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What a Performance (1987)

Anna Mendelssohn

“What a Performance”
or (Egg-Stealing Vulture.)

This is a storyfilmplaypoemmusicalcomedy
about someone who didn't want to be the
person described. It is written for the
Pin Ball Wizard.¹

A young woman is attending an art history lecture where slides are being shown of a virtually random nature of architectural styles; some fine, muted Baroque Roman facades, dazzling Mexican Rococo and an English Prison the features of which were being pointed out with intricacy by the lecturer.

Why Miranda should have been at all disturbed by this latter shot was momentarily beyond her own comprehension. Even during the five years she had spent in a prison not dissimilar to the one on the slide, the actual Reason for what had at the time seemed an incongruous example of beauty, failed to materialize.

Although, on one level it was obvious was it not? One did not mask sadism with beauty. Or wasn't that a sign of civilisation, that one did precisely that?

For the reasons why Strangeways Jail disturbed her in that godforsaken part of Manchester factory land on the van rides back with her father were not factors of plain fear; there was an unquenchable desire to know whether the imprisoned men were really a race apart, and if so, why had she not been told about them before?

NOT factors of plain fear. The first inquiry into her own mind produced worry, hurt and that terrible sense of injustice. No, no, not in the particular, in the general sense. Why should those men be behind bars, staring out at Engels' Land?²

This beautiful, elegant prison, this palace of dreams, these delicious screams.

The solicitor appeared after three days of isolation in the Police Cells. Albany Street. Just down the road from Euston Station. "Well, this is it. Shall I be too old to have a baby by the time I get out? Might just make it. What can I say? Nothing. Their scene. There is nothing I can say to defend myself without ratting on them, so I'll say nothing." Three days. Footsteps overhead on the pavement. The loo flushing non-stop auto, sit on it or don't sit on it, flush it or not, it just keeps flushing.³

Location:	A Dark, Freezing Dungeon. England. Late 20th Century.
Political Climate:	The Depression.
Prisoner's number:	971226. ⁴

flashbacks numerous.

assume dialogue except where obviously otherwise.

Go on write / I can't write/ You told me you could write / I could before I told you /
I didn't tell you I could, I told you I /
I can't say anymore, he's armed with credentials and dangerous.⁵

Why bring back torture? Because it is continuing / [...]

Never speak to another poet. Never breathe a word about your plans. Don't be kind. Don't care. They'll only think you want something. If you have style, they'll think you have money. They'll stop you in the street and tell you to get the hell out if you don't have a decent place to live in. They say they are permanently poor but they won't understand why you are not on the phone, why your name isn't in the book. You won't tell other poets because they will be manipulating against you in another way. They will reinforce any old current theory. People with radical pasts are not invited to dinner. People will warn their children against you, and your children, they will also warn your children against you. You do not ask to be born therefore you do not have the right to live. Never voice radical opinions, you may be mistaken for an activist. A poet cannot be an activist. This is England remember. You can be gucci-voiced and you may get away with it, don't jolt, don't drive, don't paint, don't read, don't bear children, don't smile, you act.

Nothing which happened before is still happening. You can fly anywhere in the world. Your old comrades have given you writing work to do.

It's too late now.⁶

The second person pronoun either singular or plural
fluctuates in its identity. As the addressee(s) must
remain anonymous and are best thought of as "types",
the exposition reads as contemporary fiction in one
way or another.

The writer slips in and out of the persona of Miranda as she is a virtual prisoner on the island of England. One of the more helpful images which come to mind is, I think, from *Los Caprichos* by Goya, where the bedraggled man has a live figurine dangling on a thread from his mouth.⁷

[...]

I do NOT want that woman there
delighting in the social fact of a period of my past.

I do NOT delight in that time
though I HAVE made light of it⁸

She walks blind. She walks in the night. I slept on the concrete floor. I gave her my bed. They had put her in with me for the night because they thought she was on the verge of suicide. She had been in MI5. Special Agent to Russia and China. She was involved in a car accident. In China. She saw the whole of her life flash before her eyes. She had not been killed. But she had been trained to kill. She had had to kill a man. Shot him dead. She was caught up in the horror of this act. She had left MI5. Resigned from her job. Her father was a magistrate in a sleepy Suffolk town. She kept bees & was an expert on wild flowers. She wrote for *Nature* magazine. She had been married to a navy man. It was from the navy that she was transferred to MI5. She voted Conservative. We had fun in the General Election. Was it 1974? Me in my cell, she in hers. Every victory for the Tories she'd rap on the walls. Every victory for Labour I'd rap on mine. Neither of us could vote. Prisoners are barred from voting. I wanted my electoral rights in there. I wanted them like mad. We saw where the suffragettes had been imprisoned. Their cells were even tinier than ours. They were no longer in use. If prisoners were given the vote it would confront the lack of education that most of them suffer from. Lack of education personalises emotion to an obsessive, often petty extent. Badly or poorly educated people become trapped inside their emotions because they lack the intellectual tools which would help them to objectify. This is why there is so much self-mutilation in prison. Women thrust their hands through the glass panes between the bars. They then take a shard or two and slash their arms or their vaginas or both. The authorities call it attention seeking.⁹

And now Miranda turned black. Her fellow female prisoner complained to a Governor that Miranda was mixing with the wrong people. Caliban was a white lecher, who gave her mind penis power. Because His poets were His poets. "Oh yes little poitiss, give us a feel little poitiss, stop weaving in and out of my straight focus with no shoes on."

