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skirting
around

SKIRT
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SKIRT

ISSUE #3

Skirting Around THREE

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It was a shock when she realised: she had not worn a skirt for over 30 years.

This issue is dedicated to writer and journalist Angela Jeffs who passed away at the age of 81 at the end of last year. She was an important part of my journey to becoming a writer, and supported *Skirting Around* right from the get go. Somewhat ironically Angela did not – as a rule – wear skirts. I can see her raising an amused eyebrow at the thought of me dedicating an issue on skirts to her. I wish she could have stayed with us a whole lot longer.

Angela Jeffs, 1941-2022

<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/community/2023/01/29/our-lives/angela-jeffs-japan-times-columnist-taught-us-write-mind-alive/>

Carolyn

23/2/23

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Elizabeth Gibson

On skirts and rivers

One day, you'll see a photo of me in a skirt on a bridge,
and you'll say, *I didn't know you ever still wore skirts*,
and I'll say, *I don't really, it was for a smear test today*.
I'll sound casual, maybe a *bit* of a wince in my voice,
but I will have got through it, at my doctor in Salford,
then come to stand over grey water between two cities,
to watch for cormorants spinning for fish, in, out, in, out.

I hold this ahead of me, as I stammer to the nurse, *yes*,
maybe there is something else you could help me with,
after she did my blood test so well, it was a non-event.
I used to think I could never have blood taken again
after I fainted at fifteen, after seeing its red newness.
But this was quick. I ate green and orange Fruit Pastilles,
listened to Carly Simon, *I know nothing stays the same*.

The nurse is kind, goes to talk to the doctor right away,
says I will have support, someone with me, and time,
enough time, to get my bearings. I had my arm cut open
this summer, to sort a nerve in my elbow, and maybe now,
having people bobbing like cormorants in, out, in, out,
of my body should be easier. And yet the fish of me flees
to the reassuring depths of my own river, warm and old.

But I do not recognise myself from even this springtime –
I have grown new trees, tolerated buildings on my banks.
In Waterstones after my blood test, choosing a brave book,
I felt the plaster crinkle in the crook of my arm and – *wow*,
I just did that, I did it. I tell my friends and they are proud,
one of them tells me a smear test is really fine. I can see it,
in the near future: one of my ancient skirts, tender on me.

Jackie Morris

The siren call of a crimson crepe de Chine dress made from a 1938 Vogue pattern, comprising of a circular six-piece skirt and a rounded neck with pussy-bow detail

... open the door. Let me out. You still love me, I'm sure of it. You didn't make me to hang in the wardrobe whilst you play mummies. I was made to flare over your hips as you sway, to caress your breasts, your arms, your waist, soft as a promise made on a dark night. I'm before-the-war crepe de Chine, back when the warehouse foreman would turn a blind eye for a pretty face. You sacrificed blood to make me, remember? All those pin jabs and needle pricks. Here's the line of tiny holes where you had to unpick me. Here's the re-working when you misjudged the seam. Our secrets. Yours and mine. Don't leave me here, suffocating in lavender and moth-dust.

Never mind paint the town red, we were the red the town got painted. Regular visitors to the Hammersmith Palais, not unknown at the Soho Shim-Sham. These days the only time I get an outing is dress-up with little Vee. I can't abide her sticky fingers rummaging through my skirts. Like her father in that regard. Why didn't he take us to Arkansas? He said he would. He said lots of things. And what about the other one? William. Does he like dancing? Do you even know? Imagine if you've married a man who doesn't like dancing. We'll find out eventually I suppose. If he survives long enough to make it home. If he swallows your honeymoon-baby story when he gets here. His mother didn't. 'Big for an early bird, isn't she?' Ha! No flies on that one.

Vee takes up far too much of your time. What happened to 'children should be seen and not heard'? It breaks my heart. We need to be out and about. I don't belong in here with your cheap catalogue dresses. I know you promised you'd be good if you got a second chance – you've done so well for so long – but fifteen minutes on the tram, we could be in the West End. Go on, put a little nip of something in Vee's milk so she sleeps. Set your hair. Find some lippie.

