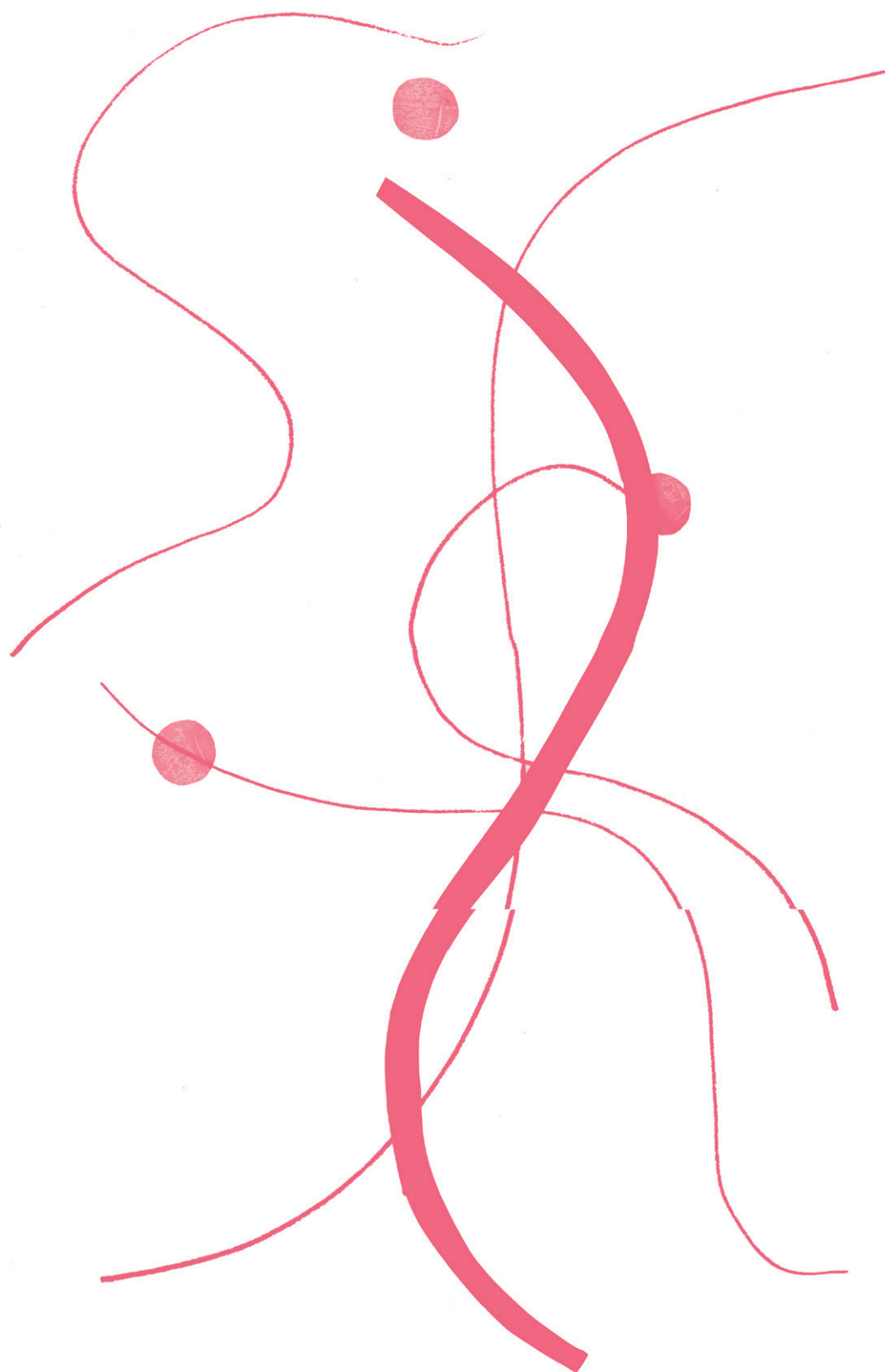


is it lovely yet?

an essay by Hannah Van Hove



*in the archives of Christine Brooke-Rose,
Anna Kavan, Ann Quin and Muriel Spark*

1.

