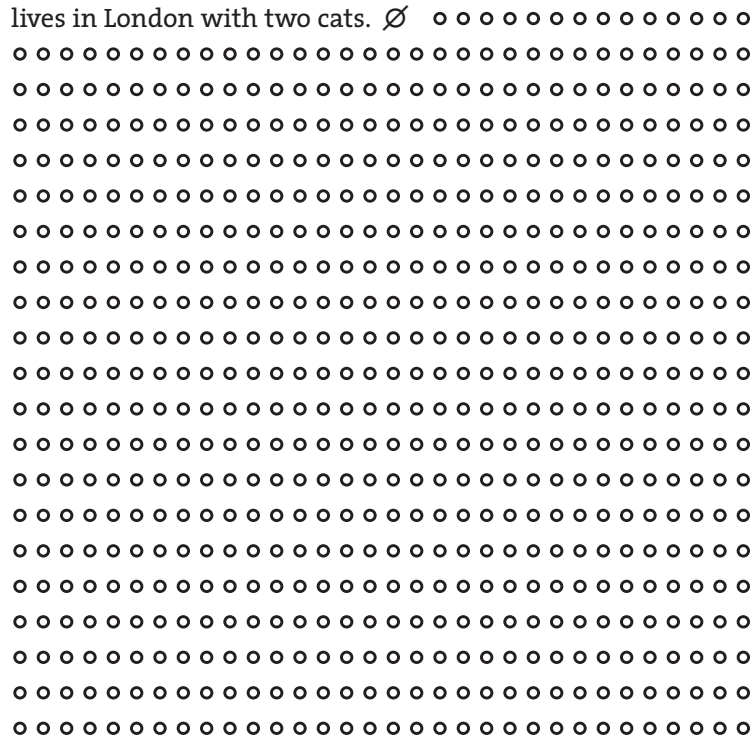
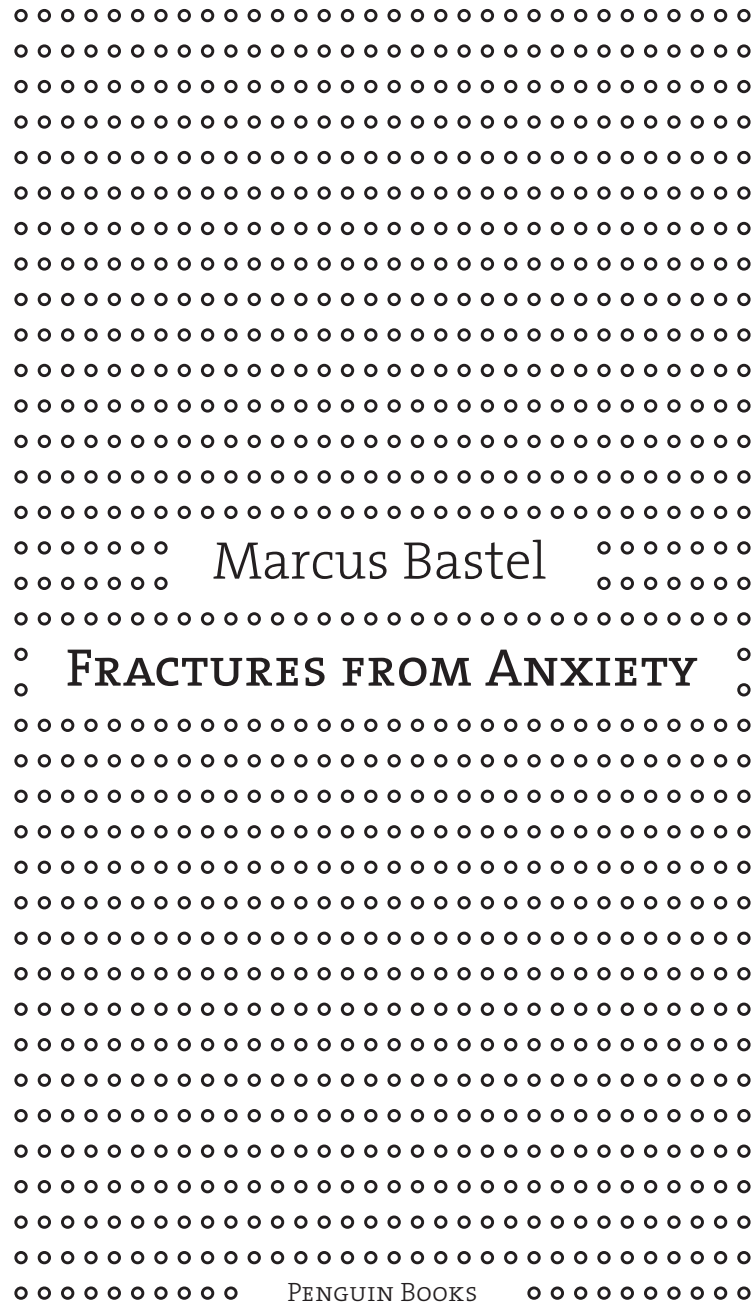
