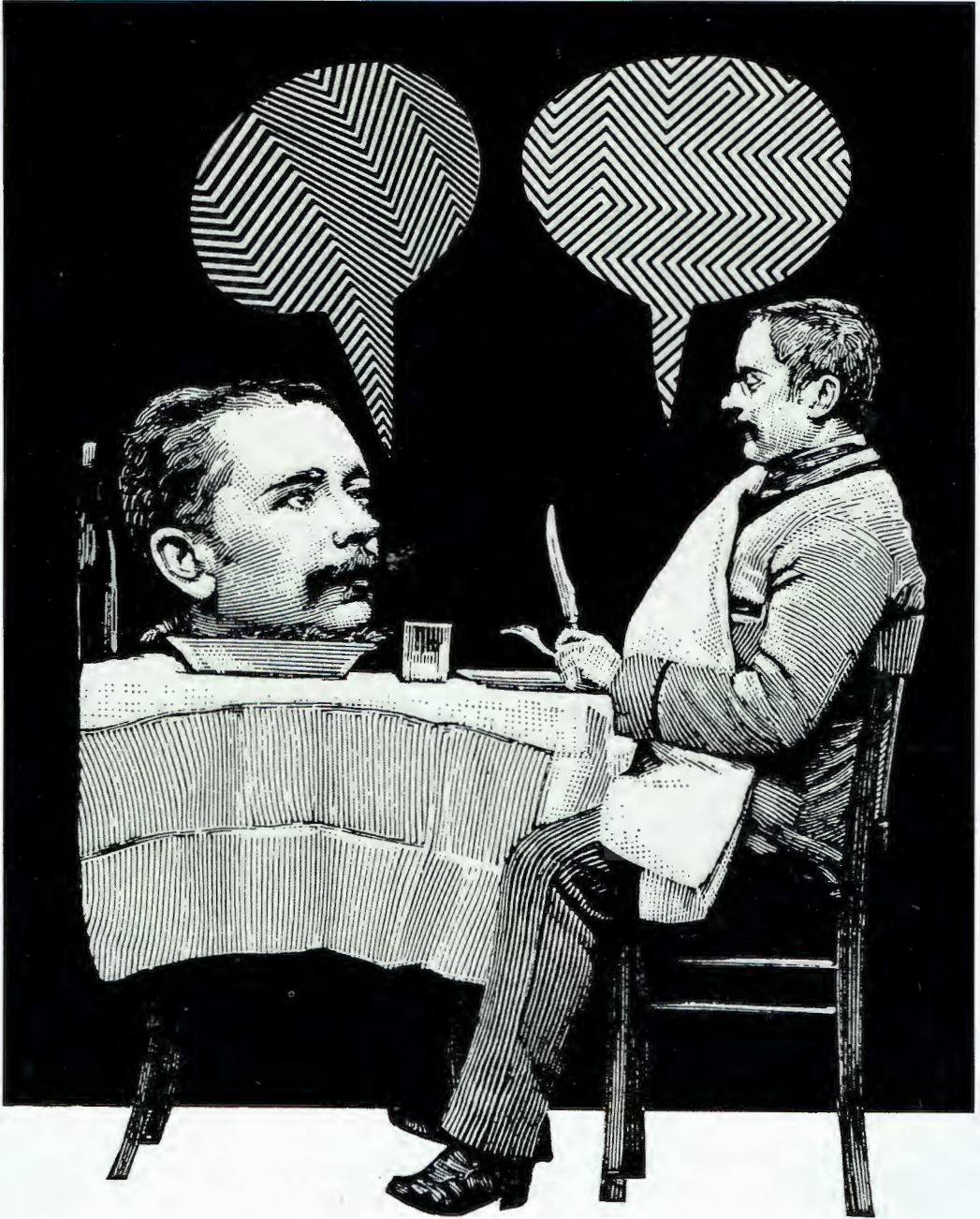


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Editor Paul Hetherington
Book Review Editor Geoffrey Dutton
Poetry Editor Peter Rose
Prose Fiction Editor Sarah Day
Picture Editor Morgyn Phillips
Editorial Chair Ian Templeman
Design TheArtworks, Canberra
Photography NLA Photographics
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Notes on Contributors

S. T. Gill and his audiences

A multi-volume publication on the work of S.T. Gill is in the final stages of preparation; it will include a comprehensive fully illustrated catalogue of all known Gill drawings, paintings and prints.

To assist in locating works held in private collections, the author, Dr Sasha Grishin, seeks to contact persons who own works by S. T. Gill, or who know of Gill works in private collections; who may write in confidence to him

C/- Department of Art History, Australian National University, PO Box 4, Canberra, ACT 2601.

Voices, Volume II, Number 4 (1992) will feature an article by Dr Grishin on S. T. Gill's contribution to defining the Australian landscape.

Not So Close To The Pole

MELISSA BRUCE

No-one answers the door. There's a good chance she's not even home. I don't knock more than once. Twice is sad on a regular day but completely pathetic at Christmas.

A dark-eyed man opens the door. When he sees that I've not come for business or bail he quietly disappears. I step over the mail they never open because 'nobody really lives here'.