It is the summer of 2014 and I'm at the Olin Library at Washington University in St Louis, Missouri. I am researching three novelists for my PhD. One of them, Ann Quin, doesn't have her own archive. I locate papers of hers, scattered around, in the archives of ex-lovers, friends, her publisher's, in a Carmelite Friary near London. Here in the Olin Library I find a letter, written in 1966 to her then-lover, in which she writes:

Quin:

In future I'm going to ask publishers not to put 'a novel' on the title page; I'd much rather let it stand as a 'piece of writing' or 'a work'. And the way I seem to be going now it seems the writing is v. far removed from the novel. I'm really excited about it for the first time since I started the book at the Colony. The moving towards words & then from them, v. much like jazz

(The Macdowell Colony was where Quin had started work on what would become her third 'novel' Passages.)

I would like to borrow Quin's phrase, her idea of moving towards and from words, the movement reminiscent of a musical pattern in which new or varying melodies are created over a continuously repeating cycle of chord changes. Here then is an attempt to circle the question of what it might have meant to be writing experimentally in the mid-twentieth century as a female novelist, and of what it means to be delving in the archives of some of these writers.

1. Again

Kavan:

Any 'experimental' book needs some sort of preliminary build-up of this kind. Book sellers and critics too have to be given an indication of what line to take; otherwise they just feel bewildered and antagonistic because they can't fit the thing into any of their conventional categories.²

Quin:

Made the unfortunate mistake of showing Don Hutter at Scribners that 1st part of novel [*sic*] – & like he just didn't have an inkling of wot I'm up to – spent whole fucking lunch hour talking about it – with him saying things like: 'but it hasn't any sustaining thing, no characterisation like in *Three* one was right there with that couple and as for the style why use just periods when these could be commas. The whole thing frankly Ann spells Experimental in caps.' My only answer to this was to say 'Well if it turns out a ghastly failure it really doesn't matter as it's something I've just got to do.'⁴

Experimental,

as defined in the English Oxford Living Dictionaries:

Adjective

1. (of a new invention or product) based on untested ideas or techniques and not yet established or finalised.

'an experimental drug'

1.1 Relating to scientific experiments.

'experimental results'

2. (of art or an artistic technique)

involving

a radically new and innovative style.

'experimental music'

3. *archaic* Based on experience as opposed to authority or conjecture.

'an experimental knowledge of God'

Spark:

There is very little I can tell you about my methods of writing because I try to do something different each time and to present the subject in an unusual way. I am aware that my work is very difficult to classify. It has been described as tragi-comic and as social satire. I do wish you the very best of fortune in your studies.³

Brooke-Rose:

[T]he trouble is I keep doing something quite different so it's a bit disorienting for critics who like labels, so that the only one they can think of is 'experimental' (which annoys them) or 'French', 'nouveau roman' (completely untrue, but that label annoys them too). I now occasionally get 'postmodern'. All nonsense.⁵

2.

In a letter to the publisher Lindsay Drummond, dated 23rd May 1949, Spark puts forward a proposal for a volume of Charlotte Brontë's letters which she would arrange and introduce. She gives three reasons why such a collection would be of literary interest to readers. This is the second reason:

Spark:

[B]ecause there have been so many different constructions placed upon Charlotte Brontë's life by biographers who have quoted the fragments of her letters which bolster up their particular theory, I think it would be a good thing to produce all the letters in an impartial manner, with notes only where necessary, so that the reader can form his own construction of her life.⁶

I highlight this in bold whilst typing out the letter in the National Library of Scotland special collections reading room.

I quote here very selectively, in a completely non-impartial manner. Sorry, not sorry.

3.

I arrive in Chicago, the purpose of my trip to carry out archival research. I am awed by the scale of the buildings – powerful, domineering, beautiful tower blocks; there is something of the poetic about them. Rust-coloured bridges, along the river, overhead, subway trains thundering across.

The Magnificent Mile

And the vast expanse of Lake Michigan. Mum and I stay in a nice, old-fashioned hotel at 900 North DeWitt Place. The next day we get the Greyhound bus to Indianapolis from outside Union Station. People come up, ask for money, tell us their stories. Loitering outside, ‘God bless you’, the shaking of a plastic cup with some coppers in. Everywhere inside is always very cold, the AC on full blast and it’s impossible to get a sense of the outside. On the bus to Indianapolis we pass a big notice sticking out in a field:

HELL IS REAL

I rifle through personal papers, looking for clues, hints. When I started my PhD I was almost dismissive of the biographical. I come across a letter from Quin’s doctor treating her after a breakdown, asking her publisher for her books. The doctor thinks it will give an insight into Quin’s person, into her condition. Without really knowing why, I instinctively feel this is wrong somehow, but perhaps I’m rebelling against the thing I myself am doing.

