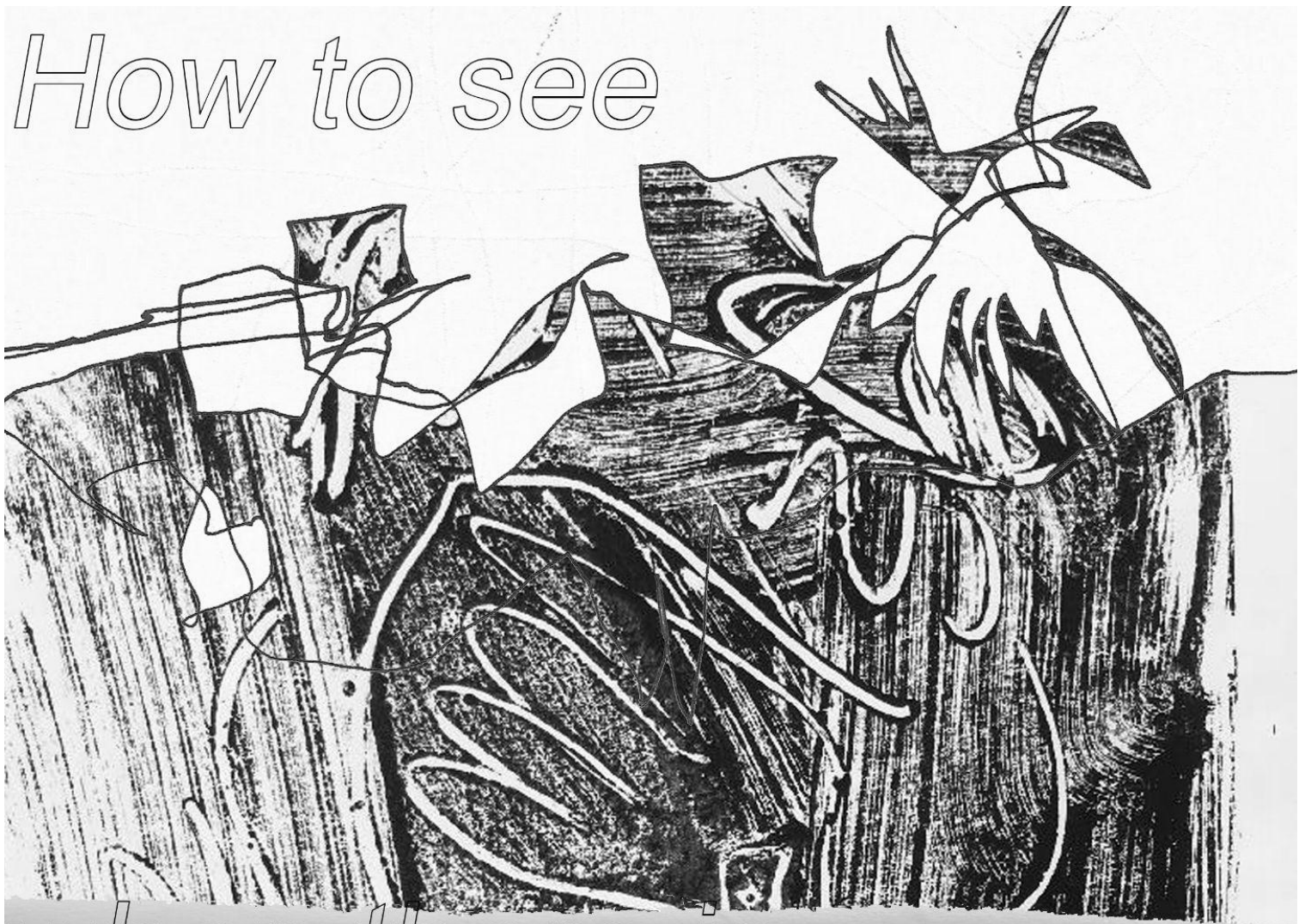


*How to see*



*when there is  
nothing there*



*Gemma Carson  
Thesis FMI 2022*



Introduction/To whom it may concern

My bumblebee friend

In my minds eye I see the hot dirt and  
smell the fresh air

Citalopram

I dreamt of a dream within a dream yet  
here I am

An interval is 'that which breathes  
between'