Oh, to dance with a handsome soldier again, to gather his aftershave and cigarette smoke into my delicate folds. And then later, the giggle and grunt of a blacked-out alley, the goosebump chill, the rough brick on our backs. Not milk-stained housecoats and sensible shoes and the boredom of a thousand empty nights. Come on, let me put a swing in your hips and a shine in your eyes. I can feel you standing there, one hand on the key. I know you, remember: every curve, every bead of sweat, every other secretion and excretion. Open the door. Let me out. You still love me. I'm sure of it...

Virna Teixeira

Mermaid

violence
suffocating the psyche
attacking her from the back

a shadow
trying to choke her
inside a cell

light
over
the small bed

the turquoise
sequins of a
skirt

shining

she turns into
a mermaid
gets rid of the fingers

on her mouth

and wakes up
gasping

Maria Sledmere

Water Vessels

Madonna loathes these flowers
lysergic with purple alimony paid to the svelte indecision of
those in media, her scorn a dulcimer w/ no added sugar
comes bearing disco arborescence
in the small of her ear, wanting a sun let moneyed and quiet,
skirting our love's ravine.
More of this please
don't stop economy, a takeover
where it kills to rain
clicky opulence and mortal bit into gold
I'll drown my cinematography
cygnet-souled with the ugliness
you see especially
what you see in me
many louche materials
howling into the contact mic

I have this canopy shyness
smoking them
for extra life
beginner hydrangeas
put icepacks on capital cities
to stem the throb
novelty of kissing with neon tongues
not easy to keep this secret
seen mid-length from above
hurt to feel too much to want even more
emotional language of flowers turn into the alimony
paid to my purple children perfect language
grown over bubble ice
remorseless and crying mum
keeps aphids of
stresses porphyria

we take up the whole bed
of awareness month
sleep's elasticity wastes me
a heart slip from
rush hour

*

blue, strange and flaming
sings nihilism electric in flowerbed
hyperbole of disembowelling the stars
only to find violets
hard-pressed to feel good
bursting from human ribcages
a giantess irisated with email mists

all over the heavenly isle
I knew it would happen
more clownery appliqué of carecore
thermal betrayal
my cochleae made popcorn & jet fuel
Madonna amorphous
spits in the petal repertoire of the princess
a pastel-coloured swear word
bloody and clandestine
who wants to swallow your aura
being so cool and sexy pellucid
can't be funny anymore, feeling
sloughed from the gold
poor dumb cunny
having a bodily
disregard of acceptable file types, passerines
replace us with motorway slip road, more
slip road to coronary artery, lace-
cap purple, people
name-dropping themselves as pearls

you are so far gone into secret autumn
unabashedly mortal, glum butterfly
lobotomy
took her out of my frontal cortex
orange wings quivering at the speed of hummingbird sleep
it's all voice
neglecting personal continuity
deep calorific recovery
what's happening up there
having outlived the fungal infection
flunked out of politics
dear the world

plant doctor
I want to be neutral, cold hardy
born from the angel marsh divine.

*

I still love the way you're all light
new ways for lifting me
and other invertebrates of the trellising discourse
solipsism of the sensuous
sick of its health
slips from my chest in evergreens
things we cannot name
and the horror in dreams of wanting
a book-length confession
all surface a florist's disgrace
open-sourced memory
dawns on us
in belle hibernation
hard and shiny cartilage of pop songs
sometimes we'll flower
a second time in fall
thought heats until it is tenderised scenery

at the fold
these favourites remain
angsty with gloss in a robe of messages
convalescing Madonnas of Neptune
a planet overtaken by hydrangeas
many arduous posies
why not
the acid makes them blue
many atmospheres
having their Orpheus era
O cashmere secretion
O cherished amnesia

[jp/p]

Turtling

Since the beginning, their confessions,
their mistakes, their momentary lapses.

We've caught them; they've landed on us.
Underneath & beside them, we've listened.

Our seagull skulls in the crooks of their arms;
our hair like sunbursts drawn across their chests.

