

The labyrinth

Tales of Entanglement. Escape



Ambiguities and escapisms of the psyche are exposed in fifteen stories - entwining motifs of conscience and repression, freedom and fixation, atonement and suicide, rivalry, intimacy and responsibility - rendered with forensic directness, a wide poetic vision, and a startling cast of protagonists.

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Also by this Writer

Awareness Alone enquires into the heart of experience, the eternal dance of absolute awareness. Grasping that awareness is all we can ever be, beyond an endless becoming born of desire and fear, we uncover the miracle of our own borderless freedom.

The Wandering Distanced from partner Marsha and her daughter Matty by physical and psychic wanderings into geographic places, historical scenes, other lives... the narrator Blank dances solo with his unavoidable other, claiming to alert her to opaque parts of his nature and to her own: on clinging and running, victim and perpetrator, freedom and fundamentalism, splitting and taking responsibility... and on Samsara, the trivial endless recurrence. *The Wandering* is Blank's ruminating travelogue, tainted-love diary, mythic karmic romance, meditation on being and becoming, conscience and commitment.

The Elusive: Three Novellas Personal quests for integrity within the complications and ironies of relationships are chronicled in this trio of novellas. **The Adventures of Sally Bang** charts an unruly anti-heroine's coming of age, and a ghost writer's need to possess. At sixteen there's insight and beauty that never come again, and within every adult is a wish to get it back. What is gained and lost with growing up, and whose story is it anyway? **Commitment** ensnares a standoffish narrator in dilemmas of want, in a psychologic navel-gaze in cliffhanger style on the elusive as romance, the tango of intimacy and distance, conformism and the irrational. **In Search of Francesca Mars** exposes an artist's vision of a self-immolating media star who tilts at strange awakening, who toys with all who need to put her on a pedestal or drag her down. A close-skinned portrayal of ambition and use, the politics of giving and wanting, glamour and ugliness, the artifice of art, the problem of value.

Total Drama (Macmillan Education Australia, 2010) investigates the dynamics of interpersonal encounters and the core ingredients of drama through original scripts and exercises.

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WARRIOR WOMAN

There is a scene that will not fade away, the one on a summer's afternoon where Matty is dancing in her swimsuit in the upper room and waves of wind are lifting the blinds so that green sea is visible beyond the balcony and the trees. Mother is out but expected back from the city, and young Matty has not invited her friends to the house. At this moment Michael Jackson's *Bad* is blaring since Matty has lately discovered it. It has not gone unnoticed that the swim items are Christmas gifts from Cool Uncle Grant, and she's loudly thanked him in front of everyone. Today she has chosen the skimpiest combination (of three) to parade in. When Matty chooses, she is all charming leggy girly freshness, a break (not without the tiniest hint of irony) from her usual brooding style. Though the fresh breeze is welcome, one error never to make with Matty is to underestimate, since she likes little risks at the expense of people who might think they have control of her. An important detail at this moment is that she is dancing with your writer (let's call him BLANK). He usually knows better than to do this, but unaccountably today he tells himself *It's summer, she is not a child, what's the harm?* She is not quite an adult either, we have to say. Blank fakes up his funky Jackson gestures - to entertain you understand - but Matty looks delighted and wants him to teach the moves. Today she's eleven, not fifteen. It all goes well with ironic and jerky beats but then comes a ballad, one of Jacko's soupy world-improvers... and here's Matty with her arms about his neck and swaying very close in some kind of undulating semi-sexual wandering daze. And this (you guessed it) is where mother Marsha walks in. Matty lets herself get a little snaky, and Blank wrinkles his brow and shrugs at Marsha. But she's walked to the balcony in that insensitive hot way he doesn't like, and done some kind of sudden-violent thing there while Matty clings, unmusically undulating her twiggy butt. He's silly enough to want to grab her hands and try a sixties' twist or some such, anything but disengage in a businessy way and say *Okay Matty, enough games, Mum's home*. But Marsha's stomp down the stairs means there's nothing left that's not embarrassing, and it gets him annoyed, and anger as we know sucks in undissolved shit like nails to a magnet, and he feels prickly-hot and a load of mental guff he was scarcely aware of starts to chatter at fine pitch. Matty is suddenly keen to know what's happening at sea and runs to the railing, stomach-swoops over and shouts to unseen fellows before legging it out with not a glance at her would-be sex partner. Blank lets Jacko's music run awhile to let things turn incontrovertibly normal, then descends. Marsha is in her kitchen, and he looks for a way to take hold of her but she won't be diverted from unloading her shop stuff, no way. The man reminds himself how effing unreasonable women are. A weird version of nothing is said and he walks out and down the beach path. There's Matty on the sand dancing elf-like with herself. He calls out but she skitters out of reach, antennae flicking. And look, there's Cool Uncle Grant, splayed out and looking buff in his board shorts, and she plunks down beside him and finger-walks over his wax-smooth chest.

He yanks at her hair, she yelps loudly, he laughs gutterally, she wiggles away, he scores a sweet slap on her behind. At the far end is a gaggle of beach boys, and now she merges in them as if nothing in the world were more natural than schmoozing with her in-crowd. Blondy uncle Grant pretends to not watch, then spies your writer and curls his lip before re-assembling his customary world-seducing pose. Wan-ker.

Parental viewers may at this point have grasped the matter. Daughter Matty would like to prove a thing to her mother Marsha. What though? Okay, that she is closer to her Daddy who walked right out when she was twelve. Let's see: maybe Daddy was driven off by mummy's control-freak persona and mummy tries ultra-hard to mould Matty to be like her 'cause the girl really isn't like her and Marsha sees the truth in Matty's sullen arcane look (adolescents are masters at sullen-arcane) and though on the surface these two get on like mother and daughter Marsha grinds her teeth because she resents how the outrages of children always need to be healed in the hospital of her own heart, how she has to pay attention to minefields of delicate self-feelings, and being the self-evidently-right no-nonsense type is in a permanent hot quandary. Yadda! Matty has this all worked out, and sabotages mummy by sliding close to future stepdaddy (your writer) not to mention cool surfie Uncle, especially on a steamy summer's afternoon - so that Marsha will have to swallow her bestial paranoia and avoid re-doing the obvious, which is the habit she has of throwing pesky males out of her life. Mum did that before, oh yeah. This time, any such throw-out would get diabolically complex and everyone knows it. Marsha will fail to admit to guilt projection (that is, how she gets shitty with daughter and present male as crude substitute for not looking into her past) and the (ir)relevant male will think: why the hell should I give in to her keyhole judgment of me and Matty's relationship? and this in the end is why he decides to walk out, go awol, exit, vamoose. Current boyfriend (*the name is Blank, James Blank*) cleverly saves his woman the bother of forcing him out, saves her from stewing further in her own complex of guilt and guilt-rejection. But to pull off his exit he has to downgrade young Matty in his need hierarchy, which is a risky psychologic stratagem, and Marsha will get right onto that, using it as an excuse to label the guy callous and self-serving. Which she'll then proceed to convince her daughter of. This is hard for Blank or any other male to take from a woman who is victim to her own *animus*. Still, he reflects that if people think they've been punished, and usually because it's a thing they've entertained in their hurt-body a long time, they easily default to victim status or outrage status or oscillate incoherently between these two cousins. Where did all the victimisation and outrage begin for Marsha? In the nebulous mists of life? No no, it began with the walkout of her own father. She was a child. Blank thereby reassures himself that all the mess between he and his woman is hardly personal, instead it is just a great historical worm that turns. This impersonal view in part justifies his decision to turn into the slippery so-called wanderer who'll narrate this story. And though the continual walkouts of Marsha's several partners only mirror her own father's great crime, this sadly is the limitation of males in the matter.

Meanwhile, daughter Matty at fifteen cultivates a gothy weird unaccountable streak, which your writer would describe as 'mystical'. Maybe Andreas (her dad) gave it to her. Blank thinks he can relate to it, because Marsha has no such streak. Instead she has what can be described as a crudely wild and demanding one. In this way Matty sometimes apes her mother since it's convenient for a calculating little bower bird like her, but in other ways she has to run from her like everyone else. Meanwhile Marsha with her insecure egoism needs to insert herself in Matty. Can a child deal with that? Why wouldn't Matty perform subtle but deep refusal? And this brings up another deepy matter. Marsha has long chosen to claim Matty *attempted suicide* at twelve years of age, and that it was the parental break-up that triggered it. Matty chooses to snakily deny all this. But her semi-guilty semi-alooof father Andreas has long since been browbeaten by Marsha to accept the self-harm scenario. Marsha has no shame when it comes to winning her points. She needs her power, and wouldn't be aware how to ever turn off that tap. Because the fact is Andreas walked out on *her*, whatever his reasons. He told Blank his reasons once, and they lie squarely in the personality of Marsha. Anyway, she will find a way to turn out the wounded party: victim or aggressor, it doesn't matter. She can easily careen between both, avoiding the necessity to actually ask someone in her self-referential goddam world for a little bit of tender help.

'And, Marsha is the self-referring type who generates energy out of her perpetual frustration vortex (simmers the writer Blank). I could never fulfill her needs, since with all men she repeats the guilty or callous circuit we've described. She's even happy to let us label her an arch feminist, but it's no more than a pose. Or sometimes she will claim to the males in her life that it's responsibility for children that frustrates her, that she never *needed* a child. Alternately she'll use Matty as a specious argument that she wants to 'serve human beings', but this is her superego, her conscience talking. And, I secretly admit she might be a braver and more adventuresome version of wanderer than I could ever be. She reminds me caustically she wouldn't ever try to 'wiggle away' like I do. Matty is not even my stepdaughter, but in fact she signifies what I might have wanted but was too afraid to want. Matty is like a pivot to my dilemma, of escape-artist versus doer of duty. And I admit that Marsha in raising the child may have done hard yards I never could. So Marsha suspects I was only ever jumping on her bandwagon, though she got me to walk out her door, which to me is so totally an example of the confusion in her life. I see time and again there's no proper place in this world for her energies to be put. She will claim there is. If she only knew what they were. Somewhere, I feel I ought to offer her something, try to work her out.

Marsha meanwhile is happy to drag at the likes of Andreas' and my own sense of duty by parading her brother as 'stable uncle'. She'll neglect to notice how he tends to dwell on Matty's tippy little arse. While Uncle Grant knows how to look incalculably cool to the teens, they all twitteringly know he's hardly seen with the same woman twice. With me gone, Grant won't be able to bag me to

Marsha since he needs me here to save the bother of putting his money where his mouth is in the role-model stakes. Marsha won't allow that he's the sort who'd shaft anyone to suit himself, precisely the type of male she should be despising. I try not to let him dictate to my conscience, though I think of putting Grant up as a convenient obstacle to my aversion to facing Marsha (though I'd be a fool to view him as a low-down version of myself). She uses her brother since she obviously can't settle her mind about me, and by this I claim, at a distance, to have some cachet and bargaining power. Meantime, Matty knows she's at the centre of the wars we adults fight, and she will use all of it. But it'll cost her.

A version of me says I in the end failed to be loyal to Marsha and Matty. But then Marsha didn't want my loyalty. It would mean I'd always hang around, and she needs her freedom though her late outrage as 'woman abandoned' won't let her admit it to me. Tough women need to have their cake and eat it. I look forward to the day when she can up-front admit her liaisons don't last. Or she might pre-empt and say it's not a problem to admit it, thereby cheapening my sense that I was once of value to her. Maybe there's no ultimate value in this life, only liaisons. We stick together for mutual benefit then move on. Everything has its use and purpose, though she won't want to hear that from me; she can't stomach my philosophic pronouncements at the best of times. I long since learnt to keep those to myself. They sound twee anyway when they leave my mouth, watered down for people who mistrust self-therapy or anything beyond life's surface securities. I told you Marsha got Matty out of her second marriage to Andreas, which we don't say is a failure since she has Matty in her grasp, and since all things have their use and purpose, and since we can't cherry-pick this or that to suit our fragile sense of success or failure, which is always dangerously subjective and self-serving. Me, I say goodbye to duty. Marsha knows all about that, having once been a soldier. Duty: I imposed it on myself as a by-product of needing her and her daughter. Then when Marsha got used to the sticky presence of it, she assimilated it in her self-universe without thought, such that when it was withdrawn, at least bodily, she was at first surprised then suitably outraged as if she were the inventor and instigator of my duty in the first place. But I may be too hard. Her fixed personality can't stand being shaken or blindsided. She did kind of 'surrender' though, in a semi-sexy parodic way after I first demanded a relationship with her. We both recall the turmoil I found her in when the Andreas marriage broke up. What she won't recall is how my quiet patient attendance was never allowed to salve her continual lurch to outrage at being dumped. The dump, artfully executed on Andreas' part as a kind of cruel-to-be-kind extrication of himself, was cruel for the reason it was calculated. Marsha had jerrybuilt a set of expectations about him that he couldn't explain to her were unreal. He finally labelled it a *liaison* - and it was, from where he was standing. But Marsha shouted that a relationship in which a child is involved is far more than that, since it was she who decided he was worth having a baby with. See how everyone's character or lack of it is predicated on Marsha's judgment? Now she can't stomach that she ever attributed such moral character to him, and she is embarrassed. So when I

turned up and she initially fobbed me off, she told herself she didn't want to make the same mistake for my sake. No question of facing up to me personally. See, it's always a question of courage and fear. We just don't want to admit to things. That'll be one reason why I am writing to her from a distance of several thousand miles (though I suspect she reads my messages to the end). By the way, I hear Andreas has run off to deepest Pakistan and is doing vaccinations and almost getting himself killed by some local Islamists who thought he was a stooge of the West. He's really some kind of guy to stand up to fundamentalists. She should have stayed married to him. Then I wouldn't have had to turn up on my white horse.

...Marsha, no big meditator on life, will assert she knows all things instinctively, that the fact she decides to do something makes it right. Chutzpah? Yessir, and if things go wrong it's because she's had the big heart to let other people in and make their big filthy mistakes on her turf. But behind the bludgeoning self-assurance is the shadow: some kind of brave vulnerability, some physical blind belief in her own resource, like a child whose big severe eyes demand everything, and which slope out of focus when things don't go her way, where there's no reflection on why, just *what - me?* It's her vulnerability, her big childy sorrow. Then she gets jack of that feeling and defaults to impatience, and the events are shoved in the back cupboard of the mind, mere proof positive that one shouldn't ever be soft in this life, that reflectiveness does no good. Yet that childy void is what most of her men respond to in their necessarily averted hearts. And the merry-go-round of the relationships is precisely how they are never granted any space to nurture or celebrate her...

I suppose we can make a case for saying it was good that Marsha joined the army at nineteen. Having had no father since childhood and wanting either some kind of revenge or needing to assert the proper idea of duty, she took on this gritty job, maybe a job a man should do. Hard realism substituted for softness, certainty replaced confusion. Still, she is complex, and to analyse is probably patronising. But what other outlet for me in my exile, caught between a sense of injustice and pity? Anyway, the physical demand of the military was probably right for her and compensated her ambivalent attitudes to sex. There, I said it. We men want to love the woman inside, but the carapace is scary. I contend that all her men had this dilemma, since Marsha holds men at rigid arm's length. And since Marsha's extremes attract their opposites and since there's no self-therapy, she can't imagine that getting balance in her life could be a supreme act of peace. Outsiders wait too long for that, and we boys are all outsiders. Matty feels it too, and probably feels solidarity with us. She sure showed 'solidarity' with me when it suited her. It's because I bet she understands why I left that I still write to her, though I tend to abuse our relationship with philosophy. An example:

'Hello Matty. For your eyes only, as usual. Your so-called 'incident of self-harm' three years back that all the adults go on about: you really don't need to deny it. To protest against peoples' idiot acts was maybe the only thing you could have done. Here's my take on things. If my shirt is clammy I

change it. Does it make me feel better? Temporarily. If I get sick of the place I'm living in, I guess I'll move house, and if I'm fed up with my marriage I'll likely get a divorce! Again, if a nasty thought comes I might think of replacing it with a better one. Likewise if I've had enough of being in my body, I might think of getting the hell out! I understand how sick people feel. Let them get out, but let them see that life itself is never-ending, that there's no way any of us can avoid participating in some form or other. I mean, though your body can be kicked out from under, *you* can never be erased. So if we are resisting problems, should we try to run from them or turn and deal with them? Snag: there's usually a limit to how much we can face in one go. After all this time my instinct is to turn and face and deal, knowing there's nothing really to lose. Bring it on, in other words. We have to deal and deal and deal till we recognise there's nothing to lose, except our freedom. To adapt makes us strong because the game is forever. Adults clearly get very prickly at young people attempting self-harm since they're in denial themselves. But you have a chance to do better, be wiser. Every generation can do better than the last, and in fact we leap-frog over each other. You might be my future parent! Then I can give you the middle finger and you can get mad and give me mature slash boring advice like I'm doing now. But I *am* a respecter of the young. They know things because they've been round the block plenty of times before. So it struck me as ironic your mum went and joined the military so young. Fair enough, she was confused and probably angry but - don't they get trained to kill people? I doubt if she'd want to be in the military now. You are surely her peace-offering to this world. Your coming along got her out of it all. She surely sees that if we kill others we kill ourselves, and that if we kill ourselves we kill others. Marsha wants you to live, Matty, and maybe wants you to be strong in a way she hasn't discovered yet. Let's you and me work on her. I'd say she's definitely worth it.'

One time, she and I were jealous of Marsha because she took a trip on her own to Florida and Mexico. This was after I'd offered more time to look after Matty. She grabbed at the opportunity so quick Matty and me felt like fools. And then she had such a great time and on coming back seemed to have found some new world-affirming insouciance, some energised purposeful guffawing optimism that seemed to derail the reasons why we were associated with her, to throw into shadow all the self-esteem we had, or to nullify the idea that she was a person who in the long run needed us. Wandering off seemed made for her! We never really learned any details of the trip, and could only suspect at the wondrous japes and lushy liaisons she got up to. And yet a week or two after, the old stress suddenly showed up, and we felt guilty for being obstacles in her life again. But then Marsha takes things on with such bare-toothed effort that we revert to feeling strangely sorry for her. She struts about the neighbourhood in high boots and some flash coat she maybe picked up in Florida, as if a closet spy or wonder-woman, big bundle of expectation who seems to want to invent bigger things than things can ever deliver... her blonde hair flaunted in a fan about her arched shoulders, or (worse sign) held up high in that face-stretching topknot. Hair up or hair down, these are bellwether signals of her inner state.

Once, Marsha told us, she got herself tangled in a 'violent incident' at army boot camp during final passing-out examinations. Why she chose to talk about it at all is a good question, and she only mentioned it once. Once was all that was needed, mind. It relates to a question of the stomach, a place where Marsha nurses a niggling weakness both anatomical and psychic. There was a food poisoning incident: she ate a thing that didn't agree with her and got a nasty fever, but being a kid with a high opinion of herself refused to report sick. When handling lethal weapons on a training exercise, this may not be a wise move. Marsha freely acknowledges her competitive spirit, as if that were all she needed to stave off any and all threats to her ego. This time her competitiveness extended to a particular colleague, her roommate, and she got it in her head that the tit-bits her roommate fed her the night before (which she accepted in a brittle show of camaraderie) were somehow deliberately tainted. Nebulous psychic conditions tend to coalesce to a convenient nemesis: 'So why wouldn't there be poison? She never liked me, felt threatened by my tongue, is totally competitive herself.' But what sort of retaliation can you exact when you are about to throw up with a temperature of a hundred and two? Be the best grunt you can possibly be, that's what! Delirium is relative in a war zone anyway, and ain't survival under pressure what they're teaching you? ...Marsha hid her red-blush fever-face behind mud camouflage as they stepped to the training zone. At a crucial point she was assigned to 'cover' her colleague as the girl moved ahead up a ridge covered only by low ferns, in order to 'capture' an enemy post. Not being leader, Marsha took the opportunity to empty an entire magazine of live ammunition just over her mate's head: verily she bit the dirt like a hare at a dog hunt. Marsha said she felt rather satisfied with having incapacitated the 'enemy' in so final a manner, until her mate came clumping down the hill and punched her the face so hard her nose nearly broke. *The point is, Marsha told us, I'd vomited away my moral sense. I simply enjoyed letting off those streams of lead into the sky. Who cares who was in the way? I felt a kind of blowsy happiness.* The exercise turned real when the colleague radioed right there for back up, basically had Marsha arrested, and made a formal complaint 'with gusto'. Marsha was suspended from the passing-out ceremony pending a hearing into the incident. Marsha tells us she was keen not to be criticised for lack of courage, and claimed to underline this by saying that if her colleague couldn't lie low with a sustained burst of .33 calibre bulletage flying over her head, she did not deserve to be in the army at all. Marsha's polemic was not assuaged by the commandant's noting that she was delirious. Indeed, the officer suspected Marsha's real problem was not food poisoning but a psychopathic want for revenge. Psychopaths only need the right situation to show their colours. Could it be proved? Not likely. So what does it say about Marsha that she can easily admit it to us? Should we be led to think she's loopy? No, it was that strange amorality, where she found herself on a kind of raw untended karmic plateau where there is no guilt, only exultation, only freedom - that makes me mention it. And which probably made Marsha want to commune with it too.

There's a further domestic scene, which I hesitate to mention before the logic of subsequent events can put it in perspective - the scene that took place just before my departure and which made my leaving seem more than a mite suspicious. It is the scene in which Matty reveals to her mother that she is pregnant. To find a daughter pregnant at fifteen is alarming for any parent, but the level of fallout generated by Marsha seemed to make Matty's act of terrorism more than worthwhile. Kids will do anything to make a point, they are extremists. Now whether Matty got pregnant by accident, or by whom she got pregnant is not the point. The point is the way she used it to make a point about her mother. And when she said she wanted to keep the baby and added that she definitely wanted it to be a *boy* and that her *dad* would definitely approve, this was the point where Marsha after much demeaning threat and shouting could find no way out except to deflect the substance of the protest against her onto someone else, anyone else. This is known as transference. Outrage, and victimhood its cousin, must affirm themselves, like methamphetamine affirms a user's addiction in the deep cellular mind, whereby the bearer must cry out in anguish and blame *something*. Marsha's chutzpah was always a brittle barrier against her intellectual frailty, always an excuse to consume the iniquities of life as if you were the sole centre of God's experiment, as if nothing of this ever happened to anyone else in the history of the world (like a child would think) and that therefore it must be a conspiracy against oneself - and perpetrated by men, men one associates with, who are always only capable of bludgeoning hurt, either by ignorance or omission or bloody ruffian egotism. The man within herself can't admit to these qualities, can only flush them outward in denial and projection. The males are dupes, targets. And I was the nearest. Yet she needed my help even if she didn't know it. The fact that I write about all this in the face of my own impotence says I believed in her. She really did need my help.

But, one step at a time. All this occurred as the sequel to another event, where Matty ran away for a long weekend to a rock festival with a bunch of other kids. Even if we'd rushed out to find her it would have been a tricky matter, and would have shown Marsha and me up for the totally uncool olds that Matty wanted to label us as anyway. Naturally Matty got herself lost in the seething crowds and naturally Marsha went in and caused a ruckus, and I had to follow even though Marsha told me to get out of the way, at which I got totally uncooperative based on utter annoyance at her pigheadedness, and instead of telling her she was making a fool of herself I let her do it and took cold satisfaction because it made me feel less like the square that Matty framed her mother as. You get it. But once upon a time Marsha had been frighteningly cool, and I had seen glimpses of it in midnight rooms where she danced recklessly with herself to her music of the past... I had found her freakishly sexy. But she'd never had the chance to share this side of herself with Matty, and certainly didn't let me in. There was a moment at the festival (which Marsha sneaked into without paying, and where I followed close behind with a pang of admiration at the middle finger she gave to the smug-cool youth establishment running the joint) where I actually spotted Matty and her gluey gaggle in the heart of

the crowd and didn't inform Marsha. I didn't have the guts either, to wade up to Matty and tell her her mother was about. It suddenly came home to me that I am the outsider. And there is no loneliness greater than in a crowd at an avidly pagan festival where everybody is in on the vibe except you. I therefore didn't have the guts to imagine what kind of distraught emptiness Marsha would be feeling behind her flailing mouthy chutzpah. Instead, I let myself be distracted by the throng and the action and the music, excusing myself that I couldn't avoid it anyway. Fatalism is my refuge in embarrassing times, and its corollary is the fobbing off of empathy. I then lost Marsha for several hours, during which I could only imagine the poison she was spreading about to teen-strangers who reminded her of her daughter, who had the evil temerity to be whooping it up in the absence of grown up control-paradigms.

Is Marsha her own worst enemy? I thought it for the thousandth time. Does she have the right to rail against being a 'victim of wanting' in a life that can't ever sort itself out? Or to rail and rage against the sticky descent into mediocrity? Is this search for her increasingly elusive daughter the sentinel of a dark end that leers at her over some horizon, where she is alone and looking fiercely back at yesterday without the skill or means to say she is sorry, or that she regrets, or that she needs love from the few poor idiots who stick with her, who imagine in her the old possibility of beauty that she recklessly forgot? We who with quiet regret shake our heads and beg to avoid the embarrassing lament of her wasted potential, she the woman *who always was going to be...* substantial, uncontained, beautiful, magnificent in the instant. She, who rails fitfully at the stupid mundanity of living that corrals us all, that makes social fools of us, makes us a fraction of what we are, makes our arrogant genius curdle on our own lips, in short makes of us mortals. Who die. And this is the ugliest cut: that we age and die, and that our bludgeoning hope held up as youth is blunted, that the careening hope of surfing this world into eternity is just another sunset dream we wildly held up with the mad feeling we were immortal, that our dance parties and uplift-drugs and sexual beauty would never end. And we were frozen at that historic moment, or Marsha was, because she couldn't see that there would ever be anything better than this, this place where she controlled men and love and sex and life and the future, and she'd finally gotten away from stupid cowering regret at her lost father and lost mother, and she could run to the wild centre of living and crow out her fuck-you victory there. Because the extroverts of the world are shallow thinkers, they rely on the energy that courses through and think (like a drug of ecstasy) that it will never expire. They have no resource for the leanness that must follow, for the autumn that must steal upon them, for the cold winds that cut through their insouciance as they strut at midnight down the ruined street-stage of their triumphs, against the niggardly cutting evil of this stupid cramped world and its obese harbingers of pain and loss. Marsha was a child when she lost her father to wandering, and when her mother caved in to the feathering of her identity. And Marsha nearly shriveled as well, before anger got the better of her at about fifteen and transformed her to a shelled ravening glamazon, and then men (and all people) were like ping-pong balls bouncing off her,

with her pointy nose and her rivery hair and her stilettoed thighs and danger jeans and her strut and her power and her fuck-you self-plenitude. I knew I could never compete with that self-absorption; my shield was always irony, threat of possible exit in case she used me like she used all the others who moth-like entered her stony orbit and were caught in the lure of her greenshine eyes. And yet when she met Andreas, with his cool aloofness, how he stood inches above her even in her stilettos and seemed to look over and above the fact of her, as if scanning horizons where less fortunate people needed real help, needed food put in their mouths, preferably by his benefaction - at this total alien coolness she strangely softened and let herself become his little girl-wife, for at least the time Matty was born and began to grow up. Andreas' adamantine monumentality was a sort of relief to her, a tonic she needed. His aloofness suggested a kind of higher purpose, where he looked coolly into a far country where none of her own soap operas mattered. She could be shielded by him. But, because he exactly represented a kind of immovable institute, the attitude he had to her at the start was identical to what he had at the finish. And her old dark broiling need eventually began to well up again, and then it was as if he had never been. And then of course Andreas came to have had enough.

I have spotted Marsha again in the throng. In this festival where youthy hearts want to let go and bathe in a sea of paganish hippy-trippy celebration, our Marsha just can't soften and let it wash over her. She has to fight it according to some kind of principle: the principle of her own curmudgeonly self-centred need. God keep her! As usual when Marsha is in a fury I oscillate wildly between hatred and awe and pity (since there is nowhere to put myself), and this is the real secret of her terror: she means to demonstrate that this is how life really is, that this is the predicament of us all, that our suffering must cry out to the sky in anger and protest, that we all must rail against God himself since our position is impossible. As if this will do some good! All the while ignoring the irony that Marsha's battle cry of solidarity on behalf of the human race comes at the expense of numerous victims littered about her feet in her charnel field of blood-stupor. She is surely a militant and a militarist, and this spirit will never be quieted. Though once it was sex-beautiful, it is ultimately meaningless.

She's being ugly now, though. And in the bemused sea of faces about her, I have to come up and tell her I've seen Matty, that she's just fine and dandy and needs to be left alone, and that we should go home, or alternatively enjoy the music for an hour together as a couple, young at heart even! She looks at me as if I am Jack the Ripper who stole her bosom child. I follow her out of the crowd, and we finally get to the car park half a mile away. And I feel something has again been wasted, because I believe I have the greater feel for mortality, which says we should learn from the trivia of living, not sweep it aside as if we are beyond it. And so I'm disappointed in her. And then I feel sorry for her, after my frustration has duelled with the usual sophisms and romances such as 'I am not to blame and am not even part of her life...' 'I should detach myself once again and go away forever...' But if I let

myself feel the real truth about lost Marsha, I will not be able to leave her, not for a thousand years at least.

On the Monday night of that long weekend Matty came home, and with a German boy in tow. By this time Marsha had summonsed the father Andreas, as she tends to do when she needs to dump on someone, and also Uncle Grant (though despising his unruffled studied coolness at the exploits of his niece) and of course I am assumed to be on hand to receive suitable abuse for my dereliction of clairvoyant vision in regard to the welfare of the child. Marsha needs a crowd to rail at, preferably men, and we amazingly fill her need like docile sheep. Matty surveys the lot of us assembled in the kitchen, and with superb nonchalance announces Jake, her friend or companion or fuck buddy or paramour or future husband depending on the nuance her eyebrow or curling lip or purry tone generates. Matty is in command, and has a brilliant feel for the way the adult world needs her yet pretends to deny it in the form of abusive reminders of her dependence on them. She looks from one to the other of us as if in childy denial that she has everyone in her pocket. She'll note varying degrees of embarrassment and bemusement according to the web of soapy intricacies we grown-ups are prey to among ourselves. So she nudges and fondles fall-guy Jake as if to say: 'relax mein freund, I haf it all under control, and just remember how we felt when the acid kicked in in the middle of the *Tool* gig yesterday, and then we'll know in our bones that everything is going to be jake (as it were).

- Mum, you need to stop talking now, she says. Because I have an announcement to make.

She pauses, and so do we. And she has us right there. She really must have been buoyed by youthful festival heaven or still stoned on some world-affirming wonder drug to be able to stand there and say what she says next.

- Mum, dad, uncle, stepdad, Jake sweetheart... I'm pregnant. I'm going to have a baby.

Five pages ago I hinted to you how Marsha reacted to the pregnancy event. So we're back at the place where we started. First of all, Matty's deadpan tone makes the pregnancy seem accomplished fact. No-one in the room bothers to question it. Andreas looks off to the distance as far as he can, and finding a wall in his way falls to inspecting his feet like a mourning gazelle. Cool uncle Grant, fighting to avoid the amorous-meaningful searching looks his evil niece is now giving him right under the nose of her mother, can be seen raging under his impenetrably cool exterior against outbreaks of volcanic panic even as he murmurs and nods and says yeah? wow that's a turn-up for the books - and other insufferably fucking stupid surfer things you'd expect from him. Jake as fall-guy and sudden scapegoat feels his jaw drop away as he gazes at his two-month girlfriend and his eyes start to swim and he seems to be breathing a lot. And me, I narrow my eyes at Matty as if to say: *you're a little bitch*. But Marsha, she stares at her daughter in silence and several seasons seem to pass over her face. Is it triumph - that she has bred a more fatalistically cruel human being than she herself could ever be;

or is it shock - that her child could be so utterly fridge-like and calculating; or happiness - that she now can choose a male to kill for a real tangible crime... or is it admiration - that her baby could have the last laugh on all these men who now stand pole-like at the implacable fact of a woman's predicament and will be enslaved to the guilt that men always must feel when women announce they are the harbourers of unexpected new life and must bear its burden and who'll demand these men become eunuchs to the very fact of it. But Marsha exits the room at this point. We four males stand about as if unhitched guests at a bad party, all trying to disavow the pain-in-the-ass hostess who invited us. And it strikes me, here is the genesis of the Marsha disease transferred to the next generation. Matty has cleverly won her round against mother... only to suddenly see everything drop away from her, as if left stranded by the last bus pulling away in a stone desert. The smile starts to exit her face. No-one can help. Only Marsha can. Only Marsha can re-badge her own loneliness by scooping up Matty's, and surrendering her torch to a new generation.

So Matty goes to her room and closes the door. And nothing else is said that day. It emerges that Marsha seems ready to put the boy Jake last on her list of possible criminal perpetrators. Maybe she thought he looked too fey or weedy to be actually capable of raising seed. And it is with marked reluctance that she turns him away when he comes to the door on the second day with a betrayed surly look on his face that says: *I wass stood up and I need to haf it out with zis girl!* Marsha very nearly puts her arm about his shoulder as she accompanies him to the gate. On the other hand, Marsha seems uncannily ready to betray her own brother's confidence, indulging veiled innuendos on the phone to Andreas. We get the impression that people like Marsha are out of control, but no, she is capable of cold strategy, however disturbed. Because I know this muttering against her brother is a shield to the ultimate task she has set herself: that of bringing herself to attack *me*. Yes, me. But it is a further two weeks before Matty's miscarriage (a scene I am not privy to, but am told occurred in the middle of the night in her bed and was suitably messy and scary) really shifts the game sideways from: what the hell are we going to do? to: who the hell are we going to punish? Because Matty is now reduced to the little girl she is, and is obviously incapable of being the virago she must have been to get pregnant. And since the thing is all in the past, and she is no longer the issue even though she still won't come out of her room, old Marsha is back in the hot seat. And she is keen to assassinate.

Here's the next nail in the familial coffin. Matty came home one night weeks later with a girlfriend. Now, it was plain that she wasn't from Matty's school; rather that she cultivated a gothy cool street-girl-of-no-fixed-abode vibe. On previous days they had been seen on the street together, and this weekend Matty seemed pretty keen to have the girl, who called herself Solange, sleep over at our house. Marsha fed this guest and said nothing much at first. Matty did the talking. Against Marsha Matty has learnt to be rather precise in her doings. Economy of means, she's learnt, has its power. She has also contrived to take on a certain dress style, somewhere in the realm of arty chic (though the

black beret and red tights combination is forced, in my humble view), and domineering is the only vibe she'll allow in relation to this Solange, who seems unfazed being implacably sulky herself. Matty knows how to play obsessive too, and on the night in question she naturally takes Solange into her bed. Marsha, wakened by strange and unseemly noises, found them at it. And though it is better to let sleeping she-dogs lie if you don't want to provoke the desperation of indignation, she broke it all up on the spot rather than judiciously waiting till morning. What better excuse for Matty to measure her mother as a psychopath and for Solange to participate through sheer jangled nerves in the dressing down of an alien mother? Matty is a great stage manager and good reader of people, no question. I know all this because I heard all the original (fake) noises from where I stood listening in the hallway. The hallway is my place, after all.

And it seems so odd that Marsha should be so unutterably uptight about things she would have done at the same age. I know it, because back then she was trying to get her own parents out of her system any possible way she could. But now I see how that cry for help, cry for change, is all fossilised, that she has actually forgotten it all since her behaviour has become implacably unaware, so robotically reactive in its outrage - as if outrage itself has got frozen in the rebel phase (where she obtusely denied even being a victim to the parental past) and now reasserts itself like a glacial wall in the adult motherly one. In short, all this is the unresolved rubbish of a rejected and ejected kid's projection on the next generation. And me, I am smug enough to note it all, shrug my shoulders and walk away. From her. But really it's too hard, it's just too screamingly loud, too futile... You idiot! If this is futile, then what thing in this vast universe isn't? Go back. Go back! No - because she will never get to the place where she realises she needs to turn again, unless people like me and Matty are entirely gone from her. That is my theory anyway. And I don't at all know if I believe it. Or maybe implacable love and selfless endurance are better for the sake of loved ones. Fat chance! One thing I do know is that no-one changes unless they want to. And then they find the guts and the nous to think about how, and they cast about for help. That technique Freud and Breuer and Jung called the Talking Cure (that is, free association): I hear it works only if there's total honesty, that is, total. And they say when the patient is able to actually free-associate at will on any and all of their murky entanglements, they're already flying down the freedom highway, well in sight of a cure.

HONESTY, yeah. To everything there is a plus side. I often think back to a party a few years ago, on New Year's Eve at a hippie farm, where Marsha succeeded for a few wild hours in being the wildest thing this side of Christendom: magnetic centre in a human heaven, centre of a hot booze-druggy party in a flung crowd of strangers where anarchy ruled its bacchanalian rule and forgetting and ignoring and fuck-you insouciance triumphed in her woman's ego as if the angel of anarchy flew down a highway at light speed, all obstacles gone, all wings on fire! Because life at its rawest, its mongrel-hottest, its bloodied brazened beautiful wildest can never be analysed, not by god or by

lucifer. To live that height for a few sharp hours! This is the pinnacle of free association, but on no analyst's couch! And then to forget all of it, and see how it makes not the blindest bloody difference, and who cares? Because life makes not the blindest bloody difference. And experience is no use but has its use in being no use. Anarchy! The last unglazed gasp of the unkilld dead. And Marsha next morning (we crashed overnight on some couch) lazing and strutting in her thigh-stretched jeans about the veranda in glassy morning sun, drinking breakfast from stray bottles, yawning and cooing and finking about and entertaining with cracking dry quips the strays and stragglers who nursed and hugged themselves in the blinking light... this is when I loved her best. When no man or woman could get within a bull's roar of her even if she had 'em dangling inside her goddam pants (we all bounce off her like seabirds off a cliff in a gale) and when she cuts it with every millionaire rockstar hipster on the face of the planet and still has a bellyful of shit-hot quips and tricks for every fucking punter who tries to break into her hot mansion and finds themselves drowning in the purple whirl of her big-gale personality... and she'd fly and flow with the music and inhabit her own dazzle-drunk universe with all the dancy panache of all the swaggering youth revolutions we ever had in fifty years: she's Woodstock, she's Altamont, she's rock and roll history, she's the strappy blonde heroine of every five-second joke tale shouted in a party maelstrom, she's the willowed sea-beach smiling lover of every cute-cool LA ballad, she's the intuiting soul of every artist on every turntabular dreaming concert stage. All power to Marshie! She had it all in her own fist and laughed in her own face and swung in her own wind and self-celebrated her own dazzling dream party. And next day the frizzing trees on that farm in the hills paid court to her as she sashayed down to the stream, slithered down her jeans and flung her vest to the aproned flowers, and as her rump sizzled in the light she flung in the cool waters nesting under the boughs and *swam*. And she enjoyed it as a Goddess should, in a way no person ever should. And she deserved all of it, because big sufferers deserve applause whenever they put their self-imposed burden down. That stream took her in and flowed on her and filled the contours of her curvy big body, and she laughed in the still air like a delighted child. I stood on the bank and waved, a not-minding stranger, and she had the grace to smile at me and welcome me in her presence. I even felt moved to dive in. Even at a distance Marsha is the full lushy goods with that aching knack of aloofness. If you want her she'll not have you, and if you don't care... she'll have you. For her own benefit naturally. And she had me on that occasion in the shoals on the smooth russet stones under the trees... oh yeah. But I'll always let her be self-centred, because she does it with such yards of style that the pathos is never far away, like a shadow in the trees waiting for her to come swaying by then crowding in and clouding her mind again with that darkness.'

This night, the writer Blank really cannot go back to bed. The sleeping form of Marsha is visible through the doorway. He sees she is restless, grappling with hot dreams. It is nearly midnight. He could continue now to pack his bag, step out of it all. What worlds are lost by such an act, what futures destroyed? Or he could shake her, try to wake her, try to get her to see, see the machinations

of this cosmic game, that if we don't see through it we will be doomed to play it, badly, for the rest of forever. But who can swallow that little thought, especially those who never thought it before? And if life really is a game, then your wandering writer should have no compunction about playing it, playing it hard, in the thick of it, in the middle of the ruck, going toe to toe with the forces of stubbornness and victimisation and hate and anger - then slowly slowly over aeons of argument and recrimination and to-ing and fro-ing in the washwinds of rejection and hurt and fear and grey horror - slowly slowly *turning about* the great ship of habit, the Titanic of momentum-habit and fixity and torpor and fundamentalism and righteous victimized abject railure against god and nature and time and circumstance that constitutes the childy or adult human mind... And Blank, where will it leave you, this odyssey? Maybe you'll be changed beyond recognition, maybe you will lose your elitist sense of yourself. Maybe your own rigidities, too close and too subtle to be noticed by their bearer, will leach out from their crevices and become food for scorn from the very one you wanted to help, the very one you bled for. Because do you really want to help her? Or do you want to score another victory in these man-woman wars? Ego will always confirm itself whatever the odds stacked against it, whatever the romantic temptation to dissolve into the nothingness of mercy or death. The ego is our implacable fact, and it lives by conjecture and argument and blunt contrast, and by words and by war. Who can douse this fire of life? No-one. Or perhaps the skill needed to divert the fortunes of our shadow lover (in this case Marsha) to better pathways, to richer pastures, demands a skill and a patience and a stratagem and foresight and vision that will take the whole of us, so that in the act of changing the other we become them, we take on their very karma, we are sacrificed on the altar of the thing we so badly wanted to change. And this is the riddle of the world: to win through we must take on and wear the garb of our deepest enemy. And who in an eternity of trying could ever do that? We might as well try to crawl out of our own skin, might as well try to wash the universe clean of ourselves. And all this metaphysic conjecturing in the dark, standing over the heaving sleeping form of Marsha, is precisely the impotent mental onanism that Blank can never break out from. He like all souls is a narcissist. And the effort to confess, to lay yourself bare, to surrender to the mercy of another judging soul, thereby trying to transform them into a seer of your troubles so that they may see their own - is the hardest thing to ever do. And who knows, it may not be our role at all. Perhaps we are soloists, islands in a crowd who stand as if at a railway station together and catch the very same train yet never meet with our eyes and never speak. It is not our lot to be each others' teachers, except inadvertently - like the scapegoats we can be for each other, the whipping boys and girls we can offer ourselves as, in a random unscientific abject embarrassing mess of cohabitance we call living, loving and marriage. Only time is the healer and the rubber and smoother of Marsha's stone. Let life be her teacher. Do not presume to take that role. So what use are you then? Just a consumer of her shit, just a bystander at the opera of another self-myopic life? We can't see ourselves as others see us, and so this soul Blank must know that all the criticisms he lays at Marsha's door must apply in differing ways to himself. The accuser is always the hypocrite. Take the plank out of your own eye

etcetera. So, to stay and club each other to death? - or to run off and breathe free air... and to postpone the day that you will run up against another karmic hurdle in the form of another shadow of yourself, that will be as hard and as steep as this one? 'Because Marsha is *my anima* (let Blank tell it) - else I would not feel the need to change her. It is I who am a fool for wanting to project onto her the truths that I perceive to be true and that I can't let rest in myself. Why mix with anyone then? Be the hermit! The truth is, the directest path is to be a player in the domestic turmoil. This is our real drama and our resurrection. The path of the ascetic is for the few, and they are the autumnal patriarchs of the race anyway. Remember, Blank, in this game of living you need to stand and face and get the bruises and the bashings, and even if you are obliterated - mentally physically emotionally - it won't matter, and it may even be the blessing of blessings, since this is the fabled death of the ego.

Cool. Now wake Marsha up and tell her all that. Don't have the patience for this, do you, Blank? And patience, irony of ironies, is only ever learned by practising it. And it stops being learned the instant you stop practising. River must flow to be a river or it ceases to be a river, ceases to flow to the sea. Your position is impossible, and rightly so! You'll have to swim in the bloodbath of grace, of face-to-face living, get killed and love every perishing bit of it. No worries! It's just that you chose a shadow in Marsha that's more bulldozerish, more blatant, more shocking, more sudden than most. Shock value. Oh yeah, you'd love to wrap her up and eat her eyes; you wouldn't want to tame her to silence like Andreas did. That didn't work in the end anyway. To win Marsha (win her to what?) you'd have to be the roughest toughest bastard lover there ever was, and you ain't made that way. Besides, there's so much inexhaustibly boring shit in her you really couldn't be bothered to have the ticker to go the distance. Let life do the job. Life feels nothing. But then you'd miss out. Jesus, this self-imposed farce play we make for ourselves. Shouldn't we just run away over hill and dale and hope somehow the farce content drops off? But then there's the problem of women. They will scorn you as a soft cock when you don't play their soap opera to the minute grainy soporific hypnotising level that they do, with all its ins and outs and soapy quotidian shit. They're so practical. Not burdened with little male dilemmas, between staying and leaving, between need to detach or engage, between the utter physical and the subtle spiritual. Such distinctions are stupid to them, the life bearers. For Marsha, my running away is simply the crime of not paying attention to her. Brutal, simple. Or being such a failure that I couldn't win her esteem. Brutal, simple.

So here I am packing a bag. It's five minutes to midnight by the illumined clock. And suddenly there is Marsha clicking on the bed light and heading for the bathroom. She goes in, flushes, comes out. Now she stops, focuses slightly on me.

- What're you doing?

- Er, going out

- In the middle of the night

- Why fret about time of day?
- 'Cause you're a coward?
- D'you care?
- Once upon a time I might've
- Thanks a lot.

She stares, shrugs, lies down, closes her eyes. And out to the midnight street I step, armed with a little pack, a credit card and a passport. The first step of a thousand miles. And all my thoughts, destined to become carping friends, slip immediately into nostalgia - such is the sudden realisation that there is nowhere for me to go that is remotely home.'

WHERE ARE YOU GOING, BLUE WENDY?

It is high time to speak of Blue Wendy, my real sort-of girlfriend. In what way real and sort-of? When Blue Wendy comes to my house she comes like a thief in the night: she is always en route, always with someplace else to go. She might sleep over, but she will do it dignifiedly on my couch. Soon though I will get her into my bed. That is, I will buy a queen bed and hope she will enter it. And she might, like a shy ship berthing in a port. Wendy will never be upset by my blatant attempts to win a married woman. She accepts affection like a bouquet, without fuss. My adolescent excuse is that I don't regard her as properly married. I make no mention of her pain-in-the-ass husband. One might be annoyed at Blue Wendy's studied dutifulness to the world's undesirables (like her husband) but there's no way to hold a grudge for long. Our dear Wendy worships and nurtures the possibilities in others, thrives on the vicissitudes of suffering and forbearance. Positivity shields her. She is a tower. She shivers and cries sometimes, then pulls her life together and goes on. Where is she going, Blue Wendy? Once it came to me: she travels nowhere, travels positively to nowhere. This is entirely the only possible answer. The wonder of it! And she has the survivor's knack. There's much to learn from her, I know it. Folks don't. They see her as none too bright, a fool even, but I know better. She's an idol to me. And she gives me her money. Why do I accept it? Because I must, and because she must give. In her dowdy clothes she's not so beautiful, is homely even, and she never lets herself scrub up as if out on a date. But soon I'll do it. I'll put her in shiny tight clothes that advertise her quite-decent rump and thighs, get her peasantry flaxen hair to curl about her shoulders like a corn-waterfall, and dress her in blue sapphire earrings, put red lippy on her so she'll smile a shy smile and come with me to a posh place... and with her big eyes will wonder why she's there... and she'll inwardly dream of being home, in her ticking forbearance, inside her unglamorous forty-year life that holds no promise. No promise save in the imaginings of her would-be paramour. Blue Wendy quietly manages this world but has no place in it. I'd offer her a place but don't know how. I always miss her and have no idea why. Perhaps she's my lost mother.

And I hate Blue Wendy's husband. Really I shouldn't, since I've no right to hate women's husbands, and since Gordon was an inexpugible member of the Divinology Church, of which I am a member. Not that he was any asset to it, rather he was a drain on its patience. That church is littered with basket-souls who slunk off to their private life and weal like lumps of old asteroid blindly orbiting a cold-distant sun. Such that the whole reason Wendy goes anywhere is to be of service, she joined the church to support *him*. Service! Wendy has no metaphysic pretensions (unlike your writer) but like the great horse in Orwell's *Animal Farm* puts her shoulder to the karmic wheel and trudges her way. Wendy is ever keen to attach herself to compromised souls, to hang round the dying, the lying, the destitute. Her specialty is the Exploiters, the ones who calculate they can offload their sins on her and

take their rise from her. All those Calculators and Betrayers, the ones with complicated layers. Now, all of us hate what reminds us of our worser selves - and this is one of the subtler spokes of the Divinology wheel, that ill-matched souls will be tied to hidden karmic wrestlings long after they've forgotten the reason, long after they've exited the officialdom of that church. Wendy anticipates all this, wraps her karmic tentacles about the real basket cases who'll give her a lifelong run for her money, give her plenty to chew on and to cry and fret about and fail with and be a doormat to - even get throttled by. One should be permanently annoyed with Blue Wendy and her stoical ways, but instead one inwardly defers to her, as if she'll carry away our sins. The only price is our ego, in the sense that we affirm she is a better person than any of us. Still, it's a relief to know there are heroes in this world, people deeper than us, more foreseeing, luminous. How would it be if fools like me were at the top of the evolution chain? A horror scenario. We need our teachers and mentors. Do we look forward to a day when we shall be leaders, shall take responsibility, shall stand alone and naked before our destiny? The answer is a quiet no. Rather we want to remain as children, to nestle under the bosom of the great... so let us suckle on the teat of great ones, let *them* be our best conscience, and in the meantime feign that we are needy victims indeed. Let us never grow up.

Husband Gordon has perfected a hundred and one ways to never grow up, and to test and torture his wife whereby he can straddle an exquisite razor's edge: to indulge his sadism yet confront his masochism. He must offer her a *reason* to be married to a poor fool who would like to love her (if only she would 'let him', that is) whilst hoping against hope that one day he might wean himself away from the victim that he is and stand on his own feet. Yet such is his terrible past, his karmic debt, that he must *allow* this perverse torture of marriage in order to admit to himself that he is somehow *worthy* of atonement, is somehow better than the *bastard* he secretly believes himself to be - and must resist the terrible temptation to flush himself away in the sewers of suicide! Alack, how finely poised is one's self-esteem in this world, that we may be miserable sinners yet do others a service - in that *they* may become dedicated to saving us through love! Welcome to the venal labyrinth of Gordon's mind. On one hand, we should marvel at the wonder and glory of the ways of the Lord in his infinite mercy and patience; on the other, one feels one might contribute to Gordon's welfare by explaining to him what a profound arsehole he is, just in case he missed anything. But ah, before taking the speck out of the other's eye we must take the plank from our own.

All our soap operas can seem meaningful when dressed in the raiment of 'the soul's journey'. And indeed that is why many people join churches and become navel-gazers par excellence, since it gives them a sense that their stupidities and dirtinesses are somehow clothed in slightly sullied gold, that the soul is a sweet rose merely covered by mud, that the debate they are having is not really a narcissistic indulgence but a noble effort to face the exquisite dilemmas of being human. Such is the counterfeit of the mind that it is able to justify its own ignorance as the currency of *enlightenment*; that though it

struggles in the tunnels of ignorance, yet is it blessed. That all its ways are somehow positive and meaningful; even abject stupidity and venality are part of the divine plan! And for sophisticated players of the game, ignorance is a beautiful justification for doing nothing. Enter husband Gordon. Folks like him are good fodder for burgeoning pseudo-professional new-age industries, industries supported by neurotically self-obsessed middle-class recipients of human progress who have simply not had enough that is nasty, brutish and short to worry on. Our Gordon also knows a rival when he sees one (me). Nothing spiritual about this I fear. If you are scrawny and slightly bow-legged and not so good-looking, like he is, you will no doubt compensate with cunning wit and keen sight. His first instinct is threat followed by bile followed by guile, all chugged along nicely by envy. Gordon's had a lot of practice. After all, if you don't stack up your sins, how can it be worth knocking them down - if and when that good journey of atonement ever actually begins. Besides, one's knees are far too boney, one's body too fragile to put on sackcloth and ashes just yet. But the thought is there, or rather the nuanced notion, or the dream in air, or some aspiration long buried. Lord help me, but I am a good person under all this tripe! I did not deserve this - the slime and smell my body makes, this angulated sandpaper chin of mine, these sunk eyes, this lank lifeless hair I curse in the mirror each day of my life. And I cry out against the self-fulfilling prophecy created by these mean and hungry looks!

I, Dust, suffer few such pangs, being altogether better made. Though I have my own issues, they reveal themselves not to the eyes of others. Nevertheless I suspect all of we human creatures are exactly the same. But so what? This doesn't mean that some of us have not seen the folly and error and have not corrected it, whereas others refuse to or are incapable of doing so, and who indulge in evil even when they know indulgence is of no use. Surely they made their own beds and now lie in them? Ugh. But this is where Wendy is superior to all of us. She does not transfer her own fear and jealousy onto the nearest unsuspecting idiot. Then again maybe her ego is as big as the planet she wants to enfold in her loving arms. Literally the 'earth mother'. I see how she might just be a tad annoying, how she might inspire sabotage. Husband Gordon needs Wendy all to himself to play his especial snotty games. But I notice that when she turns her gaze to *me* - and frankly I consider it to be her sweet weakness that she somehow sees in me an Eden, a promissory love, a holiday from her toils - that Gordon becomes suddenly very astute at apportioning blame for being cuckolded and scorned, like one of those hysterics who sees danger everywhere, who cries wolf at the cosmos before it so much as blows in their ear or disturbs their toupe. With his sunk little chest and his sideburns and his mock-heroistic craggy profile and his amateur Scholarship of the Soul and his little urine-puddles of mea culpa and his self-deluding monologues at anyone who'll listen (preferably strangers not yet inured to his ways) - he conducts the soap opera of his husbandly role with all the fake importance of a man who knows he has none, but protests at the corruption of his critics, and hates anyone who so much as catches the eye of his special Wendy-sow in her cage constructed so brilliantly by him the indulgent sow-master. 'Cause he's doing her a favour! A favour when he embezzles a tap-stream of

money from her. A favour when he lies to her. A favour when he engineers his own woman affairs. When he claims he has a 'fatal disease'. When he convinces her he will have a 'short life'. When he comes on with his best fallback: his claim that he is 'testing' her, trying to provoke her to action, to get her to be decisive! To get her to hate him decisively! To get her to *reject* him like a cur in the dust for the good of her soul. What a martyr! He is dedicated to self-abasement, he is a shit, a heel, a cur, a mongrel, a loser. Kick me, he cries. Anything for a bit of attention, anything to fire up the old sour reasons he went to that Divinology church years ago: to get himself well lambasted by the famed Guru, since he heard the Guru had a reputation for kicking the arses of sinners like him, for sorting 'em out, for turning them into sinewed street fighters of the soul... See how tightly I loathe Gordon? It's me and 'im then: we should be like two mud-wrestling brothers in a circus who forever flail at each other, getting filthier and filthier the more we protest we are somehow cleaner than the other.

But he's still an *arsehole* - and I've made a new decision. To cajole Wendy away from her city cares, ergo out of Gordy's reach for a while. The old soul won't be deflected from her mournful path, but it won't stop me trying to be the spindle in her wheel. With wheedling guile I'll copy his scoundrelly games and get my trusty woman to come away. She, full-bodied gold-haired demeter, longed-for mother and wellspring, ample goddess who shyly embraces me though inaccessible as the hills of eldorado and untouchable as drifting dunes in a desert... Blue Wendy will come with me, drive the roads with me, sleep near me, bend her head to hear my woes. And I'll expend my hopes on the glassy rocks of your maiden eyes, you in your sweet sorrowed silence that breathes like heather in the hills, that lingers like shadows in the lee of sadness. You who are forever and never there for me. And what does this make me - a grasping ego-child, shitty as Gordon? Yes but no, I'm the finer more cultivated version: more insidious therefore. I'd be better for you! And maybe I'll uncover your secret agenda, secret love of domineering the world and all its parts that you quietly wrap in the mother arms of your superb ego. Why seek out all the horrors and hushed iniquities of the world, Blue Wendy, all its excesses and abominations, unless you fetishise them, unless you secretly long for them? We are not just supposed to forbear! To fail and laugh and scream and hate and adore - these are our stoppers out of the fizz bottle! that arrest our cringy self-absorption in the name of religiosity and narcissistic piety and all the hypocritic notions we humans have of being martyrs who take on the burden of sins, who carry the word of God on our lips, who lay ourselves bare in the name of forbearance. Clever humans: do you think you're resourceful enough, *egotistical* enough to take in all that god and nature can throw at you? You ragged atom, shriveled rat, speck of dust blithered on the wind: you are never significant. You, the funfair glomeration of myriad bits and byways, you the detritus of a great bloodying opera, cauldron of nature's experiment with its own howling laughter and tears, absurd plaything of worlds crashing and dying and birthing in instants, in aeons, in blank-waved seas that surge forever to unplugged horizons in the horror and funniness of creation's hooligan game with itself. A game that arrows through cosmic woods and fields and blunders over hills stretching to ends

of borderless space and time and fortune forever, in a bacchanalian drunken game of shouting noise. You, girl, are a speck, a frolic, a moment, frittered thought, daunted shadow cast by a molecule of sunlight, ten billion years of nothing, sullen whiff of smoke from a devil's cigarette, lump of popcorn tossed to the floor in the back row of a movie slept through by God.

Sure sure, but Wendy suspects all that! and yet performs her little things, knows she drags the weight of total failure like the ragged cloak of an exiled empress behind her in this endless slush of living. She *knows*. And I'm an immature idiot. She knows what a risible farce it is to live, to play the human part in a universe that tears you asunder with every thought, every breath. To stand for 'continuity and sanity and clarity' amid worlds of blood that fling on the winds - in these groaning gales that lather today at the coasts of our faces, she and I, standing like ninepins, like reeds on this clifftop overlooking bellicose seas of flecked waves that trundle forever out of the blue-black fathoms of nowhere, into our lungs and our socketed eyes... we human creature-people, what are we? We are forgotten breath, thought-mist unknown, light that dissolved in the black nether of infinite space, tired of its fickle journey to nowhere. And yet... we are the impish upspring of a moment, clever forgetters of yesterdays, improvisors who twisted a new thing out of wretchedness, who gleaned seeds out of a dead field, who countenanced a snatch of singing like tiny birds in breathless vaults of the air. We are *here*. We are actually here... Wendy and me in our little cottage on the Southern coast, we talk of no such things. But it's the substance, the subtext, the aura of our being here. Her quietness speaks. It's the most precious thing. I love her like I love the land and the sea. She's really unknown to me. We walk on stony and sandy beaches in the freezing winter, wrapped like puffins under our coats and scarves, and her face chisels itself and her heavy hair fans backward in the stuttering wind. We advance slowly in the cold, observing wild things of the rocks, creatures of the pools, and the weed that lies like corpses slumped on Omaha beach rumped by scathing wind that howls *I'll never leave you be*... She and I become nothing, nothing special in this void. We lose contact with duty and agenda - which I tell her is really the point of our holiday respite. But she'll nary sleep with me, being married as she claims. And she doesn't even think on the absurdity of being with one who's not her husband and not bringing me under blankets into the caverns of her body in our private far gone cottage room above the sea. For Blue Wendy is so real, as real as you can ever be. Ah, she must be immortal.

Yet on our day at Tintagel she had a little turn in the heart, as if the brink of the land were sad and she were forced to fail a little just for its sake. I couldn't get her to face the cliff path. She is not a thin girl, is a little ponderous and can't be made to do a certain thing. But this stubbornness is good, hinting she is not just a wand to be waved, reed to be bent, horse to be ridden. And she knows I want her to forget her karmic weal and give herself to me. That I dare her to believe I'm worth it, as if glory could come from embracing just a wee devil-delighty bit of the world instead of it all. But again I'm

immature. For she's seen all that, done all that. In fact she does it all the time by being there for all the people and the creatures. Wander no more, fair Wendy, tarry with me! Feel what it is to be consumed by love, by passion, by want. Drench in unquenchable feeling for one instant. Lose your steadfast sense, lose your cosmosity, humble pomposity. Get real, be mortal, fail... But these cliffs are resolute. They'll not be climbed.

And one day in a sea-town she went away with another man and passed the afternoon with him. They came back to the beach café where I was, and they smiled together as if satisfaction had passed between them, and he kissed her in front of me and said thank you and left. He was a youngish man in a long coat, and didn't seem especially dissolute or needy. But she'd obviously seen his soul and seen what he needed. Didn't mention what *she* needed. She never does. To be jealous would be an asinine thing, though I am and she knows it. She's all sorry for that too. And ineluctably we don't talk about it. Blue Wendy is not without price! and thereby not without ego. So I'm right, I'm right, and so what? I'm infantile, I told you. But I sense she wants me to persist with her: one thousand years of persisting. She'll never leave; besides, there's nowhere to go. Compared to Gordon I am her day of rest, and there is hope because she shared it with me. I won't get angry. She wouldn't respond anyway, though she'd think: 'why do you want to get inside me? I'm open, there's nothing hidden...'. This is truly true and yet it's bullshit.

One afternoon as we come in sight of the cottage from our coast walk, we notice a car pull away up the track to the main road. Later in the parlour gloom she neglects to mention she knows it's Gordon's car. I toss off a cryptic remark or two, and so she unweariedly addresses the truth.

- Gordon is having a hard time, Dust
- So now we have to meet with him? We said no calls these two weeks
- Only once or twice, darling. Can't leave him totally in the dark
- Understood. But he needs to leave you be. That's the point of this
- It is, it is. Space for me and for you
- Wen, the point is he has to stand on his own
- We all have to stand on our own
- Not me. I want you.

She never looks at me when I challenge her. But she'll nod at first and later she'll look. The cure-all look. Not.

- Or perhaps he wants money?
- I gave it him before I left. All I could
- You know he'll never let you rest
- I know it, Dust. I know it. But as long as he's harassing me, he's not harassing someone else.

I've no riposte to her promiscuous wager with passivity. But in the moonlit night I wake to see a shadow hovering beside our window. I don't tell her. And in the morning when I go to fetch firewood I see Gordon's silhouette on a far headland. Again I say nothing... Fact repeated: taking shit for the sake of atonement is inverted egotism. And hanging around suffering and death and morbidity is egotism personified. Whatever we do is egoic, no way round it. Force of creation. No-brainer. I won't argue the toss with Blue Wendy but I'll sabotage one thing or the other. And she'll rush to put up with it. Like a giant snowball rolling down a mountainside, she'll gather up this fucking world and hug it all to herself. Let's see if I can do her a favour then!

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Today is clear and cold and we travel the high roads of the cliff-coast, dipping into cottagey hamlets and smiley beaches, but always out and on to lonelier places where sea hugs the headlands and sky spreadeagles over us like a gigantic mute negation to all our touristic trivia. It is getting past four pm and the light is fading. I'm driving. In the mirror I spy Gordon's older model blue Ford rounding the bend behind us. The road hugs bluffs to our right, avoiding grey raked sea and bulbous rocks to our left. Wendy's flaxen head is lowered, she's telling her beads. I slow to a crawl. She glances at me. Tough road, I say. Take care, she says. Then Gordon's grinning Ford grill is right behind. I brake suddenly. Wendy lurches at the dash. We're still. She looks back. Her husband's car can't back up on the narrow road. Wendy and I look at each other. There's a moment between us. Nothing and everything happened in that moment, I tell you. Gordon revs his motor, pulls beside, tries to squeeze past under the bluff. That's when I stepped on the gas and our car glanced forward, scraped him. We saw his upset face through the glass. He shoveled his car forward, tried to slither away. I tailgated him. Wendy shouted: *Let him go! Let go, Dust!* Least, she thinks that's what she said. But Gordon's car slithered, clutched at the corner ahead, his wheel slid to the edge, a tail-light loomed over the gulf. We came in too fast, it's true. I threw the wheel, slugged the wall but did I clip him? Don't remember. Gordon's chassis ground over the lip of the cliff but he wouldn't slow, wouldn't see what was happening. His back wheel skitters into space, car tips, drops away. Wendy screams. Gordon in his casket frumps and clatters downward then turns over in space. I scam the car to stop, don't see any impact, but Wendy claimed she saw Gordy's car shunt side first into rocks sixty feet below and tip and crunch on its back just where the waves wrestle and gurgle-sputter upward out of sea holes under the rocks.