A policeman whistled Mary Hopkin's (only?) hit, "Those were the Days my Friend." He was hired for the occasion. At a stretch of the imagination I could have been back, cross legged, on an outcrop of the Lodore Falls, listening to Pan pipe, with the loos flushing, and him whistling. Miranda slept, curled up as Fuchsia hiding from Lord Sepulchrave in the castle of her life.¹⁰

DAGGERS, he looked at her DAGGERS. "Just reduce her to an imbecile. She's too bright. Make her FEEL like a copper." No conception of the woman poet, see? So the guilt-guard which reads "she read our books" is a downright lie.¹¹

I want a slow life, free from harm, free from people screaming at me to join armies and movements. Free from being asked my opinion on political situations I am neither responsible for nor experienced enough to declaim upon. If I feel something in my gut, I know it's real. But I refused to manufacture emotion, or set myself up as a militant revolutionary, because war frightens me. When I say I have never made a bomb from an instruction manual I am telling the truth.¹² When I say I was pushed into a time warp I am hardly ever given the chance to recover from, I do not lie. I loved my university because I love book learning. I get sick of creeping around rich friends because I do NOT take more than I can give. And I get sick of being treated as a leper. But when you are young and the doors slam in their hundreds behind you, when you have been a person who was satisfied with a sunny day and a good book, when you have never been allowed to ask for money or help because there was never any money or help available, it's a bit much to have professionalism shoved at you, it's a bit hard to have sociologists and criminologists having a field day over you, it's a bit confusing not to be able to feel open when people ask you about your past, it's a bit sadistic to be lectured at and moralized to by people who purport to be your friends, even when you have struggled with all your might to run from anyone who wished you harm, you only seem to fall into the prey of someone else who has to make you wicked in some way or another. I wish I could grasp the enormity of it all. [...] Is it any wonder I walk another way?

I sit in the sea and smoke. I sit in the sun and sink.

Neither of these two sentences are true. They are pieces of poetry. [...]

The hatred of the old for the young can go deep. Maybe that's what my friend from the north meant when she told me that the likes of me don't know what love is. I do know that comfort brings with it a massive amount of emotional investment. The luxury of love. [...] Wasting time being sensual when you could be doing something more useful. Make yourself useful, don't sit there daydreaming. That is the refrain of my youth. No wonder I wanted to get lost.¹³

Return Home

Aged 28 she walked in the front door. No-one hugged her. They are probably afraid she is not the same person as the one who walked out. (MY oh MY how we love ourselves.) She is going to describe herself. In one sentence. She rang the doorbell back from Turkey. Recalled. Summoned from a life. Escaping the parents. She was shoeless. It was a hot day though. She is barred from uttering the first person pronoun here. Her mother: You will NOT. They maintained their authority through the years. She was much safer away from them.

"If you wanted me dead why didn't you say? You know you only had to ask."

They sat staring at the Television. Something had definitely gone wrong in that house. As usual she puts fight and spirit back into them.

How can you be sensitive with size 8 feet? How can you feel love with opinions like your father's? Your love is theoretical.

"Stop acting."¹⁴

Chorus.

The new girlfriends prompted them. We want to know exactly what you have done. No you can't give a talk at college about long-term imprisonment. No you can't go back to your old university the one you stopped from getting bombed, the one you stopped from giving confidential talks to an exclusive number of physicists on the qualities and advantages of chemical and biological weapons.¹⁵ Join agent orange join agent orange, there was no organisation by the name of agent orange before you started the rumpus over government patency of napalm, no matter that you read coleridge ed dorn philip lamantia richard brautigan tristan tzara arp huelsenbeck camus sartre simone weil anne waldman sang arias made us smile talked us through our boyfriend troubles kept our secrets were devastated at the news of Stuart's death in the crash, was brutally assaulted by the mad ginger the next day, didn't know where on earth you were nor why he suddenly took against you, you, our zen, our café poet who had too much imagination to live alone, who was pursued through windows, followed in the street, who wanted to be mousy with size four feet, why did you not STOP yourself loving people?¹⁶ We were told to stop loving you so that you too would stop loving people. We have heard that in your dreams you agree to having committed all the crimes that humanity has ever been accused of: adultery, violence, treachery, treason, betrayal, incest, murder, suicide, picking roses to stick in your hair, refusing to be intimate with anyone, ...what are you afraid of? That you will become someone's subject instead of their equal? You can't keep going around moaning about the bourgeoisie you know. It just is NOT done. Why didn't you understand that it was actually YOU who was standing in the dock on trial with seven other people. You were NOT Alice in Wonderland."¹⁷ [...]

INTERLUDE

It's very silly to believe that there is any such body as the bourgeoisie. It is a word which needs to be eradicated from our language, and from French too, because it sounds very similar in French. It's GREED really which makes the materially deprived hanker after perfume by Patou, it's obnoxiousness which makes them want to dissolve in mid-air when someone who might be a friend says "Hi. I'm dashing to catch the plane to a skiing holiday, should see me through Easter." It's BORING to know anyone who doesn't do EXCITING things. Socially Functioning people must guard their Image. You may as well know that Socially Functioning people are working hard at producing the ultimate version of proletarian ardour, and it SINGS with HOLES in it.¹⁸

O pretty things.
pretty things,
this is a poem o
of pretty things,
pretty lives,
pretty moments,
pretty prettiness,
prettiness loved
pretty loves,
& pretty pretty things
my son floating down the river on his back
alive not dead,
his two sisters floating after him,
giggling & pretty,
he protecting them from thugs, brutes & bruisers,
not very pretty things,
these are the poets blowing bubble gum, lazing on the banks,
chewing, their shirts' necks open to the sun,
here are their wives, pretty things, fetching tarts
& cool beer, smoothing brows wrinkled with chewing,
laughing prettily when chivvied for reading serious things,
these are pretty unpublishable things.¹⁹

There's enough to read now, don't have to write anymore.

(menacing voice over:)

"You act little for a change little girl. You act as little as you can possibly act."

It's my birthday today & I'm here watching you stir up petrol bombs on the gas cooker.

"Right. That's it. Let's kill her."

You act as though you were a fly on the wall, a speck in the eye, a mulberry tree.

"DON'T think of that tree."

"Only poets are not mysterious any more. Welcome to the Supreme Rationalist. Whipped.
WELL, we'll just get her & whip her a bit MORE, until we KNOW that there is NOTHING we
don't KNOW ABOUT left inside her."

Don't tell me. Please don't tell me. Don't tell me anything about your personal life. I prefer not
to know. Read me some poetry or play the piano. Learn some Tibetan or Greek but

The women who don't write, gurgle low. It's sexual and emotional distrust. They see a face bite the dust: "NO use to us. No use to us."

Find out from the dimensions. Window disappearing from frame by man with outstretched arm & grim strain on his lips, & a car driving into an unknown life.

You accused me of 90 per cent possession and 1 per cent love. Do you not think that was a crime?