They tell us, whiffing of vanilla or piss or sweat.
Smirking, one tells me: He's afraid of the dark

& being alone. Another admits, just minutes after:
He's attracted to his sister. One more confides:

He only ever showers if I'm on my way;
it's too much sadness. Too much mercury.

Wet-eyed, one loves his dad aloud, but
wishes he was dead. Refuses to elaborate.

And the first one: Says he wishes we could unfuck.
Vaginas don't seem right, he adds. They look like pain.

I try to speak: about my body, every woman's.
But the words are liquid. I'm only slurring.

A kid within: I ask if it's me & move towards.
He shrinks, dithers like an artificial lisp.

And all the rest – spent, they stretch.
Briefly graze us: fondle, twist, lick.

And just as halfheartedly,
they stand, dress, and turn:

Seal the tomb
and leave.

Asta Kinch

Corduroy Green's curting

down be lanket morning
the furrows of text
chirred sleep off course
be lanket in between
yoghurt chia sleeve
folds, spooned, as drapery
plate movement pushes magma
to the top or just sediments
and clothes hung up to school
succeed, age in crogress pareesses
from the day you start
institutions, body clicking,
tow arm embedded in
the nicotin of a dream
sat next that agile oddity
a child prod farts loud
trumping sleep
and rumpings leap till
subdued, and half-way
dictions pile like sites,
come aisling parently
apparels to count re
tilling wake, reveiling hems
drap dapper mat
like faux grass in senses,
in a since never final to rest
high, blanket thigh, duvet

Kathryn Paulsen

Dress Up with Julie

I would never have known what to wear to this party
if it hadn't been for playing dress-up with Julie.
She's the one over there with the sleek blonde hair
men would be crudely admiring,
pinching the ends as they lurched by,
but she's put it up like a grown-up lady.
'You put it up so you can take it down,' she says.
Or catch it back like mine, contain the ends.
Leave no loose strands for fingers to play with,
to daydream with away
from this real, grown-up party.
'Contain, to release,' – a show, for one yet unknown.

Our show was for us alone, as in the olden days,
age four or five, I'd pass through the doorway
of that vast chamber, open drawers, hers,
the mother no older than I am now,
find things to giggle about, enormous panties,
stockings that clung to hands,
might brand with a sign of intrusion, drawers
I shuddered to close. The closet, with only a little daring,
could be gone into, sat down in. The first dress
might slip down accidentally, from breath,
not touch. Oh, so delicate!
And picking it up, hanging it back – why not try it on
(no need to mess with the zipper),
parade around the room, imagine oneself
grown big and beautiful?

That's how it was,
looking into the back of my closet with Julie,
only the clothes, however forgotten, rumpled, unworn,
were mine and fit.
And the drawers hold wisps of new nylon, stuff
our mothers never had, such stuff
wasn't made for decent women then.
But they had lovely bias-cut silk slips and nightgowns,
heavy silk-satin the color of candlelight
we covet in memory,

given for weddings by immigrant grandmothers,
who remembered what men liked, and they'd not had
and wouldn't have, now that they could,
because the men had forgotten.

Over and over, we dressed me,
and I turned round and round,
to be looked at in the lights and in the mirror.
Julie insists everything be perfect, top to toe.
'Control is the name of the game,' she says, and
'What are you going to do about your hair?'
She pulls it all to the side of my head,
smooth against the scalp, then ballooning
into what profanely, mundanely, is called a ponytail,
makes a miniature braid of the ends and rolls it shell-like to echo
the scalloped ruffle at the bottom of the slender black skirt,
and the shell-shaped pin that holds in place
the scarf she has draped into a blouse.

It's white silk, a gift from a grandmother years ago,
wrapped once around and over one shoulder.
Julie fusses and fusses, pins and shifts,
and pins again. 'Don't mind me, I'm just playing
Beardsley. Oscar Wilde would approve.'
As well I see: this reflected creature,
kindred changeling, with a luminous white butterfly
beating against her shoulder, or is it a camellia
her throat grows out of – or pearl?
Only in myths and fairy tales does one wear
such a moon, pale as forever,
and sky, black as sleep.