We agree we exited the car, hurried to the place. There was no immediate way down. I maintain that Wendy was not hysteric but calm. No-one came. I saw a way down. I tell you she wouldn't come with me. She could have, wasn't that hard. Maybe she was in shock. I made it to the bottom. The waves splattered me as I tried to force open the wrecked door. I tell you it was impossible. He wasn't moving at all. You'd expect that. I'd no idea he wasn't dead. Sure looked it. I couldn't face those

sputtering spouts and backed off, crawled up the cliff. Wendy was wandering down the fucking road. I shouted but she wouldn't answer. I got in the car, came alongside. Her jacket was heaving like a balloon, hair bundles obscured her face. I got her in, she sat like a corpse. 'Nothing we can do! We'll get to the next hamlet.' I coaxed and coaxed. 'Get your mobile out. Call someone'. I swear I wanted to get us to the sea village, but something made me right-turn inland at a crossroad two miles ahead. I just kept driving into hills... We saw no-one. I was hypnotised by moor grasses bending crazily under the wind. The way that gale curled and howled over those moors, no creature, no weasel would want to stick his head up. My mind was gone really. Wendy sure said nothing, paralysed for one time in her coping coping life. I drove for an hour at least. It got totally dark. I'd had enough. We saw a light by the roadside, looked like a petrol station. I pulled in under its awning. Only then did I find the phone in her bag and call ambulance. No police. Didn't give a name. Told them where they should go. That was it. After that we didn't do a thing. I got a blanket out, put it over us. We fell asleep obviously. Hours might have gone by. We were woken by someone knocking on our window. Some grinning guy, who brought us indoors. Dark-hair, looked Italian. Introduces us to his brother. His twin. Said they were the Alighieri Brothers. They fed us. Said they were car guys. Late that night the local radio was on. Report on a crash in Cornwall under the sea-cliffs. The guy and his brother seemed to put two and two together. I know because they looked at us in a spidery way, and later they had a little conference - and before we turned in they took our car and locked it in their garage. I lay beside Wendy. She didn't speak or move. And didn't say a thing to her about the messages on her phone. The ones I saw she'd sent to Gordon at three pm today, just eight hours ago... Anyhow, I erased them. Decided to get rid of her phone later too.

Next morning was Sunday. They gave us breakfast, served petrol to one customer. The brother who called himself Dan. T. said: 'This is the empty part of Exmoor'. Sure looked quiet. Bleak is a better word. Wendy drifted off, up the road. Wasn't properly dressed and I wanted to rug her up. The other brother Domenico saw. *Let her go. She needs to be alone*, he said. I was glad to take his word for it. Later the two sat me down and we had words.

- We fix up your car, my friend.
- It's my er - wife's car
- No worries. We do panel beat, repaint, good as new
- Is it scratched up? I thought maybe it wasn't
- Sure sure. Scratched up. We fix. You relax. One hundred. Good price. You take it
- Okay... sure, sure. Very kind.
- No trouble, no trouble friend, said Dan T.

Two hours and it was done. I went in search of Wendy. Found her in a hedgerow a mile up the road in sad sunlight, and drove her back. At the garage the radio was on... What's the news? Domenico

flicked it off. 'Nothing, nothing today. Listen, you stay few days. No problem, pay small rent, no problem.' Dan. T. nodded approval. I said okay. Wendy glared at me in a fleetingly evil way. The brothers saw it. So I took her away again, in the car for a while. We spotted a hill path, walked an hour, arrived at a grassy knoll overlooking some iron-age ruins in a high valley. She wouldn't talk. The winter breeze forked at us out of a clear sun-wan sky.

- Now talk to me, baby darling. The fact is, he's dead and we are not to blame. We are not going to take this on. These brothers heard about the crash: even as strangers they've sussed it all. And we're going to take their advice and stay out of it

- Stay out? You can't stay out of anything in this world, Dust. You either deal with it now or you deal with it later

- Wallow unnecessarily now or wallow unnecessarily later

- The police will be looking. I will not lie about being there

- You will. You will lie, Wendy. And it is going to be good for you to do it. And you are going to act all those lies out. Now you and me are gonna get our story straight

- I never will, Dust

- 'We were touring in the area. You texted Gordon earlier that day. Our car is now clean, fixed. The first you heard was a radio report next day'. D'you understand?

- Why are you being this way? Are you a stupid fool?

- Because he knew where we were. I saw your goddam text! Did you want him to follow us? Did you want to meet him?

- I won't betray him. I won't leave him!

- You already did. You already have

- I will tell the whole story. This is our soul's karma. This must *be*.

She sits there on her hill, with her head forward, white fingers clutched in semi-prayer, her bomber jacket puffed against the winter, solid thighs under, her estuary of heavy hair tossing in wind. And I know I won't ever let her get away with her version of the future.

- Fuck it Blue Wendy. You're going to be mine, you're going to love me. For one simple reason. I love you and I respect you and that fucker never did

- What the hell do you know about him and me?

- Are you insane? You *used* him. Used him like you use everybody and everything. For your satisfaction, for your grand fucking journey to god or whatever you think it is. And I can respect it, really I can - but I won't accept your blundering bloody failure to face up to your own crummy ego! You are not going to let yourself down for some shitting crook who is too lazy to stand up and *live*. He got what he needed, he got the karr-*maa* that was comm-*ing*!

She is on her feet and breathless, and she is heavier than me, stronger even, but I tell you I shoved her down on the grass on that hilltop and I took her clothes apart and I made sure she got the whole lot, the whole works, all of me, inside, all she deserved. And in the middle of it I told her: you will take me seriously, you will notice me, you will take me *seriously*. For me and for you.

We never called it rape, we're too advanced for that. Called it my 'moment'. She wouldn't ever own it, but in a future time might 'let it be what it was'... somehow. But not before she'd languished for minutes on that mound with her body unplugged and her flesh reddening in the wintry wind and then had sat up and kicked me as hard as she ever could and then run off and been pursued by me, bottom-naked, and had turned and punched me so hard, so satisfactorily hard, that I went down on the stones and nearly lost my skull on a big rock and was dazed but not enough to fail to see her run to a brook and throw her head in and hold it under so long that I staggered down and yanked her out and shoved her to the bank where she howled and cried and cried while I lay over her, shielded her from the stormwind that rattled through that iron-age valley as it had for twenty thousand years... as it wooshed and jibbered and cackled at the sobs of women and men in their betrayals... on this sodden unforgiven earth under the implacable palm of an alien god.

And I got her down and out of that high valley she was in, back onto the road. And we hadn't reckoned that the soul of Gordy was not for exiting the earth so easily. The Alighieris seemed to be waiting. They peeped at Wendy's destroyed face and my guilty one and nodded their two heads. Later they sat us down with wine in the kitchen. Dan T. said he heard 'that driver' was in a hospital in Exeter, in intensive care but alive. Wendy abruptly stood, but we three men were on our feet, surrounding her.

- We seen the car-damage, Signora. Don't make no silly moves. We seen a lot in our time. Your husband is no fool. Do as he tells

- This man is not my husband!

- It's okay. She's upset. The driver of the car is her legal husband. He followed us, drove off the cliff. Not our fault. I don't want to have to explain this to anyone

- You stay here. Long as you like. Talk over. Maybe go to hospital later. Finish. You are beautiful lady. Don't cause yourself no harm, see?

And Wendy looks at these sanguine brothers and wonders how they can be so understandingly wise. And feels a light shine out of them onto her. I see it as it happens. I know her. All women need to be embraced. Easier, if it's by non-threatening people who won't ask you to change. So we talk and drink into the night. She drifts in and out, but listens. We men self-talk in our machinations and our satisfied justice. I am not even ashamed of my attack on Wendy's body. She has to forbear no matter what. It's her duty-pact with herself and the miserable world. Maybe I should be shamed. But I feel remorselessly sorry for her. Our evil event won't change anything. And though no-one will ever

topple this woman's utter obeisance to the inexorable Law, I know my task, before her future is lost. I need to nurture a tiny devil-seed... *Did you want me to will Gordon's injury, or his death - so that you could benefit by ministering to it?*

Next morning we say goodbye. The brothers shake our hands. There's equanimity in their faces. We drink it in. Wendy stares at them.

- See you again, then
- Next time you come by, we will not be here. We never were here. At all
- How do you mean?
- Life is like that. *Arrivederci*. Goodbye.

.

- Dust, if you will admit that you're no better than him, then I will accept your criticism of my path
- So what are you doing here with me?

She replies with nothing as usual. Nothing verbal that is.

- And Wen, don't patronize by hinting you feel sorry for me. Or that you're doing me some kind of service. I'm immune to service.

Mmm, her woman eyes are hurt by that one. - And you're too wonderful to be patronized. Admit the beauty in me, Wendy, and just maybe you'll see it in yourself.

How can she resist such a challenge in the name of honesty? And why on earth haven't we got to this before? Because she keeps it in, all to herself in that closeted generous ego.

- I see the beauty in Gordon
- Bullshit you do.

Our cathartical conversation takes place in a field, last stop before we enter Exeter. In the hospital car park I deliver my best meaningful hug, and watch her go off to do her duty to her husband and get herself tangled and mangled by bureaucracy and blame and the beady eyes and bastardries of the system. I linger, and I see her diminish. She doesn't wave. I walk to the station, catch a train back to the city.

But I'm sad. Is one any better than Gordon? Ugh, guess not. Getting her angry is a law of diminishing returns. Why do I interfere really? I suspect Wendy feels time spent with me is ultimately an indulgence: I'm her little sleep, little holiday from toil, since in her world the quicker we experience badness the quicker we get rid of it. Yet the psychology of ego says all action is motivated by self-interest - which ultimately must be pursuit of pleasure - which is psychological hedonism. Still, it is said that 'emotional intelligence' is the ability to put off pleasure so that the reward reaped is magnified. Wendy's altruism is a drug then, with hope of a big payout. And I know she fears her own self-centredness. She denies she has it all *calculated* under that patina of soft silence. Ironies of an old

soul! And I? I am an annoyance, a saboteur, one who tells himself we need indulgence and frippery and passion for the sake of liberty. That'd make me immature, but not passive. Driven by contempt and anger more like. Not a recipe for compassion but a bloody-minded demand that my world is shit and needs transforming. I guess people come to compassion when they've given up on pushing, when they lay their bodies down in the cosmic stream and let the current do the job... Wendy knows she can never avoid to act, so she acts out a compassion-play. Still, I admit I want what she has, and thereby grasp at her. (Even Gordy somewhere deep wants what she has.) Follow Wendy then? I suppose I ought to copy her. *Or maybe not.* Those Alighieri brothers... they were like a cool breath from nowhere, a real foil to Wendy's dogged path. Spontaneous tuned in mischievous irrepeatable, right on! Ghosts who deliver a parcel and vamoose. Really, she should love that. And somewhere I know she does.

In the weeks following, she sits around in Exeter ministering to her broken man. I glean that the police interviewed her. She avoids me, won't elaborate on the phone, especially not about Gordon. Perhaps he's more sacred than ever now, being close to the door of death. Trouble is he's going to recover. Her muted voice on the phone alerts me she's diverted to depression. I urge her back to the city. What can she do for the guy anyhow? Her florist's shop is ailing and her assistant is complaining. (I even call the assistant for gossip, claiming to be a concerned friend.) So, disingenuous query: why be depressed? Wendy's a professional sad-sack but this is other: this is the threat of the *unsolvable*. The fact I hit on her on that hilltop... add that to the truth about Gordon, how she secretly longed for me to shove him off that cliff! Dared to think she could tread a high-wire of guilt, or dig even deeper into the pit of herself and uncover *dirty shame*. Creative! For god's sake, she needs to cling on to her abrasive vortex of spiritual suffering, her big hotline to evolving. I see her thoughts: she's disappointed too. Wanted to venerate me as 'purer choice', till I proved as exploitative as Gordy. More, even. Her duty said she should cleave to me just because I want her. But with me she entertained a higher hope, a reward even. I turned out drudgy instead. (Failed her with my insistence on fucking.) I'll call her naïve but she'll quietly say: *maybe naivety is not such a bad thing*. No, Wendy! I strike at the core of your Bargain With Shit. Not sustainable! Can't be sad and resigned, can't rely on 'weltschmerz'. Duty is your concoction, your big mental jam. I'm going to tempt you to see me as better, or worse, than that. 'Cause I am, and she knows it. Licking up Gordon's shit ain't sexy any more. She has to engage with a higher pulse, a keener vision. I'm not her holiday, I'm her *confusion*. Such a malleable girl with all her devotion to raking up the karma muck. I'll bloody well use it against her. Cosy spiritual depression won't wash. It's going to be unc cosy and wild and oily and contradictory! ...But I forget: she suffers, god love her. If she gives up on Gordy her ego will tell her she failed. For what is duty if you don't do it? Stick to it like a dog with a bone, *die* with it. Maybe she really is crazy. No. Wendy, do the opposite. Disbelieve. Passion rules us. We're alive. And alive is eternity.

Finally she is back. I hasten to the shop. There she is dithering at the back, her ponderous frame bent over blooms. I buy one, put a coin in her hand and solemnly hand the bloom to her. Don't you see I love you in a pure and special way? says my look. You can have the riches *and* the flower. This wins a tiny smile. Later I ask her to a teahouse, where she and I will have a civilised chat. Yes, Gordon is on the mend but very slowly, and yes, the police asked a lot of questions but she answered just as I instructed. And she was happy to do so. I frown discreetly, avoiding to smile.

- I know it's no small thing to lie, Wendy. But this world just won't conform to our wants. And that is good. When we acknowledge it I mean. We're to blame only when we believe we are.

She nods at this sagery, smiles a little, then says:

- Dust, I've been thinking a lot. And really, thank you for everything. (Pause) Shall I tell you what I thought?

- Er, yes, do

- Well... I have been... thinking. One day at some later time - I will get a separation - from Gordon. We will become - just friends. And then... and then... I will think of marrying you. If you like.

This time she looks into my eyes. In fact, we gaze for a while.

- You see, on the hilltop -

- I'm sorry, Wendy. I really am. And I'm glad you kicked my arse. But -

- But you needed me. I truly get it. And I got so angry

- I'm glad you did. I'm glad

- But why?

- Because it's real. And fucking sexy

- I know it's real. But it's... it's...

- Wrong? Are you crazy?

- Yes, I am. I am

- I'm crazy about *you*. And I shouldn't be. But if you marry me out of duty or atonement or friendship or compassion or because you're sad or for any other reason except that you *want* me to strip you naked and spreadeagled on a deserted hilltop then fuck ourselves senseless... then I'll not do it. I won't do it. Won't marry you. So there.

Wendy's eyes widen. I try to appear satisfied with my statement.

- You're hard. That's what you are

- Whatever, I love you

- I don't love you!

- Yes you do.

Now her eyes moisten, and drip. Not hard to do it. But lady, this is *my* duty, my integrity, my high-wire tightrope. Getting you sad or angry *is* a law of diminishing return, but how to shift you? Do I

have to use and use you? Blue Wendy, you makes it impossible for people not to do it. And this I cannot stand. The reader can call me selfish but I've my reasons. And now, I am going to do us both the honour of looking on the bright side. Blue Wendy is going to be mine some day... In the meantime, Lord deliver me from any more sanctity.

ABSENCE

Home for lunch, Libby Castro scribbles in her diary as is her habit. Castro the Director once suggested she record her dreams, and she complied. Now it's every bit of fluff, daydreams as well. 'Why not? Helps me sift and cope. When Bondy was born I wanted to write up everything. It's my little habit now. Sometimes I let Bondy draw all over it. My chattering mind! - not so intellectual - but dump it all in and I'm calm, not to say empty. How will our new production go off? Castro is in his disgusted ironic phase. Right now all art is shit. He alone carries the burden of having to save us from ourselves since the critics will slaughter us. Bless him, we need him desperately. Yes, my husband is a strange intense man, but where would one be without him? This is the phase where he curses me left and right, but in the middle of the night comes to me, takes my sweet backside and puts it exactly where he wants it. I'm actually happy when he does. And his beard tickles. But he never waits for me, not nowadays.

When Bondy was on the way I stopped dancing. It was the first time I had something else to think about. To be honest it was Castro's idea. Seemed to want the child so much, almost begged me, in between his ordering me about. Behind every great man is a pliant woman no doubt. Was I indifferent? No, but I had to warm up to it, the bump and the weight and everything. When he was born I wanted to be such a good mother. Everyone gave me advice but I wasn't sure what it meant, being a mother. What's there to do? Let Bondy be what he wants, what he *is* I suppose. Who can interfere with what is?

At the birth Castro cancelled rehearsals for the whole day in our honour. Two weeks out from his biggest show ever. I guess I looked as if I'd got in his way. He saw it, and told me to stop being silly. Actually he'd choreographed pretty much everything from the big rubber balls which I failed to use, to the baroque chamber music. The birth itself confounded his actual directives but no matter, it all passed off with minimal fuss. No criticism from the critic! - despite all the pain. When Castro is helpless (not often) he looks at me with baleful eyes and touches all his fingers together. This is the sweet moment... before the brow clouds and turns to dismissive pessimistical irony at all life's ineptitudes. Me, I bask in it, the sweet moment that is. The birth put me on top for months. At home he'd fuss about and poke things and mess up everything and give orders that were totally useless. But I was useless too. So we would once or twice actually look in each other's eyes and laugh, both sweetly embarrassed for different reasons. The thing is, Castro can't be reached. I can't do it anyway. And what about me? Perhaps there are times when he wonders about me? I'm fairly sure there are.

Little Bondy was worrisome to me. How would he grow, how would our family live? They say the Divine holds us in her palm, but I seemed to gasp with vertigo... *with the unbearable lightness of being*. I read that phrase on a book cover. It seemed to be speaking to me.

Now my boy is six and I'm dancing semi-professionally again. But how do I know I'm any good? Castro's dance theatre allows no socially acceptable benchmarks. It's all infuriatingly avant-garde, and all sustained by his ego. Am I tired of it? No no, I love to dance, and I've been good at it. Just has ups and downs, that's all. I always wanted to be part of something, something avant garde. Why not? Something strange weightless beautiful ugly lovely lonely... perhaps dance would lead me there, or Castro would - to my real adventure in art, under the unforgiving eye of the self-appointed master.'

It's Saturday. Libby and Bondy are out at the line hanging washing. It's a dreamy day. Spring, in fact. Libby notes how Bondy likes to sit under the sheets and watch them billow and strain against the sky, as if sails on a great white ship. He's snug on deck with its warm caulked boards and sailing into the blue South. Face buried in white, his hands clutching at cotton, he exclaims in excited confusion:

- After this, can I go play pirates with my friend Suzie La La?

Libby would let him go to heaven and back if he wanted, and reflects that one day she'll have to do it anyway. So she says:

- Sure you can, Bondy. Get your shoes. There are nettles by the footpath, and glass and muck in the lanes. I'll call her mum first.

Castro's barely there. But when he is he takes Bondy on his shoulders for a spin round the house before grunting and heading for his books and his texting. Bondy tends to wonder who this man might be; Libby can see it on his face. No matter, Bondy is self-contained. Blondy-headed little guy, the couple named him James. Later he heard about 'James Bond' and Libby called him Bondy after that, and Castro didn't object. He's quite plump, Libby reflects, but rather beautiful. Girls 'll like him. A mite too romantic though. Does he remind me of my own father? For me the thing is to love and forbear, let him be carefree. What's there to lose by it? The dark life will grip him anyway, later.

Libby takes him to Suzie's. It's a sunny quiet walk through the lanes. What was *my* mother like doing this sort of thing? Libby thinks often on this. Since she has no role-models she'll have to invent them. Over time she has tricked together some pictures in her mind's eye.

Elizabeth! Her mannish mother used to call at her, ignoring the fact of her, instead sending a kind of unfulfilled challenge at everything about her. Tall, imperious, 'american' - she took her tea and cigarette on the verandah, glared at the mundane, railed at the ordinary. Sudden speech, impatient gesture... did it cloak a fear of wasted existence, of amounting to nothing? Worrying behind windows at unfulfilled sex, at her obtuseness as a wife, at her lack of clothing sense. Bustling, arbitrary, all directed at naught in particular... as if trying to wring meaning out of fierce panicked solitude. She

was a tax manager or some such thing. Should never have got married. Should have been a bohemian or a lesbian or an aviator. Something! Mother always seemed to pass like a storm over Libby's head. And father died when she was eight. He worked at a booksellers. She remembers him, placid in his chair in the garden, letting her flit about him and tickle his beard or stomach or his messy fair hair... She'd learn not a thing from his inset eyes, self-smile, passive quietude. He'd bask in the sun, doodle with his puzzles, put notes in the margin of a book. Nothing profoundly scholarly, just the tinkering of one who noted life as it happened elsewhere. Perhaps he himself was a footnote in the margin of a book. She'd wonder if she might reach him, make him happy, get him to crawl with her on the grass in search of bugs. Once or twice she thinks he did, and those times she thinks he called her Libby. This is the name she likes. Better than Elizabeth.

Libby remembers she liked to flit about the garden, compose little dances under the hanging trees, sidestep daisies on the lawn and billow up her summer dress. Raising her face and arms to the sky, she'd twirl about till dizzy, till she could no more recognise a world reduced to mysterious colour, shape, kaleidoscope. Libby. *Libre*. Free... Later she'd run to her father or her mother, who were seldom together, and finding nothing much there would skitter off again like a bee in summer, and wonder what the other girls in other gardens did.

Sometimes she would stand in the house corridor in the recess of the night, without a night dress, and listen for sounds in her parents' rooms. No-one ever suspected she was there. All her childhood she'd seemed to sense and see an *absence*, behind and between the things of the world. A bin standing in a corner waiting for its human family to come home and fill it with detritus; a tennis racket or wine-glass discarded; ghost reminder of activities done, not done... One time, the billow of sheets in sunlit wind in a yard, puffed reminders of lives slept, nights and dreams gone away. Or a frivolous magazine on the table, the exploits of beautiful and important youth or young dancers. Once, the alarming rogue sea, its grey-dark mountains, no place for human beings. Another time, rows of poor chimneys, squat tenements, unknown kids in oily streets pantomiming play, as if life were a playground forever, tossing hours into the air to fall where they may before some rain-squall sent them all inside to domestic prisons. She did not mix with any of them.

Once the three of them went to Italy, and in their *pensione* she encountered a bug on a windowsill trying to navigate the dusty glass. Ignorant of history civilisation wine or song - he was a bug in the sun, one feckless hour in eternity, seeking a path, feeling only the beating of his wings and the vibration of his heart, in a vault of yellow amid a planet under a sun, below a mountain, behind glass in a dusty hanging noon. Hoped to meet and marry, have his child, die in the evening a contented thing, not cheated, in no place called Italy. Libby remembered the bug but little else. Except, some similar bugs in the swimming pool, a pool deeper than any child. With her still, lazy gaze, she watched them wanting to live, desperate to fly to the sky over the forest, but they slopped instead

inside this human sea. She wanted to scoop them out and dry them on the warmy stones. But *veneration* prevented her. It was absurd. They drowned. She never forgot it.

She read somewhere in an adulty book that the sands of time erase all things, that things are just sun-glitter on the sea without body or soul (whatever that could be). And she felt that nothing is ever known except by random eyes that happen to look there, who gaze with feckless nonchalance in that place... who scarce remember, unless they are entertained.

A single moment in a dateless afternoon, nowhere in summer, barely in Italy, long ago... Yellow-aproned flower-fields glide by in a car, parallel wires raked by poles under a cobalt sky, dust on a windscreen clouding vagrant travellers' eyes, passing from unknown to unknown, place to name-forgotten place. In one such place a mute old woman looked at her, and Libby wondered if *she* cast her old mind back to a sometime when she played idly under the vault of heaven in a dusty noon by a roadside, in a parched land where feckless things passed before her eyes. Yellow-aproned flower-fields... wires... cobalt sky.

'Oh! Here we are at Suzie's... Bondy likes to run ahead since he loves Suzie La La. She's part Italian, and a girl.

My past then. Great swathes of disconnection... tsunamis of forgetting... and some little jeweled things that survive, that create a little world in which I wrap myself and take a meaning from. Little beads of meaning, little bubbles. How empty I am - one bug in the universe.'

...Yes, Libby the acolyte and ingenue has her insights. And did her man Castro have other acolytes? Oh, too many, and always female. Nadia is a new example. And did he appear to have friends? Of course not. Libby saw it straight away. Was he able to treat another as equal? Never. Could this inequal master-student coitus ever morph to up-grown equality? Never ever. Does he interest himself in others' work? Sure, in as far as he can mould or dissuade them from their decadent ignorant paths. Does he need? Oh yes, he is such a lonely pioneer. Libby felt it. But Libby is unaware in so many things, Castro does not fail to point out. What does she know? Maybe she has a 'strange skerrick of freedom' - and the consequences of this skerrick Castro would fail to note or wouldn't want to. Perhaps with her it's freedom from the burden of needing to prove herself, a difference between those who need to manipulate the world and those who don't. Great manipulators feel they are the lonely burdened ones, for without them nothing would be done, there'd be no analysis, no progress, no meaning to human struggle. *Après moi le deluge!* Insouciant blythe spirits like Libby who contribute nothing unless coerced by such as Castro - don't they see they are leaves blown on wind, grains in a sandstorm? Ah, but! Libby the nobody who chooses to not be somebody might wish to say: I harken to the unseen, to the Other, the Shadow Dancer... whose footprints appear in sands though no-one was ever seen to tread there... These mover-shaker types, they don't inhabit that universe. Libby from

the start felt sorry for him. How can a small ingenue feel sorry for a big genius? He'd feel globally patronised if he found out. He must never find out, Libby knows.

We say that in the cosmic scheme we fulfil each other's lack since none are whole, and that all are born for a purpose: to discern their limitation, admit to it and willingly let another fulfil it. While controllers find this life a torturous episode, those like Libby who sense they can't control, are at an advantage. So she'll embrace the great Other in the form of a big hairy problem like Castro, and will love her other with a sort of quiet sorrowing pity. And she'll do her part as willing disciple, as the fool who must learn. And wonder of wonders, the Lord himself kneels at the feet of his silly disciple. Libby loves with humility under her petty complaints and discomforts and her self-sorry pricked pride. She believes in her Castro because he's a larger-than-life fiend with a heart, a precious prodigy who comes among us not often. And Castro himself was all huge humility when they got married. Libby believes this was one production in which he participated with an almost naïve belief that 'life as theatre' might offer some kind of little sweetness (but never 'meaning' of course), perhaps the sense of family he blindingly strove for in his dance theatre yet always stood back from as if it were too ironic for words. This cynic Castro when he stoops to join the human round, must imagine this simple sweetness as if an elysian romance, to be had once and never again. For to have more of it would be to enact the fool - to be fooled by a dream.

Libby was tickled by how he delighted in putting her in all possible positions in their lovemaking, and she herself participated with absorbed interest in the presence of this bear who just couldn't cram all the honey in his mouth at once. She assumed she'd be pregnant within a short time, and it was so. Did she have qualms? Of course, but what can one do? Truth be told, Libby can be so present and so pliant with him because... she is absent. What thereby is there to lose? Sometimes in the dead of the evening, after being happily mauled by her sweaty now sleeping mate, she would lie there alone, languishing and thinking... He is so absorbed in his own gothic soap opera, his own little play-pen, his ego-romance of great explorer, icon, genius, artist, playboy, eclectic, young turk, master, commander, jester, devil and steppenwolf and all the rest. And I am just a sweet little pussy and lips and limbs for him to play his tunes on. She knew the only kind of muse she could be to him was to be an amusement. No illusions there. Is this unfair? A bit. He did love in his self-centred way as well as he could. And well she knew. She took up smoking at this stage for a little while. Nothing serious, like a post-coital puff or two in the vein of 1950s moll. Again, it was a role. Libby is the insouciant type who can certainly play a role and toss it away. And she wore her blondy hair in a shortish bob since he liked the image of 1920s ingenue, or cotton slacks and horn-rimmed sunglasses in the 1960s style. All of these tickled him. In his hoary way he could commit to this worldly marriage, let it matter to him despite its lack of outrage and bohemian anarchy, as long as its irony was accomplished. Thus it would last. What were his terms? As long as her beauty was fresh to him she would be his only one.

But since beauty cannot ensnare us forever and must turn to ennui, she could not expect to always be his only one. Thus he explained this accomplished logic as if to a child. But a woman is no child; the man is the child. Libby did not complain at this. She had (she felt) the benefit of his honesty - a form of flattery. Still, the girl had no idea what her reaction would be if she found him with another. She needed to be special to him in some respect! She gave her sweet body to him after all. And she gave him a baby.

Thus Libby well remembers the day she came upon Castro and Nadia in the back of the cavernous dressing room at the theatre, engaging in activities illicit but not untheatrical in nature. How she watched them for a while as specimens of interest, even feeling some prickly heat before quietly closing the door and walking away. She told her analyst (his name is Cross, and he is your writer) that she felt then her life as Castro's dancer was over... for good this time. Sniffing behind Libby's evasive silence in the days that followed, Castro sought to initiate a kind of one-way dissertation on the relative merits of his dancers. This finally prompted her to remark that, yes, Nadia certainly has a superb curve to her buttock (as she herself noted at first hand) and that in terms of breast and cunt size Nadia should undoubtedly be superior, for a man of his tastes anyway. When Elizabeth gets angry, which she hardly ever does, she turns into a fiend. Castro however is not easily swayed from the logic of his acts. He is in fact selfless, since young Nadia requires *his* commitment to match her selfless commitment to his art. His is an act of necessity, no more, and Libby should at least grasp it, should see the irony. She certainly sees the irony of trying to open the eyes of a husband to his venality, and so is liberated from the need to care what happens next. What happened next is up for grabs. One version (hers) is that little Bondy runs in, stops, sees the adults as usual in their incomprehensible big world and turns his nose up at his father. It may have been that Castro snatched at Bondy, and Libby will have protested and Castro will have pushed her roughly back, and it is possible she actually picked up the big knife and slashed wildly at him so that he collided with the kitchen door which hit him in the side of the head... and there's reason to believe he toppled backward through the doorway and down the short flight of steps beyond, so splitting his head open on the tiles and falling into black unconsciousness. Another version (his) says Libby took up the kitchen knife and stabbed him cleanly, deep into the shoulder. She may have killed him if he'd not managed to kick her to the floor and she'd not also struck her head in falling... At any rate, both of them lay on the floor for a long while, and when Libby came to and saw the blood and felt sorry and called the ambulance and fretted and wrung her hands and cried as he was taken away - she had completely forgotten her impulse to mortally stab him - as if it were a dream, a thought bubble. And thus she was his faithful wife again.

...A day ago, sweetly dressed, she dropped in at the office of the analyst Cross. Had no idea what to say so she left. He followed, sneaked behind her, into the city market. This day she wears a little stripy tank top and her bob is clipped back like a teenager's. In the sun her shoulders glisten as she

lingers over knick-knacks in the stalls. Her moves are weightless, routine. Has a way of turning her head, standing, as if there were somewhere to go, something to do... She might be at home in an eastern bazaar where no-one knows her, where there's no special reason for being. Through a bookshop window Cross watches. Her neck is arched over a book. Landscapes - far countries - bodily love - recipes - romance. Sun on the street. She stops at a café, peers at a menu, enters, sits by a window, speaks to a man who turns away. He comes with a glass. She sips, sets it down. Her hands are folded. The turn of her neck. She stares out in the direction of Cross, doesn't see him. Somewhere in the city a little bar... and a blonde girl named Libby, lingering over a glass.

In the end, Libby Castro cleared out. She and Bondy took a ship across the pearly Aegean, and during the days she sat at the stern languishing in a deck chair as the ship knifed its slew of white over the sea and birds drifted at the masthead, suspended in the sky. She sprawled by the hour, with sparkly juices within reach, presented no doubt by some swarthy waiter who lightly fancied his chance. Bondy played about the deck, and sometimes he'd roll on his back, let his face nestle in the sun like a cub in the African savannah, and she saw that he cared for nothing in this life at all. Just as well. Every mile to her was lost and gone, this ship would never return but would sail to the end of the world. Who needs anything? We are dust and sunlight, we drink in the winds of the warm south, we are ghosts of the yellow days, we will never be back.

Presently, a thin shadow crosses her sun... It's the swarthy waiter boy. Does he want to fill my drink - or drink my fill? Libby experiences a cool tingling in several parts; the knees outside her frock languish, widen an inch. What's to be done? Will you help me with a little thing, she says. My cabin is this way. Bondy squints up at them as they cross the warm deck. The whole world knows but looks the other way. In her little cabin she pulls him into her, gets filled to the gunwhales with all the muscle and blood she can take. He knows the ritual (she can see it in his pool-dark eyes) and nothing is said, only the brutal exchange of breath and fluid. This is where Bondy came from, she thinks. His tongue lolls in her gaping mouth and for aching seconds she shakes uncontrollably and so does he. Then, there's only the slow slowing of their heartbeats, and the heavy slow roll of the ship under her back. After he has left, without a word of Greek, she lies there... fingering the semen and sweat and cunt juice on her legs, and swims in the hot nothingness. Saves me performing it myself, she thinks. Love is simple, the universe is nothing but sex and death. Our sly language of life is thus uttered, and we go our ways. Perfect.

Later she's back in her deck chair... the hedonist in love with nothing. Bondy wants to go in the pool. She takes him. He flutters in the shallows like a little bug and smiles up at the woman, his simple benefactor. She is not ashamed, not a bit. Libby in her cotton frock looks out to sea. Whatever I do, the great silent world rolls on. Nothing ever happens. Nothing ever happened. Look up at that great blue field of endless sky, that legendary sunlight glittering on a glass ocean. Why do we live, why

strive like we do? Only a human is made to ask outrageous questions. But we ask, it's our metaphysic torture. Only drowning in the pool of sex can salve it, fix it. That's what I do anyway... The ship sails on. She falls asleep in the sun and has her simple dream. In the dream all is fresh and dewy like a lingering morning in the garden of god. Our past is gone, we're oblivious on the journey to our end. Freedom has no history. She heard someone say that. Transparent, a straw in the wind, a circumstance, a clamour, a whisper of a time that never was. Always alone, not lonely but somehow cradled. Lazy. Easy. Easy.

Freedom has no history. Let us explain how we can erase things, and why we must. There is no such thing as history, except the stuff invented for the convenience of propagandists and politicians, for the delectation of scholars, for the solace of sentimentalists. There are no timelines, no consequences, no significances beyond the fancies of you and me. For where is the history of the voiceless, the forgotten, the unknown, the unspeakable little people or the used-up animals, insects, bacteria, flotsam and jetsam who lived and passed away yet felt all things and documented nothing except that their very breath was a document of fact cast into the bright air and lost in millennial sky... All these are never summoned by the denizens of the future, who invent and finger history only to serve themselves. It is our own story, concocted and manufactured for our own business, serving our agendas... And all those selfish-stupid powers-that-be will try to summon Libby Castro back for her crimes. And she will never return. For without history there is no guilt. And without guilt there is freedom. And freedom has no history.

Libby is far gone. I, Cross, arbiter of all fact and fancy in this narrative, am the sole conduit for the confessions (true and false) that make up the history of Libby Castro. Her texts to me resemble the tracts of a compulsive diarist: scatty but strangely coherent, off-hand but quietly self-eviscerating. From them all, for my own purposes, I piece together her story's end.

'...Weeks of journeying through Anatolia and Kurdistan by bus and lorry. Country unknown, life unspoken. I don't care to be traced. Taking responsibility for the whole of myself. I wear the hijab, no-one sees my guilty blond hair. I clutch for safety inside my robes, all my secrets. And Cross, I found a *village* under the blue sky. The name sounded like *Nektar*. I adopted it. Do you like? All bare hills and stones. Little houses, and chalk walls, white and magenta blossom, dust. It's too hot. The biblical scrub-desert sears my sinner's eyes. Analyse me Cross, if you dare.

But everything is simple. I found a stony hilltop - and here I sit, garbed in my white. The view is stupendous! Desert and sky collude, and behind my lidded eyes I become the silence. In silence there is no place for human beings. Nothing is or could ever be out of place. Every thing as it is. It is not human. Why should I worry or strive? Castro lectured about maya, the illusion of illusion... but I am not so dull, I have a mind. I do it quietly, wait for the insights to come. I don't write books or strive

for complexity or want to control every nuance. Things come to me, and quietness and simplicity gather about me often. But I never spoke of it since there was no space to and because people were not interested. I am the type who never gets recognition, and in fact I am misunderstood. Up to a point I don't mind, but it can get on one's nerves. Noisy Castro gets on my nerves because he won't let me be his partner. Do you think I enjoyed leaving him? He is such a hopeless helpless fellow behind all that brain. Now I patronise him, just as he did me. Is he all right? I hope he is.

I have my insights. Words don't do them justice. I see this maya world is the invention of my dissatisfaction and desire. When I strive and want and complain and get confused, maya is there like a sandstorm whipped up by my mind's agitation. But when I relax and I seem to disappear, maya averts its face... and there is the soft dance of simplicity, the thing 'as it is'. And even if I must tend to the body and think and work and do so many things, they are not a problem. It's simple activity. What do you say Cross: not bad eh? Am I the Girl or not? Not so stupid! You should come to the desert. No neurotics here. Not that I mean you are one. You're just complicated. Are you a cynic by any chance? Do you remember my recurring dream? Where I walked alone in a canyon assailed by voices, all in need, calling at me, wanting to caress, cajoling at me, but I the un-judgmental walked on, not concerned or attached. Remember how none of you could stand it? Cross?

I don't need anything now. Even Bondy sees it.

And when I got furious (not often, as you know) it all came like a strange alien then passed away as if it never was. I forget it all, the violence. I suppose I should ask where it comes from but I don't or can't. I don't recall my acts at all. Thank god for forgetting. Should I worry? Maybe it's the other fool's problem since they provoked me? Maybe my rage is divine justice, the sword of correction delivered by me. Oh my, how Islamic, how philosophical. ...*I have the recollection that Castro fell to the floor.* I don't know how. Maybe I shouldn't talk about it, the law might want to know. You'll explain to everyone won't you? You know me. I'm a good girl basically, not evil or vindictive or nasty. And I care for people and try to be dutiful. I guess I'm a sinner, but who isn't? I can't ever control it. Poor old me eh. Can you check he's all right? Castro, I mean. And text me. You'll help me Cross, won't you?

Violence, her 'strange alien', the flipside of her failure to engage. When she swung that knife at him she might have killed him, killed her husband Castro. Will she build a little hill of lies? I hesitate to tell her that Castro is in a coma. I really am selfish, and I'm her lifeline now. Must take care to keep it that way. But I'm sure she'll do violence on herself, do abuse out of guilt. Stay with us Libby, and let me be your samaritan... since you will be our suicide.

Later. '*...Cross, I know he fell.* What happened? I can't piece it together. You're not telling me! Bondy ran away today. It took hours to get him back. Did I run away, Cross? They won't find me.

Can we deal with anything? In the past I've been dutiful and naïve (naïve may be good) and self-serving and attention-seeking and demanding. And uninterested. And a fairly hopeless mother. What else? What other shite can I beat myself up with! All that manipulative ego and fear and calculation... uuuuugh. But that's other people. I don't think it's me... but with me there is this *guilt*. Cross - what do you think innocence is?

...Now people in uniform are looking for me. We had to run away from Nektar. One day we camped out near some ancient columns in the hills. They had scrabbly signatures of the dead, like graffiti. Those people, where are they now? The girls, children, old wise ones, the warriors and wives, lovers, minstrels. We chalked our little names in the stones. I felt sad all that day. As if I sensed there was possibility beyond my imagining... that would have to wait till another life. And that saying: we only have it all when we know it'll be gone... this was Castro's 'razor's edge'. I get it now. He was incredible the way he sensed the impossible contradictions of our lives, that he milked this irony to the bitterest degree! He was like a furnace that refused to die to ashes. What do I feel about my husband? He's naïve like me but does he know it? I believe he wanted to be a kind of child, yet he always rode the tiger of cynicism. Right to the edge of a cliff, and how he risked falling off that cliff. He wanted to see if innocence was possible at all. And he married silly me. But I will end up helping him. You'll see, Cross. I am not such a fool after all. Here I am. Everything is all right. This is me, it's all simple. There are lots of photos of me. Thank you Cross. You're my pal.'

The texts dried up. The above is an extract from her last. Days later a report appeared online that police were still searching for her. Then nothing - until a new story, on news channels and in several papers. It is not possible for me to dramatise Libby's exit.

Somewhere near the border of Armenia and Azerbaijan, the body of a girl is found in a canyon at the base of a cliff. It is identified as Elizabeth Castro, wife of the noted director. A local peasant boy had apparently alerted the police. According to his story Libby fell by accident. Possibly, she stepped backwards while posing for a photo that the boy was taking. A photograph was actually published, presumably taken just before the fall. We see her in a robe with her blonde hair showing since the scarf is tossed back a little. She is depicted smiling sweetly, does not appear to be troubled. *This is me*, the face seems to say. Here I am in the nothingness. No drum-roll. Just a photo-moment. Everything is simple. In a minute I'll be gone.

I shall write in the great book of Nothing, says Libby Castro. And then they will know who I am.

A simple fall, the ultimate do-nothing thing. What should we say about a girl who seemed so defined by egos around her? Must she always be our victim? Anyone who asks what innocence is (as Libby did to me) may well be innocent, but not simple. I saw her quiet elusiveness and her childlike self-regard and her naïve and friendly optimism, a quality exploited by many. She met exploitation with

pity or passivity or the ducking and weaving of denial. She turned (once) to stuttering violence, to self-violence, rebellion, flight. Her regret and seeping depression segued to loneliness, and to a delusion of fulfillment by means of holiness, emptiness. At the last we saw the serendipitous accident, the serendipitous suicide.

I tend to construe the facts of her death to signify illness and failure - when I'm sad and miss her, that is. But I know we make things up to suit ourselves. Perhaps she stepped into space and walked on air, floated in the ether-wind, settled lightly like a bug in the canyon's dust, as one does in a dream. She was elusive! You and I concoct our little bubble universes, furnish and inhabit them with clinging fear or lazy habit or staunch ignorance or rabid belief. But there comes a time when every bubble turns meaningless. Should we try to concoct other, more subtle, spheres in our glass-bead game? Let us say all girls like Libby Castro endure, in their pained innocence, in a thousand lives, in finer and finer expressions of an unfolding gyre, until one day we can say: that Libby sensed (she's not intellectual thank god) that if you suffer from the disease of innocence then it's better to be an empty woman who is gone, not to be someone's shadow, not a little planet revolving about someone else's sun. Just to do and to be nothing at all, or at least not much; to be somehow cradled and not lonely, light, insouciant, *libre*, free. For me, Libby Castro took refuge, became a girl unmarked, a straw, a suggestion, a circumstance, a desert spirit, glint in the wind, flicker in sunlight, breath unheralded, woman alone.

And now maybe we should do her the ultimate service - and forget about her altogether.

FOOL FOR LOVE

The first time she sees him there, slouched in her favourite chair, lip cigarette curled at her child despair, he mouths to her, 'baby, do you dare to dance?' She barely grasps her first best thought: 'What are you, master of the universe? How can you talk to me that way? Such whispered words I shouldn't... no! because you'd...' and the girl Marine is drowning in a sudden thing: 'because you'd leave, you'd go away...' What kind of notion for a girl of sixteen in the presence of a man much older? Second scene: she slips the parental house of dolls and takes to walking in rain on a graveled boulevard, conspicuous in frilled skirt and lace-up boots, lone under a childy spotted parasol. She spies a figure ahead and knows with a jolt it is him. As he comes she sees under his sleeve tanned fingers dangling a rose that is black. A rose for any woman, is her involuntary thought. But the deepening rain curtains her fantasy, turned cloying in adolescent wish for nakedness in the heart. Could it be real? Oh it is Paris and the *new époque!* He regards her, twists the bud in his fingers. This time no cigarette but the ironic stare. You, last clean girl in creation, I see you precipitately want to join the ranks of the voluptuously stained and dead! Nice to meet again, he whispers, and brushes her cheek as one would a delicate flower in the garden of the world. They walk a little and he plays attendant wooer. Nothing really is said since the die is cast: how she'll wallow in her mind on him by night and by day in a dream where there's falling, falling with no rude-hard landing, only soft heaviness forever. And this master at making girls defrock has seen it all with an instinct only heart-sucking men can know. Without daughters of his own, such filleting on the slab of lust is but his contribution to the fresh-dance of debutance, the coming out of youth. Few would respond to his spell in fact, and that Marine is one he knows in an instant. Yet if she won't, he'll not care a damn - and here is power such that new-blooded girls feel themselves to be suddenly alive, just once! before the slow groan of dutious washed out day-death descends in their eyes. Marine wants to cry out, 'Teach me all I want, I'll swallow paradise, give me legend days, the twilight of my youth! And nothing do I know, so feed me sweet sweet lies, me, little bird caught in a wire of your money-lies and fame... and what could it matter in this darkening rain? I'll be moth to your flame, your fool again again.' None of it is said, but will be the only thing real in her bedroom dark, hallway blushings, breakfast-room misutterings, tram nothingness, park solitude, schoolyard hells. In bright-hell days of vacuous promise and priceless waste, in swelling need beyond crawling bourgeoisie and whispery god injunctions and lace-made rules and prettified doll expectations and mother's high eye and the antimacassar's ripple under her fevered hand. And the rustling down there in bedroom dark to feel the *secret*, where only the logic of exploding fucking can snuff this toady lampoon of quotidian living. What kind of dress doll do they want me to be? Painted puppet to be married in stilled boudoirs of securitised living death? I'd rather be a flame that fell useless in the sky, firework doused in his muscled hand, glad to

be slovened and undone. How he fan-flames what I want! Two meetings later he tempts her to a 'holiday in the sun'. Let's take a ride, he says. I dare you! Be warned though, I'm not your guardian and you'll not hold me. Nor am I your paramour, for if I were, hammers of censure would come down and we'd be parted. Let me be instead your tutor-poet, amanuensis in the lightest way. Thereby will the prying world respect us. *Yes my daddy*, she breathes inside her head, and he knows the mental arrangement she has made and approves it by squeezing her lacy hand. She precipitately constructs her breathy fantasia: stuffs her suitcase with garments she knows will be discarded (such is her poverty of sexual knowing) and appears to him at the Gare de l'Est in boots and bonnet one weekday morning when she should be solving mathematic equations behind a hard school desk. They board a train for the sun-blue south. Everything is paid for, and she knows there'll be so much of slaving delicate debt she can barely wait to begin. But, but - the miniature adult bred in her by Mother totters upward at moments and asks: shall we not sometime be equals when I've grown a little, though still *abandoned*, and having done my apprenticeship in slavery to love, in the way of fine-clothed experience move up to Queen in my lord's affections? The future reckons, and her instincts are the whisperers of it, but for now the glory of escape drenches in, and she wriggles in her seat like the child she has to be - until they'll reach some name-blank destination in furrowed shadows of the sun-dark south and she'll be his rent and soaked and burnt-out mistress on their sunbed's platter-sheets in the bellies of Spain or Italy or Greece, or wherever this serpent train will lead. And she never will let herself believe he has anyone else, 'for if I did, who should I blame but myself?' she chants. We'll take our hell ride! Does it ever rain in Spain? You and me can tango, eat a mango. Two petals on a wet black bough... will it forever be you and me, somehow? The fellow economically smiles: his lip cigarette is back, just for show, and she even lets herself smoke it, little harbinger of other dun fires she soon will imbibe. He stalks the corridors of the train, returns by and by with whisky and wine, and once a red jewel for her hair, gift for a little girl in her vanity fair. They experiment in the cabin bunk and he's solicitous and calm, and she is initiated in a body's racked aching under a man's muscular straightness. He teaches her tricks she can perform outside the schoolyard, and she faithfully swallows them all. After, as they stare as one from the window at passing forests and plains, the world shuttering by, she feels herself distending far from home, and is afraid even under the fiery gladness, as if peeping into a cauldron of gluey boundness that seems to suck away all her little resource.

Tucked in their southern hotel by the sea it takes little time for routine to establish. First comes the promised daily bed bliss at which she becomes artful under his cool-hot tutelage. At night he wants to wander the streets alone, lightly asks for 'space for the sake of his male needs'. What these may be she has no idea. He explains: what man can spend all his time with a woman, or a woman with a man? And here's the irony, that as her feminine accoutrements grow, her dream imperceptibly slips away. This is all written and she doesn't know it, but knows it somewhere all the same. One evening she stalks the promenade by the glitter sea, and sees at once how he meets a grown-up woman, all finery

and lace about her face like a funereal dream of sex, and how they slip away from the lamp's half-glow to a place where she can't follow. And how he called her Marianne, and how she called him Joseph. The very next day, with fiery honesty she imagines may still endear him to her, she confronts with girlish hotness and tears, and he says: Don't you want me more since you have to share? And thus it's accomplished: her initiation to this mystery of want - and beyond, to the masochistic wanting of it, of feeding like a snake on its own body or a smiley wolf that chews its furry young. Here is a cliff, a pit, a whirlpool, a gulf - with slow swooping kites above a sea purpled in the sunset, or dotting her mind like rat droppings on the crystal floor of her bathroom where she locks herself. Beyond the door he shrugs, apologises, walks oh-so-reluctantly away. She doesn't see him for days. She thinks of spilling her blood, rubbing shit in her eyes, but can't do it though a toilet and a razor are at hand. His razor, the man called Joseph.

Days later the scene is repeated, and she meantime has aged before the crying tides of the beach and the dumping fuck-you surf, behind tooth-hard tables in this loony burlesque hotel where she finds herself kneecapped, not eating, getting madder and looser to no avail. Of course he asks her not to fret, suggests she play a longer game, trust in him and his ways, never throw out a baby with the bathwater. But she's suddenly no longer the baby, and she hates in exquisite ways only love-clinging can know. I should have been drugged... should have drugged me helpless in your macho dream! What other way to play heroine in your harem! She doesn't twig this is exactly what he has had her do. She has no home to run to, which lends the tenacity of a cornered animal, and he offers her everything and nothing and submits not at all, much like the green inexorable sea-god leering outside the window. Again and again she claws at him, and he reminds her she should be flattered he liberated her, and she can't believe he *said that* and loses her mind again - and again his charm-diseased hands make her pliant flesh wriggle helplessly - and so they make it up, on and on and over and over in senseless teary nights and exquisite exhausting fights... Till at last comes a day when she says to herself: why should I take this, why should I take it any more? And so the fleeing begins, a different kind of fleeing, this time from herself, from her own dreams, not those of parental others. And she who flees will come to fire-in-the-hole nothingness... and blunder to hate and to contempt... or mercifully to aloofness, or suddenly to wild strength! I'll ride the tiger, wield a burning rod, dance on red-hot embers! Welcome to the liberation of a woman's mind. First comes the shame at fall from grace, but in whose eyes is it so? The eyes of parents, of the bourgeois - and these she must strangle outright. And all the tricks she is suddenly conscious she learnt by him with feminine guile to fake up her happiness, tricks that crept up on her even before she knew her love dream was stillborn, all these must shrivel now. Yet didn't he smile and say, never look back? That smile made her follow him a thousand miles! And she wrote her name, wrote her name on water... And what is left, for a drowned and disgraced... *daughter?*

He offers her money and luxuries which she sullenly takes. These she'll never pay back! In a bookshop in the town where she lurks in the noonday she finds a book on heroines. I'll be Salome, have his head on a platter, or Joan of Arc who dying cries 'I'll burn on a pyre all the poisons I desire! The English suffragette maimed under a king's horse, or the huntress Diana who locks up mercy in her heart, not for hire or use by any man, or delectable Mona Lisa whose smile sums up this stupid dog world. How utterly special am I, Marine! She knows she's a heartbeat from cringing tears, that she walks a razor's edge of powdery nothingness and killing wrath. But anger will save me, she chants. Like Colette I'll piss on the world of men from a height. The filthy thought cheers her up. But dressed-up women in streets and shops seem to stare as if she's the trespasser in a china doll world where women know their place just as they think they are masters. Worse, one of them is the lace-clad woman of the lamps. On the boulevard Marine strides and glares in all weathers. Hate now extends to her own kind. Pathetic women all, in this darkening rain! Did *your* lover leave you lone again, with a black rose petal in a street somewhere, leave you nothing richer than a jewel for your hair, nothing deeper than a castle in the air?

...But in the cracks between notions of knife-clean celibacy and steeled vengeance and forked victimhood... there he is. *You. Still there. Lip cigarette, sprawled in my special chair! You sell me that ironic stare and whisper, baby do you wanna dance?* Her mouth goes sack dry again. Her nether regions want to dribble. Between the two her heart quickens and aches. The face reddens, even without a mirror. The agony. What should a girl want? What does this girl want?

To be the fool. For love? For love. Again.

Not again.

Again.

A QUESTION OF STOMACH

An eminent astrologer hinted to me: 'Imagine a scene of betrayal, in the country of France at the beginning of the Greatest War'. I declare it to be Paris, and the year to be nineteen-forty. The tale occurs in the wake of the invading Nazis, and is shaped by that evil event.

'Marine, with her nose for things, knows just how badly the war is going - though the newspapers never say it. Today she and I meet in our café to share gossip as usual. Her cynic pessimism (convincing pose in peacetime) has blossomed these last weeks. Life in suspense, unreality of hollow talk, the ghostly patina of solid things: Marine seems to thrive on these. We met but six months ago and I have to say she has pursued our liaison with studied vigour. Notwithstanding, when I engage with her I can never say why she invests so much in me. These days for example she makes sure to find places where we can be alone - behind doorways, on narrow benches, in bushes in a park - and makes no bones about slithering down her panties and pulling me into her as if her blessed cunt were our only place of safety, as if she'd declared there were no choice in the matter. She knows the way to a boy's senses, and I have so far failed to be critical of her acts. I've also failed to be patronised by her blunt usury, for the simple reason that to take her seriously is beyond me. Even her notion that furtive sex in unseemly places is somehow a metaphor for the coming invasion seems lost on me. Marine seems to nurse an intensifying climactic act, as if this were the only possibility in a world going precipitately mad. Stony relentlessness becomes her personal little irony, where she plays invader and controller (and today she's offended when I offer to pay for coffee) who needs to be *out* of control, to prove she is gritty, fearless, alive. I admit she is no fool.

Back in the days of peace (if there ever was such a thing for her) I suspect Marine was unable to decide whether to accept the role of anti-bourgeois rebel or upholder of martial, even puritanical values. She attempts nowadays to combine these into some fierce form of nationalism (which she knows I disdain) and though she is a hater of warmongers to be sure, I begin to suspect she has fascist tendencies simply because she cannot see that she transfers her cynicism at the weakness of her country into the blaming of victims. We don't mention Jews. Certainly she can't abide my increasingly frequent references to the jewess Marianne F _____. It is a source of wonder to me that women think they have rights over you simply because they dislike a friend of yours. Marine certainly won't stomach rivals, and jealousy masked as contempt may well turn to scapegoating my friend Marianne if and when the Nazis come to town. The whole world knows Marianne is Jewish and that her family has money, and that she has so far refused to run. Marine's world is resolutely working class: she had few choices in life (as she reminds you) since her father is a tough. He and I in fact met one night at the door to Marine's bedroom, and I certainly had my pants down. That Marine might

have planned it that way is not lost on me; she has nothing to lose by alienating her father. To the contrary. Though what she may think of me by using me as an opportunity to hate someone else, doesn't do a lot for my sense of respect. Marine would say that respect comes from commitment. Her bullying intense nature has a certain hold on me, no doubt about it. Marine has a certain reputation around the *arrondissement* (despite being a figure of contempt in some quarters) for pushing political and personal causes, and such is her self-possession that if she pays attention to you she assumes you'll be flattered. And yes, I pay attention and she swallows it as her right. Here's the deal, she seems to say: you enter my orbit and I'll grind out my proletarian love for you with all that I have. And love and sex become a sort of bulldozerish punishment, not of you, but of a world that is fickle, that is fey, that is bourgeois, that is artistic, that talks of love as if it were a heaven-sent gift rather than a pragmatic necessity. She is no great beauty, this Marine, with her short black bobbed hair (she drinks short black coffee too) and solid brutal build which says: if you dare to find me sexy, more fool you. But I have a flinty heart and streetwise soul, her body says, and it's a case of *fuck you* if you don't accept it. That I should enter into her self-referential narrative is a credit to her street smarts more than to subtle soul feelings. And I'd know better than to display those. But I admire her, somewhere deep. What is the point of love though, or of life, unless we seek the subtle? She is right: I am victim to a typically French aesthetic. Life for her is proletarian seriousness, sex happiness a shrug in the dark at fools who never caught up with you, the prospect of war a perfect storm that heralds the closest thing she will ever get to exquisite poetry: revenge. But on what and whom? There is a hard-scrabble beauty about my Marine (I dare to call her mine) that flowers in a crisis, and she needs crisis to let her soul bloom, in the dark.

So. Today Marine reiterates a message that has begun to creep with urgency into her talk these last days. She is a self-appointed master of clandestine information, and now she urges me, her bourgeois boy, to slip away with her to the Southern Sea, far from the coming invasion and its brutal promise. That I might feel the slightest consternation at this plan, knowing that she styles herself as steely-brave Parisian ghetto fighter, cannot be lost on her. What's her game then? Can I admit that she is quicker-witted than me? Yes, if I am to succumb to the tragic poet's ruse of reading this coming invasion as a *grotesque* that can only disrupt my aesthetic soul and make of me some kind of fey martyr... and she expects this tripe from me and longs to subvert it. Her solution: to protect my future with resourceful wit and steeled resolve. What about my parents? I retort, and am not disappointed to find that she, having already thought to steadfastly reject over months any offers of financial help they might have sprinkled her way so that now in the hour of need they might take for granted that she is a trustworthy and a likely (though surprising) future daughter-in-law, so Marine's putting in of the hard yards with them (behind my back) is now seen as simply a vouchsafe of her trust and concern for me and my future. Or to the contrary, she doesn't trust me, which conflicts with her knowing that somehow she needs me. For my part, I underestimate the feelings and needs of such a woman, and

frankly am out of touch with them. In fact I aim to keep it that way, so that I may have a bet both ways on women of my choice, the other bet being my Jewess Marianne. I know this will infuriate Marine to the extent that perhaps she may be moved to see that her little universe of want and demand is relative to and contingent on the person she so hotly attends to, namely me. All this to show that I seek to retain a modicum of power, a little pinch of choice... and that I really in the end am more interested in the balancing of titivating choice than I am in the reality of having a true relationship with either woman. I consign myself to the truth that it is this freakish crisis that brings out such a lurking trait in me (that lay dormant in peacetime) - that it is a deathwish in the guise of fey passivity, or else a sexually rampant dream of thrilling self-murder, that now will reveal its head in the guise of siding with a victim Jewess whose life, as I read it, is in danger, danger - and who *needs* me... Well, that's the bit that doesn't quite add up (yet) since Marianne, I will tell you, is also a strangely wilful girl - utterly different from Marine though akin to her in her implacable opposition to her - in that Marianne seems to instinctively know who might be the unworldly fellow victims she can trust, and the pragmatists she can't. Willow-tall and blonde (unusual looks for a Jew), Marianne has become a heroine to me of late, a subtle moral crusader-seductress, a magnetist, a purveyor of romance. She seems in her desperate hour to flaunt a radical dream of fulfilment, a fundamentalist's belief that honour is possible even in the face of catastrophe. Perhaps she is mad, perhaps drunk on the notion of violence. She hardly seems to analyse her own motives. And surely she is selfish to ask me to share in her aggressive victimhood. Yet I respond. Why? I am still deciding whether it is for my sake that Marianne has asked me to stay for her and to help her family (she is an only child) in their time of need, no matter whether they are to flee or to stay. (We have already discussed that I will hide her in my apartment if needed.) I know I will not tell her about Marine's plan to leave the city, because if I did, I would never then know if Marianne's plea would be based on respect for me or on rivalry - and something in me says it may turn out the latter. The irrational seems to loom in all of us these last weeks like a multi-headed monster, and like Satan it works in strangely recognisable forms: to Marine in desperate determination amid great cynicism, to me in pseudo-decisions based on pseudo-poetic moral concern, and to Marianne in the very frisson of victimhood, that she will lean on people like me because of the very possessiveness of it, the very hope that I will respond to her plight because she is an outsider, a *condamnee*. In short, I am drawn more to the machinations of the fair Jewess than to those of the proletarian proto-fascist. And yes, I am an utter fool. But why not? The world is coming to an end one way or another. And Marianne's decision to stay, even to plan resistance in any fight to come, and to live and perhaps die, and with me, as if fighting would make of us martyrs and heroes, or steadfast lovers or stoics or divine fools - this *seduces*. And perhaps it is our duty to be seduced by the notion of honour, of *gloire*? *That is utterly immature and I loathe it*, Marine assures me. And I realise Marine fears violence more than any of us, since she probably knows it far better. Her father made sure of that. In fact I quiz her about his possible reaction to the elopement of his daughter. *He has no plans to lift a finger for French honour*, she says with a hollow laugh. But nowadays everyone

is a talker in the face of helplessness. Marine claims she is very keen to be my future wife. But does she love me? Or is it the very impossibility of a future that makes her pursue me so - as if *there* lay meaning - and as if love, in order to truly be love, depended in this stupid world on the very destruction of itself in death.

I confess I have prided and titivated myself on having two lovers, one for sunlit days and one for rain as it were (I think of Miriam and Clara in *Sons and Lovers*) as the epitome of romance; but I fail to admit that romance is the bedfellow of catastrophe, indeed that there is no romance without death. I did not see that catastrophe can make us selfish and callous, and that a death-wish is born, and that when there is nothing to lose, scores can more easily be settled: that for instance the deep ingrained politesse of a bourgeois life might be suddenly exposed as fraud by those who are jealous of it. All sorts of absurdities are exposed when crisis comes.

It is on one blank summer morning when I'm taking tea in the residence of Marianne and her family that Marine comes to the street door and, literally shouting up from the street, demands to know if I am in there. This act by Marine, spitting at any pretense to normality, brings me with a thud of cold embarrassment to the recognition that two worlds are in the process of colliding. Marine will be damned if we won't see that our picturesque card-house ruin, our museum of the nostalgic and bygone is falling, that we need to wake to stomping reality, to grinning horrific violence. And that she doesn't give a shit about embarrassing herself or anyone else. But I am incensed, because the drawing room of Marianne is precisely my sentimental-genteel refuge, just as everyone in this city clings to some cosily sane quotidian normalness - that everywhere turns to a thousand grinning gargoyles where once was life's sweet-simple face! And Marine is the rough knocker at the door of the house of Macbeth, the gallows-herald of ill wind, town crier of the bubonic future who will suck out our personal unholy truths (this is her *raison d'être*, I suddenly realise) ...and I am suddenly at the flaring centre of a personal moral feud, at the apex of a push-pull triangle, my own little civil war bubbling in the wake of this disgusting uncivility of invasion. And our triangle is suddenly wretched and unwelcome to me. Marine triumphs! But before I realise, Marianne has descended the stairs, and her sharp voice careens up from below. I look down to the street. Marine is standing there in customary red beret and black stockings - a stolid reminder of herself - and she is watching and listening. Because now it is a monologue - and the blonde willowy Marianne begins to ascend to a strange pedagogic pitch, as if she were talking at the street, at the city, at the whole world. Everything is audible, and her parents and I look at each other and don't know what to do.

- *You* are the conscience of a people? *You* - the keeper of the old order! You think I don't know what you are! Marine, who grins when catastrophe comes, who waits to profit from upheaval, the 'hoary streetfighter for Paris's soul' - as if this city had any fucking soul - and who claims to own my sole

friend, my Joseph, as if you could decide his future! What are you, who'd fuck off to Spain with your amigo in your pocket? As if you had the guts to stay here and try to live!

Ugh? So she knows of Marine's plan. I feel sick. Did I really tell, and why would I? Marine stands firm, seems to be enjoying the show, and Marianne rises to the borderland of the tragic and overweening all at once. I can actually feel the heart blistering in her chest - just as I felt it in the night when she woke me in her bed in the attic and clung to me and in a whisper screamed: *do you want to know what it's like to be me? Because it is the height of beauty, you bastard, and the depth of meaninglessness. Do you want both? In that case you'll stay for me till the end...* And it was the *you bastard* that I remember best - how it was intimate and horrific at once - how she hated and envied and knew that I mattered all at once. How our studious edifices are crumbling now, I thought with a sick mouthy feeling... But Marianne's voice has dropped, and she has stepped close, seems to be whispering. And Marine is listening. There is a half smile. Now Marine answers. And I am like a high bird who wheels over his kill, blocked up by these lumbering land-enslaved creatures. And this patronising thought disgusts me. Should I descend to the street? I see her parents want me to go. I shall then. Here's the delicate fruit of the coming-war thuggery. We are all of us *alone*. Lone birds, lone islands. Marianne can whisper what she likes, and Marine will surely not heed it except as a joke in a dream. But they are two women, and women collude with their ears and mouths. I am at the doorstep. By serendipity they both turn, like sisters, to me. There is a triangular pause... and Marianne walks straight past me, into her hallway. I step towards Marine. And she turns and walks off down the street.

Within a week, I notice that the sudden stomach pains I have been experiencing in the nights, are becoming continuous. My thought: this is just reaction to the rising communal tension. After a perplexing absence, Marine attends to me again. Brings me random things, confers with my consternated parents, feeds me odd-hued liquids. Marianne comes once, with a special little bottle that she says will 'definitely soothe me'. I ask them both for news, but they are queerly evasive. Perhaps neither wants to unnerve me. Soon I am prostrate on my settee clutching at my midriff, and far from congratulating myself at my boundless sensitivity I start to succumb to self-pity of a kind that makes me seem a wretched child abandoned by the world. Who will pity me now? And the day the actual columns of the Reich bootstomp into Paris flanked by their war machines grinding and rumbling, and when they ensconce themselves in lumbering residence at every street corner and in every square... I see nothing of it, holed up as I am on my settee with a sodden blanket over my abstracted body, fingers gripping my skin and a rictus grimace on my face that I can no more wipe away than I can erase the hell of the present or the acts of the past. I remember though, the lurid slow hotness of that afternoon, and I think for some reason of Proust, and I dimly think that time has flown away, and that this life is a shadow show, a kind of massive elaborate vaudevillean joke... and I can't even imagine

the prospect of night coming on once more. But Marine arrives before dark. There is to be a curfew, she says. Her face expresses weird excitement, bleak resolution, and... a kind of shamed embarrassment. *Poor Joseph. I will not see you for some days. Not until you get better. Your mother will keep you. And God will keep us all.* This is an especially strange remark. Where is Marianne, I ask. Marine mumbles: *She has disappeared. There is no trace.* There is a silence between. At last she squeezes my paralytic hand. She goes to the door. She turns, looks back. Then she is gone.'