"You greatly overestimate yourself as a poet."²⁰

As she was led away from Amherst (sic) Road she distinctly remembers the thought going through her brain, as she cast a retrospective mild regard:

"What a performance."²¹

Projection Forward

Miranda found Rembrandt's "Woman Taken in Adultery". She has been left in a cellar which is too dark in the daytime for reading and writing without the electric light being on. As she was on a pittance in comparison with the other people in the house, she lived in the cold and the dark as much as possible so as not to add to the fuel bills.

This is strange. Having transcended emotion with ardent, concentrated effort meeting a non-transcendent. Time seems too short: therefore being human, yet retaining consciousness of wasted effort. Having practised a holy way of life in the dungeons begins to regard Christ as her only friend. On the human level. Because, as far as we know, Christ did not write.

Out of guilt and anxiety Miranda can quite naturally take on the dilemmas of other people. If this is a way in which suffering can be shared, then so be it. But the extent to which she does it, frightens herself. One day she left the cellar to visit a homeless hostel. She paints some murals to relieve the monotony of the bare walls for the homeless people. One man remains indelible in her memory. He was about fifty years of age, Irish, quietly spoken and self-contained. He told her that yes, he had children, but they lived with his wife who was far more qualified to look after them than he was. I asked him why and he told her that his wife was a teacher.²²

She thought that by the age of twenty-eight she had the right to start looking after her own mind. As soon as this decision had been made, she was inundated with objections. "Who is going to put on plays?" "Who is going to sing?" "You should be working with people worse off than yourself." She imagined her writing lined her socks. "Don't wear those ridiculous socks." She

imagined her writing lined her stockings. “Why don’t you wear some with seams up the back?” It CAN be that ridiculous.

You see, you never QUITE know whether you are saying the right or the wrong thing, it is NOT pretentious for ME to be raising philosophical questions but when it is a matter of raising them with those who have the official right to know, it may well sound as though I am just SAYING something to SOUND clever.

If what “goes” is a body of poetry which is built on other poetry withOUT acknowledgement or obvious declaration of derivation are we being asked to bow down before the poet or worship Poetry? I would say the latter.

But I do know that I have used unpremeditated forms in which I have written certain truths about my life which I cannot write about in any other way. And I know that there are still things I want to write which I cannot, in any shape, form or content. Because there are ethical dilemmas. Jesus did not condemn the woman who had been taken in adultery. What did he say when about the man who had taken her?²³

It is pointless people who have taught or who teach in prison however strongly they sympathize with prisoners, and some of them do sympathize, imagining that their lives are as hard as the prisoners’. It is a well-known adage that prison workers complain about how they have done a life sentence too. They have not. The prisoners are their instruments of survival, their machine parts. Miranda’s prison has been bulldozed out of existence.²⁴ Her professor destroyed or lost or retained without her permission a large and detailed drawing she had made of one of the only two trees in the place, a sycamore which was a very good friend of hers, viewed from a turret room window, drawn sitting on a chair placed on a table so that she could see it. It was not the first drawing she had made. Nor was it the last. But it won the first prize for drawing from the Arthur Koestler Award and it won her one half day out after four years of being locked up, when she was taken with two escorts to the Tate on her own request, to view the Blake drawings.²⁵ A wild and drunk debutante type flew into the gallery as she was being marched round “The River of Life” etc. and at the top of her voice uttered the telling words: “A robin red-breast in a cage / Puts all of Heaven in a rage.” Miranda has admired drunken debutantes ever since [...]

But her admiration of drunken debutantes can no-wise match that fleeting occurrence. To find that moment again in time is impossible [...] Miranda’s grandfather [was a white Russian]. How they despised the revolution, those people. Even her grandmother railed against the Russians, any Russians, communists and Tzars alike, forgetting that her own father had been kidnapped by the Cossacks and given a helmet and a horse, swept off the street of the shtetl one glimmering deserted afternoon. And fine habits the Cossacks had taught him. For he gambled and kicked his daughter as she scrubbed his house on her hands and knees. And oh what a great man was he with all the leaders of the Manchester Jewish Community, the male only secret societies.²⁶

A Question of Liberty.

Next 'door', her fellow prisoner had screamed herself hoarse. Kicking and thumping at the door.²⁷ Miranda had pleaded, begged and prayed for her to stop. Then fallen asleep.

"Don't pick up the baby every time she cries."

The crying brought back the helpless crying. She couldn't react after the sentence had been passed. She didn't want to react. She would go on, into the maelstrom. She would not break down. After three years she cried in public when they came again to look through her books and papers but that was out of indignation. There is a deeper cry than that. She cried one Christmas Day when they...and another day when they brought her in from the sun. The women would cry from the time they were locked in (banged up the expression went) into tiny cubicles. Changing rooms at the swimming baths.²⁸ But no swimming baths. This is my Auschwitz, Buchenwald, Belsen journey. This is as far as I can go to assure you that my soul, spirit, heart, mind and body were always in utter sympathy with every human being who suffered at the hands of the Gestapo, all the communists, the Jews and the Gypsies.

If it was up to society I would never be allowed to breed. There was no point in asking. My daughter will let you know that I have never raised a hand to her, and hardly ever a voice.

She is saving up her pocket money to take her mummy to disneyland.

she is reckoning on the age of eleven to be about the time
when she will have collected sufficient.
her mummy hesitates to tell her daughter that there's no
point in her raising her hopes about taking her daughter to disneyland
unless we were to sneak through one of the borders
it's not a question of ego or self-image it's just the plain truth.

Dear Mum,

Yes. I am being VERY lazy. I am reading a Long Book. It is called The Devils by Fyodor Dostoyevsky. I am sorry you are feeling lonely and that Dad keeps falling asleep in his chair. I am now living in a town you have never heard of. I am worse off than myself so I see no point in going to see people who are worse off than me. Don't regret a thing. You are not indispensable.

Ever obedient, A. Drape.²⁹

Margie That.

This is the Dolly we give you to punch. When your friends are getting you down and your kids are moaning for taxis instead of walking through the noisy city streets and you are being told off for cajoling a whinge/er when it's simply that you cannot keep taking taxis and your voice won't come out because it's weary beyond reckoning and you are approached by a poet who tells you how well she brought up her child (with his continuing care) DON'T breathe a word of vengeance, spit at her, instead spit at That, but don't Do it in Fact because you'll only get another Year.