There are six floors and no banisters. She lives on the fifth. My heart's beating loudly, more from altitude than hope. I push at the part-opened door but there's something behind it. Probably Louelle.

It's a very small room and she shares it with most of her past. It looks like a remake of Monroe's Last Night, and the goddess herself lies there still on a mattress that's seen I think more than one Christmas.

'Hullo?' draws a sleepy Irish voice through last night's lipstick.

'Merry Christmas', I say and she groans.

Her Rubenesque body lies on an angle, tangled in mismatched sheets. She's wrapped in crimson silk pyjamas. She's wrapped in contradictions. Borrowed clothes and Dior perfume, Scotch Eggs and poetry, the Dole and the Degree. 'Our Louelle' says her fishing-town family. 'Our

Louelle', but of course she belongs to no-one.

I tell her I'll run the bath. She has a passion for water. I don't know if it's foetal or sexual or thirst but I figure it might wake her up.

On the ground floor again and I'm testing the water and wondering why Australians have an inferiority complex when few English houses have showers. A crippled candle sits on the window-sill left from a previous session. No other light would invite you to stay in the room. It doesn't feel clean but there is penicillin in mould. The water reaches its four inch mark and runs cold from thereon. There's not enough warmth in England.

Back on the fifth floor I watch her hair undergo some half-hearted attempt at order. It doesn't respond. She bought a book about Edie Sedgewick. It was for 'inspiration' but I feel I should tell her she looks more like Warhol today.

I see a Tarot card under her tea cup. I'm concerned about whose life she's changed. I pull out the card like the table-cloth trick but I obviously need some more practice. The picture is drowning which makes me remember the bath. I tell her the man downstairs could be walking on water and she hollers from the Irish moor of her bed to 'Turn off the bath please William — and have it yourself if you wish.'

I don't think he will do either.

NOT SO CLOSE TO THE POLE

'William's not one of the copers of life', she says with a Celtic smile.

While the bath overflows we share trivial intimacies as best friends do. About last night:

'Don't ask', she says. 'I'm on a post-sex Catholic guilt trip.' Looking round the room she seems surprised, as though in her dreams she'd envisaged a palace and woken a bit disappointed. I think she must go through this every morning.

Her room is part-wallpapered in alfoil. Some kind of violent impulse must have caused her to strip it; at least to begin. If she were a knitter she'd have lots of sleeves and no jumper. Now there are pointy, grey gaps between the silver which she's outlined in thick black texta. There's lots of graffiti in Ireland but I don't think she did it. The shapes have left prehistoric birds and exotic palm trees. She's probably reincarnated. I can see her roaming some long lost forgotten jungle. I can see all this in the foil. I can't see myself. She tells me it's quite good for insulation but the room is icy cold, not at all helped by the potentially aromatherapeutic radiator. The heat in the room is Louelle.

There are ointments and photographs, cheap jewels and ash and lids trying to screw the wrong jars; files excreting their hand-written pages and casual drawers letting black clothes escape, underground London designer-ripped clothes for the look that says 'Don't try to rape me, I've already done it myself'; jackets without arms and tapes without jackets of Brideshead, the Go Go's, the Smiths and a half eaten packet of old cigarettes and a half smoked bag of stale crisps.

'It'll be all right', she said to me once, 'whenever the weather gets better.'

While she takes off her crimson pyjamas I make my way to the window to look at the view. There isn't one. There isn't even a sky and the window is crying. There's a dismembered, white plaster hand in the window-sill box. I've seen the rest of its body in the 'garden'. It's stuck in a gesture that seems to be asking some profoundly infinite question. It hasn't got roots but it looks permanent.

She's put on more perfume than clothes. She does smell exciting. She smells like we're somewhere else.

At last we venture into the basement depths of the kitchen. She slumps in a chair with a hangover hand on her forehead. This is *not* like my mother on Christmas day. This is not quite like Christmas day. I've spent most closer to the South Pole, surrounded by wrappings and family and flies and the bush. Here it's just the two of us and the turkey.

We can't find the turkey. She hid it from the cat, who jumps from the second floor window and stays alive. I don't know if it's trying to break its neck or some ridiculous record. We search in the nightmarish corners of the kitchen before finding the bird, with over-exuberant joy, in the breadbin. This is not good for her headache, I can tell.

Louelle gently stuffs the turkey. The stuffing instructions are on the packet in the bin. I drink some wine and she drinks a little more. This is more like it. This at least smells a bit more like Christmas.

While the turkey crackles and gobbles in the gas chamber, we exchange words in half sentences. That's how well we think we know each other. She tells me the Russian ring I gave her plays Russian Roulette with her finger. She says it cuts off circulation and has to be worn on a chain round her neck.

'Incentive,' she says, 'to lose weight.' Luckily she never does — she'd be far too attractive.

She consumes the last inch of wine and stands with a grand, ethereal grace. Perhaps she's the Angel of Islington. She drifts to the cupboard and suddenly, violently vacuums the base of the stairs. I don't ask obvious questions. I shout over the noise that I'm going to buy cranberry sauce. I don't know what she hears but she laughs. Out loud and a lot.

