

Mike Brown first crashed into the Australian art world in Sydney some time around 1960. His initial steps were taken in the company of Ross Crothall and Colin Lancelty. Together they created the unwieldy enterprise of Annandale Imitation Realism. This collaborative project deployed collage, graffiti and junk to expansive and aggressive ends. Their exhibitions during this period involved sprawling installations of drawing, collage and sculpture with writing, pictures, figures and objects placed in cacophonous chorus.

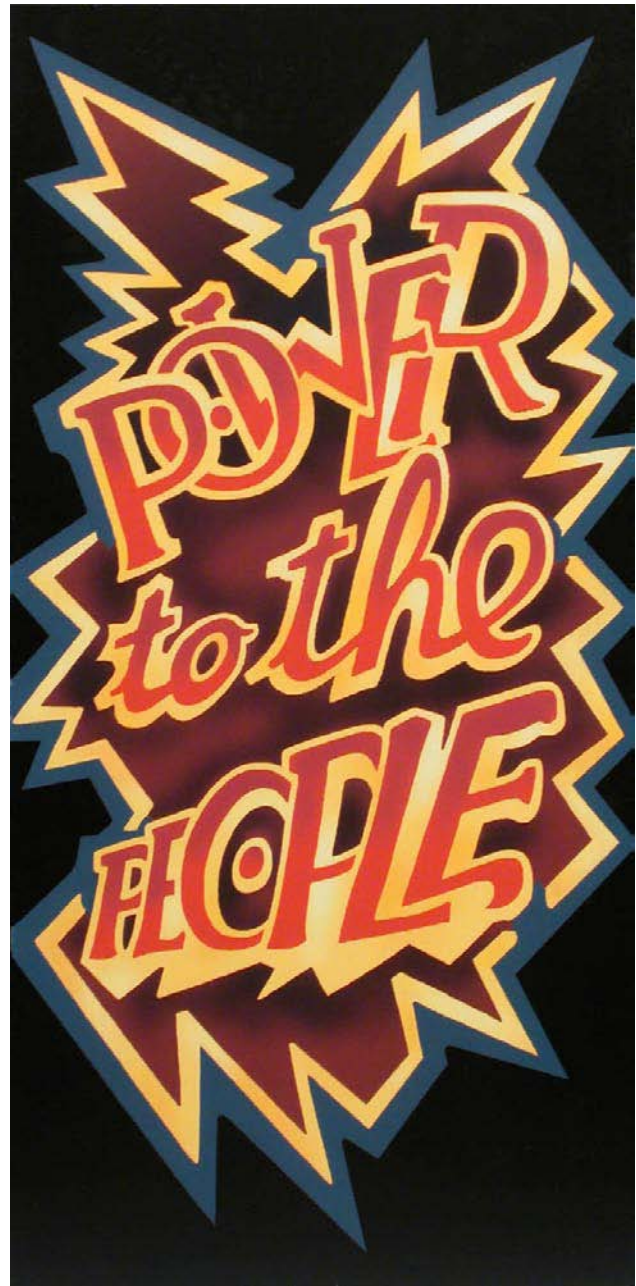
From c.1960 until his death in 1997, Brown produced a barrage of visual material. He navigated pornography, abstraction, pop lyrics and figuration, opening up and tracking diverse territory. I get the feeling much of his work was about the connectivity of known and unknown and the union of chaos and order. Accompanying this program was a heavy lashing of social agitation and the seductive concept of a 'revolution of the mind'. Words that recur when I think of his activities are proliferation, subversion, activism and belief.

As a devout fan of Brown's art, I often ask others for their opinion of his work. Despite having a big show at the National Gallery of Victoria in 1995, a majority of people are unaware of his existence. This seems an unfortunate situation. His series of Mindscapes have absorbed much of my looking. These abstract drawings that expand out from an almost arbitrary beginning, capturing, covering and outlining thought, seem to prefigure the current vogue for nomadic practice (Brown's work seems uncannily D&G). I think a fair bit of consciousness raising is needed about his ideas and his art.

