

We are all Upsideclown.

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HECATOMB

Zeugo means 'I join together'. Zeugma is the thing joined.

That was the hundredth time we have made love. Counting the three times, two early on and one when you came back a day late from that weeklong conference in Leiden, when it was over almost before it started. Definitely not counting that one time when it actually *was* over before it started, which you were very kind about. And not counting the one time last week when you said that it didn't feel right, and asked me to stop.

You were teary and jittery all that night, and couldn't really explain why. Finally you dropped into a performative slumber, all fits and starts and muttered words in your

native language. I was exhausted from the humming nervous tension of sharing a room with your anxiety, but I still stayed up for most of the night, watching you sleep, playing the guardian of your rest.

Zeugma also means a yoke, something which joins together two animals. Like the lines that cross on your wrists.

Praxis is the act of doing. Pragma is the thing that has been done. The deed.

I don't know quite why, after three months, our languages are still so alien. Without boasting, I always had a gift for foreign tongues, and the sheer number you speak suggests the same. But, if anything, your English gets worse week by week, showing utter contempt for your adopted country, and my Swedish, always non-existent, has hardly lifted itself from the tomb and walked.

Medieval Latin, Ancient Greek, and the little guttural noises you make when you come. Lying, soaked in sweat on a disgusting, overheated June night. Body shrieking with the sudden and overwhelming sensation that the sheets underneath you are made of ground glass and honey. Then having to reach over to the nightstand and scribble down a couple of practice sentences before you can work out how to say how good that was, and ask if you would like a glass of water. It isn't natural.

Water is doable, love is doable. Yoghurt, - not. Every neologistic time we must explain the concept at length to one another, then settle on a word to use for it, usually an unwieldy compound. I don't know why, but just sticking a definite article and a mutable ending on the end of an English noun never seemed to work - you always forgot it, and the next time I tried it would peer up through your heavy blonde fringe, your mouth moving imperceptibly. Trying to remember an address, or a phone number you used to dial every other day two or three years ago. Same thing with me and Swedish. Generally, it makes sense that

we avoid any topic involving concepts from later than about 1400. It seems to work peculiarly well.

Amor means love. Error means a mistake. It also means wandering.

which is what you do more and more, scissoring your legs out of bed, pulling on yesterday's clothes. Pulling a hand through that unruly bed-hair that, after fifteen minutes asleep, makes light of the hundred brushstrokes you lavish on it every night. If you wake me, you tell me you are going for a run, and usually the next thing I feel is you slipping, night-air cooled and naked, back into the bed however much later. I'm lucky - I sleep heavily and rush back to Morpheus like a guilty lover.

But then, on the occasional night, I wake with your leaving, and cannot sink back beneath the surface. I read. I make tea, and I wait for you to come home. I've been doing this more and more. You take three, four hours to make it, and the moment you arrive you shoo me back to bed. I'm lost as soon as my head rests on your shoulder.

Euphemen means to pray. It also means to keep silent.

I don't **think** you are having an affair, unless it's a very hurried one. But I do wonder what you are doing on those greying predawns. Something else I have noticed. When you go out in the rain, you come back with perfect, bone-dry hair.

I won't ask. I won't ask yet. Chances are it doesn't translate.

And that's not all. Your eyes are getting darker - blue through green to hazel - and your skin paler. You tell me that between the fog and the rain London gets less sun than your hometown, far to the north. Warmer, but darker. So you're losing your tan. I don't know whether you believe it or not. You're turning the colour of those chicken-white cicatrices that trace a perfectly white, perfectly smooth X across the upturned skin of your inner wrists. You tell me you used to wrap things around them, but you always

looked like Morten Harket, or a heavy metal singer. Heavy metal is *siderion*, something made of meteoric iron. I can't shake the feeling that it isn't the right word, but I know what you mean.

I ask you why the crossing-over shape. You smile with one side of your mouth, tell me to ask the one who made them, never tell me anything more.

But I am not one of those who needs to know everything about your past. Everybody has secrets. Between the thirteenth time and the seventieth, I slept fourteen times with one of my students. Worse, I dealt with the guilt by lowering her marks.

I can see you stirring. Another run. But not yet.
Give me a thousand kisses. Then a hundred.