Head in the clouds, feet on the ground

The sun castle

Are you leaving for the country

# To whom it may concern,

I wanted to address this Thesis in a very personable way, one written in my own writing style and one of personality in a non formal esque way. I could have sat here and written this in an academic style and shown the evidence of my research; but I struggle with this notion. I struggle with this because I in fact don't have some profound evidence to present to you. What I do want to show you is communication of my inner workings, much like looking through an old scrapbook. I remember being told that I 'describe' too much within my writing at school, and describing is something I realised I have done here. I believe this to be because as an artist we are translating something; perhaps through descriptive writing I am able to make my voice the author. It also takes you into a different world, a different place. You are allowed to feel things the author has written and allowed to imagine this world within your own lexicon, indeed a form of escapism.

I hope the reader can indulge themselves within this body of writing and can enjoy the abstract nature of rhythm. I offer personal essays that link to my experiences within art making and spiritual learnings and in-between these essays are breaks of short stories. I have noticed since I was a child I have visual flashbacks of memories or dreams often, everyday and a lot of the time. It has always fascinated me that I can link something I saw in my mind's eye to what I am doing at that current time. So I link this experience to how the thesis flows and how it is read. Somewhat disjointed, but all together makes a whole. This is why the stories and poems are inserted throughout; to break the flow or to perhaps add an extra bag to the carousel. Like adding extra spices to a recipe, not totally needed but would lack without. Each story comes from a personal place; dreams, thoughts and reality. They are important to me as they express the place I am in, the place I see myself or finally have a stage to be acted out.

## *"Spirituality"*

But before I begin, I want to clear up about what my stance on spirituality is. I have been asked and rightly so, what it means to me, and how my work which can appear completely unrelated, links to spiritualism. It is a big and broad term that can go down many pathways but essentially, for me it is a way of communication to "the other side".

*"Spiritualism is based on two fundamental propositions: first, that the human personality survives bodily death in some form; second, that it is possible to communicate with the surviving personality, or spirit, usually through a human medium".<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Tuchman M, Galbreath R - 1986, *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*, p.384

What has interested me for a long time with this subject is the fact that it may not be *real*. Who's to tell you you're imagining it, who's to tell you you're not. Over the years my intuition and my senses have gotten stronger within the ghostly realm because I choose to believe, I choose for my wall to be down or weaker than most people. Resulting in more contact and knowing when a spirit is around. There is some sort of magic in not knowing and being on the precipice. This feeling can be the same for a lot of things, art making especially. In terms of feeling, it feels like being on the edge of two spaces and accepting and remaining calm because perhaps there is always a bigger purpose. The fact ghosts might be real, is exciting. Because it means there's something else to us, to this life, to the tv remote on the table. To the half empty box of stale cereal in the cupboard. And with this it lets you appreciate the mundane and to enjoy it.

Spirituality is also about the perspective on viewing one's life, it is in a sense a way of dealing with life's challenges and comes from a phenomenological standpoint. What I aim for in my work and this thesis is for the reader to be transported into new places, but always again, brought back down to reality. Although my work may not come across as "airy fairy" or "otherworldly" or visually spiritual per say, it is not meant to confuse but to accept. Like Hilma Af Kilnt says,, being spiritual doesn't dwell on what you see, but what you see beyond form.

Cheers, Thankyou,  
from Gemma



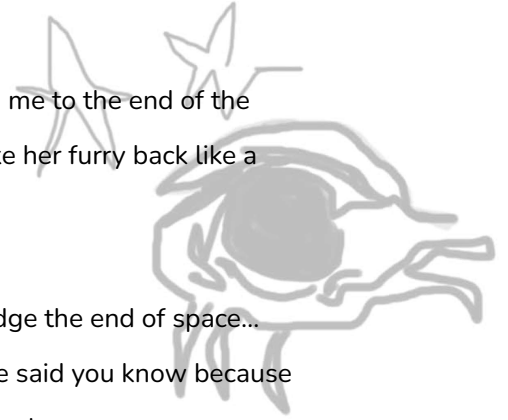
*‘Those granted the gift of seeing more deeply can see beyond form, and concentrate on the wondrous aspect hiding behind every form, which is called life.’ - Hilma Af Klint*

## My Bumblebee Friend

My Bumblebee friend sits on my finger. She loves to take trips with me to the end of the garden and back. We sit in the lavender while she feeds and I stroke her furry back like a tiny cat.