Accompanying his visual practice, Brown also wrote. The essays here are a small fragment of a much larger body of writing. The bulk of this material is unpublished. Writing was a pivotal element of Brown's pursuits, but also one of the least known. Gary Catalano's essay 'The "Wreckings" of Mike Brown: an essay on the ideas of an artist', published in *Art and Australia* in April 1976, is the only article I've come across that makes sustained commentary on this activity. With luck this situation will change.

Shout-outs to Nick Selenitsch, my co-collaborator in sourcing and proliferating Mike Brown's writing. Many thanks should also be given to Clay Lucas, the artist's son, for his permission to reproduce these essays.

Located in Melbourne, Rob McKenzie devotes his energies to making, writing and publishing on art. Accompanying these pursuits, he also enjoys playing sport and 'doing' lunch.



Mike Brown, *Power to the People*, c.1990s, digital multiple, 60 x 28.8cm. © Courtesy of the Mike Brown Estate & Charles Nodrum Gallery, Melbourne.

Just a perfect day
(1961)

I have spent the day tramping the big, hungry city, and today it was a happy peaceful city, trundling along humming a tune to itself, dreaming about nothing very much while the sun it has not seen for days beamed down on it.

No-one I have talked to today has snarled or grumbled, and I have seen plenty of laughter and good-will.

I bought three yards of chain in a hardware store to hang a picture up by, and the chain got tangled as the shop assistant tried to measure it out, and in no time the chain was tangled around everything in sight, an eggbeater was pulled off a shelf and got bent, and then there were three assistants trying to help untangle the mess, laughing at each others clumsiness, and all succeeding very well at increasing the chaos.

Yesterday maybe there would've been snarls and swearwords, but not today when the world's wounds were healing in the spring warmth.

I left a musical instrument at a Railway Parcels Office and the woman looked at it and said, A banjo, is it? I said, That's right, and she wrote down banjo on the docket. She said that she was pleased to have guessed right because the day before a musician woman had brought in a cello in a case, and she had guessed that it was a viola, and the musician woman had been irritated and annoyed because her precious cello had been called a viola.

I said that she had been clever to guess the banjo because banjos have gone out of fashion, and you wouldn't see many around. That's right, she said, it's all guitars these days isn't it? But the banjo used to make a good old sound, as good as any instrument, she said with her eyes full of reminiscence.

The big hungry city is dreaming and laughing and reminiscing about nothing very much in particular on this warm spring day. Even the newspapers have relaxed their ever-watchful alertness for news that will shock and dismay.

The early placards told of a man sentenced to twenty years for a frightful rape attack on a nurse, and of a horror car smash in which two were killed. As the day wore on and the editors saw what sort of a day it was going to be, perhaps they realised that people would only read such a heading with the mildest of good-natured disinterest.

So the latest placard I have just passed by reads "Tax Rebate Windfall for Landowners," reflecting the public consciousness that the whole day is a windfall, a fruitful bounteous windfall that fell out of yesterday's grey sky.

Tomorrow might be the start of a Nuclear Holocaust, as the newspapers call it with such delicious poetry, or next month the tactical reverse of the present financial recession might turn into the rampaging rout of a depression. Who knows or cares? This is September 26th, 1961, a day thrown at men's feet by the idle hand of the sun-god, and whoever does not pick it up and handle it with loving care and carelessness must be a rogue, a waster and a thief.

There again it might be the bums, wasters, rogues and thieves who enjoyed today most of all, since they are mostly self-employed and would have been able to

take the day off from their usual wasting and thieving and roguery to enjoy themselves whatever way they wanted to.

My business in town today was to find a gallery, hall, Town Hall, church hall, abandoned factory or half-submerged lighthouse in which to exhibit the artwork I talked of two chapters ago.

Exhibiting with me as equal partners in the venture will be Rossy Pride-of-Day Crothall, the bearded streak-of-greased-lightning from Aotearoa, the land of the Kiwi and Waikato Three-X beer; and Honest Col John Lanceley, otherwise known as The Thief, from Sydney the same as me, Mike Jesus Bloody Christ Brown.

Is NOBODY interested in damaging the reputation of their building or establishment or whatever by housing a pile of hideous junk, some of it obscene, all of it absurd, and none of it a likely selling proposition?