I’m at Chicago Midway airport. After saying goodbye to mum earlier, I feel lonelier than I had anticipated. I am tired and out of place in this country, felt uncomfortable riding the tube – train? – earlier. On the train ride some graffiti reads:

is it lovely yet?

The lives of these authors take on proportions. Reading their letters I think I recognise the laying bare, laying open, there, between the lines, the yearnings for someone to accept it whole. An ex-lover of Quin writes, in a piece intended to commemorate her after her early death, how she always demanded full attention. She wanted so much. The implication being that she wanted too much.

I’m in Tulsa and go out to Domino’s for a quick meal, wanting to get the eating over and done with, deciding not to order room service like last night. I find the tipping thing stressful and didn’t have enough change and felt bad about it for a long time, whilst watching a programme on Miley Cyrus, feeling I should be enjoying it – this whole experience – more. A man in Domino’s starts talking to me, tries to give me his number.

I'm on edge, aware of his every movement, my bag, attempting to be courteous but distant, uninterested but not rude. After a while he goes off and all is fine, but on the way back to the hotel I hurry, feeling vulnerable. This city feels like a ghost town, deserted except for a few lone people roaming the empty streets.

It's a difficult line to thread and I am aware of the voyeurism that is inherent in my acts of research. My interest and curiosity are accompanied by feelings of guilt and inauthenticity. I feel there is something unbecoming about this need to know, this search for other letters which might shed some more light on a relationship, on someone's frame of mind.

Walking the streets in Tulsa I see a man sitting on a bench wearing a cardboard box on his head. A fright which is somehow cold shoots through me in the hot lazy air. The image stays with me. The next day someone with a strange glint in his eye says hello. I involuntarily start as I see his stump for an arm, simply not expecting it. I am relieved to be wearing sunglasses, hurry on.

4.

Quin:

Honestly don't the other sex have the best of both worlds.⁷

Brooke-Rose:

I was a bit antifeminist in those days, in the early 1970s. I didn't consciously feel that I had had any difficulties.⁹

In Spark's novel *Loitering with Intent*, published in 1981, the narrator Fleur recounts on page 15 in my copy: 'The thought came to me in a most articulate way: "How wonderful it feels to be an artist and a woman in the twentieth century."'

Quin:

They can quite happily go on with their creating yet have a wife, mistress, children etc. without it upsetting him too much, besides doesn't he get all the attention and comforts from the woman, ah it was a sad day when the seed entered the wrong ovum and I was conceived a girl, sure now I would have made a wonderful man besides people take more notice of a male writer no matter what blarney he gushes forth, Oh woman is halfway in mid-stream and can never quite reach the bank but has one leg in the estuary and misses the boat out to sea although I think a lot of men do but at least they are given the opportunity of drowning in the ocean and not in a mere river?⁸

Brooke-Rose:

From the moment I went experimental, however, when I wrote 'Out', and my then-publishers couldn't understand it and turned it down, I did actually start having difficulties.¹⁰

In an anonymous reader's report of Quin's first unpublished novel *A Slice of Moon* (since presumably destroyed) for Chatto & Windus, the reader thought Quin 'showed a lot of promise', but that the novel lacked finish and failed to be completely convinced by it, writing that '[f]or a woman to make her novel the first-person narrative of a man is always a problem, and I don't think Ann Quin quite brings it off'.¹²

Spark:

There is another question which I must put down now while I am about it. I am sometimes given to reflect, perhaps wrongly, that you would be more diligent, if not indeed more generous, in your observance of agreements with an author who had claims and aspirations to a standing outside the literary sphere, or even one whose husband was, perhaps, a powerful author.¹³

Brooke-Rose:

[...] I became aware that the woman experimental writer has more difficulties than the man experimental writer, in the sense that, however much men have accepted women's writing, there is still this basic assumption, which is unconscious, that women cannot create new forms. They can imitate others, they can imitate their little lives, tell their love stories and their difficulties and so on, and they do it extremely well. I'm not downgrading that kind of writing. But if by any chance they dare to experiment, then they are imitating a male movement, and usually one that's already dead.¹¹

In Spark's novel *Loitering with Intent*, published in 1981, the narrator Fleur recounts on page 140 in my copy: 'It then came to me again, there in the taxi, what a wonderful thing it was to be a woman and an artist in the twentieth century.'