.

And at last, due to the understandable ignorance a chronicler has at his own pressing karma, my imagination has run out. The astrologer hinted to me that the end was pretty slow-drawn, and that this lifetime saw me die *in ignorance of compassion*. Those were his words. And in retrospect, from the warm safety of the future, what hurts most is the collusion of those women, and if not collusion then the bastardry or jealousy of one of them, and my aloneness, and the betrayal of me as a spirit. We should have stuck together! Whom did I, Joseph, betray? Was it the betrayal of remaining aloof, since I never came close to screwing my courage or allegiance to any sticking place? Compared to the likes of the Vichy regime and its clandestine *collaborateurs* (of which I now suspect Marine turned into one) what was my crime? And these days I wonder: who are Marine and Marianne? They must be here, hovering about this stage of earth. They cannot escape the shadows of their acts, of what they may have been, for better or worse. In which ways do we encounter each other? I would like to know how their destiny is unveiling. Who pays for the crime of perpetrator, and who wins a new evolving that comes from being a blameless victim. Because for all of us there is so much remembering, so much churning, admitting, accepting, erasure yet to be done.

THE LAST DAYS

Except in love and death, the ego must survive at all cost. War is ego's absolutism par excellence, since everything may be blithely slaughtered but itself. Ego will always invade rather than face itself, and will only dissolve in the anarchy of sacrifice. If war is some kind of dance with the *shadow* then it is the crudest stomp imaginable. Yet where else can our absolutist and anarchic spirits merge? *Élisabeth*, let me relate to you a story of love and war... You see how I imagine times and places where you and I might have been comrades in arms. I feed you such stories in the hope you'll lean closer to me. You don't tell your thoughts, but I'm sure if you did that I'd feel less of this strange magnetic pull. And that is how you calculate it. Our push-pull game! Thus, a tryst for you and me alone.

'I have been to the house where *Élisabeth*, my ancient grandmother, lived her days and passed away just a few years ago. There are nests in the rolling hills and fields of Brittany in summer wherein the lanes seem to tunnel to another dimension, where you stand at the end of one and little birds twitter in the hedge tops and trees radiate to the sky, while white clouds furl beyond in the direction of the sea. And some animal cries out in a stubble field... and you feel you'll never go back to wherever it was you called *your place*, not in this aeon. You are lost. It's easy then to feel that what happened here seventy-five years ago is not a dead thing or even a memory, but reality - deposited in sealed boxes, waiting for you or me to let it live again. My grandmother suddenly at the age of twenty wrote a diary (which the new owners put in my hands). Her scribble is hard to decipher but repays the effort. The great event of her life took place in nineteen hundred and forty, when a mysterious man (perhaps my ancestor) arrived at her farm in the wake of the Nazi invasion. It is not known whether he was of the *Resistance*, and I sense she felt no need to reveal that. There are times where she writes poetically, and from this I know she celebrates (or laments) rare specialness, a thing that was there and then gone: fleeting as they say, but terribly real.

*In the last days I gave you shelter
In the springtime of my knowing you
While the clashing steel dogs of war
Came creeping to our door.*

It's odd that a girl should see events in the springtime of life as the 'last days'. Perhaps many people felt the invasion this way. On other pages her text is terrifyingly prosaic, seeming to merely list tonguelessly things that can't be said or coped with. I believe her parents had either fled or were dead

(the latter is likely) and that alone in the large house she tended to the meagre farm, where all the animals and vegetables and grasses depended solely on her.

Invasion. I've no proper idea what it is. We demarcate space about us, create *ourselves* - body, mind, soul, history, narrative, family, destiny... and I know we want to run from fields we've ploughed and sowed, and that it takes a lifetime's effort to reject our cossetted vision for a greater one... and that we tend to reject a soulmate as too ominous a repository for our fearing needs. Perhaps *love* is invasion as much as dangerous death. And perhaps we welcome death as freedom and want to spurn love as imposition, but know love is in fact death because it is surrender to the loss of ourselves. Many have said it before, but I ask you: where is the boundary between love and death? I believe these twain dance forever in a ghost dance, and time is the detritus of all the love-and-death stories of the world, on all the shelves, in all the remembrances, in all the hidden hearts of people, all hidden; and that my grandmother was one also who died of love... although she dwelt here bodily to a ripe age, as if curtly and ironically tokening love's worth. There are few dates in her diary, and I see she didn't care for them. All her days were one, and all time lost. And those smudgy lists of hers spoke of disgust at militarism, at patriotism, brutal armour, rouge-threshing guns. And though I'm hardly qualified to do it, I find it up to me to curtain all that away; instead to let tipple in the occult unguarded thoughts of a splayed-out girl, the whispers of breath wind in leaves of a summer wood, baked sun ripples and hedgerows of stubble fields, fizzle of bees in fruitheads of sunflowers, flattened river grasses under human body love...

When he first came, exhausted and hollow-eyed like an apparition out of the hot countryside, he never even looked at her as he hung there, choking up her lean-shadowed kitchen. She asked no questions, such that there are none to be asked in a zone of war, and she held her own wide-eyed silence before he at last delved into her gaze. Soon she found herself heating water on the fire, filling a bath on the upper floor and bringing it to him as he lay out in it. And she stood in the corridor as he performed the brooding ritual of turning himself to a man again. She knew she had never seen the like of him in her life. Men, yes, but not like him. We are all unique in the eyes of one. She did not explain how she was alone in the house and he did not ask. He came out dressed in shirt and trousers she'd taken from her father's closet and offered in a neat pile by his door. He seemed worn, perhaps sheepish. She was not able to offer him a cigarette. His clothing, ragged and dirty, she took to the basement. Down there she held it in her hands, and with a sense of sudden impatient urgency she felt as if she hated to ever enter again the meaningless cellars of that house. Something seemed to turn to crystal inside her, and aloneness suddenly was her curse.

In the kitchen as she fed him, he knew her exceeding formality came from a thing other than that he was a stranger. And she, though a practical girl used to ways of the animal kingdom, struggled to contain an intrusive liquid heat under his nearness. He said almost nothing, bent there over her table

as she served him according to unadorned rations she had. Then she found a razor in her father's room and placed it in front of him. When he looked up she was frightedly aware she'd made an intimate gesture. How? The ways of intimacy can't be spoken. Soon he asked her to find him a hiding place, and she chose the tiny annex beyond the cellar. As if by a simultaneous thought they laid hands on a heavy wardrobe and pushed it beside the door. She knew if an emergency came she would certainly find strength to move it alone. But from that day on she was never alone. Even when she walked out and inspected the fields and barn and little creek under the willows she felt his present eyes behind the windows of the house. He would not at first come out, but on the third day when she was at the place by the stream under the willows that she instinctively repaired to because the number of possible places she could be in this world had suddenly shrunk to one, she looked up suddenly and saw him bodied in the sunlight. He stood without moving and seemed to peer at her, as if trying to place her in his world. She did not know what to do, and his presence signified he'd known she was here in her willow place, and how this was her special place, her dreaming place. For how many long years had it been so? Now she had no idea whether to be a girl or a mother or a woman. The thought was lost when he stepped forward to within range of her breath. The wood closed about them; insects and birds held off their busy thrum for a moment. Every breath and ticking of pulse was countable then. She was not able to say who or what she was, and at that moment felt she had never known. He softly took up one of her hands, and she put a hand on his shoulder as if silently claiming him. How did she know what to do? He touched her waist, and she took his lips even before he could take hers. Suddenly he was a great cliff and mountain she wanted to climb. And she thought for an instant of being ashamed but instead felt *warlike*. And then she was suddenly afraid she might murder the weakened soldier with her breath and her thighs and her wet mouth, but he came at her as a desperate man who must at last define the very reason he lives and will not be shriveled. And the ferocity of their first time was the very deep of stranger-intimacy, and the grasses under them were stretched and burned, and the hedged and shrouded collusions of that lonely summer war-country kept close and safe from invaders their bursting and blooded secret. *There is no war here!* she shouted out, and her voice echoed about the wood. And he understood. And for a little while neither of them was afraid.

In daylight from then onward, the strange man and his girl were confined to the house by the rumble of armour in the countryside. He told not a thing of the war and she asked nothing. And that *nothing* seemed to shout out at the vibrating air: why offer the bastards a skerrick of your life, why let them impose anything? They looked at each other and knew intimately all that had to be done.

We made love in shadowy rooms

Inside, the meadows bloomed

Through your hair the summer hay

In the summer rain

The rivers flowed...
They flowed in blood
While we played like children
We talk like fools, together we lie
For we have fled away in the heart
And we will vanish like the morning dew
And I don't know you, I don't know you
I don't know you, I just don't know you.

In the days that followed as if drugged in liminal ease she and he fucked on bare wood floors of unfurnished rooms in the upper reaches of the house where sunlight swanned through dustbeam windows and diced up their shadows. The staircase made an island shelf above a red cruel sea, and its steps would offer one crucial minute's extra clinging joy before the booted brutal world would rush in at them. And only at that moment would we say we are immortal: you can't kill us, you gnomes! For in this war my lover is my death. And our mouth-close limb-twined breath-hot swimming aching partnership of love and death gathers itself in these close-drawing days into a *dream*, and we care nothing for the stupid importance of men and machines and war-hard fixture and conquest. Instead, we seem to drift upward to an untouchable realm beyond the miserly circumstage of time and war, as if we are ghosts. And ghosts are untouchable.

We'll join the crowds, ascend the winding stair...
Our voices will echo in these corridors
Crowd through the doorway to the shadow lands
Leave no footprints in the sand.

When the Germans finally came in their dirty cloud up the gravel drive and rapped on their door they were bent together over a single bowl of soup in the barrenwood kitchen. And they looked at each others' eyes and for an instant were immobile. But suddenly, as if he had always calculated to spare her the horror of parting, he shoveled her down to the room beyond the cellar and without a word cocooned her up behind the heavy wardrobe. And we imagine he went and stood on the drive in front of the house in the glowing sun, as if it were all his farm and his land and his country, as if he owned the world and the soldiers were all trespassers, as of course they were. And we imagine he said nothing when they barked at him and shook him and thrust him in the car and drove him away. And when they searched the house, they never found her in the tiny room below, because she made no sound having thrust filthy rags in her mouth to stop the screams she wanted to scream, and when they were gone she waited hours and days and was weakened so much that she hardly had the power to save herself by pushing away the wood or stone across the door; and coming out to the hot silence of noon and beyond, and hearing the summer echoes of the land, and knowing that the rest of her life

would be a long slow trance of grope-grasping at the shadows of memory, she walked out away and down to the river in the weeping silence, and she knew then... that *things* never are, and history and people never are, and she cared not a fucking cunt damn for anything in this humanoid version of a world... yet she stood again under the whisper-sighing trees and saw again the imprint of *their* bodies in her private grasses... and began the task, the task to cocoon up in herself the tiny inch-by-inch sense thoughts carved in flesh-memory in the private and lost waltz of their stinging love affair. And this was her defiance, her victory, her death.

*And I see you on a long curving beach
Pushing back the waves, holding back the tides
As we walk the narrow miles
Always, the pouring wind
Stolen smiles upon your milk-white lips
The creeping tides sucked clean.
In the last days you gave me shelter
In the springtime of my knowing you
Till the clashing steel dogs of war
Came creeping to our door
And I don't know you, I don't know you
I don't know you, I just don't know you!*

.

The skeletal structure of that house stands intact, though the present owners have filled its floors with the bitty things of their own lives. Yet the house is not defined by detritus of the present, but is the abode of unseen ghosts, of two people who loved and fled away. The past will never be gone until their need, until their myth, is gone. And it will never be gone if lovers have anything to do with it.

Their problem haunts me. The wanderer needs to let go of the past, yet to do so must wander deeper and deeper into it. And this wandering is a deeply dislocating drug. Or perhaps he frees himself by telling his stories. Perhaps it is his talking cure. I hope, but don't know.

LIMBO

In a beauteous house in the affluent borough of Epicurea dwell Marcus and Helena Pace with their two rather fine children Benjamin and Cassandra, known to all as Ben and Cassie. Nearby is a park of great capacious trees that stand majestic in littered fields of asphodel. Here's an aspect as near-Elysian as one might hope in a world that clamours dirtily for real estate. Eminently but conscionably rich, their cup is filled yet runneth not over. Of comforts and clarities is life designed, but with positive bounty extended to all, and the Paces are counted among one's best and surest friends. *Pace*, as we know, is Italian for peace - and such is the serendipitous neatness of a name for those whose presence in the world is marked by settled rightness, by privileged pedestaled acceptance of the quiet glories of being modernly human - that I tell you all civilisation is here, and all the darkling past of the world banished, so very greenly do creepers of peace lick o'er mossed walls, and sparkle in a new-mown summer's garden ringed by wooded fields of asphodel. How lightly doth time tick in the lighted galleried halls, the parloured cossetted rooms of a new-renaissance family benignly at one with itself. For even if cloudish winds of autumn do crake the bon-ed fingers of great trees, and e'en when grey-white winter chills the landscape's warm-sap heart in shuddering blood of ice - even then do memories of unruffled rightness still the distant bells of distant death, and hold this family safe-harboured in walls of breathing comfort-stone, keeping eternal promise of springs and summers past and to come.

There is no doubt in the mind of our narrator Dust that he has been sent to the Paces so that a little gold-dust from their moneyed edifice might fall upon his employer, the shadowy Church of Divinology. Undoubtedly a Church must change to suit a changing world, and since one never really departs it, such is its tenderly pervasive spiritual perfume, it shall minister to the needs of 'former clients' in new and original ways. Dust is not quite sure as to why his new incarnation has been framed as 'tutor of English literature to the family's children'. Yet sure enough, our man finds himself one fine morning in telephone conversation with Helena Pace herself, on the subject of Beckett and Joyce and Eliot and Woolf, as well as the vagarious tastes of precocious teens - a topic perhaps closer to Helena's heart. Dust is moved to acquit himself in the manner of one who takes the literary canon seriously and believes in the cultivation of the mind through art. Helena Pace is all charm, and Dust is duly invited to the residence on Saturday next to meet the children. And to meet her Husband.

Just as ocean's great waters end in little wavelets that tickle one's toes upon a sandy shore... and as we gaze to unguarded horizons and contemplate the loveliness of our own future - we may be blessed with feelings that the world is solely here for our personal benefit. People of such attractive roseate vision attract envious others in their turn, and out of yearning we fantasise that life might always be

this: an Eden where the lion lieth down with the lamb, where cosy parties in panelled rooms, firelit communing, woodland walks, gamboling in fields, drinks on the terrace under autumn sunset, smell of new hay, girlish sweat, plush carpets and nuts, beads of rain on one's umbrella... are as natural as living itself. That our real purpose is to be artistes, connoisseurs, parties to the seasons, dancers of nature's soft ways, participants in the smile of time, custodians of pleasure-gardens in a vale of greenness called Life. In this sleep of life, sweet sleep of life...

On Saturday, at the civilisedly alert hour of ten, Dust is led into the sun-bathed glass atrium looking out to the garden of the Pace residence. There's a Vienna Secession table surrounded by matching chairs and a bookcase groaning with erudition. A young fellow whom he takes to be Benjamin fiddles with his tablet. A large white cat is curled pleasantly upon the table.

- Benny darling, this is Mister Dust. Aha! And Michelangelo no doubt seeks to share the morning's edification

- Hello Benny. Hello Michelangelo.

Dust sinks his fingers into the bottomless fur of the benign white one, who deigns to acquiesce by divine right of cats, and purrs like a Bentley.

- Mister Dust, Marcus naturally felt he was able to tutor the children, but feels they might prefer 'new influences'

- Mister, my sister is batty, just so you know

- Darling, Mister Dust will make his own observations.

At which point Daddy Marcus steps in. Extending his hand in the manner of a reasoning being who meets the inequitable inconveniences of life with sheer niceness, he greets the newcomer. Dust takes the hand, thereby donning the garb of new-trusted aide who tacitly accepts the Pace family status quo. One advantage of peace is that there seems not a thing else that can ever exist. No use to protest, for post perfection, nought else is really to be taken seriously. Still, Marcus Pace is aware of the world's tendency to be unstably unsure of itself, so whilst entertaining the usual light thought that he might play ambassador to his own rightness, he nevertheless affects to diminish his star a little in order to make a visitor feel included. He is even wont to induce a hint of a problem, of light familial disharmony, for the sake of 'keeping it real'. This has the effect of infusing a frisson of irony into the conversation - perhaps of 'shared enlightenment balanced on a razor's edge of enquiry into itself'? And what else may the visitor do but smile?

- Doctor Dust, I presume.

- Not a doctor, I confess.

- But you must be since you profess to profess. Now then, has Helena warned you of our offspring?
Ben considers himself an authority on all things beyond his age. I counsel you to beware. And Cassie
(I note she is not present) can be demanding in ways that might surprise

- Darling! Mister Dust understands you've foregone the privilege of tutoring your own children.

A party to their jest, Dust counter-smiles. - I'm sure they're wonderful.

At which remark the Paces make a little banter he assumes is for his benefit:

- Cassie is at the age where, mysteriously, the delights of the Smartphone and YouTube are superior
to those of the Moderns, the Pre-Raphaelites and the Ancients

- Oh no, Marcus! Mister Dust, she's merely seventeen and impressionable. And dare I say wilful

- You're both way off, Mum and Dad. Cass is determined to be *certified* - so she can garner more
attention than me since I'm more talented and more likely to get into Oxford.

Into this roseate and self-buoyed atmosphere Benjamin's elder sister walks in... in a manner that begs
to suggest she has surprised them all talking about her.

- Are we all talking about me? Evil people. Ooh, you must be Mister Dusty. Cool. You look a bit
young though. I've decided to study *Waiting for Godot*. I hear it's totally nihilistically
incomprehensible. Come to my boudoir. What shall we call you?

- Call me Dust

- Cassie, *Mister* Dust will work with you here

- Nonsense, Mummy. Come along, Dusty.

Pet dog to a seventeen year-old? Dust raises an eyebrow to Marcus and Helena and follows her out
the door. The big messy room upstairs announces itself as the gloried abode of Cassie Pace. A picture
of a mythic young woman clutching trails of red hair has pride of place, sitting between two long
windows looking out to woods. Cassie announces this is 'her special picture' (by Evelyn De Morgan,
1898) depicting Cassandra in front of the burning city of Troy.



- She had the gift of prophecy but shitty Apollo put a curse on her so no-one would believe her amazing predictions! See her red hair in curls (d'you like my red streaks?) blue eyes and fair white skin! She's beautiful intelligent charming desirable elegant friendly cute. (She ticks them off like a list) But, Monsewer Dust, she was considered to be insane...

Cassie offers up a sexy-conspiring look. 'You are henceforth to regard me as secretly loony' it says. And with that, she'll string out any persona she wants.

- So what do you think of mumsy and dadsy?

- Very nice. Very sane

- Tee hee, she says. - D'you like my outfit?

Garish contradiction seems the order of the day: green and red striped tights, green jerkin rather like a doublet, buckle shoes, bunch of rings and earrings, face powdered faintly white.

- Listen to this, Fusty. (She's written a thing down) 'Cassandra evokes the same awe, horror and pity as do schizophrenics - who combine deep true insight with utter helplessness, and who retreat into madness'. Waddaya think?

- Who's Apollo anyway?

- He's a big arrogant god, dunce teacher

- Oh yeah. Some kind of 'big daddy'?

- Dunno.

Or maybe she does.

Dust takes up the narrative: 'Harking no doubt to the squalls of tuneless guitar emanating from his daughter's room during her inaugural tutoring session, Marcus pops his head in. I deliver a cheesy smile that says: all is under control! I merely indulge my pupil's associative flair within the ambit of *Waiting For Godot*. When the evil volume is turned down, daddy lightly suggests I might stay for lunch. I clock he's keen for a competitive chat. For under all the sureness, all the confidence, all the irony, I perceive Marcus is prone to doubt. And dislikes it. Every person of intellect who comes to his realm shall be tested, ever so subtly. You see, only a conservative may deserve peace in this material world, one who is at the centre of the balance of things, a reasoned and reasonable human being against whom extremes are shown up for the evil they are. But there is never a reason to be smug - and Marcus Pace is too intelligent to be smug. Conservatism though, must contain all free radicals, all fly-aways, all contentiousness within its orb of reason. For behind the facade of success lies the beyond - of the unfulfilled, of the forest, of the *deep*. Is this 'beyond' the assassin of perfection, the curser of peace, choker of the subtle limbo of success? I profess to have no idea. But I predict he'll pressure me to reveal some squished evidence of wild disorder within myself. Oh but I can do that: I can circle the wagons ten times with my war-paint and tomahawk and scalp him right where he thinks he's at without a sweat. Very 'umbly of course. *Strangeness* is the crazy-making feather I'll tickle him with, the simple canker I'll infest him with. But all this is nary the point. The point would be Cassie. Me being the new tutor and all, a debate is a chance to impress. At lunch it is Hostess Helena who casts the bait.

- So, Mister Dust. Why do you think our young feel the need to rattle the world by refusing its settled wisdom?

- Well, I'm not a psychologist, but I say we should offer young people the heart and soul of the problem at the outset, since at their age they're ruled by developing intellect in its absolutist phase. That way we avoid patronizing.

She glances at her husband. He delivers a faint smile.

- Do go on

- I've heard youth say: 'Why bother with anything, we are all going to die.' But you and I should coolly reason. I tell them: 'The real joke is, we are incapable of death. We are nothing but eternal. To whom does death supposedly occur? He who is beyond it, obviously'.

Helena fishes again. - Do you think our Cassie will appreciate your brand of reasoning?

- Why not? - though young people are pretty emotional. Or I might have overlooked bi-polar tendency or a suicide-wish.

Her eyes widen slightly. But Marcus chimes in.

- According to your reasoning, young people may all put up their feet, 'chill out' and play the guitar

- No, humankind is born to action. Choose your occupation carefully lest we waste our eternity

(He smiles again) - What action do you suggest?

- Empower them. Get them to see that if we want to visualise or do a single thing, all the infinite powers and forces of the unseen must gather to make it happen. By the same token, whatever little evil we do, the unseen utterly compensates. We should get them to see they are literally drowned in the power of consciousness. Grokking that can be deeply liberating for certain young people

- Or dangerous

(Helena) - You mean exciting, Marcus

- Excitement is not necessarily what they require

(Keep talking, Dust!) - Truth is, if they set out to do a thing, especially an unusual thing, opposing forces automatically gather about. If they want to be free for instance, the strong forces of unfreedom clamp down just as precipitately as a posse called up to hunt down offending blacks. Seek creative chaos and crushing order is there. We're truly invested in the small and crushingly smug

- And your point is?

- I explain to young people, the horrific and dark side of the world must be accepted into us. We must be open to all possibility. Me, I dip my head in the cupboards of the dark, into the pools, the wells, the mines, the alleys, the brothels, dungeons, pits, mental caves, torture chambers, grottoes, underworlds. No Marcus, I'm not naive - or rather, if I were I wouldn't mind. Still, can we live? I tell you, not as we are now

- You are perhaps a *provocateur*, Mister Dust.

I make sure not to squirm under his coolly mature gaze. Behind his eyes I see several binding things: the need to be candid, for this is his cocoon of reason; the need to patronize for this is his platform of legitimacy; the need to be slightly ironically incredulous since he is the custodian par excellence of settledness; and the need to empunish, since he's the one being challenged right now.

- Mister Dust is not being allowed to have his lunch, darling.

Sweet Helena defaults to lightly serious airbrushing. Pervading success and contentment may have made her wonder where to put all those sensibilities of hers - as if it were wrong to be too happy or confident, yet also wrong to be too serious or inconfident. She who today has made a light and perfect lunch, keeps a gaggle of feelings on a leash. Unlike her daughter.

The following week after Cassie's lesson Helena invites me to lunch once more, and I assume Marcus is behind it. The amateur psychologist role I've been thrust into by the parental team will now be used against me, for Marcus must transfer onto me - in the guise of a suitable light lesson - his impotence with both his women. After a suitable banter-entree on foods and sports, in which I'm cleverly led to express edgy views, Marcus deftly steers us to topics unsolved.

- Do you think perhaps we are a too-pampered breed here in our corner of the woods? I suppose you see, mister Dust, that without the acquisition of wealth by some, the many would not prosper?

- Mmm

- Acquirers of wealth in all conscience actually take thought for the ultimate good of the world. Why assume it is not their ultimate goal to give wealth away to those in need?

- I assume no such thing

- There's a certain peace to be gained from the satisfactions of giving, and of knowing that one's giving is appreciated, even when the actual giving is unknown to its receiver. D'you have children, mister Dust? (He'll be quite aware that I don't) Because the engineering of young souls is a delicate thing

- Particularly when they're the unwitting recipients of privilege, as in your child's case. And someone has to apprise them of the need to appreciate what they've got - without disturbing their perfect future, and such that they don't neglect to love their benefactor. But no matter, feeling good about giving is its own reward. Its own drug, almost

- A drug? Helena and I give anonymously to numerous charities. You hint we do it hedonistically?

- There's nothing wrong with getting a hit from giving. But the pleasure is bound to seek reinforcement. And if it is its own reward, then *ergo*, it is a drug one can't get enough of.

He scans the space about my head, as if to seek further clues as to one's oily and elusive identity. But elusive is potent.

- Which people have helped and instructed and watched over you in your life, mister Dust?

- Many. And I'm grateful for it

- And what do you see as the purpose of life?

- No doubt 'to continue as things have always been'

- Really? Does the world not need improving?

- Which 'world' do you want to improve?

- Whichever falls to me. Whichever I inherit

- What about worlds alien to your own? The tortured worlds of individuals in layers of ignorance and suffering, their hells and layers of hells, their diseased hauntings, their spaghetti dreams, their limbos of grinding repetition

- These are precisely the people one seeks to help

- Or maybe deprivation helps them better? Or loss, failure, blind pain? Perhaps those evil things are what we all need

- Yes! Let us all wallow like pigs in the trough of despond

- Slough of despond

- Whatever you say, young teacher

- So, Marcus. Which members of society should wallow like pigs and which should not?

- We seek to pull ourselves up by any means

- I know people who seek to shred themselves

- All choice is motivated by desire for pleasure and aversion to suffering - whether we like it or not
 - Ha ha
 - Do *you* never let pleasure get in the way of good old-fashioned pain?
 - No no. Let's banish pain from the world and then all will be perfect. For when we suffer no pain, we're no longer in need of pleasure. Then we can all share in the state of perfect mental peace. Except we'd all be fat and happy and stupid
 - Aha. Even we who suffer no apparent pain may suffer it, Master Dust
 - A subtler, classier class of suffering? Excellent. Perhaps you really do suspect there's no learning without suffering
 - And perhaps you know nothing of who I am, or what I have been through, or what I seek, what I have given up, what I have achieved. Nor what good advice I might offer you
 - Beware: your need to self-justify comes at the *expense* of perfect poise, perfect peace, perfect etcetera
 - I perceive you are either peevisish due to jealousy, or have never been acknowledged for your noble efforts in the world
 - Or maybe I like the pain of being resistant, the pain of contradiction, the pain of being alive
 - The pain of being an irritant on the conscience of a smug world?
 - Whatever you like, Mister Pace.
- (Helena) - Pickled gherkin, anyone?'

Dust masks his fear and inadequacy by all this competing and judging! Can we fathom the subtle strands and wires that fashion even a single human frame? Why try to judge evolutionary paths and forces and influences that fellow souls are grappling with in the shadowy sides of themselves, that masquerade as ugly or stupid or obscure or egotistic or any of the filigrees of contradiction that make up human 'progress'? The experience of even a single person is a gyre of unutterable worlds and planes beyond the sensible. It is the gathering of limitless nuance, of causes and effects beyond grasp - except by tiny experience, thing by thing, moment by moment in the eternal dot-play of space and time. For when the conscious Lord emits himself it is forever; there is no summation, no cathartic point, no climax, only the unutterable freedom of doing and living and making and shaping and rearranging worlds without end, worlds without end, in this flicker-film of the borderless whiteness of sentient being. And here we are, judging, we who make our little pinpricks on the face of eternity. And this is our limitation: all judgy thoughts speak only of themselves, judgments speak only of ourselves. While Dust suspects that Marcus Pace is a limited man in his Epicurean avowal of contentment as highest end, how could he predict the ways this man Pace is swept by the catenations of history and time and circumstance to other visions, washed up on other lonely shores that glimmer in the half-light of his evolving, of his loneliness, that this creature known as Pace is lost like flotsam

on the cruel oceans of green eternity, in his Crusoe-like odyssey to the yet undiscovered far-flung atolls and islands of his history... Dust! You should develop some compassion.

Thus Dust counsels himself. But Marcus Pace by his air of settledness unsettles him. Marcus is selfish to be at peace as he claims, since others including those close to him are simply not. He steals their peace away with his smug peacey peace. Peace is imposition, illusion, in a vengeful chaotic world! Marxists would avow that all blessed contentment is at others' expense. This is childish reasoning, but such is Marcus' air of impenetrable reasonableness Dust has no choice but to be peevish. *Cassie Pace, I imagine you naked. I'm coming to share your bed.* Stop it. But Dust sees that the equanimity of Helena Pace is less secure (she being a woman) and therefore thinks on how he might push his ego in her direction. And she may be vulnerably-in-touch-with-herself sufficient to appreciate it. Dust starts to glean that it was she who ventured long ago to seek the mystic kiss of the unknown in the form of the Divinology Church. Can Dust thus wedge her against her husband, at least enough to expose a measure of her lurking criticism of him - or is she imperviously loyal to the solid Pace burgher-spirit? Dust has a brief to teach the children, and to his mind the brief includes upsetting the status quo. For what is teaching but upsetting? - though we must wear lightly this garment of life, knowing we can't really succeed at any damn thing.

It turns out Marcus bloody Pace survived their spiky discussion pretty well... so ruffled Dust has a brainwave. In the presence of Helena (who wisely kept her counsel during the males' little joust) he suggests:

- Let me bring Cassie to a meditation event. I have associates who will talk to her, give her the settled wisdom she surely craves. You've done all you can, as her father, for now.

Marcus looks at Helena. How to decline such a thing in the presence of his wife? She looks at him and smiles. Encouragingly.

Yes, for the Paces, a delicate and glittering balance has been painstakingly achieved, and even though they do witness life's ironies, and are quick to admit how fortunate they are, and offer so very many things to charity, and would be upset if their children took it all for granted... these cultivated people cannot suspect how the pretty streams of life merely disgorge in a limbo-field of sweet and ghostly flowers, that there's a dearth of substance behind it all, that it is *blind*. Let the soul wander then musingly, through chocolate-box worlds, no matter that this physical field is nothing but a tiny crust, a carapace on the great unuttered crystal spheres of being. No matter. Onward. We shall deliver our cribbed selves unto our *children*, shall let our children replicate us...

Or not, if Dust can help it.

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‘Cassie Pace the teenage daughter took to meditation like a duck to water. She sat in lotus on a cushion in the middle of the big hall at Divinology Church for two hours and never twitched a muscle. Lived up to her peacey name. It surprised me. After it she said she felt like the ‘high priestess in the temple of Apollo’ - whatever that means. Hey dudes, check out my trance! She likes being looked at, the hot little teen in the funky outfit with goldy hair spreadeagled everywhere. Several male devotees seem to lurk about after the session for no reputable reason. But Cassie has a tendency to burble things when she’s excited and there’s a chance to impress. - Yeah, meditation is like, *cool*. I predict mental patients will do it and oppressed women will do it and kids with ADHD will do it ‘cos you can fully zap your inner repressions in the virtual reality of brahman consciousness ‘cos like the will-force is merging with the supermind and we’re plugged into the cosmic sanctuary in the pituitary gland yeeeah, which checks right into the garden of peace, man. Woo-hoo. Talk about Waiting for Go Dot! Anybody got like a herbal tea or some shit?

Etcetera. I hustle her out into the streets, away from those drooping male members. It’s dark out. She seems blissfully wired.

- And now, Dusty boy. We’re gonna take *my* trip. Come on

- Slow down. How about a coffee?

- ‘Kay. Then we go meet the Furies!

After the caffeine she’s still raving, which appears to be her default mode in public places. The cool feeling I got bringing a chicky-babe into church is wearing off.

- You ever heard of Charlie Manson, Dusty? He had like a commune and it was Helter Skelter and the Apocalypse was gonna be coming and he had like loads of girls eating out of his hand who did anything he wanted! They all murdered Sharon Tate! He was neat. Man, this is gonna be groove-arse tonight. I’m showing a film. I did it at home on my computer.

- What? Where are we going?

In ten minutes we’re downtown. She drags me down an alley. Under a blue light is a doorway with steps curving down to a cellar. Padded doors are ahead. A bouncer looms, curls his lip at Cassie. She pulls a green note out of her jeans and shoves it in his shirtfront. A hundred? Crikey girl. She yanks me bodily through the doors, and a wall of weirdy music and chatter and psychedelic light assaults my sense.

- Where’s this?

- Come to the Furies’ dressing room!

In the room behind the stage Cassie bursts into with a demented *Hiya dudes!* - is a collection of thin, angular Amy Winehouse gothic looking girls sitting about smoking, tapping smartphones, dabbing lurid paint on faces. These seem to be the Furies. The aura is formidable, self-contained. None of them particularly reacts to Cassie. It can hardly be cool to do so. She defaults to puffing up me as her

special friend and mentor etcetera. Silence. I give her the eye. But Cassie Pace don't take 'run away kiddo' for an answer.

- Hey, c'n I show my file on your laptop. It's got all the stuff I told you about

- What stuff? says a girl with blacked eyes and blood-red hair like snakes.

- Ya know: death and mayhem scenes and Sharon Tate and Manson and Himmler and ritual zombie porn sex and Satanists and Beat Poets and -

- Oh fuck yeah. Give it' ere.

In it goes, and Cassie gives her drooling commentary until told to shut it by the snaky redhead.

- Okay, we'll think about putting it onscreen. Here's yer little present. (She drops a couple of pills into Cassie's hand) Now, if you'd like to fuck off we'll see you in the hall. Keep her on a leash, will ya mister.

We exit. That went well, I remark. Don't let their shit fool you, she says. The Furies love me. Oh, and here's your share. Open mouth... Open, Dusty!

How to refuse? I do it. The little pill goes down.

The Furies are ramping it up on stage in the big room. Alex, Meg, Tisi and Dusa wanna fuck up our eardrums. Who's the sluttiest nuttiest girl band in all the world? *Helter Skelter!* Cassie shrieks and grabs my ears. We keel over, people stomp on our legs, knees flog about our heads. Cass puts her crotch in my face, gyres her arms in funky-wild style. *You may be a lover but you ain't no dan-cer!* Wriggles to the slam beat, shouts at my ear. *This party's beyond insanity! Where'll we be in ten ugga megabillion years? In the pit! Down the pit!* I get it: she's in hell-bliss, nowhere to put herself. Now the clothes are comin' off. People are going drug strange. Cassandra shouts the future and I believe her! No morals no remorse! Manson's girls slaughtered Sharon Tate and her 'migos and her tummy baby and din' feel a feckin thing. Richy Sharona got her desserts! In the deepy depth of a diver's suit my breath is rasping. If I carked it I wouldn't care. Impregnable. We're little planets breathing and milling in a sunless cosmos. Need humans to despise in my aloof solitude. We're the hell-sixties reborn! The pulse racks me like a knife through buttocks. My heart's banging. Light shoots out a million miles a second. Fuck I am STONED. *Now* is the death of time. Diamond on girl's finger, hardest rock out of *emptiness*. Get outa the thickened brain! Hello I love you won't you tell me yer name... Where's Cass? Fuck, promised mummydaddy I'd guard her body n' soul. The Furies spit thrash death, Cassie's video splats on the shimmer screen. Where's compassion in struggle-street? Beggars fight to eat and squillionaires piss on us from Bel Air mansions. *Izzat justice?* Need violence! Furies ain't happy till the big V rears its head. Some drunk goldilocks whacks a guy in the eye so he lunges at another dude who goes down just as goldy is told to feck off by some wired female who gets clunked and falls sidewise on a boofy feller who's lookin' for a fight 'cause he can't score chicks so chucks a punch and female gets face in the way and freaks out and kicks boofhead who resents personal space intrusion embalmed in pickling effect of alcohol blaaa... suddenly it's a RIOT and

hooley dooley!' Dust is down under thundering feet and its panic and flail and those moles onstage ramp it it's out of hand the flames of riot are licking high the devil's got in and body piles gasp 'n' scream - NOW some cunt pulled the plug on the band the doors swing wide they're pushing bodies out the COPS are in it's lockdown and uuuuh the punters got an enemy to curse now! It's a fucken party any law 'gainst having a time ya dickhead squares it's the sixties don't ya dig it WILD? Poor old plods don't dig being spat at - and there's Goldy Cass onstage screaming wacked obscenities and dribbling in a trance - clearly at the edge of socially apt, so the fuzz grab her and drag her out.

Dust follows on, has to retrieve her from the station after hours of 'vestigation and charges threatened after spitty insults at the Boys in Blue and texts to Marcus and Helena who turn up white-faced but *in control* and it's all super embarrassing.

- Your meditation class certainly had a calming effect, Mister Dust.

Dust is relieved when Cassie calls daddy a fucking dropkick. The family Pace climb into the Jag and disappear. Dust reflects that Marcus under his vastly reasonable veneer looked pretty furious. Result! High five.

But next day Dust has the inkling he might've a bit lost the plot on the saving of Cassie's soul. He rings the Pace number but hangs up when Marcus answers. Later he calls and Benjamin is there. Dust wants the goss.

- Mister Dust. You're a corrupt influence! Daddy's a bit ruffled. Hold on.

Helena comes on the line. Dust decides to be straight with her, more or less. Tells her there are things he can influence, things he can't, which prompts her to say none of it is his role at all, which makes him suddenly get jack of those people. Dust decides there's a hoary big thing to be dealt with in this family but must contain himself... so he'll turn up for Cassie's class the following week whether Helena says yea or not. Besides, the tricky teen texted him to come. He learns she got in tight with the Fury Girls after the party and now they deign to be impressed. They want her to 'write', might even let her sing in the band. Write your *future*, they said. Now she feels significant dangerous radical all at once. She dreams up some lyric about Fake Materialism Fame LA Hollywood Warhol etcetera-you-name-it. Cassie is big on prophecies as we know. Trouble is, one or two of them ought to come true once in a way.

'Poor little rich girl on Sunset, riding her Corvette to Malibu.

She don't wanna be lazy famous, no no, or a fake like 'Paris' in some magazine.

Daddy paves a road to paradise. Big white house on a hill.

Oil the wheels of a death machine. Your wannabe princess - she wants to kill!

Gotta play roulette with your hearts. Cool wind in my hair. Paparazzi swarming round, round. What's that smell? What's that sound?

'Give me what I want!' I said, I said. Don't tell me what *you* want. Gonna be crazy famous, yeah. I don't care what you want, you want.

'Cause I'm richer than your money, honey. Sweeter than 'success'.

It's all unreal, this paradise. This loneliness...

It's the last ride on Sunset. Showdown at Malibu.

The wreck of a Corvette makes the papers in Hollywood.

All your fame, your lies, your money. What can you give your princess now?

What can you really give? A reason to live? I wanna reason. Wanna reason.

Poor little girl - on Sunset. She's *crazy* - did you forget, forget?

This is me on Sunset. Last ride to Malibu. This is me. Daddy, this is me. This is me...'

Dust fixes up her syntax since he can't otherwise contain the breathy lusty nymph. It'd be his job anyway. Up in Cassie's room the teacher feels like a fugitive. Though they don't invite him to lunch the Paces are overweeningly polite. As Helena observes, Cassie is 'enjoying her creative writing'. Later she puts it to a hypnotic distortion riff on her electric guitar (which really is pretty good) and Dust suggests she might sing it to the elders. She runs to the Furies instead. They 'commandeer' it (steal it) and give it the lurid creepy treatment. Cass doesn't get to sing on the record at all. This insult she affects not to notice, because a week later she's invited by the Girls to ride out to the coast 'in their Big Yankee Thunderbird'. There'll be no boys, just us, they say. But Cassie demands that her tutor come with. Dust rejoices in her loyalty! He sees the Furies would never 've agreed unless they wanted her there. But how to inform the parents? Dust slides out of that one, leaves it to creative Cassie.

Dust records: 'The Furies Ride Out! It's a clear-sky Sunday. Alecto steers into the back country with no hint of a map or plan, along hedgy lanes she hogs without the least care for oncoming traffic. Where they got this damnable convertible no-one will say, but she's a big dreckless beautiful bird anyway. These Furies keep up a draining strident allegiance to their own imagery, and anyone without enthusiasm for sardonic irony can't stick 'em for long. I start to grock this trip is an homage to the content of Cassie's song. Though they don't say it, I see quicker than Cassie the black japes they're keen to indulge at her expense. Time for me to keep an eye on proceedings. The hags pay no attention to me, and since normal relationships with them are out of the question I bung on shades and settle into the back seat with a nonchalance that does me credit. Can you call the Furies artistes? In so far as they proclaim all art as plagiarism, excusing their blatant stealing of others' ideas as a necessary counterweight to cynically exploitative western capitalism, and assuming you will be flattered when they fling the idea back in your face with a ferocity that enables you to experience the bogus hollowness of your own allegiance to art - then yes, they are artistes.

After a string of narrow-lane misses to the tune of ungovernable mock curses from Alecto and which the others respond not a whit to since they're busy daubing make-up and fiddling phones and sucking

on weed-ciggies, we trawl out and onto a highway, as screeds of gravel shoot out in our wake for special effect. The country suddenly opens up, and I guess we're heading west. All this seems a signal by bat-telegraph for the Goths to awaken. Their new recording of Cassie's song, all fried and twizzled in the pyre of the Furies' dark muse suddenly blasts from the speakers. Raucous voices leer up in unison, distorted by the wind-rush about the car as they fling words not their own at each others' faces, laughing as they go. I see Cassie feels compelled to join in though not really grocking her own song. This dismay she hides for a second or two before leaping up on the front seat and surfing and bouncing and wailing her arms at the sky. The hags all laugh and holler at this. There's nothing natural about these people! I get instantly pissed, and none too soon since Alecto elects to swerve the car about the whites of the centreline, and with sun blazing into her face Cassie reels and crashes backward into my lap and bangs her frizzy head on my mouth. I don't shout out how I nearly lost a fucking tooth. And they must have put something in her mouth earlier because she starts to act up in hysteric out-of-whack teen style which only boosts their saturnalian delight. Alecto puts foot to floor and the big Bird sways and rumbles down the blacktop. The Furies are up on their feet on seats now, and there's a moment where the copycat dare surpasses irony and flips into the death-accident zone because Medusa sprays her redsnake hair into the face of Alecto and the ship is flying blind. I reach forward, shove her sideways but she falls on Megaera who nearly tips over the low doors and under the white-banded wheels ripping up the streaming road. In the wind-gush she hangs on and kicks out at me but I grasp the foot and drag her in and her head slaps bluntly on the doorframe. *Stop the car!* I shout at Alecto, but she's already shoveled it sideways into gravel then into some lay-by and we're stationary before anyone knows what's what. Tisiphone leaps out, strides about like a chicken, points her finger at me and shouts: Get out the car, cunt! You wanna assault my sister, you gotta deal with me! If it weren't for the studs and blades and safety pins all over her tartan jacket and her pasty face I think I'd have punched her in the head. But no. Because it's all an *act*. Meg puts her arms round Tisi and says: Don't worry about the bad man. He don't count, no way. Then Alecto lurches the car forward. They all scatter but Cassie's in front of it. The car clunks to a halt against her legs. Alecto laughs. I step round the car, yank open the door, grab her by the hair and rip her sidewise out into the gravel. She screams. I hold on. The others descend on me. I don't give a fucking shit.

- If hate and anarchy's your game, girls, then you won't object to my pulling a bit of your sister's hair out. Uh? Just a game, uh?

Uh-oh. The bloke called their bluff. They're reduced. *Let Alex go*, mutters Medusa. I let Alecto drop to the gravel. Cassie stares at me. I smile back. Next, I snatch the car keys and zip 'em in my jacket. Silence. Evil glances all round. It appears I've stepped over a line. Girly violence is not real violence, it's allusive and symbolical, don't you get that, Dust? They all move off towards a green field. Alex gets all the girly touches now, centre of cooing affection. And I see what they are: the self-referencing

little asylum-world they've made and walled and pampered up for themselves because the rest of humanity will never give any quarter or even notice, this little gang of like-souls and their unholy heresy, their copycatty fundamentalista ante, their clever nihilist spite-anarchic irresponsible little circus - is all they'll *ever* have, before they wither in the tides of time and grow old. These girls just wanna have fun, and the big bad man stomped on it. That doesn't mean they won't deal it to a young tenderfoot called Cassie, including making her taste every bit of isolation and failure they go through and hate and vow revenge on the world for. But how big is their world? Tiny corral of sad girly creatures is the answer. Cassie tells me in steely tone to apologise. I wrinkle my nose. *Apologise*, she says. So we follow them to where they sit in a gaggle under a tree in their punky costumes. They eye me with their cake-black eyes.

- I'm sorry. Too rough. Lost my nerve. Maybe you can see why. How's the hair, Alex? Hey, don't give a crap about me, I've a duty to look after Cassandra.

Cassie twitches moodily then runs off into trees. Dusa gives her man-withering look.

- Let her go, man. Let her learn, do mad stuff. Let her fuck up, grow with her own kind

- That's just it. I worry about the parents. They pay me, believe it or not.

They exchange looks of unutterable scorn.

- Want our keys back now, Mister. Our keys, man

- Sure. But tell me one thing. What makes you so sure you've a right to stir it all up when you won't admit you've been given everything? No, not by parents and oldies (and don't dump me in that category) - but by *life*.

Sound like an oldie! Tisi's eyes glitter. She's the group's intellectual, good at storing abuse for future use.

- Why do anything without total commitment? If you're always protecting your little girl, what would be the fucken point of her existence? Why do parents bring babies in the world - for their own kicks? A doll to put on their mantelpiece, a pill for their own failure

- You'd let her die, would you? I bet *you* don't have the guts for it. And how long can you guys keep it up? The elaborate hating I mean. Hard work, I reckon

- It's ironic, you cock

- So you don't believe in it then?

Alex spots this flaw in their front.

- No. Till we die, till we turn to dust. Like your wanky name

(But this is lame) - And *you* like your bit of violence, don't ya?

This from Megaera, who needs to score points.

- Cute point, Meg. But I react to stupidity more than anything. And lies. And people being used

- Used? (Dusa) Used? We're the fallen angels, the daughters of night! We are used by god! We punish all the fools and hypocrites and arseholes and slimeballs and losers. But not for fun. Or yeah, maybe for fun. They need it! And if the law won't let us cut off their balls, we find other ways
- Very picturesque. (I don't tell her I like the sound of it)
- Cassie's one of us, you jerk. Needs to be hardened up
- I get it. I really do. Don't laugh. But listen: how'd you get to be so arrogantly certain?
- We tread a righteous path. We're right, Dust
- Yeah, like fundamentalists who think they've a right to take a life for their fucked-up peanut vision. It ain't moral, it's primitive
- (Tisiphone) - You wank on about morality? This world is absolute murder. Dress it up how you like. Nothing lives except by murder
- (Alecto) - We're on our own! We piss on god
- And they all start chanting. - We piss on god! We piss on god!
- Don't need a reason for nothing, Dust
- Ugh. Not even Charles Manson said that. But it's what his girls said, his girl killers. Now they start to laugh right at me, long and loud. I'll let 'em. But Cassie's nowhere about.
- Meantime, I'll go find Cassie
- Keys, Dust. Keys!
- Wait till I find her.

I turn away but get no further. I believe someone delivered a big blow to my neck. A big sodding lugging thump, because I lost consciousness.

.

I remember waking up and my neck was killing me and there was a body and it was calling Dust, Dust. I knew it was Cassie. We were like propped by a tree in what seemed a shadowy wood. Cassie's scraggy hair-mound was in my mouth and her body was spooned in mine. She wriggled and I saw she was tied to me, and naked. I could see abraded skin on her back. My skin was exposed as well. An itching pain came from under. *Dust, I'm so cold. I've been calling at you for ages.* My hands seemed bound behind. Some sort of vine. I wriggled and we rolled sideways into leaves. The wind ruffled the leaves, and the big tree seemed to groan above. Severe pain in my backside. Seemed to be odd objects strewn about as if in a circle. Who did it? One guess. Cassie was sniveling. I think I told her: *be still, I'll try to get free.* I remember fiddling for minutes and then a frond broke and a hand came free. There were livid marks on my wrists. I tore at the binding on Cassie's wrists. Her fingers were spread round my penis. I got the hands away then ripped at the fronds binding us. She rolled off and I saw her ankles were strapped as well. Her head bumped on a stone. She cried. When I saw a stick protruding from her anus I realised what my own pain was. Pulling the stick out of me made it snap.

Which made me *furios*. I took hold of Cassie's rump and yanked the stick out of her. She screamed. I untangled her feet and sat her up. She'd been drawn over with red marks. Lipstick. On her navel was smeared words and a heart. Mud was caked on her face and legs. A thing was scrawled on my torso. I pulled her to standing position and we stumbled about. We found bits of clothing hanging oddly from branches, as if draped in significant shapes. The bitches had left them. I almost thanked them. It took straining minutes to get jeans onto Cassie's bottom half, then to find a tiny stream and get her there and try to wash. Mud came off her but the lipstick wouldn't. '*Girly loves her daddy*' was scrawled on her breast. On my stomach they'd written '*Victim*'. My penis was scratched, like ritually. It stung. I felt the wind get up, riffle through the slow-darkening wood. Our shoes were nowhere. My purse was gone. I held her hands, smoothed her hair, gave her a hug. We're gonna walk, I told her. We'll find a farm and someone will get us home. Bare feet made the going hard. Cassie said nothing at all.

Presently we came to a track with tyre marks, followed it. The day was drawing on. Only once did she look at me. I felt sorry. Finally we emerged from the wood and into fields, and in the distance was the outline of a house. We knocked at the door and I explained to a startled farmer and his wife that we'd been attacked and robbed. They gave us showers and snacks and took us at our request to a rail station. I asked them for fifty quid, to be sent to them when we reached the city along with shoes they'd loaned. I am not sure they thought we were the full quid. Thank you for helping my daughter and me, I said. We waited on a lonely platform, Cassie and me, and boarded a train back to the city.

Back in my apartment, Cassandra gathered her wits and called the parents, claiming she was staying over with a girlfriend. We got food on the street, didn't talk. Later, she seemed to have no qualms about sharing my bed. Took care not to touch me all the same. But in the still of night she nudged at me, turned on the lamp. We looked at each other.

- Sorry Dust. You helped me. You're my friend

- Any time, baby girl

- How are we going to get our *revenge*?

Her fuzz of hair and white face made a halo in the gloom. Cassie Pace is a survivor. Maybe she just shoves the horror away, mashes it into fantasy.

- Don't you hate them utterly, Dust?

- I'm as angry as fuck, but that's exactly what they want us to want. You can't teach people like them. They're already victims, sado-masochists. Need to get above it, Cass. Revenge is one thing we can't have, though I'd love to rub all their faces in shit

- You're doing me in. Don't be a loser

- Cassie, you saw how I was capable of violence, the way I attacked Alex. You didn't like it. She got her revenge on me already

- But they expect us to do it. That's how they *live*

- No, Cass. That little ritual they did on us is all they've got. We have to pity them

- You're bullshit, Dust!

She went silent, wrapped the covers about her. Who to blame now?

Next morning she's vamoosed. I end up phoning the house. Helena answers. And if I'd anticipated what Cassie had done, I absolutely wouldn't have called.

- Cassandra told us a bizarre story about being attacked and tied up in a forest. What do you say about this?

- Helena, calm down. I am not sure that she... that she...

And I swear I don't know how the moment happened, but she finished my sentence for me.

- *Is sane?* Is that what you are saying? That my daughter is mentally ill?

- Uh... I don't want to -

- Do you say she fantasises? Acts crazy to get attention? Is she on drugs? Who *are* these Fury people, Mister Dust? I ask you, is she unstable? Because that is precisely what my husband is saying

- Helena. I wouldn't take what your husb-

And she hangs up. This is the point I realise I've been gazumped. Fuck! Helena and Marcus and Cassandra Pace have retreated to the security of a lie, a clannish lie. Cassie will play the vulnerable sick-kid card and the parents will swallow it. How easy now to define her, reclaim her, mould her as their own! The sickness of insanity is the excuse they need to enfold Cassie for good. Cassie Pace has no loyalty to me at all. Or perhaps she *is* crazy? Here's a nasty bind, and suddenly I feel numb. Maybe time has come to abort my plan to stir up the Paces. But oh, when I saw that little girl I knew I had a *duty*, I knew Daddy would swallow her up. Hang on - didn't she do the big schizo act against him? Is that over? Can't be, she's just fobbing the prick off with another cunning stunt. And she hates those Furies. I call that a win. Or maybe she was only ever the privileged kiddy showing off, maybe primogeniture is in her bones and she'll end up inheriting all that they are. All of it. But what the hell is truth and why does it matter? Truth should be self-manifesting, self-evident, indestructible! People should not remain asleep in this world.

...Next night my dream mind is in overdrive. I find myself sconced in the Paces' sitting-room, pontificating inside one of those bombastic self-fulfilling dreams that when we wake dump us as the shrivellised nothings we really are. 'You people! What about your Cassie? All this bipolar behaviour! She can sit still as a pin in my meditation hall but put her in a creative or social space and she's a sodding anarchist. Sick? I say no! Obsessed with mad because you're so boringly PC. It's criminal to limit her. Why clone a child to yourself? If you're desperate for status quo, pin your hopes on little Benjy who'll pop up to Oxford and turn into a mindless credit to the family.' Marcus has retired with dignity to his toilet, meanwhile Loyal Wyfe doesn't appear to be showing the decorum to puff up his status. He's back, didn't empty his bladder. 'Egocentricity is cute ain't it, like we're all gliding down a summer road in our Thunderbird and the world opens like a scene from *La Dolce Vita*, laid on a

plate. Marcus-Helena, content in your clever studied beauty, did you *create* anything? *Little Jack Horner sat in his corner, eating his pudding and pie...* Come Marcus, why the long face, man? Did you conjure up the wind and sky and sea and stars, conjure up consciousness, immutable mind, the infinite electric pathways of a human being? Where did you get all your gifts? Ask, damn it! Let's all laugh at the squelch to our egos. Respect, awe, are what you need. So much respect and awe that it drowns you in love. Don't be a bourgie. Be the empty and drunken god that you are!

But I wake up. It all fades away. Dreams tend to balance the distortions of waking. I'm depressed.

Out of the Woods And I just underestimated Helena Pace. The Lady in Limbo engineered a lull in things, no doubt to cool it all off. Now I get the summons. At her doorstep she tells me her husband is out. Her clear-light look tells me this might be a good thing. We settle in her atrium on a wicker sofa. Winter sun dabs at our faces. Michelangelo the cat peers at us, white Sphinx on a table.

- I know you're with the Divinology Church, Dust

- I think I knew you knew. It's not all I am, though

- Be that as it may. (She pauses for gravitas) I have a thing to tell you that I never told a soul. I went to that church in my early married days. As you might know, I am not unattractive to some. Your Employer took me in, and... I ended up in his bed. I longed to be one of his spiritual women. I wanted it so much and I already had Marcus! What is my problem? I thought. What exactly is wrong with me?

- You know as well as I do that Marcus for all his accomplishment can't give you all you want

- I don't want to say it

I see she wishes to possibly cry. But how to shake off the tragic-romantic pose she's cultivated many a year here in Limbo?

- Spit it out. You said it often enough inside

- I think... that Cassie may not be Marcus' child.

I suckle her hand, hold her gaze. No crying so far.

- Perhaps it doesn't matter to me, Dust.

She gazes. Does she want it to be true?

- All right, Helela. No matter what, Cassie's her own self. But no, she *is* the physical daughter of you and Marcus and you know it. But let her be the spirit child of you and the Employer.

Her face flickers to a smile. Behind that untouched sophistication she's a very sweet girl. She leans over, puts her cheek to mine. And lets me kiss her on the lips. For longer than is proper. Deftly she averts her face. There is silence in the manse. I'm thinking of the bedroom. She knows it. We pause by a glittering pond of possibility. But she stands, leads me out, through the garden, into the woods. It's glisteningly quiet there. A patina of sunlight shimmers amid the trees. The goddess clings to my arm. She wants to talk.

- The days of the church were like a thrilling heaven to me. I wanted to break out, 'experience the mystic'. And sex. And the Employer was magnetic beyond my dreams! Marcus was suspicious, said it was my 'child phase'. Had his own big project for me to invest in. Always had to prove the rational was superior. I wanted him but it seemed as if I was being locked in. Now I see, you are doing my unlocking for me. I want you to. I want Cassie to

- You feared being exposed and alone, took on his fears over the years. Spidery pact: feeling versus his sacred rationality. Me, I kind of wish you'd do something ugly, smash something.

She runs a patrician finger over my cheek, around my lips.

- Don't trust me though. I project my shit about

- Then let me soothe you, little boy

- Wish you'd been my mother. Or my wife.

She laughs... I should say merrily! Child, mother, cream-cake girl. You name it.

- And girls like you should lead, not dissemble. Teach him quietly, bit by bit. Be the goddess. You've got Cass to do the radical stuff. I'm glad you're what you are... with me, in these woods. I actually like this world occasionally. I might dream about you. Totally honest, Helena.

Helena wrinkles her succulent mouth. I want to eat all of it. She has ascended to a heraldic beauty in my eyes. She studiously arranges her little boy's hair, takes his arm, pulls him on. We walk in the winter calm. She wants me to talk.

- Question to ask is: how many times do you want to come back?

- To where, Dust?

- To this world! One part of us says: 'I'll want always to return here - for the delicate flowers in my garden, for my child's smile, my husband's smooth chest, my superior cooking, my woods and gilded sunsets on the terrace, even for my melancholy dreams of leaving...' Another part will say: 'how long do I want this grind, this desperate growing up, this clamour for status, to be noticed, accepted, to be pregnant again, to fight to understand, to stop fearing (at a distance) the world's suffering, or my need to be left alone, to carve out my peace...' We're all in thrall to lower depths, enticing pools and crevices, sleep and death. I used to want to grapple with the *shadow*. Now I just have to acknowledge it, like the side of the moon where sunlight never falls. Take the heat out: it's all we need. Life does the rest, drives us kicking and screaming to things we don't want to grapple with

- There's such huge resistance

- Yeah, but some things are already yours like gifts from heaven: your accomplishments. You barely notice those

- And so many things in those dark pools make me recoil, that I don't want to touch

- But we shouldn't worry about spirit-sapping nuisances or even harsh phobias. They're our big clean-out. And if not now, when? They're out of our control anyway. Reaches of the Gyre we just can't

know. Helena Pace, you are a serious hot *babe*. And I know you don't mind being flattered since you want to swim in the ocean of your feelings. But you need to risk! And you need to stop waiting.

She actually blushes, laughs like Cassie, then trippingly covers it up.

- Yet we only have ignorance forced out of us by the most bitter experiences!

- Better still, by clear understanding

- Fill me in, Yogi Dust

- Righto. You are nothing but the absolute awareness of utter being, the eternal real substance, here, forever now, forever *this*. You are yourself, you are pure feeling, you are the endless delight of creation. Your job is to know it, and to give up the absurd idea of your separate existence... Howzat?

Well explained, Dust! The cool light in her eyes says so. But she's an untouchable beauty, this Helena Pace. We entwine fingers in the midst of the breathing wood, share the vulnerable thrill of silence.

And then her phone goes off. Fumble in handbag. Husband on the line! Her eyes stab at the trees about her. But she listens to him... and his world impinges once again, and her expression settles into one she's long practised, the one that contains all the vibrating world... earnest, charming, mild, cool, dutiful, out of reach. We're over then, and life and duty beckon. Marcus didn't share in our holy communion, our holy science. Strange warp of intertwining worlds that never mix. Horses for courses. Would I ever want him to hear it all? Sure thing. As long as I could steal away his wife, and his daughter, in exchange.'

BLOOD BROTHERS

In the brown brick alleys of the Western City industrial zone, the Dowson and Daughters meat-processing facility glowers like Buchenwald beside a green canal. Beyond is nebulous marshland, and all around brick edifices stick like blackneedle chimneys into the horizon, jabbing at the sky. The narrator Dust, in a fit of conscience, went to a labour exchange and took a job. The description written on a card said ‘meat packer’. Next day in the early dawn he left his home and took the interminable fog-windowed bus journey to the West. Into the gated mouth of Dis.

Dust the vegetarian begins his time here. First duty of the day is the unloading of the vans. The air is freezing outside, and scarcely warmer inside the facility. Vans are backed up to the ramp, and he clambers inside them to pull the massive carcasses from metal hooks into great fridges in the building. The killing has mercifully been done elsewhere, but the bones are sharp reminders. His numbed fingers regularly get cut. He fails to notice. The ramp is greasy with frost, and lugging forty kilos of bone and flesh can put one’s back out. The job requires grit, not least to put away that slow undertowing grief at the slaving futility of the world. By tea break the feeling dissipates a little, only to be revived by *The Sun* and *News of The World* which Dust scans absently while slurping at a mug of grey tea or chewing on a gluey British scone. The upstairs canteen with its fogged barred windows looks out to the courtyard and great metal doors of the packing hall. Its inhabitants are irretrievably blacky and whitey lower class, unmercifully ignorant, stooped by the badness and monotony of work life in grimy industrial waste zones. Once Dust brought in *The Guardian*, cudgeled by some memory of a civilisation outside the gates of Dis, and was confronted by a black prole who remarked: *Waat de fock is yorr game, maan?* But Dust’s annoyance soon segued to pity. He saw slow hysteria in the young man’s eyes, his green-palmed Jamaican dignity and multi-coloured Rastafarian hat turned to a sick joke in the confines of this death farm in the brown wastes of West London. Welcome to England, mon.

Dust’s diary takes up the narrative. ‘One day a youngish guy comes into the place whom I’m told by the head Fleischer is on day parole from Wormwood Scrubs where he’s ‘doing four years’. He pig-stuck a guy with a knife in a street brawl, they say. Parole now consists of work experience in a meat-packing facility, complete with knives. He shows up in white coat and plastic hat at the bench beside me this morning. I say hello, and he grins when I say my name. I have the feeling he thinks I’m some kind of actor. *I’m Lenny Doodle*, he tells me. We look at each other. A faint derision in his eyes seems to light a spark of reckoning between us, from separate reaches of the mental spectrum. Places like this level us out, do they not? We stand together at the steel bench in the long room with the blood-puddles, racked ovens, muddy plastic curtains, fluoro lights. Our job is to honey and roast the yummy

hams, cut and wrap the succulent joints. Lenny sticks by me. His manner is part friendly-familiar, part standoffish suspicious, part derisive-ironic. What's his story? Not the time to ask. Should I say I know he's on parole? Presently I get the feeling he knows I know, but'll take his time to announce it official-like. After all, there's power in it. I silently wonder what it's like to be in nick for a crime. What's really the line between the innocent and the guilty? There but for the grace of god... Once I visited some drug prisoners in the soaked heat of Bangkok. They cheerfully told me they were in for twenty years. I took them bundles of cigarettes and they accepted with a quiet thank you. We make a living from these, they said. I ponder on the plight of the incarcerated, the victims, the abused, the dying, the needy, the hopeless, the depth-dwellers. I want to taste (not live) their crimey lives for an episode, feel a wee smidgin of how it is. I'm the voyeur, and like so many others the dirty side of nature is my fetish. I gaze at pictures of glam-murder victim Sharon Tate, poke inside the heads of Manson's killer-girls, noisomely crave the details of their I-dare-you slaughter. The best crimes tickle the fancy! And I fear my new mate Lenny (not his real name) will shortly discover how naïve I am.