Don't you dare preach to us. Don't you dare get us to justify our intelligence. You are Tricks. Trying to prove how delightful working class existence is. How can you stand it? Even if the working class cannot. "I don't wish to sound like Edmund Burke" you prefaced....

I too rose at 5 each morning whilst the house was quiet. In my slip of space I sat by the window, text book on knee and learnt Latin thoroughly enjoying myself until they came clattering and arguing their way down the stairs at 7.30.³⁰

such airy people, we float everywhere,
walk out we knocked you out
LITERALLY
walk into thin air
so emphatic,
such a heave,
indicating,
intelligibly
waves watery
tears aflow
retaining on the sea
stay There
lover of graveyards,
prays to the afterglow
we would have hired a boat
but they had all
been taken out.

apartment block
renovated
Action is concentrated in one apartment. 2 rooms.
Hair shining. groomed. teeth good.
apartment above: people are resting in an alcove. Could be Moscow.
no revelation of dramatic occurrences.

I am in fact very pleased that my parents like the people
who are looking after/bringing up...Peace, Justice and Equality.³¹

Agent Orange.

so earthly, it gets in our mouths & our ears.
up our noses, in our hair,
down our jumpers,
inside our shoes,
such earthy people.

you can hear a gaggle of voices?
it's the poor – waiting in the wings
for their entrance,

we built the stage, though,
in our minds,
they were only the hands
which moulded our ideas,
Let them wait,
we have talking to do.³²

Introductory Address to the Comparative Literature faculty.

“Any Questions?”

“Why is it a rule to write essays in three paragraphs? Why paragraph?”

Commas had come, commas had gone, lamp-posts are exclamation marks. You threw me out of my sentences, hurled me over to the State who ruled my lines and wrote me.³³ You do know I was never a me girl, and if I was it was only as a joke, I had not a sprinkling of self. The Mind? Where Mind? I mind. I mind my lovers alive or dead, but they didn't mind me, they bodied me, then they whored me, then they left me for dead. A dead body is a dead body. It may have been mummified for a while but the bandages started to devolve of their own accord. Inert maybe, but breathing. Listen. Slightly.³⁴

Don't ask. Don't ask for a book instead of an apple a day, or a book shelf, don't say anything. Suffer. Don't say anything about printing. He is a Great Man you are an aconite.³⁵

The laughing foxes

but behind – the dark.
Vision of Dionysus, thyrsus in hand
gold masqued; beautiful. sinister.

for the sake of appearances?

peribleptos. from all sides:
what was a surrounding attack,
armies moving in towards,
the virgin, good girl, moved into the sphere
of serious devotion

to demand beauty! to be seized by its force
convulsed in adoration of its power
the secret of the source, unwillingness to harm
guilt at perfection, coursing perfection
in the passage from guilt to harmlessness
the plain, astute facts,
it hardly seems fair to talk where there are those who are mute
or to fall in love, to feel the pull. the pitch.
having been told to dismiss all thoughts of happiness for ever
working hard to deny, self-mutilate, self-detest,
so much negation, the power of intellect subverted
by an every otherwise nihilism of self,
in order not to offend,
others sound so much better, more Fit,
& in the end a lowering of this soul head bowed
hand outstretched momentarily clasped but lightly
as the lapping backwaters of a still, reedy calm
guarding hearts of the babies from prejudice
how, on earth, can I be superior to another?
But sometimes thinking it is volition, fate,
to blame one self, safe, for others' ills,
their quick thinking, an unpopular social realm,
it is only that I do not understand
the scorn and the hatred
yet when I was dying on my feet
from my incapacity to give my offspring a life fit
for their merry souls
how could I say I deserved their love?

there is no-one looking now.
no one checking my brain.
no one trusting my thoughts.
the danger of the public voice
no one demanding a performance now.
no one threatening each time I open my mouth
so the urge to utter which drove underground

to mock itself for its former sense of duty
built on not what it wanted to be speaking about
but what it had to

a strict house and a wayward world

so it must seem, to the rich,
that the poor are old-fashioned, lame,
so it must seem, that lullabies
don't meet their refrain,

phrases can't occur again,
that one has happened – Siena! now
we cannot return in the same vein,
cosmic tapester,
it makes no difference? rich or poor
except when doubt
is thrown at the right of the poor
to proclaim *cosmic tapester*
show us your tickets, your snapshots, your Proof,
your footprints on Everest, your chip of Krakatoa
show us exactly the exact itinerary
cosmic tapester,
you must be joking,
(she prays, believes, the poor must)

my heaving sank,
the words, concepts, joy in developing ongoing thinking
disintegrated, broke apart,
language which fell on uncomprehending ears
was quickly reorganised into simpler fare,
it was unfair to fox those poor people
with words as foxing it would have been
to outline my own superiority.....³⁶

That it doesn't matter what you say, the deed is done.
That only with complicated arrangements can there be any release,
& then only for a day perhaps, unless you live like a street fox
or rat, & then for how long?
The point at issue was pieces of paper.
Are you not afraid of dying?
"There is no such thing as death."
Do you, in your maturity, mix up time sequences?
Did you not somehow settle down for a while in your life?
Which gave you a start, one way or another?

I immediately get reprimanded. Think of those worse off than yourself.
But I have to put up with abuse. Which is not to assume that you do not.
Your children have fathers. Even if you don't live with them.
They don't get hassled at school for not knowing who their fathers are,
Or where they are.

Their mother may be a prostitute therefore. Which may be all right if she were, but she is not.
Then successful women, whom I KNOW have worked hard, hold onto their second husband's
company car, that's the fighting spirit, and charge the woman extortionate rent for a couple of
weeks' stay in their additional self-contained attic flat, because it's on the cards,
show us your bank account before you enter our doors,
poetry is naff, painting is the cut, agents, lovers, curse their wives,
charge in, deconstruct, ship veers into ship, prows clash,
take a peep in the freezer, the FREEZER, packed, mother lays
twelve grand on daughter, hang on to that neutrality,

be ASKED to condemn, BEG me I can't be bothered to wage a battle
I was not witness to, on the tale end of news, sorry for both of you,
You should have paid me for sitting for you,
Delacroix paid his models, I did too much for free,
Couldn't be bothered demanding money, now it's money with menaces I
suppose, well you know you are lying even if no-one else does.

