

**Rodge Glass**  
**ON SPECULATION**

*After Dept. of Speculation*

1.

At the start of May 2020, I started buying books again. Books for me. Books for courses I'd be teaching online come September. Books recommended by friends and colleagues. Some dog-eared, some loved, some with unbroken spines. At forty-two, having just left half a library behind in my old office, unable to take so many things north to our delayed new life in Scotland, I was already building up again from scratch. Sometimes I'll say to C.R., It could be heroin. Or gambling! Or affairs! There are *definitely* worse men out there. Addiction is a big word, compulsion smaller. Either way, I've given away a lot of books over the years. Then set about gathering them up again, right away, as if the world was running out of print.

At least this time I wasn't acting in desperation. I wasn't parked on double yellows outside Oxfam on Byres Road, emptying boxes from the boot of my car out of spite. I did that once, in a rush. Dumping box after box between stops in the shop doorway to hack at my arms. 'Are you sure?' asked the young volunteer, as I turned to go, running a hand through her green fringe. 'This is, like . . . a *lot*!' Signed books, books I'd loved, books I'd annotated, books I'd studied and taught, books from friends, books *written* by friends – Dear R, With all my love; Dear R, Thank you for everything; Dear R, If you ever give me away I'll never forgive you! – the car was heavy, then it was gloriously, horribly light. I sat in the driver's seat and inspected my swollen arms. I reached for the inhaler in the glovebox, then started the engine. As I flicked the indicator, trying to get on the road before being caught by the advancing traffic wardens – oh for fuck's sake! – the trickle became a rush. Back

then, I was too embarrassed to look at my all-too-recent life, so pretended it wasn't there. This meant getting rid. All these years later, I sometimes go to my new shelves looking for something, then realise it was part of a long-ago giveaway. At one point, just before moving out of the old place for good, I piled old volumes of this and that on the street outside the flat M and I had shared, along with various bits of furniture, fittings and God knows what else. A neighbour came downstairs and asked what on earth I thought I was doing, young man. I had no answer for her. I couldn't even pretend.

I've loved the short story 'Why Don't You Dance?' by Raymond Carver for years. At the start of it, a man pours himself a hard drink in his kitchen, while looking out at the old bedroom suite he and his wife shared during their marriage. The suite is now sitting in his front yard. He contemplates the nightstand, also the reading lamp on her side of the bed, or what used to be, now made absurd in its new public spot. The same nightstand and lamp are replicated on his side, each of these things lying, like a dare, for anyone to pick up as they pass. The only line of the second paragraph of the story reads like this:

'His side, her side.'

You can do a lot in a few words. More, if you give it space on the page. Now, when I think of my fire sale back in 2012, I feel I must have been the man in 'Why Don't You Dance?' Looking crazy. Sounding high. Encouraging passers-by – young, loved-up couples at the start of their lives – to pick up my past so I could hurry along, unthinking, into any kind of future.

I've been starting again for decades. Escaping different schools, then England, Judaism, Israel–Palestine, friendships, England again, relationships, communities, jobs, and now England once more. But there comes a point where you aren't entitled to a clean slate any more. You can clean parts of it, cover other bits over. You can unburden yourself of things you own, telling yourself it's charity.

But the past is the past; it's what the present is made of. And there's no way to deny the past.

2.

When books started arriving at our home last May, the children got excited. Magic! Through our own letterbox! Sometimes I let L, our older girl, open the post herself. Sometimes she got to it first, running to her room with a whoop, squirrelling the treasure in some faraway corner of her room. Other times, C, our younger girl, opened the post with me in the hallway. I'd watch her face as she looked at the newly revealed cover of some strange, darkly scribbled crow, muted illustration of mussels, bleak-looking farmhouse or abstract painting. All before looking up at me with eyes wide saying, 'A-maaaaay-zing!' Some of these were books I didn't know anything about. Their authors were authors I'd never heard of. Sometimes I even forgot what I'd ordered them for, and in some cases I didn't know if I'd ordered a novel, or a memoir, or a collection of stories. I didn't know what I was reading. I had few expectations. In a sense, it didn't matter what I was reading. Only that when I was reading, I wasn't in the world.

