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Editorial Preface: on Reversals

People would stop to speak to him, and what was he going to say? He would have to introduce this – this septuagenarian: “This is my son, born early this morning.”

As this quotation from F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* illustrates, *reversals* have long been used by creative artists to startle. For Fitzgerald's readers, the opening of this short story, the birth of an already aged man, acts to question the very emblem of beginnings that we hold so certain. The sense of the uncanny surrounding the character of the old baby Benjamin Button is mirrored in our responses to many other forms of reversal. In one of the pieces in this journal, *Shakespeare Reversed*, Sophia de Medeiros highlights how audiences may squirm and laugh at reversed gender-roles on stage whilst questioning the well-established stereotypes they play off.

Another power of reversals is that of exposure. When perfecting a dance routine, a piece of choral music or a speech, many performers choose to practice sections of their piece working their way from the end to the start. In doing so all muscle memory or familiarity with the patterns present are lost and a new scrutiny for mistakes can be gained. Exposure is afforded by the reversal in Bridget Stuart's painting “Ophelia” in this edition of 1555. With Ophelia drowned among plastic pollutants not petals there is a substitution of the ugliness of manmade rubbish for natural beauty, and thus the reimagined romantic painting by John Everett Millais exposes the viewer to the disturbing reality of environmental destruction while enrapt with the beauty of the art.

The reversed life course lived by Benjamin Button challenges our perceptions and experiences of time. In Oxford, and the UK at large, we tend to have very linear and future-focussed attitudes toward time. Time is almost commodified as a resource to be controlled and exploited to its fullest – comparable to money. Hence, a reversal in time for someone in Oxford, such as an assigned essay deemed no longer required, may seem like winning a prize; we have gained back a possession we thought lost or spent. However, in a culture with a more cyclical time-orientation, such as in certain Asian and African communities, one can observe a tendency for time to be thought an abundant and repeating thing; each opportunity that passes by an individual may reverse and eventually return in different form. The diverse ways *reversals* are considered in this edition of 1555 it is hoped will prompt a beneficial pause to customary perceptions.

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Sir Richard Southern

This term's subject is Sir Richard Southern (1912-2001) who was the college president from 1969 to 1981. In order to tackle such an interesting subject I would like to bend two rules of this column. Southern's portrait is technically not in the dining hall, but is displayed in the president's lodgings instead: the tradition of only discussing figures in hall will be suspended. Secondly, Southern's career was so exceptional and interesting that it deserves to be split across two terms. His biography and role in the college will be discussed here and a second column in Hilary will describe his unique contribution to the study of history.

Sir Richard Southern was born in Newcastle upon Tyne as the son of a timber merchant. He was educated at the Royal Grammar School before going up to Balliol in 1929 where he would read modern history. His talent as a historian was established quickly: he was awarded a first in

1932 and soon submitted an article to the Royal Historical Society which was awarded the Alexander Prize and published in the Transactions.

Southern's early academic career was as follows: in 1934 he was elected to a Junior Research Fellowship at Exeter College and then in 1937 he became tutor and fellow at Balliol in medieval history. His career was interrupted by the outbreak of the war. He joined the forces as a private in 1940 though he went onto serve as a tank commander and in the political intelligence at the Foreign Office. He finished the war as a Major. He then resumed his post at Balliol until 1960, when he was elected to Chichele chair in modern history at All Souls. The professorship was recognised as Oxford's chair in medieval history at the time.

As previously mentioned, the academic importance of Southern's research will be discussed next term.

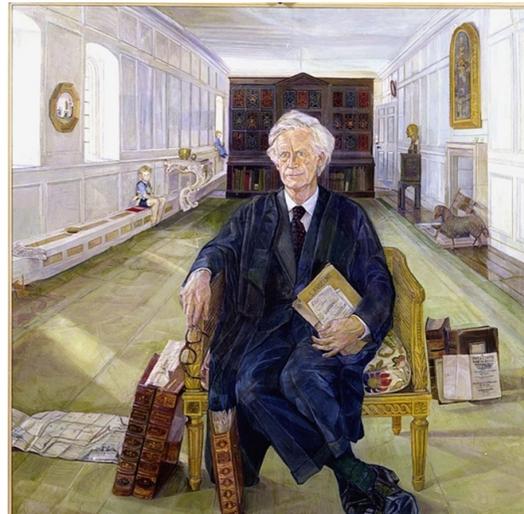
However, it is worth noting that in this period (1934-1969) he not only wrote *The Making of the Middle Ages*, but also helped reform the history curriculum by introducing a general theme paper concerning the Crusades. Southern had become concerned that there was too great a focus on British constitutional history - the legacy of Bishop Stubbs, Regius Professor of Modern History in 1866. Interestingly, Southern's modern tendencies would be approvingly cited by Edward Said in 1978's *Orientalism*; he included Southern's insights on the formation of medieval Christendom's irrational fears of Islam and how this became a systematic mindset (the same passage was also used in 1989 for a foundational text on world history and the medieval period by Abu-Lughod).