She was telling me one day that in order to fly you must acknowledge the end of space...  
“But how do you know when you are at the end?” I kept asking. She said you know because your body internally inhales itself like the feeling of turbulence on a plane.

We decided to go together, to the end, she sat on my finger and exclaimed for me to throw my spear like a javelin into the energy. I didn't know I had a spear but I threw it with all my might (I actually won javelin at a school sports tournament) and it penetrated an invisible wall; much like as if an arrow, in slow motion, was poking into a clear balloon that didn't pop. The spear was going in slowly into this energy and we were catapulted inside it, now facing the opposite way to how we started as if looking into a mirror. But now what we could see was earth and me and the Bumblebee were looking at our home in the distance like we were hanging onto a stick that was stuck in a snow globe. It seemed as though life was normal, I saw cars going by, the clouds rolling in and out of the mountains; I could even see my neighbours watering their flowers. I asked Bumblebee what the meaning of this all was. She said to me “You can't erect a house before the ground is clear”. I thought about my life in a swift moment and realised if I wanted to be successful I needed to start. I thought about the picture my mum kept above the fireplace. I thought about the dead deer under a bush I found once when I was playing. Bumblebee said it was time to go, so she pulled my arm away from the javelin and we flew back through the bubble, into the lavender bush.





*In my minds eye I see the hot dirt and smell the fresh air*

During my early 20's in England, I started visiting a spiritual medium. One meeting I had with her, I sat down and she said she heard Italian music before I arrived. I asked her why, and she began to tell me about my spirit guide, Remi.

Remi, an Italian portrait painter from the mountains lived in his yellow house with green shutters. Five years after discovering him, I moved to the Tuscan mountains, with the ancient rivers and the forests, into a yellow house with green shutters.

The Patron Saint of the area is Saint Gemma, Santa Gemma Galgani.

Tenente Ugo, looks after my Mum. A war hero, the last inhabitant of the house. Apparently once he rode down the mountain on a motorcycle firing his pistol into the air. My Mum is determined to find the treasure he buried in the back garden.

Right hand, to brush, to colour, to surface.  
The flow of energy that runs from brain to surface, a creation of one maker.  
Yin and Yang, the river.

My friends Marie and Lorenzo will have their first baby this year, baby Isabella. They live in Brandeglio, the highest village in Bagni di Lucca. Driving to this village you encounter the wildest of animals, especially at night and once I saw my first porcupine. At the start of this long drive up, to the left of you is one of the main rivers, the river Lima. Eventually this one meets the river Serchio and the waters flow past the city of Lucca and out to the seas of Pisa at Bocca di Serchio. It is a hub of activity for all parties involved. Nature thrives and last summer we went to one spot where there were so many baby fish nibbling our feet, and when I looked under the water with my goggles, I saw huge trout in the dark depths gliding silently in the current.

Casa, Dolce, Case.

Row row row your boat,  
Gently down the stream,  
Merrily merrily merrily merrily,  
Life is but a dream.

The river is exquisitely clean. It is bright blue and very cold. Some of the water comes from underground springs, making it fresh and pure. The sides are stacked with ancient grey rock



with flora and fauna spilling over the sides. Constantly flowing and bringing new water past. I try to embody this natural flow state.

I like to find myself in the middle, in between the  
Yin side and the Yang side of painting.

Big abstract pieces, torched with spray paint and handled with force. Torn canvas, stretched until an unmovable tautness is layered thickly with gesso or corrosive material which inevitably will rot and disintegrate until the masculine energy no longer resides' and the Yang is moved onto the next piece.

Planned, careful graphite lines and neat blobs of paint awaiting use on the glass palette. A stool awaiting to be sat on while the canvas is painted out, like painting with numbers. The paint goes on methodically, one layer, two layers, three. Until it is finished. Here the painting is treated like a guest in my house, I try to make it enjoy its stay.

Until, inescapably, my Yin side appears unfaithful. My masculine Yang wants to take over and Pollock the house guest. If I remain in the state of flow. It is achievable to reach the middle state of being, where both energies are used and adapt to each other. Creating the sporadic my Yang craves for, and the figuration my Yin must embody.