Today I interviewed representatives from such varied institution as the National Art Gallery of New South Wales, Gowings, the Bonza Bargain Store, and Belborfolds the Dream Home of Fine Furniture – and all I got was affable expressions of goodwill in keeping with the bewilderingly benevolent sunny day.

At the Art Gallery I was told that it was gallery policy to only exhibit the paintings of artists who didn't need an exhibition because their reputation was already made, also the paintings of artists who were dead and buried and for the most part forgotten, Thank God, and also, though I am putting this bit in myself, paintings by artists who were never alive even when they perambulated about on the earth.

Well, there's the whole of Sydney to be explored yet, and I truly believe that if I am so stupid that I can't find a place, my sculptures will sprout legs and scout around for themselves, because most of them have more brains and personality than I have.

That is all I have to report for today, September 26th, although there were lots of other things I did which helped to make it one of the sweetest dreamiest peaches-and-creamiest days of my life and all for no particular reason.

For all the saints who from their labours' rest, for each and everyone of them a thripenny bit.

For all suffering Humanity a sixpenny Paddle Pop.

For all those not present with us here in this terrible dilemma, a kissy hug and a ball-pull.

I don't know what to think about anything (it don't matter, nohow)
(1971)

This is an exhibition in the telegraphic schizophrenic manner of the arts of the planet Tralfamadore, where the flying saucers come from.

If you've read any of the novels of Kurt Vonnegut Jr. you'll know what I'm talking about. If you haven't read any Vonnegut you're an ignoramus ill-equipped to survive the 20th century.

Peace anyhow.

Here we all are, huddled together for failing comfort, in the near-ruins of a civilization marked for early destruction by a wide array of gruesome means: "art" has meant a lot of different things at different times, what can it possibly mean in 1972?

You tell me, I'll tell you, and then we'll both know. Here's a bag full of muddled thoughts I guarantee you'll find most unhelpful...

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Recently I moved from the city which was driving me nuts to a farmhouse 100 miles out in the country. From that vantage point the machinations of the art-world seem more weird, remote and incomprehensible than they ever did.

Why do I bother to scribble and paint pictures and do all that sort of stuff?

For me the answer comes back clear and strong – NOTHING BETTER TO DO.

That is to say, out of all the woeful array of non-activities that this society makes possible and permissible, art has for me the look of something at least marginally worth doing. Yet I am constantly reminded that even that narrow margin of "worthwhileness" is probably a mirage: by the time an exhibition of any kind has been mounted in the hallowed, stilted, exclusive air of an art gallery, it has been turned into something that one's healthiest reaction to would be to throw mud pies at.

What started out as a metaphysical inquiry has been turned into a sale of high-class chattels, and a public examination and judgment of something that was never meant to be either bought-and-sold, examined or judged, but lived.

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...But so what? Is this then a complaint, or proclamation that something ought to be done?

That we need different, better types of art gallery, or that they should be done away with? That artists should change to non-marketable artforms, or simply be "better" artists than they in fact are?

We could make any or all these changes and still find ourselves just where we are.

The truth is that art considered as a separate subject from anything else has quite abruptly run out of validity; it can derive no more vitality from within itself until it is well into a process of becoming indistinguishable from science, politics, sociology, religion-&-philosophy, etc., etc., etc., until the "artist" has been recognised for what he is, a sort of



Mike Brown, *Mindscape II*, 1972, oil on canvas, 134.5 x 131cm.
© Courtesy of the Mike Brown Estate & Charles Nodrum Gallery, Melbourne.

dinosaur doomed by fantastic over-specialisation to extinction.

Alienation from people and their "ordinary" doings has resulted in Art becoming an unforgivably dull subject. Visual art especially has alienated itself from fruitful social context and exists in an eerie limbo peopled by everyone-you-wouldn't-want-to-know-about: socialites and hip bank-clerks, businessmen and art scholars, professors and "instant" newspaper critics, art teachers, government officials and horse-traders.

(Hold it there! – I'm not trying to start class-warfare, but hell, what a heavy mix art-world people are!!)

Since art can never really be distinct from, and certainly not superior to, its social context, it follows that this exhibition, and this screed as well, is the uttermost bullshit. It's the best I could manage, yet bullshit it remains.