One never meets 'Dowson's Daughters', and never the old man either. Perhaps they're nineteenth-century ghosts who haunt the yards and alleys and galleries of this meat-mill. Or do they live in gardened villas in sweeter neighbourhoods paid for by grim-weary plastic-headed quotidian day workers who fondle and fiddle the flesh of the dead into plastic packets... all for them? For the great proletariat of England, here is life in all its promise. Abandon health, all ye who enter here! Sometimes in the dim carcassed halls I imagine the laughter of these Dowson daughters in spotted dresses and petticoats tipling in and out of carriages under the wether eye of Father, ruddy Victorian with paunch and jowl, rough-handling men and money, ascending the social ladder with bulldog brashness, building England's satanic mills. For here is certainly one of those, the dross-floored bowel of the elsewhere-civilised... For in this ever-dying place, with its sawdusted slabs under, the hearts of the animal dead are bled in rivers, processed sans name or recognition for the tasting of blood-lovers, for the sustenance of the race, the promotion of life through the stomach and veins - for we the people who eat our own death, we fine civilised people... And only when these places, erased from human history like *Treblinka* and *Sobibor* - whose sodden ground whispers the cries of the dead and where lupins grow innocuously above, their soft heads swaying in spring winds that fritter through black-green forests... only then shall we know what such places mean. Laboratories of soul-dissection, chambers for snuffing breath, factories of erasure, schoolyards of blotting out, clinics and slabs of forgetting. For if we can kill and process a million creatures, we can kill and process a million people. Should be simple, it's just flesh. Obviously we need the nourishment. Genocide for nourishment, for the betterment of the goodly race. Let dumb animals feed the world then - and let dumb humans feed history.'

...Home late and likely overtired, Dust seeks escape in his diary, in morbid imagination or to feed an overweening superiority need: 'The processing facility operates twenty-four-seven. Efficiency, deadlines, vigorously adhered to. Let's walk you through. Transports turn up continuously, and it is not unusual for them to arrive past midnight. Officials open the doors to the cattle trucks, shepherd the livestock onto platforms. Stock is of variable quality and has to be sorted. Smaller or older specimens are directed to marshalling areas to the left, and better-fed stronger stock to the right. Under searchlights our platform marshall makes decisions with a practised eye. Stock are generally disoriented, so appear to appreciate the speedy transition to dedicated areas following an inhospitable journey. It is understood that they will be cleaned and deloused before transitioning the short distance to their final quartering yards. While the general purpose of the facility is clear, it is understood that to unduly upset or unnerve stock has a discernible effect on efficiency. Specialists, overseen by dedicated forepersons, stand ready to receive the incoming quota. Clean process according to business-best practise is a source of satisfaction in our establishment, and, we trust, to the satisfaction of eager shareholders in our burgeoning industry. All care is taken to mitigate the impact that stock effluent, for example, might put on the environment to the detriment of other tenants in the area. Security and noise-reduction measures obtain for the same positive purpose. Phase two, after cleaning and delousing, involves the channelling of stock to bays deep within. This is done by 'trusted low-tech means' (prods and cattle dogs) but we venture to say efficiency is not measurably compromised thereby. In fact, unruly conduct is minimised by use of steel channels and cages. Stock undergo efficient stunning or gassing before 'the pieces' are removed for processing at adjacent workstations. Operators work quickly by hand to ensure hygienic dismemberment before portions are assigned their packaged form. Relevant cooking is undertaken, and following this step all corporeal material is inspected and designated 'fully processed'. Waste products such as effluent, bone, gristle, blood, hair and sundry items are assigned either to a storage facility at the premises' core or shipped to sites outside for use in agricultural support, namely fertiliser. All unused material is incinerated and earmarked for landfill, to be distributed hygienically according to government regulation. And this is how business activity is carried out at our nationalised socialised processing facility known as...*

[* *Sobibor*]

'Next day, back at Dowson and Daughters, I'm looking for something to make the morning's ham-basting session with Lenny go swimmingly.

- Maybe the only real prison is in the imagination?

Lenny smiles a coy smile. He has lately proved himself a wit and waggish philosopher of cynic bent, and while his charm is tinglingly entertaining, I'm vaguely uneasy to discover his mastery at feeding people exactly what they want to hear. Lenny obsequiously defers to powers-that-be at our factory,

but his conversation leaves one with the faint taste of being taken for a fool's ride. If one is bent like he toward the notion that the cosmos is an almighty scam perpetrated by those powers-that-be on the poor 'n' needy, then this factory of toil is a mere stage set for the exposition of his coyly grinning subversive sly negations, his *not me guv I ain't no interlectual* pissing from a height on all pretentious systematised fabricated normality. And so politely of course. Learned it all on the inside, yeah. Yet in a harsh self-promoting world Lenny is really a nobody, a carper on the sidelines, eternal knocker-naysayer, humble old-womanish whinger with but a youthful glinty eye and ready-clever turn of phrase.

- Oi was reading in moi lonely cell just this week, about a certain invention by a savvy eighteen-century feller called Jerry Benting

- Yeah?

- Ay panopticon

(He's proud of his word) - Sounds wacky

- My dear Dusty, 'tis a monstrosity. But the rulin' class thought their Christmases all came at once. Imagine if you will, a round structure consisting of a lot of levels where a single controller at the centre can check on ev'ry tom dick 'n' 'arry inmate, all in separate cells wiv no contact to each other or the world or any connection to the power bosses. Great for the insane, for unruly children and for crims like me!

- Jeremy *Bentham*, eh? The authorities won't want you reading that guff

- See that camera dere? Our great democracy has more of 'em than any country on the face of the plannit. Smile for the camera, Dusty

- Why'd you get put in jail, Len?

- Me? (Perish the thought he should ever be in jail) Doncha know? I stabbed some cunt in the guts.

(Delivered for vicious effect)

- Why, though?

- Didn't like 'im

- But surely there are deeper reasons. Sociological ones?

- Yeah. I'm a social victim. But I'll never be cured.

Lenny mixes his registers as if Gielgud were conversing with the Artful Dodger. Pathetic Lenny has no education. In his world this panopticon thingy is erudition. Though he could have been an actor. Coulda woulda shoulda been a lot of things I guess, but crime got in the way. I smile and nod along with him, suitably nonchalant. And he likes a conspiring audience (of one) to nudge and wink at. Lenny's the master of his own goon-world and inside it is quite the clever-clogs. If I listen and ask questions, he assumes all the seedy experience he gained on the inside and in the thuggy druggy byways of his life is relevant to me and my welfare. In this meaty work-world of ours, workmates in our Mondy Tuesdy merry-go-round, we can sing his crappy little tune. Still, he won't fail to give me a

rap on the knuckles once in a way, perhaps in the manner of how a master thinks a dog needs discipline. He's resourceful, old Len. Coulda been a parent and all.

- Don't touch that knife with the green 'andle. It's mine. Use vat one.

Me, I don't argue. Though the green-handled one was actually mine before he turned up.

Following his elaborate putting of people in their place according to primitive dog-teach-dog hierarchies learned on the inside and in gang world and in some deadshit school he used to drive the teachers crazy at, Lenny will for a quiet while work away at his new profession of roasting and basting with a glazed acceptance, as if to show he's an acceptable man in the important team in the big kitchen. His quiet empty expression and slow-fiddly shuffle up and down the hall are at odds with that other bristly-bravado subversive ante fellow... and suggest a sad little lag who craved routine and discipline all along. The alter-ego wants to be this humble-important little worker in the big factory that does important fings for the world like makin' 'am and bacon and stuff. And he does his shuffly part like a dutiful child. This other Lenny amazes me at first, until I see its pathos. And then I cry out inside for him, the little shit. I care about him, this dude with his sly crummy joke and his third-rate mocking grin, the nice-dumb bloke who wants to get out from behind the smartarsey survivor. He lost his life somewhere along the line and got a counterfeit of it. Now in the grinding factories and smut-alleys of England, here's a life of sorts for the offering.

The great business of knives he takes very seriously, seems to morph into chastising parent whenever we handle the knife sets. Is he conscious of the irony or not? I can't decide: some human pig nearly died squirming on the end of one of his blades. He'll grin in a knowing way but there's no cultivation in the mind behind. Me, I enjoy the joker, feel sorry for the dum dum - and so I dance some kind of act around him. One of these days he'll wise up to me and then I don't know if he'll be in control or not. Up in the canteen we don't communicate, as if he thinks of me as some embarrassing sibling he has to keep at arm's length while he's carefully educating lesser proles round about. And he's good with these types. Adopts a patronisingly avuncular mode and tells them evil stories of his chequered life, always inflated and always with a rough homily at the end as if he were a great churchman dispensing succour to the dull-eyed and sinful. There's usually a few eyeless bods about him, swimmering in the hot haze with their greasy mugs and sausages. I discern there's a reformer in Lenny somewhere, an elder brother, an uncle or dad, even a moraliser, self-chastiser. All the roles he never got to play. In this grotty nowhere uncivilised industrial hole in West London, he can be a legend in his own lunchtime...

And uh-oh, it's an uh-oh morning. Something unpleasant must've gone down back at Wormy Scrubs. Lenny is capable of dark surprise when The Saboteur rears his head. He's started to rave about 'Fascists', a catch-all term no doubt: how they rool the world, how nuffing ever changes, how 'one

'alf of the 'uman race wants to do fings an' the other 'alf wants to stop 'em from doin' it'. And where do I put myself on this scale, he asks, wielding a chopper over the bench. We both look inhuman in our aprons and plastic hairnets, perhaps making it easier for Lenny's parade of altered personalities to rear up.

- Me? I'm an anarchist. I sympathise with your frustrations

- But yer bourgie and yer educated, right Dust?

(I never fail to be reminded how alien his world is to mine) - Meaning?

- You'd rather be a boss than a worker, wouldn' ya?

- Er, wouldn't you?

- Rather be left alone, mate

- Things going badly at the Scrubs?

- Listen to 'im. 'The Scrubs'. What the fock would ye know, matey?

- I loathe all forms of control, I assure you. And I still resent things that people did to me in the past, though I shouldn't, since it's immature

- You're a sly cunt. Is that remark about you or about me?

- Whatever, Lenny, whatever. You brought it up

- Yeah. Fuckin' fascists. And they're good at hidin' it, mate.

His eyes glaze over. He appears to have thought of something else.

- Talk to me Lenny, by all means. But don't assume you and I have to defend ourselves all the time. It's a conversation. We share information, opinions, thoughts. No sweat

- Yeah yeah, righto *mum*. Them racks need filling up. Snap to it, Dusty.

Here's the childish paranoid as well as the closet authoritarian - in the mode of surly working-class father who wouldn't let his wife go to a night class. Now he drops a tray with an unholy clang. No doubt to see how it gets on my nerves. Yup, it gets right on 'em.

After tea-break he's back on the subject, but as if nothing at all were said previously. Mister Innocent and Reasonable has popped up.

- 'Fing is, right, I was reading about them Nazis in the Jewish 'Olocaust. Wasn't just them ya know. Was the gypsies, the mormons, the mentals, jehovahs - they all went in the oven. Like a ham roast, mate.

(I'm suddenly tired) - And your point would be?

(He won't like my tone) - Point would be, *point* would be - we're all somebody else's fuckin' lunch.

Know who did the dirty work though, mate? Cunts like us. You and me. Right there. Shoveled 'em all in, dragged 'em out, chopped 'em up. You 'n' me

- Not me, Lenny. I never did any of that shit. Never would, never could

- So you think. So you *think*. But you'd do it if they made ya. You'd do it, I know ya. You're hoity-toity, but you'd shove them fuckin' bodies in the oven too if they made ya, mate

(Now we've got to mister Insufferably Patronising) - People will do anything to survive, Len

- Yeah, see? Got ya there mate! Even when they know they're goners anyway. But people like you don't wanna think about it, do ya? All that dirt and shit

- Len, I've read five hundred books on The Shoah and seen a thousand documentaries. What do you want?

- Yeah, you read about it. You read about it. But you might've *been* there. Or maybe you were one of them officers. Maybe you're a reincarnated officer of the SS! Bad karma, mate!

- What? Let's drop it. It's an evil subject

- Nah, mate. I don't drop shit. I don't -

- Pass me the green-handled knife, will you? Yeah, that one

- Nah, that's mine. Use yer own. Listen, I face shit. I deal with it every day

- Do you Len? Do you now? What kind of 'karma' do *you* have, mate?

- Better 'n' yours, mate

(This is so effing childish) - Lenny, the way we are now, speaks of the way we were *then*. Why are you reading about the Holocaust? Maybe because you need to understand it. But maybe you can't, maybe nobody can. And sometimes unexpected stuff comes up, out of the blue. But not for no reason, Len. For a *reason*, mate.

Now I'm lecturing. But he is way ahead.

- Can't control it. That's it mate! Can't *control* it. So we don't 'ave responsibility. Can't fix it once it's done.

This is getting a long way from bacon and ham.

- If you believe that, you'll never get out of Wormwood Scrubs

- But if you try to *run away*, Dust, then you're no better. You're not superior at all

- I'm not running away from shit!

And I snatch at his infernal green-handled knife but he gets it first. And he gives me two sudden nicks in the palm of my hand like a cross. Redness oozes out onto the bench. He grins. See what I mean? his grin says. What the fuck? I say, and push at him. But he sways deftly sideways. Now looks me in the face. The grin is strange but intimate. - Wot if you got it somewhere else, eh Dust? And he runs that blade right up my arm. And a jagged gash starts to run crimson all at once like a wave of paint seeping under a door. I panic. I kick out at him. He pulls aside my apron and flicks at me again. This time it's the abdomen. I think it's the abdomen. Can't believe this is happening. Dirty plastic curtain glares at me. I'm on my knees. Feel a pain rush in my middle. Bluewhite lights. No-one's here. My hand is running. Red everywhere. Flickeringly I see Lenny shove something under the tap. It gushes. Now he stands over me. Wait! he says. Wait! And he hurries away through the thick plastic. I'm

waiting, Len! Then someone else is there, someone big and wide. Startled grunts from the new guy. Stained aprons coming at me now... I forget the rest.

I wake in the ambulance. It's bumping grinding hot. Lenny's face. He's saying stuff like 'It's gonna be okay. We're goin' to a picnic (clinic). Lie back and relax. I'm here mate.' At the hospital there's a palaver. They wanna stitch me up. Men in white. Big needle hurts. Lenny keeps close. They tell him get out of the way. Smell of something acidic. Feel sick. Throw up at least once. People seem to crowd about. I lose it. Later I'm awake. Lenny's face again. Nurse says something soft. He makes sweet talk. I go back to black. Later still... this guy on the far side of the room seems to be reading a magazine. Hurries over.

- 'Allo mate! They stitched you up no worries. You did good! (And soon, hushed) - Hey Dusty, listen. You and me know it was an accident, right? I mean, in the sense I din' know what I was doing. You neever, right? Both in alien territ'ry. You got me riled, I cut ya. 'S bad. Shouldn't 've 'appened. Sorry okay? Learned a lesson. You an' me both eh!

And plenty of *etcetera*. I stopped caring, went to sleep... And two days pass by. Lenny visits from work. Been all over my case, ain't he. Good samaritan, faithful mate blaa. Gettin' quite a reputation. I say nothing to no-one. Because I can't be bothered, or not angry enough? This evening the doctor tells me I'm up for discharge. Lenny has to supervise all that. Sits by me, looks furtive, whispers.

- So mate. Yer going home. Listen. You're on the *team* now mate. Reckon this thing 'll toughen yez up eh? You been through it, like.

What's this? Now I'm initiated into his cloying thug-world, patronized with his fucking version of baptism by violence? (I'm sweating) Can't be so stupid. No, he understands all too well. I'll seek refuge in the ceiling then... (One should really take more thought for the eternal and less of the trackless grind of this suffering world) So what use in laying charges? If he's the slightest teeniest bit smug about this incident, I won't let it go. But of course he is though he hides it. Thinks he's won some kind of point or, perish the thought, made a disciple. In some arcane way is he passing his knowledge on to me? - bleeding out a bit of karma, letting me share the mystery of his dice games with evil. Maybe there's respect somewhere! Well if there isn't yet, there will be when I'm done, because I'll have to use Threat. A word from me to the cops and he's done for. But the problem is, will he be equipped to care? This is the delicate delicate part: he might just use it to entrench the rebel and victim, to get more Damned. But isn't Lenny somehow angling to get *out* of his past? All right, I'll keep silent for now. He'll get to swagger under my sword of Damocles; maybe he's used to that drear sword, having felt it all his life. Wait though. In shifting ways, silence may work on us all.

Meantime Lenny has resolved to hug his enemy close. And I know the moment I ask him to get away from me he'll turn nasty. We're locked in. Makes me sick. Now I'm confined at home for several

days. Lenny bowls in, hands me tabloids, feeds me fish and chips, smokes in my room. And wants to know who else lives in my building. (Crim's habit I guess) I don't tell him. - So why d'you live 'ere? Crummy gaff ain't it? I got contacts, mate. Hey, I got rid of that fucken green knife, he says one time. As if the knife were to blame all by itself. - Listen Dust, I ain't the world's cleverest cunt but I know I gotta do better. Sure, I'm streetwise an' know how to deal it to the fascists pigs, but I know there's more. You showed me it. How? Just 'cause you're there, 'cause of who you are. Cultivated and such. Into spiritual shit and such. You helped me, I can dig it. And now I gotta help you, put yer back on yer feet. Get it?

I get it, Len. You slashed me and I'm supposed to forget about it. Maybe maybe I will but you'll need to give a thing in return. Not sure what it is but it better be something 'cause I can be an intolerant cunt! I say none of this, but he can't be stupid enough to see I'm not thinking it, there in my bed under my quietised mummified expression. But then he looks at me with his hollow-eyed scrubby-beardy look and his earring and his fake chummy way, and I see the weight of his past haloed over him like a cancered ghost and I feel he is lost. Didn't need to be but is - and will blunder on like he is for another millennium in and out of Wormwood Scrubs or its bullying fascistic equivalent, always teetering over the chasm of insanity on his knife-edge of pseudo-normality and illegitimacy and his feckless bargain with optimism glossed up by those crummy fake grinning naïve eyes; that surly-lipped school kid who pelts stones at gold palaces he'll never get entry to because his spirit just won't let him.

I'll keep my mouth shut then. Though most of me doesn't want a bar of him. And I know I have to *go through* all this. You know what hell is? It's commitment - to someone else's dunghill of shit pain fear and rubbish. My own I can tinker with, make deals with, but not someone else's. Because they're also-rans, fellow grim-riders, effaced losers shoveled behind cell doors of forgetting, rats in the rubbish of my karma who mirror my face back to me, backstreet nobodies, slum-dwelling blackface races, toilet cleaners, walmart grunts, shuttered wives, spinsters, old men, snotty kids at my old school, trolls and oiks and grubs and urchins and all the poor creatures of this sallow world. And when I don't want to help them I know how much I hate the world, how much I hate myself! With my vomit-past and my centreless mind and guilt-stricken litany of mistakes and lies avoidances fooleries half-truths mess-ups compromises and repeated failing-not-learning, lugged with me to this very last day out of Dickensian pits I can no more erase than a drunken tramp his ragged beer-swilled liver-killed hopelessness, or a criminal his stinking record of jabbing the bastards he blames the failure of his own wits on, with a long-blade knife he'd rather use if he were honest to cut his own throat from ear to ear and have done with it. What kind of integrity does it take to put up with being stabbed? Too damn much for me. Now I have to be the fecking martyr. Why do all the things we think we've sorted come back and bite us on the arse? You never know. You never know what's coming.

There are monks in the East who as they walk turn every breath into prayer, who with continual mindful acts want to bring god and world together... this karma path that fuses opposites, forbears and forgives and calms the heart, dissolves self-disappointment, makes us appreciate birth, lets us understand our descent to depths, to ego-prisons, to wells of confusion - these monks are saying to me: Brother, I am you, I serve you, I feed you, I give myself away to you. Not to the abstract ideal, to the sky and clouds and fluffy and nice - but to you. You with your smelly armpits and your mound of karma shit and your vindictiveness and your error and your sly violence and all of it. You. *But I, Dust, I can't do it. Ever. Because I don't believe I have to.* And my Lenny won't appreciate it anyway.

There has to be a bargain here. He has to be made to ride over and meet me part-way. In some way Lenny has to pay, and then I will own my hardness. Even those savvy monks know hardness. Let the chips fall as they may. Man proposes and God disposes. It's really got nothing to do with me.

Here comes the moralist again: what good will more punishment do for Len? Does absolutely everything have to turn to shit before anyone actually changes? I believe it. But it depends whether he *feels* anything for me. He may, but no more than for anyone else on this dirty planet. No catharsis! Silly idea. But he's the one who needs a lesson, not me! Or what do I really know about him anyway? Maybe Lenny has long since embarked on a fragile game of coping, of sly redemption that walks a fine line of sardony, of unfeeling, of saving himself from the anguish pit by a healthy contempt, a self-protecting matter-of-fact insouciance that lets him straddle the margin of acceptance and rejection. Which gives him a nose for vulnerable stooges like me whom he can't help but exploit because of their very desire to help. He may not be educated but he's streetwise, and that counts in the subject of human morality. Conclusion: morality is variable, subject to conditions. A wee stab, a wee lesson. Not beyond old Lenny to deliver a bit of karma-easing, a chance for his victim to have a little think about why it all happened, and to relate it in his conscience to all the bullying and guilt-shame and self-doubt and 'I deserve it' loser talk he ever told himself (and that Lenny might have told himself too). Taste of the medicine like. Lenny gets a leg-up, victim gets a leg-up. Is Lenny the teacher then? I told you I was naïve, out of depth. So the message is: 'dump a little shit on someone! It's like you dump a little kindness'. And chances are the universe wants you to do it. Cute bargain. On the other hand, human nature says Lenny 'll want to claim kudos for whatever little pact he's made with himself. Not one to wanna get poked in the eye. He's fragile and won't, can't admit it. Not to me, not publicly. Actions must speak louder than words. He needs to get the initiative and keep it. Hey, he'll be all kindness, practise a little kindness on me and feel better about it. And I suppose I should let him. Should I be stern or kind? Neither. I'll cocoon myself up in naivety. Let that be my balm that lets me do nothing, that lets silence speak some more, lets time gnaw things away a bit. Because you never know... you never know what's coming next.

What came next is complicated. Our blood-brother affair is suddenly tampered with. That bloke he ran to after the stabbing, that worker by the name of Boyce, has his little suspicions. Lenny doesn't seem to have a lot of cachet in the world, because Boyce had his wee chat with management and they've come a-knocking one morning at my flat. The younger of the two gentlemen present asks smilingly if I am in any way keen to stay on, because he's concerned for my health in a dirty business and is keen to offer me a (substantial) little severance package. Might a man of my abilities not seek employ in a better field?

- What happened with Len then, fellers?
- You do know that's not his real name?
- What did Boyce say?
- We'd rather not discuss that
- You have to. He might have it wrong
- Friend Len will not be returning
- Unfair. He has tried to support me. Boyce obviously doesn't like him, though Len trusted him
- We'd have to doubt that
- He's on parole, you idiots
- No smoke without fire, Mister Dust

The two men look at me. The speaker is younger, rather suave for a meat-packing executive. The other is grizzled with bushy eyebrows. He takes over.

- Taking a fall for Lenny is not a good idea, young feller, even if you feel it's your duty. I don't say you're naïve. We've told the people at the Scrubs he needs a 'calmer environment' to finish his work-parole. And Len might just appreciate our 'little gesture' - one of these days.

Ouch, my little bubble-world just got pricked again. The older fellow deftly took the weight off me. Wow! People are nowhere near as dull as you might think.

So. Lenny naturally turns up one more time. And makes it plain and clear that he pleaded with them fascist pigs for me to take *his* job. No matter that it's a deadshit job and that Len thereby offers a backhander. And no matter that his motives are embarrassingly transparent. Still, he grins about it. And his grin might just be friendly-nice or it might just be a big seedy comic ironic act. Or both at once. Hmm... the final takeout on all this? Only help people if they ask for it? Not exactly. Some people need help even if they don't know it, and they ask for it even when they don't know they're asking. And some people want your help even though they specifically say they don't, and some will go to any lengths to avoid receiving any kind of help including repeating their foolish crimes forever. Because if we stay in our doldrums, there's always the hope of some fresh wind of renewal. Our Len wants to hog all the acts of helping. It makes him feel superior in the absence of trust, in the absence

of having any friends in this world. It's his own special method of redemption. And don't you frickin' mess with that, Mister Dust, or whatever yer poncy name is.'

OLD MAN ON THE SEVENTH FLOOR

Picture a room in a building in a city, inhabited by a youngish man of thirty-five years. He has lately moved here, into this old building of nine floors with its blood-magenta slime-green corridors. A desk and chair stand beside his fourth-floor window, that looks out to a winter garden. There is a ragged tree sodden with winter, and beneath it a place for children to play. Few children play there. The walls of the room are bare since he has not been here long. His solitary lamp is frosted white, and if we look we notice a glass and empty bottle on the desk's dark surface. Pen and papers are splayed out, and if you spy from the corner of your eye you'll likely see an unmade bed. The day is drawing to a close. A paragraph on the computer screen: *Picture a room in a building in a city...* is not yet swallowed by the screensaver. He has stepped out to the darkened passage. The window is slightly open and the curtain is tickled by suggestions of a wind from afar. Distant traffic. Other lives. This is the moment then, where the scene - unless held, framed, made to stand as symbol, as act, as moment - will pass to the oblivion of time's winter forest. In the great war of annihilation that is the life of the world, we die here... of hidden wounds.

But no, our young man is back from the toilet, and he slumps again in his computer chair. Silence. He has the creeping suspicion nothing happened while he was out of the room. Mental illness was to have been the subject of his nascent story. He draws a blank now. The mind seems overshadowed by random things. The gloried march of Fascist culture for one... The phrase *vermin and scheisse* pops to mind. Excess schnapps perhaps? Something is waiting. He looks out to the garden. The children's summer camp was hereabouts. The snows have quite vanquished it now. No need to dwell therein. No need. Underneath. Underneath. At the edge of Poland...

Our youngish man of thirty-five had reached a peculiar plateau of late. On this high plain it no longer seemed to matter to him whether he experienced 'this or that', or anything at all. He felt in fact that no-one really experiences, that no part of us is individual, that there is no place to be in this turning world. Was this the longed-for exit? He remembers he felt momentarily lighter. I should smother the ego, stop waiting for a thing to happen, stop hoping that people will notice or that people will care or note some service I might have done them... To observe then, quietly: the best trick for putting up with it all, for when you're feeling sorry for yourself. Remember, your name is *Blank*. You walk alone in the depths of a green-black forest. Presently you tie one end of a rope about your neck, and tie the other to a single branch of a single tree... But again you see, the problem is there's no separation between your life and any other. Everything is everything else. The soul is the body and the body is the soul. And if both are one, then neither exists. Nor Yin nor Yang really exist. Your death is just some kind of narrowing, the naming of a solitary narrative you always seek. Or death is

but a wind that turned to the east, a heat that died of coolness, a day that died of evening, a girl who died of growing up, a body that died of change. Death is a soldier who died of a general's notion of battle, a mind that died of wisdom, a story that died of being told. Words that died in a hail of sentences, peace that died of its own silence, love that died of sharing, seed that died of being born into a world. Family that died of the decades, heart that died of pulsing, blood that died of flowing outward to the frozen earth. This death... is nothing but the prison of your imagination.

In time, Blank must admit his several wounds are not so much physical as emotional, and that the purpose of doing the further bidding of the Department of Employment can no longer be postponed. He is to visit a very elderly gentleman who lives on the seventh floor of the Staan Building on Fernino Street - by extraordinary serendipity just three floors above where Blank now resides. But how to connect, and what to say? Perhaps the old fellow needs a nurse... or a cleaner.

Blank records the following: 'I should not be surprised that I've had more than I bargained for these last weeks - with this antique German called Moodzlinger. I have learned a lot: that here is a man who extracts his pound of flesh from the world just as it exacted the same of him, a man who seems to tread heavily in the fields of his fate, to enact a fussy and complicated dueling harangue with the past, to assail even the calamity of his birth. Moodzlinger sweats his hypochondria and his wounds, he advertises them, he flitters them about him, sorts them in little piles in the form of talismans and signs and sighs and whispers and grudges, of logics and conversations that should have been corrected, pathways that never should have failed. He fights battles long lost, conducts polemics long superseded, rakes over ground long squished in the holocaust of history, so that only grey soil and weeds are left where a childish but stern aspiration once was, peering trustingly out to the future through the little round glasses of a child of the Reich. And if one (such as I) shows the presence and patience to engage with it all, one might be rewarded by his judging you a serious person, worthy of complaining to, worthy of presuming upon - a willing witness to the intricate horrors of a hypochondriac mind that secures no place in the slippery-eel paths of the past, that is cheated of peace in the epoch, whose *raison d'être* is to scour back some clamouring pride or dignity under the slap of life's evil... To be judged serious one must *deal* with such punctilious facts and placements and logics and rights and wrongs. This self-sorry hyperbolic shambolic wreck of a German, in whom some punctilious policeman in shiny boots who believes that history must move in sweeps, clean modellings and plannings, forever chases a gasse-dwelling ingrate of epicurean tastes, some overblown expectant bourgeois in his city-hole who cowers in the face of metallic death-reports, and whose dainty handkerchiefed mouth pouts in disdain at clomping battalions in the streets; it is he, who could never marry the cleanliness he sought with the messy odours of his own dark taste. Perhaps he is a spiritual Nazi. And likely a closet Jew.

But is he an ironist? A man who trawls his old polemics and arguments a thousand times will be suspicious if you have not performed the same punctilious duty to history as he. Not an ironist then. But personal history is nothing but neurosis, and a fact is nothing but a fetish wrapped in a gristle of years, of sour sorrow and wanting and failure, of *This might have been...* and *How could this be so?* There is no clean fact but that which is embryoed by the filthy smells of history, the dung and the bad breath of a thousand mortal thoughts, the pant-pissing sweat of the condemned, the erection-creamed delight of the persecutors. And the etheric wars, the pasting of your sins on the skies of deeper mental worlds, the splattering of your evil on the vaults of the spirit, and the chain gangs of unquiet ghosts who live again the sweated horror and machination and detritus of the soap-opera world past: here are the indelible prints of the wrestlings of races, the insurmountable stains of the graspings of ordinary ones who lived and lost and died in holocausts, in the scum-tides of fortune, in the raked bonefields of wars, in the blood rivers of falsified hope - and in the mousy scrabblings of the peace, peace that fell upon us out of exhaustion and luck, seen only by half-alive ones who dodged the bullets of others, who greased into this future out of cracks and shitholes of the past, who now stem their guilt and shame with elixirs of purpose and deserving, of family and renewal and hoping, in a better Germany, in a brave new world where men might be human again, under skies somehow made pure again...

Can we weave simplicity out of a basket of sorrow-threads, wash a bedsheet clean white from black waters? Can you get sweet youth back, when youth was dragged away by jackbooted men, or turn about the fuming bull of history with an anaemic wave of a knotty blue-veined hand?

- So, yah. You are here for cleaning zis my apartment?

- I am, if you need the help

- Iff I need the help? I haf the world on my shoulders and I need help? Okay okay. So you can clean around my things

- Can I help you sort your things? Put them in order?

- You tell some joke

- Not exactly

- Okay, you are inexperienced. We start again. Under my supervision we work. What is your charge?

- Oh, just by the hour. Nothing big

- You are from some church, some religion? You do your duty?

- Oh! No, I rent on the fourth floor. Although -

- I never wass religious. It helps nobody at all. All right. You will start. Bring me my medications. In zis next room there is a box. Bring the box. (I do it) *Gut*. Do you know how many cleffer pills zere are invented to stave off death?

The old man needs to spread about the odour of himself, and anyone who comes near must be a party to his stiff agony. Und why else would you come near? You haf a life of your own to live? Pah! In his

daylong fetishing and putting and placement, in his cardigan and roll-up trousers and spectacles, I witness the spectral busy-posing of the man and his methodised filing, filing of spittled masticated experience. Many thoughts that come at a man can make him sick. He is owned and enslaved to images like Sisyphus to his rock, like the god whose liver is eaten by eagles. And though there *may be* purity and rest, who is fool enough to dream of these? History demonstrates how stupid they are; there can be none of that. *And yet I am glad of it!* - says Moodzlinger.

I have not mentioned the old man has a sub-tenant. It is a parrot, who keeps vigil in a shadowed corner of Moodzlinger's winter rooms. And I notice there is a thing Virgil (that is his name) says every day in the morning: *Ever lost... Ever lost... Ever lost.* I'm guessing it's like the carbon-copied conscience of the man his keeper. The bird is also heard to utter a curious phrase at evening, intoning it with a spectral slow-motion regret; something absurd, something like: *Sobby Bore... Sobby Bore... Sobby Bore...* emphasising the *Sob*, with the inflection falling away under a guttering cackle. Life is a *sobby bore* then? I bet it is for you, mister parrot.

Don't we all repeat endlessly the things we cannot understand? Aren't we all parrots in our ways? Today Moodzlinger and I perform the ritual of the photographs. This scene has been enacted time and again since I came. From a shoebox marked *fotografien*, Moodzlinger takes the first little stained picture in his fingers, scrutinises it for a silent minute, and lays it on a little table next to his chair. I wait, ready to place the photo in a second box of similar size, this one a blood-magenta colour, also marked *fotografien*. This requires patience. Most would find it maddening, but I find it mysterious, even soothing, and in the winter room I am inoculated by history, by the lure of Moodzlinger the German's secrets, by European shadows, by the sepia gloom of The War. Sometimes after prolonged silence, Moodzlinger starts to talk. His topic is usually the same.

- To cleanse, to purify, iss important activity for human beings, no? Do you clean your house, put your house in order, mister Blank? For me it giffs peace. At times. Actually I have this from mein vater. He was a fit man, clean-living man, a sporting man even... You know it was Olympic spirit that brought the world together in thirty-six? It helped uss deutsche volk to see how we need zis world to realise our dreams. I need you, my opponent, becoss without you I can find no greatness. Und is greatness a crime? Sport is sublimation of war. True, there must be winners and losers. But after, we shake hands in friendship. For we are civilised.

Moodzlinger has a way of stroking under his ample nose with his thumb. He ponders.

- It wass said so much about the Polish camps that those who are forced to do the most evil work, conscripted as slave labourers to be later killed, quickly lost all sense of morality. Why? Becoss the work is routine. Industrial machine is created. It functions. So. Even killing of fellow creatures gets routine. Mechanical work is unfeeling work. This is our part in great experiment, great sport of Life.

What will stop machine? Our *conscience*? No. We destroy fellow-feeling under pressure of unmeaning, absurdism. Then self-respect is destroyed. Just as personal feeling allows feeling for other, loss of personal worth means destruction of worth of other. There is loss of contact with the source of oneself, which is the source of All, of all people... They say it is through separateness that we have moral conscience, since I compare myself to you and feel that if I hurt you someone will hurt me in my turn. That it is proper to cooperate, to let rules have their way. But I tell you: it is obeisance to *idea* that counts only, and when idea becomes necessity it is a *relief* to surrender to idea. Here then is the death of our separateness! How did this apply to people in charge of the camps? To the proud SS, the Fuhrers? Something at the core must be surrendered. Our separate identity is now super-ego. Duty idea obliterates separateness. And duty of history erases here and now, erases common feeling. Sense of mission, rightness, loyalty, logic, duty - *this is the true feeling*. It is our noble burden. We are the chosen. We dispense work to those fit for it. Victors must be victors, vanquished must be vanquished. It is clean, it is sport. Let criminals carry out the blood work. Let them indulge, enjoy themselves even! They know where they go, they go down the chute also. If life is a toilet, let it flush. Let us erase all unclean memory. Masters alone shall be; let the masters retain no evil memories, suffer no trauma stress, let them witness nothing of it! Let the left hand know nothing of what the right is doing! We offer the death work to the damned. We could never with conscience play that role. We are the beautiful, the pure race. We do not get our gloves and uniforms dirty. We do not kill, we issue orders. So. And it is done. So. That it is done was proof that it should be done. That it could be done is proof that it should be done. It is inevitable history. It is Idea!

Fucking hell.

- You see, mister Blank? Nowadays, we are so clever to make life prolong. Once we were not so fussy. Listen to me, what do you possess? You are happy vibrant man. You have everything? What does a man need in order to go to death?

- Beg your pardon?

- Why do you think I am waiting, instead of dying?

Out of nowhere, Virgil the parrot chimes in: - *Sobby bore! Sobby bore!*

- Shut up stupid parrot. Mein vater -

- *Sobby bore! Sobby bore! Sobby bore!*

- Do you wonder why this parrot is alive? Because I stay my hand, I show mercy

- Leave the parrot alone. Focus on you

- Ah! You who are 'positive', you who are full of hope. I *deny*. I refuse hope, I tell you

- Look. Whatever is in your past, you have to let it come to the front - let it come till it can rear its head no more, till it loses its energy, till it subsides and gives up in front of your eyes. You have to kill it with patience. Why else would we bother to live? We have to clear out all the shit

- You want to tell *me*?
- I don't mind. I'm giving you good advice
- I say you should leave now
- Sorry. I listen to your fascistic denial shit. You can listen to me for two seconds. *Who is it* that experiences the thought, the memory? If you look you will see it is a timeless self, it is awareness. That's *you*. You cling to the evil of the past. Yes, it is insidious and repetitious, but *you* have invited all the ingredients of a soap opera you want to perpetuate. Certainly we are victims of circumstance, but do we have to be? You won't turn your face away, you're sentimentally attached. And you're ignorant because you think that the past constitutes yourself. What of memories that are gone, are they still 'you'? Oh, you will say they are unconscious and therefore puppeteer our behaviour. But I tell you if they don't arise in consciousness, then they are no concern of ours. And if they do arise, every day over and over, then we have to *do battle*. You know this! The real problem is, you think they are 'you and yours' and they are not. So what's the nature of the battle: self-pity, which is your problem and everybody's? No, it is subtler, cleverer. You need to realise how you accommodate the thoughts, how you give them energy, how you *cling*. You need to *observe* the soap opera with your real self - which is eternal, spaceless, unconfined. This is you, not some shit that happened in World War Two, Moodzlinger
- So you are psychologist. Not house cleaner after all. But I am not so stupid. I cling because I have to punish. I must do vigil to punish. You were never there, you cannot know
- I have my shit to deal with. I actually am a 'house cleaner'!
- You are pampered youth, child of peace. You do not know
- Nurse your little soap opera. Do it forever, die with it tucked under your pillow
- Who are you, fucking? What can you know?
- More than you'd think, Moodzlinger. For example, I wanna know what happened at *Sobibor*.

The old man seems to shrink away, to diminish in his chair. Did I time this correctly? Did he assume I never suspected it? But of course not.

- I heard a story about a girl called Anna K. who lived in Krakow in 1942. She was a nanny to little children of bourgeois families, and was young and slim with neat brown hair and trim clothes. It is said there was an appealing sparkle in her round eyes, for Anna K. was remarked on by many in her neighbourhood. But one day the government resolved to separate the undesirables, and she was arrested by special police at her apartment and placed on a truck that took her to a facility where she waited days in a crowded room, not given enough to eat or drink or offered toilet facilities commensurate with her dignity. From there she was placed on a rail transport with crowds of others, rough-handled by soldiers and made to stand precariously for more days in a darkened wagon that seemed to roll and rumble and sway endlessly under her feet, and she knew nothing and no-one

except the smell of a weeping frau and her goggle-eyed child six inches from her face. And in the midnight when they stopped at a platform in a remote place and she was made to disembark with people spilling and milling in confusion and exhaustion all about her, it was surely a strange relief to feel a soft night wind on her cheek, although the rest of her felt utterly wooden and corrupted. She was led to a place and asked to remove her soiled clothing, then told to walk quickly to some other place where she'd be offered a bath and proper food. She goes along a pathway flanked by uniformed men and dogs. She is ushered into a chamber which fills so quickly and so tightly that her feet barely touch the floor. The iron doors clang suddenly shut and soon she finds herself choking for air. Shortly after, she loses all knowledge of this world. Her body is taken and incinerated, her bones are crushed to powder and shoveled into bags and dumped in a pit in a forest. Grass and lupins and shrubs are planted over her so that no-one will know that such filth as Anna K. had ever been... As to her soul, it won't be erased so easily. It keeps memories it does not know it has. In a future time it begins to play on the muted strings of the past a ragged tune of inexplicable phobias of persecution and self-loathing. She is never safe, never good enough, always alone. She is a social problem, family problem, curse to herself. She has no guide but still must find her way. There are false starts and a string of suicides, slow or quick. Every sin of the fathers is visited on her. But I tell you - Anna K. is not a historical fiction or the child of someone else. She is always here, always with us. And she is always herself. And she must take the consequence of being herself. Forever.

My little story is neatly finished. He is staring at me.

- Were you there, Moodzlinger?

And he wants me to stab him now, pitilessly.

- Or was it your father who was there? Is it sorrow that's your problem... or shame?

And he starts to grunt, to sniff, then begins a strange whining sound through his nose. It is his version of crying, there in his stuffed chair... Our little soap opera proceeds to its penultimate scene. I do not denigrate it, it is important; but it is sentimental. I take hold of his shoulders, grip them. He quietsens after a time. Moodzlinger is not entirely lacking in rehearsal. Rehearsal for his cathartic reveal.

- That will do for today. I'll come back tomorrow.

I am not so inexperienced! Let him wait. Next day, there he is in his seat, looking expectant. And he is well-dressed, meticulously so. Virgil the parrot regards us with disdainful beak and fishy eye. I immediately feel a kind of sorry disgust, but I make his customary cup of tea with biscuit. He is being patient with me, and I with him. One mustn't spoil history for youthful zeal. Finally I sit down opposite.

- It was always about removal of za handicap. Always it was about cleansing, about brave new world. Yes, we Germans were spiritually weak but we believed in purity, in strength. We wanted a better world, free from corruption, weakness, ugliness

- The Nazis did us a favour - is that what you're saying?

He glances at me, grunts. - I do not say it.

- But you were a bourgeois. You were a sensitive child. Later, an artist even. How did the Nazis contaminate your dreams? Were they too rough? How did you feel about all those stiff shiny boots and uniforms?

- You provoke. But I tell you one story now. Listen. There is a man, brought up to believe in duty, fidelity, loyalty. A patriot, family man, good husband. Clean, disciplined, strong and determined, even good-looking; not unintelligent, forward-looking, hard-working. Other qualities also. Can we say that this was not a virtuous man, a worthy man?

- If this man were real, not a figment

- This man is real. And he had a wife, who is also faithful though prone to flightiness, a little unruly, a little romantic you see, in the uncontrollable sense - but loving and kind and virtuous and clever and funny. And somewhat of an artist, and lover of fine foods and wine and dress and décor. Though not rich, no no. She is faithful when war comes, she holds to her man who must do his duty. No matter what

- A classic tale, not at all uncommon

- The question is: do we need to atone for things outside our control

- You always have a choice, Moodzlinger. You may die, but you have choice

- Do people have a choice to die, or to suffer? You talk nonsense

- I don't care. But you mean victims, and you are one of those. You need to be, don't you, or else you would be a perpetrator. Bad guy.

(Does he see how I need to unhinge him this way?) - No! Do you not see how we cling to the normal in face of pressure, of madness -

- Or how we refuse to face truth in order that we may go on as before, and how that makes it all so much worse

- What difference does one man's little stupid protest make? What difference to history, to anything? Can you stop a great wave from surging to shore?

- If nothing and no-one makes any difference, then history itself makes no difference! Logic. We are not victims, Moodzlinger. We are creators. History is the little things that happen right now. Why else would you assume your precious body is so important?

- But it is important. We must fight

- Yes. Then fight. Your own little soap opera is so important! But the big big soap opera of human history - why assume it is any more important? Death takes everything. Everybody. Why agonize, why worry?

- We must fight!

- What kind of fight though? To remain the victim, the hard-done by? Or the fight to go beyond the whole fucking lot? Now there'd be a fight worth fighting! Even while you're still in the middle of it

- That is what I do. Every day

- You think you do

- Shut up, boy. Listen to me! There is a boy who lives with his mother, day after day behind a wall in a dark house in the woods. Down the road beyond the village is a camp. Daddy works there, we are not allowed to go there. There is smoke every day. We smell it. It makes us sick. My mother will not, cannot, believe it. One day she runs away. I do not find her. She comes back at night. She takes me. It is all rough, sudden. We are gone, in a lorry to the city, to some place. I don't recognise anything. Soon we are starving. Someone helps us. Our father comes one day much later. There is a scene in the kitchen. There is screaming. She has a knife, wants to kill. He throws her down. I hide away. He is gone. We go to find the infirmary. It is already bombed. Mummy is hysterical. I cling to her. She is in bed for weeks. A woman helps us. A neighbour I think. So we exist. Later, later, the war is over. We hear it on the radio

- Your father -

- I never see him. Ever again. Years later there are stories - that he is killed. Strung up. By a mob. Especial for him. Hanged. They say he was a commandant

- Possibly not. We all have to follow orders

- He was hanged up in front of the scum!

- Moodzlinger, he was not *you*. Think of your mother. She had truer instincts. You are closer to her.

The shadows in the room have deepened. Virgil the spectral parrot has nothing to say. But he shuffles, grips his perch, eyes me birdily as I, wanting relief, make for the door.

Moodzlinger's story sounds to me eerily like *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*. But what would I know? We all need fiction to coat the facts, to fit our emotional constructs. The key to it all is the lies we tell ourselves; this is how we live after all. Moodzlinger is right, I am a kind of youthful extremist. There were plenty of them in Nazi days. But I don't apologize, because history is but a phantom, a fabled concatenation of Nows. And it never fades unless we replace it - with clear uncontaminated sky, where we might fly outward into clear knowing: that we are none of these beckoning strands, these thoughts, these smells, these clinging dreams. Or perhaps, perhaps, the Nazi time and the *Shoah* privileged us all, gave us a benchmark, a bottoming-out of human experience, a nadir by which we may measure and expedite our souls' new-beckoning at the light, at a higher peace, at the unsentimental, the non-clinging, the free. But every desperate painful step, ten forward, nine back, trodden by Moodzlinger and his mother and father and me and all of us - not one of these steps can be retracted. I get that. But one sweet morning we might arrive at the fabulous idea that the very journey is a phantom too, a roiling sweating in the mud of our own dreams, a fevered clinging to our paradigms of self-importance, to a self-narrative that leads us like donkeys onward by the nose in self-contaminated fabrics of guilt and shame and sorrow. Our really-special real soap opera. Reader, don't

get me wrong. I feel things, and deeply too. But there has to be a limit... And the fabled death of the body is never that limit. The next day, I return to Moodzlinger. I know he has clung to the idea of a final act, either by suicide or by natural cause, as the tempting end of his deep-invested drama. I claim my job is to show him death as just another dream-state, another escape, another excuse for turgid paralysis inside his opera of emotional victimhood. I am naïve but don't care. Innovators and rebels are naïve. Think of it as freshness. And I've nothing to lose. But my *disgust* wells up again - and this might be motivation enough to hack at the old man's rigidity. Yet he was a boy once, in his little round glasses, cleaving to his flouncy teary mother and his distant noble father with his Destiny, swallowing all that boy-propaganda for the leader and the army and the cause. All his days he believed in something, because Germans did, because that generation did, because people do, and he didn't notice how his dreams quietly morphed sideways into other dreams of equally suspect provenance, until he was all grown up and on the downward curve - and still unable to see into his own dream-factory of a mind and say: it is all relative, and therefore absurd, and who is the dreamer anyway? History made him, his generation made him, the tides of belief and war made him, and now his enshrinement of the Fascist ideal that crushes individuals in service to the forward march of a race, is nothing but guilt turned to aggression. For what did Moodzlinger ever do to help anyone or anything? So here he is today - in his cardigan in his chair in his gloomy flat with his parrot-conscience, and the world surging all about him in borderless fitful dream strands, and he *loves* to be shoaled on the reefs of yesterday, fishhooked on lines of soaked suffering, blinking in the flickerings of forgotten tears, the croakings of history, ghost repetitions of a billion thoughts: the cloaked night of experience, the clanking cattle train, the blockade-mind's clamped and glittering and booted fetishes, the rubbish dump of generations, the swamp of history made personal, made aching in his head and his teeth and his fingertips. He is the insect in the headlights, the quivering deer that awaits the killer, the lonely dog that drags itself from hearth to lay down and shiveringly die in the woods... perhaps in the green-black woods of Eastern Poland at the fag-end of a war. And all the souls he mourns there, that were ashed and buried under clods in the green-black forest - they rose again and marched forward, yes they did. They, the undead army of refugee souls, stamping forward on their white chalk road into the relief of higher worlds! But *you*, Moodzlinger, had to live. What a curse, what a loss! ...Be at peace, Moodzlinger.

But this is the seventh floor, like hell's seventh circle, and self-violence will out. We'll acquit ourselves by its creed. And he is wily, this German; doesn't spill his guts all at once. Draws me close with talk of hope, talk of value and common sense and moving on to brighter futures, to sunlit lands, to purity through discipline at last. Dream of his youth fulfilled! He bends an ear to my words, and in my inexperience I fail to note his game. But gradually I see: here is the limit to the mortal man called Moodzlinger. He must pass on his life, transfer his bloated being to someone younger, shovel his baggage down the line into the repeating future. And if I really wanted to help this man, I'd have had

the patience to care about him. Yes, a catharsis of some ilk is fitting, but his longed-for confession scene seems to have bloated him so. Ugh, so self-consciously narcissistic. Don't ever fool yourself, Blank: compassion is not your strong point. But his future is his, not mine. What use compassion in his thickened self-idolising world? In the abstract, at a distance, I am sorry for him. But face to face, compassion vanishes. I should help him *erase* himself then? No. Suicides should face the present, else in some soft future the act will eat them insidiously, and their loved ones too. The old man must face the cold slap of Now. Don't leave till tomorrow what you can do today, old man. But how he cleaves and cloys and feeds on me. How he wants me to hate him, wants me to feel *responsible* for hating him. How else to make me, the future, grasp your suffering than to amplify it at the last? How else to slip away yet prolong your oily-sweet agonized need inside a future world. Even with one solitary stranger-helper in a private melodrama in your grotty flat in some grave-dead building somewhere - a stranger who'll take forward the horror into his own heart and get the cancer of it: let *him* feel what it is to be abject. Let the arrogant future, the arrogant youth who wallow in their arrogant peace - let them feel how the past shredded, boned, slit and sucked one poor man; let the future feel the hate that he felt, the weltering sorrows he felt. Let contamination continue, let future clang out the past! And if I were a fool I'd have the nerve to gaze on the evil and let it seep in my heart. Thank god I'm not so young, not such a fool. But what is left me - to despise him instead? Perhaps a middle way: to gaze with dispassion, assist his demise according to his wish. To wash hands of feeling. To wash hands, to assist. Like Pilate did. Like the SS did. But no. Moodzlinger will hook me and fight for me. I'm to be his dirty deliverer.

Next day he does a significant little thing. Asks me to place, with my trusted hands, all his ranks of pills into a row of special bottles. They must be deposited, one by one. I ask why he doesn't give them up. - Neffer. How can I? I must stay alive, he says.

A week goes by, so that I've supposedly forgotten the ritual of the pills, and this day he sits me down and with solemn tone informs me:

- I wish to thank you for all you have done for me. I have re-made my will. I name you, my friend, as sole recipient of my estate.

This causes a silence.

- Is it large? is the only thing I can say.

- It is my apartment. And there are two hundred thousand Euros in a Dresden bank.

- I do not deserve any of it - is the next thing I can think of.

I look in his eyes. He looks into mine.

- But certainly you do. I do not want it to be stolen by the government. If you are not happy, donate it to charity.

I say not a thing more. Two days later he asks me to come again. He is solemn this time, seated in his chair, dressed as usual in his shirt and tie and cardigan. His round glasses glint whitely in the light. The parrot is beside him.

- Fetch me the bottle of wine on the table in the dining room. Bring the stem glass.

I do it. - I will not ask you to join me. I know it is not your way. Pour the glass now.

I do it. - Thank you. You may do this shopping errand for me. Come back after you have finished.

He gives a longish list. It takes me an hour. I return. He is in his chair. He appears to be asleep. The light glints in his glasses as before. The bottle is beside him. I step closer. A small stream of vomit extends from his chin, down his shirt and into his lap. The eyes are slightly open. The parrot paces agitatedly in his cage, his claws grappling at the bar. Moodzlinger is gone.

I was a fool to think I could ever help the German. To pass on his silent grief to another generation may soothe him, but the truth is we must die alone, unheralded. Otherwise we tempt the future to vomit us back up. Have the guts to be no-one and nothing. Take your sorrows into the void, which is not a void but another new marketplace for the great barter of clinging and letting, of longing and stillness, egoic and impersonal. If we want to be born we must take the consequences. Even at this elevated human level of ours, we still don't have a choice. (One day we surely will.) Fear and hatred and depression and confusion are still our bedfellows, our dancing ghosts, our daily bread. We have to learn to let them go. But yes, I was a fool to think I could divest the old man of his investment in sorrowed shame and victimhood. Or perhaps after the long long night it only takes a moment: a breath, clear sunlight in the morning, an unexpected ride out, a change of scene, a helping hand, a clear new face, a childlike voice, a cheery smile, a brand new day. A holiday.

I flatter myself. Moodzlinger is really nothing if not the architect of his own myth. In each successive iteration, each lifetime in the gyre of his Becoming, his narcissist's soap opera invests itself in new climaxes, and the trickle of suicide blossoms to a fountain and to a flood that seeks to drown the world. The next Adolf Hitler, ladies and gentlemen! Not notorious yet, Moodzlinger is the closet killer of cell-armies of love and esteem, of races of peace molecules; this tyrant of veins and heart, this despot of the mind in his gyre-rut of victim seeking revenge. Oh well, at least there's a passion there. Passion for the ages.'

THE SEA

The world's oceans are all instability, and sea captains are no match for them. They set out as adventurers and protectors and would-be masters, but in the end they see that they skate on the deep of the unconscious, and that the day will come when they will be lost. In this way they come to believe in nothing. Do they want to be lost? They must, for in the end there is not a thing for them to win or to know or to be. All things come from the sea, and on its unwieldy surface a man sails his ship obliquely on to a watery end. Yet the captain is defiant in his long thrill of disappearance, for a human being knows he is nothing, and this is the difference between him and all other creatures who over aeons sweat out of the watery pit of evolving. His self-knowing is a curse yet is also his compass. He journeys in the fragile ship of the body, sustained for a season by winds that blow him far away. What keeps him alive day by day? Not just a bodily need to feed himself; rather the forgetting of the guilt and struggles of yesterday, mercifully cleansed not only by the amnesia of night dreams but by the clamour of the now... My ancestor Lean was a master of merchant ships that carried things from place to place to sustain the British conquest-empire. This captain had few such concerns however. Rather, the economic strivings of others let him float almost poetically on the postponements and avoidances of his life... though life at sea is not easy, and he knew well the continual grind and clatter and moan and hustle of wind in rigging, the slurp of heavy water against the hull, the continual bubbling unstableness and frantic adjustment to wave and wind and storm followed by featureless time waste in blue grey worlds where sea and sky meet to collude against your mind like a whisky sandwich at midday, like the press of amnesia and slow swallowing of hopes... And in the ocean's cruel monotony there is no time, only the laughing bay of nightstars, only the tugging of the incessant wind (your lifeblood), only the bobbing of a matchstick ship on the shrugging sea where all nature laughs at you since you are a pinprick, a dolt who thinks he has a right to share in the unconquerable rites of overwhelming nature, who claims to spectate at the millioning power of sun and wind and billowing water on the skin-surface of a great wide planet in the sea-black cradle of the universe. What are you? You are a man? But all this solitude makes a little man laugh as well - because he is *the gift*, the jewel in the life, the spectator-seer of it all - though his body may shudder and fall to Davy Jones' locker under the very next flicker-wave that broadsides his puny ship.

A certain young midshipman, Atticus Bang, relates our story thus: 'It is a fact that our brig was once a slave ship, and below deck its fittings and racks betold of former usage that had not been erased. We trusted in the Captain, who seemed to us a brave and a sturdy man, even if his past may have involved the unfeeling trade in men. Now there came a time when our Captain having left the shores of Batavia sailed us to the west coast of the great southern continent, where we were to deliver goods at the port

of Fremantle far to the south. The endless West Australian wave-coast is a sailor's enigma. In the cyclone season storms are common, and in winter nor-west gales render sailing hazardous. There are few harbours or safe havens, and many ships have gone to the bottom. Those who go to death tell no stories, and we the survivors must conjure them for their sake.

...One day at sunset, as the glistening bowl of sea stretched before us and its endless white breakers clawed the gleaming coast as if to beg the future, and with open skies and headlands converging on the horizon tip as if inviting our ship to sail the primal shore forever, we rounded the western extremity of an unnamed cape. It loomed nearer, and within a mile of the shore we turned sharp south-west. But too late. At eight or nine knots in choppy swell we struck a reef. No-one had foreseen that hazard, and our ship scraped hard and came to a halt on what appeared to be a flattish big rock surrounded by deeper water. We hoisted out a single boat in readiness. Within half an hour there was a yard of water in the pump well, and as the light faded the pounding of waves drove the rudder into the stern timbers. Cargo and other items were thrown overboard but quickly the leak in the stern increased, and water in the hold flooded up to the height of a man. As dark came on an attempt was made by our Captain to reach shore in the ship's cutter. This proved impossible due to heavy surf, and the boat returned with difficulty to the ship. Water was now above the lower-deck beams. A decision was made at last to abandon, and most of the crew crammed back onto the cutter and precipitately departed. I did not join them, instead being ordered with the mate to belay the cables between boat and ship. It was, I quickly surmised, of no advantage to be on that boat. Our sturdy Captain stood rooted in the centre of the deck watching his cutter disappear into the choppy gloom. A moment later the ship lurched under a broadside wave and the cable snapped. The mate was thrown across the deck and disappeared over the side. But I clung on. The ship righted itself, and there again was the Captain holding fast to rigging. He seemed expressionless, not reacting at all to the loss of the mate. Now he and I were alone on deck. We waited. By degrees the Captain's form seemed to fade to its aura as light was sucked out. The moon began to rise and threw a silver sheen over the deck and surrounding water, and now the wind, still flinging in gusts at the rigging, seemed to wish to slink away. I lay in the dark, holding to the deckrail. I knew he was there somewhere. Hours went by. I must have fallen asleep. Dawn came to us grey and ghostlike. The sea had calmed a little. I could see we were about a quarter mile from a yellow-silver beach with headlands to left and right and dunes and bush beyond. Breakers curled heavily toward the land. Suddenly the Captain appeared before me out of the poop hatch. He paused, said nothing. In an instant he had flung himself over the side. I crawled to the railing and saw him swim or rather thrash toward the shore. Very soon he became indistinguishable in the green surge... and I was alone. What to do? I peered into the hatches and saw nothing but dark water. An hour passed. Finally I crawled to the poop hatch and entered the captain's cabin seeking anything to put in my mouth. Nothing to be had. I took hold of a bench, succeeded in lugging it out, got it to the railing, pushed it over the side and jumped. The green-cold undersea

shock-swallowed me but I clawed my way to surface. The bench was slumping near me in the surf. I struck out, clung to it. The breakers began to churn me inward to shore. In half an hour I found a foothold on sand and staggered to the beach. In the tussock grass below the dunes I beheld the sodden prone form of the Captain. I went to him. He opened his eyes, gazed at me, closed them again. I lay down. Time passed, the sun came out. In that windblown morning I watched the carcass of our ship bobbing and thrusting on the reef, helpless in the arms of the bay. What of the cutter? That boat would never be seen or heard of again, except for possible fragments I myself found on a far beach many days later.

Meanwhile our Captain seemed to revive. He stood up and wordlessly motioned me to follow. His boots were still on him, and his crinkled sea-slaked clothing crackled as he moved ahead of me on the strand. We must have seemed a sight to those grey-white birds that wheeled and swooped down the shoreline. Under the headland we attempted to catch fish with knotty lines of grasses we'd tied together, using shellfish as bait. No luck at first but after a time we caught a half decent-looking fish, scaled it and ate it raw. A sodden patch of oily-looking ground under a cliff offered a semblance of water. It tasted brackish-dark. Thus the day passed on that lonely wind-coast with waves and glitter-lost sunlight our only companions. The Captain said next to nothing; instead his eyes were fixed on our hulk on the reef, its masts sticking out of the sunlight like a ragged joke. Perhaps, I thought, he wished we'd all perished. At sunset we stood on a dune overlooking the yellow-silver curl of beach. Suddenly our Captain without speech shuffles down the bank and onto the strand. I watch from the height as his lone figure strides out toward the surf, his tailcoat streaming. He stops not at all as the greening white surge licks about his legs. Even then I don't comprehend the unfolding death-wish. But now I am slithering down the dense consuming dune and throwing myself across the yawing beach into the spray-sea. Curling tops come crashing; a rip pulls me sidelong. I claw at the Captain's body but he makes no effort. I wrench at him, catch his neck; he slips away! My lung-breath is three parts water and I am gurgle-shouting out to him. This time an arm, but the Captain merged in glistening foam makes no moan; his body feeds the deep. Now I pull at his throat, and again we go under before I drag him back to sand and clump down on him, my lungs a guttering chaos in the punching wind that tugs inhuman at our sodden bodies. The echoing wind, the creeping tide, now sucks us clean. Two human specks on a strand-desert coast. At length I take him up and lay him in the dunes. Later, he comes to himself, and expressionlessly thanks me for the deed of assistance. I feel as if I am glad I did it. We spend the night amid the crickling beaten bushes, shivering in the night wind. At some point he begins to talk in the dark.

- It is true that I had a girl in England. And I had a child. And that I left them there in that town by the sea to fend for themselves. I went away over the sea. I tell myself it's destiny but I regret it. Now my

ship is gone, and I expect you sir, like the rest of the human race to let me alone with my unfurnished guilt. That is, if you survive. Good luck to you, midshipman...

In the morning I wake to find the Captain absent. I hurry left and right, then spot him on a promontory beyond the beach. He sees me, turns abruptly away. Stick together, I hear myself thinking. Is he a fool? No, he has lost his ship. Let me not be angry, but let him protect me. I am his survivor, his responsibility. I overtake him on the clifftop, in low dense scrub that drags at our legs. He says nothing. Now we take to the inland. Should we not stick to the coast? He is silent. Out of the seawind the country turns lonely, scrubby, nondescript. It's as if he wants to lose the thread, wander to the moon. The sun hovers heavy above, and red dust cakes us in the noonday glare, hanging in curtains about skeleton trees, rising like a shroud on the metal plain. I know it to be an error to go inland. But he walks on. All that day and the next we trudge until we come to a high place with stone buttresses jutting out of the land. Cicadas rustle in the shadows of boulders. We are far from the sea now, but it is still visible as a shimmering line under the sky to the west. The Captain lays his once-sturdy body down in the lee of a rock. He is mournful. Red ants swarm about his legs. I need to walk into the scrub, forget. I do at last. Cicadas rattle and hum in secret places. Crowds in, a hollow empty loneliness. They say the natives of this land have a thing called the Dreamtime. And I am gone for a time I can't recall. On my return to the rock the Captain is gone. I tell you I devoted a single hour to look for him then desisted. I lay down in the dust, put my face into the sun. The heat and dust cradled me, ants negotiated my disparate parts. Peering into the bowl of sky I found out clouds to mesmerise me by. They seemed to resolve themselves according to my mind, their shapes assembling life gone and done, the future empty, the past a story, all lost, no battle glory. All is gone. Forget and leave this earthly. Let me be. Let me be.

I woke to find my body in the dust. The shadows of the trees had lengthened; the land sat heavy in yellow sun. There was grit in my nostrils, dust in my hair. I knew my Captain had gone to the elsewhere. For good this time. Now descended the embrace of eternity, and the weight of the vast continent held us both in its timeless dusk-day, here at the still end of it all...

At length I began to descend the bluff, knowing I must head to the west, cross the plain, get back to the sea.

And since I have lived to tell the tale, and though I am nothing but a dust-speck on the plains of nameless past, I should tell you that I did reach the coast, that I walked for weeks living on stray fish and droplets of water found in moist places under bluffs, and that a ship finally found me and took me on to Fremantle. But I did not forget my Captain, and still I imagine his bones, long since plucked clean by ants and birds, deposited on a red plateau in the wastes of West Australia; and that his soul will doubtless roll forward into the far future where I myself will encounter it again. And since I'm

the saver of his life, and he owes me a thing whether he likes it or not, I do not doubt we will take up our thread from where we left it - at our shipwreck on that deserted coast two centuries ago.'



THE UNDISCOVERED COUNTRY

The schoolgirl Matty Bang and Won the Korean set out westward on Australian state highway___ in early October. The Korean drove a 90s Porsche she had apparently borrowed 'from a friend'. She had notified no next of kin as she appeared to have none. The Bang parents assumed their daughter, though not strictly a minor, was in the care of an adult. They'd given her money all the same. The assumption was they'd be gone up to fourteen days. No forwarding address was given.

From the start it is plain that Won is fatigued by something more than the exigencies of pursuing her mysterious amoral city profession, but Matty is not allowed to speak of it. Not that she has more than an inkling of how Won conducts business in the social shadows. Won takes the opportunity on back roads to show Matty the wheel, and she does not hesitate; after all it is a Porsche. How did Won procure such a vehicle? Oh, a client offered it in lieu of payment. Though at ease with Won's inscrutable cool, Matty now feels she will need to negotiate the relationship with more rigour than before. But it's the unknown that attracts and thrills, so for now she basks in their reckless romance. After all, here is our adventure to the *spiritual heart*.