Upon setting my eyes on the blue water, calmness takes over and the pure air hits my lungs. My magpie eyes are struck upon pure gold when I lock eyes with the water. The reflections from the blue sparkle almost un-naturally as if this river is genuinely alive and fluttering its eyelashes. The dependency on this river is not only to the wildlife but to the people around.

Citalopram

There's an invisible level next to me, that tells me I need to be better.

There's an invisible mutter on my shoulder who tells me I can't.

And there's someone there, who I'm not quite sure who it is, that makes it  
seem impossible.

"Do you ever talk?"

"Yes, I am just shy."

"Omg, you are so extraverted!"

Yes, that's because I drink beer to louden my voice.

"Why do you want to take more pills? Isn't it better to try and get to the  
problem first?"

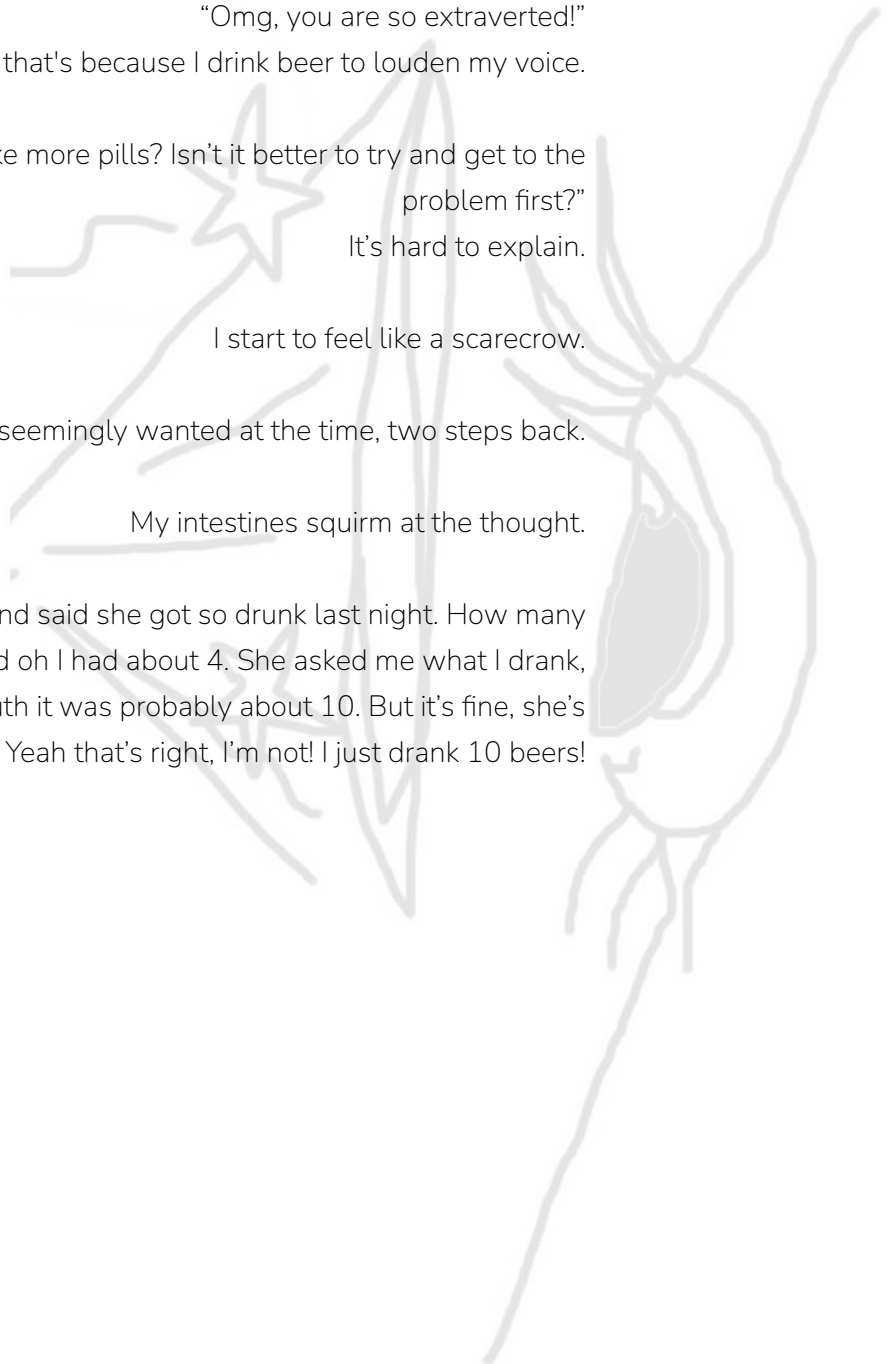
It's hard to explain.

