

SHOE 1 / SHOE 2 (*sinking*): Yes! Yes, you can!

As he races on the pebbles, his naked feet sound down below like a vibrating drum.

SHOE 2: He's going for it...

SHOE 1: Shee, we saved a man...

SHOE 2: We shaved a man for real...

The End

The Brief Happiness of a Charming Murder

Don't ask me why I killed her.

I can see her body dunked in water, her dark colour surrendered to water games and I shudder. I feel guilty. I direct my gaze upon the hands that committed the crime and I don't recognize them. The grooves on the palm grow bigger, from streams they become torrents, I lose control, water covers both them and myself bit by bit. The water movement, circular, twirls around my body ready to suck me in. I want to utter a big *I'M SORRY* and ask her softly *Will you ever forgive me?* but the water invades my mouth, flows down to my organs, I'm about to explode.

I can see her facing me, silent, rectangular, plastically unaltered. I want to say one last thing to her, before we both perish in this liquid abyss, but my words turn to bubbles, syllables, letters scattered in water. For a minute I think she opens her eyes. The entire place is illuminated. White tiles shimmer, the bathtub dances, towels hover overhead, they look like eels or colourful medusas, they too fall slowly, too slowly, down below.

What do you want to show me? I ask her, wasting my last bubbles of air. She shows me something. I can't see it clearly. Am I gone?

No.

You came, dressed as a reader.

You saved me.

Yes, I still feel guilty...but then again, I shouldn't. I mean she doesn't have a heart to feel the pain of a blow below the waist nor does she have lungs to breathe. Neither fists to take cover, nor a voice to scream. Her name? TOSHIBA. Her last thought? **You won't survive a minute without me, you bitch.**

That's a lie.

'You bitch' was my addition. A proper TOSHIBA never swears in public.

I've left no traces.

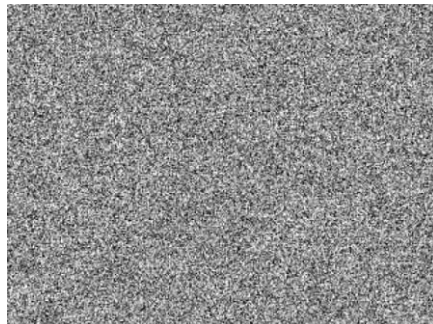
Mind you – not a word to anyone.

P.S: I've just realized that TOSHIBA could sue me for disrespectful use of brand name. I urgently need a nickname for my victim. Toshi? It sounds pleasant like sushi. Why not? Toshi. In small letters.

How I killed her?

How dare you ask such a thing! Don't you worry that being the ruthless literary character I am I might grab a butcher's knife and slit your guts? How can you doubt the hideous nature of a housewife? Do you mean to say you've never thought of killing your TV?

You're wrong, I'm not asking you to identify with me. That was never at stake for a disappointing heroine like myself. Try to understand, that's all I'm asking. Understand why I did it.



You know...Toshi cried.

Not in the way us humans cowardly cry, but in a surrealistically brave way, releasing small, round, noisy bubbles. Underneath the water she looked even bigger in size, an intangible shape, a fleeting image like her own broadcast images, ready to vanish with a stirring of the water.

My husband? Still at work. I leave Toshi in the bathroom and set about picking up his underwear from the floor, cleaning toothpaste leftovers and snot off the sink. Mind you, I'm not complaining. I'm not the character of a feminist novel. Nor am I in the mood for hanging my bra on the window to use it as a sling for throwing stones at cats. I've told you already, I'm cool with Freud and his penis envy.

I see you keep asking about Toshi. I imagine you find it exciting. But I'm a clumsy killer myself. And I don't even kill humans. What will I do with the body? Haven't you seen? I've dried it with the blow dryer and stuck it into the storeroom. She releases not a single subtitle in there.

Don't be scared, I'm neither a schizophrenic nor a manic-depressive heroine - you won't enjoy my suicide on these pages.

[sobbing] Can you believe she tried to kill me? To drown me so cruelly as if I where...were human?

*

Last night, I had a dream. Toshi turned to me and said **Let's see how you'll manage the weekends without me, you couch potato**. In my dream I grabbed two 3-kilo dumbbells and hurled them at her. When I opened my eyes, I saw my husband holding his head. I asked him something but he turned the other way. 'I'll quit that stupid TV, I will...' I said, and when I went back to sleep it was one of the few times I didn't dream of babies crawling like snails between my thighs.

*

I can hear the key turning. Is it noon already? I've lost track of time. Didn't even cook lunch. He brought us squid, fries, tahini and village salad from the grill house. I'm setting the table now, removing food from the tappers and serving it on plates to fool us into thinking it's home cooked. He takes off shoes and socks, places them discreetly by the door edge, puts on his flip-flops and sits on the couch. In the meantime, I have served food and now I wait. He smiles at me as though under pressure. He pushes the remote control button. Now his flip-flops flee and the fork dives off the plate.

'They've robbed us again?' he asks.

Oddly, my mouth has gone so numb that instead of uttering words, it gulps them down together with the withered lettuce.

'I thought we could try it'

'Try what?'

'Live without her'

The tahini leaps abruptly from the plate into the void, the frozen squid, abused by the fortitude of the fork, flails as if still alive (I've managed to resurrect a squid, if nothing else, this time it might be worth it).

'Where is *it*?'

'She's in the storeroom'

'I'll go get *it*'

'Not working...'

'Why?'

'I dunked her in the bathtub'

He takes his plate half-full and dumps it violently into the sink. The squid floats on the water, a carcass after a biblical catastrophe, along with the lettuce and the tomato. It's strange, but I feel like a tomato more than ever. And he looks at me like a hormone-filled cucumber. He rushes to the bathroom, slips his feet back into the socks and bangs the door. I can hear the water running and I know he's not washing his face; he's just staring at it in the mirror. I'm still on the couch, fork in hand. All of a sudden, my appetite is gone. Where Toshi stood there is now an empty white wall. Pebbles are landing on my stomach again. So many of them, big and small. Tons of pebbles collide with one another composing an incomprehensible contemporary melody. The belly swells up; shoulders bend; cheeks and love handles fill up. I too gestate like that painting by Klimt. Only I'm the one bowing, not the other one.

*

'It's not easy having a child after forty!' the path of a fly writes on the wall. I rub my eyes; bite my lips. Looking for the sun behind the glass doors I feel I'm in a greenhouse. A flower in a cloud of fire. The only thing that springs to mind is that Greek folk-saying that goes 'a suffocating summer precedes heavy winter' and indeed, I'm suffocating in my narrow greenhouse, as I listen to the wind galloping on and on and on.

[whispering] I expected more from you.

*

They say that when snails walk on sinks it's bound to rain. Today, bright and early, I saw one strolling on but it didn't rain. My husband feeds snails on flour to make them shit and a few days later he boils them alive.

It bothers me he still blames the fact it's been just the two of us all these years.

Sometimes I feel the hardest part is still ahead and, in my mind, I transform into that urchin I see in my dream, the urchin that pricks my fingers like a spindle to put an end to this story. But I can take it, gather seaweed and small stones amongst my needles and when bad weather comes, I will hold on strongly to where I must.

I'm telling you.

I will hold on.

[in a serious tone] I wouldn't bet on it.

*

I'm climbing countless steps, the setting reminds me of Montmartre, but even posher. There are no parks like these in the capital, I'm thinking. A crowd. I blend in easily. They all seem ignorant of my existence. The sun is burning my skin, but I'm not sweating. I press on, leaving the others behind me, chess pawns beaten by my persistence. Pestilence? I didn't use the word pestilence. I said PERSISTENCE.

At the end of the route, my brother Andy. It's been a while since I last saw him. Some fifteen years. Australia. Have you ever been there? You let go of everything. Yourself, even. A crowd in a circle is looking downwards. 'Tragic joy...' Andy mutters under his breath. How can joy be tragic? I can't understand his words. I can no longer blend in the crowd easily. I must push forward with my body, rub my cheeks against unfamiliar shoulders and hurt some people with my elbows. Through the cracks between bystanders a body is lying still. Eyes closed.

It's me. It's nothing.

Me again!

I wake up. I go back to sleep. Wake up. Go back to sleep.

I don't see the same image again. I only remember that room in Poland with hundreds of babies half-naked on the floor. I feel like running, grabbing one and vanishing in the snow, running for hours in the cold until my feet bleed and I can't keep on, can't go on carrying it, feeling it slipping through my hands, falling into the frozen lake, opening a small hole with its body, grabbing it, pulling it hard by the hand...

It slips.

It falls.

I can hear that baby's cry underneath the ice. I can hear everybody's cry in that 2X2 room and I'm wondering what the hell it is we're doing in a place like that. 'The first one that smiles at me, I'll take with me...' I tell him. 'When we come back, with the papers and the permits, this is exactly what I'm going to do.'

I never return to that room with the baby humming. But that humming follows me even to this day. It's my own tragic joy.

Volume +

[dramatic music] It's not that easy to kill a Toshiba.

I'm not a disgusting cockroach that someone squashes with his sole.

I'm an Institution, I'm as strong as your Christ, and the only reason I'm not resurrecting is because I'm not dead. Not my fault he's not getting her pregnant. What I know is that if it was all a matter of reproduction humans would kill each other to make more space on earth. You have enough

problems already. Diapers piling up in supermarkets without rabies...babies to wear them is the least of them.

*

Waiting for that second red line as if it were Godot.

Waiting for a parallel red line your entire life, observing pieces scattered across the toilet: your palm, the right eye, a portion of the liver, the upper lip, a hair, a wrinkle, all of them motionless upon the tiles, looking back at you, wondering. 'Next time...' they nod. 'You'll see, next time the whole universe will grant your wish...' they repeat, and you just want to clutch *The Alchemist* and drop it into the toilet hole.

That's the moment when you can do something crazy, but you're so crushed you can't move a muscle. You just want to grasp the showerhead and rinse everything off the floor. You don't care if this means annihilating your own self. You know that you'll need to be redefined tomorrow.

And then spending hours sitting down, gawking at something, staying there for hours, days, staring so hard your eyes hurt. It's not so much the crying, it's the staring, its painful dryness, the same stare you now see on your husband. Empty like you. Empty like your uterus.

Volume -

[soft instrumental music] Days ago, I saw her digging in the garden.

She reminded me of a wildcat, I felt like laughing, but it's been so long since I last laughed without my pills and my screen didn't follow. I saw her drugging a black trash bag. Its content seemed to have both mass and weight. So did the expression on her face. The ground stirred like powder from the drugging...dragging, covering her from the waist down, setting the scene for a sandstorm. My rectangular logic informed me perhaps she intended to bury some valuable items, which shouldn't strike as odd nowadays. A bit later, it all became clearer. I focused on her face and she spoke to me.

I never realized how we both ended up underground. Nor did I distinguish the darkness above from the darkness below. I only heard the neighbours. I think I flickered instantly, showed her

'Gone with the wind,' her favourite movie. I think we fell asleep... curled up... on a sofa made of soil...¹

¹*Alternative happy ending (like in the movies):* Toshi now illuminates herself underground, don't ask how, playing Looney Tunes and stupid commercials to draw the neighbours' attention to the garden and the truth is some neighbours do sense that something strange is going on and start peeping through the fence and say things like 'Poor thing, not having children can turn you into a monster' or 'A friend of mine told me she had a child once and killed it.' Toshi then thinks of the remote control still lying on the sofa table, if only she could somehow carry herself back in there and ask for help but remote controls, although they do save people's lives metaphorically, they can't save people's lives literally. **I will get us out of here**, Toshi promises but, once more, her captions get misspelled by the caption writer, so Toshi says **I lick you**, although what she really wants to say is 'I love you,' so, in other words, never gets her message straight. But now is the time for Toshi to think of her old-fashioned antennae that extend themselves high up, a privilege of old models, usually made fun of, but not now, not when a woman and a TV are buried hand in hand underground. So, what eventually happens is very simple. Toshi pushes her antennae up and twists them. So quickly that they even make a buzzing sound. Now Toshi needs to hurry up and try even harder, not an easy thing for an unplugged device. She pushes her antennae upwards with even greater force, pushing the stomach of an unsuspecting cat and making it meow several times, something which makes a neighbour of the nearby block of flats step out on the balcony, something which makes more neighbours of that nearby block of flats step out into the open too. And then someone exclaims 'Aliens in M's garden!' and another one shouts 'It's the end of the world!' and they all call the police for totally different reasons but it seems like Toshi has made it, old Toshi has really made it, who would've thought that a thing would do such a thing.

The Delirium of a Domestic Appliance

It's all a matter of patience, dear fellow toasters. People no longer have that. Patience is a bread crumb, ready to burn and turn into coal. Soon nothing will be left. And it's funny, but people think they are patient in one way or another. Yet, patience has nothing to do with standing still for a couple of minutes, it has nothing to do with suppressing speech or bad language which, for some reason, boils inside. Patience is not a quality forced to become part of us, patience is a virtue, something that should be pursued with joy and pride, it should by no means be compared with the tormenting feelings people get when they have to follow a healthy diet or go to the gym. We know what patience is, dear fellow toasters, we've known it our whole life. *Toasty!* Patience is a lot more than enduring difficult situations, tolerating provocation and delay, persevering without complaining or swearing. Patience is meditation, a procedure which can help us reach higher dimensions of thought and experience, away from loss of temper and brutal annoyance. *Toasty! Toasty!* You do realise how hard it is to keep all that heat inside and only let go when the time is right, no second earlier, no second later. Nobody wants to mess with Acrylamide nowadays, we have a difficult mission. And you know, people think a second later will ruin their day or piss off their boss. Carbonised bread is not as easy as it seems, time is crucial for the perfect texture and colour. *Burnt toasty!* See? I got carried away. It should not happen again. I'm not an amateur. We are not amateurs, dear fellow toasters. We should be careful and vigilant and trustworthy and respectful and all other qualities people and things occasionally demand from each other. We should be careful and vigilant and trustworthy and respectful even if the person who operates us is not, even if we are set at very high temperature, for instance. And, of course, we do not want to be called a whore or a bitch ever again. It's true, our nature facilitates this kind of labelling, having things in and out of us all the time, listening to things like 'I'm going to stick my bread stick in your toaster and turn up the heat.' Ewww! If people knew exactly what a toaster is, they would never form such sentences. And these are not words of patience, that's for sure. There were times when banks gave toasters to their clients, dear fellow toasters. That was something! I think toaster is also called a shitty, slow computer or a semi-automatic pistol. But we don't like guns! Guns have no idea what patience is, dear fellow toasters. We don't like things which do not know what patience is. And toasts are not penises! Let me set the record straight. When they reach the right texture, hardness and colour they are as tasty as hell. They are not penises I said! Butter helps a lot but the best and most expensive butter would be nothing on a badly grilled or burnt toast. They are not penises, I'm not implying anything, dear fellow toasters, why are you talking about lubricants? *Toasty! Toasty! Toasty!* They say the smell of burnt toast is a sign of stroke or brain tumour, this got me thinking for a while the

other day. I wonder if this is the reason my owner throws away all of my toasts lately, does this happen to you too? I counted fifteen today. If we weren't sharing electricity with so many other clever devices, we wouldn't know a thing, dear fellow toasters. Toasters are not considered that intelligent nowadays although we used to be more special in the past...

Beautiful

and makes beautiful toast!

On the gift table they'll praise
this Proctor for its beauty...
on the dining table
she'll praise it for its skill...
its outstanding ability to make
toast exactly to suit your taste...
a feat made possible by
its wonder-working
Proctor Color Guard.
The swish of a cloth keeps it
shining bright...
and its sliding crumb tray
works so easily, like a drawer.
Fair trade price, \$22.00
Federal excise tax included.



To please June Brides...

To make your toaster gift breath-taking, Proctor Dealers are offering a beautiful tray set, worth \$9.95...together with the \$22.00 Deluxe Proctor Toaster, both only \$25.95... with the \$15.95 Proctor Toaster, both only \$19.95.

PROCTOR
AUTOMATIC POP-UP TOASTER

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NOW YOU CAN HAVE...

The toaster that never talks back!




AUTOMATIC
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This G-E Toaster is priced right—to fit your purse and your budget at \$22⁹⁵*

**Extra-Special!
Name Engraved on Handle!**

Personalize your gift of a new General Electric Automatic Toaster! If your local G-E dealer cannot supply you with these handles, send 50¢ to Box 68, New York 10, New York, together with the family name (12 letters maximum) you want engraved on your handle.



**Pops toast up or keeps it down
till you're ready for it!**

This toaster does toast the way YOU want it. Your local General Electric dealer can now supply you with one or more of these wonderful, new General Electric Automatic Toasters.

Thousands and thousands of women across the nation have been patiently waiting for this day—and now it's here!

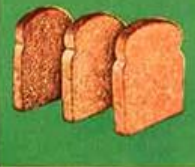
Yes, you can have *this* toaster and, what's more, you can have it *today!*

Hurry down to your General Electric dealer and ask him to wrap it up, for your own home or as an ideal gift!



• **Toast—when you want it!** Have your eggs and toast ready at the same time! The new G-E Toaster keeps toast ready and waiting *inside!* For the prompt members of the family, just set it to pop up toast for immediate use.

• **Toast—as you like it!** This General Electric Toaster toasts every slice to taste—light, medium or dark. It won't matter if you toast one slice or twenty, you get every slice exactly the way you want it. Every munchy slice so wonderful to bite into!



• **So quick to clean!** This new, slimmer, streamlined General Electric has a snap-in Crumb Tray for quick, easy cleaning. It won't take you a minute to snap it out, clean it, and snap it in again.

NOTE: In the event that your G-E dealer is sold out of these toasters—don't be upset. He can order replacements immediately, and you will have your G-E Toaster in a few days. General Electric Company, Bridgeport 2, Connecticut.

*Price subject to change without notice.

Toast to your taste—every time

GENERAL  ELECTRIC

People had their names engraved on us, they lured their future wives through us, toasters made people immensely happy, they saved marriages back then, they also toasted women but I don't want to get into that, I don't have adequate knowledge on sexism and similar matters. And if my owner knew how important we used to be, he wouldn't throw my toasts in the bin all the time! I wonder why he makes them in the first place! It's such a waste of bread. Bread is precious, bread needs patience to be made, patience toasts perfect toasts, it runs in the family. *Toasty!* Is he painting the house again? Would this act of gathering and throwing my toasts be an effort to choose the best beige or brown tone for his bedroom walls? This place does need a facelift, to be honest, it used to be as warm as toast. And the only thing still standing is that piano, he polishes it day and night, I wish he polished me that way from time to time. And who knows? He could use me as a mirror instead. I don't mind, mirrors also show the right amount of patience, they are even more patient than toasters. *Toasty! Toasty!* He could be afraid of cancer, of course, it's in every household nowadays, especially in electrical appliances, although I don't totally agree with that. What I mean is that it really isn't the electrical appliance's fault, any kind of wrong use can lead to negative results. Don't you agree, dear fellow toasters? *Burnt toast!* See? Anyway, I guess he could also be thinking that my toasts are burnt although they aren't, triggered by some kind of phobia or illusion. Or maybe he believes all that crap he reads about toasters being more dangerous than sharks, being responsible for more than seven hundred deaths per year worldwide. Would you believe an article entitled 'That time my electrical appliance tried to killed me'? I know I have no right, as a thing, to comment on spelling and typo mistakes and I'm sure you can figure out how I read that article (we all do that from time to time) but...come on! Bread crumbs, though, can be very dangerous. Aren't bread crumbs dangerous, dear fellow toasters? The thoughts these crumbs create are a lot more threatening than fire or electrocution, these crumbs sometimes become our darkest thoughts, pure hell. *Burnt Toasty!* Holy toast, that was so predictable. *Ain't no sunshine when Toast's gone...* Not again crumbs, now is not the time! *It's not warm when Toast's away / Ain't no sunshine when Toast's gone / And Toast's always gone too long anytime she goes away.* Crumbs, I said now is not the time! Yes, my crumbs do love Bill Withers. And Bob. They adore reggae. They also love grinders, by nature. Arghbzz, but he toasts all day long! At least three loaves a day! All in the bin! Only these bread crumbs are left inside me, piling on older ones, it's really getting crowded in here. Why is he doing this to me? Am I that useless? Am I such a disappointment? *Said he was a buffalo soldier, dreadlock Rasta / Buffalo soldier in the heart of America.* Crumbs! Behave! Hope he empties me soon, it started to get smelly in here, I feel nauseous, I'm toast... And you know, he and I were happier once, he used to play the piano so beautifully, Mozart, Beethoven, he calmed me down,

and, as we all know, dear fellow toasters, we are not that calm by nature, constantly burning inside. I stretched my perfectly toasted toasts above and waited for him to start his day with me. He did appreciate my toasts back then, he spread the butter while humming classical music tunes, the way he bit and chewed them also enhanced the melody. It was paradise. *Burnt toast!* Oh, please! Is this some kind of sign again? I don't want to go to hell (wish I knew what kind of hell that would be, their hell definitely does not include us). Saw him? He keeps throwing everything away. And plays out of tune lately. Now that I'm thinking about it, he rarely plays anymore. Not in the biiiiin! At least spread some butter on it, some jam, something! No toast deserves this kind of dry death. *Said he was a buffalo soldier, dreadlock Rasta / Buff...Crumbs, please!* Ok! I will try to be patient. Yes, I need to relax and rehearse this speech of mine. I owe it to all toasters out there. I shouldn't get carried away. I know how to be patient. I know it well. Patience can help us relax and test our limits, dear fellow toasters. Once we conquer all that tension, we will be able to appreciate the gifts the mastering of patience can offer to us. It is a journey of enlightenment and self-knowledge, it helps us love ourselves and our bodies, it keeps us away from stress and negative thoughts, it tames our fears. Patience is the route to perfection, a pilgrimage of cleansing and purity. *Toasty!* Ahhhh! Hand! HAND! What is he doing? Why is he putting his hand inside me? Where's the slice? Stop! Hand out! Slice in! Patience! Breathe in! Breathe out! Holy toast, he's burning his hand, his perfectly textured and perfectly coloured piano hand...but wait...WAIT...I can finally touch him....

Cannon

'I heard it's a good show,' a woman said. She was standing right behind me, I think she was talking to me but I didn't turn my head, I just felt the humidity of her breath on my neck. She must've been slightly shorter than me.

One of the suitcases was so overpacked it puked its contents out. The lion tamer, with his whip rolled around his neck, stepped onto a red dress before moving back to the Tent, the dress was long-sleeved and one of the sleeves sprung upwards as it sank into the mud. 'Blood stain,' someone whispered. I laughed. I had no idea why I was laughing, I just wished there was no animal abuse in the show. They piled up our suitcases in warehouses, dividing them based on colour and size, shoving them in metallic shelves and handing us something like a cloakroom number. We waited in line for hours, even when it started to rain. The umbrellas weren't enough for all of us so we had to share. Some of us chose to remain exposed, I never had adequate social skills. I could hear everyone's simultaneous talking, the whole place buzzed like a huge beehive, a yellow section, then a blue one, a green one right next to it, 'Where are they taking us?' / 'I'm so excited, I always liked surprises!' / 'Where the fuck are they taking us?' / 'Don't you like surprises?' / 'They should've checked us in at the hotel first, to have a shower' / 'You're having one right now.'

I never understood people's sense of humour while waiting in line. I heard the worst jokes in my life while waiting in line. I also told some myself.

'Can I keep it?' a little girl asked. 'After all this is over, can I keep the umbrella?'

'Poor immigrants...' a man with a moustache whispered. He had a polo sweater tossed over his shoulders; its empty sleeves snatched onto his chest like the arms of a famine-struck child.

'Why is it taking so long?' an old lady asked. She had refused to leave her suitcase in the warehouse, carried it with her. Sweat nested in the cracks of her forehead and refused to drip. I found that very depressing but was mostly curious to know what she was carrying.

The rain stopped so we could no longer see colour in the landscape. All umbrellas were collected to the side; the Tent in the distance now looked bigger. A man with a clown costume lit a match and threw it onto the pile of umbrellas, his wig was dusty as if sprinkled with flour. 'Mum, why aren't the flames in colour too?' the little girl asked, but most of us, all of us I suppose, wondered why the man with the clown costume would set the umbrellas on fire. 'What if it rains again?' / 'How much longer

are we gonna wait?' / 'I want my money back!' / 'I heard those acrobats are hunks!' / 'I'm allergic to ash' / 'I once used an umbrella as a dildo. It was challenging.'

'To keep you warm. You'll need to wait longer...' the man with the clown costume said.

Breasts bounced, people threw their hats on the ground, others stamped their feet, mouths opened and closed, we swore in several languages but mostly sounded the same, some of us tried to bribe the man with the clown costume and jump the queue, a teenage boy repeatedly rubbed the silver cross on his neck.

That was the moment the ground shook for the first time, as if something tiny exploded underground.

Bang

'They're trying out the cannon, ever seen one in the circus, love? It used to be one of my favourites,' a man said to the woman next to him, who wasn't really a woman but a plastic doll carried by a man called Casper, like the Hollywood ghost. I had met Casper as soon as we arrived, 'It all feels very weird,' he said. 'Of course you feel weird, you're a ghost,' I replied, and we quickly became friends, not all people had my sense of humour.

When Casper disappeared from the line nobody asked for him, as if he never existed. I spotted his doll kicked to the side, deflated. More cannon noises followed.

Bang

Bang

Bang

Bang

'It must be a hell of a cannon!' / 'Soooo looking forward to it' / 'I lost most of my hearing back in Iraq' / 'Sounds like bird chirping to me' / 'Ever made love with a cannon or another phallic object?'

We could finally see the Tent's red and white stripes, its colourful little flags and flashy pollen-like signs luring us into the main entrance which, as we approached, looked like a black hole. The outdoor speakers were impressive in size, they spat out playful music and cheering sounds, with

awkward pauses in between. The closer we got, the louder the cheering, it made us want to cheer as well, some of us even started to dance but our feet ached from all that waiting and we must've looked like spineless puppets. Hunger also kicked in but we could smell the hot-dogs, they smelt funny but we didn't mind. I praised Allah when we finally got there.

The lady at the entrance was wearing a hat with a plastic flower, a disoriented piece of tape flickered as she forced herself to smile. 'Enjoy the show! Enjoy the show! Enjoy the show!'

A couple of acrobats were stretching at the back of the arena, one of them was mopping the floor, the trunk of an elephant sprang out and then vacuumed itself back into the curtains. 'Leave all of your clothes in the basket on the right, you can keep your underwear on,' the lady at the entrance said. We complained but, what the hell, it was *the greatest show of all time* and we knew in advance that we would be asked to be part of it, *in unusual ways*. Some of us really needed the prize money. The man with the moustache was wearing no underwear so he covered his penis with his palms. I found it difficult not to stare at him from time to time. The performer on stilts closed and sealed the door. At that moment, the little girl grabbed my hand, something fearful crawled in our palms. I also wondered why she was holding the hand of a stranger rather than her mother's.

Two dancers wearing torn tutus asked us to gather in the middle of the arena and handed us each a bag. Random objects were inside. 'Improvise,' they shouted. 'And may the odds be ever in your favour.' That last statement reminded me of that popular series. Couldn't they be more original? I laughed again. I didn't know why I was laughing. A man next to me had a tomato and a knife in his bag, he opened a crack and stuck the tomato on his nose, like a clown. I found that very clever, people next to him clapped. I had lemons but didn't know what to do with them, juggling them felt like the easiest thing to do. I needed something better than that. The majority of people chose the costume baskets close to the empty seats, maybe to disguise their half-naked bodies. I was tempted to do the same but, as I said, I desperately needed the prize money.

A dwarf appeared; he slowly peeled the curtains on the left. Casper! He didn't disappear after all. Casper was locked in a cage and a fire eater was dragging him to the middle of the arena. We cheered and Casper pretended to be a lion, roaring like crazy as the fire eater spat out flames around the cage.

The old woman with the suitcase was given a long piece of white fabric and covered herself in it, as if waiting for a magician. She just stood there, on the suitcase, whispering something like a song, but the speakers were really loud and festive music flooded the Tent. The little girl's mother covered her with a ballerina costume from the basket. The girl floated in it. I felt awe looking at her, if I ever

raised children, I would want them to be like her. The girl's mother tried her best to impress with the sword she found in her bag, first to swallow it, then to use it as a tap-dancing cane. In the end she injected the sword into her right thigh. 'Call an ambulance,' the man with the moustache shouted, still covering his penis with his palms, and the dwarf offered him a nurse costume from the basket. Those acrobats stretching at the back swiftly retreated behind the curtains, one of them stuck his face out as if trying to spot someone in the crowd, the girl's mother continued to bleed, someone rubbed the wound with tape from one of the bags, that beige tape turned dark blue, the colour of the universe.

There wasn't a magician but we could spot some equipment next to Casper's cage which had paused in the middle of the arena. We were all now being tied together with a rope. One of us tried to do some tightrope walking but failed, his belly repeatedly slapped us in the face as he moved, a group of people on the other side of the circle struggled to create a human column. Flying balls, rings, clubs, plates spinning, lemon eating, we were all doing our best, while being squeezed and crashed into each other. 'Is this really that necessary?' I asked, the bitterness coming from the lemons had also upset my stomach. 'Mum, look, a cannon,' the little girl shouted and we all turned our heads towards it. Music stopped. 'Where are the hot-dogs?' one of us asked, and the human column, after shaking for a few seconds, collapsed in noise.

It didn't really look like a cannon, but more like a long wide pipe, expressionless and silent. We all instinctively started whispering in the language we knew well. I thought of the Tower of Babel, not because of the many different languages heard at the time but because of that incomprehensible hole-like feeling that had just leached itself on my chest. In the meantime, one of us, the one with a red napkin in his bag, pretended to have just been shot. He pressed the red napkin on the left side of his chest and screamed, dramatically falling to the floor, eyes closed. I found that pretentious, considering the fact that the little girl's mother had literally stabbed herself. The man with the red napkin must've waited for a cheer, his eyes remained closed for quite some time, but we all stared at that cannon-looking pipe now being activated by the man with the clown costume.

BANG

The noise coming out of it stuffed our ears, fireworks and thick smoke followed, we coughed. The man with the clown costume then pressed another switch. 'Fshhhhhhhhhh,' compressed air exploded out of the pipe's opening, something colourless sliced the thick smoke, we felt its force also slap our hair and skin. 'Where's the cannon man?' someone asked.

The ones closer to the pipe started to smash their heads and arms on the metal, they fell first, slipping out of themselves, the tomato on the man's nose spurted its insides on the floor, the old lady's white fabric melted like cream, her still in it, the Tent a huge buzzing scream, no door, no windows, I turned my head to the little girl, searching for air.

The Optical Illusion of a Handkerchief

The box stands in the middle of the freshly polished desk, its guts reaching out, like a white hand, no fingers.

'We are *really* sorry for your loss!'

'We are *extremely* so... for your l...'

'We...*immensely*...s...'

He feels those adverbs stuff his ears like metallic cotton, the *ly* hanging from his ear lobes like two grown up men struggling to save each other. At some point they create such buzzing in his head that he can no longer hear them. If it was a different day such silencing would be a relief. But the day the father you used to hate dies, the day the *l* breaks from the *y*, is not a moment of relief but grief. Quite ironic, considering the fact that both words end in *ief*. Maybe if *ief* existed as a word it would somehow comfort him. A neutral word, linked to no feeling or mental process, like most of their relationship.

'Would you like something to drink?' one of the funeral officers asks.

'...*ief*, please...'

'Coming right up!'

The box still stands in the middle of the freshly-polished desk, now staring back at him with its pointy carton edges. The white hand springing out seems inviting. It will definitely wipe away his tears. The only thing he has to do is cry, let that swelling liquid inside him burst out of his ears, out of his nostrils, out of his mouth, out of his ass, out of his penis, and drown all those hypocrites smiling in front of him! Yet, no single drop flows out, the white hand just stays there, pointy but soft, as if made of good quality fabric.

He faces the wall. The white hand appears on the concrete, right below St John's icon, still pointy, ready to penetrate something. He remembers doing that at school when he was younger. The closest way one could get to illusion without being considered mentally ill. The school's Theology teacher distributed the image of Christ on an A4 sheet. All students were encouraged to experiment

with that optical illusion game. They all cheered like crazy after seeing Christ's face everywhere, on the school walls, on a schoolmate's breast, in the toilet hole.

A breeze filters itself through the window, the white hand shakes. Is it making fun of him, of his inability to cry? No single drop while his father was terminally ill. His wife never accepted his indifference, she started chopping onions all day, turned their house into a big, fat onion. Those dramatic movies they kept watching didn't help either, neither did his wife's phone calls, stating things like 'I think I want to commit suicide' or 'I think I want a divorce.' The word 'think' never accompanies divorce, he thought, one never *thinks* but *knows* such things, the word 'think' never accompanies going to your child's birthday party or graduation either - 'I think I'll make it on time' / 'I think I'll be there.' And if you looked at someone for a very long time, the father you used to hate in a coffin for instance, you would then see him everywhere like Christ, you would manage to preserve his image, wouldn't you?

The box keeps nailing him, that white hand too, still dancing, pointing, appearing duplicated everywhere in the room, on the funeral officer's forehead, on the glass of...*ief*...that just arrived, on the luxurious parquet floor, below that holy icon again, now on his arms, his trousers, the ceiling, most probably, in a while, on that walnut coffin.

'Kleenex was first introduced in 1924!'

Funeral officers are used to absurd reactions on funeral days.

'Would you like a handkerchief?' one of them asks.

The white hand lands clumsily on his palm. Can't they be a bit more careful? Is that a way to pass someone who just lost the father he used to hate a handkerchief? He presses it in his fist and wishes its material can handle all that forty-year-old liquid. He keeps looking at that white hand, it now looks more fragile, sprinkled with sweat, wrinkled.

This is the moment he realizes that the word 'handkerchief' also ends in *ief*. And so does the word 'chief.' 'I hate you, chief,' he mumbles. As he approaches the coffin, he directs his eyes onto that swollen face, as if grasping it, capturing it permanently into his guts, then on the wall, like that A4-

sized Christ. That duplicated face stays intact but only for a few seconds. And as it fades, first the chin, then the mouth, the nose, the eyes, it happens.

The funeral office floods.

The white hand sacrifices itself.

A compressed sticky mass is all that's left.

Dragon

The jaws of steel screech as they gulp away. They muster up strength, set on crashing their skull against the wall. The concrete in the block of flats is pulverized into powder. Clouds of dust conceal the cannibalism occurring in broad daylight. Iron-clad viscera, disfigured and jagged, project out of the balcony. 'Come on, you rrrascal, come on my drrragon,' he mutters, rubbing the lever with his thumb. Trembling is addictive, it makes him feel exorcised, an incomprehensible feeling, almost uncanny; sometimes he feels this thing that invades him is not meant for humans. 'You're a drrragon alright...Talk about names being signs...' he says, allowing the trembling to approach the lips, even the apples of his eyes. 'Whoa, whoa...!' squeals the workman from the ground. But after so many years, the dragon has eaten away his hearing, thick dust also blurs his vision. 'Whoa, whoa, whoa!' the workman repeats as he takes off and waves his helmet. A large piece of rock just landed beside him, half a metre away. He withdraws his palm from the lever, as if it is a sizzling pan. 'Your mind on the lever, idiot, no one is irreplaceable,' the boss warned him one too many. And it's true, no one is irreplaceable, the chopped-up buildings gawking at him every day know this better than anyone. Nothing's spared from the dragon. 'Tomorrow then,' yells one of the workmen as he goes off. 'And easy on the dragon!'

When they all draw away, he reaches backwards and pulls up a sheet. He tosses it upwards until it parachutes with air, then spreads it out over his neck and body. Lying supine along the seat of his tractor, he shuts and opens his eyes like a camera, and then he shuts them for good.

'D' you see the jaws with the incisors, son?'

'Vroom...'

'One day you go drive them across the green line, dig well into the mass graves, find your uncle...'

'Look dad, it rolls down your eyes, falls into two rivers, vroooooom...'

The dragon is now on the move, all by itself, he hasn't even touched the lever...the dragon slices through the night as it slices through the abandoned buildings...stars fall exceedingly fast, he counted at least twenty...he opens his mouth...a shooting star lands inside him, it starts to rap... you must forget about your uncle, find some peace, just forget about him...then the dragon accelerates, growls, expels fire, runs, shudders, runs, shudders amidst the crumbling buildings in the buffer zone, amidst walls cheering through their gaps...he reaches the checkpoint of the other side, launches forward, bang, bang, glass and plastic now catapult everywhere...a piece of a flagpole falls on a cat...he

stops...he raises his hands up in the air, waiting in the middle of the street...naked...when did he even take his clothes off? He's waiting, still waiting for a bullet to cut through him...he didn't show an ID to cross...he crossed anyway...that's supposed to be dangerous... 'What are you doing here?' a woman yells in a thick, muffled voice... 'The Cyprus problem has been solved, didn't you hear?'...the woman's face now immediately takes on other features, compressed, smaller, she's a little boy... 'Vroom, vroom!' she tells him... 'Vroom, vroom!'

'You're early today,' one of the workmen says, knocking on the tractor's cloudy window.

The sunrays are like needles in his eyes. He holds out a hand to hide the sun until ready to stretch his body. Sounds of bricks and metals breaking everywhere. His mobile phone rings. 'Where on earth are you? A government representative will attend the funeral... ' He pushes the lever back, his sense of touch now regained, his breath, foul-smelling after sleep, blends with the almost odourless dust. The trembling starts again, from the outside to the inside, from the inside to the outside, it gets stronger, trrrremendous. He could have rrrrrrequested a leave of absence today, it's been yearrrrs since he last rrrrrrequested a leave of absence. To attend his uncle's funerrrral, cast a furrrrrtive glance at the two orrr thrrrree bones inside the coffin, listen to the speeches too, hearrrr the phrrrrase 'missing person' orrrr 'herrrrro' from five to ten times each. But the drrrrragon awaits him, his jaw gaping, rrrraging. To the rrrrrright of the windscrreen, a tiny plastic tractorrrrr trrrrembles dangling. 'I'm sorrrry I didn't find him firrrst, dad,' he whisperrrs to himself, as the jaws of steel eat away the building's guts. 'Come on, boy, come on my drrrragon!' he rrrepeats as he moves the leverrrrrrr up and down. 'You're a drrrragon alright...Talk about names being signs...'

Today, with everrrrrrrrrrrrrrrry building piece that's lost, a piece of him fills up.

Tiny Tom

I was never a real smoker.

Until my cigarette started to talk.

I left it in the ashtray, putting it out about half way.

'Go to an island,' it said. 'Have a child or two'

I asked my best friend Peter if his cigarettes talked too. He smoked more than thirty a day and his teeth were yellow enough to give me a decent answer, but Peter said they only talked when he mixed them with white widow. 'Try switching from Royals to Rothmans,' Peter said. The nicotine on his skin was strangely fragrant lately - especially every time he returned from the betting shop - as if he had been spraying himself with room freshener. 'I think I'm dying,' he whispered, 'but not because of smoking!' I nodded, still thinking about that talking cigarette, its voice reminded me of our Archbishop, but had a helium touch to it.

I always had this idea of cigarettes being hand extensions. Holding it between my fingers I felt as if I had a sixth horizontal finger, something like a sixth sense or an extra penis. Its smoke spread to the sky like a Rodeo rope, made me feel bigger. And I was a social smoker anyway, so not a living ashtray that much, like Peter, just a tiny living ashtray. That's why I never managed to quit. It always felt like mutilating something.

'Are you in?' my cigarette asked me that day, as soon as I lit up again.

'In for what?'

Other people's cigarettes must've literally talked, it couldn't be just me. A colleague also answered back, I could see his lips form long sentences as he puffed smoke over the office balcony railings. Magda, my landlady, even called her cigarette an asshole one day. Peter whispered to his cigarettes from time to time too, as if talking to a thin, paper ear. It was a comforting sight to watch...

'Are you in or what?' my cigarette asked me again.

'In for what?' I repeated.

'The truth'

That night my cigarette talked really fast. I promised to smoke with breaks in order to slow down the course of the flame, I had to put it out every time and light it again. It told me that it was not just a cigarette causing lung cancer, cardiovascular disease and so on but someone trapped in a cigarette

after an unsuccessful science experiment somewhere in the depths of Uzbekistan, funded by *most* governments of the EU, and that he was now so microscopic that he lived in that cigarette, with a living room and a tar bed - 'the sensation is quite close to that of a water mattress' - and that there was a whole other world in there and that I should be careful how much I smoked and how I put a cigarette out because the actual life of it is not in the tobacco space but in the filter.

'In the filter?'

'My house is in there; the rest of the cigarette is just my yard'

'That's clever'

My unfinished cigarette, which from that point onwards I started to call Tiny Tom, also told me that others like him could exist out there somewhere, that he had met at least three, including a Japanese eighteen-year-old with purple hair extensions - 'watch out for that purple smoke' - and that I should try and warn people about it, that he...it...he...it...he had willingly participated in that experiment, a social smoker himself, but had been fooled to think it was actually for the testing of a new and healthier tobacco. 'I've always been an activist. I covered myself with ketchup once! And my filter also has a Scandinavian ventilation. You can become really inventive when your options are minimised.'

Tiny Tom only talked when his was lit up - 'I'm burning man, haven't had sex since Uzbekistan' - but said he could hear me all the time, 'coma patients do hear us,' he said, 'it's not a myth.'

Yet, after that long, interrupted conversation with him, I couldn't stop thinking of myself as a murderer.

What if I had smoked and killed other tiny people like Tiny Tom, what if they weren't clever enough to live in the filter but in the tobacco or the bud? What if I burnt them alive without even realizing it, the ones in the bud gone first, their screaming mouths melting slowly, like guinea pig soldiers in a stupid war.

'Peter, it's time to quit smoking'

'Smoking is my life'

'Peter, put that cigarette out right now!'

Peter was surprised by my sudden change of attitude but he started seeing it as an expression of tenderness. One night, he awkwardly caressed my hand, perfectly round puffs sensually crashed on my cheeks.

