

capital of the UK for a few years now. People suddenly realised there was nice stuff in the bit between Soho Farmhouse and Padstow, and now everyone who's anyone is racing to Paddington after work on a Friday to make sure they're in-country in time for the acid jazz and scrumpy barn dance* at Hauser & Wirth.

The Somerset outpost of the gallery has been a totem of the irresistible rise of the Near West since it opened five years ago in Bruton. Among other emporia and eateries, it is home to At The Chapel: "a restaurant, bedrooms, bakery, terrace and clubroom" and former church in the centre of the market town that clearly ushered religion and grammar out the door when the open kitchen was installed. When it's full ("Sorry, we are at At Capacity"), visitors can decamp to a new hotel, The Newt in Somerset, which is what nearby stately home Hadspen House (whose foundations date back to the late 17th century) is now called thanks to owners Karen Roos and Koos Bekker. The South African couple have been renovating the old pile for the past six years, so at long last it has a hammam, a "cyder" press and a farm shop — things none of those feckless Georgians ever had the good sense to install.

Then there's Frome, which rhymes with tomb. The hilly, semi-cobbled town is home to the gargantuan street market "The Frome Independent", with its slogan "SHOP (independently) EAT (seasonally) SLEEP (easily) REPEAT (monthly)", and entices thousands of visitors every four weeks.

(As luck would have it, I'm writing this on a train that has just passed through Frome. The carriage is now full to the brim with exhausted get-aways and tat-shoppers who have just this instant come to a stark and depressing realisation: the density of the crowd and the direction of travel has shown them they weren't the first Londoners to come here. They probably weren't even the first Batterseans to have exciting get-away sex in that yurt.)

I grew up in the Near West, so I feel about it a little differently. I was born in Yeovil, which is an objectively shit place. A large Somerset town with a hospital at the top, a Frankie & Benny's at the bottom and not much in between. My school was in Gillingham (hard "G") in Dorset, which, like most towns in the area, has had its character gutted by the arrival of major supermarkets and discount stores. Legends, our nightclub, was on the trading estate. We would go to either Salisbury (Salisbury-Ledge) or Sherborne (Shledge) beforehand and get the last boozy train back. To finish, it was chips and cheese from Marmaris for the walk home.

There was no Jospo grill at Legends, sadly.

Independent markets were scarce, but we had the Gillingham & Shaftesbury Show once a year, where you could buy tractors and meat and cartons of thick brown cider. My older sisters went to school in Bruton, so I would often go with mum or dad in the Montego to pick them up. By my recollection, it was always raining in Bruton, but that can't be true, unless there was some pathetic fallacy for my anguish at having to move to the back seat when the girls got in. We'd also go there to play football against Sexey's (seriously), the fellow comprehensive whose Dickensian pitch was atop a high plateau behind a housing estate. Their goalkeeper, who I'm sure was a nice chap, was the lardiest 17-year-old I had ever seen. Fine from long distance but a nightmare one-on-one.

On the way out of town the one-way system took you under a railway bridge, past Texaco and the turning for outdoor-activity-centre-and-tetanus-jab-waiting-to-happen, Mill on the Brue, before swinging right up to the dark, narrow, vaguely threatening high street. There was something

of the night about Bruton; something on which Tim Burton could base an animated film.

Ironically, I am both beholden to and tempted by the Near West. I have to go there a few times a year to see my family, but I also want to go there because I'm a thirty-something Londoner with disposable income and an Instagram account thirsty for authentic experiences. I, like my fellow lifestyle curators, search high and low for the holy trinity of artisanal pies, locally-fired pottery and Aesop-approved bathrooms. The Near West has loads of all three.

I never went to America on that voyage of literary discovery. I spent all my Beckford money on petrol, Golden Virginia and lock-ins at the The Benett Arms (which is a very Beat triumvirate, as it happens). But if I had, I might have come back to a home I didn't recognise. A home that belied my own memory, a home that was at once the same and completely different. Instead, the path of my life has led to me living above a chicken shop in Finsbury Park, so the Near West is my Shangri-la. ◊

**Not a real thing, sorry.*

Fitness

THE GUNSLINGER

Michael Holden

We need a new photograph of you!" yells the receptionist at the gym. Not because I am slimmer or fitter or stronger in some before-and-after way that might serve the gym's own push for self-promotion.