One of the first to arrive was *Dept. of Speculation* by Jenny Offill. After ripping it from its bubble-pack envelope with my help, C rubbed her hands back and forth across the jacket. The image was of a blue sky that looked like it had words floating in amongst clouds so sparse they were barely there. 'Like it, like it,' she said. I asked, 'What do you think it is?' She opened it at the title page and handed it to me, saying 'Lookdaddy, lookdaddy, a book!' Then she sat down on my lap, ready for story time. I was thinking about something else. I kissed the top of her head and put it to one side, then reached for *Pip and Posy: The New Friend* by Axel Scheffler, which was lying close by on the floor. 'We love Pip and Posy, don't we?' C is a toddler-sized megaphone. 'YEEEEES!' she

yelled, and the package was forgotten. ‘Pip and Posy were going to the beach,’ I began, ‘They unpacked their things.’ Just then, C spotted Posy’s favourite cuddly toy hanging out of her beach bag. ‘Awwww!’ she said, hugging herself before stroking the picture. ‘Frog’s a wee CUTIE!’

Pip and Posy can be relied upon, time after time, to deliver. Here is the plot entire of *The New Friend*.

1) Pip the rabbit and Posy the mouse go to the beach. They collect shells, dig a hole and paddle in the sea.

2) While Posy naps, Pip meets Zac the dog. Pip and Zac have so much fun playing together that they wake Posy up.

3) Posy is invited to play, but isn’t sure. If Pip has a new friend, will he want to play with her anymore?

4) Pip, Posy and Zac go and buy ice creams.

5) As they’re handing over the money, a seagull swoops down and takes Zac’s ice cream. OH DEAR! POOR ZAC!

5) Posy gives Zac her last coin so he can buy another one. He thanks Posy and wipes his eyes.

6) They all walk happily down the beach, ice creams in hand. Posy suggests they build a huge sandcastle together. And they do. HOORAY!

Joy! Pain! Friendship! Kindness! And a happy ending too. In a parallel world, I’m invited onto *Desert Island Discs*. On arrival at the studio, I reject the traditionally proffered *Complete Works of Shakespeare* in favour of *The Complete Pip and Posy*, insisting on this swap as a condition of my participation in the programme. Naturally, the producer agrees with a smile. Her kids love Axel Scheffler. Meanwhile, back in the real world, I hugged C tight then stood and picked up my new package. As C had done, I stroked the front over, already absent-mindedly thinking of something else as I climbed the stairs.

Around that time, though books were always arriving at the house, most of my reading was reading with the children. That, or reading about HHT.

## 3.

When I began *Dept. of Speculation* a few weeks later, I noticed what C had seemed to be showing me when shouting *lookdaddy* – that someone had written a note on the inside. Spidery writing. Not exactly clear. But clear enough.

MAY 2017. To the 'I' of you, Lucy. So that you will learn to trust me again, and yourself completely. With love. From—

Then one more word. Jen? Jan? Jon? Let's call you Jon for now, I thought, leaning in on the page, edging closer and farther away, closer and farther away, like a magnifying glass trying to focus on a bug. The handwriting suggested more of a Jon than a Jen. It was a man's hand, I was sure of it. The scrawl of someone who knew others would have to work hard to read their writing, and yes actually they were fine with that, what of it? The book's epigraph was from Socrates. 'Speculators on the universe . . . are no better than madmen.' I don't know why, but I snorted – enjoying the sensation of briefly, ever so briefly, feeling superior to Socrates, maybe? What did that guy know, eh? Doesn't he know we're *all* speculators? Whether we want to be or not?

That night, I had so many things I was avoiding doing that I didn't know what to do with myself. While wandering between rooms, picking toys and clothes off the floor after the children were in bed, I spotted my copy of *Living with HHT* by Sara Palmer on the windowsill. I hid it under my desk, feeling vaguely sick. In the weeks since Joshua's birthday I'd kept returning to that book for answers, though of course no answers were in it. Just medical language, and pictures, and the stories of people whose lungs were strong enough to make it through a single day on their own. When trying to concentrate on, say, blood vessel abnormalities or how diagnoses are made, on diagrams or on personal testimonies, I was doing what I do best. Highlighter in hand, I thought about how both the Hebrew and Christian calendars

seem to work hard to multiply the anniversaries. Or rather, how they multiply the opportunities for remembrance. Of Joshua's life, his death by HHT, in spite of the odds – and what's that's made of us all.