Dan
2 July 2001

EYE CANDY

The library, a couple of weeks ago. I was sifting through the dross in the New Book Collection (maximum loan one week, no renewals), wondering which of the famous-since-Tuesday celebrities' autobiographies to borrow, when I suddenly lost interest in *The Jane McDonald Story*. Surprisingly. A brief glimpse of blonde locks was all it took to divert my attention away from the ship-dwelling diva and onwards to Paperback Fiction, where I was presented with the welcome sight of the only attractive female in the library. Or more pertinently, judging from my experiences so far that day, the only attractive female in Woking Town

Centre. Sparkling entertainment my arse.

[I say attractive. Promising would be more accurate, since all I could make out was a nice arse in black trousers and long blonde hair. But welcome enough, in a den of librarians and their kin.]

Naturally enough, paperbacks suddenly seemed exactly the kind of book I was looking for. (They're lighter to carry, after all, and they have quotes from reviews on the back so you know what's good and what isn't. Much more useful than 'praise for X's last novel'; what's to say the next one's going to be anything like as good? Stephen Fry's books have got worse and worse. No, give me a trusty paperback any day. They fit in your pockets, too. If you've got big pockets. And I have. Look.) So, time to browse. Peruse the shelves and the Sheila, as our friends in Oceania might say. Maybe she'd reach down for some Kurt Vonnegut (unlikely I know) while I was in an advantageous peering position.

What is going through the male mind in this situation, you might ask? Is he hoping to strike up a conversation with this woman? Hoping for a sexual relationship? Marriage? Offspring? A mausoleum for two? I wish I could give a more precise answer than 'well, I'm not sure really'. But I'm not. The nearest I could get to the truth would be, we just want to get a better look.

It's quite an abstract thing I suppose. And I don't know if I'm speaking for the unfairer sex in general, or just myself, but it's really quite a common occurrence. I'll happily take a quick detour, or stand on the right rather than walk up the escalator, for a few precious moments' appreciation. Walking down a crowded street, or through a busy station, there's something inherently satisfying about the pendulum swing of a ponytail accompanied by the tick-tock of the buttocks, left then right. A quick toss of the hair as the mobile is placed by the ear, chestnut waves soaring and coming to rest, and a fleeting, tentative shot of a cheek, lips, lashes. Then, of course, she stops, opens her mouth, and my

reverie is shattered on the unforgiving rocks of imperfection.

You see, up to the point where reality sets in, the potential is limitless. Your imagination fills in the gaps. But as soon as you overtake them and cast a glance over your shoulder, Eurydice is dragged back to the Hades of your mind. Women generally look a lot more attractive from the back. Funny, really, given the amount of time, money and mirror-gazing invested in their frontal and facial appearance, but that's the way it is. Sometimes it's better just to keep walking, keep the fragile beauty alive. (And as for hearing some of them speak...)

But then again, which would you rather? If you never looked back, your world would be full of beautiful, unattainable women you know you'd never see again, and memories of faceless, denim-clad figures would haunt your dreams. Maybe it's better to suffer the momentary disappointment of a face which certainly doesn't belong on a body like that, than to live in a world where everyone is beautiful but none of them are yours.

So if you happen to be walking down a street and feel a pair of eyes on your back, don't worry and don't get angry. It's not rude; it's not lechery. At least I'm not harassing you, bothering you in a bar, or approaching you down a dark alley wearing nothing but a grubby raincoat. There are worse things than a little gentle ornithology. Hey, look at it this way, you could even be brightening up my day!

[Oh yes, the girl in the library. She only reached down as far as Danielle Steele, but it was good enough for me. Not the greatest looker, but I finally got hold of *Girlfriend in a Coma* and *One Fine Day in the Middle of the Night*. So I went home happy. Which is the main thing.]

Jamie
26 November 2000

A MAN WITH NO ASS IS NO MAN AT ALL

The man in the baggy jeans caught my eye on Sydney Street. He wasn't the first that I'd seen at that time, but he was the first who seemed to accept his fate. Many of the other men around who had been called (or 'culled' depending on which underground theories you subscribed to) had fought their fate with machismo and whining - creating petitions, writing to their now-defunct MPs. Every other day there would be a protest march down Whitehall, crappy banners proudly held aloft in the drizzle, but the numbers rapidly fell. Yet this man, trousers firmly belted around his skinny waist, had no arrogance

about the future the law had decreed for him.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. To explain:

The ordination of King Sally of England was viewed by the population as unexpected, unlikely and (by the more experienced political commentators) entirely implausible. Sally H was not in direct ascent for the throne when she was crowned after the unsolved assassination of the Queen, and there were strongly voiced doubts as to whether there was any blue blood in her at all. But these dissenters were rounded up and shot. King Sally made a television broadcast in which she stated that she had dissolved parliament earlier that day, and relocated power to herself. Anyone who didn't like it would be taken round the back of Buckingham Palace and beaten with a paddle "...because that's the entire bloody point of a dictatorship, isn't it?"