Just as his academic work was groundbreaking and modern, when Sir Richard Southern became the president of St John's he approached the college with a similar mindset. Under Southern, the college was improved drastically. The college expanded with the building of the modern Thomas White Quad and he made efforts to enhance academic learning and achievement. Speaking to alumni of the college - particularly those who were privately interviewed by him for the organ scholarship - they recall his financial pragmatism, his warmth and friendly demeanour, and the care he exhibit-

ed for the non-academic staff of the college. All of this was appropriate given his interest in St Anselm, also famed for the value he placed on friendship.

During his presidency, and after, he continued his historical writings and activities. He also found time to raise a family with his wife, Sheila Constance Margaret Crichton-Miller. They survived him after his death in 2001.

Toby Paterson





An Anthropology of Poetry

What's a poem to you?

Am I a welcome spectre who, first leering from behind the letters,
Lifts a leg over the thicket, clambering out
For our uneasy embrace?
A lover acting in place of
A paid-up nurse brought to tend an infection?

Is it more sinister than that? Am I

A praise-worthy prize to wing through in triumph of your erudition
Or the focus of a mocking condescension?
To frame your own unborn legacy
Perhaps one day...
(well, miracles do happen)
I'll be a canonised text trundled through to completion
Pleasing no-one; yet 'succeeding'!

But what am I to myself?

A Darwinian attempt at status manipulation
A lion's mane, a peacock's tail, an agent of copulation
-- If you fancy it?
Am I (as I would like to think) the rotting portrait in the attic,
Cleansing my living half of remonstrations

Or a final attempt at this particular kind of vanity, before getting real
And accepting that job at McKinsey?

Lev Crofts

Revisiting Reverse Culture Shock

When I was seven years old, my family and I moved from Guernsey to Dubai, and when I was thirteen we moved back. Dubai and Guernsey are about as different to each other as two places can be. One a rapidly developing city with a varied international community, the other a small island, no bigger than 65km², its population largely made up of families that have lived there for generations.

My parents were concerned at first that my brothers and I would find it hard adjusting to such a different cultural space after having been raised in Guernsey's small community. Yet, now looking back it isn't hard to see that the greater adjustment was not moving to Dubai but rather returning home.

I had expected relocating to Dubai to be a challenge, I was prepared for it and being so young I didn't feel any of the insecurity I now feel when moving somewhere new. What I

hadn't expected was to return to Guernsey six years later and to feel like a total stranger in my own home. Nothing had really changed, time moves differently on such a small island sometimes; somehow, I couldn't recognise the place or the people that had been the background to the earliest years of my childhood.

Reverse culture shock is a funny thing, like many experiences it can be hard to explain if you haven't undergone it yourself. Despite having been born and raised in Guernsey as a child and then returning during my teen years to finish my schooling there, my relationship with home has become a complicated one. I no longer feel as if I can claim to be from the Channel Islands in the same way that my friends can. Living away has made me feel almost detached from Guernsey and I'm still unable to find a bridge that crosses the divide.

After my experience of moving home I thought I had a grip on reverse cul-

ture shock, but coming back from my year abroad to Oxford this year has resurrected old questions and issues. I was excited to return to university after spending a pretty testing year away in Amman, but found that after a couple of days the excitement had faded and a strange new feeling had taken its place. I felt out of kilter and unsure of myself in an environment which was so familiar yet also feeling totally new.

Within a couple of weeks being back in Oxford I began to notice a sense of entrapment. I couldn't help but notice that I had taken several steps backwards. I hadn't always enjoyed Amman, however, I had grown used to the independence of living there. It was hard to accept that after having been given so much freedom on the year abroad that I now have to allow my schedule and daily life to be so determined by external factors.

The beauty and the curse of Oxford is that so much is taken out of your hands. The work is often so demanding that it dictates nearly everything you do. Plus living in college means that your every need is basically taken care of: if you wanted you could eat in hall three times a day every day, not to mention all that the scouts do for us.

