

Rare is the book that remains viable beyond a single publishing season. Rarer still is the one that persists for years or decades beneath whatever cultural wreckage has fallen on it, only to be later dug up and found to have a pulse. Such a fate has befallen Chris Kraus's novels, and any reader who is wondering how to live an ethical life while paying taxes to a country creating daily social, environmental and geo-political disasters would best get reading them.

"It is 1989 or 1990", Kraus writes early in *Torpor* (2006) – which now appears in the UK for the first time, following the recent debut appearance in the country of Kraus's best-known novel *I Love Dick* (1997).

George Herbert Walker Bush is President of the United States and the Gulf War has just begun in Saudi Arabia. "Collateral damage," a military term coined to describe the accidental wasting of civilian populations, is just beginning to cross-over into self-help therapeutic terminology. Somewhere in the Persian Gulf, civilians cower in the rubble while in New York, Sylvie's friends discuss the "collateral damage" of their break-ups.

Although published in America during the second Bush era, *Torpor* is mostly set during the first. The story follows a married couple of "rootless cosmopolitans", Sylvie and Jerome. She is a "punk-formalist film and videomaker" who almost has a career. He is "a downtown celebrity and a pariah in Columbia University's Department of French Literature and Philology", where he's been teaching "death-classes" for twenty years – "*Death and Sexuality*, *Death and Literature*, *Death and the Disembodied Signifier*".

Though Sylvie first had to compete with a roster of It Girls to win Jerome's attention, her ability to "play the shy defenseless waif that their routines depend on" is beginning to fray. Still, "deep down, she knew that he was not the asshole he appeared to be". Jerome, a childhood Holocaust survivor who later suffered "a kind of psychic torture at Sorbonne academic parties", does sometimes seem to be more tortured than torturing; at other times it seems he is in fact the asshole he appears to be.

Kraus's wise, acerbic third person doesn't exactly hate these two, but Sylvie and Jerome

# A victim at every turn

## How to live a meaningful life

CATHERINE LACEY

Chris Kraus

TORPOR

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Chris Kraus

expose their various inefficiencies and neuroses repeatedly, compulsively. Sylvie has a habit of outfitting her little dog in sweaters and getting emotional about items of vintage kitsch, such as rabbit figurines and teapots shaped like corn cobs. Jerome sees himself as a victim at every turn, berating a car rental employee for her company's policies by shouting, "I am a citizen of France," . . . as if she were a Nazi asking for ID papers". He then launches into a diatribe about the implications of the woman's multinational corporate employer's complicity in the expansionist post-war culture (never mind that Jerome is the customer supporting that corporation). Sylvie,

"powerless to change the situation", simply observes this "balding 53-year-old man in dirty sneakers screaming at a neatly uniformed young woman".

A reader could spend time with *Torpor* fuming over the power imbalance and avalanche of mansplaining that Jerome piles on Sylvie, but that reader would do herself a disservice. As ridiculously as these two often behave, they share an active engagement with the question of how to lead a meaningful life in a world so often surfeited with meaninglessness and brutality. This question both gives the novel its bones and animates its central farce.

Jerome and Sylvie think they are going to Romania to adopt a baby, although they have no contacts and no applications pending with any adoption agencies or lawyers. In the unlikely event they find an orphan, they have no idea what kind of forms they'll need to get the child out of Romania. They don't know what kind of documents they'll need to bring a foreign child into America . . . But after all, Jerome reasons, they've often snuck their little dog through customs in a nylon zipper bag, and at 14 pounds, the dog is somewhat larger than a baby.

Though Sylvie has already had three abortions, they believe that adopting a child is "the only elegant means of escaping from the torpor of their lives". They consider this decision – through an ethical, a feminist, global, historical and several other lenses – and agree "the Orphan Notion" to be "Stunning in its Zen perfection . . . an act through which all the pieces of Bad History could be symbolically redeemed within a single (happy!) act of synthesis". Sylvie and Jerome's ill-conceived plan is also a weapon of satire that Kraus deploys to express the futility of anyone seeking redemption from "Bad History", and to demonstrate how her characters' intellectual distance from the world inhibits them from actually having any meaningful effect in

it. "The only things worth fighting for", Sylvie thinks, "are intangible. Because she felt this very passionately, she believed it must be true." In what is perhaps the most darkly funny part of the book, Sylvie holds up her dog to look out the window of their car as they pass through a rough part of Romania, speculating that if the pooch "understands the gravity of the Romanian situation, perhaps she'll be less jealous of the baby?"

