The Flicker Against the Light

and

Writing the Contemporary Uncanny

Jane Alexander





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First published by Luna Press Publishing, Edinburgh, 2021

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A CIP catalogue record is available from the British Library

'Now Here' was first published in *Gutter 09* (Freight) 2013
'A Temporary Structure' was first published in *Biopolis: Tales of Urban Biology* (Shoreline of Infinity) 2020
'The Hatayama Code' was first published in *RoundTable* (Fincham Press) 2019
'Dolly' was first published in *Disturbing the Beast* (Boudicca Press) 2019
'The Lag' was first published in *Uncanny Bodies* (Luna Press Publishing) 2020
'Small Objects' was first published in *Writing in Practice* (National Association of Writers in Education) 2019
'Candlemaker Row' was first published by *Lit Long: Edinburgh* (University of Edinburgh) 2015

www.lunapresspublishing.com

ISBN-13: 978-1-913387-59-4

The Lag

It's his gait that catches her attention. The limp is slight, but distinct enough for her to recognise. Below the knee, she'd guess. The opposite leg from hers. But the rhythm is the same; a kind of hiccup in each step. She finds herself calculating the seconds missed. Tracking the lag.

He is wearing a short padded jacket with trousers of some light, outdoor fabric. Once you know to look, they show what's underneath, which is why she prefers jeans – or on days like today when she has to look smart for work, a good thick cotton or a heavy wool blend.

It repeats: the sole of his hiking boot meeting the pavement in a flat, familiar shape. What she sees in the stranger, she feels in herself – her tempo fractionally slower than his, a mismatched counterpoint. And though it's not her turning, when he forks off the main street, heading east, she follows.

The paving is greased with the smirr that's hung in the air all day, forcing her to watch her step. Fleetingly she loses him as a dawdle of tourists drifts between them. Visitors are fewer in number now the summer's over, the air grown sharp and chill, but as ever this lot have left their street-sense behind. She slows, allows them to steer around her. Finds her pace again.

Used to be, her feet were how she'd owned this city. Walking, and running; threading through its unexpected turns and jinks. Her mind would set the pace, her body obey. A lunchtime saunter across the Meadows, purposely slow. A late rush to work, making up minutes with a brisk march. A dash uphill, taking the stone

steps of the city's staircases two, three at a time. She presses her lips together. It still takes her concentration, this careful back-and-forth – and always, there's the hitch.

There are so many ways for time to vanish in this new life of hers. All the medical appointments, for a start. The extra minutes in the morning, getting ready to leave the house; in the evening, tending to rubbed and broken skin. But it's the lag that frustrates her most. Something about the almost-invisibility of it. The perfect crime; the theft of a second with every step. Once she'd started to count them, to add up all those fractions and fragments, she began to understand: how much time she was losing. How, almost imperceptibly, her future was being chipped away.

Ahead, the man turns left into the narrow close that falls steeply to the Cowgate. She hesitates. She'd allowed plenty of time to park and walk the short distance to the client's office, but this detour is making her late – and the downhill is more of a challenge than anything she's tried so far. It will strain her muscles, dig in behind her knee where, despite the dressing and the layering up of socks, pain pools in a dark, constant bruise. She's not sure why she's following him; still she keeps going. Slow, careful, missing the security of a stick. Each downward step takes her further from where she's meant to be. She is losing minutes she won't be able to recoup.

Time, and practice. That's what everyone says: the doctors, the physios, the prosthetists. The fellow amputees. They talk about the new normal, say it takes a good while to get used to the changes. And it's true she's more efficient now than she was in those first weeks and months. Can move around the house well enough, get a bit of exercise most days. The slumps are to be expected. Sundays, for example, are hard. Sunday had always meant running club, and now it means crutches. It means the leg laid prone at the side of her bed, or leaned against her unyielding armchair – the only seat she owns that doesn't put up a fight when she pushes herself back upright. Sunday means a day of rest for her stump, for skin chafed raw from constant pressure; means an always inadequate

chance to heal, before another week begins. The other day one of her old running pals sent her a clip of an amputee sprinter winning the hundred metres against a dozen able-bodied athletes. *Miss you babes*, said the message. *When you coming back to kick our arses?* When you buy me a fucking state of the art blade, she thought, and deleted the message without replying.