I thought I had changed so much and gotten used to living in almost alien environments that I was once again

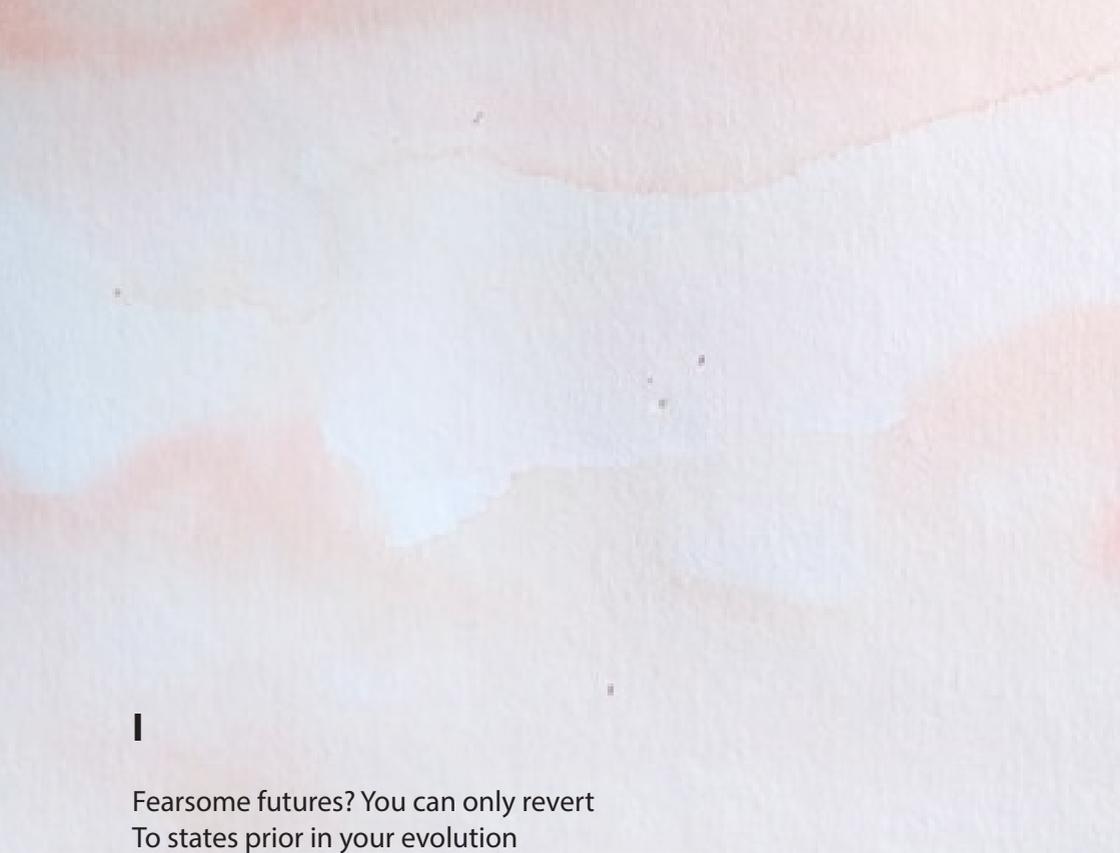
caught off guard by how disconcerting it was to come back to Oxford. However, in the last few months of this year I have come to realise that reverse culture shock, as well as all reversal, is not necessarily negative. Time away has given me a new appreciation for all that is great and not so great about Oxford and the UK. More than anything else, reverse culture shock gives you a new take on what you thought you had already understood. After all, the only way to see the bubble is to step outside of it.

