

of ancient footpaths. The hours seemed to expand in this pastoral refuge.

But there was trouble, admittedly, even in this paradise. We took a late lunch in one of the few commercial restaurants in town, an Italian diner, with perfectly OK pasta. In the middle of our meal there was an outbreak of snarling, barking ferocity between two dogs, one a passerby in the street, the other a massively built bull terrier consigned to the space underneath a dining table close by – too close by. The owner of the dog under the table proceeded to beat his animal with a ferocity that told its own story. That did not prevent Ewa from telling it out loud: ‘This skinny guy has no muscles, so he buys this dog which is all muscle as a substitute for his own lack’. Precise and to the point. Several things flashed through my mind. The guy was a working-class Pole – he might well have spent time working in England, where he would have seen plenty of attack dogs like this, owned by men turned on by the performance of threat and a readiness for aggression. And if that was the case, he would know enough English to have understood what Ewa had said, as well as hearing the contempt in her voice. Would he take offence? Would I have to intervene? Would the wretched dog intervene? Fortunately, catastrophe was averted thanks to the dog standing down. It knew the deal.

The main takeaway was the arrival, among the Polish working class, of a distinctly Western sociopathology. Perhaps it was an isolated event, but the West still holds an allure that is cultural as well as economic. Migrants from east to west are not always welcomed. And underdog status is effectively camouflaged (especially to one-

self) through the purchase of an uber-dog. Calling all Poles. Welcome to the politics of street capitalism.

Ewa and I paid up and left shortly after this episode. The dusk was gathering, and there was a fair way to go to the tram stop out on the highway to Kraków. The direct route was through a forest, unmanaged and consisting of mixed coniferous and deciduous trees. There wasn't in fact a distinct path in any direction but Ewa made her way among the mature trunks and thriving undergrowth without wavering for a second. She had worked in Kraków for decades but had grown up in the Bieszczady, the immense area of wild forest along the eastern border with Slovakia and Ukraine. This was her habitat. I soon lost all sense of direction, but within fifteen minutes we emerged from between two bushes at the exact point opposite the tram stop. A tram was approaching rapidly, with all its evening lights switched on. Ewa shooed me out to where the driver could see me, just in time. The doors folded themselves into the open position, and I hopped on board. I took the nearest window seat and looked back over my shoulder, but Ewa had already disappeared into what now looked like the primeval dark of Polish mythology – the uncontrollable wilderness where mystical transformations take place. This is an inexhaustible trope that persists to this day in Polish culture (see the 2014 TV series ‘The Border’, which is set in Bieszczady, and the 2020 series ‘The Woods’). But the absolute counterpoint to this fascination with, and fear of, the untameable wild can be found in that *chronotope* of managed socialism that is Nowa Huta.

## Ass in the air: Live drawing

ISOBEL WILLIAMS

I've been asked to draw outdoors, for a thing (unpaid). Drawing the naked model in life class, we have tea and biscuits. Out in the wild I'm offered fags and weed.

My territory is a market expanse bare of stalls for half the week in the shadow of the Westway, the A40, where it flies over Portobello Road in Notting Hill. This part of London is misrepresented in a popular film which shows no black people anywhere.

A white man under the influence is lying on the pavement with a zipped suitcase full of paperbacks. He tries to stand up for a paramedic and the police. His trousers slip down to reveal his bare buttocks. This is not a metaphor for publishing.

To the muffled swish and rumble of traffic above, people tell me about their lives as I sketch them.

A trim elegant Rasta presents himself: ‘I clean vehicles for a living and play reggae very loud.’ His name is Egbert Knight Polycarp Glasgow. ‘They say I should write my

life story but too many people gonna get hurt. I left St Lucia on the eighth of January 1959 by boat. My first address here was 19 Colville Square.’

That is, he arrived aged fifteen, the year after the Notting Hill race riots. Colville ward was one of the centres of violence. The first Notting Hill street carnival was held in 1966.

Egbert, awake and slumped asleep, is my star model over the summer. After I draw him for the final time, he whispers in my ear: ‘Her name is Doreen. She is short and chunky with bow legs. She is a wonderful cook. She's cookin' me fish. One love.’

Gusty wind. I use two clementines as weights but my paper goes flying and one clementine rolls away. I bustle after my drawings and leave the clementine, bright on the asphalt. A beautiful statuesque Jamaican in ankle-length fitted black coat and wide trilby returns my look with penetrating black eyes and elegantly pisses through



the railings into the unresisting bushes of Portobello Green. He strides off, scooping up the clementine.

A woman emerges from the shadows and says she's been watching me drawing her clients. She's from the council's drug and alcohol unit. She invites me to draw at an event for young men and boys at risk. It is cancelled because of riots, but I do draw at a similar event for girls: they can slip away from the entertainments and talk to someone privately. I learn about the young mums' group. Girls cannot join if they are under twelve.

I go on to draw the London camps and squats of Occupy, the bickering anti-capitalist alliance with its corona of homeless people. There's no space here to describe



that episode but I must commemorate the young blond balladeer and beloved activist cult hero Tom, who picks me to be his appropriate adult in Westminster Magistrates' Court. If you don't know what that signifies, please imagine something lovely. His final act of defiance is to piss on the door of MI5.

I start drawing on the fetish scene, in the UK Supreme Court, and at Crisis at Christmas, the charity for homeless people. A friend asks if I'd like to draw a company of masqueraders getting ready for the Notting Hill Carnival. They belong to an organisation called Elimu Mas Academy (Elimu means knowledge or education in Swahili). The place where they prepare – mas camp – is the Paddington Arts building. Deputy Director Eldora Edward reckons she'd be dead or a crackhead if she hadn't discovered Paddington Arts at the age of twelve.

