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Words in the Shape of Darts

Ariella Van Luyn and Jarryd Luke

Joe Orton and Kenneth Halliwell stole library books. When Joe complained their bed-sit was dull and claustrophobic, Ken ripped the pages from the books and glued them to the walls. He gummed the serene face of Buddha cheek-by-jowl with Da Vinci's Mary, her half-closed eyes forgiving them everything. *David's* penis hung just above their heads. In the places where the damp was blooming, Ken couldn't make the pictures stick, so he outlined the clouds of mould with wide, bright lines, giving the effect of an abstract artwork. Ken left the more disturbing images—smashed skulls and monkeys with mad expressions—in a pile on the desk. He shuffled through them while he dictated his novel to Joe, who only typed the parts he liked and added bits here and there. They wrote in the daylight hours to save electricity.

One morning Ken ventured out for food; their dinners consisted of rice and sardines, their desserts of rice and golden syrup, all paid for with the dwindling remains of Ken's inheritance. When he came back he found that Joe had taken one of the pictures from the desk—a pair of men wrestling in white briefs—and glued it onto the cover of Phyllis Hambleton's *The Queen's Favourite*.

They chose the books that annoyed them most: the trashy romances, the *Collins Guide to Roses*. These seemed to represent exactly what they hated about England. They made new covers for them all. Joe typed obscene blurbs with the spin of a thriller writer: 'READ THIS BEHIND CLOSED DOORS! And have a good shit while you're reading!'

Joe stuffed *Exotic Cage Birds*, which he'd decorated with twin monkeys squeezed together on a leafless branch, into a gasmask case he carried his unpublished manuscripts in. He slid the butchered book back onto the library shelf. Ken and Joe hid in the corner for hours, reading crime novels and guessing the endings, until a man in a tweed hat took the book and stood staring at it. They collapsed into fits of laughter when he borrowed it anyway. This proved to them what they'd always thought about middle-class men in libraries: that they were stupid and would do whatever they were told. It was a victory, of sorts. For the first time, they saw the impact of their work, an immediate reaction to their collaborative efforts. They developed a taste for shocking people. It came out in their writing.

This went on for almost a year, but eventually one of the librarians became suspicious of the two men who spent hours in the library. The librarian checked the files and realised Joe and Ken shared the same address. Almost certain this odd pair was defacing the books, he convinced the council to send them a fake parking ticket. Joe replied with the typewriter whose typeface riddled the dust jackets of seventy or more books. The police knocked the hinges off their door to get to them. Joe and Ken were fined £262 and sentenced to six months in prison. Joe said it was because they were queers. The judge separated them, of course. He sent Joe to H.M. Prison Eastchurch and Ken to H.M. Prison Ford Arundel. They wrote to each other.

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Ken,

I've been thinking. We've been writing for ten years. *The Mechanical Womb*, *Lord Cucumber*, *The Boy Hairdresser*. When do you think they're going to stop sending them back? You have to wonder what's off here, with the process.

I know what you're going to say about this, but maybe it's time we tried writing separately.

It might give you more time to work on your collages. People have been saying they're of a professional standard. Maybe writing isn't something we have to do together every day. You're like a zombie sometimes. All you do is write.

I don't think I can write novels anymore. I need a shorter form. I've been thinking about stage-plays—something funny, but black. London looks different to me these last few months. I want to put in some of what I've seen inside the soiled skirts of England.

Maybe it doesn't always turn out so well when writers try to live together. I've been doing some reading—I know you're not convinced by anything that's unsupported. Take Rebecca West and H.G. Wells. Wells invited her to lunch one day after she published a devastating review of his novel, *Marriage*. I quote: 'Of course he is the old maid among novelists; even the sex obsession that lay clotted on *Ann Veronica* and *The New Machiavelli* like cold white sauce was merely old maid's mania, the reaction towards the flesh of a mind too long absorbed in airships and colloids.' Their discussion went on for several hours and soon after that they began an affair. She gave him a nickname—Jaguar.

She fell pregnant and Wells set her up in a place in Norfolk, but he refused to divorce his wife. Ten years later, Rebecca, who had written about the harsh treatment of unmarried mothers, gave up trying to persuade H. G. to marry her: 'You can't conceive a person resenting the humiliation of an emotional failure so much that they twice tried to kill themselves. . . You say obsessions are curable. But people like me swing themselves from one passion to another, and if they miss smash down somewhere where there aren't any passions at all but only bare boards and sawdust.'

We need to ease up before we crash.

Think of it this way: we'll have twice the chance of getting published if we're working on separate material. I don't want to end up like West and Wells. We don't have to be in each other's pockets every day. Or each other's clothes, even.

Joe

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When he finished his letter to Ken, Joe thought of a scene he could add to one of their novels, *The Boy Hairdresser*. The main character, Gombold, is trying to escape from prison. He devises a plan to throw poetry in the shape of darts through the barred window of his cell. Joe scribbled, 'It was the kind of writing Gombold had never done before, indeed, he was convinced it was a type that no one had ever attempted in any language...After a second or two the dart was returned. His heart sank. There seemed no one here either to appreciate his writing or engineer his escape.'

Ken replied to his letter two days later.

