

# SECTION A

*A Commentary*

**Poetry:** *A City by the Sea, A Picture of GE Moore, Bristles at the Keyhole, Sub Specie Aeternitatis, The Captain*

**Prose Fiction:** *The Doctor's Office*

**Prose Non-Fiction:** *Is Epicurus right that a wise person does not fear death?*

## A Commentary

I wrote *A City by the Sea* within an hour of waking up on a cold February morning. The fragments of a dream haunted me: fresh fruit, lanterns, the Orient, the Mediterranean, a marketplace. I had the compulsion to write something—anything. I arrived at the rhythm after the first repetition of ‘there were’, invoking Leonard Cohen’s *Two Went to Sleep*. I also echo Cohen’s use of short, anaphoric lines and his nods to alliteration—‘One carried matches/ one climbed a beehive’. The ‘carried...climbed’ combination realises itself in the interplay of ‘towers...ticket booths’ and, later on, ‘Arabs...bars’. I left the poem for a couple of hours, then a couple of weeks. I always found myself too awake to tamper with it. What I’d written was raw; half-remembered from a half-dream, it was the subject of anamnesis. I couldn’t edit it till one of my teachers had read it through: I shifted to lowercase, corrected the odd pronoun. The finished poem sits somewhere between a Cohen pastiche and a dream journal. Its notion of memory—of nostalgia—recurs in the other poems. *Sub Specie Aeternitatis* relates déjà vu to Time Theory B, while *Bristles at the Keyhole* dips a very different madeleine.

‘Odds and sods’ signal the influence of early Larkin upon *Sub Specie*; the register is colloquial, the metaphysical subject matter ignored. The place of things—‘the kettle’, ‘A cracked motorcycle mug’—recalls the lonely voices of *The North Ship*. I wrote it on a Monday night, edited it over the school week. I replaced ‘rested’ with ‘burnt’ and broke the poem into two sentences. *Bristles at the Keyhole* is a much angrier, much more deliberative poem. I derived the rhythm from Earnest Hemingway’s *Riparto D’Assalto*—‘Drummed their boots on the camion floor’. The fury of ‘rust’, of ‘beat-up/ Wood’, when combined with elemental descriptions of ‘lead’, of ‘iron hinges’, hints at something biblical, finding its roots in Ecclesiastes. The poem underwent some twenty redrafts; I replaced ‘Each brown lick’ with ‘Red-brown paint’, substituted ‘sprays over’ for ‘drips down’. At heart, the poem is about ephemera. Everything is fleeting, always growing older and getting greyer. The narrator is struck by the indifference of time and the universe to his labours ‘out under the sun’.

**Commented [PF(1)]:** An intriguing and evocative opening to a piece of critical writing! Candidate’s written expression is utterly superb.

**Commented [PF(2)]:** Immediate critical reflection on his writing process.

**Commented [PF(3)]:** Cogent exploration of the influence of Larkin on his poetry.

*Bristles at the Keyhole* was also my first sonnet. The form figured itself out around line ten or eleven. I wanted a rhyming couplet, didn't like the idea of tercets, and found that a volta of some kind would allow the poem to zoom out. And so, with a caesural 'Go', I introduce this rather paternal, rather mysterious 'blue-eyed workman'. The narrator finds himself within a form of life: a kind of son working with a kind of father. The ambiguity built into 'another'—the intimation of beer, perhaps—fleshes out the world of the narrator.

Don Paterson has described the sonnet as 'a square of text'; it is not quite symmetrical, scarcely short enough to maintain the reader's interest, but there is, indubitably, something about the form which just makes sense. There's a lot going on in *The Captain*, the other sonnet in this selection; of all the poems it required the greatest deal of *craft*—the careful use of indents, imitative line-lengths, &c. Paterson had, no doubt, the most important influence over its composition. Through him I learnt how to manage idiolects, how to flesh out a scene (something to which I'll soon return). From 'drank 'em', from 'mates', from 'muddy/ Footprints', the reader gets a sense of a garden party-cum-piss-up getting out of hand. And yet, for all its laddish evocations, there is also a longing for a father figure, a none-too-righteous 'Right authority'. Thus does it hark back to *Bristles at the Keyhole*, with the ferment of my thoughts around fatherhood, alcohol, and gardens—the last of which colour *A Picture of GE Moore*, the final poem in this selection.

I completed *A Picture of GE Moore* and *The Captain* at around the same time. It was late Spring, and exams had either passed or just begun, and I remember being profoundly happy. I remember presenting first drafts to one or two of my teachers; and while the latter persisted unedited, the former required radical changes. It was, then, a bloated, egregiously over-written thing of almost twenty lines, though the central idea seems to have been there from the start: a person finds a picture of the dead, analytic philosopher GE Moore, and tries to flesh it out. Again, when it came to giving the reader a sense of place, Paterson proved a more than serviceable guide. In *Chet's Habit* a few names—the eponymous 'Chet Baker', 'Lester Young'—combine with some specific details, and somehow translate the 1980's jazz scene into verse. In a similar way do mentions of 'pink gin cocktails', of 'Virginia and Leonard [Woolf]' give us all we need to recreate Bloomsbury circa 1925.

**Commented [PF(4)]:** Excellent reflection on the influence of Don Paterson.

The edit was an exercise in concision: I cut whatever I could, keeping only the most loaded, most evocative details.

*A Picture of GE Moore* marked the highpoint of my interest in literary modernism. Last spring I'd read and, in some cases, reread the canonical texts—*The Waste Land*, *Mrs Dalloway*, *The Waves*, &c. Over the course of a few months I tried to shake off the slightly affected, Hemingwayesque voice which had hitherto formed the basis of my prose-style; this started with the expunge of Americanisms and had, by the time I came to write *The Doctor's Office*, extended to experiments with the *stream of consciousness*—by which I mean an interior monologue, wherein the writer captures their subject's every association, leaping from one thing to another, with little regard for the plot or the external world. In *Will Will Self* describes his own struggles with heroin, while employing the third person, the continuous present tense, and free-indirect speech. There is a sense in which *The Doctor's Office* tries to do something similar; in this story I caricature myself.

I wrote the essay with which this selection closes, in late February. It is a short, unphilosophical piece, devoted to clarity, often to the detriment of style. Its influences, insofar as it had any, can be found in quickly forgotten issues of *The Sunday Times Magazine*, *The Times Literary Supplement* and *The London Review of Books*. The essay sketches a Kierkegaardian response to our fear of death and postulates a 'dizzying disjunct between what we will do and what we could do'.