As it was, King Sally was a reasonably benevolent dictator. The differences that her power made to our lives were subtle: the vast new selections of cheese in the supermarkets and the increased financial help given to unsigned musicians and their bands. Thus, in an atmosphere of relatively peaceful stupor, the passing of the 'Skinny Ass Begone' decree of January 17th 2003 came as a deeply unpleasant surprise. Rumours put forward were that the King had had an unpleasant experience with a skinny-arsed male in a Sussex discotheque. These were later verified in the public broadcast that King Sally made to the nation, described by the Telegraph '...in which the monarch, clearly hungover and unshowered muttered about having "had enough of all that nonsense" and "shouldn't be allowed anyway". The King then left the stage to the sound of retching.'

The short of it - the decree stated that all males with 'skinny asses' (later modified by the scientific and medical advisors to an exact ratio of gluteus maximus to waist and thigh size) were to be prevented from holding positions of civil authority, or from producing offspring. There was also

a subclause about a severe vetting process about letting any skinny-assed man enter a sexual relationship with anyone. As the weeks passed and the King's temper worsened (there were mutterings of PMT but not too many - no-one wanted to be shot) the legislation expanded and became harsher, including bans on many other areas of employment and civil liberties.

Reaction was mixed. Rather than protesting against this infringement of rights, many men took to the fast-food chains to gorge themselves into a state of legal recognition. Realising that walking burnt off valuable calories, many small businesses made a killing from transporting fried chicken, chips, battered sausages, hamburgers and thick-shakes to the house-bound menfolk too scared to move in case their ass-weight fell below the designated legal boundary. Several families set up lard-funds for their skinny offspring. The most vocal protests came from the men and women who found skinny-assed men attractive, and were threatened by the idea of never having a partner with viable legal status in the UK. Many of these skinny-lovers (as the tabloids labelled them) went to the Whitehall protests with unmemorable banners and chants.

For a while the policy went reasonably unenforced. Although skinny men were still seen as a lower social class, the roaring trade in buttock-implants meant that having a skinny torso no longer necessarily meant having a skinny ass. However, sixteen months after the passing of the initial decree the press reported that another unfortunate 'incident' had occurred between King Sally and a skinny-assed man in a Solihull nightspot. Enforcement against the skinny asses was brought in the next day, with another royal news broadcast in which the monarch made no speech but gesticulated wildly before the camera before passing out.

And here we are. The royal decree has been violently enforced by the Royal Militia, and the labour camps have been built on the Norfolk Downs. No-one is entirely sure

what type of labour will be practised - the optimists think that a high-fat, low exercise diet will be enough to bring these men back into civilisation again. More radical types think that their DNA will be analysed to allow for a preventative programme against the birth of skinny-assed boys anywhere. The rest of us just don't know. And the guy I saw on Sydney Street, parading his skinny ass in the baggiest jeans you've ever seen, he didn't seem to know either. But he didn't seem to mind. Maybe he and King Sally know something that we larger-assed citizens don't.

George
15 November 2001

COUGH

If you'd like to follow me. Doctor Jarvis will see you now.

I hate this: odour of disinfectant masking lymph and urine; stench of absence and evacuation. I have never been happy in hospitals. No-one is, save vagrants and convicted criminals. I trail after the buxom nurse sewn into her uniform. Appearances are indeed anything to go by, and this one had once been one of the less able but more boisterous members of an under-16 lacrosse team.

Had it not been for the fact that she had expressly stated our destination the nurse and I could have been on the road to anywhere. It is the peculiar distinction of the characterless hospital corridor network that its disorientating

effect renders the visitor capable of believing that they may just as well be going to have radiotherapy as physio, as likely to deliver a child as to have a wisdom tooth extracted. The possibility rapidly increases that one is suffering from long dormant and previously undetected heart disease; that, thank god, the routine cholesterol test at the local health centre picked it up; that you are, in fact, on your way to a triple bypass.