She used to dream, before, of being able to fly. Now her dreams are of running. She can't imagine rejoining her companions on their city circuits.

She plants firmly with the heel of her prosthetic, angling sideways into the slope. She can manage this. She's moving forward. Just not fast enough.

The man she's following is less cautious. His lead increases as the pavement narrows to a single strip of skewed slabs then disappears into ancient setts, gappy and worn. Arms out for balance, ready for a fall, she keeps her eyes fixed on the tricky terrain – and when at last she reaches the bottom, turns the corner onto the Cowgate, her quarry is nowhere to be seen.

The disappointment sucks at her, a slow sinking, as she checks in both directions. To the north and the south, streets and closes rise abruptly. To hike back up the way she came – it feels impossible. Frustration twists through her, a blast of rage at her own stupidity. What was she thinking, to put herself through this pointless detour, to strand herself in this shadowy chasm? She tightens her jaw, starts to weigh her options, and as she turns a thickset young man shoulders past on the narrow pavement, forcing her off balance. The sudden shift as she catches herself sends a bright pain jagging through her. Breathe, breathe through it… Her exhalation is ragged, clotted with the threat of tears – from the pain, but not only the pain.

If she can't retrace her steps, she will have to go the long way round. A walk on the flat, a few minutes further, to the junction that promises a smoother pavement, a gentler uphill. She braces: takes a step, and then another. As she walks she reaches for her phone; she is verging on unforgivably late, must call to make her excuses, but her throat feels swollen with self-pity and she doesn't

trust her voice. Instead, she pauses to email the client, and when she starts to walk again her eyes are fixed on the uneven paving – which is why she doesn't notice the shop door swinging open till the man, her man, steps onto the pavement, straight into her path.

Their apologies collide. He takes a single step back, catching the door before it's quite closed.

'You going in?' he says, and perhaps it's something in his tone – some note of assumption – that prompts her to nod. With an awkward, circling dance she assumes his place on the threshold of the shop, while he takes hers on the pavement. 'First time?' he asks, and she nods once more. 'Ah don't worry, he's good.' The man cocks his head. 'Eccentric,' he allows. 'But good.'

He turns, heads back the way they came, setting a brisk pace – and she's caught by the difference. The ease of his gait, its steady rhythm. Narrows her eyes: she must have got it wrong, before. If anything, now, it seems to be the left leg that holds him back. She watches, still clutching the door, till he turns the corner, vanishes from sight. Then, aware of the heat billowing into the frosted November air, she steps inside and lets the door swing closed.

A fuggy warmth mists her glasses. The interior blurs to an impression: of clutter, and wallpaper fleshy pink with flowers. There's a smell too, something homely and unexpected that she can't identify. She waits for the fog to evaporate, for someone to greet her, but as her vision clears she sees the place is empty. The wooden counter to her left runs the length of the shop, unmanned. Behind, a green-tiled fireplace is topped by a peeling mantelpiece that supports an ornate gold carriage clock and several more modest timepieces. The shelves that line the walls are shabby and makeshift, piled with boxes and packets, with pliers and screwdrivers and unwashed mugs, with the glinting glass and metal of disassembled clocks.

Still unobserved, she turns to her right. On the far wall another set of shelves is filled with yet more clocks, dusty-faced mantels and carriages. A grandfather stands in the corner; a grandmother perches on the windowsill. In the very centre of the room is a chair like a throne, crazed red leather with open arms held up on dark

wood twists.

In the window is a sign, cracked white melamine. The lettering forms a shadow-sign legible from the back:

GUARANTEED REPAIRS

ESTABLISHED 1974

She turns back to the counter, leans over till she can see where it becomes a workbench littered with tools, papers, a drip-stained mug; further, into the depths of the shop where a man stands with his back to her.

'Hello?' she calls.

The man turns. He is elderly, balding; his expression is one of surprise. In his right hand he holds a spatula, in his left a cast-iron frying pan contains a single egg, frilled at the edges. 'Oh dear,' he says. 'Did it ring, then? I never heard it.'