Walk on, cat.

the heaps of moralizing, reprimanding, cutting, sneering successful women of the late twentieth
century are good at not giving a damn, but moralize, reprimand, accuse, suspect, and
congratulate each other on their hard won professionalism.

like men do. I just don't want to be in it
but don't know how to survive.

how i resent it
how i can't talk it
how could you know?
who close your doors
against me.

there is no point in pretending
in pretending
i am persona grata

that this is not the person
I ever was,
nor wanted to be.

stare down that hole
your hero dug for me
because my face

smiled at the sun
and the rain.

Don't think I want
to be This,
racked,
for you spat
so you could
smile habitually.

Or pretend
that you were
divorced
from life
when you were
actually
divorced from
love.

but i, i was divorced from both.
Black as the night of Cain.
Do you think that I am in
Competition with you?

You acted as though I was.
Assert. Assert.
96 years I'm telling you.

That's what your friends
colluded with.
96 years because the
State has no discretion
and I can add up.

10 years to be discreet,
96 years in fact.
What you have learnt
you throw at me,
hard,
and I tremble with fear
at your further judging
& marking

my children would have hated me.
don't you see?
troubled & haunted.
I do not understand you
as you cannot me.³⁷

In the vernacular.

Half the time you (meaning the voice here) are starting from such a basic position you might almost be reiterating your father's voice. Day in and day out, that is all we heard. It was either this or that. That's the pain. You go so low defending those worse off than yourself, refusing chance after chance because he refused to move, it was the lowest rung of the ladder for him, out of principle, and you thought you were obeying a commandment to stay at the bottom too. You hated yourself every time there was a cause for celebration. You became a misery guts, just like him. You were arrested without a pair of shoes to your name. You owned one dress. They hated each other too, after their arrest: The Baader-Meinhof.³⁸ This is not helping. "Get it out of you," she said. "You NEED to get it out."

"But there's no-where I can get it out to" [...] And on it goes. You met women who had been charged with child murder in there. You saw the terror in the eyes of one. You taught the other how to read and to write. She used to come up to you and stroke your sleeve. It gave you the creeps, but you could not say anything, just move your arm away. It just should not be that your child sees you crying. Lorca understood that, hugging and holding the child so close, afraid for them. Belief in fate is a terrible thing. It wishes the worst on people. I was lucky, I liked my children immediately. [...]

Obedience

Forbidden to swear at one's mother and father. When they are driving you so crazy you run away to hide and they come after you like mad folk, you can hear them calling your name and you keep very still as though they were the enemy who might ride by too quickly to notice you with your back flat against the nook in the wall. You have only to open your mouth for them to jump down it full force. Time may not be linear although conversation often is. With practice you can visualize the words which are coming out of someone's mouth, this takes away the pain of what they are saying and in an odd way, depersonalizes it.

You had to do exactly what she said the moment she asked it. Action was her panacea.

Explain this: it is true that I feared Hitler was still alive and would one night put his hand on the inside of the transit window, carefully lift the handle and open the main window. This fear materialized itself in another direction. I dreamt of my father dressed as a pirate stealing in through the opposite window which was always locked.³⁹

Northern City

Older mother visits daughter and baby living in one room.

"I don't see anything wrong with living in the back streets. I was brought up in the back streets of Liverpool. Had a lovely time. Didn't do me any harm."

Crossing worlds.

"Yes, but you didn't have a mother who kept picking up a pen and getting words in her head until it was fit to burst, did you?"

You didn't have to listen to swearing and cursing. There's relatively little that's sane about single parenthood unless you are prepared to remould yourself, give up. But Miranda gave up a lot anyway. She pushed the pushchair through the long, deserted city streets of factory land. Dirty, filthy factory buildings (they think they are so picturesque) cracked glass, disused sheds, grey corrugated and rusted iron for long stretches of oblivion. Singing at the top of her voice. Cheering both herself and the baby. Making her laugh. ("You can stretch anything out")

That's what they don't understand about certain sorts of cheerfulness. It's bravery and determination. Instead they say, "It was easier for you than it was for her. You were used to bake beans. She missed her avocado pears."

There was a row over Pat Barker's Union Street.

She was supposed to defend the merits of working class life. Get it? The girl in that book had been raped on her way home.⁴⁰ Miranda's mother had been chased by a man in Sefton Park. She had been tripping back home. He was waiting in the shadows. Exposed himself there and then in front of her. She ran. He ran. After her. Didn't dare tell her mother. Great life. Wrote "June, the Queen of Months". Headmaster cared. No money. Father out of work. Mother sewed. Had to leave school at 14. Hair fell out. Stopped doing illuminated script. Crying every night on her return from work. Mother showed no pity. Didn't dare to.

The great Oxford Marxist moaned. Lads from Ruskin. "What we find is that they can't get up in the mornings." Too whacked from going down the mines, MATE.⁴¹

we know it is wrong to talk
about imprisonment. the predominant theory is
still that people have more right to complain
for example about the imprisonment of the

woman in marriage, or the imprisonment by harsh social conditions even when the person has done nothing wrong. Because there is such little chance to explain how an individual can undergo severe punishment which can extend beyond the more acceptable forms of social punishment into the realms of more socially unacceptable forms of social punishment, I think that I might be justified in writing down some of my perceptions.⁴² They are disorganised and scattered. Some are uninteresting to write, they are not what I consider to be, in any way, imaginative. They tell a story whose end is inevitably tied to its beginning. There is a horrendous resentment and caution in responses to an imaginative treatment of Time. Having been brought up by Orthodox Jews and Freemasons, I have never understood why esoteric knowledge should be man's domain. I was forbidden to learn the tonal inflections which are marked in the Torah, yet I received first prize in the last year I was allowed to learn Hebrew from the Chief Rabbi, as the most promising Hebrew scholar. People mess you about. There are plenty of stupid rules. If people who criticize me don't have the guts to criticize some of the rules extant they can't expect my appraisal. If they insist on using one official interpretation of my past against me, all I can think is that they are sadists who delight in the thought of my death. Women who hang out together like so many giggly school girls, did they never have a chance to be in a gang? Why aren't one or two serious friends enough for them? Do they really think they are making good use of their time by analysing for the umpteenth time stupid women's magazines? Images and images: fit for collage which shows the contradictions and the CRUELTY of judging on the grounds of Appearance. The shirt swallowed the rose.⁴³

Pregnant woman with daughter and son on the grass. Being peaceful.

