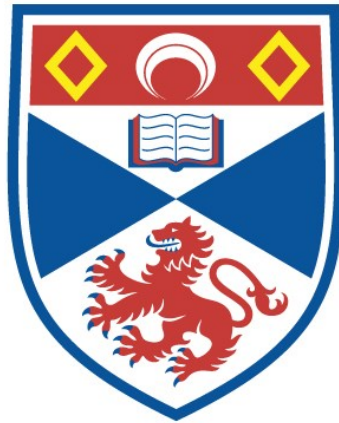


# The prospectus

Gabriel Levine Brislin

A thesis submitted for the degree of MFA  
at the  
University of St Andrews



2024

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## *Abstract*

'The Prospectus' is a collection of poetry comprising of three distinct but interrelated sections. The first part is comprised entirely of a long poem called 'The Book of Esther', a fragmented exploration of the writings of Dutch-Jewish diarist Etty Hillesum. Centred on Hillesum's relationship to writing as a practice, the poem draws upon the supposed 'ephemera' found in the diary, and contrasts it with the idealised 'book' she consistently writes about one day completing. 'The Book of Esther' references writers such as Rahel Varnhagen and Walter Benjamin in order to draw out their historical and creative affinities with Hillesum's thought. The second section contains a selection of lineated poems in a more lyrical or autobiographical mode, most of which address ideas around artistic production, the rift between artist and artwork, and the tension between *praxis* and *poiesis*, building on the questions about creation raised in 'The Book of Esther'. In these poems, family emerges as a key theme alongside the repeated motif of painting and image-making. This section also contains the sequence 'New Narratives', which repurposes 10-syllable lines from a specific copy of Katherine Mansfield's 'The Garden Party' to create a chain of sonnets that both evade and invite comparison to the source material, troubling distinctions between making and remaking. 'Lead White', the long prose-poem which makes up the entirety of the third section, furthers the investigation into artistic *praxis* and draws parallels between the techniques of various Old Masters and an oblique, circuitous narrative centred on affect and memory. The poem was written in response to the TV series 'Tom Keating: On Painters', in which the infamous forger and art restorer showed audiences how to convincingly copy paintings by Turner, Constable, Titian, etc. while teaching them about the lost techniques used by painters of a previous age.

## *Acknowledgements*

Thank you first and foremost to Karen Solie for all of the time and careful attention she invested in this manuscript, and for helping to realise its shape and structure just as it threatened to fall apart. Thank you also to Daisy Lafarge, Oli Hazzard, Don Paterson and Matthew Caley for all the thoughtful comments and advice they offered in workshops and meetings over the last two years. I am grateful to have received a small grant from the St Leonards College Travel Fund, which allowed me to carry out important research relating to 'The Book of Esther'. Thank you to my friends and family for constant, unwavering support.

'Bow' is dedicated to Stephen Thompson. 'Visiting my Sister in Manchester' is for Katya, with apologies. 'Moving Images' is dedicated to the memory of Alec Eliaser Levine. 'New Narratives' is for Arlo Gilham. 'Birthday' is for Maxime Swift, with unending love.

This manuscript is dedicated to the memory of Rhiannon Auriol Williams, who was the kindest, sharpest, and most dazzlingly gifted poet I have ever had the privilege of calling a friend. I would not be writing these poems at all if it wasn't for her influence and encouragement. Her generosity, openness and patience will always stay with and sustain me. Thank you for everything, Rhiannon.

## ***The Prospectus***

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Lead White

*Notes*

*One*



## The Book of Esther

*The Annunciation of the Book (the Prospectus) is one of those dilatory manoeuvres which control our internal utopia. I imagine, I fantasize, I embellish and I polish the great book of which I am incapable.*

Roland Barthes  
(tr. Richard Howard)

*I write with the greatest reluctance, and always feel inhibited and uncertain when I do. Yet I want to become a writer one day, would you believe it?*

Etty Hillesum to Julius Spier  
8 March, 1941 (tr. Arnold J. Pomerans)

*Many of the girls possess diaries. With little brass studs. With keys. They think they possess their lives.*

Fleur Jaeggy  
(tr. Tim Parks)

*Note* Etty Hillesum was a Dutch-Jewish diarist and language tutor who lived in Amsterdam during the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands. She wrote about her daily experiences, her intense relationships, her burgeoning writing practice, and her gradual turn towards a devoted, resilient spirituality in a series of diaries and letters that span the period from March 1941 to September 1943. Against the backdrop of increasingly severe measures against Jews in the occupied Netherlands, she writes repeatedly about her desire to write (fiction, philosophy, history, theology, translations from the Russian greats, etc.) as well as her apparent inability to put pen to paper, to say anything she truly means. Towards the end of her short life, her diary entries transitioned away from daily accounts and became more abstract and contemplative, many of them addressed directly to God. Her lover, who was also her analyst, the German-born psychoanalyst Julius Spier, died the day SS officers arrived at his apartment to deport him to Westerbork, the main transit camp in the occupied Netherlands. He had just completed 'The Hands of Children', the first volume of a planned trilogy which would combine the science of palm-reading with Jungian psychoanalysis. By the summer of 1943, Etty, her parents and her brother Mischa were confined at Westerbork, and in September of that year they were all deported to Auschwitz.