By the time I reach the examination room I have inoperable testicular cancer; at the very least I am looking down the barrel of a eunuch's shotgun. As I am shown inside a voice from behind the screen gestures me to the couch in the far corner and asks me to take a seat. I duly do so and, to the sound of running water, the lathering of hands, the tearing of paper towel, close my eyes, try to steady my nerves, regulate my breathing, allay my discomfort.

Now then, Mr Barnes let's have a look at you.

My eyes reopen. At first I see no-one. My gaze travels downwards from my sightline and a boy appears - small, certainly no more than hip-height, six or perhaps seven years old. He is wearing the white coat of a grown man. On him it is ludicrously oversized - the sorcerer's apprentice. His movements are the mannerisms of caricature: in the disorder of my shock they are made in time to the Fantasia soundtrack playing in my inner ear.

If you could just remove your shirt for me.

By the time I register his request it is already by my side on the couch - my arms have moved without first gaining consent from my brain. In the theatrical exaggeration typical of a dressing-up session my doctor flourishes his yellow plastic stethoscope and, sweeping with determination across my chest, issues appreciative grunts which I suspect correspond only to symptoms of make-belief. He then seeks my back, adjusting the angle of the box on which he is standing

in order to gain access.

There appear to be no major problems up top. If I could now ask you to drop your trousers and smalls...

Close your eyes. DON'T LOOK DOWN. A hand cups my balls, gently squeezes, checking for irregularities. It is small, so truly tiny that after a few seconds it is joined by another hand in an effort to cover the required surface area. Paralysis. Motionless both with horror and by an absurdly paternal concern not to startle my mini doctor. My mind flinches and whirls: this is repulsive, the ultimate reversal of the abusive stereotype. I'm no kiddie fiddler, but I would imagine that a large part of the thrill is being able to appreciate the vulnerability of one's victim. Here I was, and a seven year old had me by the balls. DON'T LOOK DOWN. The excessively affected murmurs of the doctor are no longer an innocent's unintentional pastiche. They have forced upon me a sensual dilemma which places me in the same category as the paedophile.

LOOK DOWN. Aaaghgodno. The noise is not mine; the rational me doesn't recognise it. The child begins to scream - fitfully at first, more of a sob, then uncontrollably, wailing like an ambulance siren. Remembering first to pull up my pants and button my trousers I fling myself into the corridor, searching frantically for the nurse who had brought me here not ten minutes ago. Recalling the unease I felt at last being out here I realise that I have little hope of finding her - staff nurses go missing for days on a regular basis, only to be rescued from an underground defile or store room blinking into the light. I will settle for anyone, of average height and above, in a uniform. A blue one approaches, a

diminutive form inside. I'm not totally convinced.

How old are you?

I don't think that's any of your business, do you?

How old are you.

24.

Good. The added menace second time around clearly worked. I tell her what has happened. Of course, she knows my name.

Mr Barnes, you know that since 1997 NHS policy has stipulated that twenty percent of new doctors are to be recruited from the Child Training Scheme.

She's right. I remember now.

And you must also know that the criteria for acceptance on the Child Training Scheme are the ownership of a toy stethoscope or blood pressure monitor and a year's experience, certified in writing by a parent or legal guardian, of playing at doctors and nurses. After all, it was your idea. Now if you don't mind, I'd better go and see if Dr Jarvis is alright. He'll be needing some ice-cream after the nasty fright you gave him.

Victor
22 November 2001

UP THE ARSE, OR NOT AT ALL

Your arse is the answer to so many of our questions.

Where's my jacket? It's up your arse. Where shall I put this cup of tea? Up your arse. What can you do with that pathetic salary increase? Stick it up your arse.

Your arse is two things. Firstly: It's the evil twin of the interrobang (the '?!' symbol that marks rhetorical questions). Up your arse is a placeholder almost as atomic as punctuation that converts the meaning of the answer just as the interrobang makes a question rhetorical.

Secondly, it's completely ridiculous - nothing personal. My jacket, up your arse?!

But such an important and widely-used answer deserves

deeper exploration. A coat would plainly not fit up the average arse, unless it was the coat of a dog, shaved and bundled into small bags, but even then only a smallish to medium small dog. Or a short haired yet larger one. Two small dogs of medium hairiness, at a push (but not too hard, or you might rupture something).