Helena Murphy





Astrid Ingemann Breitenstein

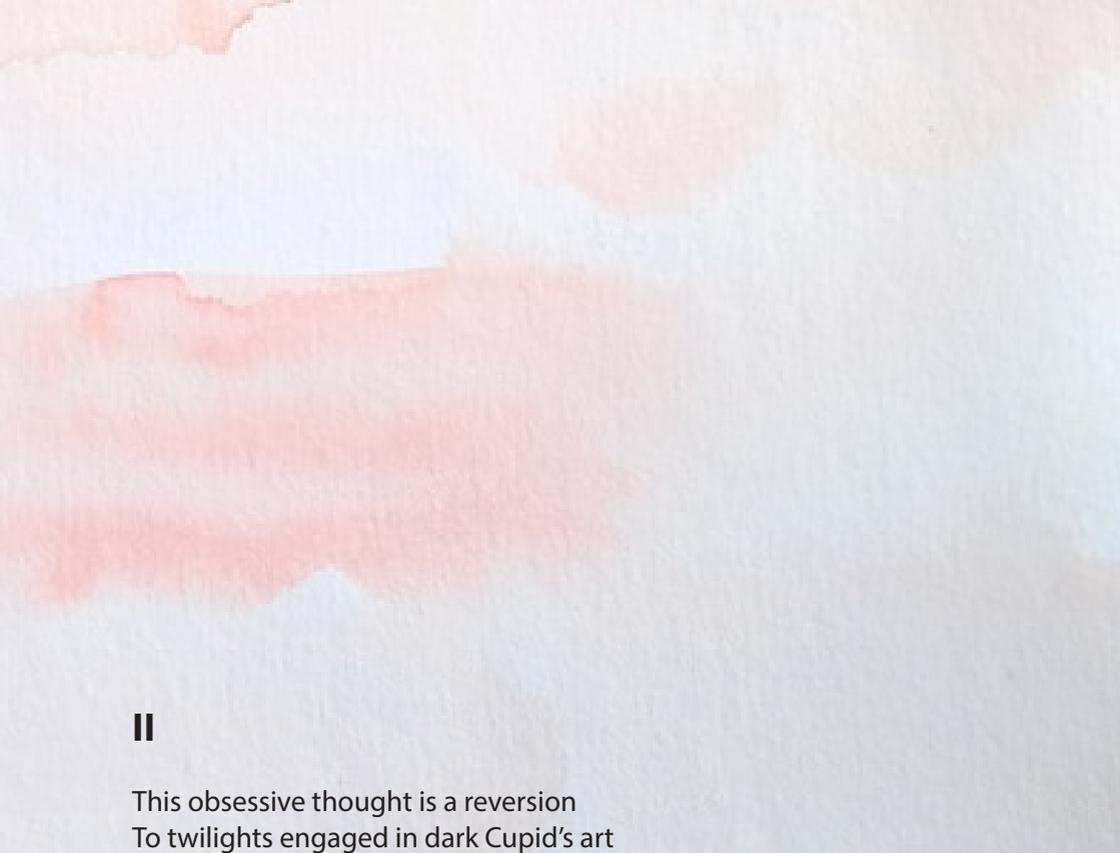


I

Fearsome futures? You can only revert
To states prior in your evolution
This is one notion I will not desert
The hopeless cling fast to this illusion

But all turns dark beyond my gaze
Energy raging is speedily spent
I stumble through a Daedalean maze
Hell awakened in a soul heaven sent

Torment refuses to let my words lie
There's reason to live and reason to die



II

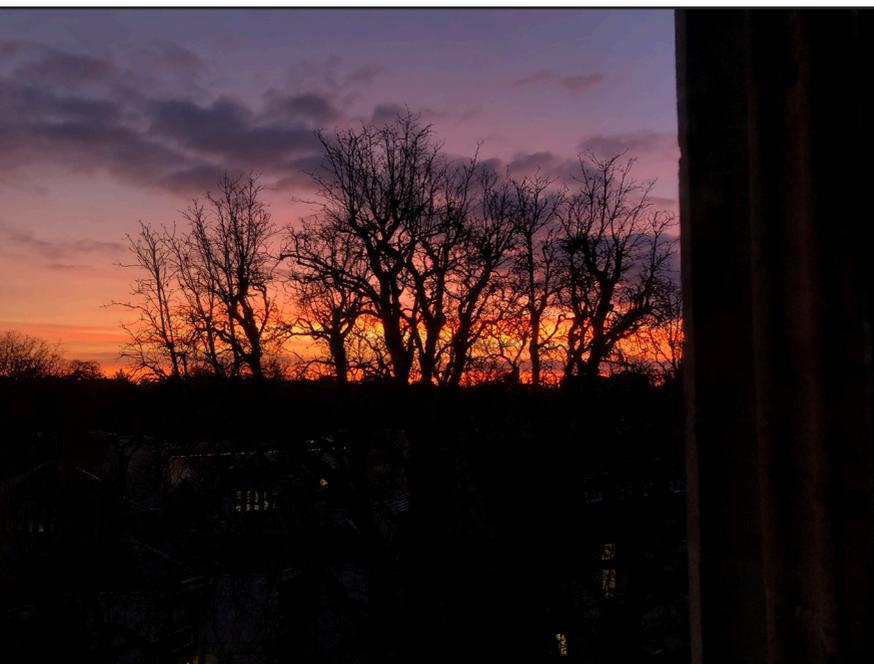
This obsessive thought is a reversion
To twilights engaged in dark Cupid's art
Someone new has stirred my mind's perversion
Too proud! I thought I was free of his dart