I start to feel like a scarecrow.

One step forward and seemingly wanted at the time, two steps back.

My intestines squirm at the thought.

My housemate just came in, and said she got so drunk last night. How many  
drinks did you have? She said oh I had about 4. She asked me what I drank,  
and I said a few beers. In truth it was probably about 10. But it's fine, she's  
fine. Yeah that's right, I'm not! I just drank 10 beers!



*I dreamt of a dream within a dream yet here I am*

Feeling is a dreaming state of consciousness<sup>3</sup>

By approaching art feelingly, multiple directions are allowed to come in before the canvas is stretched and the brush has started its motor. The flashback of that holiday you went on when you were 10 is allowed in. The dream or the memory of the old fish in the pond can arise, and these reminisces pool together somewhere in the body emanating a feeling, a colour, a texture, an emotion. That when translated onto canvas, manifests itself into a new chapter of the artworks you create. Very adaptly, the author Siri Hudsnet said...

*"Writing fiction is like remembering what never happened"... the mental activity we call memory and what we call the imagination partake of the same mental processes. They are both bound up with emotion and, when they are conscious, often take the form of stories. Emotion, memory, imagination, story—these are all vital to our subjective mental landscapes..."<sup>4</sup>*

Having this embodiment of intangible pockets inside your body, that are full with past experiences, dreams or memories can enrich the dialogue or the language I seek within painting and can make the mental landscapes we carry accessible. Spirituality is a way of looking at the world, a way of experiencing it, a way of dealing with it. I process the same feeling of spirituality with memory; from real life or memory from the subconscious. It feels similar in my body. Therefore, the act of painting is a spiritual act. Which, in turn; makes the subject of the everyday so vast and open-ended for me.

The big old orange goldfish in the pond, with his bite marks from the dog; is a mixture of memory, dream and emotion. My dog once took every fish out of the pond and laid them on the grass. I noticed the orange spark against the green grass and I thought it was a carrot. Turns out it was him, the big old goldfish. He was not dead, none of them died being deposited on the grass. We don't know why our dog did this, but I get this uneasy feeling, as after I used to dream about this pond with all its big ugly fish inside, not knowing what lurked under the brown murky water. Not to mention after this event the old goldfish had gnarled bitemarks in his side which made him look incredibly fierce.

Last night I had a typical 'what I call' an adventure dream; but it was set in the main house I grew up in, because of this dream I kept having flashbacks. It was the house my parents got divorced in and the house I mainly grew up in. It was a wild place, the driveway was half a mile long and you couldn't see a building for miles around. The winters were bleak, cold and dark and in the summer the sky was full of dancing colours. We would walk around the property in our pyjamas, with the dogs, cats, rabbits and chickens. This time of year, in the spring, the garden would light up in new colours. The 200 daffodils my mother planted would sprout up and the grass would turn greener. When we moved out of this house, I hugged the wall in the upstairs landing and I swear I heard the house cry.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.waldorflibrary.org/articles/699-painting-with-veils>

<sup>4</sup> **Three Emotional Stories: Reflections on Memory, the Imagination, Narrative, and the Self.** Siri Hustvedt

So why are these memories so important to write about?

Because I constantly feel them, and these memories shape the way I react to the world, and  
in return react to the way I make art.

So it is similar to what Siri Hudsvet said?

Exactly.

*exactly*





*An interval is 'that which breathes between'*

By feeling the pressure in-between my shoulder blades, I know someone is there, yet I can not prove it. I know when the air is thick, yet it still breathes the same. I see sparks, yet no fireworks. Trusting yourself. A somewhat energetic conductor between our world, and theirs. Remaining centred. Hanging heavy like a pendulum awaiting which direction to go, relying on your senses, the gut feeling. I wonder when I will be able to talk to them; for it not to be so one sided. Yet to be comfortable being in-between without knowing, to be comfortable in not understanding you are allowing yourself to therefore, understand.

