

Arvon How I Write

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**Readings from *Still Life With Octopus* (Nine Arches Press, 2022)
and *Go On* (Broken Sleep Books, 2022)**

STILL LIFE WITH OCTOPUS

“To completely forgo both skeleton and shell is an unusual evolutionary move for a creature of this size and complexity. An octopus has almost no hard parts at all – its eyes and beak are the largest – and as a result can squeeze through a hole about the size of its eyeball and transform its body shape almost indefinitely. The evolution of cephalopods yielded, in the octopus, a body of pure possibility.”

Other Minds: The Octopus and the Evolution of Intelligent Life, Peter Godfrey Smith

Still Life With Octopus (I)

There is an octopus in my chest, trying
to give my heart to you. She will not listen

when I say I need it. I have to keep
prying her from my vena cava, the pulmonary

veins. I ask what makes her think
you'd want it anyway. She shakes her head, her colour

shifts to indicate disappointment, hope,
connection. Finally, I let her take it. Once

it's gone, she settles in its place, exactly the right
cardiac muscle shade. I worry about where my heart

is now, did it even reach you? Let go, whispers the octopus
in my chest. These things are not in your control.

What You May Be Offered

A man in a van stopped to ask
if I wanted a mattress. I said

no. I was sitting drinking tea
by the river. How did he think

I'd get it home? He was on his way back,
he said, from a mattress show. What

was it about me, sitting by the river,
drinking tea, that made him think this

was what I needed? I am
here again today, by the river

with my tea, wondering
what someone might offer me.

Still Life With Octopus (II)

I only asked her once to climb inside a jar for me. (Before we met, I'd watched all the videos of those experiments.) She sighed but did it, said I could screw the lid, released herself easily. You could become any shape you want, I said. She said nothing. One arm sent itself out to switch the kettle on. While she made us tea, I put the jar back in the cupboard, feeling that slight ache from too much sitting in my hip bones, my lower back, where fixed part meets fixed part of me.

Still Life With Octopus (VI)

Between the octopus and her arms
is an agreement: arm will wander, touch,
explore, report some of its findings back, but
no obligation. Each arm may keep things to itself - how it felt
to stroke the metal remnant
of that hull, what it found
behind the furthest
shell. And the body, too,
has things it will never tell.

I am interested

in myself. Sometimes
I examine my hands as if
they belonged to someone else.
I watch the fingers move, ripples of
skin, the wrinkles that appear. I am interested in
my limbs, the miracle of forearm, a mole, the soft side
of the neck. I cut my own hair by feeling edge and curl. I am
interested in the age of me, notice changes in my shift, my spin. I
am interested in breath, in breathing, in what I lose, in all that I take in.

You Blow Me Away

When we meet, I have
all my armour, by which
I mean: my skin

and everything below. You
flay me slowly, love,
saying, Let go. Let it all

go. I find myself difficult
to unpin, but, like a knight
returning from her final joust,

eventually I lay aside
my battledress, stand
naked on your hill,

every nut
and every bolt
of me exposed.

Go On

I want to talk, she says. Can you hear me?

I hear her faintly. I say, speak up, but I'm not sure that gets through. So I send a note, via the Author Intermediary provided when we're having these sorts of difficulties. I ask her: What would you like to talk about?

I say it kindly. Narrators need firm kindness; otherwise they never open up, otherwise there'd be no story at all. But we must propel. Hence: firm. It would be so easy to let a thread disintegrate. I know how to do this, to coax.

She writes back. Does it matter, she writes, if I am not sure what it is yet?

Oh no, I say, because really it doesn't. Whoever knows at the beginning what it is the beginning of? Just start somewhere, I say, and I believe I hear her sigh. I believe I hear her breathe out and pick up the start of it.

Can you hear me? she says.

Yes, I say, although she is still speaking softly. We'll work on that.

I composed. A song for sitting, a song for standing. But one day I'm not sure at all how to put a note next to another note.

This doesn't seem to be the start, she says to me, and I know that a Narrator's job now is to say:

Go on.

I am alone, she says, and I want to be, although this is...

Yes?

Although this doesn't make for a good story, she says, and now I can hear her laughing. I am supposed to not want to be, she says, and there is something different in her voice. Isn't it unusual, for the heroine - I am the heroine, right? - to want to be alone? Not to be chasing someone?

Well, I say carefully, not wanting to close anything down, there are those sorts of stories.

The romantic sort, she says.

Yes, I say, quite traditional, with the desires and the thwarting of them and so on. I can hear her really laughing now. I like to hear her laugh.

What if, she says in between the giggling, I have other desires, and those get thwarted instead?

It would keep me reading, I say, although being a Narrator is a full-time job, I don't read a lot. Other stories, you know.

Ah, she says, and I can hear her louder now. Well, I think this might work then.

Go on, I say.

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When we meet, the Narrators, or as many of us as can get away, in between projects or when the writers are in The Zone, as they call it, and don't need us, we discuss problems. We never get tired of talking about problems. Starting is the hardest, we tell each other. We are usually only brought in for the new ones, the ones who have never tried this before. Yes, occasionally there is an experienced one who wants to experiment and needs assistance, but much of the time, once they have two or three under their belt, they may not know how the fourth will be, but they are happy to go it alone. They know what starting is, and that they've done it.