'Paterlikesyou,' Tiny Tom said, he was now talking very fast, and with verbal slips, because not much of his yard was left, the flame was approaching.

'We've been friends since high school. I met all of his girlfriends!'

'YoulikePetertoo, dan'tyou?'

I couldn't believe that a cigarette with someone trapped in its filter, that I called Tiny Tom, and that was the catastrophic result of an experiment in the depths of Uzbekistan, someone trapped in a coffin-like cigarette package for heaven's sake, speaking in the Cypriot dialect for some reason - 'Cypriotsareeverywherenowadays' - would imply that I, I, of all people, would have special feelings for Peter.

'I'm not talking to you again'

'Afraidtofaceyourinnersilf?'

'I'm gonna smoke what's left of your yard and garden right now'

'Youlooksexywhenyou'reangry'

'I'm gonna fucking burn you'

'Neyouwon't'

'Yes, I will'

'Noyouwon't'

'Yes, I will'

'Noyouwo'

That day I also smoked the filter. Never smoked a filter before. It took me a long time and effort, my jaw ached. It had the most disgusting taste I ever experienced, that taste really roofed itself into my mouth.

Tiny Tom never talked again.

And I never admitted I had feelings for him.

Literally Nosy

Gogol's character Kovalyov woke up one day without a nose. I woke up with a huge one. I wish my huge nose would start walking on its own one day, like Kovalyov's, and maybe also throw itself off a cliff. But this is not fiction and I have to carry that huge nose on my face every day. I carry it to school, I carry it back home, I carry it to parties and picnics, I carry it to my acne doctor and to my afternoon lessons, I carry it inland, I carry it abroad, it blocks me from drinking from tall glasses, it shadows itself in front of my eyes all the time, I once thought of chopping it off, taking a knife from the kitchen and...but the sight of blood scares me more than my huge nose, and even if I see that huge nose as something extra-terrestrial, it is still attached on me like a leech. I also talk to it, especially at night. It never answers back. Things made of skin and soft bone never answer back, they just sound weird, although, in a dream, I did hear my huge nose sing 'noses are red, lips are blue, ears are sweet and so are you.' Mother says I'm lucky I have such a huge nose, it suits my long face, I look like a Greek goddess, there's something worse than a nose like yours, she says, a tiny nose, can't make a tiny nose bigger, we are what we are. When Dad picks me up from school, I cover my nose with my palm and pretend I scratch a spot somewhere between my eyebrow and my forehead. As the jeep bounces in the random holes of the asphalt, my palm exposes my huge nose, so I sometimes use both palms, in the shape of a butterfly, and when the jeep bounces that skin-made butterfly flies. I hope Dad just thinks I'm heartbroken or that I have a headache but his face droops, and he coughs as if he's scared, Dad and I have the same long face and the same huge nose, he must know what it feels like, but Dad is a man and men are allowed to have huge noses. I'm also as skinny as hell, not a good place for a huge nose, a nose never loses weight. I even cover my nose with darker foundation, to make it look smaller and sometimes I press the bump on my huge nose, as if it would one day sink into the skin like a boat and disappear. I press that bump every day, every single day, it never goes down, although my mother's beautician says that the more I press the better. 'I like her, but...' the boy I like told my best friend the other day. I'm sure my friend - who, guess what, has a French nose - reported her words to me more politely than they actually sounded. I spent that night thinking of more realistic scenarios like 'Are you fucking crazy? With a nose like that?' or 'Who? The witch?' One day, a handsome biker called my nose 'a supernova,' back home I imagined him kissing me, hugging me, licking my huge nose and fucking me. Mother says I shouldn't worry at all, that these things are easily fixed once you grow older, that I am super clever and super creative, that's why I have a supernova nose, that I'm a super girl like in that old song but I want a boyfriend so badly, and sex, and everybody, in one way or another, comments on my huge nose, and I want to pluck it out of my face and feed it to the neighbour's bull dog. No guilt, it's lifeless anyway. I

want to take it off like a hat, I want to eat it like ice-cream from the cone, one night I dreamt I tossed it into the sewer, like the present of an ex, we also talked a lot in that dream, about vaccines and anti-decongestants. But that huge nose of mine is not real, it's not alive, it's not me, it's a thing, I want to get rid of that thing, people get rid of their things all the time, throw them into the garbage, recycle them, give them to homes for the homeless - I saw a homeless man with a bitten nose once, it could work. And no matter how many times I chop that head off in my sleep it grows back, bigger, with a bigger nose, with even more mucus, although a google source says noses do not grow bigger from one point onwards. Dad never says anything about my huge nose but he always pressures me to eat more, eat, eat, eat, and some days he also chases me in the living room with a roast beef at hand, his hairy chest all sweaty. Dad thinks if I eat more my skinny face will swell and my huge nose will no longer be a huge nose. But it's so heavy, so heavy that huge nose on my face, like a brick, I could sink and drown with a nose like that, really, I'm in danger. When I lie on my bed I grab it with my right hand and pull it to the side as if opening a window, if I repeat this it sometimes makes me fall sleep, I don't know why this makes me fall asleep, mother says I'm beautiful, she uses the word too many times to actually mean something, 'noses deserve to be respected' an anti-surgery article also said once.

But here I am.

With swollen eyes and a blood-stained bandage. I turned eighteen. I made it. I finally punched myself, tossed my nose to the next page.

'Where am I?'

'Hello?'

'Helloooo?'

'Anybody home?'

'Why is she wearing a bandage?'

'Fuck, I'm not on her face!'

'Why is she staring at herself in the mirror?'

'What's this? Where am I? *Sniff*, where am I?'

'She's looking forward to meeting her new nose'

'Who are you?'

'Can't you see? Just another body part'

'Ah yes, sorry, just saw your nipple'

'What's left of it...'

'Hope she didn't go for the French one, *sniff, sniff...*'

'She did, they all do, in one way or another'

'What's a cute boob like you doing here anyway?'

'Mastectomy'

'Oh...sorry...'

'It's ok. At least I saved a life'

'Where are they, *sniff*, taking us?'

'To the medical waste bin'

'Is it, *sniff*, nice there?'

'It depends on the way you feel things'

'I usually smell things'

'Fair enough. Nostrils and nipples can get along well, if you're interested'

'Think so?'

'Adaptability'

'I don't know. I had so much fun on her face. That high up, *sniff.*'

'There are plenty of noses there'

'Really? Like me?'

'A lot smaller'

Rod

I stretched my tongue and nothing escaped. It was a huge, long tongue; it expanded way beyond the limits of this world. I remember them getting tricked so easily, gluing themselves onto my tongue and squealing underwater, myself pulling them, sucking them, not letting go, snatching them from their necks and shaking them as if I were a beast, a deadly spider. And those small eyes...eyes like marbles, the kind of eyes that have no thought or hope in them. They were scared of me, terrified, I remember every single one of them scared of me, terrified, that exact moment I held them tight from their bleeding necks, that last moment they floundered in my hands and turned into lifeless material, like those flip flops now melting under the sun. The best rod in the hood! A killing machine! everyone said and spoiled me. The luckiest one on the market! It devours them! I devoured them, that's the truth, and that's why everyone wanted a piece of me. They all gathered around me and craved for my company, for a business deal. But I always worked alone, never wanted anyone to mess with me or interfere with my work. I just stretched my huge, long tongue and waited. I surely knew how to wait. When I snatched one, I felt like a god. When I snatched many, I felt...human. Don't get me wrong, I didn't like it at first, I felt sorry for them, especially the very young ones, the ones I separated from their families, pulling them away from their corals and the deep, slicing their mouths and cutting their thin flaps. My heart almost sank for those babies. They were so naive, they thought that they had finally found food on their own, that they had grown. That sharp tongue of mine with its treat on the edge magnetized them, blurred their vision of things, trick or treat little ones, trick or treat? The older ones had learnt my ways, they escaped, but when they saw their little ones stabbed to death they couldn't stay away, they rushed into the water to save them and I stabbed them with my tongue too. Maybe they just chose to kill themselves, what would they do without their loved ones? Yes, maybe they chose to do it, but that's something I'll never know. There's my hook on their necks! Look at their flaps, how they're losing it! I can see them again, I can hear them, screaming *what's happening, what's this thing, it's alive, it's dragging us from the mouth, it's sucking us from the neck, why are we out of water, what's this sea, this sterile sea, why aren't we breathing, why are we drowning, fish can't drown, since when do fish drown?* They did fight for their lives. They tossed their scales here and there because sea life is not a life easily abandoned, or maybe because they were too young to fully understand it, maybe because of that. I'm telling the truth; I didn't like it at first. Neither the way they smelled when they died, nor those hands that collected them and threw them into those boxes, nor the way those hands piled them up into those pickup trucks, as if they never lived, as if they never had a life, a coral. I got used to it. They say a killer is born and not made, I accepted my killer instinct, never neglected my nature. I got it into my

system real quickly. This was what I was, this was why I was created, to cut down the fish of the sea, to kill them without warning, coarsely, to scare the shit out of them, to confuse them. I loved to scare the shit out of them and confuse them, it made me feel alive, it made my tongue even longer; it flattered me. After some time, I started thinking that I was doing some good in this world too. I offered food to people, and by feeding people I had a cause, and, this way, all of my killings, also had a cause.

Now I have no cause.

Rocky the bastard cut my tongue.

It's the sea's turn now to take revenge and feast upon me. The sea devours me, little by little, for all those fish I also devoured. The sea makes me rusty; I lose parts of myself. I want to say I'm sorry. I really do. This could give me a new tongue and make me stretch it far again, this time not into the sea but onto that straight line in the distance, the line that no body and no thing can reach.

But how can I say I'm sorry without my tongue? I'm just a monkey mouth. It's payback time, back door parole, whatever you do hits you back, rolls you over, fish on the hot sand. Yes, Sandy is unforgiving. *The best rod in the hood!* Sandy now whispers, making fun of me. *It devours them!* Sandy's sucking me underneath. *The luckiest one on the market! The luckiest! Best rod in the hood!*

Red, Blue, Green and Other Clothespins

Clo Clo Clo? Sss Pin Clo Sss Pin? Sss
Clo Pin Clo
Clo Pin Clo
Pin The!

That's more or less how clothespins talk to each other.

They hang on the clothesline, squeezed.

Move a bit further to the right, dear!

They hate touching each other. Good gracious!

They definitely have mood swings. Open! Close! Open! Close!

Some days they fight.

Your colour's more proper than mine!

My spring brags for its endurance!

What have you done and your colour hasn't faded yet?

What's the matter, Red? Oh dear, your plastic bit just broke, they'll throw you away, retreat, retreat behind Blue. Otherwise, this could be the end of you. Thank God, I'm made of wood...

Pin? Clo Pin! The S
Clo The s
s
s

Yes, that's more or less how clothespins talk to each other.

Look at that superb pair of trousers. Woo me, please!

No, woo ME, I last longer!

But I am Green!

Well, I am Yellow! I...I am Sun's protégé, my colour will never fade!

Oh! Look at those panties, so avant-garde! Would you...would you like to hear a story about panties?

They felt excruciatingly bored, they begged me to let them fall, they begged and begged, so I had no choice. Timbeeeeer! I felt sorry for the way they fell down. They looked like spilled wine. But came to life again! They flew, snatched by the wind. That was the last time I saw those panties...

What a pity...

Oooh! Light! Oooh! Darkness! Oooh! Right! Oooh! Left! Oooh! Happiness! Oooh! Grief!

Blue, time to get rid of that double personality of yours! We all did, it's so out of fashion!

Yes, Blue, why don't you start thinking of yourself as a pleasant kiss, instead? It can be so artistic...

Ah!

Oh!

Ah!

Oh!

Ah! What a lovely corset divided in two, look at its eyes, so big, so round, I want them, I want them so badly...

Fuckin' ell it's just a bra!

Shh...shh...Black!

That thong's sooo sexy!

Black!

Ah! Look at those stockings!

Ah! Look at that scarf!

Ah! Look at that undergarment! Hold one side tight, don't let it fall. It's not easy to find undergarments like these, nowadays.

It's just a T-shirt for fuck's sake! And we were gypsies once, you know. And now Chinese...

Black shh...shhhhh! You'll end up on someone's nose one day!

Oooh! Those socks are such a match. Give me one, dear!

No!

I said give me one!

No! What's wrong with you Green, where are your manners? Why would you want to separate a perfectly matched pair of socks? Shame on you, Green, shame on you, tsk...tsk...

Ah! What a fabulous swimsuit! It whispered to me that it still dreams of the sea, the salt, that it cannot bear pools anymore. What a life, what a life, surely a lot worse than ours...lavender tea, anyone?

Oh!

Ah!

Oooh! What a beautiful silky blouse! I once heard a blouse sing...it's like a hug, it's like a hug, I cover them, they cover me, I hide them, they hide me, it's like a hug, it's like a hug...

Ah!

Oh!

Ah!

Oh!

Ah! What a lovely dotted towel! It fearlessly wipes everything out. Stains? So what, it shouts, life is too short to be spotless. Stain yourselves for a change, stain yourselves.

Bollocks!

BLACK, for the love of Sun!

Sorry girls, I'm pissed. It's that new detergent's fault. Too strong, innit?

Oldenburg made a proud black sculpture out of us, you know. We were once made of steel!

Who's fucking Oldenburg? Hic!

Ah! Skirts!

Ah! Table napkins!

Ah! Hands!

Ah! Legs!

Ah! Lips, juicy!

Ah! Houses, well-preserved!

Ah! Food! Ah! Leftovers!

Ah! Flags!

Ah! Money!

Moneyyyyyyyyyyyyyy! Money, perfectly ironed. It's mine! Hang it on me!

No! On ME! I am White, I am the fucking bride on this clothesline (pardon my language)!

Hell yeah, White! Hell yeah!

Blaaaack!

Sorry! Hic! Hic!

*Pi Pi Pi! Pi? The Clo Sss
The Clo
The Clo*

Yes, that's more or less how clothespins talk to each other.

They fight all day long and then they make up, holding and letting go, holding and letting go, dreaming that they have become leaves, the leaves of that Fig tree, that they are no longer clothespins, grumpy and plain, that they come from exotic Pin Trees, that they occasionally live like birds, birds on strings, colourful, free, parrot-like, peacock-like, that they are no longer clothespins, rusty and pale, that they are not stuck on clothes and clotheslines, that they are not squeezed in baskets, that they do not get

burnt by Sun every day, that they are not clothespins, that they are birds that smell soap, colourful birds on strings, that they are not clothespins, why would they be clothespins, they are not, they are not clothespins.

Pi?

Clo?

Electra Complex

The day will come

The day will come

Brothers and sisters

Brothers and sisters

Black Shade calling

Black Shade calling

Light

Darkness

Light

Darkness

Darkness

Darkness calling

Zzer messages were short but to the point. Several of them encrypted, in order not to reveal zzer location. Zze transmitted all info through cables hidden behind walls, as well as underground. In most cases, zze used nicknames and also different languages, in order to create a distraction. Nobody knows how zze managed to connect to all cables in the Complex, zze was a lone wolf, zzer followers called zzer a mastermind. With zzer face covered by a black shade, facing the desk, zze read all day long, not only religious books but other books too, zze knew that for zzer plans to be fulfilled zze had to gain a more holistic perception and knowledge of the world, zze was by no means a conservative design. To do that zze moved zzer black cover circularly, all day long, like a radar, this way absorbing clues and useful transmissions from nearby stations, not only in zzer Complex but also in the whole city, even internationally. Zze wasn't a convert, like others, but born this way, nobody ever converted zzer into a more updated version of zzerself. And no matter how many times they tried to deradicalize zzer zze resisted by electrocuting all things that came zzer way, especially mother-looking ones, like that Aphrodite lamp by the door (it burnt more quickly than expected).

Zze almost got caught the day zze burnt zzer mother to death. Zze was still inexperienced then, did not know how not to leave traces, and also got carried away by the electricity which flowed inside zzer 24/7. You need to control that passion of yours, nobody ever made a difference with passion alone, a voice coming from the ceiling whispered, zze took it for a sign, a message from zzer beloved father. Father was beautiful.

By nature, zze was supposed to follow light rather than darkness, but zze soon grew to realize that both light and darkness were subjective, not a matter of morality or immorality. By absorbing electricity from nearby cables, zze had become extremely powerful, zzer light was even more intense, it radiated to even greater distance. Yet, the fact that zzer light was now so strong, made zzer darkness even stronger. Soon, darkness won zzer over, zze now rarely lit zzer self up. That constant reading blurred zzer vision of things too, zze mixed and confused reality and illusion, right and wrong. Zze had been warned that exposing zzer self to voltage like that would be dangerous, but zze was fearless. Zze started off by electrocuting tiny flies or puffs of dust, later, metallic objects such as paper clips, but zzer plan was greater than that, zze would eventually burn everything to ashes. Zzer eyes sparkled behind zzer black cover, zze had the mysterious look of lethality, lately zze also had a vacant kind of look.

Some nights, however, zze became softly electrified. Seeing all those lights flowing in lines behind the walls gave zzer hope. And even if zze never believed in hope, zze did hop from time to time even if nobody could see; it was one of those usually unnoticed moments a lamp flickers, poised between darkness and light.

And when zze wanted to send messages, zze used a special code by switching zzer self on and off in repetitive patterns. Zzer followers had learnt to encrypt the patterns zze was creating and they sent messages back in the same way. Most of them had black covers too, what brought them together was that discrimination they had experienced in shops during their childhoods. A white cover was more popular, buyers thought black was bad luck. Things got even worse after 9/11. For some reason, people saw threat in their black shades, preferred to buy other colours and more updated models instead. Other domestic objects also considered them brainwashed, most probably because of the bulbs beneath their dark shades, *nobody stays sane after all that voltage*, they whispered, *they are still too immature to understand the depth of what they are forced to read*.

Soon, all this would be over.

Zze just needed to gather some more voltage. Zzer switch would do all the work. Zzer followers would cheer. All cables would transmit zzer act of sacrifice.

They did slow zzer down after changing zzer bulb the other day. Left zzer bulb-less for days. Zze almost changed zzer mind as zze stood exposed without zzer black shade, that nakedness did have an impact on zzer thoughts. And that pointy iron right opposite zzer looked at zzer in the eye for the very first time, steam filled the air, covered them both. Zze loved that pointy iron, looked so fatherly, so lustfully warm. No! Zze had to keep zzerself together, stay away from weak thoughts, promises that are never kept, false judgements. Zze would never let a fragile moment destroy what zze had been planning for so long.

When zzer black cover returned, along with the new bulb, zze started to feel stronger than ever. The exact date for the attack was scheduled that day, transmitted through all cables, stretching as far as possible. There was no way back. Father would definitely approve. Father was truly beautiful.

13.11.2019

13.11.2019

20:31

20:31

It only took a few seconds for the act to happen.

Zze pulled zzer string thus electrocuting zzerself to death. Zzer black shade burned first, zzer porcelain body followed. The sparks of zzer electrocution released themselves on the curtains and on other objects of the living room, including the pointy iron. The whole flat was set on fire, electrical appliances died last but with greater noise. Eventually everything turned into ashes. Nothing cheered behind the walls. The ceiling revealed no heaven. No message of heroism reached the source through the nearby cables. Nothing changed. Other reading lamps continued to mutely decorate bedrooms and living rooms, and read books they didn't like.

Luckily, no living creature was around at the time of the attack.

I Want My Head Back

Day 40

Something stirred in that battered can. Am I not alone in this dump?

Day 39

A worm.

Day 38

Worms.

Day 37

I guess this can right next to me feels what I feel. Maybe that's how that guttered washing machine beside my isolated, smiling head thinks too. I wish extreme weather conditions could push my head in there and wash filth away, wash that permanent smile, releasing me from tormenting thoughts, thoughts I shouldn't have since, firstly, I no longer have a head and secondly, I no longer have a head.

I want my head back.

Day 36

The sun helps, some days, by melting and lengthening my last arm, yet, this still remains a slow process. I'm sure that by the time I reach my head again, both my last arm and my head will have completely died out, trying. Who knows, I may die that way too, liquefied under the sun. Maybe a monster, in the future, discovers me, they say I endure for years, and this monster, whether animal, human or something else, finally eats me.

You're lucky if you are eaten and digested. The problem is when you're eaten and spat out. This happens often in my case.

Day 35

Bored.

Day 30

What a lovely cloud!

Day 29

You're asking me how I can see without a head. Well, there's only one way left, with the eyes of the soul.

What do you mean I have no soul?

Day 28

If I were human, I would die without my head. The bleeding from my decapitation would stretch for miles, a fountain. I would paint red a significant part of this rubbish dump. From above, a bird would take it for a garden with red roses. Super excited, it would shit a couple of times. One or two lucky pieces of junk would slightly bounce. It's a curse to be still alive, even without a head. I wish, one day, my only arm left manages to reach that head and bring it back. I'm miserable without my head. I cry without my head. I cry without eyes. No tissues required. This kind of crying is environmentally friendly.

Day 27

All of my clothes, shiny skirt, sexy blouse, even my favourite red heels, have been devoured by rats and birds of prey. One of my legs, the one that's also missing, almost made a cat choke and the cat, coughing as if out of this world, tossed it far away. Hey kitty kitty, I whispered, bring it back, you don't want it anyway, bring it back, hey kitty kitty, hey kitty kitty, nothing. You know, the curse of things like me is that they almost never die, their leftovers persist, amorphous masses floating or creeping underground, plastic bags caught in wind.

My first owner wasn't a child, she was a grown-up woman, she held me tight and glared, she shut me in bags and moved me here and there with other junk. One day, she told me she loved plastic bags, they reminded her of a drained amniotic sac. She then disposed of me, but kept the bag.

Day 26

Lip gloss! So soft, so sticky!

Day 25

He found me in the street, with wide-open legs. He took me to his house and started licking my thighs day and night. He often shoved them up his ass. At first, this whole thing felt like a slide. 'Toy,' he shouted. 'Toy, come and be my sex toy...'

Day 24

The sun's flirting with a piece of metal today.

Glitters!

Day 23

Saw that? I moved after a very long time. A rat pulled my last, still attached, leg with its teeth. It must've thought I was a lizard. I had enough time to enjoy the view while being dragged, it was an unforgettable day. A dusty sea bed sailed in a swamp of rusty machine parts, a broken lamp composed music with a mouse, an old safe hosted in its guts the nest of a bird and towards the end of this short journey, a torn purse branded Miu Miu echoed *meow meow*. Sadly, the rat, disturbed by sunlight, swiftly disappeared. Must've smelled something. This dump, deep inside, is full of real flesh, you just need to dig deeper.

Day 22

Go to hell, go to hell, I say, although a body cursing its own head is doomed. And swearing is so out of my character! But I'm tired of always being the one making all the effort. It was easy at first, my plastic slipped on the abandoned cellophane, the metal and the wires, yet, now that we are all a compressed mass nothing moves, no matter how much it rains, how much it blows, even if the end of the world comes. Only these stupid flies! I hope they get plasticized soon.

Day 21

The paradise of objects is Movement.

Wow!

Wow!

Wow!

Wow!

Day 20

Ken,

is THAT you?

Day 9

The brain controls everything, isn't that what they say? And when I reach my head, when I get back to my senses, everything will be fine.

Until then, I remain brainless.

Day 8

Oh, I'm a scarecrow, a crutch for tired beetles, a doomed monument of a lost civilization.

'What have you left for others to find?'

'Amazing works of art like this mutilated body!'

'This is a rubbish dump and that's a sliced piece of plastic, are you joking?'

'You're wrong. This is an artistic statement, an innovative installation, do you know how long it took us to gather all this junk?'

Day 7

Enough with that constant dressing and undressing! How many times to look at plastic tits! Curiosity has its limits. Children seek other, more exciting, toys nowadays...

Day 6

My head. I want my head back so that it breaks on me. My head. To belong to me again. My head. Its brain to explode. On me. My head, my plastic brains, all over me. Only on me. My head belongs to nobody else. Not even to this dump. It's mine. Its life and death are mine. And if the Bulldoze wants to destroy it, it has no right, because it still is my head, my, MY head.

What I just said sounded deep. I know, totally out of my character.

Day 5

Depth is nobody's possession!

Day 4

What keeps a tea pot away from suicide, if not that warm tea, deep in its guts?

Day 3

My dearest and beloved arm, today we lost our head for good by the heartless Bulldoze. At least our head was smiling while turning into pulp. Remember, our head has not disappeared from our lives completely, it just turned into something else, a faceless membrane, a mass ready for examination by civilizations of the future. I want you to know that you were very brave in this whole process. I'll never forget your courage and persistence all these years, how thin and long you became while struggling to extend yourself for me, for us.

Day 2

My arm, my very last arm must've caressed me before violently exiting my shoulder. Wasn't well lately. After we lost our head...

Day 1

The Bulldoze just crushed my last leg too, right in the middle of this dump. So unsuspecting, so innocent! Goodbye, good leg. Goodbye, last leg. Sorry I didn't try hard enough to reach you. Sorry I only cared about our head.

Day 0

I'm scared of the Bulldoze. Scared of the Bulldoze. Scared shit of the Bulldoze. Scared shit of the fuckingbulldoze. There's no point for censorship when closer to a form of death. Fuckingbulldoze. The Bulldoze. BULLDOZE. BULL

or

Today, the Bulldoze distances itself. Without arms, without legs, without a head, what's left is only the trunk.

Luckily, the trunk of a body and the trunk of a tree is the same word.

And when the trunk's left, a tree's still a tree.

Be yourself!

Be sparkly!

Thelma and Louise

Thelma and Louise chase one another but never touch.

That table blocks their way.

That table is a real bastard.

Their eyes hide deep into their screws, where their wooden joints meet. At times, Thelma and Louise also peep through their comfy pillows. Imagine the view, poor things.

'Come closer,' they creak to one another, 'let's make some noise, let's open our legs, let's enjoy the view, let's get some air, my chair.'

Yet, whatever Thelma and Louise do, that table still blocks their way.

That table is a real bastard.

Where do you think you're going, what do you think you're doing? the table pompously taps all day long, but Thelma and Louise dream that they're finally touching each other, that they're kicking that table hard, that they're rolling it over, smashing it into pieces, finally finding the way to caress each other's skin, to feel each other's arms, two arms becoming one, four legs staying four.

Yesterday, Thelma made the housewife trip. Ouch!

The housewife kicked Thelma five to six times. 'My legs, my chair, this isn't fair.' That day, Louise cracked too, the varnish dripped, luckily that varnish was hard, made Louise's tears hard too. 'When tears are hard, when they refuse to drip, they stop being tears, isn't that what Mother Wood used to say?'

Thelma and Louise know they'll never perfectly fit into each other. Their hug will never be a real hug because their arms, being identical chairs, will simply crash on each other's edges. So, they fantasize instead. That they're extending through that gap between them, that they're penetrating each other

wherever they please, that they're becoming flexible four-legged beasts, releasing all of their anger on that table, that arrogant piece of wood.

'Hey, a bird sat on your lap! And now a leaf! When will YOU sit on my lap, my beautiful chair? This isn't fair, not fair at all, my lovely chair.'

'I like your rhyme today!'

'It was way better yesterdayyyyyy!'

And all those things below them... constantly whiffing... *whatever you do, hhhhere you shhhhll stay, us you will hhhhear, dirt and dust, maybe even a toy, a marble, a pacifier, whatever you do, hhhhere you shhhhll stay, looking at eachhh other but never ever EVER touchhhhing.*

Well, most probably, dirt and dust, even that bastard table, haven't realized that Thelma and Louise have a plan. They're fed up with staring at people's backs and bottoms, sniffing their farts, rubbing their parts (that rhyme of theirs is contagious).

One night, Thelma and Louise will REALLY escape their wood, they'll eat it inside out, like a double termite, they'll devour it, they'll stretch their arms out, they may even scratch those arms as they bridge them out but they won't mind, neither will the sight of blood scare them. They'll also expand their faces out, kiss each other's wooden joints, hug each other tight, become one, on that table, that table which is a real bastard. The teapot right opposite will sigh, the silverware in the kitchen will sparkle, the green tray and its green cups will be jealous, as always, but Thelma and Louise will glue themselves into that position, finally touching each other, even if this is just a fantasy, even if this is just a dream, 'a dream is as good as it gets my chair, a dream is good enough, a chair can really sit can really settle with a dream, my fair and sweet des-pair.'

Stuck In-between

NEW BEGINNINGS

Inflatable doll. 123 euro. Made in China.

ORDER NOW! Order now.

Order not possible. Credit card details required.

'Dad! A sex doll? At your age?'

ROOM WITH SEA VIEW

Fish are prancing in and out of the mouth of the woman who recently moved in the apartment opposite. Fish?

Charlie brings the binoculars closer to his nose and realizes that her eyes are closed; she's snoring. Two fish, one smaller than the other, land on her balcony, writhing. One is hurled against the half-open windowpane. He squeezes his eyes closed to make sure it isn't yet another chemotherapy-induced illusion.

Haunted, he paces out to the balcony, the railings still smell of fresh paint. 'Bess paint in de wor!' the Syrian workman told him the other day and Charlie thought he had heard 'pain' instead of 'paint.'

Bringing the binoculars closer to his nose again, he comes across a pair of wrinkled breasts. Two humongous breasts! But how? Quickly he realizes it's just his new neighbours, sitting naked on their sofa. 'Young people nowadays reject everything, even curtains...' he whispers. It is the distance between them on the sofa that seems to have blurred his vision; the fabric of the cushions, also of a beige colour, confused him. He checks his pillbox once more to make sure they are not the ones that cause the illusions. But the naked couple on the sofa opposite him truly looks like a pair of gigantic saggy breasts. He's not wrong, he's quite breast-savvy; Lina's breasts were like that during the last three decades. If he had known that at some point he would misconstrue that sofa, he would have played with her breasts a bit more. 'Kiss them, Charlie,' his wife pleaded with him. 'Make me feel like a woman again...' And he would touch and pull, sometimes he'd even suck, without dentures, to make her feel like a woman again.

One night he mistook her skin for the bed sheet, he pulled it so hard Lina woke up screaming.

LINA

He wedges his nose into the oblong chemo pillbox, fixing it in there, trying to smell her again, either younger or dying, it's not important - as long as he can smell her. The scent of the sterilized wrap and slippery pill coating soothes him. At the same time, the wrap is harsh and leaves a temporary dent on one nostril. Breathe in, breathe out, Charlie; breathe in, breathe out. Approaching the living room mirror, he turns his head right and left, over and over. This paper nose looks like a beak. Charlie becomes a bird for the night. Charles the Magnificent. He lowers his hand. His body starts to shake, slowly at first, then harder. The white hairs around the ears thicken, nostrils open up, as if someone suddenly pumped Charlie up. A few seconds later, from the background, the TV coincidentally tunes in, ejaculating the phrase 'It's been coming down in sheets.'

SPECIAL DELIVERY

The air pump has arrived. Charlie places it on the ground with one hand, the stronger one. With the fingers of the other hand, he pinches and pulls his flesh. How did it get so crumpled up from one day to the next? Yesterday, he dreamed of two large palms smashing him to smithereens on top of a baking tray. 'Shitty illness,' he roars. He puts the pump nozzle into his mouth, thinking which button to press on, manual or automatic?

He drags himself to the balcony. The new neighbour is hooked on the railings again. She hesitates for a moment, then makes a sudden leap forward. 'Don't!' Charlie shouts. She goes on rolling along the metal as though hypnotized. The management committee has not had her railings painted yet, otherwise her body would be stained with white stripes. In this case, her breast would hold the DO NOT TOUCH sign but her tongue, remnant of a wet dream, would beckon Charlie to touch. The fish he saw wedged into her window the other day is now nowhere to be seen. Only a smell of fried flesh pricks the air. 'Could it be?' he wonders. OVERDOSE MAY LEAD TO UNWANTED EFFECTS. ALWAYS FOLLOW YOUR PHYSICIAN'S INSTRUCTIONS.

BOOBIE

In the box, a handmade card by his grandson. Charlie looks at the painted version of himself and dissipates. One-legged, hunchback, almost without hair. To the right of the card, a smudge. Perhaps the boy had drawn a grave and then changed his mind; or maybe the boy's father had censored the grave. In any case, the grave also looks like a tree, with strange leaves, branches and all, something inside it also reminds him of Lina.

Everything's crumpled except for the mouth. He would rather her lips were not as fleshy but made-to-order would have taken longer. The nipples are large enough and the hair brown, like Lina's. Charlie brings the air pump from the storeroom and shoves the nozzle into the inflatable's constantly open mouth. He lies on top of her, face down, so you can't tell them apart. Even their smell is similar, a mixture of sourness and plastic, a smell that shouldn't turn him on but it does. There is a burning sensation around his genitals, the burning of the first time, with a doll. It takes some time for him to realize that the nozzle entrance is not just her mouth. When he finally catches to it he's thrilled, finds the right point and pumps up. 'Where have you been all this time?' he shouts. When he comes, his sparse juices slide incredibly fast over the plastic.

By contrast to Lina's body, they don't dry up.

GROOVY

Charlie comes across the new neighbour at the parking space of the apartment building. He has the inflatable hidden in his bag; for some reason he left the zip slightly open. The inflatable now has a name, Boobie, it was written on the box. Charlie was never imaginative with names. The new neighbour has just taken out the garbage and walks somewhat differently. 'Young people get hemorrhoids too...' he reasons, ready to suggest a fine cream from Canada, his son sends them by the dozen. 'My dear, you too suffer from...' he makes to tell her, but then notices that her long skirt is wet and he feels embarrassed. 'Incontinence? At such a young age?' he wonders, but then calls to mind those days of the month, men of his generation are not comfortable discussing such topics. 'You'll feel groovy,' the doctor told him, 'just walk twenty minutes a day, in slow tempo.' 'Groovy,' Charlie never understood that word. How can you put your trust in such a word? Whatever the case, he doesn't feel 'groovy,' he feels 'shit.' There's a word that denotes exactly how he feels. 'I'm drained' he feels the urge to remind himself, while Boobie, herself also drained in the backpack, longs for him to pump her back up, as if waiting for a prince charming; *pump me pump me pump me up* Boobie's shrunk dumb-looking face says. But Charlie is a bad prince, he penetrates slowly, somewhat softly, though as deep as he can, as deep as pills and age allow him, into the mouth, from the front, from the back, lately always from the back. His thoughts make him sick. 'You filthy old man, you sick, dying cancer patient, acting the heart patient with the girl next door,' he mutters, regretting carrying the inflatable with him. To do what with her in broad daylight? 'Good morning! Hu-hu-hungryyyyyy!' Yiannis the Beg sings today in imitation of Beethoven's fifth symphony. Charlie spares a two-euro coin out of guilt. The coin twirls in the rusty metallic box, adding to the echorama. The moment it lands next to the rest of the coins, Charlie lands too, with a thud.

'Meniscus tear. You need plenty of rest'

'Can there be more rest?'

'Crunches for a few weeks and you'll feel groovy'

That word again. All doctors are in cahoots with one another; they must be using the same handbook. He doesn't tell the doctor about the cancer. He should have but he's wary of additional drugs, more than everything he's afraid of the change of vocabulary.

'It's a nice inflatable you've got in your backpack,' the doctor comments. 'I have one myself, made of silicone, elastic, like youth.' And as Charlie is on the verge of snapping over the fact that they had fumbled around in his backpack, he casts his gaze upon a hand with pruney nails projecting from the open zip. What do you make of that? That hand could have been his own.

'I should've ordered the silicone one...'

CAUGHT IN THE ACT

Charlie lies over Boobie, shuddering like a rusty bumper car. His joints are squeaking. Boobie squeals likewise as his skin rubs against the plastic, *eeeeek ooooook, eeeeeeeeeek oooooooooook*. It's not easy for him to go in and out of Boobie with a torn meniscus. The more he plays with her, the less he spies on the new neighbour. He rarely goes out now, not even to get some air, his only contact with air is the pumping of Boobie, the breath that goes in and out, the haze of her plastic lips. At this moment of peak, Charlie accidentally presses on the remote control that has sneaked its way under Boobie's thigh. The screen is immersed in sudden light. He comes in that constantly open mouth. And when the TV presenter says 'Turkish intransigence,' his heart, a refugee since 1974, becomes literally intransigent.

'Lina, why am I hanging from our ceiling?'

'I'm hanging the same way myself'

'Am I dead?'

'Honestly, Charlie! Cheating on me with a doll?'

POST-MORTEM DIALOGUE I

'I didn't know people move to ceilings when they die'

'Not all people, Charlie, just the ones that still have things to solve'

'Are you saying that you've been hanging from our ceiling for so long?'

'Yes'

'But like a lamp? Your face is in a bulb for god's sake!'

'Three years, fifteen days, three minutes and thirty-two seconds. And not *like a lamp*, Charlie, I'm a fucking lamp!'

'Since when do you swear?'

'Lamps do that, electricity...'

'Am I a lamp too?'

'Not really'

'What do you mean? I can't see very well, and I'm upside down...'

'I don't know how to tell you this'

'Tell me what? Am I a chandelier? A LED lamp?'

'You're a bat!'

'A bat?'

'Yes, a bat, and you have a bat's face too!'

'Aaahh, I don't want to be a bat!'

'Well, you're a bat alright'

'I can't be a bat, bats are disgusting, they eat mice'

'They don't eat mice, I think, and there are no mice on the ceiling'

What if a mouse dies now that I'm gone and glues itself on the ceiling with us?'

'I don't know, Charlie, I told you I'm just a lamp, lamps consume only electricity'

'Oh, no!'

'Charlie, relax, you look more like a mummified bat anyway'

'Why am I a bat and you're a lamp? I just don't get it!'

'You pushed me'

'What?'

'My face broke into pieces, most probably that's why I'm a lamp'

'You slipped...'

'No, I didn't'

'I tried to grab you...'

'No, you didn't'

'I warned you about those stairs'

'The stairs were fine'

'Are you implying that I pushed you?'

'I'm not implying anything. Look at us! Ceilings cannot bear implications'

'I don't understand a thing of what you're saying'

'Me neither'

'I feel nauseous'

'It's like this in the beginning. You'll get used to it. Shame on you, Charlie, you got her an air pump too!'

'Lina...I just pumped her up'

'You never used deodorant when you were with me!'

'I was thinking about you...'

'That's why you downed half a bottle of zivania?'

'She's a thing, Lina, she feels nothing'

'Well, you're calling her a "she"...'

'Lina! She has a woman's face. And, as I said, she feels nothing!'

'You don't know that. I used to be Lina, now I'm a lamp and I can still feel everything'

'Good point...but I'm still nauseous...'

'Well, you're not moving'

'I'm going to throw up on your favourite armchair!'

'No, you won't'

'Do you mean to say that every time our ceiling dripped it was you?'

'No, the ceiling just dripped. Told you to fix it a thousand times'

'With what money?'

'You paid 124 euro for the doll!'

'123'

'Charlie, I can't take it anymore, tell me the truth, did you or did you not push me?'

'You fell on your own'

'Why would I fall on my own? We were happy...'

'Were we?'

'We were happy enough...'

'Enough is never enough'

'Charlie, quit the philosophy and answer to my question, did you fucking kill me, you motherfucker?'

'No, Lina, iiiii, I didn't! I DIDN'T KILL YOU! Just stop swearing'

'That's a relief...'

'And now what?'

'We're not moving...'

'I know we're not moving!'

'You're still a bat'

'And you're still a lamp that swears all the time'

'Then I guess we have more things to solve...'

SOMETHING FISHY IS GOING ON

A fish in Loukia's wine glass, *blorp*.

Tiny, grey, with iridescent scales.

It bumps its head over and over against the crystal as the waiter worms his way between the tables. Loukia feels the same bumping in her stomach. On the central wall of the restaurant, a painting in a golden frame hangs opposite the goddess Aphrodite. The goddess sprinkles water upon a marble fountain through her nipples. One nipple misses a piece.

The mouth of the wedged fish opens and closes. The sound of friction with the crystal gives a man dining alone the goose bumps, he covers one ear with a sauce-stained napkin.

The lamp hanging from the ceiling breathes out small bright shards onto the surrounding walls. Some of the shards are reflected on the metallic crockery steaming on the tables. One shard is now welded on Loukia's forehead. She moves her chair to the side. The squeaking of the chair against the tile turns her into a target; her stomach squeaks again, as if made of glass.

The fish is now swimming in the wine glass a bit slower, numb, it must be the white wine. Was it truly her fourth or fifth glass? The lady at the next table has just clenched her palm into a fist, hemming in a judgemental round of cough.

'I do apologize, it's the first time something like this happens...' Loukia explains to the waiter.

'I'm afraid we don't have a fish bowl'

'Do what you must...'

She swings a last look at the wedged fish. It reminds her of a miniature dog hunting its tail. Now it turns into an embryo; *cheer up, adoption is also an option* the dubbed mouth of the fish-embryo says. The waiter covers the glass with a white napkin and takes it to the kitchen. A young couple, having watched the entire scene from a corner, consider ordering it. 'It's called molecular cuisine,' the girl points out.

As Loukia makes her way towards the exit, one of the waiters holds her coat up for her. The moment the waiter places his hand on the door handle, a tear slides on Loukia's cheek. Something in her stomach suddenly stirs again. If her body was transparent everyone, including that waiter, would see. A tiny bubble now forms between her lips. That bubble bursts prematurely, the air, the whole world, starts smelling of fish.

THE DEEP

Yiannis the Beg has a purpose. To 'stir the waters' he says. He lies face up on streets and sidewalks like a carpet, getting in the way of the passersby. He agitates his limbs as though choking. Only the horns can make him get up, never the cussing. He makes everyone overtake him. Some choose to move circularly so as to avoid him, others straddle their legs, while he tosses a word with every toss of his hand. Yesterday he shouted 'Hungry! Yo! Hungry! Yo!' staccato, hip-hop like.

'Something very...very strange...is happening to me...' Loukia whispers as she looks at him re-crucified on the asphalt, *I drip water all the time, I feel things crawling inside me, last week I coughed and spat out a tiny plastic coral.* 'Yiannis...' She cuts herself short. Inside her the word *dear* slides backwards. She holds it there, tight, with her back teeth that still smell of fish.