*...The increasing intellectualization of consciousness, initially a progressive direction of evolution, has led to an excessive reliance on abstraction and a loss of contact with both natural and spiritual realities. .<sup>5</sup>*

When I speak of the inbetween space, I initially mean the space that is in between us and the spirit world. But since I started using this term, I found it also has an extreme impact on art making.

Finding moments of rest bite in-between the in-between space allows you to sit inside the doorway of two possibilities.

*Try to remain centred, drink some coffee. Having the idea and having the visuals in your inside peripheral. Reliance on the creative hand. I feel the actions about to take place in my body. The dance between the painting and the painter begins. Don't think too quickly, don't think too slowly. Don't rush your hand but don't dawdle either. Hang it, put it on the table, hang it. Thoughts drift away, now we begin the flow state. Somewhere in the middle of doing and being, somewhere in-between conscious and subconscious. The space in-between the canvas and my body feels like it can crackle, my gaze turns to the view out of the window. People doing everyday things. Drink some water and bite my fingernails. Sit down, stare, sit down, stare.*

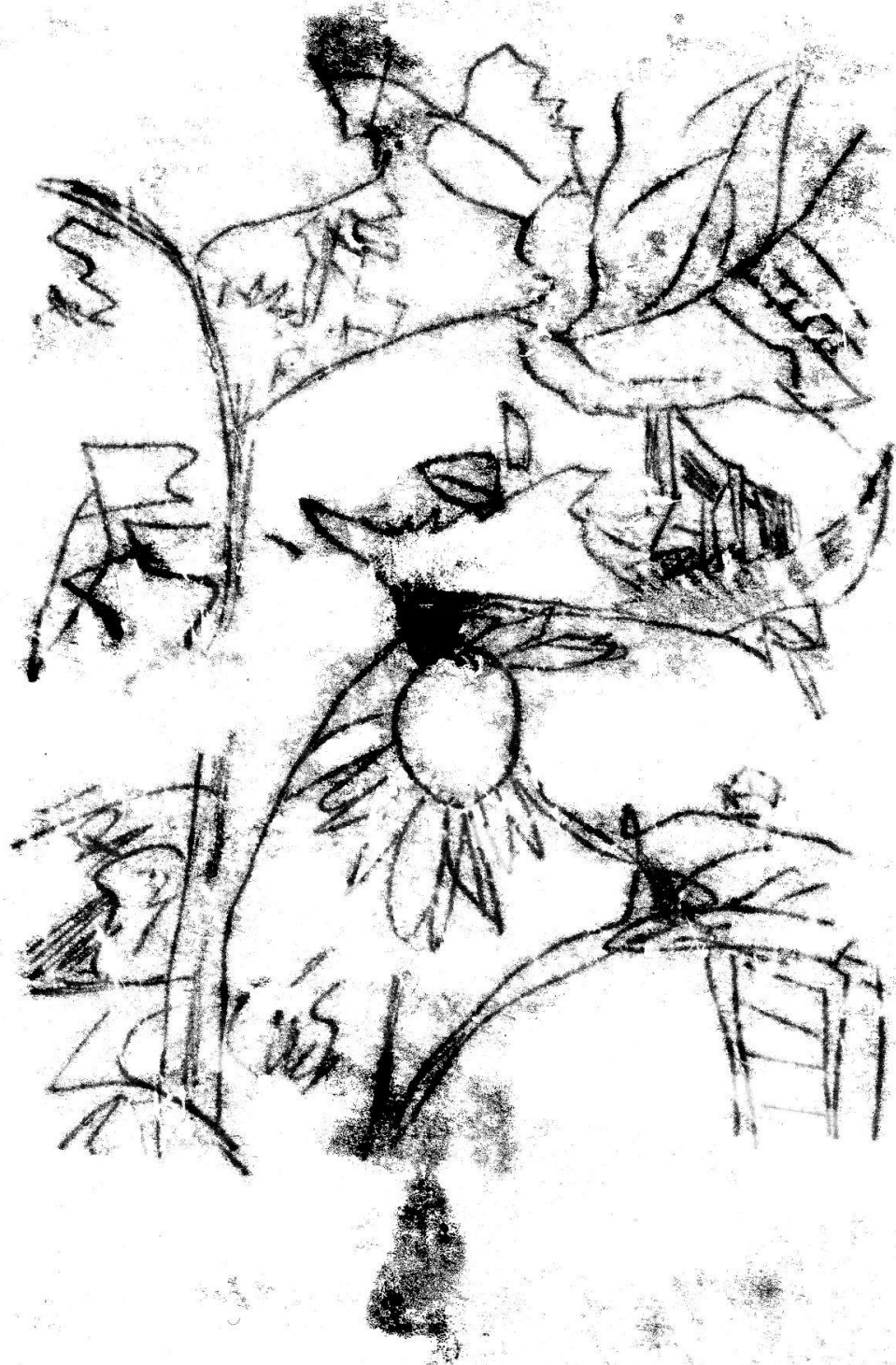
Being on the outskirts of the work, you are on the ring road, being diverted around the city centre of your painting. Constantly learning, constantly taking the wrong exit and hoping it will be the correct slip road to get to your destination. Of course you eventually reach it but it may not be the destination you wanted. I have noticed that we tend to describe the painting we are seeing as too this and too that. If it were bigger, if it were brighter, if it were softer, harder. I find this curious because it means we are always looking for something else. Maybe something is perfectly painted, yet boring as the story is in the figuration. Or so sporadic it ends up muddy with no soul. I mean of course, this is all personal taste. But it doesn't stop the 'i wish it were'.

