



vicky  
sparrow

stand  
ins





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**stand ins**

**vicky sparrow**



*'it is joy to be hidden but disaster not to be found'*

– Winnicott, 'Communicating and Not Communicating'

from the radiator we sleep beneath airlessly  
watching the snow blow upwards grey  
against the darkest blue that summer  
we'd seen no one's mouth move and  
scheming by the canal would bend our necks  
as we hid our own. the new year hit the  
windscreen and never even sent us  
off course from here i turned over a confession  
that rattled the sliding door across my  
mind i mounted the stairs and never even noticed  
the sliding focus shift. i knew it was a stand in  
this confession this shuddering jumble, you all  
lined up and my mouth was covered even  
then by my scarf already it was covered - even then.

all that year our jaws ached with  
elastic: to lie slack against the window  
watching our breath cling was too much  
the more we repelled each other like  
magnets the closer you two couldn't help yourselves  
your tacky squeaks around the gymnasium pass  
it to me to me the cool dimpled surface  
to your palm. i'll take what i can get  
at this stage as you bundled the net  
moving past the broken broom like it wasn't  
even there. a webbed ladybird you struggled  
to smile with your eyes looped something around  
your ears and sloped away with twists of string  
hanging down towards your shoulders.

how much work hadn't i done it was a  
lot. it sat with me as i scratched my notes  
over the desk my book bag hooked to my chair  
you visited me at lunch and i was so embarrassed  
i didn't know then that later i'd find a hair  
of yours stuck in oil to the  
bottom of my tuppaware. i never  
thought you'd be like that around me  
and it hurt to see your face close up i didn't know  
then i wanted every piece of you  
to hurt like i did, to bear a loss, but you  
carried on, wearing sneakers and tending  
to your net your bristling your moving  
through the fogging air.

that year in two layers of thermals  
my legs moved my muscles were always  
liquid under my skin which softened and  
folded in new places. my pee wouldn't stop  
even when i squeezed my hardest it dribbled through  
my legs beneath me never wanted spring  
to arrive, the cold settling the  
swill of my insides settled my legs too  
before the heat descended to throw its  
heavy mediation spreading over every  
perception. the black and orange of your  
uniform revealed beneath the scrubbing  
off of mud. but you play indoors i knew  
what you'd been up to i imagined it so often.

please any time i'd insisted but when you  
called i held the phone away from my ear like  
a contagion wishing it wasn't your voice wishing  
i could catch another voice wishing you weren't  
so like each other but more like me instead. i'd  
hear the phrases over and over again  
i wish i wish i wish as i cleaned thick pink oil  
from right in the corner of the food box  
rubbing a yellow finger into the curves of  
plastic, the hot water beading hopelessly  
as if rolling across the floor of the gym  
only to be scooped up by you both,  
your even skin glistening around your  
smirks and flexible touches, pushes.

all that year i cut my hair in front of the mirror  
trying to avoid looking at my gums for fear  
of tooth dreams. the light greyed in through  
the window the whole year it never went  
golden never even once we waited up  
at the canal and made exaggerations with  
our eyes, oh it's not allowed now? arched our  
eyebrows beneath our fringes in the blue  
air grey air black my legs were still  
liquid then but i recognised your hands  
slowly fitting the ball better knowing  
full well that mine never would. we pushed  
through, folding the striped mattress  
in half back and forth it went every day.

you grabbed each other by the  
wrist and not the hand i noticed it's only  
natural i guessed you peeked down to the  
reddening tingle of your fingers, knowing his  
grip moved with your heartbeat. i pinched  
the fabric over the bridge of my nose  
and breathed damply out taking my time  
to decide which film of plastic to touch next  
a single hair trapped in oil i had to keep it going but  
the squeaks on the floor took me back i wasn't  
interested i had to keep telling myself we all were  
at some point interested or so i thought but  
i snapped at you over the computer instead  
wringing shame from your lowering lids i couldn't stop.

i never learned a thing, how many times  
had that confession been the same and  
i wanted to see your lips make that oh  
again i thought about it so much. that night  
when the trip went and i stood in my house  
shoes holding a candle and a wooden spoon  
how i wanted to close us up in the darkness  
there for good the distant gentle thuds  
that went straight to my stomach making  
swill swirl up and months it would last, i'd rather  
still have been there holding that wooden  
spoon waiting each day believing at last the dawn  
would never arrive holding my thumb  
i wish i wish i wish but the darkness would never wait for me.

i'd always confused the cattle grid and the level crossing  
i could never get the shapes right and as the  
barriers dropped across i saw you take the chance  
to ruffle his hair as the orange lights took it  
in turns to flash. was it soft? like the darkening  
runnel between my eyebrows that softened  
so much or the hem of my sockets  
that folded into raspberry nests  
beneath a damp pool of puffy dimpled blue? but  
that was as much as you could see of me  
and i was grateful for it then snapping  
the elastic of my jaw higher up on the back  
of my head your hands were back in  
your pockets by the time the barrier raised.