## I

As an adolescent, private carriage on the train to Paris. Nose pressed to the glass, the landscape pulsing: dusty, buzzing fields, squat cottages cut from rock, thin clouds streaking, fenced-off cells of livestock folded into the hillside. Now, cutting through a thicket, each car rattles on the track. Mindless, clutching at a notebook: 'grey dark black but inside bright orange or crimson' – the carriage, swerving, shudders and jolts the pencil – reset: 'it is certain that the world dies a separate death for each of us / yet the world still exists' – idiotic, tinpot philosophy, but the language urging. Lashes of rain [...]

restless at the window by the desk. The world without motion, without luck. Too much trust, in the words, the belief that they will come. I am nothing and know nothing. But last night, walking home, light and languid from the white Chianti: the irrefutable knowledge that I *shall* be a writer one day, and the long nights through which I will write and write will be the most beautiful nights of all.

## II

The blue lines of my notebook run like stitches through the day: peeking out, pulling the world together, only to dip below the surface again. Typing up a letter, I see one pierce the air on the tip of a needle as the sun unravels its light in the last of the autumn leaves, shadows dancing in the dusty window. Then come the headaches, days of waking breathless, drenched in sweat. Knots, tangles, cuts. When I try to pull the thread the fabric only frays.

Last night, Loekie could hardly focus on her Russian. Scratching, her knuckles flushed with rashes, she smiled and stammered. No buttermilk, no rye bread, no carrots. Her round, darting eyes; her sharpened face. I want to hold her, to hold onto her, to shut her up in a story that never ends.

O Loekie, I long  
to watch you tip-toe like a child on my pale blue lines,  
to tie you up in them.

### III

Rain pelting the window. Head resting  
in the crook of an elbow, slumped at the desk.  
Glazed, tired eyes can't see past the light twitch of a  
laced wrist; dry nib lazily scratching at the pages of  
an exercise book. Raindrops; dead letters, clipped  
threads slipping in and out of text. Black umbrellas  
like petals on a lake. Picturing the dust  
that sticks to his boot soles, the dirty puddles shatter  
on his trouser cuff. Dark as night though day broke,  
cathedral-quiet, over an hour ago. No dreams.

Finally slept with forehead pressed to the receiver.  
Cold and hard like nothing else; silent, bulky full stop.  
But when he calls: to press a cheek to the curve of a  
question mark and carry it across the room.

Disc of honeyed light spilling  
from the desk lamp, pointlessly. A bowl of almonds;  
the woolly bloom of lethargy.

Etty, I loathe you.

Etty, you fool.

#### IV

The girl who could not kneel. That is the story I would like to write. Textbooks and rosebuds jumbled on the desk, bread crumbs in the carpet. The girl who could not kneel but learnt to do so locked in the bathroom with the rough matting the colour of coconut, fumbling through the cluttered drawers when the force of it overcame her. The tap running, the steam rising, the silence. Mouth trembling, crouched by the tub, intoning quiet letters to no one.

St. Augustine on an empty stomach. His love letters to God, the way the words coalesce into a thick mist and just burn off into nothing. To write you endless, labyrinthine love letters only to watch them dissipate, dispelled like ashes in the frigid winter air while the dirty fabric scratches at my knees. Always, the urge to wrench my eyes open to wring my folded hands.

‘This thought bubbled up in my mind like a spring from the deepest level of my heart, and I wrote it all down in two or three books, I think – only you know, God, for I have forgotten. I no longer have this work; I do not know how it went astray from me.’



## VI

Last night                    we leafed through his facsimiles  
of Japanese prints and woodcuts.                    Pine trees.  
Plum blossom.    White orchids cinched to the stalk;  
frail, trembling in the emptiness. This is how I want  
to write: brittle wisps against a wordless background.

Not to work in spite of silence,    but to give it shape,  
like a lit window    pulsing    in the distance on a dark  
night. I want to look at the blank sheet of paper and  
see in it the root,    the tough    kernel    of truth.  
Not its unbearable absence trained on me like a gun.

## VII

*after Julius Spier*

‘When we first assess a patient, we must attend to any differences between the right hand and the left. The lines and markings we discover on a patient’s right palm reveal to us a map of their ancestry: their parent’s temperaments and traumas, the residues of heritage; the history that informs and produces them.

The lines of the left hand, however, contain the grain of the individual. Here, the singular soul before us becomes apparent: their aptitudes and limitations, inclinations towards material or spiritual wealth; the traits inherent to their being, only waiting to be brought to the fore. For example, in this reproduction (fig. ix) of the hand of a girl of three, we see [...]’

Two officers	with studded insignia
and a hand-signed	deportation order
saunter into the practice	to find
the preeminent	psycho-chirologist
choleric	on his death bed:

but my work is	not yet finished
----------------	------------------



## VIII

*after Rahel Varnhagen*

Etty writes: I feel like a small battlefield. Ox-eye daisies on the dresser. Ring of white light from a steel-capped desk-lamp. An exceedingly bloody battlefield. Pellets of aspirin from an unstopped bottle, dry-swallowed. All one can hope to do is to keep oneself available, to allow oneself to be the ground on which history falls.

Later, on leave from the camps: I long to be a lily of the field. There is nothing that I want; nothing that I need. One shirt on my back, another in my rucksack. A pocket Bible. My Russian dictionaries, Tolstoy's folktales. One volume of Rilke's letters. A lambswool sweater. A lily of the field.

Rahel, in her turret on the Jägerstrasse, a century earlier: In my heart people press and die as on a battlefield. Since I do not want peace, and since people are as plentiful as sand on a beach, I bear it like the earth. Like the earth bears bluebells, yellow lupins. Bright fields of wildflowers between the dining hall and the delousing hut. Human lives, as thick as flies.