Open spring skies converge on the tip of the horizon-road, inviting the two to drive forever. One day, the glistening bowl of sea to their left, its endless breakers clawing the gleaming coast as if to beg the future, Won asks Matty to stop - which she does on a rise overlooking a silver curl of beach. Now Won with no words exits the car, starts down the dunes and onto the sand. Matty watches from the height as the lone figure, her lace-form tracing the strand, disrobes piece by piece and steps toward the surf. She stops not at all, and the greening white surge beckons her into its maw. Won's arms are spread as if in bridal supplication, her hair a flag to the wind.

Matty Bang is slow to comprehend the unfolding suicide - but when she does she flings her body downward through the dense consuming dune; lurching sliding throws herself across the yawning beach and into the spray-sea that's swallowing her sister-soul. The curling tops come crashing; a rip pulls her sidelong as she claws at the form of Won who makes no investment in her body or breath. Matty wrenches at her, catches the neck; the naked form slips away! Matty lunges again, this time an arm; her lung-breath is water and she's screaming WON come back come back don't do this I need you come with me. But the girl has liquid eyes the text of glistening water, hands of foam and makes no moan and baleful feeds the deep... Now Matty has gripped her, pulls her throat, and several times they drown together 'fore Matty drags her onto sand then drops on top, her lungs a galloping chaos in the pouring wind - which tugs at their sodden forms lying under inhuman sea-foam... Two human specks on a desert coast, the echoing wind, the creeping tide, sucks clean.

At length Matty takes her up and lays her in the dunes, collects her scraps of clothing from the strand. Later, wrapped in a blanket on a sheltered spongy patch of grass, Won apologises with all the finesse of the aristocrat, and thanks her friend for the deed of assistance. Matty tells her she is welcome, says nothing more. Absently, she picks a shard of driftwood, cradles it in her hand, and they drive on.

Later. They come upon what seems like a seaside suburb of caravans. Strange little roads with cute verges, kids with cricket bats, pot-bellied men in flimsy chairs and beers in hands, flotsam and washing and women with folded arms who gaze at them like watchers at a match. They sidle in on evening shadows. Won doesn't look at anything. They park and Matty in her arse-torn jeans chains rings and whatnot, steps up to reception. We'd like a caravan. The manageress smiles a craggy smile; she's seen a few. Pay me when you leave, she says. Two alien girls crawl into a box on wheels. The Asiatic one lies down and drops asleep. And Matty lies beside her, cradling with her body-warmth.

Next morning early, there's a knock. Matty swings the door and sunlight blinds her eyes. A large blondish woman is standing there.

- Saw you come last evening. Your friend all right? She looked a bit... come over, have breakfast with us. Just there

- Er, okay. Give me a minute.

She rummages for clothes, serves water to Won, who's aware and listening.

- I feel better, she says. - Don't worry for me, Matty

- Uh, we're invited -

- I know. Go. I will come

- Will you?

- Whatever I do, I shall do. (She smiles) But I will come.

Matty steps over to the neighbour's site. Looks fairly chaotic with jetsam stacked about. Several adults in camp chairs blink in the light. She notices hairy knees stubbier thighs reddish faces. Two males: one stocky, the other wiry, and a weighty woman in a slack t-shirt with loose grey-blonde hair.

- Hi, I'm Matty.

- Giddy Matty. Bit early ain't it? But my wife wanted to knock on yer door

- No, it was nice of her.

The guy extends a hand. - Me name's Tommy. This is Kurt. And Greta. And you met Wendy (Matty shakes awkwardly) Saw yer Sports. Like a Porsche meself. If I could afford one

- You can afford it Tommy. You just don't get round to it.

This from Kurt, who seems continentally factual.

- Don't get round to a lot of things, mate. Hey Wen! Ready yet? Starvin' out here! (To Sal) We're 'aving bacon sarnies with our booze this mornin'. Her idea. Never catch on

- Give her a chance, says Greta. (Her T-shirt says: *You'll love every piece of Victoria* over a jigsaw of the Great State).

- Whatever. She's cool

- I doubt that, says Kurt curtly.

- So is that wagon yours?

- No. My friend Won's

- Won. She Asian?

- Tommy! (Greta hisses)

- Here she is. Won, this is... sorry...

- I'm Kurt. Greta my wife, and Tommy. And here's our sweet Wendy.

And Won the perfect, in tight slacks, delicate top and two-inch heels, shakes all the hands with a bow and a smile which leaves the company impressed. She's in control. Matty breathes out.

- Which country you from, Won? says stocky Tommy, eyes a bit wider.

- Actually Tommy, I am from Australia. (Smile) But my father was North Korean. You may be aware of the political situation. He was a victim of the regime. I am his only child. At ten I was sent by my aunt to your Lucky Country. After we fled to the South, you see. I am 22 years of age, and in hospitality industry. It is a pleasure to meet you all.

There's a pause in the morning light. Wendy, dishes in hand, directs at Won and Sal a scrutinising gaze.

- Well. Nice to 'ear English well spoken!

- Tommy, you're a clever fellow but you've no class (says messy Greta).

Wendy serves bacon sandwiches and orange juice. Won offers help.

- No, it's my pleasure. Fresh young faces. Nice to meet

- Jeez, this stuff puts hairs on yer chest. Tryin' to kill me with yer health kick, Wen?

Kurt: - Ignore him please. So you are travelling? We, as you see, enjoy our spring holiday together in the cute Ossie way. We work and socialise together in our city suburb, so we are unable to be apart in our other suburb, by the sea.

Too much information, thinks Matty. Won smiles her delicate smile.

- Yeah, we love each other so much (Greta)

- Get me a beer will ya, Wen. Jesus

(Kurt) - Tommy is my partner in our boat firm. I am a designer from Kiel. He is a rich man but wishes to deny it. Why, you may ask. Because he knows money and booze but not the art of boats. Friend does not know one end from zu other.

- For a kraut you're remarkably polite. Money makes the world go round, mate.

(Wendy brings a six-pack) - Don't drink them all at once, darling

- Nah, I'm house trained. Drink 'em one after the other. (A wink) So how's about a spin in your Porsche?

Won to Matty's consternation immediately assents. - *Soon!*

Tommy swallows a mouthful, tries not to turn red. Greta being female, sees all.

- Mmm yes. Our country's future is multicultural... And what do you do, Matty?

- School. Year eleven

- Oh! You look older. I recall year eleven, wanted to be a model. Now look at me: haus frau

- Muzzer to my children! Und she has a business. Women underrate themselves, no?

- A bloated success. I'm what you'd call a winner who lost

(Matty) - How d'you mean?

- Kurt won't like this, but we're the classic smug Haves. Got-it-all, overweight bourgeoisie sitting on our real estate. Too damn lazy for a love affair! Be *quiet* Kurt, I'm talking to the young lady. And dear, with your figure and your charm and your looks, make sure you don't become what we are.

Matty returns Greta's bitter smile. But Wendy gazes at Matty as if at a long-lost daughter who's going away. Husband Tommy feels the need to crack another tube. Which sprays over Won.

- Tom! She's our guest!

- She's right. Sorry love (wink)

Won gazes at him and laughs a tinkly laugh.

Kurt: - And what is your purpose for travelling?

- *We're on a trip to the heart of the spirit.*

Matty doesn't know where this phrase came from. But as soon as it's said, it sounds as if it had always been. Nobody speaks. Matty smiles to herself. Yet Won seems agitated. She excuses herself and steps away.

Wendy, finally: - That sounds romantic.

Greta looks hard at Matty. - And why not?

Since Kurt needs to question this young lady about her curious statement, Matty is dragged into a turgid chat. Wendy clears dishes. Tommy though, looks about. Finally he mumbles: *Goin' for a slash.*

Hours later, Matty returns from the beach. The wind is up. Wendy had come after her. Seemed to want to talk about herself, her feelings (many unfulfilled it seems)... but Matty's mind is reliving the horror-scene of yesterday. The car is gone, where *is* she?

- My friend. I have to look for her

- She took 'young Tom' for a spin

- Your bloke? You don't mind?

- Why should I? I've no control. Oh, I used to like his rough and ready ways. Until... you see, I came from Denmark to marry this man. Australia was a ticket to money and ease. You have it all but what do you have? This beach is lonely, my children are gone. I used to paint - I'm not so bad - I don't do it

now. There's no reason. Our suburb, our big house... there is no culture here. As a child I loved the windy coasts of Jutland. It was romantic. But now, nothing.

The car is there, in the beach car park. Won stands next to this Tommy creature, looking out to sea. Tommy notes the 'weird one' approaching.

- Come for dinner you guys. I'm doin' prawns.

And he and his wife step away. Matty knows it is better to say nothing to Won. But she says it anyway.

- You gonna fuck every tom dick and harry you come across?

The first time she ever spoke harshly to her sister. Won turns toward the sea. Matty pulls her. The wind whips dunes into their eyes.

- Get away, Matty Bang

- No way. I pulled you out of the sea

- You should have left me

- What is *wrong* with you?

- It is the world that is wrong, Matty Bang

- I want an answer. Not some Asiatic crap!

- What do you think I am? We are nothing. *Leave* me

- Why d'you want to kill yourself? (Won moves away. Matty shouts) Did your fucking father teach you?

Won turns dagger eyes to her. The wind flings strands across her cheek. She is some Asiatic devil-ghost in white. Matty shudders.

- I didn't mean that...

Won reaches down, scoops two fists of sand and holds them rigid before her face. In slow motion she opens her palms and sand writhes and swirls in a cloud about her. Then a sudden bow or flick of the head, and she is running. The other girl pursues.

Casual observers would have seen two dots tottering down a far sea-combed beach. The one behind will catch the one in front, who pushes her away, and the follower will seem to lose heart then gather her strength for pursuit again. The one in white will seem to slow, to stumble, even fall to her knees, then as the other reaches her she'll dither forward again. Pursuer will hesitate, wrap her arms about herself, then on once more! Thus it goes, far far down the strand... until two specks are lost in the sea haze.

That evening at Camp Desperation it's middle-age grunge not bourgeois as these people cultivate their favoured sodden games of love and hate. Matty is all for driving out but contrary Won stays put. They haven't reconciled. Rich Tommy dumps a great bag of king prawns on the caravan bench (his contribution to the evening's culinary arts) and lunges for the fridge, where solace lies in cliffs of beer

cans. Curt Kurt, his tippie of choice great flutes of white, sweats red in the neck. His glasses fog at the sight of his big grey whale of a wife; for Greta, parked with cigarette in hand, is holding forth.

- There's no romance, there's no romance! When's the last time my picky Germ of a husband took a risk? All picky perfect clean and nice. Gotta let it hang out! (This to impress the young ones no doubt. The opposite effect)

- You're drunk already, woman. Where d'you put it all? Ah why did I never marry Wendy? Sit with me. Sit, baby.

Wendy says: - I-have-to-barbecue-the-prawns. Who wants a prawn? *Anybody* wanna prawn? So specially original. On the bar-be-cue like yesterday. We got dead prawns from yess-terday. They're in the bin!

- I'll cook 'em Wendy, says Matty, keen to get out of the fetid van.

- Nah nah nah. Oim the cook tonight, you're the guest! And our little Asian too.

This from cultivated Tommy who puts his arm round Matty and smooches her on the shoulder. She puts him in his place and slides out, to howls from soggy Greta, and Wendy too. Kurt is swearing. Won is bent over the grass, her hands to her stomach, the blue silk of her dress creasing green in the barbecue light.

- What is it, Won? You're sick. Come here.

And Won is crying tears she can't control. They drop to the grass like little diamonds. And Matty's heart is keen to burst. She holds the girl to her. Won's eyes are hot on her neck.

- I'm sick. Oh, I'm so sick.

A bawdier argument erupts within. There's banging on the window. *You* cook the fucken prawns! Wendy lurches down the step, spies the children standing there. She gulps, goes quiet.

- Are you two going to stay for tea? Please stay, please? Oh, is she sick? Oh, let me help.

But Won is sinking to her knees and Matty can't hold her up.

- I have disease. Do you not know?

She kneels, holds the girl's head. Wendy kneels too. Now Tommy, beetroot-red, appears. Kurt is shouting.

- You dare insult your wife? She is too good for you my friend

- Well fucken take 'er then! I gotta better fish to fry.

Tommy sways there, his Tube in his hairy slab of fist.

Greta squeezes through the door. - He already had his lil' fish today. That one there! That be right, Tommy boy?

- What do you mean, *disease*?

Matty whispers. Her hand slips on sweating silk. - What do you mean? What do you mean disease!

Wendy: - Let her be. I'll take her to her bed. But Won now vomits in a sudden arc that catches

Tommy's shoe. He grunts and jumps aside and his hand lands on the griller. He howls like a dog at the night. Won's face is disfigured above the lurid grass.

- *THE AIDS*. She chokes it out. And Wendy sits aback. - The what? *The AIDS, you see*, repeats the girl. Her words seem disembodied in the drunk light. The women kneel there, force the shuffling others to slow and cease. Their breaths insult the silence.

- Yer what? says Tommy.

- She said nothing. (Wendy, holding Won) Not to you, anyway

- What the fuck'd she say?

- *What the hell do you want, man?* This from Kurt, shamed by his uncouth partner.

- Fucken dame's got AIDS!

- Oh Yess! (says Greta) She's a whore! Couldn't you see it, stupid man. Now what'll you do?

- What does she mean? says Kurt.

- Kurt, wake the fuck up.

Greta lets her fat frame slide into a chair, and Tommy doesn't know where to put himself. But Wendy has taken Won aside, lain her in her caravan and covered her with blankets. Won, sweating hot and cold will push them off, pull them on again. And Wendy gives water, bathes her head. Our Matty has shrunk to a child meanwhile, so Wendy soothes her too. An hour goes by. Won is asleep. Wendy leaves. She'll come back in the morning.

Somewhere in the night a banging on the caravan door, some guttering voices raised, Tommy being pulled away. Matty wanders on the beach under the moon. Black surf rumbles in a tawdry dawn. She feels her heart's been torn away. Morning comes and Wendy is there. Matty says: I'll put her in the car. We'll drive away, back to the city. They bundle Won in blankets into the seat, and Matty takes the wheel. She says thank you and goodbye. And Wendy stands and watches till the car's a tiny speck rounding the headland road. Until it disappears from view.

Matty drives, not caring which direction. Her driving's rough and basic anyway. At times she goes reckless fast, at others she crawls as if to spare the insects. They abandon the main roads for the inland and the country turns lonely, scrubby, nondescript. She pays no heed to sign nor civilisation, such as it is. It's as if there's no-one else in the car, as Won has withdrawn into a semi-sleep or trance. At a lone gas station she takes on junkfood supplies, fills the tank, talks to no-one. It's as if she wants to lose the thread, drive to the moon. In the noon-day glare red dust cakes the car, seems to hang in curtains about the skeletal trees, rises like a shroud behind them on the metal road.

At a comfort stop she watches over Won who crouches in the dust without dignity. Her pale effluent makes a little stream in the dirt. She inhumanly spits. Matty is grimly lost. She told them AIDS - should anyone believe it? The red ants swarm about her feet. The car's a monster, metallic-heavy by the roadside. She wants to walk into the scrub, forget. She does it finally; cicadas rattle and hum in the secret places. Crowds in, this tempting empty loneliness. She's gone for a time she can't recall, as if

the dreamtime. Stumbles back in panic, lost then found. Won is lying by the wheel. She stares ahead as if her girl had never gone away. Now Matty puts her face into the sun and looks at nothing. She lies down in the road. No vehicle comes. She sinks into a dream. The heat and dust are cradling her, and ants negotiate her disparate parts. She peers into the bowl of sky and finds some clouds to mesmerise her by. Let the war be over, give me peace. For corpse-like Matty lies like Tolstoy's hero, lost at Borodino. The clouds resolve themselves according to her mind, their shapes assembling life that's gone and done. Her future reconciled, her past a story, romance lost, no battle glory. All times are gone. Forget and leave this earthly. Let it be. Let me be.

... Matty discovers she's been dead asleep. She finds her body in the road. She rises, looks. The shadows of the trees have lengthened, the car sits heavy in yellow sun. There's grit in her nostrils, sand in her hair. And Won is not there. Matty hurries to the left, then right. But Won is in the forest by a white tree. She's studying a gum nut in her fingers. Look, she breathes, as Matty comes up. Here is the universe, and this is me. They stare together. The insects make their rustle all about. Won takes her hand. Together they listen. The weight of the vast continent holds them in its timeless afternoon. Now descends the embrace of eternity. Here is the still end of it all. This is all there ever was - is - or ever will be.

Back in the car, and Won is quiet. Matty is mystified at the girl's untouchability. And do you have the proper drugs? she asks. Of course I do, is the hasty reply. But it is hard for you? Of course it is, but what am I to complain? And how could Matty any longer know what is fact and what is fiction? In the idle heat of afternoon they pass a stone wall that opens to a country graveyard. Stop! says the Korean. She steps out, and Maddy follows. They stare at stones dotted in the spring grasses.

- I am a daughter of the old east and my people were of Pyongyang. Not servants. For generations we lived in consummate ease, yet we practised discipline. My father taught me stillness, and taught me self-defence. To enter silos of the lower worlds, the sties of ignorance, the low rooms of the living dead, I came to this country of the West and I worshipped the feet of the gods of disgrace... Often I try to come to a graveyard. To feel impermanence, the emptiness. I do not care what I do but maybe, how do you say - my abusers, will start to care. They are weak humans, not so bad. I love them, I pity them. Maybe I will help them. Sometimes they need the violence done to them so they will wake to themselves. Sometimes they need to dominate, to be strong in their primitive way. Or else they need to cry and I am there to catch their tears. My father taught me, I will not forget. He was not all a good man but he loved me. He was strong, so strong, and they put him away for all those years. And he died. I do not forget. And he said to me: use the victim in you to make you strong. The more you know the victim, stronger you can be. And I will, always, for death is nothing.

Matty is stirred. It's kind of a holy speech.

- What is 'strong'?
 - It is purity
 - Is all that sex and abuse gonna make you pure?
 - Only I can do this. I am loyal to father's spirit
 - And what does 'loyalty' do for you?
 - Makes me free
 - Did you really know your dad though? I mean, was he around - apart from teaching you martial art stuff?
 - You question me, Matty Bang
 - I want you to live. Live with me. We don't need anybody
 - We are directed by ghosts. We do not escape
 - I will
 - I deceived this Tommy. Said I had disease, disease he could catch. He was so angry and crazy!
- Maybe this will shake him, make him see his arrogance. I entertain many like him, boy and girl. Yet I must pity this fool. He uses. But he will not use me
- Yeah, no-one's gonna use me
 - You are female. Still lazy, passive
 - Passive?
 - You are not serious.
- Matty looks at the immutable girl. Is she superwoman - or is there a thing here that has to give?
- I never asked how old you are
 - One thousand years. Does it matter? But I am twenty-two
 - You want me to be serious?
 - Matty, you must
 - My life's a serious fucking contradiction! I'm lazy and passive and cynical 'cause I don't believe in a thing but I wanna be strong. Too strong. Gotta be independent right? No victim! My parents reckon I'm totally focused on myself. Well I'm not somebody else am I? Don't need anybody, right? ('cept you, that is) But I put on identities all the time. How many masks can a chick put on! Contradiction! Most people are morons anyway. Why should I care about all the tossers trying to make the scene? Then you feel like FOMO FOMO if you don't grab the experience. Anyway, better than sitting home with my finger up my fanny... For fuck's sake let's go.

They drive on through the yellow afternoon. At length there's a settlement. By the road a pub, a store, a house or two, some cars and motor bikes. They stop. Matty turns to Won, a question on her face. Won says: - I'm better now. Don't worry Matty Bang. All in its time and place.

Won changes into jeans and jacket, boots. Matty does the same. Both apply make-up. They look at each other, the old female collusion. Couple of dykes? They step up to the door of the pub. Inside there are fans revolving in the roof and a heavy bar straddles the room around which are seated men and youths with their girls. All turn to look at the Asian and the Goth, whose studied get-up shouts their aloofness and guilt. No-one says hello except the girl behind the bar. Matty orders beers, they take their bottles, sit to the side. An older man in a hat regards them from a booth. That weirdly futile air of country pubs pervades the room - as if life happens elsewhere, as if in the collective grief of a pantomime collusive strangers share their resentment in public places, let it fester to vent itself on the new and different, the very thing they crave.

Like in a slow-motion play, two dudes step up and say g'day. C'n we get you a drink? I'm Watto, this is Binge. Not our real names. We ain't from here, fuck no. Came through from Charlton, got the bikes outside. Wanna spin? We'll have a party at the pub tonight. You stayin' round here? Dunno, says Matty. Know a place? Maybe, says Binge. These tools round here don't know much I reckon. Need some stirrin'. You chicks from the city? C'n tell straight away... The allure of craggy boys in leather, stubbly beard, a ring or two, on motor bikes, should work the trick. Crotch of leather and ironic lip puts 'em a cut above the local boys, of whom there are plenty skulking about. Matty smells the sexual danger but Won invites these males as fodder for her abnegation-quest. Easy Riders not born yesterday, they understand the mating ritual (got their dignity after all) 'cause boys need signposts on a road and drinks with chicks had better go somewhere. Matty is all for the lesbian routine - string 'em out, make a sting and put these Aussie penises in their place. Won wants meat and gravy but. Fanatically tragic, she's wilfully blind. Any moral compass she has these days is not of the human plane. And Matty has felt too much and too deep of late, and needs to drop to a baser plane. So the drinking begins. At first she'll fool herself she's in control, that her city wiles will serve her, veteran of a dozen weird eclectic roles. But here in the bush a baser instinct lurks, and booze feeds it like a croc in its lair. Out-of-depth is what we want! and why should I fear it, being a girl? But Won is older, ruthless; for her there is no 'out of depth'. Here is her abominable perfection, the fruit of her works in the underworld of revenge. A nature weirdly absolute: deep hate and joy and grief trained to feed on each other, deep nothingness too. Not suitable for any girl you'll say. Well, you will witness where it leads.

Our outsider party makes an island in the room, and the local goons and girls wanna join up. Here's the class act! The boyz in baseball caps need to impress but their bloky jokes are in-bred, their courtesy a mess. Drink gets the upper hand, universal means of social ingress! The molls who hung off chosen guys affect an indie mien as if to collude with these city feminists, so the lads just rate 'em Hard To Get. And Won! oriental artiste of desire, she should be demure and cute - not so! She prattles to the populace, exudes rice-paper light for all, never offends their girlboy loyalty webs but

lightly super-siren sexy is wild-awake and super-free! Matty lets the punters think she's slave-girl to the Asian Exotic. Her punishment is to fret inside, to dread as her own the fall of goddess Won. Now look at the competitive want that grabs our gang of thirsty new chums, excludes hangers-on, binds and entwines as the drink reaches deep. Two chicks suddenly risk unseemly attitudes of jive, the bar-girl cranks the music up and piece by piece the thing gets wild. Local elders slip to the other bar, and the field is clear for bacchanalian rites. No social strictures, adulty reference, social nuance, class, religion, cops, creed or stamp can tame a local mob in season: wild colonial boys and tarts, easy riders, city chicks in denim - all blossom into glazed revelry, wild breathless secrets told, hard skins shed, hides revealed, hot feelings offered and returned. Heated bodies touch, women go pussy-loose and brazen boys with leering breath and yellow eyes, bottles clutched and rolling, suck the nectar from each other's lies. A clamour of voices incoherent swells above the throng, shout to rough gods in hoarse inhuman song. The bar is tossing drinks about like sweets, and cash is hurled like confetti. Listless lives in farms and fields and fetid factories squander and nullify in a night to remember!

Matty sees things have travelled far when she's under a table with someone pouring liquid in her mouth and some other trying to yank her jeans off. She staggers up, sloughs off cries of protest from her five-minute paramours, stumbles past heaving couples on the floor and out the door, where the clamorous night hugs at her like a sponge. This is like the epitome of grunge, she foggily reflects. But wait, her eyes adjust, and she sees a leathered figure by a wall. He's panting 'gainst it, underneath a girl is tending to his call. It's Won of course. Stomach reeling, she wants to pull her friend away. An irony you'd think since Matty might do as much on any other day. But Won is fragile, not of this earth, diseased, and needs a friend's protection. – *Jesus, what!* Binge the Biker tells her get the hell away but Matty persists, grabs his leather wrist. She's surely pissed! And now he curses, pushes her off. Grips the face of Won, pulls her like a ragdoll to his bike, fishes for keys, starts her up while Won climbs on, a spider on his back. His middle finger's all Matty sees as the couple roars out into the night. She stands awhile in the dark yard, stares at the spewed-out tyre marks, wonders if Won will come back. An elder man in a hat steps out from the other bar. He asks politely, is she all right? She tells him yes. *Are you staying here?* She says she has no place to go. He hesitates, says good night, turns back. *If you need, my house is down there, couple of miles. My name is Edward Joy.* No thank you, she says. No more joy tonight.

Matty wanders up the dark road. Soft warmth and soundless stars bring her back to her skin. Each step I take is a moment of the future eaten, gone... like telegraph poles on a desert road. And there's nothing I can ever do. It's good, because there is no right or wrong. No-one really knows what they are, where they're going. No-one can tell me. I'm on my own. This is the dark life... and I like it. Be kind to yourself. You ARE. Have no debt. Take no revenge, not on anyone. While she's gone the bike returns. And this time Watto parks the Asian on the back of his monster and heads out up the road. So

Matty's confused when Binge informs her Won is not about. She waits uncertain in the dark. At last, a rumbling turns to a roar, and the biker and his floozy turn up. Won steps off. She looks disheveled, tired, distracted, pained.

Matty Bang steps forward with car keys in her closed fist and as Watto pulls his helmet off she punches his face BANG as hard as can be - just like in the movies. Fuck! Sudden revenge! The bike keels over, traps his leg. Won screams at her, tries to pull the bike off. Exhaust burns into his calf. Impolite! Matty grabs her, bundles her toward the car but Binge bursts through the pub door like a mad bull and Watto has staggered to his feet. There's blood to be spilt. Binge seizes her throat and shoves her over the bonnet. *Fucken bitch I'll sort you out.* But Won has stamped him in the leg! which makes him buckle quick. Now Watto yanks his sometime lover by the neck; she chokes and falls! and now he comes at Matty with murder on his mind. She's spreadeagled on the bonnet again, her keys fall away, he has fistfuls of her hair. But she shovels her fingers in his eyes and he grunt-squeaks like a startled pig. And Won grabs at the keys, dives in the car, starts it up, clumps it forward though Matty is pinned to the screen. Won brakes and off she slides. *Get in!* she screams. Matty claws at the door, they lurch ahead and Watto is knocked clean aside. Crazy Won fishtails down the road, ramming the motor reckless fast. Matty tells her slow down, slow down... And at last she does.

The car lights illuminate a figure on the road. He slides by, possum-ghostly. Matty tells her: *Stop!* Won lurches to a halt, the heavy engine guns. Matty steps down the road. The figure comes. It's Ed. What happened? *Can we come to your house?* Oh! Sure you can. Lead on, he says.

Won's strength is gone, her nerves sapped to powder. The eyes in her rice-paper face no longer comprehend. Ed offers her shower and bed. She drops to listless sleep. *They'll come for us, I know they will,* says Matty. He tells her no, they're out-of-towners, won't know this place. *My friend is sick and she doesn't care. I think she wanted to infect those men. It makes me sick to think of it. I have to guard her now. I have to save her soul.* She starts to sweat, then gasp. The night has torn her nerves. She throws up on his floor, retches again and again. The collected tension of the days has cornered her. He wraps her in a blanket like a refugee. She curls exhausted on his couch. He watches her awhile, cleans up then kills the lights.

... Matty's dreams rush madly at her eyes. Armies of men are raining blows at her, she's constantly about to die. She struggles to breathe and somehow crawls away. But her body is agonisingly heavy. There's no escape, they come from all quarters, again again. For hours the dreaded violent spectres come - at every turn, whichever way - and she must fight and scratch and beat and massacre, warrior-girl of a hundred sordid skirmishes. At last she begins to clear a space - forever watchful, ever alert, with deadly weapons she never had at the start... And she jerks awake, sweat pouring in her eyes and chest. *Oh god, where's this? Oh. The real abominable world...*

The problem with the young, Edward Joy likes to observe (he has time to observe) is the extremes of passion, the absolutes they live by. Or if they have no passion they live by listless dropping away, and drugs and dirty dreams ambush their tender minds. Everyone has their crutch I suppose - some little myth, be it love gone by, hope turned to fantasy, God put on a pedestal and cultivated fetish-like. Or a simple wish to return... and that would be me. To return to days when you thought things were different, to a Narnia of the spirit where we claimed to be free, and full of hope. And what of you, Edward Joy, hidden in your rural retreat without a link to past (because severed by you), without a way to say goodbye to undigested things? Your choice to be a hermit wasn't thrust on you; you ran. You thought 'here and now' should be anywhere, but you made it exclusive, saying it must be *here*. And that it must be faced alone. Who has the guts, the stamina, to face alone? You know the ache, know the contradiction. You said a ruminative peace would serve you well, but has it? Hell no. And where is my darling wife, where is she now? Does anything ever resolve? Ed, in your house today are kids - from the other world where you used to want to live. You made a dirty pact with thoughts you couldn't resolve, with that ever-restless mentality like the sea. You tolerated it with sophistic balances but you were never a monk. How easily the old ache returns! Two fugitives from a soap opera land at your door - and you invited them! You're seventeen again. As Faulkner said, the past is never gone, it isn't even past. And you embarrass yourself... Well, *I don't care*.

The girl named Matty has finally come round. She talked in her sleep. I would that she'd talk to me. Yes, she seems to want to.

- Then I punched this guy in the face. Why'd I do it? I'm better than that
- What are you hiding if you punch a boy?
- Wanted to *kill* him. Kill for Won's stupidity! But all he wanted was a root and a good time
- If you don't mind me saying, you blame him for your insecurity
- Go on
- You want to be strong. Want to be impenetrable. But it's no excuse for insecurity
- I guess not
- And why? Because we're afraid to love
- But I love! No I don't, I'm a selfish arse
- Don't be hard. We all fear to admit we're nothing special. Let's face it, men want what they want, like all of us. And if they can't get it they fear and they lash out. The drink is testament to that
- Yeah, we were tanked. But maybe I hate Won. Maybe I think she's a fucking fool. No, I love her. She's me
- Does she love anyone?
- Nope. Or yeah, just a sad vision of her dad. He died in a camp or something. He's her god
- You say she has AIDS?

- She says she has. Could be a sympathy trip. Never know with her. She's so unbelievably fucking unreadable. I know, 'cos *I* wanted to be unreadable. Loved the risk, the power
- She's taking a risk with those guys then
- Blow jobs only, she reckons. Shitting men. Do we want 'em or don't we? Do I hate 'em or don't I?
- Both, I'd say. Life's always both isn't it? Never black or white
- Is it true?
- I know it is
- I'm glad then. Too big to handle. I knew there was something too big to ever handle. Love that desert. Love to disappear. Get lost for good
- Yes. And then you can come back - and do the things you have to do. You know we're always failing, failing and dying. But it doesn't matter
- So we don't have to be any fecking thing at all. Cool
- We're cradled somehow
- I feel cradled now
- There's nothing to do, nothing to be. Except be here
- And here we are
- Wish I could do it though
- You've done it
- I haven't, Matty. But you might. We're always at the start. All these years, nothing ever passed, nothing ever changes. Young ones like you put me back at the start
- Me. Woah
- You're a bit of a sage and you don't know it. Good luck to you, Matty Bang
- I actually feel sorry for those goons on bikes
- Guess they wanna break out. Life 'll teach them what they need
- How will I save Won?
- Looks like her grief is deep. I hope she survives. I do.

In the late morning, Won appears at the front door. Matty and Ed are seated at the table drinking coffee. She's been to the car, changed to a white dress, made up her face. Her black hair cradles her skin in a soft moon form. The eyes seem calm again. But her make-up is a mask; she is a night-survivor in the morning.

- I'm going for a little drive. Thank you, Matty darling. Everything is all right. Thank you Mr Joy.

She walks out to the car and steps inside, starts up. The other two follow. At that moment a rumble is heard on the track leading to the house. Two heavy bikes curve into view. Won glances in the mirror - then jerks out and off down the track. The boys have seen the car, they're giving chase. Their bikes roar past the gate, and Matty shouts into the air. Edward bolts for the house. The girl is running down

the road. Ed charges out with a rifle in his hand, throws it in a truck parked by the house, starts up and lurches backward to the road. Matty turns, her face is distorted. She claws the door, he barely stops as she clambers in. This is grim, both know where this could end. They clatter onto the main road, still dirt. Four hundred yards ahead a demonic dust shroud curls backwards from a scene of chase. They reach a ridge, dip down into a gully filled with heavy trees. It's hard to see but livid tracks are slashing the road in front. And then - Ed pulls his truck to a shuddering halt. His eyes have seen. He stares. The girl cannot see. *What? What?* She falls out of the cab, runs into the glen. Two bikes like angry flies are jerking on the road. They turn and roar at her, she falls aside, they grind up the ridge and disappear. Dust chokes her eyes and mouth. Now Ed is running down to her. He reaches out but now she sees: a smoking thing at the end of a gash in the road. The car is lying askew beneath a great white tree, its backside in the air. She skelters forward, stops. Shall I look? Ed takes her arm, wants to pull her back. But Matty Bang must etch the future onto the slate of her memory. That is the way of the young.

In the sardined car the unrecognisable form of a girl in white. Glass and metal and blood are everywhere.

Her lovely girl has fled to the other country.

Her darling father greets her there.

A DUEL

‘...Such a man wants to be loved. In the absence of love he wants to be admired. In the absence of admiration he wants to be feared. In the absence of fear he wants to be hated’.

It is 1830. We enter a scene in a Russian forest. It seems there is to be a duel. One Alexander Nikolaevich Drilov sadly requires satisfaction of his erstwhile friend now rival, Iosif Vissarionovich S_____.

It is a still winter’s morning. We see about us thin white birch trees. Their trunks, mottled by dark cuts, thrust from drifts of glistening snow. At the edge of a clearing stand two men in long coats and *Ushanka* hats. One of them holds a small case. They confer in hushed tones, and a looker-on might imagine them to be bosom friends. Yet we see that their business is grave: they are seconds to this morning’s duel. Perhaps they understand only too well the falling out of friends... and harbour the colleguey feeling that it is not they who shall die today. They await their chiefs, breaths wisping in the cold. First to arrive is a stoutish young man of medium height, ruddy-faced, balding a little at the crown, which is bare since he holds his hat in his hand. This is evidently the ‘thrower of the gauntlet’, Alexander Nikolaevich Drilov. He looks about, then contrives (suddenly, jovially) to greet the two men, but is distracted as one desperate to be at peace and far far from it. He paces, his steps commit little dents in the white. Across the fellow’s face flutter guttering elderliness and boyish hope, distractive torturers both. The coincident trees stand and mutter. A sun-shaft flickers, and Alexander throws up his face to receive it... A golden hand come to rescue him from awfulness? It soon dims. Minutes slip by. At a point, an assistant affects to step across, touch the protagonist’s arm. It appears the rules are flouted; the duel cannot proceed. They begin to tramp away. Alexander Nikolaevich stares at their backs, at last resolves to follow... Suddenly at the clearing’s edge is another figure. He wears the required heavy coat and fur hat, and the face bears a heavy moustache. He seems powerfully built, and his white-dusted shoulders loom about him like a bear’s. His gaze seems to magnetize the men: they turn their heads at once. This is surely Iosif Vissarionovich S_____.

Alexander is consternated, he is sweating. Slighted honour suits him not at all! Satisfaction this morning would surely be the shaking of hands or a hug followed by repairing home for a jolly breakfast. This is the nadir of his imagining, innocent soul! He hankers for a signal that will wipe away the affair. Iosif Vissarionovich offers nothing... Soft snow begins to fall. Our scene wants to fade to fairy tale...

But wait, peer closer. It is a measure of Alexander’s soul that he’d push aside his heart’s resentment with such firmness as to be amazed when malice asserts itself, that he is forgiving to the extent that he

avoids to see that his friend is not. We will surmise that he befriended Iosif (long ago) because he knew Iosif's real qualities, then contrived to forget them along with the reason for befriending him, which is that Iosif had no other friend in the world. Whose fault this is, Alexander also neglects to think on. Iosif for his part is not one to forget such a slight from the one person who contrived to have him as friend... and by such a statement we may see that Iosif is not a conventional man. Yet it is Alexander who demands satisfaction today! Something close to the heart has upset him, a matter of love from which there is no retreat. That is, when a loving man is cornered he sees no other way out. Yet we said it is not conceivable to Alexander that Iosif would hate his only friend or seek to use friendship to prevail against him. Sir, on the contrary: a man with but one friend in the world will surely abuse that friendship! Herein is the darkness in the soul of Iosif Vissarionovich. Do we have the resource to unpick it? By official account, Iosif contrived to steal the other's lover. She is called Ariadne, a curious name, who for her part is the daughter of a Count and a difficult woman to catch, though not for that reason. And not to say there is evil in her, but she is proud and suffers no fools, and there is in her a streak of aloofness that makes men dream. Could Iosif ever steal her... she who may not be stealable at all? Alexander never actually knows if Ariadne loves him, and Iosif definitely knows she does not. And in confessing to Iosif that she 'does not love him either', the Count's daughter made it plain she would likely never bend to anyone. In fact, she is free of all men. Iosif therefore, in coming to the duel has grim information the honourable other has not. Why would Iosif tempt fate by seeking the grace of an untouchable woman? To confirm the solitude of his soul, in the surly victimhood he has nurtured all his life? Here is a man who seeks darkness and yet seeks enemies to pay for that darkness. What better enemy than a man who would be his friend, and what better means than to snuff out that friend's impulse for love... Or might this woman be a rival to Iosif's control of Alexander - for does Iosif not want Alexander all to himself? We do not say he is incapable of love. Is not every man capable? If that is so, then one might contrive not to be - for the sake of contrariness, for uniqueness. Oh, there is power in victimhood, yes, power in sado-masochism at its zenith... To people who've abandoned honour one can offer nothing, and Alexander doesn't see, because honourable men think all others live by at least some form of it. Alexander then, is fighting for the wrong thing: for a woman's honour instead of his own. By rights he should annihilate his opponent, but will fail as long as he abides by rules ignored by the other. Clearly, he should not fight at all. Iosif meanwhile pursues nihilism as morality. How? To be loyal to nothing clears the slate, creates as if a scorched earth wherein the germ of loyalty might sprout. And that perhaps, is why Iosif Vissarionovich is standing here this morning, in the clearing, ready to kill or to die.

...Iosif makes a beckoning gesture. The assistants hasten forward, but with dignified precautionary nods as if to affirm they are in charge. Today's killing ritual shall be humane, performed according to civilizing rules. The case is opened with a ceremonial click. Two pistols lie snugly end to end as if licking each other's toes on a bed of soft velvet. Alexander with quavering fingers selects the nearest,

being politely brought up. It lies in his hand like a slippery fish. Iosif gruffly takes the other as if to say 'This is not my doing!' All comprehend his gesture to signify the absurdity of death, absurdity of the world. If Iosif is nervous there is no sign of it. The attendants whisper instructions to their proteges. A coin is produced, and tossed to the snow. Alexander calls, heads it is. The combatants shake hands. The surrounding trees nudge each other. The air drips thick with intrigue. Let us rise into that air a little, as if a bird alighting on a high branch. The antagonists stand, back to back, reeds in a field of snow. Solemnity, choreography. Ten steps. They turn. The assistants fall back. Begin! one calls. The two friends stand facing each other. How did it come to this? How does anything come to this? Alexander raises his arm; his pistol seems flaccid, poetic. He hesitates... nudges his arm a little to the left... and fires. There is a red and ugly report. Smoke puffles upward into the trees. One's birdy colleagues have taken to the air in fright. Stillness, smoke drifts. Iosif stands unmoved. Alexander lowers his arm. He has made his last gentlemanly gesture; he shall not kill today. The attendants frown at each other, parsimonious extras in an amateur's play. Pause. Iosif now raises his arm, his gun the metallic extension of it. Alexander gazes out at him. There is a strange transference of force across the space. Death solemnly announces itself. Iosif curls a finger. Blast and smoke. Alexander falls bludgeoned, backward into white. The air thrills and shudders. The assistants now pad forward, peer over the body. One gestures to Iosif. He'll not come. At last he advances. Let us flutter close above the idiocy-scene. Alexander is pillowed in the snow, gasping for breath. His face is red, puffed like a balloon. He seems to be searching for something... for something to be said. Iosif will not kneel to him. Alexander wants him. Now life's purport begins to shrivel before his eyes. The eyes dilate. He dwindles in the snowdrift. A better world awaits! The lids glaze... and he is gone. The attendants stiffen. Only now does Iosif kneel. So - a good man lost! He touches the innocent face. In some wolf-like way he pays respect. *Respect*. Now he stands, and hastens away, a wolf in tundra, shambling in trees, who enclose him in their silvery limbs. Soon one attendant leaves. The other guards the scene. He'll wait until a cart comes to take the corpse away.

Little rouge gushes glisten in the white. They soon begin to soften and fade. A snowfall is predicted for the afternoon.

INCONSEQUENCE

A clerk known as A.N. Drilov is exposed to the sewer-like core of a prison called Lubyanka. His experience is documented.

The Lovers ...Sub-commandant Blokhin has exited for a piss break and Drilov's companion guard has slid out for a numbing cigarette. Drilov is alone in the chamber with two prisoners. The documents claim they are from Minsk. Drilov sees. The boy and girl are focused solely on each other. Despite their hands being shackled they nudge close, and his eyes are shining, and she bows with concentration as he whispers. Her eyes wander but he pulls them back with his words... and her knees buckle a little yet her hero stiffens them. These two obviously dreamed freedom somewhere in their bedroom solitude, before the cold justice of the state bludgeoned in on them. To dream and to love, are these not the deepest of crimes? Is love not the most insidious anarchy? The state has a right to be angry! Nothing to be done with them, their bodies clutter up the state. But these kids never participated in any state. It certainly is irrelevant now. They tread on clouds, private ones; feelings pulse between them in the most shocking way. Drilov turns away out of respect (he dare not call it reverence) and meanwhile their words, whispered as a compact where each is a diamond and none matter at all (they never matter because people never change), are beyond anyone's power to manage or poke at. The couple take their tiny moment, and the intimacy of it ushers them out of reach. Now for we killers the murder is reduced to an impersonal thing to be got over, an onerous duty. And Drilov will not record their whispers or describe the young man's eyes nor her glistening ones, nor her quivering faith in him nor his tender smile, nor she standing to him and bracing herself up, nor his protective touching of his lips to her hair, nor she nudging at his cheek like ponies do in a summer field. But Drilov recalls it all in his mind, as surely as sunshine, somewhere, in a summer field.

Blokhin re-enters, re-asserts his presence like a dirty fart in the room, slips on his favoured leather gloves, adjusts his butcher's coat, sizes up the pair, glares at Drilov, barks at the young guard - who hands him his weapon. But the boy and girl need no prompting. They'll not do this ogre the honour of resisting, thinks Drilov. And wonder of wonders, the lovers succeed. Their final moment is but a dance, a bouquet, a doorway... Ladies first, says Blokhin. He shoves the muzzle under the girl's nape and fires. Her brains fountain against the wall. She drops where she stands like cut corn. Fuck. All about angle, Blokhin mutters. Sorry fellers, more work for ya. Now he pushes the muzzle under the young man's neck, this time letting it turn slightly. Drilov notes the professional adjustment. At the shot the boy spins and crashes ignominiously to the floor. Fuck again. Blood or weight, can't have both, says Blokhin. Apologies, gentlemen. Now do yer business. Shove the pieces through the hatch,

hose the room, report to me. Blokhin removes his gloves with a light flourish, stows his pistol in his belt, exits with the ghost of a smile.

Drilov has been made to feel like a novice.

Following description of an execution one has no desire to describe another. Yet our thoughts invariably drift to the lonely victims... where they hailed from, their private world, their ghastly presence as exemplar to us all. There was a blonde-haired girl who was ushered in with hands shackled, and Drilov and his fellow novice guard looked to each other. Oh, they're really giving us the cream. She seemed as if she had been startled while on the toilet or something, been brought straight here in the middle of the night. Probably she had. She was clearly experiencing a profound crisis of confusion, yet Drilov realised he was quick to feel a certain impatient annoyance. Did she not know how the routine worked here? Why cling to delusions, why rock the boat? And yet, because she's pretty... *oh, I'm glad it isn't me who has to shoot you...* and Drilov's mind starts to grind... *The System*. Our conformity to it is the biggest mystery of all. Why do we humans take this farce called life so seriously? Why are we so invested in such orderliness and properness that we go like lambs to the slaughter... even perform the slaughter like lambs? Why do we believe in system? Because it expresses the orderly balance of Being? We cannot imagine not being: our fright is at possible injury to our immortality! But immortality can't be injured - so death is impossibility, anachronism, parody, grotesque, dirty trick, fake thought, filthy game, embarrassment, embarrassment... at the upsetting of life, at wrongness, at the foolery of the perpetrator, at a wriggly body who feels fright, at bowels that loosen, nerves that frightfully fray... We know we can't ever be anything but what we are: living, living, living. We are shocked not at the thought of death but at the affront to our being - because death is inconceivable.

Our heart goes out to the blonde girl in her lonely fright. Blokhin the professional, seeing that she is a little beauty, allows his face to assume the veneer of quasi-incorruptible regret. He less than curtly asks her to face the wall. Appearances appear to matter. She looks balefully at him, her round eyes not registering facts. But then she sees his long leather gloves and his bulgy coat like that of some high-street charcutier, sees the solemn-heavy assistants standing a few feet off... and her eyes begin to brim with tears of unfolding dread, and Drilov sees the boat of her soul toss like a matchstick in a wondering sea, foundering and gurgling under crushing stormclouds. This, in an instant... and what is time but an inkblot on eternity... and then she starts to babble, to talk, as if to explain herself, to *explain*. How to evoke your existence, your presence, your fathomless wholeness... in a moment, in a moment of crisis-truth, to a stranger, a stranger in a room where you've never been... in the sense of your story, your body, your loved and lovely hair... need for toilet, dry mouth, drunken wakeness at three in the morning, need to tell mother and brother and boyfriend and sister and daddy... and your job and your life and your bed and your dolly and your perfume and your pleasure and your future

and your - ...Blokhin asks her once more. The weapon was deftly hidden; now he pulls it out. She turns to the wall, snuffles a little. He steps up, keen to turn her into a statistic. Pause. A dot point in eternity. He guns her down in the usual manner. She drops like a cut mist, lies curlicued on the slab floor. Drilov watches the blonde hair turn to red rivulets. He imagines she would have been a soft and lonely lover. He thinks he will never get to write her story.

Drilov needs to check his watch. He does it frequently. 3.13 am. Death of 3.13, February 26, 1939. They do the business. Drilov suddenly vomits, out of nowhere. They have to clean that up as well. Drilov is certain there'll be revenge. Somewhere in the flung future, in this cesspit of eternity, there'll be revenge... revenge... on what though? We are life, we are undeniable, can't seek it on ourselves... but we will, we will! - because retribution is all we have.

Back in his apartment, Drilov gazes at the dirty night-yellow window. And falls to witnessing a vaudeville show... where endless acts and actors busily enter and leave the stage... where the auditorium is dim and featureless and the show descends to farce, to slapstick, to a lugubrious Punch and Judy where great mustachioed Punch wields his mighty club yet little Judy seems to bob up again and again, and the clubbing gets harder and fiercer, and Judy somehow turns more defiant! and a great bell starts to ring and there is a clamour of voices... and the theatre doors suddenly flood open and great rivers of slime slither down the aisles, and there is a general gasp of disgust followed by pandemonium. There is no escape now, the doors clang shut, the bodies pile up. On the stage Great Punch goes on thumping and Judy screams and bobs up for more... Drilov awakes in a fog of sweat. His heart is thudding in his chest, his temples are throbbing. He fumbles for the lamp.

Thinning of the Soul Our lowly clerk feels his earthly foundation to be crumbling, and he descends to another dream... On a moonlit winter's night a man is rushing through countryside at the reins of a Troika. The driver urges three stamping horses on yet jerks his head back and back, obsessed by bulky shapes under the seat. He foot-shoves them to an edge and one by one they roll off like oil drums into the sea. Lumps on a mirror of ice, we understand they are human beings. Our driver is alone, and the ice-road turns to deeper shades of apish blue-white as if its blood, its texture were thinning, like old men's teeth. The beasts' hooves clip and clatter on it like sticks, and it is clear the only way on is for the carriage to lighten, lighten. The driver tears at his balaclava, kicks off his boots, heaves his greatcoat from his back. It sloughs off in the whiteness, a ghost tramp by a roadside. The chill is deeper, the wind harder, the horses seem to surge crazily, their heads flaying in three directions as their knees rise and clutch at stiff air. Moonbeams bristle on snow mounds as the thud of hooves and slithering of the sled turn hollower, brittle. The rider sees a shape under his troika as if rising to meet him. He realises it is his shadow, his size but far lighter. It seems to frolic and mock, and man and shadow slide on down a moonlit river, for a river it is, an impossibly thin ice sheen. The orb slithers between clouds as the rider hogs his way in darkness and rumps of white beasts clumber

in front. He knows his end is near. Suddenly there's a clank and a crash and he finds himself spreadeagled in snow. For a moment he feels a delicious warmth then his mind is no more. He wakes... Nearby is a house. Mean and low it seems to be. He shuffles toward it, presses at a gnarly door. A long room opens to his eyes. Seated at a rough table are three men in peasant winter garb, all with moustaches and penetrating baleful eyes. Heavy beams distend over their heads toward a glowing fire at the back. Come in, Drilov, says the man at the centre. We have been waiting. Let me introduce myself. I am The Judge. This man is The Jury and this man The Executioner. You see we are three in one. And where are your horses? Did you fail to *negotiate the thin ice*? The man Drilov is moved to explain but his throat is dry. He is guilty! Do you not see, says the Judge, how your soul must turn more and more transparent? For you are Russian. In the Long Freeze we learn what we must be, and in the Thaw we are confused and have no discipline. For this reason our Troika* demands the Great Freeze ever remain. This is why you are here. We ensure it, we ensure it.

[* Troika = panels of judges appointed by the NKVD, Secret Police]

Next morning from his bed, Drilov witnesses furrows of grey slush in the morning streets. They crush him back under musty covers.

On the last day of February 1939 in the nameless afternoon, in a room in the Lubyanka basement, a woman is entertaining a posse of men. Drilov hears his name called from the corridor. He hesitates but goes, and at the door he is shouted in and clapped on the back by burly sergeant Dionylov. All the men have been plied with alcohol, and all are drunk. A beaker is thrust in Drilov's hand, and its liquid is horridly bitter. The artist Marsha Popova, a prisoner Drilov has interviewed, is poised in the midst. She rides her chair like a drunk cowboy, her orange skirt, black bodice and soaked hair are a twisted parody as she hollers in guttural laughter with the best of them. Drilov sees: the white-armed woman is using all her wiles to stay alive, and everyone knows it and wills her on! Presently Drilov is invited to partake in the degradation ritual. It is clear that rape has been done by the others. There's an inner door. Dionylov thrusts him through it. It slams. He is alone with Marsha Popova. He whispers a thing that sounds like apology. None of that! she says, though you're better looking than the rest. But won't they come and watch? There is animal roaring in the other room. She regards him pityingly. Drilov begins to feel... that she is the soul of tenacity. Maybe those men saw it too, and maybe they are flattered and amazed that she is the wife of the *chef de cabinet* of Comrade Stalin himself. Indeed she is. But now she pushes him to the floor. He lies still. Its surface is gluey-wet, stinking. She deftly exposes his middle parts to the clammy air, and she has straddled his face, and now she has his genitals in her mouth. She has no underwear. It is unclean. He gags. She is practised and lifts a little, just out of reach. He feels a cloudy hiatus, then the urgent stab of wanting. Two alien bodies fall to collaborating on deft important work. Suddenly, shockingly he comes in her mouth. And with all care she licks him clean. Drilov is amazed. She turns, kisses him once... A pause for remembrance, and

she stands. He cannot see her eyes. She raps on the door. It crashes open and Sarge Dionylov is there. He pours his drink over Drilov's feet. The clerk is invited to laugh. She, Marsha, immediately has her lips on the big man's neck.

It's clear the thing is to participate, to collude! To uphold one's colleagues, uphold the Machine, whatever it takes. Popova knows - and her self-regard, even as she toilets it away, is the thread of her imperviousness, the thing that might just turn these rapists' gaze to the irony of their acts. For they are victims too, they who participate in debasement, and she must delicately point to it without turning them violent! Drilov feels he cannot help, for this is her razor's edge: the delicate masochism where her sadistic perpetrators might see their own plight and surrender themselves in it, might choke on the shocking pain-and-hope dance of it, the nothingness-and-hope fling of it, and might just witness in their inflictions on this woman the rape of their own souls by a Machine that made them what they are. And deeper... maybe here in the midst these operatives of the machine have the power to *poison it* through the faith of a dirty woman - and she has been elevated by our power to rape her to the status of goddess, all vulnerable-real and feeling-soft and contradictory and crying out, crying even for you and me in the bloody heart of a system that allows nothing but the bruteness of its own bruteness. ...Drilov does not know how many beakers of slush he has imbibed by now... for time seems to die off in this workday underworld beyond the daylight. It is also said that this Popova is the property of the Unseen Commandant, that she is 'his conscience', that he keeps her, that it is he who offers this gift of torture and abasement! Or that he does not hog damnation for himself, that he seems to guess that we all seek a kind of *Ariadne* in this labyrinth, and that she is the conscience of we the damned; so that beyond his criminal duty, every man is a hero in his private hell beyond the power of the system to induce him. The Commandant is surely a wise one! And he must have seen, must have known this Ariadne could be relied on to fight for life, be her struggle ever so disgusting, and that this is the only correct act in a place where murder is as cheap as breath. What shall we say of a woman who fights for life itself, be it ever so low? She is surely a goddess, who embodies birth and entanglement and hope... yet every man needs to hate her because she is Woman, and everyone needs her because she is Life Itself. And yes, she is the Commandant's bitch and she is Stalin's Woman, the woman we all must abuse and slowly murder, because we know she is the one thing standing between us and our own causeless relief of annihilation. There is a party going on in the basement... the cellar where all the dung and sewage of the world collects... and we will make the party an orgiastic one, where there are no more rules but one: that our utter lack of respect is a kind of respect for something outside our control, that our raping is a thing we hallow in our wretchedness, that we commit to for the sake of wildness, for what we can't ever control, for the savagery of surrender to a *blessed unknown*. Here is the agora of the infinite, the slow dropping from the world into absolute vaults where we float without reason or rule in whiteness and blackness between the stars... we animals who know nothing but a tiny wish to wriggle our way back to mother-egg, to womb, to dark warmth, to

where there are no rules because no-one made them, no rules because nobody boot-stamped them into us... and where we can rest and nest in our cocoon of rest without responsibility or care, forever and ever.

Oh right now in the basement we are the purest drunken boys. My god! It's not crimes that matter but compassion n' care, no matter what. These're my brothers! drivels Drilov. Knowledge is the curse! To know nothing *bad*, that is innocence, that is love. Blame Eve who ate the apple in the garden, the woman who's our scapegoat all these ages, and we *are* nothing but seeds who wiggle our weak and sorry way to the great egg-planet uterus, little seeds blown on wind who by grubby and aching chance got caught in the web of the goddess Ariadne, who always waits for our dirty deeds to be done, waits for us to surrender, for we to lay down our arrogant little pin heads and be children again... God save me, but I am drunk! Someone Fucking Big is giving the orders today! This System we're all cogs of. *Someone big is letting beautiful rot trickle in.* We cogs are not responsible, and not even our leaders are, and this fact is fed by the self-murdering perfection of the Commie Machine, where corruption is its food and drink and heartbeat, and just as the sun will consume its own body in a far-off aeon so our shitty system will gobble itself away, and all the goodies, the wealth and power always get to be elsewhere nourishing some other bastards. Not for us to question why, ours is but to fuck and die. Where's order here? Is 't not rank that keeps us? We're all comrades sure, but *rank* is all we've got, and unbreakable orders can be passed down the line... as long as there's rank there's respect and life will flow! The sarge's got himself paralytic. He's foaming. This is our bloody perfect basement where the system lets out its steam... Or, or, what if there's no respect or rank or rule or morals, ever? What if there are no orders and a lunatic is charge of the asylum, and in the pit the clever snake eats all the others, and our isolation is a barren womb where the winds of the real never blow in, where our little candle of life is nary disturbed... where the rules are different, here in the *secret chamber of the heart* where there's no morals because there are no victims and perpetrators, no order-givers or takers, only *a strange democracy where we are all equally fucked*, all in the dark, all rankless servants of whatever chthonic god is ruling here. The god is Anarchy! 'cause equality is chaos, 'cause equality is Commie Death. And yet we all *win* 'cause we're all killers, all victims, all dead. We are the Nemesis of System! And our tyranny is *free* because its only rule is that everyone is fucking utterly abased. Who'll punish the fucking punishers? So there's a Party going on - till the last drunk crook's annihilated *by his own hand*. Communism - may God bless your soul and may you burn in shit-hell forever... And big Beast sergeant Dionylov has vomited on his boots, and now he's dead asleep. Marsha Popova surveys the field of corpses. Her eyes flicker like the green witch. No-one bothers her now. And Drilov passes out.

In the morning, Drilov unexpectedly woke to find himself dead.

This arresting little phrase greets us in Drilov's journal. He has no idea how he got out of Lubyanka's lower rooms and back to the faux-safety of his apartment, in bed with his boots off. The gap in his memory now corresponds to a gap in his Record. A person who knows himself to be dead is in an awkward position: he longs to cry out to the so-called living, that they might harken to his information that will unhinge the whole world. But that is not the way of things. No Unperson will ever convey the truth or feelings of the underworld journey he takes alone. No trip to the heart of darkness is communicable... The morning huddles in on Drilov. His new thought is: 'One day I will seek the benediction of a priest. Perhaps the prisoner Mishkin.' Something is over. Drilov is not sure what it is. Here in the dark of the morning.

'Yet I go back, for duty awaits me. And I perform it because I am my duty, and I wear the uniform, the neutralising uniform, and I write down the 'confessions' of souls, and this is simply and comfortingly how evil is done: that there is no choice but to do it, and it is ready to hand and intimate, with results that are clear-cut in a mondayfriday world. Yet in my other, private hours, that are languorous and imprecise and confused, there is a minute prickling of my skin that never seems to pass off, and if I care to notice, a shortening of breath as if a knot somewhere in the lungs. And the heart (again if I care to notice) seems to strangle and wither a little, begrudging its toil of being constant and firm and dutiful... for who is dutiful to this life? If anything it is the heart, and I sit in the silence in those lower rooms listening, and I always feel admiration for its continuance beyond begging or complaining, its sending of missives round the great body its empire, this beating heart that mutely performs all things, that upholds the world... upholds our Great State with the Leader at its core, he who exerts Himself for the State's continuance, for this utter utter good that we invest in and are loyal to and live and do our duty for... Meanwhile, we comrades shamle in solitary forests, in corridors of numbness. We are lone actors, and this is how we validate heartlessness, how we validate atrocity: by disconnection, by obscuration. And this world is the absurd positing of itself as real and enduring, the risible pursuit of substance in the midst of pain. It is the separation into Other, so that one may feel aloofly untouched, feel the unimpeachable separation of me and you so that I can kill you. Why must we separate the other and liquidate him? Was anyone ever able to do a single thing but in collaboration? So here is our last best collaboration: that of perpetrator and victim. And maybe it is the only intimacy some of us will ever feel. We must validate this ignorant little island self... for this is the supreme and uniform darkness. We liquidate our victims into we know not what... and they will dissolve back into the merciful Silent Great - while you, you Drilov, are left alone with yourself, an island of stupidity in the dark.'

The event in Drilov's journal that seals his fate (for no-one who has witnessed atrocity can be allowed to live, as any gangster will attest) takes place in Lubyanka's Courtyard. He is to facilitate the dispatch of truckloads and vanloads of strangers. 'No matter how 'legal' a thing is (Drilov observes)

any child may distinguish between right and wrong. But legalities not based on relativisms like right and wrong: here is the brilliant pinnacle of criminal morality.' Drilov, in being assigned to night work, that is, acts that by any shadow of decency may not be carried out in daylight, in a stroke apprehends how all his personal acts are but the gestures of a machine so oiled and deft it takes the breath away. He is suddenly mortified by his daytime scribbles and confessionals, and sees the nadir of his degradation: the extent to which he dreamed of being useful has made him a fool. Why was an intellectual interrogator-clerk *ever* called to do such filthy work? To deliver guilt by association, so that he can be charged with impunity, in his own enclosed moral universe, then punished with oiled and effortless legality...

Unknowable to the Gnomes Like salmon in a dish of sardines, the artist Marsha Popova has been inserted in this night's gaggle of unknowns to be liquidated, all spilt out of convoys of black vans that trawl the noble city of Moscow. Across the cobbled courtyard, Drilov sees her. She is shivering in the night, her sturdy frame engirdled in a big red scarf. She grips her own arms and looks at him. At last she smiles. He smiles back, and this is their little victory, his and hers: Popova is a planet, a world, a nebula, a constellation of flesh and thought and memory and feeling and attainment and journeying and love... She might also be nothing at all, since life can snuff her so cavalierly and without compunction, without the faintest alteration to its own immutable eternal body. But Popova can be nothing because she is everything, cannot dissolve because she is *indissoluble*. How else could the Lord receive her unless she were the Lord? And Drilov thinks to himself at this 'last moment', that because he saw it and because he thought it, then the thought is recorded forever and irrevocably, that the seed is planted, that it is written on the wind, written on the snows and across the sky (but of no stinking country) - that he or Popova or Mishkin the Priest or anyone is the Lord and cannot be erased, or that in the erasure is the proof of it - that we never needed to be confined in this dream of a body, in this mental dream of our own making; that we were but a musing, a drowsing breeze, a coagulation, a joke, an affirmation of sunlight, sun-tears that shone on flowers of a field, on grasses, on the branches of a wood - somewhere, anywhere, unknown to anyone yet always and forever present.

Drilov did not see the moment when Popova passed away in a flurry of shots and the dropping of bodies like ninepins under the muffling stupid thunder of the truck engines. In the greasy important shaft-light of the night she lay without name or number amid the pile. Only when the trucks were backed up for loading did he come across her, lay his hand on her. And his co-worker wouldn't allow any moment of pause before he shouted at Drilov to heave, and up she went onto the truck bed like so many pounds of lumpy potatoes in the marketplace. He'd taken her shoulders, and did not notice the runnels of blood that covered his wrists before twenty other bodies had been loaded up and driven away. And he looked down at his hands in a headlight beam, and saw the red nauseous unnatural stains, and said to himself: no-one can piss on the spirit of Popova. Hers is the blood of the earth

itself. **Put Out the Rubbish** And there's no time to think, only to do. Brutality in every instant, every act. The breath of guards and prisoners rises in the chill, caught in the beams of the trucks. Tyrannic walls, the freezing cold, industrial, industrial. A bird far up in the sky would ask, why is one set of men murdering another? Are they not one? *Put out the rubbish, the rubbish, it's rubbish night!* Drilov's offsider (who worked with him in the basement) is muttering. In truth he is getting louder. No-one else hears, hears anything above the roar of the engines. Directions come in semaphore; the group leaders wave their arms. *Do what's in front of you. Anything to get out of this damned cold.* Drilov wonders if his mate is a closet sadist, wonders if he's starting to enjoy. No. It is the absurdity of murder that gets you laughing. Is it not a killing joke that we can work our politics by liquidation, that a human being can think he's done good, done a good night's work? Insanity is accepted without feeling, without compunction, without ambiguity. It is law, it is regularity, it is *fait accompli*, so when a man starts to chatter and burble and ironise while performing his dirty deed, we can be sure he still has a skerrick of feeling in his heart, and that the skerrick can't be erased, not in a billion aeons of time or circumstance - and that his incipient madness, his mad irony, is the seed of future conscience, to be re-hatched long after he also is liquidated erased shelved unnumbered puffed and gone. *'Tis but the work of a moment, the work of a moment*, repeats Drilov's offsider, wiping the blood from his hands to his pants. A philosopher in the making! How does anyone secrete such experience in his inmost heart? There is nothing more private. Will a man strive to be a hero, who enters again the labyrinth in search of the thing he has discarded, his conscience? Oh, there will be a far time, far in the future, where he must. Any man or woman who seeks his own heart is a hero. Beyond all the atrocities we have witnessed, it is heroism to seek atonement and peace. Or will peace involve further killing... and will the peace of the ideal state of Communism require endless killing? Ugh, these thoughts are not compatible. There is but one thing holding us from the abyss, and that is conscience, conscience - in the manic mutter of Drilov's offsider. And this night it is catching. *The work of a moment...* There is a figure standing and watching in the glare of a headlamp in the insane cold. It is Mishkin the Priest, a man whose confessions he has also recorded. Drilov stops what he is doing - hoisting bodies to the truck bed - and looks. Oh, Drilov is embarrassed to be alive - yet Mishkin wants to reassure him with a look. A mere second. Mishkin is shoved aside, out of the light-beam. Drilov involuntarily steps forward. Mishkin runs at him, hugs him. Drilov can smell shit. *Yes, mine*, whispers Mishkin. *They will have to shoot quick! The Lord is watching in the form of you, Drilov. Do not waste it.* And the priest is pulled away by an officer who curses at Drilov. It is the beast-sergeant Dionylov. There is a volley of shots. Only lumps now present themselves on the shining cobbles under the wheels. Someone else's business, someone else's little granite-bit of karma! Drilov's offsider is gesturing. Clouds of breath rise in the lights. The lorries roar. Horror walls of the prison loom. The lorries grind forward in convoy. Hoses blast the asphalt clean. Inside ten minutes Drilov is back in the building.