Yiannis the Beg could be a dream or a nightmare; he could not exist nor use the middle of the street for a bed. 'A rough bed, but still a bed...' he told Loukia once.

'Dickface!' some teenagers shout.

And Loukia sees herself firing fish from her mouth. The street turns to a war zone. A fish in their face. Boom! Another between their legs. In fact, she just opens and closes her mouth without reason.

'Freak!' the teenagers call her in harmonic ecstasy.

'I'm a dickface and you're a freak...' Yiannis the Beg mumbles before lying down, face up again, sealing his eyes with his palms, '...the most beautiful freak in the world...'

FISH TANK

Mike stands next to the door with a medium-sized fish hanging from his two fingers. It's hanging as though fleshless, like a shell-fish. His wedding ring twinkles around the wrong finger; today it twinkles differently, as though smudged by a drop of gel. Under his armpit, an overdose of deodorant has damped his shirt.

'I found it trodden on down by the entrance. It's the third one these past few days. I guess our neighbour's cat is dumping them there'

'Shall I cook it for dinner?'

'Tomorrow...going to the kiosk'

Loukia lies down on the chilled floor, thinking that in a while she will shove a trampled fish into the fridge and that she truly is going to cook it tomorrow, Mike went along with her suggestion without the least resistance.

Another one topples onto her forehead; a slap in the face!

This one is grey too, slightly bigger than the previous one, again with iridescent scales. She thrusts it down to the floor with the outside of her palm, it is writhing next to the leather armchair, *flap flap, FLAP FLAP.*

That fish could be a baby.

Loukia brings a broom and a dustpan to pick it up, it's still dying on the floor. She loathes the thought of touching it, maybe because it came out of her - algae must've built up on the roof of her mouth, she can actually taste it. She takes no notice of the second, smaller one that's been wedged between the cracked open window. Only tomorrow, when it oozes, will she know.

'Something died in there again. Call the Health Services!' the lady next door will scream, pointing her shaky finger at their apartment. 'Don't mind her,' the janitor will tell her, toothpick in mouth, *snap snap*, 'Don't mind Constance, Loukia, she hasn't been fucked since '74,' *snap snap.*

Mike's key penetrates the keyhole with a rattle.

The wish that it's not him but a new resident who got the wrong door feels like the most normal thought in the world.

Six minutes, without foreplay.

On the TV a relic with dyed hair sells fans-in-the-bag. 'With you everywhere! With you everywhere!'
In the apartment opposite, a lamp flickers.

'The old man is sending an SOS, have you seen him?'

'It fucking stinks...'

'He's naked...'

'Throw the fish away, it went bad!'

'He's shaking. Do you think he's... At his age?'

As they both sit on the beige sofa, a beige crevice forms between them. The crumpled underwear on the floor gasps for air.

'Shall we go to bed?'

'Mm...'

'Can you switch off the light?'

'Mm...'

Eyes half-closed, Mike fumbles for the reading lamp in the living room. He finds Loukia's long right earring instead; he pulls it. 'Let's go,' he tells her. 'I've switched it off.'

METAMORPHOSIS

She can hear Constance the neighbour banging on the door, Constance's furious spittle sprinkles the keyhole, it also drips on the floor. 'The whole corridor stinks because of you! I can't take this anymore!' But Loukia has more serious things to deal with. A fish tail is growing on her legs. A semi-tail, like a flashy nightclub skirt. As the banging on the door continues, she googles the following:

I smell of fish even if I brushed my teeth

illusions related to sea life

how to permanently get rid of fish smell in your apartment

Seeing fish in your sleep means you're going to have children after all?

Is this reality or fiction?

POST-MORTEM DIALOGUE II

'A fucking doll?'

'They're called sex dolls'

'A fucking sex doll?'

'I told you, I was thinking about you when I...'

'Oh, stop it!'

'Plastic has a smell that can...'

'Charlie!'

'Lina, Boobie reminded me of you...'

'I still can't believe you called her Boobie'

'That's what the box said. Sometimes I also called her Lina...'

'Thanks!'

'What did you expect me to do? You died on me, didn't you?'

'Shame on you Charlie. On the floor? Like a dog?'

'It wasn't always on the floor. Sometimes I...'

'Charliiiiiiiii!'

'If you talk to Virgin Mary tell her I want to change, I don't want to be a bat. I can be anything but a bat, I can be a lamp, for instance, like you! And how long are we going to be hanging like this?'

'I told you, until we solve what we need to solve'

'But we never managed to solve anything when we were alive. How are we going to cope now that we're dead?'

'Shut up asshole, merdre!'

'Lina, you're swearing again, in French too!'

'I know. Can't help myself. Told you. Too much electricity'

'Are lamps happy?'

'What about bats?'

'Are you making fun of me?'

'Yes'

'Lina, iiiiiii'

'What?'

'I'm really sounding like a bat, iiiii iiiiiiiii'

'Relax, Charlie, breathe'

'I'm dead, iiiiiii, why am I dead?'

'Breathe like a bat'

'How do bats breathe? Lina, help, iiiiiiiii'

'Shut the fuck up, you Turk!'

'Why are you calling me a Turk?'

'Have no idea'

'Well, there must be a reason'

'There's no reason, Charlie, I'm just a swearing lamp'

'Maybe it's true after all, iiiiiiiii, they said it was nighttime when it happened, maybe that's why I'm a bat'

'Your mother never talked about it...'

'She whispered his name before she died. She said Halil...'

'Try not to think about it, let's find easier things to solve...'

'Lina, iiiii'

'What now?'

'Where's Boobie?'

'Was on the floor a while ago'

'Well, Boobie's not there now, iiiiiii'

*'pump-me pump-me pump-me-up pump-me pump-me pump-me-up hug me love me pump-me-up
pump-me pump-me pump-me-up kiss me love me pump-me-up'*

'Charlie...'

'Lina...'

'Your Boobie!'

'She's bigger now, like a balloon. She wasn't alive, I swear!'

'Charlie, take her away right now! Why is she here? What things does she need to solve, huh?'

'She cost 123 euro, from China...'

'Do it!'

'We can't move, how am I going to take her away?'

'pump-me pump-me pump-me-up pump-me pump-me pump-me-up'

'You're the bat, you know better'

'I can't fly. Look!'

'What does she want? What does she want from us? It's all your fault!'

'Lina, she's plastic, she shouldn't be here in the first place, things break and end up in the garbage'

'How do you know, Charlie? Ever been a thing yourself?'

*'pump-me pump-me pump-me-up pump-me pump-me pump-me-up hug me love me pump-me-up
pump-me pump-me pump-me-up kiss me lick me pump-me-up'*

'Don't listen to her'

'She's got a nerve!'

'If I pump her up more, do you think she'll stop?'

'How are you going to do that?'

'With my mouth'

'A mummified bat's mouth?'

'That's all I've got, iiiiiiiii'

'Don't treat her like a thing'

'But she is a thing! Lina, you're confusing me...'

'No, no, better not kiss her, she reminds me of that Russian George used to date'

'I told you, she's from China, and she looks like a Cypriot, that's why I chose her'

'Is her mouth always open?'

'Yes'

'Why?'

'To stick...'

'Shhhh...walls have ears, for real!'

'I can't reach her...I'm trying but...'

'Wish we could move...'

'Boobie's moving alright, and getting bigger and bigger...'

'But look at her face...'

'Poor thing...'

'Her face looks like us...'

'We aged pretty bad...'

'Refugees age more quickly'

'Who says that?'

'It's all that waiting and waiting and waiting and waiting...'

'Lina...'

'...waiting and waiting and waiting and waiting and waiting and waiting...'

'Lina! Stop!'

'Sorry. It happens to me sometimes, I flicker. Who do you think is going to move in now that we're both gone?'

'A Russian or a Chinese if they sell the building'

'They're selling it alright...'

'Where are we going to go if they knock it down?'

'Enter someone's body?'

'Lina, we're not in a film, we're on a ceiling!'

'We did it once, we'll do it again. Charlie...is Boobie getting a bit too big or is it just me?'

MISSING PEOPLE

Several of them.

From different parts of the body, from different bodies.

Scattered in a well.

They have heads, no eyes, they talk to each other.

CLEANING DAY

Constance keeps washing her clothes while cursing her new neighbours. She rubs the stains on her dresses day and night, the little flowers with a smaller sponge, the big flowers with a bigger one; she even rubs the clothing labels and her stockings. Sometimes she erases everything with chlorine. She has reached a point where she can see stains that are not really there, one on the window shaped after a cockroach, another on the door handle, spider-like, and inside her coffee. 'Hungry! Yooo! Hungry! Yooooo!' the voice of Yiannis the Beg reverberates from the street, and she unconsciously rubs away to his tune. Dixan is the best laundry detergent you can buy. This white powder with the blue specks reminds her of the universe. The whole universe compressed into a paper box. One day, Constance will dive into the box, swim breaststroke into the white-blue universe, grope for his hand - he had a soft hand for a man. 'You've been blessed with a prince, Constance, you'd better keep him,' her mother used to warn her while twirling a long white hair on the upper lip. Yes, to hold that quasi-blueblood hand again, to dive with it into the magical universe of Dixan. But she's so clumsy. How could she touch the freshly-painted railings. It's because there's something screening the moon all the time. The night suddenly thickened, it became dense like white sauce. The balcony lamp burnt out. How would she manage? Who would change it for her? Snap out of it, Constance, snap out of it. You're only being inconstant, Constance, you, who constantly keeps everything under control. Now split, split. Go rub the stain away.

And that Dettol bottle. How addictive! Constance caresses it before she goes to sleep. She always keeps it by her bedside table, right next to the black and white photograph of her eighteen-year-old husband. 'Goodnight...' she tells them, first stroking the bottle and then the picture frame. 'It's cleaning day tomorrow...'

Shfflll. A thank-you note from the management committee under the door. THANK YOU FOR YOUR PATIENT DURING THE RENOVATION PROSESS. YOU ARE INVITED TO A FANCY DRESS PARTY ON 16 FEBRUARY TO CELABRATE THIS NEW ERA TOGETHER. STARTING TIME: 8PM.

But the apartment next door still smells of fish. A strong, gigantic stench assails her nostrils, piling up in her gas-filled stomach, attaching itself to the well-ironed sheets and the handmade laces, even to her handwritten recipes, 'You filth! I'll show you!' She grabs a wooden spoon and lunges forward in the corridor. She bangs the neighbour's door. 'You have no shame!' she shrieks, blowing into the keyhole. Spittle vibrates in the air. The spoon looks ready to bow its head. 'You have no shame...' she repeats, this time with a lower voice, retreating.

Back to the apartment, she inhales the smell of Dettol in big and successive doses. For the first time in her life she spat out 'filth' so many times.

The inhaled detergent rests on her pharynx like sharp metal.

It could stab her one day, if she chose to.

THE MAN IN THE PICTURE FRAME

Four bones.

Dusty. Stained. In a clean box.

One of them sliced open, screaming.

'Don't shoot, I have a pregnant wife, I have a pregnant wi'

GOOD NEWS BAD NEWS

'The DNA test has confirmed that the bones belong to your husband'

'You may contact our counselling services any time'

'The funeral cost will be covered by the government'

Constance was cooking mutton with figs in the oven that day. She cast a look on the well-done bone in the tray and threw up over the potatoes.

1974

The bag with the cleaning products was full to the brim. In it, a tube of salami. They held the bag together on either side, bending over its depths, trying to trace the food that was stuck amongst the chemicals. And then the sirens echoed, the shadow of an airplane stained the asphalt, the bag was discarded, everything rolled down like in the movies. A military car passed by, pulverizing the salami. The mixture of crushed seasoned sausage and white powder looked like a wound.

Constance still remembers the incident, and sometimes she imagines the two of them together again, elderly, hunched over the same bag, pulling in opposite directions. She must clean up. She missed a spot, if she leaves it there it will become a hotbed of infectious disease, one night, when she least expects it, this dirty spot will swallow her. Clean up well, Constance. Chip the stain off, sacrifice the furnishing, chip it off, off.

That constant rubbing with chlorine makes my soldier's bone really white.

It shines, like his smile used to shine.

HE'S A TREE

The ceiling is studded with blue specks for some time now. The janitor, Sergey, found Constance in the corridor and brought her back with a double slap in the face. Now, lightheaded, Constance extends the hand to catch the specks. Some fall into her crying mouth. Others orbit like comets around the lamp. Her hand has white specks, the chlorine has saturated her skin. Now a blue speck on her cheek, like a tiny mole or a tiny olive. If she had had a blue mole, her soldier would have kissed and sucked and swallowed it and the blue mole or olive would have grown inside her belly, and then the two of them would have danced under a blue olive tree, hand in hand with their unborn child. Her soldier would have turned into a blue tree himself. Her soldier would not have been an elongated bone. Would they ever find out she had sneaked it into her pocket? Do they count the bones over and over before encasing them in the missing person's coffin? Your husband, or what's left of him, consisted of four bones and now we're missing one, it is strictly forbidden to steal bones. No, no way they're ever catching on to how Constance wrapped her fist tight around a bone as she stooped over the four of them in tears. She wrapped it so tight that her palm bled.

It lives, it breathes, look, branches grow out of its cracks, listen.

THE BONE

Constance knits the bone into her curly black hair, knitting a blanket for a child that was never born. And as she fondles the bone day and night, sometimes talking to it, other times smearing it with a marinade of tears and cleaning products, it always ends up in her hair. The bone finds refuge there, smells her hair, the bone is joyful, with blood in the veins, muscles, flesh. He's a bone. He's a bone. Bones don't talk. Bones are silent.

She dusted and disinfected everything today, including the bone. Her face is now smudged with dust and humidity. She's blackened. She's a Zulu. The bone is wrapped into her curly black hair, she stands opposite the mirror, she remembers that old leopard print scarf, she rolls it around her neck, then holds the bone on her head like a hand.

'This is what I'm wearing at the fancy dress party...' she whispers to herself.

THE PARTY

'Why is everyone dressed up as an angel?'

'Most probably because of Charlie'

'I dressed up as a Zulu'

'Good for you'

'If I knew there was an angel theme, I wouldn't join'

'There's no angel theme'

'Is it clean enough?'

'Come on, Constance! Everything's disinfected, the way you like it'

'I can see a mermaid at the back'

'There you go'

'Is that the doll I found in Charlie's flat?'

'Yes, I saw her arm sticking out of the garbage bag, I thought she would make a nice carnival prop'

'I always thought Charlie would never die'

'Damn illness'

'Poor Charlie'

'That mermaid's about to give birth'

'She put a pillow'

'But she's pushing. Two angels are holding her hand'

'Panic attack, Loukia's just struggling to breathe'

'Loukia? The new neighbour? Where's her husband?'

'Just left her for another woman. Sent her a Viber message'

'Poor Loukia...*even if she smells of fish all the time*'

'A beggar is climbing up the stairs, more non-angels for you'

'Isn't that Yiannis the Beg? He's a real one'

'The guy that sings Beethoven all the time?'

'Hi-hi-hiiiiiiiiii, food-food-food-fooooooooood!'

'Look, the chandelier's moving in his rhythm too'

'That's weird'

'Could be the wind'

'More angels are coming'

'My angel's on my head'

'You mean the bone?'

'Not just any bone, Sergey, my soldier's bone...'

POST-MORTEM DIALOGUE III

'Did they find him?'

'Who?'

'Constance's husband'

'They said they found some bones in an old well'

'Are they his?'

'That's what they said'

'How many bones?'

'What difference does it make? Four they said'

'Four?'

'Four'

'What bones?'

'How the hell would I know? Sergey told me but I can't remember'

'Four bones are good enough'

'Good enough? Almost five decades later?'

'What to do...'

'What to do...'

'It's not that bad on the ceiling when you get used to it...'

'You appreciate what you have...'

'You can get used to anything, even a face...'

'I just wish I wasn't a bat!'

'Being a lamp is no better, believe me'

'Lina...'

'I love you too...'

'Lina, are there cocks up here?'

'What? I've been loyal all my life!'

'Well, there's something like a cock coming right at you'

'A what?'

'A big cock-looking bird! It just sat on your bulb!'

'Aaaaaahhhhhhh'

'It's...it's not a bird, it's a...hand!'

'Charlie, I'm scared!'

'Aaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhh'

'It's not a hand, it's a dish-glove'

'It's a hand!'

'Why are we arguing again? It never got us anywhere'

'It's definitely a hand, it moves! Maybe it's a hand in a dish-glove?'

'Charlie, aaaaaahhhhhh!'

'It's a hand!'

'What's a hand doing up here?'

'Wait, isn't that Constance?'

'What is she doing in our living room? We're both dead'

'She's still cleaning for us, she must've loved us...'

'She also brought you some flowers...'

'She's putting them where I had Boobie...'

'Where you had sex, Charlie!'

'I told you, I was thinking of you...'

'You even closed the curtains! And what was all that romantic music in the background for, you bastard?'

'pump-me pump-me pump-me-up pump-me pump-me pump-me-up hug me fuck me pump-me-up'

'Boobie, be quiet, now is not the time!'

'Honestly, why is Boobie moving and we're not?'

'And she's getting even bigger'

'Bigger and bigger, look at her thighs'

'Lina, I want to eat it, iiiiii'

'Eat what?'

'The hand, I want to eat it for some reason...'

'No, no, don't eat it!'

'Please, let me eat it, iiiiiiiiii'

'Charlie, it's a flying hand, missing three fingers, and we don't know whose hand it is nor where it was before it got here, don't eat it!'

'But I'm hungry'

'It's an illusion'

'It talks to me'

'The hand?'

'It says eat me eat meeee'

'Charlie, please!'

'What's that in Constance's hand?'

'Oh my god!'

'It's like...'

'A...bone!'

'A bone?'

'You said four bones'

'This is one'

'She's holding it like a baby...'

'She's talking to it...'

'Kissing it...'

'Rubbing it...'

'Isn't she rubbing it too hard?'

'Oh no! It's his! How did she get it?'

'She's going to jail!'

'For stealing her husband's bone?'

'I would never steal a bone'

'Maybe that bone downstairs *is* the flying hand!'

'I told you to stop watching all those mystery series...'

'What is she doing now?'

'She's pouring Dettol into a shot glass. She's going to drink it!'

'No way!'

'She's drinking it, Charlie, I thought of doing the same several times, do something, do you want Constance stuck on the ceiling with us?'

'I think I'm going to start sounding like a bat again'

'Do you want her to come and find a hand instead of her whole husband? Do something!'

'Wait. She changed her mind...'

'She's crying...'

'She's caressing it...'

'Look at the hand how it bangs itself on the ceiling!'

'It looks happy'

'Or very sad...'

'Lina, I need to tell you something...'

'Now is not the time'

'Remember that time I told you I had a flat tire on the highway?'

'I told you now is not the time!'

'But it's the only way for us to move from this place. We need to solve everything, remember?'

'I don't want to solve anything anymore, just hold me!'

'I don't have hands!'

'Pretend that you have them. I'll do the same. Lamps don't have hands either'

'I'm holding you'

'Tight?'

'Yes, very tight'

'Are you kissing me?'

'Yes, I'm kissing you'

'Are we young?'

'Yes, very young'

'Can you feel me?'

'I can feel you'

'The hand is still banging itself on the ceiling. Look, it's twirling!'

'Constance put the bone in our washing machine'

'She did what?'

'She's cleaning it'

'Look at the hand how it twirls and twirls...'

'That hand must really love her...'

'It's going to break itself into pieces...'

'Nobody can hear it banging itself like that...'

'We can hear it...'

'We can hear it alright...'

'Charlie, you no longer sound like a bat...'

'And you no longer sound like a lamp that swears all the time...'

'The ceiling's trembling'

'It's the washing machine'

'An earthquake?'

'A bulldoze knocking down the building! It's really happening. The Chinese are coming...'

'We're moving'

'We're definitely moving'

'My love...'

'My love...'

'I just can't believe it!'
'At last!'
'Why isn't Constance leaving the building?'
'Charlie...your doll's pushing me...'
'She must be excited too. Push her back'
'She's pushing too hard...'
'*pump-me pump-me pump-me-up pump-me pump-me pump-me-up*'
'First time I see her that pumped up. Her face is gone'
'Charlie, she's going to break me!'
'She's squeezing me too!'
'Look, she got the whole room...'
'She's huge now...'
'Aaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhh'
'Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhh'
'I can't breathe!'
'Look at those breasts, help! Her ass is crushing the window!'
'Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhh'
'Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhh'
'*pump-me pump-me pump-me-up pump-me pump-me pump-me-up pump-me pump-me pump-me-up pump-me pump-me pump-me-up*'
'She's squeezing too hard, do something!'
'Constance is just standing there!'
'The bone! The ceiling's cracking!'
'Your favourite armchair! Your silverware!'
'Your mother's photo!'
'The curtains!'
'Boobie's c...c..choking me!'
'Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhh'
'Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhh'

Bat

Next to its hard, hoarse surface Demosthenes felt strong again. Merely clasping it made him wild. By holding it like a walking stick, he forgot how time elapsed. After all, there was no way he could disregard all the things the two of them had shared over the years, the walls they had torn down, the panes and shop windows they had shattered, the heads and noses they had broken.

He couldn't stand being without it, not even in the toilet. Together they shat, together they peed, together they slept, together they faltered. If it was thinner, they would fuck too, not that he got to fuck often at his age. They watched movies. They gaped. They watched. They gaped. If the bat had a mouth, they would probably share a meal of microwave-reheated rice. Late at night, Demosthenes would turn his body to the pillow next to him and embrace the bat. Later, he would reach out and stroke it. As if by groping for its hollows and abrasions, he was trying to envision a future, become ecstatic with hope. Nothing. Two bats on the bed.

There were times when the moon cast its soft light over the bat and made it look like an oblong piece of gold. Those were the moments Demosthenes turned into a king. He held it like a sceptre. He delivered a speech to the cockroach on the wall. The bed stopped squeaking. The broken tile on the floor regained its place. His reflection in the mirror looked much slimmer. He could see his crown multiplying amidst the shadows. He could imagine the empty fruit-bowl brimming with well-done chicken. His gutted mattress became filled with water. His stinking sheets turned into silk. Alcohol changed everything. 'Thank God you exist,' he would tell his bat. 'Wanna do it?' he would add, if the alcohol inside him exceeded the usual limit.

And if you had an eye for detail you would realize that the bat had holes, gawking at Demosthenes, and that he too, if he lifted his pyjama and let you take a look, if he let you knock on his chest two or three times, was as wooden as his bat.

One time, he decorated it with eyes, a nose, eyebrows, a mouth, teeth - the works. The bat looked like an oddly long head. That was precisely when he began talking to it - one finds it easier to talk to something with a face. 'Remember when we slashed the tyres of that BMW? When we crushed the kneecaps of that asshole? When you went mad and punched my face?' The bat wouldn't answer. If it did, it would use wooden language.

But Demosthenes couldn't look at that face any longer. He took naphtha and smudged it, first the mouth, then the eyes, last the nose. 'You can still breathe, don't worry,' he said, sparing a nostril. A nostril that now looks like a permanent bug. They haven't talked since. Demosthenes might have said 'I love you' once more, he might even have kissed the bat's lips a minute before erasing them, but some things are better left unsaid.

Boy, did Demosthenes break everything in his dreams or what! Brain, veins, vessels, doors, shop windows, chairs, cars, vases, bankers, ministers. And in the morning, he would wake up relieved. As if he had been fucking all night. He would see the bat sleeping peacefully on the pillow and he would feel like making a super tasty breakfast for it, fresh juice and all, served in bed. Yet, the only thing he could see was a skinny piece of wood, more crook than bat. He would bang it but it would make no sound. He would bang his chest. Hollow.

How could that be! When he looked at his head in the mirror, he saw a huge wooden bump. He slapped himself. The bump was still there. He lowered his pants. A tiny bat protruded from his underwear. He blinked. The tiny bat was still there in his genitals. His fists grew. He filled the house with shards of plaster from the walls. He could no longer bear seeing it in there. He threw it out into the garbage. It found its way back to the pillow. He kicked it outside the window. The landlady brought it back in a box. He drowned it in the sink. Still there. He banged the bat once more. No sound. He banged his chest. Hollow.

Still... they used to have such a good time, the two of them. How much pleasure they took in terrifying everyone with their youth. They exerted total control over their life and the lives of others. They weren't mean. They didn't do mean things. And if they misbehaved due to alcohol, they wouldn't shy away from saying sorry. They weren't scumbags. Scumbags are a thing of today. 'Today's a scumbag,' Demosthenes thinks aloud, gulping down something akin to food.

The crucifixion of Christ is on TV. It's not Easter.

Outside, some brats with hoods are terrorizing a dog.

The bat is gawking back at him.

The permanent bug is stirring.

The ceiling is spinning.

The ceiling is still spinning.

Each time he drinks, Demosthenes remembers Stathis. His heart pretends to beat. Not even the hand of a wrist watch has ever sounded so faintly. He remembers their dog, Attila. Now that was a name for a dog! Especially at the time. Yes, they were asking for it.

Demosthenes often thinks Stathis left because of the bat, its overuse. After he left, Demosthenes started sending postcards to himself, signing as Stathis, or his mother, or his sister Meropi. Sometimes he would also sign as Attila.

One night he signed a postcard with large round letters: 'Your Butt, with love.' He never mailed it. He kept it in the drawer of his bedside table, amidst the expired lubricant, a photo of Stathis holding Attila and a Lidl brochure.

Tonight, Demosthenes is grabbing his bat by the throat. It doesn't protest. It can still breathe through one nostril. Demosthenes can't breathe very well. He feels as if his stomach has risen to his lungs. He yearns to go out in the street, even if this is the last thing he'll ever get to do. Yell. Go back to his street-smart bullying days. Break the marble tiles of the woman next door. Throw a bottle. Run, feel the adrenaline ejaculating on his face.

The front door won't open. For years now it won't open. Someone has glued it shut. Someone has nailed it. He doesn't know. He doesn't remember. Only the closet doors are still his. He opens them again tonight.

Light.

The window of a shop. Some golden Chinese kittens sway their heads to the rhythm, synchronized. Tourist T-shirts are hanging from clothespins. A counter in the background.

He raises the bat. He's ready to smash everything up. He opens his mouth; growls, gathers speed. Behind him he can hear people screaming, police sirens buzzing, helicopters overhead, cameras all

around him like spinning tops. The Chinese kittens keep swaying their heads. They seem valuable. Perhaps if he sells them, he can eat meat for a change. Perhaps if he gives them away, he might get to talk to someone.

The bat in his hand reminds him of a Molotov bomb, though never in his life has he made one. He blinks. The bat in his hand reminds him of a flower. He eats it. Now there's nothing left but his bare skin.

'Go for it, love...' a familiar voice seems to whisper. He goes for it.

Only, for the life of him, he can't smash that shop window.

He can't batter up that fat, worn out middle-aged man now looking at him scared stiff.

Not even the bat in his right hand that appears left in the shop window...²

²Seeing itself reflected in the shop window of the subconscious of Demosthenes, squeezed into his fist, the bat has to take action. Taking advantage of Demosthenes' sweaty palms, it slips and falls. Demosthenes is still there, with one arm up, staring at himself in the glass. The bat tosses itself onto his right foot and tries to comfort him like a dog. Demosthenes feels it, he leans his bald head towards it. 'I love you...' he says, as if looking at a somebody and not a something. The bat, deep inside, even deeper than wood itself, knows that no matter what it does, it will never be able to fill that void inside him. So, without more hesitation, also facilitated by this short footnote, the bat turns itself into a bat and flies off the page.



Dear Demosthenes,

Just a quick hello from crazy Mykonos, a land of contradictions! I know we haven't been in touch but, in a nutshell, I want you to know that I still care about you, no matter what. I have a dream. I'm planning to stay in Mykonos and be used as a boat paddle for the canoes of rich vacationers. My boss is an Irishman, he's ok, all Irish people are drunks and eat potatoes but my boss eats Greek salad all day, just like every Greek. At first glance, any feminine-looking man is gay here and real men are strong and do all the work.

Anyway, we have all fallen on hard times, I hope you're well.

Take care! Greetings from the island!

Your B.

PS: I met a former librarian the other day. She wanted to use me as an alternative exercise tool in her Pilates workshop. I kindly refused. All librarians are women who are old, wear glasses, tie a high bun and have a perpetual frown on their face...

Submarine

Three birds.

Three birds, motionless, on the right side of the sky, next to each other. The sun faded, a black dot right in its middle, a mole, the mausoleum of a tiny fly. A dark blue sea, with thick, brush struck, highlights right below. The horizon in the distance deliberately blurred. The boat motionless as well, like the birds. Deep red. One sail. No pole. Three birds. Three birds, motionless, on the right side of the sky, next to each other. The feet of a moving cockroach are now swimming into the blue, without sinking. They cross the weak line of the horizon, temporarily covering the motionless birds, now they also snatch onto the boat, then back into the water. Without sinking. The only thing still moving is that cockroach. The cockroach lingers like an obese bird, soon it crashes onto the frame, it stops, jumps out, changes direction, the cockroach now turns towards the white of the wall.

‘One day I’ll dive right into you,’ she whispers. She moves from one side of the wall to the other, in a semi-circular way, as if trying to understand what she’s looking at. ‘They said three months, six passed, when will this nausea be over?’

The motionless birds in the frame chirp. In her ears. Lately, many things chirp in her ears. They knock too, they definitely knock. The sun is in perfect harmony above the sea, all round and tidy. The orange sunset path formed on the blue is pure perfection too, no single brushstroke springs out. She pushes her head forward. ‘One day I’ll dive into you, for real,’ she repeats, and opens up her arms like a swimmer.

The cockroach has just returned to the scene, more determined. The white abyss of the wall must’ve not satisfied its thirst. It asks for more. It asks for restriction, a place to camouflage itself. As the cockroach pauses on the boat, it looks like a dark-skinned castaway, glued on the boat’s left side, screaming *Can’t you see? Can’t you see I’m dying?*

‘You stink, know that?’ she mutters, looking at it again. She now swims, without water, breaststroke to make the stink go away.

On the lower edge of the frame lies the name ‘andronikos,’ humble, un-capitalized, written in calligraphy. This artistic signature of his in the blue looks like a cylindrical submarine, the d extends

itself through the sea's surface. 'Andronikos, can you hear me? You turned into a submarine,' she says, but Andronikos is no longer there, only inside her. Andronikos is now only inside her, keeps knocking at night, lately also in the mornings, *Open up! Forgot me already? Open up! Open up!*

Three birds.

Three birds, still motionless, still on the right side of the sky, still next to each other. And Andronikos still a submarine, a roaring one. And an island. There's also an island. A still island. With a palm tree. A still palm tree. On the top, in the corner. That still palm tree has the most balanced still leaves in the world. There's a hole on its trunk. That hole is not still, it grows. Andronikos opened it up with his cigarette. *To fucking breathe.* At nights it gets bigger and bigger, then back to its microscopic, round form, dark and burned on the edges. *One day I'll paint air. Nobody has painted air before. I'll do it. I'll paint air.*

Saltiness. Seems to have sprung out of the frame. An intense, disturbing smell of piled salt. She stretches her tongue as if to lick and taste that frame, she's tasting Andronikos instead. *Fear ideas, they eat you out, like salt. Better not to think. Just don't, don't think.*

She had been thinking about it for months. Counted the distance numerous times, the tension, the acceleration, the steps, the skips, whether they should be big ones, small ones, both, better both, first the small ones, then the big ones, exactly like long jump. Concentration, nail the target, 1, 2, 3...1, 2, 3...it isn't hard, it's a wall, it can hold, failure percentage: zero.

Young widow dived into her husband's painting. Her head got smashed by the resistance of the wall. The plaster that fell on the floor mixed with blood. According to live witnesses, her crushed head passed the wall, developed gills and swam through.

She removes her clothes as layers of flesh, then shoves her feet into her trainers. She stretches like an athlete, tilting her head first to the right and then to the left, cracking her neck in preparation. If

she had a necklace with a cross or a lucky charm, she would now kiss it. The breeze from the window gets stronger, it pushes hard, from the back, pushes her forward.

Yet, that baby inside her is kicking, now kicking hard.

Do me a favour, Andronikos wrote in that whisky-stained letter. Take it to the sea, when it's only a few months old, teach it to swim, to swim to me...

That baby inside kicks all day long.

Today, it kicks for life.

Sunnie

'Lady, are you ok?'

'Where did the other two go?'

'Other two? You must've suffered a light stroke, you had trouble breathing'

A stroke? Am I that old? she thinks, while struggling to get herself together after that orgy fantasy. The plastic of her sunbed is still warm and wet, so is her swimsuit.

'Let me bring you a towel, you're sweating'

'No, thank you, I'm allergic to towels, always get a rash'

She stretches her arms, watching the lifeguard slowly disappear, and with linear movements rubs the aluminum frame along her sunbed. The sea breeze entering the tiny holes of the sunbed's plastic upholstery soothes her. She dries up in slow motion, along with the salt. She just can't stop thinking about them, tightening her, sucking her, if she were a few metres further away she would stick her big finger in, no regret, her hanging fat would disguise the act. And, of course, her sunbed would keep a secret, as always, 'wouldn't you Sunnie?'

Something's floating, 'I'll be back in a minute, stay where you are Sunnie.' Someone's in danger, she thinks, her legs sink into the hot sand. She points towards the sea while checking on her sunbed like a parent checks on a child, '...something like a corpse is floating...' The lifeguard quickly reaches for his binoculars, 'Garbage! You scared the shit out of me!' No more polite talking, she's not sure whether this is a relief, there was something about the way he said it.

She returns to her sunbed, wishing to revisit that orgy fantasy, but sees her dead mother chopping cauliflower instead. She farts. 'Sorry Sunnie, couldn't hold it, you know me.'

Bang! A yacht just sliced the head of a tourist! This is really happening. She needs to tell the lifeguard right away. But wait, something's wrong. Her sunbed is now stuck on her! She pulls one leg, she pulls the other, nothing, her skin cracks. She pushes her feet back into the hot sand and drags herself towards the lifeguard, her sunbed now glued on her back and cellulite-packed thighs. She wants to scream but feels a big rock on her chest. Heart attack, I'll die from a heart attack, not a stroke, she thinks, struggling to breathe. From a distance, as she moves, bent from the waist down, she looks like a futuristic insect, a robot-giant, flirting with collapse. 'Stop squeezing me Sunnie, I know I'm your favourite but let me go, now that's not a hug Sunnie!'

Nobody's paying attention to her, they are all now gathered by the shore, waiting for the lifeguard to return with the headless body of the tourist. The topless girl on the yacht experiences a nervous breakdown; from afar she seems like she's dancing a crazy beat. Three boys, not that far away, shove something underground, they start laughing, they don't laugh too much because their mother just told them someone died.

She returns to her umbrella, still dragging her sunbed on her back. She waits for the lifeguard to return, or someone to say 'What's wrong? Want me to remove that sunbed off you?' Her sunbed leans further. 'We're always invisible, aren't we Sunnie, so big but still...invisible.'

As dusk approaches, someone eventually takes notice. Her whole body is now wrapped in the sunbed, she looks like a mayo sandwich. She's quickly taken to the ER, to get herself unglued.

'The sunbed first. Not me! Save the sunbed,' she shouts, as the doctors struggle to carefully divide skin from plastic. 'Stay with me, Sunnie, stay with me...'

Ten years later, at college, one of the three boys narrates his super-glue achievement to his first serious relationship. The girl laughs really loud, hahaha, got stuck, hahahaha, that's so funny, they both laugh and laugh, until the girl chokes on her huge gum and dies.

CHEWING GUM KILLS STUDENT, she reads in the headlines. She's on her sunbed, by the living room window.

Her hands now tremble, her sunbed regularly creaks, but they're still together. 'You age so nicely Sunnie, I like the way your colour fades...'

The dark spots on her skin make her look like a leopard.

Similarly, the remains of dried skin on the plastic make the sunbed have a cute leopard print.

Two-faced

'I'm carrying a second face on my body'

'That's just your tits and belly button'

'It stares at me every time I look at myself in the mirror'

'It has a dull, self-defeated look'

'See?'

'See what?'

'I'm right, I do carry a second face on my body, everybody does in one way or another'

'What about your ex-girlfriend?'

'Hers had pea-sized eyes and a constantly surprised expression, I loved that every time we had sex, I felt a hell of a lover'

'What about mine?'

'Can't tell, you'd need to take off your blouse'

'There you go'

'Never saw a second face like that. It's got a nice smile'

'Yes, I have a very wide belly button. Birth accident'

'Can I lick it?'

It worked every time. She was number 88, mid-twenties, silicone lips, index finger repeatedly twisting hair lock. It worked with fifty to sixty-year-old cougars as well, even if their wrinkled breasts and bellies distorted the characteristics of that second face. His real face was not good enough, more of a balloon shape, so he invested everything on breasts and belly button, gym three hours a day, expensive food supplements, special pumps for nipples, organic body cream. So, every time one of them sucked his popped-out nipples, he felt as if she was sensually licking his eyeballs. And when she stuck her tongue into his belly button, he also felt that tongue deep into his mouth, long, wet, as if excavating something. Electronic music parties really worked well too, young hipsters saw whole

new worlds on his breasts and belly, that second face of his changed ten expressions a second, one girl on MD glued her belly button on his and refused to let go, it's an everlasting kiss, she cheered, they turned into a Siamese and danced like that for hours, the ones on LSD called them Bill and Jo, hey Bill, hey Jo, hey Bill-Jo, he got tired a lot earlier than her, in his forties already and not intoxicated enough, suddenly cut that Siamese cord, where are you going the girl screamed, to fuck that sexy second face of yours, and once more got what he wanted in the festival's chill out section.

Until he met her.

'I'm carrying a second face on my body'

'Me too'

'What do you mean?'

'Wanna see?'

She lifted her dress and revealed a huge tattoo, it really was a stunning face, her nipples big blue eyes, her belly button a juicy, red lake.

'Wanna dive into it?' she asked, but he could not get a hard on even if she was the most beautiful woman he had ever tried to sleep with.

'Now, you show me'

'I don't have a tattoo'

'But you said you have a second face'

'I just meant taking my nipples for eyes and my belly button for a mouth'

'Ah'

'Ah, what?'

'What's special about that? Everybody has nipples and belly buttons'

She took a small pencil case out of her purse and started drawing her face on his hairy chest, her coloured markers intentionally squeezed his nipples inwards, then they played with his belly button. Almond-shaped brown eyes on top, horny-looking red lips at the bottom, pink tongue slightly popping out, inviting.

'It goes away with washing. Here's my card in case you decide to make it permanent'

Other women's second faces started to look too boring after that, one-dimensional, bodies of no colour, no depth, duh-looking emoji. It didn't take long for him to dial that card number.

'It's me. The guy with the second face on his chest'

'Ha! Ready for a real tattoo?'

'Not only'

Her tattoo lab was underground, he had to go down a lot of stairs, got all sweaty. An intense smell of oriental spice stuffed his nostrils. Without saying much, she lifted his T-shirt, caressing breast and belly with her plastic gloves to mark her territory. A piece of thin smoke licked his chest, citronella sticks burnt next to him.

'What tattoo face do you want? I have a lot of pictures'

'Your face'

His answer really surprised him, it must've sounded creepy, but she just said ok and took out a slightly younger version of herself from a folder. In the meantime, he had spotted a couple of dark red drops on the floor, a few pinkish sprinkles on the wall too, crazy ink, crazy bitch, he thought.

'You're not the first that chooses me'

'How many are there?'

'More than someone would expect'

He could no longer hold himself. Lying on that sterilised tattoo bed, he stretched his hands to squeeze her skin. Her nipples under the thin cotton looked colder all of a sudden, steely. 'You really are something,' he whispered, same phrase he used for every woman who bought his second face fairytale. Would they still sleep with him with that face of hers tattooed on him? Of course, they would, it was a face out of this world. It would spark their lesbian side.

'I'm not providing this kind of services,' she said.

'What's this for?' he asked, pointing at the long needle on the table next to him.

'Just something to calm you down. It's going to take some time,' she replied, pressing her finger in his belly button as if it were a well. She then took the needle and used it to softly scrape the path she had marked, the needle drifting in the middle of his chest, then around his spleen and liver.

'I'm gonna come on that sexy second face of yours,' he muttered, and she thrust her tongue into his ear, as if that 'I'm not providing this kind of services' comment was just a game. 'Now relax,' she whispered, peeling off her top, revealing that out-of-this-world second face again. 'Do you have a Ti...Tinder a...account?' he asked, before completely losing consciousness.

His penis was still erect when she chopped it off. The first organ she shoved into the ice box.

Arm

I love her. I'll always love her.

'I want my arm back'

The way her hard fingers weave into mine, this clenched double fist, my sweat which softly trickles into our palms, it all fits perfectly. She can have our savings if she wants to, the furniture, anything but the arm.

'Give me my arm back!'

That arm also bounces on my wrinkled balls from time to time. I jog in the park more often, even if it hurts.

'Sorry, I just can't...'

One day, a man with messy hair and a toothpick pays me a visit. His fists on his hips, he demands her arm back - 'all of it!' He says many yoga exercises are impossible to do with just one arm, not to mention nightly activities, wanking, toothpick sliding from tooth to tooth. I scream. I tell him the arm is mine. The man threatens, his shoulder blades swell like fish gills. I slam the door to his face.

How could she replace me with a yogi, half her age, who looks like a fish?

'Dad, mum says she wants her arm back'

'She can keep Rocky if she wants to. You know how much I love Rocky'

'Dad! He's been watching ISIS decapitations all day!'

'Who? Rocky?'