the orange and black of your airy gymnasium  
and its arching crossbars sketched out the perfect  
backdrop to the perfect curve of your knee and  
your ankle's sweep into your trainers. he looks  
at you face on and upwards with feet flat on the floor  
not knowing how to read each other he  
tips his head and turns keeping his big eyes  
on you, him, and yours. the moment passes  
you the ball and motion starts again while the  
fireflies gather low in the darkness barely  
above the dust making the angles  
of their movement visible around your legs  
why do you have to go and break my heart  
like that? he says after a game.

that was the year i first saw runnels of mould  
the house was streaming all winter  
and smoke eked itself out under the old wood  
and white wet fur lined the glass corners  
and black snowflakes bespangled the walls  
and none of our steam escaped. i'd like to  
slide my mind across then and shut  
all the windows in so the house was alone  
in space floating in front of a starscape like it was  
an internet meme, we'd float there signalless  
and drifting hoping never to feel the soft bump of  
a jetty or shore refusing to bail the saturated  
air refusing to scrub the mould or press a tea towel  
hopefully to the wet walls, every breath condensing our fate.

you flock together with serious faces for the dramatic  
walk in, i could see you all simmer, the thought  
of yourselves getting up off the floor unentangled  
from the net rising as if you weren't already threadbare  
by then, no but that was me, the thinness of my gloves  
the hole my fingertip slipped through to show  
stranded skin looking up from the plate as you  
arrived home i'm guessing you'll want a sentence  
i couldn't finish. rephrasing myself helped  
me scrolling through photos of other people  
's babies how easy your lives will be  
now, how happy you are, how much you look  
like each other. he looks at me side on  
i glove my finger away.

both of you want only to win and i don't  
blame you we all want everyone to laugh at us  
until they see us play. i say things at work  
like call me anytime i always want to hear  
about process, cheerfully cheerfully loss  
doesn't happen in an office where only visible above  
the swaying dividers are the tops of your heads  
not that your faces are uncovered but  
brown hair red hair black until you reach up  
and forwards and the curve of your nose  
breaches the barrier. i want to crawl  
along the carpet tiles under the desk and  
settling down sitting on my feet reach out  
my cold fingers and grasp the gap of your ankles.

and all that year we held our thumbs  
waiting for the alerts to stop, sliding our  
fingers across our phones, joking about  
drinking in parks and rules of three watching  
the police cars slowly crawl up and down the canal  
though the sides of our eyes. i'd lean in replacing  
my scarf muttering not now but my watch kept  
telling me the time and we still caught  
the ceasing alerts in each other  
's voices for a long time after, and even when i  
felt my liquid legs begin to coalesce i shook  
my fatty flesh don't leave me to my fate i wobbled  
but tried not to come apart in front of you gazing  
down at me, from the other side of the net.

i understand we all kept saying  
the shape of your life is different now it will take  
some time for you to fit it and everyone agreed  
it was inevitable but i harboured little resistances  
where i could, knowing the magic  
medicine would come and spare you all but  
the shape for me would still fit ill. he climbs  
towards you tremble tremble you  
take his hands we focus on the arch  
of his eyebrows and his spine too, so, he says  
over his shoulder and i still know that this is all a  
stand in but i don't seem to decide what  
gets layered over what or when someone lifts your  
scarf up and lays it over your face.

the distant thudding is gentle and occasional  
and goes straight to my insides. i repair my  
fraying laptop flex with thick white tape until  
it's like a plaster cast on a spindly arm  
it can't bend my skin has lost  
elastic too and is too soft now and dries  
so slowly i can't recognise the folds and newest  
furrows, which all become a runnel for my  
spilling patches. the grey chair beneath me squeaks  
i don't know how to set the air going again  
or what presses me to keep me upright  
it's a dam that holds the shifting mass to  
hammer a nail into the current of time  
is as much as i can do to hold you.

there was always a cup of tea somewhere  
in that house gently getting cold all  
that year the staring steam milking over  
next to the little cubes i'd slice onto  
my toast that the ants had once sought out  
in a different land and been squashed as they  
were brushed away, i covered my mouth then  
too. it's sweet now and i don't know what  
to do with the lids you'd popped open on the jars  
and the gouges of peanut butter that were  
yours knowing i'll never be able to face the  
fruit in the bin i pour the cups of tea out into  
the tupperwares snapping their little wings  
closed as i stack them higher in the fridge.