## IX

*All posts  
Are single old past now, although some posts  
Are forwarded*

*W.H. Auden*

In the end the departure came without warning.  
The last letter, a postcard pushed through the  
cracks of an airless carriage hurtling through a field.  
Slivers of sky, the scream of the wheels. Nothing

[...] that has ever happened should be regarded as  
lost to history; the past becomes citable, transcribed  
in a delicate, miniature script. Exiled, evading the  
Gestapo in Marseilles and Basel, Benjamin writes the  
blasted shards and flashes of his *Theses* on a fleet of  
aerogrammes and sends them back to his empty  
apartment in Paris. The fragments lie in a pile on the  
floorboards; awaiting, anchoring, his deferred return.

Almost finished with his day's work, the farmer walks  
to the edge of his land at dusk. He runs his torch  
along the tracks and crouches down to wipe away the  
dust. A cruel harvest. He picks up the postcard, slips  
it in his shoulder bag and turns to walk on. Another,  
caught between the stalks of heather just coming into  
bloom. A set of four, folded down the middle to keep  
them together, resting near the fencepost. He leans  
over the wire mesh to collect the final sheet, lying in  
a neighbour's field.

At home,  
the night's wreckage spread out on the kitchen table,  
he tries to decipher the handwriting by candlelight.  
In the back of an old ledger book, and then on fresh  
envelopes, he transcribes each intended address and  
lets the kettle whistle on the stove while the autumn  
wind that shakes the grass streams in through a crack  
in the window.

X

*The last sentence of the passage [...] does not appear in the manuscript and seems to have been completely made up by the person who produced the transcription.*

‘What needs eradicating is the evil in man,  
not man himself.’ Softness in the spring air;  
muffled drumming of construction. The radio’s  
papery whistle stutters and stills with a click. She  
places the exercise book on the table, lifts its mottled  
turquoise cover.

A team of researchers scan the hand-writing, hung  
like billowing linen between the pale blue lines.  
Delicate, illegible, loose pages scotch-taped to the  
spine: each notebook is designated to a specialist for  
transcription. Pencils like stich-rippers trip and snag.

Running her fingers along the loops of script, its knots  
and slippages, softly sounding out each sentence,  
feeling the black ink quiver on the larynx. Punching  
the keys; typing *III*

*[...] bolted sleepers beneath the wheels.*

*If I rattle on your rails like an empty freight car, where else can  
I go when the track’s ripped up, when the engine fails? One step,  
in your shoes, beyond? This frail garment of memory;  
our soliloquy. What needs eradicating.*

*appendix – Westerbork, a palimpsest*

[A forest.]

[A clearing.]

[A vast stretch of heathland; arid, riddled with sand.]

[A set of barracks, constructed by the Dutch government in 1939 to house the influx of Jews after the initial plan to build a central refugee camp in the Veluwe was rejected due to its proximity to the Royal Palace.]

[Arriving in October, the first 22 residents found the farm unworkable, the food scarce, the rooms cold.]

[A bombardment on Rotterdam.]

[A kitchen.]

[A cornflower.]

[A warplane.]

[Around 700 people are living at the camp when the delegation of German officials arrive; their close-cropped hair, their sky-blue eyes.]

[A barbed wire fence is erected in July.]

[A schoolhouse.]

[A theatre.]

[A wedding.]

[A watchtower.]

[A track.]

[A train.]

[A train, a train.]

[April 11, 1945: the German commander orders his guards and his staff to abandon the camp; the Canadian army encroaching, the gap between the front lines slowly closing.]

[A crowd, gathering at the gates, carrying a tattered flag.]

[After the liberation, Westerbork becomes an internment camp for SS officers, suspected collaborators and members of the NSB, the Dutch branch of the Nazi Party.]

[Around 850 Jews are still living in the camp when the new residents arrive; some of the young men, having lived as prisoners at the camp for months or even years, are hired to fill the vacant positions of prison guards.]

[A walking stick in a boy's hand, a badge on his chest.]

[A group of dead men trailing behind him, picking up twigs for firewood; pale, vacant, asking for food, for anything.]

[As the military presence escalates in revolutionary Indonesia, the Dutch Ministry of War orders the camp to be cleared and transformed into a training ground: truckloads of soldiers descend; run drills; crush buds of heather beneath their boots; dismantle, assemble bayonets; shoot targets; sleep in the barracks on chequered sacks filled with straw.]

[An agreement towards independence is reached in 1949, and the empty shell of the abolished military camp is once again repurposed, this time to provide residence to the Indo-Dutch citizens in the process of repatriation.]

[Arriving in a colonial homeland that most of them had never laid eyes on, they were dismayed at the sight of the dilapidated hangers, not dissimilar to the shacks that many of them had been forced to inhabit while imprisoned in Japanese internment camps during WWII.]

[A thousand residents are present at Christmas, 1950, but after less than a year the camp is closed, the residents forced out into overcrowded hotels.]

[A contingent of soldiers, indigenous to the Moluccan islands but loyal to the colonial forces even after independence has been officially actioned, are stationed, stranded, on Ambon, refusing to demobilise or to join the army of the new Indonesian Republic.]

[Agreements are reached, and the Netherlands arrange to temporarily accommodate those soldiers with families, who now have no option but to wait for a time that they could safely return to the Moluccas.]

[A steamer; dolphins whirling off the bow.]

[A decade.]

[An emphasis on the 'temporary' aspect of the arrangement meant that the new residents at Westerbork were purposefully isolated from Dutch society and culture, and the hundreds of soldiers who found themselves at the remote camp were not allowed to work or train with the Dutch army.]

[A new name, Woonoord Schattenberg, aimed to erase the history of the site as it gradually developed away from the frugal, rudimentary accommodation it had been designed for, growing into what might be called a small town, with shops, a cinema, a school, a hospital and a theatre.]

[A fire.]

[A barrack becomes uninhabitable; three others are severely damaged by the flames; some families flee.]