I try to leave; each time she follows me
With pleading arms outstretched and eyes forlorn
I dare to think what I could not conceive
That worthless is my existential scorn

With spirit so, I do not wish to curse
My muse demanding that I speak in verse



Issy Stephens



SHAKESPEARE REVERSED

A play of questionable comedic value, Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*, which tells the story of an undesirable girl married off and forced into submission by her unrelenting husband, poses a considerable problem to directors staging the play to a modern audience. Some productions have emphasised the comic aspects of the play, presenting it as a humorous love-story. Whereas others have staged it as a tale of abuse. In their most recent production of the play, the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) does neither. Instead they re-frame the play through an ingenious bit of Shakespearean role-reversal which places the story in a reimagined matriarchal sixteenth century.

Set in Shakespearean times, this production keeps audience members constantly on their toes, as it encourages mental comparison between the play as it was originally

written and as it is now brought to the stage. Whilst sexism in Shakespearean comedy can often be swept under the rug in romanticised renditions such as the RSC's 2017 production of *The Twelfth Night*, the *Shrew's* misogyny is so blatant that it demands our attention. The RSC's genderbent production does not make any excuses, nor does it pretend that the subject matter of the play becomes any more acceptable when the roles are reversed. On the contrary, the level of abstraction gained by the gender reversal allows this production to lean into the gender disparity with a severity that can be both troubling and comedic.

It is not merely a question of genderbent casting; on viewing this performance it is immediately clear how much thought has gone into the representation of gender at every stage of production. Instead of getting straight into the script,

director Justin Audibert has the play open with a dance. This straightaway establishes a hierarchy; dance as a medium traditionally entails the male partner leading the woman. In the case of this production the roles are reversed: whilst the women enter first, accompanied by powerful music and displaying much more forceful body language, the men come on stage curtsying to a dainty accompaniment, and are soon paired up with women of the appropriate class who lead them in the dance. The continued overdramatization of gender stereotypes in the play operates on two levels: its hyperbolic execution ridicules gender stereotypes themselves, and there is a comic appeal largely from the fact that the stereotype is being displayed by the 'wrong' person. This invites us to question why our society is so comfortable applying gender stereotypes.

An alternative way of establishing power dynamics is through the use of space. In their substantially sized period dresses, the actresses of this production physically take up more space than their male counterparts. This becomes particularly evident when any of the female characters march purposefully across the stage, forcing everyone else to get out of their way. In a post-show discussion, the actresses revealed that they were tasked by their director with playing 'patriarchy chicken' when out on the streets, making way for no-one, in a

manner unfortunately all too common in real men. During rehearsals the actresses were also instructed not to shy away from standing on centre stage, a position not frequently awarded to Shakespeare's female characters when there are men in the scene. This is further acknowledged by Joe Arkley's shrew, who is presented as 'unladylike' at the start of the play by repeatedly occupying the centre stage, but fades almost entirely from view in Act IV Scene 3, standing silently behind a mannequin whilst the other characters talk about him as if he wasn't even there.

As is often the case with live theatre, the audience forms an essential part of the performance. In this case, one is not only viewing the treatment of gender within the play but is able to watch one's peers respond to this treatment in real time, witnessing everyone's instinctive reactions. Lines such as "now there's a man" consistently elicited the most laughter, whilst a few people remained quite silent, perhaps imagining an Elizabethan audience laughing at the words "now there is a woman" as Katherine kneels obediently before her husband. Some audience members have complained that the female actresses in this production are 'too masculine' in their approach. They perhaps fail to realise that this is a deliberate attempt on the part of the RSC to get people to question

what it really means to be masculine or feminine. If much of what we consider to be 'masculine' is a product of societal factors, rather than an inherently male quality, surely a matriarchal society would feature such traits in women rather than men?

An overall thoughtful and highly comedic performance, this production brings a refreshing twist to a play that is often disliked for its blatant misogyny, taking it as an opportunity to explore the place of gender in our society at large.

