

LUNGLEY

Short story by **Thomas McMullan**

Have I tried everything in my power? I've been scratching the walls for an indeterminable time, scratching my head. I am pieces leaning against each other. Jesus, the smell coming off me. This is the last time I'll be making any sort of demands, the very last. I am pieces perilously propped and all it would take is a strong wind, not that there is wind, not a breeze. A rumble in my belly, then, if that's what it is, if I reach down to touch it I can knock and hear a hollow response. Is that the sound of rain? I'll say it is. It's the sound of rain and I can hear it clearly. If I'm to be trapped here then I can give myself the luxury of listening to the rain, which leads me to believe it is night, that's the image come to mind, a rainy alley lit by neon signs. There is a man, yes, he is standing in the alley, his jacket wet with rain, hair wet, face wet, he has a mark in the centre of his forehead, a kind of dent the size and shape of an adult thumb. Strange thing to have. He is hesitating, moving down the alley but slowly, slowly, past the big bins at the back of restaurants, like somewhere from a film, as if he were a private detective but he isn't a private detective, no, he is a coward and he has come to this place despite himself, away from the others. What is on his mind? Amongst the thoughts is an artichoke, one he had seen years before on a kitchen counter, gone bad, monstrous in a way, how it had sat there in its overspilling splendour. Why of all times does it come to him then, when he has found himself alone, out of his own weakness, in this poorly lit alley where the bins are pitter-pattering with the rain? So, I reach with my hands, if I still have hands, and touch once more my empty belly. They could have given me clothes, a potato sack at the very least. I mindlessly play with the hairs below my belly button, I will say they are hairs, pleasurable to roll between my thumb and forefinger, much like a stem of grass, the rain still going, the alley gives way to a doorway, a backdoor to a theatre, yes, that's where this is. The door is wide open and he hesitates at the threshold. Perhaps he thinks about turning back to the others. He goes on, coward he is, into the theatre, i'll say it's a theatre, although it is so far only a corridor, a small window to one side, another room, a security guard's face, tired, an open notebook on the counter, a list of names and times, check outs and check ins. The man's own name is there and beside it he writes the time, to the minute. There is a crack below my belly button, some kind of fissure. I fear if I press too hard it may cave in. An artichoke, he thinks. Its fat head spiked and purple, laying on the kitchen counter. Did it smell? Surely it smelt. Life embracing death, the stink of death, overripe, near the end. Has the rain stopped? What does it matter if it has stopped? Had it even begun? I listen out. My own breathing, is that what it is? I twiddle the hairs,

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I'll say they're hairs. The man walks down the corridor and is soon in his dressing room, a nice enough place, mirror and a desk and a sofa and such, as you'd expect, nothing you wouldn't expect, no window, no, and the ceiling is low, lower, not enough to stoop but enough to be aware of, as if he is under something, the dressing room under something, tucked beneath a terrible weight, yes, terrible. He prepares himself, changing out of his clothes, putting on the costume that has been laid out, costume, but it could be his clothes, are these in fact his clothes? I am straining to listen to more than my breathing, to voices in the hallway, a pair of voices speaking about me in urgent whispers, there has to be someone speaking about me, what else is there to speak about? I scratch at the walls, listen, there is a small bowl of sunflower seeds in the man's dressing room and while he waits for his call he splits them open, each in turn, he was once shown how to do this by an old girlfriend, biting on the fatter end, splitting the shell, careful with his tongue to take the seed, absent-minded he eats the seeds, he touches the dent in his forehead the shape and size of an adult thumb, eats the sunflower seeds, discards the shells into a neat little heap on the desk. Jesus, the effort of all this imagining. What more effort do I have within me, I wonder. No, what matters is that some remains, the belief that some effort remains. That is what I tell myself. I am in the world still, present in the world, and there is effort remaining, so he eats the seeds and waits for his five minute call, trying not to think of the others who he has left behind like the cruel fucker he is, the nasty piece of work. I scratch my head. I have demands, that's true. There is effort in me still. I scratch at the walls, I'll call them walls, my fingernails on the walls, this time as a performance, yes, again and again without success, standing or sitting, my limbs a mess, a sordid, affected mess. This time as a performance, I say. He gets his five minute warning. I have all but given up, if not for my conviction, the pride I have in my conviction will see me through, I say, out loud, let them hear me in the hallway, give them something more to whisper about. He presses a sunflower seed into his forehead, into the dent, and then he is away from the room, once more into corridors of the theatre, towards a stairway, and the stairway leads him upwards. I say all of this because it is a story close to my heart. He moves onto the stage, which is dark, not a sound in the audience, if there is an audience, only the sound of his footsteps on the boards. He finds his place, comes to a stop, looks out into the dark. There, the artichoke on the kitchen counter. He looks for faces but can't make out any faces. Will he do it again, does he have the conviction?

Short story by **Thomas McMullan** commissioned to accompany the exhibition *Strip* a solo exhibition by William Mackrell.

Thomas McMullan is a writer and artist. His debut novel, *The Last Good Man* (Bloomsbury) won the 2021 Betty Trask Prize. His short fiction and poetry have been published in *Granta*, *3:AM Magazine* and *Best British Short Stories*, and his journalistic work has appeared in publications including the *Guardian*, *Times Literary Supplement*, *Frieze* and *BBC News*. He has also worked with theatre companies and games studios in London, Amsterdam and Los Angeles, including *Punchdrunk*, *The Chinese Room* and *Roll7* (Bafta: Best British Game, 2023).



William Mackrell *Ravine UV* (2023)

Etching on c-type print mounted on aluminium 38.5 cm x 59 cm.