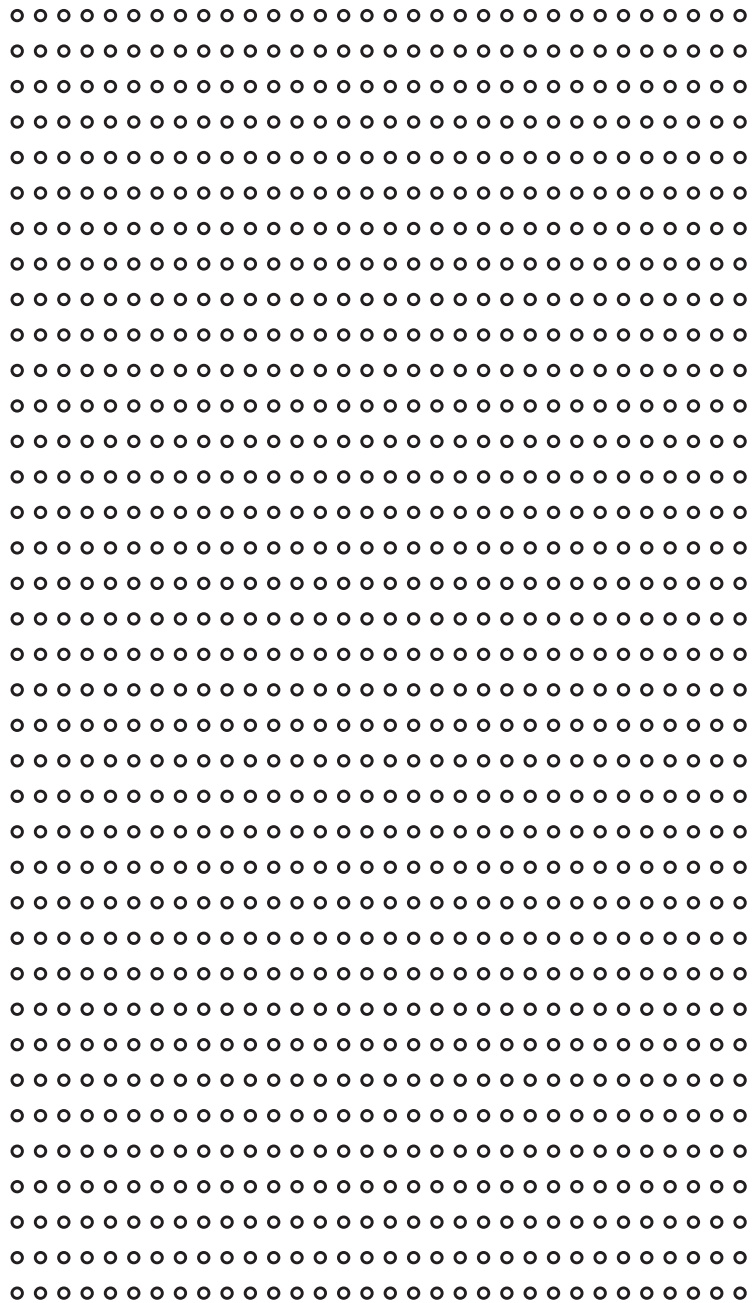