*Candidate Star*

*October 2021*

**Commented [PF(5)]:** Concise but genuine critical reflection on his influences.

*A City by the Sea*

last night I dreamt of a city by the sea

there were fountains

there were markets

there were strays

there were Spaniards

who were red-faced

when the tide

came in

last night I dreamt of a city by the sea

there were towers

there were bullfights

there were ticket booths

there were crooks

who sold out

while the church bells

rang

last night I dreamt of a city by the sea

there were Jews

there were Arabs

there were bars

there were lanterns

that burnt brightest

when the sun

came down

**Commented [PF(6)]:** Candidate really demonstrates his versatility as a writer in this poem. Stripping away the carefully punctuated periodic sentences which are so much a part of his critical writing and his prose fiction, to leave behind imagery which speaks for itself—structured simply around the lineation and anaphora.

**Commented [PF(7)]:** The shift in each stanza from anaphoric repetition to the vivid details of a scene which unfurl over three short enjambed lines was very effective.

last night I dreamt of a city by the sea

there were dates

there were oranges

there were girls

there were mothers

who gave in

long into

the night

**Commented [PF(8)]:** Candidate's reading influences come through heavily here; this is a student who has been reading Hemingway for years!

*A Picture of GE Moore*

There he stands, half-straight, his hair almost clean-cut,  
Eyes half-open, pipe hanging from the mouth,  
Hands tucked into the pockets of his waistcoat.

You make out a smile, the odd table and chair

In the background. You wonder who's out of shot:

Virginia and Leonard? Forster and Keynes?

It's a pretty thought and nothing more:

Moore's last-minute, last-second redrafts

Passing hand to hand like pink gin cocktails.

**Commented [PF(9):** Intriguing use of the second person.

*Bristles at the Keyhole*

Red-brown paint comes down

On that beat-in, beat-up

Wood—gone grey after

Years out under the sun.

Red-brown paint drips down

On those squeaking iron hinges:

Rust, the contagion,

Working its way through.

Bristles scratching at the keyhole—

How the lawnmower used to grunt!

How it ground those feathers up!

Go, get me another, says

The blue-eyed workman I mark in lead

While blackbirds sing overhead.

**Commented [PF(10):** Stylistically, this is very different from 'A City by the Sea'. It shares, however, Candidate's keen eye for detail—finding beauty in the mundane.

*Sub Specie Aeternitatis*

His forefinger burnt on the kettle,  
Odds and sods fixed in place,  
The pains of yesteryear  
Zip down his motor neurone,  
Let loose the still-life—  
A cracked motorcycle mug,  
Black tea on the tiles.  
Ceramic cuts sink in,  
Blood boils and steam rises.

**Commented [PF(11):** Like 'Bristles at the Keyhole', this poem has a forensic eye for detail. I enjoyed the biological precision of this moment.

*The Captain*

I kept the fire going through ten O'clock  
Drizzle, cracked open Coronas, drank 'em  
In *eight, seven, six*...retraced my muddy  
Footprints back from the bathroom, found no goodness  
In my wide-eyed mates.

For what could they do

With a drunken sailor's son but refer him  
To the captain, that all too righteous  
Right authority?

There'd be no need

For pay, even less for parents. Slipping  
In his keys, reciting his lines,  
He could recline the leather car seat  
An inch.

**Commented [PF(12):** A playful and funny poem. Perhaps not quite as vivid in its imagery as some of the others in the collection.

## *The Doctor's Office*

Kate and Kyle are waiting for the Doctor. They're sitting 'round a coffee table with a plastic chessboard on top. The whites are down a queen; the blacks are all out of knights, rooks and bishops. Kyle's lessons kick into gear: handicapped stalemates over Heinekens, Dad sighing under his bushy beard. Dad would tap away at his phone between turns; Kyle would nick extra goes as they neared the endgame. Kyle's a better opener than a finisher you see. He'd learnt a trick or two off Dan, and Dan knew his stuff. They'd make time for ten moves before school most mornings.

—Keep central, all right.

—Like this?

—Yeah, like that.

Kyle's openings got so good that he and Dan could play twenty-five moves. That, with the right amount of extra goes, he could beat Dad on rainy Saturdays. Kyle calls the game: the blacks in ten moves. When did chess lose the zeitgeist? he thinks, turning to the Doctor's bookshelf. The Doctor has a stack of *Harry Potter* books – seven, to be precise. This must be the collection, Kyle figures. For little Kyle didn't care for J.K. Rowling. He climbed the ladder from *Biff and Chip* to *Fantastic Mr. Fox* to *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. One summer Mum took little Kyle down to 221 Baker Street where there's a Sherlock Holmes Museum. Kyle remembers purple flowers, the draughty bedroom and Sherlock's sitting room. There were armchairs by the fireplace; there was a snuffbox on the mantelpiece and a chemistry set on the coffee table. Mum bought little Kyle a book from the giftshop: *The Complete Stories of Sherlock Holmes*. The hardback is about a thousand pages long and the original illustrations are inside. It came with a leather bookmark which reads: *There's nothing more deceptive than an obvious clue.*

**Commented [PF13]:** A very distinctive narrative voice and great characterisation here.

Kate and Kyle are waiting for the Doctor. Footsteps and chatter flood in from the hall. There are laminated posters pinned to the walls: Newton's laws, Einstein's formula, Descartes' cogito, that kind

of thing. Kate looks up from her phone and sees that Kyle is still fixed to the bookshelf. Yesterday, when all her troubles seemed so far away, she showed him her presentation.

—It's called *The Physics of Flight*.

—Sexy title.

They were sitting at the back of the common room, a few of feet away from the door. The deck was to-the-point, a blend of detailed diagrams and physics lingo. She walked him through each slide of black-on-white Times New Roman, read it through eight times before heading over to the physics classroom. She did her thing, made her way home and texted Kyle the play-by-play. *What do you mean the Doctor didn't know who you were? What does "I fucked it!" look like?* Kyle turns away from the bookshelf and plays with his hair. He reaches for his bottle and evidences one of Kate's little theories. Every boy, she thinks, has a trademark – a quirk with which they're born. They don't lose these trademarks; they keep them for life. They don't even know they've got them. *This way all boys stay the same, more or less. Kyle will drink water like a cowboy till he dies. There's nothing he can do about it because he doesn't know he's doing it. For drinking like a cowboy is his trademark. Once it's in, it's in.*

*Bibo ergo sum.*

Kate and Kyle are waiting for the Doctor. The hallway chatter has settled down. Kyle hooks his bottle onto the side of his mouth, grows wearier with each sip of dihydrogen monoxide... The soft stuff won't do! Won't see him through double maths, nor the creative writing workshop – an enlightened drum circle running low on pot. The tweed-jacketed English teacher ironing-out his next novella...no, novelette: his eyes in revolution as the teenage poet affects poor Jean-Jacques.