A golfball, on the other hand, would. As would a cup of tea, if the cup were crushable, and either the tea not too hot or your anal cavity lined with asbestos.

Admittedly, these are among the more difficult objects to consider, on the cusp of arse-fittage and non arse-fittage. Why is it important that we make this effort? I shall explain.

I would like to establish whether this answer is in general more right than it is wrong, or more wrong that it is right. In short, are there more items that will fit up your arse than things that won't, or vice versa?

We need to attack this problem in stages. To start with: What are 'things'? Next, how many things are there and what are they? Lastly, are there more things larger than the inside of your arse, or more things smaller? A useful side-effect of this study may be that we find out where in fact you put that cup of tea, given you clearly can't have stuck it up your arse. Although it'll probably be cold by now.

Things, to begin, need not be discrete objects. A hand is plainly a thing, but an arm is also a thing, as is a person; on a different scale, so is a finger, or a wart. Not that I have warts. So we must tackle the question of parthood.

But for each type of thing, there are many instances of it. Are we cataloguing things, or are we counting them? And does a tabby cat count as a different thing to a black cat? So we must tackle fungability (the brain's assessment of the similarity of objects and their grouping or division) and counting.

And what if a thing (say, a sandcastle) self-destructs on being 'stuck'? Does this count as a multiple of things? Indeed, can we say 'four million sands'? We must accurately define our terms.

Alas these are too many questions given the limited space, a much longer discussion shall have to wait for my

thesis. Instead I shall present a short reasoning and my conclusions, leaving argument for the letters pages of Nature.

As your arse is a point that can have meaning in only human terms, we can shortcut the philosophy and abide by the tenet that what appears to be correct to the human mind is what is valid in this frame of reference.

I contend that humanity sees the universe on a number of discrete scales (eg, the finger and the body are on different scales). Things do not overlap with other things on the same scale, but different scales are completely independent. Furthermore, the mind divides these scales such that there are roughly the same number of objects to deal with on each scale.

This means that a dog is a thing, as is a dog's cock, although the cock is part of the dog (one would hope).

I also contend that we should count two instances of the same type of object as two things. This is simply because we're trying to answer a question here, and given, for example, more small things, the law of averages dictates that the small things shall more often be advised stuck arseward.

In addition, a thing shall be counted as a thing at the point of its passage through the portal that is the anus. A sandcastle will still be counted as a single entity even if your arse does cause it to collapse catastrophically and grittily into a pile of sand on insertion.

It can also be observed that there are more scales close to the size of a person than away from it. We would regard the planets in the solar system as being on the same scale despite the size differential being much larger than that between, say, a head and an ear. This is because of the way the brain stores information. The number of objects in each scale is roughly the same, and because things near our level are more important in everyday life than cosmological things, the scales here are more closely packed.

And finally this brings us on to the counting of things, and we have a handy method with which to do it. If we can count the number of objects on a single scale and multiply by the number of scales, we have the total number of objects

humanity would regard as things.

So: Regarding a metre as the basic human scale, and assuming one scale per multiplication of ten (ten metres, a hundred metres, a kilometre going up; ten centimetres, one centimetre, one millimetre going down), and seeing that science (a human construct after all) goes as far massive as it does tiny, there are 63 scales (10 to the power of 31 in one direction, and 10 to the power of minus 31 on the other, with the single metre length in the middle).

We now choose a useful scale to count on, and selecting a stellar scale we simply use the number of stars in the known universe, 10 to the power of 22. This gives us a grand total of things of: sixty-three thousand billion, billion (that's 63 with 22 zeroes after it).

Now we're on the home straight. Speaking roughly, an object of just less than ten centimetres across is only just going to fit up your arse, a little more if you're lucky (or unlucky. It depends on the circumstances). And from this we determine that there are in fact more objects too large than there are too small, and the great question can be answered in both forms thus:

One. For any given object, if you're going to stick it somewhere, you would be advised not to stick it up your arse.

Two. For any given object you are trying to find, don't bother looking up your arse, it probably wouldn't fit.

Postscript. There is of course a much less tortuous route to these conclusions. To wit: how many things are there? Answer: vastly many. How many things could you fit up your arse? Answer: two, three, a dozen maybe. A hundred marbles perhaps, although they'd be quite chilly, and you'd need margarine. How many things would be left? Answer: still vastly many.

But how fun is that line of reasoning? And who'd want that cup of tea after where it's been, anyway?

Matt
7 May 2001