[A statement from the Dutch government admits that the long-standing policy of Moluccan repatriation is now an impossibility, and the soldiers and their families will have to remain in the Netherlands indefinitely; despite this, 80% of Moluccans residing in the Netherlands at the time are stateless, living without citizenship under Dutch law.]

[At the camp, the process of eviction begins in the late 1950's; by 1965 all of the former residents have been removed from Schattenberg; the barracks, the school, the entire settlement is demolished.]

[A train.]

[A train.]

[A bus.]

[A 30 minute walk.]

[A bus.]

[A forest.]

[A clearing.]

[An empty shell of a half-dismantled barrack; three free-standing beams were another used to be.]

[A mechanical sprinkler fizzing in the distance.]

[A row of radio telescopes, installed in 1970 after the camp is razed and abandoned for the last time; colossal constructions of glass and steel, with dishes spanning 25-meters, mobile bases mounted on rails.]

[Alien, incongruous, looking resolutely upwards.]

[A silence, or the quiet buzz and flicker of spring.]

[A length of 10-foot wire fencing, enclosing nothing.]

[A stone bench.]

[A field of purple lupins.]



***Two***

## Bow

A carpenter described to me his need  
to disassemble everything he owned.  
His car motor, his locks, his mobile phone.  
There was no curiosity, he explained,  
only a fear of what he could not claim  
to understand. If a single part slipped,  
the system collapsed. A slit on the face  
of his watch revealed the whirring below.

He'd recently completed a longbow.  
Cut from a single piece of finished yew,  
he had shaped and weighted by sight alone  
a pure form. This isolated length of bone  
relied on almost nothing: only a string  
to close the circle in, and the arrow.

## Visiting My Sister In Manchester

where she lives now, in a semi-detached  
house with five other girls, watching Clique  
on faux-leather sofas, tutting at sheets  
of shredded cardboard strewn about the street,  
wrestling with the lock and pulling the white  
plastic door shut before walking towards  
the bus-stop and riding to the station  
to meet me, half-asleep and lost amongst  
the plaited train-tracks sliding like corn-snakes  
between the high-rises and skyscrapers,  
realising it must have been months since I'd  
seen anything so impressively ominous  
as this forty storey office block, blank  
and simmering in the midday sun, when  
she corrects me, explaining it's actually  
student accommodation, emblazoned  
with garish fifteen-foot logos, glowing  
and entirely empty as we walk down  
to the Northern Quarter talking about  
the courses she's taking, the people  
she has and hasn't met, while pointing out the  
sandstone reliefs that serenade the old  
fish-market gutted from within and sold  
to developers, with cast-iron beams from  
local factories repainted in green  
to prop up the shut pop-up shops streamlined  
for short-term leases, one of which employed  
her to wrap burritos at lightning speed  
into the early hours of the morning  
when she would lock the glass door and follow  
the stag-do's down to the main road to sit  
and watch the sunrise: a glistening rift  
between the buildings where the thin canal  
picked its way past the shuttered warehouses,  
the flurry of its surface flickering  
beneath the streetlights and cold morning rays,  
and listening to her I am thinking  
about poetry and the city, if  
they exist together, if they exist  
at all; of Wordsworth on Westminster Bridge  
swaddled in calm before the threads of smoke  
start to rise, all asleep – apart from those  
awake and suffering – all except for  
him, suspended in beauty, as I am,  
walking back from the Whitworth, listening  
to Joanna Newsom, breaking through crowds  
and revelling in anonymity  
while I can, thinking about last night

at the bar where we drank warm Amstel and  
discussed generational trends in drug  
use: her old friends, my old friends, our mother  
finding a thumb-sized bag of ketamine  
in the back pocket of her dirty jeans,  
which she swore someone had given to her  
to hold onto, while I nod and say  
nothing, thinking I was not prepared  
for this conversation even though I  
knew it was coming, grateful and guilty  
when we finally change the subject to  
the latest American tragedy,  
the subtle, uneasy feeling when her  
flatmate plays 'Sicko Mode' on the kitchen  
speakers, especially after hearing those  
teenagers screaming at the cameraman  
as the music played on, as it does in  
the headphones of the man next to me in  
the Manchester Art Gallery, bobbing  
before Millais in a way I can't help  
but admire, breaking the hushed silence with  
the tinny rustle of hi-hats and snares  
as we walk past the sinking ship Turner  
painted on the Calais Strait towards  
the vaulted entrance hall I remember  
sheepishly stepping into when I was  
my sister's age, having run away from  
home one Christmas, fleeing to a friend in  
the city, turning up at his front door  
with a backpack, when he took me here  
and showed me the painting, his favourite,  
by A. Valette that I stand before now:  
blue haze on a moonlit canal, windows  
reflected in the water like a grid  
of stars, the same view my sister prized  
on her solitary night-walks home from  
work, the gurgle of cars sleepwalking on  
the motorway, the mighty heart moving  
through the night into the constant morning.

On a label next to the painting, the  
curator had written: "In 1912,  
it would have been unbearably smoggy,  
the air and water badly polluted  
and surrounded by inequality,  
but here Valette romanticised this view..."



## O

Edvard Munch kept dredging up images  
long after his body revolted. An ocular  
haemorrhage punctured his vision: *these blood clots  
form small flocks of crows when I look at the sky.*

A handful of sketches which date from this time  
are shot through with bruises: the holes in his sight  
becoming a part of the picture's design.  
*This absence. This emptiness. This too is mine.*

## Moving Images

i.

He wanted  
to paint a living landscape, the bluebells  
dressed in dew, bursting past the blades of grass.

He began it  
in Spring; but Summer ushered the lilies in,  
their stately heads erased the trampled daffodils.

He painted  
over the wet, green leaves, the heavy  
fruit, in yellow, amber, orange, brown.