—Man is born free, but it's society, MAN.

Kyle isn't averse to such private school pantisocracy. *Au contraire mon frère*: Kyle's a dreamer, a real hard-liner. Not only would he legalise a drip of fine wine before the schoolchildren dine, he'd enforce it. He remembers the time Dan snuck in a half-bottle of vodka. Loitering outside the art block on a crisp February morning, having played his twenty-five moves, Dan topped-up Kyle's bottle.

Commented [PF(14)]: Excellent

Commented [PF(15)]: There is a playful and inventive humour to Candidate's writing which is certainly evident here.

—What is this: hand-sanitiser?

Doctor Dan's cure for the common school day kicked in after ten minutes. Lessons one through four came and went and precious little sunk in. The post-mock, pre-revision-drive angst gave way to three lemony non-sequiturs. A missing pencil case, a girl in a heavy coat, a quick game of five-aside. Kyle woke up in a small, dark room on the top floor of the geography block. He fixed his tie, passed into lesson five. Chemistry tests aren't creative writing workshops: duffers and bluffers sit side-by-side in regular rows while the teacher bogarts her joint. Kyle couldn't tell how late he was. He sat down next to Dan, pulled a paper and filled it in. Each question followed the last; black-on-white buttons generated numbers.

**Commented [PF(16):** Love this.

**Commented [PF(17):** Not entirely sure about what is 'lemony' about a 'non-sequitur' but I love the phrase.

**Commented [PF(18):** Love the collocation cemented by rhyme. Excellent use of free indirect discourse.

*Is Epicurus right that a wise person does not fear death?*

Woody Allen's *Love and Death* satirises the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Russian novel. It exaggerates all the existential themes readers of Dostoyevsky might expect – love, death, angst and so on. Boris

Grushenko (Woody Allen) proposes to his widowed cousin Sonja (Diane Keaton) around halfway through the film. Sonja doesn't want to marry Boris. But, thinking that it'll keep him happy and that he'll die tomorrow, she goes ahead with it. Here are some of her worries:

And then he loves me; he would make a devoted husband, not too exciting but devoted. We could have a family, maybe our own or we can rent one. I could learn to love him: me, Boris and six rented children...Or would I feel trapped, suffocated? Can't breathe – open the window...no! no! no! no! not that one: the one in the bathroom...

Promise him anything, make him happy for a night. Or would I feel trapped, suffocated? My youth gone, living with this swiss cheese and rented children...<sup>1</sup>

Sonja is describing the human condition and, with it, our place between finitude and infinitude. That is, the relation between our limited human means and the unlimited number of possibilities our freedom permits. Epicurus was part philosopher, part psychotherapist. The function of his philosophy was to eliminate psychopathologies, to teach us how to lead happier lives by deducing away our anxieties. As he notes:

Empty are the words of the philosopher who offers therapy for no human suffering.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Love and Death* (1975) – Woody Allen

<sup>2</sup> *The Fourfold Remedy* (2021) – John Sellars

**Commented [PF(19):** And now something very different. Candidate shows a particular flair for non-fiction critical writing. What it shares with his prose fiction, however, is an impressive control over his syntax—an ear for the rhythms of prose.

The success of Epicurus' argument hinges not upon its premise-by-premise precision, but upon the accuracy and originality with which he describes and resolves the human condition. Can this psychotherapist rid Sonja of her despair? *That* is the question.

Epicurus' argument goes something like this: We want pleasure and fear pain; we sense pleasure and sense pain. We stop sensing at all when we die. Ergo, death must be neutral, neither pleasant nor painful. And, as such, we have nothing to fear. Yet, we still obsess over death – when will it come for us? how should we make sense of it? Perhaps Epicurus hasn't settled the matter of life and death, and our anxieties are well-founded. Professor Eric Olson outlines a common critique of the Epicurean line:

Even the most peaceful sleep can be bad by causing you to miss the party. Death can be bad by causing you to miss the rest of your life.<sup>3</sup>

Olson is touching upon our “fear of missing out”. While Epicurus is right that there's no reason to fret over nothingness, he misunderstands what we fear and why we fear it. We're fearful because the cessation of life rules out potential pleasures, because we'd rather have the extra five, ten, twenty years. As Olson later notes, ‘death deprives us of many futures, good, bad, and middling.’ And yet, such an argument overlooks the Epicurean understanding of pleasure – that is, what Epicurus, Philodemus and Lucretius meant when they used the words *ἡδονή*, *ἀπονία* and *ἀταραξία*.

The Epicureans prescribed a modest hedonism in which *static, necessary pleasures* took priority over *active, unnecessary pleasures*. Their aim was to reach a state of *ἀταραξία* (or ataraxy) wherein they'd feel complete and desireless. The Epicurean understanding of pleasure was qualitative. No pleasure could better ataraxy; no new experience could build upon it. Notions of more pleasure, future pleasure

**Commented [PF(20):** Candidate weaves in different arguments very fluently.

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<sup>3</sup> *Why is death bad?* (2016) – Eric Olson

and potential pleasure become irrelevant. To fear death is to fear missing out; to fear missing out is to miss the point. *Carpe Diem! Carpe Diem!*

**Commented [PF(21):** Even in Candidate's critical writing, there is still a real flair.

Now, having dealt with the common critique, let us formulate our own and return our minds to Sonja. Is her anxiety also baseless, or does it light upon something deeper?

We can reduce Sonja's psychopathology to the tension between that which she will do and that which she could do. She is anxious because she knows that her choice – whether she does or doesn't marry Boris – will open up and shut out an infinite number of possibilities; and that her mortality and temporality allots her but a single string of such possibilities. In Kierkegaardian terms: Sonja is *lost in the infinite*. For as the ironist<sup>4</sup> relates from under the veil of Anti-Climachus:

the self is a synthesis in which the finite is the confining factor, and the infinite the expanding factor. Infinitude's despair is therefore the fantastic, the boundless;<sup>5</sup>

The Epicureans did not account for *conscious despair* – that is, the quest for selfhood while aware of one's limited human means. Their narrow understanding of why we fear death offers Sonja no catharsis. It seems that Epicurus neither describes nor resolves the human condition. And yet, his failings as a psychotherapist alone do not justify Sonja's anxiety. We must first establish that it is wise to despair in the finite, the infinite, the possible or the necessary.