Each year, there's his birthday. That's number one.

In 2017, Joshua's year, March 26th was a Sunday, Mother's Day no less – so there's Mother's Day to mark as well, whenever that falls. His mum is always his mum, whether he's alive or not. That's number two.

Then there's number three, the Jewish Yahrzeit, which starts at sunset and is marked by the lighting of a single candle and the saying of a prayer. Ner ne'shemah, it's called – soul candle. Number three usually falls a couple of weeks either side of the end of March, dependent on the movements of the moon. So far, so Jewish. But there's more.

On the Shabbat of the Yahrzeit week, there's also number four – an annual mention of Joshua at synagogue, which we're always invited to as well. It's never a cursory mention. The other anniversaries they list are mostly of people who lived long lives, some of which ended long ago. They're remembered by children, grandchildren, sometimes by the wider community. Jews never mark things once if they can get away with it, that's the old joke. Though when the rabbi talks about Joshua's mum and dad's response to his short life, his long legacy, I can't laugh. No synagogue this year of course, even that's going online now. The rabbi, front and centre in his living room, a couple of his younger children like mini hype-boy and hype-girl, either side of him, the boy battering an improvised drum between his knees while his sister dances and claps along to the prayers. Reaching out through the screen with their smiles, as dad tries to summon the old community spirit through the unifying power of Zoom.

*Living with HHT* was published after he was born, after he died. It didn't even mention Joshua by name. What I'm saying is, *Living with HHT* didn't stand a chance.

Certain places in the old house have become frozen in time. Standing at my bedroom window, I remembered – how long ago was it? – when I stood at the same spot and apologised to my sister-in-law for what happened to Joshua, while looking out onto the park behind our house. ‘I want to take responsibility,’ I said down the phone, ‘for what I didn’t do,’ though of course it was too late to do anything, and the apology was as much about what I needed as anything else. Joshua is her baby, but she was trying to make it easier for me, which is the measure of her. She said she didn’t blame me – though she did, if I remember rightly, say the word ‘acknowledge’ at one point, the word ‘denial’ at another. Words can tie knots, but we both know. That all this could have been avoided, had I only looked after my own health, and thought, just a little more, about those around me. You can spend decades hiding in stories if you like. Stories can change lives, they can even save lives. But none of that changes what’s already happened in the real world.

As I sat there looking out at our garden, the metal drum in next door’s garden slowly eating up hunks of wood in a smouldering fire, C.R. was downstairs talking to a friend. I could hear her laughing through our paper floor. I popped downstairs and saw a bottle of wine had been opened. Good, I thought. I returned to the bedroom, took *Living with HHT* back out from under the desk and hid it again, this time above the wardrobe. Sometimes you can’t put a book far enough out of sight. Then I picked up something I wanted to read, tucked my feet into the duvet and hit the bedside light.

#### 4.

The start of *Dept. of Speculation* is split into lots of short paragraphs, with fat margins and as much white space on the page as text. I like that. It makes you feel like you’re racing towards the next thing, whatever the next thing is. At first though, the story was disorientating. It started with something vague about antelopes

and vision. Then something the narrator thought about the nature of memories. Then it moved to an anecdote about a time when the narrator was travelling alone and hid a raw steak in her purse, loath to leave the thing, bloody and unwanted, on her plate. The narrative soon cut again, sharp, to a time this same woman spent in a French park, pretending to read Horace. ‘In Paris, even the subways are required to be beautiful,’ is how the line went. I didn’t know what was happening, but I’d been sold since the word ‘steak’.