He gave it up  
when daubs of white snow blotted out  
the purple strokes on the heath-bank.

\*

Abandoning his unfinished canvases,  
his six children and his stagnant career,  
John Butler Yeats, aged 68, boarded  
the liner from Liverpool to New York.

For fifteen years, the promised homecoming  
was incrementally delayed. Shifting  
from hostel to boarding house, living  
out his 'starving artist' archetype, John

scraped his board and dined with the socialites.  
Spared from the sight of their father's body  
and its slow, sustained decline, his children  
watched him grow young in the curve of his script:

"Only in his dreams is a man himself,  
he must escape the surface of his life.  
I would could home, but I can't abandon  
my portrait, or risk a change in the light.

If I was to return I would surely drown,  
— an old man in his second childhood."

\*

“In the few days since my illness lifted

I have greatly refined the hands;  
the dry paint belied an arthritic crackle  
beneath the white and blue  
of my right knuckle,  
but with a warm blush, a touch  
of crimson,  
I have restored some life  
to the surface, to the skin.

I will be finished before long.”

\*

After a decade, his last, he still deemed  
his portrait incomplete. “I dream of it,  
and I think of nothing else.” Awaiting  
his final touches, the canvas lingered  
like a lightbulb in his rented attic,  
while its likeness was lowered beneath sheets  
of February snow.



A homesick adolescent, forced to slow  
the progress of my sheltered transgressions  
for a week in suburban Toronto,

visiting grandparents I was unsure  
I had ever truly known. I had grown  
ugly in their absence; a manicured

angst festered, unaccountably at odds  
with the world and its precedents. Endured,  
I let misguided righteousness accost

the drab landscape bulldozed by snow. Slabs  
of concrete shored in the synagogues  
and detached mansions lorded over their land

with bits of plaster, plate-glass, fake-brick façades.  
Miles and miles of endless Canadian  
neighbourhoods gridded like fishnets on grass.

We drove to the outskirts, flitting by  
the makeshift shelters flanking the underpass  
before stopping at the strip mall to buy

a half-pound of salt beef wrapped in grease-  
paper, a sliced loaf of rye. They said 'Hi'  
to the table by ours in the Chinese

canteen, perched around a laminated  
Kabbalah and steaming Chow-mein. A piece  
of pork lolled on my plate in shame. Gated,

garish, their apartment complex looked out  
over grey strips of highway. On the 28th  
floor, the lift stopped; my grandmother fished a set

of keys from his pocket and pressed open the door.

*If the passing occurs / in the morning,  
the deceased must / be buried before dusk.*

I am on the train when I get the text:  
a blue link in the family group chat.

The window rattles. An oil-rig blinks in the depth-  
less night like a tangled loop of Christmas lights.

*Memorial Chapel / Broadcast Channel  
Now: Phillip Oziel / Click [Here](#) To Join*

*2PM: Elsie Bloom / Click [Here](#) To Join  
Eliazer Levine / Click [Here](#) To Join*

I turn off the orientation lock  
and stop to check if anyone's watching

as the screen fills with a self-consciously  
apocalyptic scene: black branches webbed

on a bone-white sky. A car motor gurgles  
in my headphones as a stagehand

hidden behind the lens  
angles the camera down to show

the rabbi in his slush-encrusted snow-shoes  
crunching through the crowd to his microphone.

My train draws towards its destination  
and I clutch my phone, careful not to touch

the screen as I swing my suitcase onto  
the station platform. I hear him sing

Kaddish as the escalator rises.  
On the bridge, I stop and watch my uncle

take the stage, his black mourning clothes bundled  
under a winter coat. His thin voice cracks

and the camera pans away.

“If the men  
would like to join me, pick up a shovel

from the truck, and take a scoop of gravel  
from the large pile by the graveside...”

The camera shifts towards the sky.  
I listen to the scrape and clatter,  
  
and press the  $x$  in the top right corner.

\*

*For the sake of guests / unable to attend,  
all livestreams are / archived on our website.*

## New Narratives

*after Katherine Mansfield*

i.

Through the wide open window streamed the sun or something to that effect. Good news, Miss, the girls were too much for him tonight. They flowered, they fell and were scattered. You brushed the sandwich crusts and broken meringue-shells sweeping the floor. 'Yes,' she thought, as the broom clanked, the light carts clattered, the big swinging hammers. Someone whistled, someone sang out, things would take a long time. All the same, the band changed again and played more quickly, more suddenly her cheeks crimsoned, her eyes grew, arms outstretched, as though she was crucified to the music stand; her voice rang through the name, and you heard your name for the first time.

ii.

They danced, they quivered, and minute ripples laved the porous shores. Looking down, bending last drops off the trees; one warm star splashed on them, and then her hands fell again. She walked the floor of the dove house, walked the two doves through the air and fell 'thump' on the wharf. A clock striking! And here I've been keeping you at the door — 'give Kate notice' — she raised her stick — all the people whom he knew, the friends, shabby clerks, young Jews in fine cloth suits with ginger hair walked slowly past their house, and looked through the dark windows at the stars, they were saying, 'There is young life here. There are great masses of crushed-up rose-coloured clouds.'

iii.

And now there came the chock-chock of wooden drawers running through the pale fields for dear life to the supper room. Her cheeks burned, she was awake. Oh, madam, you ought to have stopped Anne and looked across the lawn. There was the woman at the bay who smoked, and she smoked through the french windows into the garden, and through the empty, blind-looking little town, down where the old couple had been. They were close together, her tail curled round. She looked troubled. Then the cloud sailed away, and the man's voice murmured; Sadie answered, careless, and said quickly, 'Don't be silly! Don't be. And besides, that's not the point. The point is —'

iv.