*Put your ass in the air, put your ass up in the air.* In the airy dance studio, masqueraders are idling, snacking, preening in the mirrors. A flock of young feathered



women blown in from the Caribbean slag off the weather in French. Little girls waft in wearing filmy white and lemon crinolines on hoops made from green garden hose tubing.

In the courtyard, two people on six-foot stilts lean against a building. One is dressed as the sea with a lightweight sailing ship on her head. She is Stephanie Kanhai, Trinidad's Carnival Queen; her costume is called *The Sweet Waters of Africa*. She is chatting to its designer, Alan Vaughan, who is dressed as the title of *Ah! Hard Rain*, a film he is working on.

They are moko jumbies who walk and dance as forest spirits of West Africa, benign but panic-inducing. They need stilts to see approaching evil and to follow the slave ships across the ocean. Mokos are dedicated, alert to the danger of wet pavements or a discarded sweet wrapper,



sometimes ecstatically possessed by their roles, exuding power and mystery.

Alan has based Stephanie's costume on the novel *Crossing the River* by Caryl Phillips (the river refers to the Atlantic route from Africa to America). His inspirations for other years include *Palace of the Peacock* by Wilson Harris, set in the Guyanese jungle of the sixteenth century, and *The Lonely Londoners* by Sam Selvon, a key Windrush text.

Elimu go on the road, I go home; later I wander around, avoiding noisy bits like anyone else with tinnitus. My underwired bra sets off the knife arches. As I sketch, a man accosts me: 'Are you police?' They wear bodycams. I'd be flattered if my drawing were admissible evidence.

This is the only time of year you can smell fox, horse and human shit in the same leafy road. A statistically insignificant number of temporary lavatories are provided. Men line up in height order at slanted urinals, or pee against trees and in doorways – 'I was pissin' an' she drew me. Sick.' Women as usual have a harder and riskier time in bushes or basement areas.

A white teenager is rolling on the ground, trying to take off her clothes; a white woman is vomiting on the pave-

ment; both are being looked after. I know who's making £3,000 selling nitrous oxide from a front garden.

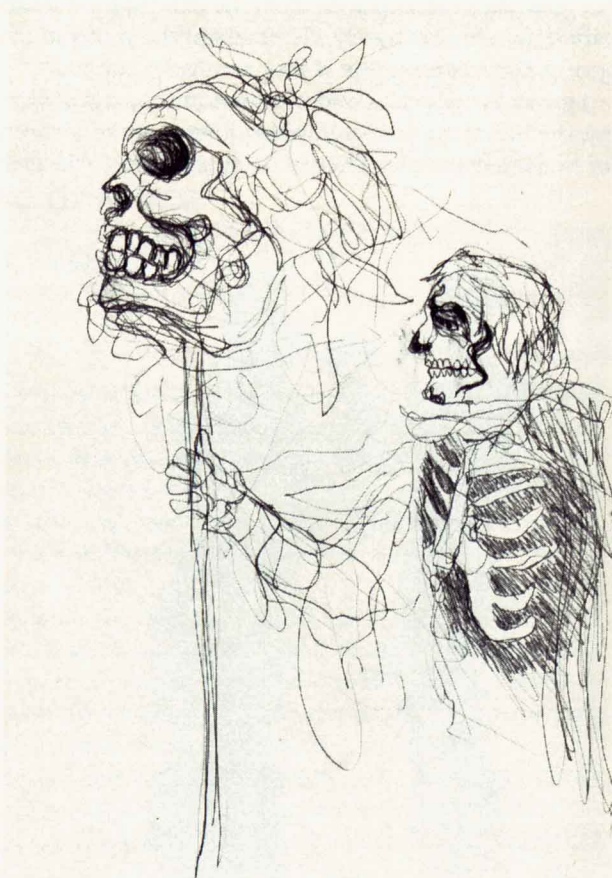
After Covid's rude interruption I lose my mojo until, this year, an email out of the blue leads to an exhibition of my Carnival pictures at a Notting Hill law firm called Oliver Fisher.<sup>1</sup> At the private view they serve Red Stripe, the Jamaican lager on which Carnival floats float.

Then Carnival swings round again so I take off my gold (my neighbour has a scar on her neck from when a reveller cut off her chain) and test the barbecue-smoked air. There is a perfect breastfeeding madonna but if I draw her it will be intrusive. First pissar of the day is gorgeously cloaked in the Dominican flag designed by a playwright (take that, poets!) with its purple and green sisserou parrot, *Amazona imperialis*. VOTE KAMALA HARRIS says the standard of Kinetika Bloco, a well-drilled youth band of all sizes and colours. Sunlight bounces off their dancers, steel pans, brass and drums, onlookers are smiling, laughing, an amiable policeman asks to use my bathroom and leaves the seat up.

After this was written, two of the people attacked at this year's carnival, Cher Maximen and Mussie Imnetu, died of their injuries.

Alan Vaughan won the 2024 David and Yuko Juda Art Foundation Grant (£50,000), curated by Peter Doig.

*In memoriam Egbert Glasgow (1944–2022), Tom Palmer (1988–2016)*



1 <https://isobelwilliams.org.uk/pdf/OliverFisherTrimmed.pdf>  
[Costume design/this page: Helen Davenport]