It is only by despairing and coming to terms with our own mortality that we can relieve ourselves of angst. When we fear death, we are fully aware of our own finitude. This awareness causes us to despair. Despair can take a range of forms – paralysis as in the case of Sonja. And yet, if we endure it, we can reconcile it with the infinite. Kierkegaard reconciled the finite with the infinite by entering

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<sup>4</sup> We could also apply the epithets 'phenomenological psychologist' or 'Christian existentialist'.

<sup>5</sup> *The Sickness unto Death* (1849) – Søren Kierkegaard

into 'absolute relation to the absolute'<sup>6</sup>, by submitting to the God of Abraham and Isaac. But, to release ourselves from despair we must first pass through it.

for the self is only healthy and free from despair when, precisely by having despaired, it is grounded transparently in God.<sup>7</sup>

His *leap of faith* raises epistemic problemata and presupposes 'a yearning for unity'<sup>8</sup>. And while it lacks objectivity, it does offer us a way out of anxiety. It's the natural consequence of a psychology built upon the tension between freedom and mortality. Other such phenomenological psychologies exist: Sartre, Camus and de Beauvoir would propose their own cures for anxiety. Each of them understood the significance of death and why we should fear it. They, like Kierkegaard before them, knew that we can overcome the dizzying disjunct between what we will do and what we could do by living in an unrelenting awareness of our own mortality. That the construction of an authentic self requires us to acknowledge our end and discard our inherited prejudices. Such a philosophy, one that diagnoses and remedies the human condition, is most wise.

Commented [PF(22)]: Lovely ending.

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<sup>6</sup> *Fear and Trembling* (1843) – Søren Kierkegaard

<sup>7</sup> *The Sickness unto Death* (1849) – Søren Kierkegaard

<sup>8</sup> *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) – Albert Camus

# SECTION B

## **Prose Fiction:**

*Notes from the Balcony*

*Oxford's Finest*

*White Burgundy*

## Notes from the Balcony

The balcony overlooks the A-Seven, the main road stretching along the Costa del Sol. The traffic quietens down around the early evening, with red-faced tourists filing into beach bars. British? Not always, not around here. Here the Fins will match our boys, beer-for-beer, though they seem to prefer cava. Mind you, their wives aren't too bad either, knowing to cancel the fourth sangria—or the tenth rum and coke. The beer fridge nestled in the corner of the patio: down to my last three Heinekens. This isn't a problem, so much as a matter requiring tact: I tell Dad that the boys and I emptied the fridge in our spare time (that is, the time we didn't spend drinking, beachside), or I mask-up, make my way to the nearest *supermercado*.

In southern Spain booze procurement is pretty straightforward; you need only meet the waitstaff halfway. This often entails a mask-on, shades-down policy, capped-off with the regurgitation of GCSE-level Spanish: *Quiero una cerveza, por favor...Si, si...Muchas gracias*. At first, the boys were a little taken aback. Nobody wanted an I.D., few raised eyebrows at cocktail orders. It wasn't till "happy hour" that the boys figured things out, that the second-hand smoke inspired cultural assimilation.

Every day at six-thirty scores of expats converge upon Millennium, the bar sitting some two-hundred metres downhill. Its owners seem committed to caricature of some kind: no snacks, no cushions, poorly lit, part dive-bar, part dystopian night club. Both in aesthetic and society, the joint is sexually ambiguous: ear-ringed homosexuals lean against long-abandoned stripper-poles; puritanical grandmothers flick through pornographic menus. Meanwhile, political chit-chat colours the happiest minutes of happy hour, not that there's much consensus. In lieu of a common person, party, or policy, the expats share in a rejection of strict epistemological criteria. In other words, anything goes; no opinions are better than others, and claims needn't correspond to reality.

In Michael Gove's words, they've had enough of experts.

We bought the flat from an old Fin who was starting afresh in Norway. At the time, it was unclear whether he'd been living here or renting the place out. Last summer I floated a third option: that he'd

**Commented [PF(23):** Effective opening—drawing us into the first person narrative with his present tense narration.

**Commented [PF(24):** Intriguing juxtaposition between the poetic and the banal trappings of teenage drinking.

**Commented [PF(25):** Effective use of analepsis.

bought-up early—perhaps after *The Crash*—and watched the flat’s value appreciate, while living elsewhere. I suppose you’d call that a holding action, though this sounds a little aggressive—and the Fin was anything but. Passing into the lounge, I half-remember something about his older sister. He was going to look after her in Norway. Yes, that sounds about right.

There’s something a little aseptic about the interior: grey law-firm sofas, polished, white-topped tables. I keep my bare necessities—Joyce, Montaigne, Dante, &c.—in a cupboard opposite the dining room table. I’ve taken to calling the cupboard “The Intellectual Corner”—which, in a sense, it is. Mum and Dad keep their summer reading in the drawers under the TV. I crouch down, begin to assay: *Flashman* (it was his birthday), a crowd-pleasing bestseller (pinched from the ferry), some get-rich-quick nonsense (prescribed by his boss, no doubt).

Mum and Dad are at the gym right now, gym-ing away in a spin class. I imagine they’re lost in translation, out-of-sync with their instructor. A Norwegian couple own and run the Alhamar Fitness Centre. Themselves former bodybuilders, they’ve designed a *gimnasio* for cast-iron obsessives. As far as I can tell, a bronze, bulbous man called Angelino is their protégé. Last summer I passed into his *abdominales* class, after a sobering day at the beach. It was me and this cockney woman of about fifty: she said that this was her tenth class, that Angelino would work us hard. Our tank-topped instructor arrived soon after, eager to get us crunching, to get us planking. He’d demonstrate each exercise before barking numbers *en español*. I was never quite sure what these meant; was he timing us, counting reps., counting down?

Perhaps I haven’t been entirely clear; allow me to explain the precise nature of my situation. We—by whom I mean myself, family, and dog—boarded a ferry about a week ago. It being a cheap ferry, the kennels proving inadequate, we spent the crossing preoccupied with our dog’s discomfort, smuggling him into our cabin in the early hours of the next morning. We then passed through border control and drove cross-country, stopping twice on our way. That was the journey.

The boys—by whom I mean two of my closest friends—stayed with us over a long weekend. They left yesterday morning, after three days of beachside drinking. Not only have they drained the

**Commented [PF(26):** Excellent details which start to suggest an ironic distance from the pretensions of the first person narrator.