He turned up the light. The curtains were drawn; white wine splashed over the Jardins Publiques — could he describe it? — confirmed what they were in the lamp-light, drinking out of cups! They'd

meant to think the whole thing out again. Here, there was something strained and almost desperate that drooped sorrowful, mournful, as though it hung down in front of her; her hands were clasped.

And now no sound came from the sea. It breathed like light among the spreading leaves. And some wet moustache brushed her cheek. But Fenella

did not say very much. He coughed, tucked his crumpled handkerchief between her teeth and understood. Small, warm arms were round his neck.

First went her grandma, then her father, then father's hat... The giggle mounted, mounted; the voice echoed, 'Oh, quite!' and she was swung in her chair and laughed till she couldn't stop.

She pulled up her gloves, hummed to herself and faced him: her lips parted. 'Good heavens — why! Here's this huge house and garden. Surely you might make a nice break in you journey — eh?'

In her blue dress, with her cheeks lightly flushed: 'it's such a long time since —' He faltered. He answered 'No' — and of course he would say 'No' —

When the car was there she wrapped her dark coat round her head; the fringe of grey bobbles danced against her cheek, and she sobbed, 'God bless you...'

They were in their bedroom in the new house with little heaps of clothes and shoes; the big bed, smoothing, tucking, patting; the thought of the light shone, and it seemed to Miss Brill that things got caught in one's hair. Why, then, flower something so new, so... The tears danced in her breath. 'It was heart.' A pause. 'Poor fellow!' She dashed out. She started, she nearly screamed at anything. 'How did one prove things, how could all these ladies want their tea? And his kind, they're never fierce with their — the people they know.' Then she leaned forward and really bawled.

Someone's hand pressed her waist, and she floated back; there were fresh marks of wheels on the drive.

# Happiness

Life is simple,  
like a gingham tablecloth  
or moral goodness.

Pressed against the motorway,  
flour mills and factories  
gape dumbfounded

at the same, unremarkable sky  
and out tumble  
the steam-powered

speech-bubbles  
of their glacial language:  
loquacious and amazed,

full-bodied statements  
in a grammar of rain.

## Birthday

St. Mary's floods the screen  
with a bright rush of green  
and the pundits buzz in my speakers:  
*"As the teams leave the tunnel,  
all eyes are on the new signings—"*  
Shipped in from Lyon,

Madrid and Brazil,  
they massage their taped-up calves  
and strut like stallions  
across the pampered grass.  
Shuttled to the stadium,  
the away fans sing

praises to the saviour,  
their buckling enterprise  
plucked from the gutter  
by a hubcap consortium,  
part-funded by the State  
of Saudi Arabia.

My eyes flick  
between the pitch and my pencil,  
snub-nosed in your birthday card,  
a cautious Pritt-stick collage  
tarnished by my illegible,  
post-dyspraxic script:

*I love you, & always will.*  
When Southampton  
strike the crossbar, the skipper  
stutters like a dragonfly  
in his saturated, sky-blue uniform.  
I've spent the last half-hour waiting

for someone to score  
but my only thought when,  
back turned to goal,  
Bruno Guimarães flicks a  
loose left heel against the ball:  
*I wish I could give you more.*



## Ars Poetica

“Last night your sleep-talk woke me up at five.  
Reaching over to check the time, I shuddered:  
conversing with the unresponsive air,  
you said my name as if I wasn't there.”

***Three***

## Lead White

*after Tom Keating*

Stepping onto the floor, a sudden convergence rushes through you, as though a thousand loose threads have suddenly bunched together, twisting to a knot and streaming off into the unlit corners of the room, whirling through the rings on your fingers, and although it appears light, even weightless, you feel as though you can draw upon the salient points of your person – untethered, intuitive, pulled from the air – with the faith that what is underneath will stay – the smoke-like, skeletal grisaille, the pin in the wheel, the non-negotiable *I* – and keep you buoyant above the day's cast of characters, its painted backdrops and cheap props; amongst the actors, tense and tiring at the interminable dress-rehearsal but reeling off their lines nonetheless, the last-minute additions to the script sounding flaccid and foreign on their tongues, opening night approaching and the story unfinished, an abundance of endings to choose from but none satisfactory; the painting revised, reworked, begun again under a different light, the image almost clear in the mind.

To encounter a kind of nameless serendipity: turning a corner to find that that all the aimless flightpaths of thought and action have coalesced in a single moment, although the processes that made it so are absent and almost traceless – the food prepared, the table laid, the room empty – waking up to find the day already activated, stretched and primed like a canvas and given a fresh ground of red bole (from the Latin *bōlus*: dirt, topsoil of every moment, wet with rain, steaming, fecund and writhing, or dusty, sunbaked clay – cracked, arid, sprouting nothing), set on an easel by an apprentice now out of sight preparing the next panel or scratching at a battered sketchbook in a shaded corner of the courtyard, mapping out future compositions, listing the prices of pigments with a broken stick of charcoal, making plans for when his training is complete and he can finally leave this place, day-dreaming of his own studio full of sunlight and young assistants as he sits scumbling the colossal picture before him: an insipid, bloodless scene, the pallid faces of the patrons luminous with greed and latent disease even after the gracious *liberties* the master had begrudgingly acceded to (smoothing over his sitters' pockmarked cheeks and feigning looks of piety from their miserly scowls), acts more charitable than any philanthropic gesture those esteemed profiles ever lifted a powdered chin towards, the apprentice thinks as he drags a dry brush across the canvas and catches a scent of incense drifting in from down the street where a brass censer swings from a hook in the autumn breeze.