There is no-one outside. I notice the quiet but it's not a relief, it's haunting. It shouldn't make very much difference because no-one in London makes eye contact, but at least in a crowd there's a chance someone accidentally might.

There are coloured lights in the windows of family homes. Tinsel and angels and stars. Gingerbread men who don't seem to be running away. Louelle has no decorations, her ground floor windows are barred, but I guess on a dark night a passer-by might just see the light of her candle.

I watch the wind chasing rubbish in circles around the empty markets and arrive beside a 'drunk' at the last open shop. He's singing a basically un-Christmas tune and is toasting yesterday's traffic. I feel we have something in common and smile but he hurls some abuse and swipes at the ghost between us.

While I'm shopping, a man rushes in and grabs last-minute cheap champagne. I buy raspberry jam, not from choice. I wish the shopkeeper 'Happy Christmas' and console her for having to work on this special day.

'Triple time,' she says with an I've-got-my-life-together nod:

Meanwhile back at the palace, Louelle has set the video to *play* when the turkey is ready. Her watch is big but it doesn't work. She says we can eat when Charlie Brown is recording. Her TV guide is a week old, so I check my watch while she waits. She tells me the 'vegies' are in (she got that from me) and she's hand-scrubbed the potatoes. She makes it sound like an ancient Irish custom but I can't think of any other way to wash them.

We wait. The lounge is alive. A furry thing tries to crawl out of a mug by the phone. An old newspaper waves at the permanently open window, a pepper grinder peeps up between cushions on the sofa and a 1950s wire dress-stand leans by the door like a missing relative. Louelle's left foot, in its odd candy sock, is digging a hole in the carpet — a fat worm searching for home.

She hands me the Tarot pack and tells me to cut it. The cards have already been shuffled. I'm a little concerned about this. She lays them out in the most meticulous order, putting shame to the rest of the house. I watch her expression. She watches the cards. My future lies flat on its face. I don't believe in this so why am I nervous? Why am I playing at all?

I get a few cards that I like so I start to believe them. In fact I'd be feeling quite good if I weren't so hungry. This one's important. It must be, it's last. I start thinking about the way I save best till last. When I get to the interesting people at a party I find they've already gone. And with a roast dinner, I'm too full to eat the potatoes. I'm thinking I'll have to change all this when I realise Louelle hasn't moved. Not her hand or her face or the card.

After a moment she looks it up in the book,

but I have a feeling she knows. I've not seen her eyebrows look like this before. She asks me if I want to hear it but how do I know? She says it's not a good card. It might be worse *not* to know. Anyway, I don't believe this. I give her the royal nod and a smile to show that I don't really care.

'This one', she says, 'means The End.'

I make a sound short of a laugh. She looks at the sound with such compassion, then seriously back to the book.

'Termination, Illness or Death.'

All would be silent if the card wasn't screaming at me.

Getting back to the more practical things I say that I'll just check the turkey. She yells out that it's '*open to interpretation*'. As if I didn't know that. She yells that '*it mightn't mean death*'. I can tell she feels really bad about this. It being Christmas and all.

I go through all the family. Vivid and varied deaths between pieces of turkey. She asks me if it's nearly ready. I swallow and then say 'yes'. I decide that it's me and a bomb while I'm shopping at Harrods. It doesn't make sense, it's not where I shop, but it'll do for now. I go back to the lounge with a generous smile.

'That was a really fun game, let's play it again.'

These could be my last words. Do I want them to be? Then I recall the card I saw in her room. It's a great relief to tell her *it's not a full pack*.

I almost kill myself running up the banisterless stairs. The card is wet and alone. I take it back to Louelle for a consultation. She says it's going to be harder to get rid of me than she thought.

I tell her I love her too.

The card represents Stagnation. She says it's hers. It's true she hasn't moved for a while. She says it's a sign to go from the lounge to the kitchen. I don't tell her about the turkey's amputation.

We rescue the bird. She says 'I'll have the blue plate and you have the goldy-starry one', so I eat from her plate and she from mine. I eat the potatoes first.

We talk. She's lived forty years at twenty-three, so I listen to her Irish philosophies and she to my Australian tales. I hear the history of her country's crusade in her blood and wonder if she sees an untamed, red desert, deep in the heart of me.

'Too much stuffing', she mumbles as we waddle back to the lounge. A great lethargy falls upon us and we become horizontal. I can't contemplate moving, ever again. The pepper-grinder suffocates under the weight of her post-Christmas daydreams and soon her translucent white hand, with the mark of a ring and her big, stopped watch, falls off the edge of the couch. Michelangelo would have painted it. Maybe I should read her palm, it might answer some of my questions. It might tell me how long we're going to be here. It feels permanent. I wanted to feel like I belonged to the world but I'm missing my local milk bar. I didn't want to go home.

We wake together. Literally. Simultaneously sitting upright. It's a shock and it's dark. Very. There's a horrible momentary flash of confused displacement.

'What the hell are you still doing here?' she says.

I think it's a very good question.