

soft soap

by Penny Goring

One of my most favourite outfits ever was my second-hand royal blue Adidas flares, (white stripes, white zippy inset pocket) skin-tight, worn with my second-hand, old school Nikes, (yellowed cream, cerulean blue) and a white, fine lawn, off-the-shoulder gypsy top, translucent, floating hip-length, hair scrawled wavelength.

In the days when I wore this outfit, I strode the Fine Art studios — the floors were concrete caked with layers of paint — I had my own space in a bright corner, looking out over the kid's playground, near the fire escape where we were allowed to smoke, my most favourite space ever, where I wielded a big paintbrush, loaded with indigo green, and slammed it up the middle of a taut white canvas to see where it would take me.

It took me to paintings like this. I coated the canvas with water first, there was a puddle in the middle, and I swished the broad strokes, rolled them around, followed them into a spreading bundle, allowed them to radiate in spokes in the top third, at the bottom and edges. I was kneeling on the hard concrete, watching the paint mingle with the water and spider about. I could hear Magdalena (artist-in-residence) telling a boy a few spaces down that his paintings were empty because he had nothing inside. I felt emptied of ideas that day but the paint told me what to do.

Leaving it to dry, I walked the long corridors of the Fine Art shanty town, through several fire doors, to your space. You had company. You were entertaining Hammond and there was one of those uncomfortable silences when I appeared.

And the green paint dried and I picked out the white gaps with cadmium red, thick and opaque, straight from the tube, using a very fine brush and it became a sci-fi landscape. On this ground I painted a woman whose legs ended at the knee, with an oversized blank cream globe balanced on her thin neck, where her head should have been — and were her arms behind her back, hands clasped, or did she have no arms at all? You couldn't know — because her shoulders

were small round stumps, her body was whittled and eroded into deformed contours, she was buffeted and worn, by the tumultuous sci-fi background she lived on, and her thighs were bulbous, flabby, and her waist was weeny, and her hips were like a table and she was wearing most stupendous knickers, from waist to crotch — high-class antichrist underwear.

I painted her knickers in sections of flat chalky pastel pinks and violets, then I covered each panel with small polka dots, each one meticulously perfect & painstakingly positioned — all vibrating vibrantly in contrasting colours. Then I painted lace at the hips, like fledgling wings, though she was never going to leave that painting, and lace at the legs and a circle of larger white spots where her stomach was meant to be. And she had no breasts — they'd been washed away, and she stared out, featureless, monumental, pinned to the landscape.

But her underwear had a life of its own. I took a narrow, rectangular canvas and painted an enlarged section of her knickers, they were flying away, without her, expanding, escaping, looming from the wall, coming closer to you — the viewer.

The last time I wore that white gypsy top was the night it got ripped from my back. It was towards the beginning of the summer break. I was working in the uni library with Caro and Jess. After shirking in the stacks all day, we got ready for the private view. I was in the Ladies, standing on a toilet with the cubicle door open so I could see how I looked in the mirrors above the sinks.

My stomach and back were covered in welts from when we'd hidden in the tall dry grass on Hampstead Heath on Sunday morning after we'd been ordered to leave the celebration. The stiffs didn't like it when the posh German bird from Furniture Design started licking my left nipple. And you started sucking her toes.

The grass was ochre and umber. You asked me to piss on you, so I did, and for the first time, you said you loved me. I never expected to hear such mundane words from you and I laughed hard. You recoiled. You said I sounded evil. You became morose. We were

waiting for the pubs to open, strung out, making do with a bottle of warm vermouth.

After the private view Jess and I ended up at the Student Union bar. I'd recently been barred for life from all Student Union bars and buildings — but it was a hot night and everyone was sitting outside by the river Hogs Mill, so I chanced it, walked inside and bought a round. I saw you and her — that homeless girl with the 1000 calorie mascara — your bodies were two thin stalks drooping from your riveted eyeballs and I could feel the connection as it sparked. I threw a full pint in her face and marched back outside — before the security guards noticed me — sat down with my friends, carried on talking, looking out over the lamp black river into the shadows of the overgrown banks and the chicken-wire fencing.

She came stomping out of the bar, bedraggled and screeching: 'Who did this? Who did it? I'll get you — you bitch!'

You were hanging behind — you were very very small, you were ever so small, you were like — the tiniest creature, hopping about on one leg.

There were rows of us, ignoring her. She homed in on me and screamed: 'It was YOU!'

Lurching forward, she grabbed the scooped neck of my most favourite top and tore it in half with one yank. It hung in two separate tatters from my shoulders, like a flimsy bed-jacket. I sat straight and still, looking out over the water, making no eye contact with anybody, my breasts exposed and glowing burnt orange in the lights from the bar, buffeted by the boozy warmth of her breath and the slight breeze, the only part of me moving — my drinking arm, raising my pint to my mouth.