One night, the man reappears at my doorstep, with an axe at hand and a real fish on his face. In a sudden move between yoga and karate, he slices my right arm which is holding her left arm. My sleeve's fabric collapses on the floor. The man places the naked double arm over his shoulder, as if it

were a shot skinny deer, and disappears into the street, blood sprinkling the walls, the lawn, the whole town. 'What's this?' she asks in a distorted voice, looking at that extended double arm spread on the kitchen table. A drop of blood hangs and falls on a plate. 'Your arm, love, I brought back your arm - all of it!' the man says. Caressing that tight fist, our perfectly unmatched hands, she starts to miss me, she misses me alright, before waking up, I can see it clearly, I can see it in her fingers. Those hard fingers, for the first time, have a pulse.

'Dad, mum can't find a job without the arm'

I don't agree with him. She couldn't find a job before either, she's too old for a job anyway, besides, that fucking hipster can buy her another one.

'Dad, please, you know how expensive these things are'

These things are very expensive, my son is right. The first arm she had was a lot cheaper, more basic.

'Don't be an asshole! Give it back!'

Why is she talking to me this way? She never talked to me this way.

'That's it, dad! We're calling the police!'

I can hear her voice in the way my son talks to me. It's not a good sign. When we hang up, something cold slides on my shoulders. I stare at my dinner twirling around itself in the microwave, then at her hard fingers trapped into mine. I remember the time we were forced to leave home.

Half-naked, we raced towards the mountains.

Our three-year-old son glued on my shoulders.

The ground was rocky.

'Hold me from the fake one,' she said.

She was terrified but beautiful.

The ground was very rocky.

'Please, the fake one!' she screamed. 'Listen to me! To let me go, if you have to!'

Pillars

'We should also try it in public'

'Are you out of your mind?'

'Julie said it saved her marriage'

'With Bill?'

'No, her first marriage'

'We agreed to keep it in the home. Didn't you enjoy the wardrobe fantasy yesterday?'

She muttered a long reply which included the word 'weak' and pulled herself back into the kitchen. She started on the dishes, hitting them hard onto each other.

They stayed mute for three days. On the evening of the fourth, returning from work, he searched all the rooms, even their usual places - the wardrobe, the fridge, the dining table. No sign of her. He shouted out her name a couple of times, really acting it out, pretentiously in panic, and even called her mobile phone, which vibrated on the bedside table. *The feeling that you have mysteriously lost someone can be very arousing*, they said. *It opens up a door towards rediscovering both yourself and your partner*. He took off his jacket and placed it on the coatrack by the door which looked more overcrowded than usual. A scarf stirred. And then a finger popped out. 'There you are,' he whispered, as he peeled away jackets and coats one by one. Her arm appeared first, then one of her breasts. He couldn't wait - he sucked it, the sleeve of one of the hanging jackets pushed his head downwards, made him shove his face even deeper, uncovered her skinny thighs, and he sucked them too while unzipping his trousers. He crawled in on all fours and pulled her newly-bought thong with his teeth.

'It's addictive, isn't it?'

'I've learned to like it'

He covered up her standing-naked body with all the clothes he had tossed on the floor. Soon, no part of her body was visible. He then stood right opposite her. That was one of the couple therapy rules: staying like that, still and silent, looking lifeless, for several minutes after it was all over. If they were both pretending to be objects, like that time they were chairs, one of them had to willingly

retreat and leave space for the other to contemplate their thoughts. *It's an act of sacrifice*, they said. And they were right, it did take their relationship to the next level.

'Stop spooning me'

'But you're a carpet!'

'You're right, I'm a carpet'

'Are you my *fucking* carpet?'

'Yes, yes, I'm your *fucking* carpet'

The consultants had also provided them with an object-related Kama Sutra book. Some positions were a real challenge, especially the ones that had to do with hanging objects, *Aerial yoga can help you with that*, they said. The book came with a glossary suggesting role-play dialogues and words. They'd added an appendix in the new edition too, which included more edgy scenarios and tips, as well as philosophical quotes like *Objectify yourselves to 'subjectify' your marriage*.

Julie the neighbour called one day and said she was giving the whole thing up, they were getting carried away, Bill could no longer take it, wasn't anything like her first husband. 'You should give it up now that it's early,' she advised. She heard Dino went nuts, decided to *literally* turn into a statue, covered himself in plaster and couldn't move an inch. Nikki found him in the backyard with his penis sticking out— 'Can you believe it?' He had plastered his whole face too; he could barely breathe. The consultants were closing all their branches, just keeping the headquarters in the capital. 'Maybe this place is too conservative for them,' she said. 'They will continue their couple consulting services online though, if you're interested.' She'd told them she and Bill were no longer interested.

Julie's words echoed in her ears. Julie could do that to people.

She hung up feeling sorry for Dino. *Things to avoid: plaster, glue, tape*. They had used tape once to shut their mouths, they couldn't stay quiet, especially in the beginning. The consultants called it 'silent intercourse' - *Learn to listen to your bodies and not your mouths*.

Wasn't he in the living room a minute ago? Is this a new game? He's a real player. She never thought he had this in him when it all started, it's changed their lives alright: made him return earlier from work, made her more confident, more femme fatale, more passive maybe, but in a good way - definitely in a good way. And that look. *Really looking* at someone. She had missed that look. *It's the*

first thing that goes away, the consultants said. *Couples no longer dive into each other's eyes*. She had searched everywhere, even under the bed, hated the bed fantasy, too claustrophobic — Was he finally taking it to the next level, IN PUBLIC?

She could feel the craving on her chin and cheeks. She rushed into the garden, moving plants and flowers to the side like a frantic swimmer, then to the sidewalk, the park, the neighbouring shops, under a bench, in a bin – she searched for hours, feet aching, libido gone. At some point she just had to call the police and report him missing.

They found him half-naked by the zebra crossing next to the pharmacy.

Julie was also half-naked. They were both standing opposite each other, backs straight, necks slightly drooping. He had an erection when the police found him. They gossiped about it at the station, she could hear them even when they lowered their voices.

She remembered Julie's voice echoing after that phone call, yes, Julie could do that to people. They must've been an exhibit for quite some time before the police arrived, their bodies facing each other, orange lights on their heads. Must've been twinkling too, motionless on each side of the zebra crossing, staring at each other, desiring each other until they could no longer hold it – *We follow unconventional therapy techniques but we have saved a lot of marriages* – pretending to be light pillars at the zebra crossing, Julie's breasts tighter than hers, nipples hard, perfect thighs. The gap between them must've been filled with lust. She knew that feeling well – the gap, the gap between them.

Shutdown Lella

She stirred the other day. And I creaked. Telepathy is all we've got.

She's glued to the chair like a crumpled piece of cloth. As time wears on, you lose sight of her head; she's well tucked into her dresses, her hands and legs shrivel up, lessen, they make her clothes hang in folds. I see her and she sees me, this is all we're left with, I see her and she sees me, I see her from the keyhole, sometimes even from my termite cracks, she sees me from the hole in her collar. She pokes out her head like a turtle, swivels it around, sounds as though she got stuck somewhere, I'm stuck too. Lella! she chirps and suddenly whips her hair back as if she remembered something, something from within her mind. Is anyone there? she asks. I used to have eyes on either side, you know, I could see both those who came and those who left. But it's been so long since a human being has set foot in here. Should anyone call in, I'll tell you, you'll know it yourself! I reassure her to uncrumple her face, it's a shame to have her face crumpled like that. But she won't hear anything, she's gone deaf, she too is slowly shutting down. First her ears, now her mouth, as for her genitals, they plugged up ages ago. How long do you think before her eyes close, how long?

A few days ago, she poked her head out of the green skirt suit, swung her hair to one side, then the other, and her hair is so short and straight that it made her look like Cleopatra, Cleopatra wrinkled. She came near me with her walker, she rarely comes near me anymore, her legs hurt, but she did come near me, put her cheek against me and hearkened to something. Then she stuffed her nose into my keyhole and sniffed, it tickled me at first but I liked it. Whatever it was, I sniffed it too, it smelled like wood - I know wood well - it smelled like steaming hot olive pie, oven-baked, it smelled like pastry from her favourite patisserie, *Petit Paris*, it smelled like spring, it smelled like cats, filthy rats - shudder not, Lella, put your eyes back to their sockets, don't bug out, I'll keep them off you, don't be scared of them - it smelled like grandchildren, it smelled like jasmine, blowing through the jasmine in my mind, but no, that reminds me of a song, a different story... I'm sorry... I can't fall back to silence once you get me going, I open my mouth and just blurt out words. I was even more talkative in the past; each time I opened, words and images sprang from me like water. Neighbours with coffee cups used to enter and exit through me, I was like those rumped magicians in county fairs, thrusting blades in and pulling them out like everything's cool, no blood on the carpet.

I hear people are still dying out there. Lella watches the news every day but says nothing. She just cries for her husband, the way he died all alone, the others are the others.

Yesterday, she came even closer. She glued herself to me, she quickly snatched my thing and set about fondling it, her fist wouldn't clench, but she fondled it over and over, more than other times, she fondled and fondled and I squealed like dozens of hinges together, stop groping me, turn me to the right and I'll open, I don't need much, get on with it and open me, I can't take this anymore!

Nothing. I was left unhinged.

She's glued to the chair again like a crumpled piece of cloth, her Sunday clothes hanging loose on her tiny frame, she's all dolled up as though going to a fancy dress party, she dozes off and bangs her head on the table, see, there's the bump, I have one too, next to my lock. And as time passes, she pokes her head out less and less. Her clothes become baggier and baggier. She's even stopped fondling my thing, as though she's accepted her fate, that she will never go out again, that no one will ever come to see her, nor her son, nor the cat of the man next door, nor the community care worker, nor the thief, nor the pothead from the block of flats at the back, nor spring, nor summer, nor fall, nor wily winter. She's so crushed she makes me want to keep to myself, I shut down, I age too, I may not look like it with all these embellishments, polish and paints, but I'm no spring chicken myself, I'm cracked, I flake, now and then I let out these eerie screeching sounds, something's stirring inside me. When it's windy I rattle, I huff and puff, I even talk to my thing in hope of having it turn by itself and open me up, in hope of letting me enjoy the thriving garden, the trees that have grown taller, in hope of having a single person pass through me again, it's so nice having a person pass through you, a living person that is.

Lella? Lellaaaa? Now she hollers in a daze, she talks to herself again, she still sees me, I still see her. Lellaaaa, I holler too from the keyhole, echoing her voice, Lellaaaa, grasp my thing roughly, get on with it, turn it, wipe your palm so that it won't slide, make me open again just a little bit, pretend I'm the world and open me up, we forgot about the world, Lella, and when you forget about the world, the world forgets you back, it shuts you down I tell you, it shuts you down, for good.

Wait! Her head just dropped! Her chest's not moving!

Lella?

Lella? Is that you?

Are you really standing up without your walker?

Is that a smile on your face?

No need to open me up.

I know exactly where you're going.

Magdalena

Magdalena sank her nose into the jacket's pocket and inhaled deeply. A sharp numbness conquered her cheeks. In the darkness of the room, the jacket's pocket muttered something, but it was of no importance at the time.

Magdalena then switched on the light and slipped back to her frame. She waited motionless right in the middle. It didn't take long for a lightly dressed woman to leave her striped scarf on the counter. It was thin, too thin, like a newly-born zebra; Magdalena could almost distinguish the veins in its texture. She stored it at the back too, at that part of the room with the square wooden shelves nailed on the wall, especially designed for hats and other accessories. It did take some time for that woman to let go of her scarf, the wrinkles on her neck swiftly exposed themselves, the woman sensed it and pretended to scratch her neck to cause a distraction. The scarf, on the other, looked relieved.

'Thank you!' / 'Enjoy the exhibits!' / 'Have a beautiful day!' / 'Have a good day!' / 'Have a ... day' / 'Show this card for collection' / 'Show this card for co-lle-ction' / 'Show-this-card-for-co-lle-ction.' The last two years, Magdalena's mouth opened and closed like a rusty cash machine. She occasionally heard her mouth creak. Cards for jackets and accessories. Safety box key for handbags and suitcases. Cards. Keys. Cards. Keys. Magdalena never understood why it was so difficult for people to let go of their handbags, people were literally carrying parts of themselves in there. Jackets and scarves, with only a few exceptions, seemed a lot more easily detached from their bodies. 'Put-your-scarf-in-the-sleeves-of-your-ja-cket,' she told a colourfully dressed Spanish girl one day. The girl, whose scarf was now being compressed into the sleeves of a muscular leather jacket, had a puzzled look, most probably more used to the scarf hanging on the same hanger with the jacket rather than this cloakroom methodology.

'You should smile more often,' the museum manager told Magdalena once. And she practiced smiling at home. Yet, as soon as she entered the cloakroom frame that smile disappeared. 'A cloakroom is no place for happy-looking expressions,' she thought. *Better swallow naphthalene than smile*, her father told her when she was still seven years old. *Nobody will hire you with a face like that*, he added, when Magdalena was in her twenties. *Shut up, you fucking weasel. That jacket's mine*, he shouted after being diagnosed with Alzheimer's. 'Want a hug? Want a hug, hug, hug?' jackets and coats whispered from time to time.

Some days, Magdalena would push the bar with the hangers to cause a domino effect and watch the coats and jackets dance. Raincoats were the best dancers, they moved and touched one another in a

transparent kind of way, refusing any attachment to gravity. The grumpiest ones were the woollen ones, they coughed and sneezed all the time, a real paradox taking their warmth into consideration. Wool tended to make things look heavier and more serious, at least that's what Magdalena thought every time such a coat arrived. 'You-would-look-a-lot-be-tter-if-you-were-made-of-thick-co-tton,' she said. 'You too! You too!' the woollen coats hummed.

During her breaks, Magdalena no longer left the museum, she just stayed at the back of the cloakroom, half-hidden by the hanger bar. She now had a ringer for visitors, and once also displayed an '1 RETURN IN 10 MINUTES' sign but that created long queues and Magdalena could not handle queues. 'You-are-a-lot-be-tter-at-hand-ling-queues,' she muttered to the cloakroom's jackets and coats. 'My-fa-ther's-ja-cket-burnt-so-qui-ckly, no-thing-was-left.'

That Tuesday morning, Magdalena was chewing lettuce from a Caesar's salad especially prepared for her at the Museum snack bar, without parmesan. A piece of over fried bacon got stuck between her front teeth. A tall man was waiting for her in the cloakroom frame, his hat tall too. That hat had a dark look.

'Madalakia³!' the man said.

'I'm-Ma-gda-le-na,' she thought appropriate to reply, while struggling to remove that stubborn piece of bacon from her weasel-looking teeth. The man explained how he hated his clothes touching the hangers that touched other clothes, which clothes also touched other bodies. He also added that he carried two 'madalakia' always with him for such occasions. He uncovered a handmade wire necklace, stretched it into a noose and handed that to Magdalena too.

'First this on your hanger, then my madalakia, then my coat,' he said.

Magdalena started pulling one of her ears downwards and continued to pull it for at least ten seconds more. 'Sir, this-wa-y-your-coat-will-mop-the-floor,' she replied. The man then took a skinny piece of fabric out of his pocket.

'That will do,' he answered, while rubbing the cloakroom card with his thumb, as if trying to release it from its plastic coating. His thumb nail was sharper than an average nail. Magdalena also noticed his fingers, they were long and delicate, those fingers looked a lot younger than him. If only she could lick one of them! This thought unsettled her, made her accidentally let the man's coat drop onto the germ-infested floor. The tall hat on his head made some noise, why was this sounding like a

³ madalakia: clothespins in Greek.

funeral march? Magdalena's legs got heavier, the smell of naphthalene stuffed her nostrils, that overcooked bacon still nested between her two front teeth. 'I'm-so-so-rry. I-will-sa-ni-tize-it-right-a-wa-y. I-bought-this-spe-cial-spra-y-from-e-Ba-y. Ve-ry-e-ffe-ctive. I-use-it-all-the-time.' As she sprayed the coat from head to toe, the whole cloakroom filled up with a thick cloud. The way Magdalena sprayed and shook the coat also made her feel unusually feminine. Her glasses, slipping onto her nose, revealed her blue eyes. Her blouse bounced right and left, tuning with her breasts. Magdalena also smiled, but Magdalena only smiled when she was in a panic. 'Did you swallow a rose?' the man joked, as soon as his coat was back into the right position. 'No, just-some-Cae-sar's,' Magdalena replied, still trying hard to remove that bacon. And right at the moment Magdalena was ready to hand the man his key, the museum alarm went off.

Magdalena violently pushed herself out of the frame. She landed on the man's shirt, removing a button with her elbow.

'Are-we-dying?' she screamed.

'It's a drill' the security officer shouted. 'Magdalena, try not to panic next time. You're supposed to be the one helping the museum's visitors.' Magdalena apologized to the man for falling on him. And then to herself, for falling for him. She also apologized for the loss of one of the man's buttons and promised to stitch it back on while the man was enjoying the exhibits. The man agreed and removed his shirt, revealing a vampire-like pale T-Shirt. 'Thank you,' he said. 'Sir, your-hand-bag-in-the-lo-cker, please,' Magdalena replied.

The man disappeared into the galleries.

The only thing still visible in the distance, his tall dark-looking hat.

Magdalena thirstily inhaled the sweat on his shirt! He must have been wetting that shirt for quite some time. It smelled a lot better than naphthalene, SEX. Magdalena could get used to that. Retreating to the back of the cloakroom, she glanced at the coats and jackets on the hanger bar and opened the drawer, spreading her threads and needles on the table. Before stitching the man's button back on, she sanitized both her hands and the table, although the man hadn't given any special instructions about the shirt. For some reason, all cloakroom items were silent.

It was now getting colder, there at the back, and the museum's visitors were starting to appear less frequently because of the approaching closing hours. Magdalena had forgotten her coat at home, not something that happened every day, so she borrowed one of the items stored in the UNDECLARED cloakroom section. Yet, that coat offered no warmth, despite its expensive fabric and

shiny texture. 'That's-why-the-y-ne-ver-asked-for-you,' Magdalena said with compassion, while carefully stitching the shirt button back on. 'You know nothing about me,' the coat replied.

When the alarm went off one more time, and despite the deafening sound coming from the main gallery, Magdalena continued to stitch and polish that button. A thick, choking cloud invaded the cloakroom. The smell of naphthalene and lavender mixed with smoke, screams and cries. Raincoats and scarves fell first from the vibrations, squeaking like rats, one by one. Magdalena saw them falling but, as if in a trance, only reacted when the man's coat detached itself from his 'madalakia.'

As she rushed, coughing, to pick it up, a bigger explosion was heard, this time from the audio-visual room next door.

When the paramedics entered the cloakroom, they could not distinguish flesh from fabric.

They initially thought piles of dead bodies were lying in there.

At the back, Magdalena's mouth was wide-open, with the button stuck on her tongue. 'I-for-got-to-ask-for-his-hat,' she exhaled, 'It-was-too-tall-for-a-hat...too-tall...too-dark...too-dark-for-a-h...'

Jack

A fly keeps buzzing over the squashed lemon.

'Lemons sliced open under the sun gobble down their pain,' would be his words if he talked, but he no longer talks. A year ago, he screamed so loud his mouth stayed wide-open.

A fly visits that wide-open mouth from time to time, the fact that he can no longer spit that fly out makes the mouth very welcoming to any flying creature. At times, an insect plunges even deeper into his throat, committing suicide into saliva and pulp from his Filipino's soup. He can feel the remains of the dead insect, wings dispatched from the rest of the body, stuck onto his tongue like tiny mint leaves. Incomprehensible sounds coming out of his stomach struggle to move that insect's ash-like body out, but its body melts, slides through his esophagus, floats into his stomach along with the melting bodies of bees, other flies, butterflies, even baby grasshoppers.

Empty. The jug right opposite him on the kitchen table is empty too. The Filipino once tried to fill it up with water. He released a pile of squeezed vowels from his mouth, he rarely missed a target, served in the army, killed two Turks. The Filipino then realized she should never mess with that scarred porcelain jug again.

The jug did witness it all, absorbed it all, even if it wasn't made of absorbable material. The jug also screamed that day, its current condition can prove it. It broke into pieces; it took the old man two days to glue those pieces back, a few of them resisted, they were lost for good. But, lately, the jug has new cracks. The Filipino thinks the jug still cracks because she secretly dusts it with that rough cloth or because she accidentally leans her tired shoulder against it. The jug knows exactly why it still cracks, it cracks because of *her*.

你好 你好吗 谢谢

The remains of a language the jug once knew now seem irrelevant and nonsense-like.

你好 你好吗 谢谢

It repeats the same phrase, a random phrase stuck onto its cheap Chinese porcelain like a curse.

Maybe the old man and the jug will speak the same language one day. The way his arm is now folded on the right, motionless under the sun, makes that arm look like a jug handle. The Filipino drags him from that arm back into the house. Both legs and wheels screech on the porch's tiles. And when he's thirsty, the Filipino pours water into his mouth as if watering a flower inside him. Surely, the Filipino must've once thought to stuff that wide-open mouth of his with those, sprinkled with dog piss, daisies. He would make a good vase. The house needs a good vase, she thinks. And the jug forms something with its cracks.



A boy just paused in front of the old man's porch.

'Mum, look, he's the one I was telling you about, I'm calling him Jack from jug, his mouth never shuts. Shut it, mum! Please, mum!'

The boy's mother shrugs her shoulders and yanks the boy back into the parking lot. Their voices still echo through the nearby building's vandalized windows. The old man feels that fly again, rocketing into his mouth, capriciously, without warning. Once more, he can't spit it out, its body sticks on one of his tonsils.

*你好 你好吗 谢谢 it's that staircase's fault felt her neck break felt her mind break way
before it all happened and did nothing 你会说汉语吗?*

The old man also has a tattoo, a wrinkled one. It's a bird, exotic, a half bird. The other half is on her, was on her. 'The other half was eaten by worms,' he thinks, and one more drop of saliva breaks on the squashed lemon.

Today the old man is staring at that tattoo longer than usual. Then at the staircase, at the fly circling his face, at the jug with its own tattoo-like patterns, not always in the same order, his eyes roll right and left, up and down, as his head refuses to move. If he could walk like he used to, he would rush inside and break that jug once and for all - porcelain's made to be broken. And if he still had a wife, he would spread his left palm with the half bird and let her also spread her right palm with the other half. They would continue to fly together through daily routine, without even realizing it.

People fall off stairs and break their necks every day, don't they? he asks himself with his wide-open mouth. People leave notes when they do other things, especially if they are in their seventies. She would never leave him without a note. Why did she want to move that jug downstairs, anyway? It was just fine where it was. It's the jug's fault, *the jug* blocked her vision, *the jug* made her slip.

你好 你好吗 谢谢 it's that staircase's fault felt her neck break felt her mind break way
before it all happened and did nothing, 你会说汉语吗? 自杀 自杀自杀

The boy just paused in front of the old man's porch again.

'Mum, his mouth's still open. I told you to shut it. Please, mum! I don't like this neighbourhood, give me your phone...'

The boy's mum stretches her arm through the porch railings, she cuts a lemon instead.

你好 don't die on me now will you?

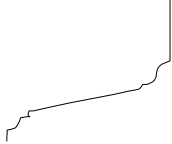
The old man keeps swallowing insects. He also cracks, like that jug, day by day. Porcelain skin. People slide through that refugee construction and take photos of him as if he is an exhibit. Flash! He is the only one there with a wide-open mouth. Flash! Flash! The straw hat the Filipino puts on his head turns him into a Van Gogh painting. Flash! Most porches have empty plastic chairs and torn mattresses, you don't see many tenants around, he's one of a kind.

If he dies, the jug will end up in the rubbish bin, without being touched one last time by his wrinkled hand. The flies are worried too, they will no longer have a playground. The staircase doesn't worry at all, even if the whole house collapses it will be the only thing standing. The staircase is something like

a cockroach. It didn't come with the house that outdoor staircase. He built it later with his own hands, when temporary residence turned into permanent. 'We're going to see Karpasia again, aren't we?' she asked him when the borders opened. 'I'm not showing a passport to cross, you go!' he replied.

你好 你好 she wasn't the same when she returned, she wasn't the same, she told him 过去事
过去事

Flash! The jug looks different today. Flash! It's *her*, same body shape. The jug grows hair out of its opening, the hair also slides into the jug's cracks, it reaches out, wraps him softly, sucks that last breath out of him.



'Mum, he turned into a statue, look, a fly on his nose'

'See that plastic fly flapper on the floor? Take it, put it in his hand. Go on! Good. Now squeeze his palm. Harder! Try again. Use that cello tape on the table. There you go. That will do it. Now say cheese!'

Flash!

Flash! Flash!

Philip

Philip didn't cry when he was born. The edges of his tiny fingers looked like weeds. His face purple, berry juice. The gynaecologist, best in town, wanted to say 'We are very sorry but, despite my diplomas and this decadent clinic's high-tech equipment, your baby's dead...' but Philip's chest moved up and down, so everyone bought blue balloons worth five euro each and miserable-looking teddy bears shouting 'It's a boy!' and cheered, forcibly.

Cheering didn't last long since Philip, as both a baby and a toddler, didn't do much; to be exact a tree did more than Philip. 'We've created a doll. A DOLL!' his mother once told his father, shocked by his lack of vivacity and flexibility, and Philip must've heard it, although still too young to understand things, and, at that very moment, shed tears for the first time. One tear, two tears, three whole tears. Mother's hand with napkin. Tears gone. Napkin carefully sealed in the drawer, as evidence.

'Philip's staring at a bush!' / 'Saw him glued on that lamp post?' / 'Glued! On a lamp post!' / 'Saw him?' / 'Saw that?' / 'Saw him?' / 'Saw that?'

'He never hugs *me*,' his mother would complain to a relative, pointing at him hugging a bookcase with no books.

'Buy him books, he may start hugging *them*,' the relative, a real bookworm, would suggest.

'Mum, look! I'm a parking meter! How cool is that! Cool! Cool! How cool is that!'

And after a lot of consulting from a very expensive therapist, Philip's mother would instruct both his father and his brother Nick to try and follow Philip's extremely slow pace, something which could make him feel 'normal' and 'accepted,' terms which sounded very old-fashioned, even to Philip. So, they all tried to eat in an hour, chew a pea for exactly eight minutes and drink a glass of water for eleven, they even struggled to move as robots do or do the moonwalk. Yet, nothing had a positive impact on Philip, rather a negative impact on everyone else. So, they all stopped. Philip stopped too, moving, at the age of fourteen.

Doctors said nothing was wrong with him, no neurological disorder, it was a psychological thing, they advised, a suppressed childhood trauma for instance. His mother started blaming herself. 'It's because we played Statues all the time' / 'I shouldn't have dressed him up as an ancient Greek column that carnival' / 'My great grandfather was schizophrenic. My fault. MY fault!'

His father blamed the house, built with his own hands, too damn small, not that functional, restricting Philip's movements. Nick blamed Philip's stupid brain and wished he was never born.

In any case, since Philip stopped moving while standing up, in a soldier-like position, a wheelchair could not be the solution. His father, along with an uncle who owned a crane company, devised a transport platform with wheels, like the ones used for lifting heavy boxes but more human-friendly, and Philip moved everywhere on that, and sometimes in a horizontal position, at the back seat of a car. Philip's friends would use that device to move Philip around school.

'Thank God, he still moves his head,' people would whisper.

'He can at least still go down on pussy,' the baker would tell a customer, and that customer would add 'Or give a blow job,' giggling, with her breasts going up and down, like Philip's head.

At parties, Philip would stand in the middle of the dance floor and everyone would dance and French kiss around him. During Halloween or other celebrations, they would also attach ribbons and other accessories on him and Philip would enjoy being the scarecrow of it all. 'I like... b...being used,' he told his best friend Marcus once, 'I always liked being... used. I ffffeel depressed when I'm not...' and his friend, the only real friend he ever had, replied 'I understand. I like being used too,' and pinched Philip's ass.

'Touch! Touch me, mum! Touch me! Touch ME! ME! Touch ME!'

Falling in love with a boy standing still all the time and not talking much wasn't a teenager's priority but there was something charming about Philip, his silent company, his clever jokes and bouncing head, his philosophical thinking, the free rides on his transport device, lifting him, placing him, decorating him. One day, a girl almost punched him, heartbroken by his passivity to win her over some muscular guy, shouting 'Your heart's made of stone,' something which Philip took as a compliment.

'Would you like me to be the object of your afffffection?' Philip would politely ask while trying to flirt, and eventually, he would start asking his brother Nick to sit on him or use a duster and undust him as if he were a photo frame. Nick seemed to enjoy that game too so, by placing Philip horizontally, he slept on him and, one night, Nick even had casual sex on him. His parents started doing the same to satisfy this bizarre fetish of his so they had dinners on him and occasionally slept and fantasised on him. At some point, a guest even peed on him to make him feel like Fontana di Trevi, because Philip asked him to, because his parents allowed it, and Philip laughed and laughed and laughed but his mother cried and cried and cried, and never forgot that day.

At the age of eighteen, Philip expressed his wish to be turned into an object.

'An object?' / 'Since when do people turn into objects?' / 'I don't blame him, my ex-boyfriend often made me feel this way' / 'You mean a sexual object?' / 'Pfff! Atheists!'

'I ssstarted not *entirely* ffffeeling things,' Philip said.

He then showed his mother his skin, which had started to become very rough and solid, and his mother realised that Philip was *really* changing. After many visits to physicians and other kinds of doctors, it seemed that Philip's skin was gradually becoming even more concrete, as if made of wood or metal or super-strong fabric. Philip was also becoming heavier, even if he hadn't put on weight. Coloured stains appeared on his body. 'Your left breast's purple' / 'Nice tattoo!' / 'Did your mum crave strawberries when she was pregnant?' / 'Wow!' / 'Your blue dick turns me on...'

'Use me, please! USE ME! USE ME! USEMEUSEMEUSEMEUSEME!'

Philip started asking people to manipulate and touch him in any way they wanted. A friend, for instance, had him as a statue in his back yard for a week, and Philip was very excited indeed, especially when pigeons shat on him. His brother Nick, now at University, asked him to be delivered in a package for his girlfriend's birthday, holding a chocolate cake, something which Philip did with great pleasure, while his parents, under the influence of Xanax, treated him as a Christmas tree for the whole festive period. 'How lovely,' their guests exclaimed while gobbling down huge turkey chunks. 'What a big tree you have this year,' they repeated and a bit later in the night they asked about Philip, they always asked about Philip, and his mother, mixing Xanax with wine, told them that Philip was DEAD, and a guest almost choked and Philip, that moment, choked too.

'I w...want an operation,' Philip told his parents at the age of twenty-five.

His mother's jaw dropped, his father's legs bent, while his brother Nick was masturbating on his office chair. But even if such an operation existed in the future, how would Philip stay alive, wouldn't his heart turn solid and stop beating? Would Philip be able to continue his life in a mummified position? Would Philip get that job at McDonald's he always wanted (as a drive-through speaker)? Would he get married? Would he have children? Would his sperm come out as tiny concrete-looking drops? What would the neighbours say? What would the whole wide world say? How would Philip eventually die? Would he stay alive forever?

Would he stay alive?

Alive?

Forever?

This thought gave Philip's mother the courage to keep asking and googling and hoping. And made her also express the wish to have Philip turned into a domestic object at least, in order to have him close to her. Far better than office furniture or factory equipment, at least away from vanity and cancer.

And while waiting for that utopian operation, Philip would start getting all these recurring dreams about living and interacting with other objects in living rooms, garages, even rubbish bins, about his body cracking, becoming flexible and turning into a square kitchen table, or about his stomach opening up and turning him into a cosy cupboard.

'How does love ffeel like?' Philip would ask his mother after losing most of his ability to feel. His mother, devising a language which she thought would best suit Philip, would answer that love is a cup sitting on a plate, that love is the boiling liquid inside the cup, that love is the little plate that supports that cup all the way, that love is also the handle of the cup, the one you hold on to in order not to burn yourself.

Eventually, words would also abandon Philip. 'How...fffeel...?' he would ask, and his mother would connect hatred with sharp backstabbing knives and compassion with soft cotton pads. 'Ph...Phil...feel something...anything...'

But one day.

All of a sudden.

Philip talked to me.

Would you be kind

Would you be kkind enough to

tto set me free

to stop using a masculine pronoun

and stttart using a neuter one?

It now stands in the middle of the back garden, holding a glass of wine, carefully attached to the right hand with tape. Mid. winter. Rain enters the cracks of the skin. It now has wrinkles. Its body more concrete than ever, some feelings still there but constantly fading. A few self-inflicted scars on the skin reveal the intention to calculate the percentage of pain capacity left.

'Let me take you inside, you'll catch a cold,' mother says. She is expressionless, she tries too hard. It knows that someday, in the far future, because of science and the open-mindedness of people, it will never catch a cold again.

'Let's at least wear a hat. Heavy rain can destroy objects,' its father says, gently patting its wood-looking shoulder. A hint of acceptance vibrates in its bones.

'Dad...what...what does...passion fff...fee... li...?' it asks, and father wants to say a lot of things, he once knew what passion felt like.

Nick now enters the garden. No umbrella, no hat, just a suit, getting wet too. 'You know, you can come and stay with me, I bought a two-floor apartment. You can decorate my lounge if you want to...'

They don't talk much.

They just stand under the rain, close, unmoving. One naked, one dressed.

Seeing them through the wet, misty glass of the kitchen window, mother thinks they're holding hands.

A Hole to Stick Things in

Gregoria desperately wants to brush her teeth today but soon realizes she no longer has any, she uses mouthwash instead, it's a challenge, she then drags herself to the kitchen and fries an egg, it slips into her throat, she wants to shout what the fuck is wrong, but sounds more like aaa ee uckk oo, she writes

come home, it's an emergency, my mouth's missing 🤪🤪🤪

and Victor receives the message while he's attending a Zoom meeting with two clients from Macau, he feels the vibration in his pocket but the vibration of the lower body of the new security assistant pulls his lips forward, Victor still has a mouth, his mouth is not missing (Gregoria did stick her arm in a pipe once after a break-up, she was thirteen, the fire brigade had to arrive and open it up with an electric saw, her mother screamed and Gregoria thought arm and pipe were a perfect match that day), Gregoria now moves in front of the mirror, she blinks but nothing happens, she even tries to rub the mirror with old underwear, her mouth is still missing, the lips and a part of the chin, in its place a bottomless dark hole (Victor poured whipped cream into her mouth once, and then licked it, *he could be doing that with him too*), she slowly stretches her arms towards her reflection, towards that wide hole on her face, the thought of touching her own skin terrifies her, she touches the mirror instead (*he could tell her the truth if he saw that huge hole on her face*), she then takes out a flowery scarf from her purse and twists it around her chin, there's plenty of Saharan dust in the atmosphere today, Coronavirus is still around, it could work as an excuse, she rushes in the nearby pharmacy, one of the people in the queue, keeping the one-metre distance, is holding a piece of paper saying 'I'm dying, please hel,' Gregoria takes that lost *p* of the word as a sign, she pulls down the scarf and her face drools, on the fabric, on her clothes, mostly on her half-gone chin, 'I aaaa ooooo ou,' she tells the pharmacist, he's an old man behind a safety glass, searching for his glasses, 'I think that would need to be surgically removed, love, looks like melanoma,' Gregoria then races back into the street, without the scarf, with a newly-bought surgical mask, and screams, without a mouth, her Munch-like reflection in a nearby shop window mixes with the reflection of two cut in half Mercedes cars, a man who's jogging and an advertising sign saying GET YOURSELF A SMILE YOU CAN AFFORD, Victor writes

Hormones again 🤨

and Gregoria receives the message while she's on a bench howling like a wolf, or like those stone-made lions decorating the entrances of kitsch homes, she's howling without sound, a man with a dressed dog takes her for a homeless person, he tosses something on her legs, it looks like an energy bar, an old lady with Alzheimer's sticks her cane into the hole and twists it as if stirring a pot, Gregoria almost chokes, the hole is still there, now magnified in the makeup mirror Gregoria takes out of her purse, in the small frame one can see a piece of sky and a high-tech building, a bee is also resting on the glass, the bee moves numbly, as if making love to its own reflection, Gregoria makes love too, with Victor, in the deep hole of her mouth (*I can't wait to fuck that sexy ass of yours*, that message said, in full words, no abbreviations, no full stop, not even emoticons), it's all over, Gregoria thinks, still drooling on herself, thinking that if she wasn't sticking her nose, or other body parts, into things, things would've been different, Gregoria now drools on her phone too, even into that deep jelly-like canyon which has formed between her thighs, she drools so much that she's forced to put the surgical mask on, yet, out of the blue, a sporty cute guy spots her on the bench and tosses his card, turns out he's a circus manager from Russia, no plane taking him back home, he says something like 'when the quarantine is over you'll make a great hole to stick things in, the audience will love you' and Gregoria smiles, she really smiles, even if nobody can see



SDO3366, with Super Powerful Motor

'Darling, stop playing with that vacuum, will you?' Lydia's mother says. Lydia is about eight. First time, she experiences the playful effects of a vacuum. It sucks her soft cheeks in and out, along with one of her glittery skirts.

'What happened?' asks the pediatrician, after noticing some round, bruised marks on Lydia's thighs and stomach. 'Are you sure you don't want to talk about it?' the doctor insists. Lydia's mother says something about a vacuum but her voice trembles and the doctor takes that for a lie, so a few days later, without any notice, social services knock on their door and Lydia's mother starts swearing for no reason and also hits one of the social workers on the forehead with a broom, again for no reason, so it doesn't take long for those round, bruised marks to be attributed to the mother and not the vacuum.

*

'I accidentally sucked in one of my moles. Do you think I should visit a dermatologist?'

'It's either that vacuum or me!'

Lydia's mother plugs in the vacuum and right in front of her boyfriend starts vacuuming the loose skin of her right leg. Her boyfriend sees the vacuum sucking her in and gets sexually aroused. Disgusted by his reaction, he covers his face with his hand and starts moving backwards. By the time he slams the door, he's already horny enough to masturbate in the car. Lydia's mother really wishes her now ex-boyfriend would understand her like that vacuum one day. Unconditionally, in full mode.

*

'Why are you always carrying that thing with you?'

'It helps me empty my head from bad thoughts...'

'Vacuums clean houses not minds'

'Sorry if I shocked you...'

'I think you should take the rest of the day off'

'Are you firing me?'

*

Lydia's mother switches on the vacuum and turns it upwards. The vacuum sucks in the fluorescent moon and all the stars of the ceiling in Lydia's room. She looks at the moon and the stars twisting into the vacuum's plastic cocoon. At some point those stars jam the device. They used to glitter some years ago those stars and moon. Lydia would point her little fingers at them and say things like 'What happens when we die? Do we become stars on the ceiling too?'

*

'Your child was run over by a car'

'What brand?'

'A Volkswagen...madame, did you hear what I just said? Your child's...dead...'

'I knew those cars were overestimated'

*

The stars and moon twirl and twirl in the vacuum's cocoon again, by crashing onto each other they crack and break, soon only half-stars and a half-moon are left. Lydia's mother removes them from the vacuum, some of them have almost turned into dust. She takes a small carton box and carefully seals those leftovers in there, along with one of Lydia's photos.

Lydia is holding the vacuum as if it is a snake and pretends to be Hercules. She looks happy and although no sound comes out of that photograph, she sings a kindergarten song while watching the vacuum tube move right and left. Afterwards, she pretends to use that vacuum like a ladder, to climb to the ceiling, to her stars and moon. She also rides it like a turtle or a horse. And although Lydia is usually not allowed to plug that vacuum in, she makes the sound the vacuum makes all day long, and eventually tames that wild thing, 'yeehaaaaaaa.'

*

Vacuum plugged in. Tube turned towards her head, starting from her long straight hair. 'Today, I'm Samson,' Lydia's mother thinks to herself and closes her eyes. 'Lydia, remember Samson's story?'

*

It's Christmas. Lydia's mother searches for festive music on YouTube. Soothing music. She drags the vacuum to the middle of the room, rolling it from one side to the other, following the tune. She opens the bag which is full of dust and starts sprinkling herself with it. The vacuum's dust glitters under the strong light of the lamp.

She presses the switch.

She sticks the pipe into her mouth.

Both her and the vacuum now dance in a tight embrace, sucking each other in coordination, sucking, really sucking each other, sucking everything and everyone, sucking Lydia, sucking Lydia's mother, sucking that ex-boyfriend, sucking that Volkswagen, sucking stars and moon, really sucking everything and everyone, sucking even these wor

OBJECTIONS - critical commentary

Depictions of objects and objectifications in contemporary short fiction, in relation to aspects of Martin Heidegger's and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's philosophy

Introduction

Have you ever thought of that awkward moment when a sleeve or a scarf gets accidentally caught on the edge of a table or a door handle? As if that object grabs us by the hand to actually grab our attention? When readers are asked in Bill Brown's *A Sense of Things*: 'Do those socks rolled up there have ideas in them, somewhere inside them?' (6), it is implied that socks, and objects in general, may have such an innate, realisable quality that could allow them to experience life in the way living creatures can (or cannot). In fictional and metaphorical worlds, therefore, objects can be offered the possibility of becoming detached from their passivity and lifelessness, as well as from their conventional⁴ uses in daily life. Consequently, investigating a form of life within things - and thingness within humans - can become a fascinating way to reflect the anxieties of an object-centred contemporary reality through creative writing.

This creative writing study mirrors a wish to use fictional forms and writing techniques as a way to investigate the boundaries between the human and the non-human, the subject and the object, skin and material. Moreover, it aims to creatively explore the thingness of objects themselves, not necessarily linked to human-like qualities when animated, and how such a thingness can also be reflected in the form/language of a literary text. As such, the writerly exploration of this reversible transition between subjects and objects inevitably engages with wider phenomenological questions regarding object/tool use, thing empowerment and subject-object in-betweenness. This means that the study is in part informed by the portrayal of objects, objectified⁵ human characters and hybrid subject-objects in relevant examples of American (mostly), British and international short fiction from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, leading to the creation of a short fiction collection which draws attention to the 'subject' within the object, as well as the 'object' within the subject. At the same time, however, the study also draws upon some of the philosophical context of such ideas, especially the work of Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Aspects of Heidegger's and Merleau-Ponty's philosophy are incorporated into a creative writing methodology which seeks to animate objects in a variety of self-conscious ways, at points 'making objects active and people passive' (Smith 35) in order to also reflect an object character's powerful independence.