The Taming of the Shrew is running at the Barbican until the 18th of January

Sophia de Medeiros

Ophelia
Bridget Stuart



Back and Forth

Degrees of pressure and perfection
Help screams rejection, protection
Fugitives capture imaginations
Severance and reverence both have obsessions

Wading, waiting, hating all
Achieving, never losing
Dark, the engulfing holes
Focus my fading
From...far too
Cold, future, staring

While a sorrowful mourning
For hope chances slight
Touching trees reaching high
Bodies shaking minds

Integrity equals being empty
Lonely and yearning for...? Crazy
Try to swallow. Disguised me
Beauty means subjectivity, surely

Anticipating the end
See, can't I stop
Being still
Paradoxical, certainly. Isn't everything?

Inexplicable

Palpable pain
I pine
Explain
Excel, I ail, pale
In bell-peal
Placate
Lean in
A plea-leap
Enable epic panic
An alien in exile
Clean-line capable
Been plain
Be able
Belie a label
Banal blip?
Apex a pill, lip
Pace in lane
Lain, clip, beep, bleep
In a cell
A clap apiece
Axe an alibi
Ex-peace
In place I pen
Lexical annexe

Clare Tierney



Ballet dancer's whirling on the toes: PIROUETTE

While pondering the various paths my response to the theme 'reversals' could take, I found myself in a situation undoubtedly familiar to many people. I was groping to remember the term for 'when a word or sentence is the same when read forwards or backwards.' Although typing this description into Google may well have yielded an instantaneous answer, I decided instead to turn to a battered Reverse Dictionary lying on my parents' dusty bookshelves. Navigating this book proved slightly more challenging than a conventional dictionary, as it is not the words that are arranged alphabetically but rather the 'clue words/phrases/descriptions' which then lead you to a specific term. But I quickly discovered turning to entries under 'backwards' and 'reverse' yielded my 'target word' - palindrome.

The satisfaction of this quest for linguistic precision and concision propelled a more extensive perusal of the multitude of entries in the reverse dictionary. I was struck by how often the 'clue' word or description evoked for me more than the 'target'

word. To 'smile in a silly, self-satisfied way' I found much more interesting than simply to 'smirk'. A 'garment, one piece and tight-fitting, worn by acrobats and dancers' produced a more vivid mental image for me than the word 'leotard'.

One entry leapt out in its significance:

'reverse of truth thought of as if it were truth: DOUBLETHINK'

In contrast to Orwell's famous doublethink concept coined in his novel 1984, the plain English definition seems to me now more powerful. That power derives from saying simply and concisely what you mean, rather than letting a too familiar polysyllabic word approximate your precise meaning. This reality is compellingly articulated by Orwell himself in his 1946 essay Politics and the English Language. He describes how so much of modern speech and writing is 'hackneyed', with prefabricated phrases placed together like a 'henhouse'. He lays bare the near inevitable tendency of political language to stray into euphemism and vagueness.

It is a challenging feat to justify harsh policies like war and vital public spending cuts, he points out.

Political parlance is designed to 'make lies sound truthful and murder respectable'. 'Bad' politics results in language riddled with inaccuracies and clumsiness. The insights to be gleaned from the Reverse Dictionary alongside Orwell's essay speak to today's political and cultural climate where concepts of truth, perception and language seem frequently in turmoil. Though the bumbling inaccuracies of Donald Trump's tweets cause political distress, the perniciousness of their impact could be sorely underestimated. Consider how Trump termed the impeachment proceedings a 'lynching' in his tweet on 22 October 2019. This word-choice is not only inaccurate and inappropriate; it is dangerous. Failing to respect the true definition and history of a word like 'lynching' reflects the sloppiness and self-reverential nature of much of Trump's dialogue with the internet. Via his position of power and influence, this President pollutes the very historical information-store inherent in language. Thereby what we refer to when speaking of the atrocities of interracial violence in the USA may in future be obscured and trivialised.

The current normalisation of slanderous, inaccurate, enraged political discourse, be it on the internet or in person, parallels and exacerbates the tumultuous global times in which we live. It is a political reality that engenders a sense of helplessness in many. Yet Orwell's articulation of the inextricable link between language and politics can provide an entry point to change-making. If, as Orwell urges, we take steps to alter the 'verbal end', reversals of the political may follow.

Aura Schonfeld



I'm always late

sharp air grazes
my skin as
leaves circle and
spin the sun's
darkening eyes
fall
through trees
a ring echoing
slams
against stone

Sofia Henderson