Spark:

I had better say exactly what I mean. I certainly do not think you would have invited Pamela Snow to your office, without her agent, to face five Macmillan men on a subject seriously touching on the promotion of her books. I do not think you would have taken this liberty with her, quite honestly. Leaving aside what was agreed or not, the whole thing was a damned insolence.¹⁴

Kavan:

It's excellent that you liked the collection of *Stories*. But please don't think of me as a propaganda writer. That's not my line at all. I'm just an individualist. Of course I shall go on writing until I disintegrate altogether. I can't live otherwise.¹⁵

Robert Nye, reviewing Kavan's novel *Ice*, published in 1967, the year before she died, deplored the novel's lack of a more 'garrulous feminine sensibility'.¹⁶ Two years later, in an article on the future of the British experimental novel, he scathingly pronounced that Quin 'may be committed to silence following the rather academic exercises in her latest novel', evidently wishing that both authors would 'chuck the box of tricks away' in order to 'write a whole book in which observation of the heart's affections is permitted to predominate and inform'.¹⁷

Kavan:

All I'll ever ask of the world if I ever get out of this nightmare is just to be left alone somewhere; with you preferably, but if not with you then quite alone, just in some place where I can sit in the sun + write + look at the birds + the growing things, the things that aren't violent or treacherous or authoritarian.¹⁸

I trawl through Anna Kavan's letters. I have been sent a sheaf of them from a library in New Zealand. I read them lying by the pool on a family holiday in France, underlining, making notes, for moments transported to the grey, soulless war-time London she describes.

I struggle to find a pithy quote for this section of the essay. Kavan generally always talked of the individual, of 'man' in her critical writing in a universal sense. In her non-fiction writing of the forties, there is a sense that she is conjuring a utopian future in dystopian times, delineating a sharp, clear, coruscating future humanity, one perhaps in which gender distinctions are not made (or maybe this is a projection on my part?). For while the correspondence and notes I toothcomb for crumbs of explicit feminist persuasions resist my readings, her fiction consistently invites the questioning and troubling of the position of the woman in a patriarchal society.

Writing in an essay in 1989, Brooke-Rose suggests that rather than '[f]luttering around a canon', '[t]he best way, in my view, for any writer [...] is to slip through all the labels, including that of "woman writer"'.¹⁹ She cautions, however, that the price is 'to belong nowhere', noting that 'this is, on the whole, what happens to experimental writers of all sexes and origins, but more particularly to women experimental writers'.²⁰

In Spark's novel *Loitering with Intent*, published in 1981, the narrator Fleur recounts on page 156 in my copy: 'But that day in the middle of the twentieth century I felt more than ever how good it was to be a woman and an artist there and then.'

In an interview with Nell Dunn in 1965, Quin playfully states, 'I've often thought what I really need is a wife'.²¹

5.

This city feels so vast; so much space everywhere:
streets with four lanes, massive parking lots, huge
buildings and complexes, then very long and flat ones.
From my window in the hotel in Tulsa:

Foolish Things Coffee Company

The wailing of sirens, hum of the air-conditioning
everywhere, never complete silence, a faded sign:

Harringtons store for men and boys

The American flag.

BERNSEN community Life Centre

TFCU West 7th Street.

After spending another day in the archives, I pick up
a package of photocopied correspondence between
Quin and her first American lover, sent to my hotel from
another library on the other side of the country.

I start reading her letters. I understand the attraction –
the poet's measured way of talking, his slow American
drawl, his eye which he lost as a child in a car accident.
He would later write there was an immediate kinship
between him and Quin because they were both loners,
on the outskirts. He will write a beautiful tribute. At the
archives of Quin's publisher I find a letter in which he
writes how he can't quite fathom she's gone.

Quin writes and writes and writes. She spends her
thirtieth birthday travelling by train through the United
States. She is on the train for days. It's Saint Patrick's
Day and the Americans in her carriage exasperate her;
they are too loud, she thinks Americans are far too
loud. She makes sweeping statements regarding 'the
yanks' and sees herself always as other. When she
returns to the UK everything seems stale, grey, timid
and she remarks on how everyone always talks about
the weather.

At this point in time, it is Quin who leaves the deepest
mark. The knowledge of her death looms large of
course, as I carry out research in the archives of those
who knew her and outlived her. However much I resist
and bristle at the reductionist narrative of the 'doomed
woman writer', I worry to what extent it plays a part in
the fact that her early death inevitably renders things
poignant. It's her age too probably, the fact I can see
myself most in her. She is not resigned, she is not set in
her ways, she is, in many ways, not sure yet of who she
is, of who she will become.