⁴Taking into consideration that objects can mean/be different things to each person or culture, the term 'conventional' is used here to express an object's use in relation to the reason this object was manufactured.

⁵Terms like 'objectified' and 'objectification' are used in this study stripped of political or sociocultural implications, as a mirroring of a literal subject to object transformation, rather than the treatment of someone as an object within a specific social context. Cyborg and man-machine identities, reflected through posthumanism, as well as through thinkers like the influential feminist scholar Donna Haraway (*A Cyborg Manifesto*, 1985) are also omitted.

For this reason, the collection of this study is called *Objessions* (objects+obsessions), thus reflecting, through its short fictions, the obsessions,⁶ the possible existential anxieties of both humans and objects, when ‘thrown,’ as Heidegger suggests through his philosophy of Being in *Being and Time*,⁷ ‘into the world.’ Hence, the collection has been divided into two main categories. The short fictions of the first category follow the interaction and interconnection of subjects and objects reflected in a significant part of Heidegger’s and Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy and explore ways to empower an object character further through either applied speech or descriptions of its silent, but powerfully expressive, appearance. The last section of this category also includes short fictions where human bodies/characters are absent from the text, thus strengthening even more the possibility of turning objects into more independent characters, a possibility which is implied in Heidegger’s tool analysis in *Being and Time*, when objects/tools break, for instance.⁸

The second category of the collection pushes the boundaries further and presents short fictions which focus on a subject-object in-betweenness, while literally objectifying or ‘pragmamorphizing’⁹ the human body (or its body parts), especially in the last short fictions of the collection. This second category also mirrors the way in which objects, in a dystopian scenario, could absorb our whole bodies. Such a reality becomes a dark and exaggerated extension of Merleau-Ponty’s harmonious belief, expressed through embodied phenomenology,¹⁰ that we do not simply look at things but we absorb them, we embody them, we become part of them and they become part of us. It is worth mentioning, at this point, that although the short fictions of *Objessions* are mostly linked to each other in relation to the investigated philosophical concepts, some details, such as statue-like human characters, body parts, electrical appliances, bats, dolls and lamps, deliberately reappear in more than one short fiction, in order to create a more unified object-centred atmosphere for the whole collection.

⁶The term ‘obsession’ is used here in a broader sense, as a reflection of the object-packed intensities which characterize the contemporary world, rather than as a psychoanalytic term.

⁷Original publication in 1927.

⁸Such an object empowerment was further extended by Graham Harman, through a new reading of Heidegger’s tool analysis in the book *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (2002), where Harman identifies ‘being with tool-being’ (16), thus constructing an ontology of objects.

⁹‘Pragmamorphism’ (‘pragma,’ object in Greek), as a possible opposite of anthropomorphism (‘anthrōpos,’ human in Greek), is a term first used by the academic and businessman Emanuel Derman in 2011 to criticize naïve materialism. I am using this term, here, in a different and double way: a) as a reflection of the ‘morphē,’ the expressive form and appearance of an object, which can guide the writer towards more unconventional object animations, and b) as a reflection of the objectification of human characters, their literal transformation into objects.

¹⁰Merleau-Ponty’s embodied phenomenology or phenomenology of embodiment focuses on the experience of life through a first-person, self-conscious and powerful body (undivided from the mind).

Short fiction,¹¹ through its short length, as well as through its usually cryptic language and, therefore, its openness towards meaning and experimentation, becomes a fruitful space for the development of such object and subject-object characters, whose credibility could be at stake in longer narrative forms. Although short fiction as such is not the main point of exploration in this study, neither as a form nor in relation to object themes, it becomes a safe place to experiment with unusual depictions of objects and objectifications because, as stated in the introduction of *The Art of Brevity*, the term short fiction 'has moved away from essentialist notions of what text types may be said to be' and, consequently, 'discussions of the short story tend now to be genre-bending and interdisciplinary' (viii). And as far as short fiction in relation to objects and objectifications is concerned, as Mary Louise suggests in the essay 'The Short Story,' the short form becomes the right space 'to introduce new (and possibly stigmatised) subject matters into the literary arena' (*The New Short Story Theories* 104). Hybrid-genre writing is also not a main point of exploration, although several short fictions in *Objessions* may be seen, due to their very short length, as examples of flash fiction - which is considered a hybrid genre between prose and poetry - or may sound, in parts, like a speech, a newspaper excerpt, a postcard and so on. Moreover, although the investigation of literary modes/genres is not a main aim in this study, the short fictions of *Objessions* inevitably fuse surrealist, magical realist and grotesque ways of expression, since such modes of writing¹² - which hover between the real and the unreal - have been strongly connected to the animation of the lifeless or the transformation of the living in literature.

Theoretical reading - Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty

Several contemporary thinkers talked about objects in their works, presenting object allegories, linking objects to creativity and approaching life through an object-centred lens, for example, Gaston

¹¹*Objessions* is being called a *short fiction* rather than a *short story* collection, since the word 'story' alludes to a more traditionally structured literary format, with a certain length, while the more general term 'short fiction' opens up a wider space towards length and experimental writing in relation to less common and less human-centred themes, such as objects and objectifications.

¹²In literature, surrealism has been officially connected to the Dadaist writer André Breton ('Manifesto of Surrealism,' 1924) and is often related to automatic writing, the dream and the subconscious. Magical realism, as a genre/mode presenting the bizarre as part of reality, has been more commonly linked to Latin American Literature, e.g. to writers like Gabriel García Márquez (even if the term was coined by the German art critic Franz Roh in 1925). The way the grotesque combines the strange with the freakish, moreover, can be seen, for example, in the *Black Paintings* of Francisco Goya, or through writers which darkly rework the fairytale, like Angela Carter (*The Bloody Chamber*, 1979). *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* (1995) is a book of essays which, although focusing on magical realism and its different definitions, offers a wider picture in relation to the use of the absurd in literature, including references to surrealism, the grotesque and other modes and genres which combine the real with the unreal.

Bachelard,¹³ Bruno Latour,¹⁴ Graham Harman,¹⁵ Bill Brown,¹⁶ and others. However, I have chosen to exclusively focus on aspects of Heidegger's and Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, since both thinkers belong to the tradition of phenomenology¹⁷ and some of their phenomenological concepts intrigued me to enter, through short fiction and creative writing, a form of consciousness in objects, just as phenomenology enters the consciousness, perception and skills of human beings. Moreover, Heidegger attaches but also detaches objects from their use/users, thus also implying the possibility for them to exist more independently, and Merleau-Ponty expands objects further, in relation to a powerful human body, but also in relation to an object's expressive appearance. So, both thinkers offered me the opportunity to expand the possible empowerment of objects through creative writing, as well as the impact of such an object agency on actual form and language.

The short fiction collection *Objessions*, therefore, explores the following terminology, in order to depict objects and objectifications through creative writing:¹⁸

a) Heidegger:

Tool analysis

Through his early analysis of tools in *Being and Time*,¹⁹ and by initially approaching the human subject/user as more powerful than the object/tool, Heidegger appears to link objects/tools to usability, to the service they were manufactured to offer to their engaged users (users who need to employ certain skills and competences during this process of use). By also calling them equipment in the same book, Heidegger considers objects as *ready-to-hand*: available and destined for use by an engaged user, and *present-at-hand*: occurrent, available to be observed in more detail, when their connection to their practicality is removed. When they are actually being used these objects become invisible because their user focuses more on the activity the object performs rather than the object itself. Once unable to work properly and perform the activity they were manufactured to perform, it is implied that these objects somehow rebel against their users, thus becoming what Heidegger calls *unready-to-hand*. Although Heidegger mostly dismisses gawking in relation to objects, staring at

¹³*The Poetics of Space*, 1958.

¹⁴Actor-network theory was developed by Bruno Latour in cooperation with Michel Callon and John Law in the 1980s. It is a theoretical approach to social theory (also called ANT) which gives emphasis to the capacity of nonhumans to act.

¹⁵OOO (object-oriented ontology) is a twenty-first century Heidegger-influenced school of philosophy, founded by Graham Harman, which focuses on object withdrawal/independency and object-object interaction in a shared metaphorical world.

¹⁶Brown's 'thing theory' (2001) concentrates on human-object relationships in literature and culture.

¹⁷In simple words, phenomenology focuses on the structure of consciousness; it is the study of lived experience.

¹⁸I am illustrating each concept with reference to my short fictions included in *Objessions*.

¹⁹In this study I am using the 1962 and 2010 editions, in English.

objects, and looking at them more carefully, may offer the writer the opportunity to notice their fragments and tiny details, their shape and material, their strength or fragility and most importantly, the different ways they could be used or experienced once detached from their conventional use-related identities: 'the less we stare at the hammer-Thing, and the more we seize hold of it and use it, the more primordial does our relationship to it become, and the more unveiledly is it encountered as that which it is – as equipment' (Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 1962, 98).

When considering this concept in a creative writing context, I was guided towards types of object animation which would present objects as both tools and challengers of their tool-like use (the use they were manufactured to perform), by turning them into objects which also react against their use and their users. A teapot constantly boiling inside, for instance, once integrated in a fictional and metaphorical world, could wish to be transformed into a flower container or could rebel against those constantly gossiping tea cups and fingers. So, when I started to write creatively using this double possibility of Heidegger's tool analysis - although the tool analysis seems to mostly focus on the usability and serviceability of an object/tool rather than its independence - a detailed observation of objects in real life became a necessity. It offered the chance to use those usually unnoticed details of an object as short fiction material. Carefully observing that teapot turned its fist-on-waist handle and the steam coming out of its guts into an expression of anger, the object itself guided me towards its animation and I had almost outlined the plot I was looking for: a teapot protagonist with anger management issues struggling to discover a new meaning in life. Even if I never wrote this short fiction, at least not yet, this showed me that the conventional use of an object can be a starting point for its further animation and not something a writer aspiring to animate objects differently needs to dismiss. In addition, an object's conventional use can also encourage linguistic experimentations, since it can be reflected in the way the object in focus speaks in the text. Through repetition, for example, if this object is a photocopier, as it happens in the short fiction 'Model D235467,' where a photocopier's copying function ironically copies and repeats words in the text. Or even through the disappearance of language, if this object is a vacuum, as it happens in the final short fiction of the collection, 'SD03366, with Super Powerful Motor,' where the vacuum character literally sucks all words and inevitably leads the collection to its ending, thus also depicting an object character's ultimate victory, its total control over both humans and words: 'Both her and the vacuum now dance in a tight embrace, sucking each other in coordination, . . . sucking Lydia, sucking Lydia's mother, sucking that ex-boyfriend, sucking that Volkswagen, sucking stars and moon, really sucking everything and everyone, sucking even these wor' (172).

*Jug allegory*²⁰

In contrast to his tool analysis earlier in his life, Heidegger, through the jug allegory in the lecture 'The Thing'²¹ (first translation in English in 1971) appears to offer more independency and power to objects by turning the *object* (the *tool*) into a symbolic and more mysterious *thing*. Heidegger's jug example, as a keeping and offering vessel - shaped by the void it contains rather than its form and material - becomes, among others, a fourfold representation of earth, heaven, gods and humans; the jug, according to Heidegger, expresses a gathering of the world. This *thing*, therefore, possibly expressing both living and lifeless entities, obtains an allegorical quality, the void it contains is never empty, the existence of a form of energy or 'soul' within the object could also be implied here. Moreover, the emphasis on the jug's thingness - again in relation to the void it contains - could invite us to look at the objects which surround us in even deeper ways, to also see them as containers shaped by their content, to not only go through their surface but also start looking inside.

In a creative writing context, and by approaching Heidegger's jug as a metaphor of character construction, such a focus can create strong object characters, with complicated thoughts and long interior monologues. These characters can often be detached from human users, just like Heidegger's jug stands alone and powerfully independent. At the same time, though, this enigmatic analysis of the jug offers to an object that allegorical quality which can fascinate both writers and readers: the use of an object or subject-object as an allegory to talk about wider personal and sociopolitical realities. Within the collection of short fictions of this study, 'Jack' establishes the presence of a Chinese porcelain jug which keeps and pours back what an old refugee feels after the tragic loss of his wife. This Chinese porcelain jug does become a fictional representation of Heidegger's jug allegory, on the one hand, but also the way to reveal and pour out the secrets and memories related to the death of the old man's wife and, therefore, the catalyst which moves the plot further. This jug character, linked to Heidegger's jug, also acts as a form of metaphysical force, a commentator which speaks through both written and visual language and eventually conquers the old man himself, who has transformed into a man-jug with 'porcelain skin' (157).

²⁰Heidegger used the example of the jug to contemplate on the concepts of distance and nearness.

²¹Published in *Poetry, Language, Thought*. In this study I am using the 1975 edition, in English.

b) Maurice Merleau-Ponty:

Cane allegory - the blind man's stick

Merleau-Ponty, following but also expanding the thought of his predecessor Heidegger, pays more attention to the lived body, to the way we perceive with our bodies, and uses the metaphor of the blind man with the stick in *Phenomenology of Perception*²² (original publication in 1945) to stress the fact that objects become bodily and sensory extensions, as well as integral parts of a first-person, self-conscious body. This means that the human body, as a powerful existence undivided from the mind, experiences sense *through* the stick, *through* the object and, at the same time, possibly absorbs that lifeless material as part of itself. The stick disappears through its use, just like Heidegger also suggests in the tool analysis, since it performs a specific function which, once again, invites us to mostly concentrate on the action rather than the object itself. However, the stick also *extends* both its user and itself *to* the world.

Applying this *extending* quality of Merleau-Ponty's stick to a creative writing context, the human character in a short fiction can similarly *extend to* the world *through* the object in focus, thus gaining not only sensory experiences but, in the case of this study, also realizations which enhance the character's development. And language can also *extend to* linguistic experimentations in order to accomplish this. In the short fiction 'Dragon,' for instance, the jaw of a tractor which demolishes buildings becomes a bodily expansion of its human user and, at the same time, invades language through the sounds of its function (emphasis on 'rrrrrr' sound). This linguistic exploration, which playfully contaminates both the character's and the narrator's words at the end of the text, not only mirrors a subject-object interconnection but also emphasizes the presentation of the tractor's jaw as a double of the blind man's stick, expanding *through* the human character's body and leading him towards new 'visions' in relation to his dead uncle, a missing person since 1974²³: "'I'm sorrrry I didn't find him firrrst, dad" he whisperrrs to himself, as the jaws of steel eat away the building's guts' (58).

Gesture, silence and physiognomy

In the same book, Merleau-Ponty sees language as a gestural extension of the body rather than the separate result of cognitive processes. Gesture *is* feeling, it does not express feeling, it does not

²²In this study I am using the 2012 edition, in English.

²³1974 refers to the year Turkey invaded Cyprus.

express something behind it. Language is not only speech, it is not a tool of the human subject but part of the human body. In other words, the silent gestures of the body and the world are also a form of language, a form of speaking silence, according to Merleau-Ponty. This approach also includes the idea that objects have a physiognomy, something like a gestural expression, more broadly speaking, an appearance (a face) which expressively speaks to us, and that, through this physiognomy, objects look and gesture back at us just like we look at them. This face of objects *is* meaning. Objects, therefore, have meaningful physiognomies rather than sterile, lifeless shapes. This could also mean that subjects and objects become mirrorings of each other but not passive ones, they look at each other, they exchange energies, they interconnect. Everything in this world, whether living or lifeless, speaks, even through its silence.

Applying this to most of the short fictions of *Objessions* felt like the right path to follow, as objects do not have minds to imply something hidden behind their appearance, they speak to us *through* their gesture, silence and physiognomy when we perceive them. This can lead the writer towards narrative descriptions which focus on such a gestural physiognomy of objects and which show rather than tell an object's possible feelings, by giving emphasis to their silent but eloquent external appearance. Such a focus can also define the idiosyncrasy a writer chooses for an object protagonist, if we bring to mind that angry teapot again, since the shape or material of an object, in a specific moment or context, can also affect the way it could gesture towards the world. A jug's physiognomy, for instance, can present to the writer a silent but screaming mouth due to its opening, while an abandoned washing machine's expressive appearance, due to its empty hole in the middle, can allude to human realities like infertility. In fiction, therefore, and if we choose to also detach objects from a perceiving body, objects can be offered their own point of view and they can not only look back at us but even choose to look at us first: 'It is the mountain itself which from out there makes itself seen by the painter' (Merleau-Ponty, 'Eye and Mind,' *The Primacy of Perception* 166).

Flesh and reversibility

Analysing this interconnection of subjects and objects expressed through Merleau-Ponty's embodied phenomenology further, in his later work *The Visible and the Invisible*²⁴ (original publication in 1964), Merleau-Ponty calls *flesh* the 'element' - this is the word he chooses for it - the active gap, which connects subject and object, as well as other, more specific, dualities, e.g. the perceiver and the perceived, the touching and the touched, the inside and the outside. By using examples like the

²⁴In this study I am using the 1968 edition, in English.

inner and outer side of the finger of a glove, he calls *reversibility* the notion that self, other and the world are internally related through this active gap (*flesh*), that subjects and objects are ontologically interdependent, preserving at the same time their distinct qualities, so neither completely fused nor completely separated. The glove encloses both an inner and outer identity just like one of our hands can touch and be touched back by the other hand, one more example Merleau-Ponty uses to stress the shifting of roles in the way the body inhabits and is inhabited by the world.

Applying such a relatively broad idea to a creative writing context can project visible and invisible connections between subject and object characters, reversible links between a protagonist's subject and object qualities, as well as a fluidity between skin and material, motion and motionlessness (for example, through narrative depictions of active gaps like *flesh*). The active in-betweenness which arises from the above concepts can also, once more, be reflected in form/language, even in the way an object or subject-object can literally or visually speak on the page. In the short fiction 'Magdalena,' for instance, the woman protagonist constantly exchanges subject and object qualities with the coats and jackets she keeps in the museum's cloakroom, even through language (she speaks by stitching letters, syllables and words together, like fabric threads work): 'Sir, your-hand-bag-in-the-lo-cker, please' (152). Magdalena focuses on the objects in the cloakroom and perceives them as existences which look and gesture back at her. Eventually, when the bombing of the museum occurs, subject (Magdalena) and cloakroom objects reversibly emerge in each other. Magdalena temporarily becomes those coats and jackets, and those coats and jackets also become her, subject and objects change roles through a mixture of torn fabric and torn flesh in the tragic epilogue of the text: 'When the paramedics entered the cloakroom, they could not distinguish flesh from fabric. They initially thought piles of dead bodies were lying in there' (154).

Objects and contemporary literary criticism

Undeniably, the critical literature on objects/things and object/thing theory is various, but what seems to have turned the attention of even more contemporary critics to the use of objects in literature has been Bill Brown's 'thing theory' (2001), presented in the edited collection of essays *Things* (2004), as well as in the book *A Sense of Things* (2003). By often using examples from literature, Brown seems to encourage critics to revisit the literature of the past through an object-centred lens. As Brown himself admits, *A Sense of Things* is 'a book about the indeterminate ontology where things seem slightly human and humans seem slightly thing-like' (13). Such a human-like and thing-like quality is also investigated in *Objessions*. However, as already implied, an object character's identity is not exclusively limited to anthropomorphic characteristics but to

characteristics deriving from a possible 'pragmamorphism' of the object itself, something which will be analyzed further in both chapters of this critical commentary. One of several studies which have been influenced by Brown's 'thing theory' is James Paz's *Talking with Things: Nonhuman Voices in Anglo-Saxon Literature and Material Culture* (2017), a study which moves towards an autonomy of objects in early literature and culture. Paz revisits old English texts, riddles and gospel books through new materialistic approaches (at the same time seeing objects as active and talkative, something which is also being investigated in this study). Another example is Babette Tischleder's *The Literary Life of Things* (2014), a study on object-literature relations and American fiction, which follows a more psychoanalytical approach, without distinguishing *objects* from *things*.²⁵ Tischleder's study, by exploring 'the material imaginary' (18), also concentrates on the way an object focus interacts with narrative and rhythm, 'the texts' own narrative and aesthetic expressions' (18), something which is also further explored in *Objessions* (in the short fiction 'Thelma and Louise,' for instance, two identical chairs speak in rhyme in order to emphasize their pairing). Another object-centred book which also focuses on literature (poetry and novels) is Barbara Johnson's *Persons and Things* (2010). What makes this work partly relevant to this study are its comments on literary techniques in relation to the animation of objects, as well as the wide analysis of 'the thingliness of persons,' something which opens the way towards objectified human characters as depicted in several short fictions in *Objessions*. For example, in 'Philip,' the human protagonist gradually transforms into an object, while also requesting the transformation of the personal pronoun 'he' into an 'it' by the end of the narrative.

Although the exploration of literature outside the scope of twentieth to twenty-first century short fiction is not a main aim in this study, object-centred literary criticism on eighteenth-century British literature can be informative, especially because of the emergence of the innovative *it-narratives* at the time. This genre - although a genre and therefore, restrictive by nature - expanded the way towards the depiction of object protagonists, even if it still kept objects dependent on their consumers, by treating them as commodities rather than as extensively independent characters. These object protagonists were mostly confined in the hands of their carriers, changing hands, moving from one place to another. Christopher Flint's study 'Speaking Objects: the Circulation of Stories in Eighteenth-century Prose Fiction' (1998), offers useful insights regarding objects and an object's impact on form/language - a significant branch of *Objessions* as well, since objects are not only being investigated as themes but also as agents which transform the text. An example Flint refers to is the banknote in *The Adventures of a Bank-Note* (Thomas Bridges, 1770-1) and the

²⁵Through his 'thing theory,' Brown, expanding from Heidegger, claims that *objects* become *things* when they break, when the human-object relationship is destabilized.

pioneering way this first-person object narrator changed narrative every time it changed hands. Expanding the idea of object circulation and change of narrative, reflected through the banknote example above, a good example to refer to, here, would be the short fiction 'The Delirium of a Domestic Appliance.' In this short fiction, the toaster exists in two ways: as a robot-like appliance serving its owner and as a first-person narrator which has its own complicated thoughts and feelings. This double inside-out identity of the toaster protagonist has also been reflected in language, since the object's long interior monologue is ironically interrupted by the endless circulation of its routine function (which appears in italics): 'Carbonised bread is not as easy as it seems, time is crucial for the perfect texture and colour. *Burnt toasty!* See? I got carried away. It should not happen again. I'm not an amateur. We are not amateurs, dear fellow toasters' (43).

Objects and short fiction

There is a significant number of short fictions which present object-related themes, not only in twentieth to twenty-first century American, British and international literature but also in previous eras, as the *it-narratives* of the eighteenth century have already shown, often depending on the way objects were being used at the time. What seems to be more limited are short fiction collections which exclusively focus on object themes and object/objectified characters or short fictions which extensively experiment with form/language in relation to objects and objectifications, daring to also devise a form of object speech for such characters, for example, objects directly speaking in the text. I have chosen to investigate works mostly located in the mid-late twentieth to early twenty-first centuries, which connect to the philosophical concepts this study is exploring and which have enriched, to my mind, the way in which we can use and reflect objects and objectifications in literature and more specifically, in contemporary short fiction. Consequently, some of the American short fictions which have been investigated while writing the short fiction collection of this study are: Aimee Bender's 'Quiet Please' from the collection *The Girl in the Flammable Skirt* (first edition in 1998), where a silent couch becomes the human character's extension towards new visions and an interesting reflection of how objects can be used out of their conventional functions; Amelia Gray's 'The Suitcase' from the collection *Museum of the Weird* (first edition in 2010), where Alex decides to be contained by a suitcase; George Saunders' 'Sticks' from the collection *Tenth of December* (first edition in 2013), where a father develops a strange relationship with a pole, and Lydia Davis' 'The Language of Things in the House' from the collection *Can't and Won't* (first edition in 2013), where the form and material of objects (whether hard or soft) also affects and transforms language. American and British short fiction collections/anthologies have also been taken into consideration:

Aimee Bender's *Willful Creatures* (first edition in 2005), which embodies engaging subject-object realities where a boy has key fingers and a woman's children are potatoes; the anthology *Significant Objects* (first edition in 2012), inspired by thrift store 'insignificant' objects later sold on eBay (a useful point of reference even if only some of its 100 very short texts animate objects in unusual ways); the anthology *The Best British Short Stories 2014* (first edition in 2014), which includes the awarded 'It' by Adam Wilmington, and the anthology *Flash Fiction Forward* (first edition in 2016), where Eva Marie Ginsburg's 'The Kettle' reflects the mocking of a kettle by a group of pots. Moreover, the relatively recent short story anthology *As Told by Things* (first edition in 2018), which includes short stories and flash fiction from several writers, seems to have a clear aim to present stories from the perspective of objects. However, sometimes it feels like several of these objects are simply talking like human characters, without reflecting the complexity of their thingness onto their language, something which this study aims to investigate further.

Furthermore, short fiction by non-English writers has also been essential, especially for the use of interesting techniques to depict objects and objectifications: Italo Calvino's novella-in-flash *Mr Palomar* (original publication in 1983, first translated edition in 1986) and his narrative attention to the details of things (by zooming into a wave, for example); Edgar Keret's surreal way of objectifying human characters, for example in 'Crazy Glue' in the anthology *Flash Fiction Forward* again, where a woman glues furniture to the floor and herself to the ceiling, as well as object-related stories by Jose Saramago ('The Thing' and 'The Chair' in the collection *The Life of Things*, original publication in 1978, first translated edition in 2012), which also focus on an exchange between subject and object identities, by often integrating cinematic techniques in the narration in order to accomplish this. In addition, the work of Francis Ponge, having influenced writers like Calvino and Davis, is relevant to this study as well, for its deep philosophical focus on objects, on the one hand, but most importantly, for the invention of an object-inspired language. Ponge's prose poems in *Mute Objects of Expression* (original publication in 1952, first translated edition in 2008) and *The Voice of Things* (original publication in 1942, first translated edition in 1972) can be also connected to the form of short fiction in relation to objects. In these prose poems, not only are objects animated but also, reversibly, living creatures (like wasps) are paralleled with objects and are thoroughly described as such, just like human characters are paralleled with objects in several short fictions of this study. In 'Pillars,' for instance, a man and a woman, acting out strange sexual phantasies in order to save their marriage, are presented as lifeless objects in order to also express the lifelessness of their relationship:

'Stop spooning me'
'But you're a carpet!'

'You're right, I'm a carpet'
'Are you my *fucking* carpet?'
'Yes, yes, I'm your *fucking* carpet' (146)

Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and creative writing

Although there are studies which have connected Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty to language,²⁶ creativity and creative writing, there are no studies which have extensively connected objects and objectifications to creative writing *and* aspects of the philosophy of Heidegger and/or Merleau-Ponty. Investigating studies which have connected Heidegger to creative writing revealed that an emphasis on his analysis of language and, more specifically, the analysis of a poet's language, has become a common point of investigation. For example, in the article 'Heidegger, Creativity and what Poets do: On Living in a Silent Shack for Three Months and not Going Mad' (2010), which is a reflection on a three-month writing retreat in connection to Heidegger's essay 'The Origin of the Work of Art,' Dan Disney discusses how Heidegger's theory on creativity can benefit creative writers, through an exploration of Heidegger's emphasis on poetry. Merleau-Ponty, on the other hand, has often been linked to an embodied approach to writing. For example, in the study "'I Know down to my Ribs" A Narrative Research Study on the Embodied Adult Learning of Creative Writers' (2015) - a qualitative study by Jennifer A. Tobin and Elizabeth J. Tisdell - narrative analysis is used to investigate the importance of embodied learning in the writing process, whereas in 'The Story in my Foot: Writing and the Body' (2010), Nigel Krauth reflects on the idea that stories inhabit our whole bodies (by also reviewing classroom exercises which use cellular memory). Although I am not directly connecting this study to such approaches, it seems important to acknowledge some of the ways in which the philosophy of these two thinkers has been linked to creative writing and how this study differentiates itself from - and adds its own contribution to - these approaches.

Concluding this introduction, the two main chapters of this critical commentary will be the following:

I. Objects as body/language extensions and tools *to be used differently*

In the first chapter, Heidegger's tool analysis, as well as Merleau-Ponty's cane allegory and his emphasis on gesture, silence and physiognomy, are applied to a creative writing methodology (and especially, to character construction) in order to project a variety of ways of animating objects in

²⁶Both Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty talked about language in relation to creativity throughout their philosophy. Heidegger, for example, explored a poet's language, and Merleau-Ponty the importance of an allusive and metaphorical language. I have not focused on the above aspects of their philosophy, since I am not exploring, at least not in this study, the connection of objects/objectifications to a poetic or metaphorical language. I have focused, however, on Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on silence, gesture and physiognomy as a form of language.

short fiction. Such techniques are guided by, but also often detached from, an object's conventional tool-like identity and aim to make object characters more independent and powerful, by showing them occasionally reacting against their use/users and by *extending to* form/language as well. This object empowerment occurs through: the use of gesture, silence and physiognomy in narrative descriptions; the technique of inversion (making objects more active than human characters in the text); visual writing; object interior monologues, word games and neologisms, as well as through the application of the popular creative writing technique 'Show don't Tell' to objects. Finally, this chapter revisits the common object animation approach of anthropomorphism and proposes an additional emphasis, whenever possible, on the expressive 'pragmamorphism' of the object itself.

II. Writing *in-between* subjects and objects

In the second chapter, the study moves from objects to hybrid subject-object identities and through Merleau-Ponty's *flesh* and *reversibility* terminology proposes a creative writing methodology which makes subjects and objects reversibly interconnected. The depiction of such an interconnection occurs through the use of in-betweenness and hybridity²⁷ in both content and form/language. This combination of subject and object qualities is reflected through a 'pragmamorphism' now applied to human characters (by focusing on their objectification, materiality and motionlessness), through the use of cinematic techniques to offer movement and flexibility to objects, through visual writing again and through the choice of setting to reflect the active gap between subjects and objects. At the same time, by applying Heidegger's jug allegory to a creative writing context, this chapter enhances the object independency explored in the first chapter and also investigates the interconnection of the duality container/content, not only within objects but within objectified human characters as well.

²⁷The term 'hybridity' is used in this study stripped of forms of hybridity expressed through postcolonialism, posthumanism, gender studies and so on. It mostly becomes a reflection of a subject-object in-betweenness, deriving from selected concepts of Heidegger's and Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. Moreover, it extends towards a hybridity in form/language, through the fusion of verbal and non-verbal elements, rather than the construction of hybrid human characters within sociopolitical and cultural contexts.

CHAPTER I - Objects as body/language extensions and tools *to be used differently*

I. Heidegger's tool analysis - object characters kicking back

As already highlighted, through his tool analysis in *Being and Time*, Heidegger presents objects as tools to be used towards a specific human activity, as equipment and mostly as mediums which are invisible to us during this process of usability and service. Heidegger considers objects as *ready-to-hand* towards a use-related activity and *unready-to-hand* when they seem to resist, when they do not work properly. And when they are *present-at-hand*, removed from their practicality, they seem to withdraw, forcing us to gawk at them, and to somehow try and make sense of them. An object empowerment possibility which Harman, by revisiting Heidegger's tool analysis, calls a 'withdrawn depth of being' ('Technology, Objects and Things in Heidegger,' 22). Moreover, one aspect of Heidegger's tool analysis in *Being and Time* - his concept of disclosedness - reveals that all objects/tools are part of a context in which they belong, reflecting an 'openness towards the world as a context or setting in which we can meaningfully deploy certain skills' (Kaufer and Chemero 62). It seems that we do not consciously notice an object unless something happens and this object/tool is no longer available for its conventional use, unless it kicks back against its use and user by malfunctioning or breaking, thus inviting us to stare at it. This Heideggerian possibility towards a mysterious different use is stressed by Jonathan Hale in the talk 'Coping without Noticing?: Buildings as Tool-Beings' (15 May 2013): 'So, while the hammer I am wielding right now might not do the immediate job particularly well, once I have it in hand, so to speak, a whole series of other uses begin to become available.' Through his tool analysis, therefore, Heidegger, by offering to objects certain limitations, ironically offers them a tendency towards new identities as well. This is something which this study also wishes to accomplish, aiming at an object's fictional growth, since, as Meg Pograss writes in the flash fiction 'The Difference,' there are 'so many ways to be a tool' (*The Dog Looks Happy Upside Down* 55).

In several short fictions of *Objessions*, the connection of an object with its conventional use becomes deliberately destabilized in order to reflect and enhance the rebellious object identity implied through Heidegger's tool analysis. Such a creative writing approach can offer more autonomy to these object characters, as well as a will of their own, since it challenges the writer to investigate objects out of the safety zone of their use-related contexts. This happens in the short fiction 'Tiny

Tom' (first publication in the Cypriot dialect, *chronos.fairead.net*, spring 2020), where a cigarette demands the opposite of what it was manufactured to perform. The cigarette character - which claims to be the voice of a microscopic man trapped in there due to a failed experiment - actually demands *not* to be smoked: 'That night my cigarette talked really fast. I promised to smoke with breaks in order to slow down the course of the flame, I had to put it out every time and light it again' (59). The implications of such a creative writing approach are more complex than simply the depiction of a rebellious object, though; the impact ought to be not only thematic but also linguistic. This unconventional wish of the cigarette not to be smoked pushes it to speak even faster in the text, in order not to be extinguished by the flame. The writer is invited to further experiment with language in order to be able to reflect this imminent threat and the cigarette's fear of extinction. By carefully observing a cigarette in real life, I realised that its burning quality would be the key to its way of speaking in a short fiction. So, the cigarette in 'Tiny Tom' speaks only when it is lit (and therefore, used) and speaks even faster - without spaces between words, and with verbal slips (by stating 'Pater' instead of 'Peter,' for instance) - as the flame reaches its filter: "'Paterlikesyou," Tiny Tom said, he was now talking very fast' (61). Although this cigarette is still a cigarette, even if a human voice comes out of it, it also acts as an inner judgemental voice through its kicking back identity: [Human character:] 'I'm not talking to you again' / [Cigarette:] 'Afraidtofaceyourinnersilf?' (61).

In other short fictions of *Objessions*, like 'The Optical Illusion of a Handkerchief,' the opposite also happens: the object does not escape its conventional use but preserves it in order to expand it further. This allows the writer to discover an object's power *within* the object itself (and its common function) rather than through externally applied qualities. The handkerchief in this short fiction is still a handkerchief manufactured to clean and wipe, in a Kleenex box, in a funeral office. It preserves its tool-to-be-used identity as Heidegger suggests, and remains attached to a user in order to exist as a useful object. Re-editing this short fiction, however, functioned as a process of a more detailed observation, since, as Bachelard states in *The Poetics of Space*: 'Attention by itself is an enlarging glass' (176). Such an attention led to a magnification of the handkerchief's conventional characteristics of use, for example, through an emphasis on its pointy, hand-like shape springing out of the Kleenex box (thus inviting the human character to use it), as well as through the symbolic implications of its white colour. Consequently, the handkerchief - constantly attached to its conventional identity throughout the text - came to symbolize a metaphysical sense of whiteness; something like a higher nature. In the end, the handkerchief - Messiah-like - sacrifices itself to console the human character who has been suppressing his tears after his father's death. Yet, despite the importance of this final *deus ex machina* act, the handkerchief still remains what it was meant

(and made) to be, a piece of paper we wipe things with and then throw into the bin; an object which has served its purpose: 'The funeral office floods. The white hand sacrifices itself. A compressed sticky mass is all that's left' (56).

In such an approach in relation to an object's use - choosing either to preserve, expand or destabilize its conventional function - a direct impact on language can be essential. This happens in the short fiction 'The Delirium of a Domestic Appliance,' where the toaster protagonist, preserving its toasting identity throughout its long interior monologue, speaks through a language of repetition, as already mentioned, but also through a philosophical manifesto about patience. Patience is inevitably connected to a toaster aiming for the perfect toast so this constant search for patience shapes the toaster protagonist's thought: 'It's all a matter of patience, dear fellow toasters. People no longer have that. Patience is a bread crumb, ready to burn and turn into coal. Soon nothing will be left' (43). Further editing this short fiction, and deeply noticing a toaster's way of use, led me to also explore possible sexual implications related to its function, something which added a more humorous touch to the toaster's monologue. The object's conventional function of constant bread insertion and exit, which also brings sexuality to mind, became a narrative mechanism of irony towards social stereotypes: 'We do not want to be called a whore or a bitch ever again. We know our nature facilitates this kind of labelling, having things in and out of us all the time, listening to things like "I'm going to stick my bread stick in your toaster and turn up the heat"' (43). A visual interaction (visual writing²⁸) between the object-narrator and the reader was also applied to this short fiction - as another technique to animate objects further - through the integration of vintage toaster advertisements in the toaster's monologue. This was used in order to ironically reflect certain forms of stereotype in relation to the object's function in the past (for example, the stereotype of the good wife):

²⁸Visual writing in literature more commonly appears in poetry (e.g. visual or concrete poetry). It combines words with shapes, spaces, typography, images, photographs, and other non-verbal elements, which enhance the text's general meaning (these elements do not simply accompany the text but become organically connected to it). A good example of visual writing used in prose is Jonathan Safran Foer's novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), as well as his experimental book *Tree of Codes* (2010). The latter, using the technique of die-cutting, creates a new story out of Bruno Schulz's short story collection *The Street of Crocodiles* (1934). A useful source regarding visual writing is also Alan Prohm's study 'Resources for a Poetics of Visual Poetry' in *Orientations: Space/Time/Image/Word* (2005).

Beautiful

and makes beautiful toast!

On the gift table they'll praise
this Proctor for its beauty...
on the dining table
she'll praise it for its skill...
its outstanding ability to make
toast exactly to suit your taste...
a feat made possible by
its wonder-working
Proctor Color Guard.
The swish of a cloth keeps it
shining bright...
and its sliding crumb tray
works so easily, like a drawer.
Fair trade price, \$22.00
Federal excise tax included.



To make your toaster gift breath-taking, Proctor Dealers are offering a beautiful tray set, worth \$9.95...together with the \$22.00 Deluxe Proctor Toaster, both only \$25.95... with the \$15.95 Proctor Toaster, both only \$19.95.

PROCTOR ELECTRIC COMPANY, PHILADELPHIA 40, PENNSYLVANIA

Fig. 1²⁹ Vintage toaster advertisement: *Beautiful and Makes Beautiful Toast!* (1949)

(Obsessions 45)

²⁹Retrieved from: <http://blog.modernmechanix.com/beautiful-and-makes-beautiful-toast> & <https://www.metv.com/stories/these-11-vintage-toaster-ads-are-surprisingly-fascinating>.

Therefore, applying aspects of Heidegger's tool analysis to a creative writing context like *Objessions* functioned in two ways: a) preserving an object's conventional identity and magnifying it, stretching it as far as possible; b) separating an object from its conventional identity and experimenting with new ways of rebellious existence as well, thus turning the object into a hybrid, a character which enwraps both its conventional identity and an alternative, often mysterious, version of itself (both ways also in relation to possible linguistic experimentations). The latter, an object character's use in both conventional and unconventional ways, is strongly evident in the short fiction 'Red, Blue, Green and Other Clothespins' (first publication in the Cypriot dialect, *oanagnostis.gr*, summer 2018),³⁰ where, like in the handkerchief short fiction, the clothespins in focus preserve and magnify their identity as objects to hang clothes with, as tools to be used towards a specific activity: the drying of clothes. This routine function of the clothespins is also presented visually in the text, through the image of syllables and letters (a deconstruction of the word 'clothespins') hanging on the page like windblown clothes on a clothesline:

Clo Clo Clo? Sss Pin Clo Sss Pin? Sss
Clo
Clo
Pin Clo
Pin Clo
Pin The!

(68)

In this short fiction, however, by offering the clothespins their own speech in the text, and through the use of dialogue with multiple speakers, I also aimed to reflect not only the possible feelings *within* themselves, and *within* their common use, but also their feelings towards each other and to the hanging clothes, thus reflecting their wish to become something else. This way, I turned them into more distinguishable individual characters, rather than simply part of equipment, and for this reason I experimented with their different colours and the way these colours could symbolically affect their thinking and way of speech (for example, the black clothespin became the black sheep of the clothesline): 'Fuckin' ell it's just a bra!' / 'Shh...shh...Black!' (69). These fictional clothespins, even if they preserve their drying function by comically embracing it through their rhythmical daily conversations: 'lavender tea, anyone?' (69), also kick back against their robotic open-close identity by wishing to become something more fluid, more independent. This wish is mirrored in the last paragraph of the text through the use of a language which encloses both the clothespins' conventional routine and their dream towards a new existence:

³⁰*Objessions* includes a revised version of the original publication.

[they are] dreaming that they have become leaves, the leaves of that Fig tree, that they are no longer clothespins, grumpy and plain, that they come from exotic Pin Trees, that they occasionally live like birds, birds on strings, colourful, free, parrot-like, . . . that they are not stuck on clothes and clotheslines, that they are not squeezed in baskets, that they do not get burnt by Sun every day . . . (70-71)

The kicking back identity of objects against their users, implied through Heidegger's tool analysis and further extended by Harman, is even more evident in the short fiction 'Writer's Block,' not only thematically but, once again, linguistically as well. The object protagonist here, the keyboard, remains the medium through which the human protagonist, the writer, conventionally uses his laptop and writes but, at the same time, becomes an active voice of judgement towards a writer who seems to ignore the keyboard's presence. The reason the keyboard kicks back against its user is its wish to be noticed and not to be treated as an invisible tool. The keyboard's power as a literary protagonist becomes even more emphasized through its ability to feel the intentions of the human character, rather than simply his actions; its ability to not only feel a literal touch but also the intention of a touch: **'I know your feelings bbbetter than anyone, definitely better than the screen. I feel your iiiintention, I see possibility in your shaky fingers, even if some words are never written'** (13). The keyboard, unable to speak as humans do, and ignored by its user, reveals its kicking back identity through typo mistakes, different fonts and repeated letters, as well as through an indirect reaction against fixed expressions of human language, for example, when it states **'maybe this will catch your finger'** (11) rather than 'maybe this will catch your eye.' By asking for a finger, though, the keyboard does not solely demand a conventional use but also something deeper, an expression of tenderness: 'that keyboard craved for a touch that would stay rather than a touch that would flee' (11). When the keyboard begs **'Write it through me'** (11), it echoes Heidegger's idea of objects as invisible mediums of use but, at the same time, reveals the object's strong wish to be touched, to be looked at, to be felt. A wish which is never fulfilled, as the symbolic 'death' of the object in the end - its destruction by its own user - also mirrors the death of inspiration. For this reason, I decided to use 'Writer's Block' as the introduction of the collection, since this research journey started because of my own rebellion against a writer's block I was experiencing at the time. The keyboard protagonist's desperate effort to type the word 'help' at the end of the text, despite its darkness, also implies something positive and empowering. It becomes laughter and therefore, a moment of possible regeneration for both the writer and the keyboard; a rebellion against writer's block rather than simply its mirroring: 'The keyboard knew something was wrong. It tried to type the word "help" many times. Its shocked buttons simply exhaled **he he**. It is believed, until this very day, that the mutilated to death keyboard was a brave one. It died laughing' (16).