Marcus Bastel ○○○○○○○○○○○○○○○○○○○○○

Marcus Bastel was born in Frankfurt in 1967. He was internationally educated in fine art practice, studying for his degree in the UK before pursuing post-graduate studies in Amsterdam. He has won several awards and his video work has been shown across Europe. Screenings in the late 1990s in Amsterdam, Glasgow, Manchester, Milan and Paris were accompanied by invitations to publish. Early writings include art catalogues and his first collection of short stories *Part of the Narrative*, first published in 2004. Having taken some time to focus on his career development within the Computer room of the BAGD course at Central Saint Martins College of Art & Design, Bastel is now a force to be reckoned with creatively. This long awaited second volume draws together still more of the different strands of his writing to date. He lives in London with two cats. ∅

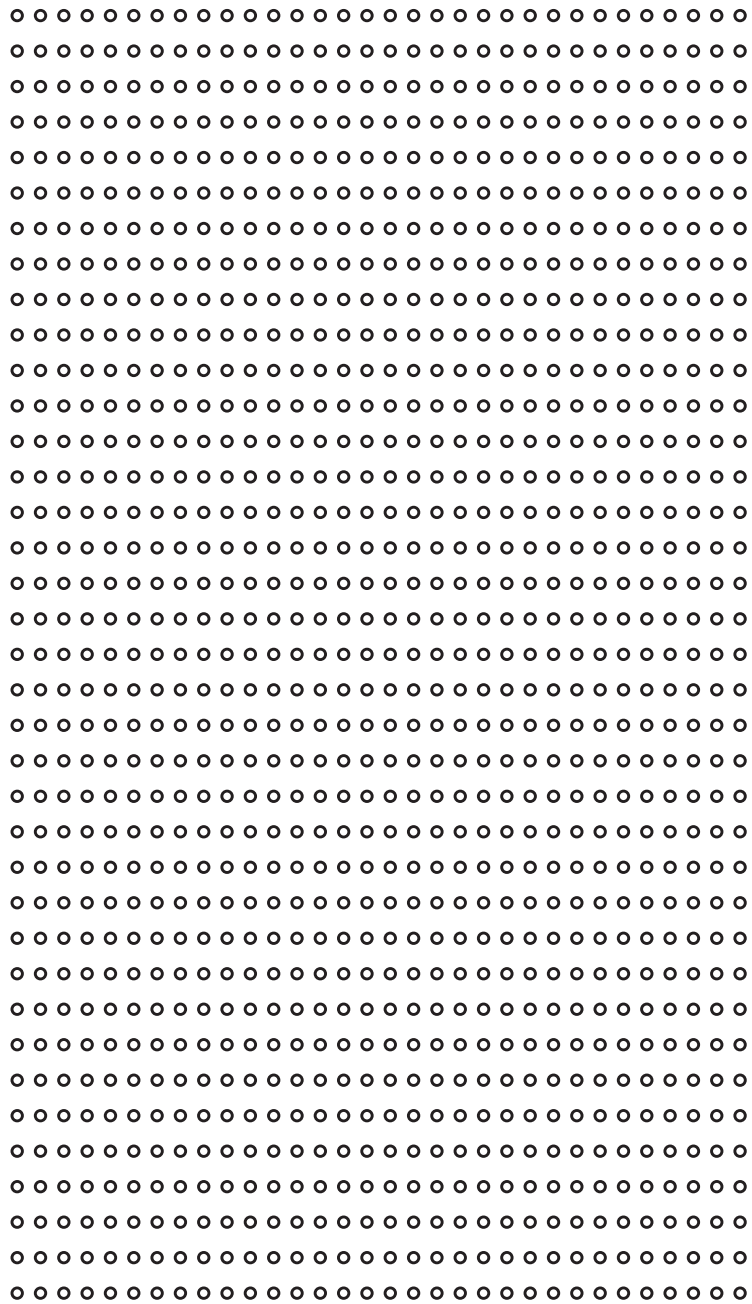




Marcus Bastel

FRACTURES FROM ANXIETY

PENGUIN BOOKS



The Other Woman ○○○○○○○○○○○○○○

Ruthie was eighty-seven when they came for her. They rang the bell and when she opened up they told her that they would have to take her away. Told her she was too old to live by herself like she had done for the past thirty-something years, ever since Walt had passed. She didn't understand what they meant, so they told her again, with patience still, but she could hear the edge of their voices taking on a sharper tone, like you would with a disobedient child, like she had done with her own, about sixty-five years earlier.

She remembered.

'It's because of them,' and her hands moved about to illustrate that them were somewhere out there watching and preying on her. 'They want to tear down this, my house and build something monstrous on top and it's just me who's been holding them up to get started, isn't it?'

They kept their voices low, when they told her that she was imagining things and that that too was reason why they were here now to take her.

'Well I ain't going nowhere,' she said to them.

That's when they brought out the paper, held it right in front of her nose and told her what it said. One of them turned it over to read it out loud to her. The paper said, that she would have to go because the law had decided for her to, had decided she was too old and too alone and probably too crazy to be by herself any longer, but they never read her that part.

To get packing they said, just the essentials for where she was about to get going to, there wasn't as much space as she was used to in her house.

She protested of course, raised her voice to them like anyone in the same position would. Younger ones who were more familiar with the laws might have called in a lawyer to slow them, but it was a thought that never crossed Ruthie's mind.