I reread *Three* and, as so many critics have remarked,
Quin appears to foreshadow her own death in it. The
'S' in that novel supposedly invites the reader to read
'Q'. I think of her as Quin mostly, not Ann. Quin suits

her tremendously. I am reminded of that interview she did in *The Guardian* in 1972, entitled 'The Mighty Quin', and of the arrogant and condescending interviewer who obviously thought she was just the thing; pretty and a little unhinged.

I am at the McFarlin Library, wearing a single blue glove as I turn manuscript pages of Kavan's correspondence and notes. My parents send me a message and suggest Skyping when I can – there's no rush they say, they know I have only a limited time in the archives. I know what their message means and I start putting away the Kavan materials. I tell the archivist who monitors me, the only other person in this dark reading room, that I won't be coming back today. I head out into the empty campus and walk to the bus stop. The buses aren't very regular, but I catch one back relatively quickly and go to the hotel, up to my room. I put my laptop on and Skype mum and dad. My camera isn't working properly and flickers on for just a moment – I catch a glimpse of mum, dad and my sister in that single second before only their voices remain.

My parents had been at my grandmother's side for the last few days. My sister had come over from London. Dad is called away and my sister goes with him. I picture them walking through the corridors of the nursing home, side by side. Mum stayed with Grootmoe. I picture her holding her hand. Mother-in-law, daughter-in-law. They were there together and then, mum said, she slipped away. Mum repeats it like that a few times; wants me, I think, to hear it just like that: she quietly slipped away.

I'm reading Quin's letters at Tulsa airport, waiting on a plane to go to St Louis, where some more of her papers are kept, before I catch another plane back home. Because she walked into the sea that day in August 1973, because her body was found, because a fisherman saw a woman wading into the sea, because I have been steeped in her writing, have witnessed her emotions, have traced her whereabouts, her thoughts on writing, on living, on loving, the nearing the end of her letters fills me with a heaviness, a dread, and I am quietly crying as I reach the last one, a Dido song playing in the airport lounge.

Quin's friends talk of relief when they hear her mother died, just a few months after her body was found; they can't help feeling it's somehow kinder, for her to be gone too.

There are four pictures of Quin in the archives of the man she nearly married, she – at one point – so wished to marry. She is wearing a short dress with long sleeves. It is, not surprisingly, a sixties dress, for it is the sixties, probably sometime in 1967. Quin is sitting on a veranda and I wonder where this is taken. Is this Iowa? At one point she was living on a farm there, miles from anywhere else. Is she visiting? Do she and her lover live there already? In one of them he (I'm assuming he took the picture) caught her just right: she looks at ease, happy and content to be there.

6.

Quin:

And *Passages* isn't doing well: turned down by Gallimard, Inset at first said yes but translator said too difficult. No one in the States will touch it. So. Reviews here very few, and only one that conveyed anything in the TLS (wondered if it was Martin Seymour Smith?!) and obviously whoever wrote that had taken the time/space to read the damned book. Well so it goes and what the hell, one goes on with some kind of conviction and/or just the sheer need to find out what is there.²³

April 2018. I take the train from Glasgow to Edinburgh. Up the Royal Mile: 'Do you want a picture with Yoda?' Entering the National Library of Scotland, Spark is everywhere: to the right, a huge poster announces the exhibition 'The International Style of Muriel Spark'; to the left people peer into a glass case which houses a first edition copy of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*; right in front of me, a huge portrait of Spark herself, peering over her glasses, imprinted on the carpet up the stairs leading to the reading room.

Brooke-Rose:

I'm a forgotten author, will either remain so or be given a short posthumous flutter.²⁵

Kavan:

My sort of experimental writing is completely out under present conditions, so I may as well resign myself to the fact that as a writer I'm just liquidated until after the war – if not for ever. It's terribly depressing.²²

Brooke-Rose:

But you see, I'm simply not in the same class as you and can't demand this and that, since my books don't sell and have at most a succès d'estime or an academic success among profs and thesis writers and a small coterie of fans.²⁴

Spark:

You are not a forgotten author by any means. Everybody knows who you are and your books are still in print.²⁶

An obituary in *The Guardian* by Natalie Ferris in 2012, its headline: 'Christine Brooke-Rose: the great British experimentalist you've never heard of'.

7.