The new ones, though, try and duck out at any opportunity. Straightjackets, we say. We've had many thoughts about innovative devices to tie them down. We have calmed each other when all we want to do is shout at our Author. A Narrator who is violent is not ideal. That's not helpful.

Endings, we say, of course. Endings are a bugger, we say, and we laugh. We laugh because there's really nothing we can do here at all. We can't put forward an ending; our guidelines are stricter about this than anything else. We can't even suggest possible avenues towards the ending. We could be struck off. It is immensely delicate.

The middle is the best part, we say to each other, opening another bag of crisps.

There is a woman walking through the cemetery. The dead are watching her. There are many of them in this cemetery; it stretches on and on. The dead sometimes take notice of who is going along the paths, the breathing walkers, and sometimes they are tired and they rest. It takes energy to observe those whose hearts are not still. Look at the way they think; they move their heads on one direction and the other, and the blood, the blood!

This woman is interesting to the dead because she is talking to them.

“Hello,” she says to a gravestone, and she reads the name on it aloud. She does this again, and when there is more than one name on the stone, she reads all the names. The dead are puzzled. They are used to the squirrels, the diggers, the weeping loved ones. They have long ago stopped noticing those who come every day, sometimes twice a day, for years and years, sitting by the same plot, talking to the gone one as if the gone one was interested, every day, sometimes twice a day, for years. The gone one was flattered at first, who wouldn't be? But who wouldn't want the still-theres to move on? Who wouldn't want the breathing walkers to go, walk, breathe through their newnesses?

This woman is interesting to the dead because she is saying other things. She is saying things to them about their words.

“Why all the ‘beloveds’?” the woman asks them. “And the ‘went-to-sleeps’, really? Is it like that?”

The dead aren't used to this, not from a complete stranger. They ask each other if anyone knows who she is, and the message is whispered down and along, down and along. It gets to the Muslim section, to the part across the road, and even as far as the Jewish graves. But no one knows.

The dead who are lying with, or above, or below, their beloveds, ask, Why is she alone? And the dead and their beloveds say, Wouldn't it be nice if...she

had a husband? The very much more modern dead say, Maybe she wants... a wife? They shake their heads as she wanders past them, reading names, looking at one date and the next. The dead don't understand *alone*. They will never be alone again and many have forgotten, those of them that knew, the joy of solitude. The ones who date back 150 years are not used to seeing a woman on her own, a woman walking on her own, seeming not to be meeting anyone, not to need anyone, doing what she pleases. The dead men are confused by this. (Many of the dead wives are not confused but envious. Not just of the life she has, but that it is hers.)

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We leave the baby in the forest. We want to see what might occur. We have pre-installed the cameras, with the trees' permission. You can't do it without their go-ahead, we learned. Technology becomes a tangle of well-placed leaves, the images - if any are captured, what with all the damp - are vague and unconstituted. The trees need to be on your side.

We leave the baby and we wait.

The first mother doesn't understand what she is seeing. She stares at our screens.

"It's a baby," we say, to prod her to respond. The first mother leans closer to the screen. "A baby in a forest," we say kindly, helpfully.

"What?" says the first mother. "What is...?"

We are filming her too, of course, filming her watching the live feed of the baby that we have left in the forest. Right now, it is around noon in the forest, which is not in fact too far away from where we are, in the room with the screen and our cameras and our first mother. The baby is lying where we left it, staring up into the leaves. The baby appears fine (we have, of course, rated the baby based on an extensive list of criteria, which we reassess on an hourly basis. We are rigorous. The Ethics Committee demanded it.)

"A baby," she says, and we record that her first use of the word "baby" occurred at seven minutes into the session. "Why is there a...?"

Our carefully designed protocol means that we only offer restricted information and we leave the mothers - of whom this is the first - space to provide their own interpretations.

"The baby has been left there," we say.

“You left a baby? In a forest? Alone?” says the first mother and we record how the pitch of her voice is rising. Later, we will examine the data on increase or decrease in skin conductance and other measures of anxiety, stress and fear.

“Yes,” we say.

“Oh god,” moans the woman. She lifts one hand up to cover her mouth.

“Do you think the baby is in any danger,” we read from our list of questions. The woman stares at us now rather than the screen.

“You’re all fucking crazy,” she mutters.

“If this was your baby,” we begin to say, but the woman stands up and starts to rip our sensors off her arms and temples.

“Fuck it,” says the first mother. “I don’t care what you’re paying me. I’m not fucking doing this.” She grabs her handbag from underneath the chair, heads to the door and then she looks at the screen again and shakes her head. We think she murmurs something like “for fuck’s sake”. We write it all down.

Although this session has ended prematurely, we are not displeased that a reaction has been provoked, and this only the first mother. We restore the room to order, place our clipboards neatly back into the box, check on the status of the baby, and move towards the coffee room.

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