She had silver coloured hair, that she spent a great length of time with every morning to make her look decent. The

The Bird ○○○○○○○○○○○○○○○○○○○○○○○○○○○○○○○

It was tiny, she thought, as she looked with big eyes at the small creature that moved about her outstretched palm. Fluff, not quite feathers yet, covered the bird as it hopped about. Everything was small, even the noises it made. She felt its warmth, saw the heart pulsate in steady rhythm. She was only seven and knew that her mum would never let her keep it, but looking down she felt so full of love, there was so much want to look after it, feed it, befriend it, so they could relax together without the anxiety that was so apparent now. Soon her mum would come out and wonder what she was up to, then she would tell her to rid herself of the little fluffy thing and wash her hands. That's what she would do. Unless, unless there was an exception. She had learned about exceptions a while ago. There was what she could and couldn't do, and then there were exceptions. Although exceptions were mostly made for other people she knew that one day she would be allowed to have one of her own.

Maybe this was it. She decided not to tell her mum, instead got a shoebox from the garage and made a little nest for the bird. Worms and water was what birds liked and that's what she would provide for the little thing. She would have to give it a name so they could be proper and call each other something, even though the bird wouldn't be able to call back cause it was probably not a parrot and only those could speak.

She put the shoebox on the shelf in the garage when her mum called for dinner, looked inside with gentle eyes once more, before putting on the perforated lid to allow for airflow. After dinner she would try to come out again, say good night to the little bird, would know what to call it and thought Lizzy a good name. Lizzy the bird, she thought, as she was walking towards the house, after her doll by the same name.

'Doreen, go wash your hands and get to the table,' her mum said when she walked in through the kitchen. 'And

hurry, your dad is in a mood and you are holding things up.' Doreen, anxious now, not wanting to be shouted at, sped up, rigidly soaped her hands and scrubbed her nails, then looked in the mirror. Saw thick blonde hair and re-did the red clips that kept it from falling in her face. Her blue eyes sparkled with excitement when she walked into the dining room and said hello to her father, who looked her over, nodded in approval and told her to get seated.

'Little people like you still have to obey the rules, just like big people.' He pointed at his watch.

'Sorry dad,' she said and looked down on her plate, moved the food around with her fork and started eating.

When they finished their meal Doreen got up to help her mum clear the table, and being careful not to trip, she carried the plates and glasses into the kitchen. Her mind was on Lizzy. She was about to sneak from the kitchen onto the lawn, when her dad's voice stopped her.

'I don't know where you are trying to go. but it's the wrong direction, your bedroom is upstairs.'

She stopped dead, then slowly turned; with hanging shoulders she walked past her father, who looked at her, wondering what his daughter was up to.

After Doreen had gone to bed and was asleep for some time, he said to his wife that now, at almost eight, Doreen has started to develop her own mind as to how to do things and we have to be careful to guide her in the right direction. His wife gave him a tired nod from across the room.

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The next morning the girl woke when she heard her father leave the house. For a moment she lay there, listened to the silence before she could hear her mum in the kitchen. She thought of Lizzy and jumped out of bed, got dressed then ran down the stairs and through the kitchen onto the sun covered lawn. Her mum shouted a good morning and looked on as the little girl crossed the lawn and went into the garage.

She was behaving a little strange, she thought, a tad out of

kilter, then went on to prepare breakfast for the two of them. Doreen went up to the shelf to take down the box, careful not to wake the bird in case it was still asleep. She carried the box outside and knelt down on the grass before she took off the lid to look at the little piece of fluff that was curled up on itself, lying there quietly and unmoving. For a moment Doreen just sat quietly watching.

She waited for movement, then stretched little fingers and gently stroked the small creature. The bird felt clammy and cold, not like it had the day before when she saw its chest pulsate with heartbeat. Her fingers pushed and the bird rolled, its little head lolling from side to side.

'Lizzy,' the girl sobbed, her big blue eyes filled with water her shoulders shaking back and forth. Suddenly her mum was standing next to her. She looked down at her daughter and from her into the box with the dead creature.

'What's that in the box Doreen?'

'It's Lizzy,' she said through a steady stream of tears, 'she's dead.'

'Death,' thought her mother. 'What a strange concept at the age of seven.'

'Where did she come from,' she asked.

'I found her under the big tree by the fence yesterday.'

'And you didn't tell!?'

Doreen shook her head.

'Well, let's bury it where you found it,' her mother said. She went into the garage to get a shovel, then walked up to the tree by the fence, dug into the soft soil till a hole was made big enough for the shoebox, that had once carried Doreen's shoes and had now turned into a coffin. Looking down at her daughter she could see that Doreen was in fact wearing those shoes.