**Commented [PF(27):** There is a directness in the narrative voice which is very different from the Section A prose.

beer fridge, but they've also left me with bugger all to do—or, at least, nobody with whom to do things; not that there's much going on, much to do, between Oxford and the beach.

I melodramatise. A Nespresso capsule clicks into place: coffee drips into a small, white mug. Tomorrow I'll go down to the beach, read some Montaigne. I picked up a copy of *The Complete Essays* a day before setting sail, so to speak. The crossing wasn't kind to the tome, folding its corners, somehow dirtying its final pages. I'm not *that* precious about books—at least, not all of them. While I prefer buying to borrowing, paperbacks to PDFs, I still lend; I lend books all the time, without any hope of their return. And yet Montaigne is different.

We must take on a sense of obligation when we buy big books. We're told that they're important, and that, by reading them slowly, by keeping them from cramped cabins, we'll discover something profound. Deep down, we know this to be nonsense, hyper-literary hocus-pocus; but then our bookshelves spring to mind: we've contrived to colour co-ordinate, to alphabetise—Waugh atop Woolf, Camus beside Le Carré. And where are the big books, and how are they looking? We've read Dickens; we reread *A Christmas Carol* once a year. We imagine the multi-novel hardback standing in mint condition, having stood the test of the time.

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Mild insomnia has, to my mind, three main causes: our exposure to blue light, desire for sex, and occasional bouts of coffee-induced nocturia. Seeing as only one of these causes precedes its effect, I'm inclined to drag out Aristotle's framework. My experiment requires a still, unambiguous insomniac; the person must be clear in my mind: an event with component parts. I paint its image, distinguish form from matter, and abstract its telos. This leaves only its efficient cause, leaves him staring into the bathroom mirror, ring-eyed.

The email came at three O'clock on Monday morning: they'd made him redundant; he'd need to find another job. He's sharing a plate of *calamartitos* with my sister, a covidian mask hanging from his ear.

**Commented [PF(28):** The shifts in the piece are very effective in deepening our understanding of the narrator.

His phone lies face-up on the table, pings every other minute. Playa de la Cala remains quiet—whatever *quiet* means around this time of year: the waves; the murmur of voices, some French, some Spanish, Italian, all Viennese Italian; the A-Seven purrs, runs parallel to the promenade.

The boys and I rubbed sun cream on each other's backs somewhere along the promenade, stripping down a few feet from the rainbow bench. Perhaps we enjoyed the irony a little too much: the knowledge that we were straight, that the bench was gay. There is, I think, a moment when the impossibility of homosexuality sinks in, when you needn't affect disgust, or deny another man's good looks. For a lot of us it happens when we're about fifteen—past which point I doubt it happens at all.

El Torreon sits in the corner of the main square, jutting out onto promenade. Like most restaurants along the Costa del Sol, it supports what I've termed *The Pisshead Hypothesis*; this maintains a strong negative correlation between the density of British folk, and the quality of food—or, for that matter, the quality of everything. There are, of course, notable exceptions: there's a pan-Mediterranean bar called Niche, with a near-even split of Brits and non-Brits. The thing about correlative claims is that they permit such exceptions and are concerned only with momentary trends. There's an inevitable downside to these dead claims. In the absence of any causal relations, they tell us nothing of what is to come. I find myself face-to-face with the vagaries of causality: the cue strikes the object balls; the object balls spread themselves across the table. That the sun—it now looms over the restaurant, reddening our necks—should rise tomorrow; is this but a hypothesis?

In the two weeks since the boys' leaving, I've settled into a leisurely routine: the dog wakes me up around nine O'clock; I read with him—sometimes to him—for a couple of hours; I drink my first beer at midday, from which point I start thinking about the gym, about whether to go, about which sets I'll do, and in what order I'll do them. One way or another, the beach enters into most days. This is the only thing I leave to chance, the ninety minutes for which I haven't a plan; this is the time when there's nothing else – nowhere I ought to be, nothing I ought to be doing.

It's not the case that time stops when the sea is close by, rather that we become wilfully imprecise: line gives way to colour. Of course, the beach exists in time. Our visits break into twenty-

minute segments—sand, water; book down, book up; eyes open, eyes shut. They stand ten million years from where those first amoeba crawled, reinventing themselves with each wave's crash.

**Commented [PF(29):** An evocative ending.

*Oxford's Finest*

Yesterday my driving teacher told me that we'd need four more months. By this time I'll have turned eighteen, have found out about Oxford—whether they've let me in. It's not that I'm particularly bothered about driving; I don't much care about getting it done quickly. I wouldn't half mind passing first time, though this, too, seems more than a little superficial. Perhaps it's the turning eighteen part, the idea of being both a grown-up and a pupil. And what about *being* eighteen, receiving my license, aged eighteen? To my mind, driving—or, at least, learning how to drive—is something for the lower-sixth. This is because, by the time you reach upper-sixth, your next birthday is about something else, something inimical to safe driving.

**Commented [PF(30)]:** The opening sentence establishes the key tension of the piece.

The Turkish café must be about a hundred yards from school. I come here whenever I can—breaks, between lessons, lunchtimes. Today was a little different: one of those grey areas between a free period and the confines of the classroom. My Oxford tutor—that is, the guy whose job it is to get me in—was having 'technological problems'. Which is to say that neither he, nor the world-of-warcraft types the school keeps in their tech-filled dungeon, could operate his computer. Standing at our rendezvous point; the look on his face as he slipped through the main gates. I knew then, with twenty minutes of our special time already spent, that the dark arts of admissions would have to wait. My personal statement earned a sentence, my college selection a monosyllable.

With rain like this, it's easy to forget that the summer was only a couple of weeks ago. The Turkish barista, whom I both do and don't know, passes me a glass of tap water, tells me that I can stay another half-hour. I pull my phone from my suit-jacket, check for texts, and missed calls, and find that nothing has come through. I'm in for the long-haul; the Turk will shut up shop, and I'll drift like the undead dead into yet another café.

**Commented [PF(31)]:** Lovely turn of phrase.

Bristol is not like Oxford—or, at least, it's nothing like Christ Church. There are, of course, the aesthetic differences: the latter being much prettier, much greener. Then comes the history, that hermeneutic bundle. The historians paint two pictures, and we place them side by side. Again, when it

comes down to it, what we're really facing is an aesthetic question—the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, or the Dissolution of the Monasteries: which is sexier? Society is, I think, the only remaining factor. The fact that the students over here are a little thicker.