It is a place of contradiction, a place of friction but also a place of finding. It interests me so much because being in the in between it is really a place where things are allowed to happen. A place where mistakes are allowed to be made and a place for deep reflection. You could describe this feeling as a meditation or an "other" space. One where you find yourself staring

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<sup>5</sup> Robert A. McDermott, "Rudolf Steiner and Anthroposophy", in Faivre and Needleman, *Modern Esoteric Spirituality*, ISBN 0-8245-1444-0, p. 299–301 - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anthroposophy#cite\\_ref-RAMcD\\_60-0](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anthroposophy#cite_ref-RAMcD_60-0)

out of the window when you are deep in thought, the space you find yourself in just before you go to sleep. This state is the time I find most magical because here I have contact with spiritual realities and the imagination is allowed to be free without restrictions of the day.



*Head in the clouds, feet on the ground*

## *honesty is the best policy*

When I was little my mum said I drew a picture of a person and she was shocked because it wasn't a potato person, it had shoulders!

Dealing with portraiture, it is undeniably something I have always been pulled to.

Let me paint you the picture...

### ACT 1: SCENE 1:

It's dark out and Simon enters the karaoke bar and discovers his friends are already drunk and shouting. His best friend Tim is singing Good Vibrations and his crush Lily is sitting cross legged on the worn red leather couch in a flowery dress. It finally gets to Simon's turn on the mic and he's a bit nervous, he loves to sing but only when he's by himself in the car. Should he either...go for the fun pop song he knows will go down a treat with his friends and is sure to liven up the party? Or sing his favourite love ballad, a risky one as its slow tempo and difficult to sing in parts, but it's his absolute jewel in the crown.

#### Scenario 1:

He sings the pop song, it was fun and it didn't matter if he sang great because everyone else was singing it anyway. Someone hands him a drink and slaps him on the back slurring 'well done mate'. He feels fine, but has a pang of disappointment that he didn't sing his ballad, then sod's law Tim sings it 3 songs later and the frustration hits his stomach.

#### Scenario 2:

He takes a courage swig of his pint and gets on the stage ready to sing the song he's been preparing for on the A11 commute. He does it, he might not have got all the high notes but the feeling of victory and honesty he feels makes him feel elated and ready to take the rest of the night by storm, now he is free! He can do anything!

Lily: What made you sing that song Simon?

Simon: Well, I didn't want to make the mistake of singing what everyone else sung

Lily: So you wanted to be different from everyone else?

Simon: Well I wouldn't say that, but rather, I wanted to stick to my guns and didn't want to regret not singing it.

