

DREAM BIG

I tell you I've been asked to write something. Respond to a theme – you know, artistically, because I am an Artist. I tell you the theme, and you say

Wow, that's hard. Everything is already so fair!

and I agree, nodding emphatically, and we go to a show, mine or yours or someone we don't know, because we can, and because the day is curious and I have paid my electricity bill without even really noticing. The show is bold, properly genuinely bold and destroying, and in the darkness of the theatre, I am excited to be alive with you.

Earlier, hours before you arrive, I am sitting at my desk with hot coffee that smells like my mother, who also wanted to be a writer and so is one, deleting all the social media apps I'd actually forgotten about, really, because I don't need them to feel real or remind people that I am gorgeous and/or employable. Instead, I spin on my ergonomic wheely chair and type *dreaming of a fairer future for culture* into a search engine, together and then separately. I search *culture*. I search *future*. I search *dreaming*, and – oh! Okay, this is interesting.

It's interesting that people who don't have access to a good, protein rich diet are less likely to dream. Or perhaps their minds are filled with more immediate things? Thank god we're all so well fed.

It's interesting that women remember their dreams more clearly than men. Thank god it says *remember*, not *need*.

It's interesting, too, that the most common emotion conjured while dreaming is anxiety. Thank god it says *conjured*, not *recalled*, or *channelled*, or *cannot escape from*.

Thank god the act of dreaming is, in and of itself, fair, and all of us get eight hours in quiet bedrooms, under matching, fresh bedcovers, our arms around someone we love – maybe ourselves - and our bellies gurgling, cooing with the food of happy childhoods. I haven't needed to believe in a higher power in a long, long time, but I do because I see it everywhere; at the supermarket, passing something off the top shelf to someone smaller, in a lost mitten waving hello from a tree branch, in the well-maintained public playgrounds doing jumps off the swings. You might call it a culture of kindness.

I'm reminded of the time you told me *culture isn't caviar, it's salt*. You sprinkle yours on everything because it brings out the flavour. It's cheap - free, really, because when you run out you can collect it from the ocean or take some from neighbours who share it gladly. There is no such thing as shoplifting when it comes to salt.

You recall your daddy gave you a taste for culture, teaching you the old songs and reminding you that salt can cut through the sweetness of your grandparents baking clementine cake in their pinewood and Formica kitchen, can offset the bitterness of a boat leaving home.

I search *can you dream hungry?*

I search *can you dream cold?*

Beaten?

Bombed?

And then I give up, deciding this isn't the best approach because I remember most people don't want to hear about your sodding dreams, anyway. Maybe I'm being pedantic with this angle. I search *pedantic*, and what I mean is maybe I'm being too literal. I am an Artist, even though I don't know what to write, and even more so when I don't understand some of the words when I do. It's a language I'm learning because I want to talk to everybody.

Hours have passed. I've made progress, even though I've not typed a word, because thinking time is vital when you are your own muse(r) and I have time to think. You arrive, and I close my laptop, which is free of tantalum, tin and tungsten and looks just like all the ones you find in the endless, well-stocked libraries we have and visit and cherish.

When we leave the flat, it is warm in a seasonally appropriate sort of way, and we dance down the street, passing intricate graffiti near walls that house precious pictures depicting a time we have almost forgotten because we learned so much from it, and if you stand *just so* in front of them, they become magic eye art, each one an intricate, intertwined map to where we have all come from and where we are all going.

We spot a friend in the near distance, their hair a lighthouse wrapped tall in a bright fabric that keeps it clear of the sweat on their neck and chest. They waddle, a heaving memoir of desire, and they stroke their stomach and tell us that they're feeling *calm*. They are not worried about the future, in which everyone gets to be themselves, completely and delightedly. They are excited to greet this brand-new little soldier, this comrade-in-arms, to share their culture and experience a whole new one – less of a passing down and more of a welcoming in. We are all excited. When it comes, the future will be so collaborative that we will mistake living for play.

The future is now, baby. The future is unionised.

Speaking of play, we are running late. As we dash into the theatre it starts to rain, in a seasonally appropriate sort of way, and everyone has an umbrella. They are left cluttered in the cloakroom, dripping, like extras in a romcom waiting to see the big kiss. The extras are paid well. The romcom is written by anyone who wants to write a romcom.

Later, the show finishes, and as we applaud and applaud and our disbelief is returned to us like a bottle on the waves, I lean over and say

I honestly don't know how I'm going to write this thing!

and you whoop over me, rightly, and I say

I love how it feels to clap along with strangers!

And you say

What strangers?!

...

Actually, to be honest, you say

Write about a hypothetical future where everything already feels fairer, so you don't risk being unemployable. Blacklisted. Don't write about the flags that were waved, and those that weren't, white boy optimism, or the choosing of remembrance days over the challenging of how they came to be necessary, the gymnastics of it all. Don't write about the canon that

only ever seems to fire backwards, or failing upwards, or how culture for some is just for some months, or some lessons, for extraction like gold grabbed by little fingers, or some horror from history that is here, now, in the clawing for scraps, the endless clawing for scraps that leaves us tired and sore and that's the point, isn't it?

Don't write about funding.

Don't write the word gutless when you mean reasonable.

Don't write about the endless necessary policies, the calling in advance to check, the exploitation – wait, what I mean is authenticity. You are an Artist, even more so when you don't understand. Don't write about being an artist who cannot afford to see art, how humiliating it all is, how patronising, how hard it was to return to work when you got so sick and how frightened we all are, how even when our mouths are clamped shut, we stink of it. Don't write about the quiet, and seriously - don't write about the flags.

You are already

So fucking skint.

We leave the auditorium, sidling out behind a woman with a screen-printed tote bag emblazoned with the words

DREAM BIG!

and we spill out onto a busy street where everyone around us seems to be looking up, so we look up. While we were indoors, the evening sky has become bright and kaleidoscopic and impossible. Like a painting.

And **everyone** gets to see it.

And **everyone** gets to say

Isn't it beautiful, this sky of ours.