**Commented [PF(32)]:** There is a subtlety to how Candidate builds up the obvious pretensions and insecurities of the narrator about his Oxford application.

Kierkegaard would compose sentences while he walked through central Copenhagen. If the city wasn't bad enough, the study was suffocating. For a long time he could only work, could only think seriously in Berlin. In Prussia he must have enjoyed a kind of anonymity—no mention of broken engagements, of Regine. The return trips, like all travels back then, were long and tiring. And yet, almost paradoxically, though Kierkegaard could not think in his city, or in his study, his ideas fermented within chattering, rattling carriages.

I collect my things, pass out into the rain.

The corporate coffeeshop sits between a bank and a bicycle rack. I stare into its windows and find my reflection: a black overcoat against a red-bricked university building. Tracksuit-wearers—students, I suppose—brush past me, brush their arms against my back before trudging uphill. There are even more of them out on the road, ascending by bus or scooter—with the latter weaving between lanes, exploiting gaps between parked cars and the pavement.

—Two kinds of people take theology degrees: duffers and religious nutters. Which are you?

That was how he put it: leant back in his swivel chair, his beady eyes narrowing.

—I couldn't possibly say. You are, of course, overlooking the philosophy side—that is, the other fifty percent of the course.

**Commented [PF(33)]:** Superb use of dialogue to break from the solipsistic world of the narrator.

Mr Secant has a hard-on for precision—or, at least, the veneer of certainty. I would try to charm him through the careful deploy of maths-speak—the odd 'fifty percent', the occasional 'Q.E.D.'. I didn't

**Commented [PF(34)]:** Excellent phrasing, again.

have him last year; he had no grounds to under-predict, no grounds to slow things down. Perhaps it had little to do with me, and everything to do with what I *represented*—the wilfully imprecise humanities-type spitting out polysyllables, perpetually questioning the question.

—I couldn't possibly say, sir. You do, of course, realise that I could very well be both or, for that matter, neither.

And with that, my A\* drifted from a certainty to a strictly conjectural improbability. Mr Secant looked more than a little perturbed. *He* was the maths teacher, the person who drew up schemata, decided how things worked, and where exactly things fitted. Forget doubt, forget concerns; when Mr Secant says something, you indicate agreement—a nod, a simple 'yessir' or, better still, a 'yeah'.

(You must bear in mind that he is, unsurprisingly, one of *those* socialists—the kinds for whom every lesson is a lecture; to whose minds literacy is terribly bourgeois, and completed words or sentences are forms of U-English, the echoes of primitive accumulation.)

**Commented [PF35]:** Interesting use of parenthesis.

In the end I traded affectations. Out went maths-speak, went 'yes', went 'very well'; in came the non-descript drawl of a self-effacing private schoolboy:

—Sorry...Yeah, you're right...Cheers.

What I'd forgotten, something I'm unlikely to forget again, was why I needed another A\*. In schools such as mine the word 'Oxford' works like 'open sesame'; its utterance moves the powers that be, and delivers the requisite grades and "support", deserved or otherwise.

My phone pings: I scan my emails.

The corporate coffeeshop is awash with busy people and segregated along fashionable lines. If you can pull on a pair of jeans, or find the means to procure a coat, you best keep away from the floor-to-ceiling window. Why? Because this coffeeshop has clear aesthetic standards; its window must remain a picture of Paris in May of 1968. (—Perhaps I exaggerate.) Here the putative counterculture puts itself on full display. Passers-by, in their blouses and suits and ties, peer like gallery-goers; and what

should they see but a collage of things without craft or rhyme or reason? A feminist poet agonising over font sizes, subjecting Twitter to sub-literacy; a post-modern philosopher quoting Foucault, sating himself with YouTube summaries of Derrida; and there, right in the centre, sit the last dregs of *quattrocento* beauty: her hair is not yet blue, her nose unpierced, and her pink lips await fattening up.

—You don't mind, do you? I'd sit with the sofa-dwellers, but they seem terribly important.

She smiles.

—It's fine.

I was wrong about her nose; there is in fact a stud. She's paging through a binder from which odd bits of card and crumpled essay occasionally spill. And though her subject seems clear enough, where exactly she studies is a little harder to discern; art student proper, or art student minor, which is she?

**Commented [PF36]:** There is a real sense of the story going somewhere here. An encounter that takes us beyond the inward looking world of the narrator.

*White Burgundy*

*I started out on Burgundy, but soon hit the harder stuff*

—Bob Dylan, “Just Like Tom Thumb’s Blues”

It wasn’t till I was eighteen that my parents left me in charge of the house. They were spending a long weekend in Marbella, and my mock exams had precluded me from joining them. We were going through a rough patch, then and I. Not three weeks earlier had they picked me up from a club, after a few too many—well, perhaps more than few. By their account, I’d decorated the pavement, stumbled into the four-by-four, and slipped in and out of consciousness. True, this was all terribly unbecoming; but I shouldn’t think that it warranted the next morning’s recriminations:

—No drinking ‘round my house. That’s final.

That was Dad, and he was adhering to a strict policy of *my carpet, my rules*. You see, I’d sicked up a little in my sleep, and in our house that was a pretty serious offence. Flecks of half-chewed olive had spread themselves around my bed; and though I’d slept like a battle-hardened docker, one of my parents would need to change the sheets, lug the Hoover upstairs, guide me—half-awake, unclothed—to the spare room. It was, thus, with due trepidation that they handed me a set of garage keys, and fired up the satnav.

Commented [PF37]: An intriguing portrait

Our goodbyes consisted of a seven o’clock start, of standing around in the February cold. There was an awkward embrace, a paternal nod; the Volvo grumbled into the spirit of things. A long ten minutes, all told. I double-locked the front door and fixed myself a pot of coffee—a *distinctively fruity flavour with a cherry brightness*. The kitchen had a kind of aseptic aspect—black granite topped white cupboards; the natural light leant everything a certain NHS blue; the lymph-nodes swelled. I was on my third mug of *Kenyan Peaberry*, when the obvious stuff kicked in—the chesty cough, the rosy cheeks, the reddening nose.

Soon enough a general torpor took hold. I exchanged my dressing gown for an old pair of trackies, languished about my bedroom. I had half a mind to take a walk; the pub was scarcely a mile away and, as per Dad's instruction, safely outside of the house. The Grouse was the kind of place you went when you felt like death: a real blue-collar dive, with real punters on the fruit machines, it was expecting a Niagara of midday types—spluttering codgers counting out old coins; scrofulous twirps skiving some geography lesson. Yes, The Grouse could survive the afternoon, without my custom.