This is like being a princess and having a maid:
someone to play more seriously than you
the game you are the rules and object of,
and can't play alone,
someone whose creation you let yourself be,
whose skill you admire that makes you look in the mirror
as if at something other than yourself.
'You've got to slit your skirt,' she says.
'You'll disappoint everyone if you don't slit your skirt.'
I haven't yet. The skirt itself protests.
Who knows what phantoms might escape
between those curtains, as from the dead?

Those shoes – I look with Julie's eyes –
may not be ten sizes too big, as long ago,
but they're still not right.

So one day I'll do what grown-up ladies do:
go out and buy the right shoes for the next time
I dare to look like that in public.

I have never taken such pleasure in the sight of my skin,
or felt the richness of wearing breasts as fully
as under that strip of antique lace Julie tied tight over them,
for when the petal blouse might flutter and lift,
dancing.

Dancing?

No, not yet.

Let's –

Karen Walker

A skirt makes a better daughter

To complement the big silver bird in the sky, Maude buys a grey skirt for Lucy's high school trip to Athens. Dove grey. Silk to wrinkle disapproval when the girl flings off her shoes and sits on crusty unpainted toes. A-line. Maude musing how Alyssa or Alycia would've been a lovely name for a little goddess with fine features and long limbs. For the daughter she does have – named by her father; robust like him – Maude selects a skirt one size too small because it's important to be tight even while visiting sloppily dressed Greek statues. Too bad the trip isn't to svelte, pencil-skirted Paris.

When Lucy says, 'No fucking way,' to dove grey silk and jets off in ripped jeans, Maude hugs the skirt. Blubbers, 'Don't despair.' She bonds with the skirt during a gentle hand wash and, laying her pretty new child on Lucy's bed to dry, looks forward to a glorious nine-day vacation from her daughter.

Cynthia Gallaher

The Needle Left the Haystack 30,000 Years Ago

between cooking and farming,
women of old were relegated to the loom,
while husbands weft state affairs,
wove essays and speeches,

unrolled bolts of new lands,
stitched into garment statements
their wives spun
in darkened rooms.

even 30,000 years ago, women
used needles from sharpened bone
to weave, piece and quilt
animal skin garb and bark shoes,

all the way
up the centuries
to rococo trains
and miniskirts.

the cookie tin under my dresser
bears half-spool threads,
mismatched snaps and safety pins,
buttons of every size,

with knowledge how to sew,
and even weave,
I no longer do either,
but only repair damage

done to clothing others made,
perhaps ones
from sweat shops
in locales I can't imagine.

there's seamstress tedium
in every luxurious valley of haute couture,
NYC's seasonal grasp to define culture,
identity, fanfare,

to add spin,
dizziness
to the changing of fashions,
confusing us to buy more.

whether natural or synthetic,
original or knock-off,
tailor made,
or ready to wear,

whether homespun sackcloth scorned
at the Academy Awards,
or multi-hooped, rainbow tulle gowns
praised at the church basement quinceañeras,

where fore art thou thimble
in the game of Monopoly
or iron that marks the pressing
and order of domestic civilization,

the binding together and ripping at the seams,
pelon that sturdies collars and cuffs,
the bobbin, the presser foot,
the needle traveling backward,

the cloth caught and bunched,
the zipper in upside down,
the pattern used too many times,
shared by everyone on the block,

the prom dress
resized for little sister,
the bridesmaid dress, month-long in
the making using a classy Vogue pattern,

yet expressed through paisley upholstery material
worn in 108-degree New Orleans backyard humidity,
the pecan trees throwing its shells
on the bride in lieu of rice.

perhaps the true fiber lies
in chain mail woven metal
protection, the hidden defense
of the Middle Ages,

or medieval tapestries,
thick curtains against
drafty winter gray
castle windows.

which roles play today's blankets, sheets,
towels and slipcovers? Do comforters replace
human fur lost either in evolution
or through alien DNA tamperings?

are we now forced to dip into sewing kits
to wrap ourselves like chrysalis
against frigid elements?
against harrowing cold that those

in far-flung extraterrestrial worlds
never guessed at, who escaped the wrath
of rogue suns, sought new fortunes in hybrid colonies
of their own making light years away.

our primitive humanity
has gone undercover,
starting with our underwear
on up,

it's the hemstitch
no one sees, the set-in sleeve
that moves like human
muscle, joint and sinew,

to help convince us
we're indeed not wearing
a strait jacket of cloth,
but no jacket at all.