The little girl was still crying when she put the coffin into the hole, her mum quick to cover it with soil.

'Do you want to say something? Now is the time,' she said, impatient.

'Lizzy,' Doreen said, 'she was a good bird, please keep her

warm and look after her god. Thank you.' Tears were rolling down her cheeks, when her mum turned to take the shovel back to the garage.

'Now go wash your hands,' she said as she walked away. Ø

Blind Man's Bluff ○○○○○○○○○○○○○○○○○

Ellie was blind, had been since she was born. All she knew of the world was the way it felt to her hands and skin. She knew the taste and smell of things and her ears picked up sounds that were lost on those that watched her. At the age of thirty-three Ellie was an attractive woman living by herself in a one bed apartment just down the road. The neighbours liked the blind woman and many called on her when they felt in need of an ear to listen. By a few words she was able to judge a mood.

Her voice was a little deeper than you would expect from a person her size. Ellie was a small slender woman. She had thick deep dark brown hair, brown eyes, a wonderfully rounded nose and full lips that often wore a smile. Her voice had a somewhat calming effect when she talked to you about whatever it was you brought to her. It worked its magic on the world around, made it feel brighter, more colourful, more liveable; it took burdens of shoulders and accounted for her popularity. But people not only went to see her when they were troubled, they came to tell stories and listen to hers, sat in the small garden out front in the summer sun sipping strong hot cups of coffee and you could hear their laughs carry. Young girls only just into their teens would come to talk of boys they fancied, brought broken hearts to be mended and the boys would knock on her door just after to tell their side of the story. More than just one wedding in the neighbourhood had her as a guest of honour and couples returned with new born babies for her to adore. Ellie loved babies and was planning on having at least two herself, but for now she remained on her own, even though suitors came by, spent many hours in conversation

man's voice, not from close by but from afar, calling for the dog, who hesitates, then waves its tail, turns and runs in that playful manner young dogs do when they play, still taking scent gradually fading into the undergrowth. Ø

The Signing ○○○○○○○○○○○○○○○○○○○○○

I read about it in the paper, Elmore Leonard would be signing his books today, in a shop, in town, 12:30.

I was in the bathtub when I read it, thought James Ellroy first, always did, always confused the two before I got it right. I had a book of short stories by Elmore. That was all, he wasn't Ellroy he was Elmore, I pondered as I played with foam bubbles and tried to keep the paper from getting wet.

Elmore, 12:30, the signing was close to where I worked. I could make it there and back during my lunch hour with some time to spare for a sandwich. The idea was formed. I left work fifty minutes after I got there to get my book signed and maybe buy another while I was there.

I took some of my short stories to give to the man in return. An exchange of goods and appreciation. I would take them out of the bag as I was to retrieve his book and casually push them over.

He would look up, raise an eyebrow in a questioning manner and I would nod at him as if to say, 'It's OK, these are for you, you can keep them and read them and perhaps if you find time, you can get back to me with some words of encouragement and we can be friends.' Something like that anyhow.

Then I stood in the queue that stretched to the nearest corner outside the shop. The sun shone down, it was a bright warm day, one of the first that year, the queue was slow to move. It took twenty minutes till I saw the man, sat behind a desk, spare pens to his left, a pile of his books between me and him and two people ahead. I browsed the titles on the table, none meant anything so I picked up the latest, somehow thinking that it was good to read either the early works or the late works

then compare, and as a writer myself I would look at how things were done, then and now.

One man in front of me now.

I ruffled through my bag, to retrieve the book I had brought to avoid any queue, it had been a needless exercise.

My short stories were in the same bag, just that I couldn't bring myself to take them out. Least of all put them on the table in front of the man, nodding. My palms got sweaty and my mouth went dry when it was down to me to move up, I put the two books down and he said something I couldn't make out. He was eighty-one then, and I couldn't hear.

My knees trembled.

I told him my name.

'C-U-S?' he asked. I didn't understand, then it dawned on me that he spelled it out and I nodded. 'All the best' and 'Take it easy' he wrote. 'For Marcus' he wrote above, and underneath he signed his name.

I said thank you, took the books and moved on, my nerves calmed, I relaxed, somewhat excited.

Later that day I wondered why it had been me whose nerves had given in when I stood in front of him, clearly it was down to him to be nervous.

Later still, I regretted that I hadn't been bold enough to push my stories across the table, nodding.

We could have been friends. Ø ○○○○○○○○○○○○○○○○○○○○○

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