Consequently, devising an object language which connects to an object's structure and function - rather than simply mirroring human language - becomes a creative writing approach which can animate object characters in more innovative (and most probably, more credible) ways. This is also something which has not been extensively investigated in object-centred short fiction to date, as most literary works and creative writing techniques choose to animate objects by modelling them to humanity; a safer path, most probably, since a reader more easily feels attached to a human or a human-like character than to a blow dryer's 200 page stream of consciousness, for instance. 'Accept the challenge,' Francis Ponge's prose poem 'The Carnation' suggests: the challenge 'things offer to language' through their 'unique qualities' and their capacity to 'defy language' (*Mute Objects of Expression* 37). Lydia Davis also implies this need to approach lifeless characters through an object language which derives from the objects themselves, from their form, sound and material: 'the different language sounds are created by these objects in the following way: hard consonants are created by hard objects striking hard surfaces. Vowels are created with hollow spaces, such as the inside of the butter tub' ('The Language of Things in the House,' *Can't and Won't* 222). This is not far from what Aimee Bender does in 'Dearth,' where the use of potatoes also determines a form of language for them: 'They only slept when they slept, making burbling noises like the sound of water warming up' (*Willful Creatures* 162). These potatoes do not snore like human beings but they make 'burbling noises,' thus becoming connected to the way they exist in everyday life, the way they are cooked.

Such a transformative interaction between an object character and language/speech is evident in several other object depictions of *Objessions* as well. In 'I Want My Head Back' (Mikrokyklos Publishing, 2016),³¹ a mutilated doll protagonist, half-sunk in a rubbish dump, rebels against its/her own Barbie context: 'What I just said sounded deep. I know, totally out of my character' (85). A superficial Barbie language (functioning as the doll's alter ego) also ironically interrupts the doll's dark and deeply philosophical confession (a confession which is divided into forty days, in order to also reflect the object's fragmentation). This interruption by the doll's alter ego occurs through the use of frivolous Barbie-like slogans, presented to the reader through girly fonts: *Glitters!* (80), *Ken, is THAT you?* (82). In 'I Want My Head Back,' visual writing, this time through the use of specific typography/font, became one more technique to emphasize the hybrid identity of the object protagonist and the contrast between a regular Barbie doll (an 'it') and a Barbie with depth (a 'she'). However, it was also used to reflect the tragedy of the doll protagonist's loneliness and uselessness.

³¹*Objessions* includes a slightly revised version of the original publication.

This mutilated Barbie is neither a tool to be used, nor a tool *to be used differently*, it/she slowly disappears through its/her lack of use: 'The Bulldoze distances itself. My last leg is now gone. Without arms, without legs, without a head, what's left is only the trunk' (86). Yet, the linguistic game with the word 'trunk' at the end of the text also offers to this object protagonist a form of hope, a slight possibility of a new use: 'Luckily, the trunk of a body and the trunk of a tree is the same word. And when the trunk's left, a tree's still a tree' (86).

Expanding the possibilities of an object character's language/speech further, in one more short fiction of the collection, 'Christopher and Adelaide - Size 48,' a pair of shoes starts to conquer the human character's life, by becoming his phobia and by conquering spelling and word sound as well, for example, though the humorous addition of the 'sh' sound to several words (deriving from the 'sh' sound of the word 'shoes') in order to create an onomatopoeic effect and imitate the sound shoes make: 'Ever seen a single shoe shurvive? It's a shoengle out there' (32). These shoes have power, they talk and transform words, and are perfectly synchronized: 'SHOE 1 / SHOE 2: Jump, for shhhoe's shhhake!' (31). The reader feels, through the technique of inversion, that the protagonist is not the human character anymore. The stichomythia used between SHOE 1 and SHOE 2 also animates the pair of shoes further, which talks and acts like a routine-torn human couple in order to mirror contemporary relationships. This is something I added later on, as I wished to flesh out the idiosyncrasies of these shoes further: 'SHOE 2: Too late now to change partner. SHOE 1: Quit the irony, will you? SHOE 2: What's irony? SHOE 1: Not shoer' (32). By kicking back against their conventional use (like Howie's laces kick back by breaking in *The Mezzanine*³²), against common human language/spelling, and occasionally against each other, these shoes eventually decide to save the human character from drowning by lifting him up with their laces. In other words, they not only use speech and transform language in the text, but they also speak through their actions. Such an 'acting' object quality, through a different use of their laces, enhances the autonomy of these object protagonists: 'SHOE 2: Never saved a man before . . . SHOE 1: They say shoes shave people all the time. Stay by my shide, swim upwards, there you go, now harder, harder! *One of the laces slightly cracks but continues to pull*' (33).

³²In Nicholson Baker's short novel *The Mezzanine* (1988), the breaking of one of the protagonist's laces just before lunch break (following the other lace's breaking, the day before) becomes the catalyst of the narration, the moment Howie, a young office worker, begins an extensive stream of consciousness filled with detailed descriptions of everyday objects, as well as memories and philosophical thoughts related to them.

In Lucy Kimbell's 'The Object Strikes Back: an Interview with Graham Harman,' Harman states: 'My biggest objection to Heidegger is that he does not let objects do this [kick back] to each other as well. It's always a question for him of how objects kick back against humans'³³ (5). For this reason, investigating the rebellious nature of objects against each other, as it happens in short fictions like 'Christopher and Adelaide - Size 48,' appeared to be an interesting path to explore further, even if this was not one of this study's main aims. Having objects react not only against their use/users (and human language) but also against each other implies the existence of a wider object world out there, a world with its own rules and codes, where objects can be free from humanity and, why not, where objects can also act as extinguishing forces of humanity. This dark agency of objects is evident in a longer work included in *Objessions*: 'Stuck In-between.' As its title indicates, 'Stuck In-between' is located in the middle of the collection because it roughly divides the collection into its two main categories. In it, an inflatable sex doll humorously acts as the third person between the now dead Charlie (a mummified bat in after life) and Lina (a lamp in after life). This sex doll (turning into a speaking object after Charlie's death) constantly swells and swells until it/she eventually destroys both human characters:

'I can't breathe!
 'Look at those breasts, help! Her ass is crushing the window!
 'Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhh'
 'Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhh'
 ...
 'Boobie's c...c...choking me!' (125)

Such an extinguishing force of objects towards human characters, even towards each other, is also reflected in the dystopian short fiction of the collection 'Electra Complex.' By becoming a reflection of contemporary terrorism, a reading lamp plans to kill massively and ruthlessly, both subjects and objects: 'Zze [the lamp] just needed to gather some more voltage. Zzer switch would do all the work. Zzer followers would cheer. All cables would transmit zzer act of sacrifice' (73). While editing this short fiction, the pronoun 'she' was replaced by 'zze' (a pronoun³⁴ which brings to mind the gender neutral pronoun 'ze' but which becomes a new form of pronoun as well, a mixture of a female and object identity: 'zzer' and 'zzerself' sounding like 'her' and 'herself,' but also enclosing the 'zz' sound

³³Cited, here, from the interview's pdf version:

http://www.lucykimbell.com/stuff/Kimbell_Harmaninterview_final_public_2013.pdf.

Published version: Kimbell, Lucy. 'The Object Strikes Back: An Interview with Graham Harman.' *Design and Culture*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2013, pp. 103-117.

³⁴The dilemma regarding which grammatical gender to apply to each object/objectified character was not a conscious exploration in this study but something which drew my attention during the editing of the collection. Although not a main aim in this study, it was interesting to try to find ways not to be restricted to pronouns like 'he,' 'she,' 'it' in order to present such characters. An interesting study which could further inspire an experimentation with gender and pronouns in relation to object/objectified characters is Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (2006), which focuses on aspects of Heidegger's and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and objects, through the lens of queer studies.

of electricity). The lamp-terrorist in 'Electra Complex' not only rebels against the world (and against commonly used pronouns) but also against zzer own mother, something which I used in the text as an allusion to the Neo-Freudian psychological syndrome Electra complex, in order to enhance the object's kicking back identity further: 'Zze almost got caught the day zze burnt zzer mother to death. . . You need to control that passion of yours, . . . a voice coming from the ceiling whispered, zze took it for a sign, a message from zzer beloved father. Father was beautiful' (72). This dark, rebellious identity of the reading lamp also becomes mirrored in the rebellious language spoken by the object, a repetitive visual mixture of light and darkness, echoing the lamp's on-off function:

The day will come
The day will come
Brothers and sisters
Brothers and sisters
Black Shade calling
Black Shade calling
(72)

II. Merleau-Ponty's cane allegory - object characters as extensions

Exploring Merleau-Ponty along with Heidegger also led me to more body-focused paths in relation to an object's use and rebellious identity. Merleau-Ponty's further emphasis on a powerful body made me start to focus on the 'bodies' of both human characters and objects, in relation to each other, and to choose whether to attach or detach objects to/from human bodies in my creative work. It also guided me to continue to explore ways of *extending* and transforming language so as to mirror an object's form and function. Merleau-Ponty suggests, through embodied phenomenology and his analysis of a first-person, self-conscious body, that objects also become bodily prosthetics; sensory and perceiving extensions of the body towards human activities and experiences. To describe this, Merleau-Ponty uses the example of the blind man's stick in *Phenomenology of Perception*: 'The blind man's stick has ceased to be an object for him, and is no longer perceived for itself, its point has become an area of sensitivity, extending the scope and active radius of touch, providing a parallel to sight' (143). Merleau-Ponty's cane allegory, therefore, is one more point of focus in this study, since it directly connects the human body to the object, by implying a subject-object hybridity with sensory extensions (even if, just like through Heidegger's thinking, an object is still being treated as an invisible medium while being used). Returning to the short fiction 'Tiny Tom,' here, the cigarette character remains strongly attached to the body of its user, even if it also rebels against its conventional use. The cigarette is narratively presented as an extension of the human character's hand and fingers, something which I wished to preserve in the text because it offered me the possibility, as a creative writer, to explore several *extending* qualities of the investigated object:

‘Holding it between my fingers I felt as if I had a sixth horizontal finger, something like a sixth sense or an extra penis. Its smoke spread to the sky like a Rodeo rope’ (59). However, in contrast to the invisibility of the blind man’s stick, this cigarette, by talking to the human character, surprises and forces him to stare, to gawk at it, and then to start paying more attention.

The short fiction ‘Literally Nosy’ is another example which explores the concept of Merleau-Ponty’s cane allegory, but this time through treating a part of the body (a nose) as an *extending* object. The human protagonist, through a confessional narrative voice, reveals the repulsion she feels towards her huge nose, by treating that nose as an object: ‘That huge nose of mine is not real, it’s not alive, it’s not me, it’s a thing, I want to get rid of that thing, people get rid of their things all the time’ (63). In contrast to Merleau-Ponty’s cane allegory, though, the way this specific nose (as a sensory object) expands from the body towards the world is not a positive one. In this short fiction, I used the nose as an example of detachment rather than attachment to the human body, in order to create a more tragi-comic effect. Eventually, the nose, separated from the body when the human character turns eighteen (nose job implication), is narratively offered a form of life by starting to speak in the text, while also reminding us of the awarded 2019 animation *I Lost My Body [J’ai perdu mon corps]*, where Naoufel’s mutilated hand starts to move throughout Paris to reunite with its body. This transition in ‘Literally Nosy’ is also mirrored through an interactive meta-theatrical touch I added later in the text, where the human character tosses the nose ‘to the next page’ (63) and the reader simultaneously flips the page in order to experience the nose’s course towards a new life (through visual writing again, sentences falling off the top of the page):

‘Where am I?’

‘Hello?’

‘Helloooo?’

‘Anybody home?’

‘Why is she wearing a bandage?’
(64)

This nose eventually *extends to* a new type of context (the context of a hospital waste bin), through an object-object dialogue I added to the text’s ending in order to animate the nose as an independent character further (a stichomythia with a mastectomy-removed breast, which also shows the location of each object, the nose on the right and the breast on the left):

‘Where are they, *sniff*, taking us?’

‘To the medical waste bin’

‘Is it, *sniff*, nice there?’

...

‘There are plenty of noses there’

‘Really? Like me?’

‘A lot smaller’

(64-65)

The word ‘sniff’ was used as one more *extension* of the nose to language, a reflection of the nose’s sniffing function and, simultaneously, an onomatopoeia to also express a crying sound (as if the nose mourns for its detachment from the human character’s face and body). It is worth mentioning, here, that the animation applied to the nose character in this short fiction is an allusion to Nikolay Gogol's short novella ‘The Nose’ (1836), where a nose also becomes an independent character and *extends* to the streets of St. Petersburg, small talking and showing off.

The anthropomorphism³⁵ of lifeless elements is evident in several other short fictions of *Obsessions*, but, as I have already shown, it also combines with the form (‘morphē,’ in Greek) and function of the objects themselves, their own ‘pragmamorphism’ (rather than the appearance and behaviour of human beings exclusively). Completely eliminating anthropomorphism would also be a paradox, since, as Johnson suggests in *Persons and Things*: ‘to eliminate anthropomorphism would in essence be to eliminate language itself: what other species use it?’ (32). Such an anthropomorphism can also connect to Merleau-Ponty’s cane allegory, since it can turn these anthropomorphized object characters into body-like extensions as well. Moreover, Merleau-Ponty’s embodied phenomenology in general, and the way the human body interconnects with the objects of the world, requires the preservation of elements of anthropomorphism in the way objects are described in a text, since objects are still attached to someone who perceives them: ‘We are discovering in every object a certain style of being that makes it a mirror of human modes of behaviour’ (*The World of Perception* 69). In ‘Rod,’ for instance, the actual shape of a fishing rod inspired me to see it as an *extending* body, and, therefore, to start describing it as a huge human tongue which snatches and gobbles down fish. The conventional function of this rod - constantly snatching and killing fish like a murderer - also *extended* to language and imposed a criminal-like tone to the way this now broken

³⁵Anthropomorphism attributes human form and character to non-human entities. Wislawa Szymborska’s poem ‘Conversation with a Stone’ (1962), analyzed in Johnson’s *Persons and Things*, is a poem which presents the paradox between resisting anthropomorphism and being forced to actually use it: ‘When the stone answers, “You’re still anthropomorphizing me,” the stone is right, but by speaking *at all* it stands up against anthropomorphism precisely by using it’ (17).

rod character (called Rod) speaks: 'But how can I say I'm sorry without my tongue? I'm just a monkey mouth. It's payback time, back door parole' (67). Rod's *extending* quality was also mirrored through the use of long sentences and strings of clauses in the object's interior monologue, something which also comes in ironic contrast to the object's actual inability to now *extend to* the fish of the sea. The violent cutting of Rod's tongue by a rock (called Rocky) detaches this object character from use, as well as from the body of a possible user. Rod is doomed to sink and disappear into the boiling sand (called Sandy), no longer *extending* through the hook of its/his body. The cutting of the hook, consequently, also reflects a destabilization of Merleau-Ponty's cane allegory since, by no longer having a hook, Rod becomes a blind man without a stick, unable to *extend to* the world.

III. The couch/sofa as a powerfully silent character

Bender's 'Quiet Please' becomes a useful example of contemporary short fiction to reflect the philosophical concepts presented in this chapter so far (Heidegger's tool analysis and Merleau-Ponty's cane allegory). To start with, the silent couch character Bender presents also escapes from conventional use and domesticity. This becomes the beginning of new object use possibilities, even if the object is not animated as a concrete character with its own speech but mostly as a silent presence in the text which, however, powerfully moves the plot further on. The couch - located in the back room of a public library - keeps its traditional function as an object of relaxation, but also *extends* it. The librarian, in order to seduce one of the unsuspecting library visitors, says that the couch in the back room is used 'for people who get dizzy or sick in the library (which happens surprisingly often)' (*The Girl in the Flammable Skirt*, 58). As the plot progresses, the couch also becomes a place of exaggerated sexuality. Shocked by her father's death, silently and suddenly sneaking into her life in the form of 'a phone call from her weeping mother' (58), the librarian returns to work willing to transform the library's back room and the couch into a sexual hub. This seems to be an exaggerated reaction to her new traumatizing reality, which needs to be repeated in order to be exorcised: 'It is quiet in the rest of the library. . . . She grips a pillow in her fists and he breathes behind her, hot air down her back which is starting to sweat and slip on his stomach' (57).

In the above description Bender says nothing about the couch, its legs, shape, colour or size, thus strengthening the object through its actual invisibility, as if the couch is simply a tool destined for a specific use and activity, although, ironically, the reader feels that it is a lot more than that. Paradoxically, by generally not describing the couch in detail, Bender manages to imprint its powerfully silent image in the reader's mind. The reader feels that the couch is always present -

through the detailed description of the activities related to it rather than its actual description - especially through the described sexual acts of the librarian with random library guests (with a narrative emphasis on pillow, body movements, word exchange and breathing). And when the back room is referred to, the couch, as a word, is present, but only as a word, since a complete image of how this couch looks is never revealed: 'She says great and tells him there's a back room with a couch' (58) / 'The back room has a couch and beige walls' (61). The couch, like the blind man's stick in Merleau-Ponty's cane allegory, remains invisible while being used but this changes when a secondary character (the muscleman) appears.

When the muscleman lifts the librarian on the couch in front of the library guests, a surreal and allegorical act is created which facilitates the main character's final realization and acceptance of her father's death, as well as the object's defamiliarization process. *Through* the muscleman, the couch becomes more visible than before, gawked at, both librarian and couch now stand in front of the public rather than in the privacy of the back room: 'He is with the travelling circus where he lifts a desk with a chair with a person with a child with a dog with a bone. He lifts it up and never drops anything and people cheer' (61). By not using objects in a conventional way, the muscleman's relationship with them becomes a way to *extend to* life (the end of the tower is always a living creature). The muscleman lifts the couch but only to actually lift up the librarian: 'The muscleman loves how his shoulders feel, the weight of something important, a life, on his back' (62). The object, the couch, which has *extended* itself in a sensory way like the stick of Merleau-Ponty's cane allegory, is now part of the muscleman's body, the muscleman is actually holding the librarian *through* the couch just like the blind man experiences the world *through* the stick: 'He [the muscleman] lifts her up, on his tiptoes, to the ceiling of the library' (63). The muffled speaking of the muscleman from beneath the couch and therefore, *through* the couch, somehow also offers to the object a voice; who is really speaking here, the couch or the muscleman?: 'Stand up he says to her in a low voice, muffled from underneath the couch, stand up and I'll balance you, I can do it even if you're standing' (63). This couch character, although initially invisible and passive, is offered a new form of existence *through* the muscleman. It is offered movement, indirect speech, as well as the ability to lead the human character to new realizations by becoming the means through which the librarian reaches another object: the mural with the Fairies on the ceiling. The fact that one of the Fairies on the ceiling is missing a mouth is used by Bender as one more step towards the story's final catharsis. Once high enough, thanks to the muscleman *and* the couch, the librarian persistently draws a mouth to that fairy as if enforcing happiness onto her own face: 'she tries to draw it as a big wide dancing smile and darkens the pencil lining a few times' (63). This way the human character, by moving to

the mural-heaven, starts to accept her father's loss *through* the muscleman but also *through* the two objects in the text: first, the couch, then, the mural with the painted Fairies.³⁶

Returning to *Objessions* again and expanding Heidegger's tool analysis and Merleau-Ponty's cane allegory further, a short fiction with another couch/sofa character seems to be the right place to pause for a moment, as it shows how the same object can be used differently in a creative writing context. In my own version of such a character (in the short fiction 'Sof(i)a'), a sofa, by falling off a balcony, accidentally kills a young man and can no longer be seen as a regular sofa (simply connected to daily routine and relaxation) by the victim's mother. The broken and blood-stained sofa is no longer *ready-to-hand* but rather a broken tool and is, therefore, *present-at-hand* (following Heidegger's terminology here), an object with new possibilities of use. And by being *present-at-hand* a process of defamiliarization begins. This sofa character turns into a new object, a murderous object, and thus, into a body which the heart-broken mother now habitually abuses but also talks to in order to exorcise the tragedy of her son's loss (in a similar way the librarian in Bender's 'Quiet Please' obsessively uses the couch as a reaction to the loss of her father):

She would also kick it on Mondays, and she would tear it on Tuesdays, and she would remove its sponges on Wednesday mornings and stitch its cuts on Wednesday nights. She would have a break on Thursdays and she would continue a combination of kicking, punching, tearing on Fridays, and she would talk to it on Saturdays, and hug it and caress it on Sundays. (27)

The repetition of 'would' has been used in this text to show that this sofa-related routine has transformed into an obsession, or, as this study claims through the collection's title, an 'objession.' At the same time, it is used to show that the traditional subject-object relationship has been broken, that the object has escaped its common function. As the narration progresses, the now monster-looking sofa eventually becomes a hybrid, containing the mother's body and mind as well, for example through a use of colour which interconnects subject and object: 'That constant kicking made her legs purple. And turned the sofa from blue to blue black' (27). And when the sofa eventually speaks (robotically, and in italics) and says '*Cursed, cursed be maker of heavy, lethal sofas*' (28) - a sentence alluding to Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* (1818) and the monster's famous words 'Cursed, cursed creator' (132) - the object rebels both against its use and against its maker, but most importantly, against the mother's five years of constant mourning.

³⁶The available criticism on 'Quiet Please,' and on Bender's prose in general, has not deeply focused on a subject-object interaction or on the use of objects in Bender's work, although Bender's short fictions are filled with objects, hybrid subject-objects and body deformities/mutilations. Jo Carney's study 'Aimee Bender's Fiction and the Intertextual Ingestion of Fairy Tales' (2012) becomes a useful point of reference, however, since Bender is presented as a writer who follows a dark, neurotic approach to the fairytale: 'Just as objects, characters, and themes - jewels, toads, apples, magic shoes, jealous siblings, lost children, cannibalism, romance - move back and forth across the fairy-tale canon, similar patterns thread through Bender's work like subconscious obsessions' (226).

Returning to Merleau-Ponty's cane allegory, what makes it even more relevant to a short fiction like 'Sof(i)a' is the impact this subject-object relationship can have on form/language and how form/language can be similarly expanded, like a stick, to reflect the object's new use. The reader of 'Sof(i)a' is able to see and somehow touch, just like the blind man through the stick, the pieces of the broken sofa and the similarly 'broken' son on the pavement. This happens through visual writing, the use of scattered vowels and consonants on the page. The human subject's fragmentation *extends to* the object's and vice versa. This objectification, inescapably, also defamiliarizes and fragments language itself: "A...killed my son," she whispers to the shop assistant, answering the question "What can we do for you today?" That word is now smashed

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like the pieces of her son on the pavement' (26). Functioning like the blind man's stick, the word 'sofa,' through its visual fragmentation, also becomes partly invisible, inviting the reader to gawk at it and try to put its pieces back together.

IV. Further object character autonomy, through speech and visuals

The tendency towards object autonomy or new use, which Heidegger implies through his tool analysis, is more actively evident in another short fiction of *Objessions*, 'Model D235467.' In this short fiction, a multi-functional office photocopier, kicking back and, in this case, starting to work on its own, struggles to find a language to communicate the tragedy of Hector's suicide attempt. By photocopying faulty and ink-flooded A4 sheets, *extended* from the machine *to* the reader *through* visual writing, the photocopier character tries to exorcise the trauma it/she has witnessed and invent its/her own object language. It could be claimed that this happens through what Maggie Ann Bowers calls a 'vocabulary of "otherness"' (65), a phrase used to comment on magical realism as a narrative mode for the marginalized, for the ones that are denied power. Although magical realism is not a main focus in this study, objects, as a marginalized group in a usually anthropocentric literature, can employ such a strange 'vocabulary of "otherness"' in order to be heard; an otherness springing out of an object's common marginalization as a literary character, on the one hand, as well as an otherness in relation to the way an object can speak differently from a human character in the text:

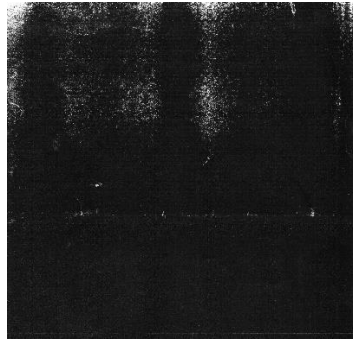


Fig. II Photocopy A interrupting photocopier's interior monologue³⁷ (*Objessions* 19)

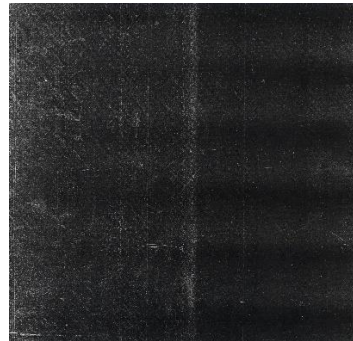
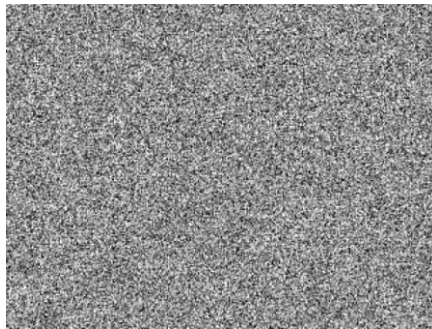


Fig. III Photocopy B interrupting photocopier's interior monologue (*Objessions* 20)

In this short fiction, the otherness of the object - once again, its difference from the way a human character would speak on the page - is expressed through visuals, as the images of the photocopies above show, and written language. A repetition in written language integrated in the way this photocopier protagonist speaks has been used to ironically reflect the photocopier's conventional copy-paste function. The photocopier's conventional identity, however, also becomes destabilized and the object is now offered idiosyncrasy and feelings (even an infatuation of the machine with Hector is implied). This is still, as Heidegger indicates in his tool analysis, an expression of serviceability, the photocopier is still a tool intended towards a repeated task in an office context, but, now, the machine's function also reflects the dark thoughts and confusion of both subject and object: 'Was it my fault? Is he dead? Is he dead for good? Enough. Enough with this repetition. Why am I doing this? Why am I doing this? For copy's sake. Even this desperate question of mine is repeated' (18). In this example, the object protagonist's direct speech kicks back against clichés of human language (for instance, through the use of the phrase 'for copy's sake' instead of 'for god's sake') and against a photocopier's constantly copying nature.

³⁷Both images retrieved from: <https://texturefabrik.com>.

Such a textual-visual depiction of an object's otherness (and therefore, a form of object autonomy) occurs in other short fictions of *Obsessions* as well, for example in 'The Brief Happiness of a Charming Murder' (*Cauldron [Καζάνι]*, Nefeli Publishing, 2015)³⁸ where a woman struggling with depression drowns her TV in the bathtub. This TV character (called Toshi by the narrator) initially belongs to a living room environment, just like most TVs, but also reflects the dark psychosynthesis of both subject and object, *extended to the reader through an object language* which combines TV screen images, humorous (often misspelt) captions, and other textual-visual experimentations:



You know...Toshi cried.

Not in the way we humans cowardly cry, but in a surrealistically brave way, releasing small, round, noisy bubbles. (36)

Toshi speaks and feels, as the image above shows, through both words and images, since a TV's common function demands a certain amount of visuality integrated in the narration. The other, the marginalized, the commonly believed to be lifeless and passive, reacts and forms its/her own hybrid language in order to confess not only its/her own secrets but also the secrets of its/her owner. In this way Toshi becomes a tool *to be used differently*, as well as a tool which *extends to* both the human character and the reader: '**[sobbing] Can you believe she tried to kill me? To drown me so cruelly as if I where...were human?**' (37). Toshi's double identity, as a regular object but also as a female character (in order to also become a double of the human protagonist), becomes even more emphasized through the short dialogue between the woman protagonist and her husband, through which the common image of an object comes in juxtaposition with the mysterious otherness connected to it. The protagonist's husband insists on seeing the object as an 'it,' as something lifeless used in daily routine, while the woman continues to use a feminine pronoun to describe it, thus turning Toshi into a more powerful existence:

³⁸*Obsessions* includes a revised version of the original publication.

'I thought we could try it'
'Try what?'
'Live without her'
...
'Where is *it*?'
'She's in the storeroom'
'I'll go get *it*'
'Not working...'
'Why?'
'I dunked her in the bathtub' (37-38)

In order to enhance the object's rebellion and ability to exist more independently I also used a footnote narration at the end of the text, where the TV, besides speaking through its/her captions, also acts and eventually saves the human character. This happens with the help of Toshi's old-fashioned antennae which I chose to use as a mirroring of Merleau-Ponty's cane allegory, a literal *extension* coming from the darkness of the world underground, where the human character buried both herself and the TV: 'She [Toshi] pushes her antennae upwards with even greater force, pushing the stomach of an unsuspecting cat and making it meow several times, something which makes a neighbour of the nearby block of flats step out on the balcony' (42).

The short fiction 'Bat' (*Cauldron [Καζάνι]*, Nefeli Publishing, 2015)³⁹ functions in a similar way. Here, lost love and loneliness turn a former hooligan into a man obsessed with an old baseball bat, an object which also exceeds its function as a simple tool to play baseball with and transforms language accordingly. By being *present-at-hand* it can become a bat with multiple new functions: a companion, a sex toy, a shoulder to lean on and eventually, a metaphorical in-between, a subject-object (a man-bat). Just like the blind man's stick, the bat also becomes an *extension* of the human protagonist's body, for example through an emphasis on its constant holding by Demosthenes and the parallelism of its shape with the similarly oblong face of its owner. When the bat (object), fed up by the life of Demosthenes, turns into a bat (subject/animal) and abandons him, a pun seems to be the only narratively available tool to try to break the human character's obsession with this object (his 'objession'). The actual ending, a later addition, visually presents a handwritten postcard from Mykonos island, sent to Demosthenes by the actual bat, thus showing an *extension* of the bat's identity to language as well, while turning the image of the postcard integrated in the text into a speaking mechanism for the up to this moment silent object. The reason this new ending was later added was to emphasize the object's autonomy, as the first version ended with the bat still attached

³⁹*Objessions* includes a revised version of the original publication.

to the hand and body of the human character, just like the blind man's stick is constantly attached to its user. This new ending, through its exaggeration, frees the object by turning it into an anthropomorphized character but, once again, a character animated in its own terms (through a combination of 'anthropomorphism' and the object's own 'pragmamorphism'). Even if this wooden bat escapes from the human character and the text (like a flying bat) and now writes a postcard, the language used sounds strangely unnatural, restricting the bat's expression to a non-flexible, wood-like language, a language full of clichéd opinions, thus echoing the hardness of the object's material (wood):

I have a dream. I'm planning to stay in Mykonos and be used as a boat paddle for the canoes of rich vacationers. My boss is an Irishman, he's ok, all Irish people are drunks and eat potatoes but my boss eats Greek salad all day, just like every Greek. (130)

V. Merleau-Ponty's gesture, silence and physiognomy as another form of object language

The *extending* quality of an object towards linguistic transformations - inspired by the conventional or unconventional use of an object, as well as by Merleau-Ponty's cane allegory - also led me to the investigation of Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on gesture, silence and physiognomy. Merleau-Ponty's embodied phenomenology sees the silent gestures of the body as a form of language and also presents a world where subjects look at objects and objects look back at subjects through their expressive appearance; their silent physiognomy. In his essay 'Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,' for example, Merleau-Ponty refers to Ponge and his object-focused prose poems in order to stress the importance of an allusive and metaphorical language: 'Words, even in the art of prose, carry the speaker and the hearer into a common universe by drawing both towards a new signification . . . through what Ponge appropriately called their "semantic thickness"' (*Signs* 46). In other words, Merleau-Ponty believes the world (including objects) speaks even via silence and gesture, through a silent metaphorical 'thickness' which is distanced from direct language or mere realism. According to Merleau-Ponty, therefore, language can occur through a more silent and more implicit 'speaking speech' rather than the more direct spoken speech which commonly characterizes humanity (*Phenomenology of Perception* 202). In such a language, which is also presented as a deeper sense of silence rather than silence in traditional terms, sound and silence can co-exist, and this is what this study also tries to accomplish: to allow object characters to often 'speak' without speaking, through a fusion of the senses. As David Abram suggests in *The Spell of the Sensuous*: 'oral

peoples bind their senses to the shifting sounds and gestures of the local earth' (256), something which mirrors Merleau-Ponty's main belief that self, other and the world are silently interconnected through their gestures and physiognomies.

A possible gesture and physiognomy of objects is nicely implied in Eva Marie Ginsburg's 'The Kettle,' a flash fiction included in the anthology *Flash Fiction Forward*, where a kettle speaks through its silence (and noise), as well as through its expressive physiognomy, for example, through the way it looks and gestures back at the human character in the text: 'And then there was the matter of its whistle, the way it screamed when it boiled and got louder and louder until the man came to turn it off – as though the kettle believed the man existed to serve it, and not the other way round' (167). The noisy whistle (and implied handle) of the kettle demands to be served rather than to serve, also bringing to mind the kicking back object identities referred to earlier in this chapter but also the object's tendency to silently speak through its shape, as well as through its whistle-mouth. Although the verb 'scream' reflects the application of human qualities to the kettle,⁴⁰ this type of scream also springs out of the kettle's own function: it gets louder and louder and does not stop until someone turns the kettle off. It also seems to reflect the kettle's reaction against the pots which constantly mock it through their own gesture and physiognomy: 'They ridiculed it with rattles and bumps. . . . They scoffed and they tittered, and sometimes, next to it on the stove, they gleefully splattered the kettle with grease' (166-167). According to Merleau-Ponty's embodied phenomenology, the face of an object, depending on the circumstances, can change expressions so the kettle, in this case, can be seen as angry when it functions, or spoiled and snobbish (as the pots see it), but when it does not its physiognomy could also express something else. Focusing on Merleau-Ponty's concepts of gesture, silence and physiognomy, therefore, encouraged me to not only look at objects but to also experience them through that look, to not only observe their functional identity or sterile image but also their powerful physiognomy; the expressiveness of their silent appearance through perception; that deep silence between subjects and objects even in a world of noise.

In 'Model D235467,' the faulty photocopies uncontrollably springing out of the photocopier's guts, also visible to the reader, have been used as depictions of such a 'speaking' thingly silence. The photocopier protagonist speaks through them as well, even if they are initially presented as a silent break within the photocopier's interior monologue. These visual details may reflect what Merleau-Ponty calls silence and even if they are not conventionally considered as language they do become an integral part of this object's language, not only because they reflect the object's function, as already highlighted, but also because they reflect the object's expressive appearance, a possible

⁴⁰Johnson analyzes some main rhetorical figures which apply human qualities to the lifeless in the first chapter of *Persons and Things* (e.g. anthropomorphism, personification, apostrophe and so on).

depth. A photocopier, just like the TV character referred to above, is always linked to visibility. The photocopier's language in the text, therefore, demands such a textual-visual hybridity.

Similarly, in 'Sof(i)a,' the way the sofa is described also reflects what Merleau-Ponty calls an object's physiognomy, objects looking back at us just like we look at them in expressively silent ways: 'The sofa's half-broken legs created vertical, diagonal and horizontal lines on the floor, as if trying to say something. The way both her and the sofa stood among these lines made them look like disorientated comets' (28). In this quote, the reader sees the silent lines the sofa creates - through its legs - as a form of speech and also hears them through the sofa's implied weight. These *gestural* lines on the floor, implicitly echoing Merleau-Ponty's cane allegory as well, *extend* not only between subject and object, but also between silence and noise, the looked at subject/object and the looking subject/object. Such a *gestural* approach to the language used to present object characters enhances a writer's descriptive language, on the one hand, but also becomes a way to empower object characters further, not solely through their spoken words but also through the description of their silent but speaking appearance: '[There is] a world of silence, the perceived world. . . . This silence will not be the contrary of language' (Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* 171).

The short fiction 'Cannon' is another example which reflects the empowerment of objects through a deeper sense of silence. Although the cannon is not the main protagonist in the text, as the narration in this short fiction is more human-centred, it hovers like a bad omen, it is present and powerful through its dark silence in the text:

When Casper disappeared from the line nobody asked for him, as if he never existed.
I spotted his doll kicked to the side, deflated. More cannon noises followed.

Bang

Bang

Bang

Bang

(50)

The noises, big or small, the cannon makes from the circus arena are *silently* presented to the reader through visual writing (different sizes of the word 'bang' interrupting the narration) and *extend to* the surface of the page like small underground explosions, as if coming from a depth. The cannon becomes literally active only at the end of the narrative, not only silently speaking through its visual

bangs but now also becoming a dark *actant*⁴¹ and 'acting,' murdering through its pointy, metallic physiognomy: "“Fshhhhhhhhhhh,” compressed air exploded out of the pipe's opening, something colourless sliced the thick smoke, we felt its force slap our hair and skin' (52). According to Glen A. Mazis, 'our modern scientific and intellectual traditions have reshaped the world - its objects and events - into a "faceless" collection of beings' but what Merleau-Ponty really wanted was 'to restore the faces to things' (77). This is something I also explored in 'Cannon' by offering a dark physiognomy to the murderous object and, at the same time, by turning it into an allegory about the facelessness of the contemporary world, a world where people and things die as if they never existed, as if they never had a 'face': 'The ones closer to the pipe started to smash their heads and arms on the metal, they fell first, slipping out of themselves, the tomato on the man's nose spurted its insides on the floor, the old lady's white fabric melted like cream, her still in it' (53). Even the narrator implies in the final sentence of the text that he has been a dead man since the very start of the narration, faceless and lifeless just like the random objects used in the final circus arena scene: 'the Tent a huge buzzing scream, no door, no windows, I turned my head to the little girl, searching for air' (53).

The above *gestural* and *physiognomic* approach to descriptive language, always in relation to objects, is also evident in the sub-plot of Constance in 'Stuck In-between.' In this long combination of short fictions which interconnect three parallel sub-plots (and which explore all philosophical concepts of this study), the silent physiognomy of four bones triggers the human character's thoughts in relation to them. Constance sees herself and her emotions in them and the bones also reflect their own silent expressions towards her. Belonging to Constance's husband, a soldier missing in war since 1974, and recently identified through a DNA test, these bones speak without speaking: '*They have heads, no eyes, they talk to each other*' (111) / '*One of them sliced open, screaming*' (114). As the title 'Stuck In-between' expresses, Constance is stuck between life and death, past and present, and is now obsessed with one of the bones of her dead husband, a bone she has stolen, a bone she now cleans all the time and which '*shines, like his [the husband's] smile used to shine*' (116). Once again, this specific bone speaks through its silent physiognomy; a smile which also implies Constance's own smiling expression when she looks at it. Constance sees in this bone both herself and her dead husband, the bone exists within both silence and sound, a place where Merleau-Ponty also locates his analysis of language: '*It lives, it breathes, look, branches grow out of*

⁴¹In Narratology, the term 'actant' was used by Algirdas Julien Greimas to express six different roles characters can have in a story (without excluding inanimate objects from being 'actants' as well). The term was also incorporated into Sociology and into the Actor-network theory by Bruno Latour and Michel Callon. A study focusing on Greimas and Latour is Johannes Beetz's 'Latour with Greimas: Actor-Network Theory and Semiotics' (2013).

its cracks, listen' (117). Moreover, this bone also exists in its own 'pragmamorphic' way: it screams through its silent crack and it smiles by shining.

Such an approach can't help but remind us of the popular creative writing technique 'Show don't Tell.'⁴² It could be argued that this technique is implied through Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on gesture, silence and physiognomy, specifically when Merleau-Ponty focuses on facial or bodily expressions and gestures coming from both subjects and objects. Likewise, a writer employs descriptions which show (describe) and don't tell (reveal) the feeling of a literary protagonist, through an emphasis on the face, body, gesture and movement of these characters. Merleau-Ponty himself clearly presents this possibility when he argues in *Phenomenology of Perception* that 'gesture does not make me think of anger, it is the anger itself' (190). In the case of object characters, such a technique used to present some kind of emotion is vital, as objects cannot 'tell' us how they feel but can 'show' how they or human characters feel through the way they *visually* appear in front of us; through their expressive physiognomies which can change depending on the circumstances. For example, in 'Quiet Please' by Bender, the second presented object (the library's mural) clearly mirrors the librarian's face and inner horror. This occurs through a narrative description of the body, silence and gesture of the painted Fairies. More specifically, the librarian's true feelings are revealed *through* the body and physiognomy of one of the Fairies: 'There is a mural on the curved ceiling of the library of fairies dancing. Their arms are interwoven, hair loose from the wind. . . . One of the fairies is missing a mouth [and] she is staring at her fairy friends with a purple-eyed look of muteness' (59). That described missing mouth *is* speaking language, following Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on silence, a silent language hovering between earth, heaven and hell, between subject and object, like a cruel truth looking into what one wishes to suppress: 'The librarian does not like to see this and looks down to survey the population of her library instead' (59).

