

Declining Figures

Eve Stainton, Olivia Laing, Constance Debré, Spa Day, Nursing Home.



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'Pasolini runs down the bank himself, races beside the glinting water. He stumbles, recovers himself, then goes down hard. Hitting the gravel on his side.'

Olivia Laing, The Silver Book, 2025

'When I'm up I feel lost, unstable, but when I'm on the floor I have the ground to support me, to dance with.'

Workshop participant

'What prompted you to have a massage today?'

Senior Massage Therapist

'He was in bed and he was prompted to get up and he held his bedsheets with a lot of strength declining to get out of bed.'

Responsible Carer

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Turn

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I keep the things I do separate, skipping between them as if they are parallel universes, separate narratives that pause when I exit, restart when I return. I can get lots done this way. Even at night as I'm falling to sleep I find that as I slip below I rejoin the dream I left the night before, the dream I had no memory of during the day.

I run my palm across the floor, dust on grey glossssssss

Three bodies ten bodies twelve bodies more

hook a slow roll on concrete

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Rest

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I push a hole through the tissue so I can breathe. It's important to breathe, she said. After a while I feel my eyes being pushed into my skull by the layers of towel and a wet patch forming near the right side of my mouth. My nose is blocked. I feel self-conscious about moving my head so I deftly adjust it. I assume that the appropriate body in this situation is the pliable body, one that's brain has absented it for the time being. Although I've paid for this, and she is effectively in my service, I feel the need to be obedient. The kind of obedience I model is one where my ego retreats from the edges of my body and my limbs become pure material.

After the massage I read Olivia Laing's book about Pasolini, Fellini and costumier Danilo Donati in the tepidarium. I'm in a council run spa in an art deco building full of local residents, which is why I like it. The thermostat must be fucked cos this room is searingly humid, much hotter than usual. My fingers leave pools of sweat on the pages of The Silver Book, that warp and fringe along the edge. In this book

decadence, violence, illusion, transaction, love and power play out between individuals and wider society.

The book is a fiction hosted by actuality, where the insertion of an 'indefinite' person allows for vivid speculation on the actions and motivations of real people. In the book narrative time is caught in loops as violent acts are re-enacted and rehearsed for film. Performing bodies hitting the ground, being dragged across gravel, mark a current of violence that connects de Sade, Mussolini, neo-fascism and institutionalised homophobia – inevitably bringing to mind the rising prominence of the far right today.

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Rise

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I step into 35 Britannia Row for a movement workshop with artist and performance maker Eve Stainton. When I picture Eve's work I see them swathed in leather lugging a car tyre, bleached hair slicked back like a queer hero. In the group of fellow workshop attendees I see a friend.

I step into Porchester Spa on Queensway after queuing up behind a group of women who are all friends. They have Notting Hill Housing Co-op vibes and drag shopping caddies full of body scrubs, plastic clogs and humous.

I step into the care home on a suburban housing estate in Guildford. There is a cat in the lobby called Monty that looks like a cartoon. On the journey I thought I was going to be sick.

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Float

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Across the severe armature of his bones his skin is taught, dry, mottled with bruising. His legs remain still in the profiling bed. The blanket arcs from his feet to his chest forming a shape that reminds me of a sarcophagus. His eyes look smaller, like the skin around them is closing in. His irises seem cloudy. He doesn't want to drink any water.

When I'm in the pool at the spa I think of Constance Debré and her two consecutive novels *Play Boy* and *Love Me Tender*. In them Debré establishes a daily swimming routine that anchors her amidst the stress and flux caused by shucking off her past life. As she leaves her husband, son, profession, home to live as a lesbian and writer she pares everything down, what she owns, needs, gives. I think of Debré's delight in the discipline of swimming and the changes it makes to her body in both appearance and feeling, becoming fitter, stronger, harder. I am a poor swimmer but still something is released through this contact with water. I feel mobile and buoyant and excited by the possibility that this feeling will float through the rest of my day.

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Sink

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I took the week off because of my birthday, treated myself with a spa visit, imagining the joyous state that would erupt out of this luxury, this resplendent nothingness. But I can't escape a sinking feeling, like my gut is melting towards the floor, panic and resignation. I think it was seeing him so shrunken, the way this cognitive retreat has dragged his body along with it. Down to the gates of the underworld, through layers of waterproof mattress covers, hospital beds and blue vinyl flooring.

Cheek bones and elbows on concrete cold gloss eyes closed and giving myself over to others feels so freeing. Four hands guide beginning with gentle suggestions that evolve into forceful demands. Sometimes I roll rock pivot fall flow and sometimes I stay push hold clash. My anatomy offers both resistance and routes forward. This becomes a rhythm a force a dynamic.

Three of us lay down and hook limbs around each other to form a chain, torqued together like a fleshy car axel. We must roll across the floor hooked up like this. How far can a ligament stretch 'til it gives, what will twist or dislocate? But instead, there's a slow squeeze and give, something relentless and forgiving in this stuttering motion that slowly, somehow arrives. We repeat and work out that being closer, more entwined offers something more fluid. Faces and bellies pressed together in a mirrored clasp like a head card, thighs scissored in a puzzle.

What is this brand new physical arrangement?

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Down

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What is it to lay down, to drop to the floor?

To die to relax to collapse to succumb to scale to seduce to surrender.

Am I stealthy or inadequate

when I'm prone

am I sun bathing?

I make space for horizontal thinking

something rollable. Start to bleed

spread soak disperse

until the horizontal rearranges the programme of my day.

All these subjects no longer discrete

span, affix, plug in to each other

and sink slowly downward.

Cheek hits the floor to kiss sediment. Nerves grind against cotton, viscose, alkyd. Dermis soaks through solvent, latex foam, polyvinyl chloride. Fascia melts through polyurethane, bones through cold rolled steel, and down through aluminium, epoxy polyester powder, medical-grade leather, moquette, Portland cement, water, aggregate, fly ash, rebar, granite, hardcore, chalk, and earth.



Image credit: participants in Eve Stainton's workshop, programmed by Mica Georgis as part of their residency at The Writer's Room, Britannia Row, April 2025. Stills from a video taken by Lu Rose Cunningham. Digital collage and post production, Fay Nicolson.

Notes:

Eve Stainton's workshop was programmed by artist Mica Georgis as part of their residency at The Writer's Room.

The Silver Book, Olivia Laing, published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2025

Constance Debré, Play Boy (2024) and Love Me Tender (2023) both translated from French by Holly James and published by Tuskar Rock Press.

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