He means the entry chime. She can't remember hearing it; tells him so. She can see now that there is a two-ring hob tucked into the corner. The man – the proprietor, he must be – sets down his frying pan.

'Ah well,' he says. 'Sometimes it does and sometimes it doesn't. I thought while the shop's empty I might as well have my lunch, but it'll wait. It'll wait.'

'Please, don't mind me,' she says, but already he's wiping his hands on a tea-towel, taking up his post behind the counter.

'Now. I hope I can do something for you,' he says, 'because so far it's been a bogey of a morning. I keep sending folk away because I can't help them. It's Mondays; people bring things in that they've been meaning to bring all weekend, and sometimes the things they bring … well, there's nothing I can do for them.' As he speaks, he is fiddling with a bill-spike that sits on the counter, stroking the edges of scores of paper slips, and she sees that although he is a stout man his fingers are slender, and perfectly clean. He's

addressing her, but his manner suggests he's talking to himself. She's not sure if he expects her to reply.

'But not the man who just left,' she says.

For the first time, the shopkeeper looks at her properly. 'Ah, no. I was able to help, there. Although, that was only an adjustment, a bit of fine tuning.' He studies the length of her. 'Your job may not be so straightforward. But we'll see, we'll see. Take a seat,' he says, and gestures to the battered armchair.

The offer is seductive; the steep descent burns all the way up her good leg, throbs below her left knee. Hands on red leather arms, she feels with the backs of her legs for the level of the seat – and it's only once she's settled onto the sagging cushion that she becomes aware of the sound: a sea of ticking. It seems impossible that she hadn't heard it straightaway, the conversation of scores of clocks crammed into a space the size of her living room. She'd been distracted by the strangeness of this place, or focused too hard on what the proprietor was saying to her, what she should say to him.

Now he flips up a section of counter, comes out to stand in front of her.

'Now then,' he says, 'let's get that off, and we can have a proper look.'

Automatically, she lifts the leg of her trousers, complying with a suggestion familiar from the mouths of countless medical professionals. But this is not like being at the doctor's. Not routine, impersonal. It is as if she is undressing in front of him. She's about to pull the trouser-leg back down, apologise for wasting his time, when he takes a step back. Turns to fossick about with the parts on his workbench, allowing her the privacy she needs.

Still she hesitates. He seems like a harmless old man – but what if he locks the door? What if he turns on her, is stronger, more determined than he looks? Her keys are in her backpack, on the floor by her foot; she would feel safer if she had them in her pocket, ready to make a sharp fist. Eccentric, but good, she reminds herself. That's what the other man had said; the man who left this place with a loose, easy gait.

She presses the release pin, slides off the leg. When she offers it

to him, she might be handing over her child.

Even before he takes it from her he is nodding. 'Maybe,' he says. 'Yes well, we might be able to do something about that.' Deftly, he unlaces her shoe, strips the sock from the foot and tucks it inside. As he hands the bundle back to her, his attention is already focused on the mechanism. He carries her leg behind the counter, lays it on his workbench. Screws a magnifying loupe into his right eye. 'Losing time,' he says. 'Yes well, seen that often enough, that's a common one. And the balance is twisted!' He sounds indignant, as if the faults he can see are the result of sabotage by some enemy they have in common. 'Yes, it'll take me a while, this one.'

In the chair, she fidgets with her trouser-leg. 'How long's a while?'

'Oh, hard to say, hard to say–' He stops, opens his mouth and closes his eyes in a tremendous yawn, dislodging the loupe from his eye. He catches it neatly, screws it back in. 'A matter of hours, it'll be. You're welcome to wait.'

To wait.

Since she has no other option, that's what she does. She pulls off the socks that fill out her stump so it fits better in the socket, peels off the liner, and folds down the leg of her trouser to cover her unfoot. She submits to immobility; the chair is comfortable enough, and she's made sleepy by the heat that turns to condensation against the cold of the shop window, blanking the world outside. Curled into her throne, good leg folded under her left, she allows herself to sink into the ticking that flows around her. To be soothed by its constant, rhythmic lull. She drowses, dimly aware of the coming and going of customers, the blast of cold air, the chime of the bell. They come to collect their mended clocks, to replace the batteries in their watches. Once, she watches the proprietor hand over a long, limb-shaped parcel wrapped in brown paper to a fat man who takes it with care, hugs it under one arm as he leaves. In a shop whose walls are lined with clock faces, she contrives to lose track of time. To fall asleep.