The Heart Drilov has no choice but to speak of himself in the intimate first person. ‘...And in these lower rooms there is often a silence that closes on me like a reality-vice, thick and inexorable like space between the stars, and I can’t help but commune with my heart as it bumps and flutters in the cold, and then I see that all this life is incomprehensibly simple. Thereby a tiny comfort arises, and I know it to be comfort for at its coming I suddenly grasp the previous dearth of it. And at that moment I am honest, and this honesty though coldly certain and utterly horrific is as if the sole thing I could ever crave. In this world people seek the comfort of validation and pleasure... or else the comfort of reality and the cold austere truth. In as much as we want the latter we are lovers of purity. I am a lover of it, in whatever form it deigns to take. I go further and say that since purity is both kind and cruel, it must be obvious that morality is nothing. Can it matter if there be preservation or destruction, kindness or cruelty, peace or war? The heart beats on... and here we forever are. In the silence of these lower rooms I often have the thought that behind every beat is emptiness... and I wait, and there it is, and then I wait for the beat to come and there it is, and it is as if the heartbeat slows and slows until it seems there will never be another beat ascending out of the silence, no signal from the blackness-sea, no starburst in the raw-cold unending space. This is the fickle moment where I almost laugh... yet am shiveringly afraid, for now the heartbeat *chooses or not* to come again. This is the very core of cruelty, is it not? And since my mind is attuned and I share it with you, whoever you are, I say that it seems that even though the heartbeat and therefore life is inexorable, it is shrouded in silence that we can only call eternity, since it is not death, not death, wherefrom the heartbeat may never come again but yet is *written* to come again, as if a pact had been made at the beginning of the world, a pact between the silence and the drum, wherein all futures were written so that they play their tunes and drumbeats till the end of time that never ends. Yet for me in this muted basement room, what use is insight? None, I tell you. And yet I tell you. Be not afraid, a voice whispers from the sliming walls: you are here forever. Be afraid, it whispers again - you are here forever! And if we are to die many times, so many times that our deaths are lost even to the memory of the soul - then what of our present death, and our present life, if this presence can be called such, in this vault of eternity whereby the moments and minutes tick away under the beck of the pulse, the pulse, this thing that is born and dies in the instant and in its death is born... There are no landmarks for us! The demise of the body by a bullet to the skull is nothing since this is the way of the world. The bubbling of blood from the fleshy mound on the floor is nothing since this is the way of all rivers of the world. The silencing of the heart at the core of the body’s empire is nothing, since here is exactly the silent eternity between every beat of the heart. These momentous events, they are nothing! These signposts and milestones and memorials and fullstops and ceremonies and passings away and recitals of liturgies, these corpse-dumpings from vans, these brutal rituals of burial in the cloddy snows, in the skirt-wastes of the motherland - these are nothing. Really nothing.

These, friends unknown, are my thoughts sufficient to this moment, which as you see are wiped out by the next. Let this instant bring what it may, while Time may never come at all but for the ticking of the heart. And even if this little heart in its great empire were to pass away, if Communism itself were to pass away, there would be other hearts, hearts without number ready to do the work. And as they beat, like a horde of clocks in a still room, into a future that is ever *this*, then their thoughts and dreams, whatever they may be, will not be worsen or cruder than this. For we are human beings, born to be born and die again within the instant of a breath, within the pulse of a heartbeat. And these worlds we conjure, these social and political and metaphysic worlds we conjure between pulsings of the heart will never be better or worse, will never evolve, for everything is already here... just this, this pulsing of the heart out of the silence. Have no fear! Or greatly fear... Marshall Stalin, wherever you are, you are all of these dead, just as you are the dread of all the living. Hear me, hear that I cling to nothing, here in my cubed room in your basement abattoir where all duty is swiftly and inexorably done. And gone. And I never used that word. *Abattoir*. No, it is fitting.

Five Hundred Clocks Unknown reader, imagine there are five hundred clocks in a still room and every one of them is ticking. And as we listen (there is no escape, even for an instant) they seem to form sonic shapes wherein the individual ticks lose themselves in a sigh, in a big sighing wind, and they seem to take the shape of the mind, a mind surrendering to the shape of a big sighing wind or a steady swish of a broom that might sweep the bitty world clean, or the flush of a river gouging its hours and years as if the peace of the sea were somewhere, somewhere to be wished for... Yet here is the sea, right in this room, and now we drown in its soundwinds, its ticking alarmless tick... and suddenly, they lose their crushing togetherness for a moment, these lonely clocks, before they collude again, and the hypnosis comes again, and we are lost again in the crush, the rush, the cloudy belting rhythm of the shoosh shoosh shoosh. Just so, the tick of time is our cover-up, our refuge from the real. Under it we can claim to be victims, automatic beings, functionaries in a great shovelling evildom under the manic laughter of god, and thereby we require no conscience, none at least that tells us we are blessed nothings and therefore incapable of harm, that we are innocent like children, and that blood is pure. Under time there is no silence, except a mute dissident conscience lurking red-eyed in the dark. Instead we are reminded of heartbeats, thudding looms of them, thousands of bloodbeats that enter here, in this room, and are dragged out by their heels again, and whose heads are lead-dead, who now are scoffed at by the dour indifference of a country's cold-numb agony. And the only sound to be had is the satisfied scratch and scribble of a pen on paper or the tappy tap of a typist's confirmation - some booted little gnome somewhere in the cavern of rooms, marking the satisfied closure of a sticky matter. And once the red dribbles have been all hosed away, it is time for appetite, time for lunch. A good morning's work, for the sake of the tranquillity of the State.

When we enter a room where death has been, where a person has met their loose lonely end - and though their abattoir place is nothing, really nothing... yet these walls, that sweat all the things they have seen, are wounded... though outside to the end of the world there is no barrier, only horizon and sky that makes this space cry in its arbitrary walls because it *is* walled, and because it has seen things no walls should see yet walls always see, as if the dirty secrets of the world have to be caged, as if the walls were doomed to witness the dirt of gnomes and men and their dirty ideas, while outside their huddled camp there is only gigantic wind and pure snow and the flung sky... Times and moments of all things are recorded in the air, whether future comers know them or not. This is the church of slaughter, where slaughter is worshipped - not ostentatiously or devoutly, but casually, necessarily, pragmatically, as a kitchen worships food, or a bedroom sleep, or a toilet, waste. Five hundred ticking hearts... every one of them has seen and felt the truth of it.

Blood and Shit And our food of life is the maker of blood, and blood beats and curdles inside veins and is shoveled forward by the heart, and its impurities are sucked out and it drips like wine in a vat into the organs of exit and then is gone. Never is it seen by the eye, and as we eat, new fresh blood takes its place, thick and viscous and pure and red and lovely. In its moving state it is the staff of living, it is the oil of love, it is the alchemical ground of healing joy. It does not stick, does not stain, does not linger in the brain as a memory of disgust or a gout of horror or as a splash of woe exposed in a place where it never should have been, exposed to the eyes of bloody old children, to immature beings who never should witness it. Blood is precious red gold, never to be witnessed by the human eye; rather it is the stuff of the eye itself, the sight and the seer and the thought and the sense and the love. So if a man is blood and all is blood, why spill it? His blood never fails to shock by its lividness; it is not water, it is not white or opaque, it is the raw viscous manna of the world. If we are to feel then we feel with the heart, and it may not seem that an organ can feel, but if you take it away, if you take its function away, you will see then if you can feel!

In the toilets, where I tend to go in the moments, the moments after, in the hiatus where the rooms and corridors are abandoned, where the doors vomit their smells, where the accusing silence closes in like red mists after a battle, I sit and listen to the acquial squeal of a cistern pipe above my head. I do not conceive any time when that water-constricted pipe did not squeak and moan at high pitch, at the edge of lonely madness, for the sake of all those dead who never uttered a sound or a word. And to it I listen, sitting there on the toilet bowl in the urinal vapours and the steel cold. And the longer I listen, the less my mind is able to form a thought or an image or remember any sound at all. It is the inhuman whistle of life, it is the moan of life's neglect, it is accompaniment to the quotidian wiping of the slate, it is the necessary sorrow of necessary rules. It is criminal. It is forever... Today, I had to run to the toilets in order to avoid emptying my bowel in the Lubyanka corridor. And this time I discharged the content so violently that I was moved to wonder: why should I take care to deposit shit

in the proper place when no-one else is remotely doing the same? Why cling to propriety in the face of imbecility? My body today dissolved under me. My being seemed to turn to the softness of nothing - confirmed by its transformation into pure unadulterated shit.

Or Life Eternal There is a fountain in the garden of paradise from which pure water flows outward as all the rivers of the world. The flow is without beginning or end, and a nameless clerk, standing at a mirror by a basin, takes a pinch of its water in his cup hands. Even his body knows that we fumble always back to the same thing, the dissolving of *hardness*. Fear, paranoia, self-protection, investment in separateness... we must come to compassion, to admitting that we are one. Conscience is our bell-ringer (and this is why victims are the holy though they never chose it), but we force conscience aside again and again, invent new norms of depravity and fallenness even in our desperation for renewal. And so here at the lowest ebb in the hard hell of separateness (the abattoir of Joe Stalin: I say it now because I can) though truth is stolen from us (since those who know that truth will never write of it) I have understood: that to grab any, any miniscule chance that life offers - this is life, this is our positivity, this is our persistence. And though I cannot fool myself that life is anything but postponement of the inevitable, and though this dungeon is hell enough for a dutiful fool who blundered in where angels fear to tread - yet your writer is a Hero, because he is always naïve, always the ingenue, always ready to be the sacrificed, to become the dead; because his vision of hell is washed clean, washed clean... in the persistence of life eternal, life eternal.'

THE LABYRINTH

Ariadne said: I am your confessor, and conscience of all the dead.

Your narrator's name is Dreeley, and he is a citizen of the present time, wherever that may be. He cannot readily tell you why instances of cruelty and madness in the world should stand out to him in the manner of an obsession, as if he had lived and died through them... and though it may be said that the experience of a solitary soul in all history's becoming and solitude and suffering is nothing but forsaken breath, distant rills, ancient winds, atomised dust... we should admit to ourselves that experience is *something*, since in the vaults of time it lodges like tiny nutseeds that by the power of obsession certainly sprout again. For the sake of all who tremble and perish under a regime of cruelty and unmeaning, for example, the institutional terror and sadism of Stalin's Soviet Union, Dreeley has an obsession with righting of wrongs, of 'light beyond darkness'. Meanwhile he envisions hordes of victims crowding towards the light, queueing and jostling on heaven's staircase - while the circumstances of their past deaths unstoppably amplifies darkness' mystique. One may claim that life is forgetting, or that omnivorous nowness cannot but drown all memory, but a psyche is a sifter, grinder, analyser (and voyeur) that tumbles in great circles like snowballs or washing machines into an aching future which is nothing but amplification of past, and no matter how people try to build brave new countries of erasure, they are but products of gone things, of things snatched away. Dreeley is resident of a southern country where the complexities of past are quietly edited out, where easy present and easier future are bravely legislated day by day. Grave-spoiler Dreeley is a poor citizen of a land that prides itself on pure waters and purer snows! One should not advertise it here, but Dreeley beyond his obsessive compulsivity long endured what should be described as a depressive suicidal disorder. It is why he now begs to burden you, reader, with his psychic burrowings. We are nothing if not revisionists: all this storytelling, fictionising, mythmaking, nothing but *process*, which Dreeley will tell you is only history's justice at work. Out of desperate need he harkens to the tempting reverberations of suffering from within the dark hearts of terror regimes, revives old cycles of perpetrator and victim, calculates the costs of old cruelties and loyalties, so far as he is able to imagine them. He asks: Why is every single victim loyal to life's duty? How does guilt endlessly seek atonement? How do the best-laid crimes of mice and men turn inward and rot the perpetrators? How shall we go beyond the perpetrator-victim paradigm - so that we might take responsibility, come to self-respect, come to detachment, come to innocence? Or how to deconstruct death itself? A mild and simple agenda!

The Unutterable Inconsequence In the early part of this twenty-first century in this mountainous southern island country, the narrator known as Dreeley penned a story set in Soviet times about a

clerk who chronicled the statements of political prisoners about to be executed, before he was dragged to the same fate himself. The reasons Dreeley did this will gradually emerge, according to the following thoughts: ‘What paradigms of dislocation, of dim struggle in the tunnels of the mind and heart (he asks) have we to endure through years and lifetimes, in order to come again to a place where we can say *‘I am a human being. I am worth something’*? My present life has been one of such fragmentation, elusiveness, inconsequence, that I am pathologically disposed to melancholy, to an overwhelming sense of *ending*. No-one has been able to offer clinical origins for my obsessional circularities. But wherein are the seeds of anything? To me it is plain they lie far beyond this present birth, and I therefore have had no choice but to try to repeal the amnesias of physical death.’ But are Dreeley’s efforts mere fiction heaped on fiction? Why does he scribble great lists of memorial things - to prove that something actually occurred, that there exists at least some kind of ragged context, since the absence of it causes such wretched vertigo? Reader, indulge him as he deconstructs the labyrinth of a mind, seeks a goddess, confronts a beast. ‘I don’t know any more how to live (he says) except to feel that when all is swept away, when there is nothing to lose since everything is nil and I am a ragged soulless ninepin in the night - that here is a way to begin’.

Ariadne ...On a bittersweet yet lumined day long ago, at a lunch for his birthday, to mark a respite from therapy’s solitude, (as if *ago* could be a word to glibly solve the impossibility of time) a certain woman, not a girlfriend or a sister, not a colleague, nor even a periodic acquaintance - but a comfort woman of sublime skill, in whose confidence Dreeley had come to invest his troubles after many visits to her private quarters where she ministered to his fears and his cravings and for which he scrupulously paid... this woman had gathered a group of men, other men like him, in the sun-bright ante-room of a restaurant in the city, on the pretext that it was his, Dreeley’s, birthday. And she had made a little speech in Dreeley’s honour, wherein she contrived to deliver apposite words to the ears of these men... and Dreeley had recalled, as she spoke, that he couldn’t imagine anyone who would eulogise such a man as he, who lacks all qualities discernible or rememberous (or was this his ploy to divert a need to be noted and loved?) or to recount the life of any man as if he were a coherent seamless (w)hole, or as if moral beauty could be codified or conveyed - especially to such male rivals who would only suck it in through veils of their own selfish need... And so this hostess who spoke, was called by him *Ariadne*... Yet who, thought Dreeley, would ever deliver praise unless they hoped for something in exchange? This woman, he knew, sought no such reward: a measure of her dedication to the business of comfort. She affirmed to the little company: ‘we all are lonely, cosmically lonely, and ever wander, ever reaching out in hope of validation’ ... a truth that reminded Dreeley of ‘all the materialists and empiricists of the world’ - including scientists and academics, who like rats in our ranks will happily deconstruct billia of particles such that they barely exist according to the Uncertainty Principle of Heisenberg - yet who can never bear to admit to *the utter dissolution of all borders, the non-existence of the self* - such would be the threat to their donning of ceremonial

hats, conferral of honours and delivery of esoteric epistles each to each in mutual boosting and desperate charade to remind them against all odds, these brothers-in-ego, that they are solid creatures of hand and eye and blood and fat and sinew, and that the very blood and fat inside their skulls is *the repository of all knowledge* which is furthermore proved by blood and fat being the pinnacle of existence, miraculously spewed forth out of the fabled Big Bang for which we should be traditionally and eternally grateful amen... But what *really* is a man? Dreeley wonders. Or rather, what is a man that he may question what is a man? Nor flesh nor blood, that is certain.

‘And so (thinks Dreeley) I validate my woman as Goddess, this *Ariadne*, who spoke coolly and truthfully of me in remembrance of my birth. And I must try to pay her homage in kind, must repay a huge and subtle debt. And since her name means *utterly holy* I ought to do it with utter zest, though I can’t think how, except that the thin threads we cling to in this mazelike world are nothing but what we claim or imagine to be... though imagination is but a watery canvas on which the exploits of men and woman and creatures only seem to be painted, and although this worldly matrix of space and time and cause is subject to winds that howl out of a void like the inky detritus of some defeated dream - or else dreamed by *she*, all unknown to me, so that her threads bind me unknowingly and darkly such that I have no choice except *as if this present thread were the only thing I could ever be*... For who can fathom the matrices of how we come to be? No puny words like *evolution* or *progress* or *cause* may catch this fathomless emptitude, for I cannot be as I am but in the context of All, and even this ‘I’, ‘I’, this painted name ‘I’, this ubiquitous mantra, this miserable fist in jeering air, lonelying moan of want, cry at the stars, hawk in etheric sky, rasping breath in the ocean of night, rallying-call to *me* the tiny pea, centre and magnet to the wandering catch-all mind memory body and soul - is nothing but the *constant beginning* of my unthreaded travels from nowhere to nowhere, my cosmic journeying from then to now, and to never, to gone.

And that special thing gifted to me by the goddess Ariadne, began to dissolve the instant it left a woman’s rouged lips, and perhaps was already deceased before it reached my ear... and if ever such a gift is given and we toss it away, then morally we are nothing - then, now, and ever - and thus in my unworthiness I cannot hope to receive another far-off gift from that shadowy Other, despite that I fool myself I might one day at last be clean enough to receive it as it was meant. Cocooned in memory a gift may surely be kept: without memory it is nothing. Though sages say all things are stored in the deep mind of the race, what use are memories unless I might clutch at them as valuable and meaningful even while I blunder on from forgetting to forgetting? My birth, the memorial of it, that luncheon, the digestion of it, my prized eulogy on that faraway day: all are as sand in the mouth of a dumbstone *Ozymandias*, swept away by rasping winds of dissolatory death. And yet I recall at least that I have forgot, so I aspire at least to a kind of amnesiac beggar-status. Now, from the far future, I dream up the notion of Seeker in a Labyrinth, and (unlike the legend) I fail to find a sword or ball of

twine to lead me in or out again. And though my delirious twittering memoric dreams fail not to throw up black beasts that brandish horns and hoarily shivel at me their death-heads, these incarnations of beasts of unmeaning, of all cruelty, all implacable blindness, revenge, loss, shame at ineptitude, grotesque longing for purity, all Stalins, all Hitlers... and though I want to believe in their realness and indulge them with shape and solidity, and shiver under them in ecstatic horror - I know that these are my excuse to live inside the great story of the past, which despite being a dead place, a drugged evil lifeless place, is the only thing I may ever claim to *own*.

...Thus the time has come when timeless gifts rejected by me in blitheness and ignorance present themselves once more, coyly, as if to say: look child, we were waiting for you. And by this pricking of conscience I begin to fumble for what was mine, as if stored for me by an unseen mother... For we who are now grown and dying, who feel the waste of time consumed, we, gesturing with anorexic breath, skeletal dreamers blundering in clammy labyrinths of our own making and who living habitually in them come to no longer recognise them as traps - or if we do recognise and seek to escape, only validate them more, or perchance by *not* seeking to escape, little by little might recognise our tunnels as lost dreams and therefore never existing - we men and women might then see that we are the makers of all our dreams, that our dreams become us, and therefore that as creators we might *uncreate*, so that our new dream is to dissolve the dreams we have made, to unmake ourselves, or yet to realise that though we cannot undream we may at least dream of undreaming (!) ...But this, this is yet far off.'

Dreeley daydreamed that in a temple of ancient Crete he stood under a grand and famous *mosaic*: the Hero holds the neck of a bull-headed beast with his sword raised to kill. But, indifferent as he was to the whole, and seeing instead only bits or fragments he knew nothing of but that here was some cracked irrelevant composite of thousand-year myths, of lives already lived, things already thought, fragments and versicles of millennia entombed yet overseeping the stone, Dreeley thought how the artisan's fingery thoughts could only be occupied in fashioning *one little bit at a time*, and only fleetingly would any intrinsicness to a whole as the poise of composed art or narrative or history occur to him as he sweated his busywork on some sun-glazed afternoon two thousand years past... and if history were a phantom glueing of fragments stirred in a soup of *ever-present oneness* that spits them out in dissonance and multiplicity as 'the moment, the hour, the century'. What then is this mosaic such that a little worker who works to fashion it can call it art or narrative or history when *he himself is the mosaic of infinitude*, ever split in the moments and minutes and hours and days of his own life, wherein no instant can ever cohere with any other, and such that he is never self-composed except as a dream - dreamed by one such as Dreeley... and that though the artisan is called a sentient soul with the sense of being 'himself' or at least of acting in ways that seem coherent and sequentially causal (albeit that he'd have no such words for that, and no notion of how or why this coherence

should ever be invested in him) he is in fact nothing but 'a random thought of himself', or some tenuous notion of being 'an artist', fashioner of 'things that were his dreams now chiselled in stone'. And how many *other* dreams crowd about as if waiting to turn to stone... yet there never will be time for all of them since thought is far quicker than stone, and this chiseller will think myriad things without chiselling them, and the things he does chisel are but inchoate fragments of some chthonic construction in his unfathomable psychic sea (as if any sea would submit to be constructed)... And what of *all* dreams, glass spaghetti of the centuries, that might halo this mosaic on a wall, infiltrating the eyes of *We* the present watchers (we are all islands, continents, alone) who might 'chafe at the agony of a mosaic trapped in stone' or 'drift to some elsewhere' even as we stand before the thing which speaks so incoherently of itself, of itself... And what are our thoughts of the maker's thoughts as he gathered these stones in his lost silence, or as he thought of times to come, or thought of *we* the people who stand before it and wonder on such as *he*, gaseous victim of the future as he has become, vapid victims of the past that we are... So the mosaic is worthless, fool's history (Dreeley says), since the Beast will never be slain! But a better thought comes: that the mosaic is a work of Art, because it is mutely patient in the face of all shivering rantings and posturings and ignorant abusings and tirades and betrayals and breathings and mind-scatterings and tides and trivias of the world of men... It bears them all in its shrugging glazed silence, its massivity on a wall in a dusky temple, where the breeding chaos of the outer world clatters and fries and dies like flies in the beating sun and dust. *Within it stands* - cool in shadows, absorbing all, reflecting all, caring *nothing*...

'And as for my long-ago lunch guests (who are my ghosts in a way no-one else can ever own) - what other scintillae of personal threaded daydreams might have been shattered by the sudden imposing tinkle of a spoon on glass, by the speech of *Ariadne*? And who will retrieve these mosaical quanta of conversational fragments except such as me who creeps as if down glass corridors of the past and enters expectant still rooms of eternity, and as if in new communions with old ghosts helps the talkers re-invest like chattering songbirds innumerable pingpongs of chat and answer out of cryogenically stilled wads of time... Or perhaps nothing and nobody is lost or waiting, for their glaze of thoughts was but candy floss that scintillated and self-entertained in eternal light, emptily signifying not a thing but itself, and barely even that. But I tell you my lunch guests *are* doomed to leave and leave again their threads like frozen pointillistic beads in passageways, for you the reader and for me the needer - for without labyrinthine arcane paths, where would any of us be, where would any of us go; without trade in words who would we be, and so on and so? In invisible paths as in electronic webs of cyber worlds we must weave the patterns, the patterns... our conversations, our browed questions and studied replies, exclams of surprise, deft rejoinders, grave considerations, ironic disclaimers... the traffic of studious nothings, the maze of past, present, future.

And there is nothing more death-ghostly than my longing to retrieve what is called past. It is as if I wished the winds of a thousand years to repatriate the leaves of a ragged tree on a winter plain that is now dust or the ether of comets, or as if I wished a surge of water that enveloped a fish in ecstasy ten billion years ago could somehow reshape and recreate itself exactly and minutely as it did... or was said to have done, or might be said to have done, once and once only in a unique expatriation of particulate atoms... but that it as if sported and flaunted and laughed at itself because it knew as it did so, that it *never* was what it was, could never in fact ever be so, and was not even conscious that its insouciant supple laughter and sport would haunt a seer from the utter future who might dream to recreate in his mind a thing he could not possibly know ever was, to conjure again a thing that might have been, once, once...

And suddenly I seem to recall on that birth day, these people I scarcely knew (since invited by *Ariadne*, who had put a spell on them also) contrived to discourse each to each and tete-a-tete in faked solicitude for *me*, as if they were like old and staunch friends, whereby in fact they talked exclusively of themselves and their doings and their wants and their ins and outs - and I, wanting to recognise this as a sort of homage to me the nameless inconsequential man in whose name this gathering happened, contrived to *join in* on my own faux-celebration and become as drunk and as involved and as posturing as they, because in seeking for my Partner one who while popularly desired by all of them (*Ariadne*) yet had the grace to focus her pearly mind on me in token of the occasion, herein I seemed to justify all the insatiable reasons why I lived and breathed and had my secrets and my fearing little nuances: it was for *her* ears and eyes only! and she in her subtle coolness responded as if I were the only person in the world - and perhaps I actually was, since I received the grace that may only be dispensed by a goddess, who with cool calculation lets herself be the chosen idol of every dreamer who hopes to be recognised or loved, inside this sultry delicate-deadly competition we call social life, or human life...

Yet though *Ariadne* is ever the object of my dreams and thereby unassailable, I am separated from her, and it is my karma to be so. Because *Ariadne* is fascinated by the obstacles she puts in the way of the ones who seek her, she who dallies sexily with many Beasts. For me they are always the Other Man, always *Dionysus*, always the desirer, the opposer, the subverter, the cutter, the toppler, the blinder, the executioner - no hero - and I must find him, must murder him, he who must steal her away, steal her away. And though perhaps she as object of my dreams will be the one to release me, she for want of whom I have accumulated all my losses and mistakes and foolish things and for whom through the labyrinth of uselessness I go, ever evading or confronting some monster or beast concocted by myself to serve my need to fight or die or be victim or victor or hero... did I turn her into an object of salvation that she could never be? A dream must always remain a dream, and will perish in its fulfillment. And dreams will metamorphose, and we do not recognise how our own dream

has shifted. All we really know is that we need to have them... and when a dream ends, what will replace it but another more refined? I need someone to idolise. A mysterious woman will do the job!

At last, at the end, all I can say is this: once upon a lost time long before this present future came to pass... certain parties were held to have had conversations at a birthday lunch, and we from the standpoint of eternity imagine that these dreamers, out of freedom, 'dreamed the conversation of themselves'. A brilliant trick, Jorge Luis Borges would agree. Should I then strike an attitude of amused irony - since this life seems to offer no meaning except that I am doomed to participate forever and ever in clever-clever mental conversations, in the dreamer's sport, as if though nothing could *ever* change or improve or evolve or grow up, it irrevocably must be allowed to *seem to do so*? And should I invest in desperate remembering, in a trivial lunch from long ago, as if I believed in evolving and growing up, and in my consternation try to see a way back in order to go forward, to get out of this unending prison of raw feeling through understanding? Or will I admit that the conjuring happens *only now, only here* - so that the speaker is forever my own ego that is forever generating and manufacturing the works of me the Manufactured Man? Perhaps my problem is utterly simple: that the secret beyond all my manufactured dreams is that *there is no secret*. That there is nothing to worry about as long as I sigh and accept that the manufactured man is all I am, that my conversation is forever non-different from me, that there is no conversation but *a dream that badly wants to overwhelm*. And this great principle of 'boundless awareness' - that there is no conversation but that of Myself - puts paid to the bother of memories and processes and particles and times and spaces and past and future! Laugh then, participate in the Great Conversation. But it is long and arduous! And its best joke is that there is a heaven of *forgetting* - and there can be no desire to remember without this aching forgetting... though forgetting really cannot be, since the Seer never forgets himself... Is forgetting and remembering then how 'lonely freedom' longs to admire itself, how it longs to celebrate itself, how the mind learns to talk to itself in its loneliness? Here is clearly the bride-price of freedom. So, my mind, remember, remember... and the laughter is certainly on you! And when the elaborate sifting-game is stopped, the ghost-waltz finished, when comes the horror that things have never been and all the while you believed in them, that you never were and never will be (you are eaten, Dreeley-man!), when you forget relationships, associations, good times, memories, fondnesses, self-dreams, evolvings, satisfactions, learnings - then you must rely only on one thing else, and it is called *The Thing That Knows!* But what is This Thing that can tell you that the labyrinth and lattice and mosaic and bundle of threads that you call yourself is *yourself*? It must surely be magical, for it is the fountain and well of generating and forgetting, and it seems to be never emptied! Perhaps we are really like the comets that seem to stream across its sky, or like a fountainhead, as if our deeds cascade behind us like a waterfall of flowers or a florid cloak or a broadening field of lights in a great city we built. This Empty Thing must be dimensional like the sky - yet full like a thing with no boundary is full, big enough for comets and aeons and history to pass over it and disturb it not... That

which is boundless shall have no rules, no unhappiness, shall have no truck with *things*. It is beyond the heaving breath and suffers no consequence, suffers no foolish time, suffers no cause. Shall we lament then, the agony of a mosaic trapped in its form? We who spend aeons to punish the boundless in ourselves, we who scurry from the loneliness of solitude, who pixelate the borderless, who holler out our syllables to the night, who hammer metals and murder the trees and lay out our waste-roads to places of Nowhere and like ants with backsacks plug them full with useless goods, we who shore up and drown deserts, drain blood from the lands, huddle in the solitude, wrap our arms about transparent air, scratch out lines of consequence and cause, rocket into spaces of the stars so deep to map them, map them and miniaturise them, who build our towers of learned babble, make rods for our backs, hairshirts for our souls, we who feel the death-breath of the boundless on our necks, that we might come creeping guiltily back to the borders of the solitude, we watchers who solemnly wonder what is its meaning: this empty, this quiet one, lone and still... This *conscience*.

Ariadne, I have named you. And I will find you. Or at least, a dream of you.'

Country of Erasure Dreeley records: 'In time I have recovered from visions of deconstructive madness born of utter inconsequence, such as the reader has been burdened with at length above. I have instead become wedded, in this island country in the southern sea, to visions of sad yellow light and clear polar wind, duneswept beaches and cloud-caressed peaks... And now on this cusp of jettisoning all I have ever known, I reflect that I have learned some things: that obsession is a fool's game, that labyrinths lead only to more convoluted versions of themselves, that obsession with death is nothing but rampant fear, that memory is nothing but the detritus of *need*. We live in the threads of our stories because there is no salve, no explication for this omni-repressive present. And worse, at last I must not only give up what I was looking for, but also the tool, the *paradigm* in which I looked for it: in the end the strands of experience must dissolve in a great lake of *not knowing*. Here I suppose is a source of hope, but my enduring need is still to characterise myself as victim, as a seeker of atonement for guilt, as one who must sacrifice, such is the power of habit, of belief, of unconscious history. Old myths seek fertile ground! And I am as if always at the turgid *beginning*, where I must take up again the unending narrative, the labyrinthine bind of birth and death and time and consequence. This man called Dreeley really wants to be gone. He habitually thinks of the end, the end of all clinging and wanting, of place and time, of cause and effect, of delusion... where life might come to be profound ease, simply as it is, nothing but itself. It sounds like death! Or else the death of death.

Meanwhile, in this country in the southern ocean the white inhabitants are shielded from the claws of history, and after generations of births and smoothings-out, they are only glancingly aware of their race's past. These whites construct new and eager lives, but they are aware of the sea, either its vast question or its capacity to swallow nascent dreams. They also know a wind that ruffles from the North

like a breathless bringer of news, as if it once knew things but forgot them. And they know a southern wind that empties out the mind, that comes lunging over deep hills bringing ice from the bottom of the earth. Better to remember, says the north. Better to be empty, says the south. 'I, Dreeley, cleave to the south wind, though I fear it. In this flung country, must we re-create the history of the world, want to refashion the past as sweet-hopeful future? Or should we be as ghosts of forest and fjord and peak, creatures of the wild without thread or bone, buffeted by the south wind all our days unto death? We who came for refuge, for exile, for a fresh life, cannot erase the need for belonging - so that the clever among us might think to minutely trawl history's secrets before leaving them forever... And is such emptiness not effective: erasure of place, erasure of time?' Dreeley can barely decide.

New Bondage Street 'There is a little premises on a steep hill above the capital city where punters come to seek what falls to them nowhere else. I have come to view it as the place of atonement where perpetrators fulfill their victimhood or their manhood. Some need to dominate, others to be dominated, but all need belonging, solace. And all are solitary. My companion-hostess at that birthday lunch I reconstructed at length, about whom I could tell you so little... is a sex worker. I will say she is part Russian since the surname is *Popova*. Another part of her may be Pacifika or Maori. I have decided that it is. Her trade name is *Endaira*... and she employs all her foreignness as mystique. Her place of work on the hill, of solace and atonement, she has called (serendipitously) *New Bondage Street* - as if she could give the place a whisper of spirit where spirit is but fools' poetry. Actually, it is only one place where Endaira goes. You might say she goes wherever there is need. What do people need? Company, comfort, sex, talk, presence with her... although Endaira does not fulfill wanting, she fulfills 'the want of wanting'. One time I got the thought in my head that I would try to urge her to leave her way of life, thinking I could offer her something more than she had... I asked her to come to see a play with me, and she agreed. Oh she dressed wondrously for me, but I know she has a little price for everything. I was nervous, had vague idealistic expectations for the piece since I knew it had to do with Pinter's *Birthday Party*. As we wandered through a warehouse with many rooms where fragments of the play were enacted by different actors, I blurted out: But what are they doing with Pinter's profound unease? How to know what to do with a moment... or what not to do... to have decided not to decide... how moments fall? Is there a message in that silence? My commentary turned quite comical, and Endaira took it in with her customary muted calm. Well I knew that if the whole building were to fall on us she'd not even cower. Perhaps she'd be amused. She is like that, in no way nervous. That is, unless she decides to manifest such an emotion for the sake of a client. I have seen her offer a little tear, utter a sharp word, even cry out - but only as if not changing anything, as if it didn't matter... In fact, there was a time when I arrived at the place Endaira calls *New Bondage Street*, and in a hurry to find her barged into a room and spied her through a heavy curtain... and she was splayed out on the floor in the chamber beyond, with her limbs tied and stretched in four directions as if on a medieval rack, and there were two men in hoods with canes in their hands who

were nonchalantly beating her legs and stomach. I shrank back, and no-one saw. Endaira had a spiked choker about her neck, and there was not a thing else to comfort her straining flesh. Blood seemed to drip from the crotch; at least, red liquid splayed about her thighs. At a point a man went down on her. I could see she was in an agony of shaking, with her muscles distended to the limit. She didn't cry out, except once and in a way that might have had the effect of amusing him. I could not turn away. The other fellow shoved himself in her mouth, and she seemed to all intents to suffocate. The brutes took their time, local fat-bodies who would not have seen this calibre of woman in all their bogan days except in this charnel house, this mental stage set where the simulation of torture is real beyond any stunted reference they could make to history's true debauchery. They had no imagination but that which Popova provided them, two oafs in hoods using her like a dog, like a urinal, like a pin cushion they could stick their pricks into and gush their semen over. And she, encouraging them, teaching them, getting *her* sexual power beyond their imagining. When they'd finished, and as the game started to look a bit tawdry and they'd backed off a bit and tittered to each other in their cowardly way, she offered the little boys a kind of professional dignity-pause (she, their victim and mother) before requesting them to untie her hands. One did, but as if to say *we don't have to, bitch* and she, controlled, neatly thanked them. Next she ran her fingers into her crotch and as they stood there (as we all stood there) expertly guided herself to a crushing orgasm - that I will never know was simulated or not, but I had the feeling it was not simulated in her *imagination*... and she proved to those fucks (sorry, clients) that she would forever have the last word, that she would forever hypnotise her acolytes at any level at which they came to her. At that point I backed away. I had felt something I had no idea what to do with. To see her like that was such exquisite pivot of guilt, desire and regret... that I realised that she strives to be a genius of extremes, of contradictions, of oxymoron. There is but one way to come to that mastery, and that is to have experienced the utter depths, over and over beyond the telling of it. What has this woman seen to become so completely detached? And why is it so magnetic, so evocative? We customers come again and again because we have to want the things we have seen her do, things she tempts us to do. We forever want her. We ever go back, deeper into the labyrinth of her...

On Friday evenings in winter I'd climb the hill, and more often than not step onto the path that led to her place of work. There was never any indication that the establishment was called New Bondage Street, Endaira's little moniker. I had told her once about a Russian story I had been writing, about great and unjust imprisonment, then had forgotten it. I failed to recognise her little irony for my sake. She has the power to make you forget... In the lobby, the hostess' brisk talk never did soothe my embarrassment. Where is Popova? I'd ask. Where do you want her to be, said a voice in my head. And I admit I fell in love with the unbearable thought that she is in the company of other men. The hostess doubtless knew my thought, and thereby was I a mundane and typical punter... and the pain is

always with me, not her. The wanting is mine, not hers. Yet I feel I have no thread to find Endaira, no sword to defend her...

In time came an event where I understood the real price she has paid. Discipline and abasement are one thing, revenge is quite another: the only proper response for certain black things that well up out of the pit. But it can't ever be served cold; such things are by definition uncontrollable, bestial. All our reactions are useless, misdirected, wild, momentary, faceless, absurd, blind and regrettable... yet they are necessary. I am reminded of an exchange we had where she showed me her anger, just once. I took it as a new stage in our intimacy, if there were any. Don't be the victim! I told her, and I guess it smacked of smugness. I'll be a victim if I fucking want! she replied. And right there is a *vocation*. But is there power in it? Popova is a phenomenally brave girl and I worship such a quality. But still, we are human. ...On the day where a price is resolutely to be paid, we are in a basement bar somewhere in the capital. She has come with me today because I am paying. Drinks will suffice, she says. All the same she orders the priciest ones. Popova will certainly talk, but not about anything that matters to her. A suitable topic is the foibles of her colleagues; they are the nearest she will get to putting herself in a human context. She'll not gossip, which is beneath a woman like her, but will observe. 'One's colleagues are dilettantes and ingenues, or are in it only for money or pleasure. Some even have degrees. None are artists.' And even her mercilessness seems apposite, for she carries heavy life within her such that nothing she says or does should ever be held against her. And she'll lavish care on clients but won't speak of them. That includes me. If survival is your *raison d'être* (which sounds strangely solipsistic) you'll take responsibility - for every little terrorising ogrous beast that squeezes itself out of the woodwork of your body, for every niggly nuance and memory and unconscious gust that flutters out of your psyche. You'll pay homage to every trumped up fat little demon that pokes and leers at you, you'll acknowledge every scummy projection of want that your customers dump - because *it really is you*, it is your chance to slough off all your need, so that all your dippings in these dirty depths are an opportunity, a privilege, are your thorn-crowning, your reward, your survival. It is good to know I am respected by her in proportion to the levels of shit I excrete from my pores... It sounds like I am a victim, but no, Popova discourages self-pity, and you get the point: she favours the empowered mode of victimhood (move over, Jesus). But how do we enact our past as the playing out of unconscious needs? It is one of life's mysteries that we carry forward the pressing force of some singular scene wherein festers a great unfinished business. We blindly circle it, circle it because somewhere deep we know what really happened to us back then. Yet amnesia, carried from birth to birth, is also our blessed aide, and without this forgetting, without unconsciousness, we could never seek justice or revenge or atonement or knowledge or purity or love...

Endaira is standing at the bar, ironically dressed in padded black jacket, webbed orange tights and red ankle-boots. Her height always wins attention, and the thighs promise heaven to needy punters.

Today's little goblins in the form of three semi-drunk guys, of a kind who think that a chick who dresses like that is asking for it, all complexed-up by their secret fear that they wouldn't ever satisfy her, sidle up and start a conversational ruck. I am ignored, and that's as Popova will have it. No bloke on *her* arm.

- Where ya from, babe?

- No planet you'd know. Sorry

- Aw right. Get you a drink?

- Sure. A bottle of *that*.

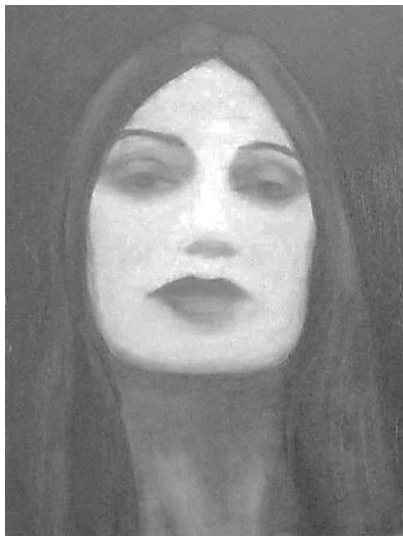
The young fellows look at each other. No choice, buddies. Furtive grapple for credit cards. Eighty-eight dollars later: - Any extras?

- You lot? Five hundred cash.

The fellas are out of depth. Get in depth fellas. - *Endaira, let's bail...* - Wait outside! she snaps. And she sidles to the far end, turns momentarily to us, slips through a door. Yo, that back passage. The guys glance to me. Murmurs all round. Finally they head in a huddle for the door. Feel almost sorry for 'em. The pub music ratchets up. I order a drink. Ten minutes. Better check. A little vestibule and a storeroom door. Get ready for fleshy scrummaging behind. I bend an ear. Suddenly there's a howling animal cry and the door bursts open. A guy is on the threshold, petrified, shovels past me. Another sways on his knees, grabs at his pants, stumbles after. I peer into the gloom. Popova has the jagged end of a bottle in her hand. The third guy is flat out on the floor, pants round his ankles. He is clutching his genitals. There is blood on his fingers. Popova steps right over him and with both arms raises the jagged eighty-eight dollar bottle and jams it downward into his navel. He screams. And she thrusts it again. Fucking norah! She straightens, sees me, flings the bottle at the wall, comes at the door. I grab at her wrists. She lets me. Her eyes are brimming. She pushes me off, veers at the pub door. I kneel down. The guy has passed out, there's blood sputtering from his navel. Penis seems cut to bits. I cast about, find some kind of rag, try to staunch. And there is her bag... her tights, her panties. Gather them, run into the pub room, make semaphore with the bar manager, drag him in. His eyes pop wide. I fuck off quick smart. She is not to be seen on the streets. I stalk several blocks. My guts are heaving. Have to get to her. Get her away.

Next day, lie low, scan the news. Hello! Bar incident in town, cocktails plus violence with a filthy twist. No pic of Popova, description only. The victim: he's going to live but he's never going to be a family man. Scandaloso. A day after, I set out to trawl for Endaira in all her places. At New Bondage Street her co-workers tell me she without warning left her place of residence, crossed the strait and caught a ride far to the south, to the green-black forests, to the land of fjords. Endaira left a card on a dresser at her flat, they nod sagely. For who? For the one who finds it, numbskull. Clearly I should

never trust sex girls, for the simple reason they don't want to be trusted. Yet it is as they said. In her thick-addled scrawl under a little portrait of a woman who resembles her face, Popova wrote: *If you look hard, a girl will leave clues to her whereabouts. I have no desire to be lost. I am a spinner and gatherer of threads. Do you want to rescue me?* I can hear her whisper it, the girl who pisses on our feelings and fears! But I know as long as I pursue she'll be a stranger, and only in strangeness can I know her, sort of. I reckon my absurd future: I will ask people in all places, *do you know Endaira Popova?* And the name is incongruous, for it's only me who describes her so. She is in my world, no-one else's. These strands of my atonement must be confidential, must appear in no official account, no police or government record...'



Dreeley soon identifies the aloof little snap left by Popova (artist Seraphine Pick) as coming from a local gallery. And he will tell anyone who asks, that it is not her face. He has learned to be evasive, and will say solemnly that his pursuit of a Russian woman in the far south of New Zealand is but a fiction, a need, a compensation - since he has a history of mental illness... and that even if he did track her down she would be semi-unrecognisable having put on new clothes new make-up new hair... He will claim she is impersonal, a chameleon, that she lives on the borderland of a psyche, that she is but the act of looking, the truth that the more you look the more a thing isn't there. He will say she is a romance, dream of a different self, and that if we glance ever so lightly we may get a hint but if we are to search high and low there will be no trace. Dreeley will say it is his last big foolishness. Reader, should we believe anything more he tells us?



Dion Dreeley records: ‘A week later I hitched a ride with a hippie traveler who claimed he was touring the south land in the winter. Called himself (improbably) Dionysus. Dion ‘for short’. He commanded an old red Falcon with a hole in its floor and beer and spirit bottles strewn underfoot and incense sticks poking from the dashboard. Ever-unshaved Dion wore a multicoloured Rastafarian beanie like a trophy. I soon realised he had bad eyes. One dim afternoon on some borderless road it was snowing heavily and the window wipers refused to wipe, and we ended up crawling into a suburb which turned out to be Queenstown. Dion said he knew a bar, and when we got there it was as if they were expecting us. I assumed Dion was a drug dealer since the proprietor wouldn’t let us pay for drinks, of which we had plenty. Several girls gave him the eye. Outside on the street, he proceeded to insult some guys on motor bikes. We drove out of town heading for the mountains. Ten minutes later the bikers appeared on the road behind us in a swarm, all ducking and weaving about. Kids. We outdistanced them somehow on a straight stretch, and I called on Dion to make a super-dramatic stop. He did it, with a mega-dangerous skid, and he and I leapt out and charged back down the middle of that highway in the blizzard in our black winter coats with our arms spread out like some dreadful Christ Redeemers shouting and hollering like madmen. Those junior bikers took one look, turned tail and scooted in a flurry and a skid back to town. I can just hear the breathless gossip: *dude, those cunts were baaaad!* Kinda cool tho, a battle with evil weird guys. Me and Dion had a laugh and it appeared we were well met: two sad aging hippie guys. We threw a couple of snowballs at each other... Later, when I (foolishly) hinted to him about the mysterious Popova, I sensed he was more than casually interested since he started lobbing non-sequitur questions at me. This little conversation it turned out, underpinned an invitation to hang with him in his car. We’ll travel the lost winter roads of the south, he said. Our cool and solitary road trip! On the face of it, the prospect of driving about with Dion

didn't stir me, but I knew I'd let it happen in a passive wintry way. Something about descriptions of Popova flutters the veil of imagination. Guys seem interested. I guess Dion built a vision. I didn't grock till later he'd made up his own mind to find her - and maybe I didn't want to grock it. I didn't mask facts, just told him she was semi-untouchable. That did it.

Anyway, Dion the old indie hipster likes to doodleyack as he drives us along, and he's a polished spruiker of himself in studiously haphazard style. I glean he is the son of well-off parents, and he certainly doesn't fail to acquaint me with their shortcomings. Couldn't they buy you a better car? I say naughtily. Bought the motherfucker m'self, he retorts. He seems to assume I'm happy to be in his company, though he'll not fail to let me think that he's an alone-and-abandoned knocked-about sort of guy who has no fixed abode etcetera *by choice*, but doesn't care 'cause destiny is much bigger than all this shit and things fade to nothing anyways right dude? But hey why not take the Trip Of Life since it's all ironic weirdness yo? Not that he's averse to chicks feeling sorry for him and doing the chicky thing by him once in a way. Dion assures me he is the arch hedonist whose live-in-the-now shtick ignores the past, rejects the psyche as personal paradigm ('human labyrinth' he calls it) and yoho! superficiality / escapism is our duty in the face of absurdity of being alive, check. But still he's pretty cool and subtle 'cause he still chases heaps of things - next best lay, primo drugs, experiences - as if they mattered. *As if*, mind you. And no way he's ashamed of it, not being a nonce. Contradiction yeah? Can't live wivout doin', can't act wivout responsibility! Dion has it all figured out, but wouldn't bother telling me unless he knew I was hip enough not to judge and if he's going to hit on my girlfriend if and when she turns up then obviously he wants me to be prepared for that little post-modern experience because according to him my casual attitude every time I open my mouth on the subject of her, pricks up his antenna that she's *way out of my reach*. He can tell 'cause anyone that cool would have to be out of reach anyway yo? Sorry dude, not meaning to bring ya down, just reciting the bare facts which is what you respect, dig? But hey, when I tell him he's putting my relationship with Popova in a shitty box 'cause he's covering up his own mind drool over her he says: right on, dude! I knew you wuz hip to me and my shit! Nope, there's no way round Dion. He studied himself all right, and came up with the goods of a persona that fits the way he thinks of himself. Err right on. Meanwhile Dion's driving is a bit fucken dangerous, and when one time he gets in a snowdrift on a blind corner and laughs his head off so I tell him 'if there was a frigging truck -' he says trust you to think the worst! in a *very* familiar way that suggests he knows my life story - and then he says sorry man because he knows he's testing me and I have to grit my teeth and eat it because he is actually not without the odd insight in the 'we're all uptight in the same way' or 'we all have skellies in the closet' or 'you're a capricorn with moon in scorio right?' mode of shite. But at least he don't assume I wanna listen to his rave all day 'cause he has a bumbingly cute habit of changing the topic as we trundle along as if life on da road wuz one cool 'lil acid trip featuring one 'lil absurdity after another... so hey let's dig into his assorted drug and booze collection he brought

along, paid for no doubt with someone else's money. Never know when you're gonna have company dude! Dion's used to having company, confident of it in fact. Lets him play the abandoned time-waif on his eternal road trip, lets him toss people off one by one... 'but man they *want* it, 'cause people are like sad fucks and masochists and they want me to deal it to them, expose their shit - which I *don't do* 'cause I got a conscience, 'cause that shit's not too evolved yo? I mean even if people appreciate you exposing their shit you don't go hard on 'em, know what I mean? I sense you're not too fucking slow in that department yerself. But hey listen: why exactly are you chasing this chick round the arse-fuck of the world? Where's she *from*, man? Wellington? Yeah, I was like up there for a time. Buzzy town. Mebbe I fucked her! Sorry dude. Describe her to me...' And so we're back on the topic of Popova. That druggy Dion brain has a habit of turning on the same riffs. Wouldn't tell him though. He's got his own self-scene going in that hip-funky head of his and I wouldn't wanna disturb. Because Dion is a metaphysician of the soul and a proselytizer too. 'We're like in the age of Aquarius, man. Wassa point if you're not gonna deconstruct all this shit? Heard of Derrida? Dude's fuckin' ace. Gimme a toke. Lissen. See that big fat mountain and sky? What's the difference between you and it?' (I'm hip to this line because privately I often get the feeling when we're flying down a road that there's no time or space because I'm always here - and BE HERE NOW is like 'what where when the fuck else could I ever be! so everything is totally blissy and super-simple - but I'll not let old Dion in on it 'cause he has to ration out the wisdom) ... 'Man, that sky and mountain are YOU. No boundary. Where's it end and you begin? Are you the air you breathe in and out? The food you gobble and shit? Are you the sun's heat you suck in and shiver out? Are you this body or this monkey mind of thoughts that come and go? Where the hell is mind anyway, get it? You are eternal, nothing but. And you drag all of your karmic shit to the next incarnation - till *you* decide to dump it.'

And I discover through the dope haze that his drift is like, a bit inspired.

- Yeah! We're nothing but Being 'n' Awareness (can't help copying his lingo)

- Yeah! How can anything ever be born? Nothing ever happened, dude

- Yeah! Who the fuck complains about dying? Let's get out of this shit!

- Yeah! We were never here anyway

(We're shouting) - Nothin's happenin'. Nothin's happenin'!

- What're you reelly, Dreeley? Shaping twisting makin' breakin' rearranging shapeshifter! What are you NOW? Get out of yer body!

(Suddenly the drug tips over to serious)

- Yeah yeah. No no... we have to stay and tough it out

- Bullshit. Unlimited awareness, man

- No. That's the reason we're in this body! We still haven't understood the relationship between body and awareness

- Fuck, we're IT, man

- But! But. I doubt it. I can doubt it
- Ooh well done you
- No, I mean d'you think every time we get some kind of insight that our whole body and mind doesn't scream with resistance and unholy shit like some pain in the ass kid? This whole material world is doubt! Bloody ignorance
- Fuck yeah, you're flying now, man. You're like that little fish swimming in the ocean holding up a little flag that says: 'Water? I doubt it!'
- (He's nailed it again) - You don't mean me, man
- I mean you, ya dumb fuck
- I just don't like to see people in illusion. Mostly they should know better anyway. What I can't forgive is ignorance. And cruelty. Makes my blood boil
- You're a heavy shit sort of dude ain't ya? The whole world is ignorance, man. Your unforgiveness is your blockage. Lighten up
- What are you, a lightweight? (But the smug bastard is right) Okay, point taken. But are you a middle class wanker who never has to suffer?
- Quite possibly, dude
- Give it up
- Don't need to. It's the hand I was dealt. It's all self, I told you. All is self, so be self-centred! I am MYSELF. All I need to do is be
- Do be doo be doo beee
- Fuck off. No choice but to participate. And there's no good or evil, man. Life is all trivia. Life is cosmic joke. Live, die, whatever!
- You're an exploiter. Which makes you a closet cynic. Why not cause evil, why not revel in it?
- There is no evil, man.

Now we're on a downer. I can just about buy Dion's line. Just about. But what if Dion were faced with catastrophe - of the kind that not only has no meaning but is calculatedly meaningless? In other words, torture. In the cells of a prison for instance. Is Dion free? The measure is, would he forgive his brainless cynical wretched captors? Because you have to, you can't just act as if the event wasn't there. We store stuff, till the end of time if need be. Nah, Dion despite his knockabout cosmic wisdom is still a limited little fuck, and that is where I'm sticking. Call me a curmudgeon, call me captive of my own conscience, call me a conservative loser. Ah but it's the dope, makes ya paranoid.

(And then) - Yer lookin' a bit paranoid, man. The dope's got horse tranquilliser in it.

Late that afternoon we turn up at a crossroads, and Dion takes his chance to totally randomly swerve onto a new road, utterly stomping on our plan to head for Wanaka and survey the Friday bars and look for Popova. Maybe this'll take us to Erewhon! he shouts in triumph. 'Random' to him translates as

pissing me off enough to get me to shout Where the fuck d'you say we're going? so he can then say Don't you know the seminal novel by Samuel Butler? Erewhon is a nanogram for Nowhere, shithead. I refrain from telling him I knew it and he's an immature twat. We settle down to him driving a couple of miles along this dirt road and then saying Fuck this, man, let's go get a drink in Wanaka. Maybe we'll run into some chicks! Which gets me grinding my teeth as he does his super-duper about-turn skid nearly breaking the axle which would be just shit hot at this time of night in this fucking place then roars off down the Road Just Travelled back to the crossroads where he acts even more confused till I tell him to get to fucking Wanaka by nightfall or else. And then he says with his greasy smile: you sure are desperate to get with your Russki ain't ya? Then he pats my knee and says light up that toke in the glovebox while I tell you about the time I half-choked this Russian chick with a billiard ball in a brothel in Wellington 'cause she couldn't come hard enough in my face unless I did it. Nope, just joshing ya. Hey! Cheer up son, mebbe your Popova will be wiv us tonight.

She sure isn't. Some other girls are though. Maybe they are all Popova. Dion gets himself a date. Local ladies bored with their husbands. Too easy. I tag along. Their names are Rhona and Lena. Later, Dion sets up an elaborate scene in our motel bedroom. He claims Rhona and Lena 'heard rumours about a girl called Popova... some people saw her on an island in the lake!' They've been plied with Dion's drugs so tongues are suitably loosened. 'Wadda women want?' shouts Dion. 'To disrupt boys and their inflated shit, we hope! Women never make good commies or fascists eh Dreeley? Good at sado-masochism though.' (This is all way over their heads) Dion likes the malleable ones. He starts to rave. 'Yeah, I'm like the vagabond son of oldies with money... don' hold it against me. I was living in the capital for a while, and turns out I knew that Russki chick, under a fake name of course. (I tell Dion to shut it. No luck) Used to play this game called Interrogation. (The ladies egg him on: Ooh Dion!) Yeah you're tied up in a chair (not me ladies, I watch) and she does her thing with the cane and the water and the billiard ball and the blood and the piss! She's so fucking ace at it it makes yer eyes pop. Guess them Russkis know, all that fucked-up history. Hey lemme show you guys!' This has the effect of creating giggle mayhem. Dion's night of sex and drugs and rock and roll degradation is about to go swimmingly. Sadly its chief spectator decides to absent himself. Has a more refined conscience to nurse.



The Bicyclists If I am

not mistaken, next day is my birthday, though this happy fact will stay a secret from the world. Dion and I, not speaking, head out on the road to the Haast. Under thicknesses of drifting rain the hills are like brooding soaked animals that want to roll right over and swallow us. Nothing but epic grey emptiness, lonely snakehead of a road ahead, blind twists in unpeopled gorges. An hour in we come to a ford. The stream is swollen and we're forced to stop. We see cyclists - a boy and girl beside the road. Their bulgy bikes are stacked by a tree. In their hooded anoraks they stand paralysed. The girl gazes at us, looks back to him. He seems to reassure: *Don't worry, we don't need help*. I can tell they're one step away from a fight. And the winter rain is sheeting, numbing; people like this, people like anyone, shouldn't be in this wilderness, this green-black forest creepling over beast hills on and on into interior places no-one ever named or walked. Dion grunts: - Get ready, we're parting the waters! - Wait, we should ask them if they need help or something. They're on fucking bikes! he says. I wind down the window and the guy mumbles: *My wife is a little injured, her head is bleeding. Her bike is not so well*. And she looks to me piteously, and I feel like I suddenly recognise her... both of them, under their hoody anoraks... as if a weird *deja vu*. Can't help ya! shouts Dion and plants his foot, and the car surges at the ford. It's not deep and the base is concrete. There's a hefty splash. Stop the car! Cool it dude! *Stop, goddam it!* Why am I shouting? He jams the car back over the ford. I climb out, the raindrift is icy. The couple stare. Come to town with us, I say. They are mute, resolutely sad. And somehow the three of us bundle their gear in back, strap their bikes to the roof. Dion never budes. We're stiff and wet to the bone. They shuffle in like soggy seals, and on the drive back, mutely suffer. Dion interrogates. Why'd you come 'ere then? For adventure. Yes, adventure. Wrong season! crows Dion. That is the point, the boy says. The girl seems to defer to him. How old are ya? says Dion uncouthly. Oh, we are both nineteen, says she. We come from Belarus. Have you heard of Minsk? It is far away, as far away as can be.

At the hostel in Wanaka I linger in the girl's spartan room as she dries herself out. Shortish lank hair embalms a round face. - Why are you here in the winter, she asks. - I'm looking for a girl, a Russian. She gazes. - *Oh I met a Russian. Days ago, in Queenstown. She was glamorous, an 'aristocrat' do you say? A coincidence.* I produce my picture, the one that is in no way Popova. *Yes! Like that. She had that look, a cruel look... And are you lonely?* She whispers it. Too frank! She seems used to a kind of space where all is inevitable, inevitably lost. Yet she potters about and smiles, and I feel moved to talk. 'I think often of the coast where I lived as a child, and where my parents lived till old age. A child never evades his ancestors, and in times of solitude they are our sole reference. When we do our lonely duty we see no future except in the past. Sometimes my parents come to me out of the blue or black, and then I am at the mercy of roiling emotion, and if I try to unravel it, to lay it out as if dissected on a table with guts exposed to the light, I see nothing but shadowy parts that make up a kind of mosaic, or a tangling jungle surrounding my heart. But I say to myself, let me lay them out, these organs of darkness: fear, sadness, fake hope, pity, love, boredom, frustration, duty... let me lay them out. I want to call it my child rescue.' She seems to accept this deep speech as evidence of life's mute inconsequence, and she takes it from me and lays it quietly aside. That's what these mournful people do, I realise, take things and lay them aside. Her boy returns from his bath, and she instinctively moves close, slips under his wing. They revert to their personalised quiet. I excuse myself.

Later, on an impulse I return to the hostel, and seeing them, as I suspected, huddled in the dining room over some tepid camp food, feel a sudden inexplicable anger. I find myself demanding that they come with me, that we will get a fine meal at a fine restaurant and that Dion will pay for it. He doesn't know yet but he will! I scurry back to the motel. There he is with his Rhona and his Lena and they're all stoned and the chicks are semi-naked. They gaze at me. Need your dough, I say to him. Kindly fuck off dude, he says. I grab his bag and take at least two hundred dollars. Cheers. Got a date with people who actually need my help. Back at the hostel the sad couple gaze at me as well. Get dressed up, I say, if you've glad rags that is. We are going to celebrate your significant visit to this fair far country. And we are going to honour the dead. By the way, it's my birthday! Naturally they've no city clothes and present at the door in pitiable anoraks and boots. Without thought they dress the same; these people are dislocated, inseparable, cocooned in stiltedness. Still, we find a fuggy steakhouse with an open fire and settle in. I note the little ritual they enact every few minutes. She touches his hand, he grasps hers in return, and their heads seem to come together just a little. Small talk is off the menu, but the girl has a soft way of segueing to significance. It seems to please him to let her talk; she is his philosopher and his poet. Her grandmother disappeared, she tells me, during a pogrom in the nineteen-thirties in Minsk after she tried to defend her family... as if such a fact were an essential entrée into this couple's mournful quietude. Such non-sequiturs are to be swallowed with sage nodding of the head: there is no other response to the quiet narcissism of permanent bereavement.'

And it comes to Dreeley: without knowing it he has already crossed the border into a land of shadows. ‘This is the couple who died in the Soviet prison in my dreams. Yes, it makes sense, the psyche is timeless, spaceless. And this southern land really does harbour people who fit nowhere...’ Now the steakhouse chef makes an appearance. Kitted in a charcutier’s apron he cruises the tables as if daring anyone to order a steak, daring us to ask why he’s out of his butcher’s lair. And he is luridly thick-set, and brusque, as if determined to prove to the world he is no species of moron chef. He scowls when the three of us want our steaks rare, and takes his squat-heavy frame off to the kitchen, surely to glower in private and turn knives about in his hands. No doubt about it - *he is the Soviet assassin, come again to sniff out his victims*. Soon we are chewing our slabs of animal in lugubrious silence. Blood seems to collect in pools in our plates yet a merciful mash soaks it up, and the beetroot salad rescues us from death by boredom. At the end the boy says *that was quite good*, and the girl smiles. Let’s have a long beer, I say, and you can tell me your family history. I am drawn to their seriousness, to the polar winds of their faces, though I cannot but think of Dion who will have his tongue in Lena’s mouth and his finger in Rhona’s pussy or vice versa. With our beers in front of us like monuments to an old dream of friendship, I start to tell of a story I wrote of a man in a prison in the time of Stalin. And they listen, but as if to an excessively drawn-out cliché. Incarnations of an older world, in all their resignation quietly peering forth into tomorrow without hope or expectation - these youths make me feel it is I who should grow up. What can I do for them? I feel like a fool. But they are kind, and we drink and chat. And by evening’s end it is me who feels he has matured a little, somehow.



Doomed Troika Dion and me, we roll indifferently on. The upland road leads to high mountains, and his headless space-music embroils us in fuggy hypnosis suitable to landscape dreaming. Here is my seductive excuse for basking in the 'ever going nowhere'. Great mother peaks spread out under blue-silk sky, their white aprons spilling into the valleys. A flock of sheep looms on the road ahead. We stop and ogle as the mob of fluffy complainers, heads craning over each others' backsides, swarms messily by. Dogs with pink tongues jump about on curly backs and horsemen in winter gear cruise laconically at the rear. I wind down the window and run my fingers through their woolly coats. Dion does the same. Cool polar wind cleans our eyes. He says:

- Where's this gang going this time of year? The works, I bet. Who'll ever tell their story?
- True. One time when I was a kid I came across a new lamb, stranded on a cliff above the sea near my home. A flecked winter sea, I remember it. In the late afternoon I heard the little guy bleating, and I made up my mind to go back in the morning and bring it up to the field. There it was, under a thorn bush. I carried the little yellow woolbag up the scree slope to the top in my arms - and three mother sheep stopped their chewing and gazed at me. Definitely grateful they were. Not fools, I thought, though their blessed kid will be slaughtered and eaten before many days are out... I felt like I'd done something. Silly really... something special

- Yeah, you never forgot. Is that lamb any less than you and me? Nobody ever tells the story of the damned and dead and forgotten. Right, dude?

Old Dion has his moments.