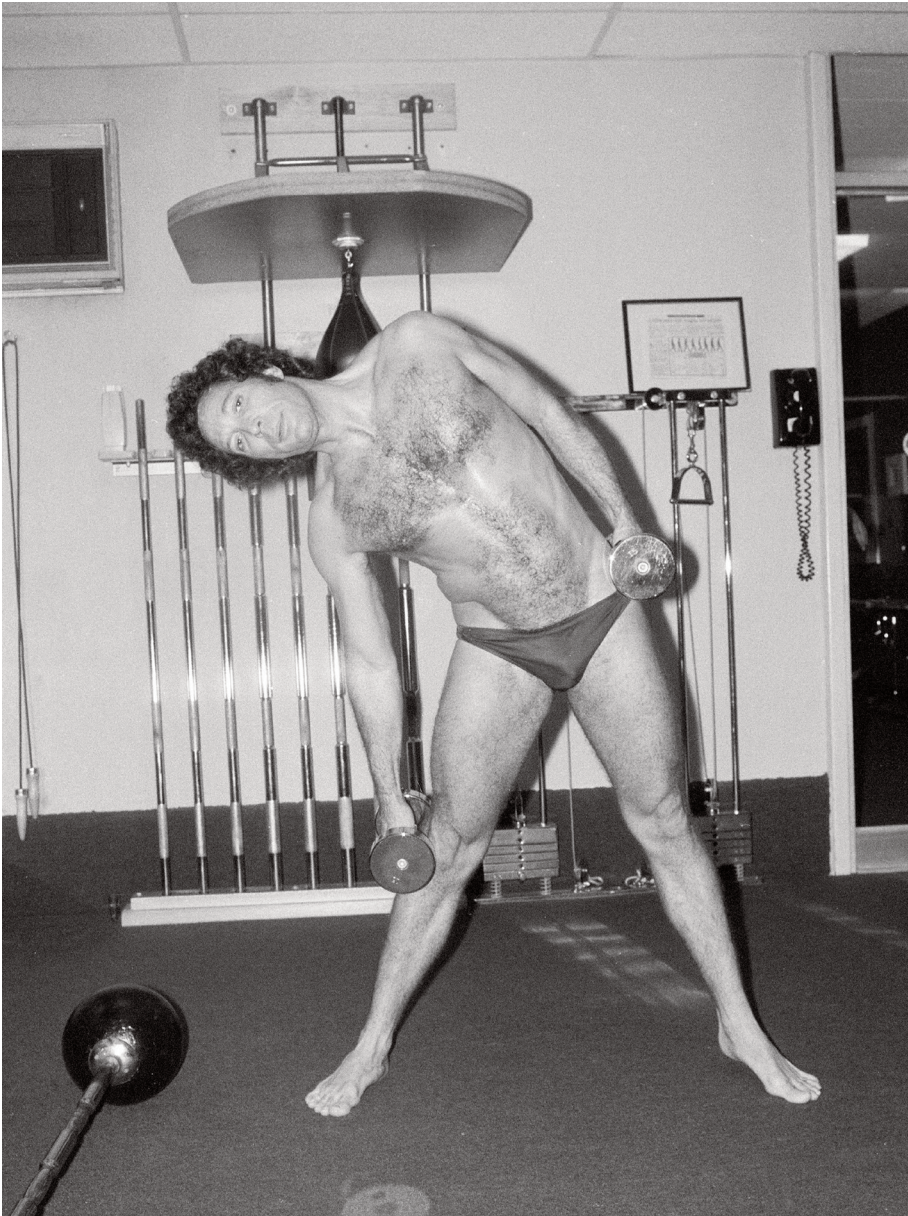
No. They need a new picture of me because I have aged. The receptionist, probably still at school when I first came here, is trying to read my expression, since I have frozen just past the turnstile to contemplate my fate in one of the place's many mirrors. To contemplate my fate, and the fact it has indeed been 16 years since I first came in.