I should die of shame to exhibit it, especially when not far away, at La Perouse and Redfern there live the embattled remnants of a race that was massacred by mine, whose art-and-culture and way-of-life, superior to that of my own race in every important sense, was ferociously, contemptuously, deliberately suppressed and destroyed; I refer, of course, to the Australian Aborigines.

I sense an immense self-satisfaction in Western art still, that is quite void of justification: we think we're really somewhere, when in fact we're truly nowhere; lost a million miles from home: the most blazing heights of modern visual art are a tiny spark, albeit



Mike Brown, *Snow White*, 1987, collage, 51 x 63cm. © Courtesy of the Mike Brown Estate & Charles Nodrum Gallery, Melbourne.

a healthy one, in an eternity of screeching blackness. We don't know what we're doing; we don't know what-the-fuck we're talking about. We grope, we dither, we idly fool about with concepts and notions that are as thin and tasteless as thin-air; the moment a feeble ray of light chances the way of one of us, we go into orgasms of adulation and crown him a genius. The arts-and-culture of the Aborigines, the Africans, New Guineans, South Americans, Indian and Chinese, Red Indians and Polynesians, in fact of almost everyone but us except perhaps in our far distant past, were no mere sparks of confused talent; they were, at best, lights that lighted up the universe. In their lights men became scarcely distinguishable from gods.

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We are sick, sick, sick, and in self-disgust we're doing our best to destroy ourselves: the Bomb, poisoning-and-asphyxiation, social collapse and starvation; what'll it be?

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And then again, so what? It don't matter nohow... in fact, the collapse of Western civilisation will be a blessing to the earth vastly greater even than the collapse of Rome, and that in its day was a blessing beyond compare. The point I want to come back to is, what in the name-of-all-that's-merciful do I hope to achieve, what do I imagine I'm doing, hanging a row of daubed sheets of

canvas on the walls of an elegant salon in this doomed putrescent shit-heap of a city, then sending invitations out to those scum-of-the-earth, the art intelligentsia, to come and gawk at the mess I've made? Precious fucking little. I am utterly pessimistic about the prospect of any event within the teacup-whirlpool that is the Australian art world having an affect, good or ill, on anything whatsoever. However deftly one might deploy one's alleged aesthetic sensibilities, the fact remains that in utilising the existing art-vending machinery one is barking up the wrong tree entirely. Nor does any "right tree" exist, at least yet. The only earthly present use for the artist's imagination is in devising social circumstances, and means and methods of communication that will combine to create a "meaningful" human situation. What "meaningful" means, don't ask me - but we've all experienced isolated, usually happenchance events where some normally moribund art form has sprung into sizzling life: a song sung at a fireside by an amateur guitarist, which combined with the flickering shadows and awesome background silence to strike joy or holy terror into one's heart; a street poster pasted up at clandestine midnight which by morning light is a flash of brilliance against the peeling paint of a factory wall... a poem or speech at an impromptu meeting which fills one with indignation and lust for action against some injustice... a Bob Dylan verse heard above the din of a riotous party... a room that has been made

into such a warmly human environment that artifacts such as pottery, furniture, even paintings can “live” there without appearing to be mere status symbols, and are freed to deliver their messages of utility of philosophy as they were meant to be.

If an art from doesn’t “live” in this human-environmental sense, then it is meaningless, and dead, and the best thing to do is to bury it. We have a lot to bury: 99 percent of our culture or more is stillborn, never having even been intended by its makers to have lifeabundance, but merely serve as distraction from, a decoration to, a justification for a way of life that is leadin’ us nowhere, or to hell.

The first step for artists should be to de-specialise themselves, so that they are no longer dependent on any one type of communication machinery (art gallery, publishing house, cinema, etc.) nor moulded by its inherent limitations or corruptions into a crippled stance.

The notion that one was “meant to be” a painter rather than a writer, musician, philosopher, scientist or politician is a self-perpetuating cultural hypnosis. The only valuable quality any of these types of people have is not their special skills, but their acute awareness of the world and what it’s about: if this awareness is genuinely present it only takes time and work to develop the skill needed to translate it into any medium or activity.

Anyone with a brain in his head can write; anyone with a soul can play music if he tries; and everyone should develop political-philosophical-scientific understanding and integrate it with his activities.

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So: this precious exhibition of mine, what does it represent?