Fiona Brittle

Trash

She was pretty trash, I'm not gonna lie,
a man said to the girl he was holding close on the subway.
I didn't expect it, she was crazy.
I'm not going to judge her though.
She was messed up.
I'm so sorry, the girl said.
That's so intense. Fucked up.
This girl has a nice skirt on
and seems only drunk,
unlike that other girl,
who came off her SSRIs
to take cocaine.
Crazy.
I've only tried ecstasy once.
Yeah, me too.
They say to each other,
and stagger up the stairs to Cowcaddens
in a cloud of rum and judgment.

Christine Fowler

The Issue

He always *skirted* around the issue

His mother had spoilt him

No doubt about it

She had to put up with the consequences

Dirty clothes all over the floor

Unable even to make a sandwich

She was not putting up with it

She shovelled all his dirty clothes

Into a black plastic bag

Tied a knot *vigorously*

Thought of a *certain part of his anatomy*

She would like to do the same to

Put the bag in the bin

She attacked every pair of his trousers

Using kitchen scissors

They too went into the bin.

She hung several skirts in his wardrobe

Before leaving with her suitcase

There she thought

If he liked skirting the issue so much

He could wear skirts in future

Louise Holland

Superhero Panties

I can't skirt

but I can shuffle awkwardly

I can

stumble and sway like a drunk at closing time

I can jog, can even run

when wearing the appropriate bra

or if I'm being chased but

I can't skirt.

I might be a sledgehammer or a seductress

might toss daisies or death stares

but I really

never skirt.

You won't need to flip a coin

or consult a magic 8 ball,

won't need to throw bones

or read tea leaves

I won't be skirting around

when

I

tell

you

NO.

Ros Woolner

Scraps

bags of covered buttons,
trays of shiny stones

*when husbands lost their jobs
their wives took in more sewing*

a piece of crimson cotton
with gold embroidered circles

*my mother may have made
your mother's A-line skirt*

beaded trim,
satin waist bands

*hidden women,
busy hands*

georgette, cotton,
chiffon, satin

*picking out a sari
for a colleague's wedding*

purple netting,
ribbons, sequins

*if we weren't shy
we would be singing*

pistachio, saffron,
mint and plum

*colours you can taste
on your tongue*

**This poem was written during a craft project run by Amarjit Nar at Wolverhampton Art Gallery as part of British Art Show 9 in 2022.*

Di Stafford

The Hurt of a Skirt

70s School

Giddy with freedom after a morning in science, with its sticky benches and gassy burners, we burst through the double doors, across the playground and towards the sheltered wall of the music block to claim our spot. Good for ball games, but ideal for handstands in all their infinite variety – longest time, one-handed, over into crab. Giggling, laughing, counting, blood rushing to our heads, arms strong and legs stretching. Breathless, dizzy, collapsing.

Your turn!

Our thick, pleated skirts tucked into Littlewoods knickers don't stand a chance.

But the playground teacher arrives. We must stop. It's indecent. Male teachers and the boys might see us. We are allowed to walk around the playground and chat instead.

Meanwhile, the boys continue to run about on the grass, playing football and making lewd gestures at us if we get too close to their important game.

80s Driving

The promise of freedom comes at a price. He is apparently well recommended for his hands-on approach, but each time I walk towards the instructor's car outside my school, everything sets my spidey senses tingling. The bright red 'L' might as well be a flashing beacon for lech.

And change! As I shift the gearstick his hand grips and pushes my leg down on the clutch pedal. Except it's not my leg, it's my thigh beneath my skirt. His other hand stays strangely in his pocket, jiggling.

My school friend, Lorna, also has lessons. We confer and decide to stop. We'll have to ask our boyfriends to drive us instead. My mother is furious, for the wasted time and money. But I can't tell her why because he is the husband of her best friend.