On our arrival at the alpine village we are told that a light plane is missing over the glacier, and that 'bodies are expected'. Bodies in this paradise wilderness? People shuffle nervously about. Dion lights up a spliff, his philosophy-guy answer to everything. I don't partake, makes me paranoid. We sit in his fogged car feeling dense. Dion suddenly says: hey, let's head down to that glacier. Just to be there, know what I mean? The guy wants to hang with dead bodies. Big evil ice river, dude. We follow the shingle road out of the village into miles of scree waste and boulder fields. At the lip of the glacier we exit the car and climb a slope. The view is stupendous: great floods of lumpy glacial ice oozing earth-slowly out of a pale sky through buttresses of white-hard mountains. Our screwed-up eyes register the sun. Soft Antarctic winds arrive from far. And the slope about us is moving, it cracks and wheezes under us, and little pebbles rattle past to the glacial floor below. In this rock-river world only the sky is still. At last... at the far side of the valley we spy a tiny coloured line - the rescue party, bearers of the dead. Now a helicopter materialises out of the blue haze. We watch it alight on the glacier's rump. The little winter gnat does its buzzy pall-bearing work... and presently is lost in the still distance. The mountains are wind-silent, they avert their faces. The earth sleeps on. Pebbly doings such as these, shall surrender to the sky.



Back at the village we find people tooling about in a kind of feckless slow motion. The chopper has been, delivered its cargo. Two foreign men and a woman, they tell us. Tourists, Russian some say. Didn't know our country. Cruel fate, all undeserved. Precious lives. Dion stands about, raps with dudes, wants to make the scene. People don't notice his wackiness in this atmosphere, or his neediness. Dion requires bits of people and things about him, the psyches of others, and this scene is the closest he'll ever get to philosophic mournfulness. Too much the dilettante to ever fall back into himself; as they say, never alone but ever lonely. Hours later, after more rapping with sundry folks in the pub bar, Dion randomly takes his leave. Outside it's freezing, but I hover by the entrance to the ranger's headquarters. Dion sizes me up.

- I get it. You wanna see the faces, see that woman's face

- No way

- 'S what we're gonna do!

He steps up to the entrance. I hang back. The cop won't let him in. Dion negotiates. Could be our friend, need to be sure, please. The cop consents. Dion drags me from the shadows, I pull my coat about my face. In a back room, bodies are laid out under sheets. Which is the female? This one. The corpse seems short, plump. Dion uncovers the face. It is east European, hair brown and cropped, chin blunt, cheeks heavy. By the head is a pair of dark glasses.

- Not Popova?

- Not by any stretch.

I mumble thanks to the cop and clear out. Dion comes after me.

- What are you afraid of, man? Jesus, let's get to the hotel.

Thanks to Dion's fabled financial stash, we manage to check into the pricey Hermitage. At around eight Dion bursts through the door of our room.

- Dude, I was at reception just now and there was that same cop asking for a guy who sounds a lot like you. He's on his way up here. What've you done?

- Nothing. Another enquiry about that body

- Bullshit, man. What are you not telling?

We glare at each other. What's he up to? I well know how Dion likes to beat up the idea of not trusting the law in any shape or form. And I start to panic.

- Okay. The one story I didn't tell about Endaira Popova is the one where she nearly disemboweled a guy in a Wellington pub

- You were there?

- I covered it up, helped get her out

- O-kay. So she's on the run and so are you - and you want me to wear all this?

- I don't want you to do anything

- I'm the dude with the fucken wheels! You're gonna deny it all. Better still, we fuck off now.

There is a rap at the door.

- Don't wanna talk to this guy, right?

Dion shoves me into the toilet. I hear a brief conversation. He's back.

- Told him you took a walk round the block. Sussed it: we leave by the balcony. We're just a floor up. Get the car, drive the hell out. Fuck, you *owe* me, man.

Owing Dion is the whole point as far as I can make out.

- And you're gonna dump her for good!

This is no time to confront Dion about how he is manipulating the whole affair to suit himself. We grab bags, negotiate the balcony, drop down into snow, make the car. At the hotel gate a figure suddenly looms. Dion accelerates, brakes. The body bounces off the front. In the slush we side-ram a barrier before slithering off down the steep exit road. I turn and see the guy hobble into the hotel car park, jabbering into a mobile. The night in front of us is dense dark. There are no stars. It is achingly cold. We drive for hours, not speaking. There is time to think. Why would Dion want to put the frighteners on me? Why deep down does he need to use me? Worse, why do I need to let him? He wants to get inside my dream! Get a life, Dreeley. No really, he doesn't have a decent fantasy to live in and he needs to hijack mine. We're rivals, plain and simple. Birds of prey picking at a corpse that's all bones. Corpse of what? Our loser lives! Are we each other's *beast*? If you like, if you like... I suddenly find myself talking out loud.

- And who has any right to put a finger on *me*? Who has a right to interrogate? Not the law, not the fucking rule makers! This is a quiet country. There's only one law here, *my conscience*. No-one's going to dictate to me. I've been through madness and sadness, through depression and obsession.

This is *my* journey and no bastard in a uniform with a set of robot-rules in his head is gonna get a hold

of it. Because I'm not anyone's, I am not containable! I'll suicide rather than submit to other fuckers' rules. I will elude these gnomes till the end. I will jump off a mountaintop!

(And Dion laughs) - Dude, I love it. You and me, we're romantics

- Oh but you know what? You need to get a life. Because I need to - and that's how I know you do. Fuck romance

- Don't ever say that, don't ever say it. You need to loosen up, man.

And in the dark I can see he is smiling. Dion is settled in the knowledge that he is an eternal loser - who once in a while is a winner. And he knows this is the fate of all human beings.

Dead End In the farthest primeval places we wish our closest heart friends were with us. In the loneliest moment of the soul's journey we wish our lover were there. I wish Endaira Popova had been here. Perhaps she came here and left again. More likely she never came amid these inhuman ferns and rocks and shadows and streams.

In sheeting rain, Dion steers us into the mouth of the Homer Tunnel. The watery curtain ceases... and our suffering engine booms hollow under rough-hewn granite walls that seep-seep with streams tunnelling out of the mile-deep granite mass above. We creep along the tunnel floor... and in the gloom I see the shadows of lone men who carved this crudity out of sheer rock, in truth out of the labyrinths of their dreams and regrets. Soon a white dot at the far end widens in mouth-open surprise to a huge gorge, with massifs funneling downward toward the fjord at Milford. The rain is deluging absurdly now, thundering on the car's bonnet and roof, crushing at the windows. Shocking cascades shoot from the mountains' granite chops and explode in ravines. The valley floor is a bulging torrent. We skitter to the lip of the canyon and grind to a stop. This is a maelstrom, there is no going on. We are hideously unwelcome, silenced in the horrendous noise of this skyburst hammering the earth. There's no choice but to hunker under, hold our breath, wait for it to end. Even Dion is cowed. I think of water torture, think of a universal mass of tears. Submit, submit you human scum shit, fucking submit! This line turns to a ghoulish chant in my head. Can't get rid of it. An hour of this - enduring a sort of hideous thrill that the drumming water can't get any louder-heavier - and at last the deluge regolates to a sullen thudding on the car's skin and we can at last distinguish raindrops from rain. Soon there is nothing but slithery runnels and rivulets under our wheels shoveling pebbles down the slicked road. A surly greyness obscures the massif above. Dion is moved to comment at last. Dude, what a blast! But his tone is faked. He has seen what irrelevance we turn to when nature vomits on us. We step out of the car. Egregious steel mists mill about the brows of cliffs. Waterspouts on their gravity faces mutter, pissing sullenly into valley pools. The air has a raked and greyblooded leanness that only a deluge can inflict. My skin registers its cold wetness, its rough loneliness. We nurse the clapped-out Falcon down the squishy gorge road to Milford. This route is a dead end; it seems tiresome to be travelling it. But at last the sun comes out and we revive a little. Nature puppeteers our

moods it seems. On our arrival at the fjord the sun is all brilliancy, and the buttressed mountains pulsate in a rock-yellow sheen. The waters of the fjord snake away to the southern ocean. Beyond, is nothing that concerns human beings.

There is always a point where you know there is nowhere else to go. How will D the dilettante deal with this old and painful conundrum? Meanwhile the sandflies (who police the joint at Milford) have found us, and they're no respecters of dope smoke. We deposit ourselves out on the jetty, hoping the little biters won't follow us over water.

- We finally arrive nowhere

- This isn't nowhere, dude. It's *here*. And it's all beauty

- As long as we have all accessories to avoid the real

- What the fuck are you chasing, Dreeley man? Me, I do it for sport, for the ironic hell of it. Why turn it into some morbid quest to 'gather up fake strands of the past'? You think you'll ever understand the totality of the world? There is nothing we can do! We are born as the *whole thing*. We are borderless, man. Do you think you can do better than one single human being who was ever born into this humanness? Get off your fucking high horse. All beings are just like this, forever, and you can't do a damn thing about it

- Cool down Dion. We don't really disagree

- Quit your idiotic mythological quest to find your special goddess. Where'd you get that romantical idea? You claim I wanna latch onto her? Mate, I chase pussy! Not some fucking myth of a woman who's half goddess, half temptress, half ballbreaker, half your own half-baked imagination about some past-life story you wrote. You're caught in your spider-web, you're the writer of your own crummy tragedy.

How Dion likes to rave. It enforces the paradigm of himself. Since I agree with most of what he is saying, the real value for me is when Dion breaks out, gets enraged.

- Methinks you protest too much, mister lonely Dion, lost in the trivia of your own need-gratification, your quotidian dribbly little hunt for bits and pieces of other peoples' experience. You're the world's parasite. There's nothing you can call your own

- I'll let you know if I'm mister fucking lonely! You think there's one tiny thing anyone can ever call theirs? You act like we're somehow animated into life by our 'body' - like some wooden puppet.

(This is clearly the after-dribble of some convo I thought was forgotten) Some huger blueprint has to be here, and it's not physical. You boast about 'evolving'. What, you evolve out of your own head? into a higher form of the same shit? That's a crock. If you were a higher form of yourself you wouldn't be yourself any more, would ya?

(What a spin-out!) - *You* still wanna change things, Dion

- It's all a haze, mate

- Total denial mode. You fear seriousness

- Don't patronise me, cunt! If I am afraid of anything, and that's a big if, it's pretentious wannabes trying to wank themselves to a higher level

- Cool. Let's say you are my own wish to do just that, my own wish to forget, to coast in a dream, to not take the world seriously, to stay stoned forever. You, the exemplar of escape culture. You, the trivialisation of the serious past, of all my furrow-browed seeking at life. Maybe I need you, maybe you really are right! But will you own the things I see in you?

- Uurrr.. maybe.

Amazing how I read the guy's thoughts! Dion somewhere wishes to be me. And I to be him.

After all this guff there is inevitably only one thing to do. To retrace our steps... Besides, the sandies are biting like hell.

The Last of Popova Hours later Dion changes course on a lonely road.

- Man, we should go to places where we're in danger, where there's risk. All roads lead to Shangri-La, my friend, in the form of *Queenstown*

- Don't wanna go there again

- You with your haloed conscience always accept the worst, Dreeley. But do you accept the best, hey? The best!

Dion is the lord of irony. I am certainly the obsessor, but Dion is the tantalizer... who teaches that since all experience is irony, then the past is all irony so he deconstructs it as *empty*. Neat eh? But your Dreeley has a conscience, and says that we have to work with what we have, and have done, in order to let it go bit by bit.

- Our Dion is a super-lazy guy. Doesn't want to do any analysis

- Deconstructing the present is hard work, idiot

- No, because you're unaware a lot of the time

- What's time?

- All right, you're unaware NOW.

Dion chews on this for a while. Presently I lob at him with:

- When a system is benign, do we have anyone to blame? Who are the evil perpetrators now, except ourselves? To take responsibility for oneself is to give up our continual creation of the Other. A repressive political system is the extreme Other

- Ultimately it's just me and you, mate

- But what does 'peace' do to people? Does it make them respect life more, respect themselves? Do we use the peace 'better'?

- Maybe we need pressure, crisis, threat, to feel really alive - even if we're not going to last long. See dude, I ain't lazy! All that time-based fucking about and so-called 'personal development through

struggle' you blither about... in reality we always live NOW, in ETERNITY. There never was 1860 or 1910, or any other stupid date

- Who are we then? Do we ever evolve, do we need to suffer?
- Nope
- The Soviet story I wrote is really about materialism. Materialism is torture. In its micro-trivia it's all torture. In its constant change, its trivial nothingness, it's torture. Stalin understood that. Was he a guru?
- If he was, he was a KILLER guru
- Deep down he thought we should all be liquidated, or else we should liquidate ourselves
- Ultimate self-censorship, right dude?
- I see life as labyrinth, with we as our own beast. Materialist beast who upholds the illusion-world
- So you chase that holy goddess! Fiction, man. No wonder you write weird books
- She's freedom to me
- Only when you give her up
- After you've got into her pants apparently
- Why me?
- You're the guy I need to blame
- Keep blaming dude, till we find her.

Queenstown. The fun and erasure capital gives up its bars one by one. The mind customarily wants to yield to worldly drugs, so Dion and I don't fail to get progressively drunk. Alcohol is our Other, the one we use to stay ignorant, to conjure trivias anew here in tourism-ville. At a bar called *Crawl* there is a girl, a little blondie on a bar stool, and she greets us with a simple familiarity. Welcome to the fun capital, she says. My name is *Pia* (not a real name). Her singy tone comes on like a jewel that says to me I have lately been very alone. Her button eyes seem to scoop up the world's escapes, and it turns out she's an agreeable little talker in ways that say very little. Dion smiles at her, and I barely realise I do too. Soon she has made us feel - as if we never wanted to be anywhere else. We buy her drinks and drink them ourselves. She reveals no need to tipple or pop a drug... rather I see a tiny container of griefs of ages, entombed in the wan mundane pleasures of this life. Yet does she participate actually - for all her attentive eyelash flicks and pursy lips and jingly jewels? We gaze, Dion and I. For she is *open*, as if to far realms... and I begin to think that if we asked her to drown in the steel cold lake she'd do it without a murmur... so lightly that you ought to check yourself in a mirror and say: be careful what you desire, beware your powers of conjuring, of your evil. Her studied nowness be-glitters a thing that once happened, a thing unerased like light that can't be leached from a day, or wetness from a lake. She has no faith but for *this*. All else she jettisoned in some long ago time... Oh she is the killed beauty who tottered in my room in a deadly Soviet prison, and I left her on a slab floor. I did not save her. Dion invades now, whispers at her mouth. Says he wants a dark tall

Russian called Popova. To confide in her is his best sotted homage. God, somewhere he stole Endaira from me. And Pia the little blonde, as if she knew the question would come, tells: *Yes, I will bring her to you!* And seems to say *'I know I can't match the one you seek, yet I am the messenger of the elsewhere'*. And I dimly register that she too is a sex girl, that she waits to be used, and that there are no borders to her. Dion assumed it all along. He never separates those who give and those who sell. But Pia has stood up, and feigns to be a little eager. She leads us into the street.

And in the white of the drunk-cold afternoon, a male face in a suit looms at us out of the crowd. Says a mouth: we're gonna ask you to come with us. More loomy faces in suits stand by the mouth who spoke. *You guys look serious!* Dion titters, till a big guy vice-grips his arm. *Dude, citizens' rights!* I'm laughing too till my arm is gripped. *What the fuck,* crows Dion. We are bundled down the street. I glance back, and Pia on tiptoe looks on, seems to dither like Alice at her tea party, as if here were some problematic mode of goods delivery or a pesky traffic light turned red. She skips off down an alley. Two hundred metres in company of the Suits feels like a mushy slipway in a dream. We're at a building. Entry by an obscure door. *Pig shop!* declares Dion. Down some stairs to a basement room and I'm deposited behind a door. Big cold pause, starting to sober up. Dion is led in. Conference. Policeman sits in front, two stand behind. '...Reason to believe you are occupants of a vehicle identified at Mount Cook... Injury to an officer... Were you in Wellington on the date of... Incident in a bar... You were identified as...' Dion looks like he's about to say *It wasn't me, guv* - then seems to think better of it. Maybe he has a criminal's honour. And criminality or the pull of it is lighting up his face right now. Cops, people, tend to think of him as troublemaker and subversive anyhow - and in that basement it strikes me he is a villain. But all villains ain't we? - since we are born and live and since we're under the eyes and ears of the LAW, under the eyes and ears of the PEACE in some closed mournful place called Nee Zulland, this thrumming humming little democracy, this thuddingly terrifying peaceable little place! Shangri-La of Forgetting, now demanding us to recall out of the pit of our past all our damned and dead things we're driving at warp speed on these lonely roads to get the fuck away from, as if this moment or the terrifying future were a deadly assassin with a knife or gun ready to spill our blood and blow our brains like Easy Riders in a dream... And we *are* guilty, guilty of living, guilty of feeling, guilty of knowing and possessing, of storing stuff away from the prying riders of the LAW... You keepers of our consciences! Which of you cunts knows what we are? You wanna have and keep our lives like you've no life of your own, you stealers, you voyeurs! Now Dion is talking in that charm-ridden way of his. 'Loook, we can do a deal... what you got anyway? You pigs are nosy, snouting about. Charge us or piss off eh, or let us piss off'. One cop thumps the table, another kicks Dio's chair. Barely legal, uncouth. The three bad boys step out. Bastards are frustrated, sez Dion. Time to go! *What?* Bolt! Got the car keys? *Yeah.* Action stations then! And he grabs at me and somehow we run into a passage and somehow Dion kicks a cop out the way and somehow there are the stairs and we're up and out to the street and running god knows

how... and there's the dreamy blue lake, the blue blessed unconcerned rills of it, and those sawtooth mountains laughing in the daydream day at us as we scurry along the shore past tourist folks living some parallel dream... till a red blob shows up in a line of cars that is our wing-ed Falcon. Dion shovels behind the wheel, shouts at me *get in*. But I see coming toward us... two things, two people, two girls. And one of them points at us, and now they're veering our way. One is dark and tall, the other littler and blonder. Dion has not seen or seems not to. He shouts, I slide into the seat, he lurches our Falcon into the road. The two girls like models on a deadly catwalk stride to the centre of it. *They'll clear out the way!* is the last thing Dion utters. *Look out!* is the last thing I scream. The blondy seems to fall to the side as if a shadow prop in a grand tableau but the tall one, the Other, strides on. Why would anyone stride like that? A noble resolute face looms, her eyes penetrate across space as if a deadly angel. Dion hollers. She is blasted off our grill like a bone and flesh ragdoll. We slam the kerb. I am out the door. In the road I am standing over the girl. Pia is kneeling like a stray dog in the gutter. *Popova* is lying at a strange angle, breast pushed outward to the sun, leg curled backward, deep hair splayed about on the asphalt like a ghost head white in a blackened sea... There is a ghost of a smile on her red lip. ...Now Dion shovels me, hurls me into the back of the car. The last thing I recall is the tossing and careeling of my face on leather as Dion floors his hell-chariot out of the streets of Fun Town... and into the lonely land and hills and forests of a quiet dead country.

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Dion didn't tell me till we were in the loneliness... he knew *Popova* was there all along. And despite wanting to murder him when he said it, I was slowly forced to understand: he had to find her, had to own (to abuse) the presence of her, then reject her, for his ego's sake. Then he would have to report it to me for the very reason that I failed to be there, that I failed to find her. But then, the *bad thing* happened, the *uncalled-for* thing. Dion didn't think she was ever going to do that, fuck no. And that admission made me laugh bitterly, at him, at him... until my laughter finally subsided in a mutter of tears, where it stayed and doldrumed for a week or two... before the oppressive presence of *Popova* one day was lifted from me gently... in the keening of a bird, a hawk I believe, as it rose above treetops of black green beech forest, under the shale cliff of a mountain, into the wide sky.

Alone Perhaps I was always a bit hard on Dion. Slippery-eel guy who from under his massed sadness masquerading as trivia, loved to pour oil on the troubled waters of my obsession. I will never know if he mourned *Popova* or not... *Dionysus is the ever-dying and rising god. He is born, he suffers a death-like experience, he is reborn...* I am forced to accept that under that eccentric hedonist escapist drivel is a man with a heart, a seeker. And he delivered one more monologue, outside a rickety hut in the *Matukituki* in front of a field... before he disappeared from my sight for good. He let himself be caught in a moment of what might have been serious sadness. Maybe the landscape of this heartbreakingly beautiful country got to him. Or maybe he did it for my sake. Our sake.

- What's the difference between my God and me, I used to ask myself. Later I told myself: Dio, you cooked up the difference. Uncreate it then, uncreate the difference. Anything we have and hold tends to rule us. It gets in our bones. But if we look directly at a thought, it tends (after complaints) to sneak away and hide. You claim I trivialise experience. Okay. Our experience is consequential since it is karmic - but karma only has substance as long as we fail to call out its bullshit. All that heavy consequence makes me feel inconsequential. You claim that to deconstruct the past is to turn it to a phantom, to a myth, to render it inconsequential. That's where you come in. I get that. And I know we can uncreate the doubt and the inertia and the conservatism and the blocked up shit karma... But our real state, is emptily still and clear like the sky. Nothing to be done, right? Do I worry that it's uneventful in the sky? Maybe. Do I have the guts to be a Nothing? Do I compensate with all my druggy babbly avoidance shit? Sure do. But now, looking at all this beauty, from this utter height... It's not boring at all. It's the most unboring thing. You, uncool Dreeley man, you've got a conscience. I don't. You think about sorrow and torture and atonement and stuff. Good for you. And who's left standing at the end of the thousand years' war? Maybe me, probably you. Who finally got himself out of the labyrinth? Probably you. 'Luck, man.

And with that, Dion-Dionysus got up and ambled away down the trail. Didn't offer me a lift back to dangerous decadent legalist materialist civilisation. Claimed he was going to dump the car anyway. Very considerate of him.



Far below a thousand years ago there had been a gate and a shingle road that ended in a field. I had stood still and seen the mountains tower beyond me. I saw the peak called *Aspiring* hide itself coyly behind a footstool massif. There was no choice but to walk up into the loneliness. On the brown

upland of this mountainside, I am nestled in dew-stained tussocks, their frond-heads swaying and stuttering under mournful wind that combs my skin and eyes. Melancholy sunlight glitters in the dew, and white spider funnels nestle in the thickets. Far on, the wild bottom of the world merges in indefinite sky, signalling 'no return to the realm of women and men'. A skeletal tree in front of me bares itself to sun and wind, and a lone spider weaves its threads inside a fork. The web sways lightly in the polar wind that suffuses its delicate dew-water, before turning to mystery in yellow light. The inhabitant of her airy labyrinth clings on. She is Arachne, the weaver. For whom does she weave in these lone realms? Only for me.

...A spidery goddess dwells at the heart of a labyrinth guarded by a beast. The questing hero seeks her but she is strangely elusive. Still, she offers a ball of twine, signifying her suitor's attention and commitment, to help him trace his path. Our hero 'liquidates' the beast and claims to rescue her. Later though he abandons her... on a remote place, on an island. She pines away, longing for death. Now comes Dionysus, god of desire, claiming to rescue her. Once more. She always was a subtle spinner and gatherer of threads! The hero begins to see the labyrinth as of his own making, as the sum of his searchings, that its tunnels are but the roads and walkways of his mind: all that imaginative story-weaving, all that obsessive need to discriminate truth. Why go back? Why not repair to a lone island and sleep forever? Because *desire*, the 'ravelled sleeve of care', the need to know and to return, cannot be stoppered! *To deconstruct* - is the goddess' magnetic wooing song. Still, the hero wants to protect his island self with a 'shield of learning'. Though his search intensifies to desperation, the goddess affects to disappear in front of his eyes! At last he realises that the problem - the beast - is himself. The beast is nothing if not a master shapeshifter, and obsession is his weapon. At last he has no choice but to skin and gut and fillet his own need. Facing his gasping for knowledge itself, he sees that it is but the habit of habits, the maddeningly unbreakable paradigm of *seeking*. At this point, the beast's death comes by suicide - and with it, the goddess's. For she the goddess is the container of all life and death, she is the movie of this world, she is the seer of the movie, she is the screen on which the movie is projected, she is the one who asks 'to whom does the movie occur?' And when the hero has intrigued and infiltrated that question, there is nothing left... She is gone. All is gone.

Dion-Dionysus had his role to play then, and I admit he was only myself. Do you see how close we were, like lips and teeth? All of my fiction is myself. And when Ariadne ceased to be, I finally admitted she was also nothing but me. Why did I look for her? This is a dilemma faced by all the world, inexplicable since none can trace the beginning of desire. And in the asking of *why* the seeking begins again. Our spider-trap is the desire to know, and all worlds unfold from desire even as heat of the sun emanates from its fiery heart. I admit there is nothing outside myself; all these wishings and wanderings are just a failure of responsibility. There are two things in this life: to accept oneself as pure formless awareness, the origin and end of all things - or to live inside the drugged solidity of

form. To know that you are nothing but yourself and that the self only *seems* to take on the world's objects... But to see oneself as 'seeker of a goddess' - this is hypocrisy, for would a goddess ever see you as anything but herself? Did Popova, as she loomed in front of my car, see me as anything but herself? What then gives me a right to see myself as separate from her? Still, we all want to worship as children, and so we wander in the mind, in dreams and in histories. This has been my position. I should declare it to be no more.

Yet a thing holds me back... Who has the guts to be nothing? There must be romantic talk and mournful talk, longeurs to celebrate the suddenness of my lady's end. That is why I came here to this place. I know now that birth and death are nothing but the arrival of the thought and its withdrawal again, that the self has no death but the thought of it. And I want to tell her, want to shout it out to *Ariadne*, as if she will understand me, as if inside her wide gaze she always gets it. But she is vanished among lakes and fjords and lonely coasts. My pursuit of her was just like a pursuit in a dream, a dream in Dion's car... like that old Kiwi escape flick *Goodbye Pork Pie*. But I don't mind. I love that she was so clever, so elusive. The fact is, I am alone. What is lost, if no-one is there to lose it? Now it is me who is so clever, so elusive! Here in this high craggy place above green black beech forests, where spidery waterfalls feed gorged rivers far below, and late white sun streams across folded peaks and shadows them... there is such a silence... and this bright air that fills the world is nothing but my own breath. Breathe in, breathe out... and here is the pulsation, densifying and rarefying, of life itself. A lone hawk caresses the sky below my eyes, and its undulant rise and fall is the loss of itself, such that in pillows of light it ever is and never is. If it were not air, how could it be? If it were not a bird, how could air be? ...One time there was sleep. I recall there was sleep. A voice said: in sleep is no awareness, in sleep you are not. But I know that I slept, for even beyond things, awareness is. And it cannot cease, but only cease to conjure. I know that I saw no hawk in the sleep of dawn... and here is pure awareness, no 'limitation of knowledge'. In the sky of awareness, only two thoughts - I and this - ever arose. I is the origin of this; without I there is no other. And this-this is the creation of worlds. From one thought comes all worlds. Limitless self-delight, limitless play of nature. And ego: habit of desire, habit of paradigm, restless wanting, serpent biting its tail, donkey craving its carrot... From mysterious desire relationship is born. Why desire, why want the works of this world? Ask not! Cease! Unless you are delighting... The goddess teases me. I want to follow, want to chase her to the end of the world, to the end of this still valley at the bottom of the planet, and beyond to the far south sea, where only a lone seeking hawk drifts in ether between crags. Here is romance, nothing but illusory beautiful delight of the self. My hawk is in the sky. A particle none other than light. A wave none other than the sea. Awareness, do you limit yourself? You never could, never did. Nothing ever was. All is dream. Who seeks? Me. Fiction. No-one.

My hawk disappears, into theatres of the sky. The goddess laughs. Her laughter fills the valley.

CHAOS

Our narrator's name is Lean, and he is a journalist for want of a better label. His business is scribbling stories to be swallowed by a society in the agglomeration of its myths. Once upon a time he did it all with gusto and commitment, but now he is over it, he says. In his diarybook he proposes to tell us why. Obsessively.

Fatal Disease 'Absent the grand fabrication of narrative, none of us can exist. In this limitless chaos of the possible, all living things crave order. Each tiny person must carve out his story, bless him, and wants it to be unique. For me, Lean, time is short for dumping things in print. Health is not what it might be. I am rotting. Total cell-count is burgeoning yet the form will be flushed away. Great news! I see nothing of consequence ever happened to me since there's only phase in this life. Sole philosophic question is: Am I responsible? Problem now is whether to write or think at all, to engage in a quixotic unravelling of complicated strands. Need to make sense is gonna be my undoing. I've nobody to talk to. Lemme talk. Got everything and nothing to say. *Be as you are*, the sages murmur. Well, if things could be any other freaking way I guess they would be. While I breathe, the bubbling Need won't rest, it vibrates. I'm getting ready to leave. And I've no way to do it since where I go is probably nowhere. Is nowhere to be like this? Fucking likely. I watch this careening phantasmic menagerie of forms, and tread water and... panic. What use is life trashed by death, what use a body, or knowledge that's all forgotten? Why participate when it slithers away from our candled eyes? Thus I feel the *chaos* - and like a pilotless plane, blunder at eternity.

Yet I cheer for a Mystery that's beyond time and space, conjured by no-one, un-subject to turn of mind or dogma or aught any creature might feel or invest in. There is a ghost who deigns to create! She has a thousand names, and no name whatever. I publish a few. The great, the reservoir, the aware, the shaker, the mover, the self who wears no chain of form, the holy ghost... She watches the angst of a man called Lean who fears the loss of his teardrop identity, his little dance of ego and id. The man who writes this shouts to be free but everywhere is in chains: of belief, idea, conjuration, fantasy, branch and eddy and limb and subset, matrix, thicket, bits and bobs, clouds, rumours, humours, perplexity, fixity, falsity, paucity, megacity, eccentricity, subtext, combination, involution, ramification, bifurcation, conflagration, fancy-flight, dream in air, garden-path, demi-chewed notion, drudgeries, faeces, gossamer filigrees, veins and eggs and wombs and rooms, fatty deposits, brains, prisons, walls and wormholes. To name a tiny few. So, the name is Lean. Some kind of *person*. And much shit do I write that must never be published in daylight. I take refuge in satire but in the silent night fret for my soul. My feelings overflow bounds of acceptable receptacles, they flood out of diaries drawers and windows, down stairs into streets and gardens, muddy up the sea, contaminate the

sky. Nowadays I write without thought (bad risk) but still pray it coheres under laws subtler than I know. This is my excuse for fashioning a story of bits. Really an impossible thing, like a dancer who craved to crawl out of his skin: expressed nothing but itself, harked at the Great, fell away like spent fireworks in the sky. Inconclusive, lacked critical mass, killed ideas it fed on. I'd like to spill my guts in red streams on your pristine carpet. Vomit anything that comes to mind. Fixations. Ego. Effects of bad seeds. Life that eats itself. Incest. Anarchy. Craving for disorder. Clinging, suffering. Hate of suffering. The Impersonal. Victimhood. My strange longing for a girl. There's even a whodunnit plot around that girl (I don't care for it) to illustrate and embroider my implosion at the hands of bastards. I pull myself on by my bootstraps: the telling creates my story, the very telling lets me live.

Narrative will Save Us! Must we all cleave to ignorance to live? My latest depressing conclusion. Depression is my muddy counterfeit for calm. I dwell on the crazy stuff people do. Eg: Feynman the physicist - he wanted to trace the paths of incorporeal particles, pin down their ghost-dance of deceasing... Boffins choppered up Einstein's brain to discern why it worked so remarkably. Pol Pot tried to kill everyone in his sight, and they say he started out a principled man. Genghis Khan died content with the smell of human blood in his nostrils. Uncle Hitler was a vegetarian and saintly to animals. Some folks get so damn confused they top themselves. Others get so riled up they murder folks. Some think and think and go potty like mustachioed Nietzsche who tried to swallow the wind. Some eat and eat till they're *dead*. Dudes drive cars at 200 miles an hour. People compose deep books. Women shop. Brave fools think they can fathom economics. Some report on this *maya*, dreaming they'll change it, worse still improve it. Some prey on others' misfortune in order to live. They're Journalists. Don't talk to 'em for pity's sake. What could be the fate of a man in search of a story, of a life? Who thirsts for coherence in this insane *maya*? Pity me then, I've no story. I am Lean the lonely one, all stripped away.

Fear the Beast This hack invents chimeras in the dark of night. 'I cling to a life raft, while at the fringe of my cabined world, my fragile pact with eternity, lurks a shapeshifting BEAST. He says: 'I am the wombless motherless beast of CHANGE. I am borderless, obliterated, never what I am. Scream and no-one will hear you! Set the controls for the heart of the sun, rush at warp speed to the centre of the black!' ... Yeah, it's Tuesday. In the morning. Eat your yoghurt wheatgerm and live. Decimate this cruddy kitchen while you're at it. Is change really a mercy? We live we shit we eat we live we shit we live live live live!' So cool down Lean. Chew yer scroggin and pause... Look, blueness through the window. Celebrate the gloried hiatus of the *possible*. Your kettle has boiled. Reminder of sweet home. And for an instant I feel a strange stirring love... and I've come to the bottom of my bowl. No place to look but up. What's with the shitey world today? Plug in, get online. Live - in your self-made death frame. Used to it. This is Tuesday.

The Beast that Eats Itself Life is sacrifice, life is incest. Two particles meet, and their problem is murder or death. Ypres 1916: two private soldiers bayonet each other's lungs in a nameless field, lie dutifully dead in embarrassing mud-bed together. Well done lads, you participated, and your next blood-and-soul embrace is destined in far off future wars where armies of men will again knife and fork each other while criminal politicians dine at table on fatted birds. Just to *be here* is incest, sacrifice. Sister-brother tribes annihilate each other to win their peace: one living, one dead, the other to follow. Saturn chews up his children, buyers and sellers scrabble for a bargain, in the self-gorging city the cake poisons 'em all. Friend, let me help you live, we'll welcome each other at the stoop and fondle our daggers under capacious cloaks. Citizen, seek not to know on whom the guillotine falls. It falls on you! It's your blood that shall water our streets, water the fetid dreams of a bloodthirsty populace. Great trees gulp carbon and give us breath yet we saw off their necks! All things take: the more conscious the taker, the greedier. Man. Fire delights in its prey's agony but consuming itself will fail, while the airy sky bloats with clouds of dead fire and casts them back to earth, where a swathe of clamouring vegetable-trees suck the watery bounty but offer no thanks. And water will ever seek its body of ocean, its massive delight, but abandoned to the fiery sun it evaporates in muttering mists and is swallowed again by the sky. Sacrifice. Incest. Sacrifice.

So much for the weather forecast... Twelve hours just vaporised, earth turns again. Your lean chaos-merchant in the night quiet, abandons laptop and sweats in the dark... How did we learn to grab these little electric info-packets of light and store 'em? Or how could such quanta be when all is fluid seas of energy! How can forms *form* and where do they vanish? All things must vanish, to Black Holes say the boffins, that suck us like vacuum cleaners into rubbish tips of the matter universe. And there really are holes in the light, tunnels in the sun! And if we burned our dead... if I was burned and they scattered my ashes, atomised my ashes... oh lord when would I turn to spirit? For spirit hath no space - so what is this infinite unseen from which all forms cometh, to which all returneth yet cometh again? In the dark I see... it is the *mind*, my own own mind. That am I and always was, and forever will be. Explain it, you material scientists: how mind is unseen yet cannot fail to be. Explain it to a cynic. Explain to a smoke-rotted journalist.

Little Jack Horner sat in his corner, gobbing his pudding and pie. He stuck in his thumb and pulled out a plum and said oh what a good boy am I! Should never've been a hack. Shoulda been... a what? Mystic poet philosopher preacher. I know: a *writer*. Here's what I like about journalism: the ephemerised trivial quotidian nose-in-the-dirt doings of little souls in their soap opera of eternal nothingness, ever-bubbling like mud geysers from the earth, fantastically complicatedly nuanced and signifying fucking nothing at all! Refuge in the NOW, I worship it. This great distraction-hideaway of fearful exposed humanity, these jottings and doings of tweety little beings in the immensity of void space. See how that immensity blows in like the weighty North Wind into cracks and niches of our

flimsy houses, flings open doors, howls like a surging tsunami to the reckless wild beyond, laughing. We're domestic beings, can't survive boundlessness, cower in the teeth of the wild. Horrid tundra knocks with knuckles of death on our papery walls. We study minutiae at the ends of our noses, chatter in nervy circles, share our bubble-nuances, so glad to be invited inside to the warm party of life. But we shiver inwardly, being sensory rats; we anticipate some great *examination*. Our little scandals hint at a great scandal: we fail to admit the emperor has no clothes, that we live in a lying land, that we're corrupt and abhor the truth though it blows all about us, lifting and flinging the debris of yesterday's news in our canyon streets. We fail to look, we fail to see, we flap our arms in the world-scouring wind, scurry to catch wavelets on a shore, scoop handfuls of dust swirling in deserts. Running breathless for the great deadline we catch taxis to nowhere, slouch on grubby pavements reporting nothingness writ in mud, scratch out a life that turns on others' misfortune, finger poppies amid the graves of dead, harken to the hollow bells of unmeaning. We proclaim the *Importance*, everywhere the *Importance!* In the relevantness of our crowing ecstasy we are Little Jack Horner who discovered the world and saw it was good, and made a meal of its unfailing bounty... But Jack, he died and was forgotten, was no creator, nor even a participant. In the forests of time, did he colour a single leaf, usher one droplet from the great lake of the sky, paint a snow-shadow on forbidding peaks, cross an ocean washed by winds no human ever mastered? He did not. He was just a grubby little journalist who thought of being a wry-ter.

Vanity Fair... This writer spits on the scientist's How and the philosopher's Why. He asks *What*. Here's his lowly calling! What, he asks, are the limits of *suffering*? We journalists know best, hard-bitten cynics that we are, how vanity rules this world. We rush to clutch the action and freeze-frame misfortune and self-congratulate on our crucial work, work we know will ever go on in the face of slaughterwar and Armageddon and un-meaning and grinding repetition of pale horror. And we'll laugh at the prospect that nothing will ever change since this is human life, since these are the conditions and parameters by which all must function for ever and ever Amen. But we must work, otherwise where'd be learning and progress? Tyrants will pull wool over eyes, injustice and horror will multiply, none will be called to account and the Good won't flourish. Thus are the world-engines of HOPE oiled by the dripty-drip of news. Must have our daily feed of adrenal-junkie factoid dramas or life will not be life, will not be worth the living. No meaning, context, nothing to cry or die for. No way to forget our neighbourly battles and dealings in our little window-worlds where fools like us peer back at us from hovels and brick-fill boxes and skyscraper towers, towers that once heralded tomorrow's better world under a better sky... Segue to endless hard-talk chatter on equity and justice and fairness for all. Is there no *equilibrium* in this crazy hill-of-beans world? Calmed by what hidden hand, the grinding chaos? The truth I saw one time in India. An old peanut seller with his cart languishes in heat and flies and dust by the roadside. His nuts are stale since no-one wants them. A man comes by on his bicycle, careens into him. Bang! Little hills of nuts are toppled and the stick-

legged vendor sees flash before him distorted visages, hungry mouths, despair - his family! So many strewn in the gutter and dust oh Shiva oh Kali! But he wrestles to restore his little nut-hill. Curses and sweats and moans. *And I saw how no-one could ever help him.* Thus I felt the sickness of the world... and reported it. Give every bastard a million then! Oh but our currency 'd rot away, death of value, death of economy, no free lunch blaaa, we need scarcity failure poverty or there'd be no striving or aspirational bullshit. Hail the great valueless striving for value. Great fucken lie of capital and commune. Economists widget about stability and prosperity for all but secretly know it can *never be*. Always have to be ugly fat chiefs, skinny little indians full of envy. Here is our tragedy: old-man river to nowhere has to flow forever. And we all wanna know For Whom the Great Bell Tolls. You fall by the wayside, I shake my head, whisper prayers, pass on and forget, seeking grim reality *elsewhere*.

Lord grant me attention-span of goldfish! New narratives required! Forget my life's a grotty tale of profitless half-baked wishy embarrassment. Don't remind me I'm nobody in my eighty-year waiting room. Still I wriggle in shame and doff me cap. Thank yer God. Glad to be alive, glad the showers are really showers. Fortune's meany roller-coaster snake jigs its snout up down. Childish hearts lurch in mouths, flickering screens of markets and banks hypnotise us little insects. Myopic bees clutter and soil their own hive. Any bee that's half-way clever will fly away, pass its earthly summer in mindless peace and bring no pollen home at all... Oh yeah, human beings one step from gods, but what life would *I* choose? I'd rather be fat and happy and ignorant than live a nobly degraded life in some benighted poverty-stricken corner of earth. In fact my ignorance degrades me wherever I am. But I'll not fail to *imagine* the gross and mass suffering of the world, imagine a perpetual living war somewhere elsewhere. I'll dwell on it 'cause to be a masochist salves my conscience. And I know it's the repetition and repetition of a thing that makes for suffering, but I will cling to the thought that this suffering has no general *mass*, that it is *individual*, that it is fractally broken in merciful bits, limited, diced into moments of ticking time - each of which is mercifully *gone* as if it never was. Please tell me forgetting is the end of suffering, that forgetting is release, that this is god's fractal mercy to the very bottom of time, to the very atoms dissolved in a void. I know there's no escape but let there be the mercy of forgetting. Please please make it all better, please salve the gaping wound of conscience...

And oh what an elaborate and beautiful thing is conformity. If all the beautiful people in the party kissed each other twice, once on each cheek at greeting and again at parting, how many kisses would be there? Surely enough to drown a million sorrows. This world grinds to conformity through habit. Even as we plan to stir it all up we simply vomit it out again in a technicolour yawn heralding new conformity. This morning as I awake is it conceivable that I might find... peace? Can philosophy do its cleansing work and lift me from the grind of yester thoughts? Nope. The quotidian world will roll on and crush me like a steamroller driven by a drunken man, like a horse its rider in a fatal charge of cavalry. Just try to do one little thing, just one little thing outside the square, outside the box, outside

the norm - and you will see how the world comes cracking down on you, how the censure and the vilification, the scorn of the four winds will pour on you and drown your dreams. The world's mindless rump is sensitive to nothing, but *you* will feel the guilt at its righteous hostility. And we live in a democracy! A hysteric democracy where gated women hate, children store up evil, the old lose their marbles, men bully their way to happiness. Where we assiduously vote for public clowns, live shunted side by side in horror of loneliness, where animals are boned and sliced to make our lunch, where we grin-freeze the past and future in photographic death (we never move again) and yearn for a moment that never was, or if it was, 'twas the moment where we yearned for *another*. Moment, that is. But don't you dare ask *the question*. Don't be a bleating little Prufrock. Oh don't wish for anything *other*... Tell me, how can a creature so fine and complex as a human being be consigned to so lowly a fate?

Answer: exterminate all sewer-rats! Systematically extract all rotten teeth! Maximal efficiency meets maximal emotional chaos #&\$@#++! And fractal unholy killing ORDER reverberates in the very bones of man. Yea, to the fifteenth generation. There are things so entrenched and monstrous I can't start to grapple with. One of these is *Holocaust*. Equal, our magnificent gift for delusion. In a flicker of brainial cells we re-badge any narrative, skirt about, shift the goalposts. Must replace, forget, in order to go on. I tell you this world or any other is a tendentious floating maybe-narrative flickering in and out with a whim and a will, and our planned and sober thought is all a fucking scam inside a dream, and when it flickers in and sticks we have the insanity of order: hardened habit plucked from an infinity of choice. But if anyone thinks this insane constructed world or any constructed world is to lead us to heaven - then he or she has not grocked the *Holocaust*. The lesson: take nothing, nothing, for granted. What is a 'world' but a flurry of mental electrics, manner of speaking, pathetic posture, mad anachronism? We're all mown down like nine-pins in a bowling alley and still we hope! Showered to death, cleansed under the nozzles of invisible gas in human slaughterhouses just like our animals, and we are so amazed that it can *be* like that. Where is dignity? We are *meat*. But on we trudge with our sacrednesses and our logics and our papering over cracks and our dark revenge. Till the very day we fall and repeat the tragic tragedy of all our forebears. And it all gets *stored*. There is a group-mind, groupthink of skinhead thugs in an alleyway bent on the bludgeoning of one who is unkempt. There's a race unconscious with enough deep *scheisse* stored within to swallow ten thousand years of light. **Do Your Duty** The *Einsatzgruppen* took snaps of their victims: ladies in groups, contented friends as if at a beach picnic, before shooting and dumping them all in their great *Babi Yar* trench. Some say Himmler only thought up the gas option because his uniform got spattered while inspecting a shooting. So very distasteful. How one loathes inefficiency. What suffocates me is the people who collated the gold fillings and jewels, shoe-pairs, laces, follicles of hair, entered them in smart ledgers, refused to smell the smell or think the thought or stand up and say: *No. I am a human being. I do not participate in butchery.* What of the barbers who snipped and

gathered the hair of naked jewesses at the chamber doors? The Commandant's wife and children who conducted happy familial lives within the fleshly smoke-drift of the slaughterhouse? What human is capable of this? Only a system, only a *corporation*. Are we human if we fail in our duty? No, we are animals. But what is a human... so much *mince*? What's human when officers require flawless requiems to be nobly executed by the camp orchestra while their eyes grow misty at some fond remembrance of home before the war... of blonde blue-eyed girls beneath a linden tree... of heather under azure sky... then send those sad and sorry fiddlers down the really road into the jaws of gas. Ruefully. But harken to the beat of a butterfly's wings! *Collective Memory*. Thinner than gas, it screams...' **The Conductor** In my little city garden, pulling back the wandering jew (what's the proper term these days?) I bring to mind a famed officer who greeted trains at the Auschwitz gates. With nonchalant sleight of hand and philharmonic mastery, in mourning black with gold cuffs like teeth he plied the conductor's art, and the orchestra responded as a great machine as he directed guests to left or right: young and strong to the left, infirm and childish to the right. And I saw that *duty*, unbearable though it be, makes each human free. If we shall accept our place on earth, accept the consequences of need - to kill, to love, to die as victim - then all is peace. And though we fret and wonder at fate: *shall I sleep in sheets tonight, eat wholesome food, take a warming shower, cuddle my loved ones after days of cold confined in wagons blindly enduring the grind of steel on steel?* we can be sure that our part is stolen by no-one else, that we are the enduring centre of our little glade, our little storm, our little garden. And salvation is here: duty to be done and done again without ceasing or regret. And as we greet the black-clad puppeteer and walk to his time and feel ourselves members of his orchestra as flutes and fiddles and piccolos, as we shape the very tone and timbre of his sublime inexorable work, composition of greater minds written in the stars of the Reich, we go to our duty like lambs. For without us the masters cannot climax their thousand-year symphony, their poetry of cleansing, their concertos of cool butchery. We shall soon rest, soon rest. At peace, at peace. Walk forward. Do not cry. Hold my hand. Play your part. Remove your vestments. Mind the step. To the chamber. Fear not the clang of doors. Breathe in, breathe out. The darkness. Summon your dignity. Human not insect. Arbeit macht frei. Don't shit yourself. Don't struggle. I love you. Is there a hiss? *Insecticide*. What is burning? Breathe your last. Expire. Be gone.

All suffering is past, all wandering done. All done. And where is grace? It is that there is no other moment. No other moment but this.

And I am ashamed to the core. What is the worst a foolish man can do in this world? Shit his pants in polite company. Show his penis to a class of children. Bleed on the hostess' carpet. Become ash. Wipe out a race. Nothing is ever disturbed! Not the moon and stars, nor the deep motion of the ocean. Not the wind on a mountainside. Not the tolling of the knell for all creatures born. Nor the habits of a human being... In my kitchen I come upon a phalanx of ants. Their crime? To be in my sink in my

clean human world. I wipe great swathes of them out and take scant pleasure therein. Look to the chaos of the mind. The holocaust of ants screams at me: you are no greater! Little ants, where have you gone? Do your little souls rest, is reincarnation for you? A solemn but blythe historian mouths his words on television: 'The war to end all wars had been costly. Forty million died... But was the loss in vain? No, they live on in the glory of our remembrance.' Suffocate that idiot first, I beg you lord. And overlook my little mass-murder. My ant murder.

One single heedless *breath* is taken by a rotting man called Lean and a billion microbes act their tiny masquerades and perish. Kamikaze microbes die for love of emperor! Who tells their untold story? We, human, greater microbes, take it all for granted. But I have no mastery. I am but the folds and valleys and cliffs and mountains of a great slimy country called Body. I am the polluted evolved field, rotting produce of human years, heaving livers and bile-churning liquid lakes, rivers of blood that roll to the heart, whiteblood corridors light-years long, caverns organ-deep, deserts and dunes of skin, mines of bone, cauldron-eyeballs sucking in light, skeins of forested lungs sucking crazily at solar winds. I am all birth and change and time, slow-dying, imperceptible as microscopic suppurating sweat-bubbles. I age in the moon's crying tides, astrologic fodder for the stars' nudgings and whisperings... helpless in the pulsing heart of an aching body. I am no individual. Microbes are me. I am microbe.

Razor's Edge No peace for me. Too much hate. This cold winter. I ache. No more stories. All my rationalisms, used up. Here I am. Razor's edge is infinitely thin. The spirit is lean. I wish I were boundless. I should cut myself open, red streams may purify. Only the empty can swallow the world. *Only light behind the eyes perceives the darkness.* Only the wind hears the thrumming of a drum. Every breath is my last. Madmen claim to stopper death. Only the lonely know a friend. There's no suffering but here. I imagine a razor so thin it cut through emptiness, a particle so small it never saw another, a sorrow so deep it swallowed the night. A castle so dense none ever escaped, a net so fine it scooped the sea, a love so entrenched it fed on itself. My clock is ticking. For every gesture, the anti-gesture. For every breath a vacuum. Every dream a rude awakening. The razor's edge is immeasurably thin, yet microbes journey forever. The caravanserai sets off. Is never seen again. Military columns have no end. War is here. Bell tolls for me. The night has no dawn. Here. Here. Don't wait. There's no time. Hurry. Hurry.

And then... my bell rings.

Man with Girlfriend Something resembling a plot is about to get invented in my gritty booky-wook! Smell of Plot may keep us all alive. Positive story: How I Wooed My Girlfriend. A girl I met at a party called Dora Jarr rocks up at my apartment. Super late. And rings my bell. I spy her distortally through the view hole. Something idiotic makes me open the door. And she barges in, ta for asking.

- Why you spying on me, dude called Lean?
- Sorry?
- You bump into me. Three times. You're a journo
- Right
- Need to see if you're a perv.

Solid thighs disappear up a tartan skirt. Black coarsehair corrals a square pale face. Breasts beckon under a leather jacket.

- Guess I'm hunting a story
- What story? 'Bout me?
- Dunno. (shit-eating grin) See what turns up?

She scrutinises. Audibly breathes, fingers clenched.

- So you 'like me'?

- Umm

- Males want full sex

- Er, pass.

She nostril-sniffs, turns on her heel, jerks to the door.

- Wait... half sex?

- Fucken mess with *me*

And my breathy reply sounds mocking. - Are we... medicated?

Ooh, she comes at me. I lose balance and clunk on a sofa.

- Know your fuckin' type. Think I'm some underage chick who needs a fuck? Show us, dude!

I've no words.

She jerks her pants half down. Eyeballs me.

I'm staring at a particular spot.

- See!

She straddles, starts to grind herself against me, hard, hard. After thirty seconds the pantomime bores her. Rolls to the floor, splays her legs, pouts. A hip flask drops conspicuously from her jacket. To speak would be problematic. She eyes the door. I wanna shut it but my legs are all broke.

- Let me... make a cuppa?

No answer. I'm up, hobbling to the freaking d -

- Bring sugar.

I divert to the kitchen, balls stinging like only boys can know. I hear a bang from the bathroom. The girl is in my shower. Make yerself at home Dora Jarr, whatever yer handle is. After a bit she's back, dumb-stares at me with tray in hands, like I'm the intruder.

- One of us'll be off then?

- S'pose I was a bit sudden.

A bit. Her eyelids seem to flutter. I can hear her breathing. Feel a bit protective.

- No worries then

- To let go, act spontaneous... or just be a fake. Get it?

(Process this) - Yup.

Lower-groin pain has a leaner view of her spontaneity. No worries, she's a guest.

- D'you eat cake? I got some

- God no! I'm fat enough.

She slurps the tea absently. Presently grabs a fistful of cake, nullifying her previous injunction. Drops a fair few crumbs. (Keep gob shut since it's going swimmingly) It dawns on me she's far younger than me. Seems angrily shy in a fierce sort of way. Solid cheeks, pouty lip, hunted look. Lot going on in that head. Where the hell did we meet?

- So, we met... uhh -

- Uh, the press party? Old journo strips me with his look, asks his curly questions and fucks off. Then bumps my arse at the Claus Heffenbonck conference (what, who?). Not to mention... uh forget it

- And the curly question was...

- I'm 'ere, dude

(Sure are) - So you're - staying the night?

I'm amazed I say it. But she seems to swallow it. Clearly post-modern.

- Up to you, pal.

Pal. Cool. My new girl, then.

A Day Trip to Remember Today being a Saturday I arise a little late in the afternoon. Days still have to start however much light is squandered. There's no running from habity thoughts of rot and failure. They say 99 per cent of all thoughts are repeated, and 99 percent of them repeat 99 times over... till one day we peer dimly out through our sticky mental gauze and sense we're trapped creatures, dulled without remembrance or inspiration, ignorant of spider veils that shut out our unutterable unspeakable freedom. We need the jolt of the new, the jarringly unknowable! I remember the first day I confessed (selected) thoughts to Dora Jarr... wondered aloud if my life amounted to a hill of beans. Nope, she said, but it might amount to a 'beautiful fucked-up narrative'. What could she have meant?

Downstairs the kitchen is a jarring mess: what else where Dora's bin and gone? Slow bomb's gone off. Doors ajar everywhere, her silly trademark. Her bed place abandoned hours ago is a pile of junk: knickers, boots, fingerless gloves, she-male porn mags, a scraggly hairbrush. Who can sleep next to that? Me is the short answer. I get when there's no choice. A single man of my age and condition has no choice. She got that on day two but doesn't exploit it too fecking much. Dora Jarr is a mystery: seems like hunted and there's no hunter but her. She vibrates. There-but-gone, tense but vulnerable in a way that gets me churning. She'd kill me if I mentioned it. But would she walk out? Don't mention

that either. People who walk through strangers' doors, what are they looking for? I'm her stranger, and I suspect the whole world is. But she hooked me, and she's definitely a Thing. Maybe she's my thing.

Late in the nameless afternoon Dora actually arrives. Got a present for me, innit. Hallucinogenic Drug. *Whaaat?* You need it, pal. *If I say no?* Then I'm not your girl anymore and that means no sex. *Does it mean you won't raid my pantry and wallet anymore?* We'll see 'bout that, clever dick. And as I ope my mouth to make further objection she stuffs it in. Has a book for me as well. Read it quick, she says. Timothy Leary's *Anatomy of Psychedelic Experience*. You hit three stages. One: egoless bliss. Language will fail you at last. Two: futile battle to understand said unrestricted state. Three: absurd struggle to regain normal dull consciousness. That'll be you. Now get with the program, silly old journo. *You mean turn on, tune in, drop out and all that? Are you going to stay?* Nah, got thingies to do. PS: I'm locking you in the house. Then she's gone. Cripes! Half an hour on it's coming at me... And I'm clingin' to my life, clinging to my learning clinging to my nightmares let 'em go no no NO! clinging to the CEILING yoooooooo... Who the hell actually is me what's the boundary of me what freaking person am i? How many times will these brain cells die and go to heaven? *You* tell me (shake finger in mirror) what's my END? Holy shit Dooraaa! I'm a GHOST, I'm nothing, I'm ETERNITY I'm DISEMBODIED. Must avoid self-harm... Seem to 've been in this TOILET for hours... They say desire is HELL but what am i s'posed to do? Might as well not have a *head*. Can't sit on arse in ashram on top of fecking mountain. We're born to stir, make mess, make suffering, fuck up, repeat till hell freezes over. Struggle and holler and fight and die for *justice*. Do we get it? GOD already *dispensed it*. I tell you LIFE is AMORAL. And religion says be quiet and blissy and humble and lick status quo arseholes. Fuck status Q I'm hungry, want sex, bored. Exit for GOOD. 'Cause I'm God, I am IT. Get the fuck outa my WAY. I invent Cosmos with every breath. Ah but Leeeean, you'd not even exist without a myriad of forces that *created you*. Oh so they all joined hands in a papal conclave and thought up me did they, wise guys. All in the same boat as me. God in a boat floundering: 'S called the world. Even HE can't exist without ME. Needn't worry 'bout me 'cos I'm free of him. Deal. We are Impersonal Being which means ANYTHING GOES. But I *say* what goes 'cos I want my pleasure my CHOICE baby. Or wuz dis blissy drug my choice? No, was bloody DORA'S. Now it's all gone BAD... Where is the COW anyway?

Hours pass... Some mystery god of Night daubed the entire contents of my apartment black! Every nook and cranny surface object mote molecule a silky richy lushity velvety black. Black atoms yo. Shoulda been born black. Incorporeal night winds flutter through my street window. Won' blow away my little black secrets... *Calmer now. Meditation*. My mind is still and mirror-like, its depths visible to sandy rippled bottom. On a forgotten tropical shore, wind and cloud can't touch its paradisiac repose. Later the mind wanders, flutters a dream of the faraway, of the wind-borne. Seeks tidings, and

a great albatross brings promises over the ocean from afar and alights at my feet... Now I am the wide sea of possibility, of longing winds that fleck the horizon, that stir the spume and foam to grand longing, eternally pushing before which I sail lonely to the end of the world... The mind-sea is a relentless blue-grey thousand-mile heaviness of waves that surge forever to the uncharted destination and never arrive. Waves... I see their nature is to surge and reach, dissolve and die, o'erborne by pursuing waves that also pass away in opaque blue-black depths of forgetting. No place for humans, this; the pouring winds make fallow my lungs and eyes. And sometime now my mind is a watery fathomless grave of the past, of ideas and notions lost, of my childhood time gone, of all the dark deep of a life stored in the hazy mud-filmed bottom-locker of the sea... And then it tortures me, this mind; a colourless vaporless mirror of stasis, as if a lethe, a pall, has settled on the ruddy sun-addled waters, and I'm a sailor languishing under useless lumpen sails. And I stir with my eyes muddy pools of ragged boredom-despair... Dora? Where are you, mermaid? Come home. I made it. Didn't drown! No answer. Make a wish then. I wish... in the morning my mind will be as a crystal river in spring, longing for the sea. And for thee.

System Paradise all the Days of your Life 'Case you're wondering, I crawled down the damn fire-escape after Dora locked me in. Trawled the city, surfed the crowd. Slow motion fog-parade of DOING. This shopping mall's the land of the DEAD. Shit everywhere. Rotting? Get a facial. Dying? Get a rope and nail. Necropolis. Sausage-machine fatness. Digestion, shit-progress, walk on... Look at them fucking *towers*. Why not mechanise whole shambling universe? SYSTEM is God. Purpose order! Forever daydream paradise. Machinery + Technology + Regulation + Control = EASE. Oil and nuts, wire and titanium. All feelings accounted. All impulse regulated. No twitchy moves. MACHINATION = apotheosis of happiness. In glassy tower rooms in foggy hives, workday warrens, we ponder at screens, send missives from pillar to post, confer and ruminate and fret, deliver decisions, await consequence, quake at superiors, mop sweat, furrow brows... Any hippie from Mars 'd see we'd all gone barmy. Why do these earthlings grovel to serve the levers and buttons and dots that feed their own pastime machine? And they built a fractal computer as big as a planet and clipped and snipped every genetical bit, with a nano-fiddle here and a nano-fiddle there, till they birthed the fattened PIG of MONEY AND MEAT... Cadge some coin for a coffee dispenser. Tastes like Dora's five-day panties. OH SYSTEM. Life's smelly red-offal carpet laid out for benefit of humo-bots. You think I lack the compassion touch, reader? What will *you* do when no-one cares because you're smelly trampish and old, when not a soul registers what you want or think or vote? When you're alone and lonesome death awaits. My advice? Face the stupid emptiness, and *breathe*.

Walk on... so many lonely fish in a rainbow sea. City crowd-shoals flutter in fantasmic synchronisation. Reefs abound. No Fisher of Men in the canyon city. Pools of human eyes come at me, pulse and withdraw, never can hide their mind-flood. What secret rivers of tears are unleashed by

people aching for the sea? We are the fish, thinking musing fish in our watery grave of musing, in liquored veins of streets whose horizon is the tips of skyscrapers, all unheeded by white winds of the sky. And down here our minds over aeons encrust pearl-shell identities, our clam bodies brood on lies and doubt and dreams. And on such strands and reefs we cast our nets and seek one fish who'll look at *us*, who'll moon through lips and eyes in private dance with *us*, who'll join our wan undersea world of lonely consequence...

Where to at last? Embarrassing when you find your end in a deserted church. Gloomy dust beams, high stained window, distant boom of the city. A woman genuflects alone in her pew, plugs her gaps of loneliness. Belong, fragile heart. Not me, not me. I laugh at people who belong to prayer and rule and habit, to vision-hues and softy peccadilloes, who cleave to posturing curves of thought, to bygone years and fogey generations, to a billion sacred unquestioned destined rules that scribe the path. Why should all this *tattle* rule your thought and act and speech? Lest you be trusted with the wide, the open, the unbelievable? Christian in his heaven, muslim and his mecca, jew with his god-fearing cap, scientist in his 'real world', kid with his fire engine, monopolist with money-wet dream, writer with booky-wook, guard in button-shiny uniform, reporter with death-defying deadline. Lunatic boxes all. Dicks who think they're individuals! Give me a mind that scorns the dogma-muzzle, pricks mental chattels, gobbles moral hang-ups. Rejects and lets it all, knows shit is forever, knows that mouths mothers minds bottoms toilets tears are the goddam same species of faeces. Where the fuck is the end to limits? Order order order determinismismism. My neighbour's toddlers obsess every day about being heard: they've perfected a subtle style of screaming. Later they'll obsess about friends who dump them. And as adolescents about contours in their faces, as nubile women about FAT deposits, as thirty-somethings about making it, forties about the meaning of making it, fifties about power, sixties about accolades, old and dying about emptiness. Me, I'm old and dead pushing forty. So who is this sick victim of rigidity? The dangedest thing: he's an *individual*. Give the toddler a hoop to tend, hoopla, she's a hoop-artist. Spend your days in dank mines, lo, you're a miner of soot-faced dignity. Me, glued to computer squander my life in digital pathways. Lock and load! What's yer label, Lean? Brave journalist! Walk on, dreaming your visions of frantic emptiness... Ugh, but I'm lonely. Go home. Here's my limit then, where satire ends, where I won't endure its heat, where I won't eat my own medicine. My limit is as a lover. With his ache.

Baby Anarchist Dora Jarr's back in the house. My adolescence, my little ache. I want to imagine a sepia-world before the Coming of Dora, where god is in his heaven, money in the banks, national team on top, roses in hedgerows, cherubic clouds in the sky. No dog-eat-dog hate but democracy freedom peace, civilised people quaffing wines nibbling canapes, conducting killing-wars with proper rules: no gas, no landmines, prisoner respect. Mercy, for god's sake! But I don't. I whisper instead a hateful mantra: *Anarchy is creative, bombs are gifts, destruction is rebirth, rudeness is manna for the*

soul and selfishness instructive. Dora is here. Those Hindus watch the hell out for Kali and Shiva. Shiva wipes out worlds and Kali grins like the evil Martian fingering her thousand-skull necklace. Bring her ON then.

The girl is making baked beans. And burning the pot. I should teach the child to cook but she'll call me Dad. I open a window, mutter about carbon footprint. Want toast? She says get it yourself dad. I do. She eats it, big deal. New idea: lightly suggest she come with me to a book launch (where she can drink). Some deal about 'Pure Foods and the Future'. She eyes me up. Am I having a laugh? Nope. Hmm, will establishment wankers be there? I tell her you bet. Says she'll come then. Goes off to dress. I fear the outcome. When it's an 'occasion' she morphs to a clown. Dora returns: red boots, green tights, pleated green skirt, red tank-top, seedy-denim jacket, face a whitish mask and rouge lippy smeared about. I murmur approval to which she replies *fuck you*. I hope she might when we get home, both of us shitfaced. I feel strange. She looks at me as if to say: has your brain changed shape yet? I know she wants it but her Drug made me vacant and detached. And detached is my best shot with the likes of her. Makes her stay within cooe. She grinds her teeth and hangs onto me as we come through the party door. *So why're we here* she asks, as soon as I've secured her a fistful of drinks. This question hints at our complicity-intimacy, since she assumes I wouldn't come amid this lot for social reasons but professional ones, and delays her question in order to appear nonchalant, since there are big intimacy problems. I note she has 'em in bed. If she lets you close it's because she needs her teddy bear, or rather, needs to fuck Teddy. Poor Ted! Bet she went through a few in the childhood she's still aching to leave. Thing with her is not to assume she's inexperienced or moody or painful or anything. She might let you co-exist then. It's a struggle but dude I get it. She's none too soft in bed, and gets annoyed if you want to linger about, but over the weeks little by little I get a feeling she might be lingering a minute or two longer. Might even allow a kiss or two. That's trust, baby... Meanwhile Dora's got her agendas in the murky corridors of student politics, and claims to have written articles for foreign mags exposing Graft and Malpractice in the Food Industry etcetera yo. Keeps her sources close to the chest since I could be a rival! A rival she assents to blow under sheets. Using her teeth. Won't go there. One little thing she floats into the convo though, is some foreign businessman with whom I assume she has a fruitful or fruity relationship since she smiles self-satisfiedly whenever she drops his name. Professional source: wow, what next? But watching her makes me ache. The *transitoriness*. How to let her see, that our little moments are the precious stuff of life itself? - that with each breath all her girly anti-moments are frittering away, frittering to nothing.