The 'phone rang a short while after dark. (I had begun to exhibit a lactic pallor, and was fixing a supper of brie, oatcakes, and over-ripe satsumas.) The call was from Will, and he was the kind of bloke who called when you felt like death: his ruddy face, his equine smile.

—Will, you all right?

There was a pause, then a giggle.

—Hi, James, said a girl.

Another giggle, then a faint crackling noise. Will's 'phone changed hands.

—James, mate, she thought it'd be funny if she answered.

—And was it?

—Yeah, mate, it was a little... You know who she is, though? You can tell, right?

Will had a rumbling, volcanic kind of laugh: his head fell back; his eyes squinted.

—It's your girl, mate!

I'm not a prude, though the intermingling of year groups makes me a little uncomfortable—the *older* boy, the *young* English teacher, and the *cool* Hockey coach suggest themselves. Sure, she was more or less seventeen, more or less my age; but there was something wrong about it, and of this much I was certain. Which is not to say, Will was a bad bloke, rather that the whole thing was wrong—she with him, he with her. There must have been some kind of gap, some show of innocence or immaturity. In any case Olivia went back to Will's, and that night I received a video call—the two of them, a little drunk, hair dripping with rain or sweat.

**Commented [PF38]:** Distinctive voices in the dialogue which skilfully suggest the world of which the narrator both is and is not a part.

In retrospect, Will must have been taunting me. You see, I'd told him that Olivia was pretty—pretty in the kind of way an amaranth is pretty. Nobody fucks an amaranth: its defloration remains a strictly literal one. My comment, then, did not make Olivia *my girl*; and if it did, those who allocate girls should at least consider adopting a different criterion.

Commented [PF(39): Brilliant!

That night I powered off my phone (in disgust, no doubt) and crept to the scullery, for it was there, in a wicker basket, that my parents stored wine and spirits. At eighteen you understand alcohol, or perhaps you and alcohol have an understanding; you have surpassed the days of false identification, are no longer reliant upon older siblings and their eleemosynary impulses. Indeed, so few illusions remain that the sacred elixir can finally become a vehicle of clarity—not through the looking-glass, but beyond the veil.

Bombay gin, two bottles of champers; bulk-bought Riesling, a dusty Malbec, raffle ticket Cava. It wasn't long before I chanced upon a reliable White Burgundy. I donned my dressing gown, disposed of any mucus-filled tissues (these had been steadily accumulating in each of my pockets), and passed out into the bleak late-winter. The garage was technically outside of the house, and I could cool the wine in the spare refrigerator.

Commented [PF(40): Excellent ending.

# SECTION C

*A Commentary*

## A Commentary

Last Summer I holidayed along the *Costa del Sol*, in a modern flat with views of the Mediterranean. I had recently discovered the novels of Julian Barnes, and had armed myself with copies of *Metroland*, *The Only Story*, and *The Sense of an Ending*. Barnes has an essayistic style; indeed, *The Only Story* begins with a vaguely philosophical question—‘Would you rather love the more, and suffer the more; or love the less, and suffer the less?’ His narrators ruminate, and hold ill-informed opinions: for instance, in *The Sense of an Ending* Tony Webster expounds largely unsubstantiated theories about sex, age, time, &c. That these books are novels—and not extended essays—affords Barnes the freedom to be semi-serious; that is, to say things which possess the timbre of a long-read, without any of the due diligence, or the research.

**Commented [PF(41)]:** Excellent engagement with ideas gleaned from his reading.

The blurred line between essay and short-story was, I think, what inspired *Notes from the Balcony*; my narrator has a lot of theories, and these range from the crass—‘*The Pisshead Hypothesis*’—to the metaphysical—‘the vagaries of causality’. Barnes also influenced the structure of this story; *Metroland* features three ‘Object Relations’ chapters, in which Christopher associates fragments of plot, with particular objects dotted around his bedroom, flat or house. Similarly, my narrator passes from the ‘balcony’ to the ‘beer fridge’; his mind flits from his ‘coffee machine’ to his bookshelf.

**Commented [PF(42)]:** Highly effective critical reflection on the influence of Barnes on the structure of his stories.

More than this, Barnes often experiments with form; in *The Only Story* he shifts between the first, second, and third person; in *The Sense of an Ending* Tony is characteristically unreliable. In a similar way my narrator exhibits a sense of authorship: he wants to help his readers along—‘allow me to explain the precise nature of my situation’—and briefly shifts into the first-person plural—‘We must’, ‘We’re told’, ‘we’ll discover’. Of course, Barnes neither was, nor seems to be, the sole influence upon this story: there is nothing quintessentially *Barnesian* about my prose, and at the sentence level the piece must have found root elsewhere.

**Commented [PF(43)]:** Interesting distinction between the structural influence of Barnes and the way in which, at a sentence level, his writing is actually stylistically quite different.

Colm Tóibín has described *Giacomo Joyce* as a ‘prose sequence’ (as opposed to the more straightforward ‘short story’). It is, first and foremost, a stylistic experiment, in which James Joyce deploys the ‘short, darting, verbless sentence, like a single brushstroke.’ Certain passages are difficult

to forget, and one can, indeed, find echoes of Joyce in *Notes from the Balcony*: for instance, the line, ‘Her classmate, retwisting her twisted body, purrs in boneless Viennese Italian’, is reconstituted as ‘all Viennese Italian; the A-Seven purrs’. What’s more, *Giacomo Joyce* is often aggressively alliterative—‘Long lewdly leering lips’; this, too, finds expression in the opening paragraphs of *Notes from the Balcony*: ‘committed to caricature of some kind’; ‘person, party or policy’, ‘bronze, bulbous’. More generally, Joyce tends to trademark his prose, with an inventive colon or two, and these figure throughout my piece: for instance, ‘the person must be clear in my mind: an event with component parts.’

Like *Giacomo Joyce*, *Notes from the Balcony* is semi-autobiographical. It more or less describes my summer holiday, yet stylistic experimentation—in this case, oscillating between a well-ordered essayistic voice, and something more painterly—prevent this story from descending into non-fiction. Indeed, all of the stories in this collection draw heavily upon things which have happened to me, and each confronts the problems raised by *auto-fiction*, or *life-writing*, differently.