After another day of trying to decipher scribbled notes, taking photographs of as much material as possible, pausing briefly to have a strange micro-waved snack in the empty library café, I get back to my hotel, take the lift, head to my room, change into some other clothes, go to the gym on the second floor. I start walking on the treadmill, key in twenty minutes, up the tempo, start running, then come off in under five. I do two sit-ups on a mat in the corner. I head to the tiny pool and lie on an uncomfortable chair on the concrete slab surrounding it.

8. Coda

Spark:

We have to address a disintegrated world. The world we draw our inspiration from is disintegrated. When we write a poem we are trying, in a manner, to write several poems at once and to speak on different levels and to make divided things whole.²⁷

Quin:

What the poets are doing is something I wish the novelists would turn to, and this is: to senses of form, to the literal nature of living in a given place, and to a world momentarily informed by what energies inhabit it.²⁹

Kavan:

I quite agree with you that some forms of short story is [*sic*] much more suited to my type of stuff than the novel form. I'd arrived at that conclusion independently.²⁸

Brooke-Rose:

Many people say that my novels are difficult; indeed, a lot of people complain about it, but when my fans say that, it's a compliment. They go back and see that I've done this, or that. They say my books are slow reading, and consider this a pleasure. If I achieve that, then I'm very pleased.³⁰

Spark:

I am sending two additional pages to be inserted at the end. I had hoped to make it longer, but I don't want to say more than I want to convey. Anything else would be padding.³¹

Kavan:

I wanted to abandon realistic writing insofar as it describes exclusively events in the physical environment, and make the reader aware of the existence of the different, though just as real, 'reality' which lies just beyond the surface of ordinary daily life and the surface aspect of things.³²

Quin:

But the sun shines and it's good to be typing again, and writing – mainly snatches of dialogue.³³

Brooke-Rose:

A letter is a letter is a
letter is a
letter is a
love
from
Christine³⁴

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21. Nell Dunn, *Talking to Women* (London: Pan Books, 1966), 108.
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23. Letter from Quin to Robert Creeley, 28 May 1969, Robert Creeley Papers, Stanford Special Collections, Stanford University, California.
24. Letter from Brooke-Rose to Spark, 20 October 1985, Spark Papers.
25. Letter from Brooke-Rose to Spark, 12 October 2005, Spark Papers.

26. Letter from Spark to Brooke-Rose, 16 October 2005, Spark Papers.
27. Letter from Spark to John Masefield, 26 May 1951, Spark Papers.
28. Letter from Kavan to Hamilton, 11 November [1940], Kavan Papers.
29. Ann Quin, Harkness Report, sent on 11th August 1967, Commonwealth Fund records, Rockefeller Archive Center.
30. Friedman and Fuchs, 'A Conversation with Christine Brooke-Rose', 88.
31. Letter from Spark to Alan Maclean, 22 April 1956, Spark Papers
32. Notes made by Anna Kavan, n.d., Kavan Papers.
33. Letter from Quin to Creeley, 2 March 1970, Creeley Papers.
34. Letter from Brooke-Rose to Spark, n.d., Spark Papers.

Acknowledgements

I owe many thanks to the estates of Christine Brooke-Rose, Anna Kavan, Ann Quin and Muriel Spark for granting permission to quote from the selected archival material. I would like to thank the Muriel Spark 100 programme for making the project possible, Jamie and Kate for their unwavering encouragement and invaluable comments on the various drafts of the essay, Laura and Alice at MAP for their enthusiasm and editing support, Lucy for excellent design work, and Katie and the team at the Glasgow Women's Library for their help in organising the launch event and for making me feel so welcome in the Library where parts of this essay were written. Finally, special thanks are due to the archivists at Olin Library, Washington University, St. Louis; McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa; Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington; Special Collections at Stanford University, California; the Alexander Turnbull Library, National Library of New Zealand, Wellington; Special Collections at the University of Reading Library; the Rockefeller Archive Center, New York and the National Library of Scotland (in particular to Colin McIlroy for his helpful guidance in navigating the Spark papers).

Part of the Muriel Spark 100 programme, this essay project was funded by Creative Scotland and supported by the National Library of Scotland, the Glasgow Women's Library and MAP Magazine.

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Designer Lucy Grainge

Edition 100

ISBN: 978-0-9931424-5-1

Published by MAP Magazine Ltd, 350 Sauchiehall Street, Glasgow G2 3JD

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MAP is generously supported by Creative Scotland.

MAP is an independent, artist led publisher and producer on and off line.

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