An exercise in de-specialisation, yes?: but still so coloured by its art-worldliness as to make it nearly worthless as a human experience, except perhaps in a very negative sense.

Implicit in the act of painting is the expectation that it will be exhibited once or twice, and thereafter put in a cupboard to rot, or displayed in someone’s lounge room, or in a public collection if it’s incredibly lucky. This is what actually happens. So it goes.

What have I to say to anyone within such an environmental context?

Certainly nothing to the cupboard, nothing to most people’s lounge rooms, and nothing to the gallery-going jet-set. Nothing, that is, except DODDLY-DAH and YAH, and HOO-HAA, and GRUNK!... and fiddle-twiddle with the brush, and scribble-scribble, and humm, that looks quite nice there, and I’ll just slosh a little bit of red stuff there, it’s all the goddam same... within the context of the art world, I don’t know what to think, I don’t know what to do or say, except: WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU PEOPLE DOING IN AN ART GALLERY ANYWAY?? IF YOU’RE LOOKING FOR ART, YOU WON’T FIND IT HERE. You may as well hope to find religion in a church, health in a pill bottle, youth in a jar of cosmetics, true love in a brothel.

A few of the paintings have ended up despite themselves looking as though they mean something or other, or are trying to. Well, fancy that. And so what. And big deal. Forget it. It wasn’t what I meant to say, anyhow.

You and I, we’re a row of dummies in strait-jackets in a dungeon. And what have dummies in strait-jackets to say to each other? Nothing much except, Let’s get the hell outta here. And that’s what I’m saying to you now.

We have grown so used to constraint that we have forgotten that it’s possible to be free, that there’s a whole world outside your dungeon cell, and outside that again a whole universe, and outside that, who knows what? We have forgotten that art isn’t some special condiment you splash on life to make it taste a little better: if it’s anything at all, it’s everything there is, or was or will be, everything that a person can do, think or say to one another. It is a way of living and thinking, a way for me to transmit to you the totality of my being and for you to transmit your totality to me.

But that’s not the way we use it...

I see modern art as the first strivings of a healthy consciousness; but hundreds of years will probably have to pass before it has evolved into anything worth pissing on.

It won’t evolve by the efforts of artists slugging away manfully at artistic problems, because artistic problems don’t exist as such; they are merely mental blocks created by absurdities of our social condition. Artists should forget about art a little and start wondering about what they were born onto earth for, where they stand in relation to everything that’s happening in this world, whether what they are doing is as meaningful in a total sense as, say, planting a row of beans or cabbages, building a chicken coop, or going for a walk in the bush.

Does one really enjoy art, or is it just another rat-race? A truthful answer to this question should in the end produce some positive results, but it’s unlikely that they’ll take the form of anything we now recognise as art – except sometimes.

Painting pictures is OK; people were painting pictures before the Flood, and probably they’ll still be doing it when the moon falls to earth. But painting pictures isn’t the problem: first we have to revolutionise the world, and that’s a tall order, a long, nearly-hopeless task.

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Smash US Imperialism.

Down with Everything.

Capitalism is a fat man eating a thin one.

Order = Chaos.

Everything = Nothing.

We are non-existent vibrations in a formless sea of nameless glunk.

Everything’s all right just as it is.

It don’t matter, nohow; and/or so it goes.

Paul Cézanne, Grandfather of Modern Art
(1961)



Above: Mike Brown, *Untitled*, c.1981, acrylic on canvas, 71.3 x 51cm.
Left: Mike Brown, *Poet Declaiming in the Wilderness*, c.1981, acrylic on canvas, 88 x 71.2cm. © Both images courtesy of the Mike Brown Estate & Charles Nodrum Gallery, Melbourne.

I would like to dedicate this chapter to Paul Cézanne, grandfather of Modern Art, who not only simplified the whole physical universe into a simple and easily digestible assortment of cubes, spheres and cylinders to make life easier for Art students, but rendered an invaluable service to mankind by inventing shadow lettering.

No man but he could have done it. No one else would have wanted to do it. But he did it.

Yes he did it all right. He dunnit, no mistake.