clatter clatter your bicycle my bicycle  
in this version he leans across your handle  
bars stopping your bike for the confession that i  
turn through again for fear of missing, i think  
of the dots around his shadowed hands  
his sharp high collar not navy blue or grey  
but black the angles of his fringe  
reflected in your big eyes. in this version you  
haven't realised your hurting heart, but you'll  
tell him that you think about him with  
empty hands as we all hold our breath.  
i run through these shapes in the morning  
smearing chocolate all over the duvet cover  
from the underside of my mug.

i felt moods and colours and shapes  
that weren't my own all that year i was  
watching someone else's telly through glass  
or perspex, bowing out of the way hooking  
something over my ear backing down the street  
then gazing through a door at your wrists your  
upper arms your ankles the spinning ball bouncing  
in each pupil your sneakers framed by a low  
rectangular window. neither of you could glance  
my way, i wanted to crouch above the dust  
and see but my legs dribbled and ran as if  
the rain and pooled beneath my hovering  
mouth my caving chest in the middle of falling  
catching a glimpse of the slowly gasping street.

you look up, not upwards, but straight up  
through the crown of your head where the  
shadows of leaves play around your hair  
your bike clatters along the mountain pass  
as you stand on the pedals your rectangular  
bag in the basket above you the same sky  
is irredeemable. it rains, but not often, and  
you lie on your backs in your bedrooms clasping  
the rubbery dimples of the ball between your palms  
spinning its stripes knees apart and i want to be  
there too in colours and a flatness that layers  
over my vision its indistinct edges softening  
the lines that divide up scenes and flattening  
depth into a breezy motion.

i don't see your lips clearly but i try to sound  
out the shapes your words make, the stops  
and vowels aren't imitated right in my  
habituated mouth, my tongue making missteps across  
the hot dark evening beneath that metal curving  
portico where i would grab your tee shirt  
with freckles rucked up close to your face to make  
some impassioned entreaty. through the door  
where the lines taped in rubbery green mark  
you in or out, you watch him swirl the breathing  
air beneath the vaulting metal and wonder who  
sees the rising of our vaporous mouths  
who hears the mist escaping  
who knows what lonely sounds we make.

the cold got in my legs and all that year  
it stayed, each pace i walked on frozen land  
the ground never softened although i never  
wanted spring to come in any case. the over  
reaching twigs snapped off as i brushed  
passed nothing curved or bent everything's  
edges were hard and the difficult reaching broke  
off as soon as it began. the hoar frost stayed  
but never sparkled, just greyed over the earth  
and inside the house we moved nothing. no  
one spoke the same and their words were  
greyed out now too, when i forgot how to read  
i had to count letters out of my fingers and every  
time i found a single hair of yours i doubled over.

you raced each other to the gym door  
relieved that everything was normal again  
panting trying not to catch each other's eye  
as the ball bounced down the steps, along the  
way the others line up not knowing how they'll  
react you bow your heads. crouching in  
my bed not sleeping i'm hearing water drip  
on to the nothing that's at my door i want to  
form a shell around my insides but balling up  
and turning doesn't make it happen i'll  
do whatever i can i hear myself telling  
myself to make it go away as i see  
you've slowed your pace for me right  
down, even though i can't keep up.

back along the canal i'm still showing you  
where there's danger above the fabric with  
my eyes but they slide and shadow the two  
of you instead walking just far enough  
away just close enough i shift the papery  
skin and tuck my hair behind elastic  
loops, as we all did all that year. you bend  
down to him to mention something his  
big eyes listening in the water the little  
fish bounce nose-first against the green wall  
making their way together down the edge  
searching for food is all they do in  
their world under the breeze-rumpled skin  
they barely even see us watching.

i was grateful for something to hide in that  
year tape myself closed but everything leaked  
the sandbags kept stacking up around the house  
so i didn't know in the end where the windows  
were or from where i might see the orange moon  
pushed up against the black sky. i sought a  
lot but didn't find much in the granules even  
when they were shiny on one surface  
or two glinting through the hessian they would  
snag the skin if you pushed your hand in; wet they  
would clag like sugar, but a small plane of light  
sometimes opened up if you approached  
the window at the right angle a recognition  
would flash as you moved like a sudden reflection.

i squeeze the pillows in turn again oh  
god again this bed this room i'm  
replacing the food box under the radiator in  
again like a basket catching a bundle from a stork  
while outside in the rain the ladybirds  
gather under the bin lid like charcoal bubbles  
on the carpet in their little uniforms they  
catch the light orange and black crawling to  
the end room, which seeps into the streaming  
corridor so we always know when the door  
has been opened; i wonder how my symptoms  
could ever be so embarrassingly literal, pouring  
the copper liquid out the window splat splat  
tremble tremble unzipping my flies i don't know whether i'll  
wank or wee.