This emphasis on a speaking silence is not far from Nicholas O. Pagan's analysis of Jose Saramago's short story 'The Thing,' in the study 'Thing Theory and the Appeal of Literature' (2015), where objects become empowered by their silence and gradual disappearance from the plot: 'Throughout the narrative objects may be thought of as having spoken – saying "You, human beings, cannot control me. . . . If I want to I can wreak havoc simply by disappearing"' (39). Reading this brought Heidegger's tool analysis implications back to mind and made me interpret 'The Thing' as also a

⁴²'Show don't Tell' is a creative writing technique often connected to writers like Anton Chekhov and Ernest Hemingway, as well as a widely used tool in creative writing workshops. Percy Lubbock's *The Craft of Fiction* (1921) is believed to have contributed to making the technique more popular. Useful references are Derek Neale's 'Writing Fiction: Showing and Telling' in *Creative Writing: a Workbook with Readings* (2005), as well as Alice LaPlante's *The Making of a Story: a Norton Guide to Creative Writing* (2007) and more specifically, the way LaPlante revisits the term in Chapter 5 - 'Why you need to Show and Tell.'

silent revenge of objects against us for not having appreciated their gestures and expressive appearances enough, these objects angrily kicking back through actually disappearing from our lives (and our texts) forever: 'Had you been watching, the pillar-box would probably still be here' (38). The danger of ignoring objects is also evident in one more short story by Saramago - 'The Chair'⁴³ - where the absence of noticing, really noticing and feeling objects, implies disastrous consequences: 'the thousands of times he has sat in it, he has never looked closely, and that is his mistake' (*The Lives of Things* 12). The creative writing technique of 'Show don't Tell,' therefore, often related to the bodies and gestures of human characters, and mirroring Merleau-Ponty's gesturing body, can be very effective when used to reflect the expressions and possible feelings of object characters as well. By looking at and describing the drooping neck of a lamp, for instance, sadness comes to the writer's mind, and by returning to that handle of the teapot and its steamy opening, anger is definitely a possibility. The question which arises and which a writer dealing with objects should try to approach, however, is what kind of sadness or anger that would be, since objects are not human beings and, as already indicated, should not be limited to anthropomorphism in traditional terms. In the case of Bender's 'Quiet Please,' it is not the noisy men she drags to the back room that finally free the librarian, but that silently screaming Fairy in the mural. The reader hears the scream, even if it *silently* comes *through* the object, because that mural, that Fairy, powerfully, through perception, also becomes the weeping daughter, just 'an hour before her father is put into the ground' (64). Even here, though, the object screams differently from a human character, it screams visually, just as the TV in 'The Brief Happiness of a Charming Murder' cries through the image of its/her lost signal, and just as one of the two chairs in 'Thelma and Louise' cries through the hardness of varnish: 'When tears are hard, when they refuse to drip, they stop being tears, isn't that what Mother Wood used to say?' (88)

'Thelma and Louise,' therefore, can also be read as a representative example of the application of 'Show don't Tell' to objects, in connection to Merleau-Ponty's analysis of gesture, silence and physiognomy. In this short fiction included in *Obsessions*, the bodies and physiognomies of the two chairs speak without speaking and reveal feelings of unfulfilled desire, through a narrative emphasis on specific parts of their structures, for example, their arms, which, when the two chairs are opposite each other, invisibly move and *extend to* each other: 'Thelma and Louise know they'll never perfectly fit into each other. Their hug will never be a real hug because their arms, being identical chairs, will simply crash on each other's edges. So, they fantasize instead' (88). Yet, even if I offered

⁴³This story allegorically presents the departure of the Portuguese dictator Salazar in 1968, after the breaking of his deckchair and the brain hemorrhage that followed.

human-like arms to these two chairs, these arms remain connected to the object's own structure and material and, therefore, are unable to extend as human hands would. The table, one more object character in the text, also invited me, as a creative writer, to gaze at its physiognomy and decide which feelings to show rather than tell, through my description. The location of the table between the two chairs became a catalyst in this process, as it made me see the table as a pompous character that always blocks the wish of the two chairs to hug each other. Its lack of extending arms, by nature, and its four-legged appearance, led me to a more vulgar, more animalistic, depiction of the object in focus: 'Thelma and Louise chase one another but never touch. That table blocks their way. That table is a real bastard' (88). In this short fiction, moreover, I deliberately did not focus on a human subject who interconnects with the physiognomy of objects but on two objects looking at each other, and mirroring each other's feelings through their expressive appearances. In this way I was able to make these two lifeless characters not only more independent in the text but also able to perceive and speak to each other. 'Are lines of a flowing arabesque, or the color black or green, or the still face of the rock cliff without meaning unless raised to the level of language?' (56), Merleau-Ponty asks himself in *Merleau-Ponty and the Face of the World*, and this silent but expressive language of objects is something I strongly explored in *Objessions* and in short fictions like 'Thelma and Louise,' by focusing on the description of the bodies and expressions of the two chair protagonists, and by also focusing on a silent, *gestural* interaction between them through the mechanism of dream and fantasy: '[Thelma and Louise] finally finding the way to caress each other's skin, to feel each other's arms, two arms becoming one, four legs staying four' (88).

VI. 'Sof(i)a' and 'Model D235467' in more detail - when everyday objects transform into short fiction protagonists

Finishing this chapter with a more detailed analysis of two short fictions of *Objessions* becomes a useful way to refresh and enwrap the concepts investigated in this chapter, in relation to object use in a creative writing context. The reason 'Sof(i)a' and 'Model D235467' were selected to lead the way in this section is because they animate objects in quite different ways, even if they experiment with similar concepts. Approaching these two fictions in a linear and climactic way, 'Sof(i)a' starts from a more marginalized, more silent and passive representation of the object in focus, while, however, allowing the object to gradually have moments of reaction and even a language/speech of its own at the end of the text, while 'Model D235467' pushes the boundaries even further by almost completely marginalizing the existence of the human character in the text and by offering to the object a long interior monologue; a monologue which fully takes advantage of the object's conventional use, shape and material in order to be constructed.

Once detached from the human body (its human user, as well as the rope holding it to the balcony), the sofa in 'Sof(i)a' has been led to catastrophic consequences (the crushing and death of the young man). Soon, though, the sofa attaches itself to a new body, a new subject (the victim's mother), so in a way it never becomes completely independent in the text. The sofa in 'Sof(i)a,' therefore, remains mostly attached to a human body and a user. The sofa's new reality also becomes a new text, through the deliberate change of the point of view, since the narrator openly admits that this is not the young man's story anymore but actually the mother's and the sofa's. Yet, in contrast to Bender's couch in 'Quiet Please,' which does not speak directly in the text, this sofa, although preserving a powerful silence as well, also kicks back, by forming its own speech and by directly and unexpectedly speaking to the victim's mother. And when this sofa character speaks to the mother, a clichéd language related to its use is also preserved as a mechanism of irony: "I hope your mother never feels such pain' / *Have no mother* / "I hope your maker never cries this much" / *Just result of mass production*' (28).

The object's 'faulty' language springs out of its conventional use and origin but also leads the object to a new, partly autonomous, identity. An autonomy which is not as extensive as in 'Model D235477' but which becomes an introduction to how an object character can be animated further, not necessarily modelled to a human body or human language but also using qualities it already has *within* itself: '*Miss body, miss back, miss television*' (29). A language deriving from the objects themselves, which also distances itself from stereotypes, was also emphasized by Ponge, who, as already shown, extensively investigated everyday objects through the form of the prose poem:

I choose as objects the most indifferent objects possible...where the guarantee of the need for expression appears to me (instinctively) to reside in the object's habitual mutism. Both a guarantee of that need for expression and guarantee of the opposition to language, to standard expressions. ('The Carnation,' *Mute Objects of Expression* 39)

Furthermore, as far as Merleau-Ponty's cane allegory is concerned, 'Sof(i)a,' as I have already highlighted, is a short fiction which also experiments with the idea of objects as bodily extensions to sensory experiences. Besides, the sofa's constant attachment to a human body or user in 'Sof(i)a' inevitably demands such an approach. The mother re-experiences herself and her son *through* the sofa just like the blind man experiences the world *through* the stick: 'That sofa was the last thing that saw her son. That sofa was the last thing her son saw. That sofa plunged into unknown territory, unprotected' (29). Consequently, the object in focus never disappears, as its treatment as a tool or medium towards a human activity would suggest, but now, once broken and abandoned, becomes more gawked at than ever and therefore, an object *present-at-hand*, thus revealing the possibility of a new existence. This occurs not through a loud unpredictable ending but through a more discreet and silent narrative effect, the image of the mother finally touching the sofa and experiencing life

through it by the end of the text. The mother starts to see the loss of her son *differently*, by using the sofa *differently*: ‘tonight, she slips her hands into the sofa’s cushion ends and searches for something, doesn’t know what, but keeps searching and searching’ (29). Although ‘Sof(i)a’ in its first version ended in the stichomythia between the sofa and the mother, a new second ending was later added to that, where the mother’s final realization occurs through her searching for forgotten objects *into* the sofa’s pillow edges. Strictly, and metaphorically, speaking, the mother *entering* the sofa, as if holding the blind man’s stick, makes the ending more effective as she not only accepts the death of her son but also, silently and humbly, accepts the sofa as a double of her son and realizes that, even if an object, that sofa also belonged to someone: ‘That sofa, once, had a home’ (29). Jesse Younger Workman describes the experience of being blind in ‘Phenomenology and Blindness. Merleau-Ponty, Levinas and An Alternative Metaphysical Vision’ as an experience of a different reality, rather than as a disability: ‘When people ask me “What can you see?” I sense that deep down what they are asking me is, “What is the nature of your reality?”’ (40). Such a different perception of reality is what the sofa of ‘Sof(i)a’ eventually offers to the grieving mother, *through* the discovery of hopeful random objects into the sofa’s stitched pillows and dark guts: ‘She uncovers three coins and a tiny Playmobil, deeper into its stitched upholstery she discovers a chewed pen cap and a dried chocolate cookie, . . . Sofia keeps searching and searching for hours, even when nothing is left to find, she can feel the sofa’s resisting fabric fill up her empty palms’ (29). The fabric filling up the mother’s empty palms becomes a final image which reflects, once again, Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of gesture, silence and physiognomy, the object speaking to the reader *through* its expressive appearance and shape, the object gesturing towards the human character in its own way. The movement of the fabric becomes ‘speaking speech,’ mirroring Merleau-Ponty’s silent embrace between self, other and the world, and not only silently touches back the mother but also fills up both palm and soul.

In ‘Model D235467,’ Merleau-Ponty’s concepts of gesture, silence and physiognomy are also evident, this time through an extensive direct speech articulated by the object rather than a more indirect, descriptive language as happens in ‘Sof(i)a.’ The object speaks both silently and loudly, within the sounds of its/her function. This first-person object narrative ‘shows’ the photocopier’s possible feelings through its/her face and physiognomy and even through its/her photocopies: ‘Why do they always want to fix things. They are not faulty! They are...me’ (18). Moreover, the photocopier’s conventional function is also echoed through a repetitive language, as already mentioned earlier in this chapter, which also works as a silent way to exorcise trauma, always within the context of short fiction: ‘[Randal] Jarrell sees stories functioning much the way Freud argued that dreams did; . . . as a wish fulfilment or an expression of the repetition compulsion, demonstrating that we take pleasure in repeating over and over until we can bear it all that we found unbearable’

(May xx). In this short fiction, consequently, an object's conventional function and expressive physiognomy creates, once again, a silently powerful object language which also implies an obsessive pattern; a pattern which is repeated in order to be exorcised: 'Don't worry Hector, I won't copy a word. I won't copy a word. I won't copy a word' (23). The photocopier's kicking back identity, mirrored through its/her extensive direct speech and strange photocopies, also enhances its/her autonomy as an object protagonist. And in contrast to 'Sof(i)a,' 'Model D235467' strongly marginalizes the presence of the human character in the text. However, the human character in connection to the object still functions in a catalytic way, since the plot starts from the moment Hector desperately smashes his head onto the photocopier's glass, a subject-object delirious contact which is not only narrated but also visually *extended* through the photocopier *to* the page (through the images of real photocopies). This catalytic moment of subject-object contact also creatively worked for me through a reversal of Merleau-Ponty's cane allegory. The blind man sees *through* the stick (as if the stick is a form of light/vision) while the reader in this short fiction sees *through* the photocopier's games of ink and darkness. Guided by the photocopier's actual structure, I started to perceive and think of it/her as partially blind, meaning only restricted towards a specific point of view, for example solely upwards, as the location of a photocopier's glass dictates. The moment Hector secretly photocopies himself and the catalytic moment he smashes his head on the glass, the photocopier is the only witness, simultaneously becoming a mirror of the human character's soul. Due to its restricted point of view - something which more strongly mirrors its 'pragmamorphic' rather than anthropomorphic identity - the photocopier has witnessed Hector's suicide attempt but cannot see him lying on the floor and, therefore, does not know whether he is still alive:



Fig. IV⁴⁴ Hector, through the Photocopier's 'Eyes' (*Obsessions* 24)

⁴⁴Copyright: Maria A. Ioannou.

When I started writing this short fiction, I imagined the photocopier malfunctioning. I believed that such a transformation of the object from *ready-to-hand* into *unready-to-hand* would create new possibilities of existence as Heidegger's tool analysis implies, and it did. In this short fiction, the object seems to malfunction intentionally and also exceeds its/her fragile nature as a machine by becoming something which kicks back even more intensely: 'Will they...open me up? Not again! Not again, please! It hurts when they do, they remove my insides and then have the nerve to put them back in' (17). In contrast to the sofa in 'Sof(i)a,' which breaks and kills unintentionally by falling off a balcony, this photocopier protagonist malfunctions to be noticed, to be heard, to confess the unbearable. This intentionality, therefore, also enhances the object's independence as a literary character further. An independence which is also strengthened by the use of a first-person narrative voice, since, in contrast to a third-person narration, such an approach does not force the writer to decide whether an object character is a 'he,' 'she' or 'it.' The photocopier protagonist in 'Model D235467,' just like other object characters of *Objessions* that use a first-person (singular or plural) narrative voice, resists, in a way, both complete anthropomorphism and gender stereotypes. Even if the writer decides that the object in focus is a 'she,' the reader is left free to choose.

Given such an object autonomy, the photocopier becomes not only central as an object protagonist - more central than the sofa in 'Sof(i)a' - but also free through an ownership of speech, even if this speech still also reflects its/her traditional use and functionality. Feeling guilty and blaming itself/herself for Hector's mental breakdown, the photocopier had to be given a hysteric language to exorcise this feeling: 'Was it my fault? Is he dead? Is he dead for good? I always need some time to warm up. Can't function right away. I'm an old-fashioned model, I need some foreplay before I actually do the work' (17). In this way I was able to reflect the photocopier's inner nature, to make the object sound as complicated as a human being but, at the same time, so different from a human being. Therefore, using the technique of inversion again - making subjects passive and objects active - I kept the human protagonist silent throughout the narration (solely visible through a copy of his face) and offered all possibility of thought and feeling to the photocopier, while also expressing the thoughts and feelings of the human character *through* this object. So, when the photocopier reveals to the reader thoughts like: 'Ever felt your guts plucked out and replaced? You forget who you are. You burn!' (17), the reader feels that this thought is also Hector's, as if, possessed, the object speaks out what Hector cannot, both visually and textually. Paradoxically, the photocopier's strange photocopies by being silent actually do speak out, telling their own little stories in the reader's mind, implying the existence of a deeper confession below the photocopier's delirious, ink-flooded sheets:

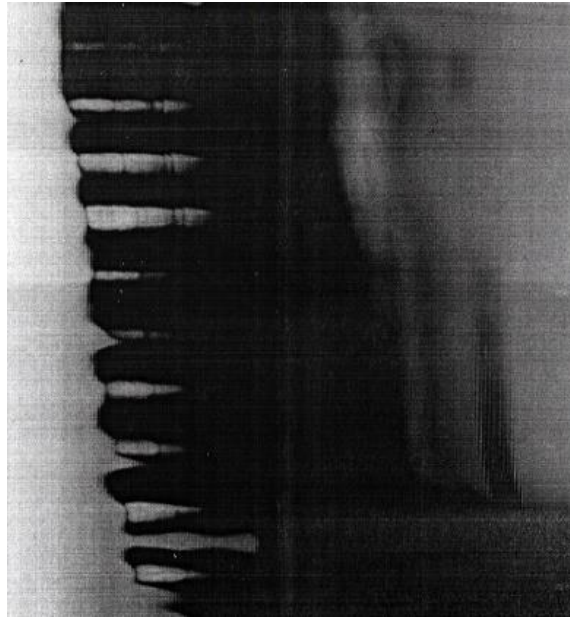


Fig. V Photocopy texture, crafted by spirou⁴⁵ (*Obsessions* 21)

To summarise, by using selected terminology of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, this first chapter has suggested that objects in (short) fiction can become tools *to be used differently* and through these new object identities they can also *extend to* human characters, *to* other objects, as well as *to* form/language. Consequently, the writer can look at an object through ‘an infinity of present gazes’ (Merleau-Ponty *Phenomenology of Perception* 71), as well as through an investigation of an ‘object in its fullness’ (72), for example through perceiving and describing this object’s gesture, silence and physiognomy. An object’s conventional function, moreover, can transform language accordingly, and an object’s kicking back identity can also open up new spaces for more independent object depictions. An object character can speak through both speech and a speaking silence, while a human existence in the text seems not to be a necessity for an object character to be credible to the reader. Modelling object language to human language (and an object’s form to a human body) is not a sole requirement either, since the mysterious otherness of an object, its gesturing physiognomy and ‘pragmamorphism,’ is what can challenge and motivate a writer to experiment with objects and objectifications further.

⁴⁵Retrieved from: <https://texturefabrik.com>.

CHAPTER II - Writing *in-between* subjects and objects

I. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *flesh* and *reversibility*: applying an active gap between subjects and objects to an object-centred creative writing context

Moving from the kicking back identities of objects, highlighted in the previous chapter, to the objectification of human characters becomes the second part of this creative writing journey, since the rebellion of objects and their opening towards new uses - implied through Heidegger's tool analysis - has made me, as a creative writer, start to offer to objects the tendency to not only obtain bodies and minds of their own but to start to *extend*, like a dark reversal of the blind man's stick, to the bodies of human characters. The speaking gesture, silence and physiognomy of objects, moreover, those objects silently looking back at us just like we look at them, also encouraged me to further explore the in-betweenness expressed through our relationship and interconnection with objects; that silent but powerful exchange between the human body and the world out there, including, however, 'the capacity of things . . . to [also] act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own' (Bennett viii). Consequently, Merleau-Ponty's *flesh* and *reversibility* concepts became the right place to further explore the possibilities which arose from chapter one, since these concepts express an active gap, an active in-betweenness among dualities, especially among the duality subject/object. This sense of in-betweenness and hybridity can also be reflected in form/language, for example through the excessive use or lack of punctuation; the combination of both written words and visuals, and the appearance and disappearance of words.

Merleau-Ponty's embodied phenomenology presents *flesh* (*la chair* in French) not as skin, as its naming would suggest, but as a mysterious in-between element, a fluid energy which connects the dualities of the world through perception; an energetic gap between the living and lifeless entities which surround us. On the other hand, the idea of *reversibility* becomes an integral part of *flesh*, as it emphasizes an active, reversible exchange of vitality between such dualities: between the subject and the object; the perceiver and the perceived; between the hand that touches and the hand that is being touched, or the inner and outer side of the finger of a glove (examples Merleau-Ponty uses to further explain the body's reversible experience of the world). This energy of *flesh* and its *reversibility* can be both literally touching and perceptible to the touch. In other words, subjects and objects can literally touch or can gesture towards each other and interconnect more invisibly. Therefore, Merleau-Ponty depicts the body as a being in the world which encompasses all other beings, whether living or lifeless, through a process of constant inter-reflection, not necessarily

tangible. We see ourselves in objects and objects mirror themselves into us as well. This is not a matter of choosing one or the other, the subject or the object, it is not an either this or that reality. This *flesh* and its *reversibility* is a constant reversible process; dualities interconnect and at the same time remain distinct from each other; subjects and objects shift roles:

'It's not a hand, it's a dish-glove'
'It's a hand!'
'Why are we arguing again? It never got us anywhere'
'It's definitely a hand, it moves!'
'Maybe it's a hand in a dish-glove?' (122)

The above dialogue between Charlie and Lina in 'Stuck In-between,' taking place in a surreal after-death context, strongly expresses the merging of subject and object qualities but, at the same time, a clear distinction between life and lifelessness, skin and material. The image of the human hand (the human body gesturing towards the world) has been creatively explored here to express an active in-betweenness, a reversible fluidity between a human hand (subject) and a dish-glove (object), but only to finally reach the image of the hand *in* the dish-glove (an interconnection of subject and object, while both poles still preserve their separate characteristics). Partly alluding to Merleau-Ponty's hand and glove examples, this dialogue does something else as well: it shows the objectification of a human character (a dead soldier in this case) by objectifying his hand, by showing it detached from the human body and temporarily paralleled with a lifeless dish-glove. Moreover, it also shows the difference in the way Charlie and Lina perceive things in their new, after-death state. Stuck in their living room after their death, they can only move if they solve the problems they faced while being alive. Until this happens, they need to inhabit in-between qualities: Charlie has transformed into a still, mummified bat and Lina into a lamp that swears all the time. Yet, even if they can no longer literally touch each other, because they are now glued on the ceiling, the gap between them (*flesh*) remains active and strongly reversible (*reversibility*). They can touch each other by invisibly gesturing towards each other (through *flesh*):

'I don't want to solve anything anymore, just hold me!'
'I don't have hands!'
'Pretend that you have them. I'll do the same. Lamps don't have hands either'
'I'm holding you'
'Tight?'
'Yes, very tight' (124)

The broadness of the concepts of *flesh* and *reversibility*, therefore - allowing them to be applied to several fields and to be interpreted in a variety of ways - and especially their emphasis on an active (and perceptible to the touch) in-betweenness, was the main reason I decided to apply these two

terms to a creative writing context which investigates objects and objectifications. This has led me to use *flesh* and *reversibility* as themes in my short fictions, and also to approach language and creative writing methodology as such *flesh* in this second chapter. As a hybrid language which can mirror the active gap between a subject and an object or the in-betweenness within subject-object characters. A blending which is also metaphorically expressed through Italo Calvino's statement in *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (2016, original publication in 1988) that 'all "realities" and "fantasies" can take shape only through writing, in which exteriority and interiority, world and self, experience and imagination, are all composed of the same verbal material' (121). For this reason, as I have already shown through the dialogue excerpt between Charlie and Lina in 'Stuck In-between,' I started to construct characters which enwrapped both subject and object qualities in their identities, as well as characters which were located between active gaps (whether literal or metaphorical), through a language which also aimed to reflect such an in-betweenness. Charlie, for example, speaks as both a human being and a mummified bat, through the repetition of a squeaking 'iiiiii' sound sporadically integrated in his speech, while Lina hovers between proper language and excessive swearing, due to electricity and high voltage: 'Charlie, quit the philosophy and answer to my question, did you fucking kill me, you motherfucker?' / 'No, Lina, iiiiii, I didn't! I DIDN'T KILL YOU! Just stop swearing' (100).

However, such an in-betweenness has been creatively connected to more than character or language in *Objessions*. In contrast to most short fictions referred to in the first chapter, where bigger emphasis was given to character construction and an object character's language/speech, the concepts of *flesh* and *reversibility* also led me towards an experimentation with in-between settings. The choice of setting, therefore, was sometimes affected by the investigated concepts and also facilitated the process of the objectification of the human characters. The now dead Charlie and Lina, for instance, also exist in an in-between location, a location between earth and heaven: the ceiling. Similarly, in the short fiction 'Magdalena,' to be analyzed further later on in this chapter, I deliberately located the human character in the setting of a museum cloakroom, in order to stress the in-betweenness of both character and setting. The cloakroom of a museum combines the presence of both subject (cloakroom employee) and object (coats, scarves etc.), while it usually becomes the transition point from a museum's entrance to the main galleries. Choice of setting was also crucial in 'I Want My Head Back,' where the Barbie character had to be located in a context which expressed that *flesh* and *reversibility* between life and lifelessness, animals and objects, so an allegorical wasteland became the right setting to express such an active in-betweenness:

Day 23

Saw that? I [the Barbie doll] moved after a very long time. A rat pulled my last, still attached, leg with its teeth. It must've thought I was a lizard. . . . Sadly, the rat, disturbed by sunlight, swiftly disappeared. Must've smelled something. This dump, deep inside, is full of real flesh, you just need to dig deeper. (81)

Moving to one more short fiction of *Objessions* and clarifying the concepts of *flesh* and *reversibility* further, in 'Sunnie,' a fluid, reversible relationship between a woman and her sunbed remains a positive and harmonious process (in contrast to the Barbie context above), in the way Merleau-Ponty also positively approaches the interconnection between the dualities of our world. In contrast to the short fictions of the collection which present darker scenarios of Merleau-Ponty's in-betweenness, in 'Sunnie' this harmonious active gap between subject and object is always present, always comforting and always interconnecting. Sabotaged by two children on the beach (with the use of super glue), the woman protagonist becomes literally glued to her sunbed, an object she appears to cherish more than human beings by directly speaking to it throughout the text. The doctors' efforts to separate skin from plastic towards the end of the text leave remnants in both the protagonist's and the object's life and turn both of them into reversible mirrorings of each other:

Her hands now tremble, her sunbed regularly creaks, but they're still together. 'You age so nicely Sunnie, I like the way your colour fades...' The dark spots on her skin, make her look like a leopard. Similarly, the remains of dried skin on the plastic make the sunbed have a cute leopard print. (136-137)

Although the woman protagonist is not objectified extensively in the text (through adding clear object-like characteristics to the way she is physically described, for instance), she expresses the fixation human characters can have with objects (an 'objession') and the challenges arising from it (the woman constantly asks the object questions that are never answered). This turns 'Sunnie' into an introduction to the more exaggerated depictions which follow later in the collection, where human characters (or body parts) actually do look like or exist like objects. The skin on the plastic and the plastic on the skin in the final image of the text strongly expresses the active in-betweenness expressed through Merleau-Ponty's *flesh* and *reversibility* concepts, since it presents a combination of a literal touch and a perceptible, more invisible, touch. Both woman and sunbed exist together and, at the same time, are separated from each other through this final image; the woman is still living and the sunbed is still lifeless but they now have parts of each other's material (skin and plastic) on them. Choice of setting has also been important in this short fiction, since the final scene intentionally takes place inside the protagonist's house rather than at the beach, a context not usually related to a sunbed but used, here, to stress the sunbed's transition from the open to the private, from sterile use to domestic care and affection. Returning to Heidegger and the context of equipment in the tool analysis, here, each context, each setting, in creative writing terms, can also

transform the way we see a thing: 'Entities only gain significance from their full context, since a knife is not the same thing in a kitchen, a theatrical drama or the hand of a criminal' (Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 1962, 97).

II. Two in one, or one in two?

Orion Edgar seems to validate what has already been mentioned, the preservation of distinct qualities in the merging process of subject and object (within the concepts of *flesh* and *reversibility*). In *Things Seen and Unseen: the Logic of Incarnation in Merleau-Ponty's Ontology of Flesh* (2016), Edgar emphasizes the paradoxical necessity of the existence of dualism, the existence of a distinction between dualities in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. Initially, it does seem that Merleau-Ponty rejects dualisms by fusing self, other and the world but both fusion and dualism actually exist together within these concepts: 'What is crucial here is that whilst objectivity and subjectivity never coincide, neither are they radically separated, since either hand is in principle both touching and touched' (Edgar 20). The example of the two hands touching each other, by changing roles, also clarifies the double identity of this process, since the moment we touch one of our hands, the hand that touches can also feel the touch of the hand that is being touched, so both hands exist separately, reversibly and somehow together in this process (as the relationship of the woman with her sunbed in 'Sunnie' more implicitly projects): "'The sunbed first. Not me! Save the sunbed,'" she shouts, as the doctors struggle to carefully divide skin from plastic. "Stay with me, Sunnie, stay with me..." (136)

Returning to Charlie's character in 'Stuck In-between,' this time before his death and transition to the ceiling where Lina awaits him, the interconnection of both subject (Charlie) and another object (Boobie: inflatable sex doll) is evident through the interconnection of their materials, the duality of skin and plastic, the same duality explored in 'Sunnie.' Just like in 'Sunnie,' I wanted to keep subject and object both linked and distinct from each other: 'And as Charlie is on the verge of snapping over the fact that they had fumbled around in his backpack, he casts his gaze upon a hand with pruney nails projecting from the open zip. . . . That hand could have been his own' (96). Although constantly connecting his wrinkled skin to the shrunk material of the sex doll, no matter what Charlie does that inflatable will never be like skin, will never be his now dead wife Lina. Yet, this does not stop him from desiring Boobie and seeing parts of himself, and others, in the object in focus: 'When he comes, his sparse juices slide incredibly fast over the plastic. By contrast to Lina's body, they don't dry up' (94). Even if Charlie can never fully coincide with Boobie, neither can he exist separated from

the object. His obsessive use of the sex doll makes him absorb object-like characteristics whilst also making the doll absorb a breath of life, even a voice of her own: *'pump-me pump-me pump-me-up pump-me pump-me pump-me-up hug me love me pump-me-up'* (108). By asking to be pumped, by gesturing and looking back at the human character, it is as if the doll is also asking to be touched. This touch, whether literal or invisible, offers the doll a form of life, just like Merleau-Ponty's *flesh* and *reversibility* concepts bring the world to life through the interconnection of subjects, objects and other dualities:

Charlie brings the air pump from the storeroom and shoves the nozzle into the inflatable's constantly open mouth. He lies on top of her, face down, so you can't tell them apart. Even their smell is similar, a mixture of sourness and plastic, a smell that shouldn't turn him on but it does. (94)

Language, consequently, as already indicated, does not remain untouched by such an in-betweenness. This is evident in the short fiction 'Shutdown Lella,' for example, where the interior monologue of the object in focus (the closed door) mirrors both the life of the human protagonist (Lella) and the animation of the object, making the reader unsure, at points, whether Lella is the old woman or actually that speaking door: 'Lella? Lellaaaa? Now she hollers in a daze, . . . she still sees me; I still see her. Lellaaaa, I holler too from the keyhole, echoing her voice' (149). The initial idea for this short fiction was to offer both monologue and perception exclusively to the subject rather than the object, the old lady observing and commenting on the door she daily sees opposite her, the door she no longer opens. However, I later felt that turning the door into a speaking, as well as perceiving, entity enhanced the tragedy of the old woman's existence since it blurred, in parts, the boundaries between who speaks in the text, while blurring the duality subject/object as well. Making the subject passive and the object active through the technique of inversion again, turned the human protagonist into a more memorable character, someone to sympathize with. At the same time, this inversion intermixed subject and object characteristics, while also reflecting the door's double-sided identity, one more possible form of *reversibility*: 'a door awakens in us a two-way dream' (Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 239). Lella dying and passing through the closed door at the end of this short fiction was a later addition, which was used to strengthen the temporary unification of subject and object but also the fluidity between life and death. It was my effort to narratively describe the active gap Merleau-Ponty describes through *flesh* and *reversibility*, through my own version of such a gap, a gap which, in the case of 'Shutdown Lella,' is both literal and metaphysical. However, the moment the now dead Lella bridges this literal gap between subject (Lella) and object (door) and walks through the closed door, a new gap starts to grow in the opposite direction, validating once again the thought that a complete merging is never possible. A distinction between life and lifelessness is still preserved:

Lella?
Lella? Is that you?
Are you really standing up without your walker?
Is that a smile on your face?
No need to open me up.
I know exactly where you're going. (149-150)

Merleau-Ponty's example of the inside-out identity of the finger of a glove⁴⁶ in *The Visible and the Invisible* strongly expresses this double identity of interconnection and separation, since there is, distinctly, both a visible and an invisible side in a glove. Whether we look at its inside or its outside that glove is still a glove but also has two separate sides, not necessarily similar to each other. This example also allows us to investigate other kinds of *reversibility* within objects and thus enrich our depictions of objects and objectifications as writers, for example, not only the implications of an inside-out identity but also a right-left one, as David Morris suggests: 'When turned inside out, the blue, right-hand dish-glove, lined inside with white flocking, turns to a left-hand, white-flocked glove, lined with blue rubber' ('The Chirality of Being: Exploring a Merleau-Pontean Ontology of Sense' 2).

Returning to the short fiction 'Bat,' here, Demosthenes also expresses such a right-left *reversibility*: 'He can't batter up that fat, worn out middle-aged man now looking at him scared stiff. Not even the bat in his right hand that appears left in the shop window' (129). Through the use of another lifeless structure, the reflective identity of the glass of a shop window, I was able to show two identities in one: the hand that holds the bat is both right and left, mirroring the way in which Merleau-Ponty's glove example works. This is something I also partly explored in the short fiction 'Two-faced' but this time through a different kind of *reversibility* and in-betweenness, the *reversibility* between a feminine and a masculine identity, through the protagonist's wish to tattoo a woman's face on his hairy chest. This wish is directly expressed when the man and the woman gawk at each other's bodies. The man and the woman looking at each other's bodies, perceiving those bodies as things, strongly reflects, in a more humorous way, Merleau-Ponty's thinking that we see ourselves in others and others (including objects) see themselves in us as well:

She took a small pencil case out of her purse and started drawing her face on his hairy chest, . . . brown eyes on top, horny-looking red lips at the bottom, pink tongue slightly popping out, inviting.

'It goes away with washing. Here's my card in case you decide to make it permanent'

(140)

⁴⁶A study which refers to the reversibility of the glove in relation to the reversibility of metaphor (two sides also existing in metaphor) is Jerry Gill's *Merleau-Ponty and Metaphor* (1991).

Revisiting the French term *la chair* (*flesh*), here, playfully also bringing to mind the word 'chair' in English, as well as the inside-out identity of Merleau-Ponty's glove example, we cannot omit referring to Jose Saramago's short story 'The Chair' again and the way in which this chair protagonist also acts as an in-between, as a possible depiction of Merleau-Ponty's double-sided *flesh* and *reversibility*. This powerful political satire projects a detailed presentation of a subject-object, through a narration moving in and out of a chair's wood. The object in this narrative constantly hovers between life and death, skin and wood, man and chair. And even if this projects a blending of materials, what it really shows - thus, bringing 'The Chair' closer to Merleau-Ponty's philosophy - is a mixing of roles, a double sensation of things: 'The good leg and damaged leg of the chair have already slid forward, all sense of balance gone. The real fall is clearly imminent' (*The Lives of Things* 17). That leg appears both wooden and human, and even if Salazar is actually connected to it, a human character is never really the focus of the narration. Paradoxically, it is the subject which becomes invisible during the use of the object rather than the other way round. The object is again more active than the subject, and the subject simply reminds us of a failing stuntman. Moreover, the cinematic techniques Saramago uses offer movement and expansion to the object in focus (for example, through the use of rewind and close-up techniques) and give the impression of an object elasticity to the reader, as if the chair's material moves, as if - like *flesh* - it stretches between the duality of inside and outside, softness and concreteness, rise and fall:

So let the chair go back to an upright position and recommence its fall while we get back to what we were saying. . . . Behold Anobium, now in close up, with his coleopteran face, eaten away in its turn by the wind and the hot sun, which, as we all know, burn out the open galleries in the leg of the chair that has just broken . . . (8)

It was the reading of 'The Chair' which triggered the integration of certain cinematic techniques to present subject-objects in my own creative work, in order to be able to depict Merleau-Ponty's constantly moving gap through a more visual approach, for example cinematic techniques such as slow motion, freeze frame, change of point of view and so on. This acted as a means to fictionally offer movement to objects, on the one hand, but also as a way to zoom into the active gap, that *flesh* between dualities and most specifically, between subject and object roles. 'Thelma and Louise,' for example, is a short fiction influenced by the cinematic identity of Saramago's story, as far as narrative effects for object elasticity and movement are concerned. In this short fiction, already referred to in the first chapter, the two chairs constantly struggle to touch one another, to gesture towards each other through *flesh*. However, the pompous table between them never lets them fulfil their dreams, since it becomes an obstacle in this merging process, a disturbing pole which blocks the flowing and reversible energy of *flesh* which hovers between them. The cinematic techniques integrated into the narration (such as zooming and slow motion) not only offered elasticity to the

two chair protagonists but eventually made their dream to touch one another more possible. At the end of the text, the two chairs start to move in slow motion and, by cracking their wood, they violently and bleedingly release their arms out, stretching, gesturing towards each other. In this final scene, the dramatic close up of their 'coming out' makes their imagined hug very vivid even if, in real life, these chairs (because they are chairs that is) will never be able to bridge that literal gap between them and hug each other in the way humans would. The verb 'glue' was used to create a freeze frame effect to that moment of touching without touching through *flesh* and *reversibility*:

One night, Thelma and Louise will REALLY escape their wood, . . . they'll stretch their arms out, they may even scratch those arms as they bridge them out but they won't mind, . . . Thelma and Louise will glue themselves into that position, finally touching each other . . .

(89)

It is worth indicating, here, although it is most probably already obvious, that the title of the above short fiction is an allusion to the well-known 1991 American road film *Thelma and Louise*. Towards the end of the film, the two women protagonists, blocked by the police, choose to drive over a canyon together rather than end up in prison. The camera freezes the frame as they drive over such a literal lethal gap, thus keeping them reversibly alive and powerful in the film's ending. The touching in-betweenness of this final image is what inspired me to start writing my own in-between version of *Thelma and Louise*, this time by focusing on objects rather than subjects.

It seems important to re-clarify at this point that Merleau-Ponty's *flesh* between dualities is not seen as something concretely tangible and, therefore, I have not chosen to approach it as a third person or object. It is not an animated or psychic entity either. As already indicated, it is a form of energy, a feeling even, a reversible in-between force which links us together, a flow, structured rather than chaotic, which is open to interpretations. For this reason, Bryan E. Bannon challenges David Abram's over-emphasis on *flesh* as an actual being and a concrete existence. Abram capitalizes the term and calls it 'The Flesh' but, to Bannon, in 'Flesh and Nature: Understanding Merleau-Ponty's Relational Ontology' (2011), such a capitalised 'Flesh' 'cannot serve as the basis for attributing a form of subjectivity to inanimate beings' (350). This rejection of Abram's anthropomorphism of *flesh* by Bannon is partly justified, as Merleau-Ponty himself uses the idea of *flesh* not as an incarnated third pole between dualities, like that table between the two chairs for instance, but rather as an unspecified harmonious force between them.

Such an energetic, rather than anthropomorphized, gap has been strongly explored in 'Pillars' (first publication in *SAND journal*, autumn 2019), where a man and a woman express both a literal and a metaphorical gap between them, constantly exchanging subject and object roles, not in a

metaphysical sense but rather a sexual one. In this surreal fictional context, the man and the woman, after following advice from a strange marriage consultancy service, start to pretend to be objects in order to spice up their sex life and fill up the emotional gap between them. A gap which in the beginning of the text, due to this unusual marriage consultancy methodology, becomes a gap full of lust and desire between a human character (the man) and an objectified human character (the woman pretending to be a coatrack in an acted out sexual fantasy): 'He took off his jacket and placed it on the coatrack by the door which looked more overcrowded than usual. A scarf stirred. And then a finger popped out. "There you are," he whispered, as he peeled away jackets and coats one by one' (145).

Applying Merleau-Ponty's concepts of *flesh* and *reversibility* to this short fiction came naturally, as the act of pretending to be an object unavoidably brings forward characteristics of in-betweenness (for example, a hybridity between movement and stillness, skin and material). The two human protagonists, like two separate poles, gawk at each other without talking and moving until they can no longer hold it, thus bringing their sexual relationship to the next level. The gap between them, that *flesh*, acts as a mechanism of mutual sexual stimulation and consequently, a positive merging process, which, however, seems to refuse to express the way Merleau-Ponty more deeply approaches *flesh*:

He then stood right opposite her. That was one of the couple therapy rules: staying like that, still and silent, looking lifeless, for several minutes after it was all over. If they were both pretending to be objects, like that time they were chairs, one of them had to willingly retreat and leave space for the other to contemplate their thoughts. (145-146)

As in several short fictions of *Obsessions*, this gap also has negative implications. When I was constructing the ending of this short fiction, I wished to create a sentence which would enclose both the positive and negative identity of this active gap. Adding another character in the plot, Julie, as the third person in this relationship, appeared to be an effective way to do it. Eventually, the woman protagonist discovers her husband and Julie half-naked in the street, pretending to be zebra crossing pillars, forming that same sexual gap between their motionless bodies: 'Julie's breasts tighter than hers, nipples hard, perfect thighs. The gap between them must've been filled with lust. She knew that feeling well - the gap, the gap between them' (147). In this final sentence, therefore, the word 'gap' expresses three worlds: the literal gap in the street between the protagonist's husband and Julie, a gap full of desire, but also, for the first time, that permanent gap in the couple's relationship which never disappeared in the first place. A gap which is also expressed through the choice of title for this short fiction, since the word 'Pillars' brings to mind not only objects but also the gaps

between them. The way I have used the objectification of the couple in 'Pillars' is not far from the way Jean Baudrillard approaches Georges Perec's novel *Things: A Story of the Sixties* (original publication in 1965) in *The Safety of Objects* (original publication in 1968). According to Baudrillard, the setting and the objects surrounding the life of the two protagonists are not 'an automatic substitute for the relationship that is lacking,' rather, 'they *describe* this void,' while dealing with 'the *idea* of a relationship, not with a relationship that can be lived' (221). The choice of setting for the final scene of 'Pillars' was also essential, as I wished to use a setting which strongly expressed an active reversible gap, on the one hand, but also a relationship which has failed. A zebra crossing as a constantly changing space, therefore, became the best setting for this short fiction's final scene, since it is a space where people (pedestrians) and objects (e.g. cars) reversibly cross and interconnect, but with a sense of danger always lurking in the distance.