END SCENE

## The Sun Castle

As if waking up from a sleep, her eyes unclouded and she heard herself breathing rhythmically, her lungs tight with air. Her eyes found her legs and feet moving quickly along a country track, she was jogging. The temperature was thick and hot and the dirt orange in colour, crunched under her feet. She stopped running, the warm air had filled her body. Catching her breath she looked to her right where a vast valley lay. This was the sort of view that magnificent was the only word you could use to describe, its vastness unbelievable, appearing to look like a photograph in front of your eyes. The sun's rays were parting through the clouds in the sky and casting down its bright light into the valley straight onto a castle. As she watched the castle's outer walls dance in light in the distance, she noticed that the castle was disappearing. She realised that when the rays hit the walls, the castle was lit up; and when the sun broke from the sky due to moving clouds it was no longer visible. She watched this spectacle for a while.



She carried on walking down the path until she reached a cross junction in the road, and opposite was a house. Unlike the castle, this house held immediate curiosity. She entered the villa and it smelt damp and un-lived in. She continued to walk around, travelling down the cold tiled staircase into the living area downstairs. Suddenly a sense of familiarity hit her, and it wasn't until she saw the big old mac computers she realised this was her Mother and Father's old holiday home. Understandably this is where the sense of melancholic comfortability came from as it had been a long time since she visited this house. Reminiscing around the kitchen, the damp smell continued and she could see the castle in the distance dancing in and out of the sun through the big windows. Turning her head to the right she could see the sparkle of reflections from a river at the end of the garden. She opened the back door and stepped onto the patio that led down to the river, she walked down slowly revelling in the unfamiliar familiarity. The garden around was lucious, untamed and overgrown, pasting vibrant green hues in her peripheral vision. Stopping at the bottom of the steps, she saw In the centre of this slow



flowing river was an island made from the river bed sand and on top was a glass table and chairs, enough room for six people. She hopped over onto the island and she sat on one of the chairs and let her discoveries and feelings sink in. It felt so sad to her, that her family were no longer here together in this completely idyllic and natural environment.

After what felt like a good time, she got up off the glass chair and jumped back over to the edge of the river bank. When her foot touched the solid earth, she heard a sudden wave of water. Quickly she turned around and she saw a tidal wave of water come up and wash away the glass table and chairs that swept them down the river, resulting with a couple of chairs upside down in the sand.



*Are you leaving for the country*

Every morning the orchestra of birdsong starts early, the house is still in the shadows until the sun rises over the mountains behind us. The white net curtain waltzes in the gentle morning breeze and the fresh air awakes you in the purest way. Everyday the mountain changes colour, purple, greens, reds.

How to know when something is right, *slightly tormenting*.

Moving slowly through the springtime air.

I want to walk the same path everyday and notice the changes of the earth, the way the light hits the mountain and how much wood the old man chops. I want to sit under a tree in a rainstorm and see the streams bulge under the pressure of the water. I want to see the change of green that explodes from the ground of the first rain in the summer season. I want to go to Lorenzo's bar and order a Cappuccino (only before 11, don't be an idiot) and meet Marie at Ristorante Circolo dei forestieri for lunch.

New house,  
New age,  
New dress.  
Tick, tick, tick.

This morning at work at 7am, my colleague asked me 'what the function of studying a masters in painting was?' I didn't answer. I drank my coffee and walked away. Oh God! Not another existential 20 something artist! I hear you cry. I know, I know. So as I was cleaning the tables, I was wiping them angrily. 'What's the point of YOU studying Artificial Intelligence'? I muttered to an empty classroom. 'I don't even know what that means!' I wish I had said that, but to be honest, I didn't want the conversation... I just wanted the silence of the bathrooms to scrub with blue gloves and toilet cleaner.

*You say the city brings you down,  
Leave the Iron cloud behind and feel the circus moving on*

In truth, I have no idea.

I spoke to my friend Andy this morning. He lives in Norwich, England where I spent a lot of time. He posted a video on Instagram of a robin coming into his boat to say hello. I told him I was so jealous of his life. He lives on a boat that you can only get to with another boat and most days he makes fires and talks to other boat people about birds. He told me it was time that I retired, to which I replied Thank God you noticed. He said we could get married in the swamp out back and smoke jazzies all day. I said yes, perfect. I will wear a long white dress that gets covered in mud, he said instead of a bouquet it will be last year's pigeon's nest.



THE  
END