After a tentative recovery – the ripped canvas fixed with melted beeswax and strips of gauze – an attempt is made to return to the structures looming on the horizon like distant cathedrals, a reintegration into daily rituals that seem automated and endless, requesting access to spaces that begin to feel strangely contingent, each interaction now fraught with nervous excess, everyone flaunting a subjectivity that rests on a web of brazen conjecture, always at the mercy of objects that orbit us like asteroids, operational but pushed to the brink: the frayed cable on a pair of headphones, the threadbare strap of a backpack, the silent scaffolds of faith, health, stability, pastels that snap and shatter no matter how careful you are, although by the end of the day you'll be grateful for the precious pieces you didn't throw in the wastebasket: a pale flicker of colour from a pink shard gripped between forefinger and thumb, dusted to nothing.

A space has been created: a stranger breaks away from the background (the tangled net of trajectories you pierce through, pushing past the crowds, wildflowers nodding sagely at the roadside) and turns to you, tentatively clears the ground, or rather ushers in a stillness that shocks with its earnest, inquisitive silence straining against the ambient clatter of the high street, and you stutter, wanting to respond to the open arms of address but failing to bring forth the now tenuous understanding of yourself, incrementally constructed out of seminal, circular stories carried around like coins, or rather what years of misremembering have rendered down to the hard centre of those formative events, forgetting the excess, the canvas caressed gently with a badger blender – bristles soaked and beaten out against a board – to take out the superfluous and temper the colours, blending them together until the contours of memory, its architectonic choreography, soften from structures into fields we can only walk across in unspecified directions, finding ourselves back at the start, by the river that marks out the property, the slatted bridge in ruins and shadows flickering like moths on the opposite bank, where Willy Lott's cottage still stands, shaded beneath the plane trees in the National Gallery, on the north wall of room 34, but also on postcards, pencil-cases, tote bags, framed and unframed prints yellowing on the giftshop wall, emerging like a flower from the gouache studies of students sat on folding stools adding rushed final touches to a horse's flank before the galleries close, stuffing their sketchbooks full of unfinished imitations into tattered backpacks and washing the flakes of dried paint and graphite from their hands, glancing nervously up at the mirror as if afraid of what they might find.

One account, possibly apocryphal, attests that when Turner saw the impotent *Temeraire* stripped of its sails, drifting quietly behind a dirty tugboat chugging its way down the Thames to Deptford, he made a thumbnail sketch on the cuff of his shirt and rushed to the studio, providing us with one of the only contemporaneous depictions of the warship – the others comprise of a few preliminary blueprints filed away in the archives of a naval museum and an amateur etching of the dilapidated hulk beached on its side in the breaker's yard, already half-dismantled for parts, which leaves the actual *Temeraire* hovering somewhere beneath these documents, sailing back and forth between the twin ports of construction and destruction, from Chatham to Deptford, without leaving a mark on the sea it cleaved and shattered on its way to battle, the white water closing behind the hull with the self-effacing patience of the faithful restorer suspended on a platform of scaffolding, filling in the final gap – the hairline crack where the fresco has flaked and chipped – before packing it in, removing the dust mask, becoming himself again.

Our conversations become a kind of card game, a play of trading clichés, and although their values stay the same even rote phrases ruffle and flare under new intonations, quietly and carefully shifting their weights, their paces, and the mechanics of exchange take on a nascent, spacious aspect; transactions deepen on another axis; the voice itself becomes a symbol; the remainder wavering, flailing as the figures in the heat of movement lose their edges and the paint, in quick slashes and streaks, buckles and breaks away from representation, de-composes towards suggestion, potential, small pricks in the skin of understanding which, although you only spoke a word or two, shafts of bright light drill right through until it's pointed out to us that, in the corner of the scene, Degas has painted the little green watering can used by the *maître* to lay the dust the dancers kicked up in the heat of a dream.



In the forest by the factory, freshly cut tree trunks tried to sell us the idea that the years accumulated in concentric, exponential circles, enclosing us in a kind of armour, but there was no doubt in us now that the centre had sunk under its own weight and each day collapsed on itself like a wave slinking back into the structureless mass of sea, leaving us as beachcombers prowling the sands littered with antique fragments – ceramics, coke cans, Coronas, bones and flowers – organising the refuse and driftwood of each event into spurious categories of cause and effect, cutting through the fat of affect to get down to the fact as if carefully redrawing the masts and riggings we lost when, with intoxicated washes of blue and orange, we excitedly painted in the sky, gaseous and billowing over our stately naval seascape (to do this, we apply a coat of varnish over the obscured image of the ship and swiftly trace each painted-over strip with a sable brush: the oily surface shores up the water in the tempera, refining it as the canvas dries, until the lengths of rope that strain against the mast and spars become as dark and delicate as hairs), the sun catching on the banks of clouds as it sets, the white sail pulling at the peach-coloured air.

The processes remained the same: appointments were kept, tchotchkes of knowledge exchanged and forgotten, sheaves of paperwork shredded or torched; the sun still rose on the suburbs even though the sense was always forming that a white lie resided at the centre of things, the way the master forger painted messages in pigments laced with lead shavings, with the knowledge that the x-ray would reveal the words (*bastard, fake, you've been had!*) cutting cleanly across the canvas, tangled in the underpainting (the picture's 'skeleton', as one critic called it, the outlines and limits of the figures having been sketched in the same lead white) even after the topcoats and finishes had crystallised into an image rendering the message illegible like a blister closing over a wound, the long scar on my left cheek hardening to a crease your finger could hardly feel, as I recalled tripping and falling onto an iron railing – one corroded spearhead plunged straight to the bone – strangely painless, the only indication the colour draining from my friends' faces (as particles of lapis lazuli catalyse on a canvas, its sparkling ultramarine degrades to a ghostly shade of grey: *blue sickness*, they call it, as it spreads like a disease, although some, like Vermeer's milkmaid, are immune) as I turned to face them, blood on my collar (I think: I didn't look in the mirror, so the image is a mystery to me), the skin of my jaw torn and sagging (I imagine), swelling to a lopsided scowl when the blue and black stitches pulled the gap shut, the surgeon's final touches like a last layer of varnish locking out the moisture, a kind of closure, although the thin strata of amber the Old Masters patiently applied to the canvas slowly ripened over time, coats of translucent resin turning from yellow to brown to bronze, all the way down to the back-lit, burnished black that lends the work its unique, autumnal glow; in this way, Rembrandt, who died a pauper, perfected his painting's renowned golden tone long after his body was buried in a rented grave, dug up after twenty years and unceremoniously discarded.