Jon had left the first page unmarked, though by the second he was already getting involved. The next line after the one about the subways of Paris was in italics, being marked with two stars. ‘They change their sky, not their soul, who run across the sea.’ Was Lucy supposed to know what Jon meant here? Was it something to do with trust? On the following page was a short paragraph about a summer when it rained and rained. In every city, said the narrator, the scene was the same: ‘A boy stepping into the street and opening an umbrella for a girl keeping dry in the doorway.’ To this, Jon had added: ‘(Oxford Street, everyone . . .)’.

I might as well have been reading the Cyrillic alphabet. I looked at this comment for a while, dumbly. Then shook my head. So little of what a reader experiences is what a writer intends them to. What hope did Jon – not even the creator of this book, a mere whispering onlooker, a bug in the eye – have of controlling Lucy’s experience? I thought about the last time I was in Oxford Street, which made me think of London, which made me think of my brother, which made me think of Joshua Jonah Glass, who lived for three hours and who I never met because, because, because. All books lead to Joshua, not just *Living with HHT*. One way or another, they do.

By Chapter 2, Jon was warming up.

At the phrase, ‘they put it through anyway’, Jon ticked the line.

At the phrase, ‘Life plus structure equals activity’ he wrote, ‘useful’.

Page 7 read: ‘For years, I kept a Post-it note above my desk. WORK: NOT LOVE was what it said. It seemed a sturdier kind of



happiness.’ At this, Jon had underlined the last seven words. Adding, ‘Read “Scaffolding”, a poem by Simon Armitage.’

So Jon was giving Lucy homework now, and me too. This was the first time I thought, No wonder Lucy sold the bloody thing on! In these circumstances, it suddenly seemed like the onlooker was the one with all the power. What chance did the author have of cutting through all this chatter? I opened a new tab, huffing audibly. I typed in: ‘Scaffolding Simon Armitage poem.’ Disgracefully, the poem did not immediately flash up before me, so I put *Dept. of Speculation* down and put out a call. One reply read: ‘Do they mean “Scaffolding” by Seamus Heaney?’ By this point, I was down a hole. I found Heaney’s ‘Scaffolding’ and took a photo of it. It’s a poem of one simple metaphor: the construction of loving, enduring walls.

Poor Jon, I thought. He thinks his betrayal will be forgotten because he built a wall, way back when. I forgot I had been looking for another poem; I became distracted by the hope that Lucy might start answering back. We never went to Oxford Street, did we, Jon? Must have been your ex-wife, that one. No, I won’t read what you tell me to. No, I won’t forgive you, Jon. Leave me alone. LEAVE ME THE FUCK ALONE.

Back in May, I was working from a small make-up desk in our bedroom. I was especially preoccupied. With the ever-burning drum next door and the sound of threats at all hours. With Joshua’s recent anniversaries. With my many conditions and never, ever feeling well. But despite all that, two people kept finding their way back into my thoughts. Lucy and Jon were now real to me. Every bit as real, at least, as my brother’s rabbi, his smiling children in the screen, my own past giveaways, and the characters in *Dept. of Speculation*.

## 5.

As it progressed, the structure of the book became clearer. Some of these short paragraphs were fragments from the early days of a relationship history between a woman and man, shown from

woman's perspective. Some sections were related to memories, or moments, or things that stuck in the protagonist's mind, though it wasn't always clear why one thing stuck while another didn't. The connection between the different strands of the book wasn't always immediately clear either, but I built up a picture of the narrator as the pages passed.

'The wife', she called herself. It matters what you call yourself, right?

Page by page, Offill seeded what her narrator did for a living and how her relationship with 'the husband' evolved over time. The years before and after marriage, before and after the loss of a pregnancy, the birth and growth of a serious young child. The pages are sprinkled with wonder and the protagonist keeps reaching for quotations by others. For Jon, this was a gift. How could he resist the urge to point at, to highlight? On an early page, Jon had underlined this italicised sentence: '*Remember it is possible to feel this way*'. Perhaps he hovered over the words, wondering if Lucy would intuit what he wanted her to, even without his annotation. But what if she missed what he needed her to see? Some risks you just can't take. Every comment was a mystery to me, every underlining a question. I closed my eyes and tried to imagine Jon, or Jan, or Jen. The curve of his jaw. Her face, in profile.