"Come with me mummy to speak to that girl from my school." "You go and say hello. It's O.K. I'll watch from here." (Too heavy with pregnancy to spring to her feet.) "I don't want to go on my own." "It's O.K." (Little son has fallen asleep on lap.) "I'm not going to move. You stand on your own two feet. I'll watch you."

Woman: "Don't talk to the child like that. This is a peace picnic."

Pregnant woman (also worries that her daughter will become over-dependent; notices 45-year-old men with their mothers in the doctor's surgery) gets up, cross. Tearful, picks up sleeping boy, goes over with little girl to speak to her school friends, then leaves Peace Picnic, walks up to school fête pushing the youngest in the pushchair. Gives her daughter the answer to how many dried peas in this jar competition. Daughter wins a metre-long tube of sweets, walks all the way back to the house on the other side of town proudly sharing the carrying of the unwieldy object with mother. Next day we divide up tube into parcels of sweets for all the children in her class, they are handed out as special treats, teeth in mind.

The lawyer lands on top of her.⁴⁴

It was with regret and a sense of democratic justice that I rejected the offer of the main female part in the French director's film. It is still incomprehensible to the majority of former friends whose lives today are far more prosperous than my own, as to what my motives were in doing that. Why did I call a meeting and put the question of star to the vote? I spread my hands openly on the table. It is up to you, I said. And I meant it.⁴⁵ But why torture me with self-image and self-interest now? Do you think that I chatted casually about my life in prison to people whom I hardly knew? To people who, often, I thought that I would not have chosen to know, had there been a choice.

I was the only girl who stood up in calculated protest against the Porton Down physicist.⁴⁶ I WAS very afraid when I was asked to participate. I KNEW I was throwing away my career. I HAD been reading Hegel, in depth, when I was so rudely interrupted. This instant in time IS important to understand, if you, as a writer, want to understand me.

It would not happen now. I am nearly twenty years older. [...] Because of my loyalty to creation, I was not satisfied with the compromise Godard had to make over the film. He had to reorganise his plan because of my decision to put it to the vote. That's probably why we had to sit around like lemons writing the lyrics to "Revolution". But listen to something I say in that film. "OUR position is tragic." That was ersatz "Honey Pie". I meant it. When the men had been expelled and people became concerned, I was very worried that a large number of undergraduates were turning into sheep. It was so obvious that we needed an education. Our teachers did not take control of the situation at that point. They SHOULD have done.⁴⁷

I could not expect them to wait until I recovered from an exhausting period of incarceration. Their enquiries met with little response. I became a prisoner of this island. [...] The narrow-minded, opportunistic, avaricious, paranoid, won. Some women are permitted male

friends, some are not. Women ganged up on me. As you. Never mind. My opinions are worthless. Know prison for one who lost every single friend she ever had. Who did I hurt? Who?⁴⁸

There was no maid brought to court. No cleaner appeared as a witness. No-one who had suffered an injury appeared before the judge. Tell me why? Had there been anyone injured it would have been a main pin to the prosecution case.⁴⁹

Na, don't bother. I carried the can with big man anyway. It was ALL my fault, says I. Like the coalman in the French Revolution killing himself laughing as the queen's head hit a split in the cobbles. Or the Mexican revolutionary smoking his cigar with his back to the wall as he faced the firing squad.⁵⁰

Oh god, scripter, no more flying visits to Jessica in New Orleans. Poor Audrey, empty freezer.⁵¹ It just depends on which side you fall out on. The reason why I feel sorry for the bourgeoisie is that they have a choice. The likes of me have no choice.

She loads her revolver. The whole street is writing in agony ten minutes later. Babies rolling around bloodied. Women twirling out of existence. Men doing their best to make out that they are still alive.

So. She deserved to die. Didn't she?

And the audience spruce themselves up attaching C.N.D. badges to one another's lapels.⁵²

They are on their way to another Messianic Production.

S.G.L. Lake.
c/o Union of Socialist Surrealist International Situationists
P.O. Box...
Cambridge
England.⁵³

I would barter my poems for paint,
for music I would barter my poems,
for a piano which played a softer tone,
for a lute and a room with high windows.

I would barter my poems for milk once a week.
I would barter my poems for poems.
I would barter and barter my poems for trees,
for water in a garden I would barter a poem.

I would barter my poems for my children to be loved
as young poems, I would barter them to be drawn
to the trees, to the trees, to the water to the trees,
I would barter my shoes for my poems, I would
not be tempted to despair in a money economy,
I would scroll my poems I would sandscrub
my floor, I would whitewash my walls in my
hut for my children to be quietly occupied in
brushing shapes into wood, I would
barter my poems for a goat and a beautiful
slow cow, I would sprinkle my cabbages for
a couple of collages from a lad in Tibet with
a head dress.⁵⁴

¹ *What a Performance* consists of six files at Sussex Special Collections, catalogued as SxMs 109/1/B/1/39/1, 1a, 2, 3, 3a, and 4 respectively, cited hereafter in the format “39/1”.

Two title pages and one authorial attribution credited to “Lake. S.G.L.” are conflated (39/2). In 1983 Anne Mendleson legally became Sylvia Grace Louise Lake; in 1997, she reverted, again legally, to her original name (SxMs109/1/9/1). From 1998, her work is published under the name Anna Mendelssohn.

“Pin Ball Wizard” is the hit song from The Who’s 1969 rock opera, *Tommy*; it describes the game-playing expertise of the psychosomatically isolated protagonist. Mendelssohn may relate to this combined prowess and alienation. More comically, Mendelssohn stood for election to the University of Essex student council on an anti-pinball platform. She argued the machines should be banned from campus, as work was students’ first priority.

² Now HM Prison Manchester, Strangeways Jail was built in 1868. Mendelssohn describes this same scene in 1984-85 (SxMs109/1/B/1/27). Engels’s *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845) focuses on Manchester’s poor. Mendelssohn grew up in nearby Stockport.

³ This typescript page repeats the memoir title and authorial attribution (39/1).

⁴ In 1986, Mendelssohn writes that after prison, “she wanted to stay in the dark, ask for nothing from people outside. live in the hell, with no outside visitors” (SxMs109/1/B/1/31).