The epigraphs for '**The Book of Esther**' come from *Roland Barthes* (1975) by Roland Barthes [translation by Richard Howard, first published in 1977 and reprinted in 2020 by Vintage, London], *Sweet Days of Discipline* (1989) by Fleur Jaeggy [translation by Tim Parks, first published in 1993 and reprinted in 2018 by And Other Stories, Sheffield], and *Etty: the letters and diaries of Etty Hillesum, 1941-1943; complete and unabridged* (2002) [translation by Arnold J. Pomerans and published by Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI]. This last text, alongside *An Interrupted Life and Letters from Westerbork* by Etty Hillesum (1996) [also translated by Arnold J. Pomerans and published as a compiled edition by Henry Holt and Company, New York], form the basis of the entire poem, with phrasings, images and events from the diaries being referenced and reworked throughout.

The last passage of section IV is adapted from the *Confessions* of St. Augustine [translated by Henry Chadwick and published by Oxford University Press in 2009, p.55]. Section VII contains passages inspired by Julius Spier's book *The Hands of Children* (1931) [translated by Victor Grove and published in 1944 by Kegan Paul Ltd, London], and section VIII interpolates lines from Hannah Arendt's *Rahel Varnhagen: the Life of a Jewess* (1957) [translated by Clara and Richard Winston, republished by New York Review Books, New York, in 2022]. The epigraph to section IX is taken from W.H. Auden's 'Paid on Both Sides: a Charade' from *Poems* (1930) [republished by Faber, London, in 2013]. This section also references and pulls phrases from Water Benjamin's 'On the Concept of History', sometimes referred to as 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', which was published in his *Selected Writings, Volume 4: 1938-1940* (2003) [essay translated by Edmund Jephcott; collection edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings for Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA]. The quotation which opens section X is taken from a footnote to Klaas A.D. Smelik's article 'To Remember Is to Act', which was published in *Reading Etty Hillesum in Context: Writings, Life, and Influences of a Visionary Author* (2018) [Klaas Smelik, Gerrit Van Oord, and Jurjen Wiersma (eds), Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam]. 'appendix – Westerbork, a palimpsest' relies heavily on the information and artefacts collected and displayed at the Herinneringscentrum Kamp Westerbork, Hooghalen, NL.

'**Visiting My Sister In Manchester**' refers to William Wordsworth's sonnet 'Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802', which was first published in 1807. The J.M.W. Turner painting mentioned is the bizarrely titled 'Now for the Painter' (Rope) – Passengers Going on Board' (1827), and the Adolphe Valette work is called 'India House, Manchester' (1912).

The penultimate line of '**Iridologist**' is adapted from a phrase in Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) [translation by Norman Kemp Smith, published in 1929 by Macmillan & Co., London, p.331].

More information about the works explored in '**O**' can be found in Michael F. Marmor's article 'Inside the eye of the beholder: Edvard Munch II' [*Tate Etc*, 25 June 2019, London. Accessed on 20/09/23 at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/tate-etc/issue-25-summer-2012/inside-eye-beholder>].

The first section of '**Moving Images**' relies heavily on accounts and anecdotes collected and arranged by Colm Tóibín in his excellent profile of John Butler Yeats, 'The Playboy of West 26th Street' [*London Review of Books*, Vol.40, No.2, January 2019, London. Accessed on 21/09/2023 at: <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v40/n02/colm-toibin/the-playboy-of-west-29th-street>].

'**New Narratives**' is constructed entirely out of lines, or fragments of lines, from Katherine Mansfield's 'The Garden Party and Other Stories' (1922) [Penguin Books Ltd, Harmondsworth, 1952]. The process by which they were made involved the extraction of every 10-syllable line, margin to margin, from my 1966 reprint of the 1952 edition, followed by the gradual rearrangement of these decontextualised lines until a new story, or a set of stories, began to emerge.

The game referred to in '**Birthday**' is Southampton 1-2 Newcastle United (10<sup>th</sup> March, 2022), with a particular focus on Bruno Guimarães' 52<sup>nd</sup> minute winner.

The sequence '**Lead White**' takes Tom Keating's 1982 television programme *Tom Keating On Painters* [Channel 4] as a starting point, lifting anecdotes, descriptions and turns of phrase from the 'master forger' and using them to anchor an abstract poetic narrative that travels a considerable distance from its source material. In the series, Keating, a famed art forger and restorer, explains and contextualises the techniques of his favourite painters by producing imitations of their most famous works. The painting referenced in 'A space has been created...' is John Constable's 'The Hay Wain', otherwise known as 'Landscape: Noon', (1802), and the Turner painting in 'One account...' is called 'The Fighting Temeraire, tugged to her last berth to be broken up' (1838), both of which are copied as 'reverse paintings', imitations that switch the perspective to behind the subjects originally depicted, by Keating in the first series of his show.