Suffering as spectacle is another rich theme in *Torpor*. Small emotional sufferings are compared to the large-scale suffering of a war-torn nation; Jerome's inheritance of trauma is a backdrop to his every interaction and thought. The question of whether the pair will adopt a child is not about parenthood so much as it is their attempt to offset a kind of suffering more urgent and valid than their own. Kraus and the reader both know that Sylvie and Jerome's adoption plot will fail, just as we all fail to escape the various oppressive forces, multinational corporations and "expansionist post-war culture" beneath which these characters thrash and rail. Despite all its winking and nudging, *Torpor* asks the very serious question of how anyone can ever make a truly ethical decision in this world. It is a question worth asking not because a clear answer to it can be reached, but because not to ask it would be a tacit agreement with the world's cruelty and prejudice.

Cynics may suggest that the resurfacing of Kraus's work can be put down to the rise of Corporatized Feminism. Extreme cynics could say that our internet-eroded dignity has enabled us to loudly declare, "I Love Dick!" with a coy wink and a hashtag – but to lump our current era in so crassly with Kraus's novels would be a mistake.

*Torpor* has less to do with the concerns of the Modern Female than with being a citizen, for better or worse, of whatever problematic country you were born in. Does your country have a problem? Do you have a problem with your country? Does your country have a problem with you? It seems two-thirds of the internet is asking us to consider these questions, and with rather less of the deftness than that offered by Chris Kraus – in which sense *Torpor* is back with us not a minute too soon.

The Jamaican-Scottish novelist Leone Ross is also a breathtakingly good author of short stories. I can envisage her as a surreal dance partner for that other brilliant writer of short stories, the poet David Constantine: both use unforgettable images, both achieve narrative drive through the absolute certainty and delicacy of their steps. Yet Ross seems to have eluded attention from mainstream publishers and critics in recent years.

Now there is a chance for her to gain the recognition she deserves, via her assured first collection, *Come Let Us Sing Anyway*, which has been fifteen years in the making. Ross writes about the big things in life – love, power and death. But she is also able to be light-hearted, playful; she is a pointilliste, a master of detail whose world materializes in clusters of precisely placed dots of colour.

Love in her writing comes in many forms, most of which subvert marriage. "Mrs Neecey Brown's husband is falling in love. Not with her, no." Love may be heterosexual, homosexual, incestuous, or, in "Art, for fuck's sake", three-way. A woman who has just

# Joining the dots

MAGGIE GEE

Leone Ross

COME LET US SING ANYWAY  
And other stories  
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finished her fifth novel gets a talking to from her friend: "Sex is good for you, Simone. You know how much man I check since you disappear into that novel?" Simone hears her, but instead a musician telephones to ask her to take part in a multimedia artwork: will she write the words for his music while his friend sculpts? She agrees, and the three of them spend weeks working in a house together, the two men praising her, patting her, ruffling her hair, sharing her like a mascot. One night the sculptor reveals his finished work, a huge

woman of apricot soapstone, and he and the musician start making love to Simone in a fluid multiplicity of ways. Finally Simone realizes that the two men can feel each other thrusting through her body, that she is the conduit for their longing for each other. Just for a second the two men "touch palms, fingers lingering".

As lyrical as Anaïs Nin but less flowery, Ross sings of desire, jealousy and sex with an explicitness few literary writers dare to attempt, never forgetting to particularize the mind quivering in the electric body. A man set to spy on a female protester in an authoritarian state falls in love with her bones: "Vertebrae marching in demonstrations, tibia spattered in tear-gas, mandible see-sawing under deep brown skin". Frustrated desire inspires some of the best writing in this collection. In "The woman who lived in a restaurant" a "woman of authority" comes into a restaurant, sits down at a table near the kitchen, and never leaves, as the staff age

all around her. The waitresses shun her, the male waiters furiously desire her after she is glimpsed orgasming in the restroom. Finally her cooling body is found by the maître d', head on the soft white cloth of the table. They try to move her but the restaurant begins to creak and roll. Her "feet have become tile like the floor; her body is no longer flesh but velvet". She is "nothing more than an expensive dining chair, pulled up to the table, and perfect for it".

Ross treats politics with the same anarchic reinvention. In one of the shortest, bleakest stories, "Echo", the poetic structure and pleasure of the prose resists the brutal facts of the real-life murder of black people, their names simply listed at the end. In "Fix" an entire novel about the merciless, starving future that may come upon us all is distilled into ten economical pages.

These stories offer constant enjoyment. Leone Ross is a writer to savour, a seducer who strokes and tickles and teases with delicious word choices. Wickedness may lurk in the room, but "outside, a hummingbird suckles pale hibiscus".