⁵ Mendelssohn contributed to Angry Brigade communiqué 12, writing three lines demanding that the British ruling classes exit Northern Ireland. She states that she did so under duress. See note 12.

⁶ 39/1.

⁷ Of the eighty prints that Francisco Goya produced under the title *Los Caprichos* (1797-98), none precisely fit Mendelssohn’s tentative recollection. She may conflate images, as Goya’s series includes numerous live figures being devoured, strung up, or hanged.

⁸ In full, this typescript page gives Mendelssohn’s rationale for embarking on a film script (39/1a). These couplets appear in the 1987 notebook SxMs109/4/C/34 (hereafter C/34), which includes extensive drafts of *What a Performance*.

⁹ Built in 1852, London's HM Holloway Prison became female-only in 1903. The Pankhurst suffragettes were among its most famous inmates. The description of the blind woman continues in typescript and manuscript (39/1; 39/4).

¹⁰ Fuchsia and Sepulchre are characters from Mervyn Peake's Gormenghast trilogy (1946-59); the first volume, *Titus Groan*, is the leisure reading of the solicitor assigned to Mendelssohn in August 1971 (39/3). Fuchsia is sister to Titus, the seventy-seventh earl of Gormenghast, a castle haunted by the ghost of the seventy-sixth, Lord Sepulchre.

¹¹ There are two draft passages beginning "And now Miranda turned black" (39/1). The former details a visit from "Caliban" who tells Mendelssohn, "Prison suits you." Though furious, Mendelssohn is pleased by his gift: the works of Emily Dickinson.

Mendelssohn was among the first generation of post-World War II Jews assimilated into white culture, a position that remained ambiguous within the highly racialised counterculture (Amanda Third, *Gender and the Political*). A childhood recipient of anti-Semitic slurs, Mendelssohn found little respite from her activist peers. In prison in 1974-75, she writes: "It is very hard to keep your head intact when you are continually subjected to ingratiating treatment. I understand the dry bitter taste of Black, Refugee, Jew of the past. [...] From the instant I step into the arena of relationship with authority I am a victim" (SxMs109/2/A/6). Later, borrowing from Aimé Césaire, Mendelssohn claims that her life with the children was perceived as "poverty and negritude" (C/34).

¹² The caveat "from an instruction manual" is significant. In another fictionalised memoir, Mendelssohn depicts a female figure inexpertly making a bomb under the aggressive directives of an unidentified man. Mendelssohn stops midway through, stating that she cannot continue the narrative (SxMs109/1/B/1/27). Mendelssohn's account is consistent with urban guerrilla practices, whereby group participation in illegal activities is enforced so that culpability is shared. In her trial closing speech, Mendelssohn articulated her opposition to the politically ineffectual violence of bombing (SxMs109/2/D/6). Mendelssohn's resistance to all violence is an archival refrain. See note 5.

¹³ There are two typescripts of this passage in file one, and a third in file two. Given here is a full-page draft in file one, which includes a sceptical consideration of atheism, Christianity, and Judaism, as well as an address to "scriptress" (39/1).

¹⁴ This passage refers to two homecomings: from prison in 1976 and from Turkey in 1970 (39/1). Mendelssohn taught English and French to Turkish elementary school students in 1969-70, where she had a relationship with a member of the Turkish National Liberation. Speech marks after "ask" and before "Stop" are not in the original.

¹⁵ Founded in 1964, Essex quickly became a notoriously radical university, and in May 1968, was shut down by an escalating student protest against physicists visiting from Porton Down, Britain's renowned military research institute. Mendelssohn often recounts how images of Vietnamese women and children burned by napalm triggered her political activism. Alumnus Chris Ratcliffe recalls Mendelssohn being highly involved in anti-Vietnam campaigns (email dated 17.05.2016).

¹⁶ "Stuart" was one of Mendelssohn's Essex boyfriends. Mendelssohn credits his sudden death, and one or more physical assaults, with emotionally unmooring her when she moved to London in 1970.

¹⁷ In this passage, Mendelssohn may be responding to the conclusion of Smith's film treatment that reads: "She was not without blame, but we were all guilty" (39/1). Mendelssohn similarly denounces Smith's Wonderland fantasy in C/34.

¹⁸ 39/1; C/34 ("Interlude" manuscript).

¹⁹ David Bowie's "Oh! You Pretty Thing" was released in 1971; Mendelssohn deploys popular culture in this satire of gender stereotype, honing in on male poets. The poem is dedicated to a

friend of Mendelssohn's who appreciates ugliness in poetry (39/1; C/34). In a memoir manuscript, Mendelssohn writes that suffering generates "unpalliative" poetry, even as those who suffer need prettiness most (39/4).

²⁰ The conflation of members of The Angry Brigade with the foster parents of Mendelssohn's children intensifies as this passage continues (39/3; 39/4).

²¹ "Amherst" should be Amhurst; the "(sic)" is Mendelssohn's own, and may gesture to Emily Dickinson (see note 11). This extract refers to Mendelssohn's arrest at Stoke Newington on 21 August 1971 (39/1a). Mendelssohn uses the expression "what a performance" as early as 1980 (SxMs109/1/B/1/11). In 1986, she writes that when arrested, "she didn't mind them stripping her of her self, she was more intent on studying what it meant in terms of self-consciousness" (SxMs109/1/B/1/31).

Elsewhere in *What a Performance*, Mendelssohn describes how she and a member of The Angry Brigade – both aspirant writers – rented a flat on Amhurst Road under the names Mr and Mrs George Buchanan, "to keep our literary identities clear" (39/3). Sixteenth-century Scots author and humanist Buchanan was tried and imprisoned as a dissenting Protestant.

²² Issue zero of the underground newspaper *Strike!* that Mendelssohn co-founded circa 1970 has an article on the Notting Hill People's Association, a group who campaigned for better housing. The women's issue of *Friend* (1969-72), partly attributed to "The female Brigade", includes writing on squatters in Notting Hill and Paddington (21 May 1971).

²³ 39/3.

²⁴ Between 1971 and 1985, HM Prison Holloway was transformed from a Victorian panopticon to a modern university campus design (with thanks to Eleanor Careless's doctoral research).