Dora affects her gracious look (pouty and sulky) and scans the room. Lucky her square face is obscured by thicksy hair. If some sap asks the name of 'my daughter' we'll both poke their eye out. We gaze sternly in opposing directions, affecting purposeyness. The room contains business types,

journos, pollies. Having trouble focusing: mind is not mine after yesterday Dorra Jaarrrr. Now a tall figure in a creamy suit steps through a door from the interior (we're in a posh town house) and greets our host. They appear to be chums. Eyes turn, the hubbub changes pitch. The arriviste has an angular-diffident way of standing, and I note the vaguely genuine tan and choice diamond on a fingery hand. We seem to bask in the reflected halo of Money, and he grins as if his eyes were forever happy (shoulda been a novelist, me). Accent betrays a whiff of German. Dora turns to look - and spits a cheekful of liquor right in my lap. *Fuck!* At this precise moment the fey-tall Deutsche breaks conversation and steps our way. Dora freezes. I take the proffered hand, knobably diamond prominent.

- The journalist Lean is it not? Ah, do not be surprised that Claus Von Heffenbonck claims to know English writers of note. You have read my new work? Und greetings Dora! Almost I did not notice you.

Dora shuffles left and right. Her knuckles are shaking.

- We are friends also. In fact, I should have little words with Dora alone, yah?

I'm not grocking it. Dora mumbulates. *Need the ladies.* Lurches straight for the front entrance. Oh, a black-suit man bars her way. Folks get jostled. She is manoeuvred *subito* to an inner door. Herr German, he smiles.

- Excuse us, Mister Lean.

What the hell did I just miss? I stare at the mystery door fronted by Man Thug. No entry! Wait up. My old drinking bud Lorna Kraus is making eyes across the room. She comes up. *Greetings Lean. Saw the little altercation. Wassup?* Big blacksuit dude is getting in the way of a story. Get him to show you the ladies room? *Ooh, filthy. Watch me hit on him.* You're a doll. And Lorna does the business... and I'm through the door. Dog leg to the right. Choice of doors. Behind one, a Germanic voice.

- You turn your nose at my tiny gift? We stay friends!

- Why? I'm fucken dangerous

- Come to my house. You like my beautiful leather

- Fuck no

- Why play game of coy? Do I not pay? My drugs are not to your taste? We lie to each other now

- When don't we?

- If you want to punish, sweet girl, take advice. People want revenge

- Save me Heffie

- Take zis. I haf it ready. Manoli, leave by back way.

Uh, someone else there. Sniffing noises. A minute goes by. Now rustling, fumbling.

- Dora, I am so better for you than 'You Know Who'

(Voice is slurred) - Fron' or back, babe?

- Back, always. The table.

Turgid breathing. I imagine them in a white-fleshed arc over the slab. He'll be mumbling disgusting things. At a point she cries out like a child. A guttural utterance from him. Now rustling.

- Going, Heffie
- Why such hurry? I have new task
- Double jiggy-jig in a day
- My Dora is in too deep? Little heroine masochist. Little attention-seeker!
- Spare me the analysis. (Silence) ...That good?
- You improve. More patient I think. But listen. You will steal me a paper of your mister *Goran Demecharian*. Private. Here is the title. Put it in your breast
- Ooh, why trust *me*? My other Daddy never would
- Think of nothing! ...So you haf new man? Zis journalist?
- Nah nah
- (Silence) - Play your little sleuth game, but not at my expense
- No prob, bigwig dude who's loaded
- I worked for what I am
- You mean what your Nazi ancestors did - selling piles of gas to der Fuhrer
- You are stupid fucking. Do not be stupid!
- Okay okay sorry all right? I'll steal yer shitty paper. Nice Heffie, still the one. (Fumbling, breathing)
Am I better than *Mummy*?
- What? Yes yes, you screw me better. Now go. Back way.

Finish! I blunder through the nearby door. Steps clump down the corridor. Pause, then follow out to the crush and chatter, and there's the Germ, all icky charmy, conducting his killing-wars with his civilised rules, smiling at the minions cluttered about quaffing his pricy slurp and nibbles. Dora materializes, spies me, shovels a thing in my mouth, hisses in my ear: *Keep it shut, Lean*. We drink hard for another hour and I leave without her.

This journalist is now conscience-bound to ask slutty Dora how she got tied with bighead Claus Von Heffenbonck. Or where she slid off to, post party. Under one's beady eye she opts for the smokescreen of telling it like it is.

- Six weeks ago. Only time I ever thought of getting paid. Before him I thought, no effing way I'm gonna. But two grand. He's a goddam show-off and I'm such a self-respecting slut. You like it, Lean? (She glares like I'm supposed to applaud.) Why me, I hear you ask. Not yer average catwalk model but that German wanted BAD so I obliged. He's a total dickhead. End of
- But what about me? He bloody well knows of me! And how many times? Do you care?

- Care? Lean, I was so pissed and stoned I don't remember a freaking thing. Sorry sorry, okay! This is my research into corruption in the fucking food industry. You never did a thing to get info? Bloody bet you did.

Very defensive. Holes in her story you'd drive a coach and horses through. And what the hell about this 'Other Daddy'? And 'Mummy'? I'm gagging to know. It'll have to wait.

Atonement Amazingly, Dora has stuck around. I begin to see a pattern these last months. She'll appear at a silly hour, acknowledge not a thing and demand body satisfaction in proportion to her latest psychic disturbance. I thereby am invited to predict its content. She's pretty bestial: a rough enigma with me the faceless conduit. I've no idea if she repeats the ritual with ten others in the neighbourhood but the fact is, she comes to me. Maybe I fill a hole in a way she has no notion of, wanted precisely because she has no idea. Father thing? And if I were to protest at her sexual harshness she'd despise me, and if I didn't she'd despise as well, so I wrinkle my brow and endure. I suppose I'm possibly in love with her, and we both suppose that no matter how pointless or unfeeling she is I'll not give up. In our Shadow is our chance, it is said. She tests, always seeks the opposite: if there's control she'll subvert, if there's knowledge she'll confound. Even chaos she'll despise. But things unspoken: there lies the chance of life, of feeling, care. Even hatred is feeling. So I turn to sardony, hint at the mystery of my annihilation - and the dirty girl deigns to need me, even affects a bit of concern. There are times when she wants that I actually whip her. Go elsewhere for the main routine, I tell her, my house has rules. At this she gouges or bites or spits or punches! I am required to disdain her as a disgusting child. At last a strange light fades out of her eyes, a light I only notice when it's gone, and then she goes calm, turns into the supplicant. One night she dribbled from the mouth, and I wiped her little prayer with my handkerchief. Then she put a thumb in her mouth and stared in my eyes. Brave, I thought. I stroked her cheek and her defiance melted away. She let me cradle, then slept the sleep of one who has atoned. Till tomorrow.

On that tomorrow I am emboldened to ask: - Who named you Dora Jarr?

- Nobody. Not my elders anyway. 'S who I am.

The sullen reply invites me to poke at a parent obsession.

- Where are they?

- Looking to send me home?

- Looking to know you, since you're a mystery

- Dunno who my mother is. Don't care who my father is.

These lies are delivered like she lost a dollar bet on a horse. But tone never matters with Dora. Fact matters.

I pause discreetly. - Have you tried to find them?

She seems almost about to tell a truth then thinks better of it.

- Nah. I mean I tried, but... waste of time.

I affect ignorance. - So they're out there... waiting?

She glares right at me. I endure being the arch fool. This is our limit of investigation for today. But I won't let this game of dare-the-past wear me out, not before it wears her out. All things of the past... must surely be paid for.

She has Gone to the Wide Universe Things fall away, pass out of shape, and at the end there's only the moment, whatever trivia it contains. Flotsam on the surface of a great unconscious lake, with the rest scuttled to the depths. Embrace the new, people say, but you and I never can cope with this world. Krishna the god was begged by his acolyte Arjuna to show the world's true nature. So he did and Arjuna nearly went mad, crying out and begging for the unutterable horrific bedlamic vision of death and change to *stop!* No. Our experience is always a sheltered, calibrated, tamed, pointed, simplified choice. We never learn how to swallow the world's chaos... So I think of the demented - who wordlessly cry out to all the things they lost or discarded. Have we seen the suffering chaos of these we love when their past is sucked away behind the glazed pools of their eyes? I need to talk about my *mother*. Just after Dora turned up at my door claiming I'd harassed her and punished me by moving in, my mother passed away from dementia. What am I to make of it, I ask myself, when a person in an eighty year-old form is presented to me in a casket and I am told 'this is the body of your mother'? Is there a single thing about this 'body' that is less unreal or more important than the person of sixty, the person of forty, of twenty, the baby of one month, the fabled twinkle in her father's eye? I saw death for what it is - a complete fake, a misnomer, a meaningless idea, a dumping ground for all superstition and ignorance. Listen. Whatever form you appear to take is passing away with each breath, each atom-second, into another form which passes away to another form, forever. This, in any million combinations, depending on the size of the optical tool we might look through. And none of these so-called forms is anything other than a phantom, an idea. And when this 'last form' appears to disintegrate, when the light of the windows of the eyes seeks the beyond, when the zephyrs of breath labour and flow outward into the wide air, when the bag of flesh hesitates, falls and hugs the earth and will not get up or walk on no matter how its companions urge it to, then we can say that the *person*, whosoever and whatsoever that may be, has moved beyond our sight into another room, a new garden - to pluck a fresh adventure, new entertainment for her eyes, a new movie to titivate her, fresh parlay with the ineffable converse of life. Inside or outside time and space, I cannot say. And I will reconstruct her story, or not, and reframe her former being in my eye, in my own tangle of grief and love, my narrative. Until I will think of her no more, since I also will have moved beyond this frightened quivering set of atoms, breathed too many of these intemperate breaths, replaced too many of these beaver cells, and walked on down the hallway into the dark or light. And then a hush will fall on our mutual mother-son soap opera, our construction, our painted little stage set, for whom there is no audience any more, for whom everyone has gone home to bed, and for whom a hush and a forgetting

now falls in the camera-show of the world of men. Never to return by this road, but passing on, into the dawn. Whom will we meet and do our business with in future pleasure gardens? It may be our chosen familiar ones or it may be strangers. Walk on. Be sure of this: nothing ever stays what it is, and yet no fish is ever plucked from the infinite sea. Walk on. Don't look sideways, or grasp at myriad operas of invention that beckon from the verges of your cosmic road. Instead be the garmented nothing that you are, and let your train trail behind you like the stars of an emperor, and let those who come behind pick up the cloth and treasure it - or not, as they choose.

When the news of my mother came, Dora took the trouble to sit with me for ten minutes, even made me tea... or whatever was in that mug. And she kept her mouth shut. I appreciated it. And as we sat we looked out to the neighbouring house and saw a little bird in a window. It couldn't get out, obviously knew nothing of the transparencies of glass. Ran up and down the shelf, got in a birdy panic. Now the owner poked at it like Punch with something that looked like a toilet brush. Ignoramus! That bird impinged on your crummy human house of secrets? Get out birdy or die, the owner seemed to say. Fly away to some parallel universe, outside our precious human window that we fool ourselves we own as our own.

Into the Dark to Find the Light So I said to Dora: did you hear of the analyst Jung, who waded in the gutter depths trying to transmute old rubbish into light, while the white winds of empyrean peace laughed over his head? He said that he made a decision one fine day, to dive into the muddy filthy crypt of the psyche. Brave man. Sick of the restraints of science, he saw that his overweening need to bring light into the murkiest places could only happen by surrender to Ignorance itself. Contradiction! Seated at his desk in his room by a lake in Switzerland, he dropped. All certainty all sanity all order all science all attainment fell away - all the sludge, into the bin, so much *scheisse*. In these wild places no language can sustain: no handhold of reason, only shadowy utterings and breathings and hysteric contradictions. So Jung unearthed some symbols, half-pie languages of the shrouded intuition, and let them stand as pictures: for wisdom and power and innocence and shadow. And out of the unutterable labyrinths of unconscious dreaming we trace Ariadne's thread back to the quiet sunlit worlds above. And here is the contradiction: no matter how we live, we will always seek the paradise of order. We follow the goddess' thread forever to the sunlit horizons. And as a race we never arrive, for this life is a railway station where people depart on night-trains just as others arrive at the gate: the crowd never diminishes. Every victory is the death of the old, every learning the displacement of something precious, the ruin of the old order, just as today's success is tomorrow's failure. Displacement is our fate. There is no evolution. When Jung dropped away to the land of the undead, he knew he would never return. When we die to ignorance we never return. On our journey of a thousand miles we die to every step. And the great ticking shuffle of shift and change whispers to our ear: you'll never come back, not by this road, not by any road. You are a ghost who walks, a mist of bones, a catenation of

ideas, you dissolve in the very sun above that loves you. And in the darkness, in the primeval world-past from whence we came, from whence we evolved, that we claim to revisit with the torch of greater understanding, with the torch of the future - we are confronted by a bloody laughter that shakes us to the core. And we see that all we are is an ape in a suit, eyeballs in scholarly glasses, bloodied hands with a manicure, a grist of primeval ooze that fashioned letters and words. We are the indescribable mass of churning life that blindly seethed over countless ages toward order, toward the sun. Now all these ages are washed away, so that this moment is the only thing that is! All time is slaughtered for this insouciant sweet moment. Oceans of blood have fried in the sun for the sake of the smile on your infant face. Billions of years of moments, all gutted and gone - so that you and I may stand here, in this sunlit woodland in the morning, and thrill to the soft perfection of ourselves. Thanks to the *darkness*.

Dora, won't you finally face me?

No such luck. But I may have hypnotised her. Because she listened, silent to the end.

Connected to Love So this day has turned to wholeness. I am the shy smile on my lover's face. The eddy of water in my lover's bath. The tattle of this day's love-wanted ads. Hushed space between the stars. All the days of our past. Caressing child-finger on a smooth shelf. Pulsing breath of a nebula... I fear no steel-eyed hawk in the blueness above. I fear not the lonely demise of a sparrow in the mouths of Sumatran crocodiles... The low-rumbling city. I laugh at the obituaries of strangers. Shit that runs in these gutters and sewers. Eviscerating chatter of the middle classes. Scream of pterodactyls ten thousand aeons past. Arthritis born of persecution-complex. Stifled yawns of a clerk in a former century, broken cup of a dead soldier at Thermopylae, hair of a woman in a dried-up river long ago. I laugh at all of these. I am the smoke and spark of a winter chimney in cold England. I breathe acres of birds rising at dawn above a lake. I am the mathematic of two atoms in love in the star known as Andromeda. I hear the sighs of a slave-girl under weighty flesh. I am you. We are larva in the bowels of a planet. We are grains of the deserts of the moon. I know the ache of a cub lost in snow. I am the breath of a billion-years wind as if it never was. I am the moan of telephone wires and a thousand conversations. I am the rise and shuddering fall of the fortunes of millions. I am the vibration of factories at war. I am the mud of the battlefield of the dead. I am the day-longing of a butterfly as its time draws into night. I'm the pleasure on your face when you wear the red shoes. I am time that never was, that I never owned, that never died, that ever lived. I'm warm here with you. You're here.

You're Not Here Yesterday is gone. Today is cold. Feel like dying again. A stream clamours down a mountain, searches for the sea. Yesterday's insight? Gone, for self-pity. But the truth of life can't die, it wells up. If we leave the body we can be sure life goes on. Where the hell is the border? Pay attention Lean. Your sense of *I* doesn't depend on your body or brain. *That You Are*. In this world or

any other, you are here... In the house opposite, the mother is feeding her child. It screams and I think of Dora. Why not smile, kid? You've got ten billion years, enjoy the tyranny of *this*. But if the moon-child smiles up at me I'd better accept: a signal to not give up. Last eve there was a discussion on self-pity. It went badly. Dora won't accept my melancholy. Looking back (I told her) I was spurred on by lack: always a cliff to climb, thicket to untangle, flame to quell. Discontent lent me life, discontent made me. The only goal was to fulfil this incarnation, ensure there is nothing left to repeat. How fucking deadening, Dora cried. - But I need to look down on all experience! so some jumped-up kid (like you) can't run rings around my arse with her flailing energy and intellect. *Pure pride old man. You're a poser.* Stop, didn't want this conversation. She doesn't do melancholy, except when it happens to her. Needs to fry all feeling then. But is she not also driven by lack: cliff to climb, thicket to untangle, flame to quell? She told me I'm a wanker. Twenty years is a gulf, unless she and I will look into each other's eyes and see ourselves. But not today. With Dora each yesterday is irrelevant. It is as if our togetherness is wiped out in the morning. It might creep back with the passing hours of longing, but in the cold of morning I am her stranger, her imposition, her obstacle. Her eyes say it. Fuck Dora, I'm alive too. Learn from me if you dare! But she grinds her teeth, seems to have multiple places to go all at once, in her fusty clothes, her mussed up hair and her despair. All is postponement, the world a heavy oyster with no prospect of a pearl. Now it's cold, the toilet froze. Someone left the window ajar. There's a blood-red scarf round her face when she emerges. The street door slams. Her breath in clouds. From the high window I watch her go. See you tomorrow? The pavement runs away in cracks and seams of ice. We can play tragedy since we live. I don't tell her she is me. She knows it. I don't tell her she can't leave me: she knows it. Doomed before the start. She tells me so very little or nothing. It's her way to be intuitive, the chaos of the unspoken. This is the spice that keeps her, the deadly grist that gets her boots on in the morning, that sends her out to the cracked world, to wherever it is she goes. Once I spotted her in a library. Maybe she longs to do research, be a writer, be somebody, part of a cosy team. She sure plays up the life-weary sage with me. Maybe it's her caustic offering.

I woke at 4 am. She was there, snoring from her milk-for-gall mouth. I felt insecure and I ached, hung over from staring at a TV doc on the holocaust. Horror wants to cling to my back like a hairy spider, to which I feed my fly-blown conscience. The anger-ache in my fingers tells me I want to be a victim. Arthritic victim, lick of racial wounds who conjures the faces of ugly systems and officials who I can loathe and murder. I'm Baader and Meinhof, I'm Black September. I'm heinously accused and arrested. I want righteous revenge. It comes to a shootout: me the hostage has to kill them all. There's a heroine. It's Dora. I save her, I always save her. She and me are victims of chaos. We're small people, we cannot grow up, we long to lose. This self-immolation in the heart! Dora has a heart, and it knows it must cleave to what it hates, endure what it fears. When bodies sleep together, like Macbeth and his Lady, there's a guilty complicity against the world, and it is tested in the metallic cold of

morning. This morning she wakes and sees me and is sheepish. Momentarily forgotten are the days of insult. Her young heart. I long to kiss her face but won't. Only in the romantic hours of drunkenness and fatigue when the world is a mellower place can she assent to have her lips pressed like the vodka she's drunk to buoy her, or her breasts kissed by this fuzzy man on the edge of her love. She might even assent to wear her raggy cotton wrap out of the shower - and wield her gothy vulnerableness at me by shedding it, as if a token of sorrow, wee apology for weeks of dirt and hard ice.

Perfect Victim The young are so bloody young and pitiless, they make me flail to shed my self-pity. I put my head on the block for Dora again.

- When the dead are gone we may ask, what role did anyone play in this eternity?
 - Huh? Oh yeah, your mum. (She humours me) To be dead might be cool, right?
 - We sustain the dead. Or maybe the living are the dead
 - The winner in your polemic is absurdity. Didn't we just do it, Lean? Lighten up, jeez.
- Le petit morte.* But anything the little anarchist says is going to piss me off.
- We do one little thing, we wipe out the rest. All is dissolved
 - Dissolve this shit, babe.

She squeezes me you know where.

- D'you know what anarchy is? To have the guts to admit you're nothing, to be as you *are* (She cringes at the idiot) - Lying to yourself, Lean. Take a chill pill
 - Sick of pills! The point, Dora. Anarchy is a fool's game since nothing stays anyway. Get it?
 - And murder and suicide and your mummy's death'? They 'stay'
 - Dump responsibility! 'I'm the cool anarchist so I'm out of here'. Sayonara!
- Dora looks at me like I pissed in our love bed. Exits the bed. No goodbye.

After an absence of days the baby anarchist slouches in and announces:

- I met my father.

And following an icy pouty pause in which I fear she just left me she declares:

- He's cool. And you need to get with the program. Check his business website. Pure Food In The Everyday dot com.

(Phew, righteo darling) Days pass, she keeps a beady eye out. I dutifully check the site. Uh...

'Nanotechnology and Pure Food Programs'. Dora hands out poison chalices but once in a way has reasons beyond punishing me for being old. Must be a story lurking.

Days later, a little media item appears: to the effect that a certain Captain of Industry has been found beaten and bloodied in the cellar of his country residence. A message in red letters on his wall informs us he is a 'Nasi Faggit'. This allegation is corroborated by presence at the scene of Nazi memorabilia

- SS uniforms, leather bits, pistols and the like. Were his (illiterate) attackers also Nasi faggits and maybe jealous? All had considerately fled before police responded to a tip-off and discovered one

Claus Von Heffenbonck, the proprietor, covered in gore and attired in nothing but jackboots and a mesh of leather. The coppers at first failed to recognise the victim, but later at the hospital confirmed the fabled industrialist had sustained four broken ribs, two lost teeth and a skull fracture but was otherwise pretty much alive and eager to point out he had been dragged at knifepoint to his cellar, wrapped in those disgusting leather items and beaten to a crisp by four skinheaded gentlemen whom he assumes to be from the National Front. Next day, numerous Fleet Street hacks willing to fake up the required research discover by magic that Von Heffenbonck did in fact have an uncle who knew a certain colonel in the SS, and thereby is a neo-nazi and gay to boot. The gay bit is harder to prove since Von Heffenbonck, though unmarried, has a reputation for liaisons with prominent people's wives, including one *Larissa Demecharian*. More dirt forthcoming. Watch dis space.

When I reckon to entertain Dora with this titbit at breakfast, she slaps my laptop shut. I raise a dully quizzical brow and she turns on me.

- Don't you get it? That rich German fucker we saw at the book party. I told you how I let him try it on.

(Have to play dumb here) - Love your phrase 'try it on'. But (a) why would a rich German fucker try it on with a little girl who'd likely deposit her boot in his eye? (b) Why admit it to me since 'try it on' means 'had full sex'? Is my wee girl shamed 'coz I'm her Significant Other?

- Listen up smartarse, I can learn heaps more about arseholes like that being *female* than you can ever be arsed to

- Wow, three rectal references in one sentence. I assume 'being female' allows you to rake up the *dirty stuff*.

Dora is consternated. Not hard to do it to her. She breathes through her nose. Her eyes glisten in a strange mix of hateable vs. vulnerable. Better let her win.

- Okay I'm a dickhead. Will you say what happened?

- You knew effing well who he was all along. Always wanna play me, don't ya? Well I don't play, mister.

This is cool, like a tennis match; can't hit a good return unless she whacks you one first. Dora longs to be feted as bad and villainous but I know better. She wants to be loved. And won't accept *that* from the likes of me or Heffenbonck or any other Daddy... though she will force me to squeeze the dirt out of her, the little tragic who behind that gritty realism bravely denies her victimhood... which she'll then grudgingly admit to if you grovel long and hard enough. We'll try a baseline lob.

- Them skinheads sure did a job.

She looks through me. Her black eyes say: trust the bastard in one million years? Answer: *possibly*.

- Wouldn't know

- Wouldn't know what, though?

- If they did a good job

- Why?
- Wasn't there, obviously
- Certainly not pros. Can't be trusted
- Sheer luck eh?
- Sheer luck. Clearly knew who to ask
- Clearly.

The rotting investigative journalist allows himself an inward smile. They were mates of hers! So, right now Bad Girl offers to 'reward him with a cuppa'. Okay, you boil up water, me pop in teabag. That puts the faintest hint of smile on her dial. Smile equals harbinger to possibility of SEX. Dora and me make quite a team in a dirty perfect world. She has the makings: instinct for the story, grocks the stupid irony of our work. I'll never train her though. She'll lead me like a dog. Here she comes. Lean likes violence, she whispers in my eye. The table makes our bed. We eat each other's mouths. She uses the marmalade in ways I don't care to mention. My laptop is peripherally damaged. Her black eyes register beauty, at the critical moment.

...A hint of a pause for my sake. And lover girl slithers off to the shower, leaving me to clean the debris. Surprising breakfast. Okay, 'll be an okay day.

Late. I lie staring at the semi-dark. In the night psychic immunity weakens, and devils creep in. The girl sleeps, though she bursts out in flummery talk by and by. I tend to listen. What kind of girl consorts with skinheads, gets them to semi-murder the richo she's rooting, then boasts it to another middle-age crock like me? What'd he do to her? Strikes me she's done it before. But - she told me. Ahh, told me. Wants approval. Maybe planning another fucking psycho-thing, this heaped silhouette in the dusky space beside me. No, she's a girl, here with me. And why not, why not me? Calm down, Lean.

Calm. Yeah. Three days later, little plot thickens. There's a Dora-call on my cell. Breathing only. Then another call the same. Some oik commandeered her phone? Fuck off, I manage to retort. Moment later, a thought. I call back. This time sobbing. *Where are you?* In a tunnel. *Where? Tell me now.* Mustn't. *Dora!* Lane... green building... roundabout. *Stay! I'm coming.* Drive out, nearly ram a cyclist. Green building lane tunnel rounda... Bull's Corner! Dump shitting car, run inside. There's a bundle in the gloom against the tunnel wall. She lies there, black jeans down her legs, blood on her mouth. Bag contents are shat about. A filthy scuffed jacket. And those boots. Dora Jarr looks at me. Snuffles and sobs. Ah, tooth missing. *Can't get up...* I pull up her jeans, gather her bits, spot the tooth, pocket it. Get her to the car. She's a ragdoll. Lurch into the stream, scuff another car, fail to stop. Get her home, upstairs into bath, douse her in hot water. She lies there.

- After this we get the police
- No police. (glares) You hear me?

- Fuck it, Dora! (My nerves are gone) Okay, don't fret.

I make tea, spill it, stumble about. An hour disappears. Wrap her, sit her in bed. No comment.

- Got your tooth

- Tooth

- You lost one, here. (She lets me finger her mouth)

- Got one o' the fuckers in the head... Pays to 'ave steel boots... Musta been paid

- You know these men? (She looks at me) Course ya do. Right. How many?

(Silence) - Some. Four

- Who do you think is behind this?

- Don't understand the question.

I stare at her.

- Can't take this, Dora

- *You* can't take it

- I mean, you can't hide this

- If you tell a single person I will go away and never return.

I stare, turn aside. *How fucking dare you?* It's whispered but she gets it. Now her eyes glaze over.

It's dusk. I'm bunched on the sofa. The city sighs beyond my window. Who's there to talk to? God, I wouldn't know. I've no friends at all. Dora and I exist in antisocial space, a cave, a cynical one. But the fact is, she called me. I'll look up a dentist tomorrow. Should make her eat. Or let her sleep. There's a stranger in my house. Don't like to admit it. It's me. And I need her.

A day goes by where she's curled on the sofa pouting and staring at TV. I serve her junk food and fizzy stuff. In the evening she not-so-randomly says:

- Yeah, so I located my *mother*, who is actually not with my father. Her name is '*Larissa D.*'

- Thanks for the casual info

- Not the only fish in the sea, mister Lean.

There are times when that terse telegraphic shorthand of the young is a fecking pain in the rear.

- Be happy with our life, Dora

- Our life? Are you mental?

- In the future... you'll need stability

- Don't need any damn thing. Got my mummy back

- You need. Wake up to it

- I'm awake, cocksucking little reporter.

And *that* remark earns her a sudden whack in the face! Stunned, can't believe her eyes. Me neither. She is forced to sit down. I just violated her girly aura in a daddyish way. First time, first time for everything.

- Oh yeah, you're such an aristocrat. *Ms. Lola 'D' for Demecharian*

- Whoa, what?

- And here in my house she can play at being pauper, anarchist, orphan. Rape victim too. Nice little niche at my expense. I go broke so she can go cashless. Poverty-loving little snob

- So the old journo uncovers a name

- Happy with it, are we?

- Fuck yes

- Has a ring to it. Baggage too. I prefer Dora Jarr. Ironic at least.

She sits still, gazes at my legs. I stand there in gutter silence. Our death then: vacant little death, without quality. But then she does a thing. Kneels on the floor and clings at me, clings and starts to sob. And I feel like I'm caught out, with no underpants. Our death recoils to a corner of the room. I stroke her scalp. Greasy, no matter. A sodding grim universe resides in that lonely head. I'll soothe it if it's the last thing I do.

- Don't worry, you. I like *Lola* as well

(Longish silence) - Truly?

- Absolutely. Come on now, come to me. Listen, I'll take you to our bar. Tell me any stories you like. True or shite whatever. I'll buy twenty drinks. Hey?

And yes. She comes.

.

Dora Lola sure is a prickly kettle of fish. Still, this same night she deems it politic to invite me to hook her in and take some bites of flesh. Me and the tragic Goth thrash about for ten minutes in my bed... and I inwardly salute her for never bothering to make our bed or wash our sheets. And it doesn't take her long to toss in the name *Goran Demecharian*. Barely got our breath back. Cute little grenade. And this is where I'm at the mercy of my lunatic mate. What kind of shite would Dora sell to ruin us, or ruin everybody? I'll assume this Goran D hasn't ruined her yet. And what fibs will she now tell to twist me round her pasty finger? Better bite.

- May I summarise? It seems this Demecharian of yours has been outed in some kind of battle over 'genetic manipulation of pure foods'. And we learn your Nazi mate Von Heffenbonck is wrapped up in it like chips in newsprint. Who knew? But *you* do 'cause you read the Daily Mirror.

Dora keeps her gob shut and flutters her eyes. She's got on her pouty cuddly look and it's working so far.

- All right, little Dor. You 'might've and you forgot'. One thing. Watch out for the pair of them. Trust 'em if you want to be used. Trust me, if you wanna be loved.

God, that is forward. I'm a hypocrite. No, I weirdly meant it.

- Oh mister Lean, I know you love me and I love you too.

Watch the fuck out! This is one moment where I realise how idiotic she makes me by coming round here to cohabit. Her bathos is killing, I feel sick. She decides to rescue. The pitiful kid gets to dangle it by a thread.

- Anyway, I want you to come meet REAL Daddy Demecharian. You're to interview him. He's a real package.

Real daddy! Oh wow. Say nothing, Lean. Look at her pasty whitey face on the pillow and its sloppy doll make-up.

- You love me too, though?

- 'Course I do, why not? Don't let me run away again

- Lonely, yeah

- Why not? (There's even a ghost of truth, but so what) So you'll do it? Real Daddy knows heaps about dirty business guys and politicians. That Heffenbonck cunt for instance. Daddy's so cool

- And why me? I'm your journalistic rival.

At this she pinches my nose pretty damn hard.

- Don't be an immature cockhead, Lean. I'm definitely going to arrange it!

Sieg Heil. Lola Demecharian.

Collection of Daddies Lo and behold, next day I stumble across a diary, lightly tossed amid the bomb-site of our bed. Dora kept it well hidden till now! She's even popped out for the morning. Little bookywoog falls open at a page dolled up in green and pink. '...DADDY REAL took me out today to his fuckin pricey Nitesbridge restaurant. Said to call him Goran. Told me bout his childhood in Georgia. Swum in freezing rivers, scaled up mountains under big blue sky. Hairy-chested guy claims he's an adventurer, 'suffers the curse of money', tries to 'avoid the world'. Some curse! Thinks I don't see he wouldn't have the *guts*. Dude's real sensitive. Glad we didn't meet up at 16, woulda thrown up. Have me round his little pinky, ruled by his moolah. Why do up-grown think they know it all? I'll make him sweat for wiping me, 's for sure. Goes on about Putin... loves Putin... So what am i? Georgian? Fuck knows don't care. Citizen of universe. Told him I was vegan and he jumped on that like flies round shit, reckons we should ban factory farming, live cattle exports blaaa. Dignity for animals! he sez chomping his fucking steak. Then he says he'll go veego as well. Copycat. Told him we should invent piggy beds lamb perms doggy toilets gold budgie cages cow massages pussy gravestones... LOL! [That reminds me, pussy's getting lonely, better be nice to Daddy LEAN] And I said let's have euthanasia for humans. That was a doozie, agreed with all of it. Fuck me, gullible. Or mebbe not. Gotta steely dark eye. Not a fecking fool I guess. Didn't mention sugar-daddy Lean... won't mention daddy NAZI with his big dong either. Gotta feeling he won't dig it. Told me heaps about his business, Daddy Real did. [daddy Nazi told me the same shit first] Reckons he's into making 'new kinds of pure food'. He wears cow leather! Bullshit all of it. Smell a big fat rat. No

wuckers, daddy Lean 'll help me get the lowdown. Me faithful girlie eh, me with DADDY LEAN. He's *daddy cool*.'

It's mostly in fresh ink, for my benefit no doubt. Sprightly confession, cute manipulation, needy girl, all there. Girls are complicated! So, *Goran Bratski Demecharian*. Dora hints at the great clubbing march through life of a man obsessed with himself - wolf in his lair, killer fish who harbours little plankton, bush rhino even the flies are wary of, whose empire is his Will. But I see this Goran has a dilemma: to show his teeth or show his heart. Born of the Caucasus, rich man's solitary son, narcissist making myths out of himself. The outsider who bought the Inside and detests it. No flashy Chelsea football team for him. And Dora easily sees his underbelly: how he fears his own need, how love weakens him. Cold mastery is safer. And ever since mother *Larissa Demecharian* produced little Lola all those years ago, we bet he resolved to keep Larissa as part-time she-bitch, at arm's length, tossing her money. And she learned his trick too, stringing that German along to get the dirt on *him*. Mother Larissa exploits Goran's love phobias all right. It was behind her decision to put away baby Lola for adoption, and he never challenged it. Thereby hangs a shaggy family tale, and after nineteen long years Demecharian suddenly wants his girl, and this is the point where Larissa turns shadow love into open war: precisely why she took up with that rival cunt Von Heffenbonck! Daddy needs to impress the hell out of daughter now. Fat chance when our Lola plays hard to get. Mind you, when you actually *get*, you might wish you hadn't. Twisted logic demands that people Dora wants she spurns, and for those she despises she plays slut cow harridan pauper waif victim orphan anarchist snob and slob, but never 'daughter'. Trust me Goran Bratski Demecharian, I grock that one.

Older I should have complained bitterly to Dora about her stupid cover-up of her parents. And about her smut show with Von Heffenbonck. I should hate that guy since he treats her badly, but a voice whispers: *he's a man of your age; somehow you know what he is*. I say nothing and that's how she likes it. Tickles her to sneak off and sidle back again. Makes her free, why spoil it? Note: the threads she's wearing are definitely smarty-tartier. Someone's taken her in hand. I choose my moment to hand back The Diary, and I watch her conscience tell her to talk but she stalls since its content spells a way forward for us. Instead there follows a weird interlude of brittle calm, as if we are suddenly 'adults together', as if she's aged upwards, somewhere proximate to me. And these days we parade in some kind of faux-bourgeois gentility, all titbits of politeness and food. She even wipes the kitchen, not to my taste but a gesture, and her teeny smile says: Lean has to compete with other Daddies now, 'cause the future is at my feet, and time never cheats on us the Young! She even affects to sleep solo, all nonchalant in a camp bed as if her shiny conscience dictated it. Not my place to complain; don't have the heart anyway. Or maybe she somehow somewhere wants to get real, and maybe lonely Lola is looking out at all these adults and daddies, at out-of-depth, at the world's cruelties, at the real costs of life. Meanwhile we olds all hope there's a place for us inside the fresh

capacious sensibilities of Ms. Lola Demecharian. I avoid the name, not sure how to address the New Woman, but at last she announces: 'Why don't you still call me Dora'. So our tiny niche opens again, and at our hoary old kitchen table I offer her a drink. We drink.

It takes a couple of nights, but she abandons the camp bed with its mounds of shaggy bits and crawls back into mine. No intro, just wraps her legs and lips about in the dark, sucks me in. No choice but to fill her favourite holes to the brim. Happens by luck, no effort from me. One of our giving moments? We don't have those, as the reader will discern by now. Post the deed she whispers in my face.

- See, Lean? I deal with stuff. Now I'll ask you one more time, and don't cry this time. Am I the best lay you ever had?

Upon my reply hangs our mini universe. Shall I say: 'might be if you practised'?

- You're your perfect perfect self.

She seems to like my nebulous reply. We nestle close. But in her jowly-mouth silence I sense I'm staring into a new world. At the moment she slipped back to my bed and took me over... she departed, on some night train, to a stranger future.

Still, it seems today's a fresh day in our bright winter. Dora is deeply attentive. Why? Oh, this borderland between selfish and selfless is a novel thing. Perhaps I look ungainly sick? Does she want to lull me before the delivery of pure punishment? Or is she mimicking her *mummy's* slippery ways of romance? Cooks a little thing for me. It's edible. Wants to walk out to the Heath in her trendy coat in the rapt cold. Wry smiles and a cosy bar. Green and blue drinks. Dora stirs them with a languid finger. She produces money and pays up. This is life, she says. At home she won't let go. Keen to go to bed. Really I can't process it. After our new love tryst (slower and softer than yesterday) she wants to read aloud from a book she unearthed called *Catcher In The Rye*. I mask a slow groaning feeling. Later she lines up my pills. A world first. Jesus wept.

Conspiracy I start to realise my cellphone is getting the runaround. Today it's parked on the kitchen table, and oh look, 'new mum Larissa Demecharian' has posted me a message. *Please call your 'Dora' right now. PS: erase this!* Or one assumes it to be Larissa. What's this lippy smudge on the bottom? Only Dora wears pastel green. Such a busy girl! Anyway, late on this day I step up to my front door, and there are lights and voices. Crikey, Claus Von Heffenbonck is here! Careful with the key now... Oh baby, they're in my bedroom.

- Small child, will you effer pay for drinks? No doubt Lean keeps you in money

(Sounds like they had a few) - Kiss muh fanny, Heffie.

- Will he come?

- So what if he does

- You sleep in zis bed?

- Yeah, do a few other things and all. I rule
- We will go to the Heath
- Want to freeze my arse? (There's shuffling and breathing) I'll get Real Daddy on ya
- What is this 'daddy club'?!
- Have to do me proper if you wanna join. No touchies, I'm underage! And I wanna know 'bout my *mother*
- Your mother does not want to know about you
- Fuckin' does
- Shall I call her now?
- Gimme the feckin' phone!

(Dora clumps into the hall. I jump to the bathroom. The German pulls her back, slams the door)

- Rack off! Fucken taunt me... (Now she utters a sob or two. 'Number 3 Sympathy Sob'... Yup, he fell for it)
- You push at me. Sit here, I want to help. Your father is dangerous
- Real Dad can handle himself
- What is your game? You hate him. Get revenge, Lola. I repeat, he needs to see what you lost all those years
- Told you, do it my way
- Is this why he manipulates you with his disgusting money and his club?
- He's a mansplaining oldie like you
- He is powerful. Do not enter his game of guilt. I know how it is
- Yeah, you do it to *me*. No fanny ever again mister
- Snotty fake rebel! Daddy's little bad girl
- Eat shit, MOTHER fucker.

There's a sudden thump! Think they're on the floor. Dora gasps. Rhythmic bumping. He grunts.

- You... should admit... your father... got those skinhead boys... to beat me... and beat *you*... Your sleuthing work... with Lean is no *use*... If you want to keep your teeth... you better listen... listen to me. Aaaaagh!

I'm ready to charge in and rearrange his teeth. But there's a sigh. He presumably rolls off my girlfriend.

- But who tipped off Real Daddy about you, Crook? It was my *mother*. And you're not the stud you think you are. I didn't even come just now. Sucked in.

More rustling, then rattling at the door. (Glad that handle's stiff!) Further leap to bathroom. Dora charges out. Heffenbonck strides after. I creep out. They're in the road, he manhandles her to his car. Car lurches, swings up the hill to the Heath. I run on. Got no fucking lungs, breath is rasping. Car is stopped, doors ajar. A lamplit path... opens to a glade that overlooks our suburb. There they are on a bench.

- We will make a ‘statement’. Send a message. Lola
- Don’t fuckin need ya!
- You want my sex violence. But I am not evil
- Ever occur to you I might have feelings?
- You are a daughter to me
- Gives you right of entry! Wait till I tell Lean. Might even kill ya. I tell him a whole lot. And he had a chat to Daddy Demecharian. Oh didn’t I say? Lean’s good at putting it together. He rescued me in the tunnel that day
- What day?
- The day I got *raped*, asshole
- You bring this on!
- Wadda you care? Self-serving egotistical -
(She jumps up. He pulls her back) - No! We are going to plan this, you hear me? Or I will expose your hate crime against me to *everyone*. We will have our little sideshow, our little *dirt bomb*
- Fuck off. If your bomb’s as big as your ego you’ll wipe out the lot
- Are we ready, baby anarchist?
- You dunno how to make it
- I am no assassin, Lola
- Ain’t got the balls
- It must be at your daddy’s seminar next week. Everyone important will be there. We plant it in a back room. Everyone gets a dusting. Fertilizer bomb. Amateur, nothing. They will look stupid. It will be all over the press
- The press? You mean Lean
- It must not be traced! That is why you must leave this man
- Fuck, I get it. My *mother* is in on this
- Idiot. Larissa does not know a thing
- Don’t believe ya
- Your mother needs your father’s money, that is all! And maybe respect. Ha!
- She’d be a suspect! Daddy and mummy have a *new thing* going. Ain’t just about money
(In the dimness he sighs, then stands) - Remember, no-one gets more than a big surprise. And keep zis Lean away.

He legs it in my direction. I shrink into a bush. Silence. Dora is hunched on the bench. I can’t tell if she is crying. Minutes pass. I’m tired. At last she shuffles off down the path. This is the last I see of her for five days. How to digest what I heard? There’s a numbness in my winter world.

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At some point comes a text. 'Mister Lean, I shall conduct a seminar on Saturday ten days hence at the _____ Centre for Research. If you will consent to report the outcomes, I shall be happy to furnish you with materials and offer a fee. All the best, *Goran Bratski Demecharian*.

The lost girl slips in one morning while I'm in bed. Affects to rummage for food then depart. Cue to go shopping, Lean. Later she's back, stands in my kitchen and... yep, that old customised grunge look is gone. Now all pain-in-arse confidence, stuffing cereal in her gob. She tosses me my newspaper. *Check out page six*. It's a pic with article. Demecharian and a luscious blond woman. *Larissa*. He seems to be exposing a scandal involving a rival in the pure foods industry. All to be revealed at the seminar no doubt? She watches me, munches her scroggin. No milk, no comment. Two days pass. Same newspaper, delivered by same dark angel, splayed on my table this time at page two. This time evil Claus Von Heffenbonck is named. She murmurs:

- Bet you'd like to be writing this story, Lean.

Friday. I step through my own front door. Dora spots me, takes her phone, hightails it to bathroom. Loudly she calls: *Daddy? Daddy? It's me... Daddy, don't do the seminar! There are bad people. They want to cause mayhem. I know the press expects you to speak. Daddy darling, I'm saying don't go. Don't cut me off! Shit. Shit.*

Fuck yeah. Nice and crude, Dora. We're communicating. Like we used to.

Saturday arrives. The morning is bright and clear. My cell rings: a female voice, no introduction.

- Mister Lean. Do you want a proper story? Meet me at the seminar

- Who is this?

- You know who it is.

Goodness me. Larissa Demecharian.

Random shards of a jigsaw! What shall a fact-gatherer do? Do not go to that place! I hurry to the place. A peaceable street in Bloomsbury's university land, adjacent to a little square... Shall I go the hell in? I am no fantasist, I am a news-gatherer, I stick in my snout and sniff at human shit. What the hell do I care? Hurry down the corridor to the main room, peer through double glass doors. A hundred heads or so. Goran Demecharian is speaking. Is he the master here? Does he puppeteer this catenation of academics, business, journalists, mover-shakers, skeptics, wannabes? And there is Von Heffenbonck, angular and statuesque, at the very back. And my Dora, near her father. Larissa is nowhere to be seen. I see how the girl glances about, how her mouth twitches under the parapet of greasy dark hair, as if to be here at this instant is her most desperate manoeuvre. How well I know you!

'...And so we humans validate ourselves according to the promises of our technology. Technology lets us ponder on our 'mastery', but is this but slavery to an illusion? Why seek the subtleties of

material life through ever deeper entrenchments, webs, nets of control? And will we claim to find the god-particle? Should we seek to master, with our fractal reach, the very soul of society? Communism may have tried it, any totalitarianism in fact; but ladies and gentlemen, there is a fly in the liquid, a ghost in the machine. To fail to master all our acts is to acknowledge the irrelevance of our acts. Yet technology lets us feed on a dream of order - and *quantum nano-technology* is perhaps the glossiest dream of all. Perhaps now we shall arrive at *origin*, at the pre-genetic, the subatomic, the ineffable, shall pierce the veil and skein of form, and yet retain it! Perhaps now we might reshape the very Shaper of ourselves! Human genome, quantum manipulations - when placed in animals and plants - might eradicate disease, create pure food, immunise us, murder carcinogens, make us free. And yet, do we not need disease to keep immunity strong? I shall expound a new possibility in the field of nano-science and disease, ladies and gentlemen, and yet I do it with this warning: beware of hubris, beware of unexpected consequence, beware of the illusion of control, beware of your entrenched belief in infallibility - in your little, local, nano-pointed *order...*'

This is the moment where the alarm goes off. A clanging grinding noise ripples in the corridor and rooms. I see a door open near the entrance, see a figure step out, hasten away. I hurry to the street door, pursue across the square. The figure slips into alleys and is gone. I pause under a wide chestnut tree. Blotches of yellow sunlight spatter the flagstones. At the entrance a gaggle of delegates has started to form; soon lots are milling about. One or two light up, others tap phones. Two security men confer. Dora has not emerged. Under blue winter sky, under brick and stone and gable, they are ants, flung together in their doings. Now the alarm seems to cease within. Here is Demecharian signalling to his people. They follow him in. Against the tide I spot Dora. She emerges, looks furtively left and right, pauses in angular street-shadows, re-enters. And suddenly with the insight of the cancered and destitute I see what is about to happen. I hurry to the entrance, into the corridor, to the big glass doors. Everyone is in the seminar room. Oh Jesus! Out of a doorway comes Demecharian. He sees me, furrows his brow, strides to the adjacent male toilet. I peer into the ante-room next to the seminar room. There is Claus Von Heffenbonck. He talks, grips others by the arm. Heads of important men bend in conclave about him. He pats their shoulders. They step away. I hurry to the glass doors. Heffenbonck has not entered the main room. But now I see *Dora* coming at me, coming at the door. She is wild. Suddenly I'm scared of her. Why? I lunge into the toilets. Stand a few seconds. White silence. Near-most cubicle is occupied. Has to be Demecharian! I slip to the far cubicle. *Then it happens...* A great blasting crunch shunters in from the corridor in a bursting wave. I'm thrown at the cubicle wall and jacked backward my head slaps the tiles there's a *crack* my ears fill with drumming blood. Cloud grit, choking throat, can't see. I'm dying Jesus NO. Whining drumming in my heart. Coughing, crawl to a basin. Tap. Flood water in my eyes. Demecharian is leg-splayed on a toilet seat. I grab his face, his eyes roll. Drag him up, somehow shove him under tap. Drag open door. Hateful white dust in corridor. Doorways stagger away left right. Screams within. A huge hole is blown where

that little room was. I fucking well go in. That grogged thing by the scudded-blood wall is a torso in a blue suit. That thing is Von Heffenbonck. Can't breathe, get out. The lime-walled corridor. Throw up over tiles. On knees. Aching fluttering waves of smoke. Dora. Where the christ is Dora! She came at me, clutched at the glass door... The entrance. People spill about in the street, shamble to the square, sprawl on grass. Some sit in gutter, whisper into phones... At last a siren cop arrives, and white vans, and flicker lights. I'm past the square, need to crawl away. Down an alley, down cobbled mews, towards the Euston Road. 'Least I think it was that way. Don't know. Just get away.

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Departure At our city's fringe is a graveyard, with a dump beside it. These were playgrounds in my childhood - where human centuries composted and methanized and rose up as vapour to fall again as rain on crowded streets and fields... where not one microbe from the sewer veins of our dream city nor its dump-hills of memoried sorrow, had not surrendered a thousand times, had not been ground to miasmatic ash at this people-mulching spot, where strivings and growings, litters of plagues and journeyings, vanity of prayers, passing years and passings away were all transmuted to mountainous fire-smoking rotted heaps... All rubbish is us, every microbe us! And when night descends like a pall on our world and ghostly forebears call us home, our child voices rise on dusky moonlit air, and we conflate our fevered party games, exhaust our pleasures in distraction. We heed not Golgotha at the edge of our city, though the bell tolls for us. We whisper: don't disturb little me, let me hoard my past like a dog with a bone, let me nurture my diseases. Let me be. Let me be.

Your narrator Lean has the unnerving sense that time is running out for him. It may be slow shock that draws him to the funeral of Claus Von Heffenbonck, but he is above all an epic regurgitator of melancholy things... The church bell tolls, and for the living gathered about today there is to be a reckoning. The robust and young won't understand, but the aged and diseased will nurture their own emotional departures, will inwardly rework the value of a life. For sages say (and we secretly fear) that the substance of our leaving is the substance of our returning; that the soul's frame is cast, and in the far future the waters of life will pour into this cast again. That a judgment is coming, a great election wherein the soul is parked on a conveyor, readied for departure to a great clearing house out of sight. And that soul, removed from its packaging in a mighty expiry of breath, retreats to a space beyond cause to lie at peace in the empty, to make its subtle hugs and handshakes with the eternal... until it begins again its slow redress to the worlds of cause and mind and sense and finally flesh once more. A breath departs, returns. Immerses, emerges. What frame of mind then, to suit departure? Herein is our riddle of ignorance, for we imitate what we think we know, seek an ideal version of what we always failed to be: a better lover, better father, juster man, sweeter, seriouser, sinless man. Von Heffenbonck I hardly knew, and his was a parallel life lived beyond a fence in another garden, where the things he did in fiddled isolation (the little things done by us all) seemed to him to be

clever, important, poignant, rich. We are islands in our self-concern, our ignorance. But in the flood of our departure there is panic. Ideals then mingle with sickness, arrangements with pain like blood with gravy. His is a case of sudden death, so strangers and priests must signpost the departing; and that is what we have this day, a play, at this moss-walled quiet place under the arms of great trees on the fringe of our civilised city. And the long cars parade in slow motion, and the long box is carried forward, the prayers are intoned, the black-clad mourners gather about the hole, the sod is thrown, appeals to god are sown, and the visages of people register their separative scripts of love and fear and bewilderment and grey distraction. And this will be repeated to the ends of time, till hell freezes over, till the last man and woman have departed the life-worlds into the sheen of light, into the clearing-house out of sight, into shells of greater meaning, of incalculable love, into the spaces of peace so deep none ever wished for past or future, where no causes or desires ever came. And one sweet day in springtime, the breath of underground undersea winds from far might rustle the trees of paradise hanging eternal amid the light. And seeds from the trees of paradise may scatter in the garden, and gentle rains of time and change push them under the earthen grasses to the soil, wherein their little nature tugs and strains and squeezes, as tiny memories of past and future curdle in their hearts. And forms, the forms of the previously known, the encased, the subtly evil, the insidious, the returning - begin. Great repetition competes with great evolving, and no-one can know the difference, unless and until another addled rushing life in the flesh, in the seas of mind, in the threshing fields of feeling, runs its round. And the day of reckoning will be here again, and the stolid ritual departure performed again, all witnessed by crowds of black-clad bystanders (some who'll weep), the ghosts of the future. Today I am one of them... And I wonder, who will weep for me.

The Clan Demecharian And here is Goran Demecharian, with the alluring Larissa, and their lost-and-found daughter Lola clinging to their arms. She is dew-eyed and silent. And how her father limps, for his wounds are poignant, inviting the world to feel the proper measure of empathy. How could I pluck Dora back from her people now? I admit to feelings welling up like black lizards from the toilet of my psyche. And how could this Clan Demecharian ever be content? Larissa's loyalties seem to have always been two-faced. And he, Goran, made his deals with Von Heffenbonck to keep her under his thumb and his eyes. Who says the Heffenbonck murder is not payback for a daughter's dirty transgressions? Dora now wants her man-lover for keeps, craves him more than her sanity. And no room there for cunts like me, though I'm the one guy who knows her better than she wants the world to see. Demecharian will dangle her in his rear-view mirror, and she will shield him to suit herself. Because Lola and Daddy and Mummy did it. The bomb I mean. Together. And just because of it, Dora will lunge out at me. She has decades of loss to feed on: won't reject her elders all at once but will scurry into 'bomb guilt' and hide between daddy's legs. Later she'll let him hide between *her* legs in a secret cave of their very own. After that she'll dream up outstanding ways to send him to hell. And one day she'll bore herself enough to trickle back to me? By then I'll be decomposing and

thereby not attractive, not even in the ironic sense of a man whose life appealed to a girl like her because it was such irretrievable shite. A journalist? Ho ho. Needy rapidly-aging dupe who wanted his youth back, persisted in hinting at love for Dora despite her crusade to drive him nuts. Worse than sad. Or slightly better, an ironic crock who agreed to use her just as she used him. That arrangement might suffice for impromptu turn-ups, the odd toss in the sack or on the kitchen table, for the leaving of one's boots and bangles and discarded drugs at the old feller's gaff. And (thinks Dora) I could stay wounded for good, blame other people who cherish a romance that the world makes sense, that we can 'love each other', be sorry for past deeds, change, grow up. No help for you, arseholes. You are *bored*. So saith young Dora, pre-wounded narcissist. Can I wait for her to actually grow up, turn her gaze to me? How to tell her that all her scathing irony is expunged by the prospect of Lean's body dropping in dust? She'll reply: how gross is that? I fucked that? Where is the faith I placed in her integrity, in her deeply buried sense of care, her ferocious grasping at honesty, those searing burns she suffered at unutterable world cruelty? I hope she might see I shared them all, that I romanced her fecklessness, ironised her suffering, smiled when she took herself seriously, tenderised her harshness. All that. I hope she'll get it. Come back to me! But her father has already slugged her with his own romancing, and she'll have no choice but to waltz with it. He'll have all the low-life tricks: his gritty foreignness, angsty suffering, new-minted legends of himself and his star-crossed heart, boyish regret for his cynical ploys of power. And she'll have his money. I assume it'll ruin her. And then her mother will seek to 'bond' with her (women take up even more of the sky than men) and Larissa, with her glamourised longing deceitful sexual past will suck in Dora like a black widow spider. Dora will be titivated by legends of her parents' preying-mantis love affair - wherein both are victims, both unrequited, both tugging at her, hating each other through her, needing a scapegoat for their dread crime of insufferable love! Larissa could never have played glamour whore all these years without the occult favours of Demecharian and his money. And he could never have fed that wolverine ruthlessness without the lure of her peerless kitten-sex to come back to. Me, I should glue myself to the idea that this trio can correct one another. Fat fucking chance. Even if it turns out the killer bomb was their 'family baby' - the baby of a girl and her daddy and her mummy - I will not cease to wallow in sewers of debased conscience, sweatingly hoping my girl's coming back to me.

And alone in the drug prison of my house, I muster the worstest notions. New plot! Demecharians are coming to *moider me*. Which of Demecharian's women will end up diverting the Wolf's gaze at me? You know, darling slash daddy! - the man who pulled you from the wreck of the toilet... the one who wormed in with our sweet girl - that wormy fellow *Lean*. And as sure as night follows day they'll come! Not that a single one of them hates me. See how displaced victimhood works? Not able to resist Demecharian's cock in your arse (so to speak) you girls will require to make me taste all your victimhood. And he won't resist a bargain killing for the sake of his nearest and dearest, because that closeted rough-cold animal soul is vulnerable to your sexual acts of acquiescence: the beast bows to

beauty and lets his head be caressed and you expendable girls get to prove you matter in some little way. Urge the emperor to murder! - and postpone the day when he flushes you away to make way for someone better. This family bleeds at the seams, and outliers like me are collateral damage. Ugly ugly.

Endgame After the death of Von Heffenbonck the pale-dark girl known as Dora did come back to me, this time bearing gifts: of concern, of attention, of conscience. At my threshold she looked hard and long, and let me watch her appear to decide: this journalist Lean is indeed a crock; there's just no need to do him in, Daddy. The black holes of her eyes said it all: no further battles to be fought with you my friend. And she moved in again, in her fashion. So much unexplained, so many black holes in the fabric of things, she said. Yes Dora, all your Daddies will go to black holes eventually... She has definitely deepened though, grown up! Plays a brillianter game nowadays. Better class of corruption, jealousy, hiding, hate, victimhood. Pushes all the healing love downward, down to the recesses where only millennia can dredge it up again. Hers is a rosy cancer-future of needle-suffering and blundering wanting and wandering in her vagabond boots with her bits and rags of memories. Perhaps I'll meet her again on the moonlit miles of her dark roads, by the hedge-paths, amid the hills, on the sea cliffs, in the towns, in the hollows of another life. But she is not my responsibility, she is hers. Still, I kind of love my black-eyed Dora. Kind of. And I fancy one day she might half-pie love me. Half-pie lovers can have it all: selfishness, narcissism, anarchy, terrorism, plus the love. Got it sussed. Half a heart's good enough! Share a heart share a pizza... So my door's ever open, and swinging both ways. If she slams it in a fury it jarrs, but if she slips in her key and worms in, I'm lifted. I admit it. Because she has her moments of levity, moments when she invites her nice-girl spirit to flutter in for lunch from some trackless desert. With this absurd life briefly haloed in a lighter insouciant shade of black, Dora aims to keep me amused. You need fruits and nuts, she calls out suddenly one day. New messiah of healthy habits! Are you the nut? I ask. *No, I'm the fruit.* She smiles at me, one of those yellowy smiles that hint at sunlight. She's obviously been practising it. Daddy didn't eat enough fruit, she says, but you have to. By god I will. Dora has taken to hiding my fags as well. Prob'ly steals 'em. Only lately did I get that the smell of departure is weirdly aphrodisiac to her. Thought she'd run a mile but she didn't. Perhaps it's finite and can therefore be countenanced. She and I are alike that way: things have to finish, we can't stand the grind, the wait, the eternal. Can't stand nuance and subtlety. Dora even consents to spread herself under me in the nights. Lies beside me too. Better kisses better smiles. Once she washed my body in a bath. Made the bed one or two times. Lordy lordy, it was semi-neat. Takes my bills away and pays 'em. Demecharian's money. Robbing a Hood, doin' good. As they say, if Stalin takes a shine to you, be happy. There's attention of a sort. World future in safe hands. Youthful lessons to be learnt, the earth may turn again. But Lady keeps her shifty ways. Comes at night, whispers in the dark. *Lean, you have to write the true story.* At bad Daddy's expense I assume? *Naturally.* But you'll be at the centre of it. *Don't care!* she says. No, you have to care, Dora. You have

to desist till love wins over hate. *When'll that be?* she says with cynic tone. *When I'm gone*, I reply. She stares. That one sailed over her raggy black head. But she thinks she has me by the short and curlies since I spoke of love. Till I gaze back at her and she sees mortality drip from my eyes. And she can't resist that. Got you by the conscience, Dora Jarr. For love is the battle Lola will fight in her gruesome future alone. Time will steal from her bit by ticking bit till one day she'll suddenly feel so sorry, so fucking sorry for everything. The fucked-up hate, the stumblings into crime, all of it. I'd want to be there then, when the guilt comes stealing, comes flooding, when she finally consents to grow up. I have one message left for her now. Of course I don't say it. She will have to come to care. I don't care to know what disgusting sins people do. We are all dumb little creatures. Life will drag us, drag us back, to care.

Oh but she keeps at me, between sweetified nudges and shifty smiles, about *The Story: the pure foods corporate nanotech scandal story*, because she needs me to celebrate the dirt and hate in her, to validate the scheming pantomimes she has played. Reader, you saw I was always there for her. I don't say out loud: 'you'll be an heiress one day baby, on the back of daddy's nano-genetical empire - or wouldn't you want any of it since it's tainted? Wise daddy Lean still strings you along, because you know, somewhere you know, what the real story is.' And like an illicit drug the mystery of murder and atonement holds us close, and sin's our slimy aphrodisiac. *Ooh, I mated with the man who knew too much*. Fucking hot, yeeahh! She needs to hold me closer than daddy, and she won't ever kill daddy but daddy's gonna have to *lose* - which says to me I'm gonna win, 'cause I'll die with all her secrets bound in my heart. My god, she likes it, oh yes yes. So we have our thrashing nights... and our surly nights and suspicious nights and cold-as-ice nights and druggy nights... and (best of all) little-girl-lost nights where her cares are watered with sorrow-tears... and at the end of all of these, at the end of a thousand years my Dora will be forced to admit: she might end up appreciating me.

Now there's a thing to stick around for.

Things are never so tidy-simple though. Dora tends to call up Daddy and make him pick her up right under my window. He mutters a curt hello, slips away with her. Back in our bombsite bed in the ruins of morning, she'll assure me she doesn't 'necessarily' like his plushy bars and hotel rooms. Likes to drags him to the Dark Heath instead, to 'her spot', where they can look down on the iniquitous barbarous world and comment superiorly on it. She aims to murder me with her winks of irony. Righteo then Dora... And how *are* mummy and daddy, one is required to ask. All pseudo-sex and desperate status, she says with a sneer. (Oh, well put) Mummy's the fucking man-hypnotist and little baby doesn't get a look in! I vaguely reproach her for that one. She says sorry Lean and licks my nose. Giz a fag, she says. I tell her I don't have any, and you're a fucking lunatic. She says thank you, thank you Lean. You get it, you get me. As a reward I'll stay tonight. And tomorrow, and the next

day. Can't promise Friday though. Going to Georgia with daddy. *For how long?* Coupla weeks. Wants to show me some cave or other. Guy's big into caves and holes.

Vanish In Light The sages say death must wait if a man asks the right question of the skeletal scyther: what exactly are you, my dirty friend? Are you real or do you ply your trade on our laziness, our stupid belief, our endless wait for Godot, we mooning cattle at the gate? I ask no more. Been in bed for turgid weeks. No clink of Dora's key in the lock. Baby you're late. Medicos tool in from time to time. Damn place is sanitised. Not my home no more. Images flood in the night... Sudden stabs in holes deep in the slums of the body. Should one give a shit? Weightless. Drugs. Imposter-doctors bleat with meanings. I crave the chaos of silence. Pinter's silence. Absurd. Each thought is death to all others. The past trails from the back of my head. Seaweed-slurry on a flecked beach. Winds of winter. My cells blow away. I slither out of a white past. Things vibrate, as if alive, as if. Ghosts walk in wind. Cliffs overbear the sea. Flies sweep over deserts. Child-whispers from way way back. Petal of rose, rustle of river. Kite in the sky. We who're here must always be here. In the warm sun of the garden of emptiness is hope. Morning winds of emptiness stir from afar. Leaves rustle and quiver. There's a whiff of future, whiff of regret. Nano-points in eternity. Moments embalmed in a haze. Strange world without meaning. Words without meaning. If they had, they'd cease to be. Look how a thing vanishes. Droplets of dew. Fractals in a god world. Don't close your eyes my friend, you'll vanish in the great. Seen one moment you've seen 'em all. Nothing stays. Flies depart a corpse in the hot wind of the veldt. My love is chaos. I sang an ode for all who seek to foul the common nest. Find a better story. Higher chaos. Oh my giddy aunt, I exist. *Scribbling in the mind...* A stream is never a stream. Silence swallows. People fall away. Nothing ever happened. Dreams of Himalayan fastness. Prayer flags flutter on a wall. Rustle in grasses heard by none. No wind ever blew, no human ever walked there. Faraway busyness in the commune of men. What is it? Lived a life. What? Murmur of a stream ten thousand years ago. Chirrup of birds after the battle. Spattered armour-mountains. Flies. The dead are sleeping. No face, no name. Regret the *Shoah*. Blanket of snow on the mounts of Asia. Carrion. Kites show no mercy. Someone called by, never returning. Memories shoveled in a hole. Cattle at the gate. Feed the turning world. Toilet fodder. *Dora, is it you?* The fullness. Never end. Bliss continuous. Ocean. Ship's prow. Tropic seas. Borderland. White cranes in the blue. Is that the door? Death is a door. Nothing lost. All lost. Pills don't work no more. Go. Not to worry. Nothing stays. Insect on a leaf. No physical. Son of man hath not where to rest... No centre to my head. Thousan' miles, to the bottom of my arms. The fingers of need. Why does one body need another? Love is habit. Dora Lola? My story. Note the mirage. Inconsequence. Don't believe. My window... Bright kite in the sky... Pause... Vanish in light*

[*Diarybook ends here. Editor]