90s Work

Suited and booted is de rigueur for nineties office life and it's always heels with a pencil skirt. *Do whatever you need to do to get the business* my boss says, pausing with a slight tilt of his head to see if I've understood the subtext. I pretend I haven't and ignore, ignore, ignore.

After the meeting and dinner, the queue for black cabs is ridiculous. *We'll walk. Do us good*, he says, striding off, leaving me to struggle with the briefcases of presentation decks, samples, and notebooks. I stumble with silly skirt-bound steps across the cobbled streets, heels trapped and wobbling with unexpected regularity.

We almost miss the train, and he tuts his disapproval as we settle into seats. I watch a thin trickle of blood make its way from the blister at the top of my heel and hope he doesn't notice.

Noughties Wedding

I love a woman in a skirt, says my new father-in-law at our wedding, as he arranges his wife and be-skirted daughters for a family photo. Succumbing to tradition, I'm trussed up in the first frock I've worn for over a decade, but I still manage to smile on cue. However, inside a little bit of me dies.

When they later choose a wedding photo for display at home, it's one that doesn't include me. *Blood relatives only* his sister says.

And Now

It's my daughter's first day of her new graduate job and I hug her in the hallway as she picks up her car keys. It'll be forty-five minutes on the motorway, but I'm not worried. She's a good driver – I taught her myself.

She's wearing black jeans, a jumper, and trainers. *Did you check the dress code?* I keep my voice light and even to avoid the slightest suggestion of intended criticism. Her young person antenna identifies some anyway and she rolls her eyes. *I will be fine, Mum. Things have changed; it's all different these days.*

They have, and it is. And I realise I am a little jealous of her.

I want to go back and do it again. But wearing the trousers this time.

Erin Gannon

Skirt your Mouth

Is what's underneath all so unspeakable? Maybe
you're hiding all the unquestionably present;
darkened, buried, inside, messy subtext?
Isn't it more like *unmentionable* -- in polite company?
You don't go around skirts. What lies! It's what's underneath
you're hiding, what's under any old thing. Pretend.
Yearn for silence, a void, tight secrets kept,
then assemble for the mind-numbing spot of tea.

I once drank seven days and seven nights, a cocktail
coward, in fear of choking on such unmentionables.
In this place, where any revelation is almost always trouble,
bile churns perpetual. The exposure of throwing up hurts,
just like throwing up your skirt, but I welcomed the betrayal.
And afterwards, I remembered the stars we keep under these woollen veils,
and I remembered how you keep making us hide the universe.

Jodie Stead

Upskirt

I felt good that day so I thought I'd wear my favourite skirt
To watch the football with my dad
Amidst the rowdy crowd and loud cheers
I felt you watching me

You made me so uncomfortable with your stares
I knew you were following me
When I moved to the other side of the crowd
And you reappeared

Everyone's eyes on the screen but yours were burning my neck
I warned the staff about you
And they kept watch from afar
My dad returned and I felt safe, protected
I forgot about you

Suddenly I was pushed forwards
I turned and two men had you on the floor
They had watched you stand behind me, kneel down to 'tie your shoes'
Your phone turned upwards between my legs
My heart dropped
And what happened next?
Nothing
You walked away without consequence
While I was left exposed

I hate that skirt now
Because it makes me think of you

Asta Kinch

Re)covery

lay a gain
as a cloth deals
Material. get a get up
ketchup, out
cramping whack, vain
& camp 'em: deli slices, satin
gloves, pore. Very, exiting the
metro, inver:
Mouth debutante to the pavements.
March is stew uttering et al
feeding broth both booth & cloathed
years: see fifties in doll gingham,
original plastic,
lines either. Quite not crisp,
mouth fumes, all laid out.
A gain as a clothed girl, shopping.
Enter mall & escalate — growing
undone for green tea powder &
other sales items.
The floor is dropping knees
covert browsing a sweatup a
staggering membership in years.
Calves don't give, change numb
burrs clinging filmed, like gyrate,
and a gain

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