He expected no fame from it, and but for this chapter would have received none. In his time he suffered for it, as all innovators must – he suffered the ridicule and derision of critics, fellow artists and signwriters, who one must suspect were just too lazy to put the shadows in the right places to give the soul-searching sensation of depth that the old painter originally intended.

I said at the beginning of the page that I would like to dedicate the chapter to a eulogy of Paul Cézanne. True, I would like to, but none of us can do exactly as he likes. There are other things in life than cubist shadow-lettering, and other men of genius than Paul Cézanne. Every page of every history book is a graveyard for great men; every grave is carefully tended and supplied with flowers by frantically adoring historians, who keep the memories of these men alive and flaming-bright despite the mountainous indifference of the masses who don't seem to want to know better.

Let us now praise famous men, and our fathers that begat us. So sang psalm-singing King David, and by god he was right. Famous men should be praised, otherwise by definition they would cease to be great, and we would be left an impoverished race, dull and bereft of the leaven of genius.

That of course is the function of historians in our society; they are sort of public relations officers for long dead men; they whip up public enthusiasm, stimulate the arts by creating a demand for public monuments to explorers, kings, liberators and such like, and give comfort to those whose daily lives are devoid of the opportunity for doing great deeds.

Readers of history books should also be paid more, for their trouble in reading such bunkum.

History is Bunkum.

History is Stunkum.

History is Crunkum.

History stunk, stonk, stank, and still does, after all these years.

History is mildly entertaining, but a massive bore in large doses. History is more of a bore in larger doses and any dosage at all is just plain stonkum.

Inky pinky ponky

Daddy bought a donkey

Donkey cried when

Daddy died
Inky pinky stonkum
Inky pinky parles-vous
Daddy's little daughter she
Had a thrill with
Brother Bill

And got to like it so much she did it all the time.

In other words, History repeated itself, time and again.
History is always doing that, it's bloody repetitive, too
much so for me to waste my time on it any more.

Let's get back to dear old Paul Gauguin, who invented
shadow lettering while rolling around with Tahitian
lasses in the shadows of the sheltering palms, and
who, the historians tell us, shot off his left ball while
in a drunken stupor at a party in a Tamboran house
[CHECK DIARY FOR NAME], which is the South Seas
equivalent of the Moulin Rouge.

We owe a great debt of gratitude to Paul Gauguin
who proved conclusively to Medical Science that you
can still do it even with only one ball. This news has
given hope to many, and a new sense of security to
many others, including me, since I am an artist and
often get drunk at parties where firearms are readily
available for the playing of Russian Ballet.

On the subject of shadow lettering, I can only say
that as things have turned out, we would be better
off without it. It has become vulgar and common,
has become common property for the decoration of
municipal council buildings, sweet shops, railway
stations, and motion picture theatres and posters.

Modern shadow letterers merely strive for effect, and
seem to give no thought at all to the true fundamental
purpose of the art, which is to create a shimmering
illusion of an immense and mysterious depth on a
mere flat surface, so that the human soul is allowed
some relief and escape from the world of everyday
things, and can heal his ailing spirit by wandering
lonely as a cloud among the highways and byways of
a three-dimensional Classic Roman world.

How beautiful it is to see you climb to the very peak of
a gracefully sloped and pointed capital "A", the whole
thriving burgeoning scene of the modern metropolis
spread out before your eyes, history in the making,
money in the making, opportunities for the taking,
bread in the baking, lovers in hiding in Hyde Park, life
in a nutshell, love in a hut, the drama of death and life,
the birth pangs and growing pains of an adolescent
city, the momentary crystallisation and culmination of
umpteenth thousand years of historical gyrations as the
world rotates upon its madly-spinning and gyrating
axes, the axis of symmetry, the polar axis, the Axle-
grinders lament, a song of peaceful resignation and
acceptance of the turbulence of life.

Could I revive within me that symphony and song, to
such delight t'would win me I'd shout BRAVO, carry
on, and disregard the consequences and the fatal
rewards that the unfortunate possessor of the true
creative spirit has meted out to him by an unfeeling
cruel world.

Alas cruel world, alas, farewell, think but of me that
in a foreign land where persimmon and buobale strive
in an unholy struggle to the death in eagerness to
be the first to reach the life-restoring sunlight, think
only this of me: there is a part of me that is forever
British.