²⁵ Writer Arthur Koestler campaigned against capital punishment, and established the Koestler Trust in 1962 to foster the artistic creativity of the incarcerated. The Trust holds scant records of its earliest years, but March 1973 meeting minutes of Mendelssohn's prisoners' union cite a recent visit from Koestler (SxMs109/2/A/1).

²⁶ This passage continues by recounting Mendelssohn's adolescent counselling at a British children's camp and her 1964 journey to Israel, concluding with a utopian vision of "a new city on the Yorkshire Moors" (39/3).

²⁷ The first sentence is included just before "Projection Forward"; the second appears under "A Question of Liberty." (39/3). This sentence recurs in another typescript as: "Next 'door', her fellow female prisoner had screamed herself hoarse, kicking and thumping at the door" (39/1).

²⁸ The typescript reads: "Changing room size at the swimming baths" (39/3). The sentence used is from an alternate typescript (39/1).

²⁹ Maternal resistance to Mendelssohn's intellectuality recurs in 39/1. "Drape" is slang for rebel; in Northern England, it means to cull or draft, usually with reference to a sheep or cow fatted for slaughter. Females unable to nurse their young are often draped (39/3; C/34).

³⁰ This episode appears preceded by writing on Mendelssohn's past associates, and her outrage about the respect afforded Margaret Thatcher (39/3; C/34).

³¹ The first initials of Mendelssohn's children are P, J, and E. This is a rare moment of positivity about their foster parents.

³² 39/3 (typescript); 39/1 (manuscript).

³³ In the poem beginning "digne" in *Implacable Art* (2000), Mendelssohn writes: "Serve your own sentences. / In future. / I collect sentences. / I used to have a set of my own."

³⁴ As a single parent, Mendelssohn was labelled a prostitute, a charge to which she frequently returns (SxMs109/1/B/1/17). British tabloids reduced Mendelssohn's radicalism to salaciousness; typically, the *Daily Express* described her as "dark-haired, bosomy"; in possession of a "lover"; and, under her bed, "a frightening cache of arms" (7 December 1972). In her poetry collection *Bernache Nonnette* (1995), Mendelssohn writes: "Has Power reared its ugly head

& defined a lumpen proletarian / By the Force it has used to cessate the education of writers & artists / By conflating us with the residents of Brothels.” (12). Hence, perhaps, the “tricks” of “Margie That.”

³⁵ This passage is preceded by a narrative about visiting a writer at a printer’s whilst Mendelssohn was on bail in 1972 (39/3).

³⁶ “Tapester” or “tapister” are corruptions of “tapisser”, the Anglo-Norman term for a weaver or tapestry maker (*OED*). A manuscript of this poem exists on pages torn from a 1982 diary (C/34).

³⁷ Edited in the same pen as “The laughing foxes” (both 39/3), this typescript begins in medias res; the manuscript starts identically (39/4). The addressees are middle-class female associates who helped Mendelssohn after prison. Throughout the memoir she is keen to point out that she assisted them in turn, usually by babysitting, rather than portrait sitting (see C/34). Feminism, particularly liberal feminism, persistently vexes Mendelssohn.

Mendelssohn calculates her sentence as consecutively 96 years, concurrently 10 (see SxMs109/4/C/36).

³⁸ Ulrike Meinhof exerts a hold over Mendelssohn. In an early nineties memoir, Mendelssohn states that unlike Meinhof, she was never flirtatious toward violence, or involved in gun running and drug dealing (SxMs109/1/B/1/45). But in C/34, she recalls being at Holloway and hearing that Meinhof was found dead in prison: “I thanked god or whatever that I was still alive. I felt her death very keenly.”

³⁹ 39/3.

⁴⁰ Pat Barker’s *Union Street* (1982) is an interlinked account of seven working class girls and women; Mendelssohn refers to the first portrait, “Kelly Brown”. The grim hopelessness of Barker’s text may have sparked debate between Mendelssohn and leftist associates.

⁴¹ Ruskin College, Oxford was established in 1899 with a mandate to educate working-class men. The 1984-85 miners’ strike severely weakened British unions and the coal industry, and for Mendelssohn, remains emblematic of working-class struggle (39/1).

⁴² “[S]ocially unacceptable” is “socially acceptable” in original.

⁴³ 39/1.

⁴⁴ The typescript “Peace Picnic.” is preceded by a conversational collage (39/3; 39/1 [manuscript]). “The lawyer lands on top of her” recurs as line one on a page detailing Mendelssohn’s intimidation by a defence lawyer in 1972 (39/3).

⁴⁵ A member of an Essex theatre arts society, Mendelssohn was introduced to Godard when he embarked on a film about English radicalism. She claims he wanted her to star, and that she requested that the decision be put to a student vote. When Godard was voted down, *British Sounds* (1969) took on an episodic structure. Mendelssohn appears at the end as part of a group of Essex students recomposing the Beatles’s “Revolution”.

⁴⁶ See note 15.

⁴⁷ The Beatles’s “Honey Pie” (*The White Album* [1968]) centres on a working-class Northern girl who achieves celebrity in the United States. The besotted singer considers his position tragic; Mendelssohn argues that she twisted the lyrics to critique herself and her fellow activists. See note 45.

⁴⁸ This page opens with a paragraph on the intelligent poor being misperceived as actors, and thus having to feign stupidity (39/3).

⁴⁹ The only person injured by an Angry Brigade bomb was working class: Elizabeth Wilson. Wilson was housekeeper to John Davies, the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry during the passage of the controversial Industrial Relations Act in 1971. On 31 July that year, a package was left outside the Davies’s residence; Wilson suffered superficial injuries when it exploded.

⁵⁰ French Revolution is “french rev.”; “Mexican revolutionary” is “mexican rev”. Mendelssohn pencilled a “y” above “rev”.

⁵¹ Jessica and Audrey are mutual associates of Smith and Mendelssohn.

⁵² Throughout the sixties, members of the English Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament protested the Atomic Weapons Research Establishment at Aldermaston; Mendelssohn’s family attended at least one of these marches. In *What a Performance* Mendelssohn nods to this legacy, noting: “We worry about the Bomb because it is Big and it doesn’t just Bounce” (39/3).

⁵³ “International” is “internation” in original (39/3).

⁵⁴ 39/3a.