*Oxford’s Finest* encapsulates the weeks preceding my entrance test. I wrote it in bursts of three-hundred words, and these were spread evenly across the purgatorial months of October and November, when every prospective undergraduate is attuned to their email address, and more than a little anxious about interviews. Of the three pieces it is both the most personal—in that the narrator and I are most similar—and the least ordered. (Here, too, one could justifiably employ the appellation ‘prose sequence’.) While there is a clear narrative present—our narrator walks from one coffee shop to another—what *Oxford’s Finest* lacks is a sense of direction, and it is thus that it differs from *Giacomo Joyce*, and comes to resemble some of the short fiction of, say, Don DeLillo.

In the essay *Laureate of Terror* Martin Amis examines DeLillo’s *unspoken premise*—‘that fiction exaggerates the ever-weakening power of motive in human dealings.’ He, then, instances a passage from *The Starveling*, in which the former spouse of DeLillo’s protagonist speculates about why her ex-husband spends all day at ‘the movies’: *Was he at the movies to see a movie, she said, or maybe more narrowly, more essentially, simply to be at the movies?* *Oxford’s Finest* is similarly directionless; it possesses a heightened sense of the interior. And though it is perfectly clear what my

**Commented [PF(44):**

**Commented [PF(45):** Precise reflections on the influence of Joyce.

**Commented [PF(46):** Again, superb comments on influences and on structural decision making.

narrator desires in the long-term—viz. to read Philosophy and Theology at Christ Church, Oxford—it remains the case that he is merely drifting from ‘the Turkish café’ to the ‘corporate’ one.

*Brideshead Revisited* did inevitably influence the writing of this piece. My narrator has chosen Sebastian’s college, longs for a ‘city of aquatint’, and is, to say the least, unenthusiastic about modern culture. Viewed in these terms, the ‘tracksuit-wearers’, the ‘feminist poet’, and the ‘post-modern philosopher’ become analogues to Hooper and the travelling salesman—‘with his polygonal *pince-nez*, his fat, wet handshake, his grinning dentures.’ Moreover, the line ‘the last dregs of *quattrocento* beauty’ alludes to Julia, who is described in like terms—‘the head that I used to think *quattrocento*’.

I would be remiss if I did not also mention the role of Clare Carlisle: an early paragraph (‘Kierkegaard would compose...’) draws heavily upon *Philosopher of the Heart*—‘Working like this in Berlin, fuelled and frayed by sugary coffee, Kierkegaard felt most himself’. Carlisle’s biography is eminently novelistic; her use of the present tense—‘Kierkegaard is grappling’—revivifies nineteenth-century Copenhagen, and, more generally, her influence finds expression in certain poetic passages—‘brush past me, brush their arms against my back before trudging uphill.’

When asked about the extent to which *Money*’s Jonathan Self resembles his creator, Amis has often said that his narrators tend to betray a small part of himself; by which he means that Jonathan is not him, but rather his hedonistic side, undiluted and multiplied by a hundred or a thousand, or whatever. The same is true of the narrator of *Oxford’s Finest*, into whom I poured a cocktail of my own elitism and pseudo-intellectualism. I was, thus, unsurprised when at workshops my classmates confused this piece with some kind of elaborate diary entry. I would need to create a level of ironic distance, and this is what the ending *tries* to do: my narrator, once so self-assured, finds himself without anything of substance to say; he has misjudged the ‘art student’, who, in sporting a nose-ring, seems to represent the very values against which he rails.

Ironic distance is perhaps the trickiest problem raised by auto-fiction. One needs to burst their narrator’s bubble; to hint at an external world. Indeed, after finishing *Oxford’s Finest*, I returned to the third-person and wrote a handful of sketches, each around five-hundred words long; these included a Wodehouse pastiche called *A Word on Young Hugh*, and a vignette inspired by Edvard Munch’s *The*

**Commented [PF(47)]:** This is, perhaps, my favourite section of Candidate’s commentary, with its strikingly honest reflection on the relationship between his narrators and himself.

*Sick Child*. In time I gathered that careful plotting and a comic note could help reassure one's readers that *no, this is not autobiography*. For instance, in a *Word on Young Hugh* I stress that 'for all of Hugh [Paterson]'s commitment, he neither was, nor ever had been, of particular importance to the First XV', and later note that 'the Paterson phenotypes' had rendered illusory the choice between 'the pitch' and 'the study'. It is for the above reasons that *White Burgundy* reads like the work of a more experienced writer, or one who is at least vaguely aware of the demands and mechanics of their form.

As with most of my fiction, *White Burgundy* began as a throb; I really wanted to write something about the first time one is left in charge of one's home. After all, this was how I would spend the first few days of the February half-term, so it followed that I might have a personal take on a common experience. After I penned the opening paragraph I was cautious not to rush; instead, I spent a couple of hours planning the story, and eventually settled upon a working title—*The Prohibition*. In an interview at the 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Y Iris Murdoch outlined a similar process: she tended to 'plan the whole thing in immense detail', and kept voluminous notes upon every chapter and conversation.

In *White Burgundy* I strike a darkly comic chord and draw upon the work of Amis. That half-term I read *Time's Arrow* and wanted to write something similarly baroque. Certain passages of this short, difficult book read like a stage play; and as the pages turn, the distinction between novella and monologue grows increasingly ambiguous: *I pay the hospital. Irene pays me. I don't get it. Are we all slaves? Are we somehow less than slaves?* These kinds of theatrics echo in my piece, especially in the paragraph which begins 'I'm not a prude'. *Time's Arrow* is not without a compelling thesis—that Naziism was a *biocratic* experiment; that it sought to heal and purify the German nation. Amis is preoccupied with the respective roles of torturers and doctors—'intimates of bacilli and trichinae, of trauma and mortification'. This, too, finds expression in *White Burgundy*; the language of the clinic recurs throughout the piece: 'aseptic aspect', 'lymph nodes swelled', 'mucus-filled tissues'.

Taken as a whole, the pieces in this collection represent a small part of my life. Each concerns the paradox of sixth form; the grey area between adolescence and adulthood. In time school, and home, and their internal contradictions, will cease to preoccupy me; these things shall soon possess

**Commented [PF(48):** What a metaphor to describe writing! But perhaps one that does suit the narrators Candidate paints.

the character of memory, whereupon I should like to write something plotted and substantive. A

*Bildungsroman* suggests itself, though the particulars remain shadowy.

**Commented [PF(49)]:** This is, perhaps, my main target for Candidate. He needs to leave the fragment behind and embark on something bigger. I would certainly like to read it.

*Candidate Star*

*March 2022*