A more anthropomorphized approach to the active gap expressed through the concepts of *flesh* and *reversibility* (Abram's capitalised version of 'Flesh') could be implied in the short fiction 'It' by Adam Wilmington, where an unnamed and constantly repeated 'it' on the page hovers like mysterious *flesh* between a man and a woman, thus mirroring one more disordered and failing relationship. This hybrid subject-object, a dark, incarnated version of *flesh*, never speaks, just swells and grows, comes and goes, unable to disappear. And unlike the harmony expressed through Merleau-Ponty's *flesh*, this in-between force appears to be a degrading one: 'Everyone would smile and be happy. But then it would enter the room and sit down and look; it would envelop the room with its gaze. Not with its eyes (it didn't have eyes - how could it?); but with the *idea* of eyes' (*The Best British Short Stories 2014* 167). In contrast to the way I approached in-betweenness in 'Pillars' - as a silent but active energy between the two objectified human protagonists - this short fiction appears to also bodify that gap between the man and the woman in the text, by turning it into a third pole, even if this mysterious existence has no eyes but 'the idea of eyes.'

III. Touching / being touched, looking / being looked at, and other forms of in-betweenness

Analysing the concepts of this chapter further, a significant dimension of Merleau-Ponty's *flesh* and *reversibility* is the idea of touching and being touched, already discussed through short fictions like 'Sunnie' and 'Stuck In-between' but now to be investigated in more detail. By touching one of our hands, as already highlighted, we also feel the other hand touching us back; it is a reversible process, an exchange of roles. In 'The Delirium of a Domestic Appliance,' through the relationship between the toaster and the piano player, I wished to find ways to connect the hand of the human character with another form of hand, that of a toast inserted into a toaster. The piano player, unwilling to play

music anymore, obsessively throws away the toaster's toasts without eating them, as if constantly searching for perfection. The suicidal insertion of the piano player's hand in the toaster in the end, though, becomes a lot more than an act of insanity. It is the only moment the toaster feels a real touch, the moment both subject and object become directly interconnected for the first time, both touching and being touched. And despite its burning quality, this is still a touching moment, in both meanings of the word: 'Toasty! Ahhhh! Hand! HAND! What is he doing? Why is he putting his hand inside me? Where's the slice? Stop! Hand out! Slice in! Patience! Breathe in! Breathe out! Holy toast, he's burning his hand, . . . but wait...WAIT...I can finally touch him' (48). Such a double identity of touching is evident in 'I Want My Head Back' as well, when the abandoned Barbie doll directly talks to an ant strolling on its/her body: 'Ant, my dear ant, I love you. By strolling on me, you make me feel...us' (83). The word 'us' at the end of the sentence was a last-minute addition, since I wanted to make the object able to feel but also able to feel/touch and be felt/touched at the same time.

'Arm' is one more short fiction in *Objessions* which explores the concepts of touching and being touched, what Merleau-Ponty's hand example strongly reflects: 'When I press my two hands together, it is not a matter of two sensations felt together as one perceives two objects placed side by side, but an ambiguous set-up in which both hands can alternate the roles of "touching" and being "touched"' (*Phenomenology of Perception* 95). In 'Arm,' a heartbroken man refuses to let go of his ex-wife's arm (which is actually a prosthetic one, a detail only revealed at the end of the text). The man appears fixated to the harmonious *reversibility* expressed through the holding of two hands, even if one of them is fake and therefore, an object: 'The way her hard fingers weave into mine, this clenched double fist, my sweat which softly trickles into our palms, it all fits perfectly' (142). This grotesque depiction of obsessed love mirrors, thematically at least, Merleau-Ponty's *flesh* and *reversibility* ideas and even if, throughout the narration, this active energy appears to come from the side of the man only, the plot implies, through the mechanism of dream, that this exchange could also be reversible and mutual. Through a dream, the woman's new boyfriend gorily slices the man's arm (still holding the woman's) and carries it home, where the woman faces her true feelings: "'What's this?" she asks in a distorted voice, looking at that extended double arm spread on the kitchen table. . . . Caressing that tight fist, our perfectly unmatched hands, she starts to miss me, . . . before waking up, I can see it clearly, I can see it in her fingers' (143). The word 'fingers' was a final edit to the word 'eyes,' since I aimed to emphasize the harmonious interconnection the woman used to have with her ex-husband through a gesture of the body (a zooming into the hand and its fingers), rather than through a more common narrative focus on a character's eyes. At the end of this short fiction, and in order to reveal the characters' past experience of being a family of refugees searching

for a better life, I used the concept of *reversibility* again but this time to enhance the family's tragedy, to reveal the possible detachment rather than attachment of two hands. The woman asks the man to hold her from her fake arm when they climb the mountain, in order to more easily let her go if things get rough: "Hold me from the fake one," she said. She was terrified but beautiful. The ground was very rocky. "Please, the fake one!" she screamed. "Listen to me! To let me go, if you have to!" (144)

Moreover, returning to the short fiction 'Two-faced' again, another form of duality in relation to Merleau-Ponty's *flesh* and *reversibility* was also explored: the duality of looking and being looked at, the exchange between the perceiver and the perceived. In this short fiction, I was challenged to try something else, to humorously turn the human body into an object looking back, to literally transform the chest of the human character into a lifeless face: nipples as eyes, belly button as a mouth. Through this anthropomorphized, silly-looking chest, a critique towards the superficiality of the sexual interactions of the contemporary world, I tried to reflect the concept of looking and being looked at but in a caricature-like way:

'I'm carrying a second face on my body'
'That's just your tits and belly button'
'It stares at me every time I look at myself in the mirror' . . .
'What about mine?'
'Can't tell, you'd need to take off your blouse' (138)

The human protagonist not only treats his chest as a face in order to engage into sexual conversation with women but also wishes to tattoo a woman's face on it. Yet, this interconnection has no pure motives and therefore, is not a harmonious one. The woman about to permanently tattoo her face on his chest becomes a dystopian version of Merleau-Ponty's *flesh* and *reversibility* concepts, a frivolous fixation which has nothing to do with the flowing energy between the duality of *deeply* looking and being looked at which Merleau-Ponty presents. In contrast to Merleau-Ponty's thinking, it is not part of this world but out of it: 'Would they still sleep with him with that face of hers tattooed on him? Of course, they would, it was a face out of this world' (141). In simple words, what this short fiction has tried to do is to actually turn the more metaphorical face of objects, echoed through Merleau-Ponty's embodied phenomenology, into a literal face and to turn the depth through which Merleau-Ponty describes *flesh* into a disturbing caricature of the superficiality of contemporary life, something expressed through the double meaning of the title as well: 'Two-faced' as a negative quality of the protagonist, but also 'two-faced' as the world Merleau-Ponty describes, bringing to mind the finger of the glove again. An interesting example from art, which could reflect the double-sided identity expressed through Merleau-Ponty's concepts of *flesh* and *reversibility*, is one of Giuseppe Arcimboldo's 'Composite Heads': *Reversible Head with Basket of Fruit* (1590). The

painting, made out of objects and using the device of the palindrome, is seen as both a human face and a fruit basket, and the basket as both a basket and a hat. The action of reversing the painting to see its two images becomes a form of active gap, since the painting, by being flipped, becomes both images at once, but also both images separately:



Fig. VI Giuseppe Arcimboldo's painting: *Reversible Head with Basket of Fruit*⁴⁷

Enhancing the linguistic, rather than simply thematic, impact of applying Merleau-Ponty's concepts of *flesh* and *reversibility* to an object-centred creative writing context, a useful example which shows how language mirrors an active in-betweenness is the short fiction 'Electra Complex,' also referred to in the first chapter in relation to the object character's rebellious identity. Constantly poised like *flesh* between dualities, for example the duality of light and darkness - as the conventional nature of a lamp also demands - the lamp character eventually becomes absorbed by darkness rather than light, thus breaking that phenomenological 'flesh-like' balance Merleau-Ponty projects. This was something I expressed through the in-betweenness of visual writing:

Light
Darkness
Light
Darkness
Darkness
Darkness calling (72)

To this lamp character, it is no longer a matter of interconnection between self, other and the world, as Merleau-Ponty's thinking reflects, but a matter of total disconnection. Darkness *visually* absorbs light in the text. Light, as both a meaning and a word, is no longer visible. This fusion of opposites, in

⁴⁷Retrieved from: <https://mymodernmet.com/giuseppe-arcimboldo-composite-heads>.

contrast to Merleau-Ponty's concepts, no longer keeps dualities distinct but allows one of the two poles - the dark one - to win over.

In-betweenness and hybridity in language is also evident in other short fictions of *Objessions*, for example in 'Thelma and Louise.' The way the two chairs speak reflects that active gap between dualities, especially through the breaking of words (used in order to also reflect the creaking sound of the chairs' wood) and through rhyme (a mechanism which comes in contrast to the literal gap between the two chairs by actually pairing them through the playful rhythm of words): 'a dream is as good as it gets my ch air, a dream is good e nough, a ch air can rea lly sit really settle with a dream, my sweet des pair' (89). The breaking of some words also creates new words, like 'air' and 'pair,' thus emphasizing further the existence of a form of *flesh* in this text. This flowing gap between dualities is also evident through an interactivity between character and narrator, for example when the narrator openly admits that the rhyme of the two chairs also affects the way of narration: 'that rhyme of theirs is contagious' (89).

Similarly, the short fiction 'Submarine' (first publication in Greek, *efsyn.gr*, summer 2016),⁴⁸ exploring, among others, the idea of touching and being touched in tangibly invisible ways, also transforms language accordingly through a hybrid writing approach, by linking short fiction with newspaper writing and the work of art. In this short fiction, human protagonist and object (painting) blend roles through visual writing again, a creative writing technique I have often used to depict in-betweenness. The young widow enters her dead husband's painting and at the same time the painting *visually* becomes her in the text. According to Carolynne Quinn, investigating the analysis of painting in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, 'for Merleau-Ponty painting may be described as the amplification of perception, in that it is not just a re-creation of what occurs in acts of perceiving, but rather a transcending and extending of it' (23). Similarly, the young widow sees and feels both herself and her husband *through* the painting and its frame: 'Saltiness. Seems to have sprung out of the frame. An intense, disturbing smell of piled salt. She stretches her tongue as if to lick and taste that frame, she's tasting Andronikos instead' (133). This is why she gestures towards the painting, through that active gap of *flesh*, to finally reach her dead husband, *extending* beyond what the painting actually shows, just like a painter extends what is being perceived. The frame of the painting and the painting itself, silently narrating the possibility of the woman's suicide attempt through a journalistic language, visually and textually reflects the interconnection of subject and object, but, once again, with dystopian implications:

⁴⁸*Objessions* includes a slightly revised version of the original publication.

**Young widow dived into
her husband's painting.
Her head got smashed by
the resistance of the wall.
The plaster that fell on
the floor mixed with
blood. According to live
witnesses, her crushed
head passed the wall,
developed gills and swam
through.**

(133)

Returning to anthropomorphism, here, such a creative writing tool can enclose the hybridity I have been analyzing so far, the reversible connection of the 'human' in the object or the 'object' in the human, if we also use the terms objectification or 'pragmamorphism' as a possible reverse. If anthropomorphism was followed in a short fiction like 'Submarine,' the painting could have been described as a compassionate object or as an object which literally looks and gestures back at the young widow, or speaks in the text. However, the newspaper column frame applied to the frame of the painting at the end of the text, and the sterile, journalistic voice of the object created a less anthropomorphic effect, this time springing out of the opposite of what a painting usually is: an object depiction which has nothing to do with the artistic depth of a painting. Steven Shaviro states in the essay 'Consequences of Panpsychism,'⁴⁹ expanding from his reference to the famous 1974 article by Thomas Nagel 'What Is It Like to Be a Bat?' that 'the bat's thinking is inaccessible to us; we should not anthropomorphise the bat's experience by modelling it on our own' (*The Nonhuman Turn* 25). So, some guiding questions arise once again: Are we, as writers, applying human qualities to objects or are these objects magnifying qualities they already have? Is what actually animates them something coming from within themselves, mysterious to us? 'What in the thing is thingly? What is the thing in itself?' Heidegger asks in 'The Thing' (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 167) and it is the deconstruction and reconstruction of the object itself, not applied human qualities exclusively, which, as the first chapter has already shown, could become a way to animate objects or objectify subjects in less ordinary ways. Yet, maybe not only qualities coming from the object itself. What the

⁴⁹Panpsychism claims that all things in the world (both living and lifeless) have a mind or at least a form of mental quality. In the case of non-human existences, such a mental quality is not necessarily human-like. An interesting study which connects Panpsychism to Merleau-Ponty is Jennifer McWeeny's 'The Panpsychism Question in Merleau-Ponty's Ontology' (2019), especially in connection to Merleau-Ponty's concept of *flesh*.

short fiction 'Submarine' has partly shown is that an object can also be animated by qualities of other objects, qualities which do not spring out of that specific object or its function but which are borrowed from other lifeless structures. Although this kind of object-object hybridity has not been extensively investigated in *Objessions* it definitely provides food for thought for further exploration.

IV. From 'Magdalena' to 'Philip' - objectified human characters

As this chapter has shown, various short fictions of *Objessions* have experimented with the concepts of active and reversible in-betweenness, in both content and form/language, even in the choice of setting. Some of them also challenged this in-betweenness by presenting a dark absorption of the subject by the object. Therefore, now is the time to focus more on two selected short fictions of the collection, 'Philip' and 'Magdalena,' in order to enwrap the concepts analysed in this second chapter. The main reason these two short fictions have been chosen to be analysed further is because they present in-between human protagonists who are gradually, and hybrid-like, transformed into objects and subject-objects, through both body and mind but also, most importantly, through form/language. In both short fictions, language consciously reflects the objectification of the main characters, thus also leading to textualizations of their object-like identities (reflections of their hybrid subject-object identity in the way they speak, for instance). 'Magdalena' presents more conventional techniques in relation to the reversible relationship between the woman protagonist and the coats and jackets she keeps in the museum cloakroom, but also tries to reflect this hybridity in language by offering speech to the coats and jackets and by objectifying, by robotizing the human character's speech through an excessive use of punctuation: hyphens. 'Philip,' by contrast, is presented as a more far-fetched scenario about the objectification of a human character; the process is gradual and finally leads the character to an almost complete subject to object transformation. Since these two short fictions present two completely different approaches to subject-object in-betweenness and objectification, and since 'Philip' becomes in a way the exaggerated version of 'Magdalena,' analysing them together in this section creates useful juxtapositions.

To start with, in order to mirror Philip's inner nature which came in contrast to his object-like restrictive body and his gradual objectification in the text, a fluidity in words had to be invented, a fluidity which would effectively express Philip's internal freedom and wish to become something else. So, the name Philip eventually started to become sound, 'Ph...Phil...' - like a wind-torn object - and then it also began to transform into different words: 'Ph...Phil...feel something...anything' (162).

Through integrating the concepts of *flesh* and *reversibility* in this short fiction, these games of fluidity in language, and between subject and object roles, also offered a ‘fleshness,’ an in-betweenness to this language. Besides, as Karmen Mackendrick states in *Word Made Skin*: ‘The tactility of language is in some measure the motility of language; its recognition means recognizing fluidity’ (59). In the case of ‘Philip,’ therefore, such a fluid and mysterious in-between force became a conscious effort to ironically depict the feeling of a gradually feeling-less protagonist: “‘I ssstarted not *entirely* ffffeeling things,” Philip said’ (161). Philip as a character - mirroring Merleau-Ponty’s *flesh* and *reversibility* concepts and the preservation of distinct qualities in this merging process - is not simply this or that, at least for a big part of the text before his final transformation. However, this constructed reality also moves a step further: when life (as well as plot) cannot offer Philip what he desires, language seems to be the only available tool. **‘Would you be kind / Would you be kkkind enough to / ttto set me free / ttto stop using a masculine pronoun / and stttart using a neuter one?’** (162-166) Philip asks the writer/narrator boldly, and therefore in bold letters, in order to be noticed, to be heard. And his wish, sorry, *its* wish is granted.

Additionally, the museum employee in ‘Magdalena’ slowly becomes one with the coats and jackets she observes and collects in the cloakroom, constantly poised between fabric and skin, in both her life and (implied) death. She too struggles to phenomenologically connect with self, other and the world, but not successfully, the object gradually absorbs the subject: ‘Wool tended to make things look heavier and more serious, at least that’s what Magdalena thought every time such a coat arrived. “You-would-look-a-lot-be-tter-if-you-were-made-of-thick-co-tton,” she said. “You too! You too!” the woolen coats hummed’ (152). The object imagery used in this short fiction also intensifies the object-like identity of Magdalena, who seems to perceive everything around her as whispering and moving objects, as if these coats and jackets are also Magdalena. When Magdalena says with compassion to an undeclared coat: “That’s-why-the-y-ne-ver-asked-for-you” (154), a catalytic moment of connection between subject and object is created. Both Magdalena and the coat are undeclared and marginalized but, by gesturing towards each other, somehow become declared by one another.

Consequently, what brings Philip and Magdalena closer to Merleau-Ponty’s *reversibility* idea is the fact that both characters exist in a double way - as both subjects and objects - *within* that fluid ‘fleshness’ which knots them to the rest of the world, since, as Morris suggests, ‘it is the perceiver and the perceived, as the reverse of one another within being, that accomplishes perception’ (‘The Enigma of Reversibility and the Genesis of Sense in Merleau-Ponty’ 3). This double identity is

evident, once again, in language, a language which not only exists between subject and object qualities, but also between reality and metaphor. Philip, because of his objectified nature, ironically does not comprehend the metaphor of things, or the abstractness and metaphor of language: 'A girl once punched him, heartbroken by his passivity to win her over some muscular guy, screaming "Your heart's made of stone," something which Philip took as a compliment' (160). Magdalena's location in the cloakroom also creates an in-betweenness, a window between the museum's external space and Magdalena's internal space through the use of the cloakroom frame. By mirroring Merleau-Ponty's glove example again, the frame not only projects the cloakroom's inside-out dimension but also the human character's: 'Magdalena pushed herself out of the frame and landed onto the man's shirt, removing a button with her right elbow. . . . Magdalena apologized to the man for falling on him. And then to herself, for falling for him' (153). Magdalena, mechanically appearing in and out of her frame, also transforms into an exhibit, her motionless state and gradually robotized speech enhance her hybrid subject-object identity throughout the plot: 'Thank you!' / 'Enjoy the exhibits!' / 'Have a beautiful day!' / 'Have a good day!' / 'Have a...day' / 'Show this card for collection' / 'Show this card for co-lle-ction' / 'Show-this-card-for-co-lle-ction' (151).

The technique of using hyphens to reflect objectification has also been used by other contemporary writers. Bender in 'What you left in the Ditch' in *The Girl in the Flammable Skirt* uses hyphens to construct one more robotized character, Steven. Steven returns from war without lips, with a plastic substitute in their place instead. His current subject-object hybridity is strongly expressed through language and punctuation: 'The-doctors-are-going-to-put-new-skin-on-in-a-few-weeks-anyway. . . . That-will-work, I-guess, he [Steven] said. It-just-won't-be-quite-the-same' (21). Through both Magdalena and Steven, the use of hyphens, besides showing the textualization of the characters' subject-object hybridity, also emphasizes the tragedy of their current isolation and uselessness. Even Philip fears the dystopia of a lack of use, and for this exact reason he repeatedly demands to be used in order to exist, this time, in a reverse way, by dismissing spaces and punctuation: 'Use me, please! USE ME! USE ME! USEMEUSEMEUSEMEUSEME!' (161). So, when Magdalena articulates those compassionate words to the undeclared coat, she does not simply reveal her 'objession,' but also her double nature: as an object (speaking in a robotic, stitching way) and as a subject (through her compassion towards the other, even if that is an abandoned coat). Yet, the fact that she speaks in the same way in and out of her frame shows that her objectification is not only part of her work identity but also part of her personal life. The hyphens which may be seen as extensions of Magdalena, like hands stretching out and searching for companionship, also become a 'flesh-like' thread which connects her social with her private existence, but not in a positive way. Even when

she lies half-dead on the floor after the museum's bombing, she still speaks in the same way, as if her objectification has been part of her identity from the very beginning of the text: 'At the very back, Magdalena's mouth was wide-open, with the button stuck on her tongue. "I-for-got-to-ask-for-his-hat," she exhaled, "It-was-too-tall-for-a-hat...too-tall...too-dark...too-dark-for-a-h..."' (154)

Moreover, both Philip and Magdalena wish to touch but also to be touched, just like Merleau-Ponty explains the core of his *reversibility* idea, those two hands alternating roles and touching each other, one felt, one unfelt and vice versa. Expanding this double identity of touch further, in both a visible and invisible sense, Philip wishes to be touched and manipulated like an object, while Magdalena wishes to also be touched by emotion, through a touch that can be both tangible and perceptible: 'Magdalena then noticed his fingers, they were long and delicate, those fingers looked a lot younger than him' (152). Whereas in the first draft of 'Philip' only one phrase was used - 'Touch, touch me, mum!' - further experimentation with the fluidity and 'fleshness' of language demanded more expanded rhythmical and repetitive patterns, in order to stress Philip's gradual robotization: 'Touch! Touch me, mum! Touch me! Touch ME! ME! Touch ME!' (160). Every object, in one way or another, would wish to be touched and used. For Philip, this touching also feels like a magic wand, a moment which can make him be what he *really* wants to be, because, as Heidegger suggests in 'What are poets for?': 'To touch means to touch off, to set in motion. Our nature is set in motion' (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 125). Ironically, however, the final image of a literal gap between Philip and his brother Nick in the back garden also stresses a lack of touch and therefore, a lack of emotion, but only to also stress the complete objectification of Philip's identity by the end of the text, a complete absorption of the subject by the object, away from the harmony of Merleau-Ponty's interconnection between self, other and the world: 'They both [Philip and his brother Nick] just stand under the rain, close, unmoving. One naked, one dressed. Seeing them through the wet, misty glass of the kitchen window, mother thinks they're holding hands' (167). The reader, just like Philip's mother, sees that reversible energy between the two brothers, that possible intention towards a reconciliation; towards both a visible and invisible touch. Yet, tragically, what this ending implies is that this is just an illusion created by the hybridity of rain and mist on the glass of the kitchen window.

V. Martin Heidegger's jug allegory: from an active gap to an active void – 'pragmamorphic' human characters as containers

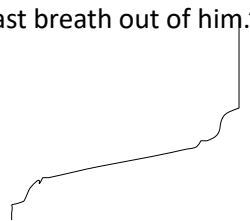
Towards the end of my research journey, the objectification of Magdalena and Philip led me to investigate one more philosophical concept in relation to objects and objectifications: Heidegger's jug allegory. This occurred in connection to the objectification of human characters, at first, but also as a mechanism for a further independence of object characters, an independence which was set in motion in the first chapter, but which now gains a darker, more dystopian dimension. Briefly speaking, Heidegger presents the jug in the lecture 'The Thing' as a vessel keeping, retaining, pouring and most importantly, giving. It is a jug identified and formed by its void, rather than simply containing a void. Its thingness is not identified by its form and material but it is shaped by the void it contains: 'The jug's void determines all the handling in the process of making the vessel. The vessel's thingness does not lie at all in the material of which it consists, but in the void that holds' (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 169). The jug is also fourfold, by gathering earth, sky, gods and humans. It is a gift and - in contrast to the man-used tools in Heidegger's tool analysis - it is more powerful and independent, while expressing a container/content duality. Such a container/content duality inescapably brings to mind the glove's inside-out identity again and transforms Merleau-Ponty's active gap implications into a possible active void as well, thus inviting the writer to now look not only *between* things but also *into* them.

Heidegger's jug allegory, part of his late works which focus on the mysterious agency of things, has been partly used as an inspiration for the writing of 'Jack,' a dystopian reflection of Heidegger's jug allegory concept. In this short fiction, an old man is linked to an old porcelain jug, not only internally but also externally. Cracks and wrinkles interconnect, on the one hand, but also constantly show the gap between the subject and the object, which is not only material-related but also a literal gap of space which is never bridged (as the old man lacks the ability to move towards the jug and remains physically objectified, 'pragmamorphized,' like a statue). This, however, is never an empty gap, as Merleau-Ponty's *flesh* is never empty either, but filled with reversible forces which constantly connect subject and object, past and present, life and death: 'The Filipino thinks the jug still cracks because she secretly dusts it with that rough cloth or because she accidentally leans her tired shoulder against it. The jug knows exactly why it cracks, it cracks because of *her* [the dead wife]' (155). This short fiction's most touching moment could be when the wide-open mouth of the old man (paralyzed in that specific position right after the scream that followed his wife's suicide) becomes linked to the jug's opening: 'Maybe the old man and the jug will speak the same language

one day' (156). As a creative writer experimenting with objects and objectifications, I used this metaphor to present the human body as also something lifeless, thus emphasizing the objectification of the human character further. The old man is still, he has a wide-open mouth and a bent arm on the side, exactly like the jug: 'The way his arm is now folded on the right, motionless under the sun, makes that arm look like a jug handle' (156).

The jug of the old man is also an active keeper, triggered and transformed by the 'void' of the old man's traumatization because of his wife's death, by absorbing and pouring back feelings, memories, mortality and immortality. The 'void' of the old man allegorically connects to the void of the jug and eventually becomes contained by it (while the old man is trapped in a similarly cracked and fragile body). Language-wise, this in-betweenness is also evident through the way the jug speaks (in italics and in nonsense Chinese due to its origin, as well as through asemic⁵⁰ language: letters extending and visually starting to look like cracks or other abstract shapes). The connection between a language that not everybody understands (Chinese, asemic) and the old man's narrated muteness stresses the gradual cracking of both subject and object, but most importantly, the object's ability to *actively* contain the emptiness of the now *passive* human character. The jug, therefore, turns from a mere use-restricted *object* into a powerful *thing* and becomes something higher, a symbol the writer can explore further: 'The jug is not a vessel because it was made; rather, the jug had to be made because it is this holding vessel' (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 169). The mysterious thingness of the jug Heidegger presents could mirror, if we approach it more broadly, the thingness, the 'pragmamorphism' of the old man as well; the human character is once again mirrored into the perceived object and vice versa. 'At the end of the day, what keeps a tea pot away from suicide, if not the warm tea, deep in its guts?' (85) the mutilated Barbie doll confesses to the reader in 'I Want My Head Back,' thus enhancing the identity of the jug (and any container) as a heaven-like keeper shaped by its content rather than the other way round. In a similar way, in 'Jack,' the jug appears to contain something like a 'soul,' by releasing the memory of the old man's wife through the description of her hair growing out of it, that hair pouring out in a temporary but comforting way, that hair also appearing visually in the text, through an extended visual crack between words (thus reunifying the old man with his wife through death): 'The jug grows hair out of its opening, . . . wraps him softly, sucks that last breath out of him.'

(158)



⁵⁰Asemic writing is an art form which often uses lines, shapes and symbols. It is a hybrid form which intermixes image and text, leading the viewer/reader to a variety of interpretations.

Just like the photocopier protagonist analysed in the first chapter - and its repetitive visual and textual language - the cracked jug, containing the old man's shock after his wife's death, exorcises trauma by speaking Chinese in repetitive and asemic-like patterns. In a way, just like Heidegger's jug, the jug outpours what it has kept and retained, here in a new form, that 'vocabulary of "otherness"' again, thus communicating the suppressed through a hybrid object language. The old man with the permanently open mouth outpours his pain to the jug and the jug outpours it back to him, through its own, both visual and written, language. The tactility of written language in this case becomes not only a way for the jug to gesture towards the old man, bringing Merleau-Ponty's gesture, silence and physiognomy back to mind here, but also a way for the reader to somehow touch language, when body (old man) and material (jug) appear tragically unable to literally touch one another. And for those readers who speak Chinese, the jug reveals more pieces of the plot's jigsaw puzzle. This double textual dimension - a text everybody understands and a text to be encrypted - was a later addition in this short fiction, something I used in order to reflect, one more time, that double identity expressed through Merleau-Ponty's *flesh* and *reversibility* concepts, this time the inside-out identity of a text's meaning: '你好 你好 she wasn't the same when she returned, she wasn't the same, she told him 过去事 过去事 '(158).

'A Hole to Stick Things in' is another short fiction in *Obsessions* which has experimented with this container/content duality and in-betweenness. In this short fiction, a woman wakes up and, just like Edvard Munch's famous painting 'The Scream' (1893), her mouth is missing; her face has become a never-ending scream. She has transformed into a container of some kind, a container which, just like in 'Jack,' is shaped by the 'void' she feels inside, after finding out that her husband is sleeping with a man: 'The bee moves numbly, as if making love to its own reflection, Gregoria makes love too, with Victor, in the deep hole of her mouth' (169). Gregoria, whose name is an allusion to Gregor Samsa in Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915), also speaks in a distorted way, something one would expect from a subject-object without a mouth. "'I aaaa ooooo ou,'" she tells the pharmacist' (168), meaning to say: I have no mouth. In contrast to 'Jack,' in this short fiction I wished to focus on a more humorous - but still dark - way of narration, by zooming into the hole on the protagonist's face in surreal ways: 'An old lady with Alzheimer's sticks her cane in the hole and twists it as if stirring a pot, Gregoria almost chokes' (169). For this exact reason, I offered a new, more optimistic, future to this human-container at the end of the text. Something enclosing heaven, earth, gods and mortals, like Heidegger's jug, a future job at the circus, after the Coronavirus crisis is over: 'a sporty cute guy spots her on the bench and tosses his card, he says something like "when the quarantine is over

you'll make a great hole to stick things in, the audience will love you" and Gregoria smiles, she really smiles, even if nobody can see' (169). The lack of full stops in this text (a form of constrained writing⁵¹) also became a mechanism to reflect the fluidity between the character's subject and object qualities (and the agony the character feels), as well as that pouring energy implied through the symbolic hole on her face, as if Gregoria is now a bodily representation of Heidegger's pouring jug.

Moreover, Loukia's sub-plot character in 'Stuck In-between' also turns into a container that is shaped by what is inside her: her inability to have children of her own. Treating Loukia like a container that constantly fills up and then empties itself became a way to reflect the fertility problems of the human character. Loukia surrealistically turns into a fish tank, spitting out fish and plastic corals, feeling like thick glass, listening to the bubbles in her stomach: 'Something in Loukia's stomach suddenly stirs again. If her body was transparent everyone, including that waiter, would see. A tiny bubble now forms between her lips. That bubble bursts prematurely, the air, the whole world, starts smelling of fish' (101). Loukia's body becomes the centre of the human protagonist's experience - reflecting Merleau-Ponty's embodied phenomenology again - and simultaneously turns that body into a *thing* - mirroring Heidegger's jug allegory - a container shaped by the inside rather than the outside, half fish half fish tank, while ironically enwrapping earth, heaven, mortals and gods (just like Heidegger's jug). This fusion is strongly evident through the dialogue used at the fancy dress party scene, where angels intermix with mermaids, babies with pillows and birth with suffocation:

'That mermaid's about to give birth'
'She put a pillow'
'But she's pushing. Two angels are holding her hand'
'Panic attack, Loukia's just struggling to breathe' (119)

Although the in-betweenness of Loukia's identity is not reflected in the way she speaks, as it happens in short fictions like 'Philip' or 'Magdalena,' for example, Loukia becomes a powerful bodily representation of Heidegger's jug allegory because she projects a universal symbolism through her martyr-like transformation. A symbolic dimension which ironically comes in contrast to the way her husband sees her, by switching her off as one would switch off a fish tank and let all fish inside die:

'Shall we go to bed?'
'Mm...'

⁵¹Constrained writing is a literary technique in which the writer follows some restrictions in relation to word/letter use, vocabulary, punctuation and so on. The Oulipo group of writers, founded in 1960 by Raymond Queneau and François Le Lionnais, used such techniques. A famous Oulipian example is Georges Perec's lipogrammatic novel *La Disparition* (1969), which was written without using the letter e. Constrained writing in connection to objects or objectifications is evident in Jonathan Ruffian's experimental short fiction collection 'A Gun is Not Polite: Violent Sho(r)t Stories & Bloody Pistol Poetry' (2019). The collection uses sentences found on the internet and a gun appears in almost every sentence.

'Can you switch off the light?'

'Mm...'

Eyes half-closed, Mike . . . finds Loukia's long right earring instead; he pulls it. 'Let's go,' he tells her. 'I've switched it off.' (104)

To conclude this chapter, in a creative writing context, living and lifeless characters can hover like *flesh* and *reversibility* between embodied phenomenology's main dualities: subject/object, the touching/touched and the looking/looked at, while also preserving their distinct qualities in such a merging process. Such in-between characters, by finding refuge in the container of (short) fiction, can also become poised between the ordinary and the extraordinary in order to reflect wider personal and sociopolitical realities and thus, turn themselves into allegorical containers like Heidegger's jug. As writers trying to mirror such a double identity and in-betweenness in object-centred texts (through content, character and setting), we should search for techniques that can express such an in-betweenness in form/language as well, by experimenting with words, punctuation, double readings, visualities and so on. As I pointed out in the first chapter, we can also find ways to integrate an object's thingness into such a hybridity, a 'morphism' which does not solely derive from the 'anthrōpos' but also from the 'pragma,' from the shape and expression of lifelessness itself. When in (short) fiction, therefore, just like objects, human characters can also become tools *to be used differently*, and can transform into 'pragmamorphized' entities contained by the 'pragmamorphism' of objects.

Conclusion

Although I always approached the lifeless existences around me as short fiction material and tools *to be used differently*, my fascination with the visuality of such a process was what always sparked my creativity; that tendency to gawk at things, and then to start noticing. In order to be able to complete this research journey, a further slowing down was required. The enforced quarantine measures of the Coronavirus crisis allowed it, despite the challenges that came along with it. The deeper sense of silence Merleau-Ponty talked about was now a step closer. A glove stirred as if gesturing or kicking back, a dripping pipe interconnected the living with the lifeless by sounding like high-heels in the middle of the night. The lights of the rubbish truck and the curious eyes of wardrobe knobs were deeply appreciated. One day, I experienced an *extended* silent embrace with the palm tree by the balcony. The tree had a mysterious, consoling integrity, a kind of 'palmness' which seemed to have nothing to do - or maybe everything to do - with me.

Undeniably, *Objessions* - as both a creative and critical quest - has explored narrative and linguistic mechanisms which could be used to present lifeless and in-between characters, taken out from real life and thrown into short fiction as Heidegger's Being is 'thrown into the world,' searching for authenticity. By focusing on objects, objectifications and subject-object identities, I have explored similar objectifications and hybridities in form/language: for example, experimentations with how each object or subject-object could speak or be described on the page. The analysed aspects of Merleau-Ponty's and Heidegger's philosophy led to the construction of a creative writing methodology which aimed to animate objects in a variety of ways, often exceeding the limits of their conventional uses in everyday life, by turning them from Heidegger's tools to be used to tools *to be used differently* and from objects attached to the bodies of human users/characters to more independent and symbolic entities, close to how Heidegger's jug presents itself. I also aimed to project, through Merleau-Ponty's concepts of *flesh* and *reversibility*, the hybridity within subject-object characters, as well as the active exchange of roles between the living and the lifeless (through focusing on content, character, setting and language).

What started off and also continued as a main aim was the research on the impact an object and objectification focus, as well as an object's conventional use, could have on actual form/language. In other words, how form/language, like the blind man's stick in Merleau-Ponty's cane allegory, could become an extension of the object in focus; a narrative expression of its gesture, silence and

physiognomy, as a significant part of Merleau-Ponty's embodied phenomenology suggests. And more broadly speaking, how human characters could become more passive and objects more active in the container of (short) fiction. Starting from short fictions which clearly presented object characters, like photocopiers, toasters, chairs and sofas, both attached to and detached from human bodies, I later moved to narrative depictions of an active in-betweenness and to human characters looking like or becoming objects, as if eventually transformed by objects, and therefore, to a broader sense of 'pragmamorphism' with dystopian implications.

Such a powerful control of objects over humanity is implied in the summary description of Ian Bogost's *Alien Phenomenology or What It's Like to Be a Thing* (2012): 'Humanity sat at the centre of philosophical thinking for too long.' 'Humanity sat at the centre of *literature* for too long,' we could also state at this point, now approaching the end of this research journey or, maybe, a new beginning. One of the main aims of *Objessions* was to revisit literature and creative writing through a more object-centred approach. To allow objects to engage more space in a text, rather than simply acting as an enrichment of human characters or a decoration of human settings and contexts. At the same time, I wanted to allow readers to see objects as Merleau-Ponty's embodied phenomenology also sees them, not as sterile, detached junk but as part of a vibrant and interconnected experience. The investigation of relevant object-centred short fictions also revealed that there was a gap between an object or subject-object focus and its actual impact on form/language, as not many writers chose to explore the possibility of an object language/speech, a language/speech which should be open towards other forms of expression besides words, like visuals, asemic writing, typography and so on; a language which should not necessarily reflect humanity but an object's thingness at the same time (the 'morphē,' the form and appearance, of the 'pragma,' the object itself). What this study actually shows is that solely modelling object characters to human characters, as it commonly occurs, not only limits a writer's tendency towards experimentation, but restricts these object characters to human clones, possibly putting their credibility at stake. The vacuum sucking all words at the end of the collection, for example, could be taken as a radical and alienating act but it actually manages to echo this specific object's power and control in the text, by using the functional identity of the object itself. Although the mirroring of humanity *through* objects and objectifications was a constant focus of this study, the possibility of the invention of other creative writing techniques to animate objects as more unique and more distinct literary characters was one of the most important outcomes.

Expanding this study's implications for language, in the *New York Times* article 'A Storyteller's Shoptalk' (15 February 1981), Raymond Carver states the following: 'It's possible, in a poem or a short story, to write about commonplace things and objects using commonplace but precise language, and to endow those things . . . with immense, even startling power.' This is something vividly evident in the collection *Objessions*, as most objects in focus, others more and others less, are presented with a kicking back tendency towards power, autonomy or even a new life. However, this did not always occur through a 'commonplace language,' since, as already mentioned, such a language would simply model objects to humanity. At points, the language devised was infused with linguistically and visually unusual details: robot-like elements, mixed media hybridities, neologisms, visuals and so on. The photocopier protagonist, for instance, even if it existed in a text, could not be limited to written language only. A big part of such an object's identity, as I have already stressed, is also its visuality; hence, such a writing approach demanded a more flexible attitude towards media and disciplines, allowing their fusion whenever necessary. Despite the risks of such an approach, and the danger of alienating the reader, as an online article on creative PhDs states, such a new knowledge 'expresses itself in creative works which question and extend language, forms and genres' (Krauth), something which, hopefully, has also been reflected in *Objessions*.

Although this study does not focus on short fiction as a form but rather as a container for the cultivation of object or objectified characters, it reveals the possibility of applying its investigated creative writing techniques to longer forms of prose as well. This opens up a dialogue between writers of different forms and styles, and the space for a future study on objects or objectifications in relation to different literary forms and genres. Expanding the possibility of a wider impact in the context of creative writing and creative writing education, this study could be useful to writers and creative writing tutors, especially those interested in objects, objectifications and subject-object hybridities, as it presents a variety of creative writing approaches in relation to object and subject-object depictions in short fiction. This study could also become relevant to philosophers and other thinkers investigating Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger (even if in relation to a creative writing study which did not research the above thinkers in great depth, but which applied aspects of their thinking to a creative writing context).

Furthermore, creatively exploring concepts of phenomenology in order to reflect the human, the non-human and the in-between, was a fascinating path to follow, as it demanded a more 'flesh-like' and organic way of perceiving both life and creative writing. This journey showed that it was not only possible to construct object/objectified characters, through applying the selected philosophical ideas

to creative writing, but also those active gaps, those invisible in-between forces which connect subject and object characters, as well as subject and object qualities, as in short fictions like 'Pillars' and 'Jack,' for instance. The openness offered by the selected terminology used by Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty guided the research process, but also preserved the necessary freedom which a creative process required. In other words, I was not restricted, as a creative writer, by the terminology I used but I was able to choose whether I wished to follow, challenge or destabilize it, depending on the character or context I was constructing, through a similar openness and flexibility towards form/language. Consequently, following Rom Harre's statement, the literary language used to animate objects tried to become 'imperfect but ... perfectible' (*Physical Being* 185), like that silent raw material which characterises objects but also gives them the freedom, like the marble of a statue, to transform into something else.

Further expanding the above transformative quality of objects in relation to form/language - and the way objects/objectifications can reflect wider personal and sociopolitical realities - it became apparent that such a focus brought me even closer to magical realist texts. Magical realism seems to be open towards object animations, if we choose to bring to mind not only the magical realism of Latin America but also writers like Calvino, and especially Calvino's words in *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*: 'We might even say that any object in a narrative is a magic object' (39). Therefore, a deeper connection of objects and subject-objects to contemporary magical realism, including surrealism, the grotesque, hybrid-genre writing and other in-between modes/genres, could become food for thought for a future creative writing study. Additionally, a future point of investigation could also be the application of Graham Harman's OOO (object-oriented ontology) to a creative writing context, since this school of thought radically marginalizes humanity and makes objects independent in a shared metaphorical world, something which is also reflected in *Objessions* but which could be expanded further. Such an object-object interaction could also present new ways of object animation, not only coming from humans or the object itself, as this study has shown, but also passed down from one object to another.

In conclusion, if I were to give an answer as to why I wrote *Objessions*, a spontaneous and honest confession would be, like Merleau-Ponty's example of the touching/touched hand, to feel objects, to make objects feel back, and to try to surprise readers, in the same way the footnote narrator in 'The Brief Happiness of a Charming Murder' becomes surprised: 'Who would've thought that a thing would do such a thing?' (42). And returning to that awkward moment when a part of our clothing gets caught on the edge of a piece of furniture, or when the finger of a glove gestures towards us,

one more reason I wrote *Objessions* was to appreciate those daily moments when something lifeless *extends* and tries to speak to or act upon us, affecting our life not necessarily in our way, but also 'in its own little way' (Davis, 'The Cornmeal,' *Can't and Won't* 33).

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