The leg, when he hands it over, is impatient, the foot squirming on its ankle. The calf and shin are warm, blue-veined and in need

of a shave. With a slight embarrassment at the fine dark hair – he must think she's let herself go, and perhaps she has – she slides it on, circles her palms around the join. Seamless. Her thumb rubs back and forth, feeling the fine-grained texture of her skin. She flexes, and the movement sparks along muscles and tendons – and she's on her feet, and running. Along the canal, a steady sprint, sun sparking off the water; breath easy, blood flowing, her arms swinging loose... Across the Meadows, not a sweat on her, the quick light thud of her feet on the track – she is making good time, overtaking her friends with a brief backwards wave – she is running like flying, a personal best, faster than wind through the summer leaves–

'Alright then,' he says, and she opens her eyes. Outside the metal shutters are drawn halfway down to cover the window. She doesn't recall the rumble of their closing, must have been properly asleep. Now she's awake, pins and needles are dancing in her right leg, a stale pain throbbing in her left.

Mr. Guaranteed Repairs is talking her through the adjustments he's made, details she's too groggy to follow. Her mouth is dry, and she's hungry – so hungry she feels it tremor through her hands as she holds them out to receive the familiar weight.

She had thought he might need to strip off the padding she'd added, peel away the glued-in strip of leather that cushions the back of the socket. But it looks just the same. She strokes the smooth, cool fibreglass, brushing away an accumulation of imaginary dust. It looks untouched.

When she bends to roll on the liner, her bladder complains – but she doesn't want to ask if she can use the shop bathroom. All she wants, now, is to be at home. She tugs on the socks, slides into the prosthetic. Pushes up with her arms, and uses her weight to lock the pin into the socket.

'Better now?' he says.

She shifts her weight from one side to the other, feeling for any difference. Anticipates the sharpening pain a second before it

blooms, and tries to hide her wince. From politeness, she agrees that it is indeed better.

'How much it will be?' she asks.

The sum he names might seem unreasonable, if he hadn't been working all afternoon. She doesn't carry that much cash, but from under the counter he reveals a card machine; she's surprised that he should be equipped with such an up-to-date facility.

'If you need any adjustments,' he says. 'Don't be a stranger. Any fine-tuning, you know where to find me.' As she ducks awkwardly under the metal shutters, he's already turning off the lights. She hears the door lock with a solid click. *Don't be a stranger*: but she has the feeling that if she were to walk this way tomorrow the shopfront would be blank, its contents vanished along with its proprietor.

A left turn leads to the junction and the smooth, gentle gradient that would take her, eventually, back to where she left the car. Instead – without conscious thought – she turns right. Starts to retrace the steps that brought her here. It makes sense, of course: to try the proprietor's workmanship on the most precipitous slope, the roughest terrain.

Into the rise, she begins to climb. Her breath comes in clouds, shorter and faster as she gains altitude. The ground is slippery with frost; from habit, her hands are lifted from her sides, the better to steady herself as she navigates the uneven setts and slabs.

The balance is twisted, he had said. *We might be able to do something about that*.

It goes against all her instincts to test it. To insert her hands into her pockets, and keep walking.

One step, and another: her footing stays steady. Hands in her pockets poised for a quick draw, ready to catch herself. At the side of her knee-cap the socket pushes, a predictable, stabbing rhythm; by the top of the hill there will be a fresh bruise, violet layered on fading yellow. But the pain is accompanied by an unfamiliar sensation, one she can't precisely locate. Diffuse, anticipatory: like the moment before the pleasure of a stretch.

The feeling tugs her, or she chases it, she's not sure which; she climbs, her left side leading, and if anything now it's the right leg that's holding her back. When she looks up, risking a glance to see how far she has come, the top of the hill is close, much closer than she had imagined. Seconds lost, seconds gained. She finds herself calculating; counting, step by step.

It isn't a jog. It's not even a march. But she's almost there, and moving more swiftly than she had thought possible. Something in her – something of her – running fast.