"Sixteen years of fitness!" he shouts as I trudge down to change.

There, in another inescapable mirror, I see what I've become. Balder and wiser, a living witness to gravity. This is about the size of it, and me. The bulk, the power, the hench and the heft have somehow proved elusive. What has not escaped me, on this long excursion into the underworld of unnecessary effort, is the rise in my fellows' vanity.

I'm sure it never used to be this way, or at least not quite so open. Since the early 2000s, the changing room has devolved into a humid crevice of literal, balls-out, self-regard. One move has come to typify this, I call it "The Gunslinger". Those who do this I condemn to a class of their own.

There are a pair of hairdryers before a mirror by the lockers. To perform the perfect



Gunslinger, one must emerge still damp from the showers (itself a capital crime), toss one's towel to the floor with maximum disregard for it, me and the cleaning staff, and then apply both dryers simultaneously to everything but the hair on your head while maintaining eye contact with yourself for the duration.

That one might come here to exercise yet find the final act of towelling oneself dry unconscious is baffling enough. That such behaviour is twinned to a complete absence of self-awareness is perhaps less surprising.

To achieve full marks here, one must then cover one's bone-dry-at-the-expense-of-the-planet body with a cloud of spray deodorant and leave briskly, past the sinks. (Where someone will be having a shave, and not cleaning

that up — another habit whose punishment hell ought be expanded to fit.)

If you think men are getting more sensitive because they are buying more cosmetics or being sold them in a different way, I bring terrible news. The beast that would, for sport, entrap his mate to huff flatulence beneath a duvet, has not died but just become more fragrant, the better to admire himself.

Odds are the scented Gunslinger will have spent much of his "session" sat motionless on each piece of equipment you would like to use, while staring at his phone. This behaviour is no more than a decade old but has gone from dick-move to de rigueur with grim acceleration.

Smartphones have even muscled into the sauna. The first person I saw doing this

— steam-swiping — then exited and left the door open. If you and I were to be the last ones left alive on this dying planet and you asked me when exactly the death knell rang, I would offer this as my suggestion, before towelling myself dry of tears, and jogging proudly away with moderate if visually unremarkable fitness for someone of my age.

Even the most annoying man in history, who has been coming here almost as long as I have and likes to scream "Yes!" and whoop, grunt and wheeze as he drops incredible arrays of free weights to the mat in triumph, is powerless against this self-regarding new wave. This man moves so quickly through the equipment that the noise he makes is offset by the speed of the display. Yet I have seen even him retreat from a younger man who looks like a tattooed Ralph Fiennes and trains with his girlfriend (separate circle of hell, again, for couples' fitness) and isn't getting out of anyone's way until he's done laughing at his phone and talking to her about how much money he makes.

One expects to find the music or the dialect or the politics of the young in some measure ridiculous as one grows old, such are the scant perks of ageing, but one is puzzled above all by what is happening to their bodies. A phenomenon even more baffling than what has not happened to mine. Between the phone staring and the mirror glancing and the unabashed bicep kissing, there is a dramatic upsurge in men's size. When *Geordie Shore* started in 2011, you would have been forgiven for thinking this archetype — body-hairless fist-man with neat but volumised coiffure — was just a regional problem. But as you will have noticed, this is now nationwide and going global.

Where, given all the vanity and inertia on display, do they find the time? It seems that many of us don't, as there is much chat among the mists between gorillas about how to cut corners in the quest for muscle definition that cannot be defined by mere biology and effort. "Tabs or jabs?" is the question among the steroid brethren. What, I would ask, if this were a more convivial space, are you going to do with all that meat you're manifesting? What do you get up to when you get home?

Is this, perhaps, the tragedy of the modern metro strongman? All that muscle, and nothing to lift but a phone. I slip past the young, dysmorphic giants and leave the gym unnoticed, resolving to keep my ageless, reverse-Dorian Gray snapshot in the system, for another 16 years, ideally. Which is, of course, a vanity of its own. I hide from my reflection one last time and recite the mid-life mantra and serenity plea: "It must be them; it can't be me." ○