*

Dear Joe,

I've been feeling pretty sick after your letter. What's brought it on? Now, of all times, we shouldn't be tearing each other up. You belittle me sometimes, but I ignore it. I just want to make you happy.

You talk about H.G. Wells and Rebecca West. I've been doing some research of my own.

Mary Godwin and Percy Shelley would meet by Mary's mother's grave. It was a sign that Percy understood Mary, her position, what she was struggling against. Her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, gave her daughter ideas about the role of women that would allow her to step outside her society and comment on it, like she did in *Frankenstein*. Percy understood that. He encouraged her.

He took her to Paris and they walked across the Alps to Switzerland. They wrote a journal together, like us. Mary said that being with Percy was like being in a romance novel. They were living in their own world, one they created themselves. One that Mary wouldn't have been able to keep up on her own; there wouldn't have been anyone to convince her of it.

And it was Percy who took her away to Lake Geneva, where they stayed with Lord Byron. It rained for days and they were so bored Byron suggested they each write their own horror story. That night, Percy woke in the night to find Mary standing, ghost-like, at the head of the bed. In a fugue, half awake, half asleep, she'd seen an image of a 'pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together.' She saw 'the hideous phantasm of a man stretched out, and then, on the working of some powerful engine, show signs of life, and stir with an uneasy, half vital motion.'

This image didn't come from nowhere. It was Percy who put it there. He, Byron and Mary had been talking about Galvani's experiments, about him running electric current through frogs, and buying corpses fresh from the gallows and wiring them up.

So when you say we should write separately, I think you've missed the point: you can write on your own, but I can guarantee your work will suffer for it. I show you something about yourself, Joe. You have to admit that. You've told me before that sometimes I say the exact thing you're thinking—I've noticed it too. In me, your stories are amplified. You wouldn't risk losing that.

You shouldn't let the bastards grind you down.

Love Ken.

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Ken's optimism in the letter was mostly show. Secretly, he was glad his parents were dead—a wasp bit his mother in the mouth when he was 11; his father shoved his head in an oven—

because Ken couldn't bear the thought of anyone knowing he was in prison. He didn't keep Joe's letter; he feared the prison postmark could be used against him.

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Ken,

You put quite a sentimental spin on the Shelleys. He was still married for more than half their relationship. And let's not forget the pregnancy. There was the matter of the drowning. The brain tumour.

This all reminds me of Rimbaud and Verlaine. Rimbaud was seventeen when he wrote a letter to Verlaine asking if he could stay with him in Paris. They shared Verlaine's house with his seventeen-year-old pregnant wife. They drank absinthe and smoked hashish. Rimbaud spiked a friend's drink with sulphuric acid. They ran off to London and Brussels. They wrapped towels around a pair of knives and fought with them. Verlaine shot Rimbaud in the left wrist (not his writing hand I'm guessing) with a gun he'd bought to kill himself with. He got two years in prison for it.

Rimbaud spent his days in the British Museum writing *A Season in Hell*. Verlaine is alluded to in the form of the 'Foolish Virgin,' a 'companion in hell' who moans: 'His mysterious delicate ways had seduced me. I forgot my every human obligation in order to follow him. What a life! Real life is absent. We are not in the world.'

I worry that we're not in the world enough either. We need to get out more. We've got the contacts. Hell, maybe we could try going to some parties. Talking to people. We need to get to know the people we're offending.

Joe

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Ken took a while to compose his next letter. He found Joe's flippant tone undermined his earnestness. He'd been thinking of ways to kill himself. He resented the fact that the other

prisoners had thought of every way already. He wanted to do something extravagant, something that would make the headlines. He began collecting odds and ends—broken prongs from the plastic forks they gave them at dinner; scraps of handkerchief from the laundry—with no particular intention except that they might be useful, in the same way he'd collected the pages from the library books. He was waiting for inspiration.

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Joe,

I'm sorry for my other letter. I was sorry as soon as I sent it off. Truth is, it's me who can't write without you. It all comes out wrong somehow, even when I'm writing to you; the words between us, they miss the mark. This is my fifth draft and I've promised myself it's the last—I've just had to get used to the idea that I can't express myself exactly.

I've been reading too much, thinking of ways to convince you. I read about the two writers, H.D. and Bryher. They met after Bryher sent a letter to H.D. She didn't know her, just wanted to tell her how she loved her poems. H.D. must have seen something in the letter, the beginning of something, because she invited her for tea. H.D. was pregnant with a child from an affair, sweaty with fever. Bryher saw it on her hands when she handed her a slice of carrot cake. After the visit, she arranged for someone to look after H.D. During the war, Bryher refused to leave H.D. in London. They had no food, the wet ashes of the city tumbling down around them. They supported each other.

I express myself badly. But I can't help it. H.D. wrote: 'the writing is not self-indulgence, or even if self-indulgence, is for us a form of living—more than food even, actual breath.'

If I can't write with you, I can't breathe.

Ken.

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Years later, when Joe was a famous playwright, the kind who shocked people and then got interviewed by the BBC, he told a reporter that he'd tried writing before the nick but it was no good. He said, 'Before prison, I was vaguely conscious of something rotten in society: prison crystallised this.' Once he was out, he began adapting one of their novels, *The Boy Hairdresser*, into a play. He gave it a new title—*The Ruffian on the Stair*. He left Ken's name off the cover.